

**Rubbery Frontiers: A Study of Rubber Appropriation in the Northeastern Tracts of
British India. 1810-1897**

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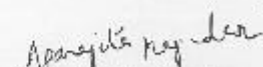
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Declaration

I, Aparajita Majumdar hereby declare that the Dissertation entitled "Rubbery Frontiers: A Study of Rubber Appropriation in the Northeastern Tracts of British India, 1810-1897" submitted by me for the award of degree of Master of Philosophy of Jawaharlal Nehru University is my own work. The Dissertation has not been submitted for any other degree of this university or any other university.



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Introduction

In 1921, British anthropologist John Henry Hutton noted a folktale on the rubber tree, describing the ‘legend of separation’ of the Naga ‘tribes’. The tale, prevalent amongst the Chang, a sub-tribe of the Nagas, went like this:¹

In the beginning a rubber tree (Chong) was felled by the founder of the Chongpo clan. The top branches were taken by the Semas, Yachumis, Sangtams, Aos, Aoshed and Konyak tribes. It is the tops of trees that sing, and these tribes carried off the tops singing, and left only the trunk and roots for the Changs, and these make no sound. Therefore it is that the Chang songs are poor compared to the singing of other tribes.

Botanically termed *Ficus Elastica*, the rubber tree in the northeastern tracts of British India was known by a variety of local names in the 19th century. For instance, the Assamese called it *Borgach*, the Khasi people of present day Meghalaya called it *Ka-gi-ri* and the Nagas referred to it as *Chong*. That the local population accorded a primacy to the tree, even before its official discovery by British colonial authorities in 1810, was evident from the tree existing both as a subject of local legends and as an object of veneration in the region. While the Chang Nagas’ folklore mythically associated the rustling sound of the rubber tree branches with the human ability to sing- a privilege denied to them due to the tree tops being carried away- the remaining roots and the tree trunk became signifiers of wealth in a latter part of the tale. The folklore, for instance, noted the various clans of the Chang Nagas attempting to divide the rest of the rubber tree amongst themselves with the share of the Lumao clan called *mawii* or loot due to the

¹ John Henry Hutton, *The Angami Nagas, With Some Notes on Neighboring Tribes* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1921), 381-382.

significantly [perhaps unjustified] large portion and the share of the Kudamji clan being nothing, leaving this clan perpetually poor.

In the history of rubber appropriation in the northeastern tracts of British India, the folkloric association of roots and trunks of the rubber tree with wealth is apt because it was from these portions of the tree that the latex producing rubber was drawn. In fact the mythic proportions of the rubber tree consummated with the increasing commercial value of its latex, when the Abors, a 'tribe' to the north of the Brahmaputra valley joined the swelling rubber trade of the region while refusing to tap rubber themselves due to the sacred nature of the tree.² The Abors, noted a colonial official, mostly 'got others' to do the tapping for them, thus reconciling the profanity of commercial enterprise with the sacredness of the tree, which prohibited them from touching the tree themselves.³ Others like the Akas, Dafflas, Meeree, Singphos, Khampis and the Nagas- 'tribal' communities dwelling in the hills bordering colonial Assam- had little qualms extracting rubber themselves when selling it to the various rubber dealers.⁴ In fact, many of these communities became known during the colonial times as the prime 'rubber tappers' of the northeastern tracts.⁵

² Bodhisattva Kar, 'Historia Elastica: A Note on the Rubber Hunt in the North-eastern Frontier of British India', *The Indian Historical Review*, 36(2009): 131-150, 147.

³ Alexander Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government With the Hill Tribes* (Calcutta: The Home Department Press, 1884), 317-318

⁴ Aka, Daffla and Meeree, however are names not used by these communities today. The present day name for Aka being Hrussoi, Daffla being Nyishi and Meeree/Miri being Mishing.

⁵ 'Assam and Cachar India Rubber Trade', Foreign Dept, Revenue A, July 1872, No 13-26 [National Archives of India, hereafter NAI]

The geographical context of my study follows the scattered occurrence of the wild rubber trees across the ‘eastern’ and ‘western’ extremity of the erstwhile province of Assam, roughly extending up to Goalpara district in the west and the present day state of Arunachal Pradesh in the east. The geographical lens however intensifies more in the north-south direction of the Assam valley, where the hilly ranges extending up to Tibet in the north and Upper Burma in the south attain a disproportionate significance in my study, due to the concentrated number of rubber trees found in these trans-frontier tracts. By tracing the history of rubber appropriation in these regions, my study conflates ‘resources’ and ‘frontiers’ to understand firstly how the mechanisms of rubber extraction shaped the colonial state’s imagination of political edges. Here I attempt to demonstrate, that the state’s need for territorial acquisition in resource appropriation was not absolute, contrary to what is believed by certain scholars like Nancy Lee Peluso. In her extensive study on the Kalimantan forests, Indonesia, Peluso posed ‘territorialized’ techniques like ‘mapping’ as crucial for acquiring resources by state authorities; techniques which were in turn emulated by customary groups to assert their own claims over resources.⁶ In the northeastern tracts of British India however, ‘territoriality’ was not indispensably attached to statehood at all moments. In fact it appeared as a flexible concept, oscillating between the shifting needs of resource appropriation.

Secondly, my study attempts to correct too the state centric analysis of resource appropriation by bringing out the participation of different non-state and local actors in rubber extraction. Earlier studies on colonial frontiers, as Bengt G Karlsson rightly notes in his anthropological account on Meghalaya, were dominated almost entirely by the narratives of the ‘expansionist colonial power’

⁶ Nancy Lee Peluso, ‘Whose Woods are these? Counter Mapping Forest territories in Kalimantan, Indonesia’, *Antipode*, 27(1995): 383-406,384.

with the state appearing paramount in all processes.⁷ However recent scholarship seen in the works of K. Sivaramakrishnan and Gunnel Cederlof have increasingly portrayed the frontier space as an ‘unpredictable’ zone fraught with compromises and negotiations with local societies, which at times even led to ‘direct failures’ on the part of the state in establishing control over resources.⁸ In my study, the officially recorded cases of stolen rubber and the emergence of the contraband rubber trade in the northeastern frontier towards the second half of the 19th century, points towards the inability of the statist authorities to remain the dominant players in the networks of production and exchange.

Thirdly, my study also attempts to put forward a ‘material perspective’ to frontier histories by elucidating the ways in which the material potency of rubber affected the various historically located practices and processes of the frontier. Here the ‘state’ versus ‘non-state’ narrative breaks down in order to include a larger debate; one concerning the human-material interface at the event of resource appropriation. Do resources as ‘objects of appropriations’ remain completely passive in the various mechanisms of extractions or do their material forms leave an impress upon the

⁷ Bengt G Karlsson, *Unruly Hills: A Political Ecology of India's Northeast* (Berghahn Books, 2011), 17

⁸ K. Sivaramakrishnan, for instance noted ‘failures’ and ‘false moves’ in the transfer of metropolitan science to the colonial province, which in turn shaped the growth of scientific forestry in the eastern tracts of British India, see, K. Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests: Statemaking and Environmental Change in Colonial Eastern India* (California: Stanford University Press, 1999), 214. Gunnel Cederlof, similarly described colonial rule in the eastern and northeastern tracts of British India, as inchoate with a ‘malfunctioning administration’, see, Gunnel Cederlof, ‘Commercial Flows and Bounded Landscapes in Between Empires’, in *Founding an Empire on India's North-Eastern Frontiers, 1790- 1840* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014)

various human endeavors, producing phenomena that remain as unpredictable they were unintentional? Answers to these questions require an engagement with the conceptual boundaries of the existing analytical category of the ‘resource frontier’. So that the ‘state interventionist’ viewpoint dominant in the resource frontier studies, becomes inclusive of the local and the ‘relational’ elements. This in turn will make way for the ‘material’ perspective by showing that the resource too as a material object relates to the various frontier processes.

The Resource Frontier Horizon

In the indexes of the ‘Foreign Department’ of the National Archives of India, New Delhi, the term ‘frontier’ is hard to miss. With hundreds of official reports, correspondence and dictums, slotted under columns headed ‘North Western Frontier’ [NWF] and ‘North Eastern Frontier’ [NEF], I was reminded of Ben Kafka’s call to ‘look at’ the paperwork first, instead of immediately ‘through it’.⁹ As I pondered at the sheer number of records indexed as ‘frontier’ cases, the term’s significance in the bureaucratic organization of colonial documents undertook a self-evidence, which considerably downplayed the need to weigh the political and administrative meanings of the term. For a moment, the ‘frontier’ lay before me - arranged and clear. This however, was the sweet seduction of what Kafka called the ‘demon of writing’, whereby the finely laid and numbered columns, hid an array of diverse geographies with tumultuous political undertones, which when exposed bring one question to the fore – what or where exactly was the frontier?¹⁰

The northeastern frontier, a part of which became North Eastern Frontier Tract [NEFT] administratively in 1914, was a tenuous realm that geographically aligned itself around Assam,

⁹ Ben Kafka, ‘Paperwork: The State of the Discipline’, *Book History*, 12 (2009): 340-353 ,341

¹⁰ Kafka, *The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2012)

while politically its extents remained uncertain and conflictive; an attribute passed on to independent India's Northeast, where areas of Arunachal Pradesh exist as sites of recurrent border feuds with China and areas near Indo-Myanmar border, morph into 'camps' for separatist groups like the United Liberation Front of Assam [ULFA].¹¹ In the colonial archive, the northeastern frontier was a geo-political maze, including correspondence on Bhutan, Nepal, Tibet, China, Burma and regions referred loosely as 'Aka country', 'Daffla country', 'Abor country', named on the basis of the dominant tribes dwelling these areas. While the term 'foreign' was used for all of these regions at one point or another, there existed a difference in the colonial treatment of regions with recognized statehoods like Bhutan and Nepal and regions dominated by 'tribes' which were seen as stateless. For instance, my study shows that the rubber trading mechanisms existing between the British Indian merchants of Cooch Behar [located in the province of Bengal] and the 'Deb Raja' of Bhutan were always formal and followed a 'legal' protocol. This was in stark contrast with the informal and ill-defined rubber trading relationships existing with the Akas, Dufflas and Nagas across the borders of Darrang, Lakhimpur and Sibsaur district of Assam. The informal trading relationships existing with the tacit approval of the colonial authorities inevitably engulfed the trans-frontier tracts around Assam into a form of 'indirect rule', where state sanctioned institutions like 'rubber *mehals*', led a deliberate negation of territorial borders.

The first chapter of my study engages with this negation of borders to underline the limitless pursuits of the resource frontier of rubber. The colonial state, represented by its officials, initially figure in the chapter as enjoying the perks of a resource appropriation, unconstrained by borders. However, the entry of European speculators in the rubber trade and the consequent anxieties of

¹¹ Soe Myint, *Burma File, A Question of Democracy* (New Delhi: India Research Press, 2003), 386

losing control over the resource frontier, broke this calm. The state reworking its position at this point, revealed an aggressive, territorial agenda which put the Akas at its receiving end. As I went through the official correspondence and petitions on the Anglo-Aka conflict, the existing narratives on the disruptive effects of the resource frontier became, more than just an academic exercise to engage with. Aspects of the physical and ideological violence endured by the Akas due to an interventionist state rings true for several communities of India even today. The most well documented case being that of the displacement of the *adivasi* communities due to the building of large dams across the Narmada river in India in the 1980s.¹² Anna Tsing's decision 'to write specifically about distress' experienced by the local 'farmers and foragers' in her phenomenal study of the 'South Kalimantan resource frontier' in 1980s and 1990s, exemplifies both the reality of mindless, resource extraction as well as the need to tell the story of those suffering on its account.¹³

Yet the 'frontier' associated with exploitative extractive regimes, is also a contested domain. Richard Slotkin's work shows how myths associated with frontier spaces have historically disengaged from the 'material conditions' of their birth.¹⁴ He based his analysis on 'Custer's Last Stand', referring to the defeat and death of George Armstrong Custer, Commander of the 7th Cavalry Regiment of the United States Army and his men by the Indian tribes, near present day

¹² See, Anjuman Ali-Bogaert, 'Imagining Alternatives to Development: A Case Study of the Narmada Bachao Andolan in India' (PhD diss., Kent State University, 1997).

¹³ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnology of Global Connection*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), XII

¹⁴ Richard Slotkin, *Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 3-12

Montana in United States in 1876. Slotkin shows how the episode from a tragic instance of ‘fraternal strife’ became a symbol of heroic sacrifice, made by the republic in bringing ‘light, law, liberty, Christianity and commerce to the savage places of the earth.’¹⁵ Over the years the trope of frontier heroism entered ‘popular culture’ and ‘political rhetoric’, subsuming ‘the complex realities’ of America’s past ‘into the heroic patterns of a myth.’¹⁶ The frontier then, for Slotkins was not a spatio-geographical arena; its resourcefulness not a material reality. Instead it was a set of malleable ideas that bent to the ideological needs of the regime and the populace propounding it. There is hence an impossibility about the geographical contextualization of frontiers spaces, precisely because their evocation in the popular realm tended to be so fiercely ideological.

The ‘resource frontier’ in my study however works both as an ideological and a geographical space; couched as much in ideological lines as it was in boundaries and extractive mechanisms. Boundaries and margins in my study, emerge with somewhat contradiction, as their occurrences are often accompanied by descriptions of their transcendences. Border transcendence, hence is a key theme in my study. As state orchestrated, trans-border trading relationships became uncontrollable due to creative tie-ups between rubber speculators and ‘tribal’ communities, the dialogical or what Keith Barney calls the ‘relational’ side of the resource frontier became apparent- where local players were actively involved in the formation of extractive cultures.¹⁷ My second chapter focus on these aspects by studying the transactions occurring between the Namsangia

¹⁵ Ibid, 8

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Keith Barney, ‘Laos and the Making of a 'Relational' Resource Frontier’, *The Geographical Journal*, 175, no 2 (2009): 146-159, 146

Nagas- a sub-tribe of the Nagas- and a speculator of the rubber trade, Edwin Vanqulin, at a time which I bracket as the period of the ‘speculative bubble’ in the rubber history of the frontier.

The speculative bubble appears in my study to describe the heightened interest in the rubber trade of the frontier in the 1870s. The entry of speculators noted for their ‘risk-loving’ and ‘pushing’ transactions in the official correspondences, produced a new enthusiasm for the resource in the frontier. However, this enthusiasm was incapable of translating the interest in the commodity into a social contagion or a ‘bubble’ all by itself. The locals, especially the ‘tribes’ bringing the rubber down from the hills were crucial in it. The role of the ‘tribes’ in the galvanization of a local resource provides a chance for rethinking the notions pertaining to ‘tribality’. Drawing from Bodhisattva Kar’s notion of ‘speculative tribes’, it is my intent to problematize the conventional binary within which ‘tribes’ are viewed.¹⁸ The exposition of the ‘racist’ discourse of savagery imposed on the ‘tribes’ by colonial historiography is a well-travelled academic domain. What has remained fairly unnoticed is the other extreme of this discourse that posits the tribe singularly as ‘victims of misrecognition’.¹⁹ To be viewed as ‘victims’, the tribes had to be inevitably projected as ‘innocent

¹⁸ Bodhisattva Kar, ‘Nomadic Capital and Speculative Tribes: A Culture of Contracts in the Northeastern frontier of British India’, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 53 (2016): 41-67.

¹⁹ Sangeeta Dasgupta, in her work posits the term ‘adivasi’ to counter the essentialist notions of difference that the term ‘tribe’ espouses. She argues that the concept of adivasi ‘implies a range of historically defined, contested and mediated indigeneities, which cannot be apprehended through the reified notion of the “tribe”’, see, Daniel J Rycroft and Sangeeta Dasgupta, *The Politics of Belonging in India: Becoming Adivasi* (USA: Routledge, 2011). Kar argues that we do need to engage with the term ‘tribe’, because it also represents ‘the long, continuing and unsuccessful struggles’ of some people ‘for being officially scheduled as tribes in different parts of India,’ see, Kar, ‘Nomadic Capital and Speculative Tribes’, 42.

not only of alliance but also of political agenda.’ My study of the involvement of the frontier ‘tribes’ in rubber extractions, specifically the Akas and the Namsangia Nagas, attempts a critique of this ‘savage’ verses ‘innocent’ binary. For instance, in the first chapter, I show that the discourse of savagery and civilization imposed on the ‘tribes’ did not remain static; instead the Akas and the local people developed a consciousness around the subject which became evident when they attempted to turn the discourse on its head through the medium of a petition; in the second chapter, I show the Namsangias as a group of people, navigating vigorously within the resource frontier by forging alliances with speculators, thus problematizing the ‘innocent’ tag associated with tribes.

The Material Perspective

In 1832, it was only fitting that, *The Penny Magazine*, of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge published a note on rubber, enlightening the British public on the “usefulness” of this new substance.²⁰ The long nineteenth century encapsulating the ages of revolution, capital and empire of Eric Hobsbawm was after all, also the age of rubber-an age when men of science, capital and empire sought to bring out the revolutionary characteristics of its latex. ‘Elasticity’ and ‘water proof’- two qualities which made rubber world famous- conquered the global commodity market by making it the prime material for a variety of goods like coats, shoes, gloves, footballs, bags, submarine wires and finally rubber tires towards the end of 19th century. Such material usages of rubber have been well noted in a variety of works.²¹

²⁰ ‘India-rubber; or, Caoutchouc’, *The Penny Magazine of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*, ed. Charles Knight (London: Pall Mall East, 1832), 242.

²¹ See, Barbara Stuart, *Analytical Techniques in Materials Conservation* (England: John Wiley & Sons, 2007), 15.

However, the materiality of an object cannot simply be confined to qualities that made it worthwhile for human usage. A closer study of rubber as a 'resource object' right from its occurrence in the wild as a tree to its harvested form, is required for a holistic understanding of both the resource as well the practices undertaken to appropriate it. This forms the central focus of my third and the last chapter, which shows how the material dimensions of the 'resource object' coalesced with the existing state as well as non state practices to give rise to new phenomena. The rubber tree or the *Borgach* figures here as an 'elusive' entity that resisted domestication in the plantation setting, making the resource starkly different from tea which proved highly conducive to artificial propagation. The inability of the *Borgach* to be grown effectively in plantations meant that the rubber trade of the frontier remained solely dependent on the latex drawn from the wild rubber trees, which in turn shaped the nature of extractive mechanisms.

The latex drawn and molded into specific material forms for markets, is another point of entry for exploring materiality. The latex, in the form of 'balls' and 'blocks' were not passive objects in the human networks of exchange. Instead their material forms produced various degrees of portability which in turn corresponded with the ways in which they could be carried or transported in these networks. A higher degree of portability meant a higher probability of the commodity being carried in clandestine networks. It is my attempt to portray that the emergence of the contraband trade in rubber towards the second half of the 19th century was not simply because of faulty policing practices by the colonial authorities. The 'relational' aspects of the resource frontier, seen in the dialogical relationships existing between the different participants of the rubber trade coincided with the material aspects of the resource object, leading to extractive networks that could on no account be controlled or policed by state authorities.

Further the branding of these networks as ‘contraband’ and ‘illicit’ by state authorities, solely on the basis of their uncontrollability asks for a contestation of these categories. As William Van Schendell and Itty Abraham argues ‘movement of people, commodities and ideas’ become illegal at times simply because ‘they defy the norms and rules of formal political authority’. Yet in the eyes of the participants of these transactions they remain ‘quite acceptable’ or ‘licit’.²² And if one of these participants was the object of contraband itself, how do we then look at the question of legal culpability and to what extent can culpability be shared amongst its various participants? These questions require an engagement with the world of objects and things in order to recognize, that objects as much as humans have the ability to bring change; an attribute which Jane Bennett calls, the ‘vitality’ of matter.²³ The ‘vital’ matter, occurs even more clearly in Bruno Latour’s ‘actor network theory’ that focuses on the capacity of non-living matter to participate actively in networks.²⁴ The term he introduces for such matters is ‘actant’ - referring to any entity which ‘acts’ on others.

Rubber, as a ‘resource object’ of the frontier impressing upon the various human endeavors, has numerous themes subsumed within it. For instance: how did rubber relate to the other resource objects of the frontier like timber, opium, tea, oil? Also if the *Borgach* was elusive and recalcitrant by nature, how did scientific forestry deal with these properties? With regards to the first question,

²² William Van Schendell and Itty Abraham, *Illicit Flows and Criminal Things: States, Borders and the Other Side of Globalization* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 4.

²³ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (London: Duke University Press, 2010),

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²⁴ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to the Actor Network Theory*, (Oxford University Press 2005) 63

my study compares rubber with tea, timber and opium in order to bring out the similarities and differences between them and their extractive mechanisms. But I have not as yet entered into the existing debates on scientific forestry. Due to the time constraints of my present work, I have reserved the study of the way in which the 'materiality' of the rubber tree left its impress upon the discourses about 'scientific' forestry for my PhD project.

As concluding words, I would like to say that the zeal to appropriate rubber in nineteenth century turned the northeastern frontier into a conundrum of diverse social, political and 'material' events. The conceptual moorings of resource extraction that resulted out of these events made the frontier dense and difficult to understand at times. Yet it is at these moments, when events became peculiar or did not naturally cohere with each other, that we see the unexpected side of the resource frontier. When regimes, people and resource objects did not remain static. But entailed encounters that waxed and waned against each other, bringing a sense of adaptability to the frontier which in turn gifted it with a quality that may be strangely called 'rubbery' both literally and otherwise.

The ‘Discovery’ and Appropriation of a Rubber Resource Frontier in Upper Assam. 1810-1884.

Introduction

The last nineteenth century Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon delivered a speech in 1907 at the University of Oxford proclaiming that Britain’s Indian Empire had ‘the greatest extent of territorial frontier of any dominion on the globe.’²⁵ He pointed towards the vast stretches of British Indian ‘frontiers’ bordering the ‘Italian empire [East Africa], the French empire [in East Africa and Indo-China], the Ottoman empire [in Arabia and Iraq], Persia, the Russian Empire [in Central Asia], Tibet, the Chinese Empire, and Siam (now Thailand).’²⁶ Such rhetorical impulse heralding the greatness of ‘empires frontiers’ notwithstanding, let me begin with the simple statement that there are no self- apparent ‘frontier spaces’.

As noted by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, ‘Frontiers are not discovered at the edge; they are projects in making geographical and temporal experiences. Their wilderness is made of visions and vines and violence; it is both material and imaginative’.²⁷ Indeed, the central analysis of this chapter involves the exploration of this ‘wilderness’ in the northeastern frontier tracts of British India, arising out of the state’s zeal to acquire resources in areas where it possessed little political control, the discursive trail of policy institutions and legal apparatus initiated by the state at various points of time to materialize resource acquisition and the ideological and representational

²⁵ James Onley, preface to *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj: Merchants, Rulers, and the British in the Nineteenth Century Gulf* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, ‘Natural Resources and Capitalist Frontiers’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38, no 48 (2003): 5100-5106, 5100

elements that got inscribed onto spaces where such exercises took place. The spaces hence produced, became much more than mere contexts to social and political actions. They became, as Martina Low argues in her work on the constitution of space, spatial entities that ‘provoke social events.’²⁸

The chapter centres on the politics which emerged around the drives of the colonial regime in early nineteenth century India to appropriate rubber resources discovered in the districts of upper Assam, primarily Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang and the areas stretching across its borders. The forests of Assam have been noted during the colonial times for a variety of natural resources like tea, timber and rubber. While there has been extensive research done on resources like tea and timber, rubber however, has received little interest. Except perhaps, in the works of Bodhisattva Kar, whose article, ‘Historia Elastica: A Note on the Rubber Hunt in the North Eastern Frontier of British India’, provides an exciting glance into how the discovery of rubber entailed what he calls ‘a peculiar legal regime and culture of extraction’ for the region.²⁹

The peculiarity of these extractive mechanisms may have arisen also because rubber as a resource possessed qualities that made it very different from, say, tea. Tea was very conducive for systematic plantations as it was grown in the form of bushes that attained maturity to give tea leaves within a period of six months. The extractive and the legal regime that evolved for the tea plantations hence were based on a strict subjection of both the resource and the immigrant tea

²⁸ Martina Low, ‘The Constitution of Space: The Structuration of Space through the Simultaneity of Effect and Perception,’ *European Journal of Social Theory*, 11, no 1 (2008): 25-49, 26

²⁹ Bodhisattva Kar, ‘Historia Elastica: A Note on the Rubber Hunt in the North-eastern Frontier of British India’, *The Indian Historical Review*, 36,(2009): 131-150, 131.

labourers living within the walled limits of these plantations. The case of rubber, however was different. Systematic plantations for rubber, although started towards the second half of the 19th century in Assam, were not very profitable as an average rubber plant required a minimum of 18 years to provide latex of a good quality and even then there was no surety that the yield would be of a good quality.

Most of the rubber trade was hence dependent on the latex collected from the naturally growing rubber trees which were found scattered both within and beyond the assumed political frontier of the colonial state. Moreover, as rubber trees were located in the most inaccessible parts of the forest, the collection of latex remained mainly in the hands of the local population- tribal groups like the Akas, Dafflas, Miris [also spelled as Meerees], Khamptis, Nagas dwelling in the hills bordering Assam- who sold it to the agents of the various rubber firm operatives of the region. And the fact that the latex was collected in small jars or molded in half coagulated forms right after being drawn from the trees, meant that rubber perhaps possessed a portability that made it a strangely mobile resource; something that could easily walk across borders in the pockets or sacks of the tappers, providing an added fluidity to the already ambiguous territorial boundaries [see third chapter]. This meant that the process of rubber extraction could not be one based on a strict subjection of resource and labour to limits and boundaries. In fact territorial borders had to be kept deliberately ambiguous so that the state could expand its revenue claims over a larger area of collection.

