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Territories of conquest, landscapes of resistance: the political ecology of peasant cultivation in Dharwar, western India, 1818–1840

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Abstract

Focussing on the initial period of British colonial rule in Dharwar, western India, this article uses a political ecology approach to explore peasant modes of cultivation in the context of agrarian changes introduced by the new administration. I argue that, in a climatically vulnerable region, the excessive land revenue burdens imposed on the local peasant cultivators strengthened rather than weakened their habitual crop choices which were designed to ensure food and livelihood security. Moreover, while the new rulers struggled to make sense of, and thus secure desirable outcomes from the local agrarian environment, the peasants astutely used their greater environmental knowledge to maintain their habitual modes of cropping and in the process resist an initial 'improvement' project based on foreign cottons. The article thus highlights the significance, historically, of context-specific, local environmental knowledge as an enabling resource for poorer peasant communities. Finally, it suggests that political ecology can offer a conceptual lens for reading colonial documents 'against the grain' and for generating fresh insights about human–environment interactions from archival traces.

*Keywords:*Dharwar; Peasants; Ecology; Colonial; Cotton; Agrarian; Environment

This article complements a previous study of cotton, climate and colonialism in western India, 1840–1880, effectively providing a 'prequel' to its narrative of failure of the most significant colonial cotton improvement project in nineteenth-century India.[1] Here, I look back at the initial period of emergence of colonial rule to explore the crucial antecedents of the cotton project which, I argue, lay in the flawed revenue policies of the new colonial administration, the lack of local knowledge and consequent focus on a series of misconceived crop experiments designed to secure higher economic returns from the local agrarian environment. The concept of 'agrarian environment' brings together research domains that have tended to be analysed separately in the historiography of rural India. As Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan have pointed out, historical works on the period of major upheaval between the decline of the Mughal and Mahratta empires and the consolidation of British rule have largely failed to engage with the ecological dimensions of the changing agrarian world.[2] Indeed, agrarian studies of western India focussing on the districts of the old 'Bombay Presidency' during this period tend to be few and far between, with Dharwar and the Southern Mahratta Country suffering particularly from research neglect.

This paper is the first localised study of Dharwar during the crucial period of the onset of colonial rule, based on the 'interwoven dynamics' between the local agrarian and environmental worlds.[3] It makes three essential arguments: first, that the excessive and unsustainable revenue burdens imposed on the local *raiyats* or peasant cultivators led to the strengthening, rather than the weakening of their survival-oriented customary crop choices; second, that the ideology of cultural superiority notwithstanding, the new rulers struggled to understand, and thus secure desired agricultural outcomes from, an 'alien' rural environment; and third that the *raiyats* were able to make use of their more advanced environmental knowledge not only to maintain their habitual modes of cropping, but also to resist an initial 'improvement' project focussed on foreign cottons. As in my previous article, I draw here on historical political ecology to explore the encounter between a contested colonial government's attempts to create territorialised spaces conducive to the growth of 'economic' crops, in particular cotton, and a vibrant local socio-nature, made up of both human and non-human (plants, soils, climate) actors, which often responded in unforeseen and subversive ways. Political ecology amplifies the concept of agrarian environment by emphasising the production and co-constitution of

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[1] S. Hazareesingh, Cotton, climate and colonialism in Dharwar, western India, 1840–1880, *Journal of Historical Geography* 38 (2012) 1–17.
[2] A. Agrawal and K. Sivaramakrishnan (Eds), *Agrarian Environments: Resources, Representations, and Rule in India*, Durham, 2000, 3–4.
[3] Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan, *Agrarian Environments* (note 2), 5.

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landscapes by both human and non-human agencies; it represents a paradigm shift away from a simple focus on human influences (such as colonial power) bearing down on largely passive natural environments, to a more complex understanding of the productive, entangled agencies of the human and non-human.[4] The theoretical perspective of political ecology signals a further departure from virtually the entire existing literature on the agrarian history of early British colonial western India.

While the question of history has been addressed differently by political ecologists, I see the situating of time and place specificities as essential to any rigorous interpretation of human interactions with nature in the past. Historical political ecology needs to be concerned as much, if not more, with what mattered to people in the different pasts in their relationships with the environment, as what matters to us now. While digging into history primarily to shed light on contemporary situations, as Offen and Davis have advocated, is a perfectly legitimate enterprise, a more open and reflective approach might perhaps provide us with a richer perspective on alternatives than one that is merely concerned to invoke history as a supporting actor in an attempt to unravel a particular aspect of 'contemporary human–environmental relations'.[5] A nuanced appreciation of historical difference might yield fresh and surprising insights into peoples' resilience in coping with and adapting to environmental stresses according to resources and ideologies available to them in different times and places. This can reveal not only continuities but also disjunctures between present and past conceptual frameworks, and is as applicable to the colonial as to any other historical period. This study, situated in the specific conditions of early British colonial rule in Dharwar, reveals the considerable ingenuity of the indigenous cultivators in responding to the new agrarian environmental challenges, while also suggesting the vulnerabilities, rather than the strengths, of the colonial order.

