

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

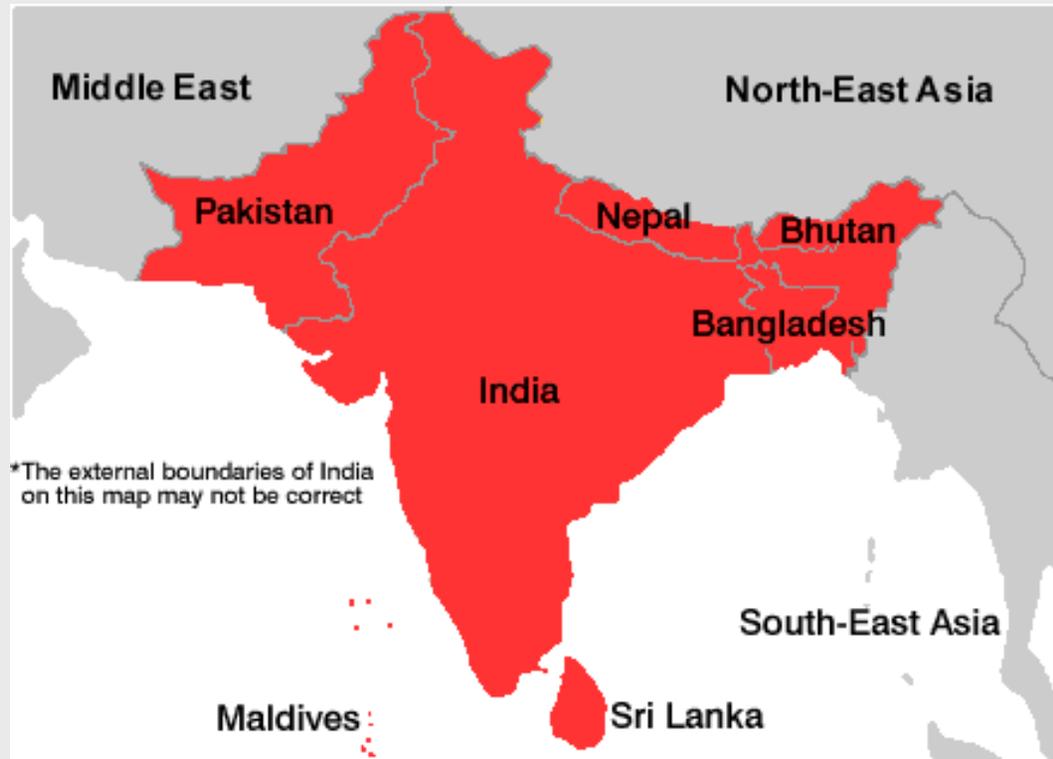
David Ludden

February 22, 2007

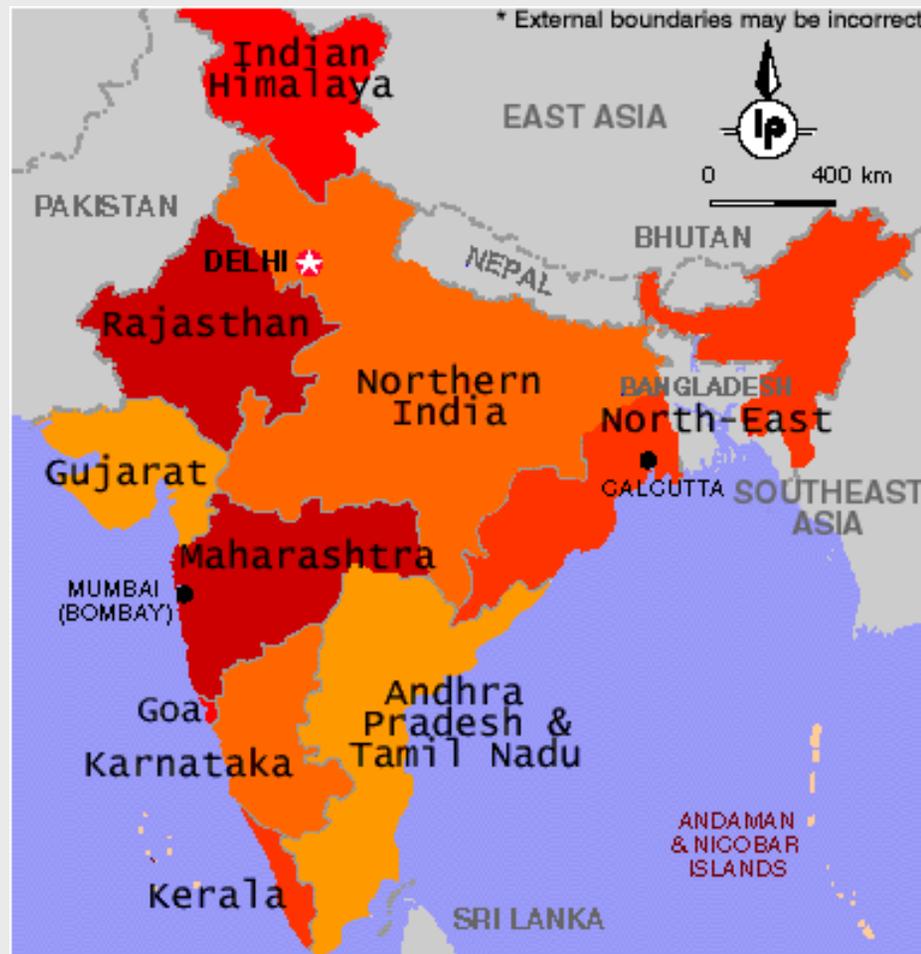
Assam sits in a continent defined by national states, and ...



In a sub-continent, defined by national territories ...



In India, a national state, centred on New Delhi ...



In a northeastern region, defined by Indian states.



Thus, Assam exists inside the gridlines of national geography ...

... where Assam is a solid piece of Indian national territory, fixed inside a world of national states.

In this national view of social reality, all things acquire their definitive location, identity, and meaning as national entities.

But other spatial perspectives exist

Despite the universal authority of national geography, the spatial location of social reality is never singular, immutable, or stationary.

The fact that Assam is part of India is of course indisputable, but this fact coexists with others that locate Assam and all its constituent elements, including its boundaries, differently.

The goal of this paper

is to explore Assam's geographical location, its composition in its wider world,

and by doing so, to suggest how we might locate social realities in multiple, changing, and mobile spaces,

in which, regions like Assam acquire a kaleidoscopic appearance, open to many interpretations and analytical approaches, in the fullness of time.

My reasons for undertaking this exercise today are that I want to

- 1) indicate the limitations of thinking about geography in the rigidly territorial terms that constitute national systems of spatial order, and**
- 2) illuminate alternative frames of spatial reference for conceptualizing geography in scholarship, activism, and policy-making.**

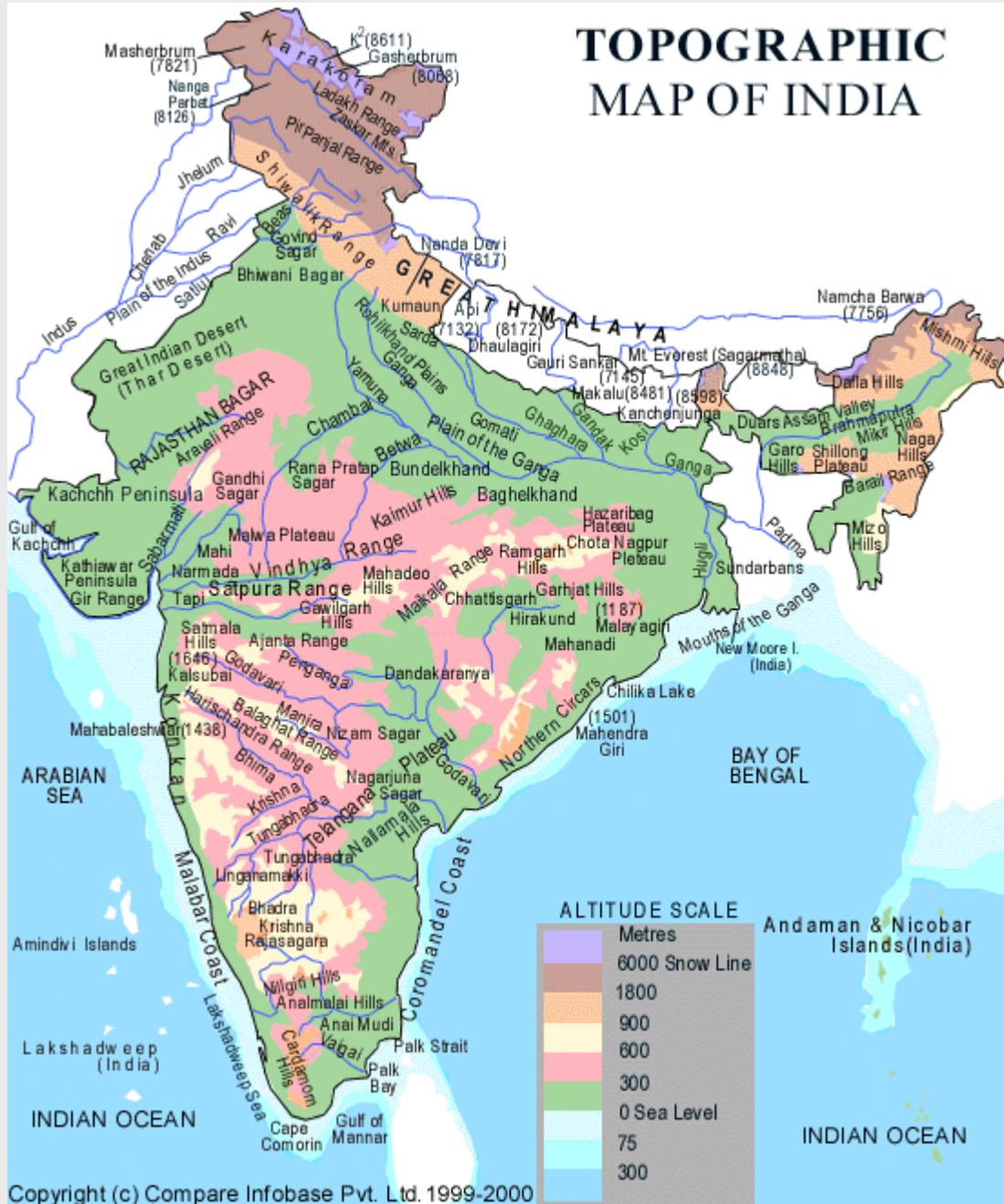
Step One:

to appreciate the cultural politics of map knowledge

All representations of territory are political projects, not merely empirical facts.

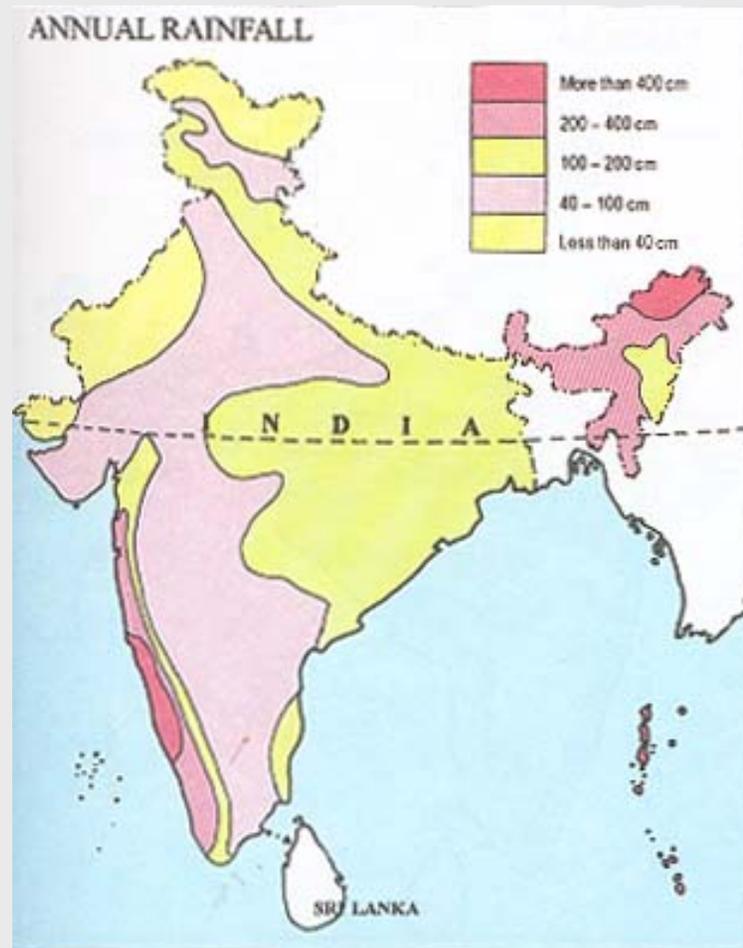
- **The makers and enforcers of today's mapped boundaries use maps to define human reality *essentially* as *national* territory.**
- **Thus, the natural world and all its contents acquire *essentially national* identities.**

TOPOGRAPHIC MAP OF INDIA



Nationalizing
Topography
Erases Spaces
Peripheral and
Exogenous to
National Identity

Nationalizing Monsoons and Weather Naturalizes National Boundaries



Step Two: to appreciate how pervasively modern reality depends on geographies of national territorialism.

Immobilizing social space inside national maps enabled the entire gamut of modern statistics to come into being.

This trend had begun by 1776, when Adam Smith composed the *Wealth of Nations*, using the assumption that each nation's wealth belonged to people who lived inside national boundaries, under national governments.

Fixing all things in social space inside modern state maps has imparted to social life its modern geographical coherence and rigor. Today, national maps describe every place on the planet.

National territory constitutes cultural politics

Human identity everywhere is now attached to national sites, where some people are always native, and others, necessarily foreign.

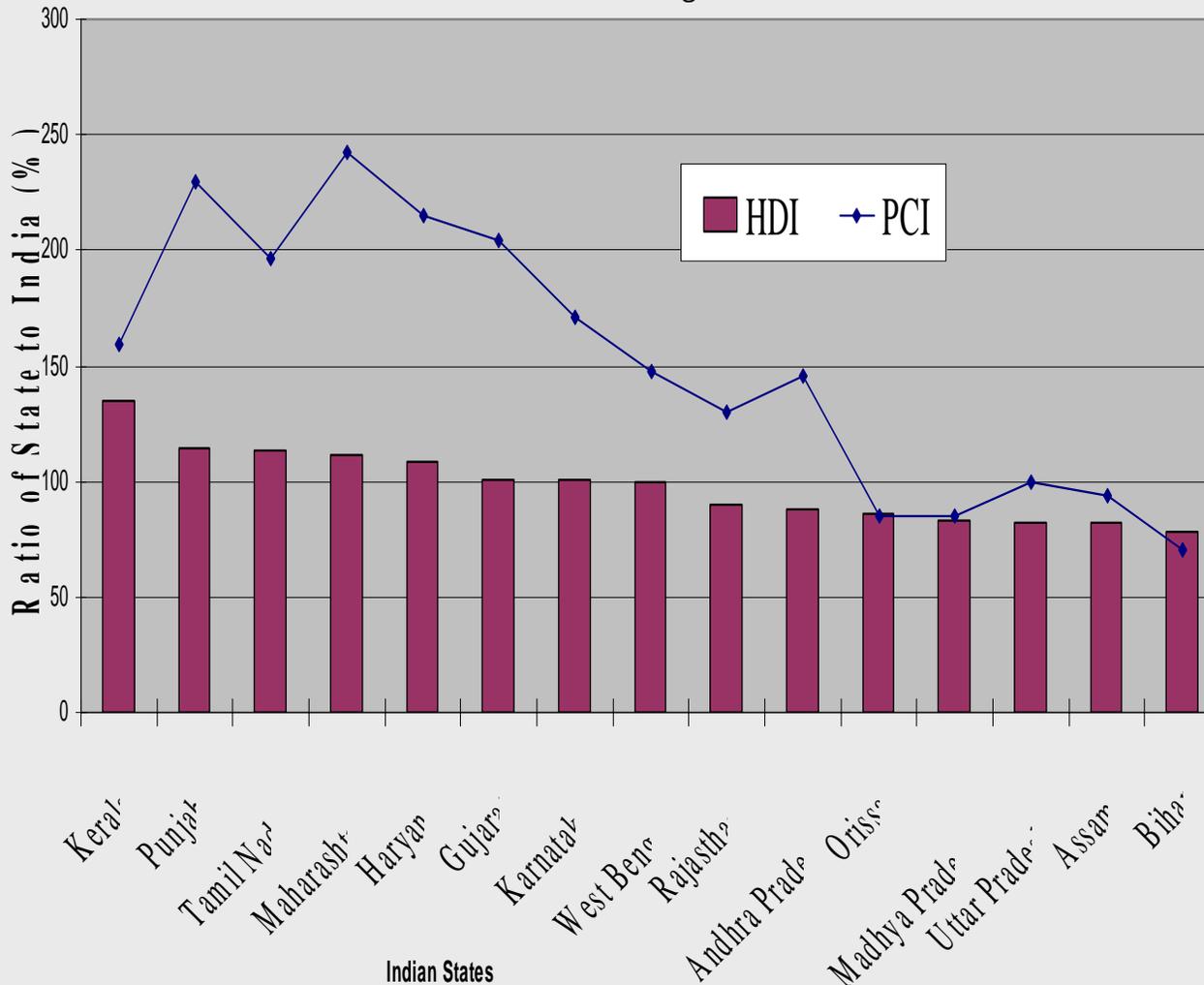
Geographically based national identities animate politics around the world.

It is now impossible to imagine or describe any place, people, culture, or facet of social life without reference to national maps, which lock every place into immobile gridlines of national geography, static and immutable.

Statistics are state-based-data, representing the world as a collection of national territories. We can juggle national statistics, however, to describe world geography in various ways.

1995 GDI HDI UNICEF STATS	\$PCGDP	litfem	litfem/\$	lifefem	InfMo	incfem	gdi
Above-AVG PCGDP	14818	91.51	0.01	77.96	12.96	31.80	0.83
Top: Switzerland	33674	99.00	0.00	81.58	6.30	32.49	0.89
Bottom: SaudiArabia	5581	50.25	0.01	72.47	24.00	10.01	0.59
Below-AVG PCGDP	1380	65.76	0.05	63.51	61.85	33.04	0.55
Top: Croatia	5358	98.00	0.02	75.98	10.00	36.64	0.74
Bottom: Mozambique	92	23.31	0.25	47.76	148.00	41.91	0.26

Ratio of Indian State Human Development Index (HDI) and Per Capita Income (PCI) to All India Figures



In India, Assam joins Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in a group of states (holding about 42% of India's population) that falls below the national average in HDI and state PCI.

(click below)

[South Asia's Densest Population/Poverty Region](#)

Assam is also part of the Indian Northeast, physically attached to India by a narrow land corridor...



