THE TRANSCULTURALITY OF HISTORICAL DISASTERS:
GOVERNANCE AND THE MATERIALISATION OF GLOCALISATION

3-5 March 2011

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**COVER PICTURE:** Gouache painting on paper. Kṛṣṇa Vatapatra śāhi; depicted as a baby, Kṛṣṇa lies on a banyan leaf, with the toes of his left foot in his mouth. During a great flood, Kṛṣṇa assumed the form of a baby floating on a leaf above the destructive waters of cosmic dissolution. The universe is protected from the flood after Kṛṣṇa swallowed it in its entirety. (AN891101001 © Trustees of the British Museum)
The Transculturality of Historical Disasters: Governance and the Materialisation of Glocalisation

CONCEPT

The third and concluding workshop of the Junior Research Group (JRG) “Cultures of Disaster” addresses the transculturality of historical ‘natural’ disasters in South Asia, from the Middle Ages to the early twentieth century. In line with the two previous workshops “Hybridity of Historical Disasters: Nature, Society, and Power” (Beirut, March 2010) and “Learning from Disaster from Antiquity to Early Modern Times: Knowledge and Experience, Flow and Blockage” (Heidelberg, December 2009) the current workshop addresses a thematic aspect of the JRG’s research concerning the relationship between nature and society in a comparative and transcultural historical perspective.

A ‘natural disaster’ is often the outcome of the interaction and the impact of various physical, cultural, social, economic and political factors. The ‘catastrophic event’ turns into a natural disaster depending on a society’s ability to cope with the event and to muster resources from the local context. Consequently, a society’s infrastructure, economy and environment, often determine the “social creation of vulnerability”. In a society it is necessary to identify these socially created vulnerabilities in order to expand the environmental dimension of human security.

By giving importance to the social factors in handling natural disasters, the agency of human beings as well as the role of administration and governance is acknowledged. The multiple and the particular local historical context of various forms and levels of governance and administration underscore the different aspects to be considered in studying historical natural disasters. Of particular interest are the processes where local knowledge, dealing with hazards and disasters in South Asia, merge with concepts, methods and aims from ‘outside’.

For the present workshop our approach is supported by the theory of glocalisation which acknowledges the pervasive impact of the global and the local, resulting in unique outcomes in different geographic areas. Glocalisation implies that globalisation depends on the “critical construction and reinvention of local cultures vis-à-vis other cultural entities”. In this way, the process of glocalisation may be seen as constructing or inventing “local traditions or forms of particularity”. With this in mind, the workshop focuses on the utilisation, invention and reconstruction of local knowledge and practices attempting to deal with natural disasters. Our aim is to analyse the ways which ideas and practices – whether originating in a South Asian context or emerging from elsewhere – have been incorporated, transformed or renewed in the process of glocalisation in South Asia.

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Thursday, 3 March 2011

Gerrit Jasper Schenk (Darmstadt/ Heidelberg):
14.30 – 15.00 Welcome and Introduction

Session I: Interpreting disasters
Chair: Monica Juneja (Heidelberg University)

15.00 – 15.45 Tracing the Will of Stars: Indian Astrology and Divination on Natural Disasters and Threats
Audrius Beinorius (Vilnius University, Lithuania)

15.45 – 16.30 Competing knowledge: Explanations to the cause of the Bihar earthquake, 1934
Eleonor Marcussen (Heidelberg University)

Tea Break

17.00 – 17.45 Perception of Environmental Risk among Three Communities in Anklesvar, Gujarat
Vikas Lakhani (Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai)

Short break

18.00 – 19.00 Keynote lecture
Sublime aftershocks: Sociological reason in the aftermath of an earthquake in Gujarat, western India
Edward Simpson (School of Oriental and African Studies, London)
Discussant Anu Kapur (Delhi University)

19:30 Reception at MMB
Photo exhibition on floods in Assam
Kazu Ahmed (Photographer, Delhi)
Friday, 4 March 2011

