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Heroes and Histories: The making of rival geographies of Tripura*

R.K. Debbarma**

Abstract

The origin of Manikya state, Tipperah, cannot be understood outside two historical factors: establishment of control over surplus producing Bengalee subjects and incorporation of Indic cosmography. These entailed re-imagination of the genealogy of the dynasty and stigmatization of the geography of 'Tipperah'. The former act consisted in silencing or erasure of certain spaces and memories connected with the identity and place 'Tipperah' — the spatiality of Dongor. In the oral history of the modern Tripuris, Dongor is the place where 'it all began' (associated with Dongoi Fa who founded the pre-Manikya Fa dynasty), where the very notion of 'Tipperah' originated, a nostalgic place connected with folktales and legends. Many modern Tripuri ethno-nationalists identify this particular site with modern place 'Dumbur', which had been submerged by a dam. Mourning the loss of this particular place — and history associated with it — is one of the persistent tropes in ethno-nationalist writings. This paper makes an attempt to re-read the Manikyan chronicle Rajmala and also tease out the significance of this history for identity politics in modern Tripura. I argue that the rival geographical imaginations produced by this history, to a certain extent, upset and unsettle the dominant narrative of Tripura.

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Introduction

In August 2006, Subendu (a prominent member of Twipra[1] Students' Federation) was taking me around Agartala (capital of Tripura). We were returning to the city from one of its outskirts, A D Nagar. Just before crossing *Howra Bridge* (a name borrowed from a major river in present day West Bengal) he arched his eyebrow towards a large statue of Subhas Chandra Bose (as always on a galloping horseback and his index finger pointed) indignantly and muttered 'Bengalee hero'. As we rode over the bridge he dared me to name the original indigenous name of the river. I maintained an inscrutable silence and smiled to hide my ignorance. 'Our forefathers called it S*aidra'*, he uttered, in such a way as to scoff at my education from one of India's top universities.

Immediately, after crossing the bridge, the autorickshaw took a left swerve and we came by walled square ground, an empty space, looking out of place. The square-walled space, un-encroached despite degradation and crumbled wall, reeks of filth and decompose. Inside the square, ruin edifices of former Manikya rulers, stripped of embellishment stands in utter disrepair. This particular site marks an abnormal presence among the buzz of life around it — the busy transport station, fruit vendor shops abutting out of every nook and corner, the famous enclosed bootleg market, and illegal tiny bars hidden away everywhere makes the modern public memory of the place. Despite these symbols of modernity and their jostle for corners, this unsightly small space stays un-trespassed, albeit a dumping site of filth produced by these modern enterprises. This particularly filthy looking place elicited revulsion from our other co-passengers, including me. However, the filth-filled place, scavenging ugly pigs all over, evoked a reaction in him which was hard to name, 'this is our kings *simlang* (cemetery)'. I can tell from his voice that it pained him to see such a sacred space (in his eyes) desecrated.

[1] Twipra is the spelling used by ethno-nationalist groups to refer to Tripura. In this paper, I will use the spelling Tipperah to refer to precolonial and colonial Tripura; and 'Tippera' to refer to Tripuris during precolonial and colonial period.

Was it anger, grief, frustration, or all of them merged into one emotion? How does one evaluate the structure of feelings evoked in him by these modern sights/sites — statue of a *Bengalee hero*, a changed toponymy and a desecrated simlang? These spaces, in more than one way, encapsulates what Said terms as the 'struggle over geography'[2] and elucidates a spatial problem in modern Tripura. Subendu's narration of the cemetery as 'our kings simlang' — an act that appropriates a certain marginalized and desecrated space — inevitably throws up the question about 'history' and seeks to re-inscribe 'difference' and 'otherness' on the landscape of Tripura. It this act of appropriation of the former Manikya rulers of Tripura as 'our king' — whose final place of rest lay in ruins, abandoned and merely there — which immediately lends his narration of Bose (as Bengalee hero) and the changed name of the river (as Howra) an element of visual and narrative excitement: It becomes a place loaded with potential for meaning. It is within these marginalized spaces Tripuri identity is produced, contingent on certain sense of loss.

Within the allegedly pervasive and broader ideological and material domination by Bengalee-Hindus in postcolonial Tripura, estranged spaces, like the simlang and silenced toponymy, become repositories of stigmatized outlawed ideologies — at times nationalistic fantasy — which continue to challenge, confront and subvert dominant interpretation of Tripura and its connection to India. It is these estranged but recalcitrant spaces this study wishes to tease out and trace the rival geographies of Tripura. And argue that in the Tripuri ethno-nationalist discourse, 'Tripura' becomes a site of loss, estrangement and dislocations. The geography of ethno-nationalism is a struggle within the lived experiences of the dominant Bengalee-Hindu narration of Tripura as a specific place.

Rival geographies, though obscured and consigned to the margins, are never silent geographies. They inhabit, to put it bluntly, as intransigent or recalcitrant spaces represented by those who wish to challenge, subvert and confront the state. That struggle is not fought 'on the surface

[2] Edward W. Said. 1994. *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage: London, p. 3.

of geography, but through its fabrication'.[3] Moreover, as Edward Said commented the 'struggle over geography … is not only about soldiers and cannons, but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings'.[4] Following these two important comments, I wish to tease out Tripuri ethno-nationalists' narrative of the place/Tripura. It is, overwhelmingly, a narrative of counter, which not only attempts to demarcate the boundaries between 'Tripuri' and 'Bengalee-Hindu', but contests prevailing/dominant idea of Tripura, sanctioned and circulated by the state.

A Story of a Submerged Geography

Perhaps, a dam and the geography it submerged would be a (unusually) good place to begin this investigation into the rival imaginative geography of Tripura. The dam in question is the Dumbur (Gumti) Hydel Project, controversially commissioned in 1976 by Tripura state.[5] It was constructed on the river Gumti formed by confluence of two rivers Raima and Saima. The former originates at Longtrai hills and the latter at Atharamura hills. The dam not only displaced a huge 'tribal' population, but also destroyed what many Tripuri ethno-nationalists termed as, the former 'granary' of Tripura.[6]

[3] Steve Pile. 2000. "The Troubled Spaces of Frantz Fanon" in Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift (eds), *Thinking Space*, Routledge: London and New York, p. 273.
[4] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 3.
[5] The dam was/is 30 meters high, 3.5 km in length and was expected to generate 8.6 mw from an installed capacity of 10 mw. The area to be submerged was projected at 46.34 sq km. See Malabika Das Gupta. 1989. "Development and Ecology: Case Study of Gumti Rivers in Tripura", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 24, No. 40 (October 7) pp. 2267–2270.
[6] A pamphlet of an ethno-nationalist group had this to say about the place. "Dumbur is misnomer, its original Kokborok name is Dongor. This place is related to Borok mythology of Dongoi of Tripura. It was one of the most fertile land in Twipra and was called the granary of Twipra. The people in this area were self-sufficient and were contended with the way they lived. But in the year 1971, under the Chief Ministry of Late Sachin Singh during the Congress regime in Twipra, a dam was constructed over the rivers Raima and Saima junction (Gumati) for Hydro Electrical Project (sic)." See *Borok People (Indigenous People) and Their Life Condition of Twipra (Tripura) India*, an Undated handout by Borok Peoples Human Right Organisation (BPHRO), p. 4.

But my interest in the dam goes beyond the debate of displacement of 'tribals'. I want to tease out a different kind of discursive encounter — an encounter that manifests and magnifies the peripheral epistemology of Tripura.

