Chapter V
A Rival Geography of Tripura: The Production of ŠTripuriÔ

Political Struggles are not fought on the surface of geography, but through its very fabrication.¹

Post-Manikya Tripura, as a specific place, is a product of series of disjunctions in space. I have traced its genealogy from indigenous space to as a place within British-India imperial geography, and finally as a place within the new Indian nation-state imaginaries making possible for its re-invention as a ŠhomeÔ by the Bengalee-Hindus. This re-invention, as argued in the previous chapter, takes place via competition with other rival geographical imaginings. This chapter is a reading of one of these rival geographies, particularly spaces that constitute ŠTripuriÔ In the Tripuri ethno-nationalist discourse, ŠTripuraÔ becomes a site of loss, estrangement and dislocations. The geography of ethno-nationalism is a struggle within the lived experiences of the dominant Bengalee-Hindu narration of homeland.

Rival geographies, though obscured and consigned to the margin, are never silent geographies. They inhabit, to put it bluntly, as intransigent or recalcitrant spaces represented by those who wish to challenge, subvert and confront the state. That struggle is not fought Šon the surface of geography, but through its fabricationÔ Moreover, as Edward Said commented the Šstruggle over geographyŠ is not only about soldiers and cannons, but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings ÔFollowing these two important comments, I wish to tease out Tripuri ethno-nationalists narrative of place/Tripura. It is, overwhelmingly, a narrative of

counter which not only attempts to demarcate the boundaries between ‘Tripuri’ and ‘Bengalee-Hindu’ but contests Bengalee-Hindu idea of homeland. Therefore, it is not merely a narrative of the ‘other’ the ‘other’ has to be imagined as non-belonging to a particular territoriality.

The margin is not simply a marked out space where the act of writing do not take place. The very act of marking it out as a space upon which inscribing is prohibited can also be conceptualised as silenced (not silent) space. The ‘margin’ therefore is not a pre-ideological site, or as Yhome argues, ‘the margin is not space of powerlessness.’ As in the chessboard, the squared spaces empower the tiniest piece, the pawns, to confront, subvert, thwart and challenge the mightiest power. Those who speak from the position of the margin draw upon rival, outlawed histories and geographies to challenge and confront the ‘officialised’ dominant perspective. Production of this knowledge, from the margin, can be understood as peripheral epistemology of place. This chapter is about this peripheral/ised epistemology of place.

A Story of a Submerged Geography

Perhaps, a dam and the geography it submerged would be a (unusually) good place to begin this investigation into the rival imaginative geography of Tripura. The dam in

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2 ‘Margin’ has been conceptualised as a ‘space of contradiction and contestation’ especially in the literature on frontiers or borderlands of nation-states, see Kekhriesituo Yhome, Politics of Region: The Making of Naga Identity During the Colonial and Post-Colonial Era. This study uses the term ‘margin’ as a discursive practice, and as a site where counter-hegemonic discourses are silenced. In that sense ‘margin’ is a site of resistance. Therefore, the ‘margin’ is a site/source of rival histories and geographies.

3 Using chess as an analogy to explain the relationship between space and power he argues conceptualization of power may not be possible without simultaneously conceptualizing space. Kekhriesituo Yhome, Politics of Region: The Making of Naga Identity During the Colonial and Post-Colonial Era.
question is the Dumbur (Gumti) Hydel Project, controversially commissioned in 1976 by Tripura state.\(^4\) It was constructed on the river Gumti formed by confluence of two rivers *Raima* and *Saima* (also spelt Sarma). The former originates at Longtraill hills and the latter at Atharamura hills. The dam not only displaced huge átribalópopulation, but also destroyed what many Tripuri ethno-nationalists termed as, the former ágranaryó of Tripura.\(^5\) But my interest in the dam goes beyond the debate of displacement of áribalsó I want to tease out a different kind of discursive encounter î an encounter that manifest and magnifies the peripheral epistemology of place.

Around the same time the dam was being constructed, the stateó first Gazetteer was also published.\(^6\) While describing the ecological condition of Raima-Saima valley and the upland, it emphasised the existence of ‘*Indian elephants*’ (emphasis mine) in herds.\(^7\) Seemingly, other wild animals î deer, tiger, boar, and bear î that roamed the abundant luxurious hill forests did not qualify as ándianó It is a possibility that the ándianó prefix to a pachyderm is an unintended attribution. Even if it is unintended, such an attribution necessarily illustrates the power to incorporate and link distance, remote places to the Indian nation-space, and can be read as a technology of appropriating unfamiliar landscapes. But that question is outside my scope here.

\(^4\) The dam was/is 30 meter high, 3.5 km in length and was expected to generate 8.6 mw from an installed capacity of 10 mw. The area to be submerged was projected at 46.34 sq km, Malabika Das Gupta.1989. áDevelopment and Ecology: Case Study of Gumti Rivers in Tripuraá Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 24, No. 40 (October 7) p.2267.

\(^5\) Dumbur is misnomer, its original kokborok name is Dongor. This place is related to Borok mythology of Dongoi of Tripura. It was one of the most fertile land in Twipra and was called the granary of Twipra. The people in this area were self sufficient and were contended with the way they lived. But in the year 1971 under the Chief Ministry of Late Sachin Singh during the Congress regime in Twipra, a damn was constructed over the rivers Raima and Saima junction (Gumati) for Hydro Electrical Project (sic).áBorok People (Indigenous People) and Their Life Condition of Twipra (Tripura) India, an Undated handout by Borok People Human Right Organisiation, p.4.


\(^7\) Menon, *Tripura District Gazetteer*, p.41.
intend to bring out the ironical, albeit unintended, consequence of this perhaps unintended attribution.

While watching the national award winning *Kokborok* movie, *Yarwng* (root)^8^, a particular scene where the state (police) used *Indian elephants* to demolish homes of those who refused to move up made my mother say, *agi khwnama kokrok* (things we have heard of long time ago). Interestingly, the state-sponsored violence including the use of huge elephants is glossed over in the texts that contribute to the dominant discourse. In this discourse, the negative consequences of the dam are population displacement (especially displacement of *tribal*) and ecological destruction. Displacement takes place due to formation of reservoir^10^ Even what the reservoir submerged is merely a huge swath of arable lands owned by the tribals^11^ They make displacement, a natural outcome of a dam, less unpleasant.

There is another narrative, a counter perspective of this submerged geography. This is a narrative of those who speak against the dominant discourse. Their concern, while memorialising state-sponsored violence, attends to violence of another kind, displacement of meaning, of an idea of place and submersion of a history. In these narratives the unpleasantness and the brutalities are dealt with directly, on its own terms. Displacement is always an outcome of violence forcible eviction by police, population displacement (especially displacement of *tribal*), and ecological destruction. Displacement takes place due to formation of reservoir^10^ Even what the reservoir submerged is merely a huge swath of arable lands owned by the tribals^11^ They make displacement, a natural outcome of a dam, less unpleasant.

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^8^ *Kokborok* is the language spoken by various Tripuri communities (Debbarma, Reang, Tripura, Jamatia, Uchoi, Noatia, Koli etc.) The movie is about this particular dam and displacement of indigenous population. It won national award in 2010.


