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Contesting the Nation-State: Spatial Negotiation of the Persecuted Bengalis in Select Short Stories from the Barak Valley of Assam

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Abstract

This paper aims to be a part of the study of region and regionalism, which is upheld by the contemporary social scientists as an alternative way to deal with polity and its inadequacies and contradictions at a sociological level. This recent vogue of the study of region and regionalism is contingent upon the collapse of the category called nation-state as a superior form of harmonious polity at the national level. The mindless homogenization tendencies of this system exposed the discomforts and dissatisfactions of various ethno-cultural-regional communities, giving rise to insurgent movements and ideologies, theories of uneven development, structural and institutional discriminations and even of internal colonialism. By taking the case of persecuted Bengalis of the Barak Valley of Assam in the post-partition era, and the spatialization of the segregationist policies of the hegemonic forces against them, this paper will show how the figure of the refugee causes a rupture in the unities of time and space and the idea of nationhood through their everyday negotiations with space. Apart from dealing with institutional racism against Bengali communities, the paper intends to engage with its communal turn, which is targeting Muslims through hate speech, religious profiling and all sorts of negative stereotypes. By focusing on four distinct types of refugee subjects from four different short stories - Amitabha Dev Choudhury's "Wake Up Call", Amalendu Bhattacharya's "The Chronicle of Vyomkesh Kavyatirtha", Moloy Kanti Dey's "Ashraf Ali's Homeland", and Arijit Choudhury's "Fire" - and their spatial negotiations in the atmosphere of institutional racism and structural violence, the paper will reflect on the inadequacy of the category called nation-state to accommodate the aspirations and imaginaries of them. The scope of the paper would also try to accommodate the potential of the "minor literature" in subverting the grand narratives of the nation by closely scrutinizing the select texts.

Keywords: Nation-state, region, "imagined communities", "minor literature" and heterotopia

The nation has to be narrated in a democratic mode
In order to recover the nation for the people of India.

Neera Chandhoke

The idea of nation is of Western origin. If we look at the condition of the Indian subcontinent in the pre-colonial time, we find that there was no concept of "Nation" but only the provinces. In fact, when India as a "Nation" got independence, there were more than five hundred provinces, which were always at loggerheads with each other. The idea of "Nation", as the West has conceived it to be, has started emerging in the Indian subcontinent during the colonial period. Therefore, in this subcontinent, the idea of "Nationhood" was crystalized against the colonial system. People irrespective of class, caste, creed and religion felt the need to have a consolidated image when they were going through the colonial experience. The exploitative quality of colonialism prompted the oppressed people of various regions to come forward and uphold a single identity. Hence, this unitary sense of identity called "Nationality" emerged as per the need and priorities or the necessities of the freedom struggle. This was the time when people from all sorts of class, creed, caste and gender, for the time being, put their liminal identities behind and created a common identity of which they considered themselves to be a part of. But with the political independence from the foreign yoke on 15th August, 1947, the common sentiment to inspire people in the name of nation was missing and as a result, in the post-independence India, the idea of "Nation" was restructured. Neera Chandhoke in her book, *Searching for a Narrative in Times of Globalization*, reflects:

> Certainly nations construct themselves around objective factors such as territorial borders, shared traditions, common historical memoirs, rituals, practices and a common language. But the presence of objective factors is simply not enough. These factors have to be invested with right symbolism and meaning so that a group of people can be called a nation. Therefore, I suggest that whether a group of people can be termed a nation depends largely on whether they consider themselves as belonging to one, and whether they consider themselves distinguished from others by this fact. It is simply not enough to depict a nation in terms of its institutions, structures and ideologies; it has to be depicted in terms of structures of feelings (40).

For Chandhoke, the individual's sense of belonging is important to turn a geographical territory into a nation. Here comes an inevitable question, how could there be a shared sense of belonging where the geographical space consisted of diverse groups and communities as its inhabitants. To this, Chandhoke discussed in detail what is to be understood by the idea of "belonging" in a multicultural nation like India:

> Belonging is always plural in its ties, its imaginations, memory, sense of history, and perception of the present. Therefore, we call any attempt to impose one sense of belonging on diverse groups, each of which relate to the nation in their own way, through the imposition of one language or religion or culture – fascism . . . people must in a democratic nation at least be free to belong to the nation in their own ways . . . Freedom in turn involves two oppositions. One, that groups should be free to follow their own religious and cultural practices within the ambit of what is democratically permissible. Secondly, groups should not be

> targeted on the ground that they subscribe to a religious persuasion that is not that of the majority (42).

