

Proceedings Volume of  
XIII<sup>th</sup> Annual NEIPSA  
Conference 2004

**N**ationality Question  
**S**ecurity and  
**D**evelopment in  
**N**orth East India

**Editor : A.B. Deb**

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**Nationality Question,  
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**NATIONALITY QUESTION, SECURITY & DEVELOPMENT IN NORTH EAST INDIA.** The proceeding volume of XIIIth Annual NEIPSA Conference is a collection of Seminar Papers presented by the Political Scientists of the region in the conference held at Cachar College, Silchar on January, 22 & 23, 2004. The volume is edited by Dr. A.B. Deb, the General Secretary of NEIPSA and published by NEIPSA.

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## **Citizens and Denizens : Ethnic homelands and the crisis of displacement in Northeast India**

Sanjib Baruah

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The following is the text of the V.V. Rao Memorial lecture delivered by Professor Sanjib Baruah on 4th January 2002 in the XI<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the North East India Political Science Association, held at North Lakhimpur, Assam.

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*I am greatly honored to be invited to give the Dr. V. Venkata Rao Memorial lecture to your Association. Thank you very much for your kindness and thoughtfulness.*

*Dr. V. Venkata Rao has been called "the first political scientist of North East India."<sup>1</sup> In 1958 he started the Political Science department in Gauhati University- at a time when it was the only university in the region and students from all over the northeast studied there. He retired from Gauhati University in 1972, but remained Professor Emeritus until his death in 1993. As the newer universities came up, Dr. Venkata Rao became an important intellectual influence at some of those institutions because some of his former students went to teach at their Political Science departments and Dr. Rao himself accepted honorary appointments at universities such as NEHU and at what was then the Imphal campus of JNU - i.e. today's Manipur University.*

*In his long and productive career Dr. Rao supervised a very large number of doctoral dissertations: 103 for the Ph.D degree and 3 for the D.Litt degree. Though his doctoral students specialized in*

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<sup>1</sup> My account of Dr. Rao's life is based on Sangma, 1994.

*many sub-fields of Political Science, former students of Dr. Rao may still constitute the largest contingent of political scientists with expertise on the northeast.*

*Dr. Venkata Rao was one of the first group of faculty members recruited by the newly established Gauhati University in 1950 and he began as a lecturer in the Department of History and Economics before he started the Political Science Department eight years later. He was no ivory tower political scientist. After all, even as an 18 year old boy in the part of Madras Presidency which is known as Andhra Pradesh today he was arrested for participating in Gandhi's salt Satyagraha. He served a seven months sentence when he refused to sign a statement of apology to the British colonial administrator. As he made northeast India his home for the rest of his life, he came to care deeply about the region. The numerous articles he wrote in newspapers like the Assam Tribune and the Sentinel are testimony to it.*

*Of course, those newspapers articles were quite apart from the 19 books and more than 200 articles in academic journals that he published. Dr. Rao's knowledge of the region was valued by policy-makers. For instance, the idea of reorganizing the northeast into a sub-federation—proposed in the 1960s— began as a suggestion that Dr. Rao made to then Governor Vishnu Sahay. We have all heard stories about Dr. Rao's Frugal life style: e.g. his riding a bi-cycle to campus, cooking his own food, travelling by second class trains. And Dr. Rao's philanthropy is well-known: he gave away all his life savings- including the considerable royalty he earned from his books to academic institutions in the northeast.*

*Even though I did not study with Dr. Rao, the political science I learnt at Cotton College- the Honors curriculum of Gauhati University— certainly had the imprint of Dr. Rao's intellectual vision. I read his book on ancient political thought and the book on local self government. And later in life, I read a number of his works on the northeast and a number of the doctoral dissertations at the Gauhati University library. The fact that so many of you were students of Dr. Venkata Rao makes your invitation very special.*

*One of Dr. Rao most notable acts of charity was his gift to*

*Gauhati University to establish the Jawaharlal Nehru Professorship of Assamese. This gift spoke eloquently of his vision for the northeast: cultivation of the region's distinctive heritage within the political framework of multicultural India - values that he associated with India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru. In the spirit of that vision I will now turn to my lecture to honor Dr. Rao's memory.*

In 1997 the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council passed the Khasi Social Custom of Lineage Bill. The body has constitutional jurisdiction over Khasi customary law. The Khasi have a matrilineal Kinship system and the bill sought to codify their system of inheritance through the female line. But the bill became controversial. A number of organisations, including the influential Khasi Students Union and the Sungkhong Rympei Thymmai ('literally', Association of New Hearths') opposed the measure and argued that instead of condifying the "outdated system" of matrilineal succession, the Khasis should reform their Kinship system. They proposed a change that would have allowed only children of two Khasi parents to be regarded as Khasi.

Why was the legal certainty about two is or is not a Khasi considered so important? Because the Khasis are designated as one of the scheduled tribes [STs]<sup>2</sup> in Meghalaya and the lion's share of public employment, business and trade licenses, and even the right to contest for elected office are reserved for the STs. Indeed the right to hold and exchange property rights in land is extremely restricted. Nearly 85% of the public employment in Meghalaya is reserved for targeted groups. 55

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<sup>2</sup> The category 'tribal' and its definition would be considered problematical in scholarly circles. In India, however, it is part of a policy discourse because of an elaborate system of protective discrimination that exists in favor of groups of people listed as tribals. Article 342 of Indian Constitution provides for the President of India by public notification to specify the "tribes of tribal communities or parts of or groups within tribes or tribal communities which shall for the purposes of the Constitution be deemed to be Scheduled Tribes." In my use, by tribal, I simply mean a group included in that list - hence scheduled tribe (ST). According to one scholar who has examined how the Indian government has arrived at the list, notes that the tribes were "defined partly by habitat and geographic isolation, but even more on the basis of social, religious, linguistic and cultural distinctiveness - their 'tribal characteristics.' Just where the line between 'tribals' and 'non-tribals' should be drawn has not always been free from doubt" (Galanter 1984: 150).

to 60 seats in the state Legislative Assembly are reserved for the STs.

