The relation between Adam White and Francis Jenkins had never been smooth. But the major disagreement in matters of policy emerged in the late eighteen thirties when the Agent to the Governor General overruled the Political Agent's suggestion to drive back the "wild hill tribes" beyond the boundaries of Assam proper. Jenkins had always believed in the power of plows: cultivation was equally useful for savage minds and virgin soils. The London authorities found such view "exceedingly judicious."

We entirely agree with Captain Jenkins as to the desirableness of encouraging (instead of repressing as proposed by Major White) the inclination of the wild hill tribes to descend to the plains and become cultivators of land under your Government.¹

The matters went so far that the Governor General's council ultimately "expressed its regret that the views of Captain Jenkins reasonable and sensible as they always appeared almost so seldom receive the support of Major White." However, said they, "as it was to be presumed that the continual difference of opinion on the part of the latter officer was conscientiously felt, we abstained for the present from any more than expressing our concern at the want of

¹ India Political Department, 9 August 1837, No. 17, E/4/752, No. XIII [OIOC]
concurrence between them." White replied in a slightly sarcastic manner, admitting that he had differed with Jenkins "on serious grounds" for "4 or 5 times."

But if I have erred in that respect I trust that the Governor General in Council will make allowance for the circumstances in which I have been placed, having been seven years longer in Assam than Captain Jenkins I may have judged perhaps erroneously that Government would expect the servants of that experience to be given. This longer residence doubtless has rendered my view and opinions somewhat different from that of the Agent [of the] Governor General and I hope may account for the discrepancy in question unalloyed by my other motive.  

But the experienced Scott loyalist did not have enough time to attune himself to the tenor of the Jenkins regime. Within three months of writing this reply, on a cold January day in Sadiya, Adam White woke up in his bed at two in the morning to find himself surrounded by an armed band of Khamti warriors who had broken into the European barrack. The British cantonment was burnt, eighty sepoys were killed, and the Political Agent was killed too. Although Hannay's Assam Light Infantry raided and burnt the Khamti villages in vengeance, it took long time before the Europeans could again feel safe in Sadiya. The army cantonment was permanently shifted to Saikhowa, on the opposite bank of the Brahmaputra. The quarters were abandoned, the missionaries left, and the trading posts disappeared: the whole place, as an American missionary later recounted, "was left to the tigers and jackals" Under Jenkins' order, "[t]he Hkamti element was largely deported far down country, where eventually they settled and became good agriculturalists."

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3 A. White to Secretary to Government of India, Fort William, dated 24 October 1838, in Extract Fort William Political Consultations of 8 November 1838, No. 49, in ibid.  
4 Simultaneous appearance at Muttock of a number of the Singphos and rumors of an impending Burmese invasion considerably worried the British. Reinforcements were hurried up from Jorhat. Strength of both the Assam Light Infantry and the Sebundy Corps of Lower Assam was increased. At Jaypur, a third local corps, the (Second) Upper Assam Sebundy was raised and Hannay's Doaneah Militia was absorbed into it.  
5 Mrs. A. K. Gurney, 'History of the Sibsagar Field', The Assam Mission of the American Baptist Missionary Union: Papers and Discussions of the Jubilee Conference (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1887), 21. "In 1855, Mr. Whiting visited Sadiya and thus wrote:- 'The houses have mostly disappeared and the very streets and walls have sunk to a level with the land, and have become overgrown with jungle.'"  
6 Shakespear, History of Upper Assam, 67. When Chowbila Kuptan Gohain, one of the Khamti chiefs held responsible for the 1839 attack against the Sadiya cantonment, was pardoned under "a general amnesty" in 1843, he and his subordinates were asked to move out of "the village of Woojan Mishmie" after the harvest and settle in the southern lands "towards Sonpore or Nordehing" given to them by the Government rent-free for a period of five years. On the expiry of that date, the Khamtis were bound to be brought under "assessment of revenue or house-tax." "[W]e bind ourselves to discharge such liabilities without demur", said the prompted declaration, "and observe all rules that may be passed in regard to the abkaree
logics of empire, the death of White confirmed Jenkins’s trust in the superiority of his own policy: cultivation was the key to peaceable subjects.

“Until the hill tribes resort to industrious pursuits there can be no security for their recurring plunder,” observed the Court of Directors in 1843, “and we are highly gratified by the statement of Major Jenkins that the same course, that of settling villagers in the plains has lately been also followed by the Duflahs, who have come down in great numbers to settle along ‘the frontiers.’” Jenkins had just reported with much pleasure that “the long frontier from Durrung to the Mishmee Hills has been undisturbed during the whole of the past season, the Daflahs, Meerees, and Mishmees all peaceably settling and trading along the frontier. A large party of the last named, 40 or 50, even came down as far as Debrooghur to traffic just after I left the station. I have equal pleasure in reporting that the Eastern and Southern frontiers have likewise enjoyed during the past season the same exemption from any violent aggression.” Before a month could pass, however, Jenkins had to wake up from the sweet dreams of the “peaceable savage” by the terrible news of a Singpho insurgency in Ningru.

It Never Arrived

In 1843 it certainly came as “a matter of great surprise and regret” to Jenkins as he learned that “all the Singpho chiefs within our border have been privy to the recent invasion, including both the Beesa Gaum and Ningroola.” Only a few months ago, as we just mentioned, he had reported to the higher authorities that “[s]everal of these rude [Singpho] tribes are now engaged as blacksmiths by the European settlers, and all are taking quietly to the cultivation of these fields, whilst Ningroola himself who, has just returned from

arrangements.” Full Text of the treaty of 2 December 1843 is available as an appendix to the letter from Col. H. Hopkinson, Commissioner of Assam and Agent to Governor-General, North-East Frontier to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department. No. 121, Gowahatty, 22 April 1872, in “Assam and Cachar India Rubber Trade”, Foreign Department (Revenue-A), July 1872, Nos. 13-26 [NAI]. Michell, Report, 138, however, says that In 1844 they “reoccupied” their villages.

7 Quoted in Political Letter from the Court of Directors, 21 April 1843, No. 9 [NAI]

8 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, 30 January 1843, in Foreign Department (F. C.), 22 February 1843, Nos. 160-5 [NAI] The British posts at Bisa, Ningru and Kugu were attacked and taken over in January. “The Jemadar and Havildar were tied up to a tree and cut to pieces and nine of the sepoys were sold as slaves, some in Hukong, others to Bor Khamti.” Michell, Report, 150-1

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Hookong with 210 Assamese men, women and children whom he is settling round his village for the purpose of cultivating the fine tea plantation in its vicinity. Bisa, as the reader may remember, was considered a favored settlement, and the chief of Ningru (Ningru-la) was not only trusted to be “the means of drawing over to our side many of his countrymen and the Assamese held in bondage in Ava … to [eventually] establish them as peaceable settlers in the rich Tea districts on the Booree Dehing”; he was also the much-advertised first “native” maker of tea. In the 1841 General Meeting of the Assam Company it was said

> The price that his Tea fetched, will no doubt so well satisfy him, that he will probably be induced greatly to increase his cultivation, and a reasonable hope may be entertained, that he and other Singphos similarly situated, may eventually become valuable auxiliaries to the objects of our Company.

And yet, as a dispirited Jenkins came to learn, money earned in tea meant less than the lands lost for tea. “With respect to lands, these from Namsang Mookh, Noa Dehing Mookh and to the Patkai, Gulling Hills are the Singpho lands,” wrote the chief of Bisa, “but you of the Company have forgotten what was said by Scott Sahib and Neufville Sahib and after this the Major Sahib (the late Col. White) said the land is yours.” Brodie, the acting Political Agent of Upper Assam, wrote back to the chief stating that there was no record in the Agent’s office of Scott or Neufville having ever granted any land to the Singphos. He pointed out that in the text of the Agreement there is a mention of the Singphos’ exemption from taxation, but “nothing is said about lands.” In other words, the British claimed to have every right to tax the non-Singpho cultivators who settled in the territory defined by the Bisa chief.

In a significant footnote, Brodie pointed out that “[o]ut of four considerable villages

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9 Quoted in Political Letter from the Court of Directors, 21 April 1843, No. 9 [NAI]
10 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 Gawahatty, 30 January 1843, in Foreign Department (F. C.), 22 February 1843, Nos. 160-5 [NAI]
11 An 1841 advertisement of the “novel and interesting sale of ASSAM TEAS” has been reproduced in George Watt, A Dictionary of the Economic Products of India, vol. 6, part 3 (London; W. H. Allen, 1892), 437. The text says, “these Teas were manufactured by the Singpho chief, Ningroolla, of the Province (aided by the Government establishment) with the greatest possible care.”
13 “Translation of Beesa Gaum’s Letter”, Appendix-F, in Foreign Department (F. C.), 12 August 1843, 90-106 [NAI]
between the Ningroo and Namsang Mookh there were only six families of Singphos, all the others being either Assamese or Phakeals." Exemption from taxation was construed by the British as a concession to the savage "races" and not as a token of any proprietary rights. The Bisa chief thought otherwise, and replied that even if the written order was not on hand, there were government servants from the plains who could bear witness to the validity of his claims. No peruanah was given[,] but on the Beesa's asking it, the country was given; and when Ningroola asked for lands, he was told he would receive them from the Beesa for at that time, I was proprietor, as far as Dehing Mookh. Now wherever you find tea, you make a tea garden. If it is to be so, there will be no room for the 12 gaums to remain and if you do not allow the Singphos to remain, I can say nothing.

The observation "wherever you find tea, you make a tea garden" had something of the intensity of a slogan and much of the pain of the recent dispossessions at Koojoo and Jogundoo. The chief of Koojoo was displaced as he was suspected to have aided the insurgent Khamtis at Sadiya in 1839. The Jogundoo chief was accused of having sent "a party of armed men into Muttock to steal cattle", and consequently pushed "higher up the Dehing." A European tea-planter, W. F. Bonynge, moved into the cleansed place to occupy the "tea barrees". Much of the violence of the 1842-3 Singpho rising was directed against Bonynge's property—a proof, said Vetch, "of their dislike to settlers in that quarter."

Brodie's report, however, made it amply clear that the Singpho elite were not adverse to settlers in what they considered their land. More than enjoying the legal rights of exemption from British land revenue demand as an ethnic group, they were interested in defending their customary rights as territorial overlords over the crops produced within that territory. "But there never was any defined tract of country made over to the Singphos, either by us or the Assamese Government", Jenkins insisted.

14 J. Brodie, Officiating Political Agent, Upper Assam, to Beesa Gaum, dated 15 June 1842, in ibid.
15 In one letter the chief exclaimed that "from where can I give the written authority you require; if I have not received the written order how can I send it?" In another he claimed, "[t]he order I formerly received was burnt in the Duffa's inroad". See Appendixes G and H in ibid.
16 "Translation of Beesa Gaum’s Letter in Reply", Appendix-G, in ibid.
17 The fear that Singphos and the Khamtis might combine against the British "as they did in 1790, 1810, 1830, and 1840" was alive at least till 1887. Cf. C. R. Macgregor, Military Report on the Kampti-Singpho Countries (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1887), 2
18 H. Vetch, Political Agent, Upper Assam, to F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General on the North-Eastern Frontier, dated Debrooghr, 20 April 1843, in Foreign Department (F. C.), 12 August 1843, 90-106 [NAI] Subsequent references to Bonynge are available in Revenue Proceedings, 28 November 1848, Nos. 85-85 [WBSA]
The only agreement with them was that their lands were to be exempt from taxation on their surrendering their Assamese slaves and having in quiet obedience to our orders; the exemption from taxation did not even extend to lands cultivated by refugee Assamese. But we have never enforced the right we had to tax the lands cultivated by the Assamese living amongst them. Nor since the death of Captain Neufville has there ever been any demand for the liberation of any Assamese detained amongst them as slaves; though they have constantly intercepted and detained for a time Assamese families returning from Ava. It was impossible however for the Singphos to prevent the occasional escape of the Doanneahs.