Session II: Floods and governing rivers
*Chair: Stefan Knost (Orient Institute, Beirut/ Lebanon)*

9.30 – 10.15 River, land and colonial state: were ‘people’ marginal? Some examples from the Gangetic *diara* areas, 1790s-1920s
*Nitin Sinha (Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin)*

10.15 – 11.00 Nature as Calamity: The Emergence of Flood Control in Colonial India
*Rohan D'Souza (Centre for Studies in Science Policy, Jawaharlal Nehru University)*

Tea Break

11.30 – 12.15 When the ‘Deluge’ happened: The Flood of 1929 in Surma–Barak valley of Colonial Assam
*Monisankar Misra (Tripura University)*

12:15 – 13.00 Floods and Urban Planning in Delhi: The Making of an Indian Megacity
*Pravin K. Kushwaha (Jawaharlal Nehru University)*

Lunch

Session III: Famine and famine relief
*Chair: Gerrit Jasper Schenk (Darmstadt/ Heidelberg)*

14.30 – 15.15 ‘Land of famine’ or ‘land of charity’? British-Indian encounters in voluntary famine relief c. 1770-1901
*Georgina Brewis (Institute of Education, University of London)*

15.15 – 16.00 Negotiating the Monsoon: Drought, Famine and Cattle in the Deccan, 1876-77
*Charu Singh (Jawaharlal Nehru University)*

Tea Break

16.30 – 17.15 A Political Experiment with Political Economy? Managing Famine Relief in Colonial North India
*Sanjay Sharma (Zakir Husain College, University of Delhi)*

19:30 Dinner (at a restaurant)
Saturday, 5 March 2011

Session IV: Tsunami
Chair: Stefan Knost (Orient Institute, Beirut/ Lebanon)

9.30 – 10.15 The Calcutta Cyclone of 1737: Was it a tsunami?
Ranjan Chakrabarti (Jadavpur University)

10.15 – 11.00 Tsunami Deposit at Kelshi, Ratnagiri District, Maharashtra
Ashok Marathe (Deccan College, Pune)

Tea Break

11.30 – 12.15 Final Discussion

CHAIRS:

Prof. Dr. Monica Juneja
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PHOTO EXHIBITION ON FLOODS IN ASSAM

Kazu Ahmed
Photographer, anthropologist and a media practitioner presently working with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in New Delhi, India
ABSTRACTS

(in alphabetical order according to last name)

TRACING THE WILL OF STARS:
INDIAN ASTROLOGY AND DIVINATION ON NATURAL DISASTERS AND THREATS

Prof. Dr. Audrius Beinorius

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In the paper I am going to focus on the divinational understanding of the natural disasters in traditional Indian culture by analysing the primary Sanskrit sources. Omens (adbhuta, utpata, nimitta) have always been regarded by Indians, as by others, as a means of knowing the future and involve phenomena occurring on the earth, in the atmosphere and in the heavens. The events in the heavens, in the sky and on the earth were supposed to intimate the thoughts of the gods and to convey indications about impending natural hazards and social disasters. The message of the gods always allowed one to prevent the imminent evil by appropriate religious actions and moral behaviour. The earliest extant such divination text is the “Garga Samhitā” (1 BC) giving prognostications involving heavy rainfall (sadyovarsana), violent storms (nirghāta), and earthquakes (bhūmikampa). Remarkable information is provided by some classical astrological Sanskrit texts, especially by tremendously influential “Brhat Samhitā” of Varāhamihira (5 AD). The Samhitās deals with the movement of planets in the zodiac and their mutual conflicts, the consideration of benefic or malefic effects of meteors (ulkā), comets (ketucāra), eclipses and omens on the world. In the early and medieval periods the identification of those environmental and social threats was a duty of astrologer’s institution (jyotisi, samvatsarika, daivajna, purohita) and very often under the patronage of royalties. The research sets out to explore the traditional Indian explanations of the earthquake based on mythological and religious semantics. How these natural phenomena were embedded in cosmological and religious discourses? An important point there is that omens and astrological positions of stars (grahas) and lunar constellations (naksatras) many times are supposed to be not only indicative but also of causative value. Not by chance, the stars were treated as dangerous, destructive demons causing the suffering to the human beings and society. In such cases the provision was subscribed for pacifying the bad omens by means of stronger magical-religious rituals (santis). The santi rites could placate the planets, and mitigate or entirely nullify the evil inflicted by the planet.

