Chapter IV

A New Geography of Tripura: Making it a Homeland

Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.¹

In the preceding chapters, I have articulated two positions: precolonial Tipperah as three inter-connected space and discontinuous geography Hill Tipperah as a colonial cartographic construct. This shift from indigenous space/precolonial space to modern western conception of space can be seen as a moment of dislocation in the discursive space: a moment where old indigenous conception of space collided with western modern conception of space. In this chapter, I locate the emergence of a new discourse of Tripura, a homeland: produced, sanctioned and circulated by the new state.² Tripura acquired new geographical and historical attribute, ṽour land in place of earlier injunction ṽny land Such a space has its own geographical peculiarities and temporal inconsistencies hidden to it.

In 1928 a complete map of Tripura for the first time accompanied the Annual Report of Administration of Tripura.³ By the beginning of twentieth century, census taking and map making had become state twin obsessions to inscribe its power over a marked geography. While earlier and colonial maps located ṽTipperah within the geography of the region, the map which accompanied the report in 1928, for the first time, provided a picture of itself, a potential sign or ṽogo(Fig. 4.1).

² Tipperah was re-named as ṽtripura in 1920 for which the Rajah obtained permission from British-India.
Fig. 4.1. Published in the 1928 Tripura Annual Administrative Report
The earlier maps concentrated upon the geo-politics of locating Tipperah along side other colonial marked places. The map of (and after) 1928 was predicated upon politics of producing modern state-space of Tripura. These maps no longer located Tripura ‘where-it-is’ but portrayed ‘what-it-is’ (Fig. 4.2).
However, though map making was attuned to production of bordered place, bordered historical subjects still eluded the state. The possibility of wrenching mobile hill people from old indigenous space and converting them into surplus producing state subjects was still an illusion. The state relied on importation of British subjects, read Bengalee, induced by low rent for agricultural and industrial production. The situation obtaining in Tripura during this period can be described as queer: incommensurability between imposition of bordered place and the notion of citizenship and exclusion. While the *hill men* designated subjects of Tripura Raja, were moving out of the newly produced bordered place, huge number of *plains men* designated British subjects, were imported for surplus production. It is interesting to note that British political agents in Tripura were unable to make the Raja understand the term *extradition*. The mapped place was yet to be inscribed with texts of linkage to a particular identity. A particularised discourse of place has not yet emerged.

A look at the politics of enumeration of population (census), carried out by the state, would be particularly helpful in pointing out the absence or failure to construct that *link*. Instead of taking census data as biased interpretation for proofs to be evinced in

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4 The system of instalment of Bengalee peasants for agriculture was called *janga-abadi* system in which Bengalee tenants accepted a lease in Tripura for reclamation and got remission of rent for at least three years, Chhakravarti, Administration Report of Tripura State since 1902, Vol. 1, p.21. Dipak Kumar Choudhury (2006) also writes that, in order to extend cultivation and increase the revenue Bengalees from British District are encouraged to migrate to the newcomer do not at once entirely leave their resident in British territory for full discussion see *Tripura in 1886: A Socio-Economic Profile* Proceedings of NEIHA, BHASA, Agartala, pp.59-68.

5 A W B Power who was the first Political Agent writes, *the provisions of Act XI of 1872 (Extradition Act: Mine) were made applicable to Hill Tipperah, and the Lieutenant Governor directed that under section 8 of the act, cases where British-Subjects charged with any offence were arrested in Hill Tipperah should be tried by the Political Agent, provided the Rajah did not object. An interview with the Rajah held for that purpose of explaining him the provisions of Act XI of 1872, and ascertaining what action he proposed to take, I was led to believe that he consented to this course, though unwillingly. It appears however, that he either did not quite understand the act or changed his mind since. The matter forms the subject of a separate communication in Administration Report of the Political Agency, Hill Tipperah (1872-2878), Vol. 1, Tripura Cultural Research Institute and Museum, Government of Tripura, p.27. (compiled and edited by Dipak Kumar Choudhuri in 1996).
support of rival histories, my intention rest on debunking such historicised claims.\(^6\)

The census (1901) listed as many as 38070 hill people as ‘not classified’ or non-classifiable, a telling example of state’s inability to classify and make sense of numerous mobile population in the higher mountainous region.\(^7\) More than this, it demonstrates Tripura state’s inability to govern the higher hills: numerous hill communities still refused to be subjects.

The census also records total population of Tripura as 1, 73,325 of which only 74,242 is classified as ‘people’ of Tripura. The Bengalee peasants, installed as agricultural workers, were still designated as ‘British subjects’ by British-India and Tripura. Obviously this is a particular example. Perhaps there are other examples which record the Bengalee population in Tripura as subjects of Tripura then. My purpose here is to illustrate this point: that is this, despite the emergence of a mapped place; neither the Bengalee-Hindu nor the majority hill people articulated Tripura as a homeland. This politics would be set into motion, within a decade, marking the evolution of a modern state, desirous of imprinting its power (including its conception of place and people) onto the modern geography.

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\(^6\) Almost all writings by Tripuri ethno-nationalists and Bengalee writers selectively use census data to support rival claims. The former use it to categorise Bengalee-Hindu as ‘outsider’ the latter used it as proofs of their presence in Tripura even before partition of British-India. In their attempts to make use of the census data in support of their claims, accuracy of these censuses is conveniently silenced. More importantly, neither the Bengalees nor Tripuris began imagining a mutually exclusive home-space in a very modern sense despite the emergence of a relatively modern place. For examples see Subir Bhaumik, ‘Disaster in Tripura’, Seminar-India, op cit. Manas Paul.2009. The Eye Witness: Tales From Tripura’s Ethnic Conflict, Lancer: New Delhi and Frankfort, pp.24-31;and Bijoy Kumar Hrankhal’s speech at 20th meeting of Working Group of Indigenous Population, Geneva, 2002 (appendix I).

