

## Ethnicity, Identity and Cartography: Possession /Dispossession, Homecoming /Homelessness in Contemporary Assam

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### Abstract

Ethnicity is emerging as a focal consideration in the politics of identity in contemporary Assam, a state of the Indian union in the North East of India. Often identified as a flash point in the subversive politics that question the logistics of the Indian nation, North East India is emerging as a cartographic domain that posits questions of internal colonialism and hegemony. Cartographic reorientation of territory based on factors of linguistic and ethnic identity is perceived as a way to acquire new homelands that will foster self-validation and the 'all round development' of the people. The North East of India is dotted with armed insurrection for autonomous territories under the Indian Union or total severance, depending on the population and the spatial domain of the ethnic groups in question. The linkages with questions of social, cultural and political marginalisation, as well as political assertion provide interesting scope for academic exploration. The present paper seeks to understand and trace such assertive movements in Assam to forces of historical neglect as well as the rhetoric of marginalisation that is surfeit in contemporary assertive idioms of different ethnic groups.

**Keywords:** identity, ethnicity, transactive domain, resistant pluralism, cartography.

### Introduction

Assam is a state of the Indian Union, located in what is known as the North East of India comprising eight states<sup>1</sup> of the Indian Union. It shares international borders with China, Myanmar (Burma), Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. The British annexation of Assam into Colonial India began in 1824 as a response to the Burmese invasion of Assam in 1822 and was complete by 1839. The Colonial province of Assam, by 1874, was a large administrative area with the annexation of Naga Hills in 1826, Jaintia, Garo and Khasi Hills by 1835 and the Lushai Hills in 1895 into British India. The North East, by the time of India's independence in 1947, comprised of the states of Assam, Manipur, Tripura and the predominantly Buddhist frontier province of North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), which became a full fledged state of the Indian Union in 1986, and was renamed as Arunachal Pradesh.

In the aftermath of Indian independence, different ethnic groups within the administrative domain of Assam began voicing their aspirations for self-determination that ranged from demands of autonomy within the Indian union to complete secession. The Naga Hills district of Assam was separated from Assam and became a full fledged state within the Indian union in 1963; however, attempts at secession from India continue and the Government of India is in negotiation with some of the secessionists groups, and a partial cease fire is in place. There are occasional bloody upsurges of interethnic clashes between the different ethnic groups fighting for secession and a negotiated settlement still looks remote. The Lushai Hill district, after a bloody and protracted struggle for

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1 The eight states are Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura.



**Figure 1:** Assam at the time of independence showing the then neighbouring states of Tripura and Manipur

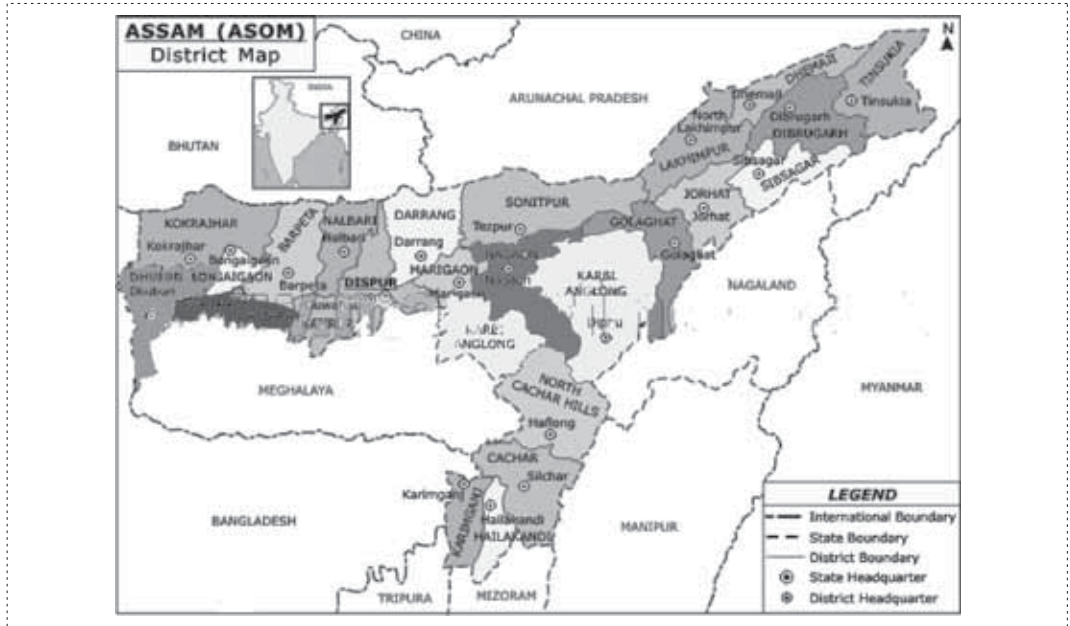
Source: [www.sikhphilosophy.net/sikhheritage/28839-assamese-sikhs.html](http://www.sikhphilosophy.net/sikhheritage/28839-assamese-sikhs.html) (accessed 23.09.2011)

