Opening the Gates of Tsangpo: Explorations and Imperial Geo-Politics in the Arunachal Himalayas, c. 1820- c. 1920

Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the degree of

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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Declaration

I declare that the dissertation entitled, "**Opening the Gates of Tsangpo: Explorations and Imperial Geo-Politics in the Arunachal Himalayas, c. 1820- c. 1920**" submitted by me in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy from 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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Certificate

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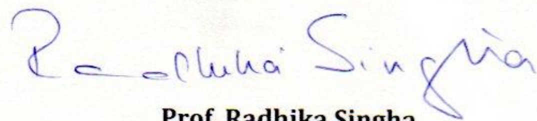

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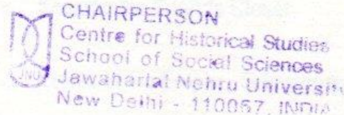

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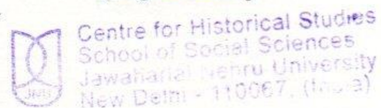

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Bikram Bora

Notes on Orthography and Usage

The colonial nomenclature for many of the ethnic groups mentioned here can be pejorative and obsolete. The contemporary names for groups such as Abors, Daphlas and Miris are respectively Adi, Nyishi and Mising. I have used the colonial terms only in relation to their historically specific contexts.

Similarly for the Mishmi groups the more acceptable names are Idu, Taroan and Kaman, instead of the older forms, Chulikata, Digaru and Miju.

Terms such as 'savage' and 'savagery' have been used with quotation marks only in their first appearance.

As the spelling for Sadiya is well-known and official, I have refrained myself from using the phonetically accurate form Xodiya. However, in case of Muttock, I have used Motok.

I have used Burma to refer to the colonial territory and Myanmar for the contemporary nation-state. For Hukawng Valley, I have used the current form. While Khamti is transliterated as Hkamti in Myanmar, I have used it the way it is written in contemporary India.

Elsewhere, alternative names and spellings have been provided within parentheses.

Abbreviations

APO	Assistant Political Officer
APSA	Arunachal Pradesh State Archives
ASA	Assam State Archives
DC	Deputy Commissioner
GOEBA	Government of East Bengal and Assam
GOI	Government of India
GTS	Great Trigonometrical Survey of India
NAI	National Archives of India
RGS	Royal Geographical Society
RSGS	Royal Scottish Geographical Society
SP	Superintendent of Police
TAR	Tribal Areas Records

Glossary

Amban	A Chinese official Resident in Lhasa.
Cutcherry	A courthouse.
Dao	A broadsword, pronounced as *Da* in Assamese, and *Dha* in Burmese.
Durbar	An institution of arbitration prevalent among many of the hill communities of colonial Assam.
Gam	A chief of a particular village or community, mostly used in the context of Abors, Miris and Singphos.
Gohain	An Ahom politico-military rank. The Ahom governor of Sadiya was known as Sadiya Khowa Gohain. The rank and title was later adopted by the Khamti chiefs.
Jhum	Shifting [slash and burn] subsistence agriculture.
Lama	The Mishmi and Khamti term for Tibetans.
Mishmi Teeta	A kind of febrifuge produced in the Mishmi Hills.
Mosup	A bachelor's dormitory in Abor villages, often used for administrative functions and arbitrations.
Namghar	Prayer hall of the Assamese vaishnavites. In Sadiya's context, a rest house for Abor and Mishmis for their visits to the plains.
Panjee	Hardened piece of bamboo smeared with poison, placed on the itinerary of the enemy. Used by the Abors during warfare.
Rai Bahadur	A British honour bestowed upon Indians for their services to the empire
Tai	A group of languages [also used to denote their speakers] spoken throughout southeast Asia. Khamti, Ahom and Shan languages of Myanmar are considered as Tai languages.

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Introduction

In 1901, J. F. Needham, the British Political Officer stationed at Sadiya in Assam asked the Foreign Department of the Government of India to sanction an expedition along the Brahmaputra river, northwards to Tibet, to establish that the Tsangpo of Tibet and the Brahmaputra of Assam were one and the same rivers. In eighteenth and nineteenth century European geographical sciences, this was a much debated issue. The official opinions in India and London were divided as well. However, Viceroy of India Lord Curzon pronounced that Needham's expedition carried the threat of potentially violent encounters with the local inhabitants along the river's course, and in any case the conventional opinion according to him was that both rivers were the same. Hence, he did not sanction the expedition, saying,

> '…I do not in the least care to "open the gates of the Sanpo [Tsangpo],"…or to "settle a world-wide interesting geographical question"… for I certainly accept as established the identity of the Dihong with the Sanpo. Why then should we undertake this expedition or incur this risk?...it would not be much bitterer disappointment to me to have send an expedition to rescue him [Needham] from trouble, or to avenge him if killed.'[1](sic)

Curzon's ironical invocation of the two geographical clichés alluded to the long genealogy of geographical explorations along the Himalayas of the region presently

[1] Notes by Lord Curzon, dated June 17, 1901, in 'Proposal to allow Mr F.J. Needham, C.I.E., Assistant Political Officer, Sadiya, to undertake the exploration of the sources of the Dihong river or of the unknown portion of the Brahmaputra between Sadiya and Gyala Sindong.', Foreign Department, External-A, July 1901, Nos. 12-14, [National Archives of India, hereafter NAI]

known as Arunachal Pradesh. In the nineteenth century, European and Indian explorers had sought to resolve the river's identity by following its course upwards from the plains of Assam and sometimes downwards from the Tibetan plateau. But they had often been prevented by the difficult mountainous terrain of the Arunachal Himalayas that separates these two regions.

In 1826, following the Anglo-Burmese War the East India Company had absorbed Assam in its Bengal Province. But its administrative reach remained very limited in the mountains towards the north. From the geographical, commercial and administrative perspective, being able to plot the course of the Brahmaputra appeared as the best way to arrive at a comprehensive knowledge of these yet ungoverned tracts. The officials stationed in Assam also expected that explorations would open avenues for greater interactions with the 'hill tribes' across the frontier. Towards the end of nineteenth century, the growing presence of Chinese administration in Tibet, budding interests of the Russians in the plateau from their Central Asian possessions, and the French drive towards south-eastern Tibet from Indo-China had created a series of cartographic apprehensions for the British Indian Government regarding its Himalayan borderlands with Tibet; most notably in the north of Assam. But until formalised colonial control was established in these mountains, the cartographic extent of these borders remained un-demarcated and territorial sovereignties remained ambiguous.

By 1840s, substantial European commercial investments began to be made in the plains of Upper Assam[2], mostly in setting up tea plantations and later in coal, petroleum and timber reserves.[3] With the amount of revenue increasing every year, a manageable borderland in the hills surrounding the plains was deemed as a crucial political investment. At the same time, the location of these hills bordering on Tibet, Upper Burma and Bhutan, also provided the empire with possibilities of making potential territorial and commercial incursions into different parts of Asia; not only the neighbouring regions but also towards the Sichuan and Yunnan, the productive parts of south-western China. Thus the act of 'opening' the gates of Tsangpo was not only an exercise in geographical discovery but reflected numerous possibilities for pushing diverse imperial agendas into the region.

In his M.Phil. dissertation, Ritupan Goswami has argued that explorations which set out to track the course of the Brahmaputra were concurrent to a process of knowing the river in a modern [western] scientific schema, by identification, selection and circulation of cartographic knowledge. He argues that these scientific forms of coherently knowing the river was central to the reordering of the water body to facilitate colonial governance and more specifically the project of 'improving' Brahmaputra's banks in the plains of Assam.[4] While Goswami has focused chiefly on the processes associated with the scientific making of the river, my research engages

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[2] In official and common usage Upper Assam refers to the districts on the eastern half of the Brahmaputra plains. In colonial parlance, it referred to the two districts of Lakhimpur and Sibsagar. Later multiple districts were curved out of both districts at various times before and after 1947; Dhemaji, Dibrugarh and Tinsukia from Lakhimpur, and Golaghat and Jorhat from Sibsagar.

[3] Jayeeta Sharma, *Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India* (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2011): 32

[4] Ritupan Goswami, "Rivers and History: Brahmaputra Valley in the Nineteenth Century" (M.Phil. Dissertation, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2005).

with the different practices of explorations in the river's basin upstream in the Arunachal Himalayas and the different geographical imaginations and geo-political repercussions that resulted from it.

I have drawn here upon Felix Driver's engagement with what he terms as 'cultures of explorations', those practices by which the people and resources for explorations of the colonial world were mobilised and by which the narratives about these explorations were produced and consumed.[5] This work will focus on how the geographical knowledge produced in the course of explorations orienting the Brahmaputra shaped the terms in which territories were demarcated and claimed for the empire in the Arunachal Himalayas, and the imprint they left upon the patterns and strategies of imperial governance, commercial speculations and international geo-political concerns conceived in the region.

The present name of the state of Arunachal Pradesh is a post-1947 coinage. Because of this, while the term Arunachal Himalayas may appear as anachronistic, no appropriate vocabulary exists that can coherently represent this part of the Himalayas between the plains of Assam and the Tibetan plateau, bordered by Myanmar in the east and Bhutan towards the west. Until parts of the region was extensively surveyed and demarcated to some extent in 1912, it appeared in the form of numerous fractured geographical entities in different registers of the empire. Until a name which is able to capture the geo-political and geo-physical nuances of the region can be proposed, this work will treat these series of mountainous tracts as Arunachal Himalayas, but only in

[5] Felix Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2001): 8-9.

a strictly geo-physical sense, with no drawing back from the present territorial limits of Arunachal Pradesh.

However the present territorial boundaries between India, Myanmar and Tibet in which these mountains are divided create a hindrance in a fluid understanding of its historical geography. Dissatisfaction with such cartographic arbitrations has recently given rise to numerous researches that have invoked the 'region' instead of territorial administrative units as a site for historical investigation. Region, as G. Aloysius's points out can be a concrete and verifiable empirical reality, but it can be made up of unverifiable social imaginaries which are yet real and influential. Regions are functional units set up for definite purposes, but they can also be construed as intellectual constructs that represent a 'desired approximation, a learning model and [a] conceptual and measuring tool'.[6]

In order to circumvent the limits imposed by contemporary political units, a number of recent scholarships about north-east India have adopted a regional approach in exploring its historical geography. Manjeet Baruah argues that the historical landscape of north-east India should be considered as a continental crossroad of connected pasts, which was gradually morphed into a marginal 'frontier' with increasing colonial interventions.[7] To recover the region's shared pasts and overlapping territorialities and sovereignties, Sanghamitra Misra suggests investigating them as connected histories independent of cartographic

[6] G Aloysius, *Conceptualising the Region* (New Delhi: Critical Quest, 2013): 13.

[7] Manjeet Baruah, *Frontier Cultures: A Social History of Assamese Literature* (New Delhi: Abingdon : Routledge, 2012).

regimentations.[8] In a similar approach, Gunnel Cederlof's work on the early days of the East India Company elaborates how the governance, policing and commercial streamlining of the northeast was shaped by the diverse cartographic exercises of the Company's agents. By underlining on the contested nature of these exercises, she illustrates how shifting conceptualisations of landscapes brought changes in social and commercial relations in the region.[9]

I have tried to examine the different imaginative exercises bound up with the explorations of the Arunachal Himalayas in their very specific context, trying not to see them as 'contributing' in some linear way to the formation of the present Arunachal Pradesh. Thus, cutting across the present international borders of India, Myanmar and Tibet; I have used the Upper Brahmaputra Basin as my spatial reference point because it ranges across the watersheds of the major streams of the Brahmaputra where most of the explorations were conducted, Dihang, Dibang and Lohit. This space includes the regions that in colonial registers were known as Abor Hills, Mishmi Hills and the Sadiya foothill regions of Assam; and also some parts of the present south-eastern Tibet and northernmost parts of Myanmar; as a connected zone of interactions between people, ideas and institutions.[10] The idea of the river basin as a unit of study has been borrowed from Terje Tvedt's work on the 'conceptual

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[8] Sanghamitra Misra, *Becoming a Borderland: The Politics of Space and Identity in Colonial Northeastern India* (Routledge India, 2011).

[9] Gunnel Cederlöf, *Founding an Empire on India's North-Eastern Frontiers, 1790-1840: Climate, Commerce, Polity* (New Delhi: OUP, 2014).

[10] The present location of the colonial category of Abor hills roughly correspond to the East Siang, Upper Siang and West Siang districts of Arunachal Pradesh. The Mishmi hills comprise of Anjaw, Lohit, Lower Dibang Valley and Upper Dibang Valley districts of the same state. The parts of present Tibet that is included in this unit are presently governed by China as the Nyingchi Prefecture. And the parts of northern Myanmar roughly encompass the headwaters of the Irrawaddy River in the Kachin state. Sadiya is a sub-division of the Tinsukia district of present Assam.

conquest' of the Nile River. The animated space of a river shared by people and institutions, Tvedt argues, makes the river basin an innovative unit of study in any 'political inquiry with a spatial dimension'. The river basin both as a physical space and social and political construct helps one to comprehend the various degrees of interactions between the physical and mental worlds within it.[11]

The conceptual space of Upper Brahmaputra basin was a dynamic entity in the nineteenth century, with numerous ethnic groups, huge diversity of terrains and several different sovereignties on its edges that gradually diminished towards the interiors. The southern lowland region of Sadiya was contiguous to the British territories of Assam. The foothills near Sadiya were occupied by the Khamtis, Miris and Singphos, societies at the fringe of the agrarian plains of Assam. The mountains towards the north till the Tibetan territorial domain begins were predominated by the Abors, a collective term for a diverse group of populations chiefly depending on shifting cultivation. Towards the east of the Abors, the largest extent of these mountains till Upper Burma was populated by the Mishmis. On the other hand the mountains lying towards the west of Abors and north-west of Sadiya were the conventional territories of the Daphlas and the people known as Hill Miris.[12]

From 1860s-1870s onwards, an Inner and an Outer line was set up in the hills north of the plains of Assam. A Posa or payment as a guarantee of peace consisting of iron, salt, opium and other commodities, equalling to 3000 rupees per annum was paid to the communities inhabiting north of ‘Outer’ lines who maintained their autonomous

[11] Terje Tvedt, *The River Nile in the Age of the British: Political Ecology and the Quest for Economic Power* (I.B. Tauris, 2004): 2-6.

[12] See maps 1 and 2.

stature. Tribes inhabiting the tract between Inner and Outer line fell under British jurisdiction[13]. However, this Inner Line was not considered as the fixed 'frontier' of colonial territories, but was only an orienting device to guide the frontier officers to the extent of their territorial jurisdiction.[14] The unexplored portion of the Tsangpo-Brahmaputra was located well beyond the Outer Line in south-eastern Tibet.

I have primarily drawn upon official sources and the trace of the pre-colonial textual traditions that remained embedded in these archives.[15] There is a rich corpus of travel writing which has accumulated as a result of explorations, official and unofficial, in the Upper Brahmaputra Basin. Controversies of these explorations were aired in the spaces of legitimisation such as the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) and the Asiatic Society, and their records have been consulted as well. In addition, an extra texture is added to it by different treaties, agreements, newspaper reports and the Parliamentary debates in Britain.

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[13] Angus Hamilton, *In Abor Jungles: Being an Account of The Abor Expedition, The Mishmi Mission and The Miri Mission* (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1912): 36.

[14] St. John F. Michell, *The North-East Frontier of India: A Topographical, Political And Military Report* (Intelligence Branch, Quarter Master-General's Department In India, 1883): 4.

[15] These consist of reports and correspondences, survey reports and maps, scientific and commercial treatises and military proceedings located in the governmental archives at New Delhi, Itanagar in Arunachal Pradesh, and Guwahati in Assam. The Foreign Department proceedings of the National Archives and the Tribal Areas Records of the Arunachal Pradesh Archives have largely remained untapped till now in terms of the politics of explorations in northeast India. I have extensively drawn upon them in an effort to understand their intextuality with other textual sources and other forms of archives about the historical geography of the northeast that have accumulated over the years.

The work is divided into four thematic chapters, with overlapping chronological trajectories. Expanding on Ritupan Goswami's arguments, the first chapter shows how Brahmaputra was framed as a linear and coherent object in European geographical narratives by the use of two interconnected strategies. First, through the quest to determine the course of the Brahmaputra from the plains of Assam up to Tibet. This included ocular verification of its course to identify it with Tsangpo and legitimising it as a singular river body by the use of scientific calculations. Bound up with this exercise was the drive to rationalise and standardise the 'vernacular' understandings of the river, and making them conformable with scientific conclusions. The river was produced, circulated, contested and consumed by a coalescing of these two methods in different scientific spaces of the metropole including the RGS. The ability to plot the Brahmaputra from Sadiya to Tibet allowed colonial administrators, entrepreneurs and cartographers to visualise this stretch of the Himalayas as a gateway to the interiors of Asia from Assam, rather than as a frontier which bounded off British India from China.

The second chapter examines the way in which the explorations in the Upper Brahmaputra Basin provided a cognitive template for organising knowledge about the different hill communities in the region and the different ways in which they could be expected to contribute towards the exercise of opening this gateway; by identifying individuals and groups as potential intermediaries and gauging the depth to which Tibetan influence had penetrated in the region. The early explorers in the region, in the first half of nineteenth century, mostly operated in unofficial capacities. To put together an expedition, to gather porters, guides, interpreters, guards and supplies they had to regularly interact with the local people. During this process, potential

collaborators were identified in anticipation for a more sustained drive to establish British control over the region in future.

In 1882, the post of Assistant Political Officer (APO) was established in the British frontier outpost of Sadiya. With the appointment of Needham as the first APO a consistent pattern of officially sanctioned tours was established in which the APO would meet with the Gams or the village chiefs of the region; who would express their opinions and grievances regarding the Sadiya administration to Needham. A key concern here was to gauge the depth and magnitude of Tibetan influence among the people of the hills and what possibilities and apprehensions it carries for the administration in Sadiya.

The third chapter illustrates how the imperial interests in the Upper Brahmaputra Basin were shaped by concerns to control and expand commerce along the routes leading to Tibet on one side and Yunnan and Sichuan on the other side. In this exercise, the Basin, with Sadiya at one node and south-east Tibet on the other, have been conceptualised as a site where multiple commercial and geo-political interests intersected and interacted. In this, Sadiya became the focus for the articulation of the different agendas of officials, missionaries, business and industrial lobbies, while envisaging the region as a stepping stone towards Asian mainland.

In 1907, in order to alleviate each other's territorial interests in Central Asia; Britain and Russia signed an agreement commonly known as the Anglo-Russian Convention. Although not included in the primary text of the agreement, both the parties also

agreed to not send any scientific expeditions to Tibet for duration of three years.[16] During these years in which Tibet remained out of bound for British explorers, China had started adopting an aggressive policy in terms of its suzerain rights over the plateau, with increasing control and by sending troops. The mountain ranges north of Assam, with very minimal presence of British governance, had no clearly demarcated boundary along with its borders with Tibet. As a result, Chinese emissaries and officials had often made sporadic appearances in the Abor and Mishmi hills. Against the backdrop of these developments, securing Assam's borders with Tibet and augmenting the British sphere of influence in the Arunachal Himalayas increasingly became an issue of consideration for the Government of India. Thus, sending exploratory parties into the region increasingly appeared to be a legitimate means to know more about the territory and shape future policies accordingly.

In 1910, the prohibition on entry into Tibet was lifted. While the ground for explorations into the plateau's borders with Assam was ripe, this was further emboldened by the murder of Noel Williamson, the APO of Sadiya following Needham by a group of Abor men during one of his tours in the hills. Being an act of outrage against a high-ranking British official, a punitive expedition was planned as a reparatory measure, the execution of which led to the Anglo-Abor Wars of 1911-12. Considering the geo-political circumstances that preceded the expedition, settling a well-demarcated British boundary between the Abor hills and Tibet was considered by the government as the need of the hour. As a result, large contingents of survey parties were sent along the imperial expeditionary forces, to appraise the landscape and frame suitable proposals for a boundary. In addition, grabbing the opportunity,

[16] Rogers Platt Churchill, *The Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907.* (Cedar Rapids, Ia.: Torch Press, 1939): 209-210.

the survey parties were also instructed to settle the much vexed question of Brahmaputra's identity if it becomes possible in due course of their operations.

Till the Anglo-Abor Wars, the geographical imaginations of the Upper Brahmaputra Basin had remained fractured and ambiguous, and the geographical knowledge produced about the region had remained contested and scattered in multiple commercial, political and scientific registers. The diverse objectives that the expeditionary forces had to undertake appeared as an attempt to reconcile these different streaks of knowledge, and to consolidate the geographical imaginations of the region. In the final chapter I would argue that this was attempted by two forms of violent measures that proliferated during the expeditions. At first the expeditionary troops tried to achieve a control over the population and the landscape by deployment of vehement warfare practices, including assault on the Abor individuals and their means of livelihood. This was succeeded by the waves of surveys and exploration parties that scoured and measured the territories and created a cartographic template for the future demarcation of territorialities in the region. However, against the backdrop of aggressive Chinese territorial designs, these two modes of operations need to be understood in the context of creating a consolidated British sphere of influence in Upper Brahmaputra Basin, rather than as a project of establishing a well-demarcated intelligible frontier.

This work attempts to provide a connected understanding of the historical geography of Arunachal Himalayas and the shifts and changes that accompanied its geographical imaginations. These shifts proliferated from the efforts of trying to open the gates of Tsangpo, i.e. the practices of explorations that projected the region as a corridor of

possibilities in diverse fronts. Rather than locating these processes as appendages of boundary-making, this work will frame the region as a zone of interactions between different imperial and local interests. Not only it will provide a multi-faceted understanding of the colonial territorialities of Arunachal Himalayas in different scientific, commercial and political registers of the empire, but will also assist us to conceptualise the region in terms of its connected pasts, instead of the marginal present.

Chapter I

Chasing the Rainbow Falls: Finding, Framing and Fixing the Brahmaputra River

In 1914, Kinthup, a Sikkimese tailor settled in Darjeeling was invited to Shimla by the Survey of India. In Shimla, two men, Frederick Bailey and Henry Morshead, eagerly awaited for the tailor. The duo had recently returned from an exploration in the mountainous upper basin of the Brahmaputra, in the borders of the Abor hills and Tibet. In the last a few decades Kinthup had become a name of regular occurrence in the geographical correspondences in India regarding the exploration of the river; a name often obfuscated by legends, hearsay and rumours.

Kinthup was a Pundit explorer. In the nineteenth century when Europeans were excluded from entering Tibet, The Great Trigonometrical Survey of India (GTS) sent these Pundits to survey the plateau in a surreptitious manner. Mostly recruited from the western and central Himalayan regions of British India bordering Tibet, Pundits were preferred for their familiarity with the Tibetan language. This made their entry into the plateau less conspicuous than it was for a European.[17] However, in his widely read account the popular author Derek J. Waller declares the 'true' designation of the Pundits to be spies or secret agents.[18] Kinthup's claim to fame was his ambitious passage across the plateau between 1880 and 1884. Henry Harman, a surveyor of the GTS had specifically trained him in the methods of surveying for this journey. When the Pundit returned to India, the account of his travel [published in 1888] was widely

[17] Goswami, “Rivers and History”: 12-13.

[18] Derek J. Waller, *The Pundits: British Exploration of Tibet and Central Asia* (Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 1988): 1.

read in the official circles. But Kinthup's personal fame was eclipsed by two specific claims he made in this account. First, the Pundit definitively asserted that the river Tsangpo indeed flows from Tibet to British India and is the same with the Brahmaputra. And second, he mentioned about a hitherto unobserved waterfall on the Tsangpo in south-eastern Tibet, where the river abruptly takes off from a cliff of about 150 feet, creating spectacular rainbows in the air when the cascading water comes into contact with the earth.[19] Two decades after Kinthup, when Bailey and Morshead reached this place, they were unable to find any such majestic waterfall. Hence after their return, the duo wanted an audience with him to verify whether it existed or was it an error on his part.[20]

Before Bailey and Morshead's endeavour, the contentious identity of Brahmaputra with Tsangpo prevailed in the air for decades, because the rugged mountainous terrains between Assam and Tibet of through which the river flows remained a virtual *terra incognita* till the commencing decades of twentieth century.[21] From the direction of Assam there was a common colonial policy of avoiding interference with the inhabitants of the ungoverned hills, the Abors, the Daphlas and the Mishmis.[22] From Tibet the furthest any explorer had followed the river before Bailey and

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[19] Explorer Kinthup et al., *Explorations on the Tsang-Po in 1880-84: With Extracts from H. R. Thuillier and H. C. B. Tanner's Reports 1886-87* (Dehra Dun: Trigonometrical Survey Office, Survey in India, 1911): 1.

[20] Captain [Henry] Morshead et al., "Exploration on the Tsangpo or Upper Brahmaputra: Discussion," *The Geographical Journal* 44, no. 4 (October 1, 1914): 360–64.

[21] "Official Account of the Abor Expedition, 1911-1912.," Frontier and Over-Seas Expeditions From India (Simla: General Staff, India, 1913): 1.

[22] [Signed Secret Despatch to Secretary of State for India, enclosed in] J.B. Wood, Additional Secretary to the GOI in the Foreign Department to Arthur Hirtzel, Political Secretary, India Office, dated December 14, 1911 [confidential], in 'Abor Expedition. Explorations and Policy on the North-East Frontier', Foreign Department, Secret-e, December 1911, Nos. 450-523. [NAI]

Morshead was Kinthup himself in 1884.[23] The Pundit had followed the Tsangpo to a place in the Abor hills, from where, he claims in his account, the plains of Assam were only 35 miles away.[24] However he mentions that the Abor people in the region did not allow anyone coming from Tibet to pass through their territory. As a result, Kinthup had to abandon any plans of reaching Assam and returned to Tibet.[25] Despite the Pundit's inability to traverse the total itinerary of the Tsangpo, the mystique of the Rainbow Falls he unwittingly produced soon became a recurrently used trope in the milieu of explorations in the region for next a few decades, a trope that manifested in diverse forms in the geographical experiences orienting the river.

With the 'discovery' of tea in the plains of Assam in 1823, and the proliferation of plantations and European investments after its annexation, the province's role in the colonial economy steadily increased.[26] And gradually, the hill ranges surrounding the Brahmaputra valley were incorporated into the British sphere of influence in the latter half of nineteenth century. However the Abor and Mishmi hills to the north remained under a very pale shadow of imperial governance till 1912. But still these elusive hills and the Upper Brahmaputra Basin in general were often perceived as a region which could hold immense possibilities for commercial and territorial inroads of the empire in future. Resolving the question of Brahmaputra's identity was greatly informed by such possibilities. In 1906, explorer W. J. Ottley, [who has served with Francis Younghusband during his expedition of Tibet] categorically identified why the resolution of the Tsangpo-Brahmaputra question was imperative,

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[23] Kinthup et al., *Explorations on the Tsang-Po in 1880-84*: 15.

[24] ibid.

[25] Waller, *The Pundits*: 231

[26] Sharma, *Empire's Garden:* 30.

> '...It is a stigma on us that we should have lost the course of one of the greatest rivers in the world about 100 miles from our frontier. We ought to know this for strategical, tactical and economic reason. From my personal knowledge of the River valley I feel confident that... [It] passes through a most beautiful and fertile country, suitable for hill stations of any size, within easy reach of Calcutta... Again to discover a practicable route into China with a view to introducing Chinese trade into India by the shortest road. I also believe that should the Government ever have necessity to lay a railway into Tibet that the bed of the Brahmaputra is the easiest natural gradient, and would be cheapest and best course to take.'[27] (Sic)

Brahmaputra, the name by which the river is known in the plains of Assam, is formed at the Sadiya foothills by the confluence of three rivers flowing from Tibet: Dihang [Tsangpo], Dibang, and Lohit.[28] In his work, Ritupan Goswami has posited the geographical conundrums associated with the making of Brahmaputra [as a modern river] against the backdrop of two issues that persisted in official and scientific circles. First, identifying whether the Tsangpo was the upper course of the Brahmaputra or not. And second, selecting and legitimising one principal or 'signifier' course for the river out of the three aforementioned streams, to establish the river as a single, linear imagination. The official resolving of these two issues by the first half of

[27] W.J. Ottley to Louis W. Dane, Secretary to the GOI in the Foreign Department, dated May 24, 1906, in 'Proposed Exploration of South-Eastern Tibet', Foreign Department, Secret-E, August 1906, Nos. 547-559 [NAI]

[28] The name for Tsangpo when it enters the Arunachal Himalayas is Dihang. However, presently it is known as Siang.

twentieth century gradually legitimised the Tsangpo as the Brahmaputra, and the Dihang as the principal course.[29]

Goswami has argued that this way of knowing the modern Brahmaputra by these two processes was already standardised by the grammars of eighteenth and nineteenth century European geographical sciences; and the later surveys and explorations on the river's course operated only to verify and elaborate those pre-formulated concepts.[30] However, he has not elaborated on the methods by which these scientific understandings were produced and contested, how they negotiated with vernacular forms of geographies and how they were circulated and consumed across the official and geographical networks of the empire. In order to understand how the scientific understanding of a river facilitated the practices of explorations of its course, one must first investigate how these understandings were achieved at.

This chapter would argue that the production of the knowledge about the Brahmaputra encapsulated three distinct and interrelated themes. First, the application of scientific methods to frame the river. This includes ocular observation of its course, and measuring the water discharge of Dihang, Dibang and Lohit,. However, this operated in an extremely contested terrain and the scientific findings were often debated, accepted and sometimes discarded in spaces of legitimisation such as the RGS. Second, this scientific strategy was complemented by imperial exercises of meaning-making over local geographical understandings of the rivers. European geographers in the plains of Assam and in the Upper Brahmaputra Basin collected locally circulating legends, tales and anecdotes about the rivers and translated, rationalised and

[29] Goswami, "Rivers and History":

[30] ibid: 11

standardised them in a consistent manner with the scientific understandings. The coalescing of these two processes produced an epistemic ground on which the premise of many explorations to resolve the Brahmaputra's identity as a coherent geographical object till Tibet was conceived.