^11^ Subir Bhoumik makes a case for decommissioning of the dam (which has become non-functioning now) so that Bengalee-Hindus can buy peace in Tripura by giving back *tribal* their alienated land, see *A Blueprint for Ethnic Reconciliation in Tripura.*
demolition of homes/houses by elephants, loading them into crammed trucks, and forcible relocation into deplorable \(\)rehabilitation\(\) camps.\(^{12}\)

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

Why were Raima-Sorma buried under water? They were not simply water bodies; they were embodiment of our stories, legends, and folk tales, they represent our continuities. This burial under water represents submerging of our history; our nation. Beginning from Dongoioma-Dongipha, to the present, our life, identity, connected to these landscapes.\(^{13}\)

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

\begin{quote}
Raima! You are today
A new named Gumoti
You were once
A daughter of Bolong, Koromoti

Each word, our history you\(\)ve woven
This land\(\)s footprints, we inherited
As water rises
Our past submerges. \(^{14}\)
\end{quote}

What matters in these two emblematic passages is that a particular geography becomes the outstanding site of raking up bitter memories and constructing different identity of place. These bitter (rival) memories and identity of Tripura run counter to the state-promoted idea of Tripura, its vision of harmonious land of átribal and non tribalô Such counter narratives, by Tripuri ethno-nationalists, lay emphasis on

\(^{12}\) Nagendra Jamatia (2003), who organized the displaced people for compensation, recollects the event as destruction of not rich ecology, but rich Tripuri villages from where people refused to move until forcible eviction by police, CRPF and huge elephants. See fRaimani Twi Mokolni Mwktwio (translation: Raima\(\)s water is eyes\(\) tears), in Mukamu, Kokborok Hukumu Mission: Agartala, pp.88-90.

\(^{13}\) Nanda Kumar Debbarma.2001. Rung (Part 1), Hachuk Khorang Publication: Agartala. Translated from Kokborok by the researcher. (Appendix II).

(including population displacement) displacement of history, memory and a particular idea of place woven around experiences of fragmentation, disjunction and estrangement.

Why was this particular geography chosen as a site for counter memory production and cultural investment by the ethno-nationalists? It can be argued that the dam, the displacement of local population and the geography it submerged makes it convenient strategic spot for reproduction of counter memory. Without denying this aspect I that these strategic ethno-nationalist investments occur after dam had been constituted I wish to situate the ideology into dim, silenced (not silent) past.

In chapter two, I had argued that Tipperah as a stable political centre emerged only after two events: controlled over sedentary, permanent surplus producing Bengalee population; and incorporation of Indic cosmography invention of a Hindu past. The invention of Hindu past retrospectively projects its dynastic existence to the Hindu mythologies, a project made possible by incorporating Hindu Brahmins. This shift in genealogy also coincides with the shift from orality (oral rendition of genealogy) to literality (writing). The shift in genealogy erased the importance of Dongoima-Dongoipha (genealogy from where Tripuris trace their origin) from history, and thereby sacred/stigmatised space, in the eye of the state, is reconstituted.15 Therefore, this particular stretch of land, as a sacred geography, had already been silenced by the political elites during the precolonial period.

15 As mentioned in chapter two the court chronicle Rajmala opens with an imaginary king complaining to gods for making him a king of unholy land (of nude boisterous people who eat all kind of flesh elephant, horse, mouse, cat, tiger, dog, snake etc...) and his yearn for holy places (Mathura, Gaya, Kasi, Hariduara, Kurukshetra, Ayudhya) and sacred rivers (Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati) situated elsewhere. This text written during the fifteen century can be read as reconstitution of sacred geographies after the incorporation of Indic cosmography.
However, the importance of this geography, as a sacred place essentially connected to history of Tripuris, existed as simultaneously real and abstract in the imagination of Tripuris. It is this aspect of being real and abstract the ethno-nationalist draws upon in order to re-produce a rival history and geography. The dam and the geography it submerged are then articulated as erasure of that history and geography (including identity) and thereby give meaning to their struggle against the Bengalee-Hindus. The irony, I pointed out earlier, lies in the image of state police (Bengalee-Hindu) and elephant (symbolising Indian state) defiling indigenous sacred geography. This image serves to legitimate the ethno-nationalist perception of (Tripura’s) modernity as a colonial condition. This perception has had tremendous influence in the making of Tripuri identity and the ensuing politics of identity, including Tripuri arm insurgency since late 1970s.

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

16 Dongor or Dambur, Raima and Saima are real in the sense that these rivers are still sites of sacred rites; and abstract in their connection to mythic tales and legends which conjures up a different geographies of belonging.
A Brief History of Tripuri Ethno-nationalism

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

The shift in territorial ideology from ‘my land’ where hill-ness and plain-ness merged, to mutually exclusive homelands conjures up interesting topographies of modern Tripuri identity. In chapter two I have conceptualised identity Tippera as ‘open’ defined absolutely in relation to propinquity to the state core. Moving out or away from a certain geographical realm that constituted immediate to the state core was interpreted as becoming the ‘mobile’ other. Conversely, moving into the fortified state-core was interpreted as civilisation. Exactly when does this portability of identity becomes non-portable is difficult to say. Geographically speaking, the various disjunctions in space, I have pointed out in this study, i.e. colonial separation of hill and plain (1761); fixing the mobile Kukis inside new named place ‘Lushai Hills’ and dissolution British-India and disruption of Manikya dynasty, shaped the landscape of
modern Tripura. Representations (by Tripuris) of this new spatial grid, within the new spatial formations, offer glimpses of ethno-nationalism struggle with identity and place.

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

1940-1965 ï Dislocations

It can be argued that thinking ‘Tripuri’ politically or imagining of the community as political collective becomes perceptible during 1940s. The following conversation between the last Raja of Tripura and his Binondia is illustrative of the nascent ideological shape of politics of identity and place.17

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

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

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

17 This conversation was narrated to Sudhanwa Debbarma (then a student at Agartala) by Ram kumar Thakur, a Binondia. The title or post Binondia is the intermediary between the hill subjects and the Raja of Tripura. He is appointed by the Raja. Sudhanwa Debbarma later became a prominent member of Jana Siksha Samity and later Tripur Jatiyo Gana Mukti Parishad. Sudhanwa Debbarma. 1997. Ki kore Rajnitite Joriye Porlam (How I came to be entangled in politics: Translation mine), Tripura Darpan: Agartala, pp.6-7.
Binodia: If this is the case, then how many Tripuris are employed in the administration? Why there are fewer educated Tripuris? All your ministers are of different race.

