Chapter I

Identity and Place: An Introduction to the Study

Each new form of state, each new form of political power, introduces its own particular way of partitioning space...its own discourse about space and about things and people in space. Each such form command space to serve its purpose.¹

The narration of ‘place’ as a homeland, based on certain idea of continuity, is historically contingent and possible only within a disjuncted space. 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 an 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, Tripura, and its production as a specific space by modern identity politics.

In many ways, this is not a new question to ask of identity politics. Thongchai Winichakul’s intriguing analysis of emergence of a new territorial entity ‘nation’ by examining the influence of cartography posits disjunction in space.² His analysis, though the scale is nation, carry significant implications for understanding any form of territorial identity. For example, in present day northeast India, the British-India colonial power named ‘places’ mapped them and fixed communities inside

geographical grids. Colonial cartography not only mapped these modern places within British-India imperial space, but these mapped places also entailed production of rival geographies in the postcolonial period. In order to attend to the rival geographies, one must inevitably recognise the ambivalence of place and paradoxical effects of cartography (elaborated in literature review section). The objective then is to carry out a genealogy of place Ī marked by disjunctions Ī so as to make sense of the possibilities of rival geographies.³

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 ḍhomeland⁴? More specifically, how the space called ḍhomeland⁴is produced?

The dissolution of British-India in 1947 Ī and subsequent disruption of former ruling house of Tripura Ī had brought into play three dominant mutually exclusive conceptions of ḍTripura⁴ as a homeland.⁴ The postcolonial place became a site where old ideas of ḍTripura⁴required erasure in order to inscribe a new conception of place.⁵

The years that preceded the accession to Indian Union (August 1949) were

³ The use of the term ďgenealogyď should not be interpreted as an attempt at Foucauldian analysis. I merely use the term to convey the spirit behind it, that is, an attempt at understanding the history of the present.
⁴ These three ideas of Tripura as homeland were: ḍTripura⁴ as part of the severed Muslim-space of Bengal; ḍTripura⁴ as natural home of Bengalee-Hindus, a place within Hindu cosmography; and Tripura as home-space of Tripuris and other hill communities. In the Tripura state classificatory grid, the term ḍTripuri⁴is used to identify only the community which use the modern surname ḍDebbarma⁴. It excludes other Kokborok speaking tribes (Reang, Jamatia, Koloi, Uchoi, Tripura etc.) and other hill communities. This study will use the term to include all the hill communities in Tripura.
⁵ My categorisation of Tripura as a ďpostcolonialď goes against conventional history of Tripura: Tripura was never colonised by the British. This study will show that Tripura was never outside the British-India imperial space, or outside colonial space.
particularly violent: wholesale extrusion of Bengalee-Muslims and subsequently, silencing of Tripuri ethno-nationalist ideologies. Tripura acquired new identity: a place within India, home of tribals and non tribals. A new ways of seeing Tripura: new discourse of space, things and people.

But this new space is produced only in simultaneous reproduction of past: reconstruction of history of place on which modern identity groups retrofits their homeland. This raises questions not only about reproduction of history, but also about the ways in which past geography is imagined. Homeland after all is a spatial ideology par excellence. It is an imagined space or to use Edward Said’s term, an imaginative geography. This work emphasises the role of history and geography in rather discourse of history and geography in the creation of a place as homeland. The question then becomes why certain groups imagine the geography of a place in a particular way? Why Tripuri ethno-nationalists imagined Tripura’s history and geography differently from Bengalee-Hindus or Bengalee-Muslims? What explains the existence of rival histories and geographies?

The subject of this study is space, place and identity. Study of identity politics in the northeast region (India) invariably ends up as a cumulative, linear (straight story telling) narration of tribal resistance to British colonialism, movement for secession, regionalism, autonomy and statehood. This study is neither a study of state making

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6 Derek Grogory writes, Said’s call for critical reading of what he called imaginative geographies in Orientalism has to do with the figuration of place, space and landscape that dramatize distance and difference in such a way that space is divided and demarcated from space. For Said, imaginative geographies are discursive formations, tense constellation of power, knowledge and spatiality, that are centred on and projected towards so that the vacant or the anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us. See Derek Gregory, 1994. Between the book and the lamp: Imaginative geographies of Egypt, 1849-50. Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, New Series, Vol. 20, No. 1 pp.29-57 (quoted from p.29); See Edward Said, 1979. Orientalism, Routledge and Kegan Paul: London and Henley, pp.54-55.
process or state formation, nor is this study merely about the making of modern identities in Tripura. This study is about producing ḍTripuraōī how the notion of this particular place was constructed and how this place is contested by other geographical imaginations?

I admit that the ideas, theories, concepts and approach used or taken in this study are not original. I have elaborately borrowed from numerous scholars who have applied the notion of space and place to the study of modern identities. Similarly, following their foot steps, I have gained from thinkers of space responsible for the ḍspatial turnō or the ḍcritical re-assertion of space in social scienceō. All I have done is to take these ideas, theories and concepts and see how a postcolonial place (in this case Tripura) can be re-conceptualised as a way to pose challenge to the prevailing notions of it. When modernity has been characterised by violent ethnic conflict, armed movements, and violent political struggles, prevailing epistemologies of this place needs to be challenged. The purpose, then, is to insert, in the scholarship on Northeast India, a new way of imagining place/identity.

