

LIBRARY COPY

2

HEAD HUNTERS AND FREEDOM FIGHTERS

CONSTRUCTION OF THE TRIBAL IDENTITY IN
INDIA'S NORTHEAST

AN ANALYSIS OF TWO CANONICAL TEXTS

by

Arunabh Borgohain

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Philosophy



Centre for Linguistics and English
School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi
2003





Centre of Linguistics & English
School of Language, Literature & Culture Studies
जवाहरलाल नेहरू विश्वविद्यालय
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi-110067, India

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled "Head Hunters and Freedom Fighters: Construction of the Tribal Identity in India's Northeast, An Analysis of Two Canonical Texts" submitted by Arunabh Borgohain, in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy of the University, is to the best of my knowledge an original work.

We recommend that this dissertation may be placed before examiners for evaluation.

PROF. VAISHNA NARANG
CHAIRPERSON

PROF. G.J.V. PRASAD
SUPERVISOR

PROF. S.K. SAREEN
SUPERVISOR

Professor Vaishna Narang
Chairperson
Centre of Linguistics & English
School of Language, Literature
& Culture Studies,
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi-110067

DECLARATION

This is to state that the dissertation entitled “**Head Hunters and Freedom Fighters: Construction of the Tribal Identity in India’s Northeast, An Analysis of Two Canonical Texts**” submitted by the undersigned is an original work and has not been submitted to any other university or institution for attainment of any degree or diploma.

Arunabh Borgohain

ARUNABH BORGOHAIN

*To Aai, who initiated me to search,
and Deota, who helped me to reach.*

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	11
<i>Preface</i>	13
<i>Maps</i>	15
1 Theoretical Considerations: Constructing the Nation and Framework	23
2 Wild Orchids in the Virgin Frontier: Ethnicity and Identity in India's Northeast	41
3 Failure of the Little Gods: Analysis of the Texts	89
4 'Relexification' and Other Conclusions	137
<i>Bibliography</i>	147

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The seed of this discourse took shape during one's initiation to the 'English' classes when the dimension of literature changed from a discrete, aesthetic terrain towards an arena of interrogation and enquiry through the scholarly navigation of the faculty. The undersigned herein takes the privilege to thank Prof. G. J. V. Prasad and Prof. S. K. Sareen who guided, directed and advised towards the completion of the dissertation. In spite of adverse circumstances which are beyond my control, they were kind, patient and understanding thus enabling one to cross the stumbling blocks and reach the rendezvous. It may be a clichéd statement but worth it, that this project would have been impossible sans their support.

My friends Amar Jyoti Dutta and Biplob Gogoi extended constant support in each stage of the task. My sincere thanks to them for their whole-hearted assistance. I also take the opportunity herein to mention the friends on the 'other' side, with whom I spent long hours in verbal duels and dialogues about the tribal question which enriched me greatly in the study. They are Ashok Tajo and Pankaj Teron, among others.

PREFACE

It is a masked world with multilayered truths, half truths, distortions and damned lies. Again this world is inhabited by different peoples in various layers- 'aristocracy of humanity' and the 'üntermenschen' with other entities in the mid-rung.

The objective of this discourse is to interrogate the 'identities' of tribal and 'other' communities and the internal colonialism that is activated in their constructions in India's Northeast in the canonical Assamese texts/novel.

While colonialism/postcolonialism is a major academic preoccupation vis-à-vis relation between the 'whites' and the 'others', we may slightly slant our view to India's Northeast, a no no land in the backwaters of the subcontinent. The view from 'outside' the Northeast is blurred in the first place but must not be assumed that the 'internal' view is brilliant and coherent or objective vis-à-vis the 'others' (read collective psyche of the mainlanders, the hierarchies of 'other' exists actively within this entity too. These hierarchies are quite complex and hence the collective tribal identity cannot be considered as uniform or homogenous.

In this context the hierarchies reach enormous heights, which may be safely termed as tentacles of internal colonialism based on a self- styled cultural and civilizational superiority. Kipling and his ilk or positions may be far removed from this domain- yet the contents of the 'ne'er the twain shall meet' is quite near, similar and evident. The hues of 'twain' are not black and white but the brown and the yellows with different shades.

The tribal communities of Assam constitute a substantial proportion of the total populace of the state. Yet literary works by the tribals are quite miniscule. The reason for this is quite obvious and at best left to the students of sociology.

However, another important point in motivating this study is the lack of objective critical study about Assamese in literary texts which are 'modern'. Studies about myths, folks tales and other cultural artefacts abound but research on the 'Assamese' contexts are quite inadequate.

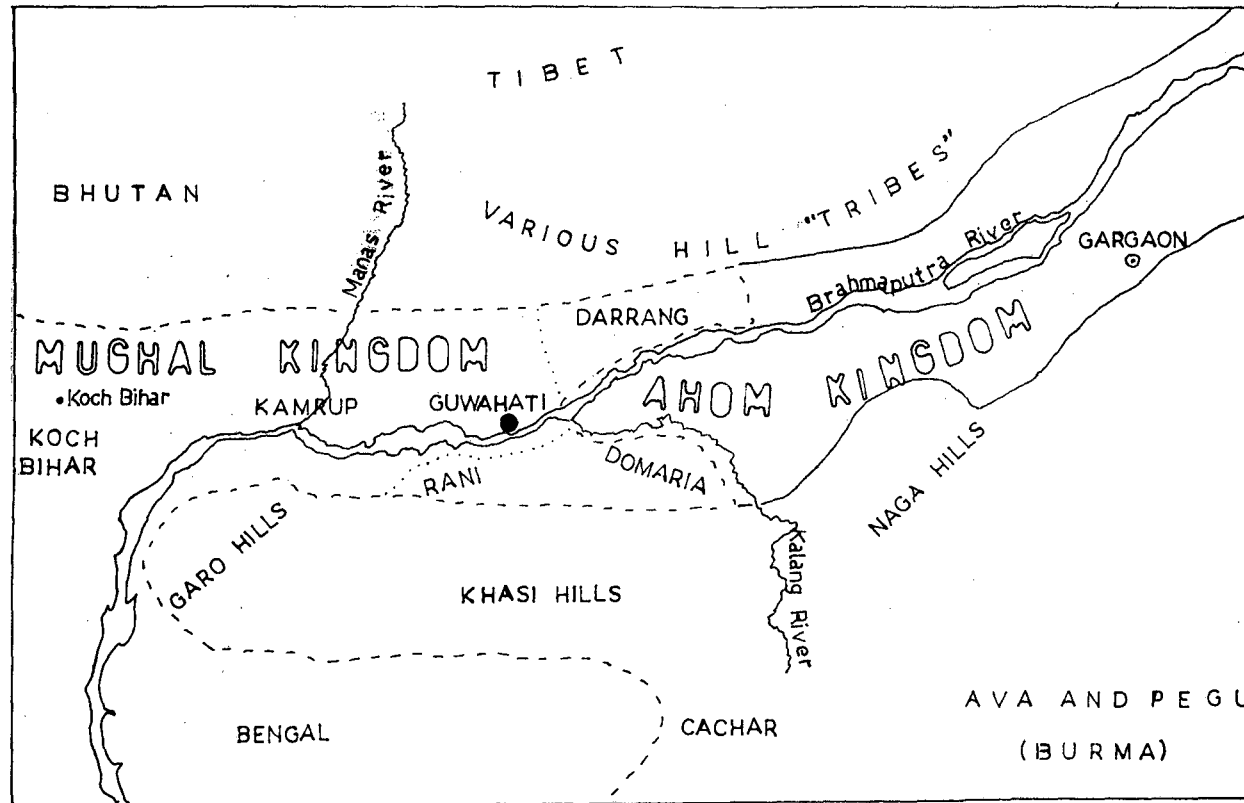
The texts studied *Miri Jyoti* and *Mrityanjay* have acquired halos of canonical positions in the Assamese literary history. But in a different view these texts are also landmarks through which the blurred constructions can be interrogated and deconstructed. Hence this discourse is about the subaltern, tribal, and peripheral identities. But to bring the context a bit closer the project is actually about the 'sub-subalterns' inhabiting a more distant periphery.

The 'Assamese' project was based on delinking from the Ahom and tribal history and the conciliatory ethos and to link the contemporary situation to a contrived-Hindu paste, which however failed due to obvious reasons. That contrived and 'constructed' line of thought and mission failed to penetrate into the Tibeto-Burman tribal and 'other' peoples. Gradually the ire was generated against the onslaught of the civilizing mission. This is about how a semi-colonizer attempts to construct a society, polity, culture by 'colonizing the indigene. However the semi-colonizer was colonized in time and space by other entities too. This is a study of colonization and subsequent decolonization. However, this is just one tale out of the whole frame of the 'epic' which constitutes the Northeast of India.

Albeit it is a different story that the semi-colonizer considers itself to be a part of the mainstream society, yet in some contexts it is again 'othered,' 'appropriated' and even 'appreciated' by the 'master' race. Yet elements of the semi-colonizer and the indigene attempt to liberate from the stranglehold. But the perspectives in the discourse have been kept within the question of the primordial ties of ethnicity, identity and race rather than class due to obvious reasons. As a whole, the situation is unique and complex thus defying any easy 'explanation'. I hope this will be an attempt in the right (or northeastern!) to blow away the haze surrounding the region.

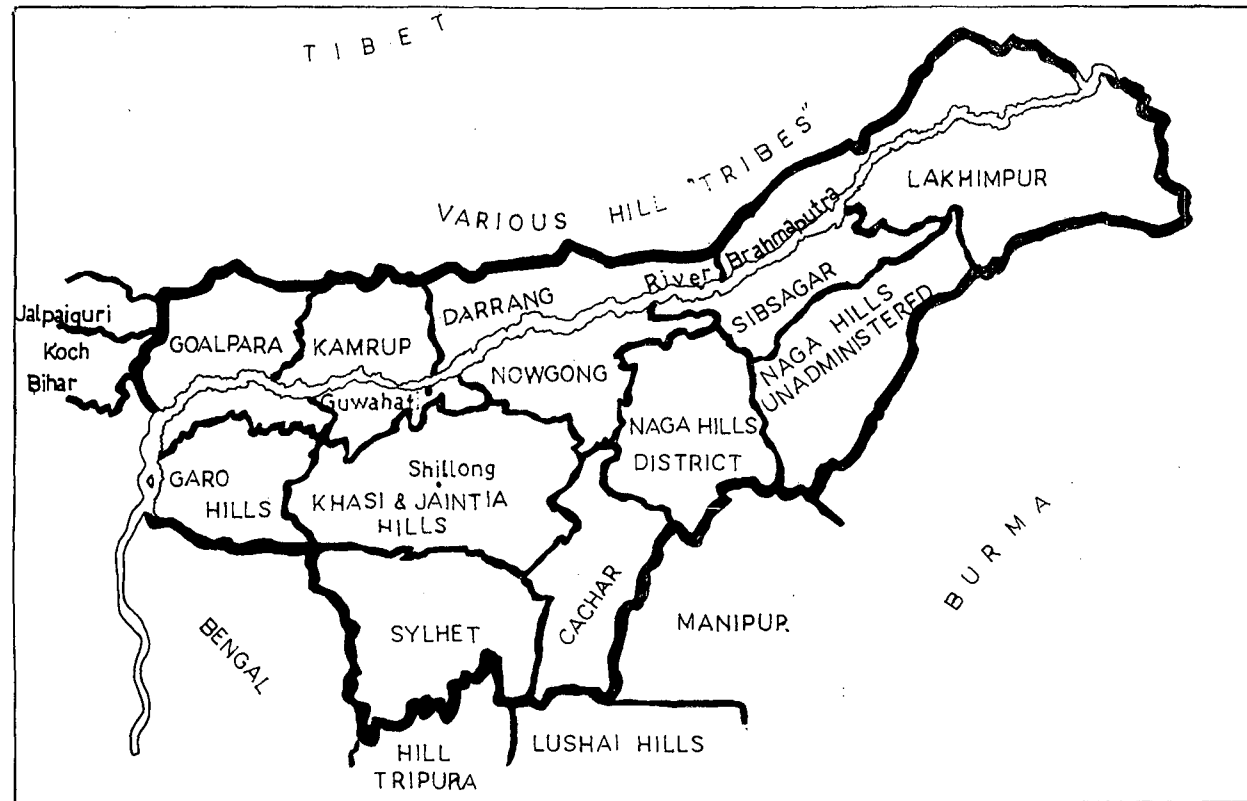
About the title: The term 'headhunters', will no doubt turn many heads toward mine. One scholar ridiculed and rebuked the title to be politically incorrect, whose attention however is limited to the Nagas as erstwhile headhunters. The tribal and the 'other' are still visualized by the mainstream as potential headhunters both in the internal and external contexts. Meanwhile historically it has been stated that Ahoms and many other Asiatic tribes practised headhunting in varied forms. It is to portray the reality and the contemporary situation that the term has been used. Need we mention about the revolutionary, guillotined French 'heads' and mutilated bodies through 'daisy cutters' and other forms of headhunting?

THE AHOM KINGDOM ON THE BORDER OF THE MUGHAL EMPIRE



Source : Habib, Irfan .1982 . An Atlas of the Mughal Empire . Delhi : Oxford University Press .

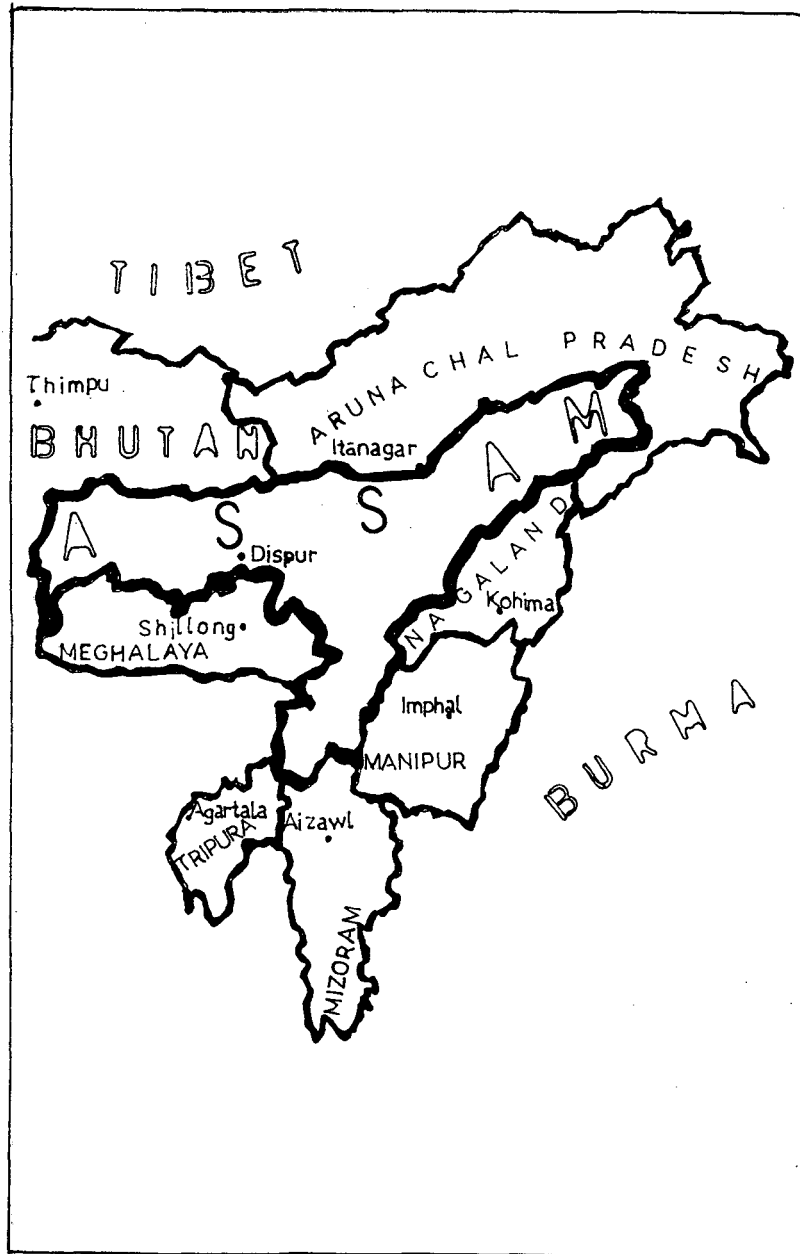
ASSAM UNDER THE BRITISH RAJ , 1875



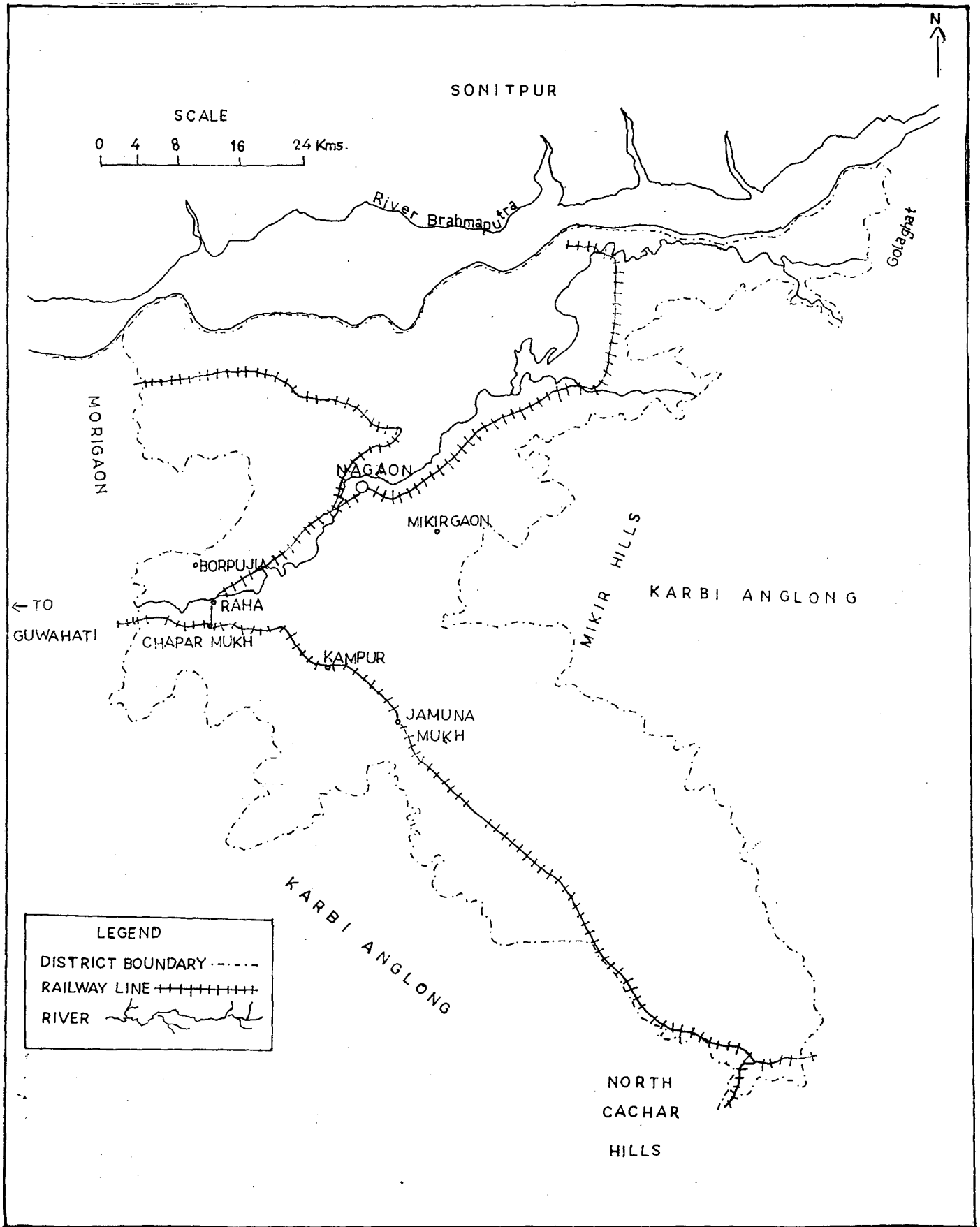
ASSAM, 1950



ASSAM, 1999



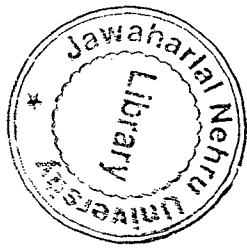
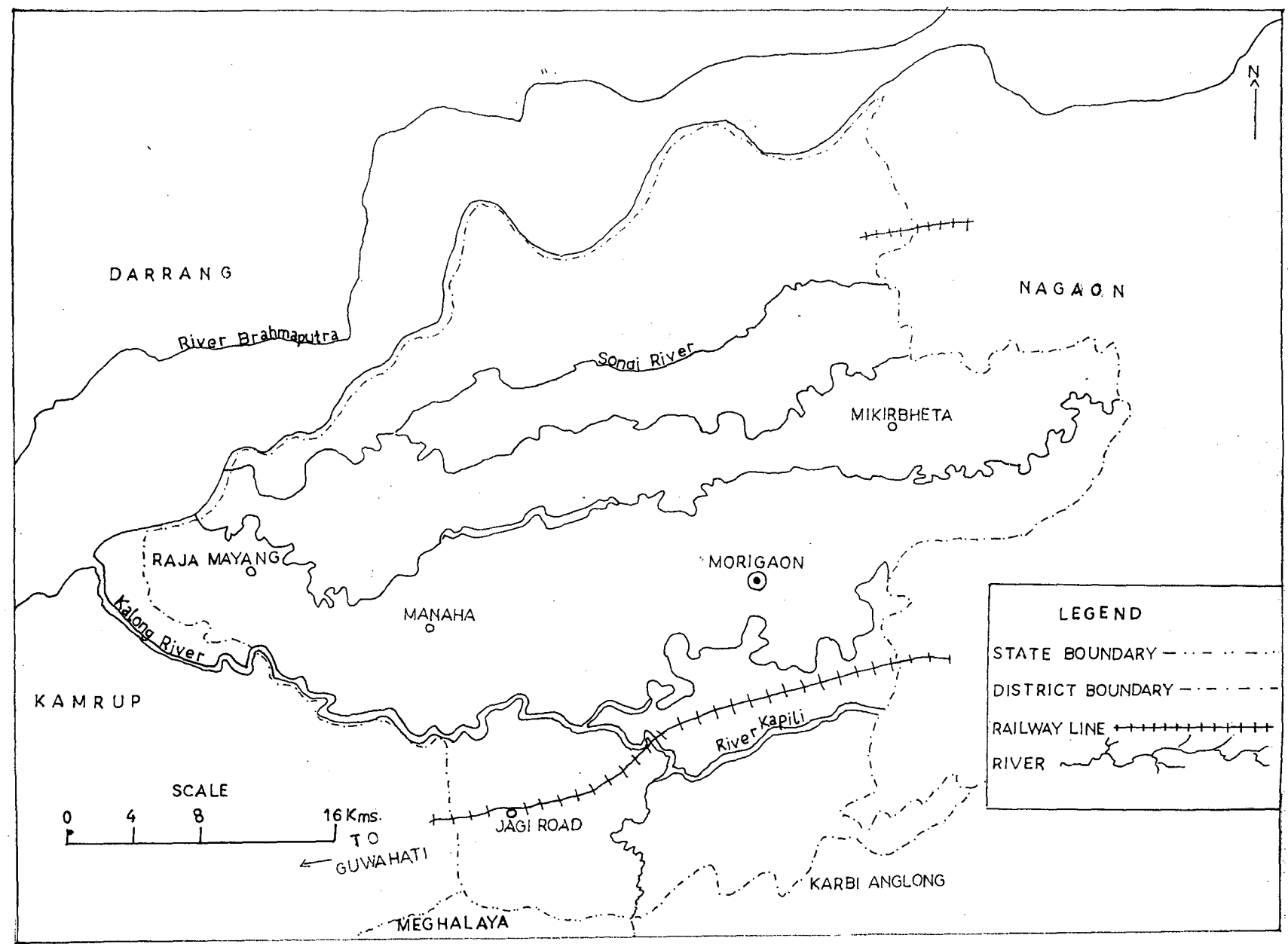
LOCATION OF MRITYUNJAY NAGAOM DISTRICT



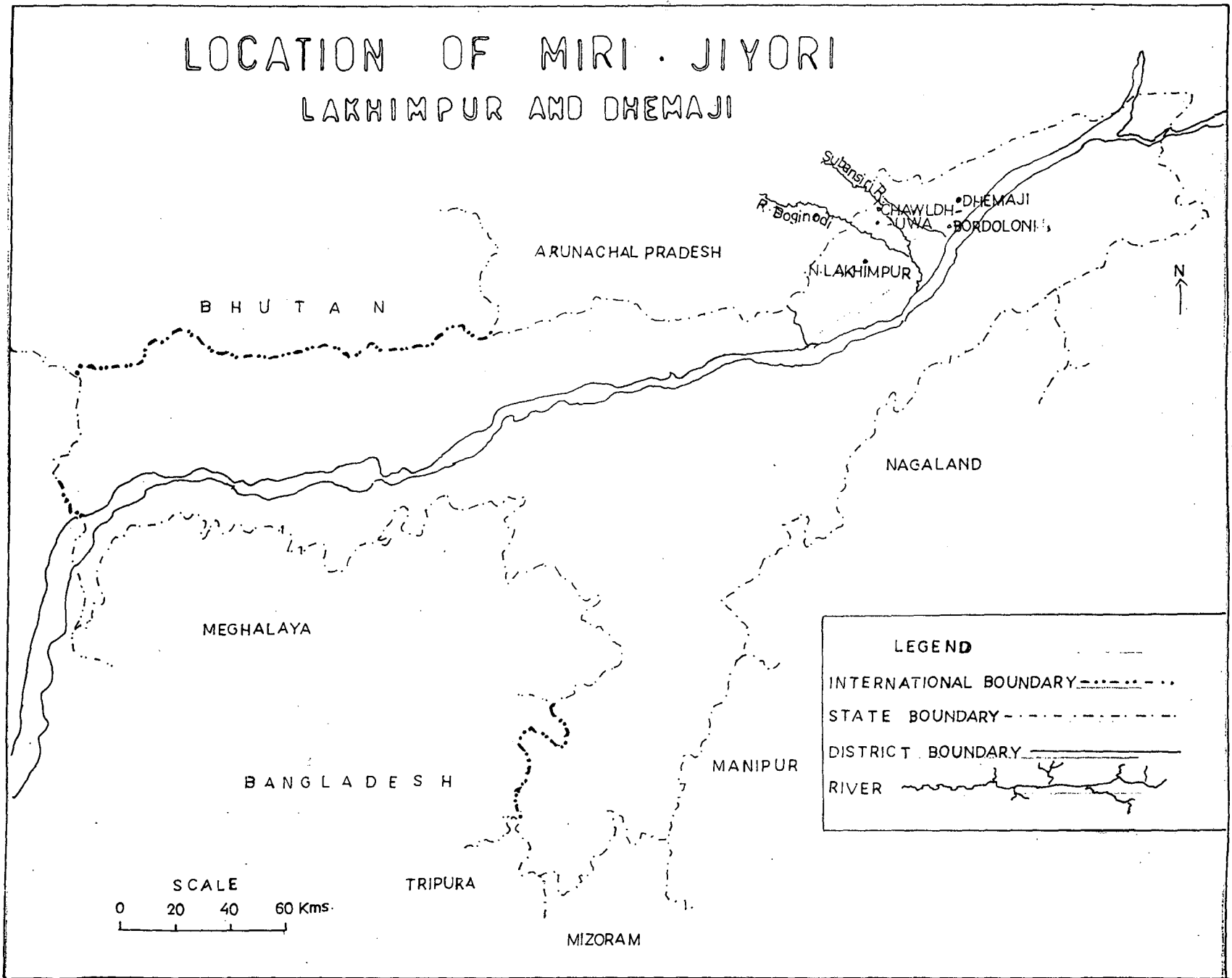
SOURCE : BHUCHITRABOLI

TH-10537

LOCATION OF MRITYUNJAY(MORIGAON)



LOCATION OF MIRI · JIYORI LAKHIMPUR AND DHEMAJI



SOURCE : BHUCHITRABOLI

Chapter One

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS: CONSTRUCTING THE NATION AND FRAMEWORK

Closely related races keep one another at arm's length: The South German cannot endure the North German, the Englishman casts every kind of aspersion upon the Scot, the Spaniard despises the Portuguese (Freud 1959: 33-34).

Tribe Social group, usually with a distinguishing area, dialect, cultural homogeneity and unifying social organization. It ordinarily has a leader and may have a common ancestor or patron deity. Member families or small communities are linked by economic, social, religious or blood ties. In a narrower sense, tribe refers to the widest territorially defined, politically independent unit in a tribal society.

Nation A large, community of people *usually*¹, sharing a common history, culture and language and living in a particular territory under one government (*Penguin Concise Columbia Encyclopedia* 1987: 859 and 581).

The above definitions are the prescriptions of the west with its tendencies of a compact, no-nonsense, gung-ho simplistic approach. Let us turn to a closer home-grown approach in order to understand and exemplify the internal nuances, complexities inherent within this paradigm.

1. *jati* as origin, such as Musalman by birth, Vaishnav by birth, a beggar by birth [*jatite musalman, bhikhar*]
2. classes of living species, such as human *jati*, animal *jati*, bird, etc.
3. *vama* following from classifications according to *guna* and *kama*, such as Brahman, etc
4. *vamsa, gotra, kula* [lineage, clan], such as Arya *jati*, Semitic *jati*
5. human collectivities bound by loyalty to a state or organised around the natural and cultural characteristics of a country or province, such as English, French, Bengali, Punjabi, Japanese, Gujarati, etc. (Das 1937: 11).

¹ Emphasis mine. Isn't it that authorities a la *Penguin Concise Columbia Encyclopedia* too are sceptical about a permanent theoretical framework of a nation? Then South Korea and North Korea are two distinct nations irrespective of their shared culture, history and language. Similar is the case with the state of West Bengal vs. Bangladesh

From the Penguin version to the Bangla *abhidhan*, the connotations of nation, tribe, *jati*, *vana*, *vansa*, *gotra*, *kula*—the *innocent* and yet compact formulations—have undergone a tremendous stir in the vortex of semantics (a la Humpty Dumpty!). So far so good. But a further venture into an Assamese dictionary will pull the rug a little more far. Suppose we take up a well-worn *Hemkosh* (literal meaning in Sanskrit, storehouse of gold), we will be delving into the hierarchies of the ‘other’ kind. It is another matter that *Hemkosh*, the Assamese dictionary, was another civilizing endeavour, albeit micro. It purposefully rejected the indigenous un-Sanskrit repertoire, thus leading towards a so-called cleansed and civilized language in Assamese literature. From the Bangla *gotra* and *kula*, another realm of *janajati*, *upajati*, etc. will be discerned. Hence, it can be assumed without much doubt that the meanings of these terms undergo numerous transitions in different contexts. And the re/search of constructing the framework roughly begins in this jagged terrain of reason and meaning.

The postmodern condition is also so the age of encountering the encounters with the ‘other’ types. The contemporary context can well be rephrased as the re/search for the ‘other’, or rather demystifying the ‘otherness’ of the ‘other’. The objective of the present text is designed to explore and interrogate the ‘identities’ of the tribal communities and the internal colonialism that is activated in their constructions in India’s Northeast in two Assamese canonical texts/novels.

Another question that will be pondered is whether we compose the reality we perceive by mental structures that are cultural, not natural in origin. While colonialism/postcolonialism is a major academic preoccupation vis-à-vis relation between the ‘whites’ and the ‘others’, we may slightly slant our view to India’s Northeast, a no no land in the backwaters of the subcontinent. The view from ‘outside’ the Northeast is blurred in the first place but it must not be assumed that the ‘internal’ view is brilliant and coherent or objective vis-à-vis the ‘others’ (read tribal). While this landmass and its people are perceived as ‘others’ in the collective psyche of the mainlanders, the hierarchies of internal ‘others’ exists actively within this entity too. These hierarchies are quite complex and hence the collective tribal identity cannot be considered as uniform or homogeneous. Similar is the case with the *civilized* internal colonizers. In this terrain there exists hierarchies within hierarchies, nations within nations, nationalities within

nationalities, nationalisms within nationalisms, micronationalisms within subnationalisms, in the constructed macro pan-Indian nationalism.

In this context the hierarchies reach enormous heights, complexities and ambiguities, which may be safely termed as tentacles of internal colonialism based on a self-styled cultural and civilizational superiority. The positions of Kipling and his ilk may be far removed from this domain, yet the contexts of the 'ne'er the twain shall meet' is quite near, similar and evident. Without irreverence to any party concerned, the situation however in this terrain is a wee bit complicated. It was indeed Kipling's good fortune that the entities then and in that location could be comfortably differentiated into two rather than the 'hydra heads' in India's Northeast. Seen through this prism the Israeli-Palestinian problem is an infantile jigsaw puzzle. The hues of the 'twain' herein are not brown/black and white but the dark and pale yellows.

Let us now dig, foray and deconstruct the remnants and fragments which constitute the archaeology of the 'nation'. A consistent battle rages within the episteme of the nation whether in the ancient, medieval, modern or rather the postmodern condition but more aggressively after the post-Westphalian era. Hybrid voices struggle for space thus bifurcating the whole notion of the nation. The dominance of the centre ceased to exist since the first construction of the nation in the deconstructivist mould itself. And since then it has been a play of signifiers essentially that created consciousness and community that has come to be collectively and commonly believed as a nation. Or is it so?

The historical perspective of the construction/imagination of the nation is to be foregrounded in this context. The treaty of Westphalia (1648) ended the thirty years war culminating in the end of the Holy Roman Empire as an effective institution and inaugurated the modern European system. It also marked the end of the era of religious warfare with an effort made towards religious toleration. France emerged as the dominant European power and thus the birth pangs of the first states heralded in the European continent. The emergence of France as the dominant power and the subsequent rise of England are not of major concern. But what concerns us is the import of the context of the nation to the subsequent colonies. The birth or rather the rearing of the colonies is an offshoot of the European state in the form of the 'other'.

The *raison d'être* of the 'nation-ness' of a nation is a concept contradictory to the inner paradigm of a rational, sane, absolute existence. This is because the nation was imagined first in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the 'dynasty' of the 'divinely' ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm. And those dynasties formed the core of the supposed unity. But that authority was undermined by the collective consciousness of the democracy and thus allowing the state to intervene, albeit in a new avatar. And gradually the newly evolved state controlled the 'nation' through enforced/voluntary 'consent' and 'hegemony' in the Gramscian sense.

