Coda

Can the Postcolonial Begin?
Deprovincializing Assam

BĀṅgāl, Bāṅgāl – you bastards, you make my head spin – Why do you still call me a Bāṅgāl [a rustic fellow from the eastern districts of Bengal]? – I have broken all taboos on eating habits – And still I am not like a Calcuttan? What have I not done to become like a Calcuttan? I have visited prostitutes’ quarters, made my woman wear fine cloth, munched white men’s biscuits, and taken to alcohol – and still, after all this, I cannot become like a Calcuttan! Then what is the point of maintaining this sinful body? Let me dive into water, let sharks and crocodiles eat my body...¹

Thus spoke Rammanikya, with a distinct Dhaka accent, and fell unconscious on the floor in front of a laughing Calcutta audience. Too drunk to be dishonest, Ram was summing up the frustrations of the first-generation provincial middle-class migrants to Calcutta, a sentiment too acutely known to Dinabandhu Mitra, the writer of the Bengali farce Sadhabār Ekādaśī. In his famous epilogue to Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World, Partha Chatterjee advises us to read this fascinating nineteenth-century account of urban decadence as “the story of the Enlightenment in the colonies,” where Nimchand, a well-read drunkard of Calcutta, recites

¹ Dinabandhu Mitra, Sadhabār Ekādaśī (1866; Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishat, 1970), 30
“Hail holy light” seeing a police sergeant’s lamp. For Chatterjee, it becomes profoundly symptomatic of the tragic dissolution of the liberatory promise of illumination into the cruel certitudes of colonial govern mentality. For us, however, the tragedy deepens with Rammanikya, Nimchand’s unsuccessful mfiassil imitator. What may it take, we choose to ask along with and through this mfiassil character, to “become like a Calcuttan?” To dissolve the provincial into the metropolitan theater of the colonial modern?

What Bengal Thinks Today

“...what Bengal thinks tomorrow, India will think tomorrow.”

Few people remember today that the famous one-liner of the Marathi Congress leader Gopal Krishna Gokhale – “What Bengal thinks today, India will think tomorrow” – actually drew on the abovementioned statement of Aurobindo Ghosh, the Bengali revolutionary-turned-yogi. Seemingly, there is no need to remember. For the wounded bhadrakul soul, it has remained a comforting catchphrase, a self-congratulating axiom that gently stirs the pleasant memories of early nationalism. The slogan, popularized among the Bengali middle class during its so-called anti-partition agitation in 1905, continues to command the power of a proverb and the potential of a program. It does not matter who coined it first. It is already a part of the nationalist common sense, a fixture of the polite bhadrakul salons. But what exactly does the slogan mean?

Perhaps one needs to look a little closely at the very movement during which the slogan gained its currency. By and large described as the first organized attempt of the Indian middle class to take the nationalist campaign from the drawing rooms on to the streets and public halls of Calcutta and other towns in Bengal, the so-called anti-partition agitation has come to be celebrated as “nothing less than a revolution in the political structure of Bengali society,” which in turn had a profound impact on the emergent Indian nationalism, in all its

2 Partha Chatterjee, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse? (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 167

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constitutional and extra-constitutional varieties. "Its goal no longer remained the mere abrogation of the partition," asserts a standard textbook, "but complete independence or swaraj, and in this sense the movement could not be considered in any way to be an expression of narrow Bengali sub-nationalism." It is beyond the scope of this thesis to offer a detailed narrative of Curzon’s Territorial Redistribution Scheme or the bhadralok agitation against it. The erudite reader does not need to be reminded of Sumit Sarkar’s masterful account, reference to which has already been made. But in this section of the dissertation we do wish to seize on certain characteristics of this great nationalist movement which are routinely underplayed in the standard South Asian historiography.

Choosing to continue the appellation of “partition” through which the early twentieth-century Bengali bhadralok agitators came to define the realignment of administrative state space in the eastern part of the British Indian empire, the standard histories keep to the tenor of Gokhale’s slogan. Little effort has been taken to step out of this unmistakably Bengal-centric paradigm, although every history book mentions that the scheme involved spatial shuffling in the administrative units of Madras, Central Provinces and Assam. This absence, we would argue, is far from casual or innocent, because in forcing the competing narratives of the spatial realignment to vanish, the linear accounts of the “Bengal Partition” confirm nationalism’s claim as the authentic other of colonialism.

To recount the basic facts, a new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam was formally announced amidst intense bhadralok protest on July 19, 1905, consisting of the Chief Commissionership of Assam, the Divisions of Chittagong, Dhaka and Rajshahi and the districts of Hill Tripura and Malda. According to the bhadralok calculations of the time, “the Bengali Hindus” were to be a religious minority in the new province (“Muslims” outnumbering them by more than 6 millions) and a linguistic minority in the old (as a result

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of incorporating large numbers of “Hindi and Oriya speaking population”). Deciding to speak in the name of the indivisible Bengali nation, the bhśabādik agitators strongly reacted to what they recognized as a colonial conspiracy. The famous Town Hall Meeting at Calcutta (March 18, 1904) directly asked, “Why Dacca, Mymensingh, and the Chittagong Division should agree to enrich Assam at the cost of themselves and their kith and kin?” It is important to emphasize here, against the grain of the sanctioned histories, that the rhetoric of the Bengali nationalist press was no less spiteful to the savage Assamese. The 27 December 1903 issue of Dhākā Prakāśh characteristically wrote, “It makes one tremble and shudder to think that the highly cultured people of five East Bengal districts will be thrown into social combination with the naked barbarians of Assam, and brought under the rule of despotic Assam officials. What a degradation! What a misfortune!” From Mymensingh, Chanmā Mihir quipped with absolute detestation, “The half-educated Assamese will continue to be the lords of the administration of the country, and we shall be judged and tried by them. What a mis-fortune!”

A more logic-chopping Tripūrā Hitaiśhi observed in 1904 that “[t]he Assam officials have to dispense justice among the coolies, the Garos, the Nagas, the Akaś and other savages, so that their higher faculties get deteriorated and they become unfit to deal with higher and more civilized people.” The influential Sanjivāni prayed with all seriousness, “O Lord Curzon! O Sir Andrew Fraser! … Do not drive us from the bright and radiant land of Bengal into the dark and dire cave of Assam.” As the Bengal National Chambers of Commerce, the mainstay of this anti-imperial nationalism, explained in its petition,

the prospect of being transferred from a highly progressive and cultured province like that of Bengal to a backward and primitive province like that of Assam, of breaking off with old associations, of the enforced disruption of immemorial ties, of being cut off from their kith and kin, and lastly, the prospect of being lowered in the estimation of their brethren in other parts of India by being merged into a people placed on a much lower place of civilisation and with whom they have nothing in common, cannot fail to produce deep pain, sorrow and

