Passages along the Brahmaputra

In 1841 a young man from Assam embarked on a lengthy journey along the Brahmaputra river. Voyaging in solitary splendour with an entourage of servants, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan had as his destination the city of Calcutta, where he aimed to join the prestigious Hindu School. Through the nineteenth century many young men across the Indian subcontinent undertook urban educational passages to cities such as Delhi, Lahore, Allahabad, Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta. Anandaram was the first inhabitant of Assam to venture upon such a novel journey. In Benedict Anderson’s classic phrase, he was a pioneer of the new secular pilgrimage. The new pilgrimages and urban encounters formed an essential component within a larger set of historical changes: they involved making an imperial “garden” and accompanying it, creating momentous encounters with modernity for Assam and India through British colonial rule.

For those officials, clerks, and migrants from British India who followed East India Company gunboats and explorers into Assam from the 1820s onward, the landscape of Anandaram’s homeland lacked a sufficiency of urban concentrations and transport infrastructure. Nineteenth-century Assam’s countryside was dotted with immense forested tracts and a large number of water bodies, interspersed with hamlets and small urban clusters. In place of nucleated
villages populated by specialized cultivating and artisanal groups, the river-valley plains alternated small riverside hamlets with wooded and cultivated tracts. The largest urban settlements, Guwahati, Jorhat, Sibsagar, and Shillong, each possessed a few thousand inhabitants and blended into surrounding rural hamlets. Decades of political strife when the Ahom kingdom of Assam faced multiple internal and external challenges left a virtual absence of wheel-ready roads and thinned out the population. Hill tracts that bordered the river plains had even sparser populations and dense forested terrain. Peasants moved between shifting and settled agricultural modes, punctuated with extensive use of arable, forest, and water commons.

Anandaram’s ship took two long months to reach Calcutta. Various transport bottlenecks long separated Assam from easy access to adjoining regions. A challenging topography aided rulers in maintaining independence from external political formations such as the Mughal Empire, while accentuating the region’s ecological and economic distinctiveness. The natural frontiers of hilly tracts such as the Naga Hills separated the Assam plains from Himalayan and Sinic neighbours. Other natural obstructions, on both land and water, hindered long-distance connections with the Gangetic plains of Northern and Eastern India. Despite a length of over three thousand miles, year-round turbulence and seasonal floods limited navigation on the Brahmaputra river and its tributaries. Alternative land routes that linked the Brahmaputra and Gangetic plains had the disadvantage of crossing impenetrable, wooded, and high-altitude territories such as the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Rains and floods made such territories almost impassable for long stretches of the year. All these factors hindered Assam’s pre-modern trade and deterred many travellers. Historically such geographical inaccessibility also shaped external representations. Over the ages Sanskrit and Persian chroniclers depicted Assam as a remote periphery to which legend and hearsay attributed a fearsome reputation for supernatural wonders and esoteric witching rituals.

The British annexation of Assam in 1826 and the resultant economic and political restructuring necessitated overcoming transport hurdles. Despite the Brahmaputra’s notorious reputation among navigators, commercially run steamers now joined country boats in plying the waterways. These steamers carried increasing volumes of people and commodities. However, improvements necessitated
time and money. In the 1850s a frustrated official complained that a voyage from Calcutta to Assam took as long as a voyage from the Cape of Good Hope to London. A decade later—some twenty years after Anandaram’s journey—a planter was dismayed that this voyage still required two weeks.

By this point in the mid-nineteenth century the discovery of Assam tea held the prospect of refinement for what seemed a wild, jungle-laden frontier, and promised to enhance the economic prosperity of the British Empire. Assam acquired strategic and economic import just as Britain sought to turn its Indian possessions to best account. Tea cultivation rapidly expanded into a million-pound industry bringing large colonial revenues. The name Assam became synonymous with tea, an everyday staple for households worldwide. A range of interlocutors, from British bio-prospectors to American missionaries to Assamese gentry, extolled the Edenic transformation under way, of a jungle into a garden. They conjured up a future ordered landscape of export-producing tea plantations, a stark contrast to the partially cultivated and imperfectly commercialized state of Nature that they saw in the present.

In the past the Ahom kings, ruling over the greater part of the Assam plains, successfully resisted most Mughal imperial incursions. However, they were weakened by internal strife, and much less capable when later forced to face an expansionist Burmese state. Burmese aggrandizers were expelled from Assam only after the East India Company’s military intervention in 1825–26. This first Anglo-Burmese war, which the British undertook principally to safeguard adjoining Bengal possessions, eventually led to the annexation of Ahom Assam and neighbouring chiefdoms. Ultimately the British took over virtually the entire frontier region known today as northeast India.

