

Narratives Claims and Identity Impasse

The Experiences of the Nowhere People

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*"Each slow turn of the world carries such disinherited
Ones to whom neither the past nor the future belong"*

- The Hungry Tide

The contemporary world is indeed confronted with an ironic and universal condition, where on the one hand increasing standardisation of cultural values released by forces of globalisation perceivably integrate everyone and lead many to believe that "there is now one culture". On the other hand political assertions that emphasise an insular, local cultural difference and ethnic autonomy are acquiring ascendant legitimacy and articulation. Every other group is engaged in a "recovery of its past" that invalidates alleged "hegemonic representations" and empowers the collectivity with a purported identity which is authentically self-referential. Amidst this 'optimism, and scepticism' about the emergence of a global culture and an increasing (re) deployment of cultural consciousness among specific groups, identities are being fashioned and refashioned in a manner that they are often merely a 'simulacrum' that are depleted of the "very symbolic resources necessary for their own ideological authority"². To put it differently, the interaction of globalisation processes with local (traditional) cultures have fashioned a new form of hybridisation that does not follow the linear perspectives of traditional or modern; the traditional cultures have interleaved with commodity forms of exchange and consumer culture to transform their very essence. As such these cultures merely mirror a "staged authenticity" in a world of "ethnicised modernity"⁴.

For this reason, cultural identity has obtained a political and economic value that inspires a need for the continual (re) invention of tradition and cultural pasts. This activation of traditionalism may nevertheless aid the production and recovery of a form of historical consciousness, which culturally may be dispossessed of meaning but is an important political tool, which undeniably assures benefits of participation, is not without tradeoffs. Many countries of the world, developed and the developing, confront a competitive solidarity by ethnic groups that produce images of 'otherness' where ethnic boundaries are politicised in an insular fashion that orchestrates and amplifies political conflicts. In pursuing this (re) production of 'otherness', particular identities liberate a form of cultural politics that interweaves modern codes with traditional forms.

Therefore, we encounter growing explication of *narratives*- "*an account.. .of events experiences etc.*"⁵, that expresses a particular historical consciousness and is intended to 'supply origins to an identity' and facilitate the (re) presentation of an identity. Narratives, aural, oral and written, therefore, have a

foundational role in the construction of group identity or community and form an 'essential part of collective organisation and behaviour'. As such narratives provide us with essential insights into not only the creative genius of a group but furnish us with a repertoire of subjective experiences of the group, what Margaret R. Somers calls "an ontological condition of social life"⁶.

The Northeast region of India is a crucible where reassessment and activation of tradition in the light of these global transformations are being increasingly confronted. The encounter between global processes and discourses with embedded life-forms in a region of concentrated ethnic heterogeneity, have released a form of 'collective determinism' that operates on very strict and complex principles of inclusion and exclusion operated through the contesting concept of 'indigeneity'. Every ethnic group in the region, especially those that derive the legitimacy of their agency from 'indigeneity' is simultaneously engaged in narrativising its past in a fashion that valorises difference and the articulation of collective action that grants political recognition of this difference. The urge for the enunciation of an authentic collective identity by ethnic groups in the region emphasises such strict rules of arbitrariness and selectivity' that groups, which once felt part of an identity, are today articulating a separate and distinctive identity. All these groups are seeking 'recognition' implicitly not only from the 'other', but also more importantly and explicitly from structures and institutions of the state.