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

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

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

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

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

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

What is particularly novel about JSS (in the political history of Tripura) is its appropriation of `Tripuri' as a political category. The numerous political formations,

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

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

The period also saw proliferation of numerous other organisations wedded to ideological opposition of Bengalee-Hindu dominance in the state administration and their rehabilitation in the state in Sengkrak, Paharia Union, Adivashi Sangh. Though the mass base of these organisations is questionable, they, apart from JSS, represented modern political construction of the Bengalee-Hindu as Ôother-outsiderÔ. The Sengkrak was most militant and vocal in its advocacy of ÔexpulsionÔ of Bengalee refugees from Tripura.
Coloniality re-invented: Tripuri ethno-nationalism since 1965

In the late 1960s Tripuri identity politics took a different shape, marked by ideological breaks and connections from earlier discourse of Tripura. This new identity politics was represented by three new political formations: Tripura Upajati Jubo Samity (political party), Tribal Student Federation (now Twipra Student federation), and Tripura National Volunteer (armed underground group). These groups have been particularly responsible for their ideological investment in, what can be described as, re-invention of colonial condition. Unlike previous narrative of Manikyan rule as 'feudalistic' the past (prior to merger with India) was imagined as 'glorious'.19 The post-merger is narrated as colonisation by Bengalee-Hindus from Bangladesh, seen as a political project of the Indian state.

These departures informed their political rhetoric and struggles. During the entire decade of 1970, identity politics in Tripura was marked by radically polarised confrontations between ethno-nationalist fronts and the state. Their demands for deportation of foreigners and implementation of Sixth Schedule (District Council) eventually led to the infamous 1980 ethnic riots between Bengalees and Tripuris.20 The 1980 ethnic riots, now popularly known as 'danga' became an important point of reference, a marker of time, especially of the last century, in the everyday social

19 For example, Twipra Students’ Federation’s anthem *Kusung Kusung* harps on Tripura as mighty expansive kingdom of the Tripuri people.
discourse. Events came to be plotted and understood as pre-danga or after-danga. The ugliness and intensity of the conflict was well-portrayed by Jagadish Gan-Chaudhury.

The flame of fire spread very rapidly from village to village burning thousands of houses and huts, cattle and crops. Numerous villages were laid waste. Lakhs of people were rendered homeless. Properties, both moveable and immoveable, worth several crores were destroyed, damaged, burnt, looted and captured. Hundreds were murdered. Women were raped. All contemptible crimes in human history were committed. Both communities were affected. In every community there are mischief-mongers (sic).\(^2\)

In the succeeding decades, after 1980 ethnic riot, Tripura has been converted into a killing field: intermittent communalised killings between Tripuris and Bengalees; armed clashes between insurgents and military.\(^2\) After 1980, ethnic violence of that scale and magnitude did not take place. Nevertheless, the period between 1998 and 2001 was marked by another phase of ethnic violence. Many believed the violence to be engineered by proscribed Tripuri armed group, National Liberation Front of Twipra (NLFT). There were other political events within which this phase of violence may be located.

In 1982 TUJS's brief stint in power as a coalition partner of Indian National Congress in many ways discredited the leaders. The party suffered a vertical split with more extremist among them breaking away to form their own parties with claims to pursue the unachieved abandoned goals of the parent organisation. Debobrata Koloi formed

\(^{21}\) Gan Choudhury, *A Political History of Tripura*, p.64.
\(^{22}\) According to South Asian Terrorist Portal the total number of civilians killed by the insurgents during 1998 to 2001 was 1145. The highest was, 453 in 2000. From 1998 to 2002 over 50000, mostly Bengalees have been displaced ([www.internal-displacement.org](http://www.internal-displacement.org)) and according to centre for International Development and Conflict Management so far the ethnic conflict in Tripura have claimed estimated 1, 0000 – 12000 lives ([www.cidcm.umd.edu](http://www.cidcm.umd.edu)). For a vivid narration of the killings and eviction of Bengalees see Manas Paul, *The Eye Witness: Tales From Tripura’s Ethnic Conflict*, op cit.
the Tripura Hills Peoples Party and Harinath Debbarma, the former chief of TUJS formed the Tripura Tribal National Conference. However, these parties failed to make any impact on the state politics. The parent organisation was able to retain some visibility but lost its credibility and standing among the Tripuris.

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

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19 Both the groups drew their support from the disenchanted youths who played active role during the 1970s and 80s.
23 Immediately after capturing power in the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council, IPFT re-named itself as Indigenous Nationalist Party of Twipra in order to contest the Assembly elections. After successive defeats the party met the same fate as TUJS.
24 Tipperah Era was the official calendar used during Manikya dynasty. In 1963 this calendar was removed from official use by the state government and replaced it with Bengalee calendar. It is believed that Tipperah Era was established by Tripuri King Hamtor Fa or Himti Fa to commemorate his victory against Bengal ruler in 590 A.D.
Presently Tring have become important symbol of Tripuri ethno-nationalism. It historicises a possible event, summons or collectively recollects a different history and geography in order to produce modern Tripuri\textregistered Other\textregistered especially the Bengalee-Hindus. As evident from above, Tripuri identity politics is constituted by production of spatial differentiation ï Tripuris and Bengalees as occupying separate geography, distinct discontinuous places. The disruption of this discontinuous space is conceptualised as the condition of coloniality ï Bengalee-Hindus as other outsider dominating the political and economy of Tripura. Tring isolates an (possible) event in history in order to re-mark that boundary, and thereby frame a colonial situation. Coloniality is made real, in their everyday imaginaries and experiences of displacements from an imagined history and geography. It is precisely, this geography, I wish to prise open.

Tripura as Contested Place: Topographies of âTripuriâ

In the previous chapter, I had argued how the postcolonial Tripura is imagined as a place within already existing Indian nation by the new political elite of the state. This imagining coincided with Bengalee-Hindu\textregistered reproduction of Tripura as a new home-space. This new territorial ideology becomes real only when their relationship to the place is naturalised ï when that abstract ideological terrain and a concrete physical territory\textregistered are âcross-mapped onto each to each other\textregistered It constructs a supposed continuity between present-day people and a past. There are others ways of constructing that âsupposed continuity\textregistered

\textsuperscript{25} The celebration of Tring (Tipperah Era New Year) is organised by Movement For Kokborok. There is no evident to show that Manikya rulers celebrated a new year for Tippera Era. This is a recent invention by ethno-nationalist. It commemorates a particular memory ï of victory against Bengal.
Modern identity groups employ diverse spatial technologies to articulate their relationship to place. In the previous chapter I showed how three spatial technologies were deployed in order to inscribe Bengalee-Hindu identity onto the landscape. These spatial technologies reproduced Tripura in the image of the new homeland. By retrospectively projecting the existence of these spaces they serve as markers of their presence since antiquity. How are these spaces contested by Tripuri ethno-nationalists? What are the spatial technologies deployed to re-inscribe their identity? What form does identity politics take within multiple mutually exclusive inscriptions?

Since the Bengalee-Hindu inscriptions are sanctioned and circulated by the modern state, the sites where difference is enacted, reproduced, and re-framed are always posited as spaces of loss, dislocation, estrangement and fragmentation of Tripuri identity and place. Tripuri ethno-nationalism inhabit, draw upon these estranged spaces. It is produced by these spaces; it also produces these spaces. It acquires meaning only within these spaces, outside of which it might have a life quite different from what is today. It is these spaces I now turn to.

