

Rachel  
Carson  
Center  
Perspectives

How to cite:

Iqbal, Iftekhhar. "Governing the 'Wasteland': Ecology and Shifting Political Subjectivities in Colonial Bengal." In: "Asian Environments: Connections across Borders, Landscapes, and Times," edited by Ursula Münster, Shiho Satsuka, and Gunnel Cederlöf, *RCC Perspectives* 2014, no. 3, 39–43.

All issues of *RCC Perspectives* are available online. To view past issues, and to learn more about the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, please visit [www.rachelcarsoncenter.de](http://www.rachelcarsoncenter.de).

Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society  
Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN 2190-8087

© Copyright is held by the contributing authors.

SPONSORED BY THE



Federal Ministry  
of Education  
and Research

Deutsches Museum 



Iftekhar Iqbal

### **Governing the “Wasteland”: Ecology and Shifting Political Subjectivities in Colonial Bengal**

Contrary to the current debates on Bengal history that trace political subjectivity in terms of religious consciousness, during the last century of the colonial period (1840–1947), it was ecological contexts and considerations that informed the peasant’s worldview and political actions in this region. This argument is important not only because it offers ecological understanding of the dynamics of political subjectivity, but also because it traces the emergence of ecological deterioration in the region.

Starting in the early nineteenth century, “wasteland” was at the heart of agrarian governance in the Bengal delta. Wastelands included vast areas of newly formed alluvial land, locally known as “char,” and the Sundarbans, one of the world’s largest mangrove forest systems. The Sundarbans, situated between the southern fringe of the delta and the Bay of Bengal, had a total area of more than 8,000 square miles (20,270 km<sup>2</sup>) at the turn of the nineteenth century.

As Bengal was increasingly becoming connected to the world commodity market at this time, fluid wastelands became the target of a social and economic elite, including indigo planters, landlords, and leaseholders, some of them being European investors. The local peasants, on the other hand, attempted to legitimize their presence in these areas, resulting in inevitable conflicts. They competed with the indigo planters for the best land in a given cropping season. The planters would look for the most fertile char lands for planting indigo, whereas the peasants wanted them for the cultivation of paddy, jute, or other local products. The landlords would confront the peasants for the land itself. In particular, the landlords would use private gangs to claim lands outside the boundary of their permanently settled lands. The peasants struggled to retain those lands for themselves. The conflict with the leaseholders of lands inside the Sundarbans revolved around the question of the increase in rent as the reclamation process in the forests progressed.

In most of these conflicts the colonial administration passively took the side of the peasantry. This is because the dilemma for colonial administration was that, while revenue

needed to be generated, revenue flow was frustrated by the fluid and forested landscape, which needed reclamation before being fit for cultivation. The government brought these wastelands under its control and categorized them as *khas* (governmental property). In most cases, the government directly settled these lands with the peasants, while also offering them occupancy rights to land, low revenue, and access to markets. These benefits were legalized through the introduction of two tenancy acts in 1859 and 1885, which largely favored the land-reclaiming cultivators. Actual cultivators or primary producers thus benefited from the administration's uneasy encounter with deltaic ecology.

The resistance offered by peasants, under passive approval of the administration, to each of the three dominant agencies—landlords, leaseholders, and indigo planters—was articulated according to the type of challenges they faced in the deltaic ecological conditions. Acts of resistance using signs and symbols of religion, class, or caste became common and helped to organize the peasant community. The colonial government's tacit acceptance of this resistance was part of a strategy of ruling by means of the productive use of the environment rather than through coercion. By allowing the peasantry to assert political agency, the government acknowledged that complete subordination and domination of the peasants was detrimental to the state's revenue generation in the given ecological conditions. The government's inclination to settle new lands directly with the primary producers was not the result of a utilitarian turn, but was informed by the formidable wilderness of forest and chars and the fluid nature of the riverine environments of the wastelands. In other words, the peasants were favored by the state because they were perceived as the most capable group to overcome ecological difficulties and generate revenue through land reclamation.

From the narratives of the nineteenth century agrarian society in East Bengal, it would seem that the East Bengal peasants responded “rationally” to the opportunity offered by the agro-ecological resources. The peasantry modified their production behavior according to shifts in the domestic and global market demand. For example, whereas the East Bengal peasants could switch from jute to rice during the jute slumps of 1870s, the Bihar peasants could not abandon sugar and indigo. A more indirect but critical effect of the formative ecological conditions and resulting prosperity was the emergence of a relatively egalitarian society where religiously inspired communal conflict, which was remarkably present in the following century, was relatively absent.

It also appears then that the Bengal peasants did not need to be spatially aloof from the center of government to make themselves relatively ungoverned.<sup>1</sup> It was the highly fluid ecological conditions in the context of a set of economic considerations that influenced a closer, if discursive, relationship between the government and the governed. The peasantry was able to capitalize on the ecological circumstances and set themselves between the colonial state and the non-state forces of exploitation. The peasant society organized themselves not merely as a political force against the exploitative agencies of colonial rule, but to build a sustained system of mediation with the state power. The state was not dreaded but engaged, which put the peasants in a position between passive resistance and outright revolution against the Raj. Many important historical works on South Asia have not been able to adequately appreciate this dimension of peasant approaches to state power since they fail to take an ecological perspective.

