

OXFORD

TROUBLED
DIVERSITY

THE POLITICAL PROCESS
IN NORTHEAST INDIA

edited by
sandhya goswami

L

The Northeast has evolved as the 'other' in India's nationalist paradigm. This otherness is the result of the region's racial composition and its historical positioning, cultural connectivity, communication, and economic linkage. A site of radical identity politics, the Northeast has various communities with striking differences in origin, religion, and language that give rise to ethnic conflicts and contestations for power, with each group perceiving the other as a threat to its existence.

This work looks at the politics of diversity and identity in the Northeast. The concept of 'diversity' can be used as a unifying mechanism in the post-colonial nation-state through which identities can get homogenized; ethnic identities and cultures can be manipulated for political or economic advantage; and ethnic violence can have disastrous consequences like extortion, rape, abduction, death, and violation of human rights.

Offering a comprehensive analysis that includes theoretical perspectives and a comparison with the political problems in Jammu and Kashmir, this book is a significant study of identity crises in minority communities.



Sandhya Goswami is Professor, Department of Political Science, Gauhati University. She is also a member of the Lokniti Programme of Comparative Democracy under the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi. Her principal research interests include democracy, election studies, and social movements.

Photograph courtesy: The author

Troubled Diversity

The Political Process in Northeast India

Edited by
Sandhya Goswami



OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trademark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

Published in India by
Oxford University Press
YMCA Library Building, 1 Jai Singh Road, New Delhi 110 001, India

© Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla 2015

The moral rights of the authors have been asserted

First Edition published in 2015

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the
prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted
by law, by licence, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reprographics
rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the
above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the
address above

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

320.95416 GOS/T P15
Call No.: ISBN-13: 978-0-19-945333-7
Acc No.: **41587** ISBN-10: 0-19-945333-0

Typeset in Dante MT Std 10.5/13
Typeset by Zaza Eunice, Hosur, India
Printed in India by Rakmo Press, New Delhi 110 020

Contents

<i>Foreword by D.P. Barooah</i>	vii
<i>List of Tables</i>	xvi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xvii
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xviii
<i>Introduction by Sandhya Goswami</i>	xxi
I. Historical Legacies	
1. Constructing and Performing Diversity: Colonial and Contemporary Processes <i>Nandana Dutta</i>	3
2. Post-Colonial Indian State and Tribes: Nationalist Discursive Structures and a New Hegemonic Consensus <i>Amit Prakash</i>	24
3. Nation-State and Ethnicity: The Critical Discourse in Northeast India <i>Asok Kumar Ray</i>	48
4. Adivasi Identity Question in Assam: A Historical Perspective <i>Meeta Deka</i>	63

II. Diversity, Development, Conflict, and Management	
5. The Nexus between Development and Diversity: A Case Study of the Pagladia Dam Project <i>Barnalee Choudhury</i>	81
6. Demand of 'Tea Tribes' for Scheduled Tribe Status in Assam: A Review <i>Dhruba Pratim Sharma</i>	104
7. Autonomy Question and Local Governance Paradox: Alternative Intra-federal De-territorialized Model <i>Jayanta Krishna Sarmah</i>	122
8. Managing Diversity: The Case of the Karbi-Dimasa Autonomy Movement <i>Uttam Bathari</i>	140
III. Comparative Perspective	
9. Northeast and Kashmir: Problems in a Comparative Perspective <i>Noor Ahmad Baba</i>	167
10. Diversity and Conflict: Lessons Drawn from Jammu and Kashmir and Northeast India <i>Rekha Chowdhary and Sandhya Goswami</i>	186
11. Beyond the Politics of Control <i>Bhagat Oinam</i>	213
<i>Index</i>	224
<i>Notes on the Editor and Contributors</i>	237

Foreword

At the outset, I would like to put in a word on the term 'India's Northeast'. It is well known how after the reorganization of the composite State of Assam, and in the wake of the coming into existence of the North Eastern Council, for reasons of convenience, the seven different units (Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, and Mizoram) came to be collectively referred to as the Northeast. Sikkim was added in 1992 to the list of the northeastern states insofar as the North Eastern Council (NEC) is concerned. While politically and geographically it is all right to use the generic term 'Northeast', we all know that each of the northeastern states is possessed of its distinctive history and culture and personality, and hence, studying anything pertaining to northeastern India would naturally mean studies in many aspects of life and culture of each of the peoples in the northeastern region. While common and parallel sources are there and could be there, I think it would be unhistorical to pass over the distinctive nature of each individual unit's sources of history or otherwise. Colonial rule meant a world of difference to interactions among the hillmen and women, and the dwellers of the plains of Assam with the alien rulers' emphasis on *divide et impera*. This explains, incidentally, why studies in colonial history are very relevant in order to pursue investigations in post-colonial history better, including tendencies and evident trends of internal colonialism in the era of independence.

It is agreed on all hands that there is a great relevance of continuous studies in ethnicity from all standpoints, including most certainly the problems of achieving desirable harmony in a voluntary Union. Judged by events in the post-Cold War period, ethnic conflicts could haunt the world for decades to come. It appears as though suppressed traditional/

tribal/indigenous/hill peoples' rivalries have been released into a power vacuum. How did so much hate accumulate in so many countries and regions? Ethnicity does not necessarily have to give rise to violence and yet, one could easily manipulate ethnicity to throw people against one another. Secondly, although the question of autonomy bothered the minds of the leadership in the days of the struggle for freedom from the British, and definitive steps were taken consider the constitution-related clauses of the 1942 Quit India Resolution and the Objectives Resolution of the Constituent Assembly, these were conveniently forgotten while finalizing the Constitution for free India with the unhappy result that problems arose in the context of nation-building. It is a painful but dominant reality that nation-building in India has turned out so far to be a rather retarded process, what with preferring guided 'integration' or for that matter, 'association', and what with onerous centralization despite the prattle about 'democratic decentralization'. I think India is as yet a nation-state-in-the making, and hence the concern about nation-building, for a real union of states called India. Thirdly, for peace to come and prevail, I think there is an emergent need today to cultivate a human rights approach while dealing with all problems of life: civil and political; and economic, social, and cultural. Ethnicity, autonomy, and nation-building all have their legitimate shares in the process in a violence-free atmosphere.

While speaking about various tribes and non-tribal people of India's Northeast, we are not oblivious of the people around us. While we speak of humankind (mankind and womankind together), might I refer to the following pleasant scenario as pictured in a simple but moving description: 'The colour of skin, facial features, languages habits, traditions and customs—all of these factors distinguish them from one another, but do not prevent them from living together, from interacting with one another, or from uniting in a world community known as humanity'¹.

Assertion of tribal identity and legitimate aspirations of the people led to the creation of separate identities with the break-up of the old Assam. But even after the creation of distinctive administrative units, differences among different ethnic communities surfaced leading to socio-political-economic movements centring round what has come to be termed as identity crisis. At times, when the basic demands of a movement like the six-year long (1979–85) Assam Movement over the

foreign nationals' issue came to be officially recognized, albeit only on paper, in the absence of the actual implementation of the Assam Accord (15 August 1985), other ethnic communities inside Assam appeared to copy the same, leading to the emergence of ethnic movements of communities like the Bodos (Boros) and this in turn led to assertions of ethnic identity by other smaller communities. A repetition of the same story is found in varying proportions in other areas of the Northeast. At times smaller communities tend to associate or merge forming, thereby, bigger entities to facilitate movements with political demands.

As events proved, the Sixth Schedule scheme under the Constitution failed to satisfy earlier popular aspirations in the hills areas, which was why there emerged the demand for separate hill states. The framers of the Constitution could not foresee the desirability of forming different hill states comprising basically the concerned ethnic groups. The States Reorganisation Commission (SRC), formed on 29 December 1953, although displaying considerable understanding of the problem, could not come forward with a viable method of resolving the issues. It considered the demand for the creation of a hill state in Assam as impracticable² (*SRC Report*, pp. 186, 259–60). But contrary to the vision of the SRC, the reorganization of the composite State of Assam and the border region called North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) took place by stages, leading to the formation of four predominantly tribal States, namely, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, and Mizoram. In fact, reorganization of Northeast India began with the establishment of Nagaland in 1963, preceded by a violent insurgency which continued afterwards, and is still a problem. Hopefully, the current ceasefire should mature into a workable settlement. Meghalaya achieved statehood in two stages, first in 1969 as an 'autonomous state' within the state of Assam, and then in 1972 as a full-fledged state in the wake of the large-scale reorganization of northeast India. Mizoram's insurgency began in 1966 under the Mizo National Front (MNF); it was formed into a Union Territory in 1971 and secured the status of a state in 1987, thereby ending the insurgency. The NEFA union territory of 1948 was renamed Arunachal Pradesh and achieved full statehood in 1987.

There have been accords galore in the northeast beginning with the Assam Accord (15 August 1985) followed by the Mizoram Accord (30 June 1986) and the Tripura Accord (12 August 1988). The Assam Accord is in tatters even after a renewed agreement with the Centre after the

United Progressive Alliance (UPA) regime took office. The politics of accords has not succeeded in other areas (with the possible exception of Mizoram where substantial progress was noticed despite the surfacing of the Reang problem). There is an endemic insurgency situation in practically every area of the northeast region. Where it was not there, new demands for a 'Union Territory' status were made in certain areas within constituted states, as in Assam's Barak Valley, Arunachal Pradesh, and on paper at least, in Manipur, where certain militant outfits also demand independent status for the state.

District Councils in a number of cases have come to grief. The three autonomous district councils in Mizoram are seeking union territory status. As reports go, at least one outfit in the Garo Hills area of Meghalaya seeks the creation of a union territory. In Assam the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC), divided now into two rival factions, stands for autonomous statehood for Karbi Anglong and NC Hills (present Dima Hasao) districts of Assam under Article 244-A of the Indian Constitution. The two factions of the United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS), a militant outfit, have entered the fray with separatist demands with their own pro-and-anti-cease fire programmes. Further, new militant outfits have surfaced in Karbi Anglong district. For several months in the recent past, much violence has been there in Karbi Anglong district emanating from rival militant groups. Disturbed peace almost reigns supreme in several areas of the northeast region.

Militant outfits have proliferated over the years in all the states of the northeastern region. They demand either sovereign statehood or separate state status within or outside the Union, or a constituted state. Predominantly tribal, militant outfits, as reports go, sometimes take resort to 'ethnic cleansing', for instance, in Bodo areas of Assam and in the autonomous district council areas in Tripura, and so on. While ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) demands a 'sovereign independent Asom', Bodo militant outfits like the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) want independent status for the Bodo tribal people, which the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) had also demanded earlier.

