Chapter 1

THE MAKING OF A FRONTIER:
EMPIRE WARS, POLITICAL UNREST, TERRITORIALISATION

The first Anglo-Burmese war (1824-26) is understood, historiographically, to have been fought by the British to repulse the threat to British Bengal from the Burmese empire. And corollary to that is the understanding that the war was necessitated for the control of the territories lying between the two empires. But the relationship between the war and the subsequent transformation of the territories lying between the two empires has hardly been discussed. The term North-East of India is taken to be a given natural category both in the colonial and contemporary accounts. But there were disparate political entities and their corresponding territorialities lying between the British Indian empire and the Burmese Empire till the second decade of the nineteenth century. There had been attempts by the Burmese empire to subdue these areas from time to time in the past and similar attempts by the British Indian empire to have political as well as economic transactions with some of the powers on the east of Bengal. But after the first Anglo-Burmese war the territory would change forever. This is the ‘event’ in which the majority of the sandwiched territory between the two empires would be made into a ‘frontier’ of the expanding British Indian empire. The Burmese empire tried relentlessly to impose some form of political control in the remaining areas and challenge the emerging authority of the British. Some political powers continued to exist as kingdoms; some territories remained beyond the political control of the British. This does not, however, destabilise the basic conception of this territory from being seen as a frontier. The attempt, here, is to explore the historical moment when this territoriality of the so-called the North-East frontier came into being.

1 See among others L. Kitzan, 'Lord Amherst and Pegu: The Annexation Issue', Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, Vo. 8, 1977, pp. 176-94; G.P. Ramachandra, 'The outbreak of the first Anglo-Burmese war', Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, Vo. 51, 1978, pp. 69-100. This is not to argue that there has been no consideration on the economic aspect of the war.
There has been extensive discussion on the first Anglo-Burmese war, especially, while writing the history of Assam, Manipur and Cachar. Moreover, outside academic writing, the ‘events’ of the war continue to be recollected in ‘folkloric’ fashion, exemplifying the popular perception of the war. By re-looking at some of the sources which were written at the time of the war, the chapter examines the complex ways of narrating the war by the British. There were conflicting claims of what led to the war, differences of emphasis, contestations of certain ‘historical events’, diversity of opinion on the ‘real’ intent of the British or the Burmese. Apart from this, the chapter also looks at the war as the ‘moment’ or the ‘event’ that brought the area between the two expanding empires into a frontier of the British Indian empire. The fate of the connecting territory would change forever once it became permanently attached as a frontier.

At the same time, the attempt, here, is not to portray what came to be seen as the unified political space of the frontier as a homogenous terrain prior to the war. While one is discussing the political space of the area, which later became the North-East Frontier, it is not meant to designate a commonality of a unified identity. There were disparate forms of political, social and economic formations. Some developed in the form of monarchical order, especially in the valley areas, some in the form of chieftainship in the hill areas, and some were loosely organised political formations. These monarchical political orders found it difficult to subdue and incorporate all the areas in the adjoining mountainous terrain. The mountainous terrain, at the same time, did not witness the same level of homogenous political, social and economic systems. Discussing the manuscripts written by Buchanan in the late eighteenth century on the social groups that inhabited different parts of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Willem van Schendel has noted,

He [Buchanan] described a complex ethnic situation in the hills and variable ethnic boundaries. There was no question of isolated ‘tribes’ living in distinct territories; on the contrary, there were several ‘multi-ethnic’ arrangements (for example, villages inhabited by swidden cultivators belonging to different language groups); villages that were ‘ethnically stratified,’ being inhabited by an ethnic group together with its debt peons from different groups; and villages in which the leaders had servants from several other groups. Moreover, ‘chiefs’ often collected tribute from households belonging to an amalgam of ethnic groups.
All groups were continually on the move not only because of their style of agricultural but also because of raids and warfare.²

These different ‘arrangements’ also applied to the territory north of the Chittagong Hills. The eastern plains of Bengal are flanked by the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia Hills to the north of Mymensingh and Sylhet. The ranges of the Lushai Hills and the Chittagong Hills separate Bengal from Burma.

After the establishment of the East India Company as the de facto ruler of Bengal as a result of the Dewani right being granted to it on August 12, 1765 by the titular Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II, the British were put in direct territorial contiguity with the following polities: Cooch Behar³, Tripura, Ahom, Jaintia, Khasi Hills, Cachar and Arakan. (Manipur was not territorially contiguous with Bengal till this point though the political development in that country would affect Cachar, which in turn would be relevant for the British.) Goalpara and Sylhet, having included in the Mughal suba of Bengal, naturally, came under the British.

**PRE-WAR ‘CONNECTED HISTORIES’: MOBILITY, TRADE, WAR**

In the colonial representations, the mountainous territories, extending southwards from Assam to the British district of Sylhet, were occupied in a “successive series from the west by the Garos, a barbarous race, subject to no paramount authority; by the Kasiyas, also a wild and uncivilised race, but acknowledging the authority of their chiefs; and by a petty principality, that of Jyntia, governed by a Raja.” The kingdom of Cachar was represented to be inhabited by “races more mixed and rather more civilised than their neighbours”, spreading round Sylhet on its northern and eastern confines. Beyond Cachar, to the north and north-east was again the territory of “wild tracts of uncultivated wilderness, tenanted by a number of barbarous tribes known collectively as Nagas”, while on the east, “the petty

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³ Cooch Behar became a tributary state of the Company by a treaty concluded on April 5, 1773 in lieu of an annual tribute amounting to half the total revenues. Despite Cooch Behar being taken under the suzerainty of the Company, it has been argued that it did not exercise much influence on British frontier policy after 1774. See, A.C. Banerjee, *The Eastern Frontier of British India 1784-1826*, second revised edition, Calcutta: A. Mukherjee, 1946, pp. 4-5.
chiefship of Manipur separated Cachar from the Burma dominions.” The peoples who inhabited the territories from Arakan northwards to Assam, the “whole of the territory west of the Chinese frontier” was understood to acknowledge the sovereignty of the King of Ava, who was the immediate powerful neighbour of the British Indian empire. In the words of Horace Hayman Wilson, the king of Ava was “separated from it throughout the rest of its eastern limits by petty states, and uncivilised races, too feeble to defend themselves against his power, and rapidly falling a prey to his ambition.” Being a ‘mountainous territory’ inhabited by ‘uncivilised’ people, the eastern frontier of Bengal was not given much importance by the British. The territory between the two empires was thought fit to remain merely as a ‘natural barrier’, rather than a territorial possession of the British before the war.

The problem in looking at the histories of the North-East frontier generated through colonial discourse is that it was represented as an organically held territorial unit. The different areas, which were sought to be included under the basic category of the frontier, were not necessarily as much internally linked as they might have been with those ‘outside’. S.K. Bhuyan argues that the Ahoms “do not appear to have any diplomatic connection with Manipur till about the year 1765, when its ruler Jai Singha Karta-Maharaj visited the court of Swargadeo Rajeswar Singha soliciting the Ahom king’s aid to expel the Burmese who had occupied Manipur.” The Ahoms, according to him, had no relations with Tripura till the year 1710. On the contrary, the western portion of the Brahmaputra valley, the Goalpara area, which is within Assam in the post-colonial territorial division, had a close historical connection with that of the history of Bengal at least from the fourteenth century. Silver was being imported to Bengal from the Burma-Yunnan region through the Brahmaputra valley even prior to the sixteenth century, evidence of a much longer connection. The records of the Chinese trade missions bringing gold, silver, satins, silks and porcelain to Bengal go as far

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back in history as 1415. Amalendu Guha argues that in the thirteenth century a major section of the population in the central plains of the Brahmaputra valley was still dominated by the Indo-Aryan culture. But he also warns, "It is more likely that the Indo-Aryan penetration was, in general, relatively shallower in the upper than in the lower valley, particularly south of the Brahmaputra." Pointing out a much longer and wider connection between China and the people who inhabited what came to be called the North-East frontier, Bin Yang traces the presence of the so-called Southwest Silk Road from Sichuan, Yunnan in Southwest China, Tibet, Burma and Assam to other parts of India. A process, which marks out as the epitome of connected histories and the mobility of the people can be gleaned from the historical process in which a group identified as the Tai–Ahoms migrated westward from the northern Shan areas in modern Burma to establish a political dynasty in the Brahmaputra valley in the thirteenth century. Edward Gait, one of the authoritative colonial authors on the history of Assam, points out that the Ahoms, who became the rulers of the Brahmaputra valley in the thirteenth century extended their expeditions to almost as far as Dacca itself. Four centuries later, the movement of the troops had taken a reverse direction. Mir Jumlah, the general in charge of Bengal under Aurangzeb, occupied Koch Behar and in 1662 set forth on his mission to invade the Ahom kingdom. However, not being successful in holding the area for a longer time, he was forced to return to Bengal the next year.

11 Yasmin Saikia, Fragmented Memories: Struggling to Be Tai-Ahom in India, Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. Gordon Luce put the political connection between Burma and the present areas of Assam and Manipur to a much earlier date. According to him, in the 8th and 9th centuries, "Nan-chao ruled the north of Burma as far as Manipur and Assam". But Luce contrasts the earlier conquests with the later Burmese incursions in the beginning of the later part of the eighteenth century: "It was an age of national expansion, but not of crude imperialism, such as was later to impel some kings of Burma to showy and short-lived conquests of Siam, Assam or Manipur." Gordon H. Luce, Old Burma – Early Pagan, Volume I, New York: J. J. Augustin Publisher, 1969, pp. 28, 43.
12 Edward Gait, A History of Assam, reprint Guwahati: Lawyer’s Book Stall, 1997 [1905], pp. 120 – 133. Mir Jumlah, nevertheless, occupied Gergaon, the capital of Ahom kingdom by March 1662 and seized a lot of property. Gait’s reference seems most likely to the events, which happened after the fratricidal war between the four sons of Shah Jehan for the possession of imperial throne in 1656. Bengal did not escape the political confusion. Shah Shuja, Viceroy of Bengal, took part in the war and he was murdered by the king of Arakan
Though by the second half of the eighteenth century, the long distance connections, especially between the southern portions of China and the Brahmaputra valley was perceived to have diminished. James Rennell remarked:

The Jesuits' map of China, as given in Du Halde, places the western boundary of Yunan (the westmost of the provinces of China) between the 97th and 98 degrees of east longitude, in the parallel of 24°: so that the eastern frontier of Bengal (Silhet) is within 350 British miles of the western part of China; or to speak comparatively, the same distance as Silhet is from Calcutta. Here one is apt to wonder, that considering their vicinity to each other, there should be no communication between the two countries. 13

Rennell went on to suggest that, perhaps, Yunnan did not produce such goods as were in demand amongst foreigners and that the course of the great navigable rivers in those parts were unfavourable to communication by water.

This, however, did not mean that there was no 'China trade' with other neighbouring areas. There was a flourishing and extensive trade with Burma till the time of Rennell's account. Colonel Michael Symes, who was sent on a mission in 1795 to Burma, reported that there was an extensive trade between the capital of the Burmese empire and Yunnan in China. 14

Accounts just after the conclusion of the war remarked on the presence of active trade involving large numbers of people:

On the northern frontier of the Burman dominions, an active trade is carried on with China and other eastern states; the chief emporium is at a place called Banmo, on the Chinese

and after which he invaded Bengal. As a result of the Mughal soldiers of the Bengal province being far away to the westward, the king of Ahom kingdom plundered Bengal to the northward of Dacca and the king of Cooch Behar was engaged in other directions. See J. Talboys Wheeler, *Early Records of British India: A History of the English Settlements in India, as told in the Government Records, the works of old travelers, and other contemporary documents, from the earliest period down to the rise of British power in India*, Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1878, pp. 151 – 152.

13 James Rennell, *Memoir of a map of Hindoostan or the Mogul's Empire: With an Examination of some Positions in the former System of Indian Geography; and some Illustrations of the present one: And a Complete Index of Names to the Map*, London, 1783, p. 87.

frontier, and at Midai, four or five miles to the northward of Amerapura... The Chinese import copper, orpiment, quicksilver, vermillion, iron pans, silver, good rhubarb, tea, fine honey, raw silk, spirits, hams, musk, verdigris, dry fruits, and a few fresh fruits, with dogs and pheasants... The returns of the trade with the Chinese are chiefly cotton, ivory, and bee’s wax, with a small quantity of British woollens, chiefly broad cloths and carpets.\textsuperscript{15}

This ‘China trade’ (discussed in chapter three), definitely interested the British and they were intrigued by its absence in the territories closer to Bengal.

This notion of an isolated society without trade or other links, with a trace of geographical determinism as rational justification, prior to the encounter with the British continue to be reproduced while writing the history of Manipur. One recent account describes the history of Manipur prior to the British encounter in the following words: “Manipur remained in hidden isolation for a long time from the rest of the world except for her immediate neighbours. Such isolation was partly due to her physical features: high ranges of hills all around and lack of passes through them.”\textsuperscript{16} Such accounts reproduce the colonial notion of a static population living in ‘uncivilized’ societies in contrast to their own imagery of mobility. Through the idiom of the territoriality of the frontier, created during the colonial process as one bounded unit, history (and historical mobility of people) is measured from the colonial outpost of Bengal as the reference point. However, there are accounts which suggest that about 1250 A.D. a Chinese invasion was repulsed by the Manipuris and the Chinese captives who were taken prisoner taught the Manipuris the art of rearing cocoons and brick-making.\textsuperscript{17}

Trade served as a means of mobility for some people but it was through wars that massive movement of people took place. The ascendancy of the Manipuri kingdom from the sixteenth century reached its peak with the triumphal wars waged by Garib Niwaz or Pamheiba (1709-
1748), making various successful invasions into Burma without any permanent conquest. Characterising the achievements of Garib Niwaz, who assumed the title of Thongnang Mayamba, Gangmumei Kabui writes, "Garibniwaza [sic] was the greatest king of Manipur. During his long reign of forty years, Manipur had attained the zenith of her glory, military, religious, cultural and literary. . . . No other ruler in eastern India could boast of such a glorious military conquest in north east India and Burma in the early 18th century." Kabui also points out that the reign of Garibniwaz coincided with the decline of the Toungoo dynasty in Burma. He classifies Garibniwaz’s military expeditions into three fronts. First, the military expeditions towards the ‘hill tribes’ as a means of internal consolidation. The second front was the wars against Burma and the third was the war against Tripura. He further divides the military expeditions into three phases: the first phase (1710-17), second phase (1728-33) and the final phase (1745-48). The first and the second phases of his military expeditions were directed mostly towards internal consolidation. During his reign, there were seven military expeditions against Samjok, a Shan tributary principality, for both economic as well strategic reasons. As a sign of the connections during this period through war, the Burmese in collusion with the king of Tripura invaded Manipur in 1723. However, after the death of Garib Niwaz Manipur was confronted with a series of internal crisis. The Konbaung rulers of Burma, on the other hand, began their first targets of aggression and expansion into Manipur. Manipur was increasingly harassed by the rising powers in Burma under Alaungpaya and his successors. In 1758, the Manipuris marching through Tamu, attacked Ava from two directions. But they were repulsed by the Burmese and the Manipuris had to retreat to Kakching inside Manipuri territory. According to R. Boileau Pemberton “the first
great invasion" of Manipur by a Burmese took place in 1755, “commanded by a relative of Alompra”. And this was the first occasion, according to him, “on which the Burmese appear to have owed their success entirely to the use of fire-arms: their weapons, like those of the Muneepoorees, having, up to this period, consisted almost entirely of the dao, spear and bow and arrow.” Thant Myint-U puts the Burmese invasion of 1758 as the first Konbaung invasion of Manipur. According to him, there was another more devastating invasion in 1764. Thousands of Manipuris were forcibly deported to the Burmese capital and the combination of war, flight and deportation, are said to have left Manipur virtually empty for years. These captives were boatmen, smiths, weavers and artisans and became hereditary crown servants at Ava, and they, their descendants and later Manipuri deportees, formed a substantial population acting as domestic servants, menial labourers and agricultural workers for the Burmese royal family and nobility.