The sane, absolute, and 'divine' monarchial dynasties were questioned by the 'insane mobs' or democracy during this period, and the death pangs of the 'divine origin' theory of the king/queen was at stake. According to Gellner, 'nations as a natural, God-given way of classifying men, as an inherent... political destiny are a myth: nationalism, which sometimes takes pre-existing cultures and turns them into nations, sometimes invents them, *that* is reality' (Gellner 1983: 48–49).

The following illustration may shed some light on the mobs questioning the sanity of the insanity of the divine monarchy theory.

Divinity no longer hedged them. When Charles X of France revived the ancient ceremony of coronation at Rheims in 1825 and (reluctantly) the ceremony of magical healing, a mere 120 people turned up to be cured of scropula by the royal touch. At the last coronation before him, in 1774, there had been 2400 (Bloch [1924] 1989: 402–404).

The growing democratic upsurge gradually debunked the monarchy, and so the masses constructed the nation with the extra'-ism' rather than the divine king.

Again in the Foucauldian sense one structure of consciousness is overlapped by the other—the dynasty by the nation. But the 'centre' occupied and enjoyed by the dynasty is replaced by the Bakhtinian festivity where 'voices' as part of the carnivalesque attempt are multidimensional but a constant battle enrages between contending voices. In the postmodern context there exist rather the play of signifiers which are basically contesting/challenging 'difference'. Thus the very idea of an 'identity' appears contradictory. Hence homogeneous and

purist existentialism has been contested and thus the cross-cultural relations are to be tackled, examined more carefully.

We harp back to the treaty of Westphalia in the historical sense but there are two pointers in the domain of the origin, legitimacy and sustainability of the nation. The influence of 'print capitalism' as propounded by Benedict Anderson in the formation of the national consciousness is quite significant.

These print languages laid down the bases for national consciousness in three distinct ways. First and foremost, they created unified fields of exchange and communication below Latin and above the spoken vernaculars. Speakers of the huge variety of Frenches, Englishes, or Spanishes who might find it difficult or even impossible to understand one another in conversation, became capable of comprehending one another via print and paper. In the process they gradually became aware of the hundreds of thousands, or millions, so belonged. These fellow readers, to whom they were connected through print, formed, in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally imagined community.

Second, print capitalism gave anew fixity to language, which in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation.

Third, print capitalism created languages of power, of a kind different from the older administrative vernaculars, certain dialects were inevitably 'closer' to each print language and dominated their final form (Anderson 1991: 47).

Nation as a concept is obviously a self-serving, absolutist and tantalizing with its origin in the west and hence fragmented portions are imported to the erstwhile colonies by the bourgeoisie elite segments of the society at the forefront of the national movement(s) for independence. While western theorists feed the world with metanarratives of the nation, a contradictory discourse operates vis-à-vis the bourgeoisie elites of the nation and the subaltern. The narrative of the nation is hence upheld and 'uttered' by the bourgeoisie linguist. The construction of the 'logos', 'centre', and order from which consciousness emerges is given shape by the dominant 'linguist'. A type of Lacanian repression and suppression is thus activated. The dominant voice attempts to curtail the freedom of expressing, demarcating those undominant styles, other's privileges of identity and finally 'other' nations.

In retrospect, a hybrid approach is inevitable to relate the infliction objective to this antagonistic permeation. The consciousness of one nation hence acquires concentric circles with the domains of the other nations rising with the others.

A poignant construction of the 'nation' and its 'others' in the Western and Eastern context is encountered in Joseph Conrad's *Youth*, a novella published at the turn of the last century, Marlow, the narrator, remembers, when he first encountered 'the East'.

And then, before I could open my lips, the East spoke to me, but it was in a western voice. A torrent of words was poured into the enigmatical, the fateful silence; outlandish, angry words mixed with words and even whole sentences of good English, less strange but even more surprising. The voice swore and even cursed violently; it riddled the solemn peace of the bay by a volley of abuse. It began by calling me Pig, and from that went crescendo into unmentionable adjectives in English.

The consolidation of the 'nation' was enhanced in the western tradition through monopoly capital, colonies, trade and albeit by the writers, i.e., through language. This consolidation was strengthened further by the discourse of the encounters between the perceived East and the real west. And those discourses were no doubt furnished by travelogues, novels, and other forms of literature. The instance cited herein is again a contradiction in terms of English as a language inherited by a Polish by birth is Conrad's writing in English. And that contradiction is again rejuvenated by the discourse of the construction of differences between the East and the West. The construction of "others" versus the 'us' thus problematized in terms of 'the fateful silence; outlandish, angry words mixed with words and even whole sentences of good English' and all those in 'English'. The hierarchy of the empirical structures of difference vis-à-vis (colonizers and colonized) is essentially in consolidation of differences. But the lack or rather the cacophony of 'presence of absence' and 'absence of presence' obviously problematised the exercise of the differences. Hence along with the construction of the nation in the western tradition, it was thus also in the process of deconstructing the 'self' of the nation while feeding the 'colonized' with the dilemma of existence. Also the conception of the 'nation's soul' in the western context was to some extent perceived only in the 'real' and 'imagined' differences; contradictions with the colonized. The balkanization of the world into concentric circles into 'here be barbarians' and 'here be civilized' in the Ptolemaic mould of ancient cartography was also an ongoing process.

The dilemma of the colonized is also an important context as a dual process was activated during the encounter with the East. As the west was de/constructing itself in terms of the 'nation' and 'state' the colonies were in throes of constructing themselves in terms of 'nationalities', 'nations', etc.

From Westphalia to Conrad it is thus a long way from the metamorphosis of 'peoples' into 'nations'. In opposition to Marxist philosophy or other 'rational' approaches, other signifiers are at play in the whole exercise. Nation is an imported western notion albeit with the hybridity of multiple factors and hence the signifiers like 'imagination', 'consciousness' and 'language' are to be contextualized. From the transformation of 'people' to 'nation', the third structure in the hierarchy is constructed by the 'state'. The themata of the imaginary nation is institutionalized by the state in a structured form. The process of 'creation' and 'construction' is the foundation of these layers of imagination and consciousness. Myriad signifiers overlap in the process of constructions. The signifiers are to a great extent imaginary because they do not correspond to 'rational' and 'real' elements.

The metaphor of a nation is thus as real or rational as 'Achilles arms' or 'Siegfried's sword'. And again these metaphors exist/arise out of creation. However, theologically speaking 'creation' is just a word; it is a misnomer for production, fabrication, or production. Ontologically 'nation' is not matter but exists in the consciousness of the people. Each nation thus, establishes, creates its own world, within which, of course it includes itself. Each nation is a construction, a constitution, a creation of a world in its own volition.

The context of first nations, one nation states, multinational states are all breeding grounds of dissents and antagonisms. Every nation is thus a utopia in itself. The processes of social imaginary significations are reinforced by the upper structures of institutions and organizations, of the westernized nations. Though first nations, one nation states, multinational states are homogenized in the context of a nation-a hybrid of signifiers interplay in all the entities. The higher structures of the institutionalized nations (states) filter/feed 'metaphors' and 'signifiers' to the lower structures in order to process the perpetual 'evidence' and 'being' of the nation due to the 'group' interests. But the 'signifiers' rarely lead to the 'signifieds' of a nation due to intertextuality and hybridity in the 'imagination' and 'consciousness' of the 'others' within the 'imagined nation' of those who control and shape the

'national' process. In the Gramscian order of things thus 'order' and 'hegemony' are the tools of the trade of the nation makers. Each nation thus creates a type of self-reference and it creates its own meta-observers.

However, the genealogical context of the formation of a nation is important in the perspective of the 'real' and the 'imaginary' in the labyrinths of time. But that is again the construction of the unconscious of the freedom of the anonymous human beings.

Representations, metaphors and myths are thus the underlying foundation of a nation. The argument on the issue on metaphor subsists on meaning as subjective, internal to that language. Discourse of a nation by itself perpetuates/perpetrates, although the postmodern condition attempts to highlight difference. The context of supposed of 'differences' arise from the contestations of identity in the postcolonial, multicultural world(s). A cacophony of dissident, dissonant 'voices' inhabit this context—the contestations of 'policed' preferences, women, colonized (neo, sub et al.) and minority voices. Again the 'new' international world is being constructed by migrants, diasporic communities, exiles, refugees, aboriginal groups etc. In fact a pure, homogeneous nation is constructed very much from the perspective of disenfranchised minorities (Bhabha 1998: 937). Hence the 'nation' exists in the 'past present' time and 'in-between' geography.

The historiographic imagination in context of the 'Indian' nation is also a bedrock of contesting/contending signifiers. Representation or rather the construction of the aesthetic Hindu nation is one school of the nation-builders. The present resurgent situation hence attempts to laden the signifiers once again with the semantics of power, ideology and imagination. The context of reconstructed/restructured histories 'imagined' and 'real' also gain significance in the Indian perspective. In the realm of the immense signifiers the reality is absurd and chaotic. The imagined Aryan and the autochthones, bifurcation between the North and the South, the Hindu and the Muslim, not to speak of the Northeast, and infernal complexities of the whole subcontinent signifies a fractured, shattered perspective. The perpetual project of nationalism is thus reinforced by the strengthening of the 'traces' of the 'past'. Again in the process what emerges is 're/discoveries' of imagined past.

While talking about the reconstructing metaphors, mimesis acquires importance as we have to coordinate mimesis and metaphors. The elements of aesthetics again gains ground with the imagination of the nation as organic, beautiful and homogeneous. In the perpetual and recurrent antagonism of the signifiers 'interpretation' is the tool rather than 'narration'.

Though a 'nation' is 'the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time' (Anderson 1983: 12), the construction, creation, dissemination and imagination of the same is 'embedded' with tensions both legitimately and illegitimately. The 'nation' since times immemorial is being created beautifully, organically, aesthetically and naturally in the most decent and gentle circumstances. Yet on the flip side the self same organic and beautiful concepts of nations undergoes miscarriages or through forced abortions and thus relegated as foetuses into the waste-bins of history. Such abomi(nations) as the stages of world history progress/regress in chariots to precision guided 'rockets' in the words of George Bush, the 'nation can also be considered as the most plastic of all entities.

However, the creations and abortions of 'nations' are not always at the behest of the greater powers. These machi(nations) are activated in each and every neighbourhoods and within the sanctum sanctorum of virtually every 'nation'. These contexts will be discussed in the forthcoming courses of the present discourse. However, these machi(nations) continued even much before Anderson's assertions 'of our time'. We need not forage into the much deeper layers of our time, but rather ruminate about the conditions of the numerous flowerings in the early decades of the twentieth century.

The self-determination of subject nationalities was advocated by President Wilson and enforced by the treaty of Versailles with the object of disrupting the Austro-Hungarian empire, which had been the traditional bulwark of European reaction. It is not sufficiently well known that years before the War of 1914-1918, Lenin incorporated the democratic principle in the programme of the Bolshevik Party. Immediately on capturing power, the latter put the principle in practice, and recognised the right of the minorities, suppressed by Tsarist Imperialism, to secede from the Socialist Republic. The new national States carved out of the Tsarist Empire from their very birth became so many thorns in the side of the Russian Workers' and Peasants' Republic, which had given birth to them.

Even after the defeat of Germany, large formations of the Prussian army remained in occupation of the newly founded Baltic states and utilized them as bases of interventionist operations against the Soviet Republic on the one hand and the German Republic, on the other. When the German Baltic Army disintegrated and the power of its fugitive Generals was broken the civil Governments of the secession States came under the political and the economic influence of the Entente Powers and became centres of anti-Soviet propaganda. Under French patronage, United Poland aspired to the status of a Great Power and was made the military pivot of the cordon sanitaire against the virus of Bolshevism (Roy 1964: 375).

According to Ernest Gellner, 'Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness, it invents nations where they do not exist' (quoted in Anderson 1983: 15). Hence subverting our position from the postmodernist to the sociological perspective it can be asserted that the contention of a nation is a point of struggle too. Also, the progressive line of thought digresses that human history is the story of class struggles. Yet on the same breath it can also be asserted that human history is the field of struggle for nations and identities in an independent existence and entity.

We are told that there are at least 2,500 potential nationalities in the world waiting to stake their claim to full nationhood (Nandy 1998: 11).

The nation-state is one of the most important sources of violence in South Asia. The beauty and the terror of separatist movements of the region also stem from it. Those who are listed as terrorists by the state are worshipped as martyrs by their communities. The whole history of the second half of the twentieth century can be rewritten as an impassioned search, by old and newly-constructed communities, for a new El-Dorado called the nation-state: the entire story has a scandalous analogy with the experience of European capitals waiting for sailor-heroes who were supposed to return with shiploads of glittering sand; they were scared to disappoint their masters. They concocted stories to begin with, later the difference between fiction and reality disappeared (quoted in Nandy 1998: 9).

Hence it is poignant that the two strands regarding the construction of the nation—the Postmodern and the political—are entirely apart. Neither can it be said that the authorities of any one school are in cohorts with their own position. So much so that Hugh Seton-Watson went on to proclaim that 'there is no "scientific" means of establishing what all nations have in common' (Seton-Watson 1977: 55).

So where do we go from here? A political, sociological and cultural reading is essential in reaching the real context of the nation, its framework and construction. However the term 'nation' is not being accepted here in its narrower sense but into its Exclusive terminology, encompassing the entire contexts of ethnic groups, tribes, races, primordial ties, nationalities et al. What however are new in the assembly line are statehood, civic consciousness etc in the structural construct.

One thing imbued with the term 'ethnicity' regardless of the numerous complexities and connotations associated are the certain and predominant aspect of 'us' and the 'others'. Hence the concept of difference is a crucial pointer in the context of cultural, linguistic and religious differences. Though a relatively new term in the political sense, the affiliation of the individual to the group cannot be shaken down gently with the sleight of the hand.

Regarding the newness of the term, it is first recorded in a dictionary in the Oxford English Dictionary of 1953 (Smith 1968: 4). The 'us' and 'others' syndromes however were prevalent since the ancient times till date. A few instances of the curious nomenclatures or the naming process involved in the nationality formation will assist us succinctly to understand the whole formation. The Greeks referred to themselves as *genos Hellenom* and to the non-Greeks—the peripheral, foreign barbarian(!)—as the *ethnei*. The Latin connotation affixed to far-away, non-Latin communities was *natio* (Smith 1986: 5). The Romans allotted to their own peoples the nomenclature 'populus'(!), in the Homeric connotation of the non-man slaying the barbarian Cyclops. This tendency still persists in the instances of the WASPian prerogative to denote 'others' as ethnic for immigrants but to register themselves as the 'nation'. It's indeed a clear irony of fate to name the Amerindian as 'ethnic', while the whites are the real 'nations'. However, an economic pejorative in this context is also witnessed, covering the initial linguistic, cultural and religious construction. In the capitals of the new empire, USA and its old sidekick Great Britain, whites of Australia, New Zealand or Canada will not probably be referred as 'ethnics' considering the context of the neo-empirical brotherhood. But an Irish, Polish or Greek will be clearly identified as 'ethnics', in spite of their 'white skins'. Rather than skinning the 'white hides' of the new empire singly, this condition is witnessed visibly in our new nation too since the times of the 'Aryans' and the 'Dasyus'. This is visualized in the

macro-construction and this tendency persists till the 'Indian nation' is broken down into its micro and nano properties.

In spite of the above complications, we have considered that the 'us' encompass only the 'us' and hence excludes all the other 'thems'. But this single-layered context is still again fraught with its numerous internal complexities. There are still other aspects apart from 'ethnicity' related to the imbroglio such as gender, class, religion, political relation, economic condition etc. thus leading us all again into multi-layered identities and existences. If we take the Indian context into consideration, the first aspect will be that of the Indian-hood, the next will be the geographical divisions North, South, East subdivided again into Northwest, Northeast, etc. multiple considerations. Next in the line will be the state-level divisions, religions, reservation related categories, languages and not to say of the mind-boggling tribes, castes, etc.

The same cases are evident also in such divergent nations as Nigeria, Indonesia, Malaysia, etc. In Nigeria, a colonial construction, an individual will be a Nigerian citizen but will also belong to numerous ethnicities to be Ibo, Yoruba, Tiv, Hausa, etc. In the next illustration s/he will belong to any of the two major religions— Christianity or Islam or may profess any of the numerous animistic cults. Another contrast will be his/her geographical affiliations— from the Northern or the Southern region. After all these concord and dualities the Nigerian citizen will probably again affiliate himself/herself with the Pan African orientation (Smith 1986: 7–8).

From African Nigeria it is indeed a long way across the seas to Asian Indonesia, a curious 'nation' of 3,000 islands. The concept of Indonesian nation formation is in operation. The 'peaceful' Indians influenced the landmass prior during the early Christian era, but Buddhist kingdom arose side by side with the Hindu entities. By the fourteenth-century Arabs appeared on the scene and in the two subsequent centuries the traces of early kingdoms were obliterated. With the sixteenth century, the spectre of the white hides landed in the landmass. No, they weren't disguised as traders but came in search of spices to send to their colder climes. But the possessors of the white hides also known as the Portuguese, Dutch and the British (this species is however again subdivided into four or five categories) liked the islands immensely and settled down to rule. Actually it wasn't their fault, you see. After all these influences or rather colonizations the Indonesian sovereign nation was born. Wary of the Portuguese rule in East Timor, the Indonesian state annexed the island in 1976. Perhaps the

numerous influences rubbed of on the new nation too. East Timor is now an independent nation, but that is another story (*Penguin Concise Columbia Encyclopedia* 1987: 407). Next in the line are people of Aceh who are demanding independence through a protracted guerrilla war.

It was in the Indonesian landmass, where Joseph Conrad (the Polish writer in English) first encountered the East, and began calling the narrator in *Youth*, the novella, as '... pig, and from that went crescendo into unmentionable adjectives in English.' The contexts of India, Indonesia and Nigeria were illustrated in order to bring out the external causalities which plays a significant role in the process of nation formation. Gestations, natural births and unwanted foetuses are very much evident in the constructions of the three entities.

Historically speaking, single ethnic groups and tribes occupying and ruling large tracts of lands, administered in the form of empires. The Egyptians, Sumerians and Elamites constituted these empires in recorded history. This process was activated in total reverse to the context of nation formations in India, Indonesia and Nigeria. The Greeks, Jews and Romans too held sway for a considerable extent in numerous times. These groups tended to keep their inherent genetic and biological characteristics intact, taking care to prevent contami(nation) and thus maintain racial purity. In retrospect, the cultures in medieval Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand and Vietnam the polity was not based on an exclusive racial identity but was formed on numerous concoctions of Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic overtures. But in a nearer clime, i.e., the Far East three predominant ethnic states existed viz. China, Japan and Korea. The context of Japanese colonization is not the point here in considering the fact that the three groups maintained their exclusive existences in spite of the internal mingling and overlapping. Again in the reverse in ancient and medieval India the enormous diversities complicated the process of a definite ethnic nationhood (Smith 1986: 11). A contrary condition continued in the European continent, with the arrival of the Indo-European peoples under the late Roman Empire. Close knit ethnicity-oriented kingdoms emerged subsequent to this development in the form of Franks in France, Visgoths in Spain, Saxons in Germany, Anglo-Saxons in England, Vikings in Scandinavia and Magyars in Hungary. Same is the case in Eastern Europe where the Slav-speaking people differentiated and thus formed compact ethnic communities and nations, in the entities of Croatia, Poland, Serbia, Bulgaria, Kiev, Muscovy (Smith 1986: 11). These formulations of nation-based politics are in respect to the hierarchies in the

administrative contours of those geographic areas. For instance the Irish, Welsh and the Scots lived and lives in comparative tussle with their ruling Anglo-Saxon counterparts till date. Similar is the case with the Flemish group in Belgium, Corsicans in France, Basques in Spain, if we consider Catalans in Italy and even Quebecois in Canada in their attempts to attain full statehood in spite of their 'first world' territorial and economic structures.

Hence, attempts to construct and forge statehoods in recent history in the Indian subcontinent by as diverse peoples as the Sikhs, Kashmiris in India, Sindhis and Baluchis (to a lesser extent) in Pakistan, Tamils in India and Sri Lanka (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, Tamil Elam Liberation Organisation in Sri Lanka, Tamil Nadu Retrieval Troops, Tamil Nadu Liberation Army in Indian Tamil Nadu), Bangla speakers in erstwhile East Pakistan and the whole gamut of groups such as Ahoms, Bodos, Dimasas, Karbis, Mishings, Lalungs, Nagas, Rabhas, Meiteis and Kukis in India's Northeast. Though the orientations of the diverse groups in the North East ranges from recognition of their languages in their respective states, to establishing district councils, attain scheduled tribe status, to administer within the country as states and to outright secession from the Indian union. Hence it is understandable that the claims for nationhoods in the geographic contours peopled by the communities in both the west and the Indian subcontinent are as legitimate or illegitimate as it is imagined or constructed by the ruling ethnic groups above these newly converts claiming statehoods and administrative rights.

Now a different position exposes itself in this litany of nations, statehoods and aspirations of identity. Till now we've traversed a considerable amount of geographical space and chronological time in the history of the nations, and witnessed the formations of the same. But to go back to the perennial question, we are bound to shift a reverse gear in the opposite direction- How are nations formed? Hence the diverse strands of theories on ethnicities and nationalism assumes a mainstay in this context. At the basic level, ethnicity is a given, assumed solidarity prior to any given kind of social interaction. Tribes, races, communities come together as a matter of emotional effect, viz., people of the same blood attract. But is it so?

According to constructivist position of Hobsbawm (Smith 1986: 7-11) and instrumentalist position of Paul Brass (Smith 1986: 44-45) ethnicity, nationhood is a constructed, invented treason. When the mass people is politicized, then the elite invents

tradition towards an artificial solidarity, and the elite to some extent attempts to maintain its own position in the social hierarchy. Thus the ethnic group is used by the elite for maintaining the power structures as an instrument. According to instrumentalist condition of ethnic concoction, Paul Brass states that

Ethnicity or ethnic identity also involves, in addition to subjective self-consciousness, a claim to status and recognition, either as a superior group or as a group at least equal to other groups. Ethnicity is to ethnic category what class consciousness is to class... (Ethnic groups that use ethnicity to make demands in the political arena in their status, in their economic well being, in their civil rights, or in their educational opportunities are engaged in a form of interest group politics... They demand a major say for the group in the political system as a whole or control over a piece of territory within the country, or they demand a country of their own with full sovereignty. In the latter case, the ethnic group aspires to national status and recognition (Brass 1991: 18-20).

The above point is quite evident and qualified in the context of the three Northeastern tribes, viz., Mizo, Naga and Bodo. After these tribes succeeded in attaining the comparative well being (in Indian standards) in educational, economic, and civil rights, they raised their guns for a major say in their geographic locations. The Mizos after demanding outright secession from the Indian state settled for the statehood of Mizoram in 1986 (Borpujari 1998: 22). On the other hand, the Naga tribes, after attaining statehood in 1960 blazed the hills anew for a sovereign republic. The imbroglio continues with the Indo-Naga joint settlement for peace, but with the Nagas aiming for tracts of land added to the state of present Nagaland from the neighbouring states, as their latest demand. The Bodo community after a decade-old insurgency laid down their guns after the formal declaration of acceptance of the Bodo Territorial Committee by the Centre recently (Chaudhuri 2003: 47-49).

Now for a look into these assertions for political recognitions. According to Brass, four sources of elite conflict that may spur the development of ethnic communalism or separatism in pre-industrial or early modernizing societies are those (a) between a local aristocracy attempting to maintain its privileges against an alien conqueror; (b) between competing religious elites from different ethnic groups; (c) between religious elites and the native aristocracy within an ethnic group; and (d) between native religious elites and an alien aristocracy (Brass 1991: 22-26).

It would be foolhardy to accept that the movements and struggles in India's North East are totally as a result of the above four pointers forwarded by Paul Brass. Though the conclusion to the causes of the battles for recognition is not the motive of this paper, the other schools ought to be studied too.

The ethno-symbolists school of the origin of nations prescribes that identities are not primordial but they are constructed and thus it becomes perennial. Identities aren't, however, constructed out of a vacuum but from a base of myths, symbols and legends in order to concretize the ethnic position (Smith 2000: 25–35).

To a great extent the tribes of India's North East in their assertive tendencies are guided through the primordial strand of nationalism. Primordial ties are based on language, religion, race, ethnicity and territory in the sense that these configurations are perennial and hence natural. Edward Shills, the first proponent of this view claims that nations and ethnic communities are the natural units of history and integral elements of the human experience (Smith 1986: 12).

The modernist school however contends that nationalism rather than being perennial, it is based more on the economic considerations. Thus since the sixteenth century certain states like Britain, France, Spain and the Netherlands – the 'core' states were able to exploit their initial advantages of market capitalism and strong administrative apparatus at the expense of the periphery and semi-periphery. In a way, this theory is instrumental (Smith 1986: 11).

Well, bidding a brief goodbye to the good old pure nations, let us now trudge a more different terrain about the multi-cultural states, companies and lately individuals. Multiculturalism is a heady topic with plethora of political scientists theorizing about the withering away of the 'national' state. Yet more they predict about the demise and subsequent obituary of the ethnic nations, the hydra-headed monsters still manage to appear in the distant corners of the globe (a la grand Marx's firm prediction of the 'withering away of the state' and Fukuyama's sermons of the 'end of history!'). Whatever may be the un/truth of the multicultural im/possibilities the following is noteworthy in its dissemination:

... Even the “nation” in transnationalism is destined to wither away within regimes of diasporic allegiance, unless a fiction of national autonomy is preserved as a marketing ploy, deemed useful for the identification of publisher’s target audiences or the distribution of literary prizes and awards (Apter 1999: 11).

Nation is ‘imagined’, yes, but in the cyber era things or rather nations went a bit far and people really applied for migration to that entity. The myth of the nation of Ladonia was created by a Swedish artist on the Internet and the ‘nation maker’ who was the self-proclaimed ‘state secretary of Ladonia’ received thousands of applications from many countries including Pakistan. The applicants were eager to know the ‘geographical’ position of Ladonia’s embassy in Pakistan (*The Times of India* 18 March 2002).

Between plain ignorance and cyberpunk, where do we go now? The next chapter will lead us to the northeastern quagmire of salad bowls and melting pots.

References

- Anderson, Benedict (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London and New York: Verso.
- Apter, Emily (1999). *Continental Drift: From National Characters to Virtual Subjects*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bhabha, Homi (1998). ‘The Location of Culture’, in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (eds.) *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Bloch, Marc (1924). *Les rois thaumaturges*, trans. J. E. Anderson. Paris.
- Borpujari, H. K. *North East India: Problems, Policies & Prospects*. Guwahati: Spectrum.
- Brass, Paul (1991). *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*. London: Sage.
- Chaudhuri, Kalyan (2003). ‘Turning to Peace’. *The Frontline*, 14 March 2003.
- Das, Jnanendramohan (1937). *A Dictionary of the Bengali Language*, s.v. *jati*. Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 2nd edition.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. James Strachey. New York: Norton.
- Gellner, Ernest. *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Nandy, Ashis (1998). *Exiled at Home*. Delhi: OUP.
- Penguin Concise Columbia Encyclopedia* (1987), s.v. nation, tribe, Indonesia. Harmondsworth: Columbia University Press.
- Roy, M. N. (1964). *Memoirs*. Delhi: Ajanta Publications.
- Seton-Watson, Hugh (1977). *Nations and States: An Enquiry into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Smith, A. D. (2000). *The Nation in History: Historiographical Debates about Ethnicity and Nationalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- The Times of India* ‘The Myth of Ladonia’ (editorial). New Delhi: 18 March 2002.

Chapter Two

WILD ORCHIDS IN THE VIRGIN FRONTIER: ETHNICITY AND IDENTITY IN INDIA'S NORTHEAST

The great nations have always acted like gangsters, and the small nations like prostitutes.

— *Stanley Kubrick*

The land is not like our lands,
The sky is not like our sky...
Its sky sends rains down
Without the originating cause of clouds
It stands outside the circle of the earth
And the bowels of the enveloping sphere
It has been separated from the earth
Like the letter Aliph.
The seasons all begin here at the time, of their conclusion elsewhere
Here there is heat in our winter,
And chill in our summer.
Its roads are frightful like the paths leading
To the nook of death.
Fatal to life is its expanse,
Like the unpeopled city of destruction
Its forest are full of violence,
Like the hearths of the ignorant.
Its rivers are beyond limit,
And estimate like the minds of the wise.

— *Mullah Darvesh of Herat**

The land was fertile and virgin, just like the other 'new' frontiers. And it was waiting to be tilled and upturned. The seeds, stems and the roots were there too, but dormant under the soil. The whole topos was in anticipation with a virgin's ache to be deflowered. The aching moments were over soon but the act was violent, bloody and ruthless. Some said for every creation, a destruction is essential. Or in plainer words, an egg needs to be broken to make an omelette. But... The soil was upturned the tillers did not need any seeds, stems or roots, which

* Mullah Darvesh came with a wartrain of Mir Jumrah to Assam in the seventeenth century.

were beneath but did not burst into life all of a sudden. The tillers decided to wait and bid their time. It was but a long, impatient drenched anticipation. One dawn the wait was over. The seeds, stems and roots burst on their own volition both to life and death. It was an intemperate, frenzied outburst of the riots of creation and destruction. The wait was over, but the anarchy of life and death continues, unabated...

Ethnography: Anthropologist's Delight

Let us now trudge into this tricky terrain with trepidation. This is the east of another empire, not much unlike the mighty west's Middle East or the Far East. This is the east of the Indian empire- the Northeast. There is a potent reason behind the claim why this part of the 'empire' is termed tricky. The region has a population of 31,386,911 as per the census of 1991, accounting for 3.6% of the total population of the country over an area that represents 7.3%.

The present population is essentially made up of eleven streams and waves of migration resulting in a mosaic of socio-cultural patterns. The emerging socio-cultural scene is such that the population of the region can be divided into 357 constitutional communities including 32 scheduled castes and 182 scheduled tribes. Herein, merely the main castes and tribes are mentioned and the sub-tribes and marginal communities are mentioned; hence the region is at times mentioned as a linguist's nightmare and an anthropologist's delight. To chart out the territories inhabited by the respective peoples in a map will indeed be a cartographer's delight (or fantasy!) (Taher and Ahmed 1998: 235-26). Hence the region runs with neck-to-neck competition with Papua New Guinea with more than 700 languages for a population of some two and half million (Hobsbawm 1990: 161).

In this context, the eleven streams of mass migration into the land-locked entity is necessary to be inducted for a comprehensive understanding of the contemporary political formations: The first ever group of believed to settle in this region in the pre-historic past is the Mon-Khmer speaking Austro-Asiatics, whose descendents today are identified as the Khasis and Jaintias. The Tibeto-Burman language-speaking people of the Sino-Tibetan family of Mongoloids followed them. Most of the tribes in the contemporary situation belong to this group. The Indo-Aryans came from the west bringing with them the Vedic culture, Hindu religious influence and a higher form of agriculture. Till the thirteenth century, these three groups peopled the land predominantly. The most influential migration was by the Tai-Ahom

people in 1228 led by Sukapha from South China and parts of Burma, who established the Ahom kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley which ruled for six hundred years, till 1826. Another group entered Assam, adherents to Islam and Indo-Aryans, beginning in A.D. 1205 who were soldiers or craftsmen in the war train of the Sultans and Nawabs of Delhi.

After the occupation of Assam by the Company in 1826 through the controversial Treaty of Yandaboo signed between the British Company and the King of Ava (Burma), influx from the west increased with the tacit support of the British. Bengalis, Rajasthanis and other north Indians, Nepalis, etc. entered the virgin frontier and were engaged in the jobs associated with the Company's administration. The next wave of influx occurred from the Chotanagpur plateau after the British consolidated its administration in the region and started tea plantations. These people brought in as labourers belong mostly to the Mundari language-speaking group of the Austro-Asiatic ethno-linguistic family. This group today exists as the tea garden and ex-tea garden labourers of present-day Assam. Influx into the landmass also occurred from the east, mainly from the borders of Burma following hostilities against them by the majority Burmese community. These groups of Kuki-chin, Naga and Kuki peoples entered the valley and maintain their original culture till date.

However, the last major influx of landless Muslim peasants from about 1880's from erstwhile East Bengal (present Bangladesh) managed to unsettle the whole region and destabilize the socio-cultural scenario. It would be foolhardy to term migrants as solely Muslims. Hordes of Hindu refugees migrated to Northeast India following the partition of the country in 1947 and after the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971. These are however different strands of stories altogether (Taher and Ahmed 1998: 234-36).

Mythology: Of Demons and Aryans

The perspective of history is a significant pointer towards unravelling the contemporary constructions of the region and its peoples. While the context of ethnography of the peoples of the region was documented in the earlier pages, a detailed account of the region's history is necessary. In the following pages we will encounter the fascinating aeons of times through which the region passed. For a better understanding of the political and social quagmire into which the region is now being churned, we will attempt to document the early history of the landmass to the present.

Assam and her neighbouring states (present-day Northeast India) were relatively unknown to the outside world in the earlier periods of history. Even the present-day nomenclatures of Assam came into being only from the thirteenth century, after the Tai people made inroads into the Brahmaputra valley. The naming of the four other states – Arunachal, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Nagaland are of relatively recent origin roughly after India's independence. However Manipur and Tripura were fairly well known entities in early history.

However, the term relatively unknown to the outside world is in itself relative. The outside world herein can be accepted as the west of the region, the present-day majority's mainstream i.e. modern day India. It is another matter that the region and the people maintained close links in cultural, social, political and commercial links with its eastern borderlands. But that is again a closed chapter with the closure of the Stillwell Road (the road connecting India's Northeast to Burma) after the British left the region. It is indeed a cruel irony that the road through which Chao Lung Sukapha made inroads into the Brahmaputra valley is today known as Stillwell Road, after Gen. Stillwell of the Company fame who led the British forces to the teak laden forests of Burma, and thereby to the Burmese throne. It is again another matter that the British eyes fell on the Burmese teak forests after the depletion of its oaks in the semi-colonized Scotland and Wales. The oak forests Ahoms dwindled as a result of the naval clashes between British and France and hence the Company had to trudge the peripheries of its newly acquired Indian empire. While the locals living in both sides of the border mention the road after Sukapha, the name persists in the government annals. (Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* is a case in point against the glassy empire of the British.)

