CONCLUSION

BEYOND TERRITORIALITY AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

Questions of history, ethnicity and territoriality are central to the contemporary collective political mobilisation in the North-East of India. There has been a significant orientation towards a politics based solely on ethnic exclusivity. There is an overrepresentation of ethnic and communitarian politics, yet the causes of this politics remain largely unexplored. For instance, the role of the state in promoting ethnicity as the sole vocabulary of social, cultural and political articulation is not examined. Likewise, the constructed – social, cultural, political – nature of ethnicity is hardly discussed. Often the ‘homogeneity’ of the territoriality of the North-East is taken for granted. Rarely do we interrogate this ‘unified’ region from a historical perspective – how this territory came to exist, how has it been sustained and the ways in which this territory has been continually produced. The ethnic boundaries are often perceived to be well demarcated. Infused with a notion of a definite territoriality for each group, the chances of conflict and contestations amongst the groups are heightened by claims to historicity. The colonial texts have become a major source for claims and counter-claims. The issues of ethnicity and territoriality have been so inextricably linked in these identity formations in the region that articulating other forms of collectivity seems to be an almost impossible task. Sharp ethnic differentiation often takes recourse to colonial practices of classification. The stereotypical portrayal of the division between the hill and valley dwellers in colonial writings takes dangerous twists in contemporary politics.

The overall connecting theme in these chapters is about imperialist expansion, war and violence, in relation to the questions of territory and identity formations. The discussion focuses on an analysis of the ways in which space was imagined, represented and constructed through colonial practices. This, of course, leaves aside the question of space as a social construct mediated by socio-economic relationships. An examination of this aspect has not been undertaken here. The crucial linkage between capitalism and colonialism and its associated ways of territorialisation has been kept in mind while examining key concepts and spatial codes like the frontier. The attempt however is to emphasise on the different practices of space making through colonial processes alongside issues of legitimation or meaning.
making. By focussing on these practices, one can see the inherent tendency of creating uneven spatialisation involved in the practice of territorialisation during colonialism – the distinction between direct administration and indirectly controlled territory; the differentiation between valleys and hills, etc.

It is in this context that the thesis analyses some of the concerns historically. We often fail to realise that ethnic configurations and conflicts on the one hand, and the fetish for territoriality on the other, often stem from such state machinations. By and large, in the historiography on the North-East the first Anglo-Burmese war (1824-26) is understood to have been fought by the British to repulse the threat to British Bengal from the expanding Burmese empire. This is seen as reason enough to conclude that the war was necessitated for the control of the territories lying between the two empires. The relationship between the war and the subsequent transformation of the territories lying between the two empires has hardly been discussed. This has led to take the term North-East of India being perceived as a given natural category both in the colonial and contemporary accounts. I have argued here that there were disparate political entities and corresponding territorialities between the British Indian empire and the Burmese empire till the second decade of the nineteenth century. But the outcome of the first Anglo-Burmese war changed these territories forever. In this sense, the war was an important event in the making of the frontier. The first Anglo-Burmese war is a watershed in many ways. Politically, a territoriality called the north-east frontier was created. With the war, the territoriality of the frontier was produced as a result of which frontier in the sense of an administrative unit as well as the limits of the British Indian empire was created. Recognising the policies and practices of colonialism in which the region was treated as a frontier territory requiring distant yet firm political control, mediated by violence, may help us in understanding the continued legacy of militarism in the region. The precise understanding of the frontier both conceptually as well administratively was never well defined at the time. It fluctuated and multiple meanings were given to it in the later historical period. The beginning of the production of the territoriality of the frontier was facilitated by the opening up of the territory to European military personnel for surveys, explorations and control. The enormous amount of writings generated would soon form the initial identity of the territoriality.
The defeat of the Burmese in the first Anglo-Burmese war, however, did not mean an easy occupation of the areas the British had annexed. The territory now turned into a frontier included large areas that remained outside the political control of any state. In order to control these different political formations, the British followed different strategies in the frontier. Colonial policies, therefore, have to be located within this specific context and the larger considerations which proved to be crucial in the management of colonialism. The colonial officials realised that direct military offensive would not be able to subjugate the population once and for all. To assure them of the ‘good intentionality’ of the colonisers, as a general rule the official were to abstain from any interference in their internal quarrels and feuds. But at the same time making it clear that whilst willing to arbitrate between them, the colonial officials would not fail to inflict prompt and signal punishment on any community which did not restrain its members from committing ‘outrages on British territory’ or giving up any of its members who had been declared guilty of offences. The price for accessing the ‘civilised amenities’ and peace had to be only under the condition of maintaining order as dictated by the colonial officials. This cannot be separated from other larger practices of colonialism in the frontier, wherein violence is the language of command.

While dealing with the ‘wild savages’ on the north-east frontier coercion certainly overshadowed hegemony as a tool of power. The inherent violence in the colonial system was not just the direct physical violence but the subtle modes of coercion that maintained forms of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence. The brutality and violence was direct and physical for the majority of the local population. In such a situation, spectacle occupied the central stage of colonial theatre. A display of power, in the form of ‘superior’ and more efficient techniques of warfare, was a tool of dominance without governance. Establishing political control without the presence of direct governance was the favoured mode of colonial rule. The mobilisation of military forces against the ‘hill tribes, was not merely to execute people or burn villages but also to display the colonial might and inscribe it into popular memory. While ruling the ‘wild savages’ on the north-east frontier, there was a clear policy of using violence in its more explicit and overt display of brutality, which determined the history of colonialism. Despite the rhetoric of a bourgeois ideology for
justifying their project, colonialism in the frontier of the ‘savages’ unfailingly resorted to a much more physical and older motif of power.

