Chapter Five

Improvement

"Why Have They Caused So Much Loss To Us?"

The imperial museum was a great deal tidier than the nationalist archive. In the Calcutta Exhibition of 1883-4, the Assam Court was a major attraction for the metropolitan audience. A variety of "savage weapons" hung upon the walls, guarding, as it were, the bright yellow and red fabrics of silk, specimens of "a brilliant, if somewhat barbaric, style of ornament", samples of brassware, fine filigree work in gold, gorgeous specimens of ivory-work, and "a collection of the agricultural apparatus used by the hill people in their primitive system of cultivation."

Men, and in a few instances women also, belonging to the tribes of Garo, Khasi, Naga (three different tribes), Miri, Abor, Dafla, Manipuri, Khampti, and Mikir, were brought down to Calcutta and taken to see the sights of the place, and life-size models of these, clothed in their national costumes, together with complete collections of domestic implements, weapons of the chase, &c, contributed towards the embellishment of the Indian Ethnological Court.¹

¹ First Report of the Agricultural Department in Assam, from October 1882 to the 31st March 1884 by E. Stack, Director of Agriculture, Assam (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1884), 17-8
None of the city spectators, of course, noticed the omission of the Akas, yet another “barbaric people” from the exotic frontier. None of them knew what it cost the Akas not to be represented. Metropolitan voyeurism thrives on sanctioned ignorance.

Preparations for the Exhibition started in the Assam Hills early in 1883. The local administration sent messengers to the various groups beyond the Inner Line asking each community to send two human samples for the show. Lakhidhar Patgiri, who had held the charge of the Balipara *muzuza* for almost fourteen years, was sent to the Aka Hills by the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang. As the Akas later recounted,

> When Lakhidhar Patgiri came up to our chang and asked for one boy and one girl of our king with ornaments on their persons, saying that the Empress-Queen had said to send them down with him; upon this we said we could give the ornaments, but we could not send any person with him, as it was not our custom to do so and as we had not done so in any of our generations. Lakhidhar Patgiri said that he could not come unless he got our people. He having said so, we told him very well you stay here. We should hold a mel with Bora Saheb.

The community had already recognized – if the English translation of their Naharbari petition is to be trusted – the increasing “encroachment” of the British in the late years. “We have been put in want of the place for shooting deer, catching fish and collecting firewoods”, said they, and pointed out that “the chaprasies of Khola Babu of the Jungle Saheb [Forest Officer]” as a rule obstructed their traditional paths to the plains, at times opened fire indiscriminately on the passer-bys, making it altogether difficult to procure rice. The reduction of *poza* was another common grievance. The Akas insisted on holding a *mel* at Majlehorali with the government officials “to determine whether or not our coming and going path and the land within our boundary would be given up to us and whether or not our pension would be increased.”

“But instead of going to hold a mel to settle the matter the sepoys and Sahibs went up for fighting”, the petition observed.² For seizing “a British subject who was visiting their country”, a military expedition was sent against the Akas in December 1883, just when the Calcutta spectators were appreciating the brilliant specimens of frontier barbarism in the

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² “Translation of the Petition”, in “Attitude of the Kapaschor and Hararikhoa [sic] Akas”, Foreign Department (External A), December 1884, Nos. 16-20 [NAI]
Assam Court. The forces “did a great injustice by burning our houses, paddy, granaries and by shooting and killing our pigs, methons, cows, birds, dogs and cats”, the Aka petitioners protested, and mentioned that two venerated heads of their deceased chiefs had also been dug out and carried off by the invading sepoys. “When we come down to the Maharani’s land, we do not cause any loss, nor do we kill even an animal”, said the petitioners, and asked “Why have they caused so much loss to us?” It is the reverberations of the disquieting simplicity of this savage question that we anticipate to overhear in the labyrinthine calculations of “improvement”.

The Agoraphobic State

“The true reason for seizing Lakhidhar must be that the Akas were of opinion that he materially assisted in ousting them from the land to which they considered themselves entitled”, acknowledged an official report. Captain Maxwell, the leader of the military expedition, was convinced that the demarcation of the boundary, and the gazetting of the forests as forest reserves, at once precluded them from following their usual pursuits as regards this tract of country; and for the purposes of hunting the most valuable preserves lie at the foot of the hills. Whatever the grievance may be worth, it is certain, I think, that in the savage mind a grievance did exist, and an experience of hill tribes teaches me that a “land” grievance is the most deeply rooted of all grievances and is next to impossible to smooth.

Bringing more and more land under regular assessment was an indispensable part of the project of improvement. Mauzadas were encouraged to expand their fiscal charges, planters to widen cleared fields and 17a to enlarge their rice lands. In one of its rare poetic moments, the Ainslie Committee observed that “[t]he area covered with rice-fields is but as a drop in the ocean of uncultivated waste.”

3 John Evelyn Shuckburgh, North-Eastern Frontier of India: Tribal Territory North of Assam (Political & Secret Department, India Office, 3 December 1910. Confidential. B 180), 6. See also Frontier and Overseas Expeditions from India. Vol. 4, 165-7
4 “Translation of the Petition”, in “Attitude of the Kapaschor and Harankho [sic] Akas”, Foreign Department (External A), December 1884, Nos. 16-20 [NAI]
5 Quoted in Reid, History of the Frontier Areas, 269.
On all sides there is jungle springing up with marvellous rapidity, consisting of reed grass rising fifteen to twenty feet in height, or of forest in which the canebreak is so dense, that even an elephant can with difficulty pass through it. The “marvellously rapid growth of vegetation” in Assam continued to pester the British officials for, at least, the entire stretch of the nineteenth century. Such growth, “when unchecked in a few years”, Shakespear observed, “spreads, chokes up valleys, and obliterates, as in the case of the Dhansiri and Kopili valleys, all traces of former towns and buildings.” The first few pages of Shakespear’s History were in fact given to establish the illegitimacy, as it were, of the jungle. More than sixty years ago Jenkins had already drawn attention to this illegitimacy. In describing the Lakhimpur Division in Upper Assam as “generally in a more backward state than the other Assam Divisions” – owing to its having been “surrounded by hill races more or less uncivilized, some in fact perfectly savage” – the Agent to the Governor General reported to the Board of Revenue that on its frontiers are everywhere vast extent of wastes, which render the adjoining lands unprofitable, from harbouring wild beasts, and separating the inhabited parts from each other. But the wastes are in general lands of great capability and were thickly inhabited at no remote period.

The alleged receding of the agrarian frontier in the first three decades of the nineteenth century had become a common cry among the officials. Robertson’s bleak portrayal of Assam in 1834 – that the country, even after its occupation by the British, had “been retrograding, its inhabitants emigrating, its villages decaying, and its revenue annually declining” – was widely quoted as a definitive description. The officials continued to agonize over such impression of large open fields lying fallow in Assam. Presence of open space within the imperial interior caused a panic which revolved around the theme of “waste”. The spatial blankness in the map of utility was as unbearable as the temporal blankness in the chart of tradition. The entire idea of “waste”, needless to say, was tied up

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6 RCSPTC, 56
7 Shakespear, *History of Upper Assam*, 4-6
8 F. Jenkins, Commissioner of Revenue, Assam to the Board of Revenue, Fort William, dated Gowahalty, 8th April, 1851, No. 76½, in “Report on the Revenue Administration of the Province of Assam”, 1849-50, *Selections from the Records of the Bengal Government*, No. 11 [b], IOR MF 1/ Fiche No. 868 [OIOC]
9 Cf. *Translation of a Passage in Mohammed Cazim’s Alemgeernemeh*, 65 for a seventeenth-century description of the Swargadeo’s territory which, most probably, haunted the official imagination in the early nineteenth century.
10 Quoted in *India Political Despatch from the Court of Directors, Foreign Department, 3 December 1834, No. 14* [NAI]

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with the force of enframing that we have referred to in the Introduction. Any land which was not proprietarily enclosed and was not yielding produces calculable in terms of the market was a “waste”, even if it was linked to the itinerant territoriality of local commerce and shifting cultivation. The new discourse of political economy ordained that wastelands required to be developed into arable resources. As we have already suggested in Chapter Three, exercising control over itinerant cultivation could only proceed through seizures of land. Without a reduction of the territorial scope of the “wanderings”, the British authorities could hardly make their img “settle.” The land which was “more profitable for [the img] to allow ... to run waste” was very much a part and parcel of the overall range of land use. Its classification as a “waste” in the official register stiffened its identity, put it apart from the local cultivators and refused to recognize the operative forms of tillage in the area.

In his oft-quoted despatch of 17 April 1830, David Scott suggested a number of “measures tending to develope [sic] the resources of the country.” Not much profit, he said, “could be expected from the exportation of so cheap and bulky a commodity as grain”, especially in the context of the sorry state of communications in Assam. He was sure that it would eventually become necessary, either to reduce materially the amount of the scanty revenue at present derived from the district or to revert to the former system of compulsory labor, unless means are immediately adopted by Government to encourage the production of the more costly articles of export, such in particular as raw silk and moogah, both of which might be prepared in large quantities and of a superior quality were the attention of the inhabitants directed to those objects by that preliminary interference which can alone prove effectual in the existing state of society in Assam.

The logic of monocultural, cash crop production seemed indistinguishable from the logic of progress in Scott's Despatch. Plantation capital was anticipated as “that preliminary interference” which could “alone prove effectual in the existing state of society in Assam.” The remaining options of “improvement” – reduction of revenue or employment of “compulsory labor” – were considered regressive and readily dismissed. Even before the

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11 Cf. Bogle, Officiating Collector, Goalpara, to the Commissioner of Revenue, 17th Division, dated 25 February 1833, in Foreign Department, Political Branch, 30 May 1833, Nos. 86 – 111 [NAI] See Chapter Three.

12 D. Scott, Agent to the Governor General on the North-Eastern Frontier, to G. Swinton, Secretary to the Government of India, dated 17 April 1830, in Foreign Department (P. C.), 7 May 1830, Nos. 51-3 [NAI]. Emphasis added
possibility of growing tea on a provincial scale appeared on the horizon, the officials were earnestly searching for "the more costly articles of export." Before he could become sure of the success of the tea industry in Assam, Jenkins, for example, seriously advocated the case of turning the province into a large sugarcane plantation. For Scott, it had been mulberry, the woody flowering dicot plant on which silkworms could be raised. The entire point was, according to Scott, "to render available for agricultural purposes, land which is not at present considered worth cultivating and of which there are large tracts unoccupied merely for the want of any suitable article of culture." He calculated the extent of such tracts as "not less than one fourth of the district" and confirmed that they were all "well adapted to the culture of the mulberry plant." Assam as a large mulberry garden should focus on "the single commodity of raw silk",

because it does not necessarily require continued European superintendence to bring it to perfection, and because the inhabitants of Assam are already so universally acquainted with the analogous operation of winding the silk called moogah ...

All that was required, said Scott, was "an outlay of from 12 to 15,000 sicca rupees" from the Government in the preliminary stage to set the ball rolling. He submitted an elaborate plan regarding the establishment of government mulberry estates which could eventually "be sold or rented to individuals" or firms for extensive commodity production. In fact, Scott's blueprint was subsequently adopted for tea plantations in Assam, although his repeated appeals for making liberal grants of "waste land" to the European "speculators in silk" did not receive any active support from the Calcutta authorities.

Scott died in 1831, and W. Cracraft, who came to officiate as the Agent for a short period, did not think very highly of Scott's mulberry plan. But in recommending a certain Mr. Woodin for generous land grants, Cracraft agreed that the only answer to the impending

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13 For some time Jenkins had been also toying with the idea of indigo, but he finally concluded that "had indigo cultivation not been carried to its utmost extent, or had it not in great measure, ceased to attract European capital, from the fall of prices, and to have passed largely in consequence into the hands of native landholders before Assam was well known, it is probable that much of our chur lands must have been sought after for the culture of the plant, but the only lands that are now in demand by European capitalists are such as are fit for sugarcane, and these are generally distant from the nearest districts in which Europeans have settled." F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General in the North-Eastern Frontier, to G. A. Bushby, Secretary to the Government of India, Political Department, dated Gowahatty, 27 March 1846, in Foreign Department (F. C.), 30 May 1846, Nos. 88-99

14 D. Scott, Agent to the Governor General on the North-Eastern Frontier, to G. Swinton, Secretary to the Government of India, dated 17 April 1830, in Foreign Department (P. C.), 7 May 1830, Nos. 51-3 [NAI]

15 D. Scott, Agent to the Governor General in the North Eastern Frontier, to G. Swinton, Chief Secretary to the Government of India, dated 18 November 1830
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crisis was "the introduction of British capital and mechanical arts better calculated to stimulate the dormant capabilities of Assam." The terms which Cracroft designed for the land grant in Assam, however, did not appear satisfactory to the Calcutta office. The Chief Secretary, George Swinton, wrote in his note that although "nothing has ever been definitely settled as to the rate and terms" at which "waste lands" were to be leased, the ideal model "was that on which lands in the Sunderbunds had been granted on lease". Cracroft's terms "do not appear to correspond with those of the waste lands of the Sunderbunds." The idea of "reclaiming wastelands" in the Sundarbans — a name loosely attached to the tidal mangrove swamp in the south-western limits of British Bengal — gained momentum in roughly the same period.

According to the Sundarban scheme, each leaseholder was entitled to enjoy his land rent-free for twenty years, although at the expiration of the fifth year, he was required to bring at least a quarter of the unsown land under cultivation (failing which, theoretically, the entire grant was liable to resumption by the Government). One-fourth of the entire land area held under the grant was to remain perpetually "exempt from assessment in lieu of an allowance for the site of houses etc". From the twenty-first year the lessee contractor was to pay an annual revenue "on the three remaining fourths" at the gradually rising bigha rate of 2 annas (for the twenty-first year), 4 annas (for the twenty-second year), 6 annas (for the twenty-third year) and finally 8 annas (for the twenty-fourth year and all succeeding years).

It is indeed interesting to see that Swinton not only collected a copy of such a lease granted to a certain Mr. Lauchlin who held some ten thousand bighas of "waste land" in the Sundarbans, but "also consulted a gentleman in the mercantile line who takes an interest in these matters." The unnamed consultant, while agreeing that the Sundarban model was by and large well-suited to Assam, pressed for "easier terms — prolonging the term of moderate rent." "Do not bind down the speculators to the cultivation of the mulberry or any other

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16 "2nd. A lease of 8 years for lands now under cultivation at the present assessment. 3rd. Permission to occupy waste land within the limits of mehal formed for 3 years without paying rent but liable to an annually increasing rent at the end of the period for a further space of five years at two, four, six, eight and ten annas sicca per Assam poora, after which the whole estate will be liable to reassessment on the terms similar to those given to other landholders. 4th. An agreement not to underlet without permission of the local authorities under penalty of half a year's revenue and the forfeiture of the lease." W. Cracroft, the Officiating Agent to the Governor General in the North Eastern Frontier to G. Swinton, Chief Secretary to the Government of India, dated Gowahatty, 17 March 1832, in Foreign Department (P.C.), 30 April 1832, Nos. 40-42 [NAI]

17 Note by G. Swinton, dated 28 April 1832, in ibid.
particular production”, said the consultant, “Leave them to discover what is best suited to the soil and climate, and depend on it they will find out and act accordingly, unless opposed by some arrangement of Government.”

The speculator-friendly and “exceedingly simple” Sundarban scheme was preferred equally by the private planters and the public officers. The alternative “Goruckpore” model required annual measurements, regular registration of the extent of “lands cleared”, and adjustment of three different rates of revenue. The Sundarban model – granting a certain quantity of land for a term of years rent free and fixing a low assessment upon three-fourths of the whole area at the close of that period to be ultimately raised to the full jumlu – allowed informality to a greater extent. The actual measurement of the assessed area was done only after the expiry of the rent-free period, leaving much scope for the lessee to manipulate the boundaries of the original grant to his advantage.

The officers in Assam however recommended a few modifications. Rather than making an “indiscriminate application” of the Sundarban model in Assam, Jenkins proposed that the “waste land” tracts should be divided into three groups. The “forests anywhere and the high waste land in Nowgong and Durrung” might be granted on the exact terms of the Sundarban scheme, but the “extensive high reed and grass (rud and kagni) wastes” should be granted for ten years with a few alterations and the “grass wastes scattered amidst the cultivated lands anywhere” should be granted for five years on the altered terms. Both Jenkins and Vetch were convinced that the value of the grass wastes would considerably increase as they were “being taken up extensively”. It was not desirable, the Agent insisted, “to encourage the present cultivators of minute patches of rice to move elsewhere, and introduce into such places their present miserable system of petty farming, which might be the case if grants were made on too easy terms.”