In August 2006, a prominent member of Twipra Student Federation was taking me around Agartata (capital of Tripura). We were returning to the city from A D Nagar. Just before crossing the Howra Bridge he arched his eyebrow towards a large statue of Subhas Chandra Bose (as always on a galloping horse back and his index finger pointed) indignantly and muttered ‘Bengalee hero’ As we rode over the bridge he dared me to name the original indigenous name of the river. I maintained an inscrutable silence and smiled to hide my ignorance. ‘Our forefathers called it saidra’, he uttered, in such a way as to scoff at my education from one of India’s top
universities. Immediately, after crossing the bridge, the autorikshaw took a left swerve and we came by walled squared ground, an empty space, looking out of place. This particularly filthy looking place elicited revolting reaction (covering of mouth and nose) from our other co-passengers, including me. However, the filth-filled place, scavenging ugly pigs all over, evoked a reaction in him which is hard to name, "this is our kings' simlang (cemetery)." I can tell, from his voice, that it pained him to see such a sacred space desecrated.

How does one interpret his structure of feelings towards these three present spatial realities at Agartala: statue of Bose, the river with changed name, and the desecrated simlang. What do these everyday sites/sights tell of the identity politics in Tripura? More importantly, how/why are these contested sites? There is a wide recognition of the connection between production of identity (especially territorial identity) and invention of particular sites of memory — the creation and maintenance of particular view of place by inscribing that conception onto the public landscapes. Every nation or for that matter, every ethnic groups produces its own places of memory. These three spatial realities are representative of the contestedness of Tripura.

Indigenous toponymies: inscribing ownership

26 In this study I use the kokborok word simlang because the word do not differentiate between a grave and a place where dead is cremated. More importantly, simlang is not only a site where the dead is interred or burnt, it is a permanent resident of the mang (a Kokborok word for individuality/feelings/reality) of the dead. In Tripuri indigenous belief system death implies exit of the fola (spirit/soul); what is interred or burnt is the flesh, the mang is undestroyed.

The Memorandum of Settlement, signed by Tripura state and Tripuri armed group All Tripura Tribal Force (ATTF) in 1993, among other things includes two interesting points: One, places to be renamed in their original indigenous names; and two, conversion of Ujjayanta Palace (seat of former ruling house of Tripura and presently Tripura Legislative Assembly) into a historical monument. This urge, by Tripuri armed ethno-nationalist, to reinstate indigenous toponymies flags off a spatial strategy sculpted as struggle over loss geographies. This sets off uncompromisable politics, where erasure of new place-names constitutes a refusal of the dominant, state-promoted idea of Tripura. It unsettles signs and memories that legitimate ‘non-tribal’ in the state-promoted vision of ‘tribal and non-tribal’Tripura. I will elaborate further.

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

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28 Other important agreements include restoration of alienated land to tribal and deportation of foreign nationals Memorandum of Settlement, Tripura State Government and All Tripura Tribal Force Accord, 1993.
29 For example the unokoti (carvings of Hindu deities on rocks at Kailasahar) which lay in ruins till its discovery (by English survey party) and restoration in 1921 is narrated as always been sacred site of Hindus and therefore the place as always been part of India. G C Chauley.2007. Art Treasures of Unokuti, Tripura, Ajam Kala Prakasham: New Delhi, pp.9, 31.
In the words of Lefebvre, “A revolution (a major social transformation) that does not produce new space has not realised its full potential”\(^{30}\) Postcolonial Tripura, as a different spatial formation, posited production of its own spaces which made itself real in every day lived experiences of the people. This character is not unique to Tripura, nor is my analysis of place-names as sites of memory and identity new. There are ample examples of how new regimes or polities, every where, engaged in re-naming of places, and have been focus of brilliant scholarship.\(^{31}\) These studies pay particular attention to the relationship between place-names, including street names, and political ideology. These names are “convenient and popular political symbols”\(^{32}\) reflects and manifest a certain political identity in that, they help to form a desired political consciousness among population.\(^{32}\) Between the meaning engraved in the word displaced and the new meaning imposed lies politics of appropriation. The place acquires new identity implicated in the new ideology of the state. Nihal Perera aptly described this practice as “semantic appropriation”\(^{33}\) in his analysis of how the British colonial power erased the imprints of former Portuguese and Dutch rule in Sri Lanka.\(^{33}\)

In postcolonial Tripura, within the political ideology of new state, the indigenous toponymy not only symbolised rival geographies, but were viewed as a threat the new history and geography of the place. Therefore, simultaneous to re-invention of Hindu

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\(^{30}\) Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 54.

\(^{31}\) For example Maoz Azaryahu makes an extensive survey of street names altered under the regime of Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED) in the East Germany. The erased names reflected the political ideology of the Nazi which were in fact had replaced the names that up to 1918 reflected of Kaiserreich. *Street names and Political Identity*, op. cit. p. 581; See also Arsney Saparov, *The Alternation of Place Names and Construction of National Identity in Soviet Armenia*, p. 179.

\(^{32}\) Azaryahu, *Street Names and Political Identity*, p. 581.

sacred sites, the indigenous place-names were erased by ossifying the new names, written and made official. Rabindra Kishore Debbarma, a writer, noted that Bengalee surveyors would come to the village, enquire the name of the place, he would then translate the name to Bengalee and record it. These acts have to be understood within that political ideology of producing a discourse of right over a territory—a moral right to own and inhabit a territory.

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

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

34 Interview with the researcher 2008. For an extensive list of the indigenous place-names which have been e-named places see Rabindra Kishore Debbarma.1998. Tripurar Gram (Trans: villages of Tripura) Tripura Darpan: Agartala.
Place-names, as important markers of territorial identity, are sites of contested memory and construction of particular identity of place. The identity of postcolonial Tripura, as a specific type of place, was produced via appropriation and invention of sacred spaces (drawing on connection between place-names and their connection to Hindu cosmographies), and also conscious transformation (read erasure) of existing indigenous toponymy. Tripuri ethno-nationalist identity politics, the restitution of indigenous toponymy, which asserts a different reading of modern landscapes of Tripura flags of politics of uncompromising spaces. The re-naming of Saidra as Howra (a principal river in West Bengal state), besides being an affront to my guide’s ethno-nationalist sensibilities, it reproduces his ethno-nationalism — where ethno-nationalism is struggle with estranged geography.

Marks of identity: contesting memory

The towering statute of Subhas Chandra Bose, on the bank of the Saidra/Howra, is not the only memorial that enacts postcolonial Tripura as a specific place. The city landscape is littered with, virtually, statues, memorials and monuments of historical figures drawn from Indian national struggle who are largely from Bengal. The visual of a youthful statue of Khudiram Bose, on the entrance of Ujjayanta Palace (presently the Legislative Assembly of the state), and Rabindranath Tagore and Ambedkar on the precinct of the palace signals two ideological agendas — appropriation of the

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38 In July 1, 2010 during my field trip I accompanied Anthony Debbarma (BPHRO), Wasok Debbarma (former president of TSF) and Bekreng (former prominent leader of NLFT) on their visit to a malaria stricken village (in Kachanpur) near Mizoram border in North Tripura District. Before reaching Kanchanpur we came by a small market place, and a white bust of Baghat Singh (the unmistakable moustache and the hat) above a glistening pillar caught our attention. Anthony muttered to himself and shook his head in disbelief and asked to no one particular, Chini Raja rok biang kwma kha sa? (Where have our kings/heroes disappeared). As our discussion suddenly shifted to the issue of memorials my co-passengers chatted about building memorials of our heroes and compete with the litters that dot Tripura's capital, Agartala.
historical site to the Indian national imagination; and, in the eye of Tripuri ethno-nationalist, Bengalinisation of the indigenous historical sites. The (almost) absence of erstwhile Manikya rulers (appropriated as Heroes by Tripuris ethno-nationalists) from the memorial landscape of the city tells of different story. What difference does this absence make in thinking space? What does it tell of the relationship between place and identity?