BLT, however, entered into talks with the Government of India and the Government of Assam in March 2000 with a view to fulfilling the aspirations of the Bodo people relating to their cultural identity, language, education, and economic development. The talks resulted in

signing of a Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) between the government and the BLT on 10 February 2003 according Sixth Schedule status to the Bodo Territorial Council (BTC) within Assam. BTC is a decided improvement on the earlier ill-fated Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC) which came to grief when even its warmest supporters turned out to be its trenchant critics because of the sham autonomy sought to be doled out by the rulers of the day. Discordant notes were in evidence after the new Bodoland Accord when the Koch-Rajbongshi Student's Union called for a 12-hour bandh and there was a threatened stir against the creation of the BTC at the instance of non-Bodo organizations under the common banner of the Sanmilita Janagosthiya Sangram Samity. On the other hand, on the day the new Bodoland Accord was being signed, a huge demonstration was staged at Silchar in support of the Dima Halim Daoga (DHD) demand for a separate Dimasaland to be carved out of parts of the Assam districts of Nagaon, N.C. Hills, Karbi Anglong and Cachar. Demands and counter-demands backed, more often than not by violence, undoubtedly threaten the peace process in Assam. If every other ethnic community continues to demand a separate status of their own, could there be a meaningful entity by the name of Assam? In the welter of controversies, however, the formation of the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD) of Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, and Udalguri was a decidedly welcome step. But the peace process in the Bodo areas can only be completed by reaching a negotiated settlement with the NDFB.

Militant outfits in Manipur also demand sovereign status for Manipur. As for Nagaland, the Khaplang faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-K) stands for a sovereign country, a united Nagaland that includes all Naga-inhabited areas of the 'Indo-Burma region'. On the other hand, the Nagaland Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isaak-Muivah), engaged in a ceasefire agreement with the Government of India for more than a decade, envisions the establishment of a 'greater Nagalim' including contiguous Naga-inhabited areas of Assam, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, and even Myanmar. This is territorial expansionism running amok since Assam, Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh could hardly be expected to part with their territories merely to satisfy the advocates of a 'greater Nagalim' precisely because expansionism has always created problems for the affected people. There is another side of the problem touching the militant organizations. Some

militant outfits of the region appear to present a 'united front' vis-à-vis the Government, and, yet, there are reported intra-militant internecine conflicts (as in the case of Bodo militant outfits in Assam and some militant outfits in Tripura). Inter-militant conflicts also arise regarding programmes of independent statehood: for instance, the Manipur rebel organizations are opposed to the scheme of statehood as advocated both by NSCN (Isaak-Muivah) and NSCN (K). Further to this welter of controversies, the peace process, started with such great hopes when the ULFA-appointed People's Consultative Group (PCG) held three rounds of talks with the Government of India, came to a sudden halt after the third round of talks on 22 June 2006. The retarded peace process needs to be activated once again, sooner than expected, because even the government expressed the view times without number that there is no alternative to dialogue and discussion, ruling out a military solution of the insurgency problem in Assam.

The dominant reality in the country's Northeast has been an increasing phenomenon of alienation. Those pledged to uphold the Constitution have only succeeded in building a 'monument of misdirected energy' by sheer neglect and callousness. The Indian National Congress had been the ruling party for over four decades in the country and most of the states including those of the Northeast. Recognizing this reality, even the leadership of the Congress in the Northeast had to acknowledge its responsibility for the sorry plight of the Northeast. No less than a body of Congress leaders in the Northeast including Chief Ministers, Union Ministers, Pradesh Congress Committee Presidents, All India Congress Committee members and Congress Working Committee members concluded in a unanimously-adopted resolution in July 1994, according to a widely published press report that: Half a century after Independence, the Northeast remains isolated and backward, spawning unrest and alienation; 'precious little has been done to end or even lessen, this sense of isolation' ('NE isolated and backward, says NECCC (I) resolution', *The Statesman* (Calcutta), 4 July 1994). Self-condemnation could hardly go any farther. The much-vaunted economic packages of both the United Front and National Democratic Alliance (NDA) governments have not succeeded in addressing the acute problems of poverty and unemployment in the region, fanning thereby the flames of alienation to the great dismay of large sections of people in the region. It remains to be seen whether the recently

announced largesse by the UPA government would be able to address the basic problems of the people.

Manifest alienation has been particularly so in the 1990s. Increased alienation has been caused due to a variety of factors like state violence, unabated continuance of engineered violence in areas peopled by different ethnic communities, politicking by the administration, continued imposition of Black laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958, and the Disturbed Areas Act, severe curtailment of citizens' basic democratic rights, perceived identity crisis due to the unabated influx of foreign nationals, the politics of corruption, failure to implement the various accords honestly, etc. Excesses committed by the army at times gave rise to situations of guerrilla warfare, mindless violence caused by individual or group acts of terrorism, violence at the instance of militant outfits, and retaliatory violence also contributed to making the situation extremely unbearable. A violence-free atmosphere is hard to come by in all the states of the northeastern region, particularly in Assam, Tripura, Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Manipur in varying proportions. The so-called Unified Command Structure in Assam, operational since 1997, has caused havoc in the state especially in rural areas. AFSPA imposed death and tears particularly in Manipur. After the AFSPA-related incidents of violence and rape in Manipur, the Government of India's Ministry of Home Affairs appointed a committee headed by Justice (Retd.) B.P. Jeevan Reddy. The committee in its report (6 June 2005) unanimously recommended repeal of the hated act altogether. It is strange that a government waxing eloquent over democracy should continue to ignore its own committee's report and thus continue to carry on with arms of the State like AFSPA and the Unified Command Structure.

Taking a comprehensive view of the situation in the Northeast, it is a patent reality that the political leadership committed grave errors over the years in confounding political problems presented by the militant organizations with law and order problems and then sought to deal with them militarily. The new Bodoland Memorandum of Settlement was welcomed. Similarly the continued peace initiative concerning Nagaland is to be welcomed. If the ban on NSCN (I-M) could be lifted in Nagaland, why it could not be applied in similar cases in different areas? In the interest of free and frank discussion, all acts of violence on the part of all, including most certainly state violence and terrorism, need to be ended to give peace a chance.

Having said all this, how can a workable federal system be designed in the context of the proclaimed federal polity and its troubled Northeast with the end in view of achieving a fair amount of peace and stability?

Over the years I had the occasion to offer a number of suggestions in this regard. Relevant to the thematic ideas of this seminar, some such suggestions may be offered:

- Review and restructure the Constitution of India in conformity with the constitution-related pledge of the freedom movement and the Objectives Resolution of the Constituent Assembly;
- The Union's powers may extend only to defence, foreign affairs, communications, currency, agreed economic coordination plus related matters, if any, while the rest of the matters are to be vested with largest measure of autonomy for the States with residuary powers, deleting, at the same time, the Concurrent List (List III);
- Powers under the Eleventh Schedule and Twelfth Schedule to the Constitution are to be effectively transferred to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) up to and including the district level; parliamentary democracy, now shared between the centre and the states, needs to be extended to the local authorities having regard to the definition of 'the States' as given in Article 12 of the Constitution;
- Autonomous states under an amended Constitution shall share autonomy within a state to accommodate the legitimate urges and peopled by them in a sizeable majority;
- Draconian legislations like the AFSPA are to be done away with forthwith; and,
- The political issues raised by militant organizations are to be resolved through a process of dialogue and discussion; political issues are not to be confused with law and order issues; there should be an end to all acts of violence by everyone, the State taking the initiative in this regard.

The Northeast region is peopled by a large number of ethnic groups with their distinctive characteristics. It is possible that communities hitherto un-assertive or non-assertive could at some time or the other come forward with their assertive claims imbibing the experience from other groups irrespective of their size. There is evidently a ferment among ethnic groups almost all throughout the world. Felt or perceived

grievances give rise to political problems and most political problems have their genesis in groups of humankind's struggle for existence and survival in their meaning of the term. Extended democracy and greater decentralization in real equality appear to provide an answer to existing and emerging problems of ethnic assertiveness.

In a situation wherein belief in virtues of autonomy is held with conscientious intensity, autonomy/self-determination not being inherently secessionist, real federal political culture ought to be the defining characteristic of our civilization. Further, the moral credibility of parliament and the legislatures deserves to be restored making governance relevant to the needs of the times.

Late D.P. Barooah

*Former Vice-Chancellor of Gauhati University and Professor in the
Department of Political Science, Gauhati University*

Notes

1. May Kolkov and Alexander Tverskoy. 1979 [English ed. 1990]. *The Birth of Nations*, Moscow: Progress Publishers.
2. States Reorganisation Commission. 1955. *Report of the States Reorganisation Commission*, pp. 186, 259–60. New Delhi: Government of India Press.

Tables

5.1	Occupational pattern of the workers (male) of the study villages of Pagladia Dam site	92
5.2	Monthly income of the households of the study villages of Pagladia Dam site	93
5.3	Livestock in the study villages of the Pagladia Dam site	93
5.4	People's views on Pagladia Dam in the study villages of the Dam	94
5.5	Impact of the dam on the people of the study villages of the Pagladia Dam site	95
5.6	House type of the people of the study villages of the Pagladia Dam site	97
7.1	Plains tribal population of Assam not covered within the Sixth Schedule	127
7.2	Expenditure incurred and budget allocation in the statutory autonomous councils	130
7.3	Distribution of Mishing population in the districts covered under Mishing Autonomous Council and outside	133
9.1	Comparative statement of the pre-1953 position of Jammu & Kashmir and States in the United States of America	175

Acknowledgements

This book originated out of papers presented at the national seminar on 'The Troubled Diversity: The Political Process in Northeast India' held in the Department of Political Science, Gauhati University, in collaboration with the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla (IIAS), in 2008. We, therefore, express our gratitude to the IIAS and more particularly to Professor Peter Ronald deSouza, the then director of the Institute, for his constant encouragement and guidance in organizing this collaborative seminar, and also in bringing out this volume. The IIAS provided financial support while the Gauhati University extended logistical support. We are thankful to Late D.P. Barooah, former Vice-Chancellor of the Gauhati University, for delivering the keynote address. We are grateful to all our contributors for the cooperation they have extended in completing this work. Our colleagues and students in the Department of Political Science, Gauhati University, and the administrative staff at the IIAS, deserve special thanks for the help and assistance they provided in organizing the seminar. Finally, with special emphasis, we would like to express our gratitude to Professor Nandana Dutta for her open critique and friendly advice in the revision of papers. This book would not have seen the light of day but for the competent work of the team at Oxford University Press, New Delhi. We are extremely grateful to all of them.

