
Sovereignty and Space: Experiences of the Frontier Peoples of the North East India

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ABSTRACT:

The visibility of the peoples in the frontiers has been very late in the course of history. It is only when they were cornered and pressurized by foreign colonial forces and powers that they were compelled to assert their 'sovereign' or 'independent' stand, which finally placed them in the map of history. The question is not about winning or losing. The experiences of the frontier peoples of the North East of India also underwent the same process until they were made to realize that they were being colonized. However, the making of history for the colonial powers has not been an easy process, as this paper recounted.

The frontier peoples of the North East of India, in the exercise of their 'sovereignty' and 'independence' in their respective spaces did not stand an easy prey for the colonial powers. The paper exhumes the fact that 'sovereignty' cannot be measured or dictated in terms of the size of the power holder; instead history ought to acknowledge the prevalence of 'sovereignty' in their respective state and stages. The experiences of the frontier peoples of the North East are a discourse to reinstate the significant stand of the frontier peoples in the course of retelling the colonial history.

Key words: *North east India, Frontier Peoples, Sovereignty and Space.*

INTRODUCTION

The North East of India, including Myanmar (Burma), and Bangladesh was secluded as a frontier, where in the quest for power and domination Great Britain, Burma, China, Japan and India met. No powers or authorities knew the bounds of these frontiers, which were again, after India's independence, administered by the Ministry of External Affairs for some time. The Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, in the year 1954, even went to the extent of organizing a new Frontier Service that was called the Frontier Administrative Service to monitor the region's administration. Army personnel and others were recruited to administer parts of the frontier.

The 'Frontier Peoples', here to denote the hill tribes of Manipur and Mizoram, of the North East of India's experiences is one of diverse chapters that witnessed the play, interplay and counterplay of the British colonial power as well as others that was immediately followed by the birth of the Indian State, which created political turbulence with a peoples who will be referred to here as

the 'Frontier Peoples.' The transition of power and sovereignty from the hands of the 'frontier tribes' to the British empire and then to the Indian State has inevitably resulted in shifting the legal, institutional and discursive terms of sovereignty and space of the same peoples whose political experiences we will delve into. The colonial expeditions in the land of the frontier peoples resulted in their stepping in without restraint, which, in the process not only spurred and challenged their sovereignty but also fragmented them with the need for renegotiation, which remains unsettled in the region till today.

The frontier peoples of India's North East understanding of sovereignty, which was associated with non-intervention and the exclusion of external authority, was negated by the emergence of the colonial powers. Large or small, the diverse and multi-ethnic frontier peoples occupy territorial units with juridical independence; they are not formally subject to some external authority and are regarded as immensely sovereign.

DEFINING SOVEREIGNTY

In practice the term sovereignty has been used in many different ways. In contemporary usage, four different meanings of sovereignty can be distinguished: interdependence sovereignty, domestic sovereignty, Westphalian or Vattelian sovereignty, and international legal sovereignty.

Interdependence sovereignty refers to the ability of states to control movement across their borders. Domestic sovereignty refers to authority structures within states and the ability of these structures to effectively regulate behavior. The classic theorists of sovereignty, Bodin and Hobbes, who were concerned primarily with domestic sovereignty, wanted above all to establish a stable system of authority, one that would be acknowledged as legitimate by all members of the polity regardless of their religious affiliation. The acceptance or recognition of a given authority structure is one aspect of domestic sovereignty; the other is the level of control that officials can actually exercise. Well ordered domestic politics have both legitimate and effective authority structures. Failed states have neither. Westphalian or Vattelian sovereignty refers to the exclusion of external sources of authority both *de jure* and *de facto*. Within its own boundaries the state has a monopoly over authoritative decision-making. At the international level, this implies that states follow the rule of non-intervention in the internal affairs of others. International legal sovereignty refers to mutual recognition. The basic rule of international legal sovereignty is that recognition is accorded to juridically independent territorial entities which are capable of entering into voluntary contractual agreements.

