Chapter 3

The Politics of Road Building in the Hill Tracts of British Assam

The South Asian historiographies have focused much on the narratives of tea that the significance of routes in re-structuring the North East Frontier of British India is often lost or glossed over. Furthermore, conventional studies on the North East Frontier repeats the old imperial assertions that the hill tracts between Assam and Burma posed as barriers to communication and were a site for "unlawful" practices. However, a focus on "borderland" routes reveals that the peripatetic trading networks and commodities had long linked the hill tracts with the lowland states. Besides, both the "state" and non-state actors had moved along and crossed these hill tracts to pursue activities that were often deemed "illegal" by the state. An example is the "illicit" trafficking of firearms discussed in the previous chapter.

This chapter examines the historical importance of "borderland" routes, how these routes were laid out, built, and monitored; and the changing role of hill communities in this colonial enterprise. It argues that the building of these roads provided a crucial site upon which the plots of empire building could unfold in the hill tracts of British Assam. This was a space, which the politics of access had to constitute. Access routes intensified the reach and power of the
colonial state over a definable territory, over which the British claimed control.\footnote{Some recent fascinating works on the politics of access are Mahnaz Z. Ispahani, \textit{Roads and Rivals: The Political Uses of Access in the Borderlands of Asia} (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1989); also see Haunes, ‘Colonial Routes.’} In the process, access routes came to replace, what Penny Edwards has referred to as the “tyranny of distance” with a new “tyranny of proximity.” This “tyranny of proximity” extended the reach of the state in a myriad ways: from colonial armies dispatched along routes to crush dissent, to mobilizing corvee labour to lay new roads.\footnote{Penny Edwards, ‘The Tyranny of Proximity: Power and Mobility in Colonial Cambodia, 1863 – 1954,’ \textit{Journal of Southeast Asian Studies}, 37 (3), October 2006, p. 427.} Road building was then closely woven into a complex network of colonial practices, such as military surveillance, taxation, population enumeration, and the subordination of the hill populace as “colies.” To do so, colonial officials had to create and draw upon native agents in the form of goanburras (village headmen) and dobhashis (interpreters), who came to hold considerable stakes in the statist project of rule.

However, the colonial road building enterprise was not only a means to control strategic spaces and make territories accessible. Roads, once built, sought to legitimize the hegemonic structures of power and authority through the symbolic control of public space. As “political highways,” roads in the Naga Hills then were one way of concretizing a dominant ideology, seeking as they did to maintain an “unending visual contact” between rulers and the ruled. This visualization operated through the imposition of barriers on travelers, creation of police check posts, trade passes, and the routine movement of colonial officials, troops and police. In the process, such practices would build up a circulatory regime along which the culture and ideology of the political centre would be routed to the periphery.

Even so, colonial officials could not simply have re-shaped the frontier landscapes, framed policies, and establish its domination from above. They had to engage and operate through the existing “traditional” structures and
institutions, whereby they negotiated, operated, and often appropriated local skills of road making. Conversely, as Ravi Ahuja has shown in his study on colonial Orissa, road building could also produce very different results, often contradicting the presumed intention of the colonial rulers. This could operate through practices of appropriation whereby the hill populace could resist, obstruct, deflect, remold, or utilize these interventions according to their own needs and perceptions.

Routes and Rivals

Beginning in the early 1800s, British interest in the North East Frontier was largely informed by their concern with access to resources—lands, plants, minerals, and labour, all of which hinged on access to routes. The growing rivalry between the Chinese and the British Empire in the early 19th century had created a context for the British East India Company (EIC) to explore the alternative trans-Burma trade routes, to penetrate China. As early as 1822, British officials at Canton had pressed the authorities at Calcutta to explore the possibilities "of transmitting their representations [to Peking] overland ... by way of Sylhet and the province of Yunan." Recognizing the vital importance of developing land routes between "Hindoostan and China," David Scott, the first EIC Agent in the North East Frontier, set in motion a series of surveys between 1825 and 1828. Expedition parties were thus organized and led by officers like

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1 For example see Ravi Ahuja, 'The Bridge Builders: Some Notes on Railways, Pilgrimage and the British "Civilizing Mission" in Colonial India,' in Harald Fischer Tine and Michael Mann, Colonialism as Civilizing Mission: Cultural Ideology in British India (London: Anthem Pres, 2004).

2 See Ahuja, 'The Bridge Builders'

3 Ever since the Chinese Empire imposed new restrictions on British traders in the early 1800s, Britain had been engaged in seeking alternative routes of access to penetrate the "Celestial Empire." The Anglo-Burmese war of 1824-26 provided Britain a crucial opening to explore and develop trans-Burma trade routes to China through Assam, thereby, extending its imperial quest for tea and influence in the "borderlands" of South, and Southeast Asia. Cited in, Nirode K. Baruah, David Scott in North-East India, 1802-1831: A Study in British Paternalism (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1970), p. 125
Captain Neufville, Captain Bedford and Lieutenants Wilcox and Burlton from the Surveyor-General's Department. Operating from their base in Sadiya in Upper Assam these "shadowy operations" were conducted with utmost secrecy so as not to rouse the jealousy and suspicion of the "wild hill tribes" and the Ava court.

As the Company officials trekked across the hill tracts between Assam and Burma, they soon confronted a landscape straddled with complex network of routes criss-crossing the hill tracts. These routes, well adapted to local conditions were used by various "groups of tribal immigrants as well as traders, warriors, and ambassadors." While the routes connected the markets in the foothills, it further interlinked the caravan routes with Bhutan, Tibet, Upper Burma and Yunan. Knowledge of these routes and its linkages were crucial for the British if trade was to be pushed and pursued across the frontier. Knowledge of these routes was further deemed crucial if the frontier spaces ultimately were to be controlled. Thus, by the 1830s, various routes from Assam, Tibet, and Yunan, passing through the country in the extreme north of Burma, inhabited by the Khamptis and the Mishmis were being gradually surveyed and catalogued.