It is difficult to determine from this extract whether Jenkins implied an identity of the "Assamese slaves" and the "refugee Assamese", of the "Assamese living amongst them" and the "Assamese detained amongst them as slaves", because the word "slavery", particularly in the contexts of the Singphos, concealed more than it expressed. The "desertion of their Doanneah slaves", however, was depicted as the actual "great grievance" of the Singpho chiefs, although none of the numerous depositions, field reports or memorials mentioned the issue. Indeed, Jenkins worked hard, and successfully, to shift the focus of official discussion from the loss of lands to the abolition of slavery.

From Brodie's report and the chiefs' letters, the Government of India had initially recognized the loss of lands as the major cause of the 1843 uprising. The distant authorities were even ready to declare that the "right of taxing to Government dues Assam:es u:lantar1:y rsident arnng the S~, which had never been enforced, was to be definitely given up." But Jenkins strongly objected to the suggestion asserting "that the loss of lands had nothing to do with it." It was, according to him, a pure and simple case of primitive reaction against the enlightened abolition of slavery. The great tea enthusiast played his card well. The zealous abolitionists in London could not imagine themselves ending up as defenders of a barbaric system. In his final report, which was adequately self-gratifying to convince a hesitant Court of Directors, Jenkins concluded that there was no question of backtracking on the issue of abolition. In fact the loss of the slaves would soon compel the Singphos "to settle down and

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19 F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General on the North-Eastern Frontier, to Davidson, the Officiating Secretary to the Government of India, Home and Foreign Department, dated Gowahatty, 31 May 1843, in ibid.
20 It is interesting to see the discomfort of the veteran bureaucrat Alexander Mackenzie regarding Jenkins' sleight of hand. See Mackenzie, History of Relations of Government with Hill Tribes, 70-1. Emphasis added.

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engage personally in cultivation as many of them had already done”, and only then, said he, “we could assign them definite land or limits.”

The amazing overwriting of the issue of territoriality and proprietorship with a question of slavery and wage labor served a crucial purpose for the tea industry. As Jenkins clearly calculated:

No encouragement has been held out by us to the slaves to desert, but … the high pay they can command for their labour at the Assam Company’s Tea Plantations is a great additional inducement to elope; for a short period of service enables them to save sufficient money to set themselves up comfortably as Ryots.

We shall shortly discuss the claims of “no encouragement”, but two things need to be said before that. One, by refusing to acknowledge the existence of the land question, the local administration was able to stay away from engaging the thorny issue of “savage proprietorship.” Infringement could continue, depending upon the pace of capital and the state of the surveys, without obliging the Government to remain respectful to a clear legal boundary. Moreover, as the territorial claims of the “savages” were not recognized, it became easier to radically ethnicize their identity which, cut loose from a habitat, was reduced to a lineage. Two, if the attempt to convert the “slaves” into “wage laborers” was a direct gift to the tea industry suffering from terrible labor shortage in the eighteen forties (and early fifties), the hope of adding numbers to the “ryots” was equally pleasing to the Government. In order to illustrate both these points we need to trouble the category of the “Doanneah slaves.”

Duarnia was a colloquial term to convey a sense of mixed parentage. Although it usually occurs in the official usage as the name for a fixed, separate ethnic unit, there is reason to suspect that in the prevailing culture of belonging, it was usually thought of as a more transient and intermediate status. Kunndooah Dowanneah, a witness of the 1842-3 insurgency, introduced himself to the Political Agent as “by caste Chooteah, now Dowanneah, resident of Iowrah.” Similarly, Komash alias Patooah defined himself as “by caste a Chacharree now a Singphoe Dwanneeh” and Lasah Doanneah himself as “by caste

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21 Foreign Department (F. C.), 23 March 1844, 89-91 [NAI]
22 F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General on the North-Eastern Frontier, to Davidson, the Officiating Secretary to the Government of India, Home and Foreign Department, dated Gowahatty, 31 May 1843, in Foreign Department (F. C.), 12 August 1843, 90-106 [NAI]
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Ahom and a resident of Sudyeiah, belonging to the Seering Mele (clan) now living at Doaneelah Gram, near Jeypore. Koongah Dowaneeah was the son of Gumbheer Sykeah, a peasant from the plains who had settled among the Singphos. Palon Dowanneah was a little more articulate:

I don't know my father's name. I am about 32 years old, an Ahom by caste, and live at present in Jogram near Jeypoor. I belong to the Khel Moran. The Singphos carried off my father to Hokong where I was born. Last year Ningroola brought me down from Hokong.24 A Duaria male, it seems, did not cease to become an Ahom or a Kachari, and neither did he necessarily lose his khol or mde identity. Added to this is the explicit assertion of John Neufville, the army officer who was in closest touch with the Singpho chiefs in the late eighteen twenties, to the effect that the Singphos “make no distinction between the children born to them of Assamese or foreign mothers, and those of the pure Sinh-~.”

A Duaria was, if we can borrow an expression from the African histories, an “acquired outsider” who had to gradually work out his “attachment to a kin group, to a patron, to a power — an attachment that occurred within a well-defined hierarchical framework ... if he was to reduce his initial marginality.”26 Taking prisoners was certainly a major form of acquiring non-Singpho workforce (and, in long term, clan expansion), but providing protection to the willing settlers was an equally important form too.27 Choosing to understand every non-Singpho working for and under the authority of the Singpho chiefs as a “slave”, the British authorities refused to attend to the complex process of subordination and absorption among the Singphos.28

24 "Abstracts of Examination and Depositions (of which the Bengali copies are appended) having reference to the persons engaged in the cause of the Frontier Disturbances", Appendix-L, in ibid. Emphasis added.
27 In 1833, Adam White took the deposition of 116 “Assamese” who left the Singpho country and found “that only 6 state that they were forcibly detained by the Singphos.” Most others insisted that their mobility was “spontaneous” and “that no obstacle was opposed to their departure.” A. White, Political Agent, Upper Assam, to F. Jenkins, On Special Survey Duty, dated 6 May 1833, in Jenkins, Report on the North-East Frontier, Appendix-B (iii), 92
28 G. H. Green, The Tribes of Upper Burma North of 24° Latitude and their Classification (University of Cambridge: Unpublished Dissertation for Diploma in Anthropology, 1934) observes, “It is a pity that the word “slave” was ever used as a translation of the Chinghpaw word “mayam”, for the Hkahku slavery system is in no way comparable with all that is usually associated with that word.” Green discusses the “many grades” of the Singpho mayams, indicating the varieties of their origin and status. An extensive excerpt of this dissertation is published as “Appendix III: The Nature of Kachin ‘Slavery’” in E. R. Leach, Good Settlers, Bad Settlers 321
To the Singpho elite, according to Jenkins, the Duania "slaves" were "the most valuable property" because "all agricultural labour is performed by their slaves." Hannay, who was considered the best Singpho expert after the death of Neufville, similarly observed that for the Singphos staying "in the vicinity of low rice lands", possessing "Assamese slaves" was crucial as the latter cultivated "the wet crops" and were engaged in breaking up the soil "with the common plough of Assam, and buffaloes" – the tasks, one cannot fail to notice, of the ryts working under the supervision of the Chaudhuris and the Kheldars.

In June 1825, a wing of the 57th Native Infantry, headed by Neufville, had defeated a large Singpho force in an encounter at Bisa, "whose success was the means of liberating some 6,000 Assamese captives." The treaty of 3 May 1826 which followed this victory stipulated that the Singphos would "liberate" all their "Assamese slaves" collected from the neighboring plains. It is extremely important to note that this anti-slavery decree exactly coincided in time with the joint proclamation issued by Scott and Richards in Lower Assam notifying that "the right of the Assamese to a property in their slaves would be respected.

The Singpho slaveholder in the hills was the target of abolitionism in the new regime while the Assamese slaveholder in the plains was officially confirmed in his position. It is necessary to appreciate the manifold implications of this scission through which the connected histories of labor organization were disentangled in the early years of British rule.

Neufville observed in the eighteen twenties that "the Assamese lowlands, occupied by the Sinphos, is extremely fertile, consisting almost entirely of a surface of rich alluvial earth, on a
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It yielded two crops annually, and was “adapted in an admirable degree to rice cultivation, being well watered by numerous streams.” Neufville was also aware of the impact of “the assumption of their Asamese slaves” which, he hoped, would “reduce the Sinh-phos to the necessity of their own exertions”: If Neufville’s computation (“the slaves ... bore a proportion to their masters, of at least fifty to one”) was even approximately close to the situation, then the impact of “liberation” is easily understandable from Jenkins’ estimate that, between 1826 and 1837, “upwards of 10,000 slaves” were “released from the Singphos and Khamtis.” Neufville, like Jenkins after him, had “no doubt, but that seeing the necessity of submitting, they will settle into order and tranquility, and that, by a gradual amelioration in their habits and character, their descendants may become peaceable and valuable subjects.”

We have already identified the two possible forms of these “peaceable and valuable subjects”: wage workers in tea gardens and tax-paying ryots in settled fields. To the leaders of a community which primarily defined its male honor code in terms of the martial and captive-taking abilities of the members, and which, at least since the early eighteen twenties, clearly saw itself as the rightful lord of the lands adjacent to the Dihing, neither of the options seemed attractive. Cultivation was not unknown but was acknowledged as unsuited to the status of an elite group. The Singpho elite understood itself as a predominantly warrior group, which offered protection to the cultivators — either the “Goom Laos” from their own community or the “Assamese voluntarily resident” among them. Particularly “the present generation”, said Neufville in 1828, “seem very averse, never personally engaging in either pastoral or agricultural pursuits.”

But the Singpho chiefs were never recognized as the landlords, just as their subject-cultivators were never recognized as anything else but “slaves.” In fact, if these people were

34 Neufville, On Geography and Population, 343-4
35 Quoted in India. Political Department. 9 August, No. 17 of 1837, E/4/752, No. XIII [OIOC]
36 Neufville, On Geography and Population, 344
37 “When in their own country and before the plunder of Assam furnished them with slaves they appear to have cultivated their lands and carried on all other purposes of domestic life by means of a species of voluntary servitude entered into by the poorer and more destitute individuals of their own people who when reduced to want were in habits of selling themselves into bondage either temporary or for life to their chiefs or more prosperous neighbours. They sometimes resorted to this step in order to obtain wives or the daughters [sic] and in either case were incorporated with the family performing domestic and agricultural service but under no degradation. Singphos in this state of dependance [sic] were called Goom Lao.” Francis Jenkins, Private Journal, 1832, in Private Papers of Francis Jenkins, Mss Eur F 257/3 [OIOC]
38 Neufville, On Geography and Population, 343-4
not the masters of the territory, how would they be justified in appropriating the fruits of other people’s labor? Categories mattered. The elision of the land question had a considerable bearing on the processes of clan expansion. In drastically reducing the territorial scope of the Singpho jurisdiction and sharply insulating the non-Singpho and the yet-to-be-Singpho (Duania, that is) subordinates from the elite clans, the British authorities also effectively narrowed the semantic scope of the Singpho identity.

