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**Understanding Northeast India
through a 'Spatial' Lens**

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Understanding Northeast India through a 'Spatial' Lens

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Abstract

Applying 'spatial' lens to Northeast India (NEI) is merely not for hermeneutic purposes but for a nuanced understanding of the flux accompanying the region. Spatial analysis helps us to move beyond the 'territorial trap' imposed on NEI through various cartographic exercises. The implications of applying the territoriality principle during the colonial and post-colonial periods are quite evident in NEI today. Now with the advent of globalization, as capital seeks to reinforce its spatiality, new imaginaries are being created both by the Indian state as well as the 'people' in the region, which have both overlapping and contradictory connotations. Spatial analysis helps us to understand these overlappings and contradictions between the economic imperatives of the state and the socio-cultural imperatives of the communities, all linked to their respective imaginaries associated with the region. Under such a scenario, what are its ramifications? Will it change the somatic proximity of the communities with their land? Is the region entering into a new era of transforming itself into a 'pawn' and a 'pathway' on behalf of the state and global capital? Or, the birth of newer batches of insurgents is becoming ominous under the present conditions? The paper analyses related issues about Northeast India in terms of its emerging history.

I Introduction

The archaic space of Northeast India has been far from a territorially entrenched nation-state space. It was essentially clan

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or kinship spaces the nature of which widely varied from one clan to another. Although each clan occupied certain territorial space, the territoriality principle was never at the core of this erstwhile clan spatiality. Space as a territorial category was introduced during the colonial rule that followed the dual tactics of capture of the clan space and creating territorial enclave within the defined administrative boundaries. Thus the colonials, following the territoriality principle, devised administrative boundaries and borders that cut across numerous clan spaces in the Northeast. From the colonial perspective, administrative territorialization of the primordial space, thus made, had political, strategic and commercial purposes which left serious ramifications in the times to come. The post-colonial period seems to have carried that legacy forward *albeit* under the preview of constitutional provisions.

In the contemporary neo-liberal frame, spatiality received wider political economy significance as the global flow of capital and revolution of information technology caused parallel supersession of the hitherto territorial boundary blocks created in the post-colonial era. Under globalization, as capital seeks to reinforce a spatiality that is conducive for its unhindered flow, the hitherto spaces, less entrenched in the circuits of capital is allured to find a berth in the global market economy. This is the context in which the Look East Policy re-imagines Northeast India as a space for market economy. The policy, apparently intends to deliver India's Northeast from its presently landlocked and peripheral status to new geopolitical *imaginaries*, not necessarily bound by the limits of the present geography. Such imaginaries of space extends beyond the region and across the international borders to the countries of Southeast Asia through frontline states such as Myanmar and Bangladesh. This imagined space is now often portrayed as the *extended* Northeast by the officialdom (Das 2012). It will be worthwhile to note here that extended Northeast which is now fancied by the state through the imaginaries of market has been a part of the people's imagination and the insurgencies in the region of course not limited to markets alone but for aspiring to share an ethnic space fractured by political boundaries.

Before we go into the details of the Northeast Indian scenario, we discuss the concept of space and economic imperatives *vis-a-vis* social imperatives and then collate our spatial understanding with the emerging history of contemporary Northeast India.

II Space and Economic Imperatives

Space, understood as a geographical-ecological reality, is always a historical configuration. While one may agree to this basic premise in relation to space, there are different views regarding the interplay of this dual (economic and social) connotation associated with space. Marx viewed that constant search and expansion of market as absolutely necessary for the survival of capitalist mode of production. Marx also viewed space as both a historical product and a geographical expression in which capitalism's recurrent search for cheap raw material, new source of labour and market is exemplified through its inherent tendency of driving capital *beyond* any spatial barriers (Marx 2010). Capital is thus inherently de-territorializing and each period of accumulation under capitalism *annihilates* space by time.

But according to Harvey, it is only through the relatively fixed and immobile configuration of territorial organization termed *spatial fixes* that the accumulation process is expedited. Through the mechanism of *spatial fix* the surplus capital is shifted outside rather than accumulated at home. In this exposition, the process of accumulation under capitalism gets expedited through a mechanism called time-space *compression* (Harvey 1990). Time-space compression speeds-up the turnover time of capital (i.e. time of production together with the time of circulation of exchange). This entails parallel acceleration in exchange and consumption. Improved system of communication and information flow, coupled with rationalizations in techniques of distribution (packing, inventory control, containerization, market feedback etc.) makes it possible to circulate commodities through the market system with greater speed. *Rapidity* of time therefore, *annihilates* space barriers through transport and telecommunications revolution that in turn connects disparate markets to the world market (Harvey 1990). Furthermore, time-space *compression* which marks the erosion of place into space creates a

disconnection to place resulting in 'universal placenessless' and 'release from gravity' (Harvey 1990). Thus territorialization though remained an inseparable part of the capital's spatiality, contemporary neo-liberalism tended to liberate the territorial barriers to facilitate international flow of capital, investment, goods and services overcoming the spatial rigidities of the liberal economy (pre-globalization) in which capital remained loyal to the nation/state.