secession, was separated from Assam as a centrally administered territory<sup>2</sup> in 1972, and a full fledged state named Mizoram within the Indian union in 1987. Unlike Nagaland, statehood ushered in peace and stability, and Mizoram is held up as a success story of the Indian Government's policy of negotiated settlement.

The United Khasi and Jaintia Hills district and Garo Hills district of Assam, in response to growing demand for autonomy by the 'tribal' areas of the state, was cohered into a semiautonomous region of Meghalaya within the state of Assam in 1970 before becoming a full fledged state within the Indian union in 1972. Thus, by 1972 Assam was divided into four states: the Hindu majority Assam with a sizeable Muslim population, and the Christian hill states of Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya. However, in the 1960's, there was a movement in the predominantly Bengali speaking Southern Assam, popularly known as Barak Valley, after the river Barak which flows through the region, against the Government of Assam's notification declaring Assamese as the official state language. On the 19<sup>th</sup> of May, 1961, 11 people lost their lives in a police shooting in Silchar, the headquarters of the southern Assam district of the then undivided Cachar, while agitating for the recognition of Bengali as an official language. The government of Assam subsequently gave the status of official language to Bengali in Southern Assam that now comprises of the three district of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. However, the language issue keeps cropping up sporadically, the latest being in 1980 when Assamese was made a compulsory subject in the secondary school of Assam, only to be subsequently rescinded.

However, the creation of Meghalaya can be said to mark the first phase of the complete fracturing of Colonial Assam, and a relative lull was observed in territorial demands based on tribal/ ethnic/ linguistic identity till the 1980's. In 1979, the influential All Assam Students Union (AASU) and All

<sup>2</sup> In India, centrally administered territories are known as Union Territories, and are under the direct control of the central government at New Delhi.



**Figure 2:** Map of Assam showing different districts

Source: [www.123yatra.com/india/eastern-india/assam](http://www.123yatra.com/india/eastern-india/assam) (accessed 23.09.2011)

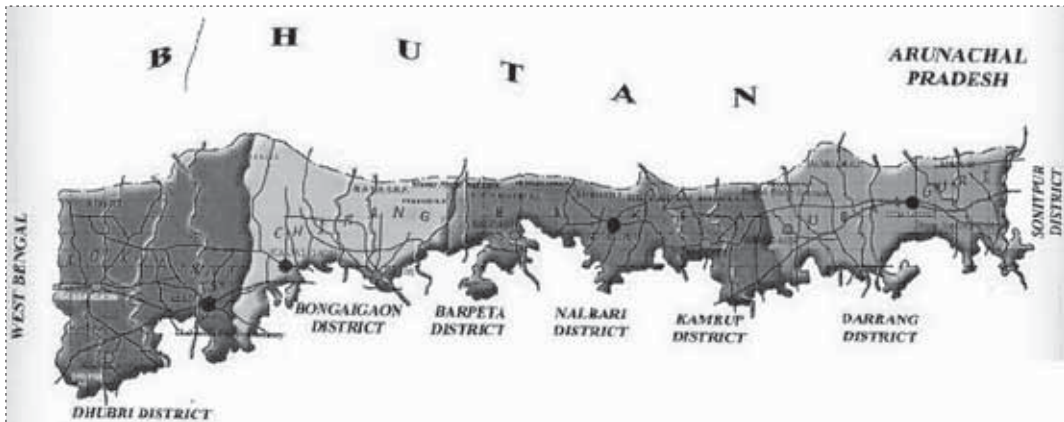
Assam *Gana Sangram Parishad*<sup>3</sup> (AAGSP) launched the anti-foreigners agitation against Bangladeshi immigrants, and it enjoyed unprecedented mass support in the hill districts and Brahmaputra valley, as all the constituent ethnic groups that went into the evolution and consolidation of the Assamese nation lent its might to the movement, popularly known as the Assam Agitation or Assam Movement that had as its agenda the identification and deportation of Bangladeshi nationals and the prevention of fresh infiltration. It was during the movement that the secessionist United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA)<sup>4</sup> was formed and a violent insurrection for an independent Assam was launched. The Assam accord was signed in 1985 with the Government of India, and the AASU and AAGSP agreed to end the movement. The political party *Asom Gana Parishad*<sup>5</sup> came into being and it rode to power in 1985, steered by the leaders of the Assam Movement. Meanwhile, the ULFA gradually strengthened, and the armed and violent battle of attrition continues.

