

**WHERE IS ASSAM?
Using
GEOGRAPHICAL
HISTORY TO LOCATE
CURRENT SOCIAL
REALITIES**

CENISEAS PAPERS

1

DAVID LUDDEN

Sanjib Baruah, SERIES EDITOR

**CENTRE FOR NORTHEAST INDIA, SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST
ASIA STUDIES**

**OMEOM KUMAR DAS INSTITUTE OF
SOCIAL CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT,
GUWAHATI**

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SERIES EDITOR'S NOTE

The CENISEAS papers seek to promote the intellectual mission of the Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast Asia Studies [CENISEAS]: to develop an understanding of Northeast India in the context of its transnational neighborhood, i.e. countries conventionally described as being a part of South Asia, such as Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal as well as countries of Southeast Asia such as Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Malaysia. The papers grow out of lectures, seminars and other events at the Centre. This paper by David Ludden — the first in the series — was the basis of his lecture marking the inauguration of CENISEAS in Guwahati on November 3rd 2003.

Northeast India is not only the northeastern borderland of South Asia it can also be seen as part of the northwestern borderland of Southeast Asia. As we know from the changing saliency, and indeed of the appearance, disappearance or reappearance of categories like Central Europe, Eastern Europe or Central Asia, the regions in which countries of the world are often placed are not objective geographical realities, but contingent and contested entities. The regions of twentieth century geopolitics and academic research are in a state of flux today as a result of the intensification of the cross-border movement of peoples, goods and ideas between

countries located within and across those regions; significant diplomatic realignments during the post Cold War era that cross earlier regional boundaries; and growing criticism of the intellectual framework of “area studies” in which knowledge about different parts of the world – South Asia, Southeast Asia, Western Europe, Latin America etc – was organized during the second half of the past century

Diplomatically and economically, India – the core country of South Asia – has grown closer to the countries of Southeast Asia during the past decade. With Myanmar as a member, ASEAN [Association of South East Asian Nations] has come next door to Northeast India. Today ASEAN and India are working towards a free trade agreement. The completion of a number of infrastructure building projects in Myanmar and Northeast India – that are either being designed or are under construction – will intensify the formal and informal economic links between Northeast India, Southeast Asia and Southwest China.

The potential impact of these changes on Northeast India is one of the Centre’s major intellectual concerns. The place of Northeast India in India’s Look East policy and under what conditions it might benefit from India’s growing integration with other major Asian economies will be a theme in future CENISEAS papers.

Since Northeast India as a region is surrounded by a number of foreign countries many of its policy challenges are inherently transnational in nature. In policy areas such as water resources and floods, the movement of small arms or the spread of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome there are no alternatives to transnational modes of addressing problems. The Centre seeks to promote transnational policy thinking and transnational conversations: these themes will appear in future CENISEAS papers.

The centre plans to focus attention on knowing Northeast India’s transnational neighbourhood better. The historical ties of Northeast Indian ethnic groups, such as the Tai-Ahoms and the Khasis to Southeast Asia – including China’s Yunnan province – are well known. Such connections and their potential use as cultural capital for India’s Look East policy will be a theme that will appear in future CENISEAS papers. Writings by visitors to the Centre from countries in this transnational neighbourhood will also be published in this series.

The Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast Asia Studies and the CENISEAS paper series have been made possible by a grant from the Ford Foundation.

I am grateful to Professor David Ludden of the University of Pennsylvania, USA for accepting our invitation to visit Guwahati to inaugurate the Centre and to relate his ideas about the eclipsing and distorting effects of map knowledge on the geographies of mobility explicitly to the Centre’s intellectual mission.

Sanjib Baruah

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Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast Asia Studies

Where is Assam? Using Geographical History to Locate Current Social Realities

Assam is today a constituent state of India and as such an official region of a world entirely covered with national states and wholly encompassed by national maps. We have no choice but to locate Assam inside the gridlines of national geography, for these govern our spatial imagination and impart to everything in social space a specific, definitive, national location, identity, and meaning. Yet other spatial perspectives exist. Despite the universal authority of national geography, the spatial location of social reality is never singular, immutable, or stationary. That Assam is part of India is indisputable, but that fact coexists with others, which locate Assam and all its constituent elements, including its boundaries, differently.

