

# 1 Borders

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By the early 1870s, some of the tea gardens that rendered the region the most heavily capitalised fringe of India had spread beyond the administered limits of Assam.<sup>1</sup> Inhabitants of the areas in question orchestrated a series of attacks on British-claimed territory. Having previously let the tea companies operate what Bodhisattva Kar terms ‘a vast, paralegal empire’ with fleeting oversight,<sup>2</sup> the Government of India now set a new boundary – the ‘Inner Line’ – beyond which its subjects required a licence to travel or settle. Despite its apparently straightforward rationale and decisive declaration, the Inner Line proved a fragmented border that varied across space and time.<sup>3</sup> The Government of Bengal, then in charge of the administration of Assam, considered that governmental intervention would continue beyond the Line in ‘indefinite fashion’.<sup>4</sup> Subordinate officials based in Assam initially assumed otherwise, understanding that the Line instead marked the outer limits of state authority.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the Commissioner of Assam remained sceptical of the possible effect of any bordering project in the vicinity of ‘wholly savage tribes’, fearing that the survey and demarcation parties necessary to lay down the border would be attacked. He continued to associate the Inner Line with a definite limit on governmental authority, which went against his desire to retain an indeterminate zone in which the state could deal with inhabitants ‘in the simple and summary manner applicable to their rude

<sup>1</sup> Bodhisattva Kar, ‘Nomadic Capital and Speculative Tribes: A Culture of Contracts in the Northeastern Frontier of British India’, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 53, 1 (2016), pp. 41–67, here pp. 42–43. See also Jayeeta Sharma, *Empire’s Garden: Assam and the Making of India* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Kar, ‘Nomadic Capital’, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal* (Calcutta: Home Department Press, 1884), pp. 55–56; Kar, ‘When Was the Postcolonial?’.

<sup>4</sup> National Archives of India (hereafter ‘NAI’) Foreign Department, Political Consultations (hereafter ‘Foreign Political’) A, December 1873, No. 42: Bengal Government to Assam Chief Commissioner, 29 October 1873, ff. 1–2.

<sup>5</sup> NAI Foreign Political A, April 1874, No. 269: Government of India to Assam Chief Commissioner, 2 April 1874, f. 2.

condition'.<sup>6</sup> At many points over the decades to come, the roles would be reversed: frontier officials in Assam repeatedly ventured beyond the Line without authorisation from distant – and generally displeased – superiors.<sup>7</sup> Mutable and conflicting definitions of what the Line meant, where it was, and its proper material manifestation persisted for as long as the British remained in India.<sup>8</sup> The toxic combination of variable borderlines and prejudicial notions of difference between hills and plains continues to manifest in violence at the fringes of Assam.<sup>9</sup> The Inner Line was, then, one of many bordering efforts at its hazy fringes that generated confusion rather than clarity for the British Indian state and people on the outskirts of its empire.

The complexities that marked colonial modernity were especially apparent in the processes by which British India's frontiers were spatially defined during the nineteenth century. Linear boundaries and unitary territory under singular sovereignty began to be asserted in this era as key distinguishing elements of modern states. Some scholars continue to assume that these more confident statements of intent regarding state space became an incontrovertible logic that was largely realised on the ground.<sup>10</sup> At first glance, the British Indian state appears to have been no exception. Especially in the metropole, a great deal of ink was spilled following Russian expansion into Central Asia in the mid-1860s debating if, where, how, and at what financial cost, a 'scientific frontier' that 'unites natural and strategic strength' might be implemented in India's northwest (a concept notably absent from discussions of the northeast).<sup>11</sup> Administrators often described bordering in India as part of the larger European attempt in the late nineteenth century, including most famously the 'Scramble for Africa', to configure global space

<sup>6</sup> NAI Foreign Political A, March 1876, No. 505: Assam Chief Commissioner to Government of India, 17 May 1875, f. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Bérénice Guyot-Rechard, *Shadow States: India, China and the Himalayas, 1910–1962* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 36–37.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 89–90.

<sup>9</sup> 'Behali Killings: Assam Registers Case Against 12', *Times of India*, 14 February 2014. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/Behali-killings-Assam-registers-cases-against-12/articleshow/30369083.cms> (accessed 10 March 2014).

<sup>10</sup> For example, Maier, 'Transformations'. For a classic counter-example, see Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> Quotation from Lord Curzon of Kedleston, *The Romanes Lecture 1907: Frontiers* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907), p. 19. See also W. P. Andrew, *Our Scientific Frontier* (London: W.H. Allen & Co., 1880); George N. Curzon, 'The "Scientific Frontier": an Accomplished Fact', *The Nineteenth Century: A Monthly Review*, 136 (1888), pp. 901–17; John Dacosta, *A Scientific Frontier: or, the Danger of a Russian Invasion of India* (London: W.H. Allen & Co., 1891); H. B. Hanna, *India's Scientific Frontier: Where Is It? What Is It?* (London, Westminster: Archibald Constable and Company, 1895). On these debates, see Bayly, *Taming*, pp. 252–9; Kyle Gardner, 'Moving Watersheds, Borderless Maps, and Imperial Geography in India's Northwestern Frontier', *The Historical Journal*, 62, 1 (2019), pp. 149–70.

‘scientifically’.<sup>12</sup> In fact, a vast gulf separated such confident global claims from the myriad localised practices of bordering, which indicate the precariousness and limitations of centralised control.<sup>13</sup> Christoph Bergmann is right to suggest that ‘confluent territories and overlapping sovereignties are key to understanding imperial frontiers’, with British colonial agents often obliged to ‘work with what and whom they [found] on the ground’.<sup>14</sup> The Inner Line was not unique – nor even unusual – among processes of bordering in the subcontinent in remaining piecemeal and provisional throughout and beyond the colonial period.<sup>15</sup>

As the case studies later in this chapter show, this was especially – and perhaps surprisingly – true of international boundaries (Sections 1.6 and 1.7). But setting definitive limits with other states was rarely the primary bordering concern of British India until the closing decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the universalising projects of imperial strategists were relatively insignificant in many of the bordering projects that made and remade India’s frontiers. Even as political imperatives at the imperial level became more clearly communicated to those on the ground in the later nineteenth century, lower-level officials and local communities continued to hold the key to the substantive realisation of these projects. Colonial agents worked on multiple and sometimes contradictory projects of internal variegation within the fluctuating areas over which the state claimed at least nominal sovereignty. Assumptions of clear, ‘natural’ limits to colonial rule that followed the annexations of Assam, Punjab, and Sind were quickly shown to be radically over-optimistic. Complex, often violent, interactions with frontier inhabitants intensified as tea cultivation spread rapidly in the northeast. While the northwest had no equivalent concentration of European capital, agricultural expansion undergirded by state-backed irrigation gave rise to similar, if more sporadic, pressures.<sup>17</sup> As a result, by the era of high empire frontiers in northeast and northwest became spaces of myriad mutable subdivisions.

<sup>12</sup> John Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-visioning World Politics*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 5–6; Curzon, *Frontiers*, pp. 51–4.

<sup>13</sup> On the importance of global spatial claims to high imperialism, see C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World: 1870–1914* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), ch. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Christoph Bergmann, ‘Confluent Territories and Overlapping Sovereignties: Britain’s Nineteenth-Century Indian Empire in the Kumaon Himalaya’, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 51 (2016), pp. 88–98, here pp. 91–92.

<sup>15</sup> On postcolonial manifestations, see Reece Jones, ‘Spaces of Refusal: Rethinking Sovereign Power and Resistance at the Border’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 102, 3 (2011), pp. 685–99.

<sup>16</sup> On British efforts in the 1870s to broker the northwestern boundary of Afghanistan with Russia, see Benjamin D. Hopkins, ‘The Bounds of Identity: The Goldsmid Mission and the Delineation of the Perso-Afghan Border in the Nineteenth Century’, *Journal of Global History*, 2 (2007), pp. 233–54.

<sup>17</sup> David Gilmartin, *Blood and Water: The Indus River Basin in Modern History* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015).

The general trend in bordering at the fringes of British India as the nineteenth century progressed was not the elimination of nebulous ‘frontiers’ in favour of precise ‘borders’.<sup>18</sup> Especially telling in this respect was the persistent lack of any clear-cut lexical distinction between the term for a peripheral zone and that for a linear boundary: into the twentieth century, ‘frontier’ commonly denoted both.

Slippages between areas and lines derived substantially from the tendency for officials in northeast and northwest India alike to be ambivalent towards imposing and maintaining fixed boundaries. These men may have been prepared to play their part in the cartographic-discursive fiction of fixed and precise imperial boundaries by drawing lines on maps in bold scarlet ink and drafting lengthy musings on the merits of different principles and material forms of bordering. When it came to making a border real – performing it in the territory instead of just depicting it on the map – officials could be as prone to subversion as the most resolutely state-opposing frontier communities.<sup>19</sup> As well as being inimical to the practices that sustained the livelihoods of many communities at the fringes of British India, clear and precise borders were equally misaligned with practices foundational to the ‘heroic’ identities of frontier officials. ‘Turbulent frontiers’ were to a significant extent products of the colonial state’s own agents breaking boundaries as well as making them.<sup>20</sup> The response of higher-ranking administrators in provincial governments, the Government of India, and the India Office to what I term ‘official subversion’ varied between vexation, acquiescence, and explicit approval. Although principles of spatial fixity and exactitude became more prominent as the nineteenth century progressed, in British India they served mainly to throw a veil over the reality of the colonial government’s preparedness to authorise – or at least inability to prevent – the indeterminacies generated in significant part by its own officials in outlying regions.

Recent literature in political geography on boundaries and territory emphasises that even the most apparently immutable spatial categories are best understood as processes that exist only through the interactions of various human and non-human agents.<sup>21</sup> As John Agnew highlights, the lived realities

<sup>18</sup> On this argument, see also Andrew Walker’s work on the French colonial boundary with Laos: Andrew Walker, ‘Borders in Motion on the Upper-Mekong: Siam and France in the 1890s’, in Yves Goudineau and Michel Lorrillard (eds.), *Recherches nouvelles sur le Laos* (Vientiane, Paris: École française d’Extrême-Orient, 2008), pp. 183–208; Andrew Walker, ‘Conclusion: Are the Mekong Frontiers Sites of Exception?’, in Martin Gainsborough (ed.), *On the Borders of State Power: Frontiers in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region* (London, New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 101–11; Andrew Walker, *The Legend of the Golden Boat: Regulation, Trade and Traders in the Borderlands of Laos, Thailand, China and Burma* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> The concept of ‘making a border real’ draws on Nayanika Mathur’s notion of ‘making a law real’: Mathur, *Paper Tiger*, p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> Galbraith, ‘Turbulent Frontier’.

<sup>21</sup> See Elden, ‘Land’; John Agnew, ‘Borders on the Mind: Re-framing Border Thinking’, *Ethics & Global Politics*, 1, 4 (2008), pp. 175–91; Noel Parker, Nick Vaughan-Williams, et al., ‘Lines in

concerning borders belie their conventional status as ‘facts on the ground’ that exist for practical reasons and have broadly consistent effects. Instead, all boundaries are ‘equivocal’ and ‘open to question, if not to all who would cross them’.<sup>22</sup> The questionable nature of borders makes them multivalent: in the words of Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan, any ‘border, far from being the same phenomenon for all for whom it is significant, is a focus for many different and often competing meanings’.<sup>23</sup> Borders and the spaces they enclose are, like any attempted project of power, proposals that subjects may renegotiate. Despite the use of material strategies from physical violence to posts and pillars used to embed boundaries, considering borders as fixed and singular lines omits the diverse ways in which they emerge through – and are subsequently changed by – the involvement of various individuals and groups. These ideas can do much to aid our understanding of India’s colonial frontier regions as spatial objects, and can help in a broader reassessment of how space across the globe came to be reconfigured during the era of modern empires. Borders had very real effects for colonised and colonisers, but rarely of the colonisers’ exact choosing. The lines and areas that comprised British India’s frontiers can, in turn, enhance theoretical understandings of the creation and operation of borders. In particular, evidence from these regions shows the need to acknowledge the impact on spatial schemes of the internally fragmented nature of states, manifested as disputes and misunderstandings between officials and discrepant attitudes over time. Agents within those ‘modern’ states that claim fixed and clear boundaries can be among the leading drivers of shifting and opaque borders.

The case studies in this chapter show that the bundles of borders and territories that constituted frontier spaces in nineteenth-century British India were contested and confused, less a coherent exercise in spatial rationality than a jumble of tangled lines. The analysis shuttles between various locales, allowing continuities and disparities between bordering processes across the subcontinent’s frontiers to be drawn out. The chapter is structured around what I argue were three distinct periods of bordering common to the northwest and northeast. The first was the decade or so immediately following the British annexation of provinces contiguous to what became long-term frontiers: the 1820s to 1830s in Assam (Section 1.1), and the 1840s to 1850s in Sind and Punjab (Section 1.2). This era was marked by a concern to instantiate partially porous borders that would simultaneously secure colonial revenue and capital

the Sand? Towards an Agenda for Critical Border Studies’, *Geopolitics*, 14, 3 (2009), pp. 582–87; E. Berg and H. van Houtum (eds.), *Routing Borders between Territories, Discourses and Practices* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003); Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan (eds.), *Border Identities: Nation and State at International Frontiers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> Agnew, ‘Borders’, pp. 175–83.

<sup>23</sup> Wilson and Donnan, ‘Nation, State and Identity at International Borders’, in *Border Identities*, pp. 1–30, here p. 24.

in fully governed ‘plains’ while allowing frontier officials some freedom of action in the ‘hill’ and ‘desert’ areas beyond. It also saw the frustration of attempts to achieve such borders in the face of limited resources, material and human resistance, and incomprehension between various colonial agents. The second period, a widespread flurry of bordering activity, began in the later 1860s and was most pronounced in the 1870s (Sections 1.3, 1.4, and 1.5). It was primarily a bottom-up phenomenon, driven by official subversion – frontier administrators persistently superseding their formal remit and breaking boundaries as much as making them. It was not simply a straightforward shift from a ‘close border’ to a ‘forward policy’ as analyses of the northwest have often supposed. Instead, various bordering projects arose from restlessness among frontier officials about their lack of sway over communities beyond fully governed British India. The third period was during the decades either side of the turn of the twentieth century (Sections 1.6 and 1.7). It was distinguished by heightened attention to international boundaries and, as such, involved more explicit direction from London, Simla, and Calcutta. But these borders remained fragmented and limited, bedevilled by similar shortcomings and tensions to earlier projects. They also had disruptive effects on internal boundaries, reopening questions that had either seemed resolved or had sat in abeyance over where normally governed colonial territory ended and where ‘the frontier’ began. Taken as a whole, the case studies in this chapter show that borders at the fringes of British India were not instruments of spatial legibility that were fixed by a unitary state with a clear purpose. They were, rather, expressions of colonial power’s basis in diverse and inconsistent agents, its tendency to be remoulded in local settings by material and human interventions, and, consequently, its patchiness across time and space.

### 1.1 ‘Rude and Complicated’: The *Posa* Boundary in Northern Assam

The British Indian state did not simply create the partially and irregularly governed ‘frontiers’ at the outskirts of its territories from scratch. These areas had been zones of variable and indeterminate state penetration and control prior to the expansion of the colonial state. Sikh rulers in Punjab had mixed aloofness with violent reprisals in their dealings with the inhabitants of the mountains beyond the River Indus during the early nineteenth century.<sup>24</sup> The Kingdom of Kabul also had a fraught, albeit more intimate, set of relationships with the Pashtuns of this region, stretching back to the sixteenth century.<sup>25</sup> Many of the

<sup>24</sup> J. S. Grewal, *The Sikhs of Punjab*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 99–127.

<sup>25</sup> Christine Noelle, *State and Tribe in Nineteenth-Century Afghanistan: The Reign of Amir Dost Muhammad Khan (1826–1863)* (Richmond: Curzon, 1997).

