

book review

## Of State and Nationalism

by M.S. Prabhakara

*India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* by Sanjib Baruah; University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1999; pp xxiii + 257, \$36.50.

**C**OMBATIVE and polemical in its tone and substance, this passionately engaged but dense narrative challenges the received concepts of the State and Nationalism as articulated in Indian nationalist discourse - a structure and an idea invested with an immaculate, eternally valid and near-mystical properties. The narrative does not claim to be, and indeed is not, a dry, impersonal and normatively detached academic exercise either.

On the contrary, the author makes clear in the introductory chapter his committed engagement as an "interested and implicated observer". Baruah is indeed deeply involved personally and professionally in the memories and experiences of his narrative - as an "ethnic Assamese" (a term he says he is uncomfortable with even while using it) at a personal level, and as a political scientist teaching in the United States at the professional level.

The focus of the narrative is the Brahmaputra Valley, historically the core of Assam. However, the narrative also touches on the peripheral areas of this core which once formed a part of what one might call the "geographical Assam". These peripheral areas were politically, economically and culturally in varying degrees of proximity and distance from the core, the relations marked by amity or hostility or indifference and ignorance. Indeed, the present problems plaguing Assam cannot be understood except in the context of the historical process of the changes in the very physical contours of Assam. A crucial element of these changes which has a bearing on the present situation is the widely shared perception among the majority of ethnic Assamese that they have only been passive spectators, if not the pre-destined victims of conspiracies hatched by foreigners and outsiders which they could barely comprehend, of these developments which have fundamentally affected their land and their history, their past and their future.

What one misses, however, is an equally in-depth treatment of the economic issues of development and underdevelopment that have contributed to the tensions. Indeed, the argument about the failure of the centralised Indian state and, concomitantly, of the necessity of a federal arrangement to overcome the tensions between the nation-state and disaffected nationalities (or sub-nations) overemphasises the organisational features of the Indian dilemma and fails to look at the far more serious structural weaknesses arising out of unequal relations of production and distribution. The sharp and telling analysis of the superstructural contradictions and weaknesses does contrast with the relatively weak treatment of the corresponding contradictions in the sub-structural material base. The rest of the narrative deals with the agitation itself, and the other

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tier providing opportunities for those enterprising enough to seize them, and its inevitable impact on the demography of the region. These developments have posed grave challenges to the concept and, even more importantly and irrespective of its "empirical validity", the self-perception of the Assamese as a distinct and internally coherent people, a nationality within the broader framework of a pan-Indian civilisation and the Indian nation-state, a jati, and to use Baruah's expression, a "sub-nation". (The Assamese word jati, meaning a people and a nation, has a significance going far beyond the relatively restricted meaning the term has in other Indian languages.) THESE chapters together chart the historical and ideological terrain which provided fertile ground for the anti-foreigner agitation in Assam. A notable feature of the narrative is that it brings together diverse themes from sources which one would not normally tap, as for instance, the interesting analysis of the songs of Bhupen Hazarika, to reinforce some of the arguments and to weave together the complex political and ideological landscape in Assam and the rest of northeastern India, where received notions and ideas of nation, nationality and sub-nationalism continue to be in contestation.

Is that admittedly flawed structure worth defending? Does it, can it, engage its citizens in any reasonable dialogue? Setting aside the Indian dilemma, is the very concept of a nation-state, what Baruah characterises as the "contingent and contested nature of nations and nationalities", and the dismissively derided process of "nation-building" in societies that have emerged from centuries of colonial rule worth one's loyalty? Can a nation-state sustain itself without the ideological prop of aggressive and exclusivist nationalism? Is there a necessary dichotomy between "nations" or "peoples" on the one hand and the "nation-state" on the other as categories that have a right to self-determination, that holly Wilsonian cow

ideas and forces that are causally related to the Assam agitation. The challenges posed by the insurrections in the core territory of Assam by the United Liberation Front of Assam (to India) and by the Bodoland agitation (to Assam and in its later stages, to India) and together to the neatly contrived concepts of sub-nationalisms of India's States and less well-defined regions and peoples existing in manageable and manipulable relations of violently articulated tension and understated complicity with the great nationalism of the Indian nation-state are yet to be resolved. Implicit in the analysis is the belief that even if these were to be eventually managed, the issues raised will not disappear and are likely to take fresh forms and manifest themselves in other areas.