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7 “The Humble Memorial of the Residents of Calcutta, its Suburbs and the various District of Bengal to His Excellency the Governor General in Council” in Papers relating to the Reconstitution of the Provinces of Bengal and Assam (Simla, Printed at the Government Central Printing office, 1906), 264
8 dhākā prakāśh, 27 December 1903 (Translation from the relevant year’s Report on Native Newspapers)
9 chāru mihir, 22 December 1903 (Translation from the relevant year’s Report on Native Newspapers)
10 tripūrā hitaiśhi, 26 January 1904 (Translation from the relevant year’s Report on Native Newspapers)
11 sanjivāni, 28 January 1904 (Translation from the relevant year’s Report on Native Newspapers)
discontent amongst the several millions of His Majesty's subjects living in Eastern Bengal...\(^\text{12}\)

The mere possibility of being placed with a place that is out of place in the national time of modernity and history opened up the hierarchized character of the national even when it was at one of its "anti-colonial" peaks. "The Humble Memorial of the Inhabitants of the District of Dacca" similarly insisted that "the land beyond the river Meghna has always been looked down upon as the land of the aborigines." The inclusion of Dhaka "into the Administration of Assam, and its permanent administrative association with tracts which have always been looked down upon in a social point of view, will be considered as degrading in the eye of Hindu Society, and they will, in course of time, lose all touch with their kith and kin in the other districts of Bengal. The tract, a person resides in, has always a determining effect in the eye of Hindu Society as to his social status."\(^\text{13}\) Almost all the nationalists asserted that the anachronistic space of Assam – "the dark and dire cave" – was completely incompatible with "the bright and radiant land of Bengal," the earliest British possession in South Asia. As the Sylhet landowners elaborated in their petition,

To invest the chief executive authority of the Province [i.e. Chief Commissioner] with discretionary power in respect of matters which hitherto formed a subject of written law would be to place them beyond the pale of all laws. This is a state of things which would be quite suitable for a Province inhabited by savages. Sylhet, Your memorialists submit, was always considered as one of the advanced districts of Bengal. The people – at least the major portion of them – are as educated, enlightened and polished as those of any other Bengal district. To deprive them of laws is to place them in the category of half-tutored savages.\(^\text{14}\)

As must be clear from this tiny sample of the enormous nationalist literature produced during the movement, the defense of the unity of an administrative unit was coded as the defense of the social. And, as we have been arguing throughout the dissertation, the temporal togetherness of the social could be ensured only through the ceaseless production

\(^{12}\) Sita Nath Roy, Honorary Secretary, Bengal National Chambers of Commerce, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, dated Calcutta, the 3rd February 1904, in *Papers relating to the Reconstitution*, 85

\(^{13}\) "The Humble Memorial of the Inhabitants of the District of Dacca to Sir Andrew Fraser, Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, 4 March 1904" in "Reconstruction of the Province of Bengal and constitution of a new Province to be called the North Eastern Provinces", Home Department, Public-A, February 1905, Proceeding No. 157 (Enclosures to Letter from Government of Bengal, No. 2556-J, Dated 6 April, 1904, to the Address of the Government of India, Home Department) [OIOC]

\(^{14}\) "The Humble Memorial of the Zemindars, Talukdars, and Other Proprietors of Land in the District of Sylhet to His Excellency the Viceroy and Governor General of India in Council", in *Papers relating to the Reconstitution*, 112. Emphasis added.
of anachronistic spaces. Arguments after arguments emerged in the nationalist archive pointing towards the primitive and backward character of Assam: it was an uncivilized country of barbarous tongues and lax caste rules; it had no respectable history; it was a malarious terrain with "an unhealthy and cheerless climate"\textsuperscript{15}, a land of evil magic and wicked charms, a free zone for savage head hunters and immoral opium-eaters. As a leader said in a public meeting, "I say it is no light matter for 11 millions of people to be driven to a strange land, of congenial clime, to the land of kala-joar or black fever and to be forced to form alliance with strange people with whom we have nothing in common."\textsuperscript{16} The term "denationalization" became popularized during the movement. To quote Chānu Mihir again,

In culture and education the Mymensingh people are inferior to none in Bengal and in matters social, domestic, and political; they have through centuries been bound by indissoluble ties with the inhabitants of the other districts of the province. But Mr. Risley [the Home Secretary, a prime mover of the Scheme] is going to break these ties. Of two brothers, one is going to be a Bengali, and the other an Assamese; the nemesis of one will be different from the interests of the other; and one will grow under the superior administration of Bengal, and the other will dwindle under the inferior administration of Assam. The very thought that, after 20 or 25 years, the Mymensingh people will be different men from Bengalis, is tormenting. In origin, race, and language we are different from the Assamese. Our national language will suffer great deterioration by contact with the Assamese language. We shudder at the very thought.\textsuperscript{17}

"I cannot see, nor has anyone succeeded in explaining it to me," replied the Viceroy in his public address in Mymensingh, "why a Bengali should cease to speak Bengali because a Chief Commissioner or a Lieutenant-Governor came to reside at Dacca [the proposed capital of Eastern Bengal and Assam], or why, as I said at Dacca, 14½ millions of Bengalis should abandon their tongue because they enter into partnership with 1½ millions of Assamese." In an attempt to conciliate the Bengali nationalists, Curzon said, "[p]robability would seem to point entirely in opposite direction, and to suggest that Assamese, whether it be a dialect of Bengali or whether it be a separate language – as to which the experts appear to differ – will be the one to disappear."\textsuperscript{18} In his 1903 Minute, Curzon admitted that the new

\textsuperscript{15} Amrita Bazar Patrika, 20 January 1904
\textsuperscript{16} Sitanath Raybahadur, quoted in Sarkar, Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 41. Emphasis added
\textsuperscript{17} Chānu Mihir, 22 December 1903(Translation from the relevant year's Report on Native Newspapers)
\textsuperscript{18} "Addresses at Mymensingh, 20 February, 1904" in private papers of George Nathaniel Curzon, IOR/ Mss Eur F111/247a [OIOC]. An anonymous author of a Bengali nationalist tract countered this claim saying
“province would acquire a new and composite character; but this character would not be more composite than is found in many other Indian administrations.” Fantasizing about an “unbroken connection by rail between the oil wells of Digboi and Margherita, the coal mines of Makum, and the tea plantations of the Upper Brahmaputra, – and the Bay of Bengal,” Curzon was determined to break “the parochialism of Assam.”19 His plan concerning the “wastelands” of Assam has already been discussed in Chapter Six.

The shuffling of spatial sequences, as we have argued in Parts One and Two, was an indispensable part of a bourgeois empire. Capital is nothing without the continuous recombinations of localities. The state-society binary through which the standard “Bengal Partition” historiography invites us to approach the design of the empire often serves to lead us away from the larger question of mobile geographies of capitalism.20 In leaving the claims of the social untroubled, these histories unfortunately fail to address certain crucial complexities of nationalist discourse. “[A]s I travelled in the railway train yesterday,” Curzon told his audience in Dhaka on February 18, 1904, ‘I saw batches of well-organised schoolboys holding up placards, on which was written, ‘Do not turn us into Assamese.’

