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CHAPTER 12

The Outsider, The State and Nations from Below: North East India as a Subject of Exclusion

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Quite for now in me, in this
Shadow country where corpses shuffle to the bar
Get their meanings dry or sweet
Red or White, dark or light, in the picture of the glass
To cool their mouths, to sweeten their breaths, to bring
Wholeness to their memory, gone like smoke, like knowing for
Sure how it was yesterday.

Paula Gunn Allen, *Shadow Country*

Ethnic movements of NE-India are often termed as 'secessionists' and 'extremists' within the dominant discourse of Indian nation-state. The paper proposes an alternative understanding of such movements in terms of a contest over occupying greater 'social', 'political' and 'cultural' spaces, the spaces in which ethnic communities were not hitherto represented. Such non-representation in terms of rights, power and authority causes ethnocentric concerns to find their expression in contestations in many possible ways. Especially contestation against an 'other' assumes the most explicit form in social spaces to mobilize ethnic communities with a

set of objectives. The 'other' is characterized in terms of an undifferentiated concept of citizenship as enshrined within the constitution of India that refuses to recognize the claims of an identity in separation with others as represented within the Nation and the State. The contrast gets further sharpened through a number of meditative measures of the state that apparently negotiates the variegating representations between communities in spaces within the Nation. In the process of such mediations the state gives rise to an hierarchy of significance which further results into contract between communities. In other words inter-community dynamics and the meditative processes of the state get mutually intertwined to produce degrees of mobilizations among communities to secure representations in and as where they find themselves less represented.

In the context of NE-India, Indian State and inter-community dynamics are intertwined in such a manner that there are fundamentally two fold consequences: one, contest over spaces within the State develops into conflicts between communities as well as with the state: two, fundamental aspects of State are interrogated and proposed to be changed with an accent on self-determination. The first aspect relates to securing greater rights over others by carving an exclusive territory for the community. The second aspect relates to exposing the limits of the State in terms of rationality, regulation and authority. Both these aspects draw upon specific lived experiences, history and culture of communities in its relationship to others as well as to the State. The purpose of this paper is to focus upon the processes of statutory exclusion of NE-Indian communities by the colonial and post-colonial Indian State that went into the lived experience of these communities in terms of their non-representation and relate this experience to particular forms of ethnic movements in NE-India. For this purpose, the paper is divided into four sections. Section one raises the question, *what is the strategy of securing community aspirations for ethnic movements of NE-India?* The section analyses the mobilizational rationale of such movements to bring out the strategies and its corresponding objectives. What such an analysis portrays is that strategies of securing community rights necessarily involve a distinction between the 'self' and the 'other' without necessarily becoming parochial or sectarian.

What follows from this is a further question, *does the Indian State recognize ethnic aspirations and ensure their fulfilment?* Section two analyses the crucial state and ethnicity relationship to demonstrate that the Indian State, because of its structural compulsions only partially addresses to such aspirations. What follows from this partial response is an intensification of unsettled conflicts between communities in terms of their share of rights. Section three discusses such intensification of conflicts taking the form of assertion of distinct identity rights in difference to others and the resultant agenda of securing those rights. Such an agenda involves a 'politics of difference' combined with strategies of acquiring means alternative to usual ways of securing rights. Such an alternative involves a struggle for securing greater power with a radical proposal changing the institutional framework. In other words, political strategies of this kind give rise to alternative discursive formations to articulate a politics of difference with a greater sensitivity to assert the identity of the community. The section espouses the characteristic radicalness of such mobilization. Section four in its concluding analysis establishes a linkage between contest over citizenship, partial recognition of community aspirations by the state and politics of difference by ethnic community in terms of a statist politics of exclusion and attempts of NE-Indian communities to overcome this exclusion.

Contest Over Citizenship

Major nationalist organizations of NE-India, play the role of mobilizing the claims of their communities for a distinct 'national' status as opposed to Indian nationhood. The concept of ethnonational identity in terms of Naga Nationalism, Assamese Nationalism, etc. by which their claim to be nations-in-themselves do not make any reference to 'Indian' as a national identity. Such nationalist movements, precisely ethnonational in character draw a distinction between citizenship and national identity. While the concept 'Indian' would refer to citizenship of members of a national community, national identity would refer to a specific ethnic identity. This distinction between citizenship and nationhood is aimed at drawing a

distinction between the self and the other. Further this distinction separates a macro and a micro level of separation between the 'self' and the 'other'. At the macro level, denial of Indian nationhood marks a two pronged difference: (i) difference from these major Indian nationalities who accept 'Indian' as a marker of national identity and (ii) denial of 'Indian' as a marker of nationality assures a distinct self identity in terms of ethnic identity. At the micro level, it distinguishes two forms of resistance: (i) resistance to appropriation of national identity within citizenship and (ii) preserving and distinguishing specific tradition, history, culture from other Indian citizens caught in the cauldron of national homogenization. The rationale that we would like to adduce here for this macro-micro distinction with its attendant features is that at the macro level the context involves securing a different identity distinct from others while at the micro level the context involves assertion of specific cultural markers and their authenticity over what is 'other' to their 'culture'. In other words, macro level contest revolves around an opposition between Indian citizenship and nationalism versus ethnonationalism, while at the micro level the contest revolves around an opposition between homogenization and specificity. In the former, it is a strategic decentring of the self from a common National and Statist identity without an essential construction of the self but a decentring that makes it different from others, while in the latter there is a practice of strategic essentialism, a distantiating from the other as well as an assertion of what is considered 'essential' for the community. Both these assume a national self identity in difference to what is 'Indian', while it contributes to spatialization of ethnic identity as an 'other' to self same notion of community within Indian citizenship. This mode of difference is not just the work of an ethnic community liking to distinguish itself from others, but it is endemic to the very notion of a common 'Indian' national identity which differentiates groups, castes, communities, tribes as different social formations for avoiding necessary social conflicts germane to such a spectrum of factors.¹ But beyond such a differentiated spectre and the social conflicts germane to it, communities of North East India identify their non-representation even within such pan Indian social formations and hence a distance marks their inclusion within

