Few scandals rocked the early nineteenth century Calcutta academic circuit more severely than the White Islands affair of Francis Wilford. Like most of the early indologists, Wilford was greatly interested in identifications of the tabulated spaces of the British Indian empire with the territories mentioned in ancient Sanskrit texts. His provocative essay on the geography of Egypt and the origin of the Nile on the basis of "the Ancient Books of the Hindoos" had already established him as an authority in the field. Now, between 1805 and 1810, he engaged himself in penning an equally provocative series of essays on the ancient geographical knowledge of the Hindoos about the west. As was usual, a Brahmin pundit was employed to spot and collate relevant sources from the purānas. Wilford's excitement became intense when the pundit told him after a few days that references had been found in ancient Sanskrit scriptures of a certain Śvetadvipa (White Islands) whose description perfectly tallied with that of the British Isles. Wilford received a translation of the relevant passages and began to write about this great discovery that would show how the colonial

1 Francis Wilford, "On Egypt and other countries adjacent to the Cāli River, or Nile of Ethiopia, from the Ancient books of the Hindus", *Asiatic Researches*, 3 (1792), 295-468
connection between the two countries had already been prefigured in the ancient native texts. In the course of writing, however, he chose to look at the original script and was shocked to learn that the pundit in his over-enthusiasm to help the employer had erased the “original” words and inserted the name of Śvetadvīpa instead. Two hundred years later, it is perhaps the intensity of the historicist demand on the local collaborators to produce an authentic tradition that attracts more attention in the story than the “fraudulent” nature of the Brahmins or the “imposture geographical literature of the Hindus.” The force of this demand has hardly left us. Places are frequently condemned to a dual nomological existence in South Asia. Whenever called upon to face up to the fiction of a continuous national history spanning across millennia, the place names that occupy the government documents, the maps, the respectable histories, and the official exchanges always threaten to disappear into other names: more archaic names mentioned in the ancient texts. Setting up this correspondence between the archaic and the contemporary, this chapter will recall for the readers, not only formed a major genre of much of the indological writings of the past two centuries, but also functioned as a foundational procedure of recuperating the forgotten histories of “India” and its regions. Right from the end of the eighteenth century, the intriguing question of place name identification has continued to excite the imagination of the local intelligentsias across South Asia till date. This chapter is concerned with exploring such place name identification practices in and through which the truth of Assamese history was produced and codified as a territorial attachment in the variegated orientalist discourse. Discussing the methods and conclusions of several identifications, this chapter not only wishes to register how the distance between the core and the margins of a

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2 Cf. Francis Wilford, “An essay on the Sacred Isles in the West, with other essays connected with that work”, Asiatic Researches, 7 (1805), 245-367; Asiatic Researches, 9 (1807), 32-243; Asiatic Researches, 10 (1808), 27-157; Asiatic Researches, 11 (1810), 11-152.

3 This incident has been discussed in some details in Thomas R. Trautmann, Aryans and British India (Vistaar: New Delhi, 1997), 91-3.

4 Horace Hayman Wilson, “Analysis of the Vāyu-Purāna”, Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, I (1832), 542 refers to the White Islands affair in this vein.

5 Vivien de Saint-Martin, quoted in Surendranath Majumdar, “Contributions to the Study of the Ancient Geography of India”, Indian Antiquary, L (1920), 119.

6 B. D. Chattopadhyaya, A Survey of Historical Geography of Ancient India (Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 1982) lists a few hundred entries on the subject between 1947 and 1972. In his introduction Chattopadhyaya not only observes a great deal of “methodological continuity” between colonial and so-called postcolonial writings in this genre but also notes how “[w]ith rare exceptions, “regions” in studies on historical geography correspond to present Indian states.” Particularly for Assam, see Ichhimuddin Sarkar, Aspects of Historical Geography of Prāgjyotisha-Kāmarūpa (Ancient Assam) (Calcutta: Naya Prakash, 1992) and Sarat Kr. Phukan, Toponymy of Assam (New Delhi, Omsons, 2001).
modern "nation" was constituted, exercised and contested along the axes of ancient space and eternal time of the nation, but also attempts to reopen some issues about the texture of disciplinary knowledge.

**Plotting Places**

In the beginning, two things, at least, need to be stated about the new will to absolute recognizability of ancient place-names. First, place name identification was something more than a sweet indological pastime. Preparing an onomastic inventory from the classical Sanskrit texts was rationalized in the name of retrieving the true tradition of the country by disentangling the historical from the mythical. Names of persons and places functioned as stable signposts in an otherwise opaque and slippery network of shared narratives. Their recurrence was understood as corroboration, as a mark of their historicity, and the stories in the context of which they were recognized were imagined as having been rendered interpretable within the language of history. Particularly the names of places occurring within the said texts ensured the idea of fixity and continuity without which a culture seemed unmappable. To stage a beginning, the historical discipline needed a theater of immobility, an indisputable foundation of space upon which the temporal plots could be unfolded. The currency of the "physicalist view" of space — "imbu[ing] all things spatial with a lingering sense of primordiality and physical composition, an aura of objectivity, inevitability, and reification" — within the nineteenth century historical profession has been discussed in greater details and with much more subtlety by various scholars. It suffices to say here that

7 "[Naming] practices created a network of places within which events could unfold its time, in which history could begin to take place once it had taken places", Derek Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 172.
9 Paul Carter, one of the pioneers in the field, defines "spatial history" as an active move against the mistaken teleology of "imperial history" which has it as its unexamined assumption that lands simply exist on the surface of the globe awaiting their colonizers, that they provide a stage on which history unfolds. "Imperial space... with its ideal, neutral observer and its unified, placeless Euclidean passivity, was a means of foundation, a metaphorical way of transforming the present into a future enclosure, a visible stage, an orderly cause-and-effect pageant." Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History* (London: Faber, 1987), 304. See also Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London:
almost a calculated erasure of the role of physical and ideological labor in producing spaces acutely informed the search for local and imperial/national traditions. Inscribing the extant localities on indology’s onomastic register justified British India’s claim to – as the 1828 East India Gazetteer put it – “the Brahminical geography.” In this sense, we shall argue, place name identification was a major site of ideological investment that worked to naturalize the space of British India. The reinscription of a place into a pre-British textual economy not only provided a sense of security to the British officials who could thus convince themselves of their remaining true to the local tradition, but also seemed agreeable to the middle-class “regional” intellectuals for having been allotted a place in “the great Indian tradition”.

Second, the process was unmistakably, but unequally, dialogic. Gleaning names from the Sanskrit texts, which were understood as reservoir of the authentic tradition, required considerable assistance from the pundits, particularly in the matters of exegeses and translations of the verses. By the end of the nineteenth century, a number of Sanskrit-knowing Indian scholars had already taken up the issue with great vigor, and within the appropriative bonds of nationalist histories toponymic identification flourished with a remarkable ease. The community that occupied the indological space in British India was not racially exclusive, and transmission of ideas and information across the cultural boundaries was certainly encouraged. But this does not lead us to believe that the scholarly space was exempted from the effects of racism or other governmentalities. The genre itself was framed within the cultural demand of metropolitan Europe upon the native to produce an unbroken and genuine “historical tradition”. History was the slogan of the day, and every narrative was opened up to the arrogance of the historical discipline, believing that thanks to its scientific methods nothing could remain hidden from its pervasive gaze.

However, as the White Islands incident amply demonstrated, the extraction of truth from an assortment of incommensurable traditions was a precarious undertaking. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the indologists assigned themselves the task of stabilizing the norms


and rules of identification, regularizing its procedures of differentiating between the true and the false, the relevant and the extraneous, and most importantly, the original and the interpolated. It has been examined in related studies how firmly the model of one Ür-text and its various deviations gripped the indological imaginings.\(^{12}\) Derivative of this was the notion of “interpolations”: sections of texts were marked as having been “inserted” later and therefore were understood as untrue or less authentic. The operational consensus among the indologists was that there existed ascertainable historical deposit beneath the surface of myths awaiting their decoders, the historians. This conviction was possibly inspired by a simpler positivist faith in the power of increasing accumulation of data in evening out all inconsistencies.\(^{13}\)

The search for the authentic tradition was of course not restricted to textual studies alone. Alexander Cunningham, who is often credited with the first systematic study of ancient place names in India,\(^{14}\) confidently declared in 1848 that a study of architecture, sculpture, coins and inscriptions “would throw more light on the ancient history of India, both public and domestic, than the printing of all the rubbish contained in the 18 puranas.”\(^{15}\) While Cunningham’s Memorandum of 1862 proposing a thorough “investigation of the archaeological remains of Upper India” described the former as “the only reliable sources of information as to the early condition of the country”,\(^{16}\) as the first Director of the Archaeological Survey he was soon to discover that without leads from the ancient narratives the disciplinary standards of coherence, correspondence and corroboration could not be established on the basis of “ancient monuments” alone. Stanislas Julien’s translation (1857) of the manuscripts ascribed to the seventh-century Chinese traveler Xuanzang encouraged Cunningham to undertake his well-known archaeological tour across the Gangetic Valley in the eighteen sixties.\(^{17}\) The course of this tour claimed to repeat Xuanzang’s itinerary and


\(^{13}\) Cf. Wilson, Analysis of Vāyu-Purāṇa, 536-7.

\(^{14}\) Bimla Churn Law, Historical Geography of Ancient India (Paris: Societe Asiatique de Paris, 1954), 53.

\(^{15}\) Quoted in Dilip K. Chakrabarti, A History of Indian Archaeology: From the Beginning to 1947 (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1988), 52.


\(^{17}\) There is definitely a tinge of irony in the fact that the historicity of the scripted kingdoms of “India” was primarily confirmed on the alleged testimony of Xuanzang (spelled alternatively as Hiuen Tsang or Hsuan-tsang), the monk from the Wei River valley conventionally associated in the Sino-Japanese histories with
establish the identities of the various kingdoms presumably visited by the Chinese monk twelve hundred years ago. The thrust of Julien’s translation, carried out within a stabler tradition of textual indology, was to render the “Sanskrit originals” of the Chinese nomenclatures. The amount of gravity that Julien attached to this task may be gauged from the fact that before printing the full translation he published a series of what he titled—“Documents Géographique”, where the issue of place name identification was intensively dealt with. Cunningham violently depended on this identification, but he also drew heavily on the works of Vivien de Saint-Martin saying that “[h]is identifications have been made with so much care and success that few places have escaped his research, and most of these have escaped only because the imperfection or want of fullness in our maps rendered actual identification quite impossible.” Nadia Abu El-Haj has recently shown in the context of Palestine how fundamental this politics of naming was to the gathering of material-symbolic facts through excavatory archaeology and how the Biblical overnaming of the terrain functioned to render the Jewish connection to the land visible—a connection that predates 19th-century Zionist colonization of Palestine. In South Asia, the curious history of overnaming Patna as Pataliputra in the survey of Rennell has been pointed out by an archaeologist.

the Fa-hsiang or Hosso traditions (vijñānavāda) that reject the reality of the “external world” outside perfect consciousness (vijñāna). As the famous sixteenth-century Chinese narrative Xiyouji indicates, Xuanzang’s alleged “Journey to the West” continued to be understood in the pre-British literary traditions more as a spiritual voyage than as a historical exploration. See Chapter Nine for a relevant discussion on the protracted process of extrication of secular landscapes from vernacular geographies.


19 Quoted in Abu Imam, Sir Alexander Cunningham and the Beginnings of Indian Archaeology (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1966), 53n.


