

Book Review: A Resurgent Northeast — Narratives of Change

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Bureaucrat Ashish Kundra displays an infectious desire to see the brighter side of things in his account of the changes sweeping the region

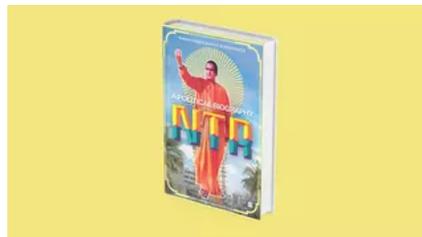
By [Kishalay Bhattacharjee](#)

'A Resurgent Northeast: Narratives of Change' by Ashish Kundra

It has been almost a month since one of the worst ethnic violence in Manipur between the Kukis and Meiteis and the dead have no takers.

It is a re-run of 2015-17 when nine people were buried in Churachandpur, 632 days after they were killed with families refusing to claim the dead. This time around, government figures state more than a hundred killed but the morgues cannot accommodate, and the bodies are decomposing.

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At such a time, I am wondering whether Ashish Kundra in his '*A Resurgent Northeast*' book has spoken too soon. The region's volatility simmers on many levels and it may be too simplistic to write off the forces of ethnonationalism.

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This book has endorsements from a journalist, a historian, a diplomat, and a politician and I have no reason to dispute what they say. However, given the Northeast region was my stomping ground, I was curious about the author's reading of it.

My first reaction to the gorgeous, spirited cover photo was that it perpetuates the stereotype of an exotic tribal habitat. However, the rest of the book dispels that in some measure and provides a Lonely Planet-like guide to some of these places.

Kundra's account is, however, hastily told and I for one would have loved to experience the slow cooking that some geographies of the region are famous for. The ensemble cast of characters and places often jostle for space and spill all over the pages. I wish this was a tale told with cadence and patience.

While the author recognises the chasm between the "mainland" and the periphery but alas the book makes it a melting pot of diverse people. That assumption may be erroneous. Any book on "Northeast" will succumb to this temptation.

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I was struck by the author's claims about "connectivity" which he thinks has been the turning point in the region's "transformation". Most of the capital cities and district headquarters are still not connected by air. The minimal air connectivity is not safe — for example, the Meghalaya air service or choppers to Arunachal.

It is not easy to connect places there but to say the region is "now" well connected would perhaps not be fair. After quoting Narendra Modi on his vision of transportation, the author quickly concedes that "air connectivity is inadequate and expensive." His claim that after Bogibeel bridge and three operational airports "the isolation of Arunachal Pradesh has ended" may also be a stretch.

Kundra displays an almost infectious desire to see the brighter side of things. One of the exceptions is his essay on healthcare which admits how broken it is. From one of the worst figures in institutional deliveries to the poorest maternal mortality, and low immunisation levels to abysmal antenatal care, the statistics are dire.

The percentage of people living with HIV/AIDS continues to be high and the disability-adjusted life years (DALY) of Assam is the highest in the country. Almost on every count healthcare in the region is "woefully inadequate". Given the author's bureaucratic position, the chapter on governance is a useful read to understand the tribal system.

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For years, the region was often described as a case study of parallel governance with the underground armed militia that controlled swathes of land, ran a full-fledged extortion racket, and even influenced the government formation. I didn't find mention of this system of governance in this book so I am hoping this may be a thing of the past!

However, he underlines corruption and injustice and does some plain speak recommending a "serious overhaul of bureaucratic machinery in the region".

As soon as the book highlights the glaring lapses in governance, the author hastens to announce that the last two decades particularly the time since 2014 have heralded a change for the good.

I am tempted to imagine that it is the familiar script of the new establishment; awakening of a new dawn of “Vikas” that will usher peace and build bridges — a bit of a cliché but who knows this may just be the time in history for the region to witness new beginnings.

But some truth-telling is necessary to provide perspective. For example, several administrative setbacks have marked the last nine years of Modi in office and BJP’s direct and indirect rule in the Northeast. The world’s largest disenfranchisement exercise through NRC and subsequent incarceration of people in controversial detention centres were draconian.

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Countrywide citizen protests against CAA and NRC started in Assam and spiraled out of control till the government had to suspend its nationwide implementation. The State’s “resurgent” Chief Minister, an erstwhile Congress heavyweight followed up his tirade against Muslims in every possible way; from cow protection bill to love jihad, from shooting drug peddlers to the dramatic crackdown on child marriage.

The viral image of a government photographer jumping on a dead body of a Muslim man killed in police firing during an eviction drive in Assam may not have extracted a political cost yet but deserves deeper questioning.

The region is battling to improve development indices, connectivity, healthcare, governance, and cross-border smuggling where the “holy cow” fetches the highest price!

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The book begins with Marquez’s Nobel speech and pointing a finger at “mainland India”. I often wonder what is contained in the word “mainland” that the “periphery” is denied?

If it is money, then the region has been given generous grants, if it is attention then the region has had its fair share of it. And the peripheries have their centres too. Look at Manipur today and we must be alert that the “resurgence” could well be of a different kind.

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