Now, the present context is to trace the history of the region before the advent of Sukapha in the region. Literary sources, albeit early holds the key in this direction. Ancient Assam and the adjoining states were not mentioned in Pali literature, neither in the historical section of the Puranas, which were revised in the Gupta age. In the Sanskrit literary works, the legends of the mythical kings Naraka, Bhagadatta and Vajradatta are found in the Mahabharata, Harivamsa and the Puranas. Literary works from this region do not produce anything substantial regarding the historiography of India's Northeast and hence we will have

to rely on the Indian, European and other sources. The sources are not merely literary in its credence but archaeological, mythical and at times based on folk beliefs.

The earliest mention of any king or monarch from this region is of Bhagadatta, who is mentioned in the Mahabharata and fought on behalf of the Kauravas against the Pandavas. Bhagadatta was the son of Narak, who is described 'as a powerful potentate ruling in the east' (Gait 1962: 14). He resisted the onslaught of Arjuna and defended Pragjyotish (earlier name of a part of Assam or present-day Guwahati and its adjoining areas. About this mention will be made in the subsequent pages). But after eight days of resistance, the eastern 'potentate' was forced to surrender and pay a tribute. Bhagadatta however licked his wounds for the time being, and attempted to pay back to the Pandavas in the final countdown of Kurukshetra, the mother of all ancient Indian wars. But he was slain in a battle with Arjuna, through the divine intervention of Krishna, who rendered the invincible weapon impotent, which he gifted to Bhagadatta's father Narak. The precise lineage or racial identity of Bhagadatta is unknown, but one concrete aspect is their non-Aryan status.

The kings ruling this part of ancient Assam are referred to as *asinas* and *danavus* and any layperson worth his/her salt understands the semantics of this appellation. As a whole the people of this region were known as Kiratas, or in the words of E.A. Gait, 'as a powerful race, much addicted to meat and strong drinks'. While the ancient populace of some parts of Assam is termed as Kiratas, the appellation is applied even to the kings of Tripura. In the chronicles of the Tripura kings, it is said that the ancient name of their country was Kirata. The word 'kirata' still survives as the designation of a tract in the sub-Himalayas, between the Dud Kosi and Arun rivers, and of the Khamba, Limbu and Yakha tribes who inhabit it. However in Sanskrit literature the term is used indiscriminately to signify any border tribe of the northern and eastern frontier (ibid.: 12).

Reference to this group of people known as the Kiratas are found in the Yajurveda (xxx, 16), which mentions that a kirata was necessary for the performance of the *purnsa-madhi* sacrifice. The Atharvaveda indicates that

The young maid of Kirat race, a little damsel, digs the drug: Digs it with shovels wrought of gold on the high ridges of the hills.

(Kairatikan Kumarika saka Khanali bhesajam: hiranyayibhir abhribhir girinam upa sarusu)

Hence it can be surmised that, the Kiratas were dwellers of hills and forests and the girl digging for drugs had some knowledge of herbal medicine. The physical attribute of the Kiratas being mongoloids can be deduced from the description of Bhagadatta's army in the Mahabharata, who appeared in gold (*tasya cinaih Kirataisca Kancanaciriva sannuttam babhan kalam*) which means they were yellow-skinned. In the Ramayana and the Kalika purana they are described as 'shinning in gold' (euphemism for yellow skinned), ferocious and addicted to meat and drink (*sura* – drink, rings a bell?) This factor will be much more transparent if we take into this discourse, the narration of some more legendary characters in the Mahabharata.

While the *danavas*, *asuras* and *kiratas* prevailed in the ancient epic who were against the centre, i.e., the Pandavas, there were some other figures who were partners in arms against the ancient forces of evil, namely, the Kauravas. While the Pandavas were banished from their kingdom and they trudged the ancient terrain of Bharatvarsha (read: they were in camouflage) – the 'famous five' (a la Enid Blyton) had the fortune to enter the northeastern parts of the domain. Mixing business with pleasure, Arjuna frolicked for some time with Uloopi, the daughter of the king of Manipur, through whom they begot their son, Babrubahan. Not to be undone by his younger brother, Bhima too had his share of physical relation with Hirimba, a Kirata princess. Ghototkoch was born out of this relationship. Being sons, both Babrubahan and Ghototkoch hastened towards Kurukshetra from the Northeast to assist their fathers, but both were slain after numerous bloody battles. But what lies beneath these stories of love and war, is that the slain warriors were termed as Kiratas and not through other civilized Indian appellation. To make the long story short, Manu classes the Kiratas with Mlechchas or untouchables, and Siva is said to have adopted the appearance of a Kirat before his duel with Arjuna, and was considered the special deity of that race.

Barring Mahabharata, the other Indian text in which the mention of this region is frequently witnessed is Bhagavad, and most of the narration is in connection with Krishna who is a prominent figure in the mythology of the 'Hindu Northeast' parts of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Tripura. However ambiguities and interpolation still exists in precisely pinpointing the authenticity of the myths and legends. However, what are myths and legends for, if we still persist in seeking the truth or rather the ultimate truth? But let us tell the

story first. According to the Bhagavad, a king named Bhismak ruled Vidarbha (not in present-day Maharashtra), which is now believed as the area adjoining Sadiya. However, there is a catch in the phrase 'now believed', considering the fact that early Hindu settlers in Assam assigned local sites for the occurrences mentioned in Hindu mythology. While the local tribes name the area differently, the settlers cling to the new name. The Hindu name sticks to the ground permanently as the autochthones recedes to the hills. Well, Krishna wooed Bhismak's daughter Rukmini who was betrothed to a neighbouring prince, Sisupal. Rukmini dispatched messages to Krishna about the intended wedding day, and the prince of Dwarka came rushing to Vidarbha. On her wedding day Krishna came in a chariot and carried her off and they were pursued by the group of princes who were invited to the wedding, But Krishna emerged as the hero of the day and married Rukmini in Kundina, Sadiya.

Krishna and his clan seem to have fair share of dalliances and peccadilloes in the northeastern frontier lands. A story in the Bhagavad and in the Vishnu Purana— to which the local site assigned is Tezpur, the 'city of blood', the headquarters of the present-day Sonitpur district— was ruled by a king named Bana. Usha was his daughter who became the cynosure of Annirudha (Krishna's grandson), and they married against her father's wishes secretly. The instant marriage ceremony in the gandharba tradition came to be quite handy in their romance. It is not known whether Annirudha had the permission of his father, but of his grandpa Krishna, he had. This is witnessed when Aniruddha is captured by Bana, but was freed when Krishna naturally won the battle against the Kirata king.

The mythological origins of the earliest known part of Assam, i.e., Kamrupa (modern Kamrup district with Guwahati as its headquarters) can be traced to a popular legend. The germ of the story is to be found in the preface to the Gopath Brahmana according to E. A. Gait. The story as it is popularly believed – Sati or Parvati, the wife of Siva died as a result of the ill-treatment meted out by her father, Daksha to Siva. Daksha is equivalent to Kuber in terms of economic assets and Siva as we very well know is portrayed as penniless, father of all fakirs. Unable to withstand the grief, Siva carried Parvati's dead body all over the world as a sort of penance. Vishnu, a pantheon of the triumvirate followed him and dissected Parvati's body into fifty-one parts – in order to obstruct the penance. Each region in which one or the other body part fell became sacred. The mons veneris of Parvati fell on Kamagiri, the Nilachal

hills near Guwahati, and the place was subsequently held sacred to Kamakhya, the goddess of sexual desire. The other gods of the Hindu pantheon were struck with fear and apprehension about the fallout of Siva's penance. The divine *dhyam* of Siva if completed would have the power to unhinge the cosmic balance of the world that could lead to chaos and eventual destruction. After a meeting of the grand council of gods was convened, Madan Kamdev, the Indian equivalent of Cupid, was summoned in order to distract Siva's meditation and thereby maintain the cosmic balance. The Indian Cupid was successful in the clandestine mission yet he had to bear the brunt. Siva was enraged after Kamdev's intervention and hence burned him to ashes with a glance of his *trinayan*, the third eye. But all's well, that ends well. Kamdev recovered his original form, and thus the land in which he regained his *rup* was known as Kamrup.

Another myth that seems to originate after the Kamakhya hill came to be accepted as a sacred place in the Hindu cosmology is about another king of the *asura* race, Narakasura. There is a hill in Guwahati that bears the same name of the *asura* king. Narakasura was born of the earth by Vishnu in his pig incarnation and was brought up by Janak, the king of Videha or north Bihar. He established his capital in Pragjyotishpur, near modern Guwahati. He was acknowledged specially by Vishnu, who instructed him to worship goddess Kamakhya. He followed all the instructions diligently and settled numerous Brahmans at Kamakhya, until Banasura, the king of Sonitpur led him astray (about whom we have mentioned earlier). The wily *asura* intended to marry goddess Kamakhya who accepted on the condition that a water tank, road and a temple should be constructed within a single night. Utilizing his immense resources, Narakasura was on the brink of accomplishing this feat. But the goddess was repulsed by the prospect of being married by an *asura* and she caused a cock to crow through which it was proved that the night receded and hence Narakasura failed. He was enraged by this stratagem and killed the cock. The place is still named as Kukurakata pahar (the hill where the cock was slain). Vishnu, the father of Narakasura was embarrassed by the evil doings of his son and he killed him in his Krishna incarnation.

A few words on the name Pragjyotishpur are necessary to substantiate the existence of the nomenclature (along with Kamakhya) by which this region was known to the western world. *Prag* means former or eastern, and *jyotishya*, a star or astrology. Hence as a whole the capital

was known as eastern city of astrology. This region was always considered to be a land of magic and witchcraft and it was from this area that the tantrik form of Hinduism originated. The two names Kamrup and Pragjyotishpur are still extant in the lower bank of the Brahmaputra valley in Assam. The above consideration is based on Kalika Purana, where it is mentioned that, Brahma made the first calculation of the stars in Pragjyotisha. Or can it be that the first rays of the sun during the millennium celebration shone in Arunachal Pradesh.

Geography: Mapmaking through the Ages

The geography of the landmass known in the ancient era, as Kamrupa or Pragjyotisha, should be taken into reckoning in this context. While myths and legends abound in regions nearing the capital, not much is known about the places and peoples living in the far-flung areas. This might be due to the metropolis vs. the mofussil divide persisted during the bygone era too. Though the extent of the land area was transformed due to political and historical reasons in the interregnum, one conclusion can be drawn that the borders of the ancient kingdom prevailed much beyond the borders of present-day Assam and even contemporary India's northeast in toto. This can be substantiated by the numerous literary, historical and mythical references.

The Stri Parva of the Mahabharata calls Bhagadatta, the king of Pragjyotisha, as Sailalaya (dwelling among the mountain), while the Drona Parva depicts him as the Parvatapati (lord of the mountains). In the Sabha Parva, Aswamedha Parva and Udyoga Parva of the epic, the troops of the eastern king are referred to as being inhabitants of the seacoast and as Kiratas and Chinas. The Kiratas of course meant the earliest mongoloid inhabitants, namely, the Bodos and the Chinas might have been the Burmese or the Tibetans. The inhabitants of the seacoast were the people living in the marshy regions of Sylhet, Mymensingh and Tripura (Barua 1966: 1).

The Yogini Tantra and Hara Gauri Sambada divides ancient Kamrupa into four pithas earmarked by river boundaries, namely:

1. Ratnapitha, between the Swarnakosha and the Karatoya,
2. Swarnapitha, between the Pushpikakosha and Bhairavi,
3. Kamapitha, between the Swarnakosha and the Kapila, and

4. Saumarpitha, between the Bhairavi and the Dikrong rivers.

From the above facts, it may be deduced that the kingdom included the present-day Brahmaputra valley, parts of Bhutan, Rangpur (in present-day Bangladesh), Coochbehar (in West Bengal) and the adjoining areas (Kakati 1978: 8).

Hiuen Ts-ang, the Chinese pilgrim-trader who visited Kamrup, in the second quarter of the seventh century mention in the T'ang-shu that the country was more than a myriad *li* (1667 miles) in circuit and to the east of the country was a series of hills which reached as far as the confines of China (Watters 1905: 187).

According to K. L. Barua, it is certain that 'Pragjyotisha or ancient Kamrupa was a much larger kingdom than most of the other kingdoms mentioned in the Mahabharata and most of the sixteen Mahajanapadas existing during the time of Gautam Buddha'.

As has been said earlier, the boundaries of the ancient kingdom did not remain static or constant but underwent numerous changes due to political or other reasons. The western limit was from the Karatoya River to the Manas or Manah under the Tai-Ahom, the great Shan stock who ruled the country from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The rulers of Bengal occupied the present district of Goalpara for many centuries but were re-united in 1874, by the British, when Assam was constituted as a separate province comprising the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys and the hill tracts in the middle, north and the northeast. Since 1947, drastic changes have taken place in its geographical limits, with the exception of two hill districts Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills. The hill tracts have been carved from the ancient state due to reasons, which will be discovered in this discourse. Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh were granted statehoods while Manipur and Tripura were granted their erstwhile geographical entities within the Indian state. The entity Assam/or Northeast will be used interchangeably to some extent considering the historical, cultural, geographical and colonial perspectives. The geographical unit will comprise of the Brahmaputra valley, parts of sub-Himalayan region northern and eastern Bengal, Sylhet and Cachar.

Foreign Historical Sources

While the earlier pages gleaned the ancient history of the religion of our concern through myths, legends, epics and other religious texts, the description of Kamrup, Pragjyotishpur or Assam are distributed in numerous foreign works ranging from Greek to Chinese sources. The earliest mention of Kirrhadae (Kirata) in the hills of Assam and Burma is found in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, a Greek work of the first century A.D. Two Chinese pilgrims, Hsuen Tsang and Shaman Hwui Li, visited the country in the earlier part of the seventh century A.D. Vast tracts of the land was covered by these pilgrims which finds mention in detail in their two works *Si-yu-ki* and *Life* respectively. Attempts have been made by scholars to track the relationship between Assam and China during the seventh century A.D. in two works, namely History of the Sang Dynasty, translated from the Chinese original. The other work is by the Chinese scholar I-Tsing which has been translated into English as *Memoir* composed during the Epoch of the Great Tang Dynasty on the Eminent Monks who went to search for the law in western countries.

Apart from the above works, numerous Arabic and Persian works exists which mention about today's India's Northeast. Most of the authors were scholars who accompanied their master's war train into India. However the earliest is by Sulaiman, an Arab merchant written in A.D. 851 but completed by Abu Zayd in A.D. 916. The most significant text *Tarikhul Hind* (A.D. 1030) is by Al-Biruni. Minhajuddin's *Tabaqat-I-Nasari*, a Persian work writes extensively about Muhammed Bakhtiyar's expedition to occupy Tibet through the land route of Assam and how the whole army was lost in the two countries. The Arabic and Persian texts denoted Kamrup as Kamrud, Qamrun and Kamru.

Asurs vs. the Aryans

Well, we have travelled numerous centuries through time in the earlier pages attempting to unravel the link of India's Northeast to the mainland through the myths, legends, epics and other texts. Now is the time to wait and take stock about what actually happened in the bygone era and whether those happenings in that epoch influenced the latter period to arrive. The key to these linkages will again be in those myths and legends. Also by reading between the lines of the modern scholars, other interesting scenarios and configurations might be

unfurled. The flip sides of the 'rock solid' myths and their twisted tales will be taken into consideration in these passages.

In an earlier page, the tale of Rukmini's elopement with Krishna is mentioned, and herein we will deal with the contrary tales. Rukmini's father Bhisma ruled Vidarbha, which according to popular tradition is in Assam, is the designation of the country around Sadiya, in Dibrugarh district. Gait remarks:

According to Puranic account Vidarbha corresponds to the modern Behar, but this is not the only case in which the early Hindu settlers in Assam assigned local sites for the occurrences mentioned in Hindu mythology. Numerous similar instances occur in Further India, and even in Java, where many of the events narrated in the Mahabharata have been given a local habitation.... Bhisma's capital was called Kundina a name that still survives in the Kundil River at Sadiya (Gait 1962: 67).

An interesting scene occurs after we flip through a few pages.

The religion of the Chutiyas was a curious one. They worshipped various forms of Kali with the aid not of Brahmans, but of their tribal priests or Deories. The favourite form in which they worshipped this deity was that of Kesai Khati, 'the eater of raw flesh', to whom human sacrifices were offered.... The person selected was fed sumptuously, until he was in sufficiently plump condition to suit the supposed taste of the goddess, and he was then decapitated at the Copper Temple at Sadiya or at any other shrine of the tribe (Gait 1962: 42).

A veritable pandemonium arises intellectually,[†] yet both the traditions are *sincerely* believed. However, the latter passage is much more historically accurate considering the fact that the Chutiya community, whose language was akin and belongs to the greater Bodo tribe ruled the area, prior to the Ahom invasion in A.D. 1228. Now, the ruins are a hotbed of contention between the two arguments of a scintillating and thrilling love story and that of ghastly human sacrifices. The ruins have not been well preserved and their historicity yet to be scientifically decoded. However lexical translation of the name of the place Sadiya (*sa + diya*) in Assam, indicates offering of human bodies. Let us traverse to other fresher grounds while we allow battle between Krishna and Kali to be fought on their own.

[†] Albeit at a lesser level than the Ayodhya imbroglio.

While Krishna eloped with Rukmini in Sadiya, his grandson Aniruddha was not so fortunate in his attempt to marry Usha, daughter of king Banasura of Sonitpur, while the young couple tried to flee the capital, he was captured by the *damara* king. This part of the story is mentioned elsewhere. What however is attempted to portray are the words of E. A. Gait, who gatecrasher into contrary region unwittingly in the earlier passage. But he was not led blind in the following passage:

Ban Raja's fort is said to have been on the site now occupied by the Tezpur courthouse.... His son Bhaluka made his capital at Bhalukpung, not far from Balipara at the foot of the Aka hills, where the remains of old fortification are still visible. The Akas are said to claim this prince as their progenitor; and it is perhaps, not impossible that they are the remains of a people who once ruled in the plains and ere driven into the hills by some more powerful (emphasis mine) tribe (Gait 1962: 17).

The above facts have been significantly corroborated by Verrier Elwin in his path-breaking text regarding the hill tribes of Arunachal Pradesh:

[T]he ruins of a fort at Bhalukpung on the right bank of the original home of their ancestor Bhaluka... who was defeated, according to Puranic legend, by Krishna at Tezpur.

As the Aka tribe receded to the hills, the ruins are now engulfed and claimed by the jungles. Not much archaeological survey has been done on this ruins, while the name of the place, Bhalukpung is quite popular as a tourist spot near the scenic river. However, our point is to ascertain the dominance of the powerful tribe and their subsequent influence in chasing the earlier inhabitants to the hills.

To speak aside, Jawaharlal Nehru in the Preface to Elwin's book

.... I came in touch with the tribal people of the North-East frontier of India, more especially of the Hill Districts of Assam. My liking for them grew and with it came respect. I had no sensation of superiority over them. My ideas were not at all clear... (quoted in Elwin 1964).

Some other instances of the native topography that were claimed and later renamed by the early Hindu settlers from the west can be traced in the following paragraphs. A consistent battle albeit silent ensued between the early settlers and the autochthones, and in the unequal strife the local resistance was wiped away gradually. The civilization that existed in early Assam has not been researched and documented in a holistic and scientific temperament. According

to the scholars it was a (un)civilization ruled and peopled by *danavas*, *daityas*, *asuras* or in plainer words, Mongolian barbaric hordes. What we have in *the* contemporary history books are plain tales, myths and legends about fictitious seductions and battles, but what emerges naturally are the tussles between the earlier autochthones and the settlers. This (un)writing of history is also amongst one of the reason of the tribal ethnic backlash against the caste Hindu Assamese speaking community and the gradual fragmentation of greater Assam. In the absence of modern and reliable texts about the extent of the greater Bodo civilization comprising of Kacharis, Mech, Lalung, Rabha and Chutiya that persisted in the ancient Assam, predating the arrival of Ahoms into the region, we are left again with the words of Gait.

The wide extent and long duration of Bodo domination as shown by the frequent occurrence of the prefix *di* and *ti*, the Bodo word for water, in the river names of the Brahmaputra valley and the adjoining country to the west e.g. Digaru, Dikhu, Dihing, Dihong, Dibong, Disang, Dipang, Dimla, etc. In some cases the old name is disappearing – the Dichu river, for instance, is now better known as the Jaldhaka – while in others it has already gone, as in the case of the Brahmaputra, which in the early days of Ahom rule was known as the Ti-lao. The latter word was doubtless the origin of another old name for this river, viz. Lohit or Lauhitya (red). This name has another derivation in Sanskrit literature, where the water is said to be so called because Parasuram washed off his body stains in it. But there are numerous similar instances of the invention of such stories to explain names taken from the aboriginal languages. Thus the Kosi derives its name from the Khussi, the Newar word for river, but it is connected in Hindu legends with Kusik Raja; and the Tista, though its first syllable is clearly the Bodo *di* or *ti*, is regarded by the Hindus as a corruption of *trishna*, 'thirst', or *trivata*, 'three springs'. The Ahoms ruled in Assam for seven hundred years, but their word for river (*nam*) occurs only in a few instances in the extreme east, e.g., Namrup, Namtsik and Namsang. They called the Dikhu the Namchau, but the earlier Kachari name has survived in spite of them. The Ahoms, of course, were relatively few in numbers, but they were the dominant race; and the fact that, compared with the Bodo tribes, they have left so few marks on the topography of the country may perhaps be taken to show that the period for which the latter were supreme was far longer than that for which the Ahoms are known to have ruled (Gait 1962 6–7).

We may also add that even Brahmaputra, the only male river in Indian cosmology is a sanskritization of a Bodo expression *Bhullom bhutter*, meaning 'making a gurgling noise' (Banua 1962: 7). Regarding the myth of Parasuram, who after committing matricide, washed his blood stains in Brahmaputra and regained his sainthood, and in the process the water turned red (Lauhitya in Sanskrit means 'red river') doubting Thomases quite naturally tend to point

equally sceptical fingers. Some allied geographical discrepancies also arise in this connection. According to Hindu scriptures, the Brahmaputra originated in the sacred pool, Brahmakunda, Arunachal Pradesh. However geographical missions with the intention of ascertaining the exact location of the source of the river are yet to discover the real glacier till date. It is generally believed to be somewhere near the Chemayungdung glacier, southeast of the Ma nas Sarovar. Geographical fallacy apart, there appears to be numerous Parasuramas in the ancient Indian tradition. The case of Assamese Parasuram is misleading, if we take into consideration the text, *The Holy City of Dwarka*, by Dr. S.R. Rao, one of India's most respected archaeologists. Herein, Dr. Rao brings in credible information about the existence of the historical city of Dwarka, ruled by Krishna in Gujarat. The archaeologist states that, Bhrigukaccha, the modern Broach, is named after the Bhrigu clan of Parashurama. Hence the incongruity is more incredible if we try to imagine an Assamese Parasurama, through whom the name of the male river might have originated.

The above absurdities apart, even the origin of the Kamakhya temple is shrouded in historical ambiguity. This is again another battleground between the myths of the Sanskrit and indigenous beliefs and traditions. One position propagates that the Kamakhya temple predates Hinduism in the area and was 'probably originally a temple for a pre-Hindu mother goddess' (Baruah 1999: 184). According to Bishnu Rabha, noted revolutionary and social reformer of Assam, 'Kamakhya' is the sanskritized form of Kamakhs or Kamalaksi, the female deity of the Mongoloid tribes of ancient Assam (Bishnu Rabha Suarani Gabeshana Samiti 1982: 64). Again the native origin of the Goddess can be further ascertained in the words of B. K. Kakati, who states that the word 'Kamakhya' has been derived from an Austric formation such as *kamoi* (demon) in old Khmer, *kamoi* (devil) in Cham, *kanet* (corpse) in Khasi, *kamui* (grave) or *komuoch* (corpse) in Santali (Kakati 1941: 53).

One has merely raised the fallacies and the historical distortions that were deciphered in the labyrinth of history. To get to the river mouths of these uncharted terrains is beyond the scope of the present discourse. Hence, we will fit the stopper into the dzin filled bottle by pinpointing some other inconsistencies witnessed in the contemporary history books. Truly there are things known and unknown, and in between lies the ambiguities. The following

quotes are taken from Dr. H. K. Borpujari's *Comprehensive History of Assam*, vol. 1. It is commonly accepted as *the* history book of the region. Is it so? In chapter three, we find that

The early period of the history of Assam is more glorious than the medieval and modern periods because it was during that period Assam produced kings who made a mark in *North Indian politics* (Borpujari 1990: 44; emphasis mine).

Doesn't it resemble a plain case of inverted inferiority complex? The fixation with North Indian politics is hilarious if we take into consideration the quote in the immediately next page. Also it is a case of the subaltern vs. the metropolitan monarch, while at the same time history is being constructed only in terms of the administrator and not by the administrated. E. H. Carr might have stiffed in his grave. We may also add that it's a context of location and position, with a clear view from the metropolis proper. The next quote will further substantiate the internal contradictions of the author:

We have to mention here an interesting Tantric work entitled *Haragauri Samudra*, which was composed after the first decade of the nineteenth century since the latest date mentioned is Saka 1734 (A.D. 1812). It aims to give an account not only of Indian history from the days of Yudhisthira, but also of the early history of territories like Kamrupa as well of the medieval Kamrupa rulers of the Indra Vamsa (i.e., to construct the Ahom kings as belonging to a Hindu pattern!). As practically the whole work is fabricated and resembles the earlier parts of the Oriya Mandala Panji, the Bengali Rajavali (written by Mnityunjay Vidyasankar and published in 1808) and Rajamala (chronicle of the Tripura kings) and similar other works, it offers an interesting instance how genealogies, chronologies and narratives can be entirely concocted (ibid.: 45-46).

Now whither goes 'the kings who made a mark in North Indian politics? Isn't that line clearly biased and prejudiced against the later non-Aryan Ahom kings who ruled during the medieval period. Hence the allegation of concoctions and distortions will work against *the* history texts too?

Rather than continuing to roll heads further, it seems saner and more prudent to sum up with a few more lines from the above-mentioned book about the epico-Puranic myths and allied myths in the fifth chapter:

What is more unfortunate is that writers on the early history of Assam often take the legends more seriously than they should be (p. 91).

These tales are similar to the rubbish that the authors of late works like the *Ain-I-Akbari* (completed in 1595 A.D.) offer us as the ancient history of Bengal and the *Madala Pariji* as the early history of Orissa (p. 94).

We have travelled through the misty terrain of the known and the unknown, at times blindfolded and at other times bedazzled by the bright rays of the sun. Between the interregnum of the unknown and the known, some more dynasties as the Varman, Palas, Bhuyans and the Koches ruled in some parts and not in the whole. But these kingdoms soon fell into disarray. The land was in waiting in order to be shed of its gloom, to be administered by an organized hand and to be rescued out of the reigning anarchy. Then something happened in the eastern frontiers... . We now stumble into the known, charted terrain. We also hear of the approaching time and about them... . who came.

Arrival of the Ahoms

Let us now enter and travel a few more centuries, albeit in a charted terrain and deal with the lesser demons. The point of departure will be from the A.D. 1228 till the present-day and we have in our hands accurate compasses, reliable texts of history and also a chronological time device. We will deal with the lesser demons and not with the pre-existing Kiratas, *mlachas*, *daityas*, *danavas* and *asuras*. However they cannot be wished away but will be signified with the names as they are acquainted to us today. The focus of this discourse shifts away from Kamrup as Pragjyotish to Assam. It is however another matter that the Tai-Ahom or Shans named the region Mung-dun-sun-kham, literally a country full of golden gardens. The nomenclature of the country underwent a metamorphosis with the arrival of the Ahoms. Arabs and Persian historians called the region 'Asham' and in the early days of the British rule it was spelt only with a single 's'. The term does not appear anywhere prior to the Ahom occupation, and in the Bangsabali of the Koch kings, it is applied to the occupying group, rather than the geographical area. The Tai-Ahom was previously known as the Shans and the Assamese pronounced the term as Shyam. Also the Ahoms were recognized by the tribes of upper Assam as *asama*, in the sense of 'unequaled' or 'peerless'.

However, there is another catch in the phrase of Assam. While the region is known as 'Assam' and its people in the widest sense of the term Assamese, the same is not the case within the state. The Assamese call themselves and their language 'Axomiya' and their place 'Axom' presently. The sound is similar to the 'ch' sounds in German 'acht' and Scottish 'loch'.

However the 'x' usage will not be used in the case of common proper nouns where the English spelling with an 's' has broad usage. The sound conventionally represented by 's', however is not always a velar fricative in Assamese. In certain consonant clusters, the letter 's' is an accurate representation of the Assamese sound. The geo-political course of the country changed abruptly with the arrival of the Ahoms. While settlers in the past entered the region from the west and sought political and cultural sustenance beyond its western periphery, the direction now changed to the east. The hegemony of the non-Aryans started with the Ahom occupation and the long strife between the Aryan settlers and native cultures ended for the time being. The eastern periphery and their peoples opened up, and the local populace sought their common regional identities as the subjects of the kingdom of Assam. This was the period when the culture tended to acquire the composite Assamese connotation with Mongolian overtones. The concocted Hindu past gave way to the flourishing of the tribal beliefs and traditions, on which the Ahoms didn't impose, any restrictions. The context of Hinduism in the pre-Ahom era may be judged from the following lines:

The comparatively short existence of the old Assam dynasties explains the slow and intermittent character of the progress of Hinduism in past generations. Hindu priests and warriors undoubtedly found their way to Assam at a very early date... And yet, in the Brahmaputra valley, large sections of population are still outside the pale of Hinduism or in the lower stages of conversion, where their adopted religion still sits lightly on them and they have not yet learnt to resist the temptation to indulge in pork, fowls and other articles regarded by the orthodox as impure. The reason seems to be that in early days the number of Hindu settlers and adventurers was small, and they confined their attention to the king and his chief nobles, from whom alone they had anything to gain. They would convert them, admit the nobles to Kshatriya rank and invent for the king a noble descent, using, as will be seen, the same materials over and over again, and then enjoy as their reward lucrative posts at court and lands granted to them by their proselytes. They would not interfere with the tribal religious rites, as to do so would call forth the active animosity of the native priests; nor would they trouble about the beliefs of the common people, who would continue to hold to their old religious nations. If the dynasty lasted long enough, the influence of Hindu ideas would gradually filter down to them and they would follow the example of their betters, as has now actually happened in the case of the Ahoms. But before this could come to pass, the dynasty would ordinarily be overthrown; the down-fallen survivors of the old aristocracy would become merged in some Hindu caste, such as the Kalita, and Hinduism would sink into insignificance until, in course of time, its priests should succeed in inducing the new rulers to accept their ministrations (Gait 1962: 9-10).

The Ahoms are the members of the Shan branch of the great Tai or Thai family of South East Asia. The Shans were so called because they first inhabited a land named Tyai-Shar on the bank of the river Tarim that flowed to the north of Mongolia and China (Buragohain 1946: 7). From Tyai Shan they first migrated to China in about the fifth century A.D. and then to Mungrimungram in Yunan. They expanded gradually to the whole of Hukong valley and established there a powerful group of Tai-Shan states. The Ahoms claim Mungrimungram as their original homeland and state that Khunlai, their younger progenitor ruled over this kingdom. Then third king of Khunlai's family divided the kingdom, Mungrimungram proper and Maulang on the bank of the Sheuli River in upper Burma between his two sons. It was at Maulang, where Sukapha the founder of the Ahom kingdom and father of the Assamese society was born. Tsao-lung Sukapha seems to have left his homeland as a result of a dispute with one of his brothers, to seek his future elsewhere, in 1215. As he and his followers moved towards the Patkai through Hukong valley, he reduced to submission the local tribes like Wancho, Nocte and Tangse Naga tribes. It took 13 years for Sukapha and his followers to subjugate the war-like tribes who inhabited the region extending from the Hukong valley to the Patkai range. The total strength of the Ahoms who first entered the Brahmaputra valley varies from 480 to 1080 as mentioned in the Ahom chronicles. The Ahom Buranji states the number as 9000 at a latter date. It might be that Sukapha originally marched with a small band but their numbers swelled as his tribesmen poured in from the Hukong valley to the Tipam-Namrup area in the Brahmaputra valley, so that when he reached Tipam he had several thousand warriors with him. It is indeed a considerable feat to subjugate the country with a small group of people. The comparatively lesser number of people of Ahom origin to enter Assam will have a direct bearing in the Ahom policy and in the transformation of the status quo of the country. But let us now have a brief look at the source of Ahom history and the tradition of the occupying force. According to Gait, the Ahoms had the historic sense very fully developed, and many of the priests and nobles maintained Buranjis, or chronicles that were written up from time to time, and which contain a careful, reliable and continuous narrative of their rule. However it would be a misnomer to indicate the Buranjis as merely chronicles. It was considered a sacred duty to chronicle the regular happenings of the day and those texts were considered as sacrosanct as religious texts of any other community. As Sukapha ordered his chroniclers to keep record of all events in A.D. 1228, it was the glorious beginning of history - writing in Assam - a precious contribution to historiography in which

the entire subcontinent is lacking. The religion of the Ahom, which was an admixture of Buddhism, animism and ancestor worship also had an influence of historiography. The genealogies of the Ahom families play an important part in the Choklong (marriage ceremony) even today. The influence of Hinduism however has crept into the Ahom religion, which is known as Phralung with the entry of Tantric rituals woven into the ancient tradition. The Buranjis were initially written in the Tai language but with the gradual assimilation of the Ahom people with the locals, they were written in Assamese too.

The Ahoms exercised uninterrupted sovereignty in the Brahmaputra valley for nearly a period of 600 years beginning with the early part of the thirteenth century (A.D. 1228 to be precise) till the annexation of the kingdom to the territories of the British East India Company in A.D. 1826. The Ahom kingdom of pre-colonial times can be described as the cultural heartland of modern Assam. The Ahoms are also credited to have offered the region a long era of political stability by capitulating the seven existing kingdom, and administering a single powerful state. For achieving this end they followed numerous policies, including monarchical federalism allowing vassal chiefs like those of Darrang, Dimarua, Rani, Beltola, Luki, Borduar and Tapakuchi. These vassal states enjoyed complete autonomy in their internal administration. They extended their sway towards west and the north ultimately becoming the lord of the entire valley up to the Manah River (see maps 1 and 2).

