

Northeast India researching community in the UK

Solidarities in Ideosyncracies

An Early Career Researchers' Seminar on Northeast India

Keynote Speaker
Dr. Roluahpuia
Assistant Professor
Indian Institute of Technology- Roorkee

Concluding Remarks
Dr. Arkotong Longkumer
Senior Lecturer
University of Edinburgh

21, Buccleuch Place, University of Edinburgh

Date – 25 October 2023

Time – 10-16.30 BST

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Concept Note

Solidarities in Idiosyncrasies

Background: The one-day seminar on Northeast India (NEI) Researching Community in the UK is the first of its kind to be organised in the UK. It is a result of the need to identify, promote, foster engagement and bring together research focussed on NEI being conducted currently in the UK. While there are already a few established scholars from the NEI region in the UK, there is a growing number of researchers currently undertaking studies based in the UK in multi-disciplinary efforts. Since they are distributed across multiple universities and institutes, this seminar is an attempt to bring researchers collectively with the purpose of networking, sharing knowledge and creating a platform for solidarity.

Overview and Purpose: The significance of a research community needs no elaboration. It is an essential aspect that offers tremendous positive reinforcement for research, perhaps much more for researchers from NEI whose society and public life highly recognises the value of a community. Northeast India lies at the crossroads of South, Southeast and East Asia (Bhaumik 2009). It comprises eight states: Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Nagaland, and Sikkim. These states consist of many ethnic communities with their own specific customs, languages and dialects, and traditional political systems. However, the region as a single entity acquires relevance, especially, when it is projected as an identity vis-a-vis the Indian 'mainland' (Longkumer 2020; McDuie-Ra 2016; Wouters & Subba 2013)

This one-day seminar is an attempt to discuss and understand the topics, approaches or frameworks that researchers, looking at different aspects of the states comprising NEI, employ, adopt and even struggle to identify in relation to conventional South Asian research frameworks and references. Recognising the need to foster engagement with each other, the seminar will offer a platform for researchers and scholars to present their work/work-in-progress. Concerns around identity, nationalism, 'insurgencies', conflict, ethnic and cultural specificities, linguistic diversity, religious concerns, gender concerns, alienation, boundary and border issues and management, environmental questions etc are issues that NEI continually grapples with, to name a few.

In this regard, the workshop aims to recognise some of these encounters inevitable when researching in/on NEI. How are researchers approaching these complex political, economic,

social and religious challenges from their own disciplines? What are the resources and methods that are employed and the issues that arise in the process? How are NEI states marked by geographical lines yet integrated on multiple issues and concerns? How are scholars researching on NEI contributing to global academia?

The seminar anticipates a friendly yet scholarly exchange of ideas and communication with the purpose of learning about diverse ongoing research in the UK on NEI.

Aims and Objectives:

- To build a community of researchers and promote solidarity particularly among research students and Early Career Researchers (ECRs) researching on and interested in Northeast India (NEI) in the UK.
- To encourage a critical yet respectful platform by engaging with each other's work, exchange ideas, raising questions together while highlighting the idiosyncrasies of India's Northeast region.
- To establish research network among researchers working on NEI in the UK and promote NEI-focused (multi-disciplinary) research through seminars on an annual basis.

Venue: The seminar will take place on **25th October 2023 at 21 Buccleuch Place, University of Edinburgh EH8 9LN**. It will begin at 10:00 am and conclude at 16:30 UK time. Those in Edinburgh and others who can join in-person will meet at the mentioned venue. In addition to physical attendance, taking into consideration the realities of distributed locations, and hoping to be as inclusive as possible for interested individuals, the seminar will follow a hybrid format with virtual participation through Zoom.

Zoom link: <https://ed-ac-uk.zoom.us/j/86192483359>

Meeting ID: 861 9248 3359

Passcode: AmU69JAM

For any queries related to the seminar, kindly get in touch with the organizers.