Initially most of these annexations were incorporated into the Bengal Presidency of British India. From 1875 the British government instituted a separate province of Assam and adjoining it, separately administered northeast frontier tracts. Assam according to the common understanding (as distinct from Assam as defined by its fluctuating political boundaries) consisted of the valley plains of the Brahmaputra river-system and the hill tracts that immediately surrounded them. In addition, from the divisions of the Bengal Presidency (1905–12) up to the era of Indian independence and partition
(1947), the vagaries of colonial politics ushered the Sylhet plain, with ties to historic Bengal, directly into Assam’s ambit. Long-term organic connections that had evolved through ecology and history meant that more distant hilly peripheries also played an important role in modern Assam’s history and politics. After 1947 Assam’s boundaries underwent further changes.

On returning from Calcutta, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan found that his experience of western education and his command over the English language eventually helped him become British Assam’s first native magistrate. His family roots were in the Brahmaputra valley’s second-tier élite, an upper-caste service gentry that served the Ahom state in a bureaucratic capacity. Like Anandaram, many members of this gentry managed to use administrative knowledge and a virtual monopoly over literacy to ease into British clerical service. In contrast, the top-ranking pre-modern élite, the Ahom warrior aristocracy, lost ground in political and economic matters.

A prolific writer in the Asomiya, Bengali, and English languages, Anandaram expressed the modernistic, patriotic, and improving desires of many locals. Beginning with his father, Haliram, and taking in Anandaram, his cousin Gunabhiram Barua, and their offspring, this gentry family contributed four generations of publicists, mostly men but also a few women. These were authors and commentators active in the burgeoning public arenas of colonial modernity. Anandaram, described as the most prominent representative of “Young Assam,” publicly extolled new avenues for economic uplift while seeking progress for Assamese society, language, and culture. Succeeding generations of publicists, while they disagreed with Anandaram as to the state’s willingness to promote local improvement, followed his lead in creating programmatic initiatives for social and cultural progress. Until the turn of the century most publicists were upper-caste males who had greater access to education and public life. But from the early twentieth century onward Assam’s public arenas saw increasing visibility of educated lower-caste and tribal males, as well as women from different social groups.

From the mid-nineteenth century the British state nurtured an export-oriented tea enterprise as an essential part of the ideology of agrarian improvement that it enunciated for its Indian colony in general, and Assam in particular. However, it eventually neglected the overall development of the region and its infrastructure outside
the European-dominated industry and its tea plantations. Partly the justification was what it claimed as the alleged lack of interest of most locals in economic advancement. The British stigmatized the Assamese as a lazy people, enervated by home-grown opium. As tea and rice acreage replaced verdant forests, the state created a legal apparatus to import plantation workers on indentured and penal contracts. The entry of over a million labouring migrants irrevocably changed Assam’s social landscape and nurtured new notions of racial and cultural alterity. The consequences reached beyond an imperial labour regime to create intricate interplays between cultural constructions of race, social histories of resistance, and local imaginings of modernity and nationhood.

In this book I argue that a wide-ranging rhetoric of “improvement” and “progress” came to characterize both colonial efforts to order Assam into an imperial garden and local élites’ responses to them. The varied, protean, and contested meanings of improvement and progress — whether plans for agrarian improvement dear to imperial scientists, policymakers, and tea capitalists, or projects of cultural and political \textit{unnati} (progress) reiterated in the writings and speeches of local intellectuals and entrepreneurs — form a broad unifying theme to understand the modern making of Assam, and beyond that, the making of modern India and South Asia. The book seeks to elucidate such important processes intrinsic to the constitution of cultural capital and the political economy of colonial and modern India, as well as the complicated interactions between migratory and local groups within a regional field.

My subject is a febrile milieu where migratory and local groups generated, contested, and modified a host of identities around place, people, and community nodes alongside the immense changes that colonial modernity brought for Assam and India. Multiple improvement agendas provided inspiration for locals and migrants looking to circulate and mobilize around new and remade identities, even as the colonial establishment shaped Assam into a commodity-producing garden space. New and plural identities such as Bodo or Baganiya or Na-Asomiya developed in interaction with the dominant identity of Assamese, with each other, and with the larger field of local, provincial, and colonial discourses in the context of a rapidly changing political economy, social and cultural ferment, colonial state governance, and emergent nationalist ideologies.
Nineteenth-century British colonial knowledge ranked indigenous societies as variously advanced and backward in relation to each other and European modernity. Within an older Indic knowledge system, Assam’s borderlands location and comparative inaccessibility already gave it an image as a land of witchcraft and demonic people. Now, a seemingly modern vocabulary of utility and diligence added to this representation, with frequent condemnations of the region’s inhabitants as backward, even in comparison with other colonial subjects. In sharp contrast to the negativity attached to lazy natives, colonialism promoted a glowing image of primitive diligence for the “aboriginal” men, women, and children recruited to Assam from distant, impoverished regions such as Chotanagpur.

