Investing in Nature around Sylhet
An Excursion into Geographical History

Geographical histories around the region of Sylhet, in north-east Bangladesh, indicate that transactions between mobility and territoriality, which typify globalisation, have long operated in diverse spatial and temporal registers – ecological, religious, demographic, economic, and political – to transform the social and cultural spaces where people invest in nature. Scholars, policy-makers and activists would thus do well to abandon the idea that national maps alone constitute the geography of modernity.

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Nature may exist outside society, but natural resources are social phenomena, composed of social investments that give nature social life. Modernity has so invested nature with national identity that national maps now often appear to contain nature the way a Petrie Dish contains amoeba. But national maps do not describe nature’s social geography; they rather represent modern territorialism impressing itself on nature; and territorialism is not the only social force invested in nature: mobility is equally important. Focusing more attention on mobility’s investment in nature in critical as globalisation increases the power of mobility over natural elements, which begin their social life in national territory but may not stay there for long. Using only national maps to imagine geographies of natural resource environments blurs analysis in one eye.

To imagine better maps, we need to put geography in motion, to keep temporal as well as spatial dimensions in view. When we do, we see that natural resources live in social geographies defined simultaneously by mobility and territorialism. Natural things become natural resources in any one place only because social assets that make nature productive move in time and space. Globalisation expands the geographical scale of an old fact of life for natural resources, which begin their social life in places where people make territorial claims to nature, but live mostly in the realm of mobility, where all the social resources that combine to make nature productive move from hand to hand, place to place, and from one social identity to another.

Intersections of territorialism and mobility have shaped natural resource environments in south Asia since prehistoric times, and their conflicting cultural attachments animate old village communities and agrarian regions as well as modern cities and national states. The basic source of their conflict is this: people who live inside each enclosed territory enjoy proprietary authority over resources in that territory, which they invest to accumulate resources inside their own territory, while mobile folk move resources from one territory to another, to combine with local assets and to carry the proceeds away, back into the realm of mobility.

Over the centuries, transactions between mobile and territorial interests have expanded product chains and social wealth, but have also typically pitted mobile and territorial claims to resources against one another, as in classically fraught relations between nomads and farmers, between shifting and sedentary cultivators, and between merchants and artisans. A more complex but critical example of creative tension appears in histories of nationalism and globalisation: that is, in fraught interactions between mobile folk who bring separate territories under expansive, encompassing territorial authority, and local territorial folk who covet assets that move across wide spaces but also fight to maintain their own territorial order so they can put assets from the wider world to work on their own ground.

Combining productive powers and reconciling conflicting interests of territorialism and mobility became the specialty of elites who produced most historical records, who typically live in central territorial sites, spread their influence across networks of mobility, enrich themselves at intersections of territorialism and mobility, and endeavour to accommodate conflicting claims to resources with various combinations of coercion, adjudication, patronage, and persuasion. The geographical reach and provenance of resource elites has changed countless times, over centuries, and thus, their territorial domains have acquired many shifting, mobile geographies. In this light, we can say that in the long span of history, mobility has had the upper hand, overall, in transactions with territorialism.

From Mauryan times onward, mobile folk have repeatedly reshaped natural resource environments in southern Asia. In the second millennium of the Common Era, the spatial scale of mobility increased, as Turks, Afghans, Mongols, and Persians reshaped territories across Asia, as Europeans reshaped territories across the Americas, Africa, and Asia, and as mobile folk in south Asia reshaped territories across the subcontinent. By the 18th century, mobility made the fixing of boundaries in India quite imaginary, for as much as half the population may have then comprised mobile artisans and workers, peasants colonising new land, itinerant merchants, nomads, pilgrims, shifting cultivators, hunters, migratory service workers and literati, herders, transporters, soldiers, people fleeing war, drought, and flood, and camp followers supplying troops on the move. All this mobility entailed widespread conflict and a huge expansion of commercial activity, commodity production, and global interconnections.

In the 19th century, territorialism began its long march to modern dominance, and in south Asia, it marched with and against the British Empire. National state boundaries only covered the globe after 1950, however, and only then did all the histories of all peoples in the world, for all times, begin to appear inside our cookie-cutter world of national geography.

The force of mobility did not decline in the world of national maps, however. Declining transport costs, bigger populations, and increasing spatial inequality rather expanded its scale of
operation. National boundaries now represent legal and cultural norms, but they do not contain mobility; they rather constitute modern instruments of power over mobility. Today, the new complexity of old tensions between mobility and territorialism appears most poignantly inside national territories, where people strive simultaneously to enforce the closure of their own territories, to control nature inside their own boundaries, to exclude and subdue aliens, to move in and out of territories, to bring in and take out resources, to move and settle in resource-rich places, to change and mix territorial identities, and to expand claims to resources in mobile territotries like those defined by metropolitian regions, multinational corporations, and the US military.

