

Sudeep Chakravarti's *Highway 39: Journeys Through A Fractured Land* is, in plain-speak, what the author says it is: notes, observations, perspectives, histories and everyday life from India's Northeast along the Highway 39 and its tributaries. It is a compendium of tales of various hues from a contested political geography, along the highway, and as Chakravarti puts it, "the story of our times, the unfinished story of India's integrity".

I met Chakravarti at an event a day before I was given his book to review. I had not started reading it yet. I mentioned to him that I had it (without telling him that I would review it) and he told me, "I considered the highway as the link between a set of narratives and myself as the *sutradhar* (narrator)."

A *sutradhar*, apart from being a narrator, is also seen as a prompter and a storyteller, weaving together pieces of information into a fine tapestry of narratives. I found a reference to the metaphor of the *sutra* (thread) again in the introductory chapter where Chakravarti talks about the treatment of the book. "During a road trip in Manipur and Nagaland along Highway 39 in 2008, the approach and the title of the book fell into place. This highway through its routing offered itself as a broad *sutra* for storytelling both about conflict and the coming out of conflict," he writes.

The National Highway 39 begins in Numaligarh, Assam, and takes one all the way to Moreh, Manipur, ending there at India's border with Myanmar after 436 kilometres. I have traversed the 39 many times, covering short and long distances, and even to Moreh, an intriguingly cosmopolitan border town, through landscapes where a sizeable chunk of the ethnic diversity of the region reside. It connects historical and existing theatres of life, celebrations and deaths played out in a complex web of political events and processes. I was not surprised at the author's fascination for this particular *sutra*.

I read the Introduction hoping it was not yet another book prompted by some fascination for the region and its seemingly unfathomable character of conflict that conversations in drawing rooms with "people from the Northeast" brought about. I have to confess, it is tricky business to get a book on the region reviewed by someone like me, born and bred in the thick of it all. Arguably people with "connections" to the region, both from within and outside, display fervent loyalty to it. Writings like this will go through that extra bit of scrutiny and even relentless attempts at finding faults to establish information, perspective or an area that the author may have overlooked.

Having read the Introduction and reached the point where Chakravarti professes a decision to take the "approach of spontaneity" rather than an "omnibus approach", I was relieved, albeit still cautious. The unpretentious submission that "political correctness (to include all sides of the stories and from everyone) could amount to more words" appealed to me. "This may

Sensitive sutradhar

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By Sudeep Chakravarti

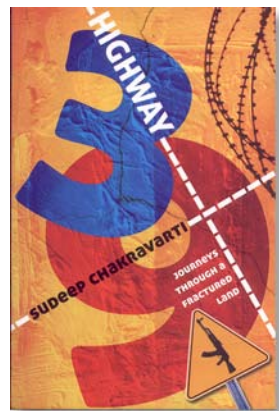
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not be the perfect approach, but to my mind there really isn't a perfect approach, only practical ones that attempt to bring untold stories – or humanised versions of told stories – to audiences that are not otherwise accessed," he adds.

I put emphasis on the Introduction of a book, as the nature of this section usually becomes the *sutra*, if you like, to what follows. In this case it made delightful reading with a mixture of personal stories, academic references and historical information – a structure that Chakravarti follows throughout. He articulates his engagement and role as a *sutradhar*, including reflections on his Indian-ness vis-à-vis the non-Indian-ness of many of the people he meets.



In addition to being a powerful journalistic work, what *Highway 39* has is life. Everything – good, bad and ugly – is alive. There are no abstractions. Everything – including people, living and dead, languages, words, places, signs, ironies – that Chakravarti writes about tells a story that is poignant and hard-hitting. This refraining from abstraction places this book among the very few significant narratives on the region

While Chakravarti follows the highway, there is no strict sense of direction that the book follows. He starts off in Dimapur, 78 kilometres into the highway, travels further through Kohima to Imphal, leaves the highway and goes to Ukhrul, hits the *sutra* again at Senapati, goes to Jorhat which is on Highway 31 and then comes back to Dimapur and so on. This wandering, however, does not disorient the reader. The candid, yet sensitive narration keeps one focused and curious of the mix of quirky travel writing, history and lived realities, that is also substantially informative in matters of what is termed as the "fractured land".