a common Indian identity. This also explains the refusal of NE-Indian communities to accept their subsumption within Indian national identity. Such a distance creates a space between them and others to make others recognize the *difference*, while the State tries to contain such a distance by travestyng the national identity as a subject or a citizen identity that refers to 'Indian' as its proper name. Such a synthesizing approach of the Indian Nation-State is resisted by ethnic identities by way of discursive production of a different domain of culture, history and specificity that undercuts even the unified notion of a subject or citizen. This is perfected again by a further distinction between citizenship and citizenship with a *primary national identity*. This distinction is enacted by drawing a boundary between citizens who are outsiders and who are insiders to the primary national identity. Therefore, an understanding of the contest requires taking stock of distinctions that move both in vertical and horizontal directions. Vertically the distinction lies between Indian national identity and ethno-national identity, while horizontally the distinction lies between an outsider and an insider. Both macro and micro level distinctions bear the criss-cross of vertical and horizontal distinctions that distinguish polarities of dominance and subjugation. The vertical polarities formed between the dominant Indian national identity and the ethnonational identity criss-cross with the horizontal polarities formed between Indian citizenship and the local civic communityship. Such a criss-cross leaves out its remainder in the form of an ongoing contest over identity between communities and between the state and the communities.

Given this theoretical framework, the micro level politics of difference practised by organizations for ethnic mobilizations in NE-India most often plays a politics of separation of the self from the other. United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) carries out its anti-Indian State insurgency by way of identifying these others who are part of the institutions of state hegemony, quite different to the All Assam Students Union's (AASU) identification of foreigners in Bangladeshis who came after 1971. Insurgency carried out by ULFA practices a 'strategic essentialism' in a nationalist mode that constructs a domain of insiders who will remain ready to identify

themselves with the cause of a sovereign Assam. In contrast, All Assam Students Union identifies neo-Assamese immigrants not as a part of ethnic Assamese community and considers immigration as a threat to the existence of Assamese nationality. The construction of Assamese nationalism by ULFA produces the image of a nation-in-the-making without closures to ostensibly different groups of migrants. But construction of ethnic Assamese Nationalism by AASU involves an exclusion or identification of these 'outsiders' who are inimical to an unified Assamese nationhood. These two modes of construction involve two different modes of contest over citizenship. ULFA's construction of Nationalism contests 'India' as a nation through an essential construction of Assamese nationhood, while AASU's construction of Nationalism involves securing Indian citizenship by keeping it free from the intrusion of foreign nationals. ULFA's construction of Nationalism considers Indian citizenship as a subjugation by the Indian State, while AASU's construction involves a contest with those termed as 'foreigners' to secure citizenship commensurate with the discourse of Assamese Nationalism.

By clamouring for the 'sovereignty' of Assamese nationalism, ULFA discourse produces an 'outside' or an 'exterior' to the Indian State and in turn makes them inside out of the Indian State. Contrarily Indian State becomes an outside to the imagined territory of the Assamese Nation. ULFA discourse inscribes such a sovereign nation space within Indian State in terms of an untemperable Assamese identity never to be dissolved within 'Indian' identity. Such an inscription of Assamese nationalism produces a vertical contest with Indian national identity without necessarily involving a horizontal discrimination between an outsider and an insider independent of the Indian State. This kind of a contest between Assamese nationalism vs. Indian nationalism also vertically splits citizenship and national identity without any connection between the two.

Contrastingly AASU discriminates citizenship in terms of one's belonging or not belonging to Assam. AASU distinguishes an Assamese national in contract to an Indian national just by drawing a distinction of locales. Such a localized notion of citizenship assumes a radical turn in its interface with nationalism of ULFA kind.

in which the essentialization of Assamese identity distinguishes itself from an Indian identity.

Therefore production of an 'outsider' in terms of non-belonging to a certain locale acts as a fulcrum for contestation over Indian identity. Such a notion is also based upon the duality of civil space within Indian nation-state. The duality is reflected in the distinction between an ethnic domain and a national civic domain, the latter juxtaposed over the former. In the context of NE-India, the cultural and social spaces within which communities are bound share its own normative and moral standards, based upon which their rights are institutionalized in customary systems. Such a coexistence produces the incongruencies of parallel rights mutually incommensurable to each other. The ethnic rights come in conflict with the civic rights of an outsider who cannot customarily enjoy the local rights of an insider, while an ethnic insider cannot secure her own aspirations in a neutral civic domain of rights as she is equal to just any other citizen. As the scope of civic rights remains greater than customary rights, communities with such customary rights could be marginalized in the sphere of the 'civic' while people with civic rights and no customary rights could wield greater capabilities because of non-belonging to a customary society and because of neutrality of the sphere of public rights. Such a neutrality is regulated by the control of the State, while State does not have any control over the sphere of the customary. This kind of a situation is unique to the NE-Indian context and it largely determines the intercommunity relationship by way of such separation of spheres of the customary and the civic.

Such a duality further results into an articulation of difference in terms of horizontal contrasts between the comparable advantages and disadvantages between communities. Such a comparison further gives rise to the political social necessity to articulate the community aspirations in such a manner that it enhances one's own community from its disadvantageous position. Such an articulation assumes a hybrid and ambivalent tenor as it engages a community in a contest for comparative advantage over others and thereby making it a subject of statist processes, while it contests other communities in terms of simultaneous surge for autonomy as well as for acquisi-

tion of greater rights as a citizen collective. Such a contest would obviously involve the vertical and the horizontal aspects of an already differentiated and structured relationship between Indian identity and ethnic identity. But the critical question is whether this contest would remain open ended or it could be brought to a certain defined closure by various parties. Especially the roles of ethnonational organizations and the Indian State and the struggles between them emerge as the driving force to determine the nature of the contest over citizenship.

