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**Rule against Nature: Founding an Empire on  
India's North-Eastern frontiers**

**Gunnel Cederlöf**



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## Rule against Nature: Founding an Empire on India's North-Eastern frontiers\*

Gunnel Cederlöf

A premise in the study of British rule on Indian territory is its roots in the aggressive politics of an early-modern European mercantile corporation. However, the consequences of this premise for our understanding of the early formation of British governance in India deserve further analysis. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, British East India Company troops advanced on several fronts; in north and east India on the north-western, south-western, and north-eastern frontiers. Though similar by name, these frontiers were different in character. The north-western frontier had a sharp edge in the battles with Afghan and Sikh forces. In contrast, the south-western frontier was pushed into the densely forested hills of central east India, into Chotanagpur and Chhattisgarh. Here, the confrontations between British and indigenous forces however antagonistic have been seen as tug-of-war where gains and losses alternated. K. Sivaramakrishnan analyses these confrontations in terms of 'zones of anomaly', where British officers, aiming at incorporating the territories as districts under a British colonial government, failed to maintain control. On the north-east, the frontier was more of an open expansion zone where the Company merchants-cum-officers aimed at getting in control of minerals, and of the commercial routes through Burma to the markets in China.<sup>1</sup>

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\* Revised paper of the lecture delivered at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 25 January 2012.

<sup>1</sup> K. Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests: Statemaking and Environmental Change in Colonial Eastern India* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); Sanjukta Das Gupta, *Adivasis and the Raj: Socio-Economic Transition of the Hos, 1820–1932* (New Delhi: Orient Black Swan, 2011); Vinita Damodaran, "Indigenous Forests: Rights, Discourses, and Resistance in Chotanagpur, 1860–2002," in *Ecological Nationalisms: Nature, Livelihoods and Identities in South Asia*, Gunnel Cederlöf and K. Sivaramakrishnan (eds.) (New Delhi and Seattle: Permanent Black and University of Washington Press, 2005).

The British East India Company's (hereafter: EIC) North-Eastern Frontier extended from the Brahmaputra towards the Burmese border.<sup>2</sup> At the outset, the lands were part of the large *diwani* territories, granted by the Great Mughal to the EIC in 1765. The grant vested the Company with revenue rights and the rights to keep an army. Simultaneously, the new governor had to provide justice to Mughal subjects according to Mughal law and therefore to set up courts. Being heavily understaffed for the task of setting up a civil administration, the EIC came to depend on the less than loyal Mughal revenue accountants.

For a historian, this situation generates fundamental questions about governance, space, and the natural and physical preconditions of the region over which the EIC took control. I will take this opportunity to discuss three aspects of the problem. The first analyses the difficulty of keeping the state as the main entity of analysis. The second targets the perceptions of space that guided decisions taken by the Company in their expansion eastwards. Finally, the third aspect discusses the general notion of a climate crisis that prevailed among European observers in the late eighteenth century. These were notions that affected perceptions of the region but did not prevent further advances into east Bengal and the annexation of the several autonomous polities neighbouring the Mughal territories.

It has been common for historical studies of colonial India to begin with the state—the 'colonial' state, the 'Company' state, the 'military-fiscal' state, the emerging 'modern' state, or simply 'the state'. But British rule did not arrive as a state but in the form of an early-modern mercantile corporation. The corporation was rather at odds with the British state and its centralising efforts which threatened the sovereignty of the early-modern corporations. Therefore, the problem we face is how to analyse the formation of governing power in the EIC territories

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<sup>2</sup>This article is based on research, funded by the Swedish Research Council. It is published as a monograph: Gunnel Cederlöf, *Founding an Empire on India's North-Eastern Frontiers, 1790–1840: Climate, Commerce, Polity* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013). I am grateful for valuable discussions when the research was presented at a weekly seminar at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library on 25 January 2012.



in India, in the absence of state functions. And with the absence of such functions comes the question of the formation of subjects and subject relations. The Great Mughal had subjects in these territories, but the EIC had no access to the social networks through which privileges and rights within Mughal polity were negotiated. It basically lacked all qualifications to enter such networks and thereby to enter the polity in which the Mughal grant was framed.

There is a tendency at times in scholarship to ascribe far more coherence of interest and institutions to a state in its daily practice than can be justified. As long as we retain the state as the axiom of our enquiries into the formation of British rule in India, we risk applying intentions and interests that had very little bearing on the actions of the officers of a mercantile corporation. We may equally be guilty of ascribing the logic of state institutions to a corporate bureaucracy.

As the second point indicates, when we research the pasts of the region that is today labelled by a geographical indication, Northeast India, we enter a spatial analysis. The EIC defined ‘frontiers’ from the perspective of Calcutta and central north India. The North-Eastern frontier was, on the one hand, an administrative unit under an Agent to the Governor General but, on the other hand and more relevant for our purposes, it was an enlargement of Company territories where China was on the horizon. Seen from the perspective of the way in which we generally frame the political geography of research, the region which is today known as Northeast India ends up on the margin, far from any political centre of significance. An increasing number of studies today, inspired by borderland-research theory, enquire into the consequences of living with nationstate borders cutting through the centres of peoples’ livelihoods and life worlds.<sup>3</sup> However, when

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<sup>3</sup> Willem van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*, Anthem South Asian Studies (London: Anthem, 2005); Sanghamitra Misra, *Becoming a Borderland: The Politics of Space and Identity in Colonial Northeastern India*, (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011); David Ludden, “Where Is Assam? Using Geographical History to Locate Current Social Realities,” *Himal Southasian*, November (2005).

engaging with maps and memoirs of the early nineteenth century, it is striking how different the frames, margins and centres are located compared to most maps that have been produced by colonial officers after the mid-nineteenth century.