The status of non-tribal in Meghalaya as well as in the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland where such protections exist is best described as that of denizens.<sup>3</sup> Their rights to land ownership and exchange, business and trade licenses and access to elected office are restricted by the protective discrimination policies that favour STs. This protective regime is the result of incremental policy-making that goes back to colonial times when policy instruments were devised to protect vulnerable aboriginal peoples living in isolated enclaves – once described as ‘backward tracts.’ Under the Sixth Schedule of Indian Constitution many of these enclaves became autonomous districts and autonomous regions within those districts – each identified with particular tribes. Subsequently many of these territories became full-fledged states – turning the once protected minorities into majority groups. In some of these states – Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland – the continuation of the colonial institution of the Inner Line has given an even stronger layer of protection against outsiders. Anyone entering those territories is first required to secure an official permit. One of the unintended effects of this process of incremental policy-making is that the notion of exclusive ethnic homelands has become normalized in the region.

At the same time North East India is one of South Asia’s last land frontiers. Through much of the twentieth century these sparsely populated areas have attracted large-scale migration from the rest of the subcontinent. Many of these “tribal” societies have been going through a process of transition from shifting cultivation to settled agriculture and from clan controls of land

<sup>3</sup> ‘Denizen’, of course, is not an existing legal category. The term goes back to the power of denization that British monarchs once had to grant some aliens some of the privileges of natural born subjects. Denizens, for instance, could buy land but could not inherit land. At a later stage, the parliament sought to control the royal power of denization by passing laws that disallowed denizens from being members of the privy council and the houses of parliament, or occupying civil or military offices of trust, or from obtaining grants of land from the crown. While the restrictions on the rights of the non-tribal population have a very different history and rationale, the particular limits, e.g. on rights of property ownership, access to public employment and elected office are not dissimilar to those applicable to denizens.

to commodification of land. The new economic niches created in this process of structural differentiation, in turn have attracted many denizens to the region.

I will show in this paper that (a) the normalization of the idea of ethnic homelands generates a kind of politics that is in complete dissonance with the actually existing political economy of the region; (b) the emerging pattern of class differentiation within the rules of the protective regime of these transitional economies is complex. While some outsiders exploit local tribals, others occupy the most marginal of economic niches. While the protective regime has enabled some tribals to do well, it has not stopped the process of proletarianization of others; (c) The idea of ethnic homelands – expressed in the institutional language of autonomous district councils or separate statehood – has shaped the political imagination of tribal activists as well as ethnic activists of historically privileged groups; (d) this diffusion of the idea of ethnic homelands in a context of the structural differentiation of the economies has shaped an extremely divisive politics of insiders and outsiders that have led to numerous incidents of displacement in the region. Yet, I will argue, the way out of the dilemma is not in eliminating all controls over immigration into the area and insist on a regime of undifferentiated nation-wide citizenship. Instead I propose that the concept of dual citizenship can maintain controls, and at the same time, by defining political communities in a civic rather than ethnic terms, it would be able to incorporate the ethnic outsider – at least beyond the first generation – and bring the citizenship regime of the region in line with the actually existing political economy of the region.

Returning now to the controversy in Meghalaya over Khasi succession rules, the authority of the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council to decide on Khasi succession rules comes from the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. According to the sponsors of the Khasi Social Customs of Lineage bill, its goal was to stop non-Khasis from adopting Khasi surnames to take advantage of opportunities reserved for STs. The Khasi activists opposed to the measure would have hardly disagreed

with that goal. But the attempt to codify custom drew attention to the liberal way in which the Khasis have traditionally incorporated outsiders into their fold. The practice by which children of a Khasi mother and a non-Khasi father can become a Khasi came up for special scrutiny. The opponents of the bill argued that the system allows too many people to pass off as Khasi and take advantage of opportunities reserved for Khasis. The President of the Syngkhong, Keith Pariat was quoted in the press as saying that the matrilineal system no longer serves contemporary needs and that, if it was allowed to continue, the "pure Khasi tribe" will become extinct in another ten to fifteen years (cited in Shridhar 2000). The bill, however did not become law because it did not receive the Governor's assent.

By raising questions about the way "outsiders" have historically been incorporated into the Khasi fold, the controversy had the effect of putting under the cloud the rights - including rights to property ownership, public employment and to contest for elected office - of significant numbers of people living in Meghalaya, some for generations. And since the proposed reforms would have denied those rights to people who had some claim to being a Khasi, the climate generated by the controversy could only have been worse for most denizens - residents of Meghalaya who had no claim to being a Khasi or a member of one of the other STs.

It is not my position that an abstract universal model of national citizenship is nonnegotiable. I agree with the view expressed recently by two political theorists who have examined various kinds of differentiated citizenship in the world. "Critics of minority rights," write W. Kymlicka and W. Norman, "can no longer claim that minority rights inherently conflict with citizenship ideals; defenders of minority rights can no longer claim that concerns about civility and civic identity are simply illegitimate attempts to silence or dismiss troublesome minorities" (Kymlicka and Norman 2000:41). The regime of citizens and denizens that has evolved in northeast India has to be first understood in a historical context. It began as an attempt by the colonial state to insulate some of the peoples organised in pre-

capitalist social formations from the devastation that the initial onslaught of global capitalism had brought. Given this history, one can argue that a model of formally equal citizenship would only reinforce discriminatory outcomes and that, the only way to protect such vulnerable groups of peoples is a regime of differentiated citizenship. But whether a particular regime of differentiated citizenship can achieve its intended goals has to be matter for investigation. For the costs of sacrificing the basic principle of equal citizenship are high; and there are intended as well as unintended consequences of regimes of differentiated citizenship.

### **From excluded areas to ethnic homelands**

Attempts to deal with "aborigines" by creating protected enclaves where they can be allowed to pursue their "customary practices" including Kinship and clan-based rules of land allocation goes back to their earliest period of British colonial rule in India. It is worth remembering, however, that the idea of protection came only after the phase of enormous violence that was let loose on some of the same people by the early colonizers in the course of pacification campaigns of 'savage tribes' and, after it became clear that the initial onslaught of colonial transformation had led to the massive dispossession and displacement of many of these people organized in pre-capitalist social formations. For many whatever protection came along, was too little and too late.

As early as 1874 the Indian legislature had passed a scheduled districts act. The Government of India Act of 1919 empowered the Governor General in Council to declare any territory to be backward tract where laws passed by the Indian legislature would not apply. The Statutory Commission which in 1930 studied the political conditions in British India and proposed constitutional reforms observed that "there exists a complete statutory bar to the legislative authority of legislatures within every backward tract (cited in Ghurye 1980: 109). The Commission did not like the term "backward tracts," but it agreed with the notion that such tracts should be outside general

constitutional arrangements. It proposed a change of name from backward tracts to excluded areas. The Government of India Act of 1935 therefore provided for excluded and partially excluded areas – so called because they were excluded from the operation of laws applicable in the rest of British-controlled India.

