

Autonomies in the North and the North East

More Freedom or the Politics of Frontier
Managment?

Sanjoy Chaturvedi
Sanjoy Barbora

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Contents

The Ethno and the Geo: -Politics of Autonomy in a Borderland named Jammu & Kashmir	5
<i>Sanjay Chaturvedi</i>	
‘Autonomy or Death’: Assessing Ethnic Autonomy Arrangements In Assam, Northeast India	37
<i>Sanjay Barbora</i>	

[*Autonomies in the North and the North East* (PP 7) is the fourth in the series of research papers on the theme of Autonomy in India. Readers interested in the theme and the series can get back to *Resouces for Autonomy - Financing the Local Bodies* (PP 2), *Peace Accords as the Basis of Autonomy* (PP 3) and *Debates Over Women's Autonomy* (PP 4).]

The Ethno and the Geo:Politics of 'Autonomy' in a Borderlands named Jammu & Kashmir

Sanjay Chaturvedi

Whether the state withdraws or is re-imagined, the reinforcement of identities is often at stake. The new trans-national economic reality seems not to diminish the need for a local or national political discourse. The essential question is whether the resulting geopolitical visions and discourses will interface with the new trans-national economic 'reality' or remain just a rhetoric accompaniment that serves essentially to boost pride and diminish pain...It requires much optimism to believe that international relations in the future will remain free from the ideological perspectives of particular groups. The end of history has not yet arrived. (Dijkink 1996).

It is well settled that ethnicities located in specific territorial boundaries have a claim to be classified as 'regions' and therefore have a legitimate claim to the autonomy at the political and economic levels. In fact, the urge for self governance and aspirations of economic development is at the root of such a claim. (Report of the Regional Autonomy Committee, 1999:11)

...whereas other Princely States signed the Instrument of Accession to India and subsequently the instruments of merger, the accession of J & K State was limited only to areas of Defense, External Affairs and Communications. Uniquely, Jammu and Kashmir State is the only one to have negotiated the terms of its membership of the Union. Right till the Delhi Agreement of 1952, it did not accept any provisions of the Constitution of India other than those agreed to in the Instrument of Accession and retained its autonomy. Autonomy has remained, since the days of accession, the heart beat of the people of the State. Today we find that the State has lost all resemblance to autonomy. Its erosion is the primary cause for Kashmir discontent. (Report of the State Autonomy Committee, 1999:4)

Introduction

Apparently, growing contestations over the question of autonomy in general relate to the complex interplay between the ethno-cultural moorings of an individual or group identity and a rather seductive appeal of geopolitical reductionism and territoriality. Territoriality, as pointed out by Robert Sack (1986: 19-20, 216), "...is the attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence, or control people, phenomena, and relationships, by delimiting and asserting control over a geographical area...It is a rather complex strategy and the device through which people construct and maintain spatial organization." The geographical concentration of a group is generally considered as essential to territorial autonomy. The same consideration, however, becomes highly problematic in places characterized by heterogeneity or mega-diversity or hybridity.

What does Autonomy mean? How effective is autonomy as a device for conflict management? According to Yash Ghai (2000: 8), "it is a device to allow

ethnic or other groups claiming a distinct identity to exercise direct control over affairs of special concern to them, while allowing the larger entity those powers which cover common interests.” Needless to say perhaps, the success of this devise for conflict management would require some consensus on what constitutes ‘common’ interests among the actors concerned. Ghai further points out that, “more than any previous age, ours is marked by ethnic conflicts...responses to ethnic conflicts have ranged from oppression and ethnic cleansing to accommodations of ethnic claims through affirmative policies, special forms of representation, power sharing, and the integration of minorities. One of the most sought after, and resisted, devices for conflict management is autonomy” (Ibid. 1). However, despite its universal appeal, the concept of autonomy, as the present study also shows, remains controversial, both in terms of understanding and operationalization.

The overarching purpose of this study is to map out the key guiding principles of what I would like to describe, both in a generic sense and in the specific context of Jammu and Kashmir, as “Autonomy of autonomies”. Such principles, I will argue and illustrate, relentlessly question the assumption that bordered state sovereignties are the fulfillment of a historical destiny, rather than a particular, and in some quarters, historically contingent as well as controversial, form of political containment. I would like to critically examine various understandings, representations and discourses of autonomy, both past and present, *in* and *about* Jammu & Kashmir in the light of these principles. Drawing upon the insights offered by critical geopolitics, I argue further that the experience(s) of autonomy in regard to Jammu & Kashmir, over the past five decades and more, have been deeply influenced—even dictated at times—by the two dominant geopolitical visions of India’s ‘national’ identity (though not entirely exhausted by them) namely the secular-nationalist and the Hindu-nationalist.

In more specific terms, the key intention behind this paper is two-fold. First, to expose the partiality of territorialized geopolitical visions, which in turn continue to remain hostage to colonial-imperial ethnographic mapping practices and the resultant ‘categories’ rooted in govern-mentality. However, such a govern-mentality is not necessarily restricted to intellectuals and institutions of statecraft. It can also be found among non-state, politically motivated, ideological groups, actively engaged in the pursuit of primacy through the exclusion of the ‘Other’ and the ‘Alien’. Ironically enough, it might also happen that those who choose to resist dominant discourses on autonomy might eventually land up deploying those very categories to which they are opposed in principle.

Secondly, while critiquing the manner in which various competing, often colliding, definitions of ‘Autonomy’, continue to be imprisoned by such categories (related to religion, ethnicity, caste, colour, creed, and gender), this paper intends to show that autonomy is not something that is determined, dictated and driven *structurally* from above by the intellectuals and institutions of statecraft. On the contrary it is, or at least ought to be, integral to democratization process; enabling peoples to *make* as well as *realize* choices of their own, without compromising their legitimate moral and political claims to human dignity and diverse socio-cultural identifications, as citizens practicing without fear or favour the norms of reciprocal civility.

Critical Geopolitical Perspectives on Autonomy

Several attempts to *critically* redefine and rewrite the field of geopolitics are aimed at developing a more complex understanding of the ways in which power relations are established and asserted from time to time and structures of the nation-states *normalized*. Concepts of fixity, domination and entrenchment are now being increasingly questioned and replaced by notions of fluidity and hybridity. An attempt to portray the world as inherently heterogeneous and amorphous requires nothing short of a ‘paradigm’ shift in the geopolitical imagination from place to mobility, while recognizing social organization as essentially unfinished, in transition, or in motion towards a perpetually receding horizon. Once the taken for granted assumptions underlying the old prescriptive political geography of normative spatial structures of absolute state sovereignty are challenged, the pursuit of alternative imagi(nations) of ‘autonomy’ might be facilitated.

Once a critical geopolitical gaze is harnessed for the purposes of decolonizing the conventional cartographies of the sub-continent, one may discover reasons — other than those sustaining the post-colonial, post-partition states— to change the *character* of colonial boundaries rather than their *physical* appearance. Through an interpretative, qualitative, and critical analysis of the ethno-geopolitical dualism of autonomy question —one that reads the relationships between borders, territoriality, and collective identity in an increasingly transnational and ‘turbulent’ moment of late modernity—I hope to critically examine the policy manifestations of both the ‘hardening’ and ‘softening’ of the borderlands and the discourses which support them. Such analysis is to be informed by new thinking about boundaries and borders in *Geopolitics* as well as other disciplines, while debating alternative ways of looking at the future of hitherto colonially inscribed boundaries in South Asia.

While adopting such ‘critical’ perspectives, I think one should not lose sight of a rather intricate intersection of power and space, which demands and deserves a sustained engagement with *both* the discursive and material. It is important to note that various conceptualizations of autonomy are themselves products of diverging, contested discourses, which in turn are one means of organizing social space, a part of the process of *place-making*. This means that questions of power, knowledge, agency and social structures become decisive. Consequently, it may be worthwhile to explore how various conceptualizations of autonomy are embedded in everyday practices of life and of collective, contested identity narratives.

While doing so, however, there is a real danger, in my view, of not only losing sight of stubborn fixities but also of complex interlocking of *continuity* and *change* if one tends to restrict one’s analysis only to deconstruction of narratives on autonomy in the case of Jammu & Kashmir. Enough space needs to be created for the study of localized geopolitical narratives and their critical engagement with a politicized and politicizing agenda of top-down projects of autonomy at a variety of geographical scales. Such a relentless critical questioning might also facilitate decolonization of mind-landscapes, which in turn could question more effectively both the prevailing spatial bias toward the ‘national’ and ‘regional’ and trivialization of the *local* understandings of and aspirations *for* and *against* autonomy per se or a particular version of it. In other words, while it is important to identify the broad ways in which the meanings for ‘self-determination’ are produced, it is equally pertinent to thoroughly focus on the geographic and political-economic dimensions of self-determination.

Whereas it could be misleading to over generalize various experiences of autonomy globally, or impose lessons from one setting to another, the ‘local’ or ‘place-specific’ characteristics of Jammu & Kashmir’s experimentation(s) in search of autonomy need to be approached and examined in reference to certain ‘universal’ features. What appear to be of general applicability are territoriality-dominance-mutuality alternatives. The ethno-geopolitical contestations over autonomy in places as diverse as Andorra in the eastern Pyrennes in Southwestern Europe, South Tyrol, Hong Kong, Tibet, the Nunavut in Canada, Catalonia, Scotland, Quebec, Northern Ireland, Basque, Palestine, and the Xinjian-Uighur Autonomous Region of China, illuminate three of the most fundamental choices in considering the puzzle of autonomy: whether it can be *resolved* or if *regulation* is more realistic objective, whether ethnic minorities should be assimilated into the general culture, or their differences recognized through pluralistic institutions; and whether minority aspirations can be better satisfied by secession or by internal constitutional reform. A critical examination of the autonomy question in J&K should be grounded, therefore, in a geo-historical

assessment of how the various autonomy choices in case of J&K were molded by a historically determined geopolitical readings and representations of space and identities.

Geopolitical Visions and India's 'National' Identity: Secular-Nationalist versus the Hindu-Nationalists

A geopolitical vision may be defined as, “any idea concerning the relation between one’s own and other places, involving feelings of (in)security or (dis)advantages (and/or) invoking ideas about a collective mission or foreign policy strategy” (Dijkink 1996: 11). It is not necessary, however, that a geopolitical vision is practiced only by the intellectuals and institutions of statecraft (although the notion of ‘foreign’ policy more or less implies it) or, for that matter, a majoritarian conception of nationhood. The state may at times be perceived as an ‘external’ source of insecurity by some of its citizens, who continue to live within its territorial borders but do not subscribe to *the* reasons of the state. There might also be alternative geopolitical visions within a nation state. A geopolitical vision may or may not require a Them-and-US distinction, but it does invariably refer to an emotional attachment to a place; a motherland, fatherland and/or a holyland. Whether an analysis of geopolitical visions can be separated from a meticulous treatment of national identity, with several defining features such as a historic territory, common myths and historic memories, a mass culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members, is more difficult to answer. It is equally difficult to imagine a national identity without the feelings of trauma and pride that involve some reference to ‘external’ entities or relations. In this respect, feelings of national identity and geopolitical visions are intricately inter-wined, and thus difficult to separate for the purposes of ‘granting’ autonomy to the subordinate parts of the dominant whole. Moreover, the fact that geopolitical visions are, more often than not, the concrete translations of such feelings into various debates on autonomy is seldom acknowledged.

A geopolitical vision includes the representation of a country’s (a people’s) territorial limits. The experiences of autonomy in the border-states of Indian Union, including Jammu & Kashmir can not, therefore, be entirely divorced from predominant constructions of the geo-body of an ‘Indian’ nation. Let us delve a little deeper into the notion of a geo-body of a nation *as ‘imagined community’* by quoting Thongchai Winichakul (1996: 69-70),

The territory of a nation is not just a profane part of the earth’s surface. It is a constitutive element of nationhood which generates plenty of other concepts and practices directly related to it; for example, the concept of integrity and sovereignty; border control, conflict, invasion and war. It defines and has some control over many other national affairs, such as the national economy, products, industry,

trade, education, administration, culture and so on. Unarguably, the territory of a nation is the most concrete feature of a nation for the management of nationhood. It is the most solid foundation, literally and connotatively, of nationhood as a whole. For a theoretical geographer, it is the territoriality of a nation. For people of a nation, it is part of SELF. It is a nation's geo-body.

Geographically speaking, the geo-body of a nation occupies a certain portion of earth's surface which can be objectively identified. It seems to be concrete to the eyes and having a long history as if it were natural, and independent from technology or any cultural and social construction. Unfortunately, that is not the case. *...the geo-body of a nation is merely the effect of modern geographical knowledge and technology of representation, a map. The geo-body, the territoriality of a nation as well as its attributes such as sovereignty and boundary, are not only political but also cultural constructs. They were formulated on the soil where the indigenous spatial discourse had existed long before.* (Emphasis supplied)

Since territory is only one of the necessary conditions of the nation-state, it follows that 'borderlands' are far more complex than often assumed. Since the dawn of the modern era, states have adopted various spatial strategies to forge a homogenous nation from the disparate cultural and regional groupings within its domain. The processes of nation-building and state-building are thus two parallel, but not necessarily *twin*, tracks in the construction of a 'nation-state'. Despite meticulously conceived constitutional engineering, a precise fit between nation and state may not occur. More so, as Satish Deshpande (2004: 75) puts it succinctly, "even after it has been successfully produced, this sense of nationness needs to be continually nurtured, partly through efforts to ensure that ideology and geography stay in synch with each other."

As one consequence, a state's borders never function precisely according to the model outlined above; if the principal function of the nation-state is ethnic, racial, linguistic and cultural homogeneity, then borders always give lie to this construct" (Wilson and Donnan, 1998: 9-10). Moreover, as pointed out by Paula Banerjee (2001: 299), "borders and divides form an independent category in politics because every border has its own compulsions and a propensity to create its own history. By designing a line on the map a border cannot be made or stabilized...But once demarcated a border can become ideologically sacrosanct even while remaining politically unstable, thereby containing seeds of dissensions, conflict and change...this is what has happened to the Line of Control in Kashmir."

A point that I wish to further underline in the above mentioned context is that the process of designating a line on the map as boundary/border is invariably implicated in the dominant geopolitical vision(s) of the country concerned. Whereas each geopolitical vision gives the impression that it is based upon a 'true' geographical knowledge, in reality there is no such thing as *the* geographical knowledge of a country. On the contrary, there are several

geographical knowledges produced by various actors at multiple sites and for different reasons (David Harvey, 2001: 231-232).

