

Land, Labour, Local Power and the Constitution of Agrarian Territories on the Anglo-Gorkha Frontier, 1700–1815¹

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Introduction

This article seeks to show how certain human interactions and the environment had far reaching implications for the constitution of agrarian territories along the Anglo-Gorkha frontier (see Map 1). It will examine the forested plains and foothills of the Anglo-Gorkha frontier in order to understand how forces such as the environment, land and labour shaped the architecture of administrative districts that lay along this frontier.² In order to understand processes of state formation on the Anglo-Gorkha frontier, the relationships between land and people in the production of territory needs to be emphasized. It might be useful to point out that territory is treated as socially produced space. The physical body of any territory (a patch of land, a region, little kingdom, administrative district, or nation) is produced by a host of social relationships. In other words, the article seeks to explore the spatial

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² My use of the term 'frontier' is less in the sense of a peripheral zone, distant from the activity of a 'centre,' and more in terms of a matrix of rich social interactions and development. While the literature on frontier studies is too numerous to cite here, see the following for a sampling: Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (New York, 1962); Igor Kopytoff, *The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies* (Bloomington, 1987). See also the special issue on Frontiers in the *Journal of World History* 4 (1993), and John F. Richards, *The Unending Frontier: An Environmental History of the Early Modern World* (Berkeley, 2003).

implications of social relationships – more specifically the way in which they impacted the layout, organization, and boundaries of territories.³ In this paper, I wish to add this crucial variable of spatiality to ecological dynamism, a theme that has been infrequently explored in the literature on environmental history.⁴ Such an emphasis on examining the connections between the production of space (here agrarian territories) and the environment is possible when investigating land-people-territory relationships along the Anglo-Gorkha frontier.⁵

From the very inception of the British East India Company's rule in 1765/8, questions of spatiality crept into matters of everyday governance on this frontier. Company officials frequently complained about the lack of information on geography, local society, and territorial divisions that severely hampered everyday governance. From the 1780s, such concerns assumed increasingly territorial overtones. Company officials were increasingly drawn into disputes with the neighbouring kingdom of Gorkha (present-day Nepal) concerning a host of political, taxation, and tenurial relationships that ren-

³ The literature that examines various aspects of spatial inquiry is too vast to cite here but needs to be engaged in an inquiry such as this. But for a sampling see Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (London, 1991); Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London, 2005); John Pickles, *A History of Spaces: Cartographic reason, mapping and the geo-coded world* (Routledge, 2004), and Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies* (London, 1988).

⁴ I have found useful introductions to these issues in Kendall E. Bailes, ed., *Environmental History* (Lanham, 1985); William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York, 1983); Alfred W. Crosby, *Germs, Seeds and Animals: Studies in Ecological History* (New York, 1994); Richard Grove, Vinita Damodaran, and Satpal Sangwan, eds., *Nature and the Orient: Essays on the Environmental History of South and Southeast Asia* (Oxford, 1995); Mahesh Rangarajan, 'Environmental Histories of South Asia: A Review Essay', *Environment and History* 2 (1996): 129–143; John F. Richards, ed., *Land, Property, and the Environment* (Oakland, 2002); Chetan Singh, *Natural Premises: Ecology and Peasant Life in the Western Himalaya, 1800–1950* (Delhi, 1998); Daniel Worster, ed., *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 3–23, 277–309. For recent work that stress a broader interdisciplinary and theoretically informed study of the environment see K. Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests: Statemaking and Environmental Change in Colonial Eastern India* (Stanford, 1999); Paige West, 'Translation, Value, and Space: Theorizing an Ethnographic and Engaged Environmental Anthropology,' *American Anthropologist* 107: 4 (2005): 632–642.

⁵ My use of the term 'agrarian environments' is taken from the recent work of K. Sivaramakrishnan and A. Agrawal who argue that agrarian environments are constituted by a field of social interactions in predominantly agrarian contexts. See A. Agrawal and K. Sivaramakrishnan, eds., *Agrarian Environments: Resources, Representations, and Rule in India* (Durham, 2000). See also James C. Scott and Nina Bhatt, eds., *Agrarian Studies: Synthetic Work at the Cutting Edge* (New Haven, 2001). For more on the constitutive role of agrarian territories in South Asia's history see David Ludden, *An Agrarian History of South Asia* (Cambridge, 1999).

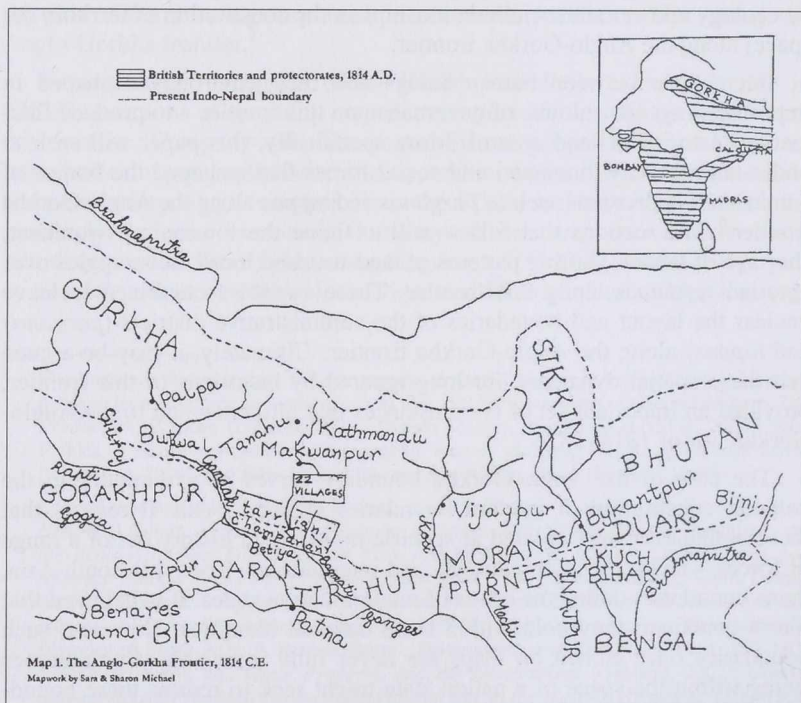
dered unclear the territorial extent and boundaries of the two states. In the ten years leading to the outbreak of war between Gorkha and the Company in 1814, the situation only worsened as both states got increasingly entangled into the logic of the complex social relationships that had organized territory on this frontier. Considerations of space force me to leave out any discussion of these disputes and this paper will focus primarily on the role played by ecology and certain social relationships in the constitution of territory (or space) along the Anglo-Gorkha frontier.

