

Empire and Ecology in the Bengal Delta

What happens when a distant colonial power tries to tame an unfamiliar terrain in the world's largest tidal delta? This history of dramatic ecological changes in the Bengal Delta from 1760 to 1920 involves land, water and humans, tracing the stories and struggles that link them together. Pushing beyond narratives of environmental decline, Bhattacharyya argues that “property-thinking,” a governing tool critical in making land and water discrete categories of bureaucratic and legal management, was at the heart of colonial urbanization and the technologies behind the draining of Calcutta. The story of ecological change is narrated alongside emergent practices of land speculation and transformation in colonial law. Bhattacharyya demonstrates how this history continues to shape our built environments with devastating consequences, as shown in the Bay of Bengal's receding coastline.

DEBJANI BHATTACHARYYA is an assistant professor of history at Drexel University. She was a junior fellow of the American Institute of India Studies and a former research fellow at the International Institute of Asian Studies, Leiden.

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The Making of Calcutta

DEBJANI BHATTACHARYYA

Drexel University



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