

Dolly Kikon

Living with Coal and Oil: Resource Politics and Militarization in Northeast India

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It was a cold winter evening on December 4, 2021, when Indian paramilitary forces ambushed and massacred six Naga civilian coal miners at Oting village, Mon district of Nagaland, on the pretext of “mistaken identity” (as reported). The incident resulted in a violent clash between paramilitary forces and protesting Naga civilians that led to the killing of another eight civilians and one paramilitary fighter. People worldwide poured condemnation against the atrocious act of the Indian security forces and its draconian legal sanction—Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA). A few years before this horrific event, Dolly Kikon’s book engages on the everyday lives of the people in this region.

The book is an excellent ethnographic sketch in the foothills of Assam and Nagaland—a “carbon landscape” as Kikon describes it—that provides a fascinating account of the varying yet entangled social, political, and economic lives and relationships of people living in a “disturbed” militarized zone of Northeast India. The book attributes coal and

oil extraction as a base that attracts heterogeneous ethnic groups, traders, laborers, investors, state authorities, security forces, and militants in the foothills and assembles its vibrant dynamics into establishing ethnic alliances and aspirations, violence, conflicts, poverty, and militarization. Kikon navigates her argument in these complex, multilayered configurations of power, claims, and assertions through extractive activities of competing state and nonstate actors—or the “triadic state”—over resources in the region. Kikon conceptualizes a triadic state as the presence of multiple state authorities and sovereigns in the foothills. In a statist sense, she refers to the state of Assam, Nagaland, and India as triadic; Assam functions as economic state, Nagaland as cultural state, and India as security state operating for varied interests in the foothills (75). She further encapsulates the concept of “sovereignty” beyond the normative notion as being synonymous with “state”—constructed and claimed by multiple nonstate actors (NSCN and other homeland-bound insurgent groups), ethnic bodies (tribal councils), village authorities, and so on. Kikon refers to this as “resource politics” (iv), as suggested in the title of the book, for self-determination and explains this mosaic multilayered setting, characterized by a variegated process of negotiations and contestations that shape and reconfigure social relations and power dynamics in the foothills.

Employing Henri Lefebvre, Kikon conceptualizes foothills as an ambiguous space, sometimes a limited boundary, that allows a locus of contact for multiple lifeworlds and enables diverse groups of people to make sense of interconnectedness around them. Situating beyond the long hills and valley framework used in various political and administrative demarcations, and drawing on works of Edmund Leach (1973), James Scott (2009), and others, Kikon presents the lived realities at the foothills that are often unaccounted for or unrepresented in the politics of hills and valley discourse. In doing so, the book intrigues readers with the myths and legendary stories embraced by both the people of Nagaland and Assam in the foothills, as-yet uncelebrated in popular Assamese as well as Nagamese oral histories. Kikon maintains that these myths and stories are not “about reiterating or rejecting [the] hills-valley framework. Instead, it forces us to reexamine accounts of escape, war and mobility as well as how people appropriate local legends and the past to establish social and political alliances for resource extraction” (16). Interestingly, the foothills, besides exhibiting sociocultural ties and economic transactions, also delineate expressions of power relations and hierarchies among communities. While narrating people’s stories about land conflicts, hygiene, and food taboos, Kikon shows how people from the Brahmaputra Valley (mostly Hindus) assert themselves as superior in a civilizational yardstick and stereotype hill people as “smelly,” “unclean,” and “unhygienic,” close to the colonial notion of “savagery” (95). The manifestation of these power relations navigates their everyday lives and continues to remain a space of belonging for both hill and valley people.

The book also carefully unpacks the abject poverty and lack of social infrastructure in these resource-rich foothills, which Kikon refers to as an “absence of state love” (80, 81). To illustrate, Kikon refers to the Konyak region at the foothills (eastern Nagaland), which has one of the largest carbon concentrations; extractive mining takes place among the poorest districts in various socioeconomic and infrastructural parameters in the state. This mirrors an affair of how the nature and pattern of resource extraction in the region is casting the same as that of the central peninsular region. It markedly traces the link with the current movement for separate statehood for eastern Nagaland, which places its origin in the stark development disparities as compared to other core hill districts of

the state. As Kikon ingeniously puts it, “state love stays up in the hills, it doesn’t filter down to foothills, and in Assam, it got ‘trapped in the Brahmaputra valley’” (63–64).

Another important contribution of the book lies in the unfolding of the development of social hierarchy, class structure, and power relations that have surfaced in the tribal foothill villages. In Nagaland, although land and resources are owned and controlled under customary institutions and protected through a special constitutional provision (371A), often tribal elites, contractors, and politicians have exploited these resources. Kikon offers rich empirical accounts of coal and oil operations and contends that tribal societies are not as homogenous, egalitarian, and autonomous as they seem. Irrespective of social class, the poor, wealthy, landowner, landless, politicians, entrepreneurs, men, and women dream and aspire to improve their livelihood, quality of life, and living standard around the prospects of oil and coal mining.

A fascinating portion is the chapter on “Love or ‘*Morom*,’” where Kikon narrates the understanding of love, *morom* (a Naga word), as being closely intertwined with kinship, gender relations, ethnicity, religion, and resources in coal mining villages. Through the medium of nonfiction stories, Kikon illustrates the way it invokes the “language of love to assert the notion of purity, social order, and meaning in the foothills” (62). Kikon further identifies the complementary relationship between “ethnic politics,” the politics of self-determination, and extractive mining activities in generating new forms of gender inequalities and acts of masculinity, defining gender roles through the life stories of women in coal mining villages.

“Carbon citizenship” (135) is another captivating concept that Kikon introduces. This concept deals with ideas of citizenship, militarism, governance, and development in the foothills and is closely intertwined with coal and oil extraction. The concept also unpacks the nature of how the dynamics of the carbon landscape are determined through the techno-rational power of science and state over the people, which vividly exposes the unruly Indian state governmentality that continuously portrays the region as “dangerous,” “peripheral,” “conflict ridden,” and “underdeveloped” through a security prism, yet also a desirable location for resource extraction and explorations. Security profiling of native people, suspicion of militant alliance, and other similar activities remain a regular occurrence. Even philanthropic corporate social responsibility (CSR) appeared to be devised toward expanding mining exploration. Words from a CSR officer, “We only invest in places where we can get some benefit” (141), speak of the instrumental approach of welfare activities initiated by the mining corporations in the foothills. Overall, this chapter exemplifies a case of “adverse inclusion” conceptualized by Virginius Xaxa (2012) in relation to Adivasi development in the mining region of central India.

The book concludes with an epilogue on the miseries and aspirations of people in the foothills: stories of a school functioning on the ruins of the ONGC (Oil and Natural Gas Corporation) building; students wearing a cardboard that reads, “I’m a donkey, I speak in Assamese/Nagamese”; a man guarding a precious oil field without electricity in his village. Security profiling and disciplining to produce loyal citizens mirrors the larger structural issues of poverty, exclusion, militarization, colonialism, and capitalism in the foothills of Assam and Nagaland state. The book is a path-breaking addition in the literature of Northeast India and South Asian scholarship. It is a must-read for any scholars and readers interested in understanding emerging dimensions of heterogeneity,

citizenship, indigeneity, ethnicity, border studies, and gender relations in contemporary India and beyond.

REFERENCES

Xaxa, Virginius. 2012. "Development and Deprivation of Adivasi in India." In *Social Exclusion and Adverse Inclusion: Development and Deprivation of Adivasi in India*, edited by Dev Nathan and Virginius Xaxa, 28–42. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

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