

CHAPTER-1

Interrogating the Nation: Collapse of the Imagined Community

This chapter focuses on how the idea of nationhood fails in the context of India. Before analysing the novels of Amit Chaudhuri, Arundhati Roy, Siddhartha Deb and Mamang Dai in the light of their criticism of the “idea of India”, I examine the definitions of nation given by some seminal thinkers. The chapter tries to analyse how the idea of a homogeneous nationhood and the metaphor of participation on which that idea is based, fail in different situations. In case of the writers representing the North-East it is the situation of marginality, whereas in case of the other two it is the situation of dispersed identity which makes the concept of homogeneity in the Indian nation-state a futile one. However, I think that it is important to examine how critics have defined the idea of the nation, have discussed the factors behind its possible success in the practical field, and have assessed its credibility in the Indian situation. Benedict Anderson defines nation as a construct: it is an imagined community because its members do not have face-to-face communication or interaction and they imagine themselves to be part of the community. Anderson says that a nation “is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communication” (6). Anderson’s definition of the nation clearly signifies the constructed nature of the entity and its dependence on psychological representations. The members of the nation always rely on a psychological image of their affinity. Dipankar Gupta has drawn on Anderson’s idea of the nation, while defining it primarily as a “sentiment” on which the “structures” of the state aspire to organize a collective life. Gupta says that the coupling of the sentiments of the nation and the structures of the state together bring about the nation-state. In the context of India, the nation-state sentiment emerged first as a result of the anti-colonial struggle. Gupta comments that the “adoption of a nation-state sentiment is not an intellectual position to begin with, but rather this position is an outcome of actual participation in a national project enlivening a given territory” (114). He says that in the later decades, after the fulfilment of the dream of decolonization in India, the nation-state sentiment gradually started to falter. The reason behind such situation is that in India

there are different regions and ethnic nationalities, and the metropolitan centres of a nation-state distinguish themselves from the regional margins or peripheries. The latter too, with their local diversities, create further problems in the process of homogenization and in creating a common sentiment. The regional margins with their ethnic uniqueness often feel that the metropolitan centres of the country are the primary space of the nation, whereas the problems of the peripheries are hardly represented in the centre. In the context of India, particularly, the essentialist notion of the nation seems to shift towards a fractured one with lot of pluralities. Gupta mentions a metaphor of participation as an essential constituent of the nation-state: “A nation-state, on the other hand, is born out of popular participation, long-distance communication, and large-scale supra-local mobilizations along ideologies that transcend parochial boundaries” (113). In the Indian context, we all know that it was the anti-colonial resistance which worked as a metaphor of participation or a common sentiment, uniting the people across the country for a common purpose. But such metaphors successfully work and continue only when the marginal spaces and cultures are respected by the centre and the issues of identify conflict do not arise. Gupta comments that it is important for the nation-state to integrate the marginal spaces within the geographical territory of the country, resolving the differences. While mentioning the prerequisites behind the success of a nation, he says:

With the inauguration of the nation as a community the numerous cultural spaces within a geographical unity begin to relate with one another supra-locally. The intensity of this relationship varies depending on how certain spaces extend themselves. For instance, when it is a question of expressing a religious identity contrapuntally against other religious identities, then the nation-state metaphors cannot but be recalled. In these moments it is impossible to observe religion as a private affair. Any nation in the course of its history, no matter how short it might be, has had to resolve issues of identity conflict, involving either religion, language or caste. On occasions like these nation-state metaphors become salient. (136)

However, the spaces within the nation-state can hardly fulfill these preconditions for making the nation-state metaphor successful or valid. Gupta says that secessionist

tendencies often appear because of which the nation-state metaphor fails, and localism emerges as resistance to the national sentiment. The act of assimilating the marginal people to the mainstream often remains unsuccessful because the nation-state fails to be sensitive towards the diversities and pluralities of the communities residing in the regional spaces or in the peripheries. As it is difficult to dissolve the diversity and plurality of the cultural spaces of the margins, the establishment of the nation-state metaphor remains an impossible dream.

In this chapter I address the issue of homogenization and absorption of the local by the nation-state. If a nation-state fails to recognize the existence of cultural pluralism and multiple, ethnic identities in the regional spaces, the entire idea of the imagined community may collapse. The communities situated in the peripheries of a nation-state may not feel as its participants. Although nations are defined in terms of common language, territory, and culture, it must be remembered that the very idea of the nation is based on its constructedness. The nation is “imagined”; it is not something inherent. The cultural plurality of different communities and ethnic groups living in the diverse parts of the nation always challenges the idea of a homogeneous nation, particularly in the context of India.

In his Introduction to *Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity* Anthony D. King discusses whether the nationally defined society is the most appropriate unit for cultural or social analysis. He emphasizes the need to study the whole historical problematic of the formation of nation-states, the proliferation in the nineteenth and especially the twentieth century of the idea of the nation, nationalism and national cultures. Although the entire project of this book is the assessment of globalization’s definition of the world as a single space, it also provides some insights to the idea of the nation-state. The way it attacks the over-generalizing sweep of globalization that submerges the differences of the local, regional and the national, the nationally defined, essentialist phenomenon where hegemonic presence of the nation ignores the local and the regional also can be criticized. The book focuses on the centre-periphery conflict and shows a shift from the notion of cultural homogeneity to cultural differences. The writers contributing in this

book, like Immanuel Wallerstein and Stuart Hall, have created a nationalizing theory to show an asymmetry between the nation-state and the globalizing tendencies. The globalizing tendencies and global-orientation emerge as the centre here, the nation-states are the peripheries. It can further be applied in case of regional-national opposition because differences exist not only in the national-global dimension, but also in the regional-national dimension. Wallenstein points out that the idea of the nation-states emerged in the sixteenth century, and became a wide-spread idea in the nineteenth century and a universal phenomenon only after 1945. He comments that culture is pluralistic and so called nation-states which are considered as our “primary cultural container” are relatively recent creations (92). The followers of the nation-state imaginary believe in the cultural homogenization, whereas cultures vary from region to region. Wallerstein defines culture as a complex entity in which the concept of boundary becomes a subject of uncertainty. The fluidity of culture is a universal social phenomenon and the cultural landscape of a nation shows lot of diversity. Wallerstein says that “the history of the world has been the very opposite of a trend towards cultural homogenization; it has rather been a trend towards cultural differentiation, or cultural elaboration, or cultural complexity” (96). From Wallerstein’s emphasis on cultural differences, it can be drawn that the existence of diverse ethnic groups with their distinctive cultural affiliations makes it impossible within a nation-state to create an imagined community with a homogeneous culture. Hall has discussed the opposition between the local and the global, with particular reference to English culture. He questions the idea of homogeneity of Englishness: “It always had to absorb all the differences of class, of region, of gender, in order to present itself as a homogeneous entity” (22). This perspective can be applied to the idea of Indianness as well. If India is perceived in terms of homogeneity, all local or regional diversities have to be submerged. Hall criticizes the peculiar form of homogenization associated with globalization and admits that marginality has become a powerful space in the recent times:

The emergence of new subject, new genders, new ethnicities, new regions, new communities, hitherto excluded from the major forms of cultural representation, unable to locate themselves except as decentered or subaltern, have acquired through struggle, sometimes in very marginalized ways, the means to speak for

themselves for the first time. And the discourses of the dominant regimes, have been certainly threatened by this de-centered cultural empowerment of the marginal and the local. (34)

In my opinion, the decentredness of the regional and the local struggling to have empowerment and prominence can be seen in the local-national dimension too, not only in the national-global dimension. The struggle against homogenization sometimes manifests itself in the form of return and rediscovery of the regional or ethnic identity.