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

A short recap would be appropriate. Immediately after the dissolution of British-India and disruption of the erstwhile ruling house of Tripura, a new idea of place needed production. This became critical for two reasons: integration to Indian union and


40 Forest and Johnson, Unraveling the Threads of History, pp. 524-5.
rehabilitation of large scale Bengalee-Hindu refugees from severed East Pakistan. The new political elites aspired to resolve these two problems through appropriating Tripura’s past: one, the invention of Hindu sacred toponymies and thereby imagining Tripura as a place within Indic cosmography; two, Bengalee-Hindus as originally subjects of Manikyan past (the proofs being control of large swathe of Bengal by Manikya rulers), and thereby making them legitimate citizens in the new spatial formation. What emerged from these appropriated past is the central idea of Tripura as historical place of harmonious hill-man and plain-man reproduced in school text books. Why is this history not spoken through the sites investigated here? What I will demonstrate is that the absence marks a contradiction, and announces a problematic space.

The problem played itself out last year when the state government proposed a bill in the Assembly to rename the Agartala Airport after poet Rabindranath Tagore. The airport was built by Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya during 1940s and was used by the allied forces in the World War II. The very idea of commemorating and memorialising Tagore by naming the airport after him, instead of Bir Bikram Manikya who commissioned it, sparked off unprecedented opposition from Tripuri ethno-nationalist.41 Between state’s choice of Tagore and ethno-nationalists open espousal of Bir Bikram, to be commemorated and memorialised as a name of the significant site, lies troubling politics of identity and place. Despite conscious appropriation of past spaces of Manikyan rule by the new state, its inability to commemorate and memorialise that history subverts that produced connection. Consequently, this calls

for re-thinking these sites, not only as spaces commensurate with a particular invented place identity, but also as ambivalent sites that display dissonance with the very central ideology of a place.

In order to situate this dissonance, perhaps, it is necessary to look more closely at the way Tripuri ethno-nationalists have imagined their identity and Tripura. Earlier, I had pointed out the rather too quick after-lives Manikya history had had among Tripuri ethno-nationalists. First, Manikya rule and its history were disavowed by the early Tripuri elites, and especially the members of JSS. Second, Manikya rulers were glorified and its history was appropriated by the new ethno-nationalist groups like TUJS, TSF and TNV. The later ethno-nationalist retrofitted their nation onto hoary past and produced the present as a colonial condition the hoary past as their resource to rival geographical imagination. This brand of ethno-nationalist discourse wrought much havoc to the nascent modern state’s control over Tripura’s past. Rather, the past became an untouchable domain, whereby use of it entailed allowing larger space to Tripuri ethno-nationalist in the body politics of the state. The heightened politics of which has been the incandescent 1980 ethnic clashes, eviscerated common past and striated lived geographies.

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

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

A geography of loss: border and memory

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

Ruins usually are favourite sites or sights for nationalist or ethnic politics ì they are inevitably treated as signs (excreta) of hoary past and thereby affording its inheritors larger space in history. The site I am interested in is a desecrated simlang of former

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42 Some of these marks are statue of Khudiram Bose in front of Ujjayanta Palace (seat of Manikya dynasty, now state legislature).
rulers of Tripura whose claim to antiquity would embarrass even the mightiest or oldest of dynasties in India. The dilapidated gravesite is located at Battala, one of the busiest corner-parts of Agartala, the capital of Tripura. The square-walled probably half the size of football field stays un-encroached despite degradation and crumbled wall. Inside the square, ruin edifices of rulers, stripped of embellishment stands in utter disrepair. This particular site marks an abnormal presence among the buzz of life all around the busy transport station, fruit vendors abutting out of every nook and the famous enclosed bootleg market (from electronic gadgets to clothes), illegal tiny bars hidden away everywhere makes the modern public memory of the place. Despite these symbols of modernity and their jostle for corners, this unsightly small space stays un-trespassed, albeit a dumping site of filth produced by these modern enterprises.

Despite the fact that dominant narrative of Tripura as a home produced, sanctioned and circulated by the postcolonial state has largely been dependent upon the character of Manikya dynasty, this particular site failed to achieve the status of a sacred in the eye of the state. This failure can be read in myriad of ways. To the Tripuri ethno-nationalists, its social and symbolic role in the narrative of identity (both of the place and of the community) is best served by the very reality of a desecrated simlang. The desecration objectifies the disjunction of a geography, the

43 It traces its lineage to Mahabarat. One of the king is said to have participated in the famous kurukshetra battle.

44 Many of the Bengalee passers-by and shop keepers (near the old simlang) I talked to, believe the place to be of importance to the royal family and its ruin as consequence of the family’s negligence. However, when I broached this issue, side by side the issue of memorials to Anthony Debbarma, a human right activist, Washok Debbarma (former president of Twipra Students’ Federation) and Bekreng (a former armed rebel), they interpreted the ruined simlang as symbolic of the ruin of their nation.

45 Discussion with Subendu Debbarma, then general secretary of Twipra Student Federation on the question of why a sacred space is not commemorated by ethno-nationalist groups. He opined that,
visual of a ruin transforms the site into ethnicised sight and makes real the invented coloniality of a present. What is that disjuncted geography?

Tripuri ethno-nationalism is contingent upon a shared belief in certain idea of Tripura’s past – this particular place as inhabiting a continuous space, as an exclusive home. This notion of place incites not only radicalised everyday politics, but also serves as ideological resource for armed struggle, waged with the objective of restoration of lost geographies. The effect of this kind of geographical imagination is a text which brought communities and political parties onto the streets of Tripura – the text in particular is Bijoy Kumar Hrankhawl’s speech at the Working Group of Indigenous Population at Geneva in 2002. The text is a perfect embodiment of ethno-nationalist geographical ideologies which upsets dominant ‘official’ narrative. What does it embody?

First, the production of Bengalee-Hindu as the ‘other-outsider’ has largely been dependent upon the idea of precolonial ‘glorious’ Tripura as a history of Tripuri nation. An ethno-nationalist discourse of Tripura takes place only within this given geographical thought – Tripura as always already a territorial entity that can be called a nation. The possibility of a text as ethno-nationalist occurs via or from this geographically given. If the production of Tripura as a home of tribals and non-

while gravesites of present Bengalee ministers become ‘flower garden’ our kings’ simlang becomes a municipality waste dumping site.

46 The speech created a furore in Tripura with various political parties demanding his arrest. On the other hand various Tripuri groups threatened as mass movement in support of the speech. One of the important themes of the speech was terming the insurgency as movements for self determination by Indigenous people.

