

Statemaking and Territory in South Asia: Lessons from the Anglo-Gorkha War (1814-1816)

by Bernardo A. Michael.

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Reviewed by Saul Mullard

Colonial state making, boundary formation, cultures of governance and territorial organisation are the key themes in Bernardo Michael's book on the history of territory construction on the frontier of the British East India Company and the Gorkha kingdom. At the outset Michael grounds his book in a context which seeks to identify the multi-faceted processes and the roles of culture, power, space, history and social forces that contributed to state formation in South Asia. Thus, Michael highlights the complex patterns that contributed to the history of state and boundary formation on the Indo-Nepal frontier, the contested cultures of space, territory and governance and the culmination of that history and cultural contestation in the Anglo-Gorkha War of 1814-16. Whilst this book can be regarded as an historical inquiry into state making along the Anglo-Gorkha frontier—grounded as it is in the history of the British acquisition of Indian territory (Bengal and Bihar) and Gorkha expansion in the late eighteenth century—to state that it is limited to history would be inaccurate. Indeed, this work draws upon ideas from several fields such as human geography and cultural anthropology as well as history, which ultimately allows Michael to make a number of more general, and therefore significant observations on the construction of territory and state making in South Asia.

The potential complexities of the entire Anglo-Gorkha frontier have been carefully and expertly negotiated by Michael, who draws his readers' attention to two particular points along the Anglo-Gorkha borderland: the Champaran-Tarriani and the Gorakhpur-Butwal sections. The use of these two case studies, rather than limiting the scope of the book, actually aids the reader in engaging with the key themes and ideas, without the presence of too much distracting and complex detail that would have to be included in a full analysis of the whole frontier region. As a result, the

book is, for the most part, accessible and well structured. In certain places, however, it could have benefitted from some more detailed explorations, as is the case with chapter five on disjointed territories. The only other criticism that could be levelled against this work would be the reproduction quality of the maps, such as the map of Mukwanpoor (sic) on page 13, which has been reproduced at such a size as to make it almost useless. Fortunately, the content of the book is so captivating and authoritative that the minor inconvenience of poor maps does not detract from the quality of the book as a whole.

The book is divided into seven chapters, including its introduction and conclusion. Each chapter elucidates important themes relevant to the main focus of the book, beginning in earnest with chapter two. That chapter addresses the relationships between land, labour, and agrarian activities that defined territory along the frontier, which the British (through the acquisition of tax rights in Bengal and Bihar) inherited from the Mughals and the Gorkha state also inherited through its expansion during the late eighteenth century. In chapters three and four, Michael turns his attention to the economic entitlements (such as land tenures, taxation and tribute relationships) which had the effect of producing non-contiguous and overlapping borderlands in the territories that ultimately fell under the East India Company's control. Chapter five then broadens the scope of the book by exploring the various forms of knowledge and practice that developed into the fluid boundaries and disjointed spaces of South Asian states, and the colonial obsessions with attempts to codify and reorganise those spaces into 'coherent' units. Chapter six develops this idea further by studying the construction and reorganisation of territory through cartography. The final chapter draws the two strands of analysis in this book together; showing how traditional patterns of entitlements, land usage, taxation and tribute formed a complex and confusing pattern of territorial organisation and gave rise to the Anglo-Gorkha War; and, secondly, how colonial notions of territory as contiguous with linear boundaries contributed to a vision of territory which suppressed older patterns of organisation.

This thoroughly researched book, which makes use of archival materials from Britain, India and Nepal, is a unique and timely study of territoriality and state formation in South Asia borne out of the causes of the Anglo-Gorkha War. Unlike the numerous other authors on this topic

of South Asian history, Michael avoids a more classical study of the political, military and diplomatic elements of this conflict; instead he has accomplished something more useful: an analytical study of the contested notions of territory and governance which precipitated the war and ultimately caused the restructuring of physical territory and the theoretical understanding of what territory is. As such, this work develops an historical context for ideas that are currently popular in trans-border studies and critiques of the nation-state model: that the definition of a state is ultimately conditioned upon an acceptance of the Weberian definition of a territorially defined political space. Instead, Michael has shown very clearly that this idea of territoriality was imposed upon pre-existing modes of organisation by colonial actors in the state-making project of South Asia. The thorough investigation of the history of this construction that Michael has offered us will undoubtedly affect our understanding of contemporary problems of contested territory in South Asia, such as the Madhesi movement for self-determination.