"The Government of India is nearly always reluctant. But the frontier moves forward." This is Robert Reid, the Governor of Assam (1937-41), describing the situation of his province in 1942.¹ If we stop becoming good nationalists for a while and do not brush aside this statement as a typical sample of imperial duplicity, it may help us to address the dilemma in which the British Indian administration was caught in its north-eastern frontier.

There is no part of our vast Indian frontier about which we have so little military or geographical information as the north-east; there is no portion of it so difficult to reinforce in case of certain emergencies arising, and there is no like extent of it bordering upon savage tribes, so sparsely garrisoned; yet, in this remote corner of our empire, there is more English capital invested in land than in any like extent of our Indian dominions.²

Thus wrote a loyalist officer in 1883, brilliantly précising the anxiety of the administration. Indeed, phrased in such language of conflict and contrast, it is always the anomaly of capitalism in a savage land which presents itself to the foreground, leaving us to wonder what smoothed its way ahead. The question can be alternatively asked from

¹ Reid, *History of the Frontier Areas*, 100-1
the other end of the spectrum: how did the disenfranchised people participate in, make sense of and eventually re-world the regime of capital? Posed in either vein, it is primarily an issue of the complex maze of entanglements which spread across the polarities of “savage tribes” and “English capital”. It is about the fields of jurisdictions, the frontiers of control and the theaters of appropriation.

An Impossible Line

In a personal letter written to assuage the discontent of her sister in London (who thought that her beloved brother, a medal-winner in the Mutiny, had been dumped with a terribly “inferior appointment” in a godforsaken corner of the Empire called Assam), the first Chief Commissioner Richard Keatinge insisted that he had not been “put down.” Of course, “Assam is the most junior and in some ways least important of the four Chief Commissions but it is I think more important than any of the political charges.” Keatinge explained to sister Hal, “I had told Government so often that I thought their treatment of the Chiefs unsatisfactory” that now he could not step back from spearheading the new administration.

In the standard histories of Assam, Richard Keatinge is usually described as an enthusiastic advocate of the so-called “forward policy”. Unflinching expansion of the Government jurisdiction, resolute interventions in inter-community feuds and increased formalization of the administrative apparatus marked his four-year term. His daring proposal of opening the Naga and the Abor fronts at the same time, though not sanctioned by the Supreme Government, reflected his acute intention to be over and done with the border problem once and for all. The minimum prerequisite for solving a border problem is a border. Much to his chagrin, the first Chief Commissioner discovered that in most places this minimum prerequisite did not exist in a readily identifiable shape. “The Naga Hills District had been constituted in 1867, but its boundaries had not been formally settled.” Apart from a few miles in the west, the

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3 Letter from Richard [Harte Keatinge] to Hal [Harriet Coutts Trotter], “Camp near Sadiya, the top of the Assam Valley”, dated 18 March [year not mentioned], European Manuscripts, Oriental and India Office Collections, British Library [henceforth OIOC], No. IOR/ Mss Eur C292/4
5 Michell, Report, 63
boundaries of Lakhimpur, theoretically the largest district in British India, were “wholly undefined and unknown”.

While Bivar and Williamson had just laid down the Khasi-Garo boundary in 1873, the Khasi-Kamrup boundary was not yet defined. As we have seen, Kelso's 1849-50 demarcation between Goalpara and Kamrup was found to be faulty, and this was a source of tension with the estate of Bijni. In 1872 Beckett had defined the boundaries between Goalpara and the Garo Hills, but Goalpara's boundary with Rangpur was still left undetermined. Even after the successful war in 1864, border disputes with the Deb Raja did not stop. To further complicate the situation, a year before Keatinge was given charge, the Inner Line Regulation was notified and now he had to fix this line of demarcation between the wider territorial possessions of the British state and its constricted jurisdictional limits.

The Inner Line was charged with the difficult task of providing a territorial frame to capital. It prohibited the British subjects in general from going without a license and the tea planters in particular from acquiring lands beyond a demarcated line. Enforcing “more stringent control [over] the commercial relations of our own subjects with the frontier tribes living on the borders of our jurisdiction”, stopping “the operations of speculators in caoutchouc” and restraining “the spread of tea gardens outside our fiscal limits” were its three explicit objectives. More deeply, it was also supposed to demarcate “the Hills” from “the plains”, the nomadic from the sedentary, the jungle from the arable – in short, “the tribal areas” from “Assam proper”. It was through a continual reordering of landscapes that the play between the proper and the proprietorial came to define the

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7 Letter No. 6343, dated 20 November 1872, from the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, in “Lakhimpur Inner Line”, Foreign Department, Political A, September 1875, Nos. 269 - 272. [NAI]
8 'Note by L. W. Reynolds, dated 10 February 1909', in 'Inclusion of certain coal bearing lands within the Sibsagar and Naga Hill Districts', Foreign Department, External - A, January 1910, Nos. 6 - 8 [NAI]
9 Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce, No. 274, Shillong, 20 July 1874, in “Inner Line” of the Sibsagar District”, Foreign Department, Revenue-A Branch, September 1874, Nos. 14 - 21 [NAI]
10 Macdonald’s 1873-5 survey of the same does not seem to have been accepted by Bijni till 1914. ‘Annual Report of the Survey Department for the year ending the 30th September 1940’, in Annual Report of the Assam Survey and Settlement Operations in Assam for the year ending the 30th September 1940 (Shillong: ). 3
11 Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce, No. 274, Shillong, 20 July 1874, in “Inner Line” of the Sibsagar District”, Foreign Department, Revenue-A Branch, September 1874, Nos. 14 - 21. [NAI]
12 A. Mackenzie, Junior Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department, No. 1418, Dated 6 April 1872, in 'Demarcation of British Frontier between Assam and Bhootan', Foreign Department, Political-A Branch, June 1872, Nos. 633-664 [NAI]
13 Mackenzie, History of Relations of Government with Hill Tribes, 56.
scope of colonial governmentality in the area. What lay unenclosed by the Inner Line was not only a territorial exterior of the theater of capital, it was also considered a temporal outside of the historical pace of development and progress. Though encountered on the numerous plateaus of everyday life, the communities forced to stay beyond the Line were seen as belonging to a different time regime — where the time of the law did not apply; where slavery, headhunting and shifting cultivation could be allowed to exist. The Inner Line was expected to enact a sharp split between what were understood as the contending worlds of capital and precapital, of the modern and the primitive.

Without such a line, "states of fact", according to Hopkinson, "are so vague, shifty, fluid, and uncertain, that any interpretation may be put upon them, and consequently any judgment either way passed on the course pursued in respect to them." A Deputy Commissioner at Lakhimpur, said Hopkinson,

cannot tell what his district is, and what it is not; he cannot define his jurisdiction as to extent, nor say over whom it extends. Some of his people are fully under the laws of the country, some he is told to regard as only partially so, upon some he is to try moral suasion, while in practice it is not always easy to discriminate which class is which. He has to deal with English planters at one end of the scale, have chapter and verse for everything he does, and be driven by them, their attorneys, pleaders, and the High Court, to have regard to all the technicalities which His Honor so much abhors; and at the other end, he has Nagas for whom he has to throw overboard all law; while to make confusion worse confounded, he is called upon ... to administer at one and the same time "law" and "no law" to Nagas and planters in mutual conflict.¹⁴

The line instituted to define the worlds of "law" and "no law" was however an impossible line, given the routine insistence of the British Indian administration on the informalization of legal agreements in its northeastern frontier. Captivated by capital's self-portrait, the historians usually sidestep its long and wide paralegal career in Assam.

We shall be discussing the fascinating web of contraband rubber trade in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Assam involving the Marwari traders in the plains, the community chiefs in the hills and the British Indian firms in Calcutta in a subsequent section. The same network was also remarkably active in working timber and ivory beyond the revenue line. Exciting histories of cross-border traffic in firearms, particularly

¹⁴ From the Agent to the Governor General in the North-Eastern Frontier to the Secretary to the Government of India in the Revenue Department, in "Mr. Minto's Claims to the Garo Hills Gardens", Proceedings of the Hon'ble the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Political Department, April 1873, File 29 [ASA]
Chapter Two

after the conclusion of the second Anglo-Burma War, still awaits its historian. Nor do we have a comprehensive account of the numerous localized land use contracts between the European planters and the community chiefs. "The tea planters had long since in many places, both in Luckhimpore and Seebasagar, taken up lands south of the revenue line, in some instances paying revenue to us, and in others to the Naga chiefs", Mackenzie explained the situation with some unease.

The earlier settlers found it to their interest to conciliate the Nagas, and troubled themselves little about Government protection. But now the fashion of claiming police assistance in every little difficulty came into vogue, and the Government had to consider what course it should adopt.

Over and over again, the Government criticized the planters in Assam for "bold assertion of legal rights." The British love for law was undeniably proportional to its fear of extravagance. If tacit understandings, informal arrangements and verbal promises could save money and energy, the British Indian administration – at least for the first fifty years in its northeastern frontier – was not extraordinarily interested in coalescing diverse legal geographies into one uniform whole.

And yet, as we all know, the Inner Line did happen. It happened because the Government increasingly realized that its lack of control over the communication between the non-rent paying populations and the speculators was making the Government miss a substantial amount of revenue and, worse still, entangling it in several legal disputes (which, by the way, gradually became more numerous than before). The planters, on the other hand, came to acknowledge the value of violence that accompanies every introduction of law. Using the increased military strength of the Government infantries seemed more reasonable than raising costly private militias.

Moreover, while old gardens like Mugroo and Koodoo, "in the very heart of the Singphoo country", or Hukanjuri and Teepum, in the Naga Hills, were helplessly dependent on the labor of local communities, the arrival of a work force whose legal

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15 See the letter from Captain Hannay to Captain Vetch, dated Saikwahs, 1 February 1840, in Foreign Department, Political Branch, 16 March 1840, Pros. No. 112 [NAI] for interesting references. Major C. R. Macgregor, Military Report on the Kampi-Singpho Countries (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1887) mentions manufacture of gunpowder by the Singphos and the Khamtis. The untitled Files 90-130 BG and 656 AC (1871) [ASA] contain some useful information regarding arms and ammunition in the Naga Hills.

16 Mackenzie, History of Relations of Government with Hill Tribes, 98.

17 Proceedings of the Hon'ble the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Judicial Department, September 1871, No. 90. [ASA]

18 Statement of A. T. Campbell (Assistant Commissioner, Assam) 14 December 1867, in RCSPTC, Appendix A, xviii. See also Assam Company, Report of the Directors and Auditors made to the shareholders at the General Annual Meeting, held at the London Tavern, Bishopgate Street, on the Sik
ability to choose alternative employment was pathetically constrained by the indenture system made the planters more confident in their power to do away with the undisciplined Naga, Singpho or Cachari labor who could and did walk out on several previous occasions.19

But could capital ever function within the law that it set for itself? Its phenomenal propensity to spill over and consume the boundaries that it in the first place had helped to bring about necessarily entailed a vast paralegal structure. We want to point at two major modes through which the cursive movement of capital through various terrains of difference was energized. One is the simple expansion of the legal theater of capital – what Hopkinson called “the inner side of our fence, … the fruit side of the garden wall”20 – by extending the Inner Line. Too much attention to the rhetoric of fixity has blinded us to the plain fact that contrary to its claim to the givenness of the distinction between the Hills and the Plains, the Inner Line was in fact a revisable, mobile and pliant boundary on the ground.21 Well until the second decade of the twentieth century, the Line was repeatedly redrawn in order to variously accommodate the expansive compulsions of plantation capital, the recognition of imperfection in survey maps, the security anxiety of the government and the adaptive practices of internally differentiated local communities. If new tea or coal tracts were found or valuable forest areas were reported to exist beyond the Line, small insertions in the Government Gazette casually declared unblushing extensions of the Inner Line to include those areas.22

A large number of documents are extant to point towards this fact.23 We shall pick up only a characteristic sample to indicate how from the very beginning, the question of


20 From the Agent to the Governor General in the North-Eastern Frontier and Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal in the Political Department, No. 114, Dated 17 April 1872, in ‘Demarcation of British Frontier between Assam and Bhootan’, Foreign Department, Political-A Branch, June 1872, Nos. 633-664. [NAI]

21 Cf. Adiak, India against Itself, Ch. 2

22 It was said clearly that “the line of ordinary civil jurisdiction on the Seebsaugor frontier must just be laid down … with reference to any specifically valuable forests, India-rubber, opium lands, or other lands which, for sufficiently cogent reasons, it may be desirable to include within the line of our ordinary civil jurisdiction.” The Commissioner of Assam, quoted in the letter from A. Mackenzies, Junir Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department, No. 595T, 14 June 1873, in “Massacre of Borlangee Nagas by Kamsinga Nagas”, Foreign Department, Political-A, July 1873, Nos. 469–507. [NAI]

23 Foreign Department, Political-A Branch, December 1876, Nos. 148-174; Foreign Department, Political-A Branch, August 1877, Nos. 120-232; Foreign Department, Political-A Branch, August
resources had dominated the movement of the Line. Luttman-Johnson, Keatinge's Secretary, explained to the higher authorities that the sole object of twisting the Line in south of Jaipur, to enclose "a tract of country which has not hitherto been subject to the formal and plenary authority of the Deputy Commissioner" was to ensure "that the three tea gardens of Namsang, Taurack, and Hukanjuri may not be excluded from ordinary jurisdiction."²⁴ In the same breath, he also explained that "all the best coal-bearing tracts [in Lakhimpur] remain outside the proposed 'Inner Line'" because "[t]here is no immediate prospect of coal being worked in this locality".

The extent of coal tracts is very indefinite as yet, and, even if we knew how far they extended, no well marked line is to be found beyond them. When we want to work them, we can do so under a system of passes, or we can extend the "Inner Line" so as to include them.²⁵ Divisions could be altered and borders could be redrawn if the movement of capital so required. Apart from this principle of resource-sensitive flexibility, the widespread confusion among the frontier officials regarding the function and extent of the Line further complicated the issue. Some interpreted the Inner Line as revenue survey limits,

²⁴ Similarly, the Lakhimpur Inner Line, which generally followed the course of the Rajghur Alii from the eastern boundary of Darrang to the Subansiri river was made to "deviate from the Rajghur Alii, so as to follow the western, northern, and eastern boundaries of the Harmati No. 95 and Joyhing No. 65 waste land grants." Notification by Government of India, Foreign Department, No. 2427 P, Simla, 3 September 1875, in "Lakhimpur Inner Line", Foreign Department, Political A, September 1875, Nos. 269 - 272 [NAI]. Again, the proposed Inner Line in Cachar had to accommodate the tea grants of Barooncherra, Bara Jalinga and Monierkhall. Notification by Government of India, Foreign Department, No. 2299 P, Simla, 20 August 1875, in "Cachar 'Inner Line'", Foreign Department, Political A, August 1875, Nos. 393 - 394 [NAI]

²⁵ H. Luttman-Johnson, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to C. U. Aitchinson, Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department, No. 2600, Shillong, 27 July 1875, in "Lakhimpur Inner Line", Foreign Department, Political A, September 1875, Nos. 269 - 272 [NAI]
and some others held that it should coincide with the limits of direct control. The confusion arose chiefly from the fact that in the Lower Assam districts, these different stripes did not widely differ. The hill and plain principle—"taking the best natural line"—worked well in settling the northern boundary of Kamrup and Darrang, and the Viceroy Northbrook wished this to be the general principle for laying down the Inner Line throughout Assam.26 Things were very different in the Upper Assam districts of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur, about which—as Keatinge said with a chuckle—the Viceroy's informants did not have much idea.27 Although tea grants were far more numerous in these districts than in any of their three Lower Assam counterparts,28 the large areas of "impenetrable" jungle and the emphatic presence of the "uncontrolled" communities effectively minimized the scope of the revenue surveys. The "limits of regular cultivation" and the extent of the surveys did not match in many places. The "line of police outposts" often represented a third line, and with the additional institution of the Inner Line, the legal landscape became as confusing as the ethnic scene.29 An exasperated Keatinge admitted during the course of demarcation "that former orders are being

26 Vide Letters of the Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department, to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No. 1661, 24 July 1873 and No. 2487 P, 17 October 1873
27 "The Chief Commissioner can hardly suppose that the difficulty of exercising ordinary civil jurisdiction in a tract of country, into which the Court's officer could only enter axe in hand, by cutting his own path, can have been laid before His Excellency the Viceroy" Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department, No. 142, Shillong, 20 May 1874, in "Inner Line of the Sibsagar District", Foreign Department, Revenue-A Branch, September 1874, Nos. 14 – 21 [NAI]
28 According to an estimate made in 1863, the Sibsagar district alone contained 143 tea gardens whereas the combined total of Kamrup, Darrang and Nagaon was 131. Lakhimpur had 57 tea gardens. Calculated from the list attached to the Map of the Tea Districts of Assam (Compiled in the Office of Colonel Henry Hopkinson, Commissioner & Governor General's Agent, North Eastern Frontier. Scale 4 Miles = 1 Inch. 1863)
29 "The degrees by which the [Lakhimpur] Deputy Commissioner's authority decreases eastwards are not strongly marked. Up to the limits within which he collects land revenue, whether he collects it by the head, or by the house, or by the plough, or by the acre, he wields plenary authority, though even some tracts within these limits are still vaguely denominated "Agency country." Beyond these limits his authority extends is distinctly political only, but is exercised with more or less strictness, as circumstances may require, at least as far east as the Brahmakund. Speaking generally, the Chief Commissioner holds that what is now considered to be the boundary up to which the Deputy Commissioner’s plenary authority extends fulfills the conditions for the Inner Line, as laid down by the Government of India. The attachment of new legal incidents to a line which has always been looked upon as a sort of boundary is received by the people of its neighbourhood without much surprise, and they soon accustom themselves to them. The definition of an altogether new line is long in becoming familiar to their minds, and the process may be accompanied by much heart-burning." H. Luttman-Johnson, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to C. U. Aitchinson, Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department, No. 2600, Shillong, 27 July 1875, in "Lakhimpur Inner Line", Foreign Department, Political A, September 1875, Nos. 269 – 272 [NAI]
construed locally, and after filtration through other authorities, in a manner never intended by His Excellency the Viceroy.\textsuperscript{30}

The Foreign Department of the Government of India, however, thought that the Chief Commissioner himself was mistaken about the nature of the jurisdictional limit:

\begin{quote}
[Al]though all the country on the British side of the frontier is to be under British jurisdiction, it is not necessary nor is it intended that the plenary jurisdiction of our ordinary Civil Courts should be exercised up to that line. It may or may not according to circumstances. Colonel Keatinge has to some extent lost sight of this, and he seems to think that in all cases our ordinary plenary jurisdiction through the usual machinery of our Courts of Law is to have full play up to the boundary line.
\end{quote}

The Line was the limit up to which, explained Aitchinson, the Government would nominally accept responsibility for the protection of life and property, but even within that line it might have a "more rigid administration for parts that are suited to it and a less rigid administration for parts that require more delicate handling."\textsuperscript{31} Consequently, the Inner Line was only an incomplete promise of uniform jurisdiction for the territories enclosed. The personal discretions of the Chief Commissioner and his deputies – what Aitchinson called "the local knowledge of the provincial officers" – could and did have substantial sway over the inhabitants of this non-regulation province.