Balochs to the west and north of Sind retained a significant degree of independence from surrounding states including the Khanate of Kalat, which during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries expanded to claim authority over an area of 30,000 square miles.<sup>26</sup> Along with other regional powers, the Ahom kingdom in Assam had long exercised a combination of discretion and occasional violent forays in dealing with the residents of the hilly regions to the north, east, and south of the Brahmaputra Valley.<sup>27</sup> The stated British border policy upon annexation was to retain the clear spatial divide colonial administrators claimed had existed between largely ungoverned uplands and deserts and settled administered areas. Continuities between British India's frontier spaces and those of its predecessors resulted not only from colonial intentions but also from the 'friction' of terrain and hostility of some of the inhabitants of these regions.<sup>28</sup> These were variable and contingent rather than immutable factors, but nonetheless they made lasting penetration by revenue-extracting states exceptionally difficult.

The colonial state's bordering and territory-making activities also featured significant breaks from previous spatial arrangements. For example, British officials had been posted to the outskirts of Punjab during the three years prior to formal annexation in 1849 and had attempted various measures, including regularising revenue demands in administered areas, which served to sharpen the divide between assessed plains and non-assessed hill regions. In many areas the colonial state simply lacked the means of obtaining an accurate understanding of the relations that had previously existed between frontier communities and lowland states.<sup>29</sup> In addition, colonial conceptions of state space in the mid-nineteenth century were in certain respects more unyielding than those of the states that preceded them.<sup>30</sup> While Sanghamitra Misra's claim that 'the master oppositional binary' of the colonial state was a rigidly enforced dichotomy between hills and plains did not always hold true, the transition to British rule in outlying regions entailed significant shifts in the form of boundaries.<sup>31</sup> Prior to its conquest of Assam, the Company-State had already engaged in ambivalent border-making at what was then its northeastern limits in the Khasi Hills, imposing what on paper was a definitive

<sup>26</sup> Nina Swidler, 'Kalat: The Political Economy of a Tribal Chiefdom', *American Ethnologist*, 19, 3 (1992), pp. 553–70, here p. 555.

<sup>27</sup> For a summary of the complex dynamics of this region in the era immediately prior to the advent of British rule, see Cederlöf, *Founding*, pp. 6–10.

<sup>28</sup> On the 'friction' of terrain in upland areas, see James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

<sup>29</sup> C. A. Bayly's concept of 'information famines' at South Asian colonial frontiers is useful in this respect: *Empire and Information*, especially pp. 97–133.

<sup>30</sup> On Ahom conceptions of state space, see Sadan, *Kachin*, pp. 43–53.

<sup>31</sup> Sanghamitra Misra, *Becoming a Borderland: The Politics of Space and Identity in Colonial Northeastern India* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011), pp. 81–82.



boundary but, in reality, one crossed with impunity by upland inhabitants and colonial subjects alike.<sup>32</sup>

A prime example of the significant but limited changes to borders between administered and unadministered territory that followed the advent of colonial rule in many areas was the *posa* system in northern Assam. *Posa* referred to economic arrangements in which inhabitants of the *duars*, outlying portions of the Brahmaputra Valley, gave goods to upland communities on an annual basis. The Ahom state had acquiesced to this system, which existed on the outskirts of their effective power. It was part of an intricate and flexible set of relations between various groups with a share in the dynamic and dispersed set of power relations that existed in the foothills of the eastern Himalaya.<sup>33</sup> Although some British officials later in the nineteenth century admitted *posa*'s merits, in the years immediately following the annexation of Assam the newly minted provincial government looked on the practice with suspicion and contempt.<sup>34</sup> Its attitudes towards monetising and codifying exchange relationships that were prone to localised fluctuations closely followed British initiatives elsewhere in the subcontinent to regularise revenue collection and bring it under unitary colonial control.<sup>35</sup> But like the most famous of these schemes, the Permanent Settlement introduced in Bengal in 1793, the British version of *posa* was incompletely realised and often ineffective.<sup>36</sup>

In 1834, the first extensive report on *posa* reached the Government of India. It showed little agreement between colonial officials over the nature of the hills–plains divide in northern Assam and over the coercion involved in the process. Some administrators said that the inhabitants of the *duars* were simply giving goods to neighbouring communities without complaint; others described aggressive border crossings during which materials were grabbed with ‘conduct . . . such as is most naturally to be expected from a rude people invested with so singular a power over the inhabitants of another country’.<sup>37</sup> Thomas Robertson, the Governor-General’s Agent in Assam, insisted that the practice should be commuted to a money payment administered by the colonial state, since ‘it seems to me quite impossible for Government long to tolerate so

<sup>32</sup> Cederlöf, *Founding*, pp. 51–52; Thomas Simpson, ‘Forgetting Like a State in Colonial North-east India’, in Shah Mahmoud Hanifi (ed.), *Mountstuart Elphinstone in South Asia: Pioneer of British Colonial Rule* (London: Hurst, 2019), pp. 223–47.

<sup>33</sup> Guyot-Rechard, *Shadow States*, pp. 10–11.

<sup>34</sup> For example, Mackenzie, *History*, p. 21; *Frontier and Overseas Expeditions from India. Vol. IV: North and North-Eastern Frontier Tribes* (Simla: Government Monotype Press, 1907), pp. 160–61.

<sup>35</sup> On *posa* reform as an intervention in political economy, see Kar, ‘Nomadic Capital’.

<sup>36</sup> On Permanent Settlement, see Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal*, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1981); Eric Stokes, *The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

<sup>37</sup> NAI Foreign Political, 20 February 1834, No. 23; Robertson to Government of India, 3 February 1834, ff. 4–5.



barbarous an interference with its own territory'.<sup>38</sup> The Government of India agreed that the practice constituted 'blackmail' and was 'rude and complicated', criticisms that administrators still repeated fifty years later.<sup>39</sup>

Following the initial uncertainties, colonial actors involved in *posa* reform came to concur on two key spatial ideas: that the Company-State had sole sovereignty over territory in the Brahmaputra Valley; and that *posa* consisted of barbaric oppressions by upland outsiders. However, the Government of India agreed to Robertson's suggestion with clear misgivings. It felt ill-equipped to coerce upland communities to accept the revised terms of *posa* and, embarrassingly, evidence came to light that Robertson's predecessor, David Scott, had in the 1820s formally recognised the practice as legitimate.<sup>40</sup> In addition, the mismatch of colonial intentions with the extant structure of *posa* generated substantial problems. Captain Matthie, who led efforts to monetise *posa*, reported his confusion over the proper collection methods or value of existing transactions. 'There is', he said, 'no ancient document extant that I can find out detailing these circumstances . . . I have taken several statements of the Articles, said to have originally fixed, to be collected from each house, but no two agree . . . aris[ing] from the circumstance of the hill tribes not taking the same articles every year'.<sup>41</sup> This indicates that a major limitation of colonial meddling in *posa* arrangements was officials' inability to properly conceive of socio-economic relations that were not codified in writing. To an even greater degree than efforts in late eighteenth century to unearth 'ancient constitutions' upon which to base Hindu and Muslim legal codes in Bengal, the colonial search for a documentary basis for interactions at the outskirts of northern Assam thoroughly failed to comprehend the fluidity and nuance of existing socio-spatial relations between communities around the *duars*.<sup>42</sup> A further source of trouble for the colonial state was inconsistency between various layers of administration. In 1837, Robertson's successor, Francis Jenkins, voiced suspicions that 'the misrepresentations of our own [Assamese] subordinate officers, who had an interest in upholding the ancient system' were a contributing factor to the ongoing struggle to implement the new form of *posa*.<sup>43</sup> These shortcomings

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., ff. 6–7.

<sup>39</sup> NAI Foreign External A, March 1885, No. 256: Assam Chief Commissioner to Lakhimpur Deputy Commissioner, 4 December 1884.

<sup>40</sup> NAI Foreign Political, 20 February 1834, No. 24: Government of India to Robertson, 20 February 1834.

<sup>41</sup> NAI Foreign Political, 18 July 1836, No. 77: J. Matthie, Officiating Magistrate, Durrung District, to Jenkins, 13 June 1836, ff. 35–36.

<sup>42</sup> On the 'ancient constitution' concept in early colonial rule, see Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 21–3; Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 9–10; Robert Travers, *Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India: The British in Bengal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>43</sup> NAI Foreign Political, 15 May 1837, No. 10: Jenkins to Government of India, 15 May 1837, f. 11.

within the colonial state partly explain the limited implementation of *posa* reform, but equally significant was the reception of the new system by its subjects.

Colonial actions connected to *posa* were an act of bordering. In attempting to stop what they understood to be threatening annual incursions by upland inhabitants into colonial sovereign territory, officials in Assam instantiated a new type of border between the valley and the hills. By monetising *posa* and placing it under their control, colonial agents instituted a new form of border crossing and tied ‘unadministered’ communities into state-controlled socio-economic relations, as also occurred through systems of payments in Balochistan three decades later (see Section 1.4). But when enacted, *posa* reform provoked from some communities the very type of violent crossings it sought to counteract. When members of the Dafla community were first prevented from taking *posa* in ‘traditional’ fashion in 1835, they responded by taking goods by force. Officials only felt able to conclude written agreements on the new form of *posa* with some Dafla potentates after the colonial state responded with violence of its own. Following Walter Benjamin’s claim that law is instantiated through state violence, this was one instance of many at British India’s fringes of what might be termed border-making violence.<sup>44</sup> Even then, the border remained incomplete: some communities did not sign up to the adapted form of *posa* and collected goods without the mediation of a state representative in what Jenkins termed the ‘traditional’ manner.<sup>45</sup> As Bodhisattva Kar has suggested, the *posa* border proved to be an ‘impossible’ one for the colonial state.<sup>46</sup>

Frontier officials were troubled not only by uplanders’ spectacular incursions across the border but also by their refusal to participate in authorised rituals of border crossing. An impermeable border seemed as problematic as a fully open one. The importance of the adjusted *posa* boundary as a form of oversight and limited control over ostensibly ‘independent’ communities is apparent from officials’ assumption that the periodic failures of chiefs to cross the border in this authorised fashion were expressions of discontent. In 1872, one administrator noted that although various sections of the ‘Abor’ (now Adi) community had come in to collect their *posa* from him, one that had previously come in did not on this occasion: ‘they seem to be tired of coming down to take the subsidy’.<sup>47</sup> This concerned him because the *posa* collection constituted the only regular contact

<sup>44</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Critique of Violence’, in M. Bullock and M. W. Jennings (eds.), *Selected Writings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 248.

<sup>45</sup> NAI Foreign Political, 18 January 1850, No. 73: Jenkins to Government of India, Foreign Department, 8 December 1849, f. 9.

<sup>46</sup> Kar, ‘When Was the Postcolonial?’, pp. 63–9.

<sup>47</sup> NAI Foreign Political A, August 1872, No. 141: W. S. Clarke, Lakhimpur Deputy Commissioner, to Assam Commissioner, 9 May 1872, ff. 1–2.

between the state and this community, and therefore the only means of exerting influence over them.

*Posa* reform is indicative of the centrality of performance to acts of bordering and the fact that boundaries do not simply exclude those on the other side but seek to instantiate a particular relationship with them. The *posa* boundary was intended to be porous – to allow certain flows while blocking others. A British map of Assam produced in the mid-1830s, the time that interference in *posa* began in earnest, effectively represented what colonial officials intended the northern Assam border to mean and do.<sup>48</sup> Despite pretensions to precision and scale in the agrarian regions of the Valley, the map represents the boundary between plains and hills with a series of scalloped lines, giving the approximate effect of a cartoon cloud. This apparent lack of precision represented the significance of the border to officials in Assam at the time, as primarily defined by actions and movements across it rather than specific spatial positioning or linearity. Gunnell Cederlöf has claimed that a profound shift towards precise demarcation took place in colonial space making in the northeast during the 1830s. In fact, her characterisation of the previous decades of expansion from northeastern Bengal, when 'marking out territorial claims meant fortifying strategic strongholds such as heights or river bifurcations, or exercising authority by taxing market places', continued to be the case at the northern fringes of Assam.<sup>49</sup> British interference with *posa* did not change the indistinct location of the border but instead altered the set of practices that could legitimately take place across it. What emerged was a changed – and much contested – boundary in the same approximate place.

## 1.2 'Making Outside Barbarians': The Administrative Border in Early Colonial Punjab

In northern Assam, local responses clearly inflected the meaning of the border even as colonial actions produced a distinct shift in the practices that constituted this boundary. Turning to the period of the advent of colonial power at the trans-Indus fringes of Punjab in the late 1840s, it is clear that pressures and confusions between administrators and local communities rendered the boundary between administered and 'independent' regions at the colonial state's northwestern limits a similarly unsettled object. Armed with preconceptions from earlier travelogues (see Sections 3.2 and 3.3), British officials first came into prolonged contact with the inhabitants of territory to the west of the River

<sup>48</sup> NAI Foreign Political, 16 May 1838, No. 53: Jenkins to Government of India, 3 April 1838.

<sup>49</sup> Cederlöf, *Founding*, p. 49.

Indus following the 1846 Treaty of Bhairowal.<sup>50</sup> In his newly expanded role as Regent to the child Maharaja Duleep Singh, the British Resident at Lahore Henry Lawrence deputed a number of Assistants to serve at the outer limits of the Sikh kingdom in Punjab. While Lawrence and the Government of India debated the amount of interference these men should be allowed to exercise, the Assistants themselves swiftly set about exceeding the advisory functions with which they were officially invested, fashioning governmental roles which combined judicial, executive, and revenue-collecting powers.<sup>51</sup> Before and after formal annexation of the Punjab in 1849, the British explicitly stated that they retained the Sikh boundary between administered territory, where inhabitants were required to pay revenue to government, and unadministered territory. The dividing line was said to be where the plains gave way to the foothills of the mountain ranges beyond which lay the possessions of the Amir of Kabul.

Beneath this apparent continuity, the forms of administration that the Assistants sought to implement imposed a sharper divide between the plains and the hills than had existed under Sikh officials, whose focus had been more or less confined to collecting revenue and curbing serious incursions from upland communities.<sup>52</sup> Reynell Taylor, the Deputy Commissioner stationed at Dera Ismail Khan, claimed that:

We . . . strive and intend to make all good ryots [cultivators] . . . In this way, our method of managing a frontier province is diametrically different from that practised by our predecessors, the Sikhs, who, when they occupied a district even on a border, merely looked to the requisite facilities for collecting their own revenue, without the slightest reference to the safety of the villages from external aggression, except on a grand scale.<sup>53</sup>

Although Taylor's juxtaposition of the carelessness of the Sikhs with his own government's beneficence was part of a broader effort to downplay colonial

<sup>50</sup> Bikrama Jit Hasrat (ed.), *The Punjab Papers: Selections from the Private Papers of Lord Auckland, Lord Ellenborough, Viscount Hardinge, and the Marquis of Dalhousie, 1836–1849, on the Sikhs* (Hoshiarpur: V.V. Research Institute, 1970), pp. 107–9. On the impact of the 'Elphinstonian episteme' on subsequent British imaginings of Afghanistan and the northwest frontier, see Benjamin D. Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Bayly, *Taming*.

<sup>51</sup> British Library, Oriental and India Office, European Manuscripts Collections (hereafter 'MSS Eur') F171/70: Henry Lawrence to Government of India, 21 June 1847; Government of India to Henry Lawrence, 3 July 1847, pp. 16, 18–19. The most famous account of the Assistants' role is Herbert Edwardes, *A Year on the Punjab Frontier, in 1848–49* (London: Richard Bentley, 1851).

<sup>52</sup> However, the Sikh kingdom's frontier personnel, especially Paolo Avitabile, the European governor of Peshawar from 1834 to 1843, had a reputation for severe punishment of infractions: MSS Eur F171/70: George Lawrence to Henry Lawrence, 19/04/1847, p. 3; *General Report on the Administration of the Punjab for the Years 1849–50 and 1850–51* (Lahore: Punjab Government Press, 1851), pp. 7, 11.