India's NE region is quite diverse and distinct from India in many respects ... for instance, in its development indicators

Poverty and Gender in NE India

Northeast India Comparisons: 1991 Indexes of Poverty and Gender Disparity										
Rank among 32 Indian States										
Sorted by Descending GDisI										
	Poverty	Rank	GDisI	Rank	Ratio of Ranks					
					Poverty/GDisI					
Manipur	41.63	21	0.815	5		0.24				
Meghalaya	49.19	28	0.807	7		0.25				
Arunachal Pradesh	49.62	30	0.776	11		0.37				
Mizoram	32.2	14	0.77	13		0.93				
Nagaland	42.07	22	0.729	17		0.77				
India	39.36		0.676							
Assam	48.95	27	0.575	29		1.07				
Tripura	44.89	24	0.53	30		1.25				

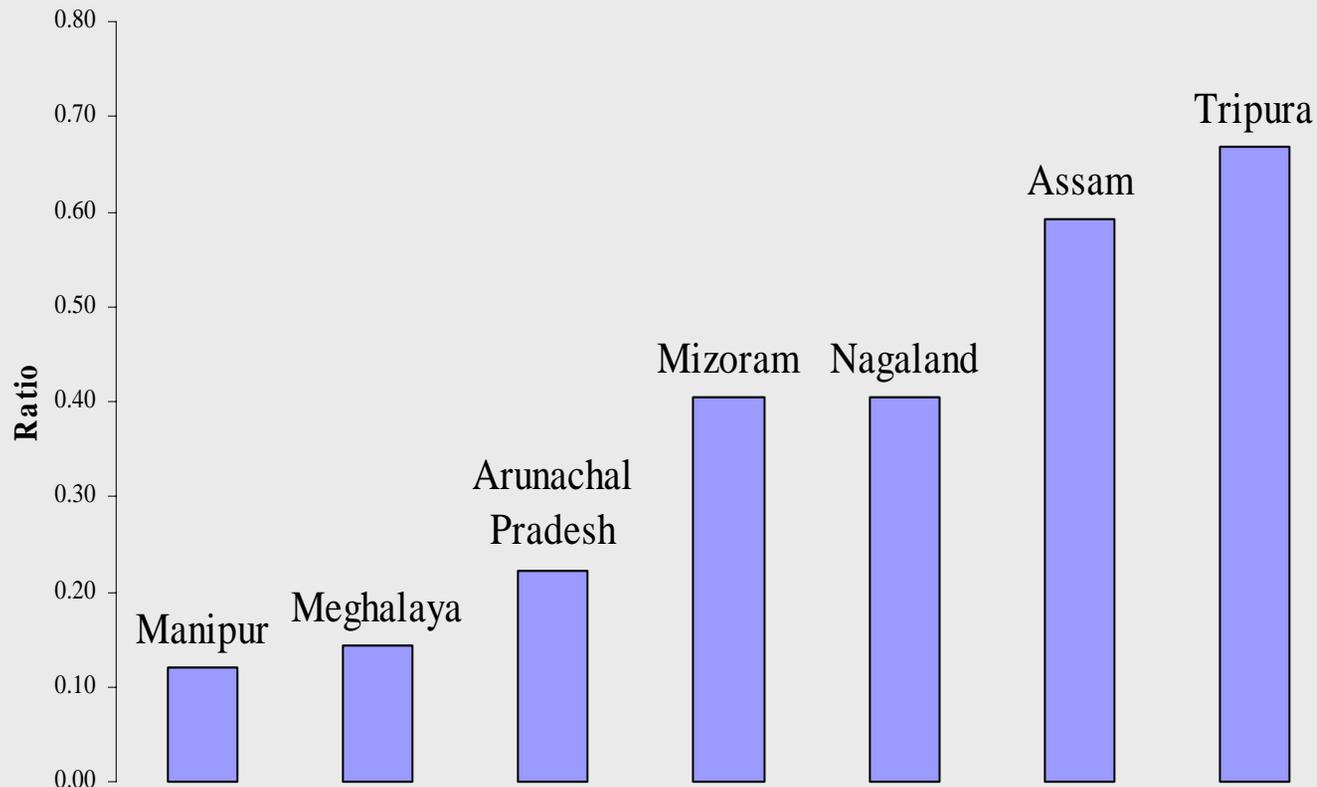
Poverty: Lower Value = Less Poverty, Lower Number Rank

GdisI: = Gender Disparity Index = Lower Number = More Inequality, Higher Number Rank

Ratio = Gender Disparity Index/Poverty Index = Lower Value = Higher Rank Proportionate

Gender Disparities in Proportion to Poverty in NE India

Ratio of 1991 Gender Disparity Index Rank to Poverty Index Rank Among States in Northeast India



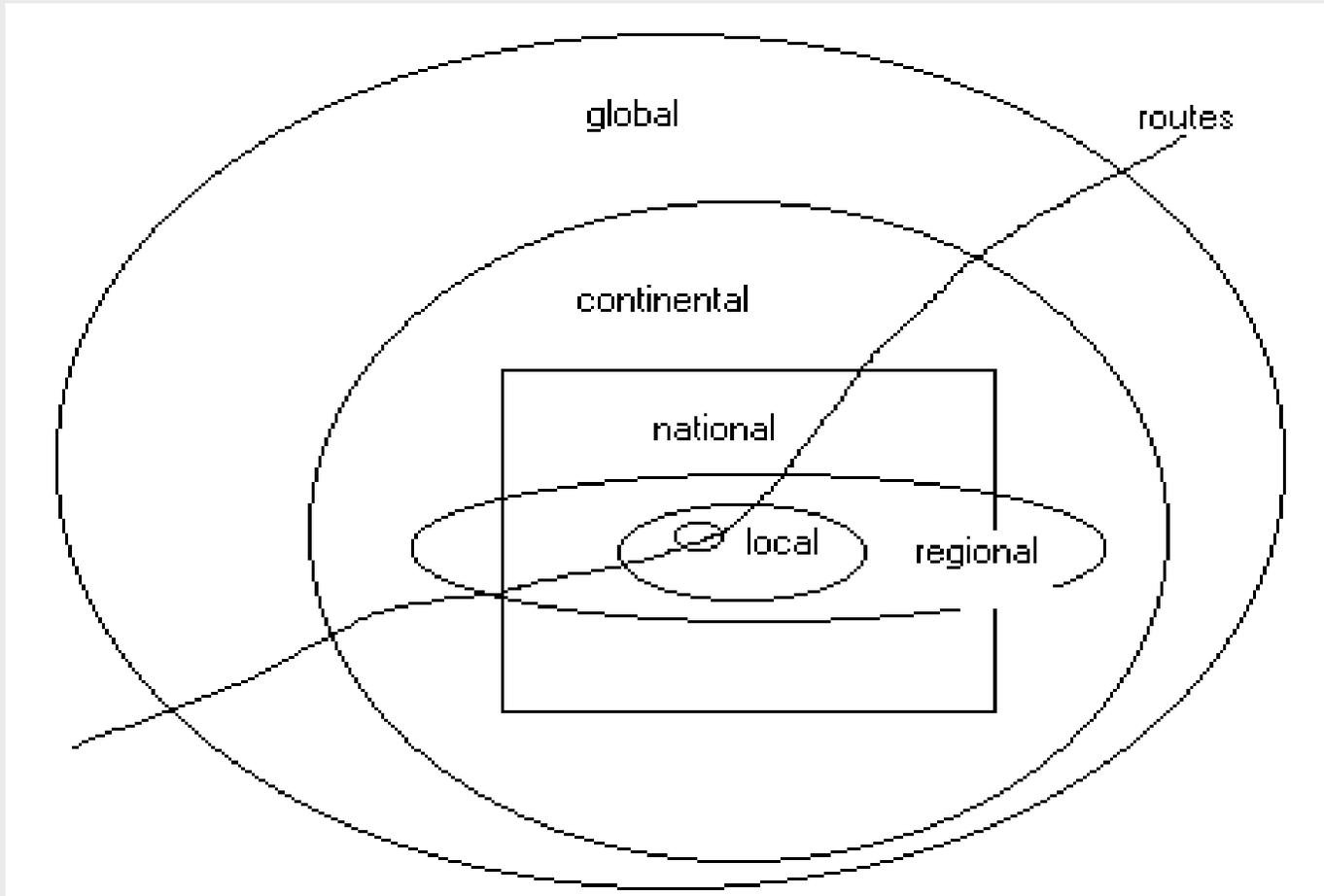
And in India's Northeast, Assam is also part of another regional setting, composed of state territories in northeastern South Asia.

From the South Asia Foundation Website

“SUBREGIONAL COOPERATION IN THE EAST SOUTH ASIA SUBREGION (ESAS)”

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 water courses, arable land, forests and natural resources. Intra-ESAS merchandise trade, however, is low and constitutes only around 2.4 percent of the total trade of the four countries. This low figure, nonetheless, masks the extent of informal trade that already occurs within the subregion.

**Thus, we can
move our spatial perspective around
to configure Assam's geographical location in various ways.**



Step Three

becomes an extensive empirical project: to elaborate geographical perspectives that *move along routes of mobility and among changing spatial frames of reference, blending them together* :

However natural, necessary, and comforting it may seem to assign everything in the world an essentially static, fixed, and immobile native location, such activity can never succeed in creating a stationary social order.

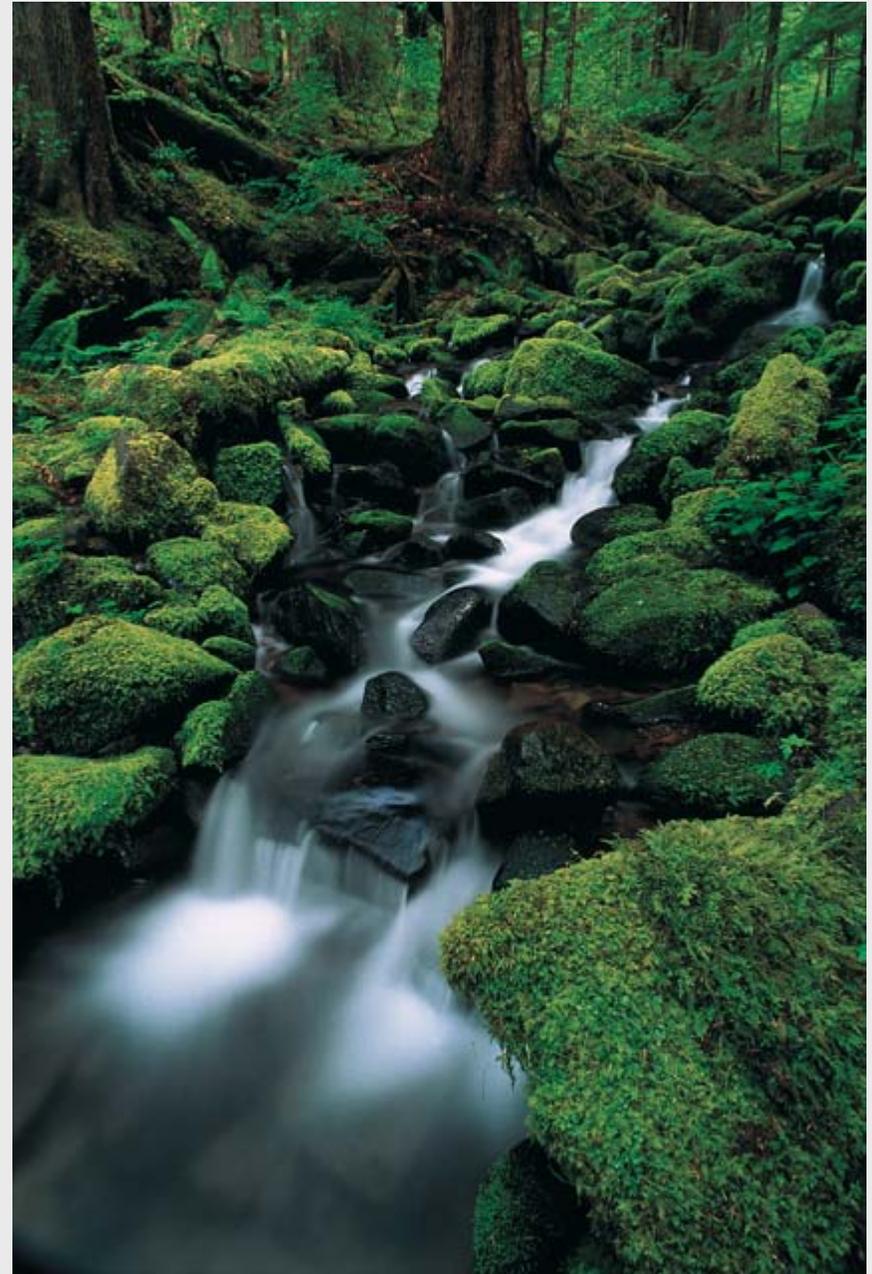
Virtually everything in social life is constantly on the move, and the mobility of things in social space defines a reality that escapes the epistemology of national geography.

Relocating Assam

By considering spatial mobility in historical perspective, we can locate Assam in geographies that are malleable and changeable, rather than being static and immutable, in the manner of national geography.

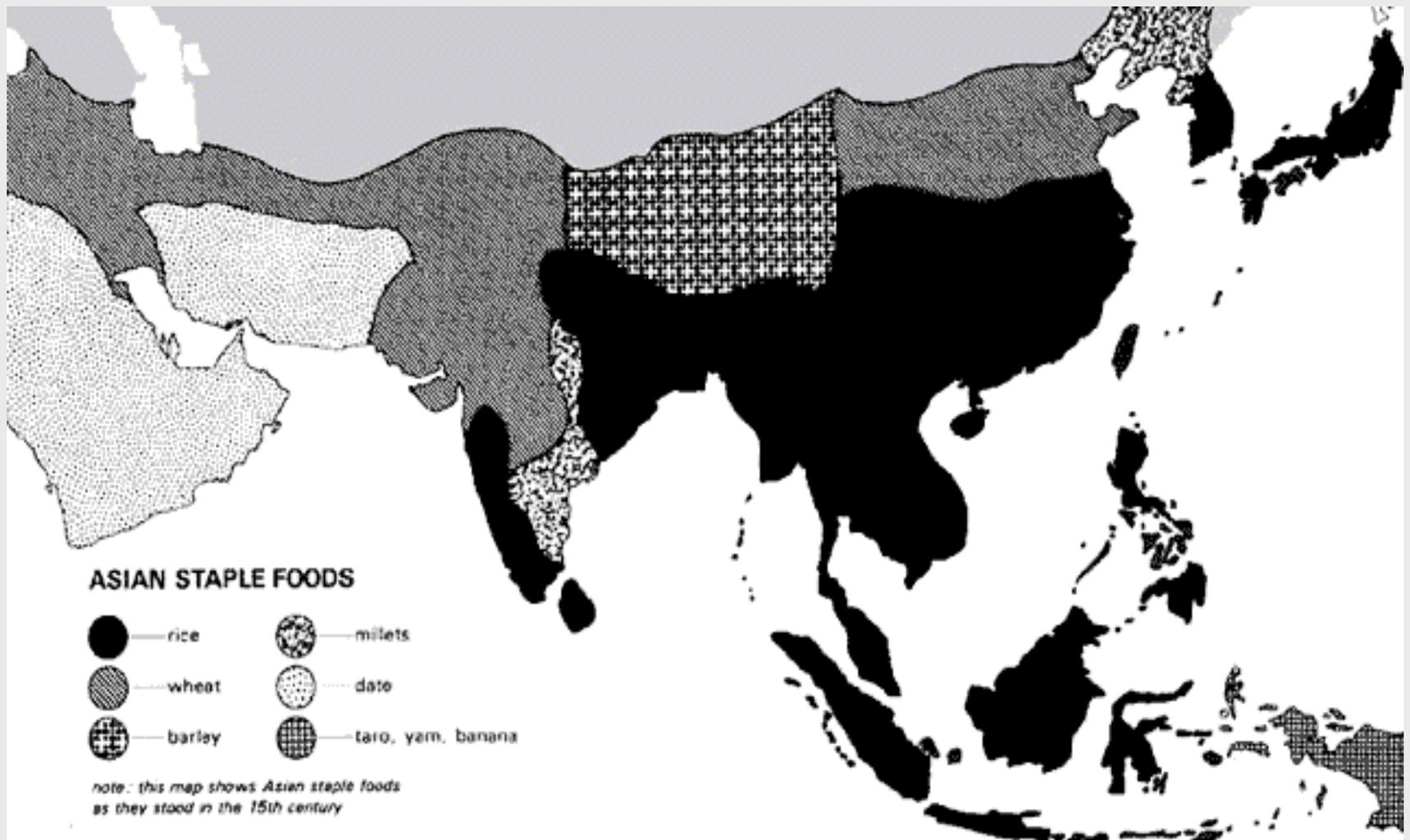
Thus we can devise alternative frames of reference for scholarship, activism, and policy making

Nature is a good place to begin. Here is an elemental, physical locality, defined not by its nationality but rather by the natural mobility of water flowing down the mountainside.



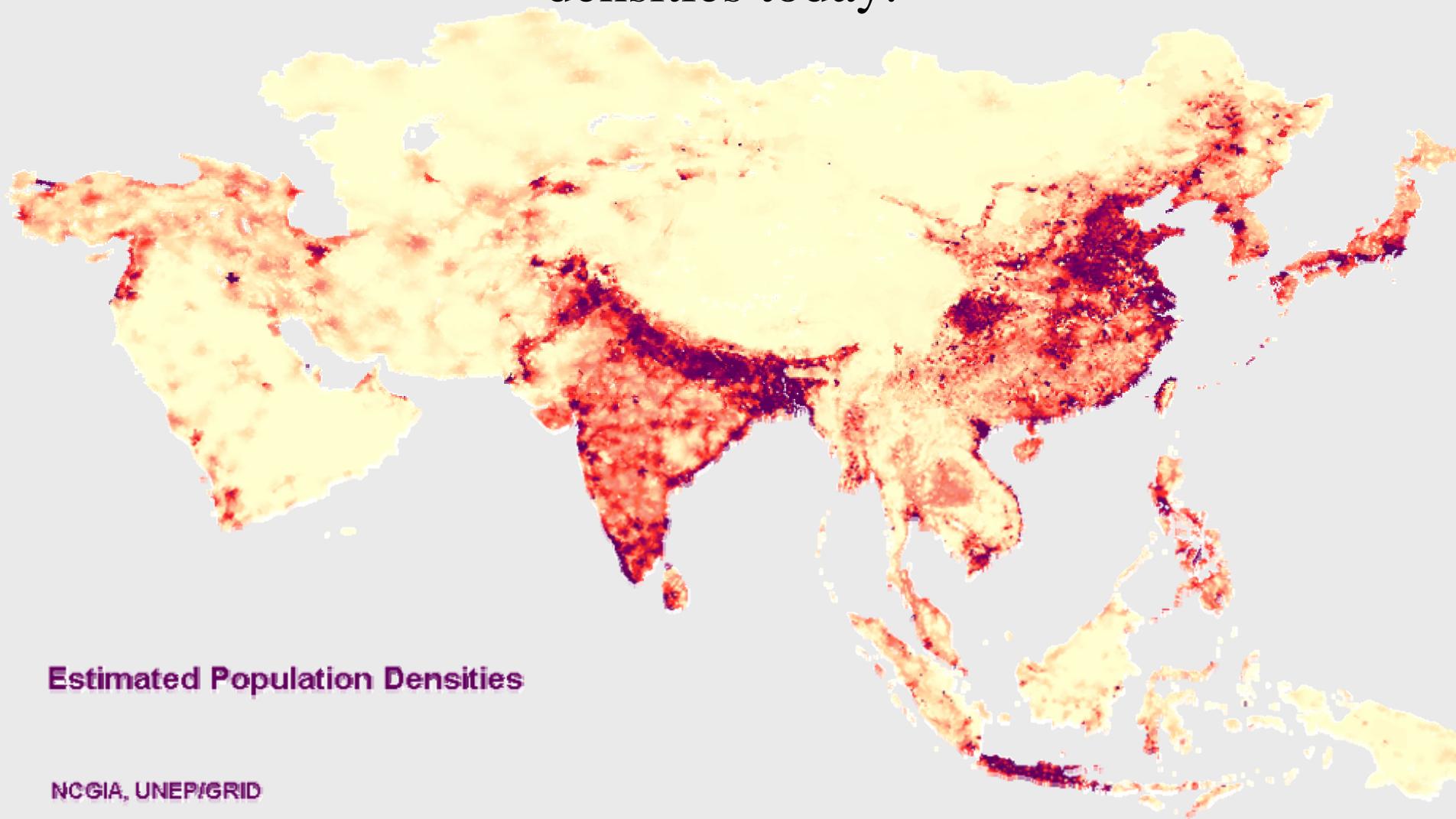
Assam lies in Asian spaces defined by mountains and river routes in valleys and plains ...