Some of the potential problems, especially the dangers to non-aboriginal people living in those areas were anticipated by the debates about these measures even in colonial times. One of the best-known critiques of colonial-era tribal policies is G.S. Ghurye's 1943 book *The Aborigines – So Called – and their Future*. "The acknowledgment of the right of the so-called aborigines to follow their traditional pursuits, like the practice of shifting cultivation, without any reference to the needs of the general community," wrote Ghurye in reference to the recommendations of the Statutory Commission, "was the most dangerous doctrine endorsed by the Commissioners. "The Commissioners, he charged, had not considered the impact on non-aborigines living in those the areas and "much less did they give their thought to the proportions of such people in the various areas, unless we discover it in the distinction of the two categories of excluded areas made by them." If the distinction between excluded and partially excluded areas was indeed based on the proportions of non-aborigines living in those areas, he wrote, it was too broad a distinction to be useful (Ghurye 1980: 111). About the Government of India Act of 1935, Ghurye wrote that in its "eagerness to do something for the tribals," the British parliament barely considered the condition of

the non-tribals in whose midst the protected aborigines live and on whom they depend to some extent for their livelihood. That these non-tribals, too, have rights, that their good will and cooperation, next only to the conscious and deliberate internal organization of the tribals themselves, are the most essential factors for the present welfare and future development of the so-called aborigines, failed to receive adequate consideration.

That some of the non-tribals may have indeed taken "unfair advantage of the simplicity and ignorance and simplicity of the aborigines," Ghurye argued, was no reason to write off

their contribution to "socio-economic development," and much less to treat all of them as a "right-less population" (Ghurye 1980: 126-29)

Nevertheless the Constitution of India of 1950, retained most of the provisions of the 1935 Act, though the nomenclatures and some of the institutional forms were modified. Not surprisingly, Ghurye could reprint the same book with a few changes and a new title in 1963. Most importantly, from our perspective, the Constitution made a distinction between the tribal areas of Assam (five of the seven states of today's northeast) and those in the rest of the country. While the tribal peoples of the rest of India came under the Fifth Schedule, the Sixth Schedule provided for the administration of the tribal areas of North East India.

The chairman of the subcommittee of the Constituent Assembly that drafted the Sixth Schedule, Gopi Nath Bordoloi in presenting its proposals justified them by referring to the uncertain political conditions in the region at the time of independence. Referring to a proposal discussed in certain colonial quarters about creating a separate entity – a crown colony under British control – that would have brought together the tribal areas of Assam and Burma, Bordoloi said, "during the war, the rulers and officers developed in the minds of these tribal peoples a sense of separation and isolation and gave them assurances that at the end of the war they will be independent states managing their affairs in their own way." Bordoloi stressed the need for continued protection because of the doubts among the tribal people of what a postcolonial dispensation would bring; he spoke of the need to "integrate" these people's in a Gandhian way (cited in Chaube 1974: 86-87)). The fear of being swamped by outsiders once the colonial era restrictions were suddenly removed was indeed a concern expressed by leaders of these people. That the Naga revolt broke out soon after independence – and continued till this day – indicates that anxiety expressed by Bordoloi was not ill-founded.

The Sixth Schedule distinguished two sets of tribal areas

using the administrative categories that were then in effect: (a) the districts of the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills (excluding Shillong), Garo Hills, Lushai Hills, Naga Hills, North Cachar Hills and the Mikir Hills and (b) the North East Frontier Tracts and the Naga Tribal Area. The first set of areas today comprise the states of Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and parts of Assam, and the second category consists mostly of the state of Arunachal Pradesh and a part of the state of Nagaland. The Sixth Schedule institutions were meant for both sets of areas, but the latter set of territories - which were mostly un-administered during colonial times - were considered to be not quite ready at that time for such self-governing institutions. The administration of those areas were going to be carried out directly from Delhi - with the Governor of Assam acting as the agent of the Indian President.

The Sixth Schedule provided for autonomous districts and autonomous regions within those districts with elected councils which enjoy powers to levy some taxes, to constitute courts for the administration of justice involving tribals and law-making powers on subjects including land allotment, occupation or use of land, regulation of shifting cultivation, formation and administration of village and town committees, appointment of chiefs, inheritance of property, marriage and social customs.

It is important to recall that not all of the STs of the northeast were part of the Sixth Schedule. Only those that were considered to be relatively concentrated in the old excluded and partially excluded areas, and for which the Constitution used the term tribal areas, came under the purview of the Sixth Schedule. The Bordoloi sub-committee did not consider the situation of other STs. Among them were groups such as Bodos, Misings and Tiwas that are described today as plains tribes to distinguish them from the hill tribes that came under the Sixth Schedule. In the Constituent Assembly the special needs of the plains tribes were considered by a separate subcommittee, that in charge of minority rights. A Bodo politician Rupnath Brahma was a member of the Minority Rights sub committee.

The process of formation of Autonomous District Councils, however did not quite proceed the way Constitution-makers had anticipated. The outbreak of the Naga rebellion for instance, meant that Sixth Schedule remained irrelevant to the political process there. Instead the state of Nagaland was created in 1963. The North East Frontier Tracts where the Sixth Schedule was eventually supposed to be in place, also went through a different process of institutional change and eventually became the state of Arunachal Pradesh. On the other hand, in response to tribal militancy in Tripura, the Tripura tribal Areas District Council was formed and brought into the jurisdiction of the Sixth Schedule.

With the creation of Nagaland, statehood in northeast India became de-linked from questions of fiscal viability and of its implications for the constitutional architecture of the larger polity. Northeast India became an exception where mini states could be created if necessary to manage ethnic dissent. In B.B. Kumar's words, it "unsettled the Sixth Schedule experiment" and created the grounds for demanding ethnic states (Kumar 1999). In the case of some these states the Constitution was amended to give their state legislatures special jurisdiction over subjects such as "customary law" that were part of the mandates of District Councils. This in the case of Nagaland Article 371-A provides that no act of the Indian parliament in respect of Naga religious and social practice, customary law and procedure, ownership of land and resources would apply to Nagaland without the agreement of the state legislative Assembly. Article 371-G has a similar provision regarding Mizoram. But the most significant aspect of these small states, from the perspective of the theory and practice of citizenship, is that the vast majority of seats in the state legislatures – indeed all but one seat in the case of three legislatures – are reserved for candidates belonging to the STs. The following table gives the number of reserved seats in the state legislatures of northeastern states and also gives the percentage of the ST population according to the 1991 census.-

Table 1 : Northeast Indian states: Reserved seats for Scheduled Tribes in legislative assemblies

	ST as % of pop	Leg Assembly Total Members	Leg Assembly Seats for STs	Leg Assembly Unreserved
Arunachal Pradesh	63.7	60	59	1
Assam	12.8	126	16	102 (8-SC*)
Manipur	34.4	60	20	40
Meghalaya	86.6	60	55	5
Mizoram	94.8	40	39	1
Nagaland	87.7	60	59	1
Tripura	31.0	60	20	33 (7-SC*)

\* reserved for scheduled castes.

