

**Debjani Bhattacharyya, *Empire and Ecology in the Bengal Delta: The Making of Calcutta***

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Much like the riverine spaces it chronicles, *Empire and Ecology in the Bengal Delta: The Making of Calcutta* is a watershed in the legal and environmental history of South Asia. In this remarkably rich account of land and profit-making in colonial Calcutta (now Kolkata), Debjani Bhattacharyya traces the transformation of marshes, bogs, and muddy riverbanks into parcels of fixed, bounded, and alienable property under British colonial rule. Framed evocatively as a “history of forgetting” (6), Bhattacharyya details the everyday enactments and contestations of imperial power undertaken by colonial officials and merchants, hydrographers, Indian property owners, urban planners, surveyors, and speculators between the 1760s and 1920. Over this period, the fluid and culturally multivalent spaces of the delta were translated and transformed into “dried urban landscapes of economic value” (12). Bhattacharyya argues that the economization of space was so encompassing that earlier ways of understanding and inhabiting the delta’s shifting lands and waters were all but forgotten.

Bhattacharyya locates the origins of contemporary urban concerns like waterlogging, flooding, and the destruction of wetlands to the earliest years of colonial encounter when

the East India Company began to seek profit in liminal watery spaces that exceeded their conceptual and legal frameworks for “land.” The British thus had to produce landed property both conceptually and materially in a process that proceeded through two entangled registers of power. The first was the legal register, which translated shifting and indeterminate aqueous spaces into apparently solid landed property through modes of legal classification and arbitration. The second register of power concerned hydraulic technologies of drying and draining the landscape (10), which materialized these legal categorizations in the production of urban space. By the early twentieth century, these “technologies of property” (5) had produced new lines between land and water in the city and rendered its fluid ecologies, such as marshes and bogs, as valuable “land-in-waiting” (172) for property development and financial speculation.

Approaching property as a technology allows Bhattacharyya to parse the complex, embedded enactments of power that gradually transferred land away from the indigenous population and to the colonial state. Along the way, the delta’s fluid ecology emerges at times as a limit on the property-making activities of the East India Company and the British Crown, and at other times as a generative force in the creation of new legal categories and modes of extraction and appropriation. Departing from earlier histories of Calcutta, which treat space as a backdrop upon which political, economic, and social dramas unfold, Bhattacharyya’s account highlights the mobility of the delta’s fluid landscape, with water, silt, and mud taking on agentic roles and shaping historical trajectories. This comes to the fore in chapter 1, which explores the efforts of an English merchant named Benjamin Lacam to claim a portion of the tidal river Hooghly as private property and establish a new harbor for passage to Calcutta. The ecological variability of the site caused considerable trouble for Lacam. The East India Company argued that his measurements differed from the “geological facts on the ground,” casting the economic viability of the project into doubt and resulting in the revocation of his land grant (50–51). Lacam embarked on an unsuccessful thirty-year legal battle with the Company, which exposed the limits of British knowledge about the delta and of the legal frameworks they used to govern it.

Chapter 2 charts some of the changes that the Lacam case set in motion over the next century. For example, the British launched mapping and survey exercises to strengthen their knowledge of the delta’s mobile landscape. The case also led to the emergence of new legal categories to govern indeterminate riverine spaces. The myriad configurations of land and water present in the delta were eventually subsumed under three legal categories, including gradually accreted land, suddenly emerged alluvial land, and so-called “derelicted land” that had disappeared below the water’s surface (86).

These categories became important in the later appropriation of land along the Hooghly River and the construction of the Strand Road, as explored in chapter 3. The road was controversial because many Bengali property owners had claims in the area and had constructed ghats and other structures at the river’s edge. Bhattacharyya considers indigenous opposition to the road by highlighting an unusual legal case, the plaintiff of which was a Hindu deity whose shrine lay on the riverbank. While there was much litigation concerning the land appropriated for the Strand Road, the deity’s case was the only one the colonial powers lost. The government was forced to pay for compensation and relocation costs for the shrine. Bhattacharyya argues that the case illuminates changing patterns of authority over the course of the nineteenth century, but she resists “explaining away the fantastic” or “normalizing the enchantment” (112).

Rather than reducing the case to a purely strategic mode of resistance, she analyzes the irreducible meanings that gathered in riverine space and argues that this case was about setting “ethical limits on the Company’s expanding land hunger” (112).

Chapter 3 is also particularly noteworthy for its engagement with vernacular modes of inhabiting and representing riverine space. The chapter provides a fascinating account of the meanings of rivers and other watery spaces in Bengali cultural life, drawing on folk songs, poetic genres such as the *maṅgalkāvya*, storytelling, and forms of artistic representation such as painted narrative scrolls. In analyzing materials typically excluded from historical accounts, Bhattacharyya recovers forms of relationality and claim-making in the fluid deltaic environment that exceed the representations of colonial cadastral surveys and revenue records. In this way, her account pushes beyond singular histories of space to recover other “inhabitations, meaning-making practices, and unrealized multitudes knotted together in the movements of lands, water and the people who lived with and worked on them” (16). These beautifully expressed portions of the text are very compelling, and in many ways leave the reader wanting to know more. More particularly, they open up questions about continuities in cultural relationships with water in the face of the massive political, economic, and material changes the book details.

As Bhattacharyya argues, however, Calcutta became increasingly disconnected from its watery past. Chapter 4 details the increasing entanglement of the urban land market with infrastructural projects to dry land and control water. These included the excavation of an extensive network of canals; the construction of docks in Khidderpore and the draining of the Maidan for the creation of a park. A collective amnesia about Calcutta’s fluid ecologies set the stage for the emergence of a speculative real estate market by the beginning of the twentieth century, as explored in chapter 5. This period saw Calcutta’s remaining wetlands and marshes rendered as “land-in-waiting for property development” (169) in a process that continues to the present day.

Overall, *Empire and Ecology* is an important addition to a growing body of historical literature on South Asia’s rivers, deltas, and littorals (Amrith 2018; Iqbal 2010; Sen 2019). Bhattacharyya’s innovative “almanac mode” of interpretation (11–19), which is closely attuned to the affective and cosmological dimensions of space and time, is a particularly crucial theoretical intervention enabling novel considerations of human engagements with land and water. Thus, the book will be of interest to a wide range of scholars outside of history, especially those in the environmental humanities and social sciences. Anthropologists of space and place and geographers will find it particularly inspiring. The implications of the text are not limited to academia alone; rather, Bhattacharyya’s account powerfully illuminates the origins of problems that now face deltaic cities across Asia, as rising tides and changes in monsoon patterns associated with climate change threaten to submerge spaces once thought to be drained and dried. As such, it is an antidote to the forgetting it describes and an important step toward imagining other possible ways of inhabiting lands and waters.

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#### REFERENCES

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Calynn Dowler  
*Boston University*