Not all the contributing constituents of the Assam movement were happy with the aftermath of the Assam accord, and many found themselves out of the corridors of power. Upendranath Brahma, who was a close collaborator of AASU, launched the All Bodo Students Union's (ABSU) movement for the self-determination of the Bodos, the largest ethnic group in Assam, with the collaboration of Bodo People's Action Committee (BPAC), formed on the lines of AAGSP in 1987. The principal demand was for a separate Bodoland state. Parallel to the ABSU's movement, groups like Bodoland Liberation Tigers (BLT) and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) were formed, whose agenda was a violent and armed rebellion for the self-determination and freedom of the Bodo people. In 1995,

3 *Gana Sangram Parishad* in Assamese would translate to 'Organisation of People's Struggle'

4 United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) was formed on April 7, 1979 by a group of radical activists of the anti-foreigners movement to free Assam from the colonial Indian Government. This was the beginning of a long battle of attrition in Assam, and marked a turning point in the history of insurgency in the region as Assam was added to list of states traditionally riddled with anti Indian armed struggles, namely Manipur and Nagaland.

5 *Asom Gana Parishad* in Assamese translates into the 'The organisation of the people of Assam'



**Figure 3:** The map of the Bodo Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD) carved out within the state of Assam

Source: [www.bodoland.in](http://www.bodoland.in) (accessed on 23.09.2011)

the Indian Government conceded the autonomous Bodoland Territorial Council to the Bodo people, but the movement for statehood still continues, in the trajectories of the upgradation of Meghalaya from an autonomous region to statehood, with one faction of the NDFB in a truce and the other in rebellion. Similar statehood demands dot Assam, with the hill districts of Karbi Anglong demanding a Karbi State for the Karbi ethnic group and the hill district of North Cachar Hills demanding a Dimasa state for the Dimasa ethnic group by integrating all Dimasa speaking regions of the North East that includes tracts in Nagaland and Southern Assam. Both demands are backed by armed rebel groups, factions of which are now in negotiations, while others carry on with their insurrection. The recent renaming of the district of North Cachar Hills to *Dima Hasao* (land of the Dimasas) invited strong protests from other ethnic groups like the Hmars and Jeme Nagas, as they contend the assertion that North Cachar Hills is a Dimasa homeland.

### **The politics of identity: language, culture and homeland**

Thus, it can be understood from the short introductory note above that identity formation dominates the contemporary political and social discourse in the North East of India. Ethnic assertion, revivalism, and quests for a separate space are the major trajectories around which such identity struggles revolve. Most resistant and resurgent idioms are centered on the issue of language, which is linked up with ethnic identity. This can be linked to the reorganisation of states on the basis of language in India after independence. States were carved out around the identity of major Indian languages. Most Indian states were identified with a language.<sup>6</sup> Thus, it was widely assumed that Assam was a land for the Assamese speaking people. But it created its own problems. Assam was a multiethnic state, where different ethnic groups had their own languages, and the viewing of Assam being a land for the Assamese was seen as a dominance of the official and majority language over other languages spoken by numerically smaller groups. This doubled as an indicator of the Assamese dominance over other ethnic groups. Thus, present articulations for separate homelands based on language as an identity marker in Assam are informed by social, political and historical conflict, and “the complex relations

<sup>6</sup> Thus, West Bengal is the homeland for the Bengalis, Maharashtra for the Marathis, Tamil Nadu for the Tamils, Kerala for the Malayalees and so on.

between / . . / language and political history embodies the conflict of social forces which will produce particular discursive forms, effects and representations” (Crowley 1993: 70). Speakers of the Assamese language at various moments in history strived for cultural unification and nationalistic consolidation through the appropriation of their ethnic hinterland that were dotted by many other languages. This was mainly attempted by making Assamese the medium of instructions in educational institutions like schools and colleges. In hindsight, this is seen as an imposition on and scuttling of the potential of smaller nationalities, for whom identities were intricately linked up with their languages.