<sup>53</sup> IOR/V/27/273/1: Reynell Taylor to John Nicholson, 'District Memorandum: Dera Ismael Khan', 1852, pp. 113–14.

violence, the advent of British rule in Punjab undoubtedly entailed a shift in what the administrative border meant. In some areas, officials sought to give the boundary a newly material form. James Abbott, the Assistant stationed at Hazara, levelled existing forts built by local potentates and constructed boundary pillars from 1847 onwards, indicating British assumptions of unitary sovereign territory here as in northern Assam during the 1830s.<sup>54</sup>

Colonial intentions did not, however, translate into a completely different type of border. Adjustments in the location of the boundary continued after pillars had been erected. A disparity persisted between formally administered areas and areas in which the state interfered, showing that the impact of the Assistants' actions was insufficient to impose a coherent space of government. The policy they pursued of attempting to fashion inhabitants of the administered plains into settled agriculturalists – and thereby governable subjects – was a gradual and fraught process, which did not create a definitive distinction between independent 'hill tribes' and administered plains people.<sup>55</sup> Officials were also far from unanimously agreed on whether the border should be completely closed. Taylor pronounced himself 'a decided advocate for allowing the men of the hills to mix freely with all classes in the plains, cultivate land in the plain district wherever they possess them, attend our markets, &c.' His call for a porous border was not rooted in confidence of the 'civilising' effects that border crossing might have, but on the practical impossibility of enforcing a strict boundary. 'It will be very long,' he wrote, 'before we shall establish a frontier line that could not be passed by individuals or small parties night or day, and an attempt to make outside barbarians of the mass of men inhabiting the hills would make literally thousands of men who now pursue peaceful avocations our active enemies'.<sup>56</sup>

Whether British officials accepted it or not, the largely unenforced and undemarcated boundary between independent territory in the hills and the administered plains continued to be crossed with impunity. Even in the few areas in which the British materially demarcated the boundary, such as Hazara, transgressions continued largely unchecked.<sup>57</sup> Many communities also inhabited areas bisected by the boundary, causing officials uncertainty when dealing with violence in administered areas. These confusions were apparent in the British response to a large-scale attack in 1849 on revenue-paying agriculturalists by a section of Waziris straddling a portion of the administrative border in southern Punjab. Officials in the area suggested that 'the difficulty of

<sup>54</sup> MSS Eur F171/25: James Abbott, 'Narrative of Events in Huzara', ff. 2–14; MSS Eur F171/70: Henry Lawrence to Government of India, 3 July 1847, p. 24.

<sup>55</sup> For example, MSS Eur F171/70: George Lawrence to John Lawrence, 1 October 1847, pp. 72–80.

<sup>56</sup> IOR/V/27/273/1: Taylor, 'District Memorandum', pp. 125–26.

<sup>57</sup> MSS Eur F171/70: Abbott to Henry Lawrence, 5 August 1847, pp. 54–55.

ascertaining the real offenders and punishing them without causing a decided breach between Government and the Wuzeeree [*sic*] tribes is so great as to amount to an impossibility'.<sup>58</sup> In the face of their inability to dispense 'justice' against individuals, some officials suggested directing violence against all Waziris who resided within the administered limits of British India. The tendency to criminalise entire frontier communities (see Section 4.3) was both symptom of and contributor to the indeterminate administrative boundary in Punjab.

In the early years of colonial rule in the region, frontier officials broke borders first and gained superior approval later. Henry Lawrence's authorisation of the military occupation of Hazara in 1847 followed an unsanctioned and unsuccessful pursuit into the hills of the perpetrators of a crime in governed territory.<sup>59</sup> The first generation of the Punjab frontier cadre developed various rationales for assuming discretionary powers beyond the proclaimed administrative boundary in Punjab. Reynell Taylor warned of 'the error of visiting the offence committed by the Majority of the tribe upon individuals of it living within the Government limits' and insisted that he should be allowed to cross the border at will.<sup>60</sup> His successor in Hazara argued, successfully, that a force should be stationed under his command must be allowed 'at a moment's warning, and at any hour of the night or day, [to go] up the mountains, without giving notice of the movement to a living creature', as 'the mountains are scarcely assailable, if [the] Enemy are allowed time to find their posts'.<sup>61</sup> During the early years of British involvement at the Punjab frontier, those who resided beyond the border were deemed liable to the same punishment as inhabitants of fully governed territory. Border transgressions were, then, a two-way phenomenon, a cycle that involved officials who proclaimed to establish boundaries every bit as much as communities arrayed across the division of plains and hills. As in northern Assam, administrators claimed that the movements and characteristics of local inhabitants compelled them to adopt transgressive tactics and a fluid definition of the limits of state territory and subject populations.

### 1.3 'Absurd and Impossible': Bordering the Naga Hills District, 1866–1905

In 1866, interventions began that fundamentally reshaped two borderlands of British India. The regions, Balochistan and the Naga Hills, were separated by the full longitudinal width of the colonial subcontinent, but the processes of colonial interference shared notable features. Frontier officials initiated and provided ongoing impetus for both. In doing so, these men embraced, and at least some of their superiors came to acknowledge, a principle of perennially unsettled

<sup>58</sup> MSS Eur E417/5: Taylor to George Pearce, 7 December 1849, f. 5.

<sup>59</sup> MSS Eur F171/70: Henry Lawrence to Government of India, 14 August 1847, p. 55.

<sup>60</sup> MSS Eur E417/5: Taylor to George Pearce, 7 December 1849, f. 7.

<sup>61</sup> NAI Foreign Secret, 26 May 1849, No. 63: Abbott to Henry Lawrence, 29 March 1849, ff. 9–10.

borders and the corollary of territory that was, in Lauren Benton's words, 'full of holes'.<sup>62</sup> After a lull from the early 1850s, a combination of occasional Naga infractions into British Assam and colonial officials' desire to interfere in episodes of violence between Naga villages tipped debates over the proper extent of British sovereignty and responsibility back in favour of expanding colonial authority into the hills (see Section 4.2). Although its title may have suggested the imposition of uniform authority over a clearly bounded area, the Naga Hills District was initially little more than a set of proclaimed intentions. In 1866, a British officer, Lieutenant Gregory, and a party of troops were established in the Angami Naga village of Samaguting. They were tenuously linked to the nearest major outpost in Assam by a thirteen-mile road that the soldiers constructed as they marched, and a further sixty miles' journey by river. Despite the colonial state's claim to hold territorial sovereignty over a large swathe of the uplands, Gregory was initially instructed not to exercise 'direct control' over Nagas except those residing in Samaguting, although he was allowed summary punitive powers against 'any village proved to have been concerned in any gross outrage'.<sup>63</sup> In this initial form, the Naga Hills District was not a clear territory delineated by a border: its limits were explicitly amorphous, ebbing, and flowing seasonally and with intermittent journeys of military parties to enact violence, and of survey parties to map the hills.

Perceived difficulties of terrain, limits on effective knowledge gathering, and tactics of flight and avoidance by local inhabitants all severely circumscribed colonial territorial power. Partly because of these limitations, the British Indian state's power to define territory in the Naga Hills District consisted more of destructive interludes than entrenched and lasting structures. Probably the most significant spatial intervention in the years immediately after the foundation of the District was the destruction of the village of Razepemah following an attack on colonial subjects, and subsequent prohibition on villagers rebuilding on the same site. The Commissioner of Assam ordered that 'not a hoe must be raised anywhere on the Razepemah lands, not a hut built, not a grave dug there, but they must remain a desert, unless, or until at some future period, we may think fit to re-occupy the locality with our own Naga subjects under a new name'.<sup>64</sup> At this stage, the colonial state's appearance in the hills was generally limited to spectacular shows of force rather than consistent efforts to construct stable administrative space.

From the mid-1870s a creeping expansion of formal British authority took place, with the colonial official on the spot intermittently taking villages under

<sup>62</sup> Benton, *Search*, p. 2.

<sup>63</sup> NAI Foreign Political A, July 1866, No. 16: Bengal Government to Government of India, 27 June 1866, f. 1; NAI Foreign Political A, December 1866, No. 137: Henry Hopkinson, Commissioner of Assam, to Bengal Government, 14 September 1866, ff. 4–5.

<sup>64</sup> NAI Foreign Political A, April 1868, No. 261: Hopkinson to Bengal Government, 4 March 1868, f. 1.



formal British protection in return for securing villagers' assent to pay a house tax (see Section 5.3). Commenting on the first two villages taken into British 'protection' through this process, the Government of India explicitly stated that there was no need for a general principle to be laid down to dictate similar events in the future. Instead, what it termed a 'rough and indefinite' process of expansion was assumed sufficient to fulfil the primary purpose of 'keeping order on the frontier' – with 'frontier' in this instance referring to the boundary between Naga villages and the tea gardens and agricultural fields of Assam.<sup>65</sup> As had been the case at the Punjab frontier immediately following annexation, officials at various levels of the colonial state agreed that upholding the limits of Assam required interference beyond those limits. Permeable borders were, once more, the order of the day.

Despite the amorphous nature of the Naga Hills District, the location of its nominal boundaries still greatly exorcised officials in the area. Gregory's successor as the Deputy Commissioner in the region John Butler claimed that the 'theoretical boundaries of this district' laid down in 1867 were 'absurd and impossible', being in many places 'utterly wrong, or so extraordinarily defined as to be quite impossible of identification'.<sup>66</sup> Although his superiors accepted Butler's alternative border, this too quickly became provisional. Ever more villages continued to be incorporated within the colonial pale and an intensified series of military and survey expeditions performed territory in ways that differed substantially from its relatively fixed representation in maps and official diktats. The cumulative effect of these various space-making practices was, as one member of the Government of India put it, 'a perpetually disturbed frontier line'.<sup>67</sup> Another acknowledged that the territorial and border confusions arose in significant part because the mainspring of actions by local colonial officials was 'no longer . . . protecting our own frontier or our settled districts . . . [but] extending our authority, village by village, over the whole tract of country . . . The Naga Hills District . . . is a geographical expression, not an administrative fact'. He admitted that 'consequently, the present boundary has no special or intelligible meaning from an administrative point of view'.<sup>68</sup>

The deliberately indeterminate limits of the Naga Hills District continued long after the bloody suppression of a major rebellion at the British post at Kohima in 1879, which has often been seen as a major turning point in the normalisation of British authority in the region.<sup>69</sup> All that was normalised was the principle of persistent, creeping expansion primarily at the behest of

<sup>65</sup> NAI Foreign Political A, July 1874, No. 45: Government of India to Bengal Government, 30 June 1874, f. 1.

<sup>66</sup> NAI Foreign Political A, December 1875, No. 87: Butler to Assam Chief Commissioner, 26 June 1875, ff. 1–2.

<sup>67</sup> NAI Foreign Political A, October 1878, No. 7–51, Keep-With, f. 4. <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 8.

<sup>69</sup> Julian Jacobs with Alan Macfarlane, Sarah Harrison and Anita Herle, *The Nagas: Society, Culture and the Colonial Encounter*, 2nd ed. (London: Edition Hansjörg Mayer, 2012), pp. 21–22; Robb, 'The Colonial State'.

officials stationed at the frontier. During the 1880s, officials in Assam creatively interpreted prior instructions from the Government of India and instituted a hazy area beyond the gradually advancing eastern boundary of the District under what it termed 'political control'. The communities within this region were subject to annual visits, known as 'promenades', by the Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills District and his armed retinue.<sup>70</sup> That the lure of boundary crossing for officials was the key element of the border's continued provisional and flimsy status was acknowledged even by a member of the Government of India, who stated in 1888, 'the political control system seems particularly adapted to force our hand in extending territory'.<sup>71</sup>

Although controversial and subject to periodic interruptions from more senior and distant administrators, the system of 'political control' and the sporadic eastward extension of the Naga Hills District continued into the twentieth century.<sup>72</sup> In missives to superiors and on maps (see Figure 1.1), frontier officials disavowed any form of border that might close off further expansion. The Deputy Commissioner pronounced in 1903 that he was 'not prepared to recommend either a natural or a tribal boundary', and instead suggested 'a mixture of the two, the principle to be followed being that the benign influence of Government should be exercised as far as can be extended without in any way increasing the cost of ordinary administration'.<sup>73</sup> Other frontier officials in the region backed such thinking by invoking long-distance comparisons and employing moralising rhetoric. One contended that 'the same grounds which would warrant our interference under certain circumstances in the Congo Free-State would justify our stopping the existing atrocities that occur in sight of our out-posts' at the eastern fringes of the Naga Hills Districts.<sup>74</sup> Almost all invoked the notion that 'barbarism' beyond the border might 'have a disturbing effect' on people in the Naga Hills District owing to the mobility of populations in the region, while the Assam Government characterised pushing beyond the acknowledged border as merely facing up to 'the responsibilities of sovereignty'.<sup>75</sup> These arguments had the desired effect: the Government of India acquiesced to a series of boundary adjustments that cumulatively meant the Naga Hills District's dimensions morphed at the behest of men stationed at the frontier.

<sup>70</sup> NAI Foreign External A, January 1889, No. 76: Assam Chief Commissioner to Government of India, Foreign Department, 14/11/1888, ff. 2–3.

<sup>71</sup> NAI Foreign External A, January 1889, Nos. 76–88, Keep-With No. 1: W. J. Crooke, Note, 24/11/1888, f. 2.

<sup>72</sup> Robert Reid, *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam from 1883–1941* (Shillong: Assam Government Press, 1942), pp. 99–100.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 132–33.

<sup>74</sup> NAI Foreign External A, July 1908, enclosure to No. 122: H. W. Cole to J. C. Arbuthnot, 20/06/1907, f. 11.

<sup>75</sup> NAI Foreign External A, July 1908, No. 122: Eastern Bengal and Assam Government to Government of India, Foreign Department, 07/12/1907, f. 6.



Figure 1.1 Indian Atlas, sheet 130 S.E. (eastern Naga Hills), with three lines later added showing (from left to right) ‘Original’, ‘Existing’, and ‘Proposed’ boundaries (1904).<sup>76</sup>

These officials did not aim to create a territory premised on uniform coverage of a defined portion of the earth’s surface. State space in this region had the character of an ever-shifting network of nodes and routes under varying degrees of control. Rather than implementing increasingly precise boundaries, colonial administrators instead came to disavow the possibility and desirability of a fixed border. By way of justification, they claimed that Nagas did not comprehend the concept of boundaries and engaged in social and economic relations that confounded efforts to definitively bound homogeneous territories. There is no doubt that they benefitted greatly from the shifting, penetrable border. For them, just as for the French colonial officials at the Siam-Laos border during the same era analysed by Andrew Walker, ‘the elimination of [border] ambiguity would have greatly reduced their potential political influence’.<sup>77</sup> Accordingly, these men successfully advanced the notion that

<sup>76</sup> Assam State Archives, Dispur (hereafter ‘ASA’), Map Collection, No. 922.

<sup>77</sup> Walker, ‘Borders’, p. 199.

effective control depended on spatial indeterminacy, meaning that the Naga Hills District remained amorphous and patchy.

#### 1.4 'Breaking the Border Rule': Balochistan's Boundaries, 1866–1892

British officials in the Naga Hills were not alone in seeing fixed boundaries as inimical to their roles as agents of empire. During the quarter-century from 1866 to his death, Robert Sandeman repeatedly broke borders in Balochistan. He started by violating the administrative boundary between Dera Ghazi Khan District in southwest Punjab and the areas nominally under the control of the Khanate of Kalat. After a British military and administrative presence in Balochistan had been established under his charge by the late 1870s, Sandeman spent the remainder of his career (and life) overlooking and undermining boundaries that limited his sphere of action. Much like his contemporaries in the uplands south of the Brahmaputra Valley, Sandeman and his underlings insisted that definitive borders had little meaning in a region of shifting people and complex terrain. They consistently construed upheavals beyond the extant bounds of their jurisdiction as existential threats to colonial interests. As in the Naga Hills, their official subversion brought about substantial results once authorised post facto by the upper echelons of colonial administration: the creation of a new administrative territory, British Baluchistan, and roles – with status and accolades – for themselves.