47 Many other texts also significantly embody these ideologies. A Brief History and Present Condition of Boroks of Twipra, a handbook published by Borok People’s Human Right Organisation (Not dated)

tribals occurs by marking the category Tripuri below the spatio-temporal grid î Bengalee-Hindu as occupying true time and Tripuris as behind time î Tripuri ethno-nationalist literature upsets that spatio-temporal grid by retrofitting Tripuri identity to a geographically different and simultaneous history. Virtually every ethno-nationalist text embodies this geographical ideology, and plot meanings within this imaginings.

Despite the marks of colonial cartographic surgery or modernity on its mapped discontinuous geo-body the Tripura in the ethno-nationalist geographical imaginings have always inhabited that discontinuity. The ethno-nationalist geography departs from dominant discourse of the modern border between Tripura-Bangladesh as simultaneously a marker of the common enemy and as erasure of distance between tribal and non-tribal. In the ethno-nationalist discourse this border announces a drastically different political project: the production of Tripuri as inhabiting a continuous place and as a site for production of non-paradoxical spatio-temporal present and non-dichotomous simultaneity. It is the later I shall turn to here.

The ontology of tribal and non-tribal produced in the dominant narrative frames dichotomous simultaneity in the present of the tribal and the other. It posits a present to be outside the spatio-temporal now of the non-tribal. The tribal as occupying space-time behind produces a dichotomous simultaneity between the

48 In the previous chapter I discussed how the modern border between Tripura and Bangladesh is simultaneously erased and made real within the dominant discourse of Tripura as home of Bengalee-Hindus.

This way of conceptualising communities visualise the tribal and non-tribal. This way of conceptualising communities visualise the tribal in relation to the past of the non-tribal and difference is postulated as meaningful only within that linear grid. The border in question is invested (by the ethno-nationalists) as a site for invention of a spatiality which champion a narrative of simultaneous time Tripuri as inhabiting now of the non-tribal and separate territoriality. Difference is then postulated as meaningful, not within the linear grid, but as occupying historically different homeland and possessing a separate history. This narrative radically confronts the idea of a shared home and history championed by the dominant narrative of Tripura.

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

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50 For example, this makes possible for conceptualising communities practicing shifting cultivation in the hills as temporally behind communities engaged in plough and wet agriculture. James C Scott turns this argument on its head by arguing that agricultural practice is not ecologically given, but a political choice. Plough cultivation is not after to Shifting agriculture, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, p.191.

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

52 The technique would be to list out every movement by the Tripuris since 1947 as movement for restoration of that geography. The inclusion of Tripura Janashiksa Samity and its avatar Ganamukti Parishad in the list is problematic for the singular reason that these two movements were antagonistic to the Manikya dynasty. For example see Mohan Debbarma.2008. *A Handbook On The Identity, History And Life Of Borok People*, Kokborok Sahitya Sabha:Agartala, pp.32-50.
colonising event. The ruin communicates the arrival of the "other-outsider" the "refugees" and announces the disjunction of a geography.

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

In this chapter, my intention had been to delineate spatiality inherent in the production of "Tripuri". The disjunctions in space anticipate the possibility for imagining "Tripuri" as a modern political category. I argued that identity "Tripuri" fixes itself within a geographical grid by re-marking the state-core no longer inhabiting a mobile stigmatised space. Finally, this particular identity inhabits estranged geographies—some of which are, silent indigenous toponymies, memories untold in the memorials and the ruined simlang. The border as an ambivalent space in the production of Tripura as home by the dominant narrative itself becomes a site invested in the construction of the "other-outsider". The production of "Tripuri" then, is contingent upon invention of a rival geography of Tripura as a resource for rival ideologies and rival narrative. This narrative thrives as a peripheral epistemology of place, always confronting, challenging and subverting the dominant discourse.
Chapter VI

Conclusion: Geography and Identity Politics

The ways identity groups conceptualise place have enormous political implications. Much of the political turmoil around the globe stems from contested meaning of space and place. For example, the Palestine-Israel problem and the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict arise from contested meaning of territoriarity and idea of space.¹ These conflicts involve questions of whose space it is, who has the right to inhabit it? Similarly the protracted armed conflicts in India’s northeast region, Myanmar’s upland regions and Bangladesh’s Chittagong Hill tracts originate from and are sustained by rival geographical imaginings of these places by ethnic groups on the margins of modern Nation-States.² The central concern of this study has been a critical analysis of one such mode of rival geographical imaginations of a particular historicised place. More particularly, this study attempted to analyse how identity groups are able to claim a particular territory as homeland how they imagined space and its boundaries?

The Ambivalence of Place

I have argued that, the emergence of Tripura as a specific space i.e. homeland is possible only after a series of disjunctions in space. I have pointed out the disjunctions of precolonial indigenous/Manikyan space and later the imperial/colonial space. Within the Manikyan spatial ideology, Tipperah as homeland of particular identity


² Major armed ethnic movements in these three regions are Wa, Kachins and Karens in Burma, Jummas in Bangladesh and Naga, Tai-Ahom, Tripuri and Manipuri in India.
group did not constitute a meaningful point of reference. Before Tipperah became an identifiable place with its fortified capital at Rangamati (now Udaipur) during the reign of Ratna Fa/Manikya it was a moving place, an identifiable political centre, not necessarily an identifiable fixed geography. Tipperah as an identifiable fixed geography, albeit open borders, could emerge only after it removed its geographical impediments to state-making: the control of alluvial plains of Bengal which became its principal extractive space. By strategically locating its capital, the state-core, between the contested extractive space and the mobile hill space, Tipperah’s political and religious elites sustained a fairly successful state under a stable dynasty.

In the indigenous or Manikyan spatial arrangement, a hill subject was defined by his/her propinquity to the state-core. The hill population adjacent to the fortified state-centre relatively immobile, performing various roles for the dynasty were categorised as Tipperas. Identity Tippera was unstable, ambiguous and geographically fluid. This is because identity Tippera can be lost by enacting two movements. On the one hand, the open geography allowed movement away from the realm of Tippera into the geographical realm of Kuki beyond the control of the state. The realm of the Kuki was the geography of wild, ferocious savage hill people who neither recognised overlordship of Tipperah ruler nor other premodern states in the region. The precolonial states could claim over this territory without actually subjugating communities inhabiting it. On the other hand, the open geography also allowed movement into the state-core and incorporation into the ideology of the ruling political class. The adoption of surname Thakur may be seen as one of the important rites of passage for incorporation or assimilation into the ideology of the state. This
change signified distance and difference from the previous identity: the stigmatised hill identity.\(^3\)

When the British moved into the region in the Nineteenth century, they introduced new geographical grids of places and population, which in many ways, disjuncted earlier Manikyan grid of nearness and farness. The map was the most powerful technology of imposition of these new geographical grids. The operation of colonial power required clearly marked or defined borders within which the political power was vested upon a recognised government. As the British-India begun defining and drawing boundaries it led to intractable conflicts with the Rajah of Tippera. In fact, the period 1820-1920 can be described as period of boundary dispute between British-India and Tipperah. The Manikya ruling house refused to accept the lines defined by British-India as its original boundary till its dissolution in 1947.