Thus, the conclusion is made that cultivation of astrology in the traditional Indian society should not be viewed in isolation from the timeless attempt by the community to contend with unpredictability. As a body of social and natural knowledge, divination developed both out of interest in prediction and control and under the impetus of expedient preventive interest. And the religious teaching on destiny (karma, daiva, adrsta) served as a means of legitimizing an application of astrology in predictive practices.
This paper considers the long history of organised relief in famines in 19th-century India. British rulers of India developed emergency famine relief programmes as a way of strengthening the legitimacy of their rule but reluctance to accept full responsibility for saving lives and fear of encouraging pauperism resulted in the emergence of a parallel system of charitable relief.

Although heavily reliant on indigenous charity, British rulers had an ambivalent attitude to Indian forms of famine relief. The making of a British ‘ideal of service’ involved the denigration and de-legitimisation of patterns of giving, duty and service to be found in societies colonised by Britain.

From the late eighteenth century the British attempted to mould indigenous charitable practices into forms they recognised as legitimate and considered to be discriminate and efficient. Indians began to adapt famine relief practices and adopt new ones but throughout the period of British rule elite Indians continued older modes of giving and service that secured status in their own communities. David Arnold’s conceptualisation of Indian reactions to colonial medicine as ‘onion layers of resistance, accommodation, participation and appropriation’ is useful in categorising indigenous responses to colonial philanthropy. In contrast to colonial interpretations of India as the land of famine, Indians regularly asserted that India was ‘the land of charity’.

By the late nineteenth century, Indian responses to famine hunger were changing as modern forms of social service that conflated well with Hindu living traditions of seva, dana and dharma took root. Participation in famine relief was a way for Indians to show continuity with older gifting traditions. The shift to social service which was partly an outcome of famine experiences was part of a movement towards self-reliance in Indian social reform circles, and was a deliberate rejection of the colonial mentality that depicted India as in need of the service and sacrifice of the British. It was also a necessary response to continued government reluctance to assume responsibility for welfare, even during disasters.

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THE CALCUTTA CYCLONE OF 1737:
WAS IT A TSUNAMI?

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Sugata Bose (*Hundred Horizons*, 2008) has argued that 'the first modern tsunami hit the Indian Ocean more than a century ago on August 27, 1883'. I will argue in this paper that the natural calamity ('earthquake'/ 'hurricane' / 'storm') that swept over Calcutta, 20 years before the Battle of Plassey was, in all probability, the first recorded tsunami in the Indian Ocean. This calamity has gone down interestingly, as one of the significant 'earthquakes in history' which is supposed to have resulted in 300,000 deaths and possibly a significant depopulation of the tract, at present known as the Sundarbans. If it was in fact a tsunami, then, it would push back the occurrence of a tsunami in the Indian Ocean to 146 years and it would also pose a challenge to what Sugata Bose thinks. The paper discusses, besides the debate relating to the nature of the calamity, the climatic history of the city of Kolkata which once became a favourite destination of Europeans and led to one of the important human migrations in history.
Colonial rule in India, through the course of the nineteenth century, effected a hydraulic transition in the deltas of the Bengal Presidency. The deltas’, in this period, were virtually replumbed by the colonial dispensation through a combination of irrigation, drainage and flood control practices. Alongside or paralleling this concrete reworking of the region’s fluvial regimes was the simultaneous production of an entirely new set of conceptions about the delta as a hydraulic phenomenon. In effect, a colonial land-centred imagination helped articulate and underpin an impetus for modifying and redesigning the rivers. This reworked conceptual frame and structure of practices predominantly viewed seasonal flooding as a natural calamitous event.

