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Imagining Territories in the Northeast Frontier: Revisiting John M'Cosh's *Topography of Assam*

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the construction of the northeast frontier of India as a colonial territory in colonial survey discourse by revisiting one of earliest colonial texts on the region, namely, Topography of Assam (1837) compiled by John M'Cosh, a colonial medical cum survey official. That travel writing and its generic allies such as survey report serve as instruments of empire-building is a well-known thesis. This paper places the text under review in the larger context of empire-building in the nineteenth century northeast frontier. However, given the enormity of the issue at hand, the study focuses only on the ways the text imagines and transforms the region from a supposedly unorganized and unutilized space to a colonial territory.

Keywords: Colonialism; Northeast India; Space; Territory; Travel writing.

Colonial Discourse and the Construction of Territories in the Northeast: Revisiting John M'Cosh's *Topography of Assam*

This paper aims to explore the colonial politics of space-production in the nineteenth-century northeast by revisiting one of the earliest colonial documents on the region, namely-*Topography of Assam* (1837), compiled by John M'Cosh who served as an assistant surgeon of the erstwhile province of Assam. M'Cosh (1805-1885), joined the Bengal Army as an assistant surgeon in 1831 and extensively traveled in the northern, eastern, and the southeastern region of India. His *Topography of Assam* is primarily a statistical cataloging of select spatial attributes of the region and hence, is apparently an instance of colonial logistics. However, as is argued in this paper, this apparently innocuous account of topographical survey mu-

tates into a discursive instrument of territory-construction. As a closer investigation suggests, the narrative calls into service a register and a body of conceptual frames that generate, as well as lend ideological support, to a condition that is favorable for empire-building.

The theoretical and political import of the study derives from the centrality assigned to the question of territory in the political discourse of the present day northeast. The element of violence or unease which marks the socio-political climate of the region and which almost entirely derives from contesting claims over territories, is a legacy of the British Empire in the region. It is these abiding socio-political and historical implication of colonial spatial interventions in the region which makes it imperative to revisit these sites/genres of colonial discourse such as topographical survey-reports which played a decisive role in generating, circulating and eventually, in institutionalizing the colonial model of exclusive territories in the northeast frontier.

Before moving on, it will be useful to briefly look at some of the ideas that form the theoretical backdrop of the study. To begin with, the spatial politics of colonialism rests on the construction of material as well as of what Henri Lefebvrein his landmark book*The Production of Space* (1974), terms as 'social space' (74).A territory is an exclusive, well-demarcated and bounded spatial unit;it symbolizes power and control; and its construction relies on a view of space as an exclusive, divisible and absolute materiality. This view of space as an absolute, instrumental and manageable utility corresponds to the cardinal impulse that marks every colonial project. i.e., control over space. Given this view of colonialism as an exercise in territorial expansionism and proliferation, it is important for postcolonial scholarship to explore how colonial discourse participates in this politics of producing and proliferating territorial spaces in newly acquired colonies. Such investigations also become important in the light of the view that images and rhetoric employed in colonial travel and survey discourse serves more as metaphorical-ideological tools of space-production than as unbiased literal references. To this extent, it becomes crucial to explore the role of these images-cum-territorial tropes in furthering the proliferation of colonial territories.

Colonialism is best viewed as an expansionist project sustaining itself through the production and proliferation of what Edward Soja terms as 'exclusive territories' (5);or what Duncan and Ley terms as 'delimited and inviolable space' (253); or what Henrie Lefebvre views as 'bureaucratic space' (215).Some instances of bureaucratic space, in colonial settings,

are these newly formulated revenue spaces, institutional structures, and private property regimes which mark the arrival of colonialism. As suggested by Matthew Edney, the construction of these 'imperial spaces' is designed and carried out through a certain kind of instrumentalizing and managerial ideology/imagination (334), and a cluster of real and imagined markers (333). This paper focuses on these apparently literal but in effect symbolic images and expressions in the text with potential territorializing undertones.