On the other hand, the pressure exerted by the supra-national entities like the World Bank, WTO, ADB and IFIs on the nation state also dismissed the 'state-society-market' conflation as neo-liberal globalization made the nation state more and more redundant and dysfunctional in terms of the development function. This process exerted mounting pressure on the nation state to liberalize the protectionist restrictions that hampered the flow of capital, goods and services. So, at the level of global market, space-time *compression* and supra-national region-formation become akin to the process of emergence of 'region state' that attain significance in providing the geographical foundations for the contemporary phase of capitalist expansion and accumulation.

This process of 'region state' formation according to Ohmae (1993) is driven by the logic of economic rationality whereby region states are supposed to be the manifestation of the natural economic zones engulfing the 'space' of more than one nation state. In the neo-liberal political framework the territoriality principle gives way to extra-territorial regional solidarity as a mechanism for market and capital expansion. The markers of ethnicity including dress, culture and crafts, no longer remain minuscule; they rather become the trading items of a constitutive market economy that requires creating a larger consumer constituency and a larger market place beyond the boundaries of the ethnic and the nation. On the global map the lines that now matter are those that may be called 'region states' the boundaries of which, as Ohmae (1993) explains, are not imposed by political fiat; they are drawn by the deft but invisible hand of the global market for goods and services; such states follow real flows of human activity; they have no call on tax payers money to finance

military forces to defend such borders; they are natural economic zones that may or may not fall within the geographic limits of a particular nation. In the contemporary times, these are appearing in Europe, the US and in Asia. The primary linkage of region states, as Ohmae found, tends to be with the global economy and not with their host nations. That is why it might be a cross-border economic zone encompassing parts of two states.

To Ohmae (1993), region state must be small enough for the citizens to share certain economic and consumer interests but of adequate size to justify the transport and communication infrastructure and quality professional services necessary to participate economically on global scale. The region states are defined not by their economies of scale in production but by their having reached efficient economies of scale in their consumption, infrastructure and professional services. It is claimed that where true economies of service exist, religious, ethnic and racial distinctions are not important as commercial prosperity creates sufficient affluence for all. Whereas nation states require a domestic political focus, region states are ensconced in the global economy; welcome foreign investment and ownership and seek access of the people to the best and cheapest products. They have a spill-over effect in the adjacent regions within the same political confederation (Ohmae 1993). So, region-international interface replaces the traditional nation-state interface with the international organizations. The role of government in region state is the creation of 'untraded interdependencies' or positive locational advantages. Region states, by their very nature, should tilt their policies towards wealth creation rather than income distribution and are thereby the dynamic motors of information in the global economy (Ohmae 1993).

Region state is a space for diffusion of differences. This spatialisation, is even less a fixed structure where boundary-marking and the construction of spatial identities become more fragile, more fraught and obviously artificial. Market economy thus hegemonises space so as to fit in with the niceties of market mandates (Shields 2007). Space as a cultural property is stripped off its essence and redefined as a market economy asset. Any

local cultural element, if found to survive within the market economy, virtually become market economy asset. The image of social space is de-constructed with banalities and distractions of the lived space. While celebrating space, the inner core of local culture is bemused and relegated to the backyard of the dominant discourse of the market economy.

III Space and Social Imperatives

Space in social theory draws our attention to the non-market (social and cultural) aspects of social intercourse with a normative approach that gives an alternative to the rational choice model. In the Cartesian representation of space, social relations are made to appear congruent with territorial nation state. It results in disconnect between the social boundary of the people and the political boundary drawn by the state. When societies are divided by state boundaries, it is expected that the population groups will remain loyal to the state-determined politico-territorial boundaries. In other words, the state seeks to homogenize the society within a space as defined in its territorial limits, but the irony is, what it attempts to homogenize has *nothing homogenous in it*¹. So territorialization of social relations albeit at a national scale becomes the hallmark of the state mode of integration during the pre-globalization era. The contemporary analysis of space in social theory has focused on space as 'liberated' from the state centric 'territorial trap'² and region formation has been extended to the non-material dimensions as well. This analysis therefore considers ethnic space with its pre-existing social relations as a lived notion that is inseparable from the totality of space.

Spatiality under globalization moves beyond the Cartesian image of a static, pre-given and bounded block entity to a more 'liberated' interpretation of escaping the 'territorial trap', where space is not limited only to the self-enclosed geographical containers. The state-centric interpretation of space in the liberal (pre-globalization) era resulted in state fetishism, where space has been viewed as a timeless entity, immune to historical changes. Such an understanding of space of the liberal era has been found to be ahistorical. Due to this, there has been a re-assertion of space in social theory during the neo-liberal era,

which is an effort to look beyond the state-centric approach hitherto associated with space. However, moving beyond the 'territorial trap' idealized the conditions for 'cartographic anxieties'³ on the part of the nation state. As globalization initiated a process of *annihilating* space by time, autonomous aspirations of people and various population groups simultaneously created conditions for space-time *compression* through an attempt for re-territorialization of their imagined or pre-existing ethnic spaces. In the neo-liberal situation there is thus a greater effort from various population groups to re-draw the territorial boundaries in tune with the hitherto existing or imagined socio-ethnic boundaries. Contrary to the de-territorialization scheme of global capital, re-territorialization emerged beyond the geographic limits of the nation-states that went towards the supra-national formations - real or imagined. These supra-national formations sought for building a social space for the communities, where information technology played an important role in creation of such social space.

