Empire's Garden
Sharma, Jayeeta

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Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India.

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History, as radical historians have long observed, cannot be severed from authorial subjectivity, indeed from politics. Political concerns animate the questions we ask, the subjects on which we write. For over thirty years the Radical History Review has led in nurturing and advancing politically engaged historical research. Radical Perspectives seeks to further the journal’s mission: any author wishing to be in the series makes a self-conscious decision to associate her or his work with a radical perspective. To be sure, many of us are currently struggling with the issue of what it means to be a radical historian in the early twenty-first century, and this series is intended to provide some signposts for what we would judge to be radical history. It will offer innovative ways of telling stories from multiple perspectives; comparative, transnational, and global histories that transcend conventional boundaries of region and nation; works that elaborate on the implications of the postcolonial move to “provincialize Europe”; studies of the public in and of the past, including those that consider the commodification of the past; histories that explore the intersection of identities such as gender, race, class and sexuality with an eye to their political implications and complications. Above all, this book series seeks to create an important intellectual space and discursive community to explore the very issue of what constitutes radical history. Within this context, some of the books published in the series may privilege alternative and oppositional politi-
cal cultures, but all will be concerned with the way power is constituted, contested, used, and abused.

The region known as Assam, much of it now a state in northeast India, is likely to be known even to the academic public either for the type of tea that bears its name or for the ethnic violence that has erupted there in recent decades. In earlier historical and journalistic accounts both the lush tea plantations and the ethnic conflicts tended to be naturalized, to be seen as deeply rooted in the region. But as Jayeeta Sharma demonstrates in *Empire’s Garden*, both “emblems” of Assamese identity are the result of relatively recent historical, not natural, processes. The British colonial venture to cultivate a highly lucrative imperial tea garden in a region previously regarded as wild and remote not only transformed Assam economically and demographically but in a sense reinvented the very notion of what and even where Assam was. To create this garden and make it profitable, the British brought in hundreds of thousands of laborers from other regions of India, forming a racialized workforce that became the “other” to an emerging regional identity promoted by local gentry eager to carve out a place for themselves in the booming regional economy, and then in the incipient nationalist movement. Ultimately it is the dynamic and unstable relationship between region and nation, further complicated by transnational influences, that lies at the heart of *Empire’s Garden*. More than a regional history of Assam, this exhaustively researched and beautifully rendered study seeks to disrupt the Bengal-centered narrative that informs so much of India’s colonial and postcolonial historiography, and invites us to think in terms of multiple Indian histories rife with the tensions seeded by local and imperial heralds of progress.
Empire’s Garden
In memory of my father, Sachindra Nath Sarma, who bequeathed me his love of books and the best education he could find.