

The First Boundary of Bangladesh on Sylhet's Northern Frontiers¹

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Bangladesh's geographical perimeter came into being at the partition of British India, in 1947, but the boundary making process that created the territorial enclosure of lands and peoples in Bangladesh began centuries ago. This essay concerns the moment in history when the first boundary that still exists today came into being, to separate Sylhet from what is now Meghalaya. At first sight, it appears this boundary emerged from a brief war on northern borderlands of Sylhet District, pitting the East India Company against mountain Khasia Rajas, after which, the Company drew a new border to mark the northern boundary of Bengal Presidency, in the year 1791. As we will see, however, the process of boundary making was more complex than first appearances indicate: it illustrates intricate interactions between state power and social attachments to the land that even today inform boundaries on the north and east of Bangladesh, as well as social boundaries inside Bangladesh.

Pre-modern Spaces

Mughals appear to have created the first ever region-wide system of state authority in Sylhet, but Sylhet also appears to have remained a marginal Mughal *faujdar* outpost before Murshid Quli Khan began his campaign to expand his resource base in *Bangla Suba*. In 1612, Mughal troops sailed to Sylhet, conquered local Afghans,² and established Mubariz Khan as Faujdar,³ but a major change occurred in the Mughal regime in Sylhet when Murshid Quli Khan began his career as Nawab (1713-1727), having earlier moved his capital from Dhaka to Murshidabad.⁴ In sixty years after 1658, Mughals granted 3,000 acres of forest tax-free to local supporters in Sylhet; but in forty years after 1719, Nawabi grants exceeded ten times that acreage. Almost all forest acres (96%) granted tax-free under Mughal authority in

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² *Bararistan-I-Ghaybi (A History of the Mughal Wars in Assam, Cooch Behar, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa during the reigns of Jahangir and Shah Jahan, by Mir Nathan)* Translated by M.I. Borah, Guhathi: Government of Assam, 1936, pp.110-11.

³ A.B.M. Shamsuddin Ahmed, "Muslim Administration in Sylhet 1303-1765," in *Sylhet: History and Heritage*, Edited by Sharif uddin Ahmed, Dhaka: Bangladesh Itihas Samiti, 1999, p.342.

⁴ See Shirin Akhtar, "Administration of Sylhet Under the Nawabs," in *Sylhet: History and Heritage*, pp.347-66. Abdul Karim, "Suba Bangla: Government and Politics," *History of Bangladesh, 1704-1971*, Edited by Sirajul Islam, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Second Edition, 1997, II, pp.35-68. Sushil Chaudhuri, "General Economic Conditions Under the Nawabs," *History of Bangladesh*, I, pp. 30-67. Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy, and the Market: Commercialization in Rural Bengal, c.1760-1800*, Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2000.

Sarkar Sylhet appear in Nawabi *sanads* dated after 1719, and mostly (59%), after 1748. Forest acres granted explicitly for the purpose of extending permanent cultivation -- on *Madad-i-Maash* tax-free tenures -- represent 59% of all grant acres in all Mughal *sanads*, and most of these acres (68%) appear in Nawabi *sanads* dated after 1748.⁵ Eighteenth century Nawabs -- most of all the last Nawabs -- sponsored agricultural expansion in Sylhet by patronizing Muslim investors who would have been the regime's most vital supporters and who thus received the largest grants of tax-free forest. After 1719, 98% of *Madad-i-Maash* forest acres went in big parcels to Muslims; the cumulative Hindu percent of *Madad-i-Maash* acres granted under Mughal authority declined from 40% in 1719 to 5% in 1759. Brahmans and Hindu temples continued to receive grants, but Muslims who invested in the conversion of forest to farmland received proportionately larger grant subsidies over time. In this context, more new, influential Muslim investors may have begun to settle in Sylhet, which may have set in motion the gradual increase in the Muslim proportion of the population that we see empirically after 1808.⁶

Before Mughal times, we do not find evidence that clearly indicates any state regime exercised authority all across the area that would comprise the Mughal's *Sarkar Sylhet*. Bengal Sultans (1303-1612) waged sporadic campaigns rather than exercising jurisdiction.⁷ When Shah Jalal conquered rajas around Sylhet town and established Islam, in 1303,⁸ and when Ibn Batuta traveled to meet Shah Jalal, in 1346,⁹ the region comprised diverse localities held by Khasias, Garos, Hindus, Muslims, and others.¹⁰ Thus, in Shah Jalal's time, a definite "Sylhet region" does not appear to have existed. Instead, unbounded geographical spaces spanning mountains and plains seem to have housed a great many small territories loosely connected to one another and to distant places, including Sultanate capitals. Waves of Hindu colonization had occurred from the seventh century, when one inscription described Sylhet as land "outside the pale of human habitation, where there is no distinction between natural and artificial; infested by wild animals and poisonous reptiles, and covered with forest outgrowths."¹¹ Copper plate inscriptions contain almost data we have before 1303, indicating

⁵ Calculated from Eaton, *Rise of Islam*, pp.260-1. Numerous grants supported professional service providers, including doctors, like Mohammad Basheer, who received a grant "under the seal of Mohammad Jung Bahabur Subadar of Bengal" of 900 Kulbahs in located in seven different Pergannahs for the provision of medicines and surgery. Sylhet District Records (Bangladesh National Archives) Volume 299, page 22, letter dated 19 October 1789. Henceforth, such citations to the Sylhet District Records appear in this format: SDR299.22:19Oct89.

⁶ Md.Mahbubar Rahman, "Population of Sylhet District During British Period," in *Sylhet: History and Heritage*, p.115; statistical summary of Hindu-Muslim proportions is on p.108.

⁷ A.B.M.Shamsuddin Ahmed, "Muslim Administration in Sylhet 1303-1765," in *Sylhet: History and Heritage*, pp. 335-9.

⁸ Abdul Karim, "Advent of Islam in Sylhet and Hazrat Shah Jalal (R)," in *Sylhet: History and Heritage*, p.131.

⁹ Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, pp.73-77. Abdul Karim, *Corpus of the Arabic and Persian Inscriptions of Bengal*, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1992, 8, 58, 270-3, and *Social History of the Muslims of Bengal*, Chittagong: Baitush Sharif Islamic Research Institute, 1985, pp.129-133. Abdul Karim, "Advent of Islam in Sylhet and Hazrat Shah Jalal (R)," and Dewan Nurul Anward Hussain Choudhury, "Hazrat Shal Jalal (R) and His Life - A Source Study," in *Sylhet History and Heritage*, pp. 129-172.

¹⁰ Abdul Karim, "Advent of Islam," pp.130-1

¹¹ Puspa Niyogi, *Brahman Settlements in Different Subdivisions of Ancient Bengal*. Calcutta: RK Maitra, 1967, p.42. Eaton, *Rise of Islam*, p.258.

sparse habitation by the kinds of people who produced lasting, datable, historical evidence. In the tenth century, inscriptions suggest that land around the Kushiara was most densely populated by frontier communities formed under Kamarupa kings who granted large tracts to Brahmans and their supporters in areas called *Srihatta* and *Khanda Kamarupa*.¹²

Efforts to reconstruct Sylhet's oldest geographical history remain speculative. We can imagine, however, that originally all the land around Sylhet was covered with dense tropical jungle, broken only by flooding rivers. This comprised a most difficult natural environment for the establishment of permanent cultivation, but one of great natural fertility. Amidst massive annual flooding, farmers focused their labor on strategic elevated sites, where flooding fields met habitable land, burned, hacked, and dug out of forest. Clearing forest was extremely difficult work,¹³ and also dangerous, because of the profusion of wild animals. As a result, fierce hunting accompanied hard farming. In this natural environment, nature's topography was a natural resource of enduring significance. The oldest farmland seems to have emerged along rivers where flooding kept forest growth down and provided silt. Farmers would have planted *boro* rice on low ground along rivers, where embankments reinforced river courses and captured silt. Sylhet town's raised site typifies the lowlands by being partly natural and partly constructed. Embankments around Sylhet and Moulvibazar, along the Surma, Kushiara, and Manu,¹⁴ seem to be very old investments in fertile agrarian sites sitting strategically between the lowest, most deeply flooded land and higher land above the flood. Much of the higher land remained covered with jungle in the eighteenth century.

From ancient times, people who created sites of enduring habitation typically endowed them with sanctity.¹⁵ Copper plates provide the oldest record of such activity around Sylhet; its physical reach expanded very slowly. In 1303, Shah Jalal sanctified a Muslim agrarian site that likewise expanded its reach, over time. Many people who were neither Hindu nor Muslim also sanctified sites of social investment on the land. In Cachar, for instance, a cult site for Kapilasram retains the memory of an ancient river goddess, later overshadowed by Siva, after Hindu settlers arrived.¹⁶ In the local Dimasa language,

¹² Abu Imam, "Ancient Sylhet: History and Tradition," in *Sylhet: History and Heritage*, pp. 173-202. See also Chakrabarti, *Ancient Bangladesh*, pp.158-9, and Kamalakanta Gupta, *Copper-plates of Sylhet*. Sylhet: Lipika Enterprises, 1967.

¹³ SDR302.19:12Feb92: "... the expense of clearing in this district is very considerable on account of the thickness of the jungles which can only eradicate [sic] by Bildars and not by burning or cutting or any more simple method [alone] ..."

¹⁴ SDR291.2-3:1Oct79 reports an expense of Rs.2,000 for renewing banks of the rivers "Surma, Coosearah, and Munnoo," saying, "These banks have received no repairs for these last 15 years and were totally swept away in different places for the extent of many miles." Similar events occurred along the Gomati, where river embankments built around 1710 broke in 1783: *Comilla District Records*, I, pp.62, 94-5, 97-99. SDR301.59-60.27July91: All the old "bunds in general in the district are totally out of repair." SDR301.91:19Oct91: Costs for repairing bunds on "Surma, Munnoo, and Cosseah Rivers," in 23 places, totals Kahans 9950.

¹⁵ On the sanctification of sites for agricultural investment, see David Ludden, *An Agrarian History of South Asia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp.66-76 and *Peasant History in South India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp.15-41.

¹⁶ Sujit Choudhury, *Folklore and History: A Study of Hindu Folkcults of the Barak Valley of Northeast India*, New Delhi: KK Publishers, nd (1985?), pp.31-46. Hamlet Bareh, "Khasia-Jaintia State Formation," in *Tribal Politics and State Systems in Pre-Colonial Eastern and Northeastern India*, edited by Surajit Sinha, Calcutta: KP Bagchi, 1987, pp. 261-306.

“Dimasa” means “sons of the river,”¹⁷ and Khasia people in nearby hills still worship river gods, including goddess Kupli.¹⁸ Kapileswar perhaps came to life at an old Kupli cult site, where high caste people worshiped Siva, while other locals venerated the site but not Siva.¹⁹

Kapilasram may encode the incorporation of an old Khasia site by Hindu settlers, who would have participated in a long, complex set of changes on the land. Like other groups now called “tribes,” Khasias once occupied many places in the Ganga basin, where they engaged in shifting rice cultivation.²⁰ Ancient Khasias had pioneered rice farming in Vietnam’s Red River delta, and when conquered there by Vietnamese, scattered up the Red River, into Yunnan (China), and across northern Burma, into Assam, Sylhet, and the Ganga basin. Also in ancient times, Gangetic agrarian societies began to expand eastward, toward Sylhet. The easternmost Mauryan site is a fort settlement on a river route at Mahasthan Garh. In Gupta, Pala, and Sena times, Gangetic cultural sites became more numerous in Bengal. Eastward Gangetic expansion accelerated in the second millennium, with Afghan and Turk conquests, but most dramatically under the Mughals. In each expansionist wave, Gangetic colonization forced local Munda language speakers, including Khasias, to fight, submit, assimilate, and move.²¹

Gangetic territorialism moved into Sylhet very slowly and late, compared to western parts of northern Bengal.²² Sylhet’s vast inundation appears the reason. The Surma and Kushiara are but the biggest of many rivers descending from high mountains of Meghalaya, Tripura, Manipur, and Assam.²³ Thumping earthquakes and river siltation destabilized rivers to send floods in unpredictable directions, while tectonic shifts and river gouging deepened and shifted *haor* depressions.²⁴ Until the Brahmaputra shifted its course a hundred miles south, in 1787, it crossed Mymensingh and emptied into the Meghna at Bhairav Bazar,²⁵ from which point a vast freshwater sea covered the land for half of every year, all across the *haors*

¹⁷ J.B.Bhattacharjee, “Dimasa State Formation in Cachar,” in Sinha, *Tribal Politics and State Systems*, pp.177.

¹⁸ The Kupli (or Kapili) River drains Manipur north into the Brahmaputra. See B.Pakem, “State Formation in Pre-colonial Jaintia,” in Sinha, *Tribal Politics and State Systems*, facing p.244. Mother-goddess imagery has wider use, for instance, along the Jamuna, where Muslim *char*-dwellers call the river, “our mother.” Hanna Schmuck-Widmann, *Facing the Jamuna River: Indigenous and engineering knowledge in Bangaldesh*, Dhaka: Bangladesh Resource Centre for Indigenous Knowledge, 2001, p.1.

¹⁹ Choudhury, *Folklore and History*, pp.31-46.

²⁰ For similarities around Chittagong, see Raja Devasish Roy, “Land Rights, Land Use and Indigenous Peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts,” in *Bangladesh: Land, Forest, and Forest People*, edited by Philip Gain, Dhaka: Society for Environment and Human Development, 1995, pp. 55-6; and *Francis Hamilton Buchanan in Southeast Bengal (1798)*, edited by Willem van Schendel, Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1992.

²¹ Bareh, “Khasia-Jaintia State Formation,” p. 263ff.

²² Abu Imam, “Ancient Sylhet: History and Tradition,” pp.174-85. Barrie Morrison, *Political Centers and Cultural Regions in Early Bengal*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1970.

²³ Dilip K. Chakrabarti, *Ancient Bangladesh: A Study of the Archaeological Sources with an Update on Bangladesh Archaeology, 1990-2000*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2001, pp. 17-21. K.Bagchi, *The Ganges Delta* (Calcutta, 1944). C.Strickland, *Deltaic Formation with Special Reference to the Hydraulic Processes of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra* (Calcutta, 1940).

²⁴ Haroun er Rashid, *Geography*, p.24. Islam, *Villages in the Haor Basin* pp.1-4.

²⁵ M Ataharul Islam, “Population and Environment,” *History of Bangladesh II*, p.701.

spanning Netrokona in the west and Sylhet the east.²⁶ This inland sea deterred settlers from the west. It made the higher plains in the upper Surma-Kushiara basin much more easily accessible from the Barak valley, in the east, where the earliest Hindu settlers originated. Settlers from the west arrived more frequently after the Afghan conquests of Sena rajas, in the thirteenth century. The fourteenth century mobility of Shah Jalal and Ibn Battuta indicate more Gangetic basin immigration following the formation of the Turk Sultanate. In 1612, Koch, Khasia, Garo, and other mobile societies also inhabited many places northeast of the Brahmaputra, but facing unprecedented pressure to submit to the Mughals, many moved to the mountains, where they formed new kingdoms.²⁷ From Mughal times onward, the accelerating expansion of permanent farming in the basins of the Ganga, Brahmaputra, Meghna, Surma, and Kushiara eliminated more and more jungle and drove more and more shifting forest cultivators out of the lowlands.²⁸

Bengali societies evolved on the moving eastern frontiers of Gangetic territorialism, on landscapes also inhabited by many non-Bengali peoples, who lived in highlands and lowlands, and who hunted, farmed, and fished without settling down permanently.²⁹ These mobile people lived in jungle habitats. Their cultural and social practices, including matrilineal kinship, marked them as primitive aliens for Hindus and Muslims alike, and also eventually for Europeans, all of whom invested their social power in expansive territories of permanent sedentary cultivation, urbanism, state revenue, and state authority. Medieval land grants by Hindu rajas represent royal authority patronizing Hindu colonies on agrarian frontiers, where settlers would have struggled to clear jungle and to conquer and assimilate local forest people. Mughal land grants represent a much more powerful regime patronizing local supporters who acquired the power to turn forests into farmland and to subdue or expel jungle people.³⁰ This very long-term process eventually produced the boundary between Sylhet and Meghalaya.

Early Decades of Company Raj

Seventeenth century Sylhet was a frontier of Mughal authority on river highways leading up to highlands held by Khasias, Garos, Ahoms, Dimasas, Boros, and others.³¹ Mughal conquest was never been absolute under the mountains, where Afghans escaped into densely forested hills and into *haors* where Hindus had escaped Afghans three centuries earlier.³² Myriad escape routes made much of the Sylhet basin impossible to conquer, let alone govern minutely. Eighteenth century outskirts of Mughal military power remained borderlands for the authority of Nawabs, and also for the English East India Company, whose Sylhet District was initially the same size and shape as *Sylhet Sarkar* and likewise comprised of a motley collection of contested state jurisdictions.

²⁶ Haroun er Rashid, *Geography of Bangladesh*, p.55.

²⁷ Islam, *Villages in the Haor Basin*, pp.6-9

²⁸ Ludden, *Agrarian History*, pp. 133-40.

²⁹ Fishing tribes included Kaivartas. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, p. 258, n. 78, citing K.N. Gupta, "On Some Castes and Caste-Origins in Sylhet," *Indian Historical Quarterly*, 7, 1931, 725-6ff.

³⁰ See Ludden, *An Agrarian History*, pp.60-129.

³¹ *Bararistan-I-Ghaybi*, pp.158-66, 171-233.

³² Islam, *Villages in the Haor Basin*, p.8

In late eighteenth century Company correspondence, phrasing like, “Sylhet is a frontier province inhabited by a turbulent and disaffected set of people,”³³ became standard. In 1779, one land dispute in Sylhet District brought six hundred armed men against Company soldiers (sepoys), who were “immediately cut down and shot,” before attackers fled to the forest.³⁴ Meanwhile, unconquered Mughal opponents still roamed the lowlands, where highland rulers exercised substantial influence. Khasias held most land north of the Surma and ruled all the mountains above.³⁵ Jaintia Khasia rajas held land north and east of Sylhet town. Cachar rajas held the lower Barak Valley. Tripura rajas ruled southern uplands and adjacent plains. North of the Surma, northwest of Sylhet town, ethnic communities of frontier settlers, called Bengali Khasias, had arisen from alliances between mountain Khasias and lowland Bengalis; and they had once respected Mughals and Nawabs, inside the *jaghir* of Omaid Reza, yet remained independent of Company Raj, as we will see.³⁶

In the 1780s, Sylhet’s large forest area and unruly population kept the East India Company’s land revenue small compared to other Bengal districts. In 1783, the Dinajpur Zamindar spent more on religious events alone than Sylhet District paid revenue,³⁷ and in 1785, the Rajshahi Zamindar’s monthly tax (*kist*)³⁸ exceeded Sylhet’s annual tax assessment (*jamma*).³⁹ Yet the Company increased Sylhet taxation as much as possible. The Nawab had reportedly collected 3,50,000 Kahans of cowries in Sylhet, all spent locally, mostly on the army, and “little more was expected by government [in Murshidabad] than a few choice elephants, some chunam [limestone], oranges, and birds of handsome plumage.” In 1776, Collector Holland raised Sylhet’s total revenue demand to 8,00,101 Kahans. In 1783, the district revenue contractor, or “farmer” (called in Sylhet a Waddadar), Goyaram Metre (who served to 1789), raised demand to 9,36,000 Kahans.⁴⁰ State tax demands on Sylhet landowners thus almost tripled in eight years after 1775, a much higher increase than in

³³ This quote from SDR294.156:12Dec86.

³⁴ SDR291.55.3Nov79.

³⁵ B.Pakem, “State Formation in Pre-colonial Jaintia,” facing p.244, also p. 261-306.