\(^7\) The earlier census (1872 and 1881) were rejected as ‘incomplete’ and ‘inaccurate’ and in the 1901 census the entire Tippera population were characterised as ‘animists’ but were classified as ‘Hindus’ in the next census. Somendrachandra Debbarma.1997. Census Bibrami, Tripura Tribal Research Institute, Agartala, pp.10-12 and 26 (Reprint).
The years that preceded the accession (to India) were particularly harsh on the Bengalee-Muslims who constituted second largest group in Tripura prior to partition of British-India. The state police literally hounded out Bengalee-Muslims, who were hiding in far-flung Tripuri villages, and forced them out of Tripura. The state also employed its sanctioned violence to keep out tribals the prevention of entry into Tripura of about 2500 Tripuris (extruded from East Pakistan) in 1956 is a case in point. The struggle to define outsider to exert power over people inside a territory, and to kill designated trespasser is inherently spatial. The biased state violence, directed against particular communities, was symptomatic of the exclusivist re-imagination of place being sanctioned and produced by the new state.

How has this rationalised, state sanctioned, violence towards selected communities become possible within a span of half a century? The fluid and porous borders transformed into sanctified sites of selective disassembling of population can be seen as culmination of the final disjunction or rupture in the old indigenous interconnected spaces. This rupture posits the emergence of modern political identity or that collective identity becomes political. In this section, I wish to analyse the emergence of competing interpretations of Tripura as homeland. I plan to do this by reconstructing a critical period in Tripura political history the period that preceded

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8 This research scholar’s father was a witness of police brutality on Muslims. He used to recall how Muslims in his village were hounded out by the police, tied to bamboo poles and lashed. See also Aghore Debbarma’s (2003) writing about wholesale expulsion of Muslims from Tripura in his memoir, Upajatider CPI(M) Pratir Biswasghata Aitihasik Dalil, Self Published: Agartala, pp.12-14.

9 When they defied police order and entered Tripura they were shot at by the police, about 35 were killed. For a detail account of incident see Aghore Debbarma, Upajatider CPI(M) Partir Biswasghata Aitihasik Dalil, pp.18-20.
the collapse of Manikya dynasty. This period had often been studied as a ‘transition’ end of monarchy and appearance of ‘popular’ government. My focus will be on the disjunction of certain kind of space and the appearance of new ways of conceptualising space.

The moment in history, when rival notions of place emerge and contest for power over the new geographical formation it can be described as anarchic cacophony. It borders on anarchy because multiple groups struggle to impose their own notion of place, people, past and future. That moment is anarchic ‘collapse of political centre; variegated discordant political overtones on crescendo; and the masses mobilised for the impending political dispensation. The moment can also be described as moment of political liminality, characterised by violence, legal vacuum (especially spaces outside urban centers), and uncertain political future.

The period between the death of the last Manikya ruler (1947) and the formation of Tripura Territorial Council (1963) resembled the cacophonous anarchy I have described above. This period requires analytical dissection without which understanding modern politics of identity and place in Tripura may be impossible. It is a period when multiple conceptions Tripura (its history and geography) emerged, masses mobilised around it, and contesting political elites sought to inscribe new ideas of Tripura. The old geography of power and rule had disintegrated and in the new geographical or spatial formation modern conception of place and people required production and circulation. Place Tripura was no longer merely an ongoing project of extractive space for the Manikyas, rather site for inventing modern home-space.
This anarchic cacophony stemmed from three competing interpretations of Tripura. One, Tripura is a home of Bengalee-Muslims, a territorially integral to severed Muslim space. Two, Tripura is home of a ‘tribals’ an original land of Tripuris and the Bengalees (both Hindus and Muslims) were ‘immigrants’ Three, Tripura is a ‘natural’ home of Bengalee-Hindus, a place within ‘Bengal’ and therefore ‘rightfully’ part of India. These three competing ideas of homeland did not necessarily divide the political elites on ethnic lines. In the din of the cacophony the Queen Regent fled to Shillong, then capital of Assam, leaving Tripura to uncertain, scary future. The divided former Tripuri elites, the fading aristocrats threw their lot behind these three homeland ideologies.

These three distinct ideas of homeland, championed by new political elites had to work within a situation of political liminality. In order to legitimate itself, within a historically and geographically contingent place, particular political elite desired to inscribe its conception of that historically contingent place by taking over the political void. To do this, especially in the emerging political mores, mobilising the masses around new ideology of place was utmost important. In this project, the new Tripuri elites were placed at advantaged position. More than this, acceptability within the larger spatial formation of new nations-state was critical. The Bengalee-Hindu political elites, under the banner of Indian National Congress, were placed at advantageous position in this. I will examine these groups briefly below.

It is pertinent to point out that prior to partition of British-India Bengalee-Muslims constituted second largest population in Tripura. In fact, in the mid Eighteen century Muslims, under the leadership of Samzeer Gazi have overthrown Manikya dynasty
and ruled Tripura for a brief period. Given this history, Bengalee-Muslims led by Anjuman-e-Islamee, on the eve of partition and the period leading to merger with Indian Union in 1949 made attempt to merge Tripura with its severed Muslims-space, East Pakistan. It appears that the Anjuman-e-Islamee had the support of brother of the deceased Raja, Maharajkumar Durjoy Kishore Debbarman. This relationship between the Muslims and one of the prominent member of the royal family had been termed by Tripura’s most prominent political historian as ‘unholy alliance’. After Tripura’s merger with Indian Union, the Muslim became the ‘enemy’ to be hounded out of Tripura.

