

Commentary

Re-Imagining India's Northeast: Beyond Territory and State

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Introductory

Northeast India is doubly displaced within the Constitutional nation-space: as a political-territorial space of the nation, it is still a “periphery”, while as a culturally specific locale its difference is misrecognised. Although the discourse of development normalises the space of difference, in the case of Northeast, it produces a disjunction between the “developmental ensemble” and the lived and the experiential world of multitudes. This disjunction can be thematised in the opening and the closure of the region in the logic of exclusivity in the very operation of the Constitutional mechanism. Suffice it to say that the logic of power privileges a discourse of “top-down” instrumentalist development over and against the primacy of the constitutional forms of justice and equity. The inherently communitarian character of resource distribution and ownership is significantly distorted and altered by the process of “mainstreaming” that the constitutional mechanism simultaneously upholds and debars. The contest between ethnic-communitarian sphere and the civic domain produces a dialectics of containment for both the State and the community.

This can be exemplified in the discourse of State-building that attempts to produce a pragmatic synthesis between the community and the nation. Such a synthesis borders on several claims of authenticity and legitimacy, the former arising out of claims of cultural and ethnic rootedness and the latter arising out of appropriation of dominant discourse of citizenship. Ironically enough, this discursive production of an identity and subjectivity is set against its own limits by a discourse of development that decontextualises any struggle within the democratic parameters of the State. The nexus between the State and the market weakens the democratic struggles for “participation” in the polity.

One question that arises at this point is, can the specific formations of ethnic and cultural identities and insurgencies signify a fundamental dissensus to the regimes of policy and development? Prima facie, the dissensus produces an “other” space beyond the deliberative limits of a Constitutional state that now assumes a de-politicised interior. Isn't proper to identify this space as an “other” Northeast that does not fit into

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the logic of the “mainstream”? A systematic suppression of dissent in the Northeast has been a strategy of state building that opens up the possibility of “othering”. Northeast as an “other” of the mainstream acquires its own distinctiveness that is simultaneously sovereign and sovereignty-free.

India’s Northeast, away from the discursively rooted nationhood is a space of flow, or a spectral flow of maps, territories and identities. It stands out as an internally differentiated and yet nominally integrated space of difference and otherness circumscribed by possibilities of boundary-making and boundary-crossing. Ethnic heterogeneity, a constantly evolved process of othering and an ever elusive call of freedom and self-determination produce a different space and time with its in-appropriable unbounded imagination of diasporic homelands. Such diasporic homelands assume a great narrative potential within which lived experience could be posited. Accounts of such lived experience require an imagination of the “beyond” in certain geopolitical destinations. These destinations are constructed not from the perspective of “reading” and “seeing” like a state (Scott 1998), but from the perspective of the unknown and the unmapped. What remains unknown to the subjects of lived experience is a long history of migration that resists knowledge of settled history.

Zomiyas and Successor Societies

Such lived experiences throw up the history of migration that has been captured fundamentally in two distinct frameworks: one by James C. Scott’s model of non-state spaces inhabited by stateless peoples who lived beyond the frontiers of organised state in upland Southeast Asia and lived a migratory nomadic life (Scott, 2009). The other framework by Richard A. O’Connor speaks of “ethnic succession” in relation to agro-cultural complexes involving subordination of lowland ecology by a succession to complex agro-cultural systems on the upland leading to a “closure” for latter migrants (O’Connor 1995: 968-996). These two frameworks throw up logical and paradigmatic models to understand empirical details and systematise these details by going beyond local knowledge of the subjects. One of the major debates in such systematisation is the constitution of the State as a relationship between subjects and power, between agents and structure. James C. Scott provides an account of “liminal zones” that are neither inside nor outside the State that reduces the authority and the functional control of the State. Such zones are elevated uplands that pose physical barrier to the entity called State. This physical barrier served those communities that wanted to flee or resist the State and in the process these communities avoided governance under the State and choose to live in a stateless condition. Examples of migrating communities from Upper Mekong to lower Mekong delta, Northern Thai and Burmese communities including major communities like Mon, Khmer, Han and numerous nomadic tribes such as Chin, Lisu, Karen, Akha, Hmong, Kayah to name just a few, whom Scott labelled as Zomiyas. Zomiyas are, in Scott’s (2009: ix-x) inimitable words:

Zomia is a new name for virtually all the lands at altitudes above roughly three hundred meters all the way from the Central Highlands of Vietnam to northeastern India and traversing five Southeast Asian nations (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Burma)

and four provinces of China... It is an expanse of 2.5 million square kilometers containing about one hundred million peoples... at the periphery of nine states... virtually everything about these people's livelihoods, social organization, ideologies, and... even their largely oral cultures, can be read as strategic positionings designed to keep the state at arm's length... to avoid incorporation into states and to prevent states from springing up among them.

The Zomiyas remained illegible as they escaped the abstract categorisation by the State and remained elusive to the processes of settlement and subjection within the territorial jurisdiction of the State. As legibility implies a viewer whose vision is synoptic and who can see from outside, the Zomiyas not only remained outside the pale of institutionalised land tenure, legally appointed chieftainship and such other forms of systematised constructions of identity. Indeed the illegibility of the Zomiyas prevented the State from coming into being. Zomiyas could follow a parallel path of livelihood and belief system that does not require an arbitrator or an authority over and above their social organisations.

These illegible Zomiyas of Scott turns out to be singular and specific agro-cultural complexes marked by a set of agrarian and cultural practices such as home-garden or wet-rice cultivation in O'Connor's understanding. Wet rice cultivators left the lowland delta and inhabited the highlands as successors to sedentary agriculturalists. The highlanders carried the practice of wet rice cultivation by shifting from flood management to flow management. This transition is explained by O'Connor (1995: 970) in the following way,

Now let us map peoples and contrast, say, 700 A.D. and 1700 A.D. In the early era Pyu, Mon, Khmer, and Cham rule the mainland, while to their north are Burmese, Tai, and Vietnamese. Ten centuries later the northerners dominate everywhere. In irrigable niches the southerners are gone (Pyu) or in decline (Cham), and their remaining strength is in the unirrigable lower deltas where Mon and Khmer floodfarmers live in states under northern overlords. Juxtaposing these two eras reveals an epochal change. The date, pace, and completeness of the change vary but not the larger fact of a succession.

The larger fact of succession from lowland to highland in the form of a disjunction between cultivating practices and practices of rule or state acts as the source of "social contrast" between lowland settlers and highland successors. If Scott's Zomiyas are the highland successors who always moved away from the state and lived in the periphery of centralised states, then Zomiyas also are the successors of settled agro-cultural complexes from the lowland. This contrast of state and non-state spaces in terms of highland and lowland gives rise to interesting cultural contrasts as well. Lowland communities practice a kind of collective burial of the dead in their fields, who ensure land right and collective belief in such spirits, while highlanders have no such ownership attachment to their land and community spirits become lineal spirits. Transformation of community spirits into lineal spirits also marks a kind of transformation from patrilineage of community spirits to matriliney of lineal spirits, a contrasting transformation that marks the story of migration to highland. Matriliney goes with highland as successor community

could see itself as a lineage not from the pastoral lowland but from the mountainous upland that held them on its laps and contours. Mountains connecting the world above is conceived as maternal nature, while the plain land below is conceived as paternal. Lineages and its imaginative domains formed around mountains imagined themselves to be freed from patrilineal regulations and tended to remain more matri-local and matrilineal in its pristine connection with sky and the world beyond. This matrilineal tendency in-built around settlement in mountainous terrains and spaces separated by deep gorges and steep hills often converged in water-heads and watersheds. The Brahmaputra river system in the Northwest of Southeast Asia, the Irrawady on the North and many other rivers act as common meeting grounds between hilly terrains and adjacent plains.

