The help I received in conceiving and writing this dissertation has been simply too much to be compressed into a neat litany of names. As it perhaps happens to everybody, I do not know the names of most of the people who collectively shaped my concern regarding the question, excited my imagination and tried to save my research from dissolving into a pointless archivism. At the moment I am thinking of that cigarette-seller in Delhi who, sensing my impatience during a traffic jam caused by a republic day parade rehearsal, wryly remarked that “nation is a costly business”. I distinctly remember the Calcutta librarian, who first asked me if I was an Assamese and after knowing that I was not, advised me in all good spirit to shift to “some worthwhile history”. The keeper of the guesthouse in Guwahati who half-jokingly murmured, “Yet another Bengali to write our history!” The computer professional in the London pub who continued to insist, “But the Assamese are a lazy bunch!”

Will it be too much to say that I have been trying to talk about these very fantasies and anxieties, assertions and apathies without pretending a ventriloquistic ruse?

I remain indebted to the South-South Exchange Programme for Research on the History of Development (SEPHIS) of the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam for having supported this project in the form of a generous and politically agreeable three-year PhD fellowship (2003-2006). Otherwise it would have been rather difficult for me to concentrate on research and certainly impossible to consult records abroad. Apart from the esteemed members of the Steering Committee, I would like to particularly thank U. T. Bosma, the coordinator of the program, Jacqueline Rutte, the secretary, and Ingrid Goedhart, the office manager, for their extraordinary patience, helpfulness and cooperation. It has been a great time with SEPHIS.

Let me also record here that my first research trip to Assam in 2002 was made possible by the first (and in my case, the only) installment of the Travel and Contingency Grant of the Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi.

My thesis advisors, Professor Neeladri Bhattacharya and Professor Tanika Sarkar, have been exemplary in their democratic capacity to shape a shared project through dialogues and debates. Their presence was inspiring, criticisms unforgiving and support unstinting. For offering their wisdom and solidarity at critical moments, for encouraging me to risk new walks, for alerting me to the crevices on the way, and for keeping their faith in the project in difficult times, I remain beholden to them. My miserably formal prose can hardly capture their affection, warmth and concern. I shall only say that I could not be luckier: my thesis advisors were also my best friends.

In fact, the entire faculty at the Centre for Historical Studies was incredibly supportive, remarkably cordial, and always available for discussions, debates and clarifications. From
A quarrel lies at the heart of every PhD dissertation. I have been carrying mine for quite a number of years. It was during my undergrad days at Presidency College, Calcutta that I became systematically interested in a reverse history of the Indian nation-space. Professor Rajat Kanta Ray would be shocked to know that I consider this dissertation — with all its chimes of the poststructuralist debates — to be, in part, a belated response to his marvelous lectures on Gandhi and Indian nationalism. It gives me special pleasure to gratefully acknowledge Professor Ray's catholicity, concern and active support which spilled over the three-year span of my formal studentship. Probably without him I could have never understood that the fun of history is all about disagreements.

Many of us, who benefited most from the fact, continue to regret that Subhash Ranjan Chakraborty never took his own research-work seriously and instead wasted his love for the discipline on the unruly undergraduates in Presidency College. To this proverbially affectionate and embarrassingly self-effacing teacher (and to his wife Uttara Chakraborty) I owe a great deal, both academically and emotionally. Cordiality and support of the other members of the history faculty in Presidency College (particularly Nupur Chaudhuri and Dr. Kaushik Roy) permit me to enjoy a living relationship with my alma mater even after eight years of leaving the college.

The Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta remains a friendly and inspiring congregation. It has been a privilege to have the opportunity of wandering in its intensely intellectual and genuinely humane climate. My debt to the two walking archives Professor Gautam Bhadra and Professor Partha Chatterjee is both incalculable and incommunicable. Without their erudite advice and quiet help, I could not have brought this thesis into being.

Dr. Raziuddin Aquil, Professor Pradip Bose, Dr. Dwapayan Bhattacharya, Professor Shibaji Bandyopadhyay, Dr. Keya Dasgupta, Dr. Pradip Kumar Datta, Dr. Anjan Ghosh, Professor Tapati Guha-Thakurta, Professor Udaya Kumar, Professor Janaki Nair, Professor Lalshmi Subramanian and Dr. Manas Ray were exceedingly helpful, and offered valuable suggestions at different stages of the work. Life in the Centre is unthinkable without the ever-obliging Prabir Basu and the evergreen Abhijit Mukherjee.

