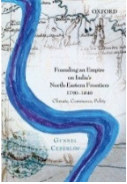


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REVIEW: *FOUNDING AN EMPIRE ON INDIA'S  
NORTH-EASTERN FRONTIERS 1790-1840*

Reviewed by Hilary Howes (Australian National University)



Gunnell Cederlöf. 2014. *Founding an Empire on India's North-Eastern Frontiers 1790-1840: Climate, Commerce, Polity*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. xvi + 273pp, 5 maps, 1 illustration, glossary, bibliography, index. ISBN: 978-0-19-809057-1 (hardcover 23.99GBP).

This thoroughly researched and carefully constructed monograph focuses on what is now north-eastern India, an irregularly-shaped region joined only by a narrow neck of land to the remainder of the Indian subcontinent and jostled (or nestled, depending on one's point of view) between Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal, and Tibet. Crucially, author Gunnell Cederlöf argues, this representation of north-east India on modern maps - an island in constant danger of drifting away from mainland India, held in place only by the "Chicken's Neck" or Siliguri Corridor - bears no relation to the way in which this region was imagined by the British East India Company (EIC) in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Having obtained revenue-farming rights and judicial duties over the North-Eastern Frontier, as it was then known, through a 1765 *diwani* grant from the Great Mughal in Delhi, the EIC aspired first and foremost to revive the administration of revenue in the region, adding a monopoly in territory to their existing monopolies in the eastern trade. Given these primarily commercial interests, it should come as no surprise that the EIC's map-makers, their eyes fixed on the web of lucrative trade routes crisscrossing the region, homed in on the North-Eastern Frontier as the central point in "a synoptic vision that connected Bengal to China" (72).

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Against this background, Cederlöf examines "the ways in which north-east Bengal and the neighboring kingdoms came under the control of the British EIC," exploring both "the enabling and constraining conditions of climate and ecology" and "the administrative practices which formed into governing polities and sovereign-subject relations" (4-5). She argues for the necessity of a broad geographical scope in understanding the history of this part of the world, emphasizing particularly the interconnectedness of north-east India and north-east Bengal, two regions dealt with separately in most scholarly works to date, and the increasing recognition of a need to "focus in new ways on the region connecting India and China" by "put[ting] aside the limitations created by the combination of a sharp nation-state focus and an academic regional studies framework" (10-11). In addition, she seeks to challenge the prevailing tendency to view imperial power in British India "from its summit" in the late nineteenth century by drawing attention to the ways in which the EIC's actions over the preceding century - "inconsistent, strongly challenged, and driven by contradictory interests" - shaped bureaucratic practices and legal frameworks (6).

The period under study, 1790-1840, commences with the revenue surveys conducted by the EIC in the 1790s, which first established large-scale bureaucratic control of north-east Bengal and its neighboring kingdoms, and concludes with vigorous debates about bureaucratic reform in the 1830s. Despite the passage of some 200 years since the abovementioned revenue surveys were conducted, recent reports of insurgent violence in Manipur highlight characteristics of this region today that are equally pertinent to Cederlöf's analysis, specifically its "geographical distance" from centers of government power (now New Delhi, then the imperial center at Calcutta) and its "long porous borders" with neighboring countries (TNN 2015). Cederlöf addresses these characteristics in part by contrasting the bird's-eye view of the EIC governing bodies in Calcutta with the day-to-day struggles of district officers in Cachar, Jaintia, and Manipur. The former were interested in the north-east primarily in terms of its relationship to Burma and China, seeing it alternately as a

valuable entry point to lucrative markets or a buffer against attacks by hostile neighboring powers; in their view, the "petty cultivators" inhabiting this "transition zone" could legitimately be subdued by force in order to meet higher goals (184). In contrast, district officials such as IG Burns, Superintendent of Cachar during the 1830s, struggled to establish trust amongst local landholders and to introduce the elements of a basic civil administration, including a police force and a local court. While Calcutta's physical distance from the North-Eastern Frontier allowed stereotypical images of the region and its inhabitants to proliferate, closer to the frontier "these static images of people and places began to chafe against everyday experiences" (72).

In analyzing the ways in which this friction between static images and everyday experiences played out, Cederlöf pays particular attention to environmental conditions. The North-Eastern Frontier, she argues, was and remains "a region characterized by water;" then and now, "the possibilities and limitations of human life" were determined by the annual monsoon, "with people adjusting their livelihood strategies to the regularity and unpredictability of the rains" (8). However, the flexible lifeways necessitated by these seasonal changes, which saw river courses shift and cultivated fields become lakes, were frequently ignored in the production of official EIC documents.

This theme is addressed in detail in chapters Two, 'The Order and Disaster of Nature', and Five, 'Bureaucratic Control and Its Mismatch with Nature'. Here, Cederlöf contrasts outside observers' perceptions of nature on the North-East Frontier with the approach of EIC officers sent to conduct military and revenue surveys. While the former recorded a wide range of "exceptional weather conditions and unusual climatic events," including a devastating earthquake in 1762, severe droughts in 1769-1770, and a series of major floods during the years 1784-1789, the latter "searched for normal situations and stable conditions" and "seem[ed] only to have had eyes for cultivated fields that could be subject to revenue assessment" (32).

