

## **Environmental Limitations to Early Colonial Expansion in the Jungle Mahals**

**Asmita Khalko**

### ***Abstract***

In recent years, Jungle Mahals has received much attention from the scholars of environmental history to study the colonial impact on the environment of India. Most of these studies have taken into account the developments post eighteenth century to show that environment indeed suffered drastically under the colonial regime. However, in order to understand the process of environmental deterioration, it is equally important to take into account the early colonial phase when instead of exploiting, the Company actually suffered at the hands of environment which slowed down the process of colonial expansion. In this paper which roughly takes into account the period from c.1765-1793, attempt has been made to show that early period of British rule didn't represent an environmental watershed and contained elements of continuity as well as change.

**Keywords:** Jungle Mahals, environment, forest, military, revenue.

The period of transition from the end of the Mughal era to the beginning of British colonialism, a rather short but nevertheless an important period in Indian history, is generally regarded as a 'watershed' for various reasons. It was during this period that most of the policies of the English East India Company were designed to maximise revenue collection in the fertile plains of Bengal and Bihar. As a result, this region began to show signs of environmental depletion and is believed to have suffered the most. However, a case study of the Jungle Mahals shows that during this period there were areas within this region where the process of British occupation was far from being successful. Amidst several factors, interestingly, the environment of the area played an important role in keeping British advances under check. Indeed, such a study makes it amply clear that the environment in these parts (especially when compared to their counterparts from the plains) was not altered to a very great degree. This early experience, moreover, played an important role in the formulation of British policies to come, especially with regard to forests. Thus, the following account not only attempts to contest the concept of an 18<sup>th</sup> century decline, but also emphasises the necessity of incorporating regions like the Jungle Mahals into the study of late 18<sup>th</sup> century transition in India.

### *Introduction*

During the early colonial period, the term Jungle Mahals was used to denote the forest tract that roughly comprised the south eastern and south western parts of the provinces of Bihar and Bengal. However, owing to thick forest cover, this region had always enjoyed a relatively autonomous position in the past – something which led scholars to deliberate on the region’s degree of association with the two provinces. For instance, with regard to the Bengal portion of the Jungle Mahals, Edward Baber was of the opinion that it had ‘always been annexed to the province of Midnapore but from its situation was never greatly regarded by the Nabob’s government’.<sup>1</sup> According to Binod Das, Jungle Mahals was ‘neither a part of Midnapur before the British period nor [was] totally administered from Midnapur by the Hindu and Muslim rulers successively’.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, although the jungle principalities of Chotanagpur and Palamu were considered to be a part of Bihar province under the Mughals, Balmukund Virottam asserts that they maintained a semi-autonomous position throughout and were never administered directly from Bihar.<sup>3</sup> Although these propositions cannot be rejected entirely, it would nevertheless be erroneous to conclude that this region lay outside the dominion of the Mughals or the later Nawabs, given the fact that they often sent military expeditions to reduce it to subjection and collect nominal tribute too. However, one cannot also deny that central control was rather weak in these parts; one reason would be their

proximity to Maratha territory that compelled these governments to adopt a lenient attitude towards them.<sup>4</sup> Besides, the cost of clearing the jungle and the heavy expense that would be incurred in administering this area also deterred them from bringing it under full subjection.<sup>5</sup> Thus, under the Mughals and the Nawabs, the Jungle Mahals represented an inner frontier that was within the ambit but beyond the effective governance of a large centralized state.

An attempt to bring these forest tracts under central control, which also involved putting a check on the autonomy of the principalities of the area, first began under the British government. The Diwani grant of 1765 automatically transferred the revenue collecting rights of this region, along with all the other districts in Bengal and Bihar, to the English East India Company. Since the forests and the mountains of this region formed an important defense against the Marathas and demarcated British possessions from Maratha territory, the Company deemed it necessary to establish effective control over this region. Unlike the Mughals who followed a policy of limited interference with regard to the forest polities, the Company desired their complete subjection. Henceforth, therefore, efforts were directed politically as well as economically to curb their autonomy and reduce them to complete subjugation. The Company faced many challenges in the endeavour but the one great challenge which rendered it almost helpless was environment. Throughout the early

colonial period, it struggled to overcome numerous environmental problems which effectively slowed down the pace of expansion in the Jungle Mahals.

### *Territorial Ambiguity*

The first problem that the Company encountered was in defining the territorial extent of this forested region that they called the Jungle Mahals. According to Binod Das, the Company took into account existing structures of political relationships rather than geographical homogeneity in determining the area of Jungle Mahals.<sup>6</sup> Although geography appears to be irrelevant to the formation of this division in the initial period, it gradually became an important thread that held the different units together. In fact, geography seems to be the only reason behind naming the division 'Jungle Mahals'. It was also given due importance by the Company government in the formulation of various regulations. For instance, when in 1787 it reduced the number of revenue establishments from 35 to 23, the division of Ramgur which included most of the jungle districts was left untouched. The government was of the opinion that given 'the Positions, extent and nature of these Districts' it was 'difficult to annex them to any other Collectorships, and preserve a sufficient local control over them'.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it would be wrong to completely ignore the environment factor in determining the territorial extent of the Jungle Mahals.