Surely I need not point out to an intelligent audience that no administrative rearrangement can possibly turn one people into another, or make 14½ millions of people to speak any language but their own: and really the alarms that I am describing seem almost too childish to deserve notice were it not that I have found them to be seriously stated, and apparently genuinely entertained.21

The Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal summed up the official justification in one line: “Mere administrative division does not produce social division, any more than...

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19 “It is owing to its contracted area, to its restricted opportunities, to its lack of commercial outlet, to its alien services, and to the unhealthy predominance in its life and administration of a single industrial interest depending in the main upon imported labour, that what may be described as the parochialism of Assam is due.” “Minute by His Excellency the Viceroy on territorial Redistribution in India, Part II, (June 1, 1903)”, in private papers of George Nathaniel Curzon, IOR/ Ms Eur F111/247a [OIOC].

20 Indeed, in planning to erect “Assam into a vigorous and self-contained administration, capable of playing the same part on the North-East Frontier of India that the Central Provinces have done in the centre, and that the Punjab formerly did on the North-West,” Curzon proposed to name the new province the North-Eastern Provinces. He was immediately told that “the important commercial interests represented by the tea industry would complain if the name of Assam, now so widely known in the markets of the world as the chief source of Indian tea, were to disappear from the list of Indian Provinces.” Brodrick to the Governor General in Council, Public, No. 75, India Office London, dated 9 June 1905, in ibid.

21 “Addresses at Dacca, 18 February, 1904”, in ibid.
administrative unity produces social union.” In underscoring the gap between the depth of the social and the surface of the administrative (“Mere administrative division”), the imperial government was in effect trying to turn the tables on the nationalist agitators. After all, as Chatterjee accomplishedly demonstrates, the strategic foregrounding of an “inner domain” outside the ravages of “westernization” and colonialism was the necessary condition of this very nationalism. But who could have understood the precariousness of the social better than those who had the greatest affective investments in the British Indian state space? As the Chittagong bhadralok pointed out, their district was “in fact, the first British district in the province.” If “amalgamated with the backward Assam, the advanced and progressive Chittagong and the other districts will naturally gravitate towards the lower level as an inevitable result of such an unequal combination.” This is hardly the place to recount the long and rather consistent history of disapproval, condemnation and lampooning with which the dominant bhadralok culture in Calcutta addressed the varying nrtulasil cultures of Chittagong, Sylhet, Dhaka and other “Bangali” districts all through the nineteenth century, traces of which still animate the urban culture in postcolonial West Bengal; but in the sudden, fin-de-siècle pledge of unity and brotherhood during the “anti-partition” movement, traces of this anxious economy were unmistakable. As the Mymensingh bhadraloks pointed out, “by any division of Bengal proper, the portion detached from the Metropolis must lose the benefit of the energy, culture, and enlightenment of the residents of the Metropolis.”

This practical cessation of intercourse between East Bengal and West Bengal must necessarily lead to a deterioration of the language of the former – a language which is being gradually improved and assimilated to that of West Bengal. In this respect, His Excellency seems to be labouring under a mistaken impression. What your memorialists urge is not their language will cease to exist but that its gradual improvement will be retarded, and that ultimately it will assume the form of an inferior dialect. It is this inferiority of dialect which formerly caused the people of West Bengal to look down upon East Bengal. Your

22 From the Officiating Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department (Calcutta, 6 April 1904) [Confidential], Para 42, in ibid.
24 “The Humble Memorial of the Residents of Chittagong assembled at a public meeting held on the 17th day of January 1904” [to G. N. Curzon, George Nathaniel Curzon, Viceroy of India, in “Reconstruction of the Province of Bengal and constitution of a new Province to be called the North Eastern Provinces”, Home Department, Public-A, February 1905, Proceeding No. 157 (Enclosures to Letter from Government of Bengal, No. 2556-J, Dated 6 April, 1904, to the Address of the Government of India, Home Department) [OIOC]
memorialists naturally apprehend that the severance of this district from the Metropolis or, more properly speaking, from the Bengal Government with its seat in the Metropolis, will remove one of the most important factors in the advancement of that people.\textsuperscript{25}

It is not incidental that we started the Coda with Rammanikya. "The greater Calcutta," noted the Government of India in 1905, "ranks among the twelve largest cities in the world, while the population of Calcutta proper is more numerous than that of any other city in the British Empire except London."\textsuperscript{26} But the question, let us repeat, is not so much of Calcutta and Mymensingh or of Bengal and Assam as of the unending enchantment of the metropolis. The reproducibility of the improvement template, we insist, is potentially infinite. The point becomes clearer from the response of the Assamese \textit{srijat} to their Bengali detractors.\textsuperscript{27}

"What do our Bengali friends mean by saying that Assam is a backward province, the people are not enlightened, and therefore they do not like to be mixed up with the savages?," asked a wounded Manik Chandra Barua.

Indeed, it is impossible to conceive an argument more selfish, more narrow-minded, more dishonourable, or more dishonest. .... Do they not remember that, about 30 years ago, Assam was a part and parcel of Bengal, and that it was under the same Lieutenant-Governor? Do they also not remember that when that high-minded ruler, Sir George Campbell, introduced "Assamese", the language of the people of Assam, into Assam, a hue and cry was raised by the Bengalees, saying that "Assamese" was not a language, and that it was a mere jargon of Bengali, and do they not now, in the same breath, say that "Assamese" is quite a separate language?

\textsuperscript{25} "The Humble Memorial of the Inhabitants of the District of Mymensingh" [to Andrew H. L. Fraser, Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, undated] in \textit{Papers relating to the Reconstitution}, 117. Similarly, "One of the People," \textit{Partition of Bengal}, 10 remarks that the detached districts' "culture would fall off owing to less frequent communication with the metropolis of India, the centre of education and culture." And again, on page 16, the author presented "the estrangement of the literary view of Eastern Bengal from the men of light and leading in the metropolis." And as the Bengal National Chambers of Commerce put it, "From a common language, a common metropolis, a common administration, a common University, common social ties and commerce and religion and several other things in common between Western and Eastern Bengal, the inhabitants of both parts, men of culture, men of light and leading, freely mix on a common platform in the metropolis, imbibe and impart thoughts, and gather ideas and informations [sic]. Consequently it would be nothing short of a calamity to dismember Bengal proper, to forcibly disrupt immortal ties and to divide the Bengali-speaking race into two sections, absorbing and merging one section into a backward race inhabiting Assam." Sita Nath Roy, Honorary Secretary, Bengal National Chambers of Commerce, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, dated Calcutta, the 3rd February 1904, in \textit{Papers relating to the Reconstitution}, 80.