The mighty Ahom kingdom came under British rule in 1826, when according to Yandaboo Treaty signed between the Company and the King of Ava (Burma), ended the Anglo-Burmese war, the King of Ava, renounced 'all claim upon' and agreed to 'abstain from all future interpretation with, the principality of Assam and its dependencies, and also contiguous petty states of Cachar and Jyntea' (Jaintia). This treaty, in itself remain till date the bone of contention for secessionist organization like the United Liberation Front of Assam/Asom (ULFA) which regard the credibility of Assam within the Indian Union as null and void, since the treaty was signed between two foreign powers and no representative of Assam was present.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century the expanding Burmese empire had began to intervene in the affairs of the Ahom, Manipuri, and other small kingdom in northeast India. Internal dissensions in the Ahom court had led to dissident faction cultivating ties with the

Burmese court; and starting in 1817 there were a number of Burmese military invasion of Assam. In 1822 the Ahom kingdom came to be ruled by a Burmese commander for a few months. The aristocracy escaped to British territories and sought British help against the Burmese invaders. As the Company's territories came to border the British empire, the latter's military excursion began to alarm the British, making for a convergence of interests between the Assamese and the Company against the Burmese. When the Ahom kingdom passed into the Company, it was the first time in history that Assam became politically incorporated into a pan-Indian imperial formation. For the Ahoms had successfully resisted the Mughals in seventeen battles. There were serious conflicts between the Ahom kingdom and the Mughals in the 17th century. But this period of strife ended with the Ahom army defeating the Mughals in 1682. This major triumph by a small kingdom against the mighty Mughals provided significant political capital to the Ahom kingdom in the region enabling it further to consolidate its rule in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, making that period the zenith of the six centuries of Ahom rule.

To document the six centuries of Ahom rule is a stupendous task and also beyond the import of this exercise. The glaring perspective of Ahom administration in their state policy and assimilationist initiation will be mentioned in the following pages. The repercussions of those policies following the disintegration of the kingdom, and the final segregation of the Assam society will be delved into.

Ahom-Tribal Alliances

Chao-lung Sukapha, the father of modern Assam, was successful in his initial attempts to conciliate the subjugated tribes and maintain a semblance of a unified administration. He knew the art of dealing with the tribes and harnessing their strength to his advantage. He was a master in making excellent compromises of arms and conciliation. He was not a follower of the fire and sword policy but sought the co-operation of the tribes in friendly terms:

Come and have mutual introduction with us. You are the hosts, the natives of this land: we are guests coming from an up-country. You should introduce us to the local people (*Deodhai Ahom Buranji*; p. 100)

Another Ahom Buranji mentions his acumen and diplomacy in his ability to win over and assimilate with the locals:

Sukapha has greater regards for the abilities and personal qualities of the Chutiyas, Barahis and Marans, whom he met at different places, then towards his own followers. Since that time, there was an admixture of blood, and children were of mixed origin, as the Ahoms had not brought their wives when they first came from Nara country and they accepted wives only when they came here (*Assam Buranji: Naobaicha Phukan*, p. 99).

The above status quo persisted for some centuries, with the Ahom monarchy bestowing degrees of federalism and liberalism to the other communities. A brief look at the state policy of Ahom administration will reveal the assimilationist tendencies. Lord William Bentick, Governor General of British India (1828–35) observed that ‘there must have been something intrinsically good in the constitution of the Ahoms’ (Bengal Political Consultation, Sept. 2, 1831, nos. 2-3), for which they ruled a sovereign land uninterrupted for six centuries. But they ruled sans any written constitution. Assam for its rulers was akin to a golden casket (*boonor bopkura*), which must be sealed to the foreigners. As long as the monarchy followed their own tribal traditions, and allowed liberalism to the numerous religious and ethnic groups in the state, the monarchy was able to rule diligently and safeguard the borders from the enemy. Foreigners were termed as *bongals* (not to be mistaken with Bengalis) and their movement within the country was policed.

The Ahoms displayed a keen sense of diplomacy and statesmanship in their relation with the hill tribes. The government offered numerous subsidies to the hill tribes in order to stop their incursion and raids on border villages in the plains. The prime policy vis-à-vis the hill tribes were that of non-interference which could be witnessed in the form of a dictate in *Chokoripheti Buranji*: ‘Being elephants do not attempt to enter the rat holes’. Political and geographical reasons influenced the non-interference policy of the Ahoms. The tracts inhabited by the hill-tribes did not yield well enough to meet their requirements and hence they were forced to raid the border villages. Fertile lands at the foot of the hills, called Khats, along with access to certain fisheries in the plains were given to the Naga and Karbi tribes. Other tribes like Akas, Daflas and Hill-Mikirs were allowed to collect a stipulated amount of rice, cloth, cattle etc called Posa from a class of Paiks called Bahatiyas assigned to them. All the tribes got the privilege of having commercial transaction with the plains. In return for the privilege of *khats* and *posa*, they were to acknowledge the suzerainty of the Ahom king and pay him an annual tribute. Even so, the Ahom tribal policy was not based on a rigid overlord-vassal relationship, because the aim of the government was not extension of its sovereignty

over hill areas but established of friendly relation with them on the basis of mutual benefits and understanding (Baruah 2002: 370).

Along with the material benefits, the diverse tribes were also offered military and administrative posts, which was necessitated by the comparatively fewer number of Ahom warriors who entered Assam. This fact can be exemplified by the words of S. K. Bhuyan, gleaned from his seminal work-Anglo-Assamese Relations, 'The Ahom were, therefore, compelled to increase their community by conferring upon the new entrants the status and privileges of the members of the ruling race. The records of these affiliations were very carefully maintained and they were checked in every reign, the most exhaustive scrutiny being carried out during the reign of Swargadeo Pratap Singha. From these records, some leading Ahom families appear to have been founded by patriarchs belonging to the following non-Ahom races, tribes and communities- Varahi Chutiya, Garo, Koch, Kachari, Maran, Hindu, Kalita, Dhoba, Miri, Mogul and Muslim'.

The Ahom policy of 'peaceful co-existence' also led to the growth of the 'one of the few races in India who could stem the tide of Mughal conquest' (Bhuyan 1974: 7). The tenacity and the strength of the Ahom army, during the Ahom-Mughal wars can be witnessed in the dialogue between the Assamese envoy Madhav Charan Kakati and the Mughal commander Raja Ram Singh of Amber, which is cited in S. K. Bhuyan's *Lachit Borphukan and His Times*:

Numerous chieftains of the hill regions have become our willing allies in the campaign. They consist of a total strength of three lakhs of soldiers. They are not amenable to any considerations of right and wrong. Their participation in this campaign has been directly sanctioned by His Majesty, and they rush furiously against the enemy without waiting for the orders of the general. They are quick and sudden in their attacks and their movements and action cannot be presaged.

A British officer, Captain John F. Michell, narrates in his Report on the North East Frontier, 1883:

The Assamese army appears at this time (1660) to have been largely recruited from Nagas and Miris and it is evident that they were quite able to hold their own against the well-trained armies of Hindustan (Michell 1883: 30).

Another instance of the friendly relations of the Ahoms with a neighbouring tribal kingdom may be gleaned from the following lines, vis-à-vis the political linkages with the tribal Jayantia kingdom,

Garhgaon and Jayantia are not two places, they are one. The sun may rise in the west, the Brahmaputra River may flow upwards, the crows may become white, but the friendship between these two kingdoms will remain intact (Bhuyan 1937).

The Mikirs (Karbis) referred to the Ahoms as belonging to their own fraternity. They once found the Ahom soldiers who were leading an expedition to their hills, partaking their food and drinks (alcohol, of course) and were moved to comment in great delight.

These men eat the things we eat, they are, therefore, man of our fraternity (Bhuyan 1932: 122).

After this episode, several families of Karbis and Lalungs migrated to Ahom territories, and till date, they are known as the Amri Karbis or the Plains Karbis.

Inter-dining and intermarriage was significantly followed by the Ahom monarchy with the tribal communities of the region. The first instance of matrimonial alliance with a neighbouring kingdom can be traced to the reign of Suhungmung or Dihingia Raja (A.D. 1497-1539), who married a Manipuri princess. Pratap Singha married a Jayantia princess and Gadadhar Singha received two Naga princesses as his consorts. The first Bor Patra Gohain (minister) was brought up in a Naga family. Again the illustrious Ahom family of Miri Handikoi was founded by a Miri (Mishing), a tribal, who was adopted by a Burha Gohain, the chief minister. Also the second Borphukan (army chief) was the son of a Naga chief of the Banfera clan.

The Ahom policy versus the independent tribes may be summed up in the following lines:

Conciliate these tribes by promising to furnish them their necessities of life as far as possible on condition of paying annual tribute. If they violate the agreement and indulge in raiding the Assamese villages, try to bring them to submission by employing force as well persuasion and capturing the miscreants, but never over step the limits (Bhuyan 1974: 34).

Sceptics may cast doubts about the liberal tendencies and the assimilationist policies of the Ahoms, but let us turn to some of the myths of the little traditions prevalent amongst the tribes of the India's Northeast. Absurd and un-Darwinian they might be, yet these tales of the

common origin of mankind, or at least of those tribes inhabiting the region indicate towards the fellow feeling and brotherhood of the diverse communities. In a further twist a tale or two even encompasses the British who arrived as the colonial agents. The legends of the Wanchos talk of the earliest of times when there were no different clans, or tribes, there was only one people who were the Wanchos from whom came the others for the 'Assamese are his children' (Miri 1993: 133).

A Singpho myth talks of the common origin of mankind from a gourd in the 'shape of a man'. When the Heavens became congested with too many people God decided to send some of them to earth. Those who came down from the heavens on a silver ladder turned into the British and the Assamese. Others came down the golden ladder and became the Burmese and the Khamptis. However the Singphos, Adis and Nagas came down on the bamboo and wooden ladders as they found them strong and durable.

An Ao Naga tale speaks about the quarrel between two brothers, one choosing the hills as his inheritance and the elder going to the plains. The former was the ancestor of the Assamese and the latter of the Nagas. The Angami Nagas too have a story of how the Nagas and the plain people are descendents of two brothers (Mills 1973: 26).

The Akas too have a similar legend, which goes in the following lines:

Long, long ago all men descended from Heavens to earth by means of ladders. The Assamese and the Akas of royal blood came down by golden ladder; the remaining Akas had a silver ladder; the Tibetans and Monpas were given a ladder of iron; the Dafflas and Abors had to be satisfied with a bamboo ladder; whilst the Cadaris and Ksoas shared a plantain ladder (Kennedy 1967: 1).

A Nocte myth from a remote part of Tirap in Arunachal Pradesh traces the origin of mankind to the marriage between the daughter of the Sky- God and a spirit on earth. Their first descendents were the Noctes and the Ahoms. The English, however, have a less dignified ancestry, for they are the children of a Nocte who married a monkey with a very long tail.†

† The colonized strikes back at the red-faces with coat tails!

Thus it has been witnessed that the Ahom monarchy retained friendly and cordial relations with the diverse tribal and ethnic groups of the country. Several Buranjis mention extensively about the relationship of the monarchy with Bhutan. Akas, Nishis, Miris (Mishings), Mishmis, Khamtis, Singphos, Nagas, Mikirs (Karbis), Garos and the tribes in the Lushai Hills, Jayantiyas and the Khasis. The scope of this disclosure will unusually widen if we elaborate the monarch's ties with the tribes individually. The monarchy's affinity with individual tribes will be dealt with where the need arises in the subsequent pages. We understand that the tribes acknowledged the monarchy as friend, philosopher and guide during its rule of six hundred years, thus leading towards a pan-Mongolian indigenous identity. But there is a talk within a tale of the silent settlers' attempts to denigrate the monarchy and carve a different civilizational ethos.

Saktism vs. Vaishnavism

Although the Ahom rulers had their own language and culture, they did not impose it on other peoples. On the other hand, they intermarried and by adoption of culture and language of the land, they became one of them. The Ahoms did not remain Tai-Shans but became a distinct element in the Assamese language, which became the court language. In order to safeguard the kingdom the Ahoms followed an isolationist policy to resist the intrusion of alien ideas from the west as they were guided by the necessity of organizing the non-Aryan tribes of Assam. The first Ahom king to break this isolation and establish cultural relation with Delhi and other Hindu kingdoms of India was Rudra Singha. But this proved to be the bane of the Ahom monarchy, ultimately culminating in the loss of the kingdom to the British Company (Baruah 1993: 25).

To a great extent the fall of the Ahom monarchy and the present burning cauldron of contemporary Northeast can be traced to the accession of Sudangpha or Bamuni (Brahman) Konwar to the throne in 1397 who ruled till 1407. Prior to this there wasn't any relationship of the Ahoms with the Hindu settlers. Even Sukapha, the first Ahom king was intent only on maintaining alliances with the tribes rather than with the Hindu settlers. Sudangpha was known as the Brahman king as he was born and brought up in a Brahman family to an Ahom princess who was banished from the royal court. The prince took with him his foster father who was allowed to stay in the palace. With the Brahman foster father, entered the worship of Lakshmi-

Narayan-Salagram, or Vishnu- to the Ahom court. This was the first instance of the official entrance of Hinduism, which had far-reaching influence in the political and cultural history of the region. The all-absorbent power of Hinduism was naturally delighted at this turn of event, and they began to concoct the Hindu origin of the Ahoms, bestowing on them, the title of Indra Vanshi:

The Brahmanical account of the origin of the ruling family is very similar to that invented for other kings of aboriginal stock who, from time to time, were induced to enter the fold of Hinduism. It is said that Vasistha Muni had a hermitage on a hill east of Saumarpath. Indra held high revels there, and was one day seen by the Muni sporting with Sachi in his flower garden. In his wrath, the Muni cursed Indra, and condemned him to have intercourse with a low caste woman. This happened; and the woman who proved to be an incarnation of Bidyadhari, begot a son who was highly favoured by Indra. He had many children, of whom Khunglung and Khunlai were the eldest and ruled in Mungrimungram (Gait 1962: 76).

The acts of Brahman Konwar's accession to the throne, concoction of Hindu origin and the usage of the Hindu titles as Maharaja and Rajrajeswari Chakraborty enraged the Ahom nobles. The Buranjis mention of a rebellion of the people of Tipam who protested against the pro-Hindu policy of the king, but the revolt was crushed immediately and brutally. After this brutal suppression of the revolt, there was no looking back for the expansion of Hindu predominance and its influence of State policy in the Ahom court. Suhungmung became the king in 1497 and assumed the Hindu title of Swarganarayan. He also adopted the Saka era instead of the Ahom system of calculation by cycles of 60 years or Laklis. Suklengmung, who claimed the throne in 1539, disfavoured the idea of professing both the Ahom and Hindu faiths. So he installed the Ahom religious deity of Chom-Cheng in a separate palace. Sukhampha (1553-1603) introduced idol worship of Goddess Durga in the Ahom court under the influence of the neighbouring Koch king.

While the above developments continued in the religious front of the Ahom court, a different fermentation was occurring in the hearths of the people. Ensnared within the palace walls, and influenced by the Brahman priests the royalty encouraged the patronage of Hinduism vigorously. The monarchy was impervious to the social awakening among the people, which was in the form of neo-Vaishnavism, as preached by Sankardev. During the seventeenth century, as a result of the propagation of neo-Vaishnavism, heterogeneous faiths

and creeds that prevailed in the land gradually disappeared and a common and simple religion, based on strict monotheism and an ethico devotional code sprang up. People living in the easternmost part of the Brahmaputra valley could now feel a sort of comradeship with those in the westernmost part. The tribes adopted some form of Assamese as lingua franca and began a process of mutual assimilation of tribal elements, which was the beginning of a new phase in the growth and development of Assamese culture⁵ (Sarma 1966: 56).

It was again during this period, when Pratap Singha or Susenpha (1603-41), the Ahom king engineered the growth of the Assamese civil society. He made a uniform pattern of administration and a penal code, which made no distinction between the nobles and the commoners. He patronized Hinduism to such an extent that the Ahom envoys (Kakatis) were replaced by non-Ahom, preferable the Brahmanas.

The Ahoms flirted with Hinduism initially with the intention of assimilating with the ethos of the country. But the initial flirtation led to the Ahom court being a pawn in the hands of the Hindu priests and Sanyasis who flocked to the eastern country. These priests influenced the royalty against the people's faith of Vaishnavism and thus wide schism appeared between the king's religion and the ruled's beliefs. A cancerous growth erupted within the palace itself with the influence of the priests and the intermarriages with the Hindu princesses. While the Ahom kings tried to pit Brahmanism (Saktism) against Vaishnavism in some instances, the tumour turned malignant, leading to extinction of the empire.

During the reign of Udayaditya Singha or Sunyatpha (1670-72), he accepted one Paramananda, a sanyasi from Brindaban as his spiritual guide and offered him huge land grants. This acts and the other treacherous activities of the Guru created fresh dissensions within the palace.

Meanwhile, the *satras* (religious institutions with land holdings), disciples and labourers were gaining ground in respects of prosperity and prestige in the country. Gadadhar Singha, the king-on-the-run visited these *satras* in disguise and was bewildered to find there a life full of

⁵ As a result of Vaishnavism, the tribals were de-tribalized, yes, but it was due to this orthodox form that the de-tribalization gave way to re-tribalization. The influence of Vaishnavism cemented the Assamese speaking community (ASC) but it again led to the segregation of the tribals from the ASC. About this we will mention elsewhere.

pleasure and paraphernalia which surpassed the Ahom court. A parallel administration was run on the Ahom lines, and thus these *satras* earned the ire of the monarchy.

Many *satras* were pillaged and their religion heads executed and their property confiscated. Gadadhar wanted to use religion as a weapon, by pitting Saktism against Vaishnavism. It was from his reign that the king's religion and the people's religion confronted each other leading to the final revolt of the Moamariyas. His final advice to his son Rudra Singha is politically important: 'Do not trust people with foreheads smeared with horizontal lines' (the Sakta Brahmins) (Dewan, unpublished MS). It is also believed that he asked his son to reinstate the *satras*, which he devastated. Also he realized the folly of believing in the Sakta priests. But it was too late.

Rudra Singha (1696–1714) adopted a conciliatory attitude towards the Vaishnavs and restored the religious heads, the Gosains and the Mahantas to their respective places. He then received initiation from the Auniati Gosain, the most influential of the Brahman Satradhikars. In order to use Saktism against the Vaishnavs, he summoned a Brahman from Navadwip in West Bengal to Assam to give him initiation. But owing to some eventualities he could not be initiated but advised his sons to accept the Bengali priest as their preceptor (Dutta 1989: 96).

The immediate cause of the Moamaria rebellion, was the after effects of the accession of the throne by the eldest son of Rudra Singha, i.e., Siva Singha (1714–44), who was a staunch Sakta and was greatly influenced by Brahman priests and astrologers. He abdicated the throne to his chief queen, Phuleshwari, a Brahman temple dancer as his spiritual guides and astrologers predicted an end to his rule due to evil influence of the stars. The chief queen was much more under the influence of the Brahman priests than her husband. She attempted to proclaim Saktism as the state religion, due to instigation and influence of the parvatiya gosain, the Bengali priest. With this objective she ordered the Vishnu gossains to worship the Goddess Durra and personally led the desecration of other religious beliefs. This act created strong resentment among the mahantas leading to Moamariya rebellion.

This rebellion gained predominance, which was organized by a group of disciples of the Mayamara Vaishnav satra on a religious pretext which later transformed into a social and political movement throughout the kingdom. The movement escalated to such a dimension

that the Ahom capital came under the sway of the rebels for a few months. Hostilities between the Moamorias and the royalists continued from 1769 sporadically, with the rebels dealt with a crushing defeat. But these engagements broke the backbone of the monarchy, so that it was unable to resist the Burmese onslaught on 1817. From 1817 till 1826 it was a period of political instability and anarchy, which compelled the monarchy to seek the help of the British. The British chased out the Burmese invaders, yes, but the Company stayed back after doing its duty till 1947. It was the dusk of the Ahom monarchy and the dawn of the colonial powers.

Colonial Conundrum

India's Northeast was the last frontier outposts to be trodden by the wheels of Company machine and it was not due to the outcome of the defeats on the part of the monarchs' of the contemporary period of the region but due to various strategies adopted by the 'pale faces'. The Company reinstated the Rajas of Cachar, Jaintia and Manipur and made political alliances with the Singphos, Khamtis and Matak. The policy of allowing the tribes to enjoy their autonomy was followed by the British initially, in keeping with the tenets of the Ahom administration as well, but they soon adopted a radically different policy towards the tribes as a whole (Baruah 2002: 385). However, no alliances were forged with the Ahom royal family as the Company's Government in Bengal was intent on annexing the whole or part of the Ahom kingdom, through which the British would be able to bring the entire Northeast under its grip.

However the annexation of the northeast was not to be a joyride as was anticipated by the British. Subsequent to the annexation of the Ahom kingdom, Gomdhar Konwar and Peoli Bor Gohain, two Ahom nobles raised the standard of revolt in 1828. After this revolt, the Khasis under Teerut Singh, Singphos, Akas, Garos, Khamtis, Nagas and Lushai (Mizos) rebelled against the British but were put down brutally. Also the Company had to bear the brunt of the 1857 revolution and subsequent unorganized agrarian rebellion in the region. But that is again another part of the long story.

Our contention is not of the modus operandi - through which the Northeast was subjected by the British, but the subsequent constructions within the region. The perspective after the subjugation will follow however the trajectory of the following line and the subsequent anarchy till the present date.

In the beginning the members of the Assamese classes, including the satradhikars, hailed them with 'unbounded joy' and extended them the most loyal co-operation (Baruah 2002: 457).

The British followed a colonial policy, which constructed a sharp demarcation between the hills and the plains, which was an abrupt disjunction from the Ahoms past. In order to believe this fact, we will have to take recourse to the under-mentioned perspective

[T]he people of the hills and of the plains or valleys are radically different but always have been interconnected (Jacobs et al. 1990: 41).

The early colonialists administered the newly colonized lands according to the past traditions of the Ahoms. But in the latter period the British policy altered as the colonial enterprise began to segregate the two entities and steps were taken to restrict the relationship within them. These limitations transformed the assimilationist tendencies of the different peoples as was envisaged by the Ahom administration.

E. Leo Rose comments on the policy of the British administration vis-à-vis the people inhabiting the Himalayan foothills.

British policy along with the whole of the Himalayas was based upon the general principle that all independent hill principalities should be deprived of whatever plain areas they controlled at the foot of the hills (Rose 1994).

The British might have stumbled upon the above fact after the occupation of Ahom Assam. The British might have been horrified by the acts of the 'peaceful co-existence' followed by the Ahoms, through which they offered the neighbouring peoples fertile lands and other amenities to better their impoverished livelihoods. Stupefied, they attempted to weaken the tribes in order to make them clamour for British justice and material benefits. Henceforward, the 'pale faces' regarded the hill tribes as 'primitive tribes' and kept them in reservation-like territories named as 'backward' or 'excluded' tracts. The Inner Line Permit passed through the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873, which is still prevalent in the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland proclaim that people living beyond this line were 'left to manage their own affairs...' But that was not the case during the Ahom rule which is evident from the earlier pages when the Ahom kingdom maintained strong

relationship in every matter and geographical transportation was not even a minor issue. The colonial enterprise was able to build up an unseen border between the hills and the plains, which was much more augmented in the latter periods due to numerous factors.

The British policy over these areas was paternalistic, and little attempt was made to introduce the kind of legal order that the British provided on establishing in their colonies. They believed that the stage of development reached by the inhabitants of these areas prevents the possibility of applying to them methods of representation elsewhere (Baruah 1999: 39).

Christianity entered the hills under the patronage of the British administration, and it found their willing adherents primarily in Naga and Lushai Hills. Conversion into new faith was also due to the disintegration of the Vaishnav *satras* after the fall of the Ahom kingdom. Even though the Ahoms persecuted the *satras* to some extent, the Vishnu institutes were allowed to preach liberally. But with the decline of the Ahom monarchy, the *satras* too were dying a slow death and thus was lost another link with the neighbouring tribes.

Assam in the political sense was a part of British Bengal until 1874, and then made a province of East Bengal from 1905–12. The landmass was considered as an extension of Bengal (even now! Is there anything beyond Kolkata?) and it was an ideal area 'room for expansion'. Along with it the British tried to 'grow more people' encouraged immigration from East Bengal while declining the pleas of the Assamese leaders to establish educational institution in the language.

While the Bengalis considered the Assamese language to be its offshoot, Grierson Sahib proved the babus to be otherwise. Again the Assamese were clamouring for their language to be the mode of instruction and asserted their individual identity than that of the Bengalis. Assistance however came in a godly garb in the American Baptist Missionaries who were compiling Assamese grammars and dictionaries as precursors to proselytization. They with the help of the native intellectuals managed to convince the British and thus the Assamese language came into being in print. Sankardev, the chief preacher of the Vaishnav faith attempted to forge a proto-Vaishnav identity through the conversion of the numerous ethnic groups to his faith. Thus an Assamese identity was carved along with the unseen assistance of Sunyatpha, the Ahom king who reorganized the society in a democratic pattern. What Miles

Bronson and Nathan Brown was able to achieve was however beyond the imagination of Sankardev. They formulated the first 'imagined' Assamese nation through their printing press and the magazine. While the Assamese language was able to cement a band within the Assamese speaking community, it proved to be a double-edged sword too. Hence it will be in our best interests to let Benedict Anderson and Sankardev, to debate the outcome of Assamese 'print capitalism'.

Assamese language: Assimilation vs. Segregation

Let us now delve into the Assamese language, which played significant roles in assimilationist and ironically divisive factors in India's Northeast. It is the language issue, a legacy subsequent to the acceptance of Vaishnavism, which served as the midwife leading to the break-up of the cauldron. The geographical cauldron of Northeast was constructed in cast-iron and the pieces fell apart as the mid-wife scissored the cord. The process resulted in the construction or carving up of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland from the greater Assam. Regarding the Assamese language, noted scholar S. K. Bhuyan mentions that

The vocabulary of the Assamese has been greatly strengthened by words used by the tribals. Assamese proverbs are brimful of references to the customs of our tribal neighbours. The popular music and dance of Assam have been largely reinforced by borrowings from the tribals. ... The liberal spirit of the Assamese Vaishnava monks has led to the conversion of a large number of tribals with the Hindu fold and they are as ardent devotees of Hindus as their older co-religionists (Bhuyan 1971: 46).

So far so good. Due to the successful assimilationist policies, the Assamese language was gaining ground among the tribals. And in the words of Gait, '... Assamese is now supplanting Kachari and other tribal languages' (Gait 1962: 2). It has also been mentioned that a pidgin form of Assamese, Nagamese was prevalent while communicating amongst the tribes. Almost all the hill tribes of present-day Arunachal Pradesh, except the Monpa tribe were conversant in Assamese.

But gradually the politico-cultural grammar of the region was transformed in the late nineteenth century. The Assamese language gradually acquired the Semantics of English in British and the tribal languages undertook the formation of Irish, Scottish and Welsh

languages. However, the kilted tribals were far too many and the complexities much varied and tenacious than that of the British Isles.

Colonial Assam initially witnessed the modern form of politics in the late nineteenth century. It was in the mould of a cultural movement, which attempted to develop Assamese language and literature through establishment of schools, colleges and universities. To an extent this was the period when the birth pangs of Assamese sub-nationalism was felt for the first time. The monarchy was gone, and along with it went the liberal federal structure and non-interference policies. It should however be mentioned that Assamese sub-nationalism came into being much prior to pan-Indian nationalism.

The role of the Bengali language influenced the course of the rise of Assamese sub-nationalism. The British colonial enterprise in 1836, a decade after the take over of Assam, decided that the language of rule in the 'new' province will be Bengali. Several organization were formed namely Assam Association, Axomiya Bhaxa Unnati Xadhini Xobha (Association for the Development of the Assamese Language), which petitioned the government. for the change of the issue. Thus in 1873, Assamese became the language of educational institutions and judicial proceedings. However the leaders, Anandoram Dhekiyal Phukan, Lakhinath Bezbaruah etc. of this cultural movement were educated in the neighbouring colonial capital. They belonged to the upper-class ethnic Assamese stock, which influenced the latter politics of the region till date. They should however not be confused with the erstwhile ruling class i.e. The Ahoms or the 'other' communities. This group came to be patronized by the British polity with the intent of pitting them against the colonists. In the meantime, three groups or Assamese came to be mobilized politically, the 'ethnic' Assamese (usually the Assamese speaking caste-Hindu community, Brahmans, Kalita, Koches to an extent), the 'immigrant' Assamese and the 'tribal' Assamese. The Ahom however in the contemporary condition are fence sitters between the 'ethnic' and 'tribal' Assamese.

The context of Assamese sub-nationalism and the subsequent movements of diverse ethnic groups for political autonomy and identity can be traced to the instances of manoeuvres called transformismo. Antonio Gramsci, paid close attention to this factor in early twentieth century Italy. Transformismo, which literally means transformation, is the tactic of appropriating the opponent's agenda, or stealing their clothes, so to speak, in order to weaken

their support and strengthened the chances of survival. This is different from countering or confronting the opponents by launching a campaign based on a distinct, independent agenda. It is problematic by its very nature because one's opponent's set the core agenda in the first place, usually on their terms (*The Frontline*, June 20, 2003).

From Italy to India's Northeast it is indeed a long way, but we have lessons to learn from this factor- of transformismo. Subsequent to the British occupation of Assam, there arose a distinct non-Ahom Assamese bourgeoisie that was bent on usurping the vacuum created as a result of the fall of Ahom monarchy. Maniram Dutta Dewan Borbhandar Barua, a non-Ahom at first assisted the Company, 'rendered useful services to the British administration' and helped the 'authorities in subjugating the Bhutiyas, Khasis and Garos'. He fell from the Company's grace due to administrative and financial irregularities and was finally executed due to his complicity in the 1857 revolt in Assam. The complicity of the compradors can be gauged by the position of Haranath Parvatia Barua, daroga (police officer) and Harakanta Sarma Barua (both non-Ahoms) a Sadar-amin who condemned numerous rebels (some falsely) in order to placate their masters. The company intent on assuaging the feelings of the non-Ahom nobility offered Jagirs and landed properties along with the titles like Rai Bahadur, Lat Bahadur to the compradors.

There is still prevalent among nobility acquired the unconfirmed report, as to how the non-Ahom nobility acquired the exalted position and managed to better themselves in the fields of polity, economy, education. It is said that following the British occupation of Assam, the Ahom martial class took to the hills in order to organize resistance against the British. They aligned with the tribes of the neighbouring hills and assisted them in numerous raids and incursion against the common enemy. The British meanwhile resorted to diplomacy and announced the surrender policy by which the warriors will be awarded material grants like estates, tea plantation and jobs. The warring class did not pay heed to this policy and they either died fighting while some assimilated with the hill tribes. Some ethnic caste-Hindu Assamese however, donned the garbs of the Ahom warriors and partook the rewards of the Company. And hence it is seen that these 'false' warriors managed to get hold of tea estates, land holdings and positions in and around the Jorhat town, the last seat of the Ahom Empire. Following the British, the Indian govt. utilized this policy in curbing insurgencies in Nagaland

and Mizoram. This policy is still being continued in Assam, but the real insurgents are still at large. But that is another story.

Taking a leaf out of the above contexts, the caste Hindus attempted to create a polity of their own in the late nineteenth century. This was another instance of the transformismo effect on the new nation builders. This however had a ripple effect on the tribal people who were pushed to the ground and the hills and alienated them from the ASC. This was due to the Assamese desire to have a culture policy that defined the state as Assamese. However this feeling grew to the gradual politics of resistance to 'the other idiosyncrasy of colonial geography: the nation of Assam as an extension of Bengal' (Baruah 1999: 43). The cultural politics of Assamese Assam and the attempt to forge an independent identity by breaking away from the Bengali shroud assumes significant dimensions in the sub-national politics of Assam in the post colonial period.

Two constructions occur in this juncture of the politics and the question of internal colonialism. While the Assamese caste Hindu attempted to carve an independent identity outside the hegemony-seeking pan-Indianhood, internal group formations and challenges were encountered within the same terrain and within the same time frame more or less. In plainer words- while the Assam province consider itself to be at the peripheries, the sub-national elites who ruled and still rules the cultural politics are themselves isolated equally from the others i.e. the peripheries. This is indeed a curious development of the evolution in the perspective of the time frame. From the late nineteenth century till date the self same mentality and politics is being activated and Assam undergoes the tremors of Balkanization. If in the decades following India's independence, Nagas, Mizos, Khasis, Garos, Jaintias and the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh were offered statehoods, other groups demand statehoods or autonomy today. Bodos, Karbis and Mishings today are challenging the Assamese sub-nationalism and clamor for pieces of the geographical pie. Even Ahoms (the erstwhile rulers), Koch Rajbonghis, Tiwa Lalungs and Rabhas are beginning to question the cultural hegemony of the caste Hindu ASC.

It is indeed the vast schism between the Assamese ultra-nationalist urge for the fabrication of an Assamese Assam and the existence of the state's multi ethnic reality, which are at the root of the growth of the contesting faces.

The transformismo effect of Assamese sub-nationalism had its ripple effects and chain reaction in the other groups too, albeit as natural corollaries. While Bengal attempted cultural colonization of Assam, the intelligentsia of the ASC did not sit idle and sought new grounds for expansion. While Assamese and its pidgin forms was the lingua franca in the Ahom times, the ASC attempted to impose the language in an organized manner in the matters of administration, judiciary and education upon the tribal people. The ASC attempted to shake off the yoke of Bengali sub-colonialism, or in easier terms, the fear of Greater Bengal, engulfing the landmass of India.

Humayun Kabir writes in *India*, a newspaper edited by himself, in 1944: 'one can easily visualize a Bengali state comprising about 100 million people and living in a compact area. Such a state would include the present state of Bengal and some of the outlying districts of Assam and Bihar: in fact the entire province of Assam may be wholly incorporated in it' (Barua 1971: 97).

While the ASC was led into the imposition of the Assamese language upon the tribals due to the fear of Bengali expansion, the tribals in the same manner resented the act subsequently, after India's independence. This aspect can be traced to the case story of the creation of the state of Meghalaya comprising of Garo, Khasi and Jaintia tribes. Assamese was introduced as the state language in 1960 and due to the dearth of technical and trained personnel; non-tribal Assamese were offered jobs in the govt. The plains people also settled in the hill areas after deforesting the forests, at which the tribals were naturally enraged. Adding salt to the wound Nilmoni Phukan, a caste Hindu ex-MLA announced

All the languages of different communities and their culture will be absorbed in Assamese culture. I speak with rather authority in this matter regarding the mind of our people that this State government cannot nourish any other language in the province. When all State affairs will be conducted in Assamese, it will stand in good stead for hill people to transact their business in Assamese with their Assamese brethren (Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings 1948: 581-82).