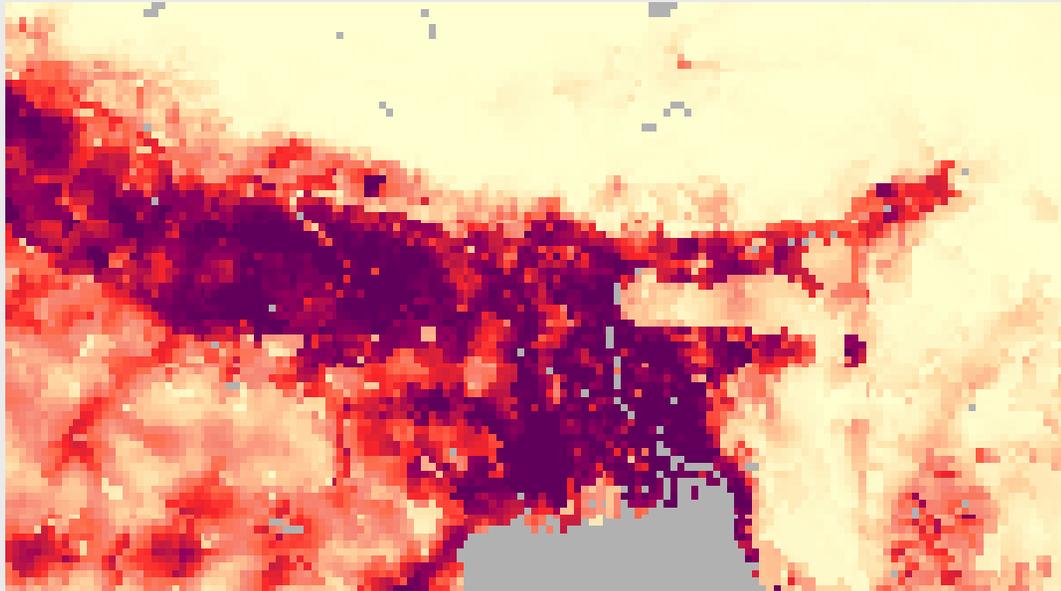


Where rains from Asia's longest, wettest monsoon seasons pour down annually to feed all the rivers ... where rice became the dominant food crop by *circa* 1500 ...

Where populations have moved, settled, and concentrated historically in river valleys and adjacent areas of intensive cultivation. This is a graphic map of Asian population densities today.



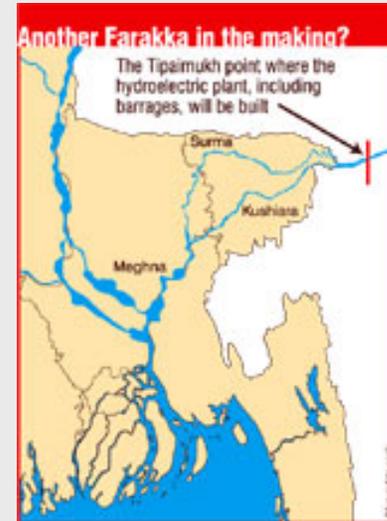
South Asia's Densest Population/Poverty Region



With low population density mountains on three sides, Assam is the eastern part of a statistically high-population density region that includes most of the Gangetic Basin and all of the Bengal delta.



Assam is in the upper drainage basin of rivers flowing into the Bay of Bengal. River valleys and deltas sustain much denser populations than surrounding mountains



All Assam rivers also occupy Bangladesh, where people depend on the same rivers for survival that local inhabitants in NE India – for example, around the proposed Tipaimukh dam – venerate and depend upon for their livelihoods ...

The background of the magazine cover is a photograph of parched, cracked earth in shades of brown and orange. At the top, the word "Star" is written in a large, red, stylized serif font. To its right, the date "October 10, 2003" is printed in a small, black, sans-serif font. Below "Star", the words "WEEKEND MAGAZINE" are written in a smaller, black, sans-serif font.

Star
October 10, 2003
WEEKEND MAGAZINE

Special Feature
Of Faith and Deviation

Impressions
Through the Windscreen

Drying The Delta Out

If India implements its massive River-link Project
it will have a disastrous impact on our river system

India's proposed plan to use Assam waters to enrich dry regions inside Indian national territory would drastically reduce the flow of water in the delta.

It is little wonder that the plan has aroused deep consternation in Bangladesh, because

...

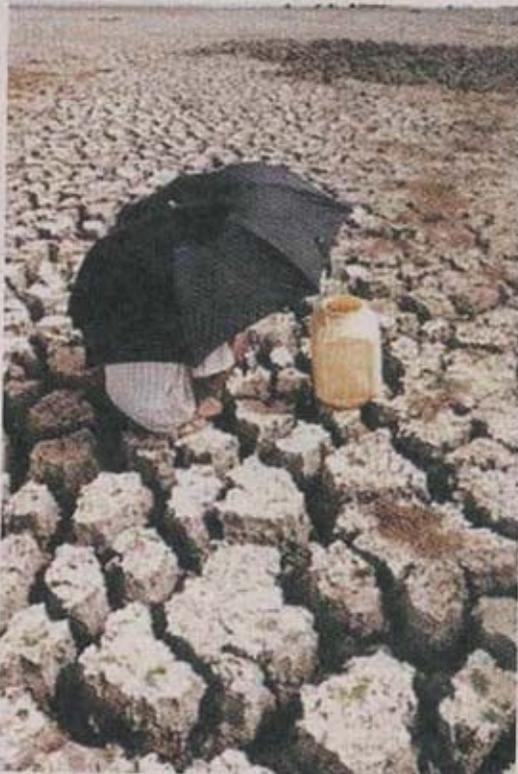
must have been sleeping for
ast one year. It has been more
a year since the Supreme
rt of India ordered the Indian
ernment to realise this project.
Indian government on its part
ed a task force, and already
e feasibility work has been
e. But here we have been sit-
idle. "It took us months to
rey our concern regarding this
ject to the Indian govern-
t."

ne also wonders what The
Rivers Commission (JRC)
been doing. It should have
ioned the government long
re. Clearly the seriousness of
ssue was not felt though warn-
id come from some particu-
arters. Nishat himself is one
ose who raised it quite some
ago, but failed to make the
erned authority care.

shat, however, praises the
f the media, which, though
ed late, eventually brought
ssue to the public notice. At
noment our main job is to
e public awareness by regu-
ssemination of information
t the magnitude of the crisis
project poses for us. Different
essional groups and civil
ty will have to work alongside
ent government agencies to
e strong public opinion
st this controversial project.
e JRC has a major role to play
One area in which the JRC is
g is public participation.
e know very little about the
ngs of the JRC, although
mendations made by the
ay have profound implica-
for them. Like many other
national commissions, it
d have a channel of informa-
dissemination geared
ds raising public awareness
getting constructive feed-
This will make the JRC more



The proposed river-link project will strike at the heart of our ecology. Decline in river flow will be the worst consequence.



South-western and northern Bangladesh is draught-struck during the dry season because of Farakka Barrage. The proposed river-link project will only

peoples of both India and Bangla-
desh.

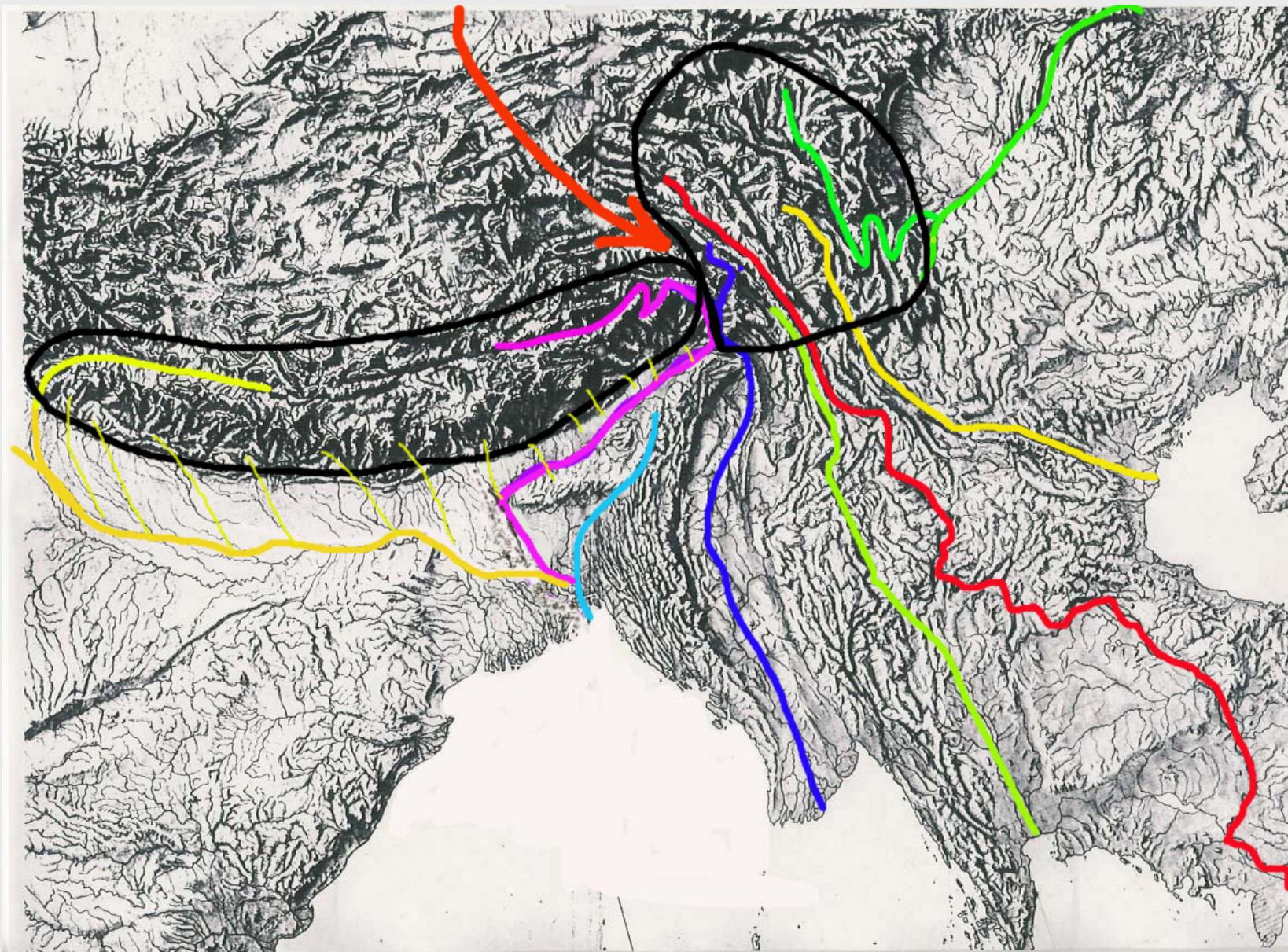
One major problem is that Bang-
ladesh doesn't have any precise
information and data about this
project, such as from which specific
part of the rivers' waters will be
withdrawn, the exact amount of the
withdrawn water and exactly when
and for how long that will be done.
Thus Nishat gives great emphasis on
gathering of information without
which we cannot determine "the
quantitative affect" and unless we
know that we cannot even forcefully
formulate our allegations and con-
vey our grievances. And here, he
says, we should make use of the JRC
to its full potential.

Nishat in his paper titled "Inter-
national Negotiation", published in
a journal called Kluwer Law Interna-
tional discusses in detail the draw-
backs and the scope of JRC's work
area. He writes that JRC should
engage in regular collection and
sharing of data on the quantity and
quality of common waters. This is
very important for two reasons, he
explains. One, it will help develop
collaboration and friendship
between experts and technicians

Bangladesh gets
80% of its fresh
water via 54
rivers crossing
international
borders from
India.

Reduced flow in
these rivers would
cause drought and
sea-water influx,
killing farms and
fisheries as far
north as Dhaka.

A wider view indicates Assam's location at the borderlands of eastern Asia water routes, which define major corridors of settlement and mobility running to and from the coasts of China, Vietnam, Thailand, and Burma.



NE India is a region of South Asia that often appears in maps of eastern Asia

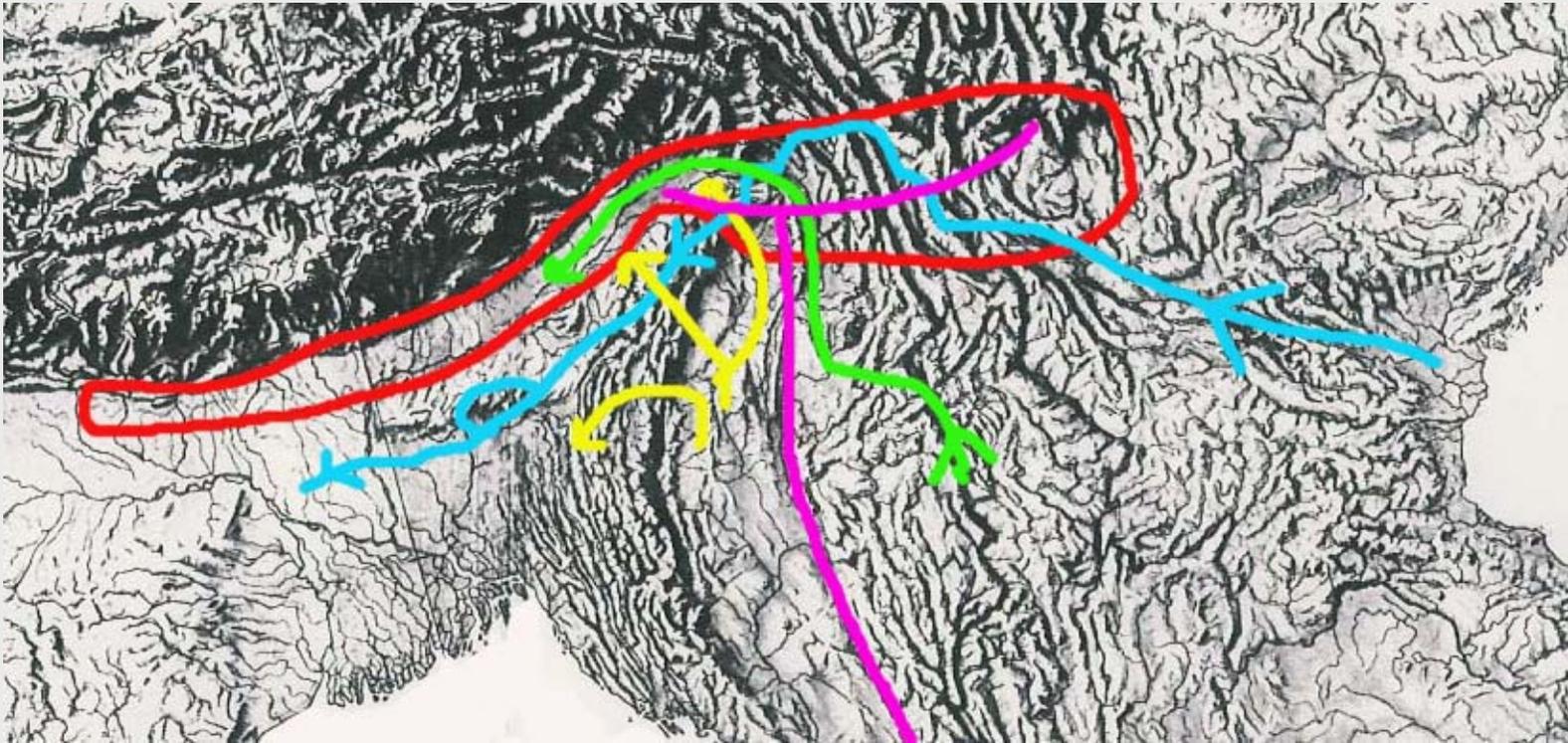


Assam, Northeast India, and the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, can be understood empirically as the western-most regions of East Asia, the area where East and South Asia overlap.





From ancient times, the NE-SE bias of river valleys east of Assam has channeled human mobility inland across the interlaced networks of mountains, valleys, and plains that connect Assam with Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and China.



Inland Spaces of Mobility in include:

Blue: Ancient Khasi Migration.

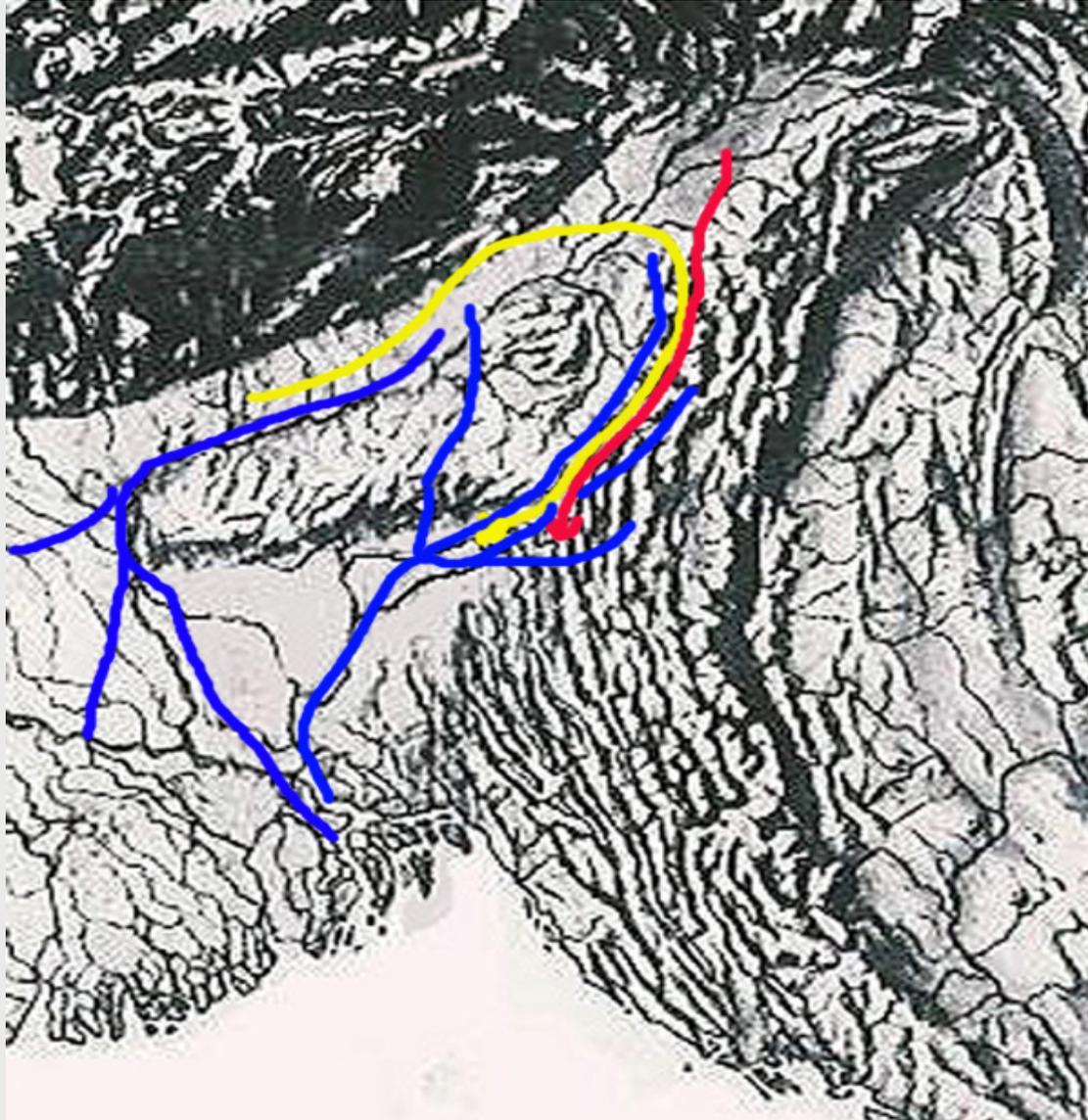
Green: Medieval Tai-Ahom Migration.

