MODERN PRACTICES IN NORTH EAST INDIA

History, Culture, Representation

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INTRODUCTION

Frames of region and people: practices of knowledge and representations

Lipokmar Dzüvichü and Manjeet Baruah

A geographical label such as 'North East India' conveys the idea of a defined physical location and identity in the contemporary times. The general description that subsequently follows underlines the spatial location of the region as a 'periphery' within the national territory. Such a notion is further congealed through the cartographic practices of the state, whereby the region is visually portrayed as geographically occupying the fringe of the nation's mapped space.[1] The idea that the region constitutes the physical margins of the nation state is thus often seen as normative and self-evident. However, such a view is historically flawed as it glosses over the various processes through which such ideas or 'realities' of spatial location were produced. It also does not take into consideration the complex ways in which societies and polities in the region encountered, contested and adapted themselves to shifting structures of economies, politics and culture.

Over the course of the last two centuries, 'North East' has come to imply different things to different regimes and people at different points of time. This has resulted in the region and its inhabitants being 'imagined' and constructed in a variety of ways. The ideational construction of the region has largely been a product of the encounter and interactions with both the 'modern' imperial and the post-colonial states. Although the region had encounters with polities such as the Mughals, the Tibetan or the Burmese, it was the British colonial expansion that marked a defining phase in concretising and framing the political and cartographic contours of what came to be viewed as the 'North East'. But the framing was as much mediated by a variety of people and societies in the region who responded to the policies of the colonial and post-colonial states in multiple ways. What is notable is that it was also during the nineteenth century that another term that denoted a

British Indian frontier came to be used, namely the 'North West Frontier' of British India. The reality behind both the terms was the construction of two colonial political geographies at the two geographical extremities of British India.[2]

One of the critical questions that arise from the above is how does one characterise this range of transformations which eventually saw the emergence as well as framing of the region, both as a category and as lived realities? A closer study of the processes highlights how through much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, ideas, constructs or practices of 'modern' have played an instrumental role in the making of the region. This was evident not only in state-making practices, but also in how societies negotiated and engaged with the historical changes that came about during the period. In other words, though the state was generally seen as the 'legitimate' bearer of modernity, societies too articulated new meanings and imaginations by creatively engaging with such 'modern' ideas and practices. This can be seen as fundamentally linked to the nature of historical context itself, that is, the new forms of global geographical mappings, flows of capital and orders that the region became a part of. But this postulation leads to questions such as what comprised the modern, and what were its features? For example, as some studies have pointed out, the notion of 'progress' became a key point in the unfolding of events that were crucial in the making of the region, and its socio-cultural, economic or political worlds. But progress also entailed other distinct elements, such as violence.[3] Thus, between progress and violence, how does one historically locate the role of actors or nature of events and outcomes? Further, the notion of modernisation even today continues to be presented as a rationale for numerous actions, whether in terms of political economy, identity making or cultural practices. Does it then mean that the 'problems' or meanings of modernity and modernisation continue to be inherent to the nature of social relations and in the ways in which societies grapple and engage with such 'realities'? In that case, does it further re-produce the binary characterisation of the region as a 'backward' space inhabited by societies which are still in 'transition' from their traditions into modernity? But in turn, does it also lead to enterprises of 'saving' cultures, thereby often leading to 'inventions' of cultural forms or practices in the name of 'indigeneity'?[4]

Through different subjects of enquiry, the chapters in the book engage with some of these questions. They explore how areas such as knowledge production, state policies, role of capital, violence, relations of gender, or political and social-cultural relations, etc., bear the multiple or contradictory imprints of the ideas and practices of modernity. Through such frames of analysis, the chapters seek to provide new insights on the region and its complexities. Scholarships have increasingly underlined that modernity is

not essentially a universal uniform phenomenon.[5] However, the concept or forms deemed 'modern' also inevitably figure in attempts to explain various socio-political and economic realities as well as the production of geographies around the world in the last few centuries.[6] In fact, the ambivalences in the practices of 'modern' have been an important aspect of enquiry. Thus, such works highlight that binaries such as tradition vs. modern, or progress vs. primitive, etc., are often inadequate to explain the relations through which realities or experiences themselves unfolded. In this regard, a common point of investigation that runs through the chapters is their focus on practices.[7] Thus, ideologies and knowledge production, state making, politics of social relations and memory, genres of writing, forms of performances or relations of gender have been studied as a range of socio-political, economic and cultural practices that illustrate the complex connections between ideas and concrete realities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As such, the book is also an attempt to explore how such approaches can become important ways of revisiting the question of the modern, and how or why its imprints continue to influence discourses, articulations and actions in the region. The book thereby also tries to underline how modernity can also denote both 'a contentious theoretical terrain and contending analytical arena'.[8]