Around the same time the dam was being constructed, the state's first Gazetteer was also published.[7] While describing the ecological condition of Raima-Saima valley and the upland, it emphasised the existence of *'Indian elephants'* (emphasis mine) in herds.[8] Seemingly, other wild animals — deer, tiger, boar, and bear — that roamed the abundant luxurious hill forests did not qualify as 'Indian'. It is a possibility that the 'Indian' prefix to a pachyderm is an unintended attribution. Even if it is unintended, such an attribution necessarily illustrates the power to incorporate and link distant, remote places to the Indian Nation-space, and can be read as a technology of appropriating unfamiliar landscapes. But that question is outside my scope here. I intend to bring out the ironical, albeit unintended, consequence of this perhaps unintended attribution.

While watching the National Award winning *Kokborok* movie, *Yarwng* (root),[9] a particular scene — where the state (police) used 'Indian elephants' to demolish homes of those who refused to 'move up' — made my mother say, *agi khwnama kokrok* (things we have heard of long time ago). Interestingly, the state-sponsored violence — including the use of huge elephants — is glossed over in the texts that contribute to the dominant discourse.[10] In this discourse, the negative

[7] K. D. Menon. 1975. *Tripura District Gazetteer*, Government of Tripura: Department of Education.

[8] Menon, *Tripura District Gazetteer*, p. 41.

[9] Kokborok is the language spoken by various Tripuri communities (Debbarma, Reang, Tripura, Jamatia, Uchoi, Noatia, Koloi etc.).The movie is about this particular dam and displacement of indigenous population. It won the National Award in 2010.

[10] These texts would speak of displacement of tribal and never the ugliness and brutalities of state-sanctioned violence. Malabika Dasgupta, *Development and Ecology*; Subir Bhaumik. ND. *A Blueprint For Ethnic Reconciliation in Tripura: Decommissioning The Gumti Hydel Project For A Start*, <http://www.tripurainfo.in/Info/Archives/132.htm> (accessed February 2010).

consequences of the dam are population displacement (especially displacement of 'tribal') and ecological destruction. Displacement takes place 'due to formation of reservoir'.[11] Even what the reservoir submerged is merely 'a huge swath of arable lands owned by the tribals'.[12] They make displacement, a natural outcome of a dam, less unpleasant.

There is another narrative, a counter perspective of this submerged geography. This is a narrative of those who speak against the dominant discourse. Their concern, while memorialising state-sponsored violence, attends to violence of another kind, displacement of meaning, of an idea of place and submersion of a history. In these narratives the unpleasantness and the brutalities are dealt with directly, on its own terms. Displacement is always an outcome of violence — forcible eviction by police, demolition of homes/houses by elephants, loading them into crammed trucks, and forcible relocation into deplorable 'rehabilitation' camps.[13]

The other form of violence —violence on memory and meaning of this place — can be gleaned from two emblematic passages by two prominent intellectuals. First, Nanda Kumar Debbarma, a prominent Tripuri ethno-nationalist poet writes,

Why were Raima-Saima buried under water? They were not simply water bodies; they were embodiment of our stories, legends, and folk tales, they represent our continuities. This burial under water represents

[11] Malabika Das Gupta, *Development and Ecology*, p. 2267.

[12] Subir Bhoumik makes a case for decommissioning of the dam (which has become non-functioning now) so that Bengalee-Hindus 'can buy peace' in Tripura by giving back 'tribal' their alienated land, see *A Blueprint for Ethnic Reconciliation in Tripura.*

[13] Nagendra Jamatia (2003), who organized the displaced people for compensation, recollects the event as destruction of not rich ecology, but rich Tripuri villages from where people refused to move until forcible eviction by police, CRPF and huge elephants. See "Raimani Twi Mokolni Mwktwi" (kokborok) [trans: Raima's water is eyes' tears], in *Mukumu*, Kokborok Hukumu Mission: Agartala, pp. 88–90. All translations from Kokborok to English are mine.

submerging of our history; our nation. Beginning from Dongoima-Dongoipha, to the present, our life, identity, connected to these landscapes.[14]

Similarly, Bikas Rai Debbarma, another ethno-nationalist writer captures the poetics of this landscape in terms of erasure and loss.

Raima! You are today
A new named Gumoti
You were once
A daughter of Bolong, Koromoti

Each word, our history you've woven
This land's footprints, we inherited
As water rises
Our past submerges.[15]

What matters in these two emblematic passages is that a particular geography becomes the outstanding site of raking up bitter memories and constructing a different identity of place. These bitter (rival) memories and identity of Tripura run counter to the state-promoted idea of Tripura, its vision of harmonious land of 'tribal and non tribal'. Such counter-narratives, by Tripuri ethno-nationalists, lay emphasis on (including population displacement) displacement of history, memory and a particular idea of place woven around experiences of fragmentation, disjunction and estrangement.

Why was this particular geography chosen as a site for counter memory production and cultural investment by the ethno-nationalists? It can be argued that the dam, the displacement of local population and the geography it submerged makes it a convenient strategic spot for reproduction of counter memory. Without denying this aspect —

[14] Nanda Kumar Debbarma. 2001. *Rung* (kokborok), Hachuk Khorang Publication: Agartala, translated from part I.
[15] Bikash Rai Debbarma.2001. "Dungur Siring Soroh", in *Chongpreng Yakhrai Bou-Wi* (Kokborok), Kokborok Hukumu Mission: Agartala, stanzas 5–8 and 12–15.

that these strategic ethno-nationalist investments occured after the dam had been constituted — I wish to situate the ideology into dim, silenced (not silent) past.

In the prevailing historiography, Tripura is narrated as always a fixed place and a stable political centre, with clearly defined boundaries, which expanded and contracted in the previous three centuries. This established mental map has influenced much of the literature on Tripura — by putting place-names and people (which were inscribed and demarcated by the colonial power) inside a modern frame (map) these modern contingent places are ascribed reality, continuity and permanence. Precolonial/pre-cartography indigenous space is made possible to be viewed from a very modern way of looking at spatial reality, preventing other ways of looking at these realities. It is doubtful if these spatial realities can be known with the help of a map, or possibility of mapping these realities. It makes more sense to view precolonial Tipperah as a moving place — an identifiable stable political centre (not necessarily stable dynasty) without an identifiable, fixed geography, constantly shifting wannabe state.[16]

> The geography of Tipperah then can be read in this way – alluvial plains (extractive space), hills (spaces of mobility), and fortified State-core on the foot hills (organised around caste system). The State core was located on the interstices of hills and plains. It can be conceptualised as a space where the hill-ness and plain-ness merged, melted and conflicted, yet produced and precariously sustained the state. It was also a space within which the hill communities allowed wannabe rulers, yet consciously keeping distance from the hierarchical structured state-core. This spatial arrangement, upon which state making was contingent, maybe termed as Manikyan spatial ideologies. The Manikya rulers strategically incorporated the already available cosmography, and already available surplus producing concentrated subjects.

[16] I have carried out a detail discussion on this subject in R. K. Debbarma. 2012. "From Place-Everywhere to Placeless: Space, (Im)mobility and Exclusion", *SKWC Journal of Social Science*s, Vol. III, Issue I (January–December), pp. 157–184.

Emergence of a relatively stable political center was dependent on two historical factors: control over sedentary, permanent surplus producing Bengalee population; and incorporation of Indic cosmography — invention of a Hindu past. The invention of a Hindu past retrospectively projects its dynastic existence to the Hindu mythologies, a project made possible by incorporating Hindu Brahmins. This shift in genealogy also coincides with the shift from oral to written genealogy. The shift in genealogy erased the importance of *Dongoima-Dongoipha* (genealogy from where Tripuris trace their origin) from history, and thereby sacred/stigmatised space, in the eye of the state, came to be reconstituted.[17] Therefore, this particular stretch of land, as a sacred geography, had already been silenced by the political elites during the precolonial period.