The book studies this racialization of local and migrant groups as shaped by, and in turn transforming, the Aryanist caste and Victorian race science ideologies that Tony Ballantyne depicts as central to European “imperial webs.”

The consolidation of an imperial tea garden both depended on and promoted these, and other types of movements, migration, and circulation. British Indian state space and the lived geographies that it generated, ranging from railways to standardized accounting, framed everyday experiences of colonialism for most colonial subjects. By the end of the nineteenth century railroads reduced the journey from Calcutta into Assam to two or three days. This eased both tea exports and the influx of migrants. The majority of new arrivals still consisted of tea coolies—dispossessed migrants with little option but to stay and toil, despite harsh conditions that local labourers refused to countenance. Often they arrived in the wake of what Mike Davis terms the late Victorian holocausts of famine and drought, conditions exacerbated by the harshness of colonial revenue demands. But increasingly there were other, better-off migrants, such as traders from Rajasthan, soldier-grazers from Nepal, and clerks from Sylhet and Calcutta. Thousands more settlers from densely populated East Bengal also entered: landless peasants attracted to cultivable lands on the last-remaining agrarian frontier of the subcontinent. In contrast to incoming groups, most Assamese travellers were sojourners who undertook secular urban pilgrimages into the Indic heartland and carried experiences of colonial modernity into Assam.

While this book focuses on the locality and the region of Assam, it locates this subject-field in terms of larger trans-regional and trans-
imperial discourses and institutions. It argues that modern Assam, as it moved from being a previously peripheral frontier kingdom into an imperial tea garden and a key hinterland for British India, was made by and against a variety of Indic encounters. Many of these took place between Assam and Calcutta. The imperial city and port of Calcutta, which served as a key site for the circulation of commodities, ideas, and people, helped to shape processes crucial to South Asia’s colonial modernity that affected manifold regions and peoples outside Bengal itself. An “imagined” Calcutta and a “real” Calcutta were central to many of the economic, political, and cultural transactions that fostered a sense of Assamese belonging, regionality, and national aspirations. Tea played an essential role in these transactions, whether in terms of commerce and the world market, labour mobilization of coolie workers, or cultural shifts around consumption and production. Elite and labouring groups evolved new understandings about locality, regions, and nation, while engaging with colonial modernity, cultural circulation, and commodity capitalism.

The book analyses a variety of state-generated archival and colonial documents as well as vernacular and local sources to explore this broad canvas. Some of its major themes and arguments are outlined below, followed by a summary of its chapters, and an account of its making.

**Making Empire’s Garden:**
**Labour, Colonial Modernity, and Public Arenas**

Through the entire course of colonial rule, urban and infrastructure growth within Assam remained tardy, since state attention and private investment concentrated on the agro-industrial plantation sector. The export-oriented tea enterprise focused on forging intimate connections that were external to the region, centering around Calcutta and its port, and looking to the British metropole beyond. Rather than serve as agents within Assam, Calcutta’s managing agency houses were the hub for Assam tea’s capital accumulation and disbursement, higher-level recruitment, supplies, and marketing. On the eve of the First World War about three-fourths of the total British capital invested in India was still based in Calcutta. The city’s managing agencies locked together the structures of commerce, finance,
railways, collieries, as well as the jute and tea industries, to control the commanding heights of British India’s economy. For instance, processed tea harvests were dispatched from Assam plantations by steamer and train to Calcutta’s port, then onward to London and export markets worldwide. Tea equipment and managerial personnel for Assam were obtained all the way from Britain, via Calcutta. This created a unique relationship of dependence between Assam as an imperial garden undergoing development, and Calcutta as the sophisticated gateway for capital, expertise, exports, urban values, and trans-imperial circulation.

The hierarchical tenor of the economic relationship extended into a wider cultural and political realm. Until 1874 (and briefly during 1905–12) the British governed Assam as a part of Bengal. Well into the twentieth century Assam’s élites depended on an external infrastructure of higher education in the absence of adequate local opportunities. As a new generation of gentry males sought college education to take advantage of colonial job openings, many became sojourners in the nearest metropolis, Calcutta. For most, this resulted in their first, momentous encounters with the materials of modernity, ranging from the printing press and the university to the railway and the restaurant. Exiles from home, these young men transcended caste, ethnic, and religious differences to develop strong affective ties to a des (homeland) and its Asomiya mother-tongue. Often this produced a complex situation in which economic links and newly created emotional attachments to Calcutta and Bengali culture jostled with regional pride and cultural nationalism. Thus journeys and passages into the urban realms of British India helped local élites to articulate their specific claims to the colonial modernity that they encountered, while at the same time they negotiated differing understandings of what was Assam and what was Bharat (India), and the spatial and emotive nodes of evolving identities.

