Northeast India
A Reader

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31 Re-imagining the Northeast in India, again

Did geography sidestep history in *Vision (2020)*?

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Did geography sidestep history in *Vision (2020)*?[1]

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In a previous incarnation of this chapter in 2007, I had somewhat smugly concluded on reading an advance draft chapter of the *Vision 2020* document that India's Northeast[2] was being re-imagined as a 'development deficit' in a formulaic way. My claim – much inspired by the subversive scholarly turn widely referred to as post development[3] – was that the authors of *Vision 2020* failed to grasp the challenge of 'historical difference' (social, cultural and ecological heterogeneity). Consequently, Vision 2020, I argued, pretty much ended up advocating for the wholesome 'economic assimilation' of the Northeast region within 'mainstream' India through 'dispossession, enclosure and displacement' (D'Souza 2007–08: 207–17).

Problematizing *Vision 2020*

This very same advance chapter draft of the *Vision 2020* document titled 'Peace, Progress and Prosperity in the North Eastern Region', however, was republished in 2008 as part of a substantial report brought out by the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region and the North Eastern Council.[4] The three-volume *Vision 2020* since its publication has unsurprisingly evoked considerable academic interest and still remains one of the most comprehensive efforts in recent times that both analyses the Northeast region for its contemporary development challenges and confidently prescribes pathways for achieving positive economic and governance outcomes. Given that the idea of economic development is a much fraught subject in itself, it is no surprise that *Vision 2020* has invited scrutiny and criticism from a broad spectrum of thinkers and observers.

Sanjib Baruah, amongst the foremost scholars on India's Northeast, in a recent deliberation on the *Vision 2020* astutely counsels us that 'to ask whether development succeeds or fails is to fall into the trap

of the imaginary of development' (Baruah 2017: 50). In effect, Baruah believes that *Vision 2020* as a 'transition narrative' – a document that scripts radical social, cultural and economic change – should not be judged only over whether it can achieve what it considers to be transformational possibilities in India's Northeast. Rather, the document knocks on many other conceptual doors as well. Notably, the need to reflect on who possess what kind of agency for effecting what kinds of change: is it the expert and her or his world of neat numbers or would it be a surprise produced through interaction, opposition and negotiation between social and political pressures from above and below?

The creative energies of the people and communities of the Northeast, Baruah claims, must be understood as being able to go much beyond the 'development imaginary' of the expert. In other words, in their daily calculations and from within their everyday worlds these ordinary folk can and will draw upon a vast reservoir of practices, memories, livelihood strategies and environmental pasts to forge outcomes that will inevitably shape a political economy of surprises rather than the linear realization of statistically informed policies. History will shape geographical possibility rather than geography dominating the region's history. *Vision 2020*, thus, as a development master text, Baruah suggests, must also be analysed for what it fails to place within its frame of reference, besides serving as a blueprint for how things should unfold for realizing development and economic growth outcomes in the Northeast (Baruah 2017: 45–67).

In part, Baruah's strategy to read *Vision 2020* 'against the grain' follows from his earlier writings and it helps us here to recall some of them. In *Durable Disorder*, Baruah underlines how the idea of development takes on an entirely different slant in the state of Arunachal Pradesh.

> The developmentalist path that Arunachal has embarked upon is neither the result of a choice made by policy makers about what is best for the well being of the people of Arunachal, nor is it evidence of the inevitability of 'progress' and 'civilization'. Rather, it is the intended and unintended consequence of the Indian state's efforts to assert control over this frontier space and to make it a 'normal' part of India's national space.
>
> (Baruah 2007/2005: 35–6)

Development discourse as a project for 'nationalizing space', in other words, frames Arunachal Pradesh principally as an extension of the Indian state's geo-political imperative rather than the means

for unleashing the region's own historical and cultural possibilities. Baruah, in fact, follows this assessment with an equally provocative and illuminating discussion on India's 'Look East Policy' (which is now rechristened as the 'Act East Policy'). Here, he suggests that the Indian government in this newest policy imagining aims to transform the Northeast region – through rail and road infrastructure – into a land bridge that then physically connects the Indian Gangetic plains with Southeast Asia. That is, the Northeast is going to be built up in steel and cement to help it overcome its perceived geographical 'land-locked' isolation rather than drawing upon its historical multiplicities and possibilities: notably by ignoring the mountainous region's links with much of Asia that was forged when it was on the 'southern trails of the Silk Road during ancient and medieval times' (Baruah 2007/2005: 214).

