

Conclusion

The novels of the four Indian English writers selected for the study clearly reflect that an alternative discourse has emerged in the contemporary literary scene which privileges the local and the peripheral over the national and the official. I have found the fictional narratives of these writers to be focused on the usually neglected areas of history. Apparently Amit Chaudhuri, Arundhati Roy, Siddhartha Deb and Mamang Dai have come from different backgrounds with different styles of writing. But a close scrutiny reveals that in spite of belonging to politically, culturally and linguistically dissimilar regions of the country and having completely different experiences in life, these four writers share some common traits. They are all engaged with the retrieval and retelling of lost, untold and marginalized histories of the nation's small fragments or regional peripheries. The socio-political realities of Bengal, Kerala and the North-East have the common feature of being the realities of India's "fragments". Moreover, the notion of the peripheral is a relative one. My intention is to show the relative nature of the issue of the marginal or the peripheral. Although the primary focus of the thesis is to show the similarities of socio-political and cultural situations in the context of Bengal, Kerala and the North-East, I want to emphasize that in some situations Bengal may emerge as a periphery in relation to Delhi and similarly the North-East may be treated as a peripheral entity by Bengal. The narrator of Siddhartha Deb's *The Point of Return*, for instance, has come to feel that Tagore is a foreign poet in the context of the North-East because in one of his much acclaimed novels he has chosen Shillong as the setting, but has not considered it necessary to write about the local people of the region. The narrator also points out how the local version of Bengali spoken by the East-Bengalis of Silchar in Assam is ridiculed by the people of the "centre" of Bengali culture – Calcutta. On the other hand a character in Amit Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address* feels that Bengal's regional hero Netaji Subhash Bose has been neglected and marginalized by officially accepted histories of freedom struggle which usually glorify Gandhi and Nehru. If the North-East is a periphery in relation to Bengal, the latter too is a periphery or a marginal entity in relation to Delhi. So this common feature of having peripheral status and being "fragments" of the nation-state has produced narratives which address common issues. The resistant voices from the local and peripheral spaces of the nation

involve rewriting of their own histories, various local praxes and performances for countering the hegemonic suppression by the centre. The novels of Chaudhuri, Roy, Deb and Dai show how local histories and cultures can be retrieved and retold. The “fragments” of the Indian nation-state – the North-East, Bengal and Kerala – are portrayed by Deb, Dai, Chaudhuri and Roy in their novels to show that these diverse locales hardly cope with the idea of a homogeneous nationhood, and they cannot rely on the official versions of history which often erase their own local histories and identities. They question the idea of nationhood through the representation of various characters and incidents in their fictional narratives – sometimes directly and sometimes obliquely. The metaphor of participation fails in the nation’s fragments to create a sense of belongingness among its members: in case of the North-East it is mostly conditioned by the tribal people’s perpetual sense of being neglected by the centre, in case of Bengal and Kerala it is caused by their unique cultural heritage and regional history which is misrepresented, misappropriated and suppressed by the centre. Siddhartha Deb’s *The Point of Return* represents the North-Eastern people as highly misunderstood and neglected by those who belong to the mainland. The North-East is a “lost spot” in the geographical as well psychological map of the country, as perceived by the characters in the novel. The people from the mainland are hardly aware of the complex socio-political realities of the North-Eastern region. Some even do not know about the geographical location of the region. The popular literary discourses misrepresent the people from the North-East; sometimes they are completely denied as human agency even when the setting of the literary text is the North-East. Deb’s *The Point of Return* addresses these issues in the setting of primarily two places in the region – Shillong and Silchar, one from the hill-state of Meghalaya and the other from the plains of Assam. Deb chooses these two settings with the intention of showing that the sense of otherness is equally experienced by the people from the hills and the plains in the North-East. Deb also focuses a good deal on the secessionist tendencies in a major section of the tribal people of Meghalaya, the conflict between the tribals and the non-tribals, and on the plight of the East-Bengalis living in the North-East who find it difficult to locate a homeland in the region. He shows how the idea of a homogenous nation and the metaphor of participation on which that idea depends fail in the context of the realities of the North-East. Deb deliberately avoids mentioning the name of the hill-town – Shillong – in the entire narrative, perhaps to show that it is distant from the centre’s adequate perception