It is with reference to ethnic nationalism, that Partha Chatterjee has defined nationalism in terms of both positive and negative aspects. Chatterjee has pointed out the reasons why in the West the rise of nationalism is perceived as a problem. He comments that by the 1970s, nationalism became a matter of ethnic politics, as a result of which “people in the Third World killed each other” (3). Nationalism, he says, “is now viewed as a dark, elemental, unpredictable force of primordial nature threatening the orderly calm of civilized life” (4). Chatterjee distinguishes between good nationalism and bad nationalism: it is a force that may work positively only when the communities are in sanitized and domesticated form. But the ethnic communities often carry with themselves “the threatening possibility of becoming violent, divisive, fearsome, irrational” (236). Chatterjee’s definition of the entire idea of nationalism and ethnic politics throws light on how it is impossible in the context of India particularly, to think about a homogeneous political entity and a sentiment that will unify people across the regions and cultures. Another thinker associated with the criticism of the idea of the nation in the context of India is Sunil Khilnani. He has attacked the “monochromy” of the postcolonial, post-imperial idea of a nation in the Indian context (Khilnani 3). Although Khilnani’s primary focus is on the devastating consequences of the essentialist notion of India in terms of Hinduism, he has also pointed out that Indianness cannot be asserted as a monochromic construct. Khilnani comments that the single, shared sense of India has lost its credibility in the recent years and it has become important to see how those situated at different locations in India have produced their own distinctive ideas of nationhood (2). Like other thinkers of nation and nationalism, Khilnani also believes in the working of a “sentiment” to construct the idea of a nation. In the recent period a

resistance to the idea of national homogeneity has emerged in the regional spaces of the Indian nation-state. The concept of a single political community called “India” has collapsed gradually. Khilnani says: “The idea of India is not homogeneous and univocal. In fact, no single idea can possibly hope to capture the many energies, angers and hopes of one billion Indians; nor can any more narrow ideas – based on a single trait – fulfill their desires. It may seem obtuse, even hubristic in these circumstances, to speak of *the* idea of India” (xv).

The failure of the metaphor of participation in the nation-state construct can further be explained with references to a definition of nation given by Ernest Renan, and to a novel titled *Freedom Song* by Amit Chaudhuri. Renan says:

A nation is soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One in the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form. (19)

Renan has emphasized a “heroic past” or “common glories in the past” as an essential constituent for shaping the idea of a nation, but equally important, in his view, is “to have a common will in the present; to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more . . .” (19). In this definition the nation is seen as dependent on a large-scale solidarity and a clearly expressed desire of the people to continue a common life. In India this common will or desire to live together and to perform great deeds together does not emerge in the psychology of the nation’s members, as the existence of different religions and caste-system in the Indian social structure destroys such feelings or sentiment. Here some references can be given to Amit Chaudhuri’s novel *Freedom Song*, set in Calcutta in the year 1993. Although Amit Chaudhuri’s fiction is usually based on quotidian details than on political issues, this novel presents many crucial political events of the last two decades of the twentieth century. The narrative ironically shows the motto of a communist journal in Calcutta as “For Unity and Harmony among all Communities”, whereas people go on supporting the Babri Masjid destruction. Two

women named Khuku and Mini discuss the event. Khuku supports the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the political party responsible for the destruction of the mosque, and Mini says: “In fact, it was no bad thing that they toppled that mosque” (295). The opinion of these two women regarding this devastating political event reflects the average attitude of conservative Hindus in India at that time. Another significant thing about the biased attitude of the two women regarding the conflict of Hindus and Muslims is that their ideas of religion were constructed by myths rather than realities. Khuku’s brother told her when she was a child, “of the Hindus, who were a fierce wandering tribe with swords who cut up everything in their path, as their very name ‘Hindoo’, suggested, and Musholmaans, he explained, were ghosts who haunted the dark hilly regions of Sylhet” (300). Many such deeply-rooted myths misrepresenting religions in the psychology of people create situations where a common desire to live together or to perform great deeds together never arises. *Freedom Song* points out the Indian government’s failure to take positive measures to stop communal violence, to maintain peace and religious integrity, presents fundamentalism as the most powerful force of the period and mocks the idea of the nation: “Some people thought that the whole corruption their country had been based was flamed; so they must start again, speeches were expended on the ‘idea’ of the country and what the meaning of what idea was” (323). The headlines of the national newspapers of that dark period were often like “Where Hate Comes in a Communal Garb” (362). There was no explanation of the brutal killings consequent on the conflict between the two religions. A newspaper states: “Here, a Muslim butcher had been found near the bypass with his skull shattered, blood on his forehead and face. No one knew why he had been killed . . . ” (363). The essential constituent of the nation, the desire to live together does not emerge here; the nation remains a construct, with challenges and fissures from within. Partha Chatterjee discusses the existence of caste-system in the Indian society as a signifier of differences. He says that although there are theories about the unity of the Indian society, the emphasis on the requirement of caste-system in India has fractured such theories. Chatterjee quotes Sudipta Kaviraj’s essay “The Imaginary Institution in India”, to discuss the inherent politics hidden behind the division of Indian society in terms of caste and community. He refers to Kaviraj’s comment that during the colonial period one fundamental change happened in the discursive domain of modern politics. According to Kaviraj, it was the impoverishment of the earlier “fuzzy” sense of community and the insistence on the identification of community in the “enumerable”

sense. Chatterjee draws on Kaviraj's analysis of the colonial policy that represented the Indian society in terms of caste and religion, to arrive at the conclusion that earlier communities were fuzzy because they did not claim to represent or exhaust all the layers of selfhood of their members, and they also did not require to know how many of their community were there in the world. During the colonial period, however, caste and religion came to be established conceptually and instrumentally as significant keys of the social structure for the convenience of describing the Indian society in numerical terms (223). The enumeration of Indian society by castes and ethnic communities was a part of the colonial discourse:

Mature colonial thought adopted this fairly obvious position because, after all, it could not countenance the idea that subject peoples might constitute, in the same way that advanced people did, a singular and true political community such as the nation. At the same time, if 'communities' rather than 'nation' was what characterized this society, those communities had to be singular and substantive entities in themselves, with determinate and impermeable boundaries, insular in their differences with one another as to be incapable of being merged into larger, more modern political identities. (224)