Sandeman's part in engendering a wholesale shift in frontier policy in the northwest from a defensive 'close border policy' to an active 'forward policy' has been exaggerated both by his contemporaries and in a number of subsequent historical accounts.<sup>78</sup> Previous colonial interactions with the communities beyond the administrative boundary had long been volatile and changeable, rather than wedded to a closed border. Although military actions during the 1840s and the establishment of military posts instantiated British authority in Upper Sind (see Section 4.1), outbreaks of violence among Baloch communities and machinations against the Khan of Kalat among Brahui powerholders

<sup>78</sup> Thomas Henry Thornton, *Colonel Sir Robert Sandeman: His Life and Work on Our Indian Frontier* (London: John Murray, 1895), pp. 18–20. Magnus Marsden and Benjamin Hopkins claim that 'Sandeman's actions ultimately proved, in the words of his assistant R. I. Bruce, the "coup de grace" to the closed border system': *Fragments*, p. 56; later in the same chapter, Marsden and Hopkins rightly acknowledge the 'ad hoc' and 'back and forth' nature of frontier policy in the northwest (p. 63). Christian Tripodi divides colonial frontier policy in the northwest into large blocks: 'close border' from 1843 to 1875; 'forward policy' from 1875 to the creation of the North-West Frontier Province in 1901; a modified 'close border' policy from 1901 to the early 1920s; a modified 'forward policy' from the early 1920s. See Tripodi, *Edge*, pp. 16–17; on Sandeman specifically, pp. 50–65.

continued.<sup>79</sup> British ambivalence towards Kalat's rulers and repeated interference in their affairs had been among the drivers of this instability since the First Anglo-Afghan War, when colonial forces attacked the town of Kalat, and replaced the Khan with a man of their choice.<sup>80</sup>

In the 1860s, the community targeted in some of the most severe episodes of violence by British forces during the 1840s, the Bugtis, began to pierce the largely undemarcated boundary with the administered areas in Dera Ghazi Khan District, which lay immediately northeast of Upper Sind. Whereas the manned fortresses of the Upper Sind border presented a formidable deterrent, the boundary further north was sparsely patrolled. Sandeman took up his post as Deputy Commissioner of Dera Ghazi Khan in 1866 against a backdrop of sporadic and generally ineffective measures to prevent border violations and an uncertain British policy towards Kalat Khanate. From the outset of his tenure, Sandeman railed against the existing location of the administrative border, claiming that it divided communities and represented a 'cruel injustice'.<sup>81</sup> He later added that the boundary line the British inherited from the Sikhs 'has proved disastrous to our subjects, and to the frontier clans, and rendered the administration of the frontier tract itself a matter of extreme difficulty'.<sup>82</sup> From shortly after his appointment, Sandeman (as his first biographer T. H. Thornton wrote in 1895) 'broke the border rule repeatedly and successfully'; the latter was certainly true in respect of the growth of his own influence in the region and within the colonial state.<sup>83</sup>

During his first year in Dera Ghazi Khan, Sandeman took his first tour beyond the administrative boundary accompanied by his assistant Richard Bruce, and four Baloch *tumandars* (chiefs) accompanied by approximately 300 followers. Beyond the border, he met with the Bugti *tumandar* Gholam Mortaza Khan and some of his subordinates who had led infractions into southwest Punjab.<sup>84</sup> In undertaking his own violation of the boundary, Sandeman directly contravened the established chain of command: all dealings with nominal Kalat territory should have gone through the Superintendent of the Upper Sind Frontier or the

<sup>79</sup> On fears of a tribal rebellion during the Indian Rebellion of 1857, see NAI Foreign Secret, 25 May 1858, No. 467. On the continuation of forays into Upper Sind after the violence of the mid-1840s, see NAI Foreign Political, 17 May 1853, No. 10. On inter-tribal violence, see NAI Foreign Political, 14 January 1859, No. 21.

<sup>80</sup> Maharashtra State Archives, Mumbai (hereafter 'MSA'), Political, 1838–40, Vol. 21: T. Willshire to Lord Auckland, 14 November 1839, f. 621; MSA, Political, 1841–42, Vol. 74: 'Treaty between Major Outram and Mir Nusseer Khan', 6 October 1841. See also Swidler, 'Kalat', p. 563.

<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Thornton, *Sandeman*, p. 30.

<sup>82</sup> Sandeman, 'Memorandum on the Rectification of the North-West Frontier of India', in Thornton, *Sandeman*, p. 336.

<sup>83</sup> A. L. P. Tucker, *Sir Robert G. Sandeman: Peaceful Conqueror of Baluchistan* (New York: Macmillan, 1921), p. 27.

<sup>84</sup> Richard Isaac Bruce, *The Forward Policy and Its Results, or Thirty-Five Years' Work Amongst the Tribes on Our North-Western Frontier of India* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1900), pp. 26–27

British Resident at the Court of Kalat, who was under the auspices of the Sind and Bombay Governments. As a Punjab official, Sandeman had no official sanction to cross the border. Nonetheless, in the name of the colonial state, Sandeman dictated terms to the Bugtis, including the restoration of stolen property. In return he offered employment in irregular levies and payments to particular chiefs (see Section 5.4).<sup>85</sup> The advent of 'tribal service' as a means of refashioning the frontier was convenient both for the those who benefitted from additional income and for the colonial state, which, as in the case of *posa* in northern Assam, tied 'independent' communities into its political economy. But its primary beneficiary was Sandeman, as it provided an alibi for additional, generally unauthorised, trips beyond the border throughout the rest of the 1860s and into the 1870s. During this period – and again without prior permission – Sandeman also established a summer camp twenty-five miles beyond the acknowledged limits of British territory at which he and Bruce spent a few months each year in contact with the communities of the surrounding hills.<sup>86</sup> Unknown to Sandeman, the contemporary frontier official T. H. Lewin had similarly taken up unauthorised seasonal residence in uplands beyond the administrative border in the region that became the Lushai Hills (see Section 1.6). In both cases, living among upland communities ended up being a precursor to their being brought under formal British administration.

Sandeman's repeated border violations in the late 1860s and early 1870s succeeded in stopping Baloch forays into Dera Ghazi Khan. Rather than ceasing altogether, though, they were merely redirected to Upper Sind – a clear example of administrators provoking instead of salving the 'turbulent frontier'.<sup>87</sup> A protracted battle followed between Sandeman and the Commissioner of Sind, William Merewether, became sufficiently severe that the Punjab and Sind governments convened a 'conference' at the town of Mithankot in February 1871 to broker a resolution.<sup>88</sup> Against previously established protocol, the meeting placed an official stamp on Sandeman's personal authority and involvement with the northern Balochs.<sup>89</sup> As upheavals continued in Kalat, inflamed by the ongoing lack of clarity over which colonial officials had powers to act beyond the administrative border, the Government of India pronounced in 1874 that 'the time has now arrived . . . [to] make our own arrangements direct with the frontier tribes and without reference to the Khan'.<sup>90</sup> This marked a significant breakthrough for Sandeman's policy of

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28–29. See also Marsden and Hopkins, *Fragments*, p. 57.

<sup>86</sup> Thornton, *Sandeman*, pp. 36–37. <sup>87</sup> Galbraith, "'Turbulent Frontier'".

<sup>88</sup> For example, NAI Foreign A-Political-E, June 1883, Nos. 306–324, Keep-With: Sandeman to C. U. Aitchison, 24 February 1883.

<sup>89</sup> Marsden and Hopkins, *Fragments*, pp. 58–60.

<sup>90</sup> NAI Foreign Political, October 1874, No. 173: Government of India to Sind Commissioner, 9 October 1874, f. 277.



overlooking the administrative border and engaging Baloch chiefs through payments and service. He was chosen to lead two expeditions across the established boundary into Balochistan in 1875 and 1876, which culminated with the establishment of the Baluchistan Agency and the permanent occupation of a British military post at Quetta.<sup>91</sup> The powers assigned to the Agent to the Governor-General in charge of the Baluchistan Agency for intervention in internal Kalat affairs essentially completed the process started during the First Anglo-Afghan War of reducing the Khanate to little more than ceremonial authority.<sup>92</sup> Once again, Sandeman's subversion of his orders was key to these outcomes. The authorised aim of his second mission was to secure the Bolan Pass from tribal depredations. After his return, however, the Government of India pronounced that 'whilst . . . we were fully alive to the difficulties and responsibilities of the permanent intervention advocated by Major Sandeman, we could not disguise from ourselves the greater difficulties of renouncing the position in which the success of his mediation had conspicuously placed us'.<sup>93</sup>

Thornton's adulatory rendering of Sandeman's 1876 journey into Balochistan was an 'anti-conquest' narrative in Mary Louise Pratt's terms, masking colonial expansion with a discourse of individual heroism.<sup>94</sup> Thornton wrote of Sandeman's border crossing that 'there were elements of grave anxiety; the hot weather had set in; fifty miles of desert lay before him, then a toilsome journey of sixty miles along the shingly bed of a dry torrent, shut in by stupendous cliffs without a blade of vegetation, before the uplands could be reached; moreover, cholera was in the air'.<sup>95</sup> Thornton also described Sandeman's previous infractions in similarly self-sacrificial terms, claiming they were 'particularly hazardous proceeding[s], because he not only risked his life, but his career'.<sup>96</sup> Sandeman's frontier-redefining tours were acts of a self-promotion, which served to accumulate personal authority within the structures of the colonial state.<sup>97</sup> This strategy was eminently successful: he was knighted and given charge of the Baluchistan Agency.

Sandeman's reconfiguration of the border was in certain respects exceptional at the outskirts of British India in the later nineteenth century, but it also points to certain important elements of frontier making in the nineteenth- and early

<sup>91</sup> NAI Foreign Political, November 1875, No. 278: Extract from the Proceedings of the Government of India, Foreign Department, 16 October 1875, f. 6; Bruce, *Forward Policy*, pp. 56–9, 62–6; Thornton, *Sandeman*, pp. 76–95.

<sup>92</sup> The removal of power to levy duties on goods transiting through the Bolan Pass in 1883 might be seen as the conclusion of this process. See NAI Foreign A-Political-E, December 1883, Nos. 74–130.

<sup>93</sup> Quoted in Thornton, *Sandeman*, p. 85.

<sup>94</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 7, *passim*.

<sup>95</sup> Thornton, *Sandeman*, p. 77. <sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 35–36.

<sup>97</sup> T. A. Heathcote, *Balochistan, the British and the Great Game: The Struggle for the Bolan Pass, Gateway to India* (London: Hurst, 2016).



twentieth-century colonial subcontinent. It was indicative of the fact that localised actions and policies shaped frontiers at least as much as grand strategic motivations.<sup>98</sup> There is no doubt that the concern to counter Russian advances in Central Asia over the preceding decade enhanced support for Sandeman's expansionism among senior officials, many of whom sought a hyper-masculine antidote to what they saw as the 'timidity' of supposed recent inactivity.<sup>99</sup> However, although in later writings on Balochistan and Afghanistan addressed to imperial strategists he emphasised the Russian threat,<sup>100</sup> geopolitics were not the primary rationale for advancing into Balochistan in 1877 for Sandeman and his coterie. As one of his assistants put it in 1882, these men believed 'if Persian independence, Khiva, Bokhara, Khokan, and Afghanistan were absorbed by Russia, there would be nothing in this course which we should fear as Englishmen or dread as philanthropists'.<sup>101</sup> Instead, what mattered to them were the issues of tribal control and communication that Sandeman's border-breaking tours both partially engendered and pretended to address.

Violating boundaries and insisting on the temporary nature of existing administrative limits became an essential element of Sandeman's administration of British Baluchistan until his death in 1892. From 1883 on, he undertook a series of tours to the large desert-bound hinterland to the southwest of Quetta, the administrative and military centre of British Baluchistan. During these ventures, he tenuously asserted Kalat's long-standing sovereignty over far-flung communities, thereby drawing them within the ambit of the colonial state and under his own brand of personal administration (see Section 5.4).<sup>102</sup> At the same time, Sandeman worked on undermining boundaries around Zhob, at the mountainous northern fringes of British Baluchistan. This involved two related forms of border disavowal: journeying into and attempting to reclassify territory beyond the colonial state's established administration, and then challenging the dividing line between the remit of the Punjab Government and that of the Baluchistan Agency.

<sup>98</sup> Examples of relatively recent claims that high strategy largely dictated frontier policies include Fred Scholz, *Nomadism and Colonialism: A Hundred Years of Baluchistan, 1872–1972*, trans. Hugh van Skyhawk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002 [1974]), p. 93; Tripodi, *Edge*, pp. 17–18.

<sup>99</sup> IOR/L/P&S/7/1: Political letter no. 13 of 1875, Note by Henry Green, 23 October 1874. On Russian expansion in Central Asia, see A. S. Morrison, *Russian Rule in Samarkand 1868–1910: A Comparison with British India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>100</sup> For example, Sandeman, 'Our Future Policy in Afghanistan (1886)', 'Note on the North-West Frontier and Our Policy in Afghanistan (1887)', and 'On British Relations with the Waziri and Other Frontier Tribes (1890)', in Thornton, *Sandeman*, pp. 342–63.

<sup>101</sup> NAI Foreign A-Political-E, December 1883, No. 91: O. T. Duke to W. G. Waterfield, 17 February 1882.

<sup>102</sup> Thornton, *Sandeman*, pp. 180–2.

Sandeman's rhetorical strategy in relation to Zhob was similar to those in the desert southwest of Quetta. He insisted to his superiors that an outbreak of violence between the Kakar community in Zhob and the Marri community in British Baluchistan constituted a threat to colonial infrastructure, security, and prestige.<sup>103</sup> He also evinced anxiety that the isolated outposts that formed the existing border were 'insufficient', suggesting that the Kakars could corral a force such that 'serious disaster would affect [the] whole policy [of] Government'.<sup>104</sup> He balanced this alarm by suggesting that other men of influence in the region had declared themselves willing to come within the British ambit.<sup>105</sup> After journeying beyond the border to obtain 'justice' and improve access into Zhob – a trip the Government of India judged had failed to meet either of its primary objectives<sup>106</sup> – Sandeman argued that the border would have to be revised to ensure his forces were 'in a position to protect the tribes on the confines of Zhob'.<sup>107</sup> When the Government of India declined to approve this suggestion, further Kakar attacks on British subjects and infrastructure came to Sandeman's rescue, enabling him to make a case for again breaking the border.<sup>108</sup> While there, he worked to entrench colonial involvement in the region such that territorial expansion was a *fait accompli*.<sup>109</sup> There were misgivings within the Government of India over Sandeman's rationales for boundary breaking, with Henry Mortimer Durand, later the architect of the British India-Afghanistan boundary, noting: 'I do not attach much value to Sir Robert Sandeman's predictions of trouble. He is always too much inclined to such predictions in support of his views'.<sup>110</sup> Nonetheless, Sandeman's ability to entangle the colonial state in previously unadministered regions committed his superiors to authorise creeping expansion of a similar sort to that in the Naga Hills at the same time.<sup>111</sup>

Within a few years, Sandeman was again advancing the cause of border adjustments through the usual mixture of pessimistic security assessments, optimistic talk of colonial administration as the driver of 'peaceful development', and assertions of sovereignty that deliberately blurred tribal authority, his own influence, and the colonial state's obligations. He wrote in 1888 that 'until the

<sup>103</sup> NAI Foreign A-Political-E, July 1883, No. 30: Sandeman to Foreign Secretary, 30 April 1883, f. 1; no. 31: Sandeman to Foreign Secretary, 21 May 1883, f. 1.

<sup>104</sup> NAI Foreign A-Political-E, July 1883, No. 34: Sandeman to Foreign Secretary, 28 May 1883, f. 2.

<sup>105</sup> NAI Foreign A-Political-E, July 1883, No. 48: Sandeman to Foreign Secretary, 28 June 1883, f. 13; no. 57: Sandeman to Foreign Secretary, 09 July 1883, f. 15.

<sup>106</sup> NAI Foreign A-Political-E, December 1883, Nos. 266–74, Keep-With: Note by J.W.R., 13 November 1883, f. 3.

<sup>107</sup> NAI Foreign A-Political-E, December 1883, No. 271: Sandeman to Government of India, Foreign Department, 16 October 1883, f.7.

<sup>108</sup> NAI Foreign A-Political-E, May 1884, Nos. 210–24.

<sup>109</sup> NAI Foreign External A, May 1885, Nos. 197–300.

<sup>110</sup> NAI Foreign External A, February 1885, Nos. 253–301, Keep-With: Note by H. M. Durand, 3 February 1885.

<sup>111</sup> NAI Foreign External A, July 1886, Nos. 220–30.

whole of the Kakar tribe owning the supremacy of the "Badshah of Zhob" is fully recognised as within my jurisdiction, our frontier railways, frontier road, and position in Baluchistan cannot be considered as safe'.<sup>112</sup> The Government of India acquiesced on the proviso that Kakar territory was not formally annexed but instead brought under British 'protectorate'.<sup>113</sup> Like the 'political control' territory at the eastern fringes of the Naga Hills, this designation served to formalise hazy territory, signalling the colonial government's acceptance of Sandeman's efforts to downplay the meaning of fixed, linear borders.

