MEMORIES OF METER GAUGE: NARRATIVES OF WOMEN FROM LUMDING RAILWAY COLONY

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INTRODUCTION

The British-incepted 'railway colony' has occupied a special place in the collective imagination of railway enthusiasts and colonial scholars in India. Railway colonies have been studied by urban scholars and romanced by writers. In their book, *India: Modern Architecture in History*, Peter Scriver and Amit Srivastava (2015) describe railway towns as, 'Hugging the railway tracks as they threaded their way through the largely segregated space of colonial urban settlement, the railway colony defined a little world apart, sequestered between the "white" and the "brown" sides of the tracks, characterized by the fastidious propriety of its modern, mechanically minded residents.'

Railway colonies, with their well-planned architecture and neatly laid hierarchies, emblemised European industrial order amidst the chaos of the empire; their workshops and locomotive sheds, bustling with workers and well-demarcated housing spaces, imposed a colonial

modernity even in far-flung hinterlands wherever the railway lines took them. Today, even as much of the railway lines' former glory has been overwritten by new histories, they continue to evoke a certain nostalgia among those who have lived there, or among those who associate them with an imaginative wistfulness for the now faded colonial space. However, these railway towns were also active sites of extraction, migration, and capital flows where new markets emerged and migrant subjectivities took roots in an industrial modernity. The creation of railway towns in India went hand in hand with the emergence of railway and industrial townships globally from around the latter half of the 18th century to the 20th century (Cuéllar 2018).

In Assam, the advent of the railway system was driven primarily by the discovery of mineral resources as well as the need to find efficient transportation and export alternatives for plantation produce. The railways arrived in Assam after a period of long deliberations by state governments under the British rule and within the modified guarantee system (Hilaly 2007). The construction of railway lines in the region was beset by many geographical challenges and also necessitated a labour workforce, which the British railway companies brought in from East Bengal and other parts of India. The labour was required not only to set up lines in a difficult terrain, but also for their continuous upkeep, leading to a special land settlement for railwaymen where large tracts of cultivable wasteland were offered for ownership under certain terms. The urban centres that were built as a result of these railway operations were manned by a largely migrant workforce employed by the British private railway companies. The inception of railways and oil townships all across Assam thus occurred amidst colonial extractive processes.

I first conceived of this project to understand how railway townships in Assam can be studied from the perspective of colonial urbanism in the region. The changes in land use and governance that the railways brought to the region have been explored by several historians. However, through the course of my research I felt compelled to look at these spaces as being beyond colonial sites of

extraction, and approaching them as complex spaces where migrants' subjectivities interacted with new geographies to produce entangled landscapes of identity, belonging, and forgetting. In particular, I felt the need to explore the inter-generational experiences of their female inhabitants.

When we talk about gender in the context of the Lumding railway colony, there is a temptation to look at the colony as a culturally homogenised whole. But Lumding colony, as all railway colonies, brought people from different parts of the country together, and each community was able to forge its own place in the sociality of the colony as well as in its contestations, where 'the discursive sites of such contestations – race, work, region, identity, sanitation, defence and protest – were as multiple as the physical ones' (Sinha 2012). Due to Lumding's strategic proximity to Bangladesh in undivided India and the fact that a majority of its resident workers who settled in Lumding came from there, the East Bengali community was dominant in the main colony, but this is not to say that other communities were not active and did not have their own thriving lives. In this essay, I concentrate on the Hindu East Bengali community that migrated with the railways due to ease of access, and on the possibility of venturing deep into memory scapes.

Two things motivated this exercise: firstly, I was pushed by my own familial roots and experiences. The maternal side of my family has been based in Lumding railway town since the 1930s, thus offering me a close familiarity with this space. The segregated, invisiblised lives (in terms of their place in the railways' operations) of early female residents, many of whom are my relatives, became an important catalyst towards exploring their experiences through family narratives and semi-structured interviews with older residents.

Secondly, the geographic specificities of the region and the manner in which migrant experiences came to be influenced by these specificities find resonance not only in the technological challenges of setting up meter gauge lines in the Badarpur hill section, of which Lumding is a part, but also in the infrastructural planning of the town

(sanitation, disease control) and more tellingly, in the memories that are preserved in rituals, family lores, and traditions which embody the transformational journey of migration. While the technological and infrastructural challenges of creating networks in precarious geographies find meticulous documentation in records, the forming of these colonies and the challenges faced are rarely explored beyond the statistics of disease, death, accidents, or technical mishaps.

Understanding the life of these spaces therefore entailed an approach that went beyond a mere historical or archival exploration to accessing personal narratives and inter-generational memory. Locating the voices and narratives of women was important since the experiences of migration varied on the basis of different accessibilities and hierarchies. During my research, I found men and women in the community articulating histories that were reflective of each other's but not the same. The men stressed upon the 'worldly' experience of being active participants in the railways' operations. The women referenced the railways as a sociality, including the community that animated the railway colony, the religious institutions that served as their social nuclei, and the traditions and stories that linked them to the places they had left behind. The articulation of this 'inner world', is an indispensable part of understanding the experience of migration. In this essay, I peer into this world through the female residents of Lumding railway colony to present a picture of this sociality that continues to revolve around a circulation network, even as it negotiates the larger questions of place and belonging.