Regimes of knowledge, framing a region

Historically, the making of the 'North East' as a region emerged from imperial power centres such as Calcutta, London and Delhi. It was from these imperial metropoles that the idea of the region as a periphery located at the edges of empire began to develop. Colonial officials, surveyors, anthropologists, travellers, missionaries and ethnographers, etc., became crucial agents in this enterprise.[9] In fact, such discourses also represented the region as 'periphery' to 'civilisation', insular and lawless, and located in 'nature' as opposed to 'culture'.[10] The production of such discourses was closely linked to the intellectual influences of European Enlightenment. In turn, these intellectual enterprises also became imperial ideological tools to legitimise conquest and governance of the region.[11] Thus, colonial knowledge and state-making practices began to gradually transform the territory into 'legible' parts of the empire,[12] and in the process defining and inventing a fixed reality about the region as a 'frontier'. The ebb and flow of empire building, and subsequently the trajectories of the post-colonial nation state, further came to determine the 'shifting "historic position"'[13] of the region from a 'frontier' to a 'borderland'. These developments were also closely linked to the way capital intruded into and re-shaped the region, often in conjunction with state practices. For example, throughout this period, making

of resource frontiers, 'Inner Lines', classifications such as 'administered' or 'excluded' territories, or approaches such as 'geo-strategic' significance and governance were frequently influenced by the nature and role of capital.[14]

If production of territory through knowledge practices was intrinsic in the efforts of the colonial state to govern the 'frontier', under the new Indian nation state a range of studies on the societies and histories of the 'peripheral' region began to be produced. The studies were closely linked to the Indian state's efforts to generate knowledge on the societies located in the 'periphery', which would in turn inform government policies of 'development'. In the process, 'integrating' the land and people into the national space emerged as an important enterprise. As a result, a diverse set of ideas and persuasions came to construct and represent the region and its inhabitants in policy making and academic writings.[15] These studies ranged from ideas where the people and societies were characterised as nothing more than cultures frozen in time, to a focus on 'insurgency' or 'identity movements' that challenged the national order, and that how the way to resolve those 'threats' was through a policy of 'development' and political representation in the 'mainstream'.[16] Many of these studies were based on primordialist understanding of the societies, and therefore in their understandings of trajectories of 'progress', they often drew upon colonial frameworks either uncritically or as unproblematic categories.[17] As such, an underlying aspect of these studies was the notion of progress of the modern state, whether colonial or post-colonial, as the harbinger in transforming the 'primitive' or 'backward' societies of the region. In fact, the concept of 'lineage' to 'state' became an important scale of measuring societies in ideas of historical progress.[18] The approaches of these studies were also often influenced by 'national frames'. As a result, their analysis of issues either enframed the region as part of the 'Indic civilisation' or evaluated its history and culture in such reference, thereby locating the region in the conceptual framework of the nation state and its ideas of nation.[19] In the process, these studies not only reinforced the insular approach to the region as 'remote' or 'isolated' periphery, but also shaped the making of durable ideas of thinking as well as governing the region.[20] Alternately, these ideas and policies also significantly shaped the representation and understanding of the (post-)colonial state as a progressive, benevolent and modernising state.

Ideas of space, exploring social realities

The above approaches, premised mainly on the layered relations between state and knowledge practices, constituted some of the dominant trends of enframing the region. However, there have been other studies as well which tried to reconsider and challenge some of these existing frameworks.

For example, one such approach was that of the 'shatter zone'.[21] What the term shatter zone implied was a region with its socio-cultural and historical processes that were shaped by the dominant neighbouring paradigms. However, these processes, though operating within the region, themselves lacked any paradigmatic formation due to their location at the interstice of the dominant paradigms. This 'lack' was characterised as intrinsic to the nature of the region. The approach, however, did not develop into important studies on the region in the course of the twentieth century.

Yet, by the 1970s, the imprints of the idea of shatter zone interestingly entered into one of the emerging bodies of historical and socio-cultural analysis of the region, namely a few studies premised on class relations.[22] In these studies, the relation between understandings of shatter zone and that of class formation/relation became evident in some of their engagements with debates such as feudalism or middle-class formation in the region. For example, in this regard, a key set of terms deployed in the case of Assam was 'semi tribal–semi feudal' to explain the socio-cultural realities of the past, or of the present. The processes of social relations, which these terms signified, were located in the nature of interaction between history and geography. This interaction included the geographical location and nature of the region, the mobilities across, and the challenges they posed to the development of classic social categories such as peasants, tribes, class, etc. In other words, what was shown was that the 'intermediate' or 'fluid' nature of social categories was a structural manifestation of the historical geography itself.