21 “Considering the general significance of this identification it might be useful to examine how this was arrived at. D’Anville put ancient Palibothra at modern Allahabad at the confluence of the Ganges and the Yamuna because the place was supposed to be situated at the confluence of the Ganges with a very large river. Rennell calculated the distance given in Pliny from Taxila to various places in Punjab and the Gangetic valley including Palibothra. According to Pliny it was 425 Roman miles to Pataliputra or Palibothra from the confluence of the Ganges with the Yamuna and the mouth of the Ganges was 638 Roman miles below that. Rennell calculated that a Roman mile was ‘57 geographical mile in a straight line or about [0].70 “by the windings of the road.” By calculating the distance given in Pliny in this fashion he thought that by this account Palibothra should be “nearly about the town of Bar, 40 miles below Patna”. This was something he found very difficult to accept: “We can hardly doubt after this account of Pliny’s, but that some very large city stood nearly in the position which he assigns to Palibothra; but that this city was the capital of India, and the place visited by the Grecian ambassador, I do by no means suppose. I rather incline to think that the city meant by Pliny, stood on the site of Patna.”” Chakrabarti, History of Indian Archaeology, 16-17
Thus the procedure was somewhat like this: the words “I-lan-na-po-fa-to” would be read in the manuscript, “Hiranya Parvata” would be identified as the original, and Cunningham would locate it in the Mongher Hills after calculating the distance from the previous station; Chen-po in the manuscript, Čampā in translators’ renditions, Bhagalpur on the British Indian map; Kie-chu-hoh-khi-lo – Kajūghira – Kajinghar and so on. Etymology was not displaced by archaeology as the organon of toponymic discourse; it was only given a new lease of life. It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that in his first Four Reports Cunningham gratefully cherished the deep continuity between the amateur indologists and the professional field-archaeologists, comparing the former with the giants and the latter with the pigmies. Furthermore, Cunningham’s “Memorandum of Instructions”, which explained to his assistants in 1872 the six points that the Archaeological Reports “should ... always include”, prioritized “[t]he various names of the place reported upon, and their origin or derivation” as the opening focus of archaeological enquiry. Collection of local traditions, reading “ancient texts” and learning from the contemporary toponymic discourse remained equally important, if not given a new stamp of authority by the scientific idiom of field archaeology. “Kia-molu-po” was promptly ascertained as Kāmarūpa and in turn as Kamrup, a district in Assam Proper and its king “P’o-se-kie-lo-fa-mo” as Bhāskaravarma, although neither the Government nor the Director of the Archaeological Survey himself had been interested in proposing a full-fledged survey in the newly constituted Chief Commissionership. The authentic tradition of India - almost everyone traversing the early and mid-nineteenth century indological space presumed - could be recognizably and justifiably reconstructed without this frontier zone inhabited mostly by the head-hunting savages and the opium-eating idlers. Horace Wilson’s Ariana Antiqua and translation of Visnu Purāna – the most influential texts on Indian toponymy in the early half of the century – were premised on this idea.

Even when the “archaeological evidences” began to arrive they were not of much help in themselves, because decipherment was possible only within a certain ideological context. John Fleet acutely recognized this problem when he published in 1887 the third volume of
Chapter Four

the Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum, a series initiated by Cunningham, with translations and annotations. The 22nd line in the “Allahabad Posthumous Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta” mentioned the rulers of “Samatata, Davāka, Kamarūpa, Nepāla, Karttrpura” as “pratyantarpratih”. Fleet clarified,

This may denote either the kings within the frontiers of Samatata and the following countries, i.e., the ‘neighbouring kings’ of those countries, or the kings or chieftains just outside the frontiers of them. Upon the interpretation that is accepted, will depend the question whether Samudragupta’s empire included those countries, or whether it only extended up to, and was bounded by, their frontiers.25

Rather than conclusively closing the issue, inscriptions and coins continued to reenergize the debate on Assam’s location in the map of the Indian tradition.26 We shall have more occasions to refer to this question later. Here we pause to observe that in Assam, where the government did not extend the archaeological surveys till the end of the century, the project of recovering the ancient history of the region was helplessly dependent on an array of “classical” Sanskrit texts at least well into the beginning of the twentieth century.” The

26 See especially the note by H. Torrens in F. Jenkins, “Paper on ancient Indian land grants of copper, discovered in Assam, with literal translation by Saroda Prosad Chuckerbuty and notes by Pandit Kamala Kanta and H. Torrens” (1 Pl.), Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, IX (1840), 766-782 for the perplexities regarding place names generated by copper inscriptions. See also A. F. Rudolf Hoernle, “The Gauhati Copper-Plate Grant of Indrapāla of Prāgiotisa in Âsām” (3 Pl.), Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, LXVI (1) (1897), 113-132 and A. F. Rudolf Hoernle, “The Nowgong Copper-Plate Grant of Balavarman of Prāgiotisa in Âsām” (3 Pl.), Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, LXVI (1) (1897), 285-297 for related incompatibilities in various copper plates found in Assam.
27 In 1884 a list of ancient monuments in Assam was submitted to the Government of India. Gait’s 1891 proposal to revise this list, which he considered grossly incomplete and unsatisfactory, was not encouraged by the Chief Commissioner William Ward. Although a scheme for including Assam along with Bengal in one of the five Archaeological Survey circles was sanctioned in 1898, no Archaeological Surveyor ever visited Assam in the nineteenth century. Even Dr. Bloch’s visit in 1901-02 did not result in any Report. In 1903 it was officially reported that “Assam is not rich in objects of archeological interest”. See correspondences in “List of Archaeological Remains in Assam”, Assam Secretariat, General Department, Revenue A, January 1903, Nos. 73-119. [MSA] Although a half-hearted excavation was undertaken at the site of Dah Parbatia near Tezpur in 1924-5, the Director General of Archaeology again dismissed the demand of carrying out a full-scale excavation in 1935 saying that “Assam has fewer monuments to show than probably any other province” and that “no single existing structural moment of the period before the Ahom conquest is standing.” He recognized that “Assam is at present the only one among the Governor’s Provinces which has not yet provided itself with a Museum, which is a provincial subject.” But, said he, “for this the people of Assam have only themselves to blame” Note prepared by the Director General of Archaeology, “Re: Council Questions by the Hon. H. P. Barua”, File No. 609 (1935) in the Office of the Director General of Archaeology in India, New Delhi. I am indebted to Sraman Mukherjee for sharing his handwritten copy of this particular file with me.
problem that the early indologists had encountered in smoothing down the diversely-weaved Sanskrit narratives did not disappear even by the end of the nineteenth century.

As an exit from this disorderly pool of facts and fictions, myths and histories, Frederick Eden Pargiter, one of the most influential figures in early twentieth century toponymic discourse, saw two distinct and competing “traditions” narrating the Indian past: the “Ksatriya” epic-purānic tradition and the “Brahmin” Vedic tradition. And he did not conceal his preference. The Brahmans, he said, confused different persons of the same name, often “brought together as contemporaneous persons who were widely separated in time”, mythologized history and fabricated “religious tales” around historical persons. This was particularly responsible, he argued, for the toponymic confusion:

The Brahmans freely misapplied historical or other tradition to new places and conditions to subserve religious ends. Thus they transferred the story of Hariścandra, Rohita and Śunahṣėpa and that of Purūravas to the Gōdāvāri in order to enhance its glory in the Gautami-Mahātmya. They connected Rāma with the River Lauhiya (Brahmaputra), and Urvāśi with that river and also Mount Malaya.

The historian’s perplexity, therefore, was not due to the insufficiency of his own tools, or the inapplicability of his hypotheses, but rather developed from his encounter with an erroneous worldview that did not care to differentiate between the true and the false. Forced to face the historicist interrogation, the popular amalgam appeared indefensible.

In the early eighteen nineties, Pargiter began to publish his thickly-footnoted translations of the Mārkandeya Purāṇa in the “Bibliotheca Indica” series of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Most of the notes were dedicated to spot allusions of various countries and to locate them on the map of British India. It is interesting to observe that Pargiter made no attempt to spatialize the “cantos” LIV (“The Description of Jambu-dvīpa”), LV (“The Geography of Jambu-dvīpa”) and LVI (“The Descent of the Ganges”) though these were unmistakably “geographical” (if descriptions and directions of locations or landscapes are to be treated as part of geography) and described with intriguing details the six seas (respectively of saltwater, sugar-cane juice, wine, ghee, curdled milk and milk) separating the seven islands or dvāpas (Jambu, Plaksa, Śālma, Kuśa, Krauṇḍa, Śaka and Puskara) as well as the seven “mountain

29 Ibid, 63-77.
30 Ibid, 71.
systems" (Himavat, Hemakūta, Nisadha or Rsbha, Meru, Nila, Śveta and Śrīṅgin). Presumably these seemed fictive to our modern analyst, and though the following two "cantos" frequently referred to these dvīpas, seas and mountains, his explanatory footnotes declared that they ("Cantos" LVII and LVIII) were based on verity while the previous ones were purely mythical.

Now, the scientistic idiom of his analysis called for a justification here: where might one draw the line between the historical and the mythical in the Purāṇas? Pargiter's answer was that "[t]here is plenty of the fabulous in Hindu geography, but it is confined, as a rule, to outside lands and the allusions to purely Indian topography are generally sober." What then were the limits of this "purely Indian topography"? Of course, no one asked this question at that time to Pargiter, but it is possible to infer the unspoken answer from the statement of Surendranath Majumdar a few years later, when he defended Pargiter saying, "As the subject of our study is the ancient geography of India and not the geographical theories of ancient Indians, we dismiss the theory of seven dvīpas [etc.] ... and return to the sources describing India only:"

The assumptions here were that the Indians did not need "theories" to access the reality of "India" and that this reality of an always-already existing Indian space had stayed alive from the ancient through the medieval to the modern period. It has been discussed elsewhere how modern regimes of territorial control in their self-authenticatory rides continually underplay the contingency of nation-space and repress the contingent aspects of its production. Here we confine ourselves to note Assam's discursive career as a late-coming frontier province in this imperial space of British India.

What often stood in the way of accessing the territorial through the textual were indications of multiple and mutually canceling locations of place names. Contradictions, seemingly

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32 Wilford, for example, dismissed the "Bhuvana-cosa" sections of the purāṇas, along with most of the "Cshetra-samāsas", as "entirely mythological, and byeneth our notice". However, he added that "[r]eal topographical treatises do exist: but they are very scarce, and the owners unwilling, either to part with them, or to allow any copy to be made, particularly for strangers. For they say, that it is highly improper, to impart any knowledge of the state of their country, to foreigners; and they consider these geographical works as copies of the archives of the government of their country." Francis Wilford, "On the Ancient Geography in India", Asiatic Researches, (XIV) 1822, 373-5
33 Quoted in Hemchandra Raychaudhuri, Studies in Indian Antiquities (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1932), 40.
34 Majumdar, Contributions to Study of Ancient Geography, 119.
35 Thongchai, Siam Mapped; Anne Godlewska and Neil Smith (eds.), Geography and Empire (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); Anderson, Imagined Communities, 163-185; Edney, Mapping an Empire.
irreconcilable within the language of history, proved to be too numerous to be evened out. Prāgyotisha, for example: “Prāg-jyotisha was a famous kingdom in early times and is often mentioned in the Mahā-Bhārata. The references to it, however, are rather perplexing” for it “was placed in the North region” in the Mahābhārata while in the Mārkandeya Purāṇa it was “considered to be in the East.” The Mahābhārata positioned it both next to “Antar-giri, Vahir-giri and Upa-giri”, which were readily identified as “the lower slopes of the Himalayas”, as well as near the ocean (“sāgarānūpa”). Sāgarānūpa was rendered as “marshy regions” in Pargiter’s translation and he inferred, “these marshy regions can only be alluvial tracts and islands near the mouths of the Ganges and Brahma-putra as they existed anciently.” It may be of some relevance to note here that our indologists frequently resorted to the argument of geological changes, and irregularities in logical smoothness were often contained in the name of the changing course of rivers and the nomadic habits of peoples. Macdonell and Keith’s influential *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects* would be a paradigmatic example. Nobin Chandra Das, a Bengal Provincial Service employee and one of the first Indians to publish a full monograph on the subject of ancient Indian toponymy, argued that places like India, Java, Mexico and Polynesia “were in closer communication with one another by land than they are at the present day” and could find references to “aurora borealis” and “submarine volcanic fire” in the Rāmāyana. What requires to be mentioned is that even in the mind of this geological anarchist the cartographic image of British India was so deeply ingrained that he identified the river Nalini of the Rāmāyana with the Brahma-putra since the river in the text was said to have been “the easter-most [sic] of all rivers”.