This gave rise to contradictions between economic space liberating the flow of global capital and ethnic space of various population groups liberating it from the bondage of state-territoriality. While the state seems more concerned with liberating the economic space for the flow of global capital, it cared little for the latter. The newer interventions of information and communication technology through social and electronic media and the infiltration of global food system through KFC, McDonald's etc., and apparel system through global brands also cut across the territorial space and the cultural fixity of a particular nation or ethnic group. These systems, taken together, redefined cultural space in strict commercial terms. Analysis of spatiality and region-formation thus got entrapped in this dual methodological interpretation. The ethno-centric methodology of 'borderless de-territoriality' became evident in contemporary global socio-cultural exchanges, global advocacy for indigenous people and Social Forums, Facebook and e-Connections.

Paasi (2000), while contesting the idea of 'space' in economic terms has analysed the resurgence of regions manifested as

socio-cultural constructs emerging through the everyday life struggles of various social groups. Region as a socio-cultural construct plays a fundamental role in production and reproduction of social relations and thus counter-poses against region as an economic unit. The other contesting category of region, as Paasi states, is on culture as the prime point of departure, concentrating on problems of regional identification and regional identities. Region is here understood primarily as a set of cultural relations between a specific group and a particular place which is connected with social commitments (Paasi 2000).

In the remaining sections of our discussion we problematize spatiality analysed so far in the context of the Northeast India.

IV The Archaic Space

The pre-colonial space of the Northeast was conceived as the bio-regions of numerous clans, which occupied varying geo-spatial areas of primordial space tied primarily with clan/kinship boundaries. The economy was subsistence based and the political structures were largely self-contained. This region had multitudinous social and political formations ranging from the republican, authoritarian to the convivial systems that in turn corresponded to the respective stages of economic formations.

In the economic front, we could find two distinct features in the region - the subsistence economy in the hills and the surplus-yielding economy in the valley areas. Such dual economic formations corresponded to the geo-morphological features of the region and divided the entire Northeast in two spatial regions – the hills and the plains. This formation followed the simple logic that smaller the surplus, lesser extensive is its territorial space and public authority and vice versa. The economic formation out of surplus generating wet-field cultivation and eventual political formations were ideologically and institutionally entrenched by the state power that could guard the surplus economy as well as its masters against any dissent. In contrast to the primordial social and political systems, each with the distinctly defined clan boundaries but with loosely defined territorial limits, juxtaposed with each other in this region. This ecological duality in terms of

the hills and the valleys was a historical construct and hence is important to understand the dynamics of and the differences in the economic, social and political formations in the region (Ray 2010).

In the archaic state process in the Northeast, there also emerged two other modes of production, namely: the Domestic and the Intermediary. The Domestic mode was a combination of shifting cultivation, hunting and gathering, tinged with a communitarian ethos. The Intermediary mode emerged out of locally-based trading economy created by surplus agricultural economy developed in the valley areas. This Intermediary mode acted as a buffer between the domestic and the mercantile modes. The foothill areas of the Northeast were the sub-peripheral entry points for mercantile economy. Some trade relations also developed between a section of the tribes in present Arunachal Pradesh with Assam and with the trans-border people in China. Such trade was not necessarily of classical mercantile nature. It was featured largely by mutual interdependencies, cultural give-and-take and community-level exchanges and social bond. There was hardly any role of monetization and profit making in such transactions and hence barter system became institutionalized as the usual mode of transaction. Barter economy ran not merely as a non-monetary mode but was based on trust. It was a part of social existence of the communities in this region. The place, we today know as border or trans-border was the natural place on which the communities could freely tread and trade without much restrictions. Such borderlessness of the local communities was reversed and was given distinct spatial dimension during the colonial rule. This deconstructed the erstwhile community space both as a social and cultural space.

V Colonial Spatiality

The colonial spatialization of the Northeastern region started from the strict standpoint of *terra incognita* (unexplored territory) that eventually was turned into *terra cognita* as the colonization of space progressed. Privatization of the commons was a part of the larger project of the private property regime of the colonial powers. Northeast India was not free from this project. In this

process, the non-state space of the historic communities was destroyed. This was done not only through the use of institutionalized power but also through diplomatic means. According to Baruah (2009), the British patronized the friendly tribal chiefs by envisaging special protective administrative regimes and used them as conduits to extend the paraphernalia of the state.