᧖Tripuraō as place/Identity: The Subject of Study

Tripura, today, is bounded geographically marked space inhabited by two major ethnic groups: Tripuris and Bengalee-Hindus. Since 1960s, these two groups have been engaged in conflicts which expressed in its bloodiest form during the 1980s and then during 1999-2002. Tripuri ethno-nationalists narrate Bengalee-Hindus as ḍoutsiderō as ḍillegal immigrantsō Various Tripuri armed groups ī since 1960s ī

demanded complete expulsion of the refugee Bengalis. Some of these organisations refused to recognize the postcolonial state, which according to them is a colonial government.

The geography of Tripura is imagined as inhabiting a continuous space since antiquity: unchanging, immutable place, a homeland of Tripuris. In their narration, Tripuri nation, ruled by numerous great kings, has always been an identifiable place. In fact, the power of the Tripuris is believed have extended upto Khashi Hills in the North, Manipur Hills in the Northeast, Arakan hills of Burma in the east, the bay of Bengal to the south, and the Brahmaputra river to the west. I will articulate a different way of looking at precolonial spatial realities. It would suffice for now to point out the problem in the narration of such simplistic geography: within that geography how do we mark Tripuri and infiltrator and how do we imagine the Bengalee-Hindu and Bengalee-Muslim as occupying different spatiality?

The state sanctioned history also constructs a similar geography of Tripura. However, that geography is narrated as original land of the tribals (Tripuris) is also the house of non-tribals and people of different religious faiths. Place Tripura is imagined as always a space within Bengal and a sacred landscape within Indic cosmography. In fact one Bengalee writer delves into the mythic past Tripuri kings had controlled

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parts of Eastern Bengal and Tripuri rulers bathing in several rivers of Bengal to naturalise modern geographical connections.  

These two narratives of Tripura present us with two divergent discourses of homeland. In both the discourses, history and geography of Tripura constitute two important tools of identity marker and differentiation. The two modes of narration proceed from a given premise that Tripura inhabits a continuous space and history, which makes possible for a linear, accretive discourse of identity and place. The premise of continuous history and space forms the starting point from where to conceptualise homeland, indigenous, original, other, which are by and large modern political phenomena.

On this understanding Tripura occupies unchanging historical space since antiquity. Tripura as always already identifiable, bounded, fixed place which allow ready conceptualisation of expansion, contraction of territory and, entry and extrusion of communities. Within this narrative of place, two political ideologies can be mapped: Tripuri ethno-nationalist idea of Tripura as always a place of Tripuris and other hill/indigenous communities; and Bengalee-Hindu idea of Tripura as a home of tribal and non tribal This study would treat the latter as state-sponsored or state-sanctioned idea of Tripura.

12 To say that only the Bengalee-Hindu idea of home is sanctioned by the state is a bias interpretation. My reason for doing so stems from the fact that since 1949 Tripura state has outlawed Bengalee-Muslims and Tripuri ethno-nationalists idea of Tripura. This subject will be elaborated in chapter four.
These fundamentally flawed spatial ideologies can be implicated in the framing of violent political confrontation in modern Tripura in particular, and the entire region in general. This spatial ideology makes possible retrofitting of radically different modern places onto premodern geographical realities, and thereby construct a history of migration or ‘entry’ of various communities carrying their already produced portable identities with them. The passages below encapsulate this problem: place-names ‘Tripura’ and ‘Mizoram’ are imagined to be geographical realities even prior to appropriation and production of that space. This way of imagining and narrating place/identity, is not only implicit in closure, but also posits their ‘givenness’.

The political history of the Riangs had been always chequered and eventful and related to that of neighbouring tribes particularly to the Tipras and the Mogs. The Tipras were once powerful in Brahmaputra valley of Assam. Owing to inter-tribal conflict they left Assam, moved south ward and through Cachar-Karimganj-Sylhet entered, in course of time, into Tripura. That was probably in the 8th-9th centuries. Similarly, the Riangs were once powerful in the hill tracts of Chittagong. Being defeated by the Mogs, they migrated north-west ward and entered into Tripura probably by the 9th-10th centuries (all emphasis are mine).

In the beginning, they (the Riangs) were not well treated by the then Tripura Raja and most of them were forced to flee to deep forests, not only in the hill areas of Tripura, but also in the adjoining areas of Mizoram.

Modern states divide hill communities into ‘tribes’ and once this classification obtains official sanction, the ‘tribes’ are imagined as entering an eternally fixed

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13 This way of imagining place is responsible for conflict, violence and territorial parochialism. Doreen Massey, in much of her work, emphasised the ‘openness’ of place and identity, for example see For Space, Sage: London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, 2005, pp.4-9.
15 A Brief Account of Riangs in Mizoram, Tribal Research Institute, Department of Education, Mizoram, Aizawl, pp.84-85 (1986).
geographical entity from some place. But this disaggregation is not without problem. Nor is the imagination of \textit{Tripura} as inhabiting continuous space. In the premodern spatial arrangement, where place \textit{Tipperah} constituted \textit{mobility} borderless and even disappearance, how do we conceptualise entry? Modern ethno-nationalist in the region, retrofit these modern geographical grids onto premodern spatial frames making possible for imagining \textit{entry} and thereby produce the \textit{other}.

The problem with classification of hill communities into \textit{tribes} is this: It makes identities as given. This \textit{givenness} of identity becomes the framework from which to proceed defining, appropriating, controlling and locating at the lower end of spatial-temporal graph. None of these identities enumerated by modern state constitute meaningful reference, say prior to colonisation. The identity \textit{Tripuri} is fraught with contestation, so much so that, ethno-nationalist groups constructed a new identity \textit{Borok} to include entire kokborok or kaubru speaking population of the state.\textsuperscript{16}

This unproblematised conception of place and identity impinges on the way the region has been studied. It makes straight story telling possible. Inevitably, every narrative of the region follows this paradigm: entry (from some place) - encounter (with other \textit{tribes} and later British) - colonisation - struggle (against Indian Nation-State) - state formation. Place therefore, is conceptualising as something \textit{given} its relationship to the identity is natural.

