Introduction

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'Home' but not at home

Sanjib Baruah in his book, *Durable Disorder*, recounts a curious tale of a man called Dindu Miri, a man 'who came in from China'. Dindu was an Idu tribesman born in 1946 in what is now Arunachal Pradesh (Baruah, 2005: 55). In 1955, young Dindu went to Beijing to study. For the Idu, China and the Tibet region were closer to his village than any part of India. Dindu found employment as a 'political interpreter' and guided the Chinese in their advance to India during the Sino-Indian war. In 1963, Dindu, once again, returned to his village (now mapped in India). In 2000, Dindu worked as a political interpreter, but this time for the Indian government. The change of job did not mean an end of the relationship with his kin on the other side of the border, in China. The regime of rules between India and China, however, restricted easy communication and Dindu had to resort to 'secret messengers' to stay in touch with his relatives. Dindu's story is an unusual tale of a man caught in the liminal divide between nation-states, his life and emotions resembling two separated parts that do not constitute a whole (p. 56).

Purnakanta Buragohain's story parallels Dindu's tale. Buragohain, an Ahom entrepreneur and intrepid traveller sojourned for a decade through Burma and Yunnan province in Southern China during the interwar period, 1933–42. In his travels, over and over again, he found remnants of connections between the Tai communities inhabiting these regions and the Ahoms of Assam. In his travelogue, he recounts the cross-cultural connections between the people

of Northeast India and Southeast and East Asia. In 1942, as the Japanese advanced into Burma, Buragohain fled on an elephant, in the process bringing back many valuable historical documents with him to Assam. In the post-war period, the gradual consolidation of the borders meant restriction of inter-state travel and Buragohain could not repeat his previous journey.

In Buragohain's travelogue we find a rich account of the populations in Burma and their cultures that seems to counter the proscription of the Burmese as 'uncivilized,' rapacious other, as the Assamese public memory depicts them based on the three Burmese invasions of the Ahom Kingdom (1817–26). What is fascinating about Buragohain's story are the friendships and connections he forged during his decade-long sojourn. The ethnographic eye in his narrative is curious, interested and engaged, acknowledging the coeval relationship between himself and his hosts in Burma. In fact, Buragohain's travelogue could very well be described as a memorial of friendship. A recent Assamese travelogue to Burma by a contemporary commentator, Tapan Sharma, recounts how Buragohain's name has almost passed into legend among the descendants of the Assamese still resident in that country (2014). Dindu Miri and Buragohain's stories of solidarity and friendships with strangers, making kin with familial others, offer a new way to think of place and home, people and relationships that survive beyond and transcend the territorial divides of nation-states.

The geographer, Theano Terekenli, points out three constitutive factors that inhere in the concept of 'home': (i) a 'recurrent, regular investment of meaning in a context with which people personalize and identify with some measure of control': this serves as a stable interface between the self and the world, (ii) an unfolding in historical time – 'home' attains meaning through 'a passage of time linked to experiential consciousness', and (iii) the idea of home gets consolidated by being placed within a network of social relations that 'validate the individual as human being' (p. 325).

The stories of Dindu Miri and Purnakanta Buragohain are one among many such instances of homeliness (and homelessness), movements, interactions and friendships between people in Northeast India and those in South, Southeast and East Asia. Miri's story, in particular, illustrates and raises questions on what we mean by the term 'home' in Northeast India. For Miri, the 'stable interface' called 'home' in Arunachal Pradesh and its unfolding in historical time is repeatedly disrupted by modern border-making processes between India and China that have changed the very topography of this region and his relationship with people who validate his life and give meaning to him as a human being. To maintain the 'network of social relations' that defined

him as a person in his 'home' has to be done via 'secret messengers.' On the one hand, the existence of secret messengers is testimony to the fact that other modes of being and navigating borderland spaces still exist in this region; on the other hand, we are confronted with the tragic fact that social relationships pre-existing the consolidation of postcolonial state entities are now relegated to a secret, shadowy, paralegal existence. Family and human emotions have to be recalibrated as home becomes a category under construction.

