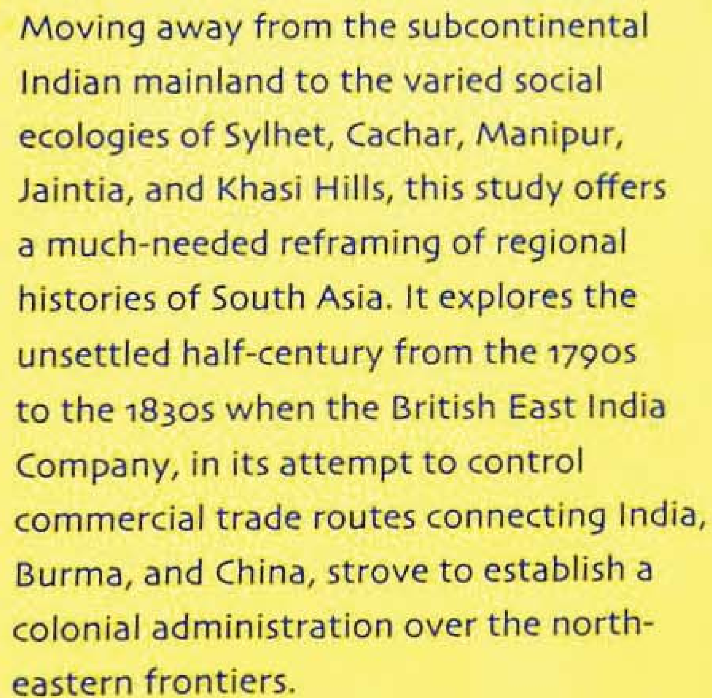
Founding an Empire on India's North-Eastern Frontiers 1790–1840

Climate, Commerce, Polity

GUNNEL CEDERLÖF



Moving away from the subcontinental Indian mainland to the varied social ecologies of Sylhet, Cachar, Manipur, Jaintia, and Khasi Hills, this study offers a much-needed reframing of regional histories of South Asia. It explores the unsettled half-century from the 1790s to the 1830s when the British East India Company, in its attempt to control commercial trade routes connecting India, Burma, and China, strove to establish a colonial administration over the north-eastern frontiers.

A region where the river courses shifted and cultivated fields turned into lakes in the monsoons, and seasonal changes required highly flexible and varied livelihood strategies, the East India Company stepped into the shoes of the existing Mughal administration with great difficulty. The book explores both the enabling and constraining conditions of climate and ecology to understand the role of daily administration in shaping subject formation. Challenging the conventional understanding of the founding of the colonial state in India, it reconnects histories of space and polities to provide rare insights into the lesser-known formative years of the Company rule.

Gunnel Cederlöf is Professor of History at Uppsala University, Sweden. Her work spans the environmental, legal, and colonial history of early-modern and modern India and the British Empire. Her publications include *Bonds Lost: Subordination, Conflict and Mobilisation in Rural South India c. 1900–1970* (1997) and *Landscapes and the Law: Environmental Politics, Regional Histories, and Contests over Nature* (2008).

Jacket visuals: Manuscript map of Burma, by surveyors of the British Army, c. 1830, courtesy of the Sterling Memorial Library Map Department, Yale University. Seal of the Superintendency of Hairamba Kingdom, 1835, English era. Image based on the original kept in Cachar District Record Room, Superintendent's Letter Book, 1837–38.

Illustration of the river by Devika Dave.

Author photograph: Courtesy of the author.

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OXFORD
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Call No.: 954·1 CED/F
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Published in India by
Oxford University Press
YMCA Library Building, 1 Jai Singh Road, New Delhi 110 001, India

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First Edition published in 2014

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ISBN-13: 978-0-19-809057-1
ISBN-10: 0-19-809057-9

Typeset in Trump Mediaeval 9/12.5
by Alphæta Solutions, Puducherry, India 605 009
Printed in India by G.H. Prints Pvt Ltd, New Delhi 110 020

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Preface

The writing of this book has been nurtured by the intellectual and personal generosity of a great many colleagues and friends in different parts of the world. Maria Ågren, Raziuddin Aquil, Henrik Chetan Aspengren, Arun Bandopadhyay, Uttam Bathari, Hans Bergström, Neeladri Bhattacharya, Gustav Cederlöf, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Ranjan Chakrabarty, Kunal Chakrabarti, Anuradha Chanda, the late Basudeb Chatterjee, Binoy Bhushan Chaudhuri, Sanjukta Das Gupta, Karin Hassan Jansson, Yengkhom Jilangamba, Asmita Kabra, David Ludden, Margaret Lyngdoh, Sanghamitra Misra, Vivekananda Mohanta, Leos Müller, Adam Pain, Kapil Raj, Philippe Ramirez, Arupjyoti Saikia, N. Lokendra Sing, H. Sudhir Sing, K. Sivaramakrishnan, Rohan D'Souza, Tanka B. Subba, Fredrik Thomasson, Olle Törnquist, Rolf Torstendahl, Ülo Valk, and David Washbrook have in different ways encouraged me in my work and helped me find my perspectives. Mahesh Rangarajan has been an endless source of inspiration. His considerate and critical reflections throughout the work have been invaluable. I am also particularly grateful to him and to Heather Goodall and Beppe Karlsson for taking the time to read and comment on the manuscript as a whole.