The boundaries of the Jungle Mahals did not, however, remain fixed and underwent several changes over time. It included some districts from the Bengal province which constituted the Bengal portion of the Jungle Mahals, and some districts from the Bihar province that formed its Bihar portion. Edward Baber provided the first description of the Bengal portion in 1773 and stated that ‘the western Jungle is an extent of country of about 80 miles in length and 60 miles in breadth. On the east it is bounded by Midnapore, on the west by Singbhoom, on the north by Pachete, and the south by Mayurbhanj’.<sup>8</sup> Bishnupur and Bankura also appear to have been a part of this division. According to O’Malley, ‘Bankura appears to have been known as part of the Jungle Mahals, a vague term applied in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the British possessions and some dependent chiefdoms lying between Birbhum, Bankura, Midnapore and the hilly country of Chota Nagpur’.<sup>9</sup> He further stated that it formed ‘a connecting link between the plains of Bengal on the east and the Chota Nagpur plateau in the west’.<sup>10</sup> In 1787, Bishnupur was joined to the district of Birbhum<sup>11</sup> and in 1793 it was transferred to the Burdwan Collectorate.<sup>12</sup>

The Bihar portion of the division comprised Chotanagpur estate with its dependent *parganas* and other tribal areas like Palamu which were added to the Company’s territories in 1765, but the area (with its headquarters at Ramgur)

was brought under final subjugation only post-1769.<sup>13</sup> In 1780, when the division of Jungle Tarai<sup>14</sup> was dissolved, its constituent districts were distributed among Ramgur, Bhagalpur and Birbhum. The districts of Kharagdiha and Chackye were annexed to Ramgur<sup>15</sup> and made part of the Bihar portion of the division.<sup>16</sup> In 1785, the district of Pachet was placed under the superintendence of the Collector of Ramgur but was still regarded as part of the Bengal division.<sup>17</sup> This arrangement remained unaltered till the Permanent Settlement, but post-1793, these jungle districts were again subjected to constant transfer from one district to another for administrative convenience. It was only by Regulation XVIII of 1805 that the Jungle Mahals finally came into existence as a definite and distinct entity.

### *Problems and Limits of Military Expeditions*

The thick jungles and mountains that were the unique physical characteristic of this region not only rendered it difficult to access but also made the inhabitants free-spirited with little regard for any external authority. Military expeditions undertaken by the Mughals in the past to reduce them to subjugation had only limited success. Similarly, fiscal duty imposed on them in terms of a nominal annual tribute as an acknowledgement of Mughal suzerainty also proved quite ineffective. Tributes came in irregularly as the inhabitants paid up only when

faced with real military threat from the centre. When the British took over the administration of the Jungle Mahals, they were adamant to make the region accept their authority. In order to carry this out, the Company appointed military officers and entrusted them with both military and fiscal obligations. Whereas Lieutenant Fergusson was the first officer put in charge of the Bengal portion, the Bihar portion was placed under Augustus Cleveland. Thus began the military foray of the Company into the Jungle Mahals.

Despite their military superiority in terms of weaponry and technique, subjugating the Jungle Mahals proved to be quite a challenge for the British. More than anything else, it was the environment which proved to be the formidable enemy. Although the government resolved to send an expedition in 1766, owing to the scarcity of sepoy and onset of rains, the measure took effect in the Bengal portion only in January 1767. Thereafter, the monsoon always played an important role in determining the time of these expeditions which were mostly carried out either before or after the rainy season. Captain Briscoe, stationed at Midnapur, called it 'hazardous' to execute military orders in those parts during the rainy season due to difficulties such as flooded rivers, unavailability of boats, impassable roads, difficulty in procuring provisions etc.<sup>18</sup> The situation was more favourable after the rains, especially from the end of October, because it enabled troops to enter the districts without any



apprehension of sickness. Besides, it was also a time when the inhabitants of the area were more disposed to quietude as their crops were ripe and they perceived that submission alone was the means of preserving them from destruction.<sup>19</sup> At other times, it was difficult to take the enemy head on because it avoided open confrontation. Indeed, as soon as the *zamindars* received intelligence of the Company's march, they took flight<sup>20</sup> along with their subjects and all effects into the jungles, where it was difficult to pursue them.

Although the Company's troops were experienced in the art of open warfare, their expertise proved futile in the Jungle Mahals where the inhabitants usually took to guerrilla tactics. This mode required a thorough knowledge of the surroundings as the locals avoided open confrontation and took shelter behind trees and thick grass and launched attack from a distance. Here 'outdated' equipment like bows and arrows proved to be of greater help than the modern artillery possessed by the British troops. The unfamiliarity of the troops with the jungle proved to be their greatest drawback which was exploited by their opponents to harass them. The English were baffled and amazed at the same time by this new mode of combat. Captain Charles Morgan, in charge of the Jungle Mahals in 1768, described his experience in following words:

They have not the least idea of fighting; they are like a parcel of wasps: they endeavour to sting you with their arrows and fly off. It is impossible almost to kill any of them, as they always keep at a great distance and fling their arrows at you, which, you may suppose, seldom or ever to any execution. As the thing is to frighten these fellows as much as possible, I wish you would send one of the one-pounders with a pair of the new wheels as soon as possible. It will be necessary to keep that gun...which I believe will be of more service than an extraordinary company of sepoy...<sup>21</sup>

Apart from such tactics, the inhabitants also used old methods of felling trees, burning villages etc. to obstruct British advance. For instance, when Mr. Fergusson marched towards Ghatsila, the *zamindar* barricaded all passes leading to his territory by felling trees.<sup>22</sup> Villages and surrounding areas were also burnt to starve the enemy by depriving them of all possible means of food supply. Thus, military detachments were always under the necessity of carrying large supplies of provisions when they entered hostile country. In the 1780s, the Resident of Bogri encountered a similar situation while trying to bring the recalcitrant subjects under control. In his letter to the Committee of Revenue, he described the situation in the following words:

[T]hey consequently exert themselves to the utmost and make use of every expedient to effect their purpose which can be perpetrated by Fire and the Sword. By the best intelligence I can obtain, I apprehend that they have amongst them about 200 Match lock Men, and that the rest of the amount of 5 or 600 Men, are armed with Bows, Talwars& hatchets. Their Numbers and agility, enable them to burn, and plunder the Villages, and cut or destroy the Crop without the apprehension of the Sepoy's reaching them before they enter a Thick Jungle, into which their Pursuers with much difficulty follow them, or use their Arms.<sup>23</sup>

However, difficult terrain and the rainy season were not the only factors to slow down the pace of British expansion in the region; climate in general also made the situation difficult for the Company. Colonial records contain numerous complaints from officers posted in different areas of the region regarding this. Charles Morgan posted at a Camp in Haldipukur described it as the 'shockingest weather' that he ever saw in his life.<sup>24</sup> He further wrote that his sepoys fell sick continually and that he was obliged to turn doctor himself and gave 'Furlington's drops' for all kinds of disorders.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the Collector of Ramgur found its climate 'very unfavorable'.<sup>26</sup> All these factors not only put a check on the initial military advances but also drained the Company of its economic resources. In 1771, it was remarked that as the jungles had not been sufficiently reduced to pay rent peacefully, the annual expense of sending troops to quell disturbances and reduce unruly inhabitants to obedience had been as great as the total annual rent.<sup>27</sup> In his Minutes presented before the Governor General, Mr. Francis (a member of the Council) estimated the military expenditure at about three times the amount of revenue collected from the whole division.<sup>28</sup> Soon the Company realized that the problems posed by forests and climate were inevitable and that militaristic approach was not enough to realise its political aspirations. Thus, it gave up its policy of extreme hostility and developed a more tactful and diplomatic

approach to bring this region under control. Although it did not do away with the practice of sending troops altogether, it did, however, refrain from using force at all times and reserved it as the last option to restore order. Simultaneously, initiatives were also taken towards making 'the Acquisition as beneficial as possible',<sup>29</sup> not only to meet military expenses but also to produce a considerable increase of revenue to the government.<sup>30</sup>

### *Natural Disasters and Economic Limitations*

Economically, compared to the fertile plains of Bengal and Bihar, the Jungle Mahals were quite a disappointment for the Company. Geographically, the region was mountainous with jungle-clad hills which sometimes rose to a height of 3600feet.<sup>31</sup>The land was mostly composed of beds of laterite (porous clay-like rock, largely impregnated with iron peroxide irregularly distributed throughout the mass) which was highly infertile. Thus, there were very few patches of land, mostly confined to hollows, which contained soil suitable for cultivation. In the absence of proper means of irrigation, the inhabitants were heavily dependent upon rain water. The climate of the Jungle Mahals had a great impact on the agricultural cycle of the region too. Here winters were colder and longer, followed by very hot summers. Monsoon came late and ended early with an average rainfall of about 50 inches. As a result, the region

produced only two crops a year unlike the plains which could produce up to three. Indeed, some districts like Ramgur produced only one crop a year.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the Jungle Mahals presented a very grim picture as far as agricultural production or revenue returns were concerned. In fact, it was this very factor which had prevented the Mughals from trying to bring this region under complete control; instead, they allowed a considerable deal of autonomy to the forest principalities. However, Company officials seemed unfazed by this reality; they not only tried to extend their control over the region but also tried to make improvements in order to render it economically profitable for the government.

The Company began by trying to bring more and more land under cultivation. It offered heavy concessions to the inhabitants who would reclaim waste lands. For instance, in 1776, the inhabitants of Ramgur were completely exempted from revenue for the year when they undertook reclamation of waste land. They were to pay only nominal revenue thereafter and it was only in the fifth year that they paid the full amount.<sup>33</sup> On similar lines, in 1783, the Resident of Bogri was authorized to give 'Grants of waste Land at a Small Annual Jumma or Rent free for the first Year, and for the Period not exceeding five Years'.<sup>34</sup> In 1786, the government resolved to allot waste lands to the 'native Commissioned and Non Commissioned Officers' from the disbanded

regiment at Ramgur. Moreover, they were not to be resumed on the death of an officer but were to be 'left to the Option of his Family to receive a perpetual Grant of them at a moderate fixed Rent to be determined by the Collector'.<sup>35</sup> The Company also encouraged the production of certain commercial crops in the region like indigo and tussur (raw silk). For instance, in 1793, the Council agreed to the request of one Mr. Robert Chapman to cultivate indigo and authorized him to appropriate 'a Quantity of Ground in Boggrie Pergunah, to the purpose of Cultivations and Erection upon it a Set of Indigo Works'.<sup>36</sup> Attempts were made to encourage the production of *tussur* by giving grants of waste lands at nominal rent to whoever was willing to undertake production. In Midnapur, the Company made deductions in the rents of lands planted with mulberry shrubs, as a bounty for raising it and making it a more profitable culture than any other.<sup>37</sup> Had these measures continued unabated, the Company would have altered the whole landscape of the Jungle Mahals by converting vast amounts of land into agricultural fields. However, there were certain natural events like floods, drought, and famine which prevented it from transforming this region into a completely profitable acquisition.