Engaging thus with some of Baruah's insights, one is given the strong impression that India's Northeast is discursively imagined and re-imagined time and time again by Indian policy makers and the political officialdom as a geographical space rather than as a historically created place. But before I explain what it means to argue that geography imposes on history and that space overwhelms place, it bears mentioning that Baruah's understanding finds resonance amongst other thinkers as well. In particular, one should highlight the recent scholarship of Duncan McDuie-Ra, whose fine-grained ethnographic accounts on India's Northeast reveals to us how fraught the intellectual, policy and political terrain over development has become. His conclusions, in a recent essay bluntly state:

> Development in the Northeast region is driven by national security imperatives and the dominance of national security ensures that development priorities are centrally orchestrated and involve securing the Northeast and integrating it into the national economy through resource extraction and road building, and the cultivation of a loyal elite rewarded in the political structures of statehood and the legitimacy of the Sixth Schedule . . . The perception that the region's people are 'backward' and in need of 'modernising' enables the highly centralised, paternalistic approach of the Indian Government to drive the development agenda and at the same time ensure that national security imperatives are met.
>
> (McDuie-Ra 2008: 203)

Both Baruah and McDuie-Ra, in effect, argue that development initiatives in India's Northeast do not entirely originate from within the

region nor are they exclusively aimed at addressing the aspirational challenges of its people. Rather, ideas and plans under the rubric of development are formulated and then despatched from the central government based in New Delhi; who, in turn, are driven by the their own anxieties about security and the need to address larger geo-political calculations for the region. In other words, the Northeast does not act but is acted upon and the terrain for manoeuvre for the people in the Northeast is reduced to one of compliance, negotiation or subversion. The *Vision 2020* document, however, wants to fix this. At the outset itself, it is stated that the 'empowerment of the people' is to be achieved by 'maximizing self-governance and participatory development through grass-roots planning' (*Vision 2020* vol. I: 4). Which, by any estimate, is no easy task. More so given what *Vision 2020* outlines as the economic, social and demographic profile of the Northeast:

> The eight states located in India's north-east cover an area of 2,62,179 sq. km. constituting 7.9 per cent of the country's total geographical area, but have only 39 million people or about 3.8 per cent of the total population of the country (2001 census). Over 68 per cent of the population of the region lives in the state of Assam alone. The density of population varies from 13 per sq. km. in Arunachal Pradesh to 340 per sq. km. in Assam. The pre-dominantly hilly terrain in all the states except Assam is host to an overwhelming proportion of tribal population ranging from 19.3 per cent in Assam to 94.5 per cent in Mizoram. The region has over 160 scheduled tribes and over 400 other tribal and sub-tribal communities and groups. It is predominantly rural with over 84 per cent of the population living in the countryside.
>
> (*Vision 2020* vol. I: 5)

The strategy for enabling development despite the above mentioned social and ecological complexity is fleshed out in vol. II of *Vision 2020*. The plan is to bring about 'inclusive growth through inclusive gover-nance' by initiating the 'devolution of functions, finances and function-aries to representative institutions of local self-government', which in turn would operate with the 'principle of subsidiarity' – meaning that 'anything which can be done at a lower level should be done at that level and no higher level' (*Vision 2020* vol. II: 11). In sum, at least in theoretical terms, the effort of the *Vision 2020* enthusiasts seems to be to endow meaningful agency to the stakeholder and the development beneficiary, so that decision-making truly flows from the bottom up.

But what do the people want?