The early subordinate frontier officials on whom the Supreme Government depended for the local details by and large shared a general distrust of the Inner Line scheme. Many demanded, in vein, an absolute annulment of the Regulation on the ground that "the tribes ... cannot grasp the difference between a jurisdictional and a territorial line of frontier."\textsuperscript{32} If the British Government declined to exercise its rights beyond the Inner Line, these officials argued, the communities there would be encouraged to understand themselves as independent. In fact, in 1882 the Chief Commissioner also acknowledged the force of "this inevitable tendency" to mix up the two lines:

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\textsuperscript{30} Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department, No. 142, dated Shillong, 20 May 1874, in "'Inner Line' of the Sibsagar District", Foreign Department, Revenue-A Branch, September 1874, Nos. 14 – 21 [NAI]

\textsuperscript{31} Note by C. U. Aitchinson, Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department, 31.07.1874, in "'Inner Line' of the Sibsagar District", Foreign Department, Revenue-A Branch, September 1874, Nos. 14 – 21 [NAI]

\textsuperscript{32} Michell, \textit{Report}, 9. Colonel A. E. Campbell, the Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar, continued to argue for a long time "that the line acts as a barrier to the taking up of good land for tea cultivation, that it leaves valuable forests to be destroyed by the Nagas, and that it restricts free intercourse with the tribes, which he considers it right to promote." C. J. Lyall, Officiating Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to C. Grant, the Officiating Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department, No. 147, 26 January 1882, in "Sibsagar District 'Inner Line'", Foreign Department, Political A, March 1882, Nos. 36 – 46 [NAI]
\end{flushright}
[O]wing to the incidents of the Inner Line Regulation, which prevents settlers from taking up lands beyond the line, and which limits, though it need not necessarily stifle, the intercourse of our District Officers with the tribes beyond, there is an obvious tendency for such a line in the course of time to be deemed a territorial boundary, beyond which neither party can exercise rights of use or possession without being thought guilty of aggression by the other.  

This unusually strong fear of mistranslation – that the “reluctance of the British authorities to enforce their rights” might be “construed as weakness” – constantly accompanied the sporadic expansion of the Inner Line, instigating different and contradictory reactions at all levels of the Government. While the majority of the top officials maintained that the Line “is a jurisdictional and not a territorial boundary”, some of them also argued that this “purely artificial” line “is not concerned with the administrative arrangements”. Underlying the confusing contradictions was however a theoretical consensus about the Line’s unconditional extensibility, deferred only by the Government of India’s decision to minimize administrative expenditure. Substantial extensions of the Inner Line were made in 1882 in Sibsagar, in 1904 and 1906 in the Naga Hills, and in 1884, 1886, 1897 and 1904 in Lakhimpur. Understandably, such extensions frequently cut across and destabilized local networks of circulation, protection and settlement, which the European authorities unvaryingly understood as a necessary precondition of development. The Inner Line, as we have already noted, was not only a

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33 C. J. Lyall, Officiating Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to C. Grant, the Officiating Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department, No. 147, 26 January 1882, in “Sibsagar District ‘Inner Line’”, Foreign Department, Political A, March 1882, Nos. 36 – 46 [NAI]
34 J. E. Webster, Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department, No. 3923 J, 9 September 1907, in “Policy to be pursued in dealing with the Abors and other tribes inhabiting the hills to the north of the Dibrugarh Frontier Tract”, Foreign Department, External-A, June 1908, Nos. 33 – 38 [NAI]
35 ‘Note by C. U. Aitchinson, Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department’, in “Demarcation of the Duffla Frontier”, Foreign Department, Political A, April 1874, Nos. 268 – 269 [NAI]
36 Note by J. M. Macpherson, dated 23 December 1908, in “Inclusion of certain coal bearing lands within the Sibsagar and Naga Hill Districts”, Foreign Department, External – A, January 1910, Nos. 6 – 8 [NAI]. Macpherson further exclaimed, “The idea of a district of which a part remains practically unadministered and outside the jurisdiction of the Courts is, so far as my knowledge goes, a novel one, and I do not understand on what principle it is based, as the main object of forming districts is, as I have always understood, to provide for the administration of the territory included in them. . . . Nor can I understand how there can be a district of which one boundary is left undefined, which is the position of this district [Lakhimpur] if its territorial boundary does not coincide with the line which has been adopted as its administrative boundary.”
37 Foreign Department, Political-A Branch, March 1882, Nos. 36-46; Letter No. 291-E. B., dated 26 January 1904. No. 131 in Foreign Department, External-A Branch, March 1904, Nos. 130-131; Notification No. 4767-P, dated 31 October 1904. Enclo. 3, No. 39, in Foreign Department, External-A Branch, October 1905, Nos. 37-40; Notification No. 12151, dated 13 November 1906. Enclo. 90, No. 39, in Foreign Department, External-A Branch, November 1906, Nos. 90-91 [all in NAI]
line on territory; it was also a line in time. The advance of the Line on map was read as the progress from pre-capital to capital, from the time of “no law” to the time of “law”. However, to borrow a phrase from Mbembe, the comings and goings between two temporalities hardly represented an anomaly for either party. Even after the delineation of the Line, critical and inconstant entanglements between the “capitalists” and the “primitives” continued with dynamism, causing insurgence and retribution at some time and maintaining off-the-record payments at others — the higher government officials being fully aware and even supportive of such unofficial settlements. A well-documented case is that of the early twentieth-century friction between the Dobangs, the Tadungs and the Pasi-Minyongs of the trans-Lakhimpur region on the one hand and the Sissi Saw Mills and Trading Company and the Meckla Nuddee Saw Mills Company on the other.

The Dobangs, Tadungs and Pasi-Minyongs — ethnic categories which emerged out of the older and increasingly obsolete category of Abors by the end of the nineteenth century — claimed their rights over different segments of the forest beyond the Inner Line in Lakhimpur. In the early years of their operations in the area, soon after exhausting the sinal timber near the Mekhla and the Sissi rivers, the managers of the European saw mills used to employ local contractors who “employed Miris to fell trees and used to send elephants to drag the logs, often sending mahuts and servants across the Inner Line without passes.” The Miris had to make a payment (alternatively referred to as “royalty” and “blackmail” in the British documents) to the said Abor chiefs for working the forests beyond the Inner Line. In fact, while paying a lip service to the standing proprietorial claim of the British state over these forests, the Lieutenant-Governor Bampfylde Fuller in 1904 actually said that “as matters stood, there was no reason why managers of saw

38 Achille Mbembe, On the Postcolony (Berkeley, LA and London: University of California Press, 2001), 71
39 If the report of Needham, the Assistant Political Officer at Sadiya, is to be believed, this evidently created some tension between the different settlements too: “I have recently received the report that Minyongs of Yemsing are at loggerheads with four gams of Ledum, because the later took money from one of the Laimekuri saw-mill contractors for permission to cut timber outside the Inner Line. The Yemsing Minyongs assert that they alone are entitled to collect such fees.” Quoted in Notes on the North-East Frontier of Assam, in continuation of Captain St. John Michell’s Report (Topographical, Political and Military) on the North East Frontier of India (Shillong: Eastern Bengal and Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1907), 35
40 At the turn of the century, forests were emphatically inscribed in the code of the new property regime. As Baden-Powell succinctly put it, a forest ought to be seen as “a piece of property — no matter to whom it may belong.” “People will think”, said Baden Powell, “that because trees, grass, and fruits of the wild trees are the produce of nature, therefore it is no theft to take them. It is not felt that gold and gems are just as much the produce of nature, and that the art and skill exercised in polishing and preparing them are not distinct in kind from the care and labour that are extended on tending a forest.” B. H. Baden-Powell, Forest Settlements in India (title page missing in the National Library copy, 1891), 1-2
mills should not pay the hill tribes some commission or royalty on timber extracted from this area if they found it convenient to do so." Exactly like the tea planters who occupied grants beyond the Inner Line, the saw mill mangers were also informed by the Deputy Commissioner "that Government does not expect to be troubled with the settlement of disputes which may arise from their dealings with the hillmen."

As "the big firms", facing stiff competition from the Norwegian and Japanese box-makers, began "to work the timber business more directly through their own servants, and [were] tempted owing to want of timber elsewhere to extend their operations near the hills", they placed themselves in direct communication with the Abors, "to whom they have been compelled to pay blackmail to secure their employes from molestation". The managers complained to Lancelot Hare, the new Lieutenant-Governor, that

[...]these exactions have as a matter of fact increased and must go on increasing. The tribes in question have no central Government, consequently each village who come to know of a timber camp anywhere in their vicinity claims to be paid, and there is no finality to the toll we have to pay."

It was not only absurd but also illegal, said the managers' memorial, because if the forest beyond the Inner Line was the property of the Government, in principle no royalty could be paid to the Dobangs, Tadungs and Pasi-Minyongs. The Government should therefore push forth the police posts and assume direct control of the territory in question. Hare, who was entirely in agreement with the subordinate frontier officials and the mill managers that it was absolutely "inconsistent with the dignity and responsibilities of the Government that it should permit savages to extort money from British subjects in British territory", admitted that with a little force applied, the Abors would be "more inclined to shift the responsibility on to another village than to stand upon their rights." And yet, he conceded in the same breath, "it is not improbable that some extortion from the Miris will go sub rosa". There is no evidence to suggest that Hare's apprehensions were ill-founded.

41 The Chief Commissioner issued orders to this effect. Annual Report on the Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the Year 1903-04 (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1904), 7
42 'Memorial from the Sissi Saw Mills and Trading Company, Limited, and the Meckla Nuddee Saw Mills Company, Limited [to the Lieutenant-Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam]', in "Policy to be pursued in dealing with the Abors and other tribes inhabiting the hills to the north of the Dibrugarh Frontier Tract", Foreign Department, External-A Branch, June 1908, Nos. 33 – 38. [NAI]
43 Shuckburgh, North-Eastern Frontier of India, 12 mentions that in 1907 the Lakhimpur Deputy Commissioner encouraged the companies to stop payments of royalty on timber to the Abors.
44 J. E. Webster, Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department, No. 3923 J, 9 September 1907, in ibid.
Chapter Two

It is this trace of the illegal operative within the very structure of law that we shall be following in the subsequent sections. Troubling the conventional image of the pristine precapitalist primitives, we would pause to ponder whether the worlds of "law" and "no law" were not in effect two functional sectors of the same economy of extraction and enframing; whether the time of capital had not always been carrying the time of precapital within itself. Entrusted to straddle the centerline, the authorities invested much in the reconfiguration an older institution — the institution of pāsa, the second major mode of escalating capital's movement in the demarcated sector of precapital.

The Proper and the Proprietorial

Textbook-wise, pāsa was an annual payment that the British kept making throughout their regime to a number of the "neighbouring Hill tribes" in continuation of an Ahom custom. Frequently translated as "blackmail" in imperialist and nationalist histories alike, pāsa is usually seen as an instance of colonial concession to primitive savagery which in any way was a peripheral and negligible fact of frontier history.¹⁵ Let it be quickly clarified here that this, like much of what we read in the textbooks, is an awfully oversimplified and even misleading rendition of a very complex and critical strategy of the British Indian administration in its northeastern frontier. Far from being a dying trait of a meaningless medieval practice, pāsa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was a dynamic register of shifting relationships between the contending elements of an unofficial biography of capital. Seizing on the traces of the customary rights of some of the non-state space communities recognized by the Tungkhungia kings, the British Indian administration over the years built an intriguing network of control and constraint beyond its formal jurisdictional limits. What went by the name of pāsa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was in fact a strategic confusion of several discrete practices. Regrouped, restructured and partly invented by the British, this cluster of practices had at least three distinct tracks of exchange interlaced. We shall slowly try to untangle them.

The first of these tracks was closely related to something we have discussed at length in the previous chapter. The massive British reconstruction of "the Khelwarree System"¹⁶ during the initial years of their rule had some interesting implications for a number of

¹⁵ In the multivolume Comprehensive History of Assam, edited by H. K. Barpujari, "posa" does not even find an entry in the detailed index. This is quite representative of the prevalent historiography.

¹⁶ This odd term occurs in Moffatt Mills, Report, 3.
communities in the north Lakhimpur area. Here the *bohotia kehes* – the *kehes* made over by the Ahom kings to certain Dafla and Miri chiefs near the Gohain Kamla Ali in recognition of their local suzerainty⁴⁷ – used to pay a very substantial part, if not the whole, of the Tungkhungia share in their services and produces to the Dafla and Miri chiefs. In fact, even at the height of the third and final wave of the Moamaria uprising, the Swargadeo Hsohitponghpa Gaurinath reserved two-thirds of the *bohotia* revenue for these local suzerains.⁴⁸ Purandar Singha, the last Tungkhungia king before the dynasty was pensioned off from Upper Assam in 1838, recognized the Dafla claims over the revenues of the Choiduar (Nakrang duār, Boranga duār, Bor duār) and Bānskāta *mubals* (Kandhurahat duār, Dolahat duār, Molahat duār, Ohat duār), the Tarbatia and Panibatia Miri claims over the Lakhimpur *mubal* (Manmoti duār), and the Čārak and Ghāsi Miri claims over the Bordoloni *mubal* (Phulpani duār).⁴⁹ Indeed, during Purandar's reign, the collection of this revenue – mostly in grain, cotton cloths and salt – was somewhat formalized by allotting specific villages to specific “clans”⁵⁰. Even in the first British inventory of Dafla-Miri *posa*, drawn up in 1839-40, “each recipient of *posa* is entered individually by name, with the name of the Assamese ryot from whom he used to get his *posa* [and] the article due.”⁵¹

It is no wonder that the British chose to understand this payment of revenue as an extortion of “blackmail” by the “hill tribes”, given their preprogrammed and over-ethnicized understanding of the indivisible sovereignty of the Ahom state, to which they saw themselves as the sole, rightful successors. The persistent British portrayal of the collection of the *bohotia* revenue as an unfair and even unlawful exaction by the terrorizing “tribes” from the honest, poor, and ever-frightened “ryots” of the plains clearly indicate the anthropological impress of political economy. The exactions by the *posa*-receivers who were given jurisdiction over the cultivators of course triggered

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⁴⁷ Jenkins defined “bohooteahs” as “ryots set aside for [the hill chiefs’] service only.” F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General in the North Eastern Frontier, to H. T. Princep, Secretary to the State, Government of India, dated Gowahtty, 15 February 1840, in Foreign Department (F. C.), 9 March 1840, Nos. 172-175 [NAI]

⁴⁸ E. T. Dalton, Officiating Political Agent, Upper Assam, dated 19 March 1852, to the Agent to the Governor General, North Eastern Frontier, quoted in “‘Posa’ payable to certain Hill Tribes on the North Eastern Frontier”, Foreign Department, Political B, July 1877, Nos. 83 – 86 [NAI]

⁴⁹ Extract from the Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam in the Judicial Department, No. 718, dated 4 May 1885, in “Posa payment to the Hill Tribes of the Lakhimpur District”, Foreign Department, External B, June 1886, Nos. 96 – 100 [NAI]

⁵⁰ Letter to the Secretary to the Government of India, 11 November 1861, No. 77, in “Correspondence regarding the Political Relations with Native States”, File No. 424 AC (1861) [ASA]

⁵¹ Extract from the Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam in the Judicial Department, No. 718, dated 4 May 1885, in “Posa payment to the Hill Tribes of the Lakhimpur District”, Foreign Department, External B, June 1886, Nos. 96 – 100 [NAI]
evasions, flights and other forms of "avoidance protest" at times. But there is no substantial evidence to show that these revenue realizations were in any considerable way crueler than those carried out in the domains of the chaudhuris, zamindars or kheldars. As a matter of fact, in a rare moment of candor, an official publication admitted after scores of years,

Posa is often inaccurately called blackmail; but enquiry will show that it was paid in the times of the Assamese kingdom to most of the hill tribes, and was not an uncertain exaction depending on the capacity of the different hordes who might descend to levy it, but a definite revenue payment.

However, the status of the Dafla-Miri posa was almost deliberately inferiorized and informalized under the British. Far from recognizing the posa-receiving communities as creative elite agents within a shared state structure, the new British Indian bureaucracy found them alien, useless and troublesome. Seen through the thicket of new rules of sovereignty, all their revenue claims were bound to be translated as acts of unsanctioned violence and encroachment — as "blackmails".

Once the Ahom state was understood as a singularly ethnic project, the fiction of the late Ahom crisis easily explained these communities as intruders and usurpers. To the communities, nevertheless, the validity of their claims remained obvious. Down to 1840, they — not simply the male warriors, but also "their families" — regularly came down through their respective Dooars in the plains during the harvest time. In the vicinity of their bobotia villages, they would usually set up a

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53 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), 160-1. See also the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam's letter of the 9th September 1907, quoted in Shuckburgh, North-Eastern Frontier of India, 12n for a similar account.

54 It may not be irrelevant to notice the Scotland border experiences of the British in this connection. Historians of legal developments in Britain point out that much before the 1843 Libel Act or the 1861 Larceny Act, which are usually taken as the early reference points of the blackmail issue in the legal studies, the British statutes of 1567, 1587, 1601, 1722, and 1754 relate a different set of conditions of "blackmail". As Winder said, "Blackmail was originally the tribute exacted by free-booters in the northern border countries to secure lands and goods from despoilment or robbery. In the Elizabethan Statute which deals with the exactions in the northern countries, 'commonly there called by the name of blackmail', it is worthy of note that the person who gave 'money, corn, cattle, or other consideration, called blackmail' is guilty of felony equally with the robber or despoiler: the policy was to suppress blackmail by punishing the victim for being so timid as to submit to it instead of seeking the protection of the law." W. H. D. Winder, "The Development of Blackmail", The Modern Law Review, 5: 1 (1941), 24. James Lindgren. "Unraveling the Paradox of Blackmail", Columbia Law Review, 84: 3 (1984), 675 fn also mentions that blackmail "referred to mail, that is, tribute or rents, exacted in crops, work, goods, or a metal baser than silver (such as copper). This distinguished blackmail or black rents from white rents, which were tribute or rents exacted in silver."
"camp" to collect the sanctioned articles of *posa.*\(^{55}\) For two to three months these camps often functioned as temporary centers for exchange and commerce.

This system was humiliating and demoralizing to the Lakhimpur ryots, especially to the Bohotias; instead of despising the hill savages they looked up to them, imbibed their superstitions, adopted many of their customs, and were as servile as slaves to the chieftains, who gave themselves all the airs of masters over those from whom they collected "blackmail."\(^ {56}\)

This excerpt does not leave much for a nuanced interpretation. As the italicized section clarifies, the cultivators in the plains were normally expected to "despise" the savages in the hills. Such an expectation does not issue from merely an individual fancy or a state credo. The general course of human progress seems to remain suspended until the "ryots" wake up to the fact of their radical non-contemporaneousness with the "tribes". The proprietorial authority is not enough any more, it must coincide with the authority of the proper. That the "ryots" could "look up to" and indeed emulate the "tribes", supposedly a primordial formation, was an instance of unmitigated absurdity in the unilinear history of unceasing progress. The adversaries of *posa* invariably dwelled on the doubly corrupting nature of the practice: on the one hand, it accustomed the "tribes" to easy money; on the other, it destroyed the self-confidence of the "ryots". We shall come to this point soon, but before anything else, we must address the question of monetization.

