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Monsoon Landscapes: Spatial Politics and Mercantile Colonial Practice in India

Throughout history, one of the major obstacles for imperial armies to conquer east Bengal has been the region's climate and ecology. Both Mughal and British armies struggled endlessly with mastering the riverine system, quagmires, and seasonal lakes that changed with every monsoon. This "fluid nature" seemed incompatible with the governing methods and land-revenue systems, which the British East India Company (hereafter EIC) tried to establish. Tracing the pasts of this region requires the breaking up of long-established theoretical binaries and forces us to acknowledge the complex interaction of mercantile interests, governance, the environment, and a multitude of perceptions of human-nature relations.

The 1980s marked a turn in historical analyses of modern India. By tackling questions of the environmental predicaments under British colonial rule, historians brought refreshingly new perspectives to the historical understanding of the formation of modern India (Gadgil and Guha 1985, 1992). In the years that followed, scholars who contributed important historical and ecological studies also joined social movements for environmental protection to criticize state-driven growth models that relied on large-scale technological solutions, destructive to nature and to the people who depended on such natures for their livelihood. These scholars often identified a sharp distinction in nature-state relations between the precolonial and colonial period. At the same time they saw long-term continuities in the working of the modern state from colonial to independent India (Rangarajan 1996; Baviskar 1995; Sundar 1997; Saberwal 1999).

In the most recent decade, historical research has increasingly pointed to more complex relations between the precolonial and colonial periods, state and citizen, colonizer and colonized, and humans and nature. This has inspired new analytical perspectives and redefined spatial demarcations.

There is now reason to move one step further, and to observe how nature and climate have delimited and contributed to the formation of modern polities and ruler-subject

relations.¹ In view of this, we may also, on empirical grounds, question assumptions of the linear growth of a colonial state since the late eighteenth century, and of a continuously successful onslaught on the natural environment pictured as an unstoppable state-machine eating its way through forests and mountains. In order to understand the early colonizers' hunger for natural resources, we need to inquire into interests, capacities, and contradictions within the mercantile corporation—the British East India Company—that spearheaded the conquest of Indian territories and natures. One of the greatest restraints for their endeavors turned out to be the climate and nature itself. Climate history, as part of the broad field of environmental history, therefore needs to inform our analysis of the emerging modern Asian polities and societies.

In the early nineteenth century, by means of alliances and warfare, the EIC had secured strongholds in the southern, northern, and northeastern parts of the Indian subcontinent. Already in 1765, the Great Mughal in Delhi had granted the Company revenue rights to large territories in east India. When they moved eastwards from Calcutta on what became their northeastern frontier, they also moved into a landscape that was continuously reshaped by water—by the annual monsoon, the riverine network, and occasional natural disasters.

Today, this colonial frontier is part of what is known as Northeast India, and in everyday conversations “the Northeast” is often used as a self-explanatory phrase, a geopolitical catchword. Often viewed from the outside, the region enclosed by Bangladesh, China, and Burma is perceived through lenses such as insurgency, identity politics, and critically contested development projects. It is also a heavily guarded gateway to Southeast Asia. “Northeast” was a catchword two centuries ago as well, but for very different reasons. To the EIC, this region spelt wealth and extended endlessly towards China. This strategically located region, termed the “North-Eastern Frontier,” was a factor in securing the global dominance of the British Empire. However, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the EIC only reluctantly created a functioning bureaucracy to govern this large region. For a long time, the climate and the regional political strongholds were seen as insurmountable obstacles to conquest.

1 I explore this topic in more detail in Cederlöf 2013 and 2014.

Forming Government in Monsoon Landscapes

In the process of establishing colonial rule, three aspects stand out as having been essential to the formation of the forms of authority. Firstly, the region's climatic and ecological conditions were not only perceived as obstacles to civil administration, they also contributed to shaping the practice of governance. British officers operated with two competing narratives—one colored by their experiences of the devastating natural disasters and the other by their own ambition to establish an ordered agrarian landscape. Both came to influence the everyday administration of the region.

Secondly, historical research on colonial India has often focused on the formation and agency of the state and has thus occasionally tended to exaggerate the capacity of a state to control a particular development. More importantly, the British territories in India were not conquered by a state but by an early-modern mercantile corporation that was in conflict with the state back home in England. Merchant interests drove the aggressive advance which, on the northeastern frontier, was not primarily driven by desires for territory but for commercial gains. Thirdly, through the bureaucratic control that took form under these conditions, specific and different polities and ruler-subject relations developed in the larger region. This came to have long-term consequences.

Bengal was (and is) conditioned by a monsoon climate. Rivers carried large amounts of sediment that continuously reshaped river beds and filled up lakes and marshes, only to be removed again by the next flood. Large parts of the low-lying lands were inundated during the summer months. Today the land is open, but survey maps from the 1820s show that extensive lands were once covered by forest. Such ever-changing landscapes made the sources of livelihood flexible, and people depended on the cultivation of the soil in combination with fishing, hunting, and trade.

