In June 1863, a few muskets began to appear among the 'Kukis' of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. This was a cause of worry for Captain J. M. Graham, the Superintendent of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. As the official directly concerned with the political administration of the frontier tribes, he was well aware of the implications of any change in the hill peoples' arsenals. The 'discovery' prompted considerable speculation about the possible source of supply. Careful enquiries by Graham and Colonel A. P. Phayre, Chief Commissioner of British Burma, confirmed that firearms circulated to the Kukis through the territory of Arracan. To block this "pernicious trade", the British pushed for rigorous surveillance and blockading measures whereby "a close watch" was "to be kept on all native vessels entering the bays and rivers on the coast of Arracan," including Cox Bazaar where, "a trade in arms and ammunition was carried on with the view of supplying the hill tribes."1

Colonial attempt to control frontier geographies against the flow of "illegal" firearms however often proved ineffective, as the state's interdiction capabilities were limited here. Firearms moved not just through one or two corridors but through many tracks along the frontier. In fact, the volume of

1 F&PD - A, June 1863, Nos. 103; F&PD - A, August 1863, Nos. 5
this traffic along the North Eastern Frontier would go on increasing in the period between the 1860s and 1900s, reaching in addition to the Kukis, the Lushais, Shendus, Khasis, Nagas, and the Chins. This chapter explores not just the challenges but also the new opportunities, which this "illegal" traffic in firearms opened for the colonial state and its subjects. It tracks the supply and demand for contraband arms, the actors involved in this trade, and the ways in which people and commodities deemed "illegal" moved across frontier spaces. Drawing upon Eric Tagliacozzo's useful framework, this chapter will also attempt to show how time, geography and other factors determine when commodities and practices are considered to be "illegal" and when they are not.2

At a particular conjuncture, the change in infrastructural conditions brought about by British rule could intensify the movement of firearms in the frontier. On the other hand, this "illegal" traffic could also be appropriated by the competing actors along the frontier, each operating with their own specific agendas and concerns. As this chapter will show, the various actors involved in this contraband trade found new opportunities in the imposition of new "borders" and rigid arms control, and took advantage of ambiguities in colonial institutional frameworks along the frontier. While various hill communities tried to extend and update their arsenals to resist British encroachments more effectively, drives to acquire firearms could also intensify rivalries between them. Finally, while firearms are sometimes understood rather flatly as products of European technology, I will explore the practices by which hill communities appropriated these commodities, modifying and changing the technology to suit local needs and contexts.

Beginning in the 1860s, the spread of firearms among the hill tribes of Assam emerged as a subject of pressing concern for the Bengal Government. Writing in 1868, Lieutenant Gregory, the Political Agent of the Naga Hills anxiously remarked, “The Tengeemah [Angamis] of the upper range are equal in courage and strength to any of the races of India and armed with firearms would prove as formidable enemies as the tribes on our North Western Frontier.”

The spilling over of firearms among the hill people was then seen as a serious threat to the military capabilities of the colonial state, spurring British officials to initiate stringent rules to prevent the transit of “illegal” firearms along the North Eastern Frontier.

One way to prevent the transit of firearms to the “wild hills tribes” was by putting in place a comprehensive system of regulations or legal structure. In September 1868, Colonel H. Hopkinson, the Governor General’s Agent in the North Eastern Frontier, pressed for rigorously implementing the Indian Arms Act XXXI. of 1860 in the districts of Assam, Cooch Behar, Dacca, Arracan and Chittagong. The rationale given for this measure was that “some of these districts being situated on the frontier, the unrestricted right of possessing and carrying arms would afford facilities for selling them to hostile tribes on the border, out of whose hands it is of the greatest
importance that arms and ammunition should be kept.”

The Arms Act, apart from other legal clause, thus stipulated the arrests and prosecution of any individual found in possession of arms of any description without a license, and banned the manufacture, sale or purchase, and transportation of arms and ammunition from any unlicensed persons. In Hopkinson’s calculations this Act was hence “the best mode of putting a stop to the purchase of arms from the British provinces by the Nagas and other hill tribes.” For the effective execution of the Act, Hopkinson instructed the district officers “to be particularly on the alert to intercept any attempted contraband importation of arms [and] ammunition.”

Stricter regulations were already enforced in Calcutta under the Arms Act, for the British had all reason to believe that Calcutta constituted a major transit point for firearms to the frontier “hill tribes”. The Act, henceforth, made it mandatory for license holders to place their chapters for scrutiny, once a year, which could be revoked either at the discretion of the Calcutta Magistrate or the Commissioner of Police. In addition to this, a register was to be maintained by the certifying officials to keep a tab on the quantity and quality of arms transiting through Calcutta to other areas. In 1874, a Home Department Notification further required a person transporting arms and ammunition to present himself immediately to the Magistrate within 6 days of reaching his stated destination. While in 1875, a revised legislation of the 1860 India Arms Act endorsed Calcutta as “the only port in the lower provinces where importation of arms by sea is permitted.”

In their endeavor to prevent arms trafficking, British authorities also extended the “contraband” status to various kinds of explosives and even its

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5 Ibid
6 Ibid
7 Ibid
8 Ibid
9 Ibid
10 F&PD-A, March 1874, Nos. 84 - 101
11 F&PD-A, November 1875, Nos. 8-9
potential composites, such as sulphur and saltpeter. Restrictions were placed accordingly on sulphur and saltpeter from moving into particular geographical spaces. In 1874, the Revenue, Agriculture & Commerce Department ordered that “saltpeter trade, internal and external, should be left entirely free except in the immediate vicinity of any frontier along which for political reasons it may be considered inexpedient to permit its export.” It was on this basis that in December 1874, an application filed by Messrs. William Moran & Co., Calcutta, to “export” saltpeter to Rangoon and Akyab was rejected by the Home Department. Officials in the Home Department argued that saltpeter once landed at Akyab might in a circular way “easily find its way to the hill tribes.”

To further tighten government's control over the firearms traffic, it was declared that all guns should be stamped, registered and licensed and a strict account of their disposal kept. British officials however made the mistake of assuming that the registering and licensing of a gun would establish control over its use. In fact, it merely gave a record of the trader who disposed of it, and provided no check once it had left the traders hands. For instance, the Magistrate of Rangoon helplessly remarked, “it is very difficult to obtain any reliable information as to what becomes of the guns purchased from the licensed holders” and “as to where they are finally carried or sold.” Further, the Magistrate reports as to how “pass holders can, if they like, purchase a gun more than once on the same pass.” Even as legal strictrues sought to handle the flow of firearms, ambiguities within these frameworks exposed the limitations of the Acts, while allowing room for contraband arms and ammunition to cross the frontiers in a variety of settings.