An English merchant, John Laird, claimed that the Manipuri captives formed a fourth part of the whole population of the capital of Burma at the time of the war. According to the contemporary colonial accounts, these people had reconciled “to their state of servitude, owing to their having been brought away very young, from their own country” and as a result of their ‘superior skill and industry’, they led their comfortable subsistence near the capital city of Amarapura. They formed the new and ‘elite

had hitherto enjoyed only a temporary independence.” The war, according to these sources, was a means of revolting against the Burmese authority while they were occupied with other powers elsewhere rather than an offensive invasion as claimed by the Chronicle. It is, in fact, claimed that after a formidable attack in 1774, Manipur remained subject to the Burmese in quite contrast to the account of the Royal Chronicle of Manipur. Walter Hamilton, A Geographical, Statistical, and Historical description of Hindostan, and the adjacent Countries, Vol. II, London: John Murray, 1820, p. 766. Rennell, who wrote almost contemporary to the events, noticed that Meckley, another name for Manipur, was subject to the king of Burma, or Ava. Rennell, Memoir of a map of Hindoostan, p. 87.

23 R. Boileau Pemberton, Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India, Guwahati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, 1991[1835], p. 41. However, Kabui argues that the “Manipur army also used some muskets which might not have been numerous despite the reference to the capture of large number of muskets in the chronicles.” Kabui, History of Manipur, Vol. I, p. 250.


25 John Crawfurd, Journal of an Embassy from the Governor General of India to the Court of Ava, in the year 1827, Appendix, London: Henry Colburn, 1829, p. 73.
Cassay Horse’, a cavalry regiment in the Burmese army. Symes reported that all the troopers and gunsmiths in the Burmese king’s service were ‘natives of Cassay’ or Manipur. Apart from the different other groups of ‘Cassayers’ present in the capital of Burma, there were ‘Cassay astrologers’ in the royal court. Manipuris being taken as prisoners by the Burmese was a constant reference in the colonial accounts. In fact, the frequent attacks by the Burmese and taking the captives away were given as reasons for the desolation of the population of Manipur.

**PRE-WAR DEVELOPMENTS**

The conquest of Arakan by the Burmese in 1784 during the reign of Padun-Mang in the eighteenth century brought them in direct contact with the British possessions of Bengal. Moreover, in that interval, the timber of Pegu became a necessary item for the British naval and military arsenals in India. There were various occasions of minor scuffles between the Burmese and the British before the onset of the first Anglo-Burmese war (1824-26). But none of these led to any concerted efforts to explore the people and the area lying beyond the frontier of Bengal. The territories lying on the north-east to south-east of the British frontier of Bengal, from Assam to Arakan, were “almost unknown” before the first Anglo-Burmese war to European geography, “having been hitherto closed against the inquiries of the Company’s officers by their inherent physical difficulties . . . and the unwillingness of the Indian government to sanction any enterprise of their servants, which might inspire doubts of their designs in the minds of the rulers of the adjacent regions.”

It is in this climate of threat from the rising Burmese empire that we can locate the treaty of alliance, ‘offensive and defensive’, signed between the king of Manipur Jai Singh (or Bhagyachandra) and the East India Company in 1762 with the stated aim of fighting against the Burmese as a common enemy. Most of the articles of the treaty focus on the concern of

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26 Symes, *Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava*, Vol. II, pp. 22–3, 57–8, 104. Cassay was an English corruption of Kathe, the name with which Manipur was known to the Burmese. But sometimes, Manipur was written as the capital of Cassay.


the Burmese for both Manipur and the British from a political and strategic point of view. But, at the same time, two of the articles are strictly commercial in nature. According to the treaty, Jai Singh was supposed to grant lands that the “English may think proper for the building of a factory and a fort” in “whatever place the English may choose for their factory and fort.” In addition to this, he was to grant to the “English free of rent for ever a distance of country round such Factory and Fort of eight thousand cubits”. Moreover, Jai Singh was to “grant permission to the English for an open trade into and through his country free of all duties, hindrance or molestation”.29 A.C. Banerjee argues that “[c]ommercial as well as political designs lay behind this bold decision.” According to him, Haridas Gosain convinced Verelst that the expulsion of the Burmese from Manipur would enable British merchants to come in direct contact with China, for “the China merchants bring their goods down as far as Manipur, in any quantities they find a market for.” Secondly, a political alliance with Manipur would enable the Company to “obtain reparation from the Burmese for the repeated ill-treatment of the factory at Negrais.”30

This was the beginning of a diplomatic relationship between Manipur and the British colonial power albeit the advantageous position of the Company in the treaty. However, because of the engagement of the British in Delhi, the force sent to Manipur was recalled and not much communication followed afterwards, except the wish that the colonial power “would not lose so favourable an opportunity of contracting an alliance with the Meckley Rajah as it might open a road to them for obtaining reparation from the Burmese for the repeated ill-treatment”.31 Direct political engagement between Manipur and the British, however, did not resurface after this event till about the outbreak of the first Anglo-Burmese war in 1824. In

30 Banerjee, The Eastern Frontier of British India, p. 35.
31 Quoted in A. F. M. Abdul Ali, Notes on the Early History of Manipur, Calcutta, 1923, p. 13. Ali uses colonial contemporary sources found in the form of a letter written by Verelst, Chief of Chittagong Factory to H. Vansittart, Governor of Bengal, dated 19th September 1762 for a narrative, which looks at the events and the history during the time of Garib Niwaz in the earlier part of the text. So, possibly this quotation is from the same source. The term Meckley was one of the names used to refer to Manipur at that time by the British. It was also the time when the tussle between Mir Kassim, Nawab of Bengal, and the Company was going on.
1814, one Mr. Smith, a botanist from Bengal, went for his research to a considerable reach of Cachar but was stopped as a result of the invasion of Manipur kingdom by the Burmese. The Burmese expelled the reigning king, Chourjit, and placed his younger brother, Marjit, who had married one of the daughters of the king of Ava.32

The British took an indecisive position towards Cachar as well. Cachar being next to Sylhet was a concern for the East India Company soon after the battle of Plassey.33 The Burmese invaded Manipur and Cachar under Shembuan, the reigning Burmese monarch, in 1774. This met with disastrous consequences for the Burmese.34 But this did not impede the Burmese king from sending a second expedition from Ava, under another general, named Kemeoza, which proved to be more successful, as he arrived at Inchamati, within two days’ march of Khaspur, and managed to extract the payment of a sum of money from the Cachar king. Apart from this the king also agreed to send a princess of the royal blood to the Burmese majesty, along with a tree with the roots bound in its native soil, as an unequivocal mark of subjugation, according to British sources. However, Hamilton, like the other colonial accounts, was not sure of the following events since then. As he put, “Whether or not the Cacharies have since been able to throw off the Birman yoke is unknown”.35 But at the same

33 Whether the battle of Plassey could be seen as a prime mover for the change in the British policy from being a trading enterprise to being a territorial power or the latter was inherently present is debatable. For a case on how the British took a 'new forward policy' after 1750 in the context of Britain’s rivalry with France, see G.J. Bryant, 'Asymmetric Warfare: The British Experience in Eighteenth-Century India', The Journal of Military History, 68, April 2004, pp. 431 – 69. Robert Travers argues that after the battle of Plassey “the Mughal province of Bengal . . . became the launching pad for further territorial expansion, and also the main laboratory for the development of new conceptions of empire.” Robert Travers, Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India: The British in Bengal, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 4-5.
34 The Burmese were said to have lost a lot of population in these attacks. One account says that in 1774 a considerable Burmese force under Shembuan overran and devastated Manipur and took a considerable quantity of spoils along with 2,000 prisoners both men and women. Afterwards they with a force of 10,000 advanced towards Cachar. But in the mountainous terrain they perished as a result of war and disease. There was another more considerable force that finally subdued and made Cachar Raja a vassal to the king of Ava. The Burmese in this expedition are said to have perished more than 20,000 men. 'Sketch of the History, Power, and Resources of the Burmese Nation, up to the commencement of the present war', Oriental Herald, Vol. III, September to December 1824, p. 40.
35 Hamilton, A Geographical, Statistical, and Historical description of Hindostan, Vol. II, p. 764. But the question of giving and taking gift as a marker of political superordinate or subordinate position is a complex one. Lorraine V. Aragon argues that “the superordinate status of the giver or receiver cannot be assumed constant for all societies and, second, that variant interpretations of hierarchy may be made by different participants in the exchange”. Lorraine V. Aragon, 'Twisting the Gift: Translating Precolonial into Colonial Exchanges in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia', American Ethnologist, Vol. 23, No. 1, February 1996, p. 44. The British often did not participate in the form of an exchange of gifts but rather making a unidirectional act of
time, he also noted that the correspondence between the Cachar king and the British in the first decade of the nineteenth century did not allude to any state of vassalage. During the Moamaria rebellion in the Ahom kingdom the Cachar king Krishna Chandra gave shelter to many Moamarias and other Ahom rebels, which resulted in a war between the Ahoms and the Cacharis in 1803-1805. Krishna Chandra was defeated in the war and as a result he had to send the customary tribute of horses and elephants.36

In 1793 Krishna Chandra was driven away to the hills by one Iranian adventurer named Aga Muhammad Reza. As a result, he sent a vakil to Henry Lodge, who was at Sylhet. Muhammad Reza was captured and sent to Calcutta by some sepoys, who were employed by the Company. But soon these sepoys who were discharged from the service of the Company went to Cachar and occupied a part of the country. Krishna Chandra appealed, again, to the Magistrate of Sylhet. The king managed to expel the adventurers only with the help of the Company sepoys.37

In one of the correspondence in the month of June, 1809, a letter was sent to the Governor-General from Raja Krishna Chandra of Cachar, stating that he had commenced a journey with the view of performing various religious pilgrimages to the holy places within the British dominions, and requested that a guard of 25 sepoys might be stationed in his country during his absence, to prevent disturbance and protect it from invasion. His application, however, was not complied with. Again, in 1811, another letter was received, in Hamilton’s words, “soliciting most earnestly to be taken under the protection of the British government, on the condition of his paying whatever expense might be incurred on account of the troops employed for the defence of his country, and submitting other points for the consideration of the Bengal government.” The Raja of Cachar in his petitions stated that as a result of the British help in expelling Aga Muhammad Reza, the neighbouring chiefs were jealous of him and that they evinced a spirit of hostility towards him. However, in reply to his application,

giving. Then they would give a particular meaning to precolonial forms of exchanges between different groups of people and thereby making way for them to make the others in a subordinate position in the newly given meanings.


the Raja was informed that "consistently with the principles which regulated the British government, his overture could not be accepted, but that he would experience every office of friendship due to a friendly neighbour." In connection with this application, orders were issued to the magistrate of Sylhet, directing him to manifest every practicable degree of attention to such requests as the Cachar king might eventually have occasion to make. Permission was also granted him to purchase 50 firelocks from the British.

These engagements of the Company towards Manipur and Cachar, especially the rejection of the latter's petition to be taken under protection, could give a sense of the policies of the British on the east of Bengal at this period. By rejecting the plea on the grounds of the principles of the British government, it gives an impression that the British were not interfering in the internal affairs of these polities or expanding territorially. However, the question of military expeditions on the east, especially against the Burmese, seems to have already been considered. Wilson, the official historian of the War, recounts that the 'offensive and defensive' treaty with Manipur was conducted with the declared purpose of not only clearing Manipur of the enemy, but of subjugating the kingdom of the Burmese. As a consequence, six companies of sepoys were sent with Verelst. But the advance of the force was retarded by heavy rains, and the strength of the force was reduced as a result of sickness. Subsequently, the force was recalled long before it had traversed Cachar. In the following year there was another attempt to renew the negotiation but in Wilson's words "the difficulties of the enterprise were better understood, and the application was declined." The British posture of non-interference also does not mean a general lack of curiosity or concern towards the territories lying on the east and north of Bengal. In those areas where they had a commercial interest, the picture begins to get more complex. The political history and engagement with the Ahoms, or to that of the Garos, were often topics of major concern prior to the outbreak of the war. On the territorial and boundary claims between the British and the Ahoms, Hamilton wrote: "The river Cailasi is alleged to have been formerly the boundary between the British territory and Assam; but now no part of that river passes through the British dominions. This encroachment of the Assamese is said to have taken place sometime

between the years 1770 and 1780, when six small districts were taken from the Bijnee Raja then tributary to Bengal.\footnote{Hamilton, \textit{A Geographical, Statistical, and Historical description of Hindostan}, Vol. II, p. 741.} The sense of losing ‘British territory’ to these powers or the British inability to protect its territorial interest in these areas was a constant worry at this time.