IF WOMEN WERE TO TELL A PLACE

We were sitting in the small office of a women's grassroots NGO in Lumding railway colony, and its CEO was telling me about the history of railway operations in the region. He had ample expertise. As a former engineer who had years of service behind him, he was involved in the

switchover from broad gauge to meter gauge in the surrounding areas, hence his grasp over the subject was extensive. However, while the conversation was informative and packed with numerous interesting anecdotes, what made it more interesting was that my intention was to specifically speak with a few women who had connections to the Northeast Frontier Railways, and who now sat around us silent and nodding, waiting for their turn to speak.

During the initial days of my research, whenever I approached women for a chat on the colony's 'history', I was inadvertently led to men who had more 'authority' on the subject. Several residents, both male and female, told me about a man who had been writing an exhaustive history of the town for the last 20 years. He was the local storehouse of all information pertaining to the town, and whenever I hit a dead end, he was evoked like the spirit of Thoth, and I was asked to seek him out for answers. Although I had never met him, I conjured him in the persona of a mythical scribe, male and meticulous, documenting the journey of a small town with precise dates, references, and landmarks—a labour of love of over 20 years. As admirable as such labour is, how female voices and experiences figured in the final telling of the town's story was a point of conjecture; since until recently, women had little to do with the main railway operations in the colony, I wondered if he would consider them as important sources of the town's history. His elusive volume of factual history became my vague compass for a humble anti-thesis. Was it possible to describe a town based solely on how the women chose to remember and describe it?

Women's reluctance to open up about the town's 'story' and their willingness to hand over authority on the subject to the men is also indicative of the gendered spaces of knowledge production and dissemination (Shetler 2003). Men and women in the colony inhabited different spaces in the past, and the former participated more in the public sphere. A linear understanding of a community's history may stem from a community's mutual corroboration over such public matters as those concerning land, inheritance, or resource sharing that

demand a consensual agreement on facts and figures without which contestations become inevitable.

When it comes to Lumding railway colony, this history unfolds with its inception as a railway township with railway lines being extended from Chittagong. The construction of Lumding railway township, located in the south-central region of Assam, commenced in the first decade of the 1900s when the British Government of India sanctioned the private enterprise—Assam Bengal Railways—to lay the challenging Chittagong–Badarpur meter gauge lines, entailing an influx of labour from different parts of then undivided India as well as close neighbouring regions. Assam, under colonial rule even prior to the advent of the railways, saw a steady stream of indentured labour from different parts of India, facilitated further with the advent of the railways. The repercussions of these processes on land ownership and urbanisation were significant, and railway or oil townships became new sites of urban governance.

The history of a place is interwoven intricately in its trajectory of development, and Lumding railway colony is no different. Post-independence the colony evolved and expanded in its own capacity, spatially and otherwise, while its governance was transferred to the Northeast Frontier Railways via the State. The Bangladesh War in 1971 saw a growth in its population as borders solidified, and the town witnessed a flood of refugees. The 1980–90 decade was a period of expansion of the small town; as the last broad gauge frontier on the *pahar* line, it became an important junction for accessing other regions, thus becoming an important channel for trade and commerce in the region. Additionally, the plans of converting from a meter gauge to a broad gauge were put in place around the same time, leading to heavy investments in railway operations in Lumding. This led to a sudden spurt in the town's economy. As many businessmen in Lumding told me, it was the first time that the principal source of income for the town shifted from the railways to other trade networks.

However, this commercial bliss was short lived. In the early 2000s the switch to broad gauge lines had been gradually made, and railway

operations had slowly expanded to previously uncharted regions. This led to a relative decline in the importance of Lumding's strategic position as a railway frontier and trade junction. The locomotive sheds that required a sizeable labour force were replaced with diesel sheds that required far less labour to operate. The railway offices were computerised and then diluted of personnel, who were transferred to new railway offices in the region. The broader narrative here is that the eventual extensions of the railway network had negatively affected the socioeconomic health of the town.

Lumding's trajectory is by no means unique or singular. Places incepted as nodal points may lose, gain, expand, or stagnate based on their position in an expanding network, with advancements in technology playing a role in replacing human labour. These changes are not absolute but fluid and rely on new networks opening up; for example, in the case of Lumding, being recently connected to the national highways grid has opened up alternative channels of trade and transport. However, what was significant for me was the uniform way in which most men I spoke to narrated this linear trajectory. In many ways, the railway continues to be the nucleus on which the principal livelihood of the colony depends. Businessmen in the main bazaar, which came up around the same time as the colony and is now embroiled in an ongoing land contestation with the railways, lamented about how reliance on the railway network affected their own ability to expand and grow. Old time railway employees, mostly men, bemoaned the decline of an era, which one of them called the *swarna yug* of Lumding, an exciting period that saw trade and culture grow simultaneously and symbiotically. New people came in, trade thrived with neighbouring towns, and commerce expanded. Cultural committees mushroomed, and as one nostalgic former railway employee reminisced, 'Famous poets and artists from Guwahati and Kolkata came to our *sammelans*.' Almost all the older men I spoke to implied that the colony had reached a commercial and cultural stagnation since. 'What is there in this town anymore?' a businessman asked me. 'Our children who are not employed in the railways and

have the option of leaving end up migrating to other places. Only those who are too attached stay back.'

The truth about this remembering cannot be contested. Census data shows that this idea of stagnation is not notional but can be corroborated with a decline in the railway colony's population. During 1991-2001 the railway colony saw a steep decline in its population, but the surrounding area that falls under the Lumding revenue town under the municipal board's jurisdiction saw population growth. This period coincides with the expansion of railway operations in the region beyond Lumding and the transfer of railway servicemen to other regions due to the conversion from meter gauge to broad gauge lines on the *pahar* line.