In 1848 Vetch reported that the vices of the elite were slowly softening into the virtue of labor.

I think there are decided indications of a more settled disposition among them than I have yet seen, and a tendency to apply themselves more to agriculture than formerly when they trusted almost entirely to their Assamese slaves for their field labour, and devoted themselves to forays and feuds, elephant hunting, idleness and opium...39

Twenty years later, the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur reported more emphatically that “[t]he Singphos have settled down to agriculture, and do now for themselves what formerly they depended on their Assamese slaves to do for them.” Indeed, there were now even ten or twelve Singphos “who have settled in the villages of Tegee and Koolie in the Megela mouzah of [Lakhimpur] district, who pay revenue, and are on precisely a similar footing as the other ryots of the mouzah.”40 However, as late as 1883, Michell was amazed to find that many of the Singphos

still ... despise any one who works [the fields] himself, and to such an extent do they carry this shameful idea that when we deprived the villagers of the Noa Dihing of their slaves many of these Singphos died of starvation and all fell into great poverty.41

“Emancipation of slaves” continued throughout the nineteenth century, because, as Jenkins astutely realized by 1850, “as long as any slaves remain to them, I fear they will never settle down quietly, either to agriculture or commerce.”42 The humiliated appearance of the wrecked Singpho elites in the labor market in the eighteen nineties was probably not

39 H. Vetch, Political Agent of Upper Assam, to F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General, North-Eastern Frontier, dated 3 January 1848, in “Report on Captain Vetch’s visit to the Abor tribes”, Foreign (Political/FC), 24 March 1848, 199-201 [NAI]
40 Quoted in Mackenzie, History of Relations of Government with Hill Tribes, 72
41 Michell, Report, 127-8
42 From the Agent to the Governor General in the North-Eastern Frontier to the Secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign Department, Guwahati, 23 March 1850, in Foreign (P.C.), 23 May 1850, Nos. 101-4 [NAI]
unrelated to the process of immiseration. By the turn of the century, a number of the Singphos found themselves irredeemably hypothecated to the kaya moneylenders. The Annual Reports on Frontier Tribes began to omit them, except for occasional references to their “idle ease” and opium-eating. They “continue on the down grade”, a twentieth-century Report summarized. Another entry was a little more elaborate: “The Singphos continued to deteriorate. They are opium eaters – lazy and unenterprising.”

While referring to the nature of the “elaborate and highly organized” system of “slavery” among the Singphos, the Agent to the Governor General had categorically assured the Calcutta authorities in 1873 that these people, though not as savage as some of the other groups in the frontier, were not as yet “in the actual stage [of history] at which possession of, and property in, land had arrived among them.” That was why, reasoned Hopkinson, the Singphos were so obsessively defensive about their “slaves.” We are told that by 1934 the Singphos were still continuing “to die out from the ultimate effects of opium and general inadequacy” while “[t]heir abandoned wet rice lands are being taken up by foreign settlers.” Next year’s Report reads: “Their old wet cultivations are gradually being taken up by foreign settlers, and they will not be long in disappearing from the Noa Dihing Valley, and being replaced by industrious people of another race.” Property in land, surely, never arrived among the Singphos.

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43 In 1895-6 The Singphos were employed to work on roads and carry stores from Sadiya to Ningrang Nong’s village for the Assam-Burma Connection Railway Survey Party. Catching elephants for the tea garden owners and the Government became a regular job of the Singphos residing beyond the Inner Line. See the Annual Reports upon Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office) for the years 1895-99. See also Notes in continuation of Michell’s Report, 42; 44 The 1913 Murder of a Kaya trader at Wakhet by Singphos was related to this issue. See also Annual Report on Frontier Tribes of Assam for the Year 1933-4 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1934), 5


46 Annual Report on Frontier Tribes of Assam for the Year 1935-6 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1936), 3

47 The Agent to the Governor-General, North-East Frontier, and Commissioner of Assam to Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Political Department, No. 154, Shillong, 30 April 1873, in ‘Massacre of Borlangee Nagas by Kamsinga Nagas”, Foreign Department, Political-A, July 1873, Nos. 469-507 [NAI]

48 Annual Report on Frontier Tribes of Assam for the Year 1933-4 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1934), 6

49 Annual Report on Frontier Tribes of Assam for the Year 1934-5 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1935), 4
In no way does the preceding section seek to idealize the self-image of the elite clans or to play down the hardship of the subjugated under the Singpho chiefs. Nonetheless, it seems very difficult to generalize, as the British officials did, the varying ways of subordination, control and absorption of "acquired outsiders" among different communities (indeed among different settlements) shut out by the Inner Line as "slavery". During the Chief Commissionership of Archdale Earle, the experienced bureaucrat B. C. Allen prepared a detailed note on the subject repeatedly insisting "that, though for want of a better term the word slave has been employed in this letter, in respect of those who run away from unadministered areas and enter British territory, it must not be thought that this word connotes anything more than a mild form of servitude."

The so-called slaves in the unadministered areas usually live in the house of the family for which they work, though occasionally they have separate houses of their own. Their clothing, food, house accommodation and general domestic equipment do not differ in any way from that of the ordinary hillman. They not infrequently possess private property which they obtain by trading during the months of the year when they are not required to work in the fields, or, in the case of women, by weaving cloths and rugs. A slave, in the event of all the males in his master's household dying, becomes the owner of his old master's property including his house. A master during his life time often sets up a slave in a separate house, finds him a wife, and gives him livestock and fields for his support, allowing him to live an independent life. It is true that slaves receive no actual cash wages, but money is exceedingly scarce in the hills, and is very little used by the hillmen in their ordinary transactions. The slaves live in the same style as other hillmen and fare as well as they do, and it might, therefore, not unreasonably be urged that the wages which they receive in kind are as good as any servant can expect in such a quarter of the world. Moreover, there seems to be good grounds for holding that in the immense majority of cases these so-called slaves remain with their masters of their own accord. No physical restrictions are placed upon their liberty and there is nothing to prevent them, if they wish to do so, from coming down and settling in the plains. In spite of this the number of slaves who actually leave their masters is very small.

Anxiously clarifying that all this "must be taken as an explanation and not as in any way a condonation of a system which the Chief Commissioner considers bad and which he will do everything in his power to discourage", Allen assured the authorities that at any rate the
“system” would not survive for long thanks to “the disintegrating influences which have been set up by the general policy of Government.”

Between 1843, the date of the Singpho insurgency, and 1916, when Allen prepared his note, a number of things had of course changed. But Jenkins’s overwriting of the question of Singpho territorial rights with the question of “slavery” among the Singphos remained somewhat paradigmatic for most of the nineteenth century. The calculated derecognition of the territorial rights of the chiefs implied that those chiefs had no legal right to appropriate the work of the cultivators working under their authority. Getting hold of the cultivators – what the official language characteristically dubbed as “emancipation” – was the first step towards bringing the official vision of settlement to fruition.

Settlement, as must be clear by now, was partly the frontier gloss for the increasingly influential principle of systematic colonization. The insistence of the expert discourse on the concentration of the cultivating population as opposed to the “hurtful dispersion” experienced in the American backwoods was taken up with much enthusiasm in different parts of the empire and worked out variedly. Partly, again, settlement was about “calming down”: forcing the acceptance of the “peaceful” ways of an idyllic peasant life on the “savages” – a function of the ideology of agriculture as discussed in Chapter Three. The emphasis on the import of the indentured workers for the tea industry from outside the province has so decisively shaped the prevailing wisdom of the Assam historiography that it pays almost no attention to the other and more protracted scheme of settlement targeted at the local “savages.” Before we proceed to address the connection between the two processes, it might be useful to return to the Khamti rebels of 1839, with whom we started this chapter.

By the end of the eighteen forties, the rebels were “settled” in both senses of the term. Spots were selected by the British officers to erect planned Khamti villages. As instantiated in an earlier footnote in this chapter, after an initial period of tax exemption, the paddy fields of these villages were brought under regular assessment. In 1849, Chowken Gohain, “a rajah of the most powerful of the Bor Khamptee clans”, wrote a letter to Hamilton Vetch, the new

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50 Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign and Political Department, No. 4902-P, 15 August 1916, in “Question of suppression of customs approximating to slavery in regions on the Assam frontier”, Foreign and Political Department, Secret – External Branch, April 1917, Nos. 63 – 64 [NAI]

Political Agent of Upper Assam, stating that he wished “to be allowed to remove into Assam from that country, with his people to the number of five or six hundred families.” Vetch surmised that the combined pressure of the Ava tax collectors and the Chinese militia was forcing the Khamtis to the Brahmaputra valley. “Last year I had a somewhat similar application from the Chief of the Choonglang Khamptees [,] a weak but rival clan.” Vetch, like White before him, was a little suspicious about this “tendency of the Khamptee tribes to remove with[in] Assam.” He wondered how far it is politic to encourage the location of any very considerable number of these enterprising and warlike people within our frontier, after the experience we have had of their rebellious disposition both under the Assam Government and our own, since they first located in the province and whether it is not better to leave the frontier waste, until the gradual increase of the Assam population extend itself rather than have it be inhabited by such restless tribes as the Khamptees and Singphoes and on whose allegiance little or no reliance can be placed.

Moreover, “in case of their coming,” said Vetch, it was “probable” that “the whole of the Assamese population in Bor Choolook up the Dehong would take the opportunity to escape from their Singpho masters and remove to Assam.” He feared that “a favorable reply” might give rise to unnecessary complications, which should preferably be avoided. Jenkins, however, upheld his former position “that any bodies of emigrants who may be desirous of settling within our frontier from political circumstances such as you advert to, should be well received, and assisted if necessary with advances for [foodgrain?] and present subsistence.” In sending detailed instructions to the Political Agent, Jenkins formulated a long-term policy: “the emigrants”, who were expected to keep together in bodies and occupy “positions on the frontier beyond our rent paying mehals”, were to be treated as the other “neighbouring chiefs.” They would be allowed to settle “all petty cases” amongst themselves, but they must refer the “heinous offences or quarrels with people of other clans” to the British courts.