The Role of Indian State

Right from the colonial days, the Indian State acted on a presupposition of distancing it from the peripheral NE-Indian communities. The colonial State kept the whole of NE-India as an Excluded and 'Partially Excluded Region' between early 19th century to first four decades of 20th century. Before the British were withdrawing from India. The Govt. of India Act of 1935 proposed to keep Mizoram as a buffer State between India and Burma, while it proposed crown colony status for Nagaland. The overall policy of the colonial Indian State was so ambiguous that once the Britishers withdrew, it was a real anxiety for ethnic communities of NE-India not really knowing who would become their new guardian. Congress also pursued a policy of negligence by remaining indifferent to the anxieties of hills and plains people of NE-India while making ploys to include this region within the new state of India.²

Being totally irresponsible to the aspirations of Nagas, Mizos, Manipuris, Assamese and other communities of the region, the post-colonial Indian State included these communities within an undivided state of Assam, keeping out Manipur and Tripura as separate. The mass scale famine, total lack of infrastructure and absence of administrative bulwark kept these communities lurching in the first two decades of independence.³ But such a policy of accommodation backfired as communities like 'Naga' and 'Mizo' were questioning their inclusion within Assam and there was a total dissent against the perceived hegemony of Assamese/Indian elite in power. The state of India, therefore, had to carve out two constituent states

called Nagaland and Mizoram from Assam in order to create a sense of self-rule among Nagas and Mizos. But such a reorganization had a two fold effect: one, it strengthened regional interests through institutional means and in terms of politics such moves were considered as manoeuvres of the Indian State to win them over. Such an intensification of regional sentiments and suspicion about the role of the State in the consciousness of Nagas and Mizos remained incipient as they were questioning right from the beginning their inclusion within Indian State. It is worth mentioning here that the famous 10 point agreement between governor of Assam and Naga National council leaders in 1947 had mentioned only a ten year arrangement between 1947 to 1957 under the rule of the Indian State and empowered the Naga National Council to go for new arrangement for the future of Naga people, if it wished so.⁴ But this open ended aspect of the agreement was violated and the Indian State retained its hold over Nagaland beyond ten years of arrangement. What this instance portrays is a politics of subjugation of NE-Indian communities within the territorial and legal jurisdiction of Indian State while such people were subjected to manipulation by the State to accord to such a design. The case of Mizoram too bears a similar statist strategy.

Given this history of political manoeuvring of the communities of NE-India by the post-colonial Indian State, the primary question of articulating community aspirations lays stress upon the possibility of attaining autonomy either within the Indian State or outside it. Such a possibility is further manoeuvred by the Indian State in terms of its dominant discourse. The only question emphasized by the State is the acceptance of the authority of the Central Government and a willingness to collaborate as a constituent of both the Indian State and the Indian nation. To be a constituent of the Indian State such communities like Naga, Mizo, Khasi were brought under a constituent State run by their own representative so that it further paves the path for acceptance of a constituent nationality and citizenship status within the identity of Indian nation. However, such an instrumental mechanism of assimilation came from above in total disregard of the inter-community contest and dynamics built around spaces of social life. Distinctly the process led to two differ-

ent but major consequences; one, an articulation of community aspirations through elite leadership placing them within the institutional framework by their participation in it and two, a contest between various communities to secure specific historical positions, rights and cultural identity expressed through self-conscious mobilization which often turned 'critical' in response to their lived experiences. These two consequences posit a mutually reinforcing relationship as creation of an accommodative institutional framework that legitimized the need for self-representation with the operation of Indian State, while such a legitimization required a social grounding in terms of its capacity to deliver goods and in terms of its acceptability within the specific cultural and historical milieu of various communities. In other words, the imagination of Indian State and the popular imagination of legitimacy of the State in a specific cultural and historical context are needed to gel together to produce a semblance of peaceful political and social order.

Sadly, there are several disjunctions between such semblance of order and popular aspirations. State-sponsored programmes emphasize development through institutional mechanism and write off various forms of resistances to the State. One can read here some of the typical responses of the State in order to visualize the large uncharted grounds of ethnic mobilization in NE-India.

Typical Responses of the State

The Indian State responds typically in a masquerade of benevolence of disciplining ethnonational movement. The State often declares them as 'misguiding' and emphasizes bringing them back to 'mainstream' by reducing the plank of movement to the handiwork of a few educated unemployed youth. When such ethnonational movements take to arms with a professed ideological line of action, the State declares them 'disturbed' and 'outlawed' and takes punitive measures to curb their activity. These administrative and legal measures undermine the political, cultural or historical content of such movements and underwrite them with an erasure of their specific histories.⁵ At the level of discourse, the State acts as a moralizer and at the field of action, it acts as a policing machinery to

physically suppress the movement.

A few cases of such response would concretize the discussion at this point. Policy of the Indian State to make United Liberation Front to Assam (ULFA) activists surrender involved monetary and other inducements. Such inducements could rally a large number of ULFA rank and file into surrender. But the apparent success of such a method has given rise to an organization of surrendered cadres of ULFA named as SULFA. The SULFA retains sophisticated arms apparently to fight against ULFA and use them for the purpose of self-defence, but it created another army of government sponsored militants to often indulge into mindless violence against ordinary citizens to which the citizens can't seek redressal as the State comes forward to defend the acts of SULFA. The SULFA cadres open run rackets of extortion and collect funds from various sources, apparently in the indulgence of the government. Politically what becomes handy for the State is to play SULFA against ULFA and develop a campaign against militant killings and to expose antinational connections of the ULFA.⁶ What has to be noted here is the extralegal means through which the State aims at subduing the ULFA formations. Such extralegal means involved selective annihilation of people suspected to be sympathizers of ULFA and even killing of family members of ULFA cadres. In all such cases the identity of the killers is never known. The State organizes such violence in disguise using some of its pet henchmen. A spate of secret killings organized in this fashion rocked Assam in 1999. Combined with such spurious means is the usual modes of operation of security forces against the supposedly intransigent elements in the forms ranging from killing in encounters to disappearances. What is further important to note here is that the politics of subduing an ethnonational movement involves both direct and indirect modes of warfare against a people to cow the militant groups to submission. The possibility of any democratic negotiation is subverted by such direct and indirect means of suppression of the movement by the State.