The new Tripuri ethno-nationalists mostly comprised of leaders of Jana Siksha Samiti (JSS) formed in 1944 with the stated goal of ‘emancipation’ of Tripuris. Besides their emancipatory goal, they had organised and mobilised Tripuris against monarchy and Bengalee dominance in the administration. A handful of communists (Bengalee communist leaders dispatch by the Communist party of India) rallied behind the new Tripuri elites. The members of JSS formed the Tripur Jatiyo Ganamukti Parishad (GMP) in 1948 with the intention of overthrowing the last vestiges tottering

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10 The Muslim rebellion overthrew the Manikya dynasty and ransacked the capital at Udaipur during the reign of Krishna Manikya (1748-1783). He established his capital at present day Agartal in 1760. See Gan Choudhuri, A Constitutional History of Tripura, op cit. pp.171-178; Also see Bibhas Kanti Kilikdar.1995. Tripura of Eighteen Century with Samsher Gazi Against Feudalism, Tripura State Tribal Cultural Research Institute and Museum: Agartala.

11 Jagadish Gan-Choudhuri writes ‘huge procession of hundreds of Muslims, carrying league flags and raising deafening cries of Allah Ho Akbar, Naraye Takdir, pakistan Zindabad, Ladke lenge Hindustan used to come out almost every evening in the streets of Agartala, Udaipur, Sonamura and other towns. Their passage through the streets used to create terror’ Constitutional History of Tripura, p.311.


13 Some of the prominent members of JSS were Dasrath Debbarma, Sudhanwa Debbarma, Hemanta Debbarma, Nilmoni Debbarma, Khagendra Debbarma, Rabindra Debbarma. Dasrath Debbarma became chief minister of Tripura in 1993.

14 The leaders of JSS and later GMP are often discussed as communists. However, it may be useful to clarify that, as noted by then prominent communist leader, the communist movement in Tripura was purely Bengalee affair. Apart from Aghore Debbarma, no other ‘tribal’ leader claimed to be communist. The tribal leaders merely proclaimed themselves as friends of communists See Deboprasad Sengupta, History of Communist and Democratic Movement in Tripura, Tripura Darpan: Agartala, pp.22 and 60 (undated).
administrative elites of monarchy and expulsion of Bengalees.\textsuperscript{15} Other groups with similar incendiary political objectives were Bir Bikram Tripura Sangha and Senkrak. Together these organisations propagated expulsion of Bengalees from Tripura, recollected as Bengal Kheda\textsuperscript{16} movement. The Bengalee-Hindus were narrated as the other outsider\textsuperscript{1} refugee\textsuperscript{2} and illegal immigrants\textsuperscript{3} This subject will receive further elaboration in the next chapter.

The third homeland ideology found expression among Bengalee-Hindu political elites who are defined by Jagadish Gan Choudhuri as freedom fighters\textsuperscript{17} According to him, Sukumar Bhowmuk, who on a momentous vision\textsuperscript{18} found the tribal youth\textsuperscript{19} idea of homeland\textsuperscript{20} more dangerous than the communal frenzy\textsuperscript{21} of Muslims, established among Bengalee-Hindus a patriotic organisation\textsuperscript{22} and infused in them patriotism and gospel of fearless strength and force\textsuperscript{23} To put it simply, Bengalee-Hindus who espoused this homeland ideology designated themselves as patriots\textsuperscript{24} and they were either sympathetic to or already members of Congress.\textsuperscript{25} Besides being patriotic\textsuperscript{26} they claimed to be saviours of Tripura\textsuperscript{27} to save Tripura from tribals\textsuperscript{28} and Bengalee-Muslims\textsuperscript{29} distorted notions of Tripura.

The idea that Tripura has always been a place within Bengal and therefore part of India attends to a particular way of spatialising homeland ideology. Obviously, this is only one way of imagining Bengali it leaves out the Bengali which came to be

\textsuperscript{15} Jagadish Gan Choudhuri writes, the GMP forgot the fact that Afghans and Mughals had attacked Tripura several times and the Bengalee army had poured out its blood like water for defense of Tripura \textit{Constitutional History of Tripura}, p.416.
\textsuperscript{17} See Jagadish Gan Choudhury, \textit{A Constitutional History of Tripura}, p.312.
\textsuperscript{18} The organisation was called Tripura Bengali-Hindu Sammilani, Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} To name a few, they were Sukhmoy Sengupta, Sachindra Lal Singh, Umesh Singh and Anil Chakrabarty. Sachindra Lal Singh became Tripura\textsuperscript{2} first Chief Minsiter.
redefined as ‘East Pakistan’. This therefore, in many ways, involves re-imagination of space that can be called ‘Bengal’ as homeland of Bengalee-Hindus. The other ‘Bengal’ not only becomes a stigmatised space but what it constitutes becomes the enemy. The ways groups define its ‘enemy’ provides important insights to its ideology. A letter sent by Bengal Pradesh Congress, on behalf of Tripura Congress, to Sardar Patel articulates the ‘enemy function’ in this manner.

The situation there is serious and may, at any time become critical. An ex-military men’s association has been formed just on the border of the state, and there has already began slow, but steady infiltration of Muslims from East Bengal. The Dewan is suspected of encouraging the demands of the Muslims, who form majority in the plains, though they are a minority in the whole state. If possible the present Dewan should be removed and an experienced ex-military officer should be appointed as Dewan, as in near future the question of defence is likely to be the most important thing (all emphasis mine).20

The letter specifically spelt out and defined enemy: the World War II disbanded Tripuri soldiers (active members of Seng Krak and Tripura Sangha, and were later inducted into the Tripur Jatiyo Mukti Parishad) and the infiltrating Muslims. The agenda of the letter was installation of a government, sympathetic to the agenda of the Bengalee-Hindus, headed by ex-military capable of crushing rival groups. Suddenly, in the eye of a particular political elites, the Muslim has become the ‘other’ the ‘infiltrator’ whereas exodus of the Bengalee-Hindu is conceptualised as natural, a sort of ‘coming home’

Another feature of the anarchy was a semblance of paranoia afflicting the administration. Immediately after death of the Raja and the formation of anti Bengalee-Hindu fronts among Tripuris, mass sacking of Tripuris from higher ranking

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20 Quoted from Jagdish Gan-Choudhuri, A Constitutional History of Tripura, pp.309-10.
offices was set into motion. The large scale expulsions of top Tripuri officials in the state occurred simultaneously with the emergent of a new discourse of Tripura as Bengalee-Hindu state among Bengalee-Hindu elites. This acts by the state allowed a particular political elite to marginalise or push to the margins advocates of rival imaginings of place or discourse, and thereby making it hegemonic.