What marks off colonial territoriality is an inherent tendency to upset and obliterate pre-colonial spatial arrangements(Delaney 23, 36). As a matter of course colonial territorialization serves to- a) perpetuate colonial power structures, and b) transform space into some kind of military or economic utility. The prioritizing of strategic military and economic interests which marks colonial spatial designs could be viewed as a denial or bypassing of indigenous claims over these spaces. Deborah Sutton's observation on the colonial construction of space entirely and only as an economic incentive(4) adds more clarity to this point. This reductionism and instrumentality that underpin colonial space-regimes is most clearly discernible in writings of two of the most pioneering figures of empire-building, namely- the colonial traveler and the colonial surveyor. It is important to note that the colonial territorial gaze traveled through different trajectories- speculation and fantasy being one of the foremost. Often, these cornucopian fantasy or dystopian apprehension serve as ideological preludes to the territorialization of space.

At this point, it will be useful to briefly look at the ways colonial models of territory deviates from their pre-colonial counterparts. Whereas in colonial parlance, territorializing implies 'exclusive possession' and 'ownership' of space, pre-colonial spatial arrangements are inherently flexible and are not determined by an emphasis on individual and absolute ownership of space (Gupta, 108). This point has been discussed in-depth by Madhav Gadgil and Rama Guha in the book *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* (1993), where they explore the colonial project of transforming India from an integrated geography into a cluster of discreetly defined political and military territories.These studies throw sufficient light on the poetics and politics of territory-making in colonial India. Another useful idea to explore the distinction between pre-colonial and colonial models of territory is what Robert Sack, the noted thinker on territoriality in his landmark study *Human Territoriality: Its Theory and History* (1986), terms as a 'political territory' (5). According to Sack, the political territorialization of a space involves a de/re-semanticization and impersonalizing of

space whereby it is cleared off all existing meanings and is re-attributed a series of impersonal and instrumental values (47). Given the fact that the conversion of space into colonial territories are carried out through these moves, these spaces are best viewed as political territories. Henrie Lefebvre views such constructed territories as a form of 'instrumental space' (Lefebvre 51: Also see Spurr 129). Sack's notion of political territory and Lefebvre's idea of instrumental come very close to each other in that both corresponds to the conversion of natural space into political spaces and are underpinned by instrumentalizing design of some form.

What marks off this mode of territorialization, central to the exercise of political authority (Lefebvre 34), is the priority assigned to the partitioning' and "enumeration" of space (90). Lindsay Frederick Braun in his study of colonial survey and the reshaping of landscapes in rural South Africa throws sufficient light on this.As suggested by Braun, the construction of colonial territory begins with the very act of seeing and moves along the subsequent steps of dividing, labeling, charting and numeralizing space (1). Another important perspective comes from WilliamBeinart and Lorie Hughes in the book *Environment and Empire*(2007). Beinert and Hughes identify commodification of space—that is, the reduction of space military or economic utilities— as the key to empire-building. They also highlight how a certain kind of 'managerial approach (128), and 'technical imagination' (213) remains central to this politics of commodifying colonized spaces. Given the centrality of colonial exploratory writings such as survey-reports in effectuating such spatial metamorphoses, these writings emerge as an important area of postcolonial research.

What marks off the construction of space as a colonial territory is the prioritization of colonial economic, and military interests over the indigenous. Such constructions do not mandatorily correspond to institutional notifications. In fact, territory as physicality is an effect of an act imagination. In other words, the material practice of territory-making is frequently preceded by acts of imagining these territories. This brings to the fore another important but underexplored dimension of colonial territorial politics, that is, the role of cultural imaginaries in supporting military, and economic territorial visions.It is important to explore how these cultural imaginaries/tropes transform the colony into a certain kind of symbolic territory and thereby, into what could be viewed as an oblique geography of power.

It is obvious that colonial discourse serves as an ideological prelude to the actual and material transformation of space into territory. Some genres of

colonial literature such as travel diaries,survey reports play a crucial role in this discursive, and material politics of space production.

Matthew H. Edney in his book *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India 1765-1843* (1997), explores how colonial cartography played a decisive role in the construction of India as a clearly organized and distributed territorial space. As Edney argues, it was primarily by mutating natural spaces into territorial markers that colonial cartographers carried out the project of territorializing the sub-continent. This thesis highlights the role of literary or discursive metaphors in de/ re-semanticising colonized spaces. The centrality of such tropes and metaphors within the colonial meaning-making system is also highlighted by Abdul R. JanMohamed in his article 'The Economy of Manichean Allegory' (1995). Two of the figurative strategies identified by JanMohamed, namely-'metaphorization' and 'metonymization' (21) emerges as crucial tools for the construction of colonial territories.

