

Military Cosmopolitanism and Romantic Indigeneity: Crafting Claims to Statehood in India's Northeastern States

India's north-east frontier region's political existence as a unified entity in continuity with South East Asia (including Burma, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia) is a result of the military history of the two world wars, which led to the recruitment of the various peoples of the region. This unity as a region is marked by myriad secessionist struggles and insurgencies since the independence of India, Burma and Nepal, which indicate the uneasy coherence of the various communities which reside there with the postcolonial narratives of nation formation. These struggles include the violent agitation against immigrants in Assam in 1980, the demand for a Gorkhaland state separate from West Bengal in 1986, the struggles for Naga independence and their subsequent formation as the separate state of Nagaland in 1963, the demand for a Greater Mizoram in 1947, voiced again in 1986, among others. What appear as a range of regional conflicts, however, derive their modern character as struggles for independent statehood as a result of the region's entry into political modernity through their participation—both through service in the army and the war being fought on their terrain—in the two world wars. Although their sites of conflict differ—taking place outside the Indian subcontinent between 1914 and 1918, and then in more regional struggles where they were deployed against the Japanese Imperial Army in British Burma and the north east frontier territories in 1940 and 1944—these wars lead to the region's decisive entry into world history and a reconfiguration of its inhabitants' relation with the state. Their contemporary insurgencies should be seen as profoundly shaped by the world encountered by the conscripts of the British Army.

The centrality of the experience of service in the British Army to these contemporary postcolonial insurgencies has been elided in documentation of these movements. One venue where this narrative surfaces is in the contemporary anglophone novel, including Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), and Easterine Kire's novels about the Naga

movement for independence, including *Bitter Wormwood* (2011). These novels chart in detail the local insurgencies and their particular histories in the region. Desai's novel depicts the Gorkhaland uprising of the 1980s in the Kalimpong district of West Bengal, which demanded a separate state, leading eventually to the district being granted autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution and then under the Gorkhaland Territorial Declaration in 2006. Kire's various novels document the Naga peoples' traditional way of life against the backdrop of the British invasion of their territory, the Japanese invasion during the Second World War, and the subsequent attempts to declare independence from the postcolonial Indian state.

While the Anglophone novel is often read as an allegory for the formation of the nation, the regional focus of these novels about insurgencies on the frontier has meant that their reworking of the criteria of state-hood have been seen as peripheral and not examined at length. Foregrounding the history of the world wars in the secessionist struggles of the region, in this paper I examine how collective military service becomes the basis for imagining an autonomous political identity in opposition to the dominant postcolonial state. These novels show how these revolutionary movements creatively rework narratives and experiences of service in the army to craft their minor nationalisms. Instead of passively accepting their definition as a martial race meant to serve the needs of the ruling powers, the descendants of soldiers build on this identity and the reminiscences of service in the British Army in order to make political claims for a separate state. I argue that while these novels register this claim made by the insurgents, they also juxtapose an "indigenous" identity to a collective notion of shared military service. The indigenous mode of identification provides a longer imagined past, a connection with the land, which aligns more neatly with Herderian ideas of an ethnic community animated by a common culture. *Inheritance* and *Bitter Wormwood* take a radical step in representing the continued significance of the history of the world wars, while

ultimately preferring the more conservative position of a national identity based on narratives of an authentic indigeneity.

The military experience of these wars provides a template for a rethinking of the criteria on which claims to statehood gain legitimacy. The experience of being soldiers in the colonial army, and of being invaded by armies in pursuit of their imperial ambitions, reshaped how the peoples of this region would make claims for independence in the era following the retreat of the armies and the British colonial presence. The Gorkhaland movement of the 1980s gained traction through the marshalling of the Gorkhas' military experience. The Nagaland secessionist struggle took on an increasingly militarized character, moving from the writing of petitions to the Simon Commission in 1929, to an underground guerrilla resistance after they are incorporated into the Indian nation in 1947. The subsequent factionalization and protracted warfare that comes to characterize the Nagaland struggle, as well as various other insurgencies in the region, mark out the practical failures of emphasizing the military as a basis of nation formation. However, the militarization of these groups undermines the ability of the Indian state to establish a hegemonic discourse of national identity, often achieved by positing the primacy of the indigenous to the exigencies of the contemporary. In making this historical connection between secessionist movements and the militarized history produced by the world wars, the novels refuse an easy distinction between the "soldier" as a figure legitimized by the Indian state, and the "insurgent" or "terrorist" working in opposition to it. Instead, the insurgent is more often than not a dissenting or deserting soldier, and becomes a symbolic figure which allows for a reworking of the imposition of a national framework on the communities of the region. This figure marks the limits of nationalist discourse and the failure of the postcolonial nation, and comes to represent the perpetual insurrection that takes its place.

World Wars, Local Insurgencies

The very constitution of the northeastern frontier territory as a political entity— “the idea of South East Asia as a region”—arises through the formation of the Allied South East Asia Command, from 1944 to 1946, as Chris Bayly and Tim Harper argue in their histories of the war and its aftermath, *Forgotten Armies* and *Forgotten Wars*¹ (Bayly and Harper, 462). A longer history of the region would make more evident the incoherence of the logic which fragments it within various national boundaries. James Scott, in his treatment of the area as a “region” united by certain characteristics of the mountainous landscape that make it hard to administrate, defines it as follows:

Zomia is a new name for virtually all lands at altitudes above roughly three hundred meters all the way from the Central Highlands of Vietnam to northeastern India and traversing five Southeast Asian nations (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Burma) and four provinces of China (Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi, Sichuan)... It is the largest remaining region in the world whose people have not yet been fully incorporated into nation-states... hill peoples are best understood as runaway, fugitive, maroon communities who have, over the course of two millennia, been fleeing the oppressions of state-making projects in the valleys—slavery, conscription, taxes, corvée labor, epidemics and warfare (Scott ix).