Readers will remember that it was also the time when Edward Wakefield was sharpening his criticisms against the Smithian orthodoxy in London. That extensive land grants and sales of lands at throw-away prices caused a disastrous drop in the rates of wages and of profits in

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18 Note by G. Swinton, dated 28 April 1832, in Foreign Department (P.C.), 30 April 1832, Nos. 40-42 [NAI]
19 See, for example, the letter from R. D. Mangles, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to the Secretary to the Board of Revenue, in ‘Extract Bengal Revenue Consultations, 12 April 1836, No. 554;”, in Ms. 9934: “Conditions for Gants of Land in Assam, Enclosed in Letter to Mr. Prideaux” [GL]
20 F. J. Halliday, Secretary Sudder Board of Revenue to R. D. Mangles, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, dated 25 July 1836, Extract Bengal Revenue Consultations, 9 August 1836, No. 278, in ibid.
the colonies threatening to divert capital to other destinations was the founding observation of the doctrine of “sufficient price”. Wakefield and his allies among the Philosphic Radicals believed that the only effective way to “improve” the colonies would be to put a high and positively restrictive price on the land there (sufficient to prevent the common European settlers from quickly becoming landowners) which would ensure continuous supply of labor to the large landowning capitalists. Jenkins, who was roughly the same age as Wakefield, wrote in 1833 that

the settlement of Englishmen of capital on the wastes on these frontiers seems to me to offer a better prospect for the speedy realization of improvements than any measures that could be adopted in the present ignorant and demoralized state of the native inhabitants.

The great champion of ryicmi repeated in 1836,

What is desired is to introduce capitalists who will take the ground only for the purpose of cultivating the mere products and establishing manufactures, and trade. Any desertions of Ryots to such colonists, though attended with a partial and temporary diminution of Revenue, will by no means be injurious. The vacancies left by the Ryots will be shortly filled up, and those who did remove will be employed on products that will give many times the returns of the rice crops left by him.

When Vetch proposed that it should be made a rule that the capital of Rs 1 per bigha must be in possession of the grantee, he was likewise referring to the sufficient price doctrine. Attracting the wealthy settlers was a pivotal credo of the Wakefieldians. However, it is clear from the correspondences that both Jenkins and Vetch did not particularly want “the Zemindars of Rungpore and North East Rungpore” to benefit from the scheme: “Their minds being little more enlarged for any beneficent purpose than the meanest of their slaves, they will convey no useful instruction though they may carry with them increased superstition and litigation.” The Rangpur zarindars, said Jenkins, should not be allowed “to take up large tracts of land merely for the purposes of subletting them.” In other words, Assam was not to be treated as an extension of the zarindari landscape – its agricultural

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22 Jenkins, *Report on the North-East Frontier*, 35

23 F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General, to the Board of Revenue, Fort William, dated 22 June 1836, No. 59, in ‘Extract Bengal Revenue Consultations, 12 April 1836, No. 554’, in Ms. 9934: “Conditions for Gants of Land in Assam, Enclosed in Letter to Mr. Prideaux” [GL]
expansion ought to take the form of a monocultural cash crop specialization. The insistence on seeing the logic of plantation as a “totally ... exogenous development”\(^\text{24}\) often misses the traffic between the processes of “agricultural development” and “plantation economy.”

The Board of Revenue was certainly less fastidious about the restrictions on the grantees than the frontier officials. “It should be obvious to His Lordship”, said the Board, “that no impediments of the nature of those proposed by Lieutenant Vetch, viz, enquiry into respectability, character, etc. should be allowed to discourage applicants for waste lands.”

The government’s job, according to the Board, was simply “to watch the progress of clearing” – to fill in the blanks, not to reproduce a respectable society.\(^\text{25}\) The Calcutta authorities “entirely agree[d] with the Board as to the impolicy and probable futility of endeavouring to exclude any class of settlers from Assam, by denying them grants of waste lands, on the terms generally sanctioned”, although they upheld the capital-stock criteria proposed by Vetch. In addition, they accepted the three-fold classification of Jenkins, and authorized the local officers to bring the tracts, after the expiry of their respective rent-free terms, gradually under assessment in the following manner:\(^\text{26}\)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Sort</th>
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<td>“grass wastes scattered amidst the cultivated lands anywhere”</td>
<td>“extensive high reed and grass (nul and kagru) wastes”</td>
<td>“forests anywhere and the high waste land in Nowgong and Durnung”</td>
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<td>9th year and all succeeding years</td>
<td>14th year and all succeeding years</td>
<td>24th year and all succeeding years</td>
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Thus, a year before the shares of the Assam Company was floated in London and Calcutta,\(^\text{27}\) the stage for the “improvement” show was set: lands on a forty-five years’ lease were thrown


\(^{25}\) F. J. Halliday, Secretary Sudder Board of Revenue to R. D. Mangles, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, dated 25 July 1836, Extract Bengal Revenue Consultations, 9 August 1836, No. 278, in Ms. 9934: “Conditions for Gants of Land in Assam, Enclosed in Letter to Mr. Prideaux” [GL]

\(^{26}\) R. D. Mangles, Secretary to the Government of Bengal to F. J. Halliday, Secretary Sudder Board of Revenue, dated 9 August 1836, No. 1134, in *ibid* [GL]

\(^{27}\) In the 12 February 1839 meeting in which the Assam Company was formed, it was resolved that “the present capital of the said Company be £ 500, 000, in 10, 000 shares of £ 50 each, of which Shares 8000 to
open in the metropolitan market by the Wasteland Rules of 6 March 1838. "No grant for agricultural purpose could be made for less than 100 acres at a time and to one who did not possess capital or stock worth at least Rs. 3 per acre." 28 "There is abundance of land adapted for the cultivation of tea in Upper Assam", reported Burney, and assured the London merchants that "the present superintendent, Captain Jenkins, would afford every aid and support to any Englishman desirous of embarking in so promising and nationally important a speculation." 29

Despite the hardsell in London, the Government failed to attract as much capital as it wished to. Therefore the revisions of the 1838 rules in 1854 entailed a prolongation of the lease period to ninety-nine years, a considerable reduction in the progressive rates of revenue (a maximum of six annas per acre till the ninety-ninth year), and a substantial raising of the minimum limit of land grant. 30 Calculated to attract the attention of the large capitalists, these revisions prepared the ground for a full-fledged land market in Assam. In 1856, the officers were categorically instructed to make grants “to Europeans, Assamese, Bengalees, and others without distinction” provided the grantees were “men of substance.” 31 The boom in the tea industry really took off in 1856 32 and reached a hyperactive state of “wild speculation” within four years. 33 In 1861, with the introduction of the “fee-simple rules”, the clearance conditions were removed from the new grants and the old grants were made commutable to the new terms at twenty years purchase payable at the time of

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28 Guha, Planter-Raj to Swaraj, 13
30 “[T]he minimum area of land for which one could apply was raised to 500 acres [in 1854]. Later [in 1856] the limit was reduced to 200 acres and made relaxable even to 100 acres in special cases, if native applicants could satisfy the Collectors of their ability to bring ryots from outside Assam.” Guha, Planter-Raj to Swaraj, 14. For the official modification of Rule III, see Revenue Department, 3 April 1856, Nos. 40-43 [WBSA]
31 Revenue Department, 22 May 1856, Nos. 28-30 [WBSA]
33 “New gardens were started with all the haste imaginable, large clearances being made without any adequate provision for labour to keep them cultivated. Old gardens in like manner had tremendous extensions put in, in proportion to their original size. Fresh companies were a matter of daily formation in Calcutta, and shares rose to an absurd premium.” In fact, many “high public officials [were] throwing up their appointments to embark untrammelled in the industry and speculation.” Crole, Tea, 37
commutation. As a matter of fact, the Assam Company converted a total of 10,310 acres of its land held under the old rules of 1854 to Fee Simple Grants at a token cost of £4,500. Before the fee-simple rules were instituted, each lessee was legally obliged to "clear" and "render fit for cultivation" one-eighth of the grant in five years, one-fourth in ten years, one-half in twenty years, and three-fourths by the expiry of the thirtieth year. On the failure to meet this clearance condition, the entire grant was liable to resumption. The removal of the theoretical possibility of resumption—which at any rate had always been very loosely applied—accelerated the frenzy in the land market. Most importantly, the grants issued under the fee-simple rules were legally recognized as heritable property awarded in perpetuity, "subject to no enhancement of assessment". Grants began to be placed on auctions, and the various tea companies were encouraged to buy enormous amounts of land in Assam, Cachar and Sylhet. Although the fee-simple system was substituted by 1876 with a new, equally planter-friendly system of thirty years' lease, the individual planters and the joint-stock companies had already acquired proprietary rights over massive areas of the entire province. The institution of the Inner Line was directed at legalizing this enormous acquisition. Amidst all the confusions regarding the fixing of the Line, as described in Chapter One, it remained a standing order from the Government of India that "in whatever line be eventually drawn, the Chief Commissioner should be careful to include all existing grants of waste land."

In 1859, Jenkins had estimated the total extent of "uncultivated but culturable and available wastes" as 4,469,533 acres in Kamrup, Nagaon, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur. Such areas, he

35 Antrobus, History of Assam Company, 166
37 See, for example, Jenkins's characteristic insistence that it was "expedient to treat the grantees with indulgence" even if they failed to satisfy the clearance conditions. F. Jenkins, Commissioner of Revenue, Assam, to the Sudder Board of Revenue, Government of Bengal, dated Gauhati, 25 January 1848, No. 20/2, BG, File No. 403, Serial Nos. 1-3 [ASA]
38 Memorandum on the Revenue Administration of Lower Provinces of Bengal, 1873
39 Note by C. U. Aitchinson, Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department, 31.07.1874, in "Inner Line' of the Sibsagar District", Foreign Department, Revenue-A Branch, September 1874, Nos. 14 –21 [NAI]
said, “extend to about one-twelfth of the whole area of Kamroop, to about one-fourth of that of Nowgong, to about one-half in the District of Seebsagur, and the waste in Luckimpore amounts to double the cultivated land.” A total area of 453,000 acres was approximately stated to be “wasteland” in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Exact figures were not available for Darrang, but substantial areas of the district were recognized as “waste”.

By 1871, at least 659,541 acres were given over to the planters in Assam. The number rose to 706,649 acres by 1881; to 996,746 acres by 1891; to 1,049,018 acres by 1901; to 1,192,264 acres by 1911; and to 1,498,784 acres by 1921.

It needs to be emphasized that although always justified by the rhetoric of “improvement” through tea cultivation, the frantic land-grabbing did not mean that all these acres were actually brought under tea. In 1867, the Jorehaut Company held altogether about 18,000 acres “within a radius of 30 miles, extending from Jorehaut to a little below Golaghat”, of which only 2040 acres were “under cultivation”. Despite the Government’s official decision against zamin settlement in Assam Proper, its removal of the clearance conditions and increasing liberalization of the terms of land grants rehabilitated a peculiar form of large landholding by the planters in the countryside: the biggest landlords of Assam paid the lowest average rates of revenue. The expansion of the planters’ domains inevitably infringed on several local privileges and practices, given the prevalence of itinerant cultivation, and the Government was not exactly comfortable about the situation. In 1872 it was complained on behalf of the Landholders and Commercial Association of Calcutta that in Assam “in many instances applications for waste lands are met by a simple refusal, no reason for such being assigned.” In fact, in one such case, wrote the Secretary of the Association, with surprise and contempt,

an application was refused upon the representation of some wandering ryots, mere nomads, to the effect that their “jooms” were included in the boundaries given; this assertion was

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41 Letter from Colonel F. Jenkins, Agent to Governor-General, N. E. Frontier, Gowhatty, 30 June 1859, in ibid, 136-8. In 1836.
43 See Annual Reports on Tea Culture in Assam for the respective years.
44 Statement of Mr. W. Roberts, 25 November 1867, in Appendix A, RCSPTC, iv. The grant area of the Chubwa estate was 15,000 acres, of which about 600 were brought under tea in 1867. Statement of J. Warren (Superintendent, Chubwa Tea Company, Dibrugarh), 1 January 1868, in ibid, xxxiv. A smaller East India Tea Company held 5900 acres, “of which we now [in 1867] have under plant 550”. Statement of Mr. R. Blechynden, 29 November 1867, in ibid, xi.
quite untrue, but no Government officer went to inspect the land, and the unsupported statement of these semi-savages was taken in preference to that of the European planter.\footnote{E. J. Stanley, Officiating Secretary, Landholders and Commercial Association to the Officiating Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department, dated 2 September 1872, in "Waste Land Sales", Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Revenue Department, January 1873, Nos. 1-4 [ASA]}

In defense, the Lieutenant Governor explicitly clarified that "personally" he was extremely "favorable ... to facilitating the acquisition by Europeans of land really waste for the purposes of \textit{bona fide} tea planting."

But on the other hand it is not to be denied that abuses have occurred, that much land imperfectly defined, or not defined at all, and far beyond the needs of legitimate tea-plating, was bought up on credit at very low prices by land jobbers, who not unfrequently\footnote{Officiating Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department, to E. J. Stanley, Officiating Secretary, Landholders and Commercial Association [date illegible], in \textit{ibid.}} failed to fulfill their engagements, and that in some districts cultivable lands have been wrongfully sold as waste...\footnote{Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Secretary of the Government of India, Revenue and Agricultural Department, No. 1879, dated Shillong, 9 August 1884, in \textit{Annual Report on Tea Culture in Assam for 1883}, 1}

As the Government officials explicitly recognized, the tea-garden registers maintained in each district could "never form an absolutely accurate record of the land held by tea-planters for tea cultivation and for the accessories of tea cultivation, \textit{viz.}, for fuel, grazing, \&c." While the area of a Government grant was officially recorded in the register, the additions which the planters often made to their estates "by private purchase or by lease" were rarely registered with the district officers.\footnote{Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Revenue Department, to the Secretary of the Government of India, Revenue and Agricultural Department, No. 1745, dated Shillong, 18 July 1885, in \textit{Annual Report on Tea Culture in Assam for 1884}, 1} "[A] thorough revision and testing of the tea-garden registers" in 1884 "disclosed the fact that in many cases waste land grants never even cultivated, but originally taken up for tea, had been entered in the registers as tea-gardens."

The following chart plots an annually continuous series of government data from 1878 to 1926 to indicate the magnitude of this practice.\footnote{Compiled from the \textit{Annual Reports on Tea Culture in Assam} for the respective years.} In the entire stretch of these forty-eight years, almost one million acres of new land grants were made to the tea-planters, but the extent of the area actually brought under tea never went above 26.67\% of these grants. Nearly three-quarters of the granted land were always kept by the planter proprietors "in reserve."

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It is worth wondering what the “land-jobbers” – to use the Lieutenant-Governor’s diction – did with so much land. “[T]he generally-accepted policy among [the tea garden] managers was to increase the area as much as possible without increasing the labour force”, observed the Chief Commissioner William Ward. Therefore, “old workout parts [of the grants were] being gradually abandoned, and the best soils available [were] being planted out.”

The tea plantation – always justified as a superior opposition to the practices of “shifting cultivation” of the “wandering ryots” in the official documents – came to employ quite the same cyclical strategy of occupation and evacuation of land. The primitive was banished from the heart of Assam Proper, and yet the primitive was right there inside the improvement regime: “a constitutive aporetic moment” in the extension of the power of capital.

The area which was not under tea could always be used for getting timber or gathering other resources, particularly as “felling jungles” was no more considered a requirement for

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50 Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Revenue Department, to the Secretary of the Government of India, Revenue and Agricultural Department, No. 2708, dated Shillong, 4 August 1887, in Annual Report on Tea Culture in Assam for 1886, 2

acquiring the control over these tracts. Indeed, J. W. Masters, who had left the Assam Company to become the Sub-Assistant Commissioner of Golaghat, emphatically suggested in 1859 “that the Tea Planters should be encouraged to reserve a part of their grasses under forest in order to make a provision for the supply of labour that they will therefore require for packing boxes.” While C. Holroyd, the Collector of Sibsagar, “proposed that one-fourth of the whole grant should, for this purpose, be allowed to count as cultivation, and to be taxed as cultivated ground at full rates”, Jenkins was initially of the opinion that “this reserved forest land should be taxed at half rates after a free period of ten years.” However, said Jenkins, no particular measure should be inconsistent “with the true policy of Government, as permitting the unrestrained employment of capital.” “I beg removing from the Planters all terms and restrictions,” said the veteran Agent, “and freeing them from the heavy anxiety which some of the clauses of the grant must necessarily now impose on them.”

After all, as Jenkins kept telling the higher authorities, “[t]he great quantity of available spare land appears to be a very sensible evil as inducing the idle habits of migration.” It was earnestly expected that taking away “spare land” would turn the slothful savage into an industrious laborer.

*Being Human and Doing Labor*

When the savage climbs a tree, and gathers the fruit; when he ensnares a wild beast, or beats it down with a club, he may be considered as operating with his naked powers, and without the aid of anything, to which the name of Capital can properly be annexed.