The 'recognition' principles are based on the notion of 'indigeneity' and even the state structures, implicitly or explicitly, pursues this principle for obligating social and political claims. This politics of representation pursued by the institutions of the state and the dominant ethnic groups has reinforced and consolidated the exclusive meanings and subjective experiences of the communities around ethnic states and ethnically demarcated territories. As such territories have acquired fixed ethnic connotations where the search for recognition and self-identity by ethnic groups also involves conscious contestations and even erasure of identity-schemes and claims by ethnic others. The resulting lack of cultural understanding, interaction and exchange of mutual respect for and tolerance of cultural differences makes cultural compromise and consensus seem an impossible task in the region. There are increasing restrictions on the emergence of a common space where encounter of different cultural traditions could take place and the diversity celebrated rather than contested. These contestations are ironically the common inescapable reality that diverse cultural traditions of the regions acknowledge and incorporate into their collective strategies and identity-schemes. The strongest foci of all these experiences, therefore, has been the idea of 'indigeneity' through which ethnic groups have structured a self-image of a community that is often contra-distinguished with "settler communities". This self-image is a cascading phenomenon where each ethnic group considers the other as "settler" and as such claims the settled areas as its own heritage. The resulting contestations breeds 'tense, mistrustful, anxiety-haunted society/ies' where even cultural spaces often "become occupied territory".

Meghalaya, called so because the clouds often shade it, is home to numerous ethnic groups, the dominant being the Khasi, Jaintia and the Garos, in deference to whose sense of difference the state was carved out of Assam in 1972. These are the three major 'tribal' groups of the states; besides congeries of Bodos-

Kacharis, Hajongs, Rabhas, Dimasas-Kacharis, Hmars, along with Mikir and a number of Kuki tribes also inhabit the margins of the social and political landscape. The 'others' are a group of 'non-tribes' comprising of the Bengalis, Nepalis, Marwaris and small sections of communities from many parts of India. What we propose to identify, in this presentation, is the existential dilemmas of the "settler Bengali" communities in the state through the analysis of personal narratives and proto-literary texts that expresses the consciousness of a community that finds itself caught in the vortex of an unfolding historical and political riddle.

The community, which had experienced the tremors and travails of a 'visible partition' almost two generations earlier, today considers itself to be experiencing the travails of an 'invisible partition' the critical force of which is their social and political projection as the 'other/settler/outsider'. The commitments made to the 'settlers' by the newly emerging 'tribal' leaders who struggled to 'live according to their own genius' within a state of their own, are perceived to be reneged soon when concerns for ethnic homogeneity and exclusive rights of the indigenous groups became the adopted political idiom. The 'settlers' who came basically in two phases-one group before the partition and the other as victims of a gory partition-are being ever more represented as the adversarial 'other' within the new state. Dominant representations not only place them at the lowest scales of social and political hierarchy and generate perpetuation of social images that identifies them as the 'occupants/outsiders' but also excludes them from being narrators and actors of the new history of the state.

It was just after six years of the creation of the state that Shillong encountered a violent riot between the 'settlers/occupants' and the dominant ethnic groups. A significant section of the Bengali community shifted to "safe places"¹⁰ in successive waves that reduced their visible presence and influence in the new state.

Today the presence of a few "socio-cultural associations and a poorly developed civil society are the only expressions of a collective consciousness, which merely reflects the outlines of a coherent 'community'". Increasingly the 'settlers' perceive a stifling sense of domination and alienation from the larger society, where their social voice and political presence are shaped by the leniency of the dominant groups. Though many members of the community were born and brought up here, they are little aware of their "Bengaliness"-most youngsters not knowing how to even write and speak their mothertongue and, therefore, for all practical purposes removed from the cultural connectedness with the community. However, despite this 'Lack', they are always "Bangalees"-the 'other' and as such their identity becomes what Fanon evoking Sartre would refer to as "identity of their situation". As a consequence the community confronts a double bind, in articulating a coherent identity that expresses their social position as legitimate residents of the state and also recover the dispossession endured, yet without unsettling established power equations the internal logic of which is driven by ethnic hierarchy. More to the point there are no effective socio-political associations that could adopt tools of collective action to alter this purported exclusion from the evolving society. In the event where the community lacks coherency and collective strategies, it is therefore, mostly the individual who through his personal encounters" seeks to

confront and engage the awareness of loss and sense of erasure.

