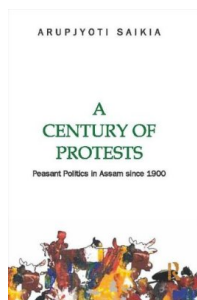


## REVIEW: *A CENTURY OF PROTESTS*

Reviewed by Uday Chandra (Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity)



Arupjyoti Saikia. 2013. *A Century of Protests: Peasant Politics in Assam Since 1900*. New Delhi and Abingdon: Routledge. xvi+480pp, 3 maps. ISBN 978-0-415-81194-1 (hardcover 97.49USD).

Notwithstanding its somewhat misleading subtitle, *A Century of Protests* is a painstaking reconstruction of the checkered agrarian history of the Brahmaputra Valley between the passage of the Assam Land Revenue Regulation of 1886 and the repeal of the Assam Tenancy Act of 1971 in 1986. The state of Assam in India today, bordering what is now Bangladesh, lies beneath the watchful eyes of the Eastern Himalayas, through which the mighty Brahmaputra gushes and breathes life into the valley. The landscape of the Brahmaputra Valley, historically speaking, has been as much a patchwork of field and forest as of different ethnolinguistic and religious groups, ever fluid and shifting in response to human and non-human vectors of change. The contested relations of power that yoke together owners and cultivators of this complex, variegated landscape in the late colonial and early postcolonial eras is the subject of the book under review.

Arupjyoti Saikia is a well-known historian of Assam, and, as he mentions at the start of the book, also the son of a committed communist who introduced him to the rural worlds of the Brahmaputra Valley. The book is primarily intended for historians of South Asia, especially those interested in eastern India. But the book also ought to be of wider interest to social scientists and historians

interested in the 'Zomian' borderlands between Inner, South, and Southeast Asia. Such detailed historical analyses of particular regions are useful for thinking through meaningful comparisons and contrasts within the region we now call 'Zomia' after Willem van Schendel's and James Scott's critical interventions. Does, for instance, the centrality of the modern state in Assamese peasant life fit our more generalized understanding of how lowland and upland politics differ? Equally, do the cultural dynamics of fluidity, hybridity, and ethnogenesis cut across the hill-plains divide? Saikia himself makes little effort to answer such questions or articulate comparisons and contrasts with other regions, but readers, the bulk of whom likely do not study Assam, cannot avoid doing so. Having said so, I must add that undergraduates might struggle with a historical monograph as narrowly conceived as *A Century of Protests*, though graduate students working on other parts of Zomia may find much of value in it. This monograph is, after all, the product of much intellectual toil on a well-defined subject rather than the next academic blockbuster on the bookshelf.

Arupjyoti Saikia's efforts, valuable in their own right, ought to be read alongside recent historical scholarship by Indrani Chatterjee (2013) on the workings of monastic governmentality between the eighth and eighteenth century, Gunnel Cederlöf (2013) on the pivotal role of climate and ecology in shaping the nature of colonial expansion under the East India Company, Jayeeta Sharma (2011) on the making of a tea plantation economy over the nineteenth century, and Sanghamitra Misra (2011) on the schizoid politics of the borderlands between Bengal proper, Nepal, and Assam in the late colonial era. Only one of these four critical reference points for understanding the region's history – Jayeeta Sharma's *Empire's Garden* (2011) – enters Saikia's bibliography, principally to indicate that Assam's tea gardens are beyond the scope of his study.