The goal of this paper is to explore Assam's spatial location and its geographical composition, and thereby, to suggest how we might locate social realities in multiple, changing, and mobile spaces that impart to territories like Assam a kaleidoscopic appearance, open to many disparate interpretations and analytical approaches, in the fullness of time, that is, in the fulsome context of history in the short-term, long-term, ancient past, immediate present, and currently unfolding future. I undertake this exercise in order to indicate limitations of thinking about space in the rigidly territorial terms that constitute national systems of spatial order and discipline, and

to illuminate alternative frames of spatial reference for scholarship, activism, and policy-making.

The first step is to appreciate the political character of all knowledge contained in maps. All territorial boundaries — and all attendant social efforts to define, redefine, enforce, and reshape them — represent political projects rather than mere empirical facts. The makers and enforcers of boundaries use maps to define human reality today inside national territory. As a result, everything in the world has acquired a national identity.

We see the internal and external boundaries of national states so often they appear as virtually natural features of the globe. This virtual reality came into being in the nineteenth century, as industrial technologies for surveying the earth, producing statistics, mass-printing, mass-reading, and mass-education, began to make viewing standardized maps a common experience. Making maps, reading maps, talking about maps, and thinking with maps-in-the-mind became increasingly common each decade. By 1950, people around the world had substantial map-knowledge in common. Today, we can reasonably imagine that most people in the world share common map-knowledge, because they routinely experience various versions of exactly the same maps. During the global expansion of modern mapping, national territory incorporated all geography. Though national boundaries only covered the globe after 1950, within a decade or two, all histories of all peoples in the world came to appear inside national maps, in a cookie-cutter world of national geography. This is the most comprehensive organization of spatial experience in human history. Scholars work inside that experience. Spaces that elude national maps have mostly disappeared from our intellectual life.

Maps attain their official form and authoritative interpretation inside the political economy and cultural politics of mapping, where the most influential people work in national institutions, in-

cluding schools, colleges, and universities. State-authorized mapping is now so ubiquitous that most governments do not regulate most map-making, but almost everyone draws official lines on maps by habit anyway, under a cartographic regimentation so invisible, pervasive, and widely accepted that few people ever think about it, which now covers the planet with the national state's territorial authority. As a result, we are now quite accustomed to seeing maps that nationalize topography by erasing spaces peripheral and exogenous for national identity, which include, in the case of India, major spaces in Assam's vicinity — in Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh — mostly blank spaces in the Indian national view of South Asia. We see everyday on TV and newspapers weather maps that nationalize rainfall, wind, and seasons, by enclosing them inside national boundaries. Such a pervasive naturalization of the nationality of nature makes it evermore difficult to visualize any world not defined by national boundaries.

Our second step is to appreciate how pervasively modernity depends on national territorialism. One indication is that modern statistics could only come into being inside froze geographical spaces, trapped inside national maps. This freezing of solid blocks of space inside national territorialism had begun by 1776, when Adam Smith composed the *Wealth of Nations*, with the assumption that each nation's wealth belonged inside its national boundaries, under national governments. Fixing all things in social space inside national maps imparted to modern social life its rigorous, comprehensive order. Today, national maps describe the authoritative location of every single thing, person, and place on the planet earth. National territory constitutes cultural politics, inside and across national boundaries. Human identity everywhere is attached to national sites, where some people are always native, and others, necessarily foreign. Geographically based national identities animate politics around the world.

It is now quite impossible to imagine or describe any facet of social life without reference to national maps, which lock every place into immobile gridlines of national geography, static and immutable. Distinctively modern cartographic passions and territorial attachments infuse modern maps and their constituent data with intense iconic significance, tinged with feelings of belonging, possessiveness, security, enclosure, entitlement and exclusion.

We can rightfully call the modern world of *statistics* a world of *state-istics*, because omnipresent *state*-based-data always represent facts inside national territories. We can however begin to reshuffle geography by juggling national statistics to generate diverse geographies of data. If we take data from the 1995 UNDP Human Development Report — on per capita gross domestic product, female literacy, female life expectancy, infant mortality, female income control, and the Gender Development Index (GDI) — for two groups of countries, that is, those with more and less than the global average national per capita income (roughly \$5990, in 1995), we can compose an aggregate statistical portrait of rich and poor countries that “re-visions” global space statistically.

We see right away that poor countries have lower Human Development Index (HDI) numbers than rich countries, indicating that more national wealth translates logically into more longevity, education, literacy, child health, and other elements of HDI. Also we see — as the recent Cancun meeting of the WTO indicates — that glaring disparities between rich and poor countries constitute a great divide in the world today, which locates all measures of what we call “development” inside a spatial division that appears on no standard world map. Wealth disparities are much greater, proportionately, than are national differences in human development.