It is interesting to see how a particular group were busy mobilising the masses in the hills, while another group was busy negotiating with the new Indian state (read Congress) for intervention in their favour. The path adopted by rival groups for legitimate political power differed in two aspects. First, the new Tripuri elites sought to capture power through mobilisation of the hill people, while the Bengalee-Hindu elites relied on sanction and legitimacy from Indian National Congress and required engineering a new political constituency.

Second, rival groups employed strategies for discrediting of the ōther (as well as rival conception of place) as the ōnemy or anti-thesis to new state. As argued above, the various Tripuri organisations conceptualised Tripura as home of the Tripuris and other hill communities; the Bengalee is imagined as the ōther to be expelled. The Bengalee (Hindu) elites conceptualised Tripura as ōnatural part of Bengal and India. Between the two rival discourses of place, the later had at its disposal sanctioned instrument of violence. In 1949, the state had banned all organisation by rival groups.

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21 For a complete list of expulsion, and the emergent of this new discourse of Tripura among Bengalee elites see Agore Debbarma, *Upajatider Prati CPIM partir Biswasgatokar Eitahisik Dalil*, pp.12-14.
22 A new constituency was required because it lacked support among the Tripuris and other hill communities. Therefore, the need to convert the state as Bengalee-Hindu predominant state through settlement of large number of Bengalee refugees looking for a new home after partition, Agore Debbarma, *Upajatider Prati CPIM partir Biswasgatokar Eitahisik Dalil*, pp.11-14 and 63, 66.
and jailed a handful of Bengalee communists having close link with the JSS.\textsuperscript{23} The year also saw, purportedly first ever, JSS mass rally at the capital, Agartala, under the leadership of Aghore Debbarma. Deboproasad Sengupta described the rally in this manner,

We witnessed another turning point in 1949. In the month of august of that year, a big rally was organised by comrade Aghore Debbarma and Hemanta Debbarma. The people from the tribal areas entered the town in big procession raising war cries of protest and assembled in the Umakanta field. There a charter of demand was adopted. The consolidation and discipline and strength of the rally silenced the police and the administration.\textsuperscript{24}

After the rally, the paranoid state, declared martial law and for the first time the state police set out to discipline and order the ‘tribal’ Proscribed by the state, JSS established an armed wing (Tripur Jatiyo Mukti Parishad) to resist the state. The response of the state was symptomatic of the attitude of non-tolerance towards rival groups manoeuvre for power. The imposition of martial law had to be seen in the context of attempt by particular political elite to delegitimate and marginalise rival conception of place. Virtually, a reign of terror engulfed the country sides marked by large scale police brutalities, witch hunt of ‘tribal’ leaders and resistance.\textsuperscript{25}

A New Home-Space Imagined

\textsuperscript{23} In fact the link also made convenient for the state to brand the JSS leaders as communist and proscribe them.
\textsuperscript{24} Deboproasad Sengupta was a Bengalee communist leader dispatched form Calcutta to spread the movement in Commilla region of present day Bangladesh. He later chose to work in Tripura, Sengupta, \textit{History of Communist and Democratic Movement in Tripura}, op cit. pp.57.
\textsuperscript{25} Sengupta noted that ‘the hills were raging in anger’ and male members of village would escape into jungles for fear of police brutalities. The female members of the village were left to resist the state, \textit{History of Communist and Democratic Movement in Tripura}, p.61.
Proscribing groups wedded to rival ideology of place do not constitute sufficient condition for the emergence of a naturalised homeland. It merely defines an enemy which can be designated as anti-national or secessionist. It allows the state to map out certain spatial ideologies to be silenced as illegitimate and incorrect. The state or the new legitimate political elites need to produce connection between people and a marked place through multiple techniques of spatialisation, or in the words of Deshpande, spatial strategies. From here on, in this chapter, I propose to analyse the various spatial techniques employed by the state and Bengalee-Hindu writers in techniques of inscribing Bengalee-Hindu past and identity into the landscape.

The period of cacophonous anarchy ended after Indian state took over the administration of the state. One of the immediate political goals of the new state was production and circulation of new discourse of homeland—a discourse about space and about things and people in space. The post partition rehabilitated Bengalee-Hindus, besides changing the demography, transformed the landscape of Tripura as a landscape of refugees of displaced people from their homeland. A new discourse of homeland discourse of belonging to Tripura would re-invent the landscape by unearthing their past within Tripura. To do this, the place had to be stripped of human history, the hill people had to be imagined (once again) as mobile, nomad and placeless. Therefore, the hill people, similar to the Bengalee-Hindus, await state intervention, rehabilitation.

27 In 1949 the Queen Regent of Tripura signed the Instrument of Accession, 1956 Tripura became a Territorial Council and in 1963 a Union Territory.
28 The logic for colony establishment for the Bengalee-Hindus has to be arrived at from a deeply problematic understanding of non-inhabited spots as vacant land or un-utilised. See for example, Gayatri Bhattacharya, 1988. *Refugee Rehabilitation and its Impact on Tripura’s Economy*, Omsons Publication: New Delhi and Guwahati, pp.7, 10-11.
The administrator’s speech in the Legislative Assembly captures the gist of this new discourse. The speech initiates new identity of Tripura, of a place peopled by scheduled tribes, scheduled castes, backward classes and displaced persons. Tripura’s recent history is one of continuous saga of struggle for rehabilitation and survival. Then the speech hits out at people who reject this new identity of Tripura.