In 1831, David Scott, fascinated with the idea of capitalizing on trade with China across the hill tracts, placed "his greatest hopes" on the Bhamo-Hukawng valley route. The Bhamo route was not only considered as the "safest and best route to China" but its geographical position was also found to be enviable. Known as the "emporium of trade" between the Chinese and the Burmese, it was

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6 Selection of Papers Regarding the Hill Tracts between Assam and Burma and on the Upper Brahmaputra, (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press1873)
7 Gazetteer of India, Nagaland, 1979, p. 129.
8 John McCosh, 'Account of the Mountain Tribes on the Extreme N.E. Frontier of Bengal,' Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (JASB), No. 5, April 1836; H. Bigge, 'Dispatch from Lieut. H. Bigge, Assistant Agent, detached to the Naga Hills, to Capt. Jenkins, Agent Governor General, N.E. Frontier, communicated from the Political Secretariat of India to the Secretary to the Asiatic Society,' JASB, 1841, Vol. X. Part 1.
9 See Selection of Papers; For a comprehensive account on the military affairs and commercial routes between Assam and Burma and on the passes between Assam and Bhutan, see Captain R.B. Pemberton, Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India (Guwahati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, 1991; 1835).
situated at the junction of an important overland commercial route connecting Assam, Burma, and China. This route passed through Sadiya, Hukawng valley to the town of Munkung and Bhamo on the Irrawaddy, from where merchants from Ava and China disembarked their goods.10

From Bhamo, Chinese merchants conveyed their exchanged goods on mules, crossing the Shan’s country and then entering the Chinese province of Yunnan. Their commodities included cotton, silk, rice, tea, copper pots, carpets, warm jackets, lacquered and Chinaware, lead, copper, silver and other precious stones.11 An overland route further linked China with Bhutan via Assam. From Peking, caravans packed with supplies, especially tea, passed through Upper Burma, the Bhamo-Hukawng Valley route, Guwahati and thence journeyed on to Bhutan. A total of Rs. 7 lakhs was the estimated volume of trade in tea alone.12 It was these exploding commercial possibilities, that aspiring British merchants were “most anxious to share.”13

Apart from the economic imperative, one possibility entertained for developing the road links was to secure access to Chinese labour for its nascent tea plantations in Assam. In 1834, Francis Jenkins, the EIC Agent in the North-East, suggested the idea of importing “Chinamen” on foot to Assam through an overland route from China.14 EIC officials like Jenkins were more anxious to obtain Chinese workers since the “savage tribes” of the North East Frontier were not likely to possess the expertise and skills in comparison to the Chinamen, who has been cultivating tea for centuries. Thus, in 1835, there was much excitement when news reached Calcutta about settled Chinese population in the Burmese district of Hukawng. Even more fascinating was the reported willingness of these “Chinamen” to come and work for them, provided the road to Assam from

10 Selection of Papers, p. 108.
13 Selection of Papers, p. 108.
14 Foreign and Political Proceedings (from now F& PD) - 4 April, 1838. Nos. 112 – 113. P.C.
Ava was open.\textsuperscript{15} Having learnt the existence of several passes into Yunan from Bhamo, EIC officials also hoped to tap the large numbers of Chinese workmen from Yunan, who visited Bhamo.\textsuperscript{16}

If obtaining Chinese labourers for the tea plantations was one attraction, at particular conjuncture, the Burmese territorial moves in the frontier could also hamper such a venture. This is because, in the politics of access, the kingdom of Ava had its own project of expansion by building roads into the North East Frontier. In 1840, disturbing news on the reported intention of the Ava king “to open a road to Assam through the Naga Hills from the Kyendwin (Chindwin) river” reached Calcutta.\textsuperscript{17} Roads, in this context, would mean that the competing imperial powers could build and use them from either direction.

Of special concern for the Company officials was the close proximity of Burma with the tea gardens in Assam. British officials were aware that a military engagement with the Burmese would be injurious to the economic interest of the Company. More pressing for the British was to secure “a large tract of country abounding in tea tracts, excellent coal, iron ore and petroleum.”\textsuperscript{18} These “discoveries” gave added urgency to the colonial enterprise for securing and regulating access routes to sites of future resources. Yet, against this anxiety over Burma, EIC officials were also aware of the strategic importance of holding the land routes in the North East Frontier.

While the surveys were a strategy to capture or deny the Burmese access to the North East Frontier, British strategists also positioned military outposts at

\textsuperscript{15} F&PD. June 1836. Nos. 49 – 51, P.C.
\textsuperscript{16} Selection of Papers, p. 92. By the late 1830s, Company officials could secure a few “manufacturers brought around from China.” Their services were, however, dispensed in 1843. The few who remained in the Dooars and Assam worked as carpenters and contractors. See Piya Chatterjee, A Time for Tea. Women, Labor and Post/Colonial Politics on an Indian Plantation (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 347.
\textsuperscript{17} F& PD. 29 June, 1840. Nos. 109 – 111.
\textsuperscript{18} In fact, between the 1830s and 40s, a series of survey reports has confirmed astounding amounts of resources – tea tracts, coal, iron ore, and petroleum etc – in the Northeast frontier. See F& PD. 16 May, 1838. Nos. 53 – 58, P.C F& PD. 7 February, 1851. Nos. 192 – 207, F.G. Robinson, A Descriptive Account of Assam.
sites "most commandable" to monitor movements and closely watch rivals across strategic frontiers. Colonial strategies to close off access to rivals also spurred British authorities to woo "rebellious" hill chiefs, who previously were in the employ of Ava King. We find one such person in Beesa Gaum, the Singpho chief, whose country the British also coveted for its geo-strategic location and its economic potentialities. Beesa Gaum the "paramount chief" over the other "sixteen [Singpho] chiefs." Besides a monthly allowance of 50 rupees a month, Beesa Gaum also served "as an organ of communication with the other chiefs and a spy upon their action"; with duties of furnishing information of anything that might occur beyond the frontier calculated to excite agitation and apprehension.

The British scheme for defending and securing the frontier also hinged on cutting new roads to permit the rapid deployment of troops and supplies in the frontier. It simultaneously enabled the British troops to patrol the passes to Ava and the Singpho country. In addition to this, the hill dvaras or passes increasingly came under colonial surveillance. Thus, in 1842, Francis Jenkins recorded the following principal dvaras or passes in the Naga Hills — the Konghon, Teeroo, Bheetur, Namsang, Joboka, Banfera, Moothon, Borhath and Jeypore, etc. These strategies, Jenkins explained, will give "the means of commanding the passes towards Ava," and "will contribute to our military

19 F&P. 16 May 1838. Nos. 53 – 58, P.C.
20 The Singphos were formerly revenue paying subjects of the Ava king, "the Beesa Gaum being the collector in Hookung and Gakhen Thao in Assam." In 1825, following the First Anglo-Burmese War, Captain Neufville's expedition led to the expulsion of the Burmese from "the villages of the Beesa and the Duffa Gams, and eventually from the plains altogether." This also resulted in the surrender of the Burmese intermediaries i.e., the Beesa Gam and the other chiefs. F&P PD. 8 May 1837. Nos. 64 - 66, P.C.
21 Here, it should be mentioned that tea was first "discovered" in the 1820s in the Singpho country. Apart from this, it was also situated along an important trading route which connected Assam, Burma and China. For the British strategist such a measure was moreover imperative "for the Burmese were expected daily to show themselves on the Patkoi, and early news of their advance could come to us only through the Singphos." Mackenzie, History of the Northeast Frontier, pp. 63 - 67.
22 John McCosh, 'Account of the Mountain Tribes on the Extreme N.E. Frontier of Bengal,' JASB, No. 52, April 1836, pp. 200 – 01.
23 F&PD. 16 May 1838. Nos. 53 – 58, P.C.
strength and political supremacy." Yet, despite the expectations and anxieties that existed among the British agents of the time, such possibilities of trade and Burmese intrigues never transpired. Rather, the politico-military policies enacted upon such enterprise could provide the British an opportune stratagem to expand its domination over the frontier spaces.