Deltaic flooding, as a hydraulic phenomenon, was thereby configured by colonial imperatives as essentially being a discrete fluvial element rather than as a dynamic geomorphologic process. That is, a flood dependent agrarian regime was transformed into a flood vulnerable landscape. Writings and narratives on floods in post independent India have overwhelmingly ignored this great hydraulic transition and have thereby tended to treat floods as a technical debate rather than a political consequence brought on by British transformations in soil and water management ideologies.
FLOODS AND URBAN PLANNING IN DELHI: THE MAKING OF AN INDIAN MEGACITY

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The Yamuna river that cuts across the city of Delhi, flooded its banks and surrounding plains in late August and September of 2010. The peak levels of flow discharge broke records of the past several decades. Consequently, a large number of marginalised communities living on the flood plains were temporarily displaced. Interestingly as well, other ‘planned’ constructions on the flood plain that were meant to withstand the flood suffered a similar fate. Government sources and the mainstream media called it a ‘natural calamity’ to be dealt with through emergency responses.

This paper argues that the contemporary urban planning practices and flood control measures are politically reinforcing flood vulnerability and social exclusion in Delhi. In an attempt to make the city perfect and globally competitive, techno-centric urban planning is being projected as a viable solution to propel economic growth and turn Delhi into a habitable megacity. ‘Beautiful City’, ‘Global City’, ‘Heritage City’ and the state-of-the-art infrastructure driven ‘urban renewal mission’ have emerged as the main constituents of this new vision. Although, the new vision offers a better quality of life to the rising middle classes and elites in the city; at the same time, processes for gentrification are fuelling social polarisation at a large scale. Consequently, a large percentage of the urban poor are forced to live marginal lives, giving rise to the growth of an ‘informal city’ parallel to that of a ‘formal city’. This ever increasing marginalisation is inevitably pushing poor people to settle in the flood prone areas of the city.

The contemporary process of creating informal urban spaces in Delhi is rooted in the blending of pre-modern and modern process of socio-political exclusions. Traditionally, the dominant Hindu community’s caste system in India had been enforcing multiple hierarchies and exclusions since ancient time. This traditional exclusion became further complex and more enforcing with the introduction of modern urban planning practices during colonial era in Delhi. Driven by the western technologies, new urban planning was primarily aimed at physically segregating British officials from the indigenous people in the city. This led to the creation of well-planned and well-serviced urban spaces of ‘New Delhi’ for the British officials, separate from the medieval ‘Walled City’ of ‘Old Delhi’. This new urban design forced majority of the local inhabitants to live in overcrowded and poorly serviced ‘Old Delhi’. Colonial segregation was further blended with the aspirations of independent India’s planners to modernise the city at a fast pace through reinforcing physical planning and maintenance of certain spaces in the city.

Thus by tracing the history of urban planning practices in Delhi since the decline of medieval era; and the field observations made during the recent floods, this paper argues that the
political enforcement of flood control measures and violations of environmental norms has driven flood vulnerability. At the same time politically enforced social exclusion has exacerbated the vulnerability of the inhabitants on the flood plains. Thus, the recent floods in Delhi were not merely a ‘natural calamity’ brought on by natural forces; rather, I will argue, that they have amplified and reinforced social and political inequalities.
PERCEPTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL RISK
AMONG THREE COMMUNITIES IN ANKLESVAR, GUJARAT

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Risks are ubiquitous and are inter-woven in our daily lives. In the last few decades, scholars have explored the concept of risk from various paradigms and contributed to the understanding of its existence, reality and dimensionality. ‘Perception of risk’ is one such area which originated from the psychological school of thought where experience, beliefs, assessments and judgments are discussed. This paper explores the perception of risk among three communities facing environmental hazards in rural parts of Anklesvar, Gujarat. It looks into the various kinds of environmental risks faced by the communities, factors influencing people’s perception and the strategies adopted by these communities to cope with risk. The paper also talks about why different stakeholders perceive risk differently. The study examines these varied perceptions using theories put forward by Beck (1992) and Douglas (1982) where concept of ‘Risk Society’ and the relationship between Risk Perception, culture and various other factors are explored.