On many occasions, Silchar has been a place of research and vital discussions. As the district headquarters of Cachar in south Assam,

it has also been a base for travel in search of the realms of the early British administration and the local polity of Cachar under colonial rule. I am immensely grateful to Sirajuddin Barbhuiya, Amalendu Bhattacharya, Eswar Bonela, Imaduddin Bubul, Parthapratim Das, Jangkhomang Guite, Marykim Haokip, Tusar Kanti Nath, Subir Kar, Projit Kumar, Sajal Nag, Sudeshna Purkayastha, Alok Tripathi, and—not least—Suryasikha Pathak, who has also been a master of logistics.

All kinds of assistance have been generously given by Xonzoi Barbora, Navaj Yoti Bathari, Subir Bhaumik, Narendra Bisht, Erik Cederlöf, Oinam Daniel, Santosh Hasnu, Sanjay Rawat, Rajat Roy, Nitin Sethi, and Pranay Sharma. The first drafts of some of the maps were carefully prepared by Gustav Cederlöf, combining satellite imagery and Geographic Information System (GIS) technology with sextant observations from the Survey of India memoirs. The final maps have been beautifully drawn by Ian Faulkner, a cartographer and illustrator. Martin Naylor has copy-edited the manuscript, thereby adding clarity to both language and content. Oxford University Press and their team has helped guide the manuscript for publication. I am deeply indebted to them all.

Many insightful comments have been made on texts I have presented at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, the School of Historical Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, the Centre for Studies in the Social Sciences in Kolkata, the Royal Asiatic Society in London, and the various conferences organized by the Uppsala–Delhi Network Ecology and Society. My work has also benefited greatly from critical discussions at presentations I have given in the departments of history at Assam University in Silchar, Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati, the University of Delhi, Calcutta University, Jadavpur University in Kolkata, Uppsala University, and the Linnaeus University in Växjö, Sweden.

I am grateful for all the assistance I have received from staff at the British Library, the National Archives of India, the Indian National Library, the West Bengal State Archives, the Manipur State Archives, and the Cachar District Record Room, less and in particular from the two record keepers Ala Uwein Barbhuiya and Swapna Biswas.

Funding has been generously provided by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, the Swedish Research Council, and the Dag Rantio Fund.

A first copy-editing was made possible by financial support from the Swedish Research Council and the Department of History at Uppsala University.

