

**Geographies of the Book:
Print Culture and Identity in northeast India**

My research proposal aims to investigate the links between ‘print culture’ and identity formation through a case study of Northeast India since the early 19th century. In consonance with its physical diversity, the Northeast had two distinct media cultures at the time of the coming of print: (a) scribal practice in the ‘Valley Society’ – especially in the Brahmaputra valley, and (b) oral tradition in the ‘Hill Society’, existing in a state of ‘primary orality’. But the printing press is no totalising technology; and the effects of print do not exclude or guarantee particular outcomes.

Among the hill tribes surrounding the Valleys, print had the most spectacular outcomes when whole tribal communities interacted with print in one go, thus bypassing the usual rite of passage through the manuscript culture of the Valley Society. In an area known as the Tower of Babel due to its linguistic diversity, print culture facilitated the formation of ‘standard languages’ by eliminating a number of closely linked, but smaller dialects which were never reduced to writing due to considerations of the economy of time and energy by the Christian missionaries. Moreover, print technology exerts effects of ‘*standardisation*’ as well as ‘*differentiation*’ depending on the time of its arrival and the place of its diffusion. With the spatial spread of print culture through the region, especially in the tribal hills, it had the effect of fragmentation when a number of closely linked linguistic families reflected ‘dialectal chauvinism’, and legitimise and ‘canonise’ their little dialectal differences by reducing their dialects to writing and the printed word – especially by Bible translation in a version rendered slightly different. Print as a technology is not a revolutionary force per se, but its reception and appropriation in different cultural contexts configures its nature, to a large degree.