³⁶ SDR298.7:20Dec88. Ganga Sing, a Bengali Khasia chief “formerly subject during the Mogul time to Sylhet,” launched a fateful revolt in December, 1788. SDR297.164:18Dec88. See below.

³⁷ Expenses for religious occasions were listed as Rs. 2,82,842. His total expenses (Rs.5,66,783) were more than double the Sylhet Jamma. Datta, *Society, Economy, and the Market*, p.171.

³⁸ A.B.M. Mahmood, *The Revenue Administration of Northern Bengal, 1765-1793*, Dacca: Pakistan National Institute of Public Administration, 1970, pp. 28.

³⁹ Dinajpur and Rajshahi zamindaris were two of the great estates totally demolished within seven years of Permanent Settlement. *The Fifth Report From the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Affairs of the East India Company* (Dated 28th July, 1812), Edited with Notes and Introduction by Walter K. Firminger, Calcutta: R.Cambray, 1917 [Reprinted New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1969], I. p.103.

⁴⁰ SDR295.122-30:(nd)Nov87, where Lindsay also says that sometime “formerly,” before 1776, Sylhet paid five lakh kahans of cowries, three of which went to the military. The farming system included several tiers of contractors. Goyaram Metre delivered revenues for the district collected in turn from farmers of pergannahs and taluks. Farmers in general appear also to have been bankers who added revenues to private funds, paid contracted amounts, and endeavored to profit from various gambits in which they would delay payments, justify short-falls in payments with claims of bad harvests, collect revenues in places where they did not have contracts, and such. Periodically, court cases revealed these machinations, e.g. SDR299.34:5Nov89.

Bengal Presidency as a whole.⁴¹ Yet actual revenue collections stagnated below 70% of demand until 1788, when they began a steep climb, reaching almost 100% by 1790.⁴² In 1785, remittances to Calcutta began a similar

Table 1

Revenue Figures for Bengal Territorial Jurisdictions, 1783 ⁴³						
(Listed by value of net revenue on measured Diwani land)						
Jurisdictions	Area		Rupees	Calculated Figures		Sq.Mi/ Pargana
	Sq.Mi	Parganas	Net Revenue in 1190	Rev/SqMi	Rev/Pargana	
Dacca	15,397	261	28,00,000	182	182	59
Rajshsahy	12,909	181	20,00,000	155	155	71
Dinagepore	4,119	12	12,00,000	291	291	34
Nuddeah	3,151	82	7,97,000	253	253	38
Purneah	5,119	31	7,45,000	146	146	165
Beerbhoom	3,858	24	5,00,000	130	130	161
Rungpoor	6610	262	5,00,000	76	76	25
Hedjele	1098	38	4,86,874	443	443	29
Jessore	1,365	46	3,61,064	265	265	30
Bishenpoor	1,256	10	3,24,043	258	258	126
Silberis	2,103	6	2,61,471	124	124	351
Mahamedameenpoor	700	32	2,38,560	341	341	22
Mahmoodshahy	844	39	2,17,001	257	257	22
Rokinpoor	600	69	2,16,215	360	360	9
Lushkerpoor	499	21	2,00,694	402	402	24
Chunakahly	823	5	1,89,441	230	230	165
Sylhet	2,861	146	1,75,609	61	61	20
Jehangeerpoor Kismut	285	11	1,53,106	537	537	26
Tippera	6,618	24	1,53,001	23	23	276
Edrackpoor	632	66	1,46,635	232	232	10
Futtehsin	259	11	99,893	386	386	24
Rajmehal	2,217	48	99,590	45	45	46
Pachest	2,770	1	19,544	7	7	2770

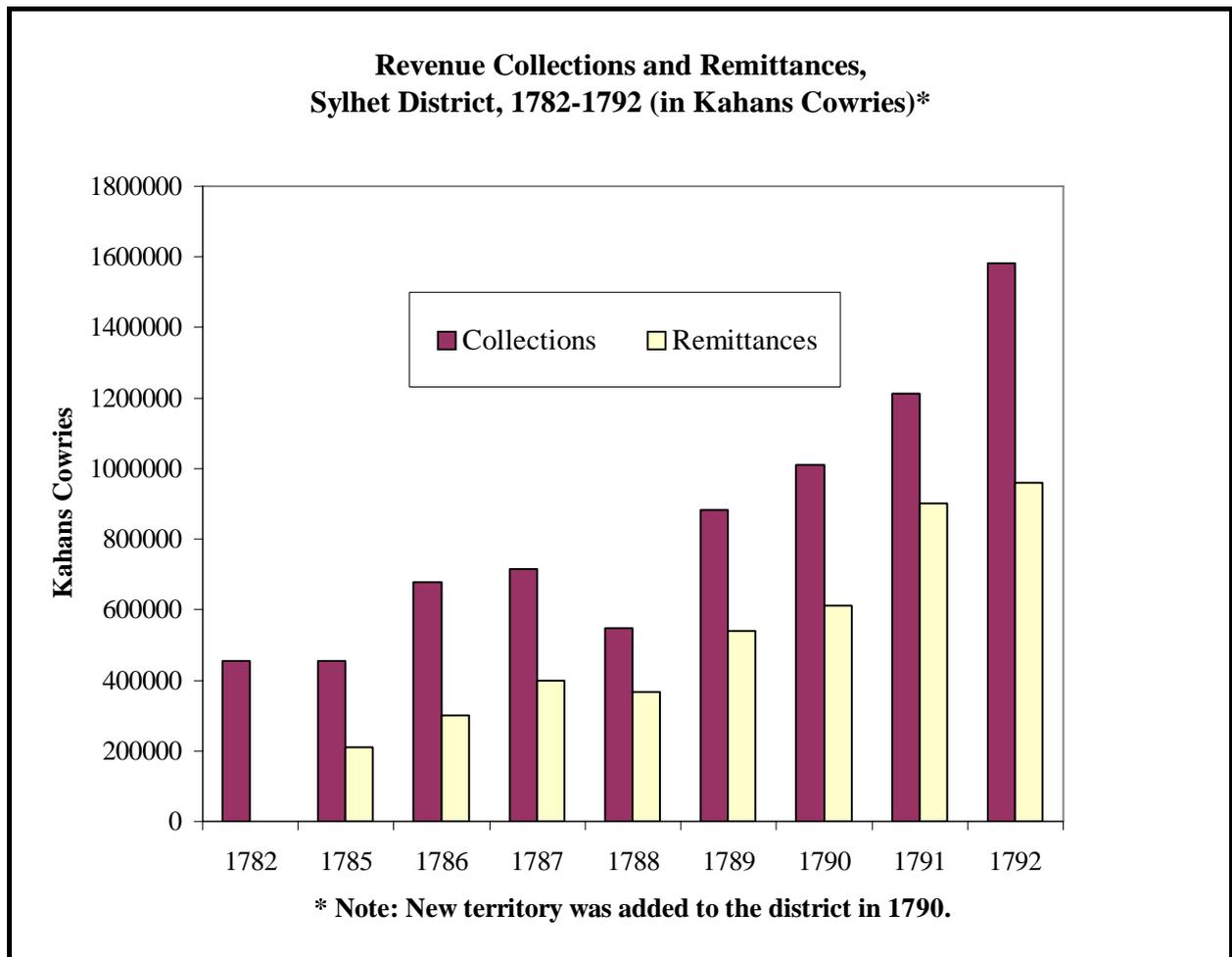
⁴¹ SDR294.53:31May84. SDR293:24Sept84. SDR293.156:1May85. SDR295.122-30(nd)Nov1787. Index values for Bengal Presidency jamma are 100 in 1767, 137 in 1776, and 164 in 1784. Datta, *Society, Economy, and the Market*, p.334. Revenue demand on Rajshahi Zamindari increased only 18% from 1765 to 1784. Mahmood, *The Revenue Administration of Northern Bengal*, pp. 28, 32, 34, 42; and for Sylhet.

⁴² SDR293.156:1May85. SDR306.21-5:19Aug94.

⁴³ Calculated from *Fifth Report*, II, 403.

climb. (Figure 1) By 1790 -- with the addition of the Turruff region, around Habiganj,⁴⁴ previously in Dacca District -- Sylhet began to look like a moneymaker for the Raj, though still a small one compared to other Bengal districts. The first available district budget, in 1794, shows a total annual expense of Rs.1,31,144, and a total jamma of Rs.2,90,554, leaving a balance of Rs.1,59,410, which at current exchange rate, translates into 8,36,900 Kahans, more than the Sylhet jamma in 1776, which was now available for remittance to Calcutta.⁴⁵

Figure 1 ⁴⁶



Eighteenth century Collectors in Sylhet pursued revenue inside state institutions and economic environments that resembled those of the Mughals and Nawabs. The most pervasive economic continuity was, of course, the constancy of nature's impact on everyday life, but also, as under the Mughals and Nawabs, state revenue emerged inside an economic geography extending across distant mountains, valleys, and uplands, into places no state had ever governed and no ruler's coin circulated.

⁴⁴ SDR300.106:30Dec90. SDR301.82.11Oct91

⁴⁵ SDR306.21-5:19Aug94.

⁴⁶ SDR304.9:20Apr93.

The Economic Geography of Cowry Country

When Ibn Batuta sailed from Sylhet down the Meghna, in 1345, he saw “water wheels, gardens and villages such as those along the banks of the Nile in Egypt,” and said that, “For fifteen days we sailed down the river passing through villages and orchards as though we were going through a mart.”⁴⁷ He did not describe market towns, as he did routinely elsewhere on his journey. Markets had operated along the Meghna many centuries before,⁴⁸ but fourteenth-century Sylhet had no big market towns, and in 1800, still had none. There were no locally resident rich merchants or big bankers.⁴⁹ No European Company made commercial investments in the Surma basin. Bills of exchange (*hundi*) were so to find that money moved almost entirely in cash.⁵⁰

Yet markets thrived all around the Surma. In the eighteenth century, the number of recorded market places increased in Bengal generally,⁵¹ and presumably also in Sylhet District, which, in 1790, had over 600 named market places (*hat*, *ganj*, and *bazaar*).⁵² Sylhet town -- with what the Company’s first resident Collector, Robert Lindsay, called its “inconsiderable bazaar,” based on his experience in Calcutta and Dhaka⁵³ -- became more active as a regional market, to which Manipur and Tripura rajahs built a new jungle road, in the 1790s.⁵⁴ The region’s markets were small and filled with small local transactions,⁵⁵ and yet, long-distance commodity chains also moved through them, up and down the Meghna, to

⁴⁷ Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, pp.258.

⁴⁸ At the confluence of Meghna and the old Brahmaputra, in Wari-Bateswar and Bhairav Bazar, northeast of Dhaka, archaeological data suggest ancient trade with Gangetic and Indian Ocean ports. Chakrabarti, *Ancient Bangladesh*, pp.62-66.

⁴⁹ Such as lived for example, in Murshidabad, where, in 1789, the Collector borrowed Rs.41,192 from seven Indian bankers (surnamed Das, Seth, Mahan, Roy, Singh, Roy, and Gopinath) to make good his revenue payment to Calcutta. K.M.Mohsin, “Mughal Banking System,” in *History of Bangladesh*, II, p.217. For the big picture, see *Merchants, Markets and the State in Early Modern India*. Edited by Sanjay Subrahmanyam)

⁵⁰ SDR294.112:15Nov85. *Comilla District Records*, I, p.71. Robert Lindsay, “Anecdotes of an Indian life,” in *Lives of the Lindsays; or, A Memoir of the Houses of Crawford and Balcarres*,” By Lord Lindsay [his brother], Second Edition, London: John Murray, 1858, III, p.170.

⁵¹ Datta, *Society, Economy, and the Market*, p.207, indicates that, between 1780 and 1800, named market-places (*hat*, *ganj*, and *bazaar*) more than doubled in Dhaka, Jessore, Rangpur, and Dinajpur regions. Hiteshranjan Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal*, Calcutta: Papyrus Press, 1981, pp.45-7, 71-3, provides persuasive evidence of deepening and expansive agrarian commercialism in seventeenth and eighteenth century Bengal. For example, a new caste group called Sadgops emerged in this period as an offshoot of pastoral Gops, to become farmers, landowners, and grain dealers in southwestern Bengal. Temple building boomed in the second half of the eighteenth century, when about 84% of all existing temples built from the 17th to 19th century were constructed, increasingly, over time, by lower castes and especially by merchants.

⁵² Datta, *Society, Economy, and the Market*, p.208. SDR299.128-9:8May90 says “there are not fewer Ganges and Bazars in Sylhet than six hundred ...” and that the largest are Ajmeriganj, Bangah, and Sylhet town. SDR300.89-90:24Nov90 has list of 31 major Ganj and Bazars.

⁵³ Robert Lindsay, “Anecdotes of an Indian life,” in *Lives of the Lindsays; or, A Memoir of the Houses of Crawford and Balcarres*,” edited by Lord Lindsay, London: John Murray, 1858, III, p.167.

⁵⁴ *Francis Buchanan in Southeast Bengal (1798)*, pp.135-7

⁵⁵ SDR299.128-9:8May90 emphasizes the small size of market centers. SDR300.89-90:24Nov90 lists thirty-one major ganj and bazaar sites with police and superintendents.

and from Dhaka, Narayanganj, and Bakarganj, and up and down the Barak valley to and from Manipur, Assam, and Burma. James Rennell described the natural basis of this trading environment by saying, “The Kingdom of Bengal, particularly its Eastern Tract, is naturally the most convenient for trade within itself of any country in the world; for its rivers divide into just a number of branches that the people have the convenience of water carriage to and from every principal [place].”⁵⁶

In the highlands and lowlands that formed the combined basin of the Barak, Surma, and Kushiara rivers, market supply and demand met in countless transactions among people who lived in economically differentiated localities, where markets received little input from major urban centers.⁵⁷ Rice and fish were the only important commodities produced in the lowlands, where farms grew almost nothing but rice. The major crop was *boro* rice, planted on flooded lowlands, when fields dried out enough to plant, from November to January, and harvested before heavy floods began in April-June. On higher ground, farmers planted *shail* (*aman*) rice under the monsoon to harvest from November to January.⁵⁸ Lindsay described the harvest of fish as follows:

There is ... in the months of October and November, when the waters subside, a trade to a great extent carried on the article of fish, which employs many thousands of the inhabitants, and certainly has the effect of drawing more cowries into the country than all the other branches of commerce united ...

It is impossible to describe the immense quantity of fish of every description left in the pools on the plain when the waters subside into their original channels, and which, being gathered by the inhabitants, are afterward exposed to dry in the sun, and occasion a smell of the most noxious nature. The fish, being dried, are buried for a certain time in the ground before they can be carried to the market, where they meet with a ready sale The hill people have another way of preparing the fish for their own consumption. They roast the fish gathered on the plains, and convey them to the mountains in great quantities, as a delicacy to their chieftains.⁵⁹

Fish and rice dominated lowland diets, though homestead gardens and horticulture at the hem of the hills also produced fruits, vegetables, and betel nut. Lowland rice markets rested on the flood-induced uncertainty of local output. Predictable crop failures sustained rice markets in farming localities, where specialists in fishing, horticulture, hunting, trade, transportation,

⁵⁶ “An Unpublished letter of Mr. Rennell,” *Bengal Past and Present*, September 1933, quoted in Sushil Chaudhuri, “General Economic Conditions,” *History of Bangladesh*, II, p.36.

⁵⁷ On the urban-centered commercialism of eighteenth century Bengal, see Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy, and the Market*. Rajat Datta also stresses “the primacy of the merchant” and urban centers in “Merchants and peasants: A study of the structure of local trade in grain in late eighteenth century Bengal,” in *Merchants, Markets, and the State in Early Modern India*, edited by Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 146-151.

⁵⁸ On crops, see Haroun Er Rashid, *Geography of Bangladesh*, pp.183-295.

⁵⁹ Robert Lindsay, “Anecdotes of an Indian life,” pp.169-70.

crafts, finance, and administration all bought rice. As a result, the lowlands fostered a thriving cash economy in which rulers from Mughal times received taxation only in cash.⁶⁰

The Sylhet lowlands were part of a much wider commercial geography that spanned countless sites of natural resource utilization, diversified along a topographical continuum running into high mountain forests, where shifting *jhum* cultivation prevailed. Lindsay was particularly enthusiastic about the commercial value of the uplands.

The lower part of the province ... was ... only capable of producing coarse rice. The districts contiguous to the hills were of a different description, with a proportion of high and low lands, producing sugar, cotton, and other valuable crops. The high country had also other resources, well deserving the attention of the enterprising merchant: -- For example, the mountains produced wood of various kinds, adapted to boat and ship building, and also iron of a very superior quality and description, little known in this country; it is brought down from the hills in lumps of adhesive and sand, and being put into the force, produces excellent malleable iron without ever undergoing the process of fusion, the hammer and fire discharging the dross and coarser particles at once, thus producing what is called virgin iron, superior to any made in Europe with charcoal. Silks of coarse quality, called *moongadutties*, are also brought from the frontiers of China, for the Malay trade; and considerable quantities of copper in bars, and a small quantity of European goods, are carried up to barter for these commodities. -- The adjoining mountain is also an inexhaustible source of the finest lime, and lower down the river there is abundance of fuel for burning it The country under the mountains, where the ground undulates, but is not precipitous, furnishes elephants of the best description.⁶¹

People working everywhere in this diverse topography supplied markets. Khasias farmed *jhum* on high slopes and grew rice to sell in lower Jaintia. In high valleys and on low slopes, Khasias grew areca nuts, betel vines, and turmeric to sell in the plains, along with honey, wax, gum, ivory, medicinal plants, cloth, “and, in the fruit season, an inexhaustible quantity of the finest oranges, found growing spontaneously in the mountains.”⁶² Mountain Khasias specialized in iron mining and smelting. They would denude whole forest tracts to stoke their cowhide blow-bag iron furnaces before moving on to exploit new fuel wood sites. Khasia iron, steel, and metal tools traveled rivers routes, along with their gold, silver, other metals, and ornaments.⁶³ Khasia merchants carried commodities up and down the hills and

⁶⁰ Abul Fazl Allami, *Ain-i-Akbari*. Translated by H. Blochman. Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1927. Volume I, p.34, says that in rice-growing Bengal (*Bang + Al* = land of hilly mounds) “people are submissive and pay their rents duly.” Revenue demand paid “by installments in eight months, they themselves bring mohars and rupees to the appointed place for the receipt of the revenue, as the division of the grain heap between the government and the husbandmen is not here customary. The harvests are always abundant, measurement is not insisted upon, and the revenue demands are determined by an estimate of the crop. His Majesty in his goodness has confirmed this custom. “

⁶¹ Lindsay, “Anecdotes,” p.174.

⁶² “Anecdotes,” p.176.

⁶³ Bareh, “Khasia-Jaintia State Formation,” pp.264-7. SDR312.141:7April1800: Iron ore in “immense quantity ... is extracted and brought down by [Khasias] for sale and compose a principal article of their traffic with the natives in Sylhet.” SDR297.48:29May88. SDR297.54.12May88.

plains.⁶⁴ Elephants, wax, iron, cloth, and ivory traveled downhill, as salt⁶⁵ and rice moved up the mountains.⁶⁶ Lindsay reported that, “at least five hundred elephants were caught annually,” in the years he lived in Sylhet.⁶⁷ His successor, John Willes, did a brisk business in elephant tusks, and in four years before 1792, bought 480 tusks in Cachar, though they were also available in Jaintia and Pandua.⁶⁸ Aloe wood and China-root appear as Sylhet products in the *Ain-i-Akbari*.⁶⁹ Timber, sandalwood, cane, ivory, rubber, cotton, and silk came from Cachar and Manipur.⁷⁰ Cotton came from Tripura.⁷¹ Mountains behind Sunamganj held the finest limestone known in Bengal, which preoccupied Lindsay’s business

⁶⁴ SDR300.56-7:2Sept90: “Wax, ivory, and iron principally from from Cutchar and Jointah from whence limestone are not procured. But these articles as well as Mugadooties are brought to sale in the lowlands by the Cosseah traders ...” In SDR299.101:21Feb90 (during Khasia wars) Willes said, “... it is difficult to prevent Cosseahs from getting grain altogether ... the Cosseahs of Sadah Bazar have always behaved quietly and allowing them provisions they of course sell it to the others.”