If we turn HDI data on its head, so to speak, and ask how well countries do in human development despite their poverty, we find that dollar for dollar, poor countries actually deliver more human development (in HDI measures) than do rich countries; and perhaps surprisingly, some poor countries actually top the world ranks of countries when measured by the proportion of family income reportedly controlled by women.

Women in extremely poor Tanzania and Cambodia control substantially more national income than do women in extremely rich Sweden, Norway, and Finland, which are the best of the rich countries on this measure of Gender Development.

It also appears from this data that national poverty is no bar to the advancement of female literacy, because some of the world’s poorest countries in Africa and Asia have much higher female literacy rates than richer countries, including India, in which Kerala is not a rich state but is the most efficient as a provider of all HDI index items: health, longevity, education, and literacy.

Looking at Assam in the Indian context, we find it adjoining Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar to form a north-eastern collection of contiguous, very densely populated, lowland states, all with below national average state figures for human development and per capita income, holding about 42 percent of India’s population. Assam is part of a region officially called North-east India, which includes mountainous Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura, and shares international boundaries with China, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Myanmar. This Northeast India has much more geographical contact and proximity to other national states than to the Indian mainland, from which it is most often described as “remote”; its international boundaries are many hundreds of miles long, while the “chicken’s neck” connecting it to northern West Bengal is at most fifteen miles wide.

Inside Northeastern India, again we see that some poor Indian states have the highest gender equality (measured by an official composite statistic of “gender disparity,” embracing female health, education, and control of income). Though Meghalaya is much poorer than Assam and than India as a whole, it has much higher gender equality. Gender disparities are in fact much lower than in India generally — and particularly in proportion to poverty — in all the mountain states of Northeast India, except Tripura. It would appear from Bina Agarwal’s research that this statistical result emerges from distinctive cultures and social practices prevalent among ethnic groups in mountain states. Assam and Tripura approximate the high level of gender disparity prevalent in Bengal and Bihar, because the same cultural groups predominate in all these regions, as well as in Bangladesh and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Mountain states of Northeast India comprise a geographical space of comparatively high gender equity.

Looking around the boundaries of Northeast India, we see that Assam is also part of another regional setting, composed of state territories in Northeastern South Asia. The South Asia Foundation web site describes this region as follows:

The East South Asia Subregion (ESAS), consisting of the eastern states of India, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal has, within its boundaries, a total population of around 420 million and a potential combined GNP of about US\$ 142 bn. The ESAS covers a total land area of over one million square kilometres with substantial watercourses, arable land, forests and natural resources. Intra-ESAS merchandise trade, however, ... constitutes only around 2.4 percent of the total trade of the four countries.

We can thus move our spatial perspective around so as to

configure Assam’s geographical location in various ways, and following this strategy into the past, step three in our exercise becomes an extensive elaboration of geographical perspectives that move along routes of mobility and among changing spatial frames of reference, blending them together, over the full expanse of historical time. This elaborate project is actually quite realistic and true-to-real-life, because however natural, necessary, and comforting it may seem to assign everything in the world a static location on fixed coordinates, inside firm territorial boundaries, such activity can never succeed in creating a stationary social order.

Virtually everything in social life is in fact on the move, much of the time, and the mobility of things in social space defines a reality that escapes the epistemology of national geography. By considering spatial mobility in changing historical perspectives, we can locate Assam in geographies that are malleable and changeable, rather than being static and immutable, in the manner of national geography. We can thereby devise alternative frames of reference for scholarship, activism, and policy making.

Nature is a good place to begin. An especially good place to begin is a river locality, defined by the naturally downhill mobility of flowing water, where the location of water is always only its trajectory. In such a water-view of the world, Assam lies in Asian spaces defined by mountains, slopes, and plains, which channel the earthly travels of rains that arrive with Asia’s longest, wettest monsoons and feed all the valleys where rice became the dominant human food crop by *circa* 1500 CE.

In this very wet, river-fed, and rice-fed Asia, human populations have moved, settled, and concentrated historically in river valleys and adjacent areas of intensive farm cultivation. Assam has been a region of in-migration hosting new generations and col-

lections of settlers each century, from pre-historic times to the present day. With low-density-mountains on three sides, Assam is the east of an exceptionally high-density Gangetic population zone — an extensive zone of historic in-migration — which runs from the hills of Punjab to the Bay of Bengal.