SOVEREIGNTY AND THE CONTESTED SPACES

The British rulers, in their quest for extending its empire, occupied Assam as a conquered territory after the Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826). While the treaty of Yandaboo (1826) did not define the boundary of Assam, it simply stipulated that the Burmese would not interfere in Assam and its dependencies. The Ahom kings in whose place the British stepped in did not possess any map to show the boundary of their kingdom; nor did they possess any documentary records giving description of their frontiers. The new rulers of Assam also did not know the bounds of their newly acquired territories.

Meanwhile, after the Treaty of Yandaboo was concluded (February 24, 1826) Burma and British India recognized the independence of Manipur. The British strategists wanted to use Manipur as a buffer zone for numerous reasons. Manipur, despite being an independent kingdom during the whole of the 19th century, continued to serve as a frontier defense base because of the increasing influence of France in Indo-Chinese peninsula. Moreover, in order to ensure smooth commercial exploitation of the two regions, the British wanted to have a friendly relation with Manipur. Manipur, as Alexander Mackenzie pointed out, played a prominent part in the politics of North East frontier, particularly with the frontier tribes. British rulers inevitably employed Manipur as a spring board for dominating the unruly tribes in the frontiers.

Lord William Bentinck created the office of political agency on February 7, 1835, making an inroad to the sovereign power of Manipur. While the political agent is dependent on the wish and pleasure of the Maharajah for everything, the protracted disputes or wars of succession inevitably becomes an excuse for interference into the internal affairs of Manipur as well as in other parts of the frontiers.

While acknowledging that Manipur was an independent kingdom, Alexander Mackenzie contends that Manipur was a protectorate or protected state. In strict sense, the protected states or protectorates were never the possession of or incorporated with an imperial power. Historically and theoretically, protectorates and protected states were independent states, which at the same time, voluntarily requested or accepted the protection of another power.

Lee Warner, however, argues that protected states enjoyed and exercised only those functions and attributes of internal sovereignty sanctioned by the imperial government. According to him, the indivisibility of sovereignty did not belong to the Indian system of native states. There was no bilateral treaty which specified the real nature of native's sovereignty. The concept of protectorate, in the process, becomes an undeniable instrument of domination by the imperial government.

Despite getting some kind of protection from the British imperial power, there was no question of relinquishing her sovereign power, on the part of Manipur. From time to time, British political agents had actually helped Manipur in suppressing internal rebellions and disputes. Manipur also helped the British rulers during the Anglo-Burmese wars and other frontier troubles that involve numerous cases of the frontier tribes as well. Meanwhile, Manipur lost her sovereign powers after it was reduced to the status of protectorate. This became more evident after the Anglo-Manipur war of 1891. The British imperialist became king-makers by asserting their right to settle successions and by also raising the doctrine that resistance to imperial orders constituted rebellion and the right to inflict capital punishment.

Meanwhile, when the British political agents were holding Manipur under their sway the Lushai Chiefs, from "Looshai country", raided parts of Manipur territory and took along a prisoner and some arms. "In March 1869, the Manipur Raja sent 110 friendly KhonjaiKookies (KhongsaiKukis) into the Lushai country to find out what they were doing, and if possible to harass them. They surprised a party of Lushais asleep, killed 40 of them and carried off a lot of arms. The Lushai Chiefs immediately sent 3 Lushais to reconcile. However the towering British political agents immediately intervened in that critical time where Dr. Brown recommended the Raja "to make no promises whatever, but to say to the messengers that that on the delivery of the captives and guns, the Munnipoor Govt. would then hear what they had to

say, regarding keeping the peace for the future...”. The British political agent’s intervention in this matter was an opportunity to tame the might of the Lushai Chiefs, whose might and territories they still do not know. Dr. Brown went to the extent of advising the Manipur Raja “to make no promises whatever until they do so...”