The consolidation of the idea of the "Nation" depends largely on the nation's negotiation with the needs of the present. The national consciousness has to be transformed into social and political consciousness which will be directed towards the betterment of the nation as a whole. If the nation fails to do so, it will end up creating a rupture in the sense of oneness. Dr. Neera Chandhoke remarks: "In short, at historically significant moments of its political biography, nation will be compelled to both re-imagine as well as re-narrate itself to its inhabitants and for its inhabitants" (26). Now in the absence of a strong anti-colonial sentiment, the idea of nation is at the risk of being faded out, and various regional, cultural, linguistic and ethnic communities are likely to demand autonomy against the homogeneity of nationalism. In the post-colonial India, nation building became a political process through which this separatist tendencies, this communalization of politics have been accelerated. Harris Mylonas in his book, *The Politics of Nation-Building: Making Co-Nationals, Refugees, and Minorities* echoed almost the same ideas: "Legitimate authority in modern national states is connected to popular rule, to majorities. Nation-building is the process through which these majorities are constructed . . . governing elites see benefit in harmonizing the political and the national units through the construction and propagation of a common national identity among the population of their state" (17-18). The entire nation building process is based mainly on three policies: assimilation, accommodation and exclusion. Who to assimilate, who to accommodate, and who to exclude was entirely up to the ruling political elites[i] of the state. The core groups are more likely to employ accommodation and exclusionary policies to those who do not share a common ethno-religious-cultural-linguistic identity with the core group. Everything they were doing, they think, is to prevent contaminating the purity of their group. In this three dimensional nation building policies, the assimilationist policies aimed at producing co-nationals and accommodation and exclusionary policies ended up producing national minorities and refugees respectively.[ii]

As against the discourse of "Nation", the contemporary scholarship is found to take interest in the study of region and regionalism. The recent scholarship conceptualizes region in the context of non-physical variables like history, language, religion, caste, and culture and blurs the conceptualization of regions only in terms of spatial categories like territory or place. Anssi Paasi and Jonathan Metzger in their essay "Foregrounding the Region", conceptualizes region from different methodological perspectives. For example, Marxists and humanistic views provided "a heterogenous set of theoretical approaches where *social practice* was seen as the key 'source' of regions" (Paasi 22). According to them regions were produced and reproduced by social factors such as politicians, entrepreneurs, journalists, teachers and several voluntary associations. Several poststructuralists conceptualize regions as historically contingent processes that are "becoming" as part of the social process rather than "being" i.e. a fixed entity or passive background medium for social processes. Hence, philosophically speaking, there has been a significant "move away from the Kantian perspective on space – as an absolute category – towards *space as process* and *in process* (that is space and time combined in becoming)" (Thrift and Crang 3). In his book *Conceptualizing the Region*, Aloysius shows how region is constructed through human emotions and imaginations, how it "instils a sense of longing for and belonging among people, who through generations were involved in its gradual, collaborative yet often contestatious

construction" (33). Apart from this, the region also imparts a sense of intimacy and community to its inhabitants and evokes nostalgia in them. This paper examines the reconceptualization of spaces through the lens of pain, suffering and political nostalgia as refugee subjects perform them through their everyday negotiations with life in a hostile land. By focusing on the literary space of the Bengali writers from the Northeast India, I would show how the lives of the Bengalis living in that region is intertwined with the larger convulsions in the political sphere. This paper is an attempt to stretch our understanding of Partition violence to include the long and ongoing process of Bureaucratic violence in a Post-colonial nation-state. It also seeks to place Partition at the heart of everyday nation making process.