Third, the scope of this shared epistemic ground was considerably magnified by the end of the nineteenth century. With the frequently increasing circulation of information about the Brahmaputra and the increasing depth of geographical debates, especially in the RGS; the issue of river's identity gained a definitive momentum in terms of its scientific worth. With the increasing circulation of knowledge regarding the river and its surrounding landscape, and increasing instances of explorations based on these circulations, the Upper Brahmaputra Basin gradually achieved its geographical status as a physical and discursive gateway for the empire.

Calculating Water, Quantifying Geography

Before the annexation of the plains of Assam [when it was not surveyed properly], the colonial officials based in Bengal were perturbed by the source and origins of the Brahmaputra, beginning with James Renell, the first Surveyor General of India. In 1789, Renell recorded that the Tsangpo flowed into the Brahmaputra and both are the same rivers.[31] Only a decade later in 1800, John Peter Wade on the other hand identified Lohit as the source and the primary stream,

[31] James Rennell, *Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan or the Mogul Empire: With an Examination of Some Positions in the Indian System of Geography; and Some Illustrations of the Perfect One and a Complete Index of Names to the Map* (London, 1783): 91.

'...The Sanpo or the great rivers of Thibet which leaves the walls of Lassa, does in all probability discharges its water into the Berhampooter but from every information procurable in Assam, it is only a tributary stream and by no means the principal source of the Berhampooter which flows from a more easterly direction and is indebted for its magnitude to the great numbers of its tributary streams.'[32] (Sic)

A year before its formal annexation, David Scott, the British Agent in Assam, and Valentine Blacker, the Surveyor General of India, instructed a surveyor named R. Wilcox to explore the hills of north of Assam, to ascertain which of these streams actually feed the Brahmaputra. After his journey and the publication of his findings, the officials of the Survey agreed that Wilcox had conclusively proven that the Lohit was not the Tsangpo.[33] But still this was only a negating confirmation and no concrete proof in Dihang or Dibang's favour. And hence despite Wilcox's overtures, the Lohit remained a strong contender for the primary course till the end of the nineteenth century. In fact an official report from the 1896 on the geography of Assam stated that 'the Brahmaputra itself, so far as is known, has but a short course beyond the limits of British territory, and above Sadiya is far inferior in volume to the Dihong.'[34] (Sic)

[32] John Peter Wade, *An Account of Assam* (compiled in 1800), ed. Benudhar Sharma (Lakhimpur: R. Sharmah, Madhupur Tea Estate, 1927): ii-iii

[33] Goswami, “Rivers and History": 8-9.

[34] “Physical and Political Geography of the Province of Assam” (Shillong, 1896): 3.

This non-linear and back and forth conceptual shift between these two different streams imply what Clive Barnett has termed as 'interruptions and disappointments suffered by imperial teleological designs'.[35] The scientific and empirically verifiable solution to find the principal course, as Waller argues, was found in measuring the volume of water in the different streams of the river.[36] A military report from 1914 elaborates this premise. The report explains that when two [or more] streams join to form a river, the composite river is known by the name of the stream which had contributed the largest share of the water. And the other streams are relegated to the status of tributaries. While this was the conventionally accepted rule, the report also admitted that the rule was 'conspicuously violated' by the Brahmaputra, alluding to the constant and indecisive contest between the Dihang and the Lohit.[37]

The view that Dihang was the connecting link to Tsangpo was also widely contested in favour of the Subansiri, another tributary of Brahmaputra which flows from the Himalayas. The most vocal advocate of this hypothesis was the illustrious surveyor Lieutenant Colonel H.H. Godwin-Austen, after whom the Godwin-Austen [presently known as K2], the second highest peak of the world is named. In1877, Godwin-Austen argued his case on the basis of Subansiri's lower temperature [which indicated glacial origin in Tibet], revenue survey maps, accounts of travel in Tibet by a Pundit explorer named Nain Singh and from local testimonies.[38]

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[35] Clive Barnett, "Impure and Worldly Geography: The Africanist Discourse of the Royal Geographical Society, 1831–73," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 23 (1998): 241.

[36] Waller, *The Pundits*: 221-222

[37] "Military Report of the Brahmaputra River System" (Simla: General Staff, India, 1914).[Assam State Archives, hereafter ASA]

[38] H.H. Godwin-Austen, "On the Lower Course of Brahmaputra or the Tsanpo," *Report, British Association for Advancement of Science* 47, no. 2 (1877): 144.

In regard to these multiple contestants for the primary course, what was deemed as the most empirically verifiable and hence the most 'authentic' way to identify the principal stream was to calculate the water discharge of the rivers. Wilcox had calculated the discharge of the Dihang at its highest accessible point to be 50,000 cubic feet per second and of Subansiri's to be only 15,000. In 1867, from the accounts of Nain Singh after he came back from Tibet, T. G. Montgomerie of the GTS calculated the Tsangpo's discharge to be 35,000 cubic feet per second at Chushul near Lhasa. Montgomerie attributed the difference of 15,000 cubic feet till Wilcox's site of calculation to the numerous tributaries on its course.[39] He argued that the Dihang for a mountain stream carried an exceptionally large volume of water and the only reason which can explain this was that it was the same river with the Tsangpo, which had a large drainage basin in Tibet.[40]

Arguably the most elaborate attempt to identify which river had the 'best claim to be considered the *recipient* of the Sanpo [Tsangpo]' was the one undertaken by Harman in 1878.[41] As a part of the attempt by GTS to triangulate the mountains north of Assam, Harman had already surveyed parts of the Subansiri basin in 1874-75 and in 1877-78.[42] During the course of these surveys, the Surveyor-General of India hinted that if the question of Tsangpo's mysterious identity [with either Dihang or Subansiri] could be settled by the surveyors; it would be a remarkable geographical

[39] Goswami, "Rivers and History": 20-21.

[40] Demi-Official from Chief Commissioner of British Burmah, dated August 8, 1878, in "Captain Woodthorpe and Lieutenant Harman's Explorations on Northern Frontier of Assam", Foreign Department, Political-A, March 1879, Nos. 145-148 [NAI]

[41] H.J. Harman, "On the Operations for Obtaining the Discharges of the Large Rivers in Upper Assam, during Season 1877," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* XLVIII, no. I (1879):4.

[42] Waller, *The Pundits*: 188.

accomplishment.[43] In 1878, Harman trained two men from the Khamti community of the foothills and dispatched them to explore the course of the Dihang from the plains. But the villagers on the banks of the river uphill turned them back, as they reportedly allowed no strangers across their territory.[44] At the same time, some anonymous 'native agents' employed with the survey started saying that Tsangpo was actually Subansiri. However, the colonial political relations with the inhabitants of the Subansiri basin [Daphlas and Hill Miris] were not deemed as favourable at that time to undertake any physical surveying of that river. Considering the improbability of ocular testimonies and following the suggestion of the superintendent of the GTS, Harman decided to measure the water discharge of all the major rivers flowing from the northern mountains; to find out the outlet of Tsangpo.[45] The premise of Harman's calculations echoed Montgomerie's contention that the connecting channel to Tsangpo would have to carry the largest volume of water, as it would possess a huge catchment area in Tibet.[46]

After the calculations were conducted in the dry winter, the discharge of the rivers as Harman found were-

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[43] The Surveyor General of India to the Secretary to the GOI, No. 515F, dated August 7, 1877, in 'Survey explorations in Assam during ensuing season', Department of Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce, Surveys, October 1877, nos. 1-7. [NAI]

[44] The Superintendent, GTS to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, no. 61-837, dated July 31, 1877, in 'Survey explorations in Assam during ensuing season', Department of Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce, Surveys, October 1877, nos. 1-7. [NAI]

[45] J. T. Walker to C. U. Aitchison, no. 46, dated November 27, 1878, in "Captain Woodthorpe and Lieutenant Harman's Explorations on Northern Frontier of Assam", Foreign Department, Political-A, March 1879, Nos. 145-148 [NAI]

[46] Waller, *The Pundits*: 221-222

River	Mean dry season water discharge (in cubic feet per second)
Dihang	55,400
Dibang	27,200 (Including Senseri river)
Dibang	26,000 (excluding Senseri river)
Brahmaputra [Lohit]	33,832 (above Sadiya and below Tengapani mukh)
Brahmaputra [Lohit]	25,000 (at Brahmakund)
Subansiri	16,945

Table 1: Water Discharge of Brahmaputra's Feeding Streams[47]

But Harman's findings exhibit a strange inconsistency. In the report, he calls Dihang, Dibang and Subansiri by their own names; but as for Lohit, he calls it the Brahmaputra-

> ...The next river measured was the united stream of the Dihang and Dibang rivers, at one mile above the junction with the Brahmaputra and one mile below the mouth of the Dibang river..The next river measured was the Brahmaputra river at about 9 miles above Sadiya.[48]

Considering the issue that his attempt was to find the principal signifier of the river; and his findings showed that Dihang carried the largest discharge of water, calling

[47] Harman, "On the Operations for Obtaining the Discharges of the Large Rivers in Upper Assam, during Season 1877."

[48]. ibid: 12-14.

Lohit as the Brahmaputra appears to be a strange discrepancy. As the table shows, the amount of water flow in Dihang was significantly larger than either Lohit or Subansiri. Harman's insistence in calling Lohit as the Brahmaputra despite the empirical evidence in front him indicates that in the conventional parlance, Dihang's establishment as the primary course had a much longer duration of uncertainty to traverse. And even in scientific circles, these empirically verified findings of Harman remained debated till the end of the century. Harman's positions and the inconsistent nomenclature he adopted had not been objected by J. T. Walker; the Surveyor General of India during his tenure. But in 1884, Walker called the Tsangpo as the Brahmaputra, in a monograph published in the journal of RGS.[49] And the uncertainty was further compounded by a resolution adopted by Royal Scottish Geographical Society (RSGS) in 1906 which categorised the Dibang as the Brahmaputra.[50]

As it shows, the empirical data generated by Harman appeared to be inconclusive in resolving of the controversy. The same data was appropriated by many others to argue, that the Tsangpo actually fed the Irrawaddy in Burma, not the Dihang. Robert Gordon, an engineer with the Public Works Department in Burma was one of those. In a report which he had claimed to have first written in 1877 and [later also in a presentation to the RGS] he made a contention for the Irrawaddy to be the Tsangpo. This he based on the discharge of water, explanations by ancient Chinese geographers and selective quotation from Indian Pundits' and Burmese explorers' travel narratives.[51] Finding the source of Irrawaddy was immediately informed by material

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[49] J. T. Walker, "Note on the R. G. S. Map of Tibet," *The Geographical Journal* 4, no. 1 (1894): 52.

[50] Enclosure in India Office letter no. 15, dated the 13th April 1906, in 'Proposed Exploration of South-Eastern Tibet', Foreign Department, Secret-E, August 1906, Nos. 547-559 [NAI]

[51] Waller, *The Pundits*: 225-236

factors in Burma. In the densely-populated and highly productive delta of the river in British Lower Burma, a vast system of embankments had been erected to prevent flood. But for its effective functioning, knowing the exact drainage and exact catchment area of the river was crucial.[52] The Chief Commissioner of Burma C. U. Aitchison wrote to Walker in 1878, suggesting that settling whether Tsangpo discharged into Brahmaputra or Irrawaddy was crucial for the prospect of both Assam and British Burma and hence he suggested that two native explorers, one from each of the provinces should be sent to follow the courses of the rivers. [53]

The Irrawaddy hypothesis was however put on test after the exploits of Pundit Kishen Singh. In 1878, the Pundit was recruited by Walker for another exploration of Tibet. Kishen Singh alias A-K's plan was to travel across Tibet and then further to Mongolia; to explore the unknown tract of land stretching from Eastern Turkistan [presently Xinjiang] to the rugged mountainous borders of eastern Tibet and China. After travelling in the plateau for four years, in 1882 he reached Rima in the Zayul Valley of South-Eastern Tibet. Zayul Valley's location is north-eastwards from the plains of Assam, separated by the Mishmi hills. The valley was situated between the explored watersheds of Tsangpo and Irrawaddy. Kishen Singh positively stated that the river that flows through the valley descends into Assam across the Mishmi mountains. Interpolating from its location, Walker and other officials of the Survey presumed this river to be the Lohit. If this description was accurate, then the Lohit

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[52] Demi-official from Chief Commissioner of British Burmah, dated August 8, 1878, in 'Captain Woodthorpe's and Lieutenant Harmans Exploration on Northern Frontier of Assam', Foreign Department, Political-A, March 1879, Nos. 145-148.[NAI]

[53] [Extract from a letter] C.U.Aitchison to J.T. Walker, dated August 1, 1878, in 'Captain Woodthorpe's and Lieutenant Harmans Exploration on Northern Frontier of Assam, Foreign Department, Political-A, March 1879, Nos. 145-148. [NAI]

would come directly between Tsangpo and Irrawaddy's watersheds, disproving Gordon's thesis. But due to resistance on the part of Mishmis, Kishen Singh was unable to follow its course till Assam and turned back to Lhasa.[54]

In February 1885, Walker presented Kishen Singh's findings before the RGS. While it received a positive response; Gordon, who was in the audience complained that he had never been treated impartially in the society in regard to his hypothesis.[55] Three months later; Gordon was allowed to present a paper where he reiterated his earlier position regarding the Irrawaddy on the basis of precipitation, distances between places on the maps and the discharge of the rivers. He argued that Lohit did not emerge from Zayul valley but from a small mountain stream which was separated from the valley by series of high ridges. He argued that the distance between Zayul Valley and Assam are far greater than, and within that distance the Tsangpo could easily slip in to become the Irrawaddy in Burma. In response to his paper, J. T. Walker, who was present in the audience, countered that from Kishen Singh's account it has already been established that the river of Zayul is the Lohit. The Tsangpo, he sarcastically remarked, would either have to fly over Lohit or flow underground beneath it to be the Irrawaddy in Burma.[56] In 1886, this was conclusively put into rest by ocular verification of the Lohit's course. J. F. Needham; the Assistant Political Officer of Sadiya, followed the course of the river, and reached Zayul from where he was turned back by the Tibetan officials. From observation, and also from the

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[54] J. T. Walker, "Four Years' Journeyings Through Great Tibet, by One of the Trans-Himalayan Explorers of the Survey of India," *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society and Monthly Record of Geography* 7, no. 2 (1885): 65–92.

[55] ibid: 88.

[56] Robert Gordon, "The Irawadi River," *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society and Monthly Record of Geography,* 7, no. 5 (May 1885): 327.

testimonies of the Mishmis and the Tibetans, Needham positively stated that the river of Zayul later becomes the Lohit in Assam.[57]

This contention between Walker and Gordon raises an important question. Unlike Harman who solely relied on scientific observations, Gordon also heavily borrowed from local geographical narratives of what he called as the 'civilised eastern nations' [especially the Chinese], to complement his calculations of Irrawaddy's water discharge. Gordon's accounts were often accused of misappropriation and selective citation from texts. But no matter how inconsistent they were, his thesis was often received with interest and even to some degree of acceptance by geographers in the RGS; so much that Walker had to prepare an entire paper to provide an unyielding counter-argument.[58] Thus, the contestations Gordon posited to Harman's calculations demand a more complex understanding of how scientifically validated geography in the colonial worlds can also be corroborated as well legitimised by locally existing forms of understandings.

Tales of Many Rivers, Rivers of Many Tales

After the colonial intervention in Assam, the locally prevalent forms of envisaging landscapes and their consistency or inconsistency with the grammars of imperial sciences engendered numerous forms of epistemic exchanges. To incorporate the

[57] J. F. Needham, "Mr. J. F. Needham's Journey Along The Lohit Brahmaputra, Between Sadiya in Upper Assam and Rima in South-Eastern Tibet.," *Proceedings of Royal Geographical Society* 2 (1889): 498-500.

[58] Gordon, "The Irawadi River."

local forms of knowing the Brahmaputra into the repertoire of imperial geography, traces of pre-colonial geographies embedded in local cognitive networks were encoded and recoded in understandable idioms; a process which entailed massive rationalisation of certain non-rational geographical phenomena.

This can be illustrated by one instance. In 1828, Captain Neufville, the Political Agent of Upper Assam mentioned about a river called Siri Lohit in his account of the province.[59] This river, according to his local informants, was located in the mountains north of Assam. However, the local testimonies regarding the river's source and course were often contradictory. As Neufville's narrative was predominantly based on such sources, he attempted to reconcile these divergent understandings of geographies under one register. From this, he argued that the river Siri Lohit branched into two different channels in the hills, with one stream flowing into the Dihang. [60]

To legitimise the existence of this river and its connection with Dihang, Neufville narrated an incident from pre-colonial Assam that he had heard from his informants. During the rule of the Ahom king Rajeshwar Singha, an overwhelming flood occurred on the Dihang that continued for fifteen days. Many agricultural and household apparatuses, elephant trappings and numerous paraphernalia which can be attributed to a 'civilised' race were brought down by the water from the mountains. From the appearance of these objects, Neufville rationalised that there must exist a large river

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[59] The loose Assamese translation of the term will be "Great Sacred River".

[60] John Bryan Neufville, “Geography and Population of Asam,” *Asiatick Researches* 16 (1828): 335-336.

valley settlement towards the north of the hills, and Siri Lohit must be a stream which connects this valley to the Brahmaputra of Assam, via the Dihang.[61]

The mention of Siri Lohit later disappeared from the discursive terrains of imperial geography. But the modality of geographical rationalisation that Neufville brought remained in its epistemic interstices. The orderly geographical knowledge of the territorial and cultural margins such as Assam, as Boddhisatva Kar argues, is mediated by other forms, which exist in dispersed 'vernacular geographies'. With imperial intervention arrived the 'translative process of historicist rationalisation', which necessitated that the previously nurtured notions of multiple localisations of geographical entities could no longer be sustained. There could be 'only one Ganga, only one Mount Meru, and, more ominously for us today, only one Ayodhya.'[62] Translation of locally existing geographies mediated by imperial forms and content made territorialities precise, unduplicated, and comprehensively delineated, in one singular knowable, governable and manageable framework. There had to be one Brahmaputra as well, unambiguous and indivisible, of course from a multitude to choose from.

The need for precise territorialities and unduplicable geographical markers find echo in Neufville's claims as well. The early European travellers in India's north-east recurrently referred to a tract of land called the Kolita or the Kulta country, also in the mountains northwards from Assam. Neufville mentioned that this country had a 'high

[61] ibid.

[62] Bodhisattva Kar, "Incredible Stories in the Time of Credible Histories: Colonial Assam and Translations of Vernacular Geographies," in *History in the Vernacular*, ed. Partha Chatterjee and Raziuddin Aquil (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2008): 289-301.

degree of advancement and civilisation' and once enjoyed a considerable extent of influence over the plains of Assam. Local informants told Neufville that the inhabitants of the Kolita country were Hindus. However, Neufville was sceptical about this claim due to its projected geographical location, far removed from [the marginally Hindu cores of] the plains. He surmised that this might have been a homonymic analogy drawn by the people of Assam, as the term Kolita was also used to define one of the Hindu castes of the plains.[63]

Neuvilles's response to the homonymic reference by deploying a seemingly 'more rationalised', but almost equally uncertain counter-claim implies that the line between the factual and the fabulous was neither watertight nor devoid of epistemic slippages. While he discarded homonymic reference to be a flight of the fancy, the same hermeneutical contrivance was deployed by British explorer and Tibetologist Laurence Waddell in 1895; to drive home the point that Tsangpo and Brahmaputra were indeed one and the same. By narrating a fascinating Tibetan legend, Waddell suggested that the Tibetan word Tsang-pu is corresponds to the Sanskrit word Brahmaputra, both meaning the son of Brahma,

> '...the son of Thi-sroug-deu-tsan, who reigned about 750 A.D., was drowned in the river, and the king ordered that the river at that spot should receive a certain number of lashes daily, as a punishment for its crime. After a time the spirit of the river, unable to endure any longer such an unjust punishment, appeared before the king in the *form of* Brahmaputra, and besought the king to cast a piece of wood into the

[63] Neufville, "Geography and Population of Asam": 345.

> river. On this being done, the wood was immediately carried off downstream. In this way the river-spirit showed that the water which drowned the prince' had long since passed on, and that the water now at the spot was wholly innocent of the offence for which it was being whipped.'[64]

As Hindu myths and names were not prevalent in Tibet before the seventh century, Waddell argues that this apparent analogy with the son of Brahma must be a later invention. He proposes that like the Brahmins of India, the Lamas [Monks] of Tibet also must have appropriated the local name *Tsang-po* to *Tsang-pu* in order to assign it a mythical manifestation. Tsang-po simply means 'the river', echoing a similar nomenclature practice that he noticed among the inhabitants of other major river basins, most notably the Ganga.[65]

Waddell also claimed that a two-hundred year old indigenous Tibetan text he had consulted says that the rivers of central and western Tibet flow into the Lohita or the Sita river. Again by the use of homonymic tools, Waddell deduces from this that Lohita must be Brahmaputra, and Sita had to be Sadiya, the closest British point from Tibet.[66] From Neufville to Waddell, in a period spanning about seven decades, a noticeable epistemic shift can be noticed. Unlike his predecessor, Waddell did not shy away from drawing parallels from the Indic-Sanskritic cultural cosmos and rationalisation of the allegorical to the literal. In the backdrop of the growing colonial

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[64] L.A. Waddell, "The Falls Of The Tsang-Po (San-Pu), And Identity Of That River With The Brahmaputra," *The Geographical Journal (including the Proceedings the Royal Geographical Society)* V, January-June, no. 3 (March 1895): 258-260.

[65] ibid: 260

[66] ibid.

interest in Tibet, of the empire in general, and of the GTS in particular, attempts to frame allegorical and mythical connections with Tibet into more spatially coherent forms find echo in Waddell’s account.

Since Neufville's times; there was a distinctive change in the colonial attitudes towards Tibet. In the nineteenth century, the Government of India had strictly ordered British surveyors not to cross into its frontier with the hermitic kingdom, in accordance with the command from the Chinese Emperor, 'no Moghul, Hindustani, Pathan or Feringhi shall be admitted into Tibet on pain of death'. In fact, this was one of the reasons the Pundits operated in an extremely clandestine manner.[67] But still, there were intermittent periods when possibility for brief interactions was possible. On December 6, 1893, the British Political Officer in Sikkim and a representative of the Chinese Resident at Lhasa signed certain Trade Regulations in Darjeeling. According to the clauses of the Regulations, a border mart was to be opened at Yatung inside the Tibetan boundary from 1894. This mart was to be made accessible to all British subjects. Although much speculation had built up regarding the mart, the clauses of the agreement were rendered ineffective due to its rejection by Tibetan officials, and inability of the Chinese government to build any pressure. In the meantime the Government of India decided to pursue a cautionary and optimistic approach as it was believed in the official circles that to engage with the Tibetan populace one needed 'utmost patience'.[68]

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[67] Showell Styles, *The Forbidden Frontiers: The Survey of Lndia from 1765 to 1949* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1970): 111.

[68] Phanindra Nath Chakrabarti, *Trans-Himalayan Trade: A Retrospect, 1774-1914* (Delhi: Classics India Publications, 1990): 110.

Waddell's account, published only a couple of years after the Yatung fiasco hints this optimism of the period. But as the physical explorations of Tibet and the Tsangpo were off-limit, his account uses speculation as the tool of comprehension. A more tangible manifestation of ascertaining this speculation was earlier deployed by Harman when he sent Kinthup to Tibet. The Pundit was instructed by Harman to place certain marked logs on the stream of the Tsangpo, so that [when they flow to Assam] watchers in Assam could ascertain Brahmaputra's identity, by observing and identifying the logs where the river enters the foothills. However, this plan could not be executed due to a number of unforeseen circumstances, including Kinthup's slavery and the resultant break in the communication lines between him and Harman.[69]

This modality of ascertaining the river's identity by reading objects in the water was a pervasive phenomenon to some extent. In 1896, H.C. Barnes, the Assistant Commissioner of Dibrugarh in Assam, reported the discovery of a curious wooden block floating on the Brahmaputra. It was discovered by an Assamese man foraging for firewood on the river banks. The block was presumably produced for printing purposes and contained a certain script in reverse for that. After its inspection by certain Khamti men [who were Buddhists], they declared that the writings in it were Lama, i.e. Tibetan. During that time Dihang river had a flash flood, and from this Barnes assumed that the wood might have been carried out by the flood from Tibet, i.e. implying that the Dihang was the connecting channel between Tsangpo and Brahmaputra.[70]

[69] Waller, *The Pundits:* 229-230.

[70] Sarat Chandra Das, "A Note on the Identity of the Great Tsanng-Po of Tibet with the Dihong," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 67, no. 1 (1898): 128–129.

Another occurrence that seemed to have emboldened the assumption of this connection was the regular appearance of coniferous timbers in the plains. The humid tropical and subtropical climate of the plains and the low-altitude hills of the Dihang basin were not suitable for conifers, even up to an elevation of 8600 feet from sea-level. And conifers were more common in the Tibetan plateau. According to a forest report from 1912, conifers such as Cypress, which the Assamese termed as Horol [Xorol] were regularly brought down by the river Dihang. A.J.W. Milroy, the author of the report mentioned about a local interpreter from the Miri community who had a walking stick made of coniferous wood. The possession of a similar walking stick by a 'native' sepoy seemingly justified this botanical connection to Milroy, as the sepoy said that he had the stick made in Lhasa during his service there.[71]

These two instances exhibit a similar hermeneutical device with the one Neufville deployed in regard to the flash flood in Dihang. But towards the end of the century, the geo-political circumstances had changed since his times. Commercial and diplomatic interactions with Tibet were increasing; and after the Survey of India's venture into the hills north of Assam, comparatively larger amount of information were available. Hence, this device was deployed not only to corroborate the scientific understandings of the river, but also legitimise them as a discursive entrance to advance the growing imperial engagements with Tibet.

[71] A.J.W. Milroy, "Report on the Forest Resources of the Abor Country" (Shillong, 1912): 8-9.[ASA]

The Curious Case of Kinthup

This coalescing of scientific understanding and translation of local geographies made the river plottable as a linear conceptualisation, traceable till Tibet. But the process also demanded conveying this conceptualisation to a larger metropolitan context. Colonial geographical explorations proliferated certain 'imaginative geographies'. The specific methods of decoding and then visually representing the colonial landscape in texts produced by diverse individuals with ties to the empire such as administrators, missionaries and explorers, was vital for the construction and sustenance of these geographies. These texts about unexplored, unmapped, ungoverned lands were often accompanied by images of ' fabulous creatures, awe-inspiring landscapes, and daring deeds', for the consumption of a metropolitan audience.[72] The process by which the selection and de-selection of the primary course of the Brahmaputra operated and how it informed the practices of explorations, can be located in the shifts occurring in the consumption patterns of geographies produced in the region.

In 1911, the illustrious journalist Percival Landon wrote that the territories of the Abors [i.e. the Dihang basin] provided no glamour or adventure for explorers; nothing in the lines of the majestic temples of Tibet or the picturesque architecture of Burma to 'sooth' their eyes.[73] In the absence of such man-made attractions, enhancing the consumable allure of the natural landscapes was vital to the project of producing, packaging and presenting these distant hills to a discerning crowd in London and elsewhere.

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[72] Driver, "Geography's Empire: Histories of Geographical Knowledge": 31-32.

[73] "The Abor Expedition: On the Road to Pasighat," *Times of India*, October 20, 1911, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

The discovery of enigmatic objects in the colonial world, be it a large waterfall or a river's source, was envisaged as triumphant [national] moments for the audience in the metropole. However, this triumph was formalised into a real, concrete and comprehensible form only after the traveller had reached his [and in a few instances, her] home shores, and textually represented them as accessible; via assigning names to them on maps, via reports, diaries, lectures in front of interested audiences and of course via the much awaited travel narratives. By assigning aesthetic qualities to the landscape they had discovered, by packing them densely with semantic descriptions and evoking a sense of 'mastery' over them, their realness was conveyed to the audience.[74]

Against the backdrop of such processes of producing landscapes, a natural reservoir on the Lohit river known as Brahmakund [colloquially also known as Parasuram Kund] captured the attention of the explorers. Situated in the lower hills within an easy distance from the plains, the Kund was considered as a very sacred pilgrimage by the Hindus of Assam.[75] The legend that was in circulation was that Parasuram, the avatar of Vishnu made an opening in the hills with his axe so that the Lohit could flow uninterrupted, and the Kund formed as a result. Because of this the Assamese also referred to it as Deopani [holy water] and Prabhu Kuthar [the axe of god].[76] The holy water of the kund was believed to have properties that could ameliorate one's sin and it became a ritual for the pre-colonial Ahom kings to take a dip in the water

[74] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London; New York: Routledge, 1992): 201-205.

[75] Neufville, “Geography and Population of Asam”: 332.

[76] R Wilcox, “Memoir of a Survey of Asam and the Neighbouring Countries, Executed In 1525-6-7-8,” *Asiatic Researches* XVII (1832): 353-354.

before their coronation.[77] In 1826, when Wilcox, one of the first travellers to visit the Kund reached it, he provided a picturesque depiction of it,

> '...This celebrated reservoir is on the left bank of the river; it is formed by a projecting rock, which runs up the river nearly parallel to the bank, and forms a good sized pool.... the rock has much the appearance of a gothic ruin, and a chasm about half way up, which resembles a carved window, assists the similitude... higher up, from a tabular ledge of the rock, a fine view is obtained of the Kund, the river, and the neighbouring hills.'[78]

Almost four decades after Wilcox's journey, the Kund was again visited by T. T. Cooper, another British traveller.[79] Cooper was looking forward to witness its 'scenic grandeur' and anticipated to see a stupendous gorge, from which the waters of Lohit had descended into the pool, an expectation magnified by the descriptions of earlier travellers. However, Cooper writes that he was disillusioned to see the river coming down as only a 'noisy turbulent stream', which 'trickled' from the cliff and descended into the basin of the pool.[80]

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[77] E.A. Rowlatt, "Report of an Expedition into the Mishmee Hills to the North-East of Sudyah.," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* XIV, no. 163 (1845): 486-487.

[78] Wilcox, "Memoir of a Survey of Asam and the Neighbouring Countries, Executed In 1525-6-7-8": 353.

[79] See chapter 2 for detailed account of Cooper's travel.

[80] T.T. Cooper, *The Mishmee Hills: An Account of A Journey Made in an Attempt to Penetrate Thibet from Assam to Open New Routes for Commerce* (London: Henry S.King & Co., 1873): 179-180.

