

Territoriality, Indigeneity and Rights in the North-East India

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Source: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 43, No. 12/13 (Mar. 22 - Apr. 4, 2008), pp. 15-19

Published by: Economic and Political Weekly

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40277273>

Accessed: 28-03-2018 09:35 UTC

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question arises as to why those ulema who condemn terrorism as anti-Islamic did not say a thing about these groups. Is it that in their eyes their actions do not constitute terrorism? Every speaker at the convention, condemned America for its terrorism", but why, Ansari asks, "did they not themselves also introspect and look within?" Further, he rightly adds, while the ulema denounced the massive killings of Muslims in Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine by America and American-backed regimes, they remained curiously silent on the massacre of Muslims by fellow Muslims, be it by the late Saddam Hussain in Iraq, or in Darfur, Sudan, where several hundred thousand Muslims have been killed and

rendered homeless in a devastating intra-Muslim civil war.

In conclusion, Ansari aptly comments, "It cannot be logically sustained that, on the one hand, terrorism is condemned as anti-Islamic, and, on the other hand, silence is maintained about those (Muslims) engaged in such anti-Islamic activities. It is not enough to denounce terrorism as anti-Islamic. Terrorist organisations must also be specifically named and explicitly and sternly condemned." Their failure to do so, he suggests, had kept madrasas under "suspicion".

Yet, despite these apt comments by critics, the Deoband "anti-terrorism" convention is indeed a very welcome

development. One hopes it is not just a one-time event, but, as the organisers have promised, it is the first of a series of such meetings to be held across the country in order to galvanise a truly popular movement involving people from different communities jointly struggling against all forms of terrorism, whether by the state, groups or individuals, and irrespective of the religious or communal affiliation of its perpetrators. As one of the speakers at the convention, maulana Abdul Alim Faruqi, very appropriately put it, the struggle against terrorism demands that "Hindus and Muslims should unitedly work to take the country forward in a spirit of love, brotherhood and unity".

Territoriality, Indigeneity and Rights in the North-east India

SANJIB BARUAH

For the people of the troubled north-east, citizenship both of India and of a state can provide an alternative political idiom to that of indigeneity and territoriality. The obvious advantage of multi-level citizenship is that it could define political communities in civic terms, and introduce a dynamic element of incorporating new members. It could make a decisive break from the notion of ethnic homelands that owes so much to the colonial propensity of fixing tribes to their supposedly natural habitats.

On a February evening in 1944 when the second world war was still going on, Robert Reid, a recently retired officer of the Indian Civil Service addressed the Royal Geographical Society in London. The subject of his lecture was the Excluded Areas of Assam. This colonial administrative term – the Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas of Assam to be exact – referred to a major part of today's north-east India to which the war drew significant attention in the west. Reid, of course, was no dispassionate academic geographer. He was the governor of Assam from 1937 to 1942. The ideas he presented were central tenets in the colonial wisdom about the region, and the foundation of the colonial spatial order, i.e., the administrative boundaries, and the rules of inclusion and exclusion that prevailed.

While Reid emphasised the area's heterogeneity, the people in those borderlands, he said, share one thing in common: "neither racially, historically, culturally, nor linguistically they have any affinity with the people of the plains, or with the people of India proper". If they were "tacked on as an Indian province" it was only a matter of

historical accident and "a natural administrative convenience" [Reid 1944: 19]. "Hill people" was one of the few general terms Reid used to describe the people living in the region. This is not surprising. In this part of the British empire, the hills-plains binary more or less coincided with a legal distinction made between "tribal" people that were governed by customary law and other colonial subjects that were governed by general law. However, the presence of "tribal" people in the plains or "non-tribal" and non-native tribal people in the hills caused considerable difficulty for colonial ethnic classification.

Reid was forthright about placing the people of the region on a "civilisational" scale, and he confidently expressed his likes and dislikes. Thus the "Dufflas, Akas, and Miris", he said, are "very primitive peoples, who respond hardly at all to the influences of civilisation". While the Nagas of the Tirap Frontier Tract were "rather a degraded, backward type", in their "abode proper" they were "frank and independent by nature, often a cheerful and hospitable disposition" [Reid 1944: 19-21]. Phrases such as "abode proper" and the "backward and degraded type" point to the peculiar logic of colonial racial and ethnic classification: the fixing of "tribes" to their supposed natural habitats and, to borrow Paul Gilroy's phrase, a "bio-cultural" notion of ethnic traits as "fixed, solid almost biological" and inheritable [Gilroy 1987: 39]. This notion of ethnicity and the fixing of ethnic groups to particular physical

Text of lecture delivered at the Cotton Conclave in Cotton College, Guwahati, on February 21, 2008.