⁶⁵ “Among the numerous articles of commerce carried on in the interior of the Dacca district, salt is not the least inconsiderable. It is manufactured by agents of government on the sea-coast, and preserved as a monopoly for the benefit of the Company. At certain periods, it is brought up in large boats to Dacca, and there exposed for public sale.” “Anecdotes, p.164” See also below on Lindsay’s private speculations in salt.

⁶⁶ SDR291.8-9:2Dec77. SDR291.18:Jul78. During battles with Khasias, in 1789, the Collector wrote that, “the Chaudries of Chumtullah ... as well as all the Hill people have been accustomed to draw their stock of grain from Sunamganj and the Bazars adjacent” (SDR299.62:31Dec89), and that hill Khasias came to the Company’s side “in consequence of the dearness of salt and rice which I have in some measure prevented from going into the Hills.” (SDR298.178:15Sept89) Khasia grain merchants apparently worked in lowland markets. During the Khasia war, Willes said, “... it is difficult to prevent Cosseahs from getting grain altogether ... the Cosseahs of Sadah Bazar have always behaved quietly and allowing them provisions they of course sell it to the others.” SDR299.101:21Feb90

⁶⁷ “Anecdotes,” p. 190. Abul Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari*, Volume I, p.295, describes hunting elephants in *khedah*: “The hunters are both on horseback and on foot. They go during the summer to grazing places .. and commence to beat drums and blow pipes, the noise of which makes the elephants quite frightened ...” they run around and get tired. Then they are caught by lassoing their feet. .” ... experienced hunters throw a rope made of hemp or bark around their feet or neckes and thus tie them to trees. They are afterward led off in company with some trained elephants, and gradually get tame. One-fourth of the value of an elephant thus caught is given to the hunters as wages.” In *Chor Khedah*, wild males were caught during fights over the tame females ridden by hunter. *Gaad* referred to elephants trapped in pits, and *bar* to elephants caught in food traps. “Tame females are then brought to the place by whose means the wild elephants are caught. They soon get tamed.” Lindsay describes *khedah* hunting techniques in “Anecdotes,” pp.190-7. Elephants suffered high mortality in captivity: SDR291.24-5:15Oct78 reports that of 217 caught, only 112 survived. SDR291.18:Jul78 reports that of 221 elephants caught from Kartick to Byshack 1187, 106 died.

⁶⁸ Other Europeans also did business in tusks, including Henry Raitt, who was also involved in many other Sylhet trades, and reported that the fixed price in Chachar for teeth weighing 13-30 seers was 40 Rs/maund, while at other places it was 45-50Rs/maund. SDR303.45-7:26Oct92.

⁶⁹ Irfan Habib, *Atlas of Mughal India: Political and Economic Maps with Notes, Bibliography and Index*, Delhi:Oxford University Press, 1982, Map, 11B.

⁷⁰ *Francis Buchanan in Southeast Bengal*, p.137. Bhattacharjee, “Dimasa State Formation,” p.186, 194.

⁷¹ *Comilla District Records*, I, pp.49-52.

ventures. In 1783, Lindsay dramatized the commercial value of the mountains by buying loads of limestone, burnt lime, and other mountain products; loading them on six sea-going ships, built on the mountains with forest timber; and then sailing his ships on the rising flood down to Bakarganj, where his agents sold forest products and bought rice to sell in Madras.⁷²

Lindsay's ships may have returned to Calcutta or Chittagong with a ballast of cowry shells, Sylhet's only commercial coin. In those days, each region of Bengal had its own distinctive money supply, acquired in regional geographies of commodity exchange. In 1787, most coins in Rangpur markets were French Arcot Rupees, minted in Pondichery, and Narainy Rupees, minted by rajas in Cooch Behar, because Rangpur did heavy trade with Chandranagore and Cooch Behar. In Mymensingh, English Arcot Rupees prevailed, because Mymensingh merchants sold loads of rice in Calcutta. Specific coins also attached to individual commodities, as in Dinajpur, where merchants used Sonaut Rupees to buy rice and other grains, but used French and English Arcots to buy ghee and oil, and used only French Arcots to buy hemp and gunny. Locally dominant metal coins in most of Bengal were originally minted quite far away, most of all, in Arcot and Pondichery.⁷³

Sylhet commerce depended entirely on cowries, except in the southwestern region of Turuff, around Habiganj.⁷⁴ These tiny shells from the Maldives⁷⁵ served as the cheapest coin all around the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia, and Africa, and were the first article of British export from the Maldives to India.⁷⁶ In the world of cowry trading, Bengal was a famous market, but in Bengal, only Sylhet had virtually no coins but cowries in its markets.⁷⁷

⁷² "Anecdotes," pp.198-202. The ships were the Sylhett (400 tons), Highland Green (260 tons), Beauty (160 tons), Tyger (150 tons), Buffalow (140 tons), and Rhinoceros (140 tons), for which Lindsay petitioned to acquire "the established freight [allowance] for 15000 bags of rice to Madras," which he undertook "to Purchase at Backergunge from the Honourable Company and load free of all Charges for 1 Rupee per Maund." SDR292.57:29Mar83.

⁷³ Debendra Bijoy Mitra, *Monetary System in the Bengal Presidency, 1735-1835*, Calcutta: KP Bagchi, 1991, pp.70-90, provides details. In 1788, fifty-two sorts of rupees circulated in Bengal markets, where Arcot coins provided the standard for commercial transactions and *batta* (conversion charges) for *shroffs* (bankers and money changers). The 1792 Mint Committee counted 28,00,000 Arcot coins of various descriptions and provenance in Dhaka markets.

⁷⁴ SDR300.106:30Dec90. The Collector reported that pergannahs of Turuff, around Habiganj (SRD301.82.11Oct91), transferred from Mymensingh and Dacca, in 1790, "inhabitants are generally men of more opulence [and] the agreements [with tax payers] will be continued to be made in Rupees." SDR301.64:29July91 again stresses that all landowners in Sylhet pay in cowries -- "indeed many do not pay above two or three Cawns in a year ..." except in newly annexed Pargannahs Bamie and Bootajureer where they pay and are assessed in Sicca Rupees." The *Banglapedia: A National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh* (General Editor: Sirajul Islam. Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh. 2003) entry on "cowry," says that cowries were also the local medium in Rangpur, where "raiyats paid their rent to Zamindars mainly in cowrie as late as the early nineteenth century."

⁷⁵ See Clarence Maloney, *People of the Maldive Islands*. Bombay: Orient Longman, 1980, pp. 112, 126, 137, 417.

⁷⁶ Frank Perlin, *Monetary, Administrative, and Popular Infrastructures in Asia and Europe, 1500-1900*, Brookfield VT: Ashgate, 1993, pp.152-163, 270. Jan Hogendorf and Marion Johnson, *The Shell Money of the Slave Trade*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986. Robert S. Wicks, *Money, Markets and Trade in Early Southeast Asia*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992, 28-72.

⁷⁷ SDR295.108:30Oct87: "...there are not 500 Rupees in circulation throughout the district and the few that make their appearance are bad Arcots ..." SDR297.44:17May88: "...there is not above 6

Gold Mohurs and silver Rupees, which appear in Lindsay's account of his first day in Sylhet, were coins of exceptional value, used in ritual settings. Sylhet people imported almost nothing from downstream, except cowries, which merchants brought from the Maldives to Chittagong and Calcutta, stored in Dhaka, and carried to Sylhet in boats that returned downstream with rice, fish, and upland products.⁷⁸

Mughal and Nawabi Sylhet had been economically self-contained: *Sylhet Sarkar* had spent virtually all its cash revenue locally. Thus, the Company faced a new monetary problem, because state revenues and private fortunes from Sylhet needed converting into Sicca Rupees to serve British ambition. In his memoirs, Lindsay therefore introduces the cowry with his "account of the revenues of the country over which I presided ... which essentially differ from [those of] every other part of India."

There was little silver or copper in circulation, and the circulating medium was carried on entirely in cowries, or small shells, such as are used in the African trade as ornaments for the women. This cowrie, or shell, is well known in every part of Bengal, and used in the purchase of the smaller articles of life by the lower ranks of society, and they answer all the purposes of commerce. How they came to be the only circulating medium of a country three hundred miles distant from the sea, is a question neither I nor any other person has been able fully to explain.⁷⁹

Now this question seems less intractable. Sylhet had never been integrated into the state revenue operations induced financial flows to and from state capitals in other regions. No ruler had the means or need to establish his coin in Sylhet, except in ritual exchange. States never played any significant role in the widespread and thoroughly indigenous pre-modern commercialization of cowry country, which did not include sufficient imports from downstream markets to bring in metal coins. Indeed, copper from mountains around Sylhet traveled downstream to become coins that did not return to circulate around Sylhet.

Because Lindsay believed Mughals had ruled Sylhet as they had ruled other regions, he assumed that standard coins of Bengal would have naturally circulated in Sylhet, if not for local obstacles. He thus concluded that cowries reigned in Sylhet because local people could not afford any other coin. The same poverty that explained the cowry's importance for poor people elsewhere in Bengal thus seemed to explain its dominance in Sylhet.⁸⁰ Cowries had served Sylhet's commercialization quite adequately, however, by articulating indigenous monetary spaces that did not depend on any state mint, money supply, symbolic authority, or transactional hierarchy, all of which entered cowry country only around only Habiganj, on the borders of Comilla and Tripura, the area most accessible from the Meghna, where silver

or 700 Rupees to be found in Sylhet and these are bad Arcots ... no copper coins of any Species passes through the District. The Revenues are paid in Cowries and all mercantile transactions are carried on through the same currency."

⁷⁸ SDR293.126-131:24Sept84.

⁷⁹ "Anecdotes," p.169.

⁸⁰ In his major report on the subject (SDR293.126-129:24Sept84), Lindsay explained why cowries are "the only currency of the Sylhet District" by citing "the extreme poverty of the country and inhabitants in general and ... [for] landholders ... rents are all in most instances so very trifling that it would be attended inconvenience to collect or for them to make monthly payments in silver." Besides Chunam, he said, "there was formerly no manufacture of any kind to draw specie into the Province."

Rupees did circulate. The geographical extent of cowry country thus coincided with the spatial dispersion of markets connecting uplands and lowlands around the Sylhet basin. The repeated depiction of Sylhet as a “mountain region,” from the fourteenth century onward,⁸¹ reinforces the idea that mountains and plains around Sylhet together comprised a diverse yet coherent regional economy, whose cowry coins remained in circulation for many decades after Company coins became prominent in the nineteenth century.⁸²

Lindsay sought to solve the problem of turning Sylhet cowries into Company Rupees without exporting cowries downstream by taking the entire Sylhet District cowry revenue into his own hands, to finance private business ventures.⁸³ He specialized in limestone trades and in building riverboats, armed with swivel-guns, which carried his own goods as well as Company cash, goods, mail, soldiers, and officials. By 1781, Lindsay “had a speculation in hand of very considerable magnitude,” and his British agents were selling his cargoes in Calcutta, while “fleets of boats now covered the rivers and the trade increased so rapidly as to keep five or six hundred men in constant employ.”⁸⁴ To generate Sylhet’s Rupee revenue, Lindsay and his partners also bought Company cowries in Sylhet and Dhaka,⁸⁵ used them for downstream trades, and delivered drafts payable in Rupees to the Company treasury in Calcutta.⁸⁶

By 1784, Lindsay was rich. He also claimed to have ended single-handedly the “vast exportation of cowries” that attended the Company’s rising revenue demand in Sylhet,⁸⁷ Lindsay exaggerated the impact of his commercial adventures, however. He did not actually stop cowry exports. Cowries may have left Sylhet in less massive quantities, after 1783, but exports remained large and unrequited. Cowries still piled up in Calcutta and Dhaka markets, depressing their price and raising the cost of conversion.⁸⁸ In the years after 1783, the Rupee

⁸¹ Abul Fazl treats Sylhet as a mountain region. *Ain-I-Akbari*, I, p.136-7: “In the Sarkar of Sylhet there are nine ranges of hills. It furnished many eunuchs.” He goes on to list only mountain products of Sylhet: Suntarah, orange, China Root, Aloe-wood, Bhangraj, and tamed birds.

⁸² The later history of cowry currency requires further study. Mitra, *Monetary System*, p.90 indicates copper pice replaced cowries in the 1820s. Montgomery Martin, *The History, Antiquities, Topography, and Statistics of Eastern India (comprising the Districts of Behar, Shahabad, Bhagulpoor, Goruckpoor, Dinajepoor, Puraniya, Ronggopoor, and Assam)* Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1976, III, p.128 indicates cowries still circulated in Sylhet in the later nineteenth century. I have heard personal accounts of cowries circulating in twentieth century Sylhet.

⁸³ He had earlier begun to combine Company business with personal speculation in Dacca, where he took a large advance from “a wealthy native,” in return for delivering 20,000 pounds of Company salt bought with a Company officer’s prerogative at public auction. “Anecdotes,” pp.164-5.

⁸⁴ “Anecdotes,” pp.176-80, 198.

⁸⁵ To help finance his big shipping venture, in 1783, he pointed out “to the Honourable Board that there is there is a very large quantity of couries lying unsaleable in Dacca. The recomporting of these couries will be of infinite service to the Province already drained of this currency by a continual exportation without any visible important and I will readily accept of them at the Bazar price in payment for the hire of freight.” SDR292.57:29Mar83.

⁸⁶ For example, in SDR292.31:12Mar83, he reports that his agent in Dacca, Archibald Burnett, transmitted bills of exchange worth 50,000 Sicca Rupees drawn on two other Englishmen, one at sight, and one in 20 days. “These sums being recovered, I request you will give me credit or the same amount the Sylhet Revenue.”

⁸⁷ SDR293.126-131:24Sept84

⁸⁸ SDR294.113:15Nov85.

value of Sylhet cowries declined 25%,⁸⁹ which induced more cowry exports to seek better prices in Dhaka. In 1788 and 1791, Collector Willes again decried the negative impact of cowry exports that attended increasing revenue remittances to Calcutta. As average annual revenue collections almost doubled -- from about six lakh Kahans in 1785-1788, to nearly twelve lakhs in 1789-92 -- cowry remittances more than doubled, from three lakh Kahans in 1785-1788 to seven and a half, in 1789-92.⁹⁰ (Figure 1) Willes repeated the old refrain that Sylhet did not generate sufficient downstream commerce to bring cowries back into cowry country.⁹¹ Thus, in 1790, the Sylhet basin remained a substantially enclosed economy within the ambit of Bengal Presidency, and its land revenues comprised its most voluminous downstream exports, extracted by the force of state power from its lowland farming villages.

Years of Calamity and Recovery

The declining Rupee value of cowries occurred during years in the 1780s when Sylhet exports declined perhaps to zero, as nature's disruptions surpassed established standards and induced adjustments with lasting impact. Everywhere in cowry country, the ups and downs of rice harvests were in nature's hands, and determined the amplitude of the annual food supply. Markets worked inside the rhythm of the seasons. People used markets "just as sufficient for daily consumption." Rice was never imported into the region and in the 1780s, annual rice exports fluctuated below 30,000 maunds.⁹² Rice prices around Sylhet town moved within a normal range of 1.25-1.50 maunds of rice per Rupee.⁹³ This normal range was breached dramatically, however, during atypically bad years in the mid-eighties.

1779, 1783, and 1793 are examples of bad years within the normal range of severity. In 1779, floods came early, in March, and destroyed much of the standing *boro* crop, raising April rice prices 50% above normal; but later crops were good, which kept the year's price fluctuations within the normal range.⁹⁴ In 1783, insufficient rains reduced the total harvest and November prices rose rapidly, but stocks from a good *boro* season prevented massive scarcity and rice exports continued.⁹⁵ In 1793, great storms and heavy flooding began on 28 June, when the *boro* crop was secure; and rivers rose higher than during the previous five years, "to greatly damage every embankment in the country," wrecking houses, killing cattle, washing away stores of *boro* rice, raising prices three times above normal in July, and

⁸⁹ The cowry conversion rate for company revenue in Sylhet was 4.65 Kahans per Sicca Rupee in 1781-1785 and 5.63 Kahans per Rupee in 1785-1790. Calculated from District treasury remission reports. SDR293.147:(nd)Dec84-Mar85. SDR293.156:25Jun85. SDR295.109:31Oct87. SDR294.53:31May84. SDR295.100:30Sept87. SDR297.7:1Jan88. SDR297.12:1Feb88. SDR299.105:5Apr90. SDR298.21.5Jan89, where the prevailing rate is called "customary." During the period 1788-1792, cowry prices fluctuated on the Sylhet open market in the range of four to five kahans per Rupee, significantly higher than the official conversion rate. SDR302.30:14Mar92. In 1794, the official conversion rate had risen somewhat to 5.25 Kahans per Sicca Rupee.

⁹⁰ SDR304.9:20Apr93.

⁹¹ SDR297.59:12May88.

⁹² SDR301.107:30Nov91. In 1791, a surge in exports drove prices in Sylhet town up to four times their normal levels for a few days, and Willes reported that Sylhet was "so peculiarly situated as to make exportation easy, while importation is attended with much difficulty and expense."

⁹³ SDR292.56:22Mar83. SDR292.58:1Apr83.

⁹⁴ SDR291.37.8Apr79. SDR291.57.20Dec79.

⁹⁵ SDR293.73-5:4 Nov83..

flooding most houses in Sylhet town with a foot of standing.⁹⁶ But again, late harvests mitigated scarcity, and as we will see, their abundance emerged from the process of agricultural recovery from abnormal calamities in 1784 and 1787 that continued through another unusually bad year in 1791.

Local markets coped with bad years by moving large volumes of rice in small batches over long and short distances among places producing *boro* and *shail* crops, respectively.⁹⁷ Grain merchants exercised considerable power in such circumstances. In 1793, for example, as the price of *boro* stocks soared, scarcity occurred among “the labouring and most indigent of the inhabitants from the grain being kept out of the market or its price unwarrantably raised.”⁹⁸ The Company’s revenue demand also intervened in market operations. In the bad harvest year of 1783, a severe shortage of cowries occurred in Sylhet, because of huge cowry exports by revenue farmers, who increased cash revenue demands to meet obligations in Dhaka, where cowry prices declined during a flood of Maldives cowry imports.⁹⁹ The 1783 cowry crisis crippled Sylhet revenue collection. Tax arrears mounted, along with desertions of land by defaulters. Petitions for remissions multiplied and more litigants came to court to fight for rights to landed property.¹⁰⁰ Such market problems made direct personal access to food necessary for survival in the worst of times, and for prosperity, even in the best of times. People acquired such personal access by maintaining locally effective rights to land and its produce that the British called “property rights.”

As the 1783 cowry crisis abated, floods in 1784 surpassed traditional severity by several orders of magnitude, and set a new standard for the assessment of flood destruction. Floods began roughly on schedule, on 7 June, but then became a deluge. Floods dipped in July, peaked again in August, fell six inches in September, and subsided by December, again roughly on schedule. In June, however, a “great part of town of Sylhet which sits on one of the highest sites in the whole province [had] been overflowed,” and the town of Bangah, “a large and populous place,” was swept away, along with many villages.¹⁰¹ In July, torrents from Jaintia and Cachar forced people to flee to the mountains.¹⁰² Late *boro* harvests and rice stores disappeared along with homesteads. Countless cattle drowned and starved.¹⁰³ In September, “all the lower part of the province being totally depopulated,” the price of grain

⁹⁶ SDR304.42:6July93. SDR304.37:28June93.