It is a matter of regret, therefore, that far from helping in the process of reconstruction, some short sighted and mistaken enthusiasts have been trying to tear the problem of the unfortunate and gullible people out of context and fanning the flames of separation and isolation. The tragic consequence of such dangerous calls is now too well known to need mention. Certain disruptive elements wedded to terrorism are threatening others to quit this territory.

Two aspects of the speech are relevant for my argument here. First, the speech suggests re-imagination of Tripura as and of tribal and non-tribal no longer merely a part of India. This new identity of Tripura, apart from erasing the refugee inscribed on the non-tribal, changes the very meaning of the transformed landscape. Second, it reproduces the tribal as simple not necessarily savage or innocent incapable of history. This image of simple tribal played important part in unearthing of history of Tripura as history of the non-tribal. It also successfully castigates other ways of imagining Tripura i.e. simple tribals imagination as anti-government and anti-national

Individuals or groups indulging in fissiparous activities promoting disunity and rift among the various sector of the populace not only harms himself but also blurs the very which has harboured under its wings the simple tribals and distressed refuges, the landless backward classes (sic).

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Within a span of over two decades, since the disruption of Manikya dynasty, the new state enforced its definition of 'outsider' (Bengalee-Muslims), 'anti-national' (Tripuri ethno-nationalists) and inscribed new text on the landscape. Rival conceptions of place (Tripura) have been pushed to the margin, denounced and designated as 'anti-national'. Once the new state (controlled by new political elites) succeeded sanctioning its new conception of Tripura, it continuously invests in it ideologically, financially, and institutional as well as blocked other ways of imagining it. However, rival geographies cannot be erased. Space can never be totally annihilated. In the apt words of Henri Lefebvre,

> These seething forces are still capable of rattling the cauldron of the state and its space, for difference can never totally be quieted. Though defeated, they live on and from time to time they begin fighting ferociously to reassert themselves and transform themselves through struggle.\(^{31}\)

The rival geographies will be the subject of next chapter. Below I discuss three spatial techniques, employed by the state in general (and the Bengalee-Hindu writers in particular), that articulates this new identity of place. Many of these literatures were produced after the ethnic conflict (between Bengalee-Hindus and Tripuris) in 1980. I intend to analyse in these literatures how the Bengalee-Hindu imagines Tripura as their ‘imaginative geographies’\(^{32}\) of Tripura. The three spatial techniques are: inventing sacred geographies, imagining common past/enemy, and ambivalent border.

Unearthing sacred geographies

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\(^{31}\) Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p.23.

\(^{32}\) The term ‘imaginative geography’ was first used by Edward said to describe the representation of the orient by the West. As mentioned earlier Said used the term to analyse how groups distinguish and dramatise the distance and difference between ‘our’ space and ‘heirs’ Imaginative geographies based on binary opposition, play important part in historical construction of contrasting images, see Edward Said, *Orientalism*, pp.54-55.
Initially, I had stated that, in order to justify rehabilitation a place must be stripped of human history to the site for re-assemblage of population as absence of human history. Tripura is construed as home of simple and ordinary hill nomads and thereby making possible rehabilitation of displaced people, victims of partition. Once rehabilitation has been successfully carried out, invention of new geographies of belonging for the rehabilitated becomes critical. This can be done, first by discrediting or devaluing existing history as non-history, and advocating a past that incorporates the Bengalee-Hindu presence into the landscapes. Ruined sacred geographies, that incorporate their presence into the landscapes, are unearthed and the state marks out such sites and sanctifies them. These sacred geographies are then used as proofs of link between Bengalee population and the land. The attempt to construct new sacred geographies for the Bengalees appeared in first Gazetteers of the state.

A school of opinion holds that the name of Gumti and Manu are incontrovertible evidence of early colonisation of Tripura by small group of Aryans. The ancient capital of Ayodhya stood on the banks of Saraju of which a branch was the Gumti. Manu whose commandments regulated our social life for centuries was an Aryan and it is significant that one of the principle rivers of Tripura bears the same name. It is also interesting that this river flows near Kailasahar (corrupted from kailasa-har and Unokuti, the famous pilgrims spot, is only six mile from Kailasahar. Another significant point is that the principle hill ranges, which stretched across Tripura, and which in fact, have given the districts its hilly name have ancient name. In the puranic literature these hills are known as Raghunandan Parvat. From the names of the hills

33 Rehabilitation of Bengalee refugee in Tripura, apart from crushing the anti-national forces, was an important task for governance during 1948-1970. See the assembly debates of this period, Assembly Proceedings (1964-1972); see also Gayatri Bhattacharya, Refugee rehabilitation in Tripura op.cit.

34 As early as 1963, Sunil Dutt, a member of state legislature had already announced the need for new history of Tripura. He opined that Rajmala is not a history. It only tells about legends... in Sonamura, Sabroom, Belonia subdivisions and areas within the subdivisions we find images of various deities scattered. History of Tripura can be constructed from these images_Assembly Proceedings, Series 1. Vol.1-9, October, 1963, p.9.

35 It may be mentioned here that as recent as 1947, neither a Tripura ruler nor their chronicle tell of any Hindu holy sites within present state of Tripura. As mentioned earlier holy sites, worthy of pilgrimage have always been the Brindabans, Mathura, Gaya etc... Tripura has always been a Manikyan stigmatised space.
and the rivers it is suggested that Kirata (pre-historic Tripura) was not entirely a land of the non-Aryans. It is supposed that in those early times Aryan settlement must have been established in these parts of the country. There are also other names which suggest a link with Sanskrit language such as Hrsymukh, Unokuti, Tirthamukh, Trilochan etc (sic).  