Classifying the region as a “nonstate space,” one whose inaccessibility has made it historically resistant to “incorporation into the framework of the classical state, the colonial state and the independent nation-state” (19), Scott argues that the region makes visible a history of the world not dominated by narratives of all-encompassing states and totalitarian enclosure. The region’s incompatibility with narratives of nation formation becomes evident in the spate of “secessionist movements, indigenous rights struggles, millennial rebellions, regionalist agitation, and armed opposition to lowland states” in the period after World War II when many independent states were created. Importantly, Scott notes that his analysis of a

¹ For an account of the stands and perspectives of various political entities on the war—the Congress, the federation of princes, Ambedkar’s advocacy of soldiers from the depressed classes, M. N. Roy’s anti-fascist stance, the Communist Party of India’s opposition to imperialist warfare—see Srinath Raghavan’s *India’s War: The Making of Modern South Asia, 1939-1945* (2016). For an account of the war from the perspective of the multitudes caught up in the war—soldiers, laborers, those dispossessed of their land, those affected by the famine—see Yasmin Khan’s *The Raj at War: A People’s History of India’s Second World War* (2015).

“nonstate space” holds only till the end of the Second World War, in the course of which the reach of the nation-states becomes much more capacious. Henceforth, the struggles of the region are harder to understand outside the framework of the nation state, which becomes the condition of legibility for various political categorizations

Even as the region’s various peoples are assimilated into the apparatus of the modern nation, Bayly and Harper point out that the processes of their incorporation also provide them with a militarized identity, skills, and arms, that determine the terms of their opposition to being thus incorporated. They identify the “minor nationalisms” that proliferate in the region as the creation of the British Indian Army’s policies of recruitment, writing, “The great crescent, so recently violently unified by the successes of the British and Indian armies, was soon to be fragmented again... Self-selected leaderships of the Nagas and other people of Assam and the eastern hills would agitate and later fight for the autonomy which they believed they deserved because of their services during the war. To the south, in Arakan, Buddhist would fight Muslim. Christian Karen would fight Burmese Buddhist. Chinese and Malay Muslim gangs continued to skirmish in rural Malaya” (Bayly 86). They qualify the nationalisms that emerge from the “mobilization of the hill peoples” as a “militant nationalism,” which transforms previously anthropological categories into ethnic minorities that could conceptualize themselves as such and mobilize against the state. “Myriad units of the forgotten armies forged themselves into the armies of militant small nationalisms. The contest between the big state ruled by the dominant Hindu Indian, Buddhist Burman, Muslim Malay nations and the militant minorities was to play out over the next generation.” Here, they make a useful distinction between the dominant nationalisms of the sanctioned states, and the “small nationalisms” that must forge themselves in opposition to them. The conditions resulting from the war prove to be decisive to the political struggles that are to characterize

the postcolonial nations created in its aftermath. The experience of the wars is therefore integral to how these regions and peoples experience their political modernity.

Bayly and Harper's account of the region's fractured nationalisms relegates the peoples' various claims to statehood to a mechanized imposition of the larger global history in which the region's inhabitants are caught up. They do not adequately take into consideration the imaginative claims to identity that are being made by secessionist movements in the region, through a deliberate engagement with the historical events that mark their entrance into world history, and their identity as modern citizens of a nation state. For instance, despite the scope of their study, when Bayly and Harper describe the impact of the militant national identities that emerge, they write: "The uniforms, the marching, the drilling and the flag-waving of war time had indelibly imprinted themselves on the minds of the region's youth" (2006: 464). Such a description subsumes any kind of creative agency in co-opting military identity for a secessionist movement to a suspicion of the ritualistic subject-formation that characterizes armies. Indeed, it is difficult to approach the figure of the soldier with anything other than suspicion, providing, as it does, the symbol of colonial modernity *par excellence*—marked by Marx as the model for the industrial workers ("organized as soldiers...the privates of the industrial army"), the logistical basis of the colonial consolidation of empire (Omissi 1994), the symbol of the modern nation—in Anderson's formulation, "No more arresting emblems of the modern culture of nationalism exist than cenotaphs and tombs of Unknown Soldiers" (1991: 9). How is it possible, then, for secessionist movements to organize themselves around a military identity without falling prey to the various entrapments of modern statehood?

This dilemma points to a larger theoretical problem that all nations must grapple with. Secessionist movements and insurgencies that retain the form of the nation as their end goal have to simultaneously undermine and repurpose the institutions that provide the basis of the

postcolonial nation state. Eric Hobsbawm's analysis of the origins and fabrications integral to nationalism notes that criteria such as language, ethnicity and religion do not correspond exactly with the modern idea of a nation, and need to be constructed and projected *ex post facto*. Indeed, he notes specifically that neither tribal identity nor the "readiness to die for the fatherland" are necessarily measures of a modern nationalism. Of the first, he writes, "One might even argue that the peoples with the most powerful and lasting sense of what may be called 'tribal' ethnicity, not merely resisted the imposition of the modern state, national or otherwise, but very commonly, *any* state: as witness the Pushtu speakers in and around Afghanistan, the pre-1745 Scots highlanders, the Atlas Berbers, and others who will come readily to mind (Hobsbawm 64). Of the second, he uses the example of the Gorkhas' military service, motivated neither by "British or Nepalese patriotism," to argue that military fervor need not correspond with a felt national identification (79). Although for Hobsbawm this means that a genuine proto-nationalism of the people cannot be identified, an examination of movements such as the Gorkhaland movement and Naga secessionism demonstrates how they actively remake these identities into the basis for a modern nation, that asks to be recognized as such. As Desai's novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, makes visible, militancy provides a basis for collective history and identity that can be turned against that of the Indian state premised on an authentic indigeneity. In this novel, this reworking of the basis of statehood becomes evident through the figure of the soldier who acts as a mediating figure for thinking through the reorganization of the nation.