⁹⁷ SDR291.37.8Apr79. SDR293.73-5:4Nov83

⁹⁸ SDR304.36:28June93.

⁹⁹ SDR292.31:12Mar83 “The very low price Cowries now bear in Dacca and indeed all over the country Chiefly owing to the great Quantities imported from the Maldive Islands must account for my remittances not hitherto being more regular.”

¹⁰⁰ SDR292.61:29Apr83. Claims for remissions came with complaints that, “... during the years 1777 and 1778 when every district in Bengal was granted remissions and deductions of revenue Sylhet never experienced the smallest indulgence.” SDR294.98:25Jun85: In 1781, four estates were sold with total jamma of 18,729 Kahans of Cowries, owing 14,097 Kahans arrears. In 1783, seven estates were sold with total jamma of 24,756 Kahans, owing 49,070 Kahans in arrears. In 1784, three estates were sold with total jamma of 17,000 Kahans, owing 16,605 Kahans in arrears.

¹⁰¹ SDR193.114.25June84.

¹⁰² SDR293.114-15:10July84.

¹⁰³ SDR293.119: 3Sept84. SDR294.64:3Sept84.

was twice normal.¹⁰⁴ Lindsay described the September scene by reference to normal times, when “the lowlands tho’ always overflowed at this season of the year produced luxurious crops of grain and pasture for cattle.” By contrast, in 1784,

the country through which I passed on my way to Sylhet exhibits the appearance of an open sea in the midst of which a few small islands appear, and even on these wretched spots, though in general raised near fifteen feet above the level of the country, the inhabitants are obliged to take shelter from the waves and inclemency of the weather by erecting Stages for temporary residence. Not only are their crops and cattle but there houses and grain intended for seed is gone ... Both men and women were employed in endeavoring to save the lives of the few cattle that still remained by diving in this open sea and scraping from the bottom roots and grass and weeds for their food, which can prove but temporary relief ...¹⁰⁵

In October 1784, many people “of the poorer sort [were] daily carried off by famine,”¹⁰⁶ and in March 1785, “a minute survey of the districts” revealed that,

Two thirds of the cattle have starved to death or [been] swept away by the flood and the few that [remain] are so much exhausted that they are of little use to the Farmers. Upon the low lands one fourth of the inhabitants have died for want of subsistence and the unwholesome flood they have lived upon for many months past. One fourth more have deserted the province and the rest are so desperate that there is hardly the sign of cultivation left.¹⁰⁷

With half the lowland population gone, state revenue disappeared, and “no settlement whatever [was] formed for the year 1193 (1784-5) [because] with no deductions authorized, the Zamindars would not settle.”¹⁰⁸

1785 was a year of laborious recovery, when families returned to rebuild homesteads and farms and also moved away in large numbers to build new farms elsewhere. In 1786, a massive *boro* harvest ensued, and though people ate well, commerce suffered, because crops were “so exceedingly plentiful” that rice would “hardly pay the expense of coolly hire to the Bazar,” where five maunds could be had for one Rupee, “and even at that rate there [were] no purchasers.”¹⁰⁹ This plenty prevented Lindsay from collecting revenue. He could make “no settlement or Kistbundies ... with Sylhet Zamindars, because “it was totally out of their

¹⁰⁴ Lindsay predicted that prices would “not considerably fall until the month of May next as the few partial spots of high ground that are now planting will barely produce Rice sufficient for the consumption of the farmer.” SDR293.132-3:28Sept84.

¹⁰⁵ SDR294.65:3Sept84.

¹⁰⁶ SDR293.137-8:8Oct84.

¹⁰⁷ SDR293.151-2:13Mar85.

¹⁰⁸ SDR295.53:10May87. SDR293.124-5:6Sept84..SDR294.102:20Jul85.

¹⁰⁹ SDR294.154-5:2Oct86.

power to execute engagements upon the original terms with any hopes or intention of fulfilling them.” He had actually “found it a much less severe task to collect any part of the revenue in the year of the [1784] inundation.” In October 1786, he said he could barely raise enough revenue to pay monthly salaries in his office,¹¹⁰ which represented a mere 16% of Sylhet’s monthly assessment.¹¹¹

The next year, 1787, brought floods that surpassed even 1784. A vast deluge forced the Tista and Brahmaputra rivers to shift course permanently. Fierce rain began in Sylhet very early, on 22 February, and continued, “without intermission ... [until] the [Surma] River from being very low [rose] 32 feet perpendicular.” All the standing *boro* was lost. By July, low lands were again a churning sea, where cattle drowned, granaries [*golah*] floated away,¹¹² people starved, and the living survived on famine food, “a small root procured by diving in the middle of the jhills in six or seven feet of water ... [then] the sole occupation of the inhabitants.”¹¹³ People fled to the hills,¹¹⁴ but cultivation was impossible even on the highest farms,¹¹⁵ and by November, famine raged in mountains and lowlands alike.¹¹⁶ In February 1788, rice prices were six times normal. The *boro* planting suffered for lack of seed.¹¹⁷ Lindsay could not “stir out of [his] house without being beset by thousands seeking relief.”¹¹⁸ Farms on high ground did not get enough April rain to sustain *boro* crops.¹¹⁹ Cholera and malaria must have killed the prisoners and soldiers who died in Sylhet town of “disease” and “violent fevers,” amidst a general pestilence from September 1787 through May 1788 that continued sporadically till May 1789.¹²⁰

By September 1788, recovery was well underway. Landowners then settled revenue contracts at a re-negotiated median of rates set in 1776 and 1783. Bankers (shroffs) provided security for revenue at 40% interest per month.¹²¹ 1789 produced a bumper *boro* harvest,¹²² but disruptions since 1784 had taken a cumulative toll on profits, savings, livestock, and other assets,¹²³ as well as on state revenue, as Collector Willes¹²⁴ explained to his superiors, in June 1789, when he petitioned to strike off revenue balances from 1784.¹²⁵

¹¹⁰ SDR294.154-5:2Oct86. SDR294.155:10Oct86. SDR294.156:2Nov86.

¹¹¹ SDR293.147:(nd)Dec84-Mar85 and SDR293.151-2:16Mar85. For 1794 figures, see Appendix 1.

¹¹² SDR295.84-8:11Jul87.

¹¹³ SDR295.104-5:23Oct87.

¹¹⁴ SDR295.97.5Sept87.

¹¹⁵ SDR295.47:(nd)Apr87.

¹¹⁶ SDR295.136:16Nov87.

¹¹⁷ SDR297.15:8Feb88.

¹¹⁸ SDR297.17:11Feb88.

¹¹⁹ SDR297.47:10Apr88.

¹²⁰ SDR297.131:19Sept88. In May 1789, 22 of 50 Sepoys recently arrived in Sylhet were “taken with violent fever.” SDR298.116-18.13June89.

¹²¹ SDR297.122.5Sept88.

¹²² SDR298.172:1Sept89. One indication of recovery is that in August 1789, the Collector realised 107,533 Kahans revenue, compared to 55,779 Kahans in August 1788.

¹²³ SDR297.70:12June88: “... amongst the Waddadar Farmers, Zemindars, and Ryotts there is no property independent of the produce of the land ... In this District whenever inundation or any

... in a country where the Inhabitants are so very poor it naturally follows that the calamities of one year should have an effect on the subsequent Inundation and famine which afflicted our Eastern provinces in 1194 are not merely temporary evils ... [and were] the Collector rigidly to force the Zemindars to make good their payments agreeable to the Kistbundy it would either drive them from the country or ruin them by subjecting them to the exorbitant imposition of the Shroffs.¹²⁶

Landmark floods in 1784 and 1787 had lasting consequences, both because of their extreme severity and because Company Raj had altered the process of agricultural recovery. The new state had produced a more compelling nexus of transactions at the intersections of coercion, commerce, and cultivation, in which gaining and maintaining rights to farmland, and thus to subsistence as well as profit, depended more strictly than ever before on tax payments that provided state revenue. These revenue transactions involved negotiations, struggles, and speculations at various sites of power, where hazy boundaries between state revenue and private fortune allowed powerful men to reap substantial profits. These men included revenue contractors (Waddadars), bankers and landowners, locals who commanded coercive force, and state officials at all levels. Such men comprise the population of local investors who financed the process of agricultural recovery, and the Company depended on them for the revenue. At the same time as calamities hit Sylhet, pressure from Calcutta compelled Collectors to secure more revenue from productive farms, and local investors as well as the state became more willing to use force to increase revenues. Their combined adjustments to the great floods altered Sylhet's regional geography.

Interactions of Empire and Agriculture

During the 1780s, a combination of natural conditions and political economy formed a historic conjuncture in Sylhet. Floods sent needy people moving in all directions to seek subsistence, with any means at hand. Floods induced agricultural investors to concentrate attention on higher ground, covered with jungle, where endeavors to expand cultivation met resistance from forest inhabitants.¹²⁷ Meanwhile, commercial investors expanded their activity in the mountains, where conflict ensued with highland peoples. The Company state supported Sylhet investors, as imperial officials became more willing to use force to expand revenue territory and to deepen state control over assets inside existing boundaries. In this context, a motley, violent, and chaotic mixture of British imperialism and local enterprise pushed agrarian Sylhet into upland frontiers, most notably at the base of northern mountains.

other calamity occasions a loss of crops on the ground the Company's Revenue will of course suffer. There is no accumulated wealth to supply the temporary deficiency ...”

¹²⁴ SDR297.15:8Feb88 is John Willes' first letter as Collector.

¹²⁵ Balances were Kahans 106,277 and the collector predicted less than 10,000 could ever be collected. SDR297.141:1Sept88. The revenue account for 1195 (1786) was not closed until February 1789. SDR298.81-2:19Feb89.

¹²⁶ SDR298.135-7.23June89.

¹²⁷ Resistance from forest inhabitants also greeted efforts to build the forest road from Manipur to Sylhet: *Francis Buchanan in Southeast Bengal (1798)*, pp.135-7

Culminating the 1780s conjuncture, military operations in 1790 incorporated northern jungles into Sylhet territory and drew the boundary that now separates Sylhet and Meghalaya. This period in the expansion and demarcation of Sylhet territory punctuated a long process of geographical change that involved the interaction of five very old, dynamic, and overlapping geographies -- of nature, land use, markets, culture, and governance -- which had together defined Sylhet historically as a region with indefinite boundaries and shifting substance.

Each of these geographies had a distinct composition. Nature's geography set the physical framework for livelihoods in mountains, uplands, and floodplains. Altering nature by burning and cutting forest for shifting cultivation and by digging up forest to make permanent farms provided the physical basis for increasing food supplies and population; but land-use remained hostage to nature, as the great floods of the 1780s amply demonstrate. Farming expanded, contracted, and moved among lowlands, uplands, and high mountain valleys. Commercial activity traveled among these same spaces, and also extended more widely, as cowries collected in markets, moved along jungle pathways, and sailed among ports on distant seas.

In addition, everyone in cowry country inhabited a social space of ethnic and cultural identity, whose eighteenth century geography had emerged during centuries of migratory mobility across southern Asia, from Arabia to Vietnam. Eighteenth century ethnic spaces held mixtures of Persianate, Sanskritic, Bengali, and disparate tribal cultures; and mixing was still ongoing. Rajas in Cachar and Jaintia had embraced Hindu ritualism to spawn tribe-and-caste societies that spread around the northern mountains.¹²⁸ Conversion to Islam increased and diversified the Muslim population. Tribal groups mingled and assimilated with Hindus and Muslims. Bengali Muslims and Hindus controlled most of the lowlands, but Afghans and Turks were also important. Migrations into Sylhet of all its many ethnic and cultural groups continued throughout the eighteenth century.

Geographies of nature, land use, markets, and culture had no strict boundaries; they remained open to limitless mixing and mobility. Inside them, however, permanent farm cultivation defined more strictly bounded local geographies of social investment on the land, where families endeavored to keep land free of forest and safe from animals and marauders, to accumulate wealth to pass on to their children. Agrarian states also defined geography in more strictly bounded territorial terms, and drew their boundaries around central sites of state authority. After 1303, the geography of Sylhet governance revolved around Sylhet town, but in the eighteenth century, Sylhet's internal and external boundaries did not appear on maps or visibly on the land. State boundaries were instead defined by transactions among individuals in the ranks of state authority. The spatial boundaries of governance emerged in transactions among the men of rank who participated in the ongoing process of producing and maintaining state authority, in places connected to one another by relationships among elites that focused on state headquarters in Sylhet town.

Social transactions that sustained state revenue and authority dispersed among farming localities where people paid taxes that symbolized submission to government. These same payments secured local property rights and social status for local people inside state territory.¹²⁹ The physical extent of state territory thus coincided with the area controlled by

¹²⁸ J.B.Bhattacharjee, "Dimasa State Formation," pp.177-211.

¹²⁹ Abul Fazl makes the Mughal connection between property rights and state territory quite explicit: "if anyone fail to pay the usual revenue, the whole of his effects shall be confiscated, and he shall be expelled the country." He goes on to explain that boundaries of land need to be defined with physical markers (like charcoal, potsherds, hair, trees) and that "The judge determines the dispute

the people who paid a ruler to secure their local assets. As Lindsay explained, soon after he arrived in Sylhet, state territory defined by revenue transactions consisted only of permanently cultivated land.¹³⁰ Until roughly 1780, state revenue in Sylhet came only from official transactions with local people who controlled productive farmland recorded in local registers. Local men at the lowest rank in the state hierarchy made cash payments to men higher up the ranks, who used this fund of cash to buy necessities for the maintenance of state authority, including their own consumption, which distinguished them as social elites. In this transactional geography of governance, the personal wealth of men of rank at all levels of state authority constituted the wealth of state territory, and thus of the state itself.

Traditional revenue practices described the social formation of state territory when Lindsay arrived. In each of Sylhet's 146 administrative areas -- called parganas, averaging about twenty square miles in extent (Table 1) -- most land "registered in the Conongoes Dufter and Takseem papers" paid conventional rates, subject to constant negotiation.¹³¹ Seasonal crop fluctuations legitimated delayed payments and remissions. Local expenses to maintain professional service providers for religion, education, and healthcare also justified tax deductions. Huge tracts of tax-free land sustained social elites; this land did not appear on local registers; and neither did many other tracts of cultivated land, which fell into the domains of rajas in Tripura, Cachar, and Jaintia, or disappeared from official view when people abandoned farms to make new fields in the jungle. State efforts to collect taxes often induced people to move farther away from the official gaze, deeper into the jungle.

Such traditional state transactions made the geography of state territory fuzzy and mobile, impossible to map in the modern manner. Changing power equations between local people and Sylhet officials -- as well as seasonal dislocations -- changed the spatial substance of state territory, during the ongoing replay of dispersed local transactions that determined the actual composition of state jurisdiction at any place and time. These features of state territory remained in 1780, when the Company pressed people in all the ranks of state authority to deliver more cash to Sylhet.

State pressure fell on Collectors as much as on men in lower ranks. Each Collector's correspondence reeks with anxiety that blame for shortfalls in tax collections might fall on him personally. All Collectors described difficulties they faced in realizing the jamma; and doing so, they detailed features of agrarian Sylhet that constrained state wealth. Permanent farms occupied a tiny proportion of the total land area. Agricultural expansion was arduous, dangerous, costly, and uncertain. Floods, jungles, and social conflict obstructed agricultural expansion, which required years of hard labor to accomplish, and the fruits of that labor were often washed away or destroyed by violence. Only locally powerful men could command requisite labor for agricultural expansion, and only when their local power depended on state authority could they be induced to deliver taxation. The pervasive autonomy and mobility of local enterprise limited the capacity of any state to harvest revenues from new farmland. In addition, though the expansion of state power and of cultivation went hand in hand, they also provoked conflict that stymied both: between agricultural colonists and forest dwellers; among colonists competing for land; among interest groups in the colonization process,

on the production of such evidence, and of the witness of four, eight, or ten husbandmen, keepers [watchmen], or hunters." (*Ain-i-Akbari*, I, pp.283-4). He also notes that "the learned among the Hindus" list "revenue default by cultivators" as one of the eighteen classic sources of litigation (*Ain-i-Akbari*, I, p.277)

¹³⁰ SDR291.52-3:1Oct79.

¹³¹ SDR291.52-3:1Oct79.

especially financiers and farmers; between state officials and colonists; and among competing state authorities. All these conflicts undermined agricultural expansion and also the power of Collectors to collect the revenue.

In 1780, tax collections remained a fraction of jamma because the Collector had little power to induce tax payments. It seems, in fact, that any determined local resistance could defeat the small force that Lindsay could bring to bear. Many locally powerful men did pay higher taxes, however. They did so primarily, it seems, to maintain and expand their local authority amidst rampant adversity. In six years after 1778, Lindsay claimed to have heard over 2,000 land disputes, involving many of the “upwards of 4,000 independent proprietors of the soil” who paid him taxes.¹³² Company officials used the generic term, zamindar, to denote anyone who paid taxes to acquire property rights under Company authority.¹³³ Local units of property rights, called taluks, were the domains of small landlords, called talukdars. Sylhet District had only one very big zamindar (whom we meet shortly) and none of the big *jotedar* tenants or merchant magnates who controlled so much of rural Bengal.¹³⁴ Sylhet was, like Chittagong, a region of small landholders.¹³⁵ Yet in 1784, Sylhet talukdars represented substantial local landed families, whose territories of authority covered as much as one a half square mile.¹³⁶ Many held the title of Chaudhuri, which Mughals had used to denote sub-zamindari authority and spread among Sylhet gentry, who made it a family name.¹³⁷ Even poor talukdars employed tenant farmers (called ryots, from Persian, *raiyyat*) to till their land. To secure assets against calamity, landed families dispersed holdings among localities and combined various sources of income, including commerce.¹³⁸ Ryots were mostly *paikasht*, non-resident tenants, who paid lower rents than *khudhasht* (resident) tenants and received no occupancy rights, but did receive agricultural and subsistence inputs from landowners who needed to attract them to clear and cultivate land.¹³⁹ Tenants employed agricultural workers who also lived mobile lives, as a matter of necessity.

¹³² SDR293.99-100:4Apr84.

¹³³ The term “zamindar” was applied to all landholders paying taxes to the Company at this time, whatever the size of their holdings and their relation to the cultivation process.

¹³⁴ See especially Rajat Ray, “The Bengal Zamindars: Local Magnates and the State Before the Permanent Settlement,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 12, 3, 1975, 263-92, and *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society, 1760-1850*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press: 1979; Sugata Bose, *Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital: Rural Bengal Since 1770*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy, and the Market*; and Shinkichi Taniguchi, “The Peasantry of Northern Bengal in the Late Eighteenth Century,” in *Local Agrarian Society in Colonial India: Japanese Perspectives*, edited by Peter Robb, Kaoru Sugihara, and Haruka Yanagisawa, Delhi: Manohar, 1997.

¹³⁵ For Chittagong, see A.M.Serajud-din, “The Revenue Administration of Chittagong, from 1761 to 1785,” unpublished Phd dissertation, University of London, 1964

¹³⁶ See Table 1. Dividing 4,000 tax-payers into the land area of Sylhet in 1783 yields 0.7 per square mile for each landholder; but as we will see, tax-payers in 1783 did not control nearly the whole land area reported in the *Fifth Report* as comprising Sylhet District.

¹³⁷ In Mughal *sanad* texts from Chittagong, *shaikh* and *chaudhuri* were the most common titular names. Eaton, *Rise of Islam*, p.249.

¹³⁸ SDR297.126:5Sept88 reports that zamindars typically held lands spread among many pergunnahs. “In example, Chytunnagher is compose of parcels of land lying in eight or ten Pergunnahs.”