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Seminar Schedule

09:00-10:00	<i>Tea/ Coffee at Chrystal Macmillan Building Practice Suite*</i>
10:00-10:10	Introduction and Welcome
10:10-11:00	<p>Keynote address: Roluahpuia (Online) <i>Asst. Professor, IIT Roorkee</i></p> <p>Discussant: Crispin Bates (In-person) <i>Prof. of Modern and Contemporary South Asia History, University of Edinburgh</i></p>
11:00-11:10	<i>Break</i>
11:10-12:30	<p>Session 1: Gender, State and Politics Discussant: Anisha George</p>
	<p>Mamoon Bhuyan (In-person) <i>Deconstructing 'Detention Camps' of a Postcolonial Frontier State: Assam, through the Lens of the 'detained other'</i></p>
	<p>Abhishek Saha (Online) <i>Documents and the Making of Precarious Citizenship in India</i></p>
	<p>Bendangyangerla Imchen (Online) <i>Political Space and the Space in Between: Participation of Indigenous Women in the Upland Region of India</i></p>
	<p>Stuti Pradhan (Online) <i>The Gendered Sikkimese Subject: Postcoloniality, Indigeneity, and Gendered Citizenship in India</i></p>
12:30-13:30	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Lunch Break</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Chrystal Macmillan Building Practice Suite</i></p>
13:30- 14:30	<p>Session 2: Methods and Methodological issues Discussant: Savio Meyase</p>

	<p>S. Seigoulien Haokip (Online) <i>Doing ethnography in North East India: fieldwork, curfew and ethics</i></p>
	<p>Shivangi Kaushik (Online) <i>Understanding the 'historical' in the collective: understand historical relationalities in newly independent India</i></p>
	<p>Mridu Rai (Online) <i>Photographic Prophecies: Ontological Poetics and Politics in Northeast India</i></p>
14:30-14:45	Break
14:45-16:05	Session 3: Cultures, languages, lived experiences Discussant: Ishita Mahajan
	<p>Raginie Duara (Online) <i>Understanding issue of substance use in Assam: Learning from young people's lived experience around substance addiction, using visual methods</i></p>
	<p>Rathiulung KC Elias (In-person) <i>Cosmology, Divine Beings, and the Wielding of Indigenous Agency</i></p>
	<p>Savio Meyase (In-person) <i>Tone in Tenyidie and related languages</i></p>
	<p>Debanjali Biswas (In-person) <i>Dance Cultures in the Realms of Thanatopolitical and Sublime</i></p>
16:05-16:30	<p>Closing Remarks: Dr. Arkotong Longkumer (In-person) <i>Senior Lecturer in Modern Asia, University of Edinburgh</i></p>

*Kindly note that that Chrystal Macmillan Building Practice Suite is only for Tea/Coffee time.

Speaker and Discussants

Roluahpuia obtained his Ph.d. from TISS, Guwahati. He has held teaching and fellow positions at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), New Delhi, and IIT Guwahati, and he is currently serving as an Assistant Professor (Sociology) at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Roorkee. He was awarded the Arvind Raghunathan and Sribala Subramanian South Asia Visiting Fellowship, 2018-19, at the South Asia Institute, Harvard University, United States. His published work has appeared in noted journals, including *Asian Ethnicity*, *Contemporary South Asia*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, *Himal South Asian*, *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, *Nations and Nationalism*. His book titled *Nationalism in the Vernacular: States, Tribes, and the Politics of Peace in Northeast India* (2023) was published by Cambridge University Press. Puia's research interest broadly covers, among others, identity, nationalism, development, and borderland studies.

Crispin Bates is the Professor of modern and contemporary South Asian history at the University of Edinburgh. He has authored, co-authored and edited a total of 15 books. These include a history of South Asia from 1600 to the present day entitled *Subalterns and Raj* (2010), and a series of seven-volumes about the history of the Indian Uprising of 1857, entitled *Mutiny at the Margins* (2017-21). He has led several major collaborative research funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council. In 2015-18 he led 'Becoming Coolies', an AHRC-funded project on the origins of South Asian plantation labour migration in the Indian Ocean, for which he conducted research in archives throughout the Indian Ocean region, including Assam. He is currently involved as a co-investigator in an AHRC project on the post-colonial history of anthropology in South Asia entitled 'The Other From Within'.