GUNNEL CEDERLÖF
Lundbacken, June 2013

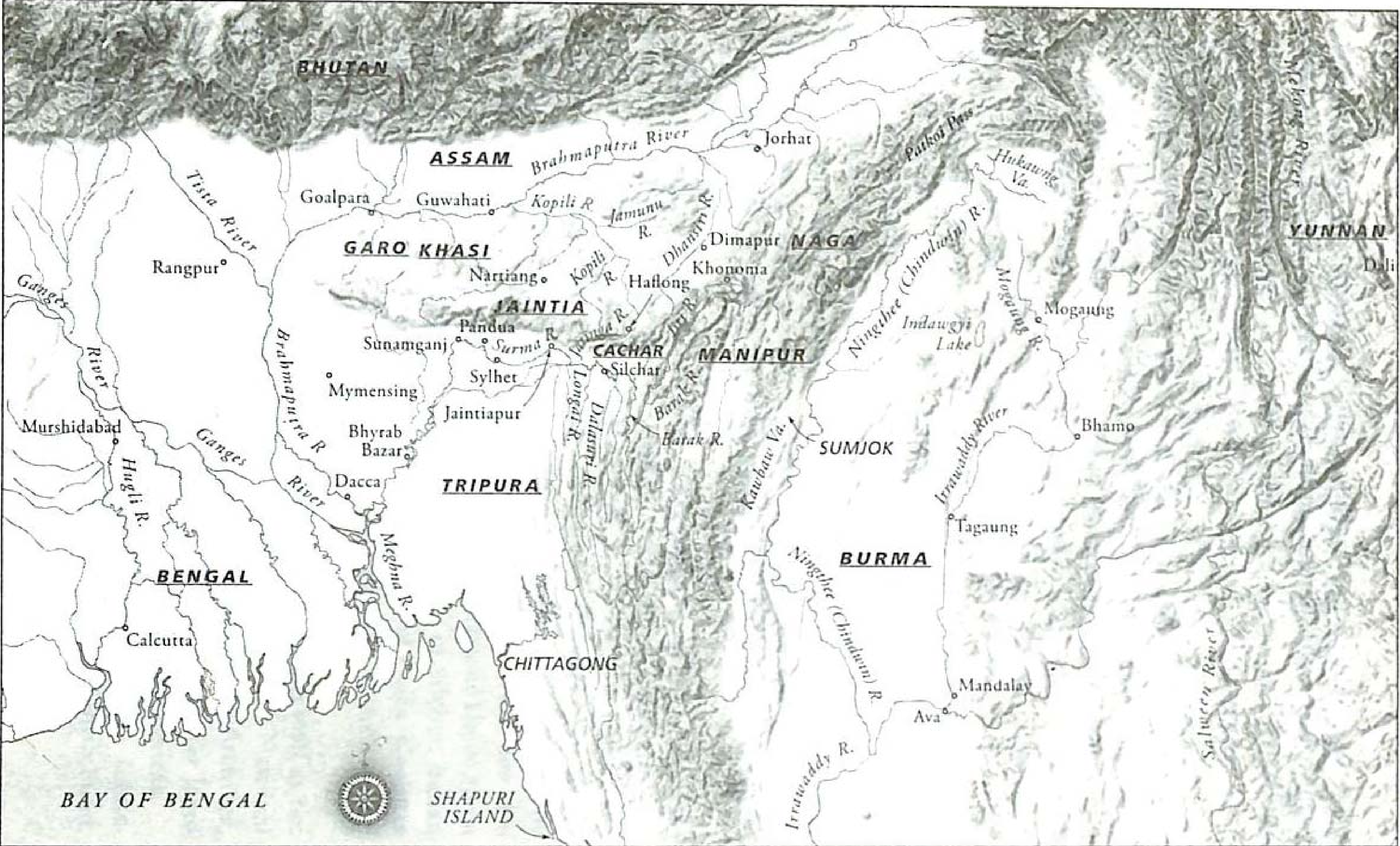

Figure 2 Overview of North-East Bengal, and the British East India Company's North-Eastern Frontier. (Drawn by Ian Faulkner.)

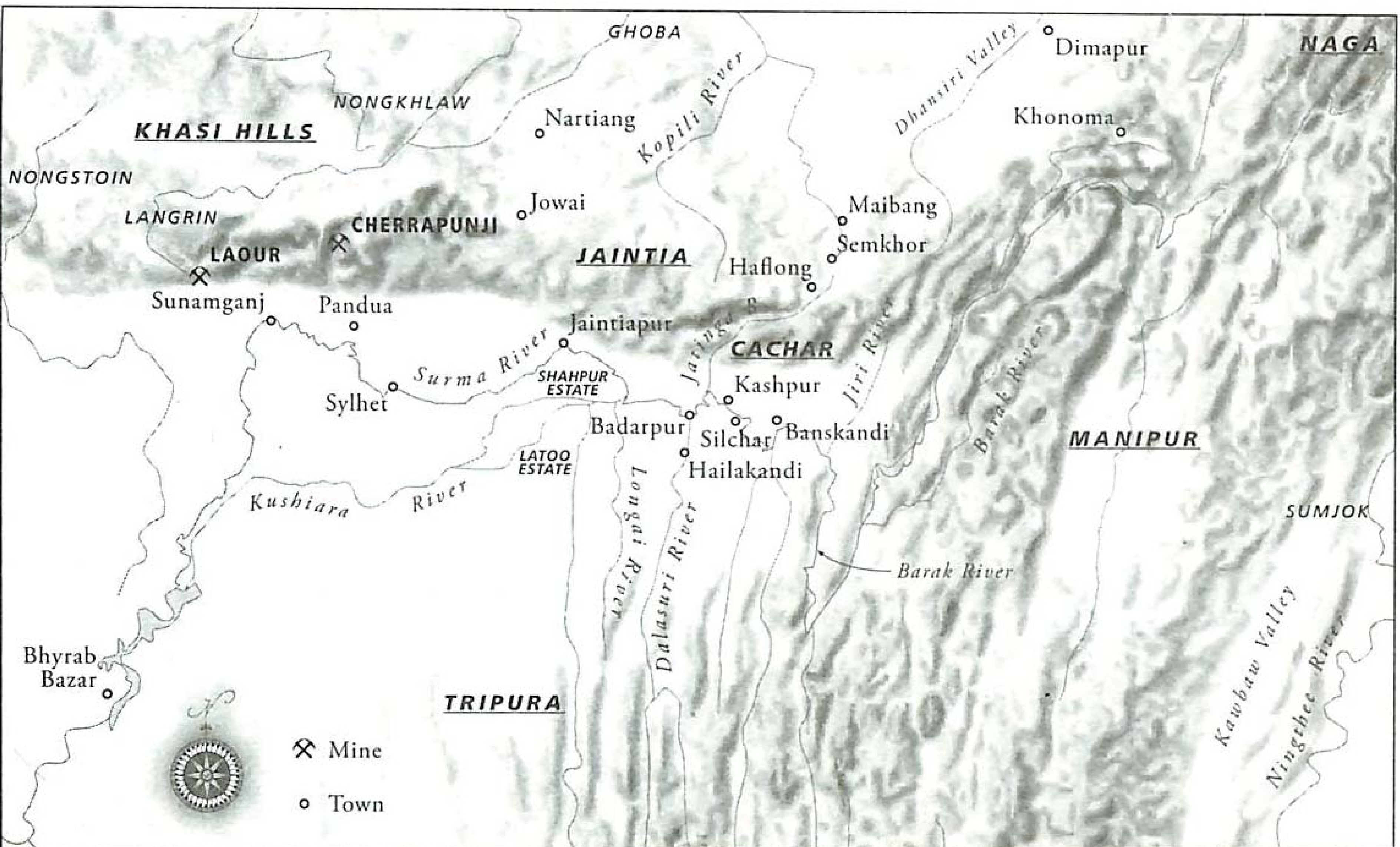

Figure 3 Sylhet district, Cachar, Manipur, Khasi Hills, and Jaintia. (Drawn by Ian Faulkner.)

1

Commercial Flows and Bounded Landscapes in between Empires

For decades, in daily conversations, 'the North-East' has seemed a self-explanatory phrase, a geopolitical catchword in today's India. Often viewed from the outside, the region is perceived through known lenses such as insurgency, identity politics, and critically contested development projects, and as a heavily guarded gateway to South-East Asia. 'North-east' was a catchword two centuries ago as well, but for very different reasons. To the British East India Company (EIC), it spelt wealth and extended endlessly towards China. This strategically located region, termed 'the North-Eastern Frontier', was a factor in securing the global dominance of the British Empire.