Similarly, David Spurr in his well-known study *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse Journalism, Travel Writing and Imperial Administration* (1993), calls attention to some of the foremost tropes employed in colonial discourse. They are- 'surveillance' (13), 'appropriation' (28), 'aestheticisation' (44), 'classification' (50), 'debasement' (76), 'negation', 'eroticization' and 'affirmation' (89). These studies reiterate the role of rhetoric/ discourse in initiating and sustaining colonial control over space. In other words, they reiterate the centrality of political troping in the construction of imperial geographies. Taking this as a point of departure, this paper moves on to examine the ways the text under review, namely-*Topography-of Assam*serves to transform the nineteenth century northeast from a pre-colonial space into a strategic economic, military, and civilizational frontier of an expanding British Empire.However, given its limited scope, the study focuses only on some of the foremost rhetorical tropes employed in the text that serve to actuate and reinforces visions to territorialise a supposedly unowned space.

M'Cosh's text *Topography of Assam* constructs the nineteenth century northeast as a symbolic geography of otherness by enframing it into a cluster of symbolic binaries such as order/chaos, identity/ difference, presence/absence. However, a closer probe reveals that all these symbolic constructions are nothing but variants of a single spatial meta-trope, i.e., a hill/plains dichotomy.It is important to note that this symbolic dichotomy of the self and the Other continues to retain its centrality in the spatial-territorial discourse/politics of the northeast even in the postcolonial times.

One such instance is the organization of the region in postcolonial times. It is the continuing and decisive role of colonial territorial models in determining the political geography of postcolonial northeast which validates the present study. The paper argues that the creation and proliferation of exclusive territories and an exclusive territorial consciousness in the northeast is best viewed as a colonial legacy.

As suggested above, the foremost trope that goes into the construction of the northeast in colonial imaginaries is the hill-plain dichotomy. The construction of the region in colonial texts is also predominated by symbols of greed and fear. It is important to note that if the east was the 'other' to the West, the northeast frontier was the further 'other' to Bengal. Both the plains and hills of the region morph into a 'magical essence' (JanMohamed 20) of otherness in colonial discourse. In other words,the hills regularly came to be viewed as the cultural-civilizational antithesis to the plains of Assam. This paper examines how M'Cosh's narrative participates in and furthers this narrative of spatial otherness.

It is important to note that the colonial territorializing vision frequently overwrite pre-colonial spatial arrangements. As a multiethnic social space, territorial arrangements in the precolonial northeast were inherently fluid and open. It is not unusual that M'Cosh's *Topography* challenges and undoes this inherent spatial fluidity and trade-offs that marked spatial interactions in the region in favour of colonial military and economic priorities. It is evident in the way the text obliterates traces of existing lived geographies in the area and constructs the Brahmaputra valley as a definite and geo-political territory with clearly visible boundaries. M'Cosh writes, "Assam is that extensive tract of the country on either side of the Brahmaputra; stretching on the north shore from the river Monash opposite Goalpara and on the S. from Nugurbera Hill, about 16 miles above Goalpara, to the foot of the Himalayan Mountains, close upon the western boundary of China (3)." This passage points to some of the important tropes instrumental in the poetics and politics of territory-making in the colonial northeast.

The foremost of these is the instrumentalization of natural landmarks such as rivers into political signposts i.e., boundaries and borders (3-4). This attribution of symbolic or political meaning to natural landmarks such as rivers and hills in the region is aimed at converting the region into enumerated, partitioned, and hence, into manageable units of colonial governance. To this extent, this passage illustrates one of the important discursive-material tricks of territorializing in the colonial northeast, that

is, the appropriation of natural landscapes into political-symbolic codes. Such expropriation of precolonial space into territorial signposts remains central to the imagining of territories in the narrative.