To imagine more realistic geographies of natural resource environments than national maps provide, we can begin by abandoning the idea that territorialism could ever contain mobility. Territorial wealth and national development depend on mobility that territorialism cannot control, and mobility is always at work transforming territory in ways that territorialism does not comprehend. Thus it makes sense to locate studies of natural resource environments at geographical intersections of mobility and territorialism.

**Locating Sylhet**

Within a hundred mile radius of the city of Sylhet, in north-east Bangladesh, many territorial transformations have occurred over the centuries, in expansive geographies of mobility where people and resources have travelled widely and also combined locally in the social process of investing in nature. Sylhet city inhabits a mound of land in the floodplain of the Surma River. The city’s immediate surroundings are as densely populated as any part of Bangladesh, at about 70 per cent the national figure, because it includes thinly populated mountains and lowlands that flood deeply and extensively for half of every year.

Sylhet inhabits nature-on-the-move. Tectonic shifts continue to lift the highlands and depress the deepest-flooding ‘haor’ basins. Natural gas moves underground in tectonic folds. Thumping earthquakes periodically destabilise water’s established pathways. The Surma and the Kushiara delta, Brahmputra, and Kushiara meander, split, and recombine before joining the Meghna, which then joins the Brahmaputra, whose main course and Kushiara meander, split, and recombine before joining the Meghna, which then joins the Brahmaputra and Yunnan, China, and across northern Burma, into Assam and the Ganga basin. As Gangetic agrarian societies expanded their territorial domains eastward, from Mauryan times, people like the Khasis enriched Hindu cultures, but Gangetic territorialism also rested on the expansion of permanent farmland that forced all the Munda language speakers, including Khasis, to submit, assimilate, or move.

Over the centuries, lowland territorialism compelled and informed tribal territorialism in the uplands. In 1600, Koch, Khasi, Garo, and others still occupied many places in the lowlands, but facing unprecedented pressure to submit to the Mughals, most retreated to the mountains. After 1600 and again after 1800, the accelerated expansion of sedentary agriculture drove shifting cultivators out of the plains; it also increased violence between contending interests on the land, confined tribal societies to the hills, and produced new political forms in the mountains. All these connected trends continue today.

Siva’s overshadowing of the river goddess in Cachar represents one local moment in the advance of lowland territorialism, which produced Bengali societies on moving eastern frontiers of Gangetic cultures, by pushing permanent farms into places inhabited by shifting cultivators, who lived in the highlands and lowlands, who moved freely among forest and field, mountains and plains, and who hunted and fished without settling down permanently anywhere. Though mobile lifestyles remained well adapted to the environment’s watery uncertainty, animist cults and non-Aryan practices, including matrilineal kinship, marked shifting cultivators as primitive aliens for the Hindu, Muslim, and European lowlanders who invested in nature inside expansive territories of sedentary agriculture, urbanism, state revenue, and permanent territorial authority.

Sylhet town (Srihatta) became a major centre of lowland territorialism after the 10th century CE. Before then, copper plate inscriptions indicate that land around the Kushiara was more densely populated, because Kamarupa kings had granted large tracts of land to immigrant brahmans and their supporting castes, to make this region part of Assam (Khanda Kamarupa). In the 13th century, Afghans conquered Sena rajas, inducing more Hindus to move east into Sylhet, and Sylhet town’s centre on the Surma became a fortified centre for local rajas. In the 14th century, the town received the sanctity of Shah Jalal, who arrived...
from Turkestan with 300 ‘darvish’, conquered local rajas, and introduced Islam. Ibn Batuta met Shah Jalal, in 1346, and described his commanding stature, ascetic celibacy, yogic discipline, and miraculous deeds. The first Arabic inscription to mention Shah Jalal, dated 1506, comes from a ‘blessed building’ that perhaps housed Sufis visiting his tomb, which soon became a pilgrimage site. 27 Shah Jalal’s spirit still pervades Sylhet, where some say it makes the land the richest in Bangladesh.28

Ibn Batuta boated down the Meghna, in 1345, and saw “water wheels, gardens and villages such as those along the banks of the Nile in Egypt”. He wrote that, “For 15 days we sailed down the river passing through villages and orchards as though we were going through a mart”.29 He did not describe market towns, as he did routinely elsewhere.30 Thus, 14th century Sylhet seems to have no big market towns, but its saint from Turkestan and visitor from Morocco show it did have wide connections, and mobility changed the land in centuries to come.