The EIC's right to govern territory in Bengal had only recently been granted by the Great Mughal in Delhi when a British administration was set up on Bengal's eastern borders. It was a turning of the tide. The Mughal *diwani* grant of 1765 vested revenue-farming rights and judicial duties in a European mercantile trading corporation. It spanned a vast expanse of land, including Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa in eastern India. Such early-modern corporations acted on the prerogatives of European royal courts, and the EIC had secured monopolies in the eastern trade. The diwani also allowed them to secure a monopoly

in territory. The corporation, hitherto trading via coastal outposts and 'go-betweens', had now ended up ruling territory and people. A mercantile corporation was thus about to take a major step from making a profit by following commodity flows to making economic use of a far more immovable source of income, that of landed revenues.

At closer range, however, the situation can be viewed in a different light. A *nawab*, a governor under the Great Mughal, had ruled Bengal until he had been defeated in war by the British company and thereafter stripped of his honours and obligations. The diwani had subsequently been conferred on a new governor, one that had been a known trading company in the region for more than a century and a half. The decision followed the logic of Mughal polity. The Company's administrative ambitions for Bengal's eastern territories were to revive and utilize the existing, if dilapidated, administration of revenue. But because they failed to enter into the socio-political networks that linked ruler to subjects, and by which revenues were also mediated, its political authority in north-east Bengal long remained shallow.

The previous half-century had seen the breaking up of one of the world's largest early-modern empires, the Mughal or Timurid polity, and the emergence of new political constellations on the Indian subcontinent. In Bengal, political control broke away from Delhi, and internally the nawab had strategically delegated authority to fewer subordinate zamindars. Simultaneously, the area of cultivable land under Bengal's control increased on the eastern borders as forests were turned into cultivated fields by means of tax-free grants issued by the nawab to Muslim and Hindu investors. However, if not cut and cleared every year, these fields were rapidly reclaimed by forests, waters, and wild animals. Just as for the Mughals, for the British merchant corporation, too, the eastern frontiers were border areas in both ecological and political terms.

Controlling the region had both advantages and drawbacks. For centuries, foreign merchants had been drawn to the areas bordering on Burma. Armenian, Afghan, Shan, and European merchants traded with Bengalis, Khasis, Cacharis, Manipuris, and others at the market places. The mineral wealth of the Khasi Hills and the remunerative overland trade with China attracted private traders, fortune seekers, and corporations alike. Old trade routes entered eastern Bengal after crossing Yunnan, Burma, Manipur, and Cachar. But the stakes were high.

Apart from the risk of plain robbery, the terrain separating Bengal from China was difficult to penetrate, and the monsoonal climate made any journey hazardous. In the late eighteenth century, the political situation had become unstable, with Burma threatening to advance on Bengal. Faced with such risks, the EIC was a mere corporation of merchants, far from the ideal officers for a task as complex as the civil administration of landed territories. The Company's administration of north-east Bengal, too, was qualified by commercial priorities, which saw speculation and risk-taking as the way to make a fortune. For the next half-century, many EIC officers were far more successful as merchants than as civil administrators.

As we enter this study, at a time when the British Empire was taking root in Asian soil, the questions discussed are framed by a transition from one empire to another. Expansion was driven by commerce and by competition between the European nation states on whose sanction the corporations operated in India. Colonial conquest, nurtured by imperial visions, had a role in sharpening the lines of conflict between rival national loyalties. Such divisions also emerged between trading companies with an otherwise multinational spectrum of merchants operating within their corporate frames. As Christopher Bayly notes, 'the wars of revolution and global imperialism also strengthened hitherto fluid patriotic identities'.[1]

Late eighteenth-century Europe was torn by warfare which multiplied and merged with conflicts on other continents. Likewise, ideological divisions and colliding economic interests played out in the British parliament were tied to competition over the wealth of the Indian markets. The dividing lines were not clear-cut. Officers of the EIC could argue both in favour of the liberal right to property and against free trade. Private traders in India and members of the growing entrepreneurial class in Britain saw the Company's monopoly claims as the greatest threat to their own chances of making a fortune. And those on the highest echelons of the Company's administration in India warned against the destabilizing influences of the American and French revolutions.

Most historians view the Company's decision to advance beyond the market town and administrative centre of Sylhet as a reluctant one. The eastern region is said to have been treated as a buffer zone against raiding hill communities and Chinese and Burmese aggression.

The limestone mines in the Khasi Hills north of Sylhet were profitable enough to satisfy most merchants. At the same time, when the Sylhet district came within the large Permanent Settlement of Bengal in 1793, surveyors mapped the cultivated lands and revenue income began to show increasingly positive returns. The revenue accounts can easily give the impression of a slowly but steadily developing colonial district administration.