As already suggested, the construction of colonial territories in M'Cosh's text begins with the act of partitioning and enumerating space. The narrative begins with the very attempt to formulate Assam as a discreet geo-political or administrative territory by leaving out traces of precolonial spatial trajectories and transactions marked by easy and regular trade-offs. In other words, the transformation of the region into a territory with discreet sign-posts overrides the fluid, flexible and dialogic geographical arrangements that were in practice in pre-colonial northeast.

What sets apart the construction of territories in M'Cosh's text is the way it formulates the northeast as a cluster of ethnic territories. In other words, apart from natural landmarks, the text also appropriates ethnicity as a territorial marker. For instance, M'Cosh writes:

> On the north it is bounded by a cold mountainous country inhabited by Booteas, Akas, Duphlas, Koppachors, Miris, Abors and Mishmis; the first being most westward, and the others eastward in succession, the Kangtis, Bor-Kangtis, Singphos, and Muamorias, separate it on the extreme east from China and Burma; The Munniporis, Nagas, Mikirs, Cacharis, Kassyas and Garrows from our possessions in Sylhet on the South. (3)

This passage illustrates the way apparently non-spatial attributes such as bodily and racial features, or so to say, ethnicity are taken over to perpetuate the requirements of extending territorial control and surveillance. Assigning a particular territory to a particular ethnic group, that is—formulating ethnically-marked territories is a trope that is regularly employed in the text.

As already suggested, the most remarkable aspect of the politics of territory-making in M'Cosh's narrative is the centrality of the allegory of otherness in it. One of the foremost ways M'Cosh extends the rhetoric of spatial otherness to the northeast is by constantly foregrounding a series of spatial inconsistencies such as illogicality and incoherence in these landscapes.Thispersistent attributing and overplaying of supposedly unwanted landscape-features to the place reinforces the allegory of spatial otherness that pervades the text.Some of the foremost literal-symbolic expressions to reinforce the stereotype of exceptionality are topographical

deviations such as a ruggedness and abruptions (5). Interestingly, these supposed topographical inconsistencies are represented in the text not as factual features but as confirmation of a certain kind of inexplicable deviance i.e., as remnants of some unknown time and space. This illustrates the way the local topography is turned into a textual-territorial trope to transform the region into a primitive or unreal space. This also draws attention to the role of rhetoric in undermining, obliterating, and overplaying certain spatial attributes.

Another co-trope of primitivism, in the text, is that of decay and degeneracy which also plays an important role in constructing the region as an allegory of cultural and civilizational exceptionality.The unknown, baffling topography of the northeast only creates impressions of ennui, frustration in the mind of the whiteman. This is another attempt to dismiss northeast as a lived geography and imagine it as a colonial space. The trope of chaos could be viewed as a figurative attempt to dislocate the place from its real temporal setting into an imagined and unreal spatio-temporal context.

Another important discursive-territorial trope in the text is the construction of the local occupants of the northeast as unseemly and lazy. This is driven by the agenda of justifying colonizing intervention. In other words, constructing the indigenous populations as inert, atavistic, and foolish is best viewed as discursive prelude to imperial intervention into, and hence, occupation over the northeast. There are other similar instances in the text that corroborates this thesis. For instance, while commenting on the aquatic habit of the local people M'Cosh re-applies the stereotype of laziness and primordiality. He writes: "Yet strange it is, the inhabitants don't avail themselves of this provision of nature, to raise themselves above the reach of the floods… They will sit still on the low ground till the water encompasses their huts and drown the fires upon their hearths (5)." There is an unmistakable note of sarcasm in this supposedly factual, matter-of-fact like description, which turns it into a figurative instrument of othering. These instances makes the interchanging usage of fact and fiction in the text obvious.The territorializing propensity of the text comes from this sort of frequent interchanges of real and ideological-imagined spatialities.