Similarly, impelled by the desire to trace the genealogies of the Tais since the Ahom community to which Purnakanta Buragohain belonged claims its historical and cultural lineage to the Tai family group, Purnakanta travelled as far as Yunnan province in China. His travels predate the existence of state security regimes (such as borders posts, checkpoints, passports) and he could move freely between the regions without official impediments. We are not trying to project nostalgia about a border-less precolonial world here, but the astonishing thing about his journey is the absence of any mention of such commonplace obstructions to travel. He was even able to return to Assam once and resume his travels back to Burma after a brief visit. 'Nationalizing space' (Baruah, 2005) and the processes through which the colonial 'frontier' became a postcolonial 'borderland' (Bhaumik, 2009; Misra, 2011) have relegated the stories of such movements and of human connections to the realms of nostalgia and scarcely believable trivia. Purnakanta did not repeat his journey after the war and India was granted freedom in 1947. In postcolonial India, the people in the borderlands had to 'forget' their histories of connections with neighbours across borders, now mapped as citizens of another (perhaps, even enemy) country!

Buragohain's travelogue offers a fascinating description of life in the city of Taunggyi in the Southern Shan region, which like any other colonial city of the early twentieth century was a hybrid space peopled by a variety of communities serving the different purposes and needs of the city. Within this diversity, deep bonds of friendships developed among strangers creating and maintaining interdependent communities that at once made the place feel like home and also made home a place for new opportunities and the growth of the self and others. Buragohain remembers:

> Bengalis, Hindustanis, Punjabis, Gujaratis, Madrasis, Maharashtrians, Pathans, Gurkhas etc. reside in this town. …The year we spent in the Southern Shan town of Taunggyi will remain the most memorable among all the places in Burma, Shan etc. that we have travelled through up to this point. The havildar Mr. Hai Kang Singh, a Gurkha of the Rai caste, along with his wife Padmabati Rai and young son, Musi, who lived in the same house as us, almost became

members of our own family (*poriyal*). … When my son (Solen) would be away
for business, then Padmabati would cook for me and help me out. Moreover,
the subedar of the Taunggyi corps, Major sahib Digbir Rai Gorkhali, was
a dear friend. His wife, Chitramaya Debi, also helped our business a lot by
selling a lot of stuff to the members of the forces. (p. 179–80, our translation).

The *poriyal* (family) mentioned here is contingent, mutually beneficial and
warmly convivial – a memorable savour that Buragohain cherished dearly in
his later days in Assam. The unknown in Myanmar (Burma) seemed familiar
and connected to him, an expanding community of friends and family that
straddled the entire region. Citing Leela Gandhi, one can say that Purnakanta's
narrative 'privileges…the trope of friendship as the most comprehensive…
signifier for all those invisible affective gestures that refuse alignment along
the secure axes of filiation to seek expression outside…possessive communities
of belonging' (Gandhi, 2006: 10).

Home and friendship, friendship and home – variations on these notes
mark our entry point into the terrain of scholarship on the 'directional
category' called Northeast India (Baruah, 2006). Our approach is different and
unique from previous scholarship in the field in that we showcase the abiding
relationships fostered by human interactions and exchanges that lead to a
culture of friendship. Friendship is a responsibility with different others that,
in turn, promotes and facilitates peace at home. In Assam, this relationship is
expressed within the cultural expression of *sinaki manuh* (known and familiar
people). The *sinaki* communities form the fraternity of neighbours and friends.
The politics of emotions that positions these interactions with others must be
understood as flexible and in constant flux. It is decidedly connected to both
ethics and politics, responsibility and questioning that is predicated on the
situational location of friends becoming neighbours or neighbours becoming
friends, between familiarity and enigma, as Derrida would argue. At times,
neighbours and friends have transformed into strangers and political tensions
have erupted accentuating the lack of familiarity, as is evident in the recent
violent exchanges between the Assamese and Bodo, Assamese and Naga,
Tripuri and Bengali, Khasi and Bengali as well as Khasi and Assamese. Politics
of bordering and border making of space and communities have been at the
root of these clashes. Without undermining the political concerns that are
important to these communities, we also recognize that there are certain spaces
and moments of transcendence that enable a reconsideration of affirmative
forms of relationship building. These exchanges are not based on a form of
compensatory transaction of political gains, but is developed through series

of human encounters and opportunities that allow for interaction to renew relationship with the other and, once again, the space of Northeast becomes the shared home of the variety. This perspective that situates the ethical relationship between the variety who are friends and are at home with one another stands in sharp contrast to the given in the current scholarship on Northeast India which, although rich and growing, gets caught in the trap of an assumed stereotypical representation of the people and place: in violence, exceptionality and security, in short, fear. This, in turn, makes the people and places of the Northeast a zone of control devoid of the possibility of positive human interaction. This is a repeated and dated theme, but it seems the narrative is stuck on this negative representation. Even popular imagination outside the region has become stilted and unimaginative.