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spaces made it necessary to distinguish between so-called pure and impure types to account for those that strayed away from the assigned physical spaces, i.e., living in the hills instead of the plains or vice versa, or living in the “wrong” hills; or those that did not conform to the ethnic stereotypes that colonial officials had about them.

Anthropologist Matthew Rich has shown that a problem that the British colonial scholar-administrator confronted in north-east India was how to make sense of the relatively egalitarian mores and habits of many of the peoples, or rather the absence or the relative weakness of caste as an institution. Given their notion of India as an essentially “hierarchical” civilisation, they had to figure out whether the peoples of the north-east were outside or inside the racial unity of India. There was no easy answer, since the ethnic kin of the people that struck them as egalitarian or caste-free, also performed rituals that could be described as Hindu a short distance away. Such facts had to be either assimilated into the master principle of caste, or categorised as “external to the caste system yet internal to a racially defined unity of India”. The hills and plains therefore became the master oppositional binary in the colonial solution to this “problem” [Rich 2006]. People were therefore classified as belonging either to the hills or to the plains, even though the classification was fundamentally at odds with local cultural dynamics and spatial practices.

Colonial Knowledge and Contemporary Practices

Territoriality and indigeneity are recurrent themes in the post-colonial politics of north-east India. The saliency of the twin themes can be explained by a number of factors. To a significant extent they are idioms of resistance by “indigenous” ethnic groups fearful of getting minoritised in the face of massive immigration in a frontier region. But the prevalent notions of territoriality and indigeneity are shaped significantly by the colonial spatial order. Thus the politics of territoriality and indigeneity often becomes an exercise in defending the fences and walls that colonial rulers had erected. The continuing hold of colonial knowledge is reflected in both

official policy discourse, and the political imagination of local activists.

According to the Indian census, for instance, of the 23 scheduled tribes (ST) of Assam, 14 are called “hill tribes” and nine are called “plains tribes”. Because the census still counts tribes only in their supposed natural habitats, it produces the absurdity of the number of people belonging to ethnic groups classified as plains tribes, being zero in the hills, and those classified as hill tribes being zero in the plains. Thus as M S Prabhakara has pointed out, if one goes by the Indian census, the number of people belonging to “hill tribes” living even in metropolitan Guwahati, is zero [Prabhakara 2003]. The same logic is at work behind Bodos – a “plains tribe” – not being recognised as a ST in the Karbi Anglong which is a hills district. Bodo activists demand the extension of ST status to their ethnic kin living in the hills of Karbi Anglong. But Karbi activists resist this demand because it conflicts with the logic of what I have called ethnic homelands. The policy of protecting customary law and the preferential policies for STs – recognised as such only within the colonial ethno-territorial frame – have in effect meant the official acceptance of the logic of de facto ethnic homelands.

What were once safeguards for the customary practices of hill tribes have now morphed into a model of protective discrimination for ethnically defined groups within particular territories. A constitutional-legal context where the list of groups entitled to protective discrimination, and the boundaries of territorial units, are always open to modification and change, have become especially friendly to political mobilisation for ethno-territorial demands.

Yet the indigenous-outsider binary is far too dissonant with local spatial practices, and the actually existing political economy of north-east India. This has produced recurrent challenges to equal rights including episodes of ethnic violence and displacement, and a permanent crisis of citizenship. It has led to a major structural dilemma for the post-colonial practice of citizenship. The idiom, to borrow African intellectual Mahmood Mamdani’s words, penalises those that the commodity economy dynamises. Those who are mobile are

either penalised by being defined as outsiders [Mamdani 2005], or mobility is discouraged because privileges that go with ST status are made specific to habitats to which particular groups are fixed.

Thinking Outside Colonial Spatial Order

Colonial occupation, as another African intellectual Achille Mbembe reminds us, “was a matter of seizing, delimiting, and asserting control over physical geographical area – of writing on the ground a new set of social and spatial relations”. Colonial rule produced new “boundaries and hierarchies, zones and enclaves” [Mbembe 2003: 25-26] as physical spaces embedded in local resource use regimes became incorporated into global resource use regimes. The colonial spatial order involved the radical subversion of existing social, political and economic networks and property regimes. It is vitally important to free ourselves from the colonial way of seeing, and to take stock of the local cultural dynamics and practices of space, recognising the violent break in spatial dynamics that colonial rule represents.

