

# Seeking China's Back Door: On English Handkerchiefs and Global Local Markets in the Early Nineteenth Century

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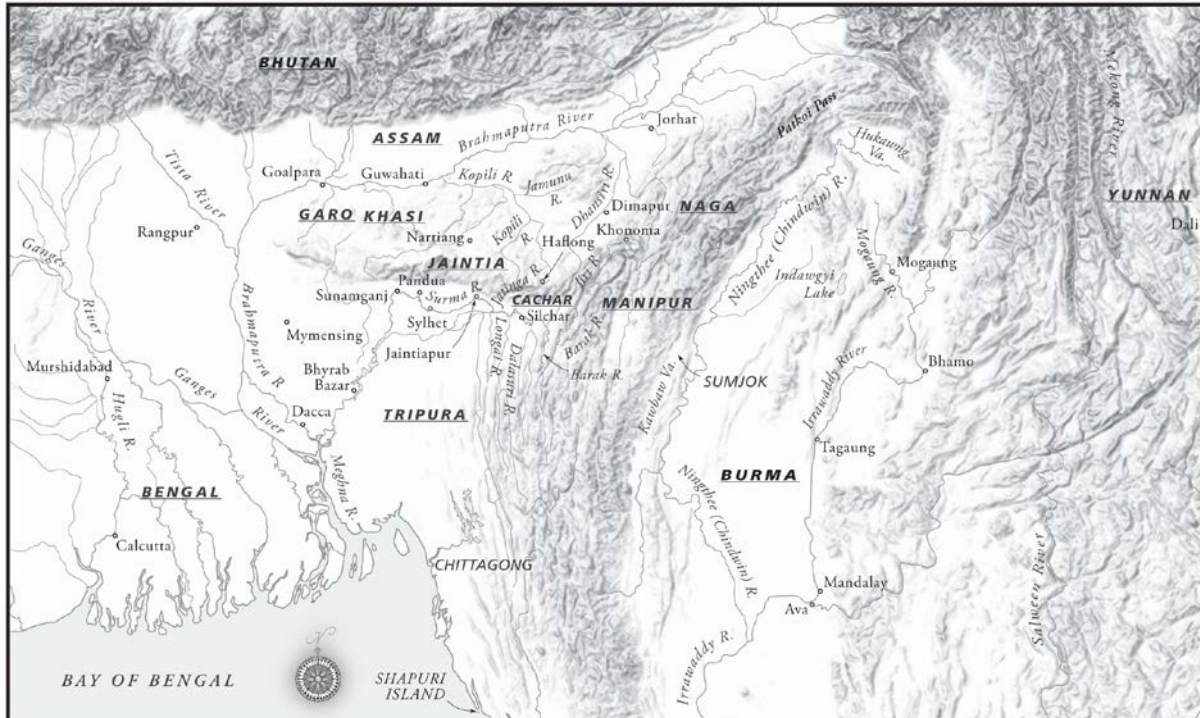


Figure I Overview of eastern Bengal, Burma, and part of Yunnan, including the British East India Company's North-Eastern Frontier (Drawn by Ian Faulkner, from Cederlöf, 2014:facing page i)

In 1836, an English officer on a mission to explore the markets along the Irrawaddy River in Burma made notes on valuable goods. One item in particular drew his attention: an English cotton handkerchief. As he travelled north on the river, he found the economy in poor shape. Most of the towns that he passed were hit by the post-war economy and by a conflict within the royal court, which was just about to erupt into civil war. The large war indemnity imposed after the war against the British East India Company (EIC) ten years earlier now threatened to empty the country's coffers. Nevertheless, the larger markets and key points on the arteries of commerce still served visitors with just about any commodity they could wish for. But the officer does not seem to have expected to find handkerchiefs from home.

J. G. Bayfield of the medical establishment of Madras headed one of the first of the EIC's expeditions in Burma. The final destination of his journey was the Patkai Bum Pass in the far north-west, where the Hukawng valley met upper Assam. Before returning to Rangoon, he had been ordered to determine the exact place of a boundary between Burma and the British territories. His report was largely dedicated, however, to the valuable trade along the routes from Yunnan in China to Assam and Bengal in India and it described an intricate web of connected routes, settlements, and market places. His information about events and places beyond those he passed was mainly based on hearsay and conversations along the way with fishermen, merchants, soldiers, governors, shopkeepers, and workers at mines and markets. At one point, he made a longer detour to find out the scale and value of work and production at a ruby mine; but he was soon back on his main path towards the Patkai Bum Pass. His narrative of travelling along a main commercial vein across Burma makes one think of a corridor with its

many connecting points, crossroads, and openings. He noticed meetings and transactions, negotiations and hierarchies. Even when his party had to cut its way through dense forest, closer to the pass—a form of travel that otherwise often resulted in reports on exotic, ‘jungly’ and impenetrable lands, they followed well-established routes where forest recently had covered the trails of troops and merchants routed for Assam.