However, as Harvey also emphasizes, the ‘facts’ of geography can also be used to promote humanitarianism and cosmopolitanism. Significant in this regard is the need to overcome what French Political Geographer Yves Lacoste (2000: 121) terms as, “lack of knowledge about conflicting conceptions, unexpressed mutual fears and above all the ignorance of those who, confident of their rights, are unaware or refuse to accept that an opposite opinion to their own might exist, in equally good faith.”

In the post-colonial, post-partition India one finds two principal geopolitical visions competing with each other for greater salience, authority and legitimacy, namely the secular-nationalist and the Hindu-nationalist. Both aim at achieving a *fit* between the nation and the state. Both construct and propagate a particular geographical knowledge about the geo-body of India, her identity and unity. It is important to note, however, that for both the defining principle of national identity is *territory*. In the ‘secular nationalist’ geopolitical vision — combining territory and culture— the territorial notion of India, emphasized for twenty-five hundred years since the times of the *Mahabharata*, is of a land stretching from the Himalayas in the north to *Kanya Kumari* (Cape Comrin) in the south, from the Arabian Sea in the west to the Bay of Bengal in the east. What make Indian civilization unique, therefore, are the virtues of syncretism, pluralism and tolerance reflected in the cultural expression: *Sarva Dharma Sambhava* (equal respect for all religions). One good example of the secular nationalist construction of India’s national identity is Jawaharlal Nehru’s *The Discovery of India* (1946). In Nehru’s construction of India, syncretism, pluralism and tolerance are the main themes. For Nehru, “some kind of a dream of unity has occupied the mind of India since the dawn of civilization.” He ‘discovers’ India’s unity as lying in culture and not religion —hence no notion of a ‘holyland’ in his mental map of the country. For him the heroes of India’s history —Ashoka, Kabir, Guru Nanak, Amir Khusro, Akbar and Gandhi— subscribe to a variety of Indian faiths and it is Aurangzeb, the intolerant Moghul, who “puts the clock back” India’s geography was sacred to Nehru not literally but metaphorically (Varshney 1993: 236).

Nehru’s secular nationalist construction of India stands in sharp contrast to religious notion of India as originally the land of Hindus, and it is the only land which the Hindus can call their own (Pattanaik 1998: 43-50). What unites the Indian landscape is the sacred geography of Hindu holy places (Benaras, Tripuri, Rameswaram, Puri, Haridwar, Amarnath, Badrinath, Kedarnath, and now Ayodhya) and the holy rivers (Cauveri, Ganga, Yamuna, and the confluence of

the last two in Prayag). This map of pilgrimage is another kind of religious map which is based on a particular belief system of relationship of sacred shrines in various places.

The term *Hindutva* was coined by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar to both indicate and vindicate its distinctiveness from Hinduism. Hindutva to Savarkar was both the life-style and the destiny of a great race. It was not simply a term but an entire history, encompassing the religious, cultural and racial identity of the Hindus. The basic tenets of Hindutva were finally refined and propagated by Savarkar, who, in this sense, represents the high-water mark of ideology driven towards the establishment of a Hindu nation (Sharma 2003: 7).

In the geopolitical vision of Hindutva, which, as the map reproduced below shows is geopolitically gendered (note the geopolitical symbolism of the sacred geo-body of the Indian/‘Hindu’ nation), one finds a serious and systematic *construction* of Hindu identity in the service of Indian nationalism (Jaffrelot 1999). The first and the most important feature of the Hindutva project remains the transformation of Hinduism into a regimented, codified, monochromatic order. There is little scope or space for diversity of opinion, practices, rituals, observances and individual choices. The Hindu nation is to be founded and united on the basis of racial and doctrinal purity. The understandings related to inclusions/insiders and exclusions/outsideers of this unity however varied. Savarkar was willing to include the Sikhs, Jains and the Buddhists in his definition of Hindu. But Christians and Muslims could not qualify as Hindus since they had potentially ‘extraterritorial loyalties’, and their ‘holy lands’ were outside the territory of India.

According to Hansen (2004) Hindu nationalism shares the worship of strength, masculinity, cultural purity. Rewriting of history and the manipulation of memories are strategies integral to the project of controlling popular imaginations (Thapar 2004). Yet it remains an incomplete project, challenged by a multitude of alternative imaginations. Hindutva’s rewriting of history intentionally undermines the long standing patterns of peaceful coexistence. There were (and there are) aspects of life in which religion was an identifier but there were (and there are) also many other aspects in which more broad-based cultural expression, evolving over time and through an admixture of various elements, gave an identity to a social groups. There is no acknowledgment in Hindutva discourse of intermingling and hybridity. Savarkar’s writings for example are replete with images of the Muslims as aggressors and expressions such as ‘pratishodh’ and ‘pratikar’, all synonyms for revenge, retribution and retaliation. As Neera Chandhoke (2004: 513) puts it forcefully,

Expectedly, even as the majority group tries to monopolize the symbols and the vocabularies of suffering, as it eagerly rushes to claim the status of victim, and as

narratives of victimhood dominate civil society, political in the sphere has become completely self-centred. But there is more: resentment articulates, sharpens and ultimately translates perhaps unacknowledged prejudice into communal actions, by constructing the subject as the historical victimizer. Unravel the story told by the Hindutva brigade and we shall see immediately how the targeted community is depicted as a proximate and corporeal threat to the identity, to the dignity, and to the traditions of the members of the community that is host to this construction. That all this leads to the politics of what has been termed the “new tribalism” –the politics of violence, vendetta and attrition—is predictable.

In India, Hindu nationalism has grown prodigiously from a dormant and apparently minor communal presence to being the party of the government over a short time. Despite loss of power at the Centre in recently held elections, the BJP continues to maintain its hold in a number of states of the Indian Union. The 1998 manifesto of the BJP said: “Our nationalist vision is not merely bound by the geographical or political identity of *Bharat*, but it is referred by our timeless cultural heritage, this cultural heritage which is central to all religions, regions and languages, is a civilizational identity and constitutes the cultural nationalism of India which is the core of Hindutva. This we believe is the identity of our ancient nation ‘Bharatvarsh’...” (cited in Noorani 2004).

It is important to note that the boundaries of India as suggested by the secular-nationalist are coterminous with the ‘sacred geography’ of the Hindu nationalist whole hallowed pilgrimage sites mark off essentially the same boundaries of the country, although the Hindu nationalist would go much further into mythic history than two and a half millennia to date the origin of these sites. As Ashutosh Varshney (1993: 238) remarks:

Since the territorial principle is drawn from a belief in ancient heritage, encapsulated in the notion of ‘sacred geography’, and it also figures in both imaginations [secularist and nationalists] it has acquired political hegemony over time. It is the only thing common between the two competing nationalist imaginations. Therefore, just as America’s most passionate political moment concerns freedom and equality, India’s most explosive moments concern its ‘sacred geography’, the 1947 partition being the most obvious example. Whenever the threat of another break-up, another ‘partition’ looms large, the moment unleashes remarkable passions in politics. Politics based on this imagination is quite different from what was seen when Malaysia and Singapore split from each other, or when the Czech or Slovak republics separated. *Territory not being such an inalienable part of their national identity, these territorial divorces was not desecrations. In India, they become desecrations of the sacred geography.* (emphasis supplied)

As an outcome, both the secular-nationalists and the Hindu-nationalist geopolitical visions share in common what Sankaran Krishna (1994: 508) has termed as ‘cartographic anxiety’. Such anxiety, surrounding questions of national identity and survival, reaches its zenith in the borderlands. According to Krishna, the term ‘cartography’ implies more than the technical and scientific mapping of the country; it refers to “representational practices that in various ways have attempted to inscribe something called India and endow that entity with a

content, history, a meaning and a trajectory”. Krishna argues that cartographic anxiety is a facet of larger postcolonial anxiety syndrome manifested by a society that perceives itself as suspended forever in the space between the ‘former colony’ and ‘not-yet-nation’. More recently, Sankaran Krishna (2003: 310) has argued that, “the nation-building efforts of the era of decolonization, especially in societies such as India, emphasized pluralism, multi-ethnicity and, despite limitations, an incipient critique of capitalism. Contemporary postcolonial nationalism in the era of globalization is marked by ethnic or religious majoritarianism, an aggressively competitive attitude towards “others’ in an anarchic international milieu, and a reconstitution of the model citizen primarily as middle-class consumer in a national/global capital space”.

It is in the border-states of North-East and Jammu & Kashmir that cartographic anxieties, as described by Krishna, find a vociferous, at times violent, expression. It is not surprising therefore that the question of autonomy, depending upon the text as well as context of a particular demand, appears simultaneously as both appealing and appalling to various actors and institutions concerned. Could we then argue that the search for ‘common grounds’ among allegedly diverse demands for autonomy is at best an exercise in futility or at worst a not-starter?

Yash Ghai (2000) has argued with considerable insight that ‘autonomy’ as a conflict-defusing mechanism is a double-edged instrument and could also be (ab)used by the powers that be to fragment, pigeonhole and divide communities and the so-called ‘regions’. Moreover, points out Ghai, “sometimes, in an order to preserve the integuments of a state, autonomy is so structured that it is difficult to find the common ground on which the communities can find a moral and political basis for co-existence”(Ibid). To quote Ghai,

Autonomy, particularly federal autonomy, is built around the notion that the people of a state are best served through a balance between the common and the particular. If the emphasis is so much on the particular, then separation may be the better option, notwithstanding the proliferation of states. The secret of autonomy is the recognition of the common; certainly it seems to be the condition for its success. Perhaps about thirty years ago, too much emphasis was placed on the ‘common’ and for this reason autonomy was narrow and contingent. Today we may be placing too much emphasis on the particular. It may be necessary to consider devices that stress the common bonds and construct the institutions that hold people together...to promote broad interregional support, to counter the tendency towards

disassociating that comes with disaggregating ethnic autonomy. *Autonomy should be chosen not because of some notion of preserving 'sovereignty' but in order to enable different ethnic groups to live together, to define a common public space* (Ibid. 24-25). (emphasis supplied)

The point emphasized above demands in my view further critical attention, especially in regard to the *constructed* nature of *ethnic* commonalities and differences, among categorically framed 'communities' and 'regions' in the dominant discourses on autonomy in Jammu and Kashmir. How does one negotiate the disjuncture between the commonality and the differences, expressed, defended and even contested though dominant ethnographic categories that were transferred —along with power— by the departing colonial power to the post-colonial and post-partition states of South Asia?

The state of Jammu & Kashmir began its life under Indian rule, in fact, with substantial, even radical, autonomy. The basis for its autonomy status was explicitly and emphatically acknowledged in the early days of dispute with Pakistan over Kashmir of the conditional nature of the state's accession to India as well as in the unique status granted to the state under article 370 of the 1950 Indian constitution. By the middle of the 1950s however any substantive autonomy Kashmir had managed to carry over from its earlier princely statehood had more or less evaporated, leaving in its wake however a strong memory among Kashmiris themselves of the state's initial flirtation with a conspicuously strong package of autonomy.

The more recent rejuvenation and reemergence of the issue of autonomy for Jammu & Kashmir could be attributed to the electoral victory of the National Conference (NC) party in September 1996 election, which had made the restoration of the state's autonomy the centerpiece of its manifesto and campaign. Soon after coming into power, Mr. Farooq Abdullah appointed two state-level committees to examine the issue of autonomy —one, the State Autonomy Committee (SAC), entrusted with the issue of inter-state or 'external' aspect (the relationship between the central government and the state of Jammu & Kashmir), the other, the Regional Autonomy Committee (RAC), responsible for its intrastate or 'internal' aspect (the relationship among the three ethno-religiously polyglot regions —Jammu, Ladakh, and Kashmir valley).

The discussion to follow shows how the two Committees set up by the National Conference Government —namely the State Autonomy Committee (SAC) and the Regional Autonomy Committee (RAC)—are concerned, by and large, with access to power and institutions of governance. Both fail to conceive autonomy as a continuum. Both also fail to acknowledge that it is the people at

the grass-roots who are asking for a space, far beyond the one provided by the categories and identities imposed upon them, so that they could meaningfully engage in the decision making process which affects their lives and livelihoods on a daily basis. In short, both, while negotiating the disjuncture between commonality and differences at various levels, appear to be lacking in terms of a broad transformative agenda and more inclined towards a politics of positional change rather than a reform of principles and structures of governance.

The State Autonomy Committee Report: Centripetal or Centrifugal?

The report of the State Autonomy Committee (SAC) was formally accepted by the National Conference Government in January 2000. It not only generated a heated debate, the twin issues concerning the autonomy of the State of Jammu and Kashmir within India and of the regions within the State —issues which have discredited the very concept of autonomy— surfaced for scrutiny. In many respects, it was a “reflection on the present political climate of Jammu and Kashmir that such a debate should degenerate into polemics” (Puri 2000). The nationalist media expressed a concern that granting autonomy would mean a serious threat to the integrity of the country with the possibility of balkanization (Kumar 2000).

A critical geo-historical perspective on the SAC and the report that followed shows how its architects selectively produced a geographical-historical knowledge about the places comprising the state of Jammu & Kashmir. It narrates at some length the history of the Centre’s relationship with Kashmir from partition onwards, highlighting how this ‘history’ was one of nearly ruthless and remorseless assault by the Centre on the genuinely autonomous status with which the state of Jammu and Kashmir began its career within the Indian Union. The central argument of the SAC revolves around the demand for the ‘restoration’ of the ‘lost’ autonomy. The SAC report’s recommendations are numerous, highly specific, and broad in coverage, urging maximum autonomy (demanding that the Centre’s writ in the state be confined to the three subjects of defense, foreign affairs and communications) similar to the one prevailed in the period prior to 1953.

The RAC report, as we shall note shortly, highlights the centrality of territorially marked, religion-informed cultural identity, urging reorganization of the state of Jammu and Kashmir along ethno-religious or ‘communal’ lines. Whereas, the SAC report grounds its arguments apparently in the secular-nationalist geopolitical vision, affirms its commitment to the principle of ‘unity in diversity’ and the secular grounds of law and constitutionality. It could well be that by forming the two committees, the then Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah, wanted to simultaneously address two different constituencies. Whereas the State Autonomy Committee (SAC) report demands the maximalist version of the secular demand for autonomy for Jammu and Kashmir as a whole vis-à-vis Delhi, the Regional Autonomy Committee (RAC) report

advocates the re-organization of the state into eight new 'provinces' whose boundaries are defined on ethno-religious lines, framing it more in terms of a 'grant' of autonomy rather than 'demands' for autonomy.