Inscribing the Brahma-putra, largely uncharted till the second decade of the twentieth century, on the purānic register posed one more difficulty for the identifier. He was certain that “[t]he people of Laubhitya”, mentioned in the Purāṇa, “was the country on the banks of the River Lohita, or Lauhitya or Lohityā, and probably also Lohita-Gangā, the modern Brahmaputra.” But the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata, the texts on whose authority he claimed to sanction this identification, also indicated “a different application” suggesting its

36 Mārkandeya Purāṇa, 328-329n.
situation “between the Ganges and Go-mati.” This second Lauhitya, as it were, he associated with the sage Viśvā-mitra who “had certain descendants called Lohitas who may have been the children of his grandson Lauhi.”

The venture of translating the epic-purānic depictions of the country in the expression of habitable landscapes was fraught with other incompatibilities as well:

[I]n some passages it is called a Mleccha kingdom ruled over by king Bhagadatta, who is always spoken of in respectful and even eulogistic terms (e.g., Sabhā-P., xxv, 1000-1; and l. 1834; Udyoga-P., clxvi, 5804; and Karna-P., v, 104-5), and in other passages it is called a Dānava or Asura kingdom ruled by the demons Naraka and Muru (Vana-P., xii, 488; Udyoga-P., xlvi, 1887-92; Hari-V., cxxi, 6791-9; cxxii, 6873, etc.; and clxv, 9790; and annotations to Kishk.-K., xili, in Gorresio’s Rāmāyana); while in some other passages the allusions seem mixed (e.g. Sabhā-P., xiii 578-80, which seems to call Bhagadatta a Yavana; and of this, see id. l. 1834-6).

“The second class of passages”, Pargiter affirmed, “are spoilt by hyperbolical laudation.”

Like many indologists of his time, he believed that “[the stories] are more trustworthy when narrated simply. ... They are open to doubt the more they are elaborated and amplified.”

Hence, the passages that described Pragjyotisha as “a Dānava or Asura kingdom” were understood as interpolated and inauthentic – solely on the evidence of their linguistic splendor. This also pushed the passages with “mixed allusions” out of consideration. Pragjyotisha was a Mleccha kingdom and consequently isolated from the main stream of the ancient Indian civilization. On the ventriloquistic testimony of the purānas Pargiter identified three races as the chief constituents of ‘the Indian tradition’: the Ailas, the Mānivas and the Saudyumnas. The “Pragjyotisha kingdom ... is nowhere connected with any of these races, and would seem to have been founded by an invasion of Mongolians from the north-east, though tradition is silent about this outlying development.” And although in the Rāmāyana he came across an alternative genealogy of the Pragjyotisha kings, stemming from an Aryan sovereign, this did not make him change his opinion about the relative aloofness of the kingdom which he identified as western Assam and “the whole of North Bengal proper”:

39 Mārkandeya Purāṇa, 357n.
40 Ibid, 328-329n.
41 Pargiter, Ancient Indian Historical Tradition, 71.
42 Ibid, 292.
43 Mārkandeya Purāṇa, 328-329n.

Naming Places, Placing Names
"The Raghu-Vamśa places it seemingly beyond the Brahmaputra (iv. 81); but Kālidāsa was a little uncertain in distant geography."\(^{44}\) Similarly, the Mārkandeya Purāṇa’s “author’s knowledge of Eastern India was so hazy that he treats Kāma-rūpa as being easy of access from the Middle-Land [Madhyadesa].”\(^{45}\) What calls for our attention here is not so much the absurdity of holding Kālidāsa or the presumed “author” of the Purāṇa guilty of poor geographical knowledge, but rather the set of the unstated assumptions which discursively enabled such accusations. Pargiter was convinced that “the ancient Indian tradition” was not only connected but also continuous, that the names Kāmarūpa and Prāgjyotishapura in all the narratives classed as “ancient Indian” stood for the same slice of earth and that they formed, if not a completely disconnected, then at least an interstitial, exterior to the main body of that Tradition. Hence, when he identified Kāma-rūpa with “the western portion of Assam” for the first time in the book in the context of a story where it was said that Sva-ročis built a city there for one of his sons, Pargiter also frowned: “A town on the hill there can only be in the Himalayas in the north, or in the Garo and Khasia Hills on the south, neither seems a likely situation for an ancient Hindu capital.”\(^{46}\) For the same reason, the allusion to “Kāma-rūpa, the modern Gauhati in Assam, ... as [being] specially appropriate for the worship of the Sun” also seemed “unintelligible”\(^{47}\) to the historian. After identifying and describing several other rivers and mountains in the northern, central, southern and western India, Pargiter turned to a line in the Mārkandeya Purāṇa where it is said, “The Rishi-Kulya [sic], and Kumārī, Manda-ga, Manda-vāhini, Kripa, and Palāśini are known to spring in the Śukti-mat mountains.” The footnote runs,

These Mountains are but very rarely mentioned ... . They were in the Eastern region, for Bhima in his conquests in that quarter marched from Hima-vat towards Bhallāta and conquered the Mountain (M. Bh. Sabhā-P., xxix 1079). Though Bhallāta does not appear to have been identified, the only noteworthy hills in the east which have not been assigned to the other great ranges are Garo, Khāsi and Tipperah Hills which bound Bengal in that direction. Can these be the Śukti-mat Mountains? There seems to be no improbability in this, for the river Lohita or Brahma-putra and the country Kāmarūpa, which is in the Assam Valley, were known. If this identification is satisfactory, the River Kūmarī may be the modern Someśwat which flows southward between the Garo and Khāsi Hills (both being names of Durgā); and the Kripā may perhaps be the Kapili.

\(^{44}\) Ibid.
\(^{45}\) Ibid, xix.
\(^{46}\) Ibid, 411n.
\(^{47}\) Ibid, xv-xvi.
which flows into the Brahma-putra a little above Gauhati, the ancient Kāma-rūpa; the other streams are not recognizable."48 Like most toponymic identifications, this was also open to challenges from within the indological community. These mountains had previously been identified with the one to the south of Sehoa and Kānker (which gives rise to the Mahanadi) by A. Cunningham and were subsequently identified with ranges as varied as the one in the north of Hazaribagh by Beglar, the Kathiawad range by C. V. Vaidya, the Sulaiman range by R. C. Majumdar and the chain of hills from Raigarh to Manbhum by H. C. Raychaudhuri.49 But what may detain us here is not so much the comparative weakness of Pargiter's inference as his brilliant gesture to evade the unbearable blankness in the imperial litany of nomination by giving the Hills annexed by the British twenty years before to bear the cross of a purānic name. Here the contextual plenitude is conceived of as a continuum of structured events organized according to the same narrative logic of the exposition and this creates the effect of past as being homologously structured. Purānas become the site where the sequence of the constitution of the British Indian space could be rediscovered. Since the rest of the Indian space had already been flagged, the leftover and the "rarely-mentioned" could safely be assigned to the belated entrants into British India. Assam was not simply "out of place in the historical time of modernity"50 but also an interpolated addendum in the frozen time of tradition.

This was the point with which some of the nationalists were uncomfortable.

Cognates, Communities, Cartographies

In 1877 Anundoram Borooah, a magistrate by profession and an indologist by preference, had already published his Ancient Geography of India, a toponymic inventory collated mostly from the post-Vedic Sanskrit literature.51 The striking feature of this compilation was its

48 Ibid. 306n. Emphasis added. 49 See Raychaudhuri, Studies in Indian Antiquities, 113-120 for a summary of the different arguments. 50 Cf. McClintock, Double Crossings
51 This was originally conceived of as an appendix to his much-acclaimed English-Sanskrit Dictionary. Friedrich Max Müller particularly welcomed the Geographical Appendices hoping it would be "gratefully received by Sanskrit scholars in Europe." Quoted in Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, ānandarām baruā: jivan-carit (1920; Guwahati: Lawyer’s Book Stall, 1955), 202
unhesitating identifications. The ambiguities and contradictions, which would puzzle Pargiter a few years later, were simply erased out of consideration. Borooah's sources on Kāmarūpa and Prāgjyotishapura came mostly from the Mahābhārata and the local traditions. "To the north-east of Pundra Desa [identified with north Bengal] lay the important kingdom of Kāmarūpa, which is said to have extended from the banks of the Karatoyā to the extremities of Assam", affirmed Borooah, placing the country in the category of Eastern Countries. He cited the authority of the Mahābhārata though the name "Kāmarūpa" does not occur there. And as far as Prāgjyotisha was concerned, Borooah did not even mention the fact that according to the description of the Sabhā Parva, it is Bhīmasena who conquers the East, Sahadeva the South, Nakula the West and Arjuna the North "while Yudhishtīra the King Dharma resided in the Khāndava tract" [2.23.23]. In the East, Bhīma vanquishes the Pāñcālas, the Gandakīs, the Videhas, the Daśārṇas, the Ćedis, the Kosālas, the Kāśis, the Vaiṅgas, Tāmralipti, the Suhmas and the Paundras [2.26.1-2.27.25], and even crosses the river Lauhitya [2.23.27]—which Borooah expectedly identified with the Brahmputra—but does not get nearer to Prāgjyotisha. On the other hand, Prāgjyotisha is confronted by Arjuna in the north immediately after the conquests of the island of Śakala and the princes of the Seven Islands—which Borooah identified with "Sīalkot in Kashmere" [2.23.23]. Similarly in Rāg̦huvaṃśa, another chief source of Borooah for identifications, the hero's conquest account places the Eastern Ocean (Purvasāgara), Suhmadeśa [IV. 35], Vaiṅga [IV. 36-7], Kalīṅga (along with Utkala) and Mahendraparvata [IV. 38-43] in the East while classes the "prāgjyotisesvvarah", the lord of Prāgjyotisha, in the North along with the kings on the banks of Sindhu [IV. 67], the Hunas [IV. 68], and the Kambojas [IV. 69-70]. The Rāmāyana does the same. And even the text from the north, Rājataṃśiṅṇī, says that Lalitāditya conquers

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52 Anundoram Borooah, Ancient Geography of India (1877; Gauhati: Publication Board, Assam, 1971), 68.
54 Ibid, 2, 80-82.
55 Ibid, 82.
56 Ibid, 77-78.
57 The Rāg̦huvaṃśa of Kālidāsa. With the commentary of Mallinātha. Edited with a literal English translation, with copious notes in English intermixed with full extracts, elucidating the text, from the commentaries of Bhatta Hemādri, Charitvārvadhana, Vallabha, Dinakaramiśra, Sumativijaya, Vijayaganī, Vijayānandastīrī's Varacharanasevaka, and Dharmamenu, with various readings &c., &c. by Gopal Rāg̦hunāṭaṇ Nandargikar (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1971).
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Prāgjyotisha in the north along the Kāmbojas [IV. 165], the Tuhkhāras [IV. 166], the Bhauutas [IV. 168], the Darads [IV. 169], [IV. 171], Vālukāṃbuḍhī [IV. 172], Sitrājya [IV. 173-174] and the Uttarakurus [IV. 175]. In spite of the strikingly persistent pattern of the descriptions across the texts our indologists chose to read these conquest accounts more as veiled geographical reports than as stylized expositions in the high Sanskrit literary traditions. The geographically programmed historicist search foreclosed the possibility of addressing the question of stylistics.

In the Sabhā Parva, to return to Borooah's inventory, after the triumph in Prāgjyotisha Arjuna moves to take control of Antar-giri, Vahir-giri and Upa-giri and then Brhanta or Kuliśa, Paścàdeśa, Divahprastha, the Trigartas, the Utsavasamketa ganas, the Dārvas, the Kokanādas, the town of Abhisaśi, Uraś, Simhapura, Suhmas, the Čolas, Bāhlika, the Lohas, the Upper Kāmbojas, the Northern Rsikas, the Niskutas and so on until he reaches the gate of Harivarsa, unapproachable for a human being [2.23.24-25]. Harivarsa, expectedly, did not find an entry in Borooah's index. He referred to the Prāgjyotisha king Bhagadatta's "presents to Yudhishthira in the great Rājasīya festival, viz., fine horses, jewelled ornaments and swords with hilts of pure ivory", and also justified the identification of Prāgjyotisha with Assam on this ground saying,

Horses are not indigenous to Assam, but a fine breed of ponies is found in Bhootan. Elephants also are not common in Lower Assam, but still caught in the Dooars and the jungles of Upper Assam. In speaking of this province, Kālidāsa speaks of black aloë-wood and we learn from Dr. Roxburgh that that it is a tree of the eastern frontier.