Abbreviations

AASU	All Assam Students' Union
AASAA	All Adivasi Students' Association of Assam
AANLA	All Adivasi National Liberation Army
ABSU	All Bodo Students' Union
ACA	Adivasi Council of Assam
ACMS	Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha
AFSPA	Armed Forces Special Powers Act
AGP	Asom Gana Parishad
APHLC	All Party Hill Leaders Conference
ASDC	Autonomous State Demand Committee
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
AnSI	Anthropological Survey of India
ATTSA	All Tea Tribes Students' Association
BAC	Bodo Autonomous Council
BAPC	Bodo People's Action Committee
BLT	Bodo Liberation Tigers
BPPF	Bodo People's Progressive Front
BSF	Border Security Force
BTAD	Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District
BTC	Bodoland Territorial Council
CHT	Chittagong Hill Tracts
CPI (ML)	Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)
DHD	Dima Halim Daogah
GoI	Government of India
HAD	Hill Area District
KA	Karbi Anglong
KAAC	Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council

KADC	Karbi Anglong District Council
KLNLFF	Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Liberation Front
KMSS	Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti
KRA	Kuki Revolutionary Army
KYKL	Kanglei Yawol Kunna Lup
LoC	Line of Control
MNF	Mizo National Front
MNFF	Mizo National Famine Front
MoS	Memorandum of Settlement
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NABARD	National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NCH	North Cachar Hills
NCHAC	North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council
NCHDC	North Cachar Hills District Council
NDFB	National Democratic Front of Bodoland
NEFA	North East Frontier Agency
NNC	Naga National Council
NPC	Naga People's Council
NREGS	National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme
NSCN (IM)	National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isaak Muivah)
NSCN (K)	National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang)
NSCN (U)	National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Unified)
OBC	Other Backward Class
PDF	People's Democratic Front
PLA	People's Liberation Army
POTA	Prevention of Terrorism Act
PREEPAK	Peoples' Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak
PTCA	Plains Tribal Council of Assam
R&R	Rehabilitation and Resettlement
RGM	Revolutionary Government of Manipur
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Corporation
SC	Scheduled Caste
SHG	Self Help Group
SRC	States Reorganization Commission
SRTD	Society for Rural and Tribal Development
ST	Scheduled Tribe
TADA	Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Prevention Act

xx | *Abbreviations*

ULFA	United Liberation Front of Assam
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNLF	United National Liberation Front
UNTLF	United Tribal Nationalist Liberation Front
UPDS	United People's Democratic Solidarity
URMCA	United Reservation Council of Assam
WCD	World Commission on Dams

Introduction

The northeast region of India comprises of eight states—Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Tripura, and Sikkim, covering 263,179 square kilometres, which is about 8 per cent of the total geographical area of the country. The region is connected with the rest of India through a 30-kilometre-wide corridor, and surrounded by five Asian countries as diverse as Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and China. No other region of the Indian union shares borders with so many neighbouring countries. The nature of diversity in this region is unique. Diversities in terms of ethnic origins, linguistic variation, and religious pluralism characterize the region (Das 2009). Diversity as a social fact has always existed within various states in the world, and is generally regarded as a cultural resource. However, diversity within a state becomes a problem when cultural or racial differences become the basis of group inequality or when the different groups perceive one another as a threat to their identity (Oommen 2007) or as a challenge to their livelihood. If any issue dominates contemporary political theory, it is that of dealing with cultural diversity and with the claims—moral, legal, and political—made in the name of ethnic, religious, linguistic, or national allegiances (Kymlicka 2001). Today governments are confronted with demands from cultural minorities for recognition, protection, preferential treatment, and political autonomy within the boundaries of the state. The turbulent politics of the contemporary world has led to an upsurge of demands from peoples aspiring to statehood and even political recognition as independent nations and for national self-determination. The issues raised by cultural diversity can no longer be ignored, since they pose a challenge to the prevailing

political theories, and to liberal and democratic theory in particular (Gaus & Kukathas 2004).

India's northeast region also poses significant challenges in the context of Indian federalism. One cannot ignore the fact that almost all the movements have a violent separatist trend and that they have exposed the vulnerability of the Indian state. For instance, the Naga insurgency, which began in the 1950s, is known as the mother of the Northeast insurgencies. Manipur, Assam, and Tripura have also witnessed various scales of conflict. Currently, most of the states in the region are affected by some form of conflict, except for Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, and Sikkim where the situation is at the moment relatively stable. The reasons for the respective conflicts vary widely, ranging from separatist movements on one hand to inter-community and inter-ethnic conflicts on the other. Accommodating the diversity with its corresponding fragmentation of the political space provides the contemporary challenge in the Northeast today.

Each state in the northeast region represents a bewildering mosaic of collective identities—religious, linguistic, and ethnic—which overlap and cut across one another in innumerable ways. The intensification of ethnicity-centric identity politics, that is, the consciousness of group identities focusing on distinct cultures is a distinguishing feature of the recent political history of the region. The process of identity-formation in this region is multilayered and complex due to historical legacies and post-colonial developments. The pluralization of claims by ethnic communities over the resources of the state constitutes the core of state-level politics in most states of the region. For creating and consolidating its respective identity, every ethnic group makes efforts to construct its 'other'. As the number of identities increases, the list of 'others' also multiplies. The logic of the 'other' is always seen in relation to the community to which one belongs. The 'other' is one who has come to dominate and exploit. The ideology of the 'other' motivates and guides identity politics in this region. The atmosphere of mistrust generated by fears of domination and vengeance over one group by another has been heightened in the wake of various ethnic conflicts in the region in the past few years, particularly after the phase of formation of states almost got over in the 1980s. Moreover, the cultural processes, values, and practices of ethnic groups are increasingly becoming political resources for elites in the competition for political power or economic

advantage. They become symbols and referents for the identification of members of the group which are called up in order to create a political identity more easily. Most of the ethnic problems and confusions that arise in the states of this region are due to intensive political mobilization and competition between the state and the non-state actors. Competitive electoral politics, in the process of mobilizing for votes, tends to foreground the identity terrain and cultural concerns of communities. The unfolding of the social processes is intertwined with the developments in the field of political economy as well. The macro level of political economy of India continues to provide the overall context within which contestations over the issues of identity often take shape. The assertion of identity in this region has also begun to display different facets of nationalism. This is largely because identities have been expressed in opposition to the 'other'. Besides, negotiating of the social diversities in this region has proved more difficult in the face of rising majoritarianism in recent years. Conflict emanates from the assertion of local/ethnic/nationalist identity vis-à-vis the larger Indian nationalist identity. The larger nationalist identity is so defined that rather than accommodating these local identities, they are posited in opposition to that. The nation-building process based either on the discourse of 'cultural nationalism' or 'composite nationalism' emphasizes on uniformities and generates 'centralizing' tendencies. In both the discourses the 'unity' and 'integrity' of the nation is paramount. It is in the context of 'unity' and 'integrity' that diversities and differences are problematized. While in the discourse of 'cultural nationalism', differences are seen as dangerous, and emphasis is placed on 'uniformities'; the discourse of 'composite nationalism' differences, though respected, are to be ultimately flattened in the 'melting pot'. The nationalist discourse in both cases places a premium on 'unity with uniformities' and the emphasis on uniformities generates tendencies towards 'centralization'. It is from the perspective of the 'centralized' nationalist model that the peripheries are dealt with. The process of nation-building in the peripheral areas remains incomplete or rather unaddressed.

The present academic exercise is aimed at developing new ways of thinking about diversity and also to build up a new community of multi-disciplinary scholarship in Northeast India. In this volume eleven chapters are included thematically along with this introductory chapter. The foreword by D. P. Barooah that reflects on ways of building a

democratic, political, community, free of conflicts in the region, sets the tone by examining issues related to the working of the federal system in the context of the troubled Northeast. Barooah observes that an extended democracy with greater decentralization could perhaps provide an answer to existing and emerging problems of ethnic assertiveness. Suggestions offered by him dwell on reviewing and restructuring the constitution, repealing of draconian legislations like the Armed Force Special Powers Act, and resolution of political issues raised by militant organizations through dialogue and discussion, with the aim and objective of achieving a fair amount of peace and stability.

Historical Legacies

Historically, much of the northeast region had remained isolated from the rest of India and had never been a part of any empire in the pre-British period. While the rest of India had generally shared social values related to the caste system and had been linked up with one another culturally and politically, as part of a chain as it were, at one or the other phase of history, the Northeast had rather short-lived ties of limited scope with the other parts of the country, and at the same time many of the social formations in the region had similarities with adjoining countries of South-East and Central Asia. It was mainly through colonial political control that sustained ties were created with the rest of the country, though without much of social and cultural interaction.

With the advent of colonial rule, the political isolation of the region in relation to the rest of India came to an end. The British rulers as part of their colonial policy took steps to separate the hill tribes from the plainsmen of Assam. Under the Government of India Act of 1935, the hill areas of the Province of Assam were divided into two categories: the Lushai hills (present Mizoram) and the North Cachar hills were classified as 'Excluded Areas' whereas the Khasi hills (with the partial exception of Shillong), the Jaintia hills, the Garo hills, the Naga hills and the Mikir hills (present Karbi Anglong) were 'Partially Excluded Areas'. The creation of Excluded and Partially Excluded areas, so called because they were excluded from the operation of the laws applicable in the rest of British-controlled India, was mooted by the colonial desire to reinforce the already existing primordial boundaries between communities. The nationalist leaders saw in this policy the imperialist design to alienate

the tribes from the general population and to divide the country by playing on their social and cultural distinctions (Nongbri 1997). Partially modifying the colonial approach, the Indian National Congress tried to devise a strategy of bringing all marginalized communities within its fold. However, the cultural policy of the nationalist forces, due to political compulsions, turned out to be internally self-subversive and conflicting. It is interesting to note that the national leaders could not completely disregard the difference which existed between the tribes and the wider society. As a result the colonial concept of exclusion finds its entry point in the Indian Constitution in the form of the Fifth and Sixth Schedules. Four chapters in this section reflect on the ways in which colonial policy and the homogenizing tendencies of nationalism and state-formation were responsible for community conflicts in the region.