After 1765, Goalpara became an important frontier outpost of the British towards the Ahom kingdom. At this time there were three outposts, Goalpara on the south bank, Jugighopa and Rangamati on the north bank. But the trade was mostly between some European merchants and the Assamese. Before the battle of Plassey (1757) a French merchant named Jean-Baptiste Chevalier had established a factory at Goalpara.\footnote{See Jean-Baptiste Chevalier, \textit{Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India (1752-1765): Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal and Tibet}, introduction and commentaries by Jean Deloche, trans. Caroline Dutta-Baruah and Jean Deloche, Guwahati: LBS publications, 2008.} Some of the prominent European traders who carried on commercial intercourse with the Ahoms in the period were Hugh Baillie, David Killican and Daniel Raush. According to S.K. Bhuyan, one of the main objectives for the Company to establish commercial relations with Assam was to participate in the trade with the ‘frontier tribes’ of the Ahoms, and if possible, with China.\footnote{Bhuyan, \textit{Anglo-Assamese Relations}, p. 55.}

There has been a long history of British remonstrance against the Ahom kingdom. The custom-houses of Assam towards Bengal were usually farmed out to the best bidder, who monopolised the trade. According to the treaty, concluded in February 1793, they were supposed to levy only 10 percent on exports and imports. But the colonial officials claimed that these Ahom officials “in reality extort what they choose.” Before the treaty, Europeans settled at Goalpara traded in salt, as Hamilton claimed, to the amount of 100,000 maunds annually. But the trade after being monopolized by the farmers of the customs, the quantity had diminished in 1809 to 35,000 maunds. Hamilton conceded that this might also be in part attributed to a decreased demand, since there was a decrease in the number of inhabitants and widespread impoverishment as a result of the disturbances. Hamilton claimed that there was the possibility of discovering many valuable commodities and mineral productions, “if the intercourse were on a better footing, but the extremely barbarous state of the country terrifies the timid Bengalese, and the advance of European beyond the frontier is interdicted.”
years after the British domination of Bengal, European individuals profited largely from the trade with Assam. But there was resentment amongst the Europeans about the monopolisation of trade by the farmers of the customs who were alleged to fix an arbitrary price both on their own goods and on those of the Bengali merchants. In fact, the counter-monopoly of the traffic in salt, on the part of the Company, was supposed "greatly to correct the evil, and at the same time realize a considerable revenue."

A.C. Banerjee points out that the "prospect of trade with Assam was naturally alluring to a mercantile Company which was just becoming a political power, and even the Court of Directors took an active interest in this subject." The Directors saw a prospect of export in salt, broad-cloth and other European commodities from Bengal in return for gold dust and other articles in 1787. Through its participation in the trade with Tibet it hoped to trade in silk, pepper, and specie. He, however, argues that the main reason for the British intervention at this point was not economic in nature: "Although the British authorities in London as well as in Calcutta were anxious to extend their trade to the Brahmaputra Valley, and even to 'the colder countries, situated to the north-east' of Assam, yet it would be a mistake to think that British intervention in the internal affairs of the Ahom Kingdom was inspired solely, or even primarily, by the commercial motive." According to him, the intervention of the British, especially that of Captain Welsh mission in 1792, from the British point of view was "nothing more nor less than a pressing political necessity." He argues that towards the end of the eighteenth century the Ahom Kingdom "revealed many symptoms of disintegration." Lord Cornwallis, because of the Company's engagements in south India, was anxious to avoid political and military commitments "but he could not remain altogether indifferent to the growing chaos in a neighbouring State, which was separated from British territories by a small river only, and connected with Bengal by commerce, religion and tradition. Thus British intervention in Assam began as an attempted solution of an urgent and difficult frontier problem."

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The remonstrance against the Ahoms certainly induced some of the officials to call for more direct intervention of the British.\textsuperscript{45} However, the official policy followed at the period seems to suggest that the British desired to expand its control, economically, if not through direct political control before the war. Bhuyan shows that the “commercial advantages that Bengal may obtain by a friendly and open intercourse”\textsuperscript{46} with the Ahoms drove Cornwallis to intervene. Later colonial accounts would also lament the postponement of British annexation of the territory of Assam.

The events, which happened in the beginning of the second decade of the nineteenth century, would finally bring the British closer to the political affairs of the Ahom kingdom. In 1811, after the death of Raja Kamaleswar, his brother Chandra Kant was put on the throne by Purnanand, the \textit{buragohain}. But soon dissensions occurred between the king and his minister, and the former was said to have entered into a conspiracy against his minister. The plot on being discovered, the raja disavowed all participation in it, and his adherents were put to death. The \textit{barphukan}, who was one of the conspirators, escaped to Calcutta and applied the British there for help. This request being rejected, he contacted the Burmese envoys who were in Bengal at that time. After accompanying the Burmese to Ava, a detachment was sent to Assam. 6000 Burmese, and 8000 auxiliaries were said to have accompanied him to Assam. But on reaching Assam they realised that the \textit{buragohain} had passed away. His son who succeeded to his father’s post, retreated to Guwahati. The Burmese were reimbursed of their military expenses, and daughter of the royal family was sent with valuable presents to Amarapura. However, the \textit{barphukan} was soon killed by Chandra Kant. Meanwhile, the son of the deceased \textit{buragohain} helped a prince of the royal family, Purandar Singha, to capture the throne by defeating Chandra Kant. The Court of Ava on learning of their ally, the \textit{barphukan}’s death despatched a large army in 1818. In June 1819 the Burmese re-instated Chandra Kant on the throne, leaving an army division under Maha Thilwa. Purandar Singha and \textit{buragohain} took refuge in the Company territory.\textsuperscript{47}


\textsuperscript{46} Bhuyan, \textit{Anglo-Assamese Relations}, p. 301.

\textsuperscript{47} Wilson, \textit{Narrative of the Burmese War}, pp. 12 – 3.
Purandar Singha, with a number of his subjects, took refuge in the Company’s territory of Rangpur. He applied to the British Government to afford him assistance in restoring him to the throne, in Captain W. White’s words, “offering to become tributary to the East India Company, and to pay the expences of the troops that might be required to effect his restoration.” “The government”, he pointed out, “declined the proposition, upon the plea of not wishing to interfere in the internal affairs of foreign states, nor to pronounce on disputed titles. But assured the refugees from Assam that an asylum should be afforded to them and protection also given so long as they should conduct themselves in a quiet and peaceable manner.”

He also states that the Assamese refugees were not contented with the ‘peaceable asylum’ they were afforded and committed depredations on the frontiers of Assam.

However, the relationship with Cachar and Ahom kingdoms in which the British declined the offer of being taken under their hold, thus, evincing a general lack of desire for political and territorial expansion, was not followed in the case of the British policies and practices in the Garo areas. The Garos, being immediate neighbours of the British, were a major concern. The former traded their cotton by bringing them down to the Bengal markets once a week during the dry season, especially in the months of December, January, and February. In these markets, the zamindar demanded his share and the remainder of the cotton would be exchanged for salt, cattle, hogs, goats, dogs, cats, fowls, ducks, fish dry and fresh, tortoises, rice, and extract of sugar cane, tobacco, and betel nut, some hoes, spinning wheels, brass ware, ornaments, and also silk, erendi, and cotton cloths. Hamilton calculated that if there was a reasonable exchange, the Garos would receive a maund of good salt for two maunds of cotton, but that what they received was adulterated with a mixture of earth and addition of moisture. Still the value of the cotton, according to him, far exceeded the amount of all the other goods, and a balance was paid in rupees. But this did not lead to a mere commercial intercourse between the two. Apart from the designs of the zamindar to exploit, there were other plans, which were driven more by a particular cultural baggage than any economic reason. “The presence of an armed establishment” in Hamilton’s words, “is indispensable, to

keep the peace while the traffic is going on, and to give confidence to the sly but timid Bengalese chapman.” Formerly, the custom was to keep a large body of matchlock-men with matches ready lighted, who paraded round the market during the sale, and discharged a matchlock at short intervals, in Hamilton’s words, “to remind the savages that they were on the alert.” He argued that without this coercion, the Garos, on the least dispute between one of their party and a merchant, “would rise in arms and massacre all within their reach.” He went further to note that notwithstanding these precautions, the Garos continued to perpetuate atrocities, and that, as a result, in 1815, all commercial intercourse with them was interdicted, and parties of police were stationed at different marts in the vicinity of the Garo mountains in order to enforce the prohibition. In the same year it was recommended that a native military officer should be appointed to the superintendence of the whole range of the Garo hills. The British tried to put an end to the Garo disturbances by recognising one of their most powerful chiefs as a zamindar in 1790 but according to Banerjee “the turbulence of the Zamindars of Golpara rendered this system ineffective.” He claims that by the end of the eighteenth century the Garos inhabiting the outer ranges had been brought partially under the control of the zamindars, though the villages in the interior were still ‘quite independent’.

Jaintias on the east of the Garo Hills managed to establish a state of their own covering both the hills and the plains. In 1774 it was attacked by a force under Major Henniker. But nothing much of their relationship with the British is known until 1821. In 1824 when the Burmese forces had reached Cachar, fearing that they might march through Jaintia to Assam, which would have seriously endangered the British possession in Sylhet, the British were prompted to negotiate with them. David Scott, the Governor-General’s Agent, opened a negotiation with the Raja of Jaintia for a treaty of alliance with the British. After some hesitation on the part of Raja Ram Singh of Jaintia, he was finally forced to sign the treaty. Pemberton wrote that the Raja “was promised the assistance of the Government troops, if his own resources were actively employed in repulsing the enemy, and threatened with punishment if he

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50 Ibid, p. 762.
admitted the Burmese into his territory." This very clearly shows the nature of the negotiations and the bullying tactics followed by the British with the smaller polities on the frontier if the need arose. Moreover, these instances, especially with the Garos and the Jaintias, clearly demonstrate the cultural foundations of the British expansion, economically and territorially.

The colonial accounts present a picture of the territorial claims of ‘encroachment’ by the Ahoms, and the British desire to post armed establishment to subdue the Garos. These might be suggestive of the larger schemes to slowly expand the control of the British beyond the confines of Bengal plain prior to the war. However, it seems to be more complicated than a neat history of slow British territorial expansion into the frontier. There seems to be a differential treatment by the British in their relationship with the monarchical polities like Ahom, Manipur and Cachar on the one hand and the other smaller political entities like the Garos and Jaintias, on the other. In relation to the former, especially the Ahoms, economic motives drove the British policies and even when political alliances were sought, it was contingent upon circumstances. whereas in relation to the latter, direct political and military intervention was the favoured policy. Moreover, the charge made by the Burmese officials against Purandar Singha and his followers, who had been given asylum in British territory and continue to attack their former kingdoms from within the territory of the British, gives further evidence to the Company’s complicity.

In the month of July 1820, Chandra Kant, the reigning king, applied to the British Government for the seizure of the ex-Raja Purandar Singha and his followers. About the same time, one of the ministers of the king of Ava addressed a letter to the Governor-General, confirming the Burmese support for Chandra Kant and stating their resolve to restore tranquillity in Assam. A request was also made to deliver the Ahom refugees in the British territories over to the officers of the Burmese majesty. The Governor-General Lord Hastings in his reply professed every disposition to promote the friendship and harmony between the Burmese and the British, but with respect to the demand for Purandar Singha and his followers, he stated, that “as long as they conducted themselves in a quiet and

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peaceable manner, he felt precluded from complying with the demands to apprehend and surrender them.\textsuperscript{54} This refusal of the British to comply with the demands of the Burmese makes the matter more complicated. The British, on the one hand, professed to have rejected the proposal of taking the kingdoms of Cachar and Ahom on the principle of not interfering with the internal affairs of foreign states. But on the other, they encouraged this internal dissension by allowing the contending parties to settle in British territory and also by selling arms to these contenders. In fact, by not accepting the demands of the Burmese to hand over Purandar Singha, the British were effectively interfering in the internal matters of the Burmese empire since Chandra Kant had, now, accepted the suzerainty of the Burmese.

Chandra Kant soon developed animosity with Maha Thilwa, the Burmese official, which led to a fight between the two. The former was compelled to evacuate Guwahati and retreat towards the British frontier. But, there having purchased supplies of arms and ammunition, he became successful and at the end of 1821 established his authority to the west of Jorhath. However by the beginning of 1822, the Burmese sent a considerable reinforcement to support another king in the throne. This force was led by the legendary Maha Bandula and Chandra Kant was defeated in the ensuing battle. Though Chandra Kant refrained from taking refuge in the Company's territories, the Burmese commander anticipating the possibility, addressed a letter and a message to the officer commanding on the frontier, stating, according to Wilson, "that although it was his wish to remain on friendly terms with the Company, and to respect the British authorities, yet, should protection be given to Chandra Kant, he had received orders to follow him wherever he might go, and to take him by force out of the British dominions." At the time the Company officials did not feel that these warnings would be put into action, though orders were sent to the magistrate that "should Chandra Kant or any of his party appear within his district, they should be disarmed and sent to a distance". Measures were also taken to strengthen the force on the frontier. Wilson states that there was a general feeling of insecurity amongst the inhabitants of Rangpur and that on various occasions Burmese parties had crossed the boundary river, and committed serious devastations within the British territory, "burning a number of villages, and plundering and murdering the inhabitants, or carrying them off as slaves." He also claimed that when these

\textsuperscript{54} White, \textit{A Political History of the Extraordinary Events}, p. 123.
proceedings were reported to the Burmese officials they "disavowed, but no redress was obtained." By this time the Burmese were said to have abandoned the "pretence of maintaining the lawful prince in possession of his throne" by instating in the Ahom throne "a chief of their own nation".55

The advancement of the Burmese forces in the Brahmaputra valley saw similar developments in the neighbouring areas of Manipur and Cachar. After the death of Jai Singh (the king of Manipur, with whom the Company officials had negotiated a treaty in 1762) in 1799, there was much fighting amongst his sons for the throne. Finally, with Chourjit ascending the throne, his younger brother Marjit fled to the court of Ava while Gambhir Singh remained in Manipur. Marjit along with a strong Burmese force invaded Manipur in 1812, and succeeded in dispossessing his elder brother Chourjit, who was compelled to flee to Cachar. Chourjit took refuge first in Cachar, and subsequently in Jaintia. Gambhir Singh, after residing with Marjit for a year, left the country to enter into the service of Gobinda Chandra, the raja of Cachar. He was soon entrusted with the command of the troops. In 1818, Marjit invaded Cachar, on which Gobinda Chandra fled into Sylhet, and "solicited the aid of the British government, offering to hold his country under an acknowledgement of dependency." As stated above, these offers were declined, and as a result, he had recourse to the brothers of the king of Manipur. He invited Chourjit from Jaintia promising to divide with him and Gambhir Singh the territory of Cachar as the price for their services. With the assistance of the two brothers, the combined force managed to defend Cachar against Marjit's invasion and the latter was compelled to withdraw to Manipur. However, the union of the two brothers proved detrimental to Gobinda Chandra. Soon after the fight with Marjit, the united force of Chourjit and Gambhir Singh expelled him in 1820 from Cachar and subsequently divided the country between the brothers. As a result, Gobinda Chandra was forced to take refuge in the Company's territories. During this time, Marjit was summoned to the capital of the Burmese empire in 1819 on the occasion of the ascension of the new king, in tradition with the customary practice of the tributary princes to pay homage to the new sovereign. On his declining to comply with the summons, a powerful Burmese force was sent against him, which successfully drove him out of Manipur and with the appointment of a Burmese official.