Red = opium cultivation/trade zone, *circa* 1900.

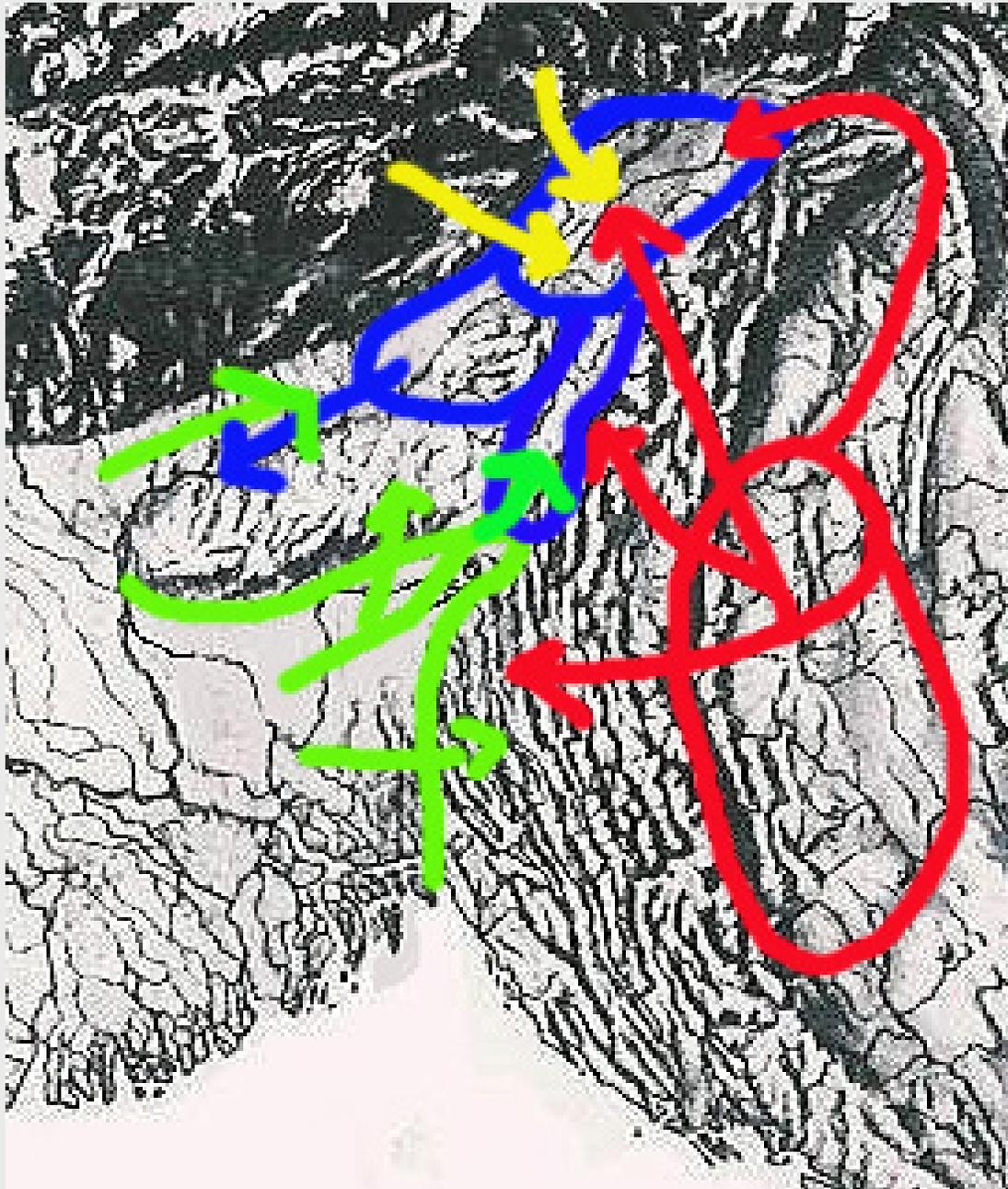
Yellow: Burma expansion, *circa* 1800.

Pink: The Ledo (Stillwell) Burma Road

- **Yellow: Kamrupa (1st Millennium)**
- **Red: Ahoms (2nd Millennium)**
- **Blue: Trade Routes (18th Century)**



In the first and second millennium of the Common Era, territorial powers based in the Brahmaputra Valley moved across the Barak Valley and surrounding mountain forest slopes, south to Cachar and Sylhet, where the oldest inscriptions are of land grants by Kamrupa rajahs. Trade routes ran along river routes connecting Assam and Bengal with the western Gangetic Basin.



Major Territorial Forces and in-migrations that shaped Assam in early modern times, *circa* 1660 – 1830, came from East and West, North and South:

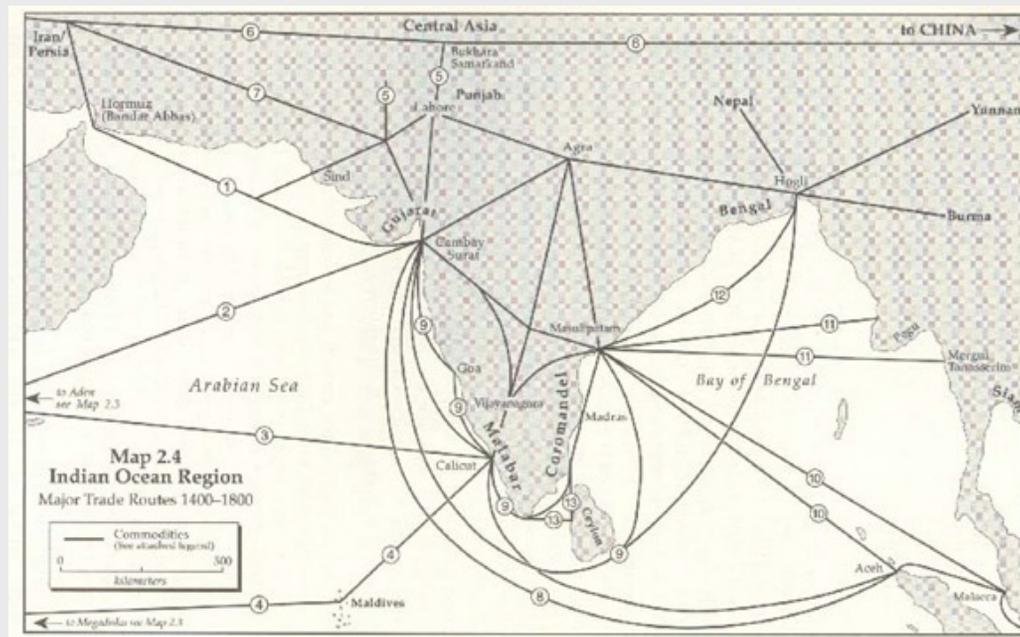
Green = Mughal and British Bengal.

Blue = Ahom.

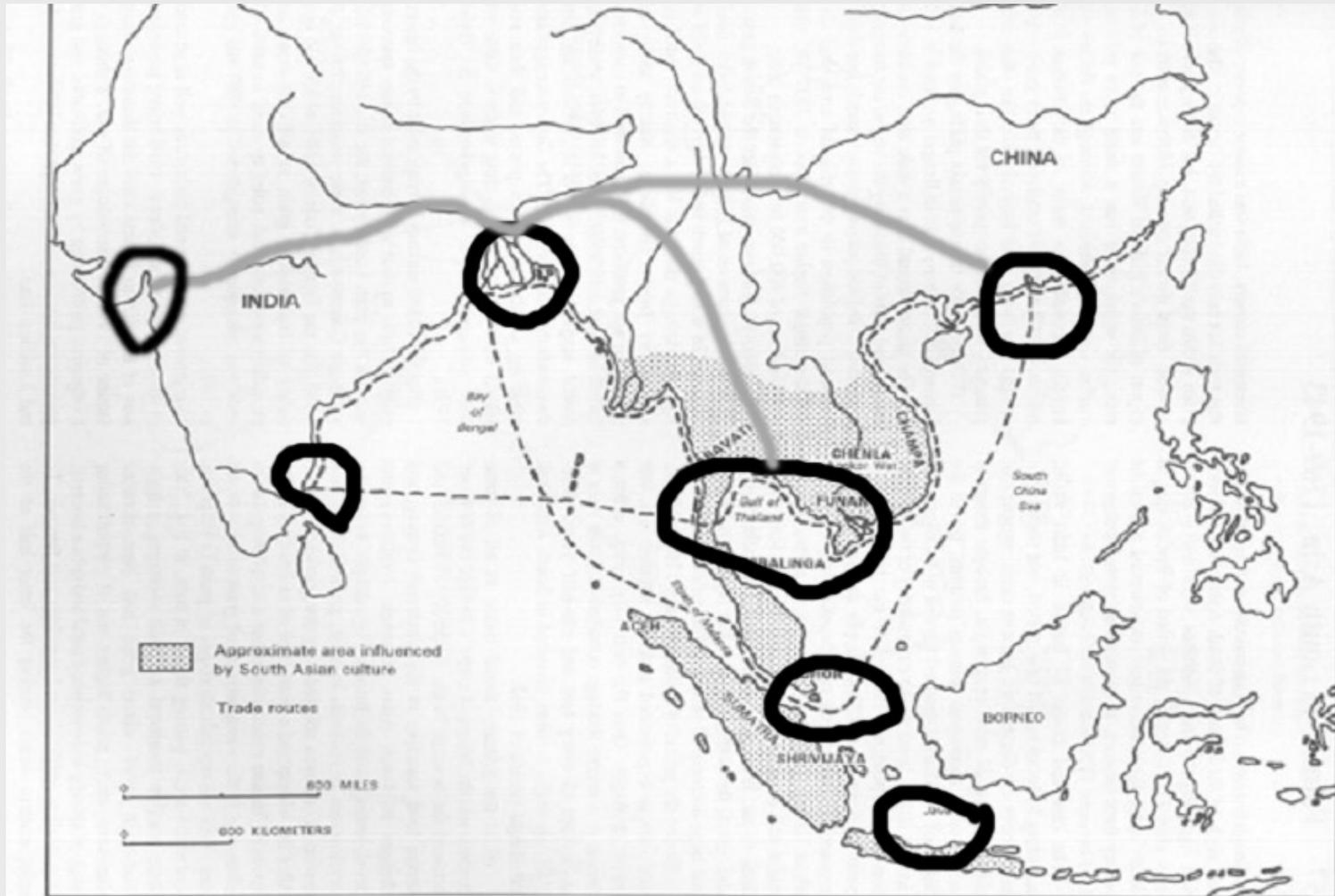
Red = Burma

Yellow = Bhutan, Tibet, China

Before 1800, Indian Ocean routes seem to have had less direct impact on the inland Brahmaputra Valley than on other regions of South Asia comparatively proximate to the coast.



Assam lay distinctively at the intersection of Indian Ocean routes with inland routes into Southeast Asia. Opium and tea, among other commodities, traveled these routes. So did many ethnic groups, for whom these vast spaces of mobility were home.



Map 56 Spread of Hindu and Buddhist Culture to Southeast Asia

A dominant spatial pattern of inland routes describes the system of mobility that underlay all major South Asian imperial powers from ancient to modern times.

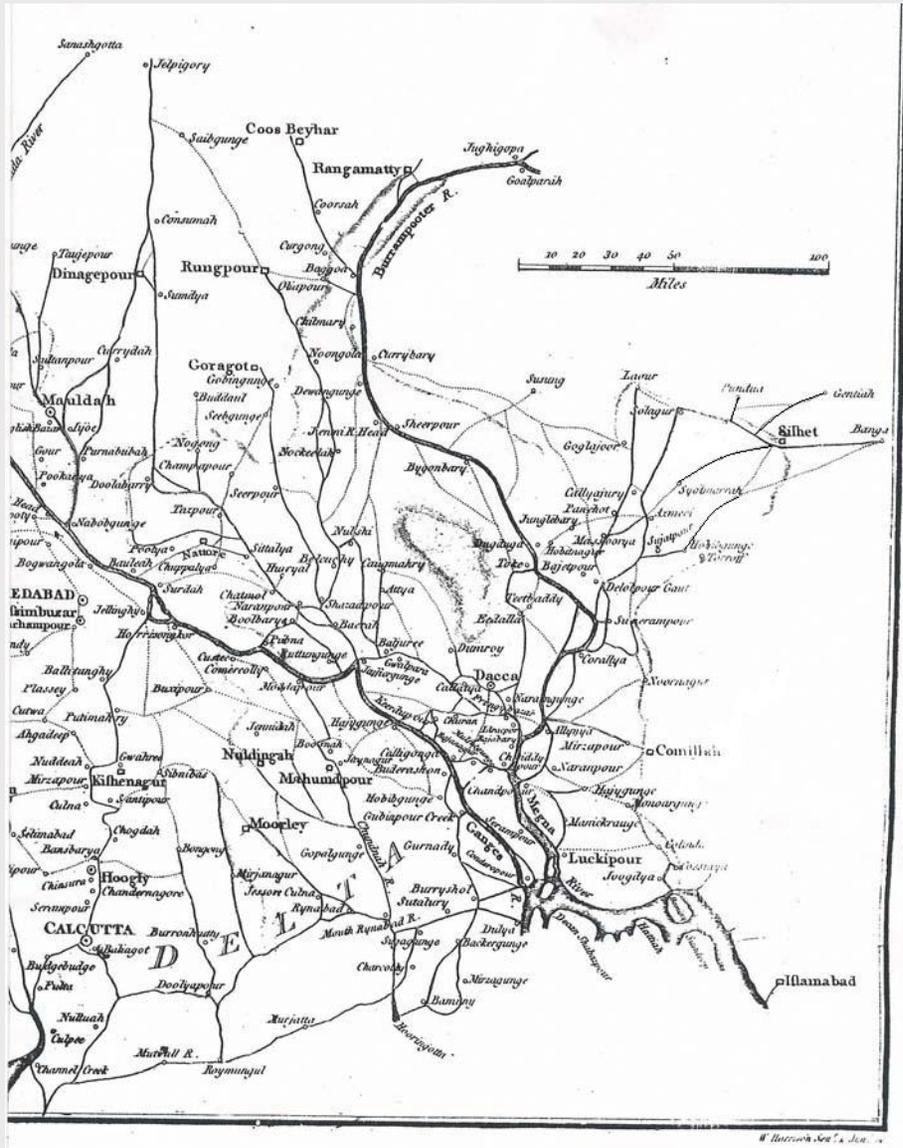


Early Gupta Expansion to circa 400s CE



Mughal Expansion





Imperial routes
into Assam, circa
1770.

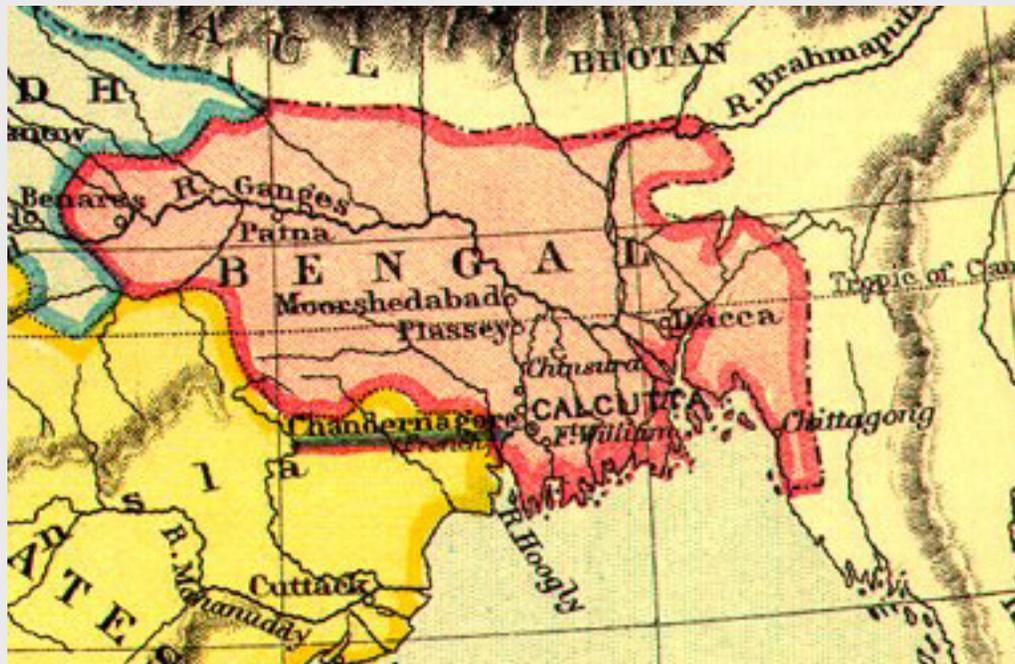
Route map by
James Rennel

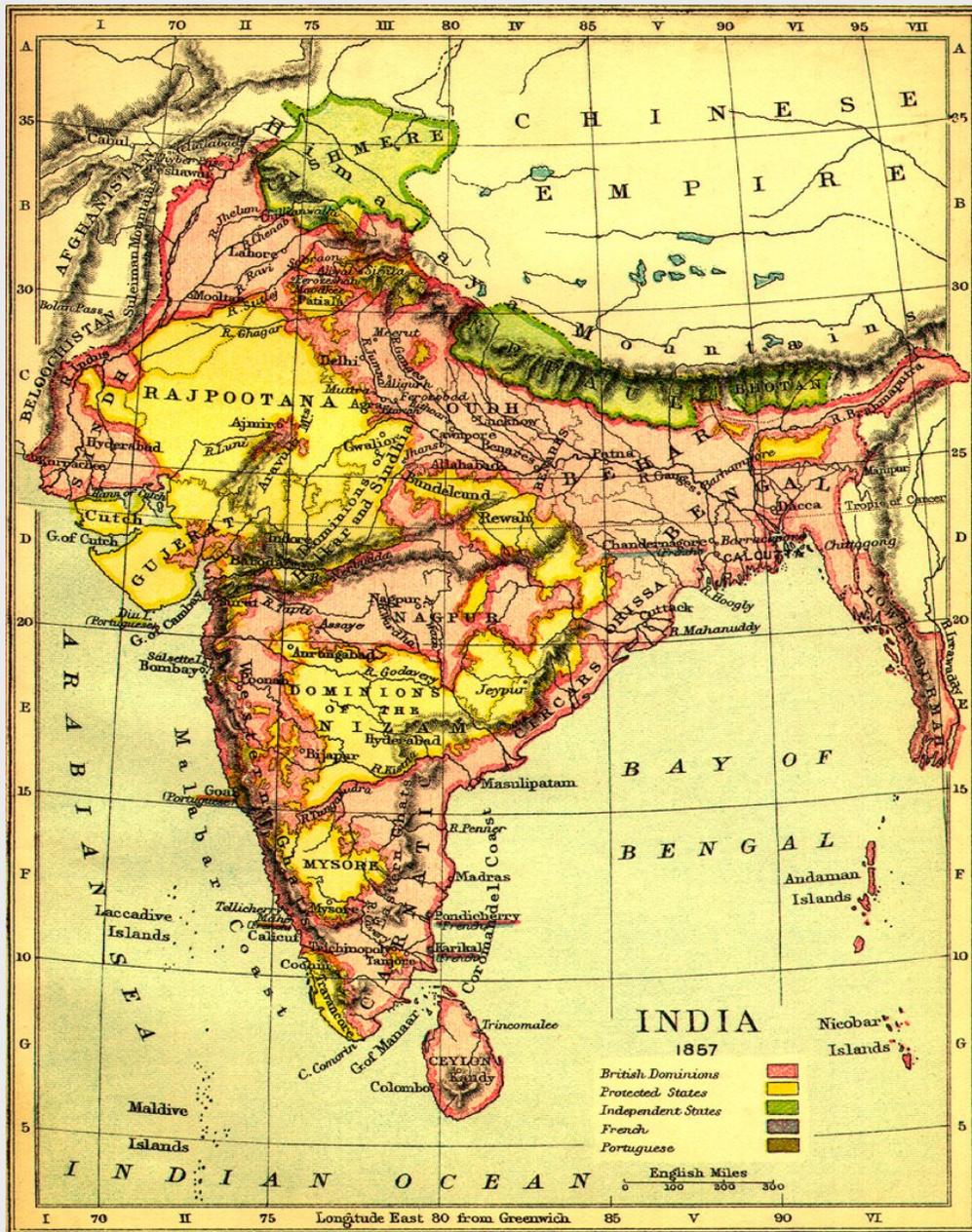


Assam lay outside
Mughal and thus
early British India.