In a recent study of Naga identity formation, Yhome tried to offer a new perspective of place. He argued that, place-making in the region, on the colonial context, mapping

\textsuperscript{16} During the late 1990s numerous groups appeared who used word \textit{Borok} instead of \textit{Tripuri}. Some of them are, Borok Peoples\textregistered Human Right Organisation, Borok Women Forum, Borok Mothers\textregistered Association. Kokborok is the language spoken by various Tripuri communities.
of spaces into places constructed many place identity in the region. For example, places such as Assam, Cachar, Manipur, Burma, Tripura, Bhutan and Tibet were all constructed through the colonial spatial imagination in the last two centuries. These places with distinct place names and boundaries did not exist prior to colonial mapping. Rather, there were many kingdoms and independent communities inhabiting these areas without clear demarcation of boundaries between them. Gradually colonial mapping of spaces constructed these place identities by naming them in the colonial map and gradually by demarcating specific boundaries.¹⁷

Imagined this way, modern spatial arrangement is inevitably and inherently articulated as contested, from without and within. My only problem with his formulation is this: he did not distinguish place formation in the hills and in the valleys. The geographical conditions and the historical context of the mapping of place identities of formerly premodern states like Tripura or Manipur or Assam were very dissimilar to the modern places like Nagaland and Mizoram. These precolonial states were characterized by existence of already identifiable political centre, whereas the hills constituted classic Zomia space.¹⁸ To talk of mapping of Tripura and mapping of Mizoram or Nagaland as similar would mistake the nature of space in the two cases. Tripura was already an identifiable place – a named-place in the colonial map, albeit an open place.

¹⁸ The term Zomia has been used by James C Scott (originally coined by Willem Van Schendel) to describe a political space or geography illegible to state-making. Zomia may also be conceptualised as a space or zone of refuge for state escaping communities. The obverse effect of state-making is the theme of his recent much acclaimed book. See James C Scott. 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of the Upland South East Asia*, Yale University Press: New Haven and London, pp.1-39.
This study conceptualises precolonial Tipperah\textsuperscript{19} (elaborated in chapter two) as a moving place—an identifiable stable political centre (not necessarily stable dynasty) without an identifiable, fixed geography, constantly shifting would-be state. One can visualise the impediments confronting would-be state-making people inhabiting an inhospitable geography or what Scott calls \textit{friction of terrain} designed to thwart such attempt.\textsuperscript{20} I have in mind what Scott calls \textit{state-preventing} and \textit{state-repelling} characteristics.\textsuperscript{21} This would explain the numerous ruins attributed to Tipperas scattered around valleys, river banks and foothills on the present borderlands with Bangladesh. Tripuri ethno-nationalists and Bengalee historians (of Tripura) would summon and use the extant \textit{ruins} to project a mighty, expansive and a glorious past. These extant \textit{ruins} can also be read against it, as proofs of state-failure, rather than successful state-making.

Precolonial Tipperah therefore constituted an identifiable place, albeit moving, open and a non-geographical bloc. Colonial enterprise disjuncted that indigenous spatial frames and established a territoriality legible to imperial ideology. However, discourse of Tripura as contested home-space—a distinct epistemology of place—appeared only after the dissolution of British-India. Therefore, the idea of Tripura as home of a specific community or particular idea of people is not given. The

\textsuperscript{19} I will use the spelling \textit{Tipperah} to refer to the precolonial and colonial Tripura. The spelling \textit{Tippera} refers to the hill communities who are subject of Tipperah state. The identity \textit{Tippera} will be conceptualized in chapter II.

\textsuperscript{20} The term \textit{friction of terrain} is used by James C Scott to refer to the difficulties imposed by geography on the state-making enterprise in premodern societies, \textit{The Art of Not Being Governed}, pp. xi and 40-63.

\textsuperscript{21} According to Scott, these two are related but not identical. State-repelling traits are those that make it difficult for a state to capture or incorporate and rule it, or to systematically appropriate its material production. State-preventing traits, on the other hand, are those that make it unlikely that a group will develop internally durable, hierarchical, state-like structures. For a list of example of these traits see \textit{The Art of Not Being Governed}, pp. 278-9.
connection between that idea of ‘people’ and the physical geography needs to be produced. The question then is: how is that connection produced?

Situating the study: The questions of space

Foucault’s opening paragraph in his seminal essay, ‘Of Other Spaces,’ locates the shift or the emergence of space as important analytical concept in our understanding of social realities.

The great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history. The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at the moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein. One can perhaps say that certain ideological conflicts animating present-day polemics opposes the pious descendants of time and the determined inhabitants of space.22

He further asserts that ‘his epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of relation among sites’ The problem of site is not simply that of knowing whether there will be enough space for man in the world but also of knowing what relations of propinquity, what type of storage, circulation, marking and classification of human elements would be adopted in a given situation in order to achieve given end. The anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time.23

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23 Ibid.
Foucault found the 'obsession' with time deeply problematic, and one that has been responsible for the treatment of space as, the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile and time as 'richness, fecundity, life, dialectic.' Like Foucault, Henri Lefebvre found treatment of space as 'undialectical' problematic. At the heart of Lefebvre's project, in his path breaking work, *The Production of Space*, is to bring to the centre the inherent 'spatiality' of human lives, together with 'historicality' and 'sociality.' These two thinkers, particularly Lefebvre, have been responsible for the spatial turn in social sciences, and in the words of Soja, opening up and exploring the limitless dimensions of our social spatiality.