For me, Professor Sumit Sarkar's interest in this trifling work is an adequate reward. I do not have the words to express my gratitude for the kindness of the scholar extraordinaire. It was a great honor to have received encouragement, suggestions and comments on different occasions from Professor Sonia E. Alvarez, Dr. Ishita Banerjee-Dube, Dr. Sanjoy Bhattacharya, Dr. Indrani Chatterjee, Dr. Vivek Dhareshwar, Dr. Robert Dover, Dr. Rohan D'Souza, Professor Saurabh Dube, Dr. Kaushik Ghosh, Professor Shamil Jeppie, Professor Jomo K. S., Dr. Prabhu Mohapatra, Professor Ranabir Samaddar, Dr. Sudipta Sen, Professor
Acknowledgements

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, Dr. A. R. Venkatachalapathy, and Dr. Milind Wakankar. This dissertation, of course, does not come up to their expectations. Despite my conscious resistance to anthropological vanity, the numerous “field-trips to the north-east” were undeniably exciting. It has been an absolute delight to know Professor Sanjib Baruah in myriad shades of his wit, erudition and helpfulness. This dissertation is greatly obligated to his energy and insights. Dr. Arupjyoti Saikia generously shared his library and deep knowledge of the sources with me. I shall never forget the warmth and kindness with which he treated an aspiring research student. Discussions with Dr. Sanjoy Barbora, Professor Kishore Bhattacharjee and Dolly Kikon were unfailingly rewarding. They, along with Uttam Bathari, Sarbani Bhattacharjee, Banani Chakraborty and Dr. Zilkia Janer, offered memorable hospitality in Guwahati. I am still not sure whether the generosity of Professor Amalendu Guha is more overwhelming than his wisdom. My aggressive critique is only one form of my profound respect for his painstaking and path-breaking research. I am also grateful to Prasun Barman, Anil Boro, Prashanta Chakraborty, Dr. Jagdish Lal Dawar, Professor Hiren Gohain, Dr. Rajen Saikia and Professor David Reid Syemnlieh for useful conversations. I continue to cherish the lovely and enlightening stay in Itanagar with Dr. Sarit Chaudhuri and Dr. Sucheta Chaudhuri. Walking with Abhijit Choudhury on the busy streets of Shillong was both pleasant and educative.

I feel privileged to record here my sincere gratitude to a number of teachers in Calcutta with whom I have never had an opportunity to formally register as a student but from whom I have never ceased to learn: Dr. Ramakrishna Bhattacharya, the most approachable doctrinaire in the most inaccessible attic of north Calcutta; Mrs. Nanda Chatterjee, who for me dissipated the air supposed to be prevailing around the sahib language; the late Professor Deepak Ghosh, my Sanskrit guru and the great anti-gerontocrat late Professor Dhruba Gupta, who taught me to speak unpleasandyto power.

The annual conferences of the Pashchimbanga Itihas Samsad, a vernacular history movement in West Bengal, provided the forum for my earliest academic ventures. Many of my present research interests were initially thrashed out in inane papers presented in its well-attended annual conferences. The members of the Samsad – particularly the late Gautam Chattopadhyay, Manju Chattopadhyay, and Dr. Ramakrishna Chatterjee – have been very kind and tolerant.

It is time to turn to the coconspirators. Jishnu Dasgupta, Rohan Debroy and Ritupan Goswami have actually assisted me in copying and locating sources in several repositories across the country and abroad. In the overlapping capacities of committed friends, spirited interlocutors, unpaid research associates and concerned colleagues, they were as central to the project as they are to my personal life. They have given me infinitely more than what I can ever aspire to return. The friendship of Baidik Bhattacharya and Anil Persaud, two fiercely original minds, has helped me and my dissertation in becoming what we are. It is particularly scary to see how intimately Anil and I inhabit each other’s dissertation. Nothing can be weirder than trying to confine my feelings for my wild sister, Banojyotsna Lahiri, to the civil and polite space of “acknowledgements.” The bandit queen, who did the most to bully an ideally interminable project into a conclusion, should be thankful that I have finished it at last!