If early 19th century British officials imagined a range of possibilities for the routes in this frontier tract, depending upon various imperatives, the colonial endeavors could also take a backseat. The unrest generated by the Company’s penetration into the region could seriously hamper the enterprise. On the other hand, settling the Burmese and Chinese question by way of the second Anglo-Burmese war (1852-53) and the second Opium war (1856-60), also seemed to have solved the problems of access earlier imposed by the Burmese and Chinese Empire. Besides, in the 1860s and 70s, when surveys under officers like H. L. Jenkins and T. T. Cooper increasingly indicated that a backdoor to China would not easily be found, enthusiasm began to cool off. Moreover, a significant intervention in the North East frontier during this phase was the introduction of steam communication between Calcutta and Guwahati in 1847. Steamers now provided a safe and speedy communication to the planters, officials, civilians, troops, and coolies for the tea gardens. These accounts also vindicate the argument that “depending upon priorities, states created or used routes.” With the gradual disappearance of the Burmese menace after the second Anglo-Burmese war, the British saw the emergence of the Nagas, Abors, and other hill people as no less potential enemies. New concerns about the flux and dangers of the frontier and the need to provide security to lowlanders from the hill raiders now assumed greater concern to the British frontier agents.

24 Selection of Papers, p. 256.
26 Ispahani, Roads and Rivals.
Securing the Lowlands

Around the 1860s, the foothills of British Assam witnessed a "mad scramble for lands" especially when lands were found suitable for the commercial production of tea. The large-scale incorporation of "the immense wastes held [by] the wild tribes" into the capitalist plantation economy soon witnessed a profound disruption of the hill people's everyday access to reserves of agrarian and political resources. In the process of "making room for tea," British planters encroached upon the jhum rights of the upland shifting cultivators. It also disrupted the established trade routes and the exchange networks of the hill communities by fencing existing roads, even as the hill people were denied access through the tea gardens. Consequently, series of frictions arose between the Nagas and "the Pushing planter" regarding boundaries, rent and tribute, even as the hill people contested against this colonial intrusion through numerous "raids" on the tea plantations and lowland settlements.

Such unregulated movements of hill people would often keep the eastern frontiers of British India porous, while blurring the colonial territorially and authority in the frontier. Thus, in the colonial spatial representation, the British colonials increasingly identified the Naga Hills as a politically troublesome area, characterized by rebelliousness and lawlessness. Consequently, from the vantage view of Calcutta officials, the Nagas became a potential source of danger to its growing power and commercial interest in the region. Furthermore, by the 1860s and 70s, the opening up of a series of plantations and coalmines along the North-

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27 F&PD. 13 April, 1840, Nos. 124 – 133, F.C.
29 F&PD – A. May 1872, Nos. 16 - 34; FPP – Revenue A. July 1872, Nos. 13 - 26
30 Beginning in the 1840s, we know, "raids" by the "hill tribes" on the tea plantations and valley settlements increased. "Raids" continued for almost throughout the nineteenth century, but they were slowly, and almost completely, halted following a series of punitive military expeditions. For instance, see, F&PD. 21 November 1838, Nos. 104 – 108, P. C.; F&PD. 6 February 1839, Nos. 60 – 61, P. C.; F&PD. 1 February 1845, Nos. 146 – 150, p. C.; F&PD. 7 June 1850, Nos. 140 – 143, F. C.
Eastern foothills had inspired British investors to buy shares on these lucrative holdings, putting increased pressure on the colonial government to cement its grip on the hills and ensure order along these resource rich, yet, “unstable” peripheries.31

However, the advancing British interests in the foothills and concomitantly expanding its power into the interior hill tracts would hinge on and worked through a broad spectrum of complex colonial practices, which among others, included the formulation of a policy of simultaneous exclusion and inclusion for the Naga Hills.32 While the exclusionist policy marginalized the hills by “drawing lines between the hills and the plains,”33 the policy of inclusion provided a sustained drive to set up infrastructure of communication, which would enfold the “strange wild tribes” and secure a borderland for the empire.34

The British, aware of their limited command over the territory and people initially set up a vigorous surveillance system. A series of military outposts were erected along the foothills, especially in close proximity to the routes or duars.

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31 Representations were often made to the Assam administration by alarmed British investors on the existing “uncontrolled violence” in the frontier. For instance, following a “raid” in the Baladhan tea garden, Messrs Octavius Steel & Co., nervously wrote to the Assam Chief Commissioner explaining that such “depredations” was “calculated to fill with anxiety and apprehensions the many capitalist whose valuable interests lie … within easy reach of marauding tribes from the hostile Naga territory adjoining. … Unless something can be done to demonstrate the security of their gardens from the like danger, the value of such properties is certain to be seriously depreciated.” Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Foreign Department, February 1881.

32 I draw these exclusion/inclusion concepts from Nicholas Menzies work, which focuses on the treatment of wildlands and their resources by the Late Imperial Chinese government. See Nicholas K. Menzies, ‘Strategic Space: Exclusion and Inclusion in Wildland Policies in Late Imperial China’, Modern Asian Studies (MAS) 26, 4 (1994), pp. 719 – 733.

33 In 1873, the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation also otherwise known as the Inner Line, empowered the Lieutenant Governor “to prescribe a line, to be called ‘the inner line’ in each or any of the districts affected, beyond which no British subject of certain classes of foreign residents can pass without a license.” By way of this Regulation, lines were subsequently drawn between the hills and the plains, even as the colonial government prohibited entry of “outsiders” around them, which in some parts of North East India continue till this day. Nagaland State Archives (hereafter NSA), Inner Line File(s), No. 115, 1875

used by the Nagas when leaving their hills "to trade or raid below." Armed levies, mostly recruited from the Nepalese, Jharuas, Cacharis, Kamptis, Khasis, Kukis, Mikirs, Bhutias and Kacharis, etc., garrisoned the areas around these passes to block this circulation between the hills and the plains. Further, patrol paths between the chains of outposts to ensure troops mobility and surveillance along the frontier. These colonial policing restricted the mobility and regulated the entry of British subjects from the plains into the hills as well as the hill people into the plains "by penal sanctions and a system of passes." Armed policemen, local militias, and legal structures were utilized to ensure that this would remain so.