55 Wilson, Narrative of the Burmese War, pp. 16 – 7.
in charge of Manipur, it was annexed to the empire. Marjit, being driven away from Manipur, was received by his brothers in Cachar and a portion of their territory was assigned to him. However, soon dissension emerged between Chourjit and Gambhir Singh and the former was defeated and fled into the Company's territories. Chourjit was said to have tendered his territories to the Company, and taking advantage of the developments, the Company authorities decided to take Cachar and Jaintia under its protection. The Burmese were informed of the determination of the Company. However, the Burmese continued to advance their forces into Cachar. This development, in the words of Wilson, "provoked the commencement of actual hostilities in that quarter... in the meantime, the discussions on the side of Chittagong had assumed a decided tone, and left the question of peace or war between the two states no longer a subject of speculation." 56

Once in the neighbourhood of Cachar, the British possession of Bengal had to think of the defence against the Burmese: "The threatening attitude of the Burmas, at either extremity of the frontier, now rendered it incumbent on the British government... to take such measures as well at once practicable for the defence of the eastern provinces." The British finally executed a treaty on the 6th of March 1824, by which Govind Chandra the Raja of Cachar placed himself under British protection, and agreed to pay a tribute of Rs. 10,000. By this arrangement the British were enabled to occupy the principal passes into the low lands of Sylhet, and "thus effectively oppose the advance of the Burmas from the district of Manipur, which they had some short time previously reduced to their authority." 57

Wilson puts the feeling of the British with the change of the situation in the following words:

[The] proximity [of the powerful and ambitious Burmese] was more a subject of reasonable apprehension, as, from the country being intersected by numerous rivers, and from the Burmas being equally prepared to combat by water as by land, it was at any time in their power to invade and plunder the British provinces, without its being possible to offer

56 Wilson, Narrative of the Burmese War, pp. 22 – 23. Also see Pemberton, Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India, pp. 45-49.
57 Wilson, Narrative of the Burmese War, pp. 18 – 9. The colonial accounts generally noted that the Burmese were driven out of Cachar in the course of the first Anglo-Burmese war. But skirmishes between the British and the Burmese had already started and they were ousted from Cachar before the formal declaration of war.
effective opposition, or to intercept their retreat, under the existing constitution of our
defensive force.\textsuperscript{58}

The interesting point to be noted here is that from the words of Wilson it is discernible that the British were content with the state of Ahom or Cachar polity prior to the Burmese entering into the scene. This seems to give the idea that since the 'feeble and distracted state' of Ahom or Cachar did not pose any threat, the British could continue to remonstrate and expand its political and economic control slowly had it not been for the Burmese, who now posed a serious threat. Within this narrative, the British now disavowed their principle of meddling into the internal affairs of foreign states and executed its political expansion in order to counter the 'Burmese threat'. The incessant fights and the political developments within the royalty of the Ahoms, Manipur and Cachar were caught up in the larger politics of empire-building.

\textbf{The War}

Despite all the transactions with the different polities, the British, definitely, did not go for a direct conquest of the territories. There were many military collisions between the two empires as well. Finally, the British declared war on the 17\textsuperscript{th} of March 1824 against the Burmese. The incident at Shapuree Deep, a little sand island in river Tek Naaf, at the boundary between Arakan and Chittagong, in October 1823 is one of the various collisions between the two powers. But these skirmishes did not lead the British to declare war. A contemporary account gave the reason: "[P]olicy could hardly advise a war for the assertion of sovereignty over Shapuree Deep . . . Doubtless . . . the affair of the island . . . led to a demand for international explanation; but they were not causes of war." The developments in February 1824 in Cachar adjacent to the frontiers of Bengal greatly alarmed the British. On the 13\textsuperscript{th} of February, the Burmese were seen putting up stockades on the northern banks of Surma river close to Badarpur. The British force at the frontier of Bengal was small and the

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid, pp. 17–8. Wilson claimed that this anticipation was soon speedily realized when an island in the Brahmaputra, on which the British flag had been erected, was claimed by the Burmese officials. The Burmese were said to have taken the flag. However, this conduct was never complained formally by the British. Meanwhile, sickness and rebellions by various groups weakened the Burmese force in the Brahmaputra valley.
developments of the Burmese posed a direct threat: “If the Burmans were permitted to extend their works; they would soon command the province of Silhet and overrun it at their pleasure.” However, the Burmese threat to the British possession in Bengal, as shown above, has a history, which antedated their ‘sudden’ arrival.

Once the war had been declared, several British corps were employed against the Burmese during 1824-26. The first under Brigadier Richards was despatched to re-conquer Rangpore, the capital of the Ahom kingdom and the plan was for him to finally reach Ava from the north. The second under General Shuldham was meant to defend Sylhet and penetrate through Cachar and reach Manipur to finally reach Ava. The third, under General Morrison's division moved from the base of Chittagong. The fourth corps, consisted of two divisions of troops, one from Bengal, and the other from Madras, united under the command of Brigadier General Sir Archibald Campbell. This is the force, which is generally referred to as the Rangoon Expedition. The force under Campbell made three campaigns. The first attempt was during the monsoon of 1824. The second opened in December, which fought with the forces of Maha Bandula in Prome, and terminating with the armistice, which followed the conference at Nyoung-ben-zeik. The third campaign began with the disaster of Watteegoung, followed up by the successes in front of Prome, terminating in the treaty of Yandabo.

The force under General Shuldham was completely unsuccessful in an attempt to penetrate through the jungles of Cachar, with the rains and the forests rendering every effort futile. As a result, the capture of Manipur from the Burmese was left to Gambhir Singh, who, with eight hundred of his own followers, accompanied by Lieutenant Pemberton, of the quarter-

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60 This Rangpore is the capital of Ahom kingdom different from the Bengal district Rangpur and to differentiate these respective spellings will be used.
61 The Bengal contingent amounted to 2,175 men, consisting of two regiments – one battalion of the native infantry and two companies of artillery. The Madras contingent was much greater, and amounted to 9,300 men, making together the formidable number of 11,475 men, of whom nearly 5,000 were Europeans. In addition to the transports, there was a Bengal flotilla of twenty gun-brigs and rowing-boats, each carrying an eighteen-pounder, and a number of transports and other vessels. See Kenneth R. H. Mackenzie, *Burmah and the Burmese*, Book II, *Burman History*, London: George Routledge and Co., 1853, p. 165.
62 Havelock, *Memoir of the three campaigns*, pp. VI – X.
master-general’s department, pushed through the jungle, finally taking possession of the
capital of Manipur. With this victory the Burmese were deprived of their westward conquest
but at the same time it did not offer any material diversion for the British. Colonel Richards
succeeded in obtaining possession of the capital of the Ahom kingdom and with the fall of
Rangpore, which commanded the capital, on the 1st of February 1825, all authority of the
Burmese fell. But the force under Richards also did not manage to advance any further
towards Ava. These are, perhaps, some of the reasons why they managed to slow the speedy
advance of the British. 63

The decision to choose the sea route rather than land route seems to have surprised the
Burmese. On the 10th of May 1824, the British fleet landed within twenty-six miles of the
stockade of Rangoon. As Havelock put it,

The surprise was complete. The Court of Ava intent on schemes of conquest, the means of
which it had collected in Assam, in Cachar, in Arracan, never dreamt of this sudden blow
against its southern provinces, and great maritime town. It was wholly unprepared for this
rude interruption of its projects. There was not at the moment any governor or Myo-woon, in
Rangoon, or in the whole of Pegue. Authority was exercised in the town by the subordinate
officer called Rewoon. He had no force for its protection but armed police. 64

However, there were accounts, which were critical of the British unpreparedness for the
eventuality of the war with the Burmese. Thomas A. Trant wrote: “The rapid rise of the
Burman power, coeval as it was with our own in Asia, must, for many years past, have
attracted the attention of our rulers in India, as it required but little penetration to foresee, that
when once we came in collision with a powerful nation, never yet defeated by us, but, on the
contrary, supposing itself superior to the whole world, a trial, at least, would be made on its
part to assert its superiority, and a war would, of course, be inevitable.” 65 This seems to

63 Thomas A. Trant, Two Years in Ava, from May 1824, to May 1826, London: John Murray, 1827, pp. 308-9.
The author of this book is not given, except that he was an officer on the staff of the quarter-master-general’s
department. But, John L. Christian identifies the author as Capt. Thomas A. Trant. See his ‘Americans and
64 Havelock, Memoir of the three campaigns, p. 22.
65 Trant, Two Years in Ava, p. 5.
suggest that if the British were better prepared, the possibility of the war could have been avoided.

On the 21st of February 1826 Archibald reached Yandaboo, only forty-five miles from the capital to negotiate. On the 24th of February the treaty was finally ratified. By the treaty, the King of Ava agreed to renounce all claim and abstain from all future interference with Assam, Cachar, Jaintia, and Manipur, to yield to the Company the territories of Arakan; to consider the Ararakan mountains as the frontier; to cede the conquered provinces, Yeh, Tavoy, and Mergui, and the whole of Tenasserim, with the islands, etc., taking the Salween river as the line of demarcation on that frontier. It was further stipulated that the Burmese king should allow more liberty to British subjects within his dominions, abolish all exactions upon British ships entering the port of Rangoon, etc., and pay for the expenses of the war a crore of rupees, or about 1,000,000/. sterling. According to one estimate the war had cost the British from 7,000,000/ to 8,000,000/. 66

**British Official Narratives of the War**

Horace Hayman Wilson, Professor of Sanskrit in the University of Oxford, who was given the duty of collecting and editing the official documents relating to the origin, course and termination of the war between the British and Burma, placed 'before the public in a collective and available form' a quarto volume titled *Documents Illustrative of the Burmese War* printed in 1827. The aim of the enterprise was “disseminating authentic information respecting the valuable countries between India and China, of which at the time little or nothing was known”. The British war with the Burmese had “opened to European access so many new and interesting regions”. With this understanding, two sets of papers were selected, first, political and military, and second, topographical and statistical. He wrote, “The occurrence of hostilities with the neighbouring kingdom of Ava, was an event which

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66 Corner, *China*, pp. 442-3. The treaty was later met with mixed reception. It was thought that the British could have exerted more by demanding the port of Rangoon and Pegu to be retained. However, it also afforded the British with the cession of Arakan, which was considered to be a formidable frontier, besides being fertile territory. The possession of the Tenasserim provinces, and of the islands which lie off that coast of Arakan, afforded increased security to the British commercial navigation, opened the road to an inland commerce with the Siamese and other distant people, and placed at the British disposal teak forests of enormous extent.
was not unforeseen by the British government of India, as the probable consequence of the victorious career and the extravagant pretensions of the Burman state."\textsuperscript{67} Explicating the designs of the Burmese, Wilson further wrote:

They repelled, with great gallantry, a formidable invasion from China, and by the final annexation of Arakan, Manipur and Asam, to the empire, they established themselves throughout the whole of the narrow, but extensive tract of country, which separates the western provinces of China from the eastern boundaries of Hinduism. Along the greater part of this territory they threatened the open plains of British India, and they only awaited a plausible pretext to assail the barrier\textsuperscript{68}.

In fact, Wilson saw the war as merely a culmination of the ‘imperious disposition of the court of Ava’. His understanding and the explanation of the war were shared by other ‘respectable Englishmen and Americans’ who were at Ava at the time. The depositions of these people, taken after the war by the British Commissioners at Rangoon, or other contemporary accounts, evinced similar sentiments.

Major Snodgrass, who was Military Secretary to the Commander of the British Expedition to Burma, Major-General Sir Archibald Campbell, and Assistant Political Agent in Ava, wrote in the opening lines of his account:

The unprovoked aggressions of the Burmese governors of Arracan upon the south-east frontier of Bengal, and the contemptuous silence of the court of Ava to every remonstrance upon the subject, in the beginning of 1824, compelled the Indian government to resort to other measures for obtaining redress, and preventing the future encroachments of a warlike and ambitious neighbour, whose arrogant pretensions and restless character had so frequently interrupted the relations of peace subsisting between the two countries, keeping the frontier provinces in constant dread and danger of invasion.\textsuperscript{69}

\textsuperscript{67} Wilson, \textit{Narrative of the Burmese War}, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{69} Major Snodgrass, \textit{Narrative of the Burmese War, detailing the Operations of Major-General Sir Archibald Campbell's Army, from its landing at Rangoon in May 1824, to the Conclusion of a Treaty of Peace at Yandaboo in February 1826}, London: John Murray, 1827, p. 1.
Henry Havelock, who was Lieutenant at the time of the war in the 13th Light Infantry, and Deputy Assistant Adjutant General to the Forces of the Rangoon Expedition, put it more harshly. In the opening sentence of his book, he wrote: “The first war against the Burmans arose out of a singular, and audacious, but perfectly deliberate attempt on the part of the semi-barbarous court of Ava to deprive the British government in India of a portion of its Eastern provinces.”

While Wilson’s account claimed a much wider treatment of the ‘causes’ and the proceedings of the war, the other accounts of the officers who were involved in the war concentrated largely on the specific events. But they shared the common understanding of the ‘warlike’ disposition of the Burmese, the threat to the British possessions in Bengal, and the declaration of the war as absolutely necessary on the part of the British. These accounts became both the ‘official’ version as well as ‘popular’ account of the first Anglo-Burmese war. Wilson’s narrative of the ‘victorious career and the extravagant pretensions of the Burman state’ and the threat, thus, posed to the British, became the core of most of the later writings on the war. These accounts became popular narratives in Europe, as visible from an account published in Edinburgh Review after one and half decade later:

The British government was driven into that war by the insolence and aggressions of the court of Ava, intoxicated with the uninterrupted success which had attended all its schemes of aggrandisement from the days of Alompra. The most ambitious of our governors-general had entertained no views of conquest in that quarter. Lord Hastings had anxiously staved off the contest, at the close of his administration, by a political artifice. But Lord Amherst, the most moderate and pacific was compelled to add vast provinces, covered for the most part with trackless forests, miserably under-peopled, unhealthy, and far beyond our natural boundaries, to our already enormous empire.

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70 Havelock, Memoir of the Three Campaigns, p. 1.
The narrative of the British being forced into the war as a result of the expansionist policies of the Burmese became a standard narrative. An account written in the middle of the nineteenth century clearly portrays the popularity of the official narrative:

During the six reigns of the princes of the dynasty of the usurper Alompra, the Burmans had extended, and apparently established, their dominion over Pegu, Martaban, Tavoy, Tenasserim, Arracan, Cassay, Cachar, Assam, and Jainteea. These last possessions, being distant and poor countries, became a source of weakness and not of strength; and they brought the Burmans into that collision with a civilised nation which was sure to end in a conflict that would for ever arrest the progress of their barbarous conquest. . . . when they took the field for the first time against the British, it was with the full confidence of victory and success. Nor did they look to a merely defensive war. On the contrary, they contemplated nothing less than the invasion and conquest of the whole of Bengal, and the capture of the Governor-general of India, who was to be brought to Ava in chains and fetters of gold.  