The regulatory fruits of their endeavors, the Decennial and Permanent Settlements of 1790 and 1793, respectively, were designed

to establish permanent revenue classes for land: *abadee* 'cultivated' land was seen as productive and was therefore assessable for tax purposes, whereas land considered *purreeh* 'fallow' or *jungla* 'waste' was tax-free. Unfortunately for the collectors subsequently charged with extracting revenue payments from their subjects, the rigid bureaucratic categories posited by the Settlements seldom conformed to the situation on the ground: "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" (132).

Simplistic administrative frameworks also clashed with the complex realities of existing social relations. Although the *diwani* grant of 1765 had conferred on the EIC the honors and obligations of the previous *nawab* 'governor' of Bengal, his social powers - "deeply rooted in society and made legitimate by a multitude of ties connected in a social web based on tacitly accepted norms" - could not be so easily transplanted (123). This "deep integration of land relations into social and religious status hierarchies" was a source of considerable irritation to district officials (140). The collector in Sylhet, for example, was much annoyed to discover that twenty square kilometers of land in the district were claimed as *lakhiraj* 'rent-free', having been granted to individuals by the *nawab* in exchange for services as diverse as keeping lamps burning at night in the Muslim mosques, feeding travelers, performing worship and sacrifices in Hindu temples, and keeping revenue accounts. He ruled the latter category of land rights invalid, arguing that these appointments had been abolished when the EIC succeeded to government, but was unable to interfere with the others.

In addition to these administrative difficulties, the EIC also had to contend with open hostility from multiple quarters, resulting in some cases from intervention in pre-existing conflicts, in others from land disputes and clashes over the profits of intensified trade. In Chapter Three, 'Making 'Natural' Boundaries', Cederlöf follows EIC officers as they advanced to take charge of the former Mughal territories, an ambition complicated not only by a lack of manpower

and arms, but by the difficulties of establishing the old Mughal boundaries so many years after the fall of the *nawab*. In Rangpur District to the west, government servant David Scott waded into a decades-long dispute between local Garos and *zamindars* 'landholders', finally deciding that the only solution was to separate them entirely.

In Tripura to the south, cotton growers who attempted to cultivate land near the limits of EIC territory were attacked and killed by followers of the local raja, who claimed the land as his sovereign domain. The Raja of Jaintia to the north, who exacted duties from boats passing through his territories, was forced to escape into the hills after Collector of Sylhet, William Thackeray, took military action against him, ignoring explicit instructions to the contrary from the Court of Directors. Conflicts in Cachar to the east, impacted by a protracted battle over the throne between the princes of nearby Manipur, proved particularly intransigent. On top of this, EIC military forces were fighting Burmese troops on three fronts between 1823 and 1826.

In Chapter Four, 'The Land Between Rivers', Cederlöf deals with efforts in the 1830s to overcome the aftermath of the Anglo-Burmese war by sending out expeditions to revive trade networks leading from the port towns of Bengal to the significant Chinese commercial center of Kunming. An extraordinary range of animal, vegetable, and mineral goods - gold, silver, copper, tin, lead, limestone, amber, jade, ruby, marble, elephant tusks, horses, spices, salt, silk, opium, cloth, lumber, cane, and bamboo - were traded along these networks. The EIC's agents were successful in some respects, notably building roads at relatively low cost, but less so in others: their efforts to reopen old routes between Cachar and Assam led to armed resistance from Naga communities, while central Cachar became "a playground for unscrupulous merchants," forcing the local superintendent to spend the bulk of his time "catch[ing] up with and put[ting] out the fires caused by entrepreneurs trying to take advantage of the situation" (107, 112).

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Chapter Six, 'Commerce and War', pursues themes introduced in chapters Three and Four, detailing the EIC's annexation of the "resource-rich and strategically located smaller autonomous polities of Jaintia, Cachar, and Manipur and the territories of the many Khasi chiefs," all of which were located beyond the easternmost borders of the former *nawab's* territories (162). While some conflicts, such as those relating to the lucrative but dangerous limestone industry, simmered just below the surface for decades, others erupted into sudden and shocking violence. In 1829, a British convalescent station at Nongkhlaw was attacked by a body of Khasis and most of the residents massacred. It is not entirely clear whether this event, which became known as the "Nongkhlaw Outrage," took place despite an agreement signed in 1826 between David Scott and the chief of Nongkhlaw, U Tirut Singh, or because of it. Suggested causes of the conflict ranged from "rumours of taxation being introduced in the Khasi Hills" and "the disrespectful language of Company servants" to "violent conflicts in the foothills" between hill chiefs and nearby villages (171).