However, the importance of this geography, as a sacred place essentially connected to history of Tripuris, existed as simultaneously real and abstract in the imagination of Tripuris.[18] It is this aspect of being real and abstract the ethno-nationalist draws upon in order to re-produce a rival history and geography. The dam and the geography it submerged are then articulated as erasure of that history and geography (including identity), and harnessed in the narrative of struggle against the Bengalee-Hindus. The irony, I pointed out earlier, lies in the image of state police (Bengalee-Hindu) and elephant (symbolising Indian state) defiling indigenous sacred geography. This image serves to legitimate the ethno-nationalist perception of (Tripura's) modernity as a colonial condition. This perception has had tremendous influence

[17] The court chronicle of the Manikya dynasty "Rajmala" opens with an imaginary king complaining to gods for making him a king of unholy land (of 'nude boisterous people' who eat all kinds of flesh — elephant, horse, mouse, cat, tiger, dog, snake etc..) and his yearn for holy places (Mathura, Gaya, Kasi, Hariduara, Kurukshetra, Ayudhya) and sacred rivers (Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati) situated elsewhere. This text written during the fifteen century can be read as reconstitution of sacred geographies after the incorporation of Indic cosmography. I used the English translated "Sri Rajmala" by Narendra Chandra Nath (1999).

[18] *Dongor* or *Dumbur, Raima* and *Saima* are real in the sense that these rivers are still sites of sacred rites; and abstract in their connection to mythic tales and legends which conjures up different geographies of belonging.

in the making of Tripuri identity and the ensuing politics of identity, including Tripuri arm insurgency since the late 1970s.

A dam is not merely constituted on the surface of geography; it strips that geography of meaning — a meaning outside certain ways of seeing Tripura. Yet still a geography of meaning, alive and potent source of rival imaginings of place. The dam and the geography it submerged is a graphic representation of modern Tripuri identity politics. In the eye of the ethno-nationalists, the submersion symbolised estrangement of Tripuris from their geography, a homeland disjuncted by another idea of homeland.

A Brief History of Tripuri Ethno-nationalism

It can be said that, the desire to view modern mapped Tripura as a specific place by mutually exclusive modern political identity groups is a recent phenomenon. Prior to this, politics over this small stretch of geographical terrain was constituted by Manikyan discourse of 'my land' — where the ideology of a collective discourse 'our land' could be imperative of rival geographical discourse. Precolonial state (Tipperah) was founded upon strategic bound-up of state-core, extractive space and mobile hill space. The identity of the ruling House defined as 'lunar race' with elaborate invention of Hindu past served as a resource for distance (from Tippera and Bengalee) and antiquity. The kingly injunction, 'my land', foreclosed emergence of any other form of spatial collective loyalty.

The shift in territorial ideology — from 'my land', where *hill-ness* and *plain-ness* merged, to mutually exclusive homelands — conjures up interesting topographies of modern Tripuri identity. Elsewhere I have conceptualised identity 'Tippera' as 'open', defined absolutely based on its propinquity to the state core. Moving out or away from a certain geographical realm that constituted immediate to the state core was interpreted as becoming the 'mobile other'. Conversely, moving into the fortified state-core was interpreted as civilisation.[19] Geographically speaking, landscape of modern Tripura was shaped by its history of disjunctions in space. One, in 1761 British-India occupied alluvial plains of present-day Bangladesh and introduced a

new boundary between hills and plains. The act constituted a major disruption of the old spaces of interconnection between the state-core, hills and extractive plains. The state-core and the hills, severed from its extractive space got designated, in the colonial discourse as 'Hill Tipperah'; while the alluvial plains which were formerly under the sway of Manikya rulers came to be designated as 'British-Tipperah' or 'Plain Tipperah'.

Two, another disjunction in space was brought about in 1874 when British-India decided to fix the mobile 'savage' raiding Kukis inside a new geographical grid, 'Lushai Hills'. The raids had unsettled the western conception of people, state and space in the hill. Sovereignty, subjecthood and loyalty in the hills operated quite differently from what the English had imagined earlier. Three, the dissolution of British-India and disruption of Manikya dynasty in 1947 rendered Tripura a contested space between Tripuri ethno-nationalists, Bengalee-Hindus and Bengalee-Muslims. While Bengalee-Hindus contented that Tripura has always been part of Bengal, the Bengalee-Muslims came to imagine it as a place within the severed Muslim space. Representations (by Tripuris) of this new spatial grid, within the new spatial formations, offer glimpses of ethno-nationalism struggle with identity and place.

A brief history of Tripuri ethno-nationalism may serve to set the background for investigation of its topographies — its epistemology of place. This history can be broadly discussed in two phases, marked by breaks and as well as connections. The first phase (1940–1965) is constituted and defined by complex process of appropriation of the spatial discourse of Tripura. It marked the destigmatisation of the 'Tippera' by re-marking the identity of the ruler. The second phase is constituted by multiple discourses of (postcolonial) Tripura as a colonial space.

[19] A subject theorised in chapter two of my PhD thesis entitled. R. K. Debbarma. 2012. *Genealogy of Place and Articulation of Political Identity: A Study of the Emergence of Tripura as Homeland.* Unpublished thesis (PhD), Department of Political Science, University of Hyderabad, pp. 35–67.

1940–65: Dislocations

It can be argued that thinking 'Tripuri' politically or imagining of the community as 'political' collective becomes perceptible during the 1940s. The following conversation between the last Raja of Tripura and his *Binondia* is illustrative of the nascent ideological shape of politics of identity and place.[20]

On seeing the Raja in good mood, I said to him.

Binondia: *Maharaj Dharmavtar, you are not a Raja of the Tripuris.*

Bir Bikram: *Why not Ram Kumar? My Blood is of Tripuri; I am a Tripuri.*

Binodia: *If this is the case, then how many Tripuris are employed in the administration? Why there are fewer educated Tripuris? All your ministers are of different race.*

Bir Bikram: *Ram Kumar, I cannot argue with you on this.*

And the Raja, angry, walked back to the palace. He later, returned and grasped my hands and said,

If the Tripuris are educated, one day they would chase me out of my palace.

[20] This conversation was narrated to Sudhanwa Debbarma (then a student at Agartala) by Ram Kumar Thakur, a *Binondia*. The title or post *Binondia* is the intermediary between the hill subjects and the Raja of Tripura. He is appointed by the Raja. Sudhanwa Debbarma later became a prominent member of Jana Siksha Samity and Tripur Jatiyo Gana Mukti Parishad. Sudhanwa Debbarma.1997. *Ki kore Rajnitite Joriye Porlam* (Trans: How I came to be entangled in politics), Tripura Darpan: Agartala, pp. 6–7. All translations from Bengalee to English are mine.

This encounter is symptomatic of the significant shifts taking place in the realm of identity and place. One, old spaces of power or the spatial matrix of mobile hill space, extractive space and state-core, the bound-up upon which the state has been structured, is loosened up. The production of 'other race' that constitutes the educated employees of the state disrupts that old spatial matrix. Two, old arrangement/classification of population also gets disrupted. Movement towards the state core, the fortified capital, no longer constituted moving away from the spatial realm of the Tippera. Ram Kumar Thakur (*thakur* as a suffix denoting civilised hill man who has moved into the state core) destabilises that meaning by re-centering that stigmatised hill identity inside the fortified state-space — the identity of the ruler re-marked and contested.