Imagining new sacred geographies, by the new state, do not only makes possible rooting or locating of Bengalee-Hindus inside the spatial frame, but also produces the existence of eternal, ancient and immutable link between ancient Tripura and the Aryan civilisation. This ālinkōis, then, used as a premise to connect modern Tripura to the modern Indian-nation state. Connection of Tripura to the modern Indian nation-state needs to be continually emphasised in order to deligitimate and counter rival groups, especially Tripuri ethno-nationalists’ notion of Bengalee-as-outsider which is often accompanied with demand for secession from Indian nation-state.

Historiography in the postcolonial Tripura, a field overwhelmingly controlled by Bengalee intelligentsia, rest upon location of a place-Tripura within Indic Aryan spatio-temporal frame, more importantly within the historical-geographical territoriality of former Bengal. The fundamental principle, on which this historiography rest upon is, Tripura has always been part of Bengal. The past

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36 K D Menon, *Tripura District Gazetteer*, p.7. Similarly, S N Guha Thakurta (1986) writes rivers Gomoti and Manu suggest early colonization of Tripura by Aryans because they bear Hindu names. Thus from the names of the hills and rivers, it seems the land was not entirely the land of the non-Aryan, and perhaps some distant past there was as Aryan settlement in *Tripura*, National Book Trust of India, p.25.

37 Gan-Chaudhuri writes, From geological, geographical, ethnographic and political points of view, Tripura’s ties with the rest of India are inseparable. Tripura is intimately related to the other parts of India from the hoary past of *A Constitutional History of Tripura*, p.26. Also see Nalini Ranjan Roy Choudhuri,1980. *The Historical Past in Jagadish Gan-Choudhrui (ed), Tripura: The Land and its People*, Leeladevi Publication: New Delhi, P.13-42.

38 Towards this Bengalee historians cite few instances from history, e.g, former king of Tripura bathing in sacred rivers in present day Indian state of West Bengal, see Subhir Bhaumik,2002. *The Dam and the Tribal* <http://www.himalmag.com/component/content/article/1734-The-Dam-and-the-Tribal.html> (accessed 13 December 2006).
“greatness” (a term overused by both Bengalee academics and Tripuri ethno-nationalists) of Tripura kingdom (and its kings) is attributed to Tripura’s intimate, irrefutable, irreversible link to the precolonial Bengal.

Locating Tripura within the history and geography of former Bengal also make possible reconciliation of the dichotomy — narrating of Tripuris as simple, mobile people and as state-making people — inherent in their historiography. The possibility of state-making, and the attributed “greatness” of the Tripuri rulers can take place only in relation to the Bengal connection. Outside this relationship, it is impossible to imagine mobile, simple hill people as state-making people, a state which withstood tides of Mughal attacks.

The invention of sacred geographies — holy sites, rivers, monuments — is a spatial strategy that aims to achieve two things: emplacement or rooting of particular people to a particular place; and connect this particular place to certain history and geography. I will return to these holy sites, names of rivers and monuments in the next chapter to show how these sites are contested.

Common past: inventing the “enemy”

The invention, or rather unearthing, of sacred geographies is simultaneously appropriation of past and production of memory; a process embedded with silences, selectivity and marginalisation. What constituted history in the earlier political formation, a political formation whose politico-religious rationality depended on
divine cosmography, cannot be said to constitute the modern state. A new narrative of past, distinct from earlier mode of narration, was needed by the new political elites.

The earliest attempt to shape a new narrative of past can be gleaned from a book ‘Tripura: The Land and its People’. Traces of these narratives were already perceptible during the period of anarchy when discordant notes of place clashed and conflicted. The tenet of the book is to construct a common history between Tripuris (and other tribal communities) and Bengalee-Hindus. A common history, in the form of a shared past, was acutely and urgently felt by the new political elites in order to normalise the recent history of mass rehabilitation of Bengalee population. This normalisation was required to counter rival discourse which called for deportation of outsiders. By inventing a common history, the twin subjects of the book land and people are cross-mapped onto each other. This cross-mapping of land and people is achieved by denying the existence of multiple conceptions of place and people.

In his recent writings, Jagadish Gan-Chaudhuri attempts to reformulate history geography and discourse of the other. He conceptualised premodern Tipperah as constitutive of five distinct spatialities in the form of chieftainships (he also differentiate them as kingdoms). These were, Bengalee Chieftainship, Tippera Chieftainship, Mog Chieftainship (a tribe inhabiting predominantly in south Tripura, they practice Buddhism), Kuki-Lushai Chieftainship and Riang Chieftainship. He writes, in the struggle for supremacy, the lead was successfully taken by the Tippera

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39 The book is written in the style of Government of India sponsored National Book Trust of India style, whose sole purpose is to present the history of Tripura as shared, peaceful co-existence between tribals and non-tribals and Tripura’s historical connection to Bengal/India. Jagadish Gan Choudhuri, *Tripura: The Land and its People*, op.cit. pp.1-12 and 13-43.
42 Ibid, pp.53-56.
dynasty and continued for several centuries. The Tippera dynasty bludgeoned into submission all other chieftainships and united all hills and valleys, ranges and rivers, under its sway.

It is impossible to controvert the existence of these kingdoms. It is equally impossible to support their existence. As I have stated in chapter two, precolonial history of the region depends on myth-making court chronicles of mimetic Hindu states. Moreover, precolonial history of the region largely falls within the rubric of colonial anthropological construction. However, it is not difficult to detect a fundamental problem in his conceptualisation of identity. Group identity is conceptualised as rigid, unchanging and something universally given, a phenomenon inhabiting permanent spatio-temporality. The identity of Tripuri is still fluid, and its socio-cultural boundary fuzzy. In fact numerous other ethnic identities in the present day northeast India are fluid, ambivalent and continuously changing.