But the very next line in the Mahābhārata, from where these references were lifted, narrates, "Other folk from different regions, with two eyes, three eyes, or one in their foreheads, turbaned and nomadic, Bāhukas, and cannibals, and one footed tribes I saw at the gate…" [2.27.47]. Borooah (like the other indologists), of course, never took up these regions for spatialization. The frontier province was not only demarcating the British Indian space from the foreign spaces but was also separating it from the realm of wild imaginations. The

61 Borooah, Ancient Geography, 68-69.
political-geographical fact of Assam’s liminality was sharpened by Prāgjyotisha’s narrative situation between the knowable real and the unascertainable fabulous.\textsuperscript{63} It is not simply because of the ironing out of the ambivalences in order to produce a comprehensible whole of India that we call Borooah’s account nationalist, but also because it was distinguished from the contemporary European indologists’ accounts in the way it employed the local traditions.\textsuperscript{64} In fact, it was on their authority that Borooah confirmed Kāmarūpa to have been the land where Krishna had fought Naraka, precisely the connection rejected by Pargiter as incredible:

> The ancient capital of Kāmarūpa was at Prāgjyotisha or Prāgjyotishapura on the Lauhitya, by which the Brahmaputra is generally known to the people of Upper Assam. Local tradition identifies it with modern Gauhati, lately the seat of the Lieutenant of the Assam-kings. The hill of Aśvakṛṣṇa on the other side of the river is still pointed out as the place where the demon Naraka fell and the marks of his great opponent Kṛṣna’s horse’s hoofs are still shewn to the credulous devotees who flock the temple or bathe in the sacred waters of the river.\textsuperscript{65}

However, it is necessary to observe here that recounting of national glory through the nagging gray litanies of toponymic inventories and dictionaries took diverse forms and the legitimacy of local oral traditions was severely contested by several Indian scholars. The process of production of the authentic local, many of them began to recognize, was fraught through numerous difficulties. The “original name” of Tezpur in Assam – it was almost a consensus among the middle class intelligentsia of the province by the end of the nineteenth century – was Šonitapura, the capital of the Prāgjyotisha king Vāna. The consensus was certainly assisted by the fact that both the names meant, respectively in Assamese and Sanskrit, “the city of blood”. Hem Chandra Goswami, an Extra Assistant Commissioner at Tezpur and “an authority on the Assamese antiquities”, reported that the town was called and known as Šonitapur’ till the British occupation of the country. A certain Deputy Commissioner changed it to ‘Tezpur’ to make it pure Assamese, it is said. ...
According to local traditions a large number of people were killed in the battle that was fought between Vâna and Śrikrśna, so much so that the waters of the Brahmaputra became quite red with blood.

Another indological giant, Padmanatha Bhattacharyya Vidyavinoda, dryly remarked,

I do not think, however, that the capital of so mighty a prince as Vâna bore such an inauspicious name as ‘blood-city’; and I am rather inclined to believe that śonita’ as an adjective here means ‘red’, so that its meaning is ‘red-city’ instead of what is signified by the Assamese versions.

Hence,

This popular interpretation falls to the ground when we remember that the city had had no other name in the purāṇas while spoken of even before that bloody battle was fought. It is the nature of the common people often to misinterpret a name and then invent what is called a folk-tale to support it.66

This particular confusion was not to be conclusively settled within the parameters of indological discourse, and the idea that hunting for history in “folktales” would be necessarily self-defeating continued to hold extensive ground among the indologists, particularly those who were writing from outside of the province. Therefore, when Nundo Lal Dey published the first edition of his Geographical Dictionary of Ancient and Medieval India in 1899, even now considered as a useful compendium in many of the Indian universities, he chose to remain faithful to the established way of purely textual studies. “Time has mutilated or obscured the ancient names of places that usually figure in the historical narratives … almost out of recognition”, a remorseful Dey complained. “The restoration of the altered derivatives to their genuine originals”, however, seemed perfectly achievable in view of the fact that most of the changes are found not to have taken place haphazardly.

Barring names displaced by new ones by some cause or other, they appear in most cases to be governed by the rules of the Prakṛt grammars, except where the peculiar brogue of a particular place has checked or modified the application of the rules.67

Thus grammar became the perfect reflection of the order that was to be found both in the “haphazardness” of time and in that of the local traditions. Dey suggested ten “rules” for

identification, porous enough to sponge in all diversities and exactly for that reason sneered at by the later workers in the field. 68

Dey was not insensitive to the question of contradictory references. Apart from Assam, he identified two other locations of the Kāmākhya pītha in the purānic literature, one in the Punjab near the river Devikā which, he significantly informed, was still “a place of pilgrimage” and the other was Māyāpurī, near Benares. 69 Similarly, the troubling question of Prāgjyotisha’s direction (north or east?) was addressed in the form of suggesting two separate locations for the ancient kingdom— one in Assam, and the other “on the bank of the river Betwā or Betrāvāti.” 70 Lohitya was identified with the Brahmaputra, while Lohitya-Sarovara was separately catalogued as “[t]he source of the river Čandrabhāgā or Čināb in Lahoul or middle Tibet.” 71 But, for Dey, these divergences did not stand in the way of imagining an uninterrupted history of Assam beginning from the age of the Mahābharata to the time of Buchanan’s tour in Rangpur. With a little help from etymology, Dey managed to dole out an answer to the baffling interruption of the Tai-Ahom kings: “The word ‘Ahom’ is perhaps a corruption of Bhauma, as the descendants of Narakasura were called.” 72

Principles of an inclusive nationalism, which subsumed every trace of difference within the folds of an eternal and undisturbed sameness, were at work here. All differences had their places; all forms were on record; but, as in a grammar, all were connected in hierarchical relations—the originals and the corruptions, the essentials and the ephemerals. For the nationalist indologists writing for a subcontinental middle class readership, the structure of Indianness was not very different from that envisioned by the European pioneers in the field.

But a rather different cartography of the nation was being prepared at the provincial level. The search for a respectable location in the map of the Indian tradition particularly haunted the early twentieth century middle class Assamese intelligentsia, fashioning a new idiom of selfhood that was sharpened through an intimate and complex relationship with the

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69 N undo La! Dey, The Geographical Dictionary of Ancient and Medieval India (1899; London: Luzac & Co., 1927), 86
70 Ibid, 158.
71 Ibid, 115.
72 Ibid, 87.
intelligentsia of Calcutta, the colonial epicenter. We can turn here to look at the paradigmatic case of A. C. Agarwala, who had been writing in the Assamese periodical Bañi on the toponymic identifications for the local audience for quite some time. In 1921 he published a booklet in English in order to
draw the attention of all Vedic scholars, antiquarians, and the historical and geographical societies to the fact that a stream of Aryan families came down from Thibet [sic] through the passes of the Eastern Himalaya into Upper Assam and settled there. It was from Assam [that] they migrated to other places in Burma and Northern India.73
Predictably, the mainstay of Agarwala’s discourse was etymology: “The Brahmaputra is called Dirhang or Dihang in the Sadiya Frontier Tract. The Vedic name of this river was Drisadvati [sic] that has now corrupted to Dihang.” Sarasvati, another Vedic river that continues to cause controversy among the present-day historians, was identified by Agarwala at one place with Suban-sri74 and at another with Brahmaputra. The presumed etymological trajectory in the second case was rather complicated: Sarasvati to Halawati to Hlawti to Lowit to Lohit.75 In the same manner, the famous Sapta Sindhu region was identified with Sadiya, Ākāśa with the Aka Hills, Bhūtasthāna with Bhutan and Dyouh with the Daphla Hills; the Bodos were given to carry the name of Varuna and Dukku in the Abor Hills was understood as the nomological residue of Daksa.76
Once these major Vedic pointers could be positioned on the landscape of Assam, the rest of the sacred geography was a piece of cake:
The outer hills between the Drisadvati (now Dihang) and Saraswati (now Suban-Sri) inhabited by the Aryans were known afterwards as Brahnavarta [sic]. The easternmost point of the Himalayas was probably the Mount Meru or Ila mentioned in the Vedas, and Adi Sharga [sic] was at the foot of the same watered by the Dib or Dibāng and Dīk or Dikrang rivers.
All this clearly showed, at least for Agarwala, that “[t]he Aryans compiled their earliest sacred books such as [the] Vedas and [the] Upanishads when they lived in Upper or the North-
Eastern part of Assam. The Eastern Aryans (Devas and Brahmas) probably met the Western or Iranian Aryans in the Punjab.\textsuperscript{77}

The name of Prāgjyotisha, therefore, was invested with a semantic immensity:

The Aryan civilization dawned in Assam, the land of the rising sun of India. It was justly called Prāg-jyotish [Prāgjyotisha], i.e. the light of the East. This light travelled towards the east and west and illuminated Burma and the eastern Peninsula and the whole of northern India.\textsuperscript{78}

In other words, Agarwala's formulation inverted, though did not displace, the discursive hierarchy of Indianness: the frontier province of British India had not been on the fringes of Vedic India; on the contrary, it had been the provenance of the Aryan civilization. The logic of the originary, however, was sustained. And the foundational fiction of an essentially Indian space continued to work. Places changed their places and, at the same time, remained stationary. This served dual purposes: on the one hand, Agarwala could strengthen the contemporary upward mobility movement of the local middle castes saying that “[i]t is a great mistake to suppose that the Brahmans and Kayasthas of Assam came from Bengal. [Rather,] The word Kaietha (now Kayastha) seems to be a corruption of the Assamese ‘Kalita’”; on the other hand, he could reconcile the emergent middle-class grudge of inhabiting a largely ignored frontier province by claiming an indispensable interiority within the space of the essential nation. It took no time for the arguments of Agarwala to be popular. Within six years, Rajani Kumar Padmapati published his equally sensational English booklet, \textit{A Strange Mistake of Geographers}, where he argued, much in the line of Agarwala, that Ptolemy's “Serike” and Mahābhārata's “Swarga” (usually translated as Heaven) were the one and same place, and “that Serike was the former name of Kamrup.”\textsuperscript{80}

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid, preface.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid, 36
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid, 24. He uses Dalton, Gait and the Census Reports to prove this point. Page 40-1.
\textsuperscript{80} “The cause of so much controversies and conflict leading to confusion among geographers about the site of Serike is due to the great mistake made by Ptolemy in thinking the Kasia range between the Brahmaputra and the Surma Valleys to be the continuation of the Kasia range on the South of Nepal. Due to this erroneous idea, he, at the time of the preparation of his map, extended the Kasia range of Nepal in the same parallel of latitude which goes by the north of the eastern part of Emoda to a great extent to include the eastern part of it in Serike for the Kasia range of Assam, which certainly his informers informed him to be within Serike. The result was that the Kasia range of Assam instead of being placed in his map towards the south eastern part of Emoda was placed towards the north and with it the whole of Serike, except Ottororokhorr, regarding which he had probably separate information to be towards the south of Emoda.” Rajani Kumar Padmapati, \textit{A Strange Mistake of Geographers} (Tezpur: Author, 1927), 14-5. It is of some relevance to note that Lassen in his \textit{Indische Alterthumskunde} (1858) had argued that the “mountain-country with Assam has remained totally unknown” to Ptolemy. An annotated translation of Lassen's
That Assam was indisputably internal to the cultural geography of India was also the key contention of Nagendra Nath Vasu who published the first of his three-volume *Social History of Kamarīpa* in the next year, 1922. Promising to set forth “as faithful a picture as possible of that glorious land of hallowed memory, known as Kāmarūpa,” Vasu described the province as “a federation-hall” where “the most ancient and the most modern” of races and (rather interestingly) of “philosophical schools” had met in perfect harmony. Assam was a synecdoche of an inclusive and integrative India, and therefore, must be studied by “not only the historian or the archaeologist, but all those who would study nationalism and try to understand the very interesting history of the rise and fall of a nation.”