Arkotong Longkumer is Senior Lecturer in Modern Asia at the University of Edinburgh. He is the author of *The Greater India Experiment: Hindutva and the northeast* (Stanford University Press, 2020; Indian edition Navayana, 2022), which was long-listed for the Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay New India Foundation Book Prize 2021. He is also the author of *The Poetry of Resistance: The Heraka movement of Northeast India* (North-Eastern Social Research Centre, 2016) and co-author of an Open Access book, *Indigenous Religion(s): Local grounds, global networks* (Routledge, 2020). He co-edited a special issue of *Contemporary South Asia* on Neo-Hindutva (2018). He is the recipient of the British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship (2017–18),

and visiting fellowships at the Arctic University of Norway. He was the co-Principal Investigator (with Jacob Copeman) of a three-year project funded by the Leverhulme Trust on 'Gurus and media', and from November 2022 has been the Principal Investigator on a four-year project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, 'Decolonising the museum: Digital repatriation of the Gaidinliu collection from the UK to India'.

Abstracts and Biographies (A-Z)

Mamoon Bhuyan, Brunel University London

Deconstructing 'Detention Camps' of a Postcolonial Frontier State: Assam, through the Lens of the 'detained other'.

Since the nineteenth century, colonial authorities have utilized camps as facilities for the mass confinement of individuals whose freedom raised concerns, including prisoners of war and civilians. European and North American colonial administrations started employing detention camps to house civilian populations in the Global South, where they were actively involved in suppressing dissent, protests and 'insurgencies.' Since then, detention camps have become a significant tool for social and political control worldwide. In this context, postcolonial Assam's detention camps also serve the purpose of containing and segregating individuals considered 'undesirable' due to socio-cultural factors, specifically those labelled as the "Bangladeshi Other." At present, six district prisons in the state function as detention camps, housing thousands of suspected 'illegal immigrants' from Bangladesh, including children. Among these prisons, the Kokrajhar district prison is the sole facility designated for women and children. Despite the inauguration of a new "transit camp" in Goalpara district by the Assam government in January 2023, the six district prisons continue to detain suspected immigrants from Bangladesh. This paper critically examines the emergence of detention camps in the northeast Indian state of Assam and Global South on a broader scale. In particular, this paper analyses Assam's detention camps by applying Foucault's ideas such as panopticon and carceral state.

Mamoon Bhuyan is a first-year Doctoral Researcher at the Division of Sociology, Department of Social and Political Sciences, Brunel University London. He has completed his graduation from the University of Delhi and has completed his post-graduation from Jamia Milia Islamia,

New Delhi. His research area focuses on migrant detention, child detention and postcolonialism at large. He is supervised by Dr Rohini Rai and Dr Rachel Stuart.

Debanjali Biswas, Research Fellow with Showtown History Centre, Blackpool

Dance Cultures in the Realms of Thanatopolitical and Sublime

I argue for an examination of performers' exegeses of dissent, thanatopolitics, and representation as imagined in contemporary choreographies emerging from Manipur, India. Historically, the continuum of performance in the region has spanned a range of bodily practices such as martial arts, dance from rituals, physical theatre, and experimental forms. The essay examines the interstices and interweaving of various repertoires as cited in two touring and evolving productions – Meepao (2022) by Nachom Arts Foundation and Footprints in Blood (2021) by Manipuri Nartanalaya. Moreover, it traces the valences that recharge repertoire(s) arising from sentiments of disquiet and slow violence that has become a part of (post)conflict society in Manipur. Both choreographies speak of/to those who have deceased - drawing from narratives on human cost of insurgency, migration, and crises of identity, which is also reflected in the ongoing ethnic violence that has varied tempi of quotidian life in the region. To analyse the acts of bodily transfer, metaphor, social knowledge, memory, and an evolving sense of identity that are at the foundation of these choreographies, I draw from anthropologist Nayanika Mookherjee's conceptualisation of 'irreconciliation' (2022) which seeks to examine the phenomenon of refusal to forget and forgive, particularly in the face of unacknowledged pain, estrangement and grief. This essay draws upon the interplay of resistance and receptivity, homeland and alienation – thematic constancy found in both productions. I illustrate that within the realm of collective action, choreographic 'irreconciliation' has been sought to work towards reconstitution and remembrance.