The above is a necessarily selective summary of the themes of the book. However, its real subject is the larger dilemma postulated in its very title - India Against Itself. This is a dilemma that is self-evidently as much an Assamese dilemma as an Indian one in that the various people of India, even those whose repudiation of Indian nationhood is apparently absolute, continue to negotiate, sometimes in violent confrontation and sometimes by making openly opportunistic deals - the two processes are not mutually exclusive - a working arrangement to live together in that necessarily flawed structure, the nation-state of India.

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which is lined up with remarkable selectivity only when existing post colonial states striving to consolidate themselves as nation-states are confronted with separatist movements? Formulations on the "declining relevance" of the nation-state inform the argument of this narrative throughout. Linked to this is the sharp criticism of "nation-building" both as an envisaged objective and as an operational exercise. Given the fact that India and Assam is the theme of the narrative, it is perhaps natural that the criticism in this regard is made only in respect of these processes as they are at work in nation-states that have emerged from colonial rule. The obverse side of Baruah's often valid criticisms of unilaterally imposed exercises in "nation-building" is the process of re-colonisation that is also at work in these entities, often with the complicit support of civil society structures and non-governmental organisations heavily funded by the West. This broader agenda which stares one in the face when one sees them at work in societies ravaged by war and starvation, appears never to have been questioned. Not to put too fine a point on it, the single minded objective of the U.S., the one and only imperial power since the end of the Second World War, has been the effective debilitation of other nation-states - except of course of itself and those under its wings. Even in the latter case, a weakening is sought, although this is problematic, as is evident in the rivalries among the U.S., the European Union and Japan. The major part of the task was accomplished with the destruction of the Soviet Union and the dismantling of the "existing socialist states" of Eastern Europe. Unlike earlier battles, this battle has not directly involved weapons of war and the physical occupation of defeated territories. Rather, apart from the systematic subversion and appropriation of international instrumentalities like the United Nations and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to serve the national objectives of the U.S., the most effective weapons have been ideological and technological ones - the beguiling promises and visions of consumerism and the so-called liberalisa-

tion and globalisation.

This is not to question the destructive, even self-destructive, potential of nationalism. An Indian scarcely needs to be reminded that the culmination of the national struggle was as much national independence as national slaughter. Indeed, the current scandal of Hindutva nationalism can be causally linked to the symbols and forces mobilised during the national struggle. However, to argue that the excesses of rampant nationalism of the Indian state in northeastern India could have somehow been mitigated if only the Indian polity had a working federal system, seems such an inadequate remedy to the horrors the narrative has delineated with such passion. Only the willfully blind can fail to see the horrors and cruelties perpetrated by the very structures and organisations and individuals, who, while themselves being victims of rampant nationalism of the Indian state, posit against it even more restrictive and exclusivist sub-nationalisms. One last point about Baruah's treatment of what he calls "cultural politics of language". A key element of Assamese nationalist discourse is the position of the Assamese language in the province and the State of Assam at all points of its constitution and reconstitution, and the contested relations between Assamese and Bengali before and since Independence. The standard view of the "fears" about the future of the Assamese in their one and only homeland is that those who have migrated (or more accurately their descendants) into Assam from former East Bengal (legal), former East Pakistan and present day Bangladesh (illegal) being Bengali-speaking would, over a period of time, outnumber the indigenous Assamese-speaking people, thus endangering the very existence of the people and their tongue. Baruah cites the observation of C.S. Mullan, the superintendent of the 1931 Census in Assam, on migration into Assam of "land-hungry Bengali immigrants, mostly Muslims, from the districts of eastern Bengal and in particular from Mymensingh". The culmination of this process, envisaged in metaphors of war and invasion, would be that in another

30 years, it would not be improbable that "Sibsagar district would be the only part of Assam in which an Assamese will find himself at home". This reading has for long been a favourite text of Assamese nationalist discourse. It was also a constant in the polemics of the leaders of the anti-foreigner agitation. Baruah, however, notes that the critics of the agitation find Mullan's "fears" to have been misplaced. "Contrary to Mullan's mischievous prediction," Baruah quotes one such critic, "the entire East Bengal Muslim peasant community adopted the Assamese language as their mother tongue."