This water-view of Assam-in-Asia immediately inflects our conceptualization of the geography of river development projects today. All Indian rivers running through Assam also inhabit Bangladesh, and all along continuous water-trajectories, people depend on the same water: Bangladesh people depend on the water as people in Northeast India. Major dam projects intersect and disrupt that geographical reality. The proposed Tipaimukh dam, other plans of the Brahmaputra Board, and India's national plan to use Assam waters to enrich dry Indian regions would block the natural mobility of rivers and reduce the flow of water into the delta. It is little wonder that these plans arouse concern in Bangladesh, which gets 80% of its fresh water through fifty-four rivers flowing across borders from India. Reducing water flow in these rivers would cause drought and sea-water influx in Bangladesh, killing farms and fisheries, perhaps as far north as Dhaka; and would certainly cause severe droughts in northern districts of Bangladesh, which depend virtually 100% on drainage water for crops and human needs.

A still wider view of Assam's river environment indicates that Assam occupies a borderland of Asian drainage systems, astride a watershed dividing the western trajectory of the Brahmaputra at the Patkai Range from major river trajectories of Southeast Asia. Five huge rivers define the major corridors of settlement and mobility running from the Gangetic basin across China, Vietnam, Thailand, and Burma. The Brahmaputra — called the Jamuna in Bangladesh — is the westernmost of these five big rivers: it is a western river of East Asia and also, at the same time, a

eastern river of South Asia. Thus it is not surprising that Northeast India appears commonly in maps of East Asia. Assam and all of Northeast India, as well as the adjacent Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, can be understood as comprising a western region of East Asia, and also as a region where East and South Asia overlap. Such overlapping is impossible to accommodate in national maps and thus disappears from standard maps that inscribe national boundaries on nature.

From ancient times, the Northeast-Southeast bias of the river valleys east of Assam has channeled human mobility inland across interlacing networks of mountains, valleys, and plains connecting Assam, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and China.

Inland spaces of mobility historically important in Assam include (i) routes of ancient Khasi migration, which began in the Red River Basin of Vietnam and extended across Yunnan and Burma to the Gangetic basin as far west as Bihar; (ii) medieval Tai-Ahom migrations, which continued over centuries and built the most powerful pre-modern states in the Brahmaputra valley; (iii) routes and heartlands of opium cultivation, consumption, and trade, with unknown origins, which extended in the 18th and 19th century from Bihar to China and today stop at the borders of India but extend south across the Golden Triangle of Southeast Asia; (iv) the imperial expansion of Burma in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century; and (v) the military travels of armies of China, Japan, Britain and America along roads from Assam to Burma to Yunnan, during the 1940s — on roads that still exist today, though in a state of dilapidation.

Mobility along river routes has long connected Assam to regions in the south and west as well as to the east and north. In the first and second millennium, territorial powers based in the

Brahmaputra Valley moved south along the Barak Valley and surrounding mountain forest slopes, across Cachar and Sylhet, where the oldest inscriptions are of land grants by Kamrupa rajahs. Trade routes along river routes connected Assam and Bengal with the western Gangetic Basin. Detailed documentation of eighteenth century trade along the Barak and Surma-Kusharia River basins indicate steady mobility up and down the rivers and forest slopes across what are now Sylhet, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Assam, and Nagaland.

The major mobile forces that shaped Assam decisively in early modern times, *circa* 1660 – 1830, came from the east, west, north and south: (i) the Mughals and British moved northeast from Bengal; (ii) the Ahoms moved down the Brahmaputra valley; (iii) Burmese armies moved around the Patkai and across the Nagaland ranges; (iv) and trans-Himalayan forces came south from Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet, and China. In the long view of history, Assam was shaped by human mobility moving in all directions, even though, before 1800, Indian Ocean routes seem to have had less direct impact on the inland Brahmaputra Valley than on other South Asian regions comparably close to the coast. Most historical accounts describe Assam as being isolated from South Asia's coastal trading system, though Assam routes into Sylhet and Bengal channeled people and commodities, including cowry shells from the Maldives, which came up river from Kolkata and Dhaka, and certainly traveled into Meghalaya and up the Barak Basin, as commodities and traders moved downstream.

By 1800, and most importantly for its geographical history, Assam lay at the intersection of Indian Ocean routes with inland routes into interior East Asia. Thus, early British imperial geographers, like James Rennell, believed with some justification that Assam was India's inland gateway to China. Opium and tea, among other commodities, traveled India-China roads through Assam.