12 F&PD – A. May 1869, Nos. 324 – 329. The list of weapons which required a license included: fire-arms, bayonets, swords, daggers, spears, spearheads of lead, sulphur, saltpeter, gun powder or other ammunitions.
13 F&PD – A. December 1874, Nos. 83 - 84
14 Ibid
15 F&PD – A. October 1873, Nos. 466 – 473.
Trafficking Firearms

A cursory glance of the colonial reports seems to indicate that by the late 1860s, a regular traffic in firearms had commenced along the North Eastern Frontier of British India. Various actors were actively involved in the trafficking of firearms, the bulk of which came through Muslim traders and Bengali agents in Calcutta, Sylhet, Cachar, Assam and Manipur. At times, even Europeans would engage in this contraband. For instance, in December 1868, the “Syloo tribe” of the Lushai Hills reportedly procured a large number of muskets "from a European in Cachar." In the case of the Kukis and Nagas, guns and ammunitions were often procured from Manipur and Cachar. Besides, Angami traders would travel on to Calcutta "to purchase beads and muskets." The Lushais were on the other hand supplied with muskets and matchlocks through the agency of the Kachins from upper Burma, while Chittagong and Cachar constituted other ideal centers for this clandestine traffic. Also, “cheap arms” could often find their way to the Lushais "from Calcutta by the creeks of the Soonderbunds." In addition, arms and ammunition smuggled into Upper Burma often found a ready market among the hill communities such as the Lakhers.

Flints, flint muskets, and sulphur also transited to the hill tribes through the seaport of Akyab, which were then trafficked through the various routes into the districts of Chittagong, Hill Tipperah and Sylhet. Firearms were also further suspected to be smuggled through the smaller marts on the rivers of Chittagong, Noakhally and Dacca, especially the one at Naraingunge.

16 F&PD – July 1869, Nos. 182 - 184
17 F&PD – A. March 1872, nos. 79 - 118
18 Gertrude M. Godden, ‘Naga and other Frontier Tribes of North-East India,’ The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland Vol. 27 (1898), 2 – 51.
19 T.H. Lewin, the D.C. of the Chittagong Hill Tracts was reportedly informed by an old Mogh who reportedly lived with the Shendus, that “they procured sulphur from Burmah and muskets from the Koladyne in exchange for brass gongs.” F&PD – A. November 1869, Nos. 181 – 183; F&PD – A. February 1869, Nos. 66 - 71
20 F&PD – A. July 1874, Nos. 244 - 245
22 F&PD – A. April 1874, Nos. 1
“where traders visit from all the Arracan and Burmese ports”. 23 The Kuladan and the Lenaroo rivers were other significant routes and sources of transit through which the Shendus (alias Pooies) obtained arms. 24 Considering the clandestine status of the commodity, the profits to be made from this trade seem considerable for many traders to be simply ignored. At least Captain Lewin thought so. In 1874, Lewin thus informs us of a single merchant in Akyab who reportedly made a lakh of rupees “by selling guns to the hill tribes in upper Koladan.” 25 Eurasians “who are allowed to buy [firearms] without permits” were further reported, “to carry on a profitable trade.” 26

Ransoming “slaves” for guns also began to constitute a lucrative venture for the Shendus and Lushais. A large number of slaves were often brought down from the hills by the Lushais and the Shendus, and were exchanged with the independent tribes across the Arracan frontier for brass bowls and guns. Guns were also used as a medium to “redeem” subjects captured in raids, with their relatives paying heavily in guns. For instance, the Superintendent of the Hill Tribes in Northern Arracan narrates the story of Quay-Me, a peon in his office who paid the Shendus five guns as his ransom money. In another case, as many as fifteen guns had to be given out to the Shendus for the release of a captured Chief’s son. 27

The steady flow and acquisition of arms into the area also meant that this “tool” was being applied and utilized by the hill people in a variety of settings and contexts. As early as 1868, the Khasis had resourcefully employed firearms during their rebellion against the British. 28 By the 1870s and 80s, firearms were increasingly incorporated by the Nagas in their

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23 F&PD – A, December 1869, Nos. 216 – 92
24 F&PD – A, October 1873, Nos. 466 – 473
25 F&PD – A, July 1874, Nos. 244 – 245
26 For instance, W. W. Daly, the DSP of Cachar notes how Eurasians would usually buy powder from licensed dealers at 11 to 13 annas a lb, which they subsequently sell at Rupees 1 – 8 to 2. Moreover, Daly candidly remarked: “He runs very little risk, and considering the number of friends and relations he might employ, and the many licensed dealers from whom purchases can be made large quantities of powder can be bought and in this way very handsome profits made.” F&PD – A, May 1881, 38 – 42
27 F&PD – A, October 1873, Nos. 466 – 473.
ongoing resistance against colonial encroachments. A case in this point could be the Anglo-Naga war of 1879 in which firearms were extensively used by the Angamis in their skirmishes against the British causing heavy casualties among the British forces.29

Nevertheless, arms were also required by the hill people to protect against one another’s depredation. In 1874 a report by A. W. B. Power, the Political Agent of Hill Tipperah mentions how men in the Lushai Hills would usually post “a few men armed with guns of the old flint lock pattern” while working their jhums so as to protect their persons and cultivation against any “external enemies”.30 In the unfolding decades, the gradual improvement of the hill people arsenals would mean that firearms were increasingly incorporated in ongoing local conflicts or “feuds”.31 The subsequent employment of guns in their everyday practices could also lead to major disruption in the hill societies. Guns not only had made hunting easier but seem to have altered the hunting practices of the hill people. J. H. Hutton, the Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills thus observed how “large number of ...Tower muskets ... has very considerably altered the hunting practices of the Angamis.” What astonished Hutton was that, “Some villages possess from thirty to forty of such guns, with the result that game is nowadays hardly obtainable in the Angami country.”32

Apart from the “illegal” arms trade, an important source of the hill people’s arsenal also came by way of raiding British outposts, guards on frontier duty and by surprising parties of traders and elephant-hunters. For instance, in 1869, Dr. R. Brown, the Political Agent in Manipur, reported that the Manipuri troops and armed Nagas in the Manipur hills, in their various skirmishes with the Lushais had lost 18 muskets in the past eight months.33

Incidences of desertion by hill men enlisted in police regiments, especially

29 F&PD – A, February 1880, Nos. 275 – 289; F&PD – A, January 1882, Nos. 119 - 133
30 F&PD – A, March 1874, Nos. 10 - 51
31 In one case, the Manipur Raja reports of a skirmish between his sepoys and the “Munjoo Nagas” in which muskets were employed by the Nagas resulting in the death of two or three of his men. F&PD – A, May 1873, Nos. 63-64; F&PD – A, February 1880, Nos. 275 – 289.
33 F&PD – A, July 1869, Nos. 182 - 184
with rifles and equipments, were also not uncommon in the frontier. Dr. Brown observed how “the hill men used to enlist in the police and local regiments and after learning drill and the use of musket’s, desert and frequently carry off their arms with them.”34 Perhaps this was one reason why some hill men were deliberately excluded from the frontier police service. As Dr. Brown writes, “now Angamee Nagas and allied tribes are not enlisted in the Cachar police.”35