By the turn of the twentieth century, however, such compromised governance practices and the resultant agrarian response had come full circle. About this time the Indian nationalists began to assert their political influence against the colonial rulers. It was time for the administration to formulate new governance strategies. Indeed, such strategies evolved fast in the early years of the twentieth century. One major policy shift that occurred was reflected in the way “modernization” featured in the governance of the agro-ecological regime in Bengal. The governance of nature was no longer mediated through the peasants or primary producers, but by a set of people educated in modern institutions, often generically called the *bhadralok* (gentlefolks). Environmental management, including that of irrigation and waterways and other agro-ecological practices, became the realm of such people. This group populated the bureaucracy from the late nineteenth century, and they were now encouraged to occupy cultivable land and use their “modern” knowledge in agriculture. The Swadeshi (patriotic) movement was a clear call to the educated youths to invest their energy and knowledge in agricultural improvement. The schema of rehabilitation for the new generation, from the point of view of the government, served the dual purpose of meeting the problem of unemployment and easing political challenges (Iqbal 2010).

This shift replaced earlier forms of ecology-informed governance at the cost of the relative autonomy of the peasant community. With fertile agricultural land now mostly

1 This is contrary to the argument of James C. Scott (2009), who sees spatial distance as an essential factor in the ability of the people of the Himalayan-Tibetan mountain ranges to maintain their independence from organized states.

in the hands of non-agrarian forces, the number of landless laborers and sharecroppers increased, and these new social forces became dominant in ecological resource zones and agrarian production. In terms of the question of ecology itself, I do not suggest that ecological conditions were destined to be better under the peasants' direction; however, on account of this shift in social power and the modern concepts and practices that came with it, nature came to be viewed as neatly classifiable and devoid of anything beyond the physical. The "scientific" mind began to defeat "mystic" engagement with nature. For example, Rammohun Roy, often regarded as the father of India's modern and liberal tradition, did not see the river Ganges as more sacred than any other. So the peasant consciousness of ecology, albeit via religious or spiritual engagement, was left to wither.

An ecologically insensitive modern outlook was most evidently attached to railways. Being built almost entirely on embankments crisscrossing the vast deltaic plains, railways divided the delta into "innumerable compartments." The result was the total disruption of free-flowing water bodies and loss of the concomitant benefits of the spread of silt and flushing of the landscape. The Ganges-Barahmaputra water system, which sustained a remarkably productive agricultural regime for over a millennium, came to face its most formidable man-made obstruction. These problems were further complicated by the establishment of the water hyacinth, a Brazilian weed that made its way to the region by the 1910s, choking both small and large water bodies and paddy fields across the delta. Both the colonial state and the new middle class saw the railways as agents of progress and the water hyacinth as a subject of scientific exploration for making profitable commodities (Iqbal 2010).

As the colonial state ceased its engagement with the peasantry—preferring new "modern" social forces—the peasants felt increasingly alienated. A majority of the peasantry now resorted to religion, no longer as a unifying agrarian force for bargaining with the state for better livelihood, but as a new form of self-assertion. This was often connected with the desire for a political authority that would ensure their economic security, as was the case in the course of the nineteenth century. It was at this juncture that state power and religious ideology began to converge. The birth of the Muslim League and its increasing popularity among the peasantry in the course of the first half of the twentieth century, leading to the creation of Pakistan, clearly reflected this convergence (Hashmi 1992).

The colonial administration in Bengal could not develop a coherent governing policy. Governance strategy was informed by the way it co-opted one or the other social or political force. In the Bengal delta, it clearly trod two different paths. In the course of the nineteenth century, when wasteland in the fluid and precarious deltaic landscape abounded, the administration decided to use the productive labor of the peasantry, offering them entitlement to land and other legal and practical facilities. As reclaimable wastelands became scarce at the turn of the twentieth century, such pro-peasant policy was abandoned in favor of a new “modern,” politically influential, and financially capable social group.

This shifting technique of governance resulted in differentiated subjective orientations of the peasantry. When the state, faced with an unmanageable wilderness, allowed the peasant community to develop farming and cultivation, they were largely successful in their economic prospects and a non-communal outlook. However, when the state formed a new alliance with the non-agrarian forces, hitherto sidelined in the agrarian domain, the peasantry radicalized to the extent that religious signs and symbols were internalized and mobilized towards another imagined state for the betterment of their life and society. As the time for decolonization arrived, the Bengali Muslim peasantry conceived of Pakistan as the provider of protection from environmental problems and poverty and of entitlement to agricultural and ecological resources. But, as it appears, the relative autonomy that the agrarian domain lost in the late colonial period was never recovered in Pakistan or in independent Bangladesh. This is a topic that demands further critical scrutiny.

## References

- Hashmi, Taj ul-Islam. 1992. *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia: The Communalization of Class Politics in East Bengal, 1920–1947*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Iqbal, Iftexhar. 2010. *The Bengal Delta: Ecology, State and Social Change 1840–1943*. Houndsmill: Palgrave.
- Scott, James C. 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.