But freeing ourselves from the colonial spatial order and the ethnic reductionism of colonial thought is not easy. This is true not only in north-east India. Everywhere in the world, political maps that typically represent the “national order of things”, for instance, make it difficult to make sense of the logic of political, economic and cultural systems that in earlier periods crisscrossed those borders. The pre-colonial history of western Assam and north Bengal (including parts of Bangladesh), for instance, is inseparable from Bhutan. Historian Sanghamitra Misra tells us of the “ambiguous nature” of the tributary relationship between the kings of Bhutan and the zamindars of Bijni and Sidli in Goalpara. Thus the Dharma raja of Bhutan every year sent horses to the Bijni raja and in exchange, the chief of Bijni sent dried fish, endi silk and salami. That the relationship between the king and his tributary rulers had a degree of reciprocity, and that the gifts given by the Bhutanese king were of greater value than the tribute received from Bijni and Sidli, was a source of utter confusion for British officials [Misra 2005: 220-21].

As if that was not confusing enough, the powers of Bhutanese officials and those of the rulers of Bijni and Sidli overlapped. The Kuriapara Dooar, for instance, was under the occupation of Bhutanese officials for eight months of the year, while local powers claimed revenue during the rest of the year. Nor were the kings of Bhutan the only claimants to such rights in this part of pre-colonial north-east India. The Ahom kings also asserted their “rights over the produce of the Dooar region and were frequently in conflict with the state of Bhutan”. At the same time the Ahom court acknowledged “the sovereignty of the Dalai Lama of Tibet over the region” and paid an annual tribute [Misra 2005: 227-28].

Unlike political scientists of a generation ago that took the modern idea of absolute and indivisible sovereignty as normal and desirable, many today look to shared sovereignty as an aspect of the usable past that could provide a framework for resolving many stubborn territorial disputes of today. For instance, Tibet, as international relations theorist Stephen Krasner points out, used to symbolically recognise the supremacy of the Chinese emperor by paying occasional tributes, yet there was extensive local control. “Both the Chinese and the Tibetans”, he believes, “might be better off if Tibet could regain some of the autonomy it had as a tributary state within the traditional Chinese empire”. Yet it is hard to translate a tributary relation into an arrangement consistent with the modern notion of indivisible sovereignty [Krasner 2001:28]. Indeed most states tend to resist compromises on the notion of absolute and indivisible sovereignty, even as they confront stubborn ethno-territorial conflicts that become eminently resolvable outside the framework of this modern dogma. However, there are examples such as “two systems one country” formula for Hong Kong in China that can be read as shifts away from the idea of indivisible sovereignty.

In north-east India, the hold of the colonial spatial order on contemporary political imagination applies not only to international borders, but to internal administrative lines as well. Yet when those lines were drawn – including those

between the hills and plains – the coherence of indigenous political or economic systems could not be further from the minds of colonial officials. The Inner Line, for instance, was put in place as the security parameter of the colonial capitalist frontier at a time when tea plantations, oil wells, coal mines, and cash crops like jute were changing the landscape, subverting local economic and social networks and property regimes. The pre-colonial networks, resource use and property regimes did not neatly stop at the colonial border between the hills and the plains, or at the Inner Line.

How do we think our way out of the box of the colonial spatial order and the ethnic reductionism of colonial knowledge? James C Scott’s work on south-east Asia, especially his formulations on state and non-state spaces, is suggestive. His starting point is the fact that historically, in these parts of the world land was abundant, but manpower was in short supply. The problem confronting the states in the valleys therefore was how to have large enough subject populations. Thus wars were not over territory, but involved the capture of subjects and slaves. The labour-starved states of the plains could not capture the dispersed and mobile populations in the hills for forced labour or military service; nor were tax collectors able to monitor their numbers or their holdings and income [Scott 2000: 2].

The non-state spaces in the hills and the state spaces in the lowlands, however, were in a symbiotic relationship. There were back-and-forth movements between the hills and the plains. Wars produced movements in both directions. While the attractions of commerce and what the lowlanders like to call civilisation may have generated movements of hill peoples downwards, it was not a one-way flow. Thanks to the extortionist labour demands of the lowland states and, the vulnerability of wet rice cultivation to crop failures, epidemics and famines; there were also movements to the hills where more subsistence alternatives were available [Scott 2000: 3-4]. Thus categories like hill tribes and valley peoples are “leaky vessels”, in Scott’s words. It is this symbiotic relationship that is probably reflected in a world where

languages, in philosopher Mrinal Miri’s words, “live so close to each other” that “in many cases, one gets inducted into the life of the community not just through one language but several languages, so people grow up as naturally multilingual beings”. When one switches from one language to another and mixes different languages in a conversation in north-east India, writes Miri, “one doesn’t move from one vision of the world to another in a kind of schizophrenic frenzy; but one is, as it were, a native citizen of a multi-visionary world” [Miri 2005: 55].