Amorphous boundaries may have been embraced when it was tribes on the other side of the line, but when the Punjab Government complained that Sandeman was infringing on the boundary between its sphere of influence and that of the Baluchistan Agency, he found persuading his superiors tougher. The clash occurred in 1890, as Sandeman sought to extend the area under his influence northwards from the Zhob Valley, across the Suleiman mountains, into the area to the west of the very District in Punjab where he had started his career, Dera Ghazi Khan. Sandeman once again cited multiple justifications for intervening across this boundary, including attacks on communities under British protection in Balochistan from men in Punjab's sphere of influence, and the notion that 'in these countries there is no such thing as a "no-man's-land"'.<sup>114</sup> This claim of the essentially borderless nature of frontier territory, and therefore the need for officials 'on the spot' to decide the space of administrative intervention, met with resistance from the Chief Commissioner of Punjab and the Government of India. The need to prevent bickering between neighbouring administrations led the latter to set down a newly specific boundary between Punjab and Balochistan's spheres of influence. What form the border should take proved a thorny issue. A division along supposed ethnic lines having been ruled out 'owing to the migratory habits of the tribes', there were extensive discussions on whether watersheds or rivers would best be 'understood by the tribes concerned'.<sup>115</sup> The majority decision in the Government of India – with two dissenters – was that a river would be superior as the watershed would have to be 'mark[ed] out', which might 'have the effect of creating the impression that the two administrations which the boundary would serve to divide were rival and antagonistic'.<sup>116</sup> Having a border convey to nearby semi-subjects such an accurate impression of regional governments as

<sup>112</sup> NAI Foreign External A, February 1889, No. 186: Sandeman to Government of India, Foreign Department, 24 February 1888.

<sup>113</sup> NAI Foreign External A, July 1889, No. 468: Government of India, Foreign Department, to Sandeman, 11 July 1889.

<sup>114</sup> NAI Foreign Secret E, November 1890, No. 18: Sandeman, Note on James Lyall's Memo, 1 August 1890.

<sup>115</sup> On watersheds as borders in late-nineteenth-century British India, see Gardner, 'Moving watersheds'.

<sup>116</sup> NAI Foreign Secret E, November 1890, No. 23: Government of India, Foreign Department, to Punjab Government, 7 October 1890. The two dissenters from the majority verdict were Sir

disconcertingly close to warring tribes would never do. This botched resolution to the episode served as an exception that embedded the rule accepted increasingly at all levels of the colonial state: fixed administrative borders should be avoided unless strictly necessary.

As was the case for many officials stationed at the outskirts of Assam, for Sandeman the idea of definitive boundaries was anathema – a block on personal ambition and on the free-ranging interventions he deemed appropriate at the fringes of British India. By the later decades of the nineteenth century, administrators at the upper echelons of the administrative apparatus in British India came to acquiesce in, and even celebrate, such amorphous frontier spaces. After Sandeman's death and before he became Viceroy in 1899, George Curzon wrote of Sandeman as a model frontier official. In doing so, he extolled a combination of hazy and non-limited frontier space and personal authority: 'It is no good to have a "Warden of the Marches" unless you give him a comparatively free hand'.<sup>117</sup> In invoking as a model of the colonial frontier official the men who had controlled the frontier areas between England and Scotland and England and Wales during the late medieval period, Curzon betrayed the extent to which senior officials came to support the subversive tendencies of their subordinates. Some fifty years earlier, Sandeman's role-model John Jacob had defended his own repeated and violent crossings of the boundary between Upper Sind and the Balochs (see Section 4.1) by claiming: 'History gives us an exact counterpart of the frontier as it is and has been (not what it may become) in that of the Marches of Wales and the borders of Scotland . . . To keep this Country in safety and quiet there must be in effect, a warden of the Marches, by whatever name called'.<sup>118</sup> By Curzon's time in India, such a sentiment had become orthodoxy. It was widely felt that borders should not act as strict limits on the activities of 'men on the spot'. To a significant extent, official subversion had become the norm. In large part, this can be traced to ubiquitous boundary violations from the mid-1860s by turbulent agents of the colonial state – episodes that shifted the meaning, location, and forms of borders at the fringes of British India.

### 1.5 'Substantial Pillars': Marking the Boundary in Northern Assam During the 1870s

In Balochistan and Naga Hills, the flurry of frontier making from the mid-1860s consistently worked against the principle of fixed border delineation – that is,

Charles Elliott and Sir David Barbour: see NAI Foreign Secret E, November 1890, Nos. 24–25: minutes by Elliott, 29 September 1890, and Barbour, 30 September 1890.

<sup>117</sup> Quoted in Thornton, *Sandeman*, p. 295.

<sup>118</sup> NAI Foreign Secret, 28 April 1848, No. 20: Jacob to Shaw, Commanding in Upper Sind, 24 November 1847, ff. 1238–39.

agreeing boundaries in principle and setting down in written documents and maps. In some other areas during this era, however, borders were not only delineated but also demarcated – marked in material form in the territory itself. But in cases in which material inscription was attempted, erecting and subsequently maintaining boundary markers proved difficult. The limited capacity and will of the British Indian state to impose and uphold materially manifested borders indicate the variability of colonial power in fringe regions.<sup>119</sup> In these areas, officials often perceived that they were losing the struggle to put in place physical objects that would serve as reliably robust devices communicating the colonial state’s spatial categories to nearby inhabitants. Officials quickly came to perceive as misguided the hope that squat pillars composed of stones and sand would stand for sovereign power and both instantiate and uphold boundaries of the colonial state’s choosing. Border infrastructure at the outskirts of British India frequently remained limited in form and restricted – or even actively problematic – in effect.

In 1873 to 1874, during the cold season when most governmental activity in frontier areas of the northeast took place, the northern boundary of Darrang District in Assam was surveyed and partially demarcated. The process was haphazard and riven with confusion. Officials understood this section of the border in a number of incompatible ways: some thought it was the Inner Line across which colonial subjects could not pass without prior permission; others believed it marked the outer limit of the state’s sovereign claims. It was one instance of many in nineteenth-century British India of border directives becoming lost in transmission and creatively adapted at the frontier. The Darrang boundary was also something of an afterthought, set down by a survey party primarily tasked with establishing a border between the sovereign territories of Bhutan and British India.<sup>120</sup> The extension into Darrang did not obtain the approval of the Assam Government: Richard Keatinge, the Chief Commissioner, claimed that ‘to survey and define a boundary already laid down by Treaty is one thing, to lay down a new boundary between ourselves and savage tribes who are controlled by no central Government, and with whom Treaties are impossible, is quite another’.<sup>121</sup> Here was another instance of British officials’ assumption that borders were first and foremost paper objects coming into conflict with their belief that no such agreements were possible with tribes without written languages or the authority structures necessary to render such agreements durable.<sup>122</sup> Such internal contradictions were significant contributors to the limited realisation of the borders supposed to define colonial frontiers.

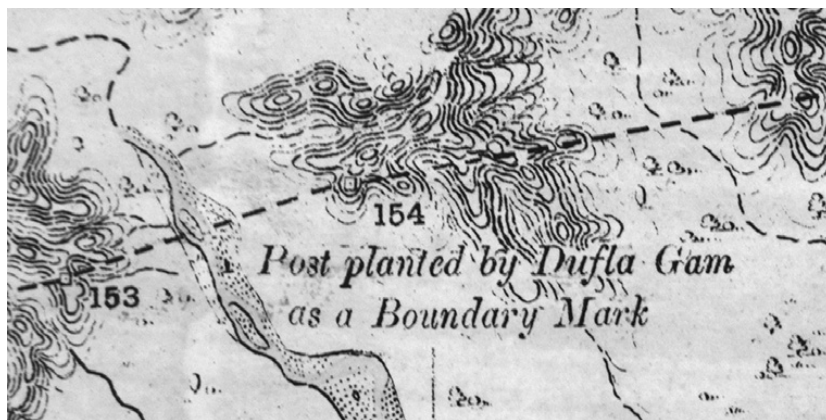
<sup>119</sup> On the intersection of materiality and state power, see Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>120</sup> NAI Foreign Political A, March 1876, No. 505: Keatinge to Government of India, 17 May 1875, ff. 2–3.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 3.

<sup>122</sup> On similar conflicts in present-day Himalayan India, see Mathur, *Paper Tiger*.

Keatinge's assumption that 'there must . . . be a risk that the tribes will look upon the Surveyor and his guard as people who are defining the boundary in their own interests, and who, being few, may safely be opposed' pointed to another common complicating factor in boundary making at British India's outskirts.<sup>123</sup> The assumed proclivity to violence of frontier communities coupled with the notion that they would see material markers of boundaries as unwarranted intrusions generated concerns among many British administrators. The Darrang demarcation party met with no resistance despite the fact that it was simultaneously tasked with enforcing an economic blockade of the Dafla community to the north of the border. But the apprehension of violence alone was sufficient to create problems: one planned boundary pillar was not built on the basis that it was at too great a distance from the Daflas for the party to confidently enforce the blockade.<sup>124</sup> It seems that the Daflas engaged with the logic of making territorial claims through material objects. Unfortunately for the British, this evidence came in the form of a contradictory assertion of where the border should be located. As recorded in a Revenue Survey map published in 1874, inside the dotted line that joined the pillars set down by the British there was 'a post planted by the Dafla Gam [chief] as a boundary mark' (Figure 1.2).



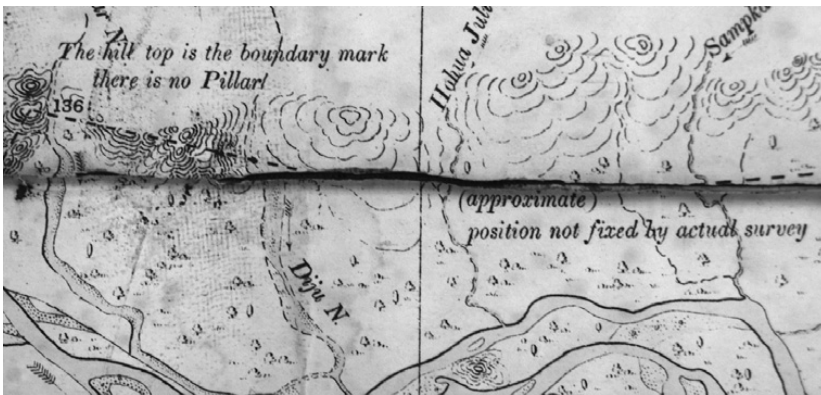
Figures 1.2 and 1.3 Detail of Assam Revenue Survey Map, 'Frontier between District Durrung and the Akha & Dufla Hills' (1874).<sup>125</sup>

<sup>123</sup> NAI Foreign Political A, March 1876, No. 505: Keatinge to Government of India, 17 May 1875, f. 3.

<sup>124</sup> NAI Foreign Political A, March 1876, No. 506: Graham to Keatinge, 18 May 1875, f. 4.

<sup>125</sup> ASA, Map, No. 159.





Figures 1.2 and 1.3 (cont.)

The issue was not, as some colonial officials supposed, that tribal communities failed to understand the concept of border markers, just that they didn't like where the British had placed theirs.

The demarcation party, 'fearing a collision with the Akas', the community to the west of the Daffas, left another pillar unconstructed, 'although,' the lead officer of the party was careful to emphasise 'he marked the site, carried stones, sand, &c'.<sup>126</sup> Perhaps because of the existence of the alternative Daffa border post and an Aka chief's claims to hold territory south of the colonial boundary,<sup>127</sup> administrators took particular care over the ceremony of placing this particular marker two years later. The official report noted that the 'substantial pillar, measuring 9x7x5 feet' was erected 'in presence of the Akha chief'.<sup>128</sup> Despite this combination of material monumentality and choreographed performance, officials nonetheless doubted the border would become meaningful to the population whose territorial limits it ostensibly defined. Lieutenant-Colonel Graham, the officer in charge of demarcation, opined that

along the Bhootan and Thibet frontiers ... we had tangible and established Governments to deal with, whereas in [Darrang] we had to deal with a population in which almost every third man is a gam or chief, and where one man may repudiate

<sup>126</sup> NAI Foreign Political A, March 1876, No. 506: Graham to Keatinge, 18 March 1875, f. 7.

<sup>127</sup> NAI Foreign Political A, March 1876, No. 503: Keatinge to Government of India, 18 May 1875.

<sup>128</sup> NAI Foreign Political A, March 1876, No. 513: Keatinge to Government of India, 8 December 1875.



to-morrow what another has agreed to to-day . . . I cannot look upon it as possessing the degree of stability which a frontier arrangement ought to possess.<sup>129</sup>

Scepticism towards the pillars' communicative potential led the Government of India to agree that demarcation should not be extended any further eastwards along the northern boundary of Assam.

The shortcomings of demarcation generated by officials' apprehensions of human resistance and incomprehension were exacerbated by unruly material elements, especially terrain, in the field. Graham reported that along the portion of the boundary between Assam and Dafla areas, 'no objections were made to our proceedings, the Dufflas merely remarking that "the plain belonged to the sirkar, and the hills to them"'. However, 'an endeavour made by me to get to the hills in this direction failed, owing to the nature of the jungle, which was simply a mass of creepers, thorn-bushes, and broken ground'.<sup>130</sup> The party encountered similar problems along the entire length of Darrang District's northern boundary. 'I had never before seen such a difficult country,' Graham complained. 'The hills ran in any and every direction, their sides were precipitous, and their tops narrow ridges, and when, after hours of climbing and clearing, a view was obtaining, it was found in many cases to be so limited as to prove of no use'. The apparently intractable terrain confounded the original intention 'to place each pillar, if possible at such a height on the first low range as would enable it to be seen from the pillars on either side of it, and give us at the same time a fairly straight boundary line, which would take in all the plain'. Contrary to these orders – and to the presumption that a natural boundary existed between hills and plain – the demarcation party found that

so far from the high hills rising abruptly from the plain, as was the case along the Bhootan frontier, the plains were bounded by a tangled mass of low hills, nearly of the same height, and forming a maze in which days were lost, either in looking for sites for pillars, or in attempting to obtain a glimpse of sites already fixed on.<sup>131</sup>

The material struggles to convey the stones, lime, and sand to hilltops where clearly visible pillars could be located complemented officials' concerns over the communicative hazards of these markers, making the whole enterprise seem relatively futile. The Government of India came to concur with Keatinge's sentiment, expressed in the wake of the Darrang demarcation that 'There is a good deal to be urged in defence of the policy long pursued in Assam of *not* distinctly defining the boundary'.<sup>132</sup>

<sup>129</sup> NAI Foreign Political A, March 1876, No. 506: Graham to Keatinge, 18 March 1875, ff. 7–8.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 6. <sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 5.

<sup>132</sup> NAI Foreign Political A, March 1876, No. 505: Keatinge to Government of India, Foreign Department, 17 May 1875, f. 2. Emphasis in original.