Debanjali Biswas is an early career researcher in performance studies and social anthropology, and a dance practitioner. Her PhD titled 'Performance and Violence in everyday life in Manipur' was completed from King's College London on a Commonwealth Scholarship. She has recently published an essay in The Routledge Companion to Northeast India (2022) and essays are forthcoming in South Asian Dance Intersections (2023), and The Oxford Handbook of Indian Dance (2024). As the current TaPRA Research Fellow with Showtown History Centre (Blackpool) and a Grantee with Women's History Network (UK) she is exploring historic collections in search of Asian performers in early twentieth-century Britain.

Raginie Duara, University of Leeds

Understanding issue of substance use in Assam: Learning from young people's lived experience around substance addiction, using visual methods

Visual means such as photographs and films are powerful tools that have the potential to unravel some of the deep-seated thoughts and emotions, most of which may not be captured with talk-only interviews. Such arts-based methods are widely used not only in knowledge generation such as to capture lived experiences, but also knowledge transfer where findings can be disseminated through impactful visual messages (Fraser & Sayah, 2011). I have worked on mental health projects with young people ranging from topics such as youth suicide, quarterlife crisis, substance addiction and loneliness. Visual methods can be especially valuable when working with young people and dealing with sensitive topics as such.

In this presentation, I will be sharing works from the Big Picture project, an ESRC and AHRC funded project, where we worked with young Assamese people at-risk of (15-18 years), and those in recovery from (19-24 years) substance addiction. The aim of this project was to increase knowledge, enhance the voice of young people, and inform practice through impacting policy and promoting public awareness. We conducted photo-elicitation interviews to capture experiences and insights from participants, followed by poster and filmmaking where young people developed powerful visual messages to raise awareness among the youth and the public in general.

Dr. Raginie Duara is a Research Fellow in an MRC funded project, CREATE (University of Leeds) working on adolescent mental health and loneliness using arts-based methods. Her interest lies in understanding experiences of youth and has worked on different problem areas such as quarterlife crisis, substance addiction, suicide and loneliness.

Rathiulung KC Elias, University of Edinburgh

Cosmology, Divine Beings, and the Wielding of Indigenous Agency

Drawing from my PhD research, the paper explores two snippets from Rongmei Christianity as demonstrative of indigenous agency. First, it looks at the reformulation of the traditional deity (*rav*) named *Tingkao Ragwang* or 'Sky Deity' in modern contexts. From being loosely reinterpreted as the Christian 'Heavenly God', or being reified (reformed?) in Heraka and *Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak* as the Supreme Creator Being, I explore whether the story

of *Tingkao Ragwang* represents cases of negotiations of Rongmei communities with contemporary socio-economic experiences and wider religious-philosophical worldviews. Secondly, the paper turns attention to the figure of *Jisu Krista* (vernacular for Jesus Christ) as the emergent deity/person in the cosmological landscape. It analyses *Jisu Krista* by briefly tracing the progression from being considered 'white demon' to becoming an integral strand in Rongmei lifeworlds today, and by delineating the multiple lives he embodies. Through these reflections, the paper suggests that the religious lives of the Rongmei serve as a window into the fundamental reorientation of indigenous cosmologies in light of their lived experiences.

Rathiulung Elias KC (Thiu) is a Rongmei from Manipur. He is currently a PhD candidate at the Centre for the Study of World Christianity, University of Edinburgh.

S. Seigoulien Haokip, SOAS University of London

Doing ethnography in North East India: fieldwork, curfew and ethics

What do ethnographic explorations in borderlands such as North East India entail? How can we meaningfully study people, cultures and everyday practices in a context that has been historically marked by conflict and violence? In this paper, as an indigenous tribal researcher from upland North East India, I attempt to present a 'reflexive' account of my experience as a fieldworker in Manipur – a state which is currently witnessing multiple instances of violent ethnic conflicts since 03 May 2023. It primarily discusses some of the ethnographic insights, challenges, subtleties and nuances pertaining to methods, ethics and practice, both for the fieldworker as well as research participants. In other words, the paper aims to highlight the complex terrain of ethnographies in borderlands including planning, access, anticipated risks, mitigation strategies and other fieldwork practicalities.