The Territorialisised Selves

The terrains of migrations find its descriptive, symbolic and existential representation within the self-definition or within the core notion of self in many tribes and communities. For example among the Kuki-Chin group of tribes, narratives of a common origin somewhere in Southwest China called Chhinlung/Khul and similarly among the Naga groups, a shared common origin called Makhel etc. give rise to an oral narrative of migration through various places in the entire Mekong-Sino-Myanmar terrain. What is more interesting is the dialogical and interactive motifs within these tribes in the form of water-spirit, rock-spirit and hill-spirit that enter into existentially lived self's reflection on its own life. Such spirits assume a variety of forms and functions such as kinship relations, transformations into insects, animals and birds. Spirits act as potential and efficient causes behind natural disasters or gifts and boons that are received from Gods and Goddesses. There is an implicit ordering of all that one experiences in terms of spirit functions and its relationship with higher order beings. One may surmise that concrete objects such as rocks and mountains are situated as spirits that live in the neighbourhood and are contained within a sacred boundary within which the tribal self can define itself. Only on the occasion of death, such a self travels across the threshold and goes onto land of dead that lies beyond the bounds of the immediate sacred boundaries drawn by concrete hills and rocks. A boundary of the sacred and it's beyond often signifies the inside and the outside that determines the subject position of the tribal self.

These boundaries are conceptualised by tribes in terms of belief about past, present and future. Time and boundary lead to abstractions and interpretative surpluses such as memory tales, limits of finite and infinite beings, ritual means of propitiation of these beings, metaphors and images of the supernatural, sickness and healing processes of the mortals etc. These interpretative surpluses open up specific conceptual tokens to a hermeneutic interface with other concepts and beliefs drawn up from other tribes and communities. For example, in a fascinating story of lived experience, there is a competition between sister rivers (who are river goddesses in Khasi tale), namely, Ka Umtong, Ka Torasa, Ka Pasbira, Ka Jani and Ka Dwara to reach the plains of Sylhet. As all of them take short cuts they lose their way in the hard rocks. Contrastingly the river Umiam quietly flows down the serpentine hills to reach the plains. The flow of the river is construed as river spirit that gets its representation in competition between rivers with a rider that one who does not take a short cut reaches the destination. River stories and

river spirits are absent among those tribes who did not migrate following the course of river. For example, in the Kuki-Chin group of tribes, it is the water creatures such as crabs and insects that assume an anthropomorphic function in determining fate of humans, but there are no significant tales of rivers connected with thick and thin of life. It is rather an issue of survival that arises from such river based animals. It needs to be further explored whether two different kinds of narratives based on two different terrains of migration can find some parallels and comparisons.

On the core concept of self, for example, in the Kuki-Chin context, the concept of *Tlawmngaihna*/Tomngaina and the concept of *Rngiew* in the Khasi context that defines the presence of the self/person could be compared in their fine-grained shades of meaning. Any such comparison cannot just be a semantic exercise, but it needs to be correlated to the whole course of migration. How a string of concepts that are available within a specific worldview give rise to a coherent meaning token and how each of these concepts remain connected with some pre-history of migration can provide a better understanding and perspective on conception of self. For example, Khasi concept of Nongshonoh as the keeper of U Thlen, Palaung (Myanmar and Northern Thailand) concept of snake spirit called *I-ran-ti* and a place where such snake spirit lives called *Kok-ya* has a close connection. In the course of migration, Palaungs and Khasis are supposed to have close ties in terms of cultural memory and concepts from one worldview got its repercussions in another. It got altered, transformed and fine-tuned by taking off from each other's specific moorings. Similarly, in the Kuki-Chin group of peoples, the *Ciimnuai* genealogy of belonging to a common ancestral tree with tribes such as Miao, Lolo, Moso, Yao, Tung and Lai in Northern Thailand and Southwest China produce an intensional notion of self, a self that derives itself from its relation with other brethren tribes with whom they are separated in the course of migration. An example of this arises in *Tlwamngaihna*/Tomngaina or the Mizo notion of personhood that finds its close reverberation in *Zothang*/*Zokang* of Lai-Zo and *Tlang* of Zo seemingly travelled from Kham region of Southwest China to move down to Yesago of Northwest Myanmar to Zo-Tlang of Chin state of Myanmar. Seemingly, Tlang as a locale with its institution of Kuki-Chin group of people assumes the form of *Kham-tung-mi*, literally, "people on the hill slope" as well as a form of "soul" in the animal or in any other natural object that later gets transformed into human form of kinship relations and associated norms and codes of behaviour to find itself emerging into *Tlawmngaihna*, as in present Lushei hills. Contrasting people with Zo line of descent further hone the concept as *La-Pao* as in Kuki culture. Similarly the commonality between Zo and Karen worldviews can be noted in Pa-O and Sgaw Karen belief in *yawa*, the creator who is dispersed in forest, river, field and land and the ancestral female spirit known as *Naka cheng*. The interconnections between tlang, *Tlwamngaihna* and *naka cheng* and their mutual transformations deserve exploration into many a hidden contours.