The climate build up by the British political agents, instead, raised the Lushai Chiefs doubts and apprehension, which resulted in another raid by the Lushai Chiefs on Manipur territory. In this juncture, the Lt. Governor of Bengal intervened and said: “Any discretion to attack the Looshais or to assume a hostile attitude towards them is to do more than repel actual attacks on his own territories is sure to be abused and to undo everything that Mr. Edgar has affected”. In the midst of conflicting opinions of the foreign power over new territories, taking confidence of their control over Manipur Rajah, the British political agents arrest the situation where they also stepped in to define and dictate the terms and conditions of the Lushai Chiefs sovereignty and space. Unknowingly the sovereignty of Manipur and the “Looshai country” came under the imposed spell of the British political agents in the course of the conflict. The Lushai Chiefs were made to understand that an attack on Manipur was a breach of the new friendly relations with the British Government.

In the other frontiers of what is today’s Tripura, the fight for sovereignty and space took a rough ride with Kuki or Khotlang nationalism demonstrably countering British colonialists’ interference in Kuki territory, which began in 1777 during the time of Warren Hastings, the then Governor General of India. In 1845, 1847-1848, 1849-1850, and 1850-1851, there were raids culminating in what is called the Great Kuki Invasion of 1860s. ‘Early in 1860, reports were received, at Chittagong, of the assembling of a body of 400 or 500 Kookies at the head of the River Fenny, and soon the tale of burning villages and slaughtered men gave token of the work they had on hand. On the 31st January, before any intimation of their purpose could reach us, the Kookies, after sweeping down the course of the Fenny, burst into the plains of Tipperah at Chagulneyah, burnt or plundered 15 villages, butchered 185 British subjects, and carried off about 100 captives.’ On the term ‘raids’, a description of the Kuki offensives, Hangshing remarks (1997):

Once again the British show the Kukis as being the villains of the piece and as being invaders into British territories, whereas nothing could have been more distorted or falsely projected. It was in fact the other way round. It was the Kukis who resented, resisted, and were eventually forced to fight the British invasion into areas of their sovereignty.

Meanwhile, before the British conquest of upper Burma (1889-90), the Burmese and the Chins were always at perpetual loggerheads. The Chins raided regularly into the plains during the cold weather “for captives and booty” and the Burmese often retaliated by sending several abortive expeditions against them. According to Captain Willcocks report (DSO Attache, Intelligence Branch), “after the pacification of upper Burma, it became necessary to put an end to this state of affairs and to protect our new subjects from their savage neighbours.”

The first English expedition to enter Chin country was in 1889, when a column of 600 rifles, Chin Frontier Levy, under Lieutenant RM Rainey marched forward from Gangaw along what

was then considered as the Chinbawk frontier to Lawngshe. The natives proved to be of a “different stamp” and several spirited attacks were made on the column “before they were taught to respect the rifle”. Effectively, in spite of the “rifles”, the Chins proved themselves to be among “the most troublesome” for the English expeditioners. However, the resistance offered by the Chins stopped with the occupation of the Kyay valley on the 6th February 1890. Immediately, after the end of the expedition, a small party including a subordinate of the Survey Department followed. The result of this expedition, according to Captain GC Rigby, Wiltshire Regiment, Attache, Intelligent Branch, was “to bring into subjection and obtain some knowledge of the country.”

However, the frontier tribes experiences with the English expeditioner’s goes beyond the mere supposed “subjection” and knowledge gathering affairs. Instead, they were always made to realize their loss of sovereignty and space despite their remarkable antagonism towards the British from their first encounter; they were made to recognize the supremacy of the British Government. The British rulers believed that the aggressive acts of the frontier tribes could be put to an end only by a superior force. They intended to play the role of a conqueror and not peace-maker. In spite of that none of the frontier tribes could be reconciled to the new alien rule. At the point of the sword, the local officers levied forced labor and collected a hill house tax of Rs 3 per house, and even a slight protest faced retaliation from a punitive expedition. Such measures had a boomerang effect. It made the people more hostile to the British.

Well aware of their inadequate control over the frontier hill tribes, the colonial officials decided to re-organize the hill administration. W.A. Cosgrave, the British political agent in Manipur proposed that the entire administration of the hill territory should be handed over to the exclusive control of the political agent. The chief commissioner of Assam, however, preferred to place the administration under the charge of the Maharaja, who, of course, was to be guided by the advice of the political agent. A new administrative arrangement was made with the creation of British sub-divisional officers at suitable places in the hills. The new administrative arrangement went farther to extend the British sovereignty over the frontier hill tribes.