A sense of what it means to listen to the 'voices of the people' for development is indicated in the strikingly innovative 'Public Hearings' exercises that were carried out during the draft stage of the *Vision 2020* document. In vol. III, it is noted that twelve Public Hearings were held at different locations within the Northeast with the recorded minutes of these meetings being listed in Annexure 16 of *Vision 2020* (vol. III: 254–93). At Silchar (Assam), for example, about 110 people attended the hearing and those that spoke included journalists, NGO workers, retired government officials, academicians and even a member of the legislative assembly (*Vision 2020* vol. III: 255). Similarly, in Imphal (Manipur) over 200 participants attended, which included the chief minister and other ministers from his cabinet.

These exercises, moreover, seem to have thrown up a fascinating set of perceptions and concerns by the assembled 'publics'. In a hearing at Itanagar (Arunachal Pradesh), Dr. I. K. Barthakur, one of the Northeast Council members, informs the meeting that following a 40,000 household survey across the Northeast region there was an 'overwhelming response' for 'developing Agriculture & its Allied sectors' (*Vision 2020* vol. III: 279). At the Pasighat (Arunachal Pradesh) hearing, a suggestion was made for transforming governance by creating 'a secure, responsive and market-friendly environment'. At Dibrugarh (Assam), about 225 concerned citizens put forward a range of opinions on corruption, employment, health, education, sanitation, infiltration and a somewhat puzzling suggestion by one Professor Horen Gogoi who felt that 'efforts need to be made for the Assamese people to learn to work' (*Vision 2020* vol. III: 277). At Agartala (Tripura) besides demands for better road and railway links with Bangladesh, there was also a demand for 'Air connectivity within the region' along with an academy for training pilots. In the same list there was also mention that the marriage age for girls in many places was as low as thirteen and there was need 'to increase this' (*Vision 2020* vol. III: 286). At Imphal, a teacher, T. Vunglallian, concluded, perhaps with a touch of irony, that 'India should adopt the policy of looking to the East and for the NER (Northeast Region) to look to the West'. Dr. Rosemary Dzuvichu (President, Nagaland University Teachers' Association) at the Hearing in Kohima (Nagaland) felt that 'academicians in general' were not 'properly consulted' in preparing the document and that the 'aspirations of the people should not be put in the appendix but should form the core of the document' (*Vision 2020* vol. III: 270). On a different note, however, in the same Hearing, the Rev. Dr. V. K. Nuh of

the Baptist Church 'lamented the lack of economic growth in the NER in spite of having 40% of the country's hydro-electric power potential, 53% of tea product and 26% of forest product' (*Vision 2020* vol. III: 270).

The above does seem to strongly suggest that the Public Hearings might have been very colourful events: filled with contradictory voices, striking claims, long speeches and inconclusive endings. The *Vision 2020*, however, though thus stirred by opposing opinions and messy realities remained unshaken when drawing out the larger governance implications when the people have spoken:

> People of the region have an ambitious vision: by 2020, they aspire to see *their region* emerge peaceful, strong, confident, and ready to engage with the global economy . . . They want to banish poverty and illiteracy and ensure that every family *in the region* has the opportunity to live a healthy and secure life with dignity and self-respect. Moving away from the dependency syndrome, people *in the region* would like to acquire the capability and self-confidence to shape their own destinies. They would like to enjoy their freedoms – freedom from hunger and poverty, the freedom to exercise choice in their avocations, income-earning and spending decisions, and political, economic and social freedoms without fear. They would like to enjoy peace and achieve sustainable progress and prosperity.
>
> (*Vision 2020* vol. I: 3, italics mine)

