

Young Voices

Defining the Other: *Systemic Alienation, and the Perpetual Marginalization of Northeast India in Modern Indian Policy*

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Abstract

This article examines the ongoing marginalization of Northeast India through Indian state policies, focusing on systemic alienation perpetuated by legislation like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) and socio-cultural exclusions ingrained within Indian society. Northeast Indians frequently experience prejudice, often misrecognized as “foreigners” despite being Indian citizens. Policies have historically deprioritized development in Northeast India, ostensibly to limit resource access for adversaries. Through a critical examination of AFSPA, economic neglect, cultural policing, and media representation, this article argues for policy reforms to dismantle exclusionary frameworks and establish a more inclusive national identity that respects Northeast India's unique diversity.

Keywords: AFSPA, northeast India, culture, society

1. Introduction: The Cost of “Indianizing” Northeast India

India's Northeast is one of the most culturally rich and diverse regions in the country, home to a mosaic of ethnic groups, languages, and traditions that contribute to its unique identity. However, for decades, the Indian state's approach to this region has been driven by an impulse to integrate and homogenize it under a singular, pan-Indian identity (Sankhyan et al., 2020).

This impulse to “Indianize” Northeast India—often through cultural, linguistic, and social mandates—has created a fraught relationship between the state and its Northeastern citizens (Lego, 2023). Instead of celebrating the Northeast's rich diversity, national policies have tended to overlook its unique cultural, ethnic, and historical identities, leading to widespread discontent and alienation (Lego, 2023) (Das, 2009).

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Efforts to define a singular Indian identity have often included encouraging or mandating Northeastern citizens to adopt mainland customs, ranging from language to dress. This strategy has resulted in stereotypes that associate Northeast Indian women, in particular, with “exotic” and “anti-national” characteristics (Dowerah, 2017). Such assumptions not only perpetuate harmful biases but also serve as a means of social control, reinforcing the marginalization of Northeast Indians within their own country. Scholars like Arambam have argued that these policies reflect a deep-seated fear of the “other,” casting Northeast India as both a cultural outsider and a security threat (Arambam, 2008).

This paper will thereby critically examine the roots and manifestations of Northeast India’s marginalization, focusing on discriminatory policies, media stereotypes, and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). By analyzing these dimensions, the paper aims to uncover how Indian policy has entrenched a perception of the Northeast as a “separatist frontier,” with its people deemed suspect and disposable. The article concludes with a call for a more inclusive approach to governance, one that respects Northeast India’s unique identity and values its contributions to the national fabric.

2. Northeast Indian Women and the Blame Culture: A System of Marginalization

A striking example of the systemic alienation of Northeast India can be seen in the treatment of Northeast Indian women within the larger social narrative. Northeast women often face discrimination that is rationalized through victim-blaming and racial stereotyping. An incident reported by Arambam illustrates the prejudice embedded within institutional attitudes (Arambam, 2008). In 2005, a college principal at a prestigious Indian university mandated that Northeast women wear salwar-kameez, a traditional North Indian attire, claiming that their “Western” dress was the cause of the harassment they experienced.

This directive encapsulates the pervasive cultural bias against Northeast Indian women, associating them with “loose” lifestyles and “exotic” sexuality that purportedly incite violence against them (Mukherjee, 2018). McDuie argues that such victim-blaming narratives perpetuate the idea that Northeast women are outsiders whose cultural norms do not align with those of “mainstream” India (McDuie, 2012).

The Delhi Police have also issued guidelines suggesting that Northeast women adopt more “conservative” clothing to avoid harassment. Their pamphlet cautioned Northeast women against “revealing dress” and urged them to “dress according to the sensitivity of the local populace.” Such statements are not merely “tips” but reflect a deep-seated prejudice that holds victims responsible for the violence they endure while absolving the perpetrators. For Northeastern women, these policies are both alienating and dehumanizing, reinforcing the notion that they are culturally incompatible with “Indian” norms (Arambam, 2008).

More disturbingly, there are reports that suggest Northeast women are seen as deliberate “threats” to Indian unity. In a 2005 press release quoted by the Northeast magazine *Eastern Frontier*, a college principal argued that “all the NE girls

are sent by the militants of the region in order to seduce the mainland people so they are molested (and) raped” (Arambam, 2008). The principal’s statement, linking Northeast women’s cultural expression to sedition, reflects an astonishingly xenophobic belief system that is not an anomaly, but a symptom of the pervasive “othering” of the Northeast. When such views are held by educated, influential figures, they become representative of a broader, institutionalized prejudice, leaving Northeast Indian women vulnerable to both physical and psychological harm.

3. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) and the Militarization of Identity

The enduring application of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in Northeast India serves as a stark example of how policy treats the region as a separate, dangerous “other.” AFSPA, which grants the military extensive powers in “disturbed” areas, effectively renders large parts of the Northeast into militarized zones where civil liberties are subordinated to security concerns. Since its introduction in 1958, AFSPA has faced significant criticism for its role in facilitating human rights abuses, including arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings, and torture (Kimura, 2018). By enforcing such a law exclusively in Northeast India and other peripheral regions, the Indian state reinforces the notion that these areas—and by extension, their residents—are inherently unruly and untrustworthy, necessitating military control.

Scholars have noted that AFSPA does not address the underlying political grievances that drive insurgency; rather, it exacerbates them by creating a sense of alienation and mistrust among the local populace (Sahni et al., 2023). Ngaihte argues that AFSPA perpetuates a cycle of violence, where state-imposed militarization fuels resentment, which in turn spawns further resistance (Ngaihte 2015). This dynamic creates a “security theatre” in which the Indian government’s response to insurgency focuses on suppressing dissent rather than addressing its root causes. By prioritizing control over engagement, AFSPA ensures that Northeast India remains distanced from mainstream India, cast perpetually as a frontier in need of subjugation rather than integration (Farrelly, 2014).

4. Strategic Non-Development and Economic Exclusion

The marginalization of Northeast India extends beyond security policy into economic development (Datta, 2011). In the years following independence, policymakers deprioritized infrastructure development in border regions, including the Northeast, fearing that resources would fall into enemy hands in the event of conflict. This “strategic non-development” has left the Northeast severely lacking in infrastructure, education, and healthcare resources. Although the policy was initially intended as a security measure, its enduring impact is an economic exclusion that perpetuates poverty and underdevelopment in the region (Rajeev et al., 2016).

Economic exclusion compounds the alienation experienced by Northeasterners, as the lack of investment reinforces their dependence on mainland India (Haokip, 2012). Moreover, economic underdevelopment is frequently cited as a justification for the continued imposition of AFSPA and other repressive measures. This creates a feedback loop in which economic neglect and military repression feed into each other, leaving the Northeast marginalized both politically and economically. Ashrafuzzaman suggests that meaningful development initiatives, driven by local needs and perspectives, could serve as an antidote to this vicious cycle (Ashrafuzzaman, 2015).

By investing in education, healthcare, and industry on the region's terms, the Indian state could foster a sense of belonging rather than suspicion among its Northeastern citizens (Barua, 2020).

5. Media Narratives and the Perpetuation of Stereotypes

India's mainstream media has also played a role in alienating Northeast Indians by focusing on narratives of violence, insurgency, and cultural exoticism. Media portrayals often emphasize the region's conflicts, overshadowing its achievements and perpetuating a monolithic view of Northeast India as a "dangerous" and "backward" frontier (Mukherjee, 2014). Such depictions not only reinforce stereotypes but also influence public opinion and policy, as negative perceptions are internalized and reproduced in governance frameworks.

The effect of these media narratives is twofold: they isolate Northeast India from the national consciousness while also legitimizing the state's repressive and regressive policies. The media's focus on conflict obscures the region's contributions and achievements, rendering its people invisible except as subjects of violence and unrest (Sitlhou, 2023). As Raj points out, a more balanced representation of Northeast India in the media could go a long way in dismantling harmful stereotypes and fostering a more inclusive understanding of the region within the national psyche (Raj, 2016).

6. Toward an Inclusive and Pluralistic Approach

Addressing the marginalization of Northeast India requires a shift in policy from assimilationist to pluralistic approaches. Rather than imposing a monolithic Indian identity, the Indian state should recognize the unique cultural, ethnic, and historical backgrounds of Northeast Indians as integral to the nation's pluralism. The repeal of AFSPA would be a significant step toward restoring civil liberties and trust, demonstrating that the Indian government is committed to a more democratic and humane approach to governance (McDuie, 2009).

Investment in infrastructure, education, and healthcare—based on local needs rather than security concerns—could help integrate the Northeast into the national economy without sacrificing its cultural autonomy.

Finally, media reforms that encourage balanced and respectful coverage of the Northeast would contribute to dismantling stereotypes and normalizing the region within the broader Indian identity (Raj, 2016). By embracing these reforms, the Indian state can foster a relationship with Northeast India that is based on respect, inclusion, and mutual understanding.

7. Conclusion

Northeast India's marginalization is deeply embedded in Indian policy, from the imposition of restrictive cultural norms to the militarization of its lands under AFSPA. These policies have fostered an environment of alienation and resentment, casting Northeast Indians as perpetual outsiders within their own country. A shift towards inclusive governance—marked by the recognition of Northeast India's unique identity, the repeal of oppressive laws, and investment in development—offers a path forward. Such changes would honor the region's contributions to India's diversity, creating a more cohesive and equitable society where all citizens feel valued and respected. By dismantling the structures that “other” Northeast India, the Indian state can begin to mend historical wounds and build a more just, inclusive nation.

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