In a larger perspective, these routes connected overland trade from the coastal ports of the Indian Ocean and the China Sea. Bayfield’s report reflected the economic instabilities of Burma, showing how Chinese merchandise overshadowed Burmese goods and Chinese merchants dominated both street life and commerce. It also made patently clear that Burmese control reached no further north than the town of Mogoung. The northern territories were largely under the control of the diverse Singpho/Jinghpaw society that stretched from uppermost Assam to Yunnan.<sup>1</sup>

What Bayfield encountered was a microcosm of commercial and imperial networks, spanning South and East Asia and the Indian Ocean. There is a rich corpus of historical research in the general field of overland long-distance trade between India and China. Earlier scholarship has made important contributions to our understanding of these millennium-old transregional connections from the perspective of the Chinese markets or their Indian counterparts. It has highlighted either medieval and early-modern politics and commerce, or British colonial conquest and modern imperial trade. This study is concerned with one of the connecting points and crossroads. It focuses on the early nineteenth century, when European mercantile commerce and British colonial military force simultaneously began to make inroads into upper Assam, easternmost Bengal, and the neighbouring kingdoms. British expeditions into north Burma had the added purpose of finding the overland routes to the markets of the Chinese Middle Empire. The study is explorative in its endeavour to establish the movement of mercantile commercial interests and capital into the territories that were part of the old south-west Silk Road network. It focuses on how, as British officers explored the natural resources and markets of these territories, they observed and handled the day-to-day transactions that made up social, political, and economic relations. It also discusses how the EIC introduced new boundaries into complex socio-political and ecological environments for the purpose of securing and mapping imperial visions.

With its emphasis on British colonial intentions and actions, the study is a contribution to our understanding of early contacts between mercantile and British colonial forces and indigenous polities and trade. It may be noted here how the temporal and spatial divides between the pre- to early-modern polities and colonial and modern forms of rule were not clear-cut. It is evident that the transformation of transregional interactions across time had few sharp edges; that one governing form did not simply replace another with the coming of British soldiers and merchants. As the European presence in the region increased, the different interests that drove mercantile commerce, colonial territorial politics, and imperial ambitions coincided and competed. The study argues that regional, colonial, and imperial politics were acted out in integrated and asymmetrical ways, in alliances and through military and fiscal policies, with one reinforcing the other.

Bayfield was far from the imperial centres as he travelled along the Irrawaddy in the 1830s. At every market place along the way, he made long lists of the goods on the stalls. Burmese goods were far outnumbered and generally outclassed by Chinese imports. The Chinese streets and houses were in much better shape than the Burmese, and a great deal of wealth flowed through the arteries of commerce. Most of the merchants from Yunnan and Sichuan, however, travelled on a small budget. They stayed in the country for a few months. In northern Mogoung, some 500–600 Chinese and Shan merchants stayed for two to three

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<sup>1</sup> National Archives of India, Survey of India, Memoirs, No. 111, Narrative of a journey from Ava.

months a year to barter needles, tinderboxes, and coarse jackets for the few necessities they needed to maintain themselves. Others travelled in parties of 50–60 men with valuable goods along a stretch of the route from Yunnan to Bengal. These merchants came from the fair at Bhamo near the Yunnan border to the Ningthee (now the Chindwin), near the foothills of Manipur. They sold velvet, woollens, gongs, and cooking pots, and returned with beeswax, elephant tusks, and cloth.<sup>2</sup>

In Bayfield's notes, however, English handkerchiefs and their price receive particular mention. For him, the price of handkerchiefs seems to have served as an indication of the exchange rate of the place. English piece goods were luxury items in the markets, and the price increased the further north he went. At Tagoung, adjacent to the ancient city of Pagan, English handkerchiefs cost 1¾ rupees per pair. At Bhamo, the most important market town, next only to Ava and Rangoon, they sold for two rupees per pair. Even further from the seaports, where two rivers joined the Irrawaddy and Bayfield was to turn north-west towards the border area – at Mogoung – the price reached three rupees per pair.<sup>3</sup>

These were old trade routes. Merchants had traded along the south-western branch of the Silk Road network for a millennium. Bayfield was travelling at a time of major political and economic transitions across the lands from Assam and Bengal to Yunnan. Global capital and British and Chinese imperial pressures were causing social and political divisions and upheavals in inner Burma. Here, the imperial politics of tea, jadeite, and opium were disrupting the fluid social landscape among Singpho/Jinghpaw communities, eventually, in 1843, provoking a united revolt. These transformations also saw European mercantile commerce crumble in the face of increasingly centralised state interventions. Private merchants for whom nationhood had mattered less than their own private enterprise in Asia, which was carried on within the security of a corporation, came up against European national interests and commercial priorities. However, global transitions also made their presence felt in subtle ways, as with the English handkerchiefs in the markets. When these cotton handkerchiefs appeared alongside silk gowns, rubies, quicksilver, and ivory, it was a sign of British imperial expansion that was far from smooth, linear, or unchallenged (Sadan 2013, 43, 75, 79-84).