Devoid of any need for factual accuracy or the need for historical evidence, these accounts portrayed the purely defensive nature of the British involvement in the war.

The popularity as well as the authority of this narrative was such that in most of the accounts written later nothing much changed with the causes, proceedings, and outcome of the war. More than a century later John L. Christian would write: “British India, along its eastern frontiers, had as a neighbor a state powerful and ambitious, gloriying in its recent conquest of Siam and its defeat of the Chinese invasion of 1769. By 1824 a series of acts of aggression by the Burmese along the Chittagong frontier between India and Burma resulted in a declaration of war between the two powers.”

With a widely shared understanding of the ‘Burmese character’, the war was declared as a logical conclusion. In these narratives, the rising power of the Burmese and their ‘attempt’ to conquer Bengal were given as one of the major ‘causes’. There was definitely a commonly shared narrative of the causes amongst the Europeans and the Americans stationed in the

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72 Comer, China, p. 430.
Burmese towns at the time of the war. The depositions of the 'respectable Englishmen and American' captives, imprisoned by the Burmese Government, after the war, before John Crawfurd, the Civil Commissioner on the part of the British Government, at Rangoon shared a common perception of the Burmese disposition. These depositions also became a source of valuable information. Crawfurd wrote, "The ... depositions, taken before me at Rangoon, in the month of May 1826, shortly after the cessation of hostilities, illustrate in so interesting and striking a manner, the character of the Burmese and their Government, as well as the history and incidents of the war". "Several of the parties examined," according to him, "were individuals of much acuteness and intelligence".74

A close examination of these depositions gives an interesting insight into the nature of the information being gathered. John Laird, an English merchant and an agent of the Prince of Sarawadi, brother to the king and the person after him in rank, came to Rangoon for the first time in March 1820 in command of the ship Mahomed Shah. Laird enjoyed a monopoly of teak timber and other produce of the province, and understood a bit of Burmese, and was later taken prisoner by the Burmese. He was asked whether he was of the opinion that the "Burman Court and people, generally, were anxious for a war with the English?" In his reply, Laird answered that "from the King to the beggar, they were hot for a war with the English." In order to substantiate his point he answered that the Burmese "looked upon the English as a parcel of merchants, and considered the Governor-general to be of no higher rank or consequence than the Viceroy of Rangoon."75

The question of the official etiquette while dealing with the British had already been a matter of much discomfort for the British. In the negotiations of Colonel Symes' mission sent in 1795, the Burmese were reluctant to deal with him, considering that he was an envoy sent by the Governor-General and not the sovereign of Britain. In Symes' words,

I likewise learned, that the pride of the court had been early awakened by a representation, that the government of Bengal being provincial, and the Governor-general, from whom I derived my commission, only the subject of a king, it would therefore be derogatory to the

75 John Laird's deposition, reproduced in Ibid, Appendix, p. 39.
Birman monarch to treat on terms of equality with an administration that was subordinate, or to correspond with any person beneath the dignity of a crowned head.  

Quite similar to the sentiments of Symes, Laird unequivocally put the continuing self-perception of the British regarding the disposition of the Burmese towards them: “I have always considered that the Burmans had a contempt for the British, whom they considered as merchants who had hired a few mercenary soldiers to fight for them.” A long history of perception amongst the British that they were not treated well, or considered worthy by the Burmese accentuated the perception of threat. The understanding that the Burmese wanted to expand further towards the west, thus threatening the British possessions in Bengal, was a common opinion at the time. Laird on being asked the advantages that the Burmese expected to derive from a war with the English, answered that they “expected to conquer Bengal, to plunder it, and extend their territories to the westward.” The ‘threat’ of the Burmese invading Bengal came from the understanding that the Burmese were aware of the wealth of Calcutta and Bengal from the Burmese merchants who visited Calcutta, “as well as by the large investments brought to Rangoon by British merchants.” The ‘Burmese threat’, and an understanding of their nature, was, however, not limited to the English perception.

Adoniram Judson, a native of Massachussets in the United States of America, arrived at Rangoon in the month of July 1813 and resided in the Burmese dominions since then when he was examined by Crawfurd. For twenty-one months, he was kept as a prisoner by the Burmese. Before his imprisonment he had frequent intercourse with the Palace and claimed to have known every member of the Royal family, both the public and private officers of State, the Woonghees and Attawuns. He recounted that when he visited the Palace in the beginning of 1824, he was received coldly by the king though he continued his visits to the king’s brothers and sisters, the queen’s brother, and other principal officers. The reason for his being coldly received by his Majesty, he answered in his deposition, was “the approaching rupture between the British and Burman Governments.” He claimed that from the first visit that he made to Ava, the Burmese disposition to enter into a war with the

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76 See Symes, *Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava*, Vol. II, pp. 146 – 7. Symes claimed that the Burmese thought the British envoy was a mission to pay tribute to the king of Burma.

British had always been manifested whenever an occasion presented itself. He declared, "I heard such sentiments expressed by the principal officers of Government, but more particularly by the members of the Royal family." Quite comparative with the English merchant Laird's account, the American missionary also gave his opinion that the causes of the war was "jealousy of the British power on the part of the Burmans, confidence in their own prowess on account of the recent conquests of Cassay and Assam, and a desire to extend their territory." To be sure, he went a step further in his opinion of the Burmese disposition towards the British. In his view, the Burmese thought the British power "formidable to the Hindus only; but considered themselves a superior order of men, whom the British could not withstand in battle, both on account of personal courage, skill in stratagem, and the practice of desultory modes of warfare, which would fatigue and destroy a British army."

There was no verifiable information to prove the Burmese disposition towards the British prior to the war. These depositions were merely personal opinions beset with inconsistencies. However, they became important grounds to substantiate the case that the Burmese had already planned an invasion of Bengal and that the British declaration of war was justified. Though this reasoning was given post-facto with a retrospective longer history of the Burmese engagements with the British, it did not disturb the narrative of the war. Moreover, the later re-telling of the war would use only those portions of the available information during the time of the war, which suited the general popular narrative.

Whether the Burmese had considered the British establishment in Bengal, or the British in general, to be lower in status is difficult to tell. It is also difficult to ascertain when the

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Adoniram Judson's deposition reproduced in Crawfurd, *Journal of an Embassy*, Appendix, pp. 47-9. For American missionary accounts with similar opinions see 'Missionary Intelligence', *The American Baptist magazine*, new series, Vol. 5, 1825; *American Missionary register*, Vol. 6, 1825. In the same way that the English and the American shared their opinions of the war and the character of the Burmese, they also claimed that the Burmese did not make any distinction between the two. "The Burmese, in fact, are of opinion, that all white men, except the French, are subjects of the King of England. Since the overthrow of the Emperor, Napoleon, they even believe that France has become part of the King of England's dominions. The Americans are peculiarly liable to be confounded with the English, from speaking the same language." Adoniram Judson's deposition reproduced in Crawfurd, *Journal of an Embassy*, Appendix, p. 48. The Burmese were thought to be conflating the "English and all Europeans with the natives of India in the one common appellation of Kula or western foreigners". In fact, it was claimed that "it is only since the war with the British of 1825-26 that they have learnt to distinguish between the more prominent of the nations lying west of them." A.P. Phayre, 'On the History of the Burmah Race', *Transactions of the Ethnological Society of London*, Vol. V, New Series, 1867, p. 37.
Burmese did finally resolve on a war with the British – whether it was premeditated or a collision with another power in their political expansion towards the west, especially in the valleys of Brahmaputra, Manipur, reaching the borders of Bengal. But the smooth colonial narrative of the war definitely had a more complex story at the time of the war. Not all accounts, which were produced at the time of the war, accepted this version of the events and the causes of the war. Not everyone affirmed the general understanding of ‘Burmese dispositions’ towards the British.

Moreover, the deposition of John Laird to Crawfurd at Rangoon in the month of May 1826 shortly after the cessation of hostilities suggests varying reasons for the Burmese and the British for going to war. In his deposition, Laird stated that on his arrival at Ava, on the 4th of March, 1824, the Prince of Sarawadi asked him, whether the “two Chiefs of Assam and Cassay,” who had gone into the British territory would be delivered by the ‘English Government’. Laird recollected having responded that it was contrary to the custom of the English to deliver up any person who had sought their protection, upon which the Prince was said to have replied, “If they will not deliver them up, we will go to war and take them by force.”

Though it is difficult to establish the historical reliability of the Prince’s reply, it nevertheless suggests that the events that were unfolding in Manipur, Cachar and Ahom kingdoms played a role in the chain of events leading to the war. Moreover, these complex narratives on the war would soon be overtaken by the official narrative.

THE WAR AND ITS CRITICS

Though the Company was successful in the war, it was fraught with miscalculations, with a heavy cost of both human and monetary lost. The war generated a heated debate and criticism from the very beginning. A sense of those who were critical of the war can be understood in the sentences of one journal in London:

The terms of the treaty you will see by the public papers, and you will agree with me, that most fortunate it is that we have got off so well; for, though the constancy of mind and

undaunted intrepidity of Sir A. Campbell, and the excellent conduct of the troops under command, are beyond all praise, and will constitute one of the brightest pages of our history, it can never be denied that the war itself was unnecessary, and this expedition, in particular, most unadvisedly entered upon. . . . And so let us discuss the matter no further. 80

Despite the call for a stop to the discussion of the war, the journal Oriental Herald did not stop discussing the matter. In the same volume, another article read as follows:

Lord Amherst's war continues. . . . The Burmese war is a sound of which every reader has been long since tired: yet, like other inveterate evils, it must be borne till the progress of time shall rid the world of them and of their authors. . . . and to us, it appears like an incurable ulcer preying upon the very vitals of the British empire in the East, - incurable, at least while the Government remains in the hands of the present empirics who have brought the patient into this lamentable state. 81

In an attempt to expose the government's justification of the war, the article wrote, "The Government of Bengal are now fully aware of the aversion with which this crusade against the 'Barbarians' is regarded by all men of sense, and endeavour to throw the odium of it on their enemies." The criticism was not merely about the justification of the war but also about the secrecy with which the developments and the negotiations were conducted: "Our diplomats . . . think it enough to tell us, that the Burmese are ignorant and perfidious savages, and that they themselves are wise, just, and reasonable". It goes on to contradict this assumption: "Those who have read the 'Journal of Captain Hiram Cox,' or Mr. Symes's 'Account of his Embassy to Ava,' will have, however, a very different opinion of the Burmese from that now circulated by their invaders." 82

There were still more people who did not stop discussing the matter. The distance from Sylhet to Manipur were calculated to be two hundred miles and then from Manipur to Ava

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80 'Bhurtpoor – Indian Engineers – Artillery – War in Ava', The Oriental Herald and Colonial Review, Vol. X., 1826, p. 108. The writer of this text is merely identified as an intelligent correspondent and informant in India.

81 'Summary of the latest intelligence from India, and other countries of the east', Ibid, p. 336.

82 Ibid. While some people criticised the negotiation on the ground that the demands on the Burmese was so little, the Oriental Herald criticised it for extravagance.
little more than two hundred miles. The other line through the Brahmaputra valley was calculated to be not much than four hundred miles. It was thought probable that if a large portion of the army in Bengal were concentrated either upon Rangpur or Sylhet it would in either route be able to penetrate till Ava in forty to forty-five marches. But the folly of the plan was later discovered by the difficult experience of the force under Brigadier General Shuldham in his attempt to advance through Cachar and his inability to reach Manipur. The three lines of invasion through Assam, Cachar and Arakan were reviewed in succession. But in March 1824, it was finally resolved on a maritime expedition, apparently by Lord Amherst. 83 This was said to have been decided “some little time before the operations in Cachar were brought to a temporary close”. The decision was taken in the words of Kenneth R. H. Mackenzie, with “the idea of diverting the attention of the Burmese from our possessions to their own, and of turning what had hitherto been a defensive war, on the part of the English, into an offensive one.” However, he criticised its choice over the land-route:

The idea was good one, and it was nobly pursued; yet, though it was successful in its ultimate object, it unfortunately cost the government more than its proceeds in land can possibly repay for many years. The military resources of the Burmese were infinitely over-estimated, while the facilities for obtaining food and proper housing for the troops were also totally unknown. 84

Apart from the criticism of the choice of routes and the subsequent difficulties, the lost of life was estimated to be huge. 85

83 Havelock, Memoir of the three campaigns, pp. 9–13.
84 Mackenzie, Burmah and the Burmese, Book II, p. 163.
85 The loss in all grades in the Rangoon Expeditionary force, both killed in action and deaths by disease from May, 1824 to the close of the war was given as – total Europeans 3222, total natives 1766, and 399 horses. 'Summary of the loss in all grades of Major General Sir Archibald Campbell's Army in killed in action, and deaths by disease from May, 1824, to the close of the war', reproduced in Havelock, Memoir of the three campaigns, Appendix, No. III. There were different figures being given of the total number of men who died in the war. Another account put the total number of the British in action to be about 3,000. However, a much bigger number died from disease. It was estimated that at Rangoon alone 2,000 Europeans, and at least 5,000 sepoys, were killed by disease. James Edward Alexander, Travels from India to England; comprehending a Visit to the Burman Empire, and a Journey through Persia, Asia Minor, European Turkey, etc. in the years 1825-26, London: Allen and Co., 1827, p. 268.
There was a common perception of the lack of information prior to the war. Henry Havelock expressed this feeling in the following words: “Few wars have been undertaken with a less precise or extensive knowledge of the topographical circumstances of the enemy’s country. This deficiency was one of the most serious of the difficulties to be encountered.”\(^8^6\) Whether this view of the lack of information despite the various missions sent by the British towards Burma was true or a mere wish for more specific information is difficult to say. But if indeed there was a lack of information prior to the war, it was a feeling of surprise as one officer put it:

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\text{[I]t seems quite incomprehensible that so little knowledge should have acquired of the real power and resources of our neighbours; and even after the conquest of Assam, when the cloud that was gathering in the political horizon might have pointed out the necessity of precaution to those whom a long acquaintance with Asiatic courts should have made distrustful of the transient calm, - even then, no steps were taken to ascertain the views and nature of the Burman government; so that, when the storm unexpectedly burst, all was confusion, and Government was obliged to act upon information received twelve years before.}^{8^7}\]

Soon after the conclusion of the war there were more fundamental and serious criticisms of the war as well as interpretations of its causes. Contrary to the ‘official’ and the popular narratives of the war, which pointed out the long history of animosity that the Burmese had disposed towards the British, Captain W. White gave a very different interpretation of the preceding events. According to him, as a consequence of the continued Burmese oppression of the Arakanese, in the years 1797 and 1798 no less than forty thousand of the population emigrated to the Company’s territories. The Burmese with an army of about four thousand men, followed the emigrants into the province of Chittagong and the commander of the troops addressed a letter to the magistrate of Chittagong with the following words:

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\text{If you will keep in your country the slaves of our King, the broad path of intercourse between the two states will be blocked up. Our disagreement is only about these refugees: we wrote to}
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\(^8^6\) Havelock, *Memoir of the three campaigns*, p. 8. The difficulty in choosing the land route to Ava was attributed to this lack of geographical information on Burma.
\(^8^7\) Trant, *Two Years in Ava*, pp. 5-6.
you to deliver them up, and you have been offended thereat. We again write to you who are in the province of Chittagong, on the part of the King of the Company, that we will take away the whole of the Arracanese; and further, in order to take them away more troops are coming. If you will keep the Arracanese in your country, the cord of friendship will be broken. 88

Burmese king sent an embassy to Bengal early in 1800 for the purpose of making a representation to the Company authorities, complaining of the injury his province of Arakan had sustained by the British encouragement of the Mugh emigrants. They also asked for the Company officials to induce their return to the Burmese territories. In White’s view, the Governor-General, Lord Wellesley, endeavoured to satisfy the mind of the ambassador by insisting on the friendly disposition of the British Government towards the Burmese and assured the mission, that “the refugees who might be disposed, were at perfect liberty to return to their native country; but declined a compliance with the requisition of forcing the return of the emigrants.” 89

In the Extracts of Despatches from the Government of Bengal to the Court of Directors justified the decision for the war against the Burmese. The Government of Bengal, in their despatch to the Court of Directors, dated the 23rd of January, 1812, gave the origin of the disputes. In 1811 Kingberring, a native of Arakan, “having incurred the displeasure (and been exposed to) the resentment of the King of Ava, took refuge with a number of his followers in the district of Chittagong”. In May 1811 “having either by persuasion or by intimidation, induced a large body of Mughs to join his standard.” It was further written,

88 Cited in White, A Political History of the Extraordinary Events, p. 8. The Burmese letter quoted in the book does not give the original source. The Magistrate at this time was one Mr. Pechell. A later account recorded that in 1798 around thirty thousand of the people, generally known as Mugs, fled from the oppressions of the Burmese rule in Arakan, and sought refuge within the British district of Chittagong. Here they established themselves as permanent settlers. The Burmese authorities made several applications, with a view of persuading the ‘resident’ of the district to deliver them up. And as a result, embassies were sent from Ava to Calcutta with little success. In 1811 a native of Arakan, named Kingberring, one of the refugees who had found asylum in Chittagong, gathered large numbers to invade the territory to which they had formerly belonged. The Burman government was supposed to have concluded that this invasion, headed by a person residing under British protection, would not have been undertaken without the sanction or connivance of the British. To remove such an impression an envoy was sent to Burma to disavow all connection with, or approval of, the undertaking on the part of the Bengal government. Adoniram Judson, Burmah’s Great Missionary: Records of the Life, Character, and Achievements of Adoniram Judson, New York: Edward H. Fletcher, 1854, p. 180.

89 White, A Political History of the Extraordinary Events, p. 9.
“Partly owing to the secrecy and caution with which he carried it into effect, and partly to the negligence of the darogas (native magistrates) of the Thannas on the frontier, his proceedings were unknown to the magistrate of Chittagong until he had crossed the Nauf river, which forms the common boundary of the two countries.”

White argued that the origin of the ill-will between the two empires could be traced back from this and that it engendered a feeling of revenge on the part of the Burmese, ultimately leading to the war. Rejecting the claim of the authorities in this report by a detailed dissection of the events and the British officers who were involved, White pointed out the complicity of the British officials in the whole plan. He alleged that the magistrate was fully aware of the developments.

In January 1812, the Burmese forces accompanied by the Raja of Arakan, advanced to the boundary of that province upon the banks of the Naaf river from where, according to White, he addressed a respectful appeal to the magistrate of Chittagong, disavowing, in the most decided terms, that he had no intention of entering the Company’s province, and “merely demanded the surrender of the two principal leaders of the insurrection.” To this demand, the magistrate replied of his inability to give any answer to any propositions on the part of the Burmese until he received orders from the government. The Burmese commander and the Rajah of Arakan, according to White, then addressed another letter to the magistrate, demanding not only the insurgent chiefs but all the fugitives including Dr. McRae, Surgeon of Chittagong, on the grounds that he had assisted Kingberring. It was threatened, “in case of refusal, to invade the Company’s territories with a force of eighty thousand men, and pursue the fugitives even to Dacca.” After the second invasion of Arakan, the Bengal government

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91 White claimed the truthfulness of his claims by asserting that he happened to be stationed at Chittagong with the regiment which he then belonged to, the 2nd battalion 15th Bengal Native Infantry, and that he was on duty with the detachment which advanced to the Nauf river on the occasion in which the Shuparee island incident which became the ostensible ground for war happened. However, there is no mention of what happened to his life after this duty. White, *A Political History of the Extraordinary Events*, pp. 19-20. White, according to *Oriental Herald*, after dismissal from the Indian army, became the editor of a weekly paper in London, entitled *The British and Indian Observer*. According to the *Oriental Herald*, the weekly “during the short period of its existence, was chiefly remarkable for the scurrilous attacks on private character with which it abounded and the gross adulation of the Board of Control and Ministers generally, whose policy it eulogized as every thing that was perfect in government.” *The Oriental Herald*, Vol. XII, No. 39, March 1827, pp. 491-2. White, definitely prised Amherst while he was critical of Hastings, whereas *Oriental Herald* consistently criticised Amherst, especially for going to war with the Burmese.
92 White, *A Political History of the Extraordinary Events*, pp. 34-5. According to White there were reports circulating in Chittagong, and believed by people, that arms and ammunition had been supplied to the Mughis
issued a proclamation, offering a “reward for the apprehension of Kingberring, and any of his chief” and also prohibiting all persons from affording them or their associates protection and from “aiding, and abetting their proceedings, either by raising men for his service, or by supplying him with arms, stores, boats, or provisions.” According to White, this proclamation should have been issued after the officials in Calcutta received intelligence of the first invasion of Arakan. “The only inference that is to be drawn from the neglect is, in his words, “that the Government of Calcutta were secretly and sincerely wishing the insurgents success; and from their despatches it would appear that they were not unsanguine in their expectations.”

White did not spare even the Court of Directors of their connivance. In their despatch to the Government of Bengal, dated the 18th of May 1815, they approved of the conduct of the Bengal Government and they expressed themselves, in White’s words, “rather disposed to go to war, than to surrender the insurgent chiefs; and they hoped that Kingberring had not been given up to avoid it.” In fact, he charged that the Bengal Government had already contemplated the expediency of the policy of a war with the Burmese but that since they were too much engaged with other distant wars in the British Indian empire, they postponed any rupture with the Burmese. On the whole, White criticised both the general assumption of ‘Burmese disposition’ and the specific events that led to the war.

Despite White’s assertions, the later accounts continued to justify the official pronouncements and, thus, produce official histories. As Edward Thornton wrote:

"After an interval of two years’ tranquillity on the frontier, the surrender of these persons was formally demanded in a letter addressed by the Rajah of Ramree to the magistrate of Chittagong. The Marquis of Hastings thereupon addressed a letter to the Burmese sovereign, explaining that the British government could not, without a violation of the principles of justice, deliver up those who had sought its protection; that the existing tranquillity . . and that whilst the vigilance of the British officers should be directed to prevent and punish any

by some European gentlemen resident there. And Dr. Me. Rae was pointed out as one of the European officials. He also pointed out the collusion of the Bengal Government in the affairs.

enterprise against the province of Arracan, it could lead to no advantageous result to either
state to agitate the question of the delivery of the insurgents any further.95

After this reply the court of Ava did not immediately stress on the subject. Thornton,
however gave a very different objective and meaning of the events:

Towards the close of the Mahratta war a second letter was received from the Rajah of
Ramree, demanding from the British government, on the part of the Burmese sovereign, the
cession of Ramoo, Chittagong, Moorshedabad, and Dacca, on the ground of their being
ancient dependencies of Arracan, then part of the Burmese dominions, and threatening
hostilities in case of refusal.96

The fact that after a reply from the Governor-General the matter rested without any
communication from Burma did not silence the logic that the threat of invading Dacca was
not with serious intention. With the assertions of White, one may find the real reason for the
British refusal to hand over refugees or chiefs, who were demanded by the Burmese. The
Burmese threat, which most of the accounts would later give as representative of the
Burmese hostile disposition against the Burmese, seem to have a specific context of its own.
Moreover the allusion to the Maratha war, though mentioned in passing, here, had serious
connotation.

Indeed, there seems to have been an active British participation through encouragement or
facilitation of depredations being made on the Burmese empire. Being caught in various wars
with other contending powers in the west, for instance the Marathas, another war with a
different and rising power would have cost them dearly. But apart from the material
encouragement to the rebels who were fighting against the Burmese, the British also
produced narratives that corroborated the threat of the Burmese. The Burmese ‘demand’ for

6.
96 Ibid, p. 6. The reported ‘threat’ of invading Bengal or other areas close to Bengal like Goalpara, Assam, 
Tripura by the Burmese officials seems more of a negotiating exercise rather than real threat. See ‘Extract of 
a Letter from the Governor-General in Council to the Secret Committee of the Court of Directors of the East 
India Company, dated Fort William, in Bengal, 21st November, 1823’ in Parliamentary Abstracts: containing 
the substance of all important papers laid before the two Houses of Parliament during the session of 1823, 
London: Longman, 1826, p. 244.

65
territories in Bengal has a complex history. White argued of that the Burmese ‘demand’ was not a genuine threat:

From the tenor of Lord Hastings’ despatch of March, 1820, I cannot help thinking that his Lordship in charging the Burmese with endeavouring to form conspiracies with other native powers for the expulsion of the English from India, has hazarded the opinion without a shadow of ground upon which it could be established. Nor can I help forming the inference that the charge was made, solely for the purpose of creating an unfavourable impression in England against the Burmese, preparatory to the development of schemes of conquest held in view.97

The Governor-General, Lord Hastings, after alluding to the demand that had been made in the year 1818, by the Court of Ava, for the cession of the territories in Bengal and Chittagong, observed that the step on the part of the Court of Ava, must have originated in a secret agreement with the Marathas. He went on to note the possibility of the origin of this agreement with the visit of a Burmese chief to the upper provinces of India for professed purposes of religion. But Hastings felt that there was “reason to surmise that his real object was to ascertain the real strength and determination of the Maharattas, in consequence of previous overtures from them”. On the possibility of the connection between the demand for territories and the mission, Hastings wrote, “The King of Ava immediately after the transmission of the message, which was really a declaration of war, would learn that the views of his expected allies had been anticipated, and that the Maharattas were crushed.” This according to him, made the king of Ava subside his hostile intentions. But as White pointed out, the visit of the Burmese chief to the upper provinces near Banaras, took place in 1813. And in the despatch of the Government of Bengal to the Court of Directors on the 1st of October 1813 wrote that since the visit of the agent for the purpose of buying religious books was over, they had been instructed to return to Ava. It was also noted that the agent, while at the city, made no attempt to obtain any sacred writings, but instead engaged in

97 White, A Political History of the Extraordinary Events, pp. 105-6. G.D. Oswell wrote much later that Hastings maintained a firm and conciliatory attitude in his relations with the Court of Ava and that “he treated the message with admirable imperturbability, and accepted it for what it was worth, and what it was probably only meant to be, as a piece of Oriental bluff.” G.D. Oswell, Sketches of Rulers of India, Vol. III, The Governors-General and Dupleix, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908, p. 96
conferences with some Brahmins. The meeting, in White’s opinion, could not be attended with any mischief. He further points out “the absurdity of this alleged plan of the Burmese trying to form a confederacy with the Marathas to throw out the British.” According to him, the Burmese had faced a number of troubles by the series of depredations in Arakan from 1811 till 1815. In his view, if the Burmese had not been friendly towards the British, they could have found the most convenient opportunity in 1814 when the Anglo-Nepal war commenced. However, the fact, in his opinion, turned out that that the Burmese instead of seeking alliance with powers hostile towards the British power, rejected all overtures made to them by the Nepalese. This fact, he argued, was established by a letter of intelligence from which David Scott, the civil commissioner in Rangpur received on the 15th of January, 1824, from one of the British spies in Assam. In his opinion, it appeared very improbable that the Burmese monarch would engage in intrigue with the Marathas for the expulsion of the British in 1813 if he rejected those from the Nepalese in 1814. Though the allusion to the renewed ‘threat’ of the Burmese at the close of the Maratha war was a British perception, this did not have much ground. But it did become a powerful justification for the war. The British fear of the neighbouring countries forming alliances and their intercourse and collusion amongst themselves to throw them out of their possession in India did exist. Hamilton also noted the possibility of such a plot between the Ahoms and the Nepalese. In his words, “in the year 1815 two agents were dispatched on the part of the Nepaul government to the court of Assam, which they quitted after sojourning some time, and returned to their own country, either through the northern part of Bootan, or the southern trace of the Grand Lama’s territories.”

Whether or not the Burmese were keenly following the events in India is difficult to ascertain, but the British at least perceived that the Burmese were doing so. And this led many to believe that the events in India would have an impact in the engagements with Burma: “[The Court of Ava] cannot be entirely ignorant of the peculiar and precarious tenure by which we hold the empire of India and control the Native powers who still have a shadow

98 White, A Political History of the Extraordinary Events, pp. 105-7.
of independence." The fear of the British against the 'native powers' was definitely based on their inability to subdue many of the rebellious chiefs and groups at this point.