Chatterjee's emphasis on caste-system as detrimental to the unity of the Indian society can be explained with reference to the character of the untouchable, Velutha, in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Roy's novel gives a detailed history of the untouchables in Kerala from the colonial period to the present: the untouchables embraced Christianity to escape the stigma of being the social other in Kerala. But the situation did not change: "They were known as the Rice-Christians. It didn't take them long to realize that they had jumped from the frying pan to the fire. They were made to have separate churches, with separate services, and separate priests" (74). Velutha's plight in the novel reflects that caste and community are essential social signifiers in the Indian society. Chatterjee defines this social signifier as a product of the colonial discursive practice perpetuated even after decolonization. He says that although the Marxists deny the existence of caste system, there are others who retain the fact that caste is an essential element in the Indian social structure. They deny the charge that the

existence of the caste institution is contradictory to the ideologies of a modern and just society; on the other hand, they view caste as a requirement for maintaining social order. Chatterjee has talked about two strategies followed by the Indian nationalists: the nationalist left and the Marxists do not consider caste as an essential element for characterizing the Indian society, but some others still believe that it is a necessary institution. He says:

The second strategy seeks to avoid these difficulties by retaining caste as an essential element of Indian society. The presence of a caste system, the assertion goes, makes Indian society essentially different from the Western. What is denied, however, in this nationalist argument is the charge that caste is necessarily contradictory to, and incompatible with, a modern and just society. This is achieved by distinguishing between the empirical-historical reality of caste and its ideality. Ideally, the caste system seeks to harmonize within the whole of a social system the mutual distinctness of its parts. (174)

Chatterjee says that Gandhi also sanctioned the division of Indian society in terms of communities and caste because he viewed it as a manifestation of a fundamental division of labour, not as an implication of social hierarchy. Chatterjee's discussion on the existence of divisions in the Indian society can be viewed as a useful exploration into the idea of the nation, the impossibility of creating a real and common sentiment among the members of a nation for living together and performing glorious deeds together. In the Indian situation, nation simply remains a construct and its constituents fail to work successfully for the stable functioning of that construct.

I want to first analyse the novels of Siddhartha Deb and Mamang Dai to see how the North-East is treated as a marginal space by the rest of India. The issue of the indifference of the metropolitan centres towards the problems of the regional and marginal spaces, and the consequent rise of ethnic nationalism and secessionist tendencies within nation-states can be best analysed in the context of the North-East in India. The North-East has long been neglected by the centre, and some people even believe that the region got centre's attention only after the Chinese invasion of the North-

East Frontier Agency in 1962. The geographic isolation of the region and the centre's lack of understanding of the region's unique political phenomena have long been creating a gap between the North-East and rest of the country. The chief socio-political problems of the region are the extreme ethnic nationalism and secessionist tendencies. M.S. Prabhakara has commented that ethnicity is a phenomenon, the origin of which can be dated back to the very beginning of human civilization. In Indian context, however, the articulation of ethnicity in the nation's political idiom is a recent phenomenon. Yet he traces the emergence of a consciousness of a unique identity that refuses to co-exist with an outsider in the 1857 Sepoy Uprising in India. Prabhakara's chief focus is on the ethnic politics, its reasons and consequences with reference to the North-East, yet he feels that the anxiety about identity is not peculiar to this part of the country alone: "Anxieties about 'identity', a catch-all term that embraces a variety of contradictory perceptions and passions by a people about themselves and the 'other' and political mobilization exploiting such anxieties, are not unique to any one part of the country" (127). Prabhakara has discussed the ethno-nationalistic ideologies of the insurgent groups in the North-East and their struggle to attain sovereignty and freedom from the Indian nation-state. He blames the centre's failure to understand the problems of the region as one of the chief causes of such phenomenon. Prabhakara sees the plurality existing in the regional spaces of the Indian nation as an extremely problematic phenomenon for incorporating and assimilating these spaces into a homogeneous nation-state. He says:

Indeed, the increasing assertion of the 'nationality question' in India has another face to it, overriding the essentially democratic content of the demand for recognition of the fact that India is a multi-nationality country. The logical consequence of this reluctance to acknowledge the plurality of Indian – indeed, Hindu society – is likely to be the emergence of the denominational state. Every self-perceived caste, tribe, language and religion is likely to split further along fresh lines, seeking a little political homeland of its own. The trend towards the denominationalization of the Indian state has to be traced directly to its failure to democratically acknowledge and shape state policies by recognizing the numerous strands that have gone into the making of the Indian people....The situation in the NE region provides some of the most explicit instances of this

trend towards the denominationalization of Indian society and eventually, the Indian state system itself. (273, 274)

Prabhakara's interpretation of the causes behind the Indian nation-state's failure to sensitively apprehend the pluralities existing in its regional peripheries, particularly in the context of the North-East, is seen to be reflected in the novels of the two writers writing about and from the North-East. Siddhartha Deb and Mamang Dai have shown in their novels how secessionist tendencies and ethno-nationalistic ideologies in the region have completely subverted the metaphor of the nation as a shared myth or as a construct that produces a sense of belongingness and psychological affinity among its people. In the prologue to Siddhartha Deb's *The Point of Return* the location of the North-East has been defined as a territory distant from the centre: "At that hour in a small town in the Northeast of India, neither doctors, nor medicines were easy to obtain" (2). The lack of essential medical facilities in the region signifies the centre's negligence of the peripheries. The novel represents the chief problem of the region as the secessionist tendencies born out of extreme ethnic consciousness. The political history of the hill-state, Meghalaya, in which the most part of the novel is set, reflects it appropriately. Meghalaya broke away from the state of Assam in 1972 to form an independent political entity: "The new hill state found itself with an old capital town after all, the town had been the capital of Assam from the time of the British – and although it welcomed possessions of the old building it felt the necessity of erecting fresh monuments to the vastly different political aspirations of the hill people" (9). The novel's focal point is this "vastly different political aspiration" which negates the possibility of merging the realities of the North-East with the mainland. The metaphor of participation in constructing the imagined community in India fails, because in the tribal areas of the North-East the outsiders are never accepted by the local people. In a chapter titled "The Pension Office" there is a description how the narrator and his father, Babu and Dr. Dam, encounter a venomous outpouring of words from a tribal man in a tea-stall in Shillong. The tribal man considers the South-Indians, North-Indians and the East-Bengalis, all as intruders: "Why do they cross the borders, hey?" (22). A desire to create a pure tribal land can be found in the man's outrageous attitude towards the non-tribals. The narrator and his father offer no comment in response to such sudden verbal attack: "they said nothing, looking away at the Indian flag fluttering in front of the guard-house"

(22). The Indian flag here fails to stand as an emblem of the nation's unity and cultural homogeneity, and is rather treated ironically as a useless metaphor of the nation-state.