Cooch Behar and Sylhet

were the northeastern frontiers of Mughal and early British India

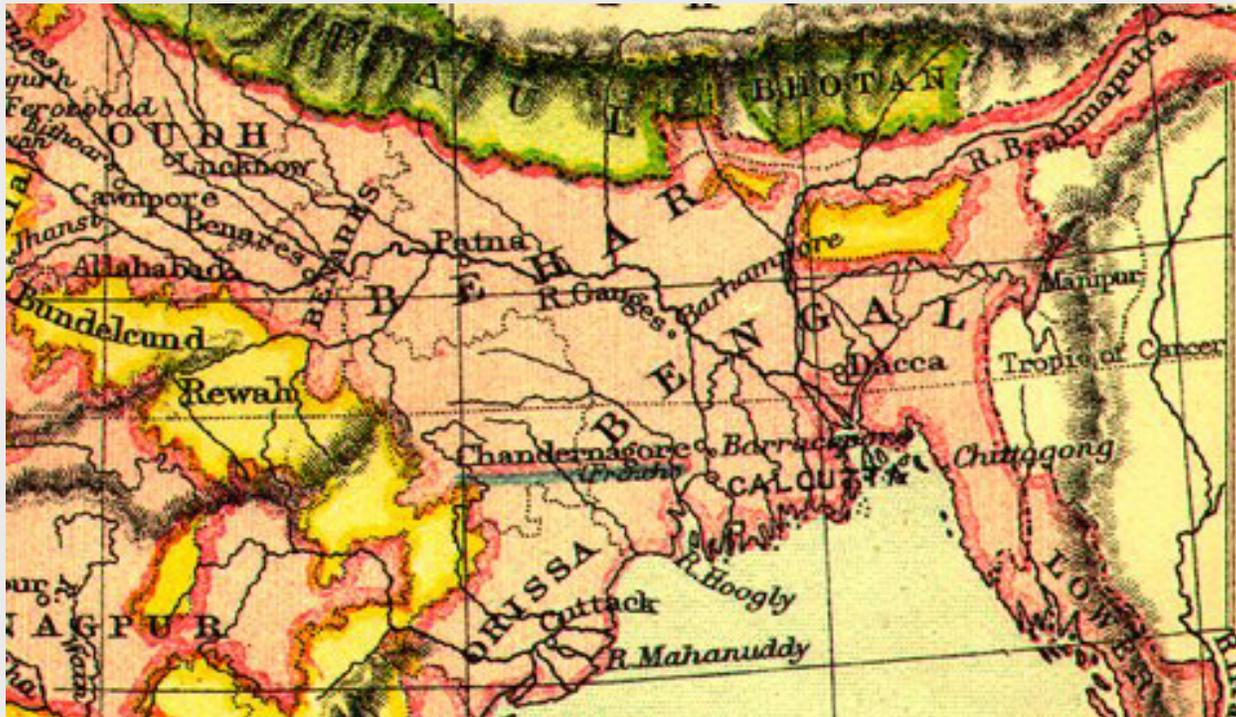


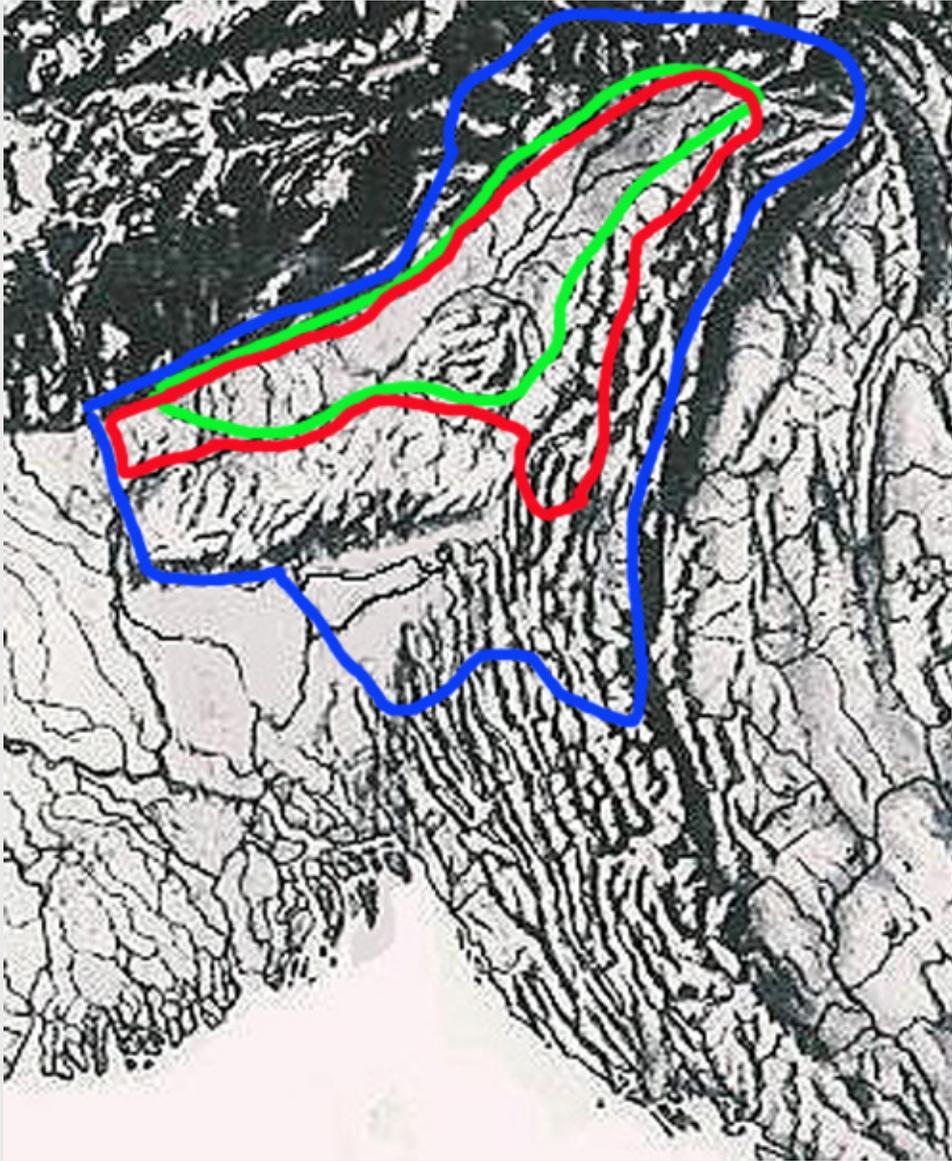


When Assam and its surroundings entered British India, they were incorporated into British Bengal.

Thus, after 1830, Assam obtained its first firm imperial identity as a regional part of South Asian political geography.

Bengal-Assam integration, circa 1857





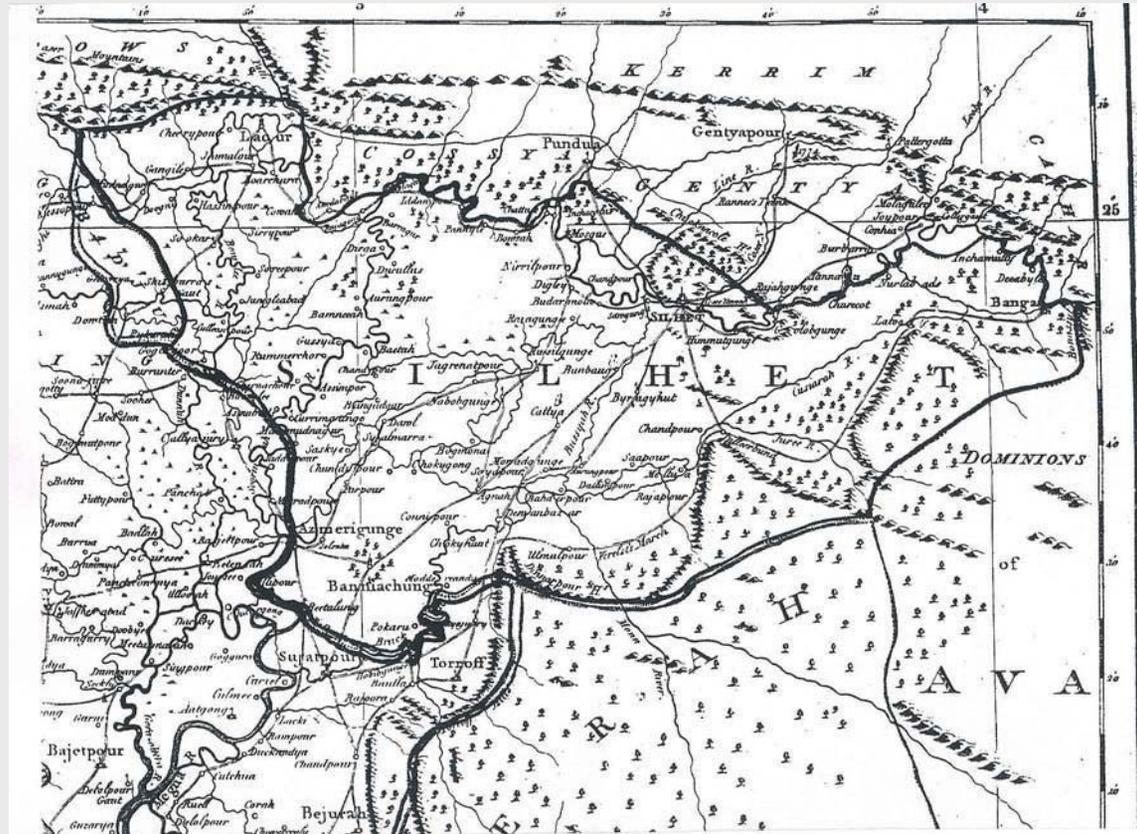
**The shapes
(*not boundaries*)
of the territory called
“Assam”:**

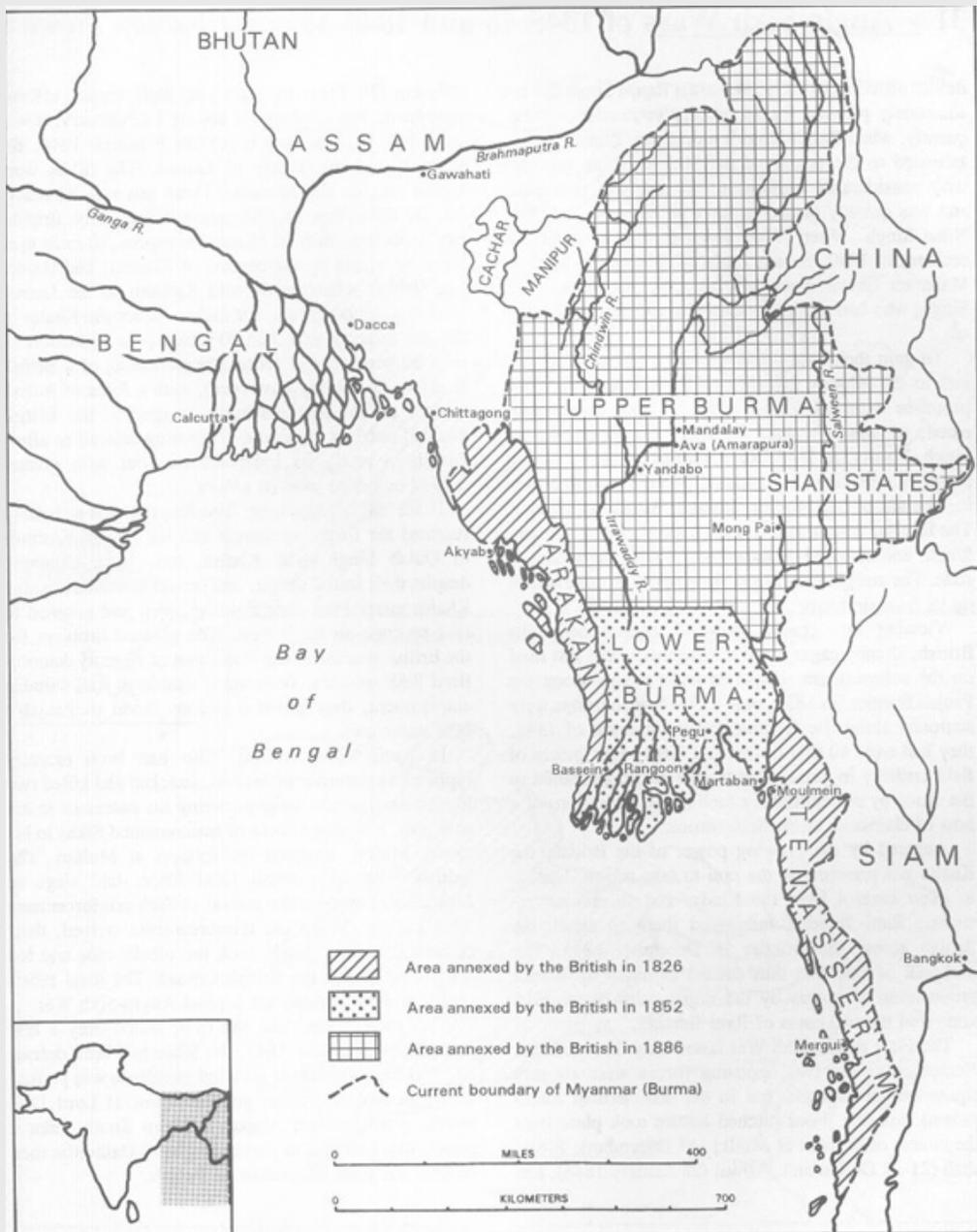
Green = 1700.

Blue = 1947.

Red = 1980

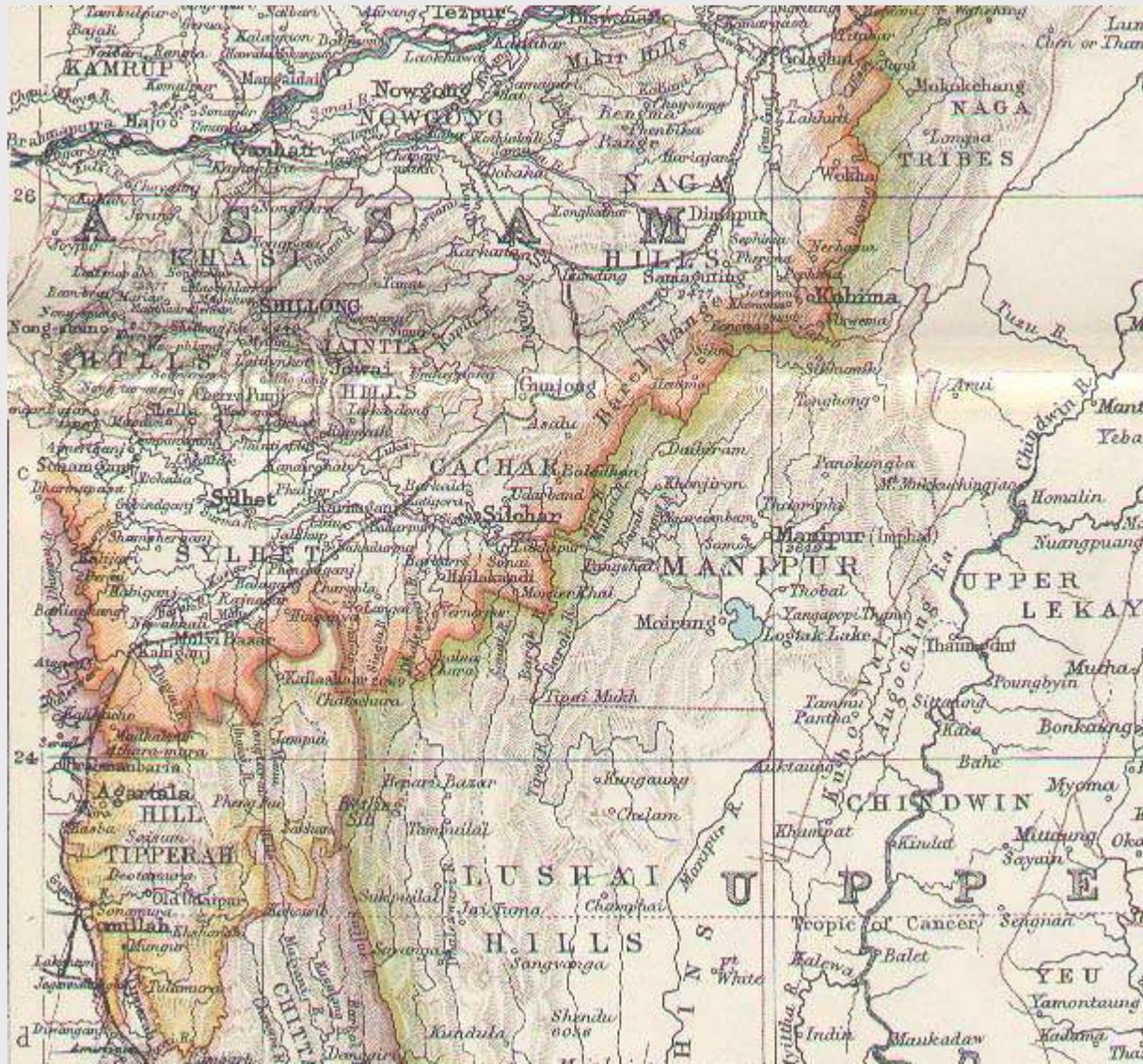
The Sylhet frontier in 1770,
which has been part of Bengal (1668-1874), Assam (1874-1905,
1911-1947), Eastern Bengal and Assam (1905-1911) 47), East
Pakistan (1947-1971), and Bangladesh (after 1971)