When Europeans "discovered" India and China, however, they did so at seaports, here they imagined all societies as being attached to separate inland civilizations. From this seacoast view of Northeastern India ethnic groups in the mountains looked more like East and Southeast Asian peoples than like Indians who dominated the lowlands India; and, thus, East Asian looking people of northeast India appeared to the Europeans, as they did to native lowland elites, as marginal or even alien to their surrounding "Indic" civilization. In the context of Assam's geographical history, however, mountain ethnic groups that appear as "minorities" in the national contexts of India and Bangladesh actually represent the historical overlapping of social spaces defined from the West and East, simultaneously, and crisscross lands from China to Iran.

Our national traditions of geographical knowledge do not pay equal attention to all routes of human mobility that shaped Assam, however. Indian historical geography focuses exclusively on routes that run east-west along the Gangetic Basin, where dominant social groups have always identified Assam with eastern frontiers. In the Indian national view, Assam is for all times an Indian frontier, always in the process of incorporation into Indo-Gangetic history. The spatial pattern of inland routes that shaped Indian political geography from ancient times to the nineteenth century leave Assam on the eastern outskirts and indicate that when the British Empire began its northeast expansion from Sylhet and Cooch Bihar, Assam still lay at the eastern edge of Gangetic imperial histories, on cultural and political frontiers of South and Southeast Asia.

The spatial trajectory of Guwahati's relations with New Delhi today represent a geographical feature of Gangetic incorporation of Assam into Indian history that began under the Gupta empire, in the early centuries of the first millennium. Like Mauryas before

them, ancient Guptas carried their imperial ambitions far from their homeland, in Bihar, but much farther West than East. Lands to the east of the Ganga were beyond the pale. Gupta culture influenced later Kamrupa kings in Assam through the intermediary means of fourth century Bangla Varman rajas. Indeed, the Buddhists who dispersed across eastern frontiers, down to the Meghna delta, flourished there for centuries in part because trade rather than imperial power extended across all the water routes of Bengal.

A thousand years after the last of the Guptas, the strength of Ahom warriors in the Brahmaputra valley, combined with the impenetrability of the forests and raging river waters, kept Mughal imperialism at bay, though the Mughals did manage to create the first regional ruling system ever to organize political power in the Sylhet basin, where the Barak river spills into the Surma and Kushiara on its trajectory south to the Meghna. During the age of Ahom rulers in Assam, the geographical pivot of inland empires in South Asia lay in the far west, in cultural spaces attached much more to inland West Asia than to the east. Gardens of Mughal civility derived from dry lands ideals in Central Asia and Iran. Homesteads of Mughal civility blended the cultures of Persia and Rajasthan, and carried them as far eastward as they could. Courts of Mughal civility moved across the landscape of empire, from one settled site to another, as warriors subdued local rulers who provided revenues to support a vast imperial court. But the Mughals never traveled deep into lands filled with dense forests, deep annual floods, tigers, rivers, elephants, and fearsome mountain warriors, lands much too difficult for dry land plains warriors to conquer, and lands that paid very little imperial taxation. Rather, the Mughal padshah and his nobles and princes mostly conquered and sported on the fringes of forest tracts they left to local rulers, from whom they extracted as much obedience and tribute as possible.

Assam became part of imperial India only after the Mughals

lost their grip in Bengal, as British imperialists expanded inland from the sea, with a combined force of merchants, armies, and Brahmans, who traveled Mughal inland highways, and who depended initially for profits on the submission of peoples living under Mughal authority. Northeast of Kolkata, Mughal highways pointed the way to Assam, but Assam lay outside Mughal and thus early British India. Cooch Behar and Sylhet were originally the northeastern frontiers of Mughal as well as early British India.

British imperialism conquered Assam after 1826, and only then did Assam obtain — for the first time in its history — a firm regional identity as a part of Indian imperial geography. Until 1874, British Assam inhabited a novel imperial territory, called Bengal, which included much of what some analysts now call Eastern South Asia, including West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Jharkhand, Northeast India, and Bangladesh. Since 1826, the territory called Assam has changed shape inside the histories of imperialism and nationalism.

British Assam always included the Brahmaputra and Barak river valleys as well as the Surma-Kushiara River basin of Sylhet. After 1860, the tea industry spread across hills around these rivers and created an effective planter interest in the administrative unity of Sylhet and Assam. In addition, all the river valleys of British Assam had in common surrounding mountain forests filled with disparate, ethnic groups, which W.W.Hunter called “non-Aryan tribes,” who reflect the cultural legacy of centuries of human mobility across South and East Asia.