Nonetheless, the three unreferenced works listed above are useful in grappling with the contents of Saikia's book. For instance, the monastic orders that are central to Chatterjee's (2013) study figure quite prominently in *A Century of Protests*, much as in

colonial revenue records, as major landlords in British Assam even as their lay subjects are categorized in the language of the modern state as tenants, sharecroppers, and migrants, subdivided further as 'Hindu', 'Muslim', or 'tribal'. Labeled thus, we now have the basic ingredients for a state managing an agrarian economy, or for a later historian writing a history of the same economy using the state's categories. The latter is, alas, hopelessly caught in the epistemological tentacles of his sources, and this is why we must follow Chatterjee in probing silences and forgotten memories as we write histories of northeastern India today. Similarly, the perspicacious reader may discern different ecological niches within the Brahmaputra Valley throughout *A Century of Protests* but, instead of following Cederlöf's (2013) trail, Saikia focuses single-mindedly on tenurial relations as defined by the later colonial administration in eastern and western Assam. 'Land' here, stripped of its ecological underpinnings, is simply a bundle of political-economic rights, contested and negotiated between lord and peasant, mediated by the state from above, and subject to transformation over time; in sum, land tenure. As is so often the case, agrarian and environmental histories of a region look at each other from afar without speaking across intellectual barriers. Lastly, what constitutes Assam as a historical region is anything but self-evident, as those studying the borderlands of Bengal or Nepal know well. The case of Goalpara, as Misra (2011) shows, complicates any historical narrative of 'Assam'. For much the same reason, the territory labeled as East Bengal, East Pakistan, or Bangladesh over the past century, also poses a challenge for scholars and politicians of Assam. As Saikia recognizes, people circulate, borders change, and even the physical landscape can be altered by floods, earthquakes, and shifts in a river's course. Yet 'Assam' remains static, almost frozen in time, for the historian here as much as the Assamese nationalists that he describes.

Only when we set *A Century of Protests* within the context of the recent literature on the region can we appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of its key arguments. The arguments themselves are not always easy to follow amidst mangrove-like thickets of historical

narrative in which evidence and interpretation are intertwined, sometimes in less-than-transparent ways. Less-than-scrupulous copy-editing complicates the reader's task. At any rate, let me tease out three key arguments for readers. Firstly, Saikia argues that the agrarian economy of late colonial Assam ought to be understood vis-à-vis the interactions between the colonial state, traditional holders of large estates, peasant smallholders, sharecroppers, and landless laborers. Secondly, by the 1930s, the upper and middle strata of the Assamese peasantry had begun to rally around the Congress party that spearheaded India's nationalist movement; by contrast, sharecroppers and the landless, typically Muslim and/ or low in the caste hierarchy, came to be courted by the Muslim League, which promised fresh land settlements and occupancy rights to those at the bottom of the agrarian order. Thirdly, after decolonization in 1947, Assam became part of Hindu-majority India ruled by the Congress party, representing the landed gentry and better-off peasants in the region, and it was only in response to pressures from below, generated by communist-led militant peasant organizations, that land ceilings were halfheartedly introduced and a new tenancy law was passed to award occupancy rights to sharecroppers. These legal changes were, however, not always accompanied by radical social transformations on the ground. By 1986, the landed gentry had ensured that the hard-fought gains of sharecroppers were struck off the law books for the greater good of Assamese nationalism. Saikia's story of the Assamese peasantry, far from a cohesive group in any meaningful sense, over the past century is thus one of limited gains amidst the relentless oppression of agrarian elites who have come to control the state apparatus in postcolonial Assam since 1947.

*A Century of Protests* undoubtedly presents a much-needed and powerful narrative about the dismal condition of the Assamese peasantry in late-colonial and postcolonial eras. The historical data in the book are drawn from an impressive range of government and popular sources, with which the author appears intimately familiar. Saikia brings to bear his deep familiarity with the region's agrarian structure and politics and his political sympathies for the