Since the 1960s, there also emerged a body of works, which studied categories such as peasants and labour from the perspective of impact of capital, and the role of the state, whether colonial or post-colonial.[23] These works highlighted how the making of peasant or labour economy in the region since the nineteenth century was part of the wider global economic and colonial state building networks. The relation between capital and state was part of producing and governing a geo-strategic and 'resource frontier'. A point which these works emphasised was how colonial capital articulated itself through existing as well as new forms of socio-cultural relations, while the state participated in the process through strategies of governance (such as land, labour and resource policies) in the name of 'modernisation', 'development' and taming an 'ungoverned' frontier. What also ensued from these processes or relations were the implications for the societies and ecologies, and how they not only resisted but also became intricately connected to the violence of capital. In a twist of times, similar processes and relations between capital and state could be observed in some of the contemporary policies such as the 'Look East' or the 'Act East' policies of the Indian state. While in the colonial context, this relation between capital and state constituted an intrinsic part of administering an 'ungoverned' frontier, what

remains to be seen are the implications of these policies on the political and economic geography of the region in the contemporary context.[24]

In the recent times, a small but growing number of studies have begun to explore new analytical frames of understanding the region from the perspective of space. For instance, scholars have drawn our attention to the importance of 'borderland space'.[25] The borderland approach tried to transcend both the paradigms of frontier and nation. Rather than taking the state produced spatial boundaries as given, they argued how knowledge, geography and politics are intertwined and illustrated the ways in which indigenous spaces were contested and eventually enclosed by the colonial and post-colonial states in the region. The fixing of borders, as their works argued, however did not necessarily end the mobile practices of people and their networks in the region. Instead, it took on new forms and meanings, which were often seen as detrimental to the colonial or the post-colonial state's territorial orders.[26] The borderland approach also argued that these networks of mobilities were themselves part of everyday and historical nature of the social world of the region. It's the lens of the colonial or post-colonial nation states that prevented seeing this reality about the societies of the region. This reality of the region, it argued, could be captured through the term 'borderland'. The term did not denote a boundary or a frontier, but a space both social and historical, which is best understood as an example of the limits of state or national cartographies.

Taking a spatial view of society and polity, another important field of enquiry has been the concept of 'zomia'.[27] The concept tries to understand the complex nature of spatial relations with regard to uplands or highlands as opposed to river valleys. It argues that the singular distinction of uplands or highlands from valleys is evident in their strategies of 'state-evading practices'. These strategies, in turn, affected several aspects of social organisation, such as use of orality in place of written culture, republican polity in place of monarchies and shifting agriculture in place of sedentary farming. These mechanisms of social organisation allowed for mobility rather than being tied to land and to fixed contours of history. Although the concept of zomia borrowed upon earlier works on 'highland' polities,[28] it also nevertheless marked conceptual departures from such earlier works by highlighting how spatial locations affected the socio-cultural and political choices that societies made in constituting themselves. In the process, the concept allows one to re-examine the colonial construction of 'highland' as 'savage' space vis-à-vis the valley, including the significance of this spatial construction in the post-colonial period. However, it is important to point out that while 'zomia' as a conceptual framework has laid out new grounds to study 'highland' societies, an analysis of the socio-historical particularities of different 'highland' societies such as in the North East highlights that such

framing tends to overlook the complex nuances of the societies, which in turn also suggests the empirical limitations of the concept.

While the above approaches offered new perspectives of understanding the region, an important question that also emerged from these approaches was whether these 'borderland spaces' are historical products or essential socio-spatial realities, and also how such spaces relate to the various politics of nation making in the region.[29] More recently, 'connected history' as an approach has highlighted new ways of understanding the region's history and culture.[30] These studies underlined the limits of the bounded and fixed spatial frameworks based on given colonial or post-colonial state boundaries. In turn, they highlighted how the meanings of the past and of the present could be more meaningfully located in the inter-relations that processes within the region had with those without. Their works pointed out the importance of studying the region in terms of how economies, cultures or polities were connected through networks of trade, people and ideas. For example, some of these historical networks not only spanned between Yunnan, Tibet, Bengal and Burma comprising significant overland routes and passes,[31] but also through the Bay of Bengal, closely connecting the region to the networks of the Indian Ocean.[32] The impact of these networks on the processes of culture and identity making[33] were evident not only in the pre-colonial period, but also in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, that is, the very moment when this 'isolated', 'primitive' fringe was 'discovered' and began to be 'developed' by modernising state systems.

Modernity's 'fringe'?

The idea that identities are primeval, a view which predominated identity discourses in the region, however glosses over other complex and nuanced historical trajectories. A growing body of writings on identity and culture has shown how the making of modern forms of identities evolved through complex processes, and was historically mediated through forms of various agencies such as religion, education, print culture, technology, gender, ecology or even riots.[34] To highlight only one instance, the role of the colonial state and the Christian missionaries in ushering 'modernisation' among the societies of the region, and in the process, leading to the formation of national identities, were noted in earlier studies too.[35] Yet, recent works have pointed out how societies themselves exercised their agency in this process of transformation and reclaimed or appropriated 'modern' ideas or technologies, but towards different formulations of their 'self'. These studies illustrate how the institutional and discursive apparatuses put in place by the colonial state and the missionaries to construct a 'frontier'[36] were recast into instruments of nation making by the people.