As it was situated, the Jungle Mahals were highly prone to the vagaries of nature. The occurrence of flood and drought was quite common in this region. The area was fed by numerous streams and hill-rivers. On the basis of the

regions they fed, they can broadly be classified into the eastern and the western rivers. Ajai, Damodar, Dhalkisore and Kasai comprised the eastern network of rivers while North Koel, South Koel, Sankh and Subarnarekha comprised the western. These rivers varied enormously in volume between the dry and rainy seasons.”<sup>38</sup> During the monsoon they often came down in flood after heavy showers, immersing a large part of the land in water. However, these floods did not last long in the upland area and it was the low-lying neighbouring areas of Midnapur and Burdwan which suffered greater devastation. The floods also entailed a certain loss which had a long term impact upon the region. They routinely carried away silt to the lower parts and prevented the deposition of fertilizing alluvium in the upland, thereby adversely affecting its productive capacity. In the very words of the inhabitants, ‘this Country is [full] of hills, from where the water Shaus [sic] in Torrents in the Rains so that they sweep everything away’.<sup>39</sup>

Drought was another calamity which often visited the Jungle Mahals. Droughts meant either standing crop withered or land was rendered unfit for the following season.<sup>40</sup> The fact that the soil in the Jungle Mahals was infertile and extreme seasonal temperatures were an impediment too, a drought-like situation was more likely here than elsewhere. This is corroborated by evidence from the Company’s records. In 1774, the Controlling Council of Revenue at

Burdwan received a petition from the peasants of Singhbhum stating that ‘our grain is withered from the want of rain in so much that we have turned our cows into our Fields to graze upon it ...’.<sup>41</sup> In 1782, the Collector of Ramgur complained that due to monsoon failure, a great part of the crops had perished in many places.<sup>42</sup> The Collector of the united district of Birbhum also complained of a drought-like situation in Bishnupur in 1792.<sup>43</sup> Thus, the Jungle Mahals were in a precarious situation, agriculturally; there were times when crops were destroyed by floods and there were times when they were destroyed for want of sufficient rain.

In extreme circumstances, natural calamities could create a famine-like situation, when subsistence and mortality crises became combined in a critical conjunction,<sup>44</sup> as in 1769 and 1786-87. Whereas in 1769 it was the failure of rain which resulted in famine, in 1786 it was flood and cyclone which was followed by famine.<sup>45</sup> It is generally believed that the disastrous famine of 1769 resulted in the death of 10 million people and stripped Bengal bare of one-third of its inhabitants; however, recent studies have observed a certain peculiarity in terms of ‘geographical asymmetry’ in the occurrence of this famine.<sup>46</sup> This was true also in the case of the Jungle Mahals. The drought of 1769 was more severe in the core areas of western and central Bengal like Murshidabad, Rajshahi, Birbhum, Hooghly, Nadia and parts of Burdwan;<sup>47</sup>



hence, it was the jungle districts like Pachet<sup>48</sup> and Bishnupur<sup>49</sup> that lay contiguous to Burdwan and Birbhum which suffered more than the other districts of the Jungle Mahals. However, the impact of famine lasted only for a few years in these districts. In 1773, Bishnupur enjoyed great cheapness of grain owing to a good harvest, and by 1778 Bishnupur and Pachet had both recovered almost completely from the effects of famine. According to the report of the Amini Commission, in 1778 Bishnupur and Pachet paid 96.54 and 67.83 percent of the *jama* respectively.<sup>50</sup> The famine of 1786-87 too had a great impact on the Jungle Mahals but unfortunately there is not enough data to measure its intensity.<sup>51</sup>

Natural calamities not only wreaked havoc on the life and property of inhabitants of the region but also increased the Company's difficulties. The government was compelled to make economic concessions to provide relief to the people. For instance, in 1775 the Council of Revenue approved of Captain Camac's recommendation of suspending the demand of Rs. 6,800 in the districts superintended by him on account of losses sustained by the inundations of 1773.<sup>52</sup> Calamities also caused many reclaimed areas to relapse into jungles, and their boundaries advanced beyond their original limit into settled areas. For instance, during the famine of 1769-70, the bordering districts of Burdwan and Birbhum were converted into an impassable and uninhabited

jungle frequented by wild beasts. So much so that in 1775, the Controlling Council of Revenue at Burdwan ordered that a publication be made at the court of Burdwan that 'a Reward of 10 Rs. will be given for the Head of each Tiger that may be produced at the Sudder'.<sup>53</sup> The situation was no different in Birbhum where even ten years after the famine, sepoy could hardly force their way through the forest. Natural calamities thus not only slowed down the process of agricultural advance, but also reversed the entire process of converting jungles into reclaimed lands.