On 3 November 1834, the Agent Thomas Campbell Robertson directed Adam White "to endeavour to effect a composition by which either a certain sum of money shall be annually paid in lieu of all demands, or else a certain quantity of various articles be collected for them at fixed points." He did not deny that "certain coercion would be necessary". But it was "quite impossible for Government for long to tolerate so barbarous an interference with its own territory." Levying *posa*, said the successor of David Scott, had become an annual event of "molestation and harassment" of the ryots which stood in the way of "the improvement of the pergunnahs." To this impassioned proposal the Calcutta authorities had the following to say:

> It is certainly an object of some importance to obtain a fair commutation of the claims for black-mail, which from their rude and complicated nature, are likely to interfere with

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\(^{55}\) "The "blackmail" was contributed by the ryots in cloths of their own manufacture, rice, pigs, fowls, dogs, daws, &c." See "'Posa', or 'blackmail', payable to certain hill tribes on the Assam Frontier": From the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No. 1792, 11 May 1876, in "'Posa' payable to certain Hill Tribes on the North Eastern Frontier", Foreign Department, Political B, July 1877, Nos. 83 – 86. [NAI]

\(^{56}\) *Ibid* (emphasis added)
the progressive improvement of the Bishenanath district, but Government is not prepared
to go to the length of having recourse to hostile measures to compel a compliance with
our wishes in this respect. The three tribes of Bhotees, Akas, and Duphlas possess a
right to levy black-mail according to a prescribed form from the Nowdoar and Chardoar
pergunnahs, which appears to have been formally recognised by Mr. Scott and we should
not be justified in setting it aside, unless because it does not happen to suit our interests;
besides which, however injurious the contrivance of the practice may be, it may fairly be
questioned whether a state of war entered into for the purpose of obtaining an
exemption from it, would not be fraught with still greater injury, both to ourselves, and
to the inhabitants of the districts concerned.

The voice of Calcutta was echoed in London. The Court of Directors wrote, “The
commutation ... would be highly desirable, but we disapprov[e] of all attempts to extort
by force the consent of the chiefs to such an arrangement.” Consequently, the local
authorities had to proceed with caution and initially they could reconfigure the
Tungkhungia paa procedures in only limited ways. “Remission”, as the British called it,
was the keystone of the Tungkhungia practice: “a sanction of 8 annas per poora on all
Khattonee lands was allowed on account of these dues to the tribes.” In the case of the
Dafla bokhias, they “received a remission of 2 rupees out of the 3 rupees capitation tax [;]
no drawback was allowed to the ryots generally.” When the capitation tax was abolished
and converted into an assessment on the land in 1841-42, with the explicit object of
“equaliz[ing] the burden to all classes of ryuts”, a remission of 4 annas per poora was
made on the Roopeet (rice) lands “to compensate the ryots for the double call made on
them.” This 4-anna remission was suggested by the Sadar Amin of Lakhimpur,
Brijonath (or Brajanath) Bhandari Barua.

57 Quoted in Foreign Department (F. C.), 18 January 1850, Nos. 73-76 [NAI]. In a few month’s time,
the Court again clarified its stand: “The principle of preserving existing interests should be faithfully
adhered to; but if the collection of blackmail by the chiefs themselves should be found incompatible
with the peace and good order of the country, it may become necessary to render compulsory that
commutation of the claim for a fixed money payment, which you have not yet been able to accomplish
with the consent of the chiefs.” India Political Department, 9 August, No. 17 of 1837, XIII, E/4/752
[OIOC]
58 H. Vetch, Political Agent, Upper Assam, to F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General in the North
Eastern Frontier, dated Dibrooghur, 24 October 1849, in Foreign Department (F. C.), 18 January 1850,
Nos. 73-76 [NAI]
59 Before 1841-2, revenue used to be collected by the capitation tax. The payment of this tax by each
male cultivator theoretically entitled him to cultivate as much as he wished. The Collector used to issue
a pottah for this. The kheldars received some remuneration for collecting the rents. Additional
payments included pensions and “the share of the head priest of the tribe”. The total expense of
collection was about 19.5%. Moffatt Mills, Report, 646
60 H. Vetch, Political Agent, Upper Assam, to F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General in the North
Eastern Frontier, dated Dibrooghur, 24 October 1849, in Foreign Department (F. C.), 18 January 1850,
Nos. 73-76 [NAI]
Soon after the overthrow of the Tungkhungias from Upper Assam, the district collector Hamilton Vetch had employed Brijonath to calculate the money value of the *bokotha* revenue claims, while he himself supervised a "temporary arrangement … with the Daflah tribes regarding the mode of collecting Black Mail." In 1839-40, Brijonath, it is said, "summarily investigated and recorded what each chief was in the habit of receiving and from whom." According to the registers drawn up by the Sadar Amin, 429 persons in this area were entitled to *posa* which was estimated at Rs 4933-2-1 in 1840. All of these *posa*-receivers were classified as Dafla and Abor chieftains. Apart from them, there were other community leaders tabulated as "Dhoba Meeris" and "Ghassie Abors and Meris" who held sway over "Seesee Domajee, the most eastern of Lakhimpur mehals". In a subsequent enquiry, their claims in this *mukul* were estimated at Rs 249-4-2, distributable amongst 42 Chiefs.

From Brijonath's report, the intricate contours of the Tungkhungia *posa* procedures became visible to the British authorities. Apart from the *bokothas*, it was found, "remissions had been made to others by the Assam Government for services rendered to the hill tribes, viz., to "Cotokies Boras" and in Bordolloni to a "Looriah Borwa" or Carbenakar [?]."

These persons were employed in communicating between the government officers and the hill tribes as messengers and interpreters. They possess a thorough knowledge of the language and customs of the tribes with whom they have to transact business, and can proceed into their hills and other villages without any fear of being molested.

Then there were the "Parowas", the residents of Bordoloni and Pattalipam, who specialized in gold washing and plying boats in the rapids of the Subansiri river. They were obliged to assist the Chirak and Panibotia Miris to cross the river in return for "a remission of Rs. 2/- each per annum." Allowances were also made to the Doms, who

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61 I could not locate the detailed figures for the Miri *posa* of Lakhimpur, but the Dafla *posa* figures of 1844 were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From the treasury of Tezpore to the Duphas of Char Dowar and Dowar</td>
<td>Rs 2494-0-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From the treasury of Luckimpore to the Duphas of Char Dowar and Dowar</td>
<td>Rs 1243-14-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From the treasury of Bunkotta with 24 <em>maunds</em> of salt to these latter in lieu of certain <em>haut</em> dues</td>
<td>Rs 392-1-6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Under Secretary, Letter No. 701, 20 April 1844, Foreign Department, in "Correspondence regarding the Political Relations with Native States", File No. 424 AC (1861) [ASA]

62 Political Letter from the President in Council 23 May 1838, No. 28, F/4/1749, File No. 71306 [OIOC]

63 Letter From the Collector of Luckimpore to the Agent to the Governor General in the North-Eastern Frontier, Dated Dibrugarh 24 October 1849, in Foreign Department (F. C.), 18 January 1850, Nos. 73-76 [NAI]
supplied fish to the visiting chiefs, or the blacksmiths, who molded their weapons. It was neither possible nor sensible to dismantle this vast structure of privileges and support at once. Services of the Kataks and the Parowas were retained by the British by assigning fixed salaries, while the allowances for the Doms and the blacksmiths were integrated into cash payments to the chiefs. But the tradition of remissions was definitely discontinued. The “ryots”, according to the British formula, were to be left uninvolved in the process. The “tribes” were required to deal directly with the authorities.

Complications emerged when some of the posa-receivers became ryots. The earliest recorded case is that of Ballum Gaum, a Dafla Chief, who took up some land in the frontier mouza of Kullungpore and cultivated the fields. Incidentally, Ballum was also the largest single receiver of posa in the mouza: if Brijonath’s estimation was to be followed, out of the total amount of Rs. 831-2-8 to be paid from Kullungpore, Ballum was exclusively entitled to Rs 312-8. This was too much of an anomaly for Holroyd, who reported with much unease, “the Gaum is a Government ryot in the Government soil, and it appears to me highly irregular, that as such, he should be permitted to collect possa (or blackmail) from the other ryuts.” But the Government, as it had made clear on several previous occasions, could not risk discontinuing the custom.

Therefore, while recognizing the money value of the Ballum Gaum’s posa as Rs 312-8, Holroyd still thought, “if a pension of 200 Rs were given to the Gaum instead of the possa payment, that it would be a desirable arrangement.” His immediate senior officer, Vetch, was even ready to propose a commutation of Ballum Gaum’s posa to Rs. 15 per month or Rs. 180 per year, “being something above half the sum now remitted to the ryuts on his account, and somewhat more than the average of what he has actually received from them during the last three years.” “In course of time”, Vetch also explained, “as this chief and others bring under cultivation wastes (which would otherwise remain such for generation in so scantily populated a country) the rents to be paid will gradually absorb the pensions to be received and thus render the arrangement

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64 E. T. Dalton, Officiating Political Agent, Upper Assam, dated 19 March 1852, to the Agent to the Governor General, North Eastern Frontier, quoted in “‘Posa’ payable to certain Hill Tribes on the North Eastern Frontier”, Foreign Department, Political B, July 1877, Nos. 83 – 86 [NAI]
65 C. Holroyd, Junior Assistant to the Agent to the Governor General in the North Eastern Frontier, to H. Vetch, Political Agent, Upper Assam, dated Dibrooghur, 11 September 1849, in Foreign Department (F. C.), 18 January 1850, Nos. 73-76 [NAI]
more advantageous to the Government." Jenkins fully endorsed Vetch’s suggestions and the metropolitan authorities approved their decision.

In all probability, for somebody like Ballum Gaum who “seems to have been able to realize little more than a third of the dues set down by the Sudder Ameen”, and who had at any rate an alternative source of living open (like many other Dafla chiefs “residing both at Goomeeree and Gowpore as Government ryutts”), this arbitrary compromise was not as grim as it could have been for the other, non-ryat posa-receivers up in the hills. But this is a typical example of how the long and protracted process of monetization of posa proceeded through several calculations and serendipities. Although monetization was always upheld as an assurance of regularization of posa, since the drawing up of Brijonath’s list, the British authorities consistently tried to reduce both the money amount and the number of posa-receivers. Throughout the eighteen forties, Vetch engaged himself on behalf of the Government in a series of local compromises. His success with several communities encouraged Jenkins to submit a proposal for making the commutation compulsory for all the posa-receiving “hill tribes.” The Government agreed to the proposal, “on the distinct understanding that it was not likely to produce any disturbances.”

In reliance on the experience and judgment of the local officers, who were of opinion that the time had come for making the commutation of these claims general and compulsory, we gave our approval to the measure; but we wish to receive a full report of all proceedings which take place in execution of it.

Finally in 1850, therefore, the Government decided “to commute the blackmail into a fixed annual payment.” Vetch had already found Brijonath’s calculations “rather high.” He and Holroyd in 1850-51, while “settling” the “Meeree Posa of Mehal Luckimpore” prepared “an entirely fresh list” of the posa-receivers, reducing the claims by “Rs 297-13-1

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66 H. Vetch, Political Agent, Upper Assam, to F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General in the North Eastern Frontier, dated Dibrooghur, 24 October 1849, in Foreign Department (F. C.), 18 January 1850, Nos. 73-76 [NAI]
67 F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General in the North Eastern Frontier, to T. J. Halliday, Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department, dated Gowahatty, 8 December 1849, in Foreign Department (F. C.), 18 January 1850, Nos. 73-76 [NAI]
68 See Michell, Report, 56. For an interesting account of Vetch’s way of “settling” the claims, see H. Vetch, Political Agent and Collector of Luckimpore District to F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General in the North-Eastern Frontier, No. 385, Dibrooghur, 30 December 1850, in “‘Posa’ payable to certain Hill Tribes on the North Eastern Frontier”, Foreign Department, Political B, July 1877, Nos. 83 – 86 [NAI]. Briefly, Imram Peshkar, “an intelligent agent”, was entrusted with several responsibilities. He, “having collected it [posa] from the ryots had it valued and issued to the several Gaums.” The measure was almost complete “over the whole of northern Luckimpore.” Vetch and (in his absence) his Assistant Holroyd personally supervised the entire process.
69 Political Despatch from the Court of Directors, No. 4, 14 January 1852 [NAI]
less than the amount stated in the original papers." Based on such modifications, a revised list was prepared in 1852 by Dalton and Bivar, "excluding persons who had failed to claim their posa", and realigning the claims of specific groups with specific subdivisional treasuries. In 1854, "the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal finally fixed the total of the commuted allowances [in Lakhimpur] at Rs 3161-6-11 per annum, which sum was payable amongst 469 chiefs."

However, the trick was somewhere else. By discontinuing the tradition of remission to the ryots, the British Government saved a substantial amount of money, which they chose to call "profit". The following table drawn by Vetch in 1850 says it all.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mehals</th>
<th>Blackmail payable to the Hill Tribes in 1850-1851</th>
<th>Remission forward made to the Ryots to meet the Blackmail demands but now collected by Government</th>
<th>Profit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chardoar</td>
<td>1274</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banskata</td>
<td>414</td>
<td>08</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luckimpore</td>
<td>843</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total settled</td>
<td>2532</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burdulloni paid in kind this year</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2818</td>
<td>08</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even greater figures are available for the situation in 1854. According to the Chief Commissioner, the total remissions amounted to Rs 4359-14-3, and the Government profit was Rs 1198-7-4. In Moffatt Mills' calculation,

The attraction of this list was, as Holroyd explained, it included "the names of no less than 56 Gams, which are entirely omitted in the original papers", although it reduced "the actual amount paid ... including all expenses of Kuttukies, Blacksmiths, Purwas, Dooms" by more than one-third. C. Holroyd, Junior Assistant to the Agent to the Governor-General, North-Eastern Frontier, to H. Vetch, Political Agent and Collector of Luckimpore District, Luckimpore, 2 May 1851, in "'Posa' payable to certain Hill Tribes on the North Eastern Frontier", Foreign Department, Political B, July 1877, Nos. 83 – 86 [NAI]

Extract from the Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam in the Judicial Department, No. 718, dated 4 May 1885, in "'Posa payment to the Hill Tribes of the Lakhimpur District", Foreign Department, External B, June 1886, Nos. 96 – 100 [NAI]

"'Posa', or "blackmail", payable to certain hill tribes on the Assam Frontier": From the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No. 1792, 11 May 1876, in "'Posa' payable to certain Hill Tribes on the North Eastern Frontier", Foreign Department, Political B, July 1877, Nos. 83 – 86 [NAI]

Captain H. Vetch, Political Agent and Collector of Luckimpore District to Jenkins, No. 385, Dibrooghur, 30 December 1850, in "'Posa' payable to certain Hill Tribes on the North Eastern Frontier", Foreign Department, Political B, July 1877, Nos. 83 – 86 [NAI]

"'Posa', or "blackmail", payable to certain hill tribes on the Assam Frontier": From the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No. 1792, 11 May 1876, in "'Posa' payable to certain Hill Tribes on the North Eastern Frontier", Foreign Department, Political B, July 1877, Nos. 83 – 86 [NAI]
The remissions to the Ryots to meet this demand amounted in the aggregate to Rupees 5217-0-8, the black-mail commutation allowance to the hill clans to Rupees 3000, so by the new arrangement under which the Ryots receive no remission but are exempted from the degradation of paying a tax to these savages, there is a saving to the State.\textsuperscript{75}

It is not known whether the "ryots" were delighted in being exempted from "the degradation of paying a tax to [the] savages", but the discontinuance of remissions certainly made a substantial dent on their savings.\textsuperscript{76} The "savages", alternatively, protested strongly against the proposed disassociation in the language of, if Dalton is to be trusted, "the joint proprietary right in the soil ... and to the services of the ryots":

In effecting this arrangement with the hill tribes, without exactly forcing it on them, Major Vetch, Captain Holroyd, and Lieutenant Bivar had many prejudices and difficulties to contend with the joint proprietary right in the soil of Luckimpore and to the services of the ryots which the hill tribes arrogated was what they were most proud and tenacious of. They talked of "my lands" and "my ryots" and they know that the substitution of stipends paid from the treasury will soon efface all traces of the connection which gave them a presumptive right to do so.\textsuperscript{77}

The thin line between consent and coercion was however successfully manipulated. In their Political Despatch of 15 December 1852, the Court of Directors "learn[ed] with satisfaction" the "primitives" were successfully pulled within the reach of the forces of inflation and market: "although the Duffla, Meree, and Abor tribes at first made strong objections to the commutation of their posa or black mail into a cash payment, 'they, with few exceptions, appear to be now quite contented with the arrangement'."\textsuperscript{78} Despite repeated applications, requests and protests from the communities, the 1854 posa sums - themselves a diminished version of the 1840 estimations - were never increased, but slowly reduced.\textsuperscript{79} In the case of the Dafla-Miri posa, through several instances of drastic

\textsuperscript{75} Moffatt Mills, \textit{Report}, 653

\textsuperscript{76} Dalton explained in a matter-of-fact way, "the remission of revenue to them ["our ryots"] on account of blackmail was found to be considerably more than the value of the Possa they were individually liable for, and the resumption of this remission will be pecuniarily a loss to them". Still he "did not doubt" that they would most "cheerfully submit to the exempt from the humiliation of being so domesticated over and in the case of the Bohotias of personal subjection to ignorant savages." Captain E. T. Dalton, Officiating Political Agent in Upper Assam, Collector in charge of Luckimpore to Lieutenant F. Jenkins, No. 162, Dibrooghur, 19 May 1852, in "'Posa' payable to certain Hill Tribes on the North Eastern Frontier", Foreign Department, Political B, July 1877, Nos. 83 - 86 [NAI]

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{78} India Political Department, North East Frontier 15 December No. 39 of 1852, LXIX, E/4/818, 462 [OIOC]

\textsuperscript{79} For the 1884 deputation of "a party of the Hazarikhowa Akas", see E. G. Colvin, Personal Assistant to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department, No. 12 T, Camp Nowgong, 11 November 1884, in "Attitude of the Kapaschor and Hararikhoa [sic] Akas", Foreign Department, External A, December 1884, Nos. 16 – 20 [NAI]
reduction, usually justified in the language of punishment and retribution, the 1840 amount of Rs 4933-2-1, which was brought down to Rs 2818-8-0 in 1850 and again to Rs 2244-12-8 in 1885, was “permanently reduced by Rs. 333-9-6” in 1917-18, and still “by Rs. 142-15” in 1918-9.

Coming back from his “friendly visit” in the “Abor” settlement of Membo in the winter of 1884, J. F. Needham, the newly appointed Assistant Political Officer at Sadiya, recorded an embarrassing experience:

From 5-30 pm until past 10 pm one incessant wrangling went on about the “posa”, and I was during that time constantly being accosted as follows, in a jeering tone, by men who had 4 annas or a rupee in their hands – “Look here, is this the amount of posa you have given me?” Previous to 1881 this village received Rs. 562 as Posa, ... but in 1881 it was suddenly reduced to Rs. 225-12, it then having been decided to give Bomjur Rs 75 of the Rs 301 sanctioned, and as no explanation of any sort was ever vouchsafed to the Abors at the time, they naturally consider themselves aggrieved, and consider that it is the fault of the officer stationed at Sadiya, and that he is responsible for the reduction. Bapok, the Gam, asked me pointedly what I had done with the balance. I assured them that I had given them every pice that had been sanctioned by Government, and I told them I would report the matter, and I now beg to request that the question whether it is politic to cut Rs. 75 out of the already very greatly reduced Posa to Membo for Bomjur, may be again discussed and settled.

