

**Book Review**

**Across the Chicken Neck: Travel in Northeast India**

Reviewed by Kekhriesituo Yhome

Nandita Haksar. *Across the Chicken Neck: Travel in Northeast India*. New Delhi:  
Rupa Publications, 2013, pp. 272, Rs. 495.

*Across the Chicken Neck* is a book written by Nandita Haksar, a human rights lawyer and activist, someone who has an in-depth understanding of the Northeast India. In many occasions, she had represented the Northeast's insurgent groups fighting against the Indian state for "self-determination". In her previous writings, Haksar has critically voiced her opinion against the Indian state for the use of military power to suppress the movements in the Northeast. In her attempt to understand more about the Northeast, Haksar along with her husband, Sabestian Hongray decided to make a journey through the region, in their scorpio car. This book narrates the exciting, at times tiring, and sometime chilling experiences of the lone couple journey from Delhi traversing up and down the Eastern Himalayan mountains and back to Delhi.

*Across the Chicken Neck* is not just a story about a journey from one place to another. It is also about ideas, histories and people living in those places. The book deals with diverse issues of Northeast India's society, politics, culture, economy, religion and environment.

It is, I think, an outcome of the writer's firm belief in the ideas and principles she upholds. In other words, putting her thoughts into perspective and tell the world what she stand for. Haksar demystify the contradictions that surround her and her thoughts. Supporting the insurgents and anti-establishments through-out her career as a lawyer and human rights activist has only earned the title of "anti-national". To these lots, she simply throws a question, "...how can the defense of the country's Constitution and international standards of human rights be termed a betrayal on one's country?" (p. 1). For those who colonised and imposed cultural intolerance and political supremacy in India, she replies that "the India I love is a place where cultural diversity is to be celebrated, not killed" (ibid).

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Kekhriesituo Yhome is an independent researcher based in Nagaland, India.

Highlighting the specificities of the conflicts in the Northeast is what one would certainly appreciate. It has transcended the common misleading narrative of projecting the Northeast region as a monolith, with the same problem and issues. The monolith approach in dealing with the Northeast is perhaps one of the problems that need to be set right. This book provides some knowledge about the diversity and complex issues that exist in the Northeast. For instance, the causes of some of the conflicts are related to identity (the case of Nagas); religious conflicts (the Garos and Rabha in Assam); migration (Bangladesh migrant in Assam and Bodoland, Adivasis in Assam); political marginalisation by the dominant groups (Nagas, Kukis in Manipur, Karbis, Kachris and Bodos, in Assam, Dimasas in Nagaland). This approach will go a long way in providing a clear view of the problems of Northeast.

After closely associated and supported many movements in the Northeast, from a feminist standpoint, Haskar disapproved the patriarchal nature of the movements and the way these movements “have increasingly taken recourse to religious fundamentalism and tribalism” (p. 2). Moreover, she laments that “today, buying arms is no longer a means to an end but has become an end in itself” (p.183).

Subtly yet, convincingly Haskar argues that “the communities in the Northeast cannot break with their past till the time their histories are denied, their cultures repudiated and their voices silenced. But the only way they will realise their full potential is if they use their histories as a tools for building a vision for the future. Otherwise, they will be trapped by their own past” (p. 245). Some people may not agree with her argument and may even find it ridiculous. But, I agree with her on this issue. It is true that the different communities are fighting for their history, land, identity and recognition, but if these movements are hijacked by others or if some leaders mislead the people for vested interest, things may go out of hand and the only thing that remains will be the debris of their history.

Throughout their journey, Haskar was critical about the developmental projects in the Northeast. As a human rights activist, she argues that development projects not only displaced and uproot the inhabitants but also disturbed the environment and ecological balance of the region. It is true that there are development-induced displacements without proper rehabilitation packages in the region; yet, I would argue that the need of the hour is to develop this under-developed region. Development is not the issue. The question that needs to be addressed is who benefits from the development projects—the outsiders, the multinational companies, the local politicians, the underground groups?

At the end of their journey, the author was honest, when she lucidly expresses that “we are nearly at the end of our trip and I have learnt a lot but have found no answers” (p. 233). The doubts and questions that she seeks to find through this journey, perhaps, only added more questions. This sums up the complexity of the situation of the Northeast today. Despite the many challenges ahead and many questions which have no answer at the moment, Haskar still has hope in the people of the Northeast as she concludes by saying that “the people of the Northeast have survived for centuries and have refused to let history pass them by. They will find ways to survive, perhaps even thrive” (p. 248). Lastly, apart from some simple grammatical and spelling errors, this is a readable and interesting piece of work. Pochury (a tribe of Nagas in Nagaland), was spelt “Pachory”

(p.142). At least the error of tribal identity should have been avoided. Again, it would have add more to the text had the pictures in the book (supposedly taken by Sabestian) were in colour. Perhaps, the editor wants the readers to focus on the substance of the text without diverting their attention with colourful pictures. Anyone who want to know and learn about Northeast India, this book is a must read. However, it may not appeal to scholars and people who have enough knowledge of the region and go for in-depth research and studies. This book is for fresh readers who do not have much knowledge about the Northeast.