The Company tried to encourage trade in this region, besides agriculture. The Jungle Mahals produced certain goods which were of great market value, but lack of necessary scientific skills and capital resources of its inhabitants meant that they were mostly produced on a small scale for local consumption only. For instance, the region was noted for rich deposits of ores in many places like the hills of Chotanagpur, Singhbhum and Ramgur.<sup>54</sup> An inferior quality of iron was found in abundance in Ramgur.<sup>55</sup> The district also contained a lead mine, which produced an ore called the 'pote's lead ore'. However, instead of being smelted for metal it was sold to artificers for glazing their ware.<sup>56</sup> However, the situation underwent a change under the Company which provided the much needed external stimulus for development in this direction. The fact that the Company and its servants came from a technologically and

economically advanced part of the world proved to be of immense significance; for, they not only recognized the economic potential of certain products found in this region but also discovered wider application for them which further increased their value. For example, soft iron which was specific to this region and not held in much regard by its inhabitants was considered useful by the British for work in cast iron, particularly the fabrication of cannons.<sup>57</sup> Similarly they were also of the opinion that the lead which was used only for glazing wares until now could also be used for extracting silver.<sup>58</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the gain that these commodities guaranteed, the transition towards commercialization was an expensive and slow process. For instance, the expenditure incurred in the establishment of mining factories included the 'expense of cutting down a jungle, of erecting a dwelling bungalow [sic], and several necessary buildings for Artificers; of preparing Materials for forming a dam, and of cutting part of a canal for supplying the bellows wheel with water' etc.<sup>59</sup> The returns from these undertakings was also very slow, and hence the British often took these mines on long leases in order to reap the benefits of their investment. In 1778, for instance, a merchant by the name of Archibald Keir obtained a thirty year mining lease<sup>60</sup> from the Raja of Ramgur which was later extended for a period of hundred years in 1783.<sup>61</sup>

The fact that those who ventured into mining were mostly individual merchants is indicative of the government's apprehension about taking a risk in that direction. Lured by the prospect of a new source of income, however, it did provide merchants with necessary support and encouragement. In case of Mr. Keir, it not only confirmed his lease but also granted him the right to transport his product duty-free in any part of the province for the first five years. Thereafter, he was to pay a duty of only ten percent on all gold and silver and a duty of five percent on all other metals.<sup>62</sup> He was also given the duty-free right to export coal, brimstone, and other minerals produced in the area to any part of Bengal.<sup>63</sup> He was later authorized to procure iron ore from other parts of the district of Ramgur and to work it at Sudapa.<sup>64</sup> But because there were very few merchants who invested in this industry and the government provided only indirect support, it took quite some time for the mining industry to flourish in the Jungle Mahals.

### *Transport, Connectivity & Effects on Ecology*

With time, the Company also realized the importance of proper communication for trade and therefore made sincere efforts to improve the accessibility of this region. The Collector of Ramgur, in one of his correspondences, highlighted its significance in the following words:

[T]he Trade to this place is considerably impeded by the Badness of the Roads between it and the lower Country. The Chitragaut which is the principal and only direct communication is at present in so very bad a state that it is scarcely passable for loaded Bullocks – which deters the Beoparries from coming here, and occasions a great falling off the Gunge Duties.<sup>65</sup>

The government understood that connectivity was important not only for trade but also for administering the region efficiently. Thus, fuelled by the dual need of commerce and administration, the Company tried to establish better links both within the Jungle Mahals and between the region and neighbouring areas. At the beginning, effort was directed towards repairing roads which had fallen into disuse; later, officials were deputed to make surveys to construct new roads too. Company records contain numerous references about the new roads that were constructed in this region towards the end of the eighteenth century. In his letter to the Post Master General at Calcutta, Lieutenant Ranken wrote about the situation of the new road that was constructed between Bishnupur and Ramgur.<sup>66</sup> Likewise, the Collector of Ramgur too, in one of his letters to the Governor General, mentions a new road of about 7 *coss* that connected Kana Chittie in his district to Chatra.<sup>67</sup>

The construction of roads had a direct impact on the environment of the Jungle Mahals because in most places, roads were paved through almost impenetrable woods by cutting down trees. Hence, although the measure provided a solution to the problem of connectivity, it created problems for the

Company at another level. Humans and wild animals had long co-existed in these parts, each occupying clearly demarcated spaces. But with the construction of roads, humans gradually encroached upon the space occupied by animals and disrupted an ecological balance. The British period was therefore marked by numerous confrontations between humans and wild animals. For instance, Mr. Ranken reported in 1790 that 'The new Road is in many parts so infested by tigers that the Dawks are frequently delayed, and very lately two of the people Carrying the Mail were killed. The packets were Carried off and not recovered until next day after much Search'.<sup>68</sup> Similar reports came from other parts of the region as well. Henceforth, therefore, ensuring the safety of the people became as important as constructing roads. In order to prevent accidents, the government resolved to clear jungles on both sides of the roads and conferred upon Collectors the responsibility of maintaining them and ensuring safety of the subjects. The Collectors also maintained a set of people called Baghmars to kill tigers in the most wild and woody parts along the new roads and different passes on a monthly expense of Rs. 75.<sup>69</sup> Thus, the measure devised to facilitate trade and commerce proved to be quite taxing on the treasury of the Company and slowed down British advance into the Jungle Mahals.

## *Conclusion*

This essay shows clearly that colonial expansion into the Jungle Mahals was kept under check to a great extent by the environment of the region. The fact that progress was hampered by numerous environmental obstacles also proves that environmental degradation was not set into motion immediately after the Company took over control of this territory. The changes brought about by the colonial government in the initial phase did alter the landscape to some degree, but not to the extent of a 'break' from the past. However, there seems to be a lack of consensus among different scholars regarding the extent of colonial impact on the environment of the area. On an understanding of the ideologies of resource-use among different societies, Madhav Gadgil and Ramchandra Guha are of the opinion that British rule had a negative impact on environment of the subcontinent. According to them, industrially advanced countries are characterised by a behavioural discrepancy between prudence at home and profligacy abroad, something that results in the exploitation of the latter. On the other hand, less advanced societies like that of gatherers and cultivators, because of their dependence on nature, adopt a more prudent approach towards environment. Thus, they believe that colonial rule marked an important environmental watershed in the history of India.

