Book Review

In Search of an Ordered Landscape

Indrani Sarma

Gunnel Cederlöf, Founding an Empire on India’s North Eastern Frontiers 1790-1840: Climate, Commerce and Ecology, Oxford University Press 2014, New Delhi, 272 pages

The book *Founding an Empire on India’s North-Eastern Frontier 1790-1840* investigates into the histories of space and polities during the formative era of the East India Company (hereafter EIC) rule in India’s north-east Bengal and its neighbouring kingdoms in the late 18th and first half of the 19th century. When the EIC entered, the region immediately opened up unprecedented commercial and revenue generation potentialities. In 1765, a Mughal *dīwani* grant vested this early-modern mercantile corporation with judicial power and rights to collect revenue over territories spanning vast areas of land, including Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in eastern India. However, the grant also strengthened the Company to shift its gaze from water to territory, and to set up its land administration. This required governing functions of territorial control and a sphere in which to communicate with new subjects. The EIC, hitherto trading via coastal outposts had gradually ended up ruling territory and people.

Gunnel Cederlöf looks at three significant issues in the book that revolve round - Climate, Commerce and Polity - which had played crucial role in determining EIC’s command over its new territory and the people that gradually came under their control. Climatic concerns and subject rights were critical challenges before the EIC when the corporation struggled to set-up an administration in the region during the period 1790 to 1840. The author rightly asserts that the politics of British conquest in east Bengal cannot be understood in isolation from the process of subjugation of the neighbouring autonomous kingdoms.¹

The detailed historical accounts in the book point out to the painstaking endeavour of the author in researching the archival data. The book is well-researched and well-collated. The maps included in the book give a fair idea of the north-east Bengal and

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¹ The dynamics of neighbouring kingdoms of Assam, Manipur, Jaintia and Khasi Hills, Cachar were interconnected with larger wars, conquest, and interstate rivalries.

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the EIC’s North-Eastern Frontiers, its adjacent countries extending to Burma and Yunnan in China as well as most travelled and surveyed routes and places by the officials. The bibliography and the indexing used in the book are well exhaustive. The book is well organised into seven chapters each dealing with specific historical accounts and deeper insights into how bureaucratic practices and legal frameworks were shaped to become cornerstone of British rule in the north-east Bengal and its neighbouring kingdoms.

**The Natural Landscapes and Climate**

The book begins with the discussion on insurmountable difficulties that the Company had to face during the 1790s in the region due to unpredictability of local weather, the unknown terrain and ecology. Throughout history, one of the major obstacles for the EIC’s armies to conquer north-east Bengal has been the region’s climate and ecology. The constant fluctuation of seasonal monsoons and abrupt discontinuities caused by floods and disasters had shaped life and livelihood patterns in the region in specific ways. Often floods forced people in the lowlands to flee and seek subsistence on higher grounds. When fields turned into lakes, rivers kept shifting their courses, and forest immediately reclaimed any land left uncultivated, livelihood strategies had to be flexible. Although Mughal grants had been given for the purpose of clearing and populating the lands, the economy was mixed and not purely agrarian. The local economy depended on cultivation, hunting and fishing in combination.

In such situation, the EIC’s struggle to establish their hold over the territory and its people was caught in debates over the issues of revenue settlements, mapping of the entire area and conflicts over land surveys, disputes over political authority and over territory, the question of making and remaking borders of neighbouring regions, disputes over private and commercial trading rights and over access and regulation of the resources. The EIC’s armies struggled endlessly with mastering the riverine system, quagmires, and seasonal lakes that changed with every monsoon.

**Commercial Interests**

The growing military, fiscal and commercial interests in the region had further pushed the Company to secure its strongholds. Interestingly, the EIC in the larger region operated with two competing narratives - one, 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. Initially, the Company’s decision to advance beyond the administrative centre of Sylhet towards the east was a reluctant one because of frequent forays by the hill communities and continuous aggressions by the Chinese and Burmese. The colonizer’s gaze shifted significantly when the officers of the Survey of India, during the first half of the 19th century, explored how far they were able to stretch the territories that could be argued to fall within the *diwani* grant. To the rulers, the small kingdoms beyond Sylhet had strategic positions and were not only resource-rich but they were known for their trade relations with the merchants from Burma and Yunnan. Such commercial interests pushed the rulers to mark out territorial claims for fortifying its strategic strongholds.
over these smaller polities and the markets.

Gradually, the Company officers played various tactics to bring the Ahoms, Kings of Manipur, Jaintia and Khasi Hills and Cachar under their occupation after 1820s. The resource-rich and strategically located smaller autonomous polities of Jaintia, Khasi, Manipur and Tripura, Cachar and other neighbouring territories were subsequently incorporated into the British imperial realms. Merchant interests drove the aggressive advance which, on the North Eastern Frontiers, was primarily driven by commercial gains. Between 1820s and 1830s, a dozen agreements were signed with the kings and the chiefs. These agreements allowed the Company to construct roads and secure access to resources in the hills. The EIC looked upon this region, first of all, as the entry point to Burma and the Chinese markets. The region connected to the South West Silk Road, and river communication within the region was known to be among the best.