Crafting Claims to Statehood

The First World War in recent scholarship has invited an examination of the cosmopolitan nature of its armies, supplied by Europe's colonies. The troops engaged in the war included 1.4 million men from India, 1.3 millions from dominions such as Canada, South

Africa, Australia, and nearly 500,000 colonial troops from France (Olusoga). Scholars have undertaken the work of recovering the voices and experiences of the soldiers recruited throughout the British and French empires during the First World War, and the subsequent changes in identity that resulted from the confrontation of various races, classes and nations at the sites of Europe's political conflicts. Looking at recovered diaries and letters kept by some of these men from India, Santandu Das attempts to recover the men's motivations and understandings of their experiences. Of the relationship between war service and subsequent effects on nationalist or racial consciousness, he notes that service in the empire's armies was often construed as a demonstration of their equality as citizen subjects (Das 17-20). Das notes that while Indian middle-class national discourse seized upon the war service in Europe as an opportunity towards establishing racial equality and proving their courage and loyalty, the men who served, "largely from the semiliterate, peasant-warrior classes of northern India," are marginalized within both European as well as nationalist historiographies. While "imperial war service... becomes a way of salvaging national prestige" for those who do not have to face warfare themselves, Das notes that some letters by the soldiers begin to articulate a critique of an empire that is based on such violence. Trying to salvage a non-nationalist politics from the cosmopolitan involvement of the war, Leela Gandhi argues that these subaltern soldiers were able to "evolve their own discourse of subtle solidarities with the empire." Although acknowledging the mercenary incentives and forced recruitment policies responsible for many of these men's participation, she nevertheless argues for the emergence of a "militant cosmopolitanism" as a result of the lived realities and affective solidarities of warfare (Gandhi 107). The conditions created by the war led to "Indian nationalism increasingly express[ing] itself in a mix of anti-Western polemic and anticolonial unity," as well as transnational, anti-colonial solidarity, as with the Khilafat movement.

These references to the cosmopolitan scope of the war emerge in *The Inheritance of*

Loss, in Gyan's recounting of his grandfather's experience of the war. He tells Sai of his family's service in the British army for over a hundred years, noting with the pride the geographical expanse made available to him as a result of his services: "they sent him to Mesopotamia where Turkish bullets made a sieve of his heart... Indian soldiers fought in Burma, in Gibraltar, in Egypt, in Italy" (Desai 158). Although not explicitly stated, the two deaths in the service of the army that he recounts are from the two world wars—the first in Mesopotamia against the Turkish and the second in 1943 in Burma, in the battle against the Japanese Imperial Army. Gyan's cosmopolitan claim to the world is related first amidst his romantic confidences to Sai. He does not pretend it constitutes a political claim, merely a more fantastical family history than their current occupations of working in tea plantations and teaching. In fact, the claim he does make is that this history provides evidence that he and Sai "had more in common than they thought... his own family history also led overseas," thereby equating military service with the more elite access provided by Sai's grandfather's education at Cambridge (157).

A few pages later, this history becomes the basis of a political claim to statehood. This is the rhetoric that is invoked later on by the leaders agitating for the Gorkhaland movement², who embroider into their speeches the twin claims of time served and worlds seen: "We fought on behalf of the British for two hundred years. We fought in World War One. We went to East Africa, to Egypt, to the Persian Gulf... We fought in World War Two. In Europe, Syria, Persia, Malaya, and Burma" (174). Here the military history is no longer personal family history, but collective political identity. Importantly, however, this rhetoric is precisely

² The earliest demand for a separate province is traced to 1907 but the first mass movement calling for a separate Gorkhaland state took place in 1986-88, led by the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF). The movement turned violent, leading to the death of about 2000 people, but culminating with the formation of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council in 1988. In 2006, the area was granted autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. The GNLF—led in the 1980s by Subash Ghising, former member of the Gorkha Rifles of the Indian Army who quit and returned to Darjeeling in 1960—was reformed as the Gorkha Janmurti Morcha under Bimal Gurung in 2007. This renewed activity led to the declaration of a Gorkhaland Territorial Administration.

not aimed at fostering a sense of identity with the Indian nation, but to mark a break from it. It is neither the cosmopolitan identity of solidarity with empire invoked by Leela Gandhi, nor in the service of the nationalist energies into which their military history is funneled in the immediate aftermath of the wars. Rather, it is a demand for a separate state—seen as posing a threat to the integrity of the Indian nation—posited as a reward for military services rendered: “At that time, in April of 1947, the Communist Party of India demanded a Gorkhastan, but the request was ignored... We are laborers on the tea plantations, coolies dragging heavy loads, soldiers... We are soldiers, loyal, brave... But we are Gorkhas. We are soldiers... And have we been rewarded?” (174-5). Here there is also a stringing together of their various positions as laborers—as “laborers...coolies...soldiers”—that Gyan’s account initially buries as lost glory versus present impoverishment. Their claim to a separate state is intertwined with their sense of themselves as having an identity on the basis of past military service. This is an affiliation that Gyan feels despite not having served in the army himself, so that their identity as soldiers takes on the status of founding myth for a separate state to which they envision themselves as having the right.

What is astounding about the book’s treatment of this claim, especially given how plainly it is writ large in the speeches made by the agitators and in Gyan’s account of himself, is its complete refusal to take this narrative seriously. The historical specificity of the narrative that the agitators construct for themselves is undercut by the plethora of historical contexts against which the novel juxtaposes the locality of the valley, so that globalization emerges as a confusing hum of competing alliances, rather than a specific world history against which to read one’s place. In this the novel manifests its contempt for subaltern understandings of history, except perhaps in the space of brief personal anecdote and through recounting within the confines of romance. The unrest created by the Gorkhaland movement is merely one of a series of events at various scales that disrupt the lives of its characters.