¹³⁹ Datta, *Society, Economy, and the Market*, pp.93-99

All this mobility among local workers, peasants, and lords of land combined with the large number of small landholdings in a vast district beset with turbulent seasons to make it most difficult to determine the exact extent of any specific piece of local farm territory, which the British authorized as “private property.” In addition, the local payments that became state revenue moved among various middlemen on its way to Sylhet, and these men also acquired rights to land: they became zamindars, owning all or parts of many taluks. Adding further complexity to the property scene, many rights to land escaped taxation and thus had no official sanction, and non-state power could be more locally effective in securing land rights than a distant Collector’s writ, particularly on new farms in the jungle. Zamindars who officially owned taluks under state authority often cleared jungle to create new farms on which they paid nothing, holding land rights outside official view. Thus, though about 4,000 local families and numerous middlemen paid Lindsay to bolster their rights to land and its produce, by engaging in contracts with Lindsay that became district revenue settlements, Lindsay described his revenue territory by saying, “there is no place in all the extensive possessions of the Honourable Company where the boundaries of each Individual property of land in general is worse ascertained than in this Province.”¹⁴⁰

In Lindsay’s day, local people at the lowest end of the state ranks held the knowledge that defined the actual extent of state territory in Sylhet District. Village Patwaris recorded local transactions for Kanungos, whose records comprised official evidence of local land rights, and local officials had to come personally to Sylhet town to provide evidence to enable the Collector to settle any land dispute. In this context, centralizing state power to determine the official boundaries of land property seemed to Lindsay the secret to increasing revenues. The more Collectors could define property rights with authoritative information that resided permanently in Sylhet town, the more authority Collectors would have in settling local land disputes, and thus the more effective the Company’s tax claims would become.

Higher authorities reached the same conclusion, and a British obsession with defining property rights thus emerged. The politics and intellectual evolution of this obsession formed imperial strands in the historic conjuncture of the 1780s, during which, a subtle shift occurred in Sylhet, in tune with trends in Bengal,¹⁴¹ away from old transactional definitions of state territory, toward a more cartographic conception.¹⁴² In 1800, there were still no land maps, no official records of boundaries, and no state boundary markers in Sylhet.¹⁴³ But by 1791, the idea had been firmly established that the district consisted of all the land in its geographical boundaries, including jungle. By 1791, in Sylhet, a cadastral survey, called a Hustabood, was complete, along with a Bandobast compilation of all individual land tax obligations; and together, these two massive official tomes -- kept in Sylhet town and in Calcutta -- regulated Sylhet taxation during the Decennial Settlement that became the 1793 Permanent Settlement in Bengal Presidency.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ SDR293.99-100:4Apr84.

¹⁴¹ For Bengal trends, see Guha, *Rule of Property*. Sylhet remained a distinctively different imperial territory, inside Bengal. *Fifth Report II* describes regional differences among Bengal districts.

¹⁴² For an account of contemporary cartographic ideologies and practices, see Matthey H. Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765-1843*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997.

¹⁴³ Contemporary boundaries could often be described in great detail, without being mapped, and these descriptions provide data for later maps. See Schwartzberg, *Historical Atlas*, p.212

¹⁴⁴ SDR305.41-2:30Nov93. Willes reported that, “In conformity with this Bandobust, I have given to each Malguzar a Takseem ... under my seal and signature with the Jumma written in English and

In the 1780s and 1790s, the increasing power of the British Empire to define boundaries in and around its territory altered the geographical composition of Sylhet District, by expanding areas for new colonization under state authority and by defining the landscape inside legal boundaries of property rights. Markets in state-defined property rights attracted investors who depended on state power to secure their investments. Financial speculation and revenue collection thus formed an economic nexus where investors sank assets into agricultural expansion, under state protection. As people in Sylhet endeavored to expand enterprise, cultivation, and taxation together, calamities in 1784 and 1787 forced them to direct their energies onto highlands above the flood, filled with jungles and non-Bengalis.

Sources of Conflict on Sylhet's Northern Frontiers

Many people attached to Tripura, Cachar, and Jaintia rajas lived in eastern Nawabi domains, where locals rebuffed Company tax claims by citing their attachments to the rajas. To increase revenue, the Company sought to erase and subordinate claims by all these rajas to land in Company territory. Thus, when the Rani of Tripura asked the Tipperah Collector to assist her son's succession, the Collector obliged, and in return, secured a new boundary at the base of the hills, inducing the Raja to move his capital to Agartala. The Raja kept private landholdings in Tipperah District, but by 1782, his royal authority had officially retreated to mountains east of Comilla.¹⁴⁵ His northern mountain frontiers with Sylhet, behind Moulvi Bazar and Habiganj, remained entirely indefinite, however, and mountain people there seem rarely to have engaged in transactions to indicate submission to either Calcutta or Tripura. These southern frontiers did not much trouble early Sylhet Collectors, who worried considerably about more immediate northern frontiers, where, as one explained, in 1798, "the lands of the Rajahs of Chachar and Jointah are blended with those of this District; indeed, the Rajah of Jointah possesses lands adjacent to the town of Sylhet."¹⁴⁶ Thus, it was not in the south, but rather in the north, that transitions began to a new formation of Sylhet territory. This transition focused on the ethnic geography of Khasia territory.

The major Khasia figure in Sylhet was the Raja of Jaintia. He held the loyalty of diverse Khasia groups in northern high mountains, adjacent uplands, and plains below; and he initially renegotiated his boundaries with the Company as he would have done with Mughals. First, he tested the Company's military with troops armed in the manner of mountain Khasias, with "a large shield over the right shoulder, protecting nearly the whole of the body, the mountain sword, a quiver suspended over the left shoulder, full of arrows, and a large bamboo bow."¹⁴⁷ Musket-wielding Company troops pushed the Raja back into a reduced Jaintia territory, but Jaintia Khasias still settled in what Sylhet Collectors considered Company territory, causing numerous disputes over revenue payments.¹⁴⁸ Jaintia people

Bengalee that any person might know the exact sum he had to pay, and might resist any unjust demands if made by the Tahsildars or their Umlah, on the detailed Bundobust now submitted ... collections have been made for the last three years."

¹⁴⁵ *Comilla District Records*, I, pp.1-49.

¹⁴⁶ SDR308.150:22Feb98.

¹⁴⁷ "Anecdotes," p.181.

¹⁴⁸ In 1789, Willes estimated the revenue of land taken by Jaintia, Tipperah, and Khasias, from 1130-1195 (1729-1784) at 95,735 Kahans, of which 69,904 Kahans went to Jaintia Khasias in 30 named areas (SDR298.52:12Jan89). He also requested force to settle Jaintia boundary because Jaintia people on Company land consider it Jaintia land where they "extend authority and claim a liberty of encountering one another" in battle (SDR298.50:12Jan89). See also SDR298.11:27Dec89.

continued to settle haphazardly in Sylhet District, however, as the Rajah returned to transactional routines appropriate for an independent but subordinate ruler. Lindsay described him as “my nearest frontier neighbor ... by far the most powerful and most civilized of the whole, holding large possessions, both on the mountain and plain”; and for his part, the Raja treated Lindsay royally, hosting him at Jaintia, on one memorable occasion, with a lavish feast and sporting entertainments that dramatized the Raja’s generosity and strength as an ally guarding the Company’s northeastern frontier and living only twenty-five miles northeast of Sylhet town, where the Company paid vakils to transact with government on his behalf.¹⁴⁹

Jaintia authority did not extend far west of Jaintia, where land behind Chhatak and Sunamganj remained an open frontier, “covered with an impenetrable jungle and so infested by elephants, tigers, and other wild beasts that ... clearing and cultivation [was] attended with great difficulty and expense.”¹⁵⁰ In 1779, elephants provided most income for the few forest zamindars who paid Company revenue.¹⁵¹ Khasia rajas in the high mountains exercised sporadic authority among Khasia people in these jungles, and the Company could no more conquer the mountain Khasias than could the Mughals, for as Lindsay explained, “you might as well attack the inhabitants of the moon.”¹⁵² Like Jaintia Raja, Khasia rajas in the northern mountains conceived Khasia territory as consisting of Khasia people, not land, and in that sense, Khasia territorialism was strictly ethnic, even when it included non-Khasia people, as Jaintia did. Unlike Jaintia Raja, however, Khasia rajas in the northern mountains never performed rituals of submission to lowland rulers; indeed, their families may have fled the plains to avert submission.

Yet in 1780, an old formation of Mughal authority did span the high mountains and jungles below. It comprised the *jaghir* of Omaid Rezah, whose home was in Bannyachang, far from the mountains, in southwestern Sylhet, in the lower floodplain of the Kushiara. Omaid Rezah’s family received a Mughal *jaghir* in return for protecting *Sylhet Sarkar* against Khasia warriors, and he was last in a line of Mughal frontier commanders, called Tankadars, who served Faujdars as a forest vanguard, protecting elite recipients of Nawabi forest land grants. His *Jaghir* expanded accordingly,¹⁵³ and Omaid Rezah became the largest landholder in Sylhet, whom Willes called “the only true zamindar in the district.”¹⁵⁴ Inside his *jaghir*, a mixture of Khasia and Bengali peoples had formed a distinctive ethnic territory. As Willes explained, Khasias who “inhabit the hills and come down to the plains in search of necessities of life and articles of commerce” engaged in “intercourse and intermarriages” with lowland Bengalis to produce what he called “the degenerate Race called Bengalee Cosseahs,” who lived mostly inside Omaid Rezah’s *jaghir*.¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁹ “Anecdotes,” p.181-5. Rajahs of Jaintia and Cachar kept vakeels in Sylhet on the Company account from Mr.Holland’s time and Willes thought it desirable to continue this support, “because both of the Rajahs think it necessary to station vakeels in Sylhet.” SDR298.72:9Feb89.

¹⁵⁰ SDR294pp.126-7 3May86.

¹⁵¹ SDR291.48-9.8Sep79.

¹⁵² “Anecdotes,” p.186.

¹⁵³ SDR304.11-17:20Apr93

¹⁵⁴ SDR299.72-4:15Jan90

¹⁵⁵ SDR298.7:(nd)Dec88

Conflict around Bengali Khasia settlements increased as Omaid Rezah's authority declined. In 1790, Willes described this once commanding figure as "a respectable old man but entirely incapable," who could not pay his huge jamma of 34,665 Kahans¹⁵⁶ without incurring a debt of more than one lakh Kahans, heaped upon him by men who managed his affairs and embezzled his wealth. Willes took the estate under his direct administration and said that insisting on full tax compliance "would be act of cruelty," which would ruin Omaid Rezah and his family. Willes appointed seven Tahsildars to replace the eighty or so renters who had claims on the estate,¹⁵⁷ but even so, at Omaid Rezah's death, in 1792, his estate was hopelessly in debt, and to add injury to insult, Bannychang drowned in the 1791 floods.¹⁵⁸ Struggles then ensued over the estate, and litigants even came from London to fight for bits of the old *jaghir* in Calcutta courts. By 1793, the Collector had carved the old *jaghir* into a collection of taxed parcels and sepoy had replaced the Tankadar's force as protectors of agrarian Sylhet. The Collector's budget came to include an expense of 13,272 Kahans for defense of the district,¹⁵⁹ raised from revenues from Bannychang land,¹⁶⁰ as talukdars came to Willes "in a body of some hundreds" to resist claims by Omaid Rezah's heirs and servants.¹⁶¹

Omaid Rezah's authority declined as commercial activity increased around Bengali Khasia settlements, around river routes from Sunamganj to Pandua, the river port town in the northern mountains that Lindsay described as being, along with Jaintia, Sylhet's main port for trade with Assam.¹⁶² Conflict attending commercial expansion at Pandua had begun by 1779, when Lindsay received a delegation of Greek, Armenian, and "low European" merchants from Pandua, who complained of "Hill Rajahs compelling them to dispose of their goods at arbitrary prices." Lindsay suspected his petitioners had joined with forest zamindars to fight Khasia rajas for control of the mountains; and to keep trade open during their struggles, he stationed a Havildar at Pandua, explaining to his superiors that, because "trade between Panduah and Calcutta [was] always considered an object worthy of attention ... to protect merchants a strong force was kept up [at Pandua]."¹⁶³

By 1781, Lindsay himself controlled Pandua limestone trade with hordes of Company cowries and a handful of troops. In this position, he sought quarry rights from mountain Khasia rajas, and when he arrived at their court, they "breathed nothing but peace and friendship," resembling in his mind "[Scottish] Highlanders when dressed in the Gaelic costume."¹⁶⁴ His hosts treated Lindsay to a feast of "six or eight large hogs ... roasted in ... a hole dug in the ground, lined with plantain leaves, and filled with hot stones," and gave him rights to "a large portion of the mountain, where the quarries are worked ... including the most favourable situation for access to [his] boats, so as to afford [him] the fullest command

¹⁵⁶ This was the figure in 1794. SDR306.38-43:10Oct94

¹⁵⁷ SDR299.72-4:15Jan90.

¹⁵⁸ SDR302.29:13Mar92. SDR301.33.25May91. SDR301.15:13Apr91.

¹⁵⁹ See Appendix 1.

¹⁶⁰ See below.

¹⁶¹ SDR304.11-17:20Apr93. SDR307.7-12:10May&8July95.

¹⁶² SDR293. 126-129: 24Sept84.

¹⁶³ SDR291.41.26Jun79.

¹⁶⁴ ... "it was evident from their complexion and the war-yell that occasionally escaped their lips, as well as the mode in which they handled their weapons, that their temperament was not dissimilar to that of other mountaineers." "Anecdotes," p.177.

of the water-carriage.” Lindsay also received permission to build a fortified villa, which became his personal hill station.¹⁶⁵

Conflict at Pandua increased as mountain trade increased,¹⁶⁶ as more limestone came down rivers into Sunamganj,¹⁶⁷ more merchants bartered lowland and European products for mountain commodities, and more mountain rajas enriched themselves amidst increasing local competition.¹⁶⁸ Lindsay’s Khasia hosts clearly expected him to support them, but Lindsay did not control events at Pandua, where, one day in 1783, a Khasia raja received a personal insult from the Pandua Havildar, and that same day, “toward the evening, the shrill war-whoop was heard in every direction, as the Cosseahs retired to the mountains,” and “not a man was seen below for several weeks ... [until they] descended in considerable force,”¹⁶⁹ to attack a fort of copper merchants.¹⁷⁰ Lindsay responded by stationing a “whole Sebundy corps” at Pandua. In March 1784, he wrote that, “hill people having collected additional forces, have become more troublesome and ... more formidable than ever.” By then, mountain rajas had “taken possession of all the neighboring jungles” and passes leading to Pandua. Lindsay reported ominously that it was “absolutely necessary to keep that port for the protection of the whole province,”¹⁷¹ and by September 1784, he had built a new fort at Pandua, to store merchant goods, house troops, and free his business from Khasia patrons.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁵ He later recalled that this retreat “never failed to restore me when exhausted by the noxious vapours occasioned by the inundation” in the lowlands. His summary evaluation of his Khasia hosts (“Anecdotes,” pp.177-8), is worth quoting at length.

After a residence of twelve years in their vicinity, and having had much business to transact with them, I can with safety describe the Cusseah, or native Tartar of these mountains, -- a fair man in his dealings, and, provided you treat him honourably, he will act with perfect reciprocity towards you; but beware of shewing him the smallest appearance of indignity, for he is jealous in the extreme, cruel and vindictive in his resentments. This I experienced in my future dealings with them, as will hereafter appear; my present interview terminated most harmoniously.

¹⁶⁶ The mode of this trade quickly changed after 1783, when Lindsay and other European merchants no longer resided in Panduah but rather made “advances ... to the Inhabitants of the lowlands bordering upon the Cosseah Country,” who procured limestone as “contractors for the delivery of the stones to the manufacturers.” SDR300.57-9:2Sept90.

¹⁶⁷ In 1790, 7 Europeans owned 120,000 ferrahs of chunam in Sylhet markets, and 50 Natives owned 50,000 ferrahs. (1 ferrahs = 1 Maund, 10 Seers.) SDR300.63:2Sept90.

¹⁶⁸ SDR300.57-9:2Sept90. “The mode of getting the stone in the first instance is by purchasing a Stone Hill from Cosseah Rajahs.... Chuman manufacturers are then permitted to break the Hill and draw the limestone from thence. In an agreement formed between Rajahs and a European which [Willes] laid before the Supreme Board, it was expressed that the Cosseah Rajahs should support him in carrying out his business against all opposition. In another agreement it was expressed that one of the Cosseah Rajahs should receive duties in preference to another. In other instances, I have known provisions for muskets and powder.”

¹⁶⁹ “Anecdotes,” p.186

¹⁷⁰ SDR292.50-1.(nd)1783

¹⁷¹ He added, on a personal note, “I have been in a constant state of warfare with the Cosseahs or Inhabitants of the mountains from whence the [lime]stones are drawn,” and “I have myself sustained considerable loss.”SDR293.92-3:1Mar84; SDR293.95(nd)Mar84.

¹⁷² SDR293.119: 4Sept84.

In 1783, fighting around Pandua forced Lindsay to end his mountain holidays. At the same time, below the mountains, agrarian investors began moving into jungles inhabited by Bengali Khasias. The most prominent investor was Lindsay's friend and colleague, Gowar Hari Singh, Sylhet's treasurer (Peshkar), a banker (shroff) and local revenue farmer (Waddadar), who hailed from Burdwan, where he returned a rich man, in 1791, leaving his Sylhet estates to his Diwan, Krishnajivan Haldar.¹⁷³ Gowar Hari Singh bought his first land at government auction in 1783, during the cowry scarcity, when he had privileged access to Company cash. In 1784, as the flood began, he bought two large parcels of the upland Langlah pargana, which came to him because its zamindars had refused to pay the 25% increase of tax demand, imposed in 1780.¹⁷⁴ No purchasers appeared when Lindsay put the estates on auction,¹⁷⁵ so he asked his Peshkar to provide much-needed cash in return for land rights.¹⁷⁶ Gowar Hari Singh's land speculations flourished under Lindsay's protection and patronage. When he bought his first estate at auction, he got a bargain. His new land owed little arrears, compared to others sold that year, and he paid far less for it than the average percent of arrears and jamma paid by other buyers that year. In 1784, however, he and other buyers engaged risky opportunities, which emerged from Lindsay's desperation to raise cash after the 1783 cowry crisis. In 1784, buyers of land at government auction paid about twice the jamma due on the land, and about twice the arrears; for one Langlah parcel, Gowar Hari Singh paid even more.¹⁷⁷

These buyers saw opportunity in government auctions that put land into the hands of well-connected investors, even if this meant bending rules, as Lindsay did to benefit Gowar Hari Singh at the expense of old Langlah zamindars.¹⁷⁸ In May 1784, Lindsay still had some attachment to the old zamindars, and he petitioned to lower their jamma, saying Langlah was one of six estates "daily going to decay because the revenue with which they are assessed is far greater than the Zemindars can possibly afford to pay without ruining their Talookdars

¹⁷³ SDR304.38:30June93.

¹⁷⁴ SDR294.53:31May84.

¹⁷⁵ SDR294.69:6Sept84.

¹⁷⁶ In 1785, as recovery from the 1784 floods progressed, petitioners in Calcutta complained about official corruption in the sale of Langlah pargannahs, and Lindsay responded thus:

The Zemindars formed an idea they were beyond the reach of Government and that from their remote situation none would dare to purchase any part of their possessions and were refractory to the last. It happened as they expected [and] although many hundreds attended the Sale not one dared to bid. At my request Ghor Hurry Sing became the purchaser ...SDR294.97-8:25Jun85

¹⁷⁷ SDR294.98:25Jun85.