Space is not merely a 'container' where events unfold in time. Space is not merely the physical surface of the earth, continuous and given. This view of space, according to Doreen Massey is an 'unthought cosmology which carries with it social and political effects.' Before inhabiting a space, it must be appropriated in order to be lived. As Lefebvre opines, 'each living body is space and has its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space.' As the epigraph tellingly suggest: each new spatial formation must produce its own space, new discourse of people, things and space.

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27 Doreen Massey, *For Space*, p.4.
Space and place, like space and time, cannot be conceptualised separately. If space is the flow, place is the pause.\textsuperscript{29} The act of appropriating space through naming, partitioning etc produces place. Place indicates appropriation of space for certain use. Therefore, place is not pre-ideological site. Place also acquires meaning only in relation or opposition to other place. As Ingold puts it, ‘life on the spot surely cannot yield an experience of place, of being somewhere. To be a place, every somewhere must lie on one or several paths of movement to and from places elsewhere.’\textsuperscript{30} Imagining a closed and individual place becomes possible only in relation or opposition to similar places. Place is, therefore, an attempt to capture space and produce a site in place of extension or flow.\textsuperscript{31} Naming, mapping and fixing of people into colonially constructed places in the present day northeast India region was predicated on the ideology of replacing the mobile spaces with sites of colonial controlled spaces.

Place therefore is a social construct. It is ‘where one is known and knows others.’\textsuperscript{32}

Construction of place is always political. As Lefebvre argued, there is politics of space because space is political, and Foucault asserted that ‘(a) critique could be carried out of this devaluation of space that has prevailed for generations.’\textsuperscript{33} For those who confuse history with the old schemes of evolution, living continuity, organic development, progress of consciousness or the project of existence, the use of spatial terms seems to have the air of an anti-history\textsuperscript{34} they did not understand that to trace

\textsuperscript{29} This distinction has been elaborated by Yi-Fu Tuan. He writes, ‘space allows movement, place is a pause, each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into places.’ Yi-Fu Tuan. 1977. Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience, Edward Arnold (pub) Ltd: London, p. 6


\textsuperscript{31} Foucault emphasised on how medieval spaces of emplacement was dislodged by the spaces of extension and which was substituted by localization or siting, see Of other Spaces, op.cit.

the forms of implantation, delimitation and demarcation of objects, the modes of tabulation, the organisation of domains meant the throwing into relief process of historical ones, needless to say of power. Collective identities are not always based on commonness of language, culture and race; they are also constructed or produced through ideas about space and place. The fabric (and the fabrication) is not only culture, but also geography and history.

The exclusive treatment of history, privileges time over space, when both space and time are basic categories of human existence. This over emphasis on time was categorised by Soja as 'space-blinkered historicism'. Soja argued that the spatiality of social life is life-world of being creatively located, not only in the making of history, but also in the construction of human geographies, the social production of space and the restless formation and reformation of geographical landscapes; social beings actively emplaced in space and time in an explicitly historical and geographical contextualisation. Therefore, this study recognises the importance of space and time in the construction of identity, as Foucault contended that, space is fundamental to any form of communal life; space is fundamental to any exercise of power.

Taken together, these insights suggest that space is socially produced. They opened up new ways of studying social realities. In the next section, I will present an outline of

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33 Michel Foucault. *Power/Knowledge*, p.70.
36 Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, p.11.
37 Ibid.
the implications of these insights for the literature on place and identity, especially those which are relevant for this dissertation. I will then explain the departures taken in this study.

A Review of Literature

The importance of space and place in the construction of identity and difference has been explored by prominent thinkers on space. The reference point among them is the shared-notion that place is a construct: the construction of place through the production of meaning and, embedded within this notion is the relation between identity and place. As David Harvey says,

Place identity, in this collage of superimposed spatial images that implode upon us, becomes an important issue, because everyone occupies a space of individuation (a body, a room, a home, a shaping community, a nation), and how we individuate ourselves shapes identity.

Harvey’s attention centres on the nature of place within the global capitalism—the shifting collage world (control over space). Place-bound identity, in the form of personal or collective identity as a search for secure moorings in the shifting world, because they are disempowered (by universalising capitalism) from organising space. Thus the capacity of most social movements to command place better than space puts a strong emphasis upon the potential connection between place and social identity.

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40 David Harvey, The Condition of Postmodernity, pp.302-6.

41 Ibid.
Doreen Massey summarised Harvey’s idea this way: the growing mobility and internationalisation of these times make our old notion of places as settled, coherent communities more difficult to sustain but the very fact of heightened spatial mobility and the feeling which he sees as a product of it that we live in an increasingly unstable and uncertain world, also makes us need even more strongly of the notion of place as secure and stable. 42 Massey on the contrary, views place as opened and interdependent. The idea of places as essentially open and porous as interlinked flows from Massey’s refusal of collective identity as oppositional differentiation based on hard boundary. Place identities are always already the product, in part, of long history, of connections with the beyond, with other places. They are always already hybrid places. 43

Massey further argues that, physical boundaries that separate places (of nations and other territorial entity) do not embody eternal truth of places. These lines are drawn by society to serve particular purposes. Secondly, these physical boundaries inevitably cut across some of the other social relations which construct social places. The places they enclose are not pure. They gain, and have gained, their character by links with elsewhere. Thirdly, boundaries are merely one of the ways of organising social space. Immense efforts are invested in constructing a sense of identity within the bordered place. They are part of the process of place-making. 44

Unlike Harvey and Massey, Gilian Rose traces the connection, between place and notion of identity, through the concept of a sense of place. The concept is sense of

43 Ibid, pp.66-67
44 Ibid, pp.67-69
place in geography is used to indicate place as locus of personal feelings, infused with meanings. The connection embodies three aspects: one, the sense of belonging which can be at the level of home, local, regional, nation etc.; two, relational, in relation to other place and other identities; and exclusive, contrasting or rejecting alien place.