Many critiques of the novel have focused on the overabundance of comparative frameworks that the novel provides—a paranoia about the region’s global imbrication that serves to evacuate any political urgency or meaning from the movement itself. The novel explicitly compares the Gorkhaland insurgency to the situation in Kashmir and Tibet. Sai notes, “The country... was coming apart at the seams: police unearthing militants in Assam, Nagaland and Mizoram; Punjab on fire with Indira Gandhi dead and gone in October of last year; and those Sikhs with their Kanga, Kachha, etc. still wishing to add a sixth K, Khalistan, their own country in which to live with the other five Ks” (Desai 118). Sai is perhaps merely echoing the disparaging tones in which her middle-class aunts discuss the movement, refusing to take seriously their demands since “on that basis [teaching Nepali in schools] they can start statehood demands. Separatist movements here, separatist movements there, terrorists, guerrillas, insurgents, rebels, agitators, instigators, and they all learn from one another of course—the Neps have been encouraged by the Sikhs and their Khalistan, by ULFA, NEFA, PLA; Jharkhand, Bodoland, Gorkhaland; Tripura, Mizoram, Manipur, Kashmir, Punjab, Assam...” (143).

The novel also ambitiously attempts to address the impact of globalization, diaspora and cosmopolitanism. The imbrication of these frameworks, and their conflicting referents when applied to the situations of the immigrant worker or the local insurgency, indicate for Elizabeth Jackson that the vocabularies of cosmopolitanism, Marxism or postcolonialism are superseded by individual human relationships in the novel. Berthold Schoene also locates the limits of cosmopolitan discourse by looking at the “interpermeation of the local and the global” in Desai’s novel, concluding, “Instead of political agents, her characters are subjects of fate, trapped in their allocated roles and positions” (138). Paul Jay argues that economic globalization and rooted nationalism co-exist in the novel, so that neither can function as a resolution to the problems created by the other, but prove in their co-existence, the ultimate

instability of all narrative identities. The focus of these critical perspectives on the entanglement of the global and the local write out the historical claims through which political struggles are routed in the insurgency. Because the interrelationships between the different contexts—immigration to New York, colonial education in Cambridge, the Gorkhaland uprising in Kalimpong and Darjeeling—acquire resonances to each other, they lose the immediacy of their specificity. These accounts of the novel’s political ambitions critique it for failing to provide any utopic possibilities, or as Schoene most aptly puts it, “The world is reduced to one huge, noisy blur of grief, impervious to all analytical or imaginative unravelling, subaltern initiative or political intervention... she fails to imagine any new, alternative (multitudinous, cosmopolitan, inoperative) forms of belonging... To conceive of cosmopolitan subalternity, which would necessitate the inauguration of an altogether different community, never occurs to her” (Schoene 140, 153). And yet, what Schoene doesn’t mention is that the “cosmopolitan subalternity” that Desai fails to champion as an alternative is spelt out very clearly if one were only to pause and take the implications of Gyan and his fellow agitators’ own words seriously.

The novel achieves this undermining of the glancing reference to the Gorkhaland agitation by foregrounding the longer, more immutable, temporality of the Himalayan landscape. In *Inheritance*, there is a proliferation of literary and artistic depictions that frame how the land is viewed and experienced. These veer from seeing it as a holdover from colonial exploration and adventure and the recreation of a Scottish sensibility, to considering it against a geological time scale beginning with the retreat of the oceans, to a set of names that mark out indigenous belonging. By way of contrast, these multifarious contexts differ sharply from Siddhartha Deb’s *Outline of a Republic* (2005), which frames the borderland region as a landscape for the military struggles that have come to characterize it in the popular imaginary. In Deb’s version of the peripheral areas of the republic, there is nothing but

endless and meaningless military posturing. The novel opens on a view of the landscape of Manipur transformed by decades of insurgency into a seamless backdrop for the normalized militancy of the city. He writes, “That initial, aerial view of a green and fecund valley gave view to the camouflage of army uniforms and the dour faces of soldiers once I set foot in the city. The monsoons had turned the ground soft and squishy, and the brown silt of the valley lapped at the black boots of the soldiers... Together with the soldiers and their sandbags, the half-finished structural frames rising from piles of sand, cement and gravel gave the city an air of impending siege” (2005: 7-8). Militancy reigns here as banal backdrop. The narrator finds it impossible to speak of the natural “valley” or “monsoons” without merging it with the uniforms of the soldiers. Rather than being transformed by the insurgency, in *Inheritance* the landscape proffers a timeless beauty, a reprieve from the ephemeral political sphere, held separate from the temporal struggles in the region.