In Membo, the residents explained to the officer with “the very greatest indignation” that “the amount has been constantly changing” since Captain Bivar’s time. “We now get less than half the amount that we used to,” said they, “although our village is nearly twice its size.” Needham, who had recently taken up the duties in the frontier, was evidently touched by the signs of acute hardship in Membo: “As far as I could find out, every fighting man received a share, and as there are some 800 at least in the village, you may imagine what the amount was which each man received!”

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80 Extract from the Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam in the Judicial Department, No. 718, dated 4 May 1885, in “Posa payment to the Hill Tribes of the Lakhimpur District”, Foreign Department, External B, June 1886, Nos. 96 – 100 [NAI]
81 “Annual Administration Report of the Western Section, North-Eastern Frontier, for the year 1917-18”, quoted in Annual Report on Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1917-18 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1918), 3
83 From the 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]
However, after reading Needham's report, it was categorically communicated from the office of the Chief Commissioner to the young member of the Bengal Police cadre "that the posa question cannot be reopened."

In dealing with savage tribes finality is of the greatest importance; an unequal distribution definitively settled is better than a more equal distribution which creates a feeling of unsettlement. ... How hard it is to satisfy barbarous tribes; how certainly their claims would grow as soon as any concession was made, which they could interpret into a sign of weakness. There are many arguments for and against the system of giving Posa. On the one hand, it sometimes affords the sole means we have of communicating with the tribes on our frontier; on the other hand, it generally tends to increase their belief in their own superiority and is looked on by them as a tribute. On the whole, it is a relic of the past and must be allowed to die out whenever any substitute for it can be devised. *The gross amount fixed by treaty cannot be decreased until an equitable opportunity arises, but assuredly it should never be increased.*

It might be worthwhile to dwell on Elliot's understanding of *posa* as "a relic of the past", especially as he mentioned it in the context of the "Abors". We are not repeating the instances of innovation already cited (the progressive conversion of the claims from kind to cash, the discontinuance of remissions, the delinking of the "tribes" and the "ryots" as well as of the issues of suzerainty and *posa* claims, and the unilateral reduction of the stipulated amount by the British). We are referring to the innovation of the Abor *posa* itself. This is our second track.

We have mentioned in the previous chapter that since the gradual expansion of the people known as Abors to the east of the Dihong, the Tungkhungias acknowledged their claims over the products of the river (mostly, gold and fish). However, unlike in the cases of the Dafla-Miri chiefs, no cultivating villager was allotted to the Abor leaders. Consequently, there was no tradition of "remission" or "allowances." No evidence survives to indicate that the Tungkhungia officials were interested in monitoring the relationship between the "Abors" and their subordinate "Miris", something the British

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84 From the Personal Assistant to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur, in "Report on the Abor Villages beyond the British Frontier", Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner, Assam, Foreign Department, January 1885 [ASA] (emphasis added)

85 "[In the eighteen twenties, they began to settle] on the slopes of the hills just above the plains; and the villages of Padu, Kumku, Membu, Mima Sipu, Silluk, Dambuk and Bomjur were formed, the last-named village, only, being in the plains some miles from the hills. As they spread to the east in this manner they came in conflict with the Mishmis and gradually drove them out. A few Mishmi villages, however, were allowed to remain by the Abors, but subject in every way to them." Captain W. R. Little, *Report on the Abor Expedition, 1894*, compiled for the Intelligence Branch of the Quarter Master General's Department in India (Simla: Printed at the Government Central Printing Office, 1895), 1.
were greatly concerned with. The "rights" of the Abor chieftains in the Meyong Hills over the neighboring Miri villagers, a number of whom began to take to settled cultivation since the second quarter of the century, were not mediated through the central Tungkhungia administrative structure.

As the British forced privation on the Meyong Hills settlements by encouraging the "slaves" to run away - an issue which we discuss in Chapter Six - the "mountaineers" were engaged in a series of "raids" on the villages under British protection for recovering their escapees. As the several British expeditions successively led by Vetch, Lowther, and Hannay were "ignominiously beaten back" by the Meyong warriors, the British in the early eighteen sixties determined to open out a road "throughout the line of country bordering on the hostile Abor Dooars" with the express intention of "having cut them off" from unmonitored communications with the plains. A chain of military posts were also planned along the road (although it is hard to ascertain if any, apart from the Poba post, were actually established). But all these measures called for an amount of money and labor which the Government was not ready to spend. The so-called Abor paoa emerged in this context, when in November 1862 the Government drew up a formal agreement with thirty-five Abor chiefs representing eight "khels or communities".

On the understanding that the communities would recognize the foot of the hills as "[t]he limit of the British Territory" and pledge "not to molest or to cross the frontier for the purpose of molesting residents in the British territory", they were promised one hundred iron hoes, thirty muareks of salt, eighty bottles of rum, two seers of Abkaree opium and two muareks of tobacco per annum. Explicitly, this was meant to enable them "to keep up a Police for preventing any marauders from resorting to the plains for sinister purposes, and to enable them to take measures for arresting any offenders." Similar agreements were signed with "the Abors of the Dehang Debang Doars" in

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86 See Chapter Six.
87 Sir S. C. Bayley, *Note on the Abor Expedition* (Secret Letter from India No. 182 of 3 October 1894), 26 December 1894, in *Burma-China Frontier Negotiations: Conferences at Foreign Office, 2nd September 1892 to 9th February 1894, Secret and Political Department, India Office, 2nd March 1894*, B68.
88 Aitchison (ed.), *Collection of Treaties*, Vol II, 248 gives the break-up as follows: 5 chiefs "on behalf of the community of Munkoo", 6 chiefs "on behalf of the community of Ramkong", 6 chiefs "on behalf of the community of Bokoong", 3 chiefs "on behalf of the community of Padannleh", 8 chiefs "on behalf of the community of Kemi" 1 chief "on behalf of the community of Lekang", 4 chiefs "on behalf of the village of Galong", and 2 chiefs "on behalf of the village of Ledoom").
89 The full English text of the agreement can be found as No. XCIII: "Agreement entered into by the Meyong Abors on 5th November 1862", in *ibid*, 245-9
1862,\textsuperscript{90} with "the Kebang Abors" in 1863,\textsuperscript{91} and finally with fourteen "representatives of the 12 Boor Abor tribes" in 1866, with varying amounts of articles promised.\textsuperscript{92} Very soon the value of the articles was converted into cash. In monetary terms, the distribution was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Settlement</th>
<th>Rupees</th>
<th>Annas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bor Abors</td>
<td>1096</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abors of Membo Village</td>
<td>562</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abors of Padu Village</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abors of Duku and Silli Villages</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pasi (Western) Meyong Abors</td>
<td>465</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abors of Kebang Village</td>
<td>393</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abors of Mankong Village</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abors of Rutang Village</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>3312</strong></td>
<td><strong>0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 1864, the names of the Mankong and Rukang chiefs were deleted from this list, citing their failure to turn up without notice. Abstraction reached its height between 1878 and 1880, when four separate "co-equal" sets of villages were imagined on the Meyong Hills landscape:

A new valuation was made of the villages of Membo, Padu, and Duku-Silli; Bomjur village was linked with Membo, and Kumku with Padu, and the three groups of villages thus formed were each allotted Rs 301 yearly as being co-equal in power and importance, while a fourth village, Silluk, was placed on a par with them, and given Rs 301 also. At the same time the Pasi Meyong and Kebang allotments were slightly altered, and that of Dambuk was separated from the share of the Bor Abors.

In other words, as the following tabular representation may clarify, four distinct sets of settlements – (i) Membo and Bomjur, (ii) Padu and Kumku, (iii) Duku and Sili, and (iv) Silluk – were brought on an imagined plane of equality, mathematically represented by the figure 301, without any reference whatsoever to their internal and mutual relations and self-understanding. The express intention of the Government was to create stakeholders "co-equal in power and importance". If compared to the preceding table, this chart also reveals another interesting feature: if the fees of the Katakis are deducted, which in any case were not meant for the pāsa-receivers, the total amount becomes Rs

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\textsuperscript{90} No. XCIV: ‘Agreement entered into by the Abors of the Dehang Debang Doars,–1862’, in \textit{ibid}, 249-251
\textsuperscript{91} \textit{Ibid}, 249
\textsuperscript{92} No. XCV: ‘Agreement entered into by the Boor Abor on the 5th of April 1866’, in \textit{ibid}, 251-252
3087 in place of Rs 3312. Abor posa was hardly “a relic of the past” – it was very much a register of the present.93

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rupees</th>
<th>Annas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bor Abors</td>
<td>831</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membo</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bomjur</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Padu</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumku</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duku</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silli</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silluk</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pasi Meyong Abors</td>
<td>465</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kebang</td>
<td>393</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dambuk</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bor Abor kotokis</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pasi Meyong kotokis</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>3312</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why the British, while explicitly recognizing the complete absence of a precolonial tradition for these “small stipends”,94 still chose to christen them posa is a matter we leave to further research (adding the fact that the same H. S. Bivar, responsible for preparing the 1852 Dafla-Miri posa list, was also the major figure behind the 1862 Abor agreement). But it is not difficult to see that by the eighteen sixties posa was becoming a generic name for the series of compromises through which the realm of the modern came to be defined, secured and structured in Assam. It was not possible to fashion a calculable and controllable domain of economy and “improvement” without negotiating with the claims, constraints and interruptions that the posa affairs represented. Therefore, it is no surprise that posa had to be repeatedly explained as a “a relic of the past” (Elliot), as a custom continuing from “time out of mind” (Vetch),95 as an irrational privilege enjoyed

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93 The tables and the citations are from ‘Extract from the Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam in the Judicial Department’, No. 718, dated 4 May 1885, in “Posa payment to the Hill Tribes of the Lakhimpur District”, Foreign Department, External B, June 1886, Nos. 96 – 100 [NAI]
94 “Posa”, or “blackmail”, payable to certain hill tribes on the Assam Frontier: From the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No. 1792, 11 May 1876, in “Posa’ payable to certain Hill Tribes on the North Eastern Frontier”, Foreign Department, Political B, July 1877, Nos. 83 – 86 [NAI]. A Bengal Government Report of 1865 explained the difference in this way: “The essential difference between ‘black mail’ and the annual allowances paid to the Abors is this: that in the one case the forbearance of the savage tribe is made by them conditional on payment of the stipulated allowance, and in the other the payment of the allowance is made by us conditional on the good conduct of the tribe. The one is initiated in an aggressive spirit, the other in a spirit of conciliation.” Quoted in Mackenzie, History of Relations of Government with Hill Tribes, 54
95 H. Vetch, Political Agent, Upper Assam, to F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General in the North Eastern Frontier, dated Dibrooghur, 24 October 1849, in Foreign Department (F. C.), 18 January 1850, Nos. 73-76 [NAI]
“from time immemorial” (Holroyd).\textsuperscript{96} Because it was through posa, more than anything else, that the compromises could be rationalized as taking place in a temporal outside, on the turf of history and customs, and did not actually belong to the domain of capital and its sentinel state. In 1865, we hear of the Government endeavors “to get the Chalikatta Mishmis to enter into an arrangement by which they were to receive a certain sum of “posa” from us, and in return engage not to attack our villages.”\textsuperscript{97} The arrangements came to nothing, but the effort indicates the validity of what we have been arguing. Let loose from its specific historical context, posa became the trope for the logics and claims which haunted but could not be contained within the rational systems of the economy and the law. These were impossible conditions, impermissible claims – and yet, they made the functioning of the law possible, they permitted the economy to operate.

\textit{Peace and Its Blackmailing}

William Minto was that kind of a tea planter who could easily put the Government in a fix without even realizing it. Hookanjoore, Towrock and Namsang were old gardens, opened by Bruce and handed over to the Assam Company in 1840.\textsuperscript{98} The Company’s local in-charge, J. P. Parker, felt that, surrounded as he was by “many ... wild people”, he needed to be generous with “presents and good treatment.” “A few courie shells and a buffaloe feast have established,” reported Parker in 1841, “a very amicable feeling with these people, which may be serviceable hereafter.”\textsuperscript{99} Since then, the Company continued to make a few annual payments amounting in all to “Rs. 200 or 250, and from time to time made the chiefs some small presents.”\textsuperscript{100} Neither the company nor the local

\textsuperscript{96} C. Holroyd, Junior Assistant to the Agent to the Governor-General, North-Eastern Frontier, to H. Vetch, Political Agent and Collector of Luckimpore District, Luckimpore, 2 May 1851, in “Posa’ payable to certain Hill Tribes on the North Eastern Frontier”, Foreign Department, Political B, July 1877, Nos. 83 – 86 [NAI]
\textsuperscript{97} Michell, Report, 100. Similar plans to “subsidize” the Nagas to maintain their own police (in the line of Abor posa) were also being discussed at the same time. H. Hopkinson, Agent to the Governor General in the North Eastern Frontier to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, No. 88, dated 5 May 1865, in “Outrages committed by the Angami Nagas”, Foreign Department, Political-A, July 1865, Nos. 48 – 53 [NAI]
\textsuperscript{98} Antrobus, History of Assam Company, 327, however, maintains that the Namsang garden was opened by Parker in 1841.
\textsuperscript{99} Assam Company, Report of the Local Directors made to the Shareholders, at A General Meeting, held at Calcutta August 11th, 1841 (Calcutta: Bishop’s College Press, 1841), 12-3
\textsuperscript{100} W. Minto, Managing Proprietor, Tingri Tea Estate, Debrooghur to Clarke, Deputy Commissioner, Luckimpore [date illegible], in “Tea Estates”, Proceedings of Government of Bengal, Revenue Department, January 1873, Nos. 104-6 [ASA]
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Communities were called to define these payments in the emergent terms of political economy. For the company representatives, it was more important to incur the goodwill of the neighbors than to determine whether the payments constituted a "rent" or a "subsidy", given the facts that even in the mid-sixties it used to take "seven days' hard riding" to go from Tingri Mookh to Towrock via Hookanjoore and that the workforce in these gardens was mostly locally recruited. The area certainly lay beyond the fiscal jurisdiction of the Government, but, as the district officer was to explain in 1873, the Assam Company obtained possession of them at a time when the Government of India, so far from entertaining the objections they now make to conferring grants of land on the borders of the Hill Tribes to European settlers, rather encouraged such settlements, and in fact they may be said to have initiated them in the case of these very tea gardens. Even so late as 1854, when it was urged from Seebsagor that "if settlers in this province are permitted to go beyond the ordinary jurisdiction of the courts except by special permission afforded under certain restrictions by Government, through the local authorities, it will be a constant embroilment", the desire of the Lieutenant-Governor was expressed that the local officers should not seek "to prohibit [plains?] persons from entering upon trading or agricultural speculations in the Naga Hills."104 The custom of making payments and gifts seems to have remained in force even after Hookanjoore and Towrock were sold to the Northern Assam Tea Company in 1865. The three gardens were eventually purchased by William Minto of the Tingri Tea Estate in 1871. Minto had been in the tea business for some time. But he was shocked to learn that what he had bought was not the land, but the right to work the land, and that too on the understanding of continuing the payments to the chiefs of the "Horoomithunias" (for Towrock) and the "Namsangias" (for Hookanjoore and

101 The late nineteenth-century official documents usually referred to these communities as the Sibsagar Nagas while identifying different "tribes" as Namsangias, Borduarias, Sangnois, Mithunias, Banferas, Tabloongs, Jaktungs, and Moolungs. Cf. Mackenzie, History of Relations of Government with Hill Tribes, 100
102 Antrobus, History of Assam Company, 140
103 "[T]he Assam Company’s gardens of Hookunjooree and Teepum, in the Naga Hills, have been maintained throughout, and extended by imported and local laborers. These gardens are now the property of the Northern Assam Company. These gardens are situated within easy distance of the Booree Dehing river. The village paths leading to them are in very bad condition, but sufficient to enable people to travel along. The paths were cut to enable the Tea to reach the river." Report into State and Prospects of Tea Cultivation, xviii
104 "Mr. Minto’s Claims to the Garo Hills Gardens", Proceedings of the Hon’ble the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Political Department, April 1873, File 29 [ASA]
105 Antrobus, History of Assam Company, 139-40
106 He owned at least five tea gardens in 1863 in the Sibsagar district jointly with P. Daguid and H. Kuarrils. See Map of the Tea Districts of Assam. Compiled in the Office of Colonel Henry Hopkinson, Commissioner & Governor General’s Agent. North Eastern Frontier. Scale 4 Miles = 1 Inch. (1863) [Bodleian Library, Oxford]
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Namsang). As he rushed to consult the district authorities, he was plainly told that the said tracts could not be considered as “British territory”. Minto found this a rather strange conclusion, seeing that during the same year Government had received a very considerable revenue from the sale of the rubber extending up to Patkai range, and also had elephant traps at Nam Chick Poong, fully six days' journey further into the interior than the garden in question.

Minto wanted to know for sure what would be the boundary between the British and the Naga territories and on what basis that would be determined. He wondered how Clarke, the Deputy Commissioner, could allow a Naga chief to deal with a property as owner which has been held by other persons for 40 years, has been formed at their expense, and derives its present value from the money that has been expended upon it.

The Government, for which protection of private property rights was the final ideology, had no publicly defensible logic. It could not deny that it had been receiving large revenues from the sale of the transborder rubber; it was actually sending kheddah parties further inland; and moreover, it had been encouraging companies and individuals to work coal and timber in the unsurveyed areas. At the same time, it could not also risk allowing the capitalist his textbook rights in this frontier, especially because the rapid encroachments of the planters along the Lakhimpur and Sibsagar borders since 1869 had already caused severe discontent among the local communities.107 Minto had opened a Pandora's Box. Indeed, Minto's letters to the Government and the letters which his letters forced different Government officials to write provided the immediate epistolary context of the Inner Line regulation.