Juridical policing of the ethnic boundary of a community, we argue, was a vital maneuver of the new regime – it corresponded to the new rule of revenue exemption. Just as exemption came to be seen as a favor to particular lineages rather than a corollary of territorial rights, the

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52 H. Vetch, Political Agent, Upper Assam to F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General on the North-Eastern Frontier, dated 20 March 1849, in Foreign Department (Political), 28 April 1849, Nos. 18-21 [NAI]
53 F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General on the North-Eastern Frontier, to H. Vetch, Political Agent, Upper Assam, dated 11 April 1849, in ibid, Emphasis added.
constriction of the hill elites' authority within their own lineage-groups was an additional step towards the derecognition of their rights as the masters of the territory. Like the Singphos, the Khamtis also had a large number of “the Assamese population” living amongst them: “the Khamptis were easily enabled to reduce the Assamese to a state of virtual and in many cases of actual slavery.” The protection networks were never exclusively “ethnic” groups. Among the settlers who accompanied Chowken Gohain to Assam, there were “ten or twelve families of another tribe of Khamtees the Mânhoo who have taken up lands near Debroogur and ten families of Singphoes who are locating themselves at Jazee near Saikwah.” But heartbroken with the Singphos, Jenkins was determined to find innate ethnic characteristics among his new favorites:

All the Khamtis are very superior to their neighbor tribe in civilization. They are an intelligent, educated and commercial people, intimately connected with all the great race of the Thaes (Shans) which extends uninterruptedly thence to Siam. Further down the Irrawaddy the population is chiefly of the same family, Shans, and with them also we should hold a free communication, but for the intervening clans of Singphos occupying and lying waste the Hookoom Province.

Convinced that only “through people of Shan race are we ever likely to extend a traffic with the Countries of the Eastward”, Jenkins told Vetch that “it is scarce possible, that the Assamese of your part of the valley can be pressed for room for the next two centuries.” The success of the Khamti “agriculturalists” in the Noa Dihing area presumably bolstered the Agent’s faith. The higher authorities approved his measure, and by the end of 1849, the Chowken Gohain had “brought down 18 houses in which are 96 souls who have commenced cultivating.” Lieutenant Holroyd, in charge of the negotiation, ensured the sanction of an advance of Rs 1000 to enable the Gohain to “get down the rest of his people”

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54 India. Political Department. 9 August, No. 17 of 1837, XIII, E/4/752 [OIOC]
55 F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General on the North-Eastern Frontier, to C. Allen, Officiating Secretary to the Government of India, dated Gowahatty, 27 May 1852, in Foreign Department (F. C.), 18 June 1852, Nos. 134-6 [NAI]. That the rebel Singpho chief Dupha Gaum had some of his most ardent followers among the Khamtis was a common knowledge in the official circle. India. Political Department. 9 August, No. 17 of 1837, XIII, E/4/752 [OIOC]
56 F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General on the North-Eastern Frontier, to C. Allen, Officiating Secretary to the Government of India, dated Gowahatty, 27 May 1852, in Foreign Department (F. C.), 18 June 1852, Nos. 134-6 [NAI]
57 F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General on the North-Eastern Frontier, to H. Vetch, Political Agent, Upper Assam, dated 11 April 1849, in ibid, Emphasis added.
to settle within the British jurisdiction. Next year, during his tour in Upper Assam, James Matthie reported that "the Khamptees are settling down in our territory in great numbers, and with a little encouragement I have no doubt their villages will annually greatly increase. They appear to get on very industriously and quietly, being on terms of friendship with each other, and at peace with all around them." A satisfied Jenkins informed the Calcutta authorities of the ways in which Chowken Gohain proved to be "useful ... to Government in controlling the Mishmees." The significance of this control became evident in the same year when shortage of funds stalled the Gohain's proposal to establish a village in Saikhowa with a government loan. Major Hannay, Captain Reid and Captain Smith – the most influential European officers of Upper Assam at that time – came forward to offer "themselves to Captain Vetch as security for the repayment of the loan required by the Gohain." A large village in Saikhowa under Chowken Gohain was thought "desirable ... in a political point of view." As a concerned Jenkins observed in his note, "now that a settlement has taken place it would be a matter of great regret that it should fail from want of proper and timely assistance."

I fear it is already too late to make advances for any cultivation this year, and I am therefore apprehensive that the village will be broken up, and the Mishmees and others who have been induced by the Gohain to settle in our lands, will of course return discontented to their hills and in all probability the control which we exercised over this clan through the Gohain's influence will be lost.

The officers' unusual concern did not go unperceived. In 1852, sixty to seventy families were stated to have left Bor Khamti owing to "the oppression of their Burmese rulers." Their connection with the Khamti settlement on the Dikrung in Lakhimpur encouraged them to

58 C. Holroyd, Junior Assistant, the Agent to the Governor General in the North-Eastern Frontier to J. Matthie, Deputy Commissioner of Assam, Dibrugarh, 5 February 1850, in Foreign (P.C.), 23 May 1850, Nos. 101-4 [NAI]
59 J. Matthie, Deputy Commissioner of Assam, to F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General on the North-Eastern Frontier, near Saikhowa Ghat on the Brahmaputra River, 8 March 1850, in Foreign (P.C.), 23 May 1850, Nos. 101-4 [NAI]
60 F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General on the North-Eastern Frontier, to F. J. Halliday, Officiating Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department, dated Gowhatty, 24 July 1850, in Foreign Department (P.C.), 9 August 1850, No. 151 [NAI]
61 F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General on the North-Eastern Frontier, to H. Vetch, Political Agent, Upper Assam, dated Gowhatty, 13 July 1850, in ibid
seek shelter in Assam. Three hundred settlers from Bor Khamti under the leadership of Chowsingthi Gohain were “allowed to settle on the Dirak river near Saikwah, receiving advances on the condition of being assessed in a few years.” In fact, in the same year when reports reached Guwahati that the Bor Moolook Singphos had captivated a number of “Moonlong Khampti emigrants” who were on their way to Assam, Dalton was immediately authorized to raise Khamti volunteers from the settled villages and move with a mixed force to release the prisoners. Although the Singphos released their “hostages” even before Dalton could gather his troops (taking, as was the custom, “a price of a passage through their country”), Dalton continued to insist that the Bor Moolook Singphos should still be punished as they had kept “a considerable number of Assamese families said to be detained as slaves.” He further reasoned that once the troublesome Singphos were removed from the scene, “great numbers of Khamptees would avail themselves of the opportunity of migrating unmolested to Assam.”

Even an unacquainted user of the English archive is bound to be struck by the contrastive treatment of the groups classed as Singphos and Khamtis: “two tribes [which] are apparently branches of the same family.” As the title of this chapter indicates, settlement was a matter involving calculations, differentiations and discriminations. Some arrivals were lovingly awaited, some others were not. Depots of provisions were maintained for the migrants from Bor Khamti at advanced points of the British Indian frontier; bodies of sepoys were moved to protect them on the final part of the way; loans were granted to raise and sustain settlements; even the high officials were ready to pledge their personal honor as security.

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62 E. J. Dalton, Principal Assistant to the Agent to the Governor-General on the North-Eastern Frontier, to F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General on the North-Eastern Frontier, dated Dibroogurh, 13 February 1852, in Foreign Department (F. C.), 5 March 1852, Nos. 145-6 [NAI]
63 Mitchell, Report, 138
64 E. J. Dalton, Political Agent, Upper Assam, to F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General on the North-Eastern Frontier, dated Dibroogurh, 22 May 1852, in Foreign Department (F. C.), 18 June 1852, Nos. 134-6 [NAI]
65 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]
66 F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General on the North-Eastern Frontier, to H. Vetch, Political Agent, Upper Assam, dated 11 April 1849, in Foreign Department (Political), 28 April 1849, Nos. 18-21 [NAI]
67 E. J. Dalton, Principal Assistant to the Agent to the Governor-General on the North-Eastern Frontier, to F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General on the North-Eastern Frontier, dated Dibroogurh, 17 October 1856, in Foreign Department (F. C.), 28 November 1856, Nos. 71-2 [NAI] mentions that 160 rupees were advanced to the Khamti settlers to buy cattle.
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Most importantly, it is amazing to notice how the issue of "slavery" among the Khamtis suddenly began to fade from the official documents since the eighteen fifties.\(^6^9\) The Singphos, on the other hand, appear to have borne the brunt of stigmatization, chastisement and retribution. They slowly emerge as the coarse and indolent slaveholders, as the irredeemable savages, as the unwilling workers. Before we move to probe the next level of the politics of stereotyping, it might be of help to follow the careers of the Khamti settlers a little more closely.

In 1852 Chowken Gohain was reported as a young head of "one of the wealthiest and most influential families" in Bor Khamti who was eventually told to settle with his followers at eight miles away from Dibrugarh. Although a group "refused to join him here and after a good deal of vacillation and delay, they decided ... on taking up lands near Saikwah", the Gohain retained his authority over two-thirds of his fellow travelers. Jenkins proposed to give "to each male capable of using them, a kodall [hoe] and a hatchet and in addition to allow them for each individual man, woman, and child at the rate of 1 rupee per mensem for the next three months." The land – classified as "heavy jungle land" – was to be treated rent-free for the first ten years after which the Khamtis were required to pay revenue at the normal rate of the ordinary rate. The amount of advance – fifteen hundred rupees in all – was to be repaid in five years although the idea of "a longer period of grace even to the unlimited 'sine die'" was not dismissed, "should it be found at the expiration of 5 years that their industry has deserved such encouragement." There was only one condition attached: nobody could leave the "site first chosen" without permission.\(^7^0\)

The object became clearer in 1853 when the Gohain was appointed by Dalton as the "chief of his intelligence establishment." Chowken was a major source of "information about all

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\(^6^8\) It was only upon their constant appeals that the London authorities sanctioned the policy of making advances to the Khamti settlers. Political Despatch from the Court of Directors, 6 October 1852, No. 30 [NAI]

\(^6^9\) In the wake of the 1839 Khamti revolt, "slavery" became the major focal point of official discussions regarding the Khamtis. Foreign Department (Political), 9 February 1836, Nos. 2-3; Foreign Department (Political), 3 April 1839, Nos. 116-8; Foreign Department (Political), 10 April 1839, Nos. 160-1; Foreign Department (Political), 10 July 1839, Nos. 61-2 [all in NAI]. No question regarding the structure of subordination among the community was seriously raised since the fifties, although occasional references made it amply clear that the community did not immediately become more egalitarian. Cf. H. Hopkinson, Agent to the Governor-General, North-East Frontier, and Commissioner of Assam to Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Political Department, No. 154, Shillong, 30 April 1873, in "Massacre of Borlangee Nagas by Kamsinga Nagas", Foreign Department, Political-A, July 1873, Nos. 469-507 [NAI]

\(^7^0\) F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General on the North-Eastern Frontier, to C. Allen, Officiating Secretary to the Government of India, dated Gowahatty, 27 May 1852, in Foreign Department (F. C.), 18 June 1852, Nos. 134-6 [NAI]
events of importance in the Mishmi country, and in that of the Shans and Singphos on the Tengapani, Noa Dihing, Kerimpani, &c." 71 In 1854, the Gohain supplied forty Khamti warriors to assist the small body of twenty sepoys led by Lieutenant Eden in attacking and capturing the rebel Mishmi chief Kaisha. 72 It will not be implausible to presume that he was also active in recruiting a hundred Khamti coolies for the anti-Abor expedition in 1858. 73 As a matter of fact, the same man was sent on a mission to Tibet in the late eighteen sixties. He marched some 170-180 miles from Sadiya along the course of the Brahmaputra and came back with much "valuable information relative to the route and the people of that portion of Thibet which nearest approaches Assam." 74 In the dual capacities of espionage centers and buffer villages between the "the more timid Assamese and Meeris" and "the Abors", 75 the Khamti settlements in the Lakhimpur frontier continued to provide crucial service to the military and civil authorities. By 1871, the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur could count five major Khamti villages on the north bank of the Brahmaputra and twelve on the south bank. Seven out of these nineteen villages enjoyed wholesome exemption while "the rest paid revenue, and [were] much on the same footing as the other ryots of the plains." 76 No officer now concerned himself about "Khamti slavery." The Khamti villages within the revenue line provided "the best class of ryots in the North Lakhimpur subdivision." 77 Even the villages outside were deemed more sociable, more civilized, and more scientific in spirit than the other savage settlements. Their help, as the journey of Macgregor and Woodthorpe