The superimposition of various historical sensibilities and discourses allows competing claims to the land to be imagined. In part, this is a result of the novel centering Sai’s perspective on the region she finds herself shipped to, and her attempts to relate to it through the various representations of the land that clutter the houses and libraries of her middle-class and essentially displaced grandfather and friends. Having no familial ties to the land, Sai resorts instead to fabricating connection through narrative and romance. A vocabulary of exploration unites the accounts of colonial settlements in the region and Sai’s yearning to leave its provincial confines. The house they live in, Cho Oyu, had been built by a Scotsman, a “passionate reader of the accounts of that period: *The Indian Alps and How We Crossed Them*, by a Lady Pioneer. *Land of the Lama*. *The Phantom Rickshaw*. *My Mercara Home*. *Black Panther of Singrauli*” (13), while amongst the paraphernalia that bracket middle-class existence in Mon Ami is “a volume of paintings by Nicholas Roerich, a Russian aristocrat who painted the Himalayas with such grave presence it made you shiver just to

imagine all that grainy distilled cold, the lone traveler atop a yak, going—where? The immense vista indicated an abstract destination” (50). This points out, rather pedantically, the continuities between the colonial framing of the land, and the structures of everyday life that continue to be shaped by this inheritance for the cast of main characters in the novel, constituting a bitter critique of middle-class insularity in the midst of the various conflicts. But while these stereotypical accoutrements are constantly evoked for their eclectic and aleatory marking out of comfort and ignorance, they provide also the template whereby Sai is able to imagine a future escape. The bounded collection of the *National Geographics* are mocked for representing outdated middle-class taste, marked by a reverence for the tacky—but they also provide the opening image of a giant squid that is juxtaposed with the “wizard phosphorescence” (1) of the Kanchenjunga, the knowledge that “The Himalayas were once underwater... There are ammonite fossils on Mt. Everest” (77), providing a concept of deep time for Sai against which to imagine her relationship to the land.

This is important because it is only through Sai that the reader hears—twice, fleetingly—of the original tribes and their claims to the land. Once, “Browsing the shelves here, Sai had not only located herself but read *My Vanishing Tribe*, revealing to her that she meanwhile knew nothing of the people who had belonged here first. Lepchas, the Rong pa, people of the ravine who followed Bon and believed the original Lepchas, Fodongthing, and Nuzongnyue were created from sacred Kanchenjunga snow” (217-18), and later in the novel, Sai recalls reading in *My Vanishing Tribe* that the Lepchas called the Milky Way “Zolugming, ‘world of rice.’” (345). In emphasizing their “belonging” to the land and their rights as the original inhabitants by foregrounding indigenous names, Sai echoes the terms of the “United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,” which stresses “the historic injustice as a result of... their colonization and dispossession of their lands, territories and resources” and the need to contribute to the “demilitarization of the lands and territories of

indigenous peoples to peace, economic and social progress and development” (UNDRIP 2-3).

This, indeed, is the framework for the imposition of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, for the administration of autonomous regions in the tribal areas of the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Tripura.

Sai’s references to indigenous claims to the land establish a connection with global movements for the rights of indigenous people. This is especially evident since the second reference to *My Vanishing Tribe* comes in the chapter immediately after Biju, in New York, has been accosted by a homeless man who provides an impromptu lesson in the colonial naming of *that* city: “You know what the name of this river *really* is?...Muhheakunnuk. *Muhheakunnuk*—the river that flows *both* ways,” he added with significant eyebrows, “*both* ways. That is the *real fucking name*” (Desai 292). In this slurred enunciation of the Lenape name of the river, evoking an indigenous cartography that predates settler colonialism, the novel makes a comparative claim for understanding indigeneity. Spivak in her afterword to *Imaginary Maps* draws a similar connection between tribal communities in India as representing “the world’s aboriginal people who were literally pushed to the margins for the contemporary history and geography of the world’s civilizations to be established” and Native American communities, thus establishing between them a kinship “through land grabbing and deforestation practiced against the First Nations of the Americas” (Spivak 198). If one reads the renaming of geographical markers, and the parallel invoked in the naming of a heavenly constellation and a river, as standing in for this historical dispossession, then by extension it makes a claim for the prior rights that these communities should have to political sovereignty against the forces of the contemporary state. However, as the anthropologist André Bételle notes, there has been much historical confusion in the application of “indigenous” as a category, which subsumed also the confusion between tribes and castes as classified by the British. He notes that the term acquired a global applicability starting only in the 1980s, when

it comes to be deployed as a political category designating oppression, such as by Dalits, since “the designation of certain groups as “indigenous” gives greater force to the rights claimed on their behalf in national as well as international forums” (Béteille 21). The global resonance of the term is certainly not meant to foreclose other avenues of political identification or action. As Spivak herself points out, in relation to Dopdi in another of Maheswata Devi’s short stories, her involvement in the Maoist movement indicates her own capacity to reconcile these conflicting political frameworks without disavowing either claim. This reconciliation is precisely what is foreclosed in *Inheritance*, because the two different political frameworks are juxtaposed indirectly and then only through Sai.

These references serve to undermine the legitimacy of the Gorkhaland insurgency, with its claim of military identity to establish their right to self-administration. These allusions replicate the prior claim of indigenous tribes to the land. Such a claim to a prior indigeneity that a cosmopolitan identity cannot encompass and necessarily displaces echoes the terms of a bureaucratic critique in government documents that the Gorkhaland movement fails to be adequately representative of the local population. In a document entitled “Gorkhaland Agitation” by the state of West Bengal, those documenting the movement’s anti-nationalist tendencies note,

In this situation various types of minorities are feeling threatened and insecure. Lepchas, the original inhabitants of the Hills, are additionally threatened by the racist attitude of GNLFF ... The Lepcha associations are opposed to the idea of Gorkhaland where they would be put under the hegemony of the chauvinist aggressive GNLFF. In a letter to the chief Minister on 10th September they have opposed the formation of Gorkhaland, reiterating that they are the original inhabitants of the Darjeeling Hills (3).

The West Bengal state government therefore twins the two threats to the security of the nation and the integrity of the indigenous population. It is because of this that the document spends so much space critiquing the central government for not finding the Gorkhaland movement a national threat, for it recognizes an indigenous, ahistorical claim to be more consistent with its

imaginary of the nation than a cosmopolitan identity that does not fit within its territorial confines.