This grand declaration, that signals such a sweeping urgency for social and economic betterment, carries not only an obvious seduction and appeal but could have been arrived at, I suspect, even without the dense discussions from the Public Hearings. More pointedly, however, the term *their region* is more than a silent physical backdrop to the innumerable back and forth at the Hearings. The use of the term region, in fact, acts to 'perform' and underwrite all discussions in the Hearings so that geography can firmly hold and contain within a sprawling physical setting of mountains, valleys, hills and plains the overflow of particularistic identities such as the *Naga, Kuki, Bodo, Aka* or *Nyishi* (to name but a very few of the '160 scheduled tribes and over 400 other tribal and sub-tribal communities and groups'). Put differently, the inhabitants of the Northeast are essentially defined by a shared geography. The region as space is thus privileged over time – comprising messy histories of differences, cultures, places and

dissimilar pasts. In a sense, once again, the *Vision 2020* document reaffirms, even if almost absentmindedly, an earlier insight of Sanjib Baruah that India's Northeast, as a category, was a 'hurried exercise in political engineering'; wherein the region by being so overwhelmingly enumerated and described as a geographical location often obscures its 'historical or cultural memory' (Baruah 2007/2005: 4–5).

Aspiration and the quest for equivalence

Is it possible to assemble a conceptual world entirely shorn of historical imaginings? Here we must recall Arjun Appadurai's instructive essay on the 'Capacity to Aspire', in which he directs us to reflect on the sharp differences in the treatment of notions such as culture and development in the fields of anthropology and economics (Appadurai 2013). In most anthropological studies, Appadurai points out; culture has been generally viewed as 'one or other kind of pastness – the keywords here are habit, custom, heritage and tradition'. Development, on the other hand, has usually been seen, in 'terms of the future – plans, goals, hopes, targets'. For anthropologists, thus, the idea of the future remains somewhat alien to many descriptions of culture, while economics with its keenness to quantify and discuss wants, needs and expectations 'has become the science of the future'. In other words, Appadurai explains 'the cultural actor is a person of and from the past, and the economic actor a person of the future' (Appadurai 2013: 180)

The *Vision 2020* document clearly is future-facing with its commitment to reveal the Northeast region primarily in the technical language of economic development and growth. Vol. II and III of the *Vision 2020* are almost saturated with statistical tables and data-sets that sum up surveys, lists, a range of classificatory schemas, taxonomies, and censuses. Some sampling of the tables, for example, are on the distribution of handlooms in the Northeast between 1995 and 1996, the ratio of mineral production to geographic area, statistics on forestry and fishing, growth rates of agriculture (1993–94 to 2002–03), number of local bodies in the region, share of services in the net domestic product (1993–2003) and even a list on the incipient sick units in small-scale industry (2001–02).

Creating a world through numbers, Appadurai explains in another path breaking essay, however, goes much beyond the mere quantification of phenomena. Numbers and their tabulation, for him, can and should be measured or drawn up against political contexts and how they are inserted within knowledge regimes shaped by power. For colonial India, in particular, Appadurai argues that the manner in

which the British generated numbers and statistics served as much to address a range of 'justificatory' protocols for knowledge making as they became a means for 'disciplining' their colonial subjects. That is, numbers, howsoever collected and howsoever flawed in their understanding of social and cultural realities, were served up as subject matter for intense internal debates within the British administration over issues of classification and policy before they were deployed to inform 'bureaucratic practices and styles' for control (Appadurai 1996: 114–35). What, however, is also critically pointed out in the essay, is that

> numbers permitted comparison between kinds of places and people that were otherwise different, that they were concise ways of conveying large bodies of information, and that they served as a short form for capturing and appropriating otherwise recalcitrant features of the social and human landscape.
>
> (Appadurai 1996: 120)

Another critical aspect of the power of enumeration, for Appadurai was how mute numbers could represent social groups as being 'unyoked' from their complex and localized situations. Such that with bland statistical tabulation the 'huge diversity of castes, sects, tribes, and other practical groupings' in British India could be 'untethered' from the specificities of their physical and social settings (Appadurai 1996: 127).