The depletion of the aura of Brahmakund is however analogous to the gradual shift where Dihang was displacing Lohit as the primary course in geographical imaginations. With Kinthup stumbling upon the Rainbow Falls, imperial geography in both India and London found a more distant, more alluring and more exoticised rallying point to satiate itself. After returning from Tibet, Kinthup was asked by the Survey of India to record the account of his travel. But as the Pundit was not literate, he dictated his tale to a scribed named Urgan Gyatso, which was later translated into English by another scribe named Norpu. This account mentions the Tsangpo falling from a majestic height of 160 feet with the cascading discharge creating a big lake at the bottom of the cliff 'where rainbows are always observable.' [81]

A remarkable hallmark of the consumption patterns of imperial geography was a fetish to shape exoticised landmarks as easily identifiable. This demanded recasting the landscapes in terms of the familiar, often in metropolitan contexts. Renaming of landscapes with the names of explorers, monarchs and other known figures was an often sought-after practice to familiarise their surroundings, the Victoria Falls being the most evident instance. In a very similar manner, in 1906, W. J. Ottley also suggested that the waterfalls mentioned by Kinthup should be explored at the earliest and be named as King Edward VII Falls.[82]

However, for this consumption to be more effective; these ‘wild’, inaccessible landscapes also demanded what JoAnn Macgregor terms as 'taming' them. She

[81] Explorer Kinthup et al., *Explorations on the Tsang-Po in 1880-84.*

[82] W.J. Ottley to Louis Dane, dated September 28, 1906 in 'Application of Mr. H.C. Barnes for Permission to Explore the Country to the North-East of the Assam Frontier', Foreign Department, Secret-E, August 1907, Nos. 358-359. [NAI]

identifies two ways by which this could be accomplished. First, scientific investigations proliferating newer understandings of landscapes which accentuates this process of taming. And second, refashioning the wilderness into a safe place of leisure and comfort where white males and females would no longer be out of place. The coming up of the Victoria Falls Hotel in 1904 alludes to this.[83] Against the backdrop of such a landscape tourism bubble in the times, the existence of a mysterious and possibly huge waterfall in the Indian borders most certainly proliferated speculations. In 1906, Thomas Holdich, explorer, geographer, and the President of the RGS wrote an extensive account of his travels in Tibet. In the account, Holdich was optimistic about opening up future commercial connections between Assam and Tibet and the possibilities of improvement via tourism,

> '...in those good times when the last relics of savage barbarism shall give place to that interchange of commercial rights... it will be realised that this is the natural highway from India to Tibet and western China, and we shall have a Tibetan branch of the Assam railway, and a spacious hotel for sightseers and sportsmen at the falls. This prospect is not more visionary than twenty-five years ago was that of a modem hotel at the Victoria Falls of the Zambesi; or the splendid establishments which will soon overlook the falls of Iguazu on the Parana, in South America."[84](sic)

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[83] JoAnn McGregor, "The Victoria Falls 1900-1940: Landscape, Tourism and the Geographical Imagination," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29, no. 3 (2003): 727-728.

[84] Thomas Hungerford Holdich, *Tibet, the Mysterious* (New York, F.A. Stokes Company, 1906): 218.

However, to assert that the mystique of the Rainbow Falls was imagined out of the mass consumptive need of imperial geography would be a monolithic explanation. In the scientific circles, one of the reasons why the waterfall was considered to be a crucial geographical phenomenon was because the river Tsangpo till the mappable parts of Tibet had an altitude of 9000 feet above sea level; while at the point where it reached the plains of Assam it was only 500 feet. This great variation in elevation within such a short distance was perplexing. Hence, it was attributed to a massive drop in the river's course, fomenting the imaginations around a fall which was often presumed to have been even larger than the Niagara. [85] In reality, such a drop in the Himalayan rivers without any drastic cascading movement was not irregular. While the Dihang appeared to have dropped from 9000 to 1000 feet within a hundred miles, Sutlej drops from 10,000 to 1000 and Ganga drops from 12,000 to 1000; without possessing any large waterfall in their respective courses.[86]

Like the Brahmakund, the lifespan of the Rainbow Falls was also not extensive. In 1911 a party of surveyors tried to reach the waterfall, operating in synchronicity with the military troops deployed during the Anglo-Abor Wars.[87] The courses of Dihang, Dibang, Lohit and Subansiri were surveyed to their northernmost possible reaches by the parties between 1911 and 1912.[88] As media attention regarding these wars was extensive, the riddle of the Rainbow Falls found a captivated audience in the

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[85] Arthur Swinson, *Beyond the Frontiers: The Biography of Colonel F. M. Bailey* (London: Hutchinso and Co., 1971): 56.

[86] S. G. Burrard, "Explorations on the North-East Frontier of India during 1911-12-13," Records of the Survey of India, (1914): 3.

[87] See chapter 4 for details on the Wars.

[88] Burrard, "Explorations on the North-East Frontier of India during 1911-12-13."

metropole. The despatches from the battlefields published in the illustrated weeklies were accompanied by numerous artistic impressions of the waterfall.[89]

During the course of these surveys, Bailey and Morshead undertook their illustrious exploration to the Rainbow Falls. Bailey was the son of an officer of the Indian Forest Service who was also a Secretary of the RSGS. He had earlier accompanied Francis Younghusband during his Tibetan expedition; after which he became a part of a survey team that traced the Tsangpo to its source in the interiors of the plateau.[90] On the other hand, the surveyor Morshead was later to be known for his forays into the Mount Everest, Spitsbergen and also for his services in the World War I.[91]

Before the wars, Bailey had already tried exploring the course of the Tsangpo from Tibet. Travelling from Calcutta to Peking [Beijing], Bailey sailed up the Yangtze towards eastern Tibet and climbed the Tibetan heights from the plains of Sichuan, and proceeded westwards towards Tsangpo, with the intention of taking a boiling point observation of its discharge to verify the existence of the waterfall. However, to reach Tsangpo; he would have had to cross a Tibetan district [Pomed] whose inhabitants were at a conflict with the Chinese officials at that time. Considering the turbulent nature of the territory, the Tibetan officials refused Bailey any transport or other forms of assistance. As going back to Peking and then travelling to India would have

[89] Ian Morshead, *The Life and Murder of Henry Morshead: A True Story from the Days of the Raj* (Cambridge: The Oleander Press, 1982): 22.

[90] Morshead et al., "Exploration on the Tsangpo or Upper Brahmaputra": 361.

[91] Morshead, *The Life and Murder of Henry Morshead:* 47

put a drain on his resources, Bailey travelled towards east, and then entered Assam by following the course of the Lohit.[92]

Despite the failure to reach Tsangpo, Bailey did not give up and with the help of the Foreign Secretary Henry McMahon, secured a position in the survey parties that were to accompany the military troops of the Anglo-Abor Wars. In the course of his survey in the Dibang basin he reached the village of Mipi close to Tibet, where he could gather much needed information about the course of the Tsangpo. As McMahon had already empowered him to explore the area as much as possible, Bailey came back to the plains in search of an appropriate partner to accompany him to the Tsangpo. Morshead, who had served with the Survey of India for six years, appeared to be the most suitable candidate.[93] The duo started from Sadiya in 1913, with intention of ascending the hills via Dibang, with which they were already familiar with and then halt at the village of Mipi close to Tibetan borders. As Mipi lied between the watersheds of Dihang and Dibang, here they would cross to Dihang basin and then proceed towards Tibet by following the river.[94] When they reached the Pemako region in South-East Tibet, Bailey asked the local inhabitants about Kinthup's waterfall. All of them replied that although there were many rapid currents along the river's course, there was no waterfall of such magnitude.[95] The duo did find a waterfall eventually, but a much smaller one of only 30 feet with the proverbial rainbows hanging over it. The explorers presumed Kinthup had confused this fall with a larger one in the

[92] Swinson, *Beyond the Frontiers:* 66-76.

[93] ibid: 83-86

[94] Morshead et al. “Exploration on the Tsangpo or Upper Brahmaputra: Discussion”: 342.

[95] F.M. Bailey, “Report of the Exploration of the North-Eastern Frontier 1914” (Simla: Political Department, 1914): 5.

vicinity, found on a tributary of the Tsangpo.[96] The height of the second waterfall was around 160 feet, corresponding with Kinthup's estimate.[97]

The duo traversed the entire unexplored course of the river saving 45 miles; and returned to India by a westward route through Tawang.[98] Despite the upset caused by the anticlimactic end to the mystery, the issue of Brahmaputra's identity with Tsangpo had finally appeared to be confirmed by their observation of its course for 'all intents and purposes'.[99] As triumphant torchbearers of the empire's geographical cause, accolades were waiting for Bailey and Morshead on their return. They were awarded the illustrious Macgregor Medal for outstanding exploratory works and publicly congratulated by Sir Henry Trotter on behalf of the RGS for resolving a problem they had been wrestling for more than fifty years.. Burrard, the Surveyor-General of India at that time was felicitated by the British monarch himself for the success of this endeavour.[100]

But despite this jubilant turn of events, the explorer duo was still perturbed by the question of the Rainbow Falls. As the other geographical information provided by Kinthup in his narrative was found to exceptionally accurate, this inconsistency continued to trouble them. Kinthup had however long receded into anonymity. His name came up occasionally in official or scientific correspondences from time to time, and his account was republished in 1911 to support the Abor expeditionary forces. But other than that no one had heard from him. When he was found to be

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[96] ibid: 41

[97] ibid: 12.

[98] Bailey, "Report of the Exploration of the North-Eastern Frontier 1914."

[99] Burrard, *Explorations on the North-East Frontier of India* :68

[100] Morshead et al. "Exploration on the Tsangpo or Upper Brahmaputra: Discussion": 361-363.

residing in Darjeeling, Bailey and Morshead arranged for his travel to Shimla.[101] In Shimla, Bailey asked him about his recollection of the waterfall. By pointing to a house nearby, Kinthup said that the falls of Tsangpo resembled the height of the house, which was nearly 50 feet, not much different from the 30 feet falls Bailey and Morshead had encountered. Apparently, Kinthup was quite aware of the two falls being separate, but due to a miscommunication between him and his scribe Urgan, they were confused as one in the written account. [102]

When Bailey presented his findings before the RGS, Thomas Holdich, who was in the audience remarked on the curious nature of why the waterfall, though a small geographical feature always attracted such admiration and interest among the Europeans. The height that Kinthup submitted, i.e. 160 feet, was still not very spectacular for a waterfall. He attributed this to its unique nature in the Himalayan region where waterfalls were almost unheard of on major rivers. According to Holdich, the colonial mind actually desired a waterfall of large magnitude in the region. And when it was not found, disappointment was evident.[103]

An acute geographer and with his own share of experiences in Tibet, Holdich was remarkably perceptive. The imagination of a large waterfall was not just a fickle fantasy of the romance of exploration. The fact that it existed in one of last 'blank spaces' on Asia attributes to the symbolic value assigned to it. It was not only an orienting device to make sense of the terra incognita but also served as an anticipatory

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[101] Waller, *The Pundits:*

[102] G. F. T. Oakes, *Note in Vindication of Kinthup.*, Records of the Survey of India (Calcutta, 1916): 2-3.

[103] Morshead et al., “Exploration on the Tsangpo or Upper Brahmaputra: Discussion": 361-363.

allegory for the empire's drive towards eastern Tibet and south-western China from Assam. It is not surprising that the extensive surveys of Abor survey parties coincides with Government of India's changing stance in 1910 to move away from the policy of undertaking 'no extension, direct or indirect, of administrative responsibilities on the frontier' to advancing of the ‘Outer Line’ to secure a 'good strategically frontier,' and to secure favourable political relations with the tribes within and beyond the Outer Line.[104]

The empirical verification of the Brahmaputra's course was not possible for decades due to absence of ocular observation. But Bailey and Morshead also did not cover around 45 miles of the river's course. For this, they were left to draw upon the testimony of a village chief in its course in south-eastern Tibet, to conclude that Tsangpo was indeed the Brahmaputra. The question that emerges here is that if there was such an insistence on not settling the question without direct physical observation, then why in Bailey and Morshead's case it was believed to be settled. In fact; the remaining 45 miles took almost a decade to be comprehensively travelled, by Francis Kingdon Ward, a botanist-explorer who spent around five decades in Tibet and South-east Asia.[105]

As Holdich pointed out, the significance of Bailey and Morshead's explorations lies not only in the geographical questions they approached; but also in terms of expanding the knowledge-regime of the empire into continental Asia. The

[104] Endorsement from the Army Department, No. 1473-1-A.D., dated the 28th July 1911, , in 'Abor Punitive Expeditions. Policy and explorations on the North-East Frontier', Foreign Department, Secret-E, Octobers 1911, Nos. 52-123. [NAI]

[105] Francis Kingdom-Ward, *The Riddle of the Tsangpo Gorges* (London: Edward Arnold & Co, 1926).

explorations, according to him, had opened up new avenues, to shed light on the problems encountered while studying the 'ancient history of humanity in India'; in regard to the independent groups of people inhabiting the mountainous tract between British India, Tibet and [south-western] China.[106] The framing of the Brahmaputra, the shift from Lohit to Dihang while mediated by the consumptive needs of geography; was materialised out of the Empire's diverse needs of knowing and accessing the frontiers of Assam, and beyond that, Tibet and China, in the optimism of opening the proverbial gates of the Tsangpo.

[106] Morshead et al., “Exploration on the Tsangpo or Upper Brahmaputra: Discussion": 361-363

Chapter II

Her Majesty's Itinerants: Travel and Explorations in the Abor and Mishmi Hills

In the Christmas of 1881, S. E. Peal, a tea-planter from Sibsagar in Assam travelled to the Patkai Hills; the ridge that separates the watersheds of the Brahmaputra and the Irrawaddy. In search of feasible overland trade routes towards the east, the passage starting from Jaipur in the foothills took him along the river Dihing [not to be confused with Dihang] and its tributaries. This hilly tract, towards the south-east of Sadiya, and on the eastern fringe of the settled parts of the Brahmaputra plains was occupied by communities such as Khamtis, Singphos and certain Naga groups. The 'discovery' of wild tea plant in the foothills in 1823 had brought the area into the glare of publicity, followed by rapid speculation for the beverage industry, and a settlement of American Baptist Missionaries in Jaipur. However, towards the middle of nineteenth century, due to the intransigence of Singphos, especially an armed insurrection against the British authorities in 1843 had forced the tea industry and the missionaries to move to the plains districts of Upper Assam. And in the imperial imaginations, the region had reverted back to its location as an ‘unruly frontier'.[107]

When Peal travelled through the territory, large parts of the region had not been formally incorporated to the British administered tracts of Assam. And the planter's account reflects that he considered the existence of such ungoverned margins, populated by communities at the fringe of the administrative circumference to be a pervasive inconvenience for the empire's territorial conceptualisations,

[107] Sharma, *Empire’s garden:* 41-42.

'...the question of the treatment of savage races bordering on, and trading freely with, a civilized power, has always been a difficult one to solve. Whether at the Cape, New Zealand, America, or Central Asia, it has generally involved the paramount power in a series of petty wars, injurious to both sides and ending in the subjection, and too often the degradation, or extermination of the savage.'[108]

Peal attributed this state of affairs to what he called as a 'conspicuous feature' of such regions, i.e. an absence of familiarity and understanding regarding the prowess of the imperial state, resulting from their remote locations. The planter added that this ignorance was reciprocated by the imperial administrative setups vis-a-vis these borderland communities and was a 'decided disadvantage' to both the parties. To familiarise the empire in such margins, he suggested travel as the most effective tool. By travel not only affable contact could be established with the people; but any prevailing rumours and misconceptions about the administration could be dispelled and the groundwork for further interactions could be laid. He believed that colonial rule as dominant force in those regions could be established by means of such interactions, which would be a favourable outcome for both the parties involved.[109]

However, in the ungoverned parts of the Upper Brahmaputra Basin beyond the Outer Line [in the hills populated by Abor and Mishmi people]; this strategy of deploying travel to establish European contact had already been pervasive during Peal's times. The practices of the European explorers in the hills in official and unofficial

[108] S.E. Peal, "Note of a Trip up the Dihing Basin to Dapha Pani, January and February, 1882," *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal* 52, no. 2 (1883): 7.
[109] ibid: 7-9

capacities had played an active role in how the region and the people were understood; and how these understandings produced a coherent discursive framework for administering the region and visualising it as a comprehensive geo-political category.

Colonial travel and exploration have often been proposed as either the precondition or an essential adjunct to the reinforcement of imperial governance. Bernard Cohn has categorised travel and subsequent observation as one of the 'investigative modalities' of defining, ordering and classifying space by which the colonial state exercised its power. This practice, he argues, stemmed from the prevailing perception that colonial societies could be 'known' and 'represented' through a sequence of facts. Processing these facts percolating from a variety of modalities, including travel, assisted their transformation into functional structures of governance.[110] At the same time, the resource and geographical potency of the imperial state, as Felix Rider proposes, provided a pedestal and a tool of legitimisation for such travels, along with determining the cognitive substance on which they functioned.[111]

This chapter would argue that the early colonial explorers in the Abor and Mishmi Hills framed a distinct cognitive field from the initial contact they made with the local inhabitants [to mobilise the required resources and information] during their tours. The information, ideas and prejudices these explorers formed during these interactions informed how further official engagements with these peoples of the borders were to be shaped. While the primary objectives of their explorations often

[110] Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History (Princeton University Press, 1996): 1-7.
[111] Driver, *Geography Militant:* 38-39.

operated in diverse commercial, political and scientific registers; this cognitive field they generated helped them to identify suitable strategies and suitable groups and individuals as potential intermediaries to expand the imperial administration's influence in the region. With the establishment of a stable structure of governance at the colonial outpost of Sadiya by the latter parts of the nineteenth century, these practices of explorations increasingly came under the ambit of officialdom. With well-structured mobilisation of resources, officially sanctioned tours by political officer in the hills proliferated a tool of renewing and renegotiating imperial influence and control among these possible intermediaries at periodic intervals. At the same time, the official legitimacy these explorers possessed opened up a formalised line of communication via which the hill people [beyond the Outer Lines] could interact with the administration in British Indian territories regarding the existing nature of their political relations.

The processes of knowing, communicating and controlling the populace of the Abor and Mishmi Hills in a comprehensive manner was necessitated by the larger discursive framework of imperial geo-politics on which they functioned. The issues of tracing the Brahmaputra's course to Tibet and the undefined borders of British India with the plateau had proliferated a sense of cartographic apprehension and at the same time, optimism for territorial and commercial inroads. In order to allay the empire's anxieties and to materialise its ambitions, it was necessary to comprehend the landscape and the people which separated Tibet from Assam, and to know how this frontier [and its inhabitants] can be transformed into productive gateways for any potential contact towards the Asian neighbours of British India.

The previous chapter had illustrated how the practices associated with the formation and circulation of geographical knowledge and the fixing of geographical signifiers had facilitated the geographical production of the Upper Brahmaputra Basin. To understand the processes by which geographical explorations in the region complemented the scientific discourses of knowing the landscape, it is crucial to understand how the people who inhabit those landscapes were envisaged in terms of diverse colonial imaginations, of the explorers, as well as of the officials in India and in the metropole.

Keeping the Friends Closer

In 1869, T. T. Cooper, a British explorer travelled from Calcutta to Sadiya by the Brahmaputra, with the intention of reaching Tibet from there through the Mishmi Hills. With the aim of introducing British trade in the plateau by exploring a practicable trade route, Cooper had attempted to enter eastern parts of Tibet from China in the previous year. But as his advance was stopped by the Chinese officials, he came to India to renew his endeavour from Assam. When Cooper reached India, his exploits in China had already become renowned in the official circles. En route to Assam from Calcutta, a British resident of Dibrugarh met Cooper and expressed his interest to accompany the explorer till Tibet. This particular individual possessed expertise in methods of surveying and had brought all his equipment with him, geared up to conduct surveys of the hills along the tour. However, Cooper declined this offer, as he believed that larger number of individuals in such explorations could pose difficulties in procuring supplies and may lead to conflict, indiscipline and differences of opinions; which in turn could jeopardise the journey itself. An avid reader of travel

narratives, Cooper conjured an idealised picture of the solitary traveller to validate this opinion,

> '...the most successful explorers of modern times have been those who travelled alone. In Africa I had the example of that father of explorers, Livingstone, besides those of Baker, Burton, Reade, and others, men whose success as skilful and brave explorers is undeniable, all of whom travelled alone, sharing with no one the merit of success or the blame of defeat.[112]

But despite this utterance, Cooper's travel could hardly be termed as an individual endeavour, considering the large entourage that accompanied him. When he started from China to Calcutta, he was accompanied by a Chinese Christian interpreter named George Philip, Masu, a 14-year old Tibetan boy, Owhalee, a Muslim man from Bombay who had served in China, and a Chinese servant named Lowtzang. In his plan to penetrate Tibet, each of these associates was to perform a distinct function. All of them possessed a good working knowledge of Chinese which could come as handy in the plateau where nominal suzerainty of China prevailed. In addition, Masu's first language was Tibetan and Owhalee was envisaged as a 'useful auxiliary' in the case of any potential contact with the Muslims of neighbouring Yunnan during the journey.[113] In Sadiya the explorer's party was joined by two more men, Chowsam Gohain, a Khamti chief as a guide and an [unnamed] African man who had settled in Assam as an interpreter. Thus, Cooper's identification of his travel as a solitary affair is consistent only vis-à-vis him being the sole European in the effort.

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[112] Cooper, *The Mishmee Hills*: 48.

[113] ibid: 3-12

This invocation of the lone European traveller, conducting his explorations to gather information of less-explored terrains is often a recurring trope in travel narratives. And the inflating of the traveller's significance as an individual in his own account and in subsequent reproductions somehow mutes the function of non-European mediators as less worthy in the production of knowledge during the explorations. However, in mobilising necessary resources along their way, and procuring the required information; the role of local mediators in explorations was extremely crucial. Without them the legitimisation of the white explorers as 'untiringly persevering, independent and self-denying seekers of the truth' would have been virtually impossible. This subordination of the mediators' roles despite their indispensability to the explorers has been explained by Clive Barnett in terms of colonial discourses as a 'fantastic projection of imperialist will-to-power'. This kind of projection, he argues, finds it perplexing to incorporate non-western agencies as foundation of knowledge. During and after explorations, the 'monopolisation of cognitive legitimacy' of by European geographical knowledge underwrote the role of the local intermediaries as having no autonomous epistemological worth without Western authoritative confirmation. He argues that admitting the role played by these interlocutors in the production of geographical knowledge would require acknowledging that the colonisers and the colonised participated in some sort of communication during the practices of explorations, which occurred in a disproportionate structure of power.[114]

This chapter however does not intend to recover or uncover any autonomous agency of such local mediators in the processes associated with the geographical explorations.

[114] Barnett, "Impure and Worldly Geography": 239-245.

Instead, what it intends to achieve is to understand how the communications with the local mediators helped the explorers in the Upper Brahmaputra Basin to formulate certain ways and patterns of knowing the people and identify individuals and groups who could be potentially expedient collaborators in future imperial projects. It is important to mention here while many of the earliest explorers in the region operated in either no official capacity or only in a pale shadow of the administration, their written accounts later formed a crucial component in the corpus of administrative writings in and about the region. A 'topographical, political and military report' from 1883 mentions that due to unavailability of pertinent information regarding the region till then, the report was 'compelled' to borrow its content from the accounts of the earlier travellers.[115]

During the time of Assam's annexation, the Abor and Mishmi Hills and the Sadiya foothills in the vicinity were populated by a number of communities. Abors were mostly predominant in the Dihang basin. The Dibang's shores were inhabited by Chulikata [Idu] and Bebejiya groups of Mishmis. The Lohit basin had Digaru [Taroan] and Miju [Kaman] groups of Mishmis. The Tibetan territory extended from the north of the Abors to the eastern border of the Miju Mishmis. Sadiya mostly had a majority of the Assamese, with a sizeable Khamti minority extending towards the Mishmi foothills in the east, and a large Singpho population towards the Patkai foothills in the south and south-east.[116] In order to efficiently conduct their journey within this diverse populace, the early European explorers in the region often found their guides, intermediaries and interpreters within these communities only.

[115] Michell, “The North-East Frontier of India: iv.

[116] See Map No. 2.

One of the earliest explorers in the region was William Griffith, a botanist with the East India Company by profession and a part of a deputation sent to inspect the wild 'tea forests of Assam'. In 1836, Griffith went to the Mishmi Hills to expand his search for the plant. [117] The porters Griffith had recruited for his journey were Digaru Mishmis; whose relation with the Miju Mishmis was apparently antagonistic at that time. While Griffith wanted to extend his journey till Tibet by the course of the Lohit, the Digaru porters refused to accompany him. The reason for this was cited as an incident which took place a few years ago. Griffith was informed that a disagreement had emerged between the Mijus and the Digarus over a marriage settlement. When negotiations between the two parties failed, Miju chief Rooling invited the Tibetans for military assistance against Digarus. Tibetan troops armed with matchlocks entered the Mishmi territory and as a result of the ensuing confrontation, the Digarus lost around twenty men. The atmosphere of hostility had apparently persisted till Griffith's arrival. Hence, his porters said that if they accompany him to Tibet, there would be very few able-bodied men left to defend their villages against the recalcitrant Mijus, or against the Tibetans if they visit for a second attack.[118]

By closely observing the state of affairs, Griffith formulated a peculiar strategy for dealing with this turbulent borderland which he elaborated in the account of his travel. The botanist noted that the [Digaru] Mishmis he met on his way were 'inclined to pay all proper respect' to the authorities in Assam; which he traced back to the influence of the pre-colonial Ahom rulers over them. The proximity of the Mishmi Hills to

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[117]William Griffith, *Journals Of Travels in Assam, Burma, Bootan, Affghanistan and the Neighbouring Countries* (Calcutta: Posthumous papers bequeathed to the Honorable the East India Company, and printed by order of the Government Of Bengal, 1847): i-ii.

[118] William Griffith, “Journal of a Visit to the Mishmee Hills in Assam,” *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, no. 65 (May 1837): 328

Tibet, Griffith stated, would one day proliferate a feasible route to the plateau from Assam. In anticipation of this development, gradually cultivating excellent relations with the Mishmis would be of paramount importance. Griffith had in fact discussed the possibilities of visiting Tibet with Primsong, a Digaru chief. The explorer had identified Primsong as a potential intermediary for any future contact with the Mishmis, due to his young age and the information he could provide about the unexplored regions towards the east. But the Digaru Mishmis at that time appeared to be apprehensive of both the Chulikata and Miju Mishmis due to their various demands and the predatory raids they conducted in Digaru villages. According to Griffith, during his stay in the hills, it was only his presence due to which the Digarus were spared of any violence by these groups. Thus, in order to transform the Digarus as expedient as well as strong allies for the empire, he advised the administration in Assam to provide them with arms and ammunitions with which they can defend themselves against any adversaries.[119]

The explorers who had followed Griffith's footsteps into the Mishmi Hills continued with this approach of identifying potentially expedient individuals and groups; for the question of geographical explorations, as well as for larger imperial concerns. But instead of Mishmis, most of their focus had shifted to the Khamtis, a group in the foothills; Buddhist by religion and mostly wet-rice cultivators by occupation. This shift towards the Khamtis had followed a definitive shift in British frontier policies and outlooks towards the community following the two decades after annexation.
Khamtis, a branch of larger Tai [Shan] group; had reportedly migrated in 1751 from a valley in the headwaters of the Irrawaddy river, and had settled near the Tengapani

[119] ibid: 335-338

river south-east of Sadiya.[120] At that time Sadiya was under an Ahom governor who held the title of Sadiya Khowa Gohain. Following the Burmese invasion of Upper Assam when the Ahom rulers' hold over Sadiya diminished, Khamti chiefs gradually started expanding their sphere of influence in the region. After the first of the Anglo-Burmese Wars, and the annexation of Upper Assam in 1826, Sadiya became a frontier outpost for the colonial troops. But the Political Agent Captain Neufville allowed Khamtis to administer their own affairs with minimal British intervention, and conferred the title of Sadiya Khowa Gohain upon the Khamti chief. But following a series of policies by the Sadiya officials that curbed the power of the Gohain [including curtailing his absolute rights over the Assamese peasants in the region and putting a check on the slave traffic the Gohain conducted]; a rupture built up between the Khamti chiefs and the officials. And in 1839, the Khamtis attacked the British garrison in Sadiya and set fire to the outpost. The casualty on the British side were reported to be eighty, including Lieutenant Colonel White, the newly arriving Political Agent. In retaliation, most of the Khamtis were pushed out from the British territory of Sadiya by the colonial troops. However, following a mercy petition in 1843 after the demise of the chief perpetrators of the incident, they were allowed to settle in British areas again. And since then due to their cooperation with Sadiya officials, relations had started improving. [121]

Only a year after their resettlement, Khamtis were visited by E. A. Rowlatt, a British lieutenant on his way to the Mishmi Hills. Rowlatt was cordially received by the

[120] The Shans called this valley as Hkamti/Khamti Long which means 'Great Golden Land'. The Shans who migrated from this land were hence termed as Khamti. The Assamese term for Khamti Long is Bor Khamti. At present, the region is located in the Kachin State of Myanmar.

[121] S. Butler, *Sketch of Assam with Some Account of the Hill Tribes* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1846): 39-56.

Khamtis and he found them to have a considerable influence over the neighbouring Digaru Mishmis. With the stabilisation of the Khamtis' relation with the Sadiya officials they had concentrating on extensive cultivation and as a result were becoming prosperous. At the same time, due to the fertile alluvium of the foothills, the possibilities of trade with the prospering Khamtis and the protection the Khamtis provided them against other groups of Mishmis, the Digaru chief Primsong and his village had settled in their vicinity. Rowlatt indicated in his account that for the commercial and political stability of this borderland region, it was necessary for the administrators in Assam to be in the good books of the Khamtis.[122]

Translating Rowlatt's suggestion to official usage did not have to wait for long. The need for establishing lines of communication with the French Catholic Missionaries in Tibet from Assam pushed the agenda of the importance of Khamtis as colonial intermediaries. In the middle of the nineteenth century, these missionaries had established a base in Batang in eastern Tibet. In 1850, M. Krick, a member of the French South Tibetan Mission reached Assam, and after spending some time with the Abors, wanted to visit his counterparts in Batang.[123] In 1854, accompanied by another missionary M. Boury, he tried to reach Batang via the Mishmi Hills. However, towards the Tibetan border, they were allegedly murdered by a group of [Miju] Mishmis led by their chief Kaisha. In retaliation, Kaisha's village was attacked by a troop of the 1st Assam Light Infantry and Kaisha was arrested and incarcerated in

[122] Rowlatt, "Report of an Expedition into the Mishmee Hills to the North-East of Sudyah": 479-480.