The dispute between the spokespeople for the Gorkhaland movement and the West Bengal government is therefore one arising from a disagreement over the construction of a “Gorkha” identity. As Michael Hutt notes, “Gorkha” no longer functions as a useful ethnic marker, since it is a category expanded beyond the confines of a single, self-identified ethnic group, through the recruitment practices of the British army. Since the British Army recruited various groups such as the Magar, Gurung, Rai, Limbu and others in the Gorkha Regiment, it became a marker signifying colonial military service. Nevertheless, the martial races theory that informed British recruitment in the region continued to link the martial traditions of the hill people to a Gorkha identity. This account indicates that identity categories are historically contingent, the result of ethnicity, geography, military recruitment, and colonial classification.

But the West Bengal government insists that identities have only one historical meaning, and any expansion in their definition in the light of global and local shifts in how populations are structured are merely “inaccuracies.” They write:

It is also important to note that the expression ‘Gorkha’ correctly applies to a small section of the Nepali-speaking population originally coming from one particular area of Nepal. Since a high proportion of Nepali-speaking soldiers were recruited by the British during their colonial regime from that area, the latter wrongly termed all recruits from Nepal as ‘Gorkhas’. Even today the Nepalis recruited by the British Government as soldiers are described as Gorkhas. GNLFF is now attempting to project the Nepali-speaking Indians as Gorkhas, as distinct from Nepalis from Nepal; thus using a label wrongly given by the imperial rulers to all the Nepali speaking people, and then further wrongly assuming that this would help to distinguish the Indian citizens of Nepali origin from the citizens of Nepal. (3-4)

The document questions the categories of political self-fashioning of group identities, with only an “original” ethnic identity being deemed acceptable. It is consistent with this emphasis on “originality” that the concessions made to the movement in the Sixth Schedule of the constitution are made on the basis of indigenous autonomy. As Anjan Ghosh notes, this basis of assigning autonomy to the tribal areas in the north east was seen as “demeaning” as the

leaders of the Gorkha movement “resented the homogenization with the scheduled tribes who are mostly Buddhists (Lepchas, Bhotias)” (Ghosh 12). The document notes also that, “In another pamphlet the protagonists of Gorkhaland have gone to the ludicrous extent of describing Lepchas, Oraos, Santhals, Mechs, Bhojpuris, Modesias and Scheduled Caste Bengalis (mostly Rajbansis) that is practically every one living in Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri excepting upper caste Bengalis as Gorkhas” (pg). This is not seen as a political act of self-creation by the leaders, but simply deemed historically inaccurate. Ghosh acknowledges the problems in the silencing of autochthonous Buddhist minorities for the sake of an all-encompassing Gorkha identity. But it is also true that the government delegitimizes the Gorkhaland movement by refusing to accept the Gorkhas’ self-definition based on shared military conscription. The disagreement over who is encompassed within the category of Gorkha is therefore one of refusing to allow the creation of a political community through a disagreement over the historical deployment of the term.

Another subtler instance that undermines the military history and integrity that the secessionists claim is the novel’s consistent characterization of the rebels as bandits under the guise of a cause. The novel opens with members of the GNLF stealing a gun from the judge’s house, on which occasion they are described as follows: “They had come through the forest on foot, in leather jackets from the Kathmandu black market, khaki pants, bandanas—universal guerrilla fashion” and “Despite their mission and their clothes, they were unconvincing...shivering there in their camouflage” (Desai 4-5) The emphasis is on costume and disguise, and despite the recourse to “universal guerrilla fashion,” there is also the charge of idle, if incompetent, banditry. When the novel’s final confrontation with members of the GNLF also involves Biju getting robbed on his way back to Kalimpong, it becomes evident that the reader’s primary impression of the movement is meant to be one of banditry run amok. Biju finds himself with GNLF men on his ride home, although it is unclear how he or

the narrator identifies them as such: “Now that the government had suspended repairs, the GNLFF men in the jeep were forced to clamber out themselves and roll boulders aside, remove fallen tree trunks, shovel clods of earth...” (348). Desai’s narrator appears to be falling back on a colonial discourse that conflates the mercenary nature of the soldiers recruited by the colonial army with lawless banditry if the men are discharged or left to their own devices, a discourse that takes on particular potency at times of unrest. For instance, G.N. Devy describes the list drawn up by William Henry Sleeman in the 1830s, of instances of assault on wayfarers in central India, which was used to persecute certain groups in the wake of the unrest following the mutiny of 1857. Effectively, this meant that “all isolated and potential groups of soldiers, and even those who were likely to be in the supply chain for them, came to be seen as candidates for the Sleeman-list. Later it was this list that became the basis of the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act” (Devy 2). In a more recent study on banditry, Kim Wagner analyses the “pre-colonial indigenous use of the term” and the material conditions that led to banditry in central India, a history obscured by oriental framings and charges of the ritualistic violence practiced by the roving bands. In the eighteenth century, the loss of military employment meant that “such men were forced to turn to other modes of employment—one option being banditry.” In addition, “there was never a very clear distinction between soldiers and marauders, as many indigenous armies were paid only with loot” (Wagner 93). The association of mercenary soldiers with banditry calls into question the nature of the soldiers’ affiliation to an empire, ruler or democratic nation. While this is a discourse geographically located around central India, the constant implication in Desai’s novel that the insurgents in the Gorkhaland movement remain interested in nothing but thieving and looting reproduces the panic about mercenary soldiers no longer controlled by the institutional discipline of a legitimate army.

Both these discursive moves, which render suspect a subaltern version of history marshalled creatively to conceptualize a demand for statehood, in favor of rampant discourses about mercenary banditry and romantic indigeneity, work through Biju who serves as the passive point of comparison, either by being yelled at, or by being robbed. Biju, the son of the servant in Sai's grandfather's household, serves also as a temporary member of the shifting, migrant proletariat in New York. In using him in these two instances to discredit the Gorkhaland movement, a solidarity based on class is turned against a solidarity based on an identity constructed through a shared past of military campaigns. Like an identity based on an indigenous claim to land, such a proletarian solidarity is invoked only in order to counteract another mode of solidarity, that might otherwise have provided a motive force uniting the agitators and allowing for a viable movement.