However, to use only the notions of progress and stagnation to describe one's home reflect the chrono-centric, developmental paradigms that have come to define the post-industrial historical imagination. The genesis of Lumding railway colony lies in an imperial exercise located in the larger loci of colonial undertakings in the region, which brought about many significant changes throughout the state. The company's employees who eventually came to man the Lumding colony, and whose successors now constitute a majority of the main colony's residents, did not have ancestral ties to the place. Their connection with the place evolved simultaneously with the connection that they had established with the railway network, even as physical connections to their own ancestral villages and towns in East Bengal were gradually severed, first because of Partition and then the Bangladesh War, which ultimately closed off porous borders to a considerable extent. The charting of Lumding's history by its residents as one that is inextricably intertwined with the railway network is therefore not surprising.

However, this history often excludes a more nuanced story of migration and forging of familiarities in a new geography. The building of the railway network in the region was not easy. As a former engineer told me, accidents were common; many old graves (now ruined and covered in undergrowth) containing the bodies of such fallen workers

still mark the areas around old, disused meter gauge lines. Diseases such as cholera, small-pox, malaria, and *kala-azar* were also common in plantations and industrial colonies, and regularly plagued workers at these sites (Dey 2017). This part of history, however, does not address the complex negotiations that involve traversing the two worlds, even as physical connections to one world recede and slowly get relegated to the space of memory and recall. It also certainly fails to convey the deep-rooted anxieties and entanglements of place and belonging as residuals of this journey.

My memories of Lumding railway colony revolve around these nuances that I was able to gather in hindsight from the many stories that were shared in close gatherings of women. The town that I was familiar with—its uniqueness and its commonplaceness—were experienced through afternoons and evenings spent in the company of mothers and aunts who interspersed their domesticity with irreverent conversations about people and events, travelling back and forth through time to illustrate connections to places old and new.

One conversation that I had with my mother and aunt started with such a story. As my mother narrated,

> The exact year is uncertain, but I remember being in the fourth or fifth grade; it was certainly in the 70s. Somewhere around Kalibari, near Lumding National School, my cousin Baby was witnessing a very common occurrence in our colony. Her family well had run dry. This was quite common in Lumding. Wells ran dry all the time, and one had to simply dig deeper into the earth till one hit the waterbed. Baby's father had hired two labourers, and one of them had been lowered into the dry well. His task was to dig the soil and transfer it into a bucket in the pulley that was then pulled up. Perhaps Baby had taken an interest in all this. She had been looking down from the edge of the well when she saw the worker beneath take a break, strike a match and light a *beedi*. Before she knew it a huge ball of fire had erupted, and shot up from the well and Baby was thrown to the ground, her face hot and her eyebrows burnt crisp. Thankfully, the fire was quickly extinguished; the labourer—still alive but hurt—was hastily

> pulled out. There was a huge hue and cry in the town that oil had been discovered in a dry well.
>
> The news of the discovery of oil rippled across town. Neighbours flocked to Baby's house to take a look at the well. Adding to all the excitement was a visit from experts who came down all the way from Calcutta's Geological Survey of India to test the oily puddle in the well and put a seal on this newfound wealth of the town.
>
> Oil was never found in Baby's well. After investigations, the experts concluded that a nearby discarded storage bunker built for the purpose of fuel stocking during the Second World War had, at some point, leaked its remnants through the soil and reacted with the spark from the labourer's match. The hue and cry died down, and Lumding remained as it was.

I found this story fascinating and telling in many ways. Several women in the family recall Baby's curious encounter with her dry well, although not all of them had witnessed it and thus could not confirm the exact veracity of its details, though none denied it either. Halbwachs (1992) in his book, *On Collective Memory,* says, 'if the past recurs, it seems of little importance if it recurs in my consciousness or in the consciousness of others.' Situating individual recollections in relation to those of others creates a collective framework of memory, an instrument through which collective memory can 'reconstruct an image of the past that is in accordance with the predominant thoughts of the society.' Thus, collective memory in its reconstruction of the past becomes a process that is as deeply embedded in its present.

To me, this story brings together several aspects that continue to characterise living in a small colonially-incepted township in Assam. What makes such townships stand out from those built elsewhere is not merely the intent behind building them but also the unique ecology that they have been built on. The appearance of a disused World War II bunker in the story, as sudden as it is, also touches a period in history when Lumding was a radar station for the British during the war, a fact that is all but forgotten in Lumding's conscious recall of itself. However, references to it often appeared in many stories shared by my aunts and

their friends. This story also elucidates Lumding's position as only a transport node that was otherwise resource deficient in every sense. Unlike other colonially incepted townships in the region, Lumding did not produce oil, coal, or tea; it was merely a transportation junction. In some ways, this reflects the lamentations of the businessmen I spoke to. If Lumding had an alternative resource to fall back on, its economy would have fared better, and it would not have been so closely affected by the fluctuations in the railway network. In fact, a few older residents recalled a time in the 1980s or the 1990s when efforts were made to drill for oil in the vicinity without success. '*Lumdinger deep jwaley*' (the light of Lumding glows) was an oft-repeated phrase to denote the lights of the oil storage depot that illuminated a small stretch of the railway route immediately outside the town as a juxtaposition to the darkness brought about by frequent power shedding in the town itself.