Interactions between human beings and their environment shaped in important ways the cultures of governance on this frontier – to produce fluctuating histories of land control. More specifically, this paper will seek to understand the environmental and social forces that reshaped the bodies of administrative divisions such as *parganas* and *tappas* along the Anglo-Gorkha frontier.⁶ The sections that follow will examine the forested environment, shortage of labour, shifting patterns of land-use, and localized struggles over agrarian resources along this frontier. These variables combined to leave unclear the layout and boundaries of the administrative districts (*parganas* and *tappas*) along the Anglo-Gorkha frontier. Ultimately, it may be argued that these spatial dynamics, for long ignored by historians of this frontier, provided an important set of circumstances that ultimately led to the Anglo-Gorkha war of 1814–1816.

The case of the Anglo-Gorkha boundary serves as a reminder to the colonial constitution of modern boundaries in south Asia. It reveals that these boundaries were created at specific moments in history out of a range of forces – local, regional, national, and international. Today, in south Asia, these boundaries define the space of modern nation states. It is believed that like a container, they hold within them national identities. However, such boundaries once etched on maps are never fully inviolable. Communities living within the space of a nation state might seek to redraw these boundaries as they struggle for autonomy from national states. Witness the ongoing armed movements for national autonomy in north-east India or the disputed status of Kashmir. Furthermore, communities living on both sides of the boundary often share deep historical, geographic, economic, religious, linguistic and cultural affinities. Such connections generate their own social energies of flux and movement that resist, transgress and spill over the boundary. Under such circumstances of sub-national struggles and cross-

⁶ These *parganas* and *tappas* were ancient divisions visible across much of northern India in the 18th and 19th centuries. The Mughal Empire was divided into large provinces called *subahs*. A *subah* typically consisted of *sarkars*, *parganas* and *tappas* in, though not always, descending order. In Gorkhali records *parganas* are referred to as *pragannas*.

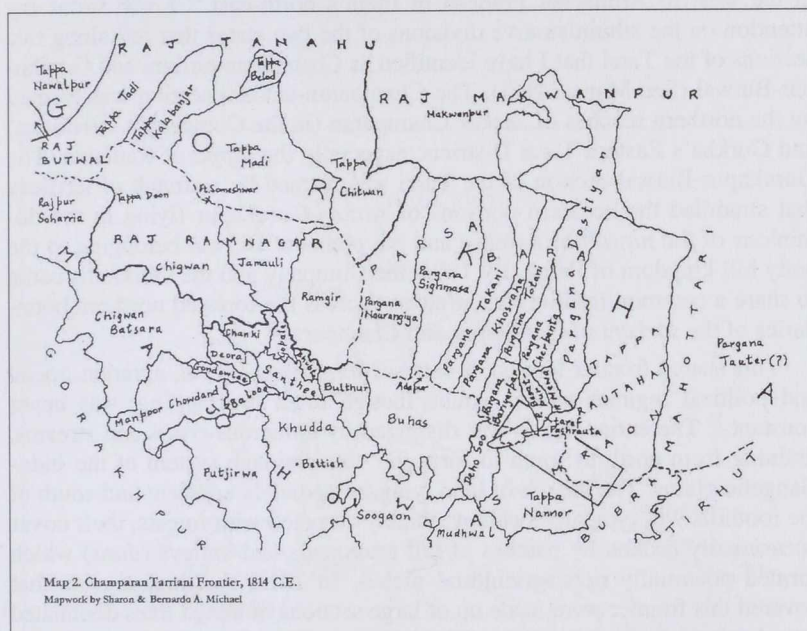
border flows, boundary disputes continue to be a source of tension that give rise to international disputes between south Asian states.⁷ Today most of these disputes take on nationalist overtones as states jostle for the rights to land, water and people. But if the historical evidence from the Anglo-



Gorkha frontier presented in this article is any indication, then more attention needs to be given to the agency of the environment and local society, rather than viewing boundary disputes merely in terms of the concerns of nationalist sentiment and international diplomacy.⁸

⁷ India, for instance, has ongoing boundary disputes with Bangladesh, China, Nepal and Pakistan.

⁸ Nation centred accounts of such boundary disputes may be found in J. N. Dixit, ed., *External Relations: Cross Border Relations* (Delhi, 2003), H.N. Kaul, *India China Boundary in Kashmir* (Delhi, 2003); Buddhi Narayan Shrestha, *Border Management in Nepal*



The Tarai: Environment and Society

The Tarai or *tarriani* as it appears in contemporary documents (both Gorkhali and Company) refers to the strip of thickly forested plains that stretched along the length of the foothills of the Himalayas.⁹ At its greatest extent it stretched for nearly 1800 kilometres from the district of Naini Tal

(Kathmandu, 2003). For exceptions to this see Sankaran Krishna, "Cartographic Anxiety: Mapping the Body Politic in India", in *Challenging Boundaries: Global Flows, Territorial Identities*, eds. Michael J. Shapiro and Hayward R. Alker (Minneapolis, 1996), pp. 193–214; Willem van Schendel, 'Stateless in south Asia: the making of the India-Bangladesh enclaves', *Journal of Asian Studies* 61:1 (2002): 115–17. Willem Van Schendel's work focuses on effect of the Chit Mahals – small enclaves lying along the present-day Indo-Bangladesh border – on the lives of their inhabitants.

⁹ The Tarriani was also sometimes referred to as Ketoni. See F. Buchanan-Hamilton, *An Account of the Kingdom of Nepal* (1819; Reprint, New Delhi, 1971), p. 62.

in the west to Arunachal Pradesh in India's north-east.¹⁰ I will focus my attention on the administrative divisions of the two states that fell along two sections of the Tarai that I have identified as Champaran-tarriani and Gorakhpur-Butwal (See Maps 2 & 3). The Champaran-tarriani section was formed by the northern reaches of *sarkar* Champaran (in the Company's territories) and Gorkha's Eastern Tarai Districts, especially the *tappa* of Rautahat. The Gorakhpur-Butwal section of the Tarai was formed by a stretch of territory that straddled the northern portions of *sarkar* Gorakhpur (lying in the dominions of the *nawab* of Awadh) and the plains of Butwal belonging to the petty hill kingdom of Palpa. By 1804, the Company and the Gorkhalis came to share a common frontier that stretched across the forested northern boundaries of the *sarkars* of Gorakhpur and Champaran.