After Dr. Karan Singh's resignation from the SAC as its first chairman, on 31 July 1997, the state assembly's strong support of the report in June 2000, generated a vociferous opposition. The 'representatives' of the state's Hindu and Buddhist minorities, perceiving that the status of Jammu and Ladakh would be further marginalized in the new ethno-geopolitical order, demanded the wholesome rejection of the report. On 4 July 2000, the BJP-lead Union Cabinet termed the state assembly's so-called autonomy resolution 'unacceptable'. The Cabinet's public response, while reaffirming its commitment to 'devolution of power' to the states of Indian Union, emphasized that, "the acceptance of this resolution will set the clock back and reverse the natural process of harmonizing the aspirations of the people of Jammu & Kashmir with the integrity of the nation". Within Jammu and Kashmir, on 30 June 2000, the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council unanimously passed a resolution as its general council meeting demanding 'separation' from Jammu and Kashmir and the status of a Union Territory.

Regional Autonomy Committee Report: Realities, Categories and Contestations

Is the place inscribed on the map of India as Jammu & Kashmir one 'region' or a 'region of regions' and/or a 'region of sub-regions and communities'? Apparently, the central idea underlying diverse geopolitical definitions of Jammu and Kashmir is that there is some contiguous space that has the character of an 'entity' of some sort defined by special attributes. Thus, sometimes the region is framed in purely materialist terms (physical qualities of terrain, climatological regime, built environments, tangible boundaries), and in others it depends on ideas, loyalties, a sense of belonging, structures of feeling, ways of life, memories and history, imagined community, and the like. Since the scale problem also enters in, with a hierarchy of labels often inscribed that begin with neighborhood, locality and place and proceed to the broader scale of region, territory, nation-state and globe, 'Region' then becomes territorialized at a certain geographical scale.

It is in this perspective that I turn now to critically examine both the context and the texts of autonomy as conceptualized and advocated by the Regional Autonomy Committee (RAC). The RAC Report (1999) begins by outlining 'approaches to Regional Autonomy' and concludes by pointing out that, "there can be more than one approach to autonomy, self-rule and decentralized development. A great caution has to be observed that the social cohesion and territorial solidarity is not put under strain in pursuit of realizing the objectives of regional autonomy." It is significant to note that the Regional Autonomy Committee report does not look at the logic of autonomy as a continuum. It is rather obvious that the issue of 'regional' autonomy is being seen as an exclusive domain of the government of Jammu & Kashmir. In other words, there is a tacit acknowledgment of the 'fact' that diverse regions/provinces of the State of Jammu & Kashmir have to negotiate their understandings and demands of 'autonomy' with the centre of power located in the valley. Some critics have also pointed out that the RAC

Report turned a blind eye to the 'regional' political sensibilities of Jammu and Ladakh. Rather than using the term 'Region' for defining the political status of Jammu and Ladakh, or for that matter Kashmir, it chose to deploy the categories such as 'Provinces' or 'Divisions'. The RAC came to the conclusion that,

a sharp sense of neglect and discrimination among the diverse ethnic groups of the regions of the State exists. This sense of discrimination is shaper in the regions of Jammu province particularly in the hilly and far flung areas of the province. There is an urgency in demarcating the regions in the State for the purposes of political and economic decentralization of power. It was argued by the ethnic groups that administrative classification of the provinces should not be recognized as the genuine and real classification of the regions. It was argued that the issue was raised earlier before different Commissions but it was not considered by them probably on the plea that this issue did not fall within their terms of reference. The memorandums submitted by people from Doda, Rajouri and Poonch indicated that these groups perceive themselves belonging to different regions. The history of these regions and their particular ethnic profiles substantiate their claims of belonging to different regions.

The central argument of the Report, ironically, revolved around the logic of counteracting the existing understanding of the regions. It did not use the term 'Region' to define the political status of Jammu or Ladakh or for that matter even Kashmir. Defining them as 'Provinces' or 'Divisions' created for administrative convenience; the report called the earlier attempts to define these as 'the distinct regions' as erroneous in nature. [RAC, 1999: 8]. The Committee came to the conclusion that there is urgency in demarcating the regions in the state for the purposes of political and economic decentralization of power. The administrative classification of the provinces should be recognized as the authentic classification of the regions. [RAC, 1999: 8].

Reading between the lines, one finds a deliberate yet subtle attempt to redraw the 'internal' map of the State of Jammu and Kashmir but without any meaningful departure from the pre-dominant, territorialized govern-mentality. The 'regions' of yesteryears, such as Jammu, are being discursively transformed into provinces, allegedly composed of various 'regions'. There is much more behind the manipulation of 'scale' in the (re)formulations and (re)commendations of the RAC than meets the eye. The human-cultural mobility and intercourse of centuries is subjected to the geopolitical reductionism of territoriality with the aid of a 'new' reading and interpretation of the 'history' of newly discovered 'regions' of Doda, Rajouri and Poonch, which, we are told, "existed as small kingdoms independently or have been parts of Kashmir Kingdom" (Ibid.). The RAC thus went on to conclude that, "the histories of these regions and their particular ethnic profiles substantiate their claims of belonging to different regions of the State" (Ibid.).

The RAC report has been criticized by a number of analysts (Chowdhary and Kumar 2000; Kumar 2001; Engineer 2000) on account of its strategic deployment of the

so-called 'regional' territorial identities on the geopolitical chessboard by the state elite. Let us take into account some of it. According to Robert Wirsing (2003: 205),

The RAC report is painstakingly (and, in its critics' eyes, disingenuously) drafted to define the project of redrawing internal boundaries entirely in terms of "ethnic diversity" and what it calls "ethno-cultural-linguistic groups". While it acknowledges that Jammu and Kashmir is a "pluri-cultural, pluri-linguistic and pluri-religious state of India", it denies that religious identity either motivates the demand for restructuring the state's boundaries or seriously figures in the restructuring plan. The report manages somehow to discuss Kashmir's ethnography for thirty-odd pages, in fact, while only once employing the word Muslim and not even once the words Hindu and Buddhists. Nevertheless, these words could not have been far from authors' minds as they prepared the report.

It has also been argued that, "despite regional issues being the locus of Jammu's politics, the discourse of state autonomy as pursued by National Conference did not include the local sensibilities of this region. If anything, this discourse was perceived to be 'Kashmir-centric'" (Chowdhary 2000: 39). A critique of the SAC Report needs to be placed, therefore, in the larger and deeper context of an 'alternative' discourse on 'regional interests', 'internal coherence' and 'internal reconciliation' (Puri 2004). To quote Balraj Puri, one of the leading and relentless voices from Jammu on the 'regional' dimensions of the autonomy debate in Jammu and Kashmir, "The Delhi Agreement on the autonomy of the state in 1952, with overwhelming popular support of the people of Kashmir valley, it may be recalled, was wrecked, not by the Government of India, but by massive opposition to it by the people of Jammu. . . as external relations of the state become paramount, regions and communities will have a tendency to be pulled in divergent directions. Unless internal harmony between the aspirations and interests of all the diversities which the state is endowed with is restored, it can not aspire for a stable and satisfactory status. The only alternative is to split the state, which inevitably would tend to be on religious lines" (Ibid).

A Homeland for Kashmiri (Hindu?) Pandits: Imaginations of the Displaced

So far, this essay has suggested that the geopolitical imaginary that governs our thinking about autonomy has different entailments depending upon not only our location but also the categories we deploy to understand our 'Self' and the 'Other'. The mental as well as physical odds and hardships faced by the displaced Kashmiri Pandits are well documented and examined elsewhere. I will therefore refrain from unnecessary repetition. However, what has not received adequate critical attention in my view is the manner in which the debate on autonomy has been approached by those who claim to represent the plight and the rights of displaced. Drawing extensively upon the website, which is maintained by the 'Kashmir Pandit Diaspora worldwide' (the term 'Diaspora' reminds us of its Jewish connotation, underpinned by the dismemberment and displacement of a victimized 'scattered' nation) all that I wish to offer in this section is a

rather sketchy account of the Panun Pandit homeland discourse, paying special attention to the categories that the discourse deploys in order to represent the ‘Self’ as well as resist the Other. The narrative runs as follows.

Kashmiri Hindus (Pandits) are in exile since early 1990 after Islamic religious fundamentalists in the valley of Kashmir took to armed subversion and terrorism and drove them out of their centuries old *habitat*. Today, we are told, Kashmir is on the brink of being separated from India. It is the beginning of a comprehensive plan to bring about the total disintegration of India—a fact not realized by most of the Indians. Hundreds of thousands of Kashmiri Pandits who were forced to leave their *sacred* land because of the war waged by Islamic terrorists must now live in despicable conditions in their own country and are on the verge of extinction as a *race*. Called “migrants” by the administration, the Kashmiri Pandits are in fact *refugees* in their own country due to total failure of the Indian State to provide security and safety to them when they were ruthlessly persecuted, threatened, tortured and murdered by the Islamic terrorists. PANUN KASHMIR (meaning *our own Kashmir*) is a struggle to re-conquer that Kashmir which is almost lost. PANUN KASHMIR is an effort to *Save Kashmiri Pandits to Save Kashmir to Save India*. Besides being a struggle for survival as a cultural entity and an ancient race, PANUN KASHMIR is described as a movement for the political survival of over 700,000 Kashmiri Pandits in their *birthland*.

A visitor to the cyberspace of ‘invisible refugees’—a website that claims to provide a “complete repository of information on Kashmiri Hindus”—is exposed at the outset to following four expressions: Culture, Heritage, Traditions, and Religion. We are told that during 1989-1991 as many as 400,000 Kashmir Pandits were forced to flee their homeland after a combination of violence and explicit threats by Islamic terrorists aided and inspired by Pakistan.

In the last decade, India-Pakistan tensions have continued and spiralled, especially over the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The tensions recently culminated in the Kargil invasion by thousands of Pakistani troops and supporting Islamic mercenaries. However, through a decade of continuing violence initiated by Pakistani elements, most of the hundreds of thousands of Kashmiri Pandits who have been expelled from their homeland continue to be ignored at the state, national and international level.

Most of the Pandit refugees, mislabeled as “migrants”, live in squalid camps with spiralling health and economic problems. That the Muslim-led state government of Jammu and Kashmir has ignored their plight comes as no surprise since the oppression of Kashmiri Pandits did not start in 1989, but much earlier. Between 1947 and

1989, hundreds of thousands of Kashmiri Pandits had left the valley to escape oppression by the Muslim majority.

This is yet another example of fear-driven discourse, which appears to be rooted in the following premise: “It is clear that the return of the nearly half a million Kashmiri Pandits to their native land will not be facilitated simply by the end of Pakistani-inspired terrorism in the state. *While a cessation of the targeting of Pandits by Islamic terrorists in the state is the essential first step, an end to the oppression by majority Muslims would be the next essential step to enable the Pandits to return as equal citizens*” (emphasis supplied).

Maps are visual narratives and through their skilled interweaving of history, territory, and identity, prove to be powerful instruments of both representation and resistance. The map produced below of the Panun Pandit Homeland is a good example of how the resistance of the silenced and displaced gets framed and articulated in terms of those very ethno-geopolitical categories of which the Kashmiri Pandits are a victim in the first place. The cartographic silences of the map also speak loudly about the manner in which the demand for a Union Territory status is expressed through religious symbols and idioms. There are good reasons to believe that the geopolitical vision behind the Panun Pandit Homeland is deeply implicated in the Hindu-nationalist vision of India and Indianness. It is not surprising, therefore, that the map highlights only ‘Hindu’ places of worship.

Excluded from the ethno-political categories mentioned above are people internally displaced due to mining, shelling and militarized border landscapes, who, one might argue, suffer from geopolitics, while not having the privilege of having a geopolitical vision of their own. Once it is acknowledged that borderlands too are homelands where Indian citizens, similar to those who live in hinterlands, have a right to live a dignified life without fear, the anxiety and sufferings of these bordered communities becomes easier to appreciate. Some of the heavily mined areas include Hiranagar, Ramgargh, Samba, R S Pora, Akhnoor, Pallanwala, Chicken Neck, Nowshehra, Laam, Sunderbani, Bhawani, Kalal, Hangargh, Chingus, Kerni, Balakote, Krishengangi, Bhimbergali, Mighla.

According to the findings of a 11-member Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence (PSCD), led by Madan Lal Khurana, that visited Jammu and Kashmir in March 2002, over 200 villages of Jammu, Kathua, Rajouri and Poonch districts have been affected by the build up on the borders in general and laying of mines in particular. According to Khurana, after the terrorist attack on Indian Parliament, army took over an area of 70,100 acres of land in border areas of which 23,000 have sprawling minefields (*The Tribune*, Chandigarh, 4 March 2002). It was pointed out by the Committee that loss suffered by border

villagers in Jammu, Kathua, Poonch and Rajouri districts owing to the military buildup was to the tune of Rs 12.52 crore.

Whether resorted to by the counter insurgent forces, including the army and paramilitary, to bring down the suspected hideouts of militants and 'securitize' the borderlands, or deployed by the militants themselves as cheap and easily available weapon against the security forces, mine explosions are constantly adding to the population of the crippled and the maimed in Jammu and Kashmir. In many areas landmines have been laid in agricultural and pastoral lands and civilians have been displaced from these areas. Human sufferings transcend borders, apart from a large number of civilian casualties, deaths of large numbers of livestock on both sides of the border have also been reported, adversely affecting both agricultural and pastoral communities in India and Pakistan. Armed groups in Jammu and Kashmir use landmines indiscriminately on public highways and thoroughfares to ambush army convoys as well as indiscriminately injuring hundreds of civilians in grenade attacks. Some of the worst affected in such cases are the Gujjars (*The Daily Excelsior*, 22 July 2004). The displacement of border villagers has been a common phenomenon since 1947 due to shelling and military build up along the Line of Control (LoC) and in the border areas.

Whereas the displacement of Kashmiri Pandits (with a large number still braving the hardships of the camps) is better known and relatively well-documented, not much awareness is to be found about other kinds of displacement that the conflict has induced. Each war, like Kargil, or even fear of war, has dislocated people, many of whom await rehabilitation while living in like Devipur. Those living in the Beli Charana camps are the ones displaced due to militancy in the upper ridges and otherwise difficult hilly-terrains. Apart from these, as pointed out by Rekha Chowdhary (2004: 1), "there are numerous others whose displacement has remained invisible as they do not want to be identified for a variety of political reasons."

