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Mapping Literature: Culture and region formation in the Brahmaputra Valley

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Mapping Literature: Culture and region formation in the Brahmaputra Valley*

Manjeet Baruah**

Abstract

The article has two main arguments. It argues that in the nineteenth century, the Brahmaputra Valley transformed from a crossroad to a frontier. What distinguished the two forms of borderlands was the erosion of the shared socio-spatial domains in the valley. The article argues that this shift indicates how borderlands comprise historical formations rather than being essential non state or inter-national spaces. Therefore, discourses of identity can be situated in these historical shifts in region formation. The second part of the argument focuses on mapping literary narratives, whether performative or written, in the context of historical shift in borderland formation. On the one hand, literary narratives attempt to map existing forms of socio-spatial relations. But the paper also discusses examples when in situations of shift, literary narratives seek a more dynamic role in both articulating the shift as well as impacting upon the shift. In the process, literature explores and experiments with modes of communicating itself (as art). The literary evidences as case studies for the article are taken from both the pre-colonial and the colonial and post colonial periods. The paper concludes on the point whether contemporary literary narratives indicate possibilities of the valley undergoing further historical shifts as borderland.

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Introduction

In the recent times, especially since the last decade of the twentieth century, north east India came to be seen in a different theoretical light. While until the 1980s, the theoretical framework to study and explain north east India was primarily mode of production or nationalism, including their various positions of state formation and identity, since the 1990s, it was replaced by the idea of borderland. It was a historical moment that state policies (such as the Look East Policy) and academic research gradually came together on a theoretical framework which redefined the possible modes of explaining the region. In this framework, the region was approached from beyond the structures of national geography. In turn, it argued that borderland is situated at the interstices of national geographies. As a result, borderlands exist as the fluid zones of social and spatial mobility in the shadow of surrounding defined national geographies. In one way, the approach revived an older concept, namely the concept of shatter zone (for example, Cohn: 100-135). Similar to the concept of shatter zone, it too argued that borderlands are marked by migration and lack of territorialisation due to its location between defined socio-cultural or political geographies. But where it differed from the older concept was in the theoretical attempt to engage with contemporary problems of identity and nation building in such fluid formations.

In this regard, it made three major formulations. On the one hand, it argued that the problem of identity was not in the social aspiration towards it, whether ethnic or national. The problem was in situating the aspirations in the historical spatial fluidity, i.e. trans-spatiality, of the region. In other words, it posed whether there can be a criterion to demarcate homelands (whether ethnic or national) in an area which had historically survived as trans-spatial zone of migration and settlements. On the other hand, it also posed that if different communities had historically lived with the idea of overlapping domains and not defined territories to deal with the fluidity or trans-spatiality of the region, how can that historical idea be adjusted to the contemporary political idea of homeland. Lastly, it also highlighted that if the above two formulations can be assumed, then how to approach the question of nationalizing this region as part of India or globalizing the region as

a borderland? These formulations were taking place in the backdrop of extraordinary levels of violence in the region for over six decades. To me, the formulations incisively highlighted the intense struggles in forging relations between social and political behaviour and thought vis-à-vis the region.

Historicizing Borderland

In this overall debate on region formation, I have, in a limited way, tried to investigate culture and the results that use of cultural data can provide in this regard (Baruah: 2012). My investigations have been limited to the Brahmaputra Valley only. Further, my data has also been limited to the written traditions of the valley. However, where these two limitations helped me was in being able to closely observe how literature provides the evidence to study the relation between thought and action among sets of human beings in given historical contexts.

One of the key limitations that I assumed in the existing borderland debate was its idea of region as essential formations. Its second limitation was that it was overwhelmingly based on the idea of national geographies, emerging from colonial geography, i.e. from the nineteenth century onwards. Therefore, it emphasised the question of fluidity in social and spatial formations vis-à-vis the territorial fixity inherent to modern state. The existing debate (for example, Baruah: 2009) highlighted two points in this regard. On the one hand, it argued that from this historical lack of territoriality emerged the various self determination movements against the (Indian) tendencies to nationalize the region. On the other hand it also argued that precisely this historical lack also negates the very ideal which the self determination movements seek to realize, namely territorial homelands or ethnic nations. But what was the region prior to the nineteenth century, or how do we conceptualise the region prior to that period? Further, based on what kind of evidences do we draw our concept of the region in the pre-colonial period?

I have tried to argue that there is a distinct shift in the nature of the region between the pre-colonial and colonial period. In this regard, the facility of studying the Brahmaputra valley and its written traditions

was not in arguing its representative nature for the entire region. On the contrary, it helped formulating the idea of historical shift that borderlands can undergo over time. Different areas of the region can experience this shift in different modes. As regards the Brahmaputra valley, this shift was formulated as shift from crossroad to frontier, both distinct and different from each other.

The central feature of the valley as crossroad was the shared domains of socio-spatial relations across communities. What it meant was that different communities were acutely conscious of their difference as a social group from one another. The evidences on this came from different sources. One kind of source was the Buranji chronicles. They were commissioned by the ruling Ahom families or those in the bureaucracy, dating from the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries onwards. It is important that the Buranji chronicles mentions most of "ethnic" groups which are found today in the valley and in the hills to its north or south. The chronicles also use the generic term "Naga" when referring to those settled in the Patkai hills, unless of course if they are not specifically referring to any one particular group among the "Nagas". Besides the chronicles, the idea of difference that social groups maintained as distinct groups was also present in the neo-vaishnava literatures, dating mostly from the sixteenth century onwards. Similar evidences can also be drawn from the oral literatures, such as ballads and songs, which were collected in the early twentieth century from among the people of the valley. These oral literatures were published in the different literary magazines of the period such as *Jonaki*, *Bahni,* etc. as well as in the works of Surjya Kumar Bhuyan who pioneered professional initiatives in this regard from the 1920s. Thus, what it proved to me was that consciousness of identity, especially what we today call "ethnic" identity, was not a colonial construct. But this consciousness of identity was only one part of an underlying dialectic. The other part was the consciousness of shared domains across communities which allowed the different and the distinct to co-exist. For example, traditions of origin and migration myths (i.e. ideational mapping) or traditions of use of precious beads (i.e. material culture) or traditions of music and performance (i.e. performative culture) inarguably emphasised the significance of how despite consciousness of differences, the different communities mapped their

shared domains despite the trans-spatiality. The question that arises is how do we view the relation between the distinct and the shared domains? Do we view it as dialectic or as syncretic order? But before I come to this discussion, let me also highlight two cases when this relation between the distinct and the shared seemed to have been transgressed, even consciously. They were the development of the "Ahom" formation and the neo-Vaishnava formation between the sixteenth and the eighteenth century.