Vasu opened his account with a rereading of the Rg-Veda. In the first few pages his protagonists were the Panis, whom he placed in a more advanced civilizational state than their undying enemies, the Vedic Aryans. Demonstrating from the textual evidence that cattle wealth was the major source of their affluence, he argued that they had inaugurated civilization in India, and though now largely forgotten, their memory was still alive in the Hindustani name for the cream of milk, *parīr*. Almost instantaneously he identified these Vedic Panis with two present-day castes, the Pani-Koch in North Bengal and Assam and the Paniyar in the Deccan. Presumably considering the phonic semblance an irrefutable proof of identity in itself, Vasu did not trouble himself to quote any other grounds for this identification. The second level of identification involved none other than the Phoenicians: “we do unhesitatingly regard the Panis also as a branch of the ancient Sumerian race and as identical in blood, and faith, manners and customs with the ancient Phoenicians.” Besides phonic correspondence, however, Vasu here cited nine other points of similarity. Both (i)
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were of “blood-red or dark-brown complexion”, (ii) dwelled in the caves (iii) erected “symbolic pillars” of worship, (iv) worshipped motifs of male and female genitalia, (v) offered animal – and occasionally human – sacrifices to deities, (vi) practiced maiden worship, (vii) shared the same mode of burial, (viii) had kings officiating as high-priests, and (ix) lived in women-dominated societies.85

In the vortex of eclectic reasoning, spaces began to be shuffled: the Red Sea that Herodotus mentioned in connection with the Phoenicians was of course the Lohita Sāgara mentioned in the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata, which was again nothing other than the Lauhitya, the Sanskrit name of the Brahmaputra or the Luit;86 the biblical kingdom of Ophir was Sauvīra;87 the Mittanis were the Mitrānikas; the Kassites were associated with Kāśī and Khari was a derivative of Ksatriya.88 While seemingly it was rather difficult “to definitely localize th[e] mlečha land”89, Vasu soon found the name Melchi-dezek, a royal Assyrian priest, in the Book of Genesis and argued that “[i]t is not unlikely that the high-priests of the Asuras or Assyrians were regarded as mlečéchas and dvījas or Melchi-dezeks …”90 This was followed by a discussion of the similarities of manners, customs and practices of faith between the ancient peoples of Asia Minor and Assam.91 It should be noted here that the presumed Sumerian connection would continue to fascinate the antiquarian research in Assam for years to come.92

Alexander’s historians mentioned a place called Patalene. Vasu asserted that it must have been the Pāṭāla of the Purāṇas, ruled by the king Valin. Learning from the 1876 Sind Gazetteer that there was “a tradition current in Cutch and Sindh” according to which Vāra and Naraka ruled there, he reasoned that Šonitapura, usually identified with Tezpur in Assam, had originally been the capital of the Sumāras in Sindh. That Vāna (by the early twentieth century who came to be identified as Valin’s descendant and Naraka’s friend) had

85 Vasu, Social History of Kāmarūpa, vol. 1, 56ff.
86 Ibid, 68
87 Ibid, 24.
88 Ibid, 29-30
89 Ibid, 114.
90 Ibid, 126.
91 Ibid, 126-30.
92 See, for example, B. A. Saletore, “A Sumerian Custom and Its Historic Indian Parallels”, Journal of Assam Research Society, IV: 1 (April 1936), 1-10. Bijaybhushan Ghoshchauhduri, āsām prasanga, vol. 1 (Ghateswara: Author, c.1923), 1 similarly claimed that Rāvana, the epic adversary of Rāma, was a Sumerian and he established the kingdom of Aśmapuri from which the name Assam was eventually derived.
been a Sumāra king, and that he had migrated to Assam with a large section of his community and established there a second capital of the same name were also easy facts for Vasu. This enabled him, in turn, to explain the Tantric allusion to the Saumāra Piṭha in Kāmarūpa. This is what Walter Benjamin calls the “evocative power” in the place names: “what is decisive here is not the association but the interpenetration of images.” Ishtar’s pillars and Kāmakhyā’s temple, the Royal Cemetery of Ur and the Ahom tombs at Nagaon crossed each other to produce an intricate figure of identity that was densely mixed and yet recognizably original:

It is thus a matter of no small congratulation to ourselves that this sacred land of ours was also the cradle of that primitive race of traders, who, over four thousand years back, carried the torch of civilization to Assyria, Babylon, Greece and other ancient countries.

For Vasu—who could connect Vāna’s wife Kīrmi with the Cimmerians, the oldest inhabitants of Scythia, or discover “a faint allusion … in Ferishta” suggesting that Afrasiab came to Kāmarūpa—reading Garudācāla into the Gārō Hills or associating the Mandehā Rākṣasas of the Rāmāyana with the Yogiṇī Tantra’s Mandāśaila were certainly less laborious undertakings. But what must be placed on record is the ease with which he shuttled between Encyclopaedia Britannica, high Sanskrit texts, ethnographic information, findings of archaeological excavations and local oral traditions. Consider his treatment of the well-known Paraśurāma story, for example. Interlacing the eighteenth-century Brahmacālita Purāṇa of Balarāma Dvija with a fairly common lore in post-census Assam, Vasu (who was also a leading member of the Kāyastha Sabha movement in Bengal) contended that Paraśurāma, the famous purānic Ksatriya-annihilator, had cursed seven dissident Brahmin families in Kāmarūpa, from whom the “tribes” of Assam eventually descended. Three of these families came to be known as Mishmis, two as Abors, one as Daphla and the other as Mirī. The argument, again, was chiefly etymological: “Dīju Mishmī” was a corrupt derivation of “Dvija Miṣra”, “Dīgārīr Mishmī” of “Dvijavara Miṣra”, and “Miśra” of the [Vedic] “Grhamedhikās”. Dalton and his lot—Vasu was in agreement with Kamalakanta

95 Vasu, Social History of Kāmarūpa, vol. 1, 23.
96 Ibid, 106-110.
97 Ibid, 110.
98 Ibid, 86-89.
Bhattacharya and Padmanatha Bhattacharyya, two other specialists on Assam—had “carelessly” and mistakenly classed these communities as Mongoloids: “[they] must have come down from the Vedic Aryans”99 Traces of the Vedic rituals and customs were soon detected in the settlements beyond the Inner Line, not excluding the suggestion of identifying the Vedic liqueur soma with tea,100 and the unresolved dissimilarities were assigned away saying “it is for the Ethnologist and the Philologist, and not for an humble writer of social history like myself, to look for those natural, physical or political causes which have brought about such remarkable changes in the languages and circumstances of this ancient people.”101

It is most crucial to note that these formulations could not have been easily brushed aside by the contemporary specialists as uninformed mutterings of a semi-educated fossil pretender to academic fame. A respected figure in the indological circle of early twentieth century, Nagendra Nath Vasu Prayávidyámahárnava was the editor (and also a chief contributor) of Viśukshó, the famous twenty-two-volume encyclopedia in Bengali. Apart from his major contribution in lexicography (Satyendu Mahákosa), Vasu was also in charge of the critical and scholarly editions of several important old vernacular manuscripts, the editor of the prestigious ‘Sáhitya Parisat Patrika’, a prominent member of the Philological Committee of the Asiatic Society, the decipherer of the Śuśunia and Madanpala Inscriptions and an untiring collector of archaeological evidences in Orissa.102

Where did, then, begin the boundary between respectable knowledge and unruly fancies?

**Disciplined Knowledges, Shared Fantasies**

It was way back in 1894 that an entire Directorate of Ethnography was established in the province at the behest of Edward Gait in order “to catalogue and rescue from oblivion” the historical records of Assam. Within three years of its inception Gait published his famous Report on the Progress of Historical Research in Assam which was a digest of several “source

99 Ibid, 86.
100 Ibid, 94n.
101 Ibid, 91.
materials” of Assamese history. What distinguished this digest was its emphasis on non-Sanskrit manuscripts, contractual documents and ethnographic accounts. Pitted as reliable elements of the region’s history against the obliquity of the interpolation-ridden, tortuous high Sanskrit narratives, these items formed a very different order of evidences. The implications of this shift were fully fleshed out in 1906 when, on their basis, Gait published his History of Assam, still celebrated as one of the most authoritative texts on the subject.

Gait’s History opened with a mistrust of the “dubious and fragmentary references in the Mahabharata [sic], and in the Purans [sic] and Tantras and other similar records.” Though these stories “are fondly remembered by the people”, he was convinced that they “cannot of course be dignified with the name of history”. Gait immediately modified this reservation saying that “[t]hey may, however, contain a substratum of fact”, but the historiographical break with which he is credited in the context of Assam primarily consisted of his brush-off to the array of Sanskrit literature that had so far been regarded as the only means to access the ancient history of Assam. Without minimizing the significance of this innovative move, it is possible to open this claim/ ascription to further problematization. Like many of the British officials of his time, Gait held that caste system was a more useful pointer than language of the racial trace of the colonized (what he posed as a central problematic of his narrative), and therefore he was not ready to accept the presiding role of etymology over the methodological discourse of history, as championed by indology – history’s colonial surrogate. Ethnographic observations and unearthed inscriptions for the pre-Buranji period were his favourite sources, but that did not take him beyond, according to his own calculations, the fourth century. Yet there was already quite a considerable volume of writings from the indological space that, as we have seen, claimed to place the history of Assam at the beginning of the Epic Age. Gait was not ready to desert the space of toponymic identification to these amateurs. He decided to turn the tables on them.

That “[s]ome three or four thousand years ago” there had been an “influx of tribes of Mongolian origin” through Assam was Gait’s founding deduction from close ethnographic inspections. The next conjecture was that the Bodos formed one such tribe and certainly

103 Edward Gait, Report on the Progress of Historical Research in Assam (Gauhati: DHAS, 1897)
105 Ibid, 3ff.
ruled a vast stretch of the valley and the hills. This judgment was fashioned within the prevailing terms of etymologically charged toponymic discourse.

The wide extent and long duration of Bodo domination is shown by frequent occurrence of the prefix di or tì, the Bodo word for water, in the river names of the Brahmaputra valley and the adjoining country to the west, e.g., Dibru, Dikhu, Dihing, Dihong, Dibong, Disang, Diphang, Dimla etc. in some cases old names are disappearing – the Dichu river, for instance, is now better known as the Jaldhaka [sic] – while in others it has already gone, as in the case of the Brahmaputra, which in the early days of Ahom rule was known as the Tr-lao.

The latter word was doubtless the origin of another old name for this river, viz., Lohit or Lau-hitya (red). This name has another derivation in Sanskrit literature, where the water is said to be so called that because Parasurâma washed off his bloody stains in it, but there are numerous similar instances of the invention of such stories to explain names taken from the aboriginal languages. Thus the Kosi derives its name from Khussi, the Newâr word for river, but it is connected in Hindu legends with Kusik [sic] Raja; and the Tista, though its first syllable is clearly Bodo di or tì, is regarded by the Hindus as a corruption of trishta, “thirst”, or tristana, “three springs”.106

Gait’s fascinating move involved a series of inversions: Bodo as the original and Sanskrit as the corruption; folklores came first and the purânic legends followed; the Mongoloid as the residuum and the Aryan as the superstructure. But the methodological brass tacks were not really very different from the contemporary indological discourse. Gait further asserted,

the fact that, compared with the Bodo tribes, [the Ahoms] have left so few marks on the toponymy of the country may perhaps be taken to show that the period for which the latter were supreme was far longer than that for which the Ahoms are known to have ruled.107

One may read this curious piece of reasoning along with Gait’s treatment of “the Nidhanpur Grant Plate”, supposedly the most useful inscriptive evidence in preparing an extensive, if discontinuous, genealogy of the kings classed as belonging to the Varmana dynasty. It is important to know how the dating of these kings was achieved. The second name in this list was Samudravarmana, and most of the contemporary indologists agreed that the name in itself was a sufficient proof of the fact that this Assam king was a contemporary of, or ruled a little later than, Samudragupta, the Imperial Gupta ruler. Gait raised his imagined chronology principally on this identification.108 Apart from adding another instance to Dilip

106 Ibid, 7.
107 Ibid.
Chakrabarti’s informed criticism of “the remarkably flimsy and subjective lines of arguments on which the entire system of Indian chronology is based”,\(^{109}\) this also shows how the search for a stabilizing idiom in names, of persons or places, in order to render the recalcitrant pasts coherent and continuous, continued to govern the new historical imagination even when it claimed to break free from the absurd elasticity of etymology. In much the same old indological way, Gait continued to whisper to his readers that Kundina survived in the name of the Kundil River at Sadiya,\(^{110}\) Vidarbha might have been a kingdom somewhere around Sadiya,\(^{111}\) and Prāgjyotisha referred to “the reputation which the country has always held as a land of magic and incantation”.\(^{112}\)

The focus of Gait’s *History*, however, was on the Ahom period and though it had a considerable, if unintended, success in exciting a sense of Ahom pride among the Assamese intelligentsia, the pursuit for a respectable place in the high Sanskrit tradition (in which the Mongoloid vestige seemed a misfit) did not really end. Within the more avowedly scientistic crease of the historical discipline the local indological imagination now started to work its way. Gait’s efforts, including his book, inspired many of the Assamese srijuts to organize themselves into a non-official research society, much on the lines of the district-level Bengal and Bihar Societies, patronized by individual government officials and local notables. In 1912, the Kāmarūpa Anusandhāna Samiti was established to assemble evidences and source materials of Assamese history on a larger scale, with Gait as one of its major patrons. Initially Hemchandra Goswami, Padmanatha Bhattacharyya Vidyavinoda and Kanaklal Barua were the chief enthusiasts and an intense search for old Assamese manuscripts in the sattras and old households soon began. However, after the death of Goswami in 1928,\(^{113}\) Kankaklal Barua became the key person in the Kāmarūpa Anusandhāna Samiti and when Suryya Kumar Bhuyan resigned from the post of secretary to join the DHAS, Barua had a chance to return the main research interest of the Samiti to the old indological tradition of analysis of Sanskrit texts. In 1933 Barua published his *Early History of Kāmarūpa*, which proved to be very popular among the local educated, and also started an English quarterly, *Journal of the Assam*.