This destabilising shift had immense social and political implications. Most importantly, the tearing away of 'realm of the Tipperah' and the appearance of that particular stigmatised identity within the formerly non-Tippera spaces, rendered political the category 'Tripuri'. More tellingly, it signified the emergence of a small group of (formerly Tippera) elite who refused to be incorporated into the ideological core of the Manikyan dynasty which had sustained its rule since its inception in the fifteenth century. Instead, by questioning the palace of its identity, they attempted to subvert the old spaces of rule in order to begin to constitute new politics of identity. This new politics of identity hinged on twin ideological underpinnings: one, production of knowledge of the Manikyan rule and its history of rule as anti-Tripuri, therefore, a full-fledged modern Tripuri nation can come only via destruction of this rule; two, they constituted a new discourse of Tripura as a specific place, as a site for struggle for a specific category of people, produced for the first time racialised narratives of the 'other'. The old idea of Tripura as open geography (despite colonial cartographic operations it still allowed movement of goods, capital and population) gets supplanted in this complex process of redefining Tripura to situate the insider/outsider. Within these two ideologies I would like to locate the Jana Siksha Samity (JSS) and its avatar Tripur Jatiyo Mukti Parishad (later rechristened as Gana Mukti Parishad (GMP) after merger with the Communist Party of India).

JSS, founded in 1944, can be described as the first and most important ethno-nationalist outfit during this period. The organisation spearheaded the movement for mass education. Its manifesto envisioned itself as a champion of 'tribal' emancipation — a task in which 'educated and half educated' were commanded compulsory participation in order to raise their society from the 'curse of illiteracy and poverty that have descended on the tribal society of Tripura during the thirteen hundred and fifty years of princely regime in the state'.[21] As early as 1948, JSS established 400 schools; as many as 300 recognised by the state, a credit largely attributed to D. A. Brown, then Education Minster of the state.

What is particularly novel about JSS (in the political history of Tripura) is its appropriation of 'Tripuri' as a political category. The numerous political formations, which emerged in Tripura during this period, were confined to the capital and urbane localities. Mostly, they comprised of deputed communist cadres from Bengal or progressive (read Indian National Congress sympathisers) Bengalee leaders fighting for political reforms. JSS struggled with and within differently radicalised geographies – the neglected hills, the landscapes feared by the ruling elites for its historically recalcitrant social structure. It was precisely this radicalisation of hitherto feared geographies by JSS which troubled the old spatial arrangement of power.

After the death of Bir Bikram Manikya in 1947, owing to JSS's opposition to large scale settlement of Bengalee-Hindus from East Pakistan and the new government, the leaders of JSS were proscribed by the state along with the communists. In 1948, after the infamous *Golaghati* massacre, the leaders went underground and founded the Tripur Jatiyo Mukti Parishad, and carried out an armed struggle against the state. The state responded by declaring martial law in the entire hills in order to stump out opposition. The leaders of this organisation drew upon its already established mass support.

[21] Manifesto quoted in Bijan Mahanta. 2004. *Tripura in the Light of Socio-Political Movements since 1945*, Kolkata: Progressive Publishers: p. 22.

The period also saw proliferation of numerous other organisations wedded to ideological opposition of Bengalee-Hindu dominance in the state administration and their rehabilitation in the state — *Sengkrak*, *Paharia Union*, *Adivashi Sangh*. Though the mass base of these organisations is questionable, they, apart from the JSS, represented modern political construction of the Bengalee-Hindu as 'other-outsider'. The Sengkrak was most militant and vocal in its advocacy of 'expulsion' of Bengalee refugees from Tripura.

Coloniality re-invented: Tripuri ethno-nationalism since 1965

In the late 1960s Tripuri identity politics took a different shape, marked by ideological breaks and connections from earlier discourse of Tripura. This new identity politics was represented by three new political formations: Tripura Upajati Jubo Samity (TUJS, a political party), Tribal Student Federation (TSF, now Twipra Student federation), and Tripura National Volunteer (TNV, armed underground group). These groups have been particularly responsible for their ideological investment in, what can be described as, re-invention of colonial condition. Unlike the previous narrative of Manikyan rule as 'feudalistc', the past (prior to merger with India) was imagined as 'glorious'.[22] The post-merger is narrated as colonisation by Bengalee-Hindus from Bangladesh, seen as a political project of the Indian state.

These departures informed their political rhetoric and struggles. During the entire decade of 1970, identity politics in Tripura was marked by radically polarised confrontations between ethno-nationalist fronts and the state. Their demands for deportation of 'foreigners' and implementation of Sixth Schedule (District Council) eventually led to the infamous 1980 ethnic riots between Bengalee-Hindus and Tripuris.[23]

[22] For example,Twipra Students' Federation's anthem, *Kusung Kusung* (Kokborok) harps on Tripura as a mighty expansive kingdom of the Tripuri people.

[23] The communal riot split the state bureaucracy and police, and also the communist party along ethnic lines, see Ranajay Karlekar. 1985. "The Tripura Riots, 1980: Problems of Marxist Strategy", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 20, No. 34, (24 August), p. 1428. Agore Debbarma (1980) claims that the police actually engaged in selective killing of Tripuris, in *Tripurai Gana*

The 1980 ethnic riots, now popularly known as '*danga'*, became an important point of reference, a marker of time, especially of the last century, in the everyday social discourse. Events came to be plotted and understood as pre-danga or after-danga. The ugliness and intensity of the conflict was well-portrayed by Jagadish Gan-Chaudhury,

The flame of fire spread very rapidly from village to village burning thousands of houses and huts, cattle and crops. Numerous villages were laid waste. Lakhs of people were rendered homeless. Properties, both moveable and immoveable, worth several crores were destroyed, damaged, burnt, looted and captured. Hundreds were murdered. Women were raped. All contemptible crimes in human history were committed. Both communities were affected. In every community there are mischief-mongers (sic).[24]

In the succeeding decades, after 1980 ethnic riot, Tripura has been converted into a killing field: intermittent communalised killings between Tripuris and Bengalees; armed clashes between insurgents and military.[25] After 1980, ethnic violence of that scale and magnitude did not take place. Nevertheless, the period between 1998 and 2001 was marked by another phase of ethnic violence. Many believed the violence

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Hottai Jonyo Mandai ki Ek Matro Saskhi? (Bengalee) [Trans: Is Mandai the only example of killings in Tripiura?], Agartala: Self Published see also a booklet by Agore Debbarma. 2002. *Tripurar Danga: Ekti Prajaluchona* (Bengalee) [Trans: An analysis of communal conflict in Tripura], Agartala: Self Published.

[24] Jagadish Gan-Choudhury. 1985. *A Political History of Tripura*, New Delhi, p. 64.

[25] According to South Asian Terrorist Portal the total number of civilians killed by the insurgents during 1998 to 2001 was 1145. The highest was 453 in 2000, see the data sheet page "Tripura" <thttp://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/tripura/data_sheets/index.html> (accessed February 2008). The center for International Development and Conflict Management claimed that ethnic conflict in Tripura has claimed 10,000 – 12,000 lives in the past two decades. For more detail see "Minorities at Risk" data on Tripura <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/mar/assessment.asp?groupId=75014 (accessed February 2008) . For a vivid narration of the killings and eviction of Bengalees, see Manas Paul. 2009. *The Eye Witness: Tales From Tripura's Ethnic Conflict,* Lancer: New Delhi.

to be engineered by proscribed Tripuri armed group, National Liberation Front of Twipra (NLFT). There were other political events within which this phase of violence may be located.

