

BOOK REVIEW

Anthropology and Indian Diplomacy, (A Social Audit of Untold Story of Manipur) by Amitabh Sarkar, Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, ISBN:978-93-92556-88-3, Price: Rs. 1500/-

This book comes in an intriguing name and it was the name that first motivated me to review this book. However, there is very little in the contents that can be called as anthropology, for social anthropology is known for its ethnographic method and reflexive understanding; both of which are missing in this volume. From the author's point of view, anthropology perhaps refers to the recording of cultures and also of ethnohistory, which is not quite away from the mark, except that here everything has been done by reference to secondary sources. Again, one may do anthropology from secondary sources, from archival materials and so on. But there is need for a narrative thread drawn from known anthropological sources to bind the material together and to produce an understanding that is anthropological. In this work, 'anthropological' only means referring to the cultural setting and historical background. The author has put together sets of information on various aspects of the North-East but they seem to come in patches and not in a well-knit fabric.

The main drawback of this work is that the chapters do not align with each other, each having been written with a purpose that remains confined to the chapter itself. The initial part of the book begins with an elaborate and well-informed chapter about the history of settlement in the North-East, but mainly confined to Assam, though making occasional references to other parts of North-East as well. From this chapter that is dealing with a time period by and large spanning the centuries from the 12th to the 16th, the reader suddenly arrives in present day North-East where mention is made of the Chicken-Neck corridor, the various road and dam building projects mostly undertaken with China in mind, and where Manipur is mentioned as creating hinderances in the Look-East policy of the present government. This is the weakest chapter in the book, put together mostly from the internet, with no proper referencing, no context and even the dates are not provided of the various projects mentioned, which government initiated them and other important details.

The next chapter takes us to the cultural pluralism of the North east and some of the available ethnographic details regarding marriage practices, inheritance patterns and religions etc. of some selected tribes are shared with a view to showing the cultural pluralism (in the words of the author) of the region.

However, none of the material described so far has any direct relationship to the problems facing Manipur which is finally the subject of the fifth chapter. Here, the author describes the various ethnic groups of Manipur, their historical and contemporary relations and the porousness of the border that Manipur shares with

Myanmar, Bhutan, Nepal and Tibet (China). According to the author and rightly so, the genesis of the ethnic strife between the Kuki and the Meitei's have more to do with deep historical and complex reasons than merely that of granting of ST status to the Meitei. However, while analysing the issue the author is showing unwarranted bias against the Kuki (p.140). He squarely blames the Free Movement Regime that has allowed a very large number of so-called Kuki to come and settle in Manipur, thereby putting economic, social and land holding pressure on the local Meitei. But from other sources, for example the volume on the Chin edited by K Robin (2009), one comes to know that the Chin have been migrating for centuries and many of them had close interaction with the Meitei. Jiten and Serto (2009), have on the basis of their fieldwork written about the Kom tribe of Manipur who are included within the Old Kuki tribes, and who, as the authors claim, used to worship the same deities as the Meitei, before they converted to Christianity. Moreover, this volume tells us about the many different tribes included within the Chin and also about the shifting identities, the many historical conflicts and unease in an area that has always been volatile.

The author has given some valuable insights for example comparing the different kinds of relation that the shifting cultivators and nomadic tribes have with land, especially their lack of memory with respect to land and that of the agricultural Meitei, for whom the land is an extension of the body. Such anthropological inputs have been however left only after mention and not developed into theory which would have enhanced the value of this work. The history of the Ahom kings and their interaction with the hill tribes illuminates the age old and sustained relation that the tribes and the feudal lords had before the advent of the colonial administration. Such information also refutes the text book definition of tribes that the so-called 'tribes' were isolated and lived a life separate from the dominant populations and states of those times. Throughout the book the author has been able to show the ongoing and dynamic relation of the tribes with the non-tribes and with each other. He has also in bits and pieces given much useful information about the North-East region and its kaleidoscopic nature. However, his main thesis that the conflict in Manipur is due to the 'abnormal' increase in the population of the Chin, mostly due to migration and their engagement in poppy cultivation and drug dealing is too reductionist. Even if such activities are going on in the border region, they certainly involve many more stake holders than the Chin tribes alone. If all the information in the book had been strung together properly in a coherent narrative, then maybe some real light could have been thrown on the Manipur situation.

The book is badly produced and it is evident that it was never peer reviewed and not even copy edited. There are numerous grammatical errors, errors of language and typographical errors that have not been attended to. There is also abundance of repetition and the same sentences are repeated again and again. All this could have been avoided with copyediting and peer review, but as it stands the book loses a lot

of academic value because of these flaws especially the poor language. There is a lot of information contained in it and a lot of good insights that could have made this into an important book on a volatile and misunderstood region. It is a fact that very little real information exists on the North-East although in the recent times some good books, especially written by those from the region are coming out. This could have been one of them but missed the mark.

References

- Jiten, Nongthombam and Serto, Manilei, (2009). The Koms of Manipur: A Rethinking on the Colonial Ethnography. In K. Robin (ed.). 2009 *Chin: History, Culture and Identity*, pp 177-187. Brussels and Aizwal: The Euro Burma Office, Belgium and Department of History and Ethnography, Mizoram University.
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