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71 Mitchell, Report, 138
72 The Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Judicial Department, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department, No. 1194, 21 June 1886, in "Mr. Needham’s report of his visit to the Zayul Valley of Eastern Tibet, and the grant to him of an honorarium of Rs 2,000 for his philological works", Foreign Department, Secret-E, February 1887, Nos. 451 – 462 [NAI]. John Evelyn Shuckburgh, North-Eastern Frontier of India: Tribal Territory North of Assam (Political & Secret Department, India Office, 3 December 1910. Confidential. B 180), 15 [OIOC]
73 Cf. Ibid
74 John Gregory, Deputy Commissioner, Lakhimpur to the Personal Assistant to the Commissioner of Assam, dated 8 September 1869, in “Account of Journey made by Chowsan Gohain, Khampti Chief to Tibet and the Description of Tribes bordering it”, File No. 652 AC, Sl. No. 1 (1869) [ASA]
75 "One set of these [Khamti] emigrants took up a position at my desire on the Dirgmoo River where they from [form?] a good outpost, assisting to protect the more timid Assamese and Meeris of the north bank of the Brahmaputra against exaction by the Abors." E. J. Dalton, Principal Assistant to the Agent to the Governor-General on the North-Eastern Frontier, to F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General on the North-Eastern Frontier, dated Dibroogurh, 17 October 1856, in Foreign Department (F. C.), 28 November 1856, Nos. 71-2 [NAI]
76 Quoted in Mackenzie, History of Relations of Government with Hill Tribes, 60n
77 Brown, Quoted in 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
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into Bor Khamti showed in 1885, was indispensable for the European explorers. Needham, the hero of the famous 1885-6 Rima expedition, went on record saying that he could not have entered Tibet without the help and company of Chowsa, a trusted Khamti chief residing outside the Inner Line.

According to Needham, Chowsa belonged to the family of “Rannah and Jow Gohains”, whose sons had established “a Khâmti colony near the Dora in 1841” under the supervision of Lieutenant Rowlett. Chowken Gohain’s “chiefship” had somewhat eclipsed the prominence of the family and they “subsequently moved to the southern side of the Brahmaputra, and nearer Sadiya, but Chowsa’s early days were spent in the colony near Doramukh among the Digars.” In Needham’s description, Chowsa was the archetype of the fearless, intelligent and forward-looking savage. On the Chief Commissioner’s recommendation, the Earl of Dufferin, the Governor General of India, sent the Khamti chief a “suitably inscribed” double barreled gun as a reward for his service to the cause of science and empire. The embarrassment came only a couple of years later, in 1888, when Needham received a complaint from Chowsa that one of his “slaves”, Ainyone, had run away with the master’s niece into the British jurisdiction. In a fitting irony of the imperial archive, the progressive savage unexpectedly revealed himself as an indefensible slaveholder. The authorities readily invoked the “prestige and position” of Chowsa Gohain to insist on the impossibility of allowing “a man socially much his inferior” to cause “a grave indignity” to the friendly chief. Suitable “punishment” was inflicted on Ainyone, and his fiancé was “restored to her people.”

78 Errol Gray, Diary of Journey to Bor Khamti country, 21
79 Needham and Molesworth marched 187 miles from Sadiya “by the route of the Brahmaputra” to neighborhoods of Rima but were prevented from moving any further. It was calculated that he entered some twenty-eight miles into Tibet without any armed escort. John Evelyn Shuckburgh, North-Eastern Frontier of India: Tribal Territory North of Assam (Political & Secret Department, India Office, 3 December 1910. Confidential. B 180), 15.
80 The Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Judicial Department, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department, No. 1194, 21 June 1886, in “Mr. Needham’s report of his visit to the Zayul Valley of Eastern Tibet, and the grant to him of an honorarium of Rs 2,000 for his philological works”, Foreign Department, Secret-E, February 1887, Nos. 451 – 462 [NAI]
81 Reid, History of the Frontier Areas, 186
82 “Since it was obviously desirable, as far as possible, to relieve the family [of Chowsa Gohain] from a disgrace which might give rise to difficulties hereafter, the Chief Commissioner approved a sanction made by the Assistant Political Officer at Sadiya, and supported by the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur, that endeavours should be made to persuade the girl to return to her people under such arrangements as would ensure her safety and good treatment in the event of her going back.” Notes in continuation of Michell’s Report, 41
It will be wrong to think that every deserter from the hills met with the same destiny. In fact, since the Khamti formula did not work with most of the other hill groups in the northern frontier, inciting the working population among these groups to desert their hill villages and settle in the British Indian plains as *rots* became a keystone of the nineteenth-century imperial policy. Throughout the century, the government consistently claimed that it followed “a strictly neutral course” regarding the escapees from the hills: “the local British authorities should abstain from aiding the recovery of slaves who has fled, or from placing any impediment in the way of those who might wish to return to their masters.” Jenkins, the brain behind the policy, acknowledged that it made little sense to the elite clans: “they will not be able to understand why we do not assist in their [subjects’] restoration. They will only perceive that we have the power to give up their slaves but will not exert it.” The concerned elite always considered it to have been their reasonable right as territorial overlords to claim back the fugitive subjects, a privilege which, needless to say, seemed most unacceptable to the British authorities. A local agreement with the Boomna Gaum forced the Singpho chiefs to affirm that “[w]e promise to liberate all whom we have kidnapped, and will cause others to do so who have similarly been taken prisoners and kept in confinement by the other Singphos, and let them go and live wherever they like.” But, at the same time, “we will not overlook the interests of the Company with regard to their subjects who may of their own accord come and reside with us.” The Company, in other words, retained the rights of claiming back its fugitive subjects, while the hill chiefs were legally bound to let go theirs. In the eighteen eighties, Needham faced strong allegations in an Abor village that the hill people always returned the runaway subjects of the British to the government authorities which the British never reciprocated. However, forcing “liberation” on all subject-cultivators of the elite hill groups – as was done by Neufville’s troops in 1825 – required a

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83 Political Despatch to the Court of Directors, Foreign Department, 6 June 1843, No. 14 [NAI]
84 F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General on the North-Eastern Frontier, to Davidson, the Officiating Secretary to the Government of India, Home and Foreign Department, dated Gowahatty, 31 May 1843, in Foreign Department (F. C.), 12 August 1843, 90-106 [NAI]. “The slaves were not to be assisted to run away, but no force was to be used to bring them back if they escaped.” Mackenzie, History of Relations of Government with Hill Tribes, 69.
85 Text of the Singpho Treaty, undated, in Col. H. Hopkinson, Commissioner of Assam and Agent to Governor-General, North-East Frontier to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department. No. 121, Gowahatty, 22 April 1872, in “Assam and Cachar India Rubber Trade”, Foreign Department, Revenue-A, July 1872, Nos. 13-26 [NAI]
86 Assistant Political Officer, Sadiya, to the Deputy Commissioner, Lakhimpur, date illegible, in “Report on the Abor Villages beyond the British Frontier”, Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner, Assam, Foreign Department, January 1885 [ASA]

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degree of access (and a minimum duration of sustained military presence) which the British barely attained in the frontier. The fear of running into a series of costly frontier wars did not allow the emancipationist fervor to be adequately stirred.

At the same time, the project could hardly be given up in a "labour-short, land-abundant Assam." The official documents pretend to forget that the "abundance" of land within Assam proper was maintained by forcible seizures, by steadily extending the revenue line, and that the continuing encroachments increased the desperation of the elite hill groups to exact additional work from their subjects. This was surely one vital part of the context of the desertions. Another part was the consequent deceleration of the pace of incorporation of the acquired outsiders. In discussing the inland "slave trade" among different communities in sub-Saharan Africa, a number of historians have claimed that "[i]n spite of the circulation of women and of slaves, social mechanism favored rapid integration into basic groups, while nonintegrated slaves were rapidly removed from social space by the slave trade." Although the archive which limits the operation of this dissertation does not contain detailed profiles of all the escapees from the Assam hills, there is reason to suspect that most of them could not be integrated into the "basic groups" with the previous ease. Only the "troublesome slaves", said Waddell in his discussion of the Ao Nagas, were sold to the communities living across the Dikhu. A substantial section of the case-histories preserved in the English archive relates to such affairs of love between the escapees which could not have been validated under the dominant marriage rules in the hills. More importantly, it would be

87 The time for direct occupation of the hills had to be limited every year "between the 1st November, when the rains have ceased, and the 1st March, when the rivers begin to flood, and sudden storms render the navigation dangerous." Frontier and Overseas Expeditions from India. Vol. 4. Compiled in the Intelligence Branch Division of the Chief of the Staff Army Headquarters India (Simla: Government Monotype Press, 1907), 159
88 Cf. Guha’s Planter-Raj to Swaraj, 206
90 L. A. Waddell, The Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley: A Contribution on their Physical Types and Affinities (1901; Delhi: Sanskaran, 1975), 28
91 Apart from the case of Ainyone and his fiancé, which we have already mentioned, the case of Lohabo and Tachi caused serious administrative problems. "Lohabo, who had lived for some years at Gaigaon, had enticed away and married Tachi, who was the wife of Deka, the headman of Pigerong, a Miripathar village. That Tachi should be enticed away and married by a slave naturally brought great shame on Deka and his family and they determined to avenge the result." Extract from the Annual Administration Report on the Balipara Frontier Tract for the year 1918-19, in Annual Report on the Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1918-19 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1919), 2. Again, the “Elopment of Tammu, Wife of Liti, with Jaru, a Chulikatta Mishmi” hit the headlines in 1893. Tammu’s maternal uncle—
interesting to know if the British derecognition of the hill chiefs’ customary rights over the work of the plains cultivators in turn enhanced the rapidity of circulation of the people seized in distant transfrontier areas, with whom the prevailing code of belongingness had little chance to work.

Lack of integration, in any case, was of little practical effect without the presence of the British in the vicinity. Juridical freedom could be “a meaningless and a dangerous autonomy” in the landscape of the frontier.° Severance of individuals from the available protection networks did not warrant a better and safer life. As an official tacitly recognized, only the gradual advance of the Inner Line—which steadily brought “the plains” closer to “the hills”—made the escape an easier option.

Formerly Singpho aghis and the wealthier Khamptis had slaves whom they purchased from Nagas, Mishmis, and also from the Khampti and Kachin traders from across the passes. Each year has brought these two tribes into closer touch with Assam proper, with the result that those slaves, who were tired of bondage, and desired release, escaped into British territory and no attempt was made to pursue or recapture them.°

The ruthless demonstration of the British military might of course weakened the claims of protection asserted by the elite hill clans. But even in the early twentieth century, the option of desertion was not without its troubles,

because if a slave has been sold, he will not better himself by returning home, where he is likely to starve, and if he has been captured, his own village is not likely to welcome him back, because he provides one of the causes of friction...