and understanding. His second novel *Surface* presents a Sikh man as the narrator and the marginal status of the region unfolds through his perception of people and situations. Deb presents an East-Bengali narrator in his first novel to reveal the peculiar socio-political realities of the North-East; in his second novel he chooses to present an outsider as the perceiver of the truths about the region. His intention is to show that even an outsider, who is sensitive enough to realize the unique cultural, economic and socio-political status of the region, can appropriately judge the marginal position of the North-East in the eyes of the centre. Deb's second novel is more political because the issues of insurgency and secession, of internal politics of the region are treated in an elaborate manner. The novel engages with the issues of insurgency and the centre's misappropriation of the North-East in the context of Manipur. A Manipuri woman's failed attempt to get assimilated in the socio-cultural ambience in Delhi – the centre of the nation-state – and her subsequent victimization in her own land are the prime focus of the novel. Mamang Dai, on the other hand, represents the tribal people of Arunachal Pradesh as possessed by an anxiety to protect their ethnic roots from any kind of contamination or external influences. *The Legends of Pensam* and *The Black Hill* present the tribal land as a territory mostly untrodden by outsiders. The former touches on the anxiety towards preserving the unique ethnic identity and the latter shows the tribal people's fear of losing their ethnic purity, once outside forces enter into the region. Although *The Black Hill* is set at a time when national sentiment was only gradually flourishing, it presents a strong ethnic sentiment of the tribal people which tends to resist all kinds of attempts towards assimilation and appropriation by the colonial centre. *Stupid Cupid* presents a different scenario where the metaphor of participation fails at last, although initially there are positive attempts shown by both the centre's marginals and those from the mainland: a tribal woman tries to get assimilated in the nation's centre through business ventures and through relationships with people from the mainland, but ultimately fails. Whereas the idea of a homogeneous nationhood in the context of the North-East as represented by Deb and Dai's novels fails for the centre's negligence of the region, in Amit Chaudhuri and Arundhati Roy's novels it happens due to some complex factors. Some of the characters of Roy and Chaudhuri display a kind of identity which has no affiliation with Indianness; they rather belong to an in-between or interstitial cultural and ideological space. Roy and Chaudhuri try to show that such identities do not always arise due to territorial displacement or diasporic situations: they

show that such phenomena mostly arise due to complex politico-psychological factors. Roy's *The God of Small Things* presents people who have an in-between cultural affiliation, more due to their fascination for Western culture than their experience of staying in the West. These are people who feel self-assured in embracing Western culture – for them the West stands as a symbol of an ideal space. Moreover, in Roy's novel the character of Velutha – the untouchable – stands as a symbol of the impossibility that India can be imagined as a homogeneous entity where a common sentiment may flourish among all its members. The existence of caste-system in the Indian society, as shown in Roy's novel makes the “imaginary institution” of Indian nationhood an incredible concept. In Chaudhuri's *A New World* the character of Ananda Chatterjee is represented as a perfect example of an in-between national and cultural affiliation. He is not anxious about Indianness; he never discusses the issue of nationhood except during the periods of national crisis. Ananda Chatterjee usually mentions Indianness to ridicule the entire idea. In *A Strange and Sublime Address* a boy writes his address in a strange manner, arranging it from the extreme local to the universal. This metaphorically suggests a desire to go beyond the limited constraints of nationhood in one place and the desire to define one's situatedness in the local space. In *The Immortals* the protagonist is trained in Indian classical music, but most of his friends hardly possess any respect for Indian culture. He even finds people who think that those who talk about Indian culture are pretentious. *Afternoon Raag* and *Odysseus Abroad* present expatriate Bengalis for whom the entire idea of belonging and nationhood becomes an ambiguous and complex phenomenon. The nation remains an ambivalent idea, an outcome of various discourses and significations, as represented in Roy and Chaudhuri's novels. The metaphor of participation and the idea of a horizontal cultural space fail in the context of India. The writers from the North-East, Siddhartha Deb and Mamang Dai, Arundhati Roy, who portrays Kerala's locale space, and Amit Chaudhuri, who mostly writes about the Bengali culture and identity, show it through their novels in various ways as discussed in details in my thesis.