The psyche of almost all the Bengalis in the Northeastern part of India is ingrained with the indelible scars of living a life with the stigma of being a suspected foreigner. The partition of 1947 and the coronary migration meant not merely one time displacement for the Bengalis of the North-east, rather it brought a lifelong threat of dislocation and perennial crisis of identity not only for the direct victims of partition but also for the subsequent generations as well. Manash Firaq Bhattacharjee's memoir, published by *Aljazeera* in the backdrop of Assam agitation, explores the perennial tension that prevails in the state of Assam on the issues of migration and identity. According to Bhattacharjee,

> The political concern of the Assamese community was that large-scale migration was threatening to turn them into a linguistic minority. Assam's leaders argued that the number of refugees from East Pakistan, fleeing conflict and civil war with West Pakistan, which ultimately led to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, had created a demographic imbalance, endangering the rights of the "indigenous" Assamese. . . They demanded that refugees from Bangladesh arriving between January 1, 1966, and March 24, 1971, should be made ineligible for citizenship rights. In the Assam Accord of 1985, signed between Assam's student leaders and the Rajiv Gandhi government, March 24, 1971, was set as the cut-off date for identifying and expelling "foreigners" (mainly immigrants from Bangladesh)" (Bhattacharjee, "We foreigners…").

This official cut-off date hardly matters when it comes to branding people as "foreigners"/ "Bangladeshis". Bhattacharjee jibes at the arbitrariness of the whole process of labelling someone as "Bangladeshis". His father, a Bengali Hindu refugee from Mymensingh in the then East Pakistan was branded as a "foreigner" even though he came to Assam in 1951 as an economic migrant initially. His mother was born in Assam, but, since her parents hailed from Dhaka, she was called a "foreigner". And needless to say, Bhattacharjee also inherited the identity of being a "foreigner" by birth. Thus the partition of India in the Eastern part culminated in the course of time to be the most significant determining factor in the socio-political context of the North-east India, particularly Assam in the Post-Independence period. Consequently, the partition has been the most decisive factor in the evolution of Bengali identity in the North-east India. This anti-Bengali sentiment in the Assamese population is to can be traced back to the period of colonial government. During the period of 1836 to 1872, when Assam was a part of Bengal presidency, Bengali was imposed as Assam's state language. Since then Bengali becomes a symbol of cultural hegemony in the mass perception of the Assamese. The gradual increase of population of both Bengali Hindus and Muslims was often viewed as a threat to Assamese language and culture, particularly by a section of

Assamese intelligentsia and political leaders. Thus migration in this part of the continent has played a crucial role in all the parliamentary and assembly elections in the state till date. Thanks to political manoeuvrings, this anti-Bengali sentiment, conflicting emotions found expression through several agitations, often violent, in Assam. Although the Assam Movement of 1979 was largely non-violent in the initial stage, the Nellie massacre (1983) followed by bloodbath of Gohpur (1983) witnessed extreme form of violence and bloodshed. The normal course of life was severely disrupted for a long period in this region. The last three decades of the twentieth century was thus a period of extreme uncertainty, particularly for the Bengalis, both linguistic and religious minorities. Thus the glory of independence was marred by a deep sense of despair hovering over the minds of Bengalis in Assam. The independence created a permanent scar in the minds as the migration following the partition of the country determined their identity, which was put to threat time and again for the rest of their lives. Once uprooted, the apprehension of getting displaced again still haunted not only the immigrants but also the whole of Bengali community in Assam. The present paper intends to explore this issue of longing and belonging and their spatial manifestation theoretically by focusing on four distinct short stories: Amitabha Dev Choudhury's "Wake Up Call", Amalendu Bhattacharya's "The Chronicle of Vyomkesh Kavyatirtha", Moloy Kanti Dey's "Ashraf Ali's Homeland", and Arijit Choudhury's "Fire".

Dev Choudhury's "Wake Up Call" is a recreation of the tension, anguish and crisis around the construction of identity of a Bengali in a very subdued tone. The narrator of the story, a second generation partition victim, comes across a homeless, destitute, pale and haggard old woman who had migrated to Assam several decades ago and found a shelter in a nearby temple. The narrator gives an elaborate description of her outward appearance, which ultimately proves to be a clue to the inner dynamics of her psychical world, in the following manner:

> Hair twisted like a rope, wrinkles lining the face, shrivelled skin – all suggest that the hay days of this person are gone. Wilderness haunts her open eyes. It is hard to figure out whether it's a male or female figure. The white piece of cloth wrapped around is the only testimony to her bygone femininity. Neither masculine nor feminine, she is beyond such attributes. Just *Homo sapiens*. Merely a human being. We call her 'Masi'. . . (Deb Choudhury 139)