The displaced, especially women, demand and deserve, but are seldom allowed, a right to live in peace and with dignity and be heard (Butalia, 2002). In most cases, as pointed out by Paula Banerjee (2004: 306), "state policies refuse to accept that the displaced population is largely a feminine population and so often rehabilitation programmes are couched in gender-neutral terms thereby creating greater problems for women...When human rights groups criticize state policies regarding the displaced it becomes easier for the state machinery to invoke the rationale of national security thereby diverting attention from the plight of displaced women, as in the case of the displaced in the LOC between India and Pakistan."

The Trifurcation Plan: Towards Internal Partitions?

The proposal of the Kashmir Studies Group for a trifurcation of the main regions of the state, namely Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh into separate administrative units has been favorably received by certain ideological groups in India as an imaginative solution. If conceded, this territorial re-ordering could result in violent social disruptions throughout the state further strengthen the ongoing communal polarization and cause irreversible damage to cultural and social fabric of the state. Such internal partitions are bound to have serious consequences for communal harmony in the rest of India and even beyond. In addition, trifurcation would forever end the possibilities of reviving the plural traditions of communal harmony in the state that had once made it a symbol of the very core of India's image of itself: unity in diversity. It is not surprising that not everyone will agree with such an assessment. The Kashmir Study Group proposal has its supporters too.

In the opinion of those who vociferously supported the trifurcation plan in mid-1990s, time was 'running out' and there was and is no logic in maintaining the State as a single political unit (Hari Om 1995). The people of Jammu and Ladakh, we are told, do not feel any more that they belong to Kashmir and those who had some immovable property anywhere in Kashmir have already sold it and settled down permanently in Jammu and Ladakh. A few employees from Jammu and Ladakh, who once held certain positions in the Government and semi-Government departments in Kashmir prior to the eruption of militancy there, too have either got themselves transferred to Jammu and Ladakh or have resigned. If there are some officials from Jammu and Ladakh still in the Valley, their number is almost insignificant.

What is the solution then to the alleged separation and polarization? The trifurcation of the State, it is argued, "would remove all negative trends, and promote in each region sound politics based on purely democratic and economic issues. In such a situation the Kashmiri Muslims would become less vulnerable to the "syncretic" pulls of fundamentalism from Pakistan. R. Venkataraman, former President of India, it may be recalled, had in 1983 urged the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, to make Ladakh a "Union Territory as demanded by the local people", confer the status of "statehood" on Jammu and deal with the Valley as a "separate entity". (Hari Om 1995).

The demand for a division of the state is not new. The UN mediator Sir Owen Dixon had recommended a partition of the state in 1950, and elements within the Praja Parishad agitation of the early 1950s had also sought that Ladakh and Jammu be detached from the valley if full integration of the state was not

achieved quickly. But, behind its more recent reincarnation, several factors and forces have coalesced to generate potentially centrifugal forces. Most obvious is the widespread feeling of deprivation and discrimination at the hands of politicians from Kashmir within Jammu and Leh. While this perception of neglect and deprivation may have some grounds, it is being politicized by sectarian political groups who are demanding separate statehood for Jammu and union territory status for Ladakh. They argue that separation from Kashmir would not only result in better governance, greater economic opportunities and a larger share of political power, but Jammu and Ladakh will also be able to distance themselves from the militancy. In its most aggressive form, the demand is being expressed in highly nationalist terms. We are told that it is in the national interest to limit the 'area of operations' of the security forces to the valley of Kashmir, and such disciplining would ensure that only one-sixth of the state remains in the vortex of violence.

At a time when the National Conference was vociferously demanding the restoration of pre-1953 constitutional status, the VHP countered it by demanding a vivisection of the state having a provision for a separate homeland for Kashmiri displaced Pandits within the valley, the demand which was first voiced by Panun Kashmir as early as 1996 (The Tribune, 2 July 2002). The demand for a separate homeland set many political analysts and intellectuals, not only in India but also in several foreign countries, rethinking on the matter.

The RSS too reiterated its support for the trifurcation of the state. Though it chose to remain silent on the demand for a separate homeland for Kashmiri Pandits. The state unit of the BJP appeared shy of making its stand on the trifurcation known. Outwardly, its leadership had been opposing it, thereby following the line adopted by the central BJP leadership but inwardly it appeared that it was in favour of statehood for the Jammu region. The Congress, like the National Conference, was opposed to the demand for the trifurcation of the state on the plea that it would promote disintegration of the state and division on the communal lines. The National Conference leadership too opposed the plan of trifurcation or vivisection of the state. The then NC President, Mr Omar Abdullah, is reported to have said that trifurcation would amount to handing over of Kashmir to Pakistan. Dr Farooq Abdullah had earlier stated that Kashmir, Jammu and Ladakh continuing as one entity would continue to frustrate the Pakistani game plan of seeking the valley's incorporation with Pakistan on the basis of Kashmir being a Muslim-dominated area.

But VHP and Bajrang Dal leaders, besides senior functionaries of the RSS, argued that the demand for the trifurcation or vivisection of Jammu and Kashmir took roots after the NC started campaigning for the restoration of

greater autonomy to the state. They said those in Jammu and Ladakh, besides the Kashmiri Hindus, had become skeptical of the NC plan of securing restoration of pre-1953 status.

Whereas those who support the trifurcation, which includes the Mukti Morcha, argued that this is the only way to end discrimination of people in the Jammu region. They have been dishing out figures in support of their contention that Jammuites had been given a raw deal in government services, in professional colleges and in public sector undertakings. The supporters of the theory favouring the division of the state put forward the following geo-historical reasoning in support of their arguments:

- Historically, the present conglomeration of three heterogeneous regions of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh were never an organic political entity.
- There is inherent inter regional contradictions in terms of history, physiography, ethnicity, language and culture.
- This sharp inter-regional contradiction has a 'spill over' in the political perception of the three dominant communities of the respective region and integration is absent.
- Political domination of Kashmiri Muslims and their discrimination against Jammu and Ladakh kept the latter neglected. Ladakh has persistently raised the issue of Islamic domination.
- The Hindus and Buddhists of the state are apprehensive of the likely demographic change in their respective regions due to large-scale Muslim influx from Kashmir valley. The Doda district for example has changed from a Hindu majority to a Muslim majority district.

One stunning example of a highly territorialized geopolitical reasoning with regard to Jammu & Kashmir, is the following. This quotation, in my view, deserves critical attention for several reasons. It glorifies internal partition as the most durable and 'final' solution to what it perceives as inherently irreconcilable divide between the people categorized as the 'Hindus' and the 'Muslims'. It revives the two-nation theory, also in support of the contention that the 1947 partition is not yet complete.

Indeed, within the Kashmir Study Group proposal for the communal trifurcation of Kashmir lie the seeds for a final solution to the Hindu-

Muslim problem all across south Asia. Perhaps the Hindus may wish to set aside 12 per cent of the territory of the Indian Union for the Muslims, who form 12 per cent of the population and hence could claim to have a 'right' to 12 per cent of the land. This land would sensibly comprise the already Muslim-dominated and historically Islamicised regions of northern UP (Rohilkhand, North Oudh) and northern Bihar (Seemanchal), where Hindus already live in fear of Muslims. The Muslims all across the rest of India could then migrate to that region, whilst Hindus would then comprise the sole ethnic group in the remaining 88 per cent of India. This migration would be a peaceful process spread over several years, with both communities slowly migrating to regions wherein they dominate, avoiding blood-baths. At the ground level, I would like to point out that this process is already at work in many parts of India.

There are numerous advantages for both sides this solution. For the Muslims, these regions would then be free to join Bangladesh and Pakistan, leading to a resurrection of the territorial limits of the Mughal Empire. It is proposed that this region be named 'Mughalstan', and it is hoped that this new nation would experience a cultural efflorescence as the glorious Mughal civilisation is restored. For the Hindus, their faith and culture would be safe in the remaining 88 per cent of the Indian union as the Muslims would have left these regions for Mughalstan. This would be effectively a 'Hindu Rashtra' which several Hindu organisations are working so hard for. Moreover, it would be a Hindu Rashtra comprising almost 90 per cent of the territory of the modern Indian union. Most importantly, the all-pervading blood-shed and constant loss of lives would stop as no Muslims would be living in this Hindu Rashtra. There would be no more Mumbai blasts, no more terrorist attacks, no more fear of the 'bearded mulla' with a grenade in one hand and a Quran in the other. This is of greater importance for Hindus, since the total casualties amongst this community are likely to be much higher in case of a full-blown jihad. State law would protect Hindu religion, and legislation could be enacted preventing conversions from Hinduism so that the present fear of a 'Muslim takeover' by out-breeding and/or conversion would be permanently set at rest. The advantages for Hindus thus probably outweigh the territorial losses in this scenario (Abbas 2000).

According to such a reasoning, the history of Jammu and Kashmir is full of heterogeneity, contradictions, dominations and apprehensions. Consequently, it is futile to look for commonality, synthesis, pluralism, tolerance and reconciliation among communities with back-to-back relationship. According to Amitabh Mattoo (2000),

This logic is dangerous for at least four reasons. First, trifurcation will destroy the composite identity of the state, which has existed as one unit since 1846, and send

a dangerous message to the whole nation. If Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists cannot live together in one state, can they do so in a larger entity? Second, it will most probably lead to a transfer of Muslims from various parts of Jammu, including parts of the city but also Doda, Rajouri and Poonch, assuming that the entire province is made into a separate state. Finally, it will lead to such deep communal polarization that bloody communal riots will inevitably follow.

Regional harmony, it should be clear from experience, cannot be ensured through partitions, but through a decentralization and devolution of financial and economic power that will treat the panchayat as the primary unit of governance. It is rightly observed that, "Jammu and Kashmir is not Assam or Uttar Pradesh where the carving of smaller states will provide for better governance; it is a recipe for disaster" (Ibid.).

The Borderlands of Autonomy Discourse: 'Voices' of the Gujjars

Beyond territorially fixed, categorically demarcated and defended 'official identities' are certain social identities, which do not seem to have made any meaningful difference to the dominant discourses on autonomy in Jammu & Kashmir. As the dominant ethno-political categories compete and clash with one another for greater political salience and power-sharing along a fractured continuum of autonomy process, they continue to exclude, in a rather callous fashion, voices and faces that are yet to matter politically. A question worth raising in my view is: who gains/loses what, when, where and how from territorial restructuring/reshuffling as various groups negotiate demands in terms of their respective geopolitical visions of autonomy?

The 'Muslim' Gujjars of Jammu and Kashmir, equally entitled to Fundamental Rights enshrined in the Indian Constitution as citizens of India, continue to suffer from educational, social and economic backwardness. Categorized as *Banibaras* or *Dodbi* Gujjars and Bakerwals, a vast majority of these 'tribal' people continue to live under poverty and deprivation, and are conveniently, but not unconsciously, left out of an increasingly communalized, binary geographies of the 'Hindus' and the 'Muslims' underpinning the dominant discourses on autonomy. According to estimates provided by the Jammu and Kashmir Gujjars United Front, "about 20 lakh Gujjars and Bakerwals have been crying for the benefits they are entitled to for being Scheduled Tribe since April 1991 when the status of the ST was given to them but the successive governments have not initiated any step in this regard so far" (Daily Excelsior 12 December 2003). It has also been pointed out that about five lakh Gujjars and Bakerwals have no homes or hearths of their own and several lakhs of them live in the temporary built huts (Ibid.).

For most part of the year these Baniharas or Bakerwals are on the move from lower to higher or higher to lower altitudes in search of 'greener' pastures and grazing grounds. Even a vast majority of those Gujjars who do not move physically stand 'displaced' in terms of their social-cultural spaces. Refusing to take to guns and genuinely reluctant to get implicated in the 'law and order problem discourse' or for that matter the practices of trans-border terrorism, the Gujjar communities demand and deserve autonomy, at least to an extent, that enables them to adapt to circumstances much beyond their making as well as control (Chaudhry 2004)

It is important to note that neither the Commission on State Autonomy nor the Regional Autonomy Commission paid any serious and systematic attention to the plight of the Gujjars, especially the nomadic communities. According to Navnita Chadha Behera (1996), "Gujjars were first politicised in the 1970s when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi cultivated them and propped them up as a possible counter weight to the Valley Muslims. The first step in this direction was the recognition of the Gojri language and allocation of time on J&K radio for its programmes. The Gujjars' quest for a Scheduled Tribe status under the Indian Constitution, which provides recognition and some privileges, however, took a long time to achieve and was finally granted only by the Chandra Shekhar government, in 1991." Is this enough?

It goes to the credit of Mr. Balraj Puri (who felt compelled to resign as the Working Chairman of the Regional Autonomy Committee but decided to publish, what in his view was the original version, as a book) to have forcefully argued that cultural autonomy of various ethnic identities which transcend the boundaries of the districts and regions cannot find full expression through political institutions alone. What is needed in his view therefore are institutions of cultural autonomy and development, such as cultural academies. The Committee strongly recommended that, "Gojri should be included in the 6th schedule of the State Constitution and efforts should be made to get it recognized by the Sahitya Academy" (Ibid.:35).

The Gurjar Desh Charitable Trust, a voluntary organization committed to speedy upliftment of the Gujjars, based in Jammu, remains at the forefront of a campaign to realize due recognition to Gojri Language and persistent in its protest against the non-inclusion of the language in the 8th schedule of the Indian constitution. According to its mouthpiece magazine called "Awaz-e-Gurjar" (January 2004: 4), the main demands of the Gujjars include, "political reservations in the high democratic institutions of the country, launching of massive programme for educational development, providing adequate loans, subsidies and incentives for reorientation of their traditional vocations, a speedy drive for their employment both in the

Army, Police and Civil Sectors, promotion of Gojri language and its inclusion in the 8th schedule of the Indian Constitution and raising of special colonies for the Gujjars”.

In all these issues that summon identity, it is critical to re-examine the current understandings of minority rights by going beyond the dominant categories of ‘minorities’. It will be crucial to focus on issues of inequality in the web of socio-economic structures, opportunities and denials. (Bishnu N. Mohapatra, 2003). It is both timely and just that questions about inequality are raised when we study Jammu and Kashmir, and particularly communities such as the Gujjars in view of their status as a *minority within a minority* and their sense of powerlessness they experience as a result of their overall marginalization. Deprived of a geopolitical vision of their own, the voices of the Gujjars, located at the border and periphery of the modern nation-state, often problematize nationalist and/or regionalist narratives of history and identity invented at hegemonic centres. They also remind us that, as pertinently reminded by Jayadeva Uyangoda (2004: 53), “without constitutional protection, local and cultural minorities that are not resourceful enough. . . would suffer insecurity, discrimination and even oppression”.