It is surprising that the real nature of the "fear" of Assamese nationalists about the present and putative future identification of their home language is missed on both sides of this polemical divide. The fear is not that the descendants of erstwhile migrants will, at some point in the future, claim to be Bengali speakers, and thus reduce Assamese speakers to a minority in Assam. Rather, the real fear is that this section of the population, most of whom have been probably using Assamese for at least two generations, will not merely continue to speak the language but indeed claim it as their own, stealing away, as it were, a crucial cultural patrimony which defines the Assamese people. This is the significance of the inscriptions on the graves of those killed in the Nellie massacres of the 1983 elections - the overwhelming majority of whom were of East Bengal origin - being in Assamese.

Incidentally, and as seen from the perspective of this reviewer from his present domicile, similar are the "fears" of the Afrikaners in South Africa about the future of Afrikaans under a democratic dispensation and without the kind of state and official patronage it enjoyed under apartheid. However, the real "fear" is not about the future of Afrikaans as such, but that the language, like so many other claimed symbols of Afrikanerdom cherished as the unique patrimony of the white Afrikaner, is being taken over, used or abused in vibrant and independently creative ways by other people who, despite their historic contribution to the growth and development of Afrikaans had been despised and made outcasts under apartheid. Closer home, one thinks of the grand escension with which a creative endeavour by Bengali Muslims used to be greeted not so long ago by those who too viewed Bengali language as their own unique and exclusive patrimony. How things have changed! For, if Bengali as a language and literature has any future at all in the long run, it will have to be in Bangladesh, where it is the national language, unlike in India, where it is only one of several.

— *Frontline*

## Chronicle of The Cultural Interface

by Susan Ram

*Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri; Flamingo, 1999; pages 198; Rs.469.95 (paperback).

**T**HE movement of peoples across borders and cultures that has, in the era of globalisation, broadened and accelerated beyond all previous experience, poses a special literary challenge. At one level, the cultural collisions, dislocation, loneliness and loss of identity thrown up by the process offer writers rich possibilities: locations, themes and characters abound, and the act of cultural juxtaposing promises interesting literary results. The scale of the canvas can, as Salman Rushdie has shown, elicit extraordinary results. But writers also face being swamped by such plenitude. The task becomes one of negotiating the material in such a way that intimacies emerge out of the vastness, the exotic is rendered familiar and the reader, irrespective of geographical location or cultural background, is jerked into new perceptions and understandings.

In her debut collection of short stories, Jhumpa Lahiri impressively unfolds the possibilities of the diaspora fiction genre, while also indicating some of the problems. Of Bengali origin, born in London and raised in the United States, she writes in the main within the bounds of her own experience; most of her stories explore uprooted Bengali experience in or around Boston, a beacon city for India's upwardly mobile by dint of its universities and career opportunities. Her instinct to explore her themes and characters within this well-defined, bipolar geography underlines the necessity, within this genre, for delimitation and control; it is when she strays beyond its param-

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For Mrs. Sen, the wife of a visiting Indian academic, homesickness for family, friends and the sheer exuberance of Calcutta is compounded by immobility in her new surroundings, her fear of driving through the fast, impulsive Boston traffic locking her in to loneliness and accentuating the fragility of her links with life back home. Mr. Pirzada, a Bengali from the other side of the border, is initiated into the mysteries of Halloween by a small Bostonian girl of Indian Bengali origin. Through the prism of his presence, she in turn seeks to make sense of events taking place far from Boston and her history lessons in the Ameri-

can Revolution; the year is 1971, India is at war with Pakistan, and Mr. Pirzada must fear for his family caught in the maelstrom of a nation in the making. Sanjeev, an MIT-trained engineer making it very good indeed in corporate America, finds his life turned upside down and his basic assumptions challenged by Twinkle (Tanima), his precocious new wife.