## 1.6 'A Line Shifting': Borders in the Chin-Lushai Hills, 1869–1900

The explosion of official interest in British India's fringes from the later 1860s had a major effect on the upland area sandwiched between eastern Bengal and Burma. Inhabited by Lushais, one of a number of subgroups of the Mizo people from whom the postcolonial Indian state of Mizoram derives its name, this region came within the colonial state's purview as a result of attacks on revenue-paying subjects and the work of hyperactive administrators. In other words, the Lushai Hills emerged from the kind of two-way boundary crossings that were central to frontier making across the colonial subcontinent. After a British military party retreated from the hills in 1869 having largely failed to retaliate against 'the late inroads of the Loosais', administrators still had little idea of the location or meaning of the border. In light of this, the Government of India approved further investigations on the ground by Deputy Commissioner Edgar of the adjacent Cachar District. Edgar's tour of the region and further incursions by Lushais into British-administered areas served primarily to negate any confidence in the possibility of a fixed border. He reported 'constant fluctuations . . . in the relative power of different [Lushai] Chiefs' and claimed that Lushais intermingled with Kukis, a community largely under colonial administration, to a far greater degree than had been thought. Sometimes the populations of entire villages moved from the jurisdiction of Kuki chiefs in British territory to Lushai chiefs beyond, and vice versa. The Lushais also practiced swidden agriculture, known in the region as *jhuming*, generally clearing different ground for planting crops each year. These migrations made it, Edgar stated, 'almost impossible to deal with them effectually'.<sup>133</sup> His suggested remedy amounted to a repudiation of the idea of spatially fixed borders: 'jurisdiction over them should be made to depend on their race, not their geographical position, at any given time. In other words, I should propose to treat them on somewhat the same principal as that theoretically adopted by the Government of the United States in dealing with the Indian tribes'.<sup>134</sup>

Although Edgar's recommendation was not adopted, frontier officials continued to push for a permeable boundary that could be crossed at their discretion. Following another military expedition against the Lushais in 1871 to 1872 to which he had been attached as a Political Officer, T. H. Lewin wrote a long rationale for such a border. Oblivious of Sandeman's dealings in Balochistan during the same era, Lewin stated:

<sup>133</sup> 'Mr Edgar's Notes on the Lushai and other Kookies', in Mackenzie, *History*, pp. 426–36, here p. 428.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

The establishment of a line of defence coincident with that of effective jurisdiction, is doubtless a wise and necessary measure on such a frontier as the north-west, where the tribes are pre-eminently warlike and audacious, and where the establishment of a Government officer or soldiers beyond reach of support would be almost equivalent to their destruction; but among the tribes of this frontier such a policy would be out of place. The circumstances, the people, the country, their social habits and character, are all different, and our mode of dealing with them should, I think, be different also . . . In all matters connected with these tribes it should be remembered that they are not a nation but a segregation of villages, a collection of small separate republics having no coherence; we are not dealing with the faggot, but the severed bundle of sticks.<sup>135</sup>

Lewin made the case that the lack of social cohesion and effective authority structures among the Lushais rendered the very idea of a fixed and closed boundary ridiculous. Unitary borders were, in his parlance, fit for 'nations', but could not work in the case of 'a collection of small republics', when a zone of indeterminate influence was instead appropriate.<sup>136</sup> Over the following two decades, the boundary between the Lushai Hills and colonial territory developed in a form between the Government of India's vision of a relatively fixed, impenetrable line, and Lewin and the Government of Bengal's preference for a permeable zone. The Deputy Commissioner of Cachar was charged with administering political relations with the Lushai headmen, overseeing trading posts and occasionally visiting the more accessible Lushai villages.<sup>137</sup> Despite quickly falling into disuse among the Lushais, officials elsewhere in Assam during the 1880s heralded these tactics as a means of establishing relations with frontier communities in the aftermath of military violence.<sup>138</sup>

Further south, to the east of Chittagong District in Bengal, Lewin forged his own path. As well as securing Government of India authorisation for a permanent post in the foothills at Demagiri, Lewin of his own volition took to staying in the hills at a place called Sirthay Tlang.<sup>139</sup> His motivations in formulating the idea of permeable borders between administered and 'independent' territory were not limited to the sociological concerns that he focused on in official correspondence, nor were they the product of a strategic impulse to expand Britain's imperial possessions. Having a flexible border mattered to Lewin at a personal level. In his memoirs, he wrote that 'the loneliness and grandeur of [Sirthay Tlang] had a strange attraction for me . . . [In the cabin]

<sup>135</sup> T. H. Lewin, 'Report of the Political Officer with the Right Column', in Mackenzie (ed.), *History*, pp. 469–70.

<sup>136</sup> For more on Lewin's idea that the Lushais were not a 'nation', see Lewin, *Hill Tracts*, p. 98.

<sup>137</sup> NAI Foreign A-Political-E, September 1883, Keep-With, ff. 1–2.

<sup>138</sup> NAI Foreign Political A, April 1885, No. 163: Cachar Deputy Commissioner to Assam Chief Commissioner, 22 January 1885; NAI Foreign Political A, August 1881, No. 203: McWilliam, Lakhimpur Deputy Commissioner, 'Note on the Abors', f. 9.

<sup>139</sup> Lewin, *Fly*, pp. 436–56.

I sat long, looking eastward, dreaming of fresh explorations, new adventures'.<sup>140</sup> Lewin's longing gaze into an undefined hinterland was indicative of a way of thinking and being that was wholly inimical with the imposition of any fixed boundary.

Despite Lewin's residence in the hills and the more prosaic activities beyond the administrative boundary further north, information about, and activities in, the Lushai country remained scant during the decade-and-a-half following the 1871 to 1872 expedition. The northern boundary set down upon the expedition's conclusion, although marked by three boundary pillars that were found in 1885 to be in 'pretty fair order', was rarely visited and remained shrouded in thick jungle.<sup>141</sup> With the British invasion of Upper Burma in 1885, the area to the east of the Lushai Hills, known as the Chin Hills, nominally came under British sovereignty. As Thant Myint-U has argued, the annexation came at a stage when British technological superiority was such that the colonial state felt able to impose substantially new administrative structures on much of its new territory, rather than incorporating pre-existing elements.<sup>142</sup> By 1889, 'constant and systematic patrols' had broken up the itinerant bands that had operated across much of Upper Burma, while the chiefs of the Shan States in eastern Upper Burma were coerced into submitting to British rule between 1888 and 1890.<sup>143</sup> However, the Chin Hills and Kachin Hills, the latter of which lay to the east of eastern Upper Assam and was inhabited by people with ethnic and cultural ties to the Singphos who fell under nominal Assamese jurisdiction, seemed altogether different propositions. The administrator J. G. Scott characterised the Chins as 'emphatically savages. They lived by raiding and blood feuds between villages made the country impossible for all strangers'.<sup>144</sup> Scott's assessment of the Kachins, meanwhile, echoed Lewin's view of Lushai social structures (or lack thereof): 'In tackling the Kachins we had to deal, not with a nationality, but with groups of small independent savage communities, with no inter-tribal coherence'.<sup>145</sup> The continuation of violent struggles between the Chin and Kachin communities and the colonial state into the 1890s affected the determination of the western and northwestern boundaries of Burma, to which the Government of Burma directed substantial attention after subjugating the Upper Burmese heartland.

Although not as tumultuous as those in Burma, the late 1880s also witnessed key developments on the Indian side of the Lushai Hills. Border infractions into

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 457–9.

<sup>141</sup> NAI Foreign Political A, April 1885, No. 163: Kennedy to Assam Chief Commissioner, 22 January 1885.

<sup>142</sup> Myint-U, *Making*, p. 252.

<sup>143</sup> J. G. Scott, *Burma: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1924), pp. 346–9.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 349. <sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 353.

the administered Chittagong Hill Tracts in 1888 provided the rationale for military parties from Bengal, Assam, and Burma to impose administrative posts in the hills. Despite this venture establishing a Political Officer at Aizawl in the northern Lushai Hills and apparently securing commitments from some chiefs, the lack of borders between provincial administrations now became seen as a major problem. Once again, the shifting location of Mizo villages and swidden agriculture worked against colonial spatial logics.<sup>146</sup> The various colonial institutions with interests in the region intensively debated both annual and longer-term movements in the Lushai and Chin Hills region. The Chief Commissioner of Assam proposed that the border between his province's administration and that of Bengal should not be a territorially fixed line but 'a line shifting with Jhums [i.e., shifting cultivated plots] of Lushais'. His reasoning was that 'it would probably be found impossible to maintain an arbitrary line intended to restrict the shifting cultivation of the tribes on either side of it'.<sup>147</sup> For the boundary between the portion of the hills under Assam and that under Burma, he tentatively proposed a more conventional fixed border, the Nankathe or Manipur River, 'which flows from north to south in a fairly straight line so far as our present maps can be depended upon'.<sup>148</sup> But even here, the mutability of the region and its people was of at least as much concern as the potential shortcomings of the extant cartography. He noted that 'the Lushais who in 1871–72 used to inhabit the tract [immediately west of the Manipur River] on the map have all moved westward, and we are ignorant of the people who have taken their place'.<sup>149</sup> To add to these qualms, the Chief Commissioner of Burma protested that he could not accept this border as the largest Chin tribe, the Tashons, who had hitherto been subordinate to British Burma, resided mostly on the west bank of the Manipur River.<sup>150</sup>

As in the late 1860s, these persistent indeterminacies called for further knowledge gathering, but the resulting information still did little to clarify administrative boundaries. British expansion into the central portion of the Chin-Lushai Hills met with widespread resistance. Colonial forces sought to sedentarise communities in the region, but their violence often provoked precisely the opposite effect. Villages were burned and, as in the Naga Hills

<sup>146</sup> NAI Foreign External A, August 1890, No. 255: Assam Chief Commissioner to H. R. Browne, Lushai Hills Political Officer, 22 April 1890.

<sup>147</sup> NAI Foreign External A, August 1890, No. 224: Assam Chief Commissioner to Foreign Secretary of India, 27 March 1890; No. 233: Assam Chief Commissioner to Government of India, Foreign Department, 28 March 1890.

<sup>148</sup> NAI Foreign External A, August 1890, No. 233: Assam Chief Commissioner to Government of India, Foreign Department, 28 March 1890.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> NAI Foreign External A, August 1890, No. 262: Burma Chief Commissioner to Foreign Secretary of India, 7 June 1890.

twenty-five years earlier, prohibitions were issued on rebuilding on the same site.<sup>151</sup> Some Lushai chiefs pre-emptively moved their communities beyond the reach of British forces to avoid violence and being coerced into providing labour.<sup>152</sup> Despite these efforts to penetrate the uplands, in 1892 the Foreign Secretary of British India, Henry Mortimer Durand, wrote bluntly about flawed colonial knowledge of the region: 'our information is still too fragmentary to afford a clue to the easiest and most inexpensive method of maintaining peace and order among these hillmen'.<sup>153</sup> The Hills and the people within them remained an unknown, perhaps unknowable, quantity.

The one decision that the British did make in the early 1890s concerned the division of the Lushai Hills into sections administered from Assam and from Bengal. Unable to agree on the proper location of this border, or indeed the principle upon which it might be established, at a conference in Calcutta in 1892 officers from the Assam, Bengal, and Burma governments agreed to abolish the whole idea of a boundary and instead unify the Lushai Hills under the administration of Assam.<sup>154</sup> As with the Mithankot conference of 1871 (Section 1.4), a multi-party meeting was required as clashes between officials attached to various provincial governments generated confusion and friction at frontiers in the later nineteenth century. Like those at Mithankot, the decisions made in Calcutta proved in practice to be indeterminate rather than final. Communications between Aizawl, the administrative post in the northern Lushai Hills, and Lungleh, the post in the southern Hills, were initially inadequate to enable effective unified administration, meaning that the implementation of the non-border was delayed. When the road between the two was completed in 1898, and administration of the southern Hills was handed to Assam, the journey between them still took nearly a month and a separate official remained in charge at each village.<sup>155</sup>

By this stage, the eastern Lushais had tendered their submission to colonial authority following persistent state violence. The Chief Commissioner of Assam pronounced that 'there is not in the Lushai Hills any unexplored "Hinter-land" such as still exists in the Naga Hills to give possible future trouble'.<sup>156</sup> The implication of smooth and even British authority throughout

<sup>151</sup> NAI Foreign Secret E, June 1891, No. 88: McCabe to Assam Chief Commissioner, 19 January 1891.

<sup>152</sup> NAI Foreign External A, December 1892, No. 43: McCabe to Assam Chief Commissioner, 23 July 1892; Reid, *History*, pp. 21–4.

<sup>153</sup> NAI Foreign External A, June 1893, Keep-With No. 1: Durand, Note, 18 December 1892.

<sup>154</sup> Anandaroop Sen, 'The Law of Emptiness: Episodes from Lushai and Chin Hills (1890–98)', in Neeladri Bhattacharya and Joy L. K. Pachuau (eds.), *Landscape, Culture, and Belonging: Writing the History of Northeast India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 207–36, here p. 207; NAI Foreign External A, September 1892, Nos. 9–62.

<sup>155</sup> NAI Foreign External A, February 1898, No. 60: Assam Chief Commissioner, 'Note on the Transfer of Southern Lushai Hills to Assam', 27 January 1897.

<sup>156</sup> Ward, quoted in Reid, *History*, p. 25.

the Hills was not altogether accurate. The boundary with Burma remained far from complete, with small pockets of space falling between the acknowledged administration of any of the three provincial governments. In 1893, it was found that such an area existed at the southern end of the South Lushai Hills, where it bordered Burma's Arakan Hill Tract. When the Government of Bengal suggested that this portion of the uplands belonged to Burma, the Chief Commissioner of Burma claimed to be unable to locate any record of the survey from the 1850s that had placed the area under his jurisdiction and pointed instead to more recent revenue surveys suggesting that it lay beyond Burma's authority. Contrary to avowed efforts to incorporate the whole of the uplands, the two administrations eventually agreed that this territory could be left as 'no man's land' unless its inhabitants gave any trouble.<sup>157</sup>

Only a year later, the Bengal Government was forced to revise its preparedness to leave the tract unadministered, as quarrels sprang up between inhabitants of the South Lushai Hills and the hinterland beyond. Adopting a similar tone to his counterparts in the eastern Naga Hills, John Shakespear, the Superintendent in charge of the South Lushai Hills, wrote: 'the fact that there are villages within a day's reach of [the administered village of] Sherkor which pay no tribute, are never visited, and are allowed to raid each other just as they like cannot help being bad for our prestige'.<sup>158</sup> Shakespear implemented administrative interventions, including taxation and a labour demand, in this 'anomalous' pocket without any formal revision of the boundary of the South Lushai Hills. Having passed unnoticed until Assam took control of the entire Lushai Hills in 1898, Shakespear's covert expansion suddenly met with the Government of Burma's disapproval. In the ensuing dispute, Shakespear and his superiors in Assam once again deployed the concept of the flexible border. 'The Lushais', the Chief Commissioner of Assam argued, 'are a *jhuming* and nomad folk, and it is difficult therefore to demarcate any permanent boundary which will be respected in practice'.<sup>159</sup> Following the Government of India's ratification, the southern Lushai Hills boundary was left to fluctuate with the cultivation of the area's inhabitants.

Over time, British administration in the Chin-Lushai Hills 'settled' previously mobile communities. In addition, ethnographic stereotyping and Assam and Burma's pursuit of distinct policies made the division between

<sup>157</sup> NAI Foreign External A, February 1894, No. 40: Burma Chief Commissioner to Government of India, Foreign Department, 11 September 1893; No. 51: Bengal Government to Government of India, Foreign Department, 24 November 1893.

<sup>158</sup> NAI Foreign External A, October 1894, No. 221: J. Shakespear, 'Report on the Administration of the South Lushai Hills'.

<sup>159</sup> NAI Foreign External A, July 1898, No. 60: Assam Chief Commissioner to Government of India, Foreign Department, 7 June 1898.



inhabitants of the Chin Hills and the Lushai Hills more pronounced. Although border crossings still continued, spatial separation between Chin and Lushai settlements was enforced more vigorously from the later 1890s, beginning with the destruction of a village constructed by Chins in the Lushai Hills after its residents refused to leave. In this instance, the Chief Commissioner of Assam noted, 'the boundary of the Tyao River is one that admits of no dispute . . . It is necessary to be very particular in these hills regarding the settlement of outsiders on lands recognized as belonging to the local Chiefs'.<sup>160</sup> Measures to impose spatial fixity developed gradually within the Lushai Hills as well as on the Lushai-Chin boundary. Concerned that with increasingly settled conditions in the Hills, the larger Lushai villages would steadily fragment into smaller hamlets, making tax and labour collection more difficult and weakening chiefly authority, Shakespear instituted 'Land Settlement' around the turn of the twentieth century. Under this system, each chief was assigned a fixed area in which his community could move about.<sup>161</sup> Shakespear summed up the policy and the rationale behind it by stating: 'every chief has his boundaries now and I should not like to subdivide the land further'. The scheme was one of numerous localised borders and continued to operate as the main socio-spatial principle in the Lushai Hills until India's independence.<sup>162</sup>

Placed alongside his simultaneous advocacy of a flexible border at the south of the Lushai Hills, Shakespear's concern with laying down internal boundaries and policing the divide between the Chin Hills and his district was indicative of the wider ambivalence among colonial officials on the efficacy of fixed borders in a shifting area. In the 1870s and again in the 1890s, administrators in Bengal, Assam, and Burma responded to their avowedly limited understanding of the Chin-Lushai Hills and the nomadic tendencies of its inhabitants with a mixture of appeals to institute divisions and suggestions that linear boundaries were not viable or desirable. Making and breaking borders in the Chin-Lushai region, as elsewhere at the frontiers of British India, was never a decisive or unconflicted act but a process of competing interests. It drew on myriad elements beyond purely spatial ones, including sociological understandings of the people who inhabited these regions, and the hopes and fears of administrators themselves. These officials understood that the imposition or violation of a border could constitute their personal authority. The lines between these ambitions and governmental undertakings were as fuzzy as those the British rendered and erased in the frontier hills.