The two geographical locations, in which the novel is set – Silchar and Shillong – stand for the impossibility of creating a metaphor of participation in the psychology of people, within the state of Assam, as well as within the nation. Silchar is an area in Assam where the Bengali community finds it difficult to merge into the culture of the rest of the state. There is a chapter titled “Wedding Season” in the novel which defines Silchar as an entity perceived in terms of absence. This is a town which is insular and isolated. The inhabitants of Silchar are mostly the immigrants from East-Bengal, and as a result the area seems to be “a small Bengali island” (107). The identity of the people of Silchar gets framed in terms of binaries: “they were defined not by who they were – that was uncertain – but by what they were not. They were Indians because they were not Bangladeshis, Hindus because they were not Muslims, Bengalis because they were not Assamese” (107). Although the inhabitants of Silchar are a Bengali-speaking community, their language is considered as a source of amusement and derision, because it is a dialect which is not accepted in “the real centre of Bengali culture and identity, in Calcutta” (107). On the other hand, the tourist brochures define Shillong as the “Scotland of the East”, its essence being compared to a foreign territory. The narrator remembers an incident when he was asked by a man in a train, whether one has to travel by a ship to arrive at Shillong. Many people of the country have no idea about the geographical location of the region. The narrator feels that the entire North-East is left out from the map of the country; “At school, in the geography classes, they told us nothing about these places....I only had to place the big industrial cities and political centers and trading ports of dusty plains to get full marks for that section of the exam” (196). The centre's indifference towards the margins like the North-East has been manifested in the inadequate, wrong representation of the area in maps as well as in literary discourses. There is a small chapter titled “Maps” in the novel, where it is commented that the map of India fails to represent “places that do not belong, people who do not belong” (210). The realities of the subcontinent before and after Partition, of the margins lead to ambivalences of the entire idea of India. Another reality of the area is that the metropolitan centres of the mainland do not get affected by what happens there. The narrator indignantly questions: “Why does no one in Delhi know what is happening

here? Why do the killings and lootings not appear in the Calcutta paper that now gets here three days late?” (151).

The North-East is not only inadequately represented in the psychological map of the people of the rest of the country, in the geographical map, but also in literary discourses. In a chapter titled “Learning to Run”, the narrator points out how the margins fail to be properly represented in the so-called grand narratives produced by nationally and internationally known writers. He discerns an indifference in the tribals in showing honour towards Tagore, as a stone-tablet speaking of Tagore’s literary achievements gets worn out and shows no sign of repair for a long period of time. The narrator comments: “I can’t deny that there was certain justice in their indifferences to this announcement of Tagore’s distant literary achievements” (237). He calls Tagore a “foreign poet”, because he remembers that a novel by Tagore set in Shillong (*Shesher Kabita*), “a tiresome drama of Calcutta relationship being played out in this hill town”, does not give any reference to its local people: “I looked in vain for any reference to the people who had always lived here, to the landscape as something more than a backdrop for Tagore’s literary abilities or the amorous impulses of his characters” (237). He comes to the conclusion that the local people of the North-East are treated as exotic props in their own land.

The North-East is geographically misrepresented and it fails to get a place in the grand literary discourses of the nation. Another significant reality is its economy being affected by the centre’s negligence. The narrator’s father Dr. Dam goes through “The Statesman” and reads the news where it is stated that the Prime Minister announces some austerity measures for restoring the economy of the country because the World Bank declines its earlier offer of lending 72 million dollars to the Indian government. Dr. Dam feels that even if the money would have been lent, it would not have come for any economic development of the North-East. These realities have led the narrator to define the hill-state as “a lost spot on the map of the nation”; he has found that the national newspapers represent the news of the area simply as “disturbances” (295). An interesting aspect of the novel is that the names of the hill-state and the hill-town where the narrator situates most of his experiences are not specifically given within the entire narrative. It

remains a space of oblique references, just the way it is treated by the centre of the Indian nation-state.

In the modern nation-state of India, the narrator and his father fail to locate a hometown. Dr. Chatterjee, a friend of Dr. Dam says: “We are a dispersed people, wandering, but unlike the Jews we have no mythical homeland” (287). Dr. Chatterjee came to the hill state of Maghalaya after Partition; he feels the people who left East Pakistan, “somewhere on some map, there must be a place for them too” (290). Dr. Dam, like Dr. Chatterjee, went through the same experience of dispersal of identity. Dr. Dam went to study at Calcutta and later he entered into the profession of a junior doctor in Assam Veterinary Department. Dr. Dam moved into various places of the North-East and when there were the “attempts to redress this flux, to put down roots”, he failed to find a hometown (38). The uncertainty about national identity and national boundary is a permanent phenomenon in the North-East: “The state of Assam to which he owed allegiance became smaller as new tribal states were formed, this fresh cartographic boundaries indicating more than anything a growing uncertainty about the relationship between the hills and the plains” (39). In Meghalaya the conflict between the tribals and the non-tribals reached its height from 1979 onwards. The local people termed the outsiders as “dkhars” and men like Dr. Dam who did not believe in such distinctions became the ultimate victims. Dr. Dam’s experience in the North-East questions the very idea of the Indian nation-state, an entity which shows a large map of shifting colours in terms of race, cultural identity and geographical location. In the novel there is a description of the celebration the tenth anniversary of the territory’s statehood. The evening of the day of the celebration consisted of two speeches, one from the chief minister who spoke on behalf of the tribal people, one for the governor who represented the larger entity of the nation or the centre. The parallel existence of the centre and the periphery, and the periphery’s attempt to come to the foreground reflects the complex political situation of the entire region of the North-East. *The Point of Return* repeatedly mentions the inaccuracy of the nation’s geographical map, because the peripheral people always feel territorially displaced and misrepresented: the map approved by the nation-state’s government is only “a simulacrum, a copy of an original” and is full of elisions and evasions (210).

Siddhartha Deb's second novel *Surface* addresses the issue of identity in the North-East in a more politicized framework. Whereas in *The Point of Return* the narrator is a Bengali immigrant residing in Shillong, in *Surface* the narrator is an outsider – a Sikh man named Amrit Singh – who goes to a region, to a dark corner of the North-East, for collecting news. Amrit Singh's search was for "A portrait of the mystery and sorrow of India through the story of the woman in the photograph" (5). But here the question arises whether the sorrows and problems of this area are considered as the nation's own sorrow and problems at all, because Amrit Singh has been instructed to search for the story by a foreigner, whom he calls Herman the German. Amrit Singh, the journalist too, is suspicious regarding the German's interest in the story concerning the backward, peripheral region of India: "Do German magazines take English articles, and why should they be interested in the backwaters of the backwaters?" (57).

The entire narrative of *Surface* centres on the photograph of a Manipuri woman. The photograph shows two armed men, from a terrorist organization of Manipur, known as MORLS – Movement Organized to Resuscitate the Liberation Struggle. On the back of the photograph there is a caption which says that the woman is going to be punished for following an immoral life, because she is a porn film actress. The intention of this enactment of punishment, according to the captain in the novel, is "to impress upon the people the importance of desisting from all corrupt activities encouraged by Indian imperialism" (29). It clearly reflects the ideological position of the insurgent group – they do not consider themselves as part of the Indian nation-state and they rather follow their own codes of moral and social behaviour; they think it important to punish those who violate those codes. The narrator, Amrit Singh, defines the political turmoil of the region and the people's refusal to merge themselves in the cultural mainstream of the country as a natural outcome of the centre's lack of understanding of the region's problems. During the British rule, the entire North-East was considered as different from the rest of the country and it continued to be like that. Amrit comments that "by the time of independence the notional line had become an unbreachable wall. The politicians and administrators in Delhi who determined how the fare in the fledging nation should have anticipated this barrier, but their knowledge was partial, their lack of imagination absolute" (31). The narrator goes on contemplating on the impossibility of bridging the gap between the centre and the peripheral substance of the North-East, blaming the

politicians in the centre for their lack of understanding of the peculiar problems of the region:

The Nagas rose first, then the Manipuris, then the Mizos, Assamese, Bodos, and Hmars and now intelligence reports spoke of as many as a hundred and fifty groups swirling in the vortex of the region, a discontented army of teenagers and young people sworn to similar but separate causes, moving stealthily along arms routes from jungle camps located in Bangladesh and Burma. (31)