smallholder, the sharecropper, and the migrant laborer in this extensive study. At various points in his narrative, he complicates the notion of the 'peasant' by bringing in gender, religion, caste, and intra-regional variations, thereby adding both richness and texture to the historical narrative. The central claim regarding the continued dominance of the landed gentry and the upper peasantry contrasts strongly with other regions in postcolonial India that experienced either a state-directed Green Revolution or popular mobilization from below that reordered agrarian hierarchies. While Punjab and Uttar Pradesh are good examples of states within India that have benefited from the Green Revolution, West Bengal and Bihar are examples of states in which mobilization in the name of class and caste respectively have ended the hegemony of the old land gentry that exercised power during the early postcolonial decades of Congress rule. By any such metric, Assam fares poorly. Its agrarian economy, as the book's conclusion states emphatically, has not progressed much beyond the nineteenth century. It is against this socioeconomic background, Saikia suggests, that we ought to understand the ethno-nationalist violence directed at 'outsiders' in the Brahmaputra Valley since the mid-1980s. Such violence forms the staple of a great deal of journalistic and social scientific commentary on the region.

The undoubted strengths of the book should not, of course, prevent us from appreciating its weaknesses, especially with an eye to future scholarship that can fill existing lacunae. Let me delineate three key weaknesses here.

- (1) The all-too-common notion of the 'peasant' is a problematic one where the agrarian structure does not afford most cultivators either ownership or occupancy rights to land. In the book under review, 'peasant' explains little, and arguably obscures how so-called 'peasants' see each other. An economy dominated by sharecroppers and landless laborers, including circulating migrants, requires an altogether different conceptual apparatus suited to the

political economy and ecology of the region under study. One possibility might be to take seriously emic conceptions of caste that are necessarily correlated with hierarchies of labor and land in Assam and elsewhere in South Asia. Such conceptions of 'caste' need not be seen as antithetical to 'class' to the extent that the former cannot avoid accounting for the social relations of production in a given agrarian context.

(2) A history of a place must attend carefully to the historical processes that produce it. Assam exists *sui generis* no more than any other place inhabited by humans. Yet Saikia draws too sharp a line between East Bengal and Assam, which may have made sense to those who wrote and archived government revenue files but less so to those whose lives crisscrossed these administrative demarcations. Despite its leftwing sympathies, therefore, *A Century of Protests* cannot avoid the trap of Assamese (sub)nationalism that takes colonial state space to be its destined resting place. Likewise, the book falls into the trap of Indian nationalism, especially as it closely follows the official government line on the Muslim League, borders, and refugees. These traps might be avoided in future if closer attention were paid to place-making processes along with the inclusions and exclusions that they invariably entail at different points in time. Doing so requires, of course, interpreting the same archival materials differently.

(3) Whereas brief historical sketches of 'gender', 'migrants', and 'tribes' appear in the fringes of the book's narrative, fuller accounts remain to be written. One hopes that not all of these future accounts will assume the same economic lens that Saikia does. Such a lens distorts and caricatures. For instance, when women or 'tribes' make a

fleeting appearance in this book, they are depicted as 'spontaneous' and oddly belligerent protestors, seemingly devoid of the capacity for calm, rational political action that permit the typical male peasant to negotiate the state from below. What we see here is a kind of unwitting mimicry of the communist vanguards who set out to mobilize the Assamese peasantry from the 1950s onwards. Their failures ought to carry at least some lessons for future historians of the region.

Paradoxically, these weaknesses make *A Century of Protests* a must-read, as much as its ambitious approach and solid grasp of the many details of Assam's agrarian history. Arupjyoti Saikia has done a stellar job of placing before us a wealth of historical evidence to mull over and think through comparatively. It will be the task of future historians of the Brahmaputra Valley to launch their own ships from this most hospitable port.

#### REFERENCES

- Cederlöf, Gunnel. 2013. *Founding an Empire on India's North-Eastern Frontiers, 1790-1840: Climate, Commerce, Polity*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Chatterjee, Indrani. 2013. *Forgotten Friends: Monks, Marriages, and Memories of Northeast India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Misra, Sanghamitra. 2011. *Becoming a Borderland: The Politics of Space and Identity in Colonial Northeastern India*. New Delhi: Routledge.
- Sharma, Jayeeta. 2011. *Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.