Until 1947, British Assam was an eastern borderland of British imperialism, which strove to incorporate Burma and never quite established anything like full control over mountains between India and China. In the context of British India, Assam’s Brahmaputra Valley had special strategic significance, as a borderland of British India facing imperial China (until 1911), and Japan (1939-1945).

In 1947, Assam became India's most proximate borderland with revolutionary China.

In this strategic location, the US Army built the so-called Stillwell Road, in 1943, running from Ledo in Assam to the China-Burma Road, to form a link with the Bengal-Assam Railway and carry support for US and UK warfare against Japan (and later, against Chinese Communists). The Burma Road ran from Lashio railhead in Burma to Kunming in Yunnan, about 700 miles, across rugged mountains. Begun by the Chinese in 1934, during the Sino-Japanese War, and completed in 1938, the Burma Road became more important to China when Japan took control of coastal China and Indochina. After Japan conquered lower Burma, the British began building the road from Ledo to the Burma Road, in December 1942, when the only way for Allies to send supplies to China was by air "over the hump." General Stillwell assigned 15,000 American troops to construct the Ledo Road, later named after the General, which ran 271 miles to a junction on the old Burma Road. Construction work trudged across Patkai Mountains, as high as 4,500 feet, required moving 100,000 cubic feet of earth every mile, and reached its goal at Shingbwiayang on 27 December 1943.

STILLWELL ROAD

| Length of roads lie within | Kilometres | Miles |
|----------------------------|------------|-------|
| India | 61 | 38 |
| Myanmar (Burma) | 1,033 | 646 |
| China | 632 | 395 |

War on this road was intense. Recently, Indian investigators as many as 1,500 graves from the World War Two era on the

India-Burma border along the old Stillwell Road.

1947 changed the contours of mobility shaping Assam dramatically. The partition of British India and subsequent political events brought the cutting and restriction of old routes of mobility around Assam, as well as major demographic mobility shifts: together these two forces to give Assam the shape and location we see today. Most importantly, in 1947 the territory that became East Pakistan and then Bangladesh constituted new national borders with a presumed hostile national state neighbor on Assam's West and South. In Assam's southeast, Sylhet was the only region of British India where a referendum was held specifically on the question of accession to India or Pakistan, and in 1947, the vote in favor of Pakistan separated Sylhet from Assam for the first time since 1826. Ratabari, Patherkandi, Badarpur and half of Karimganj thanas in the old Karimganj sub-division of Sylhet District left to join the Cachar District of Assam.

Partition also exaggerated a process of change in the cultural composition of the Sylhet population, which proceeded slowly for fifty years after 1871, when the Muslim and Hindu population were at 1:1 numerical parity. After 1871, in-migration into Sylhet agrarian frontiers increased Sylhet's proportion of Muslims with each decennial census. Between 1891 and 1931, people reportedly born in Mymensingh increase from 31 per cent to 63 per cent of the population of southern Assam valleys, including Sylhet. In 1931, the Assam *Census Report* called Muslim Bengalis "invaders" in Assam, and the Assam Congress resolved to move Sylhet out of Assam. The question of how to regulate migration and migrants into Assam from Eastern Bengal dominated the political agenda in Assam in the 1930s and 1940s. After 1947, when Sylhet became alien national territory, migration across Sylhet into Cachar, as well as across Rangpur into Gaolpara, became a new

kind of national issue, tinged with threats to national security. The total volume of migration increased, however, after 1947, and remained high for three decades, spurred in part by wars in 1965 and 1971. Migrations after 1947 transformed Sylhet as much as any other part of the former British Assam. In the 1960s, the total Sylhet population rose 60 per cent.

A hundred thousand Muslim Bengalis moved out of Assam into Sylhet's Haor basin, where vast tracts of land lay open for new colonization. Sylhet population growth was most dramatic in areas nearest to Meghalaya and Tripura, where new colonization produced new localities filled with immigrants. In much of Sylhet, a new social formation emerged, which distinguished the ranked cultural status of old and new residents. Even today, people who migrated into Sylhet within local memory appear in local culture as newcomers and not "true Sylhetis."

A sharp dip in the Mymensingh population in the 1950s indicates that new migrants came into Sylhet not only from other parts of formerly British Assam, but also from Mymensingh, which continued to be the origin of many migrant settlers on agricultural land in the Surma-Barak, as well as in the lower Brahmaputra valley. The 1951 Census of Pakistan describes complicated circuits of population mobility inside East Pakistan as well as across borders on all sides.