But we need to look beyond the revenue files and the old Mughal *sarkar* to better understand the complex situation in which the larger tracts towards the Burmese border came under EIC control. The Ahom kingdom in Assam had been seriously weakened by a violent rebellion in the last three decades of the eighteenth century. The 600-year-old polity was in crisis. EIC troops had helped to restore the king to the throne, but the rebellion was widespread and recapturing the capital came at the price of large loss of life, depopulation of extensive areas, and a seriously damaged economy. When Burma's troops later invaded Assam they met with little resistance, and Assam remained under successive occupations by the Burmese from 1817 until their forces were ousted from the Brahmaputra valley during the Anglo-Burmese war, in 1825.[2]

Manipur, in the mountains between the lowlands of Bengal and Burma, was also badly affected by the war. This kingdom was vulnerable to the strength of the Burmese court at Ava. It had been under Burmese occupation between 1765 and 1782, and remained dependent on Ava in the following decades. Cachar was another kingdom that had to fend off threats to its independence. It was located between Assam and Manipur, and was equally overrun by Burmese troops. The EIC looked upon this region, first of all, as the entry point to Burma and the Chinese markets. But it was also an entry point for Burmese troops into Bengal, and one that had to be blocked. Sylhet district was deeply affected by these developments. The politics of British colonial conquest of east Bengal cannot be seen in isolation from the process of subjugating the neighbouring autonomous kingdoms. The dynamics of states like Ahom, Assam, or Manipur were interconnected with larger wars, conquests, and interstate rivalries.

This study aims to examine the ways in which north-east Bengal and the neighbouring kingdoms came under the control of the British EIC. It focuses on the formation of polity, beginning from when the

Company, with the revenue surveys of the 1790s, established the first large-scale bureaucratic means of controlling territory and people. It concludes with the debates half a century later about how to thoroughly rework a desperately malfunctioning administration. Bureaucratic principles, it turned out, worked poorly in a monsoon climate in which river courses shifted, cultivated fields turned into lakes, and seasonal changes required highly flexible and varied livelihood strategies. Nor did they go well with the socio-economic organization of social relations. Several exceptions as regards revenue had to be made for landholders with Mughal privileges. These webs of relations on which land control rested were not reflected in the commercial networks of which the European traders were part. The present study is therefore of specific interest to scholars in environmental and legal history, as it explores both the enabling and constraining conditions of climate and ecology, and the administrative practices which formed into governing polities and sovereign–subject relations.

The study further challenges us to rethink part of our conventional understanding of the founding of the colonial state in India. It was only with great difficulty that the EIC stepped into the shoes of the existing Mughal land revenue administration. The large-scale revenue settlements were expected to stem the tide of litigation over land rights, but instead made matters worse. The loyalties of the old Mughal accountants who were employed for the task were with the existing regional social networks, rather than the new rulers. Even when general and unbendable principles of land law were invoked, trial and error was the order of the day. Furthermore, even when the collectors and magistrates were following orders, organizing land surveys and adjudicating land disputes, private and Company commercial interests guided day-to-day procedures. As David Ludden's work on the Sylhet district shows, at the end of the eighteenth century commerce and security were the highest priorities.[3] Rather than implementing the rationality of state institutions, the EIC further expanded the corporation's bureaucracy and interests into the recently conquered territories. To better elucidate the ways in which government practices were formed, the study pays particular attention to the time- and place-bound formation of law governing the control of and access to land and natural resources.

The geographical and temporal scope of the book is necessarily broad. This will enable us to cross boundaries introduced into

historical studies from the perspective of more recent pasts. India under Crown rule, after the Revolt of 1857–8, began to implement a policy of separate treatment of the provinces on the North-Eastern Frontier. The difficulty with which these regions and polities were annexed to the British territories resulted in their gradual isolation, regulated by the Inner Line (1873), the McMahon Line (1914), and the Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas (1935), and later affirmed by a separate schedule in the constitution of independent India.[4] But it would be a mistake to apply a notion of an isolated enclave to earlier periods. The 'history of the North-East' should not be addressed in the singular, nor simply as a secluded entity, and perhaps not as an entity at all. A historical trajectory in the form of an inevitable path into isolation was not written in stone prior to the peak of the Victorian empire. The EIC's North-Eastern Frontier, rather, was an open-ended affair until more universal principles of administration began to influence governmental practice from the 1830s onwards. By that time, however, bureaucratic practices were established which, in the previous half-century, had been tried out in a most pragmatic way and according to the priorities of officers serving a global mercantile corporation. The complex processes by which this took place are central to this book.

The present study endeavours to reconnect histories of space and polities in the formative era of EIC rule. There are many perceptive and important studies of ethno-histories and sub-national histories of north-east India. Equally significant studies have been made of the colonial administration of forests and wastelands in various parts of British India. Yet imperial power tends to be viewed from its summit, in the late nineteenth century when the British moved with much confidence and force.[5] Those developments were preceded by a century of British presence, characterized by both the interests and modes of operation of an early-modern mercantile corporation and, later, the growth of colonial state institutions. As this study will show, their actions were inconsistent, strongly challenged, and driven by contradictory interests. When colonial power under Crown rule operated in the region, the institutional forms it relied on were already in place, to be further adjusted into powerful, even draconian, legislation. To understand the later developments, we need a deeper insight into how bureaucratic practices and legal frameworks were shaped to become

cornerstones of British rule in the north-east. Most of the rich corpus of works on north-east India and north-east Bengal tends, furthermore, to separate these two large regions. This study emphasizes their interconnectedness. The one cannot be understood without the other.

The book addresses three key debates among historians. It aims to bring the study into conversation with some established positions, in order to nuance or alter our understanding of early colonial pasts. In the first debate, which centres on agrarian and revenue history, the study brings into focus the importance of researching colonial agrarian administration from the perspective of climate and ecology. The second is more a theme than a single debate. It is concerned with the analytical delineations of space and argues for the need to work with a multilayered spatial conception, without preset boundaries. The third debate addresses the question of colonial governance. Much historical research has sought to define the arrival of the colonial state in India, and to find the earliest traces of modern state institutions. The risk of applying teleological perspectives is thus significant. By exploring regional colonial administrative practice in the early formation of British rule, the study seeks to contribute to a more complex analysis of one of the most basic building blocks in any polity, the formation of subjects.