Imperial capital and enterprise transformed Assam into a plantation economy characterized as much by rapid demographic change as by the visible emergence of ordered tea gardens and ricefields in place of forested, riverine, and commons lands. This immense socioeconomic transformation provided an important impetus for local élites to undertake parallel projects of cultural assertion and social demarcation, and lent urgency to their claims to be represented in the political sphere.
With this broad field of study, this book connects labour history and the exploration of colonial modernity. It argues that the racialized creation of the tea labourer was the catalyst for a larger South Asian project of cultural redefinition whereby members of Assam’s gentry sought to insert their homeland into an imagined “Indo-Aryan” community and a modern Indian political space. Local élites sought to assert their distance from aboriginal labouring coolies as well as indigenous low-caste and ‘tribal’ groups. Simultaneously they claimed kinship with upper-caste Indic groups elsewhere on the subcontinent. As college-educated youths returned to Assam, now valorised as their beloved motherland of Asomi Aai (Assam the Mother), they presented themselves as modern representatives of Assam and India. Language became a fundamental part of the way they imagined the past and present. Based on their Asomiya mother-tongue’s historical relationship to Sanskrit and Sanskrit-derived languages, the dominant gentry élite claimed intimate ties with a broad swath of high-status South Asian groups. A variety of historically framed linguistic and racial claims allowed local élites, Hindu and Muslim, to assert claims to modernity while simultaneously pushing the burden of primitiveness onto “non-Aryan” neighbours, whether indigenous tribals or migrant coolie plantation workers.

Jürgen Habermas’s concept of the public sphere as one that mediated between society and state has long offered historians a useful framework for analyzing the structures of modernity. The public sphere held out the potential for emancipation as well as for social, economic, and political exclusion. While this served well as a discursive model against which actual political and personal relations could be measured, Habermas’s sole focus on the bourgeois liberal public elided important elements of contestation and unequal access. Subsequent modifications of Habermas’s model, for example by Geoff Eley and Johanna Meehan, suggest that the public sphere instead be regarded as the arena where cultural or ideological or gendered contest or negotiation among a variety of publics took place in a single structured setting that advantaged some and disadvantaged others.

Francesca Orsini’s and Sanjay Joshi’s explorations of the Hindi public sphere have proved particularly illuminating in studying colonial modernity in a specific South Asian context. Orsini’s work focuses upon the socially subordinate vernacular élite (which constituted the bulk of North India’s public), its ambitions and frustrations, and its
inclination to establish dogmatic norms for linguistic and cultural standards and exclude certain social groups from equal participation. Sanjay Joshi argues that a middle class constituted itself primarily through ability and desire for cultural entrepreneurship. Modernity was not so much an ideology as a project that empowered its principal purveyors, the (mostly) male, colonial-era descendants of service élites, publicists active in the public sphere. These publicists were not necessarily distinguished in terms of access to economic or political power, but active involvement in public-sphere politics partially allowed them to fashion their own destinies, and the nation/s of which they dreamed.

By adapting such notions of overlapping and contending publics, this book explores the consolidation of an Assamese public sphere from the late nineteenth century onward, where multiple public arenas emerged, coexisted, competed, converged, and fragmented. It argues that print culture was an important instrument for extending communicative networks and the reach of these publics. Print had a considerable if limited democratizing impact in this colonial space. In Assam print had its origins with a nineteenth-century missionary periodical that standardized and popularized a pre-modern court idiom. It enabled the wide dissemination and circulation of improving vernacular writings from different ends of a broad social spectrum. Printed personal testimonies, autobiographies, letters, memoirs, and biographies allow an important, often overlooked entry into what Sumit Sarkar terms the fragile, doubt-ridden self-images and aspirations of colonial publicists.

From the mid-nineteenth century Assamese élites became active users of the new media of public meetings, voluntary associations, and the printing press. Initially these media were dominated by gentry voices who articulated exclusivist claims to Indo-Aryan racial and cultural belonging. They portrayed tea labourers in particular as backward newcomers whose menial values and non-Aryan origins isolated them from future possibilities of progress. Nonetheless, by the 1920s this mindset gradually changed as Gandhian and other modernist pan-Indian and transnational ideologies of emancipation gained influence. Many men and women in Assam joined the Congress, Communist, and Socialist political parties. Gandhian ideals in particular now inspired many among them to propose a wholesale reform of society and a philosophy of national resistance and progress. At the same time they advocated local campaigns for temper-
ance and improved treatment of coolies, tribals, peasants, and women. This reformism perforce involved élite rethinking about socially subaltern groups such as migrant coolies, previously stigmatized as incapable of mainstream participation and progress. This rethinking received increased urgency in the twentieth century as many subaltern groups themselves began to use public media and political forums to challenge dominant articulations of region and nation that excluded them from full belonging.

