Introduction

'Small Wars' on the Frontier:
The Raj and the Army, c. 1800-c. 1900

We may generally imagine (pre-modern) wars in India to be a panorama of armies marching against each other. But these were not the only kind of wars that were common in nineteenth- century India; in fact they were not even the most dominant form. The most pervasive form of wars were those undertaken by the armies of the emerging British state in India on its 'frontiers' against 'resisting' people generally unarmed. This work will explain why and how such wars were undertaken and what resulted from such practices. 'Small Wars' was a common official usage of term used to categorize these wars. But the expression itself had nothing to with the scale of the war. It simply connoted wars undertaken by “regular armies” against “irregular” ones.¹ In the official definition the use of the term “irregular” may be noted. The binaries were posed not as the army versus the ‘civilians’ for such position carried politically incorrect implication but the effect was subsumed in the technicality of the language. The basic premise on which small wars were defined was that they were carried out against people “beyond the pale of civilized diplomacy.” who were supposedly “absolute barbarians”, “savages”, who had nothing in common with British way of government and their ‘civil institutions’; who had “nominally a religion and for most part no education”; whose customs were “prejudicial to social

advancement.” We will explore in this thesis the question, what caused the perpetuation of such strong racial biases.

'Small wars' were a recurrent practice of the British Indian state especially on its frontiers, though the civil-military clashes in various parts of north India in 1857-9 were one of their kind that were clubbed in the same category. But the ‘edges’ of the British Indian state were always burning. To give an example, between 1850 and 1876 alone, the army was sent across the Punjab frontier by the British authorities as many as 365 times. There must have been a compelling reason for doing so. It is true that a growing British statehood needed war, but to have them so habitually is an indication that the reasons were beyond the question of statehood. We may say that the reasons were both ‘local’ and ‘imperial’. Both will be explained.

The British authorities could send military expeditions across the frontier for reasons as petty as putting down a band of "robbers", dealing with “the refractory chief”, to "avenge loss of lives, property", to “reinstate” an allied chief, to “open up” a route and construct a road, to conduct surveys and map making. The syndrome of imperial expansion was such that one thing led to another, though not by its own self but by relentless endeavors of the aspiring state in that direction. It was a syndrome for the largely poor Indian population, from whose pockets these wars were sponsored. It was also a disorder for the Court of Directors and those British parliamentarians who sometimes irrespective of their position in the opposition or the ruling party saw wars as a threat to the survival of British rule in India. As a matter of fact every major military campaign on the frontiers of India caused heated debate in the parliament over the question of expenses incurred on such wars.

The British author Charles Callwell who popularized the term ‘Small war’ through his book, focused principally on the army, its strategy, its logistical needs and its ability to counter geographical terrain and local resistance. This work will attempt to shift this focus from the army to the people and examine the nature of response that was

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2 Memorandum by H. H. Thornton, Secretary to the Government of Punjab, dated 18th November 1867 in Political Department Proceedings, 1879, volume I, no. 131 (Maharashtra State Archives, Bombay).

3 Callwell, *Small Wars*
evoked by such engagement. The British state made war on people but it did so not as its first choice. As we have said, the question of financial outlay was important. But it was not more important than ‘imperial’ interests. The ‘foreign threat’ on the northwest frontier sometimes looked ‘real’, at other times, it was made to look real. We will see in the following chapters how the French and the Russian xenophobia and the colonial needs on the frontier acted and reacted upon each other.

Making war in itself required a principled justification but to make it so frequently in “inaccessible” mountainous terrain and against people who seemed particularly vary and suspicious of any Englishman visiting their habitation needed a strong rationale. We will see that this rationale was practiced by the British administrators on the frontier by imposing new definitions of ‘peace’ and ‘disturbance’. As a matter of fact, the British administration remained committed to ‘introduce’ to the local ‘tribes’ the British way of governance, a system which judged people’s way of life differently from local customs and social and political norms. Thus ‘local feuds’ could be judged not only differently but they were also seen as a ‘threat’ to the peace on the frontier. Peace was needed above all in state making- to carry out unhindered trade, to further diplomacy and to reduce expenses on policing activities. But one would be careful in giving an uncritical attention to the idea of peace. We will see in this work that local conflicts provided to the British the justification they needed as conciliator. This work will show that peace-makers were also the greatest aggressors. We will see how the peculiarity of this ‘aggression’ was justified. This peculiarity was visible in the way the British went about practicing it. See for instance a quote from Callwell’s work:

But when there is no king to conquer, no capital to seize, no organized army to overthrow, and when there are no celebrated strongholds to capture, and no great centres of population to occupy, the objective is not so easy to select. It is then that the regular troops are forced to resort to cattle lifting and village burning and that the war assumes an aspect which may shock the humanitarian. In planning a war against a uncivilized nation who has, perhaps, no capital, your first objective should be the capture of whatever they prize the most, and the destruction or deprivation of which will probably bring the war most rapidly to a conclusion. This goes to the root of the
whole matter. If the enemy cannot be touched in his patriotism or his honour, he can be touched through his pocket. 4

