

CEDERLÖF, GUNNEL. *Founding an Empire on India's North-Eastern Frontiers 1790–1840. Climate, Commerce, Polity.* Oxford University Press, New Delhi 2014. xiii, 272 pp. £23.99.

BEHAL, RANA P. *One Hundred Years of Servitude. Political Economy of Tea Plantations in Colonial Assam.* Tulika Books, New Delhi 2014. xiii, 387 pp. Ill. Maps. Rs 900.00.

Unlike the Indians who were transported to work plantations in the Caribbean in the nineteenth century, the millions of indentured laborers who cleared the land, weeded, pruned, picked, processed, and transported tea in north-eastern India have received comparatively little historical study. To be sure, anthropologists, sociologists, and several historians have argued that one cannot understand the society and political economy of this part of India and what is now Bangladesh without paying very close attention to the British colonial era. These two superb books demonstrate in crystal clear detail why this was the case. They illustrate that, far from being backwaters on the edge of empire, Manipur, Assam, Sylhet, and Cachar were at the center of British commercial and strategic interests between the late eighteenth and mid twentieth centuries. Adding to a growing volume of work on this region and to South and Southeast Asian borderland studies, these books similarly reorient standard geographical, temporal, and disciplinary divisions. They also thoroughly embed labor and colonial history within compelling new conceptual frameworks, including environmental history and the critical study of race.

Water and its impact on ideas of law, property, and land is at the center of Gunnell Cederlöf's study of how the British established an empire in what was most often termed "the North-Eastern Frontier", primarily Sylhet, Manipur, and Cachar. "Water", Cederlöf proposes, "facilitated commerce but jeopardized governance and military operations" (p. 19). Climate and ecology are not setting or backdrop, but protagonists in this book. Earthquakes, floods, droughts, and seasonal changes that came with the monsoon made this a particularly "fluid" landscape. Rivers shifted dramatically and regularly, lakes formed or dried up quickly, and cultivated land often reverted to a wild state, all of which confounded the British who tried to map and possess a stable and ordered landscape. This was particularly true during the first decades of East India Company involvement in the region, which historians now know was a period of extreme climate fluctuation. Bountiful harvests were followed by drought and mass starvation, particularly during the period between 1789–1793. Relying on data collected on long-term climate variability and a great deal of archival material in India and Britain, Cederlöf contends that the severe conditions of these years had profound consequences. For example, massive floods in 1784 and 1787 forced people living in the lowlands to flee to the hills, leading to conflicts between these migrants and those who already occupied the land. The British then took advantage of this period of upheaval and claimed that they were pacifying a violent, wild, and uncivilized environment.

Until recently, most studies have argued that the British East India Company (EIC) "annexed" these areas because it desired a buffer area between Bengal and the expanding Burmese Empire. Cederlöf shows, however, that commercial and strategic interests were always intertwined and, in fact, the British viewed this region as a "doorway" to markets in Tibet, Burma, and China. Connecting Bengal with China was of paramount importance to the EIC, especially after the conclusion of the war with Burma in 1826. The tools of conquest that Cederlöf describes, such as mapping, road building, military intervention, and control of riverine trade were not unique to this area, but the depth of her analysis is

stunning, as is her demonstration of how local landlords, tribal communities, and the environment wreaked havoc with British desires and administration.

Cederlöf also depicts the thriving pre-colonial economy with its well-established trading networks. In the late eighteenth century, cloth, lumber, elephant tusks, silk, opium, salt, and spices were a regular feature of the trade between Bengal and Southwestern China, but the British were especially interested in mineral wealth, including precious stones, limestone, gold, tin, lead, and silver. A handful of British and other foreign nationals inserted themselves in this world and some, such as Robert Lindsay, the first resident collector of Sylhet, built up a huge trade in limestone and other hill commodities and employed between 500 and 600 men. This was despite the fact that local landlords and rulers often barred access to trade routes and frequently attacked the British and their allies. As a result, conquest was slow, difficult, and partial at best. Cederlöf argues that, ultimately, the British created a commercially rather than politically defined polity, with diverse methods of administration, laws, and notions of land and economy.

Cederlöf ends her book at the point when some of the people she studies began to dramatically shift the political economy of the Northeast by introducing tea cultivation into the region. A few members of the EIC, working with local rajas and tribal leaders, first discovered tea growing in Assam in the 1820s, but here, again, they encountered resistance. Behal argues that labor shortages were the primary reason tea developed so slowly, but after reading Cederlöf we might also consider the role played by the environment itself. Tea thrives in fertile soils, enriched by flooding rivers, and requires a great deal of rainfall, but the method of cultivation the British introduced, the large-scale plantation, required abundant cheap labor, something that did not exist Assam and surrounding regions.