Though we consider "Ahom" as a distinct social group today, the early chronicles did not refer to any distinct ethnic group called "Ahom". The Ahoms were a Tai group which had migrated to the valley in the thirteenth century, and through war and alliances, emerged as the rulers of the valley by the sixteenth century. When the later chronicles refer to "Ahom", they refer to the social and political conglomerate which had emerged through the wars and alliances over the past centuries to comprise the dominant formation in the valley. Thus, "Ahom" continued to have within them the earlier social groups which had inhabited the vailley prior to the thirteenth century too. But these groups were now bound within a larger formation of "Ahom". The important point was that the alliances were not confined to marriage and kinship among ruling families only. It occurred at the level of commoners as well. Further, the "Ahom" formation was premised on shared kinship but among distinct social groups. The studies of Yasmin Saikia (Saikia: 2004) in this regard are instructive. The other example of the same period was that of the neo-Vaishnava formation. In becoming part of the neo-Vaishnava formation, the various social groups did not lose or give up their distinctiveness. But by remaining distinct, what they came to share was an idea of an overall community and performing that shared idea through the syncretic cultural repertoire. The syncretic cultural repertoire ranged from the institutional space created for the overall community (the *naamghar* or prayer hall) to the nature of performances, whether in music, costumes, text or language. The fact that the syncretic repertoire did not disintegrate the consciousness of distinct community among the respective social groups was evident in the eighteenth century Moamaria rebellion against the Ahom rulers, which was a rebellion by a constituent social group (the Marans) who were only known by their neo-Vaishnava name of Moamaria. Incidentally, the Marans were also a part of the "Ahom" formation.

This brings me to my question, of how to conceptualise the nature of pre-colonial social organization. For the valley, I have tried to explore it through juxtaposition between dialectic vs syncretic order. In sociological models, the idea of dialectic has been extensively used in the segmentary model as applied to the study Africa and West Asia. Its main premise is what is termed as balanced opposition. Among social groups, the balance in their oppositions to each other maintains the formation. The shared domains, whether in terms of ideational mapping or in terms of symbolic mediators as in the case of the priests among the Berbers (for example: Gellner: 1969 and Kraus: 1998), exist to rationalize the underlying principle of balanced opposition. Shifting alignments of solidarity and opposition among the segments or social groups was part of this balanced opposition. The difference in this matter was the formulation of Edmund Leach in his study of the Kachins of Burma. Leach argued that among the Kachins, the balance was not between two opposed segments or social groups. The balance was between two principles, one anarchic and the other monarchic. The continuous process of realignment which could happen among social groups was based on choice made between the two principles. The objective behind the choices was to strike the balance which would prevent concentration of power in the hands of an individual or family (the chief), but at the same time allow the functioning of the formation by allowing appropriate degree of power to a leader. As regards the reason behind maintaining the balance of the two principles, Leach suggests that it could have had to do with the nature of the space (i.e. geography, geographical location and settlement pattern) in which the Kachins operated. It is a point which half a decade later, James Scott took up in his study on the "art of not being governed."

In view of what Leach argued, there are two issues I would like to highlight vis-à-vis the valley. They are the questions of solidarity and opposition in inter-social relation, and that of space. If the shared domains, as evidence from written traditions indicate, mediated inter-social interaction, they also made possible shifts in socio-political solidarities from time to time among the groups. Our evidence in this matter are found in the chronicles and the oral literatures like ballads and songs already referred to. As highlighted in the case of highland Burma by Leach, shifts in solidarity and opposition in social alignments

was also seen in the valley. The formulation that the chronicles themselves followed in characterizing the shifts was "us" and "them". The distinction between "us" and "them" was not between two communities. It was a distinction maintained between opposed solidarities. The solidarities were comprised of different communities. However, the composition of these solidarities could change at different historical moments. Thus, what comprised the "us" and the "them" underwent shift from time to time. One of the best illustrations of the point is found in Yasmin Saikia's study of the chronicles. The dialectic of "us" and "them" comprised social groups not only within the valley, but also across the Patkai hills, till the neighbouring areas of highland Burma. The same is also seen in folk ballads such as *Borphukanar Geet* (Songs of Borphukan) where the Burmese attack of the early nineteenth century was not seen as an invasion as the British records indicate, but rather as conflict emerging from the dynamics of shifting social solidarities which is otherwise characteristic of the region. The ballad nowhere indicates that the Burmese attack was seen as an external invasion.

Though needing further research, I would argue that to understand the issue, we have to identify what allowed these shifting solidarities and opposition to be forged over the centuries. In other words, can the dynamic relation between "us" and "them" be explained only in terms of balanced opposition as the segmentary model formulates? I will return to this question after taking up the issue of space.

When the point of space, as Leach saw it, is applied in the Brahmaputra valley, the distinction between dialectic and syncretic perhaps become more clear. The shared domains did not stand for the assimilation of social groups. These existed as the mediating spaces among the groups, which otherwise continued to remain distinct as groups. But what caused these shared domains to exist? I would argue that these domains developed as means to negotiate the nature of space which the social groups inhabited. The valley, along with the rest of region, was indeed in a shatter zone. It meant that it was in a zone of migration. But unlike as dealt with in the concept of shatter zone, the question of migration had deeper implications. For example, despite the fact that wet rice cultivation was practiced in the valley, why did

the valley, as a geographical space, continue to be part of overlapping spatial domains that comprised not only what today is north east India but also the neighbouring areas in Tibet, China and Burma? James Scott argued that the choice to remain outside state spaces caused communities to inhabit the hills, which in turn was linked to the overall subsistence strategy of shifting cultivation, culture of low reproduction and migration. However, in that case, why didn't the valley have higher population density or why did the polities of the valley continue with the practice of overlapping spatial domains rather than territorial kingdoms?

In this regard, studies on Ahom polity of the valley have highlighted three important issues. Firstly, despite assuming the title of king, archetypical kingship was never institutionally practiced. The council of elders (the three Gohains) did depose rulers several times. Further, the Ahom ruler did not come from a dynasty. The ruler could be selected and elected from among a few ruling lineages by the ministers, especially the elders. Secondly, more important than land, the emphasis in governance was on the people. In recent studies, the labour regime of the paik system, i.e. surplus appropriated in the form of compulsory labour, has been seen as that mechanism. Despite wet rice cultivation, it was the Paik system of controlled labour and not land revenue which remained the predominant means of surplus appropriation in the valley. The fact that forms of periodic census was carried out is seen as corroborating this argument. Very significantly, even though Paiks were resettled or relocated from time to time in different areas, the Paiks continued to remain in the social groups to which they belonged. Thus, when villages were allotted as free grant of land and labour to the neo-Vaishnava institutions in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, it meant whole social groups that comprised land and labour of a given area got transferred in the process. Thirdly, only symbolic control was exercised over the foothills between the valley and the hills which lay to its north and south. This was institutionalized in the system of Khats. Therefore, the foothills remained part of the overlapping spatial domains between the valley and the hills.