A most spectacular map was drawn in several versions in 1838 by Robert Boilean Pemberton. Today, copies of this map are kept in archives in New Delhi, London and New Haven.<sup>4</sup> The map encompasses all of Burma, west China, part of Tibet and most of Bengal. It is so large that the water-colour copy of the map which is kept in the National Archives of India has been cut in two and we will move within the northern half of this map. It extends from the territories at the mouth of the Hugli in the southwest to the Celestial Lake in Tibet. On the northeastern extreme, the map includes part of Sichuan and most of Yunnan. From north Laos in the south-eastern corner of the map, the southern extreme crosses the Bay of Bengal to the Ganges-Meghna delta and Calcutta. The centre of this map is Manipur in the mountains separating Bengal from Burma. In most maps of colonial India, Manipur is on the extreme eastern margin but, in this map, Manipur and the surrounding tracts are most densely covered with place names which indicate important communication routes.

The spatial perceptions represented in this and similar maps and the memoirs that accompanied them are representative of merchant interests in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The maps encompass what is today known as the South West Silk Road that connected China via Yunnan and Bengal. The routes have millennium-old pasts and European merchants had had their eyes fixed on trade and goods that moved along them since several centuries. In the 1830s, the routes grew in importance when the Burmese kingdom had been defeated in war. Yet the timing is paradoxical. The British Parliament had tried to curb the Company's powers by seriously reducing the scale of their sovereign spheres, their monopolies, from 1813. In 1833, the EIC lost its last sovereign sphere when they were dispossessed of the monopolies in tea and the trade with China. From 1833, the EIC

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<sup>4</sup>These archives are kept in the National Archives of India in New Delhi, the British Library in London, and the Sterling Memorial Library at Yale University, New Haven.



almost ceased to exist since a sovereign sphere is the essence of a mercantile corporation. However, its activities continued by force of its merchants, officers and bureaucrats. It was a practice set in motion, a form of *habitus*. When commercial competition was let loose on the sea routes to China, the EIC merchants began to explore the overland routes.

It is therefore important, in historical spatial imaginations, to let go of the limitations that result from applying modern nationstate borders or regional enclosures such as 'Northeast India' onto historical research of the nineteenth century and earlier times. The spatial problem is more than a redefinition of 'borders'. It targets questions of overlapping space and layered scales. It speaks of the difficulty of capturing open-ended trajectories of the first half century with a merchant overlord, and of the relative weakness of the different polities (including that of the EIC) which is representative of this time period of colonial rule on the EIC's North-Eastern frontier.

The third point brings up the conflicting perceptions of the climate and natural conditions of the larger region, held by British officers, and of their implications for the establishment of governing rule. It also targets a similar issue in research by present day historians.

There is a contradiction in the reports that resulted from the EIC's encounter with this region in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. On the one hand, the authors were preoccupied by the dangers of nature or, using their terminology, of the 'unusual weather'. The annual monsoons, which flooded much of east Bengal, were accompanied by reports on disasters. Extreme droughts occurred on a number of occasions. One of several was the well-known drought of 1769–70, also the most devastating, causing the death of 1/3 of Bengal's population.<sup>5</sup> Floods were equally bad. The 1787 flood was so massive it changed the entire riverine system, including changing

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<sup>5</sup> William Wilson Hunter, *The Annales of Rural Bengal* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co, 1868): 32–34; Nani Gopal Chaudhuri, "Monopoly of Grain in Bengal and Bihar During the Famine of 1770," *Calcutta Historical Journal*, vol. 10, no. 1–2 (1985–1986): 110; Rajat Dutta, "Subsistence Crises, Markets and Merchants in Late Eighteenth Century Bengal," *Studies in History*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1994): 89–93.

the course of the Brahmaputra and giving rise to six new large rivers: the Tista, the Jamuna, the Jelanghi, the Mathabhanga, the Kirtinasa and the Naya Bhangini. Half the population along the Tista was reported dead after the monsoon and the landscape did not stabilise for the next 30 years.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the earthquake of 1762 remained a long time in the collective memory; recalculated to the Richter scale, it would have measured between 8.1–8.7.<sup>7</sup>

Simultaneously, another set of reports, ending up in the Revenue Department files, described the same region in a completely different tone. These reports speak of ordered and cultivated landscapes in which land under cultivation and the revenues derived from it increased steadily year by year. They convey very little about flooded fields or swelling rivers. In understated language, an officer would only occasionally report that such lakes and marshes made travel ‘tedious’. For historical research, it is essential not to privilege one set of historical documentation over the other, for example as when agrarian history completely relies on material from the revenue files. This is especially so in such a monsoon-dependent region as Bengal, where people lived from fishing, collecting forest products, and hunting as much as from the cultivation of the soil. These are activities that rarely show up in the revenue files.

<sup>6</sup> Radhakamal Mukherjee, *The Changing Face of Bengal: A Study in Riverine Economy*, Calcutta University Readership Lectures (Kolkata: University of Calcutta, 2009 [1937]): 139; G. Campbell, *Further Report on the Famine in Bengal and Orissa in 1866, with Appendices* (Nagpur 1867): 25–27, 29, 34–35; R. C. Majumdar, *The History of Bengal*, (Dacca: University of Dacca, 1943): 6.