The British also transformed the Northeast as a civilizational space to a colonial space in which capture and extraction of the natural resource become imperative for their rule. In this process, the erstwhile natural space was first de-constructed and then reconstructed. Border and boundary consciousness was raised up more than ever before. This they did through different modes. Territorialization under the British rule happened in Assam, a British province and the princely states of Manipur and Tripura. The Burmese military invasions and later the Burmese rule over the Ahom kingdom made the Ahom kings seek British help. The East India Company's territories were extended to the borders of the Burmese empire. The latter's military excursion begun to alarm the British, which led to a convergence of interests between the Assamese and the East India Company against the Burmese. This was the time when the Assamese heartland came to be incorporated into a pan Indian imperial formation (Baruah 1999). In this way, colonialism annihilated many hitherto existing primordial spaces by capital movement and military aggression. It recreated spaces and converted these into the colonial space for market, raw materials and surplus accumulation as well as political rule.

The Anglo-Manipuri War (Treaty of Yandaboo-1826 leading to the capture of Manipur), capture of Tripura, the Inner Line Regulation of 1873, Scheduled District Act and the Assam Frontier Tract Regulation, the series of expeditions in the Naga Hills during 1830-40 and in the Lushai Hills during 1870 to 1891, down to the Government of India Act 1935, the bio-space in the region was created and recreated through drawing the border-lines and boundaries. In 1913-14, the British Administrator, Sir Henry McMahon, drew up the 550 mile long Line as the border between

British India and Tibet as Britain sought to advance its line of control and to establish buffer zones around its colony in South Asia. In 1914 British India brought some tribes of Assam under North-East Frontier Tracts. It was divided in two sections: the Central & Eastern Section (comprising the erstwhile Dibrugarh Frontier Tract, created in 1882, and some more areas in South) and the Western Section. The Central and Eastern Section was subsequently renamed as Sadiya Frontier Tract, while the Western Section was renamed as Balipara Frontier Tract. In 1946, Balipara Frontier Tract was divided into two administrative units: Sela Sub-Agency and Subansiri Area. A combined outcome of these was de-creation of the bio spaces and incorporation of these spaces into the colonial space. The Government of India Act 1935 however redesigned the backward tracts of Assam only, classified them under 'Excluded' and 'Partially Excluded Areas' and put them under the special supervision of the Governor of Assam (Syiemlieh 1996). Even the British officers S. R. Reid and Reginald Coupland proposed a Crown's Colony Scheme for certain areas of the Northeast, thus adding new territorial blueprints in the region.

Lord Curzon conceptualized a three-fold frontier that consisted of 'an administrative border', a frontier of 'active protection' and an outer or advanced "strategic" frontier. This got an after life in the present-day legislation as the 'Inner Line Permit', 'Protected Area Permit' and 'Restricted Area Permit'. While the 'Administrative Border' covered much of the present-day state of Assam, the 'Tribal Areas' were cordoned off by the 'Inner Line Regulation' and were placed under the direct British governance. These areas came under the frontier of active protection. The advanced strategic frontier comprised of territories beyond the 'Tribal Areas' was technically independent but really served as a buffer zone of the British Empire⁴. Thus making of the frontier in this region was not necessarily conditioned by economic considerations alone. On the contrary it was seen as an area or a boundary from where the mainland could be saved from impending threats or could be used as a gateway for consolidating the Empire. The then kingdom of Manipur, for example, as Thingnam (2009) saw, sandwiched between the two belligerent Empires– the Burmese

and the British, became the theatre of advancing the strategic frontier.

The second mode of spatial recreation was re-configuration of the tribal constellations through re-titling the chiefs and the headmen in the Northeast. Thus the Lushai chiefs were given 'boundary papers' (*Ramri Leikha*) that allowed them to enjoy the British-defined rights over certain territorial spaces and not beyond; the Kuki chiefs were given Settlement Rights in the mid-19th century. The Assam Chieftainship Act was passed by the colonials that made and unmade the bio-spaces hitherto governed by numerous indigenous rulers. The agreements were made with the headmen of the Khasi, Garo and Jaintia Hills. These acts led to structured subordination of the tribes. In order to curb the influence and power of the most powerful chiefs and for decentralization of political power, the British created, as Barpujari (2001) shows, a large number of new chiefs. The concern of the colonials grew in the frontier region of the Northeast (present day Arunachal Pradesh) with Chinese consolidation in Tibet. A new type of Territorial Chiefs was created also among the Thadou-Kukis of Manipur thus creating the distinction of the territorial Chiefs (Hausapu) and the clan Chiefs (Inpipu) (Ray 1990).

The third mode of spatial reconstruction was capture of the community land and conversion of these lands into private property resources through the two jurisprudential instruments of *res-nullius* (which is not assigned by the sovereign belong to the sovereign) and *lex loci* (law of the people where the asset exists). By the principle of *res nullius* the colonial rulers denied the natural right of the indigenous people and by the principle of *lex loci*, they established legal rights over the resource endowments of the indigenous people. Any right of the indigenous people over space became the acquired right, subject to permission under the British jurisprudence and the indigenous people started to lose their natural rights. Guided by the revenue drive, the colonial rulers took quite a few measures including acquiring the forests, water bodies and the 'wastelands'. The wastelands were essentially a colonial construction on which plantation and agricultural activities were initiated⁵.

