

Bernardo A. Michael. 2012. *Statemaking and Territory in South Asia: Lessons from the Anglo-Gorkha War (1814–1816)*. India: Anthem Press.

Historiographical debates on the Anglo-Gorkha War, which hastened the end of an ambitious Gorkhali territorial expansion by circumscribing its power within a carefully delineated immutable boundary, have mostly revolved around macro political, diplomatic, military and nationalistic perspectives or the combination of these to explain its causes and consequences. Bernardo Michael, in his theoretically rich and meticulously researched book, argues that the current interpretations are insufficient because they flatten out an otherwise complex and contested cultural history of governance and the geographical constitution of the state in the processes leading up to and following that war.

Michael proposes to study the Anglo-Gorkha War as a “diagnostic event” and shows that a nuanced understanding of this watershed moment illustrates “deeper territorial dynamics and cultural transformations” (p. 14) at work in the Indian subcontinent. He specifically regards the East India Company’s (EIC) push to ossify the fluid pre-colonial notions of space as one of the defining moments in the colonial governmentality in South Asia that needs to be woven together into the larger narrative of the enforcement of caste, racial, sexual, religious and class boundaries. In that respect, Michael astutely

sees the Anglo-Gorkha War as a pivotal episode not only from the perspective of Nepali history but also from that of the regional and global history. After all, the politics and practices of cartography and the new logic of territorial sovereignty unfolding along the Anglo-Gorkha frontier were informed by widespread British anxieties over the questions of governance and legibility at home and in colonies. Drawing upon multitudes of disciplines (history, human geography, cultural anthropology) and envy-worthy diverse archival sources, the book in seven elegantly written chapters, narrates a fascinating account of the British experiment in the enforcement of the timeless linear boundary constituting a crucial element in the genealogy of colonialism in South Asia. It also explores how and why the colonial territorial boundary enforcement in South Asia survived the formal end of colonialism and subsequently surveys an intimate relationship between cartography and modern nation-building.

The book starts off with engaging discussions of cultures of governance, space, and cartographic history. Michael examines space, not as a neutral stage, but a “dynamic entity produced out of a shifting ensemble of meanings, practices, and interrelationship involving human communities, institutions and struggles to define and control resources” (p. 5). Such a formulation of space allows him to accord greater agentive power to the local and regional actors, who in resisting the various iterations of the centralizing state making processes, left indelible marks on the Anglo-Gorkha frontier throughout the pre-colonial period. Chapter Two introduces an important and often unexplored role the natural environment had as regards the possibilities and limits on resource extraction in the Tarai. The vagaries of ecology and human agency created extremely fluid agrarian landscapes that “slipped back and forth between forest, pasture, fallow, cultivation and uncultivated waste” (p. 28). This combined with the periodic changing political configurations further meant administrative divisions were rarely fixed. As a result, the dialectic of centripetal and centrifugal forces, the author demonstrates, kept the region largely outside the direct control of the centralizing rulers on either side of the frontier for much of the pre-colonial period. It is this “fluid, discontinuous and intermixed” spatial architecture and agrarian divisions that the British and the new Gorkhali power confronted when they began flexing their administrative muscles into the Tarai in the wake of the receding Mughal authority. From the beginning, the two sides operated on different registers of what constituted rights and authority. Chapter Three and Four discuss at

length the ensuing conflict resulting from those differential understandings between the EIC and the Gorkhali power on the Champaran-Tarriani and the Gorakhpur-Butwal frontier respectively.

At the same time, Michael reminds us that these conflicts cannot be understood through a statist framework. Up until 1814, both the EIC and the House of Gorkha lacked crucial information regarding the “location, layout, resources and boundaries of the administrative divisions lying along and across th[e]se frontier[s]” (p. 33). In many instances, official jurisdictions and territorial boundaries did not overlap, creating extremely patchy and decentralized cultures of governance wherein different local agents incessantly blunted the power of the EIC and the Kathmandu-based central Gorkhali authority. As these territories shifted between various “little kingdoms” and regional overlords during the tumultuous mid-eighteenth century, they further compounded issues of authority on the ground. The status of *tappā* Rhautahat in *parganā* Simraon (Chapter Three) aptly characterizes one such messy and locally inflected culture of governance in the Anglo-Gorkha frontier. Similar forces were at work in the Gorakhpur-Butwal area where the additional presence of large rent free grants, which the author refers to as “islands of authority” (p. 66), produced mutually entangled, discontinuous and fuzzy boundaries. Michael argues that such socio-spatial flux, which appeared natural to the local and regional power-holders, was seen as a threat to the larger project of legibility and governance in the sub-continent by the EIC.

Chapter Five offers a succinct overview of the pre-colonial knowledge and practice of space to underscore the segmented nature of sovereignty, refracted through localized conceptions of rights and authority. According to the author, in such an indigenous system, preservations of rights and titles not of contiguous and linear boundaries were of prime concerns to its various actors. The defeat of the Gorkhals at the Anglo-Gorkha War heralded a new and radical vision of the spatial organization that overtime completely eclipsed the pre-colonial ideas of territory across South Asia. Chapter Six of the book highlights a fundamental interrelationship between the British imposed spatial re-organization through cartographic map making and the larger project of colonial governmentality. These ideas have subsequently been embraced by the post-colonial nation states in their quest for legibility

and governance thereby creating equally imaginary boundaries. The book raises timely and important questions about the role of colonialism in the forgetting of vernacular knowledge and the unwillingness of the postcolonial nation states to articulate an alternative idea of space and belongingness that is not confined within the logic of a contiguous and immutable boundary. This book makes significant interventions in several interrelated South Asian historiographies of state making, colonialism, and pre-colonial cultures of governance. It should be commended for its theoretical and methodological richness, and particularly for its bold and daring attempt to re-think colonialism and South Asian history from the perspective of Nepali history.

Sanjog Rupakheti

College of the Holy Cross