Militarised Imaginations and the Geographies of Fear

The partitioned state of Jammu & Kashmir has entered the 21st century in a climate of all pervasive fear. Not many places on the globe today are as excessively imagined as Jammu & Kashmir. The post-Cold War geographical imaginations about Jammu & Kashmir, including ‘nuclear flash point’ and ‘most dangerous place on earth’, ‘unfinished agenda of partition’ etc. are much more than sensational rhetoric. They carry far reaching implications for conflict resolution and various pursuits for autonomy. Equally consequential are the meta geopolitical narratives such as ‘clash of civilization’, propounded by Samuel P. Huntington (1996; 2004), vociferously propagated by the likeminded in various parts of the world, and ruthlessly pursued by the neo-conservatives intellectuals of statecraft, especially under Bush administration. It has been argued by Robert Wirsing (2003: 191-92), raises some interesting questions which demand and deserve attention. These questions include: “Is either India or Pakistan –or are both of them—heading into an era of increased religious nationalism, in which the sectarian identities of the people of the region will play an ever important role than at present? Are the civilizational fault lines that transect Kashmir currently deepening, so that the parties to the Kashmir ‘dispute’ will soon have even greater incentive to exploit the susceptibilities to communal rivalry and violence that presumably deepen with them? Is cultural militancy of the religious kind on its way *in* in the region? Or on the way out?” According to Wirsing the support extended to Kashmiri Muslim separatists not only by Pakistan but also by other and more distant Muslim states, including Afghanistan, substantiates does not bode well for peaceful co-existence.

Be that as it may, it is more likely than not that Kashmir will continue to figure in the kind of ‘high geopolitics’ that has been popularized by Zbigniew Brzezinski (1997). Examining the central role of the United States in international system, especially the Eurasian Grand Chessboard, ‘high geopolitics’ is highly speculative. It tends to be dismissive of the populations

that inhabit places, is motivated by traditional military security concerns and looks at the world through a zero-sum lens –although exactly who are the opponents today is less clear than the Cold War period. The following map reproduced from Brzezinski's book, "The Grand Chessboard" (1997) illustrate how Kashmir is being discursively transformed into a 'flash point' on the so-called 'Eurasian Balkans' and 'Global Zone of Percolating Violence'. The maps of the hegemonic imperial power, deployed in support of the pursuit of primacy, not only possess an extraordinary power of persuasion they can also be used to discipline the 'real' to fit into the 'imagined'.

The US administration has already moved a long way from the territorial conceptualization of geopolitics, characteristic of US policy making since the World War II (Toal, 1999). This trend is particularly visible with reference to 'deterritorialized threats' and 'global dangers' which figure prominently in public pronouncements of the intellectuals and institutions of statecraft. Such threats include regional or state-centred threats, terrorism, international drug trade, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and climate change. It is in the light of such a broader and deeper context that we might take a look at the following observation made by Robert W. Bradnock (1998: 26), which, in my view, needs to be taken into serious account by those interested in the autonomy question for Jammu & Kashmir, "two factors will undoubtedly keep the United States and its European, Japanese allies deeply concerned to find a workable resolution. India's decision to adopt an explicitly nuclear policy with its nuclear detonation in May 1998 has drawn the USA into closer concern with Indian developments. Kashmir also scores more directly in the list of deterritorialized threats: it is close to one of the world's major sources of drugs, and continues to be a home for armed militants. However, much India would like to keep the Kashmir dispute from the international agenda, these three elements have given Kashmir a new international, and indeed, global, significance."

The valley of Kashmir has gradually been transformed into a 'Valley of Fear' –marked by a sense of despair and despondence (Malik 2000). The ground reality in Jammu & Kashmir is definitely far more complex than the descriptions offered by the Western geo-strategic discourses on Kashmir. It is a clash of a kind no doubt, but not among civilizations. It is a clash of categories, identifications and diverse notions of security. To quote Humra Quraishi (2004: 136, 141),

Religion has become more visible in recent past. It is undeniable that a certain rigidity has crept in; there is something less traditionally Kashmiri, less attractive about religious attitudes now. It is not just about men wearing skull-caps, women pulling their dupattas tight over their heads and round their torsos, and thousands rushing to the mosque, so much so that on Fridays the namaazis spill out onto the roads. It is more a about a worrying number of people doubting your sincerity unless you wear your Islamic identity on your sleeve; it is about some militant outfit threatening girls with death and

disfigurement unless they cover themselves up with burqas; it is about fiery young students defending the Taliban and everything about Saddam Hussain for no reason other than their shared faith and what they see as the valour of these men.

One sad result of the growing 'Arabization' of Islamic faith in the Valley is that the present generation of Kashmiris do not seem to attach much importance to the unique Sufi tradition of the Valley.

More recently, President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan has expressed its willingness to move away from the United Nations resolutions on Kashmir, while emphasizing the de-militarization of Jammu & Kashmir. In response from the Indian side it has been pointed out that the issues of autonomy was a matter of discussion in India and there was no question of changing the external status of the state. While the exact nature of such proposal and counter-proposals is not clear at this stage, it appears that the debate on issues related to Autonomy has entered a new phase of politicization. It has been reported in certain sections of the Indian press that Musharraf's views have given rise to fears in the Kashmir valley (*The Tribune*, Chandigarh, 2 November 2004). Fear is being reported to have risen among a section of Kashmir Muslims who have over the years established flourishing business in the state and other parts of India, and many of them have started thinking of reducing their business interests in Jammu, Delhi, Bangalore and Kolkata.

The specter of "the division of the state into either two parts, one to remain with India and the other especially the valley, to be part of Pakistan or divide it into seven regions" (Ibid.), has also made businessmen who have invested in business in the border areas of Poonch, Rajaouri, and Kargil. It is further reported that, "General Musharraf's proposal has given sleepless nights to those living in the Doda district because the majority of people in this district do not want to remain part of the Kashmir valley. They have fears about their bleak future if the Dixon plan, in a new form, is implemented under which Doda will face a division with two sub-divisions, Doda and Kishtwar going on one side, and the third sub-division of Bhandarwah being kept on the other side." (Ibid.).

Rethinking Identities and Sovereignty: Towards the Autonomy of Autonomies?

Is it inevitable that the ultimate destiny of all territories must be submitted to the discourse of state-centric sovereignty, and the practices that flow from it? It needs to be acknowledged that the role of international boundaries in the twenty-

first century is bound to change as dependence on traditional State sovereignty erodes and territorial expressions of political power diversify. Globalization, as John O' Loughlin (2000: 131) argues, "has been simultaneously reworking the nature of inter-state relations, the character of the world and local regions and indeed nature of places." These changes will inevitably produce major challenges for the cartographic depictions so critical in shaping and defining our mental perceptions of geopolitical space. Major trends that are explored here include the expanding maritime "territoriality" of coastal States, the diminishing functions of international boundaries with economic and military integration or supra-State political unions, and the growing tendency for devolution of political power and greater local autonomy. We need to explore therefore various possibilities of bi-national territories, the uncertainties associated with anomalous quasi-national political units, and the prospect of an increased number of leasing arrangements or territorial servitudes. Such changes in political management of space will require very imaginative and flexible cartographic depictions to match our mental perceptions of an increasingly complex global geopolitical structure.

The notion of Autonomy of autonomies needs to be approached both ontologically and epistemologically. In the former sense, what ought to be at the centre of projects designing accountable institutions are *people* with multiple identifications, and not categorically fixed ethno-religious identities. Equally critical is to ensure that we move from principles to practices/institutions and not vice versa. One of the cardinal principles on which the notion of Autonomy of autonomy rests relates to a paradigm shift from *domination* to *non-domination* as the fundamental principle of governance at *all* levels. Consequently, critical attention is also drawn towards how different jurisdictional scales, as deployed by the dominant discourses on Autonomy, are harnessed by powerful vested interests to their own purposes.

Epistemologically, the Autonomy of autonomies compels an acknowledgement of the fact that there is not *one* but *several* geographical knowledges of autonomy produced at various sites. The challenge is to ensure that none of these geographical knowledges, especially the one produced at the official sites, acquires the hegemonic and homogenizing status of an unchallengeable regime of truth.

Autonomy of autonomies is also based on the assumption that while providing enough room for the representation of diverse understandings of autonomy, it is equally vital to ensure the spaces for resistance are not erased or discredited. The spaces, such as those occupied by the dispersed nomadic Gujjars of Jammu and Kashmir may not inherently be invested with the symbols and rituals of territoriality. They might therefore they fail to qualify as a 'place' that

matters in the dominant discourse on autonomy. Nor is the spread and scope of such spaces of mobility always constrained by the conventional social and political constructions of geographical scale, which, as pointed out above, are often deployed to mobilize social networks, political institutions, economic resources, and territorial rights. Consequently, a group –for example, the ‘Muslim’ Gujjars of Jammu and Kashmir, that claims representativeness without a concrete network of relationships that constitutes a geographical scale of ‘region’ or ‘state’ will soon find itself criticized as discredited in the communities.

The space(s) needed for the principles and practices of Autonomy of autonomies might be lost in case the fears and the fantasies of religious fundamentalism of any kind are allowed a free hand in deciding the ‘rights’ and ‘obligations’ of communities concerned. Marketing a particular understanding of autonomy by exploiting religion-informed cultural symbols will most likely be counterproductive in the long run. It is worth pursuing the agenda of a cosmopolitan autonomy; not a cosmopolitanism of an abstract kind based on a pseudo scientific ‘view from nowhere’ but a cosmopolitanism visualised and practiced through intercultural dialogue embedded in the argumentative tradition on the sub-continent.

As pointed out by Ranabir Samaddar (cited in Barbora 2003: 4), “the legal and political thinking in India viewed autonomy as something related to exceptional and extraordinary circumstances. Rather than viewing autonomy as something that inherently leads to greater democratization, the existing political and legal discourse view autonomy as a tool to govern people in the frontier. As such, autonomy was meant for certain categories of people and not something that could be considered to be an integral part of the democratic process”.

Is it inevitable that the ethno-political objectives of autonomy be realized through territorial (in both its symbolic and material-resource dimensions) autonomy? In other words, the ‘sense of place’ (which connotes an array of ideas and processes that link people to place) can also be imagined and expressed through reasoning other than a ‘sense of territory’—a logic that insists that territories must be precisely delimited, and senses of territory are therefore inevitably linked to the legitimation of specific territorial constructs. It is equally feasible as well as desirable to re-conceptualize autonomy within a total-systems context as a dynamic process involving multi-spatial, multi-temporal, and multi-system interactions. It is vital to ensure that the geopolitical anatomy of a particular understanding or a particular blue print of autonomy remains embedded in a spatial structure of peace and dialogue.

It appears that the autonomy project for Jammu & Kashmir, in its various *avatars*, has been a result of interplay among three broad factors (a) specific power relations, (b) the material existence of geopolitical realities and (c) the democratic yearnings and possibilities for self-rule.

Kashmir to be sure shows the fascinating connection between history, geopolitics, and democracy that can exist only in form of ‘current’ history.*

What constitutes the “critical” in critical geopolitics of ‘autonomy’, for the purposes of this paper, has been a modest attempt to account for the persistent tension between the democratic impulses/aspirations emanating from socio-economic diversities/disparities, and the relentless undermining of cultural pluralism by the geopolitical reductionism inherent in the reasons of ‘sovereign-territorial’ nationalizing state. Having said that, the paper has also tried to expose the extent to which the construction of ‘peoplehood’ in various conceptualizations of autonomy has been pursued so far in the context of a territorial ambition or the extent to which such movements continue to operate within the context of the dominant geopolitical visions of their respective nation-states.

A critical analytical engagement in this paper with various discourses on ‘Autonomy’ has further revealed a rather stubborn persistence of the legacies of British imperial mapping of the mega human-cultural diversity on the sub-continent. These categories continue to be used as an instrument of power while negotiating identity and territory in the ongoing debates on who gets, what, when, where and how from a particular blue print of Autonomy. These categories force historically mobile, mixed, multicultural and hybrid communities to reinvent themselves in terms of biological, cultural and *territorial* purity. From the standpoint of Autonomy of autonomies, it is important therefore to evolve alternative cartographic practices that not only counteract a monolithic construction of religious communities but revision the map itself as the expression of a shifting ground.

In other words, the map of *Autonomy of autonomies* appears to an open construct — rather than the one that by definition insists upon containment—allowing for more possibilities of ‘indigenous’ voices and visions to shape alternative strategies to de-territorialize the spaces of autonomy. It acknowledges at the outset that future democratic societies will inevitably demand openness and ‘crossings’ of cultural, symbolic, Also, that, “territoriality is to an increasing degree turning into a continuum of practices and discourses of territoriality which may be, to some extent, overlapping and conflicting” (legal and physical boundaries between places transcending scales. They may be linked or networked partly with the past, partly with the present and partly with a utopian imaginary of the future forms of territoriality” (Paasi 2003: 120).

The inevitable daily tension of such an arrangement, —one that acknowledges hybridity, impurity, intermingling— is a price worth paying for the sake of *desirability* as well as *durability* of such a state of politics. The failure to do so is likely to result in manipulation of autonomies from the top by a highly centralized power system, which serves, more often than not, reasons of statecraft, a majoritarian, undifferentiated conception of both nationhood and citizenship, and the tyranny of artificially imposed, categorically pronounced and authoritatively imposed ‘official’ categories.

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“Autonomy or Death”: Assessing Ethnic Autonomy Arrangements In Assam, Northeast India

Sanjay Barbora

In the past decade, movements for ethnic autonomy have marked the political discourse in Assam. While some have resolutely expressed the need for more autonomy within the present administrative set-up, other movements have evolved more militant, secessionist ideas of political and geographical demarcation of territory. The autonomous districts in Assam, formed under the auspices of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, are a showpiece for the State’s capacity to address indigenous ethnic aspirations in the Northeast. On the face of it, these (autonomous district) councils are meant to devolve judicial, legislative and executive powers to those upon whom it is conferred. The genesis of Sixth Schedule is itself a question that needs special attention. The choices of the field area(s) are not coincidental. Both Karbi Anglong and the recently created Boro(land) Territorial Council offer a longitudinal contrast in the application of the Sixth Schedule to specific territories and people. At the same time, the administrative logic that decreed the creation of these “autonomous” entities/ territories, shows an almost naïve faith where complex (and contentious) issues centred on identity, are seen to be resolved.