\textsuperscript{26} Letter from the Government of India, to the Right Hon'ble St. John Brodrick, His Majesty's Secretary of State for India, dated 2 February 1905, in \textit{Papers relating to the Reconstitution}, 3

\textsuperscript{27} It may be mentioned here that in protest against the racist rhetoric of the Bengali "anti-partition" activists, Tarun Ram Phukan left his practice in the Calcutta High Court and return to Assam. Chaudhuri, \textit{deśbhakta tarunrām phukan}, 4
"Is it not practically saying this," asked Barua, "that because the Assamese are backward, let them remain so, and let them be trodden down by their more-advanced neighbours?"28 His friend, Jagannath Barua, the President of Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha, similarly observed that

[When the question of recognising the Assamese language was under consideration and when the appointments in the services of Assam were claimed by Bengalis, it was urged all along that the two languages were one and the two people were one, but now, when the question of uniting a portion of Bengal with Assam has arisen, the Assamese language is declared to be an entirely different language and the Assamese people are relegated to the levels of Lushais and other hill tribes.29]

The bhadrakiks' pain in being classed together with the savage Assamese and the frijuts' pain in being "relegated to the levels of Lushais and other hill tribes" are not strikingly different. Acceptance of the category of "backwardness" for self-description was an acceptance of the linear time of capital, modernity and nation. Even the most untiring advocate of the Kāmarūpa glory, Kanak Lal Baruah, acknowledged the force of this temporal schema.

The Assamese, who came under British rule eighty years ago, are naturally less advanced than their more fortunate brethren the Bengalis, who have enjoyed the blessings of British rule in a central locality for nearly a century and a half. They [i.e. the Assamese] are, therefore, alarmed at the prospects of having to run the race of life tied to a more advanced community.30

Gokhale's one-liner, we submit, points at this inevitably hierarchized time of the national. The earliest entrant into the imperial order is logically more modern than the belated. It is only by accepting the autobiographical time of capital that the nation can insert itself into the domain modern, and in so far as it remains committed to capital's schemes of improvement, anachronistic spaces remain its vital condition of possibility. Without the tragedy of Rammanikya, there is little joke in the metropolis.

28 "Note by Srijut Manik Chandra Barua, Dated Gauhati, February 27, 1904" [to Chief Commissioner], Annexure to "Proposed Redistribution of Territory between Bengal and Assam", From F. J. Monahan, the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, 6 April, 1904 (Home Department, Public –A, February 1905, Proceeding No. 156) [OIOC]
29 "Letter Dated Jorhat, February 10, 1904 from Rai Jagannath Barua, Bahadur, President, Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha" [to Chief Commissioner], in ibid.
30 "Note by Srijut Kanak Lal Barua, Extra Assistant Commissioner, Dated February 12, 1904 [to Chief Commissioner]", in ibid.
The Politics of Elsewhere

"Of course, that's elsewhere, always elsewhere, you'll want to say, not the rule but the exception, existing in An Other Place."31

If one is indeed talking of tragedies and farces with the vanishing memories of British Assam in one's head, it is difficult to escape the historian Suryya Kumar Bhuyan's heroes. In an earlier chapter we have described them as authentic, authoritative and assertive. But there is at least another strikingly common element in them. All of them are tragic heroes. We are not simply referring to Rudra Singha, who dies before he can succeed in executing his plan of building an Ahom empire in post-Aurangzeb India. He was Bhuyan's missed train to "mainstream."32 We have also Bhuyan's most favorite Ahom general Lachit in mind: who earns a formidable victory against the mighty Mughals in Saraighat and yet remains unnoticed in the dominant South Asian history. He was no less than Nelson and Wellington of England, or Mazzini, Cavour and Garibaldi of Italy, or Pratap Singh of Rajputana or Shivaji of Maharashtra, said Bhuyan. But the "name of Lachit Barphukan has not traveled beyond the frontier of his own country."

The limitations suffered by Lachit Barphukan's fame and glory are not attributable to any inferiority of his qualities of leadership in the battle-field; they are due mainly to the lack of publicity which, unfortunately, has fallen to the lot of all the great and good things of Assam, the deeds of her heroic sons, and the contributions and thoughts of her poets, philosophers and saints.33

What did this tragedy involve? Simply an instrumental failure? A "lack of publicity?" The absence of "an Asiatic Society of Assam?" Bhuyan probably thought so, and all his laborious efforts at professionalizing the discipline were directed to this end.34 We fear a disagreement

32 "In Rudra Singha's scheme to conquer Bengal and if possible the rest of Mogul India, was reached the high watermark of nationalistic idealism, which vanished with the last breath of that illustrious monarch." Bhuyan, "Preface" to Tungkhungia Buranji, xxv. Had Rudra Singha succeeded, Bhuyan wrote elsewhere, "[i]t may be, the centuries of British rule in India would have been a non-existent chapter of its history."
Bhuyan, Studies in the History of Assam, 11
33 S. K. Bhuyan, Lachit Barphukan and His Times: A History of the Assam-Mogul conflicts of the period 1667 to 1671 A.D. (Gauhati: DHAS, 1947), 1
34 "The most curious thing about Assam is the conspicuous ignorance about it on the part of my countrymen in India and my fellow mortals in other parts of the world," Bhuyan wrote in 1955. Bhuyan, Studies in the History of Assam, 1
here. Why, then, would Bhuyan with the breathtaking thickness of his research and with his excellent skill of storytelling, remain unnoticed in today’s historiographical recapitulations on South Asia, while he was undeniably one among the first-rate historians in his contemporary India and even chaired the Modern History Section in the 1952 Indian History Congress at Gwalior? These lines appear so uncannily autobiographical! The tragedy is deeper and it has not deserted us. It involves the problematic of the hierarchized national. Within the grids of this problematic Bhuyan is compelled to discover Lachit as an Ahom Shivaji, Mula Gabharu as an Ahom Lakshmi Bai, Moamaria insurgency as a “northeastern Sikh revolt,” or to cite the title of one of his early books, Rani Phuleswari as “An Assamese Nur Jahan.” Not much is left for the “provincial historian” except marshalling his belated-local facts into the already-national models.

In the third Bulletin of the DHAS in 1936, Bhuyan proposed a series of similar models from “world history”: Bhaskara Varmana is Assam’s Julius Caesar, Harshadeva is Assam’s Alexander, Momai-Tamuli Barbarua is Assam’s Solon, Atan Buragohain is Assam’s Pericles, Pratap Singha is Assam’s Charlemagne, Rudra Singha is Assam’s Frederick the Great, Jaymati is Assam’s Griselda, Assamese Vaishnavism is “Assam’s European Protestantism” [sic], Battle of Saraighat is Assam’s Battle of Blenheim, Battle of Itakhuli is Assam’s Battle of Trafalgar, Battle of Mohgarh is Assam’s Battle of Waterloo, Syiemships of Khasi and Jaintia are Assam’s Democracies of Athens and Sparta, Bodos are Assam’s Macedonians, and so on and so forth. In the same piece, Bhuyan looked for “an Assamese Gibbon” among his countrymen who would write a History of Decline and Fall of the Ahom Kingdom and “an Assamese Leckey” who would compose a History of Rationalism in Assam. It is possibly upon the location of the reader to determine whether the effect of this approach is farcical or tragic, but unmistakable is the acute recognition underlying this passionate insertion of Assam into “world history” of the inauthenticity of the pasts Bhuyan was professionally and emotionally most concerned with.