In a sense, then, there is always a connection between identity and place. This study agrees that places should be conceptualised as always open, porous and interlinked. Both place and identity are socially produced. The question is: how do we explain the production of idea of absolute/closed places? The idea of Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, Assam or Tripura, around which modern politics of identity is constructed, becomes possible through disjunction of premodern indigenous spaces (open, fluid and porous). The technologies of disjunction were colonial cartography and western geographical knowledge. These discursively constructed absolute/closed places (despite they being opened and interlined) are social realities that impinges the way identity politics is shaped. When did these colonially named-places become sites of modern identity? This study traces this history and locates the political in the production of this connection.

Further more, in these literatures, while both identity and place are conceptualised as socially constructed, the connection between the two is treated as unproblematic. The question, then, is: Is this connection given? How do we conceptualise place-bound

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46 Gillian Rose, Place and Identity: A Sense of Place, p. 89-97.
identity in the postcolonial places? The literatures reviewed below treat the relationship between identity and place as produced or constructed?

Satish Deshpande, in his study of the Indian nation, had argued that if the post-Anderson literature on the nation-form has concentrated on how nations are collectively imagined, the assertion of space in critical social theory has led us to realise that even such a physical phenomenon as space is not natural but is socially produced. His contention is that an identifiable territory is not a sufficient condition for the birth of a nation. Nations takes shape only when an abstract ideological terrain and a concrete territory can be cross-mapped onto each other to produce a sense of nation-ness that large numbers of people share and believe in.

Deshpande's argument proceeds from the understanding that nation-as-space is simultaneously abstract (imagined, mental) and concrete (physical, geographical) and that nation is imagined into existence when these contrary aspects are successfully linked. This link is not pre-given, it must be painstakingly constructed. The technology of producing this link he calls spatial strategy. The implication of these insights for this study lies in the insistence that a territorial identity is imagined into existence only when an idea of it and the physical geography is cross-mapped onto each other. To give an example of this, he cites Benedict Anderson's analysis of how map becomes a logo, a sign of nation, rather than as a compass to the


49 His focus is on the spatial strategies of the *Hindutva* (the right wing Hindu nationalist imagination of the Indian nation). He identifies three Hindutva spatial strategies which are based on sacred sites (places of essence), neighbourhood (our people, our area) and procession and pilgrimage (yatras), see the chapter on *Hindutva and its Spatial Strategies* pp.74-97.
world. Though Deshpande’s study is at the scale of nation, it can be useful for study of identity at smaller scale, since the primary investigation being a territorial identity or a spatial ideology.

Another study which had a strong influence on the present study is Thongchai Winichakul’s book *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*. This brilliant study explores the emergence of a new territorial entity by examining the influence of modern mapping techniques on Thai conception of nationhood. The discourse of Thai as a nation becomes possible through new knowledge of geography and new technology of mapping. These new technology and knowledge were responsible for the disruption of premodern indigenous geography or overlapping or multiple sovereignties and emergence of a mapped geo-body of a nation.

In a nutshell then, it is the technology of map which produced the nation, not the other way around. Thai nation was not prior to the operation of technology of territoriality which created nationhood spatially. The nation then is an effect of modern geographical discourse whose prime technology is a map. The knowledge about Siamese nationhood has been created by our conception of Siam-on-the-map,

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50 Deshpande writes in the construction of the nation as a special kind of imagined space, the historical (or more accurately historicised) map is followed by what Benedict Anderson has called the second avatar of the map, the map-as-logo. Among the significant method which enabled the linking of a particular physical geography to a specific imagined community as its homeland, the logo map was given a major boost by new print technology which enabled its cheap mass production, allowing its function as pure sign (or symbol) rather than as compass to the world. Satish Deshpande, *Contemporary India*, p.76.

51 He defines geo-body this way, geographically speaking, the geo-body of the nation occupies a certain portion of the earth’s surface which is objectively identifiable. It appears to be concrete to the eyes as if its existence does not depend on any act of imagining. That of course, is not the case. The geo-body of a nation is merely effect of modern geographical discourse whose prime technology is map. Geo-body is not merely a space or territory. It is the component of the life of a nation. It is the source of pride, loyalty, love, passion, bias, hatred, reason, unreason. *Siam Mapped*, p.7

52 Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*, p.16.
emerging from maps and existing nowhere apart from the map. The map as a special technology produces link between a territorial entity and a őwe-peopleő

This way of understanding a territorial entity (even at geographical scale smaller than nation) has enormous implication for understanding identity politics in the northeast region in general and the present case study in particular. Much of the modern territorial entity in the region were/are product of colonial cartographic surgery. Colonial power mapped and produced places and fixed communities within these geographical grids. These spatial grids allowed operation of colonial power as legible geographies. In the postcolonial period, these places were summoned in the construction of modern ethnic identities. Therefore modern identity politics in the region cannot be understood unless one addresses this history ř the mapping of places. This history will also enable a critique of the link produced between modern identity and place.