Slavery was officially abolished by the time the plantations were established, but, as Behal suggests, a modern form of servitude developed that was virtually identical to New World slavery. Behal argues that British planters used the power of the colonial state to secure the land and labor necessary to produce cheap tea on a massive scale. This argument is not new, but Behal documents in much greater detail than previous studies the laws, ideologies, and technologies that the British deployed to mobilize the agrarian communities of Bihar, Bengal, Orissa, and the United Provinces. Demographic depletion due to war and the type of environmental catastrophes that Cederlöf described, British racial ideologies, the technologies of tea cultivation and manufacture, and local resistance contributed to the development of a system in which millions of workers (over half were women and children) were brought to Assam between the 1840s and 1940s. Workers were “recruited” in a variety of legal and illegal ways, they were subject to horrific conditions during their transport to Assam, and survived very poor living and working conditions, starvation wages, sexual and other forms of violence on the plantations. At the end of the century, the planting industry argued that many of the abuses that occurred during the early days of the industry and the tea mania of the 1860s, when acreage expanded dramatically had been corrected. However, Behal proves that despite labor investigations, regulations, and planter paternalism, conditions did not improve in the late nineteenth century.

Behal also focuses on the ongoing conflicts within British colonial society and between colonizers and colonized. Workers rioted, ran away and, at times, thousands simply left the plantations. With a relatively small number of Europeans living an isolated environment, the colonial state contained such problems by delegating extraordinary police powers to planters, essentially making them agents of the state. However much the Victorians worshipped the idea of a *laissez-faire* economy, in Assam the line between business and the

state was virtually non-existent, as it had been in the days of the Company Raj. Company employees who had privately traded in limestone, silk, and opium, often became planters, who, over time, succeeded in turning a protean landscape into a disciplined environment, or what Jayetta Sharma called the “Empire’s Garden”.<sup>1</sup>

Most importantly, these two thoroughly researched and clearly argued books elucidate the value of regional history to understanding the emergence of global capitalism. They also creatively blend the methods of environmental, social, cultural and economic history to reveal how merchants and planters, rivers, rajas, tribal communities, and the millions of indentured laborers who were essentially enslaved on the tea plantations transformed and were shaped by this aqueous environment. Both authors have written methodologically and theoretically sophisticated books that will undoubtedly shape South and Southeast Asian studies and the scholarship on the British Empire for some time.

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TRĘBACZ, MICHAŁ. *Israel Lichtenstein. Biografia żydowskiego socjalisty.* [Israel Lichtenstein. A Biography of a Jewish Socialist.] Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, Łódź 2016. 250 pp. Pzł 40.00.

In the early twentieth century, Łódź was a rapidly developing, industrial Polish city with all the typical features of early capitalism: chaotic and uncontrolled urbanization, deep social divisions, areas of extreme poverty, and oases of wealth. With approximately 500,000 residents in 1911, the city was a living laboratory for observing all manner of social processes, and provided perfect conditions for a debate about whether class or national divisions were more important in politics. The so-called proletarian capital of Poland was inhabited by approximately 167,000 Jews, 82,000 Germans, and 270,000 Poles. It was here that the political skills and social engagement of Israel Lichtenstein (1883–1933) flourished. According to Michał Trębacz, Lichtenstein was an undisputed leader and one of the most significant individuals in the history of the Bund, a secular Jewish socialist party, in the city of Łódź. To confirm this thesis, Trębacz cites Emanuel Szerer, who equated Lichtenstein with Bronisław Grosser, Włodzimierz Medem, Bejnisz Michalewicz, and other legendary founders of the Bund.

Trębacz argues that the social engagement of Lichtenstein was rooted in his moral attitude rather than in his ideological views: “He perceived freedom as having the greatest value of all. For him, this was a very broad and diverse concept, covering a range of political freedoms, freedom from economic constraints, social freedom, the freedom of ideological and religious beliefs and the right to freely manifest them” (p. 14).

The first chapter of the biography is dedicated to Lichtenstein’s childhood and adolescence. After two years of working in a foundry and a bakery, at the age of fourteen, the

1. Jayetta Sharma, *Empire’s Garden: Assam and the Making of India* (Durham, NC [etc.], 2011).