### **Colonial greed assessing age-old routes**

Three years prior to Bayfield's journey, the EIC faced the beginning of the end of the corporation. Ever since it began expanding on Indian territory, from the mid eighteenth century onwards, the British Parliament and Crown had experienced a challenge from within. An early-modern corporation such as the British East India Company had its mandate from the Crown and Parliament and its existence depended on the passing of Charter Acts. However, in 1765, when the Great Mughal granted revenue rights in Bengal to the EIC – the *Diwani* grant – the corporation acquired political immunities in Indian territories that were larger than the British Isles. A sovereign sphere of such magnitude was unprecedented, and Parliament began to restrict the Company's operations. The most effective way was to remove the corporation's sovereign spheres, its monopolies. In 1813, most of these monopolies were annulled when the Charter Act was renewed, and in 1833 the last two sovereign spheres were done away with. These two were the most profitable and expansive global Asian trades of the time: the trade in tea and trade with China. We may conclude, then, that three years ahead of Bayfield's journey, the EIC had ceased to exist except in name and in bank papers, the British Crown having taken over the working of the Company and increased its hold on affairs in

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<sup>2</sup> Manipur State Archives, Misc. correspondence 1827, letter to C. Tucker Esquire, Commissioner, Sylhet, from I. Grant, Captain, Gumbheer Singh's levy, Mare, Kubbo Valley, 5.2.1827.

<sup>3</sup> National Archives of India, Survey of India, Memoirs, No. 111, Narrative of a journey from Ava, Diary, 28.12.1836, 8.1.1837, 19.1.1837.

Asia. In the early 1830s, India was the stronghold from which the British put pressure on the Chinese Empire and its markets (Mukherjee 2011, 134, 446-47, Cederlöf 2014, 215-16).

But for the merchants who traded within the EIC, it came as a blow when the Company lost control of the sea route to China. The timing here is important. This was precisely when the first tea plants from Assam were registered and acknowledged in England and mercantile-generated trade began to give way to the global capital of the early joint-stock tea companies. It was also when the EIC sent officers like Bayfield to explore the natural resources, markets, and goods along the Irrawaddy. When heavy-handed colonial commercial and security policies were enforced in chaotic post-war upper Assam, they played a part in reversing westward migration flows in Burma and stalling economic development in Singpho/Jinghpaw society, as they were insensitive to complex social dynamics. The time when the sea routes were threatened was when the British first tried to secure the overland route to China. We should not infer a narrow causation, but we should acknowledge the correlation and the larger contexts (Guha 1977, 7, Sharma 2011, 30, Sadan 2013, 33-34, 73-77).

The overland routes are of old date and can be traced in various ways. One is to identify commercial networks via the means of payment, the coinage. The common currency used for smaller transactions was cowrie shells. They dominated from as early as the Chinese Tang period in the seventh century and were used from south-west and north-west China, across South and South-East Asia, to the Indian Ocean. Not until the eighteenth century did they begin to disappear from commercial use, and East Bengal was one of the regions where they persisted the longest.

Cowries had been used on the maritime Silk Road since the Tang dynasty, and they were employed in Yunnan from the ninth century onwards. It might be thought that they entered Yunnan from the commercial centres of the Chinese Empire. However, the historian Bin Yang concludes that the source of cowrie shells in Yunnan was most likely Bengal. And the route by which they entered into circulation was via the south-west Silk Road. Little wonder, then, that there was such great interest among merchants in trading along the Brahmaputra and the Surma-Barak in East Bengal, and in the markets along the Irrawaddy. These were age-old highways for globally valued goods (Yang 2012, 131-135, Deyell 1990, Cederlöf 2009, 518).

The historian David Ludden has brought the analysis of global networks into the perspective of regional historical change, especially in East Bengal and the Sylhet region on the Surma River. Taking in a wide range of factors, he identifies how mobility and territoriality interacted: ecological, religious, demographic, economic, and political. In his analysis, the natural environment of Sylhet defines more than general preconditions for human activity. His view is not deterministic, but he allows for dramatic natural events to have a significant impact on our understanding of social and economic life across centuries. He shows, for example, how severe floods in the late eighteenth century influenced migration patterns, land control, and violent conflict.

Until the early nineteenth century, there were no large markets or significant European investments in the Surma basin. Yet markets thrived through innumerable small transactions in specialised trades. As early as 1790, Sylhet district had more than 600 place names indicating a market – a *hat*, *ganj*, or *bazaar*. Goods were traded from Burma to Dhaka, and from Tibet and Bhutan via Rangpur to the port cities in the delta. Large numbers of products were sold at markets in the small polities of the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo Hills. These goods, along with those from the kingdoms of Tripura, Cachar, and Manipur, were sold on to markets in the lowlands (Ludden 2003b, 5082-5083).