I have always been criminally pampered by my friends. Scattered as they are now across five continents, the following have been particularly generous with their help during the period of research and drafting: Aryama, Sartaj Anwar, Lakshmi Arya, Anindya Bagchi, Aparna Balachandran, Kaustubh Banerjee, Sharmadip Basu, Varuni Bhatia, Debraj Bhattacharya, Jeet
Acknowledgements


Discussions with the junior students at Presidency College have always been a prime source of academic motivation for me. Since 2002, the innumerable quadrangle and canteen seminars in the College formally developed into a regular series of annual lectures in the History Department on different theoretical issues. I have very fond memories of the enthusiastic participation of the students in these “classes.” Unknowingly, they remain major contributors to this dissertation. My gratitude and sympathies!


Without the writings, rhythms and tunes of Joy Goswami and Kabir Suman, I could not have survived the society of oppressive consensus I was born in. Their example and encouragement meant much more to me than they would ever know. I am grateful to the phenomenal family friends - Krishna Bandopadhyay, Anirban Chatterjee, Kanak Majumdar, Ranapriya Maulik, Saumitra Mitra, Tirthankar Mukherjee and Shankar Sengupta - for their concern, support and love. The occasion also allows me to thank the persons I have never thanked before - Arghya Basu, Supriyo Bedajna, Atreya Chatterjee, Shubhadeep Dey, Debashis Sarkar, Parijat Sengupta and Subhadeep Raychaudhury - old buddies with whom my ideas grew up.

I was sad to realize that this dissertation could finally address only a small fraction of the sources seen and consulted over a number of years. I have been told that it always happens that way: the thesis we want to write and the thesis we write are two different projects. For various reasons, I had to forgo my original plan of writing four more chapters on anthropological imagination, geological rationality, domestic space and the history of the satras (I can hear my disgusted friends shouting, “Haven’t we suffered enough already!”). Although this dissertation does not address all the materials that they helped me find, my gratitude to the everyday escorts of research is immeasurable. I sincerely regret that I could not save everybody’s names from vanishing into the institutional names. My heartfelt thanks to the staff of the following institutions:

In Calcutta: State Archives of West Bengal, National Library (Asim Mukherjee is a magician, a savior, an inspiration!), Asiatic Society Library, West Bengal State Secretariat Library, Library of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Bangiya Sahitya Parishad Library;
Acknowledgements

Presidency College Library, School of Tropical Medicines Library, Indian Tea Association Library, Bagbazar Reading Library, Max Müller Bhavan-Goethe Institute Library; In Guwahati: Assam State Archives (particularly the legendary Mr. Vaishyal), Secretariat Administration (Record and Library) Department, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies library, American Baptist Council Library, Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti Library, Krishnakanta Handiqui Library of the Gauhati University, Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan Memorial Library of Cotton College and District Library of Kamrup; In Jorhat: Sarat Chandra Goswami Memorial library of Assam Sahitya Sabha (the fabulous one-person volunteer force of B. N. Goswami) and District Library of Jorhat; In London: British Library – its Rare Books Section, Map Section, and of course the Oriental and India Office Collection (particularly Tim Thomas!), Guildhall Library, School of Oriental and African Studies Library; In Majuli: Auniati Satra collection and Garamur Satra collection. I am enormously thankful to the Satradhikar Nayan Chandra Goswami of Na-Satra, Kamalabari for granting me a long, illuminating interview without prior appointment (15 December 2005). In New Delhi: National Archives of India, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Central Secretariat Library, Indian Council of Historical Research Library, French Information Resource Centre Library, Departmental Special Assistance Library of the Centre for Historical Studies and the central library of Jawaharlal Nehru University; In Oxford: Bodleian Library (particularly the Map Room and the Indian Institute Library); In Shillong: The Meghalaya State Secretariat Library, the North Eastern Hill University library and the Meghalaya State Archive (Shillong Record Room).