However, such attempts at linguistic and, thereby, cultural appropriation did not always mean the exclusion of diversity and apparently hegemonistic and nationalistic discourses, like the champions of Assamese nationalism, who often responded to demands for linguistic and political representations by accommodating such demands. This is most evident in both political domains and expressive domains like music and literature.

In the expressive domain, one would like to mention the genres of Assamese fiction as a form that constantly strived to meet the historical requirements of a unifying discourse by accommodating and glorifying cultural subtexts in an attempt to forge a greater Assamese cultural text. The first conscious attempt to narrate the plural nature of the region and portray the diverse ethnic composition was made in Assamese literature, especially in fiction. The earliest novel of prominence in this genre is Rajani Kanta Bordoloi's *Miri Jiyori [Daughter of the Miris]* (1894), which tries to represent one of the prominent ethnic communities in the Northeast, the Misings, earlier called the Miris, through the narration of a tragic love story. After Independence, Kailash Sarma's *Bidrohi Nagar Hatot [In the Clutches of the Rebel Nagas]* (1958), *Anami Nagini [Naga With No Name]* (1963) and *Dalimir Sapon [Dalimi's Dream]* (1972) depicted the Naga way of life and gave the first hint of narrating ethnic assertions and the violence associated with it. Early post-independent Assamese literature perceived itself as an integral part of the imperative to narrate the nation and integrate plural entities into the national consciousness. A kind of inclination towards metanarratives was emerging in India in the first flush of Independence, and the conscious attempt was to consolidate a larger Indian identity by the processes of homogenising. Early post-independent Assamese authors inhabited these socio-political narratives, and one should view early writings keeping this nationalistic appropriative discourse in mind. Jnanpeeth award winning novel *Mritunjoy [Triumph Beyond Death]* (1970) by Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya and Umakanta Sarma's *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya [The Crowd and the Forest]* (1986) are novels that immediately come to mind. Both the novels have the representation of ethnicity, but the main aim was to forge and consolidate regional and, thereby, national identity. The first novel has the revolutionary approach to the Independence struggle as its main preoccupation, where ethnic representations are incidental to the main narrative thrust, and how such struggle forms a common legacy that binds the nation together. The second novel is a humanistic depiction of the travails of the immigration of the labourers of the tea industry into Assam, their emergence as a distinct ethnic identity, and the author's ideal of their final assimilation and integration into the canvas of a larger Assamese society. In the realm of popular culture, over the years Assamese music and film have tried to accommodate and glorify the ethnic subtexts of the greater Assamese nationalistic text.

In the political front, throughout its post-independent history the Government of Assam has set up autonomous councils for different ethnic groups, and Assam has two district councils for the hill districts of Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao, an autonomous council for the Bodo Territorial Council, and six more autonomous councils for six different ethnic communities: the Tiwas, Rabhas, Misings, Sonowal-Kacharis, Thengal-Kacharis and the Deuris. In addition to these, the government of Assam has announced the setting up of autonomous councils for seven more ethnic groups in 2010, namely the Ahoms, Matakas, Morans, Koch-Rajbangshis, Chutiyas, Adivasis and Gorkhas. Thus, in the constitution of the essential ethnic self, the determining markers are notions of a 'homeland' and the 'mother tongue'. Homelands are often sought to be concretised in terms of cartographic representation, the determining markers being language, art and culture; hence, the rush for new maps is seen as a

promised deliverance from dystopias, the horror of an exploitative and uncompromising state and socio-economic structure, the corrupt others. Creating new homelands through maps is basically an attempt to sanctify spaces from corrupt cultural and political intrusions, loss of livelihood options, and expunge the cultural others.