The alternative of becoming a wage worker in the valley under the authority of the British Government emerged only with the expansion of Assam proper. In order to avoid friction

"the only male relative she had living"—came to Sadiya and the runaway “slave” Jaru promised to pay him a bride price or gadhon. The difficulty of arranging a gadhon by a poor person, who could operate only with one hand, was further complicated by the untimely death of Tammu at Sadiya. See the correspondences in “Elopment of Tammu, Wife of Liti, with Jaru, a Chulikatta Mishmi”, Assam Secretariat, Foreign Proceedings-A, November 1893, Nos. 9-12 [ASA]. A “free Dafla woman” Aghani left the Lakhimpur hills with a “slave”, Sarji, to settle in Tezpur in 1891. Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Foreign Department (A), February 1891, File Nos. 51-55, [ASA] For a general comment of the issue of elopement of elite women with “slaves”, see G. A. Nevill, Political Officer, Western Section, North-East Frontier to the Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, dated Camp Halem, 11 May 1918, in "Raid by Daflas on certain villages in the Darrang District", Foreign and Political Department, External-A, August 1918, Nos. 1-16 [NAI];

° Kopytoff and Miers, African 'Slavery' as an Institution of Marginality, 17

° B. C. Allen, Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign and Political Department, No. 6888-P, 19 November 1914, in "Slavery amongst the Abors", Foreign and Political Department, Secret-E, December 1915, Nos. 17-20 [NAI] Emphasis added.
with the hill elites the British authorities decreed that the runaway was required to “work out his ransom” while staying within the British jurisdiction. The “ransom” was fixed by the local officer, and he would find the male deserter either some work “until his wages amount[ed] to the required sum” or a creditor from whom the deserter could borrow “the amount and [become] a bondman of his creditor.”  

Freedom, like peace and other abstract objects, had to meet the criterion of purchasability.

According to the official memory, this policy dated back to 1878 when “three slaves belonging to a Mishmi chief” were reported to have arrived in Assam proper and the Chief Commissioner Richard Keatinge “decided that the Refugees could not be delivered up to the Mishmis, as by having escaped into the British territory they had become ipso facto free.” The said Chief received an amount of Rs. 300 in lieu of his three fugitive subjects, with the warning “that this payment must not be considered as a precedent.” However, throughout the eighteen eighties this example was followed in several cases of Abor, Miri and Mishmi fugitives until in 1890 the Chief Commissioner J. D. Quinton explicitly directed F. J. Needham, the Assistant Political Officer at Sadiya, to “to persuade, and, if necessary, compel such slaves to purchase their freedom.” A more structured modality was developed in 1906 when the Lieutenant-Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam, J. Bampfylde Fuller, reiterated his old stand: “that [the] escaped slaves should earn something towards the provision of a ransom and to this end should be compelled to work.”

From now on, said the instructions, “[r]ansom should be paid by all runaway slaves whether demanded by their masters or not.” The Deputy Commissioner and the Assistant Political Officer at Sadiya were to jointly fix the amount of “ransom” as well as the period for payment. There was a proposal for creating a “fund” out of the amounts “realized as ransom and not claimed by masters.” From this fund, said the Lieutenant-Governor, payment could be made “in exceptional cases” in order to clear “long outstanding” amounts.

If the ransom is not forthcoming at the expiry of that period, or if substantial security for its payment is not given, the slaves should be sent to some place where they can earn their

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94 The female deserters reportedly “readily find a protector who is willing to pay the amount fixed.” Arthur Harold Walter Bentinck, quoted in Reid, *History of the Frontier Areas*, 235
97 B. C. Allen, Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign and Political Department, No. 6888-P, 19 November 1914, in “Slavery amongst the Abors”, Foreign and Political Department, Secret-E, December 1915, Nos. 17 – 20 [NAI]
98 *Ibid*; *Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam*, Foreign Department (A), August 1891, File Nos. 26-29; Foreign Department (A), December 1891, File Nos. 37-40; [ASA]
ransom and if they are unable to do so, they should be detained for a period of not more than 6 months in jail. 97

It is difficult to ascertain if by “some place” Bampfylde Fuller meant only the tea gardens, because the massive construction activities and the reckless growth of timber and rubber trade by the end of the nineteenth century, as mentioned in previous chapters, provided a number of alternative sites where the fugitives could “earn their ransom.” “Ransom” had, at least, two purposes: it was a token of the great British impartiality, a formally sympathetic recognition of the hill elite’s loss, a buffer against their armed retaliation; but, more surreptitiously, it was also a modality of control, a register of pursuit, a way to locate and regulate the newcomer. The runaways were not allowed to scatter haphazardly: their residences as well as their workplaces were determined by the district authorities. Nevertheless, the nature of official control was necessarily incomplete. The demand for labor was on the rise, and additional encouragement was deemed necessary. In 1913, Archdale Earle, the first Chief Commissioner with a Legislative Council, considered it advisable to remove the legal clause stipulating the enforcement of payment of ransom in every case. The provision of detaining the defaulter fugitives in jail was also withdrawn. District officers were given adequate latitude to handle each deserter’s case individually. All this helped the price of individual freedom to rise from “Rs 25 or Rs 30”, as fixed by Bampfylde Fuller in 1906, to a maximum of Rs 60 in 1913. 98

The officials could not fail to notice that the “owner”, i.e. the hill chief who would arrive to claim his fugitive subject and receive only a monetary compensation instead, “in any case has to wait some time for his money and in the interval to replace the labour which he cannot do without.” 99 Reports after reports clarified that the elite of the hill settlements held the British Indian authorities responsible for their growing distress. 100 Encroachment on land was

97 See the correspondences in Foreign Department, Secret-E Branch, December 1911, Nos. 450-523 [NAI]
98 B. C. Allen, Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign and Political Department, No. 6888-P, 19 November 1914, in “Slavery amongst the Abors”, Foreign and Political Department, Secret-E, December 1915, Nos. 17 – 20 [NAI]
99 Arthur Harold Walter Bentinck, quoted in Reid, History of the Frontier Areas, 235
100 For instance, returning from the 1918 expedition against the Miripathar Daflas, an army officer said: “The causes were irritation caused by slaves constantly running away to the plains, great loss being caused to the villages thereby, many of these slaves had been enticed away by the Gaigaon and Boranipathar men, who are themselves mostly ex-slaves.” G. A. Nevill, Political Officer, Western Section, North-East Frontier to the Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, dated Camp Halem, 11 May 1918, in “Raid by Daflas on certain villages in the Darrang District”, Foreign and Political Department, External-A, August 1918, Nos. 1 – 16 [NAI]
exacerbated by the drain of cultivators. The switching of protection networks also implied substantial loss of honor for the hill elite, often expressed in the organized attempts ("raids") to recover the lost subjects from the plains. The British, on the other hand, blamed the inequality and lack of opportunity in the hills, and underscored the autonomy of the individual deserters’ free will.

The limits of this freedom became apparent as the number of “deserters” began to rise in the wake of the Forest Department’s infringements. By the end of the eighteen eighties, the closure of the rubber mahals in Darrang put large groups of Daflas in dire distress. In 1891, it was reported from Darrang that “Dafla politics are greatly complicated by the fact that about half the tribe now lives in British territory, in the plains about Gohpur and Gomiri.” Most of these villages were situated near the new Trunk Road, on which many Daflas were employed as seasonal workers. A number of them also toiled for the kaju merchants, supplied vegetables and firewood to the tea gardens, and provided a pool of hired agricultural workers. Even then, the authorities were not happy.

The plains villages are in every case colonies and offshoots of hill villages. When one of the hill villages is raided and any of its inhabitants are killed, the matter is at once represented as being a quarrel between the plains colonies of the villages concerned, so as to make the Government a party to the quarrel. ... This state of things is a fruitful source of trouble, and can be avoided only by turning out all plains Daflas from British territory, or by annexing the parent villages.101

By 1893, almost a thousand Daflas were returned as settled in the plains of North Lakhimpur subdivision. “[N]o other tribe on the Northern frontier of Assam shows the same tendency to settle in the plains,” said the district authorities.102 But this was not an unmixed blessing. “They come down and settle where they like and often leave considerable property in the hills”, the Political Officer complained of the “runaways.”

When they settle in the plains, they do not leave the old life behind them. They do not improve, but carry on the wasteful habit of jhum cultivation and intermarry with the hill men and bring their old quarrels with them and keep up the hill customs. They bring their cases

101 Annual Report upon Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the Year 1890-91 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1891), 3
102 Annual Report upon Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1892-93 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1893), 3
and grievances to me, but really they are out of my control and I have none but moral authority over them.103

This was hardly the settlement that the authorities had dreamed of. The savages “settle”, but “do not improve.” Wasteful jhum spreads into the economical valley. Unmonitored communications continue between the “parent villages” and their “colonies” in the plains. “Tribal feuds” exploit the English law. Moreover, the new savage settlers increasingly refuse to resemble the classic nineteenth-century figure of the stray runaway. Rather than individual fugitives at odds with the dominant customs of hill societies, substantial sections of subjected settlements begin to evacuate the hills and “wander” in Assam proper without submitting themselves to the strictures of a sedentary life. “They should, I think, be collected into settlements and brought under my jurisdiction”, said the Political Officer G. A. Neville, “I think they might then gradually be trained into useful citizens.”104

Different forms of this “training” were already tested with the groups coming from the so-called Abor Hills. As the increased demand for rubber and timber exhausted the hill-ranges closer to the valley, and the “supplies of salt, cloth, and other necessaries” began consequently to dwindle, several families of Panbotia and Sarak Miris, Passi Meyongs and Digaru Mishmis found it advantageous to come down to the plains.105 Forests were closed to swidden cultivation; circulation networks did not recover from imperial disruption; even posa payments came to be drastically reduced. A set of general rules was proposed by the Lieutenant-Governor in 1908. He proposed that “[a]ll settlers in British territory” should be brought under “a poll-tax or house-tax”; anybody engaged in “cultivation within the ‘inner’ line” must pay a tax; posa should be substituted with “a system of presents”; and the “tribesmen” ought to be forewarned that any failure to pay would “entail the destruction of both crops and villages.”106 Although the Government of India was not ready to sanction the Lieutenant-Governor’s “proposals in their entirety”, most of his suggestions continued to be

103 Extract from the General Administration Report for the Western Section, North-East Frontier, 1916-17, in Annual Report on the Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1916-17 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1917), 2
104 Ibid.
105 Annual Report upon Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the Year 1892-93 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1893), 23. See also Chapter Three.
106 Secretary to the Government of India to the Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal Assam, Political Department No. 177 EC, dated 16 January 1908, Eastern Bengal and Assam, Political-A, April 1908, Nos. 7-19 [WBSA]
regularly “tested” in various new settlements between the Dihong and the Dibong rivers. 107 Between 1910 and 1914, the almost uninterrupted series of coordinated “expeditions” into different parts of the northern hills involved massive displacements. 108 Despite the government’s endeavors to collect the evacuators into specifically policed settlements in the plains, the control over mobility was never absolute.