Whenever the State fails to succeed by using such means, it inflicts doses of torture on a whole population. Instances galore in the context of NE-India. The Naga People Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR) had brought out several cases of brutal torture carried out

by the State forces who are authorized by various undemocratic and draconian provisions of acts like Disturbed Area Act, 1979; National Security Act 1985 and worst of all, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958. Suffice it to mention here a summary of methods of torture as presented by NPMHR after an elaborate enquiry to indicate the magnitude at which such brutalities are perpetrated by the State:

"Verbal abuse, taunting

Insulting religious sentiments like hanging the

Victims with arms spread mocking that Jesus

Christ too was tortured,

Rolling lathis/bamboos on the limbs under extreme pressure,

Suspending from the arms lifting the feet off the ground.

Coiling metal wire around wrists, ankles, other parts of the body and running electric current through them

(. . .) Injecting drugs causing unconsciousness and loss of memory.

(. . .) Scars, stitches and wounds inflicted even after death indicates interventions even to dead bodies.

Use of civilians as human shields in camps and during operations.

Detainees are blind folded and hoods are tied upon their heads, so that they cannot identify the particular army camps, officers and personnel. They are also unable to accurately identify the means of torture".⁷

What such an account reveals is that the Indian State deploys security forces with an expertise in carrying out systematic torture and brutality over a whole population for the professed purpose of flushing out insurgency and ethnic movements. State's emphasis on violent nature of insurgency gets reversed here as the means of repression used by the State not only undermine the professed policy of upholding human dignity, but they also leave an indelible mark of brutality on a whole population. So the question arises, is it merely a response to ethnic insurgency or is it part of a holistic scheme of permanent subjugation? Seemingly the role of the State adds to the already existent woes of the populace by alienating them further and at the same time turning them more resistant to the presence of the State.

The victimization process carried out by the State harps on not only curbing insurgency but also bringing a whole population to its knees to accept its dictates. Such a practice of counter insurgency marked by state terrorism legitimizes the so called terrorists. This is one reason why despite mobilizing huge forces to counter terrorism, the State has hardly met with any success in containing terrorism. In other words, the rôle of State provides a direct justification for continuation of rebellious activities.

What this picture demonstrates is that the Indian State attempts to secure its legitimacy by suppressing ethnic insurgency and in the process it increases the spate of insurgency. As a result the State plays no positive role in containing insurgency except suppressing or inducing insurgents to leave arms without any agenda of development and upliftment. What is worst is that the Indian State tries to put conditions upon NE-States in processing developmental projects that development will be initiated only if there is total peace. Thereby the Indian State not only reduces causes of ethnic insurgency to lack of development, but it creates a contradiction between the possibilities of development and ethnic insurgency as if one precludes the other. In other words, the State absolves its responsibility to bring in development by putting the blame on insurgent outfits. At the ideological level such a 'passing the buck' approach is echoed in a more coherent manner. For example, the Indian State terms the whole cause of ethnic insurgency as something sponsored by foreign mercenaries such as Inter Services Intelligence and gives it a security angle by calling it a conspiracy to break India into pieces. Often the case of Kashmir and NE-India are equated, even LTTE, NSCN and ULFA are linked up in theorizing a grand design for destabilizing the whole of Indian subcontinent. What such a security approach grossly undermines is the contestation between rights of communities and the clash between Indian identity and ethnonational identity in terms of autonomy endemic within the very constitution of the Indian nation state. This portrays the limited appraisal of the aspirations of ethnic communities of NE-India and a subsumption of such aspirations within the homogenizing discourse of Indian national identity. This further portrays the truncated nature of operation of the democratic institutions of the Indian State as it has

to address the question of ethnic autonomy by the use of a logic of homogenization that curbs the dissenting voices of autonomy within itself.

Beyond the Pale of State: Nations from Below

The question that we raised towards the end of section one comes back here. The question was, 'whether this contest would remain open ended or it could be brought into a certain defined closure by various parties'. Rewriting this question with a different accent we ask, could it be possible to have a simultaneous autonomy as well as participation within a holistic political and social formation? The possibility of such a simultaneous role could be visualized in the inter-community and inter-nation's contestation. The politics of accommodation without addressing conflicts *sui generis* to such an accommodation as followed by the Indian State seems to remain caught within the closure of building a Nation through the authority of the State. The contestation of this plank of Nation-building of the post-colonial Indian State is the most common issue across all the ethno-nationalist mobilizations from NE-India. One can go into the fundamental questions raised by various such movements in articulating their positions. A few cases are cited and discussed here.

a. The Naga Case

Post Shillong accord Naga national movement led by Isak Chisi Swu and Th. Muivah's organization National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), now NSCN-(IM) describes Indian State a 'colonizer' which sent its columns of army to occupy the whole of Nagaland in 1956.⁸ NSCN further points out to the fact of referendum organized by Naga National Council in 1949 in which over 99% Naga people voted for independent and sovereign Nagaland. NSCN, therefore, questions the legitimacy of the Indian State in claiming the territory of Nagaland. NSCN further raises questions about a cultural invasion by the Indian State through flooding markets with consumer products and in deliberate attempts to change the cultural ethos of Nagas.⁹ What such apprehensions indicate is the possibility

of a cultural dominance by Indian State through various means that prompts NSCN's pledges to thwart such moves. International working group for Indigenous Affairs describes the cultural difference even more succinctly:

The Nagas are a Mongoloid race living in the hilly region of central Asia divided by the contemporary Inter-Burma border. Their highly egalitarian and community living sets them apart from caste-stratified Hindu societies in their neighbourhood.¹⁰