The study focuses on ‘Permanent resident’ and migrant communities and findings indicate that cultural, geographical and socio-economic factors influence nature and distribution of perceived risk among different communities. The paper also argues that strategies adopted to cope with risk vary due to diverse contextual factors. Using existing theories of risk and the fieldwork undertaken, the paper concludes with a conceptual framework for establishing relation among various factors and themes.
TSUNAMI DEPOSIT AT KELSHI, RATNAGIRI DISTRICT, MAHARASHTRA

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Evidences of a large tsunami on the West coast of India have been presented from archaeological, geomorphological, geological and geophysical investigations on a huge sand deposit near Kelshi [170 55’ 50”N, 730 03’ 10”E], a coastal village, located on the southern bank of Bharja river in Dapoli taluka of Ratnagiri district. All along the coast, habitation sites occur that are covered by sand deposit having thickness of +20 meters. The archaeological artifacts collected around the site are found to be significant in understanding the antiquity of the site. At the foot of the sand deposit exists an abandoned well. The well is dated to the Shilahar period [1000-1200AD] as evident from the occurrence of typical pottery of this period around and inside the well. Presently, this well gets submerged during the high tide. The pottery collected from the sections and from the surrounding areas is of three types: Red ware, Grey ware and Glazed ware. There are small corrugated designs on Red ware sherds. Grey ware sherds belong to different shapes of pots with short neck, flaring rim, constricted neck and handis. There are globular pots, bowls and dishes. The Glazed ware sherds are with thick core of dull yellow colour. The glaze is of olive green, pale cream and grey colours. The Glazed ware sherds have yellow, brown or olive green core. Small glass objects such as globular pots, cups and bangles are also found. There are both thin and thick sherds. The faunal remains recovered confirm the existence of both vertebrate and invertebrate animals. Fish bones and molluscs are common. Three well-preserved human skulls were recovered from the small trench dug on the top of the sand deposit. All the faunal and human remains are of 11th to 16th century. It also substantiates that there was human habitation in Kelshi till the beginning of the 16th century when the sea level was 3-4m lower than the present level. Sometimes at the commencement of 16th century catastrophe occurred that deposited 20m thick and at least 81,600 tons of sand covering the contemporary habitation, probably due to a tsunami in the Arabian Sea. The supplementary investigations by tsunami experts will be advantageous in setting up preventive steps while planning major projects and useful in validation of the mathematical simulation of tsunamis on the west coast due to large earthquake along the Makran Subduction Zone.
COMPETING KNOWLEDGE:  
EXPLANATIONS TO THE CAUSE OF THE BIHAR EARTHQUAKE, 1934

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This paper deals with explanations to the cause of the Bihar earthquake of 1934 and interpretations of the event as a prognostication for disasters to come. These explanations and interpretations are found in publications by astrologers, literature and poetry (or they appear in intelligence officials’ accounts as ‘rumours’) and in publications by the Geographical Survey of India and Japanese earthquake experts. Most famous in this context is M.K. Gandhi’s claim published in contemporary newspapers that the earthquake was a “divine chastisement” of Bihar for the “sin of untouchability”, and Rabindranath Tagore’s subsequent refute of his argument as “unscientific”. Their debate as to whether “science” or “superstition” could explain the cause of the earthquake throws light upon a wider discussion on the many explanations in the aftermath of the earthquake. Several astrologers claimed to have cast predictions of the earthquake based on planetary constellations - and what was maybe most pertinent at that moment: there were more disasters to come. However, the colonial government viewed these types of prognostications and ‘unscientific’ explanations as “seditious acts”, possibly leading to civil unrest and therefore banned their publications.

