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*Empire and Ecology in the Bengal Delta. The Making of Calcutta*

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This book’s title promises a valuable study of property rights, water management and land markets. The order of chapters is both thematic and broadly chronological, from early or mid-nineteenth century through to the twentieth. However, they explain the development of landed property mainly from one perspective, the policing of margins between land and water. Others have studied riverine and deltaic lands of Bengal (problematic given a permanent land-tax system after 1793). Very many have analysed changes in land law, and their impact, during British rule in India. Property did become ‘a tool in transforming the landscape’. But I doubt that newly-hard ‘lines of separation’ between land and water were more important than those between land and land, or that ‘fluid landscape shaped [property] law … and the land market’ (pp.201–2) overall.

Three main problems follow. First, the focus downplays the continuities in land use, ownership and reclamation. Second, it obscures the personal, political and ideological contexts of British revenue and land policies. Third, it invites attention to generalisation, theorising and international comparison, at the expense of concrete detail and analysis.

Chapter 1, ostensibly studying a legal dispute over a bid (by one Benjamin Lacam) to create a new harbour near the mouth of the Hooghly river, provides insufficient detail to allow readers to understand or assess claims being made about it, while being uncurious about most of the protagonists’ ideas or interests. For example, a critic, a ‘certain F. Barlow’, appears (p. 71), some pages after apparently being identified as ‘Frederick’, without mentioning the many influential Barlows in Bengal, including Sir George, the Governor (1805–7, keenly interested in railings for the Esplanade), and his son Edward Frederick, appointed an East India Company Writer in 1807 – information that might have helped judge the political significance of F. Barlow’s intervention.

Chapter 2 discusses attempts to manage the Calcutta bank of the ‘wayward’ Hooghly. It shows what all chapters might have provided. Here are really good accounts of the limits of government control (confusions of legal title and records) and of nineteenth-century management of the river-bank. Earlier history and context are not fully explored. Private and
official interests were intertwined in early Calcutta, for building works, lottery projects, major roads, bridges and other construction, and even for minor ditches and culverts – built by individuals for personal and for public benefit, by Calcutta officers for the ruling Company, and by these officers for favoured individuals at the Company’s expense.

Secondly, if the subject is ‘property’, it is strange to refer to ‘Esquire’ (sic) Holt Mackenzie as a key planner for the river-bank and Strand (p. 99), without considering the general views of this celebrated Bengal Secretary, designer of north Indian land-revenue settlements. Perhaps the Hooghly riverside is not best examined as a ‘colonial encounter with aquatic resource frontiers’ (p. 102) but as a minor skirmish in British efforts to tame and re-order India.

Chapter 3 is mainly about ghats (landing places) and a little about gods, with more useful details on the Hooghly’s misbehaviour, and about the river’s local and ritual significance. Rather a stark confrontation is presented between sacred and secular, and between ‘Hindu’ shared land and Western ownership. The distinctions exist but are ambiguous; both co-existed in practice and theory, not only in India. Indian encroachment on public access to the river at Sivatollah ghat was successfully opposed in court by a European surveyor in 1798. Ambiguity might be revealed too in two Indian actors, only lightly sketched-in here. One, Radhakanta Deb, a rich, religiously-conservative, ‘middle-class’ (bhadralok) Bengali, used religious endowment as a weapon in a land dispute with the Company. He also worked closely with the British, donating with them to charities, and helping to found Hindu College, precursor of today’s Presidency University. Another of similar standing and experience (as the author says) is Motilal Seal (variously spelt here), protagonist in a court case where a Hindu idol appeared conveniently on disputed land. The Company ended up compensating its priest, a measure reflecting oddly on secular-religious separation.

Chapter 4 is about drainage and the land market. I was unconvinced about a causal connection between them. It would have been useful to consider earlier efforts, including dock building (such as by the Kyd brothers), or the Botanic Gardens and the houses, wharves and warehouses on the west bank, or the earlier development of ‘country’ properties, at least from the 1770s, including at Alipore and Garden Reach. Remedial drainage too started earlier, with some success, diverting rainfall into channels flowing eastwards, and improving canals and bridges south and east of the town, affecting also Calcutta’s central green space, the Maidan, described here as ‘swamp-like’ in the 1840s. Much earlier it was written about, and painted (not just as a picturesque conceit), as a place for grazing cattle and exercising
horses. Certainly, works management was weak despite various reforms and there was never enough money, as this book says, with a difficult transition from public subscription (and lotteries, used for many public and private purposes) towards urban dues and state finance. Drainage of the Maidan, however, is here presented as innovative, marking acceptance of views ascribed to the economist, McCulloch, on infrastructure as an important duty of government. I question the general policy importance of draining the Maidan, and note that McCulloch disparaged state investment if it discouraged private input or distorted prices. I suggest British India’s roads, bridges, ghats, canals and railways owed more to McCulloch’s critics who argued that state investment was needed where private investment could not be secured or profits not guaranteed.

Chapter 5, concerning housing, is excellent and informative on early twentieth-century efforts to regulate rents, amid what it claims was the ‘birth of landed property as a speculative commodity’. This delayed parturition would have surprised many – say, Richard Barwell renting the Writers’ Buildings to the Company; Samuel Middleton constructing several houses near Chowringhee in about 1807; or Eduardo Tiretta and Nilmani Haldar, market-developers and landlords around the start of the nineteenth century. In the 1920s rent reform was lost to the doctrine of ‘supply and demand’. Calcutta’s living costs went up after 1917, but rents increased less sharply than in Karachi, Bombay or Madras; and it is sadly interesting that Marwaris were accused of profiteering from property by (among others) the Maharaja of Burdwan, a major landlord. These truly are stories of changing attitudes and policies, and of the emergence of cities and new politics, though not ones that have much direct link with water.

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