These personal and proto-literary narratives that interpret social transformations undergone by the `community, often begin with "then we were" and "now we are" expressing the contemporary predicaments, feelings and thoughts of the individuals in the light of the social, cultural and historical conditions that the `community confronts. These narratives portray the experiences of becoming an inessential "Other" defined and differentiated in relation and reference to the dominant ethnic groups. In other words they predicate the contemporary subject-positions of the group in an increasingly ethnicised society and state and provides a glimpse of the subjective and objective conditions of the community in its quest for a self that has to be increasingly mediated through social discourses of indigeneity, ethnicity and nativity. Collectively, these narratives portray the listless responses of a confused collectivity experiencing adversarial ethnic rupture and its social and political consequences.

The `settler' Bengalis arrived in the state of Meghalaya alongside the British administration sometime between 1863 and 1866.² Records reveal that it was in 1863, that Ghulam Hyder an entrepreneur came from Shylet to settle in Cherrapunjee and later shifted to Shillong when the British made Shillong into a station. In 1866, Krishna Kishore Dhar a British government official along with 27 other Bengalis settled in the Shillong station. This history of the early Bengali `settlement' shows that the `first' Bengalis arrived not only at a period when historical claims to space were justified only for the colonisers, but when requirements of a colonial administration provided opportunities only to the emerging educated sections. Therefore, the `indigenous' communities were obviously confined to the margins of the social and political settings.

The narratives evoking this `past history', however, reveal no sense of any adversarial discord between the `settler' community and the `indigenous' community, on the contrary it exhibits an era of shared experiences buttressed by common trade, friendship and a cultural space. Of course this might have been possible because the common `adversary' of the settlers and the indigenous members were the British and as such narration about that period depicts mutually desired and cooperative interactions between the settler and the indigenous members. Instances such as the contribution of Nilmoni Chakraborty in collating the resistance of the Khasis in the *Sheila* areas against the construction of a Dam or collecting contributions for the famine-affected people of the area in 1901 evince those feelings. His assistance to the people of *Mawlong* to recover land from the *Chatak* English Company" were also some the positive characterisation of the `mutually gratifying interactions' between the two communities. These "accommodative relations", as Robin Williams explains in a different context, possibly rested upon an "economic interdependence that (was) mutually advantageous and essentially non-competitive" 14. Interestingly this shared space was visible in other areas of interaction as well. Members from the settler community could expressively use the local language and in fact it is often cited by the settlers that a Bengali named Krishna Chandra Pal in 1813 provided the Khasis with a "script", besides, it was Ashutosh Mukherjee the Bengali Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University who granted recognition to Khasi as a Language of examination for the matriculation".

`Informants' for this presentation recalled, that "till recently" the sense of fairness and justice demonstrated by members of the dominant ethnic groups especially in inter-personal relations revealed nonchalance for any ethnic hierarchy. An instance cited by a member of the community discloses how when he had been young, quarrels and clashes between children of the different ethnic groups were settled through "fair-fights" between the rivals and "boys of the Bengali" community were even protected from the senior members of the dominant ethnic community by the children of the same community; but today a similar clash would transform itself into a contest between "communities". This anecdote reveals how "ethnic distinctions have been built into the cultural definitions and norms of routine behaviour" 16, that even children have acquired prejudiced attitudes and consider it as part of their normal personalities. This amplifies the fracture of the society by adversarial attitudes that members of both the communities hold against each other and where trust between ethnic communities has become the causality.

The question that pleads for an answer is why are the self-representational narratives of the `settlers' motivated by a "till recently" interface between the past and the present. That is to say why do these `settlers' proffer presentations regarding their social and political location in terms of a framework that compares their status on a time-scale? The operative answer possibly is to be found in the trajectory pursued by the new state in consolidating its justification for the creation of a state separate from Assam. Meghalaya was created in deference to claims for ethnic autonomy and, for some scholars, electoral remunerations", and on both the accounts it was necessary for the new state to pursue a political and social strategy that consolidated and nurtured claims along ethnic outlines. This outcome appears logical and even justifiable, if we consider how group autonomy and representation is `recognised' and negotiated along ethnic distinctions in India's North-east. Notably, in this region ethnic claims have also often been squared by recognising ethnicity as not only the foundation of the social and political constituency and the axis of political and social mobilisation but also the conscious and unconscious creation of an asymmetry between `indigenous' and `national' norms. This asymmetry results primarily because "the (cultural) autonomy they seek preserves customary law and practices, which imply unequal rights or discrimination against outsiders as well as insiders"¹⁸ leading to the inevitable marginalisation of `others'. The conception of Meghalaya was also made on this principle and thus, the `indigenous' dominant groups are viewed as the "center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it"¹⁹.