[123] Verrier Elwin, ed., *India's North-East Frontier in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 1959): xxvii.

Dibrugarh jail, where he was executed later.[124] Following this event, a series of communications opened up between the missionaries and the British officials in Assam. In 1868, when T.T. Cooper was in China he tried to visit the missionaries in Batang but could not succeed. Later when Reverend Louis Pierre Carreau of the mission became aware of Cooper's efforts, he wrote to the explorer, lauding his initiative to reach out and mentioned about the frequent instances of robbery and physical violence the missionaries had to endure in the region.[125]

When the news of the plight of the missionaries reached India, sending an expedition party to them was considered as crucial for knowing more about the situation. R. Stewart, the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur District in Assam proposed to send a party consisting of ten Mishmi and ten Khamti men to the missionaries. The most suitable person to lead the party, according to Stewart was Chowsam Gohain, the brother of an influential Khamti chief.[126] In the meantime the Missionaries, aware of the interest they were generating in India; wrote to the British Government via the their Resident in Nepal; "...in order to show our gratitude to the English Government of their kindness to us, should some English gentlemen come to this part of the world we will help them heartily, as much as we can, and give them as much information as may be in our power." As a result, Chowsam's party was sent along the Mishmi Hills

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[124] J. F. Needham, "Mr. J. F. Needham's Journey Along The Lohit Brahmaputra, Between Sadiya in Upper Assam and Rima in South-Eastern Tibet.," *Proceedings of Royal Geographical Society* 2 (1889): 489.

[125] Rev Louis Pierre Carreau to T.T. Cooper, October 21, 1868, in ' Proposed expedition from Assam to French Missionaries in Thibet', Foreign Department, Political-A, June 1869, Nos. 18/24. [NAI]

[126] Major R. Stewart, Deputy Commissioner (DC), Luckimpore to Lieut.-Col. W.Agnew, Officiating Commissioner, Assam Division, No 20.P., dated 24th March 1869, in ' Proposed expedition from Assam to French Missionaries in Thibet', Foreign Department, Political-A, June 1869, Nos. 18/24. [NAI]

in order to reach Tibet. But at the outpost of Rochma which vaguely marked the Tibet-Mishmi borders, the party was stopped by the Tibetan officials, who denied any presence of Europeans in their country. Gohain and his party had to come back, but only after gathering pertinent information about the missionaries, about the routes in Tibet, trade between China and Tibet, and most importantly, that of tea trade in Lhasa.[127]

The act of sending a local as in-charge of an officially sanctioned expedition party, instead of an 'Englishman' as the missionaries had requested, opened up new possibilities for the practices of explorations in the region vis-a-vis the Khamtis. In sharp contrast to their earlier hostility, the collaboration of Chowsam made the administration in Sadiya to pontificate about the roles his community could play in future management of the frontier. This was bolstered when T. T. Cooper, unable to enter Tibet from China, came to Assam in 1869. A firm believer in the constructive role of commerce in the making of the empire, Cooper was of the opinion that as the [British] Indian empire was established by the 'merchants', the government should allow the potentials of commerce to discover its own role in empire-building. To maintain an amicable contact with the people at the empire's margins, he believed that it was necessary to ensure them that the government had no ulterior motive towards them apart from 'exchange of produce'. His ambition was thus to find a feasible trade route from Assam to the interiors of eastern and south-eastern Tibet, by which exchange of commodities, most notably tea [which had a high demand in Tibet] could take place.[128]

[127] J. Gregory, "Account of an Attempt by a Native Envoy to Reach the Catholic Missionaries of Tibet," *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 14, no. 3 (1870-1869): 216-218.
[128] Cooper, *The Mishmee Hills*: 35-36

After reaching Assam, Cooper started looking for an acquaintance who could guide him to the Mishmi Hills. By the time the explorer had arrived Chowsam had become the chief of his village and maintained regular communications with Captain J. Gregory, Stewart's successor in Lakhimpur. Chowsam's knowledge about the tea trade in Tibet, coupled with the fact that he enjoyed a certain degree of influence over the Mishmis and the Assamese made him the most suitable candidate in Cooper's eyes. His first encounter with the chief and the Khamtis in his village left a distinct impression in the explorer's mind. This, as reflected in his account, can be termed as an elaboration of the ways in which Griffith and Rowlatt had identified possible collaborators for the empire. [129]

Cooper was much perturbed by the constant state of uncertainty of the borderlands, characterised by ungoverned 'tribes', unchecked borders and of course, the apparent threat these pose to the inhabitants of the plains. In the pre-colonial times, Abors, Khamtis and Singphos regularly undertook predatory raids in the plains, to capture people for the traffic of slave they conducted. While these raids had become non-existent by the time Cooper had arrived, he mentioned that a sense of anxiety still persisted and Abors still commanded a great deal of fear among the inhabitants of the plains. While he was at the station of Sadiya, some Abor men from the hills visited Cooper. When the explorer went to the local market with the men, it created an absolute sense of panic among the locals,

> '...as we strolled through the native bazaar, the women bolted into their houses, followed by screaming children, and even the men quietly

[129] ibid: 135-140

slunk away, and every street as we passed along was quickly deserted, signs of fear which greatly amused the Abors.[130]

Cooper suggested in his account that instead of being a hazard to the stability of Sadiya, the people of the frontier could be actually turned into active collaborators for the empire. This he compared to his experience in China. While the six hundred mile long upland tracts of western China's border with Tibet were also populated by communities similar to the Abors and Mishmis, by Cooper's times they had apparently become the 'finest and most effectual frontier guards' for the Chinese empire. The chief of every 'tribe' or 'clan' was assigned with a nominal official rank, provided with an official outfit and was allowed to visit the Chinese emperor at Peking once after every five years. Although they were discouraged from personally meeting the emperor, a vacation at the imperial capital, according to Cooper, made them feel important. He thus proposed a similar method of maintaining reliable frontier guards for Assam, recruited from the hill communities.[131]

Among these communities, like Rowlatt, Cooper also envisaged the Khamtis as the most suitable collaborators. But while Rowlatt's concerns emerged from the influence the Khamtis had over the Mishmis; Cooper's notions were informed more by a differentiation of the two communities in a civilizational order of things. The explorer believed that vis-a-vis the other communities of the region, Khamtis should by no means be referred to as a 'tribe'. Tribe, in his opinion implied 'wildness and want of culture'; a status which he believed do not apply to the Khamtis as certain social practices prevalent among them [as he witnessed in Chowsam's village] were

[130] ibid: 129-130

[131] ibid: 130-132.

comparable and even to some extent superior to many of the 'civilised nations'. In consonance with the Victorian norms of morality and hygiene, these attributes included cleanliness, the apparently gallant way in which the Khamti young men court their female counterparts, the 'beauty' of Khamti women, their picturesque attire, their propensity towards trade and productive agriculture, and of course their attitude towards morality in regard to the desires of the flesh.[132] His depiction of the clean, spotless interiors of Khamti houses poses as a stark juxtaposition to those of the Mishmi houses, which apparently resembled 'cowsheds than human habitations, while from the outside they might be mistaken for fowl-houses.'[133]

But the initial demeanour of the Khamti Gohain towards the explorer was lukewarm. As a demonstration of his assumed significance, the Gohain refused to converse with Cooper in Assamese at their first meeting despite being fluent in the language, and instead relied on an interpreter. He also refused to enter Cooper's tent which he had placed in the outskirts of the village, and did so only after the explorer ardently requested him. Throughout the first meeting Chowsam maintained the position of that of a superior, and Cooper played along. In fact in his account, the explorer displayed an acute sense of admiration for the chief,

> '...a spare, tall man, over six feet in height, and apparently about thirty years of age, with well-proportioned limbs and very erect, graceful carriage. His face was a perfect study in itself. A very high smooth forehead denoted intellect, while his delicately pencilled and almost straight eyebrows seemed to give a soft expression to deep-set

[132] ibid: 145-151

[133] ibid: 189

glittering black eyes, which alternately flashed out keen looks of intelligence, then became cold and calm... I believe him to be one of the cleverest and most influential Khamtee chiefs in Northern Assam, and one whom the Government would do well to treat with consideration.'[134]

The reasons for which he accorded the apparently superior status to the Gohain during their first encounter had been explained in detail by Cooper. From his experience in China, the explorer had formulated a notion that the hereditary chiefs of the territorial margins were often viewed with reverence by the people. If the British officials and the police in Assam imitate this reverence in some form, and treat the chiefs of the 'tribes' with respect, then the administration of the frontiers will be much easier. If the chiefs are in friendly terms with the British, he added, so will be the people under them, as it was the prerogative of the chiefs to maintain order within their communities.[135]

Gohain categorically intimated to Cooper that as a 'servant' of the Kumpani [i.e. administration, in reference to the previous influence of the East India Company]; he would join the explorer only if the Commissioner of Assam asks him, but not otherwise.[136] Cooper's travel was however, not strictly official in nature. Before starting his journey, he had met the Viceroy of India Lord Mayo in Calcutta, who although had showed interest in the possibilities of trade with China and Tibet, could

[134] ibid: 141-142

[135] ibid: 241-242

[136] ibid: 144

not guarantee him any assistance for his trip.[137] But despite this emphasis on official recognition by the Gohain, Cooper was finally able to persuade him by providing him and his family with handsome monetary incentives.[138]

But during the course of journey Cooper became increasingly aware of the growing presence of a British officialdom among the imagination of the hill inhabitants, and thus the growing need for official legitimacy that they sought among the European explorers. On his way to Tibet he was met by a messenger from Bowsong, an influential Miju chief of the borders. The messenger informed him that while the Tibetan officials at the border had made every possible attempt to stall the advent of a European in their country; the people of Rima [the capital of the Tibetan province of Zayul] bordering the Mishmi Hills would welcome a British envoy. The Rima inhabitants, the messenger elaborated, were under the oppression of the Tibetan monks, and thus would welcome the British troops as a respite. But since Cooper was not there in official capacity, the messenger informed, he should not expect any help from the people, as they would not want to offend the Rima officials by offering assistance to a solitary European traveller.[139]

Cooper's comprehension of the need for official legitimacy urged him to convene a meeting with the Miju chiefs of the border, which laid the epistemic groundwork for establishing a line of communication between Sadiya and the Mijus, within whom the British sphere of influence was very minimal till then. When Cooper realised that proceeding to Tibet was not advisable due to the apparent hostility of Tibetan

[137] ibid: 14-15

[138] ibid: 153

[139] ibid: 209-211

officials, he decided that in order to expand tea trade from Assam to Tibet, Mijus can be negotiated to serve as intermediaries. With the collaboration of Mijus, tea from Assam had the potential to reach Tibet within twenty days, in contrast to the sixty-day period which the product took to arrive from China. This he hoped would potentially provide a fair competition to the Chinese product and might even replace it, paving way for British commercial incursions into the plateau.[140]

In order to persuade the Mijus to participate in this network, it was necessary to build up a cordial relationship with them, as the memories of British advances against Kaisha were still fresh. To discuss these possibilities, Cooper met five of the most influential Miju chiefs, Bowsong, Sengsong, Samsang, Tengke and Nhatsong. This congregation was one of the first of its kind in the region where issues of political relations were discussed between the chiefs and an explorer with virtually no official credentials. The Mijus informed Cooper that as Kaisha belonged to their community they were hesitant to visit Sadiya; in fear of reprisal from the British officials. Cooper assured the chiefs that justice had been delivered after Kaisha was hanged, and the Mijus no longer be apprehensive about any further antagonism. He proposed that a deputation of the Miju chiefs visit the Sadiya officials; and in order to ensure their safety in the plains, Cooper himself would remain as a hostage in Bowsong's village. This gesture was received with much approval, and Bowsong and Samsang accompanied the explorer on his way back to Sadiya, where to his relief they were received with geniality by the officials.[141]

[140] ibid: 248

[141] Ibid: 232-267

Due to premature abandonment of his journey, Cooper was unable to provide any definitive commercial feasibility of the route via Mishmi hills. But his act of using exploration as a site for communication and negotiation with the frontier populace, mostly with their influential chiefs, would later serve as a veritable template in the long run, when the interactions between Sadiya and the Abors and the Mishmis were to be conducted in more formalised and officially legitimised lines.

Idioms of the Empire, Grievances of the Natives

In 1907, the recently retired Viceroy of India Lord Curzon delivered the illustrious Romanes Lecture at Oxford. Against the backdrop of increasing contestations and negotiations between the European nation-states regarding their overseas territorial possessions, it was not unanticipated that Curzon chose 'frontiers' as the theme of his address. Alluding to both the didactic and the diplomatic apprehensions regarding frontiers, Curzon remarked upon certain qualities that he deemed as desirable in a British officer posted in the imperial peripheries-

> '... Courage and conciliation—for unless they have an instinctive gift of sympathy with the native tribes, they will hardly succeed— patience and tact, initiative and self-restraint, these are the complex qualifications of the modern school of pioneers...—a taste for languages, some scientific training, and a powerful physique. The work, which he may be called upon to perform, may be that of the

> explorer or the administrator or the military commander, or all of them at the same time.'[142]

The Viceroy admitted that the most gruelling resistance the colonial state machineries and officials had to encounter in India was with the 'tribes' of the frontiers.[143] But with the Empire's hold increasingly expanding over the mountainous peripheries of Assam, Curzon's clarion call for diversification of the roles of frontier officers had already been perfected to some extent in Sadiya. By the latter half of nineteenth century, with Sadiya emerging as a crucial node of administration in the hills north and east of Assam, the British officials in the region had to inculcate innovative strategies of administering the landscape and the people. The establishment of the Inner Lines had implied that official jurisdiction among the Abors and Mishmis only extended to a certain section of them in the lower hills. A large number of Abors and Mishmis remained outside the pale of any administrative clutches and remained a constant source of anxiety for the plains.

Hence, due to having no direct and formal control over the people, the contact that earlier explorers had established required to be nurtured by periodic interventions. But in the middle of the nineteenth century, the official engagements in the region had been largely restricted to punitive military expeditions sent against the Abors [in 1858, 1859 and 1862] and Mishmis [in 1855], mostly due to the violence caused by them against British subjects.[144] Thus, explorations with an official backing of the

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[142] Lord Curzon of Keddleston, *Frontiers*, The Romanes Lecture, Delivered in the Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford (November 2, 1907): 56-57

[143] Ibid: 6.

[144] Michell, "The North-East Frontier of India: A Topographical, Political And Military Report."

state apparatuses were increasingly being seen as a means by which more amicable forms of negotiations could be established with them.[145]

Sadiya was to be a node in the future governance of these frontier tracts. When Cooper reached Sadiya, he found it to be a small outpost covered by dense tropical jungles. It consisted of a 'native' bazaar and a minuscule clearance amidst the jungles where three official buildings stood, guarded by the Assam Light Infantry. According to Cooper, the only reason why the station remained functional amidst such desolation was to check the 'predatory tribes of the northern frontier'.[146] At that time; official contact with these communities were mediated by a local noblemen Rai Bahadur Lahmon, an individual of importance from the Motok community of the plains. Lahmon's official designation was that of an Honorary Extra Assistant Commissioner. But his relation with the European officials posted in Sadiya; as well as with Abors had not been cordial and the Government of Assam increasingly viewed this as detrimental to their interests in the Abor Hills. C. J. Lyall, the Chief Commissioner of Assam was of the opinion that the Abors had started considering Lahmon as an enemy and believed that through his influence he had created a prejudice among the British officials against them. Lyall wanted an official of superior rank, free from any preconceived prejudices against the Abors and Mishmis to be posted in Sadiya. So that friendly relations could be established by regularly meeting them, learning their

[145] H.M.Durand, Secretary to the GOI in the Foreign Department to the Officiating Chief Commissioner in Assam, No. 379 E, March 12, in 'Visit of Mr. J.F. Needham to the Abor villages of Padu and Kumku beyond the British frontier', Tribal Areas Records (TAR), 1885, Assam Secretariat File No. 114J. [Arunachal Pradesh State Archives, hereafter APSA]

[146] Cooper, *The Mishmee Hills*: 124-125.

languages and taking advantage of 'any opening that might occur' for the government in the region.[147]

In all consideration, a post of the Assistant Political Commissioner (APO) of Sadiya, equivalent to the rank of sub-divisional officers and under the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur District [of which Sadiya was a part] of Assam was created in 1882. J. F. Needham, an officiating District Superintendent of Bengal Police was found as the most suitable person for this position and in the same year, he joined as the first APO of Sadiya.[148] Needham's appointment was a distinctive turn in the practices of explorations in the region, not only for throwing the official weight behind them, but also for using the tours he made to the Abors and Mishmis to establish a channel of communication between them and Sadiya .

In the last two decades before Needham's arrival, the contact of the Abors with the plains had been minimal and was virtually limited to their purchase of salt and the chiefs coming down once a year to receive their annual shares of posa.[149] After reaching Sadiya, Needham learnt the Abor language with great care and with this added advantage undertook many official tours to the Abor villages; in order to renew

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[147] C.J.Lyall, Officiating Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to C. Grant, Secretary to the GOI in the Foreign Department, No 119 (728) dated 18th May 1882, in 'Appointment of an Assistant Political Officer at Sadiya (Assam); and Office Establishment for the same', Foreign Department, A-Political-E, March 1883, Nos. 116-138. [NAI]

[148] C.J.Lyall, Officiating Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to C. Grant, Secretary to the GOI in the Foreign Department, No. 126 (1587) dated September 28, 1882, in 'Appointment of an Assistant Political Officer at Sadiya (Assam); and Office Establishment for the Same', Foreign Department, A-Political-E, March 1883, Nos. 116-138. [NAI]

[149] J.F. Needham, “Excursion in the Abor Hills; From Sadiya on the Upper Assam,” *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society and Monthly Record of Geography*, New Monthly Series, 8, no. 5 (May 1886): 327.

and secure communications.[150] The earlier forms of informal interactions that explorers conducted with the people while mobilising resources in the journey had now been gradually replaced by a more institutionalised form; as the explorer's apparent legitimacy as a sanctioned representative of the Government had increased manifold.

In fact, the vocabulary that composed Needham's exchanges with the Abors reflects a gradual penetration of colonial administrative idioms into their social order. In his maiden visit to the Abor hills in 1884, Needham was invited by the village chiefs to participate in *durbars* where they could articulate their grievances vis-a-vis the way administration of the borders were conducted from Sadiya.[151] The durbars of the Abor villages were held in the Mosup or the congregational hall of the particular village. But Needham found that instead of the conventional term Mosup, the Abors often used *Cutcherry*, a term used to refer to a courthouse [or as an extension to any crucial tangible administrative space] in the British territories of the plains. This act of borrowing sites of interactions from colonial vocabulary, and transposing them over indigenous institutions implied the Abors wanting their Cutcherry to be functioned in the same manner as it was done in the plains; albeit with terms with which they can negotiate. In the numerous Abor villages beyond the Outer Line that Needham visited during his tenure, he regularly had to convene with the chiefs to listen to their grievances in such durbars; with the most recurring theme being their displeasure with

[150] G Godfrey, Officiating DC of Lakhimpur to The Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No. 1092-G, dated November 5, 1884, in 'Report on Abor Villages beyond British frontier', 1884, File no. NIL/1884. [Arunachal Pradesh State Archives, hereafter APSA]

[151] The term durbar itself is of Assamese/Hindustani origin which was used often by communities such as Khasis and Karbis on the southern hills of Assam valley [with their longer period of exposure to colonial rule] to refer to their local congregational institutions.

the amount of posa that was annually paid to them.[152] This articulation of grievances was done on the promise that Needham, as a representative of the Maharani [the Queen of Britain], would forward the Abor's demands to the concerned authorities.[153]

During his tours, Needham made considerable inroads into building cordial relationships with the Abor chiefs. And as a result of this, his status as an intermediary between the Abors and the Government of Assam had become elevated in the Abor chiefs' eyes. In one of his journeys in 1885 to the village of Kamku, Needham wanted to abandon the journey in between due to his deteriorating health. Hearing this news, the Abor chief of Kamku came to meet him, and intimated that it was a matter of indignation for the Abors if the APO does not visit their village. As not adhering to this demand would have been interpreted as an indication of some ulterior motive, Needham proceeded to the village despite his health.[154]

This apparent improvement of relations with the Abors was viewed positively in the official circles in India, with H. M. Durand, the Secretary in the Foreign Department applauding the strides the APO had been able to make in the frontier.[155] But while building relations was a prime objective, there was also a growing concern regarding the leverage the Abors could gain from these visits. Needham's immediate superior, the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur believed that the regular demands that the

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[152] Needham, "Excursion in the Abor Hills; From Sadiya on the Upper Assam": 323-327.

[153] APO, Sadiya to the DC, Lakhimpur District, No. 58, dated March 18, 1885, in 'Visit of Mr. J.F. Needham to the Abor villages of Padu and Kumku beyond the British frontier', TAR, 1885, Assam Secretariat File No. 114J. [APSA]

[154] ibid.

[155] H.M.Durand, Secretary to the GOI in the Foreign Department to the Officiating Chief Commissioner in Assam, No. 379E, March 12, in 'Visit of Mr. J.F. Needham to the Abor villages of Padu and Kumku beyond the British frontier', TAR, 1885, Assam Secretariat File No. 114J. [APSA]

Abors made to the APO regarding the increase of posa implied the magnitude of pride and self-confidence the people still possessed vis-a-vis the British officials. Unless they are 'compelled to recognise' the power of the British government, the DC suggested, it would be difficult to have them as 'friendly neighbours' in the vicinity of Sadiya. If the government exhibits any leniency, especially in regard to the money paid to them, this had the possibility of being construed by the Abors as a form of 'tribute' from the empire. Hence, the DC suggested that Needham should regularly tour the Abor villages and visit as much village as he could to remain accessible to them, but at the same time clearly and categorically informing them about any unfeasibility of the demands they make.[156]

This possibility of official tour not only as a means of communication, but also as an exhibit of colonial power had not escaped Needham. During his visit to the Abor village of Dambuk in 1886, the Abor chiefs asked him whether he had been sent by the Maharani to discover their weaknesses, so that later the British could wage a war against them. Needham definitively assured them that this was not the case. But his account of the visits reflect that the APO almost always made acute observations regarding the pros and con of the mountain villages' locations, in anticipation of any military actions which might be rendered necessary in the future. In regard to Dambuk, he writes,

> '...[the village] is erected upon a most commanding spur, and is only accessible from one point, viz., to the south-east, by the path we came

[156] G Godfrey, Officiating DC of Lakhimpur to The Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No. 1092-G, dated November 5, 1884, in 'Report on Abor Villages beyond British frontier', 1884, File no. NIL/1884. [APSA].

up, which is the main one. This path is very steep,.. and consequently very slippery. The edge of the village on this side is some 3 to 400 feet, if not more, from the little ravine below, and provided the villagers were prepared, it would be a very difficult matter, indeed utterly impossible I may say, for any enemy who did not possess rifles to get into the village during the hours of daylight at least. Of course, any enemy with rifles would not have much difficulty to get into it., because a few good shots stationed in the ravine below could pick off anyone who showed themselves above, while a storming party crawled leisurely up the path and prepared for a final rush.'[157]

The nuances of this exhibition of colonial power become more explicit in regard to Needham's proposal to visit the large and remote Abor village of Damroh on the Dihang, bordering Tibetan territories. British contact with the Abor chiefs of Damroh had been minimal and many of them reportedly viewed British officials with suspicion. To acquaint the chiefs of Damroh with the power of the colonial Government in India, Needham proposed a unique suggestion. He recommended that the Damroh chiefs should be invited by Sadiya officials to visit Calcutta, the seat of the imperial government in India. He believed that the chiefs would be impressed by the grandeur that the British territories projected and while making the journey they would be aware of the huge amount of land the British in India commanded. Thus, in Calcutta, he would be able to tell them, "Now you have seen our capital, let me visit

[157] APO, Sadiya to the DC, Lakhimpur District, no. 112, June 9 1886, in 'Mr Needham's Visit to the Bor Abor Vilages', TAR, 1885, Assam Secretariat File No. 2339J. [APSA]

yours."[158] The APO was of the opinion that this exercise would convince the Abor chiefs that the British are 'immeasurably superior' to them and possess the means to 'annihilate' them if necessary.[159]

But despite his misgivings regarding the intention of the Abors, Needham made around five visits to the Abor hills in his long tenure from 1882 to 1905, but only one to the Mishmis. Abors, according to him were more powerful, truthful and courageous than the Mishmis; and their apparent aversion to living in the plains would not provide any obstacles to the colonial territories in and around Sadiya. There was no way, he argued, the Abors should be ignored in favour of the Mishmis, who according to him were 'lying and cowardly' and assisted the empire in no other manner apart from bringing forest products such as rubber and wax to the Kayahs [Marwari merchants] of the plains.[160]

But in official capacity, Needham's fascination with the Abors in general and Damroh in particular also possessed a complicated relationship with the resurfacing of the Tsangpo-Brahmaputra question during his time. Only two years after he took charge in Sadiya, Kinthup had followed the course of Tsangpo till the northern parts of Abor hills, from where he claimed that the plains of Assam were visible. However, the officials in India received this claim with scepticism. Sir Charles Eliott, the Chief Commissioner of Assam accused the Pundit's assertion to be a 'father of lies', and

[158] APO, Sadiya to the DC, Lakhimpur District, no. 112, June 9 1886, in 'Mr Needham's Visit to the Bor Abor Vilages', TAR, 1885, Assam Secretariat File No. 2339J. [APSA]

[159] APO, Sadiya through the DC, Lakhimpur District, to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, no. 120, dated June 23 1886, in 'Proposal of Mr. J.F. Needham to visit the Bor Abor Village of Damroh', TAR, 1886, Assam Secretariat File No. 2340J. [APSA]

[160] Needham, "Excursion in the Abor Hills; From Sadiya on the Upper Assam": 321-322.

hinted that a more reliable official like Needham should visit the place mentioned by Kinthup, and confirm this observation.[161] According to Needham, while tracing the Dihang to Gyala Sindong [the southernmost frontier outpost in the Tibetan territories]; the most feasible route that existed passed through Damroh.[162] If a British official is able to visit Damroh, he added, then the tour would be able to provide pertinent information regarding not only the Abors, but also regarding who are the people who lives beyond them, what are their relations with the Abors and whether further explorations in the region are possible or not. [163]

Needham's proposal was rejected by D. Fitzpatrick, Eliott's successor, on the ground that it was not safe and advisable for Europeans in official on unofficial capacity to venture into a region so far removed from the plains, especially at a time when the status of British relationship with the Abor chiefs of Damroh had not become clear.[164] But the APO's concerns with who and what lies beyond the Abors [and the Mishmis as well] had been a recurring trope in the practices of explorations of the Upper Brahmaputra basin, a trope which carried immense scope and possibilities for opening the Tsangpo's gates.

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[161] Sir Charles Elliott to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, demi-official dated October 19, 1888, in 'Exploration on the Lower Course of the Dihong', TAR, 1888, Assam Secretariat File No. 961J. [APSA]

[162] APO of Sadiya [through the DC of Lakhimpur District] to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, no. 120, dated June 23, 1886, in 'Proposal of Mr. J.F. Needham to visit the Bor Abor Village of Damroh', TAR, 1886, Assam Secretariat File No. 2340J. [APSA]

[163] Assistant Political Officer of Sadiya through the Deputy Commmissioner of Lakhimpur District to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, no. 216, dated October 28, 1886, in 'Proposal of Mr. J.F. Needham to visit the Bor Abor Village of Damroh', TAR, 1886, Assam Secretariat File No. 2340J. [APSA]

[164] D. Fitzpatrick to Sir Charles Elliott, dated November 6, 1888, in 'Exploration on the Lower Course of the Dihong', TAR, 1888, Assam Secretariat File No. 961J. [APSA]

Over the Hills and Far Away

Early travellers in the Upper Brahmaputra Basin [including Wilcox, Griffith, Rowlatt and Cooper] had tried to enter Tibet from one route or the other. Since the time of Assam's annexation, the undefined northern frontier with Tibet and the ungoverned mountain population in the intermediate zones had been a cause of apprehension as well as a source of territorial and commercial speculations for the empire at the same time. In 1846, Major John Butler, a British military official wrote,

> '...If under any pretence, therefore, the Thibetians, being **a** branch of the Chinese empire, should be permitted to establish their supremacy over the hill tribes in allegiance to the British Government in this quarter of the [Assam] valley, our interests would be affected.'[165] (Sic)

Due to the prevalence of both British and Tibetan sovereignties on their borders [and yet with the influence of these two states being minimal] the Abors and Mishmis in the region had devised and deployed certain strategies of maintaining an advantageous position via-a-vis both these parties. Cooper reports that when the group of Abors visited him at the station of Sadiya, they seemed to be much more relaxed than usual due to the presence of his Chinese and Tibetan associates. The Abors were apparently acquainted with both the groups of people due to the trade they conducted at the Tibetan frontiers outposts in the north. Cooper, like most of his predecessors and successors, was curious to know about the status of the Abor's relations with the inhabitants of Tibet. From the conversation that his associate Masu had with them; the

[165] Butler, *Sketch of Assam with Some Account of the Hill Tribes*: 120-121.

explorer could ascertain that they had an ambiguous form of 'alliance' with the Tibetans, dictated by contingencies and circumstances. Against the backdrop of this uncertain status, Cooper asked the Abors whether they would be able to take him to Tibet. The Abor men replied that they could accompany him to the frontier outpost but not beyond that, as bringing either tea or Europeans into Tibetan territories was declared forbidden by the officials. While the Abors did not profess any explicit fear of the Tibetan officials, and also wanted to be in cordial terms with Sadiya, the lucrative border trade was not something they wanted to mislay by involving a European.[166]

While Cooper had been unable to advance the cause of trade with Tibet from his exploration, by the time Needham arrived in Sadiya these possibilities were growing with increased interactions with the Abors and Mishmis; and with the expansion of imperial knowledge about Tibet and its peripheries from the Pundit explorers.[167] In terms with the renewed imperial interests in Eastern Tibet and Western parts of China bordering Assam, Captain St. John F. Michell of the Quartermaster-General's Department in India claimed in 1883 that any material advancement of Assam was concurrent with the opening of the land routes leading to beyond the Mishmi hills. As the people living eastwards from the Mishmi hills were already under the pale of the Chinese empire; Michell emphasised, the stage of civilisation in which they were was

[166] ibid: 127-129

[167] Kinthup had returned from the Abor-Tibet frontier in 1884 and before him, Kishen Singh, alias A-K had returned from Mishmi-Tibet frontier of the Zayul Valley in 1882. Both of them were reportedly prevented by the local communities of the hills to proceed towards Assam.

considerably high and opening a line of communications with them could be profitable to both the people and the government of Assam.[168]

Needham undertook his lone trip to the Mishmi hills in 1889. Despite his unfavourable attitude towards the Mishmis, he was convinced during his journey that the basin of the Lohit river in the region could serve as a potential transmit of commerce between Sadiya, [south-eastern] Tibet and the headwaters of the Irrawaddy river, due to the prevalence of informal trade networks sustained by the Mishmis. If the existing exclusionary policy of Tibetan establishment towards Europeans can be lifted, and Digarus can be persuaded to resolve their antagonism with the Mijus; he added, then both the Mijus and the Tibetans would be able to visit the trade marts in Sadiya, and as a result a flourishing trade network could be instituted across the hills.[169]

But in order to leverage this trade network as advantageous to British India; it was indispensable to orient the political [and territorial] affiliations and imaginations of the intermediate hill communities towards Assam, rather than towards Lhasa or China. In his account of the Mishmi hills, Needham has provided many observations via which he hinted that a form of legitimisation of the Mishmis as politically and culturally appended to the Assam valley could established. In one of the villages, situated on the Tibetan borders and far removed from the influence of plains, Needham found the Mishmi women wearing jewelleries which were apparently moulded in Assamese designs. The APO subtly implied by such mentions that the

[168] Michell, "The North-East Frontier of India": 85-89.