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\(^{109}\) Dilip K. Chakrabarti, *Colonial Indology: Sociopolitics of the Ancient Indian Past* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1997), 152-166. However, Chakrabarti’s unreflective nationalist position leads him to treat the “system” of toponymic identification as rather unproblematic.

\(^{110}\) Gait, *History*, 16.

\(^{111}\) Gait, *History*, 15.

\(^{112}\) Ibid.

\(^{113}\) For an account of Goswami’s work in the Kāmarūpa Anusandhāna Samiti, see Premdhar Rajkhowa, *hemcandra goswami* (Jorhat: Author, 1940), Ch 5.
Research Society, both predominantly concerned with narrating the old glory of Kāmarūpa. In these new registers of antiquarian research toponymic discussion reoccupied its place of importance in debates over the “Assamese” pasts.

Barua replied to Gait’s theory by identifying the Bodo with the Varāha Mountains of the Rāmāyana, the Mech-Bodos with the Mlecchās and the Kocheś with the Kuvācās or Kavaeas114 [“The people of the Bodo tribes were in no sense untouchables at any time. Even now in Assam good Brahmans take water fetched by a Koch.”115], restoring the old line of argument that Assam had always been within the folds of epic-purānic geography. But what marked this renewed defense of the early indological tradition of toponymic identifications was an extremely sensitive attitude towards exact determination of boundaries of Kāmarūpa. Challenging Anundr.un Borooah’s commentary, Barua declared that the Pundra Desa of the purānas was not the Gupta name for North Bengal, Pundravardhanabhukti, but rather south Bihar, and through convoluted readings of purānic texts he affirmed that the western boundary of the Kāmarūpa kingdom extended up to the Kośī river or Videha.116 In a paragraph which scuttled across a remarkable mishmash of sources – from the Ākbaṇamah to the eighteenth century local traditions of Assam – Barua claimed a larger space for the kingdom of Kāmarūpa frozen in mythic time:

We know that the racial, linguistic and cultural affinities, between Mithilā and Kāmarūpa, at one time, were very close. In fact, during the zenith of the rule of the kings of Pusyavarman’s dynasty, between sixth and the eighth centuries, perhaps the whole of Mithilā was within the Kāmarūpa kingdom. [O]n the authority of the Ākbaṇamah, Kāmarūpa included Puraniyā in the sixteenth century. ... Those who now find it hard to believe that the Kāmarūpa kingdom extended, at any time, as far west as the Kośī will be relieved to learn that, in ancient times, the Kośī was very much near to modern Assam and that according to local tradition, collected 120 years ago, it was once a tributary of the Assam River, Lauhitya or Brahmaputra.117

It may seem equally strategic that Barua’s concerns about the boundaries of Kāmarūpa were absolutely confined to the west of Assam and he, like all other indologists on the issue, never

114 Kanaklal Barua, Early History of Kāmarūpa (1933; Guwahati: Lawyer’s Book Stall, 1966),
116 Ibid, 2n.

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bothered to demarcate the proposed Kāmarūpā's eastern boundaries. A larger share in the British Indian space was an immediate assurance of a more decent place in “the great Indian tradition.” Claiming that “[t]he assumption made by some historians that Ādityasena of the later Gupta family was the paramount power over Eastern India after Śri-Harsa’s death can no longer hold good”, Barua ascertained, “after the death of Emperor Śri-Harsa the Bhauma kings of the dynasty of Bhagadatta were the paramount rulers in Eastern India.”

Many of Barua’s contemporaries were equally keen in overstrecthing Kāmarūpā’s boundaries, not only claiming most of the surrounding areas of the province, but also often declaring relatively far-away places like Andhra to have been old colonies of Kāmarūpā. But the multiple instantiations of this weak imperial fantasy of the colonized should not lead us to believe that this new sensitivity over Kāmarūpā’s boundary was simply aggressive and expansive. It could also be orchestrated to effect precise tactical withdrawals. For example, Barua who (like most of the contemporary śrījuts and bhadrakāls) considered “Tantra and Vajrayāna” as “immoral” and “degraded” versions of the original lofty ideals of Buddhism and the purāṇas, never agreed with the fairly common positioning of the Oddiyāṇa-pitha, a renowned Tantric center, within Assam. In a paper fully devoted to renounce this ascription Barua concluded after complex and unenviable calculations that “just outside the boundary of Kāmarūpā was Oddiyāṇa.” At the same time, the absence of reference to Kāmarūpā or Prājyotishapura did not pose a difficulty for claiming reputable traditions. On the “internal evidence” of no more than seven words (Śāli: name for paddy in Assam valley; Bhalluka: a predominantly Assamese variety of bamboo; Bhora, pala, sāka: units of measurement; Jāngāla: area with little rainfall; Guna: gold thread), which were claimed to have been used in the Arthaśāstra in the same sense, Barua deduced that its author “had close intercourse with the people of north-eastern India even if he was not himself an Alpine Brahmin hailing from that corner of India” albeit neither Kāmarūpā nor

118 Kanaklal Barua, “Kāmarūpā in the Sixth Century AD”, Journal of Assam Research Society, I: 3 (October, 1933), 55-68.
119 See, for example, G. Barua, “assāmata bauddhadharmar cii”, jonāki, IV: 6 (1892), 142
120 “History of the Gavārās” by one P. Seetaramaiiah was very warmly received in the Assam research Society circle as the book argued that Komātis, a trading caste of Andhra, had come from Kamātī of Assam and that the Kākātiyas were associated with the Kākātis, the writer caste of Assam. See P. Seetaramaiiah, “History of the Gavārās”, Journal of the Andhra Historical Research Society, VIII: 2 and 3 (1933). Also See Journal of Assam Research Society, II: 1 (April, 1934), 25-27. The essay is preserved as “History of the Gavārās”, Transcript No. 252, Transcript Volume No. 59 [DHAS]
Pragjyotishapura finds a mention in the text. To strengthen his case, Barua pointed out that the description of the fabric Dukula in the text vividly reminded him of the Assam moogas. Moreover, there was a full chapter on magic or “Secret Means”, while Kāmarūpa and Kāmākhya charms were still famous.\textsuperscript{122}

Eventually, Barua found a more ingenious way of claiming an indisputable internality to essential Indianness. In “Stemming of the Tide of Muslim Conquest in Eastern India” he declared, “It is the only province in Northern India which the Mussalmans, in spite of all their attempts, from the thirteenth down to the seventeenth century, could not conquer.”\textsuperscript{123}

If one could believe — and all our scholars did believe — that Assam had always been lying within the “historical geography” of purānic India, then its successful resistance to the armies of the Bengal Sultans and Delhi Badshahs could be interpreted with no trouble as having kept it a reservoir of the pure uncontaminated fundamental Indianness. It was this argument of Barua, as we shall see, which seemed equally agreeable to his contemporary proponents of “scientific history” of the Ahom state. When certain Bengal sultans’ coins were found, which had the toponym “kamru” embossed on them, Barua contended that this must have been a false claim, because whenever the Muslims crossed some river in Eastern Bengal, they mistakenly thought they were in Kamru. This “Kamru” was not Kāmarūpa. Etymology had to be reined in order to produce the invincible archive of Kāmarūpa. To this demand numismatics and epigraphy had to submit. When an inscription of the Paramār king Vākpatirāja of Malwa containing a reference to the Uttarkuladesa was unearthed in 1938, Barua insisted that the north of Brahmputra should be understood by the term and not the north of the Ganges, as the Director-General of the Archaeological Survey, K. N. Dikshit, suggested.\textsuperscript{124}

If one is not really impressed with the originality of Barua’s identifications, one has to be certainly struck by their methodological indistinguishability from the contending and established identifications. If Barua’s conclusions seem untenable and even absurd today, it will be fair to remember that they were reached only after following the same methodological route through which the dominant indological discourse had proceeded to


produce the figure of an essential India. Methodologically speaking, Barua was certainly competent in his contemporary terms. The problem was elsewhere, as Barua poignantly recognized in one of his most provocative essays, “Prasioi and Gangaridi”, where he proposed that the fourth century Greek historians’ “Prasioi, Prasii or Proeididas or Praxiakos … stand for Prāgyotisha and not Prācyā. This kingdom then included the modern Assam Valley and the whole of Northern Bengal as far as the boundary of Mithilā or Videha.” The larger indological community, of course, did not take this identification seriously since the consensus was that Prasioi is Prācyā or Magadha, identified in turn with south Bihar. Apprehending the fate of his arguments, Barua said with a sigh:

It may be considered too late now to dispute the correctness of a theory accepted by nearly the whole host of distinguished indologists; but it should be observed that no theory is sacrosanct and that continual supercession is the law of research.125

“You come too late, much too late. There will always be a world – a white world – between you and us.”126 Fanon forgets to add that it is not mandatory for the intervening world to be white. The Assamese historian of the nineteen thirties rose to find that he would always arrive only too late in the feast of the Indian tradition. There was no getting away from the strange circle of the peripheral location of Assam on the spatial diagram of the nation and its belated entry in the temporal schema of tradition. By stretching Kāmarūpa beyond its sanctioned frontier, Barua and a number of other provincial historians were trying to straighten up the politics of hierarchized time within the nation. In their formulations, Assam was not a latecomer to, but one of the earliest members of, the Indian nation.

The time of the nation, as is often said, is “a homogeneous, empty time”.127 What came as disjunctive pasts, as a series of embarrassing blankness in the litany of tradition, inciting “temporal agoraphobia”128 in a historicist culture, could only be forced into a unity by treating them as parts of a frozen archive. In forcing “the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages”, the middle class intellectuals of the frontier

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126 Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967), 122
127 It is superfluous to say that we are all indebted to Anderson, Imagined Communities, 26 for inaugurating this Benjaminian idea in the context of the studies of nationalism.
128 This beautiful phrase is from Hayden White, The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987)
province clutched on to the archive of Kāmarūpa. It was the other space: “a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled.” The humility and disgrace of a belated appearance in the time of the nation energized “the project of organizing ... a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place”\(^{129}\).