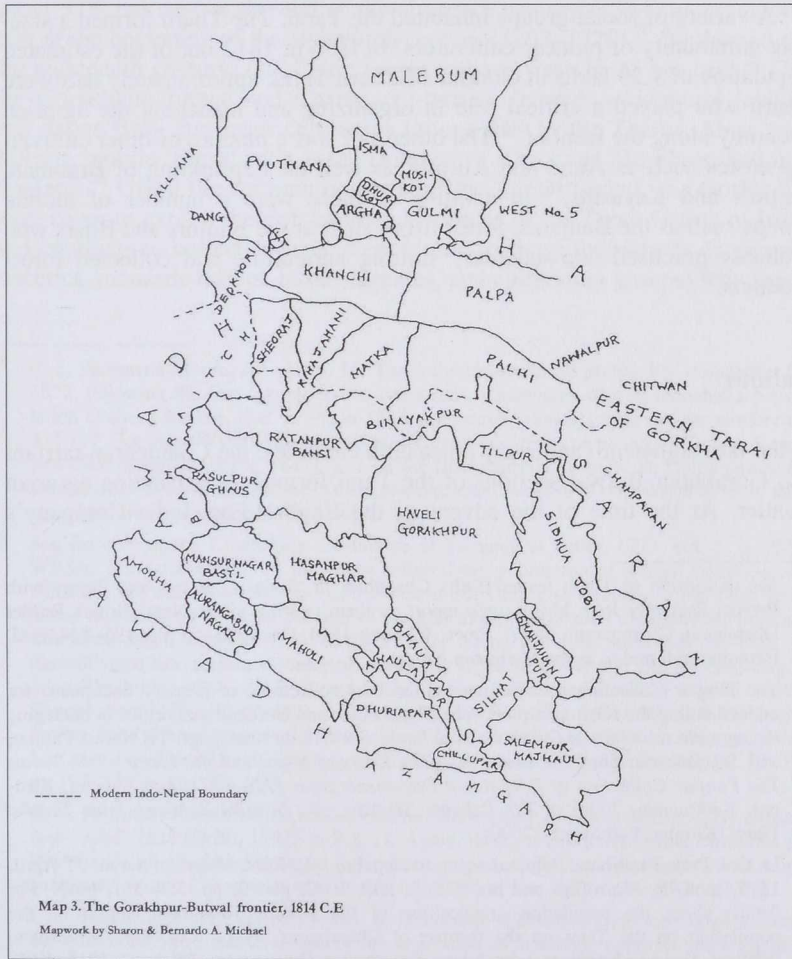
This shared frontier formed an intersection for ecological, agrarian, social and political regimes whose extent, though often overlapping, was never constant.¹¹ The entire region was dissected by numerous rivers and streams, draining from north to south to form the vast drainage system of the Indo-Gangetic plains. The stretch of land lying immediately adjacent and south of the foothills was typically swampy, thickly carpeted with forests, their cover occasionally broken by patches of tall grasslands and valleys (*duns*) which formed potentially rich agricultural niches. In 1813, the thick forests that covered this frontier were made up of large sections of mixed trees dominated by sal (*shorea robusta*) species. These forests were also particularly rich in wildlife such as, elephants, tigers, monkeys, musk deer, and a variety of birds and forest products such as pepper, wax, honey, resins, lac and grass.¹² Like the preceding little kingdoms of the Tarai, the Gorkhalis were also known for collecting revenues from the capture of wild elephants and cattle-grazing.¹³ What made these forests difficult for habitation was the presence of malaria (*aul*). Between May and October every year, when the sickness was rampant, few people dared to stay in the Tarai, other than the indigenous

¹⁰ Present-day Nepal's Tarai is almost 900 km long, comprising 15 per cent of the land, and home to nearly 50 per cent of the country's population.

¹¹ Such a melding of overlapping regimes constituting a frontier can be discerned in other times and other places. I am referring in particular to Richard Eaton's account of the rapid and creative adaptation of Islam on the Bengal frontier between the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries. See Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam on the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760* (Berkeley, 1993).

¹² 'General Statement of the Resources of the Teraiee and Forests', in letter from Paris Bradshaw, Political Agent in Nepal to John Adam, Secretary to Government 2 April 1815, *KRR*, microfilm IOR2, IOR5/1/2, part 2, p. 363, NAN.

¹³ See H.A. Oldfield, *Sketches from Nepal*, Vol. 1 (Delhi, 1880; 1974), p. 305.



cultivators such as the Tharu who through their long residence in these parts had seemingly developed immunity to the disease. Consequently, malaria discouraged extensive immigration into the region, and severely curtailed the activities of government officials to the few months of the cold season.¹⁴

A variety of social groups inhabited the Tarai. The Tharu formed a sizeable community of pioneer cultivators. In fact, in 1812 out of the estimated population of 1.29 lakhs in Gorkha's Eastern Tarai, approximately half were Tharu who played a critical role in organizing and managing the agrarian economy along the frontier.¹⁵ The other half was a mixture of other cultivating castes such as Ahirs and Kurmis, as well as a sprinkling of Brahman, Rajputs and Kayasths.¹⁶ In addition to these were a number of mobile groups such as the Banjaras, forest tribes such as the Banturs and Bhars who probably practised non-sedentary shifting agriculture and collected forest products.¹⁷

Labour

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Champaran-tarriani and Gorakhpur-Butwal sections of the Tarai formed an expanding agrarian frontier. At the time of the advent of the English East India Company's

¹⁴ See deposition of Tharu leader Bikha Chaudhari in 'Series of letters and Papers with Persian Secretary John Monckton's report on them relating to the Nepal-British Border Disputes in Champaran', in *FP*, Procs. 4 March 1814, Consl. 53-65, pp. 195-434, NAI. Hereafter, referred to as the *Monckton Report*.

¹⁵ The Panjar Collection remains one of the best collections of primary documents for understanding the relationship between Tharu elites and Gorkhali authorities in managing the agrarian resources of Gorkha's Tarai lands. See Giselle Krauskopf, Tej Narain Panjar, and Tek Bahadur Shrestha, et al., eds., *The Kings of Nepal and the Tharu of the Tarai: The Panjar Collection of Fifty Royal Documents from 1726-1971* (Los Angeles; Kirtipur, Kathmandu, 2000) or Tek Bahadur Shrestha, ed., *Nepalka Rajaharu tatha Taraika Tharu* (Kirtipur, Kathmandu, 2000).

¹⁶ Lt. Col. Paris Bradshaw, Political Agent to Nepal to J. R. Eliot, Magst. of Saran, 2nd April, 1815, in *KRR*, Microfilm reel no. IOR 2, IOR 5/1/2, part 2, pp. 354-361, NAN. For details about the population composition of the eastern Tarai see 'Report on the population on the Terai on the frontier of Champaran' by Lt. Col. Paris Bradshaw, Political Agent to Nepal, to John Adam, Secretary to Government, 2nd April, 1815, *KRR*, Microfilm reel no. IOR 2, IOR 5/1/2, part 2, p. 362, NAN. For details on the social composition of the agricultural population of Champaran, see C.J. Stevenson-Moore, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in Champaran District, 1892-1899* (Calcutta, 1900), p. 17.