His articulation of history and geography of Tripura appears meaningful, only when placed, within the context of re-imagining Tripura as a home-space of Bengalee-Hindus. It can be read as an attempt to reconstruct a shared history of peaceful co-existence between various groups in present day Tripura. In his reformulated narration of past, the Bengalee-Muslim is imagined as the Other or outsider. The Muslim, of whom the Mughal is the epitome, is narrated as imperialist.
occupationist and barbaric invaders. In a nutshell the Bengalee-Muslim is narrated as common enemy. An example of this narration,

Tripura was under the occupation of the Mughals for about three years (1618-1620). The invaders captured elephants and royal treasures. The Mughal army marauded and looted the wealth of the subjects. The Mughal soldiers cheerfully and openly enjoyed the pleasure of rape and ravage and they used to foray for sumptuous dishes. They killed many people. They drained of large tanks in search of treasures. They prohibited the worship of Chaudda Devata and the Tripureshwari Kali. They encouraged the mullas, Pirs and Fakirs to convert many Hindus to Islam by forcing them to eat beef (emphasis mine).

He concludes his book with a tinge of resentment against Tripuris,

Behind this influx of the Bengali-Hindus smouldered an impulse of fear and hatred in the tribal mind. The tribals forgave the crimes of the imperialist and aggressors and forgot the sacrifice and sufferings of the Bengali-Hindus resisting the claws of imperialism. Here the tribals committed an error of judgment. No attempt was jointly undertaken to restore Chakla Roshanabad. The tribals directed their entire energy against the Bengali Hindu immigrants who had already been harassed, denationalised and marginalised by the aggressors (the aggressors here being the Bengali-Muslims in the newly created East Pakistan: my insertion). The immigrant Bengali-Hindus again became subjected to similar atrocities by the tribals.

He not only attempts to imagine shared geographies of connection, but also invent shared enemy. This mode of narrative has not been exclusive to Gan-Choudhuri. Another example of this type of narrative is employed by Subir Bhaumik. In one of his articles titled “How the Tripuris Got Wiped out by Bangladesh Refugees”, though initially he categorized the immigrants as Bangladeshi refugees he justifies their settlement by arguing that at one historical point Tripura controlled the territory they migrated from. He resorts to mythic past to show how Tripuri kings had controlled

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46 Gan-Choudhuri, A Constitutional History of Tripura, pp.125, 126, 128.
48 Ibid, p.368.
parts of Eastern Bengal the stories of Tripuri rulers bathing in several rivers of Bengal and the kings love for Bengalee culture and language and he argues that even in the normal course of migration the tribes-people would have become minority in Tripura.49

In similar vein J D Mandal also writes,

About 550 years ago, this hilly Tripura was ruled by the Hindu Bengali kings of Bengal. After being driven by famine from Burma (Mayanmar), some tribals under the leadership of Mouchang-Fa entered into this SRI BHUMI. A battle was fought against the intruders. Later the Bengalee king allowed the homeless refugee tribal people to reside in the southern part of the land. There gradually developed a friendship between the Bengalees and the tribals. And later, the descendants of Mouchang-Fa established the Manikya Dynasty in Tripura. Though the Tripura was called an independent kingdom, really it was not independent. During last part of Mughal Empire, the kings of Tripura (hill Tripura) had to pay elephant tax i.e. supplying a good number of elephants per year to the emperor of Delhi. On the other hand, the plain part of Tripura i.e. Chakle-Roshanabad had gone under the control of Nawab of Bengal during reign of king Dharma Manikya (1713-29). The king became a Zamindar paying Rs. 50,000/- as revenue to the Nawab. During the British rule everything of Tripura (plain & hill) was under the control of the British. Thus the state was a part of India govt (sic).50

In their narrative, Tripura can not be imagined as historically disjuncted space. It has to be narrated as inhabiting a continuous space, a territoriality almost always implicated within the historical-geographical context of Bengal. This implication makes possible for the state and the majority population emplacement inside modern Tripura. This becomes the basis for constructing their original, historical and eternal

50 J D Mandal, Ibid.
relationship to the objectively identifiable portion of earth's surface as "home." But the discourse is not confined to the objectively identifiable; it is also about spaces of past memory, about place names and about imagined spaces of the past.

This process involves, not only rendering of rival notions of Tripura as dissent, but also invest in the production of true history through decision on creation of sources and archives. I have also in mind construction of monuments, specifically, statues of heroes sponsored by the state. These decisions are affected by, not only state's attempt to freeze certain type of memory, but also invest place with meaning. Tripuri ethno-nationalist find these monuments and statues invested by the state largely problematic (discuss in next chapter).

Ambivalence of border: erasure and enclosure

The final spatial strategy, employed by the state, is the discourse of border: the present boundary of Tripura, more specifically the international boundary between Tripura and Bangladesh. In the discourse of the "other" in Tripura, this particular border had been invested with multiple meanings of erasure and enclosure. In both the "official" and the "Trippuri ethno-nationalist" discourse of Tripura, this border is simultaneously erased and announced as "natural" enclosure.

I have, in the earlier part of this chapter, already pointed out the post-partition (of British-India) exodus of Bengalee-Hindus into Tripura. Their rehabilitation became an
urgent need for Tripura government. The act of categorisation or marker ‘refugee’ informs the imposition of a border in their movement. It denoted movement between already existing modern territorialities. However, the advent of modern identity politics would disrupt its modernity and transform it into a site for ‘different’ contestation. Here I will restrict to ‘official’ discourse of it. As I have underline earlier, I use the word ‘official’ to mean what is sanctioned and disciplined by the state.

I have articulated in chapter two on first disjunction of precolonial indigenous space: British-India appropriation of the extractive space based upon colonial spatial ideology ‘hill’ space. Subsequently, this particular boundary defined political realm of the British-India and Tipperah; yet it merely delimited each others’ extractive space without enclosing population. Severed from its historical extractive space, it made sense for Tipperah’s political elites to maintain a fluid, non-exclusive, ambivalent boundary. An ambiguous boundary and absence of rigid identity/place was harnessed towards state project of alchemised conversion of ‘hills’ into extractive space.