Nandana Dutta's chapter (Chapter 1) outlines the colonial constructions of the term diversity and its incorporation into later discourses on tribes, tribal cultures, and identities. The Assam Movement, for instance, contributed to the strengthening of tribal identity and aspirations especially in resistance to the articulated aspirations of identity by the dominant community. The multicultural overtones of diversity also serve to position it as a concept that is adequate in the face of universalist designs. Diversity as an idea is especially weighted in India's Northeast because of the region's racial compositions and also because of varied representations of this racial diversity in centrist and regional discourse. The notion of 'construct' reveals the colonial role in constructing the category of the tribe and consolidating several tribes as separate entities inhabiting discrete parts of the region and having peculiar and distinct ethno-cultural markers. The taking on board of this notion in subsequent political and cultural discourses has ensured its long life and its deployment in the unique conditions of the present where tribes 'perform' their tribal identity even as they live it. The 'troubled' diversity thesis is addressed through these two processes, by which identity finds expression, keeping as reference points the character of the Indian nation-state which seeks to understand and accommodate its diversity through constitutional provisions; the presence of a majority community whose language and culture has come to function as a norm; and diversity notions that proliferate in scholarship on these issues. Examining the play of 'construct' and 'performance' in the idea

of diversity reveals how 20th century socio-political developments contribute to the strengthening of tribal identity and aspirations especially in resistance to the identity and articulated aspirations of the dominant community. With regard to the adjective 'troubled', Dutta holds that it is possible to find its emergence in the narrative of diversity itself and its unresolved conflict with the narrative of universalism that might now be said to be represented by the modern nation-state.

Amit Prakash's chapter (Chapter 2) makes use of the tools developed by 'colonial discourse theory' (the stream of enquiry into the relationship between ideas and state power in colonial states) to examine the operations of the dominant strand of colonial discourse in India and the emergence of a nationalist and later, a sub-national discourse with reference to the tribal identities. The contests over the definition, administrative arrangements, development, and autonomy that the Indian state is locked into with the sub-national identities, especially tribal identities, are inextricably linked to the emergence and evolution of the discursive structures of post-colonial India. The chapter goes on to argue that owing to this derivative nature of the rationalist post-colonial discourse, the Indian state is unable to re-think the premise of the national identity or the resultant administrative arrangements. In order to unravel the complex set of ideas that form the post-colonial discourse in India vis-à-vis the tribal identities, one must start with the main currents of the colonial discourse, trace the trajectory of such ideas in the nationalist discourse, and isolate the modes in which these ideas are employed in the post-colonial era in the context of the contemporary hegemonic consensus towards the tribal identities of India. This chapter argues that due to the heavy dependence of the nationalist and post-colonial discourse on the colonial discourse, identity articulations that threaten the fundamentals of the Indian state are rising in number and intensity, and that the challenges to the authority and legitimacy of the state from newly mobilized ethnic identities have sharpened to the level that a new hegemonic consensus has started to emerge.

Asok Kumar Ray's chapter (Chapter 3) reflects the modes by which 'little traditions' were incorporated in the 'great tradition' in the historical process of state formation in the region. In the post-colonial period, the institutional power of the state gained primacy, making the ethnic discourses much more critical and in the Northeast the image of the Indian state was built around the framework of internal colonization.

Ethnic groups competing among themselves made the situation even more critical and increased the polarity between the Indian nation-state and the ethnic groups. The chapter proposes some strategic recommendations to ameliorate the situation.

Meeta Deka, in Chapter 4, examines the demand of the Adivasi communities for Scheduled Tribe status in Assam from a historical perspective. Making the 'Beltola incident' of 24 November 2007 as an *entre* point in her analysis, she points out the significant role played by the British policy of mapping out of land and mapping out of people in shaping the peoples' search for identity.

Diversity, Development, Conflict, and Management

The chapter in this section examines the possible patterns of interaction between diversity and development. Development projects like dams have been criticized worldwide because of their negative impact on ecology, environment as well as on the human society. Barnalee Choudhury's chapter (Chapter 5) points out the socio-ecological implications of the proposed Pagladia Dam in the Nalbari district of Assam, which besides displacing a large number of people also has the potential of bringing about community conflicts in the area where people of various communities have been living harmoniously for long.

Plurality at the societal level is an accepted reality and does not necessarily lead to conflict. However, political divergences have the potential to make it difficult for people to live together. The most difficult part in managing conflict is managing and dealing with the structures of mediation through which conflict is expressed: their symbolic articulations, organizational forms, leadership, management of narratives and so forth. These structures of mediation can thwart even attempts to address so-called root causes of conflict (Mehta 2010). The four chapters in this section present various case studies and perspectives on diversity and conflict management in the northeastern region.

Dhruba Pratim Sharma (Chapter 6) reflects on the historical claim of the tea tribe community for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, the reactions to this demand from other groups in the state of Assam, and the potential for conflict over the issue within this community. Assam has in recent years been plunged into turmoil by demands of various groups for official recognition as STs. One such group consisting of migrant tea

workers and their descendants is known as the 'Tea Tribe' community and is included in the list of Other Backward Castes (OBCs) in the state. Having become an integral part of the local society, members of this community feel deprived as they have not received their due status as STs in Assam, although large numbers among them belong to groups that are regarded as STs in their respective states of origin. Considering the present political situation in Assam and the social distance between the tea worker community and those tribes already included in ST category in Assam, it can be inferred that any move to include tea tribes in the ST list would meet severe opposition from the latter. Moreover, a number of those considered as 'Tea Tribes' in Assam do belong not to the ST category but to the SC or the OBC, and in a few cases, to the general castes in their respective states of origin. Thus the issue of inclusion of all or part of the 'Tea Tribe' people in Assam in the ST list has proved to be a thorny issue in the state's political scene, which the politicians find safer to avoid, despite pressure from organizations representing the 'Tea Tribes'.

Jayanta Krishna Sarmah (Chapter 7) argues that in Northeast India, as autonomy is perceived mainly in ethnic terms and not in terms of socio-economic development, there is an inevitable conflict between economic over-dependence and autonomy. Instead of addressing the basic issues of socio-economic development, the focus of attention shifts towards the accommodation of competing ethnic claims in a situation where demography determines the dynamics of autonomy movements. The author recommends redesigning of the existing autonomous councils for the management of conflicts in Assam with total reconstruction of ethnic policy and administration. The recommendations include constitution of an intra-federal structure within the state among all the ethnic communities, differentiated citizenship based on recognition of plurality, and de-territorializing of the present autonomous councils. Autonomy is to be taken as an integral and inherent part of the democratic process. Execution of the recommendations would require amendment of the Constitution of India. In this regard, consensus among all the ethnic communities is central and will help out to arrive at an enduring solution of the problem of managing diversity.

Continuing with the issue of autonomy, Uttam Bathari (Chapter 8) focuses attention on the role of the Sixth Schedule in the protection of the ethnic rights and management of ethnic diversity in Assam,

which has in recent times witnessed a series of identity movements focused on political demands such as formation of a District Council or Autonomous Council, stemming out of perceived threats to the ethnic groups' identity and culture. The general perception among the ethnic groups outside the Sixth Schedule areas is that extension of this constitutional provision to their areas can solve their problems, while on the other hand, the two hill districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills, which have been having special administrative apparatus under the Sixth Schedule since the enforcement of the constitution, have witnessed intense political movements from the 1960s onwards. In recent times the Karbi-Dimasa autonomy movement has undergone tremendous changes with the movement taking a militant turn and the rise of demands for autonomous homelands for the Karbis and Dimasas on ethnic lines moving away from the earlier demand for a joint autonomous state. Besides this, the twin districts have witnessed a series of ethnic conflicts since the beginning of the first decade of this millennium. In these circumstances, it is imperative to investigate if the Sixth Schedule is the panacea for all evils endangering ethnic identity and culture, as has been perceived by certain ethnic communities, and to examine whether the Sixth Schedule is equipped enough to address the rights of ethnic minorities, or for that matter to address the ethnic diversity within the areas under its jurisdiction.

Comparative Perspective

The first two chapters in this section compare the conflict situations in Northeast region and Jammu and Kashmir by drawing on contextual factors that lead to different outcomes. According to Rekha Chowdhary and Sandhya Goswami (Chapter 10), both the peripheral areas, due to their diversities are regarded as 'problems' in the context of 'centralized nationalism', and the process of nation-building which should have been based on local sensitivities of these areas remains incomplete. The process of nation-building should have been extended to these areas and a politically open, democratic, and dialogic approach should have been applied to incorporate them into the nationalist project. On the contrary, the 'closure' of the nationalist project with no scope for political negotiations for the peripheries, led to a persistent sense of alienation. Therefore, the conflict situation in both regions is defined by

multiple contexts of homogenized nationalism. On the one hand there is the discourse of 'grand nationalism' in its homogenized form (Indian nationalism) which is countered by 'little nationalisms' like Kashmiri, Naga, Assamese, and Mizo nationalisms. These 'little nationalisms' however share the same character of homogenization that the grand Indian nationalism has, and are as exclusive as the grand nationalist discourse is. In such a context of diversity, there is a complex character of ethno-nationalist movements. Since these movements are exclusive in nature and emphasize nationalist homogenization, there evolves a further context of conflict. It is important to understand the multiple contexts of identities in the context of both Kashmir and the Northeast. Mutually exclusive identities operate in the same political space—at a number of points, these identities overlap each other, while at other points they are placed in contradiction to each other. Internal diversity and political divergence makes it difficult to resolve the issues of competing and exclusive identities through the nationalist discourse. Nationalist discourse, in these two regions as elsewhere, is problematic due to its exclusivist and assimilationist tendencies.

In a similar vein, Noor Ahmad Baba (Chapter 9) points out a number of convergences in the nature of problems in Kashmir and the Northeast created by artificial boundaries and the plurality of social groups. In the context of plurality, the author pleads for a more viable federal arrangement with the option of softening of borders and strengthening of regional and inter-regional cooperation for empowering people, and for development and adoption of frameworks that can reconcile social diversity and allow each to live in peace, security, and tolerance with regard to the other. He stresses on the 'need to ensure the adherence to rule of law, ensuring honest democratic practice and demilitarization for promoting human and environmental security'.

Bhagat Oinam in the final chapter (Chapter 11) pleads for retrospection of the working of the present polity in order to analyze the root causes of the problems that have plagued India's vibrant democracy. He suggests moralizing or spiritualizing of the Indian polity by way of a more human form of politics, taking a cue from the Naga Hoho's initiative in this direction. 'A moral politics where morality is brought out of the confines of the private domain as seen in the traditional political discourse, and to humanize the politics as struggle for power and control, is what is ardently called for. Democratic politics needs

to be smoothened with moral intent rather than with the language of violence.’ This would engage the idea of sharing—of space and concern—characterized by a sincere and open engagement to dialogue. He puts forward the acts of conciliation and reconciliation as continuous processes to provide viable alternatives that can evoke a ‘moral’ sense in both the state and the non-state actors.