The obverse of this representation of the region as a zone of war of all against all is the exoticizing, touristic gaze on the 'others' inhabiting this region. The genealogy of this gaze can be drawn from colonial museological orders that presented the 'tribes' inhabiting the region as either versions of noble savage or as 'bloodthirsty,' ferocious head-hunters and war-like people (Kar, 2013; Kikon, 2009; Saikia, 2005; Zou, 2011). While we have already mentioned how the region and its inhabitants are approached through the lens of violence and exceptionality, versions of the noble, happy savage persist in postcolonial India. In the pre-liberalization era, the national channel, Doordarshan, used to periodically broadcast a short, musical vignette on national integration titled 'Mile Sur Mera Tumhara.' The only spoken language from the Northeast in this segment is Assamese. A smiling woman lisps the refrain 'Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' in Assamese. This sequence cuts to a subsequent one where the *mise-en-scene* initially invites us to gaze at a crystal clear river with cloudy hills in the background. Thirteen smiling 'tribal' people in colourful costumes sashay *wordlessly* across the scene. The lack of voice provided to these thirteen individuals stand in sharp contrast to the panoramic touristic gaze in this vignette as it travels around the country showcasing different languages and cultures under the umbrella of the Nehruvian ideology of 'unity in diversity.'

The post-liberalization era hasn't witnessed a significant change in this stock of representations. Popular Hindi films like *Dil Se* (1998) still represent the Northeast as a cloud-capped, hilly region that is concentrated symbolically on the figure of the mysterious feminine (the 'north-eastern' girl in the film is played by the Nepali actress, Manisha Koirala) that provokes mainland male desire. On the other hand, egregious films like *Tango Charlie* (2005) represent the region as a sinister forested area inhabited by 'Bodo' militants who like to

chop off people's ears as trophies.[1] The adoption of the Look East Policy also saw the institution of carnivalesque events like the Hornbill Festival. Kikon (2004) writes: 'Showcase events like the Hornbill festival, with catchy slogans coined in sanitized offices of the tourism department, hide a murky story of the hegemonic control of the military establishment in civil and political affairs in the Northeast.' In festivals like these, the threats and challenges of cultural difference are micromanaged and packaged in an exotic, domesticated register as alluring spectacles of cultural diversity that define the space of culture for both the inhabitants and mainlanders (Longkumer, 2014).

The limited and enclosed spaces of discourse – scholarly, popular and commercial – challenge the capacity to know the Northeast and its multiple communities and histories from the location of their own experiences that are developed through deliberations, debates and even discord within and outside the region. These exchanges are spaces for opening and not closing relationships. We focus on these possibilities of openings and interactions between people, cultures and histories in the Northeast that lead us on another pathway, to find positive, enhancing and robust relationship-building among the people of the different communities who, time and again, have forged friendships and associations beyond religious, linguistic, ethnic and class divides. We read the Northeast as a fertile place of human relations that are interdependent and intertwined, despite the many conflicts and violent uprisings that the locale has witnessed. This is not a new happening but is woven into the fabric of history of the place and people in our investigation.

Situating the history of contemporary scholarship on Northeast India

The skewed epistemological frames we mentioned above are the legatees of two particular ways of looking at and studying the region, both of which have a fairly long history: (a) the colonial anthropological[2] and (b) the security-oriented. The category of 'race,' we suggest, is the hidden motor that connects these two frames and provides the foundation for studying the representations in scholarship concerning the Northeast as the 'wild,' 'frontier' region. It was not surprising that colonial anthropological studies of the region posited the fixed, unchanging category of the 'tribe' as the antithesis to civilization, (Fürer-Haimendorf, 1943; Hutton, 1921; Mills, 1935). This frontier region was a home to 'tribal' (and by association, 'primitive') societies, who were deemed 'noble' or 'savage,' given their cooperation with or resistance to British

colonialism. Thus while certain populations in the region were projected as 'noble' or 'subservient,' other recalcitrant groups were 'pacified' through brutal campaigns on the frontier (Pels, 1999). This anthropological trajectory of the 'tribe' in the Northeast Indian context has a distinct racial tinge. Sanjib Baruah, for instance, mentions the case of Olaf Caroe, a foreign secretary in the British government, who authored a paper titled 'The Mongolian Fringe' in 1940. Caroe's paper was written within a known context; his formulations were the legatee of a long history of anthropological studies of the region in colonial times. This anthropological trajectory has been fundamental in framing the colonial and postcolonial policies for the governance of this region as the 'tribal' other territory inhabited by 'hostile' groups. This way of thinking has also cast its long shadow in certain contemporary studies (Sengupta, 2003; Stirn and Von Ham, 2003).