But it is perhaps more amusing to see how readily the indomitable assertor of bourgeois rights and liberties agreed to pay “an annual subsidy or blackmail” to the “savages.”108 The Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur, while agreeing in principle that there ought to be some money remittances to the aggrieved chiefs, contended that the proposed payment should be by way of an annuity or indemnity to the Chiefs, terminating after a time, and not by way of a perpetual annual payment, which might be inconvenient and inconsistent for

107 Mackenzie, History of Relations of Government with Hill Tribes, 97-8
108 W. Minto, Managing Proprietor, Tingri Tea Estate, Debrooghur to W. S. Clarke, Deputy Commissioner, Luckimpore [date illegible], in "Tea Estates", Proceedings of Government of Bengal, Revenue Department, January 1873, Nos. 104-6 [ASA]
time to come, when these very tribes will be as much under control as the ordinary ryot population of the plains.\textsuperscript{109}

Interestingly, the Chief Commissioner sharply objected to this proposal. Keatinge explicitly wished the payment to be modeled on \textit{pəsa}:

\[\text{[T]he payment should be an annual and permanent one. ... [M]ake the payment annual, and subject to the condition of good conduct on the general principle, applied so universally in this Province, of paying compensation to the hill tribes for their claims on the people of the plains which we prevent their enforcing themselves. The Namsangias may not be a tribe from whom we expect ill behaviour, but at the same time there being no special reason to the contrary the Chief Commissioner would prefer to retain this pledge for their good behaviour.}\]

\textit{Pəsa}, finally, became a model for blackmailing. And that this was not a purely theoretical formulation became evident in 1913-14 when, on an instance of failure of the community chief to turn up on demand, “the annual subsidy which [he] receives on account of the lease of the Tourok tea garden” was withheld for one year.\textsuperscript{110}

Out of their “own free-will and consent”, the Namsang and Borduar chiefs bound themselves to the terms of an 1874 agreement,\textsuperscript{111} which stipulated that the Namsang chief would be receiving Rs 450 per year from Minto for ceding “the rights of the landlord” over the concerned tracts.\textsuperscript{112} However, it was soon clarified that the annual payment of Rs 450 “is to cover claims not only in respect of the gardens of Hookanjooree and Namsang, but of all the tract of country which will come within the “Inner Line” and over which the Namsangias have hitherto exercised rights.”\textsuperscript{113} When in May 1889, citing his customary rights acknowledged by the Tungkhungia representatives, the Namsang chief Rangbang, applied for a grant of rent-free land between the Nabangkhowa Pathar and the Buri Dihing River which the British had by now encouraged their \textit{nəs} to occupy, the Government disallowed his application on the

\textsuperscript{109} Deputy Commissioner of Lukhimpoor to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No. P 4, Debrooghur, 25 February 1874, in “Surrender of a Tract of Country by Nagas”, Foreign Department, Political-A, May 1874, Nos. 219 – 223 [NAI] (emphasis added)

\textsuperscript{110} Annual Report upon Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1913-14 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1914), 3

\textsuperscript{111} For the prompted texts of the declaration made by Oangbang Namsangia Khunban, representing the Namsangias, and Ooanglatt, “on behalf of the Bordooaria Khunban”, see “Surrender of certain lands by the Namsang Nagas”, Foreign Department, Political-A, August 1874, Nos. 216 – 218 [NAI]

\textsuperscript{112} In the 1860s the Borduarias and the Namsangias became separated, with the latter “successfully keeping the right with them”. Although the Borduaria chief made a counterclaim during the 1874 Agreement, endorsed by Clarke, the Chief Commissioner didn’t entertain the demand.

\textsuperscript{113} “Hukunjuri and Namsang Tea Gardens”, Foreign Department, Political-A, July 1875, Nos. 87 – 89 [NAI]
ground that "the Nagas receive an annual payment of Rs. 450 in lieu of any rights they thought they had to any lands within the Inner Line."114

Ten years later, the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur said in reference to the people of Namsang and Borduar:

Both tribes are independent, but for all practical purposes they are controlled by, and obey the orders of, the Deputy Commissioner. ... [T]he Borduaria Raja holds two hundred bigas of rent-free land near Jaipur, while the Namsangia Raja is paid Rs. 450 a year on account of the Hukanjari seed garden, which belongs to the Jaipur Tea Estate. Thus, either the Raja can very easily be punished if necessity arises, and, as a matter of fact, the Namsangia Raja’s subsidy for one year was recently withheld, because he did not come in when ordered to do so.115

Two strikingly similar agreements were repeated with the people of Namsang, Kongan, and Jaktung by the Assam Company in 1881 when in return for an annual payment of Rs 180, it ensured its exclusive right to work coal, timber and bamboos in a vast “outer” area.116 Interestingly enough, in the 1881 documents, signed in the presence of the Deputy Commissioner A. E. Campbell, the payment was called “a yearly rent”, indirectly acknowledging the proprietary rights of the communities. Like Parker in the case of the Hookanjoore tea garden, a certain Mr. Malcolm of Calcutta was said to have started this arrangement in 1849 from whom the Assam Company “purchased these rights” after a while. “[N]otwithstanding the framing of the Inner Line Regulation, the Assam Tea Company has continued to quarry coal from these mines, unmolested by the Nagas and without objection by the officers of Government.” The Chief Commissioner further admitted, “Unquestionably, the acquisition or accrual of all such rights is expressly barred by section 7 of the “Inner Line” Regulation, V of 1873.” The Government did “not recognise any right of the Nagas to minerals, holding the view that these must be considered to belong exclusively to the paramount power, and therefore to the Government of India.”

However, mumbled S. C. Bayley, “The arrangement, though not sanctioned by either district authorities or by Government, has been, as a matter of fact, working smoothly for some thirty years.”

114 Annual Report upon Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the Year 1889-90 (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1890), 6
115 Quoted in Annual Report on the Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the Year 1900-1901 (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1901), 10
116 See ‘Two Agreements with the Kongan, Jaktung and Namsang Nagas’, in “Renewal of leases granted to the Assam Tea Company of two coal-fields in the Naga Hills”, Assam Secretariat, Revenue Proceedings-A, December 1893, Nos. 89-162 [ASA]
The Assam Company now propose to work the coal on a somewhat extended scale, a
change which may induce the Nagas to claim an extended scale of compensation, and
this might possibly, though under Mr. [John] Philips’s management not probably, lead to
difficulties. The Company wish the Government, in consideration of their paying a
nominal rent, and thus acknowledging the interest of the Government as paramount
power in the minerals, to recognise officially their hitherto unauthorised arrangement
with the Nagas.117

Posa as a gloss for rent: this is the third track. “Rent”, coming from an esteemed tradition
of classical political economy, implied proprietary rights – rights which could never
belong to the “savages”. (In the Dafla language— exclaimed a British linguist in 1851 –
“[v]erbs expressive of possession … appear to be wholly wanting!”)118 Nevertheless, access
to the resources – to the “land”, to use political economy’s gloss in turn – could not
begin without these acts of exchanges, these “royalties”, “allowances”, “stipends”,
“pensions”, “subsidies”, “compensations”, and “blackmails”. The missing idiom of rent
helps us to understand the massive translational indecisiveness about posa in the British
archive. Some of the communities at least distinctly understood when the function of
new posa precisely in this sense. When Trotter traveled to the western Dafla villages to
prospect for coal in 1872, “[t]he Chiefs, Pareng and Kaleng, told Major Trotter that if the
Government used their coal mine they should expect Rs 200 as rent, as they were not in
receipt of ‘posa’ from us.”119

The largest amount of posa was always paid to the “Bhooteah Rajahs” in the northern
frontier of Darrang. It was also the most constant amount through the years of reduction
and discontinuance. We have already mentioned in Chapter One about the 1844
settlement of the Kuriapara Duar. The control of Kuriapara was crucial for monitoring
the Lhasa trade. “In 1809 this trade amounted in value to two lakhs of rupees, even
although Assam was then itself in a most unsettled state.”120 The repeated directives of
the East India Company Directors to explore the unknown markets of Tibet and its
dependencies since the mid-eighteenth century121 and the hopes raised by George Bogle’s

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117 S. O. B. Risdale, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner, Assam to the Secretary to the Government
of India, Home, Revenue and Agriculture Department, No. 3242, dated Shillong, 4-12 December 1879,
in “Renewal of leases granted to the Assam Tea Company of two coal-fields in the Naga Hills”, Assam
Secretariat, Revenue Proceedings-A, December 1893, Nos. 89-162 [ASA]
118 “Mr. Robinson’s Note on the Dafllas and Peculiarities of their Language”, File No. 420 AC (1851)
[ASA]
119 Preliminary Notes on Daphlas (Simla: Intelligence Branch, Queen Majesty’s Government, c 1897), 8
120 Mackenzie, History of Relations of Government with Hill Tribes, 15
121 Schuyler Cammann, Trade through the Himalayas: The Early British Attempts to Open Tibet
mission\textsuperscript{122} vitally shaped the decision of taking a “lease” of the Kuriapara Duar from the Sat Rajas of Tawang at the rate of Rs 5000 per year.\textsuperscript{123} Along with the barter claims of the Sat Rajas of Rupa and Shergaon,\textsuperscript{124} and the revenue claims of the Thebengia and Ruprai chiefs in the lowland villages in Charduar (both of which were close to what we have discussed as the first track), the lease money was classed and calculated as “posa” in the official register. While the money value of the Charduar chiefs’ claims was drastically brought down from Rs 2526-7-6 to Rs 1740 in 1844,\textsuperscript{125} the Tawang chiefs’ claims were never interfered with over almost a century,\textsuperscript{126} although by the second decade of the twentieth century, the officials took pleasure in thinking that the Tawang paa originated in “their quite groundless claim to land in the Mangaldai subdivision”.\textsuperscript{127} It became increasingly convenient for the evolving self-image of the State to believe that its admissions of such “groundless claims” had been motivated only by its commitment to

\textsuperscript{122} Within ten days of the signing of the 1774 peace treaty with the Bhutias Warren Hastings deputed George Bogle on an embassy to visit Teshoo (Panchen) Lama of Tibet. Bogle reached Tibet after six months, met and made friendship with the Lama, but before this personal relationship could be exploited by the Company, both Bogle and the Lama expired within next five years. In 1783, Hastings took another chance of sending Samuel Turner, Samuel Davis and Robert Saunders to Tibet via Bhutan, apparently to congratulate the reported re-incarnation of the Grand Lama. But nothing came of it.\textit{Ibid, Ch 4}


\textsuperscript{124} The Charduar Sat Rajas unfailingly expressed their rights in terms of “begging” or “giving tang”. Customarily, giving chilli peppers to the lowland ryots entitled them to receive rice in return. In 1835, it was reported that they “prefer hawking about their goods from village to village, to attending a regular mart”. See Matthie,\textit{Report on the District of Darrang}, 10. The acute shortage of food-grains in the uplands after the British rendered the older spatial order of circulation dysfunctional presumably forced the Sat Rajas to become increasingly extortive. See\textit{Annual Report upon Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1891-92} (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1892), 12. However, in 1900-01, “giving tang” was expressly acknowledged to be a “peculiar system of barter” and the Chief Commissioner Henry Cotton did not find any “serious grievance” among the Kacharis of Kamrup and Darrang on this ground.\textit{Annual Report on the Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1900-01} (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1901), 7. See also Chapter Five.

\textsuperscript{125} “Posa”, or “blackmail”, payable to certain hill tribes on the Assam Frontier: From the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No. 1792, 11 May 1876, in “‘Posa’ payable to certain Hill Tribes on the North Eastern Frontier”, Foreign Department, Political B, July 1877, Nos. 83 – 86 [NAI]

\textsuperscript{126} Although in 1891-2, when influenza was raging virulently in the Bhutan hills, and claimed many victims among the chiefs, “the posa list underwent an unusual number of alterations in the names of the persons to whom posa is paid,” the total amount does not seem to have been reduced.\textit{Annual Report upon Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1891-92} (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1892), 13

\textsuperscript{127} The Political Officer, Western Section, North-Eastern Frontier, quoted in\textit{Annual Report on Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1914-15} (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1915), 2-3
maintain peace and to save “the timid Assamese” ryots.\footnote{"Posa", or “blackmail”, payable to certain hill tribes on the Assam Frontier: From the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No. 1792, 11 May 1876, in “Posa payable to certain Hill Tribes on the North Eastern Frontier”, Foreign Department, Political B, July 1877, Nos. 83 – 86 [NAI]}

The genealogies of the ryots in Assam will be thrashed out in the next chapter. Here we discuss the self-image of the State as an honest victim of barbaric blackmailing.

The word blackmail is of crucial interest to our present discussion, not only because of the several semantic reversals that it contains, but also because quite candidly it brings the question of market back into the discussion of peace: a not-so-legal and not-so-moral market, where the State bought peace from those who were allegedly ignorant of what peace was. Following the signing of the 1862 Abor agreements, Hopkinson wrote to Bivar in much hope that “the money will indeed be well spent if we can purchase security to the inoffensive people of the plains.”\footnote{Quoted in ibid.}

Probably it is not coincidental that such foregrounding of peace as a purchasable condition - a condition both internal to and causative of market relations - ostensibly took place in the annual habits or fairs that the British took special care to establish to encourage trading habits among the “savages.”\footnote{Although negligible in terms of the value of total transactions, the annual fairs at Udalgiri, Kerkaria (later Khagrapara), Daimara, Subankhata, Darranga, and most importantly Sadiya were zealously supervised and meticulously reported upon by the British officials from the 1870s. Primarily calculated to bring the sector of “precapital” into a structured conversation with the sector of “capital”, these fairs also functioned as the site where the annual posas of the authorized communities were delivered by the district authorities.}

As we have already noted, giving posa, rather than receiving it, actually became a form of blackmailing: the posa-receiving groups were held responsible for the acts of their own and of the communities surviving further inland.\footnote{See the letter from Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur, No. 81-For., 27 February 1896, in ‘Attitude of the Bor Abors, and proposals to raise the blockade against the Passi Meyongs and Chulikata Mishmis’, Foreign Department, External-A, May 1896, No. 65 [NAI]} It was the singular mechanism through which the population outside the limits of the British law could be held by the Government in ransom. As early as 1844, Gordon clearly formulated the idea. “I have always considered it derogatory to our Government yielding to such demands as were extorted from the Assam Rajahs”, said Gordon. But if indeed the Court of Directors were firm to continue “the custom of several of the hill tribes drawing their supplies from the plains, and receiving a share of the revenue”, he would rather advocate the system of granting an allowance to the Chiefs or Rajahs, in lieu of the black-mail, and thus although leaving them nominally independent, making them really dependent upon our bounty, and thereby purchasing their good will and forbearance towards the subjects [i.e. “ryots”] of Government, which will materially tend to the happiness,
security and prosperity of the latter, and eventually lead to the civilization of these rude and barbarous races. They will likewise form a barrier to encroachments from more distant and more savage tribes ... 132

We would not be mistaken in taking these lines as the general mission statement of the British pāsa policy. Apart from the occasional measures of conditionally “blockading” the communities from the valley trade, withholding the pāsa payments of the “offenders” was the singularly effective device to bring the untaxed under submission. We hold no brief for understanding pāsa as the single key to the concerned communities’ survival. But given the violent disjuncture in the traditional spatial sequence of circulation instituted by the British (see Chapter One, Chapter Five), it seems reasonable to deduce that the worth of the pāsa money increased sharply over time.

This inference is indirectly supported by the fact that most of the experiments testing the elasticity of control through pāsa took place in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The communities’ “dependence upon the Government bounty” increased as the British steadily occupied the strategic nodes of trade and expedition routes, progressively monitored human mobility, and encouraged the “slaves” of the communities to run away. Of course, in 1837, when “some Hill Dufflahs” were reported to have attacked “the village of a Dufflah Chief long resident within our territory”, Jenkins tried “the suspension of the blackmail until the prisoners are released and satisfaction afforded.” 133

In 1840, on another occasion, Vetch suggested to his Sub-Assistant “that the other hill Meerees receiving blackmail should be made to cooperate in chastising the aggression.” 134

But the efficacy of the measure became sharpened only after the British could ensure that not much choice was left to the communities.

After an “abortive expedition” in December 1883, an indefinite blockade was imposed on the Kapaschor Akas. When the rebels were forced to submit in 1888, “[i]t was decided that the tribe was not to receive pāsa for two years, and then only provided that their conduct during the interval had been satisfactory.” 135 In 1889, while seriously

132 J. T. Gordon, Assistant to the Agent to the Governor General, Durnung, to F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General in the North Eastern Frontier, dated Tezpore, 13 February 1844, in Moffatt Mills, Report, 170 (emphasis added).
133 The Court enthusiastically authorized this measure. India Political Consultations 19 September, No 53 of 1838, XVIII, F/4/757 [OIOC]
134 H. Vetch, Political Agent, Upper Assam, to Driver, Sub-Assistant, Mouza of Dhuwmolzee, dated Luckimpore 8 February 1840, in Foreign Department (Political), 9 March 1840, Nos. 172-175 [NAI]
135 Notes on the North-East Frontier of Assam, in continuation of Captain St. John Michell’s Report (Topographical, Political and Military) on the North East Frontier of India (Shillong: Eastern Bengal and Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1907), 16
evaluating the pros and cons of a possible expedition against the “Abors”, Needham calculated that

Kebang receives Rs93 yearly as paxa, and so may hold aloof, and remain neutral, in the event of our attacking Yomsing, and if it does so, Riga may be required to follow suit, for the Kebang village commands the pass to the lower hills and plains from the northward, and its people are alleged to jealously forbid their kinsmen of Riga from visiting any village, let alone the plains, to the southward of them (Kebang).136

A British incision on the complex local networks of circulation and loyalty, paxa became an instrument of significant power. The art of governance was delicately poised between the maintenance of its regularity and the repetition of its conditionality. In 1898-99, “no paxa was paid to any of the hill Daflas on the Darrang frontier, as two of the coolies who had absconded in 1896 from the Dikrai tea estate were still detained in the hills.” Even the villages who asserted that the coolies were detained in distant villages further to the north were denied payment.137 In 1901-02, in the wake of a reported abuse of an agar mulhalder by the Daflas, the authorities imposed a fine of Rs 100 on the offenders “until payment of which the disbursement of their paxa was ordered to be discontinued. The fine was paid up immediately.”138

There were of course different styles of exercising the control through paxa, varying with the perceived nature of the “crimes”. In many cases a warning sufficed, as in the 1900 imbroglio involving the rubber magnet Raibahadur Meghraj Kothari and certain “Miri Pathar Daflas” who had captured and detained Meghraj’s five Nepali employees alleging “that they were tapping rubber in Dafla territory which was closed to them.” While the Nepalis were “afterwards restored through the intervention of a Dafla gam[Dewa Gaum] in receipt of paxa from Government,” the Deputy Commissioner still “warned the Daflas when paying their paxa [next year] that a repetition of the offence would lead to the stoppage of the allowance.”139 In some other cases, where the British or their adored subjects were not caught on the wrong foot, a temporary stoppage was often the rule. In March 1902, the Daflas of the Banskotia Duar in Lakhimpur drove off the buffaloes of a Nepali herdsman. The posa of Rs 60-9-3 payable to the Tehi Gaum was stopped for one

136 J. F. Needham, the Assistant Political Officer at Sadiya to J. J. S. Driberg, the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur, No. 160, Sadiya, 15 April 1889, in “Raid committed by Passi Meyong Abors on the British Territory. Payment of ‘Posa’ suspended pending surrender of perpetrators”, Foreign Department, External A, December 1889, Nos. 163 – 188 [NAI]
137 Notes in continuation of Michell’s Report, 21
138 Ibid, 23
139 Ibid, 22-3
year.\textsuperscript{140} The Nida Gaum captured some plains Daflas, hence "the posa of all Daflas visiting the Darrang district was stopped pending the recovery of the captives" although the measure did not appear to have much effect\textsuperscript{141} Posa of the Kapaschor Akas was similarly stopped between 1883 and 1888.\textsuperscript{142} At the slightest instance, the subordinate officials pleaded a stoppage, but the higher authorities usually favored a more cautious way.\textsuperscript{143} Discontinuance was deemed as an extreme measure which should be avoided as far as possible. In 1891-2 it was reported that the "Abor" settlement Ledum

\begin{quote}
has been struck off our list of posa-receiving villages by order of the Chief Commissioner for its complicity in the murder of our Hilonimur Miri subjects in March 1889. Rs. 58-2, therefore, out of the sanctioned Passi Meyong posa have been recredited to Government, and this sum will not be drawn in future."
\end{quote}