In 1982 TUJS's brief stint in power as a coalition partner of Indian National Congress in many ways discredited the leaders. The party suffered a vertical split with more extremist among them breaking away to form their own parties with claims to pursue the unachieved abandoned goals of the parent organisation. Debobrata Koloi formed the Tripura Hills Peoples Party and Harinath Debbarma, the former chief of TUJS formed the Tripura Tribal National Conference. However, these parties failed to make any impact on the state politics. The parent organisation was able to retain some visibility but lost its credibility and standing among the Tripuris.

The ensuing political sterility disenchanted and disillusioned many radical youths (with mainstream politics) who had taken active part in the articulation and mobilisation of Tripuris during the 1970–1980. As a result, the beginning of 1990s saw a proliferation of several insurgent groups of which All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF) and National Liberation Front of Twipra (NLFT) emerged as the leading fronts in extremism.[26] These two organisations carried out eviction (of Bengalees) programs from Tripuri inhabited areas since 1994 and by 1999 certain areas came to be designated as 'liberated zones'. There is a widely held belief that NLFT was the intellectual author behind the formation of Indigenous Peoples' Front of Twipra (IPFT) — comprising of all the splintered factions (of TUJS).[27] IPFT carried out a campaign for ousting of 'foreigners' and toppling of 'refugee government'. IPFT came to power in the District Council election (2000) and introduced hugely controversial policies: re-writing of *kokborok* in Roman script instead of Bengalee (Devanagiri) script; invention or as they called it 'revival'

[26] Both the groups drew their support from the disenchanted youths who played an active role during the 1970s and 1980s.

[27] Immediately after capturing power in the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council, IPFT re-named itself as Indigenous Nationalist Party of Twipra (INPT) in order to contest the Assembly elections. After successive defeats, the party met the same fate as TUJS.

of Tripuri new year 'Tring' and; re-use of Tippera Era as the official calendar.[28]

Presently Tring has become an important symbol of Tripuri ethno-nationalism.[28A] It *historicised* a possible event in the past, and summons or collectively recollects a different history and geography in order to produce modern Tripuri's 'Other', especially the Bengalee-Hindus. As evident from above, Tripuri identity politics is constituted by production of spatial differentiation — Tripuris and Bengalees as occupying separate geography, and distinct discontinuous places. The disruption of this discontinuous space is conceptualised as a colonial condition — Bengalee-Hindus as other outsider who have come to dominate politics and economy of Tripura. Tring isolates an (possible) event in history in order to re-mark that boundary, and thereby frame a colonial situation. This situation is made real, in their everyday imaginaries and experiences of displacements from an imagined history and geography.

Tripura as Contested Place: Topographies of 'Tripuri'

Before identity 'Tippera' is employed as a political category, as a symbol around which modern politics of mobilization is possible, it must destabilise the ultimate source of its stigmatisation: the fortified state-core of the Manikyas. After all, the foundation of Manikya dynasty, its power and authority, had its genesis in the stigmatisation of the geography of Tipperah and its inhabitants. The separation of Manikya and Tippera as a demarcation between the sacred and the profane, the civilised and the wild required disjunction before it could

[28] Tipperah Era was the official calendar used during Manikya rule. In 1963 this calendar was removed from official use by the state government, and replaced with Bengalee calendar. It is believed that Tipperah Era was established by Tripuri King Hamtor Fa or Himti Fa to commemorate his victory against a Bengal ruler in A.D. 590.

[28A] The celebration of Tring (Tipperah Era New Year) is organised by Movement For Kokborok (MFK). There is no historical evidence to show that Manikya rulers celebrated a new year for Tipperah Era. This is a recent invention by ethno-nationalist. It commemorates a particular memory — of victory against Bengal

become a source of pride, glory, reason, unreason and loyalty. This final disjunction took place during the 1940s, a symbolic example was the confession by the last Manikya ruler, 'my blood is of Tripuri, I am a Tripuri'. This re-marking of the identity of the Rajah re-constituted new spaces of Tripuri identity.

This embarrassing confession by the Raja not only marks a significant departure from the earlier conception of identity 'Tippera', but it also reproduces and re-works conception of the place 'Tripura'. The colonial cartographic representation of Tripura opened up a conceptual gap between the land and the ruler, a gap which incited new ethno-nationalist politics of 'our people'.[29] This new politics was politics of place or struggle over place, because the nascent ethno-nationalist ideology 'our people' was simultaneously ideology of 'our land'. They replaced earlier discourses of 'my land' and 'my people' with new discourses of 'our people' and 'our land'. However, this new identity politics was challenged by other new emerging conceptions of land and people after the dissolution of British-India.

Between the death of Bir Bikram Manikya (May 1947) and the signing of the Instrument of Accession by the Regent Queen (October 1949), Tripura witnessed two years of political liminality.[30] While the Regency fled to Shillong, then capital of Assam (now capital of Meghalaya) the emergent political elite in Tripura, divided on ethnic lines, virtually turned the capital of the state into a feared landscape. The political uncertainty and power vacuum spawned new contesting power centers and spanned battlefields. Although Tripura's position

[29] For example as a student at Agartala during the 1940s Sudhanwa Debbarma for the first time left his village and got to 'roam' other Tripuri villages. In his memoir he writes, his first visit to places like Golagati and Takarjala (villages which were in fact not far from his village Sutarmura) there was something called 'our people'. Before this visit his identity was confined to his village. He did and could not think beyond his village. The visits that took place later shaped his politics — the need for emancipation of 'our people'. See Sudhanwa Debbarma, *Ki kore Rajnitite Joriye Porlam*.

[30] Political liminality may be understood as a political situation where political center has become ambiguous or it is no longer clear where political authority resides.

on merger was still unclear, there was already a steady inflow of Bengalee-Hindus from East Pakistan. Various Tripuri organisations opposed rehabilitation of Bengalee-Hindus and urged for their repatriation. There was wide-spread fear among Tripuri ethno-nationalists that such an exodus could reduce the Tripuris to a microscopic, politically insignificant minority in their own land.[31] They failed to define their position on the merger question as well.

However, the Bengalee-Muslims who constituted the second largest population of Tripura till the partition, demanded merger of Tripura with Pakistan. The Bengalee-Hindus, a community which outnumbered the other two ethnic groups in the post partition period, demanded merger with the Indian Union. The years that preceded the merger were particularly violent: brutal expulsion of Bengalee-Muslim population and suppression of armed movements by Tripuri organisation which merged with the communist party later.

The politics of this period is significant for two things. One the one hand, the disjunction of earlier discourses of space, people and state brought into play new competing discourses of space, place and people. These discourses were negotiations of the meaning and identity or definition of Tripura as a place, as a home — to decide who has the right to inhabit it? Who should be excluded? A common practice has been to analyze these events in terms of which group was/is wrong, who was/is right.[32] My attempt here is to try to understand, instead, how these competing groups, based on ethnicity, invoked spatiality.

Indigenous toponymies: Inscribing ownership

The Memorandum of Settlement, signed by Tripura state and Tripuri armed group All Tripura Tribal Force (ATTF) in 1993, among other

[31] The idea that Tripuri or indigenous people of Tripura have become 'microscopic minority' in their own land forms the central theme of almost every Tripuri ethno-nationalist organizations.

[32] For example Jagadish Gan-Choudhuri (2004) categorised Bengalee-Muslims as 'imperialist' and 'invaders'. He also castigates the Tripuris for targeting Bengalee-Hindus. See *A Constitutional History of Tripura*, Kolkata: Parul Prakashani, pp. 125–126, 311, and 368.

things includes two interesting points: One, places to be renamed in their original indigenous names; and two, conversion of Ujjayanta Palace (seat of former ruling house of Tripura and presently Tripura Legislative Assembly) into a historical monument.[33] This urge, by Tripuri armed ethno-nationalists, to reinstate indigenous toponymies flags off a spatial strategy sculpted as struggle over loss geographies. This sets off uncompromisable politics, where erasure of new place-names constitutes a refusal of the dominant, state-promoted idea of Tripura. It unsettles signs and memories that legitimate 'non-tribal' in the state-promoted vision of 'tribal and non-tribal' Tripura. I will elaborate further.