This paper relies on a close 're-reading' of the British colonial archive. Although it is a crucial dimension of imperial hegemony, I view the colonial archive not as 'a neat and orderly world infused with transparent and unambiguous meaning' about how Europeans conceptualised colonised landscapes, but as a fragmented and unstable 'formation of documents, categories, stories and images', which reveal multiple, conflicting and contradictory interests, projects and agendas.[6] The revenue records of the East India Company pertaining to Dharwar during this period suggest the extent of officials' reliance on different groups of indigenous informants for knowledge about land tenure, crops, soils, climate, as well as about cultivating and revenue collection practices. These documents emerged out of the immediate necessities of early colonial rule, and offer a realm of possibilities for readings 'beyond words' that enable at least a partial recovery of indigenous perspectives.[7] They thus reveal colonial knowledge as a 'fissured epistemological terrain', open to invasion by alternative voices, experiences and meanings. Moreover, alongside the will to power and presumption of cultural superiority, these texts also testify to some officials' doubts, anxieties and disagreements with superiors, sometimes accompanied by a critical disposition towards the colonial order itself. Revenue and agriculture oriented documents generated at a later period of colonial rule in Dharwar would not necessarily be motivated by the same needs and would generate different stories about the agrarian environment.

Early British colonial rule in India was dominated by the issue of tax revenues. Indeed, it was the securing of the *Diwani*, or the right to collect taxes, from the Mughal emperor in 1765, that established the East India Company's territorial power, initially in Bengal. For much of the remaining century of Company rule, the development of the colonial state was shaped by administrators' anxieties about how best to maximise revenues from an agrarian economy which they were culturally ill-equipped to understand. The perceived failure of the Bengal Permanent Settlement to produce stable taxable surpluses from the local *zamindars* (landowners), led to the emergence of an alternative model of revenue collection known as *raiyatwari*, as the Company expanded its territories into southern and western India. *Raiyatwari* involved by-passing the intermediary level of landlords and collecting land taxes directly from *raiyats*, or peasant cultivators, in each village. Each cultivator was now assessed individually on the basis of the potential produce of his fields and given occupancy rights on condition that he paid his taxes. However, it was the colonial government that now claimed, on the basis of Indian precedent, ultimate ownership of all land under their jurisdiction subject to some exceptions. The new system was shaped and enforced by the all-powerful agent of colonial governance in the countryside, the Collector, who vested with new judicial powers, was required to accumulate 'intimate knowledge' of the land and people he ruled over.[8] Unlike the *zamindari* system, which was partially based on liberal principles of minimal government, *raiyatwari* thus plunged the state deeper into the rural world and the everyday lives of its Indian subjects, but its persuasiveness required levels of cultural respect and empathy that the colonial mode of hegemony precluded.[9]

Elusive raiyatwari, or the anxieties of colonial hegemony

Dharwar and the wider region of the 'Southern Maratha Country' (Fig. 1) were conquered by Thomas Munro in 1817–18, in the wake of the final Anglo-Mahratta War, and it was Munro himself who had also founded the *raiyatwari* system as Judicial Commissioner in the Madras Presidency in the first decade of the century.[10] Munro's presence in Dharwar for about a year as both imperial conqueror and administrator, enabled him to preside over the pacification of the district and to begin to implement a strategy of hegemonic territorialisation which he bequeathed to the Bombay government led by his fellow Scot, Mountstuart Elphinstone. Munro's initiatives involved attempts to win over both the restive *jagirdars* – the local landowning 'chiefs', and the rest of the peasant population by offering the former protection from the increased revenue demands of the Mahratta *Peshwa* (king) and by reducing the latter's land tax charges set by the Mahratta government.[11]

Conquest, however, proved the relatively easy part. Munro's self-assurance as conquering imperial overlord was quickly replaced by the anxieties of succeeding Bombay government officials as they discovered just how much of the best arable land in Dharwar and the Southern Maratha Country was held in privileged tenure and not subject to state revenue assessment. This region was

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[6] R. Roque and K.A. Wagner (Eds), *Engaging Colonial Knowledge: Reading European Archives in World History*, London, 2011, 1, 22.
[7] Roque and Wagner, *Engaging Colonial Knowledge* (note 6), 18.
[8] B.H. Baden-Powell, *The Land-Systems of British India*, Vol. I, Oxford, 1892, 27.
[9] N.H. Wilson, From reflection to refraction: state administration in British India, circa 1770–1855, *American Journal of Sociology* 116 (5, March 2011) 1450, 1452, 1456.
[10] B. Stein, *Thomas Munro. The Origins of the Colonial State and His Vision of Empire*, Delhi, 1989, 4, 227, 236.
[11] Stein, *Thomas Munro* (note 10), 236.