After the alleged capture of three Miris by the Bomjur people in 1892 and the attack on the military police patrols by the warriors from Dambuk and Silluk in 1893, Needham and Maxwell led a ruthless operation against these three settlements and against Damro. The expedition ended in 1894, but the villages were never to get back their posa rights.\textsuperscript{145} The importance of the Abor posa was gradually undermined as the British were in a position to set up strong military posts at Nizamghat and Bomjur by 1881\textsuperscript{146} and to

\begin{footnotes}
\item[140] Ibid, 23.
\item[141] Annual Report on the Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1902-03 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1903), 7
\item[142] Annual Report upon Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1889-90 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1890), 4
\item[143] For example, in 1889, the sub-divisional officer of Mangaldai received information "to the effect that a large number of Thibetans, including some officials, had gone from the Khampa country to recruit the Thibetan army on the Sikkim frontier". The local authorities were thinking whether this could be used as an excuse to stop the payment of posa to the Towang Bhutias. A number of notes and telegrams circulated between Mangaldai, Shillong and Calcutta to ascertain the location of this Khampa country: whether it was in Bhutan, Tibet or Sikkim. As the Foreign Department Under-Secretary retorted in a note dated 24 January 1889, "I cannot understand why the Bhutias should be fined for Tibetan officials joining a Tibetan army." "Report by Sub-Divisional Officer of Mangaldai of Tibetans having gone from the Khampa country to recruit the Tibetan army in Sikkim. Proposal to stop payment of 'posa' to Towang Bhutias in consequence rejected", Foreign Department, External A, February 1889, Nos. 75 – 78 [NAI].
\item[144] Annual Report upon Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1891-92 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1892), 15. The text of the official order is available in Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Foreign Department (A), August 1891, File Nos. 39-49 [ASA]
\item[145] A. Hamilton, In Abor Jungles of North East India (New Delhi: Mittal, 2003), 38-39. In 1905, when Williamson succeeded Needham as the Assistant Political Officer at Sadiya, the Passi Meyongs again petitioned for the renewal of posa. But it was not granted. Annual Report on the Frontier Tribes of Eastern Bengal and Assam for the Year 1905-06 (Shillong: Eastern Bengal and Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1906), 2
\item[146] "The Abor tribe. Occupation of Nizamghat and Bomjur," Foreign Department, A-Political-E, October 1882, Nos. 200 – 231 [NAI]
\end{footnotes}
enforce compulsory disarmament of all "hill tribes" by 1891.\textsuperscript{147} Enormous and increasing production of topographic and ethnographic data about the communities further helped the Government in determining its discreions. The Miripathar Dafla \textit{posa}, "amounting to about Rs 800", was stopped in 1905 after ascertaining the chiefs' personal involvement in 1903 in an attempt to carry off four British subjects and seven guns from an elephant stockade on the Bihmari river.\textsuperscript{148}

In fact, \textit{posa} itself provided a major mode of generating and classifying information. If the awarding of \textit{posa} had granted the British an access into the yet-unexploited territories beyond their formal jurisdiction, the process of verifying the \textit{posa} claims allowed them to enter the yet-unknown domains of customs and histories. "[I] have noted all who are sons, nephews, or heirs at law to deceased Gams", said Holroyd in 1851.\textsuperscript{149} Information about the complex lineages of Chiefs' families, the baffling connections between different members within a community ("Amongst the Daphlas ... in some cases even slaves receive [\textit{posa}] payment", exclaimed an officer in 1915\textsuperscript{150}), and the perplexing associations of groups such as the Abors and the Miris could now be procured, preserved and processed for ceaseless monitoring. The annual event of \textit{posa}-presentation offered a much-awaited moment for knowing what was going on in the hills: the officers specifically quizzed the receivers about the prevailing conditions of health in the hills, news of the further inland communities, and possibilities of routes and resources. When the residents of Pasi and Kebang could not come to receive their \textit{posa} during 1870-2, "owing to rumoured sickness", and requested the Deputy Commissioner to send up the money, he declined saying, "it would be establishing a bad precedent, for besides giving the "posas", the great desideratum is the [sic] holding personal intercourse with these tribes."\textsuperscript{151}

The \textit{posa}-receivers were the new interpreters. They had to translate the demands of the British Indian administration to its distant non-state space neighbors. From finding

\textsuperscript{147} Annual Report upon Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1891-92 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1892), 1-3
\textsuperscript{148} Shuckburgh, North-Eastern Frontier of India, 7
\textsuperscript{149} C. Holroyd, Junior Assistant to the Agent to the Governor-General, North-Eastern Frontier, to H. Vetch, Political Agent and Collector of Luckimapore District, Luckimapore, 2 May 1851, in "'Posa' payable to certain Hill Tribes on the North Eastern Frontier", Foreign Department, Political B, July 1877, Nos. 83 – 86 [NAI]
\textsuperscript{150} The Political Officer, Western Section, North-Eastern Frontier, quoted in Annual Report on Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1914-15 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1915), 2-3
\textsuperscript{151} Major W. S. Clarke, Deputy Commissioner, Luckimapore, to the Personal Assistant to the Commissioner of Assam, No. 2P, Debrooghur, 9 May 1872, in "Annual Meeting of the Deputy Commissioner, Luckimpoor, with the Abor tribes", Foreign Department, Political-A, August 1872, Nos. 139-141 [NAI]
“stolen articles”\textsuperscript{152} to recovering captured \textit{rhoa}s, they were required to assist the everyday functioning of the British Indian administration which, at least in the North-Eastern Frontier, was never restricted to determinate boundaries. But their usefulness was particularly crucial in matters of geographical exploration. As early as 1838, when the Supreme Government approved the intention of deputing Pemberton, Griffith and Blake as envoys to Bhutan, “to proceed eventually to Tibet”, it was thought useful to exploit the relationship of “the Booteah tribes who receive blackmail from our territory” with Lhasa.\textsuperscript{153} Over the years such demands were regularized, systematized, and naturalized. In fact, when in 1900 Needham ordered the Kebang \textit{gans} to assist his surveyors “to map in the Dihong, and to help them on as far as Gyala Sindong”, he was apprehensive to observe that “[t]hey are very sore at their \textit{rhoa} having been stopped, and may refuse to help us on this score alone.”\textsuperscript{154}

Since 1882 an annual register, as reproduced below, began to be kept in parts, “one part for each tribe.”

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 \\
\hline
Name of & Description & Through & Amount of & Remarks (person to  
recipient & (personal title, or & whom & \textit{rhoa} & whom paid, and  
(name of clan) & whom claiming & amount) & date of payment) \\
\hline
Fixed & & & &  \\
annual & & & &  \\
amount & & & &  \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

This kind of classification, imagined the British, would prevent them from being subjected to the widespread “custom of exalting each petty village into a tribe”, a strategy, according to Michell, “most useful to the Abors in the collection of ‘posa’ from us.” He argued that in order to raise the total amount of payment, the recipients compelled the alien rulers to understand one singular community in terms of scores of “tribes” and “clans”, something which he thought was as absurd as thinking separately “of the ‘Reading’ Englishman, the ‘Birkenhead’ Englishman, the ‘Hampstead’ Englishman &c.”\textsuperscript{155} We are not sure whether this was actually an intended ploy of the several groups in the frontier, but what the detailed lists of the \textit{rhoa}-receivers undoubtedly

\textsuperscript{152} See the case of Tehi Gaum in \textit{Notes in continuation of Michell's Report}, 24

\textsuperscript{153} India Political Consultations 19 September, No 53 of 1838, XVIII, E/4757 [OIOC]

\textsuperscript{154} \textit{Annual Report on the Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1900-01} (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1901), 8

\textsuperscript{155} Michell, \textit{Report}, 49
communicate is a trace of the varieties of identities for and through which the claims were made, despite the constant attempts of the British to reduce these identities to ethnic and racial sets. The entire programming of pāsa as a payment to distinct ethnic clusters served a cartographic purpose: as the mobility of these groups was strictly curtailed, and as their domains of operation were severely circumscribed (both by expansion of the tea frontier and by the laying down of policed boundaries), the human landscape of the frontier could be mapped as (to reemploy Anderson's unforgettable phrase) "detachable piece[s] of a jigsaw puzzle." The British pāsa practices demanded a new form of collective identification: the chiefs had to represent a "tribe", or at least a "clan." It is unforgettable that the Tagi Raja's claim to pāsa had been disallowed in 1837, in consequence, as Jenkins said, of his "belonging to no regular tribe of hillmen"—a decision which finally proved to be too costly to stick to.

Hāth-chithas, or "notes of hand", therefore were introduced in the eighteen fifties, showing the name and the amount of pāsa due to each confirmed claimant. This note had to be produced during the annual event of pāsa-presentation if one was to receive one's pāsa "without further enquiry". "If the hāth-chiṭha is lost, pāsa is paid only after strict proof of the legality of the claim." Papers as proofs of identity were certainly a remarkable invention in the area, but no less remarkable was the fact that the Abors were reported to have actually eaten the 1862 Treaty document when they wished to express their displeasure with the arrangements. Did the "savages" realize that the force of abstraction and the force of extraction were indissociable from each other?

Let us conclude this section by stepping beyond such rhetorical questions and looking at how such an elaborate system could still be turned on its head by the pāsa-receivers. In 1914, the Political Officer of what was now called the Western Section of the North-Eastern Frontier discovered that the hāth-chithas have been made an object of barter and consequently in some cases quite uninfluential people will produce 7 or 8 chits. Runaway slaves have stolen in the chits from their masters and have settled in the plains and received payment on the production of the

156 In fact, one of the major conditions usually imposed by the British on the pāsa-receivers was, as Bigge, the Principal Assistant Commissioner of Durrung, told the Charduar Sat Rajahs in 1843, no "wandering through the country" would be permitted. H. L. Bigge, Principal Assistant Commissioner, Durrung to F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General, Jeyapore, 27 June 1843, in Foreign Department (F. C.), 12 August 1843, 108 [NAI]
157 India. Political Department. 9 August, No. 17 of 1837, XIII, E/4/752 [OIOC]
158 Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur, dated 5 August 1882, to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, quoted in Extract from the Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam in the Judicial Department, No. 718, dated 4 May 1885, in "Posa payment to the Hill Tribes of the Lakhimpur District", Foreign Department, External B, June 1886, Nos. 96 – 100 [NAI]
159 Michell, Report, 51
chits. Every endeavour has been made this year to straighten matters out. The producer has been asked to establish his claim and state how he become possessed of his chit and his fingerprints have been taken, in order that in future there may be some check.¹⁶⁰

The British were trapped in their own game. Blockade was becoming ineffectual as a measure of control as shops (usually run by the favored Marwari traders) mushroomed along and even beyond the Inner Line from which the "blockaded" communities could procure their goods. "It is impossible to maintain a blockade against any tribe as long as Kayas [the Marwari traders] establish shops for hill trade wherever they please", groaned the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur. "We do not want to interfere with free trade or barter, and any one is at liberty to open a shop," said he, "but we do want to know who visits the shops, and that liberty of action of the hill people is not interfered with."¹⁶¹ The same shops, as we shall shortly see, were vital for the much-awaited expansion of market economy, for supply of provisions to the expeditionary forces, and for taking out natural rubber from the areas beyond the Inner Line. When a general blockade was instituted against all Mishmis and Abors in the wake of the 1894 Abor Expedition, only the Digaru Mishmis who specialized in bringing jungle rubber to Sadiya were exempted.¹⁶² Arguments against blockading came also from the quarter of the joint-stock companies which, as will be seen in a subsequent chapter, gradually integrated various "primitive" communities into its diverse workforce. In 1918-9, a frustrated Government report notified that "[a]t the request of the Agent and General Manager of the Assam Oil Company, the blockade against the Rangpang and Yogli Nagas was withdrawn provisionally."¹⁶³

The becoming of the paa chit "an object of barter" has to be understood in this connection. Set up as proofs of inalienable identities, the hath-chithas entered the domain of circulation from which they were supposed to keep off. They could now be bought and sold in the incalculable market of the hills, which the British themselves had always wanted to grow. They could now be stolen and pocketed by the slaves coming to the British territory, a movement that the British themselves consistently encouraged. What was thought of as a fixed identity turned out to be an alienable value.

¹⁶⁰ The Political Officer, Western Section, North-Eastern Frontier, quoted in Annual Report on Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1914-15 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1915), 2-3
¹⁶¹ Annual Report on the Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the Year 1903-04 (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1904), 6
¹⁶² Annual Report upon Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1894-95 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1895), 23
¹⁶³ Annual Report on Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1918-19 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1919), 4
Throughout the dissertation we shall continue to come back to this inexhaustible issue: in various veins, in contrastive contexts. Theoretically, it is a question of excision, of framing, of keeping certain conditions of impossibility out of the bounds. In order to be functional, the modern must identify and set up a distance from the non-modern, the legal from the illegal, the scientific from the unscientific, the proper from the improper, and so on and so forth. And yet, as always, the excised — the external, the oppositional, the uncontainable — is at work within, and in fact is causative of, the inside, the framed.\footnote{164}{Cf. Timothy Mitchell, Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity (Berkeley LA and London: University of California Press, 2002), 292-303 and passim.}

It is to this elasticity of the lines separating the jurisdictions of power and the fields of identity that the following section turns coursing through a history of rubber extraction.

\textit{Historia Elastica}

In 1810, the Superintendent of the Calcutta Botanical Gardens, Dr. William Roxburgh received a rattan basket containing two gallons of honey from a friend in Sylhet. By the botanist's own admission, he was more intrigued by the strange waterproofing coat inside the basket than the quality of the honey. "The turoung [basket] was, therefore, emptied and washed out, when, to my gratification, I found it very perfectly lined with a thin coat of caoutchouc."\footnote{165}{Quoted in James Collins, "On India-Rubber, its History, Commerce, and Supply", Journal of the Society of Arts, XVIII (December 1869), 87}

Roxburgh sent a sample of this Sylhet rubber to the esteemed scientist David Brewster in London "which, after eleven years, was found to possess its elasticity, and to be superior to the South America rubber, in lightness of colour and freedom from smell."\footnote{166}{D. Morris, "Sources of Commercial India Rubber", Journal of the Society of Arts, XLVI: 2387 (August 1898), 786}

The questions of "originality" and "superiority" of specific plant species, as we shall see again in Chapter Seven, dominated the Linnaean alcoves of metropolitan science. The bringing together of the particulars from dispersed locations, made possible by the expansion of organized capital, in order to build a universal hierarchy of abstraction where works of comparison would determine the codes of exchange became a mark of the planetary consciousness described by Pratt.\footnote{167}{Cf. Mary-Louise Pratt, Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (London: Routledge, 1992)} In fact, as Foucault has argued in a different context, such "botanical model" of knowledge — which "made it possible to
turn the principle of analogy of forms into the law of the production of essences" — came to be increasingly deployed in several other fields and disciplines. Roxburgh’s private discovery, as was becoming the custom of the age, was communicated back to the frontier officials through the men of science once the British established themselves securely in Assam. After preliminary enquiries by the enthusiastic revenue officer Hamilton Vetch, a detailed and illustrated “Report on the Caoutchouc Tree of Assam” was prepared by William Griffith in 1837 at the special request of the Agent. Griffith, since his recall from the Madras Establishment in 1835 for joining the Scientific Deputation of the Tea Committee, appears to have traveled extensively in the northern hills of Assam and was considered an emergent specialist on the fauna and flora of the Assam hills. He strongly endorsed the case of the relative superiority of India rubber:

[T]he proportion of caoutchouc in the America juice is given by Dr. Faraday as 45 in 100 or nearly one in two; on the excellence of the Assamese products as compared with that of America, it does not become me to pronounce. If strength, elasticity, clearness, and freedom from acidity, as well as from foreign matter, be test of excellence, then this product may be considered supreme to any other hitherto manufactured.

In the nineteenth-century conditions of exchange, the moment of bringing-forth was necessarily a moment of bringing-together. Just as tea in Assam continued to be understood in relation to tea in China for long, rubber in Assam received its meaning only when “compared with that of America”. The enframing — the rendering of nature as “standing reserve” — structured the global scopic regime of capital, while it was shaped in

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169 “Report on the Caoutchouc Tree of Assam made at the request of Captain Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General by William Griffith, Assistant Surgeon on deputation with the Bhotan Mission”, dated Gowahatty, 10 December 1837, Foreign Department, Political Branch, 24 January 1838, No. 46 [NAI]. It was also published in Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, VII (1838), 132-142.
170 Revenue Letter from India, No. 2, 13 March 1835, in the Private Papers of William Cavendish Bentinck, IOR/ Mss Eur E424/1 [OIOC]
171 He was in the Special Mission to define the boundary between Assam and Burma in February-March 1837. See [Butler], Sketch of Assam, 89-91. As mentioned earlier, later in 1837, Griffith also accompanied Pemberton, along with the surveyor Blake, in his Bhutan Mission. See William Griffith, “Journal of the Mission to Bootan, in 1837-38”, in Political Missions to Bootan, comprising the Reports of The Hon’ble Ashley Eden,— 1864; Capt. R. B. Pemberton, 1837, 1838, with Dr. W. Griffith’s Journal; and the Account by Baboo Kishen Kant Bose (Calcutta: Printed at the Bengal Secretariat Press, 1865)
173 See Chapter Seven.
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turn by the trans-territorial movement of capital. Excited as he was about the possibility of switching on a large-scale commercial venture, Griffith also put in a note of caution:

As this tree promises to become an important source of revenue, all probable precautions should be taken to ensure the present stock from injury and to increase the number of trees so that the province may be able to meet any demand.

There was a minor problem. Although “[t]he tree exist[ed] in plenty” in the forests extending “almost without intermission, from the western to the eastern extremity of the valley, at least on its northern boundary”, it was generally “a solitary tree”.174 Griffith admitted that “[n]othing definitive [could] be stated about the probable number of trees in the whole valley” as they were scattered all over the northern hills. He hinted that without inputs from local knowledge it would be difficult to spot the borgāch. In order to handle the problem of diffused distribution, said Griffith, the Government might consider employing the local people after teaching them about the value of these trees. But “the bleedings” were urged to be kept confined to “the cold months”.175

With the successful development of the vulcanization mechanism by Charles Goodyear in New York in 1839, extraction of caoutchouc in different corners of the globe increased substantially. By the mid-forties, the use of gutta-percha, balata and India-rubber for rubbing out pencil marks and making trap-balls for children became current in continental Europe. Its use multiplied within ten years as it was found useful for shoes, footballs, bags and pontoons too. But the principal incitement came from the rapid progress of submarine telegraph which called for increased supplies of rubber for encasing the wires. By 1850s, in France, America and Britain, there were “several patents, embracing the combination of India-rubber and sulphur.”176

From an informative paper of P. L. Simmonds (an ex-planter who had earned some fame in the concerned circuit after publishing The Commercial Products of the Vegetable Kingdom) presented before the fellows of the Society of Arts in London in 1854, we come to know that by this date twenty-two different plants in British India were registered as productive of resinous gum and that the Government of India had employed a professional chemical analyst of the Gutta-Percha Company to examine all the available varieties of

174 The borgāch, or big tree, of Assam (called Ficus elastica by the botanists) was very different from the arborescent rubber plants in the Amazon basin (which the botanists named Hevea brasiliensis).
175 “Report on the Caoutchouc Tree of Assam made at the request of Captain Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General by William Griffith, Assistant Surgeon to Bootan Mission”, dated Gowahatty, 10 December 1837, Foreign Department, Political Branch, 24 January 1838, No. 46.[NAI]
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this valuable product. “Many hundred maunds of the India rubber gum are obtained in the forests of Chardwan [sic], in Assam, from the Ficia elastica, which extends over 10,000 square miles.”177 Within a year, Simmonds reported in the same gathering that “[c]omplaints are, however, made of the want of care in the preparation of the article from Assam.” If the purity of the gum was to be saved, said Simmonds, any hint of dampness ought to be removed: “a far better acquaintance with the article than is yet possessed by the Assam manufacturers seems requisite.”178

This charge of impurity – that sand, stone and water were often found in the samples brought by the “native vendors” – was repeated by James Collins in 1869.179 In fact, as a recent history points out, this complaint continued to be made from the metropolis well until 1920-21 after which the disheartened officials stopped registering data regarding rubber.180 Throughout these years, the allegations of impurity made by the continental firms and of indiscriminate incisions made by the British Government were consistently associated with the dependence on the “natives” and the “tribes” for extraction. Not much official record had been kept or systematized for the decades preceding the eighteen seventies. More than trying to interpret it as an instance of the deliberate informality maintained by the Government in this particular sector, we are interested in unpacking the scattered references in order to address the specific entanglement of the facts of nativity and imperfection.