This article seeks to locate these autonomy regimes within a particular framework that focuses on (a) construction of *frontiers*; (b) negotiating for political space within these *frontiers* and (c) the ability to redefine *sovereignty*, *citizens* and *subjects* in an “autonomous” space like Karbi Anglong and to an extent, Boro(land) Territorial Council. There is a need to spell out why it is important to understand autonomy regimes within the three areas mentioned above. Karbi Anglong and Boro(land) Territorial Council are in Northeast India, that truculent triangle beyond the populated Gangetic plains. Sanjib Baruah sees the work of colonial and commercial enterprise, in the conversion of the area into one administrative unit (Baruah 1999: 35- 43). In a sense, this is almost taken for granted when one discusses the Northeast. However, there are important considerations involved in the construction of *frontiers* that need to be broadened in their own right.

In the 1980s, Boro agitators painted the words, “Autonomy or death” on their bodies. This dramatic position itself has been the product of years of

systematic mobilisation of political resources of the community that sees its position of marginalisation as a failure of institutions of representation and participation. In 2001, the government of Assam signed a cease-fire agreement with one of the factions of the armed opposition political groups, the Boro Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF). Subsequently, the cease-fire agreement culminated in the signing of the Memorandum of Settlement of the Boro Territorial Council in 2003. The “treaty” was meant to have been a centrepiece in the conflict resolution techniques available to the State apparatus in India. However, instead of leading to the reduction of violent conflict, it has only added to the volatile ethnic polarisation in the region.

The Boro (or *Bodo*) are classified as a “plains tribe” and the demand for their separate homeland incorporates territories of western Assam. The territory in question is also home to various other ethnic groups, each with their own claims of being “indigenous” to the area. In addition to such groups, there are also others who trace their place of origin to central India; the sub-Himalayan foothills of Nepal and Bhutan; the Gangetic plains and from neighbouring parts of Bengal (including Bangladesh). Given such a complex ethnic composition, the demand for autonomy for the Boro community is bound to initiate debate on the construction of adversaries of a movement that speaks for a significant ethnic minority, who participate in political processes of a larger nation-state.

Karbi Anglong was created as a district in 1951 and a year later it was granted the status of autonomous district council. Its hilly terrain kept the region “partially excluded” from direct administrative control of the colonial British government in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Rather than pave the way for a successful experience of institutional autonomy for the indigenous people of the hills, this arrangement was gradually challenged by the emerging educated classes. The challenge resulted in sporadic outbursts of anger against the arrogance of the valley-based, caste Hindu power brokers.

In the 1980s, the Karbi, who constitute a shaky majority among the indigenous peoples in the territory (of the present district), the Dimasa (an indigenous group that is dominant in neighbouring North Cachar Hills) and other scheduled tribes,¹ began agitating for greater autonomy. The agitation, once peaceful and led by a faction of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), soon gave way to an armed struggle, which predictably underwent “splits” in the late 1980s. Political issues aside, these splits though couched in the political language of factionalism, have resulted in numerous incidents of ethnic clashes between the Karbi and those perceived to be “encroachers” into

their territory. The armed ethnic militia, as well as the more mainstream autonomy demanding bodies are however united in their desire to recreate a more pristine homeland that not only challenges the limits of the autonomous arrangement currently in place, but also seeks to find radical solutions beyond the purview of constitutional means.

The Construction of “Frontiers”

Ethno-nationalist identities are important categories of identity formation in Northeast India. They constitute a peculiar version of a process that Benedict Anderson terms as an “imagining” of constituent members of a political collective (Anderson 1991: 5-9). However, this process is bound to be a contested one. In the era of modern nation-states, one sees the persistence of ethnicity, sometimes as a vital link to the nation-building process and at other times, as a tool to resist dominance and control. Part of the reason why they exist lies in the geopolitical construction of “frontiers” in the nineteenth century, as well as the manner in which these “frontiers” were incorporated within post-colonial nation states.

The nineteenth century was in fact the era of expansion of capital to hitherto untrammelled landscapes such as Assam. This “discovery” precipitated a move towards a fundamentally different type of economy, where the movement of populations became a condition for growth and colonisation (Hobsbawm 1995: 202- 207). The process of creating “frontiers” became a condition peculiar to the type of economy introduced. Hence, a complicated process of mapping the region within notions of centre-periphery was being undertaken. With it, there was visible move towards what Rumley and Minghi call the “consideration of border landscapes as a set of cultural, economic and political interactions and processes occurring in space” (Rumley and Minghi 1991: 4). Those inhabiting regions that were not immediately earmarked for expansion of capital and colonial administration were clearly subjected to a position of marginality precisely because they constituted a new periphery. It is in the interplay between spaces and peoples that ethnicity becomes an important factor in defining subjects.

The Boro are an ethnic community comprising a number of groups speaking a more or less common dialect or language and claiming a common ancestry. They have been referred to as *Kachari* in the pre-colonial historiography of Assam. Until the 12th century, these groups controlled much of present-day Assam. They are considered aborigines of the Brahmaputra valley. Though there is some dispute as to how many sub-groups actually

constitute the larger Boro group, it is widely accepted that eighteen different groups are part of the larger family mentioned above (Pulloppillil 1997: 1-3). The question of their homogenous ethnic identity is widely contested by ethnographers and administrators alike. A census conducted by the colonial British government in 1881 listed twelve sub-groups who were collectively termed as “Bodo speaking groups”, whereas others like Endle (1883) counted as many as fifteen such sub-groups.

It is generally believed that these groups inhabited the fertile plains of the Luit (Brahmaputra) river in the twelfth century and due to frequent skirmishes with waves of migrating groups of people, like the Tai-Ahom from the east and Indo-Aryan speaking groups from the west, they moved to Karbi and North Cachar Hills in the sixteenth century. According to Nath, the Aryanisation of these groups began in the royal houses and the process ceded to hold much sway after the sixteenth century, at least not among the masses (Nath 1986). The acceptance of Hinduisation by certain sections of the predominantly swidden agricultural society, did create some degree of differences among the people who live in the region and many traces of this is seen even today.² Using a mix of anthropology and probabilities arising out of myths and oral history, Ajoy Roy says that following “...intelligent guess work [one] does find some physiognomic and temperamental similarities between the Boros and the present Kham tribes of Tibet” (Roy 1995: 2). Similar refrains about the possible origin of Boro people leads to further confusion, typical of any myth of origin that sees the Boro as a Mongoloid aborigines of the Luit valley (Swargiary 1997: 78- 80). This is not as bewildering a position that one may be tempted to think it is. The region known as Assam today was considered the crossroads for several cultures and peoples. It was home to corporate groups of migrants, traders and smaller subsistence-agriculture based ethnic groups. These groups moved constantly between South Asia, Southeast Asia and inner Asia (Saikia 1997). In such cases, it is important to conjure a sense of the geography of resource use among the denizens of the “crossroads”, with the Boro-speaking groups being one among many.

Similarly, the present day hill district of Karbi Anglong was home to various peoples who practiced a mix of swidden and settled agriculture. During the pre-colonial reign of the Ahom kings, the Mikir Hills (as the region was referred to, prior to being renamed) the region offered refuge for dissidents. Since the hill- regions were not capable of supporting an intensive multiple-crop agricultural system, most of these tribes and clans practiced swidden agriculture and supplemented their meagre resources with hunting

and gathering from the forests and seasonal farming in the flood plains. Obviously, the dearth of labour power and surplus pushed these groups into raiding areas where surplus was being produced; in this case the domains where subjects paid taxes to the Tai-Ahom sovereign. These raids often resulted in capture of subjects, destruction of property and retributions from the monarchical authorities. In order to regulate these raids, the Tai-Ahom government constituted a series of grants (of land, labour and forest resources), which served to regulate the entry and movement of the raiders on the sovereign's domains (Devi 1968: 35- 37).

In 1838 and 1854, Karbi Anglong (then simply referred to as Mikir Hills) and North Cachar Hills came under British rule and given the topography, were clubbed together as related administrative units³. In 1880, the territory was placed under the "Frontier Tracts" and thereafter changed to "Backward Tracts" in 1919. In 1936, it fell under the Excluded and Partially Excluded areas act. Given the new administrative set-up under British colonial authority, this fluid space- the hills of Karbi Anglong as well as the flood plains and foothills hugging the *Luit* (Brahmaputra) river- was transformed into a landscape where imaginary lines were drawn to prevent the movement of people. In the flood plains, a dubious "line system" allowed landless peasants from Bengal to settle on the lands inhabited by the Boros (Guha 1977: 40- 45). The construction of the "frontier" was carried out simply because the colonial administration could afford to. While restricting the expansion of its influence to probable contested zones that would bring the British into conflict with the French in Indo-China and the Chinese empire, British colonialism also managed to create conditions for extended ethnic conflicts.

The colonial encounter transformed the social and political structures of the region. Trade routes into Southeast Asia and China were closed and new routes opened. In order to monitor and regulate the trade activities in the region, the colonial authorities constructed an all-weather road from Mangaldoi to Udalguri and moved some troops to Udalguri. In addition to these measures, they also began according obligatory rights to tribal chiefs who lived in the hills. The idea was to pay them to maintain some degree of law and order along the trade route. Hence, seven hill-chiefs, known as *Sath Rajahs* (seven kings) were to be paid an annual amount in return for their service as surveillance agents of the state (Moffatt Mills 1984: 171). With law and order established just the way the colonial authorities desired, traders started making inroads into the region. Soon, barter gave way to monetary transactions and balance of trade favoured those who used the currency of the British administration. Unlike the older generation of traders, the new traders

were from different parts of the sub-continent and belonged to communities whose access and use of capital were legendary. They controlled the wholesale trade in the Udalguri mart.

Boro and Karbi society underwent a profound change. Pushed away from agriculture and trading the Boro peasants were led to utilise the thickly forested areas north of Udalguri. Adjacent to the forests there were vast grasslands where a variety of long, thatched grass grew. The peasants became substantially dependent on the forest and grasslands. This survival strategy worked for a while, as the Boro-speaking farmers traded small quantities of lac and rubber obtained from the forests. However, the northward push merchants meant that commercial interests threatened even the livelihood arising from small-scale dependence on the forests. By the time the authorities began getting revenue from the forests; non-Boro merchants from north India had taken control over what had become a lucrative timber trade. The Boro-speaking peasants were thereafter barred from felling trees and extracting any resources from the vast forest region north of the river (Roy 1995: 27- 28). The Karbi once reputed to be a mobile people who traversed the course of Southeast Asia, were sandwiched between the Doyang river and the Shillong plateau. Much of their traditional land along the Kopili and Kollong rivers was converted into tea plantations. Needless to add, the Karbi were excluded from the production process in the plantations.

Culturally, the “frontier” offered great possibilities for proselytising. Missionaries translated the Bible into Karbi and although the Karbi maintained their indigenous beliefs, an emerging educated class converted to Christianity (Anam 2000: 101). Similar changes occurred among the Boro-speaking people as well. With such changes fomenting in the “frontiers”, the need to establish some political space was also felt. In 1928, as the rest of the sub-continent boycotted the Simon Committee on constitutional reforms, the tribal peoples of the Northeast felt it was necessary to present their case to the Commission (Dutta 1993: 9). Hence, during the moment of transfer of power, two simultaneous processes were seen to be working among the Karbi and Boro peoples of the region. First, both societies were poised at the brink of tremendous changes. Education and social reform had created enough aspirations for democratic rule. Many Karbi and Boro intellectuals sympathised with the anti-colonial struggle. Second, both societies were relatively weakly positioned with respect to the aggressive decolonising nationalist ethos prevalent at the time. This meant that while a section of Karbi and Boro society were optimistic of the changes that were to come, it was still a matter of concern as to just how they would be able to negotiate

their place in the postcolonial sun and to seek coherence as communities within a (new) nation-state.

Negotiating for Space within the “frontiers”

In the province of Assam the colonial state “captured” its rural subject a by a combination of tenancy agreements and more pertinently, through strict regulation of their traditional resource base. Some relations whereby a “subject”, as opposed to a “citizen” is reproduced continue well into the period of consolidation of the post-British Indian state. The Boro and Karbi people had been sufficiently alienated from the major decision making processes that was to shape the course of the post- 1947 state in the region.

Following the transfer of power in 1947, the Interim Government of India appointed a sub-committee of the Constituent Assembly, called the North-East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas Sub-committee under the chairmanship of the Assamese political leader, Gopinath Bordoloi. Ostensibly, this came about, as the leaders of the anti-colonial struggle were sensitive to the need for adequate understanding of the situation in the Northeast, especially with regard to the growing aspirations of the tribal people. The sub-committee, also known as the Bordoloi Committee, sought to “...reconcile the aspirations of the hill people for political autonomy with the Assam government’s drive to integrate them with the plains”.⁴ The instrument of this integrative devolution of powers was embodied in the concept of the “Autonomous District Councils” designed by the committee. This instrument was thereafter passed by the Constituent Assembly *with certain modifications* and it now constitutes the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. Originally, the Sixth Schedule was to apply to the “tribal”, essentially hill areas of Assam. On January 25, 1950, the Indian Constitution came into force. As would be expected from such an ambitious nation-building project, the Constitution tried to build in some safeguards for the marginalised and oppressed groups in the country. For the people of the Northeast frontier, this safeguard came in the form of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. The provisions in the Sixth Schedule dealt mainly with the issue of safeguarding the land and customs of the hill tribes of the region. It drew upon the erstwhile “excluded and partially excluded areas” legislation of the colonial state. Yet again, the Boro people and others were left outside the ambit of Constitutional protection. The Karbi did get a semblance of a territory but the Sixth Schedule was not equipped to handle immigration. As other issues like, cultural and social hegemony of dominant ethnic groups, continued to eat away into the fabric of political discourse in Assam, the realities of the day seemed to lead

the tribal people into yet another long series of confrontations with not just the state apparatus, but also with the dominant groups associated with the state.