¹⁷ See Radhakrishna Choudhary, *History of Muslim Rule in Tirhut (1206-1765)* (Banaras, 1970), pp. 173-227.

authority, the population of Champaran was estimated to have doubled from 12 lakhs in the 1790's to approximately 25 lakhs in 1811.¹⁸ The Bengal famine of 1769–1770 also induced large-scale migration into the tarriani from Champaran.¹⁹ The extent of land under cultivation increased from about 3.09 per cent at the end of the sixteenth century (1594) to 10.71 per cent at the beginning of the eighteenth century (1707–1720).²⁰ By the end of the eighteenth century, this figure seems to have risen to 25 per cent.²¹ On the Gorakhpur-Butwal and Champaran-tarriani frontier agricultural labour was drawn from numerous cultivating groups such as the Tharus, Ahirs and Kurmis, mobile 'tribes' such as the Domkatars, Bhars and Musahars, and the Banjaras.²² Given the agrarian potential of the Tarai districts, the Gorkhals were eager to exploit the rich agrarian resources of the Tarai. Grants of land and contracts to collect revenue were issued to those individuals or groups (ascetics, monastic orders, local magnates, and cultivating groups) who were

¹⁸ C. J. Stevenson-Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 13. These figures are in all probability inaccurate. In 1872, following the first regular census operations, Champaran district recorded a population of over 14 lakhs, *ibid.* p. 14. In 1847, one conservative estimate put the number at 421,197. See Alex Wyatt, *Statistics of the District of Sarun consisting of Sircars Sarun and Chumparun* (Calcutta, 1847), p. 2. In the final analysis, it might be fair to conclude that between 1765 and 1814, the district saw a gradual increase in population as more and more land was brought under the plough.

¹⁹ See Records of the Controlling Committee of Revenue at Patna, 1772, vol. 5, p. 255, WBSA. The famine of 1770 may have reduced the population of Bengal (inclusive of Bihar) by anywhere between one-fifth to one-third. During this famine it has been estimated that between 35 to 50 per cent of the agricultural population died, and the population levels might have taken 15 years to recover. Along with this, more than one-third of the cultivated land remained 'deserted'. See Peter J. Marshall, *Bengal: The British Bridgehead* (Cambridge, 1987), p.18; Sugata Bose, *Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital: Rural Bengal since 1770* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 8–38. See also Radha Kumud Mookerji, *Indian Land System: Ancient, Medieval and Modern* (Alipore, 1940), p. 86, and John McLane, *Land and Local Kingship in Eighteenth Century Bengal* (Cambridge, 1993), pp.194–207, esp. p. 201, 207.

²⁰ C. P. N. Sinha, *From Decline to Destruction: Agriculture in Bihar during Early British Rule, 1765–1813* (Delhi, 1997), p. 8 & 11. Again, there probably were some variations in this process of agrarian expansion. Agricultural growth might have been greater and more sustained in south Champaran with its soil composed of fine light sand and clay (*bhit*).

²¹ C. J. Stevenson-Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 101. In addition to cultivation there were other reasons for people to move into and out of the area such as banditry, religious motives, and political refuge.

²² The Banjaras, who could be both Muslim and Hindu, were active as merchants, as mercenaries and also more infamously as robbers. In 1790, the Raja of Bansi ousted them from his territories. See, H. R. Nevill, *Gorakhpur: A Gazetteer*, vol. 31 of *District Gazetteer of the United Provinces of Agra and Awadh*, (Allahabad, 1909), pp. 173–192; see also Meena Bhargava, *State, Society and Ecology: Gorakhpur in Transition, 1750–1830* (Delhi, 1999), pp. 141–42.

willing to undertake such projects. Many of these Gorkhali land grants in the Tarai were made up of both cultivable and waste lands. The intention of state authorities was that these waste lands would be cleared and brought under cultivation.

Despite the growing intensification of agrarian activity and rising population figures, political stability and ecological constraints produced recurrent shortages of labour. In fact, so serious was this shortage of labour that, authorities at Kathmandu frequently issued clear instructions to their eastern Tarai officials to do everything in their power to attract cultivators, even if it meant giving generous concessions to lure them from Moglan (plains of north India).²³ Interestingly, the orders also clearly state that where possible labour was to be procured not only from India, but even by enticing labour (by giving tax concessions and breaks) already working on *birta* or *jagir* lands, that is, land already assigned to persons in lieu of some service or as salary (*khangī*). For instance, in 1810, *Sardar* Gaj Singh Khatri was ordered to procure respectable persons (*bhala manis*) and cultivators (*raiya*t)s from Moglan to retain and settle cultivable forest lands (*kalabanjar*) in Morung.²⁴ Again, for instance, in AD 1805 (1862 BS) we hear that *jagirdars* and *birtadars* of Bara and Saptari districts (in Gorkha's Tarai) were attracting peasants from India, and replacing local revenue paying peasantry on *kalabanjar* (uncultivated forest lands) lands.²⁵ Given this labour scarcity and its attendant dialectic of competition between the organizers of cultivation and tax collection, there was much back and forth movement of labour between the territories of Gorkha and the Company.²⁶

²³ Moglan is the broad term by which the hill people would refer to the plains (*madesh*) of north India.

²⁴ A *sardar* was a high ranking civil and military official below the rank of *kaji*. See royal order to *sardar* Gaj Singh Khatri, *RRS* 16 (May 1984): 78. Similar orders were given to *gosain* Baburiya Das regarding reclamation of lands in Saptari. See, *ibid.*, pp.78–79. See the following documents for additional evidence: Land Tax assessment rates in Mahottari; arrangements for reclamation of wastelands by tenants from India, 1793 A.D., *RRC* 36: 26; *Sardar* Gaj Singh Khatri ordered to issue *pattas* to tenants procured from India for settlement of wastelands in Morung, 1810 A.D., *RRC* 39: 230; Tenants emigrated to India invited back to Morung; assurance of resolution of grievances by *subba* Anup Singh Adhikari and Dhokal Khawas, 1813 A.D., *RRC* 39: 561. See also the royal order granting *chaudharis* of Chitwan the authority to invite settlers from India to reclaim wastelands, 1818 A.D., *RRC* 42: 321.

²⁵ Warnings of severe punishment were issued to such landholders by Kathmandu, but it seems unlikely that such threats were actually carried out. See *RRC* 5: 537, no. 181, NAN.