In the Legislative Assemblies of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland all but one seat are reserved for STs. In Meghalaya 55 of the 60 seats are reserved. Apart from the issue of the denizens not being able to contest elections, the principle of one-person, one-vote, one-value has had to be undermined in other ways as well in order to achieve such a weighted system of representation. Generally, the norm about ensuring the equality of the relative weight of each vote in a democracy requires that in electoral systems with single-member constituencies, the electorates in all districts be roughly of the same size. That could not be done if the legislative assemblies were to have such a weighted system of representation. As a result, Nagaland's largest urban center, Dimapur, for instance, - which has a very high concentration of denizens - is divided into two constituencies and one of them is the sole unreserved (non-tribal) seat in the Nagaland Assembly. This unreserved constituency has many times the number of voters of each of the other constituencies in the state.

Through another constitutional amendment the balance between reserved and unreserved seats in the assemblies of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland has been frozen in order to ensure that delimitation of constituencies in light of demographic changes in future does not change the current balance.

Whatever the philosophical dilemmas these arrangements present to the theorist of citizenship, the emergence of elected state governments under the control of tribal politicians and of a visible well-to-do tribal elite in those

states has captured the imagination of ethnic activists in the region. There is a perception that the STs in the most protected of these states have done well economically and in insulating themselves against being swamped by “outsiders”. While an ethnic homeland has become something to aspire for on the part of those ethnic groups (STs as well as others) who don’t have one, ethnic activists of existing homelands have become zealous defenders of what they see as their constitutionally guaranteed ethnic entitlements. We have seen that exemplified in the case of Khasi activists in Meghalaya.

### **Postcolonial Changes : Economic transformation and class differentiation in a land frontier.**

The idea of protecting the aborigines of excluded or partially excluded areas, as I have said above, was a problematical proposition even when these policies were originally conceived. As Ghurye had argued, the economic structures of those societies were more complex and varied than the image of isolated aboriginal peoples that had shaped those policies. In the half century since India’s independence, the process of economic and social transformation – significantly propelled by the postcolonial state’s development initiatives – has brought about far-reaching changes. One indicator of these changes is the rate of population growth in these areas. For instance, between the 1991 and 2001, the population growth rate in the state of Nagaland was 64.41% – the highest in India. The following table gives the populations growth rates of the northeastern states.

**Table 2: Northeastern States: Population Growth Rate 1961-2001**

States	Population	%Growth	%Growth	%Growth	%Growth
	2001	1991-2001	1981-91	1971-81	1961-71
Arunachal Pradesh	1,091,117	26.21	36.83	35.15	38.91
Assam	26,683,407	18.85	24.24*	23.36*	34.95
Manipur	2,388,634	30.02	29.29	32.46	37.53
Meghalaya	23,06,069	29.94	32.86	32.04	31.50
Mizoram	891,058	29.18	39.70	48.55	24.93
Nagaland	1,988,636	64.41	56.08	50.05	39.88
Tripura	3,191,168	15.74	34.30	31.92	36.28
India	1,027,015,247	21.34	23.86	24.66	24.80

\* There was no census in Assam in 1981. These figures are based on estimates of Assam's 1981 population made by India's census department.

Source : Census of India.

Except for Assam and Tripura – where the growth rates were very high in earlier censuses – all the other states show growth rates that are above the national average during the 1991-2001 decade. In addition, in the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland as well as in Assam's two autonomous districts (Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills), STs as a proportion of the total population is on decline. However, at the moment, except for the Karbi Anglong district, the majority status of STs is not immediately under threat. This trend of population growth is, of course, the rationalise for freezing the present balance of ST representation in the states Assemblies.

Too often the demographic change in the region has been seen only from the perspective of what scholars of migration call the "push factors". But it is important to bring in the "pull factors" as well – the economic transformation and process of class differentiation in these states that have provided significant economic opportunities to new immigrants – some of which may be hidden from the gaze of the law. Since the protection regime in place restricts what denizens call legally do, numerous informal arrangements have emerged in the ownership and control of agricultural land in business practices. Denizens have become integrated into the economies of the region in substantial, but often quite informal ways. Those informal niches are sometimes positions of advantage vis-a-vis a person belonging to a ST and at other times the ST person may be at a position of advantage.

In the Karbi Anglong district of Assam, for instance, while there is no transfer of land from tribals in a formal sense, field studies reveal that agricultural lands belonging to STs are often cultivated by immigrant denizens. In one area, while ownership rights are in the name of tribals, Bengali and Nepali denizens are the real owners (Bordoloi 1986. Cited in Karna

1990:36). This should hardly be surprising. As shifting cultivation declines, largely as a result of official policy discouraging it, the shifting cultivators of yesterday can hardly be expected to transform themselves overnight into settled cultivators without sustained assistance. Under these circumstances selling the land that he has been allocated would have been the obvious option. But since the protective regime restricts selling of land to denizens, the cash-starved former shifting cultivator tends to turn actual control of his land to immigrant denizens in exchange for cash. These denizens typically are better adapted to cultivate these lands because they bring with them some cash, agricultural implements and experience in settled cultivation.

A recent report by a local human rights group related the ethnic violence in parts of Karbi Anglong to the political tensions generated by this transition. Indeed even the presence of Indian security forces, ostensibly responding to the security threat posed by insurgencies, has become appropriated by the local conflicts generated by the informal practices that govern the emerging pattern of property relations. For instance, in parts of Karbi Anglong that was surveyed, Nepalis and Bihari denizens had acquired informal control over land that formally belonged to Karbi (a ST) owners. The Nepali land holdings were small – on the average 8 to 10 bighas, while the Biharis controlled as much as 100 bighas per family and were growing profitable crops like sugarcane. Between June and September of 2000 there were clashes between Karbis and denizens and more than 80 people were killed (MASS 02).

