

# Changing Notions of Space in Northeast India: A Review of Oral and Written Culture

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## Abstract

This study has attempted to understand the ‘Northeastern’ region through the transformation of representation in oral and written literature. Changing notions of space arise out of the experience of a transforming society. This will further supplement the idea of space as a product of human perception.

**Keywords:** Space, Northeast India, oral literature, written literature

## Introduction

Literature, oral and written, of a region reflects the respective “world view” of a given culture. Study of literary genres tells a lot of the history of an area. In order to build a synthesis of the relationship between space and culture, it is necessary to look at possible points of contact between literature and concepts of space with time. The understanding of space has changed throughout the course of time and this study attempts to analyze how the “Northeast” region of India has been conceptualized during the pre-colonial intervention, and the transformation of nation that followed after colonial encounter. Further, this study wants to discuss emerging studies on the changing notion of space through the process of deconstruction of colonial ethnographies. This will help understand how space can be observed a changing notion very much influenced by the transformation in society and culture by tracing the transformation in literature in Northeast India.

## Literature Review

As landscape research and sustainability research increasingly incorporate the human dimension, we are faced with the complexity of the human character. Each human is, simultaneously, a biological organism; a person with a unique set of capabilities, experiences, and aspirations; a social being acting within various roles in various groups; and a carrier of culture. The complexity of the human condition finds expression in the experience of landscape, which is that component of human-dimension research [3].

Edward W. Soja (1989) argues that our current environment is not just a “product of history, but rather – before all else – also a construction of human geography; a social construction of space and the continuous reshaping of geographic landscapes” [6].

Taking its roots in earth sciences and looking into the changes of the notion of space from traditional geography to current socio-cultural anthropology, Hess-Lüttich (2013) looks at different perspectives: “(i) the phenomenological perspective traces the modalities of spatial relation, which are manifested in subjective attitudes of narrator and characters, and deduces space as product of human perception, which allows for conclusions concerning respective effective social standards and cultural values; (ii) the

cartographical perspective proceeds from nameable relations of reference between inner- and outer literary reality and in that misjudges the constructional character of space in literature; (iii) the topographical perspective perceives literary space as imaginary geography, which – similar to cultural geography – refers to the constitutive character of social practice and therefore detects the meaning of spatial relations for the distribution of knowledge, power, prejudices, etc.; (iv) the topological perspective, on the other hand, bridges to the semiotic (and even rhetoric) tradition by exposing the structure of ‘quasi-spatial relations’ and their meaning for literature and culture. In other words, by exposing space as a sign system filled with meaning upon which social reality is constituted” [3].

Coming to the studies on the concepts of space in the Northeast region of India, three areas of studies are covered, i.e. South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia. History of map-making has also been looked at in various scholarships. , David and Satish Kumar (2011) looks at the history of “mapping” in its broader sense as a cultural universal over a relatively long period. The study focuses on the interface between cartography and cosmography, which were, in turn, shaped by imperial power and geographical knowledge. This helps understand the high-altitude view of this region as imperial frontier of both the Mughals and the British, and the national fringe of Republican India. The authors argue that imperial geographical discourses invested the colonial Northeast (British Assam) with a new kind of territorial identity. Surveyors and mapmakers objectified the “geo-body” of this borderland in a spatial fix and visualized it as a Northeast-on-the-map. Cartographic territoriality naturalized traditional frontiers into colonial borderlands, which, in turn, forged national boundaries.

This study investigates the emerging form of the new history of cartography and boundary making of the British Empire in the region. However, researchers have started deconstructing this concept of understanding this space as depicted by the history of colonial cartographies and have explored other means of defining this space. It is in this light that this study has attempted to understand the region through transformation of representation, oral and written arises out from the experience of the transforming society. This will further supplement the idea of space as a product of human perception.

## **Methodology**

The research employs qualitative methods with a close reading of secondary sources. For the pre-colonial period, accounts of oral literature recorded through academic writings are heavily relied on. Substantial scholarly works on colonial period are studied and mentioned.

## **Pre-colonial Concept**

Space in the pre colonial understanding can be looked at through the representations in oral literature. While written literature is limited to few sections of the society, oral remained a popular mode of articulation for the indigenous society. The hill societies of Northeast had a rich oral tradition of cosmography and creation myths. The Tai-Ahoms of Assam and the princely states of Manipur and Tripura maintained royal chronicles. About two hundred buranjis (meaning “storehouse of knowledge”) have been discovered in Tai-Ahom language and Assamese. The Ahom Buranji presents a creation myth which depicts a cosmological view of the Tai-Ahom world. The representation of God is given with a shapeless lump of flesh suspended in the sky like swarm of bees. The creator had a pair of golden spiders. They erected eight pillars in the eight corners of the earth. The spiders connected the Ahom mountains by a rope to a pillar on Mount Meru of Hindu mythology. “Indeed, the fabric of the Ahom universe was interwoven by spider webs of Tai-Ahom and Hindu myths. The verticality of such a local

cosmograph stands in sharp contrast to a horizontal map of bounded territories delimited by modern state interests” [8].