These were the markets that drew the European merchants deep into East Bengal, along the Surma and Barak rivers. In 1762, when Harry Verelst, the chief officer of the EIC at

Chittagong, formed an alliance with the raja of Manipur, two factors convinced him of the benefits of the agreement. Manipur was primarily a strong ally against Burma, which had begun to expand its realms. In addition, though, the Manipur raja Jai Singh convinced Verelst of the advantages of the alliance by pointing out the commercial rewards. Manipur was located in the mountain range separating the lowlands of Burma from those of Cachar and Bengal. One of the most important routes between India and China went via this kingdom. Jai Singh explained that Chinese merchants arrived at Manipur's eastern borders with valuable goods from China. As a result, in the agreement of 1762, the EIC secured a factory and free trade in Manipur, with the aim of gaining a stronghold on this trade route (Anonymous 1862, 121).

However, the agreement came to naught when Burmese troops invaded Manipur the following year without British troops coming to Manipur's aid. The kingdom remained under Burmese occupation until 1782, and when Burma was finally defeated by the EIC in 1826, Manipur had been invaded by Burmese troops five times. Needless to say, the branch of the south-west Silk Road that passed through the bottleneck of Manipur was severely affected (Cederlöf 2014, 62, Sinha 1987, 213, 223 n3).

In Bengal, east of the Brahmaputra River, territorial expansion was limited until late in the eighteenth century. The British, just like the Mughals before them, had great difficulty mastering the ecological and climatic conditions. It was hard and costly to move an army across wetlands and flooding rivers, and the EIC high command left further expansion to the company's merchants. From the 1790s onwards, the situation changed when the territories were brought under general land revenue. This was an attempt to gain a more systematic grip on East Bengal. The *Diwani* grant was conditional on land revenues being collected and justice administered according to Mughal law. The solution was a revenue settlement, which three years later was made part of the larger Permanent Settlement of Bengal (1793). As it turned out, it was a bureaucratic set-up that was out of sync with the climate and socio-economic organisation of the region. Whereas European merchant capital and investment remained profitable, the revenue administration was largely unsuccessful (Cederlöf 2014, Chapter 5).

To better understand such an uneven advance of the corporation and its merchants into a region over which they could claim authority by virtue of the Mughal grant, we may refer to a report by Francis Hamilton Buchanan. He was an experienced surveyor who was ordered to survey Bengal in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Buchanan concluded that East Bengal was 'naturally the most convenient for trade within itself of any country in the world; for its rivers divide into just a number of branches that the people have the convenience of water carriage to and from every principal [place]'. The monsoon and the swelling rivers were good for business. They were commercial highways. However, the same water was disastrous for the administration of land revenue. Erosion, siltation, and seasonal lakes did not go well with the fixed revenue classes that were introduced. When the five months of the annual monsoon had passed, during which time the lands were inundated, land that had been classified as 'cultivated' could have turned into a lake or 'waste' could have been brought under cultivation. But since the settlement was now permanent it was no longer possible to reclassify the land. Moreover, as we shall see, ecology and topography collided with colonial control (Ludden 2003a, 10, n56. Ludden cites 'An Unpublished Letter of Mr. Rennell' in Bengal Past and Present, September 1933, quoted in Chaudhuri (92: 36), Cederlöf 2009, 516-517).

Until crushed by EIC troops in what became known as the first Anglo-Burmese war, Burmese aggression was seen as a real threat to Bengal. Most of all, though, Burma blocked the China overland trade for the EIC. In 1817, with Burmese troops advancing into Assam, Felix Carey in service of the raja of Cachar, west of Manipur, wrote:

Since the Burmese have become a formidable nation, the principal part of the trade in Ivory, Wax, Lac, Silk, Cotton, Cutch, Mules, Horses, Copper, Tin, Lead, Zinc, Silver, Gold, Sapphire, and Rubies have been completely drained by that country and exported through that channel to Bengal and other parts of India whereas were a free trade opened through Kachar, in the course of a few years, the greatest part of it, if not the whole of this immense traffic rate, would be imported immediately into Bengal, certainly then it must follow that these important articles of commerce, might be procured at a much cheaper rate than what we now get them from the Burmans who dispose of these articles to our merchants from their different sea ports, at a very enormous profit. During the Muhamedan Government trade appears to have been carried on through these ports.<sup>4</sup>

The outcome of the war came as a shock to the Burmese monarchy. Decades of successful expansion by which Burmese troops had conquered territories towards Ayutthaya to the south, Yunnan to the east, and Assam and Manipur to the west were suddenly disrupted, and the Burmese economy was crushed. And within a few years of the Treaty of Yandabo being signed between Burma and the EIC in 1826, British surveyors and explorers were sent into Burma. Before the war, the EIC armies had been engaged elsewhere on the Indian subcontinent, leaving the British north-eastern frontiers in Asia to merchants and administrators with limited armed support. The war years changed the scene, as larger numbers of soldiers were brought into East Bengal, Assam, and Cachar. It was an empire that was seeking to close the gap between India and China. Inner borders were secured and officers were sent on missions to map the natural resources of Burma.