In his mission of finding out the mysteries concerning the woman in the photograph, Amrit plunges into the complex socio-political scenario of the region, comes to know that the politicians of the region are corrupted and immoral as well, which makes it impossible to lead the region to further economic development. He comes to know that in the entire North-East there are more than a hundred insurgent organizations and are nearly fifteen such groups in Manipur alone. He realizes that the photograph of the woman too is a part of larger politics. After an army operation executed by the Indian government, only MORLS survived as an insurgent group which earlier used to be a minor one. They as a result took the woman as a medium of showing their concern for the moral uplift of the state. Yet the consequence was a complex one – the public turned against them and the other insurgent groups blamed MORLS for victimizing someone who was already a victim of Indian imperialism. There is another possibility too – the photograph may be framed by government agencies to blame MORLS and its ideologies. The captain who offers Amrit the glimpse of many possible aspects of the story, tells him that the big newspapers of the mainland may not be able to go into the heart of the story that takes place in the region: “If you understand the principles along which events proceed in the region – which may be hard since your excellent papers in the Calcutta and Delhi report nothing of the events here and would be unable to find the region on a map of the country . . . ” (95). According to the captain the woman in the photograph may not be a victim of circumstances, rather may be an agent creating specific circumstances for specific effect.

The captain also tells Amrit that there are many restrictions and situations in the region which would not be found in mainland India. The peculiar socio-political framework of the territory creates specific situations for the outsiders too. Amrit defines Manipur as the edge of the republic, for he feels that his presence in the region is perceived with suspicion and he is viewed as an outsider. He encounters the typical psychological effects on the local people of the region created by the presence of an outsider. Amrit's appearance singles out his estrangement in the region: "People reacted differently to my presence in the streets – my height, complexion and beard singling me out as a possible member of what many of them considered an occupying force – and it was often difficult to convince hostile, fearful strangers that I was not a government official or a soldier" (138). There is the description of a small incident in the novel, on the other hand, which serves as a metaphor of power-play, between one from the mainland and those from the periphery. Amrit encounters a mobile army patrol while travelling in the region. Initially he is humiliated by a soldier, but when he challenges the soldier with an angry outburst, the situation changes. Amrit feels that it is his way of speaking Hindi – the language of the mainland, with proper inflections, for which he is treated as someone superior: "I marvelled at how these things had been overridden by my features and the Hindi I spoke, which must have reminded the soldiers of countless commanding officers (some who could have been distant cousins of mine for all I know) who looked and spoke the same way" (170).

Amrit comes to know about the Prosperity Project, an emergent alternative community in Manipur, about its director Malik and the woman's involvement in the project. The community addresses the problems which have been plaguing the state. In the course of the narrative it is revealed that Malik is abducted by the insurgents and is later killed. The character of Malik has been represented as a possible symbol of alternative for the insurgency-ridden people of Manipur, but ultimately that possibility dies out. Malik stands as someone challenging the metaphor of the republic too. He and the captain once were involved in producing counterfeit money. It was a kind of gesture which deconstructed the entire symbolic paradigm of the republic of India. The captain says that it is "a symbol, something that simulates the republic, and these dirty notes you see around here are a good illustration of how the image of the republic is tarnished and corrupted in the region" (185).

As the narrative proceeds Amrit learns more about the woman in the photograph, Leela, and about the peculiar cultural framework in which she and other women of her state are brought up. It is a matriarchal culture where the women are supposed to have authority and respect, but the same matriarchy does not allow a woman to cross the assigned roles and boundaries. Leela becomes a victim of such conflicting attitudes. From Leela's aunt Amrit comes to know that Leela preferred to speak to the strangers, rather than keeping in touch with her relatives or people from her own family circle. She preferred the unreal to the familiar. Her desire to transcend the limits of the familiar world got fulfilment when she went to study in a Delhi college. This desire to cross the geographical or territorial limits, however, failed when Leela felt herself estranged in the city. In a letter to her aunt, she compared herself to an old book-store: "I find myself thinking that I will become like the bookstore, a relic dissolving bit by bit into the city while change flows all around it" (208). Her failure to assimilate in the metropolitan centre has been termed by Amrit as an "aborted attempt to grasp the larger world" (209). In fact Leela's attempt to belong is a symbolic attempt: she is someone from the periphery who tries to belong, to find a space in the mainland of the nation, and ultimately fails. Leela's story comes to end but Amrit feels that it is not finished and somewhat not complete. He has to face the challenge of representing the incomplete, layered story of the woman in front of "a distant foreign audience" (214).

Surface portrays Manipur as a region faced with insurgency and violence. The region does not only face the problem of the centre's negligence, the internal conflicts are also common phenomenon. The Naga insurgents have demanded an autonomous Naga state in Manipur and the Manipuri insurgent groups are worried about the peace deal between the Naga insurgents and the Indian government. While leaving the region, Amrit feels being haunted by "bewildering profusion of images and voices in the region" (253). He feels that Manipur is a layered discourse of alienation, frustration and anger. The other title of the novel – *The Outline of the Republic* – refers more directly to the illusory nature of the republic and its failure to encompass and erase differences of the peripheries and the mainland.

Although Mamang Dai's novels are less political apparently, representing the local culture of Arunachal Pradesh and relationships, there are oblique, and at times direct engagements in the issue of the centre's indifference towards the margins. The narrator in *Stupid Cupid* is a woman named Adna, a woman from Itanagar, who has a friend or a partner outside the institution of marriage. Although the narrative primarily centres on the issues of love and marriage, a good deal of focus has been given on the socio-political status of the people from the North-East in Delhi. The peripheral space of the region in the map of the country has been reiterated throughout the narrative. Adna, after living in Delhi for a long period of time feels that "From Delhi, the North-East was like a map of mountains and rivers on another planet" (8). The elders of her family consider Delhi as a strange and remote territory, a jungle; they want their women to be married to local men and settle down. They often hear about shocking murders and incidents of cruelty in Delhi. Adna enjoys her anonymity in Delhi whereas her relatives from Itanagar warn her: "No one will help you there, because no one will know who you are" (14). Unlike Leela in Siddhartha Deb's *Surface*, Adna has been able create a sense of psychological affinity in the city, at least initially, by starting a business. She starts a hotel named "Four Seasons" that offered privacy to lovers, by creating a circle of friends. She believes in the imagined community of India as she feels that "people who work the land recognize each other" (28). Her cousin Jia and a vegetable vendor, a woman from Rajasthan carry their conversation without knowing each other's language properly. The Rajasthani woman's local dialect and Jia's broken Hindi create no communication gap and it is a sign of solidarity across culture, in the eyes of the narrator, although the geographical distance is emphasized: "We were from opposite corners of the country, us from the mountains and she from Rajasthan" (28). There have been several attempts on the part of the government to bridge the gap between the North-East and the rest of the country: "As the country geared up for modernization, the states of the North-East were clamouring for attention from the centre. The thrust was on infrastructure. More road more connectivity" (34). Yet the gap between the centre and the periphery does not vanish from the psychological map of the people from the mainland. The narrator's initial faith in the imagined community comes to an end after she comes across several incidents which affirm the marginal status of their people. Jia encounters a situation where she is treated as a foreigner in Delhi and is bullied by a woman who orders Jia to go back to her "Desh". Jia responds with anger: "How dare you say such a thing? Do you