According to the report, the loss of land by tribals to denizens was the driving force behind these conflicts. While the Karbis had come under the influence of the United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) – a rag-tag band of Karbi militants, the Bihari denizens who were better-off and better-organized and had the informal backing of India security personnel stationed in the area to fight insurgent groups like the UPDS, because many of these soldiers were from Bihar. Thus after every threat from the UPDS, says the report, the company of the Central Reserve Police Force and an Assam Regiment battalion

retaliated (MASS, 2002).

While in this case, Karbis lost actual control of land to Bihari and Nepali denizens, the process of transition from shifting to settled cultivation has been far too complex for the tribals/non-tribals dichotomy to neatly coincide with a notion that the former is always exploited by the latter. In Meghalaya, for instance, a class of Khasis have been able to extend substantial control over both urban and agricultural land. There has been a capture of what is formally clan-controlled land by powerful individuals. Chiefs and headmen have been issuing land deeds to non-Khasis and Khasis alike charging a fixed rent and cash payment (Karna 1990:35). A recent report on rural indebtedness in the Ri-Bhoi district of Meghalaya describe another aspect of the emerging pattern of class differentiation "The money-lender is no longer the foxy non-tribal taking advantage of the simple tribals as it used to be. Today the *mahajans* (trader-money lender) are as tribal as the village-folk are and as cunning as the old non-tribal money lenders of the old days" (Grassroots Options 2000:11)

This is not limited to Meghalaya. In various forms, such a process is occurring in most tribal areas of the northeast. "It is no longer surprising," writes sociologist M.N. Karna, "to come across a Naga or a Garo owning a thousand acres of land. Nowhere in these areas would customary practices have permitted such a concentration of land, but new linkages have brought with them hitherto unknown phenomena like absentee landlordism, realization of rent from land, sharecropping, land mortgage, landlessness and so on" (Karna 1990:36). Such land grab has also been made possible by official development policies that have encouraged plantation crops such as tea, coffee and rubber.

In Assam's North Cachar Hills, the Autonomous Councils have been encouraged by official agencies to grant individual deeds of land control to enable banks to extend loans. Villagers in the 1980s formed loose knit 'committees' - headed by influential individuals with the blessings of official agencies.

These committees then secured land deeds from the headman or the Autonomous District Council. According to one researcher, the result of this process at the end of 20 years is that there are today Dimasa ( a ST of the area) individuals, "usually well heeled in terms of education and access to political power" owning 700 bighas of land and the experimental homestead plantations abandoned by the tea, coffee and rubber board because of falling prices. (Barbora 2001).

It should come as no surprise then that the other side of this privatisation of clan-held lands is the emergence of a poorer group of people eking out a living by working as agricultural workers or sharecroppers or by whatever other means possible. To be sure, most of them are local tribals, who despite the protections given to them as STs, lack the social and political resources to benefit from privatization of clan-lands or to be able to hold on to lands allocated to them. But occupying these economic niches, are also a large number of denizens – Nepalis, Biharis and Bangladeshis among them. Indeed a tribal landowner may even find it safer to informally lease out his land to a denizen because, as Karna puts it, "it may not be difficult to handle them if disputes arise" (Karna 1990:34).

Upendra Baxi has recently written that modern India has achieved "national integration without achieving national integrity." India's 'development politics', he points out, has forged national markets for large numbers of unorganized migrant labour crisscrossing the country. In these labour markets, he writes, Indian citizens have become, "subjects without rights" all over again. What Baxi had in mind is migrant construction workers building "monumental state projects" such as the physical infrastructure for the Asian Games in New Delhi, roads and flyovers in large cities, and housing estates across urban India for wealthy Indians' migrant labour in the power-loom sector of the textile industry in Gujarat; and "the staggering forms of migrant labour from the destitute regions of east India" that had made the green revolution in Punjab possible. Baxi calls this phenomenon "unconstitutional national integration" (Baxi 2001).

**Perhaps the postcolonial social transformation of Northeast India, taking place under the protective cover of the Sixth Schedule, is slowly making the region a part of this grid of "unconstitutional national integration" in somewhat unexpected ways. In addition, the Bangladeshi and Nepali presence in the region points to a significant transnational dimension of this grid. At least a part of the significant rise of population of northeast India has to be explained by this migrating proletariat meeting the labour demands of the building boom in the region – made possibly partly by the state resources pumped into the area and the substantial leakage of funds through corruption – and the class relations in the emerging forms of post-shifting cultivation agriculture. Their presence in these economic roles is certainly very visible to any visitor to northeast India today.**

Slowly but steadily, the dispossessed tribal of northeast India is sure to join this mass of humanity on the move. Thus if the Bihari denizen in Karbi Anglong takes advantage of the misery of the poor Karbi to take effective control of his land, a tribal landlord in the Naga foothills, often empowered and enriched by positions in or connections to the state government of Nagaland, may be in a position of power and dominance vis-a-vis the Bengali denizen sharecropper informally leasing his land. Questions of social justice in northeast India are significantly more complex today than what the regime of protection was originally designed to accomplish. The informality of the arrangements exposes a large number of poor people to a more vulnerable legal position than that already implied in the marginal nature of the economic niches they occupy.

### **Ethnic homelands and the Politics of displacement**

There is a disturbing relationship between conflicts over ethnic homelands and incidents of displacement. These conflicts are not only between tribals and denizens. The discourse of ethnic homelands creates in every ethnic homeland – existing and potential groups that belong and those who don't. Thus

denizen communities as well as minority groups of all kinds-tribals as well as non-tribals-fall victim to this politics of displacement. The urge to protect an existing homeland against the homeland claims of a rival group, the project of creating a new homeland or the fear that one group's homeland or a part of it can be claimed by another are typically the subtexts of these conflicts. The aspirations for homelands are typically expressed in the Constitutional language of Autonomous Districts and in the newer language of separate statehood. Bringing an ethnic group scattered in many states into one state, maintaining the territorial integrity of an ethnic state that exists, creating a new state for an ethnic group are all part of this political discourse.

