

NATIONAL SEMINAR ON COLONIAL WRITINGS ON NORTH EAST INDIA

The ‘Centre with Potential for Excellence in Particular Areas’ working on Cultural Memory in North-East India: A Research and Documentation Programme on Textual and Visual Narratives in the Department of Cultural Studies, Tezpur University granted by the UGC in 2016, works with the mandate to explore and analyze texts relating to cultural memories in the context of North-East India, with particular focus on hitherto unexplored sites like photography and other visual narratives, oral traditions in addition to literary texts. The objective of this project is based on the understanding that collective memory and its cultural expressions are highly fluid sites of constructing the self and others, informed by several context-specific factors.

Keeping in view the mandate of the project, it is important to explore and analyze the colonial texts relating to North East India. The seminar on **Colonial Writings on North East India** will focus on various issues of colonial writings in the region.

The Centre would like to invite you to the national seminar, “Colonial Writings on North East India” to be held on 28 - 29 November 2019.

Juri Dutta
Co-Ordinator for the Seminar

Themes of the Seminar

Colonial Writings in English and in the vernacular/local languages

Colonial Writings: Religious or Secular

Colonial Writings: School Texts and Dictionaries

Colonial Writings: Fictional and semi-Fictional writings

Women in Colonial Writings

Colonial Writings: Newspapers and Journals

The afterlife of colonial texts

Colonial texts and translation

Hinduism and Islam in the Eyes of the Colonizers



CENTRE WITH POTENTIAL FOR
EXCELLENCE IN PARTICULAR AREAS
(CPEPA)
TEZPUR UNIVERSITY

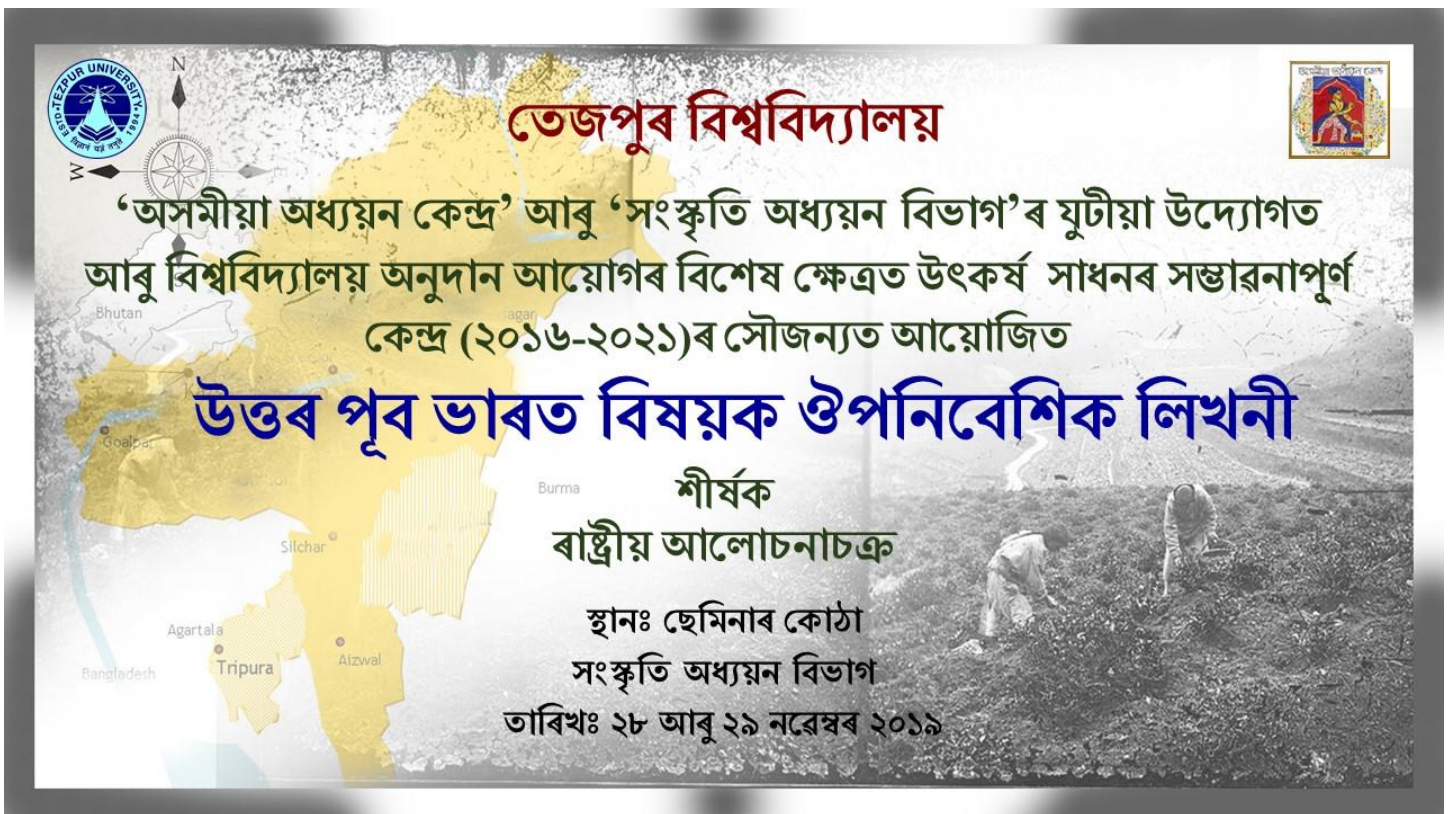
Napaam, Tezpur – 784028

Assam, India

28th & 29th November 2019

Debarshi Prasad Nath
Chief Coordinator, CPEPA

Please find attached the Concept Note below-



CONCEPT NOTE

The seminar on **Colonial Writings on North East India** will focus on various issues of colonial writings in the region. Colonial writings on and about North East India can be broadly classified under three categories— Evangelist Literature, Secular Literature and Historical/Political Literature. While undertaking close readings of these texts, papers in the seminar will critique stereotypes both with regard to the colonizers and the natives. The common assumption about Colonial Writings on North East India is that it is evangelical in nature, written with the sole aim of preaching the gospel.

To say that this is a simplified and naïve generalization is an understatement. While such a position glosses over the immense variety of colonial writings that emerged in North East India, it overlooks the obvious question of individual agency. Even though individual interventions in this regard can be seen as part of the larger colonial project, there are reflections of subjective positions in these texts which can be today seen as being different, even antithetical, to the dominant official position. Moreover, there were many “inconsistencies” in the texts which were the result of both the inability to appreciate the worldviews of the natives and the difficulties of cultural translation. The point is, the colonizers did not speak in one voice.

However biased, colonial writings on North East India do throw light on various aspects of the cultural history of the region. With its long history of evangelist (gospels, prayers, translations of Bible), secular (school texts, grammars, dictionaries, fiction and non-fiction), historical/political/cultural literatures (history, grammar books and translations), Colonial Writings on North East India offers an important site for the investigation of the orientalist’ project in North East India and to understand the difference in its modus operandi in the rest of the country.