Such is “the unconquerable power in the names”, says Walter Benjamin, “a power which persists in the face of all topographic displacements.”\(^{130}\)

“\textit{A Place of All Times}”

Barua explicitly referred to these issues in his 1937 presidential address in the History Section of the Āsām Sahitya Sabha conference. “Some people asked me after the publication of my \textit{Early History of Kāmarūpa} why I have not called the book \textit{Early History of Assam}.” He admitted that particularly for the people from Upper Assam the name Kāmarūpa pointed to the “small district” of Kamrup in Lower Assam. But, said he, the ancient Kāmarūpa was even larger than the whole of the present province of Assam. The Ahom \textit{buranjis} – Gait’s new order of evidences – were confined to Upper Assam, a place that Barua chose to call in the old indological way “Saumāra”, a fraction of the great Kāmarūpa kingdom. The history of Kāmarūpa was more expansive, more inclusive, and more Indian than what the Ahom \textit{buranjis} would allow the people to recognize.\(^{131}\)

Barua’s veiled reference to the immense popularity of the Ahom court chronicles or \textit{buranjis} in the nineteen thirties bring us back to the unstated history of an academic quarrel in the nineteen twenties. As we have already noted, the Kāmarūpa Anusandhāna Samiti was a Guwahati gathering of enthused amateurs with some patrons in the local government. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, a graduate in English from Presidency College, Calcutta and a teacher in the local Cotton College, was one among them. By the age of twenty-seven, when

\(^{129}\) Michel Foucault, “\textit{Of Other Spaces}” (1967), translated by Jay Miskowiec, \textit{Diacritics}, 16: 1 (Spring 1986), 26-7

\(^{130}\) Benjamin, \textit{Arcades Project}, 518


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he became the Secretary of the Samiti, Bhuyan had already published six books and a number of articles in Assamese, indicating his sustained interest in history. By 1926, he was already expressing his discomfort with the lay setup of the Samiti, and in March 1927, in the paper he read in the next anniversary meeting of the Samiti, Bhuyan vigorously made a case for organizing "An Asiatic Society of Assam" with salaried staff, suitable infrastructures, and a permanent reserve fund to constitute "a central bureau of research":

Let the Asiatic Society of Assam remain forever a never-perishing example of the humanizing influence of our western contact. We cannot conceive of the exact nature of the white man's burden if the infusion of the critical spirit, love for truth for its own sake, veneration of the past, and rigid and selfless worship of culture be eliminated from its category. ... An act of Providence has wedded the once glorious Kamarupa kingdom with the British; and it is in the fitness of things that the history and antiquities of that ancient country and of the lands fringing on its borders should be studied and investigated under the auspices of that benign connection.

It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which Bhuyan's dissatisfaction with the nature of the work of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti had pushed him. But it is evident that when the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies was set up in 1928 to assume most of the responsibilities of the Directorate of Ethnography, Bhuyan was happy to join it as the Assistant Director. It was this government Department – the only one of its kind in the entire British Indian empire, specifically entrusted with "the pursuit of historical and antiquarian research" in the province – which spearheaded the new movement for professional and scientific history. As an active and self-conscious participant in the process, Bhuyan consistently privileged the experts over the amateurs, the scientific over the mythical, and the written over the oral.

The new History, which Bhuyan pledged to offer, wished to see itself as sharply differentiated from "the romancings, inventions and exaggerations of uncritical history-writers." And although "the public here [in Assam were] ... not trained to appreciate the laborious and scientific reconstructions of academic workers", said Bhuyan, "[t]he present writer and his comrades [were] engaged in the wearisome and spendthrift business of

132 Bhuyan's speech as the Honorary Secretary of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti at its 14th anniversary, 11 September 1926, is printed as "The Aims of a Research Organisation" in Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, Studies in the History of Assam (Gauhati: Laksheswari Bhuyan, 1965), 219-222.
133 Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, "An Asiatic Society of Assam" (1927), in Bhuyan, Studies in History of Assam, 201
original research.” The invective was not misfired. In a review of the Second DHAS Bulletin, where Bhuyan wrote these unkind lines, Kanakdai Barua regretted the fact that Bhuyan had not even mentioned the names of the Kāmarūpa Anusandhāna Samiti or its founder-member Padmanatha Bhattacharya Vidyavinoda: “Any writer on historical research in Assam is bound not simply to mention but to gratefully acknowledge the valuable work done by the Society and Pandit Vidyāvinod [sic].” Since Bhuyan significantly emphasized the need for “scientific reconstruction” and “critical history writing”, Barua retorted by saying that neither of the two “is confined only to himself and his comrades in the Government.”

What Barua did miss in his criticism was the emergence of a new theater in the new history of Bhuyan: “the State.” The Sanskrit sources for the history of Kāmarūpa were not telling “the intricate detail of the state machinery.” But that was something “[t]he Ahom conquerors and settlers and their Assamese compatriots” appeared to offer. They had maintained a rigorous system of reducing everything to writing. Every event that happened within the land, and even outside it, was duly recorded, and was ultimately incorporated in the voluminous chronicles of the government which were known as Buranjis. They have conserved the language, customs, institutes, official and judicial procedures, social and religious usages, and the intricate detail of the state machinery. One would be justified in saying, – ‘Give me the Buranjis of Assam, and I will say, what the people are.’

And this knowledge, as Bhuyan pointed out elsewhere, was of primary concern to the State: Full and detailed knowledge of the institutions of a country is indispensable for its good government; for no political measure, however assiduously conceived and constructed will fall in the natural stage of evolution unless it is based on the corresponding indigenous system which is already in existence. The mentality of the people must be realized, their expectations thoroughly studied, and precedents under the old regime must clearly sifted in order to eliminate the risk of committing catastrophic political blunders.

This strategic enmeshment of the art of government and the discipline of history was further confirmed between 1930 and 1938, when at least nine buranjis were published by Bhuyan from the DHAS. These buranjis, usually understood as the age-old chronicles of the Ahom courts, have shaped the twentieth-century Assam historians’ cosmos in a fundamental way.

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134 Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, “Difficulties of a Research Worker in Assam”, Bulletin II of the DHAS in Assam, 23 February, 1934
135 See Journal of Assam Research Society, II: 1 (April 1934), 28-30
136 Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, “Sources of Assam History”, Bulletin II of the DHAS in Assam, 23 February, 1934
137 Bhuyan, Asiatic Society, 202
Prompted by Bhuyan, the editor of these *buranjis*, the historians choose to overlook the implications of the substantive editorial labor that went into them.

In the first Bulletin of the DHAS, Bhuyan spelled out the difficulties encountered by him while editing:

The trend of narratives in old chronicles cannot be followed by uninitiated readers on account of the multiplicity of facts of a similar character, *viz.*, wars, intrigues, and diplomatic negotiations, etc. Considerable difficulties also arise from the archaic character of the language, *from the long strings of toponymous and patronymic appellations* to indicate the identity of *historical personages*, generally aggravated by the mixing up of words and sentences, when there are no signs separating them. The reduction of the chaotic mass of materials full of unfamiliar names and expressions to a presentable form, without at the same time making any alteration in the text, is obviously a matter of delay, and requires long practice, discretion and judgment which can be attained only by close and intimate knowledge of the minutiae of Assam history.

He laid out ten steps of editing the Buranjis:

1. Transcription of the original
2. Comparison of the transcript with the original to guarantee accuracy
3. Grouping of the transcript into paragraphs and chapters with appropriate headings
4. Collation of the text in the event of there being two or more chronicles containing the same version, so that no important detail or expression having any philological interest may be left out from the final version
5. Correction of orthographical errors which reveal scribal idiosyncrasies rather than a system, rigidly avoiding any correction which will involve phonetic alteration
6. Preparation of a fresh copy for the press if the transcript has been subjected to heavy alterations and corrections
7. Numbering of the paragraphs
8. Correction of the galley proofs by comparison with the original manuscript so that in accuracy in the transcript undetected in previous comparisons may have one more chance of being detected
9. Correction of the page-proofs once, twice, and even thrice by comparison with the corrected galley-proofs and with press-copies and originals where necessary
10. Compilation of the title-page, table of contents, preface, errata, etc., and their transcription and proof-reading.\textsuperscript{138}

The editorial work was enormous, laborious, demanding – but hardly innocent.\textsuperscript{139} Collation of texts and correction of "errors" left enough room for the editor to present the \textit{buranjis} as a singular, indivisible unity frozen in the condensed centuries classed as the Ahom period. The construction of this stately pre-British archive under the aegis of the British government was possible only by determinedly overlooking its fractures and crucially underplaying its inconsistencies. The influential \textit{Tungkhungia Buranji}, published in 1933, was compiled by the editor from numerous contemporary Buranjis in the languages and manner of the old chronicles. The editor has not framed any new sentence; he has simply picked up sentences or passages from the older chronicles and inserted them in due place in the evolution of a monarch's reign. No information acquired from sources other than old chronicles has been incorporated in this section. The editor's object has been to compile the history of the earlier period of the Tungkhungia supremacy in a style naturally fitting in with Srinath Barbarua's chronicle which follows.\textsuperscript{140}

Even without calling into question the editor's appreciation of Srinath Barbarua's "style", the whole method of mobilizing discrete and widely spaced texts into one coherent historical narrative might appear disquieting to the professional historians today.\textsuperscript{141} But the textual politics of editing the \textit{buranjis} corresponded to the larger politics of defining selfhood in terms of the unitary and the singular, of the authentic and the immobile. As Bhuyan explicitly said, "[t]he Buranjis are our strengthening tie to bind us with the past, and maintain the solidarity of the Assamese people, and protect us from any threatened erosion of our nationalism."\textsuperscript{142} This nationalism was a nationalism of authentic, authoritative and assertive heroes: Bhuyan exalted Lachit Barphukan and Atan Buragohain, two "Ahom" nobles, for having "suppressed the voice of rupture, brought the jarring elements into concord,\textsuperscript{138}


\textsuperscript{139} It was also strikingly different from the earlier editorial works. Cf. Hemchandra Goswami (ed), \textit{purani asam buranji: The Ancient Chronicle of Assam (From Chukapha to Gadadhar Sinha)} (Gauhati: Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti, 1922), iii-iv. Goswami mentioned three steps: (1) chapterization (2) titling chapters and (3) spelling corrections.

\textsuperscript{140} Bhuyan, \textit{Tungkhungia Buranji}, ix

\textsuperscript{141} In her doctoral dissertation (\textit{A Name without a People}), Yasmin Saiki is one of the firsts among us to clearly articulate the worries about the naivety of treating the processed \textit{buranjis} as raw sources of pre-British Assam history. Surprisingly, the editorial role of Bhuyan is grossly underplayed in her book \textit{Fragmented Memories}.

\textsuperscript{142} Bhuyan, \textit{Sources of Assam History}
punished delinquency, and encouraged valour and inventiveness\textsuperscript{143} — something, one is tempted to say, he was doing with the collected manuscripts.

In Bhuyan's original work, the Ahom tradition, about which the older indological writings were somewhat silent if not apologetic, was increasingly construed as an object of collective pride, culminating in an elaborate state structure that could successfully hold back in face of the mighty Mughal invasion. This had a curious double function to offer: while this suggested a moment of glorious resistance to the force of dominant Indian history and thus indeed constituted a remarkable departure from the “include us” cry of the provincial indologists, at the same time it also folded the “Ahom” narrative back into the dominant history of “India” by situating the Ahom kingdom purely in relation to its contemporary Mughal Empire.\textsuperscript{144} Refusing to look at the Ahom realm in its multiple other contexts, Bhuyan's new statist history substantially contributed to a particular form of provincialization of Assam. The meaning of Assam could derive only from its historical connections with mainland India. It was never the center of its own worlds; it was always a polity on the fringe of the essential India. Its Yunan trade, its Ava obligations, its cultural transactions with Southeast Asia were trifles. Its sole importance lay in providing a partly successful resistance to the Mughal forces in the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{145}

In fact, over and over again, Bhuyan explicitly asked his readers to read the Ahoms as the mighty heirs of the Kāmarūpa glory. In his 1926 presidential address in the History Section of the Āsām Sāhitya Sabha conference, Bhuyan presented his hero Swargadeo Rudra Singha as a powerful emperor who “sought to reorganize the ancient Kāmarūpa kingdom” after a gap of several centuries.\textsuperscript{146} In his famous Anglo-Assamse Relations, a book which grew out of

\textsuperscript{143} Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, “A Panorama of Assam History”, Bulletin III of the DHAS in Assam, 25 July, 1936. The masculinist tinge in Bhuyan’s pantheon of icons is unmistakable. For an interesting take on the long afterlife of this masculinism in Assam nourishing contesting political positions, see Jayeeta Sharma, “Heroes for Our Times: Assam’s Lachit, India’s Missile Man”, in John Zavos, Andrew Wyatt, and Vernon Hewitt (eds), The Politics of Cultural Mobilization in India (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2004)

\textsuperscript{144} The popular Bengali novel ahom-sati by Priyakumar Chattopadhyay (Calcutta: Students’ Library, c. 1913) eminently prefigured this Ahom-versus-Yavanas (i.e. Mughals) theme. See particularly Ch. 5

\textsuperscript{145} “The history of the Ahoms of the seventeenth century was the history of the Assam-Mogul conflicts.” Bhuyan, “Introduction”, Tungkhungia Buranjii, xxv

\textsuperscript{146} Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, “dwītya adhiveśanar sabhāpatir abhibhāshan” (Dhubri, 19 October 1926) in Hazarika and Goswami (eds.), asam sāhitya sabhār bhāshānāvalī. Part III, 35

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his doctoral thesis at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, he read the trace of Kāmarūpa in its absence:

The basis of Assam’s foreign relations was the remembrance of the limits of the ancient Hindu Kingdom of Kamarupa, bounded on the west by the Karatoya river, including ‘roughly, the Brahmaputra Valley, Bhutan, Rangpur, and Behar’. The ultimate territorial ambition of the Ahoms was to restore the old limits up to the Karatoya river, and they succeeded at times to bring parts of the ancient territories under their domination or under their political influence.