think I'm Chinese, huh?" (52). The narrator and another woman from the North-East, Mareb, are in love with men from the mainland, but these relationships are represented as illusory and unreal, because these are relationships which are formed outside social and legal institutions, remain incomplete as they are never fully realized. Adna herself feels a strong desire to go back to the hills: "I was seized with a longing to return to those remote hidden valleys....It was a distant place, abandoned and almost forgotten, buried deep in the hills . . ." (132). When she reaches Itanagar, the world that is familiar to her in Delhi becomes remote and indistinct. The world in the hills makes her feel it is an unreal world that she has left behind: "My life in the city seemed very distant. My friends, my loves, my hopes, began to shrink and recede" (134). The narrator's desire to go beyond geographical or territorial limits to create new bonds across cultures comes to an end as the project of "Four Seasons" gets devastated when Amine, Adna's friend associated in the project, is murdered. Like Leela's failure in *Surface* to assimilate with the centre, here Adna's failure to bridge the psychological barriers created by geographical boundaries reflects the unreal nature of the metaphor of participation in the construction of a nation.

In Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* the world of the Adi community is defined as a territory mostly untrodden by the people of the outer world. The community has its own myths regarding the outsiders or invaders coming from the distant countries: "It was said that there were different types of migluns, and that some of them had wings. Those from a big country called America shouted a lot and they were more frightening than the original migluns who were the Bee-ree-tis" (39). The Adis are conscious of their peripheral status, and an Adi man named Rakut tells the narrator: "We are not politicians, scientists or builders of empires. Not even the well-known citizen or the outrageous one. Just peripheral people thinking out our thoughts" (190). The novel engages more with the Adi community's myths and memories than with the issue of the region's unique socio-political problems. Yet the narrative touches on the spectre of secession as a haunting phenomenon of the region: "The youth were caught agitating, and there was no time to sit with them through the days and nights and erase their frustration....New fences marked old territory and it seemed a curtain had fallen over the old villages" (163). The territory's peace has been stolen by various disturbances, born

out of anxiety about tribal or ethnic identity and the centre's failure to erase their economic and political problems.

Dai's latest novel *The Black Hill* is set in the colonial India, where the narrative focus is on the untold story of a French missionary coming to Arunachal Pradesh and the ups and downs in the lives of few tribal people associated with the missionary. The tribal communities of the region at that time were in constant conflict with the colonizers and all outsiders, irrespective of their actual intentions of entering their land. Perhaps they were anxious of losing their ethnic purity once the invaders crossed their pristine territory. The novel engages with the internal conflicts of the various tribes in the region, their constant fear of tribal purity being contaminated by outsiders. The French missionary is shown as a victim of many such negative circumstances working together. The issues of national idea in conflict with the peripheries did not appear at that time because the story is set in a period even before the first nationalistic struggle in the country against the colonizers, the Sepoy Mutiny. The national sentiment was in its burgeoning stage at that time; the idea of the nation being fractured by internal political problems did not arise. Yet the novel points out the existence of strong ethnic sentiment among the tribal people of the region which could become extremely violent to wipe out all foreign elements.

Arundhati Roy and Amit Chaudhuri's characters can be interpreted in the light of the interstitial nature of their identity. As dispersed identity is the central issue here, I want to mention Homi Bhabha's analysis of such identities in his "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation." Bhabha borrows the term "dissemination" from Jacques Derrida to define the experiences of migration or of the scattering of people across nations. Bhabha speaks about a time of gathering, gathering on the edge of foreign cultures, for instance. He says: "the emergence of the later phase of the modern nation, from the mid-nineteenth century, is also one of the most sustained periods of mass migration within the west, and colonial expansion in the east" (291). According to him, the phenomenon like mass migration and colonial expansion creates a situation in which the space of the modern nation-state does not remain horizontal. There emerge cultural movements, the consequence being the dispersal of the identities and

cultural orientations. Such experiences create a rupture in the entire structure of the imagined community, as the metaphor of participation fails to unite those whose identities are dispersed and who have diverse cultural and ideological affiliations. Bhabha's exploration into the liminality of the nation and its cultural and political effects helps to understand the ambivalence of the idea of the nation and to understand some socio-cultural phenomena in Arundhati Roy and Amit Chaudhuri's fiction. However, the representation of identity as trapped in the in-between space in Roy and Chaudhuri's novels is not solely based on the conditions that Bhabha has emphasized; in their case the situation of belonging to an interstitial space emerges due to a complex politico-psychological reason. There are some characters in Roy and Chaudhuri's novels who seem to feel self-possessed and content in their connection to whatever belongs to the West – for them the images of the West are more ideal than their own culture. These characters never become free from their Western disposition. There are some characters in Roy and Chaudhuri's novels, who remain in a perpetual state of confusion regarding their choice of culture and their belonging. On the other hand, for some it is a conscious choice without any discomfiture.

In *The God of Small Things* Chacko defines the family in Ayemenem as more loyal to the colonial culture, than to the nation-state: "Chacko told the twins that though he hated to admit it, they were all Anglophiles, they were a family of Anglophiles. Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away" (52). The family's interest in Western music and film, according to Chacko, also reflects the loyalty towards the colonial culture: "Chacko said that going to see *The Sound of Music* was an extended exercise in Anglophilia" (55). Chacko, studying at Oxford and Baby Kochamma, being extremely proud of her Western orientation, form identities which are dispersed and show the nation's culture failing to create a horizontal space. Baby Kochamma's failed attempt to be close to Father Mulligan leads her to study at the University of Rochester in America. After she returns from America, she becomes a woman with full devotion towards American culture and habits: "Baby Kochamma followed American NBA league games, one-day cricket and all the Grand Slam tennis tournaments. On weekdays she watched *The Bold and the Beautiful* and *Santa Barbara*, where brittle blondes with lipstick and hair styles rigid with spray seduced androids and defined their sexual

empires” (27). Baby Kochamma is put in charge of the children’s formal education and she takes it as an opportunity to attempt at an internalization of the Western culture, literature and ideology by the children. She forces Rahel and Estha to read the abridged version of *The Tempest* by Charles and Mary Lamb. The selection of this text for introducing the children to the West also symbolically stands for a loyalty towards colonial ideology – *The Tempest* is often interpreted as a play about imperialist ideology. Baby Kochamma’s indignation at the children’s lack of interest in the Western culture, expressed through their play of the English language while reconstructing it in their own terms, leads her to glorify Sophie Mol, Chacko’s daughter through a Western wife. Even Ammu tries to train her children in colonial culture, not so much in a gesture of following the Ayemenem family’s obsession with Western ways of behaving, but in a manner of ridiculing such obsessions. She tells the twins that it is important to learn the difference between “CLEAN and DIRTY” and “Especially in this country” (149). *The God of Small Things* is a novel about the acts of breaking rules and crossing into forbidden territories, Ammu and her children being the transgressors of all social and familial boundaries. Although it is a narrative of transgressing psychological, emotional and social barriers, it also obliquely refers to the transgression of national boundaries to locate one’s identity in a non-horizontal, interstitial space. Arundhati Roy’s own ideological position as a writer also reflects that she believes in belonging to elsewhere, rather than trying to belong to one space, one country or one nation. In “The End of Imagination” Roy declares that she is an independent, mobile republic. She says that she is a citizen of the earth and she owns no territory, no flag (21). In this context Rushdie’s idea of identity as dispersed and belonging to several places can be cited. Although many critics interpret Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* as betraying an anxiety to be rooted, in many of his critical writings he maintains that in the contemporary time our identities are essentially dispersed in nature. Rushdie says in *Imaginary Homelands*: “Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools” (15). Although he basically points out the plural cultural affiliation of the diasporic identity, his proposition can be applied to any identity connected with external cultures.