## Making and unmaking boundaries

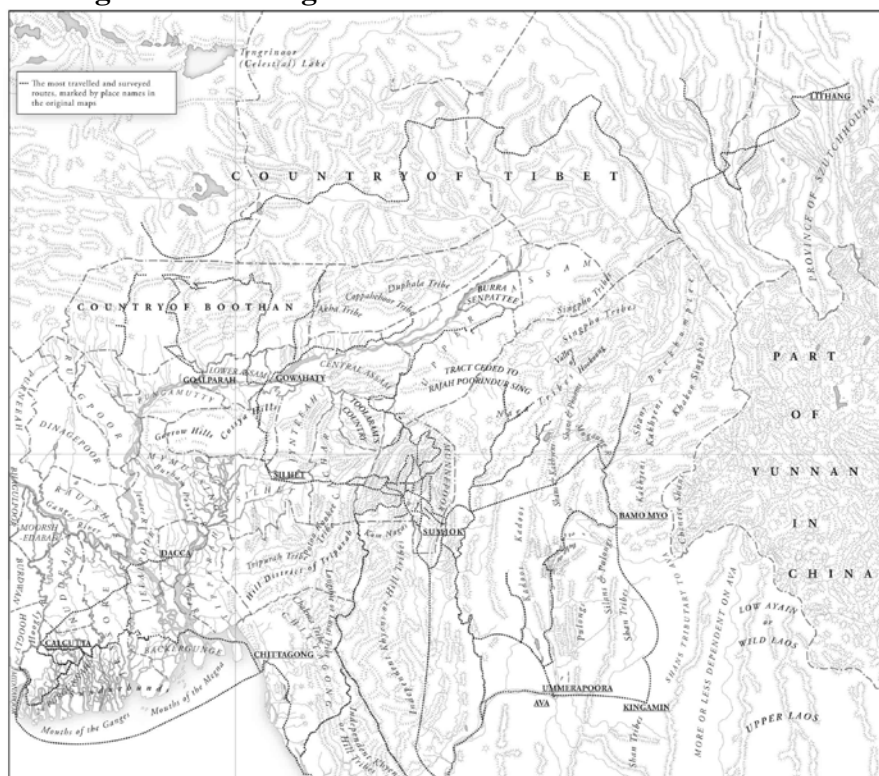


Figure II Pemberton 1838

<sup>4</sup> National Archives of India, FPP, 14.5.1832, No. 81, in Bhattacharjee (2000: 34–5).

As has often been stated: a map is not a depiction of reality, but an image of what someone wants to say about reality. It is the result of selection. After close to two decades of surveys of the eastern parts of the old *Diwani* territories and mapping routes external to these lands, a cartographic masterpiece was produced in 1838. Within it we can find the many small maps produced in each individual survey of a limited area. These surveys had by no means covered the entire area of the 1838 map. But with the many maps placed side by side, and the gaps between them coloured in, the cartographic image appeared all-inclusive, extending from Calcutta to Sichuan and Tibet to Laos. The central part of this image was Burma.

The map is impressive in its detail. Rivers meander and survey routes stretch across the sheet like ants' trails made up of place names. Bottlenecks on the trade routes, as in Manipur in the mountains, are densely covered by place-name trails. In this way, to borrow from Willem van Schendel, it shows a geography of flows—but of course only the flows that were known to the British and those in which they took a particular interest (van Schendel 2002, 662-664). Scale and detail vary in the image. Most of the routes had been mapped with the exactness of sextant observations, but the topographic details of the hill ranges were at best estimates and mostly a mere illustration of mountains. In 1838, the map expressed ambition and anticipation. Many copies of it were made. The one that is kept in the National Archives of India was done in watercolour. It was produced in one piece, but cut in two because of its large size. The copies kept in the British Library and the Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University, have been made to fit into the pages of an atlas. As a cartographic image, the map was an imperial vision. It encompassed the territories that were intended to become part of the Empire and were within its reach. It was a grand view, titled 'Map of the Eastern Frontier of British India, with the adjacent countries extending to Yunnan in China'.<sup>5</sup>

Being an idea of imperial geographies, it was inclusive. For the sake of security and trade, the borders that were drawn between political formations—kingdoms or other polities—were intended to harden if need be. Resident officers were placed next to rulers, to influence decisions. Administrative practices such as systems and forms for collecting taxes and fees were to have far reaching influences, which as a consequence could reshape a polity. But there was no immediate intention of meddling with state formations as such. This was an asymmetrical political space where many different political forms and polities operated. It resembles the multiple political centres and histories in Sara Shneiderman's work on the Himalayan massif (Shneiderman 2010, also discussed in the introduction to this volume).

The 1838 map encompassed a great variety of polities, and borders that were drawn on maps as this one must not be assumed to reflect hard realities. Some of these boundaries are exact and can be traced to survey reports, whereas others are indications of places where a border ought to be. By looking in detail at how maps were drawn and boundaries laid out on them, we can see the Empire claiming territory and fixing the conquered terrain.