The shabby appearance of Masi and her apparent sexual ambiguity draws an immediate and obvious connection to the three withches of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Like the witches in *Macbeth*, she too represents fate, the fate of lakhs of Bengalis languishing perennially in exile. Like the witches, she also embodies a strong sense of alienness: "Our Masi is oblivious of the world around her. She belongs to a completely different world altogether" (39). And for her, this world is the world of memory, the "seamless spectacle of eternal Bengal" that lurks beneath her consciousness all throughout her life (142). Masi compulsively talks about her past life in East Bengal and creates a spell in the narrator's mind as he feels nostalgic about what he only heard from elderly people. The narrator is not sure whether the account of her past life is authentic as some of the stories told by the old woman contradict one another. Although he feels irritated at times listening to her same old stories, but more he listens to her stories, more he feels like going back down the collective memory lane of the Bengalis, more he searches his identity in an imaginary homeland. Thus through Masi's repeated retelling of her past

life, she performs nostalgia and thus creates a mnemonic existential space that seems to offer, at least, temporary refuge to a refugee heart in an alien land. Both Masi and the narrator are the active and passive residents of this mnemonic space respectively. Now this imaginative reconstruction of a mnemonic space becomes a "heterotopia" in Foucauldian terms, causing rupture in the unities of time and space and the idea of nation-hood. In his posthumously published essay "Of Other Spaces", Foucault declares that "the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time" (230). In this essay, Foucault shifts his concern from centrality of time and history in the nineteenth century to centrality of space in the domain of knowledge production. According to Foucault, the space we live in is not a "homogenous and empty space", but a space imbued with our perception, dreams and passion (231). Foucault identifies those spaces as "real spaces", the "heterotopias" as opposed to the "utopias" that are "fundamentally unreal spaces" (231). By calling them "counter sites", Foucault classifies heterotopias in two ways – crisis heterotopias and deviant heterotopias. Whereas crisis heterotopias denote sacred or forbidden spaces or places, deviant heterotopias denote spaces inhabited by subjects whose "behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm. . ." (232). Dev Choudhury's short story "Wake Up Call" illustrates how Masi, through her repeated reminiscence of her past life on the other side of the border, creates a heterotopia of deviation against the bureaucratic definition of nation as a rooted space surrounded by sacrosanct border.

Amalendu Bhattacharya's story "The Chronicle of Vyomkesh Kavyatirtha" centres around the figure of a refugee Bengali Hindu Brahmin priest who was compelled to migrate from an East Pakistan village, his ancestral homeland to Barak valley of Assam just after the partition. The partition has caused havoc in the life of Vyomkesh, the son of a relatively well off Sanskrit teacher of Panchakhanda, once a seat of learning in undivided Pakistan. Faced with extreme financial constraints watching helplessly a gradual erosion of traditional cultural values and a disregard for Sanskrit language which he regards highly, Vyomkesh feels the pangs of dislocation. For him, his language and its performativity become synonymous with his homeland. Partition has not only robbed him off his land, but also off his language; it has compelled him to settle in a society where he is constantly reminded of his marginal existence. He is shocked to see how "with the loss of their ancestral land they have experienced a sea change in the way they talk and interact with others" (110). He is finding himself a complete misfit with the surrounding world, because an individual personality is largely "a product of the cumulative power of regional conditioning, both in its physical and cultural phases" (Aloysius 33). Thus with the change of region, pattern of living and mental type get changed. In case of Vyomkesh, "this symbiotic relationship between the individuals and the totality of cultural imponderables" of his familiar world gets severely disturbed after his migration to Barak valley of Assam. As a resident of the deviant heterotopia, Vyomkesh's refugee identity fails to accommodate itself to the newly made imagined community called India. His deviant self unsettles the sacrosanct category called nation-state with the following questions: "Will the rich tradition of Sanskrit completely vanish in independent India one day? Should our nation continue to remain besotted with the West and be oblivious of itself?" (115). Vyomkesh's love for Sanskrit is a displacement of his love for his own identity. Paul R. Brass, in his essay "Elite Interests, Popular Passions, and Social Power in the Language Politics of India", claims that "love of one's language is a form of displacement of narcissism of the self onto the language. . ." (365).