Another aspect of Lumding is that unlike most parts of the state, Lumding colony has always faced a shortage of water. It does not have a perennial river. The only presence of running water near the colony is a seasonal tributary of Shubansiri river that the residents call Lumding nala, which runs dry during winters and peak summers and overflows during the monsoons. Under the British administration, the railways provided running water only to the colony that housed its employees—a hierarchy of infrastructural provisioning that continues to this day. The rest of the town dug wells and, later, relied on borewells to extract groundwater. Today, although water is available beyond the railway colony, water shortages continue to plague the town, and many households continue to use old wells in their backyards. It is hardly surprising then that water makes an appearance in stories and recollections shared by women, sometimes in passing, sometimes referred to as an absent presence; the procurement of water also adding to the existing rigours of domestic labour.

But water also plays a symbolic part in connecting the flows of intergenerational memory. My mother recalls a children's game taught to her and her cousins by her father called *jol manga*, a ceremonial plea for rain. When the rains lashed across the state but somehow forgot

Lumding, my mother and her cousins set out with a bamboo sieve in hand, knocking on one neighbour's door after another, begging for rain. The neighbours poured a bucket of water on the sieve under which my mother and her mates sat huddled. Supposedly, the more the households that complied with this odd ritual, the closer were the chances of seeing rain in the next couple of days. This game that my mother and her cousins often played as kids in Lumding was a remnant of many agrarian rituals their predecessors had practised. Despite being severed from their strong agrarian roots, many early migrant families in Lumding continued to re-enact these rituals through their young, as games or rituals separated from their ceremonial value. A continuity of these rituals, even in the form of a children's game, assured them of a continuum of belonging and an expression of their own transformative journey as associations to their ancestral places were slowly severed. But it is not only a memory of ecological lack but also of calamity that preserves itself in these stories.

While talking about the colony, an elderly lady casually mentioned how her ancestral home in Borishal, Bangladesh had been eaten by a flooding Padma river, forcing her family to migrate to Dhaka after which her grandfather found employment in a tea plantation in Assam. The complex links between ecology and migration, perpetuated by necessities of livelihood and capital, are a resonant truth of fluid riverine landscapes across borders. The interconnectedness of these more nuanced histories may often get buried under an understanding of migration as only a socio-political event brought about by top-to-bottom decisions. Their retrieval then becomes possible only from spaces that they continue to reside in—in narratives of family origins and personal histories, which are passed down as keepsakes to anchor the present.

Harking back to Baby's story I have often mused over her role as the protagonist in the narrative. Throughout the story, Baby plays the role of a bystander. Despite the event taking place in her own backyard, her participation is restricted to that of a passive audience. While talking to older women, several my own distant relatives, I discovered

that it was only two generations ago that women from East Bengali migrant families in Lumding stopped actively practicing the purdah. In most households women's mobility was restricted by rigid moral and gender codes. While women put in labour on family farms, they did so in different capacities than men. The gendered allocation of space and mobility imposed on caste Hindu Bengali women in Lumding in its early years continued well into the 1950s restricting their social lives to a considerable extent.

Despite Lumding being one of the earliest railway junctions in the region, employment for women in railway offices was almost non-existent till the 1970s. The only employment opportunities available to women during this time were in keeping with gendered roles of services, such as cleaning, nursing, and teaching in the railway-run hospital and school. While today women are employed in various roles and capacities in the Lumding railway office, the space remained strictly dominated by men even during the two decades immediately following Independence. Many of the early female workers who found employment in clerical positions in railway offices were extended these positions on 'compassionate grounds', a provision provided on the death of a close male family member who worked in the railways.

While Lumding railway colony's life revolved mainly around the railways, avenues for women's participation in its operations did not open up fully and dynamically until two to three decades after Independence. Therefore, while railway operations constituted the main centre of economic activity in the colony, women were largely absent in its operational sphere for a long time. This could be one of the reasons why older female residents of Lumding colony did not centralise the railway network in conversations about the colony, instead choosing to converse about the sociality of the colony itself while referencing the railway operations more peripherally. Women seemed to rely much less on mutual corroboration of facts and figures focusing more on fluid exchanges and stories shared in the intimate refuge of their domesticity. This domesticity was not restricted to their own hearth and home but also expanded with their

mobility. Many older women had journeyed from villages and cities in Bangladesh to Lumding with their families, but they had also made an additional journey from their own natal communities to their in-laws' via marriage. These journeys sometimes entailed movement from one transfer town to another with many marriages occurring in the families of railway service holders. Later as relatively younger women started travelling to neighbouring towns and cities for education and vocational training, their knowledge networks expanded. While women in the colony were largely passive participants when it came to the top-down decisions made in the railways' processes, they actively relied on community networks to produce their own knowledge.

A TALE OF TALES

Women's participation in the religious and ritualistic traditions of Lumding colony

During conversations with women across Lumding one thing that became clear was the importance of religion and ritualistic practices in their lives. Lumding railway colony celebrates a large number of Hindu festivals. While speaking to many business owners it was evident that the town looked forward to these occasions for commercial purposes as well. Hotels get booked for these events, the shops bring in fresh goods, while fairs and carnivals attract local artisans and small sellers. Lumding colony is known in neighbouring towns as much for the railways as it is for the many religious festivals that its residents celebrate.