It is difficult to name everybody who did me the honor of publicly responding to the presentations. But I owe much to the esteemed interlocutors. A good deal of the materials used in Chapter Four have been used in the paper “Ideological Investments in Toponymic Practices: Assam as Heterotopia” presented in the International Young Researchers Seminar Session at the Young Researchers Workshop in Social Sciences, Identity and Territory in India, organized jointly by the History Department, University of Calcutta and the French Institute, Pondicherry (Calcutta, February 2003). Another version of the chapter was presented as the fifth GENISEAS Lecture (“What Is in a Name: Politics of Spatial Imagination in Colonial Assam”) at the Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development (Guwahati, February 2004). The lecture version has been separately published by the Institute in 2004. The same Institute organized a workshop on Historiography of Northeast India: Critical Perspectives, in collaboration with the Department of History, Cotton College and the Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University (Guwahati, February 2004), in which I presented a paper titled “Marks of the State and the State of Marx: A Report on the Modernist Moments in Assam Historiography”. Sections of this paper have been reworked and variously incorporated in Introduction, Coda and Chapter Four. Chapter Seven grew out of “Energizing Tea, Enervating Opium: Culture of Commodities in Colonial Assam”, a paper presented in the seventh annual Cultural Studies Workshop of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (Shantiniketan, January 2002). The workshop version, from which the present version differs substantially, was subsequently published in Manas Ray (ed.), Space, Sexuality and Postcolonial Cultures (Calcutta: the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, 2003). A digest of Chapter Eight was published as “The Assam Fever” in Wildlife History (June 2003). Amazingly varying versions of Chapter Nine were presented in talks at the History Association, Jawaharlal Nehru University (August 2001) and Folklore
Department, Gauhati University (December 2003). A more recognizable version, “Kamakhya's Sheep: Dispersed Geographies of the Minor Literature Question” was presented in the graduate conference on Minority States: Violence, Nation-States, Multiculturalism in Oxford organized by the Postcolonial Studies Group, Faculty of English, Oxford University and the Nottingham Trent Centre for Colonial and Postcolonial Studies (June 2004). The present version is more closely affiliated to “Incredible Stories in the time of Credible Histories: Colonial Assam and the Translations of Vernacular Geographies” in the conference on History in the Vernacular, organized by the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (December 2004) and “Kamakhya's Sheep: Colonial Assam and the Shifting Geerers of Vernacular Geographies”, the Workshop for Yong Research Scholars, Centre for the Study of Culture and Society, Bangalore (November 2005). Some ideas in Introduction and Coda have been taken from “Stating Nations, Statist Nations: Specter of India and Discourse of Independent Assam”, a paper I presented in the Sephis workshop on Contested Nationalisms and New Statsim in Penang, Malaysia (September 2004). Sections of Chapter Two, and the concerns of Coda were tested in “When Was the Postcolonial: A History of Policing Impossible Lines”, a paper presented in the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi’s workshop on Rethinking Northeast India’s Conflicts and the Roads to Peace in Guwahati (November-December 2005). A section of Coda is adapted from “Frontiers of Nationalist Imagination: The Underplayed Perspectives of the 1905 Movement”, a position paper presented in the panel discussion organized by Indian Council of Historical Research, North Eastern Region to observe the hundredth year of the 1905 movement (Guwahati, December 2005). Many arguments of Chapter Ten were discussed in “Tongue Has No Bone: Fixing the Assamese Language, c. 1800-c.1930”, a paper presented in the international seminar on Identity, Emotions and Culture Languages and Literature in the Subcontinent, c. 900 to c. 2000, organized by the Indian Council of Historical Research (Shillong, May 2007).

My grandfathers are no more around to see this dissertation completed. May I indulge in imagining their reactions: Satyendra Nath Gangopadhyay would certainly have been the happiest person on the occasion while Bhuvaneshwar Kar, most probably, could not have cared less for such a mundane thing – a Ph D thesis, and that too on the history of Assam! It is between these poles of hyperbole and indifference that I invite the shadow of this work to fall. Thanks to my grandmother, Uma Gangopadhyay, and other members of the larger family for remaining generally encouraging and sympathetic to my commitment. A special hug to my favorite cousin Anandi Ghosh.

My parents – Bolan Gangopadhyay and Arun Kar – were my earliest intellectual and political companions. Their pathological support for this project is as remarkable as their astonishing ability to survive hundreds of boring and uncalled-for home seminars for about two decades. Each word in the dissertation owes something to their endless everyday self-sacrifices. I feel almost a disconcerting sense of gratitude as I write these lines.

I first met Subhalakshmi Roy in 1997, exactly when I was getting focused on the concerns of this thesis. The dissertation stands complete today. The person who had suffered more than anyone else for it – my friend, my reader, my critic, my wife – passed away in last October. She was just twenty-eight. What do I care for this dissertation anymore?