Brass further argues, "one defends one's mother tongue when one cannot speak at all or well a language of wider communication when one's own language is dying out or is useless for improving one's life chances. In such a situation, the use of the mother tongue metaphor must mean that one has lost one's mother's protection and that the speaker feels like a child, isolated in a world of adults who speak another language" (365-66). Although Sanskrit is not Byomkesh's mother tongue, but his dependence on the language for sustaining his life and livelihood elevates it to the status of mother tongue. Therefore, with the degradation of Sanskrit in the independent India, he feels unprotected like a child in adult's world. Here the adult's world is to be metaphorically understood as the category called nation-state.

"Ashraf Ali's Homeland" by Moloy Kanti Dey represents the plight of a Bengali Muslim in the post Assam Agitation period in the early 1980s when a witch hunt for foreigners and their deportation created a havoc in the lives of the Bengali people. A resident of Assam for last three decades, Ashraf crossed the border in his childhood along with his parents after they had lost their ancestral home to the land hungry wealthy Muslim landowners. Even though he had exercised his franchise in several general elections in India, it never occurred to him that one needs to have a document to support one being an Indian citizen. Since Bangladesh government was not ready to accept the deported people from India, dispossessed beings like Ashraf Ali was evicted under the cover of darkness by the state police. Standing deserted in a no man's land, Ashraf's little son asked his father when they could go back home. Ashraf had no answer as he did not have a homeland now:

> Ashraf is standing in the forest in distress. Abdul asks him, 'O father, won't we go to our country?' Ashraf does not reply. The place where he now stands at is a no man's land. As he stands here Ashraf realises that he does not have a homeland anywhere in the world. He has lost his homeland in Pakistan to Irfan *chacha* and in Hindustan to Kader Mian. Homelands are now in their control. And Ashraf? Standing on the strip of no man's land, Asraf, in fact, now is no man – a nonentity (Dey 122).

Now this ending of "Ashraf Ali's Homeland" finds resonances with the ending of Manto's "Toba Tek Singh", another poignant partition story. Manto's story ends in the following way: "Over there, behind the barbed wires, was Hindustan. Over here, behind identical wires lay Pakistan. In between, on a bit of land that had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh" (Manto 220). Ashraf's condition can be understood in terms of the idea of precarious citizenship. For the last five decades, Assam's Bengali speaking Muslims have been invariably seen as illegal migrants and brandished as a threat to state's demography, economic opportunities and culture of the local population (Punathil 2). Salah Punathil, in his essay "Precarious Citizenship: Detection, Detention and 'Deportability' in India", states: "In South Asia, the distinction between a citizen and a migrant is understood as highly blurred, as citizenship rights are illegally extended to migrant groups throughout the region . . . Studies highlight the illegal extension of citizenship rights to migrants through fraudulent means, leading to a situation of 'indistinguishability' between citizens and non-citizens" (2). The concept of precarious citizenship is an important analytical tool to understand the complex citizenship process in India. In most of the cases, it is a result of arbitrary state policies, regulations and their implementations in practical context. Ashraf's transformation from a human being to a

non-entity is due to this arbitrary state policy. With the presence of a "non-entity" in a no man's land, the sacred aura of the border of the two nation-states is mocked at. Farhana Ibrahim, in her essay "Re-Making a Region: Ritual Inversions and Border Transgressions in Kutch", delineates in detail how the sacred aura of the borders of the nation-state is created:

> From the perspective of the state, the border is a definitive line that divides two nation-states; this boundary is to be maintained at all costs . . . Identities such as language and religion, which are usually amorphous and porous across borders, are sought to be fixed into cartographic moulds of the nation-state, in order to give it the physical and ideological fixity (447).

Thus, the problematic presence of Ashraf, a Bengali Muslim in the state of Assam, in a no man's land unsettles the natural division between religions (Hinduism/Islam) that became core constituent in the monolithic nationalist rendition of nation and nationhood. Ashraf belonged neither to Islamic republic of Pakistan, nor to India where majority of population is Hindu, but to a "third country" – a border culture, where the lifeblood of two worlds merged. To quote Gloria Anzaldua in this context seems appropriate, though her study was largely based on Us-Mexican borderlands. In *Borderlands: La* Frontera, Anzaldua observed:

> A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants . . . The only "legitimate" inhabitants are those in power . . . Tension grips the inhabitants of the borderlands like a virus. Ambivalence and unrest reside there and death is no stranger" (3-4).