In this process, social and cultural reproduction function of space was denied by the administrative and economic spatialization of the region. The topographical and ecological diversities, the people and their social structure, the nano politico-social units were homogenized by colonial mode of geographical, economic and administrative spatialization. Certain types of spatial enclaves were created in Northeast through 'Reserve Forests' and 'Protected Forests' that reviled the natural right of the forest dependent communities. The Assam Forest Regulation of 1891 created certain types of spatial enclaves with administratively defined forest boundaries that prohibited entry of the tribal and the forest dependent people in such reserved or protected areas. Such 'spatial enclaves' were created in different hill locations of the region at different points of time depending on the spread and extent of colonial expansion.

The fourth mode of spatial reconstruction was the Land Revenue Administration. The Assam Land Revenue Regulation was promulgated in 1886. In the hills, Hill House Tax was imposed through the Chin Hills Regulation (1896). Whereas most parts of Assam were brought under the Ryotwari System, some areas were also brought under Permanent and Temporary Settlements. The Regulation was brought into force in Cachar, Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Naogaon, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur and with certain exceptions, in the NC Hills, Garo Hills, KJ Hills, Naga Hills and Lushai Hills districts. The regulation was also brought into force in the tract transferred from Mokukchung sub-division of the Naga Hills district to Sibsagar district. In Tripura the Chakla Rosanabad areas were brought under the Zamindari system and the King of Tripura, the tributary to the East India Company, was accorded Zamindari right in Chakla Rosanabad. The state of Manipur followed the Assam Land Revenue Regulation and the Ryotwari system. Revenue interest of the colonials squeezed the community space through individuation of rights, a rationale that emerged during the days of John Locke and perpetuates till the contemporary era.

The fifth mode of spatial reconstruction was building road infrastructure, commercial and administrative infrastructure, army

cantonments and army colonies etc. In this process many natural community spaces went into the oblivion of history. It can be mentioned in this connection that for the construction of the National Highway 39 (Numaligarh to Myanmar border in Manipur) only, as many as ten army expeditions were made on the Angami tract of the then Naga Hills which obliterated numerous ethnic spaces along the tract.

In the colonial re-construction and de-construction process the role of the local powers was immense. The royal authorities in the region were made important players in the colonial chessboard. The chieftainship organizations and the micro-political organizations of the multitudinous tribes of the region were also made major players in these activities. In the process, both these traditional institutions however faced different degrees of structured subordination to the colonial power and played mostly the instrumental roles in annexation, oppression, regulation and military intervention. Some tribes were also designated as buffers who were made instrumental in frontier defence and that is why; they were given settlement rights in the territorial spaces around the frontier through various legal instruments. This territorialization made the ethnic space spherical, put a territorial limit across the ethnic space, eroded the ingenuity of the primordial social, economic and political institutions, fractured the ethnic categories and hindered their primordial mobility and exchange. Simultaneously, such territorialization gave the colonials a relative advantage in managerial, political, legal and resource controls over the *recalcitrant* tribes in the frontiers.

Annexation, territorialization and ruling over these areas were however not the end functions of colonialism. They targeted the incredible natural resource endowments of this region and made this region supply zone for the colonial industries located elsewhere. The colonial state also targeted this region for opening trade and market routes to the Southeast Asia too. The locally available natural resource endowments apart, the agricultural and forest produce of Burma (presently Myanmar) became the attractive tradable goods to the British. Northeast India was also crucial for gaining access to South China's natural wealth as well.

A synchronized *modus operandi* was in operation, while the Foreign Office and the Colonial Office were engaged in locating new markets; the War Office was mostly involved in defending the markets for commerce.

In the process of de-creation and recreation, the bio-spaces of the Northeast were intersected, interwoven and incorporated into the colonial space. The Simon Commission and the Government of India Act 1935 also re-created and de-created space in the region which left an indelible scar in history that had adverse ramifications in the post-colonial programme for the nation state.

VI Post-colonial Spatiality

The social pathology emanating from colonial territorialization of space was perpetuated largely in the post-colonial era. The post-colonial spatial reconstruction of the Northeast became however more critical. As such, immediately after the transfer of power, by Northeast India we understood basically three states— Assam, a British province; Manipur and Tripura— the two Princely states. Manipur and Tripura were later integrated into the Union of India. But this project of the state builders faced challenges from the multitudinal ethnic groups in the region from the very beginning and remained a source of trouble for the Indian state from the very inception. The ethnic movements in the post-colonial Northeast went on with multitudinous contesting self-determination plans starting from identity assertion, autonomy to secessionist movements at different times and scales. This region thereby became the spaces for resistance in post-colonial India.