These insights of Appadurai, in fact, do inform our discussion as they give fresh meaning to the many statistically generated equivalences and comparisons that liberally pepper *Vision 2020*. In particular, I could argue that there is a steady dissolution or obscuring of the Northeast region as a 'place bearing landscape' by detailed statistical information posed in terms of geographical contrasts – the systematic comparison of averages between the Northeast region and all India facts. In vol. II, thus, we see the full play of this striking format of mute numbers deployed to rhetorically eliminate place and install space or by getting geography to sidestep history:

> In 2001, 23.13 per cent of the total terrorist incidences in India took place alone in this region, which increased to 28 per cent in 2005 and further to 29.4 per cent in 2006. . . . Assam shows the highest number of civilians killed due to terrorist violence, which was around 11 per cent of the total civilians killed in India in 2001 due to terrorism.
>
> (*Vision 2020*, vol. II: 279)

That Internet usage is low in the Northeast is clear from the insignificant number of connections in NER, being a low 15,303 in 2002, just 0.48 per cent of the total number in the country [India]. This increased in 2003 but was still less than 1 per cent (0.88 per cent) of the total [in India].

(*Vision 2020*, vol. II: 179)

Meat production per head for the NER is higher than the national average. The dependency on milk 'imports' is high because cattle is used primarily for meat production rather than for milk, there is low buffalo per head ratio (0.02 compared to the national average of 0.09), and low milk productivity of cattle in the region.

(*Vision 2020*, vol. II: 58)

Agricultural systems remain predominantly traditional. The land-to-person ratio for the NE region (0.68 hectares/person) is much higher than the national average (0.32 hectares/person), with Arunachal Pradesh having the highest ratio (8.63 hectares/person) and Assam the lowest (0.29 hectares/person).

(*Vision 2020*, vol. II: 42)

Agriculture is the mainstay of the economies of the northeast. This sector accounted for close to 30 per cent of the region's NSDP in 2002–03, and is a major source of employment and livelihood for around 80 per cent of the population. However agricultural growth has been uneven across regions and crops. NER continues to be a net importer of food grains. In spite of covering 8.8 per cent of the country's total geographical area, NER produces only 1.5 per cent of the country's total food grain production.

(*Vision 2020*, vol. II: 39)

Economic Poverty (EP) of the region, as per the estimates of the Planning Commission, is 19.1 per cent, as against 28.5 per cent in the country as a whole, and is being reduced at a faster rate in NER as compared to the all-India average.

(*Vision 2020*, vol. II: 27)

The above is a mere sprinkling from the more weighty data and fact based interpretations that are advanced throughout *Vision 2020* – a typical format for texts that deal with development and economic growth. But the constant contrast drawn between the Northeast region (NER) and the all India country averages clashes with and

collides against another perhaps unintended narrative: the idea of 'historical difference' which altogether escapes the power of quantification, equivalence and comparison. One refers here to the often times passionate debates that animated the making of India's official policy towards the 'tribes' in what was then known as the North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA, today's Arunachal Pradesh). Many Indian administrators, academics and political leaders in the decades of the 1940s and 1950s, in fact, hotly questioned whether these tribes and communities were to be kept 'isolated' from the Indian mainstream.

One of the most striking voices on the subject, in fact, was that of the Oxford educated and self-trained anthropologist Verrier Elwin (1902–64). Elwin briefly served as tribal affairs advisor to the Indian government in NEFA and for quite a while his views carried much weight even with Prime Minister Nehru. In an absorbing biography on Elwin, Ramachandra Guha tells us that in the decades following India's independence in 1947 the central government was largely conflicted about its role in the near inaccessible mountains and hill ecologies of the Northeast region. And it was amidst this lack of official clarity that Elwin's ideas, strong beliefs and opinions, drawn from his many years of living with tribes in central and now Northeast India, acquired considerable academic, polemic and even political persuasion. More so after the publication of his much celebrated *A Philosophy for NEFA* (1957) in which the leitmotif of the book could be summed up in the term ' make haste slowly' (Guha 2014: 264). That is to say, the full force of modernity in the form of industrialization and economic growth had to be greatly tempered in the Northeast region because 'if the tribals move too fast', Elwin argued, 'they tend to move downwards' (Guha 2014: 264).