It is with an awareness of the uniqueness of the situation in Assam that one has to enter into the emerging theoretical premises of Northeast studies in India. The need is to historicise theoretical debates in their socio-political context. However, one would also need a certain amount of sympathetic intellect to humanise such debates. The earlier centripetal trends of unification and nationalistic consolidation can be seen as a response to the need of consolidating new found nationhood as the:

*[...] fate of nations which have managed to escape from colonial rule and the historical complexities involved in such processes serve as further counter-examples ... The preference for pluralism and difference may well be laudable one but history demonstrates that forms of unity and organization may be a prerequisite before such an achievement can be attained. (Crowley 1993: 85)*

The present centrifugal trends that celebrate differences and ethnic uniqueness in Assam are the symptoms of a radical rearrangement and realigning of political and cultural dynamics. As Gramsci had mentioned, “every time the question of language surfaces, in one way or another, it means that a series of other problems are coming to the fore: the formation and enlargement of the governing class, the need to establish more intimate relationship between the governing groups and the national-popular mass, in other words to reorganize cultural hegemony” (in *ibid*: 83).

## Interethnic dialogues and pluralism

Assam is marked by the existence of numerous languages and dialects that is held up as a dominant marker of a plural society. However, the mere façade of a plural society does not always indicate the existence of a mutual and dialogic engagement between cultures. Contemporary debates on pluralism owe its antecedents to the observations of Furnivall, who had marked a plural society to be a ‘medley of peoples’ that ‘mix but do not combine’:

*Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet, but only in the market-place, in buying and selling. There is plural society, with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit. (Watson 2002:19)*

Furnivall’s observation is important because it was based on the observation of an emerging multiethnic Asian milieu in South East Asia, traits similar to the social, cultural and political set up in Assam and North East India. Furnivall’s ‘market place’ can be said to be the part of a transactive domain, where the constituents of a plural society engage and deal with each other. According to Azyumardi Azra, an Indonesian scholar:

*Furnivall further maintained that this situation is accompanied by a caste-like division of labor, in which ethno-religious groups play different economic roles. This social segregation, in turn, gives rise to what Furnivall regarded as these societies’ most unsettling political trait: their lack of common social will. Facing this unfortunate situation, Furnivall asserted that unless some kind of formula for pluralist federation could be devised ... pluralism seemed doomed to a nightmarish anarchy. Furnivall’s ‘doomed’ scenario by and large fortunately failed to materialize itself. In contrast, a post-war Southeast Asia saw the establishment of independent Indonesia and other countries. But, this national independence was assumed to paradoxically stimulate the rise of ethno-religious sentiment in the struggle for control and power of the new state. Indonesia saw outbreaks of communal violence in the late 1950s and 1965; more shocking yet,*



*Indonesia was shaken by bitter, though intermittent, ethno-religious violence since 1996—the final years of President Soeharto in power—up to 2005, when all communal conflicts from Ambon (Maluku province) to Poso (Central Sulawesi province) and Aceh were finally peacefully resolved. (Azra 2010)*

Daniel P. S. Goh, a scholar from Singapore, distinguishes post-imperial societies and postcolonial societies, while directing attention to the nature of plural societies in South East Asia. Post imperial societies are ‘former metropolitan and dominion societies of the First World’, whereas postcolonial societies consist of the nonwhite societies of ‘Third World’ Asia and Africa. He goes on to argue:

*[...] the problem of multiculturalism in the latter category goes deeper than the political effects of colonial racialization in structuring citizenship and national identity issues. The key difference between postimperial and postcolonial societies is the nature of the state. The state in postimperial societies is liberal democratic, with a long history of being conditioned by civil society struggles against state power, or the cultivation of civil society institutions and representative democracy as in the case of the former dominions. But the state in postcolonial societies is born of the colonial imposition of absolute power and built on colonial racialization as opposed to being merely inflected by it as in postimperial societies. As an instrument of absolute rule, sometimes intentionally operating with a divide-and-rule strategy but mostly operating on the premise of ethnic pluralism along the lines prescribed by colonial racialization, the colonial state intervened into local society and organized the social economy according to its pluralist model. Consequently, the nationalist elites who inherited the legacies of colonialism also inherited a racial state and its pluralist worldview. Resulting separatist ethnonationalisms and ethnic conflict are symptoms of the continued operation of the racial state, and ironically, symptoms that confirmed its pluralist model. In such a situation where the political effects of colonial racialization are acute and traverse the entire length and breadth of state–society relationship, the problem of multiculturalism revolves around the question of whether the ruling group could establish itself as the transcultural elite who can legitimately define the distribution of the economic spoils of national development to ethnic groups. (Goh 2008: 233-234)*