A broad variety of historical sources are consulted. There are documents with performative statements, such as orders, treaties, and verdicts. European-authored documents dominate the colonial archives. They speak in different voices and from different positions, such as that of EIC governing bodies, in board minutes, department notes, and government orders; the standpoint of officers on tour reporting to government, as in surveyors' memoirs, revenue survey reports, and the reports of army officers; or the position of officers at local levels, trying to adjust government orders to recalcitrant local realities, in their diaries and in local and regional correspondence. As with most state archives, there will be many documents in the files that were produced by the state's subjects and opponents, for the obvious reason that a state needs such information. There is an unfortunate misconception that the colonial archives consist only of British-authored documents with heavy 'colonial biases'. Colonial rule would not have functioned without an inflow of information from and about people in the conquered territories. There are the most vocal

of the landlords, petitioning and corresponding with government, and the rajas' correspondence with collectors and agents. There are Persian documents in English translation, primarily those needed by revenue officers to determine land relations. Individuals of lower social orders appear in court records as witnesses, accused, or deponents. Perhaps, as in most historical research, the most vocal voices of non-elite communities are documented in descriptions of their actions and reactions.

Historians of the regions now comprising north-east India struggle to find sources in the vernacular languages. There are the well-known royal chronicles of the Ahom kingdom (*buranjis*) and the Meitei court in Manipur. There are also the less known and more limited chronicles and legal documents of the Dimasa kingdom in Cachar, written in Bengali script, from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Such archives are good examples of material resources compiled by a state, invaluably rich and varied in content but, like any government archive, carrying a weight and bias of selection and interpretation dictated by royal preference. As the senior Assamese historian S. K. Bhuyan has explained, they 'recorded only those events which were crucial to the royal polity'. Even harder to find are primary vernacular-language documents that view Cachar, Jaintia, the Khasi Hills, and other regions and minority communities without the filter of dominant communities or of Assamese or Bengali narrators. Further research is needed to seek out such sources and other material and oral evidence, secure them from deterioration, and make a careful study of them. As always, we can only access a fraction of what went on in the past. Most will be left to our informed guesses or to oblivion.[6]

Climate, Ecology, and Agrarian History

This study focuses on a region characterized by water. The annual monsoon sets the pace for the regeneration and growth of flora and fauna. It determines the possibilities and limitations of human life, with people adjusting their livelihood strategies to the regularity and unpredictability of the rains. Poetry, tales, and songs witness to the deeply integrated lives of water and human society. Together with the many varieties of rice, beans, and lentils, fish ought to be counted as a

staple food in the lowlands. Travelling across land was difficult, while waterways were highways. In the 1760s, long before British officers had begun to complain that fishing could not be taxed since people simply walked into their inundated fields and collected the fish, the Surveyor-General James Rennell observed the water with appreciation. He noted that eastern Bengal was 'naturally the most convenient for trade within itself of any country in the world; for its rivers divide into just a number of branches that the people have the convenience of water carriage to and from every principal [place]'.[7]

With their long experience of trading in the region, the Europeans were not taken by surprise by the force of the monsoons. They too relied on local skill to ship goods along the best river courses during the right seasons. Yet they seem to have been completely unprepared for the insurmountable difficulties involved in applying a general land revenue settlement to a landscape marked by such varying weather conditions. They even appear to have turned a blind eye to the climatic conditions when tailoring the quick fix of the first land settlement in 1790. The mismatch of climate and land administration, which is discussed in detail in Chapter 5, haunted the collectors of the north-east Bengal plains for decades.

While the revenue surveyors were busy collecting data on the extent of cultivated fields in the Sylhet district, reporting back to the revenue department of the EIC central administration in Calcutta, the governor-general and his staff were also handling other, more worrying reports. Late eighteenth-century India was hit by extreme weather, with both excessive floods and lasting droughts. East Bengal was one of the worst-affected regions. Doubts were raised about the advisability of forming more than a minimal government to secure order and commerce east of Sylhet. Given these circumstances, the way land revenue was organized is even more striking for its fixed and unbendable principles. The contrast between the two sets of reports or, better, the two themes in reports on east Bengal is explored in the second chapter of this book.

Consequently, while the revenue accounts most certainly reflect the progress of assessments in terms of income for the government, and the extent of land included in the revenue class of 'cultivated land', they fall short of providing an account of production and livelihoods in the region. We cannot assess the quality of the region's economic

life from the colonial revenue files alone. Any agrarian history needs to look beyond the cultivated fields.

Rewriting Regions, Frontiers, and Borderlands

Modern maps of India show the seven states of the North-East as an easterly appendix, hanging by a thread that is the 'Chicken's Neck' or Siliguri Corridor. This thin strip of land has connected the eastern states with the Republic of India since East Pakistan was created at the time of independence from British rule. On many maps, it resembles an isthmus, preventing an island from floating away from 'Mainland India'. Such an image bears no resemblance to the place and role of the territories between the Brahmaputra and Irrawaddy rivers in the larger geographies of politics and trade in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century.