In postcolonial times, the 'frontier' may have 'become' a 'borderland,' but a similar attitude of othering and framing the people through narrow epistemological parameters have persisted (Bhaumik, 2009; Misra, 2011). The 'wild' colonial frontier was recast as the 'violence-ridden' borderland inhabited by disgruntled and disloyal subjects in the postcolonial period. Vallabhbhai Patel, India's first home minister, writing to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in the wake of the Chinese invasion in 1961, stated:

> All along the Himalayas in the north and north-east, we have on our side of the frontier a population ethnologically and culturally not different from Tibetans and Mongoloids. The undefined state of the frontier and the existence on our side of a population with its affinities to the Tibetans or Chinese have all the elements of the potential trouble between China and ourselves.[3]

Just as the figure of the 'Muslim' who supposedly swears allegiance to the 'other' nation, Pakistan, is seen in mainland India, the populations inhabiting the 'Mongoloid fringe' of India too were reproduced as groups with suspect loyalty to the postcolonial nation-state.[4] Foucault's argument that the category of race introduces a break in the 'pastoral' functions of modern biopolitical regimes is, we think, applicable here. According to Foucault, the application of this more expansive notion of race/racism makes its reappearance in modern biopolitical regimes expressing its power to make live or let die. The application of racism as a tactic of power divides the 'population' – the object of biopower – into two groups: those that live (and live well) and those that can be killed off or exist at the point of death so that the former may be secure and live. The state security regimes in force in Northeast India that were brought into

effect to 'control' the rebellious subjects, such as the Armed Forces Security Protection Act (AFSPA), reframe the colonial figurations of subjection and sustain a continuing state of exception in the region. In fact, we can extend this to argue that the original locus of sovereign power and necropolitics in the postcolonial Indian context is the Northeast, a point noted by various commentators on exceptionality in the region (Akoijam, 2005; Baishya, 2014; Baruah, 2007; Lacina, 2008; McDuie-Ra, 2009; Oinam, 2007; Vajpeyi, 2007).

Recasting the region as a violence-ridden zone inhabited by turbulent populations, the postcolonial dispensation of exceptionality developed along two major lines: the first one focused on the origins or causes for the numerous insurgencies in the region (Bhaumik, 2009; Hazarika, 1995; Nag, 2002; Saikia, 2006), and the second shifted the locus from the anthropological study of primordial 'tribes' to how the reductive categories of 'poverty' and 'ethnic difference' precipitated, perpetuated and, in some cases, prevented violence and terror in this locale (Madhab, 1999; Raghavan, 2013). Poverty and deprivation, on the one hand, and clashes between ethnic communities, on the other hand, were identified as causal factors for the recurring episodes of violence in the region. Calling such broad tendencies 'greed and grievance debates,' McDuie-Ra states that while these models have 'proven useful for understanding the origins of insurgency in Northeast India,' they only managed to 'explain the causes of violence rather than analyzing the ways in which this violence is experienced, normalized and contested' (p. 17).

To be sure, alternative and powerful epistemological frames studying the history and culture of the region through materialist analyses (Gohain, 2006; Guha, 1977, 1991), culturalist analyses of socio-political issues (Misra, 2000, 2014; Prabhakara, 2012) and social histories of literary traditions (Misra, 1987) always existed parallel to these two trends discussed above. However, the last fifteen years or so have seen a steady trickle of academic publications that have slowly shifted the region from a passive, instrumentalized object of analysis to a dynamic subject that is the producer of complex discourses.[5] At the risk of simplification, we can divide the dominant trends in this emerging body of scholarship under four major headings (these trajectories are not mutually exclusive, but intersect with each other): (a) works that critique the monolithic ascription of the locale as a bounded entity and probe its uniqueness as a crossroads where various cultures and cultural traditions interact in complex ways; (b) works that do not take 'identity' as a fixed essence, but study its plasticity and complex historicity; (c) works that focus on the environmental and ecological history of the region and (d) works that move away from the paradigm of 'exceptionality' and study the dimensions

