

# SPATIAL POLITICS AT INDEPENDENCE AND THE PRESENT SUB-NATIONALIST MOVEMENTS IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

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## ABSTRACT

*Since the late twentieth century India has been witnessing strong manifestations of contesting (sub) nationalist movements with aims of maintaining separate spaces. This presents two seemingly related problems in terms of discourse about the modern nation-state and its territorial space. First, though dissident nationalism is often projected as a source of political instability and crisis, it exposes the contradiction underlying the vision of national leaders at the time of independence and the formation of the new nation and its illatively drawn space, and secondly, it questions the very foundation of the sovereignty by highlighting the problems of existing power and legitimacy system. Hence, the paper throws the argument that this contradiction that comes out of the visioning of a singular strong nation-state without the sufficient political instrumentality (of managing its own internal diversity) is corollary of the spatial politics (read as Partition) at the time of independence. The post colonial process of building the nation at the behest of that very visioning of strong State leads to crisis of legitimacy in the Northeast especially in Manipur as it is partly based on the very tenets of colonialism.*

## INTRODUCTION

Since the late twentieth century India has been witnessing strong manifestations of contesting (sub) nationalist movements from within. This presents two seemingly related problems in terms of discourse about the modern nation-state. First, though dissident nationalism is often projected as a source of political instability and crisis, it exposes the contradiction underlying the vision of national leaders at the time of independence and the formation of the new nation, and secondly, it questions the very foundation of the sovereignty by highlighting the problems of existing power and legitimacy system. Hence, the paper throws the argument that this contradiction that come out of the visioning of a singular strong nation-state without the required or sufficient political instrumentality (of managing its own internal diversity) is corollary of the fluid and fragmented political atmosphere existing at the time of Partition. Had Partition not happened the political destinies of the erstwhile Princely Kingdoms in the Northeast would have been different.

The post colonial process of building the nation at the behest of that very visioning of strong State leads to crisis of legitimacy in the Northeast especially in Manipur as it is partly based on the very tenets of colonialism. Thus, the paper tries to expose the inherent link between the Partition and the nationalist movements in the Northeast particularly in Manipur. Consequently, it indicates in terms of theorizing the nature of modern nation state that Indian

'nation-state' that was constructed with a particular *will* deduced from the fragmentary politics of the Partition had never been truly impersonal. It is necessarily both influencing and influenced by power *section* from the beginning itself. The very foundation of the States was based on the wishes of the some *section* which formed the central structural determinant of the state and political outcomes. It makes even the idea of political equality supposedly available in democracies a farce than reality as minor nations are always sidelined in national politics to the extent that their representativeness remain meaningless.

## PARTITION AND ITS REMNANTS

Let's go back to history for a moment. India won her hard-earned prize freedom after long, glorious years of struggle but a bloody, tragic partition rent asunder the fabric of the emerging free nation. On the eve of independence, when it was certain that the British rule could not survive in India, many sorts of contradictory visions on post imperial order started raising their heads. The congress demanded transfer of power to one centre which was also the British bid. The British called for a united India for their own post colonial foreign policy opportune as they thought that divided India would lack depth in defence, frustrate joint defence plans and be a blot on their diplomacy (Bipan Chandra, 1989, p.492). The Muslim League sticks to the two nation theory and the corresponding demand for partition of the country and the creation of Pakistan. Finally the British succumbed to the demand of the league and left India divided. Thus, Punjab, Bengal and Assam were to be partitioned. In the NWFP, and the Sylhet district of Assam where the influence of ML was doubtful, a plebiscite was called for.

The congress was not ready on partition even till 1946. On 5<sup>th</sup> April 1946 Nehru states "Congress is not going to agree to the ML's demand for Pakistan under any circumstances whatsoever, even if the British Government agrees to it. Nothing on earth, not even the United Nation is going to bring about the Pakistan which Jinnah wants".<sup>1</sup> There was a sudden change in the idea on Pakistan and said on 13 of the same month that he was prepared to view with respect the demand for Pakistan if it is made after the freedom of the country is achieved. There has been a lot of debate on this sudden change of the move. This move from the Congress has a lot of significance in terms of future political destiny of the country as a whole in general and of the smaller princely kingdoms in particular.