Prevailing scholarship on political history of Tripura would study these border disputes as outcomes of disagreement of exact location of the actual border.\(^4\) A study of British-India and Tipperah relationship, so far, merely records quarrels between the two states. This study attempted to understand these disputes as clash between indigenous spatial arrangement and colonial or modern spatial arrangement, therefore a conflict of spatial ideologies. Boundary disputes are after to the concept of border: a boundary which could be disputed by two parties was absent. It was a conflict of

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\(^3\) In Agartala (which has been Tripura's capital since 1760) a fairly large number of Tripuris use the surname Debbarman instead of Debbarma. The former differentiates Tripuris who are still in the hills derogatorily designated as Pahari and Tripuris who have adopted education and civilization (read Hinduisation). For a reading on Hinduisation of Tripuri society see Suren Debbarman. 2006. \textit{A Short Account of Tripuri Society}, Jnan Bichitra: Agartala, pp. preface and 9-41.

two, mutually antagonistic, discourses of space: the indigenous conception of Tipperah and the western conception of it. After all, there is no such thing as an *actual* or *natural* boundary. Moreover, instead of recording the disputes as quarrels over actual boundary a more useful question would be why did they desire a border at a particular *here* and not *there*?

Many factors go into the consideration of a certain area as actual border by a given state. In mountainous geography, with scarce population, two factors become vital in deciding a particular area as borderland: control over population and control of strategic trading points. A careful reading of reports of colonial surveyors and administrators in the region reveals a huge contradiction between their claims of search for *actual* boundary of Tipperah and the desire for control of human power (especially Bengalee peasants) and strategic trade routes or points. Human power, specifically surplus producing settled cultivators, was the scarcest of commodities in the region. Tipperah and British-India quarrel over control of Bengalee peasants highlights serious politics, at times confusing. For example, Kukis (who were yet to become *wild* and *savage* in the colonial discourse) raids of Bengalee village within British-India and later Tipperah boundary, demonstrated the indeterminacy and ambivalence of new borders. These colonial borders were laden with antiquity in the discourse of identity politics and creation of the *other-outsider* during the postcolonial period.

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5 In 1860s when the Kukis started raiding Bengalee villages in British Tipperah and Hill Tipperah there was much confusion about the subject status of Kukis (the English blamed Tipperah Rajah for his failure to control his subjects) and Bengalee peasants in Hill Tipperah. The raids on Bengalee peasants in Hill Tipperah were considered as raid on subjects of British-India.
New geographical knowledge produced modern mapped Tripura. But this place was still a space within the British-India colonial geographical imagination. It was not outside the imperial space. Therefore the prevailing discourse that Tripura had never been colonised, and that, it was an independent territorial entity within which Manikyan rulers exercised sovereignty is an unquestioned epistemology. The need for surplus producing subjects precluded any discourse of homeland. A mapped Tipperah was still an open place, yet to be inscribed with discourse of homeland by a particular group. In other words, a link between the mapped place and an idea of people has not been constructed. As a mapped place within the imperial geography—a locatable space in the imperial map—a discourse of Tipperah was still discourse of any land rather than our land. Although a new system of identification of certain people as Tippera was set in motion (through colonial anthropology and later reflected in census) politics around this identity was yet to emerge.

Identity Politics as Politics of Place

Before identity Tippera is employed as a political category, as a symbol around which modern politics of mobilization is possible, it must destabilise the ultimate source of its stigmatisation: the fortified state-core of the Manikyas. After all, the foundation of Manikya dynasty, its power and authority, had its genesis in the stigmatisation of the geography of Tipperah and its inhabitants. The separation of Manikya and Tippera as a demarcation between the sacred and the profane, the civilised and the wild required disjunction before it could become a source of pride, glory, reason, unreason and loyalty. This final disjunction took during 1940s, a symbolic example was the confession by the last Manikya ruler, any blood is of
Tripuri, I am a Tripuri! This re-marking of the identity of the Rajah re-constituted new spaces of Tripuri identity.

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

Between the death of Bir Bikram Manikya (May 1947) and the signing of Instrument of Accession by the Regent Queen (October 1949), Tripura witnessed two years of political liminality. While the Regency fled to Shillong, capital of Assam (now capital of Meghalaya) the political elites in Tripura, divided on ethnic lines, virtually turned the capital of the state into a feared landscape. The political uncertainty and power vacuum spawned new contesting power centres and spanned battlefields. Although Tripura’s position on merger was still unclear, there was already steady inflow of Bengalee-Hindus from East Pakistan. Various Tripuri organisations opposed

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6 For example as student at Agatala during the 1940s Sudhanwa Debbarma for the first time left his village and got to roam other Tripuri villages. In his memoir he writes, his first visit to places like Golaghat and Takarjala (villages which were in fact not far from his village Sutarmura) there was something called our people Before this visit his identity was confined to his village. He did not think beyond his village. The visits that took place later shaped his politics the need for emancipation of our people Ki kore Rajnitite Joriye Porlam (How I came to be entangled in politics: Trans mine), op cit.
rehabilitation of Bengalee-Hindus and urged for their repatriation. There was widespread fear among Tripuri ethno-nationalists that such an exodus could reduce the Tripuris to microscopic, politically insignificant minority in their own land. They failed to define their position on the merger question as well.

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

The politics of this period is significant for two things. One the one hand, the disjunction of earlier discourses of space, people and state brought into play new competing discourses of space, place and people. These discourses were negotiations of the meaning and identity or definition of Tripura as a place, as a home to decide who has the right to inhabit it? Who should be excluded? A common practice has been to analyse these events in terms of which group was/is wrong, who was/is right. In this study I tried to understand, instead, how these competing groups, based on ethnicity, invoked spatiality. How do they lay claim a particular territory as a home? How does it become possible for groups belonging to Bengalee-Muslim identity to imagine and narrate Tripura as a place within the larger idea of Muslim spatiality? Or for that matter, how do various groups belonging to Bengalee-Hindu identity

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

8 For example Jagdish Gan Choudhuri categorised the Bengalee-Muslims as imperialist and invaders and castigates the Tripuris for targeting Bengali-Hindus, see A Constitutional History of Tripura, pp. 125-126, 311, and 368.
imagined Tripura as a place within the idea of Bengal and the Indic sacred cosmological space?

On the other hand, these new competing discourses of Tripura radically transform the idea of Tripura by retrofitting their identity, nationality and home to immemorial past. The search for proofs, either for or against a particular idea of home, in the folksy past generated controversial articulation and circulation of past. In the postcolonial period two competing spatial imagination of Tripura shaped its modern politics: the state-sanctioned idea of Tripura and the Tripuri ethno-nationalist idea of Tripura. These two spatial imaginations present us with two divergent discourses of Tripura’s history and geography.