Thus, for example, education and print culture were appropriated to claim a place in the universality of modernity and progress through the construct of nation. Therefore, in contrast to the colonial or missionary projections of 'frontier' as comprising of disparate anthropological social groups located in the geographical 'peripheries' of modernity, there was now the consolidation of national identities as historical entities, located in the contemporaneity of the times as nations of the world. In fact, in the process, societies themselves underwent a transformation in self-representation, wherein the past and the present was increasingly consolidated into standardised narratives of nation. Such narratives of nation also encompassed ideas of space or homeland, that is, there was now the production of new concepts of political and socio-cultural geographies in contrast to that of colonial 'frontier'.[37] Genres of narrative too became important tools to articulate alternative forms of social and political-spatial imaginations.

Thereby, in this range of studies, aspects of society and culture, such as religion, orality or visual culture came to occupy new meanings. Challenging the rather dry and jaded historical and political perception of the region as one of modernity's fringe caught in internecine turmoil, some of these studies reconstructed how societies appropriated new forms of knowledge, technology and cultural objects in the context of their historical locations.[38] Thus, for example, if visual practices constituted an important tool of the empire in making subjects and territories visible to a metropolitan audience, they also alternately became tools or mediums for the colonial and post-colonial societies to articulate their various experiences and dynamic worldviews. Practices of photography or cinema thus became attempts at re-imagining and re-positioning oneself in a wider cosmopolitan context of the world. Even existing socio-cultural mediums such as orality became new tools to articulate its sense of time and space. Thus, myths or folktales were no longer about the 'time immemorial' but about colonial expeditions, political movements and the changing contours of identity. Religious practices, revivalisms and millenarialisms became new modes of attempting re-configurations of the ideas of political geography. These developments, as the studies show, were fundamental interventions not only in how the societies of the region tried to represent themselves, but also in their self-understandings of concrete historical and socio-political locations. In the recent times, the agency of societies and individuals in articulating locations in such realities of time and space came to be explored in an emerging body of biographies and memoirs too.[39] In addition, a growing body of work has tried to explore the important aspect of gender relations pertaining to the region. Focusing on the colonial and the post-colonial period, this body of work has drawn attention to the significant role that women have historically played while engaging with institutions of state, capital,

indigenous structures and multiple forms of politics.[40] In the process, these studies foreground the role of gender in analysing the agency of women and how their experiences and engagements have redefined ideas of self, space and relations of power in the region.

The themes discussed above constitute just some of the broad contours of studies that have engaged various scholars working on North East India. The assessment as such, is only illustrative and not a comprehensive review of the works produced on the region. Today, there is an increasing emphasis to take into account the region's wider geographical relations with global networks of capital and the changing forms of mobility. It also points out that institutional and discursive interventions have played a significant role in the production and understanding of 'frontiers' or 'peripheries'. At the same time, there is also an emphasis on how such productions of 'frontiers' or 'peripheries' are challenged by people as part of articulating alternative modes of self-representations and self-assertions. Moreover, the resilience of societies and their engagements with the violence of capital are other important aspects of study. In this regard, the chapters in this book not only engage with existing bodies of work, but also critically outline new avenues of inquiry. Besides, the chapters in a way also seek to complement the growing number of scholarly works which draw upon new conceptual approaches while formulating new perspectives on the region. One of the aspects that the chapters bring out in their respective analysis is how production of region, knowledge, and socio-cultural or political practices are closely inter-related processes, and how such inter-relations in turn produce modes of representation of the past and of the present.

The organisation of the book

The book is an attempt to generate possible reflections and discussions by focusing on some of the critical issues pertaining to North East India. Through specific case studies, the chapters cover fields such as history, literary studies, social anthropology and performance studies. The book is divided into three sections: (a) *region, frontier and state*; (b) *knowledge, people and representation*; and (c) *writing culture, writing politics*. The concerns of each chapter are distinctive, and as such, they convey the views of the contributors on their specific research areas. But a perspective, which runs through all the three sections, is that region is a complex and dynamic process, which continues to articulate itself in multiple forms. What the chapters in the three sections also underline is the politics behind these multiple forms of articulations and representations, and their connections to wider global developments pertaining to the past or the present. Thus, the chapters complement one another in locating the region and people in the

wider political and intellectual contexts of the times, especially since the nineteenth century. This in turn brings in the dimension of the 'modern' and its relations to experiences, ideas and a range of practices.

The first section engages with both the discursive and institutional construct of a region in the colonial times, including how pre-colonial constructs in this regard came to be interpreted or transformed during this period. Further, the chapters in this section highlight how state making in the region have not been isolated instances, but closely connected to wider processes of history, circulation and space beyond the region. Such wider connections have played key roles in the articulations of the idea of the region as well. In the chapter, 'Region formed and imagined: reconsidering temporal, spatial and social context of Kāmarūpa', Jae-Eun Shin draws our attention to the complex historical problem of conceptualising region(s). Taking the specific case of Kāmarūpa, Shin traces the processes through which 'the region has been imagined in the dominant historiography of Assam' since the early twentieth century. This historical process of Kāmarūpa as the ancient past of Assam is examined through its temporal, spatial and social contexts. In the chapter, Shin also considers the function and purpose of Sanskrit records in the socio-political context of early medieval east India and, in doing so, seeks to give alternative perspectives on the 'controversial issues on Kāmarūpa history' with regard to twentieth century historiography on the subject. One of the points Shin highlights is the relation between nature of sources and the politics of historiography in the representation and interpretation of the past from one's location in the present.