The dynamics of inauthentication and inferiorization necessarily obfuscate the convenient, commonsensical boundary between self and other, nation and empire. The viewpoint ascribed

35 Bhuyan, Lachit Barphukan, ix, 1, passim. Even in the title of Bhuyan’s book there is a distinct allusion to Jadunath Sarkar’s popular Shivaji and His Times.
36 Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, “Noble Women of Assam” (1957), in Bhuyan, Studies, 71
37 Bhuyan, Anglo-Assamese Relations, 257
38 Published in 1926
39 Bhuyan, Panorama of Assam History
to the metropolis becomes the abstract perspective: politically neutral, scientifically endorsed, and available to the provincial aspirant for his/her self-description. Complexities of this process, as we have been trying to suggest, are difficult to be captured in a language of "invasions" of the social.\textsuperscript{40} Rather the very assumption of its pre-existence requires to be opened anew to critical thinking. It is perhaps obvious to the reader by now that for us the metropolis is scarcely reducible to the cartographic dots of London or Calcutta. It is rather a modular center, Poovey's "nowhere," from which the social appears as a legible and accessible world. "Indeed," observes Achille Mbembe,

the Western imagination defines the metropolis as the general form assumed by the rationalization of relations of production (the increasing prevalence of the commodity system) and the rationalization of the social sphere (human relations) that follows it. A defining moment of metropolitan modernity is realized when the two spheres rely upon purely functional relations among people and things and subjectivity takes the form of calculation and abstraction.\textsuperscript{41}

Perhaps Mbembe will not disapprove if we add that it is precisely in the deferral of these relations and forms that one can locate a colonial landscape's "temptation of minatory, that is, of imagining itself as ... a pale reflection of forms born elsewhere."\textsuperscript{42} This deferral, of course, can be seen as a token of agency of the oppressed, as a sign of writing difference into the dominant text of modernity and capital ("Don't fuck me yet, I still have (an)other story to tell," as Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it in allusion to the\textit{Arabian Nights}).\textsuperscript{43} But the deferral is simultaneously a structural imperative of improvement — a condition of its reproduction. The disciplinary dispositif becomes an ontological guarantee for the subject produced within it. If we are not too willing to be drawn again into the loop of "truth and error, freedom and constraint,"\textsuperscript{44} we must disrupt the dialectic of the rule and exception, of here and elsewhere. It is

\textsuperscript{40} Cf. Charles Tilly,\textit{Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1992} (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 25
\textsuperscript{41} Achille Mbembe, "Aesthetics of Superfluity",\textit{Public Culture}, 16: 3 (2004), 373
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid, 375. Emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{43} Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Difference-Deferral of a Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British India", in David Arnold and David Hardiman (eds.),\textit{Subaltern Studies VII: Essays in Honour of Ranajit Guha} (Oxford University Press, 1994), 88: "I think of it, as Barthes once said with reference to Shaharazad of the\textit{Arabian Nights}, more as a merchandize, a narrative traded 'for one more day of life.' To attempt to write difference into the history of our modernity in a mode that resists the assimilation of this history to the political imaginary of the European-derived institutions ... which dominates our lives, is to learn from Shaharazad's technique of survival. It is to say, to every perpetrator of epistemic violence and in the voice of the woman-subject Shaharazad: 'Don't fuck me yet, I still have (an)other story to tell.'"
\textsuperscript{44} Cf. Foucault,\textit{Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self}, 223n
with this sense of urgency that we seize on a casual reference in Mbembe and Nuttall to the work of deprovincialization.\footnote{"If, as we believe, the world has nothing other, if it is not subject to any authority, and if it does not have a sovereign, then we must read Africa in the same terms as we read everywhere else. This is not tantamount to diminishing aspects of its supposed originality or even its distinctiveness or the potency of its suffering. It means that scholarship on Africa should be deprovincialized." Mbembe and Nuttall, \textit{Writing the World}, 351} 

In 1937, the year when Bhuyan was working on the final draft of his doctoral dissertation, Jawaharlal Nehru, the president of the Indian National Congress, visited Assam on a short propaganda tour. In his public address to the people of Assam, Nehru characteristically emphasized the overriding importance of the two major “national problems” facing India: the attainment of independence and the eradication of poverty. He contended that every true nationalist in Assam ought to give more priority to these two issues than the specific “provincial problems” like “opium, future of Sylhet, settlement of immigrants, the Line System, tea plantations and particularly their workers, Partially or Wholly Excluded Areas and the hill tribes therein, and crude oil.”\footnote{Quoted in Jnananath Bora, “pandit nehrū āru asamar samasyā”, \textit{āvāhan}, 9: 1 (1937), 116} Jnananath Bora, a political commentator and activist from Assam, published an impassioned response to Nehru’s speech in the popular periodical \textit{Āvāhan}. In a certain sense, this response was a continuation of his earlier and lengthier piece in the same periodical, “Kāmarūpa and India.” In that piece, Bora had entered into a detailed discussion of the relationship between a \textit{deś} (country/nation) and a \textit{pradeś} (region/province). It was only after the arrival of the British, said Bora, that “our ever-free country became a province.”

From then on, Kāmarūpa or Assam is not a \textit{deś} anymore – it is a mere \textit{pradeś}. In the beginning, our people could not understand it. For a long period of time our people continued to consider Assam as a different \textit{deś} from India [Bhāratvarsha], and did not participate in any of its programs. This was only natural. For two thousand years our people have regarded their \textit{deś} as an independent \textit{deś} in the world. \ldots For the last thirty years or so, there have been signs of a change. Some of our people have started to think of our \textit{deś} as a \textit{pradeś} of India; but this is not a feeling common to all. Our people still cannot think of the people of Punjab or Madras as our own countrymen. They are as distant as the people of China or Afghanistan.

Turning the long nineteenth-century history of distance upside down, Bora argued that what had been condemned in the official accounts as seclusion and remoteness of the province
were actually indications of Assam's refusal to accept a provincial status. According to him, the recent provincialization of Assam had the most damaging effects on its people.