Both Deshpande and (especially) Winichakul’s analysis of the production of link between identity and place/nation have enormous implication for this study. There are however a few differences between their analysis and this study. These two studies, particularly Winichakul’s, do not recognise the ambivalence of cartography in the narration of nation. Cartography can also be used against the narration of particular nation or in the words of Mathew Sparke, řthe paradoxical capacity of such cartography to function variously for and against the exercise of modern state power. Sparke’s contention is that scholars (like Benedict Anderson) emphasised

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53 Ibid, p.17.  
on the general *hegemonic* effect of national mapping, they have rarely addressed the *counterhegemonic* effect of cartographic negotiation.\(^{55}\) This study investigates the production of both the hegemonic and counter hegemonic ideas of a mapped place. In the narration of modern Tripura as a homeland, modern identity groups not only use the colonial maps, but also summon other geographies and spaces in the production of the link. These other geographies and spaces, investigated here, are sacred sites, toponymies and places of memory.

For the study of sacred sites, I am indebted to Satish Deshpande’s analysis of, what he calls, *places of essence*. His concern underlies how certain sacred places (e.g. birth place of Ram) are used in the imagination of Hindutva or the narration of Indian nation by right wing Neo-Hindu nationalist. These sacred places are sacred to a particular religion, and therefore religious sites. The sacred places in my study are ethnicised sites. No doubt some of the sacred places owe their origin to Indian sacred cosmography, but these places gain sacredness only in relation to production of homeland by an ethnic group. I argue that a place invested as sacred by ethnic group is an ethnicised site.

**A Brief History of Mapping of Tripura**

Discourse of identity is also discourse of history and geography. For construction of identity involves construction of history and place.\(^{56}\) It must always lay claim to a past

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\(^{55}\) Ibid.

or reconstructed past in order to construct ‘we self’ and the ‘other’ in the present.\(^57\)

Therefore history becomes a site for ideological investments and contestation. In Tripura two different modes of historiography exist: the state sponsored history and the Tripuri ethno-nationalist history. The former is the official history of Tripura, presented as the ‘correct’ and ‘true’ history, as provided in the chronicles of Manikya rulers; the later, contest much of the claims and conclusion made in the official history.\(^58\) Central to the two modes of history is that the former presents the place as original home of both Bengalees and Tripuris and other smaller communities, while the latter treats Bengalees as ‘immigrants’ and ‘refugees’ from Bangladesh. However, both agree to the fact that Tripura as a place have existed since time immemorial, the testimony of which is the list of 184 Tripuri kings who have ruled Tripura since ancient times.

This study tries to escape such simplistic view of history. ‘Home’, ‘Bengalee’, ‘Tripuri’, and ‘refugee’ are meaningful only within certain frame of understanding of place. Within the two modes of history lies practice of projecting modern frames onto ancient past. This study takes modern Tripura as a construct, a product of colonial cartography and spatial practice. One important objective of this study consists in challenging these two modes of history.

Tripura’s modern boundaries are product of British-India colonial cartography. Imperial project required imposition of modern spaces. Present day northeast India in general, and Tripura in particular, was a mere ‘blank space’ on the margins of the


\(^{58}\) Both the modes of history draw from Rajmala (the chronicle of Manikya dynasty), the writing of which began during the reign of Dharma Manikya in the mid 15\(^{th}\) Century.
British-India’s imperial map. The need for colonial annexation and exploitation required mapping the region. Mapping legitimates possession, exclusion, and control. In the early nineteenth century colonial cartographers began filling up these blank spaces in their imperial (project) map. What appeared then were colonial inscribed demarcated places like Garo Hills, Jaintia Hills, Khasi Hills, Lushai Hills etc seeming to show the isomorphism between demarcated space and the cultural affinity of the people. In the postcolonial period these colonial demarcated spaces became the basis for construction of exclusive modern identities.

Colonial demarcations of spaces are expression of imperial power towards imperial project of control exclusion and exploitation. The imperial cartography which displaced the indigenous lived and shared spaces in these formerly blank spaces served this particular project. For maps do not represent reality; they construct a reality. And they serve the power which benefits by that reality. Maps are not disinterested depiction of their spatial subjects but are partisan assertion about the nature of space, deployed to subject space to particular political interest. The emergence of colonial demarcated spaces imposed the colonial power’s representation of the blank spaces. Therefore what was displaced was the indigenous conception and practice of space.

Knowledge of cartography was unknown to the Tipperah rulers. The geography of its dominion and its frontier regions were unmapped, open spaces of mobility. The

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59 Garo, Khasi and Jaintia are three prominent communities in present day Meghalaya state. Each of these communities dominant the hills named after tribe names in Meghalaya, while simultaneously inhabiting places in Assam, Bangladesh and Tripura. The Lushai hill is presently known as Mizoram of State. In this study the terms Lushai, Kookie and Kuki will be used interchangeably.

failure to inscribe its political power over the geography of the region through technology of cartography, maps and other forms of text created enormous problems for the dynasty when confronted with the British over the ownership of the frontier regions.