It is evident that M'Cosh's narrative overplays a series of undesirable spatial attributes or drawbacks while framing the northeast as a topography. As already suggested, this textual-discursive politics is predominantly determined by the space-clearing agenda central to empire-building in nineteenth century northeast. One key trope used in the text is framing

the region as an unutilized but abundant wealth. M'Cosh constructs the northeast an underutilized cornucopia of the eastern frontier with its "extensive ranges of well cultivated land" (4), "fertile soil" (5), "the exuberance of the brushwood" (6), potential routes (11), agricultural products (35), and minerals (57). As anticipated, what frustrates the colonial topographer is the carelessness of the local people. Quite understandably, the material-mineral wealth of the northeast transforms M'Cosh into an imperial speculator, making it difficult for readers to distinguish between the topographer and the colonial wealth-seeker. For instance, he writes, "Articles more precious than silver and gold grow wild upon its mountains, uncultivated, and till only late uncared for… The tea tree… and it only requires the same attention to be bestowed upon its culture and manufacture, to secure the same blessing to our country (31)." Here, M'Cosh seems to be more of a capitalist vanguard than a disinterested knowledge-seeker. Similarly, he speculates on the prospect of utilizing the other forest-resources such as exotic creepers that grow upon the hills and "whose beauty and perfume would render them valuable acquisitions to the bower or the parterre (35)." This is a clear overture towards creating colonial economic territories in the northeast.

In what could be viewed as another extension of the trope of otherness in the text, M'Cosh frequently endows the local people with attributes of bestiality and thereby turns them into asymbol of civilizationaldeviation. For instance, while commenting on the living-habits of the local population he frequently employs a register that is pejorative in tone and meaning. Frequent usage of terms such as 'roost', 'nest' (5) to refer to the corporeal and cultural attributes of the people transforms M'Cosh's text into a classic example of colonial anti-aesthetic.The territorializing propensity of this rhetoric comes from layers of unfavourable implications it bears. M'Cosh'scomments on the moral and behavioural attributes of the native corroborates this point further. He writes, "In integrity of character they are estimated very low indeed; falsehood and knavery prevail to the greatest extent; they are idle and indolent in their habits, childish and timid in their manners (22)."

This is another attempt at bestializing as well as territorializing. Similarly, M'Cosh vilifies the morality of the native women elsewhere. He writes, "Unfortunately their morality is at a very low ebb; and a mother thinks no more of contracting for the person of her daughter, than for a duck or chicken, or renting it at a fixed sum per month (23)." This is another instance of otherness as a trope of territory-making whereby the imposition of certain unwanted attributes to colonized space/subject is a dis-

cursive-moral pretext for imperial intervention and guardianship. This corroborates the main argument made in this paper, that is - topography as an allegory of spatial otherness and hence a literal/symbolic tool of empire-building in the northeast.

Another instance of the traveler's attempt to obliterate existing geographies could be traced in his view of the northeast as an uninteresting ambience or so to say, a dystopia (6). What is important to note is that he transmutes his personal experience of boredom into a general attribute of the northeastern landscape. Interestingly, what frustrates him is the 'uncultivated nature of the country'; frequent sights of sandbanks and water; endless jungle of impenetrable reeds and the paucity of population (6). The same spatial attributes which leaves the colonial topographer disappointed is a symbolic invitation to the colonial entrepreneur or capitalist vanguard. In fact, the perpetual note of disappointment over abundant but unused resources in M'Cosh's narrative aims at that. To this extent, the cornucopian construction of the northeast topography in his narrative could be viewed as another powerful trope of territory-production.

It is already suggested that the colonial traveler-surveyor does not remain satisfied with the partitioning of space. The act of partitioning always goes along with the marking of territories as either friendly or hostile. In other words, the imperial gaze mutates territories into friendly and hostile geographies. Colonial spatial imaginations are regularly determined by the contrapuntal and complementary impulses of desire and fear. In a travel text, native resistance is always viewed and presented as hostility. However, the trope of hostility was also extended to the native landscape.What is interesting is that this trope of hostility distributed across a set of metaphors such as germs, venomous and disease was central to the mutation of the colony into a geography of fear. It is important to note that the colonial pathological imaginary was a prelude to territorializing. M'Cosh's *Topography* incorporates the northeast into such a colonial pathological imaginary.

Interestingly, this pathogenic construction also is aimed at creating an ideological pretext for a corrective or therapeutic imperial intervention in the region making an expansion of colonial territorialization almost inevitable. For instance, M'Cosh's view that the region is nothing but "an impenetrable jungle of gigantic reeds, traversed only by the wild elephant or the buffaloes; where a human footstep is unknown, and the atmosphere even to the natives themselves is pregnant with febrile miasmata and death (3)" could be viewed as an attempt at negative allegorization of

the northeast as a tropical dystopia, and hence, crying out for corrective intervention.