Such instances render suspect attempts to conceptualize a national identity based on participation in the military, even if that identity locates its origins in colonial practices of recruitment. As the West Bengal state government's analysis of events discloses, this colonial identity is nevertheless the basis for the Gorkha identity becoming a threat to the integrity of the national army, as it calls for their members to discontinue their military service in the national army. It is through Gyan that this military identity is voiced in the novel, although the novel then moves to immediately dismiss the authenticity of his attachment to such an affiliation. The novel describes his experience of being caught up in the procession, and therefore absorbing the affective structure that the movement momentarily creates:

As he floated through the market, Gyan had a feeling of history being wrought, its wheels churning under him, for the men were behaving as if they were being featured in a documentary of war, and Gyan could not help but look on the scene already from the angle of nostalgia, the position of a revolutionary. But then he was pulled out of that feeling, by the ancient and usual scene, the worried shopkeepers watching from their monsoon-stained grottos. Then he shouted along with the crowd, and the very mingling of his voice with largeness and lustiness seemed to create a relevancy, an affirmation he'd never felt before, and he was pulled back into the making of history... Then, looking at the hills, he fell out of the experience again. How can the ordinary be changed?... But the men were shouting, and he saw from their faces that

they didn't have his cynicism. They meant what they were saying; they felt a lack of justice (Desai 173-4).

There is an inability here for the narrator to enter into the absorption into the present that Gyan experiences—his experiences the protest as a “documentary of war,” a “scene” from the “making of history,” replete with the tropes of “a revolutionary.” Once again, the narrator shows a preoccupation with the performative aspects of playing the role of a revolutionary—a comparison that echoes Bayly and Harper's evocation of “the uniforms, the marching, the drilling and the flag-waving” as the creators of historical consciousness, rather than the protestors and leaders of the movement (Bayly pg). In keeping with Desai's argument that “the hills” encode a more direct and authentic access to history, Gyan's moments of discomposure arise from “looking at the hills,” so that the mountains cannot coexist with a military identity forged outside its confines. Of course, this is an odd and insubstantial critique, for all national identities are necessarily constructed and contingent on the claims that one wishes to project. As such, the criteria for evaluating its validity are not complete historical accuracy, but the way in which it is able to provide an alternative to the contemporary political arrangement. “There are of course no ‘authentic’ identities in the novel to offset the ‘fake’ ones Desai confronts us with, none who float free of the cultural forces Desai evokes...None of them predate forms of migration and the cultural mobility that facilitate... contamination,” writes Jay (pg). But the various references to the timeless framing of the hills provides the illusion of an ahistorical identity that resists historical construction. As such, it is not surprising that this sort of indigenous claim would be attractive to more conventional narrative constructions of the nation, which would like to forget its recent historical origins.

While Desai's novel does not provide any utopic or even alternative political community, it does recognize the different lenses through which the characters' attempt to give their political aspirations form. While refusing to take any active political involvement in

good faith, the novel does identify the contours of a discourse premised on the military, and centered on the figure of the soldier, as the basis for theorizing the failure of the nation. It is telling that criticism on the novel reproduces the novel's own tendency to elide the terms by which the agitators define their own call to arms. The criticism focuses instead on the more accessible critiques of globalization, continuities of colonial patterns in the aftermath of Independence, and the emergence of a global proletariat as a result of postcolonial migration patterns. Even as the critics cited here find Desai's engagement with these intersecting fields limited, they do not turn to a serious engagement with the problematics of a commitment to a militancy—itsself conditioned by colonial recruitment and conscripted imperial solidarity—as the agitators' chosen mode of outlining a postcolonial revolutionary stand against the nation state.

Claiming Indigeneity

Easterine Kire's novels about the Naga peoples provides the perspective that is elided in Desai's novel—that of the indigenous inhabitant of the land, threatened by modernity and military invasion. As the first Naga writer to publish novels in English, Kire possesses the kind of native knowledge that Foning enables an access to in his self-anthropologizing work, *Lepcha: My Vanishing Tribe*. Like Foning, Kire can be seen to represent the traditional ways of life, beliefs and organizing principles of the Nagas, besieged by the forces of the contemporary world. Unlike Foning, she also draws a connection between the impact of militarization under Japanese invasion and the Naga peoples current struggles for independence³. Rather than positing the two ends of an indigenous identity and a military

³ Julian Jacobs in *The Nagas* notes that the separatist movement began in 1919 when a group of Nagas who had returned from military service in France met to form a Naga Club. This political unity continued in the aftermath of the Second World War. Jacobs writes, "the most significant event in the development of Naga nationalism was undoubtedly the Second World War. This had been foreshadowed to some extent in the First World War, in which many thousands of Nagas had volunteered for a Labour Corps, bringing men of different communities into contact with each other,

history at odds with each other, Kire's novels show a contingent negotiation of these intertwined histories, both of which play a role in how the Naga peoples understand their position vis-à-vis the postcolonial state. This is evident in a comparison of the paratexts to two of Kire's books, *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003) and *Bitter Wormwood* (2011). The political representation that her novels aim at is evident in their paratexts, providing anthropological and legal documentation of her peoples' attempts to translate their existence into legible terms for the state and for an Anglophone audience.