One observes the fluid nature of the self and the other in the colonial writings on North East India. Miles Bronson's *A Dictionary of Assamese and English* (1867) is a secular book as well as part of evangelical project. Bronson declares in the Preface of the book that this is the first dictionary in Assamese and that "After thirty years of familiar acquaintances with the people, I am fully persuaded that it is a mistake to ignore their language" (1867: iv). William Robinson's *A Descriptive Account of Assam* (1841) deals with a wide range of topics related to the climate, geology, geography and history of Assam from the earliest times to the initial stages of the British occupation of the region. Mrs Brown published *Bhugolar Biwaran* (Description of Geography) and *Gononar Anka* (Calculation in Maths) in 1840. She translated fictional writings for children from English and Bangla into Assamese. As we said earlier, Mrs Brown, through such activities had "transgressed" the official mandate awarded to a missionary.

A significant portion of Colonial Writings on North East India was definitely targeted for the reading public of America. In Butler's *A Sketch of Assam: With Some Accounts of the Hill Tribes* (1847) the author mentions the chief object of his book is "to make Assam better known, to remove some prejudices which exist against it" and he expresses that "the narrative of these events has been compiled from official documents" (1847: vi). Mary Mead Clark's *A Corner in India* (1970) and Elizabeth Vickland's *Daughter of Brahma* and *With Christ in Assam* (1925) are a few examples of such books which were produced "specifically for consumption in America" as "the accounts of the excesses of Hinduism surely must have found a large reading public in the home country" (Das, 2005:vii). In addition, there were the books meant to prepare would-be tea-planters for life in Assam. A case in point is George M. Barker's *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam* (1884).

Any kind of fictional, non-fictional, ethnographic or/and documentary accounts of the North East India by the Colonizer do deserve a serious academic attention. Evangelist literature like S.R Ward's *A Glimpses of Assam* (1884) and William Robinson's *A Descriptive Account of Assam* (1841) give a detailed description of the place and people of Assam. On the other hand, in E. Elizabeth Vickland's *Through Jude's Eyes* (1924), the author "hopes that this little volume may serve a wide purpose, in introducing a more intimate way the Assam mission, in proving the worth-whileness of the folks who live in the Brahmaputra Valley and the Assam Hills, in showing how the missionary works, in encouraging those who have invested in the work by showing proofs of the way Jesus Christ is working, transforming lives and communities as he is introduced by the Christian missionaries" (1924: Author's Preface). Francis Jenkins' *Report on the North East Frontiers of India* was published in 1835. It was the result of a survey conducted by Francis Jenkins and Robert Boileau Pemberton of the entire North East Frontier under the order of Lord William Bentinck (Barpujari, 1995: v). Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf's *The Naked Nagas* (1939) and *The Apa Tanis and their neighbours: A primitive society of the eastern Himalayas* (1962) are two important ethnographic texts about the people of Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh which give glimpses of the people, their lives, cultures and societies during the colonial period.

The proposed seminar hopes to provide a platform for scholars in India and abroad who are engaged in the study of Colonial Writings in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. We are particularly interested in Colonial Writings that are attentive to the historical and cultural specificities of the Northeast.