While the former imagines Tripura as a home of Bengalee-Hindus since antiquity, the later deny the Bengalee-Hindu character of Tripura. For example, this is reflected in the politics of memory-making or the symbolic politics of Tripura. The monuments and memorials built by the state to commemorate heroes become visual affronts to Tripuri ethno-nationalists. Within Tripuri spatial imagination of Tripura, these monuments and memorials champion another narrative, another past, and therefore contradict, marginalise and erase the geographies of Tripuri identity. Tripuri identity politics draw upon a different conception of Tripura’s history and geography. Their version of history and geography becomes sources of rival discourses and ideologies i.e. a source of different narrative of home. This shows the paradoxical capacity of history and geography or the ambivalence of a mapped place. They can function variously, for or against any particular discourse of homeland.
I began this thesis with a set of questions about homeland, identity and specifically their relationship to space. From these questions, I set out to construct a story or stories of how groups actually produce a place as homeland. Evidently, I did not proceed from explicitly stated hypothesis of the relationship between space and identity. In as much as the study is a search for a particular relationship between identity and space/place, the study attempted to locate a spatial history of a place. In that sense it is a historical study: it tries to construct a story and narration of a place. This study insists that methodologies are intrinsic to the kind of research one envisages.

In trying to construct a history of a place, my over-arching intention has been to insert in the scholarship on northeast India a new way of conceptualising place and see what difference does it make to one’s understanding of identity politics or the articulation of political identity. I tried to demonstrate that identity becomes political only through disjunctions in space. The identification of a geography as homeland is possible only in that disjuncted space. That identification is inscribed, constructed, ambivalent and contested. There is always other rival geographical imaginings of place — always confronting, subverting and thwarting the dominant narration of place.

The representation of Tripura as a place within Indian nation-state is inconceivable without the image of the map of this place within the map of Indian nation. This representation is possible only when our historical lens is fixed on the dynastic history. But this single way of representing Tripura is misleading. An unconventional look at its spatial history uncovers other ways of looking at Tripura — there has never been only one Tripura. It was a moving place, multiple Tripuras within the Manikyan
space, and as many as two Tripuras within the British-India imperial space. Though it can be said that all these spaces were politically connected to state-core, cultural affinities were absent. These multiple spatialities and histories are the ideological sites of competing interpretations of modern, one Tripura, a mapped place.

Limitations of the study

A place as home is not given. The connection between place and identity is discursively produced. As such both identity and place do not inhabit a continuous space. They are produced through disjunctions in space. But space is not the only instrument through which identity is constructed. There are other components of identity construction. At any given situation, identity groups will make use of various factors such as culture, economic deprivation and political oppression (real or imagined). Non-emphasis of these factors in this study of identity politics is probably a weakness. But this is intentional or a conscious decision on two grounds. First, as I have reiterated throughout the study, this is an attempt to insert in the scholarship on Tripura in particular and northeast India in general, a new way of conceptualising place and identity. I am interested in how identity groups invoked spatiality in the identification of homeland or nationhood or ethnicity.

Second, a large body of literature already exist which takes into account these factors in the analysis of identity politics in the region. I have pointed out in the introduction chapter the problem with literatures on state-making. These literatures make use of cultural difference, economic backwardness and political assertion as if identity is a given territoriality. The method is to assume that cultural difference or economic
backwardness or political alienation is responsible for identity politics, expressed in demands for state-hood or armed movements for independence. These studies fail to question the ways in which a place or territory becomes a homeland on which state, independent or otherwise, can be organised. A marked out place or territory has to be invested and inscribed with meaning of home. Geography and history are powerful technologies of production of home. Therefore, it calls for investigation of how actually rival histories and geographies are produced by identity groups because they contradict other ideas of home which may be idea of India or at a smaller scale Assam.

There are other limitations which are of more serious in nature. These limitations are methodological or more precisely, limitations arising out of paucity of data. First, my reconstruction of precolonial space of Tripura is based on limited texts. I have based chapter II mainly on the chronicle of Manikya dynasty known as Rajmala and Tripura Buranji (a description of Tripura by ambassadors of Ahom ruler) translated into Bengalee as Tripur Desher Katha. Both the texts are translated versions. I have not read the originals. I tried to supplement these texts with early colonial descriptions of the region. Moreover, I have gained and used enormously from James C Scott's analysis of upland space in South East Asia (The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland South East Asia).

Second, I have not been able to complement my analysis of precolonial space of Tripura with indigenous maps. In order to point out the clash between indigenous conception of Tripura and colonial conception of space (a subject of chapter III) an indigenous map would have been interesting and useful. The existence of such a map
or maps is doubtful because my tedious searches among published works or in archives were fruitless. This absence inevitably limits or reduces the significance of an important part of my thesis.

Third, while I rely on written text as my primary data, I relied on other kinds of texts for my analysis of rival geography in chapter V. These texts are symbolic landscape (monuments, statues, memorial sites etc.), orality and conversations/interview (especially with Tripuri ethno-nationalists). These texts were required to augment the paucity of written texts by Tripuri ethno-nationalists.

These limitations, in no way, undermine the central argument of the thesis that a place as a homeland is not a given territoriality. Identity groups lay claim over a particular territory as 'homeland' by using history and geography. 'Homeland' then is a spatial ideology par excellence. It is an imagined space or to use Edward Said's term an 'imaginative geography.' Like other political battles, politics of homeland is not constituted on the surface of geography but produced through the fabrication of that geography. To ignore its spatiality is an unquestioned epistemology.

Identity groups make a place 'homeland' through discourse of space. Such as invention of sacred sites, toponymies, symbolic landscapes and ruins. These spaces lend a particular identity and character to a place. They champion a particular narrative of a place. But they are always ambivalent. This is because, no matter how much effort identity groups invest in creating the antiquity of a place or of an identity, they are always in the process of making, ongoing projects. Space is always open, porous and fluid as Doreen Massey constantly reminds us. But that space is
meaningless to identity politics. It makes more sense to view identity as produced through disjunctions in space. It always requires a closure, exclusion, inclusion, outsider and insider. It requires a disjunction of open, porous and fluid space or an attempt of it.

The significance of this study lies in its insistence that identity politics, especially ethnic identity, is a spatial ideology. This study recognises, in the tradition of spatial turn in social sciences, the impossibility of political events outside space. Any attempt to understand and carry out a critique of identity politics must inevitably recognise its inherent spatiality, alongside temporality. What this study attempts is to locate identity politics, beyond the conventional framework of culture, in the ways groups imagines their geography. As such instead of trying to search for the evidence of identity in folksy past, it makes more sense to see view identity within series of disjunctions in space.

Tripura today is a contested homeland between two major identity groups: the Bengalee-Hindu and Tripuri. These two narratives of homeland present us with two divergent discourses of Tripura’s modernity. In fact they are debate about the very idea of Tripura: its past, present and future. Within that debate politics of identity masquerades in various guises in re-naming of place, invention of sacred sites, and commemoration of heroes. Conventional scholarship on the region, specifically the scholarship on identity politics, is steeped in search for authentic or original territories of ethnic groups. Instead of trying to determine original territorial rights, it would be more useful to concentrate on the production of rival histories and geographies by modern identity groups. The re-invention of Nagalim, Tai-Ahom, Twipra, Bodoland
etcé should not be merely seen as etymological. They fabricate geographies, and are attempts to re-conceptualise space. It would be interesting to focus on the imaginative geographies of these new ideas and identities of place.