The chapter uses the geographical metaphor of the 'resource frontier' to look into the ways by which the colonial state attempted to gain control over a natural resource whose locations surpassed the extents of the state's political boundaries. The story however, is not only of the

colonial state and its resource but is one that involves a variety of other people in processes that may not be understood only through extractive dynamics.

The notion of a 'resource frontier' has been extensively used by scholars such as Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, in her work on the making of the resource frontier in the 1990s, in the eastern part of South Kalimantan, Indonesia and Keith Barney in his work on commodification of nature and the coming up of 'enclosures' in the peripheral South-East Asian country of Laos. Tsing argues that resource frontiers were created 'where entrepreneurs and armies were able to disengage nature from its previous ecologies.'³⁰ While from a distance, the resource frontiers appeared as 'the discovery of global supplies in forests, tundras, coastal seas', a closer study reveals the ongoing displacement of existing systems of human access and ecological dynamics.³¹ In Tsing's approach the displacement of indigenous rights of access to natural resources is a key theme. In Barney's work, however, rural people and local ecologies are not merely acted upon at the event of resource appropriation, but are themselves 'key actors in a complex relational reproduction of frontier zones'.³² The relational nature of the resource frontier category reminds us of scholars like Doreen Massey who have defined space itself as 'a product of relations.'³³

³⁰Tsing, 'Natural Resources and Capitalist Frontiers', 5100.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Barney, 'Laos and the Making of a 'Relational' Resource Frontier', 146

³³ Doreen Massey, 'Concepts of Space and Power in Theory and in Political Practice', *Doc Anal Geogr*, 55 (2009): 15-26, 16

The position I have taken in this chapter and the others is that the resource frontier has to be evaluated as a space where the disruptive and the dialogical are produced simultaneously in a multiplicity of extractive as well as non- extractive activities. I begin with an attempt to understand the nature of institutional mechanisms, legal policies and the debates unfolding in the process of appropriating rubber in the frontier. I conclude with an in depth analysis of a particular moment of encounter between the colonial authorities and the Akas, a community who figure often in the official records as among the prime rubber tappers of the region.

Rubber *Mehals* and a Frontier of ‘Limitless’ Pursuits

In its October 1880 edition, the *Popular Science Monthly* noted that ‘India rubber or Caoutchouc possesses properties so widely different from those of most other substances that it became an object of very great interest as soon as it made its appearance in the civilized world’.³⁴ In the North-eastern frontier of British India, the substance was discovered as early as 1810 by Dr. William Roxburgh of the Calcutta Botanical Gardens who was ‘intrigued by the strange water proofing coat’ of the material.³⁵ Henceforth started a series of official enquiries that sought to identify, locate and map the whereabouts of the indigenous rubber tree of Assam, known botanically as *Ficus Elastica*. One of the first reports on the indigenous rubber tree of Assam was

³⁴ Thomas Bolas, ‘The India Rubber Industries’, *Popular Science Monthly*, October, 1880, 802; The term ‘Caoutchouc’ for rubber came from the indigenous populations of South America, who referred to their local rubber tree [*Hevea Brasiliensis*] as *Ca-o-chu*, ‘the crying tree.’

³⁵ ‘Report on the Caoutchouc Tree of Assam made at the request of Captain Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General by William Griffith, Assistant Surgeon on Deputation with the Bhutan Mission’, Foreign Dept, Political, 24 January 1838, Nos 46[NAI]

prepared by William Griffith in 1838, at the request of Captain Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General.³⁶ The report noted that the ‘forests in which the tree yielding the Caoutchouc is found extends from the western to the eastern extremity of the [Assam] valley, at least on its northern boundaries.’³⁷ However, as Griffith indicated, there were chances of rubber trees existing beyond the valley into the hills bordering Assam, where many tribes like the Akas, Miris, Dafflas and Abors dwelt and where the colonial state did not possess any political control. About 10 years after Griffith submitted his report, a survey was conducted in 1848 by which the forests with concentrated number of rubber trees were leased out and made into rubber *mehals* by the colonial state.

This policy of leasing out forest lands has to be seen within the larger trend of land grants that was started by the colonial government after the whole of Assam came under its control in 1838. Amongst the very first land policies started in the region was the Waste Land Settlement Rules of 1838 by which the colonial government, in order to encourage tea plantations, leased out uncultivated tracts of forest lands to European planters at almost revenue free rates.³⁸ The wasteland status of these lands came from the assumption that only lands under sedentary cultivation were ‘useful’. The process of converting land into resource was not only therefore about the mathematical weighing of the profits and losses. It was in fact, about operating within a universe of ideological characterizations through which resource appropriation seemed rational and meaningful. ‘Wastelands’ thus operated as a means of exhibiting ‘the foundational binary

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Griffith, ‘Report on the Caoutchouc Tree of Assam’

³⁸ Suparna Roy, *Land System and Management in the Colonial Period: A Study of Barak Valley* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2007)

between the state of nature and the state of culture and also simultaneously between the savage and the civilized.³⁹ The zeal to bring ‘the wild’ under cultivation, however cannot be seen restrained only to the colonial period. Chetan Singh in his study of Punjab in the seventeenth century has elaborated on how the raiding, pastoral nomadic communities like the Jats were brought into settled cultivation by the Mughal state’s attempts of transforming hinterlands into revenue generating, cultivated villages.⁴⁰

The leasing out of rubber *mehals* followed however a different logic in that there was no condition of clearance or cultivation attached to the lease. The Government of Bengal [under which Assam and the territories around it came] auctioned the sole right to buy rubber from local rubber collectors in a designated revenue area or *mehal* in the districts of Assam.⁴¹ The number of years for which the lease was given shrunk over the years. In 1848, the Charduar forests of Darrang was halved and leased out to two European companies- Messrs Martin & Co. and Messrs Ritchie & Co for a period of fifteen years. The long duration of such leases of the initial years gave way to six to seven years, until finally in 1869 the system of annual leases came about. In this year, the ‘India rubber’ forests also came formally under the direct control of the newly formed Forest Department.⁴² The Forest Department was organized as a state department under the radar of the Indian exchequer in 1864. The beginnings of this department was noted as

³⁹ Gorky Chakraborty, ‘Roots and Ramifications of a Colonial Construct: The Wastelands in Assam’, *Occasional Paper*, no 39 (2012) : 4.

⁴⁰ Chetan Singh, *Region and Empire: Panjab in the Seventeenth Century* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991)

⁴¹ ‘Assam and Cachar India Rubber Trade’, Foreign Dept, Revenue A, July 1872, No 13-26 [NAI]

⁴² B. Seeman, ‘Production of India-Rubber’, *Journal of the Society of Arts*, 18 (1869): 91

the ‘beginnings of environmental forestry’ in British India, when concerns about depletion of natural resources entered official debates. Dietrich Brandis, who was appointed the first inspector general for forests in 1864, for instance, remarked on the destruction of the rubber trees under the ‘old system’ of long and uncontrolled leases.⁴³ The move towards annual leases thus was seen as a step to offer some degree of protection to the rubber trees, by means of yearly government monitoring of the forests. Yet exploitation and conservation remain two sides of the same coin, one happening in the name of the other. The system of annual leases, which involved a *mehaldar* drawing as much rubber as he could within the short duration of one year, probably intensified the process of rubber extraction with little relief for the trees. For instance, Brandis in 1879, ten years after the introduction of the annual leases, himself noted the ruthless destruction of the rubber trees during an official tour of the forests in Assam. He described how the stems, roots and branches of the rubber trees were ‘covered with numerous scars...and in many cases trees were dead or dying due to over-tapping.’⁴⁴ Clearly, the annual leases had not fared well ecologically. Brandis, however continued to support them. And in a statement that revealed the paradoxical anti-forest stand of the Forest Department, Brandis posited the ‘extermination of the rubber trees’ as an unavoidable reality in the face of indiscriminate tapping. Hence in his words ‘the amount realized by the sale of these leases’ was the more important matter and this amount was ‘likely to increase considerably if the *mehals* [were] sold for one year only.’⁴⁵

⁴³ ‘Report by D. Brandis containing suggestions regarding Forest administration in Assam’, Home, Revenue and Agricultural Dept, Forest, October 1879, Nos 41-43,[NAI]

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Ibid

While the duration of the leases was clearly specified from time to time, ‘the boundaries within which the lessee may conduct his operations’ were from the beginning ‘indefinitely specified’.⁴⁶ For instance, the boundaries of the rubber lease in Lakhimpur district were set out as: ‘East-mountains; North-mountains; South-boundary of the Seebaugor District; West-boundary of the Durrang District.’ The ambiguously laid boundaries of the rubber *mehals* show that there can be an institutionality to the indefiniteness of political boundaries, meant to serve various purposes. In this case, the purpose was to allow an unproblematic access to resources that were located beyond the political borders.⁴⁷ The fact that the farm let out in each district was held to include not only the right to buy the rubber produced in the district, but also the right of purchasing all that comes in from outside, was like an open secret at that point of time. In fact, very little of the rubber collected actually came from within the settled revenue limits of the colonial state. While some came from the tracts inhabited by tribes in a state of semi subjection; more still came from tracts over which no administrative reach was being claimed at all. In Darrang, for instance, the agents of the *Mehaldars* made arrangements with tribal groups like Bhutias, Akas and Dafflas who were seen as the owners of ‘the trans-frontier rubber bearing tracts.’⁴⁸ The *Mehaldars* of Darrang paid a sum of money referred to as ‘rent’ or ‘salami’ to the hill chiefs of these communities for permission to send their rubber tappers into these areas.⁴⁹ In addition to the

⁴⁶ H. L Dampier, Secretary to the Government of Bengal [hereafter B G], Revenue Dept to the Secretary to the Government of India [hereafter GOI] in the Dept of Agriculture, Revenue and Commerce, Foreign Dept, Revenue A, July 1872, No 13-26 [NAI]

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Kar, *Historia Elastica*, 139

salami amount, there was also a 'royalty' charged by the chiefs on the number of rubber tappers actually sent in. In Lakhimpur, the extractive arrangements existing with the tribes beyond the political boundaries were less explicit in that the hill men themselves 'brought down the rubber and disposed of it to the merchants'.⁵⁰ This made the distinction between 'foreign' and 'home' growing rubber [i.e. within British territory] very difficult.

The rates at which the *mehals* were leased out informally took into account the additional right to purchase foreign rubber that the *mehals* meant and were hence set quite high. An official memorandum on the conservancy and working of the rubber forests, for instance, remarked on the 'considerable' revenue generating capacities of the rubber *mehals*. It noted, in 1870-71, the Lakhimpur lease alone was sold for Rs 17,000 and for the year 1872-73, the price of the lease was further increased to Rs 20,000.⁵¹ The revenues garnered from the leasing of these *mehals* and the almost negligible state expenditure that such a system required, meant that the emerging resource frontier of rubber was one that thrived on the indefinite sense of territoriality maintained by the colonial state. As the *mehals* became limitless in their pursuit of the resource, what entailed was a deliberate negation of political borders in the transactions of the frontier.

The 'limitless' *mehal* reminds me of John F Richard's 'unending frontier', where resource appropriation in the form of intensified land usage, forests clearance and commercial hunting happened unendingly from roughly sixteenth to nineteenth century leading to an unprecedented

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ 'Memorandum on the Conservancy and Working of the Caoutchouc Forests in Assam', Foreign Dept, Revenue A, June 1871, No 19. [NAI]

rise in human reach and population.⁵² The phrase ‘unending frontier’ conveys a double meaning: one it refers to the long temporal span of intensified resource appropriation, two, it points towards frontiers as margins which kept extending endlessly into regions with resources. The phrase -limitless *mehals*- similarly emerges as a frontier trope in my study, where it speaks not just of the limitless boundaries of the *mehals* but also figuratively of the limitless pursuits of the resource frontier.

A Crisis in Rubber Leases: The Threat of the Speculator.

The year 1872 in the north-eastern tracts of British India brought in a series of debates in the official circles over what was seen as the emerging legal and political complications of the rubber trade. The official correspondences shared amongst H. L Dampier, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department; Col. H. Hopkinson, Commissioner of Assam and Major W.S Clarke, Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur recurrently spoke about the breaking down of the ‘existing system’ under which the rubber trade was carried out.⁵³ In a petition addressed to the Viceroy, those who had paid for the rubber *mehal* in Lakhimpur, for the year 1871-72, complained that speculators were buying directly from frontier tribes thereby violating their claim to a monopoly of purchase within the limits of the *mehal*.⁵⁴

⁵² J.F Richards, *The Unending Frontier: An Environmental History of the Early Modern World*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003)

⁵³ ‘Assam and Cachar India Rubber Trade’.

⁵⁴Ibid

The *mehaldars*, referred to as ‘natives’ in official correspondence, were mostly Marwari merchants who had migrated to Assam.⁵⁵ They had become active when the rubber *mehals* were leased out for the long duration of six to seven years. Then they paid an amount close to £1000 [approx. Rs. 87000] for these long leases, which if estimated annually came between Rs 12000-Rs 14500, depending whether the lease was for six or seven years.⁵⁶ However, as discussed earlier, annual leases implied a hike in the auction prices and those petitioning were now clearly paying much more than they use to. The annual price for the Lakhimpur lease already noted as falling anywhere between Rs.17000-20000 at his time. The *mehaldars* of Lakhimpur, hence strongly protested against the infringement of their rather costly monopolistic right due to the activities of the speculator and sought immediate protection from the colonial authorities.

The speculators seen often as the men of ruthless capital, were of European origin and they certainly did not quietly carry out their operations.⁵⁷ They embroiled themselves into a legal battle with the *mehaldars* which had ramifications for the system of ‘non-territorial resource appropriation’. The speculators questioned the indefinite boundaries of the *mehals* that gave the *mehaldars* a limitless access to the latex collected even beyond the political boundaries of the colonial state.⁵⁸ This inevitably posed the question squarely on the Government of India, that is, with what legal authority was the state granting monopolistic rights to collect rubber from lands over which it had no territorial control or jurisdiction and hence, no legal rights.

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Seeman, Production of India-Rubber, 91

⁵⁷ ‘Assam and Cachar India Rubber Trade’,

The ‘independent European speculator’, noted Dampier, ‘came in with his parade of law’ and insisted that ‘we cannot let out what is not properly ours’.⁵⁹ The entry of the European speculator, described by colonial officials as ‘aggressive’ and ‘pushing’ apparently shifted the balance of the rubber trade against the colonial state.⁶⁰ Foreign rubber, being imported free into the *mehals* was beginning to be largely brought up by the speculators who disputed the monopolistic rights of the *mehaldars*. The indefinite nature of the *mehal* boundaries made protection of these *mehals* even more difficult. The continuance of the present system, pointed Dampier, would lead to a variety of economic and political complications.⁶¹

Economically, he estimated a loss of revenue, as the *mehaldars* will not continue to buy the *mehal* leases at present rates if the informal right of purchasing foreign rubber was not secured to them. And the speculators, who being able to purchase rubber without having to pay for a lease were able sell it to the export houses in Calcutta at a much cheaper rate.⁶² The export houses referred to the British merchant families who were running the system of agency houses in Calcutta. The agency houses united the ‘intimate local knowledge’ about resourceful commodities in colonies with the ‘home ports’ of Britain, like London, Glasgow and Liverpool.⁶³ Originally these houses dealt in the exporting from Britain cotton piece goods and importing of

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Ibid

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ Stanley Chapman, ‘British Free Standing Companies and Investment Groups in India and the Far East’, in *The Free Standing Company in the World Economy, 1830-1996*, ed. Mira Wilkins and Harm G. Schroter (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 204.

silk. However, in the second half of the nineteenth century their trades diversified and they got lured into new industries, like that of tea, coal, gold, iron, hardwoods, petroleum and rubber.

There is a high probability that the European speculators of the rubber trade of the frontier shared a close tie with these houses.

Politically, Commissioner Hopkinson noted the ‘high handed dealings’ of the ‘clever’ speculator with the ‘ignorant savages’ of the frontier, could lead to clashes if the tribes felt cheated.⁶⁴

However none of the reports came up with an actual recorded case of friction between the tribes and the speculators. In fact the entry of the speculator, by breaking the monopolistic hold of the *mehaldars* probably provided the tribal tappers for the first time with a competitive market, resulting perhaps in better prices for their rubber. Indeed the high prices procured by the tribes by selling to the speculator became one of the prime features of the rise of speculation activity in the region [discussed in Chapter 2].

What seems to have generated a sense of crisis amongst these colonial officials was the feeling that a resource had been discovered which might turn out to be the equivalent of the contemporary gold rushes in Australia. The discovery of goldfields in Queensland in the 1860s and 1870s had led to the immediate migration of thousands of ‘fortune seekers’ to these lands. The rising interests in the rubber trade was seen as following a similar trend, with the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur, Clarke, comparing the northeastern frontier tracts to a ‘gold mine’

⁶⁴ H. Hopkinson, Commissioner of Assam and Agent to the Governor General, North-East Frontier and The Secretary to the BG, Revenue Dept, Foreign Dept, Revenue A, July 1872, No 13-26 [NAI]

generating ‘enormous’ profits for those involved in the trade.⁶⁵ It were these profits that the colonial authorities wanted a share of – something that was possible only if the state was able to maintain control over the rubber resource.

Lines, Boundaries and Regulations: Towards a New Legal Authority

The course of action proposed by Dampier, Hopkinson and Clarke was to ‘enforce an effectual government control’ over the rubber resource by bringing the ‘India rubber trade of the north eastern frontier under the direct management of Government.’⁶⁶ All the rubber, foreign and home grown was to be brought down by the tribes to government depots established in different districts. The tribes would then get receipts from the government officer in charge. The ‘collection in each district’ was in turn to be sent to a ‘central depot at Gowhatty’, which would be charge of the district forest officer there. From here rubber was to be sold to the various competitors.⁶⁷ I see two trends becoming apparent here- first was the sudden zeal to territorialize the resource by registering rubber explicitly within British territory; second was the stamping of a sense of government authority over the functioning of the entire rubber trade by making government officials the prime mediator between the rubber tapping tribes and the various purchasers.

Not everyone within the colonial circles however, agreed with this system. There was J.W Edgar, Deputy Commissioner of Cachar, who believed that ‘the practical difficulties of direct

⁶⁵ Major Clarke, Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur to the Personal Assistant to the Commissioner of Assam, Foreign Dept, Revenue A, July 1872, No 13-26 [NAI]

⁶⁶ ‘Assam and Cachar India Rubber Trade’.

⁶⁷ Ibid

management would be insuperable.’⁶⁸ The establishment of government monopoly implied that the police would have to be given the power of search and detention to detect the transport of rubber which had not been sanctioned by passes. Enforcement of monopoly, hence required the setting up of an expensive establishment. Commissioner Hopkinson was also initially against such a system as he believed that, ‘government would be out of pocket if it attempted to collect by a direct agency.’ However, the hope of a large amount of revenue to be derived through direct agency soon silenced such qualms.

For instance, H. Leeds, Conservator of Forests, Bengal noted, rubber from all sources- foreign and home grown- ‘may be estimated as 5000 to 6000 maunds yearly’, which at Rs. 40 per maund in Calcutta, represented a ‘substantial’ sum of Rs 2,00,000 to be derived annually.⁶⁹ Against this, the annual cost of establishment of government depots was calculated like this: one ‘forester’ paid Rs. 75, five ‘watchers’ [police constable] paid Rs 7 each, one hundred ‘coolies’ at 4 annas for one hundred days during the active rubber collecting months of December, January, February and March paid Rs 2500, building of ‘Collectors’ hut at Rs 900 and finally ‘collecting 5000 maunds’ of rubber at an average of Rs 25 per maund from the tribes. The total cost, Leeds estimated came to Rs 1, 35,000 which left ‘a considerable margin of net profit to be derived from this forest produce.’

⁶⁸ Ibid

⁶⁹ H. Leeds, Conservator of Forests, Bengal and The Officiating Secretary to the BG, Revenue Dept, dated Shillong, Foreign Dept, Revenue A, July 1872, No 13-26 [NAI]

As discussions on government monopoly over rubber intensified, there emerged once again the legal question posed by the speculators: how can the government monopolistically control resources not occurring within British territory? Both Dampier and Hopkinson largely agreed that ‘government control cannot be enforced without legal authority against people who are always ready to appeal to the courts.’ The para-legal stature of the rubber *mehals* was put forward by the speculators because its operations negated political boundaries. To counter this, what was needed was a reinstatement of the political boundaries in a manner that the government depots became the sole access point for anyone wishing to engage in this trans-frontier trade.

The official correspondence between the frontier officials recurrently talked about the extension of ‘Act 33 Vic, Chap 3’ to Assam. There was a sincere belief that the ‘rubber difficulty will only be met by regulations passed in accordance with that Act.’⁷⁰ In 1872, the extension of the Act 33 was awaiting the definition of precise boundaries for the Assam province, in the form of a line beyond which British jurisdiction is not to extend. This was the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873, more commonly known as the Inner line regulations.

According to this regulation an ‘inner line’ traced its way from Lower Assam to the regions holding concentrated number of rubber trees in Upper Assam like Darrang and Lakhimpore district.⁷¹ This line demarcated the jurisdictional limits of the colonial state in these districts. The

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873, Annexure-III. Assessed February 10, 2015

http://www.mdoner.gov.in/sites/default/files/silo4_content/entry%20restrictions%20in%20NER/Bengal%20Eastern%20Frontier%20Regulation,%201873.pdf

regulation made it mandatory for any person wishing to cross over the line to possess a pass signed by the ‘chief executive authority’ of the district. Anyone convicted by a magistrate of being found in the area without a pass could be imprisoned for one year or fined a sum of one thousand rupees or both. The regulation further noted that, ‘any rubber, wax, ivory or jungle product found in the possession of any person convicted of any offence under this Regulation may be confiscated to government by an order to be passed at the time of conviction by the magistrate.’⁷² The Regulation thus attempted to not only draw new borders but also seal them to do away with the earlier informal and fluid transactions of the rubber trade. However, later reports on the contraband rubber trade suggest that this may not have been very effective. For instance, Brandis in 1879, prepared a report on the flow of contraband rubber across the ‘inner line’, indicating that the multiplicity of networks and exchanges that thrived before 1873 continued in the later period [discussed in chapter 3].⁷³

While the Inner line may not have been very effective in giving government a tighter control over the rubber trade it had consequences for the region and its people. The line tracing its way from Lower to Upper Assam did not only demarcate the jurisdictional limit of the colonial state but it also divided the province of Assam in an ideological geography consisting of the hill- plain dichotomy. While on one side of the line lay the civilized plains of Assam, over which British rule prevailed, on the other side- lay the hills belonging to the ‘savage’ and the ‘predatory’ tribes over which British jurisdiction did not prevail. By casting the hills as a ‘savage space’, the

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ Brandis, ‘Suggestions Regarding Forest Administration in Assam’, Home, Revenue and Agricultural Dept, Forest, October 1879, Nos 41-43,[NAI]

Bengal government was able to expand its jurisdictional claims over rubber rich tracts in the area ambiguously described as the ‘foothills’.⁷⁴ Many of the ‘trans-frontier rubber bearing tracts’ which earlier came under the control of the hill tribes were now absorbed within the line by locating these areas within the category of ‘foothills’. The earlier mode of trans-frontier, non territorial, resource appropriation thus changed to one where resource appropriation was based on the explicit territorial claims of the state.

The Making of the Balipara Frontier Tract: The Conflicted Politics of a Resource Frontier

In the course of the application of inner line regulation, many regions which were earlier unmapped and un-surveyed were attempted to be molded as territories under the jurisdiction of the state. What made this endeavor problematic, however was the fact that there hardly existed any unified notion about such territories. Many a times such endeavors led to confrontations between local and colonial notions about space and authority. It is my argument that the tribes coming down from the hills, with items like rubber, lac and honey to sell in the districts of Assam, travelled with a sense of economic freedom that was considerably opposed to the growth of restrictive border lands.

Having said this, I do not mean that the tribes were not territorial. They were very much possessive about their ‘chang’s’ [villages] in the hills and the resources in their vicinity. However, territoriality as a concept perhaps made sense to them only if their regions, their resources and their people stayed in negotiations with those that fell outside it. The rubber trade in the frontier- which sometimes involved the payment of ‘salami’ to chiefs to enter their territories for rubber collection and sometimes the coming of the hill men themselves into districts for selling rubber-

⁷⁴ ‘Memorandum on the Conservancy and working of the Caoutchouc forests in Assam.’

was an example of how territories operated among the local populace through trading relationships and not borders. No institution other than rubber *mehals* could testify more to this. However, after 1873 lines/borders came up and the local notions about space and trading relationships collided with the exclusive territorial instincts of the state.

This section looks into the existing relations between the colonial authorities and one of the 'northern hill tribes' of Assam -the Akas at a moment when the colonial state was trying to overcome the discrepancy between its 'political' and 'resource' frontiers. Geographically the section focuses on the 'Balipara Frontier Tract' which was carved out of the District of Darrang as a separate administrative unit in 1914.⁷⁵ The event was part of the larger administrative decision of separating the 'hilly areas' from Darrang and Lakhimpur- the part carved out of Lakhimpur became 'Sadiya frontier Tract'.⁷⁶ My study, however goes a couple of decades back to look at the tumultuous history of these regions, when the first inroads for formal administration started.

Balipara in 1872, was a part of the 'Aka-Darrang' frontier- a 'foot hill' region located between the district of Darrang and the Aka dominated hills. The Deputy Commissioner of Darrang was charged with the duty of maintaining relations with the hill tribes like the Aka. However these relations got seriously jeopardized in the wake of the Aka 'raid' of 1883 and the punitive 'expedition' sanctioned soon after by the then Viceroy of India, Lord Ripon, into the Aka

⁷⁵ Manilal Bose, *Social History of Assam: Being a Study of the Origins of Ethnic Identity and Social Tension During the British Rule, 1904-1947* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing House, 1989), 25.

⁷⁶ Ibid

country.⁷⁷ While the colonial descriptions of the event made by the Deputy Commissioner, H. C Williams and Chief Commissioner of Assam, Charles Alfred Elliott, cast the raid as resulting from the natural predatory instincts of a tribe. Scrutinised closely and over a longer time the raid emerges as, what scholars like Jangkhomang Guite have called, ‘an expression of hill politics’, characterized by long standing material grievances.⁷⁸

Raid or drunken revelry?

An account of the Aka raid published soon after in the 1883 issue of the *Indian Forester*, gives us a sense of the way in which local forest officials waved the incident off initially as a drunken revel, before waking up to its seriousness.

On November, the 10th, a party of about 100 Akas made their appearance at the forest office at Balipara, 20 miles north of Tezpur. They behaved quietly at first, and said they wanted to buy rice; but having got hold of some liquor they grew uproarious and went off in the evening, carrying the Forest Ranger and Clerk with them. It was hoped at first that it was only a drunken freak, but the captives have not been returned since.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Robert Reid, *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam, 1883-1941*, (Delhi: Eastern Publishing House, 1942), 269.

⁷⁸ Jangkhomang Guite, “‘Colonialism and its unruly?’ The Colonial State and the Kuki Raids in the Nineteenth Century, North East India’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 48, Issue 05 (2014): 1188-1232, 1188

⁷⁹ ‘The Late Aka Raid in Darrang’, *Indian Forester*, ed. W. R Fisher, Vol. 9, (Roorkee: Thomas Engineering College Press, 1883), 631

The articles describes the Akas as a tribe inhabiting the ‘sub-himalayan region to the north of Tezpur [headquarters of Darrang district]’.⁸⁰ And categorises them as a race of people inhabiting the hills ‘from the confines of Bhutan to those of China’.⁸¹ The image was one which had been put in place earlier by Edward Tuite Dalton in his book published in 1872, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*. Dalton had come to Assam in the 1840s and had risen to the rank of a General in the Bengal lancers. He was however more famous for his anthropological work on the northeastern tribes, with the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, citing him as an authority on ‘primitive people’ several times, in 1878.⁸² On the Akas, Dalton said that numbering only about 230 families, they were ‘for many years the terror of the inhabitants of Charduar, in the district of Darrang... notorious as the most daring marauders of the frontier.’⁸³ There was hence, little doubt in the Chief Commissioner’s mind about the Aka incident of 1883 in Balipara being anything other than a ‘raid’.

Yet going back again to the description of the raid, there was much in the account itself which did not match this monolithic violent and predatory image.⁸⁴ Even though the Forest Ranger and the clerk, had been carried away, the incident did not, initially at least cause panic and alarm. This underlines the fact that the turning up of the Akas at this base was perhaps a regular feature,

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ Ibid

⁸² ‘Anthropological Miscellanea’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 7 (1878): 101-102.

⁸³Edward Tuite Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing 1872), 37.

involving the buying of rice on their part for consumption as well for trading with other tribes of the frontier. Raghubir Sinha's ethnography, *The Akas*, in fact describes them as among the most entrepreneurial of all the tribes who ran, since nineteenth century, a network of rice trading in the hills.⁸⁵ They procured rice from the districts of Assam by exchanging it with other items like rubber, collected from the hills in which they dwelt. Rubber, in the 1870s was in fact described as 'almost the only item of trade' for the hill-men of the Darrang frontier, on account of which the Akas were a regular presence at the weekly haat bazaars of Udalguri, a small village of the Darrang district.⁸⁶ The commercial activities of the Akas within the Darrang district, hence contested the predatory and the savage image that the colonial literature wove.

To further complicate the colonial perceptions on the Akas, it has to be recognized that the Akas themselves were not a homogeneous tribal group. Dalton himself, noted that they were divided into two clans- the 'Hazarikhowas', the 'eaters of a thousand hearths', and the 'Kupachor', the 'thieves that lurk in the cotton fields.'⁸⁷ The Hazarikhowas were seen to have cordial relations with *the colonial state* and were in receipt of *posa* –an annual payment commuted by the colonial government to the tribes as part of their customary rights over the produce of the plains. The *posa*, in most senses figure in the official document as a 'subsidy' received by the frontier tribes on account of their 'good conduct' [discussed in Chapter 2]. The Kupachors, were not in receipt

⁸⁵Raghubir Sinha, *The Akas: The People of Nefa*, (Shillong : Research Department, Adviser's Secretariat, 1962), 41.

⁸⁶ *Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year 1885-84* (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office), 8.

⁸⁷ Dalton pointed out that Hazarikhowas and Kupachor were the Assamese nicknames for the two clans, the Akas refer to themselves as *Hrusso*, see, Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, 37.

of *posa* and their relationship with the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang was hence seen as one of constant frictions.⁸⁸

The Kupachor Akas were initially under the leadership of Tagi Raja who was responsible for wiping out ‘a British outpost in Balipara’ in 1835. His legacy was carried on by his son Medhi who in 1875 laid claims over ‘an extensive tract of forest and other land on the Bhorali river’, which was cut off by the demarcation of the boundary in 1874.⁸⁹ The demarcation of boundaries of the Balipara *mauza* in 1874 as a consequence of the Inner line Regulation, pushed the revenue limits of the colonial state into the forest tracts of the Bhorali river close to the Aka country.⁹⁰ These forest tracts, rich in rubber trees, were previously in the control of the Akas, who as mentioned before, were involved actively in the rubber trade. The new boundaries however excluded the Akas from any kind of claims over the forests and its resources. The years 1874 and 1875 saw some disputed claims over the boundary by Medhi. Nothing further, however happened and the new boundary line was quietly accepted.⁹¹

The Akas procured rubber from even more interior parts of the hills and the day to day pattern of trading rubber for rice continued, on the condition that all rubber brought down was first registered at the police outposts at Balipara. In fact, the relations with the Kupaschors Akas were possibly so non-confrontational at the moment of the Aka raid of November 1883 that for the

⁸⁸*Frontier and Overseas Expeditions from India*, Vol 4 (Simla: Government Monotype Press, 1907) 162

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 64

⁹⁰ Reid, *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam*, 269

⁹¹ *Ibid*

episode to be actually recognised as a raid, there required the coming to light of another incident that occurred just a few days before, in October.

The 'fountain head' of Aka grievances

In October 1883, Lakhidar, a *mauzadar* [head revenue official], who had visited the village of Medhi, the son of Tagi Raja, the Kupachor Aka chief, in order to ask him to supply articles for the Calcutta Exhibition, and to send down a man and a woman to be modeled there, was forcibly detained⁹²

The immediate reason that was noted for the detainment of the *mauzadar*, Babu Lakhidar Kolita, as told by the 12 people who had accompanied him but were let off, was the 'insult' meted out by Lakhidar to the tribal chiefs by demanding human samples for the Calcutta museum.⁹³ The entire exercise of collecting exotic items and human samples was meant for the Calcutta International Exhibition of 1883. The exhibition which was the first international exhibition to have been held in British India stood as a tangible representation of the civilizational discourse of the late nineteenth century where the displays of the tribal populations and articles were seen not just as primitive but in British explorer Laurence Austine Waddell's words in 1901, as the 'surviving traces of prehistoric usage.'⁹⁴ Lakhidar's expedition to collect 'prehistory' however had the ironical effect of exciting the historically contingent anxieties and dislocations of the Akas, resulting from their position on the axis of the resource frontier.

⁹² Reid, *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam*, 165

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Lawrence Austine Waddell, *Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley: A Contribution of their Physical Types and Affinities* (New Delhi: Logos Press, 1975), 3

The episodes which follow bring out the ways in which the resource frontier was experienced by certain local communities. The nature of the Aka grievances become apparent when in reply to the Chief Commissioner Elliott's ultimatum of returning the abducted people, the Akas demanded the surrender of the entire forest reserve of Darrang, consisting of approximately 100 square miles of land.⁹⁵ This brings into picture the long standing boundary dispute that existed between the Akas and colonial authorities since 1873 when the inner line passed through the district. The connection of Lakhidar with this dispute was an intimate one, as he was the *mauzadar* of Balipara even in 1873 and had actively participated in the exercise of boundary demarcations; an aspect that was well known amongst the Akas. In a later description of the Aka raid in 1942 by the Governor of Assam, Robert Reid, Lakhidar was in fact held as the 'fountain head' of the Aka landed grievances.⁹⁶

However, I would like to maintain that the precise reason for the detainment of Lakhidar and the raid in Balipara still remains a little hazy as it took almost a decade, since the boundary demarcation, for landed grievances to erupt in full swing. Perhaps the new custom of compulsory registration of rubber after entering British territory in Balipara, had generated amongst the Akas a new sense of borders that was earlier non-existent when the rubber *mehals* had deliberately negated political boundaries. These borders, which pushed the Akas further back into the hills maintained a sense of exclusivity that the mere continuance of cross-border trading relationships could not have overridden. The significance of the boundary demarcation and the loss of control

⁹⁵ 'The Late Aka Raid in Darrang', *Indian Forester*, 632.

⁹⁶ Reid, *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam*, 165

over the government appropriated land, thus may have dawned on the Akas only over a longer temporal span.

In this context, the sudden appearance of Lakhidar in the Aka country to collect ‘human samples’ may have provided that ‘configurational’ moment when the body of the *mauzadar* became the representative site for the material and the ideological violence that the resource frontier had unleashed on the tribe.⁹⁷ To analyze the question of the human body a little further, it needs to be pointed out that Akas have been noted to possess slaves from other tribes within their villages.⁹⁸ In that sense it can be assumed that they had a certain understanding of the ways in which the human body can be possessed in highly unequal and degenerate terms. In this context, it is possible that the asking of human samples for an exhibition was equated with an attempt to enslave some members of the tribe and the figure of Lakhidar who was earlier associated with the dispossession of their land may have come to represent an authority that was now attempting to dispossess their body.

A military expedition was advocated to Viceroy Lord Ripon against the Akas by Chief Commissioner Elliott, soon after they demanded the Darrang forests.⁹⁹ It was at this stage that the predatory nature of the tribe was especially highlighted by Elliot in order to disengage the

⁹⁷ For a description of what forms the ‘episodic’ and ‘configurational’ moments in a narrative, see Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1, trans. Kathleen Mclaughleen and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), xi

⁹⁸ Sinha, *The Akas*, 62

⁹⁹ ‘The Late Aka Raid in Darrang’, 632.

incidents from any on-going grievances and rationalize the need to ‘punish’ the community.¹⁰⁰ On the 27th of November, Lord Ripon sanctioned a punitive expedition under Brigadier General Hill, who soon after led a mixed force of police and military into the Aka hills. In the course of the expedition, the Forest Ranger and the Clerk were released from the Aka country. Lakhidar, however was found dead. The expedition that lasted for almost two months resulted in the destruction of Aka villages and the complete sealing of the boundary space against the tribe. Elliott, however termed the expedition ‘unsuccessful’ in bringing the chiefs to surrender. In this context, the emergence of the Aka petition, detailing their viewpoint on the land disputes and the military expedition, almost a year after in November 1884 throws an interesting light on the whole question of Anglo-Aka relations.

Conclusion: The Aka Petition

The narrative constructed in this paper has been derived mostly from official records and correspondences. The narrative logic of the paper hence, lay in a critical grappling with sources that primarily voiced out the intentions and anxieties of the colonial state. The petition filed by the Akas in 1884, too cannot be simply seen as a document representing the unadulterated voice of a tribal group. The voice that the petition held was essentially one that was framed in the format which the medium itself dictated. To have a critical sense of the voice, it then becomes important to find the people ‘who’ were involved in formatting it.

In the case of the Aka petition, it was the faction within the tribe that had more cordial terms with the colonial authorities who relayed the ‘message’ of the Kupachors Akas in the form of this document. Nijalu, Limbu and Miju belonging to the Hazarikhowa tribe through the help of

¹⁰⁰ Reid, *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam*, 165-167.

two interpreters or *kotokis* came to the office of the new *mauzadar* of Balipara, Kami Nath, to submit in writing the views of Medhi.¹⁰¹ The process of translating the message of the Kupachor Akas into a petition thus may have given rise to a space of negotiation for a variety of people. Firstly, the Hazarikhowas, whose otherwise peaceful relations with the colonial authorities may have been jeopardized through the recent turn of events. Secondly, the *kotokis* from tribal groups like Miris whose status as interpreters between the colonial state and the tribes may have depended on the production of messages that remained acceptable in colonial eyes despite elements of transgressions. Thirdly, the newly appointed *mauzadar* Kami Nath, who may have been anxious to prove his efficiency to the higher colonial authorities by bringing in the voice of the ‘rebellious’ Kupachors through the ‘submissive’ format of a petition.

Indeed the most visible aspect of a petition is the acceptance of the authority to which the petition has been addressed. Madhavan K. Palat while analyzing how conflicts get regulated through petitions, argues that the petition as a medium firstly, accepts the authority of the autocracy, it invokes its ‘might and mercy’ and affirms its laws in a seemingly ‘craven submission.’ This aspect figures typically in the petition's structure of salutation.¹⁰² In the Aka petition, for instance, the Government of India, has been repeatedly addressed as *Dharmaraj Praja palak* or the ‘king of virtue and supporter of subjects.’ The second structural element that Palat notes in a petition is the ‘narrative of grievances.’¹⁰³ Every narrative of grievance, for Palat

¹⁰¹ ‘Attitude of the Kopaschur and Hararikhoa Akas’, Foreign Dept, External –A, December 1884, Nos 16-20,[NAI]

¹⁰² Madhavan. K. Palat, ‘Regulating Conflict through Petitions’, in *Social Identities in Revolutionary Russia*, ed Madhavan K Palat, (U.K: Palgrave , 2001) 86

¹⁰³ Ibid

has its own design. The narrative of grievance found in the Aka petition is one that is explicitly rhetorical and perhaps even questions the problematic categories of ‘raid’ and ‘expedition’.

The Akas problematize the categories of ‘raid’ by seeing it as an event when the Akas came down to Balipara ‘for some eating things’ and also pleaded that the abduction of the forest ranger and the clerk that occurred within this event, have to be seen within their larger aim of holding a *mel* or a meeting with the colonial authorities for discussing various grievances. ‘Meetings’ held in the hills with the ‘unfriendly tribes’ where the ‘Superintendent representing the colonial government’ addresses ‘all complaints and grievances’ of the chiefs, had been discussed by the colonial administrator, Alexander Mackenzie in his 1884 published book, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal*.¹⁰⁴ In fact, Mackenzie considered such meetings held away from British territory as soothing to the ‘natural savage pride’ of the chieftains, terming it especially useful ‘for conciliating the good will of tribes like the Kookies’ of the Lushai Hills. The idea of a *mel* with the colonial authorities, happening not in British territory but in the interior parts of hills- home to the tribes- was thus not an unfamiliar idea in the hill politics of the frontier. The Aka petition was clearly drawing from it.

To get a sense of the rhetorical impulse of the petition narrative, I quote a few lines from the petition:

we therefore seized and took away one mandal of the Jungle Sahib and one mandal of the Khola Babu and kept them at our chang[village]. Then we sent word through Balipara

¹⁰⁴ Alexander Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 348.

Kotokis[interpreters] inviting the Bora Sahib and other respectable men to hold a mel at Majlehorali to determine whether or not our coming and going path and the land within our boundary would be given to us...but instead of going to hold a mel to settle the matter the sepoy and sahibs went up for fighting...after this they did a great injustice by burning our house, paddy, granaries and by shooting and killing our pigs, cows, birds, dogs and cats. Another great loss and injustice done to us is that they took away the head of our old rajas's rani which had been kept buried when she had died, and also took away the head of Sharo Raja from the place where it had been buried. When we come down to the Maharani's land we do not cause any loss, nor do we kill even an animal. Why have they caused so much loss to us?¹⁰⁵

The rhetorical device of the petition was explicitly questioning the rationality of the military expedition against the Akas by stressing on the performative aspects of categories like 'raid' and 'expedition'. This did not require the direct usage of the term raid and expedition in the petition vocabulary. Instead, what was attempted was a description of what these categories conventionally implied and who fitted the descriptions best. The tribe, for instance, figured here as a group of people who believed in the idea of negotiations, seen in their attempts to hold *mels*. The 'event' depicted as a 'savage' raid in the official discourse, emerged in the petition performatively as an accepted, even civilized, way of opening a dialogue with higher authority. In contrast to this, the troops sent by the colonial authorities, vandalizing the villages of the tribes and violating the sanctity of the venerated tribal heads, seemed more like the savages who carried out a 'raid' in the name of 'expedition'. It has to be further recognized that the kind of performative role reversal in which the tribe engaged through the petition, was not possible

¹⁰⁵ 'Attitude of the Kopaschur and Hararikhoa Akas'.

firstly, without an awareness about the traits and attributes through which the tribes and the colonial state were differentiated within the frontier dynamics. This meant that the petition demonstrated an awareness about the discourse of civilization and savagery imposed on the region by the colonial authorities. Moreover, if the process of producing a petition was seen as a collaboration of a variety of people, like the Hazarikhawas, *kotokis* and *mauzadars*, then the awareness of the discourse could be traced to all these people, implying perhaps a consciousness in the region itself towards these essentialist categories.

The petition also addressed the ongoing land disputes by citing instances of past frictions occurring between the Akas and the *Jungle Saheb* or Forest official of Balipara. It noted how on many occasions, Medhi Raja's men who came to buy rice were 'obstructed' from entering Balipara. The strictness in the boundary operations had come on account of the rubber tracts that had, not very long ago, been appropriated from the Akas and converted into government forests. The official records, in fact noted that the boundary dispute between the Akas and the colonial authorities over the forest tract in Balipara occurred due to 'ill feeling that grew up on account of the rubber reserve and the restriction of tapping India-rubber trees in Government forests.'¹⁰⁶ For the Akas however the stretch of forest that was taken away from them was not only a matter of losing control over the rubber trees that existed in the area. The forest tract was the space for a variety of other activities crucial for their existence. For instance, the petition notes,

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

the boundary has been removed to the vicinity of our chang[village or dwelling place] by encroachment. We have been put in want of the place for shooting deer, catching fish, collecting fire wood.¹⁰⁷

A further interesting aspect is that nowhere in the petition, do the Akas mention their ‘rubber tapping activities’ although, official reports of the time denote them as one of the main ‘rubber tappers’ of the region. This is surprising as the land dispute between the Akas and the colonial authorities was primarily seen as a tussle for the rubber bearing tracts. This throws light on how the archive itself needs to be read critically. On the resource frontier, people and region often get defined through meanings that are monolithically derived from the operative functionality of the spaces created. As appropriation of rubber was the prime operative intention of the resource frontier, its delineation inevitably led to the imposition of very ‘singular’ identities over a people who were otherwise involved in a variety of other activities. For instance, the Akas, whose rice trading activities have already been noted.

Analyzing the Aka petition has formed the concluding section of this chapter, as the petition amongst a plethora of consulted official reports and correspondences, emerges as a document that singularly features the complexity that resource frontiers bring for the region and its people. While the colonial state attempted to appropriate resource through a discursive trail of policies and institutions, there simultaneously emerged spaces where its material and ideological effects interacted to produce quite unpredictable consequences. The ideas and perceptions that circulated

¹⁰⁷ Ibid

in the frontier, due to the imposition of a discourse of savagery and civilization, did not remain static. Discourse also opened up space for dialogue, where the same ideas and perceptions got reappropriated to produce a critique of the existing order. In the history of the resource frontier of rubber, the Aka petition then exists as a document that traces the complex processes through which the disruptive and the dialogical engaged with each other.

Bubbles and the Transactions of a ‘Relational’ Frontier. 1870-1884.

Introduction

In 1876, an editorial article in the *Times of India* compared the quest for India rubber in the forests of northeastern tracts of British India and Upper Burma as almost as ‘enthraling as the wanderings of Jason after the Golden Fleece, or Henry Von Ofterdingen after the mythical Blue Flower’.¹⁰⁸ While the ‘Golden Fleece’ stood as the symbol of power and authority for the mythological Greek ruler Jason, the enigmatic ‘Blue Flower’ of Henry, used in the works of the eighteenth century German author, Novalis, was a motif of beauty that marked the confluence of humans with nature.¹⁰⁹

The imageries of the Golden Fleece and the Blue flower depict the romantic engagement with commodities like Assam rubber around this time; a romantic engagement that produced the commodity within an aesthetic world of thrill, excitement and beauty. The aesthetics of a commodity, to use W.F Haug’s terminology, is very much ‘an element’ of the commodity’s ‘use value’. However the needs which the aesthetic element of the commodity satisfies are different from the commercial needs its physical elements have to satisfy.¹¹⁰ For instance, to the durable, elastic and odour-less physical attributes of Assam rubber, the allegorical representation of

¹⁰⁸ ‘Editorial Article 1 -- no Title.’ *The Times of India (1861-Current)*, Jul 11, 1876.

<http://search.proquest.com/docview/506779925?accountid=142596>.

¹⁰⁹ William Godwin, *Lives of the Necromancers: Or An Account of the Most Eminent Persons in Successive Ages, Who Have Claimed for Themselves, or To Who Has Been Imputed by Others, the Exercise of Magical Power*, (London: F. J Mason, 1876), 41.

¹¹⁰ W. F Haug, *Commodity Aesthetics, Ideology & Culture* (New York: International General, 1987), 106.

Golden Fleece or Blue Flower, may have added a fourth quality, that of 'exotica', which made the commodity alluring.¹¹¹

The symbolic association of these allegories with avenues of power and authority also takes me to the complex political routes that the extraction of rubber entailed in the northeastern frontier. The political routes showed that exercise and experience of power and authority is never all pervasive. In fact colonial 'power' manifested itself patchily and episodically along the rubber resource frontier, in the many transactions of business and politics, undertaken by different actors. Moreover, drawing from Max Weber's philosophy, if we understand 'power' as the ability of one actor within a social relationship to carry out his own will despite resistance, then the resource frontier of rubber existed as a space which allowed many 'powerfuls' to thrive.¹¹²

The colonial state, was not the sole entity directing the course of production and exchange within the resource frontier. Although the various state generated institutions like rubber *mehals*, legal apparatuses like the Inner line or military expeditions like the one undertaken against the Akas [chapter 1] give the impression of the state being all powerful in the region, such an impression

¹¹¹ The allegorical mode of representation was seen as peculiarly suited to commodities by the historical materialist Walter Benjamin. Firstly, because rapid change in technology often rendered commodities as obsolete, Secondly, because there was always 'a peculiar metaphysical subtlety' in the 'commodity system' through which things related to each other in the market place, hollowed 'out of their intrinsic material qualities' and 'invested with arbitrary signs of collective desire and anxiety,' see, Carolyn L Cartier and Alan A. Lew, ed., *Seductions of Place: Geographical Perspectives on Globalization and Touristed Landscapes* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 53.

¹¹² Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, (California: University of California Press, 1978), 53.

is often misleading because it tends to equate an ‘economy of visibility’ with an ‘exercise of power.’¹¹³ The colonial archive, for instance, accords a disproportionate amount of visibility to the various rubber extractive mechanisms of the state, be it legal or militarist. What is visible, however, maybe deceptive. The colonial zeal to legislate and regulate rubber extractions did not amount to controlling the resource; it referred only to an attempt to control. Official documents laying down the state’s attempt to control rubber were often just conversations, which swung from uncertainty and indecisiveness to phases of high excitement. On investigation, these official conversations point towards the existence of other competing attempts of resource extraction- the most interesting one being that of the ‘speculators’

In the 1870s, the term ‘speculator’ emerges as an ambiguous category in the colonial correspondence about the rubber trade. While in some instances, the term ‘independent European speculators’, linked the origins of this group of people to European countries other than Britain; in most correspondence however, the group was simply referred to as speculators, perhaps indicating the presence of Indian people too within it. Speculators had surfaced earlier in official correspondence in relation to schemes in the 1830s and 40s to source tea from Assam instead of relying on china.¹¹⁴ In fact, R.P Behal, in *Coolies, Capital and Colonialism*, has noted a ‘speculative boom’ or ‘a spike in asset values’ in the Assam tea industry during the 1860s, just a

¹¹³ Lester Faigly, *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992), 114.

¹¹⁴ Phillip Alexander Prince, *Parallel History: Being An Outline of the History and Biography of the World, Contemporaneously Arranged*, volume 3 (London: Whittaker 1843), 709.

few years before the rise of speculation activity in the rubber trade.¹¹⁵ Behal's speculative boom in tea, mainly draws from colonial citations of the time which noted 'a madness' that seized the minds of 'normally level headed financiers and speculators' who began to 'scramble wildly for tea shares and lands' in the northeastern frontier.¹¹⁶ The 'speculative boom' in tea, then shared a geographical as well as a temporal proximity with the speculation activities of the rubber trade. There is, hence, a strong possibility that the speculators of the rubber trade came from those who were earlier involved in the tea boom.

This has in turn induced me to investigate the relevance of 'booms' and 'bubbles' in my own study on the history of rubber appropriation. The first section of the chapter assesses the way in which speculative activity compromised state monopoly over rubber collection and therefore income from the auctioning of rubber leases. The section then attempts to weave together some of the circulating 'rumours' and 'stories' about the lucrative nature of the rubber trade, to analyze the possibility of a 'speculative bubble' in the rubber dealings of the frontier, generated by an 'affective' economy.

The second section of the chapter takes up the transactions between a particular speculator Edwin Vanqulin and, the Namsangia Nagas, one of the rubber collecting 'tribal' communities in the un-surveyed territories of the British and Burmese border. The profitable relationship with the speculators had reached the Namsangias, exposing the vulnerabilities of the jurisdictional patchwork which the Bengal Government had worked with so far along the frontier. The section

¹¹⁵ R.P Behal and Marcel Van Der Linden, ed. *Coolies, Capital and Colonialism: Studies in Indian Labour History*, (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2006), 116.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 117

also evaluates the way in which the Namsangias involved in rubber extraction negotiated their territorial rights and forged alliances with state as well as non state actors. In this frame, local rubber collecting communities emerge as ‘agents’ of change within the resource frontier, transacting in business and politics, just like the speculator and the government.

The third section, puts the lens on the two other participants in the rubber trade, the *mehaldar* and the ‘rubber tapper’ by contextualizing them within the trans-frontier rubber trade existing between the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan and the region of Cooch Behar, located in the northern part of present day West Bengal in the foothills of Eastern Himalayas. Here I want to explore both the trading relationships involved in rubber extraction; and to compare and contrast the rubber extractive mechanisms of Bhutan-Cooch Behar border with those existing between the districts of Assam and the surrounding trans- frontier tracts dominated by ‘tribal’ communities.

Speculative Bubbles and Metaphorical Goldmines.

In his book, *Devil Take The Hindmost: A History of Financial Speculation*, B. C. Edward Chancellor, speaks of the ways in which speculators, known in Rome as *quaestor*, which means seekers, came together in the forum to buy and sell shares and bonds of tax-farming estates and to trade in commodities like ships, storehouses or slaves.¹¹⁷ While Chancellor found many elements of modern capitalism in ancient Roman society, ‘speculation’ as a modern economic concept, according to Neil J Smelser, emerged only in the eighteenth century.¹¹⁸ It was around

¹¹⁷ Edward Chancellor, ‘This Bubble World: The Origins of Financial Speculation’, in, *Devil Take the Hindmost: A History of Financial Speculation*, (USA: Penguin, 2000)

¹¹⁸ Richard Swedberg and Neil J Smelser, *Handbook of Economic Sociology*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 294

this time that economic philosophers like Adam Smith started to describe the speculator as ‘one interested in short-term opportunities in profit’.¹¹⁹ Smith termed speculator’s activities as primarily ‘fluid’, whereas ‘those of conventional businessperson were more or less fixed.’¹²⁰ Along the northeastern frontier, this ‘fluidity’ in the speculator’s activities came from their functioning outside state- sanctioned institutions and structures like *mehals*.

In 1872 Bengal Government officials described speculative activity as confined mostly to ‘the country beyond the plains’, extending beyond the ‘lower ranges of the hills on the north bank of the Brahmapootra’ inhabited by the Akas, Dufflas, Abors, and Mishmies’.¹²¹ A major part of this region, rich in rubber trees, was considered ‘foreign territory’ as the government had no ‘jurisdiction or control over these savage tribes, nor had the Assam Rajas.’¹²² As a result rubber collecting communities of this region could strike their own deals with speculators, who offered a higher price than the state sanctioned *mehaldars*. The anxiety was that this would bring down the auction price for the rubber *mehals*, south of the Brahmaputra valley in the region stretching up to the Patkoi hills [along upper Burma]. The ‘tribes of the south bank’ mainly the Singphos, Khamptis and the Nagas who were considered more ‘submissive’ than the ‘tribes of the north bank’, had hitherto had no option but to sell their rubber to the *mehaldars*. However, the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur, Clarke considered that this would change once they came to know of the higher prices being offered to their counterparts to the north. He noted:

¹¹⁹ Ibid

¹²⁰ Ibid

¹²¹ ‘Assam and Cachar India Rubber Trade’.

¹²² Ibid

when they [tribes of the south bank] see that the tribes to the north of the Brahmapootra are getting higher prices for their rubber, while they themselves can only sell to the farmer [*mehaldar*] at such prices as he chooses to give them, jealousy and discontent will be the result; probably they will refuse to supply the *mehaldars*.¹²³

Clarke's phrase 'jealousy and discontent' is indicative of an economy of 'affect' being monitored along the rubber resource frontier. However, it is not sure the extent to which the monitor himself was immune to the workings of such an economy, which brings me to the discussion on the possibility of a speculative bubble consuming all the participants of the rubber trade.

According to the 2013 Nobel laureate in economics Robert J. Shiller

A speculative bubble is a social epidemic where contagion is mediated by price movements. News of price increase enriches the early investors, creating word of mouth stories about their successes, which stir envy and interest. The excitement then lures more and more people into the market, which causes prices to increase further, attracting yet more people and fueling new era stories, and so on, in successive feedback loops as the bubble grows. After the bubble bursts, the same contagion fuels a precipitous collapse, as falling prices cause more and more people to exit the market, and to magnify negative stories of the economy.¹²⁴

¹²³Ibid

¹²⁴Rober J Shiller, 'Bubbles Without Markets', assessed 10th November, 2015 <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/bubbles-without-markets>.

Shiller's description of speculative bubbles is based on a historically rooted phenomena, depicted also in Charles Mackay's 1841 bestseller *Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, where price rise was not so much related to market shifts as it was to the people's amplified notions about price movements.¹²⁵ It was not an economic but a 'social epidemic' which was often described through terms like 'craze' or 'madness' that affect people in 'herds'.¹²⁶ Here, price rise of a particular commodity or an enterprise happens unsupported by any actual alteration in the financial market or the commodity itself. Basically it is the rumors and stories and the resultant anticipations and anxieties of groups of people which make prices shoot up, which then creates a speculative 'bubble'.

The Bengal Government felt that the speculators had been drawn into the rubber trade in the first place, by rumours of the huge profits made by those who had taken licences for rubber collection. The 'profits made by the farmers [of the rubber trade] has been enormous' reported Clarke and it was this which had 'lured' the speculators into this trade. He claimed that 'a profit of not less than 300 to 400 percent [had been] realized' both 'by the farmers of the *mehal* and the purchasers [speculators] of the rubber from the Abors and Mishmies' in 1872.¹²⁷ Clark further

¹²⁵ Charles Mackay, *Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, (London: G. Routledge & Co, 1856), viii.

¹²⁶ In case of the Assam tea industry in the 1860s, Percival Griffiths in *The History of the Indian Tea Industry*, noted that, 'a madness comparable in intensity with that of the South Sea Bubble seized men's minds,' cited in , Behal and Lindened, *Coolies, Capital and Colonialism*, 117

¹²⁷ 'Assam and Cachar India Rubber Trade'.

noted, that if speculation activity was not regulated ‘there would surely be a rush towards the frontier to obtain rubber as there would be if a gold mine had been discovered.’¹²⁸

This reference to huge profits does not appear to be seconded by statistical evidence. The absence of statistical data for these claims, however, do not make these accounts superficial or invalid. This was a moment in the history of the rubber trade, when stories and rumors of speculative activity seeped through the official documents. Interestingly, this was also the time of the world wide price recession called the ‘Long Depression’ which began in 1873 and ran through the spring of 1879.¹²⁹ It was considered most severe in Europe and United States, which had been experiencing high economic growth as a result of the second wave of the industrial revolution. Britain, for instance saw bankruptcies, dwindling public works, growing unemployment with its ‘heavy goods’ made of iron and steel becoming twenty six to sixty six

¹²⁸ The metaphor of a gold mine is interesting because of the ‘feverish migration’ which had been sparked off by the dramatic discovery of gold deposits in Australia which continued till 1870s. See Wendy Lewis, Balderstone Simon and John Bowan, *Events That Shaped Australia*, (Holland: New Holland, 2006)

¹²⁹ Economists like Vasmi Vakulabharanam, however have termed the Long Depression to be the ‘longest’ that ‘industrial capitalism has faced since its origins’, extending not just from 1873-1879 but all the way to 1896. This is because just a few years after 1879, there was another series of global price depression in 1882-85, which led to the conception that the Long Depression of 1873-79, might not have ended after all. See, Vasmi Vakulabharanam, ‘Economic Turbulence in Capitalism: Twentieth Century and Beyond’, in *Marxism: With and Beyond Marx*, ed. Amiya Kumar Bagchi and Amita Chatterjee (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 119.

per cent cheaper in these years.¹³⁰ The global rubber industry however ‘held its own in the deep depression of 1873’ with larger markets for rubber shoes and rubber soles and smaller markets for hard rubber like pen cases, buttons and combs surviving with no apparent price deflation.¹³¹ Dazzled itself by the idea that rubber could turn out to be a ‘gold mine’ and boost revenues which were being affected by the trade depression, the Government of India began to explore the idea of setting up rubber plantations. The first rubber plantation was inaugurated at Charduar in Darrang district in 1872, precisely at the time when rumours of huge profits to be obtained from rubber were sweeping the province.¹³²

The *mehaldari* extraction of rubber in the northeastern tracts of British India had been continuing since 1840s. However it was not until 1869 that the bulk of the official correspondence on the rubber trade actually started surfacing in the colonial archive; filled with an excitement about the rubber trade’s almost fantastical profit making capacities which was simultaneously placed against the anxiety of losing control of this trade to speculators. The exact cause of this sudden extraordinary interest in rubber, luring speculators and government officials alike is difficult to ascertain. The depression of 1873, during which rubber maintained its global demand, may have been one cause. Another maybe the growth of the under-sea telegraph cable industry from late

¹³⁰ ‘The World’s Progress in Trade and Industry’, *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, 45 (1882): 82-180, 101.

¹³¹ Quentin R. Skrabec Jr, *Rubber: An American Industrial History* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2014), 40.

¹³² Gustav Mann, Conservator of Forests, Assam to Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Home Dept, Forests, May 1884, Nos 1-5 [NAI]

1860s, which required rubber insulation. One of the largest telegraph laying companies of Britain at this period was the India-rubber, Gutta-percha and Telegraph Works Co., founded by S. W Silva in 1864.¹³³ The company manufactured its first cable for the Submarine Telegraph Co., running from Dover in Britain to Cap Griz Nez in France in 1865. By late 1860s and early 1870s, the company was busy laying cables along the west coast of Africa and in South America and for the French Government and had become the single most powerful company in the telegraph industry. While its head office was in London, it had agencies in chief towns of Britain like Belfast, Birmingham, Bradford, Liverpool, Glasgow and Manchester as well as abroad like Durban, Melbourne, Paris, Buenos Ayres and Calcutta.¹³⁴ Its office at Fairlie Place, Calcutta was established in the late 1860s to deal in the rubber coming out of the northeastern frontier. It is possible that the entry of this giant telegraph company in the Calcutta rubber market created a new interest in the commodity, luring many to venture into the frontier as speculators in this period.

I equate the sudden upsurge in speculative activity to that of a bubble because it produced an interest in the rubber latex that did not stay confined only to the people deemed as ‘speculators’. To use Shiller’s words, it was a ‘contagion’ that spread all the way to the official circles involving an outbreak of disputes and regulations around the issue of rubber and how best to control it. The quest to procure rubber led to an immediate shooting up of the prices of the rubber

¹³³ ‘India Rubber, Gutta Percha and Telegraph Works Co’, accessed May 19, 2016,

http://www.gracesguide.co.uk/India_Rubber,_Gutta_Percha_and_Telegraph_Works_Co

¹³⁴ ‘India Rubber, Gutta Percha and Telegraph Works Co’, Ltd., *The India List and India Office List* (London: Harrison & Sons, 1905), 1.

latex in the frontier. In the 1860s, the frontier ‘tribes’, noted W. Schlich, Conservator of Forests, Bengal, were receiving for rubber an amount ranging from Rs 20 to Rs 40 per maund.¹³⁵ In the 1870s, the amount rose to Rs 80 per maund, for the Akas and Mishmis [‘tribes’ of the north bank].¹³⁶ This was a staggeringly high price for the rubber latex, considering the price for rubber in Calcutta from this period till 1882 was about Rs 80 to Rs 100.¹³⁷ This meant that the people buying rubber in the frontier and selling it in Calcutta could not have maintained a high profit margin. But such is the irrationality of bubbles, as noted by Robert F. Bruner and Sean D. Carr, quoting Mike Dash’s argument, that the ‘commodity’s price quite outstrips what is actually worth to anyone other than a speculator.’¹³⁸ In other word high prices achieved within a bubble stay disengaged from the larger market fundamentals. The ‘greater fools’ theory’ plays in here, whereby the ‘investor’ becomes willing to pay a very high amount, thinking he can sell it to someone [a greater fool] in future for an even higher price.¹³⁹ There is hence, a probability that

¹³⁵ W. Schlich, Conservator of Forests, Bengal to the Secretary to the B.G, Agricultural Dept., 25th August, 1873, File No. 655, Assam Commissioner Papers, SI. No. 1-8 [Assam State Archives, hereafter ASA]

¹³⁶ Ibid

¹³⁷ *Annual Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year, 1881-82* (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office), 6.

¹³⁸ Rober F. Bruner and Sean D. Carr, *The Panic of 1907: Lessons Learned from the Market’s Perfect Storm*(New Jersey :John Wiley & Sons, 2007), 201

¹³⁹ Matt Krantz and Robert R Johnson, *Investment Banking for Dummies* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 294.

the rubber speculator of the frontier may not be selling the commodity immediately in Calcutta. He may be selling it to the people within the frontier.

Bubbles which form oblivious to the wider market dynamics, however at their peaks, exhibit a vulnerability of bursting with shifts in the very market dynamics. Bodhisattva Kar and Sarah Hilaly noted a crash in the prices of Assam rubber, in the markets of Calcutta in 1884-85.¹⁴⁰ The price of one maund of rubber from Rs 80 was reduced to less than half, i.e., only Rs 30. The crash came in the wake of the price depression of 1882-85 in the United States which led to a world- wide price depression in 1884-85.¹⁴¹ My study argues that this crash in the Calcutta rubber prices, led to a bubble burst in the rubber dealings of the frontier. This is because, the loss of business for Assam rubber in the frontier was particularly harsh in the period after the depression. This is evident firstly, when we compare the Calcutta export and import reports of

¹⁴⁰Kar, 'Historia Elastica', 145. Sarah Hilaly, 'Early Attempts at Commercializing the India Rubber Mahals in Assam', *Proceedings of the North East India History Association*, (Kohima, 1987), 238, accessed 10th November, 2015,

[http://dspace.nehu.ac.in/jspui/bitstream/1/10110/1/Early%20attempts%20\(S%20Hilaly\).pdf](http://dspace.nehu.ac.in/jspui/bitstream/1/10110/1/Early%20attempts%20(S%20Hilaly).pdf)

¹⁴¹ The price depression, known as the 'panic of 1884' came as a result of a global downswing in business activities. David Glasner, in his edited work *Business Cycles and Depressions: An Encyclopedia*, noted 'using an index comprising six series (railway, revenues, pig iron production, coal production, domestic cotton consumption, bank clearings and merchandise imports)' that business activity had fallen by almost a fourth,' in the years 1882-85 in USA and other parts of the world. See David Glasner, ed. *Business Cycles and Depressions: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 149-152.

rubber with that of other commodities like tea. ¹⁴²W.W Hunter noted the ‘depressed state’ of Assam tea market in 1884 in his encyclopedic compilation, *Indian Empire: Its People, History and Products*.¹⁴³ However, *Capital*, the commercial journal brought out from Calcutta, the hub of European agency houses, noted that tea recovered and registered a steady increase in sales in the late 1880s and 1890s. The scene of the rubber market at the same time however was very different. The journal noted that although ‘Assam rubber [was] in good demand, but owing to absence of stock and supplies, no business of any importance [had] been reported.’ ¹⁴⁴ Why was there no rubber coming from the frontier despite a good demand for it in Calcutta? It seems that the crash in the Calcutta rubber prices in 1884 created a slump in the rubber dealings of the frontier that lasted even after markets had recovered in Calcutta.

The first negative reports were about the Marwari rubber merchants suffering considerable losses by paying high prices for rubber to the frontier ‘tribes’ at the time when the rubber prices fell in Calcutta.¹⁴⁵ The Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur, at this time, noted that the merchants had to a large extent restricted their trading in this commodity. Such stories of losses at the time of the crash may have magnified leading to negative notions about the rubber trade, which in turn led to an overall slump in the rubber business. The slump was reflected in the auction prices for the rubber *mehals*. The average income from the sale of rubber *mehals* between the period 1879-

¹⁴²*Capital: A Weekly Journal of Commerce*, July 13th- December 24, (Calcutta, 1889).

¹⁴³ W.W Hunter, *The Indian Empire: Its People, History and Products*(Oxon:Routledge,2000)506

¹⁴⁴ *Capital*, July 13th- December 24, (Calcutta, 1889).

¹⁴⁵ *Annual Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Year, 1887-88* (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office), 9.

82 was Rs. 32,800. However, after 1884-85, the worth of the *mehals* saw a sudden decline. In fact many of the rubber *mehals* in Kamrup and Naga Hills when opened for auctions in the following years, could find not a single buyer.¹⁴⁶ As a result the idea of shifting to plantation grown rubber fell out of favour with the Bengal Government. In 1884, when Gustav Mann, Conservator of Forests, Assam forwarded a proposal to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Charles Alfred Elliot, for extending the Charduar rubber plantations by 200 acres per annum for the next 15 to 20 years. Elliot, dismissed the proposal declaring that ‘government does not wish to enter in a speculative trade’ and there was to be no additional expenditure on rubber plantations.¹⁴⁷

At this point, I do not have the data to confirm exactly how long the negative opinions about the rubber trade in the frontier lasted, that is, did it last for just a few years after the crash or did it entail a decline of the rubber resource frontier from which it could never rise. Answers to these questions require an extensive study of the demand and supply channels working between Calcutta and Assam throughout the decade of 1890s and the viewpoints of their participants. It would also require addressing the ecological question of the wild rubber trees and how they were faring in the aftermath of the intensified extraction of the 1870s. For now, however my study rests with the idea that Assam rubber turned the northeastern frontier in early 1870s into a

¹⁴⁶*Progress Report of the Forest Administration in Assam, 1884-85*, (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press)

¹⁴⁷ Mann to Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Home Dept, Forests, May 1884, Nos 1-5

metaphorical goldmine, swelling a lot of excitement and anxiety to mid-1880s, when all of this became starkly dull, almost in a pattern that echoed the saying- ‘all that glitters is not gold’.

Lessons from a Lease: ‘Troublesome’ Speculators and ‘Punctilious’ Namsangias

In the analysis of the speculative bubble, what is missing is the speculator himself and the relations he forged with local rubber collectors unmediated by any state agency.¹⁴⁸ This section focuses on the curious case of a ‘rubber speculator’, Edwin Vanqulin, who obtained a lease over a tract of land from the Nagas of the Namsangia Chang in 1872. In doing so, the relational nature of the resource frontier becomes evident, where non state actors such as these speculators and local groups like the Namsangia Nagas negotiated for commercial and political advantage.

Vanqulin’s lease of land was obtained for the ‘express purpose of purchasing India-rubber’ from ‘the un-surveyed lands’ lying between British Assam [Lakhimpur and Sibsaugor district] and Burma, south of the Ladoighur.¹⁴⁹ These ‘un-surveyed lands’, extended up to the Patkai ranges of upper Burma. Though they were claimed as British territory in fact they lay outside the limits of the ordinary civil administration of the districts. These limits were those which had been fixed by the Survey Department in the exercises it had conducted since parts of Assam gradually came under the Bengal Government from 1826.¹⁵⁰ In the ‘case of northeast frontier’, these limits ,

¹⁴⁹Ladoighur was a region located at the border of Sibsagar district and the un-surveyed lands to the Patkai near the British and Burmese borders

¹⁵⁰ ‘Application of Act XXXIII. Victoria. Chapter 3, to certain districts in Bengal’, Home Dept, Judicial, Feb 1872, Nos 172-73. [NAI]

noted S. C Bayley, Officiating Secretary to the Government of Bengal, in 1872, ‘cannot be accepted as a conclusive boundary’. On the one hand he pointed out there were tracts within surveyed areas occupied ‘partly or entirely by savage tribes’ who were left largely to themselves and there were tracts un-surveyed, ‘which [were] properly parts of the surveyed districts.’¹⁵¹ The category of ‘un-surveyed lands’ hence, remained one of jurisdictional ambiguity; an aspect that was well exploited by speculators like Vanqulin.

Before the granting of the lease by the Namsangias Vanquin had entered into a ‘business co-partnership’ with J. A Rayson, A.S Campbell and G. A Dolby to purchase ‘India rubber from foreign territory’.¹⁵² The nature of this co-partnership was such that Vanqulin was required to provide ‘services necessary for the purchase of India rubber’ to the other three business partners at a price which amounted to ‘one fourth share of the net profit’ made on selling the rubber in “Calcutta and other markets”.¹⁵³ It is evident from the ‘co-partnery deed’ that most of the site-specific transactions of this ‘joint stock company’ were carried out by Vanqulin himself. The official documents refer only to him.

The correspondence between Colonel Hopkinson, Commissioner of Assam and Major A.E Campbell, Deputy Commissioner of Sibsaugor district in 1872, reveals the interesting history of Vanqulin’s lease. The Bengal Government had initially rented this ‘large tract of land’ to a Mr.

¹⁵¹ CS.C Bayley, Officiating Secretary, B.G, to C. U Aitchison, Secretary, GOI, Home Dept, Judicial, Feb 1872, Nos 172-73. [NAI]

¹⁵² ‘Appeal of Mr. Vanqulin against prohibiting from cutting rubber etc. in the Singpho country and Naga Hills’, File No-27-32, B.G, 1872-1873. [ASA]

¹⁵³Ibid

Brooke, for tea-cultivation.¹⁵⁴ However, after a ‘raid’ on the Geleke guard station in the region, the manager of the tea estate fled and the pottah or lease was given up in 1868.¹⁵⁵ Since then, noted Campbell, ‘several applications’ had been made to him ‘for this piece of land’ but all had been refused.¹⁵⁶ Four years later, Vanqulin managed to obtain a lease on this land directly from the Namsangias, not to cultivate tea but to collect rubber. The choice might have been shaped by the feverish interest in this resource fuelled by the speculative bubble and the zeal of the speculators to not pay the standard auction price for rubber *mehals*.

Getting a lease of land directly from the Namsangias compromised the Bengal Governments prerogative to auction out rubber *mehals*. Hitherto ‘speculators had entered into informal arrangements with local communities only to the north of the Brahmaputra valley. Vanqulin’s lease not only breached this boundary, by extending speculative activity to the south bank of the Brahmaputra, but the arrangement had taken on a much more institutionalized form. To recognize that arrangement was to recognize the proprietary right of the Namsangia Chief to lease out the right to collect rubber in the area under his control.

The lease seemed to formalize the rights of the ‘tribal’ communities like the Namsangias over these lands. Hearing that Vanqulin had commenced clearing the lease, Campbell sent for him and questioned him about occupying the land without permit. There upon Vanqulin ‘presented a deed executed by four sundikois of the Namsangia Chang, giving him the land on a yearly rental of Rs

¹⁵⁴ File No 141-251, B.G, 1872 [ASA]

¹⁵⁵ *pottah* was the local name for lease.

¹⁵⁶ A.E Campbell, Deputy Commissioner, Sibsagar to and the Personal Assistant of the Commissioner of Assam, 10th August 1872, File No 141-251, B.G, 1872 [ASA]

20/-.' Sundikois, also referred to as hondikois in official documents was the term for the representatives sent by the Namsangia Chief Oangbang. The production of the deed put Campbell in a 'troublesome spot', and he sought the advice of the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Hopkinson, on whether 'Vanqulin should be allowed to remain on this land.'¹⁵⁷

In his recent article, 'Nomadic Capital and Speculative Tribes', Kar points out that in the north eastern tracts of British India, 'almost every major company struck numerous contracts and arrangements with the chiefs of the upland communities' to extract resources beyond the jurisdictional line.¹⁵⁸ The Government of India gave a certain tacit support to these arrangements but they created a problem by seeming to acknowledge that 'primitive' people had proprietary rights. For instance, in 1865 Hopkinson, noted that the concept of proprietary rights in lands did not exist amongst 'nomadic' tribes like the Nagas and 'an exception to this rule' had to be seen as 'ideas instilled into the Nagas by planters and other for their own purposes, not to give Nagas any right, but to derive right from themselves.'¹⁵⁹

A contract, as Kar noted 'invariably articulate[d] itself as secondary and derivative of the original proprietary rights of the communities.'¹⁶⁰ Their existence could hence certify the tribes' ownership to the lands. It is perhaps due to this reason that the various arrangements of the tribal communities with the speculators and planters, although made on paper with signatures of the chiefs, were seldom referred to as 'contracts'. Instead there was a tendency to view these deeds

¹⁵⁷ Ibid

¹⁵⁸ Kar, 'Nomadic Capital and Speculative Tribes', 41-67

¹⁵⁹ B.G Papers, File No. 214-522, SI. No. 1, 1871 [ASA]

¹⁶⁰ Kar, 'Nomadic Capital and Speculative Tribes', 46

within the customary tradition of *posa*, whereby the colonial authorities in continuation of the ‘old Ahom custom’ paid a certain amount in cash or kind annually to the ‘hill tribes’ in lieu of ‘their territorial claims’.¹⁶¹ An important aspect of the *posa* payment, also termed variously as ‘pension’, ‘subsidy’ or ‘blackmail’, was that they were based on the condition of ‘good behavior’ on the part of the frontier ‘tribes’. This made the *posa*, a measure of the ‘tribes’ primitiveness. Interestingly as Kar noted the colonial authorities sought to ‘model’ all deeds [whether government or private led] made with the ‘tribes’, on the *posa* by including ‘good conduct’ on the part of the ‘tribes’ as a mandatory clause. As Kar eloquently stated, the ‘promise of the *posa*’ was such that it’s ‘conditionality’ made it ‘function like a contract and its over-coding as a [primitive] custom’ kept ‘it distant from law’.¹⁶²

Yet, viewing every contractual transaction in the light of the *posa*, became a strenuous affair, especially when terms like ‘deed’ for agreement and ‘rent’ for payment to the tribes, started entering the vocabulary of speculator-‘tribe’ transactions.

Earlier the system roughly was to apply for official sanction for any landed deal happening between a planter or mining prospector and a tribal community. In 1849, for instance, William Malcolm of the Assam Coal and Timber Company submitted an application to Francis Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General, North-east Frontier, to work ‘on the coal deposits’ found on ‘both banks of the Dikhu river’, in the un-surveyed territories, not very far from Vanqulin’s lease. Following this ‘15 village elders representing the four morungs [Naga guard houses]’ of Namsang signed an agreement that authorized Malcom or anyone acting on his behalf to

¹⁶¹ Ibid

¹⁶² Ibid

exclusively mine coal, cut timber and bamboo within a defined boundary.¹⁶³ The agreement was made on a 'yearly rent' of Rs. 60 to be paid by Macolm to the 'tribal' village. A copy of this agreement was duly sent to Jenkins who did not object to it, despite the use of the term rent for the payment to the tribes.

In 1872, however Vanqulin's lease from the Namsangias was strongly opposed by the colonial authorities. Not only had he not applied for any official sanction, but the lease was formulated as a contractual agreement between two private parties, which stated the Namsangias as the landlords 'giving out the land and Vanqulin as the tenant 'paying rent' for it.¹⁶⁴ It seemed to give a sharper expression therefore to the proprietary rights of 'primitive' communities than the Bengal Government was willing to countenance. Campbell, expressed his concern that the 'deed will only make the Nagas more punctilious as to what belongs to them and what does not.'¹⁶⁵ A punctilious or a meticulous delineation of 'tribal' claims undermined the stance hitherto adopted of treating these claims as a bundle of 'primitive' exactions to be systematized only through *posa* payments.

Ordering the cancellation of the lease, J.J.S Driberg, Personal Assistant to the Commissioner of Assam, noted that the sundikois sent by the Namsangia chief should be informed that:

although the British government elects to entirely abstain from any interference with such cultivation as the Nagas may carry on within British jurisdiction, but beyond our regularly settled *mauzahs*, it nevertheless does not recognize the right of the Nagas to lease or alienate

¹⁶³ Revenue Proceeding-A, December 1893, Nos. 89-162. [ASA]

¹⁶⁴ Campbell to Personal Assistant of the Commissioner of Assam, File No 141-251, B.G, 1872 [ASA]

¹⁶⁵ Ibid

those lands in favor of anybody, whether European or native, and they must strictly abstain from doing anything of the kind.¹⁶⁶

This was a well-directed warning for the granting of the lease was a considered move on the part of the Namsangias. This becomes clear when one reviews a second case which emerged around the same time. This concerned a dispute between William Minto, the proprietor of tea estates on the un-surveyed hills outside the Lakhimpur District and Oangbang, the Namsangia chief, who claimed rights to this land.¹⁶⁷In 1834, three tea estates, known as Hookanjooree, Towrock and Namsang were opened ‘beyond the ordinary fiscal jurisdiction’ of the colonial state in the ‘un-surveyed lands’.¹⁶⁸The estates were first worked for the government and then for the Assam Company, which monopolized the cultivation and production of tea from 1840s to 1860s. The records of the Assam company revealed that the managers had paid a ‘yearly subsidy’ of Rs 200 to 250 to the chiefs along with ‘small presents’ and were ‘on fairly friendly relations with them.’¹⁶⁹ Around 1865, the rights of the estates were sold to the Northern Assam Company which stopped working in 1868, due to which its rights were sold to Minto in August 1871.¹⁷⁰

A dispute between Minto and Oangbang, emerged soon after, with the Namsangia chief protesting ‘that the Northern Assam Company sold his rights without referring to him as the

¹⁶⁶ ‘Appeal of Mr. Vanqulin’, File No-27-32 B.G, 1872-1873. [ASA]

¹⁶⁷ ‘Dispute between Minto and the Chief of Namsang Nagas’ ‘Foreign Dept. Pol A, October 1873, No 205-211 [NAI]

¹⁶⁸ Ibid

¹⁶⁹ Ibid

¹⁷⁰ Ibid

owner of the land.¹⁷¹ The dispute soon took the shape of a conflict on the amount of ‘yearly rental’ which Minto was expected to pay to the chief. The shift in the terminology of annual payment from ‘yearly subsidy’ during the time of Assam Company to ‘yearly rent’ at this juncture should be noted. The initial arrangement of paying Rs 200 as yearly rental by Minto broke down when Oangbang demanded a sum of Rs 500, against which Minto was willing to pay Rs 350.¹⁷²

As Oangbang remained obstinate in his demand for an annual rental of Rs 500, Minto turned to Clarke, Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur district, to ask whether the tract of country in question was in British territory and whether he could get a ‘title’ to the estates from the British Government.¹⁷³ Clarke replied that the lands ‘purchased by Minto were held under rights from the Nagas’, and that he ‘could give no title’. Minto should hence arrive at a mutual understanding with the chief himself.¹⁷⁴ He added that the ‘territorial jurisdiction’ of the state ‘would not affect the landed and other rights of the tribe.’¹⁷⁵

Offended Minto declared that this meant that the Bengal Government had decided that the dispute was taking place outside ‘British territory’. This he pointed out was a ‘strange conclusion’ as during ‘the same year [1873] government had derived a considerable revenue

¹⁷¹Meeting Minto for the first time, Namsang Chief made his grievance known. Foreign Dept. Pol A, Oct 1873 [NAI]

¹⁷² Ibid

¹⁷³ Ibid

¹⁷⁴ Ibid

¹⁷⁵ Minto to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal. Foreign Dept. Pol A, Oct 1873 [NAI]

from the sale of rubber extending up to the Patkoi range and also had elephant traps at Nam Chick Poong, full six days journey further into the interior than the gardens in question'.¹⁷⁶ Why had the Bengal Government decided to annul Vanqulin's lease with the Namsangias but refused to intervene in Minto's dispute? In effect the 'lumpy' nature of colonial jurisdictions in the frontier, allowed the state to acquire resources without having to claim formal territorial control, but to assert this claim when it was expedient. Vanqulin's lease threatened to break down the state's monopoly over auctioning rubber *mehals* in these areas; an act that could not be silently tolerated in the wake of the predicted 'enormous' profits from the rubber trade. In Minto's case, the colonial policy was different [at least at the Deputy Commissioner's level] because it did not imply immediate economic jeopardy as tea estates at that moment were run completely by private capital. Hence any 'difficulty' in the running of the estates were expected to be dealt privately.

The difference in policy may have arisen however not just from the difference between colonial stakes in tea and rubber. Discrepancies arose sometimes simply due to a change of officers and a difference in their perspectives Campbell, felt the Namsangias could not be allowed to become too 'punctilious' about their proprietary rights, whereas for Clarke 'non-interference' was the prudent way to maintain 'tranquility' in the frontier. The dilemma of intervening or non-intervening in the affairs of the Namsangias was also evident of a larger shift in the colonial policy towards the Nagas. Sanghamitra Misra notes that the policy of 'non-interference' which characterized the overall colonial policy in the Naga Hills from the 1840s gave way to one of direct annexation and subjugation in the 1870s, as evidenced in the ruthless battle fought against

¹⁷⁶ Ibid

the Angami Nagas at Khonoma in 1879 which led to the establishment of the Naga Hills district in 1881.¹⁷⁷

Ordered by the Chief Commissioner of Assam to arrive at a 'formal settlement' between Minto and the Namsangias, Clarke drew up agreements not just with Oangbang, the Namsangia chief but also with Ooangman, the chief of the Bordooria Nagas. The latter he said had also laid claims to the tea estates declaring that they were the 'parent tribe' of the Namsangias. The agreements, holding signatures of the Chiefs stated that the Government of India would pay 'an annuity of Rs 500' to both chiefs for their life and 'to one heir succeeding him for the cession of all their claims, rights and titles' to the tracts including Namsang and Hooanjooree estates' [Towrock tea estate, not included, being seen under a different 'tribe', the Horoomithonias].¹⁷⁸

Hopkinson, however, strongly disapproved the terms being especially critical of Clarke:

having treated with the Chiefs and their heirs as if they stood in the same relation to the lands in question as a landed proprietor does in England in respect to his lands, the fact being that so far as landed rights exist at all among these Naga 'tribes', they are common to the whole tribe, and not to individual chief.¹⁷⁹

The agreement had to be made with 'all the representatives of the tribe'. Hopkinson, declared that the amount paid to each of the 'tribes' was 'far too much', and that Clarke had neglected to

¹⁷⁷ Sanghamitra Misra, 'The Nature of Colonial Intervention in the Naga Hills, 1840-1880', *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 19, 1998, 3273-3279, 3273

¹⁷⁸ 'Surrender of certain lands by the Namsang Nagas', Foreign Dept., Pol- A, August 1874, Nos 216-218 [NAI].

¹⁷⁹ Ibid

insert an important clause, that of making the payment to the tribes ‘subject to the condition of good conduct.’¹⁸⁰ Hopkinson wanted to adhere to the time tested policy of placing such arrangements within the ‘traditionalist’ framework of *posa*, instead of acknowledging the propriety rights of the Namsangias. Having studied Vanqulin’s lease only recently, he was certainly at a better position than Clark to detect a pattern in the activities of the Namsangias. The patch work jurisdictional ambiguities that may have earlier allowed the colonial authorities to take convenient economic as well as political positions, were now being used by the speculators and ‘tribes’ to assert their own agency. There is a ‘learning curve’ discernible in the ways in which the people, negotiated their positions in the ‘resource frontier’.

The Namsangia Nagas, in their forty years of dealing with colonial authorities and European planters had learned to see contracts/agreements as means of asserting their territorial claims. While they had no problem granting a ‘large tract’ of land including not just Brooke’s estate but also lands falling within the boundaries ‘North-Ladoighur, South-Naga Chang, East- Dekhon river, West- Dekhona Nuddee’, to Vanqulin on a meagre yearly rental of Rs 20 in 1872.¹⁸¹ In the case of Minto’s estates, the amount demanded was a non-negotiable rent of Rs 500. The discrepancy in the quoted amounts was a calculated move. For the Namsangia Nagas, the act of granting a lease to a speculator for Rs 20 was far more valuable for it reinstated their landed rights over territories at a moment when these were being rapidly eroded, as evident from the estate transfers taking place without notifying the chief. The Rs. 500 quoted by Oangbang for Minto’s estates, proclaimed in official correspondence as ‘extortionate’, was hence a way of

¹⁸⁰ Ibid

¹⁸¹ ‘Appeal of Mr. Vanqulin’

asserting the chief's claim over the territory as the landowner, by which he reserved the right of quoting the 'rent' of his choosing.¹⁸²

In Vanqulin's case, the speculator's prowess in securing the lease from the Namsangias has to be studied along with his life history. As the son of an employee of the Assam Company, he was born and brought up in these territories.¹⁸³ He in many ways was the speculator par excellence, because of his awareness of the jurisdictional ambiguities of these regions and the nature of dealings that were in place with the 'tribes' of these territories. This gave his endeavors a head start which led him to do what no other speculator had done before- secure a lease for rubber collection from a 'frontier tribe'. In fact, the lease stood as the testimony of Vanquin's partnership with the Namsangias; a partnership that went well beyond the transactions pertaining to the lease. In 1873, for instance when Minto's talks with the Namsangias failed and Clarke refused to intervene, Vanqulin jumped at the opportunity and purchased the Namsang tea estate from Minto.¹⁸⁴ It was almost as if the Namsangias wanted the talks to fail, so Minto would have no option but to sell the estate. And the Namsangias could once again enter into an agreement with their 'accomplice'- Vanqulin- transacting more in rights than anything else.

Though the involvement of the Deputy Commissioner in 1874 stalled such aims, the Namsangias still managed to get their quoted amount on terms that brought their territorial rights away from the 'primitive vagueness' with which they were often referred to in colonial correspondence.

¹⁸² Ibid

¹⁸³ Deputy Commissioner of Lakimpur to Personal Assistant to commissioner of Assam', Foreign Dept., Pol- A, August 1874, Nos 216-218. [NAI]

¹⁸⁴ Ibid

Their agreement with Clarke, as Hopkinson noted, made them look like landed proprietors. But did the Namsangia chief intend for proprietorship? At this juncture it becomes difficult to ascertain. What, however becomes clear is that the Chief and the sundikois had learned to mold their territorial claims on papered landscapes. Agreements holding the signatures of the 'tribal chiefs' were not simply farcical document that tricked the 'ignorant' tribe into giving up their lands. The deed between Vanqulin and the Namsangias was a lesson in 'rights' that the Namsangias had mastered, even though the lease stood cancelled. For them the act of 'leasing' was no different than the act of 'cessation'. When done on papered agreements, both the acts became signifiers of prior landownership which may be evoked by the chiefs at later periods. Kar, in this work has noted the sensitivity developed, since the Singpho rebellion of 1843, amongst the local communities about the 'disproportionate' importance that the colonial regime seemed to put on paper.¹⁸⁵ The Namsangias, were drawing upon this significance of the written word on paper. They were thus, not docile communities, at the receiving end of the resource frontier. Forging alliances with speculators, negotiating rents/rights with planters and colonial officials, the Namsangias were the 'speculative tribes' of Kar, unafraid of risks and open to capital.

The case of Vanqulin and Namsangias hastened the application of the Inner Line Regulations in 1873, which at that moment was awaiting the delineation of 'territorial boundaries'. The official correspondence discussing Vanqulin and the Namsangias included notes from the then Governor General in Council who ordered that the movements of British subjects beyond the 'inner line' be put to certain restrictions or 'it might even be in the case of Europeans, forbidden altogether.'

¹⁸⁵ Kar, 'Nomadic Capital and Speculative Tribes', 46

Indeed the inner line setting new jurisdictional limits for the districts of Assam was mainly intended on stalling the troublesome activities between European speculators and frontier tribes, brought to the forefront most explicitly by the rubber deals. Such ‘restrictions and prohibitions’, it was noted would ‘result in inducing tribesmen to bring their rubber to marts within the line of British jurisdictions, where contact with competing speculators would have a good rather than a bad effect’.¹⁸⁶

Mehaldars, Rubber Tappers and a ‘Legitimate’ Trans-Frontier Trade.

To recapitulate from the first chapter, the ‘bad effect’ of speculators was first noted in 1869 by the *mehaldars* of the rubber trade whose monopolistic rights to purchase rubber within the *mehal* boundaries was infringed due to speculation activities. At the heart of this crisis was the ‘para-legal’ stature of the rubber *mehals* whose blurred and negated boundaries enabled the *mehaldars* to transcend political borders to purchase rubber. The speculators, who were breaking deals with the various trans- frontier ‘tribes’, dragged both the *mehaldars* as well as colonial authorities to the court, arguing the colonial state could not lease *mehals* in areas that jurisdictionally did not fall under it. Vanqulin’s attempt at acquiring a rubber lease, not from the colonial authorities but from the Namsangias came from the larger ‘speculative rhetoric’ that exposed the vulnerability of patchwork jurisdictions in trans-frontier tracts.

As the colonial authorities, *mehaldars* and the speculators wrestled on the question of legitimately engaging in the trans-frontier rubber trade in the 1870s, there existed a system in the Bhutan-Cooch Behar border that allowed British subjects, living in British territory, to hold

¹⁸⁶ ‘Dispute between Mr. Minto and the Chief of Namsang Nagas’.

rubber *mehal* leases in Bhutan.¹⁸⁷The rubber *mehals*, held by British subjects in Bhutan make an important point of comparison with the rubber *mehals* of the northeastern frontier. They also provide the context for elaborating on the activities of individual *mehaldars*.

The *mehaldars* of both Bhutan-Cooch Behar border and the districts of Assam were British subjects, living in British territories, who shared a zeal to collect rubber from the trans-frontier rubber bearing tracts. But there was a difference between the *mehals* they bought. In the case of the northeastern frontier, the *mehals* bought, were physically located within British territory and legally the *mehaldars* had no right to the rubber growing beyond political boundary. In the case of the Bhutan-Cooch Behar border however, the *mehals* were physically located in the forests of Bhutan. This meant that the *mehaldars* of these leases who were living in British territory, had managed to secure a legitimate right to the rubber growing beyond political borders.

The establishment of a rubber *mehal* in Bhutan implied firstly that the region was recognized as an independent country with its own state-form. The noted 'willingness' of Deb or Bhutan Raja to have commercial relations with British India, sealed in the 'Sinchula Treaty of 1865' hence translated into a 'legitimate trans-frontier rubber trade' between two countries.¹⁸⁸ In the districts of Assam, the rubber *mehal*'s negation of political borders to appropriate resources can be seen

¹⁸⁷ 'India-Rubber trade with Bhutan', B.G, Pol, April 1875, Nos 27-25 [NAI]

¹⁸⁸ The Sinchula Treaty signed in 1865 was considered 'one of the landmarks' in the British-Bhutanese relations. The 'article nine' of this treaty noted that 'there shall be free trade and commerce between the two governments and no duty should be levied on the goods imported by either side.' See, Neil Fraser, Anima Bhattacharya, Bimalendu Bhattacharya, *Geography of a Himalayan Kingdom: Bhutan*, (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2001), 15

as a way of denying the state form to communities living in these trans-border tracts. The enthusiasm of the communities like the Akas, Dafflas and Nagas to engage in the rubber business hence could never result in commercial ‘treaties’ with the British authorities. Instead these communities and their territories were sucked into transactions that did not require the meeting of basic political protocols, like clarifying who owned these tracts?- a contentious question- both in the tracts to the north of the Brahmaputra Valley comprising the ‘Aka country’ and ‘Daffla country’ referred often as ‘foreign territory’ in colonial correspondence; as well as in the region to the south of the Brahmaputra Valley- the ‘un-surveyed lands’- where the granting of ‘rubber leases’ by the Namsangias, had started a saga of landed rights.

In the Bhutan-Cooch Behar border, the *mehaldars* running the ‘legitimate’ trans-frontier trade were Bengali and Marwari businessman. The official correspondence on the ‘India-rubber trade in Bhootan’ referred to a ‘Bengali businessman’, Moti Babu and a ‘Marwari merchant’, Aidan Oswal, both residents of Cooch Behar and owners of individual rubber *mehals* in Bhutan.¹⁸⁹ Moti Babu was the owner of the ‘Cheerung Dooar’ lease, which fell under the Cherrang Subah of Bhutan and was said to be ‘in good terms’ with its subahdar whom he paid an annual rent of Rs 1600. The official correspondence, also noted that ‘he had a Bhooteah agent, a Lama through whom he [had] no difficulty referring to the Subah.’ The other *mehaldar*, Aidan Oswal held two leases. First lease he received for a period of one year at Rs 1200, and comprised the tract in Bhutan ‘from Chononhi river to Sunkoss’.¹⁹⁰ The second lease he received for six months at Rs 1200, and comprised of tracts between ‘Sunkoss and Pisu rivers’.

¹⁸⁹ ‘India-rubber Trade with Bhutan’.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid

There is a fair bit of information on the mode of rubber collection undertaken by these *mehaldars*. Oswal, for instance, provided an advance of money, rice and cloth to Nepalese coolies, who went and extracted rubber from the trees on the land covered by the lease. The advance was made on the condition that they sell all the rubber collected there to him only. On delivery, the coolies were paid Rs 35 per maund, minus the preliminary advance. [an amount quite less in comparison to what the frontier ‘tribes’ of Assam were getting at this point]. The fact that Oswal chose Nepalese coolies and not Bhutanese for rubber extraction has to be noted.¹⁹¹ Nepalese were considered better skilled in rubber tapping as compared to the ‘Bhootiahs’ who were seen as lacking the art. As a migratory group of people the Nepalese coolies moved between the polities of Nepal, Bhutan and British Indian territories, providing services.¹⁹² Most of the rubber tapping across the Bhutan-Cooch Behar frontier was done by them with the rubber collected noted to be ‘particularly fine’.¹⁹³

The system of procuring rubber from legitimate leases in Bhutan thus appeared quite devoid of the cumbersome conflicts of the rubber trade of the northeastern frontier. However, from 1875

¹⁹¹ The engagement of the Marwaris with the Nepalese, may be seen as the building of channels of trade and commerce between these two communities. In fact, it has been noted that the ties between Marwaris and Nepalese became so strong that the first factory in Nepal was started by a Marwari group who went to exercise ‘considerable power in Nepal’s business life’, See Brij. V. Lal, *The Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 153.

¹⁹² The history of Nepalese traversing the frontier lands as graziers, rubber-tappers, soldiers have been well covered in the secondary literature, see, Dillip kumar Chattopadhyay, *History of Assamese Movement Since 1947*, (Calcutta: Minerva Associates, 1990) 48.

¹⁹³ ‘India-Rubber trade with Bhutan’.

the official correspondence started noting disputes in this trade. There were complaints made by the *mehaldars*, that rubber collected from their leases in Bhutan was stolen and sold in British territory.¹⁹⁴ The ‘thefts’ apparently were happening for two reasons. Firstly, the tracts leased out for rubber collection in Bhutan, like the *mehals* of the northeastern frontier, were found to be ‘ill defined’. Rubber was usually collected from ‘pathless forests’, and brought into British territory without any covering pass. This made it impossible for the *mehaldars* who resided in British territory and received the produce here, ‘to know their own property.’ This in-turn allowed other agents/merchants/ and even *mehaldars* to buy ‘anyone’s rubber’ as soon as it entered British territory. The operations of these ‘other groups’ of people seem quite similar to the activities of the speculator from the northeastern frontier, who jeopardized *mehaldari* monopoly by buying the ‘foreign caoutchouc’ directly from the frontier ‘tribes’.

Secondly, the fact that ‘stolen’ rubber from the leases in Bhutan was disposed only in British territory showed an active involvement of the people closely connected with the existing channels of trade, mainly the rubber- tappers hired by the *mehaldars*. Sir W. J Herschel, Commissioner of the Cooch Behar Division, noted that the ‘men engaged in this illicit traffic’ may come from the *mehaldar*’s own channel of rubber extraction. He noted, ‘they may very possibly be the coolies themselves who are employed, or their confederates.’¹⁹⁵ Oswal, for instance, in a letter to Herschel, expressed strong ‘suspicion’ that many of his coolies may be selling his rubber to Moti Baboo, his competitor.¹⁹⁶ Herschel, writing to the Secretary to the

¹⁹⁴ Ibid

¹⁹⁵ ‘Remarks on Commissioner’s Note on India-rubber trade’, B.G, Pol, April 1875, Nos 27-25 [NAI]

¹⁹⁶ Ibid

Government of Bengal, noted, 'possibly Moti Baboo holds the same suspicion of Aidan's [Oswal] transactions as Aidan does of his.'¹⁹⁷

The involvement of the coolies in the illicit trade is quite similar to the involvement of the northeastern frontier 'tribes' in the activities of the speculator. The similarity arises because the channels of rubber extractions, whether legal *mehals* or para legal; illicit or speculative, were directly dependent on the latex collected by the rubber tappers, who by virtue of traversing in the trans-frontier lands had come to wield considerable amount of flexibility in their operations. For instance, in the northeastern frontier, rubber tapping was conducted by the Akas, Dafflas, Mishmees and Abors who, after bringing down the rubber from the trans-frontier tracts into British territory, instead of selling it to the *mehaldars*, exercised a discretion of selling it either to the *mehaldar* or the speculator. The nature of this discretion stemmed from the 'tribe's' familiarity as well as relative control of the rubber bearing tracts. Also the ambiguous boundaries of the *mehals* that allowed a transcendence of political boundaries, created a highly fluid space of operations for the 'tribe', where their product can hardly be subjected to any kind of pre conceived ownership.

Such a level of discretionary power was also seen in the operations of the Bhutan-Cooch Behar coolies. Here the discretion came not from the control of the rubber-bearing tracts, but more from the coolies being, in most cases, the only physical means of rubber extraction between the *mehaldars* in British territory and their *mehals* in Bhutan. The custom of providing an advance to the coolies, did not guarantee that the coolies would return from Bhutan and sell the produce only to the *mehaldars*. *Mehaldars* like Oswal, for instance, noted 'great losses suffered' by

¹⁹⁷ Ibid

paying advances to the coolies as many coolies never came back, and if they did, very little rubber was brought.¹⁹⁸ Moreover, the ill-defined boundaries of the Bhutan leases, added with the rubber entering British territory without pass accounted for a fluid channel of extraction to prevail in the Bhutan-Cooch Behar border as well.

As disputes over stolen rubber grew, the colonial authorities in Cooch Behar, like Captain Money, attempted diplomatic talks with the 'Deb Rajah' to 'take steps in his own territory to protect those who hold lease under him.' I do not at this point have information as to how the Deb responded to the disputes. But it is clear from a few references that the disputes were strong enough for the colonial authorities to abolish the system and contemplate the application of Inner Line in these regions.¹⁹⁹ It thus appears that the structural difference noted between the *mehals* of Bhutan-Cooch Behar border and the *mehals* of the northeastern frontier, at the early part of this section, were somewhat superficial. The 'legality' or the 'illegality' of the *mehals*, only had a bearing on the recognition of statehood in certain territories and denial in others. It did not in any way condition the nature of rubber extraction, which in 1870s had started to take place more outside the *mehals* than within it. This means that, the channels of rubber extraction could never be adequately regulated or controlled by the colonial authorities, for the category of 'legal' to matter in the true sense. In this context, it is doubtful if legislations like the Inner Line Regulation of 1873, which attempted to restrict trans-frontier operations, were of any help in establishing government authority.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹⁹ Ibid

Conclusion

The decade of 1870s registered as a highly active phase in the resource frontier of rubber. Speculative activities made the colonial state anxious about its control over the channels of rubber extraction. However, as the decade unfolded, it became evident that the mode of rubber extraction was such that the government could never exercise any real control over it. *Mehals* may have been instituted, regulations may have been passed, but the ultimate shape that the resource frontier of rubber took was contingent on the various participants of the trade, and the nature of their transactions. And herein lay the relational nature of the resource frontier that was molded at every turn by people and relationships which appeared deceptively subservient in the first glance. The operations of the rubber trade were at no point simply managed by the state, the *mehaldar* or the speculator. The speculative bubble working in ‘feedback loops’ thrived for more than a decade in this frontier, because other grass root actors like the ‘tribes’ and the coolies learned to maneuver their commercial and political positions in extractive networks. These transactions, both in business and politics continued till 1884, when the first signs of a slump in the rubber trade emerged.

‘Objects’ of Appropriations: Locating the Material Efficacies of Rubber. 1810-1897.

‘A true idea must agree with its object’²⁰⁰

The idea that things or objects possess efficacies that affect human designs and endeavors, often finds itself in contradiction to the critical theory of demystification that ‘presumes at the heart of every event lies a human agency that has illicitly been projected into things.’²⁰¹ Karl Marx, for instance, attempted to demystify commodities and prevent their fetishisation by arguing that the ‘commodity form’ and ‘the value relation of the products of labour’ had no connection with the ‘physical nature of the commodity’.²⁰² Commodities, for Marx, were merely the projections of social relationships of humans involved in production. The material quality of the commodity itself had little role to play in the larger structures of production and distribution. It is hence, ironic that Marx called his theories- ‘the materialist conception of history’- when in actuality they were demonstrative of an ‘almost metaphysical indifference of matter in the self professedly materialist accounts’.²⁰³

Historically, however, the idea that matter or objects possess the ability to bring change has been found in the works of a number of philosophers, writers and novelists. For instance, the

²⁰⁰Don Garrett, ‘Representation, Misrepresentation, and Error in Spinozas’s Philosophy of Mind’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, ed. Michael Della Rocca (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

²⁰¹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (USA: Duke University Press, 2010), xiv

²⁰² Karl Marx, *Capital* (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), 165

²⁰³ Partha Chatterjee, Tapti Guha-Thakurta and Bodhisattva Kar, ed. *New Cultural Histories of India*. (India: Oxford University Press, 2013), 12

seventeenth century philosopher Baruch Spinoza had argued that ‘every idea has an object with which it is parallel in an order of connection and causes, and indeed with which it is identical or one and same’.²⁰⁴ Don Garrett in his essay elaborating Spinoza’s notion of representation and misrepresentation, notes, the Axiom six of Part I from the philosopher’s celebrated work, *Ethics*, which says the, ‘a true idea must agree with its object’. The truth of an idea, comes from a non-hierarchical agreement of the subject with the object, where the object is not a mere projection of super-imposed ideas, but is in fact the subject itself, i.e., the bringer of change. Virginia Woolf in her novel *Orlando* similarly portrayed things as subjects with agency when she made her comment on clothes saying, ‘it is clothes which wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking’²⁰⁵.

Incipient in Woolf’s words was an urge to break the binary between active humans and passive things. This urge maybe seen more explicitly in the frequent use of anthropomorphism as a storytelling and artistic device. An instance of anthropomorphism that has an uncanny relevance with the subject of the present chapter is O. Henry’s ‘The Rubber Plant’s Story’.²⁰⁶ Written in late nineteenth century, the narrator of the story is the rubber plant itself, giving delightful glimpses of its experiences with various people as it got sold into different households as an ornamental plant. While the human like portrayal of the rubber plant certainly provides an inspiration to break the vertical plane in which humans and things are often placed, however, its existence as a

²⁰⁴ Garrett, ‘Representation, Misrepresentation, and Error in Spinoza’s Philosophy of Mind’.

²⁰⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998),180

²⁰⁶ O. Henry, *Waifs and Strays: Twelve Stories* (USA: Start Publishing LLC, 2012)

household ‘ornamental’ plant in late nineteenth century, will eventually serve as bit of a shock to the reader, as a significant part of the chapter in fact deals with the rubber plant’s resistance to domestication.

The present chapter attempts to analyse the dynamics between ‘objects’ and ‘frontiers’ by exploring certain themes of rubber appropriation which have received only a marginal reference until now. The themes for discussion include: the early colonial studies on the rubber tree of Assam, conduction of experiments on the rubber tree in plantation settings after 1872, emergence of contraband trade in rubber after the application of the inner line regulations in 1873 and the allegations pertaining to the prevalence of impurities in Assam rubber. The attempt here is to invoke a ‘resource centric’ narrative that goes beyond the ‘human centric’ continuum of disruptive state practices and local dialogical engagements. Through such a narrative, I hope to unveil the intermeshed relationship that spatio-geographical realms like frontiers share with their objects of appropriations, referred often as resources.

That objects of appropriations, like minerals, trees, fishes, animal hides etc., possess material potencies, having the ability to conjure tangible effects in the various historically located processes is a theme left relatively unexplored in the studies of resource frontiers.²⁰⁷ For instance, John F Richard’s extensive history of extractive frontiers in a ‘global context’,

²⁰⁷ Terms like ‘potency’, ‘vitality’ and ‘efficacy’ have been used in the works of scholars like Jane Bennett as descriptions for matter, things and objects. These terms attempt to develop a vocabulary for explaining certain arguments of materiality. For instance, the idea of humans being a ‘potent mix of minerals’ or bones coming into being out of a ‘mineral efficacy’ to evolve; or ‘garbage hills’ being alive due to the ‘vitality’ of the ‘poisonous’ gases oozing out of it. See, Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 6-11

encompassing fur trading, cod fishing, whaling among few, exists largely as an anthropogenic study of environmental change across early modern and modern times.²⁰⁸ Anna Tsing's study of 'capitalist frontiers' involved in 'logging activities' similarly works within a generic model of human centric activities, with only occasional non-human actors like landscapes thrown in. What remains completely obscure is the resource object itself.²⁰⁹ Are the timber forests in Tsing's description completely passive to the onslaught of human intervention; or did the sweeping histories of commercial whaling in the Arctic, noted by Richards, overlook a 'Moby Dick' - a resource object which fought back.²¹⁰ Drawing upon Spinoza's declaration, this chapter articulates that a 'true resource frontier', must agree with its 'resource object'. Otherwise the idea of a resource frontier stands as a misrepresentation or in Spinoza's words, 'an error.'²¹¹

In the north eastern tracts of British India, rubber led to a resource frontier whose effects, pointed not only towards human actors but also towards a force generated essentially from the material qualities that rubber exhibited at the various stages of its appropriation. The chapter elucidates this argument at two levels. The first level deals with *Ficus Elastica*, the India-rubber plant of the

²⁰⁸ Richards, *The Unending Frontier*

²⁰⁹ Tsing, 'Natural Resources and Capitalist Frontiers'.

²¹⁰ Moby Dick is the fictional white whale of Herman Melville's novel titled *Moby Dick*. The plot of the novel centred around Moby Dick destroying Captain Ahab's whaler and the latter seeking revenge on the whale. Published first in 1851, Melville's story was inspired from real life events recorded in early 19th century about whales attacking ships with 'premeditated ferocity', leading to the devastation of many whaling missions, see, Jeremiah Reynolds, 'Mocha Dick: or the white whale of the pacific: a leaf from a manuscript journal', *The Knickerbocker, or New-York Monthly Magazine*, May 1839, 377-392.

²¹¹ Garrett, 'Representation, Misrepresentation, and Error in Spinozas's Philosophy of Mind'

northeast and some of its characteristics as they started influencing some of the dominant state practices of the time. The second level deals with the material efficacies of the coagulated rubber latex that was circulating in the frontier zone as the prime commodity of the contraband rubber trade. Material efficacy, here refers to the qualities that the various manipulated forms of rubber latex possessed and the ways in which these impressed upon the networks of exchange.

The ‘Elusive’ Nature of *Ficus Elastica*.

In 1879, almost 70 years after the discovery of rubber in the north eastern frontier of British India and ten years after the commencement of the rubber plantations in the region, Dietrich Brandis, the then Inspector General for Forests noted, ‘... we often see that of two trees [*Ficus Elastica* plants] standing at no great distance from each other and both apparently in the same condition, one yields milk in profusion, while the other only furnishes a small quantity... cause of these differences we know nothing.’²¹²

Brandis’s quote indicated a persistent theme in the official reports and journals concerning the strangely elusive nature of the rubber tree of Assam, known botanically as *Ficus Elastica*. The tree from the very beginning existed as a series of irreconcilable questions for the botanists, demonstrating it as an entity difficult to comprehend. As artificial propagation of the tree commenced within the plantations setting, it became apparent that ‘elusivity’ seen in its constantly shifting, unpredictable demeanors, was an inextricable essence of the tree. It made the tree formidably resistant to attempts of domestication and thwarted the growth of plantations for decades.

²¹² Brandis, ‘Suggestions regarding Forest administration in Assam’

Borgach: a 'sculptural' enigma

In 1810, a British magistrate, Mr Matthew Richard Smith, from Sylhet [located in present day Bangladesh], sent a rattan vessel called 'turrong' filled with honey to the Superintendent of the Calcutta Botanical Gardens, Dr William Roxburgh. Smith, who was a self-styled plant collector, had observed 'that the inside of the vessel was smeared over with the juice of a tree which grows on the mountains'. On inspection by Roxburgh, the vessel was found to be lined with a 'thin coat of caoutchouc [natural rubber]',²¹³

Soon after a series of official tours and enquiries were conducted by the colonial authorities to gather information about the whereabouts of the indigenous rubber tree of the northeastern tracts of British India. One of the first reports on the subject was prepared by William Griffith in 1838, at the request of Capt. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General. Griffith, known then as an 'emergent specialist on the fauna and flora of the Assam hills' noted that the forests in which the rubber tree is found extends from the western to the eastern end of the Assam valley, at least on its northern boundaries.²¹⁴ Within a couple of years, however, it became clear that the tree was not merely restricted to the Assam Valley. It was found scattered in the foothills of the Himalayas, from Nepal extending all the way eastwards, into the province of Assam and the surrounding frontier tracts. As noted by the Deputy Conservator of Forests, Imperial Forest Service, E. M Coventry in 1906, in his illustrative book titled, *Ficus Elastica*, the tree existed naturally in the 'Khasia Hills up to an elevation of 3000 feet' and was also seen in the Hukawng valley of Upper Burma. In Assam, the tree was frequently found in Darrang and Lakhimpur

²¹³ Griffith, 'Report on the Caoutchouc Tree of Assam'.

²¹⁴ Ibid

district but was also reported to be most densely found in the frontier tracts bordering the province like that of the Aka, Duffla and Naga Hills.²¹⁵

Despite the later findings, Griffith's 'Report on the Caoutchouc Tree of Assam', however remains crucial to get glimpses into the aspects of early encounters with the tree. In his report, he writes that the rubber tree, known by the Assamese as the *Borgach*, literally 'big tree', occurred in the forest as 'a solitary tree'. But occasionally, it was also found in groups of two or three. In size the *Borgach*, was believed to be 'far superior' to all the other trees, being inferior only to the banyan. With an average height of about one hundred feet, the *Borgach* was distinguished from a great distance in the forest 'by its dense, immense and lofty crown'.²¹⁶ It was, however the unusual nature of its trunk that made the tree particularly 'extraordinary' in Griffith's eyes. The trunk of the *Borgach* differed from any ordinary tree trunk because it had, what Griffith described, 'a sculptural appearance'.²¹⁷ This in his opinion made the tree look 'extremely picturesque'. The sculpted appearance arose firstly, from the tendency of the 'tree to throw out roots both from the main trunk as well as from the branches' and secondly from the 'extreme tendency' that these roots had of 'coher[ing] with the trunk or with each other.'²¹⁸

²¹⁵ E.M Coventry, *Ficus Elastica: Its Natural Growth and Artificial Propagation with a Description of the Method of Tapping the Tree and of the Preparation of its Rubber for the Market* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1906), 1.

²¹⁶ The name *Borgach* today exists as local name used by the Assamese to refer to Fig trees in general.

²¹⁷ Griffith, 'Report on the Caoutchouc Tree of Assam'

²¹⁸ Ibid

Placing the *Borgach* in the genus of the ‘Fig tree’ which displayed a similar tendency of cohesion, Griffith went on to note the other characteristics of the tree. He was especially intrigued by the simultaneously ‘self-destructive’ as well as ‘parasitic’ nature of the *Borgach*.²¹⁹ The self-destructive nature of the tree resulted from the roots and branches cohering around the trunk to ultimately form a ‘nearly solid and excessively firm cylinder’ which enclosed the main trunk to ‘such an extent that the death of the tree [was] sure to occur sooner or later.’²²⁰ The *Borgach* was also parasitical because its seedling ‘as a rule’ grew in the ‘forks and crevices in the barks of the light-foliaged trees at a great height from the ground’.²²¹ The young seedling thus obtained a ‘good start over its rivals in the struggle for existence’.²²² As the seedling grew into a young plant, it remained an epiphyte for years until its aerial roots touched the ground. On reaching earth, the ‘little epiphyte’ metamorphosed into a ‘vigorous tree’, throwing out more aerial roots which gradually engulfed the host tree, often killing it. It is precisely this characteristic that made Griffith denominate the *Borgach* as a ‘parasitical epiphyte.’²²³

The *Borgach*, for Griffith as well as later colonial officials remained an enigmatic tree. Being both self-destructive and parasitical, it became emblematic of a formidable force in nature. Its natural growth was such that it destroyed as well as recreated itself in ways that allowed it a mastery over the forest. Starting its life ‘so high up’ in the barks of the trees, it was able to throw out branches which ‘overtopped the surrounding trees’ and formed what Griffith called ‘a

²¹⁹ Ibid

²²⁰ Ibid

²²¹ Coventry, *Ficus Elastica*, 2

²²² Ibid, 3

²²³ Griffith, ‘Report on the Caoutchouc Tree of Assam’

network'. The numerous aerial roots from this network soon established connection with the ground and within a few years' time the tree 'dominate[d] the forest growth around it.'²²⁴ These characteristics made it practically impossible to know the complete extent of the *Borgach*'s labyrinth in the wild.



Pic 1. A *Borgach* of about 120 feet high, growing in the forests of the north eastern tracts of British India. The photo was produced by Coventry in his book on *Ficus Elastica* (1906.)²²⁵.

²²⁴ Coventry, *Ficus Elastica*, 3

²²⁵ *Ibid*

From Borgach to Ficus Elastica: a difficult transition

As Griffith meticulously noted down his observations on the *Borgach* in 1838, he was probably aware of the difficulties the tree would display if an attempt was made to domesticate it. The transition of the ‘wild’ *Borgach* into the ‘tameable’ botanical plant *Ficus Elastica* was not an easy one. It was a journey that was fraught with unsolved questions. For instance, one of the first questions raised was regarding the nature of the climatic conditions under which the tree grew. Griffith noted that the tree was of a ‘decidedly tropical nature’.²²⁶ In fact, certain colonial forest officials like M.H Thompson, argued that the main factor behind the growth of *Ficus Elastica* was the ‘excessive humidity’ of Assam’s tropical atmosphere.²²⁷ However, that the tree also grew naturally in temperate climates, was known and noted by Griffith himself in a later description.²²⁸ The question of the ideal climatic condition required for the favourable growth of *Ficus Elastica* was further complicated, when Coventry noted that the tree ‘was found growing in abundance in the Lounau hills [Upper Burma] at an altitude of 5,200 feet’ and was also ‘reported from high altitudes in the Jan Mun Bun mountains [Upper Burma]...the highest crests and peaks of which are covered with large masses of snow in the winter’.²²⁹ The climatic conditions noted by Coventry were thus in sharp contradiction with the ones noted by Griffith and Thompson. Indeed it were these contradictions, seen sometimes in the tree’s ‘parasitical’ and

²²⁶ Griffith, ‘Report on the Caoutchouc Tree of Assam’

²²⁷ Coventry, *Ficus Elastica*, 1.

²²⁸ William Griffith and John McClelland, *Journals of the Travels in Assam, Bhutan, Burma, Afghanistan and the Neighbouring countries* (Calcutta: Bishop’s College Press, 1847)

²²⁹ Coventry, *Ficus Elastica*, 2.

‘self-destructive’ dynamics and sometimes in its ability to withstand both ‘tropical’ and ‘temperate’ climates, which made the *Borgach* strangely elusive to the botanical minds of the times.

Appropriation of the *Borgach* and its conversion into *Ficus Elastica* in plantations, hence required a constant engagement with many of these contradictions. Griffith, however downplayed the idea of rubber plantations suggesting that the tree was naturally available in ‘abundance’ with an estimation of nearly 42,000 rubber plants located, in the north eastern tracts. He asserted that Assam alone could meet ‘all demands’ for rubber.²³⁰ Downplay of the idea of plantations by Griffith seemed strange at the first instance, because rubber was a commodity of immense commercial value at that moment. In the early nineteenth century rubber was extensively used as ‘water proof coating for cloth in Macintosh raincoats’, the name of the raincoats derived from the name of their inventor Charles Macintosh.²³¹ By the time of Griffith’s report, every kind of coat was produced and exported out of Britain with rubberized fabric, including riding coats, coats supplied to British army, British railways and to its police forces. The needs for rubber had become so well recognized that ground breaking researches were occurring globally to improve the quality of rubber. The vulcanization mechanism developed by

²³⁰ Griffith, ‘Report on the Caoutchouc Tree of Assam’

²³¹ Barbara Stuart, *Analytical Techniques in Materials Conservation* (England: John Wiley & Sons, 2007),

Charles Goodyear in 1839, which improved the durability of rubber drastically, for instance, was the result of rubber experiments that began many years before.²³²

The discovery of *Ficus Elastica*, in these early years led to considerable excitement in the colonial official circles as it was seen as an opportunity to break the existing monopoly of Para rubber from Brazil in the world rubber trade. ‘Assam rubber’ was even proclaimed superior than the Brazilian variety by David Brewster, a notable London based scientist, in the very early years.²³³ In these circumstances it was thus quite surprising that Griffith asserted naturally growing rubber trees would meet ‘all demands’ for a global market, without a need for its systematized artificial propagation in plantations. Here, there can be two possible reasons for Griffith’s assertion. Either, he genuinely believed in the inextinguishable nature of *Borgach* as an object of resource appropriation or he found the prospect of domesticating the *Borgach*, an unrealizable project, hence chose to concentrate instead on the abundance of the tree.

Whatever the reason, Griffith’s reluctance to domesticate the *Borgach* left a mark. Since then, it took more than three decades for the first rubber plantations to be established in the northeast by an order of the Lieutenant Governor General of Bengal in May 1873.²³⁴ This was the time when speculative activities had triggered an extraordinary interest in the rubber trade. The peaking of interest in the commodity was not matched however by the state of botanical knowledge about

²³² Vulcanization referred to a process by which rubber was cross-linked with sulfur to reduce plasticity and to develop elasticity.

²³³ D. Morris, ‘Sources of Commercial India Rubber’, *Journal of the Society of Arts*. XLVI (1898): 786.

²³⁴ Gustav Mann, Conservator of Forests, Assam, to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Home Dept, Forests, May 1884, Nos 1-5,[NAI]

the tree, which still remained scanty at this time. Rubber plantations, hence were strongly dependent on local knowhow. The *Borgach*, for instance, was known to be planted by the Aka ‘tribe’ in the hills bordering the Darrang district of upper Assam.²³⁵ The first rubber plantation was hence strategically started in 1873, in the Charduar forests of Darrang, located close to the Aka hills, with an intention to draw from the local knowledge about the trees. At Charduar, the locals distinguished between two varieties of the *Borgach*- the *Bogi Bor* and *Shikha Bor*.²³⁶ It was the *Bogi Bor* which had much larger leaves that was affirmed as the tree yielding better rubber. The quality of rubber was ascertained quickly by rubbing a few drops of the milk drawn from the tree in the palm of the hand, which caused the ‘watery juice’ to separate, leaving a small round ball of rubber, that was struck hard once or twice to check its ‘elasticity’.²³⁷ The quality of rubber produced also depended on the age of the tree yielding it. It was reported that older trees produced a better quality than the younger ones. In fact, the age at which the rubber plant matured to yield a suitable quality of latex became a subject of heated debate that indicated some of the official anxieties about the starting of rubber plantations; anxieties which considerably magnified in 1884 with the crash in the rubber prices in Calcutta.

Some of these debates were recalled in the 1884 report of Gustav Mann, Conservator of Forests, Assam, on the rubber plantations²³⁸ The report also carried with it the correspondence between the then Chief Commissioner of Assam, Sir Charles Alfred Elliot and Mann, where the former frequently doubted the feasibility of rubber plantations by comparing it with the existing tea

²³⁵ Coventry, *Ficus Elastica*.

²³⁶ Ibid,2

²³⁷ Griffith, ‘Report on the Caoutchouc Tree of Assam’.

²³⁸ Mann, ‘Rubber Plantations in Assam’, Home Dept, Forests, May 1884, Nos 1-5,[NAI]

plantations of Assam. Elliot was of the opinion that the growth of rubber by government should be treated on the same principle as those which regulated the growth of tea. In the case of tea, the government made the first experiments in plantation and then the industry was handed over to private capital. Mann however, questioned the comparison between tea and rubber as both the plants for him, were fundamentally different from each other.²³⁹ Mann, for instance noted that a tea plant grown in the form of bushes matured within six months to produce tea leaves and was hence, aptly suited for private enterprise. A rubber plant however was not a bush. It was a tree that needed about 20 years, at least, to mature and provide latex of a good quality. Mann in the correspondence noted,

a man may start a [tea] garden, and yet reap all the advantages, before he dies... But to expect a capitalist to start a rubber plantation in Assam, so that his grandchildren may reap the fruits thereof is quite utopian.²⁴⁰

Doubting that private enterprise would ever have the patience for rubber plantations, Mann urged that the project of growing rubber trees 'be treated as an imperial one.'²⁴¹ However, the long temporal scale required by the rubber trees to mature and the resultant unsuitability for opening it up for private endeavors, remained a strong criticism for investing in rubber plantations.

²³⁹ Ibid

²⁴⁰ Ibid

²⁴¹ Mann in his report noted that it was the duty of the state to have rubber plantations in Assam'. But cost of rubber plantations should not be borne by the province of Assam alone. Forest revenues from other provinces needed to be invested in this project, see, Mann. 'Rubber Plantations in Assam'.

The official anxieties about rubber plantations were further corroborated by the constant difficulties experienced in the artificial propagation of *Ficus Elastica* in the plantation setting. The first ambiguity in the growth of the tree came from the inability on the part of the colonial botanists to replicate the tree's natural method of growth in plantations. For instance, in imitation of the tree's growth in the wild as an epiphyte, the first seedlings were planted in the Charduar plantations in the forks and on the branches of other trees.²⁴² However, the growth of the seedlings in this set up was reported to be very slow and all of them died. As a result of which, the Charduar plantation came to a standstill as there were no seedlings left to be planted. About 400 seedlings were then bought from the Miris, a tribe dwelling close to the Aka hills.²⁴³ It was then experimented that the seedlings would be first put in cane baskets and then these baskets would be placed in the forks of the trees.²⁴⁴ The desire to replicate the natural growth of the tree as epiphytes was hence still very strong. This desire was connected with the general belief noted by Brandis, that 'rubber trees will not be productive unless they...commenced life as epiphytes.'²⁴⁵ The experiment as Coventry noted, was first started in 1875 'on January 25th...and up till the 21st April they [seedlings] looked everything that could be desired; in all 400 plants were put out, but in May 1905 only one survived.'²⁴⁶

²⁴² *Ibid*

²⁴³ Arupjyoti Saikia, 'From Jungles to Forests: Aspects of Early Scientific Conservation of Assam, 1839-1947', in, *History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization: pt. 1. Science, Technology, Imperialism and War.* ed. Debi Prasad Chattopadhyaya (India: Pearson Education India, 1999), 255

²⁴⁴ Coventry, *Ficus Elastica*, 8

²⁴⁵ Brandis, 'Suggestions regarding Forest administration in Assam'

²⁴⁶ Coventry, *Ficus Elastica*, 8

The epiphytic growth of the *Borgach* which made it a formidable tree in the wild, hence remained an elusive force in the plantation setting, beyond the comprehension of the botanical minds. In 1879, when Brandis commented on the absolute lack of knowledge about the rubber trees, he was essentially hinting on this incomprehensibility, which made the tree very unpredictable. The way in which the seedlings, placed quite favourably in the crevices of the trees died, showed in some way the resistance of the *Borgach* to domestication. It was this resistance which ultimately slowed the growth of rubber plantations in Assam in the nineteenth century.

The many failed experiments of the initial decades made it clear that it was futile to recreate the conditions of natural growth for *Ficus Elastica*. Mann, noted in 1884 that the attempt to grow the plant ‘in the forks of other trees...has almost been given up.’²⁴⁷ He, instead remarked that ‘trees planted on small mounds of earth of 3 to 4 feet in height’ grew much better.²⁴⁸ Indeed most of the rubber trees of the Charduar plantation were grown in this manner. To plant the seedlings lines of about 20 feet broad were cleared through the Charduar forests and all shrubs and trees falling on the way were cut down. The lines with the planted seedlings were set 100 feet apart and this distance between the lines was allowed to retain its forest cover.²⁴⁹ The rubber plantations were hence started as a form of plantations existing within the forest itself.

²⁴⁷ Mann. ‘Rubber Plantations in Assam’.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁹ The forest cover was retained between the lines of planted trees in order to retain the natural moisture of the atmosphere.

By late 1890s, when the Charduar plantation was readied for the first systematised rubber tapping exercise, it seemed that the transition from *Borgach* to *Ficus Elastica* had at last been completed. In 1892-93, just a few years before systematized tapping, attempts were made to ‘kill out’ some of the weaker rubber trees by tapping them heavily. But to the astonishment of the plantation keepers, the trees refused to die even after being hacked. On examining by botanists, what was found, was quite unbelievable. The underground roots of the neighboring *Ficus Elastica* trees had ‘anastomosed’ or joint together, so ‘that the [Charduar] plantation had practically become one tree.’²⁵⁰ The transition from *Borgach* to *Ficus Elastica* was thus far from complete. The *Borgach*, had extended its network again; only this time it did not happen aerially. Planted in lines, trimmed at will, monitored at every stage by the forest officials, the labyrinth was now a covert underground society; gaining strength hidden from the human gaze.

Contraband Rubber and Appropriation Mechanisms

The resistance of the *Borgach* to domestication stagnated the growth of rubber plantations to this extent that the first systematic rubber tapping exercise in a plantation happened only in 1897-98, nearly 100 years after rubber was discovered in the northeast.²⁵¹ This meant that the north eastern resource frontier of rubber in nineteenth century was shaped mostly by the raw latex extracted mainly from the wild rubber trees, found both within and beyond the assumed political boundaries of the colonial state. As the state as well as non state actors engaged in a variety of practices to appropriate wild rubber, it was the material quality of the rubber latex that seemed to determine to a large extent, the efficacies of the appropriation mechanisms.

²⁵⁰ Coventry, *Ficus Elastica*, 3.

²⁵¹ Ibid

A trans-frontier 'object' of appropriation

As discussed earlier, a striking feature of the *Borgach* was its occurrence in different topographies and climates. From the tropical low lying valley of Assam to the near temperate mountainous zones of Upper Burma, the existence of the wild rubber trees were always scattered and unpredictable. The geographically scattered nature of the tree made it a resource whose locations often transcended the assumed political frontiers of the colonial state. This in turn influenced the shaping of political boundaries for the region. For instance, the 'rubber *mehals*' auctioned by the colonial authorities with their blurred and ambiguous limits, enabled a deliberate transcendence of political boundaries to increase the circumference of rubber appropriation. The operations of the *mehals* thus showed that there that there can be an institutionality to the indefiniteness of political borders. The logic of territorial expansion of the state need not always be in tandem with the logic of resource appropriation. Resource appropriation can be non-territorial, especially in this case, when the object of resource appropriation were the rubber trees which were found more beyond the frontier than within it. The rubber *mehals* in the northeastern tracts thus occasioned a form of indirect rule where the state deliberately kept territorial borders porous and fluid in order to maintain a more intimate connection with the trans-frontier rubber bearing tracts; a connection that allowed people transacting in the resource to move in and out of these borders at will.

The clearest example of how some of these trans-frontier transactions worked is demonstrated by the trading networks run by a particular group of Marwari *mehal* lease holders known as the *kaya mehdars* [*Kaya* being the colloquial name for Marwaris in Assam]. In 1869, when the long duration of the rubber leases shifted to annual ones, many Marwari merchants settled in Assam

came together in groups to outbid other contenders in the *mehal* auctions.²⁵² The *kaya mehdars* many of whom owned *golas* or shops, apart from paying cash in exchange for rubber, also had a barter like system in place where the tribes bringing down the rubber were paid in kind from the shops itself. An item that was especially sought from the *kaya mehdars* in exchange for rubber was salt. Earlier as Burland, a civil officer from the Lushai expedition of 1871-72 noted, salt was made by the frontier tribes from the salt springs and it took a man to labour for three months to ‘make enough’ for his family.²⁵³ However, now a ‘tribal man’ was able to collect ‘sufficient India-rubber’ within a month’s time to exchange it for a quantity of salt that would last him and his family for more than a year.

The networks between the *kaya mehdars* and the trans frontier tribes were in turn connected with trading circuits existing amongst the ‘tribes’ themselves. The ‘tribes’ of the northern Brahmaputra valley like the Akas, Dafflas and Miris were reported to trade their surplus salt acquired from the *kaya mehdars* with the ‘southern tribes’ of the Brahmaputra valley, like the Singphos, Khamptis and the Nagas. As Burland noted, the southern tribes, were ‘willing to give one maund of rubber for a quarter maund of salt’.²⁵⁴ Rubber procured in this manner, in turn entered the *kaya mehdari* circuit, demonstrating a relentless circulation of objects across geographical and political markers of the frontier.

²⁵² Kar, ‘Historia Elastica’, 137.

²⁵³ R. C Temple, ‘Beginnings of Currency’, *Journal of Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 29 (1899): 99-122, 102.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid*

Aided by the institutionalized indefiniteness of political borders, the trans frontier rubber trade served as a luscious bait for the ‘independent European speculator’ who entered into direct rubber deals with the tribes, violating the monopolistic rights of the *mehaldars* over the purchase of rubber.²⁵⁵ The speculators in many ways brought to the fore the futility of *mehals* in securing monopolistic rights. Although on paper *mehals* were auctioned by colonial authorities as the ‘monopolistic right’ to purchase rubber within loosely demarcated territories, in practice they operated majorly as the institutional apparatus required by the colonial state to transgress its own political borders for resource extraction. The *mehals*, however, could do little to structure or contain the on-going flow of objects and people over negated boundaries. The increasing activities of the speculators in the trans- frontier rubber bearing tracts was a testimony to that.

The Inner line regulations of 1873, introduced by the colonial state as the line demarcating the jurisdictional limits of the districts of Assam, was an attempt to undo the tide of unregulated transactions initiated by the negation of political borders by the *mehals*.²⁵⁶ According to this regulation, any individual crossing over the line without an authorized pass was to be imprisoned and any rubber or other ‘jungle product’ found unregistered in his hands was to be immediately confiscated by the colonial authorities.²⁵⁷ The ‘inner line’ thus came to embody the zeal of the colonial authorities to seal and formalize border spaces in order to regulate trans-border trading operations. The question however is- is the experience of border spaces always defined by the

²⁵⁵ ‘Assam and Cachar India Rubber Trade’.

²⁵⁶ ‘Assam and Cachar India Rubber Trade’

²⁵⁷ Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873, Annexure-III. Assessed February 10, 2015

http://www.mdoner.gov.in/sites/default/files/silo4_content/entry%20restrictions%20in%20NER/Bengal%20Eastern%20Frontier%20Regulation,%201873.pdf

agendas of the statist authorities, that is, if an institution like *mehal* could open up the borders, could the inner line regulation close them up? The growing issues of the trans- frontier contraband trade in rubber in the post 1873 period, signaled otherwise.

Brandis, in his 1879 report on the forest administration in Assam, described the contraband nature of the rubber trade. He noted:

in most parts of the Assam Valley, the rubber trade is in the hands of the Kayas or the Marwari merchants, who had their shops in the rivers coming from the hills, and who purchase the rubber from the hill tribes... in many cases rubber was [procured not just from within] British territory but also from beyond the line.²⁵⁸

Brandis's remark came at a time when most rubber *mehals* were closed and collection of rubber within British territory was at large prohibited, except in the Garo hills, where its collection was permitted on condition that all rubber be brought to Tura [a municipality town in West Garo Hills District in present day Meghalaya] and sold to the government at a fixed rate. What was however quite well known, was that sale and purchase of rubber was happening in other districts as well, regardless of the prohibition rules. *Mehals* may have been closed, but many *mehaldars* continued their operations. This was true especially for Darrang, Lakhimpur and Sibsagar districts, where the Marwari merchants, many of whom were earlier Kaya *mehaldars*, operated the contraband trade in rubber in alliance with the Akas, Dafflas and the Nagas dwelling beyond the inner line.²⁵⁹ The streams and rivers of the northeast, flowing unhindered, fractured the many political lines and boundaries of the colonial state and became a major precursor of the

²⁵⁸ Brandis, 'Suggestions regarding Forest administration in Assam'.

²⁵⁹ Ibid

contraband trade. Brandis himself noted the riverine route of this trade. The shops of the Marwari merchants were aligned along the course of the Brahmaputra and its many tributaries. For instance, Brandis noted, that there were Marwaris on the banks of the ‘Bharali river in Darrang who probably [got] part of their rubber from the Aka country.’ He further noted that the Marwaris were also ‘established at Jaipur, Makum, and Phakial [small market towns in Lakhimpur district]’ who got their rubber from the Naga hills and the forests higher up the Dihing river beyond the inner line.’ The point reiterates Anna Tsing’s argument about the significance of topographies and landscapes in resource frontiers. ‘Landscapes’ for Tsing emerged as ‘lively actors’ in the resource frontier, shifting and turning in an ‘interplay of human and non-human practices’.²⁶⁰ In the resource frontier of rubber, however, the interplay between human and non-human actors was seen not just between landscapes and the various human traders of rubber. The emergence of the illicit networks hint towards the play of another actor, which was, rubber - the prime commodity of the contraband trade.

‘Balls’ verses ‘Blocks’

In fact, Gustav Mann, in 1884, provided a strong point of analysis for exploring the materiality of the circulating rubber latex, when he spoke for ‘large establishments to watch over forests because rubber is so portable and its removal not just confined to roads or tracts, rivers and so forth.’²⁶¹ Issues of the contraband rubber trade, flooding the colonial correspondences around this time, then may not have been so much due to faulty state practices, like lack of police power or surveillance in border areas. The unique ‘portability’ of the rubber latex that lent itself quite

²⁶⁰ Tsing, ‘Natural Resources’, 5100

²⁶¹ Gustav Mann, ‘Rubber Plantations in Assam’.

easily to contrabanding, may have been one of the prime reasons for the persistent uncontrollability of the rubber trade. To understand portability as a material efficacy of contraband rubber, firstly an illustration of the procuring, processing and packaging of natural rubber is required. This will provide an idea as to how and more importantly who manipulated rubber into this efficacious form. Secondly, an attempt will be made to show how portable rubber lent itself to the existing practices of appropriation, ultimately aiding contraband trade.

In 1872, James Collins, Curator of the Pharmaceutical Society, Britain, was ‘charged by her Majesty’s Secretary of State for India to prepare a report on the caoutchouc of commerce’.²⁶² Collin’s ‘Report on the Caoutchouc of Commerce’, carried an elaborate detail of the prevalent ‘mode of tapping’ and ‘mode of preparation’ of Assam rubber in the frontier.²⁶³

With regards to the mode of tapping, Collins noted that that the tribal collectors used their ‘daos’ or knives to make cuts on the barks of the wild rubber tree to obtain rubber.²⁶⁴ The cuts varied from six to eighteen inches in length and were made diagonally deep into the wood. The milk flowing from these cuts were received into holes prepared in the ground, or in ‘leaves doubled up in funnel shape’. Collin’s noted that ‘about 50 oz. [approx. 1 kg] of milk is the yield of a tree in August, giving about 15.5 oz. [approx. 439 gms] of pure caoutchouc.’ However, during the winter months, the milk was considered much richer in caoutchouc than in the summers. Hence, the ideal season for tapping was noted to be from October to March.

²⁶² Ibid

²⁶³ James Collins, *Report on the Caoutchouc of Commerce* (London: W.H Allen and Co, 1872),

²⁶⁴ Ibid, 20



Pic. 2. This photograph titled ‘Method of Tapping’ was produced by Coventry to illustrate the rubber extraction process in his book, *Ficus Elastica* in 1906.²⁶⁵

After the latex was collected, the second phase of converting the latex into rubber began. Collins elaborated on the prevalent ‘mode of preparing’ the raw latex into exportable Assam rubber. The

²⁶⁵ There is a fair amount of ambiguity about this photograph as Coventry neither specified the origins of the rubber tree, i.e., if it was wild or plantation grown, nor did he mention anything about the man tapping the tree. Coventry, *Ficus Elastica*, 18-19.

milk derived from the tree was poured into boiling water, and stirred until it got ‘sufficiently firm to be carried about without being clammy or sticking together.’ When the preparation was carried out by rubber operative firms of the *mehals*, there was an added step, followed by firms like Messers. Martin, Richie, & Co, of Tezpur, involving the use of some machinery. After the caoutchouc had coagulated in the boiling water, ‘it was taken out with iron forks’ and then pressed into ‘large blocks’ of about 18 inches, with the help of a machine called ‘screw presser’.²⁶⁶ The conversion of the coagulated masses into ‘rubber blocks’ created a uniformity and also helped in the bulk shipment of the commodity to the markets.

Collins, however, noted two forms in which rubber reached the Calcutta markets for exports. While one form belonged to that of ‘large masses or blocks’ produced by rubber operative firms using machines, the other was in the form of separate ‘small balls’ of ‘a rather stringy character’.²⁶⁷ The origins of the rubber found in the form of small balls exhibited a certain dubiousness, as clearly they were not worked on by machines. Their mode of preparation was simpler, involving the rolling of the boiled half-coagulated forms of rubber, into small balls of about 2 inches in diameter with hands. Similar to the process earlier described by Griffith for testing rubber quality. Small in size, easy to make, they could have been produced by anybody; peddled in a million ways as an item of contraband trade. They did not require elaborate techniques of screw pressing. Their mode of preparation required only a basic knowhow about rubber; a knowhow that was prevalent amongst the tribes like the Akas, Miris, Nagas.

²⁶⁶ Collins, *Caoutchouc of Commerce*, 20

²⁶⁷ Ibid

The material efficacy of the small rubber balls also came from the relatively superior quality of the small balls of rubber in comparison to the blocks. A major complaint against Assam rubber in the global market, noted in 1854 by P. L Simmonds, an ex- planter and the author of *The Commercial Products of the Vegetable Kingdom*, was the existence of impurities like sand and dust particles in the material.²⁶⁸ However, as Collins noted in his report, ‘large admixture of bark and earth matters’ were found only in large blocks of rubber.²⁶⁹ In fact, some blocks have been known to yield about 35 % of undesirable impurities and were priced quite low. In contrast with this, the small balls of rubber were found to be purer in quality and were remarked by him as ‘the best form’ of rubber. He noted that ‘large masses of even good caoutchouc will never fetch so high a price as small pieces.’

This was because in larger form the chances of impurities either due to faulty preparation or deliberate adulteration were maximum in comparison to small pieces like the rubber balls. It was hence recommended by Collins that most rubber be prepared in smaller sizes, in the form of cakes not more than one or two inches thick. The best form for rubber preparation was hence, ironically set by the standards of rubber, likely to have been produced in contraband. The recognition that small pieces, got much higher prices than machine pressed large single blocks put one point straight, that is, it was quality and not quantity which mattered. For instance, it was noted that one pound of rubber block got a price of only 1s. 6d in the markets, in comparison to one pound of rubber balls, which got a price of 2s. 3d.²⁷⁰ (Collins 1872: 41) The value of rubber

²⁶⁸ Kar, ‘Historia Elastica’, 134

²⁶⁹ Collins, *Caoutchouc of Commerce*, 21.

²⁷⁰ Ibid, 41

produced in contraband was hence almost fifty per cent more than the value of rubber produced in the rubber operative firms.

When Mann referred to rubber as ‘so portable’ he was not referring to rubber prepared in large blocks in the industries of the rubber operative firms. He was actually referring to the circulation of high quality contraband rubber in the form of small rolled up balls in the frontier. These balls accounted for rubber’s portability and underlined, further for Mann the uniqueness of rubber from other commercial commodities like tea and timber with which it was often slotted in the official correspondence. Tea, timber and rubber, although originated as forest resources, in reality espoused very different material conditions. The production and packaging of Assam tea in ‘wooden crates’ happened under the strict subjection of both the resource and the immigrant tea labourers inside the walled limits of plantations. There was hence hardly any opportunity to contraband tea. Most of the tea was shipped straight in steamers operating between the river *ghats* of Assam and Calcutta. With regards to timber, till 1870s due to the absence of saw mills in the north eastern tracts, the local tradition of converting timber into more portable planks was not there.²⁷¹ Even the wooden crates for packaging tea were initially imported ‘from Scandinavian countries’ by the planters.²⁷² Any timber cut from the Sal and Soom forests of the frontier, was hence in the form of rugged logs that could be transported only on rafts through the rivers due to their bulky nature.²⁷³ The difficulty of ‘removing timber’ made export of the

²⁷¹ A.C Sinha, *Colonial Legacy and Environmental Crisis in North East India*(Guwahati: EBH Publishers, 2012), 10

²⁷² Ibid, 18

²⁷³ Ibid

resource quite unfeasible during this time.²⁷⁴ Rubber, on the other hand was different from both tea and timber. Unlike tea, rubber did not come from a strict plantation setting but was harvested from geographically scattered wild rubber trees. Moreover rubber harvested was not bulky and difficult to transport like the timber logs. In fact, portability as a material quality of the small rubber balls made it a strangely mobile resource; something that could easily walk across borders in the pockets or sacks of the tappers, providing an added fluidity to the already porous boundaries of the frontier zones.

Portability in this sense displays a strong tie with contrabanding and exploring this tie maybe, in the words of William van Schendel and Itty Abraham, the ‘radically different way’ to understand the ‘persistence’ of clandestine trades ‘over space and time’; especially the one in opium- a commodity noted by scholars like Om Prakash as ‘ideal for contraband trade’ due to its ‘high value’ and ‘low bulk’ nature.²⁷⁵ Although Prakash’s comment on opium was made in the context of seventeenth century trade operations of the Dutch East Indies Company, it needs to be noted that there was an ‘illicit trade’ in opium in the north eastern tracts as well, running between Goalpara [a present day district in lower Assam] and the ports of eastern Bengal, at a time when the British East India Company had established a trade monopoly in Bengal opium in 1797.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁴ Sinha, *Colonial Legacy*, 11

²⁷⁵ William Van Schendell and Itty Abraham, *Illicit Flows and Criminal Things: States, Borders and the Other Side of Globalization* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005),4 ; Om Prakash, ‘The Mughal Empire and the Dutch East Indies Company in the Seventeenth Century’, in *Hof en Handel. Aziatische vorsten en de VOC. 1620-1720* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2004), 185

²⁷⁶ Sanghamitra Misra, *Becoming a Borderland: The Politics of Space and Identity in Colonial Northeastern India* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011),76

Opium was collected in Assam by dipping ‘strips of coarse cotton cloth-each about three inches broad- in the juice’ obtained from incisions made in the ‘homegrown’ poppy plant. ‘Dried and lightly rolled up’, these market ready strips known as *Kanee*, were similar to the small rubber balls in the sense that these too could be carried around quite discreetly.²⁷⁷ In 1860, when the British authorities banned the cultivation of opium in Assam in order to allow only the sale of government imported ‘readymade opium’ in licensed shops, it was found that issues of contraband opium persisted.

Portable commodities of high value lent itself to contraband trades because their circulation, as noted by Mann was not restricted to roads, tracts or rivers. The rubber balls, for instance, circulated in networks that in many ways emulated the untraceable labyrinth of the *Borgach*. Before the introduction of the inner line the rubber networks were essentially state sanctioned, operated willingly between the tribes dwelling beyond the frontier and the *mehaldars*. However, the circulation of the portable rubber pieces aligned with the informality of political borders, soon made the networks more widespread, including other non-state actors like the speculators and their agents. After 1873, when many *mehals* were closed down and rubber collection was prohibited to push out non-state actors, it was found that the networks and relationships of the prior period refused to die out. Thriving as contraband, the operations of the different actors of the trade gradually ‘anastomosed’ into a firmer, more elaborate network. Such that the operations of the contraband networks became an open secret. Seasonal *haats* or fairs like the annual market

²⁷⁷ While people from humble backgrounds dissolved the *kane* in water and drank it, more affluent ones extracted *madak* by evaporating the water from it, which was then smoked. See Sanjib Chetry, ‘Opium: Popularity and Consequences in Colonial Assam, India.’ *International Research Journal of Social Sciences*. 5(2016): 41-45, 41

at Udalguri in Darrang became well known for their transactions in illicit rubber. Tribes like the Akas, Dufflas, Miris continued to bring rubber or *bor attah* across frontier despite prohibitory rules. Marwari merchants recurrently sent their rubber tappers into territories beyond the inner line. For instance, in 1891, Megh Raj Bahadur, a Marwari merchant was reported to have sent Nepali rubber-tappers beyond the line into the Aka country to collect rubber.²⁷⁸

Detection and confiscation of the small pieces of rubber, circulating across the line, in the crevices of the clothes or sacks of the tribes, required the conferring of an unimaginable amount of police power at the transit points of these borders. Moreover the fact that the borders often traced its way into regions of ‘dense evergreen forests’ known for their ‘impenetrability’ [For instance: Darrang- Aka frontier], meant that the exercise of such police power, remained always a figment of imagination.²⁷⁹ The flourishing of contraband trade leading to a ‘peculiar culture of extraction’ across borders hence may not be only due to ‘confused discussions’ and ‘half-hearted legal actions’ as noted by Kar in his otherwise brilliant article on the rubber hunt in the northeast.²⁸⁰ The impotency of state surveillance techniques in the resource frontier may have come from the potencies of non-human actors like landscapes and resources. Rubber traversing these ‘impenetrable landscapes’ as a highly mobile object, could not be confined to any one

²⁷⁸ Cited in footnotes, Kar, ‘Historia Elastica’, 137

²⁷⁹ H. Leeds, Conservator of Forests of Bengal in 1871, noted that the forests with rubber trees were ‘situated for most part at the foot of the ranges of mountains to the north and south of the Brahmaputra Valley, in the low and damp ground, covered with dense evergreen forests, which is almost impenetrable...so that supervision and control is very difficult.’ See, ‘Memorandum on the Conservancy and working of the Caoutchouc forests in Assam’.

²⁸⁰ Kar, ‘Historia Elastica’, 131

channel of appropriation. It lent itself to a number of networks and channels of extractions, which made the distinction of ‘contraband’ and ‘legal’ rubber difficult. For instance, the small balls of rubber intimately connected with contraband trade, were also procured by the state sanctioned rubber operative firms, stamping a sense of legality over the commodity.²⁸¹

Conclusion: the ‘telling power’ of objects.

The resource frontier of rubber analyzed through the frame of ‘objects’ of appropriations demonstrates that the resource itself does not exist as a passive recipient at the event of resource appropriation. Its physical and material dimensions act as an active participant in the historically located practices and processes of the frontier zones. Given a chance, the resource objects also possess the ability to weave narratives that provide a more wholesome understanding of extractive cultures. In the case of the northeastern frontier they showed the efficacies of the various mechanisms of appropriations by subverting some of the dominant narratives of the colonial reports and correspondence.

In 1873, the inner line regulation not only attempted to formalized borders spaces. It concealed within it the intention of dividing the province of Assam within an ideological geography, whereby the tracts located beyond the line came to be represented as the ‘savage lands’ of the tribes in stark contrast to the ‘civilized plains’ located within the line in British jurisdiction. The contact between the tribes and the plains people, within this discourse, as discussed in the first chapter was mainly viewed as confrontational where the savage tribes like the Akas came down to the plains only to conduct raids. The discourse was also seen in the category of the ‘savage

²⁸¹ Collins, *Caoutchouc of Commerce*.

rubber tapper' when Simonds and Collins univocally held the 'ignorance' of the tribal rubber tappers as the cause for the impurities prevalent in the rubber articles.

The study of rubber appropriation in the northeastern tracts however problematizes many of these conventional colonial narratives. Firstly, the confrontational dichotomy between the 'savage' hill tribes and 'civilized' plains people appear superficial, especially when we look at the networks of contraband rubber trade existing between tribes and 'people of the plains' like the Marwaris. Moreover, the fact that the hill tribes like Akas had always participated in the seasonal haats of the plains like those of Udalguri, Daimara, Khagrapara in the district of Darrang, trading in a variety of articles like rubber, lac, spices, musks etc., showed that their relations with the plains people were embedded in mutually benefitting economic transactions.²⁸²

Secondly, the allegation that held the 'savage' tribal rubber tapper, as solely responsible for the impurities in the articles became unfounded when the material qualities of the various forms of rubber in the market, were investigated. The small balls of rubber, which in all likelihood were prepared by the tribes, entirely, appeared to be the purer version in contrast to the large blocks which got pressed by machines in a more industrial set up. In fact, it was the process of pressing to convert rubber into large blocks which made impurities irremovable and made the commodity very poor in quality. The impurities in Assam rubber thus, resulted from a faulty application of machinery in the preparation of the commodity by rubber operative firms. In this context, the

²⁸² *Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries, 1890* (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office)

small hand-made balls of rubber, noted for their purity and higher prices, speak not only of the superior efficacy of the tribal mode of preparation but also subverts the colonial discourse of savagery that scapegoated the tribes by making them responsible for the poor quality of rubber.

The resources as objects of appropriations hence possessed a ‘telling power’ that revealed more holistic narratives on being studied. Inscribed, in their material bodies was an element of truth that cut across the trail of ideological politics and discourses to tell a story that did justice to the various actors of history. In the resource frontier of rubber, objects and things occurred as an untapped archive; each having a story of its own. The focus cannot be only be on the resource but also on other objects and things which got used in the appropriation mechanisms. For instance, Griffith in his report had elaborated how rubber was collected in a leaf folded up in the ‘shape of a rude cap’ placed in the ground under the incision. The leaf which also appeared as a ‘collecting vessel’ in Collin’s description of rubber extraction, was better suited than the occasionally used ‘plastered clay’ which according to Collins contaminated ‘the milk in a very objectionable manner’.²⁸³ The leaves used in this mechanism, as noted by Griffith himself, belonged to a particular plant called, *Phrynium Capitatum*.²⁸⁴

Recent studies on the contribution of forest products on the livelihood of the tribes of Meghalaya, have shown that the leaf, *Phrynium Capitatum*, was the most common wrapping and packaging material used by the people of these regions since ‘time immemorial’.²⁸⁵ The leaf had

²⁸³ Collins, *Caoutchouc of Commerce*, 39

²⁸⁴ Griffith ‘Report on the Caoutchouc Tree of Assam’

²⁸⁵ B.K. Tiwari and H. Tynsong, ‘Contribution of *Phrynium Capitatum* Wiild. Leaf of a non-timber forest product to the livelihoods of rural poor of South Meghalaya, North-East India’, *Indian Journal of Natural Products and Resources*, 2 (2011): 229-235, 229.

a shelf-life of about four to five weeks which made it very durable for carrying different items. The utilization of the leaves as collecting vessels for latex thus showed a strong dependence of rubber extraction on local knowhow. The leaf in this case, became an object with a telling power. It told a story that was hitherto untold; one that related to the contribution of local knowledge in rubber appropriation techniques.

As one looks deeper into the world of things and objects, the narrative for the prevalence of sound indigenous knowledge about rubber gets only richer and richer, to include not just the commodity but also the tree bearing it. An object which corroborated the narrative for local knowledge about the *Borgach* in nineteenth century was the ‘living root bridge’ found near Cherrapunji in Meghalaya. These bridges, were first noted in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1844* by Lieutenant H Yule, who was utterly amazed to see these structures in the villages near Cherrapunji.²⁸⁶ (Brent 2012) The bridge, hand made by the local Khasis from the aerial roots of the *Ka-gi-ri* [Khasi name for *Borgach*], was made to grow through the trunks of beetle trees which were placed across the rivers or streams until the aerial roots of the *Ka-gi-ri* attached themselves to the other side.

The root bridges which survived for many hundred years, by renewing themselves continuously with new aerial roots emanating from the *Borgach*, were unique as they literally showed what a ‘living’ object or a thing could be like. The efficacy of these bridges were such that many of them, like the photograph below shows, have survived well into the 21st century. The creation of these bridges by the Khasis, in the nineteenth century or even before, meant that the local

²⁸⁶ Lewin Brent, ‘India’s living bridges’, *Readers Digest Australia*, November (2012): 82–89.

population had a strong idea about the nature of the *Borgach*'s labyrinth and the way in which its force can be harnessed.



Pic 3. A present day photo of a century old living root bridge over the Wahthyllong River in the East Khasi Hills District, Meghalaya.²⁸⁷

This was remarkable as the aspects of the *Borgach*'s natural growth continued to be elusive to the colonial forest officials, even after rubber plantations had matured. The lacunae in the colonial knowledge about the tree, perhaps, came from the zeal to conquer and domesticate the tree, leading to a more top-down interventionist approach in dealing with the resource. The zeal was to convert the tree into a knowable botanical species by attempting to categorize and tame its

²⁸⁷ Image source: <http://imgur.com/29KuE> , Accessed February 20, 2016.

various aspects in plantations. In contrast to this, the living roots bridges of the Khasis became representative of a form of human contact, where the encounter entailed an engagement, rather than an intervention, with the natural forces of the tree. As the roots of the *Borgach* grew, from one end of the river to the other, aiding human flow, what was bridged was not just the physical gap between the banks of the rivers but also the mental gap that created the binaries of active humans and passive objects. Incipient in the idea of the living roots bridge, was the recognition of the ‘agency’ of the *Borgach* in a human project that would continue for centuries.

This is an agency that most natural resources possess. If recognized, this agency may lead to a better understanding of the resource, creating ultimately resource frontiers which are more sustainable and ecologically friendly in nature.

Epilogue

The flourishing of the *Borgach* as a ‘living root bridge’ at the hands of *Khasis*, should not be read as a conservationist streak present in indigenous communities at large. As Sumit Guha points out in his study of environment and ethnicity in India, ‘tribal’ or *adivasi* people have been known to manipulate and exploit forest resources quite extensively both before and during colonial rule.²⁸⁸ For instance, the *Berads*- a forest dwelling community of Karnataka engaged in widespread forest clearance and cultivation in the thirteenth century.²⁸⁹ In the nineteenth century the *Bhils* of Khandesh sent hundreds of carts ‘loaded with heavy timber’ out of the forests into the markets, leading to clashes with the colonial Forest Department.²⁹⁰ In the northeastern tracts of British India, the frontier ‘tribes’ too were well integrated with the market economy of the Assam valley. The Akas, Dafflas and Nagas were known to bring regularly into the markets of Darrang, Lakhimpur and Sibsagar, items like canes, honey, mittens, timber, bamboo and rubber.²⁹¹ Trade in certain articles out of this, like cattle, cane, honey and bamboo were carried by these communities out even during the time of the Ahom Rajas. Commercial exploitation of forest resources, hence had a pre-colonial history among the frontier tribes. When resources like rubber came to be sought intensively during the colonial period, it was this commercial sensibility that made the ‘tribes’ engage energetically in the extractive networks.

²⁸⁸Sumit Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200-1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)

²⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 55-56.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 180.

²⁹¹ *Report of the Committee on Indian Trade Statistics, 1905*, (Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing). 58

The 'living root bridge' demonstrated the comprehensive understanding, by the Khasis of the growth pattern of the *Borgach*; an understanding that maybe extended to other communities of the region. However such a knowhow did not leave its impress on rubber extraction undertaken by the various 'frontier tribes'. In fact using the living body of the tree to ford a river and the extraction of latex from its roots and branches by making cuts, are two very different forms of manipulating the tree. The living root bridge involved a meticulous inspection of the healthy growth of the tree on whose material body suspended literally the life of the many humans, who crossed flooded rivers. There was hence a symbiotic human-material relationship in this encounter. In contrast, the extraction of rubber was an inherently disruptive process where the cuts made on the tree to draw the latex out, left the tree wounded. It was the extracted latex on which the 'life' of the resource frontier suspended. The tree itself was secondary to the resource it produced.

But such is the history of natural resource exploitation that the well- being of the 'source' or that state of nature, from which the resource was drawn in the first place remains a non-issue. This is ironical as the continuance of resource exploitation was inevitably based on the question of the renewability of its source. I term the large scale depletion of natural resources, as evident of a 'slash and burn' mentality because it implies an almost 'primitive' insensitivity towards future needs- a kind of thinking that believes that the eventual disappearance of a resource in a particular area, due to excessive exploitation will coincide with the emergence of new resourceful areas, where the same process may be repeated.

Hence, we see hillsides getting completely denuded due to timber cutting, like the disappearance of the 'sacred groves' in Meghalaya noted by Karlsson , ecologies turning toxic due to mining- like the Ruhr River in Germany becoming the 'river of hell' in early twentieth century due to the

chemical sludge released in it from the nearby coalmines and animal species getting hunted to the point of extinction, like the case of the Asian Cheetah becoming extinct in India due to excessive hunting during the colonial period.²⁹² There exists, I believe, a ‘slash and burn’ pattern of thinking in the utilization of natural resources, involving the ruthless exploitation of the resources in the hills, rivers and soil, followed by their abandonment, when resources get scarce or sites get inhabitable. Such a thinking however is often attributed only to the outside forces; the local people are shown as much more concerned about the resource depletion. For instance, Tsing’s study on Meratus Mountains, South Kalimantan, in 1990s focuses on the displeasures of the local villages about the destruction of forests on account of outside logging company activities.²⁹³ But large scale exploitation of natural resources in a region can seldom occur without any local support. Tsing herself admits there were certain ‘ambitious’ sections of people in the Meratus Mountains, who made ‘good money’ and benefited from the timber economy.²⁹⁴ However, what if the concerned resource was completely exhausted and there was nowhere else to go? Then the scenario would be, in the words of Alexander Mackenzie, like that of ‘kill[ing] the goose which laid the golden eggs’.²⁹⁵ Mackenzie had toured extensive parts of Assam valley during his term as assistant magistrate in Bengal in the 1860s. The statement made by him was in

²⁹² See, Karlsson, *Unruly Hills*, 3; Thomas M Lekan, *Imagining the Nation in Nature: Landscape, Preservation and German Identity, 1885-1945*(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 33; Sasmita Panda, Gagan Kumar Panigarhi and Surendra Nath Padhi, *Wild Animals of India* (Germany: Anchor Academic Publishing,2016)

²⁹³ Tsing, *Friction*, XII

²⁹⁴ Ibid

²⁹⁵ Alexander Mackenzie , *History of the Relations*,400

the context of the utter destruction of the rubber trees in certain parts of the northeastern tracts of British India towards the second half of the nineteenth century. He noted an incident in 1872, when two parties [probably agents of the *mehaldars*] who had gone up to the Naga hills in search of rubber, complained that the ‘trees had ceased to yield rubber.’²⁹⁶ The *kotokis* accompanying them added that ‘it was no wonder’ that this had happened as the Naga ‘tribes’ dwelling in these areas ‘had been chopping them [the trees] all over from the roots to the upper branches.’²⁹⁷ This however, may not be only because of tapping activities. The term ‘chopping’ implies that the Nagas may have been cutting these trees for firewood as well. In fact, author Yeo Hong Eng describing his life experiences in the rubber estates, Bedok district of Singapore, in the 1950s, described ‘dried rubber wood’ as best for firewood.²⁹⁸ It contained ‘traces of latex’ which caused it to burn easily. The emergence of the rubber resource frontier in the nineteenth century, thus may have flattened the different uses of the rubber tree by the local communities. Some of these uses, like the hacking of the rubber tree for fire wood, may have been downright opposed to the idea of latex extraction.

That the rubber tree could be used for anything other than extracting rubber, however was a strange idea in the official reports and correspondence. The issues discussed in them, hence were strictly related to the extraction process and the trading mechanism. The problem that figured recurrently in James Collin’s *Report on the Caoutchouc of Commerce*, and Dietrich Brandis’s ‘Suggestions regarding Forest administration in Assam’, prepared in 1872 and 1879 respectively,

²⁹⁶ Ibid, 401

²⁹⁷ Ibid

²⁹⁸ Yeo Hong Eng, *The Little Red Cliff* (Patridge, 2014), 331

was the crudeness of the ‘tribal’ way of tapping rubber by making ‘gashes’ into the tree. Brandis noted:

I have met with a much larger number of rubber trees...but in every case were the stem, the roots, and branches covered with numerous scars...the Nagas, the Akas, Miris, and other tribes, who climb the tree and tap them, carry on this business in a destructive manner.²⁹⁹

But can the ‘tribes’ be isolated from the regime and the people whose zeal to appropriate rubber had become insatiable in early 1870s? The destruction of the rubber trees, arose from an interplay of both the ‘technique’ and ‘intensity’ of extraction. Collins contrasted the ‘frightful gashes’ being inflicted on the tress by natives with the precision of the ‘incisions’ he favoured, using a ‘tapping knife’, which inflicted minimal harm to the tree.³⁰⁰ What was however, even more damaging than the gashes was the intensity of the extraction process. Collins noted:

If a tree be tapped too often, without a sufficient period of rest being allowed to intervene between each successive operation, the tree itself becomes permanently injured...natives always resort to over tapping if left to themselves.³⁰¹

According to Collins a gap of three years should elapse before the tapping operation was repeated ‘in order to allow the tree to recover its strength’.³⁰² The irony of this was that the rubber *mehals* were leased out annually without allowing for a break of even half the prescribed

²⁹⁹ Brandis, ‘Suggestions regarding Forest administration in Assam’

³⁰⁰ Collins, *Report on the Caoutchouc of Commerce*, 34-37

³⁰¹ Ibid

³⁰² Ibid

rest period. The high revenues derived from the annual auctioning of *mehals* allowed no scope for trees to ‘recover’. The *mehaldar* to whom the lease had been sold for a year would attempt to draw as much rubber as he could within his allotted time, intensifying considerably the process of rubber extraction. If local rubber collecting communities were ‘over-tapping’ they were in fact responding to the demand that the system itself had created. This demand for rubber increased even more with the entry of the speculators and the emergence of a ‘contraband’ trade competing with the official one. The ‘tribes’ like the Akas and Nagas thus formed a part of a series of extractive relationships of the frontier, each of which had an impress on the destruction of the trees.

My study ends in 1897, around the time when the Charduar rubber plantations were maturing for their first commercial tapping. I intend to study this episode in detail in the course of my PhD as it entails an engagement with two issues. First, how did the rubber trees react to tapping exercises within the plantation setting? Did the ‘plantation setting’ affect the growth and the yield of the trees or did the setting itself alter due to the ‘elusivity’ of the trees? The theme about the altered plantation setting emerges in the wake of the introduction of South American varieties of the rubber tree in different parts of the British empire, like Ceylon [Sri Lanka], Upper Burma and Kerela in the late nineteenth century.³⁰³ Charduar itself had *Hevea Brasiliensis* and *Castilloas*

³⁰³ Clement R Markham, Secretary to the Royal Geographical Society, London, noted in 1876: ‘while the indigenous caoutchouc tree of India [was] being converted from a wild to a cultivated state’, other kinds of ‘caoutchouc trees of South America [were] being collected for introduction into India’, see Clement R Markham ‘The Cultivation of Caoutchouc Yielding Trees in British India’, in *Journal of the Society of Arts*, (London: George Bell & Sons, 1876), 481.

[South American rubber species] introduced in it around this time.³⁰⁴ The process of experimentation that ensued in these episodes will allow an understanding of the *Borgach*'s resistance to domestication, in relation to that of its counterparts. This in turn may answer questions about what determined the choice of species.

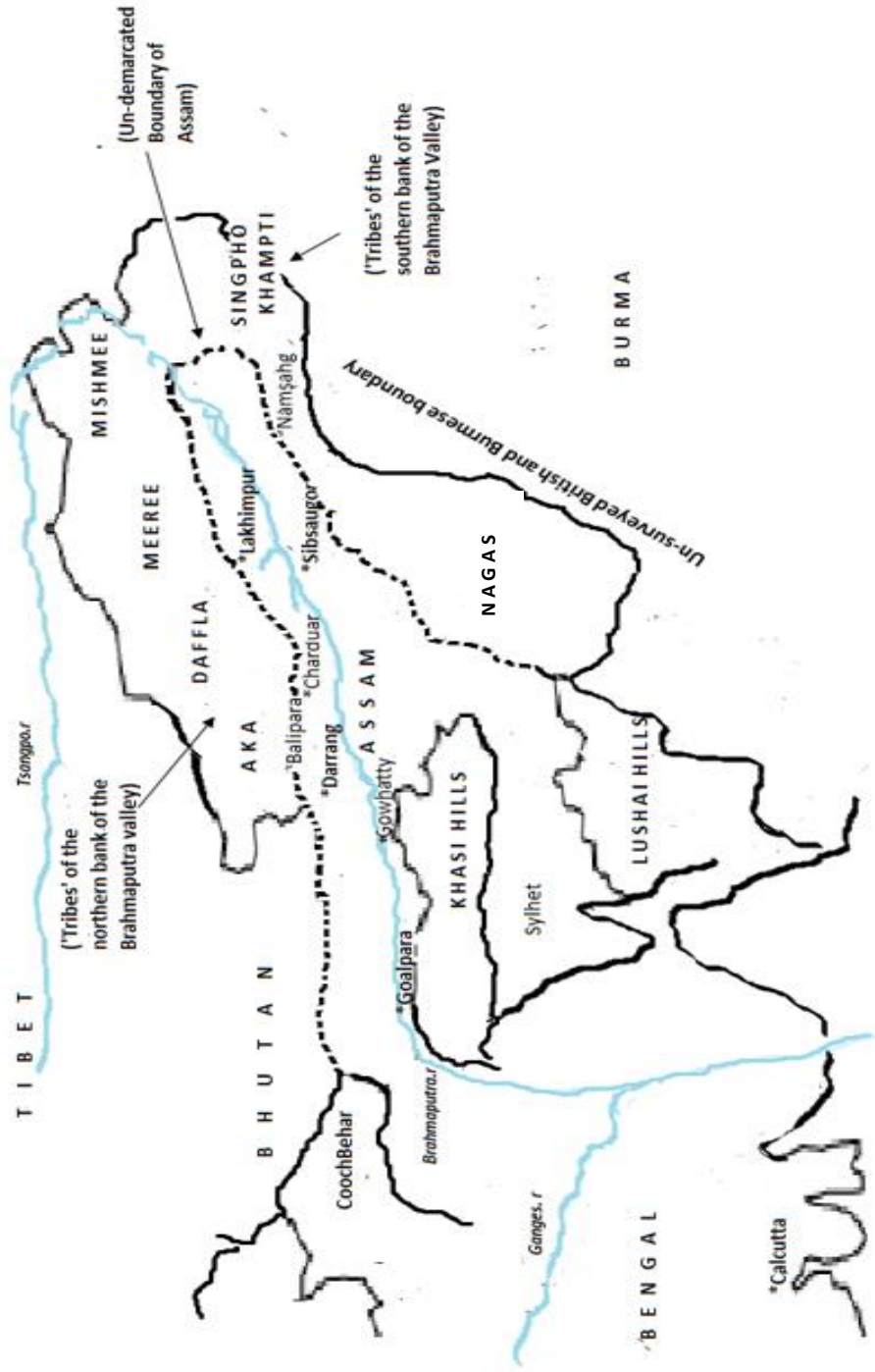
The second issue which I seek to address in future, concerns the state of rubber markets at this point, both in Calcutta as well as the frontier. Keeping in mind, the destruction of the rubber trees occurring in the 1870s, probably the contribution of rubber from the wild trees was shrinking by the beginning of twentieth century. This meant that the nineteenth century resource frontier of rubber, dependent solely on the latex drawn from the wild rubber trees, was undergoing a dramatic change at this point. It is this change drawn by the ecology of the resource object that I seek to trace in the future projects.

³⁰⁴ The introduction of these new varieties happened after British explorer Henry Wickham smuggled approximately 70,000 Hevea seeds out of Brazil in 1876 and sold it to London's Kew Gardens, from where they were distributed to the different parts of empire. See, Joe Jackson, *The Thief at the End of the World: Rubber, Power and the Seeds of Empire* (Penguin, 2008)

Maps

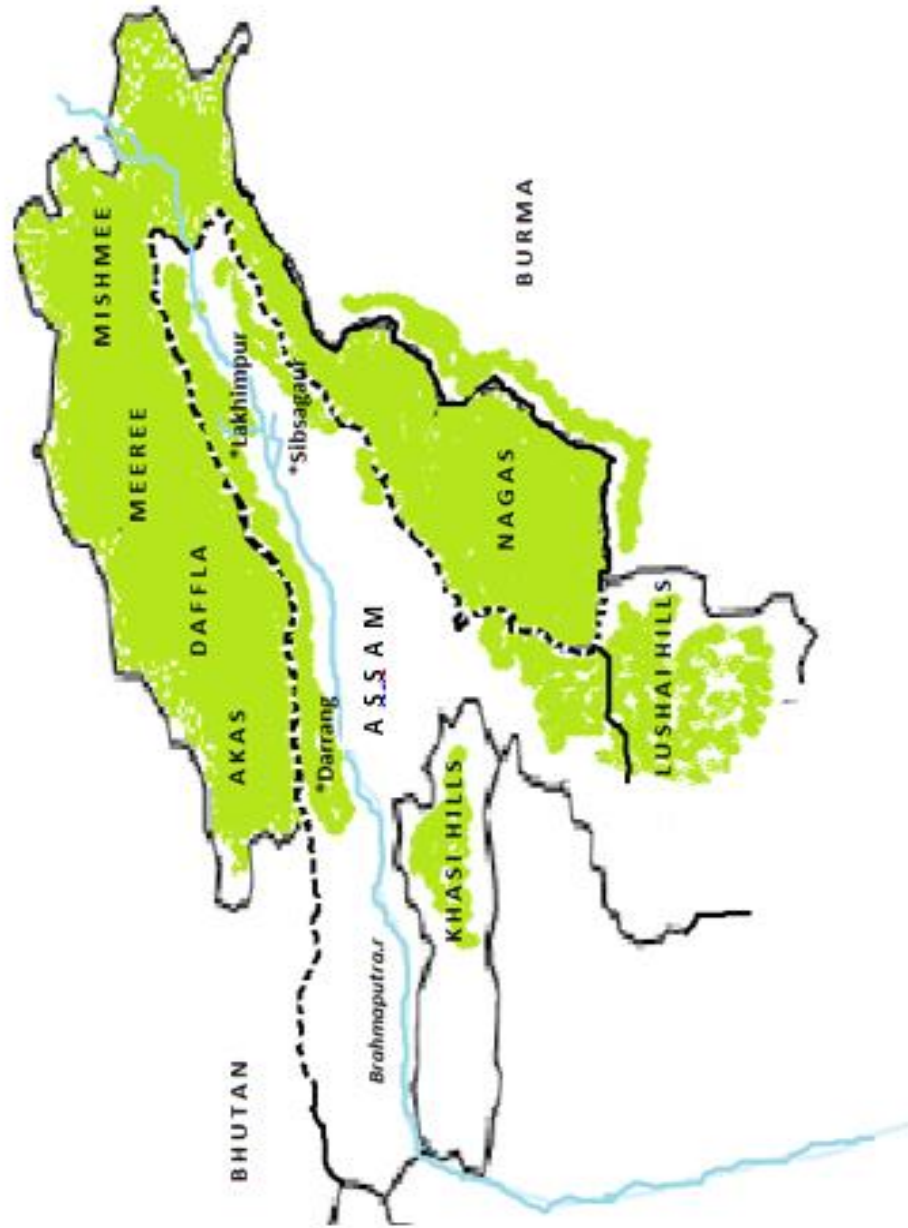
Northeastern Frontier of British India, 1872.

Note: The map is based on the 1872 map, titled 'The Distribution of Caoutchouc Tree or Ficus Elastica in Assam,' prepared by Gustav Mann, Deputy Conservator of Forests, Assam. Mann's map was produced in James Collin's *Report on the Caoutchouc of Commerce* (1872). The boundaries of the present map are only indicative.



Distribution of Wild Rubber Trees in the Northeastern Tracts of British India, 1872.

Note: The areas, in green, showing the distribution of rubber trees have been sourced on Gustav Mann's 1872 map, titled 'The Distribution of the Caoutchouc Tree or Ficus Elastica in Assam', produced in James Collin's *Report on the Caoutchouc of Commerce* (1872). The boundaries of the present map are only indicative.



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