²⁶ Shortages of labour were not always uniform in their manifestation. Francis Buchanan-Hamilton who surveyed the northern reaches of Gorakhpur District in the first decade of the nineteenth century, noted that while the *thana* of Parrona had much wasteland, the shortage of labour was not so acute. In fact, there seems to have been plentiful labour,

Cultivators too preferred to shift to new lands or were enticed to do so in order to take advantage of tax concessions and breaks being offered by these states or local landlords. Cultivators also abandoned their fields in order to escape political instability and oppression by local officials. In this connection, cultivating groups such as the Tharus would migrate elsewhere at the slightest sign of oppression. For instance, in 1791, the *gosains* and Tharus of *pargana* Koradi (Mahottari district) who had fled to India (Moglan) following oppression by *amils* (revenue collectors), were asked to return and restore the *pargana* to its former state.²⁷ In 1762 following the conquest of Makwanpur by Gorkha, many Tharus fled the eastern Tarai regions to the safety of Champaran. Later the authorities at Kathmandu recalled them on the promise of restoration of their former holdings.²⁸ At the same time large numbers of cultivators migrated from Awadh to the Company's territories in order to escape the heavy assessments imposed upon

when compared with the other northern *thanas*. Again, *pargana* Amorha being well-cultivated had a smaller percentage of wastelands when compared to *parganas* elsewhere in *sarkar* Gorakhpur. See, J. Hooper, *Final Report of the Settlement of the Basti District* (Allahabad, 1891), pp. 41–43. See also Francis Buchanan-Hamilton, 'An Account of the Northern Part of the District of Gorakhpur', Volume 1, part 2, p. 8 in Eur MSS G 22–23, *European Manuscripts*, OIOC, BL. Hereafter this account will be referred to as *The Gorakhpur Report*.

²⁷ See RRC 5:20–22, NAN. The term *gosain* is a broad generic one, that by the early nineteenth century came to encompass various mendicant groups and orders operating in the Gangetic plains, and beyond into "Nepal." Strictly speaking, *gosains* were Shaivite monks. For details about the terminological ambiguities connected with the use of this term, see William R. Pinch, *Peasants and Monks in British India* (Berkeley, 1996), pp. 24, 43–44. See also Bernard S. Cohn, "The Role of the Gosains in the Economy of Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Upper India," *IESHR* 1 (1964): 175–182. The *gosains*, in addition to their military, religious and agricultural prowess were also active in inter-regional trade circuits. We hear of them engaging in trading activities that integrated Kathmandu to the Gangetic plains in the eighteenth century, and receiving protection from the Malla kings. They were also active in financing the struggles between the kings of Kathmandu and Gorkha in the eighteenth century. See Dilli Raman Regmi, *Modern Nepal: Rise and Growth in the Eighteenth Century*, rev. ed. (Calcutta, 1975), pp. 117–121. For close examination of the activities of these groups on the Champaran-tarriani frontier, see Richard Burghart, *The History of Janakpurdham: A Study of Asceticism and the Hindu Polity* (Ph. D. Diss, University of London, 1978). See esp. chapters 6 and 7. Both the kings of the little kingdom of Makwanpur and its successor state – Gorkha – donated considerable lands to the *gosains* in the area that falls under the purview of our study.

²⁸ See Tej Narain Panjiar, 'Birtabal Tharu', *Ancient Nepal* 135 (Oct–Nov 1993), pp. 25–27. See especially the *lal mohar* (royal document bearing the red seal of the king of Gorkha) to Hem Choudhari, grandson (*nati*) of Ranpal Choudhari, p. 25 & plate 2. See also Giselle Krauskopf et al., eds., *The Kings of Nepal and the Tharu of the Tarai*.

them by the revenue collectors (*amils*) of that kingdom.²⁹ In this fashion, the agrarian landscape pulsated in sync with the flows of labour – that is, patches of land fell in and out of cultivation depending on the availability of labour.

Thus for these reasons, lands on the Gorakhpur-Butwal frontier kept moving back and forth between cultivation and waste depending on the availability of agricultural labour. There was a tendency for uncultivated forest and grasslands to acquire the ambiguous status of ‘commons’ as for instance in the northern reaches of *pargana* Ratanpur Bansi and the *taluqa* of Matka.³⁰ In 1814, the *tappas* that marked the northern boundary of Gorakhpur (*viz.*, lying in the *parganas* of Ratanpur Bansi, Binayakpur, and Tilpur) registered frequent fluctuations between cultivation and waste. An instance of this can be found in the case of *tappa* Dhebrua. *Tappa* Dhebrua lay across the disputed Gorkhali *tappa* of Sheoraj and was at one time made up of 60 *mauzas*. In between 1752–92 the lands here lay waste. Since 1792, 14 *malguzari* tenures and eight rent-free tenures were present. The *malguzari* tenures fell to 11 in 1805, 12 in 1806 and 11 in 1807. In the meanwhile, two rent free villages had fallen out of cultivation. Thus, in November 1811, there were a total of 48 *mauzas* in cultivation.³¹ On many occasions, it became difficult for Company officials to distinguish between lands that lay under its jurisdiction, and those that belonged to Gorkha. Uncultivated lands in this event, as D. Scott, the acting Magistrate of Gorakhpur in 1811 explains, remained in ‘a state of commons than of private pasture grounds, it becomes in many cases a matter of difficulty to ascertain

²⁹ Meena Bhargava, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

³⁰ For details on the *taluqa* of Matka see, Reports and Observations submitted by Paris Bradshaw on the negotiations and correspondence with the Nepaulese Commissioners, April-May 1813, *FP Procs.* 18 June 1813, nos. 18–24, NAI. It is unclear if these lands were indeed ‘commons’ or became ‘common’ lands during periods of fallow or uncultivation.