Bipan Chandra rightly puts it, the Congress failed to accomplish one of the two fold task it had on the eve of independence – structuring diverse classes, communities, groups and region into a nation and securing independence from the British rulers. While Congress succeeded in building up nationalist consciousness sufficient to exert pressure on the British to quit India, it could not complete the task of welding the nation and particularly failed to integrate the Muslims into this nation. (Bipan Chandra, 1989).

As a matter of fact when the partition happened a new political destiny was also forced upon areas which were still not 'India'. These were the five hundred princely states,

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Manash Bhattacharjee, 2006, In Nehru's Shadow: Between India and Politics, Eastern Quarterly, Vol 3 Issue IV, p. 232.

rule by medieval Monarchs which were acceded into the Indian union after independence. They were, in fact, given the choice of joining either of the new states. Under some circumstances most of them acceded to India. For instance, the Nawab of Junagadh, a small state on the coast of Kathiawar, announced accession to Pakistan, afterwards Indian troops occupied the state and a plebiscite was held which went in favour of joining India. The Nizam of Hyderabad made an attempt to claim an independent status but was forced to accede in 1948 after an internal revolt had broken out in its Telengana area and after Indian troops had marched into Hyderabad. The Maharaja of Kashmir also delayed accession to India.

The relationship some of the princely States shared with the British was exclusive in the sense that some of them were under the protection of the British Empire and were granted a relative autonomy of sovereign rule. When the question of merger arrived after India's independence, these states were co-opted by sleight-of-hand procedures, pressure tactics, and force. Take the case of Kashmir. After maharaja Hari Singh was finally persuaded to accede to India, Nehru promise plebiscite which was never happened. The larger issue that call for a serious discussion is that *is the current political problems in the erstwhile princely states like Manipur the result of flawed political method (out of the obsession with the making a strong Indian nation) adopted in the absorption to the Indian state after the later lost a major territory in the 1947 partition.*

A upshot question which can be set for discussion at this juncture is that whether Nehru's aspiration on the Northeast started from that moment when he and other leaders accepted partition of the country as no political strategic link could be marked out between them and people in the remote hilly region before that. The significance of the question lies in the fact that political strategy made aftermath the Partition by these leaders had strong impingement on the existing political atmosphere of the region which consequently commanded the future course of political mobilization in the region. Before that the Northeast was found nowhere in the political map of the nationalist leaders and for them the Northeast was just incommunicable and inaccessible terrain.

One issue naturally come out of this question is the possible political destiny of the smaller kingdoms which were forced to accede into the Indian union. Had the partition not happened would there be any question of imposing somebody's nationalism on differently civilized populations? This question is important as there has been always a question from many that whether 'nationalism' that was regarded as a feature of the victorious anti-colonial struggles in the 40s and 50s is used as a tool to colonize and suppress nationalist aspirations of various smaller nations by branding their movements for preserving past sovereignty as sub-nationalism and a matter of ethnic politics, unpredictable force of primordial nature threatening the orderly calm of civilized life.

## POST-PARTITION POLITICAL IMAGINATION

Just before independence, in terms of future political structure, the Cabinet mission in 1946 proposed a two tiered federal plan which was expected to maintain national unity while conceding the largest measures of *regional autonomy*. There was to be a federation of the

provinces and the states, with the federal centre controlling only defence, foreign affairs and communication. At the same time, individual provinces could form *regional unions* to which they could surrender by mutual agreement some of their powers. Both the national congress and the Muslim League accepted this plan. The political development in the immediate post partition is of enormous importance for whatever accepted by the Congress and its leaders on the future political structure of the country were sidelined after partition. The Partition in fact shattered the imagination of the nationalist leaders of maintaining a strong nation. Thus, a new path had to be sought to materialize this imagination. It was felt amongst the nationalist elites that the system that was thought to be constructed for making a strong India needs to be based on centralization of political authority. The idea of integrating small princely states within this centralized power suddenly became a technical wheel invented to carry out the making of a strong India.