The narratives of the "settler", if viewed on a time-scale, also reflect the constitution of different meanings and construction of divergent sense of self-identity of the community at different times. While these narratives during the British period helped conjure a positive and assertive sense of self-identity, in contemporary times it conjures a defeatist and victimised sense of self-identity for the community. This is probably because from being a socially dominant minority, after the formation of a state, the settlers have been forced on the defensive and experiences a sense of loss. They are no longer considered historical subjects who provide content to the crafting of a specific image and history of the

state and as such 'contributions' of 'settlers' are considered differing and competing the 'indigenous' history necessary to legitimise the 'uniqueness' claims of the new dominant majority. In the new state where the content and character of ethnic identity determines social and political privileges, the settlers were 'Otherised' through the enactment of legal restrictions²⁰, and production of social images²¹ that contests their legitimacy as equal members of the new society.

In the chronicling of the contributions and role of individuals and members of the community and evaluating their relative importance under the changing historical context, the community not only seeks to 'rediscover' and 'redefine' its past but also makes an effort to express the contemporary crisis of ethnic legitimation. The chronicles provide a 'nowhere' community with a pseudo-historical consciousness that partially sublimates their alienation and disadvantage and simultaneously helps explain a vulnerability where the past is being recovered merely as a feeble and futile attempt to alter the disadvantage of the present. A blend of claims and doubts are simultaneously made in expressions like "Dr. Bidhan Chandra Ray in 1923 brought 'light to Shillong"²²; and "Bidhan Chandra's personal items are kept in the B.C. Roy House at Shillong...but for how long ...is a question"²³. These phrases reflect the attempts of the 'settler community' to legitimise its 'being there', but anticipates its ineffectiveness in reordering the ethnic matrix in a nascent society that is also trying to establish its survival and growth within a wider order of ethnic gradations.

Instances of the crisis of legitimation are reflected in the personal narratives of individuals interviewed by the presenter of this piece. Many of these personal narratives reflect the compulsion of the members to prevail over their legitimation crisis by defining their identity along multiple axes. As illustrations, are the outlook of many individuals who anecdotally recover their genealogy to groups that arrived in the state "before the partition" days and preface their presence as "builders" of the state. They say, "my forefather came to Shillong during the pre-partition days from another part of British India and was here simply because he was employed by the British Government. What is more, he was brought here because they needed his expertise to develop infrastructure for development"". Many of these individuals preferred to stay here and make this their permanent home.

What is important is that in individualising their history they attempt to overcome their contemporary crisis by egotistically disassociating themselves from the second phase of settlers who were the victims of the partition. Ironically they often expunge facts that reveal that many of the 'victims of partition' arrived to the place only because they had relations here and thus could expect support and sustenance. Few others having been prejudiced by the consequences of a partition laced with religious overtones often adopt an outline of 'confessional politics' that detaches the "Hindu Bengali settlers" from the "Muslim Bengali settlers" to emphasise an internal difference in the justification for 'settlement' in the place. The actors, therefore, concurrently (re)position their identity and claims along these multiple themes relative to the condition of external collective image and threat and the needs of local negotiation of their self-

identity. The multiple moral justifications not only reveal the internal contradictions of a community that fails to comprehend its contemporary subject-positions but also reflect the discontinuities in the history of their identity construction.