For more than a century after 1830, Assam was an eastern borderland of British imperialism

Map 30 Absorption of Burma, 1824-86

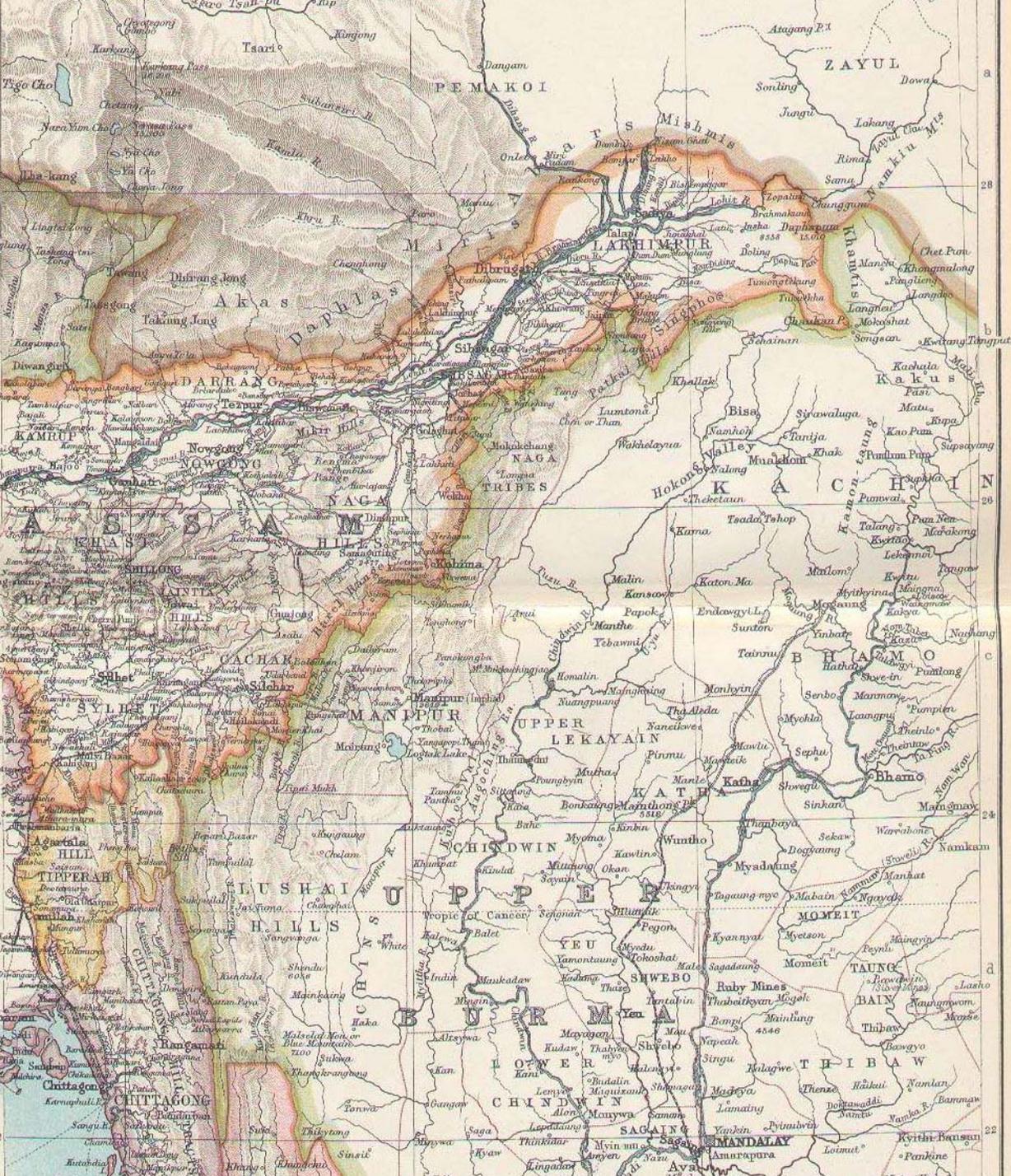


Sylhet
constituted
southern
Assam
from 1874
to 1947.

Describing Assam in 1879

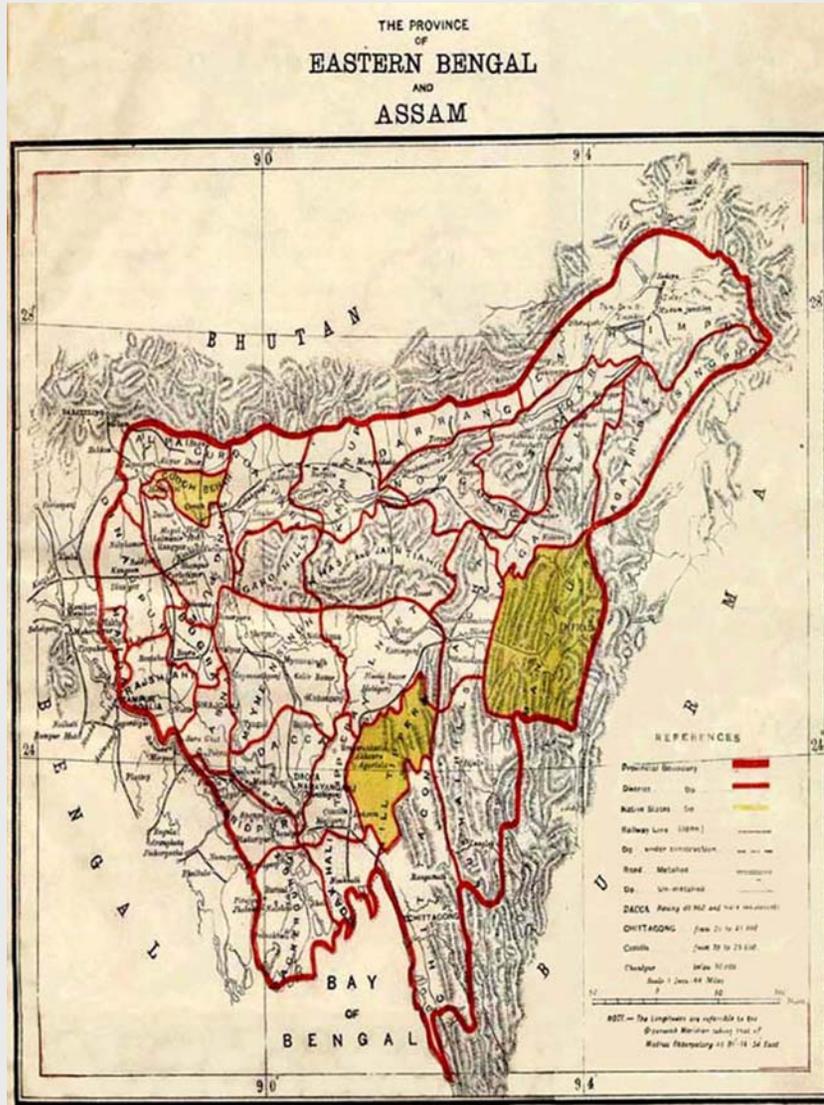
W.W.Hunter. *A Statistical Account of Assam* (1879) Author's Preface (1879): p.1

“...the Province of Assam as constituted in 1874 [when it was] withdrawn from ... Bengal and formed into a separate Chief Commissionership.... consists of two river valleys with a lofty hill tract in between. On the north, the Brahmaputra Valley covers an area of 20,683 square miles, or one half of the whole Province From its southern edge rises the hill country, a wild broken region of 14,447 square miles, inhabited by non-Aryan tribes. To the south of these intervening mountains, again, lies the smaller valley of the Barak and Surma, extending over 6,668 square miles.



Assam had special strategic significance as an imperial borderland of British India, imperial China (until 1911), and imperial Japan (1939-1945). In 1947, Assam became India's borderland with the Chinese revolution.

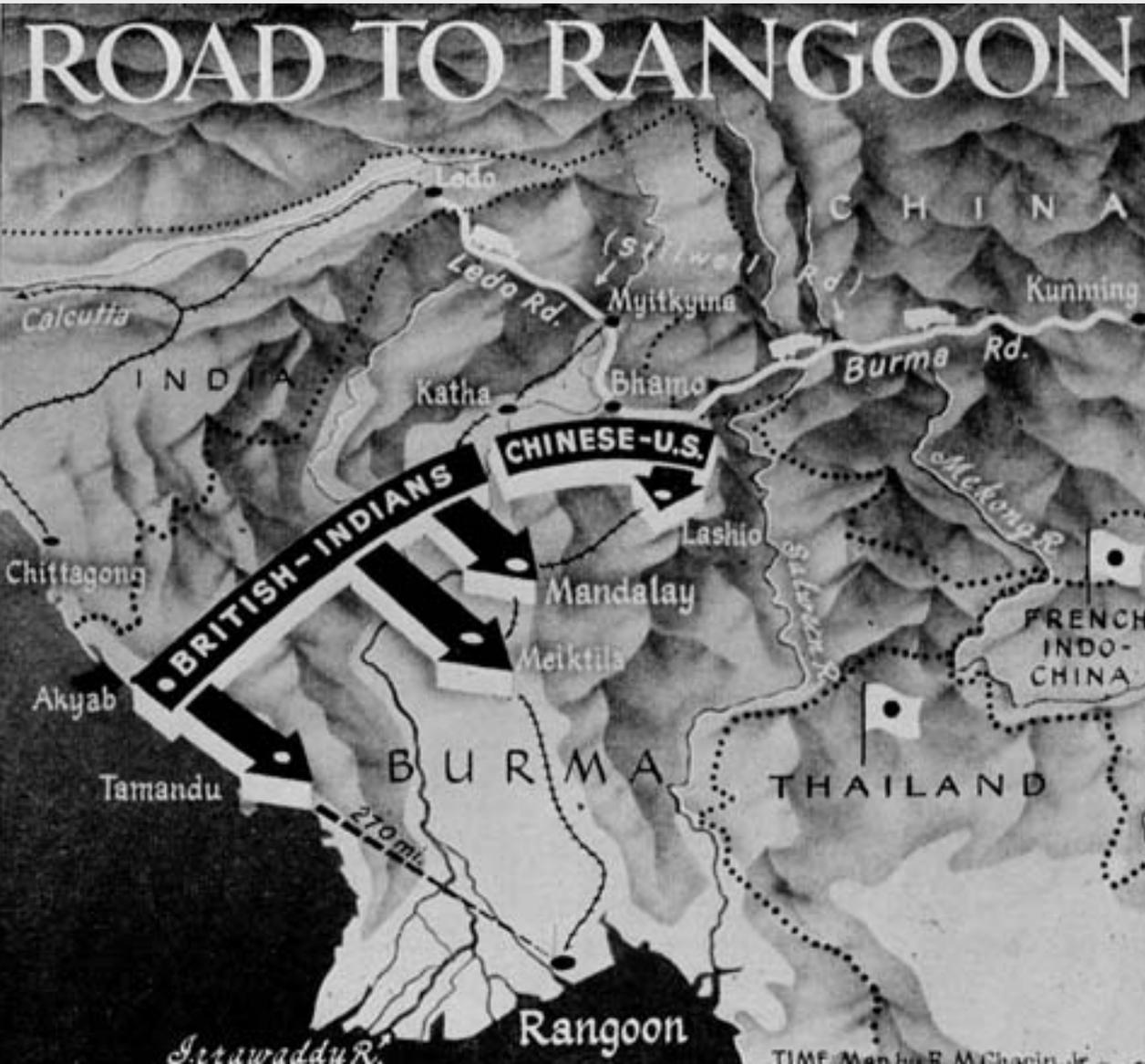
The Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam, 1905-1911



The creation of a new province in 1905 relocated Assam inside a province that connected it with eastern Bengal and the sea.

The new province died as a result of Indian nationalist agitation.

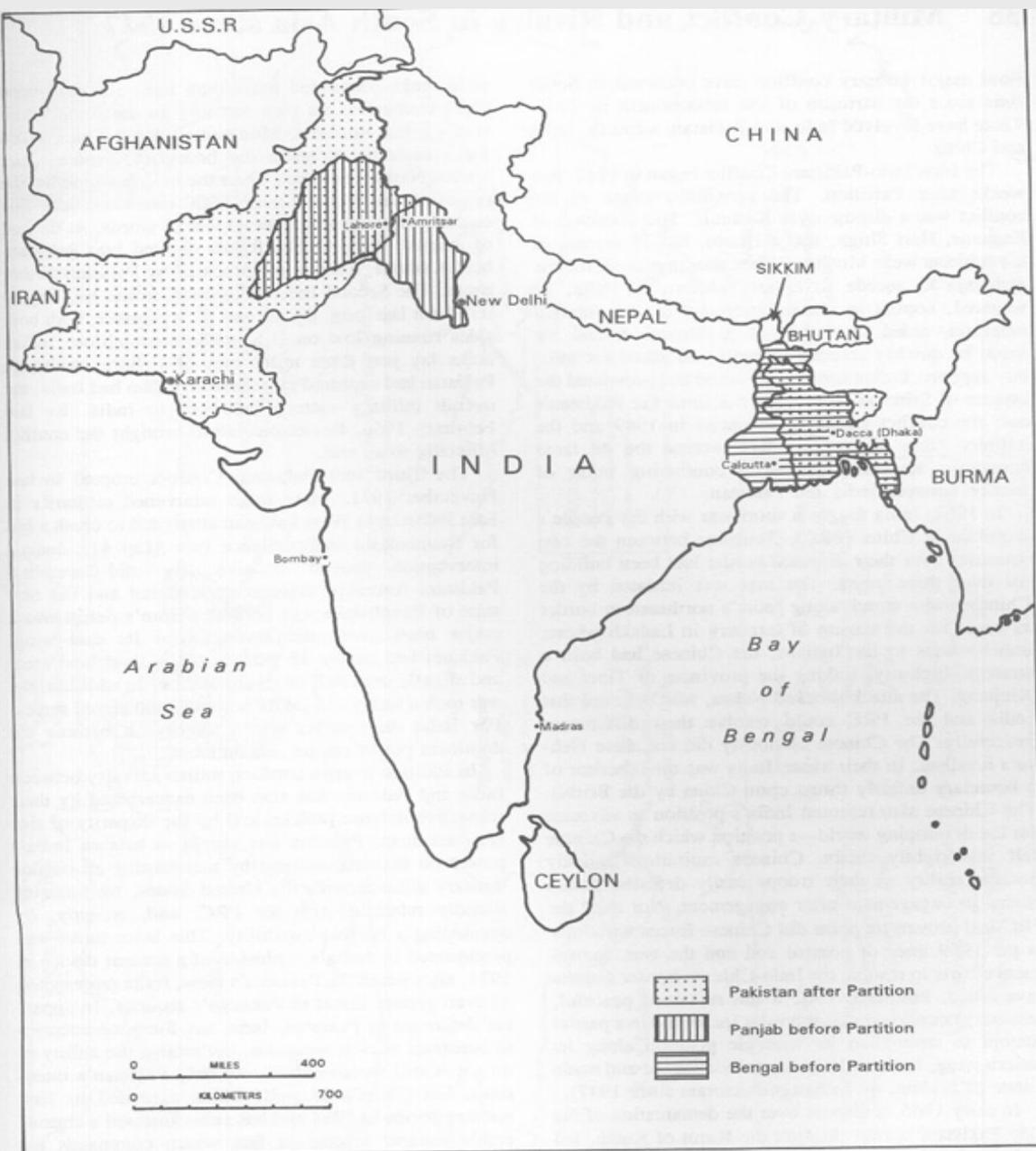
In 1943, the Stillwell Road, from Ledo in Assam to the China-Burma Road, formed a link with the Bengal-Assam Railway, to support US and UK war against Japan (and later, against Chinese Communists).



Recently, approximately 1,500 wartime graves have been found on the India-Burma border along the old Stillwell Road.



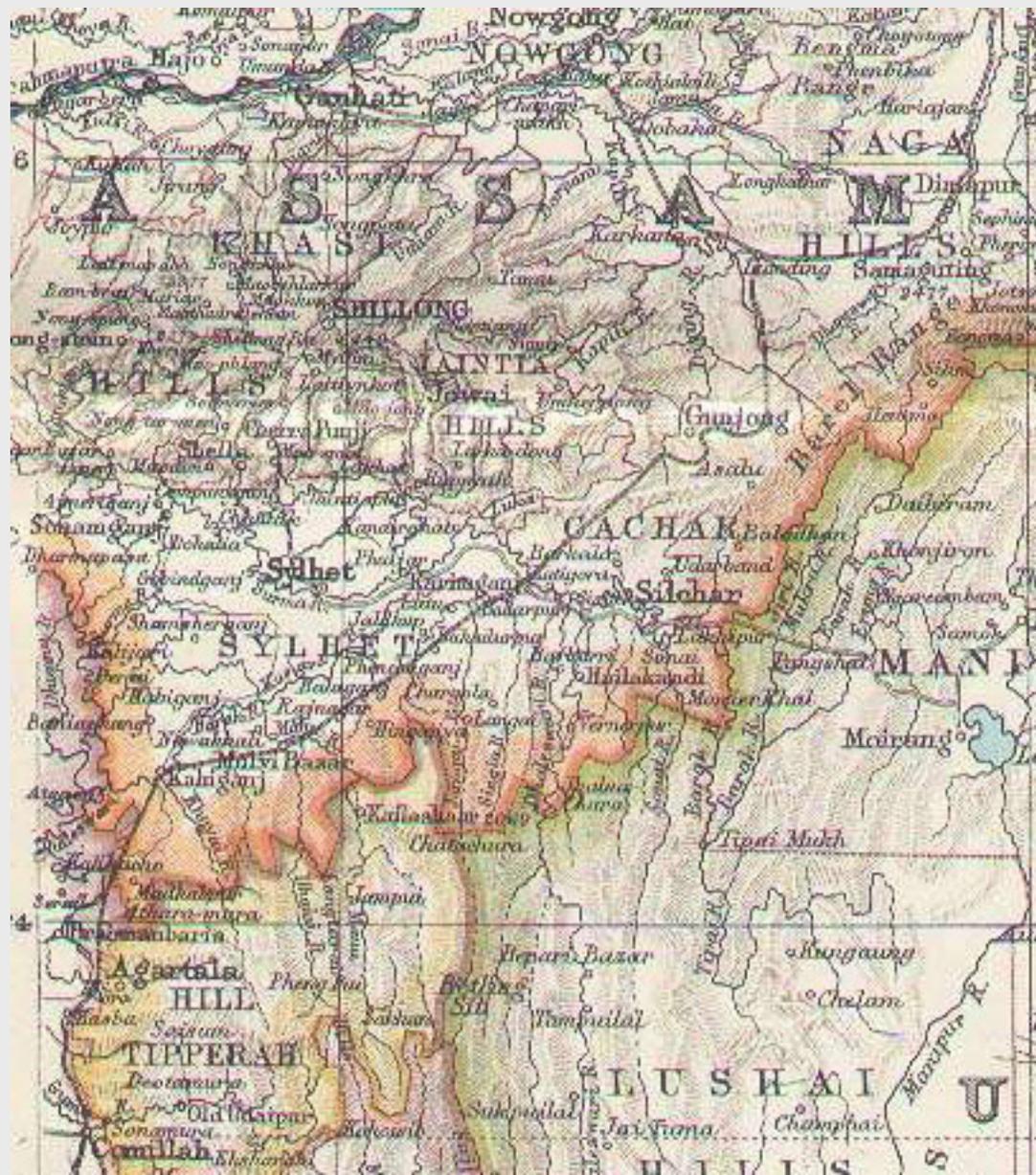
BBC News 2 March 1999



Regions of Partition, 1947

Map 37 Partition of India, 1947

The Eastern Scene of British India's Partition, 1947



The Eastern Site of Partition after the 1947 Sylhet Referendum



In 1947, the Sylhet region moved from Assam into East Pakistan.