Let me return to the Meghalaya example with which I began. Some of the numbers cited by Khasi activists about non-Khasis living in their midst are telling. Keith Pariat, President of the Syngkhong Rympei Thymmai, for instance, said that full two thirds of the 1.8 million people living in the Khasi hills were non-Khasis (cited in Shridhar). How the figure was arrived at and the categories Pariat used are not above question. But the perception itself is significant. A few years earlier, a Khasi Students Union leader had said that in a number of electoral constituencies in the Khasi Hills Bangladeshis outnumber locals, while in the Jaintia coal belt Nepalese and Bangladeshis are a majority (Cited in Verghese 1996:203). There is little doubt that there has been a steady influx of people from Bangladesh-with questionable legal status-into Meghalaya and other parts of the northeast. But the national and ethnic labels are hardly accurate since they do not distinguish between a primary immigrant and a descendant of a primary immigrant-who may be even generations removed. This rhetoric-not untypical in today's northeast-illustrates the potential adverse impact of the homeland discourse on hundreds of thousands of ethnically labeled people. And the latter, it should be emphasized, are not just new immigrants, but descendant of earlier generations of immigrants as well.

In 1980s the logic of ethnic entitlements and the norms

and laws of Indian citizenship laws came to a head as a result of some displacement of ethnic Nepalis in Meghalaya. The displacements became the catalyst for a major political upheaval in the Darjeeling area of North Bengal – which historically had a large concentration of ethnic Nepalese.

The settlement of ethnic Nepalese in northeast India as well as the Darjeeling region has an old history that goes back to colonial times. However, quite separately from that history since India's independence, there has also been a significant movement of people across the Indo-Nepal border. This movement of people is governed by the India-Nepal Treaty of 1950. According to the treaty, Nepalese citizens can freely establish residence, own property and engage in trade and commerce in India just as Indian citizens can do in Nepal. The Gorkha National Liberation Front, an organisation of ethnic Nepalese of the Darjeeling region, now interprets the displacement of ethnic Nepalese in Meghalaya as evidence of a danger implicit in the Indo Nepal treaty for India's ethnic Nepalese population.

The treaty said that GNLF, turns the ethnic Nepalis of India into aliens. For in effect, it puts the bonafides of the ethnic Nepalese Indian citizen in doubt. Indeed the GNLF's preference for the term Gorkha to describe the ethnic Nepalese of India is significant. The GNLF believes that while the term Nepalese implies citizenship of Nepal, the term Gorkha – popularized by the British to describe soldiers recruited from the Gorkha Valley of Nepal – does not carry the same baggage. Along with the creation of Gorkhaland, the GNLF therefore demanded the abrogation of Indo-Nepal Treaty. A separate state called Gorkhaland, the GNLF argued, will demonstrate that “we are not here in India in accordance with the 1950 Indo-Nepal agreement, but we have been here in this land since 12th century (cited in Sonntag). Of course an ethnic homeland for Nepalese in North Bengal that GNLF secured, did not quite change the conditions of the ethnic Nepalese in Meghalaya. After all, the rhetoric of ethnic entitlements there portray all non-tribals as

outsiders. Indeed in due course all ethnic Nepalese may even be assumed to belong to Gorkhaland and hence outsiders in other ethnic homelands.

Among recent episodes of conflict-induced displacements in northeast India are: Paites, Kuki and Nagas were displaced in Manipur; Reangs displaced in Mizoram; Bengalis and various Tripuri tribes displaced in Tripura; and Chakmas displaced in Arunachal Pradesh. And, of course, the political upheaval that became a model for the recent wave of ethnic entitlement campaigns in the region is the Assam movement of 1979-85. This episode of political protest was important because it involved a community that was not seen historically as one needing protection; indeed the ethnic Assamese of the Brahmaputra Valley are the very epitome of a plains people against whom some of the protections favouring tribals were originally devised by colonial officials. Among victims of displacements during the Assam movement were mostly Bengalis-Hindus as well as Muslims, and Nepalese. The Assam movement's focus on "foreigners" - the legal ambiguity of the status of the people who had migrated to the state from what was East Pakistan and become Bangladesh-touched a chord among ethnic activists all across the region.

Let me give some details of a few of these conflicts to show the relationship between the politics of ethnic homelands and displacement. The displacement of Reangs (also known as Brues) in Mizoram relate to the demand by the Brue National Union for a Autonomous District for Reangs in Mizoram. The Reangs have a large presence on the tribal belts in Tripura, as well as in Mizoram. Mizo politicians and organizations like the Young Mizo Association vehemently oppose the demand and see the Reangs not as indigenous to Mizoram, but the bulk of them as recent immigrants. They see the demand for a Brue homeland as a conspiracy to split up Mizoram. But from the Reang activist's demand said, referring to the fact that there already exists a Chakma Autonomous District Council in Mizoram, " If the 60,000 Chakmas can have their own Autonomous Districts Council in Mizoram, Why not the Reangs

with a population of about 90,000?" (cited in Ali 1998).

One of the major element in the Kuki-Naga clashes that have led to the displacement of Kukis and Nagas in Manipur is the Kuki demand for the creation of a Sadar Hills (Kangpokpi) district. The demand for a separate district by bifurcating the Senapati district of Manipur is framed in terms of the inconveniences of the people living far away from the present district headquarters. However, the proposal is read by Nagas as the beginning of the process of creating a Kuki homeland in an area of Manipur that the Nagas claim as theirs, and which Naga militants would like to see some day become part of greater Nagalim.

A conflict that has produced some widely reported displacements in the late 1990s centres around the demand for a homeland for the Bodos on the north Bank of the Brahmaputra. While the memory of ancient Bodo kingdoms, and of a distant past when Bodo culture may have been uncontaminated by Assamese culture, animates the demand, Bodo speakers today are only 1.1 million or 11.5 per cent of the population of the north bank where the Bodos want their homeland to be. Even though there are areas where Bodos are relatively concentrated, they do not constitute a relatively contiguous area. This is not surprising for it is precisely because of it. That their territory was not designated as either an excluded or a partially excluded areas in colonial times; nor did it become part of the Sixth Schedule's "tribal areas". True the inability to extend protection to them was itself to a large extent, a function of demographic changes brought about by colonial transformation when the Bodos had lost control over much of their land to tea plantations, government enclosed forest areas and to migrant groups settled in those areas by official policy. In that sense they were probably one of those groups for whom the colonial discovery that the "aborigines" might need protection came too late.