of everyday life in the region without ignoring the complex effects of race and racialization and gender and ethnic differences. We are not claiming that this attempt at cognitive mapping is exhaustive. For instance, this four-fold typology does not discuss the established trajectory of studying the genealogies of history writing (Guha, 1983; Saikia, 2005) and conversion and the role of Christianity in the Northeast (Eaton, 1984; Nongbri, 2014; Subba, 2006). Neither do we mention the work that studies the impact of the 1947 partition on the region extensively (Baruah, 2015; Dasgupta, 2003, 2008) or inter-ethnic and religious violence (Hussain, 1993; Saikia, 2011). However, our aim here is to cover some of the broad trends that have provided launching pads for some of our own studies and frameworks in this book. At the same time, this attempt at cognitive mapping is one of the first synoptic summaries of the contemporary state of scholarship on Northeast India. While we are cognizant of the fact that this mapping is provisional, we want to emphasize that such an enterprise becomes very necessary if the stakes of our project are to be outlined clearly.

Consider the location of this geopolitical region: connected to the Indian mainland by a slender 'chicken's neck,' Northeast India lies at the crossroads of South, Southeast and East Asia. Contemporary scholarship on this region (Baruah, 2004; Chatterjee 2013; Saikia, 2005) have increasingly begun to take stock of the dynamic exchanges that occurred in this borderland region. Here, Willem van Schendel's work is a key reference point although his designation of the region as the 'Bengal borderlands' (2004) places too much centrality on Bengal as the nodal point in this locale. Far more provocatively, van Schendel's coinage 'Zomia' has been studied extensively in James Scott's polemical anarchist classic *The Art of not Being Governed* (2010) as one of the last bastions where the modern state-form has been contested fiercely. A large portion of Northeast India also forms part of Zomia. Lintner (2012) and Bhattacharyya's (2013) non-fictional accounts of the guerrilla camps in the no-man's zones lying between India and Myanmar, and Anurag Mahanta's Assamese novel *Aulingar Jui* (A Harvest of Fire, 2007), a subject of one of the essays in this collection, are within the Zomia imagined by van Schendel and Scott.

While these fictional and non-fictional accounts talk about contemporary narratives of border-crossing and existing systems and networks of cross-cultural contact, what of memories of older forms of connections that refuse to disappear despite the hardening of national boundaries and its attendant politics of forgetting and remembering? This has been an important thematic in contemporary scholarship on Northeast India. Three longer works are exemplary in this context. Saikia's books, *In the Meadows of Gold* (1997) and

Fragmented Memories (2005), provide the peoples' narratives of history that are remembered in the region. Memories in these accounts spill over the boundaries of nation-state and national history and connect with neighbours in Burma, Thailand and even south China. Both memory and identity are in motion, and enclosing them have led to the transformation of the people and places of the Northeast into sites of contestation between local, national and transnational actors and agendas, as Saikia argues. Instead of looking westward toward Bengal, Saikia's narrative journeys eastwards to appreciate the lively connections forged through multiple layers of historical encounters and connections at the crossroads of Assam.

Similarly, Chatterjee's recent monograph (2013) explores the costs of 'forgetting' the precolonial past in the emerging intellectual debate on the region. Chatterjee's polemical point that a 'post-nationalist geographical sensibility' dominates the study of this region is a very important one and should open up new avenues for researching the precolonial past and its lingering impact on the present (p. 18). Of particular interest for us is what Chatterjee says towards the end of her book where she discusses the lessons she learned about memory from refugees in Mizoram: '…a general refusal of narratives of suffering could also indicate a profusion of an ethics of enormous discipline, the commitment to and cultivation of compassionate albeit hierarchized friendships. These histories of friendships, of expansive personhood and futurity, had been erased from the historiography of a South Asia conceived only in terms of freedom and rights, products and markets, here and now' (p. 364). In fact, these scholars urge us to look beyond the focus on the 'here and now' and probe 'histories of friendship' and of 'expansive personhood' beyond the present lacuna of the postcolonial mentality.

At the same time, we are also aware of the possible pitfalls of the normalization of such a narrative paradigm that valorizes precolonial connections and fuzziness. Such narratives often follow the trajectory of declension into nostalgia, one may argue. Nostalgia for the 'fuzzy' communities, a form that influences both nationalist and nationalist-Marxist variants, is predicated on a romantic secularization of a narrative structure with colonialism or modernity as trauma leading to the 'fall' from a sort of paradise. Politics then gets reimagined as a reinvigorated search for a lost 'nostos' (home) projected onto the present. This tendency is evident, for instance, in Uddipana Goswami's work (2013), a well-researched book otherwise. Goswami's call to re-invent an expansive sense of *bar-axamiya* as a politics of personhood and identity for the present is predicated on a desire to recuperate and reinvent older, fuzzier