The change in infrastructural conditions brought about by British rule also seemed to have intensified the movement of firearms in the frontier. In 1872, Colonel Hopkinson, the Commissioner of Assam, thus reported the operation of a regular systematic trade in smuggled arms and ammunition by the river steamers trading with Assam.36 The depot flats of steamer companies such as the Bengal Steamer Company and the India General Steam Navigation Company, at the Dhunsiri and Kokeela Mookhs were reported to be points of this “illicit” trade. Varied actors like the lascars, firemen, passengers and at times, even the Master of the vessels, were suspected to be involved in this “illicit” trade. For instance, Monsoor Ally, a fireman in the steamer Burmah, was reportedly charged for illegally possessing and selling ammunition, gunpowder and caps and disposing of the same without a license. His extracted statement by the police further gives us an idea of the extent of the traffic: “The trade in powder has been regularly carried on for two years on the Burmah. We sold at Tezpore, Koliabar, Bishnath, Dikhomookh, and in fact wherever the steamer stops.”37

The complicity of the Master of the vessel in this traffic was often a matter of concern for the British officials. Colonel Hopkinson argued that, “a lascar would not venture on trading in any article that was obnoxious to the master of his vessel.”38 What appeared frustrating for officials like Hopkinson was that when confronted by the district officials, the Master of the steamers

34 F&PD – A. September 1868, Nos. 359 – 63.
35 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
would feign complete ignorance of the matter. In a few other cases, they
would at the most claim to "have again and again warned their crews against
it." 39 In further implicating the Master of the steamer's, Major T. Lamb, DC of
Kamrup informs the Political Assistant to the Chief Commissioner of Assam,
one Mr. W. Bull, Commander of a River Company flat, who reportedly sold a
double-barreled gun to a Mouzahdar of this district for Rupees forty. 40 Even
as evidences increasingly pointed towards the doubtful role of the Master of
steamer's, H.L. Harrison, Officiating Secretary, Government of Bengal,
furiously remarked that, "the officers of the steamers do not appear to take
any pains to co-operate with the Government in checking the smuggling." 41
As a counter measure, Harrison pressed the Government of India to give
"Magistrates the right of searching them and for depriving commanders, on
board whose vessels arms or ammunition may be found, of their pilot's
license." 42

Apart from the colonial transport networks, "smugglers" and native
officials could draw upon the imposition of new "borders" and rigid arms
controls as an opportunity to make profit from the changing political and
economic conditions. The Inner Line Regulation of 1873, an act by which lines
were drawn between the "hills" and the "plains", could be one such example,
which was appropriated both by the non-state as well as state actors. The
"illegal" status of firearms and the very fact that this very commodity was a
desirable item among the "wild tribes" beyond the inner line was a windfall

39 Ibid.
40 Ibid
41 One reason perhaps was also because some of the vessel commanders were themselves
engaged in this trade. For instance, Major T. Lamb, DC of Kamrup informs us of one Mr. W.
Bull, commander of a River Company's flat who reportedly sold a double-barreled gun to
Mouzahdar Rangu Churn, of Somoria, for the sum of Rs. 40. Ibid.
42 Following a search of the steamer Progress, the Kamrup Deputy Superintending of Police,
reports of finding 44 canisters of powder and 12 boxes of caps in a box owned by Sagur Ali and
Ahmed Ali, lascars of the steamer. The accused were arrested and the Commander and 2nd
Engineer were sentenced to nine months rigorous imprisonment along with a fine of Rupees 30
each. A package containing 12 boxes of caps was also found in the possession of Monoo, lascar
of the same steamer. He too was convicted and sentenced to a fine of Rupees 50 or in default
one month rigorous imprisonment. F&PD - A, March 1872, Nos. 72 – 118; F&PD - A, June
1872, Nos. 537 – 544.
for traders as well as officials.\textsuperscript{43} If this is any indication, in the village of Kohima alone the number of muskets went up from 25 in 1871 to 95 in 1873.\textsuperscript{44}

On the other hand, Manipuri officials also saw possibilities for profit and self-aggrandizement in the new colonial arrangements around them. For instance, John Butler, the Political Agent in the Naga Hills found that firearms from the Manipur government magazines often found its way into the hands of the surrounding “wild hill tribes”. In fact, firearms leaked out from the Manipur Raja’s magazine often found a ready market among the Nagas and the Kukis. In 1873, Inspector Memaram of the Naga Hills Police was thus “informed by the Nagas of the village [Mozemah] that any amount of cartridges could be bought at Munnipore and that some Nagas of Khonomah had brought away a good quantity.”\textsuperscript{45} A closer examination of the cartridges in the Naga Hills by Inspector Memaram revealed that, “most of them are exactly the same as those” used by “the Munnipore troops”.\textsuperscript{46} The cartridges, which were bought from Manipur at the rate of 50 for a rupee were subsequently, sold at the rate of 20 rounds for a rupee by the Khonoma traders in the Naga Hills.\textsuperscript{47}

“Native” personnel serving in militia units or local police could also seek opportunities to enhance their reserves by engaging in this “illicit” traffic. Thus, we come across instances where recruits from the Naga Hills Police would often be found “stealing” and selling cartridges to the Nagas. In

\textsuperscript{43} In March 1874, the Lieutenant Governor issued a notification stating that in none of these divisions i.e., Assam, Dacca, Chittagong and Arracan, “should any license be allowed for the manufacture or sale or for the transport of fire-arms of any description.” Such a step was necessary as “Some of these districts being situated on the frontier, the unrestricted right of possessing and carrying arms would afford facilities for selling them to the hostile tribes on the border.” F&PD – A. march 1874, Nos. 84 – 101.

\textsuperscript{44} F&PD – A. September 1876, Nos. 143.

\textsuperscript{45} F&PD – A. January 1873, Nos. 140-143

\textsuperscript{46} F&PD – A. October 1877, Nos. 541 – 548.

\textsuperscript{47} Memaram was further informed that a few days before he arrived at Mozemah, some Nagas had brought two “khangs” or baskets of cartridges. To keep a check on this leakage of arms from the Manipur state, the Commissioner of Assam proposed to limit the supply of munitions of war in future and to demand for whatever maybe issued to Munnipore. In addition to this, the Commissioner suggested that “a monthly statement be furnished showing the daily receipt and expenditures of all ammunitions in the magazine, the receipt and expenditure of the loose powder, the number of caps and loose bullets and that the Political Agent should occasionally inspect the magazine. F&PD – A. May 1873, Nos. 63 – 64.
August 1876, P. T. Carnegy, the Political Officer in Charge of Naga Hills thus convicted two of his constables for stealing and selling cartridges in the Naga Hills. Perplexed by this tendency within the forces, Carnegy anxiously remarked: "if it is tried here by our men even, how much more likely are thefts to take place amongst the Munnipoor force where supervision is so much less strict"? In fact, sepoys of Manipur were often reported to have sold caps and cartridges to the hill people. The existence of an illicit traffic between Indian sepoys and the hill people moreover came as an unwelcome surprise to the British authorities. In September 1899, the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam thus reported the existence of a large number of Tower Enfield guns in the hills adjoining the Princely state of Manipur. These guns were allegedly exported from that state to the neighboring hill tracts. Much to the astonishment of frontier officials, these rifles were found to be "mostly the result of the loot after the Manipur expedition of 1891 when guns in large number were sold by sepoys, and found their way into the hands of Manipuri's, Nagas and Kukis."