³¹ See, D. Scott, Acting Magst. of Gorakhpur to Dowdeswell, secretary to government in Judicial department, 19 November 1811, *FP Consl.* 17 January 1812, no. 46, NAI. I might add that the information Collectors like David Scott was gathering was invariably refracted through the interested lenses of local landholders, and their officials such as *quanungoes* and *patwaris*. Such officials often colluded with other agents in concealing such information in an effort to deprive the state of its share of revenues. In this sense, these hidden narratives can never be fully unearthed in an historical investigation such as this one. Our access to that world of agrarian representations and practices will always be obstructed by this opacity inherent in the Company records.

what wasteland has been hitherto subject to the British government and what has been usurped by the Nypalese'.³²

It is possible that on the Anglo-Gorkha frontier that such patterns of flexible and shifting cultivation indicated the availability of a class of *pahikasht* cultivators or persons who cultivated lands in a village other than to the one to which they belonged.³³ Francis Buchanan-Hamilton noted the presence of just under twenty thousand persons who would qualify as *pahikasht* and who were active in the northern *thanas* of Bansī, Dholiya Bandar, Pali, Lotan and Nichlāul.³⁴ *Pahikasht* cultivators were constantly on the move, drawn to cultivate *banjar* lands, on short term leases for up to three years, after which they would move on in search of new lands to cultivate.³⁵ Christopher Bayly's observations on the phenomenon of *pahikasht* cultivation in north India are relevant to the argument here when he notes that, 'Cultivators of this sort [that is, *pahikasht* cultivators] provided a shifting population of agrarian servants and specialists whose movements in response to political change could rapidly transform an area from high cultivation to wilderness, or vice-versa'.³⁶ Commenting on the synergistic relationship that existed between *pahikasht* labour and the land in the northern tracts of Gorakhpur, historian Meena Bhargava concludes that 'the ability of the economy of Gorakhpur to re-people, recycle and revive agriculture speaks for its resilient, adaptive and flexible nature during the

³² D. Scott, Acting Magst. to G. Dowdeswell, secretary to Government, 19 November 1811 in Letters issued to Magst., *GCR* basta 25, vol. 164, pp. 100–06, RSA. See also, *FP* Consl. 17 January 1812, no. 46, NAI.

³³ Standing opposed to this category was the *khudkasht* cultivator, or one who cultivated lands in the village of his residence. For details, see S. Nurul Hasan, *Thoughts on Agrarian Relations in Mughal India* (Delhi, 1983) p. 19. Yasin's Glossary notes that a *pahikasht* cultivator was a *raiyat* (cultivator) resident in one *mauza* belonging to a *zamindar*, but cultivating land in a *zamindari* of a different *zamindar*. See, Mahmud Hasan, *Yasin's Glossary of Revenue Terms: Edition, English Translation, Annotation and Analysis* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Jamia Milia Islamia University, 1984), pp. 86, 147. Thus, Meena Bhargava clarifies when she notes that the *pahikasht* 'were such cultivators who cultivated lands in villages, not belonging to the same *zamindari*, tribal or clan settlements as their own.' See M. Bhargava, *op. cit.*, p. 160; See also 'Perception and Classification of the Rights of the Social Classes: Gorakhpur and the East India Company in the late eighteenth Century and early nineteenth Century', *IESHR* 30 (1993): 234.

³⁴ 'Estimates of the proportion of different classes of society employed in agriculture in the Northern Part of this District of Gorakhpur', Table no. 3, in Francis Buchanan-Hamilton's *Gorakhpur Report*.

³⁵ M. Bhargava, *op. cit.*, pp. 31–32.

³⁶ C. A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen, and Bazaars: North Indian Society in an Age of British Expansion, 1770–1870* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 39.

period of the study.³⁷ Bhargava's comments about the northern reaches of Gorakhpur district echo similar patterns unfolding elsewhere on the Champaran-tarriani frontier.

Forest-Field-Waste Mosaics on the Anglo-Gorkha Frontier

Historians studying the Anglo-Gorkha War of 1814–16 have yet to trace the connections between the Tarai environment, shortages of labour and the production of agrarian territory. Important to any such discussion of agrarian spaces was the considerable presence of 'wastelands'. The term 'waste' land occurs frequently in Company records. Along the Anglo-Gorkha frontier there is evidence of the considerable presence of waste lands. Considerable tracts of land on the Champaran-tarriani frontier remained uncultivated. For example, in Champaran, over half the area of *tappas* Rajpur Soharria, Jamauli, Chigwan Batsara, and Manpur Chowdand were covered with forests, grasslands, and uncultivated "waste" land.³⁸ In fact, the entire northern reaches of the Raj Ramnagar were covered by grassland.³⁹ Again, further east, a considerable portion of Gorakhpur district remained *wairan* or waste. Gorakhpur's first English Collector, John Routledge on his first survey of the district in 1802 noted the presence of uncultivated wastelands, with a high incidence of migration to, for example, areas like Butwal.⁴⁰ At the beginning of the nineteenth century as much as 50 per cent of the total

³⁷ M. Bhargava, *op. cit.*, pp. 31–32. Most *pahikashts* were also *khudkasht* cultivators as well, the latter often working as *pahikashts* in fields other than their own in order to supplement their income. Cf. *op. cit.*, pp. 159–68.

³⁸ And there is ample evidence to support this statement. In 1788, Archibald Montgomerie, Collector of Saran district noted that *sarkar* Champaran contained an "immense" quantity of waste lands that were fit for cultivation, which for the most part lay along the border of the "Nipal" territories. Cited in C. J. Stevenson-Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

³⁹ The Raj Ramnagar, or the little kingdom of Ramnagar lay on the northern frontier of Champaran and was made up of the three *tappas* of Chigwan, Jamauli and Ramgir. In 1814, it administered by members of the former rulers of Tanahu. It originally formed a part of the Tanahu raj whose main territories lay to the north in the hills. When the Tanahu raj fell to Gorkha in the late eighteenth century, its ousted rulers fled down to Ramnagar and established their authority there. For further details about the Tanahu raj see Suryamani Adhikari, *Tanahu Rajyako Itihas* (Chitwan, 1998).

⁴⁰ See J. Routledge to Henry Wellesley, Lt. Governor and President of the Board of Commissioners for the Ceded Districts, 14 January 1802, Letters Issued Register, *GCR*, basta 16, vol. 112, RSA.

land available for cultivation, at least in the northern *tappas* of Gorakhpur seem to have, at some time or the other, lain in a state of waste.⁴¹

The use of this term in Company records was in some ways misleading because it missed out the crucial role these lands played in the constitution of the agrarian landscapes of the region. A variety of land-use patterns can be discerned within the category of 'waste'.⁴² Such 'waste' lands could be a complex composite of various types of cultivable wastes (fallow lands that could be forest fallows or grass fallows) unculturable wastes, forest lands (cultivable/uncultivable) and common lands. In other words 'waste' was not a permanent condition for lands to lie in. Rather lands that were deemed at one time to be lying in 'waste' could be under cultivation in other times. So the generic category 'wastelands' could in reality enclose lands that for various reasons (transhumance, warfare, and famine) shifted back and forth between cultivation, fallow, and waste. Unpacking the category of 'wastelands' and discovering the diversity of land use it entailed, necessarily calls for its historicizing. Only then will it be possible to discern the various environmental and social factors that tugged at them leading to such shifting patterns of land-use. Such 'waste' lands and their varied histories could be found aplenty on the Anglo-Gorkha frontier.⁴³