In Chapter 2, 'Conquest and the quotidian: forms of violence and the making of Tripura (1760–1793)', Anandaroop Sen examines how violence becomes an important trope through which the British entered and created the territorial frame of Tippera. Focusing on the quotidian and the foundational forms of colonial violence, Sen argues how it was through these violent 'events' that Tippera acquired a state legibility. In other words, British colonial state not only used violence in the production of territory, but also used the language of violence to legitimise their intervention and rule. In his analysis, Sen further argues how violent episodes shaped 'the historical production of Tippera as revenue unit'. It is through the practices of violence that, 'the idea of calculability enters the language of conquest.' Colonial practices of violence were also attendant to the nature of governing the frontier. In this regard, the everyday anxieties of colonial frontier officials came to shape and characterise the British culture of governance in the region. The stringent policing of the frontier, and 'the violence of that policing', eventually 'mutated into a language of settlement'. In the process, in Tippera, colonial rule came to be marked by 'a governance of exceptionalism that mutated into frontiers'.

In the chapter, 'The arteries of empire: routes, people and mobility in colonial Naga Hills (1850s–1920s),' Lipokmar Dzüvichü examines the contexts and the different moments in which modern infrastructural projects were used to justify imperial agendas. The study underlines the strategies by which access routes extended the physical reach and control of the colonial state, and the various interactions that ensued along the land routes in the Naga Hills. Roads, as such, became a powerful instrument of colonial territorial practices and came to be closely associated with the exercise of state power over the hills. In turn, the making of 'modern' roads also came to be closely linked with the emergence of a coercive labour and fiscal regime in the hills. While colonial roads sought to forge new linkages, and allowed mobility of the coercive colonial apparatus, it also put new pressures on the movement and mobility of people and commodities in the frontier. Dzüvichü's work highlights some of these limits and possibilities as well as the challenges and opportunities, which the imperial road-making endeavours opened for the state and its subjects. There were various ways in which communities reacted to the colonial forms of transport and control over mobility. In the process, the chapter shows how imperial road-building enterprises was mediated and shaped through contestation, negotiation and appropriation by various people and groups in the Naga Hills.

The second section of the book engages with the various experiences of the societies as a result of colonial encounter. Some of the socio-cultural practices that constitute societies and their relations to forms of power, and how these practices have provided material and discursive dimensions to the understandings of the region and its societies from different political positions are also discussed in this section. In the chapter, '*Vai* phobia to Raj nostalgia: *Sahibs*, chiefs and commoners in colonial Lushai hills', David Vumlallian Zou examines the encounter between the British *sahib* and the indigenous Lushai chiefs and the implications of this interaction in the Lushai hills. Zou traces the significance of this contact and the subsequent making of the British as *sahib* in the course of colonial interaction with the hill society. The growth of British prestige and the changing relationship between the British and the Lushais was shaped by a related transformation in local political conditions. This was a result of the colonial policy of 'indirect rule'. As a result, the dread of the British *vai* and the resentment of colonial occupation was virtually forgotten by the hill chiefs (*lals*). Instead, in a twist of irony, the Lushai chiefs' power increased through the colonial project of indirect rule. In the course of rule, all the chiefs 'eventually became loyal collaborators of colonial rule under the administrator *sahib*'. Such a distinct relationship with the Raj would stand in stark contrast with the perceived apathy of the Indian state during moments of crisis in the Lushai hills. It was in their post-colonial miseries, argues Zou, that the

Mizos sought consolation in Raj nostalgia and memories of British paternalism. 'Raj nostalgia' for formerly colonised subjects such as the Mizos eventually constituted a form of resistance against 'majoritarian domination and hegemony of the postcolonial state'.

In the chapter, 'Orality: analysing its politics within the domains of the Mizo narrative', Margaret L. Pachuau focuses on the location of Mizo oral culture vis-à-vis the Mizo written culture. This location is addressed in terms of shift from the oral to the written in the making of Mizo modernity since the twentieth century, and its historical and cultural implications. Pachuau argues that orality and writing are not merely two modes of textual articulations. Rather, they pertain to two different understandings and practices of social reality, and therefore the place that each occupy in their respective realities. In this regard, it is pointed out that the pre-colonial/pre-Christian Mizo reality was one of orality, and that it was consciously replaced by the Mizos with the reality of the written text as part of their colonial/Christian experience. As a result, what it entailed was either a systemic removal of the oral understanding of social reality, or the appropriate recasting of the oral forms (such as songs) into structures that the written modes allowed. This, according to Pachuau, raises two questions. First, if colonial modernity was a process of encountering and indigenisation of modernity, then could the presence of the past (i.e. orality in her example) in only its form but devoid of its content exist as sites of meaningful indigenisation; or could they only exist as sites of encounter and loss of the past? Second, if in the process of this loss, Mizo modernity was a conscious participant, then what are its implications in the wider understanding of the post-colonial writing back to the empire?