Since arms were often found emanating from Burma, representations were often made to the Burmese King to use his influence in checking the flow of "illicit" firearms from his domain into the British North East frontier. As early as 1868, Captain Lewin, the DC of the Chittagong Hill Tracts sought the Government of Bengal's intervention in making the King of Burmah understand "the inconvenience likely to arise from such traffic being permitted." Lewin further remarked that while "We take great precaution on this side and I have communicated with the Commissioner of Arracan as regards that Province, but I recommend that the King of Burmah be moved to take strenuous measures to prevent arms, ammunition or materials reaching the wild hill tribes from his territories." 

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49 Ibid.
50 F&PD (External) - A, Jan 1900, Nos. 36 - 64
51 F&PD-A October 1868, Nos. 296-97
However, efforts to suppress the traffic could not proceed beyond securing agreements with the Burmese King. In fact, the unhindered accessibility of firearms in Burma caused no small amount of worry to the colonial authorities. Thus, C. U Aitchison anxiously observed how “any quantity of match-lock flints, and flasks of gunpowder, percussion caps find their way to Mandalay and can be purchased in the bazaar.” These “contraband articles,” Aitchison further notes, “are brought into Upper Burmah to a considerable extent by the inland steamer... that are exported to Rangoon by sea from different ports, including Calcutta and Singapore.” Worse still, at least from the British official perspective was that, “a few” of these guns would “occasionally find their way from the British or Upper Burmah into the hands of the surrounding tribes.”

Yet, as much as the British expressed their disapproval over the Burmese King’s indifference to the transit of arms through his territory, official records also reveal how alongside these remonstrations, the British themselves actively connived in undermining the Burmese King by quietly supplying arms to the Shans in Upper Burma. Thus, Horace Spearman, the Officiating Assistant Political Agent, Bhamo, writes in his diary as to how the British were “assisting” the Shans in procuring arms and ammunition from Rangoon and Moulmein; the plan was to launch an attack upon Bhamo and subsequently to harass the Ava king’s interests in the area.

Even as states engaged in ways to undermine and manipulate each other’s power, various actors would come to exploit this predicament and draw benefit out of the prevailing order of things. Considering the trade

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52 F&PD – A, June 1872, Nos. 148 - 190.
53 F&PP-A, October 1873, Nos. 466 – 473. For instance, the Commissioner of Pegu remarked that “during the last three official years [1871-1873], 3, 588 stands of arms were imported.” What surprised the Commissioner was the fact that the Magistrate who grants the passes to purchase retail from the importers reportedly expressed his ignorance as to “where they finally go.” See F&PD – A, June 1872, Nos. 735; F&PD – A, October 1873, nos. 466 - 473.
54 F&PD – A, August 1872, Nos. 212 – 19. Horace’s diary further mentions as to how “for some two or three years the Shans who went down to Toungoo brought back arms and powder instead of money or ordinary merchandize.”
55 As a consequence of the Second Anglo-Burmese War 1852 - 53, the Kingdom of Burma had been reduced to its core regions around the capital Ava, and its foreign policy effectively was
restrictions imposed by the British especially on the transit of firearms into Upper Burma, smuggling became a lucrative substitute for traders as well as petty sailors.56 A cursory assessment of the official records would indicate that Chinese and Arab traders closely linked to the Burmese officials were largely engaged in this contraband trade. For instance, a “Chinamen” named Shooy Ala Gyee reportedly imported 2000 flaks of gunpowder, which was then disposed off to the Burmese Government. An additional stock of 70,000 flints were reportedly stashed away by Ala Gyee in his house for sale. An assortment of arms was further supplied to Burmese officials at “high prices” by one Syed Abdoor Rahman, an Arab trader through Moung Pah Tsan, Agent of Messrs. Edmund, Jones and Co.57

Alongside the Chinese contrabanders, Khalasees of the river steamers would also engage in smuggling commodities or wares such as flints.58 The presence of Italian merchants in Burma further points out the magnitude of clandestine transit of arms into Upper Burma.59 We have thus information on one Mr. Adrieno, an Italian merchant (later appointed the Italian Consul in Burma), who reportedly sold three lakhs of percussion caps to a Chinese

determined by the British Resident. The Burmese, highly uncomfortable with this situation, entered into communication with the Italians and the French. Business interests were also involved such as rubies and lumber. The treatment given to the British Bombay-Burmah Trading Company by the Burmese administration in 1885 provided the excuse for the British to act and resulted in the third Anglo-Burmese war of 1885. One crucial reason was that the British wanted to prevent a potential expansion of the French sphere of influence.

56 F&PD-A, June 1872, Nos. 148 - 190
57 Ibid. The articles included:
   10 dozens boxes of percussion caps at Rs. 120
   5 dozen waterproofs at Rs. 40
   40,000 breach loading caps at Rs. 180
   1,800 cartridges for breach loading rifles at Rs. 144, and
   150, 2 lb canisters of gun powder at Rs. 300
   Total = Rs. 784

58 Ibid
59 F&PD (Secret) – A. July 1871, Nos. 32 – 42. As a consequence of the Second Anglo-Burmese War (1852 - 53), the Kingdom of Burma had been reduced to its core regions around the capital Ava, and its foreign policy effectively was determined by the British Resident. The Burmese, highly uncomfortable with this situation, entered into communication with the Italians and the French. Business interests were also involved, such as rubies and lumber. The treatment given to the British Bombay-Burmah Trading Company by the Burmese administration in 1885 provided the excuse for the British to act and the resultant third Anglo-Burmese war in 1885. One crucial reason was that the British wanted to prevent a potential expansion of the French sphere of influence. This entire section has been repeated! Please delete!
trader named Shooy Ala Gyee. While rivalry between the British and the Ava court opened opportunities for people like Adrieno to sell their wares at high profits, it also attracted the attention of prospective arms dealers like Captain Racchia. On 23rd December 1872, G. A. Strover, the British Political Agent at Mandalay, thus makes an entry in his diary on the suspicious activities of Captain Racchia. Strover notes how after having “presented His Majesty with two rifles,” Racchia confidently assured the Ava king “that any number of these rifles can be purchased in Italy at the rate of Rupees sixteen per rifle and be forwarded to Rangoon. While the Burmese King figured as the chief end user of the firearms, a sizeable amount could also find its way across the frontier among the hill peoples. Thus, the firearms found in the possession of the Lushais and the Chins were often found to be the ones furnished from north of Bhamo in Upper Burma.

Princely States, Strategic Alliances

Even as firearms spilled across the hills, strategic alliances and security ties were being put in place with the princely states like Manipur and Tipperah. The territories of these states formed a land cordon to thwart any “unlawful” proclivities by the surrounding hill people, which might “disturb” the peace in the frontier. Alternately, these pieces of land also served as military bases, facilitating British strategic access; their rulers in turn would gain access to British military and economic resources. For instance, in June 1869, the Government of India announced a “gift of 500 muskets to the Raja of Manipur,” with the provision to enable the Raja to purchase 500 more later on.