Despite its riverine nature and agrarian pattern, what prevented the rise of archetype territorial kingdoms in the valley? It is an issue

which needs further investigation. I would tentatively argue that the answer lies in exploring the significance and meaning of the shared domains in inter-social relation. If the valley was part of the overall shatter zone, it meant that it could not operate isolated from that overall context. The shatter zone was both a social and spatial condition. What linked the two was the development of shared domains which allowed the dynamic of shifting solidarity and opposition between different formations. And that dynamic also did not allow the emergence of archetype territorial kingdoms in the region. It necessitated the approach of overlapping spatial domains and its concomitant polities. Thus, a shatter zone did not mean the absence of specific structure of socio-spatial organization. It did not mean fluidity in social organization because the region was indeed organized on specific socio-spatial relation. In that structure, social groups were conscious of their distinction from the others. Yet, they also developed the mechanism to align and re-align with one another from time to time under given historical conditions.

If the shared domains and the overall nature of space made possible these changing alignments, they also allowed the consciousness of distinction to survive through time. But in that case, how to view the paradox of social processes which tried to transcend the consciousness of distinction, such as the Ahom formation or the neo-Vaishnava order, and yet continued to carry the distinctions too? If pre-colonial literatures (i.e. from the around the sixteenth century onwards) highlight any fundamental feature of social organization in the valley, it is the above contradiction which stands out as important to me. Therefore, returning to my earlier point of dialectic vs syncretic order, the challenge is to conceptualise this contradiction. It is the contradiction of co-existence on the one hand of the dialectic of the shared domains and the distinct consciousness with, on the other hand, of the attempts to transcend the dialectic through syncretic frameworks (the Ahom or neo-Vaishanava orders) co-exist. One of the points that the later formulations in the segmentary model debate, for example the writings of those like Kraus (Kraus: 1998) and others, make is to consider ideational mapping as a folk ideology which however does not inform everyday social relations. In other words, the folk ideology (in this case segmentary mapping of social relations) should be de-linked from

everyday behavior. It is a principle held in reserve, which comes into operation only in moments of crisis. The other view in this regard can be those of interpretative anthropology, such as that of Clifford Geertz (Geertz: 1973), when he argues that social relations can be understood only through observation of social behavior or actions rather than ideology. If pre-colonial literatures of the valley are our sources, then what is the evidence we draw from them?

I would argue that despite the literature bearing the contradiction of the dialectic and the syncretic at the same time, by the late eighteenth century, the crisis of the syncretic in social organization was already evident in the form of the Moamaria rebellion. The Moamaria rebellion highlighted the breakdown of both Ahom and neo-Vaishnava orders, a breakdown that involved the clash between the two and eventually bringing about what is today referred to as the "Burmese invasion". It is noteworthy that in the face of the collapse of Ahom authority, the re-alignments of social groups vis-à-vis Ahom authority was based on the underlying dialectic of solidarity and opposition. Though the syncretic principle was revived towards the end of the nineteenth century, it was a different in nature and concept. The example of the Brahmaputra Valley and literature that emerged in it during my period of study shows the specificity of the valley. If, on the one hand, it was a valley where wet rice cultivation was practiced, the valley was also situated in the overall context of trans-spatiality of the region. Pre-colonial literatures and their mapping of socio-spatial relation show this peculiarity of the valley. This peculiarity marks out the valley as a crossroad, distinct from colonial frontier. Importantly, literature comes across as a conscious mapping of the socio-spatial relations, of which identitarian distinctions and the mediating shared domains were critical mechanism of negotiating trans-spatiality. But its nature as a valley also probably created attempts at syncretic orders, whether social or political. What possibly needs further research is the difference between consciousness behind the mapping and ideology of action. It also means doing history of literature or doing social history of the region in ways different than as we have generally been doing until now.

Becoming a Frontier

It is from this premise that I would like to view the colonial intervention in the region. The important question here is did colonialism bring any changes to the above condition of crossroad. I would argue that to answer the question, observing the changes in the shared domains and in the relation between society and space could be critical. Colonial reports from the 1830s onwards often referred to the region, including the valley, as "frontier". But was "frontier" only a descriptive use? In my view, it was a conceptual use. It was conceptual because the "frontier" was described as trans-spatial in nature. To the colonial state, it was trans-spatial for a number of reasons. For example, while the British wanted to identify and demarcate a frontier that separated the two British colonies of "India" and "Burma", both socially and spatially, they found it difficult. Robert Reid's *A History of Areas Bordering on the Province of Assam* (1942) is instructive in this regard. The colonial state found that settlements in the area did not bear notions of territory. In contrast, most of the communities practiced overlapping spatial domains. The practice allowed them to change settlement locations from time to time. The fact that social groups practiced mostly shifting cultivation and took part in trade was seen as cause of change in settlements over space.

The colonial state also found that polities were based on measurement and appropriation of labour rather than land and its products. They also thought that polities were generally republican and based on kinship. Thus, they classified it as "tribal". Many of the communities also practiced head hunting. Therefore, they were also seen as anthropological case of "primitive" societies. In all these matters the colonial reports did not make much distinction between the hills, foothills and the valley throughout the nineteenth century. In other words, these were seen as features common to the region irrespective of the specific geographical location which social groups occupied as habitats. What is striking is that despite the practice of wet rice cultivation and despite the concept of monarch ("swargadeo") in Ahom polity, the valley was also seen as part of the overall trans-spatial. This point is very clear in Edward Gait's classic study *A History of Assam* (1905). When Gait discusses the colonial period (i.e. latter part of the

nineteenth century), he points out that despite the agrarian economic base, what they had to govern were different and distinct social groups and not peasants. Secondly, he also points out that the valley lacked in the practice of territorial polity. Both the conditions were seen as a historical lack. Between the distinction among the social groups and the lack of territorial polity was adjusted their "warlike" nature, reflecting further his colonial anthropological position vis-a-vis the people and the region.

The colonial state followed different strategies to engage with trans-spatial frontier in the hills and in the valley. I will only focus on the valley. But these different strategies came under the overall colonial approach of "pacification". Colonial pacification in the valley followed both social and spatial strategies. In my view, peasantisation and tea plantations were two important colonial interventions in this matter. They were important due to their relevance to the questions of shared domains and of spatial change. For example, wet rice cultivation was not new to the valley. But what was new was the colonial attempt to tie cultivator to land, and consider revenue from produce of the land as a major source of state income. This approach was legitimised through the ryotwari settlement in the valley. Gait's *A History of Assam*, possibly one of the most perceptive accounts on the valley by a colonial officer, can be taken as an illustration of the point. Gait indicates that one of the problems which the colonial state faced throughout the nineteenth century was differential tax regimes of the various social groups. It was differential because the colonial tax regime was based on the pre-colonial tribute regime. The pre-colonial tribute regime was premised on the balance of power between the Ahom authority and the respective social group. It was also the time when, in the face of the collapse of Ahom authority re-alignments were taking place in solidarities and oppositions in the underlying dialectical order. As indicated in the previous section, the Burmese attack of the period was possibly a part of that re-alignment in the underlying dialectic, a matter which has gone almost completely overlooked in our studies till now.