This form of colonial rule necessitated an investment in the creation of territorial boundaries. However, modern borders are hardly a criterion to distinguish between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. The contiguous presence of the same group of people on both sides of an arbitrarily marked boundary render them suspect and they pose a permanent threat to the territorial sovereignty of the modern state. In moments when the borderlanders refused to accept the existence of the ‘imaginary’ lines of demarcation, it throws up important questions as to how one looks at the complex processes of negotiation between different regimes of control and notions of territoriality. Some social groups who trace their history to migration, or those who are connected by language, kinship, or culture to peoples across the border become the problematic site of these classifications.

It is important to address the issue of how one engages with the past, with special reference to history and colonialism in the North-East of India. The frequently argued point that colonial knowledge cannot be merely taken as transparent information has problematised the historian’s dependence on using them as sources for writing history. In a context like that of the North-East, where a culture of writing was not prolific, if not completely absent, the dependence on colonial writings for our history writing becomes all the more inevitable. This foregrounding of the ‘lack’ of history explains the enormity and the persistence of the efforts during the colonial period in the production of anthropological knowledge in the frontier. There have been various works which have dwelt on the connection between colonialism and anthropological knowledge. Or, in other words, the production of anthropology as a discipline and its relationship with colonialism. The pertinent point with regard to this relationship is that the production of anthropological knowledge based on an order of classification and differentiation like caste, ethnicity, race, religion, etc. was crucial for colonialism. The discourse of primitivism is implicated within the rising authority of science and racial classifications, closely associated with colonial rule. Racial differences and a discourse of the ‘inferior Other’ marked the dictum of colonial policies. If contemporary history writings use the colonial anthropological knowledge unquestioningly, Anthropology
as a discipline also continues to be the dominant mode of studying the peoples in the North East. In fact, the vocabulary of categorisation and anthropological knowledge seem to have become much stronger, with these colonial categories intersecting with the identity politics of various communities.

The representation of the peoples in the region as inferior in the civilisational scale has prompted various responses. One of the commonly seen approaches is by accepting this logic of differentiation and hierarchy. It is argued that practices like 'head-hunting', 'slavery', etc. in the past are examples of the savage past, before the advent of colonialism and/or missionaries. Another kind of response is the argument, which takes recourse to a long celebratory history before the advent of colonialism in order to disclaim their being characterised as primitive. However, this insistence on the presence of a historical past is grounded on the very assumptions and the tools of history writing, which has created the dichotomy. Or, in other words, rather than critiquing or challenging the dichotomy of 'historical' and 'historyless peoples', it seeks to reaffirm its presence in the precolonial past too.

In order to move beyond this impasse of the relationship between history writing and colonialism, the oral could be used creatively and productively both as a challenge to a preferential treatment of writing and also as a means of engaging with the past for those who did not have a culture of writing. An understanding of the 'founding moment' of the differentiation between the oral and the written would lead us to critically examine the ways in which colonialism has organised this separation. Indegeneity as a self-assertive claim to 'originality of the ex-colonised' has to be critically enquired for its possible 'origins' within colonial ethnographic production of knowledge. The task is to see how colonial power created the conditions and altered the terrain on which classification/self-identification was made. Given this conceptualisation of a history-less people, it is pertinent to interrogate the ways in which social classification became rooted during colonialism.

The attempt is to also raise the question of whether there can be a possibility of writing history of the peoples in the region, which could engage with colonialism without
succumbing to colonial history. Colonial texts are readily used for writing history. Colonial knowledge, with its intermeshing relationship with colonialism and conquest could never claim positions of neutrality and objectivity. It is important to be critically aware of the colonial context within which these texts were produced, circulated and later consumed, and its legacy.

A critical analysis of territoriality allows us to look at it not merely as static and mirroring the natural location but as a reflection and an important element of ideology constructed through historical processes. Sovereignty was now equivalent with the safeguarding of the ‘territory within’. A historicity of territoriality illustrates its intermeshing relationship with the (in)visualisation of a population. Who should or not be taxed, called a legitimate subject of the empire and thus, entitled to the ‘protection’ of the colonial state, was decided by one’s location. Apart from the gargantuan process of counting and classifying the population through the official census, information in the form of revenue ethnography, ethnography miscellany and tribal monograph created the groundwork for forging identities. Identifying, putting people within neat social boundaries, classifying the generic groups in sharp contrast with one another and so on were the methods used to frame identities which were intelligible to the state.

The policy, which advocated personal influence over bureaucratised force, was imagined to bring peace and quieten the ‘warlike savages’ permanently. Whether it is the continued practice of the frontier, which sustained these forms of control or the inability of the British to fully subjugate the people that called for such particular forms of control, is an issue that needs further exploration. However, there is a close relationship between these modes of control and the idea of the frontier as inhabited by ‘uncivilised races’ in mountainous tracts. What is interesting, here, is that the imagery of the people and the place seem to have a close connection, which in turn would shape the policies and the practices of colonialism. The impact of the colonial encounter and the political control that it brought about with various socio-economic changes has had a lasting legacy in turning the area into a frontier or border region. This has become the identity that marks the geo-body of this territory long after the formal conclusion of colonialism and empire.
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