Bibliography

- Das, N.K. 2009. ‘Identity Politics and Social Exclusion in India’s North East: The Case for Redistributive Justice’, *Journal of Sociology*, 6 (1): 1–16.
- Gaus, Gerald F. and Chandran Kukathas (eds). 2004. *Handbook of Political Theory*, pp. 250–4. London: Sage.
- Karna, M.N. (ed.) 2006. *Democracy, Pluralism and Conflict*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications.
- Kymlicka, Will. 2001. *Politics in the Vernacular: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Citizenship*. Oxford University Press.
- Mehta, Pratap Bhanu. 2010. ‘Some Notes on Conflict and Decentralisation in India’, in *World Development Report*, Background Case Note. World Bank.
- Misra, Udayon. 2000. *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland*. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study.
- Nongbri, T. 1997 [1995]. ‘Ethnicity and Political Activism in the North East: State Policy and Tribal Identity’, in P.S. Dutta (ed.), *North East and the Indian State*, pp. 42–58. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.
- Oommen, T.K. 2007. ‘Nation Building and Diversity’, in *Unity and Diversity: Learning from Each Other*. Fourth International Conference on Federalism, Conference Reader, pp. 63–80. New Delhi.
- Roy Ramashray, Sujata Miri, and Sandhya Goswami (eds) (2007). *Northeast India: Development, Communalism and Insurgency*. Delhi: Anshah Publishing House.
- Verghese, B.G. 2004. *India’s North East Resurgent: Ethnicity, Insurgency Governance Development*. 2004, Delhi: Konark.

Part I

Historical Legacies

Constructing and Performing Diversity

Colonial and Contemporary Processes

Diversity, it is worth recalling, is not the same thing as difference and, if properly managed, can easily be transformed into its mirror image, homogeneity.

(Ghosh 2002: 258)

If the construction of diversity was one of the important results of colonial administrative processes, its performance has been modern India's most significant manifestation of 'agency'—the wresting of the initiative for self-construction and presentation. In the process many of the legacies of the British have had active roles in the present and have been remodelled and remoulded beyond what could be reasonably imagined. Among these has been that most ambiguous legacy—the 'nation'—facilitated into existence through the colonial government's need to integrate a diverse land as far as possible into a single governable entity; represented as the vision of the motherland by the Independence Movement; and moving into new life in the post-Independence era with its diversities jostling for space and acknowledgment, negotiating and resisting the homogenizing impulse of the nation-state.

Diversity in Assam, with a long discursive legacy*—heard in early reformist visions of its society, in British accounts, and in post-independence attempts to manage the region— has come to represent a peculiar complex of dominant community–tribal community politics that must offer a violent critique of the category of nation. The incorporation into the nationalist project that has been the design of all ‘unity in diversity’ exercises whether through constitutional articulations or through administrative ethnographies of the kind exemplified by the central government’s most recent People of India project (following the model of colonial People of India/Asia projects), has been incomplete and unsatisfactory, particularly in the face of an identity politics that has positioned Assam as India’s other and that continues into a present where this politics has resulted in several violent insurgences.

Since governance is the urgent concern of the post-colonial nation-state, it has been in the emphatic assertion of nationalism—a unifying theme—that the idea of diversity has been most often deployed. Indeed, the collation of diversity characteristics, begun as an imperialist policy to exercise more effective control through knowledge and record became, in the post-imperialist period a mode to hold a ‘nation’ together. Different exercises of studying the peoples of India undertaken by the AnSI can be seen in this light. In a comparative essay on the People of India projects of Herbert Risley and K. S. Singh, Laura Jenkins remarks that ‘nationalism characterizes this post-colonial ethnography, reflecting the changing needs of the state which shifted from an old concern with maintaining colonial rule by reinforcing social divisions to a new preoccupation with maintaining national unity and integrity in an independent and diverse country’ (Jenkins 2003: 1163–4). The national design indeed underpins all such descriptive projects, most of which are official or government sponsored and fuelled by the latest political concern. That is why ‘diversity’ seldom appears without its twin ‘unity’, for

* The secondary nature of my data emerges from my admission to a disciplinary rootedness in English and allows me to explain that I am in fact deliberately using secondary discursive sources that embody narrative constructions. Such narratives are major objects of study and analysis in this discipline I profess, and it is precisely their modes of construction that is the focus of this chapter. As I say in my concluding remarks, what I study in this chapter is a discursive construction of identity.

instance in the phrase 'unity in diversity', deployed regularly in politically inspired representations of India. The country's unity is assumed and its differences, multiplicities, and pluralities are accommodated within this basic assumption.

While these intentions embedded in official descriptive-cataloguing processes may appear to have pan-Indian characteristics, in the Northeast the nationalist design takes peculiar turns. Ethnographic study here establishes a two-way relationship—racial and cultural links with the 'rest of India' balanced by similar links with the east (Thailand, Burma, etc). The attention to Mongoloid facial features has been one of the most notable aspects of the description of tribes of this region contributing to the diversity picture and yet at the same time causing a degree of ambivalence to attach to its perception of links with the rest of India. The attempts at manoeuvring for political visibility are different in the case of different constitutive groups and it is in this domain that one might find the occasion for studying a Northeast case as separate from those in the rest of India, where descriptive categories might be deployed by the subject differently, given the difference in circumstances of affinity and historical records of resistance or victimization.

The question that politico-cultural scrutiny of this kind raises is: Why is a concept like diversity floated at all? Faced with a country of such heterogeneities of people, nature, and culture, such a concept seems like the handiest tool, an innocent exercise in description. But as the British 'description' especially of people and their life practices reveal, there is always embedded in them a tacit value judgement achieved usually through comparison, and contrast, and through those familiar colonial tropes of surprise, shock, revulsion, or wonder that directed encounters with the dark other. A brief reference to two such descriptions should make this point clearer. The first is from Charles Lyall's well-known monograph *The Mikirs* (recently republished as *The Karbis* [1997]), generally considered to be an objective, sympathetic, and quite uniquely positive account of a tribe that he says was difficult to classify and group with other tribes of the Tibeto-Burman stock. He writes of their physical appearance: 'In features the men resemble Assamese of the lower classes more than most of the Tibeto-Burman races... . The men are as tall as the majority of the hill races of Assam' (an average of 5.354 feet is mentioned). 'The nose is broad at the base, and often flat... . The facial hair is scanty... . The body is muscular and the men are capable of

prolonged exertion. In frontier expeditions in Assam they have frequently served (like the Khasis) as porters ...' (Lyll 1997: 4).

The classic elements of colonial description are evident here. As diversity was described and recorded with as much detail as possible, what was kept in mind in many other accounts as well were abilities (the Mikirs were porters), habits (fondness for drink or opium), and character traits (deceitful, thieving, tendencies towards crime), as well as a history of martial valour or cowardice. These often became information pools that were tapped in the case of employment. Also apparent in the above description are two other modes of assessment that were popular with other writers as well—differentiation and homogenization—differentiated and debased in comparison to the dominant Assamese with their more obvious links with racial stock from the rest of India and therefore functioning as a local paradigm with which the British official was familiar from association in other parts of India, especially through a framework like the caste structure. This appears in Lyll's account in the possible misapplication of the phrase 'lower classes'; homogenized under a label like the Tibeto Burman; established as 'tribal'; strong and robust in comparison to the weak, indolent, opium addicted Assamese. (See Robinson [1841] for an early account of the Assamese on these lines.)

The insertion of a fissure into this society—by way of contrasting descriptions based largely on distinctions between Caucasian and Mongoloid facial features, different racial associations, suitability or otherwise for menial labour by virtue of physique and habits—ceases to remain innocuous in the light of these legacies now inflecting identity discourses in the region. Diversity is not appreciated and left alone. It is harnessed to the needs of the colonial state and because it is so effectively used in the evolution of a mode of governance—the infamous policy of 'divide and rule', and its modern, Enlightenment-driven practice of record production assimilated into bureaucratic functioning, its traces remain in the methods adopted by the post-colonial clone of the colonial administration in its inevitable nexus with the political class which seems to have internalized the methods of divide and rule. These dubious adaptations inhabit the dark underbelly of the oft-stated nationalist intentions of the post-colonial state, and actually subvert them.

Lyll's monograph, based on the papers of Edward Stack, was the product of the tribal policy of Sir Bamfylde Fuller (British Lt. Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam [1902–6]), which included the writing of a

series of monographs on the tribes of the Northeast. The intention behind writing these monographs was to get to know the tribes primarily with a view to isolating them, especially in the climate of growing terrorist activities against the British government in nearby Bengal (Bhattacharjee 1997: ix). The visible production of diversity through description and compilation of information was always accompanied by a characteristically colonial will to power—managing and cordoning off the diverse through strategies of control.

What is, however, of interest for this study is the continuation of these descriptive practices (now in a different regime of control) not only in official accounts but also in scholarly studies which appear to be entirely objective but are revealed to be in thrall to the same rhetoric. Such a legacy is evident in the second description of the same tribe that I have chosen to cite here. It appears in a collection of essays brought out by the Asam Sahitya Sabha, a socio-cultural organization that has an important place in the life of the people of Assam. This too describes height, complexion, the short and blunt nose, scanty eyelashes, and sparse facial hair. Within the Tibeto-Burman group their physical features are said to match those of the Lushai and the Kuki. Also while there is no mention here of their colonial careers as porters, the description does refer to the thick and sturdy ankles of the men and the women of the tribe (Gogoi 1962: 118–19. *Translation and paraphrase mine.*). At work here is the anomaly of the post-colonial condition—the recourse to a language and methodology of observation and compilation of features that have been established as suspect and yet without some use of which such study cannot seem to take place.

From glorifying 'unity in diversity' to acknowledging 'troubled diversity' is the trajectory that our acceptance of the idea of 'diversity' in our public life in pre- and post-colonial India has taken. The shift from colonial ethnography 'driven ... by a desire to contribute to ... scientific progress but also by the imperative to monitor and control a diverse land' to 'the contemporary nationalist desire for scientific achievement and national unity in diversity' (Jenkins 2003: 1147) is, however, not as dramatic or comprehensive as the rejection of colonialism in the nationalist project might make it appear. In fact, as the above examples show, the same essential elements are harnessed in new projects of giving or wresting visibility. And the optimistic acceptance of an idea that would integrate a nation (in the immediate aftermath of colonialism) has also changed to scepticism because of its character of containing the

diametrically opposite belief that it divides the nation (since the integrative impulse also appears homogenizing, erasing uniqueness and difference, and therefore breeding resentment and alienation).

