Empire and Ecology in the Bengal Delta announces a shift in gears within the burgeoning and bustling field of the environmental histories of South Asia. Instead of taking the familiar route that revisits themes in the existing canon—forests, irrigation, and carnivore control—Debjani Bhattacharyya cuts an altogether fresh path by exploring how radical ecological change was critical to the making of urban colonial Calcutta (today's Kolkata). The core claims in the book pivot on the many arduous British efforts from the late eighteenth century onward to transform Calcutta's soggy marshy origins into landed concrete spaces—a process that involved the transformation of “floating watery soil” into firm land, Bhattacharyya argues, was principally an ideological project that was profoundly underwritten by the notion of landed property, which, as a “legal technology” to “demarcate land, marsh, accretion and water,” actively triggered the clotting of Calcutta into urban soil (p. 23). Colonial landed property, moreover, by being set on a treadmill of economic valuation inevitably mutated into the archetypal capitalist commodity: subject to the logics of the market and the relentless pursuit of profit. Unsurprisingly, therefore, as Calcutta in the early decades of the twentieth century began to explode into a crowded city—short on space, cramped with people, and lacking affordable housing—a thriving and ferocious urban land market burst forward. While Bhattacharyya does provide a riveting account of the aggressive jostling for land among an increasingly vocal working class, sundry lobbies of builders, extortionate landlords, the oscillating fates of rent speculators, and various interventions by municipal authorities, the discussion, however, is more pointedly aimed at returning us to the “secret.”

What finally emerged from the protracted confrontations over land scarcity, we are told, was a less advertised, if not entirely unstated, consensus among the various contending urban interests: that the outlying marshes and untidy swamps were “lands-in-waiting” rather than distinct hydrological phenomena (p. 172). This unanimous and determined call for cutting off the city from its


Reviewed by Rohan D'Souza (Kyoto University)

Published on H-Water (March, 2019)

Commissioned by Aditya Ramesh (SOAS, London)
“watery hinterlands,” in Bhattacharyya’s estimate, actually sought to mask a radical ecological rupture by which land and water were meant to be split into distinct and separable entities, instead of being acknowledged as ecologically entwined domains and integral to Bengal’s deltaic environments.

Though converting “soaking ecology” into land or “propertizing” (p. 171) spurred the “era‐sure” of the city’s “hydrological memory,” defining landed property as permanent and quantifiable with exclusive ownership, however, drew from deeper ideological sources. More pointedly, as Bhattacharya explains, early British Company officials who arrived in Bengal were considerably invested in the belief that meaningful sovereignty could be asserted only over enduring unchanging geographies. That is, given the preference for stable territory rather than dynamic environments, the British administration’s standard tool kit, made up of colonial cartography and legal terminologies, Bhattacharya affirms, often entirely failed to come to grips with the Bengal delta’s ecological realities as a “mobile landscape” (p. 5). Bhattacharyya, in fact, highlights their peculiar quandary by narrating for us the tormented story of a certain Benjamin Lacam, company servant, speculator, and a “middling character” of sorts (p. 51), who in 1774 attempted to build a private harbor downstream of Calcutta. Lacam intended to generate profits by offering a safe docking point for incoming trading ships. The ambitious project to build wharves and piers, however, soon came to grief, and he found himself fighting several dispiriting legal battles between 1777 and 1806. In discussing the various twists and turns of this fascinating case, Bhattacharya, in fact, convincingly underlines that the Lacam saga, at heart, was a “representational” failure (p. 75). Neither the colonial courts nor the then existing colonial sciences on measurement—mapping, surveying, meteorology, and the recording of fluvial depths—could intelligibly make sense of the delta’s “inscrutable tidal swamps” (p. 59). Put differently, the Lacam af‐

fair, Bhattacharyya concludes, clearly indicated that no “common geographical” understanding of the delta could be achieved given that “what is silt today is swamp tomorrow, and perhaps headed for the bottom of the Bay of Bengal in the future” (p. 69).

While “cartographic mindedness” (p. 121)—the languages of legal property and bureaucratic survey—shaped colonial responses to the soaked landscapes, other sharply contrasting indigenous understandings were, nonetheless, also in active circulation. To trace these different environmental imaginations, however, according to Bhattacharya, requires an “almanac form of reading space,” a reading that could be more “receptive to temporality in space and its cosmological dimensions” (p. 16). In effect, Bhattacharya insightfully makes the case for a closer scrutiny of a range of cultural forms that continue to animate the Bengal delta’s social worlds, such as local folk songs, oral performances, and pictorial and textual presentations of Mangalkavya poems, which describe land and water as a continuum rather than as relations of separation. The Manasamangal paintings of riverbanks, for example, celebrate river‐land confluences where trade, commerce, worship, gods, goddesses, humans, fish, and vegetation are woven into “inseparable and interdependent ways” (p. 118). In sum, Bengal’s popular and vibrant riverbank cultures reveal a meshed river‐land world that ran opposite to colonial political, legal, and economic practices, which stubbornly pursued ecological separations.

*Empire and Ecology in the Bengal Delta* is path‐breaking and makes a compelling case for drawing urban studies in South Asia into the deepening folds of environmental history. This is an original effort that brims with theoretical insights and helps us recover ways for “remembering” contemporary Kolkata’s many entanglements with the Bengal delta’s soaking ecology. “And because we
forget,” as Bhattacharyya correctly concludes, “it
is harder for us to imagine alternatives” (p. 201).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
https://networks.h-net.org/h-water

Citation: Rohan D'Souza. Review of Bhattacharyya, Debjani. Empire and Ecology in the Bengal Delta: The

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=53090

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.