Moreover, aftermath of the Anglo-Burmese war opened up wider opportunities to reconnect to the larger commercial networks and expeditions set out to explore the geography of the trade routes joining the Brahmaputra and the Irrawaddy rivers. The peace treaty with Ava in 1826 was thus accompanied by a commercial treaty, which aimed to secure free movement of goods, safe trade routes and fixed borders. Progressively, the EIC rulers cartographically defined the geopolitical boundaries of the neighbouring kingdoms of the native rulers to establish an ordered space with well-defined trade routes. G.J. Bayfield’s fascinating survey along the Irrawaddy and Mogoung rivers via the Hukawng valley to the Patkoi Pass shows the importance of the large commercial network known as the South-West Silk Road connecting India with China and the South-East Asia. His accounts provide details of old trade routes and commercial exchanges between the small autonomous kingdoms of the region and the merchants from Burma and China.

**Polity and Subject Control**

Cederlöf further elaborates the question of EIC’s establishment of the process of sovereignty in the territories formerly under the Mughal rule, east of Sylhet and in the riverine lowlands. The author goes on to argue that the abstract administrative principles, such as revenue classes, clashed with social and environmental realities of the region, those realities forced the officers to renegotiate the implementation of the regulations confirming ruler-subject relations. The Company used large-scale land-revenue settlements to master the situation in the *divani* territories. Revenue Settlements were thought to be the most important medium to tie people to agrarian landscapes which had been put in place in one stroke, to solve the problems of governance, revenue and subject relations. However, peculiar practices of revenue collection, land rights and indigenous customs of the locals were found to be in clash with the new administrative control under the EIC. In addition, the EIC’s aim to fixed land relations in permanent revenue classes continued to clash with the conditions of local ecology and climate. The monsoon landscapes of Sylhet, Cachar, Jaintia, Khasi and Manipur required polities to be contextual and flexible, and to adjust to climatic and ecological conditions. The administrative mechanisms introduced during the initial years of Company’s rule in the
region were not in tune with ecological and climatic conditions nor did they go well with the socio-economic organisation of social relations.

During 1790 survey, land under the Decennial Settlement was registered under three revenue classes: cultivated (abadee), fallow (purreah), and forest or waste (jungle). In 1793, the Decennial Settlement was brought under the principles of the Permanent Settlement and made the original classification of the piece of land permanent. However, the unpredictability of monsoon soon thwarted all intentions to garner maximum land revenues. Within few years, the cultivated fields had turned into lakes and forests into ploughed land. The Permanent Settlement (1793) turned out to be a grand failure to achieve longevity for its profound mismatch with nature, climate and ecology. The following four decades were characterised by a constant reinterpretation of the ‘actual’ meaning of the different revenue classes to mark revenue administration adjust to the natural conditions and at the same time result in government revenue. Gradually, a governing practice was into place during the 1830s with constant twisting and turning of the bureaucratic laws.

**Conclusion**

The book as a whole captures the detailed history of the early expansion of the British EIC in the north-east Bengal and the North-Eastern Frontiers of the British India. It is a well cohesive and organised work explicating the critical half century history from 1790 to 1840 when the EIC strove to establish control over the North-Eastern Frontiers spanning the River Brahmaputra to the Burmese border. Significantly, there is lack of comprehensive works that systematically dealt with the history of the EIC’s initial struggle to establish control over the entire region. Majority of the scholars have contributed important historical studies of the period after 1840s when the imperial power moved into these regions with much confidence and force. Equally, there have been important studies on colonial administration of forests and wastelands in various parts of British India. Cederløf’s work in that context provides a fresh perspective to the understanding of the complex history of the region enmeshed with varied climatic conditions and politics of the native rulers. The accounts are of remarkable endeavour that offer an opportunity to comprehend the unique socio-cultural, political and ecological history of the larger region. The organisation of the book in that context is commendable. The merit of the book lies in its coming out with rigorous historical data pertaining to the EIC’s polity establishment in the region and the strategies of commercial expansions. In sum, the book is a significant contribution to the understanding of the broader history of the complex and uneven process through which the British EIC formed into a governing bureaucracy in the larger region.

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2 The period after 1870s marked a turning point in historical analyses of British India. It was during the period, the modern scientific forestry was started in the country with the introduction of the process of reservation of extensive tracts of forests. Scholars like, Mahesh Rangarajan, Ramachandra Guha, Madhav Gadgil, Richard P. Tucker, Gunnel Cederl of have immensely contributed to significant historical research in India. Interestingly, these studies identified a sharp distinction in nature-state relations between the pre-colonial and colonial period. At the same time, long continuities can be derived in the working of the modern state from colonial to independent India.