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60 F&PD – A, June 1872, Nos. 148 – 190. Mr. Hernandez, another merchant representing the Burmah Company at Rangoon reportedly contracted to supply the Burmese Government with the following steamers: Two sea-going steamers of 1,000 tonnes each, Twelve steel sterns paddle river steamers of about 250 tons each, Ten steamers of about 200 tons each building at Mandalay, One gun-boat of about 250 tons building at Mandalay, Three steamers of about 250 tons each, completed some years ago, and Three or Four small steamers. F&PD – A, December 1871, Nos. 190 – 209.
61 F&PD – A, April 1873, Nos. 140 -59
62 F&PD – A, June 1870, Nos. 248 – 252
depending on the contingency. From the British perspective, “it is of the greatest importance to strengthen the hands of the Raja as much as possible,” and therefore the grant of muskets “free of payment” was considered indispensable. In the calculus of R. Brown, the Political Agent of Manipur, such a policy would enable the Raja to effectively handle “the affairs on the Munnipore borders.” A steady supply of arms and ammunition to the Raja also worked with the aim of keeping a check on any territorial move across its frontier by the Burmese king.

However, at particular conjunctures, resources provided to aid the Manipur state could be employed by the Raja to counter the agendas of the British in the frontier. For instance, in February 1871, John Butler, the Political Agent of the Naga Hills nervously reported that the Manipur court was quietly arming “all the Naga villages along the border within their own jurisdiction.” This scheme of distributing muskets to the bordering villages was explained by the Raja as purely for “defensive measures” against other more powerful and troublesome villages in the hills. Yet, what bothered John Butler was that the Manipuri’s “have been promising to do the same to the villages within our territory if they will only bother the sahebs and get them (by which, of course they mean the Government) to leave the country.”

If the arming of some hill people were framed from the Raja’s perspective of defense, it also seems to have served other larger purposes in the frontier. In fact, this strategy of the Raja also conjunctured with the British Government’s plan to survey and demarcate the Manipur-Assam boundary. Thus, C. U. Aitchison, Secretary, Government of India uncomfortably remarked: “I think it is probable that the supply of guns and powder to the

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63 F&PD (Military) – A. June 1869, Nos. 5 – 7. A ‘grant’ of 1000 stand of arms was further made to the Raja of Manipur in 1869, ‘half free and half with payment and 12 months credit’ including ‘powder of the value of Rs. 6000, lead Rs. 2000, and one lakh of percussion caps of Rs. 300.’ F&PD-Military A, August 1869, Nos. 4-5
64 Ibid
65 In May 1878, the British reportedly supplied 200 maunds of powder and 5000 muskets to the Manipur Raja to counter any Burmese misadventure through the Sumjok Raja along the Manipur-Burma frontier. F&PD – A, May 1878, nos. 107 – 128
Nagas was part of the general intrigue to defeat the boundary settlement."67

At other times, villages were armed by the Raja to intimidate and coerce defaulting villages to shell out revenues to the State. Writing on the relations between the Manipur Raja and the hill populations, Robert Reid thus notes how “if any village failed to pay the taxes demanded, other villages were armed with guns by the State and allowed to go in and decapitate as many inhabitants as they could.”68

Even as British officials expressed doubts about the ability of the “weak" Manipur Raja to keep a check on the circulation of arms in his domain considering the fact that “the affairs of his country ... is almost entirely in the hands of the advisors, a set of unscrupulous men ... who think of nothing but how to fill their pockets,”69 elsewhere in Tipperah, British officials suspiciously eyed the Raja’s request to purchase an assortment of arms and ammunition from Calcutta, which were purportedly meant to fend off and “chastise” Kukis “incursions” along his border.70 Official discomfort to such a request was especially so because investigations had previously revealed that officials of the Tipperah court were often found to be “in the habit” of indulging in “illicit” firearms trade with the Kukis and Lushais in the Sylhet

67 F&PD – A. May 1873, Nos. 63 – 64. Aitchison was however hopeful that “once the boundary case is decided we shall hear little more of this.”
70 F&PD – A, July 1870, Nos. 254 – 270. In his letter to Lord Ulick Browne Officiating Commissioner of the Chittagong Division, the Joobraj of Tipperah argued that procuring new arms and ammunition were indispensable for his sepoys to check the increasing “incursions” from the “Kookies” along his territory. The list included:

- Muskets with Bayonets ...300
- Cartouch with belts & c ...300
- Lead .....40 mds [maunds]
- Large Cap ...40, 000
- Small cap ...20, 000
- Cartridges of soldier’s gun ...200 boxes
- Cannon ...3 pieces
- Sword ...4 pieces
- Gun-powder, coarse ....50mds
- Ditto of china ... 20 mds
and Cachar frontier. Even so, British endeavor to put arms away from the reach of certain sections of the hill people seemed to be rather unworkable as firearms and ammunition continued to slip in and out of the Manipur and Tipperah Raja’s territory through the conduits of corrupt officials, traders as well as sepoys.

**Surveillance and Evasion**

Considering the rampant nature of traffic in “illicit” firearms, Colonel Hopkinson remarked that, “every gun brought into Assam is potentially a gun which some hill savage or another will sooner or later have the opportunity of acquiring.” What baffled and hence distressed Hopkinson was that:

... once they [firearms] have got into Assam, guns passed by sale or barter from hand to hand, until obeying a law of gravitation towards the person who will pay the most for them, they reach the savage, and the operation of this law cannot be effectively checked with a frontier of some 800 miles (both sides of Brahmaputra) to act in.

Controlling frontier spaces where firearms flowed freely therefore became an increasingly important pre-occupation of the government. Although the British sought to work through different legal and institutional mechanisms with the aim to keep firearms from falling into the hands of the hill people, yet as we shall see below, the ambiguities presented by these different institutions could as well be exploited by the varied actors involved in this traffic.

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71 Ibid
72 Home and Political Department [henceforth, H&PD] (Public) – A. 9 September 1871, Nos. 49 - 51
73 Ibid
To thwart the movement of arms and ammunition in the frontier, a rigorous surveillance mechanism was initially proposed. A series of military outposts were established along hill passes or _divars_ to check the circulation of this "pernicious" commodity. Adding to the range of surveillance infrastructure was the establishment of _Searching Stations_ along the borders as well as on the various routes into the frontier to detect arms contrabands. For instance, a searching station was reportedly established at "Allanmyo, near the external boundary line between British India and the Kingdom of Upper Burma." With such measures in place, British officials like General W. F. Nuthall confidently remarked: "it would be most difficult to smuggle a single musket past the many police posts on the road between Cachar and Munnipoor."76

However, control over the flow of arms and ammunitions through such military outposts was less certain and often difficult to enforce. In the words of Colonel H. Hopkinson, Chief Commissioner of Assam, this system had "proved faulty or proved so on trial" to check the movement of people. Perhaps, one reason for this was the fact that the geography of the long frontier lent itself admirably to concealment and evasion for the hill people from the military posts. And besides, firearms circulated in a wider geographical frame. Considering the efficacy of the existing surveillance measures in Assam, Hopkinson in his letter to the Secretary, Government of Bengal, thus rather apprehensively remarked that the "shutting up of Assam would be insufficient unless Sylhet and Cachar were equally well closed, even