[169] Needham, "Mr. J. F. Needham's Journey Along The Lohit Brahmaputra, Between Sadiya in Upper Assam and Rima in South-Eastern Tibet":: 504-505.

prevalence of such connections could be harnessed, amplified and legitimised to bring the Mishmis within the periphery of the British administration of Assam.[170] In fact, following Needham's excursion, the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam wrote to his counterpart in the Government of India that an obscure state of sovereignty existed in the Mishmi-Tibet borderlands, especially in the region near the border village of Walong. Tibetan territorial extent towards the Mishmi hills, he wrote, entirely depended on a 'casual exertion of force'; implying that expanding British influence to the region if necessary could not be discarded. [171]

In 1907, when Noel Williamson, Needham's successor at Sadiya, visited Walong after almost two decades, he found the village to be under Tibetan jurisdiction [at least in technicality], as the inhabitants paid their revenues to the Tibetan authorities. However, Williamson found that certain Mishmi chiefs, especially one named Dagresson who accompanied him, practiced considerable amount of influence over the Tibetans at Walong and indirectly also at Rima. As the Government of India at that time had strictly conveyed it to him to not enter Tibetan territories, Williamson did not proceed to Walong. But many Tibetans from the village came to meet Dagresson where their party had camped. The manner of reverence in which they conversed with the Mishmi chief, and the evidently superior way in which he reciprocated convinced Williamson that it was necessary to build concrete relations with the Mishmis. This, he believed, would properly channelise the influence they had over Tibetans to the advantage of Assam. The greatest incentive towards cultivating relationships with the Mishmis, as he found, was the fact that despite being neighbours with the Tibetans, their cultural influence over the Mishmis [including

[170] ibid: 524.

[171] ibid: 497-498.

Buddhism] was very minimal. Thus, he reported that most of them do not look towards Tibet as any form of spiritual or political authority and rather see the British as a potential source of paramountcy. If these lingering advantages could be cultivated and manoeuvred, he emphasised, then the banks of the Lohit, with a little human intervention can be converted into a 'natural highway of commerce' into Tibet. [172]

Williamson found that due to being cut-off from the trade marts of in the heartlands of the plateau; South-eastern Tibet's trade was not voluminous; and as a result one of its chief produces, wool, was thrown away unused in large quantities every year. The Tibetan people should be made aware, Williamson argued, that their wool had a huge potential market in Assam at that time, where they could also procure tea and clothing. Sadiya, he believed, was to be to be an excellent hub for this commercial exchange. The frontier station was already a nucleus of transaction for the nearby hill communities and its proximity to the head of the Dibru-Sadiya Railway system of Assam was an added advantage. Against the backdrop of increased Chinese inroads in Tibet, Williamson argued that a rapid 'Sinification' of Tibet was on the way and soon the south-eastern parts may become a definitive Chinese province, instead of remaining with Tibet. However, if that happens, he elaborated, this could also be translated into an advantage for the commercial prospects of Assam. With China and Assam being separated only by the 50 miles of the Mishmi Hills, a route to the prosperous province of Sichuan appeared to him as a lucrative prospect. With the construction of a road, not only Assam's trade would grow and but its acute shortage

[172] Williamson, Noel, "The Lohit-Brahmaputra Between Assam and Southeastern Tibet, November, 1907, To January, 1908": 373-383.

of labour would also be resolved by paving way for Chinese workers for the tea plantations.[173]

Williamson's overt optimism in regard to trade and communication however had a long discursive antecedent in how the commercial and geo-political possibilities of the Upper Brahmaputra Basin [due to its strategic location], was envisaged and articulated in the official and business circles of the empire, in later half of the nineteenth century. Thus to further comprehend how geographical explorations informed the geographical imaginations of the region; it is also necessary to understand how the discursive framework of these explorations were shaped by concerns of cross-border commerce and international diplomacy in its vicinity. The practices of the explorations conducted by the explorers in the Upper Brahmaputra Basin in official and unofficial capacity had provided certain cognitive boosts to how the British political relations with the region were framed and articulated. But at the same time, these practices also projected the Abor and Mishmi hills as potentials zones of political and commercial contact for the empire with its neighbours in the interiors of Asia, towards eastern Tibet and south-western China [Sichuan and Yunnan], with Sadiya at one terminus and south-east Tibet at the other end of this conceptual space.

[173] ibid: 382-383.

Chapter III

Interactive Spaces of Empire: Explorations, Commerce and Geo-Politics

In one of the earliest European geographical accounts about Assam in 1836, John McCosh, a British surgeon of the East India Company termed the province's location as strategically advantageous. This he attributed to Assam's access to China and Burma via land. Hence, strong colonial control over Assam [and its surrounding mountains] was decisive not only for commercial prospects, McCosh added, but also for any potential military exploits of the British Empire vis-a-vis China.[174] Physically the valley of Brahmaputra river was separated from the Tibetan plateau and the plains of Burma and China by a series of mountains towards the north and the east. In his account, McCosh portrays a captivating picture of these mountainous terrains,

> '...This beautiful tract of country,… enjoys all the qualities requisite for rendering it one of the finest in the world. Its climate is cold, healthy, and congenial to European constitutions; its numerous crystal streams abound in gold dust, and masses of the solid metal: its mountains are pregnant with precious stones and silver; its atmosphere is perfumed with tea growing wild and luxuriantly; and its soil is so well adapted to all kinds of agricultural purposes, that it might be converted into one continued garden of silk, and cotton, and coffee, and sugar, and tea, over an extent of many thousand miles.'[175]

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[174] John M'Cosh, "Account of the Mountain Tribes on the Extreme N.E. Frontier of Bengal," *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, no. 52 (April 1836): 193-194.

[175] ibid: 194

This imagery of invoking gardens, reminiscent of Eden, often underlines the trajectory of colonial interventions in India's north-east, expectant with the vocabulary of progress and improvement in a thinly-populated region. Jayeeta Sharma has argued that imperial expansions, across the globe in general and in Assam in particular, were concurrent to an extensive effort of converting the 'non-productive' spaces of the colonial worlds into productive 'gardens'.[176] Assam's conceptualisation as an 'imperial garden' with the coming of the tea industry proliferated diverse articulations by different interest groups: officials, entrepreneurs, missionaries and local gentry, to 'improve' this tract and to accentuate its association with a global movement of commodity and labour.[177] However, with the frequently changing territorial confines of colonial Assam, the incorporation of the mountain ranges surrounding the plains into this Edenic scheme was ambiguous at its best. With formal and direct British authority mostly confined to the plains, the proliferation of the Inner Lines in 1862 resulted in an artificial, although not absolute regimentation of people, commodities and ideas between the plains of Assam and the Abor and Mishmi Hills.

A differing conceptualisation of the hills and plains in the colonial idioms however predated the Inner Lines. McCosh's deployment of the trope of garden was extremely specific in regard to its spatial expanse. The mountains towards north and east of Assam appeared as a distinct geographical zone in his account, distinct from either the plains of Assam, China or Ava [Burma].[178] When Christian Missionaries penetrated the hills of the region after the Inner Lines were established; this categorical

[176] Sharma, *Empire's Garden*: 11.

[177] ibid: 25

[178] John McCosh, *Topography of Assam* (Calcutta, 1837): 193-194.

distinction found acceptance within them also. Almost seven decades later; Reverend S.A. Perrine of the Impur Mission in the Naga Hills wrote,

> '...Assam is strategic, not because of the Bengali or Assarnese or Kol [migrant tea-plantation labourers from Central India] populations but because of the Mongolian people bordering the Brahmaputra valley. I believe our chief effort should be to reach those peoples which by virtue of their position form the human heart of Asia. In the providence of God our Mission is like an Evangelical arm to reach and save the peoples occupying the highlands of Asia.'[179]

Two things become clear from this. First, since the occupation of Assam the hills towards the east and north of Brahmaputra valley were seen as potential zones of interaction towards interior of Asia. And second, the distinctiveness of the hill ranges in terms of its populace and the loose nature of political control; gradually informed their emergence as a distinct geographical category in the early twentieth century. However, admitting the prevalence of this distinction should not be confused with its reification. The intention behind the this chapter is to investigate how the prevalence of such a distinction was to be magnified by the diverse articulations about improving Assam and its mountainous peripheries against the backdrop of trade and borderland politics.

The outlook of envisaging the mountains as an inroad to Burma, China and Tibet proliferated a complex form of colonial engagements in the Upper Brahmaputra

[179] "Minutes of the Eighth Session of the Assam Mission of the American Baptist Mission Union" (Gauhati [Guwahati], January 24, 1905): 56.

Basin; comprising of debates and discourses on possibilities the of cross-border commerce, and imperial geo-politics vis-a-vis other Asian and European powers in the vicinity, most notably China in Tibet, Russia in Central Asia with a growing interest in Tibet, and France in Indo-China. This chapter would argue that the different interest groups invested in British Assam, missionaries, administrators and commercial interests, articulated the Upper Brahmaputra Basin as a potential gateway for cultural, commercial and political interactions between different parts of Asia; between the plains of Assam, Upper Burma, east and south-eastern Tibet and south-western China. And the way the practices of explorations operated in the region were distinctly informed by these articulations.

The concept of 'imperial space' formulated by Daniel Clayton can serve as a useful interpretative device here. Clayton has deployed this notion to elaborate the geographical discourses emerging out of diverse colonial encounters in North America with the indigenous population. He argues that the geographical production of the Pacific Northwest of the continent was shaped by two distinct but interrelated processes. First, interaction, conflict and accommodation between the European explorers and traders and the local inhabitants facilitated certain changes in the notions of existing geographies. And second, a process of geo-political meaning making that resulted from international diplomacy of various imperial powers in the region subsumed local interactive geographies into what he terms as an 'abstract imperial space' consisting of maps and plans.[180] Anchoring on Clayton's model, this chapter would elaborate how the interactions between explorations, administrative concerns, commercial incentives and territorial anxieties about the borderlands

[180] Daniel Clayton, “The Creation of Imperial Space in the Pacific Northwest,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 26, no. 3 (2000): 327.

produced the Upper Brahmaputra Basin as a physical as well as discursive space, where different imperial agendas competed and collaborated, and framed the way the unenclosed region's territorial demarcations were to be shaped later. The distinct political developments at the two edges of the Upper Brahmaputra Basin, Sadiya and south-eastern parts of Tibet implicitly informed how this space was articulated.

Missionaries in the Making of Sadiya

An old Assamese proverb warns the people of the plains not to ever venture into Sadiya, comparing it to the futile act of packing dry salt in damp leaves. A famous song for children from the post-independence times subverts this, 'Mother we will go to Sadiya... we will pack salt in raw leaves'; a sympathetic allusion to the marginal nature of the region in Assamese territorial and mental imaginations.[181] However, the inaccessible foothills region of the present, separated from other parts of the plains by a maze of rivers as wide as 10 kms, was once a nucleus for the empire's forays into the hills surrounding it. The mountainous and submontane territories of the Abors to the north, Khamtis and Mishmis to the east and north-east, and the Singphos towards the south-east, converged in Sadiya; making it the most appropriate location for a colonial frontier outpost after the annexation of Assam.

For these communities, Sadiya served two definitive purposes. First, as illustrated in the previous chapter, it was a required functional node for their communication with the British officials. During the winters the mountain communities including the Abors and Mishmis descended to the plains to conduct trade, and to collect their

[181] Khagen Mahanta, *Ma Aami Xodiyaloi Jamei*, Music, n.d.

annual share of Posa. McCosh reports that these communities stayed in the plains throughout the winter and went back to the mountains whenever Simala [Ximolu] tress started flowering, indicating the arrival of the hot weather to which they were unaccustomed to.[182] The significance of Sadiya in the local livelihood networks can be gauged from one incident. When J. F. Needham visited the Abor village of Membo in 1886, the chiefs of the region put a demand before him for the construction of a Namghar [rest house] for the Abors' annual visit to Sadiya.[183] The chiefs pointed out that as the Mishmis already had a Namghar there; there was no reason why the Abors may not.[184] Already beginning to develop a close association with the Abors, Needham forwarded this motion to the Chief Commissioner of Assam and it was later sanctioned.[185]

Secondly, Sadiya served as a juncture of trade between these mountain communities and the people of the plains. McCosh mentions that Sadiya in the initial days after the annexation of Assam boasted a lively trade network between these communities, comprising of gold, silver, amber, musk, ivory, Khamti Dao [machetes], Chinese and Burmese trinkets, arrow poison, dye, and Mishmi Teeta.[186] Many of these objects came from distant parts. For instance, the Daos brought by Khamtis were believed to be manufactured by the Kunungs, a community in the Upper headwaters of the

[182] McCosh, *Topography of Assam*: 145.

[183] The term Namghar refers to the prayer hall of the Assamese vaishnavites. But in the political grammar of Sadiya, it had taken the connotation of a rest house.

[184] Needham, "Excursion in the Abor Hills; From Sadiya on the Upper Assam": 320-321.

[185] E. G. Colvin, Personal Assistant to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the DC of Lakhimpur District, No. 46T., dated December 4, 1884, in 'Report on Abor Villages beyond British frontier', 1884, File no. NIL/1884. [APSA]

[186] Mishmi Teeta was the Assamese name for the root of a plant known as *Coptistita* belonging to the natural order of *Ranunculacae*. The root contained the alkaloid berberine and from it a drug was produced which was used as a tonic and a febrifuge.

Irrawaddy. [187] The markets during the trading seasons flourished with different communities from the hills and plains bringing their products. Abors and Miris brought pepper, ginger, *manjit* [madder], and wax; Singphos with their expertise in elephant hunting brought ivory. The items brought by the Mishmis were as diverse as swords, spears, gongs and copper vessels bought from the Tibetans and small quantities of febrifuge and arrow poison produced by them. These they exchanged for cattle, salt, clothes and coloured beads from the plainspeople.[188]

Before these locally developing official and commercial networks, Sadiya was a desolate, jungle-covered tract when the first British officials reached there. However it possessed a fertile alluvial land suitable for cultivation and a well-watered terrain criss-crossed by the snow-fed rivers flowing from the surrounding mountains.[189] The recurring invasions by the Burmese; and the continuous predatory raids by the neighbouring hill communities had virtually depopulated the region in the early decades of the nineteenth century.[190]

After the stationing of British troops in Sadiya, the Khamtis appeared as a strong obstruction to the British sphere of influence in the region. When the news of imperial antagonism with the Khamtis was circulated widely in the Empire's information networks; it paved way for the entry a new group of interlocutors in the region, who

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[187] McCosh, "Account of the Mountain Tribes on the Extreme N.E. Frontier of Bengal": 198.

[188] E. Rowlatt, "Report of an Expedition into the Mishmee Hills to the North-East of Sudyah": 489-490.

[189] McCosh, *Topography of Assam*: 147.

[190] Captain Neufville reportedly found 7000 Assamese slaves among the Singphos and believed that there were probably 100,000 Assamese and Manipuris who remained in captivity in Burma. (McCosh 1837)

were to be proven as crucial in the 'improvement' of Sadiya and its transformation to a node of contact and commerce. Concurrently to the annexation of Assam, the American Baptist Missionaries in South-East Asia were trying to enter China, following their Convention in Richmond which suggested extending their base of operations to uncharted regions. But two of such attempts had failed recently. The first one by John T. Jones from Bangkok could not succeed due to the exclusivist policy of China during those times in regard to Europeans. On the other hand, Rugenio Kincaid who tried to cross the Chinese border via Upper Burma was stopped by the Burmese government itself. As a result, Assam was seen as the final point of entry from which they had any expectation of reaching China.[191] With the failure of the previous attempts by land and most of the seaports of China being closed to foreigners; Sadiya's proximity to both Tibet and south-west China was deemed as suitable from the 'missionary point of view'.[192]

This opportunity was provided by Francis Jenkins, the Agent to the Governor General of Bengal in Assam. Jenkins was of the opinion that the 'pacification' of the Khamtis near Sadiya was possible only by allowing the missionaries to work among them.[193] Jenkins invited the English Baptist Mission of Bengal to extend their services to Assam. The mission forwarded this invitation to the American Baptists in Burma. Nathan Brown, a Missionary in Burma was allured by this invitation. Brown had already been acquainted with the Shans of Burma; and the news of the presence of Khamtis, another Shan group in Assam was seen as a potential for further propagation

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[191] H. K Barpujari, *The American Missionaries and North-East India, 1836-1900 A.D.: A Documentary Study* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publishers : Sole distributors, United Publishers, 1986): xiv.

[192] "Report of the Eighth Biennial Session, Assam Baptist Missionary Conference" (Gauhati [Guwahati]: American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, March 4, 1911): 32.

[193] Barpujari, *The American Missionaries and North-East India*: xiv.

of the faith. Hence before leaving Burma, Brown extensively studied the Shan language for this. In November 20, 1836, Brown and another Missionary Oliver Cutter started from Calcutta with their spouses and reached Sadiya a month later. However, he was disappointed after reaching Sadiya when her realised that the only Shan speakers in the region were a few Khamti villages, a minority within a large number of Assamese and other language speakers. But the missionaries decided to concentrate on learning Assamese and translated the Gospels in both Assamese and Khamti, while also busying themselves with immense physical labour to set up a Mission station by clearing the jungle-covered terrain of the region.[194] In Brown's opinion, the attempt of transforming the spiritual landscape of the region coincided with their long-term aims of transforming Sadiya as a productive, prosperous and well-populated tract;

> '...There is no doubt that in a few years the tea trade will be carried on here extensively. This will produce a great change in the country-will fill it with a dense population, and convert these now almost impenetrable jungles into the happy abodes of industry. If the means of grace are employed, may we not also hope that it will become a garden of the Lord.'[195]

However, he observed that while the alluvial soil of Sadiya was immensely fertile, and the climate was capable of producing a large variety of tropical and temperate fruits; the material conditions of the locals were not satisfactory due to the 'inferior' methods of cultivation. To improve this, Brown wrote back to the Mission in

[194] ibid: xvii

[195] ibid: 7.

America, asking them to send him a missionary with adequate knowledge of farming. However, before this regime of gospel driven improvement could take place and the gateways to China could be opened, Sadiya was attacked by the Khamtis in 1839 and the Missionaries had to shift their base of operation to Jaipur in the Singpho territory.[196] But the tropical climate of Jaipur proved to be unhealthy, and in addition the intransigence of Singphos made the Missionaries to move to Sibsagar, in the plains of Upper Assam. By 1845, the Mission had a sturdy presence in Sibsagar, Nowgong [Nagaon] and Gauhati [Guwahati]. With this shift to British-controlled territories of Assam, Sadiya became a 'barred door rather than an open gateway to China.'[197]

After the confrontation with the Khamtis, the British frontier outpost also shifted from Sadiya to Saikhwa, on the opposite bank of the Lohit. Saikhwa's proximity to the tea-plantations of the Muttock country [present Tinsukia district of Assam] also allowed the Assam Light Infantry to protect the plantations from the predatory raids of the hill tribes. But Saikhwa's climate proved to be unhealthy for the constitution of the troops; and the outpost again moved back to its old location in Sadiya in 1854.[198] Although the missionary element was no longer present; Sadiya continued to grow as a centre of administration. Numerous punitive expeditions were conducted against the Abors and Mishmis for the instances of violence against Europeans or British subjects during the latter half of nineteenth century, and Sadiya served as the base for these operations.[199] Trade networks between the local communities continued to flourish. In one of the

[196]"Report of the Eighth Biennial Session, Assam Baptist Missionary Conference": 31-35.

[197] Barpujari, *The American Missionaries and North-East India:* xvi-xvii.

[198] Butler, *Sketch of Assam with Some Account of the Hill Tribes*: 11

[199] Against the Abors in 1858, 1859, 1862 and 1894. Against the Mishmis in 1855 and 1899.

fairs held for the communities in 1873; 1029 Chulikata Mishmis, 298 Digaru Mishmis, 67 Miju Mishmis, around 300 Khamtis and Singphos and also a large number of Abors and Miris participated and a transaction equalling to 40,000 rupees occurred in a single day. [200]

Despite their absence from the expansion of Sadiya, the concern of opening up China via land had not disappeared from the missionary vocabulary. With the construction of Bengal Assam Railway in the last decades of nineteenth century, and the sanctioning of the extension of Burma Railway to the borders of China, the possibilities of a 'great Asiatic continental highway' commencing from either Bombay or Karachi and reaching Shanghai via Assam and Burma seemed probable again. [201] The establishment of the Assistant Political Officer's post had stabilised the administration of Sadiya as well. Emboldened by their success among the other hill communities of Assam such as Garos, Khasis, Lushais [Mizos] and Nagas, the Baptist Mission in Assam was ready to unveil Sadiya again after sixty-six years. In 1904-1905, a donation of Rs. 3500 was made to the Assam Mission of Baptists to restart its activities in Sadiya and to convert it to a full-fledged station of the Mission.[202] In 1905, Reverend L. W. B. Jackman and his wife were sent by the Mission to undertake this endeavour. Two years later, another Missionary Dr. H. W. Kirby and his wife joined them. The couples soon expanded their work; by preaching during their weekly

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[200] "Reports on Trade Routes and Fairs on Northern Frontiers of India [presented to Both Houses of Parliament by Command of Her Majesty]" (London, 1874): 52-54.

[201] Barpujari, *The American Missionaries and North-East India:* 90-91.

[202] "Minutes of the Eighth Session of the Assam Mission of the American Baptist Mission Union": 8-28.

visits to the local markets, appointing evangelists among the locals, and by opening a dispensary.[203]

By 1907, the Church at Sadiya was consolidated with seventeen members, and around twenty-seven people had been baptised. By the time the Sadiya Mission had divided its labour into two branches, the first among the Assamese and other 'migrants' [Bengali, Nepali and Hindi speakers], and the second one among the Abors and Miris. In track with the prevalent tradition of touring by officials; the Mission also decided to explore the Abor and Miri territories. Staring from the winter of 1907-08; around forty Miri villages at the foothills were toured within a duration of three seasons. Two excursions were also made to the Abor villages beyond British jurisdiction. In 1908 and 1900, Jackman also accompanied the APO Williamson in two official tours of the Abor region. In all total Jackman visited ten Abor villages outside British territory, seven closer to the plains and three remotes ones bordering Tibet; and was able to develop an effective rapport with the people.[204]

Soon the Government realised the increasing hold of the missionaries over the hill people, and the administration and the Mission started working in a loose collaboration. With the arrival of Dr. Kirby, the Mission expanded to the medical field as well. In 1908, the Government handed over the local dispensary to the Mission along with a grant of Rs. 400 per annum. With the support of Williamson, the medicinal works of the Mission expanded in the frontier. In the same year, Kirby was invited by a Khamti man to his village to treat his bedridden relative. In thirteen days,

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[203]"Report of the Eighth Biennial Session, Assam Baptist Missionary Conference": 31-35.

[204] "Report of the Tenth Biennial Session, Assam Baptist Missionary Conference" (Gauhati [Guwahati]: American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, January 8, 1910): 64-70.

Kirby and his wife visited thirteen Khamti villages, and treated 650 patients without any consultation fee. This expansive amount of work made the Mission's influence grow in the Khamti areas as well. The present Khamti chief even wrote to Williamson to persuade Kirby to visit his territories again and talk his people out of the widespread abuse of opium that was quite pervasive in the region.[205]

With Jackman and Kirby's efforts, Sadiya's importance in the economic, political as well as medical networks of the frontier was increasing. Unlike their predecessors; they had been able to get a throttlehold over Sadiya, engaging with both the administration and with the Abors, Khamtis and Miris. Following the Younghusband expedition of 1904, when the political climate was clouded by growing imperial concerns over Tibet and China, the Mission in Sadiya had become optimistic that its decade-old ambition of opening up China from Assam at last had a possibility of materialising. Emboldened with such optimism, Kirby remarked,

> '...the opportunities for the future are full of wonderful outlook; promise and glorious possibilities. It is quite possible that Sadiya will soon become a highway into Thibet. The time will come when the country will be opened up between Sadiya and Northern Burma through the Kompti [Khamti] and Singpho country.'[206] (sic)

[205] ibid: 70-72

[206] ibid: 73

The Search for an Asian Highway

The concern for a route towards China that was pervasive in the Missionary vocabulary, also had an intertextuality with the official and commercial positions of the empire in regard to Sadiya. With the Missionaries trying to expand the spiritual base towards China, another group of British men; geographers, businessmen and officials were speculating on the possibility of connecting Sadiya with China for added commercial advantages. Due to its location, the north-eastern parts of the British India had witnessed a constant mobility of people and commodities with Tibet, Yunnan and Upper Burma since the pre-colonial times. Following the imperial annexation of Brahmaputra valley in 1826, Captain Pemberton, a British officer, noted in his account that the pre-colonial commercial interactions between Assam and Tibet were very frequent. Two trade marts served as the principal nodes for these transactions: Chouna on the Tibetan side and Geganshur towards Assam. Tibetan merchants brought silver bullion, rock salt, woollen clothes, gold dust, musk, horses and Chinese silk. This they exchanged for rice, silk, iron and buffalo horns brought from Assam, and also with pearls and corals that the Assam traders had acquired from Bengal. Even in 1809, when the Ahom monarchy in Upper Assam was enduring a series of political instability, the trade in the border marts amounted for around 200,000 rupees. And only a year before the Burmese army invaded Assam, Tibetans brought trade goods amounting to 70,000.[207]

McCosh, who travelled extensively in Assam and the neighbouring regions, wrote an authoritative account of its people, customs and also of its trade. He mentions that

[207] Elwin, *India's North-East Frontier in the Nineteenth Century*: 10-11.

during his tenure in the province, two pre-colonial routes existed by which Tibet could be reached. The first route went along the course of the Dihang starting from Sadiya. Travelling through this route for sixteen days; one could reach the Tibetan town of Ro-Shi-Mah [most probably Rima]; which possessed a huge population and its administration was predominated by the Chinese. McCosh never personally visited this route and his account was largely based on information provided by the British officials such as Robert Bruce [the one often credited with 'discovery' of tea in Assam in 1823] and local testimonies. McCosh mentioned Gha-lum being one of the stops en route. Both Wilcox and Griffith had mentioned about the existence of a Mishmi village named Ghalum on the Lohit on their accounts. But if the road passed through Ghalum, and reached Rima that was in Zayul valley, then most certainly it would be the road across the Lohit river and not Dihang as McCosh had mentioned. He also mentioned about a secondary route to Tibet via the Brahmakund, which had a more difficult terrain and was covered with snow for a large section of the year.[208] In reflection, both these routes appear to be the same, or the second route rather appears to be the route to Khamti Long.

This apparent sketchiness prevalent in McCosh's account portrays the non-standardisation of the dispersed geographies of Assam and its northern frontiers in the early colonial days; where mountains, rivers and people appeared to be elusive and disaggregated to the imperial eye. But despite this initial unfamiliarity, it was widely recognised that the edges of the mountains bordering Assam touched some of the most productive and well-populated river basins in Asia, the Ganga-Brahmaputra plains to the south, the basins of Irrawaddy, Mekong and Salween towards the south-

[208] McCosh, “Account of the Mountain Tribes on the Extreme N.E. Frontier of Bengal”: 196-197.

east, and of course towards the further east, the vast plains of eastern China. With his evident zeal towards 'improvement' of the region, McCosh advocated the establishment of overland communication lines between these plains. This, he believed would serve as a 'great highway of commerce', facilitating further movement of commodities across the boundaries.[209] The search for pre-existing trade routes served the purpose of establishing templates for conceptualisation and construction of trade routes in the future. In the practices of geographical explorations in the Upper Brahmaputra Basin, the quest for feasible route for commerce was an often recurring trope; the most notable being that of Cooper and Williamson. But with the constantly shifting geographies, modes and motives of the explorations, finding the definitively feasible and suitable routes remained almost as contentious as finding one signifier for the Brahmaputra. In that regard; the explorations and the quest for trade routes shared the same epistemic ground on which the geographies about Abor and Mishmi Hills were conceived.

Developing a corridor of trade in the early days of the empire was not devoid of physical and material hindrances. In terms of feasibility, the mountainous terrains of Abor and Mishmi Hills provided a definitive barrier to Tibet. The dense forest cover; tropical undergrowth, deep gorges and the long monsoon season of the region made their passing a herculean task. Most of the roads passed around the hills at their bases along the course of rives, and sometimes they stood at almost a hundred feet from the river bed, where any miscalculated step would be fatal for the traveller.[210]

[209] ibid.