S. Seigoulien Haokip is a PhD candidate at the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, SOAS University of London. His areas of research interest include anthropology of borderlands, mercantile networks, tribes, and North East India.

Bendangyangerla Imchen, University of Sussex

Political Space and the Space in Between: Participation of Indigenous Women in the Upland Region of India

During the colonial and post-colonial periods, Naga indigenous women were at the forefront of the fight for their community's self-determination and sovereignty. However, their participation and struggles have not been well recorded or presented in existing research. Without the suffering and plight of Naga indigenous women who endured militarisation and violence for almost a century, the Naga battle for self-determination would not have been achieved. Six decades have passed since the Naga indigenous community achieved statehood, but despite women's participation, there is limited female voice and representation in the political space. Naga indigenous women's political rights are limited due to multiple challenges and various intersecting forms of oppression, but no measures have been taken seriously to address this issue. Hence, the following are the four objectives that this research addressed: i) the forms and patterns of participation for Naga indigenous women in political space, ii) the impeding factors, risks, and opportunities that influence or bar Naga indigenous women's participation, iii) men's perceptions and attitudes towards the participation of Naga indigenous women, and iv) an examination of any space beyond the political space for Naga indigenous women's emancipation for empowerment and participation.

A qualitative methodological approach and in-depth interviewing were employed to explore the participation of Naga indigenous women in three spaces: the state electoral political space, the indigenous traditional village institutes for self-governance, and Naga indigenous women's organisations. The concept of space is built on Andrea Cornwall's (2002, 2004, 2007) work on spaces: closed space as the electoral political space, which is difficult for women to participate in; invited space as the indigenous traditional institute (self-governance) that invites women to participate but with limited choice; and the organic/claimed space as the indigenous women's organisation the space in between, a collective space for women to assert their own power and subjectivities.

This thesis makes a unique contribution to the study of the Naga indigenous people and the larger Indigenous discourse on women carving out a place for themselves that is neither personal nor formally political but instead brings all women together and enhances their

political engagement and manifests empowerment. It also contributes to understanding the act of hidden and open resilience and resistance of Naga indigenous women to reclaim their rights and advocate their interests without being seen as attacking the traditional norms and status quo. Another contribution is situated empowerment, from the Naga indigenous women's worldview, to gain recognition, self-awareness, and self-determination for women's rights. The study advocates enforcing gender parity within party systems, facilitating equitable access to financial resources and funding for campaigns, addressing corruption and other wrongdoings, and finally supporting the evolution of customary law in a consensual manner to address the misconceptions. The inspiration for this research is rooted in the researcher's childhood memories and her embodiment as a Naga indigenous woman.

Hi, I am Bendangyangerla Imchen, and I go with the stage name Yangthy Imchen. I am a passionate researcher with a focus on Indigenous women, gender, and intersectionality. I have completed my fourth year of PhD in Gender studies (Humanities) at the University of Sussex from the school of Media, Arts, and Humanities and school of Law, Politics, and Sociology and currently waiting for the university to fix a viva date. My PhD research focuses on, 'Political space and the space in between: Participation of the Indigenous women in the upland region of India'. My research is driven by a deep curiosity to understand the forms and patterns of participation for Naga indigenous women in the political space and contribute to the advancement of knowledge in this discourse. The inspiration for my PhD research is rooted in my childhood memories and my embodiment as a Naga indigenous woman.

Before embarking on my PhD Journey, I earned the degree of Bachelor of Arts with major in English literature from Unity college under Nagaland University, and Bachelor of Divinity from Trinity Theological college under Senate of Serampore University. I also completed my Master degree in Women Centred Practices (School of social work) from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. My academic background, combined with multidimensional identities as indigenous and woman has prepared me to tackle complex challenges and explore researches on similar discourses.