<sup>7</sup> William Hirst, “An Account of an Earthquake in the East Indies, of Two Eclipses of the Sun and the Moon, Observed at Calcutta: In a Letter to the Reverend Thomas Birch, D.D. Secret. R.S. From the Reverend William Hirst, M.A.F.R.S.,” *Philosophical Transactions*, vol. 53 (1763): 257–58; Edward Gulston, “An Account of an Earthquake at Chattigaon: Translated from the Persian by Mr. Edward Gulston, in the Service of the Honourable East India Company, and Communicated by Him to the Reverend Mr. Hirst,” *ibid.* (1763a): 255; “Extract of a Letter from Mr. Edward Gulston, at Chittigong, to Major John Carnac, at Calcutta,” *ibid.* (1763b): 263–64. On the geological history of the Burma scarp, see C. Nielsen et al., “From Partial to Full Strain Partitioning Along the Indo-Burmese Hyper-Oblique Subduction,” *Marine Geology*, vol. 209, no. 1–4 (2004).





## **Governing by Means of a State or of a Corporation**

With Sudipta Kaviraj's words, the EIC made a 'stealthy entrance' in India when it expanded its powers from the position of a revenue farmer under the Mughal and not as a formally sovereign ruler.<sup>8</sup> Political power within the Mughal empire was delegated to subsidiary levels of authority. Similarly, in England, the situation was characterized by the competing and overlapping political and constitutional forms that shaped early-modern political and associational life. In the civil law tradition, the corporation was a body politic composed of a fellowship that was bound together for a communal purpose under a shared set of rules. Not only was the EIC a corporation. Municipal governments, trades, guilds, public works, ecclesiastical establishments, universities, charities, and conceptually speaking even the monarch were forms of the corporation. In most of early-modern Europe, relations between states, on the one hand, and corporations, estates, and institutions on the other, reveal a complex situation of cooperation and conflict. In England with its seventeenth century Glorious Revolution, the relationship may have been more polarised. Philip Stern speaks of a 'total antagonism' between corporations and the notion of an absolutist state. The EIC's expansions on Indian territory were caught in this conflict, and was an example of how the modern state and empire 'was in many ways formed by the process of incorporating, co-opting, and undermining the legitimacy of [the corporations]'.<sup>9</sup>

The EIC, as any other corporation, acted on royal mandates granted by Charter Acts. These were grants that secured sovereign spheres.

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<sup>8</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Trajectories of the Indian State: Politics and Ideas* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010): 20.

<sup>9</sup> Philip J. Stern, *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundation of the British Empire in India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011): 6; Farhat Hasan, *State and Locality in Mughal India: Power Relations in Western India, c. 1572–1730*, (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 42–43; Muzaffar Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707–48* (Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1986): 47–52; Cederlöf, *Founding an Empire on India's North-Eastern Frontiers*, Chapter 7.

In order to enter such a sphere, one needed a licence or a passport in some form. The *diwani* was in many ways treated as yet another sovereign sphere of the Company, this time, it was a monopoly in territory. As a consequence, the Company officers chased ‘interlopers’. They were private merchants who lacked a licence to trade within its territories. On the other hand, the monarch and parliament in London issued one regulation after the other to restrict the EIC’s independent position since the *diwani* territories—being larger than the British Isles—was far too large a sovereignty for a corporation to exercise.

The Company’s priorities were reflected in its officers’ activities. The first resident collector of Sylhet, Robert Lindsay, had a handful of European colleagues at his disposal for the administration of thousands of ‘landholders’ (to use his terminology) and some 11,600 square kilometre. In contrast, he employed between 500–600 men permanently for his private business enterprise in limestone.<sup>10</sup>

The revenue administration landed the Company in a whole new role as governor. The administration of land revenues was not only in the EIC’s interest but also a requirement of the *diwani* grant. To the subjects of European origin operating in EIC territories were now added the populations of Mughal territories who remained subject to Mughal law. The grant gave the EIC access to large revenue resources, but their collection depended on participation in complex socio-economic webs. These rested on norms of close and personal relations between ruler and ruled, or between sovereign and subject. Obviously, the Company not only lacked attachments to subjects in the region, it also lacked the status and identities that would have made such attachments possible. However, without such relations, civil administration would be impossible and, clearly, each collector and magistrate strove to establish and formalise ruler–subject relations. The

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<sup>10</sup> David Ludden, “The First Boundary of Bangladesh on Sylhet’s Northern Frontiers,” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh* 48, no. 1 (2003): 13–16.



revenue settlements became the means by which to achieve these ends.<sup>11</sup>

The legal mechanism was property. The security of life and property was an unquestioned quality of subjecthood, in the British Isles as in Bengal. Property gave a man a right as an individual and subject. Therefore, defining landed property in the *diwani* territories would make the subjects visible in the administrative files. People realised how important it was to get lands registered with the new rulers, and thousands of them sued each other to court over small holdings. The collector who carried through the first settlement in 1790 left no room for uncertainty; the settlement was made ‘not for the purpose of obtaining an increase of Revenue to Government, but to give extension to cultivation by ascertaining the boundaries of each man’s possession and thereby repressing litigation’.<sup>12</sup>

By measuring plots of land, calling them holdings, and assessing amounts of revenue, the land became holdings attached to people who had duties to government to fulfil. Or, the other way around, people became fixed to measured lands in agrarian landscapes and, thereby, individuals became visible as subjects to government in the records – however faulty the accounts may have been. The revenue settlements were without comparison the largest and most systematic mapping of subjects under British government native to north-east Bengal. Their implementation had all kind of weaknesses, but through fiscal practice, a channel of communication was opened between ruler and ruled. It was so extensive and authoritative that we may usefully speak of a ‘fiscal subject’.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Jon E. Wilson, “The Domination of Strangers: Time, Emotion and the Making of the Modern State in Colonial India,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 46, no. 30 (2011): 48.