Élites responded variously to these challenges from below, sometimes negatively, at other times sympathetically, and often paternalistically, while the Assamese public arena expanded in scope and reach to accommodate the demands of newly vocal groups such as Bodo tribals and educated women. As various new groups became active participants in public discussions about history, progress, language, and community, late colonial and postcolonial attempts by local élites to consolidate a modern Assam faced a constant process of negotiation and disputation. Even while the dominant regional identity of Assamese achieved a strong public presence, a host of affiliated identities, whether of Bodos, Assamese Nepalis, or Na-Asomiya Muslims, developed to interact with, emulate, or contest that dominant one. All of these interacted too with other regional identities such as that of Sylheti Bengalis, and most significantly with the novel concepts of a national Indian identity and of nation-states to which all might belong.

Improvement and Progress:
Garden, Colony, and Nation/s

Gardens had long-standing associations with notions of paradise and civilization, whether in Indo-Persian or in European traditions. However, from the early modern period onward there appeared a remarkable change, as Europeans began to view gardens as receptacles of empire, filled with collections of flora and fauna accumulated from the lands they had discovered and colonized. The creation of botanical and zoological gardens linked with bio-prospecting explorations and imperial expansion was paralleled by global endeavours to transform seemingly nonproductive spaces into productive gardens. Assam appeared to be a promising example of such a space.
Assam’s arrival as an imperial tea garden was in the first place inspired by a larger ideological doctrine of agrarian improvement. Progressive capitalism avowedly formed the fulcrum of British Indian socioeconomic policy, especially under Lord William Bentinck, a self-professed “practical agriculturist.” However, this state-inspired improvement doctrine proved restrictive in its actual implementation. In Assam, for instance, full participation and benefits from the tea industry became virtually reserved for white denizens of the empire. Still, the slogan of improvement continued to generate some optimism among locals, particularly Assam’s gentry. Over the nineteenth century, while many locals strived for a bright future for themselves through the new tea garden economy, increasingly their energies were directed toward a program of social and cultural regeneration. They called this objective unnati, a term increasingly in use all over the subcontinent. Even in the early twentieth century, when Assamese élites had come to bitterly contest most of the British claims to improvement, modified visions of unnati still shaped the mental horizon of most nationalists.

The classic contribution to the study of colonial improvement and progress is Ranajit Guha’s history of the Permanent Settlement of Bengal in 1793. He traces the origins of the British colonial faith in Indian landed élites as an improving class to the ideas of the French physiocratic thinkers and the English agricultural revolution. When Bengal’s zamindar landlords failed to justify the faith which had bestowed on them the Permanent Settlement’s landed estates, with the state’s revenue claims fixed in all perpetuity, the British regime transferred hopes for agrarian improvement onto other landed groups such as prosperous peasant-proprietors, or “ryots.” Over the nineteenth century the colonial state abandoned the model of Bengal’s Permanent Settlement in favor of that of time-bound Ryotwari land settlements with peasant-proprietors. In his later writings Ranajit Guha makes an important polemical intervention when he argues that the idiom of improvement, in areas as varied as education, the factory, and marriage legislation, informed almost all colonial efforts to relate non-antagonistically to the ruled but in reality offered little but political sops to placate élites. Subsequently a contest for hegemony defined the rivalry between bourgeois aspirants to power and the colonial rulers. In contrast to Ranajit Guha, another historian of modern South Asia, Peter Robb, asserts that colonial rule, however
hollow its improving pretensions, made important beginnings in creating new forms of interested attachment to government, and through those generated an expectation of progress which outlasted colonialism.12

On the subject of improvement and agrarian initiatives, David Arnold points out that individual European administrators, missionaries, naturalists, and a variety of Indian groups played a significant role in extending and modifying this doctrine beyond the purview of the colonial state.13 Ranajit Guha’s work on the Permanent Settlement left unexplored such later incarnations that developed in regions other than Bengal, and in a variety of other hands. Richard Drayton makes an important intervention on the doctrine of improvement, using the lens of the newly emergent historiographies of science and environment and the “new imperial history.”14 He argues that agrarian improvement was a key instrument of British state policy, as it disseminated a range of improving ideas and practices, particularly those associated with the natural and agrarian sciences, from metropolitan Britain into its nineteenth-century colonial empire. However, Drayton’s focus on Kew Gardens and British botanists is too restrictive: it needs to be amplified by expansive trans-imperial studies of how various local and metropolitan actors took the notion of improvement into new directions even as older initiatives failed. For instance, when Bengal’s Permanent Settlement turned sour, British and Indian members of Calcutta’s once-prominent Agricultural and Horticultural Society moved from advocacy of core agrarian innovations into a narrower horticultural agenda. In newly annexed Assam the doctrine of improvement inspired the ambitious project of an imperial garden based around tea. Individuals as diverse as the Bengali merchant Dwarkanath Tagore, the Assamese aristocrat Maniram Barbhandar Barua, the American missionary Nathan Brown, and the Calcutta-based British trader William Prinsep expressed faith in the transformative possibilities of tea enterprise.