Thus wrote James Mill. “In the state of society, in which we exist”, he clarified, “we seldom see Labour employed except in conjunction with Capital.” The difference between “Labour” and “naked powers” was essential, even central, to the emergent discourse of Political Economy in the early nineteenth century. Mill contended that “the separate operation of Labour” might have been possible in “that simple state of things, in which society may be

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52 F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General, North-East Frontier, to E. H. Lushington, Officiating Secretary to the Government of Bengal, No. 12, dated 18 January 1860, in *Selections from the Records of the Bengal Government*. Emphasis added

53 F. Jenkins, the Agent, Governor-General, North-East Frontier, to A. J. Moffatt Mills, Judge of Sudder Court on Deputation, 23 May 1853. Appendix ‘B’, in Moffatt Mills, *Report*, 61
conceived to have originated.” At the present, it could only happen “in conjunction with” — nay, inside of — Capital: labor could “no longer be spoken of as an instrument of production apart from capital”, because “[t]he materials, upon which labour is to be employed, … have … been the result of previous labour.” “[T]he source, from which capital is ultimately derived, is labour.” However, if all labour were employed upon objects of immediate consumption, all immediately consumed, such as the fruit, for which the savage climbs the tree, no article of capital, no article to be employed, as a means to further production, would ever exist. To this end, something must be produced, which is not immediately consumed; which is saved and set apart for another purpose.54

In other words, Labor presupposes remains. It leaves vestiges. It is the history of capital, the depth of the past. Naked powers dissolve into instantaneities. They squander themselves on the quotidian surface and thus dodge the time of history, making themselves unavailable “for another purpose”. The past of Labor is accessible in commodities, the present in market, and the future in its reproducibility.55 Labor is appropriable within, and appropriate for, the operation of history.56 The calculability of time allows labor to be broken into use units: Adam Smith and his beavers and deer. “Labour was the first price — the original purchase-money that was paid for all things”: Ricardo fondly quoted this Smithian formula to reiterate that labor “is really the foundation of the exchangeable value of all things.”57 The new empiricity of labor (to borrow a phrase from Foucault) allowed the work of abstraction, without which, as Marx would point out in a few years’ time, the social imaginary of an exchange-value economy was not possible.58


55 Mill was dissatisfied with the term “reproduced capital”, as it was “a past and not a future participle”. *Ibid.*

56 Through a brilliant reading of Ricardo, Foucault recognizes how “[e]ven before economic reflection was linked to the history of events or societies in an explicit discourse, the mode of being of economics had been penetrated, and probably for a long while, by historicity.” In Ricardo, says Foucault, “‘Wealth’, instead of being distributed over a table and thereby constituting a system of equivalences [as is the case with Smith], is organized and accumulated in a temporal sequence: all value is determined, not according to the instruments that permit its analysis, but according to the conditions of production that have brought it into being; and, even prior to that, the conditions in question are determined by the quantities of labour applied in producing them.” Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), 255-6

57 Ricardo, *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, Ch. 1

58 See Rubin, *Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value*, Ch. 13 for a relevant discussion. See also Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, 77-8
In pointing out how the category of "labor" helped Ricardo to claim a "semantic justification for profit" which would set it apart from "rent", Stephen Gudeman calls attention to the shift in the Ricardian thought from a gloomy vision of impending stasis to an attainable dream of bright future: "Because capitalism was founded upon [reproducible] labor, not scarce land fertility, unlimited accumulation could be foreseen."59 Tied as this optimism was to the vertical dimensions of an unending depth, namely the standing-reserve of human labor, it received a corresponding impetus from the horizontal expansion of the imperial boundaries. The unceasing attempts to pool the naked powers of the savage into the growing reserve of labor were not only a matter of numerical expansion of the workforce, but also an issue of defining work as such and establishing the meaning of being human in terms of the operative work regime.

In 1840, for instance, while discussing the difficulties of carrying coal from the newly discovered deposits in Cherrapunji, the Coal Committee declared that "[t]he Kasyahs, on whom the burden of the experiment will literally fall, though a fine athletic race, are little accustomed to labour." Labor, to go by the Committee's account, was a different civilizational condition, almost an ethical and cognitive dimension of superior existence, de-linked from the observed facts of physical strength and survival work. It was feared that Major Lister, the officer in charge of impressments, would encounter "some difficulty at first in reconciling a sufficient number of them to a continued effort, the object and importance of which they can so little understand."60 If the new imperial projects seemed strange and alien to the local people, it could be blamed on their inability to grasp the rationality of labor. "How can it be expected that a proved barbarian race will labour for us when they cannot be induced to do so to procure grains for themselves", exclaimed Adam White in 1833, and observed, "Surely we ought to be cautious enforcing plans of improvement upon them."61

The studied use of the words "savage" and "man" in Mill's *Elements of Political Economy* appears significant in this context. "The savage, who makes his own bow and arrows, does not make bows and arrows beyond what he wishes to possess", but "a man produces a greater quantity of any commodity than he desires for himself", as "he desires some other

60 "Report of the Coal Committee", *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, vol. IX (1840), 204. Emphasis added.
commodity which he can obtain in exchange for the surplus of what he himself has produced." The expression "man" (indeed, at places, "every man") is, predictably, "the Enlightenment figure of the abstract human" – the rational individual possessing both "the will to purchase, and the means of purchasing." The "savage" is, even more predictably, different from him: "he operates upon materials, which are prepared for him by the hand of nature." But the difference is reducible just as history is universal. The savage is salvageable. He only needs to work to produce a "surplus."

The lack of "surplus" production is probably one of the most consistent allegations against the workers and cultivators in Assam in the nineteenth-century English archive. Officers after officers complained of the "indolent contentment" of the Assamese ryots – their general lack of enthusiasm to "take the trouble to raise themselves above their neighbours." Indeed, they appeared hardly any different from their savage neighbors, the Naga who "do not appear to be a cultivating population beyond what they actually require for their own subsistence." The residents of the Assam plains, said a European observer, had "gentle and pleasing manners", but they were "exceedingly indolent, caring for little beyond the supply of their daily wants, which require little labour on their part." We shall see in Chapter Seven how the refusal to care "little for anything else after they have satisfied the cravings of hunger" was relentlessly tied up to the practices of opium consumption and the norms of the new work regime. But it is the anthropological limits of the discourse of political economy that we are concerned with at the moment. In focusing on these limits, we intend to understand the enormous condensation through which the terms of human work were forced to pass in nineteenth-century Assam. Ideally, one would think, the trajectory of this passage would be a transformation of the savage into the ryot, and then, of the ryot into the wage worker: from hunting-gathering to agriculture to industry – the authorized path of

63 Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, 59
64 Mill, Elements.
65 H. Vetch, Deputy Commissioner of Assam, to A. J. M. Mills, Sudder Judge on Deputation, dated Gowhatty, 22 June 1853, in Moffatt Mills, Report, 69
66 H. Bigge, Assistant Commissioner, Nowgong, to F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General, the North Eastern Frontier, dated 8 June 1839, in Foreign Department (F. C.), 14 August 1839, 107-9 [NAI]
67 T. T. Cooper, The Mishmee Hills: An account of a journey made in an attempt to penetrate Thibet from Assam to open new routes for commerce (London: Henry S. King & Co., 1873), 100
68 Ibid, 102
progress. However, as we have already indicated in Chapter Two, the exigencies of capital could hardly afford such neatly linear course as prescribed in the Enlightenment texts of history or political economy. The categories turned against themselves, altering their own ideals in the process of being fixed on humans. The savage, as he entered the imperial archive, was already a worker, gathering rubber, collecting ivory and working timber for the companies registered in London and Calcutta.

In fact, the early efforts by the tea companies to enlist “local labor” for their plantations require to be addressed from this perspective. The original plan of the Tea Committee was to bring some experienced “planters” from China who would teach the art of tea cultivation to the local people in Upper Assam, and accordingly its Secretary, G. J. Gordon, did “despatch” a number of Chinese tea-makers to Assam. The “indiscipline” and costliness of these Chinese “workmen” came as a great shock, and hopes were soon expressed that the work of plantation would proceed “without the aid of Chinamen.”

In the 1841 Annual Report, the Assam Company directors declared with a glee that we have every reason to believe that the time of greatest difficulty is past; – the Assamese are beginning to work, and for the important art of Tea manufacture, they seem peculiarly adapted, and likely to supply eventually all the labour that will be required. The greater part of the Tea that was manufactured in 1839, and sold here some months since, was made by Takelans, inhabitants of Assam; and their manufacture was considered, in every respect, as good as that of the Chinese artizan.

The produce of 1840, said the 1842 Report, “fully justifies the expectation that the labouring population of Assam will eventually furnish teamakers sufficiently numerous and skilled in the art, for the purposes of the manufacture, on a very extended scale.”

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69 India Revenue Department, 23 August 1837, No. 11 E/4/752, No. XIII [IOIC]
70 In 1841, when a “large gang of Chinese labourers” from Singapore arrived at Pabna to reach Upper Assam, “an affray took place in the bazar between the Chinese and the Bengallees” which led to the imprisonment of 57 Chinese. The rest, at first refusing to move, finally “demanded a further advance of pay, and supplies of opium and provision.” This was refused by the Company. “They would not yield; we had but little power over them, and they were consequently discharged on the spot...” Assam Company, Report of the Local Directors made to the Shareholders, at A General Meeting, held at Calcutta August 11th, 1841 (Calcutta: Bishop’s College Press, 1841), 4-5
71 Assam Company, Report of the Directors and Auditors made to the shareholders at the General Annual Meeting, held at the London Tavern, Bishopsgate Street, on the 6th May, 1842, with an Appendix (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1842), 14
72 Assam Company, Report of the Directors and Auditors made to the shareholders at the General Annual Meeting, held at the London Tavern, Bishopsgate Street, on the 7th May, 1841, with an Appendix (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1841), 15-6
73 Assam Company, Report of the Directors and Auditors made on the 6th May, 1842, 14
humanist satisfaction in having been able to push the indolent Assamese up one step in the civilizational scale was not without its mundane rewards. The employment of "the Assamese" brought down the coolie rate from 16 rupees a month, which had been the standard rate for the Chinese workmen, to 2 annas a day. The "Assamese" of the early Company records however included Singphos, Nagas, and a large number of Kacharis. They were also employed to make new roads and to clear the "jungle" to enlarge the bari.

By 1854, George Williamson, the Superintendent of the Assam Company, expressly referred to the abundance of land and cheapness of rent as the factors holding the people of Assam, which at any rate was "scanty and scattered", from becoming fullblooded "labourers". The "position of an independent cultivator" was too easily attainable in the province. However, "as a body", he contended, the people of Assam were "very inferior to Bengallees."

We had now practically availed ourselves of all the native labour that the contract system was capable of drawing from this section of the country, and that, in the cultivation of our future extension, we must entirely depend on Kacharie and immigrant Bengali labour.

The "Kacharies" of Darrang were preferred to "the common Assamese" as workers, since they were reported to have "fewer prejudice of caste" and better food habits. But, Williamson regretted, "this fine race from their increasing intercourse with the Assamese, are gradually acquiring their vices and becoming less valuable as labourers." The unmarried males from Darrang were marrying local girls in Upper Assam and as the position allotted to [a Kachari] in the social scale is considerably below that of the Hindoo Assamese, he is proud to be admitted into their families, readily renounces those practices sanctioned by his own creed, but obnoxious to theirs, and promptly assimilates himself to their habits.

That the social mixture destroyed the "original vigour" of the Darrang Kacharis was a common cry in the planters' circle. In 1837, Jenkins had described them as "generally a rude and in the Bhootan Doars rather a savage race, but as they are, very strong, able-bodied labourers, it is on their services, that all settlers in this province must chiefly depend."

Indeed, their location "without the pale of Hindooism" was understood as a warranty of

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74 Assam Company, Report of the Directors and Auditors made to the shareholders at the General Annual Meeting, held at the London Tavern, Bishopgate Street, on the 5th May, 1843, with an Appendix (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1843), 52

their superior resilience – their coarser, almost animalistic energy. In drawing on that energy, capital was perceived to have brought it into an unavoidable contamination. The place of the savage was no more outside the sphere of the social. But at the same time, the savage had to play the archetypal outsider: his was a different place and a different time. He was always understood as a residual element, as an odd figure somehow surviving from the past. According to the textbooks of political economy, it was the persistence of savagery which set it apart from the reproducibility of labor. One was a sad reminder of the past and the other was a cheery promise of the future.

In our understanding, however, the reproducibility of the figure of the savage was equally crucial to the functioning of capitalism. No primitive accumulation was possible without an accumulation of the primitive within the regime of capital. As the dispersed and diverse origins of profit were “gathered back into the linear story of capital,” the savage became an important site for negotiating such heterogeneities. What was underpayment in the language of wage was deemed sufficient in the language of “presents.” We have already learned how the Assam Company in-charge J. P. Parker recruited the local Nagas to work for “[a] few courie shells and a buffaloe feast.” In 1841, a number of residents were drawn from Jorehat to work in the Hukunjuri garden at a monthly rate of four rupees. As most of them took no time to “abscond”, Superintendent Bruce made an endeavor “to persuade two or three tribes of the Nagas, who reside on the neighbouring hills, to come and take work … in return for shells, beads, rice, &c.” J. W. Masters, the Company Superintendent in Nazira, plainly said that although these workers “do but very little work”, “neither can we expect any great deal of work to be done for 2½ d. per day. An [sic] European labourer would do ten times the work, but he would not work for ten times the pay.”

That the tea companies, despite active state support, failed to create a labor force out of the savages in Assam is too well-known a tale; seldom in imperial history had a failure triggered

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77 Mitchell, Stage of Modernity, 10

78 Quoted in Assam Company, Report of the Local Directors made to the Shareholders, at A General Meeting, held at Calcutta August 11th, 1841 (Calcutta: Bishop’s College Press, 1841), Appendix D, ix

79 J. W. Masters, Superintendent of the Southern Station of the Company in Assam to F. R. Hampton, Secretary, Assam Company, Calcutta, Dated Nazeerah, 21 February 1841, No. 99, in Assam Company, Report of 7th May, 1841, 46
more brutal determination for achieving success. By the end of the eighteen fifties, the traditional recruitment area of the Assam Company – the settlements just beyond and the villages within the revenue line – was deemed insufficient to provide the necessary numbers of wage workers for the gardens. The plan of drawing “the surplus population of Western China” into Assam by way of an overland route was given a serious consideration in the bureaucratic and plantocratic circles. The contemporary experiments with the Chinese migrant workers in Cuba, Peru and in the Pacific sea-board of the United States possibly encouraged the idea of “the importation of men from the Shan districts of Yunan”80 As an European officer put it in 1860, “the distance between N. E. Assam and the western territory of Yunan is nothing” and the “population of Yunan ... are noted for their industry.” But the fear of the “perfect savages” controlling “the higher and distant Range” who “are not certainly under authority and in subjection to either [sic] the Burmese, Chinese or British Governments” put the plan on ice.81 Hence, the massive and ruthless mobilization of the “hardy savages” from more distant parts of the Indian empire (principally the Santhal Parganas of Bengal) since 186182 and their employment under indenture contract since 1863.83 Various aspects of the issue have been discussed in several admirable works,84 and the known stories of deaths, cruelties and frauds need no repetition here.

81 Unsigned letter written from Dibrugarh 7 May 1860, in “Question of opening communication with the Chinese Provinces east of Assam with a view to procuring labour for the Tea-Gardens in Assam”, Foreign Department (Part A), January 1861, Nos. 11 – 16 [NAI]. See also Chapter Six.
82 Previous to this year only the Assam Company and Messrs. Barry & Company used to import workers to some extent. Statement of Mr. A. T. Campbell (Assistant Commissioner, Assam), 14 December 1867, in Appendix A, RCSPTC, xviii
83 In 1863, the Legislative Council of Bengal passed the “Transport of Native Labourers Act” to specify the “engagement” at the outset between the employer and the worker. “The Act consisted of forty-five sections. Section 1 provides that recruits for the tea districts of Assam, Cachar and Sylhet must be inhabitants of India who either belonged to or were conveyed through any of the Bengal Province. Section 2 gave the Lt. Governor the authority to appoint Superintendents of Labour Transport who were given wide-ranging power to grant license to contractors, recruiters and agents to engage or induce persons to proceed from or through any of the Bengal provinces to the tea districts to work for hire. Under Section 18, every labourer was to sign up a five-year service contract in a form prescribed by the Lt. Governor. It was the Superintendent’s duty to explain and execute such contracts. The Act did not stipulate the minimum wage but it did require the wage rate to be stated in the written contract. After signing the contract, labourers would proceed towards their destinations. Elaborate provisions were made for licensing steamers or boats to carry them. On arrival of the said steamers or boats at their destinations, the list of transported labourers would be submitted to the Magistrate, who would then intimate their arrival to the persons importing them. Section 36 provided that the Superintendent might refuse to grant embarkation passes if the party of labourers contained less than one female to every four male labourers.” Ramakrishna Chatterjee, “Legislative Control of Labour Migration in Colonial Assam Plantation”, Paper presented at Fourth Improvement
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We are rather more interested in the people dropped out of the systematic records of labor: the people who — like their naked powers — seem to have dodged the time of imperial history. In spite of the unrelenting confiscation of the lands they considered theirs, the communities did not immediately dissolve as individuated wage workers in the new work regime. Nor did they stay completely outside the new abstract theater of labor market. As we have already mentioned in Chapter One, the perennial concern of connecting the tea tracts with the sadar stations and the steamer ghats prompted the government to resort to severe schemes of labor impressments. In fact, by manipulating the sharp competition between the rival press gangs of the private tea companies and the Public Works Department of the government, the local people appear to have secured a slight rise in their wages. Given the charge of “repairing the bunds along the Desaye and Bhodgaye Rivers” in Sibsagar in 1840, the officiating magistrate “recruited” the “coolies” from their fields at a rate varying between 3 to 9 pies per day. Even at that time it was complained that the “price of labor” had increased after the appearance of the Assam Company. While informal, on-the-spot understandings between the competing labor contractors continued throughout the eighteen forties, the expansion of the tea industry since the middle of the fifties — which in turn accelerated the pace of road-building in the province — intensified the competition.