The second issue that I refer to in the title—the ‘performance of diversity’ follows closely on the heels of such constructions. Once a tribe has been described and comprehensively given ‘reality/existence’ it often suits its immediate political needs to fall back on these descriptions and live out its life in accordance with these accounts. It might select from these accounts whatever is most convenient but the availability of a document on its ways, its history, its culture, etc. attests to its uniqueness, and can become a tool to assert its distinctiveness. It might then go on to emphasize aspects from those accounts as age-old and traditional, reviving them in the present in order to give them greater visibility. This is what I have meant by performance, and performance in conjunction with agency—a method of self-construction and representation associated with the entry of a people into modernity when they take the initiative and responsibility for the way they are to be perceived.

In the year 2001, on a field trip to Morigaon that some of my colleagues and I from the English Department of the Gauhati University undertook as part of a project, to listen to folk tales and collect variations from people of the tribe known as the Lalungs or Tiwas, we were confronted with a unique example of the ‘performance’ of ethnic identity. We were told that many of the traditional institutions like the boy’s dormitory were no longer in use but because these were so important as ethno-cultural markers a boy’s dormitory was actually being rebuilt as a ceremonial concession to the tradition, not to be used regularly but available for display (reference to such dormitories appear in accounts of the Lalungs, for example,; Bordoloi, Sharmah Thakur & M. C. Saikia 1987; Sharmah Thakur 1985). This is a situation that is enmeshed in ideas of selection and self-presentation and suggests a consciousness of those conditions that invite such ‘display’ especially for the benefit of outsiders to the community. Edward Bruner speaks of a ‘touristic borderzone’ where culture is invented on a massive scale in anticipation of interested viewership (Bruner 2005: 193). Bruner’s example is of the ‘frog dance’ devised specially for tourists in Batuan (Bali) in the 1970s: ‘the dance was a commercial invention ... an example of creative cultural production in the borderzone’ and had no “‘authentic”

counterpart' in Balinese culture (Bruner 2005: 199). A decade later Bruner found that the dance was being performed at a Balinese wedding and he predicts that 'What began in tourism had entered Balinese ritual, and might eventually be included in an ethnographic description of the culture' (Bruner 2005: 199). The invention or retrieval from a traditional cultural corpus in acts of reinvention, with display or presentation as steps in the primary goal of asserting distinctiveness is precisely the point that one would like to make about performance of identity by a beleaguered people in danger of being consumed by a dominant culture. In the cases one is faced with in the northeast of India, invention and reinvention are both seen at work.

The larger folk tale project itself—one that many of these communities were engaged in—involved the collection and publication of tales often in Assamese translation, by members of the community in an ambiguous exercise of asserting distinctiveness in the language of the community against which they were declaring their cultural distinctiveness but that would ensure their availability to a larger readership¹. By taking recourse to this duality they set out to prove that their marginalized cultures were as rich as the one that overshadowed them and at the same time, because the primary interlocutor was the dominant community, they spoke/wrote to its members in their language, the act of translation giving them a space otherwise unavailable.

A more organized effort may be seen in the revival, upgradation and consolidation of traditional skills in weaving and other crafts, undertaken by the Society for Rural and Tribal Development in Odalguri, Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD) that is an aspect of the performance of Bodo identity. The Annual Report of the Society for Rural and Tribal Development (SRTD) provides details of the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) sponsored training program on 'Skill Upgradation Training on Handloom' for Self Help Groups (SHGs) held from 17 March to 25 April, 2006. The idea behind the encouragement to SHGs is to cultivate, improve, and use existing skills in a more organized and cost productive manner, paving the way for changes in style and design, as well as for economic self-sufficiency. The aspect of 'performance' in these activities is obvious. The training program involved cutting designs on cards, drum warping and using the jacquard machine—all of which are also avenues to gently introduce the new while sustaining the old. Among the most interesting

of the innovations that today pass off as traditional is the use of 'rolex' thread, which is a synthetic fibre, to embellish the traditional Bodo weave. It is now difficult to establish when exactly this gold thread (an outside element) entered the indigenous fabric. It is part of the gallery of weaves that is presented as traditional/tribal in local shops, fairs and exhibitions and even in the weekly bazaars, and adorns the Bodo woman in her colorful *dokhona* that she wears with pride in a politically propelled return to sartorial timelessness.²

Participation in cultural festivals, youth festivals, and national days like the Republic Day, with traditional dances and music, and in traditional attire, are more overt instances of performance as are the invitations to present ethnic distinctiveness at craft *melas*, exhibitions, and similar displays held often under the aegis of government agencies and institutions (The erstwhile festivals of India held in different countries was a huge exercise in such performance.). What we have here are the two ways in which identity and diversity are performed—one, through the communities themselves consciously engaging in expressions of distinctiveness and difference (for varied ideological reasons and at critical points in a community's life) and two, through official initiatives offering forums for such displays. This extension and furtherance of the distinctions engendered by colonialism in nationalist practices, and through the very mechanisms of ensuring justice and equality into this area of deliberate acceptance and assertion of tribal identity is an interesting path that the idea of diversity has taken.

Participating in this debate on diversity from the perspective of my own discipline of English studies has offered an occasion to not only employ its tools and concepts (especially its reliance on narrative, and the construction and performance that is demonstrated by narrative) but to take a look at these tools and reflect on their significance beyond a mere application to a literary text. These literary-critical tools in this instance include an implicit consciousness of modernity (an idea whose beginnings are recorded around the 16th century in Europe; an idea that in Assam has not been as neatly resolved as might be expected from the contiguity of the Bengal Renaissance) as played out in the British compulsion to document (counting, mapping, and producing neat lists), but particularly in the element of agency that is embedded in the idea of 'performance' and that is possible to view as a 'seizing of initiative'. In this sense modernity has been a peculiarly double-edged instrument

of change—traditional societies objectified and reduced by the British gaze and yet transformed by the perception brought to it by the alien/foreign viewer, and therefore turning round to answer back and assume responsibility for the change; and accompanying this gesture, awareness of the power and role of discourse in self or identity constructions (which could take the form of rhetorical analysis of the census and ‘accounts’). This particular deployment of critical tools has a history in post-Orientalist critique (developed from the late 1980s) which focuses on ‘the role of the British in the construction of new identities through the power of a colonial discourse on India’ (Rogers 1994: 10), which was based on a scientific documentation of Indian society. An interesting aspect of this process and one that is relevant for this chapter is that while information on population was gathered and organized for the better exercise of power, the same information came to be used to construct ‘other’/alternative discourses that contested power. It is against this backdrop of critical-theoretical position and crucial colonial practice that this chapter attempts to place colonial constructions of diversity and contemporary performances of it in unique conditions of socio-political turbulence.

The study of colonial modernity and its techniques of systematization have been greatly facilitated by the advances in theory, especially in the increased understanding of discursive representational processes and the deep entanglements of knowledge and power exemplified in the work of Michel Foucault (Foucault’s work on space and power in conjunction with knowledge helps to explain the way British methods of knowledge production were also ways to exercise spatial control). British methods of systematization that may be explained as deriving from this nexus of knowledge and power are well known—the census, maps, records (governmental/administrative, anthropological, scientific) and accounts neatly ‘understood’ the country in order to govern (Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* contains an interesting study of the way these systems work). The construction of diversity by such methods continues and expands into post-Independence views of the Indian nation and its diverse constituents—a common compulsion being the maintenance of order, and efficient governance. The same constructs of diversity and difference are taken advantage of by the tribal groups themselves in setting up resistance to the homogeneity designs that may come from the functioning of the nation-state but

may also emerge from the dominant community discourse of a composite Assamese identity.

In his reflections on diversity against the universalizing discourses of nationalism, racism, and exoticism in French thought, Tzvetan Todorov asks the question 'How must we behave with respect to those who do not belong to the same community as ourselves?' (Todorov 1994: 384). This is a crucial question because it is at the heart of the diversity issue—describing a condition of being in the modern world—where everyone is an 'other' and the onus for action is on the subject. Such concern with one's response to others is also a corollary to assimilation urges that are characteristic of political formations like the nation-state.³ A related question is: are there universal values? These are concerns that are implicit in the idea of 'troubled diversity' and they reveal themselves to be important for the understanding of the unique diversity that characterizes this region of the country and that is the source today of many of its most pressing problems. When I say this I do not suggest that there are not other sources of these problems but merely that the contiguity of so many groups of different cultures, aspirations, relations with each other (which might include competing on various social, political, and economic grounds) and with the dominant community might be one of the sources.

On the other hand the discourse of the universal that has categorized human societies and divided them is a starting point for the recognitions and articulations and then the subsequent administering of diversities. Todorov speaks of the nationalist discourse as a universalizing idea (Todorov 1994). In the case of modern post-colonial societies the nation-state is one such universalist formation that continues with colonial devices of ordering diversities.

The problem then looks something like this: (a) diversity especially in the form of ethnic (a word used here in the sense of shared customs, language, history) distinctions is studied and recorded by the colonial administrative engine for better governance; (b) following the nationalist movement and its unity project the assimilationist discourse is strengthened, but such assimilationist designs are suspected of erasing the smaller components of the national entity, or swamping them in its embrace; (c) the result is resentment that takes the form of ethnic separatism and autonomy demands; (d) now the groups which received their identities from colonial records engage in performance of their

differences, of an already established ethnicity through craft melas, tribal exhibitions, or their own revival of defunct tribal social institutions—all of which feed into separatist aspirations or autonomy demands. Performance of difference which is also a performance of identity contributes to a larger picture of diversity performance.

Associated with this is the question of agency, a significant feature of modern identity formation and the seizing of the initiative in a gesture that turns on its head the colonial tribal entity formations or their continuations in the Indian state's knowledge exercises (Both the colonial government and its post-Independence replacement clearly position themselves as active subjects viewing objects on a unidirectional plane). It is in this final area that the most interesting moves and shifts are taking place in response to the conviction by the tribal groups of Assam that the dominant Assamese identity narrative is not hospitable to the groups it would embrace, the host unable to accept the other in her otherness. This has ensured that the assimilated reverts to an original state; one who has been made or made herself Assamese now seeks out the elements that assert an old tribal identity. The identity that emerges is an interesting hybrid where the conformity to a stereotype formed by a British account (though often selective as it must be, since the British accounts also pointed to negative characteristics of deceit and knavery) is an aspect of the strong declaration of separate and distinctive existence, the focus now on cultural forms and expressions rather than on stereotypical character traits.