Only a century has passed under the British rule in Assam. As Assam has been administered as a part of India during these hundred years, our educated class has come to view its own desi as a pradesi of India. There cannot be any doubt that this change has narrowed the ideas of our people. Our ancestors, located though they were in Kāmarūpa, could look at the whole world and adopt different models of other desis to improve the condition of their desi. But now our downfall is so complete that we can only look within the confines of India and not even the adjacent desis. Today the pradesis of India are our sole models. Our people are following the other pradesis of India on every account. Forgetting our distinctiveness, our particularity, our originality, they are blindly imitating the pradesis of Bengal or Punjab. This is the present condition of the ever-free desi of Kāmarūpa.47

Bora's own models therefore came from Europe. In a detailed chart he compared the respective population figures and area measurements of Albania, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Greece, Irish Free State, and Switzerland with those of "Kāmarūpa" (the British province of Assam in 1936 without the district of Sylhet plus the Division of Jalpaiguri), and concluded that Assam suited almost every criterion of a modern nation-state, a desi.48 In his response to Nehru a few months later, Bora lashed out at Nehru for not having recognized the true nature or intensity of the problems of Assam. If Assam's problems were secondary in priority because they were "provincial problems" and not national, then – according to Bora – the best way to put these problems on the top of the priority list was to make Assam an independent nation, a desi rather than a pradesi: "If we cannot achieve our objectives in staying as a pradesi within India, then we should not hesitate to secede from India and form an independent desi."49

It is not our purpose here to deal with the details of Bora's "objectives" or his strong and complex rhetoric of anti-immigration; but we do wish to call the reader's attention to his logic of desi and pradesi, which is of continuing interest to many political activists in the present-day Indian northeast.50 In Bora's understanding, desi was the cancellation of pradesi: the dignity of the national was the best antidote to the disgrace of the provincial. In an article

47 Jnananath Bora, "kāmrūp āru bhāratvarsha", āvāhan, 8: 3 (1936), 255
48 Ibid, 260-1
49 Bora, kāmrūp āru bhāratvarsha, 120
50 In his controversial Swādhinatār Prastāb ["Proposition of Independence"], the independentist activist Parag Kumar Das categorically reclaimed the legacy of Jnananath Bora while making a case for secession of Assam from India. See Das, swādhinatār prastāb, 36-40.
Coda

titled “Why Would the Assam Des Stay within India,” Bora more explicitly linked the understanding of a lived space as a provincial space to the fact of colonial occupation. The Indian National Congress, he said, actually continued and strengthened the imperial politics of provincialization as it entered Assam in the nineteen twenties.

It was injected into the mind of the Assamese public that Assam was not a different des but a prades of India. … [It was taught that] We are Indians first and Assamese later. Every issue of Assam, each of its problems is provincial [pradesik], and hence can in no way be given primary attention. … As a result of these lessons, the issues of Assam were pushed out of the purview. However deep our problems may be, they are considered as provincial and therefore unworthy of attention. … Now the situation has become such that our people feel embarrassed and ashamed if one mentions the interests of the Assamese nation. The educated people are always scared lest they are called insular and narrow-minded.31

For Bora, only nationalism, as a full-blooded politics of legitimation and authentication, could offer a promise of the fullness of presence, an answer to the self-denigration and ignominy of the provincial. The independent nation-state of Assam would not have to imagine itself as a bad copy of the other provinces of India; as a des, it would preserve “our distinctiveness, our particularity, our originality.” Needless to say, Bora did not wish to see the constant reproduction of the provincial within Assam – the domination and denigration of the Hills, the delegitimation and chastisement of Bhāti, the inauthentication and vilification of the “settlers.” Nor was he open to the possibility that the very desire for distinctiveness, particularity and originality was the missing twin of what he criticized as embarrassment, shame and self-doubt among the provincial middle-class.52 But there is a less obvious point too. The point concerns the putative autonomy and self-presence of a des.

Provincialization, for Bora, is the effect of an exogenous force, an invasion, an assault that comes from an ever-present outside. The force confiscates a des and turns it into a prades. Therefore, the project of turning a prades back into a des necessarily involves a gesture of return: to the original place, to an etymological beginning, to Kāmarūpa. Bora’s repeated invocations of the history of “two thousand years” of an “ever-free des of Kāmarūpa” are hardly incidental. Nationalism, as Derrida points out, has to “indissociably” connect “the

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31 Jnananath Bora, “asam des bharatvarshar bhitarat thakiba kiya (asamiyā jāti āru congress),”āvōhan, 10: 3 (1938), 261-274
52 Cf. Julia Kristeva, Nations without Nationalism, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) 3-4. Of course, we are in serious disagreement with Kristeva’s valorization of “the French national idea.”

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ontological value of present-being to its situation, to the stable and presentable
determination of a locality, the topos of territory, native soil, city, body in general.” He calls it
the axiomatics of ontology. At the heart of the ontography of Bora’s political
nationalism, however, is active the heterotopia of historicist pedagogy. To draw on our
earlier discussion, the original place is always elsewhere, an-other space, “outside of the time
and inaccessible to its ravages.” The nation-space (dei) becomes conceivable only as a
misplaced space, the nation (jati) as a displaced people. Sense of loss and proprietorial logic
reinforce each other in the form of an unforgiving circularity. Without this spectral centrality
of elsewhere, there is no “here and now” of the nation.

Coming back from the ruthless expedition against the Abors in 1911, a young British soldier
lamented in his journal that “[t]he frontier tribesman … always sees us at our weakest.” He
mentioned the “gigantic difficulties of road-making, transport, and supply” which had to be
necessarily overcome “before we can throw out the smallest feeler into his territory, and our
subsequent victory over him is sometimes therefore not of the most signal kind.”

But when a little of what one might call “punitive globe-trotting,” imposed as one of the
terms of peace, might have a great effect upon our future relations. Imagine a band of
hostages handed over to us at the close of hostilities for a couple of years, and the chance
thus afforded of enlarging their political outlook. A dozen Abor gens would, for instance,
make excellent subjects for “punitive globe-trotting.” We would start by a little general
education of an elementary kind. Having thus rendered them receptive of larger notions, we
would proceed to “trot” them round the British Empire, expound to them the big physical
facts upon which our empire is founded, and then send them back to their corner in the
mountains to give a salutary account of what they had learnt to their fellow-tribesmen.

Millington’s fantasies are remarkable for too many reasons. But what matters most for the
present discussion is his allusion to the enormous power of elsewhere. Even the severest
conquest of a place is unfinished until the conquered is exposed to other places and forced
to trot the globe at the heels of the masters. It is from one’s place in a sequence that one
must know the meaning of one’s own place, and there is no sequence without other places.
The obscene pride of the empire in the length and variety of its territorial sequence formally

53 Derrida, Specters of Marx, 82
54 Foucault, Of Other Spaces, 26. See Chapter Four
55 Powell Millington, On the Track of the Abor (London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1912), 67-8
56 See Reid, History of the Frontier Areas, 230 for a brief description of crop-burning, village-burning,
“rapid fire” and forcible displacements of the target population during the 1911 expedition.
Coda

contrasts with the modest "desire and designs" of the nation for its spatial homogeneity. But, as Benedict Anderson points out, it is only in the "new, restless double-consciousness" of comparison lies "the origin of nationalism." What would Bora's "Kāmarūpa" do in a world without the corresponding European exemplars? In a brilliant gloss on Anderson, Pheng Cheah writes that "[c]omparison is a specter precisely because it is a form of inhuman automatism conjured up by capitalism's eternal restlessness." In the language of this dissertation, this would mean that the comparative moment can occur only in the series of autobiographical time of capital.