The ethnic composition of the population had been a political issue in Assam since the 1920s, and rose again after 1950, as Assam became smaller, first, because Partition subtracted mostly Muslim Sylhet, and second, because nationalist territorial claims by ethnic groups demographically predominant in mountain domains produced the mountain states of Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh. The boundaries of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Nagaland are still contested today, representing a tug-of-war over ethnic claims to resources marked by

state territory.

Recent trends in population change, territorial demarcation, and ethnic political mobilization inside the boundaries of national states occur inside a much longer history in which the composition of the population in all of northeastern South Asia has changed dramatically over time, with constant migration, periodic surges in migratory movements, and fairly constant natural increase, all of which moved more people into more densely populated areas that expanded physically uphill, moving from the lowland plains and valleys into hills and mountains all around. In the Brahmaputra Valley, for example, the Hindu population had been expanding its cultural and geographical reach since the early days of Ahom imperialism, in part by absorbing groups that W.W. Hunter called "non-Aryan" and "aboriginal tribes" in 1879. Muslim populations had expanded by similar means in Sylhet and elsewhere, and ethnic populations of all kind had moved and settled to form many local mosaics of cultural diversity.

All of this demographic change occurred inside the complicated social process by which populations increased their food supplies by expanding permanent farmland. Over the century after 1880, when statistics appear for the first time, we can see that the expansion of permanent cultivation proceeded at extremely high rates in Tripura, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Assam, faster than almost anywhere else in South Asia. Most of this expansion appears to be the result of people in the agrarian lowlands investing in land at higher altitudes. During this process, Tripuris became a demographic minority in Tripura, where mostly Hindu Bengalis became numerically dominant. A similar change occurred more recently in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, where Muslim Bengalis became numerically dominant, as in Tripura, under national state protection, and also as in Tripura, triggering resentment and revolt among the ethnic groups inhabiting the Chittagong hills.

Such transformations of social space by the force of human mobility moved investors, investments, and residents into areas wide open to new agricultural colonization in 1947. Vast tracts remained open for new colonization in forested regions of eastern and especially Northeast India, one of the last agricultural frontiers in South Asia, where new farming communities produced new farmland, in areas of opportunity and in the process improved their living conditions and enhanced national wealth. The physical expansion of cultivated farmland remained the major source of additional increments of agricultural production in South Asia until 1960. Population densities increased most rapidly in these frontier areas, where, until 1880, people moved and settled at an even greater pace than into urban areas, though most upland agrarian frontiers have very low population densities, even today.

And yet, in the context of all this human mobility, in geographical settings typified over many centuries by extensive mobility, national governments and popular movements endeavored after 1947 to close off, regulate, and suppress mobility across national borders more rigorously than ever before. Their goals were (1) to defend national territory against foreign threats and (2) to secure national territory against internal disruption that might be fed by forces across the border. India's Northeast became a most "exposed" territory, facing alien states around most of its perimeter. Defending India's borders meant closing off the Northeast and thus Assam against alien threats from across the border. In Assam, a regional political movement also endeavored to close borders to alien immigrants and push back illegal aliens from Bangladesh. Today's BJP government has again raised the pitch of claims that India must repulse alien migrant infiltration, particularly from Bangladesh.

All efforts at closure are not so obviously political. As we have seen, nature itself is nationalized in contemporary maps, so it is only logical that the Brahmaputra Board, set up by the Government of India, in 1980, with jurisdiction covering all Northeast States, either in full or in part, would conceptualize its role only inside Indian borders. Any ramifications for its projects downstream would be left to international politics. The Board enclosed its river charge inside India, and has now identified fourteen multi-purpose projects, including the Tipaimukh Dam project, with a 162-meter high dam, now slated for construction after agreements have been reached among the concerned states of Manipur, Mizoram and Assam.

New political efforts are now also moving, against the trend of national enclosure, however. Today, civil society in Bangladesh is pressing its government and India to consider the actual real-life implications of the fact that rivers running through Assam also run downstream into Bangladesh. We also hear calls from state governments in the Indian Northeast to re-open routes of mobility along the old Burma-China Road, which would benefit landlocked state economies that face international barriers on three sides. And yet, Assam's continued official isolation from non-Indian territories — however long and porous its international borders may be — is a serious security concern for the Indian government, and now not primarily because of threats to India from alien states, but rather because of insurgent problems inside India, which cannot be physically contained inside India in the northeast any more than in the northwest.