¹⁷⁸ Willes wrote to the Board that, "when [Gowar Hari Singh] bought the lands at the Company's Sales, he was Peshcar in charge of the Collections of the District, he was Wadaddar for the several Talooks, and he was also Shroff. From this you will judge what oppressive modes were pursued to establish his Zemindaree and how little such a Zemindaree is entitled to the protection of the Government." SDR297.113:1June89. Willes later concluded that documents were fraudulent that Lindsay had used as judge to confirm the original purchases. SDR299.12-14:(nd)Sept89. Gowar Hari and his cousin and partner, Prem Narayan, held land and mortgages in many Sylhet localities. SDR299.43-5:28Nov89. In 1792, his personal estate consisted of land in 22 parganas with 17,678 kahans jamma, of which 11,888 were in Chowalis. SDR302.43-6:23Apr92. His Janglah purchases were moreover the biggest land purchases at government auction till that time, and his purchases in 1783 and 1784 amounted to 39% of the total sold in the four years after 1781.

and Ryotts with exorbitant exactions.”¹⁷⁹ But a year later, to defend its sale to his friend, Lindsay said that Langlah zamindars “did not pay one single Cowry” in revenue” on the “highest and best land in Sylhet, which was “over-run with wild beasts” because they oppressed their tenants, who deserted the land.¹⁸⁰ By the time of this latter report, Gowar Hari Singh’s speculation would have begun to pay dividends, as the 1784 floods forced families from the lowlands to seek good high ground to farm. In 1786, Lindsay again petitioned to reduce the Langlah jamma, formerly paid partly in elephants, because, he said, the estate was still too full of jungle to pay tax rates appropriate for cultivated land.¹⁸¹

These transactions indicate the workings of the market in state-authorized property rights. The market appears buoyant even before 1784, and in the north, must have benefited from commercial expansion around Sunamganj. John Shore provided a rough contemporary measure of land market buoyancy, when he told the Board of Revenue, in 1791, that he had “never known of any instance in Bengal in which the price of revenue lands sold, out of Calcutta, exceeded the revenue of two years.”¹⁸² The sale price of 31% of the fourteen estates sold at auction in Sylhet, between 1781 and 1784, exceeded two years’ jamma. Gowar Hari Singh’s two upland purchases, in 1784, were for 195% and 282% of jamma, respectively.¹⁸³

Floods in 1784 and 1787 boosted the market value of upland jungles, by promoting forest clearance and new *shail* cultivation that must have bolstered the agrarian economy during floods in 1791 and 1793. Observers compared 1791 to 1784.¹⁸⁴ An earthquake occurred, on 15 March 1791, followed by torrential storms that destroyed the *boro* crop and drowned Ajmeriganj, Beejoorah, and Bannyachung.¹⁸⁵ Yet the overall harvest in 1791 was adequate, because of good crops in the second half of the year,¹⁸⁶ which seem to have come from high ground not farmed in 1784, whose owners came forward to buy lowland properties

¹⁷⁹ SDR294.53:31May84.

¹⁸⁰ SDR293.156:25Jun85.

¹⁸¹ SDR294.118-19 4Feb86. In 1788, forest Zamindars sought property rights in Khedah grounds for elephant hunting. Khedah rights had been secured by elephant payments in the past. Collector Willes denied this request, saying the Khedah is a hunting ground that moves from hill to hill, not land on which property rights pertain. SDR297.72-3:12June88.

¹⁸² India Office Records, Bengal Revenue Consultations, P/52/31, 10 June 1791, quoted in Datta, *Society, Economy, and Market*, pp.146-7, where Rajat Datta finds seven estate sales from 1776 to 1793 and 43% purchase prices over 200% jamma. Datta concludes that this sale price pattern “suggests a buoyant land market in this period” (1724-1793), by the standards of the day.

¹⁸³ In response to Collector Willes’ hostility to his land acquisitions, Gowar Hari Singh organized a substantial petition campaign against Willes, and particularly his conduct of the Hustabood measurement-registry of landholdings, to which Gowar Hari objected as a violation of his landholding rights. Willes defended himself at length in SDR304.8-17:20Apr93, where he said (p.8) that he had met Gowar Hari Singh in Calcutta, who had said he would not submit the petition, the goal of which was to have Willes recalled and thus prevent “impartial investigation respecting the lands he obtained while acting as Peshcar of this District.” The case continued in the court, however, and in 1793, Gowar Hari Singh’s wakil arrived in Sylhet, under government orders to present ownership papers, which he does not have for period when Gowar Hari Singh was Peshkar. Diwani Adalat and Board of Revenue nullified his purchase of Lunglah, which was returned to original proprietors.

¹⁸⁴ SDR301.15:13Apr91.

¹⁸⁵ SDR301.15:13Apr91.

¹⁸⁶ SDR301.59:26July92.

destroyed by flood.¹⁸⁷ In 1793, owners of uplands bought at auction in 1781-1784 could well afford to pay a 43% higher jamma (86,715 Kahans) than the land bore when they bought it (60,485 Kahans).¹⁸⁸ In 1793, thirty-five small estates in the uplands sold at government auction for an average price six times the jamma, and all but six went for more than twice their jamma.¹⁸⁹

The 1787 floods caused new problems on Sylhet's northern frontier, because they ravaged mountains as well as the lowlands. As famine raged, in October 1787, Lindsay reported -- as it turned out, mistakenly -- that,

Cosseahs of the Laour mountains joined by the inhabitants of the contiguous lands under the Hills have totally laid waste the Autgong-Selbouries, Bunsikoorah Sookar, Bandugah, and Beetel Pergunnahs all under Sylhet. They were not satisfied with plunder but inhumanly murdered near 300 people before distressed by Famine ...

Adding that "Dacca pergunnahs have also suffered" the same affliction, Lindsay opined that, "the most essential mode of redressing the general grievance is by retaliation -- that is, burning their villages and carrying off their cattle in season as the water subsides," and he reported that, "in order to put a stop to their incursions for the present I have sent a Jemidar and 50 men to watch their motions in armed boats." Having caught some perpetrators, Lindsay said, they "declare in their justification that a famine upon and under the mountain forced them to these outrageous measures."¹⁹⁰ Two days later, he revised his original account, by saying, more accurately, that "inhabitants of Laour Pergannah particularly those who live immediately under the mountains joined by the Cosseahs have entered and laid waste the [upland] Beetal, Bunseekoorah, and Banduga pergunnahs."¹⁹¹ Two weeks later, he revised his account further, saying, more accurately still, that the violence also involved mountain Khasias, "Laour people," and "inhabitants of the Lowlands under the mountains," whose combined force had become "more formidable than [he] had at first reason to suppose." In then "dispatched Lieutenant Davidson with a 100 men in addition to those already sent in order to reduce them to obedience," ordering Davidson "to proceed to Lahore" and "strike terror" accordingly.¹⁹² Two days later, Davidson reported famine had devastated hills to which his enemies fled on his approach.¹⁹³

In a long report on the state of the country, in November 1787, Lindsay emphasized that the military protection of northern frontiers "against incursions of Hill people" had been a central concern of the Mughal government. He argued that rapidly increasing revenue demands and indefinite boundaries of landed property aggravated conflict in a region where

¹⁸⁷ SDR301.29-30:21May91.

¹⁸⁸ SDR304.11:20Apr93

¹⁸⁹ SDR305.8-19:(nd)Sept93. See also below, on the exceptional case of parganas "destroyed by Khasias." Two more estates were sold in 1793 for 350% their jamma. SDR306.60-3:8Nov94. Datta, *Society Economy and Market*, p.146, also shows an increase, during the 1780s, in the jamma-proportionate sale price of the small number of estates in his sample.

¹⁹⁰ SDR295.107:26Oct87.

¹⁹¹ SDR295.111-12:29Oct87.

¹⁹² SDR295.117.14Nov87.

¹⁹³ SDR295.136:16Nov87.

“ryots are of unsettled disposition and have no fixed abode or native place like others,” moving in “wretched hordes” as need be from one place to another.¹⁹⁴ In one of his last official letters, he said that floods and Khasia incursions had killed the 1788 revenue. zamindars had paid him nothing for eight months and would never repay securities advanced by shroffs. As remedies, he prescribed lower taxes on insecure farms, fierce protection from Khasia incursions, and a fixing of boundaries for the district and all its landed property.¹⁹⁵

When Collector Willes took office, in February 1788, he only pursued the latter two remedies, and focused first on mountain Khasias. Citing “Mr.Lindsay’s narrative” and tingeing his prose with apprehension, he wrote: “Government have been informed of the uncivilized state of these [Khasia] people, of the minute division of their country into small independencies, and their incessant disputes with each other which are frequently decided on the bordering lowlands in the Company’s jurisdiction.” He then exaggerating the frequency of Khasia attacks and stoked fear of French intervention, by saying the French Commissioner “has lately felt himself authorized to form connections with the Cosseah Rajahs, inhabitants of the Hills whose depredations have been so frequently felt in this district.” He described how the Company had “courted the Rajahs who look up to its authority,” and he warned that the French sought alliances that would divide Khasias into “French and English Rajahs,” whose quarrels would spill into Sylhet. To woo mountain Rajahs, he sought permission to distribute presents among them, not to exceed in value Rs.2,000 per annum.¹⁹⁶ His request approved,¹⁹⁷ annual expenditures for such presents then entered the Sylhet budget.¹⁹⁸

Willes believed that increasing trade with the hills would increase conflict “if every trader be allowed to form whatever connections he thinks may be conducive to his own interests,” and he sought authority to regulate private trade in the hills, saying that, “these [commercial] connections have within the last six months brought forward four times the Number of Principals ever known before.”¹⁹⁹ He knew that trade was beneficial and lively in both directions, with “wax, ivory, Muggadooties etc coming from the countries without our dominions under the Rajahs of Cutcher and Jointah and the Cosseah Rajahs of the Ponduah Hills,” and with “salt and grain etc coming from the Company’s territories.” But he warned that free trade could be dangerous, because trade in weapons could tilt the military balance.

[T]he custom of stopping all boats at the Bunder Ghat to be searched also took its rise in Mogul Government when Sylhet as Frontier was placed under the authority of a Nawab sent immediately from Delhi and independent of the Subah of Bengal. The order was given to prevent warlike stores of any kind being carried to the hills for the use of the independent Rajahs and I beg to recommend that the practice be continued...

Problems would arise, he said, “if Hill people acquire arms” and “learn the [use] of them from the wandering lowland Europeans, Moguls, Greeks, and Armenians who infest this

¹⁹⁴ SDR295.122-130.(nd)Nov87

¹⁹⁵ SDR297.17:1Feb88

¹⁹⁶ SDR297.48-50:29Mar88.

¹⁹⁷ SDR297.70:12June88.

¹⁹⁸ SDR306.21-5:19Aug94.

¹⁹⁹ SDR297.48-50:29Mar88.

district.” If this should happen, he feared, “the Company’s territories even as low as Dacca may be subjected to [mountain Khasia] incursions” He said that Lindsay had “stopped several foreigners who were going off to the Hills with arms for the purpose of barter,” and that “within these [past] few weeks [in May 1788] a large part of armed Moguls have been stopped and prevented from going off to the Hills to assist in the predatory wars of these inimical Rajahs.”²⁰⁰

Willes soon discovered that mountain Khasias were not his only problem, or indeed, his main problem. In July 1788, as he negotiated with hill rajas to rebuild markets destroyed in battle and bring merchants back to Pandua,²⁰¹ conflict erupted among Bengali Khasias.²⁰² In December, one Bengali Khasia leader, Ganga Singh, “calling himself the Zemindar of Barrakeah,” burned to the ground a neighboring zamindari and killed its proprietor, Baroo Chaudhury, also a Bengali Khasia, in a land dispute that became a “blood feud.”²⁰³ Ganga Singh then captured both sides of a river carrying mountain trade with Sylhet.²⁰⁴ Then Willes learned that Pandua had fallen completely to mountain Khasias, while Bengali Khasias under Ganga Singh and his confederate, Aboo Singh, zamindar of Dewallah, expanded control over land below the hills in “open hostility to the Company,” seizing people, goods, and boats on the river.²⁰⁵

Ganga Singh was a complex character, whom Willes described as a Bengali Khasia who “possesses territory on the hills and also holds many pergannahs on the lowlands [and] rents many villages from dependent zamindars of Sylhet.” Willes found that “this practice of letting and selling lands to the Cosseahs [had] been adopted by many of the Sylhet zamindars,” and he thought “it extremely injurious to the Company’s interests.” Despite this complex situation, Willes had a simple remedy: “nothing but coercion will suit the dastardly and savage disposition of the Bengalee Cosseahs of the lowlands.”²⁰⁶

In 1789, Willes formulated strategy for handling his frontier problems, amidst new discoveries and changing circumstances. He proposed that a strict boundary be drawn at the base of northern mountains, so that Khasias might settle in the plains as Company subjects without hill rajas taking this to be an extension of their territory.²⁰⁷ But at the same time, he discovered, to his surprise, that Khasia Tankadars in the lowlands held tenures under the Company to protect Sylhet from hill Khasias.²⁰⁸ When he proposed seizing all the land of Ganga Singh, claiming the sale of this land had been forced upon sellers,²⁰⁹ he met hill rajas who offered to buy Ganga Singh’s Barrakeah estate.²¹⁰

²⁰⁰ SDR297.54-61:12May88.

²⁰¹ SDR297.93-5:5July88.

²⁰² SDR297.93-5:5July88.

²⁰³ SDR298.45:12Jan89.

²⁰⁴ SDR297.154:15Dec88.

²⁰⁵ SDR297.164:18Dec88.

²⁰⁶ SDR297.164:18Dec88.

²⁰⁷ SDR298.45:12Jan89.

²⁰⁸ SDR198.59:12Jan89.

²⁰⁹ SDR298.48:12Jan89.

²¹⁰ SDR298.49:12Jan89.

Willes requested military force to settle all borders with Khasia rulers,²¹¹ including Jaintia, once and for all.²¹² But then, he discovered that territorial ambiguity did not plague only his northern frontiers. Landowners in borderlands between Mymensingh and Sylhet claimed to live in Sylhet to avoid taxation in Dacca District, and claimed to live in Dacca District to avoid Sylhet taxation. As a result, western Sylhet borderland markets boomed as buyers sought strategic sites for evasive investments.²¹³ To clarify legal property rights in its dominions, the Company now issued a public notice that sanads must be produced for all rent free land, with the goal of resuming land for which proper sanads could not be shown.²¹⁴ At the same time, Willes engaged a Hoostabood survey of jamma land, and reported that, “about 60,000 Kulbahs of cultivated lands have been measured,” despite “Conungoes and Principal Mussalman Landholders” who had “combined to retard its operation.”²¹⁵

In February 1789, Ganga Singh and Aboo Singh captured Chumtallah pargana,²¹⁶ and Willes took a sepoy troop on a tour of parganas supposedly ransacked by Khasias in 1787. This coincidence hardened his heart for war on the Khasias, though he soon discovered he was wrong about the nature of Khasia aggression. On his tour, he found Betal and Betal Nawarrah, Bunsicoorah, Ausgang, Silberis, and Rundugah fully “depopulated by Khasia thieves and [Bengali] dacoits.”²¹⁷ He learned that Khasia attacks, dacoity, and famine had rendered Betal and Betal Nawarrah “almost entirely waste and jungle and the zamindars had deserted it.” He wrote that,

On my giving Zamindars encouragement they returned and produced the Kutcha Autpon papers of the several villages and the Fishermen received from me Pattahs to establish their Fisheries” [for a total jamma of 3,989 Kahans] ... which with great care may be collected but if the thieves and dacoits who plundered the Pergunnah are not punished and the ryots do not receive Taccavi, there is no prospect of any cultivation in the approaching year.

Autgang was still subject to Khasia incursions and people in eighty-two remaining households subsisted on nothing but fish.²¹⁸ Bunsicoorah had “no appearance of cultivation,” and “where the Zemindars and Ryots [had] dwelt there was nothing but jungle grass.” He learned that most of people “sustain[ed] themselves by eating the roots of grass and fish.” Again, he said, some revenue might be collected with help for local residents.²¹⁹ Next, he found Rundugah destroyed and “solely inhabited by dacoits,” led by Madooram, the Chowdury, with “no cultivation” and “no revenue”; and there, his “Sepoys were attacked by forty or fifty persons armed with bows and arrows and other offensive weapons and were not dispersed till the Sepoys had discharged their muskets on them.” Likewise, he found that

²¹¹ SDR298.50:12Jan89.

²¹² SDR298.49:12Jan89.

²¹³ SDR298.67-9:9Feb89.

²¹⁴ SDR298.64-5:3Feb89

²¹⁵ SDR298.81-2:19Feb89.

²¹⁶ SDR298.60:3Feb89.

²¹⁷ SDR298.74-5:19Feb89.

²¹⁸ SDR298.76:19Feb89.

²¹⁹ SDR298.77:19Feb89.

Silberis had been “destroyed by Cosseahs” and the people were now “alarmed by the appearance of a notorious dacoit” who “having been driven from the Pergannah bazaars and the Dacca Division ... [had] concealed [himself] in the jungles of Silberis.” He said that the Silberis’ “Revenue [could] be recovered from the Putwaree Sitaram ... and from the ... [revenue] farmer, Raja Raji Singh, zamindar of Susung,” though local people complained that this same raja had burned their villages and taken away ryots to cultivate Susung.²²⁰

The Conduct of War on Northern Frontiers

In April 1789, the Company launched a war on two fronts: in mountains around Pandua and in jungles behind Sunamganj and Chhatak. On 15 April, a Sepoy company arrived in Sylhet,²²¹ and on 8 May, fifty more sepoys arrived, many suffering “violent fever.”²²² The Surma then swelled with “violent rains,” preventing a land expedition against mountain Khasias, Ganga Singh, Aboo Singh, and Bengali dacoits. The expedition would have required 30-40 boats, deemed too expensive, so military action was postponed, as attacks on Company positions continued, one prison guard was killed,²²³ and rebel Khasias and Bengali Khasias continue to control “137 Bengalee villages scattered throughout the district.”²²⁴ In June, Willes sent for more troops, saying, “Cosseahs having attacked and destroyed the Tannah at Panduah which is only ten coss from Sylhet,” threatened “further depredations.” Logistics were difficult, he said, because, “the country being now inundated the troops can only proceed by water,” yet “this [flooding] by having opened the Bunseah River ... [also] affords more direct communication with Sylhet from Ajmeri Ganj.”²²⁵

Ganga Singh then escaped to the hills, where Aboo Singh attacked Pandua fort, killing its commander.²²⁶ The eighty sepoys who marched to Pandua found their powder and guns soaked with rain, and realized the advantage of bows and arrows,²²⁷ but on 20 June, managed to relieve Pandua, without bloodshed, presumably because Ganga and Aboo Singh had fled to the mountains.²²⁸ More sepoys then arrived in Chhatak, which became Company’ military base of operations.²²⁹

Meanwhile, Willes pondered civil measures to settle the borderlands. He explained to Calcutta the need for leniency and patience in parganas supposedly destroyed by Khasias and then plagued by dacoits, “of which ... there are not less three or four thousand in the several pergannahs under Sylhet.” He had by now discovered that “many zemindars are notoriously the supporters of these bandits and share the profits,” and he thus recommended, “that every village where dacoits are harboured be sold, for without some such punishment the mischief

²²⁰ SDR298.78:19Feb89.

²²¹ SDR298.98:17Apr89.

²²² SDR298.116-18.13June89.

²²³ SDR298.102:10May89.

²²⁴ SDR298.127:18June89.

²²⁵ SDR298.119:12June89.

²²⁶ SDR298.119-21:14June89.

²²⁷ SDR298.126:14June89.

²²⁸ SDR298.131:21June89.