For most Assam locals, tea eventually became the god that failed. Despite a brief window when improving British partnerships with a diversity of local individuals and groups seemed achievable, the late-nineteenth-century tea project of British India was consolidated as a predominantly white enterprise. Indeed, the supremacy of British capital and management in this sphere was such that its hold over the tea industry in India outlasted the era of formal empire, well into the
late twentieth century. A combination of ideological, economic, and political factors caused the tea enterprise to be dominated by racialized constructions pertaining to entrepreneurship and labour. Historians of labour such as Ranajit Das Gupta, Rana Behal, Prabhu Mohapatra, and Samita Sen have shown how the coolie system of Assam’s plantations developed along racialized and exploitative lines similar to disciplinary and legal regimes on other imperial plantations, creating a distinct enclave economy ruled by a “Planter’s Raj.”15 The colonial state’s obsession with the tea industry also derailed other improving efforts for the region. Although British officials introduced Ryotwari land settlements with Assam’s peasant-proprietors to replace pre-modern land tenures, the tea industry’s low opinion of locals and peasant society meant that the kind of optimism vested by British administrators in Punjab’s cultivators, for instance, was absent in Assam. As a corollary, even the limited infrastructural investment that other regions received from the colonial state was absent, or benefited only the tea sector where it existed. For instance, railway lines in Assam failed to connect the region’s towns and districts, and instead served only the needs of plantation management. A previously vague expectation that British rule ought to bring improvement to India, Thomas Metcalf argues, was consolidated by the mid-nineteenth century into a distinctive ideology of imperial governance, inspired by the ideals of British liberalism.16 The historiography of colonial South Asia provides ample evidence of the huge gap between this ideology and its fulfillment. Nonetheless, the hopes evoked among many colonial subjects by the slogan of improvement cannot be ignored, nor can the initiatives that it catalyzed, although it ultimately disappointed.

One of the first locals to articulate optimistic views of state-led improvement, in particular its agrarian agenda, was Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, the young Assamese magistrate and publicist. In his vernacular writings in the 1840s and 1850s Anandaram explicitly referred to the image of a blooming, productive garden which would transform Assam through a combination of British and local enterprise. At the same time he expressed his dreams for a wholesale rejuvenation of local society. He hoped to enlist British support for locals’ reformist efforts in arenas ranging from educational and language innovation to agricultural and peasant uplift. Anandaram’s vision received new impetus from a new generation of late-nine-
teenth-century Assamese gentry who placed progress at the centre stage of hopes for their homeland’s present and future, eulogizing the transformation of Assam through the tea enterprise. However, by the end of the nineteenth century racially exclusionist colonial policies had gradually demolished local optimism about collaborative possibilities in the tea garden economy. While members of the Assamese gentry had initially aspired to become tea planters in their own right, most could become only hired clerical employees of British tea firms: the few who achieved planter status operated on a petty scale compared to their white counterparts. Nonetheless, the dependence of local élites upon the economic and political structures of colonial modernity meant that they had little choice but to look to the state for support, even when dissatisfied with its policies. In contrast to Anandaram’s expansive hopes for agrarian development, later generations of Assamese publicists proffered few autonomous ideas for economic progress. This was a telling indicator of the increasingly restrictive circumstances for entrepreneurship in fin-de-siècle colonial India.

Sumit Sarkar has acutely analyzed how from 1870 to 1905 dreams of improvement and reform under British auspices were dashed without as yet being replaced by an alternative viable patriotic vision of nationalist activism which might end colonial rule. A disjuncture of state and society, politics and community, began to appeal to many Indian intellectuals as a result of disillusionment with promises of improvement from above and with the futility of existing mendicant oppositional politics. Manu Goswami adds another important element to our understanding when she argues that this period also saw the elaboration of India as a spatially bounded national space and economy. By the 1920s quests for individual and community advancement were able to lay the foundation for a broader, more optimistic agenda to seek cultural and political progress for region and nation. The Assamese élite objective of unni was supplemented by other calls for progress—whether from Muslim peasant leaders or lower-caste and tribal publicists, who saw agrarian and economic improvement as an urgent prerequisite for broader social and cultural uplift and community redefinition. As P. K. Datta’s work on Bengali Muslim publicists shows, such voices from below have often been overshadowed by urban élite and state discourses. This book analyzes a number of early-twentieth-century improvement and iden-
tity initiatives to better locate the ground-level complexities of the quests for colonial independence and nationhood to which they led.