Some Contradictions

Nothing illustrates the incongruity of the political idiom of territoriality and indigeneity more than the controversy over ST status by the adivasis – descendants of tea workers who were brought to Assam as indentured labourers starting nearly a century and a half ago. The tea workers posed a classificatory problem for the census of Assam more than a century ago. In the language of the 1891 Census, the “aboriginal tribes of central India” were not included among the “forest and hill tribes” of Assam, and instead were classified simply as labourers [Rich 2006]. Today adivasi activists argue that since their ethnic kin in their places of origin are recognised as STs, they should have the same status in Assam. Rather strikingly, they use the bow and arrow as an ethnic symbol, presumably to meet the test of a “primitive” past that is still part of what a group needs to prove to get ST status.

That a group that provided the muscle for the 19th century capitalist transformation of Assam today demands ST status and the framework within which the debate is being conducted, draw attention to the dangerous residues of colonial knowledge that remain in India’s institutional culture. Seen through the prism of the global political economy, the tea labour community of Assam is part of the same 19th century migration that took Indian labourers to plantations in various parts of the British empire, such as Fiji, Guyana, Mauritius or South Africa. India now celebrates the Indian diaspora. The Pravasi Bharatiya Divas honours descendants of those migrants to far-away shores, some of whom rose to become presidents

and prime ministers of their countries. Surely, given the contribution of the tea labour community in blood and in sweat to the formation of modern Assam, no other group has a better claim to full citizenship rights and compensatory justice than them. Yet in a political culture that is infused with colonial knowledge, there is little space for asserting their claims except through the language of ST status.

The roots of a few other controversies regarding ST status in contemporary Assam also lie in this aspect of colonial knowledge that became institutionalised into legal categories. Thus communities like the Koch Rajbongshis that are on the plains and the non-tribal side of the divide, now seek ST status, and communities like the Bodos that are recognised as ST, but are on the plains side of the divide, now seek Sixth Schedule status, once available only to "hill tribes".

The Inner Line, originally put in place in 1873, is another colonial institution that survives. Today Indian citizens require permits to enter the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland. Since only certain ethnic groups legally belong to these territories, it is not difficult to see why those living behind the Inner Line would develop a stake in defending this colonial institution. After all, it becomes a legitimate way of excluding outsiders. However, the logic of the commodity economy and everything that takes place under the short-hand "development" mean that outsiders do come and work across the Inner Line. But a permanent distinction is maintained between those that legally belong to these territories and those that do not. Given the fears of minoritisation, it is not surprising that there are growing demands by ethnic activists for extending the Inner Line to other parts of north-east India.

Yet this talk of retaining or extending the Inner Line underscores the incapacity of Indian official thinking and local political imagination, to think outside the box of the colonial spatial order. The Inner Line, as historian Bodhisattva Kar reminds us, was "not only a territorial exterior of the theatre of capital – it was also a temporal outside of the historical pace of development and progress". The communities beyond the Line were seen as "belonging

to a different time regime – where the time of the law did not apply; where slavery, headhunting and nomadism" could exist [Kar 2008]. While India today seeks to bring about massive development and progress in this zone that was once marked off as being on the temporal outside of such a process, it lacks the political capacity to challenge the colonial spatial order, and consider removing the Inner Line that had fenced off that region as being outside the "theatre of capital".

A Proposal

Mahmood Mamdani has observed in the context of Africa that defining "political identity, political rights, and political justice first and foremost in relation to indigeneity had turned the colonial world upside down, but it did not change it" [Mamdani 2005]. Economists use the term path dependency to refer to the phenomenon of being locked into bad choices even when better alternatives are in principle available. It is easy to stick to a path that has already been taken, because making a switch requires strong political will and the investment of significant intellectual and other resources. That the genocide in Rwanda was ultimately the product of the Hutu and Tutsi being constructed as native and settler [Mamdani 2001] should serve as a warning about the dangers of continuing to indulge a political idiom

that is shaped by some of the worst institutional legacies of colonial knowledge.