In contrast to Mon-Khmer and Tibeto-Burman tales of origin, ambivalence of origin among the Abo and Tani group of tribes opens up a new dimension of self-conception. Tani conception of *Doyni-Polo* as the creator involves the Sun goddess and the moon god and their union to give birth to all the living creatures of the world. Further, Tani group's ceremonies such as *Myoko* and *Murung* perform elaborate rituals to regen-

erate the souls. It is said among the Tani groups, “Miyu Saliang La Gyunyang Santa Tiggo Santa Lingi Du” (man is born with the ceremonies for spirit and therefore we cannot have a prosperous life without these spirits). In a sense, the connection between place of origin and spirit worship is transformational, the former transforming into the latter. In case of such a transformation, there is a creative appropriation of the idea of origin in symbolic forms. Tani group speaks of *Kojum Koj*a (rib of the hills). As descendants of *Kojum Koj*a the Tani group stood against the God of deluge called *Biri-Bote*—the hill and the river enter into a binary contrast. Quite in a similar vein, the Hmong (one of the major Tai group residing in Thailand, Cambodia) notion of *saib loojmem* or literally “sighting the veins of the mountains” involve both a trajectory of migration and a conceptual formation that reproduces the relationship between hill and the community. One might surmise that seeing the veins of the hills is an intimation of the successor social formation in the upper Mekong. Tai speaking people such as Hmongs, normally settled in lower valleys intimate and indicate the emergent social formations in upper hills of Northwest Laos. This marks a transition from Hmong to successor societies such as Tai Nua to Khmu communities and their settlements. Similarly, Tani ambivalence towards water-spirits and a greater attachment to hill and celestial spirits mark an aversion towards riverine routes, routes which are occupied with more ancestral or other communities such as Akas, Khampas, Padamyongs and/or Tibetans and Bhutiyas. Indeed water-spirits in Tani tradition assume the form of *wiyu* or evil spirit. Territorially water-spirits come from trans-border of Southern Tibet, marking a kind of descent into lower depths and finally they are supposed to reside in the nether world. This is a non-hierarchical horizontal construction of self that purges out alien spaces and spirits from the inner core of self-definition.

The Primacy of the Anthropological

There is a reciprocal and alternating convergence and divergence between physical and cultural spaces with the basic elements of self-conception. Initial organisation of a dwelling space brings out the underside of tribal imagination: presence of an alter subjectivity to whom experience could be related in the mode of conscious self-relation. The idea of *Kojum Koj*a and *saib loojmem* is a form of everyday cognition that gives rise to a various levels of conscious understanding of how the self cognises itself. Such a cognition is relational that arises through specific representations. Another form of representation is construction of conceptual artifacts that it is not only that the reflective consciousness of the world is modified by the pre-reflective in the form of a transformation of pre-reflective into reflective, but it also produces a “phenomenological datum” within any expressive, metaphorical, rhetorical and literary rendering of the experiential. In the phenomenology of the tribal world, any rendering of the experiential takes the form of geomancy or some kind of spiritual explanation of the phenomenon.

Such a construction of self combining the lived space and the phenomenological datum from the lived space along with a variety of conceptual artifacts draws up its resources from beyond, which is the larger terrain of Southeast Asia. The Project aims to explore certain close connection between tribes of Northeast India and Southeast Asia. Apart from the tribes, there are Major cultural inter-relatedness between Shan people

and Ahoms, Meitei people and other Tibeto-Burman groups of people.