Thus, the need for imagining the new community called India out of divided populations including those in the remote terrains was born out of this particular phenomenon at a historical juncture that India faced on the eve of independence. However, the formation of this imagine community poses a contradiction between the very doctrine under which the national elites fought for liberation (**nationalism which says, if one takes hint from Hegelianism, each people had its particular genius, its own “spirit of the people,” that its people had its own peculiar political institution which had grown as it grew, and that the institution of one people could not be imposed on another/ the belief in the right to political independence to all people against colonialism/ right to nations self determination**) and the vision of constructing a strong powerful State by acquiring territories under different nationals. Partition, thus, remained one strong force that shape and influence the politics of constructing new Indian nation.

This contention would be clear if one takes the following points seriously. The nationalist leadership at independence had a set of ideas and goals that helped to structure their responses to the problems of governing the newly independent country. At the top of their goals, “the sine qua non for everything else was an abiding faith in and determination to preserve the national unity and integrity of the country against all potential internal and external threats to it. The very fact that this first priority, the centre of the dreams of the Congress nationalists, had to be sacrificed at Independence itself, with the partition of the country, reinforced the determination of the leaders never to make such a sacrifice again” (Paul R. Brass, 1994). Thus, since independence two strict rules have been followed in dealings with “dissident” ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural group demands. The first is that no secessionist movement will be entertained and that any group which takes up a secessionist stance will, while it is weak, be ignored and treated as illegitimate, but, should it develop significant strength, be smashed, with arm force if necessary. All secessionist demands in post independence India which acquired any significant strength have been treated in this way, especially in the north east part of the country. The second rule has been a prohibition against the concession of demands for any form of political recognition of a religious community. Religious minorities are free to preserve their own personal law, to practice their religion as they see fit, to seek protection for their language and culture, but not

to demand either a separate state for their community even within the Indian Union or separate electorate or any form of proportional representation in elected or appointed government bodies.

The consequences of these decisions taken by national leaders after the partition should be properly invoked for a deeper academic discussion. These decisions are quite closely connected with the dismemberment of the country because of the partition. Thus, national leaders' vision for the new state on the basis of a strong centralized power has overshadowed every other consideration that even Nehru had to compromise his earlier stand on great autonomy promise to the federating units. In his Presidential address on the future of the Indian states, 31 December, 1945, "Jawaharlal Nehru categorically assured that Constitution will have to be for a democratic state of the federal type, with a great deal of autonomy for the federating units. Such a federation, the National Congress has declared, must be a *willing Union* of its various parts..." (Sanajaoba). Suddenly after the partition this idea of "willing union" had given way to 'tightening grip policy'. The efforts have enormous consequences on the geo-culturally diverse and socially fragmented populations.

Thus, it would not be exaggerating to claim that the vision of the strong power is one of the important outcomes of the Partition and this has led to the suppression of small kingdoms and ethnic minorities in the Northeast. This suppression has created a contradiction in the form of primacy given to the national security which is interpreted in terms of territorial integrity over the human security which should be the foundation of all forms of political organizations. Thus the heightened cultural and political conflicts in the region is an evident of the corroding the effectiveness of the political organization that was founded on the basis of the vision created after the partition. The strong state cannot legitimately incorporate many of the identities with equal consideration.