In the past, these festivals were an important extension of women's domestic sphere and allowed them to actively participate in public life with sanction. While the norms of purdah were slowly relaxed, and they ultimately disappeared, earlier religious festivals legitimised free mingling with their peers and even opened opportunities for travel. An important festival in Lumding is the Bono Utsav, a ritual associated

with Ram Thakur, a Hindu religious reformer of the 19th century from East Bengal. The Bono Utsav, or forest festival, is held once a year where disciples travel to a spot in the wilderness away from Lumding to feast, sing, dance, and offer prayers to Lord Krishna. Women married in other towns would travel back to their natal families in Lumding for this festival.

Because the railway colony brought together people from different parts of the region, the community rituals that emerged are also reflective of this journey. An analysis of ritual performances draws attention to new forms of identification with locality as well as their intersections with gender (Mand 2006).

In Lumding colony, the influence of several 19th and 20th century Hindu religious reformers from East Bengal is very evident. Branches of ashrams dedicated to their practices, such as Bharat Sevashram Sangha and Ram Thakur Ashram, came up not long after the inception of Lumding. For women, these ashrams became important arenas through which they could not only participate in public life but also exert some power in the socio-cultural life of the community. These ashrams also helped in legitimising women's place in society in circumstances of widowhood, old age, and spinsterhood, or some form of social ostracization and marginalisation, allowing them autonomy and agency over their lives, to some degree. While visiting the Ram Thakur Ashram in Lumding I discovered that it also doubled up as an informal retirement home for elderly women. A line of single-room establishments adjacent to the worship area served as living space. While it can be assumed that living in these ashrams restricted their everyday lives in dedication to the ashram, this was, in fact, not the case. An elderly woman who now lives in the ashram informed me that alongside her duties, she also organised group travels once a year for the women in the ashram. Religious pilgrimages give her and the other older female residents of the ashram a chance to travel the length and breadth of the country without male supervision—an opportunity not available to many other older women who continue to reside in family units. She also informed me that she had willingly chosen to live in

the ashram instead of with her siblings' families, having never married herself, the implication being that she enjoyed a greater freedom of mobility and decision making in the ashram. Thus, these spaces not only serve as a means for women to find a foothold in cases of social marginalisation but are also preferred over more traditional family set-ups in certain cases. The association of an ashram life with religious piety also gives these women a say in the community. Depending on their hierarchy in the ashram's structure and their own socioeconomic backgrounds, the women are capable of exerting pressure on selective organisational decisions in the ashram. It is to be noted that they are neither recluses nor ordained nuns, and do not hold a formal position or designation in the organisation's hierarchy, nor are they allowed to directly participate in the ritual worship that continues to be performed by a priest. Nevertheless, they are active participants in all other aspects of the ashram and manage to lead relatively autonomous lives. However, it is not just the ashram's inhabitants who are able to participate in active decision-making processes through religious participation; older women who still live in domestic set-ups are also able to do so in many ways.

Most of the religious organisations have organisational wings for women that run largely without intervention by male members. Two such active wings are Sarada Sangha (Ram Krishna Mission) and Bhogini Sammelan (Ram Thakur Ashram). These wings have their own hierarchical structures and are managed by elected members. These wings organise their own meetings and festivals, independent of men, and may have their set of rituals that excludes male participation. They also travel to branches in neighbouring regions, and organise charitable and religious events. Although it may seem that these wings serve only as avenues of religious engagement separated from men, over time they have evolved into powerful institutions. In contrast to the ashram-dwelling women who have either abandoned domesticity or have found refuge and belonging away from society with their reach accordingly limited, members of female organisational wings are still integrated in society through domesticity. In contrast to the

ashram, the hierarchies in the organisational wings are determined by the status and standing of the women in the colony. For example, the current president of Sarada Sangha in Lumding is a retired upper caste teacher and wife of the former headmaster of the Lumding railway school who had participated in local politics at one point in time. In these organisations, the hierarchies of caste and class in the colony are reproduced and the socioeconomic standing of a member's household in the colony may determine what position of power the member will hold in the organisation. Alternately, women's positions in the organisations' hierarchies add to the standing of their households in the colony.

While women's participation in religious institutions and practices occurs within the 'acceptance of male-centered theologies of female subordination' (Frederick 2003), they are still able to use this acceptance to exert an influence on decisions made by the community. However, it is equally important to acknowledge that this acceptance does not ensure transcending the barriers of class, caste, or community but continues to reproduce them in many ways. What this participation does, however, is destabilise to a certain degree the hegemony of men brought about by the exclusion of women from important organisational roles in religious institutions.

However, the institutionalisation of religious and ritual practices over time has also led to the slow demise of certain folk traditions, which were performed by women alone and were important remnants of the transformational process of enacting old belongings in a new locality. The *brata* ritual is one such tradition that was performed by women in Lumding irrespective of caste and class, but has now become rare in the colony.

Bratakathas are folk rituals and rhymes that women narrate while offering vows of domestic virtuosity and devotion to various deities and goddesses for granting their wishes. It is a narrative tradition, a tale of tales, which 'involves a form of continuing divine revelation with women as the primary transmitters' (McDaniel 2003), and which emerged from the folk traditions of rural, agrarian economies.