This 'difference' between cultures shapes the voice of difference with 'India' as a nation-state and this is repeatedly emphasized by various Naga organizations. The question is, would Indian State give recognition to this difference? In its' attempt to broker peace, the Indian State has never addressed itself to the question of sovereignty of Naga culture as this implies acceptance of the political self determination of Nagas. Rather guided by an apparent centrist concern the State prefers to set terms which only amounts to surrender of 'inalienable' notion of Naga national rights leading to continuation of insurgency in Nagaland and perpetuation of violence of human rights in Nagaland.

b. The Assamese Case

United Liberation Front of Assam points out the unabated process of depletion of natural and mineral resources from Assam by agencies of Indian State. It also points at the marginalization of Assamese national identity within the metropolitan Indian State as it does not recognize the indigenous rights over its own land and polity.¹¹ ULFA cites the process of marginalization in terms of disempowerment, poverty and all other maladies perpetrated on people of Assam by the corrupt machinery of the Indian State. It combines both these plundering of resources and non-recognition of indigenous rights as a fallout of Indian colonialism. But interestingly there are voices within Assamese nationalist line of thought who consider Assam as an integral part of the Indian Nation¹² and argue out the futility of fighting for a sovereign Assam. This critique of Assamese

Nationalism points at Assam's historical linkages with mainstream Indian culture and its participation within postcolonial nation-state.¹³ What this contest of opinion posits is the dilemma within Assamese nationalism. 'Assamese' as a nationality is still in the making with a large number of disparate ethnic groups: tribals, assimilated caste groups, immigrants, etc. A constant redefinition of identity marks a simultaneously fuzzy and stabilizing interior of Assamese Nationhood. Such a constant redefinition involves 'transformations', 'alliances' and 'dissent' within the formation of Assamese nationalism with a plurality of voices.¹⁴ Such a plurality refuses to accord to a monolithic and unified idea of nationalism. Cases like Bodo and Ahom denials of Assamese identity and fragmentation of the earlier consensus of tribals for belonging to a common Assamese identity makes the intelligentsia and the Assamese nationalist leadership rethink the idea of 'sovereignty'. Rather a good number of such people prefer the idea of remaining within Indian mainstream to pave a smooth assimilation of various subgroups within a common Assamese nation. As the question of retention of an Assamese identity against further fragmentation acquires primary importance, the elite within Assamese nationality prefer not to let the nation go haywire in fighting for a sovereign Assam. Within such changed circumstances, Assamese nationalist thinking flows into two distinct channels: One emphasizing unity of various sections of Assamese nationality to concretize Assamese identity and the other, letting various ethnic communities freely express their aspirations and articulate them in terms of their autonomy. The two trends are often mutually conflicting but both point at the growing cultural aspirations in order to strengthen Assamese nationalism. What is interesting is to note that the second line of thought opens up the possibility of expression of various sections from within Assamese nationality. A few cases should be cited here.

The movement launched by Bodo Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF) for a free sovereign homeland for Bodos also faces the same dilemma of 'autonomy' vs. 'independence'. Moderate and democratic bodies like All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) and Bodo Sahitya Sabha, Bodo Peoples action committee, etc. favour creation of a separate Bodoland State by carving out Bodo domi-

nated areas from Assam. The strength of alliance of such democratic forces speaks of a Bodo national aspiration different from 'Assamese' identity as they feel betrayed within Assamese nationalist movements.¹⁵

The cases of Karbis, too, portray an urge for autonomy without yet a distinct demand for independence. Though Karbi National Volunteer's Council (KNVC) proposes building up a separate Karbiland but it does not clarify whether it wants a separate nation or not. What this reflects is a growth of national consciousness at its early premature state threatening to emerge into a more radical position.¹⁶

The case of Tai-Ahoms also assumes significance in their continuous debunking of Assamese identity as a disguise by reclaiming Tai past of Ahoms and initiating a revival of Tai Ahom culture in the face of erosion of their specificity in the process of assimilation with "Assamese society infested with Brahminic and Vaishnavite culture".¹⁷ Therefore the attempts of cultural revival of Tai-Ahom communities express the categorical differences with Assamese culture and seeks to initiate a Taiization of Ahom-Assamese culture.

The case of Koch-Rajbangohi's demanding a separate state to be named as Kamtapur comprising parts of Western Assam and North Bengal is also an assumption of cultural difference with Assamese as a culture. They recall the history of Kamtapur kingdom during 11th century and seek to regain their lost authority over plains of Brahmaputra by way of distantiating them from Assamese Culture and by establishing a separate state for themselves. Interestingly Koch-Rajbangohis of North Bengal profess to fight Bengali cultural domination over them, while their bretherens in Assam stand against hegemony of Assamese culture.

c. The NE-Indian Context as a Whole

What such cases portray is that the ethnic and cultural minorities within the general identity of Assamese feel dominated and live in the process of greater assimilation within Assamese nationalism. Hence based upon cultural differences such minorities within Assamese community seek recognition of their cultural and political

aspirations and give rise to a discourse of securing these rights through self-rule. The general allegation of negligence and discrimination by such smaller factions of Assamese national formation point their finger at Assamese dominance over them and seek redressal by way of registering their political objectives.

Within Naga National movement too, there is an exclusion of Kacha Nagas comprising of Rogmei, Kamei, and Kabui Nagas, who had together formed a confederation called 'zeliangrong' and kept them aloof from movement for sovereignty of Nagaland. In fact the Zeliangrong demanded a separate state or autonomous council comprising of areas inhabited by their people.

The role of Kuki national army in resisting the diktats of NSCN (I-M) in Churachandpuri district of Manipur resulted in Kuki-Naga clashes between 1990-95. Through such clashes Kukis proclaimed their difference with Nagas and ultimately demanded an independent Kuki Autonomous council for Kuki dominated districts of Manipur. Further Paites who traditionally remained with Kukis felt alienated as a group within Kukis and formed their separate outfit to get their ethnic rights recognized as different from Kukis.