In the spirit of "the utopian impulse" associated with the work of Karl Mannheim – to project possibility beyond a given reality as a "discovery process of political projects that may later become possible and realistic" [Breiner 2001] – I have elsewhere put forward a proposal for multi-level citizenship [see Baruah 2005, chapter 9; 2007]. Citizenship both of India and of a state can provide an alternative political idiom to that of indigeneity and territoriality. Multi-level citizenship is not unknown in federal systems. Instead of effective local citizenship being determined by state monitored customary rules that define ethnic belonging (that prevails in the old Excluded Areas – i.e., four of the seven north-eastern states), state-level citizenship could introduce a civic principle, and give the right to define the rules of inclusion and exclusion to territorially defined political communities. In principle, such a provision could be extended to all north-eastern states.

My premise is that citizenship discourse is based on a different grammar than the discourse of territoriality and indigeneity. In principle, most countries recognise three ways of becoming a citizen: birth within the territory of a country ('jus soli'), descent from a citizen ('jus sanguinis') and naturalisation. If 'jus sanguinis



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incorporates the principle of citizenship gained through blood ties, the other two principles can incorporate the ethnically or culturally different outsider. On the other hand, current rules in a number of states in north-east India – the old Excluded and Permanently Excluded Areas – in effect guarantee the ethnic composition of the political class governing ethnic homelands with few ways of incorporating the outsider except when the customary practice of a *st* fixed in that space allows it, that is only through the mediation of the *jus sanguinis* principle. Countries, of course, vary in terms of how much of the *jus soli* principle is applied to the claims to citizenship of children of immigrants born in a country, and on the degree of difficulties that are involved in obtaining citizenship through naturalisation. Yet inherent in the grammar of citizenship discourse is that new members can enter the political community as full members, unlike the rules of inclusion and exclusion of our *de facto* ethnic homelands. It is hard within the discourse of citizenship not to recognise the rights of second- or third-generation immigrants. Outsiders and their descendants cannot remain foreigners in perpetuity.

The obvious advantages of introducing state-level citizenship in this frontier region would be that it could define political communities in civic terms, and introduce a dynamic element of incorporating new members. It could make a decisive break from the notion of ethnic homelands that owes so much to the colonial propensity of fixing tribes to their supposedly natural habitats, and is profoundly out of sync with the actually existing political economy of the region. State-level citizenship could allow elected state governments and legislatures, to make rules by which an internal immigrant or his or her descendant can become a citizen of the state, and a full member of the local political community.

Indian public opinion is unlikely to be sympathetic to the idea of multi-level citizenship. However, it is possible that such constitutional innovations may be less politically controversial in north-east India than, say, in Jammu and Kashmir. In any case, it is not a matter of introducing new restrictions on rights to movement,

residency or property ownership. They already exist. Multi-level citizenship would only introduce a civic element to the composition of political communities at the state level. At the same time, it will not abolish distinctions between outsiders and locals. This is not an advocacy for dismantling the protective discrimination regime. Multi-level citizenship will continue the protective discrimination practices, but will incorporate an inclusive civic element over time consistent with the trends of demographic change.

Conclusions

Activists in north-east India often allude to memories of ancient kingdoms in support of their contemporary territorial claims. In appealing to the past, however, they show little awareness that colonial rule involved a profound break in spatial and cultural dynamics. Yet one still finds traces of local spatial practices that stubbornly resist the ethnic reductionism of colonial knowledge. However, to discover them one must step out of the colonial archive. For instance, only about 40 miles away from Guwahati, the Jonbil mela still takes place every year, where a descendant of the Gobha king presides over a fair in which Tiwas, Khasis and Karbis that straddle across the colonial hill-plains divide, trade edible roots in exchange for fish.

Of course, the appreciation of such local spatial practices would have to go hand in hand with an understanding of what the colonial spatial order was all about. Long before north-east India became a remote and militarised border region in the postcolonial political order of nation states, it was incorporated into the global capitalist economy in the 19th century. The efforts of the descendants of tea workers to claim compensatory justice with a borrowed idiom of remembered tribalhood and primitivism, underscore the need to fundamentally rethink the political idiom of territoriality and indigeneity in this 19th century capitalist frontier.

The memories of a real or imagined shared past mediated by the colonial spatial order and the “bio-cultural” notions of race and ethnicity on which that order was founded cannot be the basis for rights

and entitlements in north-east India. The political and intellectual challenge facing the region is to bring about a language of politics that is based on an understanding of local cultural dynamics and practices of space, as well as a vision of a common future of those who live in the region today. The more able we are to think beyond the rigid borderlines of the colonial and post-colonial spatial order – whether it is the Inner Line or notions of absolute and indivisible sovereignty – and accommodate practices consistent with notions of soft boundaries and shared sovereignty, the better the chances of ending the protracted conflicts that plague north-east India today.

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