New Sylhet/Assam borderlands

Sylhet/Assam borders acquired their current geographical definition after 1947, when Ratabari, Patherkandi, Badarpur and half of Karimganj thana left the former Karimganj sub-division of the old Sylhet District to join the Cachar District of Assam. In 1983, these territories became Assam's new Karimganj District. In 1951, the North Cachar sub-division of Cachar District joined the new district of United Mikir and North Cachar Hills. In 1989, Hailakandi sub-division of Cachar became a separate district.

Notes on Sylhet Demography, 1871-1991

1871: Muslim population at 1:1 parity with Hindu population.

1874-1947: Sylhet's proportion of Muslims increases with each census, as migration slowly transforms the population.

1911-1931: people reportedly born in Mymensingh increase from 31% of the population of southern Assam valleys in 1891 to 63% in 1931.

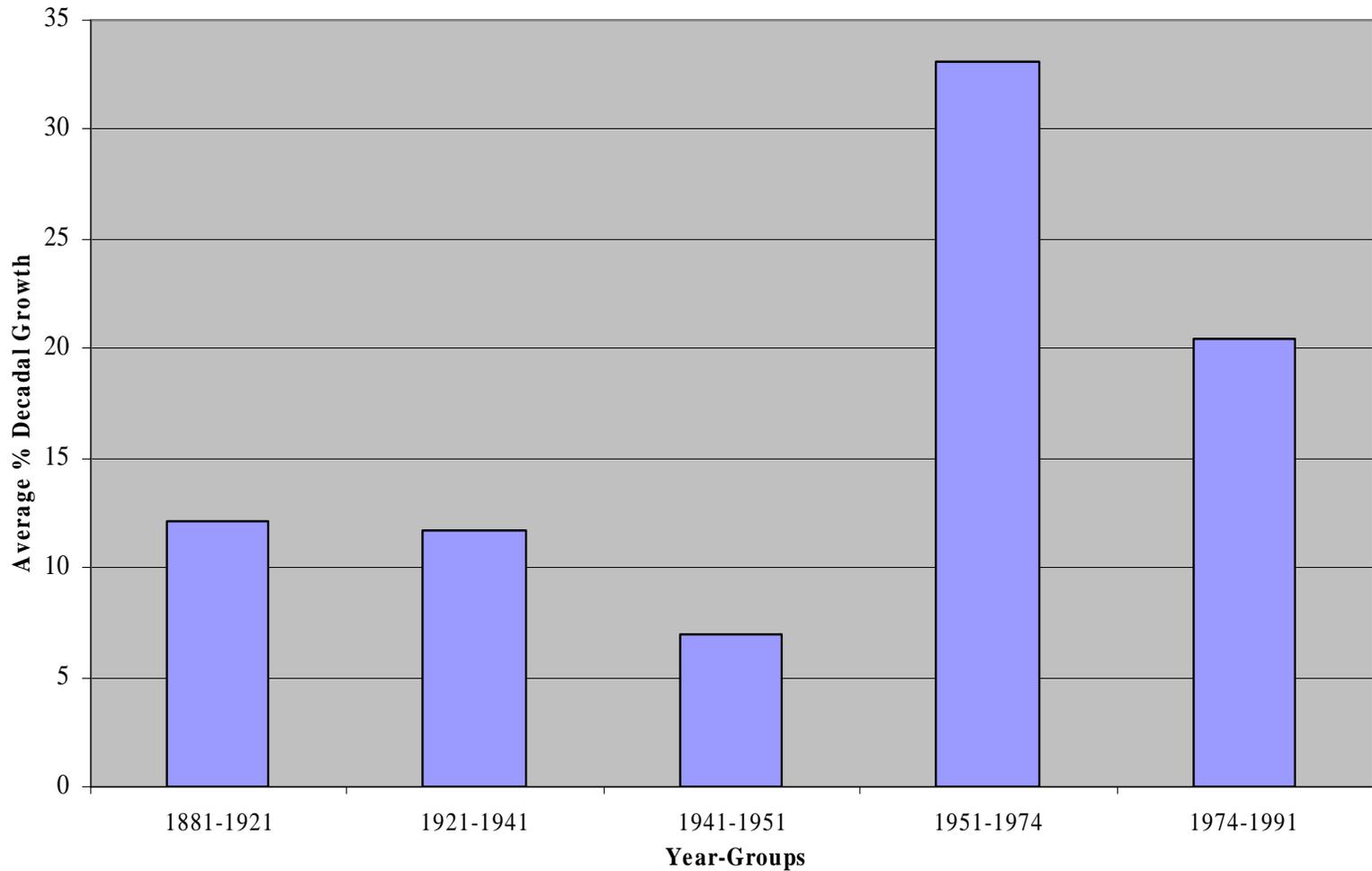
1931: *Assam Census Report* called Muslim Bengalis “invaders” and the Assam Congress resolved to move Sylhet out of Assam.

1947-1991: Immigration radically transforms Sylhet population.

1961-1971: population grows almost 60%. A hundred thousand Muslim Bengalis moved out of Assam into Sylhet's haor basin, where land still lay open for colonization.

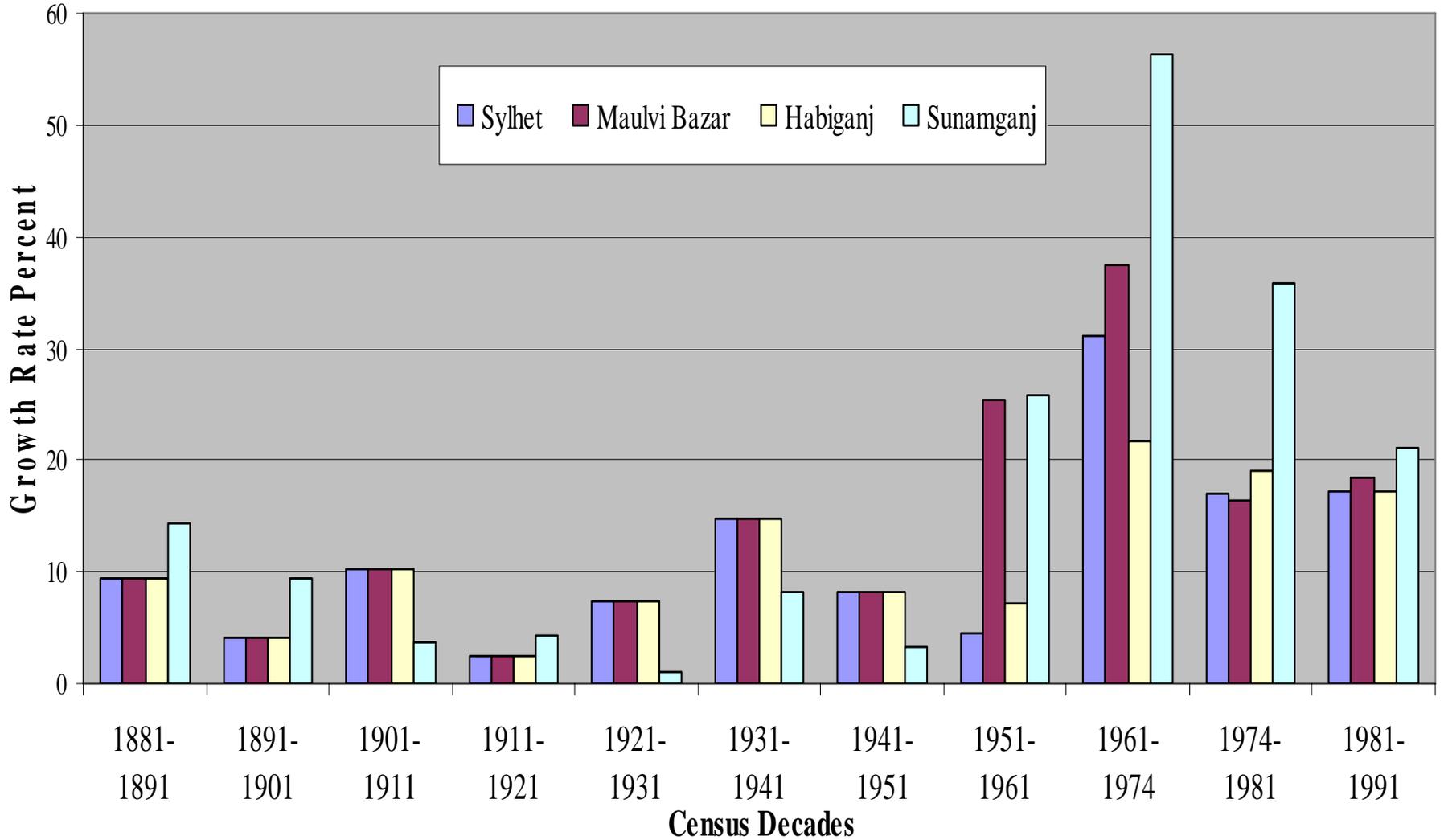
Modern Sylhet Region, Gross Population Change

Sylhet Year-Group Decadal Population Growth Averages



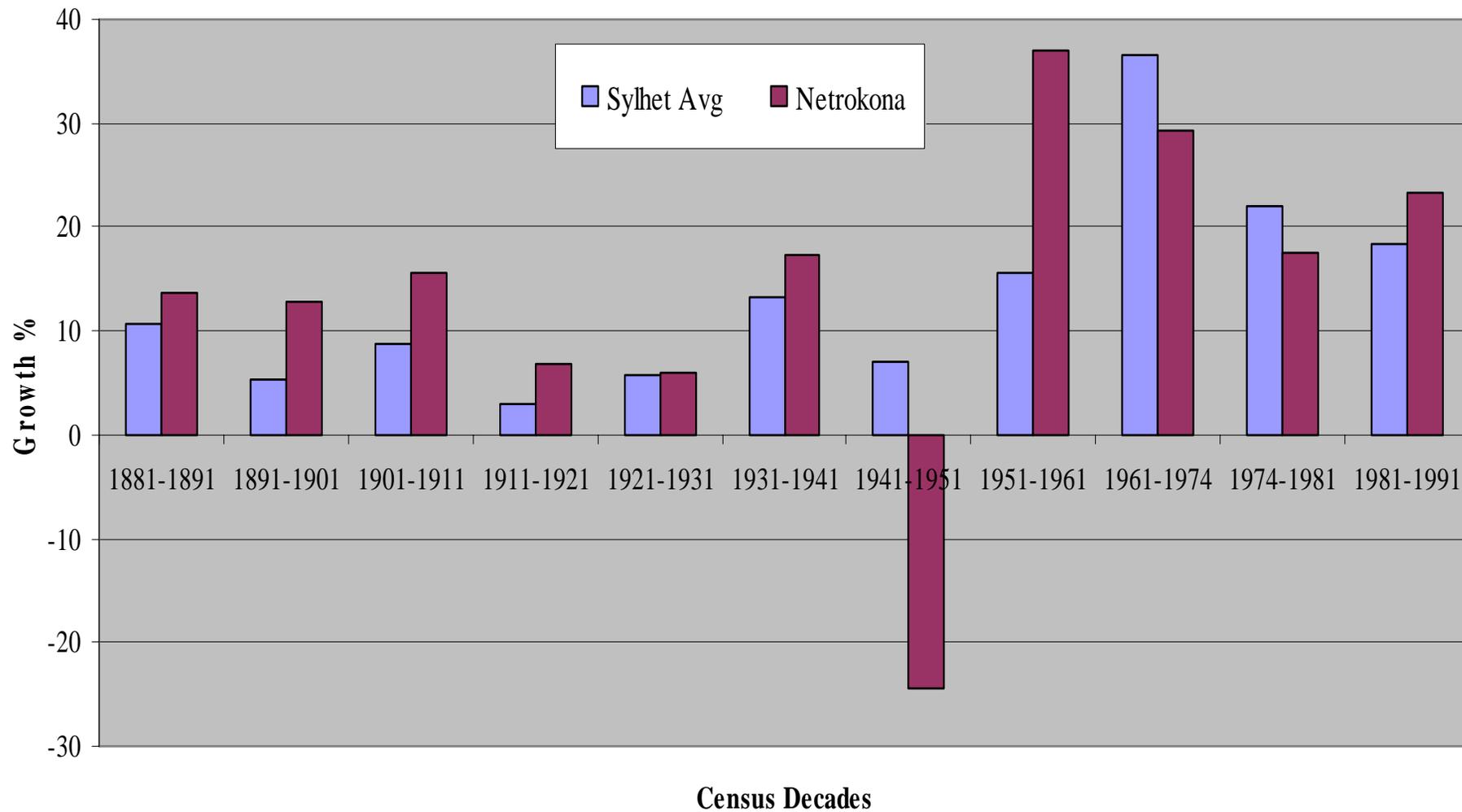
Modern Sylhet Zilas, Gross Population Change, by current Zilas

Decadal Population Growth Rates: Old Sylhet Zilas



Sylhet and Netrokona, Gross Population Change

Decadal Population Growth: Old Sylhet and Netrokona



Describing Assam in 1975

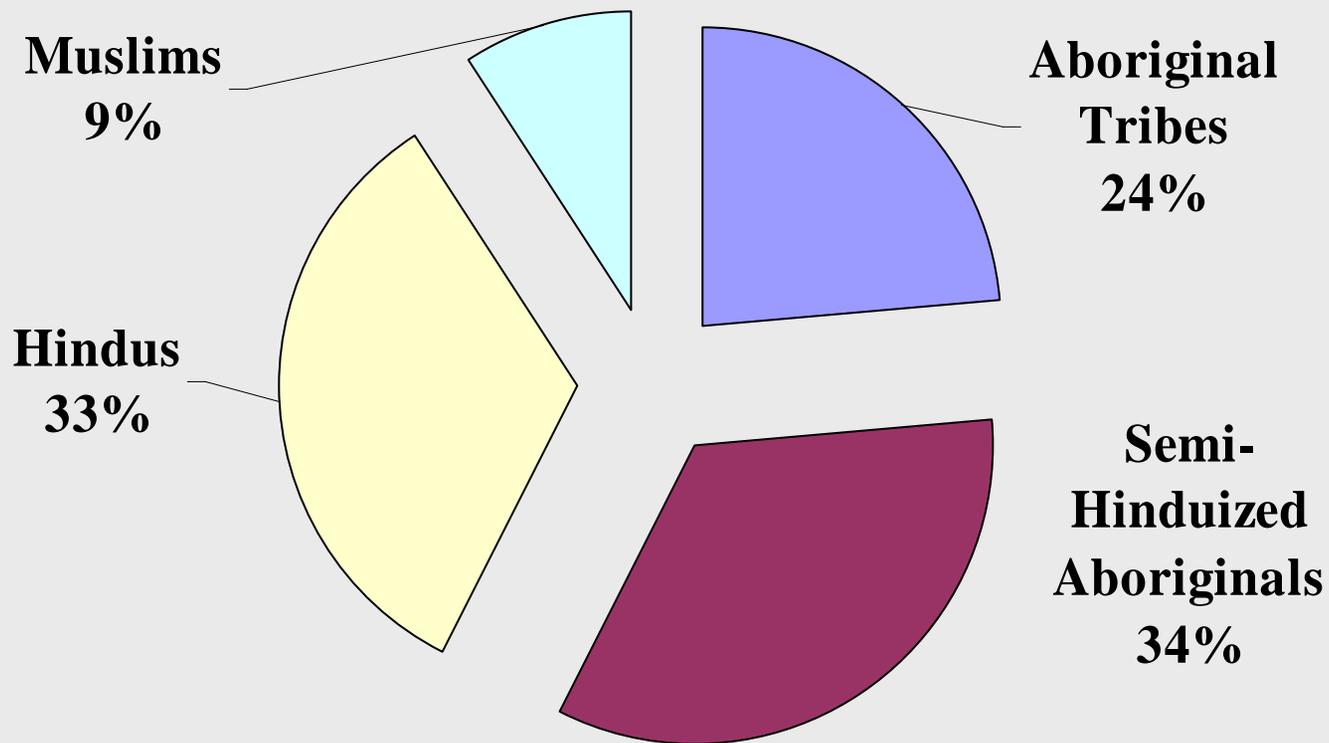
“The dominating feature of Assam is the great river Brahmaputra, which lends its name to the whole length of the valley. This river, awe-inspiring even in its quieter moments, is aptly named for the son of Brahma....

“The truncation of Assam began with the inception of political movements in regions inhabited by non-Aryan tribes, both within and on the borders of Assam. As these movements gained momentum and the hill tribes required enough political self-consciousness their demands for statehood or Union Territory status were met one by one. The result is the formation of Meghalaya consisting of the Khasi and Jantia Hills and Garo hills and the Union territories of Mizoram and Arunachal. Nagaland had earlier come into being as a direct result of nationalist agitation current there [T]he emergence of these separate unites in the hills has involved much bitterness between Assam and its neighbors mainly over the boundary issue. The Assam-Nagaland boundary question is still far from settled and is the cause of friction between the two state governments.”

--- M.Horam (Delhi School of Economics) Preface to WW Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam* (1879). Spectrum (Guwahati) reprint (1975), p.ii-iv.