In 1821, the Survey of India ordered Captain Thomas Fisher to survey the areas between the British Sylhet district and the kingdom of Tripura. This landscape is made up of a number of hill ranges running from south to north, like fingers pointing north, from the Tripura plateau to the lowlands of Sylhet district. The survey was to result in a geographically defined border between the two territories, presented in the form of a contract and a boundary

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<sup>5</sup> National Archives of India, Survey of India, Historical Maps, 'Map of the Eastern Frontier of British India with the adjacent countries extending to Yunnan in China'. Sterling Memorial Library, Map Department, Yale University, 'Map of the Eastern Frontier of British India with the adjacent countries extending to Yunnan in China. By Robert Boileau Pemberton, 44th Regt. N. I. British Library, Charts and Maps, Eastern Frontier of British India, by Capt. Pemberton, and India Office Records and Private Papers, Oct 1838-Oct 1839, Payments made to Jean-Baptiste Tassin for preparing 100 copies of Captain Robert Boileau Pemberton's 'Map of the Eastern Frontier of British India' as well as 50 copies of his own 'Map of Afghanistan and the North Western Frontier'.



line on a map. However, notions of such borders were vague in this region. Territorial affinity and identification differed between polities and communities, and territoriality was constantly renegotiated. When EIC troops entered into the equation and claimed control of places that were of strategic importance, constant clashes followed. People who lived and worked on the fringes of such claims often ended up as the collateral damage of skirmishes and raids. While the Company sent soldiers into the lower hills to fight for customs points, the raja of Tripura invoked old agreements and drew attention to offences against his kingdom going back to when the Mughal governor infringed on its lands.<sup>6</sup>

Fisher had been ordered to identify a border with reference to ‘natural markers’ in the landscape. These could consist of a river or a hill range; they should be unchallenged and easy to defend. The border was expected to be ‘out there’ in nature, as an empirical fact to be found. But what Fisher considered ‘natural’ hardly coincided with notions of the natural among the people in the area surveyed.

The survey’s most important result was a map. It is detailed and shows two lines. One of them indicates the route Fisher and his party followed and the other the boundary line, clearly coloured in red ink in the document which he drew up. He began his journey in Sylhet and followed the Surma River eastwards to the point where the Barak River bifurcates into the Surma and Kushiara. Here he turned south-west and continued downstream until he reached the westernmost valley of the hill ranges. From this point he began to walk into the valley towards the southern hills. And when he could go no further, he returned to the Kushiara and continued to zigzag into valley after valley until he got back to the Surma. Fisher never went into the densely forested parts of the valleys and never climbed a hill: ‘The hills as usual in India are covered with super abundant vegetation [...]’ (Cederlöf 2014, 56-57).

The claims of the raja of Tripura and the EIC collided dramatically. Both of them referred to law in support of their claims. Tripura wanted access to the Kushiara and its vital markets. The route by which they were reached followed the watercourses flowing from the hills. To align his claim with the idea of an outer border that encircled the kingdom, he therefore claimed the entire territory south of the Kushiara. He also argued that the land had been unlawfully taken by the Mughal ruler, a crime that should now be rectified. The EIC wanted to control all the cultivated land in the valleys and therefore pushed the boundary as far south as possible. They argued that these lands were within their contract as part of the Mughal *Diwani* grant.

Squeezed between the two were people who cut across such territorial claims, like the cotton growers who moved seasonally between the plains and the foothills, and the salt miners whose access to the sources of salt was now lost. However, for a cartographer, nature did not volunteer the distinct boundary markers that were required. Fisher complained: ‘[Tripura] unfortunately does not afford any continued natural boundary ... all the principal rivers and chains of hills running in a direction perpendicular to the line of frontier’ (Cederlöf 2014, 57-58).<sup>7</sup>

Yet his map does show a boundary line. As can be seen from the map, the two lines meet in only two places. With these two exceptions, Fisher and his party never set foot in the actual location of the boundary. The boundary is a fiction. Fisher explained how he solved the problem of unbending nature. He searched for watercourses. Once he reached the point where he could go no further, he aimed at random up the hillside to find a stream running into the valley. Then he found a stream coming down the other side of the valley and connected the two with a line on the map. And when he reached the top of the next valley, he searched for a

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<sup>6</sup> National Archives of India, Survey of India, Memoirs, Sylhet Frontier Survey, Thomas Fisher, 1821–25, 1. Memoir, south Sylhet and disputed areas between Sylhet and Tipperah, 1821–2.