In case of Mizoram, the forced exodus of Brus from Mizoram resulted into the creation of Bru National Liberation Front (BNLF) which claimed to secure the rights of Brus expatriated from Mizoram. The BNLF recently demanded creation of an autonomous council for Brus in Mizoram so that lives of Brus are at least secured within Mizoram. The Hmar national organizations in Mizoram again renewed their agitation for creation of a separate Hmar State in Northern Mizoram. Bru and Hmar movements in Mizoram are debunked by Mizo leaders as detrimental to Mizoram, while the background of such movements reveals that Hmars were given a bad deal when MNF signed accord with the Centre in 1985. As for Brus, their indigenous religion and culture were humiliated as they were termed as 'outsiders' resulting into assertion of their identity in 1995.

These typical instances of ethnic mobilization in NE-India present the picture of dominance over a certain community by the State or by the culturally stronger community against which ethnic mobilization take their particular organized form. The struggle against

such dominance begins against an external dominance while it gradually turns against the dominant within the national formation. The struggle of Bodos, Tai-Ahoms, Koch Rajbongshis and others against the hegemony of Assamese culture to which they professedly belonged turns against the generic identity and searches for specific cultural markers to articulate a different self-identity. Such a process of redefining the identity by a number of erstwhile constituent smaller and marginal ethnic groups hinges upon cultural and historical specificities of their group and they carve out a niche for themselves independent of subservience to the State or to the dominant.

It is such an inspired search for an alternative indigenous identity that acts as the prime mover of ethnic mobilizations through which they claim what their inclusion within the dominant national formation denied them. Claims of this kind aim at annihilating the centre-margin relationship that emanated within the dominant configuration by decentering them to a different position from where they can claim the centrality of nationhood. Claims which bring at least a symbolic freedom from the dominant national group, without which such marginalized community could not assume the claims of dominance by inscribing the dominant category of identity upon itself. This is how the marginalized community makes the claim of being a nation in order to distantiate itself from the dominant and produce a horizontal difference with the erstwhile generic identity to which it belonged. In creating such a horizontal difference, say what the Bodos have created with the Assamese, it carries on a similar vertical relationship of subsumption within the Indian identity, but such a possibility of subsumption is resisted vehemently as this will defeat the search for their self identity in difference to the dominant to which they belonged. As an 'other' of the Assamese nation, the Bodos, therefore, are twice removed from Indian identity; once removed for their past belonging to Assamese identity and now removed for their non-belonging to Assamese identity and current existence as separate identity. From such twice removed position, smaller NE-Indian identities negotiate their self assertion with the larger Indian national identities, but this time as an independent identity. Interestingly, the Bodo, by choosing Devnāgari as their

script showed greater interest in distantiating from the Assamese, while the recent proposal to change to Roman script is a further move to distantiate itself even from a symbolic allegiance to Sanskritic Indian traditions. The case of Zeliangrong community differentiating them from Nagas also involves a similar kind of move to distantiate themselves from Christianity among Nagas as the Zeliangrong people professes their indigenous cult of the god Bambu.¹⁸

Such comings out of the generic identity independent of the hegemony of the dominant elite take us beyond the differentiation between the leadership and mass as it remained within the erstwhile formation. The experience of being marginalized while being a part of mobilization of the erstwhile group produces a vertical distance within the dominant formation and by moving in a horizontal trajectory of centring the marginalized identity, it moves beyond the earlier order of things. The case of Hmars moving away from Mizos portrayed that their horizontal decentring changed the earlier disposition of a relationship of subsumption of Hmars within Mizo nationhood.

The assumption of nationhood by such a separating community acquires a lot of significance in terms of ethnonational sensitivity. It also acquires strategic significance in terms of claiming a status which was denied to them and which placed the dominant community in the centre. Seemingly the cultural contest in which the community engages itself within the dominant formation assumes a political turn when the community asserts its own national status. Such an assertion cannot be regulated by the state as its interference would merely intensify already existent vertical distance between the dominant and the marginal. The phenomenon, therefore, could be categorized as an assertion of nationhood from below and within the dominant. While it assumes nationhood for itself it remains a simultaneous imaging of the dominant as well as contesting it in its own language. Such an assertion raises its own claims of cultural, historical and political validity by assailing the processes of non-recognition and non-representation that had hitherto muffled their autonomy. NE-India assumes a special significance with its ongoing national assertions from below as such assertions seek to break-

through the structuring of identities within the fold of dominance. The cultural contest involved in such assertions marks an attempt to strengthen ethnocentric communities, while the political articulation of such an assertion radically alters the terms of relationship between the dominant Indian National identity and the identities subsumed within it. A paradigm case of such assertion is available in the slogan of Khasi Student's Union (KSU) affirming, we are Khasis by birth and Indians by accident'.¹⁹

Such an affirmation by KSU assumes its significance with its contestation with Garos and Jaintias who are currently clubbed together to form the State of Meghalaya. The Khasi experience of uneven contest between Garos and themselves makes them feel marginalized in their own land. As such an experience sharpens the gap between Khasi and Garo which widens further because of activities of Garo outfit called A'chik National Volunteers Council (ANVC) demanding a separate Garo homeland. In response to such perceived separatism of Garos, the Khasi outfit Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC) also raises its demand for a separate Khasi homeland. This internal contest between Khasis and Garos portrays a transitional development after continuing to exist within the same State for over two decades.

Another form of such contest involves relinking the diasporic past of communities. Mizos of Mizoram consider themselves as part of the Zo people inhabiting the Northern Myanmar and Mizoram and there is a demand for unification of all Zo inhabited provinces. Such a trend for reuniting the dispersed sections of the nationality assumes a transnational significance as the political articulation of such demands would necessitate the redrawing of political boundaries.²⁰ Interestingly Mizos as ethnic minorities in Tripura had very recently demanded inclusion of North Tripura Jampui hills within Mizoram. The demand comes very close to the talk of a greater Mizoram as often voiced by various ethnic Mizo nationalist organizations.²¹

Especially those who remain in other terrains as minorities seek such panacea to the experience of being neglected and dominated. But the narrative of a greater Zo Country draws upon a distinct cultural history to claim for a reunification. This is also a

phenomenon of mobilization from below in the context of the 'Nation from above' Similar is the case of Nagas in Manipur who are currently leading the NSCN (I-M) movement and who seek reunification of all Naga inhabited areas of Manipur, Nagaland, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh creating a lot of furore among other ethnic communities inhabiting in those states. The case of Hmars of Manipur who participated and led the movement for Hmar Autonomy experienced a greater dilemma as the functioning of the autonomous council remained limited to the state of Mizoram.