²²⁹ SDR298.144-6:6July89.

will daily increase.”²³⁰ He had also realized the value of colonizing jungles with tax-paying farms, and proposed that, at the completion of the Hustabood survey, all jungle land be assumed as Company property, so grants might be given rent free for a specific term of years with Sanads “to whomever may offer to bring any part of it under cultivation, first giving the landholders in the Pergunnah in which the Jungla lies the refusal of such Sanad.”²³¹ In response to Board of Revenue criticism, he said he made his proposal not to establish state property in jungles, but rather,

...with a view to the general prosperity of the country with which they are so intimately connected. During the Mogul government the janglah lands were considered as property of Government, and the several Faujdars of Sylhet constantly exercised a power of granting Abadee Sunnads, to their dependents or others.

But to obviate any appearance of injustice to the Chaudries etc. I recommend giving to the Landholders of the Pergunnahs in which the janglah lay the refusal of such Sunnuds, but the Chaudries of Sylhet are generally so poor and so encumbered by a train of idle partners that if inclined such exertions as are required to bring Jungle land to cultivation could hardly originate with them.

My motive for wishing that the janglah lands should be considered as absolute property of the Company was that men of property and abilities might relying on faith of Government be induced to attempt at their own expense clearing and bringing into cultivation such parts of the country as at present only afford harbour for wild beasts an application to the Chaudries for such grants would generally be unsuccessful.²³²

By August 1789, Willes began to hear good war news. Mr. March, commanding Pandua, reported continued success and requested to be “indemnified” for losses incurred “solely for the purpose of his mission.”²³³ Willes wrote to Commander Ashe, in Dhaka, that after Sirdars at Chamtullah and other villages “north of Surmah under Cosseah hills” had fled, local ryots “expressed an inclination to acknowledge Company authority.” In response to this opportunity, he requested more troops to secure the territory, “not for offence but to respond to force if presented” and “to secure if possible at easy rate the obedience of the Company Ryots who have been led to contumaciously by their interested Seerdars.”²³⁴

In September, amidst a good harvest, “particularly in the lower Pergunnahs,”²³⁵ Willes composed a long report to Governor-General Cornwallis, to make his case for still more troops. He said the Company’s “passive stance” toward Khasias had encouraged their aggression: “The more we have given way the more the Cosseahs have encroached ... leading to the loss of whole Pergunnahs from Panduah to Lohore, and the destruction of

²³⁰ SDR298.151-2:22July89.

²³¹ SDR298.165-72:31Aug89.

²³² SDR299.36:13Nov89.

²³³ SDR298.157:10Aug89.

²³⁴ SDR298.174:9Aug89.

²³⁵ SDR298.172:1Sept89.

uplands [in] Chumtallah” and elsewhere. Under the Mughals, he said, “Jaintia people made constant inroads,” but since Major Ellington’s expedition “they have been perfectly passive.” Willes promised Cornwallis that concerted military action would pay quick dividends, because Ganga Singh was by then “confined to hills,” and he said, Bengali Khasias could be subdued “with little opposition” in the plains, because they “are not united” and will at best “entangle” forces in the woods. Though Aboo Sing “acts as he pleases” and “collects whatever the country produces,” around Pandua, he said, “very few Cosseahs are with him, [though he is] supported by the Bengali Ryotts of that place, who have occasioned the whole disturbance.” He said his Khasia ally, Subba Sing, “is less of a Savage than the rest and wishes earnestly for an accommodation,” and had prevented his people assisting Aboo. He reported that, “most of the other Cosseah Rajas and Cosseahs have fallen off from Aboo, it is said in consequence of the dearness of Salt and Rice, which I have in some measure prevented from going into the Hills.” The “Jaintah Raja who joined in the incursion is fallen off from Aboo and has applied to me to be allowed to destroy all of Aboo’s villages on the Hills,” he wrote, adding that, “Aboo I believe will soon return from the [Pandua] plains but leave a party to parade before the Tannah.” He advised that land of rebel Chaudhuris be sold at auction immediately, and proposed to burn all the houses of Khasias supporting Aboo, saying that, “After this punishment, I recommend accommodation, provided there is an appearance of submission.” He suggested that annual stipends could be given Aboo Singh and Subba Singh, and that a permanent force would be needed for the foreseeable future, to protect Sylhet against Khasias and “dacoits who number at least 2,000.”

Willes’ also proposed a boundary policy to separate Khasia and Bengali territories. Saying Khasias are “not inherently warlike,” he promised they might be kept under control with little force, but for their entanglements with “Bengalee Chaudries” in localities where “irruptions never take place wherein the Cosseahs are not aducted by the Company’s landholders [and] frequently after an irruption the Revenue to the Company is [seized] and the Bengalees and Cosseahs divide the produce.” To sever connections between peoples in the mountains and plains, he proposed,

... that the Cosseahs never be allowed to purchase lands or become residents within the Company’s limits. It can answer no good purpose. A Cosseah never cultivates the soil. He employs Bengally Ryotts, comes down at the time of the Harvests, and carries off the Produce. The Cosseahs have obtained stronghold of this district either by the artful management of the Bengalee Chaudries or by agreements taken from such Chaudries whom they have forcibly taken off into the hills.

For the trade with the hills, marts must be established near some Tannah where the Company’s authority is in full force and not in places close to the hills where the Cosseahs collect Mussool and can easily exert their strength. Sadal Bazar and Panduah are in this situation. The consequence has been almost all the merchants, whether Europeans, Armenians, or Bengalees, though living under Company protection, have looked up to the Cosseahs, have courted them by presents of guns, etc etc and from this intercourse the Cosseahs have learnt an idea of their own strength and these particularly Armenians and Bengalees have frequently been their guides and instructors in their attacks on the Company’s lands.²³⁶

²³⁶ SDR298.175-85:15Sept89.

In October 1789, Willes obtained further support for his plan to separate Khasia and Bengal territory from depositions acquired at the “apprehension of daring marauders,”²³⁷ which documented a “combination [among] the Zemindars, native Collectors, and Dacoits of Bazoo, whereby since the irruptions of the Cosseahs the Pergunnas Autgong, Silberris, Bunsicoorah, and Rundugah have been totally desolated.” He found that Zulkuddah Khan, zamindar of Bazoo, had long protected dacoits, who “are his slaves,” and pay him part of their profits as hush money. In combination with Ramkrishen, the Naib Collector, Zulkuddah Khan commanded 17 boats and 150 men to “murder Company ryots and ruin the country.” These activities occurred under the guise of revenue collection, with the bandits posing as Company officials to steal Company cash from villages, which, if they resisted, were destroyed.²³⁸ Thus Willes found that though Khasias had participated in the destruction of parganas he had toured in February, his original attribution of local devastation primarily to Khasias had been seriously mistaken, and planted in his mind by implicated local informants.

Realizing that local landowners and officials could stoke rebellion, Willes began to imprison refractory Chauduris, Patwaris, and renters for tiny revenue arrears, to set an example and avoid the cost of selling countless small estates to their local allies.²³⁹ In December, he instructed Lieutenant Ashe how to handle revenue arrears at Pandua, saying,

people at Panduah not having paid any revenue this year and their grain being ready to go out I have sent a Derogah to attach the same and collect it for the use of government. You will therefore favor me by marching to Panduah with a party of Sepoys and giving every assistance to the Derogah in executing the order I have given him. While at Panduah I shall be obliged if you will direct that all the houses which you may deem to be too near the Tannah be razed. Jesmunt Sing in command at Panduah Tannah has directions to comply with any requisitions you may make to him.²⁴⁰

Ashe soon responded that he had been unable to use the harvest or convert it to revenue, so he had burned it entirely, and he explained his action thus:

I regret burning so much grain, yet if we cannot carry it off and do not destroy it, the Cosseahs obtain their object and escape punishment. It is the Company’s grain and the Company’s lands and they know it well. The Cosseahs etc of Punduah have had the most public notice by tom tom that they pay their revenue or their grain would be seized. If they attack our Sepoys in the execution of their duty they must take the consequences of their own temerity We have never been aggressor in any context with these wild people and by ill fortune we have had within these few years many persons killed and wounded tho’ excepting at the attack at Punduah Tannah by the Cosseahs we have never fired a shot and I sincerely hope we shall never fire first.²⁴¹

²³⁷ SDR299.24-30:19Oct89.

²³⁸ SDR299.24:19Oct89.

²³⁹ SDR299.33:31Oct89.

²⁴⁰ SDR299.51:9Dec89.

²⁴¹ SDR299.55:16Dec89.

By late December, Lieutenant Cheape's men had captured Chamtullah and Barrakeeah, two former strongholds of Ganga Singh, the latter his home. To settle Barrakeeah, Willes instructed Cheape thus:

In relation the Barrakeeah, I have to recommend that you adhere to the Board's orders; and that the inhabitants thereof may know the terms on which only they will be allowed to remain independent. I enclose a perwannah which you will cause to be published in Barrakeeah. Should they after this notification appear in arms, to molest the Company's District, conformably to the Board's resolution you will dispossess them of their lands. By the general tenor of the resolution, you cannot fail to observe that it is the wish of Government to restore order, rather by immediating the disaffected into a proper sense of their duty than to reduce them to obedience by any violent exertions. Therefore, I hope that in every instance you will consider them as the Company's ryots and not as Public Enemies. In these places where due attention is not paid to the summons of the Darogah you will of course assist him seizing both the persons and property of the refractory and adopt such measures as may appear most likely to re-establish the authority of Government on the Lands, with the exception of Barrakeeah, from Lohore to Panduah.²⁴²

By the end of 1789, a new agrarian order had begun to emerge on northern frontiers, where Willes sought to sponsor investors in agricultural expansion. Concerning the parganas supposedly "devastated by Khasias" in 1787, he proposed to John Shore that,

[the] most efficacious mode would be to sell the lands [because] most of the present Chaudries are by profession Dacoits and its by no means clear that the irruption of the Cosseahs was not occasioned by their intrigues A creditable person has offered to undertake the management of the above pergannahs provided he be allowed ten percent for his expenses on the lands presently in cultivation and assured of nankar forever for himself of ten percent on all the lands which he may restore [to cultivation]. But as he is a man of no property Taccavee will be requisite and five thousand cawns of cowries will be sufficient. I am not afraid of losing the advance and I recommend this mode in preference to a monthly allowance by which a certain expense accrues to the Company without any certainty of profit....²⁴³

Yet rebellious Bengali Khasias remained a problem. Willes wrote Cheape that, "the people to the northwest of the Surmah are a troublesome Race and their submission to avoid punishment is not to be relied upon too much, tho' I am satisfied that the exertion of temperate severity during the continuation of the present season will effect the wishes of government." Willies hoped to hear good news from Cheape soon about "the disposition of the Bengae Cosseahs, how far their obedience may be depended upon and what security

²⁴² SDR299.57:21Dec89.

²⁴³ SDR299.59-60:29Dec89.

they have likely to give, for the due exact and constant payment of the Revenue due from them to Government.²⁴⁴

On 8 January 1790, more good war news arrived for Willes, who wrote Cheape he was “happy to hear the business continues to go so well,” and gave orders to treat “Sirdar Chaudries and Patwarrays of every village that may be induced to submit” as dangerous criminals, telling Cheape to send them under guard to Sylhet.²⁴⁵ At Chumtallah, Willes hoped Cheape would raze all the houses of Chaudhuris who were “principal offenders,”²⁴⁶ but Cheape had gained control of the place by promising not to destroy it, and Willes agreed he had to keep his word. Willes reminded him, however, that, “Burning some of the villages of persons very refractory and who are notorious as dacoits and murderers is absolutely necessary and a mode of intimidation most likely to give tranquility to the District by depriving them of the power of making further irruptions.” Willes told him to “sieze and either burn or send to Sylhet every boat which you may find to the Bengalee Cosseahs of Chumtullah etc to the Northwest which appears calculated to carry dacoits or fighting men.” He clarified his methodology of state terrorism, by saying that, “In destroying a village when necessary, I certainly wish that the Inhabitants by a shrill or two or some other means should be first if possible frightened out of it because when Sepoys are heated some time their officers are not able to restrain them.”²⁴⁷

Despite this warning, Cheape ordered the massacre of Bengali Khasias around Ganga Singh’s home village, Barrakeeah, where, on 20 January, after his men had captured 33 Khasia and Bengali prisoners, seized 290 cattle, and stopped grain and salt going to the hills (perhaps to supply Ganga Singh), his troops were attacked, which, he wrote to Willes, forced him

to use military rigour with the particular advice of your Tahseeldar by burning and destroying every village I came near, and putting to death as many of the enemy as were unable from their wounds to make their escape, a rigour which I find absolutely requisite to be continued for the preservation of the detachment committed to my care and the better regulation of the Company Purganas, one of which I [take] this to be

He then justified himself further, saying that,

[from] local knowledge I have hitherto acquired of the country and its inhabitants peace will never be kept nor well regulated government established without a disciplined and active military force, ready at all times and at all seasons [and] for so long as the inhabitants are unawed by such force and the very impolitic communication admitted between them and the Cossies or independent hill people allowed to exist, so long it will be impossible to establish internal peace and good government.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁴ SDR299.67:7Jan90.

²⁴⁵ SDR299.69:8Jan90.

²⁴⁶ SDR299.69.9Jan90.

²⁴⁷ SDR299.77-9:17Jan90.

²⁴⁸ SDR85.37:20Jan90.

Horrified by this report, Willes ordered Cheape to leave Barrakeah to “encamp at Chumtullah, Bangar, Pondua, ... or elsewhere in safety ... without being reduced to adopt such disagreeable measures.”²⁴⁹ Then he “entreated” Cheape “in the strongest terms to show in the future all possible leniency to such persons as may be unfortunate to be wounded as contrary conduct if persisted would reflect the greatest disgrace on the English Character and I further again request that in no instance the Sepoys be allowed to fire on any person except when in the direct act of opposition.”²⁵⁰

On 2 February 1790, Cheape captured Ganga Singh.²⁵¹ Immediately, “about 400 Cosseahs under Menon Sing, a relation of Aboo Sing, came down from the hills and burnt villages around Chhatak,”²⁵² where Company control took several months to reestablish. Cheape again blocked grain moving into the hills, but Willes reported that, “it is difficult to prevent Cosseahs from getting grain altogether,” because “the Cosseahs of Sadah Bazar have always behaved quietly and allowing them provisions they of course sell it to the others.” Willes ordered Cheape not to break up bazaars, because it would effect the revenue,²⁵³ but again, Willes could not control events at Chhatak, where in early April 1790, a “most extraordinary act of violence” occurred, when Sepoys attacked Puna Terub Punjee, whose Khasia residents, Willes said, “are well affected to us.”²⁵⁴

On 20 April 1790, some Khasia rajas sent a faqir to Willes “with written proposals of conciliation,” as Khasia warriors attacked Pandua, where sepoys were falling sick²⁵⁵ at the rate of five or six per day, and by 24 April, about seventy were fully debilitated,²⁵⁶ before a surgeon arrived from Dhaka.²⁵⁷ By this time, Company troops had conquered most people below the mountains, but had again lost Pandua -- now permanently, it seems -- to Khasia warriors who then came down again in large numbers, under Aboo Singh, to threaten Raja Ganj, within five miles of Sylhet. At this point, the only military action required was to drive away mountain Khasias to secure Sylhet’s northern boundary. To support this effort, Willes again expounded the barbarity of Khasias, who belonged forever confined to the mountains.

The Cosseahs are of a barbarous and revengeful disposition and without discrimination sacrifice men, women, and children ... But fortunately they are so divided among themselves that [they] can never be a powerful enemy still their divisions render it more difficult to render a General Settlement altho’ many of them I have reason to believe are well affected to the Company ... The Revenue of Sylhet is too trifling to claim the attention of government yet while it is received and obedience exacted from

²⁴⁹ SDR299.79:21Jan90.

²⁵⁰ SDR299.80:21Jan90.

²⁵¹ SDR299.84:2Feb90.

²⁵² SDR299.87:7Feb90.

²⁵³ SDR299.101:21Feb90.

²⁵⁴ SDR299.107:3Apr90.

²⁵⁵ SDR299.114:22Apr90

²⁵⁶ SDR299.117:24Apr90.

²⁵⁷ SDR299.118:26Apr90

Inhabitants they [in] return have an undoubted right to expect protection....
[lest they] be immediately overrun and desolated by these savages.²⁵⁸

Aboo Singh's retreat to the mountains under the 1790 monsoon ended the Company wars to secure Sylhet's northern boundary and subdue rebels in northern jungles. In February 1791, some of Cheape's troops left Chhatak,²⁵⁹ and in November 1791, the entire 35th Sepoy Battallion left Sylhet,²⁶⁰ after which, Sebundy Corps troops "stationed at Panduah, Kontakall, Chamtullah, Moradpur, and Meroan at Parannah Lahore, where Brick Forts [had] been erected as a check on the Cosseahs," seemed to the Collector "sufficient except for extreme circumstances."²⁶¹ Though Willes had ordered Ganga Singh sent to the Sylhet jail on his capture, in February 1790,²⁶² Ganga Singh remained in Cheape's custody, in Chhatak, "under a gentle and unsuspected confinement," until January 1792, when Cheape could report that all the ryots of Barrakeeah, including its four Khasia Waddadars, "with their Raja Ganga Sing have come in and acknowledged themselves dependant on the Honourable Company."²⁶³

The Production of a Modern Boundary

The conjuncture of the 1780s included two sets of violent conflicts on Sylhet's northern frontiers. Both escalated during the 1787 famine and ended abruptly in 1790. Though connected, they had different origins and distinct implications. They fell on either side of the boundary that would separate the later histories of Sylhet and Meghalaya.

The first set of conflicts had begun before 1780. It focused sharply on Pandua and concerned control over commercial routes and resources in high mountains above that river port town. These conflicts involved Company officials, mountain Khasia rajas and warriors, Bengali settlers and merchants, private European merchants of various nationalities, Bengali Khasias, and jungle zamindars. In 1780, Lindsay's warm welcome by mountain Khasia rajas surely derived from their hope that he would help them, and he needed their help in return. Their alliance controlled Pandua for three years, but in 1783, one of his former allies attacked Pandua and Lindsay brought sepoy to secure Pandua merchant assets, including his own. For the next five years, a rough balance of power held at Pandua, where the Company had enough force to protect trade and collect some revenue but not enough to protect Europeans, who did business there through resident Bengali and Khasia middlemen. In 1788, as mountain peoples recovered from famine, some Khasia rajas wanted to bring European merchants back to Pandua, but other Khasia rajas captured the town instead. Sepoys seized Pandua in 1789, but lost it a year later, when the Company silently abandoned the idea of making Pandua part of Sylhet, and then sought instead to foster mountain commerce across a strictly enforced state border between Khasia and Sylhet territories. Prospects were bright for this plan, because mountain trades had continued through Pandua during the previous decade

²⁵⁸ SDR299.121:29Apr90.

²⁵⁹ SDR300.106.3Feb91.

²⁶⁰ SDR298.98:17April89. SDR298.116-18:13Jun89. SDR299.80:21Jan99. SDR299.104:5Mar90. SDR305.55:6Jan94. Correspondence on the Khasia boundary war occupies much of SDR volumes 85 (received) and 298, 299 (sent).

²⁶¹ SDR305.52:1Feb94

²⁶² SDR299.86:7Feb90.

²⁶³ Willes again ordered that Ganga Singh be sent to Sylhet "in irons under strong guard," inf's SDR302.20.31Jan92.

of hostilities,²⁶⁴ and resident merchants at Pandua could easily deliver all desired commodities to buyers in the lowlands.