In the chapter, 'Text, knowledge and representation: reading gender in Sumi marriage practices', Lovitoli Jimo probes from a feminist perspective the relation between narratives of gift exchange as part of customary marriage practices and the actual reality of the process. In reality, Jimo argues, gift exchange is a reciprocal process between the families of the groom and the bride, with the newlywed couple becoming the eventual repository of the material objects in order to set up their new home. However, in both the social or customary narrative on the exchange of gift as well as in the academic discourses in this regard, Jimo highlights how the actual reality of the process is misrepresented. In either case, the narratives highlight that while gift moves from the groom's family to the bride's family, the bride moves in reverse. Thus, women come to exist as 'objects' in exchange in the marriage practice. Jimo locates the reason behind this anomaly between the reality and its representation in two different though inter-related factors. While on the one hand the misrecognition, Jimo argues, is engineered by the patriarchal narrative, which in turn gets

perpetuated by the patriarchy itself. On the other hand, the anomaly in the academic discourses emerged from the colonial (mis)representation of the process of gift exchange, and because it fitted into the customary misrecognition already present in the society, it acquired its legitimacy and continuance. Jimo shows how the 'modernity' of knowledge production and the already existing marginality of women's location in the society arrived at a peculiar connection.

In the chapter, 'Empire and the making of a narrative: The Ballad of the General and its history as a historical source in colonial Assam', Manjeet Baruah engages with a nineteenth century 'folk' Assamese ballad *Barphukanar Geet* (The Ballad of the General) dealing with Burmese and British imperialisms of early nineteenth century. Baruah tries to show how the ballad became an important 'source' in the project of constructing Assamese nationalism in the early twentieth century, and how this process cannot be dis-entangled from the actual existence of the ballad as a 'written' text through much of the twentieth century. In other words, the emergence of the ballad as an important historical 'source' in the twentieth century was closely connected to the very nature of its textual existence. In turn, this influenced the use of the text to denote peasant or national consciousness, depending on the location of the historian in debates on imperialism and identity making. The chapter further argues that the given nature of the 'source' raises important methodological questions too vis-à-vis its use to interpret the past. One such methodological aspect that the essay explores is reading the ballad in terms of history of literature, and what such an approach can highlight about nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century history and historians of Assam.

The third section of the book engages with the acts of writing the region and culture, and how such acts of writing are shaped by the vicissitudes of region formation. The chapters underline the fact that acts of writing and producing a text, whether literary or performance, while being rooted in the processes of the region, have also been attempts to re-articulate new possibilities of understanding cultures of the region. In the chapter, 'Of people and their stories: writings in English from India's northeast', K. B. Veio Pou deals with English writings from North East India. An important point, which Pou highlights, is that the English language as the medium of literary articulation is peculiarly placed vis-à-vis the history and culture of the region. This peculiarity, for example, is explored in the field of 'writing orality'. Pou also argues that the historical self, which literary articulations in the English language seek to represent, is a manifestation of the wider context of borrowings, recastings and inventions in culture, a process which is still unfolding. Further, Pou shows that the fact of literary exploration of the 'periphery' taking place through the English

language, that is, through a language which is at once global, national and local, produces complex literary practices, including the challenges of literary representation.

In the chapter, 'Close encounters of the real kind: the avatars of terror in two Assamese short stories', Amit R. Baishya poses the question whether Assamese literature, especially the genre of short story, can have its limits in representing the contemporary experience of violence in Assam. He argues that literature, like other mediums of engagement or articulation of social reality, exists within the frames of symbolic orders, which constitutes the scope or method of such engagements or articulations. Therefore, the ability of literature to engage or articulate reality depends on the existence of the symbolic order itself. Once that symbolic order breaks down in the face of reality, induced by the actions of the contemporary state, the limits are set for literature to represent the reality too. The symbolic order, he highlights, is the worldview, which is premised on the unwritten social contract, which in turn frames perspectives through which reality is perceived. When the experience of reality can no longer be framed through these perspectives, that is, reality undergoes a breakdown, the symbolic order arrives at its limit to represent reality. A reading of Baishya's chapter raises the important question whether the genre of short story, which became the marker of the practice of literary modernity in the late nineteenth century, has today reached the limit of representation.

In the chapter, 'Subdued eloquence: poetics of body movement, time and space', Usham Rojio highlights how an 'organic' reality persists as the underlying continuum and shapes the making of an identity and its cultural productions. Taking the example of Meitei performance traditions, the chapter explores how organic reality is comprised of a worldview and practices, which encompasses the socio-political, historical and spatial aspects of a people. In the process, there comes to exist no distinction between the lived reality of the people and its aesthetic articulation. Rojio argues that it was this underlying aspect in the aesthetics of Meitei performance traditions, and its resilience in the course of the twentieth century, which was ignored or misrepresented in the various forms of Sanskritic or Indian nationalist appropriations of the traditions during the period. An important point the chapter makes is that the meta-narrative of the performative traditions cannot be the Sanskritic aesthetics or the idea of Indian culture. On the contrary, the meta-narrative is the underlying Meitei organic unity, while elements of the Sanskritic field or that of idea of India, including aspects of the 'modern', exist as borrowings at different historical moments, which nevertheless merge into the basic organicity underlying the tradition.