International Labour History Conference of Association of Indian Labour Historians and V. V. Giri National Labour Institute, 18-20 March 2004, Noida. Another important aspect of the Act was its insistence on medical inspection (including medical attendance on journey) of the coolies and of the depots. The post of the Medical Inspector of Emigrants was also created by this Act. Through minor alterations in 1865 (Act No. VI), 1870 (Act No. II) and 1893 (Act No. VII), this system was formally in force till 1925.


Lt. Brodie, Officiating Magistrate, Seebsagur, to F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General, North-Eastern Frontier, dated 7 July 1840, No. 95, in Foreign Department, Political Branch, 16 March 1840, Nos. 108–109 [NAI]

For an interesting account of how the Assam Company superintendent George Williamson confined his “catchment area” to the “west of the Jhumisi river” in order to “avoid clashing with the hoeing contractors who chiefly procure their labour from the east of the said river”, see Sircar, Labour and Management, M-38.

“From 1849 to 1855 there was no perceptible rise up to 1861”, recollected the Assistant Commissioner A. T. Campbell, who was himself a planter in Lakhimpur for nine years until when he joined the government service in 1861. “The price of labor rose gradually, owing to the extension of tea gardens. After 1861 the rise was very rapid. Before 1861 you could get local labor at the rate of ten days’ work for a rupee.” Statement of A. T. Campbell (Assistant Commissioner, Assam) 14 December 1867, in Appendix A, RCSPTC, xviii. “When I first began tea planting, local labor was obtainable at Rupees 3 a month”,

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Almost every planter complained to the Ainslie Committee in 1868 that the Public Works officials "bid against our labor." 88 "The Department of Public Works has almost entirely taken away our local laborers by paying them higher wages than we can afford to pay", said the Superintendent of the Chubwa Tea Company. 89 A planter from Nigriting alleged that the government contractors promised Rs 8 to 10 a month to a coolie while the planters were not willing to proffer more than Rs 5. 90 As a matter of fact, the planters had united in a meeting at Golaghat in 1867 to condemn the "native underlings of the Department" for "tampering with the coolies, and inciting them to leave their employers on all sides." 91 The government's response, as encoded in the observations of the Ainslie Committee, was couched in the available parlance of free market:

Admitting that the Government should refrain, as far as possible, from employing time-expired coolies imported by planters into the Tea Districts at a very considerable cost and risk, we consider that the local labor market is open to the State equally with private individuals, and that the Government should look rather to the welfare of the people than to the interests of any one section of the community, however deserving of encouragement in the prosecution of a great enterprise. 92

As far as the imported "time-expired" garden coolies were concerned, the Committee however was unanimous in recognizing the planters' complaint as "just": "if public works are to be carried on with the energy which is so much required, labor must be specially imported for the purpose." 93 The value of the Chotanagpur savages was derived usually from the privately-borne cost of their importation, and henceforth their service was understood as proprietarily enclosed, even if the indenture-period was formally over (which made them, in official classification, the "time-expired" coolies). In contrast, the savages at hand -- "the

88 Statement of Revd. E. H. Higgs (Dibrugarh), 30 December 1867, in ibid, xxix
89 Statement of J. Warren (Superintendent, Chubwa Tea Company, Dibrugarh), 1 January 1868, in ibid, xxxv
90 Statement of G. M. Smith (Nigriting), 23 January 1868, in ibid.
91 "We must totally exonerate, however, the head European Officials from any knowledge of these proceedings." Copy of Resolutions of a Meeting held at Golaghat submitted to the Tea Commission for consideration, 20 October 1867, in ibid, lxvi
92 RCSPTC, 23. Emphasis added. A number of government officials also believed that "the vast expansion of the Mustard crop, the culture of which is both very easy and remunerative, and the high profits from it, and the great advance in the price of Rice, have no doubt much to do with the want of labor in Assam." Selections from the Records of the Bengal Government, 54-5
93 Ibid, 106-107
local labor market" — were in principle deemed "open to the State equally with private individuals."

The English archive usually maintains a deliberate indistinctness regarding this "local labor market" by a classic strategy of deferral. It suspends the categorical opposition between the savage and the ryots, just as it blurs the formal boundary between hired labor and seized labor. Needless to say, the "local labor market" in Assam, like every other of its kind in the imperial world, never became the copybook abstract theater, "unconstrained by bonds of personal servitude and governmental coercion providing the best means to achieve a just wage." 94 Governmental coercion was consistently visible in the settlements both within and beyond the revenue line, seemingly directed equally at both the ryots and the savages, but definitely with varying degrees of duress. The unpopular barkuli system, sporadically functional in the settled districts for most of the nineteenth century, required each village to give up at least seven ryots every week for the "public works", and did not extend to the Brahmins and the Daibajnas of the mauza. In spite of the recurrent complaints about the mauzadars' (who were the immediate employers) ill-treatment and misdemeanor, the scope of the corveé in Lower Assam was circumscribed by the earlier paiken traditions. 95 Even when the Upper Assam planters vigorously prescribed state impressments of the "ryots" for building roads in 1867, they theoretically agreed to limit each ryot's "service" to fifteen days per year and proposed to pay the workers "at the local rate" out of a fund jointly maintained by the government and the companies. 96

It will be futile to look for a comparable set of fixed rules, for instance, in the Naga Hills, where the government decided to build a range of roads, bridle paths, water supply arrangements, and telegraph lines, along with the Kohima Fort and Magazine, within a very short period of time in the eighteen eighties. Massive labor impressments — absolutely unhindered by any custom, law or convention — took place in the Naga Hills. In 1887, even the officials were embarrassed to admit that in the last year at least 16,500 Nagas were forced to work for "public utility." 97 After a few years' token abatement, the official

95 Paniram Sharma, "darangjila; barkuli", bijuli, vol. 2 (1892), 87-9.
96 See "Copy of Resolutions of a Meeting held at Golaghat submitted to the Tea Commission for consideration, 20 October 1867", RCSPTC, lxviii
97 Reid, History of the Frontier Areas, 110. Similarly, unchecked impressments of the Singphos to work for erecting the British military stockades in Bisa in the late eighteen thirties caused serious discontent in the
impressment figures for the Naga Hills shot up to 20, 507 in 1891-2. Within four years, the figure became even more frightening: 91, 516. Explicit official statements are available to the effect that the “actual number of coolies used in the district” was still much higher. Statistical imprecision, as far as the savages were concerned, was almost a discursive imperative. The immeasurability of savage work performed the same function in the discourse of improvement that the indefinability of Kāmarūpa did in the discourse of scientific history: it represented the recognition that the structure was scarcely as self-sufficient as it professed to be.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the labor profile of improvement became clearer in Assam. The caste-Hindu rāṣ of the valley — now exclusively called the Assamese — were by and large exempted from formally compulsory labor, although a substantial portion (though statistically undefined) was compelled to work seasonally in other peoples’ fields for wage. The “rarely prosperous” cultivators (mostly of Lalung, Mikir or Cachari lineages, along with the low-caste Dhangars and Doms) provided the bulk of wage laborers in the plains: “when they want spare cash, they work on roads or in gardens.” The Public Works Department,

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The following table, indicating the broad trends of the inter-departmental distribution of impressed labor in the Naga Hills, has been collated from the relevant volumes of the Annual Report upon Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1891-2</th>
<th>1892-3</th>
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<th>1894-5</th>
</tr>
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<td>764</td>
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<td>1008</td>
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<td>1737</td>
</tr>
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<td>4191</td>
<td>9201</td>
<td>5535</td>
<td>3778</td>
</tr>
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<td>Telegraph and Postal Department</td>
<td>2149</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>1099</td>
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<td>Commissariat</td>
<td>8651</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Works Department</td>
<td>2392</td>
<td>20574</td>
<td>77697</td>
<td>80268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey Party</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20507</td>
<td>34476</td>
<td>86443</td>
<td>91516</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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99 “[S]ome four or five hundred coolies were supplied daily during the cold weather to work on the Nichuguard-Manipur cart road. The figures in the above statement do not represent the actual number of coolies used in the district. Coolies impressed at Wokha, Henima, and Mokokchang are not included in these figures. In addition to the above figures, some 8000 coolies were supplied to bring rice into Kohima.” Annual Report upon Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1893-94 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1894), 27

the main employer, was happy to see “local men . . . coming forward for works on the roads.”

The people, however, dislike earthwork, for divers[e] reasons: In the first place, the men who work on embankments are liable to be impressed by the zemindars [sic]; and, in the next, they always show a want of taste for heavy work – their constitutional system, afflicted by the stupefactive effects of opium, not being fitted for it. The feeling of dislike for earthwork is so strong with the people, that it was a more difficult task to collect a hundred men for earthwork than to organize gangs of carpenters, aggregating upwards of 250 men, for the bridges.

For the arduous earthwork, therefore, hundreds of coolies from “Nuddea, Hooghly, 24-Pergunyahs, Fureedpur, and Burdwan districts, in Lower Bengal, and in the Patna and Arrah districts, in the Behar Province” were recruited in the eighteen seventies. But most of these people “would not stand the climate, and had to return home before the expiry of their covenant.”

A better substitution was found in the Mikirs, valley dwellers but “savages” nonetheless: “About forty-eight lakhs of earthwork was thrown up [in 1874-5], of which ten lakhs were executed by the Mekirs.”

As a government official put it, “the Cossyahs . . . do up to 100 feet [of road work a day]: the imported laborer is only expected to do 70 feet.”

This was a corollary articulation of difference between the savages and the ryxs in the register of labor. Certain tasks – such as carrying loads, clearing jungles, catching elephants, collecting rubber, cutting canes, and especially “earthwork” – were considered better suited to the sturdy “tribesmen”, not to “an idle set” like the plains ryxs – the “almost effeminate race . . . addicted in a large measure to opium eating, and not disposed to diligent labour.”

A late nineteenth-century Text Book of Tea Planting and Manufacture stated in a matter-of-fact manner that “[p]lanters, in a rough and ready way, judge the worth of a coolie by the darkness of the skin.” The stereotypical world of primitiveness was indeed striated by a

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101 “Annual Report of the Lower Assam Division for the year 1874-75”, No. 1172, dated Gauhati, the 26th May, 1875 (From Executive Engineer, Lower Assam Division to the Superintending Engineer, Assam), in Public Works Department Progress Report for 1874-75 and 1775-76 (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1877), 12.

102 “Annual Report of the Central Assam Division for the year 1874-75”, Letter No. 84, dated Jaklabanda, the 5th April, 1876 (From to the Assistant Engineer Executive Engineer, Central Assam Division, Assam), in ibid.

103 Statement of Captain Pollock, 14 December 1867, in Appendix A, RCSPTC, xviii.


105 Crole, Tea, 194.
Chapter Five

constant and mobile hierarchy of work: the Khasis were first-rate porters, the Mishmis were good cane-cutters, and few could excel the Hatogoria Nagas in the art of road building “in the most scientific manner.” 106 The Singphos, on the other hand, were “far too proud and independent to act” as porters. 107 The Dafla workers “give more anxiety than they are really worth.” 108 The Manipuri Nagas were great as coolies, but the Angami Nagas were “too well off to enlist voluntarily in a coolie corps.” 109

While these perceptions differed, changed and were continually readjusted to immediate circumstances over the protracted course of imperial and capitalist experience in the frontier, 110 it will be unwise to ignore the broadly-agreed and overtly-racialized structure of representation through which the discourse of “skill” operated in determining the variables of the labor market. As an army officer indicated after coming back from the 1894 expedition against the Abors, the question, linked as it was to the self-image of the employed, was far more complicated than a matter of one-sided perception: “the Khasias

107 Errol Gray, Diary of a Journey to the Bor Khamti Country, 4-9. see also C. A. Bruce to F. Jenkins, dated 10 February 1837, Return to an order of the Honourable House of Commons, dated 15 February 1839; - for, Copy of papers received from India relating to the measures adopted for introducing the cultivation of tea plant within the British possessions in India. Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed, 27 February 1839. 92 [GL] for a similar view.
108 Annual Report upon Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1892-93 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1893), 22
109 W. R. Little, Report on the Abor Expedition, 1894, compiled for the Intelligence Branch of the Quarter Master General’s Department in India (Simla: Printed at the Government Central Printing Office, 1895), 33
110 The case of the Singphos provides the most striking example of stereotypical reversals. In the eighteen twenties, the Singphos were considered to have “more stamina than the Khamtis.” (Wilcox, Memoir of Survey of Assam, 428). Their active involvement in tea garden work in the early phase of the industry prompted many officials, including Jenkins, to think that they were among the most “valuable and peaceable subjects” in the province. Their eventual withdrawal from the tea gardens and their prolonged resistance to wage work strengthened their early twentieth-century stereotyping as an irredeemably indolent and useless lot. See Chapter Five. The Khamtis, again, who were charged with “extreme indolence and apathy” in the eighteen thirties (A. White, Political Agent in Upper Assam, to F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General, North Eastern Frontier, dated "On the River", 20 March 1837, in Foreign Department, Political Branch, 22 May 1837, Nos. 115-117 [NAI]; India Political Department. 9 August, No. 17 of 1837, E/4/752, No. XIII [OIOC]) became “in many respects, the best class of ryots in the North Lakhimpur subdivision” in less than sixty years (Annual Report upon Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the Year 1891-2. Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1892. 16), and there was no dearth of praise for their industriousness and diligence (Cf. Cooper, The Mishmee Hills, 150). By 1934 they were also given “for the first time all the temporary bridge contracts on the Lohit Valley road and were most successful.” (Annual Report on Frontier Tribes of Assam for the Year 1934-5. Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1935. 4)
made no objection to carrying the gun ammunition which was nearly 100 lbs, but objected strongly to kitbags often under 30 seers. The ammunition was their favorite load. 111

The relationship between military expeditions and labor conscription has not been addressed in the existing historiography. We contend that the connection was vital and cannot be reduced to the largely symbolic exportation of Meetei, Naga, Lushai and Khasi Labor Corps to France and Mesopotamia during the Great War of 1914-18. 112 Since the late nineteenth century, the British Indian state managed to seize a sizeable “tribal” workforce after every successful expedition into the extra-jurisdictional territories which was principally set to work on roads. During the 1911 Mishmi Expedition, the conscripts were forced to build 1843 feet of bridges and 13 miles of cart road in 37 days. 113 Fourteen years after the brutal Abor Expedition of 1911-12, it was officially reported that

[The villages of Rengging, Rotung, Babuk and Kebung, who after the Abor Expedition were compelled as a punishment to maintain without payment the bridle path from near Pasighat to Yambung have been relieved of this compulsory labour and will henceforth be paid full rates for the work. The Pasi Minyongs are beginning to take contract work for road maintenance, a good sign that they are feeling land hunger and greater want of necessities and luxuries. 114

The entry of the Kebung residents into the labor market in the nineteen twenties – “[they] will henceforth be paid full rates for the work” – was by no means exceptional. 115 In December 1897 Captain Cole, after burning the trans-border village of Kiyeku for failing to meet the heavy fine of Rs 1000, confiscated cattle worth Rs. 400. “A sum of Rs. 150 was later brought in cash, and the rest worked off in labour on the Sema road.” 116 Was this forced labor? Was this free? Straddling the imagined domains of hired labor and seized labor,