From the resistance movements there emerged a number of territorial blue-prints which provided the background for the spatiality of resistance. Some of the blue-prints were also submitted to the government. These movements in Northeast appeared out of the deep dissatisfaction with the homogenized nation-state and its development projects that were concentrated in the metropolitan pockets, while the ethnic spaces became mere suppliers of raw materials. The failure of the Indian state to economically integrate the Northeast problematized the issue of national integration. Apart from the perceived process of coercive

integration of the tribes within India, simultaneous proclamation of independence by the Nagas and the Chinese presence on the frontier worried the post-colonial state builders further. So from the threshold of 1947, the Northeast was viewed by the state apparatus largely through security prism. Threat perception of the state and the securitization of the region soon followed in the region through the promulgation of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act in 1958. This Act got "embedded in the mindset of the Indian state in imaging and governing the Northeast" and "the contradictory politics inherent in the implementation of this alleged new vision appeared destined to exacerbate grievances among the people in the region" (McDuie-Ra 2009: 314).

The backlash of the ethnic groups against this nationalist project was felt in the struggle for *embedded autonomy* against the perceived *internal colonization* of Northeast by the Indian state. This state of affairs challenged the pan-territorial reconstruction project of the state builders and the smaller loyalty, thus appeared to be a threat to the monistic concept of sovereignty and the cartographic boundaries of the Indian state. Ethnic nationalism had equal space implication like the nation state and hence the former floated some imagined or real territorial/cartographic blue-prints of its own that often went against the grand cartography of the Indian state. Influx of people both from within and outside India in the post-partition era added criticality to the question of citizenship in the region. This eroded the distinction between the citizens and the aliens in these areas that culminated in serious political movements in Assam, Manipur and Tripura in course of time.

Here it will be worthy to note that there was another dimension to this power play of resistance within the region. The ethnic groups in the hills perceived that there *embedded autonomy* stood threatened after the transfer of power in the post-colonial era. These highlanders sought to secede from Assam and from the hegemony of the Assamese language to protect themselves from marginalization due to the introduction of Assam Official Language Act of 1960. Baruah (1999) found that the politics of resistance to immigration reinforced the Assamese desire for

cultural policies that would give an Assamese public face to Assam- following the pan Indian cultural grammar of the nation province. On the other hand, Assam's multiethnic landscape- the product of colonial geography and of immigration as well as a much older diversity- was not conducive to Assamese becoming a language-based nation province following the pan Indian model. Yet the Bengali challenge to cultural policies that would define Assam as Assamese - produced serious culture wars that even degenerated into 'language riots'. The contradiction between the Assamese sub-nationalist vision of an Assamese Assam and the reality of multi-ethnic Assam might have greatly facilitated the break-up of what was colonial Assam. However, the prime mover in the break-up was a powerful central government which decided that by creating new states, it would be able to contain, and even preempt the impending insurgencies in the Northeast. It is rather apparent now that this policy was a failure. Later, the Reorganization Act of 1971 was instrumental to new spatialization of the region.

The dominant statist construction confronted the plural narratives of the nationalities in the region and invited a trade-off between the two. Northeast, therefore, symbolized a new rebel consciousness. The first generation elites of the region were already lumpenized by the British. The second generation elites tossed between the allurements of liberal constitutionalism of the Indian state on one hand and the rebel consciousness of the region, arising from discontentment of the tribal masses on the other. These elites who were embedded in the tradition stood at the cross-roads of tradition and modernity, made the different ethnic groups attuned to reactive politics, which, while acting as a countervailing force against the over-arching homogenizing tendency of the Indian state, became overwhelmingly based on identity and ethno-territoriality. This juxtaposition of tradition-modernity in the elite leadership exposed a *route* paradox to modern politics. This might be the distant reason why the elites of these ethnic groups were unable to forge a pan-regional identity and remained confined in the micro-political cocoons. There was some attempt however, to foster Kuki-Naga Unity at a point of time after Independence. But this attempt was short-lived and the

inter-tribal unity plan did not go for long. The Kuki movement stole the fire from the Naga movement although the former did not go to the extent of conflagration (Ray 1990). The emerging tribal organizations were also unable to assemble under a single regional forum that could really act as a countervailing force against the centrality of the Indian state. Therefore, although some efforts were made for a regional confederation of the discrete tribal groups, it did not sustain because of the exclusivist nature of the latter.

Romanticization of a larger ethnic space engulfing territories beyond the Indian border has been in the agenda of the insurgent groups but these groups could do little in realising their demand for a unified ethnic space. The insurgency movement of the Nagas is an indicator in this direction. NSCN (IM) in its on-going talks with the Central Government exhibits *Nagalim* with areas that not only includes Nagaland but also Naga inhabited areas in other states of Northeast as well as in Myanmar, the later areas referred as inhabited by the Eastern Nagas. Similar has been the case with the grand plan of BRACHIN State in 1980's, the blue-print of which showed areas spreading from the Brahmaputra valley of Assam to the Chin Hills of Burma (presently Myanmar). This plan although mobilized support initially both in India and Burma but faded away subsequently.