Bratakathas can be categorised as *shastriya* or *ashastriya*: the former requiring execution by Brahmin priests, and the latter performed only by women. Bratas were performed by many households in Lumding with women performing the role of the narrator, the audience, as well as the subject and object of the tales. One woman narrated how the practice of the *ashtalok brata* (a brata to the eight realms) brought together women from her family in an elaborate observance that was spread over eight days and involved a complex continuous storytelling ritual from which men were completely barred:

> We woke up while it was still dark, and my mother swept the eastern part of our verandah with cow dung and laid out leaves of jackfruit and banana plants. Each member had a leaf dedicated to his/her name. We sat in a circle with my grand aunt in the middle, and she narrated a tale. The tales revolved around women and their ideal religious behaviour as wives and mothers. Every day she narrated a new tale, and each day the tale was longer than the previous day's. How did we know that it would be longer? We knew because with every passing day we would progressively witness the day unfolding—on the first day the tale ended before dawn, the next day it ended in early dawn, then sunrise and day break till, in the last day, the tale ended when the day had started. My grand aunt recited these tales from memory in rhyming verses while my mother and my aunts listened holding *durba* (sacred grass) in their hands. At the end of each day we were required to put the durba in our leaf and fold it with a piece of string. These were then collected and kept away, and, each day, new leaves were added to the pile. After the tale was narrated by my grand aunt, my grandmother finished the session with a small verse in prayer to the sun god, which she recited from memory. After my grandmother's death, I started reciting the verse that I had memorised through the years. At the end of the eighth day, my mother collected all the folded leaves and threw them in a nearby pond after which the women fasted through the day before conducting a puja. That day we consumed only boiled and unsalted food. The ashtalok brata was performed in our

> home till my grandmother's death after which the practice was discontinued.

The brata tradition, still practiced in rural Bengal, Odisha, parts of Barak Valley, and Bangladesh, is rarely practiced in Lumding. It is important to note that bratakathas could be performed by women and households from any class, caste, or educational background.

Bear (1994) points out that 'for colonial officials, Indian nationalists, and social theorists the railway had a special role to play in modernizing India.' While the space of the railway colony attempted to project European modernity in terms of spatial organisation, town planning, and infrastructural provisioning, many from the migrant community attempted to root themselves by enacting rituals from their rural agrarian ancestry even as they slowly ceased to pursue cultivation. With the transition from an agrarian identity to a completely urban one, folk traditions gave way to more institutionalised forms of religious worship with public festivals, ashrams, temples, and organisations becoming the central nuclei of religious performances. For women, this meant both a new avenue of participation in public life and the gradual discontinuation of the narrative mores of storytelling and ritualistic folk knowledge that were themselves a result of syncretic and complex traditions.

BOUMA'S MEDICINE

Under British rule, Assam was considered to be vulnerable to contagious diseases such as cholera, malaria, and kala-azar. Plantations and colonies often became hotbeds of contagions due to the intensification of labour. From 1882–92 around 92,92,275 tea workers perished 'with cholera, kala-azar (or black-fever), malaria, anaemia, dysentery, dropsy, diarrhoea, respiratory disease, and "other causes" leading the list' (Dey 2017). In 1899, a cholera outbreak in

the Lumding section of the Assam Bengal Railways led to the death of hundreds of workers.

While speaking to railway officials and residents in Lumding a phrase that was often repeated with reference to Lumding was 'punishment area', a phrase that had found its way in the official lexicon due to its association with disease, 'bad water', and the harshness of the terrain. The phrase, also used in relation to tea estates in the region, probably originated from colonial perspectives where the British not only struggled with containing outbreaks within the labour force but also dealt with the outbreaks themselves. In a 1925 issue of the *Indian Medical Gazzette*, Dr Strickland (1925) writes, 'As a final point I would cite the ill reputation for "fever" that the Nambur Forest has for officers on tour.' As such, given the industrial value of plantations and railway colonies for the British, they became important sites of medical research on infectious diseases.

Lumding's location made its colony vulnerable to diseases and the British administration undertook many surveys and public health initiatives to combat outbreaks. The colony had a designated sanitary inspector, and the administration undertook initiatives of 'water-tidiness' by concretising water drains and filling tanks. The Haru Longpher river, in particular, was considered a hotbed for malarial mosquitoes with many initiatives being taken to clean its bed to prevent the spread of the disease.

The history of these initiatives and the colony's own struggles with outbreaks have found a way into its own recall of the space as well as its socio-cultural life. Sitala puja, an 8-day-long religious festival celebrated by the colony's residents is said to have its origins in a prolonged struggle with pox and other contagious diseases. Sitala is primarily known as the goddess of pox and is worshipped throughout north India and Bengal, although her personality and roles vary from place to place. In her article, 'Sitala: The Cool One', Wadley (1980) says, 'the attribution of widely varying personalities to Sitala is a result of continuous processes of communication between localized little

traditions and the more widespread, continuously Sanskritizing great traditions.'

In Lumding, the story goes that the Haru Longpher area once saw a deadly outbreak of disease that refused to die down. In an occurrence not uncommon, the goddess appeared in a resident's dream and asked him to start a tradition of worshipping the goddess. On waking, he communicated the goddess' desire to other residents who then came together and organised a puja, following which the disease subsided. After this the Haru Longpher Sitala *bari* was formed, and it became an annual event—as much cultural as it was religious.

Along with the administrative initiatives for preventive care and medical research, a parallel recourse for the colony's residents was traditional healing that blurred the line between medicine, faith, and sorcery or magic. It was common for residents to turn to practitioners whose clientele included people from all backgrounds and communities. Bouma was one such practitioner whose name continues to invoke respect and veneration among old timers.