111 Little, Report on the Abor Expedition, 18n.
112 Amidst considerable local resistance, different Labour Corps were formed out of the Naga, Lushai, Khasi and Meetei conscripts in April-May 1917, and were sent to France for aiding “the Allies and the Associated Powers” of the British Empire. Annual Report on Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1917-18 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1918). See also the correspondences regarding the proposal for “raising a labour corps for service in Mesopotamia”, Foreign Department (Inti), October 1917, Nos. 120-145 (Part B) [NAI]
113 Reid, History of the Frontier Areas, 240
115 By the middle of the nineteen twenties, it was “usual” for the Dobang and Galong people (“Abors”) to come down in large numbers “to work as cane-cutters in the plains.” Annual Report on Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1923-24 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1924), 3
116 Reid, History of the Frontier Areas, 128
such arrangements continued all along the frontier, barely calculated and scarcely classified in the official documents. Five years after the infamous Miri Mission (1911-12), it was officially acknowledged that a huge number of “Hill Miris” were beginning to take regular seasonal work in the tea gardens as a direct result of the said Mission.\footnote{Annual Report on Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1916-17 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1917), 2} The casual mention of the fact in a 1934 report that the Assam Saw Mills, notwithstanding its abnormally low wages, “expends something over a lakh on tribal labour mostly on the Miris” makes one wonder how many “primitives” were “freed” into the invisible market of labor, the great marvel of modernity.\footnote{Annual Report on Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1933-34 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1934), 6}

Similarly, repeated military actions, blockades and effective British interception of the circulatory structures forced different Mishmi groups to visit “the plains in large numbers bringing in hill produce and working in the plains and in the Lakhimpur district cutting cane and clearing jungle.”\footnote{Annual Report on Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1923-24 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1924), 3. In 1889-90, the “Chulikata Mishmi chief Kalidoi supplied labour and cleared the road from Bomjur to Nizamghat for Rs 100. This was the first occasion on which such assistance was received from the Mishmis.” Notes in continuation of Michell’s Report, 37. The work was continued next year, but a “fear of sickness” allegedly stopped them in the 1891-2 season. Annual Report upon Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1890-91 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1891), 5; Annual Report upon Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1891-92 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1892), 16} In 1926 it was reported that the Taraon and Miju Mishmis “visited the plains area in greater numbers than ever, many thousands coming down mainly to cut cane as far west as the Majuli.”\footnote{Annual Report on Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1925-26 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1926), 3} The 1930 report mentions that “[t]he exodus of these tribes to the plains for work at cane cutting or jungle clearing during the cold weather is yearly becoming more complete.”\footnote{Annual Report on Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1929-30 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1930), 3} The Dafla Expedition in the winter of 1910-11 was eventually followed by a creation of wage workers for tea gardens out of “the Eastern Daflas.”\footnote{Annual Report on Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1923-24 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1924), 2} The gradual extension of military authority in the Naga Hills accelerated the process of intensive labor mobilization. Thousands of Nagas were employed by the Sibsagar..
and Lakhimpur tea gardens (most notably Powai and Makum).\textsuperscript{123} Even the Assam Railways and Trading Company was heavily dependent on the Naga workers “in the clearance of their extensive jungles.” Therefore, when blockading measures were being considered after a series of “raids” of the Naga groups on the collieries in Namdang, Tikak and Upper Ledo, the Chief Commissioner had to swallow the hard fact that “[t]hese large employers of labour are not likely to regard with equanimity proceedings on the part of Government which would effectually close the supply of labour to them for a considerable time.”\textsuperscript{124} The savage was too dear to capitalism to be lost to wasteful punishment.

An unsigned article titled “Labor” appeared in a 1906 issue of the Assamese periodical \textit{Usha}. “Some labors are sterile and some are productive”, it said. However, “the labor which cannot increase wealth is no labor at all, but only pain.” In gainful labor, said our Assamese James Mill, one could find “the best medicine against wicked thought”: the physical act of doing labor had an enormous and beneficial impact on the mental state of laborer. “The man who constantly labors is free from violent and malicious tendencies.” Laziness, on the other hand, was defined as “the lack of the will to labor”, as the “greatest obstruction” to the schemes of improvement.\textsuperscript{125} Any noncompliance with the norms of the new work regime was liable to be construed as an act of disobedience, even defiance. Indolence was insolence in the frontier. After the resistance to road work was successfully crushed in the Naga Hills in the eighteen eighties, it was calmly reported that “[t]he Nagas are steadily making progress towards civilization and are now-a-days more frequently found to work in gardens for wages, and to settle in Government land.”\textsuperscript{126} Tea gardens were the new destination of civilization. Labor was the ticket to the realm of the human. After all, even if we have forgotten our Mill, do not we still have our Lucács to believe in “[t]he overcoming of animality by the leap to humanization in labour?”\textsuperscript{127} The “lazy Garo” reminded a noted Assamese intellectual of “the missing link described by Darwin”: a distant hominid, an “ugly” primate “barely

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\textsuperscript{123} \textit{Annual Report upon Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the Year 1889-90} (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1890), 6; \textit{Annual Report upon Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the Year 1896-97} (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1897), 25.

\textsuperscript{124} Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur, dated 8 November 1897, No. 247 Confid/1911, in “Thefts by Nagas and the kidnapping of coolies in the Lakhimpur districts”, Foreign Department (External-B), February 1898, Nos. 16 – 20 [NAI]

\textsuperscript{125} “śramaṇa”, \textit{usā}, 1: 10 (c. 1906), 282-4

\textsuperscript{126} \textit{Annual Report upon Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the Year 1889-90} (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1890), 6

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distinguishable from a chimpanzee and scarcely more useful." To another self-proclaimed Darwinist of Assam proper, the Nagas were "hardly different from the wild and violent apish animals."

Training Tribes to Trade

Learning to trade was another important part of becoming useful, because market was the prescribed habitat of Homo economicus. This section is interested in the ways in which the very placelessness of the abstract market of political economy and the pronounced spatial determinants of the Assam hâts pulled on each other to reconfigure the site of improvement. Market, after all, is "the hollow core at the heart of economics": its proverbial elusiveness only adds to its notorious claims to universality. It is therefore convenient and customary to reduce the historical marketplace to a particular, localized expression of the abstract universal of market. In pointing towards an unacknowledged history of the frontier hâts, however, we wish to seriously contest this view.

The nineteenth-century history of the frontier markets is inseparable from the history of the British interception of the circulatory networks. Just as the Court of Directors had hoped in 1835 (see Chapter One), the polities of the sub-Himalayan hills - traditionally "dependent for [their] necessary supply of grain upon the districts which [they] possess[ed] in Assam" - were thrust into a precarious situation after the British closed the northern Duars to the subjects of the Debraja. At the commencement of every cold season, the British Government posted several guards from the Assam Corps "to protect the passes into the plains, as at that time the hill tribes were accustomed to abandon their hills." These

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128 R[atneswar] Mahanta, "gā̄̄ro-bāttānta", āstāمبرbandhu, 1: 1 (1885), 34-5. The italicized section was in English in the original text.
129 Padmanath [Gohain] Barooah, "nagā", bijuli, vol. 2 (c. 1892), 250
130 John Lie, "Sociology of Market", Annual Review of Sociology, vol. 23 (1997), 342. Lie further says, "The very abstraction of the market - its ontological indeterminacy - allows for its universal applicability. The analytical structure developed for the abstract market, in other words, can be used for nonmarket spheres precisely because there is nothing particular about the institution or the structure of the abstract market. According to the economic approach, the phenomenological diversity of markets ... in fact reveals deep isomorphism, or market essentialism." See also Philip Mirowski, Against Mechanism: Protecting Economics from Science (Totowa: Rowman & Littlefield, 1988), 210-32; Paul Bohannan and George Dalton (eds.), Markets in Africa: Eight Subsistence Economies in Transition (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 1-7 for related discussions.
“stringent measures put them to the greatest inconvenience and distrusts”, an officer happily remembered, “as they drew their supplies chiefly from the well cultivated fields of the plains, their barren hills being incapable of producing sufficient for their subsistence.”¹³¹ In 1841 Lieutenant Scott received a delegation from the Charduar Bhutias stating that they were much pressed for food having for the last two years been without their usual supply of grain for which they trusted to the plains and that in consequence they were obliged to live upon berries and roots of wild potatoes etc and were in the greatest distress for food and reduced to extreme misery and begged most urgently that they might be allowed to exchange their salt and other hill produces with our ryots for rice. All this I believe to be most true, and well knowing that consequences might ensue when a large body of men are driven to desperation from hunger I thought it advisable to take upon myself the responsibility of … making a temporary arrangement with them.

The arrangement was elaborate but focused: the lieutenant selected a spot – “on a plain in front of the stockade at Oorung” – where the Bhutias were allowed “to barter their salt and other hill produce for grain”, but they were not permitted to move further into the villages within the revenue line. Two days in the week were declared as “the market days”, and

[ever market day the Bootahs are to assemble, without any weapons, at our frontier outpost called Asnye Kooree, and when the whole party has collected they move off under charge of a Naiek and 4 sepoys for the market place at Oorung. Here the guard remain with them to see that our ryots are fairly dealt with and that the Bootahs do not wander about after the bartering is over. The hill people return with the rice they may have obtained, under the charge of the same guard that brought them in, and this is repeated every day appointed for the hauts.¹³²

The transaction between the savage and the ryot was to be limited to the hat, a specially demarcated and closely monitored place, under the cautious gaze of the British Indian army. In 1844, when the Sat Rajas of Tawang were forced to pledge themselves “to be satisfied, now and for ever, with the ... sum of 5,000 Rupees, and relinquish all right over any proceeds that may accrue from the [Kuriapara] Dwar”, they were also specifically instructed

¹³¹ “‘Posa’, or ‘blackmail’, payable to certain hill tribes on the Assam Frontier’: From the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No. 1792, 11 May 1876, ‘‘Posa’ payable to certain Hill Tribes on the North Eastern Frontier’, Foreign Department, Political B, July 1877, Nos. 83 – 86 [NAI]
¹³² Lt. Scott, Assistant to the Agent to the Governor General, North-Eastern Frontier, to F. Jenkins, the Agent to the Governor General, North-Eastern Frontier, dated 15 February 1841, in “Proposal to Abolish Blackmail paid to Bootah Chiefs”, Foreign Department (Political), 12 April 1841, Nos. 75-6 [NAI]. Emphasis added.
to do the same. "In our traffic we pledge ourselves to confine our dealings to the established market places at Oodalgooree and Mungle Dye, and never interfere with the ryots."\(^{133}\)

Within two days of this agreement, a very similar accord was signed with the recalcitrant Aka chief, Tagi Raja, who was permitted to "trade in all the villages in Chardoar" under the 1842 agreement.\(^{134}\)

It being now considered that my trading in this way is oppressive to the ryots, and therefore required to be discontinued, I bind myself to confine my trade to the established market places at Lahabarree and Baleepara, and to adhere to the following [term]: –

Myself, with my tribe, will confine ourselves in our trade exclusively to the markets in Lahabarree, Baleepara, and Tezpor. We will not, as heretofore, deal with the ryots in their private houses."\(^{135}\)

Similar agreements were soon forced on other Aka chiefs who pledged to confine their trade "exclusively to the hauts or market-places established at Lahabarree, Baleepara, Oorung, or Tezpor, and not, as heretofore, traffic with the ryots at their private dwellings." Moreover, they had to give an undertaking that while "coming into the Plains", they would "always appear unarmed."\(^{136}\)

Together, these brief excerpts direct our attention to the two most pressing concerns of the early British Indian authorities regarding the north-eastern frontier trade: stopping the "traffic with the ryots at their private dwellings" and prohibiting the armed arrival of the savage traders. The carefully constructed distance of the hat from the "private houses" of the ryots – which helped the exchange between the savage and the ryots to be folded into an

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134 "This man has succeeded in obtaining the hegemony over all the Kopâs-chor Akas, and as he exercises great influence over the Mijis also, he is able to intimidate the rest of the Aka people and thus may be said to be the head of all the Hrusso." Rev. C. H. Hesselmeyer, 'The Hill Tribes of the Northern Frontier of Assam', Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, 37:2 (1868), 196. A 500 rupees award was declared for capturing him – "dead or alive" – after he stormed the Balipara stockade in Char Duar and killed 16 British sepoys and their family members (because of "the tyranny and insolence of the sipahees towards his tribe") in 1835. In 1842 the Government came to an agreement with him on the condition of his swearing future allegiance to the British. "As an inducement to him to restart a rapacious banditti from future aggressions, a pension of twenty rupees per mensem was bestowed upon him for life." [Butler], Sketch of Assam, 208-9.

India. Political Department. 9 August, No. 17 of 1837. XITI, FJ4/752 [OIOC]


136 "An Agreement entered into by Changjoe, Hazaree Khowah Aka Rajah, Chang Sumly Hazaree Khowah, Kabooloo Hazaree Khowah, and Nijum Kapasorah Aka Rajah, on the 29th Maug 1250 B. E.", No. XCII, in ibid, 244-5

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enclosed place – was consistent with the overarching British policy of limiting the mobility of “the hill people.” What the British called “trade”, however, had never been a pure exchange of goods observing the principle of absolute commensurability. The correspondence of one series of goods to another was not understood as happening in a formally self-regulated plateau abstracted from all other relationships between the exchangers. Repeated allusions to “oppression” by the savage traders in the English archive clarify the situation.

They were constantly during the cold season prowling about the villages, and under the pretence of begging, extorting articles of food and clothing. In most cases the ryots were afraid to refuse or even complain, such was the terror with which the remembrance of former cruelties inspired the timid Assamese …

The space between “begging” and “extortion” – between “commerce” and “oppression” – was invested with an official silence. In 1835, it was reported that the Bhutias “prefer hawking about their goods from village to village, to attending a regular mart.” We have mentioned in Chapter Two that the Sat Rajas of Rupa and Shergaon consistently maintained that peddling hill products in the lowland villages every winter was their customary prerogative: “giving tong.” They knew their villagers from whom they would take paddy and to whom they would offer chilli (red pepper). Specific lowland villages were kept earmarked for specific groups of hill peddlers. The affiliation of the transactors did not become inoperative after the act of transaction: the relationship was hardly anonymous.

The Bhutias visited the villages in batches of four to eight, placed small packets of chillies in the hands of the villagers, or deposited the chillies at their doors, and demanded one to two maunds of dhan [paddy] per house in return. Where there was not sufficient dhan to satisfy their demands, they took cash and cattle.

If this late nineteenth-century description has retained anything of the transactions current in the early part of the century, it is the impression of formal incommensurability of the value of the articles (“small packets of chillies” in exchange for “one or two maunds of dhan”, and even cattle). It appeared absurd, even oppressive, to the European observer, because the

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137 “Posa”, or “blackmail”, payable to certain hill tribes on the Assam Frontier: From the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No. 1792, 11 May 1876, “‘Posa’ payable to certain Hill Tribes on the North Eastern Frontier”, Foreign Department, Political B, July 1877, Nos. 83 – 86 (NAI)
138 Matthie, Report on the District of Darrang, 10
139 Ibid
140 Annual Report upon Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1891-92 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1892), 12
exchange was not even close to “that sort of rough equality which, though not exact, is sufficient for carrying on the business of common life.” Framed off from a wider field of inter-settlement relations, the event of transaction was indefensible in the logic of political economy, an instance of the unfair “sharp dealings” of the savage traders. According to the polite discourse of political economy, the hand of power must be hidden in the abstract market.

In the “traffic with the ryots at their private dwellings”, it was not. Non-anonymity meant familiarity with the might of the hill neighbors – their power to offer and take back protection. When in 1834 Rutherford helplessly watched “so many of our ryots going over to Bootan” facing the harsh revenue demand, leaving “the [settled] pergunnahs ... a waste”, he was evidently perplexed. “The natives have a natural aversion to the Bootans, who ill-treat and use them as beasts of burden; and yet ... I frequently saw the Ryots of our Pergunnahs assemble just without the line of boundary, some in the act of leaving, others already settled [sic] driven there as they said by the extortion of the Choudrees.” Deserting the protection network of the British Indian authorities for that of the “Booteah chiefs” was not an impulsive and uncalculated act by the desperate ryots; everyday performance of the roles of the protector and the protected underwrote such relocations.