As far as Naga tribes are concerned, they have their close kins with Mao, Kham and Akha people of Southwestern China. There are significant linguistic and cultural similarities that can be understood on a closer examination. Kuki-Chin group of people has significant and shareable cultural similarities with Hmong, Miao, Kham, Lai, Tai Lue communities. Indeed there are cross-cutting beliefs, folk motifs and shared stories of origin in space and time that opens up possibilities of wider comparison. For example, Hmong origination from the hills and their settlement to the plains point to a reverse migration that happened in search of water, which is similar to Naga migration in search of sources of water for swidden cultivation.

This comparison would open up various core notions of self as it is available in the worldviews of various communities and tribes. An important constituent of these worldviews is the religious beliefs and practices that throw up a number of ideological categories. For example, among Tai Lue community of Southwest China, there are conception of self that sink deeper below the surface level praxis, adjusting to a subterranean world of secret alliances and multiple meanings. Tai Lue community adjusts itself to dry plains, to the spirits of shrubs and groves and flower valleys that are invoked in festivals such as Wat Phrathat Sob Van meant to bless the community. Similarly in the context of Northeast India putting down roots in a deeper substratum of personal and social networks will lead us to intricate ways of world-making that various tribes engage in.

The account brings into play religious belief and rites of passage from one territory to other in a larger function of “grain producing community” that keeps copying itself, from plains to hills and from hills to plains in relation to fields, water, mountains and spiritual well-being (Scott, 2009: 9-10, 23). Taking this as a point that undergirds much of Southeast and South Asian formation of successor communities and their boundaries within the landscape, one needs to inquire how nation-spaces with its logic of territorialisation actually subverts the sense of belonging of those who own a fuzzy history of migration of their life-worlds. Such a subversion is more metaphysical and ideological, as it consists in a project of appropriation of these nascent communitarian forms of life into a legitimised narrative of national identity with its force of unification. Depending on the level of tolerance of plurality and difference, various nation-states attempt to draft a variety of policies of recognition and assimilation of these essentially minority-ised fuzzy ethnic identities. Scott and van Schendel’s description of these identities as northwestern “borderland” identities of Southeast Asia (van Schendel, 2005: 275), Graham Chapman’s description of these identities as “resource owning and resource sharing deterritorialized identities” (Chapman, 2009) are more liberal than that of “singularities” of nation-state. Singularities that create a binary opposition between native versus settlers, indigenous versus non-indigenous actually subvert both the common space of belonging as well as the idea of “indigenous citizenship”. The conflict is patently reflected in territorial claims beyond one’s lived spaces that result into certain singularities. The question is, why such claims are made? Do such claims create a conflict between ethnically defined citizenship and civic citizenship? How borderland identities deal with these questions of adaptations, struggles and cross-border alliances is a major question.

These questions do not depend on mere territoriality, but such identities are inscribed in terms of indigeniety, migrancy and situated belonging. Drawing and redrawing of several such boundaries across the spaces through which such identities traverse in space and time, be it drawing of national boundary or be it marking of internal boundaries between communities reproduce a narrative of shifting, altering and fluctuating self-descriptions, which sometimes remain non-negotiable in many a mutual encounters. Such encounters shaped the national policies toward these mutually clashing, competing and contesting identities.

The moot question before us is the dominant process of nationalist appropriation of these communities and identities, who mostly remain in the border spaces and lie at the exterior of the nation. For example, the whole of India's Northeast, although a part of the Indian territorial identity is ascribed a different signification in terms of its contiguity with other South Asian states. There is a simultaneous inclosure and exclosure of these areas in an imagery of being a part of the other. To illustrate, Barak Valley of Southern Assam is considered as an imagined extension of Bangladesh, while the Khnogsha valley of Arunachal Pradesh is conceptualised to be at the extended area of Chinese territory, Eastern Nagaland is considered to be an extension of Myanmar's Eastern Kachin. An abundance of such spatial extensions and co-extensions is a cognitive mapping of the otherwise subverted overlap between communities that leaves a remainder of the actually traversed routes of migration by these communities. Indeed the link between Hemi Nagas and Kachins of Myanmar, Tani group of tribes of Arunachal Pradesh with some of the tribes on the Southern border of Tibet Autonomus region of China (Zayu, Menyü, Medog, Mainling and Lhunze counties), who all live across Dihang river that flows from Tibet to Kameng districts of Arunachal Pradesh. One may consider the phenomenon of drawing of boundaries between nation-states as a way of opening up continuous interpretative anthropological connections across political divide. This leads up to position the primacy of the anthropological-ethnographic imaginaries over the realist idea legitimacy of political and security apparatuses.