Much of the frontier region of the present day Tripura and Bangladesh was an ambiguous margin between the Mughal rulers and Tipperah. When British-India took over the territories from the former Nawab of Bengal in 1761, it inherited a problematic region where notion of sovereignty, territoriality and boundary needed redefinition and imposition to legitimate its colonial rule. It is to be noted that the Muslims occupation could not or did not move beyond the plains into the hill tracts, perhaps for the reason that the hills were seen as non remunerative. Tipperah rulers paid tributes to the Nawab of Bengal for four compact blocks, known as Chakla Roshnabad: one in Sylhet District, two in the region termed by the British as Tipperah district and one in Noakhali district. These four blocks were seized by the Nawab of Bengal in 1620 from the Tipperah ruler and since then Tipperah had to pay Zamindary to the Nawab of Bengal. The British renamed it as Chakla Roshnabad Estate. Unlike their Muslim predecessors, British were not satisfied with income generated form the small portion of plain land. It coveted the fertile valleys at the foot hills and the river valleys flowing from the hill, most importantly, control of tax over the remunerative trade in the foot hills. Consequently Manikya dynasty and British-India came into confrontation over control of rivers and fertile valleys and markets leading to boundary disputes for over a century.

When British-India took over this frontier region, old boundary between the Mughals and Tipperah were slowly altered and a new boundary was imposed which defined the limits of control of now called Hill Tipperah by the British and Independent Tipperah by Tipperah Rajah. The use of Independent Tipperah and British Tipperah to separate the British held territories from Tipperah Rajah territory. Independent Tipperah referred to the Tipperah Hill and British Tipperah referred to the plain Tipperah Initially Tipperah rulers did not agree to British’s request for a settled and marked boundary between the newly defined geographical entities. For the Tipperah rulers, more than geographical, social boundary between settled agrarian and moving communities of the hills was the fundamental distinction between its subjects and non subjects (elaborated in chapter two).

The geography of the frontier region between the present day Northeast and Bangladesh consisted of ambivalent margins. The Khasis held most land north of the Surma (river) and controlled mountains above; Jaintias controlled mountains and lowlands north and east of Sylhet town; Cacharis held the lower Barak (river) valley; and Tipperah Rajah controlled southern upland and the adjacent plains. In the low lands, the English increased taxation as much as they could, but the district remained poor revenue territory. By the beginning of 1780, a combined enterprise of British and Bengalee merchants and zamindars and farmers were pushing the Khasis and Jaintias farther into hills and occupying the plain regions. The territory between Hill Tipperah and the British East Bengal also underwent significant transformation from 1800 A D. According to Cumming, Rennell’s Map of 1779, shows that the estate was

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coterminal with what was the original ‘Tipperah District’ the under control of British-India. When the boundaries were altered parts of the then districts of Dacca and Mymensingh were included. The map made no distinction between the plains and hill Tipperah. However, the 1835 map of the region by Rushon show the estate to be entirely included within the then district of Tipperah, which extended widely on the east.\(^{63}\) The separation of the estate from hill Tipperah on the east was effected by the map of 1835. In 1854 the boundary between Hill Tipperah and British Tipperah was demarcated. The division of former Tipperah Raja’s territory into Hill Tipperah and British Tipperah was done on the basis of Lt. Fisher’s Line drawn on the ambiguous margin in 1819-21.

The Fisher line, drawn in 1921 to demarcate the boundary between British-India controlled territories known as ‘British Tipperah’ and ‘Independent Tipperah’ was the beginning of cartographic construction of modern Tripura. Fisher Line which became the reference point, albeit contested, of later boundary disputes between Tipperah rulers and British-India, posited that ‘Independent Tipperah’ merely consisted of the hills alone, now called as ‘Hill Tipperah’. A marked border on ambiguous and ambivalent frontier geography was resisted by various ‘warlike, savage’ tribes inhabiting this frontier region. Kookies or Lushais and other tribes who recognised neither the rule of the Tipperah Rajas nor the British-India raided British-India controlled territories. Tipperah rulers refused to control the raids as the state possessed neither the means control the Kookies nor did the Kookies acknowledge Tipperah rulers overlordship over them. After numerous expeditions against the Kookies, British-India drew another arbitrary boundary to separate Lushai hills and

\(^{63}\) J G Cumming, op. cit.
Tipperah hills, and ordered the Tipperah raja to secure this particular boundary. The present day Tripura is colonial cartographic constructed place produced out of borderless space in an ambiguous frontier region of the British-India Empire.

Much of the modern boundaries of the northeast region of India were marked, in similar manner, during British-India colonialism. Place-names, such as, Khasi hills, Garo hills and Jaintia hills, Tipperah hills, Naga hills, Cachar hills, Lushai hills etcé were defined, inscribed and bounded by the colonial power. Colonialism, the possibility of exploitation is contingent upon production of an archive of knowledge about people and place. Geographical knowledge and the technology of mapping produced mapped places which makes possible possession, exclusion, inclusion and control. Fixing and containing communities into rigid geographical blocks provided colonial power with the knowledge of the region and thereby control over it. The new territorial boundaries and what contained within them became co-constitutive, isomorphic and naturalised the connection between identity and place. Maps did not simply produced borders; it ethnicised these borders by disjuncting indigenous spatial arrangement.

Methodology

The problem of this study 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 ōwe-selfō 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 ō 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 ÐTripuraÐ 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.

This study understands the term ÒdiscourseÓ as defined by Michel Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. He defined discourse as Ôa group of statement in so far as they belong to the same discursive formationÓ. Discourse is a way of representing or producing knowledge through language/text. It determines what can be legitimately said and what constitutes a meaningful statement. This study would consider discourse as a group of texts, spoken or written, symbols or signs that constitute meaning and contributes to a Òdiscursive formationÓ. When a discourse is manifested and found in institutions and practices (including language) it can be called a discursive formation. Though I employ the term ÒdiscourseÓ this study should not be seen as an attempt at Foucauldian analysis of identity and place. My attempt here is to conceptualise ÒhomelandÓ as a discursive space and thereby offer a spatial perspective to identity politics.

