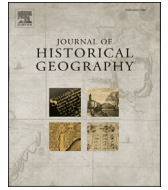




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Material meanings: 'waste' as a performative category of land in colonial India

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ABSTRACT

Nearly seven decades after 'decolonization', policymaking in India continues to be haunted by colonial categories. Focusing on the category 'wastelands', which has been central to recent debates on India's biofuel policies, we study how it was heterogeneously constituted during the Permanent Settlement of land revenue in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century colonial India. In particular, we trace how this category took on multiple meanings through its encounters with different human and nonhuman entities in disparate spatio-temporal settings. The entities encountered included not only ideas and moralities derived from theoretical notions such as Locke's 'natural rights', but also the soil and water on diverse lands, and the beings living or made to live on these lands. The multiple meanings of the category led to debates and controversies between colonial administrators regarding the ways in which the Permanent Settlement should be introduced and extended. By mapping these debates and controversies, we attempt to accomplish two things. First, we construct a narrative in which dominant colonial categories and associated rules do not possess unidirectional power to reformat colonized realities and practices. Second, we attempt to account for and recognize realities and practices that were marginalized or disregarded in the formulation of colonial administrative rules. Narratives such as ours, we hope, can help proliferate possibilities for enacting new decolonial and decolonizing practices of making, using and transforming meanings.

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'Waste', as a colonial category of land, continues to haunt twenty-first-century policy-making in India. This has been particularly salient in the case of India's biofuel policies. In 2003, launching the National Mission on Bio-Diesel, the Planning Commission of India published a report claiming that 13.4 MHa of land was available for the cultivation of *Jatropha curcas* for biodiesel production.¹ In 2009, the Indian national biofuel policy claimed that the available land was actually wasteland, on which the cultivation of biofuel feedstock would prevent competition with food production.² This claim has provoked significant controversy, just as the issue of 'wasteland regeneration' through eucalyptus and subabul plantations did in

earlier decades.³ First, the biofuel policy has been criticised for assuming that land classified as waste is somehow un- or under-used land not cultivated for food production, on which biofuel feedstock therefore can be grown. Activists asked to what extent was wasteland readily available for conversion into biodiesel plantations. For example, Friends of the Earth reported several cases in Chattisgarh where lands classified as wastelands were actually used for livestock grazing. Attempts to convert these lands into *Jatropha* plantations were met with resistance by existing users.⁴ Similarly, others have argued that if wastelands can be used

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¹ Planning Commission, *Report of the Committee on Development of Bio-Fuel*, New Delhi, 2003.

² Government of India Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, *National Policy on Biofuels*, New Delhi, 2003.

³ For wasteland regeneration using eucalyptus and subabul, see, for example, N. Jodha, Common property resources and rural poor in dry regions of India, *Economic and Political Weekly* 21 (1986) 1169–1181; V. Gidwani, 'Waste' and the permanent settlement in Bengal, *Economic and Political Weekly* 27 (1992) 39–46; S. Singh, Common lands made 'wastelands': making of the 'wastelands' into common lands, *Foundation for Ecological Security Working Paper* 29 (2013).

⁴ S. Lahiri, *Losing the Plot*, Brussels, 2009.

to get profitable yields from *Jatropha* or other biofuel crops, they can also be used for food production or grazing and for sourcing non-timber forest products.⁵ Secondly, the fact that wastelands granted to companies for *Jatropha* plantations were later used for profitable real estate development has fed into larger debates on how agrarian policies enable landgrabbing.⁶

In this article, we attempt to show how a fuller understanding of the present controversy, and of ways to challenge powerful categorizations that trample upon the existing uses and materiality of lands, may be gained by delving into the history of the term 'waste' as deployed to classify and transform land in colonial India. Within the discourse on India's biofuel policy, scholars have highlighted how the term was introduced by the British in the late eighteenth century in the process of developing agricultural tax collection systems.⁷ They base their historical discussion of wastelands on the work of Gidwani and Whitehead, who have both persuasively argued that the category was most centrally informed by the writings of John Locke on private property.⁸ In this paper we contend that both Gidwani and Whitehead, by arguing that the category 'wasteland' was constituted predominantly by ideas alone, marginalise the encounters between the category and the materiality of the lands (and the beings dwelling on it) in Bengal and Orissa where it was first enacted. Through these material encounters, not only was the category deployed in attempts to transform the land and the lives of its inhabitants, but the meanings of the category of 'waste' itself were also transformed. We focus on the latter process of the multiplication of meanings.

These multiple meanings eventually led to a multiplicity of rules for wasteland reallocation; rules that were focussed, more narrowly than the meanings, on transferring land to planters and cultivators so as to extract rents for the British administration. Thus, while some of wasteland's initial economic and technical meanings (such as non-productive land and non-tax yielding land) may have been dominant in administrative rule-making, and may have been handed down from the late eighteenth century for instrumental deployment by twenty-first-century Indian governments, these were definitely not the only meanings attached to it by contemporary actors. By uncovering these different and more marginal meanings, and the controversies generated by them around the turn of the eighteenth century in Bengal and Orissa, we aim to go

beyond narratives that ascribe unidirectional power to colonial categories in reshaping extant socio-material (relational) realities.⁹ Colonial governance categories such as wasteland did not always emerge victorious, and when they did become dominant it was not through unilateral capture and transformation of diverse relational realities. Instead, those realities resisted their categorical capture in different ways. As a result, the constitution and enactment of colonial categories were contingent processes, situated in specific relational settings and multiple in their meanings.