The state, in order to produce Tripura as a home for the Bengalee-Hindu, drew upon considerable amount of existing Indic place names. These names were believed to be connected to Indic cosmography and therefore these Hindu sacred geographies made possible retrofitting a home onto an unknowable past. The fact that these places were conferred sacredness by the postcolonial state did not prevent the invention of Bengalee presence since antiquity.[34] Nevertheless, what I wish to emphasise is that place-names can be viewed as sites for investment of certain kind of memories, carries particular identity, and makes real different geographies. In Tripura, these place-names are deeply embroiled in the struggle for identity and place.

Postcolonial Tripura, as a different spatial formation, posited production of its own spaces which made itself real in every day lived experiences of the people. This character is not unique to Tripura, nor is my analysis of place-names as sites of memory and identity new. There are ample examples of how new regimes or polities, everywhere, are engaged in re-naming of places, and have been focus of brilliant

[33] Other important agreements include restoration of alienated land to 'tribals', and deportation of 'foreign nationals'. See the Memorandum of Settlement between Tripura State Governement and All Tripura Tribal Force Accord, 1993.

[34] For example the *Unokoti* (carvings of Hindu deities on rocks at Kailasahar) which lay in ruins till its discovery (by English survey party) and restoration in 1921 is narrated as (always been) a sacred site of Hindus and therefore the place as always been part of India. G. C. Chauley. 2007. *Art Treasures of Unokuti, Tripura*, Ajam Kala Prakasham: New Delhi, pp. 9 and 31.

scholarship.[35] These studies pay particular attention to the relationship between place-names, including street names and political ideology. These names are 'convenient and popular political symbols', 'reflect and manifest a certain political identity', in that, they help to form a desired political consciousness among population.[36] Between the meaning engraved in the word displaced and the new meaning imposed lies politics of appropriation. The place acquires new identity implicated in the new ideology of the state. Nihal Perera aptly described this practice as 'semantic appropriation', in his analysis of how the British colonial power erased the imprints of former Portuguese and Dutch rule in Sri Lanka.[37]

In postcolonial Tripura, within the political ideology of new state, the indigenous toponymy not only symbolised rival geographies, but were viewed as a threat to the new history and geography of the place. Therefore, simultaneous to re-invention of Hindu sacred sites, the indigenous place-names were erased by ossifying the new names, written and made official. Rabindra Kishore Debbarma, a writer, noted that 'Bengalee surveyors would come to the village, enquire the name of the place, he would then translate the name to Bengalee and record it'.[38] These acts have to be understood within that political ideology

[35] For example, Maoz Azaryahu makes an extensive survey of street names altered under the regime of Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED) in the East Germany. The erased names reflected the political ideology of the Nazi which were in fact had replaced the names that up to 1918 reflected of Kaiserreich. Maoz Azaryahu. 1986. "Street Names and Political Identity: The Case of East Berlin", *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 21, No. 4. p. 581; See also Arsney Saparov. 2003. "The Alternation of Place Names and Construction of National Identity in Soviet Armenia", *Cahiers du Monde russe,* Vol. 44, No. 1, p. 179.

[36] Azaryahu, *Street Names and Political Identity,* p. 581.

[37] Quoted and discussed in Nira Wikramasinghe. 2009. "The Imagined Spaces of the Empire", in Cathrine Burn and Tariq Jazeel (eds), *Spatialising Politics: Culture and Geography in Postcolonial Sri Lanka,* Sage: Los Angeles, London, Singapore, New Delhi and Washington DC, p. 31.

[38] Interview with the researcher in 2008. For an extensive list of the indigenous place-names which have been re-named into Bengalee see Rabindra Kishore Debbarma. 1998. *Tripurar Gram* (Trans: Villages of Tripura) Tripura Darpan: Agartala.

of producing a discourse of right over a territory — a moral right to own and inhabit a territory.[39]

These new place-names disrupt the old topographies of identity — the connection between identity (not necessarily modern identity) and place — allowing new connections and linkages to appear as natural and given. However, the indigenous names continue to exist in the everyday discourse of the other inhabitants, as an oral memory, always as a potent source of rival imaginings of the place. Tripuri ethno-nationalist struggle, to reclaim the indigenous toponymy, converts these surfaces into sites of different memory production and circulation. Arseny Saparov provides a gist of politics of place-names.[40]

> Ethnic groups that have preserved their national identity are especially sensitive about maintenance of the national landscape. Often the national toponymy is the only witness to the fact that a territory belongs to a particular ethnic group. Most definitions of any ethnic community — tribe, nationality, nation necessarily mention the common living space of that ethnic group. Within that territory a national toponymy has been formed — a system of geographical names in the native language of the indigenous population.[41]

Place-names, as important markers of territorial identity, are sites of contested memory and construction of particular identity of place. The identity of postcolonial Tripura, as a specific type of place, was produced via appropriation and invention of sacred spaces (drawing on connection between place-names and their connection to Hindu

[39] Naming events, actions and places by Israel has been a project of crafting a national identity and claiming certain territories of Palestine for Jewish homeland and state. See Julie Peteet. 2005. "Words as Intervention: Naming in the Palestine: Israel Conflict", *Third World Quarterly,* Vol. 26, No. 1 (The Politics of Naming: Rebels, Terrorists, Criminals, Bandits and Subversives), pp. 153–173.

[40] For a similar reading see R.D.K. Herman. 1999. "The Aloha State: Place Names and the Anti-Conquest of Hawaii", *Annals of Association of American Geographers,* Vol. 89, No. 1 (March 1999), pp. 76–102.

[41] Saparov, *The Alteration of Place Names and Construction of National Identity,* p. 179.

cosmographies), and also conscious transformation (read erasure) of existing indigenous toponymy. Tripuri ethno-nationalist identity politics, the restitution of indigenous toponymy, which asserts a different reading of modern landscapes of Tripura flags of politics of uncompromising spaces. The re-naming of Saidra as Howra (a principal river in West Bengal state), besides being an affront to Subendu's ethno-nationalist sensibilities, reproduces his ethno-nationalism — where ethno-nationalism is a struggle with estranged geography.

Marks of identity: Contesting memory

The towering statute of Subhas Chandra Bose, on the bank of the Saidra/Howra, is not the only memorial that enacts postcolonial Tripura as a specific place. The city landscape is 'littered' with, virtually, statues, memorials and monuments of historical figures drawn from Indian national struggle who are largely from Bengal.[42] The visual of a youthful statue of Khudiram Bose, on the entrance of Ujjayanta Palace (presently the Legislative Assembly of the state), and Rabindranath Tagore and Ambedkar on the precinct of the palace signals two ideological agendas — appropriation of the historical site to the Indian national imagination; and, in the eye of Tripuri ethno-nationalist, 'Bengalinisation' of the indigenous historical sites. The (almost) absence of erstwhile Manikya rulers (appropriated as Heroes by Tripuris ethno-nationalists) from the memorial landscape of the city tells a different story. What difference does this absence make in 'thinking' space? What does it tell of the relationship between place and identity?