Nonetheless, despite these exclusions the sense of belongingness to the "place" is revealed in the expressions of nostalgia for the "leisure moments" of the winter days and "the sweet water & tasty fish"²⁵ that Shillong provided. Many of the narrators "born and brought up" at Shillong agree that when anyone enquires of them about their "*desh*" (homeland), they still believe it is Shillong. To be precise, they consider the place their idyllic ancestral home with which they have a cultural association and from where they draw their sense of "being born and growing up". Nonetheless today, this 'belongingness' is mediated through an ethnic prism that denies them the right to be a part of its history and in their bid to negotiate a self-identity that disowns a socially imputed one of being an 'outsider', the community encounters a sense of ambiguity and doubt. They feel like "*Udbastu*"-an uprooted people who "belong nowhere". This sentiment becomes more acute for the "generation of settlers" who were born "here" and have no sense of the "original homelands" of their forefathers the sense of familiarity with that history is marked by "historical amnesia". This generation of "born settlers" often also consider themselves 'different' from their 'kin' on the other side of the 'border' or even in other parts of the country where a similar 'language community' resides but nonetheless draws a cultural affinity with them. Of course for the generation who were the 'victims' of the 'visible' partition the centre of cultural and social origin had been the land from where they were uprooted. The imagery of "*Sylhet* could be seen from Shillong peak" helped this directly uprooted generation to overcome their immediate trauma and help them establish a link between their uprooted homes and the new host homeland thereby also linking the two spaces by a common fictive bond. Such imageries are, however, absent among the generations born at their 'host' land and as such consider the 'host land' as a "homeland". The sentiments involved here are, therefore, very 'complex and contradictory'; while on the one hand the "land of origin" is somewhere else, where they trace their cultural rootedness but on the other feel a sense of discontinuity and exclusion in "that land because they are different from the people of those lands".

The traumatic affects of this feeling of uprootedness can be vividly illustrated in the condition of an eight-year-old child who had to leave the place under painful circumstances. The father of the child narrates how the child had become glum and melancholic when they had gone to their place of new residency. "She would not talk to anyone and would sit in the veranda and stare into the vast sky ...we went to a lot of doctors, but that was of no help.. .this had almost become a part of her personality. But after about five years we suddenly had a chance of visiting Shillong...it was then that we realised what had happened". During their stay at Shillong, the child had become very gregarious and amiable. She delightedly asked her parents to "stay here" to the extent that she was willing to let her parents leave her with relatives and her "*bondhus*".

Now if we were to interpret the conceptual circuit that connects all these narratives we find that a template of memory, experience and time conjures an identity for the 'settlers' that is prosthetically

moulded. Collective identity for the settlers, therefore, is determined by the consensus that is derived from the interaction between their real and prosthetic selves". Such prosthetic selves are often demonstrated in the cases of giving rise to a multiplicity of derived identities. In case of Bengalis living in Meghalaya, idea of identity is often in response to the dominant other. Organizations such as Bangiya Sahitya Parishad in Shillong, in the early twentieth century or the idea of "Daccaiya-Bengalis", "Sylheti Bengalis" in Shillong are a reflection of an organised prosthetics. Such organisations gives shape to the sense of `collective self derived from the sense of place, which is inalienable in a situation of partition and other sociopolitical disruptions. The sense of place results into an internal differentiation on nomenclature, e.g., Mymensingi, Daccaiya, Sylheti or Noakhali to be evolved into later clusters such as Silcharites, Shillongites, Kolkatis or even Prabasis. This is not a mere internal difference, but it is a kind of regrouping of community/ identity vis-a-vis contemporary shifts in life and world.

Nonetheless, these personal "stories of the past" fail to engender a guarantee for collective solidarity among the `settlers', who could not transform the collective feeling of exclusion and alienation into a collective `settler' consciousness that provide them with a meaningful identity and power. Though being manifested as a `collective other' in their interface with the dominant `host' community, collective consciousness among the settlers is largely a measure of emotional imagining that is neither politically or materially empowering. Thus the `individualised form of history'²⁸ neither braces the evolution of new subjectivity among the `settlers' that binds them to a collective consciousness nor offers much for imaging a collective future. The settlers thus continue to encounter their existential dilemma in the discursive space of negotiated identities generated through the

continual enactment of individual histories.