A striking feature of the book is its references. Chakravarti seems to have done his homework thoroughly, diligently pouring over and observing every shred of information that came his way in the form of historical documents, academic books, poetry, and even plays and writings on the wall, literally. This makes for immensely pleasurable and enriching experience. His references to Sanjib

Baruah's *Durable Disorder* plug the reader to a political analysis of the region. Citations from the reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India regarding Nagaland bring home the realities of the political economy of a history from where the fractures have emerged. The dreams of the *Vision 2020* document for the region are illustrative of the ironies when viewed through the prism of prevalent realities. Pegged to actual and recorded conversations with officers of the Indian Army, rebel leaders, people affected by violence and the odd entrepreneur, the references are made more relevant and distinctive.

Throughout the book, Chakravarti remains true to the character of the

the book and is an emphatic indicator not only to the quality of the narrative, but to the uneasy coexistence of the region and what symbolises India. His description of bizarre and ubiquitous representations of this state of being in everyday life along NH 39 are made vivid through memorial monoliths, modest graves of those who fell prey to the conflict, Sports Authority of India tracksuits and security forces "gripping AK series rifles, heads covered in trademark, rakish black bandanas".

While this may be termed as ordinary to any observant and sensitive "Mainlander", what marks Chakravarti's writing apart are instances such as the honest acknowledgement that a resident of the region is "inured to such schizophrenic missives" unlike him, "for whom such a place seemed bizarre in the way dignity, desperation and death came together so carelessly, so seamlessly".

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The poignancy and harshness of reality is pronounced particularly when narratives involve children. In Chapter 11, Chakravarti visits the family of Rabina, a resident of Imphal who was killed in 2009. He meets Russel, Rabina's two-and-half-year-old son. "As Rabina's father-in-law, Thokchom Damu, arrives from the depths of the house, I get up from my perch on a plastic chair to greet him with folded hands, the same as I had his wife. Chinglensana and I managed a brisk handshake. And Russel, well, he got his hair tussled by me, much to his irritation, and laughter from grown-ups." His conversations with Vidyanani, a girl of eleven who was arrested by the security forces, are tough to read, both due to the circumstances that she went through, and the questions that Chakravarti raises, making Vidyanani relive her trauma. Chakravarti admits he is equally uncomfortable by this and his interrogation of the act of seeking information, along with other instances, adds an element of honesty that runs through the book.

Reading *Highway 39* reminded me of an incident when Temsula Ao, a writer and poet mentioned in Chakravarti's book, read some of her poetry and excerpts from one of her works of fiction, *These Hills Called Home*, to a gathering in Zurich. One of the first questions asked after the reading was whether she always wrote about conflict in her homeland, Nagaland. Ao said she did not. She simply told stories. Chakravarti is admittedly writing about conflict. Everything, including the cover illustration of the book, has conflict pronounced in no modest manner. However, while reading the book, it strikes you as being a narrative about life. It just happens to be located in a reality of protracted conflict. This is what makes *Highway 39* such a convincing read. ■

sutradhar, a trait, that I must say, is praiseworthy. Subtle and intelligently inquisitive, he lets others do the talking, carefully choosing the nature and content of his interventions. This has yielded spectacular results. In Chapters 4 and 5, when he meets leaders of the NSCN-IM, one of the most powerful armed political groups in the region, his interviews are examples of a seasoned journalist. The point of departure here, as a fine writer, are the minute observations that cleverly recreate the environs of the conversation, adding subtly to the nuances of a given situation. For instance, he writes about his meeting with a high-ranking officer of NSCN-IM:

Across from where I am seated, a staircase reaches into the shadows of the first floor. After a few minutes, Major General Phungthing, number three in his army, and convenor of its Ceasefire Monitoring Cell on behalf of NSCN-IM, descends from it. He carries a LED lantern.