In the paper, the main argument put forward is that ‘local’ knowledge on earthquakes, here in the form of astrological predictions, mythology and Hindu philosophical understandings of cosmos, was subjugated through legal measurements since the colonial government regarded it as a means to stir unrest and oppose the government. Instead the Geological Survey of India provided ‘expert’ knowledge with scientific explanations as to the cause of the earthquake. The colonial government legislated against publications of prognostications and “unscientific” explanations in order to counter political mobilization and thereby hampered coping mechanism based on local knowledge.
WHEN THE ‘DELUGE’ HAPPENED:
THE FLOOD OF 1929 IN SURMA–BARAK VALLEY OF COLONIAL ASSAM

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Surma- Barak Valley comprised the districts of Sylhet and Cachar in colonial Assam. This valley is prone to floods from time immemorial. Although our knowledge about floods is inadequate for pre-colonial days, with the arrival of the British in this valley from the late 18th century our sources of information had taken a great leap forward. One of the heaviest floods to visit Sylhet and Cachar was in June 1929, which left a disastrous trail of impact on the valley. But this flood is more important because it provided another occasion for the Indians to evaluate the role of the British in aggravating floods in the valley. Majority of the inhabitants of the valley considered the flood of 1929 as ‘Plabon’ or Deluge, the like of which had never happened before. On the otherhand, the British officials left no stones unturned to dispose of such allegations. In the end, a committee was formed to investigate the causes, but its findings failed to satisfy the Indians. The present paper will deal with this important event in the history of Assam and will show that nationalist critique in Assam of colonial rule had variegated dimensions, till now unknown to the historians.
This paper is about the 1837-38 famine in north India which affected mostly what was then known as the North Western Provinces of the Bengal Presidency under British rule. Starting as a drought, the 1837-38 famine came to be regarded as the worst famine in colonial north India with at least a million deaths that remained embedded in popular memory for a long time. British officials singled out this famine as one in which ‘for the first time, the obligation of the Government to provide for the relief of the starving masses was recognized’ and ‘relief on modern principles’ was attempted. The decision to start works of ‘public utility’ was indeed a new one and subsequent official accounts come up with a variety of reasons – often mentioned with enormous ideological pride – which were instrumental in inaugurating an era of state sponsored famine relief in India. Colonial officials emphasised the humanitarian and benevolent aspects of state action during this famine and commend the ‘positive non-interventionism’ of state policies that were otherwise grounded in bourgeois political economy favouring laissez faire.

The paper examines some of the key ideas which informed the concerns of the colonial state and its novel response to that famine, i.e. provision of work on ventures of ‘public utility’. It explores the ideological roots of categories like ‘destitutes’ and ‘able-bodied’ that were used to classify and manage ‘famine victims’ with a view to utilise their labour ‘productively’. It suggests that by setting famine labour to work the colonial state sought to discourage indolence, vagrancy and prevent misuse of charity. This response involved assumption of new responsibilities by the state, shaped official attitudes towards the poor and set norms for subsequent famine relief and disaster management in India. Many such core ideas and policies were shaped by the debates on Poor Laws in England during the 1830s that this paper analyses. Thus it examines early British colonial perceptions of famine as something more than just a natural disaster that invited a specific relief-based state intervention which was described somewhat sarcastically by a contemporary newspaper as a ‘political experiment with political economy’.
SUBLIME AFTEershocks:
SOCIOLoGICAL REASON IN THE AFTERMATH OF AN EARTHQUAKE
IN GUJARAT, WESTERN INDIA