A preliminary survey in 1848 revealed that the Charduar forests in Darrang contained relatively concentrated groups of Ficia elastica than anywhere else in the province.181 Very soon the Board of Revenue had the Charduar forests halved between two European companies. Messrs. Martin & Co. held one half along with the whole of the Na’duar forests. Messrs. Ritchie & Co. held the other half of Charduar. In allowing each Company “the exclusive privilege of collecting Caoutchouc” within these rent-free leases for fifteen years, the British officials thought that “the monopoly will benefit the people in the vicinity, as the money spent amongst them in purchasing the juice ... cannot but tend to improve their conditions.”182 The local people employed by the Company for

179 ‘Extracts from a paper read before a Meeting of the Society of Arts, December 1869, by Mr. James Collins, Curator of the Museums, Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain’, in “Assam and Cachar India Rubber Trade”, Foreign Department, Revenue-A, July 1872, Nos. 13-26 [NAI]
180 Saikia, Jungles, Reserves, Wildlife, 196
181 Revenue Department, 25 May 1848, Nos. 55-56 [WBSA]
182 Moffatt Mills, Report, 410. See also Revenue Department, 14 March 1849, Nos. 1-4 [WBSA].
extraction, were reported to be “ryots”, who were willing “to employ their spare time in this manner, and to send out for a season the young man not required at home.” Therefore, Jenkins assured the authorities, rubber tapping would not interfere with the expansion of the agrarian frontier. A botanist, Dr. Falconer, was also consulted in preparing the terms of these grants who advised that “not more than forty incisions should be made at one time, and tapping should not exceed two in the year, once in spring and a second time early in the rains.” Moreover, the grantees and their employees were forbidden to tap the “roots” of Ficus elastica. While repeating these recommendations in his 1854 report, Moffatt Mills reckoned with a pragmatic cynicism that “it is vain to hope that these injunctions in large uninhabited forests, where supervision is impracticable, can be enforced.”

With time, supervision became even more impracticable. The mounting demand of Assam rubber in the new global market necessitated a rapid expansion and diversification of workforce in the frontiers. As extensive tapping soon rendered the forest close to the settled fields exhausted, commercial ventures required to open out the unmapped woods further inland. The truth of Griffith’s prediction about the indispensability of local informants began to be felt acutely. Constrained by the increased sedentarization of the local cultivators (who, if Jenkins is to be believed, had “never shown an inclination to abandon their fields to live by hired labour alone”), the reserve of rubber-tappers had to be sought beyond the line of political control. Without the service of the savages, it seemed, modernity could not advance.

We do not have adequate data to definitively lay down the details of the extraction mechanism of this period. However, the broad picture is somewhat clear. Until 1869, “the right of collecting India-rubber [used to be] leased, for periods of six or seven years, principally to natives, the sum paid being about £1000.” It is not difficult to ascertain who these “natives” were, given the remarkable growth of the kapglas or Marwari shops in this period. The question of the Marwari presence in nineteenth-century Assam seems to be locked in an uneasy silence today. But any history of capital’s career

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183 Quoted in Moffatt Mills, Report, 410
184 Ibid
185 Quoted in Ibid
186 B. Seeman, “Production of India Rubber”, Journal of the Society of Arts, XVIII (December 1869), 91. Seeman said that he received the information from Anderson, the Director of the Calcutta Gardens, and formerly Conservator of the Forests of Bengal.
187 The category “Marwari” needs further probing. Contrary to the formal assertion of the All Assam Marwari Conference (1933), some friction of interest between the Rajasthani and Haryanvi Marwaris in the province was discernible by the early twentieth century. Even within the Rajasthani Marwaris, there was latent tension along caste lines, most notably between the Oswals and the Maheshwaris.
in the region will remain fearfully incomplete without an appreciation of the crucial role played by the *kay*; shopkeepers.

The network of the Marwari shops began to extend eastwards from Goalpara since the eighteen twenties. In 1832 White came in touch with such shopkeepers at Bisa.\(^{188}\) In 1833 Jenkins reported that “the merchants of Hindoostan ... have already begun to establish themselves at Sudya.”\(^{189}\) The culture of regular shops in Upper Assam – more particularly in the frontier region – began to congeal in the eighteen forties with the growth of these *gad*;s. It is said that there were at least fifteen Marwari business families operating in Assam until 1860.\(^{190}\) With the inauguration of the Benares-Calcutta railway in that year, their number began to proliferate. Between 1870 and 1914, more than a hundred firms were set up.\(^{191}\) Throughout the nineteenth century, these Marwari firms and their numerous outlets variously operated as suppliers of rural credit, sellers of provisions, and nodes of informal trade.\(^{192}\) In Nagaon and most other parts of Lower Assam the Marwari traders transacted mostly with the settled cultivators in the dual capacities of creditors and shopkeepers, and held significant stake in production of jute as well as in tightening the wide web of rural debt by the twentieth century.\(^{193}\) But it is their operation in the areas close to the frontier that demands our attention here, because

\(^{188}\) “I was happy to find that the spirit of commercial enterprize [sic] had induced 2 or 3 Kayas (people from western provinces of India) to settle at Beesa, which is 40 or 50 miles nearer than Suddeya to the passes leading from Ava to Assam. I anticipate, as the advantage from this in the way of procuring intelligence, as the natural anxiety of these people in regard to their property will induce them to give information of any movement on the part of the predatory Singphos”: A. White, Political Agent, Upper Assam, to T. C. Robertson, Agent to the Governor General on the North Eastern Frontier, dated 12 April 1832, in Foreign Department (P.C.), 8 October 1832, No. 78 [NAI]

\(^{189}\) F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General on the North-Eastern Frontier, to W. H. Macnaghten, Secretary to the Government of India, Political Department, dated 22 July 1833, in Foreign Department (P.C.), 11 February 1835, Nos. 82-106 [NAI]

\(^{190}\) Rishi Jaimini Kaushik 'Barua', *main apne märwādi samāj ko pyār kartā hun: rāstra kā amrit kalas āśām* (Calcutta: Author, 1988), 945.

\(^{191}\) Some of the major firms operating before the First World War were: Shaligram Chunnilal, Raibahadur Rameshwarl Saharia, Mangalchand Rajkumar Saharia, BHINGBARAJ CHAUNITMAL KAHERIWAR, BHUAMRAJ JODHRAJ KHEMIA, SADARAM JHUTHALAL GARODIA, BANSIDHAR BADRAS MODI (in Dibrugarh); Mahasingha Mehraj Kothari, Narasimhadas Mohanram, Surajmal Huribux, Dasuram Mirjimal, Radhakrishna Company, Sanehiram Phulchand, Ganeshidas Badrinarayan, Ganapatri Mangilal (in Guwahati); Sanehiram Dungarmal Lohia, Narasimhadas Surajmal Jalan, Ramjilal Ganeshilal Khaitan (in Tinsukia); JUHMALI MURALIDHAR CHOKKAN (in Makum); Chunnilal Pannalal Kashera (in Panitol); Gurumukhrai Shibbaksrai Jalan (in Golaghat); Nathuram Jaydayal Khamka (in Sibsagar); Sahiram Hazarimal Rasibasia (in Bish-mile); Asharam Shabhabagwan (in Dumdum); Bhajanlal Shrinibas Bajoria, Ganesh Das Shri Ram Goenka, Ramchandra Lachminalayan Singahania (in Shillong). *Ibid.*

\(^{192}\) For a schematic account, see Sajal Nag, “Economic Roots of the Regional Capitalist Class: A Study of the Primitive Accumulation of the Marwari Community in Colonial Assam “, in Bhattacharjee (ed.), *Studies in Economic History of North-East India*, 349-61

by engaging the service of the communities beyond the line of political control they helped to effectively haze the sharp lines of British Indian jurisdiction.

Let us trace the case of Meghraj Kothari to whom reference has already been made in the previous section. His father Mahasingha Kothari, orphaned in an early age, had left the village of Gersar in Bikaner in 1816 with his younger brothers to work as a servant in an Ajimganj family. Before he was thirteen, Mahasingha was employed by a certain Golocha Seth to work in a Goalpara shop for a monthly salary of two rupees. Between 1818, when he first came to Goalpara, and 1838, when he died in the age of thirty-three, Mahasingha established at least seventy-five to eighty gaz between Goalpara and Dibrugarh, his initial stock having come from selling opium at exorbitantly high prices in the early eighteen twenties.194 "In this wretched country", Walter Hamilton grieved in the early nineteenth century, "there are no shops and few markets."195 Mahasingha's string of shops primarily functioned as provision stores for the British Indian army. Meghraj consolidated his father's business, and particularly impressed the British authorities by supplying 50000 musks of rice at a very modest price and in a very short notice during one of the critical frontier expeditions. As tea gardens began to come up one after another through the mid-nineteenth century, Meghraj established several shops near these gardens, each of which, it was said, secured him a minimum annual profit of one hundred rupees. These shops also became crucial nodes for conducting an extensive trans-border trade in ivory, timber and rubber, the principal source of Meghraj's prosperity.196 Though barely documented, the formidable scale of Meghraj's operations can be estimated from the scattered allusions in official papers.197

Similar narratives are available for Haribilas Agarwala, one of the most successful businessmen in mid-nineteenth-century Assam, who reportedly "earned many hundred thousands in the rubber business",198 and Shaligram Karwa, the holder of the Dibrugarh rubber musals since 1852, who used his massive profit from rubber trade to emerge eventually as a major moneylender, a leading supplier, the sole dealer of kerosene oil in the province and the treasurer of the Assam Railways and Trading Company.199

194 Kaushik 'Barua', main apne márwdi samaju ko, 918
195 Hamilton, Geographical, Statistical and Historical Description, vol 2, 744
196 Kaushik 'Barua', main apne márwdi samaju ko, 918-9
197 In 1891-92, for example, "[Some 700 Nepalis in the employment of Rai Mysing Megh Raj Bahadur entered the Akas] territory to cut rubber, a privilege for which the Akas must have received substantial remuneration." Annual Report upon Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1891-92 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1892), 14
199 Kaushik 'Barua', main apne márwdi samaju ko, 924-35
traders, and some others, learned the trick of the trade quite early. Even when “the old system of long uncontrolled leases” came to be replaced by the annual *ijara* system in 1869, they grouped to acquire the annual lease (*ijara*) of a rubber *mubal* in the district auction by outbidding the contenders. The *ijara* was the right to purchase rubber from the tappers in that *mubal*. However, as the Secretary of the Revenue Department clarified in 1872, “The boundaries within which the lessee may conduct his operations are of necessity somewhat indefinitely specified, because the boundaries of the province itself have never accurately been defined.”

In the Luckimpore lease they seem to have been thus set out: “East - mountains; North - mountains; South - boundaries of the Seesabaugor district; West - boundaries of the Durrung district.” The greater part of Eastern Luckimpore is inhabited by tribes of Singphos, Khamptis, and others, acknowledging our supremacy, but subject to no very stringent control; while the hills bordering on this district are inhabited by tribes of Abors, Mishmis, and cognate tribes, over whom we exercise no jurisdiction, and who have been, and may yet again be, sources of positive trouble to us. All these people are largely engaged in collecting rubber, and it is the entry of rubber from the hills beyond our border that forms the chief disturbing element in this question...

The veteran bureaucrat clearly identified the issues involved: “the question must be looked at in two most important aspects, - the forest or productive and the political.” The first related to his concerns regarding “indiscriminate tapping” by the untrained “tribes”, aggravated by a three-year old Forest Department which was “no efficient” and could neither protect nor enlarge the “rubber forests.” At any rate, “[e]ven if there were an efficient Forest Department in Assam”, Dampier realized, “all that it could do would be to plant and nurture plantations in our settled districts. It could not deal with a [political] difficulty.”

Very little of the rubber collected comes from within our own settled revenue limits; much comes from the tracts inhabited by tribes in a state of semi-subjection, and more still from the country which is not under subjection at all. Rubber from these different tracts, unlike the people who were bringing them, could not be distinguished. Levying a duty on “the free entry of foreign gum” into British Indian

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200 In this year “the India-rubber forests” in Assam were theoretically placed under the direct control of the newly formed Forest Department. Under the old system, it was alleged, “the trees were much injured by overtapping, as each lessee endeavoured to get as much out of each tree as possible.” Seeman, *Production of India Rubber*, 91

201 H. L. Dampier, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department to the Secretary to the Government of India in the Department of Agriculture, Revenue, and Commerce, No. 2153, dated Calcutta, 27 May 1872, in “Assam and Cachar India Rubber Trade”, Foreign Department, Revenue-A, July 1872, Nos. 13-26 [NAI]
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territory, "even if practicable, ha[d] not been thought advisable." Moreover, since the *jiha* let out in each district had been held to include not only the right to buy the rubber *produced* in that district, but the right of purchasing all that *might come in* from outside, it was difficult to regulate the flows. To complicate the matter, in the eighteen sixties arrived "the independent European speculator", said Dampier, "with his parade of law for the Government and something else for the tribes, arguing that we cannot let out what is not properly ours, and driving our farmers into civil courts." Once again, the law-giver was caught on the wrong foot in Assam.

In other words, most of these private European speculators chose to circumvent the claim of the farmers of the government *mubals* by "insisting on buying from the frontier tribes direct". The speculators' argument was simple: by no legal standard, the annual *jiha* of the British Indian districts could be said to include the territories outside. Therefore, the private European entrepreneur had every right to strike independent deals with the people who were not under the legal jurisdiction of the British Indian administration. Such assertion of legal rights continued to cause serious tension between the *kula mubaldars* and the European speculators since 1869, particularly because the swelling trade of the rubber-merchants like Meghraj Kothari or Shaligram Karwa also drew its strength from this precise context of undefined *mubals*.

In Darrang the Marwari traders were found to make arrangements with the communities of Bhutias, Akas and Daflas owning the trans-frontier rubber bearing tract. They paid the hillmen a rent or *salar* as consideration for permission to send in rubber tappers, usually Nepalese, *plus* a royalty on the number of men actually sent in. In Lakhimpur the hillmen ordinarily brought down the rubber and disposed of it to the merchants. It does not seem likely that either of the contending parties – the *mubaldars* and the private speculators – cared much for definite boundaries of operation. Both had their own sets of informal "arrangements" with the communities beyond the line of political control, and both were well-aware of the formal clauses of the legal agreements. The predicament of the government is imaginable. The Europeans were ready to drag the Deputy Commissioners to court at every instance, while great profit came from leasing out the *mubals* (in 1870-1, the annual right over the Lakhimpur rubber *mubal* was sold for

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202 "Memorandum on the conservancy and working of the caoutchouc forests of Assam", in *ibid*
203 H. L. Dampier, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department to the Secretary to the Government of India in the Department of Agriculture, Revenue, and Commerce, No. 2153, dated Calcutta, 27 May 1872, in *ibid*.
204 *Notes in continuation of Michell's Report*, 24

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Rs 17,000 in the auction, and in the next year the price shot up to Rs 20,000). Moreover, “under these circumstances”, it was found “very difficult to stop [the] unlawful tapping of trees in British territory,” for unless caught in the act, any one found with the gum will immediately aver that it is foreign, and no people could be found, even if they could live in the neighbourhood throughout the year, to go into and visit the forests and prevent trespass; added to which, if trespasses were discovered, it could not be brought home to the offenders.

For the Supreme Government, however, there were wider concerns:

His Excellency in Council concurs in the opinions of the authorities who have regarded the political aspect of this question as of more importance than considerations of the amount of revenue derived or derivable from the India-rubber forests. If this trade can be so worked to enrich and partially civilize the frontier tribes, the results will be of more value than any mere increase to the revenue, which could be attained by sale or taxation of the India-rubber.

“On the other hand,” said the Council of the Viceroy, “if the speculators are allowed to advance into the hills, to take advantage of the ignorance of the tribesmen, and, perhaps, even to buy up from them the right of collecting forest produce”, then “the difficulties which have arisen from the unrestricted extension of tea-planting on the frontier may be expected to recur in a new and even more dangerous form.” It was this dilemma between the administrative requirements of keeping the “tribesmen” out of the frame and the perceived historical responsibilities of dragging them into the civilizing lattice of capital that the strange institution of the Inner Line came to embody. As we have already mentioned in a previous section, one of the three explicit objectives of the institution was bringing “the operations of speculators in caoutchouc” to an end.

It was exactly for this reason that the Conservator of Forests objected to hand over the monopoly rights in caoutchouc in the Lakhimpur district to R. Rowe, a private capitalist based in Dibrugarh. In 1873, the year when owing to intense disputes between the mahaldars and the private speculators the ijara of the district was suspended, Rowe proposed to pay one hundred thousand rupees per annum for the monopoly rights; but in spite of the attractive amount, the Conservator decided against the proposal saying that “by doing so we put the whole of the tribes in his hands.”