As late as 1934, the officer in charge of the Balipara Frontier Tract reported that he was “still experiencing considerable difficulty in getting all Daflas who have no authority to live in the plains to settle in the Lokra settlement.”

These people are difficult to catch as they move from village to village bribing the headmen to give them shelter, and to keep quiet about it. ... Many runaway slaves came down during the cold weather and were ordered to return to the hills or settle at Lokra. It is however very doubtful if they have gone back to the hills. ... Runaways are not allowed to settle in the Dafla settlement unless some compensation is paid to their masters but the danger lies in the larger number of runaways who migrate from plains village to plains village and owe allegiance to nobody. The headman of a plains village has now been made responsible that no Hillman is allowed to reside in his village and disobedience will be followed by prompt punishment. 109

End of “slavery” did not mean that the ex-slaves would “owe allegiance to nobody.” New referents of control, new modes of extraction, and new sites of subjection were in place.

“Talent Wrapped in a Napkin”

As early as 1836, when the Government had just started its Experimental Tea Garden in Chabua, Adam White became extraordinarily concerned about the fate of “the Assamese captives in the Burmah Territory.” Even after “making allowance for native exaggeration,”

107 Reid, History of the Frontier Areas, 213.
108 The Dafla Expedition in the winter of 1910-11 was followed by General Bowers’ ruthless expedition against the Minyong villages in the next winter (which again was timed with the “friendly missions” to Mishmi and Miri villages), the Dibong Survey and Exploration Expeditions (1912-3) and “Promenade Parties” to the Aka Hills and Walong (January – March 1914). Annual Report on the Frontier Tribes of Assam for the Year 1911-12 (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1912), 1; Shakespear, History of Assam, 141-2;
said he, at least ten thousand Assamese were in “a state of captivity” across the Patkai. He urged Jenkins to take immediate measures to ensure “release” of those subjects “who rightfully belong to us.”

The release and settlement of those captives in the districts where the Tea Plant has been found would prove a most valuable acquisition in the event of the cultivation succeeding, as thereby a marked disadvantage would be overcome viz., the difficulty of procuring labourers, arising from the thinness of the population, and I have observed that the Assamese subjects who have returned from the Burmah territory are much more energetic and industrious than their countrymen, subject to our rule.110

Right from 1836, the alleged “difficulty of procuring labourers” for the tea gardens had been quite consistently emphasized in the English documents. As we have mentioned in the previous chapter, the industry and the administration seriously contemplated on several occasions about the possibility of importing workers from China. Although usually depicted as a typical feature of “a plantation economy,” the idea of peopling Assam was not restricted to tea interest. Indeed, the prevalence of itinerant cultivation simultaneously induced the government officials to import “hard-working ryots” from the adjacent parts of the empire. In fact, it was on this ground that the Calcutta authorities rejected David Scott’s plan to “restore” the Miri cultivators to the plains of the Dihong and Dibong river valley in 1830. These cultivators, said Scott, had been “relieved from the payment of taxes and assigned by the Assamese Government to the Abors, to provide them with accommodation, and otherwise to facilitate, in the capacity of interpreters, the trade between them and the Assamese.” However, “[d]uring the late troubles the Meerees left the place where they had been thus located and having settled elsewhere as cultivators, they are now unwilling to return to their former station unless the expense attending their removal be defrayed by Government.” Scott reasoned that the British should honor the arrangements made by the Tungkhungia administration and “restore” the Miris to their traditional overlords, even if that cost some “1000 or 1200 rupees.”111 But he was categorically reminded that the Miris as

110 A. White, Political Agent, Upper Assam, to F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General in the North-Eastern Frontier, dated Bishenath, 1 June 1836, in Foreign Department (P.C.), 27 June 1836, Nos. 49-51 [NAI]
111 D. Scott, Agent to the Governor General, North Eastern Frontier, to G. Swinton, Chief Secretary to the Government, dated 7 February 1830, in Foreign Department (S. C.), 26 February 1830, Nos. 5-6 [NAI]
“industrious cultivators” were particularly valuable “assets,” and cannot be submitted to the “unlawful demand” of the blackmailers.\textsuperscript{112} In 1833, Jenkins explicitly said,

The Merees are an agricultural and therefore a highly valuable race. The Abors claimed the Merees as their slaves but either to avoid their oppression or in consequence of convulsions which followed the Burmese invasions the Merees have generally deserted their old settlements between the Subansri and Dibong rivers and have become dispersed throughout Assam. The Abors are very rude hill tribe and have been occasionally troublesome.\textsuperscript{113}

The “value” of a “race” was primarily measured in terms of its availability for organized commodity production. The central role played by the Miris in cultivation of mustard in the \textit{chapuri} areas has already been mentioned in Chapter Three. On the other hand, Jenkins expressed his desire in 1836 to exchange “the Shans” staying in Assam for some “useful Ryots” from Hukong: “although they [“the Shans”] have proved useful militia to us on several occasions, they are as Ryots rather useless from their unsettled habits.”\textsuperscript{114}

“[O]ur extensive wastes or jungles cannot be cultivated with a scanty population decreased by epidemics,” opined Butler in the eighteen forties. “The people are not industrious or enterprising, and will not cultivate more than is sufficient for their own wants; unless Assam is colonized from Bengal, there is no prospect or hope of the province being brought fully under cultivation for centuries to come.”\textsuperscript{115} “We must not look for a return too soon,” said Moffatt Mills in 1854, “the object is to clear these vast tracts of forest, and promote immigration.”\textsuperscript{116} By the end of the nineteenth century it became a doxa in the official circle that “Assam cannot be peopled without special effort.”\textsuperscript{117} Much has already been written (and we have reasons to believe that much more will continue to be written) about the “malevolent policies” and the “carefully orchestrated move[s] by the British” which induced thousands of “land-hungry” cultivators from the populous eastern districts of Bengal proper

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{112} G. Swinton, Chief Secretary to the Government, D. Scott, Agent to the Governor General, North Eastern Frontier, dated 26 February 1830, in \textit{ibid}.
\bibitem{113} Jenkins, \textit{Report on the North-East Frontier}, 22
\bibitem{114} F. Jenkins, the Agent to the Governor-General, North-East Frontier, to W. W. Macnaghten, the Secretary to the Government of India, Political Department, dated 6 June 1836, in Foreign Department (P.C.), 27 June 1836, Nos. 49-51 [NAI]
\bibitem{115} Quoted in Moffatt Mills, \textit{Report}, 455
\bibitem{116} \textit{Ibid}, 17
\end{thebibliography}
to migrate to Assam in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{118} The “contribution [of the settlers] to the society and economy of Assam” has remained an uninterrupted source of intense political debate since the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{119} These are not exactly our concerns in the remaining pages of this chapter, although we shall occasionally refer to the force of this scheme. Rather, in these two brief sections we intend to point at some of the underplayed perspectives of the settlement schemes. In brief, these concern the very language of describing Assam as a “labour-short, land-abundant” economy (which, as we have already discussed, was founded on the silencing of the question of savage proprietorship); the calculated curtailment of certain mobilities (while aggressively encouraging certain others); and the complex performance of a boundary between “ordinary cultivation” and “tea cultivation.”

Invited to deliver a lecture on “Immigration into, and the Extension of Cultivation in, the Province of Assam” at a meeting of the Bengal Chamber of Commerce in April 1897, the Chief Commissioner Henry Cotton began his speech saying that “[t]hese two subjects may be considered together; for they are one question really.” Cotton referred to the proverbial disinclination of the Assamese “to extend cultivation any more than is necessary for their own immediate requirements” and their “extremely slow” rate of growth. “As you all know,” he told his audience, “there is no prospect of the vast tracts of waste land in Assam being ever brought under cultivation by the indigenous population.” Although “a very considerable number” of the tea garden coolies brought from other districts had often chosen to settle as ryots or “under-tenants” in cultivable land after the expiration of their indenture period, Cotton was clearly aware of the increasing opposition from the planters concerning this arrangement. He asserted that “facilities must not be furnished for bringing land under cultivation, which would result in coolies being enticed from the gardens. In other words, the immigrant population which is brought in to cultivate these large tracts of waste lands must actually be imported from other Provinces for the purpose, and not be drawn from Tea.”


Chapter Six

It is very easy to offer tracts of country, and say, "you may take it on favourable terms, and bring it under cultivation", but there is a great risk that if this be done thoughtlessly and without proper precautions, it may result in an immense number of immigrants settled in Assam, being drawn away from their present occupations. It is the tea industry that would suffer in that event, and we do not desire that the country should be exploited at the expense of the tea industry.

Cotton was particularly excited by the success of "Messrs. Thomson and Mylne" who had managed to "import" thousands of cultivators from the north Indian district of Shahabad into Upper Burma for cultivating some thirty thousand acres of land. In a few months' time, Cotton submitted a detailed Note on the Extension of Cultivation in Assam and the Colonization of Waste-lands in the Province. "The millions of acres of culturable land now lying waste represent millions of rupees which might be dug out of the soil, but are now allowed to lie useless like the talent wrapped in a napkin," regretted Cotton. There was only one way to unwrap the napkin: systematic colonization. The specter of Wakefield returned at the end of the century. "There is no other colonizing in Assam, except that of the time-expired coolies," said he, "and a few Gurkhali settlements which have been established by retired Gurkha sepoys. Many of these sepoys are fond of settling in Assam, but they prefer cattle grazing to cultivation, and are not, as a rule, permanent in their habits." Cotton reiterated his position that he would "be no party to any scheme for the exploitation of the province at the cost of the tea industry."

I welcome this cultivation of land by time-expired tea coolies, so far as it is natural and spontaneous, and no one is better aware than the tea planters of the benefit of such cultivation to themselves; but I am not prepared, except at the request of the tea industry, to give it any special or artificial stimulus. The problem before us is to encourage independent immigration ...

As we have mentioned in Chapter Five, although the Government formally recognized the informal (paralegal) right of the planters over the services of the so-called "time-expired

120 Report of the address delivered by Mr. H. J. S. Cotton, C. S. I., Chief Commissioner of Assam, on the 29th April, 1897, at a meeting of the Members of the Bengal Chamber of Commerce, in Colonization of Waste-Lands in Assam, 5-7
121 "Note of the Chief Commissioner of Assam on the Extension of Cultivation in Assam and the Colonization of Waste-lands in the Province," The Officiating Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to T. W. Holderness, Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Revenue and Agriculture, No. 544 Rev. / 4834 R, dated Shillong, the 27th September, 1898, in ibid, 47
122 ibid, 46
123 ibid, 43
coolies,” various Government agencies and officers often encouraged these coolies to employ themselves in Government services. In fact, by the end of the nineteenth century, the increasing tendency among the “time-expired coolies” to become Government ryot's caused enormous anxiety among the planters. In a meeting of the Indian Tea Association in 1897, the representative of the Dooars Tea Company explicitly said that if the “time-expired coolies” were encouraged to settle as ordinary peasants, “the recruiting grounds would be enormously narrowed.” “At present, coolies renewed their engagements, but if other men of similar position were working their own lands, it would be more difficult to get them to re-engage.” His views were immediately and heartily seconded by the representatives of Messrs. G. Williamson and Co., Moabund Tea Company, Lebong Tea Company and other firms. “No coolies hitherto has become a cultivator until after the expiry of his original tenure,” regretted the Indian Tea Association in 1906, “so that being acclimatised he becomes at once a valuable asset, as a rent paying raiyat, to government, while his loss as an acclimatised and probably a trained hand to the estate which imported him is one that has to be replaced by a further expenditure of capital.”