Seen in this context, the stipulation of appearing unarmed in a bāt becomes more intelligible. Disengaged from a range of customary rights over subjected populations in the lowlands, “peddling” was now reduced to a discrete act of selling. Extracting a coherent and pure language of demand and supply out of a variety of constraints and incitements depended on the ability to isolate specific instances and practices of “force.” The spears and the dācos carried by the “traders” were expressive of their other identities, of their revenue claims as superior warrior groups. In staging the free will of the buyer at the center of the new discourse of commerce, the official archive was also engaged in staging a new conception of force as a constraint exterior to the civility of exchange. In his prototypical settlement of the Rangpur Garo bāts in 1816, Scott specified “[t]hat they should come unarmed to the hauts, abandon all claims to exact perquisites, pay fair prices and engage to refer all differences to

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141 Smith, Wealth of Nations, 31
142 Quoted in India Political Despatch from the Court of Directors, Foreign Department, No. 14 of 1834 (3 December) [NAI]
the police muharrir of the haut abiding by the magistrate."\textsuperscript{143} Coming to the haut without weapons was evidently linked to the relinquishment of the warriors' claims "to exact perquisites" or to obtain valley products against "unfair price."\textsuperscript{144}

Throughout the nineteenth century, several attempts were made to reshape the sequence of circulation in the north-eastern frontier. The project of building an ideal haut in Sadiya was surely one of the oldest of these attempts. Much before its orientalist overnaming as the purānic Dikkarbāsīni, Sadiya, the reader may remember, was visited by Wilcox in 1828, stormed by Neufville in 1830, and occupied by the gunboats of C. A. Bruce in the same year. "A nearly impenetrable jungl of many days' journey is said to separate Suddeya from the next settled division which has Jorhat south of the Burumpootur for its principal station."\textsuperscript{145}

In 1828, Bruce was ordered by Scott to open a Government Trade Depot in Sadiya so as to connect the circuits of circulation in the adjacent hills to the imperial trade of Bengal. From subsequent communications, it become clear that Scott sent up a considerable "investment" in the form of cloth, salt and other merchandise in order to find a market for the Bengal goods among the neighboring Mataks, Khamtis and Singphos.\textsuperscript{146} As we have mentioned in Chapter Two, some Marwari traders took the opportunity to "establish themselves at Sudiya." The details of this early endeavor are not forthcoming at the moment, but it is somewhat certain that it did not prove to be commercially profitable, and that like most of Scott's plans for improvement, the Trade Depot was abandoned at some point of time after his death in 1831. However, in 1832, Robertson reported that at least for the Khamtis and the Singphos, Sadiya remained an important node in the transfrontier circuit of circulation.


\textsuperscript{144} Of course, disarmament was easier instructed than enforced. Most of the warrior groups were reluctant to come unarmed to the plains. A series of confrontations and negotiations took place in different parts of the frontier at different points of time before the general shape of a "compromise" became visible from the eighteen sixties after the revolt at Gelaki. See \textit{Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Judicial Department, December 1867, Nos. 57-64; February 1868, Nos. 12-24, March 1868, Nos. 216-217 [WBSA] Most of the hill communities were forced to pledge that they would "not ... come armed with their spears and bows and arrows, but merely ... carry their daos." "Agreement entered into by the Meyong Abors on 5th November 1862", No. XCIII, in Aitchison (ed.), \textit{Collection of Treaties}, vol. II, 245-9.

\textsuperscript{145} Secretary to the Governor General to G. Swinton, Chief Secretary to Government, Fort William, Dated Shimla, 18 July 1831, in Foreign Department, Political Branch, 2 September 1831, Nos. 1-4 [NAI]

\textsuperscript{146} A. White, Political Agent in Upper Assam, to F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General in the North-Eastern Frontier, dated 'On the River', 20 March 1837, in Foreign Department, Political Branch, 22 May 1837, Nos. 115-117 [NAI]
where opium, elephants' teeth, gold dust and other things which could be produced "without the drudgery of regular industry" were exchanged with the people from the Brahmaputra valley and other "tribes on the Burmese frontier."\(^{147}\) Rutherford also reported around the same time that the "Meeshmees", "a slightly built race of remarkable agility," used to bring bags of musk "for sale to Suddya."\(^{148}\) Jenkins, who was deputed by the Governor General on a lengthy tour in 1832-3 across vast areas of the new frontier with 700 soldiers and 800 coolies,\(^{149}\) reported in 1833 that

Suddiya seems of no less importance a commercial point of view and the imports are articles of value amongst which I may enumerate Musk, Amber, Ivory, Gold, Silver, Lead and Steel [sic]. Burmese Silk, Dyeing drugs, Cotton etc. and its communications are with the Lama Country, Ava and through the Shan provinces to China. There are already three or four Manwaree Kootees [gēlā] established at Suddiya, one at Beasa and I understood an agent of these most enterprising merchants had last year been pushed on to the Hookoom valley with a view to open Koote there.

As we shall see in more details in the next chapter, Jenkins was particularly excited about utilizing the connections of the "Khamtis of Suddiya," the "widely spread and very mercantile people," who kept up "occasional intercourse ... with the Shans beyond the Irrawady." But the problem was, according to Jenkins, that "[t]he principal clans of Singphos interposed on this road between the Khamtis on the Burhampooter and those on the Irrawaddy."\(^{150}\) Robertson had already noticed that "the savage tribe of the Singphos occupy the territory between Sudiya and Hookhum, which latter is in possession of Burmese and capital of the Shan country." Hukawng, said Robertson, "is described as a rich place carrying on a direct trade with China in precious stones, silk, etc. It is a month from Sadiya through heavy jungle. ... But we possess little power over the Singphos."\(^{151}\)

Jenkins was understandably fearful of "the formidable hand of Singphos that threatened Assam in 1829-30." But he was also optimistic about the "trade of some consequences" which "the Singphos of Assam now carry on ... with the Shans and Chinese of Yunnan

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\(^{147}\) Extract Fort William Political Consultations of 7 January 1833, From T. C. Robertson, Agent to the Governor General on the North Eastern Frontier to G. Swinton, Chief Secretary, Dated 14 December 1832. F/4/1505, File No. 59025 [OIOC]

\(^{148}\) Ibid.

\(^{149}\) Phillimore, *Historical Records of Survey*, vol. IV, 262

\(^{150}\) Jenkins, *Report on the North-East Frontier*, 3-4

\(^{151}\) Extract Fort William Political Consultations of 7 January 1833, From T. C. Robertson, Agent to the Governor General on the North Eastern Frontier to G. Swinton, Chief Secretary, Dated 14 December 1832. F/4/1505, File No. 59025 [OIOC]
through the provinces of Ava inhabited by their kindred tribes.” In order to give an expansive push to this trade “under the fostering encouragement of our Government,” he urged the authorities to concentrate on the Khamtis in Sadiya. 152

An influx of the same races from the Chinese and Burmah countries would gradually follow on the intercourse of traffic and the merchants of Hindoostan who have already begun to establish themselves at Suddiya would be drawn thither in large numbers to partake in the advantages of a trade in the most valuable articles of commerce. The development of the resources of Suddiya would tend to advance those of all the other parts of Assam, for the commerce must pass through the whole country and of course cannot fail to be of beneficial effect. Indeed only an extension of foreign commerce seems to be wanting to give an impulse to the slumbering agriculture of this rich country and no extension of any consequence can take place except in this direction. 153

Neatening his plan on paper, Jenkins added “that the present insignificant though rising traffic with the bordering countries could be greatly enlarged by the least exertion on our part.” A periodical fair, instead of a Government Depot, required to be established in Sadiya in which the different communities could be encouraged to participate and eventually, through this institution, “a portion of the commerce which now finds its way from the northern parts of Yunnan into Ava could be diverted into Assam and as direct exchange of merchandise with Setchwan and eastern Thibet be gradually created.” 154 The last bazaar of India would be the base camp for the commercial conquest of “Indo China.”

Despite the stationing of a British officer permanently at Sadiya in July 1834, the plan was not immediately worked out. Some of the local European officers were particularly skeptical in view of the failure of the Scott plan. Adam White, the Political Agent in Upper Assam and Scott’s confidant, “anticipate[d] little advantage from the measure, as owing to the extreme indolence and apathy of the neighbouring tribes, [and] their distance from Suddeeya.” Fearing that “their attendance would be extremely scanty,” White strongly argued against repeating the same mistake.

In 1828 when no trade existed in Suddeeya, I conceive that the Government were perfectly justified in sending up an investment with the view of reviving it, but now that it has been reestablished, I think that the parties interested may with some reason complain against the interference of Government. However if the measure is determined upon, I shall make every

152 Jenkins, Report on the North-East Frontier, 4-5
153 Ibid, 10-11
154 Jenkins, Report on the North-East Frontier, 20
exertion to carry it into execution. To show the nature of the demand which exists for woolen goods at Suddeeya, it is only necessary to mention that a Government investment to the amount of 4000 rupees worth which was sent up in 1828, took 8 years to sell off, and would not have been sold to this day, had not the price been reduced to 30 per cent below prime cost, afterwards at a reduction of 10, 20, and 30 per cent.

While White convinced the higher authorities of the hazards of encouraging private traders from Bengal proper to send up "stocks of woollens at prime cost," as originally suggested by Jenkins, his misgivings about the worth of the fair did not capture the fancy of the Government of India. "Our opinion has been communicated to Captain Jenkins to the effect that it would be a very desirable arrangement to establish a periodical fair at Suddeeya," the Court of Directors was informed by the Calcutta authorities in October 1837, "and that we considered it advisable as proposed by that officer that invitations should be issued to native chiefs with a view of encouraging their attendance, as well as to the merchants, but it was stated that we did not think it expedient that any sale of goods should be allowed on the part of Government." But in 1839, as we shall see in the next chapter, Sadiya became the center of a massive insurgency, ironically led by warriors from the same Khamti communities which were supposed to be the keystone of the imminent transfrontier British commerce. The Europeans were forced to abandon the place, and for long the grand fair was not even mentioned in the official circle.

155 "The party of the people on this part of our frontier is such, that scarcely any persons can afford to buy woollens, except the Chiefs, and even they generally receive them as presents from the Officers of Government. Therefore it would be desirable to send up articles of less value, the great demand, being for salt, clothes, tobacco, opium, knives, needles, and cups and saucers, but on general principles, I conceive extremely objectionable this interference with the private trade of the merchants, as whatever trade exists here, has been established at a considerable risk, and the losses which the merchants sustained at Beesa have never been compensated by Government. Under these circumstances the introduction of Government goods a 2nd time might induce them to withdraw their capital altogether. Now I am aware that the measure is called for by the exorbitant price at which goods are sold, as even woollen goods are bought at a rate not exceeding 40 per cent above the prime cost, which I do not consider high, there being 5 months water carriage before the goods reach Suddeeya." A. White, Political Agent in Upper Assam, to F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General in the North-Eastern Frontier, dated 'On the River', 20 March 1837, in Foreign Department, Political Branch, 22 May 1837, Nos. 115-117 [NAI]

156 Secretary to the Government of India, Political Department, to F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General in the North-Eastern Frontier, 22 May 1837, in ibid.

157 Political Letter to Court of Directors, Foreign Department (Political Branch), 20 October 1837, No. 53 [NAI]

158 After the abrupt termination of the Sadiya Fair plan, Jenkins seems to have invested much energy and interest in a plan of exploiting the personal connections of a Chinese resident in Assam to attract Chinese merchants to Assam. This plan, sanctioned by the Government of India, failed too. See the correspondences in "Deputation of Mr. Lum Ping Young for inducing Chinese merchants to visit Assam", BG (1849), File No. 361, Serial No. 1-6 [ASA]
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At some point of time in the middle of the century, the government hat at Sadiya finally came into being, almost surreptitiously, as if a little ashamed of its reduced scale and purpose.159 A detailed report is available for the year 1873, where W. C. S. Clarke, the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur, referred to “the immense number of persons assembled” in the annual hat. As far as Clarke could count, there were 1029 “Chullikatta Mishmis”, 298 “Digaroo Mishmis,” 67 “Mijoo Mishmis”, 300 “Singphos and Khamptis”, 50 “Abors and Meerees”, and “about a hundred souls” of “the ‘Jeele’, ‘Molok’, and ‘Kachungs’, who are a sort of low caste Singphos, and in appearance are something between the Singphos and the Nagas.” Describing the variety of commodities bought and sold in the hat, the “entertainments” organized by the Government to amuse the participants, and the “uncleanly character” of the people, the officer observed,

Some Rupees 40,000 or upwards in value of one kind and another has ... changed hands. Something has been taken away in money, but money has also been spent to a small extent in the purchase of cattle; and some Mishmis have gone on to the Muttock districts for further purposes of trade.

This, said Clarke, “shows an increase of many times over the amount and value of transactions at the fair of 1871-72.” For him, this meant an “evident wish for an active and extensive trade with the markets of the plains,” which in turn was “a good guarantee for the maintenance of friendly relations with us on the part of these rude hill people.”160 Objectives seem to have changed between the eighteen thirties and the eighteen seventies. The hat at Sadiya was no more to be considered as a measure for the commercial conquest of Ollna and Tibet,161 but as a site for integrating the savage into “the markets of the plains.” As far as the “value” of the “commodities brought down by the Mishmis and other tribes” was concerned, out of an estimated total of 25700 rupees, rubber, ivory, musk-balls and wax

159 Moffatt Mills’s voluminous and detailed Report (1854) does not mention the Sadiya hat. J. B. Bhattacharjee, “The Eastern Himalayan Trade of Assam in the Colonial Period”, in Bhattacharjee (ed), Studies in the Economic History of North East India, 199 mentions that the Sadiya hat started in 1867, but does not cite any source.

160 Deputy Commissioner of Luckimpoor to Personal Assistant to the Commissioner of Assam, No. 3P, Camp Suddya, 21 February 1873, in “Massacre of Borlangee Nagas by Kamsinga Nagas”, Foreign Department, Political-A, July 1873, Nos. 469-507 [NAI]

161 It may be relevant to remember here that in the Beijing Conventions of 1860, the Unequal Treaties of Tianjin were finally ratified, securing the opening of ten Qing ports as Treaty Ports; the opening of the Yangzi River to foreign trading vessels, the sweeping reductions in internal customs duties on goods, the legalization of the import trade in opium, the payment of heavy indemnities, the proprietorial rights for Christian missionaries and the rights of residence for foreign envoys in Beijing. Little was left of the proverbial Chinese market to be conquered.
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accounted for 23300 rupees.\textsuperscript{162} If we trust the testimony of the series of \textit{Annual Reports on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries}, this remained the unvarying trend in the Sadiya hat until 1885, the year after which the hat became “extinct.”\textsuperscript{163} Read together with our discussion in Chapter Two, this clearly indicates the increasing dominance of the k\textit{a}yu traders in the transfrontier commerce. But there is a larger point too, concerning the shifting schemes of improvement.

In 1848, twenty years after David Scott’s opening of the Government Depot in Sadiya, Hamilton Vetch solicited the permission of Jenkins for “the establishment of a Golah or small Government Depot for salt, iron, Assam and other cloths at some convenient point” in the so-called Abor Hills
to enable these people to come down for barter and which I think is highly desirable. They should be encouraged in, as well for the purpose of improving their condition as with the hope of eventually opening a more easy and direct intercourse with the Lamas of Tibet than by any other route from Assam, and which I am inclined to think is neither very distant [n]or difficult, and only barred by the jealousy of intervening tribes, perhaps at the instigation of the Lamas themselves, but which if once thrown open might lead to a considerable trade with Tibet.\textsuperscript{164}

Even until the end of the eighteen forties, it seems, the improvement of the conditions of “the frontier tribes” was largely seen in the official circle as an inevitable byproduct of the project of “opening a more easy and direct intercourse” with Tibet and China. But the fantasies of an overland transfrontier trade, as Ma Thaung rightly points out, took a backseat since the conclusion of the second Anglo-Burma war in December 1852.\textsuperscript{165} It was around this time that a number of annual Government hats were opened in the northern borders of the settled districts with the explicit purpose of “promot[ing] the frontier trade.” Most probably, all these hats – Dhubri in Goalpara, Darranga and Subankhata in Kamrup,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Calculated from the “Statement showing commodities brought down by the Mishmis and other tribes and their value at Suddya” in Deputy Commissioner of Luckimpoor to Personal Assistant to the Commissioner of Assam, No. 3P, Camp Suddya, 21 February 1873, in “Massacre of Borlangee Nagas by Kamsinga Nagas”, Foreign Department, Political-A, July 1873, Nos. 469–507 [NAI]
\item Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year 1886-87 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1887), 9
\item H. Vetch, Political Agent of Upper Assam, to F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General on the North-Eastern Frontier, dated 3 January 1848, in “Report on Captain Vetch’s visit to the Abor tribes”, Foreign Department (Political), 24 March 1848, Nos. 199-201 [NAI]
\item Ma Thaung, \textit{British Interest in Trans-Burma Trade Routes}, 57 points at the increasing British interest in “the much easier Irrawaddy route.” “The river, the lower reaches of which from Myede fifty miles north of Prome downwards – was now in British territory, was reputed to be navigable for many miles …”
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Udalgiri, Kerkaria and Daimara in Darrang and Sadiya in Lakhimpur – had their origins outside the policy decisions of the Government. But since the eighteen fifties the Government intervention radically reshaped their organization and purpose.