The rise of majoritarian discouse and anti-Muslim sentiments in Assam is contingent upon the Hindu Right's rise to political power in India in the 1980s and 1990s. Thanks to their constant attempts at "rewriting history or replacing it by myths for public consumption" in favour of communal representation of history, the anti-foreigner discourse in the state became more prominent and eventually evolved into an anti-Muslim one (Chakraborty 169). In the tussle between the secular histories and communal histories to capture the realm of the popular, political groups of the Hindu Right mobilized social support and successfully instilled a deep sense of communal hatred in the public imagination and thus the vision of the construction of a secular public eroded eventually (Bhattacharya 70). In the essay "Predicaments of Secular History", Bhattacharya very wisely remarked: "people's perception of the past were very often shaped not by what historians wrote but by the popular tracts that circulated in the bazaar" (70).

Arijit Choudhury's "Fire" records the act of sanity and human compassion in the turbulent time of mass agitation in Assam. The story is significant because it reveals that the experience of dispossession is not limited to the linguistic or religious minority only, it is experienced by anyone who attempts to resist the agents of political power and hegemony. Mahendra, an Assamese, a worker of the Farmer's Association and a communist party member did not participate in hate mongering surging all over the state of Assam targeting Bengalis as "foreigner". Mahendra has realised that "spotting a Bengali-Hindu or a Muslim or a Nepali, immediately branding him "foreigner" and inflicting torture in him is inhuman and unjust. Even if one is a foreigner that does not

mean that he should be burnt down – Mahendra would never support this" (Choudhury 56). However, for taking a clear political stand against the sectarianism of his own community, his friends, relatives and villagers ostracized him and even went to the extent of trying to kill him and setting fire to his house. Despite bearing the identity of a Hindu Assamese, he was more comfortable in the company of Samsul, a Bengali Muslim and his party comrade. Mahendra and Samsul seem to be a resident of an ideal world where the narrow walls of religious and linguistic affiliation are dismantled to give rise to sheer sense of humanity. In the author's narrative, a train compartment is presented as a microcosm of that ideal world: "The train was bound for Cachar where most of the people were Bengalis and most of the passengers on the train were also Bengalis. The passengers were mostly all 'Sylhetis', originally from Bangladesh. Mahendra could neither speak pure Bengali nor the Sylheti dialect perfectly. But in this train he felt secure" (62). With this sense of security, humanity is established in an otherwise maddening world of hatred and disintegration. Now with the presentation of a deviant figure like Mahendra, the fixed rendition of identity along a hard religious and linguistic line is destabilized. Due to this inherent complexity of Mahendra's identity, his political and territorial allegiance to the nation-state remained somewhat questionable. Thus, he, like Masi and Ashraf, is also a resident of the heterotopias of deviation, whose presence is always suspected by the nation-state.

The contested space of the Nation-state emerges not only in the fictional universe of the concerned writers, but also through their ontological position as writers from minority background. Deleuze and Guattari, in the essay "What is Minor Literature?", talk about a kind of literature which celebrates a revolutionary way of writing, which they think Kafka exemplified. Deleuze and Guattari are leading us to believe that great literature emerges when one is open to change, when one embraces the possibilities of becoming rather than sticking to the definitions, the standards which have always been there. Kafka is particularly an interesting example to take in this case because he wrote without a sense of the people or any fixed identity. Instead he wrote about the world, a set of people, who are yet to come into prominence. He wrote about a set of people who were in the process of defining themselves rather than a people who always already had a kind of identity which they could own as their own. Kafka was a Jew writing in German, the language of the Austro-Hungarian empire. He used to live in Prague in Czechoslovakia, which was detached from Austro-Hungarian empire during Kafka's lifetime. So, he was writing in a language that was not fully his because he was a Jew, it was not even fully the language of the country where he lived. German was the official language of Czech when it was the part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. The writers from the Barak Valley of Assam and their ontological crisis are almost a mirror image of Kafka. Settled in the Assamese dominated community, the Bengali writers are making a political statement by asserting their identity through the medium of vernacular literature. In the face of Assamese chauvinism, in the state of being deterritorialized as a linguistic community, they embrace their language to crystallize their identity. By making a conscious choice of writing in the Bengali language from outside Bengal, they are imparting a strong political message that the free flow of language cannot be circumscribed within a geographical territory and by doing this, they are challenging the unilateral definition of the 'Nation" which consists of states drawn along the linguistic line.