Bouma was an anomaly in the colony. Not much is known about her parentage apart from the fact that her mother, of unknown origins, had drifted to Lumding with Bouma in tow. When she arrived, her mother was pregnant and without a male companion, a state that made her place in the colony an irregularity, and she was likely to be pushed to the periphery. However, Lumding often saw a flood of people in transit because of its strategic position as a connecting nodal point. Taking pity on her destitute state, a resident gave her and her daughter refuge in his household. Bouma's mother gave birth not long after, although the child was stillborn. After the incident, Bouma's mother decided to depart from Lumding, leaving her daughter in the care of the household. Bouma was assimilated in the family and learnt the art of traditional healing practices from her patron who was himself a *kabiraj* or traditional healer. After his death, she inherited his practice and gained a reputation in the colony for having strong mastery over her skills, specialising in the cure of jaundice, ulcers, piles, and other

diseases that were said to have been brought by 'bad water' and other abnormalities.

Bouma's cure for jaundice was one of the most popular in the colony. Jaundice was a common affliction that residents believed was caused by the impurity in the groundwater that they used. Bouma's jaundice cure brought people from surrounding areas to Lumding, and there would be queues of patients lined up for her medicine. As is common in these practices, the lines between medicine and ritual performance were blurred. Patients sat outside her home, and she offered them the bark of mango trees and limewater, which they were required to rub in their palms for a length of time. After this ritual, she handed them little sachets of pellets that she had prepared a few days ago by grinding the leaves of the *arhar* plant. Once cured, patients were likely to return and make a small offering at Bouma's worship altar. Her ingredients ranged from household items and herbs grown in her own kitchen garden, to things that are considered abject by others such as raw animal meat, animal dung, and insects. One of her cures included a medicine for mouth ulcers that she made from the insects that breed in cow dung, which she ground and mixed with various ingredients to make an ointment. The ointment was applied on the ulcers. Bouma also inculcated magic in her medicine and was known to offer talismans and perform pujas for physical healing as an important part of her practice.

Bouma's enduring reputation as a successful medicine woman in the colony is both a testament to how women from the peripheries integrated themselves in a society bound by strict patrilocal associations, and how, despite this integration, they continued to enact a peripheral, though significant, role. Bouma's life revolved around making herself useful for both her immediate family as well as society. Her clientele included people from all socioeconomic backgrounds. Especially for women in a segregated society, having a female healer meant comfort and ease in explaining their unique situations. As such she fulfilled an important role in the colony. She was also a repository of knowledge that was itself an assimilation of many belongings.

Her knowledge required her to know the lay of the land in meticulous detail, sourcing meat and plants in the vicinity, and knowing the seasonality as well as their availability with precision—a remarkable antithesis to the detachment of the conceivers of colonial modernity of which the railway colony is a product.

GRANDMOTHER'S DESH

Kawwa kaa kaa kaa
Bel kuriya khaa
Bel shundori pottor laiyye
Khuli mili saa
(Chaitgaiya or Chittagong dialect)

Crow caw away
Pick the fruit from the ground and eat
The lady of the wood apple has sent a letter
Open it and see

As an undergraduate student in Kolkata, I would often amuse my peers by reciting a random verse in a regional dialect learnt from one of my grandmothers or grand aunts. A frequent term that was used to refer to me was *probashi Bangali* (non-resident Bengali); the primary reason for this being that in contrast to them I spoke Bengali with a heavy influence of *Bangal*, an umbrella term they used to refer to a concoction of East Bengali dialects and languages. I had learnt these verses by rote sitting beside my grandmother or from my mother. My friends would listen enthralled as I recited these memorised verses. This led to discussions of their own grandparents' journeys as Partition refugees and their ancestral places of origin. Frequently, the conversation would end with reminiscing about their grandparents' attempts at keeping the legacy of this journey alive by insisting on

speaking in their native dialect with their family members. Native languages and dialects can reaffirm a sense of identity when migration renders language as the sole residual of belonging.

My maternal grandmother's idea of *desh* or homeland did not spill further than what people today understand as the eastern frontiers of the country and Bangladesh, the immediate places where her male kin had found employment. In the years preceding her death when my grandmother had descended into complete senility, she often used the phrase *desher baari*. Described as a 'rural rentier homestead in the homeland' (Sharma 2011), desher baari is in essence ancestral property that many Bengali migrants maintained in their places of origin while holding secondary households in urban centres by virtue of their job postings. However, what my grandmother meant by the term is open to conjecture and abstraction. Married at 13 and a mother by 15, my grandmother was no more than a child when she had made the journey, first to her in-laws, and then three children later, to Lumding railway colony with her husband's family (from Noakhal district in Bangladesh). Additionally, she followed the purdah till the death of her husband in 1986. For my grandmother Suniti Bala what desher baari truly meant was difficult to ascertain for the simple reason that she never explained it; did it mean her parents' home, or her in-laws' in Noakhal? Or was she referring to her domestic household in Lumding where my grandfather's family worked and had procured land that they also cultivated?

By the time I had hit adolescence and was able to value a relationship with my grandmother, she was already in her late eighties, and her slow descent into memory loss had started. One of the ways I could still bond with her was by engaging with her when she prattled on in verses in her native dialect Noakhali, or in other dialects she had picked up from her interactions with neighbours, relatives, and friends. Her scattered sentences were mostly incomprehensible to us siblings and also to my father. Only my mother and aunts, and occasionally older cousins, fully understood the nuances and inflections in her words, catering to her needs accordingly.