[42] On 1 July 2010, during one of my field trips, I accompanied Anthony Debbarma (member of BPHRO), Wasok Debbarma (former president of TSF) and Bekreng (former prominent leader of NLFT) on their visit to a malaria stricken village (Kanchanpur) near Mizoram border in North Tripura District. Before reaching Kanchanpur we came by a small market place, a white bust of Baghat Singh (the unmistakable moustache and the hat) above a glistening pillar caught our attention. Anthony muttered to himself and shook his head in disbelief and asked, to no one particular, *Chini Raja rok biang kwma kha sa*? (trans:Where have our kings/heroes disappeared). As our discussion suddenly shifted to the issue of memorials my co-passengers chatted on about building memorials of 'our heroes' and compete with the 'litters' that dot Tripura's capital, Agartala.

There is a burgeoning literature which shares a common insight: monuments and memorials create and maintain a particular view of place — they impress that conception onto the public landscape or inscribe a particular view of history on the landscape.[43] The politics of 'memorials' work within the ideology of producing place and identity: and as 'a marker of memory and history…places of memory provides an ideal way to trace the underlying continuities and discontinuities in (national) identity politics'.[44] The underlying assumption is that a place of memory (memorials) makes real, in the everyday lived experiences of given population, the invented idea of place and identity. These sites symbolise connection with a particular idea of history of the place, entombs a specific memory, and performs rituals of commonality. I wish to flesh out, not withstanding these connections, a different reading of these sites and arrive at a radical take on the idea of Tripura.

A short recap would be appropriate. Immediately after the dissolution of British-India and disruption of the erstwhile ruling House of Tripura, a new idea of place needed production. This became critical for two reasons: integration to the Indian union and rehabilitation of large-scale Bengalee-Hindu refugees from severed East Pakistan. The new political elites aspired to resolve these two problems through appropriating Tripura's past: one, the invention of Hindu sacred toponymies and thereby imagining Tripura as a place within Indic cosmography; two, Bengalee-Hindus as originally subjects of Manikyan past (the proofs being control over large swathe of Bengal by Manikya rulers), and thereby making them legitimate citizens in the new spatial formation. What emerged from this appropriated past is the central idea of Tripura as historical place of harmonious 'hill-man and plain-man', reproduced in school text books. Why is this history not spoken through the sites investigated here? What I will demonstrate is that the 'absence' marks a contradiction, and announces a problematic space.

[43] For a detail discussion on the relationship between monuments and identity construction see Paul Stangl. 2003. "The Soviet War Memorial in Treptow", *Berlin, Geographical Review,* Vol. 93. No. 2, pp. 213–236; Benjamin Forest and Juliet Johnson. 2002. "Unravelling the Thread of History: Soviet Era War Monuments and Post-Soviet National Identity in Moscow", *Annals of Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 92, No. 3, pp. 524–547.
[44] Ibid.

The problem played itself out last year when the state government proposed a bill in the Assembly to rename the Agartala Airport after poet Rabindranath Tagore. The airport was built by Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya during the 1940s and was used by the allied forces in World War II. The very idea of commemorating and memorialising Tagore by naming the airport after him, instead of Bir Bikram Manikya who commissioned it, sparked off unprecedented opposition from Tripuri ethno-nationalists.[45] Between the state's choice of Tagore and ethno-nationalists open espousal of Bir Bikram, to be commemorated and memorialised as a name of the significant site, lies troubling politics of identity and place. Despite conscious appropriation of past spaces of Manikyan rule by the new state, its inability to commemorate and memorialise that history subverts that produced connection. Consequently, this calls for re-thinking these sites, not only as spaces commensurate with a particular invented place identity, but also as ambivalent sites that display dissonance with the very central ideology of a place.

In order to situate this dissonance, perhaps, it is necessary to look more closely at the way Tripuri ethno-nationalists have imagined their identity and Tripura. Earlier, I had pointed out the rather too quick after-lives Manikya history had had among Tripuri ethno-nationalists. First, Manikya rule and its history were disavowed by the early Tripuri elites, and especially the members of JSS. Second, Manikya rulers were glorified and its history was appropriated by the new ethno-nationalist groups like TUJS, TSF and TNV. The later ethno-nationalist retrofitted their nation onto a hoary past and produced the present as a colonial condition — the hoary past as their resource to rival geographical imagination. This brand of ethno-nationalist discourse wrought much havoc to the nascent modern state's control over Tripura's past. Rather, the past became an untouchable domain, whereby use of it entailed allowing larger space to Tripuri ethno-

[45] *The Telegraph*. 2010. "Controversy over renaming of airport after Tagore", (14 July), <http://www.telegraphindia.com/1100713/jsp/northeast/story_12674635.jsp> (accessed 15 July, 2010); Sentinel. 2010. "maharaja or poet? Controversy hits airport rechristening", (3 July), <http//:www.sentinelassam.com/northeast/story.php?> (accessed 15 July, 2010).

nationalists in the body politics of the state. The heightened politics of which has been the incandescent 1980 ethnic clashes, eviscerated common past and striated lived geographies.

The Manikyan period, and the Manikya rulers were nationalised by Tripuri ethno-nationalists — an ideology (ethno-nationalism) chastised, stigmatised and delegitimised as 'extremism', 'anti-national' and 'anti-social' since 1947. The ethno-nationalised history can no longer serve as a symbolic agenda for the state-promoted vision of common past. The point is that incorporation of the nationalised historical figures would confer legitimacy to rival geographies — a situation where even a 'common past' can no longer exist. These built environments, ironically, merely serve as markers of Bengalee-Hindu present in Tripura. They no longer tell of a shared past between 'tribal' and 'non-tribal'.

The marks of identity, that interspersed the city landscape then, are non-commensurate with the postcolonial states ideology of place and identity. These marks dot the landscape, as rain battered statues, names memorialised in public places, martyr memorials and gravesites. These do not necessarily tell only of the identity of Tripura, but also symbolise the failure of that supposed identity.

A geography of loss: Border and memory

So far, I have delineated two underlying threads of Tripuri identity politics and its rival geographies: First, its appearance within the state-core as disjunctive of former spatial grid. That is, it re-constituted itself as (from a mobile category) non-stigmatised identity by re-marking the body of the ruler as 'Tripuri'. Second, the sites where difference is enacted, reproduced, and re-framed are always posited as spaces of loss, dislocation, estrangement and fragmentation of Tripuri identity and place. I would like to push these arguments further, and by mapping politics of identity and place develop a critique of the way Tripuri ethno-nationalist have imagined Tripura.

Ruins usually are favourite sites or sights for nationalist or ethnic politics — they are inevitably treated as signs (excreta) of a hoary

past and thereby affording its inheritors larger space in history. The ruined site which confronted me with this politics is a desecrated simlang of former rulers of Tripura whose claim to antiquity would embarrass even the mightiest or oldest of dynasties in India.[46] The dilapidated gravesite is located at Battala, one of the busiest corner-parts of Agartala, the capital of Tripura. Despite the fact that dominant narrative of Tripura as a 'home' — produced, sanctioned and circulated by the postcolonial state — has largely been dependent upon the character of Manikya dynasty, this particular site failed to achieve the status of a sacred in the eye of the state. This failure can be read in a myriad of ways.[47] To the Tripuri ethno-nationalists, its social and symbolic role in the narrative of identity (both of the place and of the community) is best served by the very reality of a desecrated simlang.[48] The desecration objectifies the disjunction of a geography, the visual of a ruin transforms the site into an ethnicised sight and makes real the invented colonial present. What is that disjuncted geography?