<sup>160</sup> NAI Foreign External A, October 1899, No. 40: Assam Chief Commissioner to Government of India, Foreign Department, 13 September 1899.

<sup>161</sup> Reid, *History*, pp. 35–44. <sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

### 1.7 'As If Our Territory': British India's International Boundaries at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

It seems at first glance reasonable to assume that the Durand Line separating Afghanistan and British India was a more authoritative imposition than the earlier borders that defined colonial frontiers. Unlike these boundaries, which had to be negotiated with numerous communities, it was an international border agreed between the Foreign Secretary of British India and the Amir of Afghanistan when the colonial state was by some measures at the peak of its powers. However, it has proved to be deeply problematic: the Afghan and post-colonial Pakistani states have both disavowed its legitimacy.<sup>163</sup> The original resistance to the Durand Line came not only from representatives of Kabul but also from inhabitants of the uplands it bisected; the actions of multiple parties reshaped and undermined the border. And just as in northern Darrang twenty years before, material markers were a key part of the Durand Line's curious border effects, more often prompting subversion than communicating sovereign power.

Despite making some significant departures from the boundary line that had been agreed with other senior members of the Government of India prior to his departure, Henry Mortimer Durand, still Foreign Secretary of British India, returned from Kabul in 1893 satisfied that he and the Amir had agreed 'a well-defined' border.<sup>164</sup> From the perspective of his grand strategic motives, his self-congratulation at the conclusion of the mission seemed justified. The boundary completed the delineation of an Afghan buffer state separating the British and Russian players as they played out what would be the last moves of the 'Great Game'.<sup>165</sup> But the delineation in Kabul had no material reality until Boundary Commission demarcation parties, comprising British and Afghan members, took the field from early 1894. And as Thomas Holdich, the lead surveyor involved in demarcating the border, later acknowledged, 'the process of demarcating a boundary . . . is the crux of all boundary making . . . It is in this process that disputes usually arise, and weak elements in the treaties or agreements are apt to be discovered'.<sup>166</sup> There were persistent disagreements between British and Afghan surveyors over the actual location of the border agreed in Kabul, which were further complicated by numerous inaccuracies in

<sup>163</sup> Elisabeth Leake, *The Defiant Border: The Afghan-Pakistan Borderlands in the Era of Decolonization, 1936–1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>164</sup> MSS Eur D727/4: Durand to Sir Steuart Bayley, 27 November 1893.

<sup>165</sup> On the delineation of Afghanistan's other boundaries during the 1870s and 1880s, see Hopkins, 'Bounds'; Francesca Fuoli, 'Incorporating North-Western Afghanistan into the British Empire: Experiments in Indirect Rule through the Making of an Imperial Frontier, 1884–87', *Afghanistan*, 1, 1 (2018), pp. 4–25.

<sup>166</sup> Thomas H. Holdich, *Political Frontiers and Boundary Making* (London: Macmillan, 1916), p. 208.

the maps that Durand had used in his negotiations with the Amir (see the introductory section to Chapter 2).<sup>167</sup> The result was that, as Holdich himself admitted, 'no part of the boundary defined . . . was the actual boundary of the agreement'.<sup>168</sup> A pertinent example of the failures of demarcation at the level of sovereign statehood was the performance of contradictory boundaries that continued to take place every time a caravan passed through the Khyber Pass. British and Afghan guards would accompany the caravans to the different villages through which their respective governments claimed the border ran, so for a distance the two military parties travelled together, locked in a tense impasse.<sup>169</sup>

Although thinly veiled hostility and confusions were rife between British and Afghan boundary commissioners, the opposition to the border of numerous inhabitants of the region between fully administered British India and Afghanistan was more consequential. From the British annexation of Punjab until Durand's agreement with the Amir, many Pashtuns had continued to contest the administrative boundary of Punjab. Like its equivalent in Assam, this border was defined intermittently and hazily, with infrequent material demarcation. Laying down a sovereign boundary between British India and Afghanistan had variable consequences for the administrative boundary. Colonial administrators debated the significance of the Durand Line on the governed limits of Punjab before, during, and after the parties of Boundary Commissioners took to the field. An especially intense and unresolved discussion regarded the region to the west of Dera Ismail Khan District in southern Punjab inhabited by Waziri tribes. Richard Bruce, the Deputy Commissioner of this District and a protégé of Robert Sandeman, saw the imposition of the sovereign border as an opportunity to push for British interventions in Waziri affairs, which he had long advocated.<sup>170</sup> Durand agreed with Bruce that the 'natural consequence' of demarcation in this area was that the colonial government should tax and employ Waziris in militias. 'We should,' he wrote, 'without annexing, bring the whole [Waziri] tribe into order, and insist upon the stoppage of raids and fighting, and gradually make the country free to our political officers'.<sup>171</sup>

Other members of the Punjab Government and the Government of India dissented from these understandings of the border in various ways. The ensuing debates particularly focused on the effect of the 'democratic' structure of

<sup>167</sup> IOR/L/PARL/2/284/9: *Agreement Signed by Mr R. Udny and Sipah Salar Ghulam Haidar Khan* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1896), pp. 3–4.

<sup>168</sup> Thomas H. Holdich, *The Indian Borderland 1880–1900* (London: Methuen, 1901), p. 242.

<sup>169</sup> MSS Eur F111/315, *Khyber Administration Report, 1899–1900*, f.77; Holdich, *Indian Borderland*, p. 242. See also Robert Warburton, *Eighteen Years in the Khyber: 1879–1898* (London: John Murray, 1900), pp. 142–43.

<sup>170</sup> NAI Foreign Secret E, July 1890, No. 115: Bruce, 'Memorandum', 6 November 1889.

<sup>171</sup> NAI Foreign Secret F, July 1894, Nos. 402–34, Keep-With No. 1.

Waziri communities – that is, their lack of authoritative leaders – on colonial spatial policies.<sup>172</sup> As in the Chin-Lushai Hills around the same time, reworkings of frontier space were bound up with tentative and conflicting notions of internal tribal dynamics. In the face of such difficulties, the Government of India wavered when delivering its verdict on the implications of demarcation ahead of the Waziri Boundary Commission taking the field. It instructed officials ‘to interfere as little as [possible] in [the Waziris’] internal affairs’. Contradictorily, it also claimed that the international boundary meant the colonial state had ‘assumed a measure of responsibility for the peace of the Afghan border which has not hitherto been ours’, demanding more active oversight of the Waziris. The Government of India decided that a military post should be established beyond the existing administrative border and Waziri potentates identified and given financial allowances.<sup>173</sup> However, three members of the Government dissented from this policy, claiming that the post in Waziri country amounted to ‘practically assuming . . . administrative control’. Given the loose social constitution of the tribes, these men argued, the outpost was ‘eminently calculated to set the whole frontier in a blaze’. This minority instead advocated a continuation of the policy prior to Durand’s trip to Kabul, which they described succinctly as ‘resting on our present frontiers and influencing the Waziris from without’.<sup>174</sup>

The lack of clarity among officials on the Durand Line’s intended impact on nearby inhabitants and tentative talk of extending British authority intersected with heightened suspicions among Waziris. When the Boundary Commission finally assembled in the Waziri uplands in October 1894, it met with the most intensive immediate contestation of the Durand Line. A party of more than 1,200 Waziris assembled and attacked the Commission at the village of Wana, before it had begun to materially inscribe the border by erecting boundary posts or piling up stones.<sup>175</sup> Even Holdich, who suspected the Afghan state’s complicity in almost every instance of resistance to colonial projects along the frontier, admitted that ‘there was no suspicion of concerted action about this affair at Wana. The Waziris had heard about the boundary that was to be placed between them and their refuge’.<sup>176</sup> Along the Durand Line’s entire length, substantial armed brigades accompanied the parties of surveyors, political officers, and civil administrators, purportedly to fight off anticipated resistance

<sup>172</sup> The quotations and narrative in this paragraph are drawn from NAI Foreign Secret F, July 1894, Nos. 402–34, Keep-With No. 1.

<sup>173</sup> NAI Foreign Secret F, July 1894, No. 433: Government of India to Secretary of State, 10 July 1894.

<sup>174</sup> NAI Foreign Secret F, July 1894, No. 431: Minute of Dissent signed by Westland, MacDonnell and Pritchard, 6 July 1894.

<sup>175</sup> *Report on the Punjab Frontier Administration, 1894–1895* (Lahore: Punjab Government Press, 1895), pp. 7–8.

<sup>176</sup> Holdich, *Indian Borderland*, p. 238.

but also to display British military might and thereby instantiate the colonial border. Following the attack at Wana, a large military party was sent to attack the groups deemed responsible and thereby clear the way for the return of the demarcation party for a second attempt to inscribe the border materially.<sup>177</sup> Once again, British administrators understood violence to be an essential element of founding a new boundary. The Government of India also deemed it prudent to maintain a permanent garrison of troops at Wana in case of continued border refusals; in fact, this served primarily to further inflame discontent.<sup>178</sup>

Initial British estimates of when the demarcation parties would complete their work were hopelessly inaccurate.<sup>179</sup> Indeed, the idea of finishing the Durand line proved overly optimistic: the demarcation parties left the field – often with fewer men than they had contained at the outset – without setting down material markers along large sections of the proclaimed border. Disagreements with their Afghan counterparts, what Holdich termed ‘the geographical impossibility’ of laying down some portions of the agreed boundary owing to difficult terrain, and above all resistance from Pashtun and Baloch communities overcame the capacity of the British to transfer the boundary from inadequate map to intractable territory.<sup>180</sup> Furthermore, the cessation of demarcation did not represent an end to the unrest induced by the Durand Line.<sup>181</sup> For many who resided in its vicinity, the border indicated British interference and was therefore a continuing source of irritation. Holdich wrote, sympathetically if simplistically, that from the perspective of upland communities, ‘a boundary line indicated by piles of stones had been drawn across their hills to show that theoretically they were shut, and that beyond that line they might appeal no more to people of their own faith and their own language in times of difficulty and disaster’.<sup>182</sup> There may have been widespread awareness of the Durand Line among frontier communities, but this did not translate into practical acknowledgement of the border as a limit that should not be transgressed. As late as 1939, one British official bluntly stated that ‘many [Pashtuns] would not admit that the British had any right to control their actions across the Durand Line’.<sup>183</sup> Acts of border subversion continued apace after 1895, ranging from quotidian practices of ignoring the boundary, which concerned the British most

<sup>177</sup> *Report on Punjab Frontier Administration, 1894–1895*, p. 7.

<sup>178</sup> H. C. Wylly, *From the Black Mountain to Waziristan* (London: Macmillan, 1912), pp. 459–66; Evelyn Howell, *Mizh: A Monograph on Government's Relations with the Mahsud Tribe* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1979 [1931]), pp. 14–7.

<sup>179</sup> Holdich, *Indian Borderland*, pp. 238–39. <sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.

<sup>181</sup> *Report on the Punjab Frontier Administration, 1895–1896 and 1896–1897* (Lahore: Government of Punjab Press, 1896, 1897).

<sup>182</sup> Holdich, *Indian Borderland*, p. 338.

<sup>183</sup> William Barton, *India's North-West Frontier* (London: John Murray, 1939), pp. 19–20.

when they involved acts such as trading stolen British guns with Afghans, to much grander rejections.<sup>184</sup>

That the border was a difficult-to-control process rather than a stably imposed entity became abruptly apparent to officials in 1897 with numerous outbreaks of unrest, which collectively constituted the largest uprising the British faced in their century of frontier administration in the northwest. As Robert Nichols and David Edwards have shown, the episode was not the ‘fanatical’ uprising that many stationed at the frontier and more distant commentators claimed.<sup>185</sup> Rather, the border was a vital contributor to a widespread show of resistance directed against heightened colonial intervention. Even the Secretary of State for India acknowledged as much in a letter to the Viceroy, saying that delimiting the Line ‘furnished the religious preachers with material for stirring up alarm and jealousy among the tribes, who were thus persuaded to connect the delimitation with the ulterior designs upon their independence’.<sup>186</sup> In 1897, the border also proved problematic to the colonial state in another, somewhat contradictory, sense. Many Pashtuns involved in the uprising crossed the border into Afghanistan to avoid military retaliation, then recrossed – often with kinsmen officially under Kabul’s sovereignty – to attack colonial infrastructure and subjects.<sup>187</sup> The border was porous in all the wrong ways from a British perspective – a significant irritant but flimsy deterrent that became detached from its supposed function as a marker of state power and unitary sovereignty.

While the Durand Line provoked intense resistance, the border separating northeastern British India and south-eastern Tibet was ineffective in a distinct way: for decades after its declaration in 1914, it was largely forgotten. As Bérénice Guyot-Rechard shows, the upper echelons of the colonial state engaged in this border-making project reluctantly and subsequently refused to commit the resources needed to instantiate the boundary as a meaningful

<sup>184</sup> The trade in stolen arms was a major concern for the British and reached a significant scale towards the end of the nineteenth century: MSS Eur F111/315: ‘Report on the Traffic in Arms on the North-Western Frontier by the North-Western Frontier Arms Trade Committee’, 18 April 1899, ff. 10–40.

<sup>185</sup> Officials forwarding the ‘fanaticism’ explanation included, most notably, Robert Warburton and Harold Deane: Warburton, *Eighteen Years*, pp. 290–8; IOR/L/PARL/2/284/13: *Frontier and Overseas Expeditions from India Vol. II*: (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1898), pp. 59–63. Subsequent histories endorsing this explanation include J. G. Elliott, *The Frontier 1839–1947: The Story of the North-West Frontier of India* (London: Cassell, 1968), pp. 157–58, 165–9. However, some other accounts attributed the rising primarily to the Durand line: for example, Wylly, *Black Mountain*, pp. 311–12. Robert Nichols’s historical anthropological account disputed the importance of religious millenarianism in the revolt: Nichols, *Settling*, xxxi. For a critical account of the British discourse of ‘fanaticism’ in 1897, see David B. Edwards, ‘Mad Mullahs and Englishmen: Discourse in the Colonial Encounter’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 31, 4 (1989), pp. 649–70.

<sup>186</sup> IOR/L/PARL/2/284/13: Secretary of State for India to Viceroy, 28 January 1898, p. 177.

<sup>187</sup> Peshawar Commissioner to the Amir of Afghanistan, 13 August 1897, p. 75.

object for local populations or British frontier officials.<sup>188</sup> After it had been agreed between Henry McMahon, Foreign Secretary of British India, and the Tibetan Government (and, famously, refuted by the Chinese Government), the boundary was not publicised for fear of antagonising Russia. By this stage, the Chinese expansion into Tibet that had been a prime rationale for the colonial state to set a sovereign boundary had receded.<sup>189</sup> The secrecy of the border and lack of effort to give it shape through material demarcation or performed activities meant that by the mid-1930s, the Assam authorities professed to be entirely unaware of its existence.<sup>190</sup>

Although its effects were very different, this border resembled the Durand Line in more ways than its being colloquially named after the Foreign Secretary of British India who negotiated it. The McMahon Line, like its counterpart on the opposite side of the colonial subcontinent, was not a definitive clarification of British India's sovereign territory. It was thoroughly entangled with extant colonial boundaries to the north of the Brahmaputra Valley, including the *posa* border and the Inner Line, that constituted variegated administrative spaces and enabled frontier officials to operate in the region with limited oversight. Chinese moves into southeast Tibet during what proved to be the final years of the Qing empire was a major imperative for the British to set a sovereign border. The Chinese challenge to the northeast was short-lived relative to the decades-long saga of hypothesised Russian interference in the northwest. But in 1910, it emerged that Chinese administrators were making concrete inroads among communities with direct access to the Assam valley, presenting a more immediate threat to administered colonial India than the Russians ever had.<sup>191</sup> British concerns abounded, typified by the assessment of one diplomat that the Chinese 'spread their influence' among tribal populations 'a little year by year ... [and] are determined to extend their administrative area, until they are met by the outposts of their neighbours'.<sup>192</sup> However, as with the limited role of Russian expansion in dictating British borders in northwest India, imperial rivalry interplayed with colonial officials' desire to modify existing boundary arrangements to the north of Assam.