In a similar observation on the North East of India, Patricia Mukhim, an activist journalist from Meghalaya, opines that:

*The modern Indian view is [...] that the existence of different ethnic identities within the nation and the existence of systems to separate these identities are divisions which in themselves are a source of conflict and therefore ethno cultural assimilation is both desirable and inevitable. But in fact, the exact opposite is true. The point about ethno culturally divided societies is that they wish to remain divided. A Bengali or a Bihari is determined to retain and preserve his identity as is a Khasi. Each group draws the essence of its being, its group consciousness from the fact that it is different, and that it wishes to remain different. Those who see division as a source of conflict overlook the fact that conflict arises because threats to the factors which make for that division – threats to separate identity, characteristics, or even real or perceived threats to the existence of the group. (Mukhim 1996: 30-31)*

Siddhartha Deb, a Bengali from Assam settled in the United States who writes fiction in English, deals with the plight of the Bengali Hindu settlers in the North East from erstwhile East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. In his novel *The Point of Return*, one of his characters points to the insularity of the Bengalis in the North East:

*We [Bengalis] were not perfect, we are not perfect and never will be. We were insular and narrow minded, with a false sense of superiority when we first came to ‘Assam’. We saw the honesty of the tribal people as stupidity and through that we taught them our deviousness. That is the irony [...] that we should have learnt to be more human only when they became less so. (Deb 2002:286)*

## Space, maps and identity

The term 'plural' can be contested from different spatial domains. I would like to approach Assam in the sense of a heterotopia. An idea first put forward by Foucault, heterotopia means 'many places' and is defined as a social space combining different functions: 'a single real space' in which incompatible spaces are juxtaposed in a sort of "counter-arrangement in which all other real arrangement (state/territories/nations) that can be found in a society are at one and at the same time represented, challenged and overturned" (Foucault 1997: 350-358). Ethnicity is a flexible cultural description loosely based on an attachment or a perceived sense of belongingness to any or all of the categories signified by ideas like homeland, cultural heritage, belief system and language. The multiethnic or polyethnic cannot be always understood in terms of the dominant and the peripheral, but also in the sense of a mosaic of contiguous groups. What we have in Assam are cultural micro-spaces, the markers of which are languages and dialects, dress, food and other cultural parameters. These micro spaces are juxtaposed within a larger cultural space of Assam and ostensibly a larger Assamese Culture with apparent overlapping contours of commonality. Calendar events like springtime and other agricultural festivals (*Bihu*, a harvest festival, is an important example from Assam, with almost all the ethnic groups having their own version of the Bihu) are the common nodes of culture that are most apparent and part of a cultural commerce in the transactive domain.

Yet resistant nodes of exclusivist idioms in the larger transactive domain, where the constituents of a heterotopic society engage and deal with each other, direct attention more to differences based on unique cultural markers ranging across a multitude of references like social structures to performative forms, linguistic identity to local cuisines, than to sameness. Each cultural micro-space is consistent to its own linguistic and cultural core. And, importantly, such competing cultural micro-spaces, and their resistant idioms spawned against a larger integrative rhetoric like the greater Assamese nation, can collectively serve as counter spaces, a kind of resistant pluralism to an overarching rhetoric of larger unifying and homogenising discourses. We are not talking here of a pluralism in the sense of "discrete patches of culture, all, somehow, 'equally valid' within the polity /... /but /.../ a collection of cultural entities that are /.../ not discrete and complete in themselves /.../ are active together and hence bound up with change" (Hewitt 2003: 190) and resistance.

It is also interesting to explore the notion of received identities as an agential factor in subsequent recasting and redefinition of the ethnic identities. Most of the smaller ethnic identities had received their initial ideas about themselves from both colonial anthropology and the post-colonial lineage that was more like continuity than a break. Culturally, the idea of the 'self through other' can become an enabling quality of self-assertion and it is through an internalisation of dominant categories that subsequent recasting occurs. Good illustrations of these are the mimetic social and cultural organisations that evolved in the model of those established by the apparently homogenising class. Thus, a literary organisation like the *Asom Sahitya Sabha [Assam Literary Organisation]* spawned numerous mimetic organisations in the different ethnic groups, like the *Bodo Sahitya Sabha [Bodo Literary Organisation]* that took the forefront in stressing cultural and ethnic uniqueness.