In some of the recent studies, peasantisation has come to be seen as the means through which colonialism rationalized the differential tax

regime by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It was through eroding the shared domains among the communities. A cultivator tied to the land and paying land tax was radically different from the earlier condition of social groups providing labour to political authority. The difference was of whether land relations or labour relations mediate social organization. Through the tax system, peasantisation individuated the peasants as rather than providing labour as members of a community, tax was paid as an individual to the state. Thus, it tied them to their land. It was into this condition that the colonial state undertook the massive immigration of peasants from eastern Bengal, settling them as peasants in the vast tracts of land available in the valley. Amalendu Guha's *Planter Raj to Swaraj* (1977) still continues to be on the best studies on this process of immigration and settlement. In some recent studies, it is also noted that the idea of "Assamese" too was linked to the process of peasantisation. It is pointed out that though the word "Assam" has pre-colonial origins, without its exact connotation being clear, the word "Assamese" can only be traced to the colonial period. These studies point out that British use of the word predates the emerging middle class using the term for nationalist politics since the later part of the nineteenth century. The colonial use of the term "Assamese" was part of the overall attempt at creating a uniform category of peasants who could be taxed uniformly, i.e. not on the basis of the social group to which one belonged. It is an area of study which requires more research. But it was a fact that the series of nineteenth century "peasant uprisings" in the valley (from the 1860s onwards) were in fact rebellions by disgruntled social groups, i.e. groups which we today call "ethnic" groups, against the land revenue regime that the colonial state had instituted. The solidarities across groups which were forged were not among peasants. They were solidarities among social groups, opposed to the new form of authority, the colonial state, which sought to redefine their strategies of social and economic existence.

The other change the colonial state introduced was that of tea plantation. The plantations were massive landscape transformation which came up mostly in the foothills. Relying once again on recent studies, I would argue that plantations were actualized as much as part of military strategy of spatial pacification as there were economic

interests tied to them. The history of colonial capitalism and its economic interest in the plantations has already been widely discussed in several studies. I will only focus on the aspect of spatial pacification. Tea plantations came up in the foothills between the valley and the hills to its both north and south. The foothills were the Khats of the pre-colonial period. The setting up of the plantations in the foothills meant the loss of historical migration routes in the region which passed through the valley, a point well illustrated by Amalendu Guha. The loss of the foothills to the plantations also meant the loss of that space which had allowed the different social groups to maintain their overlapping spatial domains. It was because the foothills functioned as that free space. The loss of the foothills also meant that the access to resource, whether in trade and barter or in produce of the land, that the hills enjoyed as part of their spatial relation with the valley was now lost. It took the colonial state very long to pacify the north east frontier, especially due to the nature of geography and social habitation in it. Since the 1860s, the tea plantations were used as one of the instruments in negotiating the lack of pacification or political control over people and space. This was carried out in two important ways. On the one hand, the foothills were territorialized into colonial space and its defence against the hills became a frequent excuse to wage pacification battles against the social groups of the hills. On the other hand, through the mechanism of absolute surveillance and control of their life and livelihood within the plantations, the foothills were transformed into the wedge that broke the earlier spatial and social continuity of the overall shatter zone (Baruah: 2008).

The colonial state followed different spatial and social pacification strategies in the hills. For example, the institution of chief or the settlement areas of communities were radically redefined in the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. However, I would focus only on the changes effected in the valley. If peasantisation individuated the cultivator and plantations broke down the mechanism of social and spatial continuity in the overall region as crossroad, then what was its impact on the shared domains which had been critical to the dynamic of solidarities and oppositions, i.e. the dialectic model of the region? Also, what was its impact on the way the communities now mapped their inter-social relations? Peasantisation and spatial change

through plantation introduced two processes which were contradictory to one another. At one level, the two processes led to territorialisation. The territorialisation was in terms of political authority (the institution of colonial state), socio-economic existence (peasants tied to their land) and breakdown in socio-spatial continuity (of overlapping spatial domains). But did the colonial state succeed in dismantling the consciousness of distinction that given social groups carried in the region historically? It is obvious that I am drawing on the argument that colonialism did not create the consciousness of distinction, i.e. ethnic consciousness, among social groups. The consciousness predated colonialism. The roots of the consciousness lay in the dialectic model of the region rather than in any syncretic model. Though it is an under-studied area of research, my contention is that it was the failure of colonialism to create the breakdown in the consciousness of distinction which made the colonial intervention peculiar and historical. Yet the context of the consciousness of distinction now underwent a shift, due to the erosion of the earlier shared domains. Thus, the meaning of the consciousness underwent a radical shift due to the colonial intervention. The fact that the consciousness of distinction continued throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth century is evident from the debates on identity in two literary magazines *Jonaki* and *Bahni,* majorly on the idea of "Assamese" and the idea of "Ahom". Similar to the earlier Ahom and neo-Vaishnava attempts of the pre-colonial period, these constructs too can be seen as attempts at creating syncretic orders in the valley. But in the face of the erosion of the underlying dialectic of the valley, their meaning was now fundamentally different from the pre-colonial attempts.

We have already argued that the idea of "Ahom" was constructed or practiced as conglomerate formation rather than as a single entity in the pre-colonial period. Further, all evidences seem to suggest that the idea or consciousness of "Assamese" did not have pre-colonial roots. But even if it had a colonial origin, it acquired two different meanings by the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century. On the one hand, it was a uniform category which the colonial state sought to create out of the mass of multiple categories of people with their differential tax regimes. On the other hand, by the 1880s, the term "Assamese" also began to emerge as the consciousness through which the modernity that colonialism introduced was sought to be articulated.

Thus, for the emerging middle class, "Assamese" stood for the idea of national language, it stood for their unity against the competing identity of Bangla to their west, it stood for the idea of progress of "modern" thought and it stood for the idea of new culture where written language and the people of the valley fuse together towards a totality of collective being.