The framing paratexts point to the two discourses of indigenous identity and prolonged insurgency which are evoked to legitimate their claim to political statehood. *A Naga Village Remembered* relates the history of Khonoma village. Appendices to the text include "Glossary of Angami Words," "Place Names" (including the "native" names of various villages as well as landmarks such as mountain peaks and rivers), "Oral narratives of the Mehru Clan" (transcribed into English), "Oral narratives" of the Thevo Clan, the Semo clan, and the Khwunomia. This documentation of oral narratives and place names, aimed at preservation and dissemination of the tribes' traditions, echoes the anthropological framework adopted by Foning in relating the traditions of the Lepchas, as a counter to the encroaching erasures of modernity. As such, the conflict is between the timeless traditions of the Nagas and the disastrous modernity inaugurated by the conflict with the British in the nineteenth century. For *Bitter Wormwood* on the other hand, the narrative starts in the twentieth century. Although the novel provides dates for the births of characters, these track with historical events which are not consistent with the narrative and chronology of the Indian nation state. Mose is born in 1937, a few years before the Japanese invasion, and his daughter in 1964, a year after the disappointing culmination of the secessionist struggle with the creation of

and into contact with industrialized warfare in Flanders... the Naga Hills was a crucial strategic focus of the war in the East, and it was here that, with the help of Naga irregular troops, the Japanese advance into India was repelled" (Jacobs). He notes also that the movement positions the Nagas as one people, instead of as separate tribes.

Nagaland as a separate state within India. The contemporary struggle for recognition as an independent state therefore begins with Japanese invasion as the prototype for military invasions into their territory, which provides also a point of comparison with continued invasions by the Indian army in the aftermath of the world war. Kire prefaces the story with a history of the Naga's demands for statehood and the coercive measures deployed by the Indian state in their refusal of this demand. The appendices to the narrative are "Some important dates of Naga Political History," (starting with the 1832 British occupation of the Naga Hills and documenting the various claims to independence made by the Naga clan throughout independent India's history, up to the "Declaration of Commitment" signed in September 2009 for Naga reconciliation), the letter to the Simon Commission written in 1929, A. Z. Phizo's letter to the President of India in 1951, the "Nine Point Agreement" between the Governor of Assam and Naga leaders reached in 1947, and a speech by Niketu Iralu on the "Historical Rights of the Nagas and their Quest for Integration." This extensive collection of paratextual material, along with the narrative of the novel itself closely tracking historical events, resistance movements, and Acts passed to justify military occupation, indicates a more circumscribed narrative of the quest for political recognition, inevitably a quest paralleled by the militarization and factionalization of the native population. Despite a disillusionment with the taking up of arms as a method for claiming independence towards the end of the novel—"The trouble with us Nagas is that we have allowed the conflict to define us for too long. It has overtaken our lives so much that we have been colonized by it and its demands on us" (236)—giving up military struggle effectively means taking a more assimilationist approach to the Indian state.

The negotiation of the impact of militarization is further complicated when the people in question also conceive of themselves as defined by a long history of their life on the land, so that indigeneity and military identity inform each other. For instance, a retired soldier of

the Indian Army recalls his posting in the Naga hills, saying, “They also make fine soldiers and guerrilla fighters. Even though we were fighting on opposite sides, we could not help admiring their skill in fighting. They moved like shadows, how else could we explain a small band of men holding off large battalions of the Indian Army and the Armed Forces at the same time? There is something in their culture that produces great tenacity in them as fighters” (BW 201). Although this echoes the discourse on martial races to an extent, it also ties their military prowess to their “feeling for the land,” rather than to ideas of descent from certain ethnicities or superior intelligence (as in earlier books such as *The Martial Races of India*). It also elides a distinction between arms taken up for the sake of resistance, and the potential to be “good soldiers,” by equating soldiers with “guerrilla fighters.” As the reminiscences of a former Commandant of the Indian Army, this praise is supposed to bestow legitimacy to the claims of the Nagas, providing an alternative to the classification of the Nagas as “insurgents” (200). It is only by re-classifying them as “soldiers” working for another people that their militarized struggles can be recognized.

This intertwining of the claims of an indigenous population and the martial valor that enables their continued relationship to the land indicates that the highlighting of one aspect over the other can be seen as a strategic choice aimed at the anglophone, “Indian” readership of the novel. As the first Naga writer to write about the region in English, Kire’s works can be read as an act of deliberate political representation for her people. While their literary aspects might be important, they are framed foremost as a political intervention, presenting a narrative of events that are elided by the documents and representations of the Indian government. As acts of political representation, these two novels provide different narratives that might yield political recognition—one based on indigenous inhabitation of the land, the other on a political modernity forged under military occupation and invasion. *Bitter Wormwood*, while foregrounding the military invasions of the Nagas that provides the

backdrop to their struggle for independence, ultimately ends with the motif of the “bitter wormwood” plant—native knowledge of the herbs in the territory posited as therapeutic remedy to the ills of warfare. In other terms, the reclamation of traditional, indigenous knowledge functions as the counter to a corrosive, militarized, modernity.

To different extents, then, these novels about secessionist movements in the north-eastern frontier of the Indian state—*The Inheritance of Loss* and *Bitter Wormwood*—document how their history with the world wars bequeaths a particular trajectory in how they make claims for statehood in the post-independence era. The anglophone novel therefore both resurrects the history of the second world war as the moment of the region’s shaping, while also drawing on anthropological sources to posit a longer history that is juxtaposed to the break of modernity instigated by warfare. In this way, it uses the claim of indigenous identity to undermine the legitimacy of the military. However, the presence of two narratives of the region—either modern military history or anthropological ethnicity—indicates that the process of claiming recognition from modern nation states remains an active process of shaping identity through competing frameworks. As the colonial history of ethnic classification and military recruitment makes evident, these two narratives are inevitably bound up in each other. Untangling them is not an attempt to access an “original” or “authentic” state, but a political claim that works in the context of recognizable discourses that legitimate political community and enable nation formation.

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