Elwin's pleas for restraint and going slow, however, ran afoul of an equally powerful set of opinion makers who with equal vigour argued that his tribal worldview amounted to a celebration of primitivism and was inevitably about turning the much disempowered tribe into objects for display in museums. Elwin nonetheless, before his untimely death in 1964, energetically responded to many of his critics by constantly fine-tuning and giving much nuance to his initial claims. Guha sums up Elwin's careful but firm conceptual navigation in which he ended up rejecting the extremes of isolation and assimilation by formulating instead a 'Middle Way, the way of integration' (Guha 2014: 263). The middle way was further explained by Elwin in his *A Philosophy of NEFA* as trying to resolve the puzzle of 'how to bring the blessings and advantages of modern medicine, agriculture and education to them, without destroying the rare and precious values of tribal life'.[5]

In several ways one could still argue perhaps that the tensions over 'assimilation versus integration' continue to play out in the manner India's Northeast is often framed and discussed in many official and popular forums. The *Vision 2020* document, in fact, also appears to twist awkwardly on this fault-line of sorts. One cannot help but note, for example, that despite the technical and objective tone of the document with its surfeit of statistics and averages to explain 'backwardness and the lack of prosperity in the NER', *Vision 2020* nonetheless acknowledges that:

> The quest for ethnic and regional identity, nationalism, and ideological motivations have fomented a climate of insurgency in several parts of the North Eastern region, which has led to political fragmentation of the region; the climate has been further fuelled by with the slow pace of development. The difficult terrain, dense forest cover and open borders with Myanmar and Bangladesh have provided a congenial environment for this.
>
> (*Vision 2020* vol. I: 6)

In effect, place based identities and recalcitrant or 'difficult' ecologies can congeal to amplify corrosive politics, furious opposition and disagreement. The *Vision 2020* document, thus, much as it sees salvation and hope in needed development for the NER, it also acknowledges that not only is a dense social world interwoven into the landscapes but that these thick cultural clots might not be reached only by economic means.

But, of course, it can also correctly be argued that too much is being made of the *Vision 2020* document by non-economists in the social sciences: after all *Vision 2020* is a mere text, a wish list, a cautious road map for change and above all else a qualified exercise for generating economic foresight. On the other hand – and this is the crux of this chapter's question – did the document despite its alluring claims for objectivity through data and fact end up re-asserting through its analyses, rhetoric and narrative style that the NER story can be understood within the biography of India's development quest? Put differently, did the region's pasts, histories and imaginations play out on the surfaces of its geography or the reverse that the very geography of the NER has been constituted by its pasts, histories and imagination? This is, I argue, a critical distinction that ends up posing the problem of development and economic growth differently: either we accept a geography that is intimately woven into and shaped by the turns of history rather than a history that was enacted on the passive stage

of geography. What follows is of course the inevitable question: how does history matter for developing the NER?

Experiencing the past

Before moving onto the final section, it is important that I state my preference for treating the idea of history as a dialogue between the present and the past.[6] This E. H. Carrian sense of history becomes particularly helpful for this chapter, I believe, as it prevents the past being warped by the pursuit for an ahistorical essentialized authentic moment. Instead, the past can be more meaningfully grasped as never fully escaping the taint of the ideological present. Two other qualifications also follow. First, my effort here is to discuss how a recent mood in histories on India's Northeast tend to increasingly emphasize the interpenetration of the geographic and the historical. That is history and geography co-constitute rather than exist as separate domains during period of change and transformation. Second, this effort, given the limitations of space, will be indicative rather than comprehensive.

In sum, I wish to suggest that by thus reviewing some of the relevant claims in four recent monographs dealing with histories of the Northeast region that *Vision 2020* has been somewhat blindsided (no pun intended) in failing to grasp how critical history was to constituting the region's geographic peculiarities and processes for identity formation, leave alone trying to redeem it through development and economic growth.