<sup>12</sup> Oriental and India Office Collections, Bengal Board of Revenue Proceedings, 12.10.1830, No. 3, 19.9.1830, Memorandum respecting the extent and sources whence an increase of revenue may be derived in Sylhet by Lieutenant Fisher Revenue Surveyor, 1829.

<sup>13</sup> Cederlöf, *Founding an Empire on India’s North-Eastern Frontiers*, Chapters 5 and 7.

Later, at the time of the first Anglo–Burmese war (1824–6) and throughout the 1830s, such ‘fiscal subjects’ were nowhere in sight when the EIC advanced beyond the *diwani* territories. Their ambition was then to secure strategic positions for military purposes, and to take control of the major routes of communication in the larger region, from the Brahmaputra to the Irrawaddy. The *diwani* did not authorise the EIC to annex any other territory, and no international law would sanction war on neighbouring kingdoms who had not in the least provoked the Mughal *diwan*. Annexation became a step-by-step mix of violence and legal argumentation. Since the close of the eighteenth century, the Company had worked out rules to indirectly control and annex new territory. The principle was known as that of ‘subsidiary alliance’. It was used in agreements with native powers where the ruler remained in place, subordinate to the EIC overlord. This was a flexible approach that could be adjusted to particular circumstances. Under such alliances, British troops could be kept in the allied state’s territory, with the state covering all the costs. If payments were not forthcoming, the Company had the right to annex the territory. A British resident was placed at the royal court and the ruler surrendered control of foreign affairs to the EIC. One after the other, the autonomous kingdoms on the North-Eastern frontier were taken in under British ‘protection’ by means of treaties.<sup>14</sup>

The aim, as for example when treaties were signed with the rajas in Khasi hills in the 1830s, was to get free access to the sources of minerals, the construction of a transport network for goods and troops within and across the hills, and subjection of the states to EIC overlordship. The Company had no ambition to establish relations with subjects beyond the local rulers. Until the 1840s, the driving force and dominant interests of the Company were clearly commercial, military, and imperial. The Company’s administration may at times have resembled that of a state—not least since they relied on old Mughal state functionaries and reported on the legality of their activities to the British parliament. However, it was a bureaucracy at work, in which

<sup>14</sup> Barbara N. Ramusack, *The Indian Princes and Their States*, (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), Chapter 3.



relations to subjects were of low if any priority. At times, individual officers at the lower levels of administration tried desperately to make the government in Calcutta accept its responsibilities towards suffering subjects of British rule, but did so mostly against the tide.

### **Flows and Blockages in the Imperial Geographies**

Historical studies of a region that is today so interlocked with nationstate politics and international conflicts may easily result in a focus on bonded landscapes also in the past. But while both real and imagined landscapes may surely have been bonded, we need to rethink ideas about borders encircling exclusive territories. British imperial preferences and the mobile character of several regional polities require us to redefine the location of centres and margins. Geophysical and climatic conditions challenge our analyses into identifying stability and continuity as well as mobility and rupture. Both political and environmental realities speak for the necessity of taking the entire region, from the Brahmaputra to the Irrawaddy, and perhaps also the Mekong into account.

Over the centuries, the region has been characteristic of people moving across land, along rivers, uphill and downhill, and over longer and shorter distances. The highways between Bengal and Yunnan—the Brahmaputra, the Surma, the Barak, the Chindwin, the Irrawaddy, and all the interconnecting waterways and overland paths—brought merchants, goods, networks, and ideas to market places and to the societies in which the markets were located.

Polities expanded and contracted. When British officers travelled along the Irrawaddy to the Patkoi Pass in the mid-1830s, in large and heavily armed contingents, Singpho clans controlled most of the lands from Bhamo to Hukawng valley and into Upper Assam. Nagas traded east and west of the hill ranges. The Jaintia polity connected plains and hills, having its capital in the Surma plains and many small, federal chiefdoms in the hills. The Dimasa dynasty in Cachar twice moved the centre of their polity away from both the Ahom kingdom in Assam and from raiding Naga clans who competed for the salt wells. First they

moved from Dimapur, southwards, up to Maibang in the lower hills in the fifteenth century and thereafter to Kashpur in the Barak plains in the seventeenth century.<sup>15</sup>

Manipur was known as a strong state in the eighteenth century which raided the eastern plains up to the Irrawaddy until the Burmese retaliated and forced them to retreat. The EIC entered into a treaty with the Raja Jai Singh of Manipur in 1762 so that the two, jointly, could keep the Burmese at bay. These were mobile political geographies. Larger movements, claims for tribute, slave raids, and warfare caused domino-effects of forced migrations among smaller communities. People moved as did place names. Thus the many sub-national and ethno-histories of North-East India need to connect to larger spatial and political contexts, which may be—but are not necessarily—‘colonial’.<sup>16</sup>

The EIC as a governor of the *diwani* territories was preceded by the Company’s private merchants. Since at least a century, they had competed for wealth with French, British, Dutch, Portuguese, Afghan, Armenian, Shan, Burmese, and Chinese merchants. Nationalities were of lesser importance than loyalties to a corporation or trading house. The British employed French merchants for their skills in negotiating with Khasi chiefs for limestone contracts. They employed Armenians as go-betweens in dealings with Mughal officers, and so on.