Trade passes, issued at the police outposts, were now required to permit the hill people access into the plains. For instance, in February 1882, C.A. Elliott, the Chief Commissioner of Assam informs us that "the Angami Nagas who come to trade in Lakhimpur show their passes here [Baladhan police post]." The police manning the outposts were ordered to "report or detain any suspicious cases of Nagas or Kukis coming without passes." A register was further maintained at the outposts "showing the number of persons who have passed towards the plains." To ensure tighter working of this scheme, Elliott suggested that, "the District Superintendent [in the Plains] should communicate to the District Superintendent, Naga Hills to see if the number of passes given by him corresponds with the number of Angamis visiting the plains."

Even as the colonial regime devised and enforced these stringent regulations about who and what could go up and down the hills, the Nagas also frequently ruptured and subverted the state apparatus. Dodging the military

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35 Some of the principal outposts were at Borpathar, Mohan Dijao, Dimapur, Mahurmukh, Hosang Hajoo, Guilon, Gumaigaju, Gunjong, Baladhan, Jhirighat, Jaipur, Hangrung, Maibung and Asaloo, etc. Shakespear, History of the Assam Rifles, p. 9.
36 Ibid.
38 Ibid., p. 516.
39 Ibid.
posts, the Nagas continued to “infiltrate” the plains, to either trade or to directly hit the British plantations and lowland settlements. Attempts to pursue the “raiding gangs” often proved disastrous as the officials would be confronted with a virtual “information lack” on local hill routes.

If the limited knowledge of the local routes were a hindrance while engaging with a resourceful enemy, the efficacy of their colonial policing was also largely undermined as British resources in the frontier were often found to be hopelessly overstretched. Even as provisioning and maintaining the outposts proved “troublesome and expensive business,” the location of these outposts in isolated and unhealthy positions often meant frequent reports of high casualty among the native troops. Thus, the rigors of the climate, the difficulties of communication, and the mounting casualty of Hindustani sepoys created a context for the British to increasingly fallback on the services of irregular auxiliaries.

To supplement the colonial organizational and military informational grids, one key strategy thus involved the creation of a cadre of “Kookie scouts.” In the colonial scheme of things, the settlements of these “scouts” were then

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40 F&PD - A. March 1880.
41 On one such occasion, the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar reports: “the police loaded and followed them up the Asalu road for about two miles, when the Angamis suddenly turned off into a path leading to the left. They then fired in the direction the Angamis had gone and marched back to Asalu.” F&PD – A. August 1877. Nos. 133- 177.
42 In fact, as early as in 1872, Colonel Hopkinson, the Chief Commissioner of Assam helplessly remarked that the police force engaged to watch the frontier “cost five times more than it did eighteen years ago, while disturbance are more frequent than then. F&PD – May 1872, Nos. 16 – 34.
43 In one such instance, Alexander Mackenzie remarks: “the deaths alone in the 5th Madras Infantry ... have numbered two British officers and upwards of 110 rank and file, and in the 28th Madras Infantry one British officer (the colonel) and upwards of 70 rank and file.” Foreign Department Report on Chin – Lushai Hills, September 1892 (Aizawl: Firma KLM 1980; 1892).
44 See Mackenzie, p. 501.
45 Organized into a hundred strong militia, Alexander Mackenzie writing in 1880s describes the “Kukis” as a hardworking and self-reliant race: “the only hillmen in this quarter who can hold their own against the Angamis.” Using bows and arrows, instead of spears, “they were much respected by the Angamis.” The Kukis were thus employed as “a buffer or screen between our more timid subjects and the Angamis.” Mackenzie, pp 514 – 16; also see James Johnstone, My Experiences in Manipur and the Naga Hills (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Company Limited, 1896), pp. 25 - 27.
strategically implanted around the vicinity of the military stations or along the routes frequented by “troublesome” hill communities, such as the Angami Nagas. Considered to be “intimately familiar with the landscape,” these Kuki scouts were subsequently deployed to discover the various “secret passes” through which the Angamis descended into the plains.\footnote{F&PD-A. December 1866. Nos. 137-140.} Knowledge of these routes, Col. H. Hopkinson, Commissioner of Assam argued, “will be of great importance and in which we are at present greatly deficient.”\footnote{It was through such a surveillance mechanism that Colonel Hopkinson claimed to have “discovered” a crucial Angami trading route, passing through the villages of “Sumoogooting, Setekemah, and Tessepemah.” Ibid} While such practices sought to render the local hill routes more “legible” and thus, enhance the policing arm of the state on the grounds; on the other, these colonial settlement strategies also served to initiate a new policy of “ethnic bordering” in the frontier.

Settlements were implanted for other purposes as well. For instance, a permanent Beldar Corp, was settled in the station headquarter, Samaguting. Brought from around Darjeeling, these settled Nepalese were primarily engaged in the clearing of paths, jungles, and constructing roads around the station.\footnote{F&PD - A. June 1882. Nos. 134 - 137} Such colonial practices of planting settlements and the subsequent creation of auxiliaries for low cost border control not only sought to strengthen the coercive presence of the state along the foothills; but they also came to serve as crucial agents in facilitating the imperial “civilizing” agenda of “opening up the hills”.

**Politics of Linkages: From Samaguting into the Angami Hills**

Around the 1870s, the changing territorial demands of the British came to perceive Samaguting, as geographically and politically, at the periphery of the Naga Hills.\footnote{F&PD- Gen. A. September 1872. Nos. 34 - 46} Such perception also occurred in a context where the British
government nervously watched Manipur's territorial "encroachments" over the Angami Hills. What also drew the attention of the British to the Angami hills around this time was the idea of developing an overland trade route "between India and China via Assam, Munipore, and Burmah." In this imperial scheme, "the Angamee Naga Hills ... appear[ed] to be the easiest route from Assam." The enviable position of being directly athwart one of the main land route between Manipur and the Assam plains, twined with the concern over possible Manipuri advance in the area soon spurred the British to frame policies, which would make more explicit their claims over the Angami hills.

Officials soon began to complain that Samaguting was "located far away from any powerful village" and was thus "out of their sight." In terms of military logistics, it was located sixty miles from Golaghat by road and forty-eight miles from Borpathar, the first village on the road. The growing consciousness among the frontier military strategists of the physical limitation of British power in the Naga Hills made the identification of "healthy" areas more urgent than ever.