Williamson Sangma and his compatriots formed the All People Hill Leader's Conference in August in 1960, and sought for the separation of the hill districts from Assam.

The people speaking the Assamese language are determined to do away with the language and culture of those who do not belong to the Assamese-speaking community. If this attitude continues, there will be no other alternative but to go out for a separate state, which will enable to preserve their racial identity, culture and language (*Hindustan Standard*, 25 June 1954).

The birth of Meghalaya was comparatively a tame affair considering the other bloody movements for the division of the state. After numerous petitions to the Central Government and meetings with the then P.M., Jawaharlal Nehru, Meghalaya, 'the abode of the clouds'— a state of the three tribes— came into being on Jan. 21, 1972.

The context of Nagaland's tumult for autonomy is a complex issue, predating that of India's Independence. Secessionist politics of the Nagas started prior to 1947, and hence Naga insurgency is often termed as the 'mother of all insurgencies' and the oldest in the sub-continent. The Naga National Council (NNC) that was formed in 1946 declared that:

Nagaland was never conquered by India. The British conquered a part of Nagaland Hills and once British left India it should revert to its original free status (Alemchiba 1970: 179).

The extremist fraction demanded complete independence, while the moderates favoured the status quo. As a result, a memorandum was signed between the moderates and the Government of India, on June 1947 but Angami Zapo Phizo disregarded the process and declared independence on August 14, 1947 a day ahead of India's independence. This was followed by brutal warfare between the extremists and the Indian government. The area was within the boundaries of Assam, but in 1960 the state of Nagaland was created. However the impasse continues with the extremists led by different camps- NSCN, Issac- Muivah, and Khaplang factions and truce maintained between the two entities till date.

Mizoram however had an abrupt and immediate reason to flare up, in order to carve a state of their own. Along with the imposition of Assamese as the official language and the general apathy of the Assam govt. against the isolated Lushai Hills District, the Mizo National Union was in the process of demanding a Union Territory status. But nature aided their clamor in an ironical twist. Famine struck the land, after the flowering of the bamboos, (Mautam) which make the rats to destroy all the crops of the fields. The Assam government was slow in providing assistance and relief measures which prompted the Mizo National Front, under the leadership of Laldenga to rebel for an independent, Sovereign state of

Mizoram. An underground parallel govt. was formed in 1966 and the Indian Government attempted to crush the rebellion brutally. Help came to the rebels from foreign sources namely Bangladesh, Pakistan and China. Equipped with foreign psychological and armed aid the war (yes, war) continued for a long period. However, the imbroglio was settled after a Memorandum of Settlement was signed in June 1986 leading to the formation of the state of Mizoram (abode of the Zo peoples).

If a freak occurrence of nature in the form of Mautam aided the creation of Mizoram, it was a man-made factor (made in China, albeit foreign), which abetted the separation of Arunachal Pradesh (then known as North East Frontier Agency) following the Chinese aggression. In 1971, NEFA was renamed as Arunachal Pradesh, and separated from Assam under union territory status. It was only this state which didn't lead or agitate for statehood but was created as a result of the direct intervention of the Government of India. A process of Assamization was active in the state in the southern areas and had intimate relation with the plains people. The people of the north are however much more assimilated with the Tibetans and strict adherents of Buddhism. Assamese was accepted willingly by the northern tribes, to the extent that writers like Lummer Dai was awarded in 1970 by the Human Resources Development Ministry of Government of India, for his novels in Assamese under the section 'Writers writing in languages other than his/her mother tongue' (*Dainik Assam*, Guwahati, April 6, 2003, p. 4).

After the terminated births and caesarean deliveries we will enter the belly of contemporary Assam, the mother of all segregated states. The belly has shrunk in its size with visible symptoms of acute malnutrition and anorexia (see maps 3 and 4), and all is not well within.

It is indeed through brutal turns of historical and political destiny that the Tai-Ahom were compelled to form the Ahom Association (AA) in as early as 1893 under the leadership of Padma Nath Gohain Baruah. The Association demanded the recognition of the Ahom as a minority community and a separate electorate, while tabulating themselves in the census as 'Tai Ahoms' instead of Hindus (Baruah 2002: 615). An existential struggle took place between the Tai-Ahom, the erstwhile ruling class and the caste-Hindu Assamese, who were the first to join the hands of the British. The discord between the caste-Hindu Assamese on the one hand, and

the Tai-Ahom and the tribals was sprouting quietly, the results of which are visible in the present discourse. Similar to the Muslims in the Indian mainland, the ex-rulers failed to take advantage of English education – the passport to government jobs and other benefits.

During this period it so happened that the letter inviting the Ahom king as the legal representative of the state of Assam to the First Round Table Conference in London, in order to discuss the further political status quo of the region was not delivered to the addressee. It was alleged that the leaders of the Assam Chapter of the Indian National Congress appropriated the document, and attended the London Conference in the garb of the Sovereign. This infuriated the Ahom Association (AA) to denounce the INC, as 'a league of caste Hindus'. The Association however could not progress much due to internal dissension between the liberal and orthodox Ahoms.

Late in 1944, through the initiative of the AA, All Other Tribes and Races Federation (AOTRF) was formed in Shillong with the objective of reverting back to the pre-colonial status in a federal structure accommodating all the tribes of the region. All the rajas, Khasi Syiems and traditional rulers of the region participated in it. But the Federation could not gather much steam and died a slow death due to its inherent characteristic of being a royalist accumulation rather than a mass based political organization.

After Independence, in an Ahom revivalist movement, an agitation was launched under the aegis of Padmabikash Borgohain and other leaders through the Ujani Asom Rajya Parishad (UARP) in Garhgaon, the former Ahom capital demanding an autonomous state comprising the land area of upper Assam. This was followed by the Tai-Ahomland Demand Committee Convention held in Guwahati, on Feb 3, 1996 seeking an autonomous Tai-Ahom entity with Ajuha as the capital in the Dhemaji District. The movement for Ahom autonomy and other benefits are being carried on at the behest in the contemporary period at the behest of outfits like Ban 'Ok Puplic Myung Tai, AII Tai-Ahom Student's Union (ATASU), Lachit Brigade, etc. The movement has not acquired a heightened stage yet, but it remains to be seen when the sleeping dragon turns into a crouching one.

The most violent movement for a political entity in the present decades which rocks Assam now is however being carried on by the Bodos. (Gait has been proved wrong, RIP!) In

fact the genesis of this context has its roots in a much earlier period in 1928, when Assam Juba Kachari Sanmilan and Bodo Juba Sanmilan met the Simon Commission demanding recognition as a distinct unit. The contention was that Gopinath Bordoloi, Chairman, North East Frontier Tribal Areas Sub-Committee failed to do justice to the plain tribals. The sixth schedule of the Indian constitution attempted to provide adequate safeguards to protect the rights, customs, usages and distinct identity of the plain tribals. The influx of foreign migrants and neglect by the central and state government led to the formation of organization like Bodo Sahitya Sabha (1952), All Bodo Student's Union, ABSU (1967), Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), Bodo People's Action Committee (BPAC) etc. While the above outfits agitated in a democratic way, the tide turned with the emergence of Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT), with the demand of a State within the Indian Union, while National Democratic Front of Bodoland going outright for secession. It has indeed been a ruthless and merciless era of violence with its share of internecine killings and bombings, massacres and assassination directed against the non-Bodos.

The Assam government led by AGP in 1986 attempted to suppress the movement with naked violence, and statements like, 'we will shed every drop to prevent fragmentation of Assam'. But these didn't help matters; instead they bloodied the situation more grievously. The Bodo Autonomous Council was declared hurriedly in 1992. But the impasse didn't end there in; fresh agitations were launched clamouring for more powers. The Bodo Territorial Council came into being as recently as May 2003, with its own internal complexities but there seem to be no end of the imbroglio.

Just as Assamese outfits narrate about the 'colonization from Delhi', leaders of plain tribals or Bodo organization talk of colonization by the 'Assamese chauvinists' (Baruah 1999: 188). The litany of Bodo grievances may be summoned up as, dispossession of their lands, non-compliance with the reservations in public services and posts, imposition of language etc. all by an administration biased against them. The transformismo factor can be witnessed in the Bodo movement too. In this regard Monirul Hassan writes,

Sociologically speaking, leadership of the Assam movement has become their reference point (Hassan 1993: 34).

Being the oldest known autochthones of the region, they are however at the lowest in terms of economy, polity and education. A reverse process is now activated vis-à-vis the Bodos in their rejection of the ASS language. The Bodo script is today written in the Devanagiri script which was however in Roman in an earlier period.

A curious ferment of assimilation in the reverse can be witnessed in the Bodo inhabited and thus areas. It is indeed true that the Bodos inhabited the peripheries of the old Ahom kingdom were also not much influenced by the Vaishnav faith. While the traditional beliefs of the Bodos are akin to Shaivism, the common Bodo today are reverting back to the worship of 'Bathou' as the common God and the cactus (Xiju tree) as the emblem of that God. The cremation rites are also conducted today by burying as in the earlier times. The traditional attire has also changed to the dokhona rather than the Assamese *mekhela chador* amongst both the educated and common rural womenfolk. The context of Christianity has gained ground among the Bodos in the present context. It can only be commented that a time bomb is silently ticking away to rupture the torn belly of the Assam state.

In the meantime, other tribes as Mishings, Rabhas and Tiwa Lalungs were offered Autonomous Councils in order to prevent further movements. Meanwhile the Karbi Anglong and the North Cachar Hills District (the last hill districts in Assam too are fared up with their own agendas, with some groups taking to the gun. However these two hills districts remained within the Assam state on their own preferences in 1971 when they were given the option of either merging with Assam or Meghalaya.

The tale however will not see its end, if we do not mention the rise of United Liberation Front of Assam/Axom (ULFA) in 1979, roughly during the growth of the Assam Movement or Anti-Foreigner's agitation led by the All Assam Student's Union (AASU). A secessionist outfit, with the aim of carving out an independent Assam out of the Indian Union, it is at present in doldrums following army operations and lack of any clear-sighted organizational strategy. It has indeed become an ethnic Assamese caste Hindu band and thus an anachronism in the context of multi ethnic Assam. It attempted to forge a pan-Assam identity bringing into its fold all the settlers and autochthones of the land. The Front stated that if the need arises, the people of the land will be termed Axombaxi (inhabitants of Assam) instead of Axomiya, fraught as it with chauvinist connotation. It slipped into a ditch with that very misnomer, as

this statement would encompass even the Bangladeshis and other internal migrants, thus being weakened in its credibility and leverage. ULFA's was a rational, scientific and practical policy on Marxist lines but due to its weak ideological foundation in a withered group and an aberration in the political grammar of the state.

To make matters worse, the tribal began to question the legitimacy of its very existence and assertion for an independent identity.

In January 1991 a letter to the editor by a Bodo gentleman about ULFA's call for an independent Assam appeared in Guwahati's English language daily newspaper Sentinel. Lakhi Kachari asked what gave ULFA-which represents only the upper-caste Assamese-the authority to demand an independent Assam? ULFA, he said, has no right to demand Assam's independence. Assam in fact is 'illegally occupied' by the 'so-called Assamese'. He refers to them as 'so called Assamese' because they, or rather their forebears according to him, were immigrants from Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar. They came to Assam in search of 'economic salvation' and have dominated the 'local Assamese and aboriginals' ever since. It is time for the 'tribals and aboriginals' to seek 'freedom' from the illegal occupation of Assam by the 'so-called Assamese'. The notion that 'upper-caste Assamese' are descendents of immigrants from other parts of India ironically draws on myths that are popular among the 'upper-caste Assamese' themselves: myths by which they had in the past sought to distance themselves from their 'less sophisticated' neighbours and countrymen.

The spirit of the letter is at the heart of the cultural and political rebellion of Assam's 'tribal' communities, notably the Bodos and the Karbis, but potentially other communities such as Tiwas and Rabhas as well. Historically they have seen themselves as part of the composite 'indigenous' population of Assam, but they now seek to withdraw from the Assamese sub-national formation and, in the case of the Bodos, even seek territorial separation (Baruah 1999: 175).

In order to provide itself a semblance of nativeness, the ULFA flirted with a pan-Mongolian identity initially. The christened their aliases with pre-colonial Ahom and tribal titles as Dhekial Phukon, Bagh Hazarika, Miri Hondikoi etc. in keeping with the assimilationist policies of the Ahom monarchy. But military operations broke the spine of the once-dreaded

yet admired organization and with it went to the winds the flirtation with attempts forge a native Mongolian identity, or precisely to the dug outs and hideouts in Bhutan and Bangladesh.

The above perspective of ULFA vis-a-vis the tribal question may be documented through the dialogue of Diganta, the chief protagonist of the novel *Sanglot Fenla*, (warriors of the Revolution), a novel in Assamese by Parag Kumar Das. The novel is about the guerrilla militants from India's Northeast and Burma and the reason for the armed struggle for independence. Das was an ardent advocate for the cause of secession of India's Northeast from India who was gunned down in May 1996, in broad daylight in Guwahati, allegedly by pro-government gunman. An alumni of Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi and a brilliant political economist he can at best be mentioned as an organic intellectual of the Northeastern insurgencies. About the narration in the novel

Diganta: We should take a clear policy regarding the tribal movements. We cannot deny the legitimate demands of the Bodo agitators. But the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) government is trying to suppress the stir with violence. And even in this juncture, if we attempt to maintain relation with the AGP, we will lose the trust of the tribal populace. The Bodos are the sole strong-willed ethnic group among us. Without their active support, we will never be able to liberate Assam. Other ethnic groups will assert themselves gradually. If we do not have any distinct strategy about their basic rights and aspiration or if we continue our dealings with a ultra nationalist force like the AGP, we too will be termed as a chauvinist organization one day (Das 1993: 89; translation mine).

The above context is quite true if we take into account the perspective of the letter to the editor. In this period of brutal truth, the above imaginative yet admirable possibilities are undergoing a nemesis and slow moribund existences on their own, sans any external agencies to resuscitate these formations.

State of the States

All is however not well with the states that were segregated from Assam. Irrespective of the Assamese sub-colonialist tendencies, the state of Meghalaya is undergoing a violent phase of secessionist strife. The ire of the groups like Hynniewtrep Liberation Council (HLC), a Khasi-Garo formation, or Khasi Student's Union (KSU) are directing their ire against the internal migrants and forging links with other insurgent groups in order to secede from the Indian Union. Their catch phrase today is 'Khasi by birth, Indian by accident'. In western Meghalaya,

the Garo tribe formed the A'chik Liberation Matgnik Army (ALMA) with the objective of the creation of a Garo sovereign state carved out of Assam, Meghalaya and Bangladesh. It can be assumed that the initial honeymoon with other tribes in a single state is being tedious for a section of these peoples.

Meanwhile in Mizoram, allegation of Mizoram sub-nationalism raised its ugly head compelling the Hmar tribe to come under an autonomous council. The Hmar tribe was offered the Singlung Hill Development Council (SHDC) in July 1994, but it failed to assuage their feelings. As a result the HPC cadre, abetted by the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isaac Swu - Muivah faction), went underground and started resorting to violence. The deadlock between the Mizo government and the HPC continues.

In the distant district of Tirap, in eastern Arunachal Pradesh, the tribes of Wanchos, Noctes are clamoring for a distinct U.T. status. Their grievance is the alleged neglect of the district by the faraway state capital Itanagar, dominated by Nishis and Adis to an extent.

There are numerous other group formation made and unmade at the turn of the hour. But that is not our part of the story. In this peripheral landscape, the battle formation are much more vicious and complex than that of Israel or Palestine, region much more illuminated by the international media.

With an attempt to shorten (the already long) the volume of this disclosure I've intentionally avoided the contentious issues like the serious issue of immigration, the changing demography of Assam or the AASU movement or the alleged exploitation and the indifference attitude of the center to the region. Parallels could have been drawn with the Fiji and Malaysian experiences vis-à-vis the immigration imbroglios.

An Assamese adage goes that one cannot clap with a single hand and this is just one hand of the game, though small (yet Big for the inhabitants!). It can thus however be documented with the above mentioned facts and accounts that the caste Hindu ethnic Assamese community played an unprecedented role in alienating the tribal populace with their self assumed attitudes of superiority, callousness and utter indifference to the aggrieved parties. It has indeed been a protracted impasse for the Assamese-speaking intelligentsia in order to

awaken themselves and turn the tide of the ongoing events. It seems however that time is not in their hands anymore. The balkanization of Assam as a term will be probably replaced by Assamization in the subsequent geo-political tracts of world history. That might be in store for Assam in the posterity. It is indeed a fit account of *asama* peerless balkanization of a land.

Allow me to recount an incident in a personal vein with due apologies. Once in a vacation to my home district, Dhemaji, lying in the northeast of Assam I accompanied a friend to his native village inhabited by the Mishing tribe. Before serving us with *apong* (rice beer) and *nanshing* (dried fish), a Mishing woman questioned me in their language, Okko Amin. Rudely translated it means, what is your title? The semantics of this interrogation is quite known to me, in the context that Mishings are divided into clans with different titles and hence intermarriage is impossible within a clan. Hence trouble is taken to ascertain the clan identity let any flirtation occurs between the same clan and thus to nip it in the bud. To cut the story short, I answered with my name and title. The questioner was a bit perplexed, and blurted, 'O mipake', which signifies a non-tribal or non-Mishing and hence not much 'desirable'. The host hurriedly explained to assuage my feelings that as I was donning a Ribi gachem (Mishing scarf) and due to my Mongolian countenance, they mistook me to be a Mishing. My friend, in order to further comfort me retorted that, as I was an inhabitant of a Mishing populated area and knew their ways I've been gradually Mishingized too. I didn't know whether I was pleased or discomfited, as they offered me liberal bowls of *apong* subsequently.

It was indeed a tiring core to collect the rather numerous and exotic ingredients and condiments in order to construct the four course discourse. Our next task now is to throw them into the frying pan and stir it. Or better, deep-fry the item in the gravy emanating from the juices of the two texts.

References

- Alemchiba, M. (1970). *A Brief Historical Account of Nagaland*. Kohima.
- Barua, H. (1962). *The Red River and the Blue Hill*. Guwahati.
- Barua, K. C. (1971). *Critical Days of Assam*. Guwahati.
- Barua, K. L. (1966). *Early History of Kamrupa*. Guwahati: LBS.
- Baruah, S. L. (1993). *Last Days of Ahom Monarchy*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.
- — — (2002). *A Comprehensive History of Assam*. Delhi: Munsiram Monoharlal.
- Baruah, Sanjib (1999). *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*. New Delhi: OUP.

- Bhuyan, S. K. (1932). *Deodhai Ahom Buranji*. Guwahati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies.
- — — (1947). *Lachit Borphukan and His Times*. Guwahati.
- — — (1971). *Studies in the History of Assam*. Guwahati: Gauhati University.
- — — (1974). *Anglo-Assamese Relations*. Guwahati.
- — — (ed.) (1937). *Jayantia Buranji*. Guwahati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies.
- Bishnu Rabha Suarani Gabeshana Samiti (ed.) (1982). *Bishnu Rabha Rachanawali*. Guwahati: Bishnu Rabha Suarani Gabeshana Samiti.
- Buragohain, P. K. (1946). *Abonar Adi Buranji*. Sibsagar.
- Das, Parag (1993). *Sanglot Ferla*. Guwahati: Udangshri Publication.
- Dewan, Maniram. *Buranji Vivek Ratna*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Dutta, Debabrata. (1989). *History of Assam*. Calcutta: Sribhumi.
- Elwin, Verrier (1964). *A Philosophy for NEFA*. Shillong.
- Gait, E. A. A. (1962). *History of Assam*. Guwahati: LBS.
- H. K. Borpujari (ed.) (1990). *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, vol. 1. Guwahati: Publication Board, Assam.
- Hassan, Monirul (1993). *The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity*. Delhi: Manah Publication.
- Hobsbawm, E. J. (1990). *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jacobs, Julian, Alan MacFarlane, Sarah Harrison, and Anita Herle (1990). *The Nagas: Hill People of Northeast India, Society, Culture and the Colonial Encounter*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Kakati, B. K. (1941). *Assamese: Its Formation and Development*. Guwahati: DHAS.
- — — (1978). *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya*. Guwahati: B.K. Kakati.
- Kennedy, R. S. (1967). *Ethnological Report of the Akas, Khoas and Mijis and the Monbas of Tauwarg*.
- Michell, John F. (1883). Report on the North East Frontier.
- Mills, J. P. (1973). *The Ao Nagas*. Bombay: OUP.
- Miri, Sujata (1993). *Communalism in Assam: A Civilizational Approach*. Delhi: Har-Anand.
- Phukan, Naobaicha. *Assam Buranji*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Rao, S.R. (2003). *The Holy City of Duxarka*. Jaipur: Aditya Prakashan.
- Rose, E. Leo (1994). 'The Nepali Ethnic Community in the Northeast of the Subcontinent'. *Ethnic Studies Report*, 12(1).
- Sarma, S. N. (1966). *The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam*. Guwahati: Gauhati University.
- Taher, M. and P. Ahmed (1998). *Geography of North-East India*. Guwahati: El-Dorado Publications.
- Watters, T. (trans.) (1973). *On Yuan Chuang's Travels in India*, 2 vols. New Delhi.

Chapter Three

FAILURE OF THE LITTLE GODS: ANALYSIS OF THE TEXTS*

Kalir bekhob hoiba kalkir avatar

Kati mari mlechok koriba boondamar

Hoboku bodhiba Boudhgon joto ache

Kalir bekhob hotyo probortaiba pache

After the Kali era, there will be an incarnation of Kalki. During the period, cut and kill the untouchables (Mleches) as you would strike tomcats. Annihilate all the Buddhist followers wherever they are found. Only after the Kali era, truth will prevail if such acts are done (Sankardev and Madhavdev, *Kirtan Ghoxa*; translation mine).

Antonio Pignafetta, the Florentine navigator who accompanied Magellan on his first circumnavigation of the world, kept a meticulous log on his journey through our Southern American continent which, nevertheless, also seems to be an adventure into the imagination. He related that he had seen pigs with their umbilicus in their backs and birds without feet, the female of the species which would brood their eggs on the backs of the males, as well as others like gannets without tongues whose beaks looked like a spoon. He wrote that he had seen a monstrosity of an animal with the head and ears of a mule, the body of a camel, the hooves of a deer and the neigh of a horse. He related that they put a mirror in front of the first native they met in Patagonia, and how that over excited giant lost the use of his reason out of fear of his own image (Garcia Marquez in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, 1982).

It is beyond the scope of this exercise to divine on the four or five unities of drama or the epic, but we have reached the third act, the decisive phase. In this phase we will face the encounters and battles, which are live, and real through the Kurukshetras and Phulaguri dhewas of the two texts. The battle lines are drawn not exactly as in the infinite 64 squares of the chessboard or in plainer terms in direct black or white. The lines are hazy, shadowy and at times totally dim as these are fields dominated by gods, humans and the devils. Print capitalism, to a great extent is the crucible to examine the national, tribal, state-level constructions in the Indian hinterlands. This chapter will thus analyse the racial constructions after the arrival of the British along with their bullets and Bible in India's Northeast after the 1830's. The British arrived in Assam with the printing press and set up shop by publishing and

* Unless otherwise stated, all quotations in this chapter are from *Mrityanjy*, and *Miri Jiyori*, translated into the English by D. N. Bezboruah and P. Kotoky respectively.

translating the Bible into Assamese and establishing the first Assamese weekly *Annudoi* (1846–83). But it is a different story that not many people of the valley converted initially. After the initial failures, the British went ‘up the hill to fetch’ scores of unbelievers into believers.

This chapter will attempt to analyse the intricate inter-community relation vis-à-vis the Assamese speaking and the tribal communities. Inter-community relationships acquire subtle and political underpinnings that may not be visible to the lay reader at a first glance. However, a deeper probe into the texts provides ample emphasis on the manner and the mould in which the tribal is constructed. This aspect, on the other hand, is related to the context of nation formation and the quest for identity in the region in the two texts: *Miri Jiyori* by Rajani Kanta Bordoloi and *Mrityanjay* (1970) by Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya.

The time frames of both the novels constructs the chronological and spatial frames of the late nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth century. While *Miri Jiyori* (1894) by Rajani Kanta Bordoloi constructs the positions of the Mishing community in Upper Assam, the other novel, *Mrityanjay* (1970), constructs the time frame during the freedom movement of the sub-continent along with the tribal constructions within the so-called Assamese majority community.

The chronological spaces of the two texts are far apart- divided by nearly a century- and the socio-political contexts too are different. While the advent and the strengthening of the company’s positions into the interiors of the Northeast mark *Miri Jiyori*, the other novel, *Mrityanjay*, constructs Satyagraha and *himsa* movements against the Raj. While in *Miri Jiyori* we see the dawn of the Raj, in *Mrityanjay* we are engulfed in the anticipation of the dusk that is the wrapping up of the impartial project. The Company subtly penetrates into the tribal hinterlands subjugating the land and its people while a reverse process is witnessed in the other text: the tribal participates with the majority Assamese community. But what lies subtly beneath the two texts are the lurking trappings and designs of internal sub-colonialism.

Colonialism is overtly witnessed in both the texts. But witnessing the colonial enterprise in every text is fashionable, yet to an extent old hat too. Streaks of internal and indirect sub-colonialism rather than overt white colonialism, is witnessed in both the two texts. The colonialist and the colonized others are, however, completely varied herein. No, it’s not the

mainland brown Indians exploiting the hinterland yellow Northeasterners. But the texts are constructed by the pale yellows of the hinterland 'othering' and 'appropriating' the authentic yellows at the same time. Herein the position of the authors can be termed quite significant. We will however enter into the complexities of the two novels not in a linear chronological sequence but by reversing the archaeological frames of the two texts. Hence we will enter the Chakravayehu of *Mrityunjay* and as has been said elsewhere I will avoid narratives of causation but follow jagged lines of time and space.

Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya's *Mrityunjay* was awarded the Jnanpith Award in 1979. A doyen of Assamese journalism, he was a professor of journalism in Gauhati University. A celebrated novelist, he is the author of numerous novels as *Iyannungam* (1960), *Pratipad* (1970), *Ronga Megh* (1976), *Munichunir Pookor* (1979) etc. He usually collected the raw material for his novels from the archives and the people who participated in the freedom struggle.

Let us rather enter the vortex of the text, in order to make the matters short. The suddenness of the impact of the lines in the third and the fourth chapter might easily hit the discerning or knowing reader.

... One day during a mathematical lesson, his mind dwelt drowsily on a Mikir maiden. The Rangkhong Mouza was on the foothills, then there was the cattle-track and beyond that Kampur. Mikir woman had brought cotton wool for Bhibhiram's wife.... An exquisitely formed body on a pair of beautifully shaped calves. He had never seen such shapely calves on any Assamese girl. Her name was Dimi and her mother was called Kaadam. She would wear a *lek* round her neck, *kadeng simo* on her eyes, *roi* on her wrists and a colourful *pini* around her waist.... He found out the names by asking her... (italics mine; pp. 4-5).

These are indeed lines steeped within the traditions of imperialist (or rather sub-colonial) historiography, anthropology and even cartography. As regards the cartographic landscape it would not go to the extremes of comparing the Mikir Hills with the Mappa Mundi (c. 1290) with the presence of the dog-headed beings, bat-eared humans, mermaids and griffins as depicted in the thirteenth century map. But the situation is however a bit closer if not totally similar in vein. The Mikir Hills today is known as the Karbi Anglong and the North Cachar Hills, which are the two last autonomous Hill districts of Assam. The Rangkhong mouza is today part of the hill districts, and it is through the 'cattle-track' that the Mikirs came to the plains in order to barter with the Assamese. The sartorial, physical and communal divide

between the plains and the hill tribe is thus predominantly depicted as very much vivid. While the hill-tribe's life was based on a primitive socio-economy of barter with items extracted from the nature such as cotton-wool, fine grained rice, lumps of gum (p. 4), the plains people, it is evident wielded an upper hand. Albeit in terms of economy, as it was through the plains that the tribe marketed their wares. He had never seen such shapely calves on any Assamese girl (p. 4) (wares both physical and emotional!).

Again the sartorial aspect of Dimi's outfit was 'found out' only after 'asking her'. The distance between the plains and the hills are not much far apart, yet the main ignorance of the protagonist is quite perplexing. The distance is not far, yet the relationship between the two peoples is thus based only on the barter economy. It is also strange that the author, in the third person narrative didn't place the protagonist in a more democratic terrain by bringing him to the hills. The hills however had to come down, as it is plain truth! Well we know of Romeo-Juliet, Heer Ranjas of yore, of their inimical political position yet this is also another account of plains and the hills on different dwellings, which cannot be pulled apart. That differences exist between the two entities are further augmented by another line of the novel.

Kaadam, Dimi's mother, asked him as she quartered the areca nut, 'Do you also love the Kapili?'

'Oh yes, our people held it in great esteem' (p. 5).

The slip has indeed fallen apart in the term 'our' thus diversifying into the tumult of 'us' and 'they' gradually. Also throughout the text the tribal is referred as in the expression of the French or Hindi term '*tu*'.

A twist in the great tale of *Mrityanjay* is however shadowed by a slight misnomer. For this it will be revealing to pen a few more lines on the Karbi maiden (but Mikir as mentioned in both the original and translated texts) and other tribes. We will have to go back to an earlier era, i.e. 1302-06, when the then British (who else!) Lt. Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam Sir Bamfylde Fuller's administration initiated an imperialist historiographical policy of writing monograph on the various tribes inhabiting the Northeast. The monograph from which the following information is based upon is composed by Sir Charles Lyall from the papers of Edward Stack. While the monograph was first published in an Indian edition in 1972 titled *The*

Mikirs, in 1997 it was published as *The Karbis* by Spectrum Publishers, New Delhi. And thereby hands the tale. Other texts dealing on the Karbi tribe diligently quote the first monograph, that being the first anthropological mission about the people.

The Karbis are one of the most numerous and homogenous of the many Tibeto-Burman tribes inhabiting present-day Assam. The term *Mikir*, used to represent them in the earlier days (and to some extent in the present too), is abhorred and detested by them. Today it is regarded as a derogatory term to demean them. Yes we know of many such race-specific terms, but let's not spill our ink by mentioning them.

Hence, we will have to go back to accept the words of Sir Lyall:

The name Mikir is that given to the race by the Assamese: its origin is unknown. They call themselves Arleng, which means man in general. It has been asserted that Arleng means properly only a Mikir man, not a man in general, who would be called monit or munit. This however is opposed to usage as exemplified in the folktales collected by Mr. Stack, and to well-established parallels found elsewhere. Thus, in Assam, Mande (=man) is the national name of the Garos; Chingpho (=man) is the tribal name of the race so called in upper Dehing valley; Boro (=man) is the proper designation of the Kachari race. Similar cases are found all over the world. In Europe, for example, the name Deutsch for the Germanic race indicates that their ancestor's spoke of themselves as 'the people' (*diot, diota*), ignoring the other members of humankind. Munit is a very recent loan word from Assamese, and nowhere occurs in the tales.

It is a long period of time from the imperial monograph till the year of 1952, in independent India, when five district councils were set up for Garo Hills, United Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Lushai Hills and the United Mikir (Karbi) and N. C. Hills. It is another destiny of history that Meghalaya and Mizoram were carved out of Assam while Karbi and N. C. Hills remained.

But it is again strange that the author of *Mrityanjay*, clung to the archaic, derogatory and politically incorrect term, even when the novel was first published in 1970. What happened in the translated version by Dharendra Nath Bezboruah in 1983 is more crucial, as the Karbi agitation was in full swing during the period. The translator does not offer any explanatory notes about the changing terms and conditions but mentions about the *Mikir* term as lamely as 'a

name long used to refer to the Karbi tribe of Assam' in the glossary tucked away in the last pages of the text. A superiority of one's own culture as presumed or plain dumb ignorance!

To turn to a different context, let us venture into the terrain of the different protagonists who play their part in the text. We will however incorporate the above entity too, which will assume an important role. The background of the novel is set in 1942, during the height of World War II and the backdrop naturally is Assam. The Japanese had reached the other side of the Chindwin and as a result foreign troops like American, British, etc. are virtually sweeping the state into anarchy. Volunteers for liberation are agitating in different forms-violent and non-violent. However the compradors are serving their own interests along with that of the British ruling class. While the leaders of the *ahimsa* agitationist are rounded up, sabotage groups are busy plotting. This is the tale of such a group who derails a military train and their women folks who too suffer in between. But as usual there are tales within a tale.

In *Mrityanjay* a different story thus unfolds: Assamese as a community and its construction is on the cards. There are two sets of characters at the basic level: the Assamese-speaking and the tribal, but there are some 'other' in-between communities as the Lalungs, Koches, Mataks, etc., who held on to their tribal past, yet they too are swayed by the sweep of the tide of time. Swaraj is approaching fast, and the interaction between the communities increases. Othering the other diminishes, giving way on the other hand towards appropriation. So much so that the tribal is mystified and venerated. From being a 'noble savage' the tribal is raised to the pantheon as the 'divine savage' (a la Shiva). However, the author inadvertently others the tribal by exoticising the locals. The author attempts, no doubt, to construct an objective space, yet the faultlines are poignantly visible.

The politics of nationality formation and its after effects are finely witnessed throughout the text, with the repercussion clearly felt in the text outside i.e. in the political field. The Swadeshi movement in Assam, both violent and non-violent, arose out of the nationalist ideology, which again came into being 'in opposition to colonial or imperialist exploitation'. This is again an outcome of the old-settlers (read caste Hindu Assamese) nationalism that was able to control the indigenous society totally and hence was able to direct the movement outward against the British colonial machinery. The leaders of the movement clearly were the educated middle class, whether the education is in the Hindu or the western tradition is

immaterial here. In the case of the anti-colonial nationalist movement in Assam, the upper caste Hindu leadership out rightly followed the process of assimilation. The leadership knew rightly that without the active co-operation of the semi-tribal, tribal elements along with the downtrodden of the upper caste, the movement would have failed. Hence the attempts for the artificial union and assimilation within the tribes of Assam. However the compradors and the revolutionary leadership came from the same stock.

It has already been said a numerous times that the upper caste-Hindu Assamese community usurped the political scene of the contemporary times. The first rebellions of Gomdhar Konwar and Rupchand Konwar, Ahom rebels were brutally suppressed in 1828 and 1829. Next on the line were the tribal Singphos who raised the banner of revolt during 1830-31. Also the Khasis raised the war of Independence (1829-33), led by U. Tirot Singh, on behalf of the petty Khasi republics. They fought valiantly but had to lay down arms to the mighty force. However, peasant's wars started against the British, which was unprecedented before. The Khasi people of the Jaintia Hills rebelled against the Company for a year in 1863. Also in Nagaon, in 1862, tribal people predominantly Lalungs, raised the standard of revolt against over taxation by the British. This being the first people's agitation against the foreign rulers in Assam proper, it is known as the Phulaguri Dhewa.