The quest for cultural separateness and political self-determination is often sought in new cartographic exercises, in what can be seen as assigning people to a map. But this has its own pitfalls and it is time, perhaps, to take Korzybski's postulation of the map being not territory seriously in Assam, if one has to liberate oneself from what Brian Harley had termed to be a "semio-logical trap and a frightening ideological weapon" that gives an "objective and natural appearance to what is mostly a cultural and social construction" (Harley and Woodward 1992: 510). Beyond the innocuous façade of an objective and natural appearance of factual and topographical information and the belief in the map being a neutral representation, are the discursive formations through a rhetoric of power and neglect, marginalisation and usurpation. The map is being taken too seriously. The living world is too liminal, too fluid to be pinned down to a graphic representation, and that representation to be held sacrosanct.



Culture alters, people move and topography changes even as maps are being etched. There is almost a hermeneutical impossibility of representation and the map is more often than not a disjunctive device between life as a process and its representation in a fixed scape. Baudrillard mentioned this when he held that maps are no longer being taken as abstraction: the double or the mirror. It is no longer a concept or referential, but “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality” (Baudrillard 1994:01), a virtual world brought into being by a bricolage of coalescing fragments of culture, history, memory, and the positing of a perceived past glory over present deprivation and neglect.

## Palimpsest and Utopias

Maps in the North East are often seen as an *ad hoc* exercise that emerged through the interface of colonial and post-colonial mediation, and points no more than the areas location on India’s political map:

*Northeast India has been known this way since a radical redrawing of the region’s political map in the 1960s. It was a hurried exercise in political engineering; an attempt to manage the independentist rebellions among the Nagas and the Mizos and to nip in the bud as well as to pre-empt, radical political mobilization among other discontented ethnic groups. From today’s vantage point this project of political engineering must be pronounced a failure. (Baruah 2007: 4)*

But maps in the North East are virtual worlds in quite another sense. There are too many maps being etched over a single space, with a palimpsestic vigour that ironically does not obliterate the older maps. Competing ethnicities want their own territories designated on maps; yet such ethnicities are not always contiguous groups, but fragmented and dispersed in a random manner within Assam and across it too. These are what have been termed as cultural micro-spaces. This competitive and continuous act of etching maps is creating a virtual maze that submits the populace to an infinite act of transgression, a continuous stepping into each others territory, the sense of being in an eternally split space of ours and theirs. People are being used as pawns to populate virtual territories, an orchestration by artists of discontent: the student leaders with their sophomoric sense of history and culture, politicians with their *ad hoc* economic and political agendas, the subversive rhetoric of neglect and persecution from both identifiable and hidden authors of discontent. A band of virtual and amateur cartographers has drawn too many maps over a single space, and more aspire to continue the process. Such an enterprise in a heterotopic space is basically the selling of untenable utopias in the shape of a regression into past glory and greatness to an unsuspecting populace unable to come to terms with the loss of past languidity and the emergence of new livelihood challenges. But such maps are conflated with collective agendas of contributing constituencies of resistance and remapping. The map is a specific abstraction of a space that does not convey all the forces that go into its discursive formation, and limit an individual’s comprehension of that space from one’s ideological or agendised lens. Too many people are confusing maps with territories. And when representations like maps, along with their accompanying ideological and political structure, fail to fulfill individuals’ expectations, the rhetoric of discontent continues into an infinite regress as a response to the ‘treachery of image’ of the map.