### **THE VISION AND THE ABSENCE OF LEGITIMACY.**

So, one question still remains unanswered - 'How Indian State tries to promote vision of a strong state? This question is important because of the very fact of existing dissenting nationalism sprouting in the region and the later's invalidation of the Indian nation. It is often expressed that the nation is produced as a tool of dominance and this politics generates an antithetical historical consciousness against this very tendency of dominance. As mentioned earlier that the political rhetoric of the contemporary India is led by the thrust for the very idea of keeping the nation strong by maintaining territorial integrity. This is to be enforced by adopting various policies, laws and principles of rule and if necessary with armed force. It is here one needs to question the legitimacy of enforcing such policies by the 'democratic India' whose *raison d'être* is the protection of citizens from any sort of despotic use of power. If one believes in what J S Mills had said it is clear that "a people cannot well be governed in opposition to their primary notions of right, even though this may be in some points erroneous", then one needs to confess that the vision of strong state to be created by tightening grip policy' inherently possess illegitimacy. The crisis of legitimacy starts right from the conception of a strong India by annexing different smaller Kingdoms in the

Northeast without the proper consent of the concerned people. Many still wonder on the very basis of this conception. Was it based on the utilitarian idea of human welfare or do we have enough strength to invoke the modern idea of justice. It was neither imagined for the welfare of the people nor for the security of the lives of the people but for the 'security of the territory' maintenance of which become necessary after the partition. It was part of the practical policies to impose colonialist imagination of maintaining strong power over the suppressed ones. The move was as much illegitimate as illiberal as it does not emphasize the wishes and acceptance of the people concerned. This historical error gives birth to a new challenge in the nation-building process in the sense that feeling of loyalty, belongingness and fraternity that should be with diverse people living together within a recognized political boundary have not been properly inculcated. Put in different way, the success of a nation building process would necessarily be centred on the intuition of the individual members of that particular political community that they are equal and conceited parts of that community. Even if the individual members belong to different ethnic or linguistic communities, or of different classes or races, they should have a feeling of common affiliation to that nation "imagined" or otherwise. Thus, in the case of India, nation-building should necessarily aim at bringing all the socially and economically diverse communities together so that they could proudly identify themselves as Indians first. This is missing from the beginning itself.

The argument on illegitimacy involves in the enforcement of the vision and contemporary governance in the region will be supplemented by the kinds of laws imposed on the people in the region. Even after the merger of the smaller groups into the Union colonial laws and ordinance were invoked to deal with the resistance in the region. A colonial mindset was particularly visible in the case of the Assam Disturbed Areas Act (ADA), 1955, a predecessor to the more draconian Armed Forces Special Power Act of 1958. The ADA Act was passed by the Assam Assembly to meet the threats pose by the late A.Z. Phizo-led Naga insurgency. It had followed the guidelines set by an ordinance passed by colonial government in August 1942. Ironically, the 1942 ordinance was passed to counter the opposition to the war effort by the Congress Party. The Congress, in turn, decided upon the same law for 'its own people' in the region. Is the State, which in liberal scheme claims the "monopoly use of force", justified its employment of might for securing territorial integrity without the required acceptance from those over whom might is being used? Some even maintain that the kinds of crises the region has been facing for the last few decades are logical corollary of the attitude of the Indian mainstream.<sup>2</sup> Thus, one of the scholars working in the field had to mention that the initial broadmindedness of the framers of the Constitution was gradually undermined by a Centre which was ever more concerned with national integration rather than nation-building in true sense. He opines "the centripetal attitude of the Centre was never satiated as its very mindset towards the region was negative as illustrated from a letter written by Sardar Vallabhai Patel to Pandit Nehru in 1950: *our Northern or Northeastern approaches consist of Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, Darjeeling and the Tribal areas of Assam. From the point of view*

<sup>2</sup> T.B. Subba, 1996, 'Ethnicity, Culture and Nationalism in North-East India: A Conspectus', in M.M. Agrawal (ed.) *Ethnicity, Culture and Nationalism in North-East India*, Indus Publishing Company, New Delhi. pp. 43-44.