As noted earlier, the commercial logic of the EIC made them think of 'frontiers' as expansion zones that would connect them with profitable markets and sources of wealth. The earliest maps therefore often looked like trails through blank spaces. The merchant-officers were less interested in the tracts that would fill a map with forests, scrub, fields, lakes, and marshes, being more intent on getting from one place to the next. When exploring these routes, therefore, they crossed numerous frontiers and boundaries with other 'heartlands' than those defined by the British company or the former Mughal state. Yet, as Chapter 4 will show, the political heartlands of present-day maps, which place Manipur and its neighbouring states on the periphery, do not follow the logic of the EIC map-makers. The maps resulting from the many individual surveys of the early nineteenth century in this region located the centre differently. Stretching from Bengal to Yunnan, their focal point was north-east Bengal and, more precisely, Manipur, one of the key points in the British imperial vision. This is of more than passing importance. Imperial map-makers clearly had spatial ideas that were far removed from the security concerns of later national cartographers of India.

Recent research has begun to focus in new ways on the region connecting India and China. This is a much-needed shift in attention. Rather than emphasizing difference and separation, scholars from a

variety of fields have begun to reassess the significance of the region for its commonalities and interconnectedness. From these studies, the need to put aside the limitations created by the combination of a sharp nation-state focus and an academic regional studies framework emerges with the utmost clarity. The new studies vary from historically tracing old trade networks between China and India[8] to analytically ascribing a common form of polity, defined by a lack or absence of the modern state and conceptualized as 'Zomia'. While the former research is characterized by its emphasis on the interconnectedness of sub-regions, including high- and lowlands, plains and rivers, and a variety of polities, the latter defines the region in terms of a mutually exclusive binary. On the one hand there is the state, aggressively expanding from a valley-based existence, and on the other the high-altitude, non-state space to which people escape from the reach of the state. James C. Scott describes Zomia as the 'shatter zone', which is at once inaccessible to the state, because of the geographical obstacles it raises to the exercise of state control, and a refuge characterized by flexible and egalitarian social structures. These 'stateless spaces' are more generally identified with particular communities and societies in the mountain region from Himalayan South Asia to South-East and East Asia, as earlier elaborated in less axiomatic terms by Willem van Schendel.[9]

In a critical note in support of his thesis of an anarchist history of mainland South-East Asia, Scott questions earlier debates over the writing of South-East Asian history, which were about 'how the history of the state should be written—not about whether states should have been the center of attention in the first place'.[10] The objection is valid, but less for what it assumes about the lack of state-like polities at high altitudes than for the assumptions it makes concerning state-like polities in the lowlands. There is a tendency at times to ascribe far more coherence of interest and institutions to a state in its daily practice than can be justified. As long as we retain the state as the axiom of our enquiries into the formation of British rule in India, we risk applying intentions and interests that had very little bearing on the actions of the officers of a mercantile corporation. We may equally be guilty of ascribing the logic of state institutions to a corporate bureaucracy. The answer, therefore, is not to put forward a theoretical binary of the state and its negation, the non-state, but to

search for the bureaucratic practices that were shaped into a polity in the formative period of colonial rule. It is equally important to identify the variety of social forms that made up the societies outside the former Mughal territories and to observe their inner tensions, hierarchies, and conflicts. This again breaks down simple binaries of state and non-state spaces. Giving thought to ambivalences not only at the territorial edges of states, but also in their heartlands, provides for nuanced analyses of contested, shifting, or evolving zones of authority.[11]

While Scott tends to make broad generalizations across vast territories for the sake of an argument about the nature of the modern state and the societies that he sees as beyond its reach, researchers in a different yet parallel debate have enquired into the socio-political and cultural consequences of state aggression for local society. Conceptualized as borderland research, a growing number of important studies deepen our understanding of societies that have been politically or analytically trapped by modern nation-state boundaries. Such borders cut across territories where people were united by spatial practices, histories, and imaginations.[12]

The question of making and remaking borders is also highly relevant to this study. During the slow and uneven formation of EIC governance in north-east Bengal and the neighbouring regions, Company officers demarcated borders for a variety of purposes, but never for that of establishing a modern state. Different and competing borders were claimed by officers, regional rulers, landholders, and local lords. These were intended to define authority, duties, and rights such as political authority over the territory and the people living within its boundaries, rights to collect duties at customs points or revenues for user rights, rights to cultivation, customary practices, and thoroughfare; or to provide a shield of security or a realm of jurisdiction. Accordingly, at different times, boundaries or the lack thereof represented different meanings or no meaning at all to the individuals or communities involved. As is argued in Chapter 3, spatial conceptions involving boundaries were thus varying, overlapping, and negotiable. Their significance shifted over time as the economic and political landscape changed.

Over the first half-century of British rule, the balance of power was altered. The outcome of the Anglo-Burmese war in the EIC's

favour marks a turning point. From then on, the British officers began to argue more forcefully for boundaries that related to a larger political space of governance. At this point, the old mercantile corporation was on its way out, losing its last monopolies in 1833, while the new generations of Company servants were recruited less from the old merchant families and more from among men with formal administrative training.

Early-Modern Corporations, Polities, and Subject Formation

The formative years of British governance in Bengal were greatly influenced by the priorities of an early-modern corporation. Such corporations should be compared to guilds, which safeguarded their interests against competition by means of sovereign control over their skills and agreements. Membership of the EIC required a licence, and private 'interlopers' were chased away from the Company's territories. As Philip Stern has observed, the EIC projected itself alternately as a '"mere merchant" and an independent "sovereign"'.[13] This may explain why in Europe the corporations were often in opposition to an authoritarian state, and why centralizing states tried to curb their actions.