74 H&PD (Public) – A. 12 February 1862, Nos. 36 - 38
75 Under Section 11, the Governor General in Council further declared the establishment of searching stations "near the boundary line between British India and the French Settlements on the Eastern and Western coasts and the Portuguese Settlements on the Western Coast." Compilation of the Circulars and General Orders of the CCOA, 1874 – 1885 (Shillong: Assam Sect Press, 1885), p. 25.
77 Hopkinson anxiously remarked in 1865 that "a French Army might hold the Pyrenees against a Spanish Army, but it would certainly fail in dealing with parties of contrabandists and stopping contraband along the Spanish frontier. Though the United States might be able to overwhelm Canada with its Armies, it cannot prevent smuggling along the Canadian frontier.... [T]he case of our troops in the Assam tenai against parties of Nagas or Abors or Garrows is beyond all comparison, a more hopeless one. F&PD – A. June 1866, Nos. 37 – 39.
then Manipur would not suffice without British Burma or the latter without Bangkok.”78 Corroborating Hopkinson’s view, H. Lepoer Wynne, Under Secretary to the Government of India was convinced that, “no measures taken would hermetically close the sources from which arms might eventually reach our frontiers” for “even Bangkok and China are not too remote.”79

Adding to the official dilemma was the fact that contrabandists often preferred and operated in spaces far away from the vision of the state to carry on “illicit” trade. Thus, mountain passes into the northern parts of the Akyab district and the south of the Chittagong Hill tracts came to constitute important routes for the transit of arms into the North East frontier. These points were preferred by the “smugglers” since they “are remote from general efficient police control.”80 Besides, “a good deal of smuggling” was also carried on by means of native boats through the “Soonderbuns” and up the rivers and creeks.81 These contrabands often escaped official detection as they were smuggled over the frontier either concealed in piece goods shipped on the river steamers or in native boats trading in salt.82 At other times, guns were often purchased by the Nagas from the “Barparies” (traders) at Barkhola Bazar in Cachar “secretly at night”. To avoid detection by the police when bringing these guns home, the Nagas would skillfully detach the barrel from the stock, wrap them up in cloth and plantain leaves, pack them off in their baskets and bring them home.83 The ruses and stratagems developed by the varied actors to smuggle “illicit” weapons across the border seemed to be extremely effective and most weapons reached the hill people without detection. Moreover, the licensed vendor’s books, which would as a rule,

78 Ibid
79 F&PD – A. March 1872, Nos. 79 – 118. In fact, Lepoer writes that “the Kampars who occasionally visit Assam from Thibet have many muskets which must have found their way from the seaboard of China, while the Shans are partially supplied with arms from Bangkok.”
80 F&PD – A. October 1873, Nos. 466 - 473
81 H&PD (Public) – A. 9 September 1871, Nos. 49 - 51
82 F&PD – A. June 1872, Nos. 735
83 Quoted in Birendra Chandra Chakravorty, British Relations with the Hill Tribes of Assam since 1858 (Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Ltd., 1981), p. 91
show the records of transactions were often found to be unhelpful as dealers were often found making "fictitious entry in his books."  

In 1881, renewed efforts were initiated by the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Steuart Bayley along with the Cachar and Sylhet authorities with the aim "to detect and put a stop to the illicit traffic in arms and ammunition across the frontier to Manipur, the Lushai country and the Naga Hills." One strategy employed by the district officials in Cachar was to attract the "smugglers" attention by making the case of a demand for firearms for a probable "invasion of Manipur" by Prince Gokul Singh, the pretender King to the Manipur throne. With stories of Gokul Singh's purported invasion of Manipur and his desire to purchase arms having being planted around in the bazaars by police informers, it was not long before certain Bengali traders from Syedpur expressed an interest for a transaction. In Cachar, as the police reports go, 7 guns, 4 barrels, 2 or 3 new stocks and several locks were thus seized from five Bengali men while transacting with the police constables who were all allegedly masquerading as Gokul Singh's agents. Identified as residents of Syedpur, these five "offenders" - namely Brojo Ram, Abdul Miah, Narayan, Maya Ram and Mani Ram - were charged of breaching the Indian Arms Act. Shortly, they were produced before the Magistrate and "tried in open court" which subsequently "sentenced [them] to 3 years imprisonment."  

Similarly, on another occasion, seizures of 2 maunds and 27 1/2 seers of sulphur were made from two Manipuris by frontier police constables masquerading as arms traders from the Lushai country. At other times, British officials could also usefully employ Manipuri refugees in Cachar as decoys in their frontier operations. It was through this tactic that in 1880 two

84 F&PD - A, May 1881, Nos. 38 – 42
85 Ibid
86 Ibid
87 F&PD - A, July 1880, Nos. 180 - 181
important captures were made along with 22 muskets. By 1881, if one were to go by police reports, the arms of the state seemed to be increasingly closing on the "illicit" traffic and the people who moved the commodities. Moreover, with the aim to tighten the states' grasp on the spiraling of arms trade, movements of people such as the Muslims, Bengalis, Lushais and Nagas etc., were henceforth brought under stricter colonial surveillance.

Colonial networks of spies and detectives further sought to enhance and sharpen the vision of the state on the ground. With such assortments of colonial surveillance structure in place, the arrests of arms traffickers were now more frequently reported by the police department. This was besides the significant seizures of arms and gunpowder's around the time. In 1881 alone, a list of 32 individuals was released, all of whom were tried and convicted under the Arms Act. While police officials celebrated these exploits as one of eventually outmaneuvering the "illicit" networks, what is interesting here is that through the recorded stories of these arrested individuals we occasionally get a closer glimpse of the lives, contexts, networks and geographies upon which these actors carried out their clandestine transactions. The next section is then an attempt to trace the world of "illicitness" through the story of one individual namely, Hafiz alias Abdul Hamid.

89 The period from 1876 to 1881 saw a series of arrests and seizures of firearms and subsequent prosecution of traffickers. In fact, the Chief Commissioner of Assam celebrated the fact that since 1876 "fifty-one guns, 687 ½ lbs of English gunpowder, 494lbs. country made gun-powder, 528lbs. sulphur and 200, 100 caps had been captured and 28 persons had been punished under the Acts." In addition, the police report stated that "the market price of the arms, powder & c., purchased and seized amounts to Rupees 2000 and the fines imposed on the persons arrested to Rupees 4,020." F&PD – A, May 1881, Nos. 38 – 42.
90 Considering the alleged traffic of firearms between Manipur and Naga Hills, G. H. Damant, the Political Agent of Manipur asked the Manipuri authorities to inform him "of the arrival of any Nagas from British territory in order that I can keep a careful watch on their movement here." F&PD – A, October 1877, Nos. 541 – 548.
91 F&PD – A, May 1881, 38 – 42
Hafiz alias Abdul Hamid, a resident of Sylhet, initially appears in the colonial record in November 1879. Prior to this, little is known about Hafiz or his role in the “illegal” arms trade. It was while making enquiries in Cachar to purchase arms that Binaud Singh of Hailakandi first learned about “one Hafiz of Sylhet” from two Muslim Bengali arms dealers.92 In the course of their conversation, the Bengali agents informed Binaud that Hafiz “was well acquainted with the trade and could get them any quantity.”93 Binaud was accordingly introduced to Hafiz, who very soon afterwards “sold him 850 caps, and promised to supply as much powder and as many caps as Binaud wished to have.”94 It is in the process of these underhand dealings that a certain partnership develops between Hafiz and Binaud.