Another site of Ethnic mobilization is the continuation of social boundaries between various ethnic groups interspersed with others while the terrain bears a common habitat. Such a feature of social boundary locates the base camps of Ethnonational mobilizations across the boundaries of the Nation State of India. The province of Kachin in Myanmar inhabited by people of Zo origin, Nagas, etc. provides social support to the base camps of various ethnic outfits in those areas. Such common locations of bases make insurgent outfits come to some alliances that reflect the possibility of social coexistence as well. In other words this also portrays a close historical, social and cultural connectedness between peoples of NE-Indian communities. Further the continuation of such social boundary even within Bangladesh and Bhutan make these countries a safe shelter for various ethnic outfits. The social boundary even extends to Thailand and East Asia as expatriate organs of outfits like NSCN and ULFA can operate from there because of physiological and racial closeness to the people of those Asian countries. Such a mobilization of transnational social boundary in ethnic insurgency further indicates the possibility of an alternative nationalism through these terrains of historical closeness.²²

NE-India as a Subject of Exclusion

This picture of ethnic emergence in NE-India through a contest over citizenship that involves the respective community identity and the Indian national identity remains in a terrain of unmediated negotiation between communities. The role of Indian State, as we have seen, largely remains limited and irresponsive to the processes of

formation of Nations from below. Such community oriented idea of nationhood grown within the dominant formation of Indian identity reveals the repressed interior of Indian nation-state by its intransigence to such claims of identity. Such an intransigence of the State ironically reveals and safeguards the unfulfilled tasks and responsibilities of the State by forcing various identities claims on their collective nationhood both as a subject of Indian nation as well as an autonomous entity.

The all important question is what makes the Indian State intransigent to such an assertion of subjecthood and autonomy? One can answer this question by observing a logical and processual linkage between the distinction of 'self' and 'other' within any claim of identity and its impact on the State or the polity. If we take the example of AASU which intended to remove outsiders from the sphere of its social life actually ordained a process of legitimation of the 'self' over the 'other' beyond the structuring of identities by the State. Such an autonomous move on the part of ethnic organizations resists attempts of ordering the identities in a linear and neutral fashion, which the State aims to accomplish. For holding a centre of power, the Indian state requires this kind of unsubjugated and yet subsumed set of identities. The dominant discourse of the State produces a central and dominant identity out of such a mosaic.

But such a statist formation of central Indian identity denies any place for local, regional and ethnic aspirations to articulate a position of power through its claims of identity. Indeed such local, regional and ethnic claims bring out a picture of non-recognition of aspirations at various levels. Rather an affirmation of identity draws upon such an exclusion. Once the State steps in co-opting and accommodating such excluded identities it codifies them within a static, stable and fixed name. The process of formation of Indian-State as we have discussed in first section of this paper positions a certain identity within a certain institutional framework, but such a positioning merely institutionalizes the differences, gaps and discrepancies, existing between dominant and less dominant partners of the State. For example, the inclusion of Assamese identity through creation of Assam as an administrative entity included within itself 'others' who were denied a separate representation in

the same act. This denial institutionalized the already existent differences within the setup and accentuated it through all its measures. One can term such an inclusion an investment in dominance. Such an investment strengthens the difference to such an extent that it gives rise to a conflictual situation as such an inclusion thickens the experience of exclusion in being included within a formation. The cases of Bodos and Hmars were typical of such exclusion in their inclusion within the formation of dominant identity.

Therefore, this mode of statist-nationalist inclusion demonstrates only a partial recognition of the status of an ethnic identity as it is clubbed within a larger formation. Such larger formations were necessitated by the compulsions of constitution of Indian State that could uniformly hold such formations as they would gravitate towards some kind of coherent centre, be it linguistic, regional or cultural. This project of homogenization as part of the project of forming the State left within itself the possibility of marginalization of many distinct cultural identities as well as their emergence with distinct claims of national identity.

This simultaneous act of inclusion of the dominant and exclusion of the nondominant by placing it within the dominant, automatically separated two layers of building the nation. It became a simultaneous exercise in 'Nationalism' and 'localism' and the sway of dominant communities over such a simultaneous exercise produces the possibilities of different layers of solidarity and mobilization within such a formation of the Nation space. But such solidarities had to face the dominant presence in any of its mobilizations. Therefore such mobilizations necessarily leads to a contest with dominant Nationalism. It also plays an antagonistic role against its own other nondominant formations. Caught in a double contradiction against the dominant as well the indominant, such mobilizations claim a lot of elements of other communities with which their aspirations overlap.

But such solidarities need to insurrect against the double contradiction in which they are caught up. Without an insurrection the fear is that their claim for a distinct identity status would be adjusted within fragile normative order. The case of Nagas resisting dominant appropriation by Indian Nation State also need to contest

the claims of its associated communities. Primarily such resistance cannot aim at establishing their own dominance, but it registers the distinctness of Nagas in between the Indian identity and other associate identities. This is a difficult mode of negotiation. In negotiating from such a catch the distinctness of NE-Indian communities lie at the risk of being called anti-national and anti-Indian perpetrating the worst forms of state violence unleashed on them. Their struggle against the armed agencies of the state expose their own people to face the enmity of a modern armed State.²³

In order to reduce risks, most often Indian State and the ethnic militants declare ceasefire mutually and try to settle outstanding differences through negotiation. But the imposition of framework of Indian constitution as interpreted by the State keeps the negotiations unproductive.