So long as this movement is spontaneous and natural our Association is silent; but it would justly depurate and stoutly resist any artificial stimulus to hasten colonisation at the expense of the industry or create any precedent for giving time-expired coolies land on a rent-free period outside the zone of gardens, as was ordered by a former Chief Commissioner, viz., to all coolies on the expiry of their original indenture.

On the ventriloquistic testimony of the Government reports, it is usually believed that the “time-expired coolies” by and large preferred government tenancy to reengagement in the gardens. However, it may be of relevance to remember that at least for the coolies concerned, life did not dissolve itself into a binary of garden work and government tenancy: other lines of flight and mobility were not entirely absent. The Assistant Political Officer at Sadiya reported in 1913 that at the Singpho settlement Ningru he “saw several deshuallis, coolies from gardens and the coal mines of Margherita and Ledo, who had voluntarily taken service with Ningru Moria and were living like Singphos, and unwilling to return to their

124 Report of the Proceedings at a Meeting of the Indian Tea Association in London on June 1st, 1897 (London: Indian Tea Association, 1898), 6
125 Annual Report of the Indian Tea Association for the Year 1906 (Calcutta: Indian Tea Association, 1906), 130
homes." An earlier report noted, "Bengali coolies can be seen in the Dafla village patiently threshing out paddy and taking it away on payment, while the Daflas sit round and smoke their pipes." Another report wondered why the "tea coolies sometimes abscond into the Naga country, where they are enslaved." Twelve coolies of the Dikrai tea garden in Darrang deserted from the garden in August 1896 and "wandered into the Dafla Hills," where they were reportedly "detained as slaves." However, as a brief line in the official report mentioned, nine out of these twelve "deserters" did not want to leave the hills to return to the garden. Of course, in digging these brief and scattered references out of the imperial archive, we do not wish to suggest an idyllic relationship of camaraderie between the oppressed in the hills and the oppressed in the gardens. There are also references to "[c]ases of quarrels and violent frictions among coolies and Daflas," instances of fraud and murder, and fight over quality of liquor. But what these minorized allusions in the imperial archive perhaps allow us to imagine is the ceaseless disarticulation of the settlement blueprints. For some, at least, becoming "slaves" in hill settlements appeared a better choice than becoming "wage laborer" in tea gardens or "ryots" in government lands.

"I ought not to omit a reference to the slow movement of migration which has been going on for years among the hill tribes of the Himalayan range bordering on Upper Assam," remarked Cotton, "The Daflas, Miris, and Abors have been, and still are, slowly pressing southwards, and their settlements in or on the verge of the plains country of Assam are ... increasing in number and population. But no statistics are available, and this movement is not worthy of the name of colonization." According to him, "the Naga and Mikir Hillmen, ..."
in localities where their services can be made available, afford a material second to none for undertaking the clearance of heavy jungle. But as cultivators of any sort, they would be quite useless.”

The experience of colonisation elsewhere teaches also that an essential condition of success is that the settlers should be carefully selected. They must be chosen from purely agricultural castes, and not from among those who look for their means of livelihood to paid labour. Cotton’s “Assam Colonization Scheme,” therefore, was focused on “the migration of the regular agriculturists,” intending to put a definitive end to the “rude and temporary cultivation of nomadic and aboriginal tribes.”

Yet Another Line

“For a period of nearly four years I lived on very amicable terms with the tea industry,” recounted Cotton in 1911. “I do not think I was guilty of any bias, but whatever bias I had was a natural one in favour of the planters…. But my predecessors were more fortunate than I was in that no burning questions directly affecting the antagonistic interests of Capital and Labour arose in their time.” As is well known, Cotton’s report on “horribly coolie sufferings” in the Assam tea gardens brought him into open conflict with the powerful planters’ lobby and embittered his relationship with the Viceroy George Curzon, obliging him to resign from the imperial service and eventually become President of the Indian National Congress in 1904. However, there are certain lines in history which are less fuzzy than the one between an imperialist and a nationalist.

Much to the chagrin of the Indian nationalists, Cotton’s “Assam Colonization Scheme” did not secure the support of the Government of India in its entirety. Cotton, as we have mentioned in Chapter Three, had urged the Government to do away with the ryoti system in Assam and introduce a class of zamindars under whose guidance systematic migration

134 “Note of the Chief Commissioner of Assam on the Extension of Cultivation in Assam and the Colonization of Waste-lands in the Province,” The Officiating Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to T. W. Holderness, Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Revenue and Agriculture, No. 544 Rev. / 4834 R, dated Shillong, the 27th September, 1898, in Colonization of Waste-Lands in Assam, 45-6
135 Cotton, Indian and Home Memories, 258-9
136 Ibid, Ch. XXII; Guha, Planter-Raj to Swaraj, 41-2.

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could take place: "The lower orders stand in urgent need of an aristocracy above them, their ignorance and characteristic docility and want of firmness require the guidance and protection of more powerful superiors." The Government of India, however, quite consistently defended the ryotwari settlements and maintained that "colonization can only be effected by private enterprise and capital." But as far as the idea of systematic colonization was concerned, Curzon was in full agreement with his adversary. In fact, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the entire British Indian bureaucracy was more or less unanimous on the question of promoting systematic colonization into Assam.

"[T]he Assam climate is a bar to their colonisation on any large scale by immigrants from areas with drier climates, such as Behar or the united Provinces. This obstacle would not exist in the case of natives of the damp districts of Eastern Bengal." More importantly, this was perceived to be cheap and effective, given the fact that the adjacent districts of Eastern Bengal were considered "over-populated." One of the major arguments that Curzon used to justify his controversial Territorial Redistribution Scheme was to "relieve Bengal to the extent of 11 million people" by combining half of that province with the Chief Commissionership of Assam: "There are large areas of waste lands still available for cultivation in the Assam Valley."

As population begins to press on the soil of Eastern Bengal districts, the Assam Valley will be available as an outlet for their surplus population, either as cultivators or as workers, temporarily or otherwise, on the tea gardens; and this migration can be encouraged and carried on under favourable conditions if they are under the same Administration as the Assam Valley.

137 Quoted in “Mr. Cotton as a Defender of the Permanent Settlement”, The Amrita Bazar Patrika, 2 May 1902, in private papers of Henry John Stedman Cotton, IOR/ Mss Eur D1202 [OIOC]

138 Denizel Ibbetson, Secretary to the Government of India to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No. 855-28-1, dated Simla, 2 June 1897, in Colonization of Waste-Lands in Assam, 26. “[The Government of India] are inclined to doubt whether the serious risks and manifold difficulties attending such a scheme have been fully appreciated by you and it appears to them that the present economic condition of Assam is to be traced to geographical and physical causes rather than to any defects inherent in the system of peasant proprietorship.” T. W. Holderness, Secretary to the Government of India, to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, dated Calcutta, 26 January 1899, in ibid, 81

139 Letter No. 12T of February 14, 1904 from P. G. Melitus, Commissioner, Assam Valley Districts to J. Bampfylde Fuller, the Chief Commissioner, Assam, Annexure to “Proposed Redistribution of Territory between Bengal and Assam” From F. J. Monahan, the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, 6 April, 1904 (Home Department, Public – A, February 1905, Proceeding No. 156), in private papers of George Nathaniel Curzon, IOR/ Mss Eur F111/247b [OIOC]

140 “Minute by His Excellency the Viceroy on territorial Redistribution in India, Part II, (June 1, 1903)”, in private papers of George Nathaniel Curzon, IOR/ Mss Eur F111/247a [OIOC].
It was not before 1911 that the rail connection between “Assam proper and the rest of India” was finally secured. The immigration of the cultivators from the eastern districts of Bengal also gathered force around this time, and so did the organized opposition of the Assamese middle class to the scheme. As a response to the political complexities, the imperial administration chose to adopt the so-called Line System in 1920 after a few years’ discussion.

Under this system, a line was drawn in the districts under pressure [i.e., Goalpara, Kamrup, Nowgong, and Darrang] in order to settle immigrants in segregated areas, specified for their exclusive settlement. The number of settlers, including children born after their arrival, increased from an estimated three lacs in 1921 to over half a million in 1931. Colonists were settling on Government waste lands by families, and not singly. They were better cultivators [sic] and, hence, could offer higher and lucrative land prices to induce Assamese peasants to sell out portions of their holdings. Local Marwari and even Assamese moneylenders financed the immigrants so that the latter could reclaim land and expand the cultivation of jute, abu rice, pulses and vegetables.

The contours of the ensuing political mobilization are not unknown to the readers of Assam history. But we wish to pursue a slightly different path. What the Line System was directed to bring into being was a regime of bordered, compacted and sedentary territorialities, where each “group” had its defined “homeland.” As the 1929-30 Report of the Assam Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee clarified,

Before the immigrants from Eastern Bengal came to the province there were large areas of waste lands in all districts. The indigenous Assamese, prior to that time, used to take up much land for cold weather crops, preferably near the banks of the Brahmaputra, on annual lease. There he would cultivate for three years or so and then throw them up, seeking fresh pastures of which there was abundance. After some years would go back to the previous lands, knowing that probably no body would have taken them up, as there was enough spare land for all. This was in addition to his permanent rice land in or near his village. The coming of the Mymensingh people has changed all that. They have occupied most of those waste lands (frequently buying them at an exorbitant rate from the Assamese who had them under annual lease) and have brought them under permanent cultivation. Of late years

141 Guha, Medieval and Early Colonial Assam, 199
142 Guha, Planter-Raj to Swaraj, 206. See also Dasgupta, Emergence of a Community; Pegu, Line System. For two typical samples of the literature produced from the opposing camps, see P. Das, “asamat liin prathâ”, āvāhan, 8: 8 (c. 1937), 873-885 and Kari Mohammad Abdul Hamid, āsâmer ratnahâr (Nagaon: Author, c. 1937).
Government has adopted the policy of settlement of the immigrants. Certain areas are set apart where they are allowed to settle and areas reserved for expansion of cultivation among the Assamese are barred to them under penalty of ejectment. Understandably, this again changed the meaning of the chapuri geographies in the imperial register. “Up to about twenty years ago,” noted the Committee, “the Assamese practised fluctuating cultivation in the Chaporis mainly in growing cold weather crops, but very large areas have now been brought under permanent cultivation by the Eastern Bengal immigrants. The Chaporis of Barpeta subdivision show an increase of about 700 per cent in the settled area in the last 20 years.” As a result, said the Committee, the “Bengali immigrants hold most of the low land near the river,” the “Rupit mahal is densely populated and is mainly inhabited by Assamese cultivators,” and “the submontane tract” – which was “less favourably situated in respect to cultivation at the disposal of produce” – was mainly occupied by the “backward tribes.” The lines on the map were not abstract lines anymore. With the increasing support for the Line System from the nationalist Assamese, the imperial administration finally succeeded in its century-long struggle with itinerancy.