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An earthquake is a distinct kind of catastrophe, which history, comparative literature and the ethnography from Gujarat suggests demands particular kinds of explanation. Such explanations are typically organised around the theme of sin, as well as other provocations of the divine order of the gods. Unlike situations of mass violence, the blame for disaster is not projected outwards onto ‘others’ but inwards on one’s ‘self’. To blame others would be to grant power and legitimacy to their gods. In this lecture, I examine the structures of the blame narratives found in Gujarat. I conclude: there are significant similarities in the ways people of different religions cast blame and attribute agency in the region. Secondly, those affected by the disaster use social memory as a form of collective reason to explain the catastrophe; as they do so, they render the extraordinary ordinary. Finally, the cleavages and ruptures evident in such explanations strongly resemble those that make society itself and, therefore, explanations can in fact be seen as attempts at understanding the experience of living through a disaster.
NEGOTIATING THE MONSOON: 
DROUGHT, FAMINE AND CATTLE IN THE DECCAN, 1876-77

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In my paper, I will explore the negotiations of rural communities and the state with the rainfall regime of the dry, arid tract of the Deccan in the Bombay presidency of British India during a year of drought. My attempt will be to understand what really happens when “the monsoon fails,” in a historical context. What are the calculations and responses of peasants and grazers on the one hand, and the state and its bureaucracy on the other hand? To this end, I focus on a single year of drought and famine in the Deccan, 1876-77, to understand popular and state anxieties regarding the fate of cattle – the most important asset of the peasantry next to land – and policies for relief. I draw attention to the close links between agriculture and forests for both rural communities and the state in a time of crisis such as the famine for the preservation of cattle. I further demonstrate the intricate intervention of the state for this purpose, and its concerns regarding recovery from the famine in the following year. My attempt shall be to shed light on the local unfolding of the drought and its subsequent impact in order to understand this moment of severe dislocation in the agrarian economy of the Bombay Deccan.
**RIVER, LAND AND COLONIAL STATE: WERE ‘PEOPLE’ MARGINAL?**
**SOME EXAMPLES FROM THE GANGETIC DIARA AREAS, 1790S-1920S**

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Within and on the borders of Bihar and U.P, the two dominant agricultural economies of north India, five surveys were conducted in quick succession between 1839 and 1910: two revenue surveys of 1839-40 and 1845-46, Diara Survey of 1863-64, N.W.P Survey of 1882-83, and the Cadastral Survey of 1908-10. One of the reasons was to ascertain the boundaries of the shifting lands – the diaras – which was almost an annual feature in the Gangetic riverine tracts due to annual flooding or inundation. The annual ‘flooding’ caused mainly due to monsoonal rains that also not infrequently led to shifts and changes in the course of different streams of the Ganga in turn led to creation of new lands (highly fertile island villages) or to the washing away of the existing ones. This natural or physical phenomenon sometimes led to acute social crises (and it continues to do so even in the contemporary times). While on the one hand total submersion led to flight of peasants and their re-settlement in other diara lands and villages, lack of inundation of lands meant less or no deposition of silt that did not enrich the soil.

My paper tries to understand the ‘everyday’ (read annual) nature of dislocations that these lands underwent and their effects on the social structures of livelihood, subsistence and domination (between and amongst different social groups/classes). The colonial state, whose legal and revenue interventions and requirements provide the necessary enframing background, was almost until 1870s oblivious to the forms of dislocations the tenants and other social groups (and categories) of agricultural workers underwent. The colonial archive in this case is surprisingly silent on the ways the ‘people’ dealt with these annual forms of dislocations. What mattered most to it, and the concern stemmed from both its ideological pursuits and practical concerns, was to find a ‘permanent’ solution to the ever shifting landforms, which would also not affect their potential to realise maximum revenue from these lands (knowing that these were highly fertile tracts). What is interesting in this whole story is to notice how natural dislocations (and I am consciously refraining from calling these annual inundations as ‘disasters’), could provide to certain classes, like the native zamindars and British private planters, a ‘business opportunity’ to raise revenue and garner profits. This became possible in the lack of any permanent surveys of the area, and so the state used to put these lands on lease to the highest bidder. Obviously, the competing claims over either propriety or lease status was yet another outcome of the entangled story of a peculiar natural phenomenon on the one hand and the colonial legal intervention on the other.