Nevertheless in an attempt to respond to the demand for Bodo homeland, an agreement signed between Bodo activists and the state government in 1993 provided for the formation of

a Bodoland Autonomous Council. However, the precise territorial jurisdiction of the Council was left open to be settled later. Disputes over the precise jurisdiction eventually led to the collapse of the agreement. On the other hand, the continuing public discussion about a dissonance between what Bodo activists see as a historically Bodo area and the contemporary demographic reality of overlapping ethnicities has fueled violence against "outsiders." East Bengali Muslims and Hindus, Nepalese and Santhals have been victims of the displacements that have followed.

Indeed northeast India is becoming known world-wide among refugee advocates for its displacements. Nagaland appears to be the only northeastern state that has not reported incidents of displacement, though the Naga insurgency has generated its own displacements, albeit not of the ethnic outsider. The displaced in Nagaland in the 1950s have been mostly Nagas: victims of the village regrouping policies of the Indian army and subsequently, of insurgent and state violence. The US Committee of Refugees in its report for the year 2000 estimated that there were 157,000 displaced persons in northeast India (USCR 2000).

### **Now a homeland for a non-tribal community?**

One of the ironies of the career of the idea of protecting tribals in northeast India is that over time, as the economic and ethnic landscape has become more complex, the not-very subtle distinctions originally made between different levels of isolation - implied in categories like excluded and partially excluded areas, and the distinction between tribes living in such areas and those living in mixed areas - have been lost. Now traditionally unprotected groups demand the same kinds of protection once extended to groups that were thought of as the most isolated. Perhaps the most interesting example of this process is the current discussion among All Assam Student Union (AASU) and the central and the state governments about ways to extend protection to the "indigenous peoples" of Assam.

The issue goes back to the Assam movement which

ended with an accord signed between the Government of India and the All Assam Students Union in 1985. The Assam accord signed between prime minister Rajiv Gandhi and the AASU leaders are not only acknowledged that Assam has a problem with "foreigners"; it agreed on certain formulas for identifying, expelling and disenfranchising some of them. After the accord, the students leaders of the Assam movement formed a political party and contested elections to the state Assembly and won. But since constitutionally, citizenship is under the federal government's jurisdiction, there was not much the state government could legally do. A law passed by the Indian parliament in response to the Assam movement made the task of proving that someone is an illegal alien in Assam, extremely difficult, if not impossible. And once faced with the tasks of winning elections and staying in power, the electoral logic of Assam's demography soon made these student leaders significantly modify their position on the issue of "foreigners."

The non-implementation of the Assam accord has remained a live issue in Assam politics. Clause VI of the Assam Accord had promised "constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assam people." The formulation had angered Bodo activists in the late 1980s, who argued that it might legitimize the imposition of Assamese language and culture on Bodos and other tribal groups. Yet in the most recent discussion on the implementation of the Assam Accord, a proposal made by AASU that was actively considered would reserve hundred percent of the seats in the local elected bodies, and the state legislative Assembly in Assam and all the seats for Assam in the national parliament for "indigenous peoples."

According to press reports, representatives of the Assam government and of the Government of India had agreed "in principle" with the proposal. The student leaders have defended their proposal on the ground that Indian citizens from other parts of India living in Assam will continue to have all other

rights except that they will not be able to contest elections in the state. Obviously the proposal is modeled on the near-total reservations of seats for STs in the tribal states of AP, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland, but this time for a category of people that would include non-STs.

Not surprisingly the proposal, especially the concept of "indigenous people," has become highly controversial. Among the most vociferous critics of the proposal are Assam's ST activists. Since the term in indigenous people in international human rights discourse roughly corresponds to what in India are called STs, the extension of the word "indigenous" to include a non-tribal people - especially one that is itself in loggerheads with some of Assam's STs - has aroused deep suspicion. Daleswar Bodo, Vice President of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, said that the notion deprives the "aboriginals/autochthons of Assam, like Bodos and Misings, of their due protection and safeguards from the intrusion of the new-comers under the guise of '*khilarjia*', that is, indigenous." In other words, he fears, that the Assamese by calling themselves an "indigenous people" will manage to obscure their presence in tribal areas. Another important Bodo organisation All Bodo Students Union said that the reported understanding has created "lots of doubts, confusion and misunderstanding." Tribal activists from Karbi Anglong and North Cachar districts have challenged AASU credentials of unilaterally engage in a project to defend the interest of "indigenous peoples" of Assam. It called for a dialogue among different sections of Assam's population to arrive at a consensus definition. ABSU called for a meeting of experts to define the categories indigenous and non-indigenous peoples of the state.

Organizations representing minority groups such as Bengali Hindus - many of them refugees of the Indian partition of 1947 - and Bengali Muslims have also expressed misgivings. A Forum for Linguistic Minorities of Assam was announced in order "to safeguard the interest of the people belonging to the various linguistic minority communities." Its public statement emphasized that "all citizens of the State, irrespective of their

language and religious affinity" must continue to "enjoy equal rights as guaranteed by the Constitution.

Yet the AASU proposal has been taken seriously enough for mainstream political parties to develop position on it. The chief of the state's Congress Part, who is now the chief minister, Tarun Gogoi said that his definition of indigenous people is simply: those "who accept the Assamese language and culture and Assam as their own land." It is not clear, however, how such a definition would be used to decide who is eligible and who is not, to context elections in Assam. Other political parties have proposed formulas that were used in the Assam Accord to define a "foreigner". No matter how serious the problem of immigration into this frontier region, the cavalier way that a basic political right of citizenship of hundreds and thousands of people - to stand for elections - is sought to be negotiated away - is rather extraordinary.

### Looking ahead

But the formidable difficulties that AASU faces in operationalizing the concept of indigenous peoples, perhaps show how anachronistic the ethnic homeland idea has become in the context of the actually existing political economy of northeast India today. The discourse today has become a serious challenge to the foundational principles of citizenship. It cannot be expected to provide a framework for the struggles for social justice today and of the future.

Minimally we need a framework that does not involve the state for ever categorizing groups of people in ethnic terms and making descendants of internal immigrants into perpetual outsiders. While mechanisms to control immigration are no doubt necessary, so are rules about incorporating the descendants of immigrants - no matter how restrictive. And at least a generation or two later, they have to become full citizens. I would suggest that the notion of dual citizenship - i.e., citizenship both of India and of a state - might be able to provide such a framework.