Tripuri ethno-nationalism is contingent upon a shared belief in a certain idea of Tripura's past — this particular place as inhabiting a continuous space, as an exclusive 'home'. This notion of place incites not only radicalised everyday politics, but also serves as an ideological resource for armed struggle, waged with the objective of restoration of lost geographies. The effect of this kind of geographical imagination is a text which brought communities and political parties onto the streets of Tripura — the text in particular is Bijoy Kumar Hrankhawl's speech

[46] It traces its lineage to the Indian epic *Mahabarat*. One of the Tripuri kings is said to have participated in the famous Kurukshetra battle of *Mahabarat*.
[47] Many of the Bengalee passers-by and shopkeepers (near the old simlang) I talked to, believe the place to be of importance to the royal family and its ruin as consequence of the family's negligence. However, when I broached this issue, side by side the issue of memorials to Anthony Debbarma, Washok Debbarma and Bekreng, they interpreted the ruined simlang as symbolic of the ruin of their nation.
[48] Discussion with Subendu Debbarma, then General Secretary of Twipra Student Federation on the question of why a sacred space is not commemorated by ethno-nationalist groups. He opined that, while gravesites of present Bengalee ministers become 'flower gardens', 'our kings' simlang becomes a municipality waste dumping site.

at the Working Group of Indigenous Population at Geneva (WGIP) in 2002.[49] The text is a perfect embodiment of ethno-nationalist geographical ideologies which upsets dominant 'official' narrative.[50] What does it embody?

First, the production of Bengalee-Hindu as the 'other-outsider' has largely been dependent upon the idea of precolonial 'glorious' Tripura as a history of Tripuri 'nation'. An ethno-nationalist discourse of Tripura takes place only within this given geographical thought — Tripura as always already a territorial entity that can be called a nation. The possibility of a text as 'ethno-nationalist' occurs via or from this geographically given thought. If the production of Tripura as a 'home of tribals and non-tribals' occurs by marking the category Tripuri below the spatio-temporal grid — Bengalee-Hindu as occupying true time and Tripuris as behind time — Tripuri ethno-nationalist literature upsets that spatio-temporal grid by retrofitting Tripuri identity to a geographically different and simultaneous history. Virtually every ethno-nationalist text embodies this geographical ideology, and plot meanings within these imaginings.

Despite the marks of colonial cartographic surgery or modernity on its mapped discontinuous 'geo-body', 'Tripura' in the ethno-nationalist geographical imaginings have always inhabited that discontinuity. The ethno-nationalist geography departs from dominant discourse of the modern border between Tripura–Bangladesh as simultaneously a marker of the 'common enemy' and as erasure of distance between 'tribal and non-tribal'. In the ethno-nationalist

[49] The speech created a furore in Tripura, and various political parties demanded his arrest. On the other hand, various Tripuri groups threatened a mass movement in support of the speech. One of the important themes of the speech was terming insurgency in Tripura as 'movements for self-determination' by indigenous people.

[50] Many other texts also significantly embody these ideologies. An undated handbook published by BPHRO entitled, *A Brief History and Present Condition of Boroks of Twipra*. Speech of Sukhendu Debbarma in the First session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, 13–24 May, 2002, United Nations, H. Q. New York; Speech of Kabita Jamatia at United Nation Commission on Human Right, Geneva, 1–5 March 2004.

discourse this border announces a drastically different political project: the production of 'Tripuri' as inhabiting a continuous place 'Tripura', and as a site for production of non-paradoxical spatio-temporal 'present' and non-dichotomous simultaneity. It is the latter I shall turn to here.

The ontology of 'tribal and non-tribal' produced in the dominant narrative frames dichotomous simultaneity in the 'present' of the 'tribal' and the 'other'. It posits a present to be outside the spatio-temporal 'now' of the 'non-tribal'.[51] The 'tribal' as occupying space-time 'behind' produces a dichotomous simultaneity between the 'tribal' and 'non-tribal'. This way of conceptualising communities visualise the 'tribal' in relation to the past of the 'non-tribal'; and difference is postulated as meaningful only within that linear grid.[52] The border in question is invested (by the ethno-nationalists) as a site for invention of a spatiality which champions a narrative of simultaneous time — Tripuri as inhabiting 'now' of the 'non-tribal'; and separate territoriality.[53] Difference is then postulated as meaningful, not within the linear grid, but as occupying a historically different 'homeland' and possessing a separate history. This narrative radically confronts the

[51] Harry Harootunian's formulation is apt here, 'true time' is kept by the modern west and colonized societies exist in a temporality different from the modern. Quoted in Manu Goswami. 2004. *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space*, Permanent Black: Delhi, p. 28. (Quoted from Harry Harootunian. 2000. *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture, and Community in Interwar Japan*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, p. xvi).

[52] For example, this makes possible for conceptualising communities practicing shifting cultivation in the hills as temporally behind communities engaged in plough and wet agriculture. James C. Scott (2009) turns this argument on its head by arguing that agricultural practice is not ecologically given, but a political choice. Plough cultivation is not after shifting to agriculture. See *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland South East Asia*, Yale University Press: London. p. 191.

[53] In a widely distributed short leaflet, Narendra Debbarma, a leading ethno-nationalist intellectual attempted to prove how Tripuri's idea of time is similar to "English" and "Indian Era". Though similarities can be assigned to notion of day, week, month and year; the comparison of hour, minute and second appears preposterous. Narendra Debbarma, *Twipra Era* (Undated and publisher unknown).

idea of a 'shared' home and history championed by the dominant narrative of Tripura.

Second, the text reproduces the postcolonial place as a geography of loss and geography of continuous struggle.[54] The dissolution of Manikya dynasty and the disruption of British-India, and the immigration of Bengalee-Hindu refugees into Tripura and accession into Indian dominion are conceptualised as events which coincide with the loss of a geography. The simlang is a powerful reminder of this loss — a reminder not only of a glorious past, but also of suppressed present. The simlang is a signifier of 'glorious' history of Tripuri people and its crumbling edifices as a signifier of the suppressed present. The desecrated simlang is used as a site to invoke an event in the immediate past — the crossing of the border by Bengalee-Hindus — as a colonising event. The ruin communicates the arrival of the 'other-outsider', the 'refugees', and announces the disjunction of a geography.

In this ethno-nationalist narrative of Tripura hides a gap — the production of Bengalee-Hindu as 'refugee' unsettles the appropriation of Manikya period as history of Tripuri 'homeland'. It is impossible to study Manikya history outside the permanent surplus-producing Bengalee peasantry — the alluvial plain as extractive space. Political identity of the Manikyan Tripura has been intricately interwoven with Bengal. Bengal was its political umbilical cord — it supplied Bengalee Brahmins, administrators and Bengalee peasantry.

Conclusion

My intention had been to delineate spatiality inherent in the production of 'Tripuri'. The disjunctions in space anticipate the possibility for imagining 'Tripuri' as a modern political category. I

[54] The technique would be to list out every movement by the Tripuris since 1947 as movement for restoration of that geography. The inclusion of JSS and its avatar GMP in the list is problematic for the singular reason that these two movements were antagonistic to the Manikya dynasty. For example see Mohan Debbarma. 2008. *A Handbook On The Identity, History And Life Of Borok People*, Kokborok Sahitya Sabha:Agartala, pp. 32–50.

argued that identity 'Tripuri' fixes itself within a geographical grid by re-marking the state-core — no longer inhabiting a mobile stigmatised space. Finally, this particular identity inhabits estranged geographies, some of which are, silent indigenous toponymies, memories untold in the memorials and the ruined *simlang*. The border as an ambivalent space in the production of Tripura as home by the dominant narrative itself becomes a site invested in the construction of the 'other-outsider'. The production of 'Tripuri', then, is contingent upon invention of a rival geography of Tripura — as a resource for rival ideologies and rival narrative. This narrative thrives as a peripheral epistemology of place, always confronting, challenging and subverting the dominant discourse.

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