

CONCLUSION

The production of space is a paradoxical activity. People, as well as texts, imbue places with meaning in the same way as they empty spaces out of meaning. For, on the one hand, producing space means robbing a place of its meaning (as space is no-place). On the other hand, place making is a process of transforming space into place. It means giving space a kind of meaning that it did not have.

The transformation can be signficatory and figurative, on the one hand, and substantive or factual, on the other. If it is signficatory, it turns space into a trope, a signifying practice. A riverbank, in this sense, becomes a landscape of joy and romance. Similarly, a cave becomes a house of death. We can say that space-gazers produce metaphors that symbolize or substitute places. On the other hand, there are place-makers who want a substantive and material transformation of space. The first group in a way invents the knowable, the second makes it. Poets and artists invent and visualize space. Architects are not just happy with inventing space. They make and objectify space.

This thesis tries to grapple with the relationship between visual and visible spaces by examining the production of space in colonial travel writing and its allied genres. This is done by examining how narratives of travel—especially of exploration and expedition of colonial officers and agents—often set the ground for establishing a geography for the Empire. These narratives, it is seen, work at marking off colonial landscapes in seemingly empty spaces. Having done that, the narratives initiate a multi-layered and multivalent project of formation and transformation of territorial markers.

It is found that the production of space is best understood in terms of a quadratic networking of knowledge production and knowledge morphing. Each of these spheres is an ideological apparatus as well as part of an evident spatial geography. The travel writer combines with the other organs the Empire—neither implicitly nor explicitly in a predictable way—to ensure that spaces of interest marked and produced as such morph into objects of utility. The ultimate purpose of Empire building is to transform passive—say, useless—objects into assets. To the extent that writing produces the knowable, it makes the world know its surrounding in a particular way. To produce a more knowable world is the beginning of the production of a less hostile and more useful world. This production is visible as landscape.

Landscape

The framing of pre-colonial space as or into a certain kind of landscape, as seen in the texts under investigation, does not remain confined to observations of and on space. In fact, the landscape gazers that go into the framing of space in these narratives are informed by a strong desire to transform space. However, the exercise does not always result in clearly visualized formal spaces. In other words, the transformation of space, in these texts is presented more as a possible agenda than as a strategic instrument with all aspects covered. These texts partake of a discourse where what is not articulated adds up to produce the grand project in a paradoxical manner.

Suggestions for the transformation of space are made, in these texts, primarily by means of a negative aesthetic. In other words, appropriation of space and conversion thereof into landscapes are pursued through a rhetoric of darkness and dystopia. This is a case of metaphorization of space. The politics of metaphorization, in the studied texts, is directed towards transforming the colony into a series of dystopian landscapes. In a way, these metaphors are used by the imperial traveler to draw the attention of the Empire to empty spaces or places without rightful claimants, thereby enhancing the possibilities of expansion.

The texts also construct the landscape of the northeastern frontier region as a cornucopia with abundant but unutilized resources. This is a more direct form of suggesting an alternative use of space. In a way, it complements the objectives of behind more obvious negativization of landscapes. Either way, travel and expedition texts are precursors of the transformation of landscapes into possession or territorialization. The eagerness with which the travelers convert landscapes into imagined confrontation zones bears testimony to this.

Finally, the construction of space involves the politics of self-fashioning. The most obvious way to carry this out is to foreground—whether real or imagined—the participation of the local population in the making the Empire. From this perspective, the colonial travel writer is an agent of transformation. Their texts both anticipate and precede the occupation of territories. However, in many cases, these texts move from the role of witness to participant in the production of the colonial northeast. These moves require that the writers—mostly travelling anthropologists or ethnographers—create

‘imaginary’ ethnoscares for ‘real’ people. The transformative power of rhetoric touches social and corporeal spaces.

Ethnoscape

Texts as much as ‘technicians’ of colonialism—here colonial travel and expedition narratives—transform the corporal bodies of indigenous groups in the northeast into a geography of otherness. But more importantly, these writings transform the northeast into a cluster of ethno-corporeal spaces. The traveler-ethnographer marks spaces as exclusive homelands or territories of particular tribes. This is done primarily by formulating a particular set of corporeal, cognitive and cultural attributes for a particular group of people and subsequently tracing out these attributes in landscapes identified as exclusive homelands of exclusive groups.

This could be viewed as a mode of demographic othering of space. Given the fact that such marking of space is always likely to be followed by more ambitious projects of mapping and distribution of space such as cartography, the transformation of space into ethnoscares is better seen as a prelude to colonial governance. The transformation of space to ethnoscares could also be seen as an overture towards transforming the supposedly unmapped spaces in the northeast into more precisely mapped places.

Given the role colonial travel and ethnographic texts play in facilitating larger projects of mapping and distribution of space by the Empire, this form of writing is best viewed as a foundational instrument of Empire-building. The construction of space, therefore, is a condition and consequence of travel and expedition, and, by extension, of travel and expedition writing.

At another level, this exercise can be said to inform the political unrest and competitive identity-formation in the northeast at present. The foundations for the present conundrum of map-making and state formation in the northeast, on closer analysis, can be said to have been laid by colonial travel writing and its many allies such as expedition writing and ethnographic writing.

Territory

The texts under investigation clearly mark a transformation of space from landscapes to territories. In other words, they illustrate the transformation of the northeast from a

cluster of perceived spaces to a strategic cartography of power and resources. It is substantiated by the extensive visions of intervention and modification of spaces into occupied positions. Whereas the framing of the northeast as a landscape in colonial-era travel and expedition writing is marked by traces of uncertainty and unease, its transformation into a territory is marked by certainty and assertiveness, on the part of the colonial traveler-surveyor.