Bengt Karlsson, a much-celebrated Swedish anthropologist, in his monograph *Unruly Hills* (2011), which studies the ethnic communities in the state of Meghalaya points out how in pre-modern or pre-colonial times the hills and plains in the region were woven into a single resource bloc. The inhabitants comprising the *Jaintias, Garos*, and *Khasis* were marked by being relatively egalitarian social groupings and were characterized by chiefdoms, headmanships, clan loyalties, village decision-making bodies, and lineage-based hierarchies. A reasonably elaborate and complex social world that Karlsson is also keen to suggest which depended greatly on mobility between the hill and plain ecologies. The transformative moment, however, was initiated with the coming of British colonialism in the middle of the nineteenth century. Karlsson flags, in particular, three significant colonial initiatives: (1) the political and administrative separation of the hill ecologies from that of the plains, (2) the strengthening of male control over decision-making and (3) the introduction of private property in land. Whilst these colonial interventions were never entirely fully

realized, the entry of the modern Indian state in the latter half of the twentieth century only resulted in the further intensification of such modernizing process. Leading inevitably, Karlsson tells us, to the further erosion in Meghalaya of the community based institutions for managing local resources (Karlsson 2011).

There is a somewhat similar pattern that is discernible in Joy L. K. Pachuau's elegantly written monograph on the Mizos. In *Being Mizo* (2014), Pachuau tells us that not only is the notion of the Mizo as a distinct identity fairly recent in history but that, significantly as well, the strong association between identity and territoriality is equally novel for the region. Prior to the emergence of British colonial rule in the Lushai hills (mountain range spanning today's Mizoram and Tripura), Pachuau explains that a number of groups headed by chiefs crisscrossed the valleys, plains and hills as part of their livelihood strategies and cultural understanding of these landscapes. But as the British began to consolidate their sway over the hills by the early decades of the twentieth century, the idea of the 'fixed boundary' and the introduction of standard time was obsessively pursued as critical organizing principles for modern administration. To quote Pachuau:

> the struggle between the colonialists and the indigenous can be seen as a contestation between an identity founded on territory and territoriality and an identity founded on movement, which made the forcible 'rooting' of a people to a fixed space even more significant. (Pachuau 2014: 101)

Sanghamitra Misra's much-celebrated *Becoming a Borderland* (2011) further deepens our understanding of how certain landscapes and people in the NER were rendered separate and marginal by a slew of British colonial and modernizing impulses, beginning in the nineteenth century. What is Goalpara in today's Assam Valley, she points out, was in the Mughal period (sixteenth to seventeenth centuries) peopled by a range of mobile communities who shared cultural and historical ties with Bhutan, Tibet, Cooch Behar and parts of Bengal and Assam. While social, economic and political transformations had been shaping Goalpara complex histories through time, the introduction of absolute private property in land by the British inaugurated an unprecedented rupture in decisively sundering the intricate relationships and interdependencies between plain and hill ecologies. In time, much of Goalpara's social plurality and economic mobility was substantially inflected and altered by the spatial imagination of colonialism and the 'heartland' political sensibilities of the modern state (Misra 2011: 196–7).

The historian Gunnel Cederlof in her insightful sweeping study of India's Northeast from the early British colonial period, perhaps best explains how colonial modernity profoundly reconstituted the region's geography and its communities (Cederlof 2014: 44–78). In a chapter titled 'Making "Natural" Boundaries', we are told that kingdoms and chieftainships perceived geo-political boundaries very differently from the early colonial officials. For one, to most of the indigenous grouping a 'political boundary' was treated as a 'set of points, like *ghats* [steps leading to a riverfront] at narrow places where rivers flowed from the hills into the plains. Marking out territorial claims meant fortifying strategic strongholds such as heights or river bifurcations, or exercising authority by taxing market places'. For the British, on the other hand, marking a boundary meant connecting dots or points with lines that enclosed territory and usually made manifest in 'red ink on cartographic sheets' (Cederlof 2014: 49). In part, this sharp difference in how political geographies were viewed lay in the critical role of mobility for indigenous livelihood and cultural strategies. Cederlof, in fact, quotes David Ludden's persuasive conclusions from his study of Sylhet (now Bangladesh) to throw light on the immense sociological and economic consequences following the steady triumph of the cartographic boundary in the region:

> It decisively ended an 'old order' of fluidity and vagueness in which land use, commerce, and culture existed in mobile geographies and people [*sic*] were beyond the reach of state authority . . . the 'boundary's' modernity came with its subordination of all geographies to that of the state.
>
> (Cederlof 2014: 51)