In the postcolonial period the expectations of progress that the colonial state had so singularly failed to meet were transferred onto its successors, the new nation-states of South Asia. In postcolonial India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (which incorporated some parts of erstwhile British Assam as well as East Bengal), the thwarting of these expectations often played a major role in creating volatile political situations. In particular, the twenty-first-century Indian state of Assam confronts multiple challenges from various insurgent groups, who accuse regional and central governments of perpetuating patterns of colonial exploitation long after the demise of the British Empire. Disillusionment with the slow pace of socioeconomic progress and perceived disenfranchisement has impelled different groups, from tribals to former coolies, to contest the legitimacy of the Indian nation-state and its local stakeholders. However, many of these contesting movements have themselves manifested weakness. Although critiques of the region’s “economic backwardness and political marginality” have served as their rallying cry, they have often failed to enunciate broad-based programs for economic growth, social equity, and grassroots political mobilization for democracy. Instead nativist demands for territorial autonomy and a sectarian type of identity politics, lacking a proper class and gender critique, have been common. At times there have been attempts to seize power and territory through sectarian killing and ethnic cleansing. Contestatory groups have been riven with dissent while the viability of the twentieth century’s national formations appears increasingly fragile. Meanwhile, India’s Northeast remains buffeted by ecological, economic, and demographic pressures, with social inequities worsened by global commodity capitalism and migration, and political rivalries between the nation-states whose frontiers it demarcates.

This book examines local and imperial knowledge, economic improvement and social progress, racialized, ethnicized, and gendered identities, cultural and religious assertions, colonial exploitation, local resistances, and nationalist ideologies. For the most part its detailed regional archival study covers the period from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth, but it ends with broader, urgent, and troubling questions which face twenty-first-century South Asia, and many other countries and regions of the global South.
Part I focuses on the British discovery of Assam tea and the establishment of an export-oriented enterprise based on plantation production using indentured migrant labour. Chapter 1 explores how the imperatives of plantation production reordered Assam’s natural environment, in which commons, forested, and swidden lands, and people, were subjected to the scientific arguments, the economic pragmatism, and eventually the industrial discipline of creating an imperial tea garden. Chapter 2 discusses Assam’s character as a historical borderlands distinguished by long-standing movements of commodities, people, and material cultures. Even as colonialism brought about the modern migration of coolies to serve as a docile work force for its garden, its construction of local indolence helped create a distinct, white-dominated enclave sector for tea production, and constituted the coolie migrant as a racial and cultural Other for Assam’s inhabitants. Chapter 3 argues that the plantation production system introduced for the Assam garden decisively transformed the region’s social demographics, far beyond the entry and settlement of labouring tea coolies. New opportunities emerged on this expanding frontier for Marwari traders, Nepali graziers, Sylheti clerks, and East Bengali Muslim peasants to migrate and settle in Assam, and to create new social and political identities in the process.

Part II focuses on the social, cultural, and political circulation of people, ideas, and commodities that distinguished colonial modernity for the Assam region and the subcontinent as a whole. It explores how members of the Assamese gentry transformed themselves into a modern intelligentsia and dominated the new public sphere and its discussions around history, nationhood, and progress. The complicated, often fraught nature of the identities that developed on this Indic frontier meant an uneasy location within the parameters of a historical Assamese homeland and a new Indian nation in the making. Chapter 4 argues that the transition to colonial British rule engendered important cultural shifts and a variety of ideological and power struggles, particularly for the temporal and religious notables of the old order who faced cultural misunderstandings and economic conflicts with colonial functionaries. In contrast, the service gentry of the Ahom regime were able to use their literate and bureaucratic skills to gain employment under the British, and accumulate a new cultural capital of literature, language, and devotionalism. Chapter 5 explores the consolidation of a colonial intelligentsia and the emergence of key publicists within an urban associational culture and a
vernacular public sphere. The involvement of the Brahmaputra valley’s predominantly caste gentry élites with the city of Calcutta, its educational institutions, print culture, and consumption patterns, formed an important impetus for a new social identity which sought to balance local particularity with Indic cultural and religious belonging, in order to initiate a new agenda of improvement and progress. Chapter 6 focuses upon how a newly standardized vernacular language emerged as the most visible component of this modernizing Assamese identity. It explores the social inclusions and exclusions that this process engendered, and how the politics of empowering language necessitated a vocabulary that stressed historical and emotional ties to a historicized and gendered mother-tongue. Chapter 7 argues that the constitution of Assam’s multiple public arenas and their claims to the twentieth century’s nation-in-making operated through a new language of gendered social improvement, and racial and historical entitlements. Contestatory movements found new adherents and political arguments within the volatile expectations generated by the achievement of independence from colonial rule, and the disillusionments that the postcolonial nation and its structures of regional governance subsequently generated.

The conclusion considers how Assam has evolved through the fraught destinies of local nationalisms and regional configurations within South Asia, as well as the impact of globalizing market processes. The making of modern Assam involved the making of the Indian national formation of which it came to constitute a part, and to which it poses so many challenges today. Assam offers a striking example of how the interplay of global commodity flows, imperial rule, and local cultural contestations has shaped the expression of nationalisms in the postcolonial, multiethnic societies and states of the global South. The lush, green appearance of the tea garden which empire created still conceals deep fissures and conflicts, despite all the hopes and promises associated with the postcolonial regimes that succeeded it.