Such extensions and co-extensions also go into formation of homeland imageries and territorial claims of belonging. For example, the Kuki-Chin notion of Zale'n-gam including Lushai hills, Chin hills, Kachin hills, Shan state upto the river Chindwin and the Kale-Kabaw valley in Myanmar bases itself on the mutual affiliations. The Kuki-Chin peoples joined with other tribal and ethnic minorities of Myanmar in forming their ethnic militia. Kukis joined Wa, Palaung, Paoh, Lahu, Chin, Arakan peoples within federation of ethnic nationalities of Burma. Quite parallel to such mutual affiliation, the whole of Chin, Kachin and Shan states are inhabited by many of Northeast India's Naga ethnic groups such as Hemi, Chang, Konyak, Yimchinger, Tangkul and many other Kuki-Chin ethnic groups.

Once there is primacy of the anthropological knowledge on territories and customary practices, it takes over the limits of political positioning of ethnic identities in the border lands of Southeast and South Asian territories demarcated in nation-states. What emerges is much more complex and sensitive than mere descriptions of the kind, such as "indigenous", "native", "migrant" and such other reflexive categories of interpretation. What also needs to be pointed out is that the anthropological is overdetermined

by the constitutive splits in the categories of the spatial and the temporal, which arises as part of a larger memory tale of migration through a currently undetectable terrain that silently stands out as an evidence for succession and moving away from permanent state and social forms (Scott, 2009).

Can this overdetermination be expressed in terms of usual categories of “self” and “other”? Can this overdetermination find its reverberations in the subject-centred descriptions of Anthropological and philosophical categories? The self of these communities cannot be produced in the tormenting gaze of the disciplinary othering of the communities by a host of scholars, as such a self is never present to the constantly migrating and shifting communities and their landscape and memory-scape of time and space. The content of their “selves” remain beyond the reach of nationalist, security-centric imagination of a self-present awareness of itself. The latter imagination (nationalist, security centric) can only turn inward to recover a phenomenology of absence from their self-descriptions, while such a perspective shall always lie at the exterior of the local community, as their narratives constantly keep floating above the subversive as well as stabilising “constructive” narratives of the nation-state. The domain of such communitarian narratives as retrieved by an anthropological machine shall only produce a few liminal quibbles of the traces of their selves that can be feebly heard within the master narrative of the nation-state (Mccaskill, Leepreecha and Shaoying, 2008).

A kind of sympathy for nationalist narratives work as the basis for ethnic struggles. Such a sympathy is held as a source of imagining difference by security centric approaches. It formulates a sense of distance from one’s own emotions, whose history is now depleted by a sense of belonging to civic co-existence. This deep rooted fissuring of the anthropological by the political and the security imaginations as part of the production of nation-state is simultaneously an effect of distancing of the plural worlds of multiple identities in a state of liminality. No notion of a unified existence can capture liminality within its rigid limits. The saturated limits of nationalist notion of *Rashtra* or *Desh* is always paradoxically opened up to a zone of the liminal by the lines of flight drawn around ethnic, local and community notions of belonging.

The question before us is, how does one institutionalise this notion of a different self within the given federal structure of the nation-state? The question remains, which of the given or new form(s) of institution would be best suited for the ethnic identities of Northeast India from a menu of, say, Associated State, territorial autonomy within differential federal system, Condominium, complete autonomy with respect to Economy and Juridical affairs? The broader political issue of inclusion and exclusion of various constituent units of an ethnonationalist identity could be categorised by drawing them from chosen field(s) of engagement. Such a recovery of voices can dispel the regretful tones of triumphant and achieved nationalisms’ such as Indian nationhood that consigns truth exclusively to itself and relegate falsehood and inferiority to others such as North-eastern tribes and communities.