Narsingh Lalung and eight other peasant leaders, mostly tribals, were punished with long-term imprisonment or transportation. This episode of the people's heroic resistance to the increasing tax burden and bureaucratic mindlessness is still very much alive in folk memory as the 'Phulaguri Dhawa'. To sum up, the Assamese.... unlike the Khasis, reacted to the new regime at first with mixed feelings. After half-a-century of chronic political chaos, the British measures at restoration of law and order appeared to them as a welcome phenomenon (Guha 1977: 8).

The above rebellions were nevertheless local and tribal in character and hence did not acquire a pan-Indian anti-colonial nationalist movement. It took several decades for pan-Indianism to filter down to the leaders of Assam. It did trickle down but not evidently to the tribal indigenes. The fermentation of the pan-Indian nationalist phenomenon took root not in the damp plains of Assam but in the far away metropolis, Calcutta, the jewel of the east. Scions of the aristocratic landholders, tea planters, government officials belonging to the Upper class Hindu Assamese flocked to the metros to partake higher education in the western medium. Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Baruah, Manick Chandra Baruah, L. N. Bezbarua, Anandaram

Barua were the heroes of the day who fuelled the spread of the civilized fire to the uncouth tribes and other races. In this perspective, Dhekial Phukan in a letter wrote to Hemchandra Barua, a young social reformer of the day:

A group of people styled as Young Bengal has emerged and some people in Assam are absorbing what is good in them but not their vices. My mind is full of joy at the sight of this germination (Barua 1915).

Gunabhiram Barua, the author of the above letter-writer's biography also wrote prodigiously in the late nineteenth century about Bengali-Assamese relationship. He noted that the Bengali babu or *bhadralok* should be the facsimile for the growing Assamese middle class. This Assamese middle class however is the Assamese speaking upper caste Hindus and not some other heathens. He mentioned that the on going acculturation was simultaneously in the western and Sanskrit pattern. Traditional Assamese sartory, fashion, culinary and other modes of culture should be eliminated to accommodate the Anglo-Bengali influence as was witnessed in the towns of Assam. What price, Anglo-Bengali fashion, Mr. Barua?

There were some detractors of this mode of thought like, Bolinarayan Bora, who wrote in the Assamese weekly, *Mau*, to this effect, but to no avail:

Those restless Assamese young men who, in quest of celebrity and aping the Bangalees, carry on unintelligible political movements by calling together, the peasants, would do good to the course of the country... if they dedicate half of the energy to the promotion of education in this province (Bora 1887).

Gunabhiram Barua's process of acculturation—Anglo-Bengali carbon copying—was expected to bring in civilization, dynamism, progress, decency, rationality and heap loads of things to 'barbaric' Assam. It bought a few in the apple cart, but a top-heavy tyrannical approach towards the so-called lower rungs of the society was also thrown in.

Crucial to this culture co-optation was the process psychoanalysis calls identification with the aggressor... In the colonial culture, identification with the aggressor bound the rulers and the ruled in an unbreakable dyadic relationship. The Raj saw Indians as crypto-barbarians who needed to further civilize themselves... Many Indians in turn saw their salvation in becoming more like the friendship, in friendship or in enmity (Nandy 1998: 7).

If the British was the master, then the Bengali oversaw the master's estates and then clearly the upper-caste Assamese the serf. Need I answer the question: who were the 'slave's of serfs and what was their fate?

The caste hierarchy of the revolution and the society in the text is thus quite revealing. Tarun Phukan, an aristocrat, however doesn't take roles in the rebellion against the British. He arrives just in time driving and helps a raped woman,

Phukan had driven down Gauhati from Nowgong and happened to drop in at Kali Baideu's place on his way back.... We returned in Phukan's car. A very handsome man, this Phukan. The looks of a cupid. And the stamp of an aristocrat in the way he talked (p. 15).

The aristocrat in the times of a bourgeoisie revolution. Yes it rings many bells. One, he is an aristocrat, two, he is wealthy and three, he belongs to the upper caste. What role this gentleman plays in the revolution is not known, sans the author's homoerotic praises lavished. The sympathy on the author clearly lies on the cupid then, and not on the raped woman.

Next in the line is the leader of the sabotage group (*mitru-bahini*), the Gossain, a devotee of the Vaishnav faith. He is also the *satradhikar* or the abbot of the Daipara Satra. Notwithstanding the revolutionary zeal in this monastic person, the trappings of wealth and landholdings.

My elder brother is a sharecropper of the Goswamis - Dhanpur (p. 12)

The context of sharecropping and assuming the social leadership will come in handy if we consider the case of Tikou, a low caste- 'volunteer'.

In better days Tikou had been a sharecropper on Barthakur's land as also on the land of Saikia, the lawyer. This year he hadn't been able to do a bit of hoeing. Saikia had been threatening to give his land to some other share-cropper... (p. 231)

Borthakur is incidentally the local priest of the area and a major landholder. Saikia, the lawyer is a diabolical character who refuses to offer his daughter Arti's hands to Rupnarayan, her ex-lover, who is however a saboteur. On Rupnarayan,

A lad who brightens our village. Won scholarships all through. (p. 231)

It is true that the widespread peoples struggle was formed after uniting the peasants and the absentee landholders. As seen in the text, the non-cultivating landowners as Brahmans, Mahantas and other religious satraps led the revolution, but it was the landless sharecroppers and other classes of the rural people that generated to the movement a militant character. The necessary steam in the text is also provided by the self same lesser protagonists to the movement (Yes Marx and Mao!). We have already mentioned in length about the Mikir maiden Dimi, who plays a pivotal role.

Dhanpur Laskar, is a significant protagonist, a bohemian chain-smoker, non-believer who rails at the religious order is the only sane among the 'lesser' protagonist. Questioning his caste hierarchy, a character taunts him,

You were mere bowman and labourers. The Kachari kings called you Laskar, the Ahom kings
Lahkar. (p. 34)

The translator's note in the Glossary reads:

Laskar: The more acceptable view is that Lahkars are the descendents of the Barabhuyan
family.

There are thus two versions of the character's genealogy. The author allows him a lower rung, while the translator guides us towards an illustrious genealogy of being a descendent of Sankardev. Independent sources however points towards a comparatively lesser origin of the Laskars being prisoners of war captured from the Mughals who subsequently settled down in the state. Being efficient archers they were inducted into the army. Laskar incidentally in Arabic means a warrior.

Ahina Konwar is however quite proud of his ancestry.

It was Dewan Silarai who conferred the title on us, by Krishna. (p. 34)

In another retort to Jairam Medhi, he taunts him

By Krishna, my ancestry is not as insignificant as yours. Your ancestors were all Lalungs. It is only recently that they have been elevated to the level of Koches (p. 34).

Well herein we will have to mention about the curious elevation or rather promotion from a supposed low caste to be embraced by the hierarchies of Hinduism. The socio-political definition of Koch in contemporary Assam points towards a caste well entrenched into the caste Hindu Assamese community. Gait writes, 'into which all converts to Hinduism from different tribes—Kachari, Garo, Hajong, Lalung, Mikir, etc.—are admitted on conversion'. It is a different context that the Koch community is now demanding a scheduled tribe status, while the Lalungs (Tiwa) are offered as autonomous district council, who are recognized as a tribe.

In that sense Manik Bora, Koli Baideu, Gayon Bora, Dodhi Bordoloi or Lairam Koch are neo-converts to the Vaishnav Hindu category from undisclosed tribal entities in the text. Prince Baneswar in the text is the prince of Mayang, a feudal province, but is still a Lalung tribal potentate. Tikou and his wife Rationi's identities are not fully constructed in the text. But looking into the lines yields the perspective of their lower caste identity, if we take into consideration their intimate terms with Rosoki, the woman who belongs to the SC Dom category, Madhu Keot, it seems is a *jal* (fish net) Keot, i.e., a fisherman; Dimi's absent husband is a Garo, hence distant!

A critical religious aesthetics dominates the topography of the text. To an extent, organized Vaishnavism and Shaktism of the Assamese and the neo-converts from their priorly tribal identities is pitted against the unorganized animism of the Karbi community. However the tantric phenomena is observed betwixt the two. And thus the subtle tension is witnessed in the interaction between the communities. The Assamese (propah!) to certain extents witnessed fissures—in the hierarchy of communities—Vaishnava and Shakti followers assumes the top position. Ahoms, the once-ruling class, along with tribes like Lalung dominates the mid-rung. They profess Vaishnavism or Shaktism and speak 'proper Assamese' yet they are dangling at the mid-rung. And predictably, the Karbis and the Garos, followers of animism, inhabit the lowest rung of the sociological hierarchy.

Let us now, turn our attention to the religious contexts within the lines of the texts. As we have mentioned in a previous context, Madhu Keot, the fisherman refuses to allow Manik Bora to apply his bleeding feet (leech bites): Manik is an ordained Vaishnav disciple and hence our fisherman's refusal, as the 'touch' will be polluting.

How can I let an ordained disciple touch my feet? (p. 18)

Vaishnavism, propounded by Sankardev in Assam was a progressive and dynamic faith that did away with idol worship, sacrifices, bigotry and tyranny of the Brahmans.

But with time (why do we blame it always! This faith degenerated and acquired all the evils of any other orthodox and obscurantist faith. The preachers of this sect in the early period, stressed on inter-dining, inter-marriage without any bias with a democratic outlook. It is not known whether they laid importance on this term on an eye to masses flocking to them. Manik Bora, accuses Dhanpur of his bohemian, non-believer streak,

And you eat food offered by anyone without regard to religion and race-Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Nagas and Mikirs. You are a drunkard as well. (p. 22)

On the other hand, it can also be observed that the streaks of primordial tribal shamanism refuses to die, in spite of converting and elevating oneself to the Hindu echelon. Jairam Medhi, of the text is a proclaimed *bez*, tribal shaman, and practitioner of witchcraft, possessor of herbal medicine all rolled into one. While our rational, non-conformist Dhanpur is a firm believer in science and progress, the *bez* threatens him

I could have given you personal proof of that. But I have given up all that ever since our grace here drew to me to the congress. I could have kept you glued to that plank you are sitting on. *There are so many evil spirits.* And there are many bad ones. (p. 24, italics mine)

As mentioned in Chapter Two, the *bez* belongs to the Mayong region, where people can be turned into sheep. While Pragiyotishpur was known for wizardry in the outer world, Mayong still is regarded for that phenomenon within Assam till date (Rowling beware!). The call for arms against the foreign rule by the Gossain, the Vaishnav

Abbot transformed the poor *bez* into a congressman. Yes, but what lies beneath the lines is that the religious patronization by the Satradhikars cannot be diminished by any congress. In spite of the prevailing anarchy, our grace maintains the tranquil religious order. It's a kind of magic.

The following lines, though repetitive portray the upper caste domination on the lesser ethnic entities. Manik Bora ruminates and reflects the labyrinths of that two headed monster, politics and religion.

We have to slacken the rigors of our observances ever since we became volunteers of the swaraj. Is that exceptionable? Or acceptable? (p. 27)

This is in reference to the Gossain's orders that the devotees need not cook their own food, as it will be done by the Grace's wife. Today it is a form of supreme sacrilege if the Grace's wife cooks for the humble devotee and not themselves. Again, we encounter the untouched 'touch', when ravenous Dhanpur tries to take the cup of tea from the Gossain's wife:

Young man, you shouldn't take things from her hand. If you touch the bowl, she would have to bathe again† (p. 28)

The deliberate attempt on the author's part in keeping the so-called UCHA and the tribals is apparent in the following lines that the artificial attempt to forge links within the two have crumbled in the recent times may be due to these perspectives. This is about an incident when two boys were gunned down by the military. Not for nothing that the contemporary fissures came out into reality. It was thus an upper caste attempt to unite the two groups for the primary goal and after achieving it to let the lessers (üntermensch!) to their own ways. The semantics of the following lines will bring out the assumed prejudices and thus the apparent diversities between the two entities:

Madan and Rauta were the boys. One, the son of a Kalita, the other of a Kachari... Kalitas and Kacharis became unified in their wailing. (p. 45-46)

The lack of the generic term Assamese is felt out in the open. An Assamese(!) saying goes, *Baghe dxage ekeloge thake*, i.e., in times of a deluge a tiger and a goat would share space together. Now was the dramatic effect in the second line intended to produce that sensation! Another sentence of the text goes in this vein,

† It was 'too much' already for the cooking task to be accomplished, and now the non-believer attempts to take the cup from our grace's wife. Such PLUCK!

All the Kacharis and Koches of the neighbouring areas went in a body to hoist the flag at the police station. (p.67)

What else do we have to say?

Well, fortunately, we do have to say something. But it is of a bygone era, when the attempts of a 'melting pot' was not advanced, but what developed on its own was a 'colourful mosaic'.

But the king of Mayang and the neighbouring Chieftains never allowed the Moghul kings to establish a base here. Even at the Battle of Saraighat they had fought on the side of the Ahoms. And the Chiefs from the hills had also arrived with three hundred thousand of their subjects (p. 75).

The author now attempts to hammer down the differences by alluding to an earlier period of unity. But the tie has already been cast and the harm done. In the latter pages, attempts are made to bring in the question of assimilation, but it is by all means a futile exercise. It is in fact curious to witness the mention of the anthropological and cosmological perspectives of the Karbi and Garo peoples with a sub-colonialist eye as in the next pages of bondage between the two entities but it fails. What inadvertently happens is that the tribal is exoticised as a 'noble savage'. However a brutal and caste-ridden aura infects the interiors of the text when the Gossain, accepts tea from the hands of Dimi, the tribal.

Even Rama ate at the house of Guhak, the Chandala. What is to happen? (p. 94)

But what happens in the reverse is a curious phenomenon. We have witnessed in the preceding pages that the neo-converts to the Hindu echelon from their prior tribal status are much more orthodox and adamant in their belief system. It must have been due to the sediments percolated down to the lower castes by the upper castes. There is a tension of identity only amongst the lower classes and not within the upper caste. This is possible due to the firm ground on which they stood from which they cannot be shaken. While the lower occupied the middle rows, the fencesitters naturally were dangling their legs in order to be seated in a front row. Also the chief protagonist, Dhanpur was an atheist for whom fighting for independence was his rebellion. In the case of the Gossain, he was caught in a vortex between violence and religion-higher metaphysical but decided to lay down fighting as a guerrilla. On the other hand, the other lesser characters who were debating the essentials of

religion and their ethnics-religious identities. Meanwhile, Dimi, the female character remained in the fringes (as usual) along with the Garo tribal village. But about the periphery within the peripheries we will disseminate later. But how did the movement led by an upper caste manage to mobilize cadres from the lower class, that too with its own inherent diversities and complexities. To an extent it can be argued that the construction of a nation holds a fascination for the intermediate classes. For the time being the intermediate class and the leadership is able to shadow the question of class till the attainment of independence or a nation, whichever possible from the 'people' through whose mobilization the goal can be achieved. Also it is able to manage the pretence of a 'supraclass appearance' through the operation of hegemony. But that appearance remains intact merely till the moments of liberation. The mask slips gradually till the leaders of the new 'nation' dons the garbs of the erstwhile regime. The regime acquires a colonial (or sub-colonial) façade till it confronts the new intermediate class of the newly oppressed people. The new becomes old and the old becomes new, quite naturally.

The reversal of these roles are poignantly visible in the next pages. The tribal acquires his/her voice gradually, though the culmination of the 'new' goal is not ordained within the 'finished' part of the text. It must be mentioned that the Garo and Karbi villages forms peripheries of a broader periphery- Assam. Dimi did not intentionally participate in the movement, only through an accidental emotional encounter with Dhanpur. She does not exercise any role predominantly, but plays a role in bringing succour to the fugitives momentarily. However her big 'day' is when she is ordered to identify the guerrillas in the witness stand in which she lies and enables the release of the prisoners. Other than this character there aren't any other tribal, except perhaps her mother, and Dili her husband who is mentioned but doesn't appear in the stage. The Garo village flees from the brutal police campaign but is not seen assisting the volunteers. It exists in its own space and time- with the trappings of tribal administration, culture, economy and cosmology. In other words, it maintains its own sphere, and it's the volunteers who intrudes into it. The peripheral perspective of the entity is hence quite stark and real. The voices of dissension are finally being pronounced even when the primary goal has not yet been attained. The Mikir maiden interrogates Dhanpur, the guerrilla, with some loaded questions:

Do you think distinction between Brahmin and devotees, Garos and Kacharis, rich and poor will disappear when we get swaraj? Not a bit, you mark my words! (p. 104)

Tell me, do they have Garo-Assamese and Kachari-Mikir distinction in that other world? (p. 106)

It is indeed significant that the tribal speaks of the perceived differences with that of the mainstream community and also the intra-tribal dissensions as 'lived-in' experiences. The context assumes an important political perspective as the separatist voices are heard even before swaraj arrives in the Indian terrain. In retrospect, even the main protagonist Dhanpur asserts his subaltern position of difference vis-à-vis the mainstream community. However it is he and Rupnarayan who strikes the enemy, although he is in a lower hierarchy than the other leaders. Hence it may be assumed that the 'lower' classes acted as the sword arm (Ahom, Kacharis, etc.) who were instead utilized as the canon fodder of the revolution.

You are a Mikir girl, I am a Kachari and Dili is a Garo. Rupnarayan is of the fisherman stock. Look, we haven't even learnt to be Assamese (p. 107).

The above outburst of Dhanpur is quite revealing vis-à-vis the class, caste, tribal and ethnic position in the nascent Assamese nation. We may also recall that he was one referred to as a Kachari or Ahom in page 34 of the text. The glossary signifies his ancestry to be of the Bhuyan, a major slip on the translator's part. What is however discerned is that the Mongolian is thus clubbed to be in the lower hierarchy and the author is frivolous on this account too.

What may however be drawn from the subaltern-speech is that even the Assamese intelligentsia was on a very nascent stage during the late nineteenth till the early twentieth century. Attempts were made by the upper caste intelligentsia to convert the tribal and the other lesser ethnic groups to the cause. They were successful to some extent in their manoeuvres to mobilize 'flock' into the Assamese cause against the colonial power. But for how long it is clearly visible inside the text, outside the text and within the second chapter.

[T]he new born, rickety Assamese intelligentsia of the period found itself to be an insignificant 'minority' in the 'urban' sector. ... superimposed as it was on a semi-tribal, semi-feudal society of petty producers, the new plantation economy-subjugated to foreign capital and linked with immigrant usury and merchant capital- could not bring in a radical transformation within the local society itself. The start in modernization was indeed a false start (Guha 1977: 25-26).

Yes it was indeed a false start, which had within it the initial attempts of the sub-colonialist expansion and thus the subsequent rebellion against the 'Assamese' mainstream. The 'rampant subordination' and oppression of the lesser tribes, ethnic groups (or nationalities?) within the peripheries of the 'Assamese' nation gave way to form the basis for the Advent of the separatist tendencies. The upper-caste attempted to portray Assamese speakers, Saktas and Vaishnavite Hindus as the threshold principle' from which the Assamese sub-nation was to emerge within the Indian nation after the decay of the Ahom monarchy. This was to be achieved through naturally- hegemony and power through which the lesser ethnicities were to be deranged by breaking their religious, cultural, linguistic, political and economic teeth. But all hell broke lose within a few decades of independence, as we have seen elsewhere. This context is very much revealed in the subaltern speak of Dhanpur, one of the chief protagonist (pp. 103-104). The empire, not only the British though, almost all the European colonial powers were in search of neo-Europes, in the colonized lands.‡ That tendency however rubbed into the colonized peoples too, as in the case of the Bengalis, who attempted to mimicry their immediate English masters.

Every educated Assamese is bound to know Bengali just as every Welshman is bound to know English... (Kar 1954: 21-34).

Similar was the case with the Bengalis who too joined the race in search of neo-Bengals. Not to be undone, the upper-caste Assamese were not left behind in their attempts to seek neo- Assam. Equipped with the newly found access to western education in Calcutta, also the bastion of the 'invention' of a masculine India, the young upper-castes insisted on all those western and Sanskrit ideas and practices. An interesting illustration of a cross-section of the then commanders of the Assamese ship is found in the appendix of the text by Amalendu Guha, who has been quoted elsewhere too. Of the twenty-four commanders, nineteen belonged to Daivajna, Brahmin, Kayastha or the Kalita castes, thus belonging to the upper caste Assamese hierarchy. The fifteenth is a Marwari born of an Assamese mother who is thus bracketed within the obvious position. Of the remaining four, two are Ahoms and the other two are Muslims. Of the nineteen upper caste commanders eleven pursued their higher education in Calcutta. Also it would be significant to add that they held important position in the imperial government machinery and in the legislative or municipal councils, owned tea

‡ Needless to mention dear Uncle Sam, but you have not our concern now.

estates, rubber plantations, published Assamese newspapers or owned printing presses. Thus the stranglehold of those echelons in every aspect of the civil society through the 'hegemony of consent' is quite stark. While we need not speak of the two Muslim commanders for obvious reasons, one of the Ahoms Krishnakanta Handique was a reputed Sanskrit scholar and owned tea plantations. It may be fairly added that this was indeed a case of having two 'birds' in hand (viz., Lakshmi and Saraswati). Also the pressure of the hunt of neo-Assam fell on the shoulders of the sanskritised Ahoms too. No Ahom worth their salt (or rather sanskritization) would assert their Tai-Ahom identity and merely state as the mere secular sounding Ahom, as if it is a mortal sin. It was/is a case of being more royal than the king. Also there aren't any tribal!

But what is our concern are the import of the 'new' ideas by the above satraps to be followed by the Assamese and their foreseen after effects.

But now the aping of the Bengali ways of life tended to introduce this rigour in Assam as well. The Assamese Brahmin's rigidity against widow re-marriage was extended further by the model set by the Bengali caste-Hindu elite (several non-Brahmin castes of Bengal did not have the practice of widow re-marriage). Even the Kalitas—a dormant peasant caste of Assam which had no such traditional prejudice—began to take a stand against widow re-marriages. Theories were invented to establish that the Kalita was identical with the Kayastha or even the Kshatriya. Similarly, the simple rites of marriage practiced by non-Brahmins at popular level were being progressively replaced by elaborate sastric rituals, presided by Brahmin priests.

Thus, the social change in nineteenth-century Assam was, more or less, modelled on the immigrant Bengali caste Hindu society of the time—with all its virtues and vices. The latter society itself was passing through the twin process of westernization and sanskritisation, acting upon and often conflicting with each other (Guha 1977: 68–69).

The percolation of the imported practices was experimented primarily on the womenfolk of the neo-coloniser. Compared to the tribal women, the Assamese women led a cowed down, meek and an isolated existence within the family. Within the text we find the mention of Subhadra who was raped by the military and unable to come to terms she commits suicide. Gossain's wife's position is also revealing in the context that she inhabits a cloistered existence in the shadow of her husband. She hasn't been able to carve out her own identity and throughout the text she is merely mentioned in the third person as the grace's wife. She is in the know of her husband's guerrilla activities but does not take any active involvement.

Another character is Anupama, wife of sub-inspector Ananta, a Brahman and a comprador who is shot down by the Mrityu Bahini. Her condition as illustrated in the text is illuminating in the context of the 'lived' experience of the Brahman wife and widow.

It was only after their marriage that these Brahmin maidens went through the exhilaration of youth, possibly because they were married off at such a young age. Anupama had been married two years earlier but had come to live with her husband only about five months ago. The opulence of youth had come upon her only now. And this was when she had to lose her husband. Being a Brahmin widow and being dead were about the same thing. Lifelong repression of the body, and astute vegetarian diet and the exhalation of the deceased husband to godhood characterised such widowhood. Life became something unreal (p. 251).

The docile and subdued existence of the upper caste womenfolk can also be gauged through the lives of the Gossain's wife. It is ironical that she alludes again to the Hindu myths that condition the pan-Indian female perspective:

Our fate is akin to that of Uttara, Gandhari and Bhanumati. It is we who have to suffer for the wars that our menfolk wage. (p. 243)

But in the retrospect, if we juxtapose the roles of mlecha women versus the upper caste, a different scene unfurls. The world views of the *üntermensch* female is in radical opposition to that of the upper caste. The sociological perspective of this aspect is not our concern here, but what is seen in the text are the acts of strength, independence and resilience. Probably the civilizing missions of the imported ideas and practices might have reached a dead end and failed to percolate into the lower ethnic groups. Let us take the instance of Ratani, wife of Tikou 'volunteer' and once sharecropper in the Borthakur household who manages to let her husband and another saboteur, by prolonging her verbal tricks with Inspector Saikia, who obviously came to arrest them but failed. Subsequently, she is arrested in lieu of her husband. In her monologue (which follows) she philosophises her situation comparing with Jaimati, the Ahom princess. Jaimoti is a recurring theme on the prowess of Assam's womenfolk. An Ahom princess she was tied to a Kutkura tree (a native fruit yielding tree with sharp thorns at the stem) and tortured by the chaodangs of king Sulikpha (1679-81). She was beaten to death as she didn't divulge her husband Gadadhar the subsequent Chaopha's (king) whereabouts who was on the run.

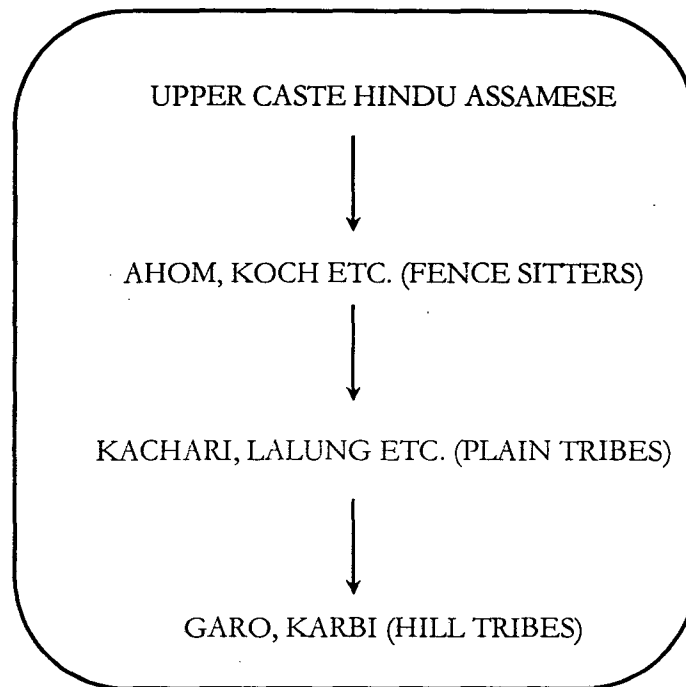
These rascals had uprooted all established values. The honour of women, customs, and conventions, purity and piety, mercy, love-none of these things mattered to these brutes any more. It was a naked war. There was no use weeping. Had Jaimoti wept? (p. 237)

It is indeed ironic that our character of a low culture invoked the memory of Jaimati, a historical figure of another ethnicity low in the hierarchy. While on the other hand the Gossain's wife invoked the legendary myth of a varied yet presumably high culture. These are classic constructs of the psychological colonialism within the text.

The colonization of the plain tribal cosmology by the obvious group is rampant as evident in the text as Dhanpur and the Gossain enters the 'hill' country and witness the Wongla festival of the Garos.

The restraint that he saw in this distance of men and women stirred his heart. He had never imagined that a society could function like this. According to the traditional beliefs of the higher castes, mixed singing and dancing of men and women like this one was not natural or free of inhibitions. But what he had seen that night was natural and uninhabited. A little earlier Dimi too had danced, sung and given herself up to the merriment of the festivities. But she hadn't lost anything thereby and moved around fearlessly and without hesitation performing her manifold duties. She talked without hesitation to Dhanpur and yet hadn't transgressed any limits. She was a chaste woman. It was easy to remain chaste in a locked house, but such a chaste woman was like a touch-me-not out of doors- drooping at the lightest touch. (p. 132)

Three influences are apparent in the above paragraph. The mental universe of the Gossain is totally manipulated by the civilized Hindu ethos. He is a Kachari, a plain tribal but is Assamized to an extent but the Gossain is perplexed by the turn of the events wherein men and women intermix and dance without any inhibition. But his psyche reverts back to his conditioning that 'according to the traditional beliefs of the higher castes' do not do these things. Hence these functions are not worthy of his status, as he belong to a higher strata. The stratification of the society is hence complete in these contexts.



In a latter turn, Dhanpur ruminates over his peripheral status as a Kachari who have not been able to enter the Assamese mainstream society. In spite of the Assamese language, conversion into the Vaishnavite faith his attempts to gatecrash into the party failed. What failed along with too is the process of Assamese assimilation from the top, which is now clearly felt as a pattern of coerced nationality formation. The context of position of women in the 'real' tribal society is also manifest in the text. While the Assamese female lives a life of seclusion in semi-purdah, the liberal, independent and uninhabited spirit of the tribal women is out in the open.

The Dalrymple effect a la *The White Mughal* is again clear if we delve into the monologue of the Gossain who watches Dhanpur and Dimi chatting in the moonlight. Truly the colonizer becomes the colonized to some extent.

The Gossain's mind quivered with this novel realization. He wanted to meet his wife and tell her, 'This stepping out of yours...it is good, you know. Come out further, come and stand in the same row with Dimi. Then your entity as a helpless women will be transformed. In your mind will be created the might of an able woman. And that power is the real Woman' (p: 251).

The context of Dimi's position as a spirited tribal woman is further replenished by the facts of the text. She takes an independent line of thought in her every action. It would indeed be considered promiscuous if we take into account her dalliance with Dhanpur, in spite of her being married to a Garo youth, Dili. It might also be a case of psychological adultery, yet that too needs a spiritual will. Within the lines it can thus be surmised that without transgressing her matrimonial allegiance she was able to sustain herself mentally by her culture (tribal) which allows her to live a life sans the purdah of a conjugal existence. Her mental strength in retorting and repulsing officer who attempted to rape her is a case in point too, if we juxtapose the submissive accounts of the other Assamese woman characters, who bows to each and every convention in accordance to the prevailing culture. Deification of the tribal by the author however goes hand in hand with the exoticisation of the same too. The Gossain was charmed by Dimi's halting drawl. The Assamese language sometimes turned to ambrosia on their tongues. The Dalimi that Jyotiprasad Agarwala introduced in his film Joimoti spoke exactly the same kind of halting Assamese. Sounded almost like an echo. The sweetness of one's own language did sound like one's echo when it was articulated in honeyed syllables on someone else's tongue. While Dimi is considered as an exotic creature, the Naga maiden Dalimi too earns a similar fate. Thus the Karbi and the Garo falls on the same side of the fence of language politics. Assamese which is chaste is spoken, singly by the upper castes while the ones spoken by the 'others' are like 'ambrosia' but nevertheless, not the real thing! Language thus is also the medium through which the semi-colonizer attempted to 'other' and 'differ', and in the reverse, a chastened Assamese tongue would have been considered to be worth the 'appropriation' to the fold.

That the nascent 'Assamese' society was a divided entity and that the upper caste semi-colonizers were running the helm of affairs can be countenanced from a recent government decree. It is indeed a closed society, which is governed by strict matrimonial alliances within the groups, barring however some exceptionable cases in the urban Assamese towns. The futility of the pan-Assam nation-building project lies in the fact that the groups are 'made' to be firm believers in ethnic endogamy. However, the tribal, mostly of the hills, are out of the purview of this upper-caste tinge, due to obvious reasons. This is witnessed within the text itself, when Dili, a Garo youth marries Dimi, the Karbi protagonist. But our concern lies outside the text, towards a quite recent decree formulated by the Government of Assam,

aimed towards circumventing the age-old sub-colonial matrimonial practices of rigidity through the fermentation of inter-caste marriages.

If marriage is the union of two families, inter-caste marriages could well be the mantra to break the rigidity, of the caste-system. This is what the state Directorate of Welfare of Scheduled Castes is trying to achieve by giving monetary incentive for inter-caste marriages... According to 1991 census, Assam has 17 lakh Scheduled Caste population with 16 sub-castes. ... Inter-caste marriage, not only between Scheduled caste and the general caste but also between sub-castes, is considered a taboo (Dev 5 July 2003: 6).

While it is a commendable effort of the govt. towards breaking down the casteist conundrum of the Assamese society, what is however glaring is the absence of any process to facilitate a similar perspective towards the tribal. Half measures again!

While we witnessed the Axomiya and tribal Assams, between the lines of the text we 'discover' the gradual evolution of the neo-Assam, formed by the foreigners. The incursions of these migrants into the tribal lands had very reaching consequences in the socio-political history of Assam.

At the same time Manik Bora will visit the neighbouring Nepali farms and gauge their minds on the pretext of buying milk from them (p. 62). We even went to the Bengali village. It is inhabited mainly by people from Mymensingh and by Namashudras. (p. 124)

The British colonizers followed the 'colonization policy' since April 3rd, 1928 through a conference of district officers in Shillong. The policy to 'grow more food' by peopling the wastelands of Assam by bringing in impoverished immigrants from nearby East Bengal and Nepal was otherwise supplanted by the call of 'grow more Muslims' (Das 1931: 20). Though the British pioneered the policy, it was followed obediently by the Saadulla and Bordoloi governments.

Marwari traders and even Assamese mahajans of Barpeta provided a substantial part of the necessary finance to enable the immigrant peasants to bring virgin soil under the plough. ... A steady influx of Nepali grazers into the Brahmaputra valley led to an increased cattle population and milk production (Guha 1977: 102)

Vast tracts of land was brought under the plough, cattle-population and milk production increased, yet a heavy price had to be paid subsequently. As a result of the massive

immigration, land to people ratio depleted to a great extent. Mainly the tribal people had to bear the brunt of these 'colonization policies'. While in the Caribbean and American contexts, slaves were brought in from Africa and engaged in plantations and estates without any rights to property or land offered, it was a different case in this part of the empire. The immigrants were offered land to cultivate, however they too were individually cultivated by the successive governments after Independence as fixed vote banks. The gamble paid off for several decades until 18 February 1983:

It is difficult to generalize about how this understanding can foster inertia, but there is an unparalleled example in what has come to be called the Nellie massacre, which took place in Assam on February 18, 1983. For reasons of her own, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had decided to hold state elections in Assam without purging the electoral rolls of numerous non-citizens, mainly Bengali immigrants. Such a decision was certain to inflame Assamese opinion. Mrs. Gandhi's Congress (I) could expect considerable Muslim support, and most recent Bengali immigrants were Muslim. Hundreds of small violent incidents occurred during the election campaign. Assamese police came to believe the central government had betrayed the Assamese and put the police in an untenable position. Nationally recruited, the Central Reserve Police Force was not Assamese in composition; there was tension between it and the local police. Cooperation was therefore minimal. The army was kept out. The police had been told to insure that the balloting was conducted with a minimum of disturbance and, to that end, been instructed to protect election officials. Arun Shourie, who studied police dispatches, found abundant warnings about the 12,000 attackers who came from villages 18–20 kilometres from Nellie. The police, however, apparently reasoned (or were content to believe) that they could not simultaneously protect election officials and the villages around Nellie. They chose to protect the officials. Despite specific messages describing violence in progress, no police patrol arrived in the Nellie area until three hours after the killing, by which time some 1,383 people, in ten villages, were dead (Horowitz 2002: 357).