Moreover, studies on indigenous knowledge have shown the understanding of the concept of time and space. Oral literature was a popular mode of encoding cultural histories, of kinship, genealogy, social relations, rituals and cultural values. This was presented with the use of metaphorical and figurative languages. Space is understood more in connection with Nature. Names of places were derived from myths and belief system associated with the particular societies. Space was also regarded in terms of community area, a social space. It is where rituals, ceremonies and festivals are performed. Community ownership, ideas of sharing and helping are associated with the concepts of space. The idea of space is also connected with fluidity and mobility.

### **Colonial Representation**

Imperialism had its focus on the passion to identify territory. Map making, writings, ethnography have therefore been shaped by their understanding of spatial knowledge. Edney remarks, “To govern territories, one must know them”[4]. Maps are not mirrors that passively reflect the world; they have always been “a way of seeing” or “a mental image” to make sense of the world. And in this light they have viewed the Northeastern region of India for the benefit of their governance. Sanghamitra Misra’s study of Goalpara district in colonial Assam noted that the early British Raj “had to first contend with the conditions of overlapping territoriality and sovereignty, which characterized the indigenous polity of this region”[5]. Misra further viewed colonial boundary making and the fixing of previously fluid realms as “a confrontation between indigenous and colonial notions of political space.” This way of understanding perception of the world highlights the difference with the indigenous ways of picturing the world.

In literature, the idea of a ‘developed’ form of literature is *measured* by leveling to the standard of the modern western literature. Therefore, adoption and imitation of cotemporary genres and trends became the tradition. In terms of understanding space, emphases on the accuracy and scale were some important approaches of the colonial writers. The absence of sharp boundaries, the fluidity between two indigenous societies became some of the difficulties they came across while framing the region. “European maps represented a different way of seeing the world. They mapped a new territoriality or ‘geo-body’ of India’s Northeastern borderland” [8]. Moreover, boundaries were drawn with little consideration of the similarities or dissimilarities of people residing in the region. This made it easier for the colonial administrators in implementing revenues. It is also necessary to understand how contemporary understanding of ‘space’ with the coming of ‘globalization’ and ‘regionalization’, demands for local assertion of identity and belongingness.

The emphasis on the production of *accurate* knowledge, maps or written documents, served the colonial administrators in many ways. The geographic knowledge of the frontier region could be of great importance for military operations, revenue collection, etc. This gave them power and a sense of control over the region.

### **Deconstruction**

With the changes coming to the world in which cultures are merged, borders re-imagined, construction of roads, production of new ways to look at the world, literature faces a difficulty in trying to find with the new change in order. This new form of perception of the surrounding brings changes to cultural

perception of space amongst the local people. In the initial stages deterioration of previously existing literature was evident. This can be looked at through a study of the emphasis of western understanding and forms of genre in literary work. It is interesting to note that literary trends were borrowed and there was a shift from previous methods of articulation, however, it gradually became a way of deconstruction even while appropriating western concepts of articulation.

This also gave a way of restoration and preservation of the earlier form of life. The transformation in literature shows how the new studies foreground the changing notions of space from that of the colonial writings. Emerging literature tries to find a way of understanding and reimagining the region by redefining the geographical concepts of space. For instance studies have been made investigating the relationship of power, identity, and territoriality. This allows researchers to look at social perception of the transformation, of position and identity and how it is reflected in literature. This new form in literary approach comes in contrast with the objectification of colonial perspectives and as a critique of the reorganization of space. It is further discussed below by observing the changing nature in oral and written literature of the region.

## Oral

New ways to deal with the reorganization of space emerged with transformations in oral literature. To fight cultural transformation people faced a lack of discourse and found themselves needing to take up a new one to counter it. Therefore, invention of new discourse can be seen in oral literature. For instance origin myths undergo certain changes to produce a linearity of time and space to construct a past. Appropriation of the fear of change, of the unknown in the oral literature is commonly found across the region. This helped the society in memorizing the contemporary. The oral tradition of the Apatanis shows the anxiety of the people over the slow domination by the halyang. The 'Journey to the Land of the Dead' describes a path to the land of the dead, Neli. The journey illustrates a very detailed picture of Neli with tortuous paths. Presence of various named locations, mythic creatures, physical obstacles and the possibility of ritual error or inability to return back from a wrong path make the journey to Neli very difficult. This is an example of how the Apatanis appropriate their experiences and memories and remember the journey through oral tradition. This can be analyzed through the oral narrative of the attack on outsiders, 'Attack on Kure' (Kure Chambyo), 1948 [2].