In response to this, Benoy Bhushan Chaudhari argues that societies seldom conform to any specific mode of subsistence and often change from one mode to another according to situations. According to him, declining fertility of cropped land through continuous cultivation, harassing fiscal demands, and abundant forest lands are some of the reasons which could lead to changes in the pattern of settled cultivation and result in peasant mobility. Besides, the 'prudent' use of nature by these societies does not accrue from any ideology or conscious effort on their part to 'conserve' environment, for they hardly have any means of knowing if going beyond a limit could, in the long run, damage their locality's eco-system. It is, therefore, basically the needs which determine the pattern of resource use by different societies.

Whatever the reasons behind resource-use, the fact remains that subsistence pattern and environment are directly related and that subsistence pattern of communities have direct impact on landscape. To understand what happened in the Jungle Mahals, it is useful to ponder on the phenomena of prudence, expansion, and extraction. So long as communities here were confined within their own settlements, they tried to utilise resources with prudence. However, after a point of time when resources within the area were exhausted, more areas were acquired by various means like reclamation of unsettled areas, displacement of various groups, and conquest and colonisation. In case of



gatherers and agriculturists, it mostly resulted in internal colonisation of areas in the vicinity, whereas in the case of the colonial government it resulted in external colonisation. The process of expansion entails in greater use of natural resources, but not necessarily to the extent of being called profligate. It is only when the process of extraction sets in that nature begins getting exploited, especially when extraction is in the form of raids etc. which result in immediate destruction of environment. However, extraction in the form of excessive taxation leads ultimately to gradual environmental depletion. It cannot be denied that the colonial government was an exploitative government. With regard to the Jungle Mahals, the high revenue demanded by the English East India Company did bring about a significant change in the environment whereby agricultural land expanded at the cost of forests. However, it was a slow and tortuous process often interrupted by natural occurrences like droughts and famines. Thus, throughout the early colonial period upto 1793, the region was still covered with thick forest. In 1783, the Commissioner of Burdwan stated that 'The Country of Buggree is of great extent chiefly run with Jungle amongst which the villages are thinly scattered'.<sup>70</sup> In his application to obtain permission for indigo cultivation in Bishnupur district, Mr. Robert Heaven wrote about the existence of 'a great deal of Jungul land' even in 1792.<sup>71</sup> With regard to the situation in Pachet and the petty districts of

Jhalda in 1793, the Collector stated that 'The Country is extremely Mountainous covered with almost impenetrable woods and Forest, and badly cultivated'.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, it can be said that the detrimental effect of the colonial policies on the environment of the region became apparent only after the early colonial phase. Hence, late eighteenth century cannot be regarded as a watershed in the environmental history of the Jungle Mahals.

The English East India Company attached great importance to the acquisition of the Jungle Mahals – given its strategic location – and made every effort to establish its authority over this region. In the process it also tried to make the acquisition economically viable and lucrative for the government. There was thus a distinct shift in the political and economic approach of the Company from that of the Mughals who had regarded the Jungle Mahals as an economically taxing frontier and hence had maintained a rather distant attitude throughout. The region was thickly forested and in order to secure its position, the Company deemed it necessary to clear it. Its administrative and economic measures therefore consciously sought to deplete forests by cutting down trees, bringing more land under cultivation, and constructing roads. However the inhospitable climate, poor soil, and frequent occurrence of drought and flood severely restricted these measures and posed a considerable challenge to its political and economic ambitions. Even wild animals became a source of

trouble for the administration on a scale that it never anticipated. All these factors combined to slow down the process of British expansion in this region. Whereas it is true that the regional landscape was transformed to a great extent, it is also true that these jungles were not completely destroyed in the process. Thus, as far as environment is concerned, the establishment of British rule in the Jungle Mahals was not a break from the past, but rather, a period of continuity and change.

## REFERENCES

---

<sup>1</sup>Firminger, W.K., (ed), *Bengal District Records Midnapur (BDRM)*, vol. 4, Calcutta, 1926, Letter No. 163, 6 February 1773, pp. 106-107.

<sup>2</sup> Das,Binod,*Civil Rebellion in the Frontier Bengal (1760-1805)*, Calcutta, 1973, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup>Virottam,Balmukund,*TheNagbanshis and the Cheros*, New Delhi, 1972, pp. 71-72.

<sup>4</sup>O'Malley, L.S.S.,*Bengal District Gazetteer Bankura (BDGB)*, Calcutta, 1995, p. 31. The principalities and their chiefs in these forest tracts were of utmost significance to the Mughals due to their strategic placement. Thus, the Mughal *subahdars* often treated them as allies rather than subjects.

<sup>5</sup> Ray,Ratnalekha,*Change in Bengal Agrarian Society*, Manohar, 1979, p. 111. MurshidQuli Khan never attempted to bring these districts under the full subjugation as he calculated that the cost of administration would far exceed the revenue of the country.

<sup>6</sup>Das, *Civil Rebellion*, p. 22.

---

<sup>7</sup> West Bengal State Archives (WBSA), Board of Revenue, vol. 11, Mr. Shore's Minute, dated 13<sup>th</sup> March 1787, p. 207.

<sup>8</sup>Firminger (ed), *BDRM*, Letter No. 163, 6 February 1773, pp. 106-107.