The proposition that “backward tribes” reside in the hills shows the residues of colonial notions of which subjects are categorised as “primitive”. Nevertheless, even if one bestows the proverbial “benefit-of-doubt” to the committee for this, it still does not address the issue of who constitute “tribal” groups. Implicit in this problem is the issue of marginalisation and impoverishment, as well as the working through of a cultural dynamic in a region where identity is a matter of life, death and most importantly-livelihood. Hence, the persistence of a policy that originated in negating democratic notions of self by reconstituting the governed subject as something *less* than a citizen reveals the first discordant notes in the nation-building process in India. The effect that this has on political mobilisation is quite interesting. In numerous memoranda demanding separation from forced union, Karbi, Dimasa and Boro leaders have come up with images of a collective self that does not have a similar resonance in mainstream politics. Hence, in a petition to the Prime Minister of India in 1973, leaders of the Mikir and North Cachar hills stated:

“...there is an indisputable case for constitution of a separate state for Mikir and North Cachar Hills together with the contiguous tribal areas. Only by this means they (we) will be able to exist unhampered, preserve and develop their (our) entities, languages, cultures and ways of life and at the same time be in tune with the mainstream of national life, to sail the wide ocean that is India and not be restricted to the backwaters of the Brahmaputra valley.”⁵

Similarly, the Boro educated youth had already begun to feel the need for more say in the political and economic distribution, the these “belts” and “blocks” were just not enough. As early as 1933, when the All Assam Plains Tribal League was formed under the initiative of the Boro leader- Rupnath Brahma and his counterpart Bhimbor Deori, the need to reassess the condition of the Boro-speaking peoples in the region was of utmost importance. Continuing with the formation of a consolidated political collective, the Boro Sahitya Sabha (Boro Literary Forum) was formed in 1952. The Forum’s main activities were to promote and protect Boro culture and identity within what they perceived was the growing threat to their survival as a people. It also aimed to devise a ‘standard Boro language’, which could be link for all the Boro-speaking peoples in the region.⁶ Some years later, in 1967, the educated

Boro youth also formed a student body known as the All Boro Students Union (ABSU). In the years to come, these civic organisations would try to steer Boro political discourse against severe odds- both from within and from external forces.

Similar to the memorandum submitted to the Prime Minister by the leaders of Mikir and North Cachar Hills, the Plains Tribal Council of Assam, a body representing the various tribes living in the plains, including the Boro, sent a memorandum to the President of India in 1967 stating:

“...the bitter experience of the last 20 years of independence has given rise to a firm conviction among the tribals of Assam that the Assam government is not interested in giving adequate protection to tribal land. It has deliberately rehabilitated refugees from East Pakistan in tribal Belts and Blocks areas, given settlement to the non-tribal encroachers...(in) gross violation of provisions of the Belts and Blocks”⁷

The main demand of the PTCA was the federal reorganisation of Assam. Symbolic of the fact that the decision to rationally allow for democratic federalism could not be taken by the denizens of the region; the Central government in Delhi rejected the plan *submitted* to them. Over the next few years, this demand took a concrete shape in the agitation for a homeland for the plains tribes of Assam. This homeland was called “Udayachal”. Almost immediately, the Koch-Rajbongshi community who shared the same spaces with the plains tribes struck a discordant note and opposed the demand for a separate state for the scheduled tribes, in this case the Boro and the Mishing. The Koch-Rajbongshi community were not among the schedule tribe list and the fact that they had been Hinduised seem to weigh against them. Soon after, dissent among the PTCA leaders saw a split in the movement, with one section renaming itself the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (Progressive) with a broader position on who ought to be considered the indigenous communities in such a proposed state.

Here it is interesting to also note the differences and similarities of political mobilisation in the two cases. It is a matter of concern for most Boro academics and activists that the Bordoloi Commission chose to leave the Boro-inhabited areas outside the purview of the Sixth Schedule, choosing instead to implement the ineffectual “tribal belts or blocks” for the plains tribes of Assam (Swargiary 1997: 80). In a situation where the Boro educated youth had already begun to feel the need for more say in the political and

economic distribution, the these “belts” and “blocks” were just not enough. This moment of betrayal is played out in subsequent demands for separate institutional arrangements among the Boro people. The language movement, as it is called today, started in the 1950s itself when the Boro Sahitya Sabha (BSS) submitted a memorandum to the then Chief Minister of Assam, Mr. Bisturam Medhi, demanding the introduction of Boro language in the primary schools in Boro populated areas. The government’s efforts at designing a textbook in the Boro language was rejected by the BSS as it had a disproportionately large number of Assamese words in it. In 1963 the government of Assam recognised the use of Boro language in the Boro dominated areas, albeit with a catch that after a particular age Boro would give way to Assamese as the medium of instruction for primary school students. In a play of positions, the BSS demanded that Boro be taught at least to the middle school level. In 1968, the state government recognised Boro as a medium of instruction at the secondary (middle) school level. As if occurring on a parallel stage, the political movement also underwent a split with a dissident PTCA leader announcing the formation of a militant political organisation that would speak for the Boro community but also represent a wider non-Boro, tribal outlook. It was called the United Tribal Nationalist Liberation Front (Roy 1995: 61). However, despite the “tribal” nomenclature in the acronym of the political formation, it actually accepted the idea of a separate state that would be called Boroland.

On the other hand, a feeling of betrayal was also prevalent in the political demands for an autonomous state in Karbi Anglong. Time and again, the up-gradation of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo hills to a full-fledged state is cited as the moment of reckoning for the people of Karbi Anglong (Ingti 1999: 65). That the leaders from Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills decided to stay away from forming a separate state and thought it in their best interest not to merge with Meghalaya, is often explained as prudent bargaining on their part by those seeking to give the movement a teleology of sorts. It is clear that certain Karbi administrators and prominent persons were instrumental in the district being accorded special provisions under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. Following a period of lull in political activities, the Autonomous State Demand Committee was formed in 1986. Since its inception, it was poised as an anti-Congress formation led mainly by students who had participated in the Assam agitation and felt sidelined by the caste-Hindu student leaders from the valley. The provisions for creating another state that would sever Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills was always a possibility given the existence of Article 244(A) of the Indian Constitution.⁸ However, political manoeuvres resulted in periodic clash of interest between

the Congress and the increasingly Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) led ASDC.

It is therefore interesting to quickly telescope the two cases and compare their effect on the politics of the region. This would centrally entail looking at the autonomy arrangements themselves and see if they address the issue of rights that are central to the political constellations that demand autonomy. It is of great interest to reiterate that the dominant tendency in Karbi Anglong points towards the “lack of autonomy” under the Sixth Schedule, whereas most of the political actors in the Boro movement are today speaking about something on the lines of what exists in Karbi Anglong by asking for a Boro(land) Territorial Council. What is it about the institutions that are supposed to guarantee autonomy that makes them obsolete and ineffective in one context and allows them to assume mythical conflict resolution properties in another?

Sovereignty, Citizenship and Subjects: Autonomous Institutions or Governance

The Karbi comprise 63.36% of the total hill (scheduled) tribe population in Assam. The territory of the autonomous district (Karbi Anglong) has been redefined over time. In the elections to the Executive Council in 1989, the ASDC won as many as 22 of the 26 seats. In its election manifesto, its leader Jayanta Rongpi stated that the objective of his party and the movement it had established was to “achieve more decentralisation of the political, economic, socio-cultural and parliamentary power and restore them...to the people of the region through the formation of an Autonomous State” (ASDC 1989). He further went on to assure other ethnic groups in Karbi Anglong that the movement was not hostile to non-Karbhis and promised to check fratricidal strife among the different ethnic groups living in the territory. In June 2000, members of the United Peoples Democratic Front- an ethnic militia comprising militant Karbi youth- carried out attacks against Hindi-speaking agriculturalists in Hamren sub-division of Karbi Anglong. In retaliation, the settlers armed and aided by the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) stationed nearby attacked Karbi villages, looting and killing many Karbi farmers (MASS et al: 2002). These violent events against settlers were repeated in 2001 and 2002. In 2003, a fresh series of ethnic conflicts erupted mainly due to the divisions between the Kuki⁹ and Karbi communities around the area of Singhason Hills. In March 2004, suspected members of a Karbi militia killed six Kuki ginger cultivators who had refused to pay them the

taxes they demanded. In retaliation, members of the Kuki Revolutionary Army (a Kuki ethnic militia), raided three villages and killed as many as 30 Karbi farmers.

These events would read like an indictment of the autonomy arrangement and assurances put across by advocates of an autonomous state. Under the aegis of the Sixth Schedule, provides that for any area notified as an autonomous region by the Governor of the state, a district council comprising of 30 members will be elected. Of these, four are appointed by the Governor of the state. Thereafter, it is the Governor who makes the rules for the first consultation in consultation with tribal representative organisations. As may be noticed, it is the Governor who has the final say in the creation and dissolution of the council. For finances, the autonomous district council gets a meagre amount from the business and commercial enterprises and some land revenue. A district and regional fund, endowed and managed by the Governor, is the main source by which the autonomous body is financed. The powers of the autonomous council are varied, but it in their capacity to regulate land transfer that their discretionary powers are most interesting. Following the colonial policies of allowing land in the hills to be under “community ownership” and not bringing such land under its revenue scheme, the Sixth Schedule also mentions that tribal land is not be sold to anyone and that it belongs to the community. However, by 1979 the overwhelming logic of doing away with community property is noticed in a notification wherein private property is not only acknowledged but also encouraged.¹⁰ In that sense, the councils and village chiefs become the most likely figures of authority to be able to grant and renew leases and land titles. Furthermore, this leaves open the space for political manipulation, wherein it has been known that village chiefs who belong to one or the other political party, would try and push the leases (or titles) of their party members if the executive council is dominated by a friendly party.

This discrepancy between formal rules of the game and informal occurrences; the tension between valorising “tribal tradition and community” and undermining community by extending the logic of private property; all contribute to the reaction- sometimes violent and always aggrieved. In 2003, a publication from the United Peoples Democratic Solidarity, partly addressed to its cadre and partly to the authorities says:

“(therefore) our substantive demands are: 1). Full restoration of land rights to the tribal traditional authority- namely the *sarthe*”, 2). Full political security to the indigenous tribes and *complete disfranchisement of non-tribal infiltrators* who have settled within the territory after 1951, 3). Complete control over law, order and justice, 4). Complete control over natural and

human resources of the territory and 5). Complete authority over all financial and developmental matters (and) *direct access to the financial and economic authorities of India*¹²

The demands are couched in the progressive discourse of indigenous rights and well within the juridical limits of the constitution. However, these demands also have an underlying logic of excluding people from a homeland- *Hemprek*- that has been constructed in the imagination as a pristine homeland that might have existed in the moment of pre-contact with the world and political structures of the colonisers. Today, after several rounds of ethnic clashes and military operations where several people have been affected, the demand for an autonomous state has run into calm waters. It seems to have lost steam, largely due to recurring splits within the movement and the overwhelming power that electoral politics is capable of exerting in obfuscating issues. For the ethnic militia, radical students and cultural leaders, *Hemprek*, is still an ideal though the road ahead is still perceived to be mired with compromises.

In 1999, leaders of an armed opposition group- Boro Liberation Tigers (BLT)- declared a unilateral ceasefire with the government and said that it would sit for talks. In response, the government announced that it would agree to create a territorial council under the sixth schedule for an area demarcated in consultation with representatives of the Boro groups and the government of Assam. Almost immediately, non-Boro groups launched a massive agitation claiming that such a move would not only encourage more ethnic clashes, but also lead to evictions and population transfers from the proposed area. The story, however, predates the 1999 ceasefire announcement. In 1988, the Boro Peoples Action Committee (BPAC) was formed to try to incorporate all the different tendencies within the Boro movement. However, this could not stop the rupture within the ranks of the Boro movement, with the All Boro Students Union scaling down its 92 point demand to just three that included the creation of a full-fledged state on the North Bank, the creation of autonomous districts for Boros on the South Bank (of the river Luit) and also the inclusion of non-Karbi tribals of Karbi Anglong in the Sixth Schedule. This position obviously would not be acceptable to other tribal groups and the government of Assam. The central government intervened and initiated a tripartite talk between the ABSU-BPAC combine, the government of Assam and the central government itself in 1989. The central government, as if throwing a bone to the Assam government said that further division of Assam would not be carried out, however pressed upon the Assam government to accept some of the secondary issues around which the movement had managed to gain ground. The government of Assam accepted, with the classic divisionary tactic that sought to provide the same benefits to other plain tribes of the state.¹³

After eight rounds of talks, the government of India proposed a three member expert committee, in 1990 to examine and demarcate the areas of the Boro and other plains tribes of Assam and submit its report within forty-five days to make recommendations on

autonomy. The committee submitted a report with a proposal to grant maximum autonomy to the Boros, short of a separate state within the Indian union, which the BPAC-ABSU leaders resolutely rejected. However, the fact that the recommendations did place some concrete points over which the leaders would possibly soften their stand and accept a compromise. The main issue remained that of the inclusion of a certain number of villages within the proposed homeland. While a section of the Boro leaders insisted on as many as 4443 villages to be included in the proposed territory, the state government offered another sop saying that it would be the contiguity of the region that would determine the basis of the creation of an autonomous Boro territory. Wherein villages in which Boros constituted even a mere 1% of the tribal population, would be included within a compact territorial area. A section of the BPAC- ABSU leadership debated the issue and came up with a counter demand where an additional 1035 villages were to be added to any proposed autonomous territory. The issue was referred back to the central government.

In 1993, the central government herded the Boro leaders who had sent friendly and frequent feelers for a honourable resolution of the conflict as well as the government of Assam to sign on what came to be known as the “Boro Accord”, in Kokrajhar. The accord created what it called the “Boroland Autonomous Council”, that was to comprise an area covering 2000 villages and 25 estates stretching from the Sakosh river to Mazbat Pasnoi on the north bank of the river Luit (Brahmaputra), via a government of Assam notification (No. TAD/BAC/26/93/18).¹⁴ The area also included reserved forests as per the guidelines laid by the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Environment, Government of India. The actual difficulty in the demarcation of the boundary continued to be the vehement opposition of the non-scheduled tribe population living in the area. A considerable number of people residing in the said area are actually classified as “scheduled tribes” outside Assam. This is especially true of the time-expired indentured labourers who left the tea plantations. Hence, there are large pockets of Santhal, Munda and Oraon villages and these ethnic groups are considered “scheduled tribes” as per the Central list. The government of Assam has not included these tribes among the list of “scheduled tribes” in Assam.