In European-authored reports about the region, the contrast between two different perceptions of the natural environments is evident. One set of reports described disasters and a nature out of control, while the other reported on ordered and controlled agrarian landscapes. The former were written mainly from outside the region and conveyed weather observations and information on ecological conditions. These reports were dramatic and spoke of an immediate crisis. Severe droughts and floods marked the reports from the late eighteenth century, and an earthquake in 1762 made the Europeans ques-

tion the viability of entering further into Bengal. The climate was seen as unusual and extreme, and it was not worth taking the risk for the Company.

Among the authors of these reports were influential persons like Harry Verelst (Governor of Bengal), James Rennell (Surveyor-General of Bengal), Francis Hamilton Buchanan (surveyor and member of the medical corps), William Roxburgh (Superintendent of the Botanical Gardens in Calcutta), Jean-Baptiste Du Halde (historian), and Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville (geographer and cartographer). Most of them were academically trained and belonged to the higher echelons of society. Their reports worked to restrain the politically based decisions at high levels in Calcutta that guided the Company's advance.

The authors of the latter narratives, which conveyed an image of well-organized landscapes, were of lower ranks. They were revenue surveyors and officers exploring routes of communication and boundaries between polities. Writing from within the region, they made accounts of cultivated fields and the best locations for bringing troops to the Burmese border. Floods, droughts, and earthquakes figured only marginally, if at all, in their accounts. The officers who were ordered to find the basis for revenue extraction also searched for order and logic in the landscape; thus an image of order also dominated their reports. There is therefore a risk involved in studying agrarian history from the perspective of land revenue without integrating climate history into the analysis. This cannot be done without consulting documents from other government departments and archival files. All these reports need to be read in relation to each other or else we will only get a partial understanding of the region which had now come under EIC control.

Rigid Laws in Conflict with Nature

In hindsight, we could say that, as could be expected, the large revenue settlements of 1790 and 1793 met with failure. At the time, however, they followed the logic of a mercantile corporation's bureaucracy. The revenue settlements had been put in place, in one stroke, to solve problems of governance, revenue, and subject relations. When lands were surveyed they were classified as "cultivated," "fallow," or "waste." But nature soon thwarted all intentions of efficiency and general applicability. Within a few years, cultivated fields had turned into lakes and forests into ploughed lands. However, the revenue settlement of 1793 made the original classification of a piece of land permanent.

On account of the “once fallow, always fallow” rule, only about a quarter of the surveyed lands resulted in revenue income. The following four decades were characterized by a constant reinterpretation of the “actual” meaning of the different revenue classes to make revenue administration adjust to the natural conditions and, at the same time, result in government revenues. Laws could not be undone, only wrestled with. And the officers in the bureaucracy were skilled at twisting and turning, and thus formed a governing practice.

European mercantile corporations like the EIC traded in the East by the legal means of royal charters, contracts, grants, and treaties. When the British Company received a Mughal grant of revenue rights in India, it posed an unprecedented challenge to the British Crown since the grant gave political immunities to the corporation for territories that were larger than the British Isles and outside the control of the British Crown. This reflected the dual personality of the Company. It was first and foremost subject to the British Crown. At the same time, it not only secured the Mughal grant, but also negotiated a great mix of agreements that gave it varying degrees of political authority in other regions. Treaties on the northeastern frontier, outside the Mughal grant, allowed the EIC access to mineral wealth, passage, and political control. These treaties subdued the local rulers to EIC rule in Garo, Khasi, and Jaintia Hills, in Cachar, and indirectly in Manipur.

However, the annexation of the Mughal territories on the one hand, and the subjugation of the autonomous kingdoms on the other, took place in different environments and under different preconditions. The legal frameworks of government were so profoundly different that we may argue they formed a dual polity under one government. The practice of administration in each locality resulted in different ruler-subject relations. While subject relations in the Mughal territories rested on fiscal relations that were vested with rights, subject relations in the former kingdoms were much weaker or often even nonexistent.

In 1813 and 1833, the British Crown and Parliament pulled the carpet from under the Company’s feet when it refused to renew charter acts that included monopolies in the eastern trade. Yet the corporation’s mode of operation continued through its bureaucratic practice, now under the immediate control of the British parliament. Since their decisions had legal status, regulations—however haphazard and mistaken—became cornerstones in the making of a new polity. As a consequence, the British colonial gov-

ernment inherited a contradiction between universal administrative efficiency and varying natural environments in which people's livelihoods were adjusted to the realities of a monsoon climate.

The case of the British mercantile corporation's formation of governance in east Bengal and in the annexed polities bordering on Burma points to complex relations between human action and the forces of nature and climate that contribute to condition such actions. It challenges us to integrate analyses of landscapes and climate with those of the formation of government and ruler-subject relations, and—broadly speaking—a ruler's capacity to rule.

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