Like the Anglophile family of Rahel and Estha in *The God of Small Things*, in Amit Chaudhuri's *A New World* we find people with dispersed selves and a complex psychological set up, with no loyalty towards so-called Indianness or national culture. The novel's central character, Jayojit's father Ananda Chatterjee was undoubtedly against the British Empire, yet the ideological and cultural framework of his mannerisms shows the influence of the colonial world: "He was one of those men who, after independence, had inherited the colonials' authority and position, his club cuisine and table manners, his board meetings and discipline; all along he had bullied his wife for not being as much as a memsahib as he was sahib" (7). Admiral Ananda Chatterjee does not have any positive opinion on India's socio-political or economic condition. Jayojit too has similar opinion and he believes that Indian economy is completely dependent on the West and economic reform is necessary: "Nothing but economic reform, he believed, could change India from a country living on borrowings from the west into a productive and competitive one" (30). Jayojit's mother, on the other hand, is a victim of her husband's fondness for Western culture and mannerisms. She never went abroad and yet this imaginary place has intruded in her life, making her constantly aware that she lacks something very desirable for making herself suitable for her husband. The West was "a territory that intersected with her life without ever actually touching it, and which had for her, its own recognizable characteristics" (40). Jayojit is trapped in an in-between space of a desire to know and adopt the cultures of the nation where he was born, and the necessity of internalizing the values of the West where he resides. He laments that he has taught Bonny the words "ma" and "baba" without teaching him other things that surround those words in Bengali culture. Even the pet name of the boy – "Bonny" – is a product of "a strange western affectation from the old days" (4). It is a name given by Jayojit's mother, who is bullied by her husband for not being westernized. The Chatterjee family's cultural affiliation stands in an interstitial space. Ananda Chatterjee prefers Western culture like Baby Kochamma in Roy's *The God of Small Things*. On the other hand, Jayojit remains in a confused state regarding his national and cultural affiliation. In Chaudhuri and Roy's novels the situation of remaining in an in-between cultural space emerges not so much due to diasporic phenomenon, but more due to some complex politico-psychological factors. The characters like Ananda Chatterjee and Baby Kochamma feel more self-assured in embracing foreign cultures. They prefer to live in a utopian world rather than accepting the realities of their immediate world; for them the

colonial world and Western culture represent an ideal space of escape and self-affirmation.

Being an economist Jayojit is interested to go through articles on Indian economy. He finds an article on economic liberalization in India in an old newspaper, where the idea of Indianness is questioned: “The problem we face with liberalization is not, after all, the loss of our culture and native traditions. For what is Indian culture, anyway? It has been redefined at every stage in history by its contact with what at first was perceived as ‘foreign’” (112). This definition of Indian culture, as something constructed by its contact with the West essentially points out the non-horizontal nature of Indianness. It has been repeatedly mentioned that neither Jayojit nor his father are bothered about their Indianness or Indian identity. It is reflected especially when Ananda Chatterjee advises Jayojit to fight the case of legal separation between Jayojit and his wife Amala in an Indian court. Jayojit is confused regarding his son’s national identity as Bonny is born in America and questions his father about his own identity as well: “I’m an Indian citizen, aren’t I?” (90). It is stated that their family does not bother about the questions of nationality and citizenship:

It was at that time, the admiral remembered, that the question of what it was to be an Indian had to be addressed. It was not something that either Jayojit or Admiral Chatterjee had bothered about, except during moments of political crisis or significance, like a border conflict or elections, or some moment of mass celebration, when it seemed all right to mock ‘Indianness’ if only to differentiate oneself from a throng of people. (90)

For Jayojit and Ananda Chatterjee, the issue of Indianness is a matter of mockery, because they themselves are dispersed identities, heaving no sentimental ties with Indian culture.

Amit Chaudhuri’s *A Strange and Sublime Address* is about a boy’s journey from Bombay to Calcutta and his attainment of knowledge about the city’s different realities,

about identities. The boy, Sandeep, represents the rootlessness of an identity which is dispersed: he is a Bengali by birth, but knows no Bengali to be capable of reading Sarat Chandra, Bibhuti Bhushan, Tarasankar or Rabindranath. Sandeep is defined as “one of the innumerable language orphans of modern India” (75). The very title of the novel questions whether it is rational to define oneself through one’s language or geographical territory. The entire narrative of the novel centres on the fact that everyone has a “strange and sublime address,” with mixed cultural or territorial orientations. Sandeep finds in his cousin Abhi’s book an address written as:

Abhijit Das

17 Vivekananda Road

Calcutta (South)

West Bengal

India

Asia

Earth

The Solar System

The Universe. (80)

This “strange and sublime address” challenges the horizontal nature of one’s identity and belongingness. The territorial affiliation here is interpreted in terms of the local, national and global, all existing simultaneously and intersecting each other. Like the twins in *The God of Small Things*, Abhi too has to undergo a forceful process of internalizing what is English or Western. Sandeep’s second visit to Calcutta leads him to discover that his cousin has a genuine trouble with the English language, whereas he is expected to be “smart, English-speaking, and brittle, like one of those ideal men in cigarette advertisements” (93).

Chaudhuri's *A New World* defines Indian culture as a construct dependent on its contact with foreign culture. On the other hand, in *A Strange and Sublime Address* culture is defined as dependent on individual representation and perception. There is a reference to a Sikh man in the novel whose knowledge about Calcutta is derived from popular culture. The Sikh man forms his own ideas about Calcutta through representation alone, through a black-and-white Hindi movie called *Pyasa*: "The city, or the idea of the city given to him years ago by the black-and-white film, had absorbed him without his ever knowing it" (44). It is the "idea" of the city that he receives from popular cultural representations like Hindi films. This kind of perception about a place and its essence, which is dependent on representations, is mostly partial. Chaudhuri wants to define culture as a construct rather than as a fixed entity. His characters perceive Indian culture in diverse forms and for them the notion of a homogeneous national culture, which can be defined in monochromic terms, becomes invalid.

Like many other novels by Chaudhuri, *The Immortals* also deals with the expatriate Bengali identity. Nirmalya, the central character in the novel, finds that many of his friends in Bombay have no respect for Indian culture, whereas he himself tries to train himself in Indian classical music: "most of them planned to go to America some time in future and study management and 'lay' American women" (122). The novel presents many examples of a generation which is rootless and estranged from the culture of the nation. The friends of Nirmalya embody this rootlessness. His friend Rajiv knew nothing about Indian culture, and thought people who went around talking about Indian culture were only oily and pretentious.