Diversity as an idea appears in that popular phrase 'unity in diversity' that one might encounter in Vincent Smith's prefatory remarks about India being an 'ethnological museum'— 'the states, hundreds in number, might be likened to a swarm of bees, mutually repellant molecules in a state of incessant movement, now flying apart and again coalescing' (Smith 1982: 5) in *The Oxford History of India*, and which many of us have met in our own school history textbooks or textbooks of social studies, a term that has slipped into a pat everyday usage. It is a neat and convenient formulation that brings together the idea of nationalism which is so obviously a unitary idea and that of diversity which accounts for and indeed renders both visible and invisible in a peculiarly Foucauldian panoptic way all the multiple and diverse ways of being in India. Repressed in this statement of unique Indianness is an 'ambivalence' (and I use the word with an awareness of the resonance given to it by

Homi Bhabha)—an inevitable visibility and invisibility that is a function of governance but that is also at the same time a desire for the same states. The term crops up every time there is a concern with holding the Indian state together. It usually appears in its modern usage in conjunction with the institutions for administering actual diversity (unlike its earlier usage as a description of a colorful and plural past). In an article by M. S. Gore titled 'Unity in Diversity' which appeared in the *Social Scientist*, a sense of the ambiguity in the term is immediately apparent: 'Diversity poses problems to societies in two ways. First differences imply a commitment of different groups to different styles of living and to different value frameworks ... Besides, diversity has also a way of giving rise to disparities, to unequal access to opportunities and to an unequal share in the power structure of society' (Gore 1996: 31).

And in a statement that is particularly relevant we find an expression of the peculiar bind in which this duality is caught: 'Political institutions, in so far as they seek to ensure or promote "order" and stability in society, have to find ways of either minimizing these disparities and/or of interpreting, explaining and justifying them' (Gore 1996: 31).

A description is offered in another essay:

The Indian state has maintained unity in diversity by creating unifying institutions and by according equal respect to all linguistic and cultural social groups in society. An extremely heterogeneous society has achieved a level of integration through democratic mechanisms which has allowed regional assertions and pressures to coexist with an all-India integrative process of social formation of a modern Indian state. (Bhambri 1993: 30)

There is a degree of smugness in this conviction about the unifying mechanisms that borrow from this trait in the phrase itself.

One might think of the way in which the Constitution enshrines this ideal of unity in diversity through special provisions to safeguard minority rights, carefully sidestepping more inflammatory descriptions by focusing on numbers to signify minority status (Art. 350-A). Or one might look at the ideals of equality and justice through which special provisions are made for socially and economically backward classes. Articles 25 to 30 express the intention of protecting the religion and culture of minorities, speaking of the right of citizens to conserve

distinct language, script and culture, and establish and administer educational institutions of their choice.

Against this background of official safeguards which are used to administer a nation is what has been called 'ethnic management': 'Accommodationist management to prevent ethnic consciousness from becoming too intense and destructive to national unity and the democratic process' through 'sharing of power and resources at regional and sub-regional levels'; 'Polarizing management, to intensify ethnic consciousness to the point where "ethnic transformation" occurs' geared towards a more centralizing and homogenizing governance; and 'Manipulative management to stimulate short term ethnic awareness for short term political advantage' (Manor 1996: 470). These instances of management are not strictly speaking performative, used as they are by external agents to manipulate ethnicity for narrow political ends. What I have suggested by performance rather is a voluntary 'use' of ethnic distinctiveness made by a people in the process of consolidating an ideological position.

Examining the construction of diversity as a colonial mechanism evolved to produce an account of a country that was geographically, culturally, linguistically, or ethnically heterogeneous is a natural step in continuing this exercise in colonial and orientalist critique. Whether in the reinforcement of social division or in the maintenance of national unity and integrity, compiling a systematic list of its diversities has been an essential feature of the needs of the state. Confronted with the continuation and perpetuation of these representations in the present (often simply because of the colonial legacy in administrative practices, and the production of records about its diverse peoples for the better administering of the Indian nation-state, by institutions like the Anthropological Survey of India and its People of India project) it is necessary to look back and retrieve from the past the beginnings of a discursive history of ethnic divisions, periodically consolidated and resentfully articulated as a response to political processes or the moves made by the dominant community of the Assamese to assimilate tribal groups within a pan-Assamese identity.

Diversity in Assam too has been constructed as a result of British administrative requirements. But its history as a perceptual tool has been chequered. As in the rest of the country the early pre-colonial instances of it point to a fairly loose mix with which there were no

consistent dissensions. The most interesting perhaps are the well-known lines from the medieval poet-saint Sankardev: 'The Kiratas, the Kacharis, the Khasis, the Garos, the Miris (Mishings), the Yavanas, the Kankas, the Govalas, the Asamas (Ahoms), the Malukas, the Rajakas, the Turukas, the Kuvachas, the Mechas, the Candalas, and all others become pure in the company of the servants (devotees) of Krisna' (Dutta 1996: 207).

These lines are familiar in the state as an example of an inclusive image of medieval Assamese society where these varied groups are on par with one another and distinguished only by their spiritual purity or impurity. But this characterization into pure and impure appears in a different guise in Francis Hamilton's *An Account of Assam (1807-1814)* where they are defining traits of the people he describes. This suggestion is sustained in other British accounts and would appear to be an import from the rest of India where the category of caste which was formalized and consolidated by instruments like the census became divisive in a way that was absent in pre-British India. British accounts, of which there were many, are revealing in their systematization efforts, imposing a design of an ordered society on a land that had existed without this debilitating neatness. These accounts might also be seen as responsible for driving the wedge of purity/impurity between the so called 'pure' Assamese and the other groups who they defined as tribes. M'Cosh for instance, provides the following description: 'A large mass of the population is composed of tribes who originally descended from the Hills in the neighborhood; such as Rabhas, Garrows and Cacharies, Kangtis, Mikirs and Miris. Indeed these tribes form so large a share of the population that it is no easy matter to distinguish the pure Assamese amongst them ...' (M'Cosh 1837: 21).

And then in a stunning instance of criminal ethnography, he goes on to a more general diatribe against the Assamese who 'are inferior to the people of the North western provinces. In integrity of character they are estimated very low indeed: falsehood and knavery prevail to the greatest extent' (M'Cosh 1836: 22). M'Cosh also performs the task demanded and expected by the empire: naming the tribes.

The act of naming was to be performed by all other such accounts that produced the land even as they measured and counted and mapped it. The most detailed of these accounts is of course to be found in the two volumes by the ubiquitous Hunter whose statistical intentions are transparent: he records the peoples of each of the districts by name, number, and profession. These accounts of population composition

and the subsequent censuses clarify the diversity profile of the society. At the same time, these pictures, consolidated and stabilized over time, serve to give shape to collective and individual identity. And further comprehensive descriptions came out of the grand ethnological exercises, the most famous of which was Herbert Risely's People of India project. The post-Independence government-sponsored People of India project is an example of the way these colonial legacies remain in modern post-colonial states. Vol. XV, which is on the People of Assam found 115 communities speaking 45 languages belonging to the Tibeto-Burman (24), Indo-Aryan (12), and Austro-Asiatic (5) and described the place rather euphemistically as the meeting ground of ethnic streams from the west, north, and east. K. S. Singh who directed and edited the many volumes of this new project declared that most of the communities (62 per cent) reconstruct their identities from ethnographic accounts (Singh 2003: xii–xxviii).

A similar official project is the Tribes of Assam in three volumes produced by the Tribal Research Institute, Assam 'to bring out a popular series of books containing ethnographic notes on each scheduled tribe' in order to acquaint people with 'the basic characteristics of the tribes of each state, their pace of development and their role as an integral part of the greater Indian society' and also 'help the administrators, planners, development agencies, scholars'. 'This would ultimately pave the way for national integration' (Bordoloi, Sarmah Thakur & Saikia 1987: i). This peculiarly British legacy of description for the sake of better administration along with knowledge for better understanding is continued in the task of compiling notes on all of Assam's tribal communities, not only for the sake of better understanding but, as the concern with national integration shows, to also realize a definite goal of order.

A recent example is a coffee table book titled *Textile Tradition of Assam: Collection of Purbajyoti Sangrahalaya* which profiles the textile gallery of the Srimanta Sankardeva Kalakshetra and is published by the Indian Museum, Kolkata (no date given). It contains photographs in full colour of the textiles produced by different tribal groups along with the more familiar *muga* and *pat* weaving traditions. It is comprehensive and detailed and, more pertinently, an exercise in giving visibility.

But it is precisely the descriptive comprehensiveness demonstrated by all three projects that sets up a disturbing similarity with the colonial descriptions of Assam's diverse peoples and points to a commonality of

purpose. These exercises in compiling information on the tribal groups seen against their deployment for more effective governability (with corollaries of justice and equality) are equally well revealed to be exercises in surveillance for the better exercise of political and administrative power. And while such attempts seem to be geared towards a better incorporation of the diverse groups, a callousness/carelessness is sometimes evident in official unwillingness to make timely interventions. For example, one of the ways in which ethnic identity and diversity may be performed (and facilitated into performance) is through what is known as the 'living museum' (Clifford 1997) where a group may be invited to a museum to demonstrate its typical life over a period of a month or so—a kind of participatory exhibition that can become an occasion for the tribal group to attain visibility, and through such performance establish distinctiveness. However the local museum in Gauhati which opened its tribal gallery in 1983 only has static presentations from some of Assam's tribal communities. A proposal to organize a series of living exhibitions was shot down without serious thought given to its usefulness and its implications (communicated to the author by one of the officials of the museum who prefers to remain unnamed). So while it would appear that a desire for national or state integration propels the steps to compile knowledge in these forms, a limited understanding or simply official/bureaucratic indifference to the efficacy of such exercises in a climate of ethnic strife and discontent often proves obstructive.

To come around to the issue of troubled diversity through these routes—it would now appear that all these exercises in official recording and description of diverse peoples are ways of reinforcing differences. Just as caste has been revealed to have been reinforced as a result of British caste-based categorizations, the category of tribe has been similarly strengthened by these descriptions pushing the tribal groups to a corner from where the only strong assertion is that of a tribal identity. It is also worth noting that the political events of the recent past, particularly the Assam Movement with its chauvinistic identity narrative, have worked as catalysts to reinforce and stabilize these initial rumblings of difference into clearer sounds of ethnic resurgence. This is evident in the several autonomy demands that were made through memoranda to the central government by different groups that included not only the tribals but other groups unhappy with the prospect of assimilation within a grand Assamese narrative.