<sup>9</sup> O'Malley, *BDGB*, Calcutta, 1995, p. 42. According to O'Malley, the history of Bankura, so far as it is known, prior to the period of British rule, is identical with the history of the rise and fall of the Rajas of Bishnupur. (p. 21)

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup>Hunter, W.W., *The Annals of Rural Bengal*, London, 1868, pp. 15-16.

<sup>12</sup> O'Malley, *BDGB*, p. 41.

<sup>13</sup>Jha, J.C., 'History of Land Revenue in Chotanagpur (c.1760-1800 A.D.)' in R.S. Sharma (ed.) *Land Revenue in India*, Delhi, 1971, p. 71

<sup>14</sup>The Jungle Tarai district was in existence from 1772 to 1780 and was loosely applied to the whole of the Country extending from the Kharagpur hills on the west to the Rajmahal hills on the east, and from Bhagalpur plains on the north to Ramgarh, Pachet and Birbhum on the South.

<sup>15</sup> WBSA, Governor General in Council (GGC), vol. 59, L.N. 582, Letter from the Collector of Ramgur Charles Chapman, dated 24<sup>th</sup> June 1780, p. 3454.

<sup>16</sup> WBSA, Revenue (Judicial) Department, vol. 4, L.N. 33, Board's Resolution, dated 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1790, p. 268.

---

<sup>17</sup>WBSA, Committee of Revenue (CR), vol. 54, Letter from the Board of Revenue, dated 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1789, p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue at Burdwan (PCRB), vol. 15, Letter from Capt. H. Briscoe, Commanding at Midnapur to Edward Stephenson, dated, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1776, p. 64.

<sup>19</sup> National Archives of India (NAI), Home Dept., Public Branch, Original Consultation dated 30<sup>th</sup> June 1783, No. 34, pp. 2391-2396, Letter from Mr. George Dallas, Acting Collector of Ramgur to Mr. Auriol, Secretary to the General Dept. at Fort William, dated 4<sup>th</sup> June 1783.

<sup>20</sup> WBSA, PCRB, vol. 2, extract of a letter from Capt. Crawford, dated Silda, 5<sup>th</sup> August 1774.

<sup>21</sup>Firminger (ed), *BDRM*, vol. 2, No. 359, p. 78.

<sup>22</sup> Price, J.C., *Notes on the History of Midnapur*, Calcutta, 1876, p. 46; also Firminger, *BDRM*, vol. 1, Calcutta, 1914., No. 127, p. 97.

<sup>23</sup> WBSA, CR, vol. 33, Letter from Mr. Thomas Short, Resident at Bogri, dated Bogri, 29<sup>th</sup> October 1783, p. 425.

<sup>24</sup>Firminger, W.K., (ed), *BDRM*, vol. 2, Calcutta, 1915, Letter No. 379, p. 96.

<sup>25</sup>Price, *History of Midnapore*, pp. 60-61

<sup>26</sup>WBSA, GGC, vol. 96, dated 10<sup>th</sup> March 1786, p. 216, L.N. 180.

<sup>27</sup> Price, *History of Midnapore*, p. 136.

---

<sup>28</sup>WBSA, GGC, vol. 8, Minute of Mr. Francis, dated 12<sup>th</sup> September 1775, p. 290.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Wood, W.H. Arden, *A Short Geography of Bengal*, George Bill and Sons (London and Bombay), 1895, p. 164.

<sup>32</sup> WBSA, GGC, vol. 44, Examination of the Collector of Ramgur, dated 28<sup>th</sup> August 1778, p. 382.

<sup>33</sup> WBSA, GGC, vol. 15, L.N. 436, Letter from S.G.Heatly, Collector of Ramgur, dated Chatra, 13h June 1776, p.143. In the words of the Collector “For the present year they are to pay nothing, the ensuing year they pay four annas in the Rupee, the second Eight the Third 12 and the full Jumma the 4<sup>th</sup> year”

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., vol. 74, extract from the Proceeding of the Committee of Revenue, dated 5<sup>th</sup> May 1783.

<sup>35</sup> WBSA, CR., vol. 67, Letter from Mr. E. Hay, Secretary of the Secret Department, dated 29<sup>th</sup> March 1786, p.1. A similar practice in the Jungle Tarai resulted in the formation of Invalid Settlements. According to SeemaAlavi, there were three categories of invalid soldiers, first comprised soldier who had been in the Company’s service for a minimum of ten and twelve years and who was disabled by age or infirmity, second consisted of those who had not served for this length of time but had become disabled by wounds sustained in the service of the

---

Company, and third category consisted of soldiers who took discharge from the service for personal reasons and were allotted plots of land, generally near their homes. Settlements of these Invalid soldiers were called Invalid Thanas. (SeemaAlavi, *The Sepoys and the Company Tradition and Transition in Northern India 1770-1830*, OUP, 1995, p. 95.)

<sup>36</sup>WBSA, GGC, vol. 264, L.N.7, Letter from Robert Chapman to the Collector of Burdwan Mr. W.A. Brooke, dated 7<sup>th</sup> March 1793, p. 534.

<sup>37</sup>Price, *History of Midnapore*, pp.161-164.

<sup>38</sup>Hunter, *The Annals*, p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> WBSA, GGC, vol. 117, Petition from AzeemUllah Khan and others of Dittorah, Ramgur, dated 20<sup>th</sup> September 1787.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 248.