Shivangi Kaushik, Oxford University

Understanding the 'historical' in the collective: understand historical relationalities in newly independent India

This paper seeks to understand how historical collectives from the different states of Northeast India influenced sociopolitical recognition in newly independent India. It seeks to understand how past struggles for recognition disrupts hetero-temporal narratives of belongingness. As a privileged ethnographer hailing from one of the community and states of the region (Assam), I also hope to revive and centre conversations on relationalities which emerged during my archival research amongst individuals from different communities (in relation to each other and me as the ethnographer).

Shivangi Kaushik is a researcher and hails from Guwahati. She listens to music in her free time. Shivangi was born and brought up in Guwahati and is fond of Xal (Sal trees).

Savio Meyase, University of Edinburgh

Tone in Tenyidie and related languages

My research deals mainly with the documentation of tones and the phonological analysis and comparison of the tones and other linguistic elements in the Tenyidie language varieties and their related languages. Tenyidie, also known as Angami, is an under-documented language and is designated an endangered languages by UNESCO, despite the fact that it has the most number of speakers in the immediate area, and amongst the languages in this study. These languages are located in the south of the state of Nagaland and north of Manipur in India. The linguistic relationship of these languages is also poorly studied and language trees for these languages are not properly worked out. This study attempts to fill some of these gaps of information by establishing the relationship between the languages as well the varieties within Tenyidie. I am trying to work this out by collecting language data from these languages and comparing the cognates while also trying to construct a proto-language wherever possible and working out the branching of these languages in the tree. An important aspect of this study is the documentation and study of the tones of these languages. These languages show complex tone inventories and such systems are still considered new findings in the world of language studies. For example, both Tenyidie (Angami) and Sopvoma (Mao) have four level tones in their inventories. Most tone studies in linguistics are mainly done in African or

Chinese languages which are very different tone systems when it comes to number of tone inventories and type of tones. African tonal languages are mainly two-toned systems with a few having three tones, while Chinese tones are rather dynamic as compared to the level tones of Tenyidie and Sopvoma. Such an inventory provides novel data to studies of tonal interactions.

I am a Newton International Fellow doing my postdoctoral research in linguistic. I am based in Edinburgh and affiliated to the University of Edinburgh and the University of York. My research is mainly concerned with the study of tone in the languages of Tenyidie (Angami) and its neighbours.

Stuti Pradhan, Newcastle University

The Gendered Sikkimese Subject: Postcoloniality, Indigeneity, and Gendered Citizenship in India

My research engages with differentiated citizenship model adopted by postcolonial India — a model that enables historically marginalised groups to acquire collective rights within the individualistic liberal framework, ensuring the inclusion of everyone as full citizens. In India, and more specifically the Northeast India (the eastern Himalayan borderland), collective rights of historically marginalised groups are maintained and sustained through the constitutional validation of the marginalised groups' customary laws over parliamentary laws. While such a framework protects the community rights of minority groups, these customary laws, however, privileges the rights of men over women. Thus, creating a contradiction between community rights of minority groups and individual liberal rights of women belonging to the minority group.

It is within this framework, that I take Sikkim as a case study to explore the gendered nature of Sikkim subjecthood within the Indian democracy. More specifically, this research aims to understand how Sikkimese women experience, navigate and socialise through their gendered Sikkimese identity on an everyday basis.

The research is embedded within postcolonial feminist epistemology and draws from sociological and political theories of postcolonial feminist citizenship and indigeneity. The research also engages with feminist borderland studies to explore gendered citizenship

practices manifesting in the (eastern Himalayan) borderlands as a result of colonial and postcolonial legacies.

Drawing from feminist research methodology, this project uses semi-structured interviews, archival studies, and autoethnography as research methods to understand the experiences of Sikkimese women as ‘Sikkimese citizens’ and ‘gendered subjects’ within Indian democracy.

Stuti is a PhD scholar at Newcastle University, UK. Her research is broadly based in the eastern Himalayan borderland, and views the region through the lens of gender, indigeneity, and coloniality/postcoloniality. Stuti’s research interests are heavily influenced by her personal experiences of being a gendered Sikkimese subject within Indian democracy.