We may notice here, the validation Callwell provides to make these wars specially his emphasis on what he considered as the “uncivilized” existence of local societies, which by British norms was “primitive” and beyond the “pale of civilized diplomacy.” The idea of ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ were embedded in the in political dialogue that formed the everyday part of British relation with the locals. Even the dissenting voices with in the British administration argued from the same perspective. The Indian Viceroy for example stated in his minute in 1876:

I object to this particular form of punishment because it perpetuates a system of semibarbarous reprisal, and because we lower ourselves to the ideas of right and might common to our barbarous neighbours, rather than endeavors to raise them to our own ideas; because it seldom really touches the guilty, and generally falls most heavily on the innocent; because its natural tendency is to perpetuate animosity rather than lead up to good relations; because as a rule, it leaves no permanent mark, and the tribes assailed by us can point triumphantly to our having evacuated their country after all; because there can be no more trying fighting for our own troops than that which obliges them ultimately to retire before an enemy increasing in strength and boldness; and it appears from the records of these expeditions, which are not always successes even in the most limited sense, the losses suffered by ourselves often exceed the losses we inflict. 5

The difference of opinion did not cause these wars to be stopped; they were a perpetual feature of British engagement with the local people throughout the nineteenth century. But we will see that such wars did not ensure an unchallenged British presence, though they certainly prolonged it.

In this work I have looked at certain flash-points in history and by connecting these flash-points I have tried to examine how the practice of state-making is carried out by

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5 Extract from the Viceroy Lytton’s Minute on the Reorganisation of the Frontier, dated 22nd April 1877, Nainital in Political Department Proceedings, volume no. 243, 1878 (Maharashtra State Archives Bombay).
the British on the north-west frontiers of India. The first chapter begins with an analysis of the East India Company's policies towards its north-west frontiers under Richard Wellesley as the Governor General. The focus is on understanding the rationale for expansion of the Company's territorial frontiers from Awadh to further west in the Indo-Gangetic doab. The whole exercise is to show how the 'fear of French invasion' of Hindustan was used to "annex" more territories in north India by the British. The traits that underlined Wellesley's policy chiefly his obsession with the idea of "insecurity" and therefore occupation of certain "vulnerable" regions in order to better "control" them as a counter measure against "insecurity" were to remain as striking feature of the British policy till the end of the nineteenth century. The only difference was that the French were replaced by the Russians. But unlike the French, the Russians did not have a presence in India. The British rivalry with the Russians was more to do with the 'imperial' interest in Afghanistan and Central Asia whose trade routes and markets promised rich dividends. These trade routes had to be "controlled" but first of all they had to be "discovered" and mapped. Mapping was also an important way of "knowing" the region on which the British wished to exercise various forms of control. The project of mapping began in late eighteenth century and continued throughout the nineteenth century. This is the subject of the second chapter, which outlines both European and local explorer's surveys that served the British state's needs on the north-west frontier. The attempt of this chapter will be to show how progressively, the mapping of the frontier became dependent on the 'native' explorers and also to show how such exercise was fraught with 'dangers' and 'difficulties'.

The third chapter brings back the debate of "insecurity" and shows that the occupation of the "vulnerable" region in anticipation to the Russian fear, did not by any means 'secured' the British presence on the frontier. The British invasion of Afghanistan in 1839 and their subsequent acquiring of political and fiscal control of Kabul economy led to a local outburst among the chiefs and the local population which manifested itself in the massacre of about sixteen thousand British and Indian troops and civilians in 1841. What followed in response to this massacre from the British side was a typical example of a 'small war'. This chapter is focused solely on examining the
course of this expedition and the debates that followed about the ‘justness’ and ‘unjustness’ of the army’s actions in “avenging” the “Kabul tragedy.”

After having looked at the Delhi frontier and the Afghan frontier, the fourth chapter takes up the Punjab frontier. This chapter goes on to show how the British authorities become arbitrators in a ‘local dispute’. The case study unfolds the murder plot of a British officer and his working party by local village men who resort to killings to ‘avenge’ the abduction of a woman from their ‘tribe’. The local jirgas appointed by the British fails to come to a consensus over the settlement of the issue allowing the British authorities to judge the case partly on British laws. This chapter shows how and why this happens. The idea of ‘tribal’ responsibility and holding the whole ‘tribe’ responsible for an individual’s act as a common feature of ‘small wars’ emerges quite strongly in this episode.

The fifth chapter will further explore the idea of ‘tribal responsibility’. The British understanding of this phrase assumed that actions of individuals could be regulated through local chieftains and local council of elders (jirgas). This chapter will demonstrate that this was not so simple. The main focus of the chapter is to examine the politics of “access” to the frontier and to bring out the nitty-gritties of the process that went into ‘opening up’ a region by constructing road. The attempt is to see how the ‘tribal’ chieftains related to the British authorities and to analyze the nature of conflict between the two.

Throughout this work, we shall pose ‘small wars’ as a response to the idea of ‘insecure frontier’ and will examine the relationship between the two.