With the growing importance of region and regionality in the social science discipline, the political category called nation-state seems to be losing its sway over its population

in various forms like ethnic assertion, separatist movements so on and so forth. Sudipta Kaviraj, in his article "Three Planes of Space: Examining Regions Theoretically in India" argues if we are to follow the theory of "fragmentation" and take regions to be fundamentally real, it does not leave any room for India to exist (63). His disinterestedness to agree with the idea of fragmentation prompted him to form a third kind of space, which according to Kaviraj, can only be called India because it is impossible to locate these features elsewhere. In order to resolve this debate, Kaviraj comes up with the idea of India as a second-order space, he relies on the federal structure of Indian democracy. For Kaviraj, it is through the tussle between the state and the nation, the "real" and unique India emerges. But, my intervention at this point is what if that federal structure completely fails and path to dialogue between the centre and the state is completely closed? The said essay by Kaviraj was published in November 18, 2017 and in the post 2017, Indian democracy has been through a roller coaster ride through the abrogation of article 370 on August 5, 2019, the listing of 1.9 million people in the northeast state of Assam as illegal migrants from Bangladesh in the official report of National Register of Citizen (NRC) and the passing of anti-constitutional Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 11 December 2019, which brazenly discriminates against country's Muslim minority. The whole idea of nation, as envisaged by our Constitution, is upended under the guise of protecting the persecuted minorities from the neighbouring country. The idea of India fails at the very moment a refugee languishing in the detention centre of Assam cannot imagine himself/herself to be a part of the "imagined community" inhabited by the multi-millionaires of the country. In order to substantiate my point I would like to quote Kaviraj again from another essay "Crisis of the Nation-State in India": "It was in that sense impossible to achieve the kind of firm identification between people and a form of politicized space which is presupposed in the political ontology of the modern nation-state" (116). Partha Chatterjee, in his essay "Anderson's Utopia", nullifies the existence of the nation-state in the form of an empty homogenous time, as it was developed by Anderson in his phenomenal work *Imagined Communities*. Going against the modern historical thinking that the social space of modernity is distributed in empty homogenous time, Chatterjee shows why the imagination of the category called nation-state is basically a utopic imagination. The simultaneity of experience which, according to Anderson, is believed to bring forth the category called nation-state, is more of a myth that of a reality in the post-colonial context where the presence of a dense and heterogenous time is constantly made palpable by the

> … industrial capitalists waiting to close a business deal because they hadn't yet had word from their respective astrologers, or industrial workers who would not touch a new machine until it had been consecrated with appropriate religious rites, or voters who could set fire to themselves to mourn the defeat of their favourite leader, or ministers who openly boast of having secured more jobs for people from their own clan and having kept the others out (Chatterjee 132).

Hence, people are found to live in the heterogenous time of modernity and not in the empty homogenous time called nation-state. Moreover, the very foundation of an egalitarian nation-state is dependent upon the wills and consents of the people inhabiting it, whether they connect themselves to the aims and aspirations of the nation-state as a whole. Even after a close scrutiny of all four short stories, not a single character has been found, who can, at least, claim his/her basic human rights in the rigid structure of the nation-state. Thereupon, with the negation of the basic human rights to a group of people

inside the geographical territory of a sovereign nation-state, the possibility of the very existence of it is negated.

Notes

[i]By the use of the term "ruling political elite", Mylonas refers to the core group (i.e. the inhabitants of a country who share a common national type along racial, religious, linguistic and cultural line) of the host state who participate actively in the nation building policies. These ruling political elites of the host state are not to be confused with the economically dominant class or with the intellectuals of the state. The principle aim of this group of "ruling political elites" is to preserve their own position in the state. Driven by a homogenizing imperative, they believed the process of nation-building is incomplete until the "threatening" non-core groups are made extinct in their state.

[ii]See Mylonas, especially page 21-22, for an insightful analysis of this issue.

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