Working within the confines of this canvas, Lahiri exhibits the deftness of the gifted miniaturist, unlocking mysteries to throw light on sensitive areas of human experience. In the best of the stories, she pursues an identifiable literary strategy: something offbeat or unexpected or quirky is introduced, and this becomes the means by which problems are brought out into the open, confronted and resolved.

In the fine opening story, "A Temporary Matter," a nightly electricity cut - a rare event in Boston or indeed any Western society - creates interludes of intimacy, shadowed by folk memories of India, in which Shoba and Shukumar can at last begin to deal with the grief bequeathed by their stillborn child. For Sanjeev and Twinkle, the newly married couple whose first weeks together are explored in the story "This

Blessed House", a trail of Christian iconography and bric-a-brac secreted in their new home by its previous occupants proves deeply unsettling, destabilising the husband's instinctive male assertiveness and setting the marriage on quite a different course. In other stories, the perceptive abilities of a child cut to the heart of things. In the story "Sexy", Miranda, a young American woman, is shaken out of her obsession with Dev, a married Bengali investment banker, by seven-year-old Rohin, every bit as precocious and forthright as the boy in the story of the emperor's new clothes. Elsewhere, Eliot, an American boy on the threshold of adolescence, is edged into India across the evenings spent at the home of Mrs. Sen, his Bengali babysitter. In this story, Lahiri fully observes the best of the collection, East meets West in the shared experience of loneliness and the poignancy of Mrs. Sen's situation. The interaction is handled with utmost delicacy and control, unsullied by any hint of mawkishness.

In the best of her storytelling, Lahiri eschews showiness in favour of simplicity, delicacy and sustained understatement. This results in moments of acuity and insight. The immaculately

attired Mr. Pirzada, escapee from subcontinental chaos and mayhem, makes a small girl feel a stranger in her own home through the superb ease of his gestures. Eliot, observing his mother in the new universe of Mrs. Sen's flat, suddenly finds his own perceptions turned upside down: it was his mother. Eliot had thought, in her cuffed, beige shorts and her rope-soled shoes, who looked odd. Her cropped hair, a shade similar to her shorts, seemed too lank and sensible, and in that room where all things were so carefully covered, her shaved knees and thighs too exposed. She refused a biscuit each time Mrs. Sen extended the plate in her direction and asked a long series of questions, the answers to which she recorded on a steno pad.

IT is when Lahiri moves outside her Boston setting to assay India as the backdrop for stories that her grip on her material falters. In the story that lends its title to the collection, the Bengali diaspora feeds back into India in the shape of Mr. and Mrs. Das and family, visiting from the United States. Their interaction with the homeland is observed by Mr. Kapasi, a part-time guide who chauffeures them on a day trip to the Sun Temple at Konarak. Through the story runs the theme of misinter-

pretation: Kapasi believes the (by Indian standards) scantily dressed Mina Das to be interested in him and the interpreting work he does at a doctor's clinic, while she assumes that Kapasi, by his very Indianness, will be able to interpret her failing marriage and falling out of love with life. But the authenticity of their doomed encounter is undermined by stilted dialogue, elements of cliché and loaded symbolism exemplified by a gang of menacing monkeys. Set loose from her Boston moorings, Lahiri allows herself to wander rather too freely. In the story "A Real Durwan", she attempts an Indian morality tale with surreal undertones. Magical realism surfaces unconvincingly in "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar", accompanied by overwriting and awkward sentences: "thus, her soliloquies mawkish, her sentiments maudlin, malaise dripped like a fever from her pores" (p. 161). Detached observation, a hallmark of Lahiri's writing elsewhere in this collection, becomes edged out in this story by elements of judgment and caricature. Lahiri as a chronicler of cultural interface, rooted firmly in the Boston she knows and with her antennae tuned to the muted anguish of her middle class protagonists, emerges from this first collection as a writer of deftness, control and understatement. In the best of her stories, she binds reader to character so artfully that the reader longs for the narrative to continue beyond its typically low-key ending. Lahiri, it seems, is a writer well-positioned to move from short story writing to a more sustained fiction. What is not yet clear is whether she is interested in making such a journey.

— *Frontline*