From attempting something equivalent to a conceptual hop, jump and skip exercise through four well-argued and rigorously researched monographs, it becomes clearer that any meaningfully understanding of India's Northeast requires one to see it as being co-constituted by the simultaneous play of its history and geography. In effect, to treat them as separate domains or turn geography into a passive context to the loud voice of history is to impoverish or diminish the richness of insight and analysis.[7]

Concluding remarks

The *Vision 2020* document, to reiterate, is undoubtedly one of the most comprehensive efforts in recent decades that set out to map a pathway

of solutions for the NER's many economic, social and political challenges. And, not unexpectedly, any intellectual ambition positioned at such a scale would perforce invite meaningful academic scrutiny and careful evaluation. This chapter should be considered as merely one such attempt with the further caveat that any criticism, howsoever withering, does not necessarily set the grounds for the complete dismissal or disavowal of the document as being a very substantial and detailed exercise. Nonetheless, *Vision 2020* I argue rests on certain premises and principles that might weaken its capacity to solve or sort out precisely those challenges that it appeared most confident of addressing: in particular, I point out that *Vision 2020* by getting the geography of NER to sidestep its own history might misread a range of realities on the ground. This claim is significantly borne out by what appears to me to be the main historical hinge of the Vision 2020 document:

> Troubled by history and geo-politics, the Northeast has remained one of the most backward regions of the country. *The trauma of partition in 1947* not only took the region backwards by at least a quarter of a century, but also placed hurdles on future economic progress. *It isolated the region*, *sealed both land and sea routes for commerce and trade, and severed access to traditional markets and the gateway to the East and South-East Asia* – the Chittagong port in East Bengal (now Bangladesh). It distanced the approach to the rest of India by confining connectivity to a narrow 27-km-wide Siliguri corridor, making it a 'remote land' and constraining access for movement of goods and people.
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> (*Vision 2020* vol. I: 2, italics mine)

As a cursory reading of the four monographs cited in the previous section suggests, the NER of today was radically reconstituted in terms of its sociology, geography, economy and politics following the emergence and steady consolidation of British colonialism, the introduction of modernizing impulses under conditions of external domination and the dramatic re-articulation of the relationships between territory and identity. To therefore simply hold the partition of 1947 as a defining moment is not just flawed history but causes us to totally misread a range of critical social, cultural and political relationships that shape and continue to animate the NER.

Whilst these monographs, it must also be added as a further qualification, survey and offer a picture of change only in relatively few zones within the sprawling region of the NER, their conceptual implications are nonetheless compelling: that geography and history are

co-constituted. And since the pasts never quite disappear even as the people of the NER seem to have embraced the full force of the modern, those distant imaginations and memories, it would be perhaps be only correct to assume, still have the potential of reviving under new circumstances and as plots in new narratives. The authors of *Vision 2020* might yet be surprised, again.

Notes

1 This chapter is a substantially revised version of the article titled 'Making Backwardness: How to Imagine the Northeast as a Development Deficit' *Eastern Quarterly*, 4(3&4): 207–17, 2007–08.
2 India's Northeast region currently refers to the states of *Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, Sikkim, Nagaland, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh.*
3 On post-development, see Escobar (1995); Rahnema and Bawtree (1997); Crush (1995); Sachs (2000/1997); Deb (2009). Also see for an excellent summary and discussion McGregor (2009: 1688–1702).
4 *North Eastern Region: Vision 2020*. Henceforth *Vision 2020*.
5 *A Philosophy of NEFA*, cited in Guha (2014: 263).
6 It is but obvious that I draw this claim from Carr (1964/1961). For an engaged discussion on E. H. Carr, see Evans (1999).
7 Ideally, I should have offered a broad and telling discussion of the growing importance of environmental history writing on the Northeast. Notably, the writings of Saikia (2011) and Sharma (2011). While I clearly stand guilty of omission, my argument in this essay however was to highlight geography as a political and territorial quality rather than an ecological one.

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