The second set of conflicts occurred in jungles and farming frontiers below the mountains down to the Surma River around Sunamganj and Chhatak. Local conditions became turbulent after 1780, as hill trades increased on routes to Pandua, while Omaid Rezah's authority declined, and new settlers and investors like Gowar Hari Singh arrived with Company authority. Violence erupted in 1788, dispersed rapidly, and focused periodically on markets (*ganj*) where subsistence goods, especially salt and rice, came from villages and left for the mountains. Widespread conflict raged for two years. It involved Khasia and Bengali Khasia merchants, who carried goods to and from the mountains; Bengal Khasias, who moved among high and low lands where they held various proprietary interests; Bengali merchants, villagers and zamindars; and Afghans and so-called "Moguls"; and the Company's army. Most residents got embroiled in conflicts. Zamindars, talukdars, chaudhuris, tankadars, wadaddars, patwaris, and other local men in the ranks of Company Raj joined the fray. Ganga Singh and his relatives emerged as warrior rajas, whose mountain pathways provided routes of escape and supply, and who focused particularly on controlling river routes. War ended in 1790, after Lieutenant Cheape spread terror in the region. Ganga Singh probably surrendered, perhaps to prevent more death among his people, and appears to have been influential in securing local submission. Many surviving local officials rejoined the Company ranks after prescribed acts of contrition and terms of imprisonment.

In 1790, the Company drew a new boundary below Pandua that institutionalized the outcome of war in mountains around Pandua and forests behind Sunamganj. This new boundary of Bengal Presidency in Sylhet became a reality based on Khasia victories in the mountains and British victories below. It ran along the base of the mountains and bisected the route from Sunamganj to Pandua. It marked the northern limit of British Bengal, which only then extended indisputably to the mountains, and equally indisputably, did not include Pandua. Marking boundaries with such official firmness was not normal imperial practice at the time, and it required extensive justification, duly recorded in official correspondence.

The primary justification for the boundary was that it secured Company territory against threats to British authority posed by unregulated mobility between mountains and plains. The English drew the boundary to restrict mobility and sever social bonds between people in mountains and lowlands. The boundary altered Sylhet's geography by crimping mobility in cowry country, defining northern mountains as alien Khasia territory, making northern Khasias aliens in Sylhet, and defining all the farmland below as Bengali. The new boundary was distinctly modern in that it sought to curtail the fluidity and indeterminate vagueness of an old regional order where state territory was immersed in unbounded, mobile geographies of land-use, commerce, and culture, and thus hostage to the whimsy of people outside the reach of state authority. The boundary's modernity came with its subordination of all geographies to that of the state.

In the official culture of Company Raj, the new boundary separated "races" of Khasias and Bengalis. It restricted "intercourse and intermarriages" that produced the so-called "degenerate Race called Bengalee Cosseahs." As Willes explained most eloquently, state problems addressed by the new boundary did not arise from the inherent character of the Khasia "race," but rather from Khasia and Bengali miscegenation; and hence from Khasia-

²⁶⁴ In SDR304.11-17:20Apr93,.

and-Bengali alliances that threatened the Company's territorial order by mixing lowland popular culture with the wild, unruly culture of the mountains, where people did not respect the symbols or comply with the rituals of state authority. The threat posed by Khasias came not from Khasia culture itself, which if properly contained, seemed harmless; but rather, from its potential to influence people at the lowest levels of state authority on frontiers of British India. After 1790, rules governing geographies of culture, commerce, and land-use came to coincide more effectively with rules prescribed at the highest ranks of state authority and passed down to every locality through the ranks of bureaucracy, law, and official knowledge.

The new state border became a boundary of "free trade" that separated groups who could be and could not be trusted by officials to obey the rules of the state. Willes began to concoct this new commercial geography in September 1789, when he still hoped Sylhet might keep Pandua; but a year later, that hope had vanished, when he detailed a plan²⁶⁵ to manage limestone trades in the manner of the salt monopoly, as "one mode of preventing wars and disturbance with numerous clans of independent barbarian borderers and on secondary view as an aid toward the protection of the low country against these borderers."²⁶⁶ He did not want to limit private trade in limestone and rejected the idea that "competition among European manufacturers of Chunam [was directly] connected with the incursions and depredations of the Cosseahs," because merchant "advances seem to be made to Inhabitants of the lowlands bordering upon the Cosseah Country, who procure the stones and in reality are contractors for the delivery of the stones to the manufacturers."²⁶⁷ But he did believe that, "a promiscuous intercourse with the Rajahs has been and will be productive of constant disputes in the lowlands," because,

The mode of getting the stone in the first instance is by purchasing a Stone Hill from Cosseah Rajahs. The Comars or Chunam manufacturers are then permitted to break the Hill and draw the limestone from thence. In an agreement formed between Rajahs and a European, which I laid before the Supreme Board, it was expressed that the Cosseah Rajahs should support him in carrying out his business against all opposition. In another agreement it was expressed that one of the Cosseah Rajahs should receive duties in preference to another. In other instances, I have known provisions for muskets and powder.

He sought to "remedy this evil without taking the management of the drawing of the stone," by leaving "the power of trading with the bordering [lands of limestone supply]" to Company servants, who would sell stone from the mountains to private merchants in the lowlands.²⁶⁸ He then prohibited European merchants from operating personally inside all Khasia territory, including Jaintia and Cachar.²⁶⁹ To engage in limestone trades, Europeans had now to procure a license from the Collector to buy stone only at Sunamganj or Companyganj (which

²⁶⁵ SDR300.51-9:2Sept90.

²⁶⁶ SDR300.52-3:2Sept90

²⁶⁷ SDR300.57-9:2Sept90.

²⁶⁸ SDR300.57-9:2Sept90.

²⁶⁹ All Europeans had to register with the Collector to work in Sylhet. In 1793, the Collector ordered one European whom he suspected of encroaching on the Janitia Raja's timber business, to stop his old resident dealings in Jaintia and to work only through Jaintia contractors, as a condition for the renewal of his registration. SDR304.69:18Sept93.

seems to have been established specifically to regulate mountain trades).²⁷⁰ He prohibited Khasia traders from northern mountains from operating personally in Sylhet, but not Khasias merchants from Jaintia or Cachar; and he explained this distinction by saying,

Wax, ivory, and iron principally from from Cutchar and Jointah from whence limestone are not procured. But these articles as well as Mugadooties are brought to sale in the lowlands by the Cosseah traders who are considered as quiet and inoffensive and are not as some of the Cosseah Rajahs desirous of living by oppression and plunder. The Cosseah traders have and ought to receive encouragement [because] they are oppressed by every independent chief of a little hill and are anxious to live on good terms with our government.²⁷¹

The new boundary did not end all troublesome travels between mountains and plains. For example, in 1793, during the Company's wide-ranging confiscation of Bengali Khasia and Khasia land (see below), the Tahsildar of Zillah Bungong reported that Khasias had come and beheaded five people and taken women to hills. Sepoys then burned Khasia villages before Khasia rajahs met the Collector and convinced him this conflict continued an old struggle between some Bengalis in the plains and Khasias in hills, it appears, over land.²⁷² Convinced that the violence had not involved unilateral Khasia aggression, the Collector then pursued judicious discipline to prevent further conflict, sending sepoy under orders not use their weapons to bring Khasia suspects to Sylhet, where the accused received individual treatment as criminal offenders.²⁷³ Another telling incident occurred two years later, when Willes traveled to Pandua, where he delivered customary presents to Khasia rajahs and then surprisingly marched sepoy on a sightseeing trip to a famous cave nearby, apparently without local permission. A fight broke out and Khasias gathered "in great force around [his] troops," sending "arrows flying all around in every direction." Despite wounds to his men, none died, and Willes escaped without injury. He described the event as "a minor incident" and said that despite their "treachery and duplicity," Khasias had overall been "remarkably peaceable."²⁷⁴ Nevertheless, while at Pandua, Willes "devised a scheme to punish [the] treacherous Cosseah chief," by having his village "at the summit of a high mountain" burned. One sepoy died and others received wounds in this punitive action, which must have met the approval of some Khasia rajahs. Willes explained to his superiors, alluding to local custom, that "Cosseahs cannot be allowed to believe [he] retreated out of fear," and that he had inflicted this punishment to maintain peace, "in accord with precedent."²⁷⁵

Though the new boundary between Khasia mountains and Sylhet District remained open for ongoing mobility, it also marked a new phase in the geographical history of state discipline and territorial order, which imposed a new regime of private property rights in old

²⁷⁰ Companyganj first appears in SDR306.145-7:18Jun97.

²⁷¹ SDR300.56-7:2Sept90.

²⁷² SDR308.51:11Oct97. The Board of Revenue inquired about lingering Khasia claims to Bongong, and the Collector responded that Khasias never had a legitimate claim and had not pressed any claim since the land had been reclaimed from jungle for cultivation.

²⁷³ SDR303.68-72:15Jan93.

²⁷⁴ SDR307.5-6:(nd)Apr95

²⁷⁵ SDR307.2-5:(nd)Apr95

forests north of the Surma River. This imposition entailed a forceful, protracted partitioning of old agrarian domains, where shifting cultivation, hunting, permanent farms, trading and fighting had mingled in spaces of boundless mobility between mountains and plains, and where local mixtures of proprietary cultures emerged in mixed Khasia and Bengali environs. In 1780, mixtures of proprietary practices included local respect for the authority of the Company, Omaid Rezah, clan leaders, zamindars, Khasia rajahs, and others. Men like Ganga Singh worked in this realm to create mixed proprietary interests in land, labor, crops, and cash. After 1790, all this mixing faded away as the Company's Sylhet property system extended up to the new northern boundary. With the completion of the Hustabood and Bandobast for the rest of the district, property rights had become more strictly tied to taxation than ever before; and this new rigor -- instead of old indulgences designed to woo powerful locals -- now encompassed the northern forests. Four years after his 1789 tour of "devastated parganas," Willes declared all indulgence for their landowners should end, and they should now be accountable for jamma on normal terms, meaning their land could be sold for arrears.²⁷⁶ Instead of giving away tax-free grants of forest, as Willes had proposed during the war, Collectors kept old tax rates in force and endeavored to sell defaulting estates at government auction to new investors.

Land buyers in northern forests now entered a state-managed land market where -- as in the case of commerce -- individual rights rested on ethnic classifications. The Company prohibited all Khasias from owning land in Sylhet District, on the grounds that all their legally owned land had all been acquired illegally, and that they could never abandon alien mountain methods for establishing property rights.²⁷⁷ Collectors then expropriated Khasia property. Even major figures like Ganga Singh must have either lost their land to become tenants and laborers, or turned themselves into Bengalis, at least for official purposes. In this context, the land market thrived, as buyers acquired state-defined land rights to support the long, laborious process of clearing jungle, creating new farms, attracting tenants and laborers, establishing markets, and generating crops to sustain a growing population.

North of the Surma, clearing jungle to make farms involved clearing Khasias from records of land rights and expelling them or making them tenants and laborers. In August 1792, the first recorded auction of Khasia taluks went to Lal Barker, who bought land assessed at 3,728 Kahans (with arrears of 4,503 Kahans) for 4,845 Kahans, or 130% jamma.²⁷⁸ A year later, the Collector reported that he had completed the sale of all the land expropriated from rebellious villagers, except for a "trifling remainder of Cosseah land."²⁷⁹ Lal Barker's purchase typifies two apparent patterns: most buyers bought very small parcels of land, and former Khasia land sold at much lower prices than other land on auction,²⁸⁰ especially in "devastated parganas" toured by Willes in 1789.

The general reason for the extreme cheapness of northern land on government auction appears to be that it remained covered with jungles where substantial numbers of Khasias still lived. In addition, high tax rates continued to plague potential investors. Jamma remained pegged to the productivity of cultivated land, and thus to the jungle's potential, rather than current productivity. Owners of jungle found it difficult to expand cultivation, in part because

²⁷⁶ SDR300.132:23Mar91.

²⁷⁷ SDR302.31-32:26Mar92.

²⁷⁸ SDR303.7-8:24Aug92.

²⁷⁹ SDR304.38-9:1July93.

²⁸⁰ SDR305.8-19:(nd)Sept93.

property rights rested on state tax demands poorly calibrated to encourage, let alone subsidize, investment. All this did not prevent forest investments, but encouraged investors to concentrate on land already farmed, which they might sell or let go on government auction, where they would reap any excess in the sale price over arrears.²⁸¹ Sale proceeds might eventually go into clearing forest for new cultivation, but Collectors complained constantly that investors concentrated attention only on already cultivated land, despite much lower tax rates on forest.

One obvious reason for this investor strategy was that jungles yielded no cash for paying even the lowest jamma. The land of Golam Hossain illustrates the disabilities of large jungle estates, most numerous, it appears, north of the Surma. In 1793, Golam Hossain's vast Bunsicoorah holdings went on auction, as Willes said, "because of over-assessment." Jungles covered 94% of the land. When it went on auction, it owed a paltry 515 Cawns arrears on its huge jamma of 11,027 Cawns, and it initially attracted no bidders, because like other such estates in the area, it had too much forest in proportion to farmland. Though the jamma for Golam Hossain's Bunsicoorah forest was only 1.21 Cawn per Culbah, compared to 11.66 Cawns per Culbah on Bunsicoorah farmland, his total jamma for his Bunsicoorah land had to be paid entirely from the cultivation, and his jamma amounted to 35.57 Cawns per Culbah of farmland.²⁸² By contrast, Golam Hossain's other landholdings, elsewhere in Sylhet, though covered 74% with forest, produced enough cash from farms to pay the jamma and some profit. On that other land, the total tax per Culbah was 2.52 Cawns, compared to 1.70 Cawns for his Bunsicoorah estate, but its effective rate was 9.97 Cawns per Culbah of farmland, compared to 35.57 Cawns per Culbah in Bunsicoorah.²⁸³

All across Sylhet District, many more estates than ever before went on auction in 1792 and 1793. Their jamma in general rose as their proportion of jungle declined, and only a small number attracted no bidders, despite harsh floods in 1791 and 1793. As Bunsicoorah indicates, large estates covered with jungle remained unattractive investments. Bunsicoorah and other "devastated parganas" toured Willes in 1789 remained impossible to sell or very cheap. At the same time, however, by 1797, tracts of land north of the Surma, formerly owned by Khasis and Bengali Khasis, had been occupied by Bengali cultivators, who "[had] become very willing and eager to enter into regular engagements to pay Revenue." Again saying that Khasias had held this land by force, failed to bring it to cultivation, and rather "scared away farmers," the Collector reported that after the Company "secured the area and confined Cosseahs to the hills," peace came to the region along with people who turned forest into farms. This land had not been included in the Bandobast and its cultivators were now anxious to secure their rights, by having land duly recorded in their names. Their total jamma, he said, would be at most 6,000 Cawns, which "[could] be used to defray the cost of Tannahs that defend district against Cosseahs."²⁸⁴

As generally in Sylhet, most new farmland north of the Surma appeared inside small estates where farmers could clear enough land quickly to pay taxes. A vast profusion of new land rights appeared in the Hustabood survey and Bandobast accounts. Whereas in 1783, approximately 4,000 tax payers held official property rights in Sylhet District, in 1795, the

²⁸¹ SDR305.8-19:(nd)Sept93.

²⁸² SDR308.73-4:7Nov97. SDR308.39-40:25Sept97

²⁸³ SDR308.73-4:7Nov97.

²⁸⁴ SDR308.27-8:15Sept97. When Board inquired about lingering Khasia claims at Bongong, Willes again said they never had a valid claim and did not press one now that the land had been reclaimed from jungle for cultivation. SDR308.51:11Oct97.

Collector reported that, “the Talookwar Bandobast of this province exhibits a list of 26,000 persons and upwards by whom the small jumma of this district is paid, many of these paying from a single Cawn of couries to five hundred and [only] a few any considerable sum above it.”²⁸⁵ By 1798, the number of tax-paying landowners had increased to 27,000.²⁸⁶ Data on estates sold in 1793 indicate the small size of most landholdings,²⁸⁷ showing 37% owed less than 10 Cawns jamma, 66% less than 30 Cawns, and 83% less than 100 Cawns.²⁸⁸

Table 2

Sylhet District Statistics for the 1790s ²⁸⁹		
Population	4,93,000	(1789, 1808) ²⁹⁰
Zillahs	12	(1794) ²⁹¹
Villages	7,227	(1791) ²⁹²
Parganas	127	(1791) ²⁹³
Taluks	27,000	(1798) ²⁹⁴
Taluks per Village	4	
Taluks per Pargana	213	
Taluks per Zillah	2,250	
Villages per Zillah	611	
Villages per Pargana	58	
Parganas per Zillah	11	
Population per Village	67	
Population per Taluk	18	
Population per Pargana	3,882	

²⁸⁵ SDR306.126-7:8Sept95.

²⁸⁶ SDR309.51-5:12May98.

²⁸⁷ SDR305.8-19:(nd)Sept93.

²⁸⁸ These figures are from a sample of 35 sales in 1793 and exclude atypical cases from the northern frontier in Bunsicoorah and other “devastated parganas” toured by Willes in 1789.

²⁸⁹ Citations for sources appear in footnotes above.

²⁹⁰ Figures for 1789, 1808, and 1872 from M.M.Rahman, “Population of Sylhet,” pp.115, 117. 1822 figure from *Report on the Population Estimates of India*, p. 71.

²⁹¹ SDR306.21-5:19Aug94

²⁹² SDR300.141-44:24Oct91

²⁹³ SDR300.141-44:24Oct91

²⁹⁴ SDR309.51-5:12May98.

In the 1790s, the estimated district population was about 4,93,000, so that landowners would have comprised a bit more than 5% of the total; and estimating landowners' immediate families at five persons each, we can imagine that 27% of all people in Sylhet District lived in landowning families. A statistically average village would have held a tiny population of sixty-seven people and only four landed estates (taluks), each representing about eighteen people, perhaps few more than one family, its dependents and servants. (Table 2)²⁹⁵

Thus it seems that in the 1800, Sylhet's northern boundary marked off Khasia mountain territory from a lowland agrarian region of state authority where farming expanded primarily in and around the small village family estates. In the surviving domains of larger estates, north of the Surma, however, new farms expanded more slowly, leaving more old jungles in place for the pursuit of traditional Khasia ways of life.

Conclusion

The boundary of Bangladesh all at once in 1947, but its oldest segment, separating Sylhet and Meghalaya, indicates much older, more complex, and diverse local histories in the borderlands, which carry meanings quite distinct from meanings inherent in the singular, continuous line we see on national maps. National boundaries often cover older boundaries, whose meanings have changed dramatically over time, and all boundaries have different meanings for different people in different places. National boundaries are sacrosanct symbols of sovereignty, but for people who move across them routinely, these same boundaries often appear as mere obstacles to mobility. This popular experience reflects a much older reality than national maps, because for most of human history, states had little power to regulate mobility across their borders.

Before 1790, northeastern frontiers of Bengal remained as open to mobility as they had been during Mughal times and before. Cowry country embraced an array of social environments spanning mountains and plains that comprised a historical space with a very long past and boundless geography. In 1790, British military victories in lowland forest frontiers of northern Sylhet and Khasia military victories in the mountains above combined to produce the first boundary in the region that endeavored specifically to restrict mobility from one side to the other. This political boundary became a social boundary on both sides.

Below the mountains, old Bengali boundaries acquired new geographical forms and cultural meanings. Land rights authorized by the state now defined all the local elites who owned bounded plots of agricultural property, including farms and jungles. Khasias became official aliens, disallowed from participating fully in what became for the first time a definitively Bengali agrarian territory. The first boundary of Bangladesh thus defined Sylhet as a Bengali territory in British India, where alien Khasias might live and work but could never really belong. Initially, and still today, this boundary defines Bengalis and Khasias as peoples with separate histories, homelands, and cultural identities, which mingle in the local history of the borderlands, where each defines the other, and where the memory of Bengali Khasias north of the Surma indicates a distinctive borderland cultural past outside the reach of the national imagination.

²⁹⁵ Willes often asserted that each taluk typically belonged to one family: SDR297.126:5Sept88 and SDR300.141-44:24Oct91.