Further studies on space can be observed from the reconstruction of space in the Apatani society. This can be seen from the division of Apatanis and the halyang with Hapoli. Hapoli becomes a space where co existence of Apatanis and halyang occur. It also became a space that separates Apatani culture from outside influences "until about 2000, when the boundary began to dissolve" (Blackburn, 2010) [2]. Hapoli is a space where Apatanis mix with Nyishis, Assamese and Adis and sometimes even foreign tourists. The idea of reconstruction is also evident in the changes seen through the increasing business transaction in Hapoli, emergence of educational institutions, transportation, etc.

These are some of the ways of the transforming perception of the world that surfaced in the oral literature of the society. The changing notion of space is also evident in the formation of the concepts of sacred space. This can be seen in two Sanskrit sources, Yogini Tantra and Kalika Purana in ancient Assam. The texts mentions the transformation of a local tantric goddess of the Garo hill tribes into a puranic goddess called Kamakhya, who eventually merged with the mother goddess Durga under a Koch Bihar king who rebuilt the Kamakhya shrine in 1565 ad on a sacred hillock named Nilachala, meaning "blue mountains." While in the Lushai hills, a local informant applied the newly acquired map skills to

describe the Lushai life world to a colonial official. He “embellished his essay with a map”. This cosmological plan was a syncretistic sketch that depicted the soul’s journey beyond the grave in Lushai cosmography [8]. This shows the incorporation of colonial modernity to depict the local’s way of life and the new concept on space.

### **Written**

The beginning of the Nineteenth century Assam was marked by the disintegration of the feudal fabric of Ahom rule and the divided nobility. This was further hastened by the Burmese invasions. The fall of the Ahom monarchy and the disintegration of the social structure had consequences like the decline of the privileged position of the nobility; the agrarian structure closely linked to the hierarchical system broke down totally. The ruling class ridden with infighting could hardly revive the system at a time when successive Burmese invasions and internal dissensions had devastated large parts of the country. The final days of the Ahom rule show the unstable condition with a large number of peasants reduced to the category of serfs and slaves, many of them accepted the condition of dependent tenancy and bonded labour [1]. The victory in the Anglo-Burmese war and the Treaty of Yandabu, 1826 was followed by the annexation of Assam by the British.

1872 became an important landmark in the Assamese cultural history. Assamese language which was banished from the school and law courts was reinstated after about four decades. It has its impact on the Assamese literature. It energized a creative flowering in literature in the last two decades of the nineteenth century with significant literary trends. Different literary genres emerged representing a literary renaissance in Assamese literature. It was closely allied with the broad stream of the pan-Indian cultural development of the time. Assamese readers were becoming very familiar with the writings of Michael Madhusudhan Dutta (1824-73), Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-94) and Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). With the birth of *jonaki* published in 1889 Assamese literature ushered towards a new age. One of the foremost writers, Laksminath Bezbarua (1868-1938) wrote poetry, dramas, short stories and a novel. His works covered Assam’s past history, religion, language and culture. This gave a new sense of tradition and drew attention towards the distinct cultural and historical identity. These were some of the ways of finding new meaning with the resurgence of literature.

The changing realities generated by the thrust of modernity did not take long to surface in Manipuri literature. The transformation in response to colonial modernity is more visible in the early part of Twentieth century with the entry of prominent writers like Khwairakpam Chaoba (1895-1950), Lamabam Kamal (1899-1935) and Hijam Anganghal (1892-1943). Their works revisited and questioned assumptions and notions of received ideas and practices. “Their literary works celebrated the richness of their culture, language and history as well as passionately foreshadowed a resurgent literature written in the grass-root Manipuri language with an explicit attempt to foreground its strength and vitality”[7]. Their works reached different genres-poetry, drama, novel, short story, essay, epic and criticism.

In addition to this, de-terrorization of the discrete territorial units emerges. Yasmin Saikia talks about crossroad culture of the Tai-Ahom and how cultural exchange happens here [9]. Adoption of new images and customs were adopted from neighboring areas. This gives a new way of looking at the boundary, not as a fixed, definite line but as an entity in itself helping in the formation of the culture of adjacent societies. Similar reading of Michael Charney’s, “Literary Culture on the Burma-Manipur Frontier in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries” [9] shows a view from the periphery rather than observing from the centre. He examines the role of Manipuri brahmins in shaping the perspectives of the



Burmese royal court. This helps in understanding boundaries as a paradigm in itself and helps look at the Northeast region beyond territory. This also shows a new understanding of space as a means of interaction and a way to create connected history.

## Conclusion

The change in the perception of space during the pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial time is evident in the literary production of the corresponding time in Northeast India. The transforming perception of the people impacted the way of articulation in both the colonial literature as well as literature produced by the local inhabitants in both oral and written forms. From the areas studied in this paper, it can be observed that space as a changing notion very much influenced by the transformation in society and culture. It is shown to be impacted with the way of understanding it- as social position, discrete boundaries or as connected history that transforms along with the society. Space can, therefore, be looked as a product of cultural construct and social product which is very much influenced by the experience of the society.

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