Mridu Rai, University College London

Photographic Prophecies: Ontological Poetics and Politics in Northeast India

As a critical colonial frontier in the 19th century, on the one hand, Northeast India was heavily capitalized, whilst, on the other, it was consistently imagined as backward and uncivilized. An assertion over time and space, such imaginaries are never innocent. They are but a classic form of coloniality providing conceptual and ideological scaffolding to material conquests. However, what was pictured as a wasteland for the colonizers—the viewer, the knower, the storyteller—was, in fact, a space pregnant with diverse cosmologies enacted by the collaborative coexistence between humans and non-humans. After independence, this position of power seamlessly transferred from the British to the Indian state, which then placed itself in the seat of the viewing subject as the storyteller representing the region from afar. Thus, despite its perception as a dangerous and vulnerable space, extractive regimes, in its many guises, continue to thrive in the region.

If Northeast India has been confined by coloniality, a raw material for representation to be familiarized, made knowable, ordered, and put to profit for distant sovereigns, my hypothesis is that a new conceptual and aesthetic shift in photographic practices is beginning to challenge these notions. Communities are now reclaiming the power of storytelling, dismantling the fictional visions imposed upon them. Through ethnographic investigations of three artists practicing within diverse communities and contexts, this paper seeks to understand how they navigate complex histories and lived experiences to forge new political

spaces through their image-making processes. The paper also seeks to make the case for the emergence of an animist ontological perspective in photography. This distinct visual culture approaches the image as a sensorial and relational phenomenon as opposed to the dominant ocularcentric paradigm that emphasizes a vision-centered rationalistic interpretation of knowledge.

Mridu Rai is a PhD scholar in Anthropology at the University College London. Her research centres on harnessing indigenous and animistic philosophies as methodologies and frameworks within visual culture. She is interested in investigating photography's transformative potential in challenging dominant narratives to foster ethical and inclusive representations. Her ongoing project, How Do I Bring You Home?, examines colonial photographic archives of the Eastern Himalayas and has been exhibited at the Royal Anthropological Institute in London (2021-2022) and the Serendipity Arts Festival in Goa (2022).

Abhishek Saha, University of Oxford

Documents and the Making of Precarious Citizenship in India

My DPhil project — tentatively titled 'Documents and the Making of Precarious Citizenship in India' — aims to understand citizenship through the triadic relationship between documents, people who do or do not hold them, and the state. I will examine the ongoing citizenship determination processes in the Indian border state of Assam — the preparation of the National Register of Citizens and the functioning of Foreigners' Tribunals.

The NRC was an unprecedented exercise asking all residents of Assam (approximately 33 million) to prove their Indian citizenship based on decades-old documents. The final list published in 2019 excluded 1.9 million applicants, leaving their citizen status in limbo as of now. The NRC intersected with an existing citizenship determination mechanism — quasi-judicial institutions known as FTs. FTs send notices to those Assam residents whose citizenship has been questioned by the police or local election officials. From the 1980s till today, the FTs, a quasi-judicial institution unique to Assam, have 'declared' around 150,000 Assam residents, who largely claim to be Indians, as 'illegal foreigners'. In both these processes,

documents that people hold — and the details these documents contain — assume critical significance towards citizenship determination.

As people, especially from religious and linguistic minorities in Assam, try to pacify the state's concerns, an intimate relationship is crafted between the people, their documents, and the state — a relationship that this DPhil project will attempt to unpack. The project will seek to answer questions on how possessing documents shapes people's perceptions of their citizenship status and belonging, and how documents are interpreted by the state in its efforts to identify a citizen and an outsider. Can citizenship be revoked by the state by questioning the authenticity or disregarding the paperwork that people possess — and if so, then what does it speak about the nature of the majoritarian state itself?

*Abhishek Saha is a DPhil candidate at the University of Oxford. His research focuses on questions of citizenship in India. His book **No Land's People** (HarperCollins, 2021) is a journalistic account of the humanitarian consequences of citizenship determination exercises in Assam.*