Notes

1 David Vumlallian Zou and M. Satish Kumar, 'Mapping a Colonial Borderland: Objectifying the Geo-Body of India's Northeast', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 70, no. 1 (2011), pp. 141–170; David Ludden, 'Where Is Assam? Using Geographical History to Locate Current Social Realities', in CNISEAS Papers, Guwahati: OKD Institute of Social Change, 2004; for a general discussion on the nature and role of colonial cartographic practices, see Ian J. Barrow, *Making History, Drawing Territory: British Mapping in India, 1756–1905*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

2 In a recent work, Thomas Simpson has pointed out the importance of a comparative analysis of the North West Frontier and North East frontier of British India. See Thomas Simpson, 'Bordering and Frontier-Making in Nineteenth Century British India', *The Historical Journal*, vol. 58, no. 2 (2015), p. 515; for a discussion on the North West Frontier of British India, also see, Magnus Marsden and Benjamin D. Hopkins, *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

3 Tezenlo Thong, *Progress and Its Impact on the Nagas: A Clash of Worldviews*, London: Routledge, 2013.

4 Meenaxi Barkakati-Ruscheweyh, 'Performing Identity: The Transformation of a Tangsa Festival in Assam, Northeast India', *Asian Ethnology*, vol. 72, no. 2 (2013), pp. 241–258; Arkotong Longkumer, '"As Our Ancestors Once Lived": Representation, Performance, and Constructing a National Culture amongst the Nagas of India', *Himalaya*, vol. 35, no. 1 (July 2015), pp. 51–64.

5 For instance, Miles Ogborn argues that with regard to modernity, 'there is certainly no agreed upon definition. Its periodisations, geographies, characteristics and promise all remain elusive.' See, Miles Ogborn, *Spaces of Modernity: London's Geographies, 1680–1780*, New York and London: Guilford Press, 1998, p. 2.

6 For some important interventions on the complex nature and questions of modernity, see Timothy Mitchel (ed.), *Questions of Modernity*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996; Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996; Fernando Coronil, *Magical State: Nature, Money and Modernity in Venezuela*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997; Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008; Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004.

7 For a recent work on how study of 'practices' can provide new ways of understanding culture, including modernity, see Partha Chatterjee, Tapati Guha-Thakurta and Boddhisattva Kar (eds.), *New Cultural Histories of India: Materiality and Practices*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015.

8 See, Saurabh Dube, 'Introduction: Colonialism, Modernity, Colonial Modernities', *Nepanthla: Views from the South*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2002), pp. 197–219.

9 For a critical study on the agencies of missionaries, officials, travellers, etc., see Andrew J. May, '"To Lay Down the Frontier of an Empire": Circumscribing Identity in Northeast India', *Studies in History*, vol. 32, no. 1 (2016), pp. 5–20; for some writings by missionaries and travellers who imagined the 'wild periphery', also see Mary Mead Clark, *A Corner in India*, Guwahati: Christian Literature Centre, 1978 (1907); and Francis Kingdom Ward, *Assam Adventure*, London: The Travel Book Club, 1942.

10 For example, see Andrew Gray, 'The British in Nagaland: The Anthropology and their Legacy', in *The Naga Nation and Its Struggle Against Genocide*, Copenhagen: IWGIA, Document 56, 1986, pp. 37–66; Jelle J. P. Wouters, 'Reconfiguring Colonial Ethnography: The British Gaze over India's North-East', in T. B. Subba (ed.), *North-East India: A Handbook of Indian Anthropology*, New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2012, pp. 99–121.

11 For instance, the works by colonial officials such as Alexander Mackenzie, Edward Gait and Robert Reid highlight how the region as an 'ungoverned' frontier needed to be brought within the colonial apparatus. This colonial necessity was represented in the language of 'modernity' and 'progress'. See Alexander Mackenzie, *The North East Frontier of India*, New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2008 (1884); Robert Reid, *History of Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam*, Guwahati: Bhabani Books, 2013 (1942); Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, Guwahati: Lawyers Book Stall, 1996 (1926). For a general discussion on empire, enlightenment ideas and governance, also see Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1982 (1963); and Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.

12 In order to exercise its power over disparate population and territories centralising state seeks to make society 'legible' through practices such as census, enumeration, cartography and infrastructural enterprises. See, James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Conditions Have Failed*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

13 Zou and Kumar, 'Mapping a Colonial Borderland', p. 143.

14 For example, on how capital operated through administrative arrangement such as the Inner Line, see Boddhisattva Kar, 'When Was the Postcolonial: A History of Policing Impossible Lines', in Sanjib Baruah (ed.), *Beyond Counterinsurgency: Breaking the Impasse in Northeast India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 49–79.