<sup>15</sup> National Archives of India, Survey of India, Memoirs, No. 111, Narrative of a journey from Ava. Cederlöf, *Founding an Empire on India’s North-Eastern Frontiers*, Chapter 4; Ratna Dey, *Land Revenue Administration in Cachar (1832–1900)* (Kolkata: Biswabani Prakashani, 2011): 6–7; E. Grange, “Extracts from the Journal of an Expedition into the Naga Hills on the Assam Frontier,” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, vol. 9, no. 2, July to December (1840): 956–57.

<sup>16</sup> R. Boilean Pemberton, “Report on the Eastern Frontiers of British India: Manipur, Assam, Arraca,” *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, vol. 8 (1838): paras 22, 28–40; Surajit Sinha, *Tribal Politics and State Systems in Pre-Colonial Eastern and North-Eastern India* (Calcutta: K. P. Bagchi & Co., 1987).



There were commercial flows as well as checks on conveyance. A Company Collector, Henry Lodge, blocked trade at Cachar's borders in the 1790s. This almost crushed Cachar's economy and, on the Cachari raja's request, the Governor of Bengal interfered to restore a free flow of goods. Until the Burmese war, Cachar prevented the EIC to enter into its territories. Jaintia, in turn, battled with both Mughals and British governments for keeping lands south of the Surma so that they could tax trade on the river. In 1837, the British simplified the collection of transit duty by auctioning out the ghats, or custom points along the Barak to the highest bidder. But the profitability was destroyed already the following year when 'small items' were removed from the list. The British wanted to promote commercial flows, and this was blocked when boats were searched for smuggled goods. However, the small items included the valuable ivory pieces that were a major source of income for the Ghat contractors.<sup>17</sup>

The Anglo-Burmese war dramatically changed the balance of power in the larger region. British military presence was then high. Burma's economy was in ruins. People had fled Cachar and Manipur, and the war was followed by three successive severe floods of the Barak-Surma rivers. The Survey of India officers reported from Cachar, Manipur, and Tripura in accounts that were tailor-made for military and revenue needs. Yet it would be an exaggeration to claim that the Company now controlled the region. Still, in the 1830s, after half a century of active administration on the North-Eastern Frontier, the EIC was a comparatively weak governor.

In the literature, colonial rule is often ascribed with a singularity of vision and a fixed uniformity of policy. But this is poorly reflected in the archived voices from the Company's North-Eastern frontier. There was a remarkable difference between high and low levels of the bureaucracy. The Calcutta high command's frame-of-reference

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<sup>17</sup> J. B. Bhattacharjee, *Cachar under British Rule* (New Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1977): 21. For conflicts over Jaintia lands south of the Surma, see the Shahpur case, in Cederlöf, *Founding an Empire on India's North-Eastern Frontiers*, Chapter 5. On the auctioning out of Shealteck and Banskandi ghats, see *Founding an Empire on India's North-Eastern Frontiers*, Chapter 4.

extended over imperial geographies. Orders given to subordinate officers originated in this political logic, which was of course far from the immediate problems of making an unwilling population submit to the idea and authority of a ‘district’.

For example, the post-war plan for Cachar was to rapidly increase cultivation and, thereby stabilise the local economy. This was done by using incentives—a cultivator could be granted lands rent-free for up to five years. However, the monsoons in 1834, 1836, and 1837 thwarted all such plans when the lands were submerged under up to fifteen feet of water. Buildings and bridges were washed away and crops destroyed. Burns, the Superintendent of Cachar asked for relief funds and tax exemption. But the Bengal government turned a deaf ear to social concerns and insisted on new clearings. The superintendent then replied that no one had capital enough to make a clearing and explained, as if to a child, that the forests were full of tigers, buffalos, stags, and other animals that made any cultivation difficult.<sup>18</sup>

Again, in 1838, when stores were to be carried uphill into Manipur, Burns was requested to provide 1,750 coolies. The request was impossible to meet. Cachar’s population of only 50,000–60,000 was spread over a vast territory. Most of them cultivated small plots of land, and they could not be removed from cultivation in the ploughing and sowing season without severe consequences for their livelihood. Yet Burns tried. Of the first 160 men, 155 soon escaped. The Cachari and Bengali landholders, however small their holdings, refused to work as porters or construct roads. Burns explained that it was ‘totally foreign to their habits and revolting to their prejudices’; they themselves employed Malees and Nagas to carry goods.<sup>19</sup>

Another evidence of how far removed the government was from ground realities came in the summer. Burns then explained that the monsoon was fast approaching and there would be no shelter for the porters in the hills. With thousands of men on foot in the hills, roads

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<sup>18</sup> Cachar District Record Room, Superintendent’s Letter Book, 1837–38, Nos 41, 42, 75, 77, 91, and 113.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 130.





would turn swampy and be destroyed, and only fevers and death would follow from such a mission. At the height of the rains, the demand for coolies from Cachar had risen from 2,000 to 4,000, since two companies were now moving into Manipur. Burns reported that only violent seizure could assemble such a workforce. At the end of the rains, he was only willing to recruit Nagas and Kukis, but washed his hands of the operation as such, saying that if the government wanted coolies from Cachar the army would have to collect them itself and he would have nothing to do with their remuneration. By December, the forced seizure of men for coolie work had begun.<sup>20</sup>