The short-lived burst of British involvement in the eastern Himalaya that culminated with the delineation of the McMahon Line began two years before Chinese incursions into the uplands at the northeastern fringes of Assam in 1910.<sup>193</sup> Noel Williamson, the Political Officer in charge of overseeing unadministered communities to the north of the Brahmaputra Valley, insisted

<sup>188</sup> Guyot-Rechard, *Shadow States*, pp. 31–57. <sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52–53. <sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>191</sup> NAI Foreign Secret-External, January 1911, Nos. 211–40.

<sup>192</sup> Archibald Rose, 'Chinese Frontiers of India', *The Geographical Journal*, 39, 3 (1912), pp. 193–218, here pp. 203–4.

<sup>193</sup> For initial British reports of Chinese expansion, see NAI Foreign Secret-External, January 1911, Nos. 211–40.



a recent incursion of Adis in pursuit of two escaped 'slaves' revealed major flaws in the region's administrative boundary. Williamson persuaded his immediate superiors that 'there is no doubt that Abors must have known that they were in inside British territory', but as they 'have scarcely been subject to any control and have been permitted to cultivate lands in our territory and even to settle in it without making any payment', they did not respect 'the sanctity of the frontier'.<sup>194</sup> It was these crossings of the administrative border that prompted the provincial government to first raise the spectre of contested sovereignty over upland communities. 'If we show ourselves unable or unprepared to protect our subjects and those of our allies who may enter the hills,' it warned its superiors in the Government of India, 'it is just conceivable that the Government of Tibet may consider there is nothing to prevent them from extending their sphere of influence over these hills'.<sup>195</sup> Here was yet another instance in which colonial administrators based at or near frontiers employed talk of grand strategy to lend urgency to an essentially localised set of concerns.

The following years saw officials in Assam continuing to press for interference in the uplands.<sup>196</sup> After news of the Chinese infractions emerged, the Government of India still generally opposed such moves. The Viceroy, Lord Hardinge, plainly stated in December 1910 that 'any forward movement beyond the administrative frontier was strongly to be deprecated. Chinese aggression would . . . be met, not in the tribal territory bordering Assam, but by attack on the coast of China'.<sup>197</sup> The following year, the border-breaking actions of frontier officials swayed the Government of India's stance in unintended fashion. The same telegram that informed the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam that Williamson had superseded his authorised remit on a tour in Adi country and crossed the 'Outer Line' denoting the supposed limits of British influence, also contained news that he had been killed.<sup>198</sup> In the wake of Williamson's death, the Government of India began to agree with its subordinate administrators in Assam that existing border arrangements were inadequate. The Adis, British officials claimed, had persistently violated the treaty that underpinned their *posa* relationship with the colonial state.<sup>199</sup> Even Williamson's illicit border crossing was retold as an act of Adi boundary

<sup>194</sup> NAI Foreign External A, September 1908, No. 5: Eastern Bengal and Assam Government to Government of India, Foreign Department, ff. 1–2.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 2.

<sup>196</sup> NAI Foreign Secret-External, September 1909, No. 299: Eastern Bengal and Assam Government to Government of India, Foreign Department, 29 June 1909, f. 1; NAI Foreign External A, August 1910, Nos. 8–11.

<sup>197</sup> NAI Foreign Secret-External, January 1911, No. 239: Government of India to Secretary of State for India, 22 December 1910, ff. 62–63.

<sup>198</sup> NAI Foreign External A, May 1911, No. 40: Eastern Bengal and Assam Government to Government of India, Foreign Department, 22 April 1911, f. 15.

<sup>199</sup> NAI Foreign External A, August 1911, No. 6: Eastern Bengal and Assam Government to Government of India, Foreign Department, 16 May 1911, f. 3.

breaking: 'It is as much a deliberate attack on us as if the Abors had come into our country, for Mr. Williamson's was a wholly unarmed and peaceful entry solicited by them'.<sup>200</sup> In assenting to military reprisals against the community identified as Williamson's killers, the Government of India for the first time backed 'the determination of a suitable boundary between India and China in this locality'.<sup>201</sup> It was not considerations of great power politics that prompted this shift. Rather, the narrative of Williamson's death spun by officials in Assam prompted new anxieties of the threat that might be posed by upland communities if they were to come under Chinese influence. McMahon averred that the 'tribes . . . are liable to become a serious danger along the length of rich but defenceless British districts', which made it 'more necessary' to communicate to communities along the northern edge of Assam 'that we consider them to belong to us and not to China'.<sup>202</sup> This involved expanding the 'Outer Line', guarding it against Chinese incursions, and taking all inhabitants of the zone between Inner and Outer Lines under 'loose political control'.<sup>203</sup>

In arriving at the notion that a sovereign boundary in this region was necessary, the Government of India and Assam administrators looked to the northwest for justification. The notion of a 'scientific frontier' was notably absent in the northeast due, perhaps, to a combination of its conspicuous vacuity in the northwest and the fact that British knowledge of this boundary region was even sparser than in the northwest. Instead, McMahon suggested that if Chinese influence spread, 'we would then have a series of tribes who would by force of circumstances become as great a local nuisance and danger as the tribes of the North-West Frontier Province'.<sup>204</sup> The Assam administration's comparative perspective was essentially similar: allowing the Chinese to extend their influence up to the existing Outer Line would, it claimed, result in a position 'similar to that on the North-West Frontier if we ceased to control the Khyber and Bolan Passes and retired to the plains, leaving the Afridis and other tribes in possession of all the hill country'.<sup>205</sup> As with many other long-distance comparisons employed to justify frontier activities, invoking the opposite fringe of the subcontinent was a means of replacing local complexities with a simplified tale of events and policies elsewhere. The highly publicised trouble

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 4.

<sup>201</sup> NAI Foreign External A, August 1911, No. 8: Viceroy to Secretary of State for India, 29 June 1911, f. 11.

<sup>202</sup> NAI Foreign External A, August 1911, Nos. 5–17, Keep-With: Note by McMahon, 15 June 1911, ff. 5–6.

<sup>203</sup> NAI Foreign Secret-External, October 1911, No. 60: McMahon to Eastern Bengal and Assam Government, 8 August 1911, ff. 9–10.

<sup>204</sup> NAI Foreign External A, August 1911, Nos. 5–17, Keep-With: Note by McMahon, 15 June 1911, f. 6.

<sup>205</sup> NAI Foreign Secret External, August 1911, No. 439: Eastern Bengal and Assam Government to Government of India, Foreign Department, 25 April 1911, f. 2.

attending the demarcation of the Durand Line might reasonably have been a cause for caution; instead, myths of the northwest's uniquely problematic status became a way of bolstering an already determined course of action.

Regardless of the rhetorical strategies put to work in support of an extended Outer Line, what it entailed in practice remained deeply uncertain in (and long after) 1911. The colonial state had minimal geographical knowledge of the region, and the question of what type of topographic or ethnographic features should properly form the basis for the border's location remained undecided.<sup>206</sup> As plans were set to dispatch three parties into the region with combined punitive, political, and knowledge-gathering functions, disagreements remained even at the very top of the British Government in London as to whether officials on these expeditions should be empowered to determine and demarcate the border. The Secretary of State for India, while recognising potential problems with enabling 'subordinate officers, on their own responsibility' to erect boundary cairns, opined that these men should set the border 'both on account of the difficulty and expense of sending [further] expeditions into these remote and mountainous regions, and in view of the effect likely to be produced on the ignorant tribesmen by repeated incursions of armed parties into their territory'.<sup>207</sup> His counterpart in the Foreign Office disagreed on the basis that a Chinese advance beyond such a border might risk the prestige of the colonial state if it felt unable to respond effectively.<sup>208</sup>

The limited success of all of the expeditionary parties in gathering information on potential border locations complicated this mass of competing concerns further still. Confusion reigned among the officers leading the parties as to the relative priority of surveying the land and securing agreements with tribal potentates.<sup>209</sup> Difficult terrain severely hampered survey and political efforts, with rising rivers, inadequate paths, and struggles communicating with local communities rendering large portions of the uplands inaccessible.<sup>210</sup> Constructing and maintaining a road up the Lohit Valley to the portion of the

<sup>206</sup> NAI Foreign Secret External, October 1911, enclosure to No. 109: 'Memorandum by General Staff Branch' to Survey Parties attached to the Abor Expedition, undated, f.39.

<sup>207</sup> NAI Foreign Secret External, May 1912, No. 202: India Office to Foreign Office, London, 19 October 1911, f. 1.

<sup>208</sup> NAI Foreign Secret External, May 1912, No. 203: Foreign Office to India Office, 26 October 1911, f. 2.

<sup>209</sup> NAI Foreign Secret External, May 1912, enclosure to No. 209: S. G. Burrard, Officiating Surveyor-General of India, to Government of India, Revenue and Agriculture Department, 24 November 1911, f. 6.

<sup>210</sup> NAI Foreign Secret External, May 1912, No. 222: Eastern Bengal and Assam Government to Government of India, Foreign Department, 28 December 1911, f. 14; NAI Foreign Secret-External, May 1912, No. 270: Officer Commanding Abor Expeditionary Force to Chief of General Staff, 10 February 1912; NAI Foreign Secret External, May 1912, Nos. 201–337, Keep-With, Bower, Commanding Abor Expeditionary Force, to Lieutenant-Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam, 11 December 1911, ff. 9–10.

boundary with Tibet that had been a focus of particular British anxiety since 1910 ‘proved a matter of much greater difficulty than was anticipated’.<sup>211</sup> The lead officer on this project followed the trend of rendering comparisons with the northwest frontier, but came to very different conclusions to the projection of British authority into the mountains suggested by his superiors a few years previously. Arguing against placing an armed post at the border in the Lohit Valley, he invoked ‘a parallel case, when Chitral was occupied in 1895, [and] it was not considered necessary to push forward the post to the actual frontier . . . The physical difficulties of this country are much greater than those on the North-West Frontier’.<sup>212</sup> The inaccessibility of portions of the eastern Himalaya coupled with administrators’ perceptions that the threat from Chinese expansion had diminished following the Republican revolution in 1911 to 1912 meant that the McMahon Line was realised in only the most partial ways. Material markers were set down in only a few locations, and colonial officials had little will to enact the border as a precisely located, linear object. However, as in Punjab when the Durand Line was set down, making a sovereign boundary with Tibet in the northeast was tied up with the status of the administrative boundary that separated fully governed territory from the irregular zone beyond. A North-Eastern Frontier Tract under the supervision of Political Officers was created, with adjustments to location and significance of the Inner Line boundary and the adoption of a loose legal framework for dealing with the Tract’s inhabitants.<sup>213</sup> The burst of border making to the north of the Brahmaputra Valley did not, then, result in the creation of a fixed and singular line. Instead, a permanently exceptional frontier space of patchy, irregular sovereign territory was formally instituted.

## 1.8 Conclusion: Limits of the Colonial State

The multiple spaces that collectively constituted the frontiers of the colonial state in India were consistently mutating and never definitively settled. Even efforts around the turn of the twentieth century to set absolute outer limits to colonial sovereignty were partially realised, highly contested, and often overlooked. At British India’s frontiers, the limitations of the state’s ability and will to impose coherent and durable governmental territories were often laid bare. The examples examined in this chapter collectively suggest that from the earliest stages of colonial expansion into Assam, Sind, and Punjab to the end of the nineteenth century, bordering and territory-making were defined by

<sup>211</sup> NAI Foreign Secret-External, February 1914, No. 283: Assam Chief Commissioner to Government of India, Foreign Department, 19 June 1913, f. 40.

<sup>212</sup> NAI Foreign Secret-External, February 1914, enclosure 3 to No. 283: E. C. Tylden-Pattenson, ‘Proposals for Work in the Lohit Valley, 1913-1914’, f. 62.

<sup>213</sup> NAI Foreign External A, April 1915, Nos. 4–10.

multiple slippages rather than being the type of assured projections conventionally assumed to be characteristic of modern state authority. The borders and territories of British India were shifting combinations of practices and ideas, far more complex and less fixed than the areas and lines depicted on maps. They were performed, subverted, and reformulated over time and were subject to interventions by multiple, often conflicting, agents.

Officials variably interpreted most bordering projects, meaning that uncertainties over the location and nature of the boundaries that defined colonial frontiers often existed from the outset. Considering the prevalence of confusions and subversion among agents of the colonial state, it is unsurprising that instantiating borders among populations whose actions they were intended to influence was fraught with difficulties. Such problems were especially apparent in the regions designated by the colonial state as frontiers. These areas were essentially synonymous colonial notions of tribes as generally lacking individuals or institutions with enough authority to enforce binding spatial arrangements. Such stereotypes did not straightforwardly empower the colonial state. Instead, they led many officials to conceive that borders were inevitably doomed to failure, or that repeated bursts of violence were necessary to uphold boundaries. This lent a farcical edge to many colonial frontier-making efforts, as officials sought to implement lines they knew in advance to be impossible.<sup>214</sup>

In frontier India, just as Andrew Walker has shown in the case of the Laos-Siam boundary, the border-making agency of local inhabitants was not only negative.<sup>215</sup> James Scott's famous characterisation of the hill populations of upland South-East Asia as communities seeking above all to escape governmental control fails to capture the variability and complexity of state-tribe relations. Examples from the frontiers of British India suggest that upland and desert- and forest-bound communities (along with the terrain they inhabited) not only opposed the state and its bordering efforts but shaped them in subtler ways.<sup>216</sup> The idea that resistance was a simple act of state refusal was more evident in officials' preconceived apprehensions than in frontier inhabitants' actual responses to bordering projects, which ranged from acceptance to persistent and violent resistance. Even in the case of the Durand Line, which tended towards the latter extreme, the border was not refused outright, but selectively used as a resource – in this instance, for evading colonial violence through crossing to Afghan territory.

Borders were resources for colonial officials every bit as much as for borderland communities. Historians most often approach the spatial

<sup>214</sup> On 'impossible lines', see Kar, 'When Was the Postcolonial?'. <sup>215</sup> Walker, *Legend*, p. 16.

<sup>216</sup> Scott, *Art*, pp. 179–90, passim. On the point of tribes and states constituting each other, see for example Noelle, *State and Tribe*. Scott also argues that tribes and states develop in tandem but exaggerates the role of opposition in this process, arguing that this co-constitution centres on states having a 'tribal problem' and tribes having 'a perennial "state-problem"': *Art*, p. 208.

engagement of the British Indian state during the era of 'high imperialism' in the mid- to late-nineteenth century through strategies, such as irrigation and forest clearance, which sought to render space fixed, productive, and legible.<sup>217</sup> There is no doubt that agents of empire did sometimes seek, in Doreen Massey's words, to 'tam[e] the challenge of the spatial'.<sup>218</sup> But in many cases at India's fringes, such efforts were not only unsuccessful but ambivalent from the outset. Administrators 'on the spot', along with many of their superiors further from frontiers, perceived certain advantages to amorphous boundaries and patchy territories. Unfixed borders were interwoven with notions that the administrative initiatives and interventions of the colonial state should be variable and locally managed, rather than definitively delimited and overseen from distant hubs of empire. This was a trend that fully flourished in the later nineteenth century, when official subversion profoundly shaped frontier spaces in northwest and northeast British India alike. Colonial officials generated conceptions of borders and territory contrary to the clearly delineated and unitary spaces and boundaries generally considered to be integral aspects of the modern state. As soon as we consider the state as a disparate collection of men and materials that had to perform its authority to its subjects and semi-subjects, it becomes apparent that hazy limits and the variegations within territory was a ubiquitous element of colonial spatial engagement, not an exceptional or unusual aberration.

<sup>217</sup> See, for example, Imran Ali, *The Punjab under Imperialism, 1885–1947* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); Sunil Amrith, *Unruly Waters: How Mountain Rivers and Monsoons Have Shaped South Asia's History* (London: Allen Lane, 2018); Sumit Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India: 1200–1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), chs. 6–8.

<sup>218</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005), p. 71.