

Reclaiming Histories of Land Reclamation

Understanding politics and ecology of riverine settlements in Assam, 1900-1951

Mapping the nature of settlement of peasants migrating from Eastern Bengal to Assam during early twentieth century formed the core of my dissertation. I learnt that all these migrant settlers were allocated land that had to be cleared of untamed vegetation on them. This process of land reclamation for agriculture took about 2 years. I was intrigued as to how these people went about carving out a village settlement and their cultivating plots. This phase of settlement found only scant and indirect references in government documentation. Lands allotted to settlers from East Bengal were not much accessible owing to lack of communications and therefore supervision was usually confined to revenue collection and settlement procedures. Thus, the transformation from forest to fields was witnessed primarily by those who made this possible. Existing histories of late colonial period of the province tend to look at this matter from far. It is primarily through official documentation and their enquiry is limited to enumerating the volume of this transformation in terms of acreage and its impact on economy and society of resident communities.

Resident communities also practiced cultivation that required clearing land of untamed vegetation. But unlike the clearing practiced by settlers from East Bengal, it was not sedentary. After a season, land was left fallow. Reasons for such practice varied within different communities. Moreover, the kinds of tracts that settlers from East Bengal began to reclaim were riverine areas. These areas often had dense vegetation, were low lying, close to the river channels, inundated for most part of the year. Therefore, these areas were conventionally cultivated only for cold weather crops when the river was dry. Hence, these tracts never had perennial human settlements with permanent households prior to this coming of East Bengal settlers. A steady flow of migration took place within the first 3 decades and these tracts simultaneously began to be cleared and cultivated. Understanding this pattern of settlement required me to comb through different registers of colonial government such as land

revenue administrative reports, settlement and resettlement reports, survey and settlement reports, forest administration reports, census reports and other departmental records.

In course of doing so, across different repositories in India, I could not ignore the importance of the riverine ecology in shaping and producing life in this terrain. Having read a certain amount of historical literature of peasant world of Bengal in the nineteenth century, I learnt that the incoming settler was fairly acquainted with this practice of clearing land for sedentarised cultivation in the deltaic tracts of Eastern Bengal. At this juncture, I felt compelled to engage with and understand the very concepts through which ecology and the equation of humans and nature in course of modern times have been comprehended so far. So, this happen to become my objective for which I applied for the SYLFF SRA grant in order to have a consultative excursion at the Centre for World Environmental History (<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/cweh/index>).

Consultative Research at University of Sussex

I approached Dr. Vinita Damodaran <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/profiles/7389/publications>, director of CWEH and a few other scholars working in areas that appeared to be relevant for my trajectory of research ideas. The Centre for World Environmental History that came to life in 2002 is one of a kind academic yard that has a collaborative and interactive platform for research professionals working on questions of environment and material culture in the tropics or in other words the Global South. It is the nerve centre of 5 extensive research networks namely:

Botanical and Meteorological History of the Indian Ocean 1600-1900

Mines, Water and Energy Network

Academia and Activism Network

Historical Climatology

Climate Change and the Humanities

Discussions opened up with Dr Damodaran on the very first afternoon I arrived. She recommended and introduced me to many other research professionals who were working with similar research concerns as mine. Over the course of the next two months I interacted with every one of these scholars in person and online as per availability, visited repositories for mapping material and also made a seminar presentation at the Centre.

Dr. Debojyoti Das <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/history/our-staff/post-doctoral-research-assistants/dr-debojyoti-das> whose research is on coastal frontier of Sundarbans in Bay of Bengal emphasized on the need to rediscover ‘people’s repositories’ or ‘lay museums’ in order to bring to the fore histories of the ordinary. He pointed towards the Endangered Archive Project commissioned by British Library every year. Dr. Das had used the grant to preserve a substantial amount of non-official literature that he came across in his fieldwork. The Sundarbans which are now located in two different nations (India and Bangladesh) was one of the tracts that were cleared for agricultural and habitation purposes during the colonial administration.