Having said that, it is important to note here that by this time a series of investigations had been launched by the Assam administration in the frontier districts to “detect”, and if possible, stamp out the “pernicious” firearms traffic in the region. Emphasis was especially placed on Cachar and Sylhet considering their proximity to the hill tracts, as well as these being major meeting points for an assortment of traders including the hill people. A number of spies, informers and undercover agents posing as arms traders were subsequently deployed with the purpose to “infiltrate” and gain detailed knowledge of the business. Binaud Singh, an undercover agent working under the direction of Inspector Golok Chandra Nandi of Cachar police, constituted one such crucial link in the colonial intelligence network. In the unfolding months, Binaud’s knowledge on the nature and extent of firearms traffic would steadily expand subsequent to a series of surreptitious encounters initiated through Hafiz.

92 Ibid
93 Ibid
94 Ibid
In the meantime, Binaud continued to make “small purchase of powder and caps from another Mohammedan Bengali” in Cachar. Such actions were not only crucial to demonstrate his trafficking proclivity, but also to prove his credibility in the eyes of the trafficking community. Thus, it was not long before Hafiz, seemingly impressed with his newfound client, candidly informed Binaud “that the Mahajans from whom he got the powder & C., lived in Sylhet.” Plans were accordingly set afoot whereby Binaud, Hafiz and one Jakir Munshi - an “acquaintance” of Binaud - proceeded to Sylhet to engage “the Mahajans for further purchases.” In February 1880, the party arrived in Sylhet. A clandestine rendezvous was soon arranged where Binaud “was introduced by Hafiz to two licensed dealers, Shahar Ullah and Rohim Bux, and by a Manipuri friend, to a third licensed dealer, Iman Bux”. In the ensuing meeting, all these dealers “expressed willingness” to sell their spectrum of wares to Binaud.

Such close collaboration between Hafiz and the licensed dealers exposes to an extent the limitations of the existing colonial legal and surveillance frameworks. That government “licensed dealers” could easily switch over to such “illegal” trade, to obtain greater profit with fewer risks, is much evident from the narrative. These furtive encounters further provide us a window to the range of linkages and networks through which this clandestine trade operated in the frontier. As Binaud continued to gain access into the intricate workings of the arms traffic, sporadic arrests were being made at various places along the frontier.95 Yet, much to the relief of W.W. Daly, DSP, Cachar, “The news of these seizures did not reach the ears of the Sylhet traders and Binaud Singh was able to continue his enquiries.” 96

That Hafiz’s clandestine activities operated on a larger geographical space, transcending the borders of Cachar and Sylhet into the colonial

95 For instance in March 1880, “four Kamars and one Mohammedan,” were reportedly arrested at Sildoobi where by 9 guns and one pistol was seized from their possession. Much to the satisfaction of W.W. Daly, DSP, Cachar “These seizures were effected through the agents employed by the police.” These five offenders were subsequently “tried, convicted, and sentenced four to three years and Rupees 50 fine, and one to one and a half years and Rupees 50 fine.” Ibid
96 Ibid
metropolis of Calcutta, came quite as a surprise to Binaud and his officer W.W. Daly.\textsuperscript{97} Hoping to capitalize on this startling ‘discovery’, Daly excitedly remarks how this was “the opportunity we had long sought, \textit{viz.} that of finding out how the [illicit] trade was carried [out] in Calcutta, and how ... men from Sylhet and Cachar managed to supply themselves with arms and ammunition to resell to different tribes.”\textsuperscript{98} Even as the story unfolds, Binaud and his two associates persuade Hafiz to accompany them to Calcutta under the pretext “that the prices asked in Sylhet were too high,” and that “a larger number of guns than the dealers there could supply was required.” With Binaud assuring Hafiz that all travel expenses would be met, on June 1 the party embarked on a steamer and arrived in Calcutta on June 6.

Once in Calcutta, oblivious to the Calcutta police, Binaud carried out his covert investigations, meeting several arms traders through Hafiz. Advances were subsequently “made to four of them” to supply an assortment of arms and ammunition to Binaud. “Most of these were shop-keepers in China Bazaar.” Amongst the host of traders, one particular individual attracted the attention of the detectives namely Kalipada Rai, “a \textit{gumashta} in the employ of Nafar Chandra, one of the largest licensed dealers in arms and ammunition.” Kali we are told, had apparently “used his master’s name” in the transaction. With Nafar Chandra reportedly away from Calcutta, “it could not be discovered whether he really knew that his gumashta was offering to sell in his name.”\textsuperscript{99} Whatever be the reason behind Nafar’s absence, instances such as these seem to indicate the opportunities available for people like Kali to cut a deal for themselves outside the gaze of the state. At the same time it is not impossible to imagine the complicity of big business entrepreneurs like Nafar in the chain of “illicit” trafficking, considering the heavy government taxes and regulations on arms trade and even more so because profits involved in this trade appeared to be extensive.

\textsuperscript{97} In fact, Binaud had learned that “Hafiz’s acquaintance with people who carried on this illicit traffic was not confined to Sylhet, but that he had many acquaintances in Calcutta.”\textsuperscript{Ibid}
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid
By early August 1880, the clandestine operations under Binaud and his associates had collated a considerable amount of evidence on the "illicit" trade. Accordingly, Daly decided to act swiftly to apprehend the people involved lest they soon disappear from the state surveillance apparatus. Thus, beginning on August 17, a series of raids were organized across Calcutta, along with the Calcutta Detective Department, leading to a number of arrests and simultaneous seizures of arms and ammunitions. Not long after this, the Cachar police arrested their prized catch, Hafiz. Even as police officials celebrated over the "successful prosecutions" of several significant traders, the Chief Commissioner of Assam, C. A. Elliott confidently stated that "for many years ... much difficulty will be experienced by them [arms traders] in getting supplies for release to the tribes here." Such a calculation, however, seems to be short lived as local networks and collaborators in the following decades found new subtler ways to move their commodities without arousing the suspicion of the state.

Even so, the above narrative also draws our attention to some insightful lessons about the nature and dynamics of the "illicit" trade at this time. Not only was contrabanding a multiethnic business, the actions of these actors also further remind us of Tagliacozzo's argument, though in a different context, as to how varied ethnic groups "were unafraid to combine to carry out these ventures [illicit trade], if enough profit was on the line." Moreover, in this maze it was through the like of Hafiz who straddling across frontiers, often evading the prying eyes of the state, ultimately linked such diverse people from the Naga Hills or Lushai Hills to the web of arms agents in Cachar, Sylhet and Calcutta.