<sup>7</sup> National Archives of India, Survey of India, Memoirs, Sylhet Frontier Survey, Thomas Fisher, 1821–25, 1. Memoir, south Sylhet and disputed areas between Sylhet and Tipperah, 1821–2, App. 1.



watercourse which could be connected on the map by a boundary line following the top of the hill range to the stream in the first valley. Watercourses counted as natural markers and, according to Fisher, they were the ‘most suitable for forming a nearly complete natural line of frontier’. This explains the jagged shape of the boundary. Fisher was convinced that the whole mission was futile. He doubted that this boundary would ever be respected or that there would be peace in the region until it was controlled by either Tripura or the EIC.<sup>8</sup>

The year before Fisher set off to survey the Tripura border area, the magistrate of Sylhet, J. Ewing, was ordered to survey the eastern limits of EIC territories in the lands bordering on the kingdom of Cachar. The matter was of urgency to the EIC. Burma had invaded Manipur and controlled the royal court. Four princes of the expelled royal family were competing with each other for lands west of Manipur, in Cachar, while the raja of Cachar had taken refuge in British territory. The Company’s assessment was that a distinct boundary between British territories and Cachar, one that could easily be fortified, would secure the Company’s possessions (Cederlöf 2014, 62-63).<sup>9</sup>

Ewing too was ordered to find a distinct natural marker and he chose the most strategic location on the large Barak River as his point of departure, the fortified hillock at Badarpur. The boundary was to continue from Badarpur south along the Daleshwari River, upstream into the valley. It was a broad, flat, and densely forested valley, and the river was a principal route for trade. However, Ewing needed to find clear evidence of a Mughal presence on the western side of the river, so that the land could be claimed as part of the *Diwani* grant. He was immediately opposed by people living in the valley and by the several rajas who claimed authority over Cachar. They argued that the river was not the outer limit of Cachar, but in fact the very centre of the southern part of the kingdom. The correct boundary should be drawn in the hills west of the valley. But for Ewing, military strategic considerations were more important than the socio-economic life of south Cachar. And he pressed ahead in search of evidence to prove his point.

He carefully noted the details of cultivation and land control as he made his way south, recording a mix of Cachari and EIC revenue settlement holdings. However, when he finally found a Mughal *sanad*, a land grant from 1732, this was enough for him to claim the territories west of the Daleshwari for the Company. The fact that the family who had held the grant had left the land as a result of poverty as early as the 1770s and that the forest had reclaimed it all was treated as irrelevant. The *sanad* was a legally valid document and Ewing immediately placed flags along the western bank of the river to confirm British authority.<sup>10</sup>

The borders that resulted from the Tripura and Cachar surveys reflect a situation in which the EIC was simultaneously trying to meet immediate and long-term needs. Both borders were put in place to solve an imminent crisis. Both emerged as equally temporary in nature, perhaps even accidental. Within four years of the border between Sylhet district and Cachar being determined, Cachar became the seat of war and, a few years later, it was annexed to the British territories. The boundary line now separated districts within the EIC polity. Once the war was over, the border was no longer important. It never separated Cacharis from other communities, as if they were different nations or ethnic groups. Empires are rarely disturbed by difference. Soon it was found to be altogether impractical. The British Empire, like any other, swallowed up diversity.

The border between Sylhet district and Tripura met with another fate, one that reinforced the border rather than weakened it. Seventeen years had passed since Fisher’s

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> West Bengal State Archives, Board of Judicial Criminal Proceedings, 10.2.1821, No. 7, To W. B. Bayley, Chief Secretary to Government, Fort William, from J. Ewing, Magistrate, 18.12.1820.

<sup>10</sup> West Bengal State Archives, Board of Judicial Criminal Proceedings, 10.2.1821, No. 7, To W. B. Bayley, Chief Secretary to Government, Fort William, from J. Ewing, Magistrate, 18.12.1820, paras 9-12.

survey of the border region of Tripura, without much attention having been given to the dispute over it, when Pemberton drafted his grand map of the Eastern Frontier. However, looking carefully at one of the drafts we can see a boundary line – Fisher’s boundary – that has been sketched onto the map. This was the boundary that had been drawn with no knowledge of the terrain, right across the lands and livelihoods of communities and the many trades. Nobody agreed to it at the time it was determined, and Fisher did not even believe it would survive the submission of his own report. But in this draft, the boundary has become a fact, and it was transferred to the final imperial map of 1838. In this way, it left a mark in a larger imperial imagination. The claim had turned into reality and, via the map, it remained the boundary between Tripura and the EIC Sylhet district.<sup>11</sup>