The acceptance of demands for autonomy and distinct nationhood implies a separate State formation and hence a breach in the Indian State identities. Such a state of affairs of being included within the National formation without any recognition to their distinctness remains as a mode of excluding them within the very structuration of Indian State. Hence it remains an open question whether distinctness of identities could be recognized by the Indian State by letting the political implications of autonomy in its most advanced form?

This question takes us to note that as a strategy of making the State the socially dominant, communities of India pursued a strategy of inclusion and exclusion by giving rise to the fundamental question of *identity/difference* in terms of finding answer to the question about one's location within the configuration of Nation. Obviously inclusion of a community within the Nation implied a concomitant exclusion of its other located within itself in various internal spaces. Looked from the other side the determination of who is not a part of the community/nation as envisaged from the point of view of an already entrenched community became very important for legitimating the presence of the self. This process of inclusion/exclusion being essential to the formation of a Nation from the perspective of the dominant forces generated resistance from those who found themselves caught within the pale of the dominant despite being a

part of the formation. Such resistances inverted this model of nation building by moving from a position of being excluded to exclude those who are not a part of their National identity. So the question of identifying Outsiders became essential as a response to such a process of inclusion/exclusion within the field of one's identity. Further this is an ironic and mimetic reproduction of the processes of building a nation through social dominance, a verisimilitude of what they themselves are subjected in. In other words becoming an outsider in the sense of being marginal provides the fillip to draw a line between inside/outside to reverse the experience of marginalization as a culture or community. North East Indian communities, therefore, convert their experience of being different and of being treated as an outsider to the mainstream, into an expurgation of dominant National communities in their struggle to remain inside out of the Nation. Such a mode of reversal acquires discursive articulation when a peripheral community makes use of the dominant rationality and its institutional mechanism to assert its inside over and against an outside to which they remain a forever outsider. North East India communities in this subversive mode rearticulate the idea of a Nation space which is free from outsiders produced by mechanism of the State.

Notes and References

1. Partha Chatterjee gives only a Political Economy explanation of such avoidance of 'Social conflicts' in terms of accumulation with legitimation within the capitalist formation of the Indian State. See, Partha Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, OUP, New Delhi, 1994, p.213.
2. For a detailed discussion, see Sajal Nag, *Secessionism, Separatism and Communalism in India: A Nation in the Making*, Rawat Publishing House, Jaipur, 1999.
3. For a detailed discussion, see B. Dutta Roy (ed.) *Reorganization of States in NE-India*, Omsons Publication, New Delhi, 1992.
4. In a historic meeting between Mahatma Gandhi and A.Z. Phizo, the Naga Nationalist leader in Bhangi Colony, Delhi in July, 1947 Gandhi said to Phizo: "If you do not wish to join the Union of India, nobody will force you to do that".
5. Such erasure by the State is reflected in considering tribal past as part of the mainstream Puranic tradition as Assam and Manipur are

often referred in Mahabharata as Naga rajya or Asura rajya.

6. See, "Surrendered rebels await ULFA end" in *The Telegraph*, April 5, p.9.
7. Fact Finding Report by Naga Peoples' Movement of Human Right on 20th August, 1996.
8. Isak Chisi Swu, "Statement on Naga Peoples' Movement" in *UN Conference on Indigenous Peoples*, 27th July, 1994, New York.
9. "Manifesto for Free Nagaland" by Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland, Oking, 1992.
10. "Nagaland: Ten Months of Peace in 33 Years" in *IWGIA Year Book*, 1998.
11. Memorandum Submitted by United Liberation Front of Assam to United Nation Organization, 1991.
12. This critique of ULFA comes in a very striking manner from the intelligentsia of Assam. For a detailed discussion, see Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back*, (forthcoming), Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla, 2000.
13. The concept of Asomiya Jati within Bharatiya Mahajati is mooted by Prof. Hiren Gohain as a counter argument to ULFA's claim of historical differences with Indian civilization.
14. See Udayon Misra, "Immigration and Transformations of Assamese Identity", *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 22nd, 1999.
15. The new spate of democratic movements in the demand for a separate state of Bodoland began from January, 2000 jointly led by All Bodo Students Union and Bodo Peoples' Action Committee. Re-launching of the movement also coincides with Bodo Sahitya Sabha and Bodo Ultra forces debate on validity of Devnagari as script for Bodo language. It also coincides with 'ceasefire' formally announced between Centre and Bodo rebels in March, 2000.
16. The polemic between Autonomous State Demand Committee, an organization led by CPI(M-L) Vinod Mishra group and Karbi National Volunteer force took violent turn causing quite a few killings and rape of a Karbi girl.
17. Dr. Puspadhar Gogoi, "State of Tai Studies in Assam and Ahom's Struggle for Revival", working paper from the archives of the Tai-Ahom Research Institute, Maran, Assam.
18. The indigenous god Bambu is the principal marker for Zeliangrong prowess and welfare. This distinguished them from other Naga communities.
19. For a detailed discussion see Prasenjit Biswas, "Construction of Identities in the Khasi Hills of North East India: A foucauldian Conspectus" in *North East India History Association Proceedings*, vol.16, 1996.
20. Sing Khaw Khai, *The Zo People*, the Burma Baptist Church Publications, Rangoon, 1995.
21. The latest is the formation of United Mizo Organization, a political part

- based in North Tripura.
22. For detailed discussion see, Prasenjit Biswas and Chandan Suklabaidya, *Ethnophilosophy: Cultural Politics In North East India*, (forthcoming), Samya, Calcutta, 2000.
 23. Such exposure to armed offensives continue to be the every day life of North East Indian People. Especially women and children become the soft targets of such offensives against which women's organizations like Naga Mothers Organization are fighting a battle alongwith sister organization like Meiri Peiba of Manipur, for details see Sukalpa Bhattacharjee, "Ethnosexualities: Two cases from NE-India" paper presented at VI-th Subaltern Studies Conference, Lucknow, 1998. Also see *Manipur Update*, vol.1, No.1, 1998.

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