According to Espin (2015), for those who have lived in many places during their lives, memory provides the only sense of continuity. If what she says holds true, that the only way of knowing who we are is to remember, then I saw my grandmother slowly lose grasp of that knowing in continuity. As her memory failed her, she started confusing those around her with relatives from her infancy or her friends from childhood. Our home in Guwahati sometimes transformed into her domesticity in Lumding, and during other times into some other homestead where she had lived in Bangladesh. What anchored her to the immediate to an extent was her native dialect to which she retracted increasingly, and completely by the time of her demise.

Unlike my grandmother whose sense of the world and nation was gathered from books, limited travel, and hearsay, the older men in the family had a firmer and more rooted sense of the world as they actively engaged with the outside world through their professions. The use of Bengali language in offices and schools was an advantage for many families. Even if the men had travelled less and spoke in their native dialects with their families, they participated directly or indirectly in the undertakings of their professions that demanded an initiation and practice in the language of official processes. However, this also translated into many families insisting on prioritising teaching their children a version of Bengali that was 'pure' and free of heavy dialects and accents. But for many women such as my grandmother, native dialects remained a repository of memory that they relied on heavily to communicate with their children and their social networks. It was also native dialects in which women such as her articulated their own observations of society in the form of *chharas* (rhymes) or songs and passed them on to their children and grandchildren.

By the time my grandmother passed away with us in Guwahati, she had completely receded into the womb of her native dialect and had more or less stopped talking in *cholti Bangla*—the 'clean' Bengali used in official practices and communication that we children had been taught to speak in—probably forgetting or rejecting its use altogether.

WHOSE WOODS ARE THESE?

Railway colonies under the British rule were seen as 'a paragon of European enterprise' (Bear 1994) in India for their modern urban infrastructure. However, as Scriver and Srivastava (2015) comment, 'While model settlements were engines of improvement in the imagination of the colonial modernizers, they remained antithetical to the organizing principles of their surroundings and almost completely detached' (Scriver, Srivastava 2015). A passage from Rudyard Kipling's (1891) observation of the Jamalpur railway colony illustrates how the imagination of modernity is produced by juxtaposing it with the uncontainability of its surroundings:

> There is a dreary village in the neighbourhood which is said to make the most of any cholera that maybe going on but Jamalpur itself is specklessly, spotlessly clean…Everything has the air of being cleaned up at ten that very morning and put under a glass case.

According to Bear (1994), railway colonies can be understood as heterotopic spaces where the 'rhetorics of respectability, modernity, gender, and race intensified in new forms'. The railways may have been imagined as a modernising project that would help in eradicating local obstacles such as caste and gender restrictions, but the hierarchical space of the colony not only fostered existing social distinctions but also gave way to newer forms of discriminatory practices. Hierarchies of race, class, and caste were distinct in the way housing was designed and infrastructural provisioning was allocated. In Lumding the residential spaces were designed and named as per the designations of the employees that they housed. Names such as Officer's Colony, Mistry Patti, and Sweeper's Colony continue to exist and are indicative of these demarcations of colonial planning.

For many Lumding residents from the East Bengali migrant community, the slow transition from a rural-agrarian to an urban identity required re-negotiating the domestic sphere along the axes

of modernity and nationalist identity. However, the colony itself was home to many communities which had been brought together from different parts of the country to participate in the railways' operations. So, what we understand by the community of the railway colony is an ethnoscape (Appadurai 1990) where actors from different backgrounds and affiliations found themselves in a space where constant flux and motion was the rule rather than the exception. They were subject to larger decisions of the railways as well as their own aspirations of growth and progress.

During my conversations with the women what stood out was that despite having distinct memories of ancestral villages and towns, even when they had not visited them personally, many of them did not have any anecdotes or stories, or a consensual idea about their predecessors' first encounter with the place besides in relation to the colony itself. I could not help but read this as an extension of the 'complete detachment', that Scriver and Srivastava (2015) allude to when referencing the 'modernizing project of the railways'. Despite the colony's collective amnesia about what existed before it was incepted, the fact remains that the existence of a space does not begin with its cartographic discovery and inception. Thus, the Lumding railway colony is as much a space of collective forgetting, which seems to constitute an active component of the migration history of its residents, as it is about collective remembering.

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PHOTOGRAPHS

Surviving photograph of Lumding Railway Station, 1915. The only women in the photograph are British.

A photograph of a family taken in the 1960s. Older women did not follow their mothers' strict purdah norms but continued covering their heads in public.

A young female renunciate of Ananda Marg.

Old offices that have survived the many fires that have burnt other buildings. Older buildings were Assam type, which was more suited to the terrain, however, the building materials made them vulnerable to fires.

Construction of new railway offices in the vicinity of the old offices.

My maternal aunt with her eldest son who was a businessman with establishments in the main bazaar.

Main bazaar in the present day. Residents of main bazaar have been embroiled in a prolonged contestation with the Northeast Frontier Railways over ownership of land in the bazaar.

In stark contrast to the congestion of the bazaar, the railway colony is neatly laid out and spacious. Since Independence, the railways have followed the planning paradigms of the British and built their infrastructures largely on the same planning ethos.