CHRISTIANITY, WW I, AND THE FINAL ESTABLISHMENT OF BRITISH SOVEREIGNTY

When various parts of the North-East were undergoing the process of Sanskritization, the frontier tribes including came under the influence of Christianity. The American Baptist Mission in Burma made the first attempt to establish their mission station in Manipur in 1836. However, faced with opposition both from the ruling princes and the British political agent, no missionary was allowed to enter Manipur. An unsettled political situation in the State was the main factor that prevented the missionaries from entering Manipur.

However, after the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891, William Pettigrew reached Imphal, the capital of Manipur, in February 6, 1894. Pettigrew was given the permission to work in Imphal by A. Porteous, the acting political agent. Pettigrew began to think that his call was among the Meiteis and began to preach the Gospel among them. But the Hinduised Meiteis took Pettigrew’s preaching as a deliberate attempt to impose upon them the government’s religion. Pettigrew left Imphal and later he was allowed to work in Ukhrul among the Tangkhul Nagas as a Baptist

missionary to Manipur. The State government appointed Pettigrew as superintendent of the first census of the hill territory (1910-1911). Meanwhile the whole of Manipur hills was claimed to be the exclusive mission field of the American Baptist Mission. A Welsh missionary, Watkin R. Roberts also reached Senvawn, one of the biggest Hmar villages in Tipaimukh, southern Manipur on February 5, 1910 through Mizoram. The Christian missionaries achieved in converting the frontier tribes to embrace what is seen as the imperialist religion.

The outbreak of the First World War marked another momentous offensive against the British known as the 'Kuki Rising, 1917-1919.' In the aftermath of 1917-1919 rising, there was landscape change in Kukihistory. It marked the lost of sovereignty of an independent people who were victimized by colonialism. After 1919, Kuki ancestral lands were brought under British India and British Burma.

Meanwhile, the wave of Christianity coincided with the First World War to establish the British rule in the frontiers of the North-East. During the war, H.J. Higgins, the then president of the Manipur state durbar undertook to organize a contingent for the second Manipur labor corps for service in France and other war fronts. Hundreds of recruits from the Lushai Hills also constitute the labor corps. William Pettigrew was called out from Gauhati and he proceeded to Ukhrul to help in the work of persuasion and recruitment for the labor corps. The labor corps consisted of 2000 men, mainly the Christians amongst the tribes. Besides, six Christian workers and students were selected to lead the contingent and also act as interpreters.

However, for the frontier tribes, after the WWI ended in 1918, and on returning Home from France, their kith and kin were deep in war with the British. In the Lushai Hills, although political awareness amongst the Looshais/ lushai was born much before the British Government created the Simon Commission (1928); Lushai businessmen from Aizawl have already represented themselves to pursue the "Mizo aspiration" in politics by joining the Assam Provincial government. The businessmen – VZ Biaka (Kulikawn), Saikunga (Kulikawn), Thuama (Clerk pension, Kulikawn), Telela (Secretary) and Laldala (Secretary) were however arrested for their attempt to join Assam Provincial Government without consulting the then Lushai Hills Superintendent. NE Parry arrested these leaders and sent them to jail, which was seen as one of the early significant factor for sowing the seed of political awareness in the Lushai Hills.

INDIA INDEPENDENCE AND THE COLONIAL HANGOVER IN THE NORTH EAST INDIA

The withdrawal of the British Empire from India and the immediate independence of India in 1947 left behind an unsettled if not unfinished political situation in the North East. The new political state orphaned the entire frontiers particularly the frontier peoples territories. Accords and new assertions to negotiate their lost "sovereignty and space" has been gaining momentum in the North East since then. While the frontier peoples opposition to colonialism fell short of realizing an honourable political status, the vacated frontier remains an uphill task of negotiation for the new State. A number of accords and ceasefire agreements were immediately made to come to terms with the new State.