In this respect, India's national state problems of internal order are intimately linked with the virtual impossibility of closing off Assam to human mobility that is much older than any state in the region; and Indian national problems of internal order are also linked inevitably to strenuous state efforts to enforce the closure of

national borders that isolate Northeast Assam from the world of mobility that has run through it for centuries.

This problem of course seems commonplace today in the age of globalization, when all world regions could benefit from easier transportation across borders, which would enrich economies, and when people on opposite sides of all international borders would clearly benefit from common striving to solve trans-border problems that affect them all — while, at the same time, national political and cultural systems remain committed to a strident defense of national borders against transgressions or weakening that might disturb their internal coherence of national traditions — and indeed, the conflict between these two pressing needs of the day — territorial openness and closure — seems increasingly intractable.

So now we can return to our question: Where is Assam? From perspectives that I have explored here, a useful answer would be that Assam consists of all those elements that have ever left traces in valleys and mountains around the Brahmaputra and Barak Rivers. In this view, locating Assam in its real world requires that we trace the mobility of all those elements, over the long span of human history, to discover the geographical framework within which they most meaningfully overlap, intersect, and cohere — this would provide us with a good picture of Assam's location — and clearly it would not be one picture, but many, leaving the problem of location open for discussion, debate, and endless research.

There are numerous bottlenecks and obstacles to the conceptualization of geography in this manner. National borders do not sit happily inside a spatial context composed of social realities that are mobile, shifting, and changing, which elude state con-

trol. It may be that people would be better off in regimes that would permit freer geographical mobility than national states contemplate today. Plans for a new Asian Highway would put Assam at the center of a new Asian overland transport system and clearly take Assam from the periphery of India to the center of a new territorial formation in Asia. But progress on the highway is now stalled, in part by India-Bangladesh diplomacy dominated by border issues, illegal immigrants, and allegations that Bangladesh (like Pakistan, Burma, and China), permits terrorists to operate in India. Any consideration of easing transport across national borders always takes second priority to security concerns.

In this context, it is worth remembering how new national borders are, in the long span of history, where dreams of ever-expanding mobility and of territorial integration — of the kind to be fostered by the Asian Highway, which might allow someday for driving between Kolkata and Hanoi, and from India through China to Singapore — are typically dreamed by imperialists. So it was in the days of the Guptas, Mughals, and British. And so too, in the 1940s, when the US Army built the Stillwell Road to wage war against imperial Japan.

It is not surprising then that since 1945, independent national states have in general reduced the level of integration accomplished by mobility among territories in the world, by controlling and regulating traffic more strictly across their borders, to secure national sovereignty not only against imperialists but also against hostile nations. Hostilities between India and Pakistan have cut old routes of communication and mobility across new national borders more dramatically than almost anywhere in the world. The Bengal Assam railway tracks from Guwahati to Dhaka were torn up at the Cachar-Sylhet border, in 1965. Now it is much easier to communicate by phone or mail between Dhaka and London than between Dhaka and Guwahati; and all forms of transport and com-

munication are endlessly difficult between India and Pakistan — where routes running from the Gangetic basin to the Mediterranean had been open highways for history for a thousand years before 1947.

In a world of national states, it is thus worth pondering, who is it that sponsors and argues for the spatial opening of geography and the crossing of national borders. Today, it is fair to say that increasingly diverse groups are engaged in this project, including academic historians, like myself; but it is also fair to say that business groups and especially huge ones are in the lead in the border-crossing movement. Once upon a time, British imperial tea interests financed the railway from Dhaka to Guwahati, and fostered Bengal's integration with Assam, designed originally to link tea estates to ports and thus overseas. There is currently no major economic interest to instigate or finance major change in our thinking about travels along the Assam-Burma-China Road; indeed, the closest thing to a big commercial interest in the regions outside India are perhaps the opium lords in the Golden Triangle, not a likely economic basis for international cooperation to re-open the road.

Indian business has shown some interest in opening India to the East, but remains weak compared to the security establishment when it comes to the project of putting Assam at the center of the transport map in South-Southeast Asia. The Indian Chamber of Commerce secretary Nazeeb Arif, is a passionate proponent of economic cooperation in the Asian sub-region, where Assam might be viewed as a central place, a region of connections and interlacing mobility. Mr. Arif has said, hopefully, "If you visualize a map in which Kolkata is looked at as being on the western side, as you go eastwards, there is a world of opportunities. One only needs the right initiative to set the ball rolling."