205 “Memorandum on the conservancy and working of the caoutchouc forests of Assam”, in “Assam and Cachar India Rubber Trade”, in “Assam and Cachar India Rubber Trade”, Foreign Department, Revenue-A, July 1872, Nos. 13-26 [NAI]
206 Ibid.
207 Resolution of the Viceroy-in-Council, in ibid
The hill tribes got this year from Rs. 20 to Rs. 40 per maund, but Mr. Rowe does, as a matter of course, not intend to pay them more than Rs. 10 or 12 at the utmost, and in accepting his proposals, we should simply sell property, which belongs only partly to Government and partly to the hill tribes. On the other hand, if Mr. Rowe was bound down to pay certain fixed rates to the people, we would reduce his offer in proportion to the rates fixed, or be unwilling to accept the mehal at all. Taking it altogether I think the principle of investing anyone not in the direct employ of Government with such an extensive authority in the dealings with hill tribes is objectionable.\(^{208}\)

While the force of the market was tacitly recognized as causing ecological havoc in the forests of the frontier, the onus of depletion and imperfection lay customarily on “the ignorance of the tribesmen”. Particularly in the botanists’ circle “fears were ... expressed that the industry would be destroyed” if the “natural reserve” continued to be “rapidly and recklessly drawn upon” by unscientific hands.\(^{209}\) Recurrent incisions in \(Ficus elastica\), the scientists warned the bureaucrats, irreparably damaged the cortical tissues containing the laticiferous channels which responded to the cuts by making the latex flow. Gustav Mann, the Conservator of Forests in Assam, submitted a report in 1868-9, proposing a drastic reduction of “the time of collecting”; otherwise, said he, “the rubber tree will gradually disappear, and a valuable commodity be lost to the public, as well as the revenue derived therefrom to Government.”\(^{210}\) The same anxieties were echoed in the report submitted by James Collins, the Curator of the Museums of the Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain, in 1872.\(^{211}\) The government officials were however more bothered about the “[loss of] reputation in European markets” than about the depletion of the forests beyond the British jurisdiction. The scientists repeatedly affirmed that given a chance, experimental plantations of \(Ficus elastica\), modeled on scientific lines and supervised by European experts, on government land would do much better in the European markets. Moreover, they said, it would be easier to police such a plantation

\(^{208}\) W. Schlich, Conservator of Forests, Bengal to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Agricultural Department, No. 40, dated Calcutta 25 August 1873 in “(i) Leasing of Rubber Mahal in Assam (ii) Tapping of Rubber of Khamptis and Singphos”, File No. 655 AC, Sl. No. 1-8 (1870-73) [ASA]

\(^{209}\) Morris, \(Sources of Commercial India Rubber\), 786

\(^{210}\) Mann proposed either that tapping should be reduced to three months a year (January-March), or that a regulation should be made prohibiting the tapping of forests more frequently than once in three years. Quoted in \textit{ibid.}

\(^{211}\) See Gustav Mann, Conservator of Forests, Assam, to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No. 151 A, Shillong, 21 February 1884, in “Report by the Conservator of Forests, Assam, on the Rubber Plantation at Darrang”, Foreign Department, A – General – E, May 1884, No. 62 [NAI]
than the "very inaccessible" areas "with naturally grown rubber trees on them" where the diffused distribution of the trees facilitated illegal "removal" of rubber.\textsuperscript{212}

The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal finally gave his consent in May 1873 and the work of the Charduar Rubber Plantation started in the winter of 1874. Although the government plantation proved to be far more expensive at least for the first eleven years (Rs. 72 per acre for the first 892 acres), Mann argued that "if the compound interest on the capital is taken into consideration, that an acre planted with rubber trees will give about four times as much revenue as an acre planted with first class timber trees."\textsuperscript{213} In May 1884, Government of India issued directives sanctioning an annual increase of the plantation by 200 acres for the next five years. Moreover, seedlings were offered by the Forest Department at cost prices "to induce private persons to plant india-rubber trees on their estates."\textsuperscript{214} Although the Inspector-General of Forests avowed in 1896 that the future of rubber trade in Assam "seems to be in the direction of artificial plantations",\textsuperscript{215} the unsatisfactory results of the government experiments did little to unsettle the vast network of rubber trade in the frontier. A year after the orders were issued from the office of the Conservator of Forests to stop unauthorized "cutting of India-rubber", the government came to know - from the sources in the Calcutta rubber firms and steamer companies - that at least 11000 m\textit{ausb} of caoutchouc had been illegally dispatched from the jungles of Assam to Calcutta in the past seven months.\textsuperscript{216}

Staggering amounts of annual profit, running into a few hundred thousand rupees, continued to accumulate in the hands of the rubber merchants. In 1882, a Deputy Commissioner observed,

\begin{quote}
Kyahs make very large proportionate profits in their dealings with the hillmen, making, for instance, cent per cent on the rubber, or even more. I saw rubber selling the other day at Dirjmur at Rs. 20 a maund, when I understand it fetches Rs. 80 in Calcutta just now.\textsuperscript{217}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{212} \textit{Ibid.} Emphasis removed

\textsuperscript{213} \textit{Ibid.} The logic was that the rubber trees took half the time that the timber trees took "to reach maturity."

\textsuperscript{214} Quoted in Morris, \textit{Sources of Commercial India Rubber}, 786

\textsuperscript{215} H. C. Hill, the officiating Inspector-General of Forests, Quoted in \textit{ibid.}

\textsuperscript{216} W. Schlich, Conservator of Forests, Bengal to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Agricultural Department, No. 40, dated Calcutta 25 August 1873 in "(i) Leasing of Rubber Mahal in Assam (ii) Tapping of Rubber of Khamptis and Singphos", File No. 655 AC, Sl. No. 1-8 (1870-73) [ASA]

\textsuperscript{217} Quoted in \textit{Annual Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year 1881-82} (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1882), 6
To such profits were added deliberate under-payments, blatant violations of agreements and sheer manipulation of registration statistics. On 19 April 1900, a party of the transfrontier Akas forcibly entered Meghraj Kothari's gola in Balipara “for the purpose of extracting their alleged dues on account of rubber tapped in their hills.” The Deputy Commissioner of Darrang “immediately proceeded to the scene with a detachment of the Lakhimpur Military Police” and kept ten Aka men under arrest until the community Raja could be forced to pay Rs. 300 as a fine “for their misconduct.” In the shadow of this event, orders were passed that agreements between hillmen – Bhutias, Akas, and Daflas – and plains traders regarding rubber-tapping in the hill rubber mahals beyond the British territory should be ratified before the District Officer. In Darrang, the Inner Line permits or “passes” could be obtained only after written agreements between the hill people and the rubber traders were registered in the office of the Deputy Commissioner (subject to the Chief Commissioner's approval), “the trader being required to give substantial security for the prompt payment of any claims which might be made and substantiated against him.”

“The great bulk of the imports consist of rubber and forest produce”, observed the 1899-1902 trade report, “to which a certain value is assigned at the registering stations, but the actual cash paid for these articles to the trans-frontier people is, in the majority of cases, considerably less than the value entered in the returns.”

There is no reason for supposing that the tribes on our frontiers are either hoarding the profits of the trade with Assam, or spending it in other countries, and there can be little doubt that most of the money actually paid for foreign imports must be expended in

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218 "[A] good deal of rubber escapes registration, owing to the fact that mahaldars buy caoutchouc themselves in the hills. When this rubber is brought to the frontier, it is sent down with rubber taken from the mahals, and no distinction is made. The Daflas and Akas, when they bring it down to the plains, are supposed to have it registered at the police-outposts of Gohpur and Balipara, but very little is now brought down by these tribes, and what does come is sent on with rubber from the mahals.” Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year 1883-84 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1884), 5

219 Notes in continuation of Michell's Report, 17; see also Foreign Department, Political A Branch, August 1899, Nos. 21-24 and Foreign Department (Political-A), March 1900, Nos. 22-23 [NAI]; Shuckburgh, North-Eastern Frontier of India, 6.

220 In March 1899 a similar incident had happened in the same district: “a party of between fifty and sixty Daflas from the Miri Pathar Chang came to the Kaya’s shop situated on the Borgang tea estate in the district of Darrang to make arrangements for the payment of money due to them on account of rubber-tapping in their forests. They were dissatisfied at the treatment they received at the hands of the Kaya, who practically refused payment after having brought them down to receive it, and, turning towards the hills, seized three plains Daflas who were tapping rubber in the Government forests south of the Inner Line.” Finally the government officials had to compel the Kaya to pay while they imposed a fine on the Daflas for their “misconduct”. Notes in continuation of Michell's Report, 21-2

221 Foreign Department (Political-A), July 1900, Nos. 40-47 [NAI]

222 Annual Report on the Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the Year 1900-1901 (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1901), 7-8
Assam, though the articles purchased very possibly do not appear in the export returns.\textsuperscript{223}

Put more simply, the money received by “the trans-frontier people” from the merchants was spent in their shops only, and that was why the \textit{kaya mubader} could offer marginally bigger amount of \textit{salami} and “head-rent” to these people than what the European speculators tendered. The history of the much-desired growth of money-economy in the north-eastern hills is also a history of its stillbirth.\textsuperscript{224}

Rubber is shown in the import tables as worth Rs. 80 per maund, but payments are made in kinds as well as in cash, and large quantities of the product are extracted by the Nepalese coolies sent into the hills by the traders. The actual amount paid to the trans-frontier people is therefore much less than is shown above, and the value of the goods removed by them to the hills is probably an excess of the registered figures.\textsuperscript{225}

Such disquieting instances can easily be multiplied, but it is more important to take note of the series of interrelated developments which had already ensued from the “arrangements” between the \textit{kaya mubaders} and the rubber-bringers of the hills. First and foremost, the exchange networks beyond the direct control of the British Indian administration began to be loosely integrated in the nineteenth century into the abstract cycles of world trade.\textsuperscript{226} By 1902, Messrs. Van Wint & Co., a Belgian mercantile firm, showed considerable interest to act as brokers in Europe for the sale of rubber from Assam.\textsuperscript{227} The rise and fall of the price of rubber at Calcutta, the immediate destiny of the Assam caoutchouc, slowly began to affect the lives of the rubber-tappers beyond the Inner Line. Compared to the total value of export from Assam in 1876-77, the trade was

\textsuperscript{223} \textit{Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Three Years ending the 31st March 1902}, by B. C. Allen, Officiating Director, Department of Land records and Agriculture, Assam (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1902), 2

\textsuperscript{224} The availability of rubber-money in the “remote” hills amused the planter-traveler S. E. Peal in 1883 when he found that among the Bishi Singphos “[m]oney is thought less of, as the rubber trade enables them to earn it easily at times for Re. 1, and even, if lucky, Rs. 2 a day, and I have heard of a Naga making at the rate of Rs. 4 a day for a week.” S. E. Peal, “Notes on a trip up the Dihing Basin to Dapha Pani, etc., January and February, 1882”, \textit{Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, 52:2} (1883), 26. Another planter-traveler, J. Errol Gray, was told in the Singpho village of Ningroo that the chief derived “a considerable revenue from rubber, as apart from the rent of Rs 100 annually taken from each of the 5 Kyahs who have shops in his village, he exacts a tribute of Rs 3 for every maund of rubber sold in these shops.” Errol Gray, \textit{Diary of a Journey to the Bor Khamti Country}.

\textsuperscript{225} See also \textit{Annual Report on Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1933-34} (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1934), 5; \textit{Annual Report on Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1934-35} (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1935), 4 for accounts of the response of the “savage labor market” to the Great Depression of 1929-39.

\textsuperscript{226} \textit{Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Revenue Department (B), April 1902}, File Nos. 136-144 [ASA]

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calculated to have dropped by Rs. 13, 263 in 1877-78. This “marked decrease” was singularly attributed by the Deputy Commissioner “to the fact that, the price of rubber at Calcutta having fallen, the Marwari merchants restricted their transactions in that article.” The price rose again to Rs. 100 per mumd in Calcutta within a couple of years, boosting enormous extraction in the trans-Lakhimpur region. In 1884, the kayas reportedly “lost” by paying Rs. 50 to Rs. 60 for a mumd for rubber as the price in Calcutta suddenly dropped, and therefore in 1885 they “refused to give more than Rs. 30 to Rs. 35 for it.” Consequently, the import value of the transfrontier rubber trade plummeted by more than Rs. 30, 000 in the latter year. During 1908-11, there was another series of severe price falls, and the flux of an invisible market caused palpable everyday hardship for the communities near the Darrang frontier (for whom rubber was described as “almost the only” item of trade who finally began to concentrate on the less-paying manjit trade.

At the same time, it is crucial to remember that, as a recent analysis of the nineteenth-century north-western frontier of British India reckons, “[t]he world market does not simply expand via an inexorable impersonal process, absorbing societies through its powerful embrace, subordinating them to its logic, displacing inferior and primitive forms. ... [I]t is shaped [as well] by the persistence of entrenched structures – their power to resist and adapt.” In our case too, official references to such adaptive practices are occasionally available, directing towards the ways in which the new trade of the frontier affected the circulation networks further inland. An interesting and relatively detailed excerpt comes from Burland, a Civil Officer associated with the Lushai Expedition of 1871-2.

228 Annual Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year 1877-78 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1878), 9
229 Annual Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year 1879-80 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1880), 9
230 Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year 1884-85 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1885), 6
231 Report on the Trade between the Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Tribes and Countries for the Three Years ending the 31st March 1911, by S. G. Hart, Director of Agriculture, Eastern Bengal and Assam (Shillong: Printed at the Eastern Bengal and Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1911)
232 Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year 1885-86 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1886), 8
233 Report on the Trade between the Province of Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Tribes and Countries for the Three Years ending the 31st March 1917, by J. McSwiney, Director of Land Records and Agriculture, Assam (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1917)
In former times these tribes made all the salt they required for their own consumption from salt springs, and they say that to make enough salt for the requirements of an ordinary family, a man's labour was required for three months. A man can now collect sufficient India-rubber in one month to exchange with Bengalee traders for more than enough salt to last him and his family for a year. So that a man who chooses to occupy himself three months in collecting India-rubber will, by bartering the same for salt, have a large surplus of that article, with which to trade with the southern tribes, who, they say, are willing to give one maund of rubber for a quarter maund of salt.235

Such savage calculations substantially complicate our received picture of colonial extraction. "Capitalism", we are reminded by Timothy Mitchell, "has no singular logic, no essence. It survives parasitically, like the Plasmodium falciparum, taking up residence in human bodies and minds, or in sugarcane or private property, drawing its energies from the chemistry of others, its force from other fields, its momentum from others' desires."236 The stories of these entanglements do not dissolve the will of the sufferer into the interest of the oppressor; rather, they point, simultaneously, to the enormous power of capital to restructure the conditions of human action and volition as well as to the matching might of the oppressed life to reconfigure the conditions in which capital may operate.

How else can one interpret the growing changes in settlement locations beyond the frontier and the migrations along new routes and towards new directions? In early 1875, the Chief Commissioner brought to the notice of the Calcutta authorities "a growing movement northward on the part of the Looshais, ostensibly for purposes of rubber collection", as he feared that "[c]omplications were expected to arise from a movement of this nature." 237 Similarly, fifty houses of transfrontier Nagas engaged in bringing rubber "from across the Patkoi" were reported in 1891 "to have migrated from a distance of ten days' journey and settled near Tikak", just beyond the Inner Line, presumably to facilitate their business.238 These instances suggest not only the extent of the increased hardship of the transfrontier people, caused by the British interception of the spatial sequence of circulation, but also a possible way in which the said people negotiated the changing situation. It has been a standard trick of the textbook histories to

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236 Mitchell, Rule of Experts, 303
237 The Chief Commissioner of Assam, No. 1731, 26 May 1875, in "Line of action to be pursued towards the Looshais", Foreign Department, Political-B, June 1875, No. 23 [NAI]
238 Annual Report upon Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1890-91 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1891), 5
present the transfrontier communities as passive victims of the conspiracy of capital. We argue on the contrary that they braved the challenge of capital by actively engaging the terms of the new regime.

"There is more competition now in the rubber trade, due to the rise in prices", reported the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhmipur in 1904, not only between the kaya mohaldars working in different parts of the frontier, but also among the different groups of "hill people" who came forward to work as rubber tappers.

A number of this [Sarak Miri] tribe came into Dibrugarh to tap rubber for the mohaldar of the Dibrugarh rubber mukul. It was reported that some of them working with the Gomasta of the rubber mohaldar at Margherita tried to take possession of the rubber brought down by eight Nagas for sale to another Kaya. There would probably have been bloodshed, had not the Political Jamadar, hearing of a disturbance, appeared on the scene.

The Akas, the Daflas and the Bhutias — the early recruits in the Darrang frontier — were soon joined by a host of other communities across the whole stretch of the Inner Line. A report of the 1882 Sadiya fair recorded,

The Chulikata Mishmis are said to have brought down 100 maunds of rubber, valued at Rs. 40 per maund, the Digaru 30 maunds, valued at Rs. 45, the Miju Mishmis 20 maunds, and the Singphos and Khamptis 300 maunds, also valued at Rs. 5 a maund.

There were also the Nagas who often missed the Sadiya fairs as they used to be "engaged in the India-rubber traffic in another part of the district." On the banks of the Barak, large groups of the Lushais continued to work throughout the eighteen seventies, evading the official watch. As late as 1887, it was alleged that "[t]he Abors themselves do not tap rubber, as they hold the tree sacred." By 1893, Needham reported that "the Passis and Minyongs are now either themselves tapping the trees, or getting others to do so for them." Dijmur, Sisi and Dhemaj, along with Passighat and Pangighat, became usual haunts for the Kaya's agents who discovered that there was ""magnificent rubber forest in the vicinity of Badak up the Dihong", extending for some miles on either bank.

\[^{239}\] Annual Report on the Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the Year 1903-04 (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1904), 6
\[^{240}\] Annual Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year 1881-82 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1882), 3
\[^{241}\] Annual Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year 1879-80 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1880), 3
\[^{242}\] Mackenzie, History of Relations of Government with Hill Tribes, 317-8
\[^{243}\] Notes in continuation of Michell's Report, 27
\[^{244}\] Quoted in ibid, 29

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contact for the most of the nineteenth century, "came down [in 1895] to Joyhing in considerable numbers, bringing with them quantities of rubber for sale or barter." The enthusiasm shown by these communities was as uncanny for the imperial authorities as it is for the nationalist historians today. The government directives of the eighteen seventies reportedly left the Singphos and the Khamtis "a little sore about the prohibition to cut rubber when and where they like". But the government was determined to ignore their "jealous[y] of the money made by [rubber] collection by the Mishmis." Similarly, the Digarus – who had always been praised as "the keenest rubber collectors on this frontier" – were unhappy to learn in 1898 that they were prohibited from crossing the Dihong, "as their doing so might cause complications with the Passis", as well as from working rubber "in the jungles to the north of Sadiya which are claimed by the Chulikatas." As the mahals were kept closed during 1906-07 following the suggestion of the Forest Department, the Togo and Kajum Gaums of the Sarak Miris who had come "with numbers of their tribesmen to tap rubber and receive their ponde" bitterly complained "that their livelihood had been taken from them by this order." Between the savage exigencies of survival and the scientific language of protection operated the force of extraction, drawing its energies from both the fields and giving lie to the legal fabrication of a spatial exterior to capital. The theater of appropriation was much larger than the proscenium of Assam Proper. The landscape beyond the jurisdictional boundary – Assam Improper, if we can say so – was simultaneously opened up to the play of capital. The legalese of the Inner Line and the trope of the primitive, directed towards the fabrication of a temporal outside to this play, had the important function of disowning the simultaneity in historical time by fracturing the domains of exchange along the axis of autobiographical time of capital.

Put simply, the embarrassing incongruities of the "economy" were used to fill the pervasive vacuity of the temporal outside. While dealing with the "hillmen", let us remember, both the Government and the merchant invariably slipped into the talk of

245 Annual Report upon Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1894-95 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1895), 22
246 These Singphos and Khamtis, it was said, "live in the plains and are British subjects, their case is quite different to that of the Mishmis, who live in the hills, and over whom there is no control." Deputy Commissioner of Luckimpoor to Personal Assistant to the Commissioner of Assam, No. 3P, dated Suddya, 21 February 1873, in "Massacre of Borlangee Nagas by Kamsinga Nagas", Foreign Department, Political – A Branch, July 1873, Nos. 469–507 [NAI]
247 Notes in continuation of Michell’s Report, 38-9. See also Annual Report upon Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1898-99 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1899), 24
248 Annual Report on the Frontier Tribes of Eastern Bengal and Assam for the Year 1906-07 (Shillong: Eastern Bengal and Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1907), 2
salari – not that of rent. Whenever the aggrieved rubber-suppliers gathered to claim the price of their labor or to oblige the employer to abide by the agreement, it was routinely narrated in the language of “extraction” and “extortion”, and even when proved right, the “savages” were nominally punished for their “misconduct”. Every time there was a censure from the firms based in Europe for the poor quality of the product, the “tribesmen’s” unscientific methods of tapping were blamed in turn. By derecognizing the presence of the services without which capital could not have moved, by disowning the internality of the sphere of exchange without which accumulation could not have happened, by renouncing the historical contemporaneity of the people without whom the “resources” could not have been gathered, it was possible to posit a tidy set of abstract coordinates as the proper economy, as the real world of modern capitalism, working in the bounded arena of Assam Proper.