What the superintendent was battling with, was how to establish a basic level of trust among the landholding Cacharis. He introduced a police force, a local court, and stamp paper to form the most basic civil administration. However, he did this in conflict with the EIC government at Calcutta. They had a bird's-eye view, and their focus was on Burma and China, far beyond the everyday difficulties in Cachar. In only 100 years, Calcutta had developed from 'a city in the swamp' into the largest clearing house for trade in Asia and the second most important city of the British empire. Cachar was something of a transition zone between resource-rich areas. The officers in the Company were operating at completely different scales, as were people belonging to different polities in the larger region. District administrators devoted a great deal of time to negotiating orders from Calcutta with ground realities; it was in fact the general mode of establishing authority in the locality.

Perhaps a seal, stamped into one of the superintendent's letter books from 1835, best represents the mode of transformation in the district and the superintendent's struggle to gain trust among landed subjects. It has a circular form, four centimetres in diameter, and reads 'Mohar Superintendency Moluke Hairamba 1835 Eng'. 1835 was three years after the introduction of a superintendent of Cachar and Jaintia and the same year as when Cachar was formally annexed to the British territories. The wording is as mixed as the character of the seal. In Bengali *mohar* means seal and *moluke* means kingdom or state.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Hairamba is the Cachari name for Cachar: ‘Seal of the Superintendency of the Cachar Kingdom 1835 English era’.

### **A Climate in Crisis or Ordered Landscapes**

There is a contradiction in the reports from the British explorations of east Bengal in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. It can be summarised broadly into two different kind of reports. One set of reports was mainly written from outside the region by authors who focused on weather observations and ecological conditions. They gave dramatic narratives of an immediate crisis caused by a climate out of control. The authors were among the most influential persons in the field. Reports were written by Harry Verelst who became the Governor of Bengal, James Rennell who was made Surveyor-General of Bengal, Francis Buchanan Hamilton, the well-known surveyor and member of the medical corps, and William Roxburgh, the Superintendent of the Botanical Gardens in Calcutta. Two influential French authors were Jean-Baptiste Du Halde, a historian, and Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d’Anville a geographer and cartographer. They were scholarly trained persons of the higher echelons of society.

The other set of reports were written by revenue surveyors and officers who were sent to explore routes of communication through east Bengal and to find the location of existing boundaries between British territories and other polities. These officers certainly mentioned the weather, especially so when it prevented them from travelling. But as they were in search of the order and logic of a particular landscape they did not pay particular attention to the heavy rains. The revenue surveyors travelled between estates and accounted the size and location of cultivated fields and their ‘owners’. Other officers were sent to assist the military operations and therefore searched for the best routes to bring troops to the Burmese border and to locate the physical borders of their own domains.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Three surveys that were carried out by the Survey of India in Rangpur, Tripura, Cachar, and Jaintia are discussed in Gunnel Cederlöf, “Fixed Boundaries, Fluid Landscapes: British Expansion into Northern East Bengal in the 1820s,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 46, no. 4 (2009).



The distinction between the two contrasting sets of reports was not as sharp as I now made it to be. The very same officers could be sent on missions by the different government departments, and they answered to orders accordingly. But the difference is significant enough to merit our attention. If we read these reports separately, it is as if the revenue, political, and judicial departments experienced different Indias. Unless we read the reports in relation to each other we may get a partial understanding.

The annual monsoon set the frames for life in Bengal. Large tracts of the low-lying lands were inundated for several months every year. During the rains, the rivers carried large amounts of sediment that continuously reshaped river beds, and filled up lakes and marshes, to again be removed by the next flood. Erosion and sedimentation made the riverine landscape change. And as the landscape was in a constant motion, livelihoods adjusted in flexible ways. The Survey of India maps and memoirs indicate that much land was covered by forest. Significantly, the European officers preferred to travel in the dry season in the winter and otherwise chose to turn a blind eye on the climate.

The general and often very detailed narrative of these surveys followed a common logic: ‘you have told me to do [X]. I have done as I have been told, and the mission has been a success.’ The reports were occasionally spiced with events that, in an understated way, was intended to prove the officer’s bravery and ingenuity. But one report stands out against the others. Thomas Fisher’s report of the Survey of Tripura in 1821–22 can better be summed up as: ‘you have told me to do [X]. I have tried my best to do as I have been told, but the mission will be a complete failure unless either the EIC or the Tripura kingdom conquers the entire region.’ Fisher, who had been ordered to establish and draw a map of the boundary separating Tripura from the British territories in Sylhet district, was unable to find any boundary. Further, he failed even to get close to the places where the boundary ought to be, according to him. Not only were the dense forests impossible to penetrate, thus preventing Fisher from setting foot on the lands where the boundary line was to be drawn. The entire landscape turned on the aims of the mission. Whereas the mountain ranges in north Tripura stretches south to north, the boundary line was drawn

from west to east, uphill and downhill, into each of the valleys. Nevertheless, Fisher made his report and sent a map that indicated a boundary line in red ink. However, he wrote that he doubted it would ever be respected.<sup>22</sup>