### **An empire closing in**

The European-authored reports from the travel routes and market places between Bengal and Yunnan reflected a large and interconnected region. The officers reported on diverse societies and on people who were constantly on the move. The authors specifically had eyes for the craftsmen, the workers, the miners, the salesmen, the moneylenders, the merchants, the royal representatives, and the many trades that served commerce at each individual place. They had a selective view which forms a bias in their reports. However, each of the men involved in a particular trade represented the social and communal life of which they were part. We may see also this in their texts. As Hildegard Diemberger discusses in detail in this volume, the network of a particular trade—books, in Diemberger’s study—tied a great variety of people and places together who were part of the production of books, from the source of paper and ink to the knowledge that went into the script. The European officers in our case also kept a note of communities and societies on the fringes of the trade routes, and especially of members of the many Singpho/Jinghpaw kinship groups who were seen as powerful and as potential allies. In the 1830s, however, the surveyors focused on commercial trade. Places were interconnected and mobility was high. As in a spider’s web, with its many points at which radial and spiral threads cross, individual places and peoples were connected in larger networks. There was not one, but many interconnected and overlapping webs. Some had a shorter range, while still involving a large number of crafts, like the links between sites of production and the *ghats* where goods were reloaded onto larger boats and shipped downstream towards the coastal ports. Others were global, like the old Armenian merchant network, tying London to Canton via India and the centre at New Julfa in Isfahan. Flows of people, goods, and skills were occasionally interrupted, diverted or, as in Manipur and at the Patkai Pass, blocked by violent conflict, occupation, and war. In the 1830s, the Company tried to tailor these pathways in their own favour by treaties and contracts. Borders were made and unmade; they hardened, softened, and shifted (Cederlöf 2014, 86, 165-68, Aslanian 2011, 1-2, 48-52. See also Chatterjee 2013, Yang 2004).

In that decade, when the officers of the EIC were reassessing the Company’s relative strength and planning its further advance, they anticipated an empire with a complete hold on the Asian trade. To achieve this, they aimed to control the switches and governing points in the commercial networks: the market places, the customs posts, and the elevated places for fortifications. Officers went in search of suitable hill paths, heights, and fording and landing places in the riverine system. Just as a spider controls its web, not by patrolling its outermost thread, but by controlling the points where the spiral threads cross the radials, the EIC aimed to command strategic points in the communication networks.

The British Empire in Asia was never a single force. Colonial expansion on the EIC’s North-Eastern Frontier was grew out of innumerable competing interests and depended on

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<sup>11</sup> Sterling Memorial Library Map department, Yale University, Manuscript map of Burma, by surveyors of the British Army, c. 1830.

equally uncountable daily transactions. Certainly, merchants in the mercantile corporations operating in Asia aggressively sought to fill their own coffers, with little concern for the human suffering they caused. But they were not of a single 'colonial' mind. They often allied themselves with local producers and governors for mutual benefit. They bent the law in their own favour, but were also badly cheated and put out of business. As a consequence, we need to rethink binary assumptions of agency and response. Regional polities, it is true, were heavily affected by external forces far beyond their control. Mandy Sadan's study of Singpho/Jinghpaw society shows in great detail how it was under pressure on all sides from Chinese, Burmese, and British colonial aggression (Sadan 2013). But the actions of these polities were no mere response to exogenous agency. Prior to European encroachment and throughout the conflicts of the early nineteenth century, there were cross-boundary alliances and regional tensions. Regional competition and conflicts found new arenas. This perspective does not reduce the asymmetries between global capital and regional economies or between the coloniser and the colonised. It is intended, rather, to help us better understand the complex workings of such unequal relations in the formation of the British Empire in Asia.

When Bayfield visited the markets of Burma in 1836 and observed English cotton handkerchiefs, he saw the signs of larger change that had also begun to have an effect on Burma. Cotton handkerchiefs may seem like innocent luxuries in a world of rubies and jade. But, more than most other items in the markets, they were an indication of global transformations. In the late eighteenth century, colonial politics in India 'poleaxed' the textile centres, the weavers' economies, and the production of cloth. By monopolistic means, market competition was replaced by a system in which Indian weavers were obliged to produce only for the British EIC. Simultaneously, they were squeezed out of the market by coercive economic methods. The age-old production of high-quality silk and cotton cloth, for which the European merchants had competed, was being replaced by exports of yarn, feeding the English textile industry. And by the time Bayfield travelled up the Irrawaddy, in the 1830s, the highly priced English cotton handkerchiefs had already reached the inland markets of Burma (Prakash 2002, 139, 148-152, Parathasarathi 2002, 203, 214-215, Bayly 2004, 58).

Yet linking Bengal to Yunnan was far more difficult than first anticipated. Felix Carey dreamt in 1817 of diverting the Chinese trade away from the Burmese rulers and into Cachar and Bengal. But even after the war, trade continued along the old routes, as Bayfield carefully observed. When war broke out again between British and Burmese forces in the 1850s, it effectively closed the trade routes to Yunnan and Sichuan. In 1868, long after the war, British officers still argued the benefits of an overland route to China. A. Bowers repeated old arguments in his report from an expedition to investigate the prospects of reopening the route from Bhamo to Yunnan:

When it is considered that of the 30 millions of people of the Yunan and Szechuen provinces, who have to send their goods some 1,200 to 1,500 miles before they reach any of our ports on the east, and that here in Bhamo the distance between the Irrawadi and the Yang tsee kiang is only 480 miles, and the actual distance between the Provincial Capital of Yunan and Bhamo, is only 230 miles, the advantages of having the route opened, must be apparent to everyone (Bowers 1869, 8).

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