As the novels of Chaudhuri, Roy, Deb and Dai refuse to accept the idea of a homogeneous nationhood, a horizontal cultural space and the metaphor of participation, they also question the authenticity of the dominant or official historiography of the

nation. Whereas official historiography deletes the stories of the common man, the revisionist historiography produced by the new novelistic discourse of these writers focuses on the lost and untold histories of common man. They retrieve the erased and ignored voices of people from the peripheries and the local space. The regional icon Netaji Subhash Bose has come to be glorified and deified by a character in Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address*. The official historiography of India's freedom struggle usually ignores Bose and puts him under erasure by glorifying Gandhi and Nehru. However, Chaudhuri's novel shows how in the backdrop of a domestic scene such marginalized identities can be brought to the foreground by a common man. The marginal and ignored voices of history can be revived through the enactment of regional history in the domestic space, as represented in Chaudhuri's novel. The nationally popular and significant identities are reassessed and reappropriated in Chaudhuri's *The Immortals*: the story of Gandhi's travelling in third class compartment in a train and the legendary singer Lata Mangeshkar's transformation from an ordinary girl to a nationally known figure have been judged from an impartial, detached perspective. In *Odysseus Abroad* Tagore is represented as a lost identity in the West, as an identity in need of retrieval. On the other hand, Chaudhuri's *Freedom Song* offers a detailed description of the rise and fall of a small company to show how local history reveals complex political realities and social transformations. Most of Chaudhuri's novels also nostalgically allude to a lost Bengal – the pre-Independent Bengal, and to East-Bengal particularly. The representation of an old, primitive Bengali culture as a historical reality beyond Bengal's colonial history, its industrialization and contact with the West in many of Chaudhuri's novels reflects his preference for writing about more regional and local realities over public and official histories. It is clear that history's spectres come back to be reassessed and reappropriated in Chaudhuri's novels. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* presents the binaries of "big" and "small" – if the small things are the marginal voices, the big things are the official discourses of the patriarchal system and the highly stratified society of Kerala. The marginal voices try to write their own histories by defying the laws made by the authoritative system. In the novel the History House stands as a metaphor of the possibility of rewriting ordinary man's small histories. It is notable that even the Englishman who committed suicide in the house during the colonial period is alive in the public memory as a suffering man, not as a colonizer. Siddhartha Deb's novels directly refer to some historical writings on India produced by Western men as

inadequate, inappropriate and partial. Deb's *Surface* shows the failure of Euan Sutherland's memoir of the last years of colonial India and *The Point of Return* shows how Henry Walters' official history of the North-East offers many conclusive remarks about the region's realities, but fails to give a true account of its history. *Surface* presents a historian's movement from darkness to light through the account of a Sikh journalist's attempt to understand the peculiar history of a Manipuri woman. Yet the journalist feels that there are many gaps and silences in the history of the region which can be filled by local voices only. *The Point of Return* presents the history of a hill-town and its people in a flashback mode – the narrator's backward journey from his youth to childhood reveals many realities of the region: the stories of Partition, the sufferings of the East-Bengalis, the secessionist tendencies emerging in the hill-state and the tribal-non tribal conflict. Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* shows the Adi community's attempt to preserve their own histories, myths and memories through a constant process of retelling. Dai's *The Black Hill* offers the best example of official history's erasure of local and regional histories. The nineteenth century story of a French missionary's arrival in the North-East and his mysterious disappearance from the Mishimi hills tells how historical documents may fail to represent true and authentic history. The novel's focus on undocumented and unwritten history reveals many realities – particularly the truth that official history deletes the local and peripheral voices. The novel becomes a historical project of retrieving the fragmentary local histories which have been erased in the official history or documentation. Whereas Chaudhuri's novels deal with alternative histories of Bengal and nationally known identities, with the reappropriation of forgotten icons and regional heroes, Roy focuses on ordinary men's potential for writing their own history to defy the authoritative system and hegemonic discourses. The writers from the North-East show how official historiography fails to represent the unique realities of the region and erases the local voices and stories.