When disasters hit the region the authors were quick to conclude that the climate was in crisis. The earthquake in 1762 was particularly fatal. It hit outside the Arrakan coast and caused large-scale destruction in Chittagong. An islands outside the coast disappeared in the sea together with people and cattle. The waters in Dhaka and Calcutta rose by six feet and the Europeans were quick to compare the quake with the recent and devastating 1757 quake in Lisbon. Reports from Chittagong were apocalyptic.<sup>23</sup>

When the new scientific methods made systematic weather observations on larger scales possible, also the magnitude of the forces of nature seemed formidable. Scholars produced complex climate theories. From the reports, we may conclude that even the sheer volume of weather data generated a general anxiety also far from the centre of events. In Bengal, the evidence put further expansions into east Bengal in doubt. But merchants in general tended to have shorter time perspectives and pushed ahead to secure territories and markets. A few officers stood out from the majority, like the Agent to the North-Eastern Frontier David Scott and the Superintendent of Cachar I. G. Burns in the 1830s. Their arguments, over a longer period, show their ambition to form a civil government at district levels. Such governments could only be based on law and trust. Therefore they argued in favour of cultivators rights to exercise old privileges that had been granted to the zamindars by the former Nawab. But over time, these officers were effectively silenced. From the perspective of the colonial government at Calcutta, the easternmost parts of Bengal were simply too difficult to administer with account taken to local conditions. Until the mid-nineteenth century, these regions remained primarily a profitable marching ground on the route to China.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> National Archives of India, Survey of India, Memoirs, Sylhet Frontier Survey, Thomas Fisher, 1821–25, part 1.

<sup>23</sup> Hirst, “An Account of an Earthquake in the East Indies.”

<sup>24</sup> Cederlöf, *Founding an Empire on India's North-Eastern Frontiers*, Chapter 6.

The contrast, which can be seen in the historical material between tropes of a well-ordered landscape and those describing a landscape in chaos, to a certain extent is also reflected in the academic literature on the agrarian history of east Bengal. Occasionally, the same blindness to the effects of water and climate, as in the revenue files, is apparent here too. Research into the history of Bengal's agrarian economy has produced an impressive range of studies over the last half-century. Most of them focus on the period from the mid-nineteenth to the twentieth century. The dominant focus in these studies have been on an agrarian rather than a rural economy, if by rural we mean more than the cultivation of the soil as a means to gain a livelihood. By and large, research has centred on the economy of agrarian production. Patterns of agrarian land use and labour relations, the effects of land revenue systems, trade and the economy of cash crops, and the introduction of technical innovations to improve agriculture have been researched. One important exception is Radhakamal Mukherjee's work on the riverine economy of Bengal (1937).<sup>25</sup>

A problem in historical studies, which may arise from the disconnection of climate and livelihood, and from a narrow focus on agriculture as accounted in the colonial revenue documents, is strikingly evident in the large-scale revenue settlements in east Bengal. The first revenue settlement, the Decennial Settlement of 1790, was brought under the principles of permanency by the Permanent Settlement of Bengal in 1793. The government expected the settlement to pave the way for sovereign rule and result in a stable flow of income. But in east

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<sup>25</sup> Mukherjee, *The Changing Face of Bengal: A Study in Riverine Economy*; Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri, "Agrarian Economy and Agrarian Relations in Bengal 1859–1885," in *A History of Bengal, 1757–1905*, Narendra Krishna Sinha (ed.) (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1967); "Land Market in Eastern India, 1793–1940. Part 2: The Changing Composition of the Landed Society," *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1975); Ratnalekha Ray, "The Bengal Zamindars: Local Magnates and the State before the Permanent Settlement," *ibid.*, no. 3; Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri, *Growth of Commercial Agriculture in Bengal (1757–1900)* (Calcutta: R. K. Maitra and Indian Studies Past and Present, 1964); Narendra Krishna Sinha, (ed.) *A History of Bengal, 1757–1905* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1967).

Bengal, the Decennial Settlement originated in a critical situation in the 1780s. At the time, landholdings in the Sylhet District were highly fragmented. The Collector had registered 4,000 landholders, which was only a small part of the total number of cultivators with a claim on landed property. While the EIC staff in the district counted only a handful, the collectorate was swamped with litigations when landholders sued each other to court over small possessions. The settlement was expected to put an end to litigations but, in fact, it merely added to it.<sup>26</sup>

In the settlement, land was registered under three revenue classes: cultivated (*abadee*), fallow (*purreeh*) and forest or waste (*jungla*); 54 per cent of the total lands of Sylhet District were surveyed and settled in 1790. Of the settled land, approximately 25 per cent was classified as ‘cultivated’, or 13 per cent of the whole district. Since cultivated land was the only land seen as productive, only land recorded within this class came under assessment. Land registered as ‘fallow’ or ‘waste’ was tax-free. The Collector John Willis explained: ‘You will be sensible gentlemen that in affixing the Jummah distributively in above twenty thousand cases errors must have been unavoidably committed, injustice may also have arisen sometimes from the corruption of the native officers as well as from other causes.’<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> West Bengal State Archives, Bengal Board of Revenue Consultations, Consultation 19.3.1830, No. 29, Extracts of correspondence referred to in the accompanying report, From Mr. Lindsay to the Board of Revenue, 24.11.1787; From J. Willis to the Board of Revenue, 5.9.1788; Consultation 12.10.1830, No. 3, 19.9.1830, Memorandum respecting the extent and sources whence an increase of revenue may be derived in Sylhet by Lieutenant Fisher, Revenue Surveyor, 1829.