100 For instance, a police raid on 17th August resulted in the arrest of Kali Baboo and Tafil. From their possession were seized a large quantity of powder and caps, including 5 guns. In another case, a search of Karim Bux's house resulted in the seizure of "50 lbs powder, 70,000 caps and two revolvers." Alongside these police actions in Calcutta, "the DC, Sylhet and Cachar, were telegraphed to arrest all those against whom we had cases." Ibid

101 According to Police records, Hafiz was arrested at the house of Karim Bux, one of the arms dealers in Calcutta. He was eventually convicted and sentenced to two years imprisonment, with a fine of Rs. 50. Ibid

102 Ibid

103 Tagliacozzo, Secret Trade, p. 355
Firearms in the Changing Frontier Context

By the late nineteenth century, the scale and quality of the tribal arsenal caused consternation and alarm among the political and military authorities prompting immediate attention to be paid to the disarmament of the hill tracts. On 20 March 1899, the British government thus issued a Resolution with special reference to the total disarmament of the hill tribes along the North Eastern Frontier. Yet, such ambitious colonial projects in the form of a “total disarmament” could also involve enormous risk, which some frontier officials wished to avoid at all cost.

Sensing the grave outcome resulting from such a scheme, Sir Henry Cotton, the Chief Commissioner of Assam argued “that any attempt to enforce complete disarmament would be a most dangerous measure calculated to set the whole hill side in a blaze and to throw back the gradual civilisation and amelioration of the condition of these savage tribes for a generation.” What he rather proposed for the Assam Frontier was to, “steadily and persistently pursue the policy already established in this province of licensing guns with caution and moderation, imposing a maximum limit as far as possible and of confiscating all unlicensed guns, fining heavily the owners of such guns and liberally rewarding informers.” Such a “systematic control” rather than a “spasmodic disarmament” was then ultimately seen to be the best course to “ensure order” in the frontier.

Subsequently, the Assam Administration announced a decree, according to which one gun was stipulated to every ten houses and excess

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104 The many rebellions during the period between the 1880s and 1900s which included the Anglo-Naga war of 1879-80, the Manipur Rebellion of 1891 and the Chin – Lushai Hills campaign of 1889 had in fact brought to light the hill people’s capabilities to resist colonial encroachments.

105 F&PD (External) - A, Jan 1900, Nos. 36 - 64

106 Ibid

107 Henry Cotton further explained that “It is essential that the action taken should be steady and systematic but if this policy is persistently adhered to the effect will be that we shall gradually without any necessity of a resort to force and without disturbing our present friendly relations with the hill tribes get in practically all unlicensed guns at present in possession of the people.”
guns were liable to confiscation. At the same time, guns voluntarily surrendered before November 1899 was to be “accepted in payment of house-tax at the rate of Rs. 30 per gun.” A system of licensing guns was further introduced and persons found in possession of unlicensed guns after November 1900 were either to be fined or imprisoned, the fines realized being paid as rewards to informers. Punitive measures were alternately planned to coerce recalcitrant villages into submission. These measures not only sought to establish a comprehensive system of registration but also curtail the number of licenses issued to carry arms in the hill tracts. Through such regulated ownership of guns, the government also aimed to establish a gradual monopoly over “legal” arms sales. Yet, gun owners could turn this seemingly “simple” colonial arrangement to their advantage. Thus, the Political Agent in Manipur dryly notes as to how the Kukis “with great shrewdness surrendered all their worthless flint locks to get revenue exemption, while retaining all their good guns.”

Even as these legal frameworks gradually extended the state’s reach into the periphery, new alternate ways were simultaneously devised by the hill people to counter the “shrinking” spaces. For instance, Captain H. Lewin remarked that the “increased vigilance on the part of the authorities,” had driven the Lushais “to manufacture a rough sort of powder; they learnt to do this from the Shendoo tribe.” In the case of the Chins, saltpeter was ingeniously manufactured “from bats dung or from the filth -heaps which collects under the houses”, while sulphur came the beans and vine of the “Aunglek”; the liquid obtained from this vine was then mixed with saltpeter and charcoal to make powder. The Lushais could also draw upon skills

108 It was pointed out by Captain Cole that when he was officiating as DC of the Naga Hills, the number of licensed guns in that district had increased rapidly from 330 in 1888 to 1,128 in 1893. But that since 1893, it had remained practically stationary, the number in 1898 being 1, 133 of which 446 were held by Angamis, 415 by Mikirs and plainsmen and 109 by Kukis. Ibid
109 Ibid.
111 Lewin, The Chittagong Hill Tracts, p. 150
112 Lead, writes Captain Chambers, is not procurable in the Chin Hills, as such bullets are made from iron purchased or stolen from the Burmese. See Captain O. A. Chambers, Handbook of the Lushai Country, p. 77.
from their "Bengali captives" who reportedly taught them "to repair the lock of a gun, as also to make spear-heads and fish hooks." Elsewhere in the Naga Hills, the Konyaks were known to be expert gunsmiths who "devised guns made of pipes and were able to reassemble as well as repair broken ones." In fact, many cases of stolen pipes, which were reported in the tea gardens and rail tracks often ultimately ended up as the barrel of a Konyak gun. These locally manufactured muzzle-loaders were found to be very popular among the Konyaks. Even as hill people gradually became skilled at assembling and manufacturing guns locally, by the early twentieth century, many Nagas would also migrate to nearby tea plantations or colonial 'public' work sites where they earned cash to buy guns.

Conclusion

In the nineteenth century the transit of "illicit" arms and ammunition challenged efforts by the colonial state to establish control and stability along the North Eastern Frontier. The dynamics of colonial state-making opened new opportunities for a host of actors, ranging from corrupt court officials to sepoys, lascars, traders and Europeans etc., to make profit by resourcefully engaging in this clandestine trade. The many rebellions against the British and other less protracted episodes of conflict in the hills further fueled the demand for firearms in the frontier. Although colonial laws sought to regulate the flow of firearms, ambiguities within these frameworks and superior geographical knowledge of the locale by the traffickers allowed room for contraband arms and ammunition to cross the frontiers in a variety of

113 Lewin, The Chittagong Hill Tracts, p. 151
114 F&PD – A. April 1900, Nos. 15
115 "The Konyaks of the Sibsagar and naga Hills hinterland make their own powder, and with the help of water piping stolen from tea gardens, also their guns," records J. H Hutton DC of Naga Hills in his tour diary in 1928. MSA, HD, CB -4, H 54, 1927 - 28
116 In April 1900, Captain A. E. Woods, the DC of Naga Hills after his visit to the Konyak Naga area thus reported to the Chief Commissioner: "I heard that there were a number of guns in these villages, a good many imported from the plains, and some manufactured locally from stolen pipes etc." Ibid
settings. Increasing colonial pressure on the arms traffic and people moving the commodities could however push the trade further underground. Yet, firearms constituted just one of the many "illegal" commodities that circulated in the North East during the nineteenth century; other banned commodities such as opium and counterfeit currencies clandestinely made their passage in the frontier much to the worry of the colonial state - this fascinating history however lies outside the scope of this present chapter.