Genealogy of Place and Articulation of Political Identity
A study of the Emergence of Tripura as Homeland

Synopsis

Homeland is not a given territoriality and identities do not inhabit a continuous space that can be called homeland. This is because the connection between identity and a marked place is not natural — that connection is produced through disjunction in space. This disjunction in space is what this study is about: that is, what difference does it make to think of identity as constituted by disjunction in space? The ways identity groups conceptualise space have enormous consequences for identity politics. It is that space I attempt to critically analyse. This study aspires to tease out a radically different reading of geography of place and its production as a specific space by modern identity politics.

Taking Tripura, a state in the northeast India, as a case, this study traces the tortuous path space has been subjected in its emergence as modern contested place. This study then is about the emergence of Tripura as a specific space, a homeland, in the postcolonial period. It is about the making of rival geographical imaginations of Tripura: how identity groups narrate it as their ‘homeland’? More specifically, how the space called ‘homeland’ is produced?

The problem of this study, then, is the emergence of a place as a specific space, a homeland. How identity groups are able to talk of a place as their homeland? How does it become possible for the ‘we-self’ to be fixed within a geographical grid? How does groups inscribed themselves onto the mapped geography? My contention is that
a place as a specific space, a homeland, is produced through discourse without examining homeland as a discourse one cannot possibly makes sense of the immense political investments in its imagination. Homeland is not something out there, already identifiable, know-able, and talk-able territoriality. It is produced through discourse and this is a study of the discourse of ‘Tripura’ as a homeland by competing identity groups. My position is that the competing, alternative version of Tripura as homeland cannot possibly be understood outside discourse. The method of this study then is discourse analysis. Simply defined, it is a method of analysing oral or written communication or any form of text. The focus of analysis is the ‘exchange of communication’ between conflicting ideas of social reality. This study understands identity, place and homeland as constructs: they are not given objective realities; rather they are socially produced through discourse.

This study argues that, the emergence of Tripura as a specific space – a homeland – is possible only after a series of disjunctions in space. First, the disjunctions of precolonial indigenous space or what I called the Manikyan spatial ideologies. Second, the disjunction of imperial/colonial space. Within the Manikyan spatial ideology, Tipperah as homeland of particular identity 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.

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 Tipperah. In fact,
the period 1820-1920 can be described as period of boundary dispute between
British-India and Tipperah. 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. After the dissolution of British-
India ĭ and subsequent disintegration of Manikya dynasty ĭ various groups arose to
inscribe new ideas of Tripura onto the mapped place. They produced new ways of
seeing ĖTripuraĒ as a homeland space.

There are five chapters in this study. The first chapter is an introduction to the study.
It discusses the theories and concepts used and also the objectives and methodology
of the study. More importantly, this chapter formulates a set of questions on identity
and place. These questions form the starting point of my investigation into a
particular space, homeland. The second chapter provides an overview of premodern
indigenous space in the region: the history and geography of the region before
colonisation by British-India. This chapter is an attempt to provide a different history
and geography of place from the ones constructed by the state and the Tripuri ethno-
nationalists. More specifically, in this chapter, I plan to reconstruct precolonial spatial
arrangement and carry out a different reading of geography Ė a reading which will be
used to problematise the prevailing ideas of Tripura.

The third chapter discusses the incursion of British-India into the present day region
straddling the borders of three postcolonial states (India, Myanmar and Bangladesh).
It analyses the role of colonial explorers in the colonial project of mapping the region
and producing mapped and marked spaces and the subsequent displacement of indigenous spaces. It shows how historically and geographically Tripura has been arbitrarily and artificially created into a well-defined place with its marked boundaries through boundary contestations, and agreements between the colonial power and the rulers of Tripura. The second and third chapter form the basis from which to problematise the two modes of historiography in Tripura.

Chapter four details the emergence of postcolonial nation states and seeks to locate the present day Tripura within the spaces of nation-states. It traces how the new discourse on nationhood and sovereignty displaced the old colonial discourse on space and place and Tripura. The abolition of monarchy and the emergence of new form of political power entailed imposition of new notion of Tripura, the place and the people. This new discourse of history and place was also a discourse of modern Tripura's border, particularly the new international border, the definition of which made possible the notion of Tripura as home of tribal and non-tribal.

Chapter five discusses the rise of Tripuri ethno-nationalist forces in reaction to the displacement of Tripuri's sense of place and indigenousness. This chapter looks into Tripuri ethno-nationalist groups' attempts to re-define place and reconstruct history of Tripura. This re-definition and reconstruction involves attempts to imagine geography and history of Tripura different from the official version. Central to the ethno-nationalist discourse is the re-definition of the border and thereby construct the other as outsider and refugee.
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.