The continuity of Kāmarūpa was ensured in the new, ethnicized register of the Ahoms. The DHAS, of which Bhuyan became the Honorary Director in 1933, continued “the stimulation, furtherance and encouragement of Kamarupological research.” While the Samiti mobilized opinion and resources for the construction of a museum in its precincts, the DHAS began to send off young researchers to districts for collecting manuscripts and preparing detailed reports of scattered sources. Reading these reports of Bhuyan’s recruits, it is difficult not to notice the almost premeditated erasure of the “Muslim” traces. When Sarveshwar Kataki, for example, reported from Goalpara that eight miles away from the district headquarters there lay a stone slab apparently carrying a footprint on it, and that the local “Muhammedans perform ‘dlhinna’ in this place now and often” trusting it related to the prophet Mohammad’s mother Fatima, he immediately dismissed this claim saying that it must have been “a Vishnupada” forgotten by the Hindus. Nothing “foreign” could be allowed to erupt into the uncontaminable space of Kāmarūpa, which had never been conquered by the outsiders. The copper plates found in Pabna and Godagadi, which explicitly mentioned the conquest of Kāmarūpa by “the Sena kings of Bengal”, were rejected by another Kāmarūpa enthusiast as instances of the usual “exaggeration of sycophants.”

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147 Under the supervision of H. H. Dodwell, Bhuyan completed his thesis in the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London in 1938.
148 Bhuyan, Asiatic Society of Assam, 204
149 In December 1937, a few months before this “museum” was inaugurated, Kanaklal Barua characteristically declared, “The Museum House will be built with stones from Kharguli, sand from the Bharalu, iron from Jamshedpur and the swadeshi Rohtas cement prepared near the Rohitāśva fort of ancient Magadha.” Barua, saptam adhiveśanar sahbāpatir abhībhāshan, 112
150 “Historical and Antiquarian Survey of the District of Goalpara, Assam” by Sarveswar Kataki, 1933, Transcript No. 302, Transcript Volume No. 50 [DHAS].
151 Sarveswar Kataki and Birinchi Kumar Barua, like Kanaklal Barua and most other provincial indologists, were unanimous in rejecting the suggestion that “Buddhism” could never touch Assam. Any resemblance was purely “accidental”.
152 Kalikanta Biswas, “banger ṣesh senrājgan”, rangpur ṣākhā sāhiya-parishat patrikā, 2: 1, (c. 1907), 21

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Even if Bhāskaravarman’s coins were not coming forth, as Katakī had originally hoped, or no traces of the Kāmarūpi art—“a distinctive school of art of its own”—could be found in the ruins as Birinchi Barua, another DHAS surveyor, had earnestly sought, the place of Kāmarūpa was beyond all questions. It was the “effectively enacted utopia” conjured through the labor of loss and consumed through its invasive archaeological absence. In self-consciously “trying to effect a compromise between technical appreciation and popular appeal,” Bhuyan found in Kāmarūpa a blurring line between the indological “romancings” and the expert histories. As the slow process of professionalization from the top was matched by a tremendous growth in unsanctioned vernacular local histories from the below, Kāmarūpa became the beloved middle ground, with its infinite reproducibility on diverse registers of professional, amateurish and community histories. The esteemed novelist Rajanikanta Bardalai (who had also been a principal assistant of Gait in his historical research) spent most of his presidential address in the first All Assam Chutiya Conference in 1925 confirming A. C. Agarwala’s suggestion that the Chutiyas, usually understood as a depressed caste in the post-census world of Assam population, were the legitimate descendent of a Mahābhārata people. In his 1930 presidential address in the History Section of the Āsām Sāhiya Sabha, Rajani Kumar Padmapati reiterated his sensational and popular arguments that the Heaven of the Vedas and the epics actually referred to Assam, the original entry point of the Aryans. Bhuyan, who was unrelenting in his affirmation that “historical research presupposes the employment of a critical technique, and hence it is a matter for experts, who also foresee the importance of things long before their lay contemporaries can estimate their value”, however, went soft on Agarwala and Padmapati, praising their “learning, research and labor”. It was well within the realm of the plausible,
said Bhuyan, that the Aryans had entered India through the north-eastern and not the north-western corridor.\footnote{161}

The regime of the modern not only invited the local middle classes to sign on its catechistic roll of producing tradition, but the increasing access to print and the unpretentious dependence of etymology on the aural also democratized the scope of local responses to some extent. Place name identifications could hardly remain an expert's preserve. Many of the local educated, well versed in the village and district traditions and broadly acquainted with the identificatory methodology of indology, began to publish articles, pamphlets and tracts on the subject. It is not the aim of this chapter to catalogue such writings, and surely the variety of their agendas resists easy generalizations. If one author insisted on reading the textual references to the famous city of Gaur as allusions to the Garo Hills,\footnote{162} another tried to prove that the Ahoms, along with their Koch, Kachari, and Garo neighbors, were the descendents of the great Kauravas via the line of Kankati.\footnote{163} The history sponsored by the Bara Bhuyan Sabha,\footnote{164} the works of the Nath Yogi Sanmilani enthusiasts,\footnote{165} the tract propounding the cause of Kachari unity,\footnote{166} the pamphlet of the Kshatriya-status demanding Nat activists,\footnote{167} almost each of the early-twentieth-century community programs in the British province of Assam which desperately required an ancient tradition to respond to pressing contemporary concerns laid express or oblique claims to the grandeur of Kamarūpa. As Padmanath Gohain Barooah's presidential address to the first literary conference of the Āsām Sāhitya Sabha (1917) clearly showed, espousing the cause of Ahom pride did not stand in the way of claiming that Assam was essentially an Aryan country – the great Kamarūpa of yesteryears.\footnote{168} During the 1901 census operations, Gohain Barooah had actually submitted a
petition to the Government “praying” that the Ahoms might be officially recognized as belonging to the ancient Aryan warrior Kshatriya lineages. The Rangpur zamindar Surendrachandra Raychaudhuri, arguing that “Ahom” was a derivation of the Vedic word “Soma” (Soma > Chom > Hom > Ahom), emphatically asserted that “there is no doubt that the name [Ahom] is Sanskritic. ... Whatever might have been their actual residence, [it was] Aryan blood which ran in their veins.” The persuasive indefinability of Kāmarūpa greased the passage between disengaged histories.

In his delightful description of the rhetorical investment of the Australian landscape through an analysis of James Cook’s “travelling epistemology”, Paul Carter notes how Cook’s “metaphorical mode of naming [places]” was an inherently grammatical scheme, a project of “civilizing the landscape, bringing it into orderly being”: teaching it to speak the same syntactical connections of the explorer’s language. The orientalist overnaming of Assam not only served the explicit purpose of teaching the disjunctive geographies the grammar of “the national tradition”, but also the more discreet cause of emptying the lived places into an abstract archive. The enormous appeal of etymology among the educated middle class of the British Indian empire can be rethought in this context. As a perceptive account of the classical Latin genre observes,

End point of the attempt is to reverse linguistic chronology – the loss of the proper and dispersion of meaning; it implies a place where arguments end, where sound gives way to silence, motion to rest, and where words begin to border on meaning and meaning on things.

The promise of the etymological thought was the promise of an absolute space: an annihilation of time, an abolition of the wavering of language. There seemed to be only one access to this absolute stillness of the indissoluble proper: the sounds of the place names – because to name was to own, to possess, to keep the place under the command of the voice. While the nineteenth-century European scholars were busy restraining the earlier, Leibnizian

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169 Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Home Department (B), December 1902, Nos. 1774-1789 [ASA]
170 Surendrachandra Raychaudhuri, “prācīn mudrā”, rangpur sākhā sāhitya-parishat patrikā, vol. 3, (c. 1908), 59. See also Lakshmikanta Gogoi, “ahom bangsār utpati”, bijuli, Vol. 2 (1892), 65-8 for a similar argument. For related references to Surendrachandra Raychaudhuri, see Chapter Ten.
171 Carter, Road to Botany Bay, 31 and 58-9
freedom of recuperating an original order of the world,\(^{173}\) devising rules and regulations for "systematic comparison of inflectional endings" and elaborate schemata of regular "sound shifts",\(^{174}\) their unacknowledged colleagues in a far-away corner of the British empire chose to hang on to the temptations of phonic resemblances.

A typical tract published in 1941 by an Extra Assistant Commissioner in Assam regretted, "[no one had] gone deep into the science of nomenclature of the famous places like Rampur, Ramgaon, Ramgarh, Ramartila, Ramcharani, Ramchahila, Ramdia, etc [in Assam]. Is it merely an indication of devotion towards Lord Rama or a manifestation of some historic truth?"\(^{175}\) The truth was — as the unusually bold letters screamed in the first page of the tract — "Assam is Ceylon". Cherapunji was derived from Cherī ("a female Rakhasa [sic]"); Nāgas were of course the purānic Nāgas; the rivers Meghna and Surma were respectively styled after the names of Meghnād and Saramā, noted members of Rāvana's family; the reference to gold in the name of Svanalankā was retained in the name of Subansiri, and Shillong was, "with little or no phonetic diversion, the same word as Ceylon". Assam, said Nagendra Narayan Das, was precisely the landscape where the epic battle between Rāma and Rāvana was fought. Chronicles had failed to record, memories had faded away, historians had been deluded; but there remained two indestructible cursors to that otherwise inaccessible history: the names of the places and the place of the "aboriginal tribes."

It is an admitted tradition that the three main primitive aboriginal tribes of Ceylon are: — (1) Yahkas [sic] (2) Rakhas, or Rakhasas [sic] (3) Nāgas ... The descendents of those meat-eating savage Rakhasas are still to be seen with their tribal characteristics in their own country — own home — own caves and peaks, jungles and in slopes. ... They are the glorious relics of Assam, namely, the Hill Tribes... Even through this impregnable darkness of the past, the only illuminating factor is these Hill Tribes, acting as the Pole Star.\(^{176}\)

Original words had only one worldly cognate: the aboriginal peoples. The figure of the uncontaminated savage was the missing file in the frozen archive of Kāmarūpa.

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\(^{174}\) For a standard account of the works of Frantz Bopp, Jacob Grimm, August Pott, and other nineteenth-century philologists working on etymology in western Europe, see Holger Pederson, Linguistic Science in the Nineteenth Century: Methods and Results, translated by John Webster Spargo (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1931). See Trautmann, Aryans and British India, 44-7 for a discussion of William Jones’s discomfort with what he called "conjectural etymology".

\(^{175}\) Nagendra Narayan Das, Sword of the East (Shillong: Author, 1941), 3.

\(^{176}\) Ibid, 3-4.
All wealth is coinable; and it is by this means that it enters into circulation — in the same way that any natural being was characterizable and could thereby find its place in a taxonomy; that any individual was nameable and would find its place in an articulated language; that any representation was signifiable and would find its place, in order to be known, in a system of identities and differences.

Michel Foucault