But even when the idea of "Assamese" was taking shape, the brittleness in the idea too became evident. For example, there were two issues which exposed this brittleness even in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. One issue was that of language. In the two literary magazines, one of the fiercest debates was on how to identify a language which can be representative of the social diversity which it claimed to represent. The modern "Assamese" language was seen as the representative marker of the collective identity of "Assamese" comprising of various social groups which otherwise inhabited the valley. To me, what is notable in the debates is that it was quite clearly assumed and accepted that both the modern "Assamese" language and the collective identity of "Assamese" were recent developments. In other words, it was widely accepted by most advocates of the two propositions that neither the modern language nor the collective identity could be traced to the pre-colonial period. It was also accepted that the language itself was never referred to as "Assamese" in the pre-colonial period. The different variants of the language were referred to through their locale names. But forming a modern, written language required a language standard. Since the socio-political and economic seat of power during the period was in eastern part of the valley, the language as used in the area came to be advocated as the standard. It was also the variant in which the buranji chronicles had been written. In this, the role of Christian missionaries was also notable. Since they based themselves in the eastern valley, from where they went to the hills to the north and south, and since they used the eastern variant for their various religious publishing activities, they too advocated the "scientificity" of the eastern variant. But possibly, the most frank argument in this regard came from Laxminath Bezbarua, one of the leading writers and social commentators of the valley until his death in 1938. Bezbarua argued that selection of a variant as a standard need not have any scientific basis. It is a matter of making a political

choice, later refining the language variant thus chosen to provide it greater representativeness. The criterion that determined the political choice was did the language variant chosen belong to the dominant social groups or the dominant area of a region. He argued that since the eastern valley was where the power was concentrated during the period, it was only natural that its language variant becomes the standard (Bezbaruah: 1897/2001: 817).

If the attempt was to create a linguistic identity, then the challenge existed both at the level of language and its representativeness and also at the level of the collective idea and its inclusiveness. If the representativeness of the language was a matter of debate and remained so throughout the twentieth century, then the inclusiveness of the collective idea too remained an issue of debate throughout the period. The latter point can be illustrated through a parallel example, namely that of the Ahom identity. Since the 1890s, the idea of Ahom identity was institutionalized by the founding of the Ahom Association. Its leading figure, Padmanath Gohain Baruah (1871-1946), was a significant literary figure in modern Assamese writing as well. The Ahom Association did not claim the Ahom identity as unitary and uniform. It highlighted how the idea of Ahom itself should be seen as a formation or collective in which historically several social groups have had come together. But the Association also noted that the formation did not exist based on the assimilation of these social groups, i.e. what we today call ethnic groups, into a syncretic whole. Within the formation, the various constituent groups remained with their respective distinction. What the Association advocated was that this formation in its historical character ought to continue. But the Association also advocated two other issues which distinguished this new construct of Ahom identity from the pre-colonial formation. The Association argued that the unique history of the formation must now be pursued through the electoral politics. In other words, a historical formation needs to transform into an electoral identity. At the same time, the Association also argued that within the larger Assamese collective being constructed during the period, the Ahom identity can continue as a constituent (Baruah: 2012).

The history of the Ahom identity has been dealt insightfully by Yasmin Saikia in her various researches. On the issue, her studies focusing

from the period 1970s to 1990s she makes an important point. She shows that the Ahom identitarian movement even during the post colonial period remained caught in a bind (thus the title of her book: *Struggling to be Tai Ahoms*). The bind was firstly in how to be an identity while being a formation of several identities and secondly how to formulate the concept of homeland when historically, the Ahom formation had been based on the idea and practice of trans-spatiality. Notably, the advocates of homeland were conscious of the bind. Therefore, as Saikia argues, their struggle to formulate the meaning of being Tai Ahoms. In my view, the struggle was between the history of the dialectic order and attempt to create a syncretic order from it. If the Ahom identity was caught in a bind, the same was also the case with the idea of "Assamese". Even when it was being formulated and advocated during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it was clear to people that "Assamese" as standard language and "Assamese" as identity were contemporary constructs only. By the 1930s, the very fact that along with the Ahom Association, tribal organizations were founded as distinct from the idea of "Assamese" though not outside the idea clearly indicated the problems in conceptualizing or practicing linguistic identity in the valley. Then how did literature now written in modern standardized Assamese engage with the problem?

The answer to the problems raised above can be found in posing the question was there a consensus on what should be "Assamese" literature? The answer is frankly in negative. Since the late nineteenth century until the twenty-first century, the idea of "Assamese" literature has had several experiments. I shall discuss only three. The first example is of Laxminath Bezbarua (1868-1938) and his writings between the 1880s and 1930s. Bezbarua was one of the most ardent advocates of the idea of "Assamese" language and "Assamese" identity. His views on language standard have already been mentioned. His advocacy in the idea of "Assamese" identity, that there can be and needs to be a collective entity called "Assamese" was because of his belief that progress (as found in colonial modernity) could be only realized in the form of such a collective syncretic identity. Bezbarua was a pioneer in fiction writing. Along with Padmanath Gohain Baruah, he was one of the first to successfully develop the craft of short story and novel

writing in modern Assamese literature. Bezbarua was writing during a time when the debates on language standardization and loss of voice of those not native to the eastern valley variant were still alive. Yet, Bezbarua chose to use the everyday language variant as the primary instrument of his literary experiments.

Bezbarua himself viewed his language use as a critique to the position that in modern Assamese the grammatical nature in language use should be Sanskritic. Bezbarua thought and advocated that if literature has to reach the common people, it needs to read the way it is commonly used. Therefore, the everyday form of the eastern variant figured prominently in his writings. His detractors though can equally claim that it was the methodical implementation of his views on language standard. But what if we see it vis-à-vis his idea of "Assamese" identity? Even if the idea of "Assamese" did not predate the nineteenth century, the language in different variants did exist in popular usage in the pre-colonial period. In the absence of a language standard, it existed primarily as a practice, through which inter-community interaction was carried out within the valley and across the neighbouring hills to the north and south as well.

In our earlier discussions on symbolic culture, the Assamese language as a practice (and not as a linguistic code) was also shown to be one such domain. I would argue that Bezbarua's social commentaries published in the magazines like *Jonaki* and *Bahni* he edited amply indicates that he chose the language as the rationale which can justify the possibility of an "Assamese" identity. Yet the problem of how an exclusive language standard can represent the inclusiveness which the "Assamese" identity needed to stand for was not settled. It was indeed a bind, in which, language standard was a necessity in the age of the printing press and its power to usher knowledge through the written word. The process of standard language, as Bezbarua saw it, was the path of progress. Yet, the very path also negated the scope of inclusiveness when a language practice is transformed into an exclusive language code. Bezbarua realized the problem, and his experiments in using the common usage, even if it was of the standard language, was an attempt to take language as close as possible to people, that people can identify themselves with the language.

But can Bezbarua's experiments be seen from perspectives other than that of making of linguistic identity? What I have in mind is relation between language and narrative in literature as an engagement with trans-spatiality. Becoming a frontier meant breakdown in the socio-spatial continuity. It meant territorialisation of the communities. It meant being individuated as peasants and yet remaining largely settled and territorialized in their pre-colonial social groups. Importantly, these processes were institutionalized. The peculiarity of the situation is evident from the fact that three conflicting or contradictory thoughts and practices operated simultaneously. They were the consciousness of one's social group, the idea of transcending that consciousness as an individual, and formulating a larger collective identity though still being a part of it both as an individual and as belonging to one's social group. The problems of the "Ahom" and the "Assamese" identity during the period exemplified it.