The Sengupta family in Chaudhuri's *The Immortals* attempts to incorporate the nation's culture, but ironically they are Bengalis living in Bombay and for them musical education or performance remains only a pastime in the luxuries of the corporate world. The only son of the family, Nirmalya suffers from an existential anxiety, which is considered by his father as his lack of idea of the "real world". Their "real world" is the corporate world which has occasional associations with the popular culture of the country, particularly Hindi film-songs. Mallika Sengupta's personal assessment of the famous musical personalities of Hindi film Industry shows the culture of the nation as

being symbolized by singers from popular culture. She fails to find any distinguished quality in the voices of the famous singers of the country: “This wasn’t the India she’d grown up in; India had been transformed into an island, with only one radio station, and she had to listen to the same singers again and again” (135). Here India as a nation seems to be constructed by cultural signifiers – mostly by Indian music, particularly the popular Hindi film songs. It reflects the transitional social reality as largely being responsible for changing the constituents of a nation’s culture and its overall essence. The idea of India here may simply be constructed by popular culture which is also subject to various ways of representation and interpretation.

Chaudhuri’s *Afternoon Raag* presents the narrator as an expatriate Bengali living in Oxford, working on Lawrence and belonging to a “consciousness of Lawrence country” (131). His memory oscillates between his days in India and those in Oxford. Like many other expatriate Bengalis in Chaudhuri’s fiction, the narrator’s identity here belongs to elsewhere, without any root. His parents were originally from Sylhet in undivided Bengal. They went to London for few years and returned to India at last to live in Bombay. The narrator remembers his mother speaking English in a Bengali tone, yet finds some of her expressions in English as extremely “un-Indian” constructions. The primary setting of the novel, Oxford also metaphorically stands for a space which does not offer anyone any concrete sense of belonging: the narrator feels that “Oxford itself is a temporal and enchanted territory that has no permanence in one’s life” (184). His three acquaintances in Oxford – Shenaz, Mandira and Sharma – do not reach the level of assuring him that he is not a stranger in the city; relationships are not fully realized and the city remains strange: “It is the city that remains, a kind of meeting place, modern and without identity, but deceptively archaic, that unobtrusively but restlessly realigns its roundabouts and lanes and landmarks, so that it never becomes one’s own, or anyone else’s” (189). The difficulty of defining one’s identity and cultural affiliation through geographical territory, because of cultural dissemination or dispersal of identities is the focal point in the majority of Chaudhuri’s fictional narratives. One of the most crucial political phenomena of the nation, Partition is also repeatedly referred to in *Afternoon Raag* as creating a fracture in the very idea of a homeland. The story of the country’s independence and of the nation-building process goes simultaneously with the story of Partition: “So India took on a new shape, and another story began, with homelands

becoming fantasies, never to be returned to or remembered” (201). Chaudhuri’s latest novel *Odysseus Abroad* also questions the ideas of nationhood and nationality. The protagonist of the novel is a diasporic subject, who lives in London and tries to belong there rather than to the “homeland” he has left behind. Ananda questions himself: “What am I doing in London? And what’ll I do once I’m back in India?” (10). His failure in the attempt to make a position in the poetic world of the West creates this existential uncertainty. Ananda regularly sends poems to *The Poetry Review*, finds no interest in Indian politics, but is addicted to British politics: for him British politics offers a great spectacle. He conceives his own identity in terms of dispersal: “None of the things that defined him – that he was a modern Bengali and Indian, with a cursory but proud knowledge of Bengali literature; that he wrote in English, and had spoken it much of his life; that he used to be served lettuce sandwiches as a teatime snack as a child” (18). This statement about Ananda makes it clear that he belongs to or desires to belong, both to Bengal and to England. The novel’s narrative constantly refers to Ananda’s disliking of interiority: it is stated that he does not like the neighbours and their closeness to him. He rather embraces the anonymity of the street, because its “sounds and manifold associations” help him to evade the existential questions: “He wanted to escape, to slip away from the ‘I’ surreptitiously, leaving behind somewhere” (22). Ananda’s apathy for interiority and his preference for the manifold associations of the street can be defined metaphorically as a desire to belong to elsewhere, rather than to be trapped in a limited geographical and cultural space. The novel presents a place in London called Belsize Park as a site of cultural dispersal. Ananda calls it a small Bengali island – a bhadrakok village. He meets an eleven years old boy in Belsize Park. Ananda observes that this Bengali boy belongs to London than to India or Bengal:

He had casual long hair which fell repeatedly on his eyebrows, and he spoke exactly as a London boy would, unobtrusively dispensing with many of his t’s. He was, actually, English. Speaking the language in that way translated the features, his facial muscles, in the idiom of this city’s culture. Ananda was convinced that this *was* an Indian boy who *belonged* more to Belsize Park than to India. (114)

Ananda's uncle perceives the inherent racism of the West in positive terms and is fairly comfortable with the word "black"; in fact he calls himself a black Englishman (125). He stands as a man without roots and no desire to belong. Such acceptance of rootlessness and an identity defined in paradoxical terms makes Ananda's uncle a dispersed identity situated in an interstitial space.

In the Introduction to *Nation and Narration* Homi Bhabha defines "nation" as a powerful historical idea, "where cultural compulsion lies in the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force" (1). Bhabha points out the existence of a "particular ambivalence" in the idea of the nation, the language of those who write of it and the lives of those who live it. This ambivalence emerges from the fact that nation has a cultural temporality which inscribes a transitional social reality. Anderson's idea of "imagined communities" too points out the nation's ambivalent emergence through a system of cultural signification. Bhabha's definition of nation as a "narration" defines the nation as a construct coming to exist through various discourses. If nation is a product of a signifying process or discourses, the representational nature of the entire idea affirms its ambivalent nature.

Neil Lazarus says that a sudden interest in the "national question" has emerged among the writers in the later decades of the twentieth century. He comes to the conclusion that this phenomenon is an essential outcome of decolonization. He says: "Over the course of the past fifteen years or so, and – for very obvious geographical reasons – especially since 1989, there has been something of an obsessive return to the subjects of nationalism and nation-state . . ." (68). Lazarus says that in the present context nationalism has been seen as constituting a kind of return of the repressed. But he feels that it is necessary to interrogate the anti-colonial nationalist ideology and its credibility. Lazarus refers to Frantz Fanon's critique of anti-colonial nationalism in *The Wretched of the Earth*: he mentions Fanon's criticism of the bourgeois nationalists, whose "'historical mission' was to constitute themselves as functionaries, straddling the international division of labour between metropolitan capitalism and the subaltern classes in the peripheries" (68). Fanon is aware that if the decolonized nation-state is dominated by the national middle classes, capitalism will extend and the interest of the

peripheral people will not be served. Lazarus discusses the complex issues associated with nation and nationalism, with reference to Fanon's critique of bourgeois nationalism, to imply that the entire idea of nation is ambivalent. The novels of Deb and Dai explore these dimensions concerning the idea of nationhood in the context of the North-East. The characters of Roy and Chaudhuri's novels redefine the ambivalent nature of nation, national identity and national culture. The transitional social reality, the absence of a horizontal cultural space in the lives of the characters of Roy and Chaudhuri emphasize the disseminating and dispersed nature of identities, rather than on any common metaphor of participation uniting people across cultures within the nation or outside the nation.

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