

ABSTRACT

This thesis deals with the work of colonial travel writers on Assam during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. While most of the texts selected for this study are by British writers—administrators, businessmen, professionals, tourists—the work of missionaries is by American Baptist Missionaries who had been invited to Assam by the colonial authorities. This thesis shows that these texts of travel in Assam, despite their varying nature and focus, are imbricated in the discourse of colonialism. Interestingly, the colonialist position is covered by a combinatorial rhetoric of appropriation, deliverance and persuasion. In a sense, colonial travel writing operates as an inscription in an imagined blank space that adverts for colonial knowledge systems.

The thesis examines the nature of this rhetoric, variously identified as that of anti-conquest by Mary Louise Pratt and as the rhetoric of empire by David Spurr. Each chapter is devoted to a particular aspect of this rhetoric that ostensibly counters the colonial binaries but ends up endorsing the project of Empire.

Chapter 1 examines the types and tropes of representation in colonial travel writing and shows how travel narratives convey information about people, places, culture and politics even as they deal with travel experiences.

Chapter 2 examines the works of colonial administrators who despite their individual preoccupations engage in masks or masques of conquest and simply cannot separate themselves from the discourse of colonialism.

Chapter 3 examines the work of American Baptist Missionaries, mainly women, to show that even such agencies cannot be separated from the colonial project, despite their attempts to meet the indigenous people at a different level through their religious and social work. Their rhetoric of anti-conquest cannot totally cover their complicity with colonialism.

Chapter 4 examines selected works on life in the tea gardens with their combination of indigenous, migrant and European subjects, focussing primarily on the transculturation that takes place in the contact zone of colonized and colonizing subjects. The tea plantation is seen as the miniature colonial state with the planter at the helm.

Chapter 5 examines works written by persons who were linked by their colonial identities, though they were not administrators. These were the doctors, engineers and surveyors, botanists, geologists and others of such scientific bent of mind. Interestingly, each of these travel writers is seen collecting and conveying knowledge about things other than their specific areas of inquiry. It is shown that in the course of their scientific travels across Assam, they also study the culture, history, society and commercial prospects of the places and people they come across.

Each narrative shows individual and typical characteristics through the writer's choice of priorities and preoccupations. Almost all of them speak in support of colonialism, especially the colonization of Assam and its people. The rise of the tea industry which made Assam its largest producer, captured the imagination of most of the Westerners as they dreamt of trying their luck in Assam. Some lived to tell the tale while others failed or perished in their attempt. It is through these eyes that Assam's success in tea is presented as the gift of colonization, an act of rescue and deliverance. All other rhetoric pales in comparison as Assam's troubled history is held up for scrutiny amidst the present difference. This rhetoric is not confined to the tea planters or people associated with tea but internalised in the discourse of almost every colonial traveller from administrators to scientific professionals, even preachers. As they possess the colonized site—Assam—through their rhetoric, they are in turn possessed by the discourse of Empire.