It is evident that both the tropes of dystopia and degeneracy plays an important role in M'Cosh's narrative by augmenting the allegory of otherness and thereby serving as discursive-ideological precursor of territory-making. To this extent, it is not unusual that narratives of native ineptitude and is succeeded by covert and overt overtures of improvement. This is obvious from what M'cosh writes about transforming Goalpara, a place in Lower Assam, into a colonial township. He writes, "Towards the improvement in the healthiness of Goalpara I would recommend that a marsh or jeel marked in the chart, be either drained, or converted into a tank. This is… in fact a perfect marsh, and must be a great source of disease. I would next suggest that the hill be kept free from jungle (81)". In fact, the text incorporates multiple similar proposals to intervene and thereby reconfigure/ modify the local landscapes such as in the native station of Guwahati (89). This illustrates the politics of self-assumed guardianship, and by extension, that of extending colonial ownership over native geographies.

What is interesting to note is that on every such occasion, there are suggestions of concrete measures to rearrange or reshape local spatial arrangements such as clearing forests (89), or raising new landmarks such as bunds (81), which could be viewed as visible symbols of colonial authority. To this extent, these supposedly apolitical overtures in the text emerge as strategic-symbolic instruments of territory-production. As already suggested, the proposal to improve/modernize the station of Gohatti illustrates this point. "Another cause of unhealthiness; is the proximity of dense wooded marshy jungle, and the multitude of old tanks throughout the station, perfect quagmires and marshes; the very hot beds of disease (89)." It does not need to be reiterated that the proposal to deforest certain surrounding areas, entirely driven by colonial military or other interests, has an important territorial implication, both literal and metaphorical, that is — fostering Eurocentric territorial models in the region.

As suggested before, the mot overarching territorial trope in the narrative is the hill-plain binary wherein the hills symbolize savagery. In it, the hills and its inhabitants are mutated into stereotypes of fierce, warlike, savages. However, this attempt at spatial troping is not always obvious and is regularly concealed behind another metaphor- the metaphor of the wild. To this extent, the politics of territorial troping is a layered exercise in M'Cosh. As natural space, the northeast is viewed as untamed, order-

less, and raw nature whereas as a socio-cultural space it is a metaphor of savagery and orderlessness.This pejorative metaphorization of the hills was prelude to numerous military expeditions and subsequent colonization. This exercise was radically different from spatial imaginaries in the pre-colonial northeast. Manjeet Baruah in his study *Frontier Cultures: A Social History of Assamese Literature* (2012), observes that pre-colonial spatial imaginations in the northeast never encouraged the distinction between the hills and the plains as separate spatial formations (6). The hills are never presented in unfriendly light in literary and cultural narratives of what the British viewed as the plains. The visualization and institutionalization of the hills as a special category distinct and different from the plains and also its stereotyping into a metaphor of savagery is,by and large, a colonial legacy (6, 10). M'Cosh's gaze presents the Akas (141), Duphlas (142), and Koppachors (143), tribes in the northeast, through trope of savagery.

Throughout his narrative M'Cosh gazes at the northeast as a 'contact-zone' between civilization and savagery. His narrative illustrates how if India was the social space of encounter between the West and the East, the northeastern frontier was viewed as an extension of the 'further East', a savage terrain inhabited by the Mongoloid races. If in Bengal, it was 'the effeminate Bengali', and in the Brahmaputra valley, 'the timid race of Assamese', the hills were the space to encounter the 'savage.' It is important to recognize that the tropes employed in the text are both a conditions and consequence of the colonizing/ territorializing designs in the northeast. They only inform and are informed by a colonial logic of exclusion and difference. To the extent that empire-building and territory-making are not only military or economic exercises, but also a cultural/ ideological project, tropes as seen in M'cosh's *Topography* are central to the transformation of the northeast not only into land frontier but more importantly,into a cultural and civilizational frontier.This metaphorization of the region into a symbol of anarchy, hostility and chaos continued to determine popular imaginings of the northeast both postcolonial times. The stereotyping of the northeast as 'troubled territory' in recent times probably best illustrates of this cross-over from the colonial to the postcolonial spatial regime.

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