These texts also mark a transition in terms of strategies of space production, employed by the travelers. The politics of metaphorization, to a certain extent, is taken over by actual politics of space. The traveler-surveyor often participates in the marking and classification of spaces into assets and liabilities, visualizing larger geographies such as military or economic frontiers. From possible or desirable geographies, space is transformed into concrete, specific and more importantly, into planned geographies. It is important to note that there is a resolute assertion of ownership.

Such metamorphosis draws strength from parables of transgression. To this extent, the project of territory production is similar to the coding of space as landscapes. What distinguishes the use of transgression for converting landscapes into territories is that the potential transgressor is clearly identified. The overwhelming and all-pervasive air of fear and unease is replaced by clearer visions about potential transgressor or enemies as well as allies. Eventually, in these texts, the northeast is transformed from a symbolic geography of desire and fear to a clearly marked colonial instrument, a geopolitical space, thereby preparing the conditions for the transformation of territories to assets.

Assets

The transformation of a passive or hostile region to a region of promise or a passage of destiny for the empire is no small feat, and the texts discussed here show that travel writing—at least expedition and exploration narratives and ethnographic texts—is not just about metaphorization and rhetoric but also about statecraft and economic prospecting.

These narratives mark a clear shift in the transformation of space. As a follow-up from the coding or marking of space, the traveler-explorer initiates and often actively participates in the transformation of space. In other words, the transformation of space

into assets—as markers or producers of wealth—shows the direct intervention of colonial governance or agency in the northeastern region. The transformation of space from territory to assets can also be seen in the infrastructural assets of colonial governance such as transport and communication networks, roads, bridges, railways, forts, military garrisons, etc.

It also shows the transformation of ‘passive’ space into ‘active’ economic assets or zones, such as tea gardens, taxable land, timber industries, toll gates etc. This transformation of space can be seen as a movement from observation to Empire-building. Given the fact that most of the travel and expedition writings happened to be colonial military or official agents, this move seems logical. Even otherwise, travel and expedition writings participate in the transformation of spaces seen as natural objects or empty spaces to instruments of the Empire.

In sum, colonial travel and expedition writings frame pre-colonial landscapes or territories into assets that can produce wealth for the Empire. Though writing as such is never credited with active or direct intervention in Empire-building, the evidence that we get from the texts suggest that writing is as powerful as direct colonial instruments. Colonialism, therefore, can be seen not as a result of any particular form of instrumentation but as a result of several combinatorial forms of colonialism of which travel and expedition narratives form an important part.

Inferences

Colonial space formation begins by a rhetoric of marking that result in the production of landscape. The formation of landscape is part of what we call symbolic geography. Colonial travel writers first assign meaning to a place and then transform the place into a space with the meaning already assigned thereby resulting in a circularity of meaning and interpretation.

Broadly speaking, the dissertation draws out the following inferences:

1. The writers are not content with the rhetoric of space making. They anticipate, facilitate and force different degrees of territorial marking and control. Territorialization is a more potent use of space for Empire building and as such

marks the beginning of a differential cartography that leads to the formation of the frontier provinces, the northeast frontier, the NEFA and finally the northeast.

2. The creation of territory serves the Empire only up to a particular point. The texts examined here plead for, and finally succeed in seeing the transformation of landscapes into territories and of territories into assets. A mountain worshipped by a tribe is seen as a god or ancestor, and then converted into a mine, or a river seen as a natural and divine presence is converted into military or civilian asset.
3. The rhetoric of Empire is seen as mutating into the materiality of the Empire. The study sees in the expedition and exploration texts under scrutiny here (broadly subsumed under travel writing) a passage of formation and transformation of colonial topography that converts inhabited places into empty spaces by a forced and layered rhetoric.
4. Imperial travelers/ expedition and exploration accounts/ cadastral surveyors manufacture and manipulate settings in order to convert them into territories. Once consolidated, such territories are converted into useful assets.
5. It is suggested here that in comparison to other forms of travel writing, expedition and exploration narratives participate more eagerly in Empire building though its initial protocols do not always have the mandate for expansion or control.

In colonial production of space, witness and participant—say, writer and officer or agent—combine at unexpected moments in expected ways. Although it cannot be presented as a predictable activity, the production of space more or less follows a pattern. It moves from ‘empty’ spaces—morphing from perceived to conceived, and then from conceived to lived or livable spaces—to ‘transaction’ zones. The movement is from unknown to knowable, and then from knowable to known.

The story of colonialism is the production, consumption, and circulation of colonial knowledge. The production of space is one of the first steps—if not the first step—of cartographic epistemology. People have tried to transform the northeast frontier of

India—the scene of multiple battles in the long history of colonial Bengal and Assam, Manipur and Myanmar and the many imagined geographies of the centre and the borders—from a zone of danger and darkness to a zone of unease, but ultimately a zone of great promise.

As the Indian nation-state moves to modernize the region, the narratives of contest and conflict change into new cartographies of fear and desire—and post-nationalist claims to space and territory by people and pockets, ironically marked by the colonial traveller-writer—amid claims to mutant modernities and competitive identity formations. In the rhetoric of the great nation-state, the area is seen as one of strategic interest. The region, in the meantime, has been asking for a human and dialogic interest that does not simply prioritize security and economic concerns—that is, free and unlimited access to assets and resources of the region—over lives and life-worlds of the people.