In his experiments in relation between language and narrative, was Bezbarua then trying to invoke the idea of syncretic order, something which was seen in pre-colonial Ahom or neo-vaishnava formations, but struggling with the underlying trans-spatial dialectical principle of the region? And was it precisely because the syncretic order of the language standard which was invoked was false and lacked historical heritage, what he attempted did not succeed either, i.e. to resolve the contradictions? To the first point of attempt at syncretic order, Bezbarua's repeated reference in his various writings to the neo-Vaishnava saint reformer Sankardeva (1449-1569) as the father figure of Assamese identity can possibly be further researched as an indication of this underlying strategy in his literature. But on the second point of the failure of the syncretic order at the very time of its creation, if Sankardeva could succeed during his period with regard to invented syncretic order in the dialectical context (the crisis in it came only later), what failed Bezbarua? It is certainly a matter to be further researched, but there is scope to view it from the perspective of changed nature of trans-spatiality between the pre-colonial and colonial period. As already outlined earlier, what was different between the historical contexts of Sankardeva and Bezbarua was the impact of colonial intervention on the dialectics of trans-spatiality. Therefore, despite the apparent commonality of strategy in negotiating the dialectic through the creation of syncretic orders, the former succeeded while the latter

failed. Indeed there was one difference between the two strategies. Sankardeva's syncretic order was articulated in the idea of religious formation while Bezbarua's was articulated in the idea of linguistic formation. Nevertheless, if the above line of enquiry is appropriate, then there is cause to research why syncretic orders emerge in certain historical moments in the otherwise operation of the dialectics of trans-spatiality.

This takes me to my second example. Bishnu Rabha (1909-1969), who continues to be a cultural icon in the region, came a generation after Bezbarua. When he entered the cultural scene in the 1930s, Bezbarua was already in the last years of his life. By then, the contradictions in the idea and practice of modern "Assamese" language and in the identity of "Assamese" were already evident. Thus, Rabha provides a different literary experiment through his works. Rabha was a writer, playwright, film maker, musician and dancer. What was incredible was that he left a mark in each of these fields. Rabha also belonged to the Rabha/Bodo community, i.e. what we call an "ethnic" community. One of the basic questions that Rabha attempted to address was how to communicate through art. Rabha was a communist. Being an active member of the RCPI (Revolutionary Communist Party of India), he spent most of his time during the 1940s and early 1950s as a political fugitive. This was also the most culturally productive period of his life. To Rabha, therefore, the challenge in communicating through art involved multiple issues. For example, it involved issues such as identity of ethnicity, identity of nationhood, communism and the fact that all these issues did not fall into any neat pattern, i.e. each subverted the other.

As regards literature, Rabha clearly identified that to communicate literature, it was important to transcend the written word. These views were indicated in his introduction to his collection of short stories titled *Sunpahi* (Rabha: 1989/2008). The different strategies to communicate that he adopted included using bi-lingual registers in his fictions, text-in-translation, reading out his writings in public gatherings, in neighbourhood get-togethers or in front of his hosts who sheltered him during his fugitive years, and performing them in festivals. Though Rabha was not the only writer-performer in the RCPI ranks in the valley during the period, he was the only one who used these strategies of

communication with the grassroots. Thus, at this level, he removed the distinction between the written word and the oral. However, Rabha's fiction (in fact, most of his cultural productions) aimed at making people aware of their class oppression and to show them how communism was the ideology which would usher an equitable context. In other words, Rabha's attempt was in making his readers/audience realise their own hegemonised unconscious and then also make them conscious in communist ideology and action.

In all his literary and other cultural works, one point always present was how the idea of class was indeed the only possible criterion based on which solidarities across distinctions among social groups could be forged. There are a few points about his works which to me are very significant. One of the significant features was inclusive strategy in literary production. Therefore, the meaning of his texts cannot be disassociated from the strategy. The objective of literature was not merely to voice ones' thoughts or ideas of change. The objective was as much to be able to communicate the thoughts and the intent of change so as to bring about the change. But to be able to communicate, one had to be inclusive in strategy. This is where the distinction between Rabha and Bezbarua lay. While Bezbarua too propounded his views of progress as he saw it, which was bourgeois in nature, his strategy to communicate his views remained confined to the written word. As a result, Bezbarua could not emerge from the contradictions in socio-spatial relations that colonialism had introduced. Through his writings, and despite his experiments, though Bezbarua attempted to create an inclusive category and its representative writing, he failed due to the contradictions. In this regard, to me, what is important about Rabha was not only his ideology and notion of class distinction, i.e. a new criterion of social distinction compared to the past, but also how his ideology and new notions of social distinction was combined with the question a shared space of communication. As evident, the ideology and the shared space of communication were inseparable. It was in that space of communication wherein the meaning of his texts was formed.

Was this space dialectic or syncretic in nature? The context which both Bezbarua and Rabha were faced with, in my view, was not that

of plurality of identities, or what we would today call multiple identities. The context in which they found themselves was one where social groups were left without the ability to come together into formations of solidarities despite distinctions, unlike what they achieved in the pre-colonial period. Both Bezbarua and Rabha found themselves in currents of contradictory processes due to the colonial intervention. It created a peculiar state of contradictory consciousnesses in which notions of distinctions (ethnic identity) and processes leading towards its erosion (national universe) seemed to have existed simultaneously. I doubt if the situation has changed even today. Bezbarua experimented with the written word founded on a new ideology of "Assamese" identity to engage with the context. Rabha experimented with communicating the written word founded with another new ideology of communism to engage with the context. Both were trying to create a shared domain which would allow social groups to form ideological formations, whether nationalist or communist. In the end, I think they both failed.

Was Bezbarua's "Assamese" a syncretic space? I think it was only an appeal he made to the people founded on the national idea. Was Rabha's communism that syncretic space? It too was only a political attempt founded on the revolutionary idea. But what their failure highlighted was the fact that the erosion of the pre-colonial dialectical order in the valley left the colonial order of contradictions. Bezbarua's or Rabha's literature was art as produced in the colonial order of contradictions. Though both tried to transcend it. It is evident that my argument on the pre-colonial dialectical order and the colonial order of contradictions is not based on romantic notions of the past. On the contrary, it is based on the idea of principle based on which a region constitutes itself. A colonial frontier, in my view, was denied a specific principle of constituting itself as a region from within. This is what distinguished it as frontier from the pre-colonial crossroad, despite the area in question being the same. I would also like to pose a comparison here with the argument that Nandini Sundar makes vis-à-vis the Bastar area, especially in her concept of dialectics of Dussera (Sundar: 1997/ 2009). If Dussera is the shared domain that integrates or relates diverse social groups and hierarchies into a social structure in the Bastar area, the shared domain rests primarily on the relation between rulership and ritual. The legitimacy of Dussera is linked to the ability of rulership

to enframe its authority institutionally in the social structure, while the medium of its expression is dussera. But at the same time, the ritual of Dussera is appropriated into the local customs of different social groups, transforming it into a local custom too. What it makes possible is that vertically, the authority of ruler is enforced and legitimised while horizontally, it integrates the diverse into a social mapping based on local appropriation of the supra local. The validity of ritual and rulership is closely tied, one does not exist without the other. In this context, it is shown that colonialism allowed this dialectics to grow further entrenched, the state now replacing the ruler and integrating the various social groups as colonial subjects.