Dr. Anna Winterbottom <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/profiles/196205> spared time for numerous unscheduled discussions. Her research interests spans across histories of science and medicine. In course of these interactions, she sensitized me about the aspect of health and diseases in the historical scenario I was looking at. She further elaborated on the kind of archival registers that I would have to consult in order to look for such information both in UK and India.

Dr. Richard Staley <http://www.hps.cam.ac.uk/people/staley> suggested that it was important that production of scientific knowledge should be studied by professionals who are not from that particular stream of scientific discipline. This illuminated an important aspect of my thesis which was to try and understand the scientific experiments in agriculture and its application during late colonial period and look for possible linkages with my case study. He also cited similar studies happening in Vietnam.

Meeting Dr. Simon Pooley <http://www.imperial.ac.uk/people/s.pooley> was very useful in discussing the very crucial issue of handling scientific data and to be able to analyze and use it in historical narration in a way that was more than just a meager reference or a factor in the backdrop of an event or process. With regard to my case study, he suggested that I look more closely at the bio-physical consequence of reclamation of marshes and the cultivation of jute. He suggested the repository of Kew Gardens as a place to look for archival references.

Emeritus Professor James Thomson <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/profiles/2657> advised me to be mindful of the larger pattern of capitalist enterprise during the period under review and to identify the structural variations that it could have acquired in the region that I am studying. His own work on the distinctive experience of industrialization in Catalonia in Spain was a very useful reference.

Dr. George Adamson <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/departments/geography/people/academic/adamson/index.aspx> brought forward the important factor of climate. By this time, I had consulted Vernacular Tracts in the Asia & African Collection at British Library. These were collections of printed books in different regional languages. Many of these tracts contained descriptions of agrarian life and the seasonal rhythm of nature around it. Dr. Adamson's research in climate change reconstruction in Western India during the East India Company administration is engaged intimately in bringing out such narrations of climate in order to compare with accounts of climate of colonial officials and their ilk. We promised to be in touch and exchange notes on these issues.

My most unanticipated meeting was with Dr. Richard J Bingle, former curator of India Office Records at the British Library, <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-karnataka/not-just-google-bingle-too-is-loaded-with-lots-of-information/article4433545.ece>. He guided me about tracing private papers of British officers who served in the administration for my case study. I was also fortunate to see his collection of books on Indian history.

Dr. Sunil S Amrith <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/history/our-staff/full-time-academic-staff/sunilamrith> assured me that my increasing attention to questions of climate and ecology was a very natural and appropriate trajectory in terms of critical thinking as political economy of human circulation of modern times and questions of climate had deep linkages that historical research ought to bring out as clearly as possible.

Professor Alison E Bashford <http://www.hist.cam.ac.uk/directory/professor-alison-bashford> pointed out that it was important to study inter-provincial migration in order to understand local and regional variations in the larger process of ecological transformation and colonial expansion in the modern era.

Dr. Richard Axelby <http://www.lse.ac.uk/anthropology/people/RichardAxelby.aspx> attached specific chapters from his recent publication <http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/distributed/S/bo5667156.html>. It contained useful references to archival material in the British library that would be relevant for me.

Professor Emeritus John Elvin <https://researchers.anu.edu.au/researchers/elvin-jmd> explained in detail how the question of environment was not just a mere factor that could be located in some dimensions of a particular historical case study but that it was a perspective; an approach that could be applied to enrich the understanding of a general scenario, provided one is able to identify that dimension and substantiate it. Additionally, I also went to National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth in order to obtain certain relevant vernacular tract and some maps.

Each of these discussions was reported back to Dr. Damodaran who on each of the emerging points of understanding suggested further readings. Having had this exposure, I returned to my case study and made a presentation <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/cweh/newsandevents/researchseminars> after which I received critical feedback from associates at the Centre, Alex Elliot, Dr. Alex Aisher, James Hamilton and Khaled Zahid. Taking into account all the consultations, I was able to ascertain the scope and method through which I am to approach the question of environment in my case study.