For the first time, during the period of political liminality, this particular boundary assumed contentious meaning. It conjured up multiple notions of difference. The Tripuri ethno-nationalist conceptualised it as ‘site’ for construction of different ‘home’ for Tripuris and other hill communities; Whereas, the Bengalee-Hindu political elites conceptualised it as ‘site’ where Hindu space and Muslim space meets. After the merger, Tripuri ethno-nationalist version was outlawed as ‘anti-national’ and large scale violence against Muslims sanctioned. Two contradictory representations of

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51 Gayatri Bhattacharya, *Refugee Rehabilitation and its Impact on Tripura’s Economy*, see the preface.
present day border between Bangladesh and Tripura may be drawn from such conceptualisations.

First, in order to define the Muslim as the ‘other’ non-belonging, existence of an imagined natural boundary between Bengalee-Hindu and Bengalee-Muslim required production. Though this do not essentially eventuated in recognition of the present boundary as ‘natural’ a natural primordial boundary was belief to have been in existence further inside the territories of East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. From this point, it becomes possible to define the ‘other’ not only as ‘non-belonging’ but also as ‘invaders’ ‘occupationists’ and ‘imperialists’. Invested with meanings as a site of rupture between primordial given identities, modernity of a boundary is disrupted.

Second, as I have argued above, in order to cross-map the link between Bengalee-Hindu and the spatial frame Tripura, the place have to be re-imagined as inhabiting a continuous space, ‘Bengal’. Therefore, simultaneously the boundary, instead of its modernity, is itself disrupted. A borderless geographical reality, ‘Bengal’ have to be constructed without which spatial connections between the colonial produced place and the already existing geography becomes impossible. From these connections, it becomes possible to argue the rehabilitations of uprooted Bengalee-Hindu populations from Pakistan, as a ‘natural’

52 Gayatri Bhattacharyya argues that despite loss of their ‘home land’ to the Muslims in Pakistan, Bengalis feel at home in Tripura and are ‘emotionally attached to their new homeland’ Refugee Rehabilitation, see ‘preface’

These two contradictory representations illustrates the ambivalence of this border — its reality implicates the Bengalee-Muslims as the eternal enemy, the ‘other’ of territory beyond, unfamiliar space. The border makes real new history of incessant Muslim attack on Tripura; it incriminates the Bengalee-Muslims. This is a new history, in that it ethnicised an enemy akin to criminalisation of certain tribes in colonial India. In the Manikyan Tipperah, as shown in chapter two, ‘Bengal’ represented diverse identity. One, Bengal was a given extractive space, unlike elsewhere in Southeast Asia, Tipperah rulers did not need to raid the hills for slaves to be concentrated as sedentarised agricultural manpower. Instead it raised mercenaries of hill tribes and waged war against rulers of Bengal to wrest small part of its fertile plains which became Tipperah’s extractive space.

Two, Bengal also represented as source of its palace cosmology — its ideology of rule (divine ruler), sacred genealogy (lunar dynasty) etc. were incorporated with the incorporation of Bengalee Brahmins. Third, Bengal also represented a constant threat to its fragile, somewhat uneasy, control over the extractive space. It cannot maintain a standing army to defend its hold. Through out its history, the Manikyas never maintained a standing army: mercenaries are raised during war and disbanded after the war’s standing army of hill tribes could mean ever lurking threat of rebellion. In fact, during World War II the then ruler of Tripura as a mark of its loyalty to the British Empire raised an army (of Tripuris). After the war, when these men returned, they were immediately disbanded.54

54 When the Congress leaders wrote to Sardar Patel about the dangerous situation of ex-military men ready for revolt in Tripura (quoted in this chapter) they were referring to these disbanded World War II veterans.
The Bengalee-Hindu imagination of Tripura as homeland, then, hides uncomfortable geographical peculiarities—a particular border as simultaneously a site of enclosure and erasure—that serve as a premise for Tripuri ethno-nationalist critique. However, such peculiarities are not unique to their homeland ideology. Tripuri ethno-nationalists constantly silence their own geographical discrepancies. After all, homeland is not an objectively identifiable, given territorial entity. It is discursively constructed space. It does not inhabit a continuous temporality.

The Ambivalence of Place

A mapped Tripura did not necessarily become a homeland of a particular identity group. It only makes possible for that space to be articulated as a homeland. But that space is still, inevitably, an ambivalent place: it can engender contradictory ideas of homeland between different identity groups inside a historical territory. As is the case with Tripura, the dissolution of British-India and disruption of Manikya dynasty brought into play three dominant territorial ideologies, or ideas of homeland. While a clear distinction can be made between these three competing ideas of homeland, it is hard to insist on clear distinctions between political elites on ethnic lines. Despite this blur or overlap, I insisted that Bengalee-Hindu idea of Tripura became as the most acceptable and official idea of Tripura. This idea of Tripura inscribed Bengalee-Hindu past into the landscape and produce it as their homeland by producing connection between identity and place.
In this chapter, I attempted to show three spatial techniques of producing link between place and identity. Obviously, there are other ways of imagining of Tripura as homeland by the Bengalee-Hindus. For example, it is almost impossible to miss, the crucial reiteration of historical association between the poet Rabindranath Tagore and Tripura rulers by modern Bengalee-Hindu writers. Such a narration establishes historical relation between Tripura and Bengal, in particular, and India in general. It converts Tripura as familiar space for the Bengalee-Hindus, even before they created it as their homeland.

In the next (final) chapter, I concentrate on other ways of imagining Tripura by Tripuri ethno-nationalists. My particular interest there will be the production of rival geographies as a way to challenge the state sanctioned idea of Tripura. Within such geographies, the Bengalee-Hindu is not only imagined as ÔotherÔbut also ÔoutsiderÔ. They become the Ôother-outsidersÔ in the Tripuri ethno-nationalist imaginative geographies of Tripura.