15 For example, see Verrier Elwin, *A Philosophy for NEFA*, Shillong: North East Frontier Agency, 1959; Nari Rustomji, *Imperilled Frontiers: India's North-Eastern Borderlands*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984; on the complex process of state building project that unfolded in the postcolonial 'north east frontier', see Berenice Guyot-Rechard, 'Nation Building or State-Making? India's North-East Frontier and the Ambiguities of Nehruvian Developmentalism, 1950–1959', *Contemporary South Asia*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2013), pp. 22–37. Also see, Berenice Guyot-Rechard, *Shadow States: India, China and the Himalayas, 1910–1962*, New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

16 For instance, see, Elwin, *A Philosophy for NEFA*; Rakshat Puri, 'Towards Security in the North-East: Transportation and Nationalism', in K. Suresh Singh (ed.), *Tribal Situation in India*, Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced

Study, 1972, pp. 98–109; Pannalal Dasgupta (ed.), *A Common Perspective for North East India*, Calcutta: 1967.

17 For example, S. K. Bhuyan's writing according to David Syiemlieh 'was a curious mixture of nationalistic sentiments and an acceptance of British rule'. See David R. Syiemlieh, 'History Writing on North East India: Periodization, Varieties, Concerns', in Bharati Ray (ed.), *Different Types of History, Vol. XIV, Part 4*, New Delhi: Pearson Longman, 2009, pp. 229–243; also see, S. K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations, 1771–1826*, Gauhati: Lawyer's Book Stall, 1949/1974; H. K. Barpujari, *Problem of the Hill Tribes North-East Frontier, Vol. I*, Gauhati: Lawyer's Book Stall, 1970; ibid., Vol. II, Shillong: NEHU, 1976; ibid., Vol. III, Gauhati: Spectrum, 1981.

18 For example, see Surajit Sinha, *Tribal Polities and State Systems in Pre-Colonial Eastern and North Eastern India*, Calcutta and New Delhi: K.P. Bagchi & Co., 1964.

19 For example, see, Suniti Kumar Chatterji, *The Place of Assam in the History and Civilisation of India*, Banikanta Kakati Memorial Lectures, 1954, Gauhati: Department of Publication, University of Gauhati, 1970; Verrier Elwin, *Nagaland*, Shillong: Research Department, Advisers Secretariat, 1961; for a general discussion on the relations of nation state with that of historical reconstruction, see Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History From the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

20 For instance, some of the residual categories through which North East India continues to be perceived today includes the banal representation of an 'isolated' and 'landlocked' region; as a 'sensitive region'; an economically 'underdeveloped' area; a 'rebel country'; apart from perceiving the region as 'ungovernable areas' whereby the 'unruly' population can be disciplined only through repressive exceptional laws such as AFPSA. For example, see Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of North East India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005.

21 For example, see Bernard S. Cohn, 'Regions Subjective and Objective: Their Relation to the Study of Modern Indian History and Society', in *An Anthropologist Among Historians and Other Essays*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987, pp. 100–135; also see Thomas H. Holdich, 'North Eastern-Frontier of India', *The Journal of the Royal Society of the Arts*, vol. LX, no. 3092 (February 23, 1912), pp. 379–389.

22 For example, see Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity, Economy*, Guwahati: Anwesha, 2014 (1991); Amalendu Guha, 'Great Nationalism, Little Nationalism and Problem of Integration: A Tentative View', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 14, no. 7/8, Annual Number: Class and Caste in India (February 1979), pp. 455–458.

23 For example, see Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826–1947*, New Delhi: Tulika, 2006 (1977); Arupjyoti Saikia, *A Century of Protest: Peasant Politics in Assam Since 1900*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2013; Rana P. Behal, *One Hundred Years of Servitude: The Political Economy of Tea Plantations in Colonial Assam*, New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2014.

24 Sanjib Baruah, *Between South and Southeast Asia: Northeast India and the Look East Policy*, CENISEAS Papers number 4, Guwahati: Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast Asia Studies, 2004; Rakhee Bhattacharya,

example, see Kaberi Kachari Rajkonwar, *Issa Anissa Swotteu Kisu Katha* (Though Hesitant, A Few Things that I Have to Say), Guwahati: Alibat, 2013.

40 For example, see Tiplut Nongbri, *Gender, Matriliny, Entrepreneurship: The Khasis of North East India*, New Delhi: Zubaan, 2008; Rakhee Kalita Moral, *Living and Partly Living: Politics of Freedom and the Women of United Liberation Front of Assam*, NMML Occasional Paper Series, History and Society No. 31, New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, 2013; Hemjyoti Medhi, 'Tribe, Caste, Nation, Gender: Chandraprabha Saikiani's Presidential Address to the First Assam Kachari Mahila Sanmilan (1930)', *Summerhill: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies Review Journal*, vol. XX, no. 1 (Summer 2014), pp. 33–41; Romy Barooah, 'Transformations in Trade and the Constitution of Gender and rank in Northeast India', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 27, no. 2 (May 2000), pp. 371–399.