This book examines how the 'mere merchant' set up an administration to govern territories in India and in particular its North-Eastern Frontier, east of Sylhet and south of the Brahmaputra valley. Research into the formation of the 'Company state' is an old field of enquiry that has received fresh energy from works such as Stern's. Pointing to the early-modern character of the trading corporation is a fruitful approach, since it counteracts simplistic assumptions about the coming of the modern state, arriving with the setting up of early colonial governing institutions. It also redraws the lines in debates in which arguments in favour of a sharp binary between an authoritarian colonial state and a subdued or even stateless society are also applied to early colonial interventions.

A close reading of the Company officers' reports from the early survey tours, military operations, and daily local administration challenges us to rethink the process of introducing a colonial government.

The geographical region that is the focus of this book provides an empirical field that stands out in its broad diversity of polities, in the decentralized Mughal administration that had turned into little fiefdoms, and in the predominantly commercial interests of the Company's presence. This is one of the instances where it is more constructive to identify how the corporation's bureaucracy and governing bodies were adjusted to complex realities and developed through practice, while taking on board the language and forms of government. Ludden's study convincingly shows how the many colliding interests within and in conflict with the Sylhet district administration in the 1780s and 1790s tore apart initiatives to implement general principles.[14] The district officers were far from simply feeling their way across the hurdles of day-to-day administration. The orders and guidelines from the EIC governing bodies in Calcutta were precise. But daily realities forced the officers to invent and experiment with practical solutions when those orders were to be carried out. As a result, bureaucratic routines were shaped into a time- and place-bound practice, which became the EIC government at the Sylhet district level and, later, at the Cachar and Jaintia levels and so on. Thus practice formed into polity.

But no polity exists without subjects. A ruler depends on having relations to subjects, in however rudimentary a form. As observed earlier, in contrast to the earlier revenue system under the nawab, the new ruler was unable to enter into the socio-economic organization of land relations. There was no place for such an outsider within the regional order. As will be argued, in the former Mughal province under British governance, the most systematic way in which relations were established was through the land revenue surveys. Fiscal ties connected ruler and subjects. They were a selective instrument that excluded the majority of the population. But this situation did not differ from subjecthood or citizenship in most of Europe, where property and wealth were the distinguishing qualities of a citizen. Of course, the district administrators in north-east Bengal related to subjects in many other legal ways. But given the importance attached to land revenue as a bureaucratic means of control, fiscal relations became the glue that joined together territory, people, and government. We may therefore speak of a fiscal subject.

However, as this study shows, no such instrument was applied in the formation of government in the formerly autonomous neighbouring

kingdoms. Subject formation in Manipur, Jaintia, Khasi, and other territories followed a very different path, characterized by much weaker ruler–subject relations. At the very inception of British rule on the North-Eastern Frontier, two polities emerged as a result of the different bureaucratic and military practices of the British mercantile corporation. Chapter 5 examines subject formation in the former Mughal province, while the following chapter discusses the subjugation of the neighbouring territories to EIC rule. The final chapter analyses the ideological and political processes by which the different bureaucratic practices were brought under the sovereign government of the EIC. We may note the difference between subjects of the British EIC government in India, made legitimate by the Charter Acts, and Indian subjects of the British Crown after 1858. While they were not the same thing, the distinction between being an EIC subject and a 'British subject' was often blurred. The point to be made is that the rights of subjects and citizens grew out of precedent, as constituted by the bureaucratic and legal practice of ruler–subject relations during the formative years of EIC rule.

These transformations by no means came to an end in the 1830s, where the present study concludes. The severe tensions provoked by British aggression in north Cachar and the Naga Hills rapidly escalated in the 1840s to merge with other regional conflicts, and in Jaintia fiscal interventions had only begun to be elaborated and rejected. During the 1830s, however, we can see how universal principles were introduced into the administration of this region and how a reformed bureaucracy, stripped of some of the core features of Company administration, began to gel.

Notes

1. Bayly (2004: 113).
2. Bhuyan (1949, ch. 8: 2; ch. 9).
3. Ludden (2003a: 5–6, 25–34).
4. The process of exclusion has been the subject of numerous studies. For a recent one, from the perspective of cartography, see Zou & Kumar (2011).
5. See, for example, Guha (1977); Guha (1989); Rangarajan (1996); Sundar (1997); Saberwal (1999); and Karlsson (2011). Research has begun to appear which addresses early colonial pasts as something significantly more than

a simple backdrop against which later developments take place. See, for example, Sivaramakrishnan (1999); Misra (2011); and Saikia (2011).

6. I am grateful for discussions about vernacular historical sources with Uttam Bathari, Arupjyoti Saikia, and Rex Hasnu. See also Saikia (2008); Parratt (2005: 3); Purkayastha (2008); and Bhuyan (1947 [1994]: 115), cited in Saikia (2008: 497).

7. Ludden (2003a: 10, note 56). Ludden cites 'An Unpublished Letter of Mr. Rennell' in *Bengal Past and Present*, September 1933, quoted in Chaudhuri (1992: 36).

8. Deyell (1983 [1994]); Yang (2004).

9. Van Schendel (2002); Scott (2009, ch. 1).

10. Scott (2009: 33).

11. For a critique of Scott's argument, see also Sadan (2010).

12. Ludden (2003b); Ludden (2005); Van Schendel (2005); Baruah (2008); Misra (2011); Zou & Kumar (2011).

13. Stern (2011: 13).

14. Ludden (2003a: 5–8, 22–5).