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50 Referring to the Raja's purported claim over certain Angami villages, Colonel James Johnstone anxiously remarked, "There was a long standing boundary dispute between Manipur and the Naga Hills. Manipur claimed territory which we certainly did not posses and which she had visited from time to time, but did not actually hold in subjection. Over and over again efforts had been made to bring the Durbar to terms but without success." Subsequently, in 1873, British plans to demarcate the Assam-Manipur boundary witnessed an "unexpected amount of opposition on the part of the Munnipoor Government and its advisers who were exceedingly averse to any further prolongation of a boundary line to the east of that part of the Naga Hills." In fact, as the survey report goes, "this opposition became so formidable that operations had to be suspended." Alongside these actions, what also worried British frontier officials like Major John Butler was the suspicious role of the Raja in distributing firearms among his border villages so as to "bribe the sahebs and get them (by which, of course they mean the Government) to leave the country." Such maneuvers were instances through which area potentates like the "princely" state of Manipur occasionally sought to play off the growing British imperium in the region to maintain its independence. See, James Johnstone, My Experiences in Manipur, p. 93; F& PD – A. May 1873, Nos. 63 – 64; also see Annual Administration Report of the Munnipoor Agency for the Year ending 30th June 1873 (Calcutta: Foreign Department Press, 1874)

51 F& PD – A, December 1873, Nos. 373 – 77
52 F& PD – A, July 1874, Nos. 163 – 168
53 F& PD – A, August 1877, Nos. 120 – 132
54 For instance, The Assam Administration Report of 1877 – 78 writes of Samaguting as "notoriously unhealthy and it had long been proposed to move the troops to a higher and less feverish spot." See The Assam Administration Report, 1877 – 1878.
Even as official narratives characterized Samaguting as a “hellish” and insalubrious space, stories began to float about of a unique landscape full of natural marvels about the same time. The officials stated that the Angami country was fertile and healthy, where food was obtained without much labour, and the “tonic air” of the hills held out the promise of a healthier settlement. Over such an exotic landscape, declared Captain Butler, the Political Agent of the Naga Hills, “good roads might be made in almost any direction.”

In choosing a new station, colonial officials were attracted to locales with easier transportation or communication links to the plains. Another colonial imperative was to identify tracts that could support a large concentrated population (officials, civilians, troops, coolies, etc) in the hills. The Angami hills seemed to meet these strategic requirements. In his 1877 report, Colonel James Johnstone, the Political Agent in the Naga Hills, thus argued that the Angami Hills were “the most thickly populated hills in India...and was capable of supplying rice for the whole force.”

Closely linked to this was the British concern with access routes and linkages into and through the hills. Considered as “the most powerful Angami village,” Johnstone argued that Kohima lies at the “apex of the strategic triangle”, i.e., Wokha - Kohima - Samaguting. He further argues that Kohima could simultaneously “control relations with Manipur,” and more importantly, “control the encroachments from Manipur.” Apart from this geographic centrality, a crucial plank of Johnstone’s argument was that by choosing Kohima, Captain Butler claimed to have got rid of his “fever” following a tour, along with his brother, of “the fine healthy country inhabited by the Angamis.” Describing the area as well watered and lightly timbered, Butler said that both the country and the climate reminded them of New England “instilling new life making them feel as strong as ever.”

55 Captain Butler claimed to have got rid of his “fever” following a tour, along with his brother, of “the fine healthy country inhabited by the Angamis.” Describing the area as well watered and lightly timbered, Butler said that both the country and the climate reminded them of New England “instilling new life making them feel as strong as ever.” F& PD-A. September 1873. Nos. 219 - 229
56 F& PD. General. A. September 1872. Nos. 34 - 46
57 In 1874, official records show Kohima as containing 865 houses, Khonoma 545, Viswemah 530 and Jotsoma 434 houses. Further, Butler’s report put the density of the Angami Naga population at 50 per square miles, in contrast to 23 souls per square mile in the Khasi Hills, and 10 in Chittagong Hill tracts and in Tipperah 9 per square mile. F& PD – A. July 1874. Nos. 40-45
they could benefit from the importance positioned along an important Angami trading route, instead of taking the risk and expense of creating a new route:

A new trade route is not opened out in a day; how can we tell that the Angami Nagas will use the new route via Wokha? If they do not ... one great opportunity of constantly meeting our officers will be lost .... The Rengma Nagas who intervene between the Angamis and the Wokha are a powerful tribe and it is hardly likely that the Angamis will care to risk going by a new route.59

Also, a prime reason for the eagerness to enter into political engagement with the Angami Nagas was the fact that the Angamis “were very influential.” The Angamis were known to have levied contributions in several villages.60 Besides, they were considered powerful by virtue of their position in the networks of long distance trade. Some of them, making long journeys for the purpose of barter to Sylhet, Dacca, Calcutta, Bombay and Rangoon.61 British officials were also aware of the strategic importance of developing and holding the land routes passing through the Angami hills and connecting Manipur and Burma. What seemed more tempting was the prospect that it could also enhance British commercial and political influence in the region. In 1879, the British by opening its new station headquarter at Kohima, in Angami country, found an outpost from which they could watch over their imperial interest in Assam and Manipur, while providing a defensive flank against any possible Burmese intrigues from across the frontier.

59 Ibid
61 F&P D - A. September 1882, Nos. 135 - 137
"Opening up the hills"

If connectivity (of ensuring quick and easier access into the frontier) constituted an important element in the colonial policy of rule, British expansion into the Naga Hills was paralleled by their focus on the development of "efficient lines of communication." As early as 1873, Alexander Mackenzie, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, had indicated the indispensable need for developing road links in the hill tracts. To bring the "Nagas and other hill tribes" in the Northeast frontier out from their "isolation," what was required, declared Alexander Mackenzie, was "to open up the country by good bridle paths enabling the authorities to visit them often and at all season of the year."62 Roads, British officials argued, would further induce these wild tribes "from their present habits of plunder and outrage" to settled and peaceful pursuits. It would also lead to "a full development of their potentialities."63 Improved road access in the hills therefore came to be one of the most frequently cited item in the wish list of nineteenth century colonial political officers.

A flurry of activities involving the construction of a network of bridle paths thus ensued in the 1870s, of which the Golaghat - Samaguting road. This route was perceived as "one of the most important road" in the Naga Hills, serving as the "life line" for the British linking the station headquarters Samaguting with Assam. Seventy-three miles in length, this road was "put in cold weather condition by the middle of November 1873."64 In 1874, adding impetus to this evolving communication grid, the key forty-mile hill road from Samaguting to Kohima was "completed and declared open for trade."65 Though promoted primarily on economic grounds, these roads nevertheless also became emblematic of the state's ability to penetrate the peripheral areas, inhabited by

62 F& PD – A, September 1873, Nos. 219 - 229
63 Ibid
64 Ibid.
65 F& PD – A, August 1874. Nos. 273 - 275
recalcitrant subjects. Plans were further set on foot to connect Dimapur to the neighbouring territories of "Cachar, Munipoor and Burmah", with the primary purpose to funnel troops more quickly from one garrison to another. Nevertheless, early colonial road building was never a simple and smooth enterprise. For instance, the "best line for roads" in the Naga Hills was often a subject of endless debate amongst early British frontier officers, with every official becoming an instant "expert", intolerant of others' views.