The State of Exception

Agamben’s “bare life” that constitutes “Being” “as its own form”, “inseparable from itself” and appropriates “belonging to itself” is a “form of life” that challenges the very

“sovereignty” of itself by simultaneously producing “an undivided people” as well as a “biopolitical fracture” of a “state of exception” that does not distinguish between “representations” such as life and State, death and politics (Agamben, 1995). The continued divide between appropriated life-worlds of communities and peoples versus internal boundaries in terms of homogeneous homelands act as a condition for reduction of identities to political subjects. Such political subjects are often produced and reproduced as “rebels”, “outsiders” and as people disqualified from the pale of Constitutional rights.

Such a reduction of life into “bare life” and the “synchronous difference and diachronous deferral” between the “coming-over” of “irruptive event of hope” as “grace” and “gift” does not mark out a destined homeland, as it is deferred to geopolitical imaginations. Such geopolitical imaginations of the beyond by ethnic communities of North-east region cannot affirm the “passage of time”, as the experience of “hoping the un hoped” always is a never-yet, a continued “midnight” in Northeast. In case of Northeast India, the paradigmatic vision of freedom from the colonial yoke and emergence into a destined homeland is turned into an exception to the logic of the Indian state, as it cannot recognise the “politics of difference” that it gives rise to. The homeland imaginary constituted in terms of living and belonging to a territory and its secondarily constituted adaptations in other spaces keep creating renewed yearnings of return to an originary home as a destination.

The syntax of empty signifiers of temporalisation of the event of “achieving our own country/nation/home” and the hope for being “saved” refer to an un hoped, impossible, empty, transcendent object that is mediated by way of “representations” constituted by “normative institutions and expectations” that are formative of individual and collective identities in the planetary contexts of desacralisation, secularisation, and democratisation. The question is, can the finite and temporalised bounds of the historical and cultural “sense” of community represent such a planetary hope for itself as well as for the Other in ethically oriented political actions to be fulfilled in projections of the fullness of the community, justice, democracy, and the like?

An Agambenian “state of exception” (Agamben, 2005) persists in India’s North-east. Military interventions determine articulations of authority of the State of India as well as armed resistance to such an authority. India’s six decades long war with Naga nationalists threw up an irresolvable problem of “unification of Naga inhabited territories” under one political entity in the ongoing peace talks post-1997 ceasefire. The failure to resolve the demand for unification has resulted into internecine conflicts between Meitei-Naga, Kuki-Naga and Naga and other borderline tribes inhabiting areas adjacent to Myanmar. Questions such as (1) whether inclusion of Naga-inhabited areas from four Indian states of Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh would actualise the Naga unification into a single administrative umbrella as demanded by Naga nationalists; (2) whether “other” minority tribes and communities such as Chin-Kuki, Komrem, Wanchus, Noctes and many others have equal citizenship/homeland rights in the proposed unified area are posed and a “war of positions” is enacted between all the affected parties. This complicated inter-tribal, inter-ethnic and Indian State versus Naga nationalist positions requires a framework of peace-building. I would surmise that institutional peace building processes have to be based on an attempt to overcome the structural,

cultural and relational contradictions that lie at the root of conflict between Northeast Indian communities and the Indian nation-state. For this purpose, innovative ways of transforming the ontology of conflict at Intra and Inter-ethnic levels between Nagas and other communities vis-a-vis the “state of exception” needs to be worked out. A framework that denies a fully legitimate domain of sovereignty has to be shunned in favour of emergent forms of ethnic sovereignties by recognising the right of the other peoples and cultures. It is still a question whether the Catalonian and Flemish models of territorial autonomy can be of any help as the current tension between security-centric approach of the Indian State and the self-defining acts of the Naga nationalists result into an equivocal outcome of vigilantism, the reverse face of a Constitutional democracy.

The post-conflict reconstruction in many ethnic conflicts in Northeast India shall depend on establishment of a non-military and non-violent institutional mechanism that can self-reflexively evaluate long-term and short-term policy measures. Working out such policy measures in geopolitical terms is still a distant dream, as community specific articulations of identity, space and power is sub-ordinated to a larger discourse of mainstreaming. Such mainstreaming only produces a regime of rights based on the disused rights of others and propels the geopolitical imagination towards an internal fragmentation that multiply injuries.

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