CONCLUSION

The various accords/ceasefires/suspension of operations may be seen in the light of negotiating the lost sovereignty and space that has its roots in the misdoings of the colonial power, which was further inherited by the new India. From what is evident from the cited experiences, sovereignty of the frontier peoples is situated prior to the colonial period. However after the colonial expedition, the sovereignty of the frontier peoples were and always regarded as having a semi-independent position when they preserved their relations, not as states, not as nations, not as possessed of the full attributes of sovereignty, but as separate people with the power of regulating their internal and social relations within the limits of their settlement.

The outcome of all this, for the frontier peoples, was what they were left with, in the words of Shattuck and Norgren, “neither external nor domestic”. They were not “external” enough as sovereign nations to compel compliance or renegotiation of the historical misdoings and they were not “domestic” enough to realize their imagined state of sovereignty. The diverse unsettled assertions that have cropped up are evidences that the frontierpeoples political life had been neither fully assimilated to nor excluded from the existing political system. The political state of the frontier peoples in the North East, from being more like foreign nations to becoming more like domestic entities is still an ongoing process.

For a people who fought to defend and safeguard their sovereignty amongst themselves, from the colonial power, and then from India, the shift of power and allegiance was not only a taxing and tolling experience, but one that has misguided their aspirations. Just as the colonial imposition sought to prevent the frontier peoples political life from becoming and being seen as “mainstream”, it necessarily propelled them into post-colonial challenge of seeking to redefine the political meaning of their “on the map” relationship. This contestation of sovereignty and space led to the development of a political struggle in post colonial time, because it necessitate the frontier peoples to try to counter and renegotiate the erstwhile powers imposition by redefining their in-between status. This inevitably resulted in the quest for the third space in which the frontier peoples sought to define their own paths as political agents of the modern world. (Third Space – The sought after location of indigenous post colonial political autonomy that refuses the choices set out by the settler society). The ongoing third space politics of the frontier peoples/indigenous peoples in post-colonial time sought to define political identity, express political agony and secure political autonomy to regain their lost sovereignty and space.

However, the birth of the Indian State posed a challenge to the future political status of the frontier peoples because it fostered a more determined Indian effort to break up if not assimilate the possibilities of frontier peoples collectivity to the larger Indian system. This has resulted in the frontier peoples assertion gaining two forms – spatial and temporal impressions. The spatial impression is that the frontier peoples can express sovereignty, if at all, only as narrowly conceived internal self governance, severely bounded as to geographical and demographic reach. The temporal impression is that frontier peoples sovereignty is out of time, a notion that can be broken down into three forms of temporal displacement: (i) The frontier peoples has run out of time in making claims; (ii) The frontier peoples claim are based on archaic premises or promises; from another time, which are not applicable today; (iii) Contemporary frontier peoples economic and political development has outpaced the historical boundaries of their past

sovereignty and thus it is not an expression of sovereignty at all, but is rather a romantic, violent form of special-interest activity that threatens the stable democratic system.

However, contemporary political observers also suggested that the sovereign state is being subjected to unprecedented pressures. For instance, in *Modernity at Large*, ArjunAppadurai writes: "I have come to be convinced that the nation-state, as a complex modern political form, is on its last legs (Appadurai, 1996: 19). Exactly what might emerge to replace the sovereign state is not clear, although some observers have pointed to a new medievalism with overlapping structures of authority within the same territory (Mathews, 1997: 50). Stephen D. Krasner also writes: "Sovereignty is a weak evolutionary stable strategy, one that will be selected by many actors, but that can also persist along with neutral mutants, alternative strategies that are more appealing to specific actors at particular moments (Krasner, 2001).

Whether the wave of assertions for sovereignty and space that are still flooding the North East India will coincide with the "last legs" is, but, undergoing an endless process, the adoption of alternative strategies to meet the third space is yet to speak for itself. However, the experience of the frontier peoples still resembles like blaming a shackled man for not freeing himself.

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