As new access routes advanced into the hills, their orientations were also much shaped by the contingent imperial needs. A strategic outcome of these road building projects thus involved the structuring of routes to sites of valuable commodities, such as rice to sustain supplies for British troops in the hills. In 1876, officials had "discovered" large amounts of rice trickling into Samaguting from the Katcha Naga country. A bridle road was subsequently pushed towards the area to ease access, which "would lead to larger supplies coming in." At a particular conjuncture, the possible "commencement of a trade in lime" in the Naga Hills also attracted the attention of the Assam Government to cut a new road connecting Nambhur forest with Dimapur and Golaghat. Even as the new route was being laid, about 4 beldars were reportedly imported from Rajputana to work on the lime quarry. By the end of January 1885, these beldars had "quarried 3000 maunds" of lime, which were subsequently used in constructing the bridges on the Golaghat-Nichuguard road. Thus, these newly constructed road linkages gradually added these lands into the expanding web of colonial road networks.

66 Ibid
67 F&PD-A, October 1878, Nos. 7 -51
68 F&PD. General. A, September 1876, Nos. 142 - 145
69 This lime, officials hoped, would form a crucial alternative source against "the lime now imported from Sylhet by the circuitous route via Goalundo." It could as well meet "the wants of Sibsagar, Nowgong, Tezpur, and Gauhati. See Assam Administration Report for 1885 – 86 (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1886)
70 However, despite having reportedly "worked" their services were dispensed in 1886 "pending revision of rate for quarrying." Assam Administration Report for 1885 – 86 (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1886)
As objects of "progress" and transformation, colonial roads also sought to help resolve issues of socio-economic exclusion by giving people access to new circuits of traffic and exchange. In October 1878, there was thus much excitement amongst British officials when the Lotha Nagas, who "formerly never visited the plains" reportedly began to visit Golaghat in large numbers to buy salt through the new Wokha - Samaguting road. Adding to these seemingly emerging possibilities was the perceived increase in trading activity among the Nagas, with the gradual "opening up of the hills" through a network of new roads. From the perspective of 19th century British officials like P. T. Carnegy, the Political Agent of Naga Hills, road building then came to form "the most useful work of a civilizing nature" in the Naga Hills.

Along with the "improvements" in the communication grid, the British officials also developed the idea of a political path to accord with the new "values" of colonial regime. In 1878, Lt. H. Maxwell, the Political Agent in the Naga Hills declared this route – running through Samaguting, Piphema, Nerhema, Wokha and Kohima – as "sacred" and "dedicated to peace." Henceforth, "parties making use of it were to leave all ill-feeling at home." Any interference with the people on "peaceful errands," on the political path, was considered an offence, which "would invite punishment." This notion of a "public order" was to be maintained along the "political highways." Keeping

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71 F&PD-A. October 1878, Nos. 7-51
72 For instance, while the Administration Report of the Naga Hills for 1874-75, recorded a total of 1,919 Nagas as having passed through Samaguting to trade in the plains. The Administration Report for 1878-79, recorded a total of 1,995 persons who left the hills to trade in the plains. Of this, "1706 took down Rs. 7943 to buy salt, 207 took Manipur and Naga cloths, and the remainder took 45 ponies." Their trading forays taking them to Dimapur, Golaghat, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Guwahati and Cachar. See Annual Administration Report for 1874 – 75, Naga Hills (Calcutta: Foreign Department Press, 1875); and Annual Administration Report for 1878 – 79, Naga Hills (Calcutta: Foreign Department Press, 1879).
73 FPP - A. May 1876. Nos. 101 - 103
74 FPP - A. May 1878. Nos. 58-60
76 FPP. A. October 1878. Nos. 7 - 51
with this view, in 1878, the Mozema village was thus ordered, “to pay a fine of Rs. 100/- for fighting in the political path.” In the process, colonial officials sought to symbolically manifest and institutionalize political power by introducing the political paths into the everyday consciousness of the local populace.

Despite the significance of the frontier tracts in the security calculations of the colonial state, road building, however, could take a low priority and be regarded as an unnecessary expenditure at conjunctures in which the military-strategic imperatives dominated the picture. District officers would thus often complain of insufficient funds for road works in the hills. “Little has been done,” wrote Major Butler in 1873, “in opening out paths through the hills when we come to consider that we have been in occupation of them since 1867.”

The low priority for the hill roads were a further cause of anxiety for the military officials, since easing access for troops were always deemed crucial in the success of military campaigns. Considering the “great distance of the country of the offending tribes,” the Quartermaster General, F. S. Robert had thus suggested “the opening up of fairly practicable roads between British territory and their [Angami] villages”Ironically, demands for increased funding for road works in the Naga Hills were countered with proposals “to curb state expenses.” The justification for this was that, “local needs of the Naga Hills do not count for such in the plains.”

Yet, the fact that good communications network was basic to firm political control glared with uncomfortable intensity during the campaign of 1879-1880 to

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77 As the story goes, ‘The Mozema people had attacked a party of Kohima Nagas with whom they were at feud, contrary to the standing order, which prohibited fighting in “political highways.”’ Ibid
78 F&P - A. September 1873, Nos. 219 - 229
79 F&P - A. August 1877, Nos. 137 - 177
80 Ibid
81 Ibid
82 Home and Political Department (hereafter H&PD), June 1883, Nos. 140 - 143
the Naga Hills. The failure of the existing communications network had then put
an empire in jeopardy. The Anglo-Naga war saw one of the biggest military
mobilizations in the erstwhile Northeast Frontier.\(^\text{83}\) However, the existing
communication infrastructure in the hills proved inadequate to handle such a
large contingent of men and resources. Much to the troop’s discomfort, the state
of communication seriously delayed the military campaign.

In 1880, with the Anglo-Naga war still inconclusive and the persistent
heavy toll on the men and resources, the British Government deputed Major G.
S. Hills to report on the conditions prevailing along the lines of communication.
During his inspection, Major Hills not only found the Golaghat - Kohima route
“over grown with jungle” but the whole route “utterly neglected.”\(^\text{84}\) Similarly, he
found the bridges languishing in a deplorable condition, impassable even for
ponies. Transport service was further choked between Dimapur and Kohima,
with the garrison at Kohima “living from hand to mouth.” Another grim detail
along the communication lines was the heavy mortality, both of men and
animals employed in the campaign’s Transport Corp.\(^\text{85}\)

Considering the nature of the situation, Major Hills pushed for drastic
measures on the lines of communication. Henceforth, travel between the Naga
Hills and the plains were abandoned during the rains. The aim was to contain
sickness and mortality in the military Transport Corp. On the other hand, they
either diverted or abandoned the old routes. Thus, the existing Pherima-Piphema
line and the Kohima-Piphema route were abandoned on the grounds that they

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\(^{83}\) Altogether, a force of 1135 of all ranks along with two mountain guns from Calcutta, Col. James
Johnston’s force of 2000 Manipuri troops, 700 boats, 200 carts, 305 elephants (from Dhaka), 227
ponies and 405 coolies were pressed into service Frontier. F& PDO - A. February 1880; also see V. J.