There is one striking point when compared with the case of the valley. Colonialism re-enforced the shared domain in the Bastar area, also considered a "tribal" area and situated at the interstice of the northern and southern parts of the subcontinent. Was it a case that despite the objective being similar, the strategy of colonial pacification of Bastar and of the valley was different depending upon the suitability of the strategy in respective areas? In that case, does it once again highlight that "frontier" for the colonial state was much more than a mere administrative classification of convenience?

Before I move to my third and last example, let me highlight a point about the colonial order of contradictions I referred to with regard to the valley earlier. It may be posed that if frontier meant the contradictions of socio-spatial relations, did it emanate from the false assumptions of colonial knowledge or was it the result of deliberate colonial strategy of governing frontiers? On colonial knowledge and its place in governance, there is a rich body of research pertaining to understanding of land rights and customary laws in British India. Similarly, the role and place of anthropological knowledge in colonial governance across the world is another such case. More than categorical answers, it is the ironies which possibly highlight the relation between knowledge and governance. In the case of the valley in particular and the region in general, such ironies were visible. For example, if ryotwari settlement was colonial knowledge brought into the area, Gait's writings also indicated that it was as much a part of pacification of 'social asymmetries' to facilitate colonial governance.

In the same way, if plantations being set up in the foothills were based on series of scientific experiments and knowledge of suitable co-relation between soil, climate and tea plants, it was also a part of strategy of territorialisation and breakdown in pre-colonial socio-spatial relations. The objective in either case of land revenue settlements or plantations was pacifying the social and spatial nature of the frontier, leading to a manageable frontier. But clearly, the pacification was never complete. The contradictions it led to remained. The frontier remained turbulent throughout. And it got written down in colonial writings as late as 1940s, such as in Reid's *A History of Areas Bordering the Province of Assam*, that the turbulence was because the social groups of the region were "savage" tribes, and that colonial strategies of governance failed to "civilize" them either.

To the colonial state, the failure was in the failure to pacify the pre-colonial socio-spatial relations (trans-spatiality, as they termed it) completely. Nevertheless, they were able to change them into expedient arrangements as well. Thus, knowledge and governance were never separable. The praxis that they formed created the contradictions of frontier. In my view, what makes Bezbarua or Rabha historical was that they both were part of the contradiction of frontier. It was evident in their works. But what made them unique, i.e. distinguished them from others, was that they recognised the problem in their own ways and, importantly, attempted to change it.

My last example is taken from developments in literary experiments in modern Assamese literature, especially since the 1980s. By then, a few trends had come to stay. On the one hand, the politics of ethnic identities claiming historically non-existent "homelands", i.e. their territory, had assumed legitimacy. The politics, including armed movements, was based on the idea of ethnic distinction and to territorialise the distinction. On the other hand, there were also armed movements which brought together different social groups under the overall idea of "Assamese" and seek an independent territorial entity in that name. This was what United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) in their formative period stood for. Literary experiments since the 1980s actively engaged with the two contradictory politics. Writers revisited the question what is "Assamese" language and what can be "Assamese" literature? There has been a conscious attempt since then to create an

inclusive narrative. There were two kinds of inclusive narratives which were being experimented.

One kind of inclusive narrative had to do with multiple variants of (Assamese) language finding meaningful space in the narrative. It was meaningful space because the meaning of the narrative was in the reference created through the juxtaposition of the different variants of the language. The writings of Indira Goswami (1942-2011), especially those which were based on Assam, can be treated as representative sample in this regard. The third person narrative, i.e. the voice of the author, was in modern standard of the Assamese language. However, in the narrative, the different characters communicated in the language variants as per their respective social or locale specificity. The language variants signified the distinctions at social or locale levels within the "Assamese" identity. The instances of breakdown in communication or comprehensibility at the fault lines of distinction signified the ruptures within the "Assamese" identity. The author's voice in the modern standard of the language signified the fragmented reality of the "Assamese" identity. Her novels like *Bhikhar Patra Bhangi* (To Break the Begging Bowl, 1990) are examples of her experiments with idea of "Assamese" and contradictions it contained in practice of narrative. Indira Goswami's writings were not the first instance of use of what was called "dialects" in narrative. There were writers who had used it before her as well. But hers was possibly the earliest attempts to use the interplay of language variants to signify ruptures across social distinctions within the identity of "Assamese".

Her writings were in stark political contrast to the preceding years between the 1950s and 1980s. At that time, the predominant literary practice was to assume that the exclusive language standard was inclusive and that the language standard represented the "Assamese" identity. "Assamese", whether as language or as identity, was argued to be that syncretic space which accommodated the diverse in it. The motif of the river Brahmaputra where hundreds of its tributaries dissolved was often used to signify the word "Assamese". The history of debates and experiments with literary narratives between the 1880s and 1940s on the matter was almost completely overlooked. Ironically, they were also the decades which witnessed the severest critique of "Assamese" as linguistic identity from diverse social groups within the

valley. In my view, it was the irony of breakdown between a language and the social base that it claimed to represent. Thus, Goswami's writings emerged from the perceiving of the breakdown, and engaging with it. Her writings did not indicate how to overcome the problem. But what it did expose through literary experiment was that the syncretic space of "Assamese", whether as codified language or as identity, did not exist in reality. In her writings, river often was the motif of turbulence and death rather than life.

Further, her writings also highlighted the problems of invoking notions of shared domains to mediate distinctions. But importantly, she did not ignore the role of colonial intervention in influencing the ideas of distinction and shared domains. For example, in her arguably most famous novel *Datal Hantir Une Khowa Howdah* (The Moth Eaten Howdah, 1988), the social breakdown that the narrative emphasized was how the pre-colonial shared domain that the Satra (the neo-Vaishnava monastic orders) symbolized was eroded due to class consciousness, that the cultivators of land acquire as peasants. The distinction that she highlights was of class consciousness of peasants against the pre-colonial shared domain that the Satra institution symbolized and practiced. The peasants were social groups which in contemporary parlance would be "ethnic" groups. But their consciousness was not opposed to the idea of "Assamese". It was only to redefine "Assamese" as a more equitable political space and it could only be achieved by bringing down the shared domain of redistributive social and economic space that the Satras stood for. In the dismantling of the past, symbolized in the figure of the abbot who was killed despite his sympathies for the peasants, lay the future.