Global and Local Journeys: Personal and Political

In the course of my writing this book, a typical conversation would go this way. “Hmmm. Writing about India . . . oh, Assam. Interest-
ing. Umm, where is it, actually?” Over my years as a student and professional in Britain, the United States, and Canada, I eventually evolved a strategy to deal with this sort of question. I would remind my interlocutor of her last trip to the supermarket, to its shelves of tea, where lay the packets marked Assam. There, I announced, was my subject. The conversation usually ended at this point. Packaged tea was central to the world marketplace, ubiquitous yet mysterious, travelling far and wide with evocations of distant places, depictions of graceful women picking the leaf. This, many questioners might have concluded, was the essence of Assam. This Assam existed in Cambridge, London, Pittsburgh, and Toronto, as it did everywhere yet nowhere.

Was Assam merely a label, like Darjeeling or Demerara or Madeira, an adjunct to the term “tea,” for the world at large? I was reminded of my college days in Delhi. Whenever my Assam home was mentioned, my peers would exclaim, “Oh, yes, your father must be in tea.” This was an assumption that I would hasten to correct, thinking of my sober parent and his middle-class government job, worlds away from the tea manager’s quasi-feudal bungalow and lifestyle, an entrenched “Raj” relic in postcolonial India. In my family’s existence Assam tea impinged mostly through tales of distant relatives living in “gardens” whose retinue of servants grew yearly, and whose children attended expensive boarding schools, and of course also through the ctc beverage that my economical parents continually drank, so different from the beautifully packaged, first-flush teas that I later encountered in the gourmet market of the global North. Tea workers, and the lives they led, meant little to me in my sheltered youth, although I was puzzled by the term “coolie manuh” (coolie people) employed by adults around me, usually in a disparaging manner.

Puzzlingly, the Assam history that I studied in my provincial Guwahati school resounded with kings and warriors, viceroys and commissioners, poets and freedom fighters, but said nothing about the universe of tea. When I made the journey to Delhi University, I connected with little that my fellow students from “mainstream India” associated with Assam. Certainly I was ignorant of any skill in performing the Assamese Bihu folk dance. That was the other image which every Indian knew, a vividly gendered fantasy circulated endlessly by national fetes celebrating the country’s Republic Day, with
demonstrations of the region’s “folk” culture by supple, smiling youngsters clad in “ethnic” dress.

During those university years another Assam emerged in newspaper headlines and television screens, never to go away. This was the Assam of bombs and killings, massacres of Bangladeshi and North Indian labouring migrants, Bodo tribal insurgents, and the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), joined by other militant groups variously claiming to represent tribals, tea labourers, and the descendants of East Bengali Muslims. The Indian armed and paramilitary forces, already ubiquitous in neighbouring Nagaland where “rebels” fought for Naga independence from India, were repeatedly deployed to curb this sort of resistance. After decades of seeming invisibility Assam entered mainstream India’s consciousness, even that of the BBC and CNN, but yet again, as an aberration. In India’s schools and colleges history had been taught for decades without reference to such a “periphery,” a little corner of the map. Now twenty-first-century politics might incorporate Assam, sans history, as an example of primitivist ethnic insurgencies in a postmodern age.

I was born in Assam. I left it as a young adult, when in the manner of other young South Asians I travelled away, for study and work in a national metropolis and then in a global city. The Brahmaputra valley receded in my daily vision. I began to see it more clearly just when the never-never Assam of the mass media and the global shopping mall came closer to my life. As I shed the political indifference that my middle-class upbringing had bequeathed to me, the complicated and unbeautiful connections between tea, history, and politics came into sight. Assam’s tea pickers and folk dancers were on display for the nation and the world, safely abstracted from class, race, and gendered contexts. Indian and international consumers could regale themselves with one or the other while Assam’s dominant narratives erased both figures from history. In such manner were people and localities entered into the roll call of ethnicity, emptied of actual experience, the claims that imperialism, colonialism, nationalism, and globalization successively made on them.

Assam has been notably understudied in the modern scholarship on South Asia, partly because of its political volatility and strategic border location, partly because of its perceived remoteness from what policymakers and academics tend to view as the Indian normative paradigm. One of this book’s arguments is that no such norm
exists. Despite the rich recent crop of regionally and locally based historical and ethnographic studies of South Asia, there still exists an unfortunate tendency among some scholars to dwell defensively on an undifferentiated “India” and to elide the important constitutive links that particular regions and cultural groups developed with people and processes from other regions of South Asia and beyond. In this book I challenge these histories and seek to bring multiple archives of region, nation, empire, and postcolony into one frame of analysis, reflexivity, and understanding.