\(^{84}\) F& PDO - A. January 1882, Nos. 119 - 133

\(^{85}\) Ibid. In his 1880 report Col. D. Robinson, Commanding the Naga Transport Corp, thus records:
‘100 ponies dead; out of 105 Khasi coolies 40 invalid or died, remaining sick; of 105 Bhutias only 30
or 40 fit for work; of 125 syces, 100 grass cutters and pony attendants, majority are sick and
increasing daily.’ The heavy toll and cost on the elephant train, from November 1879 to June 1880
reportedly amounted to Rs 4, 03, 091.
were impracticable, both as a military road and for pony transport. Against these measures, new lines were drawn in the hills, with the thrust on improving the strategic communication lines between Kohima - Golaghat. By placing the new routes along villages, officials strategically hoped to solve the problem of victualling troops and coolies on the march. Labours for road construction and carriage, though contested, could be impressed more easily. Tax, a central component in the politics of control, could further be assessed making the subjects “legible” to the authorities.

Between a detail of sappers and an enlistment of Gurkhas, Khasis and Cachari labourers, the Golaghat - Kohima road was slowly opened out, easing access in the hills. Sixteen years later Colonel James Johnstone reminiscences about this road in his book *My Experiences in Manipur and the Naga Hill*: “I began to make this road during the Naga Hills campaign of 1879 -1880, and it has been since regularly used.” While rebellions prompted pacification campaigns to settle the independent “tribes,” roads gradually etched a permanent colonial presence over the Naga Hills. Ironically, some or most of the roads in the hills were built in the course or aftermath of military pacification campaigns. The labours needed for them worked into the terms of the “agreement,” imposed on defeated chiefs.

The immediate product of the 1879-80 Anglo-Naga war was the creation of the district “capital” at Kohima, within which the government constructed a system of administration. Building roads in the Naga Hills district now took on a new objective with an allegedly “civilizing” agenda. Grand schemes of “public works,” were announced with the aim to consolidate and establish tighter

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86 Besides, Hills also planned to open out a new line from Kohima to the Zubza valley avoiding the unnecessary climb at Keruphima saddle. Ibid.
88 James Johnstone, My Experiences, p. 13
control over its newly acquired territory.\textsuperscript{90} Despite its “modernizing” basis, these road-building projects were nevertheless largely organized, with military priorities in mind. Its architects were military men like Colonel Johnstone, who placed emphasis on keeping important communication lines open throughout the year. Of this, in 1883 – 84, the following bridle paths were reportedly constructed and declared opened for traffic in the hills (See Table 1).\textsuperscript{91} Roads, once built, also created a proliferating network of exchanges through which intelligence would filter to the colonial authorities, through the country. They also served as rearward routes for communication, reinforcement, troop’s circulation and supply, and patrol routes. More so, the traveling district officers and troops were frequent reminders of British power in the hill tracts.

Table 1. Table showing the Bridle paths built during the year 1883-84, in the Naga Hills.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Route(s)</th>
<th>Distance (in miles)</th>
<th>Expenditure (in Rs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kohima-Chichema-Mao</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9,794</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kohima-Mao</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>12,718</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kohima-Jotsoma</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kohima-Themokotsoma-Lazami</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1250</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Colonial officials, however, could not have simply framed policies and woven a mesh of roads in the hills from above. They had to engage with the existing

\textsuperscript{90} For instance, a proposed permanent road originated from Kohima to Zumha and culminating at the Diphu Gorge road. Another “well aligned bridle path”, went out from Kohima to the Manipur frontier, which once completed aimed to connect and open up the two regions. Colonial officials also planned to construct “a good and easy path between Kohima and Khonoma,” even as other key projects involved securing “a good means of access from Kohima [to] the Kutch Naga country and the Cachar frontier.” F&PD – A. September 1882. Nos. 135 – 137.

“traditional” structures, whereby they negotiated, operated and often appropriated local knowledge of road making. Thus, despite the early colonial official narratives on the lack of roads in the hill tracts, local roads and bridge-making attracted much admiration and appreciation for their engineering skills, in the later part of 19th century. Observing one such instance, R. G. Woodthorpe, remarked:

Their [Ao Nagas] roads are constructed with due regard to the easiest gradients, and are not carried up and down over every little hillock. The steeper parts are stepped and paved to prevent the rain-washing channels in them, and in the gentler gradients cuts are made across the road at every change of inclination or direction in the most scientific manner to carry off the water down the hillside.’ 92

In this context, road building was then a highly developed skill practiced by the Ao Nagas. Impressed with this road-making technique, Woodthorpe thus goes on to categorize the Ao Nagas as “road engineers,” who “far surpass their neighbours.”93 On the other hand, local knowledge of bridge-making was as well appropriated by the colonial officials in their infrastructural schemes. For instance, G. H. Damant, the DC of Naga Hills explains the process through which the Nagas of Jotsoma constructed a bridge spanning about 80 feet over the Zubza River, along the Kohima route:

This [bridging] was overcome by the embedding long beams for a third of their length in a substantial stone abutment, and supporting them in the

93 Ibid
middle at the point where they meet, by a very strong trestle, which it is hoped will withstand the floods.94

Even as these existing frameworks were being appropriated by the British in their evolving communication grid, there were occasions during which the district officials often condemned the local roads as “circuitous”, “steep” and “little more than animal tracks”, which often winded over spurs and around hills.95

Nevertheless, for the local populace, these winding tracks reflected their age-old skills and experience of their environment, which concomitantly entwined with their strategies of secrecy and evasion.96 Thus, in the context of the Mao Nagas, “rough and steep roads” were preferably constructed so as “to impede the progress of any invading party.”97 The Angamis, on the other, would usually “prefer a steep ascent”, while laying their roads. This method was so given that “an easy path makes his home too accessible.”98 While the materials and techniques of road building differed amongst different communities based on their ecology, the different categories of roads convey to us that there were as many types of roads for mobility in the Naga Hills.