And such Utopian thinking comes in direct conflict with those that wield power, the actual powers-that-be. The quest for an apparently non-existing perfect, cultural and political state is an indictment of the existing system, which in turn orchestrates and sets in motion a quest for counter Utopias, and behind the dreams of a perfect homeland is the reality of gore and blood, setting in motion a process of infinite regress, where maps are being continuously etched in a mode of mimetic severance; an

imitation of the process through which new territories are created. Thus, Meghalaya which was split from Assam as a tribal homeland faces the grim prospect of a split in very much the same way it was created; the Achiks (also known as the Garos) are demanding a new Achik territory to be carved out of Meghalaya in the same way Meghalaya was carved out of Assam, to liberate themselves from the hegemonistic machination of the Khasi–Pnar people. In Assam, the North Cachar Hill district, which was renamed as Dima Hasao in 2010, to cater to the wishes of the demands for a Dimasa homeland, now faces the prospect of further fracture, as a coalition of non-Dimasa ethnicities are demanding a new territory to be carved out from Dima Hasao for the non Dimasas. One draws one's own map imitating the map from one which separation is attempted. That map was also perhaps drawn in an imitative mode focused on severance from another apparently oppressive cartographic entity. Such a condition has been described as the result of competing ethnic egocentricities where:

*We have an incredible multiple of egocentricities arrayed against each other: the Assamese against the Bodos and the Misings and the Karbis; the Karbis against the Dimasas; the Nagas against the Meiteis; the Tangkhuls against the Aos and the Angamis; the Khasis against the Garos and so on. (Miri 2007: 5)*

Ironically, the Greek etymology of the word Utopia can also be seen as a combination of topos (place) and u (non) which means a non-place, instead of eu (good) and topos (place), a good place. Perhaps a good place is a perennial non place. Maps are culturally generated representations, and can be seen to be an extension of how specific ethnicities respond to the cultural and political ecology, that is how the speakers of a particular cultural group think and experience the world through a rhetoric of persecution and neglect.

## Home and homelessness

Creating a homeland also entails the simultaneous creation of homelessness and acts of othering. In a non contiguous heterotopic ethno-linguistic mosaic that Assam and the North East are, the creation of ethnic homelands through acts of mapping, creates ethnic enclaves where the other-ethnic and the non-ethnic is rendered politically and culturally homeless in a space that they have perhaps been located in for ages. Simultaneously, those of the same ethnic stock for whom the homeland was created, but outside its mapped purview, degenerate into outsiders in the very land that their ancestors had tilled and lived in. Thus, the Bodos who are outside the purview of the recently created BTAD have become outsiders in their age-old homestead, while at the same time they are ineligible for all the benefits enjoyed by the Bodos within BTAD. Moreover, the sanctity of such abstractions like map induced homelands is often attempted in the ground through acts like ethnic purging in an attempt to create insular homelands. Yet, simultaneously the creation of such insular homelands can double up as some sort of new age reservations, where the population is rendered into some sort of captive citizens, and where each act of stepping out can be seen as an act of transgression into another's land. Maps and the creation of homelands in the North East can represent at any given moment of time, a combination of these: home and the loss of home, homecoming and exile, confinement and transgression, centrality and the marginal, opportunity and the loss of it, the friendly and the inimical, an insider and the outsider, and so on. The neat division into binaries is not possible in single dimensional terms. The map is no longer a representation of an idea of a place, but also of territory that is ours, that is not ours but could be/should/must be ours and also of what and who should be/should not be on the map. Maps have a wide range of referents signifying varying ideological strands and political strivings. The real problem is the attempt to enforce them in real lived spaces, to translate the graphic representation into the tangible.

Thus, as cultural subtexts like Bodo Nationalism emerged from larger nationalistic cultural texts like Assamese nationalism and imbibed a centripetal striving for a greater cultural text, it spawned newer cultural subtexts. Basically organised around the linguistic identity of the Bodo language, it is a heteroglossic space that has diverse strands interacting with each other. There is the question of the script: Roman, Assamese or Devnagiri? Then there are the followers of the Christian faith with its various denominations, the traditional *Bathou*<sup>7</sup> practices, and the reformist *Brahma*<sup>8</sup> movement. Thus, there cannot be a single source of cultural control within the Bodo nation, and the range of voices generates its own heteroglossia. The present centrifugal trends in Assam are the symptoms of a radical rearrangement and realigning. The proliferation of stock and clichéd rhetorical categories like linguistic oppression, unequal development, and marginalisation are entering into relationships with socio-historical and political specificities of mutual transformation through ethno political encounters, and one witnesses a continuous process of new identities being created, and new demands being articulated. Perhaps, only after the process of fragmentation reaches an untenable and dead end, the reverse dynamics of consolidation and a truly federal set up will be set in motion.

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