*of communications they are weak spots... The contact of these areas with us, is by no mean(s) close an(d) intimate. The people inhabiting these portions have no established loyalty or devotion to India. Even Darjeeling and Kalimpong areas are not free from promongoloid prejudice. It is such an attitude of the Indian mainstream that is probably responsible for so many past and present ethnic movements in the Northeast India. Hence, if there is any problem of nation-building in the region, it arises from the mind-set of the mainstream rather than the region itself'.<sup>3</sup>*

## DOMINATION AND DISSIDENT MANIPURI NATIONALISM

Many of the scholars suggest that the Manipuri narrative of creating a modern Manipuri self is reasoned against certain historical experiences of denial and coercion that trickle down from the hegemonic spacing created by Indian nationalist project. It is this experience of denial and coercion that marked a historical time of contestation in Manipur resulting into a reproduction of a dissenting nationalism. A constant reproduction of this historical time added by the contemporary experiences of under representation, under development and fragmentations has led to the emergence of conflicting historical identities within. These conflicting relationships are not inherent manifestations but more of a by-product of the encounter with the dominant.

Before its annexation to Indian union in the year 1949, Manipur had been an independent state with a history of two millennia old political organization and a standing army. Even during the period of British rule in India, Manipur was not a part of British India and not subject to its laws. "I have been able to find, tend to show that our Government (British India) has dealt with Manipur on the footing of its being a Sovereign power in alliance with, and not owing any allegiance to the Queen, such as may be due from some of the native States in India".<sup>4</sup> Even after the Anglo-Manipur war, 1891, without being annexed to the British Crown, Manipur continued its independent political status till 1949 under the protection of the British Paramountcy. As the Paramountcy lapsed in 1947, Manipur adopted its own political Constitution, under which the Constitutional Monarchy was adopted and continued till Manipur's merger with Indian Union on October 15, 1947.

The Indian nationalists' imagination of the strong state has suppressed such historical facts in the region. Talking about the genesis of insurgency in Manipur a renown scholar remarked, "from whichever historical perspective one looks, Manipur always stood as a country or nation-state with its territorial integrity, population, distinct cultural heritage, self-reliant economic structure, a government under 'Rule of Law' for more than 10 or, even 15 centuries and a national mental attitude during these centuries till its merger with the newly born Indian Union on October 15, 1949. The events that rolled by led to erosion of the national question, dominance of Manipuri nation by others, destruction of economic stability

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Arguments by Barrister Mono Mohan Ghose on the political status of Manipur regarding the trial of the Manipuri King and Senapati by the British in 1891 cited in Naorem Sanajaoba, (eds) Manipur Past and Present, 1988, Mittal Publication, New Delhi, p Xviii, Introduction. It was even acknowledged as an Asiatic Power by Calcutta High Court in its verdict on case in 1865.

and a trend leading towards permanent, irrevocable national subjugation” (Sanajaoba Naorem, 1989, p. 253-54). The merger was not a smooth sailing business and later on, it became a curious object of controversy as it was signed by the Maharaja under duress, which was not ratified by the Maharaja in Council nor by the legislature. On the eve of the signing the agreement he wrote to the Government of India that “ Direct dealing with me was feasible when sovereignty was vested in me but, after the introduction of the State Constitution Act, the sovereignty and administration of the state has been shifted to the people.” This is to be substantiated by his early letter in which he stated that “if I am compelled to work independently of my people, my action will be quite unjustifiable” (Sanajaoba, 256)

### **CONCLUDING REMARK**

However, one question still remained unanswered. Had the partition not happened would the political destiny of the Princely State be different and not the kind of problems created by the armed revolutionaries and counter insurgency operations be there? I would like to submit here that if that was not happened, the liberality of the nationalist elites would have been maintained towards the Princely states. The urgency of annexing them in the manner it was experimented might not perhaps been there. Because one of the crucial understanding that could have been built between the Congress and the Muslim League would be a considerable amount of autonomy to the minorities and that understanding would certainly benefit the Princely states. The vision for strong state would have given way to local autonomy and the acceptance of the later would have been gain through confidence rather than through force. Thus, one possible answer to the question why within the Indian nation sudden rise of ‘contesting nations’ is the visioning of a strong centralized State which was necessitated by the partition of the country on the eve of independence. This is, I think the sufficient ground to link the 1947 event and insurgencies or national liberation movements in the erstwhile independent kingdoms in the Northeast. The calculated move of the Muslim League comes about as a political mishap for the princely kingdoms.