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

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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.
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.
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.*
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.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>1995 GDI HDI UNICEF STATS</th>
<th>$PCGDP</th>
<th>litfem</th>
<th>litfem/$</th>
<th>lifefem</th>
<th>InfMo</th>
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<th>gdi</th>
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<td>Above-AVG PCGDP</td>
<td>14818</td>
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<td>77.96</td>
<td>12.96</td>
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<td>33674</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>81.58</td>
<td>6.30</td>
<td>32.49</td>
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<td>Bottom: SaudiArabia</td>
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<td>50.25</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>72.47</td>
<td>24.00</td>
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<td>47.76</td>
<td>148.00</td>
<td>41.91</td>
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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)
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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Poverty</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>GDisI</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Ratio of Ranks</th>
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<tr>
<td>Manipur</td>
<td>41.63</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0.815</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>Meghalaya</td>
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<td>28</td>
<td>0.807</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>Arunachal P</td>
<td>49.62</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0.776</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mizoram</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.93</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nagaland</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>0.729</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0.77</td>
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<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>39.36</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.676</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>48.95</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0.575</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1.07</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tripura</td>
<td>44.89</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>30</td>
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</table>

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 ...
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 ...
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.
Pink: The Ledo (Stillwell) Burma Road
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 rajas. 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.
Routes of mobility that dominate the historic definition of Assam positioned Assam geographically beyond the eastern frontiers of Gangetic Basin.
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.
South Asia’s dominant empires and cultures moved historically across the Ganga Basin, west and east.
Early Gupta Expansion
to *circa* 400s CE
Mughal Expansion
The geographical pivot of inland empires, 1200 - 1700.
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.
Sylhet constituted southern Assam from 1874 to 1947.
Describing Assam in 1879


“…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.
Regions of Partition, 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.
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.


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

Average % Decadal Growth


Year-Groups
Decadal Population Growth: Old Sylhet and Netrokona

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 fare from settled and is the cause of friction between the two state governments.”

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

- Aboriginal Tribes: 24%
- Semi-Hinduized Aboriginals: 34%
- Hindus: 33%
- Muslims: 9%
1931 Cultivated Acreage (green)
Population Frontiers

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

Regions

- Tripura
- Sikkim
- Assam
- Mizoram
- Chittagong Hills
- Nagaland
- Chittagong
- Dhaka
- Comilla

1980/1880 vs. ratio to India Average
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.
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