The critique of White and others against the official and popular narratives pointed out some deep-rooted assumptions that have been applied in their assessment of the whole situation. While reviewing Snodgrass' *Narrative of the Burmese War*, the *Oriental Herald* wrote,

> His character of the enemy against which he was engaged is, perhaps, as correct as any picture which they might draw of their opponents in war: for each would, no doubt, use the terms of 'false and faithless, arrogant and restless;' and each call the other 'aggressors;' . . . In *all* contests, whether of men or nations, if you will take *their* words for it, each party has . . . a right cause.\(^{102}\)

In spite of the many points on which White and others refuted the claims and justifications of the government, and the general criticism of the Company’s policies, the general intention and the reception of the official account of the war seems to have been successful. White already anticipated the success of the official account,

> The impression which has endeavoured to be fixed on the minds of the public has been, that the Burmese were the *sole* aggressors – that the Government of India having long borne insult and aggression without retaliation, and with great forbearance, were at length compelled to resort to arms in support or vindication of the honour of the British character – to repel invasion, to seek redress for past injuries, to obtain security for the future, and to establish a peace on a solid and permanent basis.\(^{103}\)

The partiality of the official accounts was concisely pointed out when the *Oriental Herald* wrote: “We should like much to see a Burmese narrative of the war, and a Burmese estimate

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\(^{102}\) 'Major Snodgrass' Narrative of the Burmese War', *The Oriental Herald*, Vol. XII, No. 38, February 1827, pp. 307 – 308. Emphasis original. Major Snodgrass, was Military Secretary to the Commander of the British Expedition to Burma, Major-General Sir Archibald Campbell, and Assistant Political Agent in Ava.

of the character of their English invaders. Out of this and Major Snodgrass’ account, a fair estimate might, perhaps, be formed of the truth.”¹⁰⁴

Despite the differences and the criticism of the official account of the war, this is obviously the narrative of the victor giving its version of the causes and the proceedings of the events. The British managed to occupy more territory within the fold of its Indian empire and consolidate its centre of power in Bengal. But the conduct of the British officers during and after the war was not without conflicting opinions. Though the official and popular versions of the events that led to the war managed to dominate the accounts of the war, there were voices, which completely challenged this narrative. White’s A Political History of the Extraordinary Events is an example, which absolutely puts a question mark on the claims and representations of the official narrative of the events, whereas the criticism of the Oriental Herald pointed out the bogus claims of the Company. But in the later works, which reflected on these events, these works never became an issue of contention or a source. Though White or the Oriental Herald often does not give all the sources for many of the conclusions, there was a fundamental critique of the official narratives. These accounts give a collusion of the British officials from top to the bottom and thus turn the whole official narrative upside down.

An interesting aspect of the war between the two empires, in this regard, was that the Burmese wrote a history or a counter-narrative of the preceding events. The king of Burma kept a historian of his own and immediately on the conclusion of the first Anglo-Burmese war, the court historiographer, thus, recorded the events with the English:

> In the years 1186 and '87 (A.D. 1824-25), the Kula-pyu (white strangers of the West) fastened a quarrel upon the Lord of the Golden Palace. They landed at Rangoon, took that place and Prome, and were permitted to advance as far as Yandaboo; for the king, from motives of piety and regard to life, made no effort whatever to oppose them. The strangers had spent vast sums of money in their enterprise, and by the time they reached Yandaboo their resources were exhausted, and they were in great distress. They petitioned the king.

who, in his clemency and generosity, sent them large sums of money to pay their expenses back, and ordered them out of the country.\textsuperscript{105}

The depositions of the Westerners who were taken prisoner by the Burmese during the war formed an important source of legitimation for the colonial justification of the war. These depositions however did contain elements that conformed to the Burmese official narrative. Adoniram Judson, an American missionary, as shown above, on being asked what the Court of Ava thought of the news of the capture of Rangoon answered, "It was considered a mere marauding incursion, similar to that which the Siamese frequently made on the province of Martaban—an example quoted at the time." But more importantly, he also added, "The King frequently expressed his anxiety for the speedy march of his troops, lest the English who had landed at Rangoon should escape."\textsuperscript{106}

Whether the Burmese felt that the British were pitiful strangers 'who fastened a quarrel upon the Lord of the Golden Palace' or they were re-interpreting the accounts of the events for posterity is difficult to say. But British accounts, which narrated the proceedings prior to the Burmese historical writing, seem to suggest that the latter were serious about their friendly disposition. While the negotiations before the final signing of the treaty was going on, the Burmese officials wrote a letter to A. Campbell not in the "polite, amicable tone which marked the former intercourse" but still "not a little of impertinence and defiance." Thomas A. Trant wrote of the letter:

In conclusion they [Burmese officials] added, 'If you sincerely want peace, and the re-establishment of our friendship, according to Burman custom, empty your hands of what you have, and then, if you ask it, we will be on friendly terms with you, and forward a petition for the release of the English prisoners, and send them down to you. However, if, after the termination of the armistice between us, you show any inclination to renew your demands for money in payment of your expenses, or any territory from us, you are to consider our friendship at an end. This is Burman custom!'\textsuperscript{107}

\textsuperscript{105} Crawfurd, \textit{Journal of an Embassy}, p. 176; also see Corner, \textit{China}, p. 444.
\textsuperscript{107} Trant, \textit{Two Years in Ava}, pp. 310-11. However, the colonial official would interpret this transaction in the following words: "This letter was quite explicit; and a petty just notion may be derived from it of Burman
This may indeed be consistent with some of the overtures that they had made prior to the war. Though the Burmese officials were involved in expanding its control over the Ahom and Manipur kingdoms, they claimed to have been more interested in advancing their commercial interest vis-à-vis the British. A letter from a Burmese commander in Arakan to the magistrate of Chittagong, thus, read:

Kingberring, Larunbage, and Nakloo, have destroyed the four districts of the king, have killed 20,000 of the inhabitants of Arracan, and have fled into the Company’s territories. My people have gone after them, and the above traitors have fled to the Company’s territories; several Burmese that did enter are put into confinement; you will allow them to return. The merchants of the two countries formerly traded; let them now continue to do so. Let there be no strife between the two countries for Kingberring, Larunbage, Nakloo, or the other delinquents. It is therefore between that you deliver them up to us.  

These accounts, indeed, give a counter-narrative, a different interpretation of the events of the war – a critical combination of the two would, perhaps, give a ‘truer’ picture.

As discussed above, most of the colonial narratives commenting post-facto allude to the war between the two empires as inevitable. In such a scenario what is incomprehensible is the fact that very few forces were deployed on the eastern frontier despite the ‘obvious’ threat. In order to understand the confrontation, which led to the war, it would be easier if we have a rough chronology of the rise of the Burmese empire. In 1757 Alaungpaya began the foundation of the Burmese empire by establishing his authority over the Peguers and subduing internal disturbances. His successors annexed Mergui, Tavoy and Tenasserim from the Siamese in the empire. In 1783 Arakan was conquered and made a province. Though it had begun earlier, in the year 1819, the Burmese managed to expand their direct authority to Manipur, the Ahom kingdom and the other smaller states. As a result, they were placed in

\[\text{A Political History of the Extraordinary Events, p. 41.}\]
contact with the British territories from Goalpara on the Brahmaputra, to the Teknaaf, a small inlet of the sea dividing Chittagong from Arakan. What is noticeable in the confrontations between the two empires prior to the outbreak of the war is that the Burmese and the British shared a political boundary in the south-east frontier of Bengal and as a result there were many occasions for the two parties to confront each other; whereas, in the north-east there were still many political entities that proved to be a buffer between the two. But the confrontations in the south-east frontier near the British territory of Chittagong did not pose a threat to the imperial seat of power in Bengal. It was with the crossing of this status by the expanding political control of the Burmese in Manipur and the Brahmaputra valley that the British realised the proximity of their presence.

Once the Burmese entered as supporters of one of the contenders for the Ahom throne in the Brahmaputra valley, the British realised that the “Burmese frontier in this quarter was thus advanced to that of the British.” In a British account written later the new political situation was noted in the following words: “Though ceasing to threaten the British government with war, the emissaries of the Burmese did not abstain from acts calculated to provoke it. In 1821, and again in 1822, they seized and carried off parties of elephant-hunters in the Company’s employ, under the pretext that they were within the Burmese territories.”109 The shared political space between the two empires led to conflicts of territorial demarcation. These acts were followed by the final declaration of war.

PRODUCING THE FRONTIER DISCURSIVELY

Just before the outbreak of the first Anglo-Burmese war David Scott, was appointed the Agent to the Governor General on the North- East Frontier of Bengal in November 1823 for the whole of the eastern frontier from Cachar and Sylhet in the south to the Sikkim country in the north.110 With this creation of a colonial administrative post, the meaning of the frontier began to be articulated not merely as a barrier between the two contending empires but both

110 See Adam White, A Memoir of the late David Scott, reprint Guwahati: Department of Historical and Antiquarians Studies in Assam, 1988 [1831].
as an outpost as well as a territory with the illusion of a well-defined demarcating line. Moreover, with the treaty of Yandabo in 1826, the areas of Assam, Cachar and other areas were annexed to British possession. During the course of the war or prior to it, the British managed to sign a number of treaties with different polities, all of which would be included under the North-East frontier after the war – the treaty with Govinda Chandra, Raja of Cachar, 6th March 1824; the treaty with Rajah Ram Singh of Jaintia, 10th March 1824; agreement with the Singphoe Chiefs (36 in number), 5th May 1826; Koboolyut of Bur Senaputtee, 13th May 1826; Kuboolyut of Suddeya Khowah Gohain, 15th May 1826; agreement of Teerut Sing of Nungklow, 30th November 1826. There would be many more of such agreements as a part of controlling the frontier, which would be discussed in the next chapter.

In many ways, the first Anglo-Burmese war became not merely the foundation for political and economic extension of British colonial expansion eastward but also the establishment of new forms of knowledge. The mission of Colonel Symes in 1795 “first gave shape to the geography of Burma.” Symes was accompanied on his mission by “an excellent practical surveyor”, Wood of the Bengal Engineers, and by “a great geographer”, Francis Buchanan. The stated lack of information faced by the British in the Burmese empire, becomes curious, given that the earliest record of British presence in Burma goes so far back as 1619, after the ouster of the Portuguese from Burma in 1613, and that by the beginning of the 17th century British factories were present in Thailand, Prome, Burma, and on the borders of China, the Burmese frontier town of Bhamo. The record of an Englishmen Thomas Samuel travelling in Thailand and the Shan States goes as early as 1615. By 1663 French priests were acquainted with coastal Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia. The French made a naval

111 Multiple meanings of the term frontier have been discussed in the Introduction but the historical context of the use of the term in the context of north-west and north-east frontiers will be discussed in chapter 4.
114 G. T. Bayfield, ‘Historical Review of the Political Relations between the British Government in India and the Empire of Ava, from the earliest date on record to the present year,’ Supplement to Pemberton, *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India*, p. 1.
expedition in 1690 to the Bay of Bengal with the objective of establishing commerce in Burma and Thailand.

However, till the late eighteenth century the British East India Company was not successful in its trade in Burma and Thailand. Not so long after the establishment of the trade with China through Bhamo could be developed, the factories were closed by the Burmese king after the Dutch had sought Chinese help to settle a dispute between themselves and the king of Ava. Moreover, the coast of Burma was under native domination and the British traders concentrated largely with travelling along the rivers; and it was not until 1829, three years after the first Anglo-Burmese war when the British had annexed the Burmese provinces of Tenasserim and Arakan, that steps were taken to establish overland trade with Northern Thailand, the Shan States, and China. After that many British missions were made to ensure friendly relations and trade towards China. However, it was only after the final conquest of Burma after the third Anglo-Burmese war of 1885 that the British could have a direct hold on the trans-frontier trade with China through Bhamo. The scarcity of information and failure to politically subjugation the areas and the peoples became the basis for the British imageries of an unknown territoriality in the discourse of creating a frontier.

Around the late eighteenth century, there were attempts to collect information on the present areas of Tripura, Garo Hills, Chittagong, Lushai Hills by John Rawlins, John Eliot and John MacRae. By 1787, Captain Hugh Baillie, Superintendent of the Assam trade and Collector of Rangamati and Goalpara was instructed by the Governor-General in Council to report on the resources of Assam, and the customs of the inhabitants. As a result of the closure of the office in Goalpara by 1790 not much advance was made in the effort. Captain Welsh, who was despatched to Assam in connection with the political strife in the Ahom kingdom in

117 Hallett, A Thousand Miles on an Elephant in the Shan States, p. VIII.

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1792, endeavoured to add more to the then available knowledge. In fact, a medical officer, John Peter Wade accompanied Captain Welsh's mission in 1792 – 1794, and visited once more in 1798 for the main purpose of collecting information. Welsh was sent after the Governor General decided on “motives of humanity as from a wish to be better informed of the interior state of Assam, its commerce etc.” Though a political engagement of the British had been already established at this instance by sending a troop to help the Ahom king, it manifests the acknowledged ignorance on the part of the British as far as the information on the people and the territory was concerned.

Francis Buchanan’s accounts on Assam collected during the years 1808 and 1809 was a continuation of the attempts made by the English East India Company on the areas of Bengal and the areas east of it. Buchanan’s attempt, here, was peculiarly a mode of producing information ranging from the form of government, topography, administration of justice, divisions of the people, religion to productions, manufactures, labourers etc. Buchanan was instructed to enquire about both the territories under the immediate authority of the Company as well as those “adjacent countries, and to those petty states with which the British Government has not regular intercourse.” However, since he was prohibited from quitting the Company’s territories, and directed to confine to consulting the ‘natives’ of those countries as might be met in the Company’s territories, or those ‘natives’ of the British territories who had visited the countries in question, his account was based on the collections from ‘natives’ of Bengal and the ‘fugitives’ in Bengal.

Not much geographical knowledge of Burma or the areas lying east of Bengal was added afterwards till the first Anglo-Burmese war of 1824-26. But the knowledge on Burma produced during the war was largely confined to the military operations of the river banks rather than what was called the ‘Burma proper’. During the war, two of the passes between the Irrawadi and the sea were traversed and mapped, and “an army of surveyors” was thrown

120 John Peter Wade, An Account of Assam, edited by Benudhar Sharma, North Lakhimpur: R. Sarmah, 1927 [1800].
121 ‘Memorandum of Proceedings regarding Assam, July 1794,’ No. 7, Foreign Department Miscellaneous Volumes 1767 – 1800, Serial Number 8, National Archives of India (NAI).
upon the northern part of the then eastern frontier of the British Indian empire. Bedford, Wilcox, Bedingfield and other colonial officials were employed for this work in the Brahmaputra valley and the outlying territories; Grant and Pemberton in Manipur; Wilcox in the Irrawadi; the lower valley of the Chindwin was surveyed by Lieutenant Montmorency in 1828. In the aftermath of the first Anglo-Burmese war, a series of possibilities, as far as surveying and gathering information in the frontier territories were concerned, were opened up to the British. Numerous surveys were made from British India and Moulmein toward the Chinese frontier. Richardson was said to have been within 100 miles of the point where Burma, Thailand, and Vietnam meet on the Mekong river.\textsuperscript{123} R. Wilcox, S. F. Hannay, W. Griffith, G. T. Bayfield, H. L. Jenkins, Vetch, Brodie, S. E. Peal and various other British colonial officials traversed the area between Bengal and Burma through the northern part of the Burmese empire.\textsuperscript{124}

Though threatened by the rise of French influence in the polity of Burma, and insecure about the British possessions in Bengal, “British officials in Burma” John Christian points out, “frequently complained of the impossibility of getting the government of India to give any attention to the northeastern frontier. That government was wholly occupied with the northwestern frontier and the danger of Russian aggression through Afghanistan and the Khyber Pass.”\textsuperscript{125} Expressing the marginalisation of the territoriality in the colonial geo-strategic situations, Christian recounts the official attitude of the colonial government, “The condition of the Northeastern frontier caused no Governor-General a single sleepless night.”\textsuperscript{126} This lack of attention and a change as a result of the extraordinary circumstances between the Burmese and the British informed the imageries and the future narratives of the

\textsuperscript{123} Christian, “Trans-Burma Trade Routes to China,” p. 176.
\textsuperscript{125} Christian, “Anglo-French Rivalry in Southeast Asia”, p. 277. The object of Anglo-French rivalry for a century in the Southeast Asia was based on the belief that the Irrawaddy, the Salween and the Mekong rivers would provide the entrepot to interior China. However, later acquaintances with trade demonstrated to the British that none of these river valleys provided an economical entrance to China.
frontier. Moreover, a shift in the production of knowledge and the basis of establishing reliable information could, perhaps, account for a belief in the lack of information. In fact, Francis Buchanan’s *An Account of a Journey undertaken by Order of the Board of Trade through the Provinces of Chittagong and Tiperah, in order to look out for the places most proper for the cultivation of Spices*, undertaken and written in 1798 was never published, though a copy of it was retrieved from a private collection in 1853. Willem van Schendel, who has recently edited the journal, says that the reason for the non-publication even after a copy of it was retrieved could possibly be “because it was by then over fifty years old and by mid-century [of the nineteenth century] travel accounts on Bengal had largely given way to bureaucratic reports.”