As the condition of comparison, elsewhere is intrinsic to the discourse of the nation. The deferral of the authentic is the only manner in which the power of authentication can continue to hold sway. To draw on a Timothy Mitchell sentence, what matters about this labyrinth is not that the nation never reaches the authentic, but that such a notion of the authentic cannot cease to govern the national imaginary. This ineffaceability of the provincial does not however make the work of deprovincialization utopian. On the contrary, it saves such work from being reduced to an exorcist gesture. The work of deprovincialization, explain Mbembe and Nuttall, involves reading the minor place of the provincial "in the same terms as we read everywhere else." This, we would argue, activates a brilliant displacement: the cheery promise of familiarization ("the same terms as ... everywhere else") develops into a scary project of defamiliarization. The nation begins to resemble the empire, and the province, in its turn, confirms the infinite replicability of the nation form with relentless capacities for further provincializations. Anderson's thesis of "serialization" takes a wicked turn. The novel of comparison becomes infinite histories of coconstitution.

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59 Pheng Cheah, "Grounds of Comparison", Diacritics, 29: 4 (1999), 12. In such a description there is however an unmistakable shadow of Pheng Cheah's own neo-vitalist defense of the nation-form as "the last effective bearer of the idea of transcendental freedom for the majority of the world's masses," which we find difficult to accept. Cf. Pheng Cheah, Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to Postcolonial Literatures of Liberation (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 197
61 Mbembe and Nuttall, Writing the World, 351
62 Cf. Anderson, Imagined Communities, 184-5

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It is at this point of the discussion that the specificity of the colonial again appears as a question. Amalendu Guha tells us that there were not too many takers for Jnananath Bora's "secessionist" ideas in the nineteen thirties, and that even Ambikagiri Raychaudhury's model of dual citizenship did not have "any general acceptance among the Assamese people." Within half a century, however, Bora became common sense for many. "The struggle for national liberation of Assam never is a separatist or secessionist movement", declares the website of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), the particular insurgent organization around which the contemporary discourse of "independent Assam" has consolidated since its inception in 1979. According to ULFA, the question of "secession" does not arise since "historically" Assam has never been a part of the Indian nation and its location within the political map of India has to be explained simply as a fact of "colonial occupation."

While the Indian state is too eager to assure its metropolitan citizens that ULFA's call for independence ("secession") is the voice of a few isolated youths in the province propped up by the bad neighbors, most of the perceptive commentators point at the facile naivety of such descriptions. Contending that "the ideas that inspire ULFA are located in the mainstream of Assamese social, political and cultural life," Sanjib Baruah offers informed accounts of critical complicities between "mainstream" institutions (like the Asam Sahitya Sabha) and "marginal" outfits. It is the availability of a wider "social space," according to Baruah, that helps the banned dreams of "independence" to grow. It must be clear by now that we cannot agree with the sense of primordiality with which Baruah invests this "social space." But instead of going with bold strokes over the lines that have already been penciled, we are more interested in ULFA's description of the Indian nation-state as a colonial empire. The description is of course neither original nor unusual. Scores of other guerilla organizations in the north-eastern frontier (and elsewhere) continue to challenge the postcolonial credentials of the Indian state, while the government statements routinely refer to the difficulties of "regional inequalities" in the northeast as an obstruction to "nation-

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63 Guha, Planter-Raj to Swaraj, 316
64 http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Congress/7434/ulfa.htm [visited June 15, 2004]. See also the ULFA Chairman Arvind Rajkhowa's assertion that "history does not sustain the argument that Asom and Asom's identity is part of India and the Indian identity ... Asom was never a part of India. Indian history provides no instance of any Indian ruler ever ruling Asom", quoted in Frontline, 12 May 1990.
65 Baruah, Durable Disorder, 168. See also Misra, Periphery Strikes Back, 143
66 See Baruah, Durable Disorder, Chs. 6, 7, and 8
building." It is not our purpose to judge the verities of these contending constructs. But what the continuing career of the idioms of desi and pradesi indicates is a larger paradox: consigned to the relentless reproduction of the provincial, territorial nationalism can never abolish its mythical other - colonialism - which always threatens to lodge itself within the very claims of nationalism.67

Nation & Co.

"We are taught that corporations have a soul, which is the most terrifying news in the world."68

It is with another brief allusion to the continuing history of policing impossible lines that we intend to close this dissertation. This concerns the boundary between the nation and "the transnation."69 As our preceding discussion may clarify, the legal theater of capital has never been a limit to capital's expansive potentials. Revisability of legal jurisdictions, rewritability of political borders and reducibility of the sovereign outside have always provided the theoretical groundwork for capital's movement. They still do. The recent academic attention to the "unbundling of territorial sovereignty" in the regime of hypermobile financial capital has by and large underplayed the elements of continuity from the earlier and less mobile regimes of capital.70 Indeed, too much has been said about the immobilizing aspects of colonialism - its maps, its objectifications, and its stereotypes. Even without minimizing the intensity and criticality of these forces, it is possible to recognize the corresponding

67 Nothing much is to be gained from sanitizing this paradox as "internal colonialism," because the jargons of interiority and exteriority, as we have been trying to demonstrate throughout the dissertation, are complicit in the project and cannot be deployed to comprehend it. Cf. Michael Hechter, Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536-1966 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975). See also Tilottama Misra, "Assam: A Colonial Hinterland", Economic and Political Weekly (9 August 1980), 1357-1365 and Apurba Kumar Baruah, Social Tensions in Assam: Middle Class Politics (Guwahati: Purbanchal Prakash, 1991)
68 Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," October, vol. 59 (1992), 6
69 This term is from Appadurai, Modernity at Large, Part III
expansive and productionist thrusts. If the security anxiety and hardening of the borders is a legacy of the colonial state, so is the urge to open the borders to capital and labor flows.

The current policy literature on the Indian northeast is focused on the much-trumpeted "Look East" program of the Indian government. Formulated during the "liberalization" of the Indian economy in the early nineteen nineties, the program calls for "deeper integration of the economies of ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] and India in coming years."71 [O]pening up the natural outlet of the Northeast" for this purpose has remained a more or less steady concern of the Government of India. In fact, the vigorous lobbyists from Assam have consistently blamed the "artificiality" of the colonial boundaries and argued that the Government should instead allow the "natural economic region" to emerge "without the constraints of national boundaries."72 "Focus on the North Eastern Region of India" has been marked as a "priority area" in Asian Development Bank's 2005-07 Country Strategy and Program. What exactly are on the cards, of course, cannot be known. But in its 2004 statement on "Technical Assistance to India for Preparing the Northeastern States Trade and Investment Creation Initiative," the Asian Development Bank [ADB] clearly observes that the "northeastern states in India have lagged behind other parts of the country in terms of integration into the world economy and competitiveness". In order to develop, says ADB, the "subregion" must emphasize its "bridge function":

[T]he private sector will increase its productivity, while the northeast of India can increasingly serve as an important land bridge for trade between South Asia and Southeast Asia and the Greater Mekong Subregion.73

In November 2005, the Asian Development Bank and the Confederation of Indian Industries organized a meeting of the Mekong Development Forum in New Delhi, involving "high-level representatives from the GMS Governments," "representatives from the GMS chambers of commerce and industry and private companies," and "senior executives of about 60-80 large private sector enterprises in India". There are reasons to believe that the effort at "fostering regional economic integration in GMS and South Asia" will not stop here.74 As one Vice-President of the ADB categorically said in the meeting, "Regional

71 See the special issue on the subject in Seminar 550, June 2005
72 Baruah, Durable Disorder, 221
integration is a building block, not a substitute, to greater integration with the global community.” “Harmonization” of the several bilateral trade agreements among the Asian countries “with the World Trade Organization’s guidelines on global trade” remains a declared objective of the ADB. Explicitly promoting the coherence of the region in this context “to create economies of scale,” the ADB is keen on resolving or mitigating particularly those cross-border problems which “serve as barriers to trade and investment liberalization.