In laying out “new” colonial roads, an existing trail was usually preferred. For instance, a proposed bridle path in the newly occupied Ao Naga country followed traces of a “Naga path,” which commenced from Jekum and finally emerged in the plains of Amguri.99 Works along these Naga paths usually involved leveling out certain sections and filling in holes and ruts, etc. Even so, colonial officials could invest on the extension of a small bridle path with great

94 F&PD-A January 1880, Nos. 498-511
96 Ahuja, ‘Opening up the Hills?’, p. 94.
97 F& PD – Pol. A. December 1874, nos. 91 – 98
99 F& PD. External. A. January 1889, Nos. 76 - 88
"civilizational" significance for a "backward tract." Celebrating the transformation of the "Naga path" between Golaghat and Kohima, Colonel R. C. Low, Deputy Commanding General Transport remarked that, prior to 1881 the road was "nothing but a goat track." He further states that the road was now "an excellent road for pack animals during the cold season with several section of it on a gradient fit for wheels."100 Colonial officials also celebrated the fact that the Nagas easily adapted to their "new" roads. Along the Kohima-Khonoma and the Manipur road, the Administration Report of 1885 recorded with satisfaction that, "the Nagas have completely abandoned their 'old paths' with their steep ascent and descents, and taken to the ... lines laid out by the engineer."101 Even so, Naga paths continued to form crucial arteries of connectivity for the colonial officials as the raj's political influence expanded in the hills.102

Meanwhile, the British officials also devised ways to orient routes and linkages towards the key colonial center in the hills, whose hub was now Kohima. Henceforth, hill residents from the neighboring locales were now required to travel to Kohima to present their complaints and petitions to the DC. This was in contrast to the earlier practice of tendering their cases to the DC during his "annual cold weather tours". In 1887, for instance, during a tour in the Ao Naga country, A. E. Porteous, the DC of Naga Hills fixed the hearing of a case filed by the Nunkum people at Kohima. The rationale being that since "no Ao's had ever hitherto visited Kohima," such a measure, according to Porteous, will help "to familiarize the Nunkum people with Kohima and the road thither."103 Roads, in this way, acted as a catalyst in manifesting and institutionalizing political power in the hills, by way of taking the state to the people and likewise the people to the state. While strategic imperatives took precedence in the execution of road construction, roads once built would have a much wider

100 Ibid.
101 H&PD. June 1883, Nos. 140 - 143
102 Tour Diary of H. C. Bam::s, D. C, Naga Hills 1917, GRC, NS, K.
significance, by serving the state in a variety of compelling ways, in the Naga Hills.

Besides, "improvement" in transport and communication also produced very different results, often contradicting the presumed intention of the colonial rulers. This operated through the practices of appropriation by the natives, who would obstruct, deflect, remold or utilize these interventions according to their own needs and perceptions. For instance, in 1874, R. Brown, the Political Agent in Manipur, reports that, "Many complaints have been made by the Munnipooris from time to time of the damage done to the hill road by travelers squatting on it, digging up the roadway for cooking places, and sometimes almost blocking it up by their temporary huts." Such instances seem to reflect the "informality" of the local people with regard to their treatment of roads, one that was in contrast to the emergent "roads regimentation" under the British.

At a particular conjuncture, the prospect of engaging in commercial activity also attracted itinerant traders, who would establish their role as suppliers of transport animals. In 1887, the Assam Administration Report thus records the presence of "a large number of Nepalese traders," who "have camped on an open plain between Langthobal and Manipur." Apart from selling spices, they further "hire[d] out ponies for the carriage of commissariat stores." Apart from trade, Nepalese also gradually established settlements along the roads, working as herdsmen and cultivators. "Near Pherimapani, at the side of the bridle-path, I find quite a colony of Gurkhalis has settled," reported A. Porteous, DC of Naga Hills in 1890. The gradual expansion of colonial roads

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104 See Ahuja, 2004
105 *Annual Administration report of the Manipur Agency, 1873 – 74*, p. 17
107 *Assam Administration Report, 1887 – 1888*
108 Porteous in another instance, reports of twelve Gurkhal cultivators having settled and built houses along the Kohima – Nichuguard road. Kohima State Archive (hereafter KSA), Tour Diary of A. E. Porteous, DC Naga Hills, 1890, Sl. No. 431.
into the hills was also accompanied by a variety of actors, who came to provide crucial support service in the region. One such group of people was the Marwari trader’s from Merwar and Rajasthan. In 1884 - 85, the Administration Report informs us of “a Kayah merchant [who had] obtained permission to open a shop at Mulangting a Hatigoria village in the hills.”109 In 1890, during his tour, Porteous also found two or three Marwari traders in the neighborhood of Wokha. He was astonished to notice how “there is great competition for the purchase of the cotton which the Lhotas bring down” by the Wokha road and the other hill paths.110 While the Marwaris gradually moved in to establish their control in the market networks, on the other, by facilitating these merchants to establish gollas or stores in the hills, the colonial officials also hoped to secure a reliable supply network for its troops, which would simultaneously be tapped to meet any frontier contingencies.

Despite the grand colonial claims, many of the roads built under the British dispensation were however often no more than little “improvements” over existing local paths. Works along these paths usually involved leveling out certain sections and filling in holes and ruts, etc. Moreover, these improvements on communication infrastructures would often be very ephemeral. Heavy rains could turn supposedly “all weather cart roads” into a morass. This is what the Manipur administration report of 1899-1900 had to say on the constructed Assam - Burma Road:

It is serious matter that it should have been found to keep open during the rains the cart road from Golaghat to Kohima, which was made at a cost of 35 lakhs of rupees. It is unmetalled and traverses heavy soil which when soaked with rain cuts into a morass.111

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109 Assam Administration Report, 1884 - 85.
110 Further in Mokokchung, “A Marwari has opened a shop and the ubiquitous Gurkahi buffalokeeper has started a business.” Tour Dairy of A. E. Porteous, DC Naga Hills, 1890, Sl. No. 431

111 Ibid. earlier, following the Manipur rebellion of 1891, the Assam-Burma Road totaling 365 miles, which ran through Naga Hills and Manipur, emerges as a key concern for British imperial strategy. In recognizing the importance of this route, a sum of Rs. 22 lakhs was thus sanctioned for its
The situation was no different in the early 20th century. And against this, one has to balance the fact that the old circulatory routes were blocked off and access to the Naga Hills were sporadically denied or regulated.

Even so, by the late 19th and early 20th century, a handful of roads skewed across the hills landscape slowly worked their way up into the hills. According to the Imperial Gazetteer of 1905, the total mileage of roads in the Naga Hills in 1903-04, was 73 miles of cart road and 470 miles of bridle paths. By 1909, officials recorded a total of 621 miles of bridle path in the district. Add to this, the officials considered the state of communication as “sufficient for the requirements of its inhabitants,” even as access routes along imperial borders were often left to languish in disrepair. Yet, for this modest road network, the inhabitants of this territory, as I shall show below, often had to pay a heavy price. The “modernizing” or the “civilizing” basis of the colonial state snapped into view as, to use Ralph Fox’s term, “the white man charges very heavily for bearing his burden.”

construction. This route totaling 365 miles formed a crucial link between Assam and Burma. Beginning from Nigriting on the Brahmaputra, to Kalewa in the Chindwin River, this route was divided into four sections. The first section totaled 83 miles, from Nigriting to Nichuguard (plain section); the second section was 40 miles and covered Nichuguard to Kohima (hills section); the third section was from Kohima to Manipur, 92 miles and the fourth section stretched from Manipur to Kalewa, at 150 miles. F&PD. External. A. September 1885, Nos. 36 - 38; F&PD. Secret - E. May 1895, Nos. 139 - 178.

112 F&PD. External. A. December 1900, Nos. 24 - 26
113 Imperial Gazetteer of India, 1905, p. 293.