NOTES

1. See for instance U. Hannerz. `Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture' in M. Featherstone (ed.). *Global Culture*. London Sage. 1990. pp. 237-252. 2. Terry Eagleton. "The Crisis of Contemporary Culture". *New Left Review*. No. 196. 1992. pp. 29-41.
3. This term was used by, D. MacCannell. *The Tourist: A New Theory of Leisure Class*. Schocken. New York. 1976.
4. Raymond L.M. Lee. "Modernisation, Postmodernism and the Third World". *Current Sociology*. Volume 42. No. 2 summer 1994. p. 30.
5. Birendra Kr. Bhattacharjee. `Some Thoughts on Narratology' in Amiya Dev (ed.) *Narrative: A Seminar*. Sahitya Akademi. New Delhi. 1994. p.30.
6. Margaret R. Somers. "The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach". *Theory & Society*. No. 23. 1994. pp. 605-649.
7. See Rajesh Dev. "Human Rights, Minorities & Relativism in the NorthEast". *Economic & Political*

Weekly, Oct. 23, 2004.

8. David Marquand Quoted by E. Hobsbawm 'If the truth be told,' *The Guardian*, 20 June 1996.
9. See *The Shillong Times*. Nov. 3, 1979.
10. The irony is that these "safe places" identified as such by members interviewed by this author, were the very same places where they sooner or later again confronted communal riots or were denied residency because they happened to be members of the 'same community' but not indigenous. Many of the interviewees have explained how they confronted riots in places like Silchar in the Cachar district of Assam or how when they went to settle in West Bengal they were denied access to many privileges including jobs on the grounds that they were non-indigenous Bengalis.
11. See for similar explanation, Camilla Rosengaard. "The Past is a Lost Country: Family Narratives among Ethnic Russians in Latvia". *Anthropology of East European Review*. Vol. 14. No. 1. Spring 1996.
12. See Shayamadas Bhattacharjee. *Shillonger Bangali: Shillonge Bangali Samajer Avadan O Bartaman Avasthan*. Patra Bharati.Kolkata. 2004. p. 26.
13. *Ibid*. p. 53.
14. Robin Williams. *Strangers Next Door: Ethnic Relations in American Communities*. Prentice Hall Inc. New Jersey. 1964. pp. 17-29.
15. Shyamadas Bhattacharjee. *op. cit.* p. 93.
16. *Ibid*.
17. See Sanjib Baruah. *India Against Itself Politics of Nationality in Assam*. Oxford University Press: New Delhi.
18. Yash Ghai. "A Framework for Analysis" in Yash Ghai (ed.) *Autonomy and Ethnicity: Negotiating Competing Claims in Multi-ethnic States*. Cambridge University Press. 2000. p. 7.
19. Robin Williams. 1964. *op. cit.*
20. For instance, in the new state, 'non-tribes' were debarred from buying and selling landed property, or instructed to desist from political participation even though they may have been residents of the state for generations. See "4 rebel ministers oppose Non-Tribal representation in Meghalaya Assembly". *The Shillong Times*. Nov 7th, 1987.
21. See Rajesh Dev. *op. cit.* 2004.
22. Shayamadas Bhattacharjee. *op.cit.* p.78
23. *ibid*. p79
24. The interviewee maintained that his father had been an engineer who served the British and the independent Indian Government and had built numerous bridges and other infrastructure in the region including the state. He insisted to remain anonymous.
25. A resident of Shillong who has now settled in Delhi.
26. This is the story of a family who were professionals and had taken a transfer to Kolkata during one of

the riots that occurred in the State, but had come on a visit to the state after span of five years when the state was relatively

peaceful.

27. This argument is inspired by Bjorn Ekeberg's. "No Hay Banda. Prosthetic Memory and Identity in David Lynch's Mulholland Drive" in *Image (& Narrative)*. Online Magazine of the Visual Narrative. Issue No 10. March 2005.

28. Camilla Rosengaard. *op. cit.* 1996 p. 5.