The conception of Assamese identity assumes that the tribal participates in and takes on elements of the dominant Assamese narrative but the reverse is hardly ever true. Examples of this imbalance may be seen in public representations of the Assamese: the most commonly recognized cultural markers are the pat or muga *mekhela sador*, the *jaapi*, the *sorai*, or the red and white *gamosa*; all of these are taken from the dominant Assamese community. The traditional Bodo attire for women, the *dokhona*, for example, has not so far been recognized as a representative cultural marker for the entire Assamese community. (A student of mine noted that when the floats of the various states went in procession down Rajpath, during the Republic Day parade in New Delhi on 26th January, one knew Assam from the Bihu dance that formed part of the ensemble on the float. But it was always the Bihu as celebrated by the dominant Assamese in their traditional muga mekela sador, notwithstanding the fact that the tribal communities also had very distinct ways of celebrating the Bihu with their Bihu dances and songs, and in their very distinctive traditional clothes).

One memorandum for a separate state gives the example of a Bodo cultural group which won the first prize at a national competition held at Hyderabad and was selected for being sent to Moscow as part of the Festival of India but was dropped by the Assam Government in favour of an 'Assamese' Bihu cultural group (Datta 1993, Document 8: 309) In imagining the concept of a modern Assamese identity, the term Assamese is contested and deeply troubling because as with all inclusive terminologies, it privileges one section of a people at the cost of others—the term rendering the others invisible. A society that is made up of so many different groups, communities, all with distinct languages and cultures is bound to have as its major problem this subsuming under a unitary term. The compulsions of nationalism cannot accommodate these many elements unless it releases itself from a majority-minority thought paradigm.

Many of these imbalances become evident in the autonomy demands made by several tribal groups in the crucial aftermath of the Assam Movement. The memoranda submitted by these groups all through the 1980s repeat the same grievances about the chauvinism of the Assamese community, the injustices of the language movement, and the attempts through linguistic dominance to 'Assamize' them and erase their distinct cultural identities. One of the memoranda makes a caustic

accusation: "The present agitation in Assam in the name of foreign nationals has threatened the linguistic minority communities including the tribal people of these two hill districts (Karbi-Anglong and North Cachar Hills)' and 'made no secret of their intention and determination to destroy the language, culture and tradition of the minorities as well as the tribals in Assam' (Datta 1993, I, Document 2: 50. 'Memorandum demanding an Autonomous State comprising Karbi-Anglong and North Cachar Hills in Assam, under the provision of Article 244(A) of the Constitution of India'). This document also expresses fears of what would happen to the tribals once the leaders of the students' union come to power in the state and mentions 'step-motherly treatment of the Assam Administration' (Datta 1993, I, Document 2: 51). There is also a reference to the steps taken by the two universities of Gauhati and Dibrugarh to have Assamese as the sole medium of instruction with effect from 1982 and the decision of the Board of Secondary Education of the state to impose Assamese as a compulsory subject in all non-Assamese schools (whereas members of the tribes would like to educate their children in Hindi and English) (Datta 1993, I, Document 2: 53).

This is a commonly heard resentment in many of these documents, perhaps finding ultimate expression in the suggestion made in the document submitted by the Bodos that since they were the original rulers of Assam and their language 'the most aboriginal and widespread in Assam' why should the Assamese people not read, speak, and accept Bodo as a link language (Datta 1993, II, Document 8: 284). This memorandum for a separate state submitted by the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) to the President of India and the Home Minister on 10 November 1987 articulates the grievances common to most of the tribal communities of Assam. In a section titled 'The Attitude of the Assamese People' it claims that 'The Assamese people have never accepted the tribals as part and parcel of Assamese community and society in real sense (sic)' and doubts that there ever has been anything like a 'Greater Assamese Nationality' (Datta 1993, II, Document 8: 287). It describes the attitude as anti-tribal, expansionist ('policy of expansionism and imperialism to capture and dominate all corners of Assam including the tribal areas') and politically intolerant ('cannot tolerate the existence of tribal communities and other democratic organizations who (sic) oppose the policies of Assamisation and Assimilation') (Datta 1993, II, Document 8: 287-8). The major issue on which autonomy demands rest, is, of course,

land. The document lists 45 tribal belts and blocks but points out that encroachers (non-tribal and non-indigenous) have illegally occupied lands in these areas and have also got land *pattas* in connivance with Government officials (Datta 1993, II, Document 8: 294–6).

These autonomy demands which prepare the ground for identity and diversity performances came in the wake of the alienation of Assam's tribal groups following the articulation of 'dominant Assamese' identity during the Assam Movement. This resulted in an increasing closing in of tribal communities, the denial of age-old traffic and exchange amongst communities, the loud declaration of distinctness, the revival of ethnically separate rituals and festivals, and the visible assertion of ethnic identity through dress.

This scenario of 'troubled diversity' which now appears as a function of colonial and post-colonial descriptive processes brings us back to related issues of social composition and everyday relations with the other and to Todorov's question (1994) cited earlier: 'How must we behave with respect to those who do not belong to the same community as ourselves?' I believe this is an important question to end on because the diversity that we have been gifted with has now become the ideological ground for resistant and collusive acts of self-fashioning.

Notes

1. It is interesting to note how many of the folk tale collections from Assam's many tribal communities are actually available in Assamese and seem to use the widely popular collection, *Burhi Aair Sadhu* (Grandmother's Tales), of Lakshminath Bezbaroa as a model.

2. The entry of synthetic fibres into traditional natural cloths like cotton and silk and the representation of this new hybrid as the authentic form is a common feature of the weaving cultures in many of the northeastern states and is often complemented by the insertion of new designs that differ from the old motifs. My personal experience of setting out to buy traditional fabric in Aizawl (the capital city of the state of Mizoram) was to find this strange blend of the old and the new in texture and design in fabrics that were being sold and used as 'traditional'. The fashionable boutique in any Northeastern state capital is possibly the place where this interesting re-presentation of the traditional becomes most evident.

3. The significance of the differences that exist between human groups is apparent in the attempts to discover whether we form a single species or

several, and the 18th century terms for these steps in European thought were monogenesis and polygenesis—which together suggest the working of the norm in perceptual exercises.

References

- Anderson, Benedict. 1999 [1983]. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Athar Ali, M. 1996. 'The Evolution of the Perception of India: Akbar and Abu'l Fazl', *Social Scientist*, 24 (1/3): 80–8.
- Bhambri, C.P. 1993. 'Cohesion, Conflicts and Contradictions within the Indian State', *Social Scientist*, 21 (5/6): 25–35.
- Bhattacharjee, Tanmay. 1997. 'New Introduction', in *The Karbis*. pp. V–XII. Guwahati: Spectrum Publications.
- Bordoloi, B.N. 1987. 'The Lalungs', in *Tribes of Assam Part I*, pp. 74–98. Guwahati: Tribal Research Institute.
- Bordoloi, B.N., G.C. Sharmah Thakur, and M.C. Saikia. 1987. 'Preface', in *Tribes of Assam Part I*. Guwahati: Tribal Research Institute.
- Bruner, Edward M. 2005. *Culture on Tour: Ethnographies of Travel*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Census of Assam. 1984 [1902]. *Census of Assam, 1901, Vol I: Report*. Delhi: Manas Publications.
- Clifford, James. 1997. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.
- Constitution of India. EText. Articles 25–30 (pages 13–15) and Article 350A (page 216). <http://india.gov.in/my-government/constitution-india/constitution-india-full-text>. (Last accessed on 5 November 2013.).
- Datta, P.S. (Compiled and Introduced). 1993. *Autonomy Movements in Assam (Documents)*. New Delhi: Omsons Publications.
- Dutta, Birendranath. 1996. 'Sankardeva and the Tribals of North-East India', in Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami (eds), *Essays on Sankardeva*, pp. 205–8. Guwahati: Lawyers Book Stall.
- Ghosh, Amitav. 2002. 'The Global Reservation', *The Imam and the Indian*, New Delhi: Ravi Dayal and Permanent Black.
- Gogoi, Jagyaram. 1962. 'Mikir', in P.C. Bhattacharyya (ed.), *Asomor Janajati (The Tribes of Assam: An Account of the Tribes of Assam, Nagaland and the North-Eastern Frontier)*, pp. 118–140. Guwahati: Lawyers' Book Stall.
- Gore, M.S. 1996. 'Unity in Diversity', *Social Scientist*, 24 (1/3): 30–43.
- Hamilton, Francis. 1987. S.K. Bhuyan (ed.), *An Account of Assam (1807–1814)*. Guwahati: DHAS.

- Jenkins, Laura Dudley. 2003. 'Another "People of India" Project: Colonial and National Anthropology', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 62 (4): 1143–70.
- Lyall, Charles. 1997. *The Karbis (The Mikirs [1972])*. With an Introduction by Tanmay Bhattacharjee. edited, arranged, and supplemented from the papers of Edward Stack. Guwahati: Spectrum Publications.
- M'Cosh, John. 1986 [1837]. *Topography of Assam*. New Delhi: Logos Press.
- Manor, James. 1996. "'Ethnicity" and Politics in India', *International Affairs*, 72 (3): 459–75.
- Robinson, William. 1975. *A Descriptive Account of Assam (1841)*. Delhi: Mittal.
- Rogers, John D. 1994. 'Post-Orientalism and the Interpretation of Premodern and Modern Political Identities: The Case of Sri Lanka', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 53 (1): 10–23.
- Sharma, Goutom and Julie Barooah (Compiled). (no date of publication, released in 2007). *Textile Tradition of Assam: Collection of Purbajyoti Sangrahalaya*. Kolkata: Indian Museum.
- Sharmah Thakur, G.C. 1985. *The Lalungs*. Guwahati: Tribal Research Centre.
- Singh, K.S. 1998. *India's Communities. People of India: National Series*, Vols IV–VI. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- . (General Editor). 2003. 'Foreword', in B.K. Bordoloi and R.K. Athaparia (vol. eds.), *People of India: National Series (Assam), Vol XV, Part Two*, pp. xii–xxviii. Calcutta: Seagull.
- Smith, Vincent. [Fourth Edition (ed.) Percival Spear]. 1982 [1919]. *The Oxford History of India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Society for Rural and Tribal Development (SRTD). 2006. *Annual Report, 2005–6*. Odalguri, BTAD, Assam: SRTD.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. 1994. *On Human Diversity*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.