Waste lands in the Permanent Settlement

On the 22nd of March 1793, Lord Cornwallis, the then governor-general of British India proclaimed the Permanent Settlement of Bengal. This event has been viewed, most notably by Guha, as a watershed in colonial agrarian history which is supposed to have radically altered land rights and land use patterns.¹⁰ At the heart of this agreement between the East India Company and the landlords in Bengal was the aim of installing a 'permanent' system of land taxation.¹¹ Once the tax rate on a certain piece of land was fixed it was never to be changed, regardless of increasing or decreasing yields or change of ownership. According to Guha, the imperative underlying this policy was twofold. The first aim was to set up an agrarian policy to be implemented uniformly across Bengal, abandoning the frequent changes characteristic of the earlier agrarian policies of the East India Company. It was assumed that unchanging tax rates on a specific parcel of land would make it more conducive for its owners to invest in improving the land's fertility since any benefits from such improvement activities would be reaped by the landowners themselves. Secondly, the proponents of the Permanent Settlement aimed to install private property rights. Guha showed how the policy was informed by three sets of ideas: mercantilism, physiocracy and free trade. Waste – the concept, the lands it was supposed to categorize, the transformations carried out on those lands and the land users' voices – was absent in Guha's account.

Gidwani therefore criticized Guha and others for overlooking the importance of waste, as a concept and a category, in the creation of the Permanent Settlement of Bengal:

The idea of 'waste' is richer, and more politically significant, than most histories of the Permanent Settlement have indicated. The concept of 'waste' not only possessed an ecological dimension that described land types, but also a moral dimension that described undesirable kinds of human behaviour.¹²

Even though Gidwani mentioned the 'ecological dimension' of waste, he considered this to be uninteresting and unproblematic, even insignificant, in comparison to its 'moral dimension'. To appreciate the politics of the moral dimension Gidwani argued that

⁵ For literature on competition with food production, see S. Jain and M.P. Sharma, Biodiesel production from *Jatropha curcas* oil, *Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews* 14 (2010) 3140–3147; S. Das and J.A. Pries, Zig-zagging into the future: the role of biofuels in India, *Biofuels, Bioproducts & Biorefining* 5 (2011) 18–27; P. Ariza-Montobbio, S. Lele, G. Kallis and J. Martinez-Alier, The political ecology of *Jatropha* plantations for biodiesel in Tamil Nadu, India, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 37 (2010) 875–897. For literature on competition with grazing and collecting non-timber forest produce, see D. Rajagopal, Implications of India's biofuel policies for food, water and the poor, *Water Policy* 10 (2008) 96–106.

⁶ See, for example, J. Baka, The political construction of wasteland: governmentality, land acquisition and social inequality in South India, *Development and Change* 24 (2013) 409–428; J. Baka, what wastelands? A critique of biofuel policy discourse in South India, *Geoforum* 54 (2015) 315–323; S.M. Borrás and J.C. Franco, Global land grabbing and trajectories of agrarian change: a preliminary analysis, *Journal of Agrarian Change* 12 (2012) 34–59; B. White and A. Dasgupta, Agrofuels capitalism: a view from political economy, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 37 (2010) 593–607.

⁷ Baka, The political construction of wasteland; Ariza-Montobbio, Lele, Kallis and Martinez-Alier, The political ecology of *Jatropha* plantations for biodiesel in Tamil Nadu.

⁸ Gidwani, 'Waste' and the permanent settlement in Bengal; V.K. Gidwani, *Capital Interrupted: Agrarian Development and the Politics of Work in India*, Minneapolis, 2008; J. Whitehead, John Locke and the governance of India's landscape: the category of wasteland in colonial revenue and forest legislation, *Economic and Political Weekly* 45 (2010) 83–93; J. Whitehead, John Locke, accumulation by dispossession and the governance of colonial India, *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 42 (2012) 1–12.

⁹ Such accounts include not only the work by Whitehead and Gidwani, but also, for example, Brara's work documenting diminishing availability of grazing lands in rural Rajasthan after the 1920s and Gadgil's work on the colonial and postcolonial exploitation of forests and disintegration of indigenous institutions. R. Brara, Are grazing lands 'Wastelands'? Some evidence from Rajasthan, *Economic & Political Weekly* 27 (1992) 411–418; M. Gadgil, Deforestation: problems and prospects, *Society for the Promotion of Wasteland Development Foundation Day Lecture*, 12th May 1989.

¹⁰ R. Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement*, Paris, 1963.

¹¹ Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal*.

¹² Gidwani, 'Waste' and the permanent settlement in Bengal, 44.

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