For example, there had been a hat in Daimara since “the time of the Assam Rajahs” acting as a thriving center for exchange of rice and salt between the lowland cultivators of Darrang and “the Bhutias and their cognate tribes.” Under the British authorities, it became the most important center for passage of transfrontier caoutchouc. The change in the trade staple signified not only a change in the status of the uphill “traders,” but also a coordinated effort to restrict the circulation of rice outside the strictures of monetized exchange. In 1878, it was reported that “the strict enforcement of the provisions of the Inner Line Regulation during the year has caused a marked decrease in the export trade [of Daimara]. . . This decrease was mainly under the heads ‘Paddy’ and ‘Rice.’” Even in 1878, Daimara was described as “a place three miles beyond our frontier” of Darrang in the official accounts. By 1885, the advance of the Inner Line redefined its location as “about one mile due north of British territory.”

Kerkaria, another frontier hat in Darrang, used to be held “at a place just beyond the border of the Darrang district” until 1877, when it “was moved to Khagrapara,” within the Inner Line. Predictably, this invoked strong reaction from the “Rajah of Kerkaria,” a local chief who was traditionally entitled to a share of the profits from the exchange between “the Bhutias from the eastern portion of Bhutan Proper and the residents of the Mangaldai subdivision.” Traditionally, Kerkaria, like Daimara, was an important center for exchange of rice and salt. The distress of the uphill “traders” during the late nineteenth century is best captured in an 1883 Report:

166 Annual Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year 1877-78 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1878), 4
167 Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year 1883-84 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1884), 5
168 Annual Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year 1877-78 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1878), 4
169 Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year 1884-85 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1885), 5
170 Annual Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year 1877-78 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1878), 3
171 Annual Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year 1878-79 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1879)
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The Bhutia chiefs who came down to this [Kerkaria] fair complained to the Deputy Commissioner that, owing to the present cheapness of salt in Assam, they could not dispose of the hill salt which they had brought with them at the old rates of barter for rice and fish; while they were obliged by their agreements with their superior rulers in Bhutan to bring back as much rice &c., for the salt they imported as in former years. The Deputy Commissioner explained to them how our salt had got cheaper, and that prices could not always remain the same.172

However, as repeated references in the official documents suggest, the “savage traders” quite consistently expressed their distrust regarding the alleged impartiality and neutrality of a market where “prices could not always remain the same.” That their suspicions were not entirely unfounded becomes clear when we read in an earlier report that “the increase in the salt brought down is very large, and this trade will be carefully watched to see that the untaxed salt brought down from the hills is not allowed to interfere with the taxed salt brought from Calcutta.”173 “The import of salt from Bhutan has before this attracted the notice of the Government of India,” admitted the 1883 Report, “but its insignificance prevented any steps being taken to check it, and it seems likely henceforth to diminish or disappear before the competition of the cheap salt which is imported into Assam from Calcutta.”174 Very similar steps were taken to systematically dismantle the thriving salt trade in the so-called Naga Hills.175

To cut the long story short, instead of growing into base camps for the commercial conquest of China and Tibet, the frontier hats of Assam became training camps for the residents of the adjacent hills in the second half of the nineteenth century to become resource-bringers for the Calcutta and London firms. The calculated disruption of the traditional sequence of circulation between the rice-growing “valley” and the salt-producing “hills” was crucial for

172 Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year 1882-83 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1883), 4
173 Annual Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year 1881-82 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1882), 5
174 Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year 1882-83 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1883), 4
175 In 1844, it was reported that “Each class [of the Nagas] being governed by independent chieftains, they see but few strangers, and these are principally Mohungeas, or Assamese traders from the plains, who, with a view to obtain salt, carry up barter quantities of grain and opium, together with a few cocks, as a present for the Khoonbow or chief.” Cf. John Owen, Notes on the Naga Tribes, in communication with Assam (Calcutta: W. H. Carey & Co., 1844), 9-10. See also S. K. Barpujari, “Raja Purandar Singha’s Management of Salt- Wells in the Naga Hills”, in Bhattacharjee (ed), Studies in the Economic History of North East India, 73-83.
posing Assam proper as an enclosed economic unit. (It is not an unremarkable fact that since 1876 the details of these exchanges were halfheartedly recorded in "Annual Reports on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries." The increasing emphasis on "foreignness" may appear a little surprising if one reads it against the standing claim of the same administration that these areas were indisputably within the political boundary of British India. "The Kaisas," noted an official, "do not keep separate accounts of their trans-frontier trade."\textsuperscript{176} In radically altering the goods profile of these hāts, the administration was able to force a further distanciation between the transfrontier communities and the cultivators in the valley. In almost all the official descriptions of the hāts, the Marwari shopkeepers and their agents are mentioned as the principal trading party from Assam. In a number of cases, [t]he hillmen ... do not come to the principal marts to trade, but deal with outlying shopkeepers who live near the hills. During the cold season, traders watch for the hillmen on the roads by which they come down to the plains, and all business is transacted in temporary sheds erected for the purpose. As soon as the rains begin, the hillmen return to their homes.\textsuperscript{177}

There were such on-the-way hāts targeting the Mishmi rubber-bringers in Gogamukh, Sisi, Doblong and Dimu. Bisa, Phakial, Jaipur and Daba were meant for the Naga and Singpho ivory-sellers. Even the steadier and more traditional hāts – like that of Udalgiri, "the principal Bhutia fair" which the Government started to monitor since 1854\textsuperscript{178} – experienced heightened activities during the decades of intense rubber extraction and by the end of the nineteen twenties "has very nearly ceased to exist."\textsuperscript{179} Actually, Udalguri had an exceptionally long career. Dhubri hāt had already "died a natural death" in 1885, Sadiya hāt in 1882,

\textsuperscript{176} Report on the Trade between the Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Tribes and Countries for the Three Years ending the 31st March 1911 By S. G. Hart, Director of Agriculture, Eastern Bengal and Assam (Shillong: Printed at the Eastern Bengal and Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1911), 1

\textsuperscript{177} S. O. B. Ridsdale, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Revenue, Agriculture, and Commerce, Dated 19 January 1878, in Annual Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year 1876-77 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1877), 5

\textsuperscript{178} Annual Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year 1877-78 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1878), 3

\textsuperscript{179} 'Extract from the Annual Administration Report on the Balipara Frontier Tract for the year 1930-31', Annual Report on the Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1930-31 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1931), 1

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Daimara and Kerkaria sometimes in the eighteen nineties. How "natural" were these deaths? Very much, in fact, if we take the altered goods profile of these hats to have been natural. With the exhaustion of the "natural resources" beyond the frontier, these hats almost abruptly lost their functions. New hats were of course opened to facilitate the one-way traffic in the less-tapped areas. In 1883, Campbell, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, opened a hat in Darranga. "A number of huts were built for the accommodation of the half-dozen Kaiyas, or native merchants, who attended, and spacious sheds were provided for the Bhutias."

The articles disposed of at the Fair are usually lac, chillies, rubber and wax, these goods being bulky, and not usually bought by any but professional traders. In exchange they take sometimes money, sometimes goods, such as eri silk cloth or yarn, or cotton fabrics. No charge is made for the accommodation afforded. A police guard remains on the spot as long as trade is going on. As the lac and rubber accumulate, the Kaiyas send it by coolies to their regular shops, which are most of them at Rangia, half-way between Darranga and Gauhati. In 1886 it was reported that the new hat at Margherita "is generally rising into importance." It was now "the principal depot for [rubber]" and "the Nagas, Duyaniyas (half-breed Singpho-Assamese), and Khamtis" acted as the major rubber-bringers here. But it was also frequented by the tea planters and their agents who were interested in recruiting "unskilled" laborers from these "tribes." The principal functions of the hats were changing again, and by the early twentieth century, the remaining hats actually became places to buy cheap seasonal labor for "public works" or private gardens.

"The trading post at Rotung is in itself nothing, what it represents is everything," remarked a perceptive officer in 1914. Rotung was one of the latest hats on the Sadiya frontier, two days' march beyond Pasighat and "only on the fringe of the Abor country." It was explicitly declared that the hat was "the first step towards receiving the trade block in the hinterland,

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180 Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year 1884-85 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1885), 5
181 Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year 1884-85 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1885), 6-7. See also Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year 1883-84 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1884), 5 and Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year 1886-87 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1887), 5
182 Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year 1885-86 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1886), 9
183 Cf. Report on the Trade between the Province of Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Tribes and Countries for the Three Years ending the 31st March 1920 By J. McSwiney, Director of Land Records and Agriculture, Assam (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1920)
and the policy to be pursued in the future is the simultaneous advance of posts and road, stage by stage, until at last Riga is reached. Only in this way will it be possible to exercise any real control over the tribes to the north. In the meantime, the Minyongs may also learn the value of working for wage.”

Coining a Country

It must be clear from our previous discussions that the process of fabricating a bounded theater of improvement included a series of spatial shuffles. In this section we wish to point at a common but relatively overlooked site: currency, as a discursive performance inciting in their users a new sense of geographical situatedness. Historians working on different areas have come to suggest that as an articulation of relations between the domestic and the foreign, the legal tender increasingly became a crucial institution in the nineteenth-century imperial world for the fabrication of a spatial coherence. In the emergent post-Enlightenment culture of governance in western Europe, the power to issue coins was almost unvaryingly understood as an indissociable, absolute and indivisible power of the legislative sovereign, and by the end of the eighteenth century a considerable effort was undertaken to standardize “the national currency.” Such an idea, as the reader can anticipate, was not operative in the Tungkhungia world of concurrent sovereignties. The use of currency was not widespread in any case, and even where it was (in the western parts of the kingdom: particularly in the Kamrup and Darrang parganas), it did not readily relate to a corresponding form of singular sovereignty.

184 S. N. Mackenzie, Officiating Political Officer, Central and Eastern Sections, North-East Frontier, Sadiya to the Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No. 179G/XII-5, dated Sadiya, 21 April 1914 (“General Administration Report of the District of Sadiya for the year 1913-14”), in Annual Report on the Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1913-14 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1914), 4
186 Frank Perlin, “Money-Use in Late Pre-Colonial India and the International Trade in Currency Media”, in John F. Richards (ed.), The Imperial Monetary System of Mughal India (New Delhi: Oxford University
Recent accounts of "monetary diversity" suggests that almost a hundred types of coins were in simultaneous circulation in the late eighteenth-century Bengal Presidency, some of course having a wider purchase than others.\textsuperscript{187} While Arcot and Raj Mohari rupees – thanks to their greater integration into the rivirine and oceanic trade circuits of lower regions of the deltaic Bengal – were more familiar to the British, in vast areas of the sub-Himalayan stretch, the coins issued by the [Koch] Bihar Maharajas – usually called the Narayani Rupee in the British Indian documents – had come to enjoy a superior advantage over others. As David Scott discovered during his initial efforts at revenue settlement, "the taxes were in some localities calculated in Nariny Rupees and in some Rajmohree Rupees, and the revenue was moreover taken in those currencies in Deb Mohuree, Arcot and Sonat Rupees.\textsuperscript{188}

For the greater parts of the Tungkhungia territories – what Scott called "the interior" – "clothes of certain fixed dimensions, salt, iron hoes and other articles in general pass current instead of money, and are necessarily accepted as such from the cultivators by the Chowdries and other malkoozars, who frequently find difficulty in converting them into cash, and are obliged to dispose of their private property to take up money at an interest of 10 percent per mensem to discharge the Government dues."

The state of things may be traced to the system that prevailed under the native government, by which the labor of its subjects was established for money taxes, while the practice of barter was universal in the interior and necessarily reduced, within a very small compass the quantity of coin required for circulation. Since the accession of the British Government the labor of the payicks has been commuted for a money payment without any considerable addition being made to the currency, and the inhabitants of Assam are now suffering much...

In this 1830 report, Scott identified three major "problems" with the exiting currencies in the area: deficiency, drain and debasement. They were, according to him, interrelated: the problem of "deficient amount of the currency" was aggravated by "the constant drain of the small existing stock of coins that takes place, in consequence of a sum considerable for so


\textsuperscript{188} F. Jenkins, Commissioner of Revenue, Assam, to The Board of Revenue, Fort William, dated Gowahtty, 13th November, 1849, No. 192, in "Report on the Revenue Administration of the Province of Assam", 1849-50, Selections from the Records of the Bengal Government, No. 11 (b) [OIOC]
poor a country, being annually remitted to the Presidency to be recoined.” 189 His colleague Neufville was in complete agreement with him about “[t]he increasing scarcity of precious metals and the immense proportion of bad coin afloat.” But he was even more incensed by the cumbersomeness of the local currencies in Upper Assam, namely foodstuff, salt, iron hoes and clothes. While Neufville hoped that the stationing of British Indian regiments in the frontier would bring “good money into circulation,” temporarily he was compelled to accept part of revenue in kind. In doing so, however, he specified that only those articles which could be sold in a market and were not perishable could be accepted as a standard, like gold, ivory, silk, marjut, cotton cloths etc. 190

For the famous collector trio of 1833, it was again the difficulty of revenue collection in such a condition that called for a currency reform in Assam. “The current coin of Assam being Narainee and Rajah Muharee Rupees appears to me a great evil,” remarked Bogle, “more particularly the former, for its value is very uncertain and a ryot seldom gets fair play in the exchange.”

He can scarcely ascertain whether he should pay 3, 4, or 5 annas batta and whatever he does pay it is more than probable that one or two annas per Rupee are absorbed on the way to treasury. The Narainee currency is a perpetual annoyance, but one which I think might be remedied by making no repayments of Narainee Rupees, but hording them to be sent to Calcutta for recoineage and in lieu of them, I beg to suggest the introduction of Sicca half Rupees to such might annually be paid away in commission to Chowdries and village officers, the Sudder and Mufussil Omlah, the troops and contingencies, as entirely to extinguish Narainees in the course of half a dozen years. To effect this change more expeditiously the payment of any part of the revenue in Siccas might be discontinued for a time. 191

It must be clarified here that by the early nineteenth century, the British administrators had evolved a specific mechanism for dealing with the baffling diversities of currency in the Indian empire. As it was later explained in a tract, “[i]n civilised countries” the foreign coins hardly had any other option but to be converted into bullion in the mints. But in the Indian Empire

189 D. Scott, Agent to the Governor General on the North-Eastern Frontier, to G. Swinton, Secretary to the Government of India, dated 17 April 1830, in Foreign Department (P. C.), 7 May 1830, Nos. 51-3 [NAI]
190 J. B. Neufville, Political Agent, Upper Assam, to D. Scott, Agent to the Governor General on the North-Eastern Frontier, dated 29 April 1830, Foreign Department, Political Branch, 10 June 1831, No. 58 [NAI]
191 A. Bogle, Assistant to the Agent to the Governor General, North-East Frontier, to F. Jenkins, On Special Survey Duty,, dated 15 April 1833, in Jenkins, Report on the North-East Frontier, Appendix-D, 126
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it is impossible to avoid the introduction of a vast number of foreign coins of all kinds; which, owing to the difficulties of communication, cannot be brought to the Mint for conversion, and for the want of intelligence and active enterprise in the natives would never find their way thither, but would remain as obstructions to the channels of circulation and the freedom of exchange and the fertile source of fraud and exactions of the native shroffs, did not the Government interfere to hasten their removal. 192

Therefore, the Government established Treasuries in all principal stations to receive different kinds of coins in order to convert them according to a table of values constructed by the Calcutta Assaye Master. Rutherford complained from Darrang that “the currency ... requires to be altered from the local into the sicca, which latter is fast becoming the medium of circulation thereby tending to render soon, the different local coins in which the land settlements are made, merely nominal 70 per cent of the total revenue here is paid in sicca Rupees, the exchange daily becoming a great check upon trade and agriculture.” 193

Adam White was one of the first European officers in the province who offered a solution to the problem of “the scarcity of circulating medium.” He suggested that measures should be taken to establish a mint in which Rajmohurree Rupees should be coined. At present all those rupees are sent out of the country and none but Sicca Rupees come in their place and if the payment is withdrawn there will be a great deficiency in that respect. But if a mint were established the merchants in paying a [commission?] would be enabled to obtain coin for the impure silver they obtain from the Singpho country which would pass into circulation and thereby enable the ryots to pay their rents and those now out of money could coin their silver ornaments. Independent of this [,] great advantages would result from its establishment to the inhabitants of the Durrung and Bishnath Divisions in both of which districts the Rajmohurree Rupee forms a principal medium of circulation.” 194

The plan of utilizing the Singpho silver was however rejected by the Government of India on the ground that it would be “inexpedient” to authorize “the Rajah of Assam ... to establish a mint.” The sovereign rights could not be abandoned to a “tributary prince.”

193 H. Rutherford, Civil In-Charge of Durrung, to F. Jenkins, On Special Survey Duty, dated 30 April 1833, in Jenkins, Report on the North-East Frontier, Appendix-C, 110
194 “Memorandum regarding the Management of Upper Assam under a Native Prince by Major White”, Foreign Department, Political Branch, 30 May 1833, No. 87 [NAI]
Moreover, said the Accountant General, “the new Furruckabad Rupees should if practicable be introduced into circulation in that quarter.”