So, the failure of the elite groups either for trans-border integration or within India paved the way for nuclear politics which became an instrument of hope for getting a possible berth in the power structure. This nuclearization of ethno-territorial blueprints weakened the efforts for collective mobilization against the homogenization of the Indian state. Once they chose the court of nuclear politics, they thereby started to jealously guard their boundaries to avoid any incursion from 'others'. So there was no visible consensus among the ethnic groups on a workable regional blue-print as a result the regional voice did not emerge. A top-down approach of politico-administrative arrangements on the part of the state, ranging from Autonomous Region to formation of new states ultimately could not satisfy the tribes of the region. Instead it created a new power structure where many

erstwhile chieftains in collusion with the power-brokers, bureaucrats and a section of the middle class, usurped the community space and muted any voice of dissent in the name of preserving the exclusivity of the cultural-identity. Thus, the tribal masses of the region in general and the highlands in particular suffered from the same amount of deprivation, inequality and pauperization as their non-tribal counterparts. The state, notwithstanding this, surged ahead with its spree of *nationalizing the non-space* (Baruah 2007) and transforming these frontiers, termed as Northeast, into inland borders through a nationalist bandwagon and administrative re-configuration.

The middle class in this region could have played a great role in reconciling economic modernization within the ethnic economy. This did not happen. Under the spell of modernization their energy was directed towards politics of bargain where the ethnic space became the playing field in the hands of the local power elites. The middle class thus remained entrapped within these two ends and Northeast revolved essentially around cognitive and allocative politics or a combination of both (Ray 2010). In the post-colonial polity formation process, the legacy of the colonial territorialisation of space died-hard and the discourses on territorialisation of space in the Northeast never got successfully resolved. Secondly, in the Northeast, as we see, so far no major capital intervention and *in-situ* industrialization materialised. This perpetuated the erstwhile social and political structures and cultures of the ethnic groups. The dominant discourse in the region centred on erosion of autonomy in the face of hegemony of the nation-state. The republican constitutionalism of the Indian state and the new legal-administrative structures became contesting to the indigenous system of governance. This created a hiatus between the two spatial realities— state nation and ethnic nation and a dyadic face-off between the dominant integrationist view of the Indian state and the ethno-spatial view of the emerging regional elites.

The grand polity of India established hegemony over the region and agreed to grant only limited autonomy. It viewed any contesting formulation of bio-regional and ethno-cultural spaces

as act of sedition and hence unacceptable. Ethnicity and region however became two opposing realities both in terms of scope, sphere and coverage and of the ideological differences, as well. While ethnicity represented an organic unity of the communities, regionalism could envelop them in a larger spatial entity by diluting the organic unity of wider and secular regional spaces. Regionalism at the same time could intersect the ethnic areas by redefining, squeezing and enlarging the borders and boundaries. But this type of pan-regionalism did not take shape in the Northeast.

VII Neo-liberalism and Space

Neo liberalism came to view space not merely as a self-closed cartographic unit but as a liberated de-spatialized entity. The *domestic* and *foreign* differentiations therefore became abominable, which the state through its policy framing and 'might' should facilitate to materialize. Neo-liberalism reinstated a free market economy featured by privatization, deregulation and rolling back of the state. Under neo-liberalism, the larger social policy sphere came to be dominated and dictated by the market economy both in the developing and under-developed countries. A major landmark under the neo-liberal economy was initiated in the Washington Consensus propounded by John Williamson in 1990. This Consensus pleaded for market fundamentalism (Williamson 2000). In the global perspective this Consensus propounded a universalistic neo-liberal ideology based on free market where the state was regarded as inefficient and corrupt. The state was necessitated only to make necessary changes in the policies and legislations to allow unbridled market forces to operate. In other words, the state had to structurally adjust with the mandates of free economy and act as a facilitator for the hegemony of capital to thrive. Globalization thus required a surrogate global state (Patnaik 2006).

The need for creating a surrogate state fostered a change in the character of the middle class and elites worldwide and Northeast has not been an exception either. The middle class of the region that was once culturally vocal against the centrality of internal colonization of the Indian state suddenly changed its vocabulary.

Being enchanted by the global economy, their primary allegiance quickly shifted towards the global masters and a larger section of them joined the band along with the state in welcoming FDI, MNCs and market economy in the region. This was a new consciousness within the middle class. For that purpose, the ruling elites and the bureaucrats in the region formulated investor-friendly industrial and investment policies, offered a host of subsidies in different relevant sectors that involved very high economic, environmental, social and human costs. Much of the development focus was laid on infrastructure development in the region in line with the Look East Policy. Dismantling of government control over trade and industrial policies delegitimised much of the state-led development function and in such a scenario the elites could only assure a berth by becoming the internal cronies to the foreign capital. The oscillation of primary allegiance of local elites towards the corporate class and dismantling of the control regime engaged the political parties and leaders of the region in a big way. This scenario also ideologically disengaged them from local concerns as they expressed a high degree of compliance to the neo-liberal changes.

In neo-liberal frame, the central discourses on ethnicity and nation state therefore changed. The administrative categorization of the ethnic groups within territorial politics happened within the colonial political framework first and the post-colonial political framework thereafter, although the nature of categorization, thus made, did not differ much from each other. In the neo-liberal political framework the territoriality principle gave way to extra-territoriality as a market-based approach. The marker of ethnicity including dress, culture and crafts, were no more allowed to remain minuscule. These became the trading items in the global market. Much of the markers of ethnicity in this way became constitutive of the extension of the market economy. All these stymied the political and cultural legitimacy and caused alienation of the middle class from the space of ethnicity. Under such situation, ethnicity did no more provide an ideological prop and political patronage to the middle class as it was the case during the pre-globalization era.