Such idioms and practices of regional coherence provide the context of the ADB’s focus on “the subregional transport corridors” through Northeast India. Perhaps it will not be out of place to remember that in 2004, transport and communication sector received the largest portion (38%) of total $5.3 billion of ADB lending to South Asia, over three times more than what the agriculture sector received. Plans for upgrading the old Burma Road to provide access between Yunnan and Assam via Myanmar are being prepared. In fact, it is hoped that the renovated Burma Road would be the “backbone” of all “ongoing plans for road and access development” between China, Myanmar and India. Once the transnational transport grid is in place, we are told by the Greater Mekong advocates, it would unfailingly help “to attract new markets from India and other parts of South Asia to the GMS.”

The twenty-first century improvers wish to believe that these are fresh ideas and new beginnings. The reader of this dissertation will be sorry to spoil their joy, but under the surface of the Greater Mekong palimpsest, it is not difficult to find the traces of a worn-out nineteenth-century blueprint. “Connectivity,” “integration into the world economy” and “bridge function” are not merely fashionable watchwords; they are the newest relics of the oldest capitalist speculations in the north-eastern frontier. As we have already mentioned, finding a land route to Yunnan through Assam was one of the major concerns of the British

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77 ADB, Technical Assistance to India for Preparing the Northeastern States
78 “Demystifying Asian Development Bank [ADB]: Note Prepared by Bank Information Center-South Asia Office as input towards CSO preparations for ADB’s 2006 Annual General Meeting,” November 2005
Indian state throughout the nineteenth century. In fact, since the eighteen sixties the tea industry took particular interested in opening the “natural gate to China.”

The throwing open of all India to all China, the access of a country containing 200 millions to the produce of a country occupied by 400 millions, and the opposite, (to say nothing of Central Asia), would be of its kind a work of such magnitude as that nothing approaching to it has ever yet been seen in the world; and the export of a large portion of the produce of Western China for Europe through our own principal port of Calcutta is an imperial question of the very first importance.80

Is this 1867 argument too unfamiliar to us? In 1873, M'Cosh was already talking in terms of establishing “an international thoroughfare between Assam, Burmah and China,” and under instructions from the Secretary of State for India, copies of M'Cosh's pamphlet were printed and distributed from London.81 The proposal for extending the North-Eastern Railway of Bengal over the hills of Manipur across Burma through Bhamo, Momein and Talifu to Yunnan was seriously discussed since the eighteen eighties.82 What the ADB is selling today to the Government of India is neither a novel nor an original vision. Today, endorsing the suspicions of Anil Agarwal, Sanjib Baruah reminds us that apart from the enormous environmental costs which it carries, the transnational project of road-building in the Northeast has other sinister implications: “If industry is slow to take off because of the lack of a local market, roads could become, in Agarwal's words, ‘excellent corridors to siphon off the existing natural resources of the region, its forests.”'83 Given the recurring suggestive references to the “unexploited natural resources” in “[s]ome parts of Assam and the more remote states in the east” in the ADB documents,84 Baruah’s anxieties are hardly ill-founded. After all, we know a little more about the ADB than what it wishes us to know.85

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82 Indian Tea Districts Association, Sixth Annual Report. 1886. Private papers of Indian Tea Association. European Manuscripts, OIOC, No. IOR/Mss Eur F174/1. In fact, in 1920, a preliminary survey for a railway line to connect India and Burma via Hukong Valley was officially sanctioned. But the plan for a railway connection between Burma and Yunnan was shelved owing to the “disturbed state” of China. Foreign Department, Sec.-E, February 1920, Proceedings Nos. 267-287 [NAI]
83 Baruah, Durable Disorder, 34
84 ADB, Technical Assistance to India for Preparing the Northeastern States
85 See Hemantha Withanage, Ronald Masayda, Romil Harmandez and Arturo Nuera, Development Debacles: A Look into ADB’s Involvement in Environmental Degradation, Involuntary Resettlement and Violation of Indigenous People’s Rights (NGO Forum on ADB, 2006); Gutta!, Marketing the Mekong; Jonathan
Nevertheless, the Union Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region and the ADB have already started to collaborate on the North Eastern State Roads Project without attending to the larger infrastructural issues. (In the first phase of the program, "roads from Nagaland could not be included because of the State Government's insistence on proposing only new roads whereas the ADB project was for upgrading existing roads." 86) The citizens are routinely assured that roads are alleviating poverty as markets are being connected and disparate productive units are being conjoined into a wider network of prosperous interdependence. "Over the recent years," admits the ADB Vice President, "it seems that economic and social disparities, among and within countries in the [Asian] region, are widening due in part to unequal or inadequate access to markets, finance, and technology." But, claims he, "this phenomenon is not the consequences of economic integration; rather it is the lack of regional integration and cooperation that have left some countries in the lurch, particularly lowest income ones with weak institutional capacity." 87 The distance (from a metropolis more deterritorialized than ever) is again to bear the cross of inadequacy. It is scarcely our case that the present-day "problems" of Assam are merely a continuation of their nineteenth or early twentieth-century antecedents. But only the commissioned-to-be-indifferent can overlook the continuity of the problematics.

It is in the context of this current and calculated impulse to represent the "regions" as somewhat more durable, more historical and more authentic than the political arbitrariness of "nations" that the work of deprovincialization gathers additional responsibility. In recognizing the "simultaneity of spatial plays" of capital, 88 such work invariably violates the sacrosanct logic of elsewhere and points at the constitutive connections between the seemingly contending jargons of spatial coherence. It has appeared surprising to many that in a world of abrupt deregulation of "domestic" financial markets, "liberalization" of global capital flow, and instantaneous transmission through computer networks, "the nation becomes the only way to imagine community ... Every imagination of a community ... Every imagination of a community becomes overcoded as a

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86 ADB NE Tour Report IFAD(130)
87 Jin, *Regional Cooperation and Integration*
88 We owe this phrase to David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 184
nation.” Such a sense of surprise, we contend, is possible only when one indulges in the fantasy of an authentic space of the autonomous subject constituting an ever-present exterior to capital. To think of survival beyond such fantasies is not to erase hope but to rescue it from eschatology.