While Donald Horowitz quotes the generic Assamese term as the group massacring the Bangladeshi immigrants, the reality is a little blurred. Local reports suggest that it was predominantly the Lalungs and Karbis who participated in the effort to 'cleanse' the area. It is significant that the terrain of the text is contiguous to Nellie, in the present Nagaon district (see maps). This not however an isolated incident but it was a precursor to the numerous other 'cleansing attempts' which is now scattered throughout the present state of Assam. The victims and the aggressors might be varied, yet the pattern remain throughout the indigene is pitted against the immigrant.

The Fanonian method of 'total annihilation' however today is directed both against the semi-colonizers, and to their cronies too. But the 'cronies' too are in a protracted battle against the erstwhile semi-colonizers who sits today in a fence between the 'indigene' and the 'immigrant'. The question of class might be a recurring leitmotif, yet the colours of caste, identity, ethnicity and religion are starkly visible. This question for the clamour for land resulted due to the no-holds barred policies of earlier governments. There is no solution in sight as the battles rage on.

If the subaltern entities in the former text can be categorized as 'soft' who came into considerable closeness with the mainstream society and even assisted as 'freedom fighters' even if by default, we will subsequently enter a varied dimension. We will encounter tribal of both the 'soft' and 'hard' types as facilitated and textualized by the author. European discourses are replete with varied accounts of intellectuals, while one view extols the 'noble savage' in warmest colours, others denigrate the very existence of such 'vile creatures' in earth. Let us take the instance of Montaigne, who in his essay, *Of Cannibals*, declares that American Indians are only wild in the sense that wild flowers are wild, but that in them are 'true and most profitable virtues and natural properties most lively and vigorous'. Civilization has 'bastardized' these virtues, 'applying them to the pleasures of our corrupted taste'. However, the policy of Dickens, is radically different, if we delve into a little-known 'reprinted piece', where he declares that, the savage, 'howling, whistling, clucking, stamping, jumping, tearing', he is something highly desirable to be civilized off the face of the earth.

Meanwhile the position of the author of this text oscillates between the two extremes of 'hard' and 'soft'. Also he himself can be located in three contexts:

1. He belongs to the subject race,
2. He is of the mainstream Hindu Assamese community of the newly colonized province.
3. He is also incorporated into the colonial machinery as a deputy magistrate of a colonized district.

The tale of *Miri Jiyori* is set in the timeframe of 1890s when the region was undergoing the first throes of the impact of colonialism. However, it was not direct colonialism in the real sense as, it was administered by proxy through the newly emerging educated upper caste

Hindu Assamese. It is predominantly about the love story of a Mishing couple who married against their parents' wishes but met a tragic end after they were abducted and punished by the tribal justice of the 'Hill-Miris'- 'hard' primitives. The tribes' brushes with 'civilization' (read, colonial machines) and mainstream society are brief yet they reveal the relations between the colonized and the semi-colonizer. Again it is through the colonial judicial system that one of the brief encounters between the two entities is witnessed. The upper- caste 'native' writer at this juncture ingratiates him/herself with the colonizing regime, while rejecting the 'other'. Herein the three phases of the evolutionary schema of Fanon, can be forwarded:

1. In the first phase of 'ingratiating' with the colonizer the 'native intellectual gives proof that he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power'.
2. In the cultural nationalist phase he/she attempts to memorize and maintains the part by delinking with the colonial culture.
3. Fanon states that in this stage 'the native will after having tried to lose himself in the people and with the people, will on the contrary, shake the people (Fanon 1967: 167-72).

While *Mrityanjay* was a relatively tame affair, in *Miri Jiyori* we will encounter the internal constructions and codifications of a stark, heightened and brutal oeuvre. In this text we enter the Northeast of contemporary geographical Northeast, a 'wild' region at the mercy of the elements, which is a regular annual affair, even if the other perspectives are irregular.

Rajanikanta Bordoloi, the author of *Miri Jiyori*, is however from Barpeta district in lower Assam and worked as a deputy magistrate in the erstwhile Lakhimpur district during the 1890s, albeit under the Company but remotely controlled from the imperial metropolis, Calcutta. Hence he enjoyed a semblance of autonomy in his position. The text is incidentally culled from his service memoirs and an autobiographical perspective is seen in the court incident within the text. Lakhimpur district is in the remote upper Assam area or a modern no-no land or Kalapani, which is better known today as North Lakhimpur after the Dhemaji district was carved out of it. The author by dint of the colonial legacy administered over the area and attempted to make inroads into the tribal psyche.

The text is predominantly about the Mishing tribes of the North Bank and the neighbouring hills. Brief encounters with the colonial machinery and the civilized Assamese Hindu also finds mention along with other perspectives. Meanwhile the most politically incorrect and blatant nature of the text arise in naming the tribe. The Mishing community is derogatorily signified by the author and the Hindu-Assamese in *Miri Jiyori* as Miri which the tribe do not find too polite. Even in the translated version of the text into English by P. Kotoky (2000), the nomenclature Miri is retained. The translator notes in the title page with disregard to both the finer points of editing and ethics that

The Miri community is today called the Mishings. We have, however, retained the old term for the obvious reason. In doing so, no disrespect to the community is meant (in the title page).

However, disrespect already was done in the title of the text itself. 'Miri Jiyori' in Assamese signifies a maid of the eponymous tribe. Yet in my opinion, the text should have been titled in a politically correct way as 'Jonki Panei'. Jonki and Panei carry in Assam the same semantic weight as Laila-Majnu or Heer-Ranjha of North India or Romeo and Juliet of Europe.

Before delving into the internal contours of the text it would be worthwhile to objectively identify the two groups of the Miri (Mishing) that we will countenance in the text. The term Miri is today regarded as a term of insult and even abuse and hence a misnomer too. Even if we track into the historical labyrinths, this context will be quite visible. Due to lack of any local ethnographical accounts we will have to pay heed to the words of A. Hamilton, a major general of the Assam Valley and Surma Valley Light Infantry, who traversed the hills leading a military and expeditionary force during 1911-12.

Divided into those who occupy the hills and those who have settled in the plains the so-called Miris of today are grouped in four chief clans: the Ghasis, who live east of the Subansiri; the Saraks, who live on the the right bank of that river; the Panibotias and Tarbotias, who inhabit the country further to the west. Each section is broken into many minor branches, but, though the term 'Miri' is employed officially to describe them, it is undoubtedly a misnomer. ...

The Miris who have colonized the Assam border describe themselves as Hindus. At the same time they have liberal notions with regards to diet, eating pork and drinking rice beer without hesitation. Where they are not Hindus, they are Animists sacrificing to the sun, moon and earth. (A. Hamilton, *In Abor Jungle of North-East India*, Mittal Publications, 1984, reprint, p. 86-87)

That the Hill Miris are a different people residing in the hills is clear from the above account. However the author clubs numerous groups of people within the generic term of the Miri tribe. The ethnographic linkage of the author in the text to the 'hard' primitive belongs to the above-mentioned entity. However. The 'soft' version, according to the author will belong to the tribe, mentioned below. Though there might be linguistic, cultural and social affinities the two groups are distinct, though belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family.

E. T. Dalton, in his *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* (1872), explained the origin of the nomenclature at some length, noting that the word Miri is actually an Assamese word. Many years later, the Miri Mission (1911-12), which visited the upper reaches of the Subansiri and undertook the first ever-extensive survey of the area, confirmed the finding of Dalton. It noted:

'The name Miri is purely an Assamese word originally used by the Assamese to denote all the hill people between the Daflas of the Runga Valley and the people of the Dihang whom we call Abors.'... The Assamese people designate them simply as Miris. (J.N. Chowdhury, *The Hill Miris of Subansiri*, pub. by T. P. Khaund, Director of Information and Public Relations, NEFA, 1967)

The tribe popularly known as Mishings or plains Miris is found mostly in the three districts of Assam namely Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang. The Mishings or the Miris were originally a hill tribe within the ranges of Abor, Miri and Mishmi hills in the North East Frontier Agency who came down to the plains before the reign of the Ahom kings and since then began settling in the riverine areas of the Brahmaputra and Subansiri rivers of Assam. Originally there was no tribe such as the Miri. ... It is stated in the Assam Census Report 1881 that the name Miri was given by the Assamese to the people inhabiting the mountains between the Assam Valley and Tibet. ... The Mishings should not be confounded with the Hill Miris. It has been mentioned in the Assam District Gazetteer 1926 that the hill Miris inhabited the Subansiri Valley as far as the plains. (The Mishings) had in time past left the hills and settled in the plains and had become a distinct community (Sharma Thakur 1972: 1-2).

In the initial pages of the text we are introduced to the 'soft' subaltern, 'the simple Miris' and the 'true hearted Miri men and women'. The patronizing, superior and paternal attitude of the author is clearly noticed. The 'soft' Miri is a noble savage who is to be civilized by the colonial mission and through his own efforts even if he is a mere 'quisling' of the Company. Truly, the burden is to be shared by all and sundry. That the politics of internal colonialism operates quite overtly is seen through the machination and paternalistic attitude of the author. In this context, Ania Loomba states:

Colonialism is not just something that happens from outside a country or a people, not just something that operates with the collusion of forces inside, but a version of it can be duplicated from within (Loomba 1998: 12).

The softer version of the primitive is stereotyped throughout the text in numerous contrivances and linguistic twists: 'my simple Miri girl', 'my simple Miri youth', 'guileless Miri youth,' etc. The appropriation of the 'noble savage' into the ranks of the Assamese society is again contrived. Through the subtle process of cultural colonization the author speaks rather assertively in a footnote that,

Though they have different dialects they all speak Assamese. They put on dresses in the manner of the Assamese. Some of them have also adopted Hinduism (p. 3).

The aspects of language, sartory and religion hence are the threshold principles through which the author intends to encompass into his society. But the 'Miris' are 'Miris', not even Mishings or Assamese. Even if they are Assamized, they occupy a lesser hierarchy in the Assamese social structure. They are not even once offered a position of an inch above the 'noble savage' tag. Further construction of similar types will be found in the subsequent pages.

Further construction of similar types are the Ghasi Miris, and Hill Miris who are slave-runners, cruel, despotic and vicious. An illustration of their location by the author may be gleaned from the following lines.

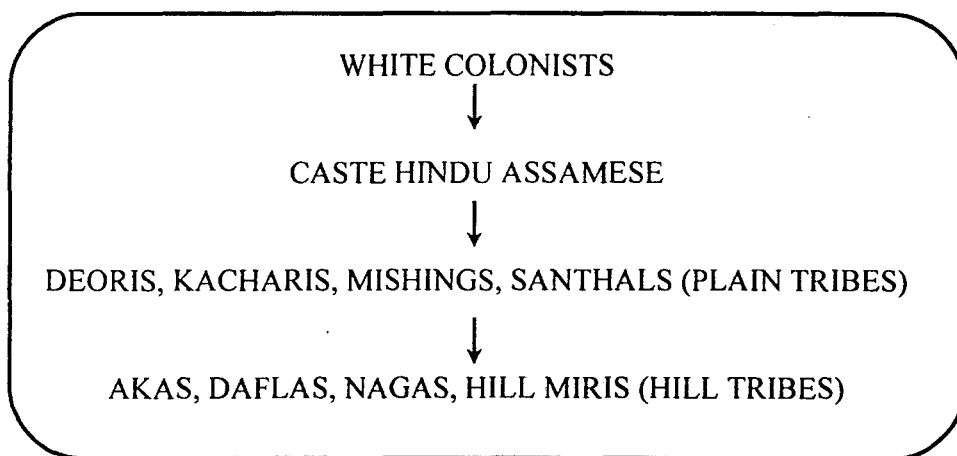
Having filled their bellies, the brutes relaxed, by stretching their limbs like animals. Their assembly was in session. ... It was a sort of sessions court of those barbarous people. (p. 57)

The Ghasi and Chili Miris thus inhabit the 'other' extreme terrain than that of the 'noble savage'. To an extent, this text may also be considered as a novel of an imagined 'sub-empire'

with clearly denoted hierarchies. Other groups though mentioned only fleetingly occupy delineated position. In this Colonial landscape, the white sahib thus occupies the highest chair. Though the Company is mentioned overtly, the white colonial officers are not in the forefront of the novel, as the colonial machinery, administered this region through 'remote control' of the 'native' authorities.

Millions of Indians never saw an English person throughout the term of the Raj, although that did mean their lives had not been woven into the fabric of the empire. This kind of 'shallow penetration' can be seen as prototype for modern imperialism, which function largely through remote control (Loomba 1998: 111).

The old warts of internal contradictions viz. 'appropriation' and 'othering' is thus a recurring theme in this text too. The hierarchical position of the different ethnic groups in the 'sub-empire' is shown below.



The authors depict the topography in the typical style of imperial formations of European textualities. It is true that the 'land' does not acquire connotations of physical and sexual intimacies a la Donne's poems like 'Love's Progress' or 'To his Mistris Going to Bed'. Yet, imperial connotation of gold that was culled from the river Subansiri is mentioned profusely. One of the chief leitmotifs of colonialism was economy and hence it is quite natural for the author to allude to the aspect of the 'yellow metal'.

Even today, gold dust can be traced in the water of the Sovansiri. ...Earlier, in the days of the kings, rice and paddy and other necessities of life were very cheap. (p. 1-2)

The author enters the text through geography and time. He is not a liege of the Ahom monarchy which was pulled down in 1826, but a subject officer of a new entity. The sympathy of the author is by no means with the earlier administration, but in a fleeting conjecture he analyzes the two systems. The texture of the author's voice is paternal and colonial in nature, in the vein of assessing the land for a report to be submitted to an officer in the higher echelon.

The Mishings are demarcated as 'noble savages', but they inhabit a different universe of their own, in spite of the author's forced attempts to 'herd the flock' into the enclosure. The author's imperial eye makes him categorize the tribe's idiosyncrasies and rituals through an amateur anthropologist's perspective.

Headache is a common ailment of the Miris. They drink heavily and therefore, often suffer from headache. The Miris are terribly afraid of stomach disorder. They would even abandon a cholera victim and run for safety to the woods. (p. 3)

Our simple 'imperial' author is indeed 'guileless' too. The white colonial officials too were aficionados of the drink! The observation of the author is replete with loopholes and ambiguities. In the subsequent pages, the author rides piggyback on 'British writers like Dalton and Hunter' on the metaphysical and cosmological universe of the tribe. Other observations are laden with half-truth and personal biases and hence the 'biological' aspect of the tribe is a suspect too. The author in spite of being a 'native' of the land had to ride piggy back on European ethnologists due to the reasons of the colonial administration, before which there wasn't much interaction and knowledge about the tribals.

In other instances some songs are rendered by the author in the Mishing language, which are not translated into Assamese in the original, or English in the translated version. The interesting perspective however lies in the footnote.

[These]... are songs of the Miri community. Not to speak of us, even some Miris do not know what they mean. [This is what the author has observed. tr.] (p. 3)

The question of language is a fundamental site of struggle by which the imperial or sub-imperial centres attempt to manipulate the subject race into its fold. As it is through language that the reality is known, it is again through language that the truth may be circumvented.

In a different context, Robert Crawford has shown that it is through the 'marginalization' of the Scottish language and literature that played a significant part in the 'invention of English literature' (Crawford 1992).

In the preface to the novel, the author dedicates the text to one 'Bidyadhar', in which he states:

My innocent 'Miri Jiyori' couldn't learn to sing in the modern Bengali way. When she is sad she merely knows to sing Bihu songs in broken (pidgin!) Assamese. During the advent of 'norachinga' Bihu she sings 'dadam boning boning dading (in her indigenous parlance). Hence, don't be scandalized with these songs. Only a few songs have been rendered since you profess to like the Bihu songs. Do not curse me to ascribe to a 'low culture'. The maiden doesn't sing that bad, and if she does so I don't have any other way.

This thus can be ascribed to a difference of perception between the 'high' and 'low' cultures. Contradictory positions are however unveiled within the text, when the author describes the Bihu songs (and dance) rendered by the Mishing tribe to be in Assamese. While the Bihu songs rendered by the Mishing tribe within the text are in chaste Assamese, perplexity arise from the preface-that the 'Miri' maiden does not know to sing 'the modern Bengali way'.

Different positions are activated within the terrain of the text if we take into consideration, the socio-political context of language within the Indian panorama.

For Sanskrit too has been the language both of classicism and of brahminical, of imperial rule and of 'high' culture, opposing and opposed by the vernaculars of India for centuries, and yet coming to modulate the very crucible out of which so much of the subsequent linguistic formations of at least northern India were to be shaped. Brahminism of course never could constitute itself as a centralized Church and a Universal Religion, nor did it ever come to directly command as much property as did the Catholic Church, but it is really quite beyond doubt that High Brahminism did in fact seek that kind of homogenization of populations in belief systems and social practice; it assigned to itself that same sort of cultural supremacy, that special relation with the language of belief and command, and that agential role as the ideological guardian of the Indian systems of tributary exploitation of the peasantry (Ahmed 1993: 223).

While the 'high' and the 'low', 'Sanskrit' and the 'vernaculars' context each other in the north Indian mainland topography, a varied spectre activates/ed in the periphery. The 'low'

Assamese language and culture with its strings attached to the 'high' Sanskrit culture modelled itself on a higher hierarchy in order to civilize the other 'lower' i.e. tribal and Mongolian subaltern culture by distorting the whole cultural framework. It was indeed a peripheral product of spurious 'high' cultural connotation with the intention of subjugating and colonizing the ones at the lower order of things. While the attempt in the initial periods succeeded, it had to bow down to the turn of events, giving way to the phase of semi-colonial cultural de-colonization. The heterogeneity of the varied ethnic entities were attempted to be done away, with enveloping the terrain with a pan-Sanskrit yet 'spurious' vernacular coverage. This was however in contrast with the policies of the erstwhile Ahom Raj which modelled itself on liberalism and federalism. This is again an instance when the 'colonizer' (i.e., the Assamese UCH) became colonized by the practices of the Bengali immigrants who held clerical position under the aegis of the Company. Hence the attempt was to forge as different identity of their own, of the 'other', of the past Ahom history and reign and thus finally to incorporate the whole text into a composite pan-Indian perspective either by coaxing a throttling the constituents. This was a clear case of trying to ally with the immediate higher-ups (the Bengalis), while the Bengalis in turn attempted to ape to whites. (About this we have mentioned in length.) Yet, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee asserted and thus stated in dejection:

There exists no history of Bengal, what we have does not amount to history: it is partly fiction and partly the biographical account of the non-believing, foreign exploits. Bengal must have its own history, otherwise there cannot be any hope for Bengal (Chatterjee 1959: 301).

While the author was unable to distort and engrave a concocted history due to the overwhelming and patent presence of the Ahom Raj through the Buranjis, a section of the Upper Class Hindu Assamese however experimented in adulterating the ethnographic terrain through 'fictionalizing' the indigenous attributes by exploiting the heathen in them. As usual there wasn't any hope in the project of constructing a post-Ahom, imagined Sanskrit pan-Assam semi-empire. Attempt went with the wind! Those concocted attempts were primarily through the terrain of language through institutions like literature, official language, cultural entities etc. It is another matter that these attempts were frozen in time.

At any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form (Bakhtin 1981: 291).

There are other semiotic codes in the text too, which again expresses the internal contradictions and hierarchical relations. Cultural festivals, dances and sartorial aspects are attempted by the author to be 'appropriated' and also given a distorted form in order to Assamize the tribal community.

Some of them (Mishings) visited respectable families, and collected small amounts as their prize after performing Bihu in their yards. ... This group first performed Bihu (i.e. danced Bihu dances in tune with Bihu songs) [p. 7]

However there are numerous twists in their dance. The main festival of the Mishing tribe is Ali-Aye-Ligang {Ali-fruit, Aye- seed, Ligang- plantation}, which is celebrated on the first Wednesday of the Phagun month of the Assamese calendar, and thus precedes the Rongali Bihu. Ali-Aye-Ligang, in fact, is regarded as more important because along with being a socio-cultural festival, it is religious in nature too. The religiousness marks the common descent of the hill tribes of Arunachal Pradesh along with the Mishings. They profess animistic cults and regard Donyi (sun) and Polo (moon) as their principal deities (Borgohain 24 April 1994).

While the cultural festivals of the Assamese speaking community and the Mishing tribes are different in the contexts of form, content and time, even the dances are different too. The author however tries to paint the Bihu in terms of singing and dancing in Assamese colours. That the dances are completely different can be understood from the following context,

The dance that I noticed...was mimetic, representing sowing of seeds, planting, reaping, threshing of paddy in wooden mortars, weaving on the shuttle etc. Each feature formed a sort of tableau, the raising of the arms over the head and waving of the hands forming a 'rest period' at the conclusion of each tableau. This (Mishing) dance was purely religious, not the dance with sexual suggestions that is usually associated with Bihu. ... In recent years the tendency has been to synchronise the Ali-ai-ligang festival with Bihu (Goswami 1966: 45).

Thus it can be analysed that the tribe made attempts to 'synchronize' their distinct festival with the mainstream Bihu festival. Yet that 'tendency' occurred only in the 'recent years'. But the author of *Miri Jiyon* penned the novel in the 1890s in a colonial set-up, P. Goswami, who

witnessed the 'dances' and compiled the socio-cultural study in 1966. There is a gap of 76 years between the novel and the study, and hence the author's formulation that the Mishing group performed Assamese Bihu is highly suspicious. Though in a varied content it is a significant factor that folk-dances of the tribal form or Bihu of the 'lower culture' did not find a worthy position among the übermenschen of the upper caste Hindu Assamese society.

Sometime Brahman youth are seen taking part in Huchari, singing, though they do not normally dance or sing in the Bihu festivals (Goswami 1966: 54).

The recurring themes of folk-dances of the 'lower' people are seen in both the texts, in *Mrityunakshy* the Gossain was perplexed and mystified by the mixed dances of both the sexes in the Wongla festival of the Garos. Almost all the mongoloid communities of India's Northeast celebrate the Bihu festival in distinct forms during spring. But the 'lowness' attached to it probably stem from its non-Hindu connotations. However, it is a different matter that Hindu elements crept into it, thus eliminating the tribal attributes. It was the Tai-Ahoms who gave Bihu a national character, but gradually the national hue was overshadowed by religious overtones.

The author of *Miri Jyoti* a la Columbus too distinguished between two groups or rather tribes. The tribal is segregated into two divisions- the hills and plains tribes. While hills tribes are termed as beastly, violent and brutish, the plains tribes are noble savages, gentle and civil. The politics of othering and attempts on appropriation however continues. A section of the contemporary mainstream Indian community takes pride in being Hindus, i.e., *garb se kaho huan Hindu hain*. A century and some decades ago, a Hindu was fashionable if not a plainly proud fact. The parivar would be amused to find devout and active Hindus in the hinterland in such a timeframe. It is indeed a strange quest for identity or rather self-proclaimed affiliation with the mainland. The author thus portrays the hierarchies in a European style:

Differences were 'noted' within each group as well. Columbus distinguished between 'canibales' and 'indios'-the former were represented as violent and brutish, the latter as gentle and civil. Both however were regarded as inferior to the white people (Loomba 1998: 109).

In Chapter XIII, p. 49, we find the female protagonist Panei: "The next day, in the early morning, she began her journey, as aimless as before. Towards evening she reached a Hindu village'. This single word 'Hindu' thus creates the tension of politics within the otherwise

innocent 'love story'. Thus the author to some extent locates himself as a miniature, superior white. I quote Charles Kingsley's observation after his first visit to Ireland:

I'm haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country...
But to see white chimpanzees is dreadful: if they were black, one would not feel so much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours (quoted in Gibbons 1991: 95-117).

Delving into the interior contours of *Miri Jiyori* will no doubt strengthen the analysis that 'appropriation' and 'othering' of the Mishing community goes hand in hand.

At such a pleasant hour, a few beautiful young girls, four or five in number were seen plying a small boat down the river. All of them were charming and cheerful. They were neatly dressed in *riha* and *mekhela*. (p. 13)

The author, in an attempt at sartorial cover up, drapes the tribal women in robes worn by the majority Assamese-speaking community. The Mishing women in the 19th century tugged the mekhela above the breasts and the riha above the shoulders.⁵ The tribal women still dress themselves in this manner in the interior villages. It is only after interaction with the majority community the Mishing women started aping the majority sisters!

Sceptics may at times cast doubts about the extent of colonialism in the innocent 'love story' but the emphasis of the colonial project can be gauged by listening to the song of Rokomi, a female character:

The Company's ship came up sailing
Shaking the earth around
Anchor near the bank. O' the ship from Calcutta,
Let me enquire about my beloved. (p. 15)

It is not that the Mishing woman merely has been dressed in unfamiliar clothes. The Mishing man too is dressed in 'foreign' apparel.

He (Jonki) has a Chinese vest on. He was enwrapped neatly with a dhoti. (p. 9)

⁵ A la the English draping the Scott in a kilt with Jodhpurs and top hats.

Rather than wearing the Assamese *riha* and *mekhela*, the Mishing women wore a wide strip of cloth *sumpa* around the waist extending down to the knee. Around the breasts they wrap a narrow strip of cloth called a *galuk*. (a blouse is a European influence, though quite Indianized in its present form). A small piece of cloth called *bura* was the headdress. There was an extra small piece of cloth worn round the hips, which distinguished married women from the unmarried ones. The males used a long narrow strip of cloth round the waist called *kaping*, and not a dhotis the author mentions. The author again commits the faux pas of labelling the *mihu galu*—waist-length vest—as ‘a Chinese vest’. The above information on Mishing sartory is taken from G.C. Sharma Thakur’s text where he mentions that the above status quo was in the period ‘before foreign clothes invaded the Mishing villages’ (p. 7). Also he states that,

In recent years due to easy communication and other facilities mill made clothes have penetrated into the furthest comers and the traditional clothes are fast disappearing (p. 7).

It is hence improbable that during the 1890s, the Mishing community adorned themselves with Assamese dresses, and the intention of the author is ‘obvious’.

As has been said earlier, appropriation attempts and othering overtures work simultaneously. An excerpt of conversation from the text:

‘Jonki, my simple Miri youth! What have you done! Why did you all unsuspectingly reveal your? You had little idea as to how it could mortally wound the sentiment of another simple soul! But there is no blaming you, for you are guileless Miri youth, totally unaware of the double dealing educated people (p. 16).

The Miri people are simple hearted, and they do not easily relent in the stand they take. They would argue, ramble much, but would, in the end, return to their own point. (p. 17)

The sympathy of the author is abjectly suspect. There is indeed a sharp delineation constructed in the social, mental and psychological processes of the two communities by the author. Sermonising about a community in such a manner is of course biased, unethical and counterproductive. These aspects in a literary text are against the essence and aesthetics of literature itself. These constructions thus cannot be accepted to be within the scope of an author’s license but that of a propagandist pamphlet giving way to discrimination and subsequent anarchy.

The litany of biased constructions runs page and even if it's a wee bit tiresome, justice must be done in portraying those constructions.

Everyone of them struck to his or her own stand. We have already observed that the Miris are a stubborn people. They are not easily prepared to admit the truth. (p. 18)

Dear reader, we have already observed that the Miris are by nature reticent. They stick to their points rigidly. As a result of their subordinates, almost every family among the otherwise innocent Miris has suffered no end of misery and misfortune (p. 19)

The presence of the colonial economy in the region during British rule is a commonplace element in Assamese Bihu songs. It may be possible for the tribal to imagine and render a company-inspired text as they inhabited the 'third space' in the hierarchy and the British did not rule the land directly but through 'surrogate' authorities. A Bihu song with colonial attributes is mentioned below in the parallels of the foreign administration and influence on the society.

The river with the Company's steamer
The mortar throbs with its tooth,
The heartburns, the mind yearns
Since I have attained puberty (Goswami 1966: 101).

The above instances are clear attributes of a colonial mechanism in which the subject is codified, branded and stored. Though this codification is a semi-colonial affair, the elements are clearly European in essence.

In any colonial context, economic plunder, the production of knowledge and strategies of representation depended heavily upon one another... The different stereotypes of the 'mild Hindoo', the 'warlike Zulu', the 'barbarous Turk', the 'New World Cannibal', or the 'black rapist', were all generated through particular colonial situations and were tailored to different colonist policies (Loomba 1998: 99).

It can also be seen that these ways of codification were not, 'confined to the British and colonial and native ways of representation played upon and against each other' (Loomba 1998: 99). Assamese literature as a whole is filled with similar codification and representations of the subaltern identity. The *üntermenschen* are shown in an obvious light, in texts as *Dharmadibosh phaisola Nobis*, *Bhum Kerula* by Lakhinath Bezbaruah, so-called father of modern Assamese literature. The Ahom community in *Jibonor Batot* by Bina Baruah and the Scheduled Caste

Doom community in *Matsyagandha* by Homen Borgohain receive adverse, distorted and politically incorrect treatments.

The Assamese linguistic repertory is replete with interesting connotations, proverbs, nomenclatures and sayings. Items if considered to be inferior or exotic will be termed as man ada (Burmese ginger), man dhopat (Burmese tobacco), *Noga gha* (Naga wound), *Miri da* (Mishing knife), etc. Interestingly, this process works both ways. How about an Assamese proverb, '*Tiri, Miri, kuwa, bhatou, aei charitak nidiba axoi*'? Loosely translated, it means: 'Do not trust a Miri (i.e., Mishing), a woman, crow and a parrot.'

In the Assamese psyche too the following linguistic usages are extensively used even today—*Okora Miri* (idiot Mishing), *Obhong Ahom* (insolent Ahom), *Manoh-khoua Deori* (Cannibal Deori), *Modabi coolie* (drunkard tea-tribe), *Obhong Kodhari* (insolent Kachari) etc. Semiotic codes too are utilized by the upper-castes to ascertain the identity of the subaltern. For instance:

Upper caste speaker guest—Who is one weaning the lentils of the host?

Upper caste speaker host—Oh, they are the one who in Bohag sings with a 'coo-o.'

The knowledge derived by the guest in 'known' yet unuttered sentences, is that the person is a coolie, a member of the tea-tribes, as they are 'commonly' known. The cuckoo (*koel* in Hindi, *kooli* in Assamese) thus acts as the semiotic signifier to indicate the person's identity.

So far so good. Yes, the 'Miris' are innocent, but at the same point they are stubborn, recilent, and at times, plain liars. So far the 'Miris' were misconstrued, let us now turn to another chapter of constructions, that of the Assamese-speaking majority within the context of the story. Panei, the female protagonist, reaches a 'Hindu' village, wherein a young man attempts to 'violate her chastity,' or rather, crudely put, tries to rape her.

The family which Panei approached happened to be the richest in the village. There were a few young men in the family. They had a little learning too. One of them even passed the lower primary school-leaving examination. He was about twenty-five years old. Though a villager, he acquired the habit of drinking imported wine... (p. 20)

Even though Panei swallowed several glasses, she did not become tipsy. But the young man grew exited and unquiet... Reader, it embarrasses us to say so, but the young man tried to rape her. (p. 21)

Dear reader, this young man was not all heartless. As he came to his senses, the fiery words of Panei opened his eyes of wisdom. He realized that he did something really heinous. He repented his conduct and resolved that he would not do such a thing again. (p. 22)

Dear reader, the 'Hindu' youth wasn't at fault, the fault lies in glasses of imported colonial wine, the weak constitution of the youth and his tradition which doesn't allow him to drink at social levels and albeit the charm of the woman. It seems that the author intends to sympathize by the words that the young man was not all heartless-for didn't he repent his conduct and resolved that he would not do such a thing again. It is indeed a very Christian world, which the Hindu youth inhabit, and something as 'innocent' as an attempt to read after a few glasses wine can be forgiven. After all, attempt to molest a tribal woman doesn't carry much semantic stigma as that of an attempt to rape a Hindu woman. The youth is educated and his inebriation is the crime and not the molestation attempt.

Another Hindu element is depicted in the text, while comparing the female Mishing dancers:

Their gaiety and abandon in singing and dancing gave you illusion of two heavenly nymphs descending on earth with Chitraratha, the king of the gandharvas. (p. 9)

It is indeed pretty clear that the author had a potent intention in bringing in the symbolic Hindu parallels. It was an attempt to homogenize and forge a common religious identity, even if the cultural loopholes are rampantly visible in the process.

The new Hinduism which is now sought to be projected is in many ways a departure from the earlier religious sects. It seeks historicity for the incarnations of its deities, encourages the idea of a centrally sacred book, claims monotheism as significant to the worship of deity, acknowledges the authority of the ecclesiastical organization of certain sects as prevailing over all and has supported large-scale missionary work and conversion. These changes allow it to transcend caste identities and reach out to large numbers (Thapar 1988: 31-32).

The religious homogenization project is witnessed if we pursue the context that while they (Mishings) are mentioned at times as Hindus even if reluctantly, they are never accepted as Assamese, being relegated to a lower position in the imagined semi-empire.

Another character, that of the chief judicial magistrate, albeit autobiographical echoes the Fanonian prescription of the colonial administrator who is a master- both of the law and the languages. He works punctually and is the epitome of justice personified.

Sharp at half past ten, the judicial magistrate arrived at the court. All his subordinate staff stood up and saluted him in accordance with the practice then prevailing. He acknowledged the courtesy with a smile. As a man he was of amiable disposition, and as judge fair and impartial. He was popular because his judgement strictly upheld the spirit of justice. He was well versed in the laws and practices of the hill tribes like the Akas and the Daflas, and those of the plains like the Miris and Deuris (p. 23)

The magistrate is thus the monarch of all he surveys: all-knowing, benevolent and judicial. All tribes cohabit a Babel-like topography and speak rudimentary, colloquial Assamese, yet the magistrate is a virtual encyclopaedia of tribal laws and practices. This is indeed the most commonplace construction of the colonial administration (though surrogate) and thus can be located in every colonial time and space.