'Waste' lands and even grazing runs over a period of time became a complex composite of various types that were subject to fluctuating patterns of land-use. Such fluctuating land-use patterns meant that patches of territory would shift back and forth between cultivation and waste, and at times between different sources of political authority (Gorkhali, the Company, and little kingdoms and powerful landed magnates) along the frontier. This

⁴¹ Alexander Ross, Coll. to BOR, 15 May 1805, Letters Issued Register, GCR, basta 16, vol. 4, RSA. Ross in his estimate claimed that this figure applied to the entire district of Gorakhpur. Even if this figure might have been an exaggeration, it probably reflected the condition of the northern *tappas* of Gorakhpur district, such as Dholiya Bandar. See also 'General Statistical Table about the Northern Part of the District of Gorakhpur,' Table no. 1, Statistics of Gorakhpur, Eur MSS G22, OIOC, BL. The tables are part of Hamilton's *Gorakhpur Report*. See also Montgomery Martin, *The History, Antiquities, Topography, and Statistics of Eastern India* (Delhi, 1976), Appendix p. 10.

⁴² For an analysis of the colonial state's use of such classificatory categories see Burton Stein, 'Idiom and Ideology in Early Nineteenth Century South India', in *Rural India*, ed. Peter Robb (London, 1983), pp. 23–58.

⁴³ For instance, the internal divisions and boundaries of the *pargana* of Pharkaya were unclear (in Monghyr District, which lay along the Anglo-Gorkha frontier) largely because its lands were constantly slipping in and out of cultivation. Furthermore, in the same district, the *pargana* of Furkeeah had 14 highly intermixed *tappas* with a high concentration of *bairan* (or waste) lands. See R.H. Phillimore, *Historical Records of the Survey of India* (Dehra Dun, 1958), vol. 4, pp. 182–183.

meant that the administrative districts such as *parganas* and *tappas* were never constant in their layout or boundaries. They tended to possess shifting contours with intermixed bodies and fuzzy boundaries. Histories of such forest-field-waste lands, I believe, would provide important insights into the changing architecture of the administrative divisions to which these lands must have ultimately belonged.⁴⁴

The manner in which lands fell in and out of cultivation had a lot to do with the organization of political power on the frontier. Numerous elites were always invested in various kinds of agrarian activity because of the symbolic and material resources it offered them. The ability to organize labour, to coerce cultivation and extract revenue are dependent on the persuasive and organizational capacities of local and supra local elites. This meant that lands all too frequently tended to shift back and forth between agents belonging to different states. In this case, patches of land belonging to the administrative units along the Anglo-Gorkha frontier could come under the extractive levies of some local magnate or petty chief in one year, lie waste in another, and revert to cultivation in the third, only this time in the hands of some new source of political authority. Such lands would be recorded in the account books of an administrative division (such as a *pargana* or *tappa*) only to be left out the next year and attached to the accounts of another totally separate division. Depending on the political managers organizing cultivation and their allegiances, these administrative divisions could belong to one state (such as Gorkha) in any one year, only to be attached to the revenue record of the Company the next year.

One example should suffice. As I will endeavour to show, such developments and their attendant spatial implications were unfolding in the area of *pargana* Simraon, which as a disputed area played an important role in the

⁴⁴ Such an investigation would take us to the rich intersections of various disciplines such as environmental history, political ecology and cultural studies. This article does not aspire to do this and it will suffice, at this juncture, to point out the value of such an exercise. My articulations, at this juncture, especially in terms of my attempt to trace the linkages between ecological variables and spatial production have crystallized following a number of exploratory readings. See Sara Berry, 'Social Institutions and Access to Resources', *Africa* 59 (1989): 41–55; Piers Blakie and H. Brookfield, *Land Degradation and Society*, (London, 1987); Ronald J. Herring, 'Resurrecting the Commons: Collective Action and Ecology', *Items* 44, no. 4 (1990), pp. 64–67; Minoti Chakravarty-Kaul, *Common Lands and Customary Law: Institutional Change in north India over the past two centuries* (Delhi, 1996); Nancy Peluso, *Rich Forests, Poor People: Resource Control and Resistance in Java* (Berkeley, 1992); idem, 'Fruit Trees and Family Trees in an Anthropogenic Forest: Ethics of Access, Property Zones, and Environmental Change in Indonesia', *CSSH* (1996): 510–547. I would also like to place on record my gratitude to Brian J. Murton and George Varughese who cued me in to the possibilities of making such connections in the first place.

outbreak of the Anglo-Gorkha war in 1814. In 1815, Lt. Col. Paris Bradshaw, the Company's political agent to Nepal noted that the areas east of Bara Garhi (twelve forts) and *pargana* Simraon were 'surprisingly' barren.⁴⁵ The arguments about the region being barren might also be applied to the 22 villages that in 1814 became the chief bone of contention between Gorkha and the Company state. These 22 villages were claimed to be the ancestral property of the Raja of Bettiah, a subject of the Company. However, John Adams, the secretary to Government had this to say regarding the status of these lands: 'I should rather imagine that though the lands may have been considered to be his (the Bettiah Raja, Bir Kishor Singh's) *de jure*, it was not actually his *de facto* and [it was for this reason] that the jumma (*jama*) of the 22 villages was not included in the settlement of his estate concluded in the year 1799'.⁴⁶

Why was the jumma (*jama* or expected revenue yield) of the 22 villages not recorded in the accounts of 1799(?)? There are a number of possible reasons for this. It is possible that the Raja of Bettiah had tried to conceal information relating to the resources and revenue yielding capacity of these 22 villages. Such tactics were common practice in Champaran. They usually signified a part of the long-standing struggles taking place between local elites and central authorities that for long had characterized processes of state making and the cultures of governance in this region. On the other hand, it might have been 'waste' land in 1799(?), whose status in 1814 had changed to that of cultivable land. It is unclear as to who the cultivating agencies were. Finally, it is also possible that the land was being cultivated by some person(s) paying revenue to some authority that was neither the Company or the Raja of Bettiah and thereby these villages found their way into the revenue accounts of that collecting authority (Gorkha? or Gorkhali officials? some local landed magnate?).

⁴⁵ Letter from Paris Bradshaw to J. R. Eliot, Mgst. of Saran, 2nd April 1815, in *KRR*, microfilm reel no. IOR 2, IOR 5/1/2, Part 2, pp. 354-361, NAN. It might be appropriate to reiterate that *pargana* Simraon was made up of two *tappas*, Nannor and Rautahat. In this observation, Bradshaw is probably referring to *tappa* Nannor. Rautahat as a newly acquired territory was granted to Gorkha by the British, in 1783. In between 1783-1814 the Gorkhals strengthened their presence by conferring a large number of land grants in *tappa* Rautahat.