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

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65 Ibid.
66 Discourse analysis has been defined as a method of analysing spoken or written communications as Òsocial practiceÓ. Its primary objective is to analyse how a text version is designed to compete with one
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 informs the choice of methodology. I will examine the discourse about ‘place’ its history and geography, and how they are contested by identity groups in Tripura. I will also examine the spaces that produce such discourse, the role of state in imposing certain notion of space to the displacement of the ‘other’. The strategy would be to analyse the premodern and modern discourses about the geography and history of Tripura. It traces the emergence of modern colonial borders and boundaries on the frontier or margin of the British-India leading to conflict and displacement of premodern indigenous spaces and the production of modern mapped Tripura. This shift in conception of space also entailed shift in conception of collective identity.

The emergence of Tripura as a modern state within the postcolonial spatial formation required a new discourse about geography and history of Tripura: new discourse about things and people within this new mapped space. This new discourse about Tripura is challenged by the rise of Tripuri ethno-nationalist groups whose discourse of Tripuri identity consists in reinterpretation of history and geography of Tripura, particularly the colonially demarcated borders of Tripura.

This study therefore, employs discourse analysis at two different junctures: First, when the discourse of premodern indigenous spaces collide, conflict and are displaced by the discourse of colonial spaces; second, when the state sponsored, what this study will term as ‘official’ notion of Tripura is contested and challenged by the Tripuri

ethno-nationalist groups. These competing discourses of Tripura can occur in the interpretation of monuments, archaeological sites, contested place-names, observation of historical events, and of course, in the debate about the 'margin': the boundary where the imagined dichotomous spaces collide and overlap.

In order to subject the assumed historical continuity and given relationship between space, place, and identity since antiquity, one must interrogate the disjunction between premodern indigenous space and the modern. This will make possible for a very different perspective of history and geography of Tripura, and thereby provide a framework from which to challenge the present discourses of identity politics. The strategy of this study, then, is to analyse the history of premodern and modern spatial organisation: the displacement of premodern indigenous space and the imposition of modern space. Central to the study is how modern colonial map making produced rigid discontinuous place, the boundary of which is contested in the making of modern political identities in Tripura.

Written texts constitute the most important data for this study. However, other forms of texts (such as oral, transcripts of conversation or interviews and symbolic landscapes) are used or relied upon. I used three kinds of written texts. First, I relied on chronicles of former ruling dynasty, reports on administration; second, maps and documents of border demarcation and; third, postcolonial documents. The first category of texts include precolonial documents of Manikya dynasty of Tripura and Tai-Ahom dynasty of present day Assam and early colonial writings in order to understand the precolonial indigenous space and place making. In the second category, this study used colonial documents on border agreements and disputes and
letters between the British-India and former rulers of Tipperah (Tripura) to locate the historical and geographical context of the construction of place-bound identities and Tripura. Finally, I relied on pamphlets, leaflets, articles, memorandums and websites of the ethno-nationalist groups to identify how this constructed place was/is imagined and defined and how the colonial borders are appropriated in the discourses on identity. In the fourth and (particularly) fifth chapter, I used Tripuri oral histories and interviews (in the form of conversations) with ethno-nationalist to clarify certain points.

I used the first category of text to re-conceptualize precolonial indigenous space. The second category of texts is used to analyse the conflict of indigenous spatial arrangement and colonial spatial order. Finally, from the third category of written texts I tried to reconstruct the contested narration and different versions of place/identity in Tripura.

Data collection was carried out in various archives and libraries. Some of which are Tribal Research Institute and Museum (Agartala), Tripura Legislative Assembly library, Tripura University library, Indian Council of Social Science Research (Northeast Region), Nehru Memorial Library. For historical documents on Tripura I relied on the compiled publications by Twipra Historical Society. As part of my field research I conducted interviews (in the form of conversation) with Tripuri ethno-nationalists. A small part of my arguments in chapter 4 and 5 were drawn from conversations with individuals I met on my visit to various places of memory – cemetery/crematorium of Rajas of Tripura and memorials/monuments).
This study used the term `Tripuri' to denote various indigenous tribes inhabiting colonially demarcated `Independent Tipperah'. This is done with full acknowledgement of the fact that Tripuri is a contested identity: not all indigenous communities use this term to identify themselves. Despite this limitation, I used the term `Tripuri' to juxtapose against the identity `Bengalee-Hindu' since every indigenous tribe view the Bengalees as `outsider' and since one of the most durable criteria of division of collective identity have been `hills people'(denoting the various tribes) and `plains people'(denoting the Bengalies). I also used the state sponsored or official discourse and Bengalee's discourse of history and geography of Tripura as synonymous.

The Chapters

The study consists of five chapters. 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 will provide an overview of premodern indigenous space in the region: the history and geography of the region before colonisation by British-India. It seeks 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 will attempt to reconstruct precolonial spatial arrangement and carry out a different
reading of geography i a reading which will be used to problematise the prevailing ideas of Tripura.

The third chapter will discuss 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 will argue 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 will look 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’.

By now it is apparent that this study inhabits the borderlands of academic boundaries. To explore questions of space, place and identity one must inevitably rely on inter-disciplinary approach. In order to understand when identity actually becomes ‘political’ I have strayed into fields such as geography, history and cultural anthropology. Drawing from diverse disciplines and diverse methodological approaches I have attempted to carry out a critical reading of modern ideas of homeland. In this sense my approach is eclectic, directed towards singular project of critical reading of modern geographies of place and identity.