The writers under discussion present a resistant narrative in their novels along with an urge for retrieving and rewriting history. The local is used by them as a powerful medium of countering any kind of hegemonic and authoritative suppression. A desire to preserve the ethnic identity and roots appears in Mamang Dai and Siddhartha Deb's novels and this desire conditions various modes of resistance. The territorial distance of

the people of the North-East from the people from the mainland India and their cultural distinctiveness create a situation where it is difficult for them to accept external influences. The idea of a horizontal cultural space or a monoculture fails in India, particularly in the context of the North-East. In Amit Chaudhuri's novels local culture and language emerge as a medium through which the community's life-style and world-view get reflected. The local culture of Bengal serves to protect the entire Bengali community's traditional values and cultural heritage in the face of outside influences or hegemonic suppressions. In Arundhati Roy's novel the necessity to counter the authoritative system emerges with greater urgency, because the entire narrative of the novel is centred on the binaries of the big and the small. The small forces or the peripheral voices can counter the big and the hegemonic forces only through creating some resistant tactics; in Roy's novel it is mostly done through the twins who create such tactics, particularly in the domain of language use. Whereas in Chaudhuri's novels many Bengali characters twist and recreate the English language to give it a local flavour, in Roy's novel it becomes a more powerful medium of resistance. The way hip-hop becomes a powerful mode of cultural resistance for the African-Americans in the United States, the retelling of community's myths and memories in Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* becomes a strong cultural praxis that can fight against suppression or attempts towards appropriation by the centre. The old men and women of the Adi community frequently engage in an act of retelling the stories and folk-tales of the community to the younger people in a mode of handing over the heritage to the next generations. The shaman travels roads to tell his stories, the ponung dancers participate in the ritual of cultural continuation. Even the myths of the community bear symbolic meanings to warn the tribal people to preserve their heritage at any cost. The story of the travelling vessel symbolically indicates that a community's destiny depends on the preservation of its legacy. The Migu clan fails to protect the mysterious travelling vessel and faces downfall, which implies the importance of a community's legacy in shaping its destiny. The way Toni Morrison talks about the existence of some timeless people or ancestors who protect the African community's stories, in Dai's novel there are characters who stick to the roots. The novels of Dai refer to many incidents which reflect the tribal people's suspicion of outsiders; at times their resistance comes out in more violent terms. The murder of a British political officer in *The Legends of Pensam* and the disappearance of two French priests in *The Black Hill* reflect this violent mode of resistance and refusal

for assimilation. Deb's *The Point of Return* presents the desire to preserve the past and a lost home: Dr. Dam tells his son some incoherent stories of his lost homeland – Sylhet. This is a performance for him, which helps him to preserve the memories and to let his son know that sticking to the past is important. *Surface* presents localizing praxis or the attempt to create local knowledges through the character of Malik who organizes a local project for the welfare of the Manipuri people. It can be said that Dai and Deb have shown a localizing praxis and the emergence of a minority discourse in their novels, which intend to counter any form of hegemony. The dominant cultures always try to represent the cultures of the peripheral people as perverse and underdeveloped; the marginalized voices of the periphery counter such representations. The twins in Roy's *The God of Small Things* resist the demands of the authoritative system by creating their own ways of expression. The act of breaking the laws of the patriarchal and caste-system oriented society of Kerala is another form of resistance for Ammu and Velutha – the two peripheral voices of the novel. Their relationship itself is a kind of performance to counter the existing hegemonic system. In the language of the twins the established laws of English language are subverted to suit their own purpose; they make English a local language by twisting it and mixing it with Malayalam words and accent. Whereas the authoritative characters of the novel stress so much on the correct speaking of the language, for the twins the incorrect use and subversion of the language become a way of escape from the repressive world of adults. In Amit Chaudhuri's novel *A Strange and Sublime Address* the Bengali letters are perceived as containing the spirit of the entire Bengali community. Small Bengali words are presented as being replete with significances beyond the literal meanings. The Bengali language and culture are represented as inextricably connected to each other: small Bengali words carry the entire life-world of Bengal. The smallest domestic rituals and women's day to day performances in Chaudhuri's novels stand for larger significations: they become the means for preserving the local culture of Bengal.