⁴⁶ This observation noted in pencil (probably by Adams himself) on the margins of a letter he received from the Magistrate of Saran. See J. R. Eliot, Mgst. of Saran to John Adams, Secretary to Government, 5 January 1816, *FS* Consl. 3 February 1816, Consl. no. 21. NAI. It is possible that the year should actually read 1789 and not 1799. It was in 1789 that the East India Company entered into a decennial or ten-year settlement with the *zamindars* of Champaran. With the introduction of the Permanent Settlement in the Provinces of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, in 1793, the terms of this decennial settlement was fixed in perpetuity.

Whatever the reason, such histories clearly reveal that for a variety of reasons patches of land could slip between cultivation and 'waste' (culturable, non-culturable, grazing and forest), their 'ownership' oscillating back and forth between different loci of authority and power. This gave rise to all kinds of complicated multi-cornered disputes over land and labour. At the other end of the spectrum when local conditions and human agency were lacking, these lands could return to the status of 'waste' or 'barren' land. Such lands must have been widespread all along the northern reaches of Champaran. Over seventy years later in the 1890s, the district of Champaran continued to possess approximately 12 per cent of old fallow land – land that had at one time been cultivated, but over the years had remained fallow. Such lands remained in such a state for long periods of time ultimately becoming common lands that were utilized in winter for grazing purposes by the pastoral castes such as the *goalas*.⁴⁷ In other words, shifting patterns of land-use are to be discerned all along the Champaran-tarriani frontier. Company reports of this period while referring to the barrenness of the landscape typically gloss over the social and ecological tensions that may have gone into the creation of the land as 'waste' or 'barren'. Malarial forests, shortages of labour, and disputed cultures of governance marked the production of agrarian territories along this frontier. Together they would produce the fluctuating 'forest-field mosaics' all along the Anglo-Gorkha frontier.⁴⁸

Thus, the agrarian environments of the Anglo-Gorkha frontier created a tract of land rich in forest resources and conducive to cultivation. This fact was not lost on the range of actors from individual cultivating families, local elites, and intrusive powerful states. Together these human agents forged a field of activity that was marked by negotiations and contests as they sought to exploit these resources. Struggles over such resources were one of the marked features of cultures of governance on the Champaran-'tarriani' frontier. Human labour became a valuable and contested resource. Attempts at such resource extraction had an ebb and flow like quality to them that closely synchronized with the seasonal presence of malaria, the vagaries of power struggles, and the shortages of labour the tarriani was periodically subject to. In terms of space or the organization of territory, such a context of shifting relationships produced administrative divisions that were incon-

⁴⁷ For details see C. J. Stevenson-Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 106. For more details about such an exploration elsewhere, see Minoti Chakravarty-Kaul, *Common Lands and Customary Law* (Delhi, 1996).

⁴⁸ In the eighteenth century, similar processes seem to have been unfolding elsewhere on other sections of the Company's frontier with Gorkha. For evidence from the Purnea frontier see, Ratneshwar Mishra, 'Agrarian Economy of Purnea in the Eighteenth Century', *JBRIS* 60 (Jan-Dec 1974): 183–189.

stant. Administrative divisions such as villages, *parganas* and *tappas* pulsated in their internal organization, layout and boundaries – defined more by a fluid intermixed architecture than by any notion of fixed linear boundaries and coherent contiguous lands. I suggest that it was these kinds of spatial dynamics that informed the creation of the Anglo-Gorkha frontier and played an important role in the disputes that emerged between the English and the Gorkhalis by 1814. Both would lay claim to lands that possessed such shifting histories of possession.

Conclusion: Agrarian Environments and the Production of Space

It was this dynamics of ecology, land, and labour that helped produce the mobile agrarian spaces of the Champaran-tarriani and Gorakhpur-Butwal sections of the Anglo-Gorkha frontier. While an expanding agrarian frontier in the eighteenth century, it was simultaneously an unstable one. Patches of land along the central and eastern sections of the Anglo-Gorkha frontier fluctuated, at times rapidly, from a state of cultivation to waste and also between competing centres of political power. It can be argued that such phenomenon were unfolding all along the malarial forests lying on the Anglo-Gorkha frontier prior to the outbreak of war in 1814. Such processes triggered commensurate fluctuations in the internal organization, layout, and extent of administrative divisions such as a *pargana*, *tappas*, and *mauzas*. In spatial terms, this meant that the actual extent, resources and layout of a *pargana* and *tappa* would remain inconstant.

The internal resources of these fiscal divisions would fluctuate appearing in the revenue accounts of subjects belonging to either state in one year, disappear the following year only to reappear in successive years. The spatial cohesion and integrity of fiscal divisions on these sections of the Anglo-Gorkha frontier began to break up as bits and pieces of land slipped back and forth between cultivation and waste, a process driven by human and environmental agents. Multi-cornered contests between local elites, officials and various cultivating groups also produced shifting patterns of land control. So a patch of land could in one year belong to Gorkha and its dependencies and in another year to the Company and its dependencies. In this case the boundaries between *parganas* and *tappas* along the Anglo-Gorkha frontier remained fluid and discontinuous. These divisions tended to possess patchy, intertwined bodies and in many instances, it was difficult to discern where one fiscal division began and another ended.

In the early nineteenth century this would pose problems of governance for Company officials who became increasingly obsessed with the need to reduce such histories of shifting control of land and the spatial illegibility it produced. Company officials believed that this could be achieved by clearly delineating the boundaries between the Company's territories and Gorkha. Needless to say, when the Anglo-Gorkha war concluded in 1816 with the victory of the British, it should come as no surprise that they took steps to carefully delineate the common boundary of the two states using masonry pillars. The boundary between the two states now became a line visible on a map that would contain any spatial spillovers of the kind outlined earlier. This would initiate the long drawn and often ill-coordinated process by which the political boundaries of modern south Asia would be put into place.

Abbreviations

BL	British Library, London
BOR	Board of Revenue
Consl.	Consultation
CSSH	Comparative Studies in Society and History
FP	Foreign Political
GCR	Gorakhpur Collectorate Records
IESHR	Indian Economic and Social History Review
IOR	India Office Records
JBRS	Journal of the Bihar Research Society
KRR	Kathmandu Residency Records
Magst.	Magistrate
NAI	National Archives of India, New Delhi
NAN	National Archives of Nepal, Kathmandu
OIOC	Oriental and India Office Collection, London
Procs.	Proceedings
RRC	Regmi Research Collection
RRS	Regmi Research Series
RSA	Regional State Archives, Allahabad
WBSA	West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta