
*‘A Character to lose’: Richard Goodlad, the Rangpur
dhing, and the priorities of the East India Company’s
early colonial administrators¹*

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Abstract

This article examines the conduct of Richard Goodlad, the East India Company’s collector in Rangpur, north Bengal, upon the outbreak of a peasant rebellion in his district during 1783. It uses his reaction to this event to illustrate the nature of the Company’s district bureaucracy and its relationship with the central colonial authorities in Calcutta during the later eighteenth century.

The article considers the aims and limitations of the European officials who were sent out to administer Bengal’s districts, detailing their priorities and practices within a weak and decentralised state structure. Ultimately it argues that the relationship between these local and central components of the colonial state was, prior to the Company’s rise to subcontinental hegemony in the early nineteenth-century, profoundly shaped both by widespread military under-resourcing, and by the primacy of personal interest among its local officials.

My situation is a very cruel one and I am brought to the Brink of Destruction by acting as I am sure what was my Duty and what was the intention of my appointment . . . God knows my friend what is to be my fate. From the consciousness of my own innocence I do not dispond, but, Anderson, I have a Character to lose – a Character dearer to me than all the appointments under the sun.²

So lamented the British East India Company civil servant Richard Goodlad, in the spring of 1784 to David Anderson, an influential colleague and a confidant of the governor-general of Bengal, Warren Hastings. Until a year earlier, Goodlad had considered himself fortunate to be employed as the Company’s collector (its senior civil officer) at Rangpur in northern Bengal. Then in the early months of 1783 the district’s *raiya*s (cultivators), incensed at the extortionate taxes being levied upon them, rose against the Company’s local representatives. This *dhing*, or peasant rebellion, engulfed Rangpur and threatened to spread to neighbouring districts with dire consequences for the security of the Company’s rule in Bengal.³ Goodlad was removed from his lucrative post in disgrace, and found himself likely to be made a

¹I am grateful to Professor P. J. Marshall and Dr J. Wallis for reading and commenting on earlier drafts of this article, and to Mrs R. Dobson for suggesting references for Goodlad’s life after India.

²R. Goodlad to D. Anderson, Rangpur, 14 April 1784, British Library, Anderson Papers, xx, Add MS 45436, f. 49.

³S. Ray, *Transformations on the Bengal Frontier: Jalpaiguri, 1765–1948* (London, 2002), p. 37.

scapegoat in the findings of a commission instigated by his superiors at Fort William, the Calcutta headquarters of the Company's fledgling colonial state.

This article will use the example of Richard Goodlad and the Rangpur *dhing* to illustrate the nature of the Company's district bureaucracy and its relationship with the central colonial authorities in Calcutta during the later eighteenth century. It will examine the aims and limitations of the European officials who were sent out to administer Bengal's districts, and the conflict between their personal and professional priorities in carrying on the business of local government. It will also investigate the implications of their conduct for the scope and penetration of the Company's rule prior to the establishment of its military-political hegemony across India in the early nineteenth century.

I

Following its victory over the Mughal emperor's alliance at the battle of Buxar in 1764, the Company's 'men on the spot' in Bengal, led by Robert Clive, were able to obtain from Shah Alam II the *diwani*, or the right to collect territorial revenue, in the provinces of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. Under this arrangement, formalised by the treaty of Allahabad in 1765, the Company became nominally both a subject and minister of the defeated emperor, essentially acting as a tax farmer under the agreement that it would wring whatever profit it could from the civil administration of Bengal, while supporting Shah Alam with its military forces and paying him an annual tribute of 2.6 million rupees.⁴ With the grant of the *diwani*, the Company had found a source of wealth – public revenue – which could rival, and would eventually overtake, its income from trade, transforming it within half a century from a largely commercial body into the Indian subcontinent's dominant territorial power.

At this time the public revenue of Bengal and its adjacent provinces – home to a largely agrarian population of some 25 million people⁵ – was estimated at approximately one quarter of that of the entire British Isles in the same period.⁶ It was, by any measure, a potentially lucrative source of income, but the realisation of that potential would require a robust bureaucracy, properly supported by armed forces. As this article will demonstrate, such an ideal was far removed from the actual working environment of the Company's local officials in the decades immediately following the accession of Bengal. Indeed, it was only as the Company overcame its subcontinental rivals militarily, from the very end of the eighteenth century, that the colonial authorities began seriously to turn inwards, and to focus on the bureaucratic consolidation of the territory that they had conquered.

The early Company state was, to borrow Anand Yang's term, a 'Limited Raj', constrained by the practical need to operate through indigenous collaborators.⁷ However, as this article will argue, its penetration was also limited by the unwillingness of European district officials to engage with a turbulent local society. This was because, in many cases, their prime interest

⁴P. J. Marshall, *Bengal: The British Bridgehead: Eastern India 1740–1828* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 90.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁶P. J. Marshall, "Hastings, Warren (1732–1818)", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), xxv, p. 784.

⁷A. A. Yang, *The Limited Raj: Agrarian Relations in Colonial India, Saran District, 1793–1920* (Delhi, 1999), p. 226.

was not service to their superiors in Calcutta and London, but rather their own personal enrichment. Tackling difficult local issues carried the danger of public failure. This, in turn, could lead to an official being removed from his post, and so denied a source of potentially vast personal remuneration. Many officials consequently preferred to maintain a passive stance in their dealings with Indian society. If local disturbances could not be suppressed without risk, then district officials would often attempt to conceal them from their superiors, and thereby retain their profitable positions for longer.

A key factor in shaping the conduct of the Company's district officials in the face of violent resistance, such as the Rangpur *dhing*, was of course the quantity and quality of the armed forces that they could bring to bear against it. Modern historians have largely agreed with nineteenth-century Anglo-Indians in emphasising the importance of the Company's army in enabling its rule over a vast and militant Indian population, and particularly in combatting insurgency within civil society. Certainly, from an early period the Company's regime in Bengal was supported by a significant armed force. In 1768 25,000 soldiers, mainly Indian infantrymen or 'sepoys', were serving in the Bengal army;⁸ by 1805 it was 64,000 strong.⁹ Douglas Peers, writing on the role of the Company's army, has called it "a gendarmerie of last resort", noting that "troops . . . were scattered across India in small garrisons, where they were in a position to monitor local society and if needs be stamp out any signs of resistance".¹⁰

This is a compelling argument for the period after the establishment of the Company's hegemony, following the defeat of Mysore and the Marathas in the early nineteenth century. The Bengal military statements for the 1810s demonstrate that the army *was* dispersed throughout the countryside in a policing role, providing strong background support for the district administrations; but this contrasted sharply with the policy that had, in the main, been pursued consistently during the fifty years after 1765. An examination of the Company's troop returns from the late 1760s through to the early 1800s shows an active policy of concentrating the Bengal army in a few large garrisons, normally on the line of the river Ganges, facing the threat of the Maratha states to the south and west.¹¹ The army's presence within Bengal's immense rural hinterland was in fact, negligible. Even where there were army garrisons, local officials were strongly discouraged from calling on them for assistance.

The Company's army was intended by its political masters in London and Calcutta to fight the armed forces of other Indian powers. During this early period its function as an instrument of regular warfare took almost complete precedence over its potential as a police force for countering unrest within Company territory. The Company's highest officials, both civil and military, were adamant that these troops should not be frittered away in attritional operations against *dakait*s (bandits) and in enforcing the government's authority

⁸Marshall, *Bengal the British Bridgehead*, p. 94.

⁹R. Callahan, *The East India Company and Army Reform, 1783–98* (Cambridge, 1972), p. 6.

¹⁰D. M. Peers, *Between Mars and Mammon: Colonial Armies and the Garrison State in Early Nineteenth Century India, 1819–1835* (London, 1995), p. 11.

¹¹See 'Ninth Report of the Secret Committee of 1773', Reports from Committees of the House of Commons, 12 vols. (1803–06), iv, pp. 506–507, and British Library, India Office Records, Bengal Military Annual Statements 1785–1820, L/MIL/8/1–29.

among the discontented populace, but rather reserved for major armed conflicts.¹² Therefore such duties were usually assigned to the small bands of locally-raised, and poorly-trained, paramilitaries who were placed at the disposal of district collectors and known by the general title of 'revenue troops'. Such a system meant that the Company's operational overheads were significantly lower than if it used its regular army in this way. It also limited the scale of the armed force which its officials could misuse for their own ends, as will be discussed later.

These paramilitaries ranged from units of locally-raised, quasi-military revenue sepoy ('sebundies') and a militia composed of invalided infantrymen from the regular native battalions, to bands of armed peons and itinerant mercenaries.¹³ In addition to being poorly trained and equipped, these forces shared the common trait of being very few in number. The size of the revenue troop garrison varied between districts during this period, but two companies (on paper some 200 men) was perhaps typical.¹⁴ Some districts had no official garrison at all, and collectors had to ask their neighbours for support in the event of an emergency, or hastily to raise as many local mercenaries as possible.

These early district collectors frequently lacked a reliable armed force to bolster the routine administration of their districts, but perhaps equally problematic was the inadequacy of their bureaucratic training, and their knowledge of local society. As Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam have argued, it had taken the Mughal government nearly 150 years to develop fully its mechanisms of coercion and to gain a working administrative purchase on Bengal's rural hinterland.¹⁵ Although these organisational networks still existed to varying degrees in the 1760s, they could not be fully exploited by the British because there simply had not been enough time for the Company's servants, with their commercial rather than governmental training, to learn the business of civil administration and, particularly, to understand the manner in which local society operated.

In the 1760s, no formal professional training was offered or required by the Company; appointments to the service were not made on merit, and the motives of covenanted servants tended to lie in hopes of amassing a fortune by any means necessary rather than honourable employment. Writerships (the most junior civil post) lay largely within the patronage of the Court of Directors, and positions were awarded on the grounds of personal influence, not professional competence. It was not until the Governor-General Lord Cornwallis's reforms of the late 1780s and 1790s that the pay and terms of service for Anglo-Indian colonial administrators began to be properly regulated, in an attempt to reduce both the opportunity and the need for corruption.¹⁶ Even then, it was not until 1800 that another Governor-General, Lord Wellesley, established the civil service training college at Fort William, which was to provide the inspiration for the later East India College at Haileybury.¹⁷

¹²Commenting on the use of the army in securing the district revenues, a senior member of the governor-general's supreme council declared that its employment in these "provincial duties" was "pregnant with Evils of a most serious nature", see Secret Department, Minute and Resolution of the Governor General in Council, 29 June 1795, BL, IOR, F/4/8/709.

¹³G. J. Bryant, "Pacification in the Early British Raj", *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, XIV, i (Oct. 1985), p. 8.

¹⁴Bengal Military (incomplete) and Civil Statement, 1784–85, BL IOR L/MIL/8/1, pp. 75–78.

¹⁵M. Alam and S. Subrahmanyam (eds.), *The Mughal State, 1526–1750* (3rd edition, Delhi, 2003), p. 42.

¹⁶Under Cornwallis's reforms of 1786, district collectors were to receive an increased salary of 1,500 rupees per month. B. B. Misra, *The Central Administration of the East India Company, 1773–1834* (Manchester, 1959), p. 157.

¹⁷Wellesley's minute, 10 July 1800, cit. *ibid.*, p. 389.

Nor, before this gradual professionalisation of the service, could the Company's servants fall back on the support of their colleagues in performing their duties. The early colonial bureaucracy was rife with factionalism, especially in the period between 1773 and 1786, when Warren Hastings was Governor-General. "Let the Company tremble for the consequences when They are told", declared Hastings, "that the Governor General and Council meet to dispute and part without doing anything else".¹⁸ Officials farther down the professional hierarchy sought preferment by attaching themselves to key players among the upper echelons of the Company's service, seeking to earn favour by undermining those attached to their rivals. This unsavoury working culture was also an insalubrious one, with service in India often proving fatal, mostly through disease: more than half of those Europeans who joined the Bengal civil establishment between 1757 and 1775 died in office during the same period.¹⁹ It was not an environment in which many colonial administrators attempted the steady accumulation of wealth over a long period; rather, it encouraged gambling for high stakes with the prospect of rapid enrichment or death.

Despite the many disadvantages of serving in India, competition for district postings was intense, largely because of the opportunities for great remuneration that could accompany them. Accordingly, the desire of local officials to remain in post and to seek promotion to ever more lucrative positions strongly informed their relationship with the central authorities at Fort William. This article contends that the combination of under-resourcing, a lack of professional training, and an intensely competitive service, led district officials to misrepresent or conceal major events in the territory under their jurisdiction, events that they frequently had neither the knowledge nor resources to control. By so doing they were able to maintain their 'character' as reliable employees, and were able to access sources of wealth for longer, but often with serious consequences for the effective functioning of the Company's rule.

II

The history of early colonial Bengal is replete with examples of the illicit sources of income into which incumbent officials could tap, and Rangpur was a particularly suitable posting for such activity. It was desirable for several reasons. Rangpur district, covering an area of some 3,000 square miles in northern Bengal, came under the Company's jurisdiction following the grant of the *diwani* in 1765. Its topography was extremely flat with no significant natural elevations of any kind; but the terrain was dotted with numerous small marshes or *bheels*, rendering its soil extremely fertile. This saturated landscape provided Rangpur with a particularly rich agricultural economy based primarily around the cultivation of rice, although there was also significant production of indigo, opium and tobacco.²⁰ In consequence, the district enjoyed a generous revenue yield, a share of which could be misappropriated by unscrupulous collectors.²¹ It was also located at the intersection of

¹⁸"A Summary Abstract of Mr Hastings' Government And Present Situation (1781)", H. H. Dodwell (ed.), *Warren Hastings' Letters to Sir John Macpherson* (London, 1927), p. 73.

¹⁹P. J. Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes: the British in Bengal in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1976), p. 218.

²⁰E. G. Glazier, *The District of Rungpore* (1872), cit. W. K. Firminger (ed.), *Bengal District Records: Rangpur, i, 1770-1779, Letters sent and received* (Calcutta, 1914), p. 1.

²¹Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes*, p. 193.

a network of caravan routes between northern India, Bhutan, and Nepal that presented an opportunity for officials to trade, against Company regulations, on their own account. Crucially, it was distant enough from Calcutta for district officials to avoid the scrutiny of their superiors, unless their activities (or, frequently, their ‘inactivities’) resulted in a disturbance large enough to draw the attention of the central government.

The levying of unauthorised taxes by Company servants in order to maximise their personal profit was a serious problem across Bengal’s districts in the eighteenth century, and Rangpur was no exception. Equally worrying for Fort William was the fact that local Company servants often used the public purse to make private loans, usually to *zamindars* (rural magnates) and merchants, profiting from the crippling rates of interest which they could impose. In 1769 and 1770, Captain David Mackenzie, the commander of Rangpur’s small garrison, made loans to local *zamindars* at over 150 per cent interest.²² His position of authority over this body of troops was a distinct advantage, in that he could both loan out a portion of the money intended for his men’s pay, and then use the soldiers to enforce the collection of repayments.

The Rangpur collectorship was such a prized position in the early Anglo-Indian civil service that in 1779 an attempt was made to buy out the incumbent collector, George Bogle, by a would-be successor, his assistant collector Richard Goodlad, for the enormous sum of 100,000 rupees.²³ Goodlad considered this to be a sound investment, expecting, with some justification, to make a significant profit from the post were it awarded to him. Certainly, Bogle must have felt the same, since he turned the offer down. Bogle is chiefly remembered for his mission to Tibet as Warren Hastings’s ambassador in 1774–75, and his appointment to bountiful Rangpur was intended by Hastings, his patron, as “a remunerative post” to help him recover his fortunes; it was not one to be abandoned lightly.²⁴ It was only with Bogle’s death in 1781 that the way was cleared for Goodlad to obtain the coveted collectorship. The desire to remain in such a post could easily encourage incumbents to conceal instances of local unrest from Fort William, lest they were blamed for mishandling their districts and fell from favour. In the case of Rangpur this attitude contributed to the most serious rebellion of the eighteenth century against the Company’s rule in Bengal: the Rangpur *dhing*.

The trigger for the revolt by Rangpur’s *raiya*s in early 1783 was the extortionate tax levied on them by the Company-appointed revenue farmer, Raja Devi Singh. Between 1765 and 1793 the Company trialled several systems in its attempts to realise fully the revenues of Bengal, and revenue farming was one such experiment. The Company had contracted Devi Singh to collect Rangpur’s revenues for a three-year period commencing in 1781. He was given “both practical and political authority to manage the process of revenue collection and juridical responsibility for ensuring that the cash the Company demanded was delivered each year”.²⁵ As an outsider to Rangpur, however, Devi Singh had little appreciation of the realistic level of its tax yield, and this ignorance was not helped by his frequent absences from

²²*Ibid.*, p. 197.

²³R. Goodlad to G. Bogle, 24 September 1779, Mitchell Library, Bogle MSS, cit. Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes*, p. 198.

²⁴R. Wenger, “George Bogle, Part 3: Into Bhutan and Tibet”, *The Journal of the Families in British India Society*, XVI (Autumn 2006), p. 27.

²⁵J. E. Wilson, “‘A Thousand Countries to go to’: Peasants and rulers in late eighteenth century Bengal”, *Past & Present*, CLXXXIX (Nov. 2005), p. 87.

the district. According to Goodlad, Devi Singh "never was in Rungpore but for five weeks before the Disturbances broke out. It was always under farmed by him to the *zemindars*".²⁶ In 1782, he and his subordinates had managed to collect less than three-quarters of the total revenue anticipated when the tender was made to Fort William. With the government pressurising him for money, he sought to extract all he could from the district's cultivators, allegedly using the most brutal methods of torture to achieve his aim.²⁷

In response to this provocation, from the end of December 1782 the outraged cultivators began to combine against Devi Singh's assistants to withhold tax. Many left the fields and assembled in camps outside revenue *kacharis* (offices) across Rangpur to protest against their treatment. As the *dhing* grew in strength, the rebels organised their own governing body, appointing their own *diwan* and other assorted 'officials' from among their ranks. After storming several outlying *kacharis*, the *raiyats* imprisoned a number of *zamindars* and forced Devi Singh's revenue officers to flee for their lives. Many of these collectors were then seized and tried by the rebellion's leaders.²⁸ One particularly notorious official, Gourmohan Chaudhuri, was captured alive by the insurgents and taken to their encampment near Dimla, where he was later decapitated and his body mutilated.²⁹ After a brief lull, in which Goodlad unsuccessfully attempted to restore order by addressing the *raiyats*' grievances, these events were replicated across the district, with Devi Singh's representative at Kankina being killed by the *dhing* when he attempted to disperse protesters there by force. The violence continued until the end of February 1783, at which point the district's contingent of militia sepoys was reinforced by other Company units and the rebellious cultivators were finally defeated and dispersed.

While Jon Wilson, a recent commentator on the *dhing*, has argued that, for the *raiyats*, it was not an attack on the government *per se*, but rather "an attempt to assert their ability to negotiate within a flexible political order",³⁰ it was perceived by the Company's senior central authorities as a direct threat to their authority, and one that had to be treated with hostility. Indeed, Fort William was, as much during this period as at the height of its power in the nineteenth century, "most firmly resolved to punish in the most exemplary manner" any acts of rebellion.³¹ The basic tenet of Anglo-Indian military government was that negotiation implied weakness and "the idea that swift, decisive action was the only response to rebellion was embedded in British thinking".³² In this context the most ready interpretation of 'action' must be the application of armed force. Yet, despite the clear message emanating from the higher echelons of government, the first response of the Rangpur collector to disturbances within his district was not a vigorous, crushing blow, but rather an attempt at negotiation with the rebels. Clearly there was a serious discrepancy between the theory of government,

²⁶R. Goodlad to D. Anderson, Rangpur, 14 April 1784, British Library, Anderson Papers, xx, Add MS 45436, f. 47.

²⁷"Report of the Rungpore Commission", 23 March 1786, cit. J. R. McLane, *Land and local kingship in eighteenth-century Bengal* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 84.

²⁸Ray, *Transformations on the Bengal Frontier*, p. 37.

²⁹Wilson, "'Thousand Countries'", p. 88.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 84.

³¹Circular from Fort William, 3 Oct. 1781, Firminger, *BDR: Rangpur*, ii, p. 160.

³²D. G. Boyce, "From Assaye to the *Assaye*: Reflections on British Government, Force, and Moral Authority in India", *Journal of Military History*, LXIII, iii (July 1999), p. 651.

as it was understood by the central authorities, and its practical implementation by their local subordinates. Richard Goodlad wrote of the rebellious cultivators that he “should have deemed it cruel to have submitted them to military Chastisement without first hearing what they had to say”.³³ Indeed, in his attempts to quell the *dhing* through negotiation, he undertook to protect the *raiya*s from any person who levied unjust taxes, promising them that their grievances would be “redressed in the most advantageous manner to you”,³⁴ and later he went so far as to reduce the levels of taxation to those of a previous assessment.³⁵ Although he ultimately “found these lenient measures ineffectual” it is interesting to speculate on why he chose leniency as his first response to the unrest and why he turned to a more aggressive policy only later.³⁶

III

Even if Goodlad could have immediately suppressed the revolt by armed force, the enormous damage that military operations would (as they ultimately did) cause to the district’s agrarian economy, with huge numbers of cultivators killed or forced to flee, made a peaceful, non-disruptive resolution an attractive option. Although it could not sanction resistance to the government’s authority, Fort William would not thank a collector for decimating the district’s workforce, however rebellious it might be, and thereby throwing the revenues into turmoil for years to come. The collector, his superiors would argue, should never have allowed the *raiya*s to become so discontented as to have revolted in the first place, overlooking the fact that the Company’s servants in Rangpur were under enormous pressure from the Committee of Revenue to realise the maximum possible tax yield.

In addition to his concern that violence be avoided so as to protect the district’s profitability as far as possible – both to appease Fort William and perhaps to ensure a healthy slice of the revenues for himself – Goodlad must have been painfully aware of the limitations of Rangpur’s military resources. His initial preference for negotiation can be explained by a belief that the armed force present at Rangpur (two companies of militia and a contingent of poorly-armed and ill-trained *barqandaz* mercenaries) was not equal to the task of putting down a district-wide uprising unaided. This conviction is testified to by his appeal to the neighbouring district of Purnea for the loan of an additional company of militia³⁷ and Fort William’s agreement with Goodlad’s assessment is evident in their dispatching, unrequested, 200 militia sepoy to Rangpur at the end of February 1783.

Indeed the precarious nature of the Rangpur administration’s military capacity is highlighted by a report from Alexander Macdonald, the lieutenant commanding the government forces operating against the *dhing*:

They [the district’s militia sepoy] came up with the ding about dawn of the Day, who wer[e] very numerous, and the greater part of them armed with Bows and Arrows, lances & spears, as I

³³R. Goodlad to Committee of Revenue, March 1783, Firminger, *BDR: Rangpur*, iv, p. 151.

³⁴R. Goodlad to ‘The Ryots of the Chucklas of Cargeehaut, Kankneah and Tepah’, Feb. 1783, *Ibid.*, p. 138.

³⁵R. Goodlad to ‘The Ryots & ca of the Pergunnahs of, Kankneah, Cargeehaut & ca’, Feb. 1783, *Ibid.*, p. 142.

³⁶R. Goodlad to Committee of Revenue, March 1783, *Ibid.*, p. 151.

³⁷W. Rooke to R. Goodlad, 15 Feb. 1783, Firminger, *BDR: Rangpur*, iii, p. 13.

advised the Sepoys to disguise themselves, by [c]overing themselves over with white cloths, the Ding allowed them to come very nigh taking them for Burgundasses, whom they are not afraid [sic] of. . . .³⁸

Although this particular party of rebels was successfully dispersed, Macdonald's letter casts doubt on the authority which the Rangpur administration could expect to draw from its military establishment. The standing force in the district at the onset of the *dhing* consisted of the two companies of militia under Macdonald augmented by some 300 *barqandazes*.³⁹ If, as Macdonald asserts, the peasantry were "not afraid" of the *barqandazes*, then it is reasonable to suppose that the gangs of *dakaitis*, border raiders and armed gangs of various sorts that plagued the district held them in equal contempt. It is also possible that it was not simply a lack of martial skill and equipment that emboldened the rebels. As the *barqandazes*, being raised locally, were known to the *raiyats*, and perhaps also were periodically cultivators themselves, it is likely that they were to some degree sympathetic with the *dhing's* aims. In any case, Goodlad must have realised that more than half of Rangpur's armed forces, the prop of the local government, were of a very doubtful quality, and, more importantly, the behaviour of the rebellious *raiyats* suggests that the local populace were aware of it. This reasoning helps explain his actions during the previous summer, when he recruited 100 more *barqandazes* than Fort William permitted.⁴⁰ If he could not request regular troops from his superiors without jeopardising his credit with them, then his next best resort was to strengthen the locally-raised contingent. While this may have risked harbouring elements with questionable loyalty, it at least took them out of circulation for a time and placed them on the district's pay roll, rather than leaving them among the ranks of its potential adversaries.

The weakness of Rangpur's armed forces at the onset of the *dhing* made it clear to Goodlad that external aid was urgently required to end the rebellion, but an appeal to Fort William for military relief would have been viewed as an admission of failure by both the collector and the central government. The collector's early negotiation with the rebels, stemming from his inability to put down the *dhing* swiftly and convincingly with his immediate armed force, can be seen as an attempt to resolve the crisis quietly, before it had the chance to adversely affect his standing in Fort William by disrupting the revenue stream. It is notable that even when his dialogue with the insurgents had failed, as was obviously the case by the middle of February, he appealed to his neighbours in Purnea for military aid, but still made no direct requests to the central government. Although the proximity of Purnea meant that its company of militia would have arrived in the troubled area well before any force sent by Fort William, the scale of the unrest, described by Goodlad as "the most formidable that ever happened in Bengal",⁴¹ clearly warranted greater reinforcement than Purnea alone could muster. It would certainly be taking the point too far to suggest that any notable level of camaraderie, arising from the shared experience of the difficulties of local administration, existed between

³⁸A. Macdonald to R. Goodlad, 22 Feb. 1783, *Ibid.*, p. 20

³⁹W. Haverkam to R. Goodlad, 20 Jan. 1783, *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 7. Goodlad reported an establishment of 300 *barqandazes* (100 above his permitted complement) between May and July 1782. It seems probable that this remained the case at least until he was warned by the Committee of Revenue in January 1783, and, with the onset of the *dhing*, likely that it continued for some time after.

⁴¹R. Goodlad to Committee of Revenue, [. . .] March 1783, Firminger, *BDR: Rangpur*, iv, p. 151.

collectors in different districts. These men were rivals in the Company's service, with the welfare of their own districts, and careers, to consider, and nothing more than a calculated provision of the minimum of assistance could be expected. However, Rangpur's collectors were far readier to ask their neighbours in Purnea for a loan of troops than they were to appeal to Fort William for aid. While the professional respect of his neighbouring colleagues may have been important to him, the primary concern of the collector was the protection of his reputation for competence and self-sufficiency with his superiors.

The maintenance of this reputation with the forces immediately to hand was often a difficult task. The early Company collector was not only frequently under-resourced militarily; the executive powers which he could legitimately exercise in an emergency were also heavily restricted by the central government. Provision simply had not been made within the Company's inexperienced civil service for a rebellion on this scale, as Goodlad made clear in a letter to Macdonald at the height of the unrest:

If I adhere strictly to the Letter of my authority, it will be impossible for us to remain in the district, and as a disturbance so violent never before happened in Bengal, and is consequently not provided against by Government, I am obliged of my own accord to adopt such measures as I deem most essential for the Public safety, and as I have tried every plan that could be dictated by humanity for quieting this disturbance, and all in vain, I must now see what effect [severity] will have on them . . .⁴²

There is evidence here of a pronounced gap between the theoretical authority that Fort William was prepared to delegate to the collector and the pragmatic exercise of power that the collector judged necessary to keep the district functioning adequately. In his letter to Macdonald of 13 February, Goodlad authorised the hanging of rebels without any legal process whatsoever "as a public Example";⁴³ a policy that his lieutenant wasted little time in implementing.⁴⁴ Clearly the imposition of summary executions exceeded the collector's authority. However, Goodlad was forced to choose between acting within the limits of Fort William's sanction and allowing his district (and his career) to be ravaged, or to use his initiative and perhaps save his district, but by means that would damn him in the eyes of his superiors if they were not immediately successful. In justification of his conduct to the Committee of Revenue, Goodlad talked of the necessity of taking "the most active and vigorous exertions"⁴⁵ while hampered by the "little authority invested in me",⁴⁶ but the fact remained that Fort William's attention had been drawn to his mishandling of the crisis before he could present them with a *fait accompli*. The necessity of his resorting to such measures when the restraining of Devi Singh's excesses during 1782 might have prevented the rebellion, or the early use of punitive military action halted it less violently, incurred the government's extreme disapproval.⁴⁷

⁴²R. Goodlad to A. Macdonald, 13 Feb. 1783, Firminger, *BDR: Rangpur*, iv, p. 133.

⁴³R. Goodlad to A. Macdonald, 13 Feb. 1783, *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁴⁴A. Macdonald to R. Goodlad, 21 Feb. 1783, *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁴⁵R. Goodlad to the Committee of Revenue [...] March 1783, *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁴⁷Committee of Revenue to R. Goodlad, 28 Feb. 1783, Firminger, *BDR: Rangpur*, iii, p. 22.

Yet it was not Goodlad alone who was responsible for the development of this state of affairs. Rather it was a product of the competing priorities of the central and local authorities; the conflict between the collector's desire to stay in post and make his personal fortune, and Fort William's need to wring an exorbitant profit from its districts in order to keep the Company state afloat. As has been seen, to reduce its operational overheads, Fort William had hamstrung many of its collectors by providing only a slender garrison of irregular troops. Likewise, anything that impeded the maximum possible revenue collection would not be welcomed. Even had Goodlad been aware of Devi Singh's alleged brutalities,⁴⁸ it would not have been in his interest to do anything that might limit the amount of money the farmer could remit to the Company. To attempt to restrain Devi Singh's excesses may have prompted the farmer to cease collection entirely and complain to Fort William about Goodlad's interference. As a major landowner and multi-district revenue farmer, Devi Singh was a significantly more important figure in the early Company state than a collector on the make, and such a protest could seriously have damaged Goodlad's professional prospects. Even if Devi Singh did not make a formal complaint, less violent collections would almost certainly have produced a much smaller return on the revenues, seriously displeasing Goodlad's superiors, and threatening his prime interest, the tenure of the Rangpur collectorship. As Goodlad himself later observed: "when a Farmer does his duty . . . it is neither my duty, nor to the interest of my employers that I should set up an opposition to him by which he must fail in his rents and Government lose their revenues".⁴⁹

However keen Goodlad was to remain in post and quietly accumulate wealth, the sheer scale of the *dhing* forced him to break cover. He could not conceal the devastating impact of the unrest from his superiors, however desirable it was to do so, because Fort William's attention would shortly be drawn to Rangpur's disarray by his failure to remit a satisfactory amount of revenue. The whole district was in uproar and by the second week of February he was forced to abandon the pretence that normal administrative functions could be carried on. As he observed in a letter to Macdonald, "it is needless in the present state of the Country to look for any more revenue".⁵⁰ He also ordered Macdonald to concentrate his forces, even though this amounted to the public relinquishment of the government's control over large parts of Rangpur.⁵¹ In that climate of open rebellion, maintaining the revenue troops in scattered outposts invited either their desertion or piecemeal destruction by the incensed *raiya*s, and the slightest hint of a military reverse would have encouraged the *dhing*, damaged the government's prestige and dealt a significant blow to Goodlad's professional prospects.

The collector could, then, misrepresent the scale of his district's problems for his own sake until the point where they began to make a serious impact on the revenue stream. It was at that juncture, when concealment of the financial disruption became impossible, that Fort William would begin to take an increasingly close interest in events, and, were the *status quo ante* not immediately restored, an increasingly critical stance towards their agent. Goodlad's

⁴⁸Warren Hastings suggested that it was easily in Devi Singh's power "both to commit the enormities which are laid to his charge, and to conceal the grounds of them from Mr Goodlad", see P. J. Marshall (ed.), *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, vi, *India: The Launching of the Hastings Impeachment, 1786–1788* (Oxford, 1991), p. 434.

⁴⁹R. Goodlad to D. Anderson, 14 April 1784, Anderson Papers, xx, BL Add MS 45,436, ff. 47.

⁵⁰R. Goodlad to A. Macdonald, 13 Feb. 1783, Firminger, *BDR: Rangpur*, iv, p. 133.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, p. 133.

admission in mid-February that events were effectively moving beyond his control was met with a letter from the Committee of Revenue stating that: “We are of opinion that the Disorders which have arisen may be easiest obviated by your personal Interposition”.⁵² This reply suggests that Goodlad was right to consider a request to Fort William for military aid as professionally damaging to himself: the Committee judged that Goodlad had badly neglected his duties and that his implicit appeal for reinforcements was both an unnecessary extravagance and proof of his professional incompetence. This impression is reinforced by the Committee’s appointment in the following week of a special commissioner, Judge John Paterson, to return the district to normality and to determine the causes of the *dhing*.

We have invested Mr Paterson with the fullest authority to take such measures as he may deem necessary for restoring the Peace & Tranquillity of the Country, and direct that you cooperate with him in all such Orders as he may judge expedient to give . . .⁵³

This move was a pointed expression of Fort William’s lack of confidence in Richard Goodlad’s professional abilities and was, one imagines, precisely the kind of development that he had originally hoped to avoid by resolving the unrest through negotiation. He realised at the start of the crisis that he had insufficient armed force to put down the rebellion cleanly, and by the time that it became his only option the *dhing* had spread to an extent where he was entirely unable to combat it without assistance. His only hope of maintaining his position had lain in a comparatively quiet resolution of the uprising; the sanguinary punitive operations that followed sealed his fate. As far as Fort William was concerned, the end justified the means, and whether Goodlad had been innocent or complicit in causing the *dhing*, whether his conduct as violence erupted around him had been professional or partial, responsibility for that end – the bloody mayhem which paralysed Rangpur’s administration in the winter of 1783 – would be laid at his door.

Whether the course that Goodlad chose of conciliating the rebels was, as he claimed, “dictated by humanity” or by less laudable motives, his principal concern throughout much of the *dhing* seems to have been to portray himself to Fort William as a competent district administrator acting in a manner that would meet with his superiors’ approval. His desire for a favourable public appraisal is revealed in his post-*dhing* entreaty to David Anderson: “I have a Character to lose – a Character dearer to me than all the appointments under the sun”. While this sentiment may be genuine, the vehemence with which he pursued the Rangpur collectorship and the violence that he displayed in trying to retain it suggest that in reality Goodlad was principally concerned with the way in which his public character would affect his professional career. However, his reluctance to draw Fort William’s attention to his shortcomings by appealing for help at the start of 1783, far from safeguarding his reputation, actually allowed the *dhing* to grow in strength and ultimately invited the censure of his superiors.

Goodlad, who had been so very keen to buy out George Bogle for the collectorship, now found that his tenure of this coveted post was to be seriously curtailed. The Committee of Revenue decided that it was convenient to treat him as if he had been complicit in Devi

⁵²Committee of Revenue to R. Goodlad, 20 Feb. 1783, Firminger, *BDR: Rangpur*, iii, p. 16.

⁵³Committee of Revenue to R. Goodlad, 28 Feb. 1783, *Ibid.*, p. 22.

Singh's reign of terror or, at best, a "patient witness" of it, content to receive the revenues from the farmer's hands without inquiring closely enough as to his methods.⁵⁴ Consequently, upon receipt of Paterson's initial findings, the Committee peremptorily dismissed Goodlad from office and replaced him with his erstwhile assistant Peter Moore, who was charged with examining the events surrounding the *dhing* and verifying Paterson's discoveries. Given that the new collector, in addition to being no friend of Goodlad,⁵⁵ was Devi Singh's "most inveterate enemy",⁵⁶ it was exceedingly unlikely that he would present his predecessor's conduct in a favourable light, particularly if it might lead to Goodlad's reinstatement in the prized Rangpur collectorship.

Goodlad railed against his accusers, declaring that Devi Singh's crimes were much exaggerated ("I cannot answer for things I never heard of, that I believe did never exist")⁵⁷ and defending his conduct with indignation:

I know not upon my word what the Board can call on me to answer. I can tell them that I supported D' Sing and that it was my Duty so to do; that he the first year paid his rents with regularity that highly pleased Government. I myself had nothing to do with the minutiae of the Collections . . . D Sing was farmer and dewan - nobody complained of him, he paid up his rents and I supported him.⁵⁸

Unfortunately, after the fiasco of the *dhing*, no defence could have saved Goodlad from censure, and he was soon reconciled to being "held forth as . . . Collector of the District where enormities were committed unheard of in the annals of Time".⁵⁹ Once the Rangpur commission had been set in motion he remained unemployed until 1787, when he was briefly posted as collector of Goraghat. Then, after another period of unemployment he worked as the Company's salt agent at 24 Parganas throughout the 1790s, until, finding himself without employment yet again, he returned to Europe in 1800.

However, even if Goodlad's career was not exactly sparkling after the *dhing*, it is notable that he was not prosecuted, nor even dismissed from the Company's service. Indeed, he remained prosperous enough to maintain an estate and country house at Baruiipur in the district of 24 Parganas (painted by the celebrated artist Balthazar Solvyns in 1793);⁶⁰ and on his return to England he took up residence in a "capital modern mansion" in Hampshire,⁶¹ and retained enough influence to be later made Sheriff of the county.⁶² In contrast John Paterson, upon returning to Fort William from Rangpur, discovered that it was he, rather than Goodlad, who was more likely to face trial. The very people who had engaged him

⁵⁴During his prosecution of Warren Hastings, Edmund Burke declared that Richard Goodlad "had been a patient witness of all these cruelties, to say no more . . .", see Marshall, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, vi, p. 422.

⁵⁵R. Goodlad to D. Anderson, 14 April 1784, Anderson Papers, xx, BL Add MS 45,436, ff. 46.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, ff. 49.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, ff. 48.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, ff. 46.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, ff. 48.

⁶⁰See 'The Residence of Richard Goodlad at Baruiipur', Balthazar Solvyns (1793; oil on wood panel) in the collection of the Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkatta.

⁶¹The *Times* (London, 5 July 1822: no. 6566).

⁶²*The Royal Kalendar and Court and City Register for England, Scotland, Ireland, and the Colonies* (London, 1819), p. 239.

to head the commission now questioned his veracity. Employed, one suspects, simply to smooth matters over, Paterson's revelation of widespread corruption in Rangpur found little favour at the highest levels of government. Warren Hastings himself publicly declared that the collector was innocent of any crime: "I entirely acquit Mr Goodlad of all the charges . . . I so well know [his] character".⁶³ In 1781 Goodlad had been recommended to David Anderson by George Bogle as a suitable person to join the Governor-General's circle of intimates, and this patronage may account for his relatively mild treatment.⁶⁴ In contrast, Paterson was made the subject of forgery charges laid against him by Devi Singh, who claimed that the judge had falsified testimony to secure a conviction. In the words of Edmund Burke, addressing Parliament during the later impeachment of Warren Hastings, Paterson was reduced by degrees from "a Commissioner to report; then an accuser to make good his charge; then a party accused", and so the findings of the commission were gradually discredited.⁶⁵

Although Goodlad was widely deemed to have been culpable for having permitted Devi Singh's atrocities, perhaps in return for bribes, and was censured in Parliament for his brutal suppression of the *dhing* – his "conduct was terrible indeed", declared Burke –⁶⁶ the embarrassment of his superiors at having allowed such a state of affairs as occurred in Rangpur to develop may have afforded him a degree of indirect protection. Just as Goodlad feared the wrath of his employers, and was reluctant to appeal for help to put down the *dhing*, so too did Fort William fear the scrutiny of the British government. The concealment of unpalatable facts from superiors seems to have occurred at all levels of the Company's service, and had Warren Hastings done any less than clear Goodlad unconditionally, this would have been seen as an implicit admission of the inadequacy of the Company's provincial government in Bengal.

IV

In the example of Richard Goodlad and the Rangpur *dhing* we see an official who had demonstrably sought a position (the Rangpur collectorship) with the intention of wringing maximum personal profit from the post. This being his priority, he was either unaware of, or was complicit in, Devi Singh's activities leading up to the *dhing*. Once the rebellion broke out his priority – to remain in post and accrue wealth – remained the same, and throughout the uprising his conduct towards this end was shaped by the inadequacy of his military resources, a deficiency common among the district administrators of the eighteenth-century Company state.

Whether Goodlad really was genuinely unaware of the methods employed by Devi Singh and their impact on the district's cultivators, or simply chose to turn a blind eye to them for reasons of personal expediency, this raises serious questions about the extent of the

⁶³'Opening of the Impeachment, 19 February 1788', Marshall, *Edmund Burke*, vi, p. 434.

⁶⁴'I have a good opinion of Goodlad's sense, & I told him to have full confidence in talking with you. Get him to pass a Saturday & Sunday with you at Hooghly and make *him* be very free with you, which I desire him to be. I told him how trusty a man you were. The great point to my mind appears to be to get every able man . . .'
addendum, G. Bogle to D. Anderson, 11 Nov. 1780, Anderson Papers, v, BL Add MSS 45,421, f. 118.

⁶⁵Marshall, *Edmund Burke*, vi, p. 428.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, p. 434.

Company's knowledge of, and control over, what it claimed as its territory in this period. The senior Company official of a major district was shown to be either dangerously ignorant of local society or profoundly corrupt; a state of affairs which, given the nature of the early colonial bureaucracy, seems unlikely to have been confined to Rangpur alone. The contention of this article is that Goodlad's conduct during the 1783 Rangpur *dhing* may be taken as an indicator of the priorities and practices of the Company's local officials more broadly, and that similarly self-interested courses of action (albeit with less obviously dramatic consequences) were being pursued by European district officials throughout the early Company state.⁶⁷

As has been argued above, an overwhelming, if not defining, priority of many of these district officials was that of amassing substantial personal wealth. This, together with the working environment of a local administrator at that time – the probability of imminent death by disease, the factionalised and supremely competitive nature of the Company's service, the absence of any very rigorous professional training – served to focus local officials' energies towards rapid personal enrichment, thereby hampering attempts by the Company's leadership to exploit fully Bengal's potential profitability for the colonial state as a whole. These factors, and, crucially, local officials' limited access to armed forces, inadvertently created a bureaucratic culture that encouraged misinformation, dissimulation, and the withholding of knowledge from the central authorities by officials on the periphery, who were anxious to retain their illicitly profitable posts despite their inadequacies as colonial administrators. This hallmark of early colonial bureaucratic culture would not change until well into the nineteenth century, by which point the regularisation of civil service pay and training, and the improved access to armed forces provided by the establishment of a British military hegemony, had begun to shape the governmental character of the mature Company state. <james.lees@sas.ac.uk>

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⁶⁷ See, for example, the conduct of the Company's collectors in Chittagong in the face of the *Chakma* uprising of the late 1770s and early 1780s, in J. Lees, "A 'Tranquil Spectator': the district official and the practice of local government in late eighteenth-century Bengal", *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, XXXVIII, i (March 2010), pp. 1–19.