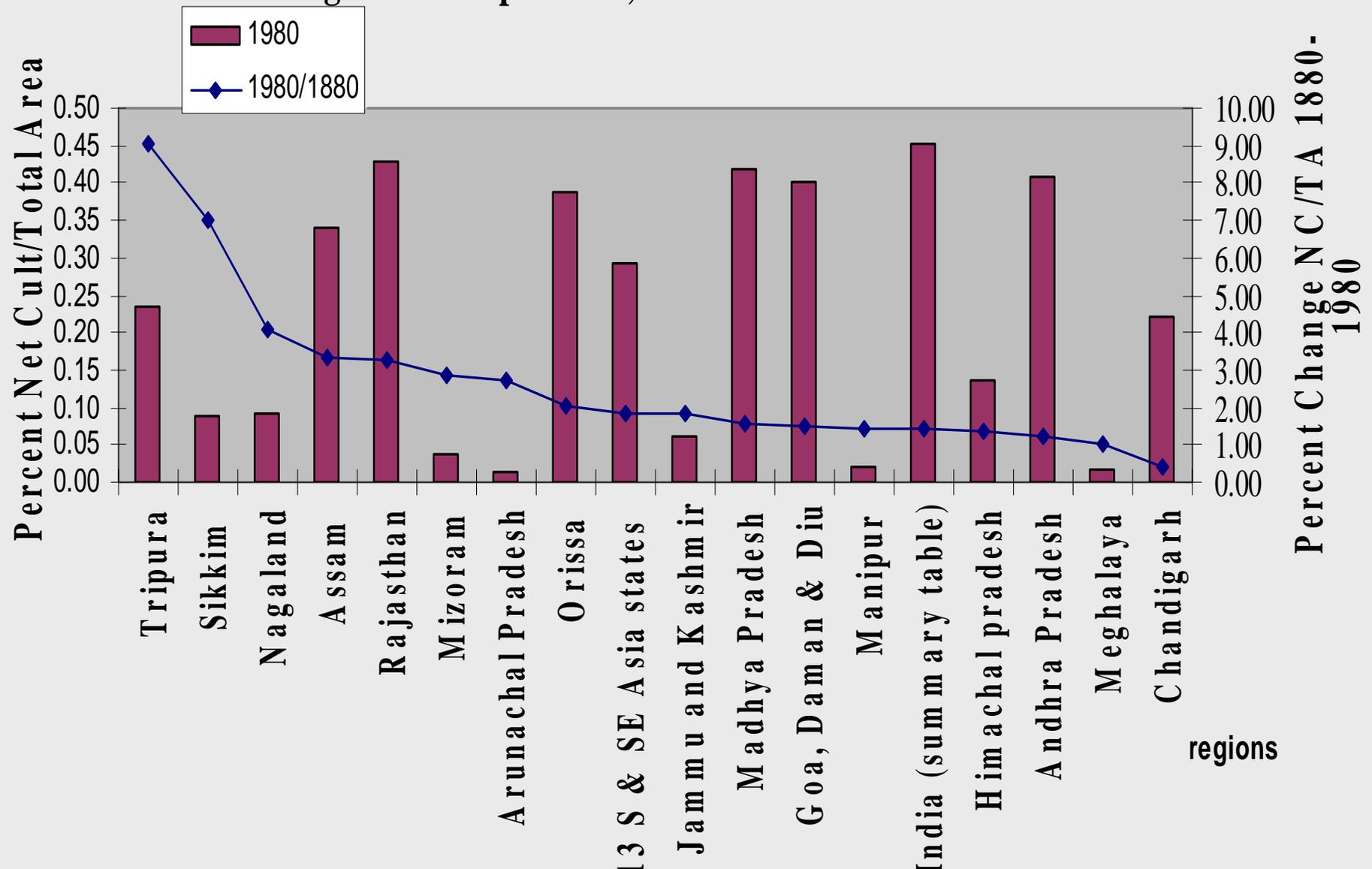
Changing Populations in Old Cultural Frontiers

Percent of Assam Brahmaputra Districts, Major "Ethnical Divisions of the Population," in WW Hunter *Statistical Account of Assam* , 1879

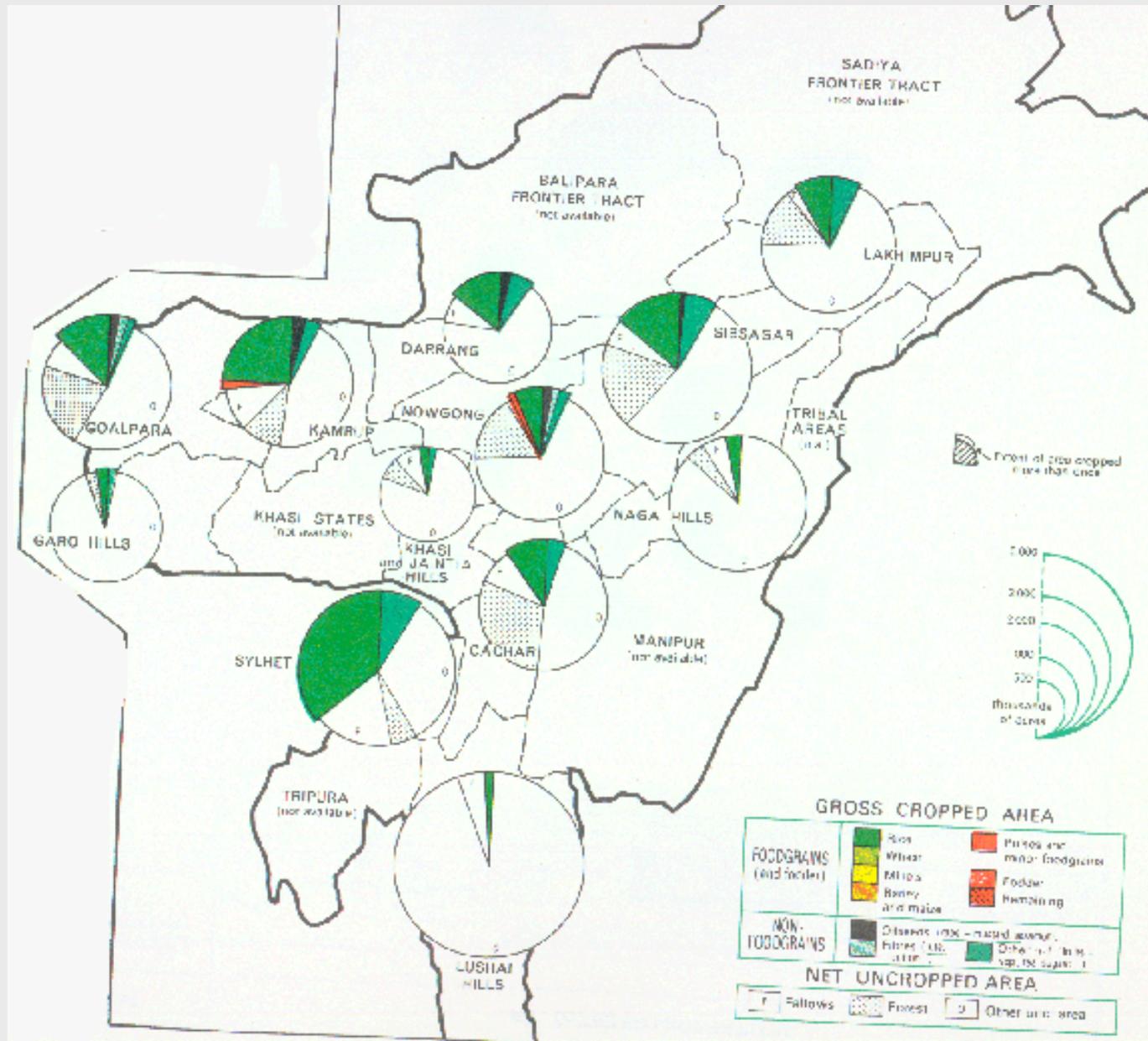


Agricultural Frontiers

Regional Comparisons, Net Cultivation to Total Area

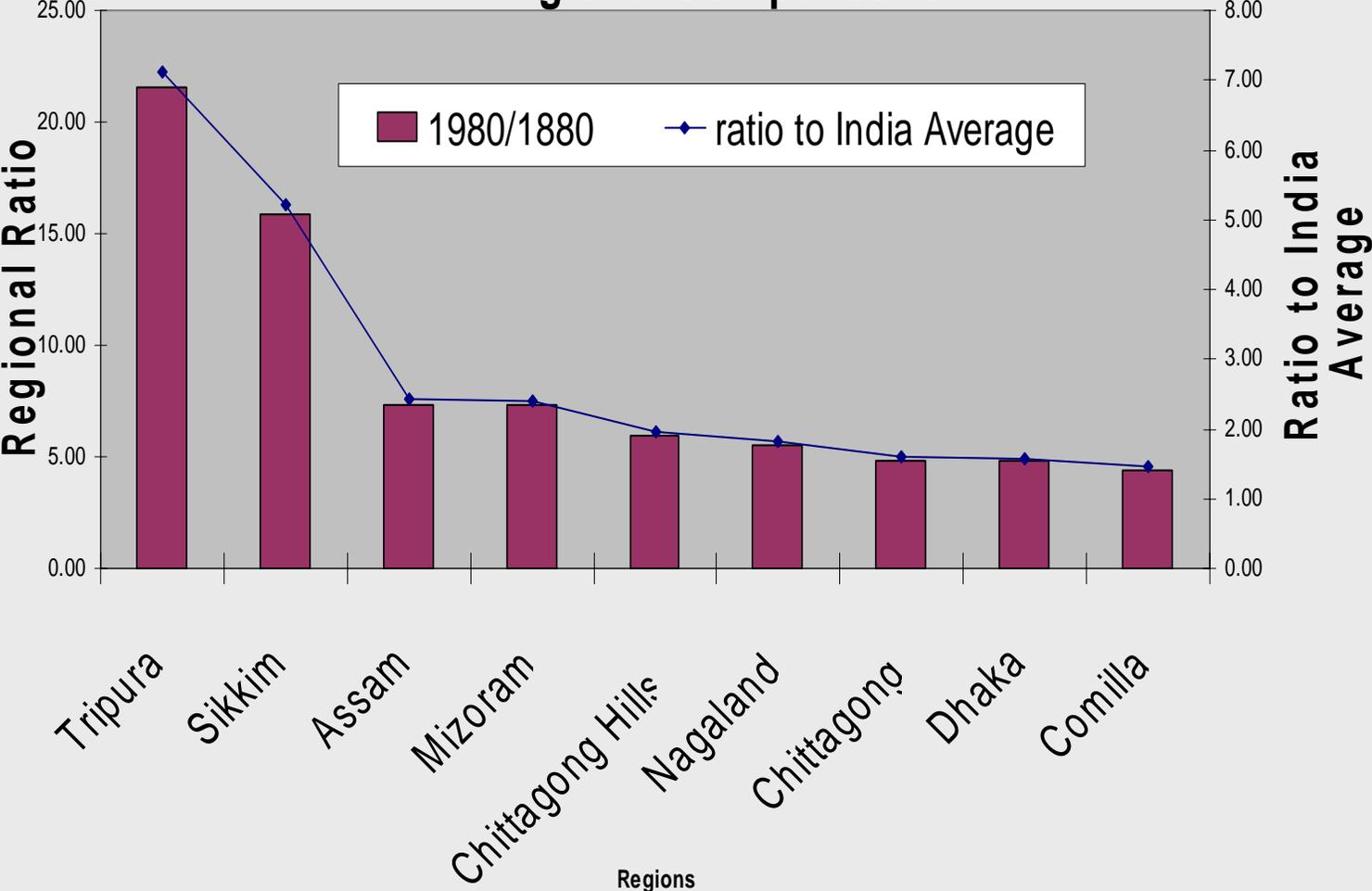


1931 Cultivated Acreage (green)

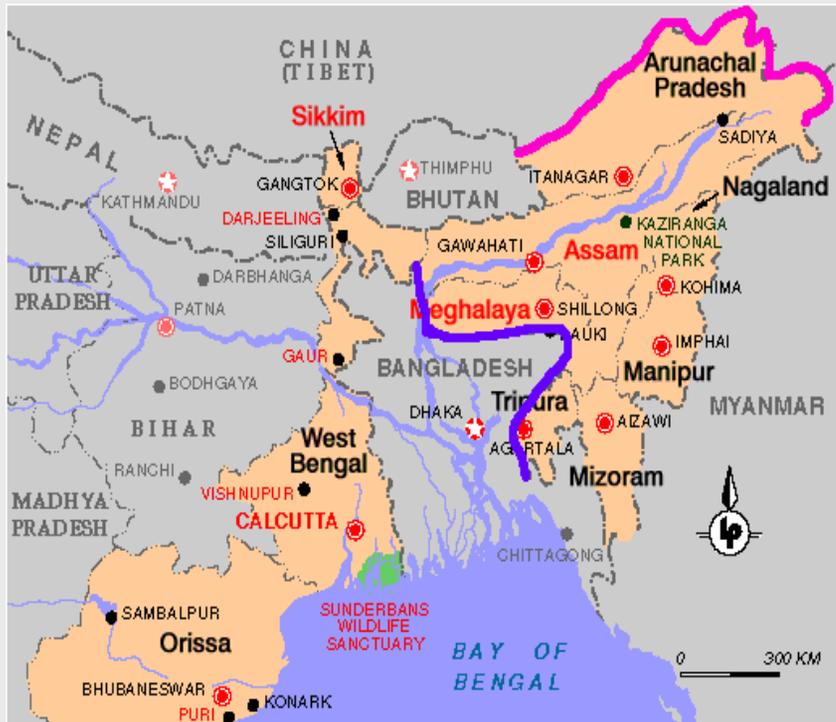


Population Frontiers

Total Population per Total Area, Ratio of 1980/1880, Regional Comparisons



Closing off Assam inside NE India



- Blue – re: Bangladesh -- railway closure, the Brahmaputra Board, anti-immigrant drive, Tipaimukh dam.
- Pink – re: China -- Ledo Road Closure (1947), border clashes

Inland Mobility and Indian Security

Mizzima News

Guwahati, 22 June 2003:

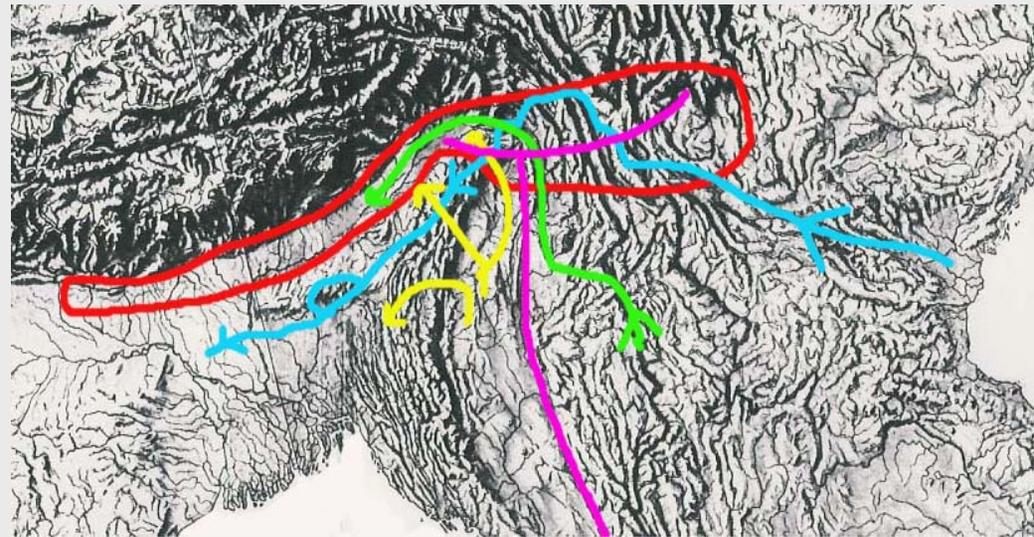
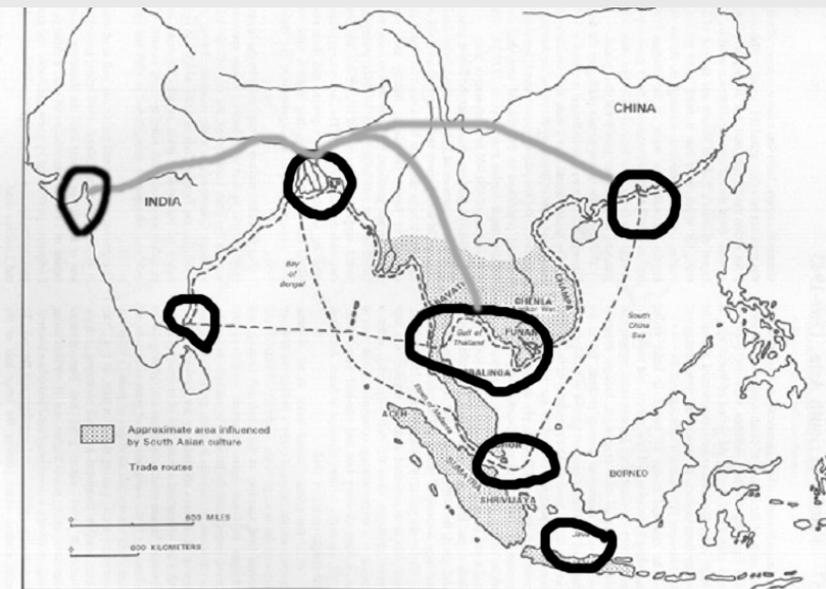
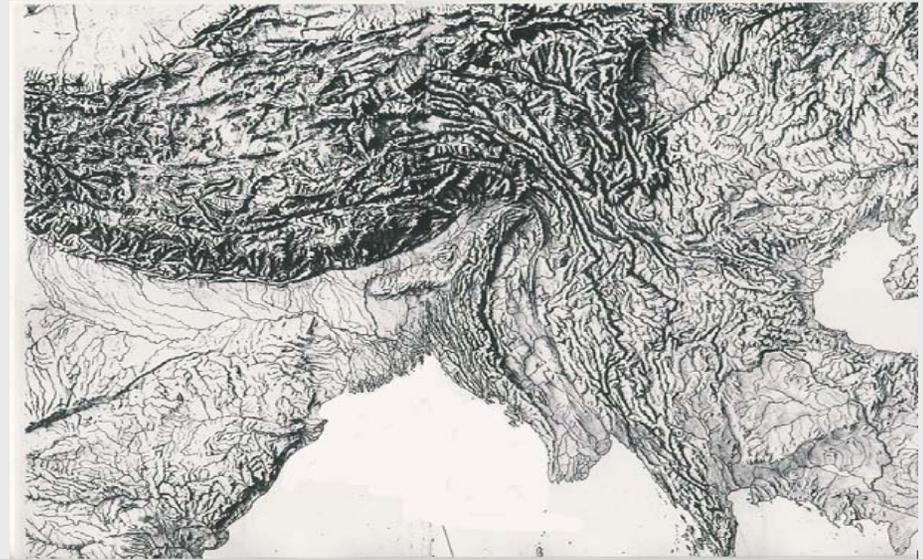
Though it is a long pending demand of the North East India for re-opening of the famous Stillwell Road in order to accelerate trade with Burma and the South East Asian countries, The Indian Commerce Ministry appears to be not in a mood to meet the demand of the region.

The seven states of the North East India have been demanding for reopening of the road The Chief Ministers of the region have already submitted a joint proposal to reopen the road in order to attract the tourists and to boost trade with the South East Asian countries ... trade and commerce. But the Government of India has been delaying the matter keeping in view the underground problem in the region.

"Several underground groups of the region are now operating from Burma from different hide-outs so how can we open the road," a senior officer of the Home ministry questioned. He however said that though the Indian Government has opened trade routes with Bangladesh, yet the case is different in respect of Burma. Asked whether it had completely abandoned the proposal of the region, he stated that it was under consideration.

"We can not ignore the security part after all the region is very sensitive for the militancy problem," the officer added.

Where is Assam?



Map 56 Spread of Hindu and Buddhist Culture to Southeast Asia