At another plane, the new values including dress, food, custom, belief, life-style, and consumer economy progressively de-essentialised the vital features of ethnic diversity in the region. This also de-essentialised common cultural and kinship space and myth of collective ancestry as constitutive of an ethnic identity. The ethnic space was reconstituted by market economy with a view to widen the consumer constituency. According to Das (2008) the borders are seen in the existing policy literature not as boundaries but as *gateways* to opportunities and of international trade and commerce. The political economy of globalization in this way de-essentialised both ethnic space and nation-state space and recreated them in order to fit in with the market economy. The flow of global capital was based on the methodology of the 'borderless', 'de-territoriality' and economic rationality.

This state of things dismissed space as a social category in the Northeast. Elevation of political economy over and above the normative theory happened in the Northeast first by a stroke of the Look East Policy- that was laid in hibernation for many years before the 1990s. This policy all of a sudden, roused a consciousness about the emergence of an economic space in the region through global trade, communication and financial flow (Chatterjee 2007). The social space, on which the entire edifice of economy, culture and literature of the primordial communities were anchored, became facile in the neo-liberal frame. This time, with the advent of market economy, the economic space became over-pervasive and de-embarked the society, culture and literature of the primordial space and annihilated the sloth space of primordiality by time-space *compression*. If anything happened as a result of acceleration of turn-over time, it happened more visibly in the Northeast not in the field of production but in the field of consumption, a feature highlighted by Ohmae in his analysis of region state!

VIII Summing Up

We have seen precisely three types of hiatus on the issue of space in Northeast India. The first was between the lived space of the indigenous communities and the colonial space, the

second between the former and the nationalized space of the modern state and the third between the globalized space vis-à-vis the lived space of the indigenous communities. The colonized space in the Northeast was a space for colonial expansion for commercial, political and strategic purposes which detached the original inhabitants from their land, culture and the indigenous political systems and trapped them with strictly defined colonial administrative boundaries. The nationalized space was a sovereign expression of resource nationalism on the politically defined territory of the Indian state. The Constitution of India established the sacrosanctity of this space of the nation state over every other territorial space. It recognized no space concept valid other than those specified by the Constitution and demarcated by the same as borders and boundaries of the nation state. This created a hiatus since the lived space of the Northeast was more a defined place for social and economic existence of the indigenes. The somatic proximity that the people had with their land was detached as a result of colonial and post-colonial space reconfigurations. The concept of space has been once more re-defined in the contemporary era of globalization which further diluted the place consciousness of the indigenous people of the Northeast India. If the colonial and the post-colonial space reconfigurations caused somatic *detachment*, globalization of space can cause *extinction* of the hitherto existing somatic proximity. These three types of hiatus thus exposed the ideological and social polarity of space consciousness between the 'indigenous' and the 'exogenous' and thereby stands at contesting courts.

Notes

1. Henri Lefebvre identifies the modern state as a form of "violence directed towards a space". Modern state is grounded towards homogenizing social relationship within a territorial space. According to Lefebvre, "each state claims to produce a space wherein something is accomplished, a space, even where something is brought to perfection: namely, a unified and hence a homogeneous society". But "the space that homogenizes... has nothing homogeneous about it". (Brenner 1999)

2. The term 'territorial trap' has been in vogue in globalisation studies which highlights different aspects of territoriality in the pre-globalisation phase. John Agnew has been one of the earliest to use this term. For details see (Agnew 1994)
3. Richard Bernstein uses the term 'cartesian anxiety' to critique Descartes notion of reason and expresses that "there may be no such fixed foundation or clear distinction" between reason and unreason to provide a fixed foundation for our knowledge. Using Bernstein's concept the term 'cartographic anxiety' was used both by Derek Gregory and Sankaran Krishna in 1994. While Gregory used this term for a critique of the objectivist tradition in human geography Krishna used the term in context of nationalism, subnational territories and map making in post-colonial India. Both uses the term in explaining two senses of boundaries-the epistemic and the spatial. For details see (Painter 2008)
4. The British policy towards the tribe was mainly motivated by twin principles, namely subjugating the tribes against raids and securing the pathways for trade through the ethno-space that the tribe occupied. The formulation of the Kuki Policy is an example in this direction. Settling the migrant Kuki tribes as buffer between the warring Nagas on one hand and the Lushais on the other exemplifies this aspect.
5. Wastelands were essentially a colonial construct which was synonymous with lands that did not yield revenue to the British Crown. For the tribes in the region, who were attuned to the usufruct practices, any land that was left unused was not waste but rather left to be used in future. There was therefore an essential difference between the understanding of the colonials and the indigenes in terms of land and its utilisation which was based on different jurisprudential, socio-cultural as well as politico-economic edifice and world view. (Chakraborty 2012)

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