If there was one dimension that ran common in all her writings, it was the need to revisit what comprised "Assam" and the idea of "Assamese". Nowhere did she try to define it, unlike the writers of the preceding couple of decades. Did it mean that the inhabitants of the valley now lacked a socio-spatial principle that defined their relations? Was the idea of "Assamese" an attempt to invent a principle, whatever may have been its colonial origin, to negotiate the reality of this lack? Weren't Bezbarua and Rabha's literary experiments too a part of this attempt, a struggle to arrive at a principle that binds contradictory

multiplicities? It is worth remembering that Rabha, along with some of his contemporaries, advocated that the region including the valley could only exist successfully as a confederacy. The decades between the 1950s and 1980s clearly indicated that modern "Assamese" literature could not represent the social diversity it claimed to represent, a point confirmed in the subsequent years in the writings of Indira Goswami. Then how would Assamese literature map the reality of its struggle for a defining principle of itself and its relevance in the face of that struggle?

One of the trends in this regard has been to use Assamese language only as a descriptive tool in a narrative. In other words, language is only provided a descriptive role rather than any referential role. This use of language is often found in fiction which transcends the valley and incorporates the neighbouring areas of the region as well. They are not fiction based on what is "Assamese". They are fiction on what a frontier is and the various kinds of habitats that comprise it. In fact, in all these writings the emphatic point made is about the trans-spatial nature of the region. Therefore, the language only describes the diversity that comprises this trans-spatial region. The works of fiction which I have in mind are such as Anuradha Sarma Pujari's *No Man's Land*, or Anurag Mahanta's *Aulingar Zui* or Rita Chowdhuri's *Makam*. All these works are very recent, between 2006 and 2010. They have been commercially successful too. These writings seek to establish that the facility of a language can only be used to describe a frontier. The language cannot represent a social identity. If throughout the twentieth century, one of the basic problems of "Assamese" literature had been the relation between language and narrative vis-à-vis identity and ethnic distinction, then these works certainly are breaking away from the problem. In the process, they are redefining the relation between the two. Further, it has been the most direct placement of the idea of frontier in literary engagements in Assamese literature by more than one author and around the same time. Though being written in Assamese, their framework rather than being on identity is on the trans-spatiality of the region.

But does the trend also indicate a coming of the full circle for the relation between language and narrative in literary mapping of historical context? The language of the Buranji chronicles, which primarily became

the modern Assamese language was used in the chronicles as only a tool of description. It described the various socio-spatial relations and the shifting trends of solidarities and oppositions. These descriptions comprised the account. The chronicles did not practice the concept of court language. Thus, language did not signify or represent any social distinction. Throughout the late nineteenth and the twentieth century, the very attempt to negotiate colonial contradictions through the idea of "Assamese" identity redefined the relation between language and narrative. The various literary experiments struggled to balance the contradiction between an exclusive language standard and its inherent failure to be inclusive of distinctions of social diversity. Is it that from this realization emerges the attempt now to emphasise how the contradictions of frontier cannot be conceptualized in literary mapping. It can only be described, producing a literature which belongs to none, and yet universal to the entire frontier?

Conclusion

It is evident from the preceding discussion that I have tried to situate literature in the valley in two broad socio-spatial historical structures, namely crossroad and frontier. I have tried to argue that there can be historical borderlands or shatter zones. But the nature of such regions can change over time. The change, as I have seen it, is in the framework of its socio-spatial relations and the factors that mediate such relations. It is what makes regions historical. In other words, borderlands or shatter zones need not be seen as fluid formations. They give rise to social and spatial organization of collective life. In recent discussions on the north east India, the idea of trans-spatiality has acquired theoretical significance. And in obvious ways, it has shifted the focus away from earlier concerns like nationhood or mode of production. What is also remarkable is that it is one of the very few occasions when the state and the academia seems to theoretically converge on an issue, namely to consider the region as trans-spatial. The idea of trans-spatiality can be traced in pre-colonial literature as well as colonial writings. While in pre-colonial literature, trans-spatiality was a mode of socio-spatial organization of collective life, in colonial parlance, it meant organization of collective life which prevented colonialism from establishing its paramountcy.

The current theoretical convergence of the state and the academia on acknowledging trans-spatiality of the region has come about after nearly half a century of post-colonial denial about it. The denial was in the name of (Indian) nationalizing project of the region. What strikes me as equally notable is the emerging genre of creative writing which too views doing Assamese literature in the framework of trans-spatial frontier. In the process, it seeks to redefine what Assamese literature is, especially the relation between language and narrative. I see this genre of literature as transcending the framework of literature and identity, and engaging with the historical context of trans-spatiality. Thus, I ask are we witnessing the rise of new perspective that tries to shift the attention from identity to questions of trans-spatiality vis-à-vis the region, whether in state policy, or academic discourse or literature? How much of this perspective is juxtaposed between the pressures of nationalizing or globalizing a borderland?

Further, colonialism did change the trans-spatiality of the region to create a colonial frontier. Then I assume that the recent emphasis on trans-spatiality should be different from the colonial framework. Is this emphasis then a theoretical explanation of failure of identity politics to resolve the turbulence and problems of collective life in the region since the 1950s? Therefore, is it assumed to be a justification for moving away from frameworks such as identity or mode of production to explain the region, i.e. lack of organized structures is inherent to trans-spatiality? What makes it possible for the state and the academia today to come together on this, and especially in contrast to the theoretical ambiguities that divided both earlier? And importantly, what do we achieve from this emphasis on trans-spatiality today? The answers to some of these questions lie only in the future.

I have tried to show that literature maps society and it also maps itself. This consciousness of literature is embedded in its being part of the context on which it reflects upon. It is also the reason why literature can be treated as an atlas of social behavior and thinking. But literary experiments indicate that literature also maps itself. It is what constitutes literature into a domain of knowledge. Literature has always been a conscious act vis-à-vis its context. It is what allowed us to use literature as evidence of shift in region formation as well as how social life

negotiated the shift. Therefore, despite the limitations of my study in being confined to a narrow valley and only to its written traditions for evidence, the larger point about how borderlands can be historical structures, which can nevertheless change as region, is possibly addressed. But using literature as evidence of historical regions also showed that here is still scope of research in looking into literature as cognitive mapping of socio-spatial relations and as ideology of action. Or to what extent is such mapping and ideological action in literature connected? When viewing literature from the trans-spatial context, pre-colonial as well as colonial or post colonial literatures exhibit the problems of mapping trans-spatiality on the one hand and also being instruments of ideological action on the other. The changing relation between language and narrative is an indication of literature trying to engage with this literary problem. Analysis of this literary problem of literature might also provide new theoretical frameworks to study in what contexts syncretic orders come up in different historical moments in an otherwise dialectic order of trans-spatiality in the region.

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