

Debjani Bhattacharyya

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

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Some cities never sleep, others never stop shifting. Some, like Calcutta, restlessly do both. Under the clamour of today's modern metropolis is the Bengal Delta, a notorious shapeshifter. In *Empire and Ecology in the Bengal Delta*, Debjani Bhattacharyya puts the delta at the heart of Calcutta's (now Kolkata's) history from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. She shows how what she terms the 'soaked ecology' (p. 4) of Calcutta was colonised, reclassified and capitalised upon through a series of legal and political instruments that ultimately, if circuitously, rendered it as property. This history takes the reader through failed attempts to build private harbours and legal wrangling about how to make the delta look like land, to the appearance of gods in courts of justice and the draining of swamps in an effort to bring equilibrium to an early twentieth-century housing market. Throughout, Bhattacharyya shows how the many moving relationships in the Bengal Delta not only frustrated tidy distinctions separating land from water but how water shaped the distinction itself.

Bhattacharyya's work focuses on where and how ecology populates the colonial archive: its appearances, disappearances, and the ways in which ecology compelled and constrained different 'technologies of property' (p. 5) that were brought to bear upon the delta. What emerges is not a narrative of complete conversion of the delta into something recognisable as 'land'. Neither, however, do the colonial conceptions of land rights or water rights in common law successfully remap the delta such that ambiguities in one legal domain could be shored up by tools in the other. Rather, what came about was a piecemeal conglomerate where ecologies between land and water – the littoral – were papered over

through bureaucratic and legal mechanisms and, over time, concretised in material forms, such as harbours, roads and the city itself. Through a judicious rendering of both the material and the moral orderings of empire, Bhattacharyya provides a novel and compelling account of Calcutta's watery origins. It is not environmental history extended to social concerns, exactly. Nor is it the reverse. It is closer to an almanac, which is the methodological device that Bhattacharyya mobilises to convene the rhythms, temporal differences and speculative bets that combine law, ecology and competing cosmologies to forge terrains for property and ownership in a deltaic city.

*Empire and Ecology* has immense potential to shape conversations across a range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary concerns. For instance, Bhattacharyya's attention to the intersections of the materiality of the delta – tidal forces, the appearance and disappearance of silt bars and small islands – with colonial mapping exercises will be of interest to legal geographers and political anthropologists. The failure of what Bhattacharyya terms the colonial, 'pregiven ontology of the soil' (p. 66) simply did not square with the imagined spaces of property or potential accumulation. Here, the measurements and devices used to codify rights, themselves so central to concerns of science and technology studies, are those that Bhattacharyya examines for how they coproduced social and natural orders. The history of the spatial registers used to imagine where one type of ecology began and another ended will entice environmental historians, and those interested in the histories of colonial cities. Likewise, the surge in social studies of the ocean will find an account that is alert to the peculiar and powerful way these myriad concerns were (and remain) entangled in Calcutta. From these soaked beginnings, the drying and titling of the delta faced no shortage of obstacles as the delta ran near constant interference with simplistic formulations of fixed ideas of space that occupy scholars focused on place, economy and values.

As Bhattacharyya shows, the deltaic landscape in Calcutta formed and reformed routinely as tides washed in and out and as the Hooghly River distributed the floodwaters of

the Ganges. These forces changed the very ‘architecture of ownership’ (p. 77). With clear, concise and admirably referenced prose, Bhattacharyya shows how new categories of accreted land, suddenly emerging alluvion, and derelict or disappeared land gradually were incorporated – not without considerable puzzling – into the legal traditions British colonisers sought to impose. These categories were complicated by controversies over how to distinguish between what land was (or could be) privately owned versus what was used as public space. It is from this quagmire that new technologies of property eventually took shape in ways that rendered the delta legible to the both law and economics.

The final chapters of the book consider the ethical limits of the law and the ways in which a now forgotten history has been key to making the delta comport with speculative forms of wealth accumulation. The narrative, deeply peopled by those challenging and making legal reports, writing public accounts and rendering political judgments, gives insight into the early commercial economies for housing, rentals and commerce in Calcutta. As the city was rezoned and taxed in new ways, Bhattacharyya identifies the importance of urban infrastructure and its mediating role among the legal, the natural and the economic. The subsequent, speculative market for urban property presented yet another shifting set of circumstances, ultimately allowing for the delta to be recognisable in stable vernaculars of supply and demand. Bhattacharyya’s final arguments turn to another destabilising force: climate change. By situating climate change amid the forgotten compromises of property, law and infrastructure that empire once made with delta ecology, Bhattacharyya highlights the urgency of remembrance at a time when climate change is raising tides that will renegotiate the terms. This is a book to keep ready to hand on shelves and to place prominently on syllabi.

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