A quick review of the language in which the citizenship

laws of countries are framed illustrate how the logic of the citizenship discourse necessarily differs from the language of ethnic homelands. In principle, most countries recognize three ways of becoming a citizen: both within the territory of a country (*jus soli*), descent from a citizen (*jus sanguinis*) and naturalization. If *jus sanguinis* incorporates the principle of citizenship gained through blood ties to citizens, the other two principles can incorporate the ethnically different outsider. In contrast to that, the ethnic homeland discourse tends define political communities always in exclusively ethnic terms. Of course, in reality countries vary enormously on how much of the *jus soli* principle is applied to the claims to citizenship of children of immigrants born in the country and on the degree of difficulties that are involved in obtaining citizenship through naturalization. Indeed in countries like Israel and Japan, *jus sanguinis* remains the predominant way of acquiring citizenship. Yet the openings for new members that exist in principle makes the discourse of citizenship different from the exclusionary logic of the discourse of ethnic homelands.

Certain recent developments in the citizenship policies in Europe may illustrate my point. Despite the political rhetoric against foreigners in Europe today, the trend in most European countries has been to extend the right to citizenship to second generation immigrants. The labour demands during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had induced a major part of Europe's recent immigration. Originally the migration was thought of as temporary - as illustrated by the notion of guest worker that guided official policy in some countries. However, as many temporary migrants became permanent settlers, countries have had to respond creatively to the reality of growing number of foreign non-citizen residents living in their midst. Most states seem to be "unwilling to tolerate, generation after generation, large numbers of non-citizens without an entitlement to citizenship." Whatever their degree of economic and social integration, lack of citizenship had tended to separate immigrant groups the broader community in significant ways and implicitly justified xenophobic and exclusionary rhetoric. Thus it was hard

not to see a direct connection between Germany's inability to recognize Turks, Yugoslavs and other former guest workers as potential German citizens and the attacks of Turks as 'foreigners'. Germany, of course, has now changed the laws of citizenship recognizing the right of second generation immigrants to citizenship (Hansen and Weil 2001: 12-13).

Indeed except for Austria, Greece and Luxemburg, the other twelve EU countries now give second generation immigrants the right to become a citizen. Children of immigrant parents, born in the country, can apply to be a citizens when they become adults. Of course, there are conditions, Residency in the country is always a condition and sometimes the residency requirement can be as long as 10 years. In some cases there are also conditions such as double *jus soli*, i.e. apart from the applicant, a parent too has to be born in the country. Of course, for first generation immigrants the access to citizenship through naturalization in EU countries is extremely restricted. But my point is not to defend European citizenship laws; but that unlike in the ethnic homeland discourse, it is hard within the discourse of citizenship not to recognize the right to citizenship of second generation immigrants. In that sense the citizenship discourse is qualitatively different from the ethnic homeland discourse which makes denizens and perpetual foreigners out of ethnically defined "outsiders."

The obvious advantages of the framework of dual citizenship, it seems to me, is that it can define political communities in civic terms; introduce a dynamic element of incorporating new members and thereby make a decisive break from the notion of ethnic homelands that is part of the legacy of colonial subject-hood. Dual citizenship would imply that elected state governments and legislatures could make rules by which an internal immigrant becomes a citizen of the state and a member of the political community embodied in that state.

Furthermore, under a strong dual citizenship regime, even national citizenship could become a concurrent subject requiring for instance, that international treaties affecting the

flow of people from outside the country into India – for instance the treaties affecting the rights of ethnic Nepalese or East Bengalis in India – would need the concurrence of state governments. Making such treaty-making a part of state level political debates could give such treaties the popular legitimacy that they appear to lack in northeast India. Giving state legislature a formal say in controlling the flow of people into the region – restrictions that exist today, but primarily through non-transport colonial-era bureaucratic practices like the Inner Line or as an indirect effect of the protections given to STs – will give legitimacy to the internal immigration into the region that is only likely to increase in coming years.

Indian public opinion, however, is unlikely to be friendly to the idea of dual citizenship. Indeed in the debate in 1999 that followed the autonomy resolution of the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly, commentators specifically pointed at the dangers of the dual citizenship idea. Arvinda Lavakare, for instance, argued that if a state had such power, it would “discriminate in favour of its citizens in matters such as the right to hold public office, to vote, to obtain employment or to secure licenses for practising law or medicine.” He gave the example of Jammu and Kashmir where the right to acquire immovable property is restricted to the state’s permanent residents to illustrate how “politically explosive” the idea of dual citizenship can be. “With that solitary exception,” he noted with satisfaction, an exception that could be removed by abrogating Article 370 of the Constitution, “the Indian federation has largely achieved, and seeks to maintain, uniformity in basic civil and criminal laws” (Lavakare 1999). Like many Indian commentators, Lavakare is, of course, oblivious of the northeast and of Article 371 that give some of the northeastern states its special forms of autonomy, the article that immediately follows the article on Jammu and Kashmir which offends so many Indians.

The choice in northeast India today is clearly not between a new set of restrictions that dual citizenship would introduce

for the first time and a uniform national citizenship where all Indian citizens have unrestricted rights to movement, residency and property ownership. What exists on the ground is a set of rules that distinguish between citizens and denizens, rules that have fueled an increasingly exclusionary politics of homelands and have been prone to generating ethnic violence and recurrent episodes of displacements. Dual citizenship in such a context would be able to introduce for the first time a regime of civic citizenship that will be in line with the actually existing political economy of the region.

Such a citizenship regime will also be consistent with the traditional liberal incorporative ethos of the region. In the controversy over the Khasi Social Custom of Lineage Bill with which I began this essay, the matrilineal system of succession that Khasi activists would like to “modernize,” has a remarkably liberal and progressive conception of group membership. While descent is traced along the female line, that does not stop children of non-Khasi women married to Khasi man from being absorbed into Khasi society. Children of such marriages typically adopt the non-Khasi mother’s given name or occupation as a clan name and over time such names became recognized as Khasi clan names. Indeed there are many Khasi clans today that trace their ancestry to non-Khasi women. They were wives or concubines of Khasi men abducted from the plains in the course of trading expeditions and wars. This also does not discriminate against children married out of wedlock. As Khasi sociologist Tiplut Nongbri points out, while the Khasi rules of descent may render “the ethnic boundary of the Khasi highly porous, it makes the addition of new members into the society relatively easy and adds to the vibrancy of the system” (Nongbri 1998). Dual citizenship will only return the northeast to the spirit of such progressive traditions of incorporating new members – so dramatically different from the caste sensibilities of mainstream India – and make a clean break from the colonial constructions of ethnic subject-hood that have generated today’s lethal politics of ethnic homelands.

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