<sup>41</sup> WBSA, PCRB, vol. 2, 22 August 1774, Petition from the *Raiyats* of Singhbhum.

<sup>42</sup>WBSA, CR, vol. 21, Letter from George Dallas, Acting Collector of Ramgur, dated Etchawk, 9<sup>th</sup> November 1782, p. 32.

<sup>43</sup> WBSA, GGC, vol. 240, dated 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1792, p. 213, L.N. 32. Letter from C. dated 25<sup>th</sup> January 1792; vol. 243, dated 20<sup>th</sup> April 1792, p. 386, L.N. 25. Letter from C. Keating to W. Cowper dated 6<sup>th</sup> April 1792.

<sup>44</sup>Datta, Rajat, *Society, Economy and the Market : Commercialization in Rural Bengal c.1760-1800*, Manohar, 2000, p.238.



---

<sup>45</sup>Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, pp. 268-270.

<sup>46</sup>Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p. 245.

<sup>47</sup>Marshall, P.J., *Bengal: The British Bridgehead Eastern India 1740-1828*, Cambridge, 1987, p. 18.

<sup>48</sup>Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p.261.

<sup>49</sup>O'Malley, *BDGB*, p. 34.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 264.

<sup>51</sup>Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, pp. 268-270.

<sup>52</sup> WBSA, PCRB, vol. 5, Letter from the Council of Revenue, dated 27<sup>th</sup> January 1775, p. 165.

<sup>53</sup>WBSA, PCRB, vol. 9, 12 July 1775

<sup>54</sup>Choubey, Asha Shukla, 'Technology and Culture among the Iron Workers of Bihar during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', *The Medieval History Journal*, 6, 1 (2003), Sage Publications, Delhi, pp.79-80.

<sup>55</sup> WBSA, GGC, vol. 35, L.N. 6, Letter from Mr. Motte and Mr. Farguhar, dated Calcutte, 4<sup>th</sup> November 1777, p. 20.

<sup>56</sup> WBSA, GGC, vol. 35, L.N. 6, Letter from Mr. Motte and Mr. Farguhar, dated Calcutte, 4<sup>th</sup> November 1777, p. 20.

<sup>57</sup> WBSA, GGC, vol. 35, L.N. 6, Proposal from Mr. Farguhar and Mr. Motte for working the mines in Ramgur, dated Calcutta, 4<sup>th</sup> November 1777, p. 20.

- 
- <sup>58</sup> WBSA, GGC, vol. 35, L.N. 6, Proposal from Mr. Farguhar and Mr. Motte for working the mines in Ramgur, dated Calcutta, 4<sup>th</sup> November 1777, p. 20.
- <sup>59</sup> WBSA, GGC, vol. 49, L.N. 391, Letter from Mr. Farguhar to the Board, dated Calcutta, 20<sup>th</sup> June 1779, p. 583.
- <sup>60</sup> WBSA, GGC, vol. 45, L.N. 880, Letter from Mr. Archibald Keir to the Board, dated Chatra, 15<sup>th</sup> March 1778, p. 109.
- <sup>61</sup> WBSA, CR, vol. 66, Letter from Mr. Archibald Keir to the Board, dated Chatra, 10<sup>th</sup> June 1783, p. 279; GGC, vol. 75, L.N. 333, p. 358.
- <sup>62</sup> WBSA, GGC, vol. 45, Governor General's minute, dated 15<sup>th</sup> December 1778, p. 109.
- <sup>63</sup> WBSA, GGC, vol. 45, Governor General's minute, dated 15<sup>th</sup> December 1778, p. 109.
- <sup>64</sup> WBSA, GGC, vol. 77, Board's Resolution, dated 9<sup>th</sup> December 17983.
- <sup>65</sup> WBSA, GGC., vol. 185, L.N. 8, Letter from Matthew Leslie, Collector of Ramgur, dated Chatra, 9<sup>th</sup> December 1789, p. 23.
- <sup>66</sup> WBSA, GGC, vol. 198, L.N. 18, Letter from Mr. J. Ranken to Mr. Charles Cockerell, Post Master General at Calcutta, dated 7<sup>th</sup> January 1790, p. 347.
- <sup>67</sup> WBSA, GGC, vol. 271, L.N. 24, Letter from Mr. William Hunter, Collector of Ramgur, dated Chatra, 20 September 1793, p. 407.

---

<sup>68</sup> WBSA, GGC, vol. 198, L.N. 18, Letter from Mr. J. Ranken to Mr. Charles Cockerell, Post Master General at Calcutta, dated 7<sup>th</sup> January 1790, p. 347.

<sup>69</sup> WBSA, GGC, vol. 272, L.N. 32, Letter from Mr. William Hunter, Collector of Ramgur to Mr. G.H.Barlow, Sub-Secy to the G.G. in C., dated Ramgur, 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1793, p. 564.

<sup>70</sup> WBSA, CR, vol. 27, Letter from Q.Q. Ducarel, the Commissioner of Burdwan, dated Burdwan, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1783, p. 52.

<sup>71</sup> WBSA, GGC, vol. 260, dated 4<sup>th</sup> January 1793, p. 227, L.N. 35. Application from Mr. Robert Heaven to the Revenue Board dated 11<sup>th</sup> December 1792.

<sup>72</sup> WBSA, Judicial (Criminal), vol. 7, L.N. 19, Letter from Mr. Hunter, Collector of Ramgur, dated Ramgur, 20<sup>th</sup> August 1793, p. 153.