Buchanan’s main purpose of his journey was to find out if spices could be grown in areas lying on the south-eastern Bengal. As a result, he collected the quality of the soil, the geographical peculiarities, and the state of agriculture in the localities he visited, almost on a daily basis. A denunciation of the earlier modes of knowledge gathering was slowly influencing the colonial discourse. An encyclopaedic mode of information gathering was being slowly giving way to a more organised, in the words of V. Ball, “systematic arrangement of the subjects, a fuller and more carefully correlated chronology, and a reconciliation of really or apparently contradictory statements.”

In that sense the first Anglo-Burmese war was a watershed.

There was definitely a belief in the lack of information prior to the first Anglo-Burmese war on the frontiers of Bengal despite the earlier British attempts to gather information. This belief was sought to be connected with the British policies of non-interference. This line of policy could be understood as a practice of the resolution made by the House of Commons in 1792 in so far as the line of conduct to be pursued by the British Indian government towards their neighbours was concerned. The policy stated that

> every interference as a party in the domestic or national quarrels of the country powers, and all new engagements with them in offensive alliance, have been wisely and providently

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117 Willem van Schendel, *Francis Buchanan in Southeast Bengal (1798)*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1992, p. XI.

forbidden by the Company, in their commands to their administrators in India. That every unnecessary or avoidable deviation from these well advised rules, should be followed with every severe reprehension and punishment, as an instance of wilful disobedience of orders, and as tending to disturb and destroy that state of tranquillity and peace with all their neighbours, the preservation of which has been recommended as the first principle of policy to the British Government in India. 129

While the eastern frontiers of Bengal were being conquered by the Burmese, the British were, in the words of H.H. Wilson, “too much occupied in Central India . . . to bestow any serious attention upon the arrogant pretensions of a barbarous court”. 130 Depicting an image of British indifference in expanding its territorial possession on the eastern frontier helped in legitimising the blame against the Burmese as the aggressor, which pushed the British to declare the war. However, this policy of using the attack on the frontier as a justification for the British declaring war on the Burmese could be located within a longer intention in the colonial policy. Despite the claim to non-interference, the British aided and assisted Rajah Poorunder Singh in terms of arms and ammunition. As Captain W. White wrote, the objective of the British government was “nothing short of that of instigating the different native princes under the yoke to revolt against their [Burmese] authority.” According to him, the scheme had been in contemplation for long but the colonial officials did not execute it for a lack of opportunity. “The moment, however, was favourable to prosecute their designs; it was not to be lost.” 131 As Edward Thornton, who was critical of the British official policy towards the Burmese put, “the quarrel with the Burmese was not a sudden and unexpected occurrence”. 132 At the same time, Thornton commented that “[t]he character of the territorial acquisitions [in the north-east frontier after the first Anglo-Burmese war] was not of the most desirable order – a large portion of them being little more than rock and jungle.” The only value that these newly acquired territory held was “in removing an ambitious and grasping

129 Resolutions of the House of Commons of the 9th of April, 1792, quoted in White, A Political History of the Extraordinary Events, p. 116. Interestingly, C.A. Bayly points out that the period under Richard Wellesley, Governor-General 1798-1805, was the most expansive period of empire-building. C.A. Bayly, Indian society and the making of the British Empire, The New Cambridge History of India, II.1., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, reprint 2006, p. 16.

130 Wilson, The History of British India, p. 23.

131 White, A Political History of the Extraordinary Events, p. 120.

power to a distance from the more fertile portions of the British dominions, and in substituting, in some instances, a strong and defensible frontier in place of one more open to irruptions." The relationship between the first Anglo-Burmese war, the subsequent annexation of the territories on the north-east of Bengal, and the colonial representatives of the frontier is best exemplified in G.D. Oswell’s words:

There had consequently been frequent disputes on that border between the Anglo-Indian and the Burmese authorities, for the dividing line was unsettled and variable, and on both sides the landmarks had been unavoidably set forward in pioneering fashion until they were separated only by strips of semi-dependent tribal lands and spheres of influence from which each party desired to exclude the other. In this situation it has always been the policy of the English in India, as of other civilized empires in contact with barbarism, to maintain the zone of tribal lands as a barrier or quick-set hedge against intruders upon their frontier by taking the little border States, or headships, under their protection.

The colonial imagery legitimised taking over of the territory ‘from the Burmese control’ once the contestation between the British and the Burmese began. The characterisation of the people in this region as ‘too feeble’ in their political power would justify the need for the British to conquer this territory. After the first Anglo-Burmese war, the defeat of the Burmese and their relinquishing of these areas would give the British a legitimate ground to be the successor protective power. The representation of the people as savage, uncivilised acknowledging the authority of the king of Ava, without being under the direct administration, gave the British an impetus to frame a policy which would continue as far as the particular forms in which controlling the area was concerned. The divide between the hill and the plains and the allocation of a civilisational scale to divide the two was practiced.

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133 Ibid, p. 98. The sense of unprofitability of the new acquired territories from the Burmese was commonly shared in colonial writings. Some, in fact, argue that there was an idea of giving up Tenasserim because of its small population to the Burmese. See Sir George Scott, ‘Introduction,’ in Joseph Dautremer, *Burma under British Rule*, translated, and with an introduction by Sir George Scott, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons and London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1913, p. 13. Dautremer was Lecturer at the School of Oriental Languages, Paris. But prior to that he was Consul for France in Rangoon. The significance of the frontier became more important since after the first Anglo-Burmese war, the British were not able to conquer the whole of Burma and rather chose to propose a peace treaty. On the contentions of the policy see Snodgrass, *Narrative of the Burmese War*, especially pages 284-5.

while carrying the ways in which the British either ruled or interacted. The trope of a 'mountainous natural barrier' inhabited by 'wild and uncivilised' population fitted well in formulating this territory as a frontier. And the policy of controlling the frontier through means other than direct administration continued throughout the colonial period.

**CONCLUSION**

The war saw many consequences for the overall administration of the Company administration. The Age of Reform, usually associated with the administration of Lord William Bentinck (1828-35), as C.A. Bayly points out, for many contemporaries meant reform mainly in the sense of 'economical reform'. Effectively, this meant a departure from the interventionist administration of the Napoleonic years. The immediate cause was the imminent bankruptcy of government brought about by profligate salaries and swollen military expenditure, which was increased by the first Anglo-Burmese war.\(^{135}\)

War is, usually, taken as the prime mover in the historiography on state-formation. Charles Tilly argues that states not only make war but that it is through war that states are made. In this formulation war is central in the construction of state, therefore, territory.\(^{136}\) As Jean-Michel Brabant argues, "Thinking about and organizing space is one of the pre-occupations of power." However, the "practice of spatial domination cannot be totally identified with military practice." Military practice is one of the aspects, which is "institutionally concentrated, of the spatial practice of power."\(^{137}\) It could be argued that war as the foundation of territoriosity takes for granted both the complete sovereignty of state over its territory and the static and fixed nature of that territoriosity. As we have discussed, political

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territoriality, which came to constitute the North-East frontier, was both dynamic and historically variable. This understanding necessarily implies, in the words of Benno Teschke, “rejecting the prevalent idea that territory – in its geographical-topological or its geo-strategic positional sense – is a primary determinant of state-formation, statehood and statecraft”.\textsuperscript{138}

Without going into the social logic of property relations for territorial metamorphosis, central in Teschke’s formulation, this chapter has attempted to look at how different forms of connections to territoriality through economic transactions and wars were sought to be brought under a modern territoriality as a result of the subsequent annexation of the territories under colonialism.

The expanding British power in Bengal in the second half of the eighteenth century had to face many hurdles in different parts of the sub-continent. This political and economic power expanding as an empire was countered by the other expanding empire of the Burmese. The area running from the extreme limits of the Ahom kingdom in the north-east of Sadiya southward to the Chittagong and Arakan, thus, became buffered between these two empires. Being caught up at various other wars and conflicts, the British tried to avoid a war with the Burmese initially, by employing diplomatic tactics. But at the same time they were also hoping to expand friendly commercial intercourse. Even the problems arising out of the internal affairs of the Ahom kingdom, which was beginning to affect the trading relations with Bengal, was measured with caution and they decided not to interfere in its internal affairs. This produces a picture of the British not having any desire for territorial conquest at this point. But this assumption may be countered by its expansionist policies in others parts, including the discussion on the desirability of expanding the territorial control towards the Garos. Quite early on, attempts had also been made to form political and strategic alliances with different polities lying on the east of Bengal to counteract and arrest the expanding Burmese. But once the war had begun, expanding the territorial base towards the east through the annexation of territories, maintaining political alliances and a system of barriers through military posts became measures along the borders with Burma.

The first Anglo-Burmese war is a watershed in many ways. Politically, a territoriosity called the North-East frontier was created. The precise understanding of the frontier both conceptually as well as administratively was never well defined at the time. It changed and multiple meanings were given to it in the later historical periods. Nevertheless, the war, for the first time, created the territory of the frontier that did not exist in this form prior to it. With the creation of the frontier as an extension of the British empire, these areas were brought under its the political influence. Along with this, the area was slowly connected to the colonial economy, although a large portion of the areas in the frontier would remain outside the direct control of colonialism. Moreover, an opportunity arose for the beginning of the production of the territoriosity of the frontier through the opening up of the territory to European military personnel for surveys, explorations and control. The enormous amount of writings would soon form the initial identity of the territoriosity.

An attempt has been made to show the links between colonial conquest and the processes through which the territoriosity of the northeast frontier was created. The narratives of the conquest, in turn, fed into ‘ideologies of rule’ in the frontier. In the writings of the first Anglo-Burmese war, as discussed above, it was often stated that the British were forced to declare war against the Burmese because of the latter’s threatening demeanours on the frontiers of British possessions in Bengal. This, in turn, puts the annexation of the frontier into the British territory, as ‘natural right of conquest’. The practical necessity along with other purposes of controlling the territory necessitated enormous amount of surveys. The events of the war were informed, and decisions were made based on the prior understanding of the geography of the areas. At the same time, the war also gave the colonial officials a chance to explore and increase their corpus of knowledge of the areas. The space lying in between the two empires was formally enclosed within the political sphere of a frontier as a result of the war, and at the same time, it also exposed the territory to the operations of the British.

Robert Travers argues that there were “links between processes of conquest and colonial state-formation, and... narratives of conquest fed into ideologies of rule.” Travers, Ideology and Empire, p. 31.
There were different views connected to the question of waging war for British expansion. Though the British were interested in expanding their trading networks and relations with the Burmese empire, they were undecided about a formal political relationship even after the war. To the question of a permanent residence of an Envoy at Ava after the end of the war, the Governor-General in Council replied that he “does not deem it necessary to come to any final determination at the present moment, but will await the receipt of further information . . . as to the advantage or otherwise of such an arrangement”. As a result, it was decided that useful purpose could be accomplished by a temporary residence at the capital of Burma.

In giving prominence to one of the two interests – territorial or economic expansion – it is usually understood as two different motives. Looking at colonialism in this light is to repeat the colonial narratives of the British expansion as being purely commercial in nature: “Bengal was destined to be the seat of British empire in the East. The first military operations however of the [British] nation in that province, instead of being prompted by views of conquest, were employed solely for the defence of their principal factory, suddenly, when they thought only of the peaceable pursuits of commerce”. Moreover, it also narrates the British colonial expansion as if the processes of empire building are natural, and logical, outcome in the unfolding of colonialism’s history. However, as Teschke argues, the establishment of the “nineteenth century British-sponsored world-market and the consolidation of a worldwide system of sovereign states were mutually co-developing and co-constitutive processes.”

In the context of colonialism, political, territorial expansion and economic expansion were closely interlinked. Moreover, military expansion and political upheavals put new power into the hands of Company agents in India after Plassey. This new power was often used to promote ‘private interests’. Though the Directors in London found themselves “to be losing control of the situation, or blamed their servants for the unwelcome

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140 From George Swinton, Secretary to the Government, to J. Crawfurd, Civil Commissioner, Rangoon, 30th June, 1826, reproduced as an Appendix in Crawfurd, Journal of an Embassy, pp. 4-5.
141 ‘Mr. Grant’s Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain, particularly with respect to Morals; and on the Means of improving it. Written chiefly in the year 1792’, in Reports from Committees: East India Company’s Affairs, Session 6 December -16 August 1832, Vol. VIII, General Appendix, p. 5.
costs and dangers of warfare”, as Travers argues, “the expansion of the Company’s territorial ambitions was not wholly the work of opportunistic ‘men on the spot’.”

The war also brought about many changes: the acquisition of the territories to the Company’s control, the creation of buffer frontier zones. But, at the same time, it also produced a change in the discourse of the ‘frontier’ population and territory. European travel writings of the period around the first Anglo-Burmese war still noticed the connections of the various polities and the mobility of the peoples. There were descriptions of the ‘Cassay horsemen’, which formed an important element of the Burmese army. Narratives written later still included the presence of various populations in different territories. But the writings give a sense of well-demarcated, territorial, political and social boundaries rather than that of a history of polities and populations moving from one to the other area as a result of various historical circumstances. An imagery of an area, ‘overgrown with jungle’ with ‘pestilential climate’, isolated from the rest of the world, inhabited by a savage population was established at the very moment when the earlier history of connections with the neighbouring areas and the continuous mobility of population were sought to be restricted through the establishment of colonial rule. From an earlier writing in which the emphasis was on failure of the Europeans to travel to these territories, the focus was now on the ‘insalubrity’ and the ‘unhealthiness’ of the territory and the ‘barbaric’ state of the population.

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143 Travers, Ideology and Empire, p. 35.
144 See Alexander, Travels from India to England.