At this point, it is important to remember that in spite of the frequent allusions to the financial homogeneity of British India, the imperial monetary policy was marked with extraordinary lack of coordination between the various administrative agencies. While the Government of Bengal had issued the Furruckabad Rupee with a standardized weight of 173 grains troy and 166.135 grains in 1803, its own 1805 Regulation fixed the Sicca Rupee (of 179.66 grains troy and gold mohur of 190 grains troy) as the sole legal tender for whole of Bengal. As an 1806 Despatch from the Court of Directors clearly stated, “we are fully convinced of the inefficiency of present system of our mints and coinage” which reportedly inflicted “losses … of a magnitude far beyond our expectation.” The Court was evidently disturbed by “so many denominations of gold and silver coins of different values in different districts.” In January 1818, a gold rupee (of 180 troy grains weight and 165 troy grains fineness) – divisible into halves and quarters – was proclaimed as the recognized currency by the Madras Government in order to displace the Arcot and Star Pagoda. But in the same year, the Bengal Government declared another new sicca or silver coin (of 191.916 troy grains weight and 187.651 troy grains fineness) and a mohur or gold coin (of 204.710 troy grains weight and 187.651 troy grains fineness). In 1824, the Furruckabad rupee was redefined (180 troy grains weight and 165 troy grains fineness) and the Benares Sicca was declared abolished. Until then, the Bombay establishment continued the Surat rupees. With the 1833 Charter Act, however, the legal provisions for establishing a centralized administration for the scattered British Indian territories came into force, and in August 1835, the Silver and Gold Coinage Act proclaimed the entire British India as a uniform currency landscape.

But the first supply of Furruckabad Rupees to Lower Assam predated the 1835 Act by more than a year (June 1834), and the specific plans of integrating the new territorial acquisition in the north-eastern frontier into the emerging currency landscape were discussed in the course of the year. “[I]n the existing state of the Assam currency we had no objection to Raj Mohurree Rupees being received as bullion at their intrinsic value,” noted a Government

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195 Extract Political Letter from Fort William, dated 10 July 1834 [OIOC]
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document in 1834. At “their intrinsic value,” because “they may have been irregularly coined by individuals.” The question of irregular and individual coinage demands a little more attention. What came to be typically described in the imperial archive as chaotic counterfeit was intimately tied to the political culture of the region. Different coins represented different fiscal focuses towards which certain taxes and tributes flowed from different parts of the Brahmaputra valley. In their eagerness to discover one irreducible fiscal unit in Assam, the British officers chose to understand the plurality of coins as a clear marker of their inauthenticity. Indeed, we should be a little cautious in using the category of Narayani Rupee as a local/indigenous equivalent of the Furruckabad or Sicca Rupees. As it becomes clear from the imperial documents, large varieties of coins were subsumed under this rubric, and the ones not issued by the [Koch] Bihar Maharaja were invariably dubbed as spurious. But the minting of the so-called Narayani Rupees was in no case confined to the Maharaja alone.

[W]hen the Booteabs carried away the late Raja of Cooch Behar, they got hold of the dies, with which they still stamp Narainee Rupees. Every new Deb Raja puts a mark upon the Rupees of his coinage, and alters the weight. The Dhurma Raja also coins Rupees, and besides them, no one else is permitted to put their mark upon the Rupees, but there are mints at Paro, Tongso, and Tagna.

“A great quantity of spurious Narainee Rupees come into Assam that is coined out of our territories, the largest portion and the most debased probably from Bootan,” observed Jenkins in 1834. “There are private mints I understand in the Bootan Doars.” Davidson calculated that there were at least one million of Narayani Rupees in circulation within British Assam. Jenkins’s initial plan to displace these coins was simple:

On being satisfied that we had a sufficient quantity of Furruckabad Rupees to enable us to adopt the measure I would beg to suggest that expediency of proposing a date when the Narainee Rupee should cease to be a legal tender, enabling the holders however after that date to pay in the coin as bullion at either of our treasuries and to receive its value in Sonats. An arrangement to this effect might also be made with the Cooch Behar Rajah to exchange the Narainee Rupees received by him as revenue for Sonats and refusing after the lapse of a certain period to receive from him any but Sicca or Sonat Rupees.

197 Extract Political Letter from Fort William, dated 13 November [OIOC]
198 Kishen Kant Bose, “Account of Bootan”, translated by D. Scott, in Political Missions to Bootan, 203
199 F. Jenkins, the Agent to the Governor General in the North Eastern Frontier, to C. Trevelyan, Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, Political Department, dated Gowhatty, 31 May 1834, in Foreign Department (Political), 19 June 1834, Nos. 94-95 [NAI]
Within a month, Archibald Bogle submitted a detailed discussion of the causes of the "popularity" of the Narayani Rupees. According to Bogle, although the Calcutta mint tables placed 100 Narayanis as equivalent to 68 Furruckabad Rupees (and 100.63 Sicca Rupees), "they pass current in the bazaars and are taken in the treasury at the value of 12 Annas 16 Gundas Sicca or 25 per cent discount and one description of them called the Jhar Chulaun at 13 Annas 4 Gundas or 21.14 Annas percent discount." Referring to the "extreme baseness" of the Narayani, Bogle maintained "that of every hundred rupees collected in the interior about 20 are rejected at the treasury and being returned on the Malgoozar [revenue farmers] or Ryots gives rise to endless confusion[,] for it is impossible then to discover who gave the bad ones, and the only remedy is to make up the loss by a proportionate levy from the whole." The Chaudhuris in fact collected 4 annas batta on each rupee, "taking upon himself the responsibility of bad coin." Bogle's plan was more complicated than Jenkins's:

I beg to propose that the assessment be at once calculated in Furruckabad Rupees and that for one year Narainee Rupees be taken at the rate of 1.4 for each Furruckabad or 25 percent discount, the current difference between them being about 2 annas. It must follow that provident persons will purchase the new rupee in the bazaar at that discount as by so doing they will save 2 annas in their payments of revenue and bearing in mind the loss they have always sustained by bad Narainees or by the batta, paid the Chowdrees which too often failed too procure them the release stipulated for it will be seen that although the increase of assessment appears in figures to be 25 percent yet the demand on the people of the country will not, as long as Narainees are plentiful, be felt as any augmentation at all, and by the greater safeguards against exaction which may from the introduction of sound currency be established with efficiency they will in the long run be gainers. The direct increase to the Government from being paid in the new coin will however be 32 per cent after one year it may be proper only to receive Narainees at a discount of 32 per cent, or at their intrinsic value, but were we to increase the rates of taxation to Furrackabad Rupees and only receive Narainee at the above discount it might cause vexation. What the Government will lose by receiving Narainees at 25 per cent discount they gain by increase of rent.\(^{200}\)

Bogle's proposal that the Narainee Rupees should be received at the treasury at 25 per cent discount instead of 32 per cent (as directed by the Accountant General) was supported by Jenkins. "[T]he Sicca Rupees being usually at a depredation in this country if the

\(^{200}\) A. Bogle, Collector, to F. Jenkins, the Agent to the Governor General in the North Eastern Frontier, dated 21 June 1834, in Foreign Department (Political), 10 July 1834, Nos. 216-217 [NAI]
Government do [sic] not consent to receive the Narrainee Rupees at a premium that will draw this coin to the treasury instead of its passing into the hands of the merchants to purchase Sicca Rupees to be again recirculated for produce, I fear we shall not get rid of this bad coinage for many years.”

The Calcutta authorities however strongly disagreed with the proposal of Bogle and pointed out that the “purchase” of the Narayani Rupees “at more than they are worth” could be attended with a degree of loss to the Government which it was not prepared to undertake. Particularly, said Fort William, “it by no means follows that the same persons would gain by the sale of Narrainees who would lose by having to pay their revenue in Furruckabads.” In fact,

if it be intended that the holders of existing engagements should be required to pay an equal number of Furruckabad Rupees for the Narrainee Rupees expressed in their agreements which seem to be implied by the use of the term “at once,” this would amount to a virtual breach of faith which the Hon’ble the Vice President in Council could not for a moment sanction. Even with respect to engagements hereafter to be formed, it would not be proper to lay it down as an invariable rule to demand an equal number of Furruckabad Rupees for the same number of Narrainee Rupees hitherto paid, since this proceeding would involve a demand for an increase of assessment the propriety of which must depend upon circumstances quite independent of the change in the description of coin used to express the value of the Government revenue.

Therefore, the Calcutta authorities directed Jenkins to receive the Narayanis at the different treasuries in exchange for the Furruckabads “at their intrinsic value as per mint assay.” While it was agreed that all future engagements for the payment of revenue shall be formed in Furruckabad Rupees, Jenkins was directed to base his calculations as per the mint tables. It was also resolved in principle “that after a certain date, to be fixed hereafter, none but Furruckabad Rupees shall be received in payment of revenue,” and “that all the establishments throughout the province shall be paid in Furruckabad Rupees … according to their intrinsic value as compared with Narrainees.”

Jenkins, however, tried once more in August to convince his superiors of the worth of Bogle’s proposal saying that otherwise “the absorption of the old coinage will … be very

201 F. Jenkins, the Agent to the Governor General in the North Eastern Frontier, to C. Trevelyan, Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, Political Department, dated Gowhatty, 26 June 1834, in ibid.
202 C. Trevelyan, Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, Political Department, to F. Jenkins, the Agent to the Governor General in the North Eastern Frontier, dated Fort William, 10 July 1834, in Foreign Department (Political), 10 July 1834, Nos. 216-217[NAI]
tedious and that in the mean time the Province will be subjected to much inconvenience from the numerous coins current together. I fear also that the Narrainee Rupees shall be no longer received at the Government treasuries, the holders of this coin must suffer severely, and that cannot happen without loss to the state or compelling the Government to extend the term for the receipt of Narrainee Rupees indefinitely.” He also pointed out that the term of the annual settlements with the ryots was almost over, and the Government was at liberty to revise the conditions. “The assessments that the ryots will have to pay under the new settlements will in fact be only in a slight degree greater than what they have hitherto paid their Chowdries, or subordinate officers of collection. In this letter Jenkins once again insisted on forcing the [Koch] Bihar Maharaja to stop issuing the Narayani Rupees. 203 However, the Accountant General recognized that the strength of the Narayani did not come so much from the sovereign claims of the Maharaja as from the other unlocatable mints. “[T]he speedy introduction of the new Furruckabad currency must, in a great measure, depend upon the extinction of the private mints, … it being clearly apparent that, so long as both the Rajmohree and Narayanee currencies circulate without restriction, and are in course of coinage, it will be impossible to displace them wholly; while on the other hand, a prohibition against the receipt of these rupees at the public treasuries before the country is well supplied with the new currency, would have the effect of distressing the agriculturalists, by depreciating the prices of their produce, and of subjecting them to a system of extortion in the shape of premium which would be levied by money changes in exchanging the old for the new currency.” 204 But the exact modalities of control were still to be decided. Even in 1835, Jenkins was still considering the different “means of suppressing the private coinage from which in that part of the country the circulation appears chiefly to be supplied.” He finally settled in favor of “introducing the Furruckabad Rupee which would probably supersede with great facility a coinage so debased as the greater part of that used in Upper Assam seems to be.” 205

Elsewhere Jenkins noted, “the Furrackabad Rupees in this quarter have a very limited circulation and are confined in all sides by Sicca currency.” He suggested that the

203 F. Jenkins, the Agent to the Governor General in the North Eastern Frontier, to C. Trevelyan, Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, Political Department, dated Gowhattiy, 2 August 1834, in Foreign Department (P. C.), 21 August 1834, Nos. 56-57 [NAI]
204 Accountant General to the Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, Political Department, dated 11 September 1834, in Foreign Department (Political), 18 September 1834, Nos. 29-30 [NAI]
205 India Political Despatch from the Court of Directors, 12 April 1835, No. 44 [NAI]
Government should simultaneously undertake the introduction of the Funuckabads in Manipur, Cachar, Arakan and even "the three ultra-Gangetic districts of Chittagong, Comillah and Sylhet." However, as the Accountant General clarified, the Government was scarcely prepared for such a large-scale overhaul. But Morley heartily endorsed Jenkins's plan to bring pressure on the [Koch] Bihar Maharaja. During 1834-5, formal and informal ways of pressurizing the Maharaja were explored, and despite strong protests from the [Koch] Bihar court, the Maharaja was formally forbidden to mint coin for popular use. "The Rajah of Cooch Behar having no claim to sovereign power, or independence, could not justly expect his territory to be made an exception from the general regulation respecting the currency." Earlier in 1834 Jenkins had observed that "Gowalpara being the principal mart of Assam, and the Narainee rupees being the currency of the neighbouring countries, in this coin all mercantile transactions of that part of my jurisdiction are made, and it must unless replaced there continue to issue over all Assam." In persuading the Government to derecognize the Narayanis, now Jenkins was able to effectively disengage the circulation networks of western Assam from those of the sub-Himalayan belt and recombine them with the series of commodity exchange focused on Calcutta.

Perhaps, a brief allusion to the corresponding calendrical reforms would not be entirely out of place. As the Political Agent of the Bhutan Duars explained in 1865, "One cause of much confusion has been the era in use. At present according to the Bhootes' Era it is Saka 356."

The era is supposed to be the same as the Cooch Behar Saka; but this corresponds with the Bengalee year, commencing sometime later on 1st Boisakh. Again in different Dooars another reckoning prevails, in some the year is held to commence with Aghun viz., middle of November, in other with Poos or middle of December. The truth is, I believe, that there is an historical year and one for revenue purposes, which later begins when the Revenue

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206 F. Jenkins, the Agent to the Governor General in the North Eastern Frontier, to C. Morley, Accountant General dated Gowhaty, 8 October 1834, in Foreign Department (Political), 30 October 1834, Nos. 35-37 [NAI].
207 C. Morley, Accountant General to C. E. Trevelyan, Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, Political Department, dated Fort William, 23 October 1834, in Foreign Department (Political), 30 October 1834, Nos. 35-37 [NAI].
208 Amanatulla Ahmed Khan Chowdhuri, kocbihārer itihās, vol I (Coch Behar: The Sate Press, 1936) provides an impassioned account.
209 India Political Despatch to the Court of Directors, 9 August, No. 17, 1837 [NAI].
210 F. Jenkins, the Agent to the Governor General in the North Eastern Frontier, to C. Trevelyan, Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, Political Department, dated Gowhaty, 31 May 1834, in Foreign Department (Political), 19 June 1834, Nos. 94-95 [NAI].

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Improvement
Authorities by custom or from caprice, choose to open the business of the New Year and celebrate the Pooney, as it is here called, or commencement of the revenue year.”

On 30 August 1865 it was ordered to “assimilate” the different prevailing eras into the standardized “Bengali calendar.”211 The eight-day weeks of the northern Khasis and the four-day weeks of the southern Khasis were also “abolished.”212 No doubt, the “confusing” local eras and the “spurious” Narayanis continued for some time. Why else would an 1843 Treaty with the Khamtis dub “counterfeiting coin” as a “heinous crime” and class it together with “theft, murder, dacoity, grievous hurt,” which ought to “be duly reported to the Political Agent” (and could not be disposed of by the community Chiefs)?213 As A. G. Hopkins has noted in another context, the “monetary jingoism” of the early nineteenth-century British policy was gradually replaced by a mid-Victorian placidity to live with different currencies.214 Morley had already predicted the indispensability of the “cowries.” The majority of the population had little or no use for large denominations of money in commercial transactions, and even the lowest denominations of the Furruckabads represented values too high to be useful for their everyday retail transactions.215 When the Government demanded a fine in money from the Mozungjami Nagas in 1909, the chief of the Nagas was reported to have replied: “We have no coins. We hear the Sirkar makes coins. If they are short, let them make some more”216 But with the gradual expansion of the land-tax terrain, the fiction of fiscal homogeneity came to be increasingly resolved into everyday facts.

211 From the Political Agent to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, No. 865, Dated 12 June 1865, in “Revenue Administration of Western Dooars”, File No. 385 BG, Sl. No. 1-39 (1867-69) [ASA]
212 For details, see P. R. T. Gurdon, “Note on the Khasis, Syntengs, and allied tribes, inhabiting the Khasi and Jaintia Hills District in Assam” Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, LXXIII: 3 (1904), 68-9
213 The full Text of the Khampti Treaty of 2 December 1843 is available in “Assam and Cachar India Rubber Trade”, Foreign Department, Revenue-A, July 1872, Nos. 13-26 [NAI]. See also Aitchison (ed.), Collection of Treaties, vol. II, 253-4
215 The late nineteenth-century reports typically deplored “the tendency of half-civilized tribes to take back with them coins instead of merchandize.” Annual Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year 1878-79 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1879), 5
216 Quoted in Reid, Robert. History of the Frontier Areas bordering on Assam, from 1883 to 1941 (Shillong: Assam Government Press, 1942), 143