<sup>27</sup> Oriental and India Office Collections, Bengal Revenue Department Consultations, Consultation 12.10.1830, No. 3, 19.9.1830, Memorandum respecting the extent and sources whence an increase of revenue may be derived in Sylhet by Lieutenant Fisher Revenue Surveyor, 1829. West Bengal State Archives, Bengal Board of Revenue Consultations, Consultation, 19.3.1830, No. 29, Extracts of correspondence referred to in the accompanying report, Mr. Willes to the Board of Revenue, 24.10.1790, and No. 36, To Board of Revenue, from D. Scott, Commissioner of Assam, 31.7.1829, para. 5.



When the Decennial Settlement was brought under the principles of the Permanent Settlement, in 1793, the classification and revenue attached to all the registered land were made permanent. As a consequence, these lands could never be liable to further assessment or reclassification. Whatever mistakes Willis had made, they were to remain forever. Within a few years, the British officers experienced the consequences of such a settlement. A region such as the Surma and Barak river valleys—with a monsoonal climate, annually flooding rivers, seasonal lakes (*jhil*), erosion and changing river courses—is the antithesis of the principles underlying the Permanent Settlement. Land classed as cultivated could turn into lakes, fallows be broken up and cultivated, river flood plains either cropped or swept away during the rains, and forest land used for all kinds of purposes.

Soon all the land that had not been surveyed got a name: *halabadee*, or plough cultivation land. These were mostly vast forests mixed with open landscapes in both plains and hills. It was primarily either lands within the old privileges of the *chaudhuris*' forest grants, or land under the control of communities whose livelihoods depended on them. As for the *chaudhuris*, this was a privilege they had enjoyed in their capacity as revenue officials under Mughal rule; their lands had been granted during that time. They were authorized to use or dispose of it as they pleased, and mostly they portioned the land out to a large number of share croppers who paid in cash or kind for the right to use it. The land was intended to cover risk. Under the nawab's administration, the *chaudhuris* had to answer for any shortfall, particularly any arising when cultivators liable to taxation deserted their lands. As a compensation, they were granted a customary privilege to access and use lands that had not been appropriated within the *pargana*.<sup>28</sup>

In the 35–40 years following on the settlements, British officers wrestled with legal principles and reinterpreted the meaning of revenue classes; but did so mostly without success. They abolished the office of *chaudhuri* only to realise that the *patwaris*, who succeeded them

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<sup>28</sup> West Bengal State Archives, Bengal Board of Revenue Consultations, Consultation No. 29, Extracts of correspondence referred to in the accompanying report, Mr. Ahmutty to the Board of Revenue, 22.11.1800.

acted according to exactly the same old logic of Mughal privilege. The meaning of 'waste' changed dramatically during these years, from useless *jungla* to profitable government property. Until the 1820s, the EIC tried to establish bureaucratic control by means of revenue in the region. In the 1820s and 1830s, the focus began to shift towards more direct involvement with questions of governance and attempts to ground EIC rule in relations to subjects that did not allow Mughal privileges to prevail. This process was never completed or brought to a conclusion during this period.<sup>29</sup>

During the earliest phase of British conquest and establishment of EIC rule on its North-Eastern Frontier, there were obvious differences between the territories included in the Mughal grant and those of the autonomous neighbouring kingdoms. There was the difference of polities, their varying natures and livelihoods, the status of those that were autonomous and those dependent on imperial demands, the different connections to larger markets, and so forth. But we may also observe a similarity between the two, a characteristic of subjecthood that differs in scale but not necessarily in quality.

As according to the *diwani* grant, the EIC had responsibilities to Mughal subjects in their role as governor. But in their encounters with people in the larger region, the EIC sought only to establish minimal subject relations. A few individual officers at lower levels of administration disagreed and strove to strengthen the rights of subjects to British rule, particularly of the landholding subjects. But they were mostly isolated voices amidst a chorus proclaiming the sovereign rights of the EIC, under which subjects had few, if any, legal rights. During this early phase of British rule, in relation to subjects, law was mostly treated as an act of benevolence that legitimized Company governance. And although political rights were part of the growing debate about citizen rights in Europe, they did not figure in debates on the rights of subjects in these parts of the British territories. Seen from this vantage point, differences in subject formation between the *diwani* and the autonomous territories emerge in a different light.

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<sup>29</sup> Cederlöf, *Founding an Empire on India's North-Eastern Frontiers*, Chapter 5.





The former territories were indeed sparsely populated and, after the fall of the nawab, increasingly governed by strong subordinate lords. However, institutionalized fiscal and tenorial relations were in place since earlier governments. The EIC saw themselves as the true successors to the territorial government and therefore as lawfully exercising absolute rights. Even if the Company introduced an essentially new revenue settlement, relying on the old revenue accountants, they were able to build on a local experience of subjecthood to a distant overlord with fiscal demands. There was hardly any consent among the governed for the legitimacy of the EIC ruler, and very far from a social contract between ruler and ruled. But there was a certain extent of acceptance of the institution of government that had been put in place, and the legal institutions were approached in matters of arbitration and redress. The legal rights of the subjects in north-east Bengal grew from this minimal fiscal connection.

In contrast, in the neighbouring polities there were no similar prehistories to build on, and the EIC was uninterested in developing closer relations to subjects. The ruler's relationship to subjects ended with the rajas or chiefs. This resulted in weak ruler–subject relations and a comparatively weak government. Emphasizing this point still further, it could be said that dual polities developed under one government.

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