The everyday plays a significant role in the novels of Chaudhuri, Roy, Deb and Dai, as the representation of local history is the primary thematic concern of their narratives. It is particularly Amit Chaudhuri who emphasizes on the significance of the everyday in the articulation of local history. The representation of local history demands a special focus on the everyday life of the common man, because local history does not

merely involve the retrieval of the past but also the realities of the changing present. The immediate realities of the present are explored through the representation of the everyday in the novels of Chaudhuri, Roy, Deb and Dai. Their novels show how ordinary man's life is reified by the rise of capitalism. Chaudhuri is particularly influenced by Walter Benjamin's theory of the *flâneur*. A majority of his characters involve themselves in aimless walks, observe the city life, and become the constituents of the urban everyday. The everyday is a social signifier in all these four writers' novels, because it serves as a powerful medium of diagnosing social class. Chaudhuri's description of the Kalighat painting where the mythological family of Shiva, Parvati, Kartik and Ganesh emerges as an ordinary middle-class family through an everyday act of family outing and wearing fashionable dresses best exemplifies the social signification of the everyday. The novels of Chaudhuri register the hidden socio-political realities through the portrayal of everyday life in the local space. The newly industrialized Calcutta and its impact on the lives of common man get reflected in *Freedom Song* and *A New World*. The interior and the exterior, the natural and the artificial have been juxtaposed to define the emergence of a consumer culture: the arrival of the commercial products produced in the West in the middle class Bengali life is emphasized through long descriptions of the brands. The possibility of social transformation is also signalled through the characters like Nirmalya in *The Immortals* who try to find out an alternative everyday far away from the humdrums of the city life. Roy has focused on the everyday life of Kerala to unfold the changing face of the state, the emergence of consumer culture which does not spare its heritage and culture. The description of the polluted Meenachal river, the five-star hotel chain which contributes more to the contamination of the river, the transformation of Kathakali dance – all these reflect the present realities of Kerala as haunted by capitalism. In Roy's words the "Heart of Darkness" has overpowered Kerala's everyday life and culture. In Siddhartha Deb's *The Point of Return* Dr. Dam appears as a man who prefers the old world order like the tribal people of Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*: he is a man who resists capitalistic reification. In Dai's novel a gradual emergence of consumer culture is indicated: the everyday life of the tribal people has changed, particularly that of the young generation. The new generation prefers a culture that the old generation finds difficult to cope with: MengaX – the traditional performer finds it uneasy to perform in front of the new generation audience. His condition is similar to that of the Kathakali dancer in Roy's novel. Chaudhuri, Roy, Deb and Dai treat

the everyday as a powerful mode of social signifier; they explore the contemporary socio-political structures through the portrayal of the everyday.

The alternative narratives of the local and the peripheral in Amit Chaudhuri, Arundhati Roy, Siddhartha Deb and Mamang Dai's novels produce an alternative mode of history-writing in literary discourse. This new mode of history-writing rejects the idea of a homogeneous nationhood and official historiography's privileging of nationally known identities and incidents. It also writes back to the "centre", to the hegemonic forces through counter-narratives of resistant culture and emergence of marginal voices. The changing present and the immediate realities of the local and the peripheral are given equal importance through the representation of the everyday.