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Perpetual Fluctuation: The Rivers of Bengal as Historical Agents, 1750–1800

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In the second half of the eighteenth century, Bengal's rivers were shifting as they always did. Channels silted, flooded, and abandoned their courses with a regularity that confounded European surveyors and indigenous observers alike. This paper argues that the instability of Bengal's landscape did not merely complicate the colonial project of cartographic knowledge: it actively shaped the epistemological frameworks through which that knowledge was produced. Drawing on manuscript surveys, correspondence, and published geographical treatises, I examine how EIC surveyors, most prominently James Rennell, developed ways of thinking about landscape as dynamic and historically legible rather than fixed and mappable in any final sense.

This challenges a dominant scholarly narrative that treats colonial cartography as a technology of territorial mastery and epistemological closure. I show instead that surveyors in this period operated within plural epistemological traditions, blending classical geographical reasoning with empirical observation of environmental change; and that Bengal's rivers were active participants in that process, not merely its objects. In recent years, environmental historians and scholars of the nonhuman turn have argued for rivers as historical agents in their own right. My research complicates this by showing that the historical agency of Bengal's rivers operated not only through the physical transformation of landscapes but through the transformation of the intellectual frameworks used to understand them. That is, that rivers shaped how people thought about history itself, and not just the ground beneath their feet. Finally, the paper suggests that this geographical knowledge was never the product of a single tradition: classical European, Islamicate, and indigenous frameworks all left their mark on how Bengal's unstable landscape came to be understood, and on the colonial archive it generated.



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