On the other hand, there was also an internal split within the broad spectrum of political discourse in within the Boro community, with an armed section of the movement declaring the accord to be “sell-out” of the original goal of an ethnic homeland for the Boro community. A more militant armed opposition group called the Boro Security Force denounced the accord and vowed to continue what it perceived as the resistance to colonialism (Roy 1995: 76). This organisation was later renamed the National Democratic Front of Boroland and continues its armed activities against the state. Importantly, the armed oppositional activities began to articulate the idea of self-determination for the Boro-speaking people. This included the complete and total secession from India. The rejection of the Indian Constitution marks an epistemological break of sorts in the movement. Although it is difficult to assess the efficacy and successes of such a political strategy, given the fact

that it is proscribed, one can however say that this radical ethno-nationalist voice is an important sub-text in the political discourse in the region (Baruah 1999: 6- 8). It projects into the Boro imagination a vicarious notion of what forms of institutions of collective action that it could reproduce. Following the transfer of power, civic mobilisation within the plains tribes of Assam concentrated on civil disobedience and explicitly stated the cultural basis of economic deprivation. The Boro groups were perhaps more organised than their other tribal counterparts. This also meant that they were already capable of using the constitutional machinery and at various points of the agitation; the Boro political discourse took recourse to the constitutional machinery. However, abstentions from the armed opposition defined the future scope of action. Both armed factions soundly repudiated the formation of the BAC, though their positions were considerably different. NDFB had an ideological problem with the idea of a “deal” that diluted the movement for self-determination. Since the year 1996, the BLTF and NDFB had been engaged in a series of internecine wars, in which both sides took extreme steps to target each other’s cadre and sympathisers. In 1996, the BLT killed a prominent woman activist claiming that her organisation was working as a front for the NDFB.¹⁵ This sent a message to the other group that such acts of violence could be justified. It also brought about a flurry of accusations and counter accusations about the role of the state in arming the BLTF to annihilate the supporters of the other armed opposition group.¹⁶ The fault-lines between the two groups spilled over into the public sphere as well. It was obvious that a section of Boro political opinion, especially the students and the literary bodies, favoured a settlement brokered by the central government. In this settlement, they saw the beginning of a barter where they gained more resources and made it possible for them to control the ethnic competition that would arise with other groups. Indeed, one of the most disturbing aspects of the armed struggle for any variety of autonomy in the Boro-inhabited areas is the fact that successive episodes of violence makes it look like a campaign for ethnic cleansing of the area. There is a continuing debate on what constitutes the historically demarcated Boro areas and the contemporary demographic realities. This adds a potentially intractable angle to the question of who “belongs” to a particular version of ‘national space’.¹⁷

Echoing a concern along these lines, Biswas and Bhattacharjee state that “(ethnic) movements in the Northeast can be understood in terms of a contest over greater social, political and cultural spaces, the spaces in which the ethnic communities were not hitherto represented. This non-representation is further explained within the contexts of rights, power and authority, which cause ethnocentric concerns to find their expression in contestations in many possible ways (Biswas and Bhattacharjee 1994: 232- 245). Here, contestation against the “other” assumes the most explicit form in social spaces (to mobilise). The ‘other’ is characterised in terms of an undifferentiated concept of citizenship, as enshrined within the constitution of India where the Constitution does not recognise the claims of an identity in separation from others as represented within the Nation and the State. This contrast between the statist view and collective aspirations is sharpened through a number of meditative

measures (undertaken by the State) that apparently negotiates the variegating representations between communities in spaces within the concept of the Nation. One wishes to locate the ethnic polarisation in the Boro areas within this process of the lack of a meditative measure that can accommodate the different responses. Splits within the movement are a prime example of the kind of ad-hoc policies that are taken up by the state apparatus in containing the problem posed to the nation-building process by ethno-national projects. The persistence of colonial tones in the political structures in the region only account for one aspect of the “ends” to which governments strive- that of political and territorial unity. In the process, the Indian state’s propensity to carve out states to satisfy the political elite might suggest that it is more “tolerant” of ethnic aspirations. However, the fact that it has a definite “ethnic agenda” of its own- an agenda that is shaped by policy machines that are not “ethnically neutral”- is a condition that negates the provisional safeguards in its Constitution (Brown and Ganguly 1997: 7- 19).¹⁸

It is also interesting to note that the persistence of ethnic identity, as part of (or parallel to) the growth of modern institutions such as literary bodies, students associations is not peculiar to the Northeast. In the case of the Boro and Karbi struggle, an important tendency that accompanied the cultural revivalist and economic deprivation tendencies was the use of physical force.¹⁹ As some theorists argue, rather than decrease ethnic heterogeneity, modernisation tends to increase it in many ways (Olzak and Nagel 1986: 1- 14). However, in the Northeast this process follows a set pattern where groups consolidate around issues of cultural unity; engage with the state for some concessions and in this engagement, the outcome is often one of intractability and violence (Barbora 2002: 1287). This is woven in with the hard realities of fighting for political (and as the case shows) geographical space within contested territories such as “frontiers”.

There seems to be a pattern to ethno-nationalist demands for autonomy in the Northeast, and the lack of institutional capability to handle these demands. Most political demands for self-determination are centrally linked to the idea of a distinct identity of an ethnic group. The manner in which this identity consciousness is articulated is precisely the subject of discussion. It is against this backdrop that much of what appears as guarantees of autonomy compatible with the aspirations of given groups of people within the framework of the constitution, or even within international law, can actually be seen as a condensed body of intricate political negotiation. In essence, these negotiations are supposed to appear as processes that lead to further democratisation of society and politics. In the Indian context, this idea was supposed to form the core of the federal ethos of the republican tradition. Hence, provisions like the Sixth Schedule, Article 371 A and even the recent *Panchayati-Raj* Bill are seen as efforts to ensure the devolution of powers of administration and governance to the grassroots. In each case, legislative, resource mobilisation and executive powers are supposed to somehow address the complex web of people’s aspirations. Yet in the manner in which they filter down, they leave more questions than answers in their

wake. One senses the overwhelming assertion of the concerns of the (centralised) state in losing its locus as the sovereign font of law and administrative processes. Indian democracy is defined by its constitution, inasmuch as it is defined by a particular notion of the rule of the “majority”. On one hand, a ‘statist’ view asserted that it was the individual citizen, rather than seemingly amorphous collectives, who were the backbone of the state. This view harked on the tensions between notions of citizenship and that of communitarian collectives and reiterated that the state “was above all gods”.²⁰ This view that the individual’s loyalties as a citizen of the state supersede her or his loyalty to other identities is constantly being challenged by a second discourse that is articulated against the backdrop of inadequate representation in matter of governance and administration. It would be tempting to see the persistence of primordial identity in the shaping of demands for autonomy in such a situation. Perhaps it would help to see some semblance of political leverage at work here. The definitions of an indigenous collective self, is meant to challenge a “settler” nation state. In both cases, indigenous cultures within post-colonial societies find themselves excluded from the decision processes that central to the state. Their subsequent declaration for separation from a “mother body” is based on an implicit declaration of *people-hood* based on genealogy and descent ties function “not only as other sub-national units do in, say, the assertion of ethnicity, but point to the history of pre-contact and raise questions about legal and moral legitimacy of the present national formation” (Murray 1997: 11). In this significant development, one sees that ethnicity and notions of ethnic contiguities begin to change almost as soon as the community sees itself as the purveyor of a smaller national space. In just a matter of two or three decades, the organic solidarity of the groups classified as plains tribes, against caste Assamese society changes to one of mutual distrust and competition between groups who are placed on the same social and economic plane.

Central to both discourses are certain principles that govern the quest for autonomy. Autonomy and autonomous institutions have not delivered justice. Hence, it is rare to find an instance where autonomy has sought to work on the principle of restitution, by acknowledging that an injustice has been committed, or that some form of reconciliation has to undertaken. Moreover, autonomy- as framed within a statist discourse- does not address the issue of control of resources, finances and costs of running autonomous territories in a comprehensive manner. When they do, as in the Sixth Schedule, they seem ineffectual and laden with contradictions that make the principle of custodianship appear more like a managerial policy. As long as autonomy arrangements are seen as a tool to manage the political demands of people in the region, there will always be problems with its implementation. For every instance where an ethnic group is promised autonomy, there will remain others who will claim to be aggrieved by that arrangement. As one has seen in the case of Karbi Anglong, where the autonomous council already exists, it is hardly a guarantee that such models can be upgraded to include other ethnic groups and/ or economic and political developments. If anything, it is seen as an impediment and a “Trojan Horse” that leads to further loss of lands of indigenous people. The political processes that oil the

workings of such autonomous arrangements (as in Karbi Anglong) lead to an overarching reliance on institutions that need not have a democratic ethos. For example, in a bid to solve an immediate crisis arising out of ethnic conflicts, political and public opinion waste no time in calling for armed intervention by the army and the police. This is self-defeating to say the least. Where these autonomy arrangements are sought to be bestowed as a “peace measure”, as in Boroland, they have only worsened ethnic and political relations between Boros and others who share the same space. Academic concerns have to take these factors into consideration if any intervention or mitigation strategies are to be thought of.

Notes

¹ “Scheduled tribes” are those that appear in the Scheduled Tribe list of the Indian Constitution. This rather fixed categorisation seems at odds with the dynamic process of re-creation of identities in the hills of Northeast India. Groups once classified with generic appellations with one tribe during colonial times, today vehemently claim their distance from those they were arbitrarily linked. Hence, the embarrassing colonial categorisation of the “Kuki-Naga” today stands in stark opposition to “Kuki” and “Naga” identities.

² Hence one sees the dominant Boro students’ organisation- All Boro Students Union (ABSU)- delineate those who it considers to be of the same racial stock but not among the ethnic claimants of a Boro territory because they “have completely forgotten the language” (ABSU, 1987: 11- 15). ABSU is referring to the Rajbongshi ethnic group who inhabit parts of North Bengal and western Assam. The Rajbongshi say that they belong to the Hindu fold, whereas the Boros cannot make such an unambiguous claim.

³ It mattered a great deal that the hills were clubbed together for administrative purposes. This becomes an important political consideration when autonomy, or separate state arrangements are being worked out in the post-colonial milieu. The political logic of creating new states and autonomous districts seems to favour an arrangement wherein a people are seen to “naturally” inhabit a given space- like a hill range. So, while the clubbing together of the two hill districts might have given the Karbi (and Dimasas) a relative advantage, it is only expected that the Boros (who lived in mixed populated areas along the plains) would feel appropriately bitter in the years to come.

⁴ Cf. Bhupen Samah, 2002. “The Question of Autonomy for the Plains Tribes of Assam” in *Social Change and Development (October)*, Ormeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development: Guwahati. pp. 91. Samah’s assessment of the constitutional safeguards and the context in which they evolved are comprehensive but they do not deal with the dynamics of social movements within such regimes.

⁵ The memorandum demanding a separate state comprising the Mikir Hills, North Cachar Hills and the Contiguous Tribal Areas in Assam, was signed by Mr. P.K. Gorlosa and Mr. S.R. Thaoson, secretary and president respectively, of an action committee of the Mikir and North Cachar Hills Leaders’ Conference in Haflong in June 1973.

⁶ Boro-speaking peoples are dispersed all over the region. The Dimasas, speaking a variant of Boro as do the indigenous peoples of Twipra (Tripura). Rather than suggest a pan-Boro identity, the BSS move seems to suggest that Boro-speaking people traversed the course of the region at different points in time. There is an implicit agreement that the geographical and political boundaries of a Boro homeland are limited to western Assam.

⁷ The Plains Tribals’ Council of Assam was formed to articulate the demands of the tribal people living in the “tribal belts and blocks” in the Luit valley. This memorandum was addressed to the then President of India, Dr. Zakir Hussain on May 20, 1967. Mr. Biruchan Doley, Mr. Samar Brahma Choudhury, Mr. Charan Narzary, Mr. Praful Bhabara and Mr. Ajit Basumatary were office bearers of the organization and signed the said memorandum in Kokrajhar town in Assam.

⁸ Article 244(A) recognises that some states can be created by upgrading existing autonomous districts and councils. This was true especially in the case of the formation of the state of Meghalaya and has been retained exclusively for Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills.

⁹ Some political commentators say that the Kuki were actually “invited” to settle in Karbi Anglong by politicians following ethnic conflict between Naga and Kuki peoples in Manipur in 1992. The idea was to use the Kuki as a “vote bank” during Council elections.

¹⁰ Karbi Anglong District Council Notification of July 2, 1979; No. KAC/XVIII/1/63

¹¹ *Sarthe* was appointed to mediate cases in a village. He was usually the most respected person in the village and could adjudicate on any matters except murder and sex.

¹² Excerpt taken from: UPDS. 2003. *Lakhya (Goals): Bixex Smriti Grantha*, UPDS Publicity Wing: Central Office.

⁶ One cannot expect that this to be a magnanimous and enlightened gesture on the part of the Assam government, given the fact that it was probably aware that the discursive politics of ethnic homelands in the region had already become exclusionary.

⁷ The Bodoland Autonomous Council Act 1993 (<http://www.neportal.org>)

⁸ The activist, Ms. Golapi Basumatary was a well-known and respected activist who was the general secretary of the Boro Women's Justice Forum and was a known figure not only in the Boro areas but in other parts of Assam as well. The killing of human rights activists, trade union leaders and others who try to use the democratic spaces to articulate dissent, is a deliberate state policy in Assam, according to reports of voluntary human rights groups (MASS 1999).

⁹ As reported by a staff reporter in the Assamese daily, *Dainik Janambhoomi* on November 25, 1998.

¹⁰ Analysing the exigencies of a 'white nation(al)' space, Ghassan Hage pints to the incongruous similarities between a white supremacist fantasy about what and who controls a particular political landscape in the contested terrain of Australian politics. Although the context is entirely different in Boroland, the process of systematic creation of a well-worn political path that precludes other ethnic groups in a multi-ethnic social milieu, has some uncanny resonance in Boro political discourse (Hage 1998: 16-28)

¹¹ This view is often reinforced by the support that settlers receive in areas where the potential and realities of ethnic conflict are common occurrences. For many indigenous rights activists in the Northeast, the Sixth Schedule seems like a "Trojan Horse" for greater centralisation that would allow the state to fill up the lands (belonging to indigenous persons) with ethnically acceptable groups (MASS, ASMS, NPMHR 2002).

¹² Conflict managers often say that there is a political nexus between student associations, armed opposition group and cultural and political organisation. This diversionary rhetoric does not take into consideration the absurdity of a group of small albeit militant youth posing a national security threat, when all such display of militancy actually seems to be aimed at protecting a small community against domination.

¹³ G.B. Pant, cited in the *Constituent Assembly Debates- Vol. VII*, p. 865.

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