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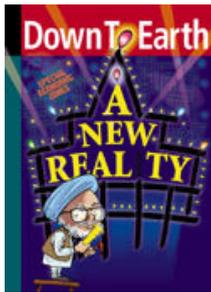
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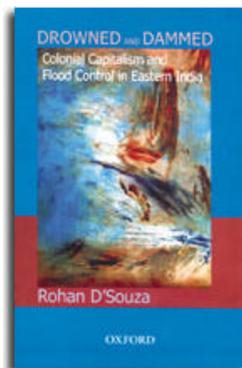
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From the Archives



## "Drowned and dammed: Colonial capitalism and flood control in eastern India

PRAVEEN SINGH



ROHAN D'SOUZA, 'DROWNED AND DAMMED': COLONIAL CAPITALISM AND FLOOD CONTROL IN EASTERN INDIA, 2006 • Oxford University Press • New Delhi •

In recent times, dams — the very structures supposed to control floods — have caused rivers to run in spate. This year's floods in Gujarat, and in the Mahanadi delta in 1961, 1982, 1994 and 2001, were caused by the sudden release of impounded water. The frequency of floods in the Mahanadi basin has increased since the construction of the Hirakud dam in 1958 — from once in 3.1 years in the pre-dam period to 3.35 years. The effectiveness of dams as an instrument of flood control has been debated vociferously with activists and academics on one side, and irrigation officials on the other. But the evaluations have largely been technological ones. The book under review, in contrast, has tried to analyse the politics and economics behind the choice of dams.

Rohan D'Souza argues that flood control was integral to the colonial project of transforming subsistence agrarian economies into profit-making enterprises. In pre-colonial times, peasants in Orissa used various strategies to utilise silt-laden floodwaters. But embankments created by the colonial state transformed the Mahanadi delta from a 'flood-dependent' to a 'flood-vulnerable' landscape.

The colonial intervention, D'Souza argues, was different from those by the Mughal and Maratha rulers. The numerous local revenue officials in the service of these states did not just ascertain the seasonal variations in agrarian output; they also helped people sustain conditions for agrarian production and supported the peasantry during distress and devastation. The colonial state's revenue administration, in contrast, was geared towards collecting rent, an amount fixed for thirty years. The introduction of private property in land transformed the peasant from a hereditary tiller who had to surrender a part of his produce to the state to a tenant who had to pay a fixed rent to a landlord irrespective of all extenuations. As a result, the peasant lost all initiative and interest in carrying out his traditional roles. The colonial state, however, did not speak in one voice while carrying out this transformation. D'Souza's brings out the interesting debates within the colonial government: for instance, between the military engineers and the revenue officials. He shows that there was complete unanimity by the 1930s about the inefficacy of colonial flood controlling measures in deltaic regions. The state, however, continued with its project. There lies D'Souza's main argument. He reasons that the urge to dominate rivers was informed by "the imperatives for disciplining the local populace and forging specific economic and social relations". At the same time, the government found it difficult to maintain the embankments and canals: they were, contrary to expectations, financially unremunerative. But vested interests militated against the disbanding of these structures.

While there was some unanimity amongst officials against tampering with the rivers in the flood plains, opinion was also gaining ground to control rivers in the hills. The success of the multi-Purpose valley development model in the US in the 1930s proved manna for the colonial state whose strategy for flood control in Orissa "had collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions", D'Souza shows.

Environmental historians have seen the colonial agenda of reconfiguring social and natural environments in terms of imperatives of ruling, and Western sensibilities on nature. D'Souza, in contrast, has located the working of the 'colonial project' within the processes of capitalist expansion. His work makes it easier to understand continuities in patterns of environmental degradation that continue to dog post-colonial South Asia. The analysis does not show how the various classes of rural communities that found strength from colonialism encouraged the trajectory of development in post-colonial India. The book is a significant addition to the literature on environmental history of South Asia, nevertheless.

*Praveen Singh is a visiting fellow, Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Environment and Development, Bangalore*

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