[210] Butler, *Sketch of Assam with Some Account of the Hill Tribes*: 122.

The pre-colonial routes towards Burma on the other hand were more frequented than the Tibetan routes, earlier used by the Ahoms, Khamtis, Singphos and the Burmese to reach Assam from Upper Burma.[211] When Neufville arrived in Assam, he made enquiries about those routes, and the Assamese, Khamtis, Singphos and the Burmese he met all agreed about their existence. While the itineraries provided to him were diverse and often contradictory from person to person, all of them agreed that there were two rallying points from where the routes began, Namrup, and Bisa, both in the foothills of the Patkai.[212] Bisa was a Singpho village south of Sadiya. The ascribed route connected it to Old Bisa; another Singpho village on the other side of the mountain, in the Hukawng valley of Upper Burma. The altitude of the Patkai was much lower than the Abor and Mishmi hills, and hence, it was often deemed as traversable within six days.[213]

But while the physical difficulties were fewer in the Burma routes, the likelihood of a consumer-oriented trade was limited by the material conditions. While Upper Burma was only 200 miles away from the plains of Assam, it was more easily accessible from Rangoon [Yangon] via the waterways of Irrawaddy [and Chindwin]. The few products that had high demand in the region were easily available from Rangoon, and at a cheaper price than from Assam. On the other hand the purchasing power of the people of Assam and its surrounding hills, still recovering from the Burmese invasions, was not sustainable for long distance trade of goods. In 1828, the newly established British administration in the plains decided to invest in woollen goods in

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[211] The ancestors of the Ahom kings of Assam are believed to be a branch of the Tai [Shan] group like the Khamtis, who reached Brahmaputra valley [according to Ahom chronicles] in 1228, while travelling from what is present Yunnan, via Upper Burma.

[212] Neufville, "Geography and Population of Asam": 346.

[213] Michell, "The North-East Frontier of India": 152.

Upper Assam, while sinking the price thirty percent below the principal cost. But even after that, the stock cleared after almost eight years. Apart from wealthy noblemen and the tribal chiefs, very few in the region could afford woollen clothing. Articles chiefly in demand were salt, cloths, tobacco, opium, knives, needles, cups, saucers and plates. None of them demanded mobilising a lucrative high-value trade across the Patkai.[214]

Despite these difficulties, McCosh considered the Burma route as more suitable transit to reach China from Assam. With regular undertaking of explorations in the hills eastwards from Sadiya, especially by Wilcox, Griffith and Rowlatt, geographical comprehension of the lands between Assam and south-western China had become much more coherent by the mid-nineteenth century. Armed with this frequently perfected knowledge, McCosh elaborated his thesis on the trade routes in an account he wrote in 1861. Now he proposed that there were five routes which could lead to China from the valley of the Brahmaputra.[215] These were the Dihang pass [via Abor hills], the Mishmi route, the Phungan pass [leading to Khamti Long], the Patkai route extending through the entrepot of Bhamo in Burma, and the route via Manipur.[216] However, he still insisted on the superior feasibility of the Patkai-Burma route. Six years later, the illustrious British irrigation engineer Sir Arthur Cotton proposed for an exploration in the frontiers of Assam, to evaluate the possibilities of connecting the waterways of Yangtze and Brahmaputra rivers. While discussing the proposal in the RGS, McCosh who was in the audience remained insistent about his position that any

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[214] Butler, *Sketch of Assam with Some Account of the Hill Tribes*: 87-88.

[215] See Map No. 3.

[216] John M'cosh, "On the Various Lines of Overland Communication between India and China," *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of London,* 5, no. 2 (1861 1860): 48-50.

routes to China from Assam must pass via Bhamo on Burma-China border, and not through the difficult northerly [i.e. Abor and Mishmi] routes from the plains.[217]

The tea lobby in Assam, in Calcutta and in London also became increasingly proactive in regard to the extension of the province's commercial potentials. In 1878, S. E. Peal; the aforementioned tea planter from Sibsagar submitted a memorandum to Steuart Bayley, the Chief Commissioner of Assam. Peal's brother A. J. Peal had conducted a tour in the Patkai Hills in 1869, and had reached Hukawng Valley. The route his party took was crisscrossed across the low-lying ranges of the Patkai. However, unlike the high-altitude passes in the Abor, Daphla and Mishmi Hills, often exceeding 10,000 feet in elevation, the highest point they measured in the Patkai was only 2140 feet. Hence, echoing McCosh's argument, S. E. Peal suggested that the Patkai route should be the favoured transmit for any eastward commerce from Assam. Many of the passes in the range, he pointed out, were not higher than 1000 feet; less than half the elevation of the road constructed from Bengal to Shillong, colonial Assam's capital in the Khasi Hills, where at places it rose to 5000 feet.[218]

Following Peal's suggestions, Bayley discussed the scope and extent of exploring the Patkai route with Harman, who was in charge of the Surveys in Assam, and with Captain Woodthrope, who had recently concluded his survey of the territories south-east of Sadiya, i.e. in the Mishmi and Singpho territories. As Woodthrope was already

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[217] Arthur Cotton, "On Communication between India and China by the Line of the Burhampooter and Yang-Tse," *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 11, no. 6 (1867 1866): 255.

[218] Note on the Burmese route over Patkai via Nongyang by S.E.Peal, dated July 1878, in 'Proposed continuation of the exploration survey on the eastern border of Assam, with a view to establish, if possible, a direct trade-route between that Province and China', Department of Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce, Surveys, December 1878, nos. 1 to 7. [NAI]

acquainted with the people of the frontiers, Bayley believed that he should be entrusted with any such explorations in the region. In the Commissioner's opinion, even if the trade routes are not proved as feasible after the exploration, it would have sorted a 'much vexed question' circulating in commercial circles regarding their likelihood of materialising. The itinerary they considered the most suitable was to start at foothills of the Patkai, then to proceed to the independent territories north of Upper Burma [i.e. Khamti Long] and then towards China. The communities in the region, Khamtis and Kunungs were believed to be 'friendly' and efficient traders, with relative absence of Tibetan or Burmese influence which was considered as an added advantage. However; following the end of Woodthrope's surveys, he was deployed by the Survey in the Afghan Frontier, and none of the other officers were immediately available for the explorations. This ambitious plan could not materialise as a result of that.[219]

With T. T. Cooper's journey in the Mishmi Hills, and the publication of his widely read account in 1873, the possibilities of opening up of south-eastern Tibet and adjacent parts of China from Assam again received a boost in their circulation. Not only Peal, but the commercial interests in London also started speculating about what further dividend it could bring to the emerging plantation economy of Assam. In April 4, 1878, a number of notable individuals with interests in Assam congregated in Jeremy Street, London. The agenda of the meeting was to improve the 'internal and external communications of the province [of Assam] for further commercial interests.

[219] The Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to The Secretary to the GOI, no. 1477, dated September, 1875, in ‘Proposed continuation of the exploration survey on the eastern border of Assam, with a view to establish, if possible, a direct trade-route between that Province and China', Department of Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce, Surveys, December 1878, nos. 1 to 7. [NAI]

Those who were present included the late Commissioner of Assam Henry Hopkins, H. H. Godwin-Austen, the Director of the Assam [Tea] Company William Maitland and James Warren, the Director of the Doon-Doon Tea Company. The acute shortage of labour for Assam's tea industry had become a reason of concern during those days. Those present in the meeting suggested that this can be resolved by establishing overland communications lines with Yunnan and Sichuan, preferably passing through Burma. This would not only facilitate movement of skilled labour from China, especially Sichuan where the tea bore the same characteristics with that of Assam, but would also open up the intermediate mountainous territories. As a result of this the people of the mountains were expected to become as 'friendly and trustful' to the empire as the Khasis and Garos with their long exposure to colonial contact had become. Continuation of Woodthorpe's explorations in the hills to the east of Sadiya was seen as pivotal to these concerns. Godwin-Austen emphasised that while these explorations and surveys and explorations and the resulting opening of communication may not provide any immediate economic dividend, it would provide an 'exact knowledge' of the region's topography and people, and would give the tea-districts in the plains a secure frontier.[220]

Against the backdrop of the growing plantation-based prosperity of Assam, these concerns were not unfound. Till the second half of nineteenth century, Assam remained one of the most inaccessible provinces of British India. On the other hand, it had an abundance of fertile alluvial soil, and famines and drought were almost

[220] Memorial Submitted to Viscount Cranbok, Secretary of State for India in Council, dated July 24, 1878, in 'Proposed continuation of the exploration survey on the eastern border of Assam, with a view to establish, if possible, a direct trade-route between that Province and China', Department of Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce, Surveys, December 1878, nos. 1 to 7. [NAI]

unheard of. With proper access of cheap labour, the region was envisaged as a potential supplier of food grain to other parts of India during shortages. At the same time, the province's tea production was increasing every year, but the labour supply was not concurrent. In 1876, there were around 800 tea plantations employing 190,000 labourers, 37 of them being opened only in the previous year. The demand for Assam tea was also growing in London. In fact, British Member of Parliament H. W. Peek once remarked that even if Assam's tea production increases fourfold, there would be no dearth of demand in the metropole.[221]

But this excitement towards Burma proved to be short-lived [with Chotanagpur emerging as the supplier of labours], and the last two decades of the nineteenth century was marked by an almost pervasive silence regarding new routes of commerce. With the consolidation of British power in Sadiya, J. F. Needham had shifted his entire focus towards Abor and Mishmi Hills, bolstered by the exploits of the Pundits in neighbouring Tibet, with which negotiations had been renewed following the opening of Yatung trade mart.[222] On the other hand, the increasing instances of rampant opium consumption, intoxication and constant internecine warfare among the local inhabitants in the Patkai had diminished the allure of the Burma route in the official eye.[223]

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[221] Report of Deputation, dated July 31, 1878, "Proposed continuation of the exploration survey on the eastern border of Assam, with a view to establish, if possible, a direct trade-route between that Province and China', Department of Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce, Surveys, December 1878, nos. 1 to 7. [NAI]

[222] For Yatung, see Chapter 1. Needham's tenure has been discussed in Chapter 2.

[223] Michell, "The North-East Frontier of India": 125.

In 1886, Woodthrope returned to Assam from the Afghan frontier, undertook another tour of the Patkai accompanied by C. R. Macgregor of the Gurkha Light Infantry, and reached the upper reaches of the Irrawaddy. In the next year, MacGregor presented the findings of their travel in front of the RGS. While their tour was lauded for contributing new information regarding the much vexed issue of the Irrawaddy's source, the response towards any commercial possibilities along the route was lukewarm. Macgregor had suggested that China could be connected to Makum, the easternmost railway junction in Assam, by construction of a railway line across the Patkai to Burma and then to Yunnan. While this would certainly be a difficult undertaking, he did not consider it as improbable. Sir Richard Strachey of the Bengal Engineers, who presided over the meeting, however remarked in conclusion that it would be a disastrous endeavour to be a shareholder of a company that invests in any routes or railways across Patkai![224] In fact, an official report from 1883 suggested that the only feasible purpose that the Patkai route could serve was for military movement, as it already had a history of such mobilisation when the Burmese army with strength of 20,000 to 30,000 men invaded Assam.[225] This was later even materialised, when during World War II, the Ledo [Stillwell] Road was constructed along the lines of this route, to facilitate mobility of allied troops into the interior of Burma and south-western China from Assam.

This shift towards Tibet and routes leading to Tibet was brought to the forefront during this time by the Younghusband Expedition to Lhasa in 1904. With what was

[224] C. R. MacGregor, "Journey of the Expedition under Colonel Woodthorpe, R. E., from Upper Assam to the Irawadi, and Return over the Patkoi Range," *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society and Monthly Record of Geography* 9, no. 1 (1887): 42.
[225] Mitchel, "The North-East Frontier of India": 152-153.

perceived as growing Russian interests in Tibet at that time and Dalai Lama's relatively cold demeanour towards the British, both the British and the Indian Governments agreed that their influence in Lhasa must proliferate in a way which would make any other powers ineffectual vis-a-vis India. Thus it was deemed as suitable to send an expedition to Lhasa, by use of force if necessary, in order to ensure British territorial and commercial interests in Tibet. An expeditionary party with a military attaché was sent under the leadership of Francis Younghusband, the British Resident in the princely state of Indore. The expedition, one of the largest ever send across the Himalayas in terms of scale reached Lhasa after a number of violent encounters with the Tibetan troops. The Dalai Lama escaped to the safety of Mongolia, and the expeditionary party signed a treaty with the Tibetan officials. Along with other privileges, the treaty allowed British subjects to conduct trade at the border marts in Yatung, Gyantse, and Gartok.[226]

Before the expedition, Younghusband insinuated that the abundant natural resources of the plateau, including gold and wool, coupled with the Tibetan people's 'natural inclination for trade' demanded increasing commercial interactions from British India. He reported that annually five lakhs rupees of wool were exported from the plateau to Bengal and even more to Punjab and Kashmir. On the other hand, items which could be imported from India such as clothing, cutlery, iron ore, copper, indigo, dyes, tobacco, sugar, precious stones and most importantly tea were in high demand. He was optimistic that with proper channelisation Indian tea could replace the huge Chinese trade in the beverage in Tibet. The most crucial and functional route for this

[226] Francis Edward Younghusband, *India and Tibet; a History of the Relations Which Have Subsisted between the Two Countries from the Time of Warren Hastings to 1910; with a Particular Account of the Mission to Lhasa of 1904* (London : J. Murray, 1910).

commerce, he believed, was the one starting from Sikkim, crossing the Jelap La pass to Chumbi Valley and then to Gyatse, from which it could lead to either to Lhasa or to Shigatse. [227]

However, The Englishman newspaper speculated at the same time that the 'real' trade transmit to access Tibet was not via Sikkim but via the route connecting Assam with Rima across the Mishmi Hills. Once connectivity with Rima was established, the newspaper reported, this could be further enhanced to Batang, the entrepot in the easternmost Tibetan region of Kham. The prosperous region of Kham was believed to be under the suzerainty of the Chinese officials of Sichuan, rather than the Dalai Lama of Lhasa. Hence, it was speculated that seeking permission to expand any trade junctures would not be as difficult as it was with Tibet, with its hermetic isolation towards foreigners.[228]

But Lord Curzon, in his usual caustic manner, found the Mishmi route to be 'extraordinarily unpromising'. Although this route would have reduced the distance from Assam to south-western China considerably than the Burma route, certain mountain passes along the way were believed to be at the altitude of 16,000 to 17,000 feet.[229] At the same time while it was closer to Sichuan, to reach Lhasa which was the focus for the British interest at the moment, the route would have to take a very

[227] Francis Edward Younghusband, “Memorandum on Our Relations with Tibet, Both Past and Present, Together with a Forecast of the Future Developments of Our Policy in That Region” (Simla, 1903): 27-34.

[228] Notes in Foreign Department [From The Englishman of 5th March 1904], in ‘Assam Batang Route’, Foreign Department, Secret-E, October 1904, nos. 311-317. [NAI]

[229] Notesby Lord Curzon, dated March 8, 1904, in ‘Assam Batang Route’, Foreign Department, Secret-E, October 1904, nos. 311-317. [NAI]

roundabout way from Rima. The route going along the Dihang across the Abor territories provided a much direct approach towards the Tibetan capital.[230]

Even Younghusband himself expressed his doubts regarding commercial feasibility of the Mishmi route, apart from the likelihood of facilitating local trade and bringing Tibetans to [British] Indian territory; which in the long run might have been beneficial for maintaining contact.[231] Following his expedition, there were rumours floating around that a trade mart would be opened on the Mishmi-Tibetan border at Zayul. This would have provided a legitimate context for both geographical explorations and search for trade routes in the south-eastern Tibet. But after the return of Younghusband's party, no such mart came up and any immediate designs on the Mishmi-Tibet frontier had to be stalled for the time being.[232]

Despite no crucial strides made towards commercial openings, renewed contact with Tibet rekindled the conundrum of the Tsangpo-Brahmaputra, virtually absent in official correspondences in the last decade. In March 1905, C. H. D. Ryder of the Survey of India, who had accompanied Younghusband, submitted a proposal for exploring the river downstream from Lhasa. Younghusband's party had already discussed the issue; and Ryder was deputed as the in-charge for planning and

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[230] Notes by M. Ray and W. Malleson, dated April 13-14, 1904, in ‘Assam Batang Route’, Foreign Department, Secret-E, October 1904, nos. 311-317. [NAI]

[231]Demi-official from F.E. Younghusband, , British Commissioner for Tibetan Frontier Matters, to L. W. Dane, Secretary to the GOI in the Foreign Department, dated April 3, 1904, "Assam Batang Route", Foreign Department, Secret-E, October 1904, nos. 311-317. [NAI]

[232] Draft notes by C. Somers-Cock, dated January 24, 1905, in ‘Possible Assam-Tibet Route’, Foreign Department, Secret-E, March 1905, Nos. 328-329. [NAI]

execution of the journey.[233] Ryder believed that the exploration would not only settle the question of the mysterious river but would also leave a 'good moral effect' on the Tibetans vis-a-vis the British. If the river could be traced to Assam; he added, this could assist the Empire's mobility towards Lhasa in two ways. First, it would help materialising a commercial highway along its course, which in turn would 'pacify' the intransigent tribes of the borderlands. And second, it would provide an alternative military route to the Tibetan capital from India.[234]

Ryder's plan did not materialise, but it opened the floodgates on the Tsangpo question again, now emboldened by the newfound possibilities of commerce. The absence of formalised commerce, Ottley remarked a year after Ryder's proposal, had been detrimental to the people of Gyala, the southernmost Tibetan outpost on Tsangpo. Despite its close proximity to Sadiya, the people of Gyala had to procure tea and other necessities either from China which was 400 miles towards the east, or from Jelap La, 500 miles towards west. The Bor Abors, Ottley reported, demanded blackmail from the Tibetans of Gyala if they wanted to visit Sadiya via Dihang, and thus monopolised any trade which could pass through their territories. And the situation was further complicated by certain Miris of the foothills, who had blockaded the Bor Abors from visiting Sadiya. In this multi-tiered regime of blockades and blackmails, Ottley suggested that the British step in as a 'guarantor of peace'. Opening up of the

[233] C.H.D. Ryder to The Surveyor General of India, in ‘Captain C.H.D. Ryder's note on the feasibility of undertaking a journey from Lhasa down the Brahmaputra to Assam’, Foreign Department, Secret-E, April 1905, Nos. 45-46. [NAI]

[234] Notes on a journey proposed down the Brahmaputra to Assam, dated February 22, 1905, in ‘Captain C.H.D. Ryder's note on the feasibility of undertaking a journey from Lhasa down the Brahmaputra to Assam’, Foreign Department, Secret-E, April 1905, Nos. 45-46. [NAI]

territories, he believed, would be beneficial for diverse interest groups: the Tibetans, the Bor Abors, the Miris, and the planters, traders and residents of Assam, as,

> '...once these tribes really see what an Englishman really is and that he is not a devil, their present fear and distrust of them would vanish, as has been proved by the good feeling now engendered in the Tibetans since the [Younghusband] Mission.'[235]

At the same time, the celebrated Swedish explorer Sven Hedin, with the experience of his exploits along Silk Route in Central Asia, was looking for opportunities to enter Tibet. Although Hedin was reported to have no desire to travel to the unexplored regions of the Tsangpo, his moves were closely being followed in the official quarters in India.[236] Ottley hence proposed to undertake the exploration of Tsangpo before Hedin or any other foreigner completes it.[237] Ottley's proposal was not granted, but it was able to convince Foreign Secretary L. W. Dane and Curzon that British geographical undertakings in Tibet and its frontiers with India towards Assam now need to pursue a swifter and more effective course of action.[238] Not only individual explorers like Hedin, but European governments as well, most notably Russia were showing increasing interest in Tibet. Pursuing a policy of detachment towards the

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[235] ibid.

[236] Notes by L. W. Dane dated December, 13-15, 1906, in 'Application of Mr. H.C. Barnes for Permission to Explore the Country to the North-East of the Assam Frontier', Foreign Department, Secret-E, August 1907, Nos. 358-359. [NAI]

[237] W. J. Ottley to Louis Dane, Secretary to the GOI in the Foreign Department, Dated September 28, 1906, in 'Application of Mr. H.C. Barnes for Permission to Explore the Country to the North-East of the Assam Frontier', Foreign Department, Secret-E, August 1907, Nos. 358-359. [NAI]

[238] Notes between L. W. Dane and Lord Curzon, dated December, 13-15, 1906, in 'Application of Mr. H.C. Barnes for Permission to Explore the Country to the North-East of the Assam Frontier', Foreign Department, Secret-E, August 1907, Nos. 358-359. [NAI]

plateau in the long run would have been detrimental in terms of India's ungoverned and [most dangerously] undefined boundaries along with in the Assam frontiers, for geographical, commercial or territorial contingencies.

Scramble for the Roof of the World

The years between Ottley's proposal and Noel Williamson's unfortunate encounter with the Abors in 1911 were marked by a growing unease and uncertainty in British official circles in regard to augmenting contact with Tibet and the stability of Indo-Tibetan borderlands. Russia had stabilised its position in Central Asia, China had increased its involvement in Tibetan affairs, and the French were interested in making inroads into Eastern Tibet from their imperial possessions in South-East Asia. The issue of expanding trade networks into Tibet and neighbouring south-western China was thus gradually brought into a register of competing diplomatic manoeuvres.

In 1907, The Pioneer hinted that the on-going constructions of railways into Yunnan from British Burma and from French Indo-China were indicative of a contestation to gain an upper hand in neighbouring Sichuan, arguably the most prosperous of the Chinese provinces in the region.[239] This competing outlook is reflected in a visible change in British position towards French Missionaries in Tibet, in contrast to the times when Cooper interacted with them. The growing French influence in the region,

[239] Extract From The Pioneer dated May 10, 1907, in 'Application of Mr. H.C. Barnes for Permission to Explore the Country to the North-East of the Assam Frontier', Foreign Department, Secret-E, August 1907, Nos. 358-359. [NAI]

via the missionaries spreading across north of Burma to Batang, was increasingly being perceived as an 'awkward obstacle' for future British interests.[240]

However, it was not the French but the Russian interests that increased the unease of British officials in India and London regarding Tibet. By the early twentieth century, Russia had positively established stronghold over its Central Asian and Siberian possessions. And although Tibet was separated from its territorial borders by Eastern Turkistan [Xinjiang] and Mongolia, to a large number of Buddhist Russian [Buryats, Kalmyks and Tuvans] subjects Lhasa had remained a spiritual nucleus. The clandestine undertakings of a Dorzieff, a Buryat Mongol from the shores of Lake Baikal, and a subject of Russia, were viewed with apprehension from the British Indian quarters. A Buddhist by birth, Dorzieff had spent twenty years in Russia and had met the Russian emperor at Yalta in 1900, carrying a letter to him from the Dalai Lama. The Russian officials denied any official or diplomatic nature to the visit, and said that it was only a group sent by the Lama to his spiritual subjects in Russia. But this gesture of the Dalai Lama, when juxtaposed against his refusal to receive any forms of communication from the Viceroy of India at the same time heightened the paranoia in India.[241]

Russian geographers and officials had displayed a similar interest in Tibet like their British counterparts. Russian Geographical Society had met Dorzieff during his visit and displayed tremendous interest in regard to the information he brought about

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[240] Notes in the Finance Department, dated May 15, 1907, in 'Application of Mr. H.C. Barnes for Permission to Explore the Country to the North-East of the Assam Frontier', Foreign Department, Secret-E, August 1907, Nos. 358-359. [NAI]

[241] Younghusband, *India and Tibet.*

Lhasa.[242] So far Russian geographers had been unable to reach the Tibetan capital. In 1870, Nikolai Przeval'skii, a military officer posted in Central Asia had attempted to reach Lhasa from the north. He held a view that Russian political interests in Central Asia could be 'camouflaged' as scientific research to keep other imperial interests from interfering in the region. While unable to reach Lhasa, he was soon hailed as a national hero in his return to St. Petersburg two years later, for the information he brought regarding the unexplored tracts of land in Central Asia and Mongolia bordering North Tibet. Przeval'skii continued his explorations in the region in the next decade and in 1879 reached a place only 250 kms away from Lhasa. The explorer met an unfortunate end in 1888 while crossing the Tien Shan Mountain, in his final attempt to visit the Tibetan capital.[243]

But the template of exploration to Tibet he had established survived in the subsequent Russian journeys to the plateau. Following his death, his accomplices led by M. V. Pyevtsoff visited Chinese Turkistan. By crossing the high mountains which separates the deserts of the region from the Tibetan plateau, the party tried to enter Tibet. But their advance was abandoned due to an enormous blizzard.[244] Due to these failures, when Younghusband's group reached Lhasa, the developments were being closely observed by the Russians, and the fact that the expedition was accompanied by a military attaché did not help in any manner in ameliorating their anxiety.[245]

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[242] ibid: 68-69.

[243] Peter Waldron, "Przheval'skii, Asia and Empire," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 88, no. 1/2 (2010): 309–27.

[244] K. P. "Russian Expeditions in Tibet. I. M. V. Pyevtsoff's Expedition, 1889-1890." *The Geographical Journal* 9, no. 5 (1897): 546–55.

[245] Churchill, *The Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907:* 58-59.

The region between British and Russian territories in Asia; Afghanistan, Persia and Tibet had been a bone of contention throughout the Great Game that the two powers engaged in the nineteenth century. After a series of negotiations in the first decade of the next century, an agreement was reached regarding the region in 1907, commonly known as the Anglo-Russian Convention. For the purposes of the agreement, the cartographic extent of Tibet was defined by the British representatives as all the territories within the 'plenary and autonomous jurisdiction' of Tibetan officials. But this definition had to be dropped due to Russian opposition, and the territorial demarcations of the plateau remained ominously undefined. One of the suggestions that the British had put before signing the agreement was that the both parties would not send any scientific expeditions to Tibet for five years unless further political stability is reached in Central Asia. But the Russian Foreign Minister Izvolsky showed his displeasure regarding the proposal, insisting that the Russian endeavours to Tibet were of highly 'non-political' nature and any prohibition would have created strong repercussions within the powerful scientific lobby back home. But as the British were also not relenting, a compromise was reached by not including the prohibition of the expedition in the original text of the agreement, but by exchanging as a note at the time it was signed. The ban was also decreased from five to three years. A correspondence was also sent to China to abide by the clauses of the Convention, to which Chinese Government replied that it had been the conventional practice to not allow any foreigners in Tibet. With the signing, Tibet remained officially out of bound for British and Russian explorers till 1910. In addition, the Convention also admitted the suzerain right of China over Tibet and both the signatories agreed on not communicating with the Tibetans without the mediation of

China and, to respect Tibetan territorial integrity by not interfering in its internal affairs.[246]

But the attempt to curtail Russian ambitions inadvertently tweaked the circumstances in China's favour. China's suzerain rights over Tibet had taken a twist following the signing of the Convention, with the gradual consolidation of power by Lien and Wen, the authoritarian senior and junior Ambans [Official Resident] of Lhasa, vis-a-vis the Chinese Viceroy. The duo had side-lined the General Committee [Tibetan advisory council to the Viceroy] and brought more Chinese troops to Tibet. The General Committee send representatives from Lhasa to Calcutta. From there they sent a telegram to the Emperor of China requesting him to step in, accusing the Ambans of abusing their powers, desecrating Buddhist monasteries and killing monks.[247] However this policy of aggression was justified by Chao Erh Feng, the influential Chinese Commissioner of Defence, saying that due to its status of a 'dependency', China had more rights to use coercion in Tibet than Britain had in India or Japan had in Korea.[248]

However, sending troops to Lhasa from mainland China was not an effortless task. The high mountains and deep gorges towards the north and east of the plateau made military mobilisation a formidable achievement. The Chinese officials in Lhasa hence corresponded with the Nepalese government, to provide them military assistance across the Himalayas. At the same time, a message was also sent to the British

[246] ibid: 209-210.

[247] Extract from the London Times, dated January 14, 1910, in 'Action of the Chinese in Tibet. Flight of the Dalai Lama to India.' Foreign Department. Secret-E. March 1910. Nos. 385-510. [NAI]

[248] Extract from the North China Herald, dated January 28, 1910, in 'Action of the Chinese in Tibet. Flight of the Dalai Lama to India.', Foreign Department. Secret-E. March 1910. Nos. 385-510. [NAI]

Government via their resident minister in Peking, to allow the Chinese forces to cross over to Tibet via Indian Territory.[249] Secretary of State for India Lord John Morley saw this advance as a threat to the territorial stability in the Assam frontiers, and to the British influence over Bhutan and Nepal. To actively pursue any direct course of action vis-a-vis Tibet, the British had their hands tied due to the Convention. But at the same time the Dalai Lama's attitude towards India had been unpredictable, and any inactivity ran the hazard of being perceived in negative terms by the Tibetans. With all due considerations, Morley decided not to provide access to the Chinese forces.[250] But at the same time, orders were issued to reconsider the issue of Outer Lines in Assam-Tibet borders. The officers posted in the frontier had earlier been prohibited from making any modifications in the existing territorial demarcations. The issue was now reconsidered in the face of an advancing China.[251]

In view of the Chinese actions, there was an increasing clamour from Government of India to relax the norms of the Anglo-Russian Convention. Morley however said in reply to this demand that as the general British policy towards Tibet was to maintain its 'state of isolation', the norms of the convention could be relaxed only if a definite evidence could be presented that Tibetans have no objection to foreigners travelling in their country. The relaxation could not be made at the time, as the Government of India failed to produce any concrete evidence of that. But the clauses of the

[249] J. Manners-Smith, Resident in Nepal to S.H. Butler, Secretary to the GOI in the Foreign Department [Very Confidential], dated January 3, 1910, in 'Action of the Chinese in Tibet. Flight of the Dalai Lama to India.', Foreign Department, Secret-E, March 1910, Nos. 385-510. [NAI]

[250] The Viceroy to the Secretary of State for India, Telegram P., No. 41 C., dated November 22, 1909, in 'Action of the Chinese in Tibet. Flight of the Dalai Lama to India.' Foreign Department, Secret-E, March 1910, Nos. 385-510. [NAI]

[251] Notes in the Foreign Department, dated January 24, 1910, in 'Action of the Chinese in Tibet. Flight of the Dalai Lama to India.' Foreign Department, Secret-E. March 1910, Nos. 385-510. [NAI]

Convention had been increasingly proving to be detrimental to British interests. There was no way to stop Russian expeditions from entering Tibet from neutral territories such as Mongolia.[252] At the same time, the sparsely populated northern borders of Tibet had remained unwatched to check any Russian explorers, and the Russian Buddhist communities could unreservedly enter the plateau due to being provided exemption from the prohibition. [253]

In addition, the Convention also did not apply to European nationals other than British and Russian subjects. China had already allowed French Missionaries to travel in Chiamdo and Derge in Eastern Tibet.[254] As a result of these developments, Britain was unable to gather any direct information about Tibet; general, geographical or military vis-a-vis other powers. Referring to this disadvantage, A. H. Gordon, the Director of Military Operations in India remarked that maintaining this state of isolation would not only make China emerge as a stronger power but would also embolden Russian, and even Japanese influences over Tibet.[255] In the face of the mounting pressure, Morley suggested that at first the Russian should be asked for a

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[252] Telegram from Political Officer in Sikkim, No. 105-S., dated July 26, 1910, in 'Question of the extension of the period for which the British and Russian Governments undertook to prevent the entry of scientific expeditions into Tibet.' Foreign Department, Secret-E, December 1910, Nos. 749-768. [NAI]

[253] Notes by A. H. Gordon, in 'Question of the extension of the period for which the British and Russian Governments undertook to prevent the entry of scientific expeditions into Tibet.' Foreign Department, Secret-E, December 1910, Nos. 749-768. [NAI]

[254] Telegram from Political Officer in Sikkim, No. 105-S., dated July 26, 1910, in 'Question of the extension of the period for which the British and Russian Governments undertook to prevent the entry of scientific expeditions into Tibet.' Foreign Department, Secret-E, December 1910, Nos. 749-768. [NAI]

[255] Notes by A. H. Gordon, in 'Question of the extension of the period for which the British and Russian Governments undertook to prevent the entry of scientific expeditions into Tibet.' Foreign Department, Secret-E, December 1910, Nos. 749-768. [NAI]

further extension of the treaty, in such a way that both Russian and Chinese ambitions could be curtailed. If it cannot be achieved, then they should discuss whether Tibet could be opened for explorations before the expiry of the Convention.[256]

Minto, the Viceroy of India on the other hand believed that as other Europeans like Sven Hedin and the French Missionaries had already entered Tibet, there should not be any extension of the treaty. The British explorers should make attempts to enter Tibet, and if the Chinese oppose this, a blanket Frontier Crossing Regulation should be imposed over all Chinese subjects in entering Indian territory.[257] Although British Government decided not to allow any explorations before the expiry of the prohibition after three year, they admitted that it put Britain at certain disadvantage.[258]

Following the expiry of the article on prohibition in 1910, the geo-political ground had been set for British explorations to enter Tibet or India's undefined borders along with it in the northeast. With the wheels already set in motion, the death of Noel Williamson after only a year from this provided a definitive context and a legitimising device for imperial forays into the Abor and Mishmi Hills and South-East Tibet.

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[256] Telegram from Political Officer in Sikkim, No. 105-S., dated July 26, 1910, in 'Question of the extension of the period for which the British and Russian Governments undertook to prevent the entry of scientific expeditions into Tibet.' Foreign Department. Secret-E. December 1910, Nos. 749-768. [NAI]

[257] The Viceroy to The Secretary of State for India, Telegram P., No. 452-S., dated August 9, 1910, in 'Question of the extension of the period for which the British and Russian Governments undertook to prevent the entry of scientific expeditions into Tibet.' Foreign Department. Secret-E. December 1910, Nos. 749-768. [NAI]

[258] Edward Grey to O'Brien, no. 251, dated September 17, 1910, in 'Question of the extension of the period for which the British and Russian Governments undertook to prevent the entry of scientific expeditions into Tibet.' Foreign Department. Secret-E. December 1910, Nos. 749-768. [NAI]

In 1909, Williamson had reached the Abor village of Kebang on the Dihang, beyond the Outer Line. He was accompanied by Colonel D. M. Lumsden and Rev. L. W. B. Jackman of the American Mission at Sadiya. The party's intention was to reach the Rainbow Falls, but as the Abors villages beyond Kebang were engaged in certain conflict within themselves, the party had to turn back.[259] Emboldened by the cordial reception he had received in Kebang, the APO decided to visit the region again in 1911. By that time, many Abors of the Pasi and Minyong groups from beyond the Outer Line had settled in the land within the Inner and Outer Lines, and disagreement had proliferated between them and the Sadiya officials regarding revenue settlements. Williamson had decided to undertake a tour of these villages in 'ordinary course of business', to inform them that they must pay poll-tax to the government, as cultivating within the Outer Line brought them under British jurisdiction.[260] But later, the Government of the East Bengal and Assam also admitted that one of the intentions behind Williamson's tour was to deduce the 'extent of Tibetan influence' in the Abor Hills. The APO was also accompanied by Dr. Gregorson, a physician from a tea plantation near Tinsukia in Assam, Williamson's two servants, Gregorson's Tibetan servant, thirty-five coolies [mostly Gurkha] led by a sardar, an orderly, a Miri interpreter and three other Miri men.[261] Williamson had decided that no military guards were necessary for the party, judging from his previous tour in the region. But due to the disagreements over the Inner and Outer Lines, the relations with the Abors

[259] "Official Account of the Abor Expedition": 2.

[260] Foreign Department to the Foreign Secretary dated April 6, 1911, in 'Massacre of Mr N. Williamson, Assistant Political Officer, Sadiya, and party by Abors in the Pangee Hills.' Foreign Department, External-A. May 1911, Nos. 1-45. [NAI]

[261] The Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam (GOEBA), Revenue Department to the Foreign Department, Telegram, no. 403 P., dated the April 12, 1911, in 'Massacre of Mr N. Williamson, Assistant Political Officer, Sadiya, and party by Abors in the Pangee Hills.' Foreign Department, External-A, May 1911, Nos. 1-45. [NAI]

had been at an all-time low and the Miri Kotoki who could sense it wrote to his wife,'...Have arrived Pangighat. Hear Kebong [Kebang] Abors forbid going further, Saheb insists on going on... My impression is we shall never return."[262](sic)

While starting from Sadiya, the party assembled at Pasighat at the foothills on March 18 and reached the Abor village of Rotung two days later. In Rotung, Williamson accused some Abor men of stealing provisions from the party and told the villagers that the matter will be dealt with severity on his return. Apprehensive at the turn of events, the Abor men at Rotung convened a meeting, where many proposed that the APO should be killed. Paying no attention to these developments, Williamson moved towards the village of Komsing. On the way when three of his coolies became sick, he sent them back with a Miri men named Manpur, along with certain letters to be despatched to Sadiya. While passing through Rotung, Manpur started gloating that the letters contain orders to inflict punishment on the Abors. Growing suspicious, some men from Rotung followed Manpur's party and killed them when they stopped on their way for dinner. Soon the news of the murder was spread within the nearby Abor villages, and more Abor men gathered for further actions. On March 20, Dr. Gregorson was murdered while camping in the vicinity of Rotung, staying back to look after some coolies who had fallen sick. The next day, the news of the developments reached the Abors who had accompanied Williamson from Rotung to Komsing. However, they kept it undisclosed and ambushed Williamson when he was being given a tour of Komsing by the village chief. When pandemonium broke out

[262]The Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam, Revenue Department to The Foreign Department, Telegram, no. 414 P., dated the April 1, 1911, in 12th (received 13th) April 1911, in 'Massacre of Mr N. Williamson, Assistant Political Officer, Sadiya, and party by Abors in the Pangee Hills.' Foreign Department, External-A, May 1911, Nos. 1-45. [NAI]

after the APO's killing, his party of coolies and servants tried to escape, but apart from five men, all other met the same fate as Williamson.[263]

Apart from the killing of Lieutenant White by the Khamtis and the two French Missionaries by the Mishmis, this was an unprecedented and unforeseen occurrence of violence against Europeans in the Upper Brahmaputra Basin that brought the issue of the safety of the Sadiya frontiers to an all-time low. Hence, punitive measures were deemed as absolutely essential. The Lieutenant-Governor of East Bengal and Assam believed that,

> '...a well-equipped expedition must be sent into the Abor country at the beginning of the next cold weather with the object, not only to avenge the massacre of Mr Williamson, Dr Gregorson and their followers, but to prove to the Abors that they cannot oppose the British power and kill our subjects with impunity. Until this is done the country between the hills and the Brahmaputra will not be safe, and if no avenging column is sent, our prestige will fall among the hill tribes on this frontier..."[264]

Immediate rebuttal was considered as unfeasible as the terrain of the Abor country made it hazardous to advance with the small number of troops available in Sadiya, with no suitable transport and no guns to penetrate the stockades of the Abor villages.

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[263] "Official Account of the Abor Expedition": 15.

[264] Confidential Letter from the GOEBA, no, 197-C.G., dated the April 22, 1911, in 'Massacre of Mr N. Williamson, Assistant Political Officer, Sadiya, and party by Abors in the Pangee Hills.' Foreign Department, External-A, May 1911, Nos. 1-45. [NAI]

In addition, the rainy season had begun, and hence the government decided to wait till the dry winter to make plans for a full-fledged expedition.[265]

But the magnitude and the dimension of the proposed expedition was to be amplified by the increasing Chinese presence along the entire northern borders of Assam. In April 1911, D. H. Felce, a tea planter in the Darrang district of Assam heard rumours about the arrival of some strangers in the hills north of Darrang. These hills, with the Abors and Daphlas to the east and Bhutan to the West, were occupied by the Aka people. From an Assamese man named Jaduram Koch who was friendly with the Aka chief, Felce came to know that four men of pale complexions and black attires, with their hairs tied in pigtails [i.e. in the apparent Chinese stereotype] arrived in the Aka territory and asked for provisions.[266] While they wanted to stay there for ten days, the village in which they arrived convened a meeting and refused to comply. Felce believed that the men were from the Chinese Intelligence.[267]

Later in August, Bailey who was in Tibet at that time reported that the Chinese officials were being active in the Mishmi-Zayul borders as well. They had sent Tibetan emissaries to the Mishmis, with orders to visit the officials so that they can discuss the possibilities of the Mishmis submitting to China. When the initial message was disregarded, another order was sent with the hint that non-compliance would lead

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[265] Ibid.

[266] D. H. Felce to A. R. Giles, SP of Darrang district, dated June 20, 1911, in 'Abor Punitive Expedition. Policy and explorations on the North-East Frontier.' Foreign Department. Secret-E. October 1911, Nos. 749-768. [NAI]

[267] A. R. Giles, SP of Darrang district to H. M. Halliday, DC of Darrang district, no. 32, dated June 27, 1911 [confidential], in 'Abor Punitive Expedition. Policy and explorations on the North-East Frontier.' Foreign Department. Secret-E. October 1911, Nos. 749-768. [NAI]

to military actions. Bailey met two Mishmi men while coming back to Assam, who were on their way to visit the Chinese officials. He persuaded them to consult the officials at Sadiya before going to Zayul, to which they agreed and decided to visit Sadiya with him. But en route to Sadiya the men left him and he was unable to ascertain whether they met the Chinese officials or not. [268]

But the most alarming concerns came from Abor territory itself. When Government of India did not allow the Chinese troops to cross over to Lhasa by Indian territories, they were to be sent across the mountainous tract of Pomed, the 'largest tribal district' in Tibet, north of Abor and Mishmi hills and eastward from Gyala. However at that time Pomed was considered a turbulent territory due to recently resurfacing armed conflict between the Chinese troops and the local groups.[269] A rumour reached the British authorities from their resident minister in Peking that the Chinese troops sent to Pomed, which was very close to the Tsangpo, was to be diverted towards the Abor territories. The minister reiterated that before China could gain an upper hand in the ungoverned Abor regions, a British expedition should be sent there as soon as possible.[270] The Ambans of Lhasa had already included a large portion of the Abor

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[268][Extract from a letter] F. M. Bailey to the Secretary to the GOI in the Foreign Department, no. 3 dated August 8, 1911, in 'Abor Punitive Expedition. Policy and explorations on the North-East Frontier.' Foreign Department. Secret-E. October 1911, Nos. 749-768. [NAI]

[269] Memorial by Lien Yu, Resident in Tibet to Sir Edward Grey, dated July 14, 1911, in 'Chinese action in Tibet. Despatch of a Chinese force down the Dihang river towards the Abor country. Situation in the Poyul Country. Measures taken by the Chinese to subdue the tribes in the Pomi region.' Foreign Department, Secret E. September 1911, Nos. 159-197. [NAI]

[270] Notes by E. H. S. Clarke, dated September 4, 1911, in 'Chinese action in Tibet. Despatch of a Chinese force down the Dihang river towards the Abor country. Situation in the Poyul Country. Measures taken by the Chinese to subdue the tribes in the Pomi region.' Foreign Department, Secret E. September 1911, Nos. 159-197. [NAI]

territories in their definition of Pomed.[271] If Chinese troops had followed this definition, then they would have had a legitimising ground to enter the Abor village, as their orders were applicable to entire Pomed.

Considering these reports of Chinese advances, the Government of India decided that gathering pertinent information of the ungoverned mountainous tract north of Assam, extending from Bhutan borders in the west to Upper Burma in the east was immensely crucial to negotiate any future territorial demarcations vis-a-vis China. Settlement of a external territorial demarcation, with a 'safe' distance from the region where direct British jurisdiction prevails was crucial. The districts at the foothills of these mountains, in the plains of Upper Assam formed one of the highest revenue-producing regions in British India at that time, with a high concentration of European population and private capital. Thus for the ensuring the safety of British interests in the region, the question of the ungoverned and un-demarcated northern frontier must be settled. The Government of India decided that the only way to gauge the possibilities of such measures, it was necessary to exhaustively survey the entire northern mountain terrain. Thus, it was suggested that survey and explorations parties were to be sent with the punitive forces that were to go to the Abor territory by the end of 1911. These surveys would not only cover the Abor regions, but the neighbouring territories including the Mishmi hills, in order to resolve the question of 'whole' frontier in the north of Assam.[272] This was a crucial juncture in the historical geography of the Arunachal Himalayas, as the disaggregated geographies of the

[271] Despatch from the British Minister in Peking, dated July 25, 1911, in ‘Chinese action in Tibet. Despatch of a Chinese force down the Dihang river towards the Abor country. Situation in the Poyul Country. Measures taken by the Chinese to subdue the tribes in the Pomi region.’ Foreign Department, Secret E. September 1911, Nos. 159-197. [NAI]

[272] “Official Account of the Abor Expedition”: 3-4.

region were now moving towards empirical comprehension by surveys and towards the redistribution of the terra incognita into coherent cartographic units in the future demarcations.

When the official sanctions for the Abor punitive expeditions arrived in 1911, it included a diverse range of objectives; catering to the opportunities provided by the time and context in which the murders occurred. Along with the military actions in reparation for Williamson and Gregorson's murder, extensive surveys were to be undertaken in the region, in Abor hills on the banks of the Dihang, as well as in the neighbouring regions. While the focal point of the surveys was to identify the practicability for a specific India-Tibet boundary, they were also to make efforts to visit the Rainbow Falls if possible, and settle the still dubious identity of the Tsangpo-Brahmaputra on their way. If the parties were to encounter any Chinese officials they were to be engaged with respect. But if the rendezvous was outside the Tibetan limits, then they were to be turned back, by force if necessary.[273]

In the course of diverse empires and peoples coming in contact in the region, Williamson's murder and the subsequent course of actions is a crucial watershed in the political development of the Upper Brahmaputra Basin. Not only it provided a legitimising ground for the British Empire’s incursion into the Abor Hills, but at the same time it attempted to provide a cognitive totality to the frameworks in which the diverse explorations were performed in the region. First, it facilitated framing coherent geographical imaginations from the dispersed geographies of the Arunachal Himalayas by means of the extensive surveys. And second, it also attempted attaining

[273] Ibid: 17-18

a comprehensiveness in terms of the practices of explorations in the region as well. The manners in which the Upper Brahmaputra and its surrounding regions was known and conceptualised from the previous explorations operated in multiple conceptual registers of commercial, geo-political and of course geographical stipulations. The expedition's objectives attempted to reconcile these dispersed and diverse conceptualisations into one coherent plan of action.

Chapter IV
Colonial Violence and the Anglo-Abor War, 1911-1912

In nineteenth century, the Upper Brahmaputra Basin beyond the Outer Line was marked by fractured geographical imaginations and an absence of effectively delineated national and international boundaries. Colonial territorialities categorised the ungoverned landscape either in terms of ethnic denominations [Abor hills, Mishmis hills] or by identifiable cartographic markers [Dihang valley, Lohit valley etc.]. The diverse commercial, scientific and political registers of the empire where these territorialities were framed were saturated with unresolved questions about river's identities, possibilities of trade routes and about forms that imperial governance and geo-politics should adopt vis-a-vis the frontier. In the unsettled boundaries between these registers, these uncertainties reproduced the physical and discursive elusiveness of the terrain again and again.

Till the beginning of the twentieth century, the practices of explorations had established channels of communications with the Abors and Mishmis, had scoured the landscape with increasing coherence, and had conceptualised the Upper Brahmaputra Basin in the form of a geo-political and commercial transit zone. But the region's production in different discursive contexts of the empire had not fully translated into a formal administrative hold over it. Despite numerous attempts to open it, the gates of Tsangpo remained closed to the imperial agendas of commerce, science and geo-politics. But by the time Williamson was murdered, things were changing fast, both locally and globally. With the territorial aspirations of China looming over the north, the way practices of explorations would produce the Upper Brahmaputra Basin was to change as well. Shifting away from of the earlier forms of virtual non-interference,

the territories of the Basin now demanded more intense colonial engagements due to the geopolitical circumstances. And to curve out a British sphere of influence in the region, the landscape need to be known more exhaustively, the people need to be brought under regular imperial interactions and the ambiguities of territoriality and sovereignty prevailing in the region need to settled comprehensively.

The diverse range of objectives that the Abor expedition parties adopted, ranging from punitive actions, surveying the territories on the banks of Dihang and in addition, resolving the issue of Brahmaputra's identity; reflects this need for comprehensiveness in regard to the Upper Brahmaputra Basin. By sending military troops and surveyors to the very gates of the Tsangpo, it was an attempt to push open those gates, and find resolution to all the questions that the empire in general and practices of explorations in particular, ever had about the region. This chapter would argue that in functional terms, the Anglo-Abor War was not merely a punitive expedition, but was a larger imperial project that attempted to reconcile the diverse ranges of knowledge about the Upper Brahmaputra Basin produced in the commercial, geo-political and scientific registers of the practices of explorations. This was a necessary cognitive precondition for the act of drawing comprehensive cartographic borders on the region and subsequent division of the hitherto unenclosed territories into different national and international administrative units in the decades to follow.

Reconciling diverse modes of knowledge can be a violent act, and the Anglo-Abor War was no exception. Ned Blackhawk argues that violence is not only a historical subject but also a concept and a method to understand the unequal power structures of colonial encounters. In order to understand the changes brought over historical

landscapes by colonial incursions, shifting relations of violence may provide new ways of engaging with the histories of colonialism.[274] This chapter would argue that in order to attain a geographical control and comprehensiveness over the territory which would in the long run be beneficial for administrative purposes, the Abor expeditions operated in two forms of violent methods.

The first was in a physical form adopted by the military troops to subjugate the intransigent sections of the Abors; which was accompanied by large-scale casualties and destruction of Abor villages. The principal targets of the British punitive forces were the influential Abor village of Kebang, and the village of Komsing where Williamson's murder took place. The plan of the troops, with Major-General Hamilton Bower as the General Officer Commanding was to 'subjugate' all the Abor villages that provide any form of resistance in the troops' itinerary between the plains and these two villages.[275] Once most of the villages along the Dihang that were alleged to take part in the murder were brought under control, this was to pave way for safe and efficient functioning of the surveys and explorations.[276] The more subtle and more nuanced form of cartographic violence deployed by the surveys and its appendages measured and quantified the territories, and standardised a territorial idiom which was to be crucial in shaping how the Upper Brahmaputra Basin would be demarcated later.

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[274] Ned Blackhawk, *Violence Over the Land: Indian and empires in the early American west* (Harvard University press, 2008): 5-6.

[275] The force under Bower consisted of men from the 1st Battalion 2nd Gurkhas, 1st battalion 8th Gurkha Rifles, 32nd Sikh Pioneers, a company of Sappers and Miner, a Signal Company, the Lakhimpur Police Battalion and the Assam Valley Light Horse. (Shakespeare, 121)

[276] L. W. Shakespear, *History of Upper Assam, Upper Burmah and North-eastern Frontier*, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1914): 122.

The Art of Savage Warfare

The story of this violence began with more questions. Questions that were raised at the very helm of the British Empire, the Parliament in London itself. Till now, the Arunachal Himalaya's familiarity in the metropole was largely if not exclusively restricted to the scientific circles. But due to the widely publicised murder of a high-ranking official like Williamson and the prevailing geo-political circumstances at the Indo-Tibetan boundaries, the expeditions picked up an unforeseen political interest in London. Before the punitive expeditions were to be sent in the winter of 1911-12, Edwin Montagu, the Undersecretary of State for India was bombarded with questions in the Parliament.

In October of 1911, when the plans for the expeditions were being hatched, a number of parliamentarians directed a question to Montagu that if the Abor villages are willing to give up the alleged murderers of Williamson, what course of actions will be taken and whether the villages will be spared from any forms of collective punishment by the expeditionary troops. John Morley, the Secretary of State for India was already expecting a question in those lines.[277] And he had already provided suggestions to Montagu regarding what can be an appropriate answer. Following Morley's suggestion, Montagu replied in a tactful and ambiguous manner that the matter will be resolved by officers in the field of action, who are to be trusted to act

[277] Secretary of State for India to the Viceroy, telegram P. dated October 27, 1911, in 'Abor Expedition. Policy and explorations on the North-East Frontier.' Foreign Department, Secret-E, December 1911, Nos. 7450-523. [NAI]

with 'justice and forbearance'.[278] These concerns in the parliament regarding the scale and magnitude of punitive actions, and the ambiguous response to these concerns by the officials in connection to British India provides one with a useful approach to understand how using violence as a tool of colonial engagement had to negotiate with different political contexts and how these negotiations were fundamental to its use [and abuse] in the Abor hills.

The recourse to violence, often indiscriminate, marks the trajectory of punitive expeditions in the colonial world. In regard to the Benin Expedition by the British Royal Marines in 1897, Ekpo Eyo has shown that its dimensions can be articulated only by the term 'sack', as indiscriminate killing by colonial forces was rather a standard than a deviance.[279] With the periodic occurrence of punitive actions in the nineteenth century, the Abors were not unaware of the scope and magnitude these may achieve. In 1893, three British Sepoys posted near the Dibang river were allegedly killed by some Abor men and their rifles were taken away. While a punitive measure was set in motion, the Chief Commissioner of Assam cautioned the troops to 'punish' only those villages that were believed to be guilty of the act. He added that unless the perpetrators of the crime are handed over by the villages themselves, there was no way to identify whether an entire village or only a few individuals within it were responsible. In those situations, he believed that the whole village must be held accountable. Similarly in 1899, when a group of Mishmis committed a murder in the

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[278] Secretary to GOI in the Foreign Department to the General Officer Commanding, Abor Expedition, telegram P. November 2, 1911, in 'Abor Expedition. Policy and explorations on the North-East Frontier.' Foreign Department, Secret-E, December 1911, Nos. 7450-523. [NAI]

[279] Ekpo Eyo, "The Dialectics of Definitions: 'Massacre' and 'Sack' in the History of the Punitive Expedition": 34–35.

foothills, the punitive party offered their 'punishment' by 'occupation and destruction' of the villages of the perpetrators.[280]

Thus the notion of collective reprimand was not unique to the Anglo-Abor Wars. However, in the commencing decades of the twentieth century, the rights that civilians and non-combatants should be granted during armed conflicts had morphed from a 'widely held moral principle' to a 'shared ethical norm', and indiscriminate violence had become increasingly difficult to legitimise in an international pedestal. Two international Conventions that took place in The Hague, in 1899 and in 1907, widely proliferated the notion of protecting non-combatants by the 'laws of humanity, and the requirements of public conscience'. Thus, following the conventions, violence in any political conflict was deemed as legitimate if they occur *only* between parties that recognise each other as 'belligerent'.[281]

But despite these newly proliferating notions, once the expeditionary forces entered the Dihang basin and proceeded northwards in the Abor hills to Kebang, widespread violence became a pervasive phenomenon. During one instance, in a village called Ledum near the Dihang, a military contingent encountered a group of Abor men by a cultivated area on the hillside. Without ascertaining whether they are belligerent or not, the troops started open firing at the group, who disappeared to the jungles in the vicinity to escape from it. When assault over individuals was not possible, violence was curved over the Abors' means of subsistence. As conventionally the Jhum fields

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[280] Robert Reid, *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam from 1883-1941* (Delhi: Eastern Publishing House, 1983): 193-207.

[281] Alex J. Bellamy, "Massacres and Morality: Mass Killing in an Age of Civilian Immunity," *Human Rights Quarterly,* Volume 34, no. Number 4 (November 2012): 937-939.

of the Abors were situated at a distance from their settlements, destruction of crops or debarring access to the fields created a shortage of food supplies for them. In anticipation of such moves, many Abor villages had burnt their crops themselves and deserted their villages before the arrival of the troops. After reaching there, the troops often burnt down the villages completely. After a series of such destructions, a certain control was achieved over the region following the fall of Kebang, which was held as instrumental in Williamson's murder. But even after that, the acts of destroying grains and supplies in the vicinity continued. As the conventional belief was that Abors carry only seven days of supply with them while travelling, it was intended to create difficulties for those hiding in the jungles and had not surrendered yet. [282]

Powell Millington, a British officer in charge of the Lines of Communications during the expedition writes that the casualty that was caused among Abors was much more than it would have been 'safe' to mention in official records. This large magnitude of violence, he writes, disturbed the Assamese boatmen who had accompanied the troops to a great extent and many of them expressed a keen desire to return to the safety of their homes in the plains.[283]

The issue that appears here is that if the amount of violence in the expeditions surpassed any prevalent acceptable standards, then how its legitimisation was conducted vis-a-vis the aforementioned concerns in London and the international platforms? I would argue here that this was achieved by articulating and establishing a case of exceptionalism for the Abors and their habitats. By advancing this exceptionalism in official and military discourses, the conventional standards of non-

[282] "Official Account of the Abor Expedition": 41-87.

[283] Powell Millington, *On the Track of the Abor* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1912): 101-104.

combatant immunity and ethics of warfare were circumvented and legitimised as non-applicable to the Abors. The deployment of indiscriminate violence in the context of this region was deemed as necessary, to gain control over its intransigent population. On the other hand, gaining control would have provided a significant security for opening up the territory to surveys, which would ultimately inform how the landscape was to be controlled.

Alex J. Belammy argues that the growing international concern for the protection of non-combatants was rarely extended to the 'uncivilised' non-European societies, where the pretext of their race created a 'permissive normative environment' for unrestricted colonial violence in the nineteenth century. In fact, the British Manual of Military Law, published only two years after the Anglo-Abor Wars, reiterated this position that International Laws in terms of ethics to be practiced in warfare are applicable only when the conflict is between two 'civilised' nations and are not germane to any 'tribes'. [284]

In the Abor hills, by invoking a 'savage' attribute of the people and landscape, the case for non-relevance of 'civilised' warfare norms was articulated. Before the expeditions commenced, Montagu assertively mentioned in the parliament that the punitive character of the expedition was necessary due to the savage nature of the Abors.[285]

[284] Bellamy, "Massacres and Morality: Mass Killing in an Age of Civilian Immunity": 938.

[285] Edwin Montagu to MacCullum Scott, dated 17 August 1911, Oral Answers to Questions, Common Sittings, British Parliament Records.
<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1911/aug/17/expeditionagainstabors>

This, he elaborated, made negotiations with them an impossibility, and thus the only choice that appeared to be available was armed retaliation.[286]

The well-planned and well-publicised expedition had attracted the interest of the media. And a certain section of the media accentuated this trope of savagery. Percival Landon wrote that while the Abors are competent fighters in their jungles, they are almost 'entirely barbarous' in nature. He believed that it was preposterous that a 'few thousands of almost naked savages' had been able to stand in opposition to the Government of India.[287]

Thus, a discursive environment was created in the public and political culture of India and the metropole during and before the wars, legitimising the need to deploy violence and particular forms of warfare against the savage people. In the military discourse of British India, the concept of 'savage warfare' had already been perfected to some extent during the conflicts against the 'tribes' of the North West Frontier. T. R. Moreman has illustrated that this unique form of military tactic at the territorial margins was variedly known as tribal warfare, mountain warfare, trans-border warfare, frontier warfare and from 1880s onwards as 'savage warfare'.[288] In the military discourse of India, this necessity behind developing a specific form of military tactic was articulated as stemming from the unfamiliar terrain and

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[286] Edwin Montagu to Keir Hardie,, dated 17 August 1911, Oral Answers to Questions, Common Sittings, British Parliament Records.
<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1911/aug/17/expeditionagainstabors>
S5CV0029P0_19110817_HOC_119

[287] Percival Landon, “India and the Abors: No Man’s Land,” *Times of India*, August 19, 1911, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

[288] T.R. Moreman, *The Army in India and the Development of Frontier Warfare, 1849-1947*, Studies in Military and Strategic History (New York: St Martin’s Press INC., 1998): xxii-xvii.

unpredictable modes of combat of the inhabitants in the frontier regions. The 1892 edition of the *Infantry Drill* officially recognised the term as a 'class of operation against tribesmen' in the various margins of the empire. [289]

In his account, Powell Millington justifies this rhetoric of necessity in regard to the practices of warfare adopted against the Abors. He warns his readers that while many of them might find these practices of the expeditionary troops to be extremely violent, it was also necessary because the British Empire was a heterogeneous space. A space as diverse as this cannot be secured by uniform standards of war; or by what he terms as a 'catholic' perspective in regard to warfare.[290]

Millington argues in his account that a certain vanity existed among his contemporary European military strategists and civilians that only the forms of warfare practiced in European topography is La Grande Guerre, i.e. superior and those in the colonial worlds were only 'small wars'. Fighting the savage armed with rudimentary weapons, as he grudgingly states, was considered the lowest in this 'social scale of warfare'. [291] A section of the media in fact deployed this taxonomy of warfare to legitimise the necessity of a tailored form of violence for the expeditions. A newspaper report advocated the use of violence against the Abors by citing that officers and soldiers in these kinds of marginal wars endure a life away from the luxuries that civilisation offers, a life devoid of stimulation and also devoid of the usual 'glamour' associated with the military. Thus soldiers are often prone to adopt a cautionary approach in

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[289] Ibid: xvii.

[290] Millington, *On the Track of the Abor*: 99-100.

[291] ibid.

order to survive, which, the report emphasised, must be abandoned as during such wars nothing must be 'left to chance'.[292]

And not only the people, the landscape as well was packed with aspects that could enhance its apparent savagery. Angus Hamilton, one of the British officers posted with the troops, paints a macabre picture of the mountainous terrains-

> '...Deep snows capped the mountain crests; dense jungles blocked the way...Where there was no waste of upland snows the frowning faces of the distant mountains were seared with yellow where giant landslides had torn their monstrous way from icy pinnacle to jungle-covered base. Arctic snows; flooded jungles and raging torrents; avalanches of God; booby traps and poisoned arrows of Man! These things seem to set out a fairly arresting list of the unconsidered, yet perpetual difficulties which attended the daily progress of the troops!'[293]

As he mentions, resistance that the Abors and their habitat had provided to colonial troops with their 'rudimentary' weapons was increasingly proving to be difficult to contain. Instead of direct confrontations, Abor insurgents adopted a guerrilla-esque method of laying ambushes and preventing the advent of troops. Panjees were placed in the jungle paths by carefully covering them. Panjees were hardened piece of bamboo produced by placing them in hot ash and smearing them with [Aconite or

[292] "In Aborland: The Native as Cultivator," *Times of India*, November 21, 1911, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

[293] *In Abor Jungles:* 177.

Croton] poison. While they were able to penetrate only the softer boots of the sepoys; for the bare-footed Naga coolies who accompanied them, the results were often disastrous. The infection that resulted was often fatal, accompanied by violent convulsion and tetanus and a person afflicted had a very slim chance of surviving for more than six hours, if the required treatment was not provided immediately. [294] Even if the results were not fatal, then the immobility setting in the body of the victim would have provided logistical hindrances for the movement of the troops. [295]

Millington mentions that as a result of the methods deployed by the Abors to offer their resistance, the expeditionary troops had to resort to means that were not consistent with conventional forms of warfare,

> '…the tactics pursued, and the only tactics possible, were rather those of big-game hunting than of human warfare. To avoid a booby-trap by means of a flank attack was of course pure tactics of the dignified human sort, but apart from a few such human details, the main objects in fighting Abors were to take care that your quarry did not round on you unawares, but to stalk him yourself so closely and so cunningly that you got a good shot into him before he slunk away.'[296]

In addition, the way the people were mobilised for the expedition; the troops and the coollies, was also shaped by this regular production of the savagery. Along with large number of Gurkha soldiers, the expeditionary troops were also appended by Naga and

[294] ibid: 22-27

[295] "Official Account of the Abor Expedition": 177-186.

[296] Millington, *On the Track of the Abor*: 96.

Gurkha coolies in the courier corps. The chief reason for hiring these groups of people, as the official account mentions, was that they were 'more accustomed' to the landscape of the Abor territories, believed to be similar to their home terrains. Thus they were able to procure their victuals from the surrounding environment, unlike the groups such as Punjabis and this was deemed as a great logistical advantage.[297] The official account of the expedition mentions the Gurkhas as,

> '... [the Gurkha] is to a great extent a savage himself and remarkably well able to look after himself in the jungle if he is encouraged to use his own initiative, and this instinct, coupled with the fact that he has been *trained to think*, makes him quite able to cope with almost any jungle man.'[298]

Amidst the production and deployment of this savagery, the military parts of the expedition paved way to safer passages of the surveys into the territory. The recalcitrant Abor villages were subjugated and the alleged perpetrators for Williamson's murder were arrested.[299] But to achieve a comprehensive geographical mastery over the region for the empire, surveys and explorations were unleashed in the Dihang basin, and with this, the violence of the punitive actions was translated into a form of cartographic violence that attempted to measure and define the savage landscape, in order to articulate and assert control over it.

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[297] "Official Account of the Abor Expedition": 133-177

[298] ibid: 33-34.

[299] ibid: 69.

Where Do We Draw the Lines?

While the discursive atmosphere had made the usage of physical violence permissible, it also had to take into account the political repercussions of large-scale violence in the borderlands. With the pervasive Chinese presence in the north, there was always certain susceptibility that Chinese officials would seize opportunities to make inroads into the Abor territories. And unwarranted use of force against the Abors had the possibility of further alienating them, and compelling them to cooperate with the Chinese; putting a check in curving a British sphere of influence in the region. Bower himself exhibited this concern,

'...take the next village on this bank [of Dihang], Ponging... It certainly had nothing to do with Williamson's murder... If I march there they will probably be either fight or burn their village and disappear. If I go on the eventual result will be to make the farther villages welcome the Chinese as likely to be of use to them against us.'[300]

But there was also a conflicting concern that any retreat of the British troops from the territory would be construed as a weakness by the Chinese. Considering this, claiming and consolidating British territorial hold over the mountains was increasingly deemed as a necessity in the official circles in India. Physical violence was not a viable or pragmatic option against the large groups of Abors who had not participated in any way in Williamson's murder. As a result of this dilemma, colonial violence as a means of maintaining control manifested in a softer but more pervasive and

[300] H. Bower, Commanding the Abor Expeditionary Force to Sir Charles Bayley, Lieutenant Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam, dated Yambung, the 11th December 1911, in 'Abor Expedition. Explorations and Policy on the North-East Frontier', Foreign Department, Secret-E, May 1912, Nos. 201-337 [NAI]

persuasive form of cartographic violence. I would show here that this process functioned in two distinct but interrelated modes of operation. The first was surveying the land and framing suitable proposals for boundary demarcations. And the second consisted of orienting the people who inhabit these ungoverned lands towards British sovereignty, in order to effectively legitimise the territorial demarcations vis-à-vis China in the future.

In 1911, when the proposal to send surveys along with the Abor expeditionary forces were being considered, the General Staff of the Army submitted a memorandum to the government. The memorandum strongly supported the need for such surveys, insisting that against the backdrop of the Chinese advances, knowing the mountains north of Assam was extremely crucial,

> '...A suitable military frontier should follow the principal watersheds and include on our side the tributaries of the lower Brahmaputra, the Lohit and the Irrawaddy river. A mountain chain is from every point of view the most advantageous strategically frontier... We are already precluded from obtaining the best military line on this part of the border; *the Tsangpo alone decides this point*. Besides this instance, the Chinese, by their effective occupation of Tibet, control many of the ranges and passes, and have established themselves at the head-waters of the several of the rivers which flow down into Assam. [301]

[301] Memorandum by General Staff Branch, in 'Abor Punitive Expedition. Policy and explorations on the North-East Frontier.' Foreign Department, Secret-E, October 1911, Nos. 749-768. [NAI]

The most visible allusion in the memorandum is the reference to rivers as signifiers for territoriality. Most of the previous explorations in the region, both official and unofficial, had used the courses of the rivers as itineraries. The surveys in the Abor expedition also followed the same approach. But unlike the earlier explorations, this was a massive effort backed by government machineries. Thus instead of following the course of one or the other river, the resources of the imperial administration allowed a comprehensive survey of the territory.

However the originally conceived plan for the expedition was to survey parts of only the Dihang where Abor villages were located and where the punitive action was concentrated. But the Army Department suggested the government that this opportunity should be utilised to explore the mountains in the vicinity of the Abor territories as well. The Army Department had been concerned about the appearance of Chinese emissaries throughout Arunachal Himalayas, in Aka, Abor and Mishmi territories. And hence, surveying the entire tract of land between Bhutan and Upper Burma was projected as a significant counter-weight to any Chinese designs.[302]

This was a watershed moment in the historical geography of the mountains, where the region was being invoked as a potentially continuous stretch of land. The political opinion in India and London were increasingly becoming vociferous in support of this consolidated imagination, instead of the disaggregated geographies of the previous century in order to identify a suitable boundary with Tibet. Thus, the Abor expedition's surveys were magnified and two more simultaneous surveys were added

[302] Endorsement by Army Department, no. 1383-B, dated July 28, 1911, in 'Abor Punitive Expedition. Policy and explorations on the North-East Frontier.' Foreign Department, Secret-E, October 1911, Nos. 749-768. [NAI]

to it. A mission was to be sent to the Mishmi Hills under the lead of W. C. M. Dundas, the newly appointed APO of Sadiya. The other party was to be sent to the basin of Subansiri, lying towards the west of the Dihang, a region populated by Daphlas and Hill Miris. The Sub-Divisional Officer of the adjacent North Lakhimpur sub-division of the Lakhimpur district was to lead this team.[303]

The Mishmi Mission was deemed as one of the most crucial undertakings throughout the Anglo-Abor Wars. The Chinese troops possessed a strong base in Rima, the principal town of Zayul Valley in Tibet that bordered these hills. Just before the Abor expeditions, reports reached Assam that officials from Rima had started providing Chinese passports to the Mishmis living in the undefined borders. The Mishmis at that time had asked the Government of East Bengal and Assam to provide them with firearms. But as the Government did not comply with their proposal, many of the chiefs were reportedly looking towards China as a source for procuring them.[304] The dubious state of Mishmi-British relations was further compounded when Chinese officials from Rima started erecting Chinese flags and boundary markers in the region. One of them was erected at a place called Menilkrai, as place well-outside the conventional Tibetan sphere of influence. [305]

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[303] The Secretary to GOEBA in the Revenue Department to the Foreign Secretary, telegram no 52-C.G. dated August 20, 1911, “Proposals for the punitive expedition against the Abors.” Foreign Department, External-A, August 1911, Nos. 5-17. [NAI]

[304] Reid, *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam*: 243.

[305] Endorsement from Army Department, no. 3728-1 (C.G.S.) dated September 21, 1911, in ‘Abor Punitive Expedition. Policy and explorations on the North-East Frontier.' Foreign Department, Secret-E, October 1911, Nos. 749-768. [NAI]

To sustain and nurture British interests among the Mishmis, the Mission sent to their territories on the banks of Lohit and Dibang was projected as a 'friendly' one, without any punitive intentions. The twin objectives of the Mission were to ascertain whether any possibilities of Mishmis allying with the intransigent Abors against the British exist, and to gather requisite information about the topography of the borderlands, so that an appropriate boundary could be determined in the future. The Government of East Bengal and Assam gave Dundas the power to place cairns and other boundary markers such as stones at places that he deems as potential boundary frameworks. In any negotiations with China in the future, these markers were believed to be of assistance in legitimising British positions.[306]

Due to the existing nature of relations with the Mishmis, the Mission was at first advised to adopt a cautionary approach. But by December of 1911, Chinese soldiers in Rima rose in revolt, killed their officers and started arson and looting. Grabbing the opportunity proliferating across the border, Dundas decided to survey the entire tract of Mishmi inhabited areas so that a complete topographical understanding could be reached. [307] After conducting his surveys, the APO found a spot north of Menilkrai to be the suitable boundary post between British and Chinese spheres of influences in the region. This decision was informed by an attempt to contain all the Mishmis within British zone of interests, as the spot was located between the last Mishmi village and the first Tibetan settlement one would encounter on the Lohit while travelling from Assam. Dundas reported that despite the recent turn of events, the Mishmis still consider themselves as British subjects by still referring to themselves

[306] Reid, *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam*: 225.

[307] E.H.S. Clarke, Deputy Secretary to the GOI in the Foreign Department to J. F. Grunning, Secretary to the GOEBA , Revenue and General Department, dated December 10, 1911,

as 'children of Maharani'; and hence all the Mishmi villages on the banks of Lohit should be included within British governance.[308] Agreeing to this proposal, the Secretary of State intimated that a boundary cairn should be posted at Menilkrai.[309]

However, due to the nature of virtually non-existent political control beyond the Outer Lines, tangible cartographic approximations such as cairns or boundary markers can neither be enforced nor be reified too easily. In that case, an designs over the territorial sovereignty of the Upper Brahmaputra Basin had to be intimated to the Abors and Mishmis. In fact, the survey part of the Abor expedition that operated in on the banks of Dihang had been dubbed as 'Political, Survey and Explorations'. The appendage of political was used because the surveys were used not only for measuring the territories, but also to inform the locals about the implications of measuring and demarcating the land; especially to those Abor groups who had remained neutral during the Wars and among whom the British had the best potential to make inroads. And at the same time, to effectively conduct the surveys, building cordial relationships with those tribes were crucial so that survey parties could pass through their territory unharmed. [310]

The surveys conducted in the Abor territories were led by A. Bentinck, the Political Officer appointed with the expeditionary troops. And interestingly, reminiscent of the

[308] W. C. M. Dundas, Political Officer in charge of Mishmi Mission, to the Secretary to the GOEBA, Revenue and General Department, No. 7, M.C., dated January 15, 1912, in 'Abor Expedition. Explorations and Policy on the North-East Frontier', Foreign Department, Secret-E, May 1912, Nos. 201-337 [NAI]

[309] Endorsement from the Army Department no. 3728-1 (C.G.S.) dated September 21, 1911, in 'Abor Punitive Expedition. Policy and explorations on the North-East Frontier.' Foreign Department, Secret-E, October 1911, Nos. 749-768. [NAI]

[310] "Official account of the Abor Expedition": 53

days of Needham, the surveys parties convened in regular durbars at 'friendly' Abor villages on their itinerary. The Abor chiefs from different villages were informed that from now onwards all of them would be able to conduct trade with the plains uninterruptedly and the British government will more actively engage in their affairs. It was intimated to them that the British authorities in India had no immediate territorial designs upon their territories. But at the same time, they were also told that in future they must look towards the British as a paramount power and an arbitrator in any form of inter-tribal conflict.[311]

However, it is crucial to keep in mind here that while the British administrative hold was strengthened over the Upper Brahmaputra Basin; the War did not immediately informed in any way in the settlement of the external boundary. In fact the surveys were conceived more in the form of curving a British sphere of influence in the region rather than creating distinct and objective frontier vis-à-vis China. The proposed policy that was suggested was to erect boundary cairn all along the Tibetan border identified in terms of the surveys and explorations. While this had the possibility to be the framework for a future demarcation for boundary, for the time being, the policy that was seemed as prudent was to keep a minimal governance in the territories that falls between this external frontier and the British territories of Assam.[312]

Instead of fixing any external coherent frontier for the British India, the surveys in a way informed the internal demarcation of the Arunachal Himalayas, which was now increasingly being imagined in terms of contiguous geo-physical landscape with the

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[311] "Official Account of the Abor Expedition": 64-70

[312] To the Secretary of State for India, no. 1054 of 1911, dated September 21 1911, in 'Abor Punitive Expedition. Policy and explorations on the North-East Frontier.' Foreign Department, Secret-E, October 1911, Nos. 749-768. [NAI]

future potentials to emerge as a political unit. Following the Abor, Mishmi and Miri surveys, and after the reconciliation of the topographical and political information, Bower suggested that there is a need to formalise administration in the entire mountainous tract by dividing it into three sections. The central section, as he proposed, would comprise of all the Abor territories, the eastern section would include the Mishmis and Khamtis, and the western section would extend from Subansiri to the borders of Bhutan.[313] The Viceroy of India agreed to this proposal.[314] In 1912, the eastern and central sections were joined to form the Sadiya Frontier Tract. It was devised as a distinct administrative entity from the plains and was placed under a Political Officer who was to be assisted by three APOs, and who was directly answerable to the Chief Commissioner of Assam. [315]

While the concern for an advancing China had created cartographic anxieties for the empire, the violence deployed in the Anglo-Abor Wars ensured the curtailment of that anxiety for the time being. In order to not unsettle the imperial grip that had been achieved over the region, territorial aggrandizement at a large scale had to be cautious in the Abor and Mishmi hills so that the British do not lose the advantage they had gained there. Thus, while set out to fix an external frontier in the hills, the surveys on the other hand worked in favour of establishing a stronger form of imperial governance in the region.

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[313] The General Officer Commanding, Abor Expeditionary Forces to the Secretary to the GOEBA , Revenue and General Department, no. 147 A., january 16 1912, for dept may 1912

[314] viceryo to Sec of State for India, Telegram P., march 7, 1912, for dept, may 1912

[315] 181

When the Abor expeditions had started, Member of Parliament Sir William Byles asked Montagu whether Indian laws are applicable in the Abor territories or not, as official maps show both the Abors and Mishmis to be beyond the 'external frontier' of India. And if they are not, under what pretext will the British Indian forces operate there? To this, Montagu replied that as the Indo-Tibetan boundaries have remain un-demarcated till then, no uniform certainty prevails regarding the status of the Abors, who, he insisted, do not comprise an 'independent country' but are 'independent' only because the Government of India has not expanded its reach there.[316]

Montagu's reply is noteworthy because it hints the possibilities that exist for an imperial state in its undefined peripheries. From the previous practices of explorations, it had often emerged that a porous border was prone to create a more vibrant discursive atmosphere for the empire than a closely regimented one. In fact, the possibilities of expanding towards the East and South-east Asia had insinuated that undefined borderlands were able to create more dynamic and diverse speculations and larger possibilities of territorial expansion for the empire. Thus the attempt to a reach cognitive comprehension in the Anglo-Abor Wars do not necessarily signify an attempt to either annex the territory or the define an objective border, but rather ensure that the empire's presence is pervasive in the border.

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[316] Edwin Montagu to William Bytes and Swift Macneill, dated November 14, 1911, Oral Answers to Questions, Common Sittings, British Parliament Records.
<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1911/aug/17/expeditionagainstabors>
S5CV0029P0_19110817_HOC_119

Conclusion

This work, as an exercise in historical geography, has attempted to show how territorial frontiers can be seen as zones of interaction and opportunities for states and people, instead of envisaging their construction as a linear process towards regimentation of mobility and objectification of territories. The very act of opening the gates of Tsangpo encompasses the processes that wanted to project and produce the Upper Brahmaputra Basin as a corridor of transmit between British India and other parts of neighbouring Asia to the north, east and south-east. And the mobility of the colonial ideas and institutions towards this space was facilitated by practices of explorations; practices that nurtured this desire for ‘opening’ the territory for almost a century. Passages in search of elusive rivers, seeking of routes for commerce and trying to curve out niches for different imperial agendas sustained this desire in different registers through the shifts and changes in the political climate.

In the first chapter, I have argued how the formation of geographical discourses orienting on the elusive identity Brahmaputra sustained a series of geographical explorations on the region. Framing the Brahmaputra and its landscape as a cartographic outlet to Tibet informed the conceptualisation of its basin as possible passage for the empire’s outreach towards its Asian neighbours from Assam. The production and consumption of the river and riverine landscape in empire’s information networks facilitated the spread of this discourse from the scientific to commercial and political registers.

In order to project the Upper Brahmaputra Basin as such a gateway, it was necessary for the empire to maintain a constant series of engagements with the local people and the terrain, and also to formulate patterns of affable relationships in the ungoverned territories. In the second chapter I have showed how the European explorers by their interactions with the people attempted to gain leverage over the communities and the landscapes of the Upper Brahmaputra Basin; in order to orient their political and social affiliations towards British India. This was crucial for the efficient functioning of the different imperial agendas that were conceived and were going to be conceived in and about the region.

The coalescing of these different agendas projected and produced the region as a political space where different and sometime competing interest groups; missionaries, administrators and business and commercial lobbies articulated their versions of how it could be transformed into a zone of access and interactions for commercial and geo-political purposes. The third chapter illustrates how this process was augmented by the competing political and territorial claims over neighbouring Tibet expressed by Britain, Russia, China and France; and what were the repercussions it created for the Upper Brahmaputra Basin across the undefined and un-demarcated borderlands.

The short concluding chapter is focused on the Anglo-Abor War. By treating the War as a project of attaining control and comprehension over the land and people of the Upper Brahmaputra Basin; I have illustrated that its diverse objectives in political and geographical fronts was an attempt to attain an exhaustive compilation of the different practices of explorations in the region that were performed in different registers of the empire. By the deployment of physical and cartographic violence, the War

proliferated certain idioms which were helpful in consolidating the disaggregated geographies of the Upper Brahmaputra Basin into somewhat coherent territorial forms in the future.

Since the Anglo-Abor Wars, the contentious historical trajectory of the Upper Brahmaputra Basin; starting from the demarcation of boundary between India and Tibet in 1914, the independence of India, and the Indo-Chinese War of 1962 had pushed the region into the realm of the periphery. Following the cartographic divide of its territories within three modern-nations states insisting on strict regimentation of mobility, its geographies have become disaggregated again. In 2016, Arunachal Pradesh passed through a series of political crises and in the meantime, Kalikho Pul became the Chief Minister. A section of the media projected and hailed him as the first individual from the Kaman Mishmi community to reach that position. Kamans, or the Mijus in terms of colonial records, were 'introduced' to the readers as a peripheral group in the multi-ethnic state, with a presence in both India and China. A little more than a century had passed since the unfortunate Williamson had declared the Mishmis to be vital for the empire's trade and since his successor Dundas had been overjoyed with their apparent assertion of being the 'children of Maharani'. And within that that timeframe, the 'great Asiatic highway' that was supposed to pass through the Kaman territory had seen the raising of one the most formidable territorial borders between two of the planet's largest populations; pushing Kamans to the cartographic and mental periphery of both.

What are the possibilities that are ahead for the region? Can the gates of Tsangpo be opened again? Have the traces of colonial territorialities remained embedded in the

vernacular geographies of the region? The questions are many, and not unexpectedly, they can be raised in different registers. As someone engaging with historical geography and explorations, the most pertinent one is to ask whether it is possible to write histories of landscapes as histories of movements and mobility. And what possibilities await for that history when movement is curtailed?

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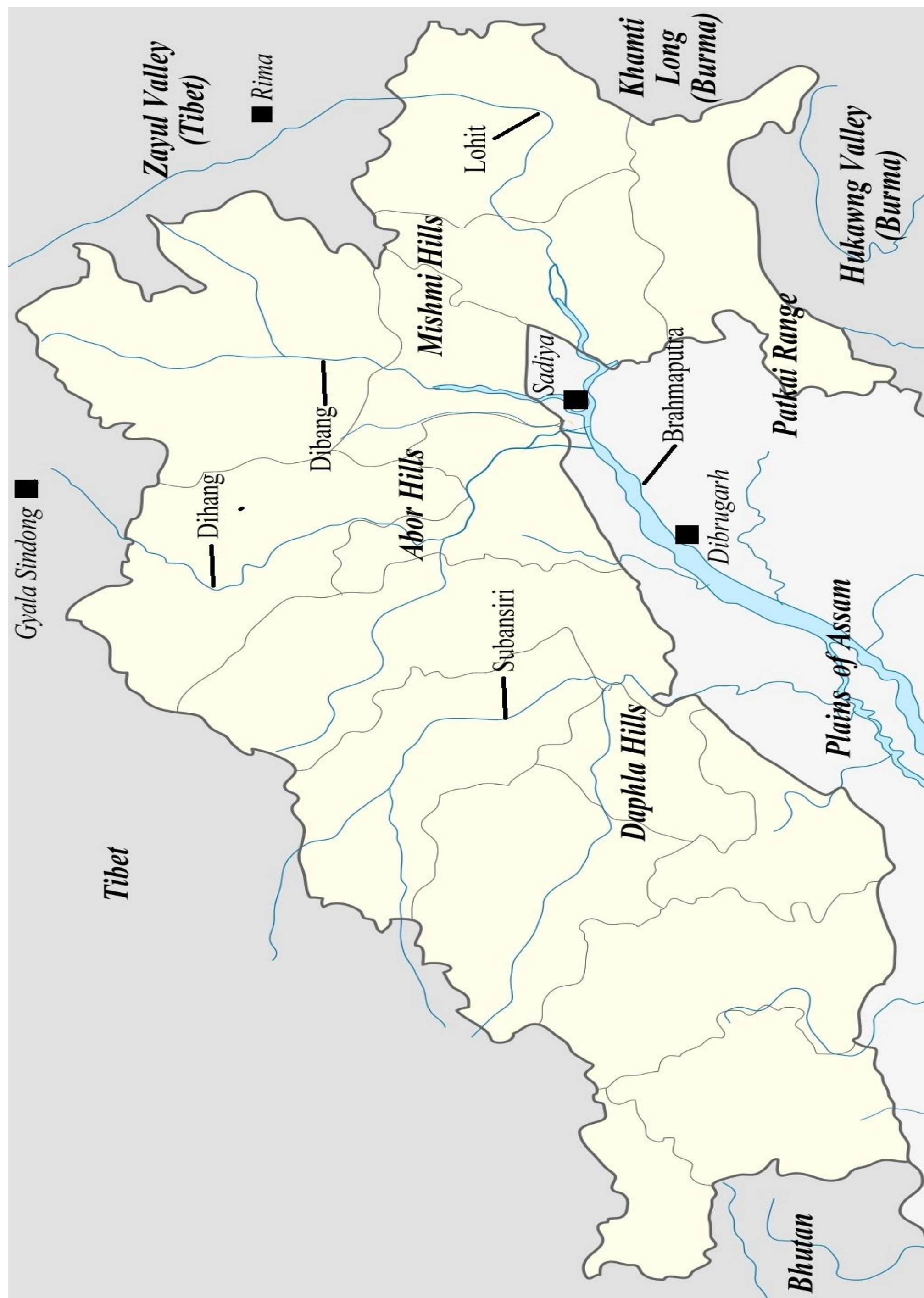
Maps



Map 1: Places and Rivers in the Upper Brahmaputra Basin

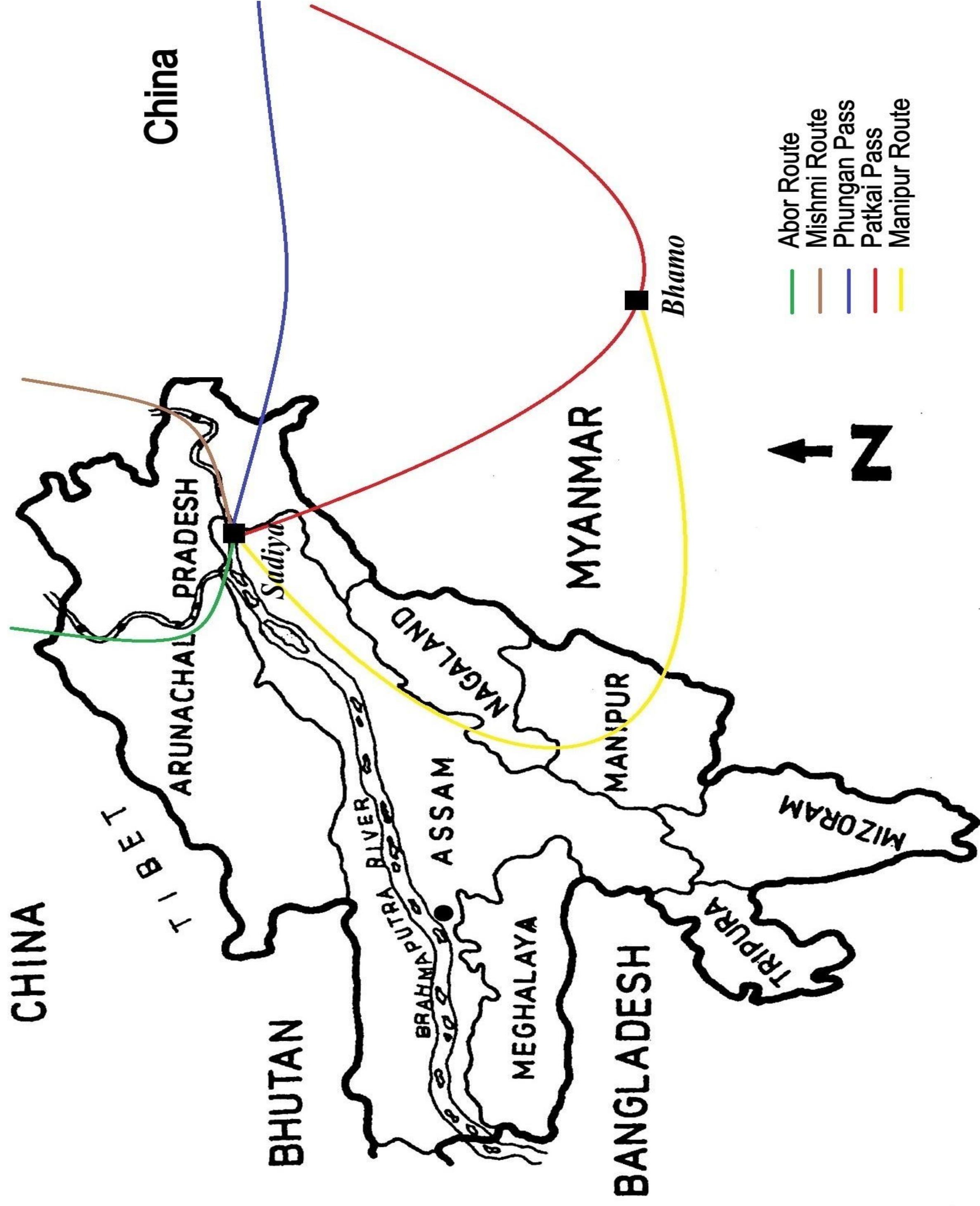
Map redrawn based on:

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/c/c4/India_Arunachal_Pradesh _location_map.svg/2000pxIndia_Arunachal_Pradesh_location_map.svg.png

Map 2: Major Ethnic Groups of Arunachal Himalayas

Map redrawn based on:

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/c/c4/India_Arunachal_Pradesh_location_map.svg/2000pxIndia_Arunachal_Pradesh_location_map.svg.png



Map 3: Potential Routes between Assam and China [Yunnan and Sichuan] proposed by McCosh[Map redrawn based on: http://www.ajtmh.org/content/69/5/555/F1.large.jpg]