A further incident in 1832, interpreted (probably wrongly) by the British as a case of human sacrifice, led to the formal annexation of Jaintia, though this administrative change was largely ignored by people in the hills. Although the EIC was able to force many Khasi chiefs into submission over the period 1829-1834, it had no noticeable success in establishing relations with anyone other than the chiefs, and no particular interest in doing so. Winning wars, as Cederlöf sagely notes, "was quite a different matter from establishing functioning rule," and the EIC's focus of commercial, military, and imperial interests meant that "relations to subjects were of low, if any, priority" (183, 202).

Cederlöf's seventh and final chapter, 'The Fiscal Subject and the Absent Citizen', draws together elements of the preceding chapters to consider the quality of governance exercised by the EIC on the North-Eastern Frontier. Subject formation under EIC rule, she argues, was influenced by four branches of debate: firstly, ideological discussions about the rights and freedoms of British subjects; secondly,

the EIC's interest, as a corporation, in securing monopolistic power; thirdly, the difficulty of eliminating pre-existing Mughal privileges embedded in land and socio-economic networks; and finally, the need to form relations with people living on the North-Eastern Frontier through administrative practice. The interactions between these four branches led to a preoccupation, amongst district administrators, with "defining the extent and boundaries of landholdings," which in turn led to the creation of a primarily fiscal subject - that is, one whose chief distinguishing characteristic was his or her ability to pay revenue (232-233).

This emphasis on revenue enabled the EIC to "build on a local experience of subjecthood to a distant overlord with fiscal demands" in the territories included in the Mughal grant, leading eventually to the development of legal institutions and the growth of legal rights of subjects (241). In the neighboring polities, however, this was not the case. There, in the absence of comparable local experiences of subjecthood on which to build, both the government and the ruler-subject relations that developed under EIC control were relatively weak. The long-term legacies of these "dual polities ... under one government," Cederlöf suggests, could fruitfully form the basis of further scholarship (241).

The extraordinary complexity of environmental, commercial and socio-political conditions across the North-Eastern Frontier, together with the diversity of EIC responses to the challenges this complexity posed, threatens at times to descend into a seemingly impenetrable forest of details. However, Cederlöf's talent for lively description of specific individuals and events helps readers to navigate her sometimes dense prose. The image that stuck most firmly in my mind was that of James Rennell's cartographic survey of 1764, the first comprehensive mapping of Bengal undertaken by the British. Initially published in 1779 under the title *A Bengal Atlas*, Rennell's maps were reprinted unchanged in 1788 and 1793, despite the fact that a series of floods during the years 1784-1789 had altered the course of several major river systems, reshaping the topography of the region to such an extent as to make the maps essentially useless for practical purposes.

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Clearly, Cederlöf points out, the later editions of these maps were intended primarily "to represent an imagined landscape ... for a British market" rather than to help orient readers "in a real landscape" (23).

Other memorable figures include Captain Francis Jenkins, who suggested that the "uncivilized tribes" of the North-Eastern Frontier would benefit from radical social reorganization: the Khasis, for example, should simply be resettled *en masse* to Assam from the hills, and the resulting vacancy filled by "more improved races." I also enjoyed Cederlöf's description of the Duffa Gam, chief of one of the principal Singpho clans occupying the hills east of Upper Assam, who counteracted the EIC's attempts to woo him away from his recognition of Burmese sovereignty by diplomatically avoiding contact with visiting EIC representative, GJ Bayfield, wherever possible and filling any unavoidable meetings with endless small talk.

Credit must also be given to Cederlöf for the impressively broad range of sources she has consulted. These include, but are not limited to, documents with performative statements (orders, treaties, verdicts); documents issued by EIC governing bodies (board minutes, department notes, government orders); reports to government from officers on tour (surveyors' memoirs, revenue survey reports, army officers' reports); and accounts produced by officers at local levels (diaries, local and regional correspondence). The concerns and agendas of landlords and rajas are embedded in petitions and correspondence with government collectors and agents; those of non-elite individuals appear in court records. Notwithstanding the richness of this material, Cederlöf is careful to acknowledge its limitations, noting that sources in the vernacular languages of north-east India are few and far between, that those which do exist are seldom unfiltered by "dominant communities or ... Assamese or Bengali narrators," and that much of "what went on in the past" must inevitably "be left to our informed guesses or to oblivion" (8).

In short, *Founding an Empire on India's North-Eastern Frontiers* is not an easy read, but it is certainly a worthwhile one. The wide range of topics it addresses will interest and inform not only students of Indian and South-East Asian history, commerce, and



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politics, but also those interested more broadly in empire and settler colonialism, environmental history, legal and administrative history, the making and unmaking of borders, and the cartographic expression of alternative spatial imaginations.

#### REFERENCE

TNN. 2015. 20 Soldiers Killed in Manipur Ambush in Deadliest Attack on Army in 33 yrs. *The Times of India*, 5 June, online <https://goo.gl/CjiqYN>, accessed 13 July 2015.