The 'judicial magistrate' is modelled on the author's own personal experience as he served in the region in the same capacity. An 'internal orientalism' operation in this enterprise along with sub-colonialism, the discourse of which are evident.

Imperial relations may have been established initially by guns, guile and disease, but they were maintained in their interpellative phase largely by textuality, both institutionally... and informally. Colonialism (like its counterpart racism), then, is a formation of discourse, and as an operation of discourse it interpellates colonial subjects by incorporating them in a system of representation (Tiffin and Lawson 1994).

Last but not the least, the hill tribes too receive their 'fair' share of brand treatment:

Having filled their bellies, the brutes relaxed, by stretching their limbs like animals. Their assembly was in session. Their gam (chieftain) has come. They have something serious to decide. It was a sort of sessions court of those barbarous people. (p. 24)

The difference of the constructions of the two spaces 'civilized' imperial and 'brutal' tribal is quite vast. The attributes of the two categories can be gauged from the following chart. Herein, the white colonial is not the imperial, but the 'judicial magistrate' and the terrain he occupies is truly a product of that system or 'ism'.

‘Civilized Imperial’	→	Rational
	→	Civilization Manifest
	→	Masculine
	→	Controlled Behaviour
	→	Just

‘Brutal Tribal’	→	Irrational
	→	Uncivilized
	→	Feminine Yet Aggressive
	→	Sensual and Gluttonous
	→	Barbaric and Unjust

The ‘fine’ distinctions between the homo sapiens and ‘homo monstrous’ has been demonstrated, which is again a colonial by-product. While ‘class’ was a result of Marxist interpretation, the colonial enterprises of Europe offered to the world terms as ethnic, tribal, race, cannibal, dialect etc.

Ethnic, tribal and other community groupings are social constructions and identities that have served to both oppress people and radicalize them (Loomba 1998: 122).

In the postcolonial pan-Indian system however ‘caste’ and the ‘tribal’ phenomenon are the order of the day. It should also be added that, India offered to the British Raj, as a belated gift the package of ‘caste’ which is evident in the interiors of English literature. Jane, the

protagonist in Charlotte Brönte's novel *Jane Eyre* is sent away by the rich relatives who think her to be an unnecessary trouble. She however chooses a boarding house than her poorer relations because: 'I was not heroic enough to purchase liberty at the price of caste' (Brönte 1981).

However, in the northeastern region of India, the positions of caste and tribal identities are far more sub-divided due to a 'different' colonial legacy. While the general, other backward community, Scheduled Caste formulations are well-entrenched in the politics, demography and authority in mainland India, a varied illustration will be seen here. Two 'other' positions are constructed by the powers that be to delineate the different communities-'more other backward castes' (MOBC) and 'hill tribes'. While there exists the process of internal colonization, the context of colonization by external forces is rampantly activated. Thus a vast number of different 'cultures' influence and succeed in 'eating away' the basic and authentic identity of the indigene**.

The socio-political landscape of contemporary Assam is characterized by numerous ethnic groups who can at best be clubbed together in the following broad categories:

1. Upper caste Hindu Assamese.
2. Immigrant Hindus and Muslims (usually Bangladeshis as a result of British 'colonization scheme' and the unabated influx policy followed by the postcolonial Congress Governments' tacit support.
3. Bengali Hindus (mostly in Surma Valley and the refugees who came following the liberation of Bangladesh).
4. Tea tribes (people brought in by the British to work in the tea plantations from Chotanagpur plateau a la blacks.
5. Migrant North Indians who followed the trade posts of the British and others who followed subsequently a la duccawalas in Africa (see Mulk Raj Anand's *Two Leaves and a Bud*). Rajendra Prasad, former President of India, intended to people the 'land' with Hindu Biharis. In this context he wrote in his autobiography, 'I sounded the Assamese

** O. H. K. Spate an Australian geographer once predicted the colonization of Assam by people from outside the state. Talk of the devil...?

on the subject and they welcomed it... Some thought it better to have the Hindus of Bihar than the Muslims of Mymensingh... ' (Prasad 1957: 259-60).

6. Other Backward Classes. (Ahoms, Koch Rajbongshis ^{††}etc.)
7. More Other Backward Classes (Chutiyas, Morans, Mataks, Boriyas, etc.)
8. Scheduled Castes.
9. Nepalis (who were abetted by the British to 'develop' the land by 'milking'. Also the colonial system offered land to the Nepalis who served in the British Army as pension benefits, and also to act as a para-military force in the borders)
10. Plains Tribes (Bodo Kacharis, Sonowal Kacharis who however are Assamized to a great extent, Mishings, Rabhas, Plain Karbis, Tiwa-Lalungs, Deoris, Hajongs, Tai Phaki, Tai Aiton, Khampti, Tai Turungs, Tai-Khamyangs. The groups with the Tai prefix belongs to the broad Tai brotherhood who followed the Tai-Ahom, who came to Assam in the 15th century. Unlike the Ahoms they maintain their Tai language, religion and culture).
11. Hill Tribes (Karbhis, Dimasas, Hmar and some Zeliangrong Naga tribes predominantly in the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hill Districts). In a further twist to this 'anthropological nightmare', we will have to cite the case of the Bodo Kacharis who are demanding Hill Tribe status in Karbi Anglong. However this is a different matter that the Bodos found themselves in the Karbi dominated hill district after internal migration from northwest Assam. In this struggle, if they attain the desired Hill Tribe status, Karbi leaders say that they will be minority in their hills. These facts were corroborated by Pankaj Teron, an executive of Karbi Students' and Youth Federation in Karbi Bhawan, New Delhi.
12. And others.

All these ethnic groups clamour for socio-cultural, political and economic rights. Some demand tribal status, others hill tribe status, autonomy, or statehoods, both internal and external.

^{††} The Koches added the suffix 'Rajbongshis' in order to Hinduize themselves. But in the contemporary period they are in a regressive mood to re-tribalize themselves in order to share the 'tribal' pie, albeit through a political stir.

Constraints of space do not allow to mention in length the internal and external extents of colonization and assimilation. Hence let us move on.

The context of othering the others by the mainstream is so blatant vis-à-vis the tribal and lesser context that the text *Miri Jiyori* was a part of the Assamese literature course in the undergraduate syllabus in the university of Delhi till 2001 and in universities of Assam. When one questioned the compiler of the syllabus, a famous pan-Indian litterateur and recipient of several national level awards about the inclusion of such a biased, sub-colonial text, the answer was an incoherent brush off.

Thus it can be seen that the system which imposes such texts on unsuspecting undergraduates activates out of a politics of its own. Also the network of literary intellectuals and other groupings offers canonicity to such texts. Meanwhile they acquire the scepter in the 'regional' literary kingdom. However, there are other 'ism' which penetrate into such regional satellite from the 'above' (read centre).

Other constructions are need to be analysed if we question the intent of the author and the effect of the texts in a given time and space.

This may be properly called a literature of combat, in the sense that it calls on the whole people to fight for their existence as a nation. It is a literature of combat, because it moulds the national consciousness, giving it form and contours and flinging open before it new and boundless horizons; it is literature of combat because it assumes responsibility, and because it is the will to liberty expressed in terms and space (Fanon 1967: 193).

The context of the author of *Miri Jiyori* no doubt acts with the aim of 'charming' the oppressors, written as it is within the colonial corridors of power. The author of *Mrityanjey* however is of a different mettle, the text assumes the position of a post-colonial 'literature of combat' which 'calls on the whole to fight for their existence as a nation'. But Fanon would have been horrified to witness the other 'constructions' within the text, wherein the colonized author in a parallel formation is imbued with semi-colonial tendencies. While the call to the people to fight for the existence of the nation and its liberation is made; the author tries to unite them but the project fails. The shroud through which the unification attempt is made, in fact brings out the diversities of identities and position of the people. It thus acts as an instrument of liberation while at the same time donning the garb of coercion, othering,

diversification and ethnic codification. While the supra colonial machinery was activated by the whites, the browns fought for their liberation yes, but the yellows were being 'seasoned' for the post-colonial 'colonial' experience.

In a postcolonial, yet unipolar situation with its satellite camp followers, do we need a newer-Fanonian prescription for the post-operation diagnosis.

However in the long run in post-independence Assam an alternative 'literature of combat' has come into existence in the form of a sub-national struggle against the centre since the late 1980s. The texts as *Rastrodrohir Dinalipi* (Diary of an Enemy of the State), *Suadbinotar Prostab* (Proposal for Independence), *Sanglot Phenla* by the slain author Parag Kumar Das, *Moor Roktobomo Protigya* (My Bloodstained Pledge) a collection of poems by Rajendra Sharma (also slain) heads the list of this corpus. During that period a whole gamut of newspapers and periodicals as *Budhbar*, *Aagan*, both edited jointly by Parag Kumar Das and Ajit Bhuyan, *Matir Manoh* (People of the Soil) edited by Nibarun Borah from Tezpur and a host of other publications with 'combat' favour were published from the 'metropolises' and the mofussils. But almost all the overground 'combat' press died a slow death, with some embers remaining in the underground. The perspective of this alternative literature will be treated in a further context.

Meanwhile let us turn our heads to a medieval literary formation with its own civilizing mission, albeit donning a religious garb. We have already witnessed the example of the Vishnu preachers, Sankardeb and Madhabdeb in the *Kirtan Ghoxa*, exhorting the believers to annihilate the 'mleches' and the Buddhist camp followers.

A different element of combat is seen in the contours of the *Kirtan Ghoxa* wherein the duo lavishes praises on Ramchandra, the ultimate pan-Indian hero. They subsequently preach the Assamese followers to follow the 'scorched earth' and 'blood and sword' policy towards the *üntermenschen*.

*Ekepat bore Bali bombolila jibo
Tukhware prokhade raja bhoilonto Sugribo
Lonkat Pakhila hagarot bandhi hetu
Bodhila Rabon Sita boron hetu.
Manila ronot aru raikhob onek
Bhakta Bhibhikhonok korila abhikok.*

You killed Bali with a single arrow
And accepted Sugrib in your palace as a king
Built a bridge to Lanka through the sea
And killed Ravan for abducting Sita.
In the battle you annihilated many demons
And enthroned your devotee Bhibhikhon.
(Sankardeb and Madhabdeb, *Kirtan Ghoxa*; translation mine)

This is a call to arms for war to be directed against the 'others' in the peripheries both cultural and geographical by constructing a 'central' position, which is however concocted. Inherently there exists the 'empire' with colonial perspectives of the central power, regime changes, and enthroning the geographical entities with vassal potentates who fall in line. This is an older and alternative version of 'combat'[#] literature, although in a different connotation.

In this anarchic and embattled space and time, we however have no other alternative than to turn to the lines of Derek Walcott:

We left
somewhere a life we never found,
customs and gods that are not born again.
(Laventille, *Collected Poems*, 1986)

References

- Ahmed, Aijaz (1993). *Lineages of the Present*. New Delhi: Tulika.
Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.
Barua, Gunabhiram (1915). *Anandaram Dhekial Phukonor Juxan-caritra*. Calcutta.
Bora, Bolinarayan. *Mau*, February 1887.

[#] Is it so, Fanon?

- Borgohain, Arunabh (1994). 'Of Oinotom, Apong and Paksom: Mishing Festivals'. *The Sentinel*, Guwahati, 24 April 1994.
- Brönte, Charlotte (1981). *Jane Eyre*. London: Zodiac Press.
- Chatterjee, Bankim Chandra (1959). 'Banglar Itihasa Sambandhe Kayekti Katha', in Brajendranath Bandhopadhyay and Sri Sajanikanta Das (eds.), *Vividha Prabandhe*. Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishad.
- Crawford, R. (1992). 'The Scottish Invention of English Literature', in *Devolving English Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Das, P. (1931). 'Asamar Pamua Samasya aru Line Pratha', *Auxhan*, XI.
- Dev, Soumya (2003). 'Assam Offers Sops for Inter-caste Marriage', *Hindustan Times*, 5 July 2003.
- Fanon, Frantz (1967). *The Wretched of the Earth*. Suffolk: Penguin: Suffolk.
- Gibbons, L. (1991). 'Race against Time: Racial Discourse and Irish History', *Oxford Literary Review* 13(1-2).
- Goswami, Praphulladatta (1966). *The Springtime Bihu of Assam: A Socio-cultural Study*. Guwahati: LBS.
- Guha, Amalendu (1977). *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947*. New Delhi: ICHR.
- Horowitz, Donald L. (2002). *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*. Delhi: OUP.
- Kar, M. (1954). 'Assam's Language Question in Retrospect', *Social Scientist*, vol. 4, no. 2.
- Loomba, Ania (1998). *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. London: Routledge.
- Nandy, Ashis (1998). *The Intimate Enemy-Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. Delhi: OUP.
- Prasad, Rajendra (1957). *Autobiography*. Bombay.
- Sharma Thakur, G. C. (1972). *The Plain Tribes of Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar and Nougong*. Guwahati: Tribal Research Institute, Government of Assam.
- Thapar, Romila (1988). 'Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity', Kingsley Martin Memorial Lecture, University of Cambridge, 1 June 1988. Published in School of Social Sciences Working Paper Series. New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru University.
- Tiffin, C. and A. Lawson (eds.) (1994). *De-scribing Empire, Post-colonialism and Textuality*. London and New York: Routledge.

Chapter Four

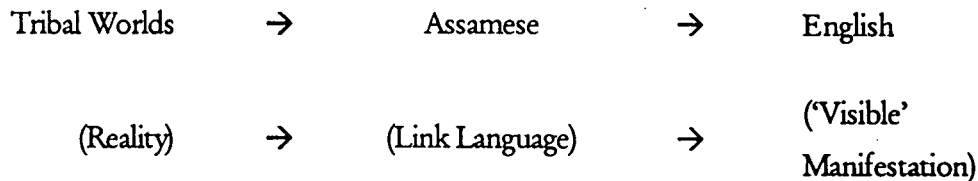
'RELEXIFICATION' AND OTHER CONCLUSIONS

I listen to the speech of my people, to the ring of dialogue in my home language and struggle to find an approximation to the English equivalent... it is really an attempt to paraphrase a single Sotho expression (Es'kia Mphahlele 1962 pp. 303–304, 'Press Report', Conference of African Writers MAK/V2).

The above task might be considered a wee bit easier (without any offence meant) if we take into account the true, real and authentic texture that should have emanated in the translated versions of our two texts *Mrityanjay* and *Miri Jiyori*. The original Assamese texts were 'tough' constructions in themselves due to the presence of 'non'-Assamese language elements. To an extent the originals were second hand renderings due to their 'once removed' position from the tribal terrain. Also the novels are located in numerous tribes— Garos, Karbis, Mishings, Hill Mikirs, etc. The Assamese language terrain itself is a heterogeneous one—with the two distinct geographical variations— of upper and lower Assam— with their own internal categories.

Of course their dialect was a bit different from ours. But how do slight variations in speech matter? They are the same Assamese. In fact the Assamese from Kamrup are a more industrious lot. (*Mrityanjay*, p. 45)

Thus in order to translate the varied cultural, social and perspectives into the English is bound to be strewn with potholes and ditches.



Thus in an objective manner, it can be said that the translators managed to 'carry' the load to the language. Yet there exist the usual distortions and ambiguities due to the difficulty inherent in the 'carrying' process. The indigenous cultural connotation have not been rendered in an authentic manner. Instead of relying on the ethnic terms of familial relationships-the translator of *Mrityunjay* relies on English terms, which however muddies the picture subsequently.

Tell me, Kaadam Aunty, did Harat Konwar really get a bride? (p. 5)

Aunty is a comparatively contemporary English term of appellation which has been thoroughly Indianized. But in the original version, the protagonist address the tribal woman 'Bai' with connotations to a sisterly relationship usually elderly woman. Class/caste configurations too come into the consideration. While 'Bai' is referred to a person of lower caste or class position, the suffix 'deo' is used to denote someone in a higher hierarchy irrespective of sex. Also, 'aunty' is either a paternal or maternal aunt and hence the 'elder sister' connotation is disfigured.

In other words the translator, retain the archaic and Anglicised forms of the place names. Instead of Guwahati, Ngaon, and Mayong which are the actual pronunciation in Assamese and used in the modern parlance, the names are, quoted as 'Gauhati' and 'Nowgong' and 'Mayang'- clearly British practice

The cultural connotations throughout the text has been rendered appropriately and in difficult cases it has been stated according to the original terms. In this regard the translator mentions that,

The translator of a novel like *Mrityunjay* assumes a three-fold burden of fidelity-fidelity to the author to the language and culture it embodies and finally to the target language in which it is to appear. Apart from a preoccupation with semantic nuances, the task demands a skill in linguistic jugglery that many of us have yet to acquire (Preface).

While the translator attempts to maintain 'fidelity' to all the three factors, he errs in stating that there exists only a single 'language and culture' with and outside the text. We've emphasized in almost all the pages, about the 'difference' and hence it is needless to mention the repetitions again.

The translator however excels in his ability to translate all the verses from the Hindu Sastras in the original Axomiya to well-versed English. There is however a slight error in semantics while translating and comparing the physical attributes of Tarun Phukan. In the original version the comparison is with 'Kandarpa'- the Hindu icon, while in the translated version the comparison has been with 'Cupid'. Both may carry the same connotative attributes, yet bearing in mind the literal translation, the translator might have done well in retaining the original term and maintaining his 'fidelity'

A very handsome man, this Phukan, the looks of a Cupid. (p.15)

In *Mrityanija*, the translator passes muster, yet he naively incorporates, his own semantics in naming the text as a 'A love story' which it is not, as we have witnessed in the whole exercise.

The translator commits a major error when he describes the tokora bird 'as a variety of small sparrows' (p. 4). The actual translation would have been as weaver bird which builds nests in a conical form hanging from the branches of usually tall trees by mixing a type of gum and twigs. In a different context, he retains the term, 'babu' from the original, which should have been translated as gentleman etc. The 'babu' euphemism carries the weight of a much more unbalanced relationship vis-à-vis the tribal, which seems to be politically incorrect, considering the date of the translated version (2000).

In spite of the above inadequacies, one would however refrain any more 'digression' of the translators' in/ability to retain fidelity and loyalty to the original texts. The translations thus commands independent positions of their own and hence it would be better to let the matter rest with the following quote:

How many times have we been tortured by the clichés of the uninitiated, veteran or novice, that translation is never equal to the original, that languages differ from one another, that culture is 'also' involved with translation procedures, that when a translation is 'exact', it tends to be original, that the meaning of a text means both 'content' and style and so on (Evan-Zohar 1981: 1-7).

Translation also acts as a political function in which the translated text occupies forms of alternative 'combat' discourses. While, in the hands of the authoritative powers that be, it may be activated from the above but in the case of the oppressed it may be from below. This can be in the roles of 'decoders' wherein the 'constructed' distortions, contradictions and repressions of the 'suppressed knowledges' may be deconstructed. The translation of texts also operates in the forming of national cultures moreover in 'nature' with multicultural set-ups.

Thus in this context we will have to by-pass the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis which argued about the untranslatability of two languages to a more contemporary positions,

In the sixteenth century, one asked oneself how it was possible to know that a sign did in fact designate what it signified: from the seventeenth century, one began to ask how a sign could be linked to what it signified (Foucault 1970: 43).

Other Alternative Conclusions

The two texts which have been analysed are products of two 'ism', *Miri Jiyori* during the hey days of colonialism while the other was a by-product of the nationalist phase of attempted de-colonization. *Mrityanjay* was published in 1970, though the themata of the novel is about the struggle for liberation during the second text as a postcolonial endeavour. Much water has flown down the Nam Tilow and the tributaries since the two stacks. Likewise position, or move precisely 'centres' too have changed. It has also been proved right that, 'The centre itself is marginal' (Minha 1991: 216).

While there was a single capital in the foggy Isles 'acrost the blue water' during the period of the author of the first text, a new ball game was played during the authority of the second text. The subcontinent was divided into five well-known entities with new centres Delhi, Islamabad, Rangoon, Colombo and Dhaka. Alternative movements for decolonization (read liberation) was launched by new groups against the groups emerged, a day after the British left for home. It was a gradual phase with some groups starting armed agendas even the day before Independence of Nagaland on August 14, 1947, for instance. Then other people rose as late as the 1980s, namely the ULFA and the Bodo militants who stepped up armed movements as late as the 1980s.

This perspective is not solely confined to the borders of the subcontinent but is a worldwide phenomenon. While there are numerous factors to these growth, we may accept a quite simplistic argument. An adage in Axomiya goes that *epat tal nabaje* (i.e., a single cymbal doesn't makes noise). Hence there exists other factors too. In our case we have narrated a single part of the story, these are alternative versions too. While the tribal entities of India's Northeast bifurcated into numerous states from the erstwhile Greater Assam, an alternative discourse of identity and its distinct existence was activated parallelly.

Meanwhile, we will have to trudge back to a medieval period of Ahom Assam, when assimilation was the 'in' thing:

... as for the Musalmans who had chosen to marry here, their descendents are exactly in the manner of the Assamese and had nothing of Islam except the name; their hearts are inclined far more towards mingling with the Assamese than towards associations with Muslims (Sarkar 1915: 193).

It can thus be perceived that Assam under Ahom monarchy acquired a multicultural and liberal framework to the extent of acculturation of prisoners of war into the cultural ethos of the land. While a section of the people attempted to preserve and protect that distinct structure of the kingdom, others tried to bond the land with the Indian mainland which can be seen in both the texts. Thus the germ of the contemporary backlash against the mainstream with the rise of ULFA can also be traced to the phase of pre-Independence Assam. The tensions between Assamese nationalism and pan-Indianism can at best be traced to a memorandum submitted by Madhav Chandra Bezbaruah on behalf of Axomiya Deka Dal (Assamese Youth Front) on November 28 1937 at Guwahati to Jawaharlal Nehru, the then president of the Indian National Congress.

We must tell you at the outset that it will not be doing justice to Assam if you consider Assam as one of the many provinces of India in the same sense as the Punjab or Bengal are Indian provinces. Assam has become a part of India only since 1826 prior to which Assam was a separate country governed by independent kings having practically no connection with the rest of India and inhabited by a race whose culture and civilization was different.

But when Nehru failed to provide a clear and satisfactory reply to the memorandum Madhavchandra was prompted to declare publicly: 'Then Assam will secede from India.' Nehru in a flourish retorted, 'Go to hell' (Bhattacharya 1994: 4).

Similar 'voices' can be heard in the extensive writings of Ambikagiri Raychaudhary (1845-1967) who was a militant anti-colonial activist along with being a major figure in

the Assam chapter of the Indian National Congress. A controversial leader, he was however marginalized by the Congress leaders in the post-Independence period. In 1926 he formed the Axom Xonrokhwini Xobha (Assam Preservation Society) to safeguard the subnational interests of Assam. A decade later he started the Axom Jatiyo Mohaxobha (Assam National Assembly) and tried to organize a self-defence force on militant lines. He was also responsible for the publication of two influential magazines, *Deka Axom* (Young Assam) and *Cetana* (Consciousness). Without being a secessionist he advocated the formulation of Assam as a *jati* (nationality) within the pan-Indian *mohajati* (nation). He emphasized the assertion of the distinct and collective identity in order to resist economic and cultural marginalization by forces outside the borders of Assam. The goals of the Assam National Assembly (among others) were to

1. To form the Assamese nation by bringing together the high and the low, and the rich and the poor and people across the religious divide.
2. To protect the national interests of Assam that were inimical to its national interests.
3. To ensure the full control of the Assamese over Assam's land and natural resources, agriculture, commerce and industry, trade, employment, language and literature, culture and ethos (Raychaudhuri 1986: 77).

Hence the whole discourse of the historical, political, literary, cultural constructions carry the 'practical problem' of

Who can be trusted to represent the real interests of the group without fear of betrayal or misrepresentations? (Mohanty 1998: 202).

The above 'subversive' quotes may not be exactly literary in their import. Yet within them we find the traces and codes of an alternative paradigm overlapping the other formulations. We will have to delve into other texts too to unearth the 'truth' and 'errors' inherent in the varied discourses. The constructions and distortions of

history and politics thus will have to rely on literature to excavate the 'other' and alternative layers of codification and production of knowledge systems.

To conclude, it should be added that this discourse is not singly about the subaltern, tribal, non-Hindu or peripheral identities. This discourse is about how the (semi-)colonizer attempts to construct a society, polity and culture through a Lacanian mirror image by 'colonizing' the indigene. However, the semi-colonizer was subsequently colonized in time and space by other super imperial entities. This is a study about colonization and subsequent decolonization. Albeit it is a different story that the semi-colonizer is a part of the mainstream Indian society, yet elements within (and without it too) attempt to liberate itself from the stranglehold. The situation is unique and complex, thus defying any 'easy', explanation.

The texts studied and the subsequent discourse is also about the context of power and its ramifications.

[P]ower is there, hidden in any discourse, even when uttered in a place outside the bounds of power (Barthes 1979: 4).

While we have mentioned that this discourse is an analysis of two canonical novels, there exists texts which belong to the pantheon of the 'imperial brotherhood' of colonial texts like *A Passage to India*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Kim*, *Lord Jim* and *Mansfield Park* in the English line of the family. The Indian line of the 'imperial' family can also be traced to *Raj*, *Two Leaves and a Bud*, *A Bend in the Ganges*, *Continent of Circe*, and yes, *God of Small Things* too. Interestingly, the Indian family of these canonical texts incorporate elements of India's Northeast too, albeit with blurred overtones thus forming and contributing to the 'white vibgyors'. But that will form a different story.

Till then the battle goes on.

References

- Barthes, Roland (1979). Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France, 7 January 1977. *Oxford Literary Review*.
- Bhattacharya, B. (1994). 'Secede and Go to Hell', *The Sentinel*, Guwahati, 19 February, p. 4.
- Evan-Zohar, Itamar (1981). 'Translation Theory Today', *Poetics Today*, 2(4).
- Foucault, M. (1970). *The Order of Things*. London: Tavistock.
- Minha, Trinh T. (1991). *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Culture Politics*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Mohanty, Satya P. (1998). *Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics*. Delhi: OUP.
- Mphahlele, Es'kia (1962). 'Press Report', Conference of African Writers MAK/V2.
- Raychaudhuri, Ambikagiri (1986). *Ambikakagiri Raychaudhuri Roconaboli* (ed.) S. Sarma. Guwahati: Publications Division Assam.
- Sarkar, Jadunath (trans.) (1915). *Fathiyar-I-Ibrayibby Shihabuddin Talish*. Calcutta.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ahmed, Aijaz (1993). *Lineages of the Present*. New Delhi: Tulika.
- Alemchiba, M. (1970). *A Brief Historical Account of Nagaland*. Kohima.
- Anderson, Benedict (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London and New York: Verso.
- Apter, Emily (1999). *Continental Drift: From National Characters to Virtual Subjects*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Barthes, Roland (1979). Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France, 7 January 1977. *Oxford Literary Review*.
- Barua, Gunabhiram (1915). *Anandaram Dhekial Phukonor Jivan-caritra*. Calcutta.
- Barua, H. (1962). *The Red River and the Blue Hill*. Guwahati.
- Barua, K. C. (1971). *Critical Days of Assam*. Guwahati.
- Barua, K. L. (1966). *Early History of Kamrupa*. Guwahati: LBS.
- Baruah, S. L. (1993). *Last Days of Aborn Monarchy*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.
- — — (2002). *A Comprehensive History of Assam*. Delhi: Munsiram Monoharlal.
- Baruah, Sanjib (1999). *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*. New Delhi: OUP.
- Bhabha, Homi (1998). 'The Location of Culture', in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (eds.) *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Bhattacharya, B. (1994). 'Secede and Go to Hell', *The Sentinel*, Guwahati, 19 February, p. 4.
- Bhuyan, S. K. (1932). *Deodhai Aborn Buranji*. Guwahati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies.
- — — (1947). *Lachit Borphukan and His Times*. Guwahati.
- — — (1971). *Studies in the History of Assam*. Guwahati: Gauhati University.
- — — (1974). *Anglo-Assamese Relations*. Guwahati.
- — — (1978). *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya*. Guwahati: B.K. Kakati.
- — — (ed.) (1937). *Jayantia Buranji*. Guwahati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies.
- Bishnu Rabha Suarani Gabeshana Samiti (ed.) (1982). *Bishnu Rabha Rachanawali*. Guwahati: Bishnu Rabha Suarani Gabeshana Samiti.
- Bloch, Marc (1924). *Les rois thaumatiques*, trans. J. E. Anderson. Paris.
- Bora, Bolinarayan. *Mau*, February 1887.
- Borgohain, Arunabh (1994). 'Of Oinitom, Apong and Paksom: Mishing Festivals'. *The Sentinel*, Guwahati, 24 April 1994.
- Borpujari, H. K. *North East India: Problems, Policies & Prospects*. Guwahati: Spectrum.
- Brass, Paul (1991). *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*. London: Sage.

- Brönte, Charlotte (1981). *Jane Eyre*. London: Zodiac Press.
- Buragohain, P. K. (1946). *Ahornar Adi Buranjī*. Sibsagar.
- Chatterjee, Bankim Chandra (1959). 'Banglar Itihasa Sambandhe Kayekti Katha', in Brajendranath Bandhopadhyay and Sri Sajanikanta Das (eds.), *Vividha Prabandhe*. Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishad.
- Chaudhuri, Kalyan (2003). 'Turning to Peace'. *The Frontline*, 14 March 2003.
- Crawford, R. (1992). 'The Scottish Invention of English Literature', in *Devoting English Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Das, Jnanendramohan (1937). *A Dictionary of the Bengali Language*, s.v. *jati*. Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 2nd edition.
- Das, P. (1931). 'Asamar Pamua Samasya aru Line Pratha', *Auwahan*, XI.
- Das, Parag (1993). *Sanglot Fenla*. Guwahati: Udangshri Publication.
- Dev, Soumya (2003). 'Assam Offers Sops for Inter-caste Marriage', *Hindustan Times*, 5 July 2003.
- Dewan, Maniram. *Buranji Vivek Ratna*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Dutta, Debabrata. (1989). *History of Assam*. Calcutta: Sribhumi.
- Elwin, Verrier (1964). *A Philosophy for NEFA*. Shillong.
- Evan-Zohar, Itamar (1981). 'Translation Theory Today', *Poetics Today*, 2(4).
- Fanon, Frantz (1967). *The Wretched of the Earth*. Suffolk: Penguin: Suffolk.
- Foucault, M. (1970). *The Order of Things*. London: Tavistock.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. James Strachey. New York: Norton.
- Gait, E. A. A. (1962). *History of Assam*. Guwahati: LBS.
- Gellner, Ernest. *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Gibbons, L. (1991). 'Race against Time: Racial Discourse and Irish History', *Oxford Literary Review* 13(1-2).
- Goswami, Praphulladatta (1966). *The Springtime Bihu of Assam: A Socio-cultural Study*. Guwahati: LBS.
- Guha, Amalendu (1977). *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947*. New Delhi: ICHR.
- H. K. Borpujari (ed.) (1990). *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, vol. 1. Guwahati: Publication Board, Assam.
- Hassan, Monirul (1993). *The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity*. Delhi: Manah Publication.
- Hobsbawm, E. J. (1990). *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Horowitz, Donald L. (2002). *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*. Delhi: OUP.
- Jacobs, Julian, Alan MacFarlane, Sarah Harrison, and Anita Herle (1990). *The Nagas: Hill People of Northeast India, Society, Culture and the Colonial Encounter*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Kakati, B. K. (1941). *Assamese: Its Formation and Development*. Guwahati: DHAS.
- Kar, M. (1954). 'Assam's Language Question in Retrospect', *Social Scientist*, vol. 4, no. 2.
- Kennedy, R. S. (1967). *Ethnological Report of the Akas, Khoas and Mijis and the Monbas of Tawang*.
- Loomba, Ania (1998). *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. London: Routledge.
- Michell, John F. (1883). Report on the North East Frontier.

- Mills, J. P. (1973). *The Ao Nagas*. Bombay: OUP.
- Minha, Trinh T. (1991). *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Culture Politics*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Miri, Sujata (1993). *Communalism in Assam: A Civilizational Approach*. Delhi: Har-Anand.
- Mohanty, Satya P. (1998). *Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics*. Delhi: OUP.
- Mphahlele, Es'kia (1962). 'Press Report', Conference of African Writers MAK/V2.
- Nandy, Ashis (1998a). *Exiled at Home*. Delhi: OUP.
- — — (1998b). *The Intimate Enemy-Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. Delhi: OUP.
- Penguin Concise Columbia Encyclopedia* (1987), s.v. nation, tribe, Indonesia. Harmondsworth: Columbia University Press.
- Phukan, Naobaicha. *Assam Buranji*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Prasad, Rajendra (1957). *Autobiography*. Bombay.
- Rao, S.R. (2003). *The Holy City of Dwarka*. Jaipur: Aditya Prakashan.
- Raychaudhuri, Ambikagiri (1986). *Ambikakagiri Raychaudhuri Roconaboli* (ed.) S. Sarma. Guwahati: Publications Division Assam.
- Rose, E. Leo (1994). 'The Nepali Ethnic Community in the Northeast of the Subcontinent'. *Ethnic Studies Report*, 12(1).
- Roy, M. N. (1964). *Memoirs*. Delhi: Ajanta Publications.
- Sarkar, Jadunath (trans.) (1915). *Fathiyah-I-Ibrayibby Shikabuddin Talish*. Calcutta.
- Sarma, S. N. (1966). *The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam*. Guwahati: Gauhati University.
- Seton-Watson, Hugh (1977). *Nations and States: An Enquiry into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Sharma Thakur, G. C. (1972). *The Plain Tribes of Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar and Nowong*. Guwahati: Tribal Research Institute, Government of Assam.
- Smith, A. D. (2000). *The Nation in History: Historiographical Debates about Ethnicity and Nationalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Taher, M. and P. Ahmed (1998). *Geography of North-East India*. Guwahati: El-Dorado Publications.
- Thapar, Romila (1988). 'Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity', Kingsley Martin Memorial Lecture, University of Cambridge, 1 June 1988. Published in School of Social Sciences Working Paper Series. New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru University.
- The Times of India* 'The Myth of Ladonia' (editorial). New Delhi: 18 March 2002.
- Tiffin, C. and A. Lawson (eds.) (1994). *De-scribing Empire, Post-colonialism and Textuality*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Watters, T. (trans.) (1973). *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India*, 2 vols. New Delhi.

21