Mughals brought unprecedented force.31 Sylhet became a Mughal frontier town on river highways to the lands of unconquered opponents, Khasis, Dimasas, Ahoms, and others. When Mughals conquered Orissa and Bengal, Afghans flew into the Meghna and became powerful around Sylhet. A Mughal fleet sailed to Sylhet, and in 1612, Mughals conquered Afghans, but highland peoples, including Khasis, Garos, Ahoms, and Dimasas, did not succumb.32

Conquest invested nature with cultural politics. Afghans escaped Mughals into forested hills and haor depressions, where high caste Hindus had escaped Afghans, three centuries earlier.33 Myriad escape routes made most land around Sylhet impossible to conquer, until 1830, when the British finally succeeded. Until then, highbrow lowlanders considered Sylhet a wild frontier, and rulers supported settlers who would use the weight of demography to civilise the land. A seventh century inscription described Sylhet as ‘outside the pale of human habitation, where there is no distinction between natural and artificial; infested by wild animals and poisonous reptiles, and covered with forest outgrowths’.34 Kamarupa kings gave tracts of forest to brahmans to civilise. A millennium later, Mughals gave forests to Muslims and Hindus. In the 18th century, Nawabi Faujdars and forest grants brought Sylhet firmly into the ambit of Bengali Muslim culture.35 Meanwhile, Rajas in Cachar and Jaintia embraced Hinduism and patronised Brahmans who expanded mixed Hindu-traital polities and mixed tribe-and-caste societies around the Barak valley. In Cachar, Hindu rituals elevated Bodo rulers over Dimasa subjects and enabled high caste Bengalis to mix among tribal masters, neighbours, and servants, in the manner of oil on water.36

Natural Economy

Over the centuries, local territories of natural resource utilisation diversified along a topographical continuum running from the highest highlands, where shifting ‘jhum’ cultivation prevailed, to the lowest lowlands, where farmers grew ‘boro’ rice, planted in December-January, when fields dry out enough to plant, and harvested before the floods arrived in May-July. In 1800, forest still covered much of the land, roughly in proportion to altitude. Permanent agriculture expanded and contracted, in fits and starts; and expansion only gained a firm upper hand in the 19th century.37 Farmers facing recurring flood calamities routinely abandoned old farm sites, allowing forest to return as they colonised new land. The 1780s brought the worst floods in memory, which destroyed farm investments in the years when the Tista River shifted its course, joined the Brahmaputra, and changed its course as well.38 The 1790s brought floods and earthquakes that demolished the lowest farmland behind the 18th century market town of Ajmiriganj, spawning endemic malaria, which stymied new colonisation until 1900.39

Nature’s topography defined economic geography. In the late 18th century, farming communities in the lowland floodplains grew almost nothing but ‘boro’ rice, which they consumed with locally abundant fish. There were no large market centres, let alone major cities, by the standards of lower Bengal, no weavers exporting cloth, and no locally resident rich merchants, let alone portfolio-capitalists.40 ‘Hundis’ were so hard to find that early Company Collectors had to ship revenues on armed boats to Dhaka.41 No European Company ever made a major commercial investment in the Surma basin. Yet markets thrived, as supply and demand met in countless small transactions with little input from urban commercial networks.42 Rulers received taxation only in cash. Specialists in fishing, horticulture, hunting, mining, trade, transportation, crafts, finance, and administration all bought rice in local lowland markets that thrived amidst the flood-induced uncertainty of local rice output. In 1790, Sylhet District had over 600 named market places (hat, ganj, and bazaar).43 Long-distance commodity chains passed through them, up and down the Meghna, to and from Dhaka, Narayanganj, and Bakarganj (near Barisal), and up and down the Barak valley, to and from Manipur, Assam, and Burma.44 As the number of market centres increased in Bengal generally,45 Sylhet town became a more active regional market, to which the Manipur and Tripura rajahs built a new jungle road from Manipur, in the 1790s.46

Many commodities in the lowlands carried Khasi social identities. Khasi merchants brought goods from Assam through mountain river ports at Pandua and Jaintia.47 Khasis sold mountain ‘jhum’ rice in Jaintia. In high valleys and on low slopes, Khasis grew areca nut, betel, turmeric, and fruits to sell in the plains, along with wax, ivory, and cloth. Mountain Khasis also specialised in iron mining and smelting, and they would denude whole forest tracts to stoke their blow-bag iron furnaces, with cowhide bellows, before moving on to exploit new fuel wood sites. Khasi iron,48 steel, and metal tools travelled lowland rivers routes, along with their gold, silver, other metals, and ornaments.49 Khasi mountain quarries behind Sunamganj provided the finest quality limestone.

Elephants and ivory also travelled down the mountains,50 as salt and rice moved up.51 Aloe wood and China-root appear as Sylhet products in the Ain-i-Akbari.52 Timber, sandalwood, cane, ivory, rubber, cotton, and silk came from Cachar and Manipur.53 Cotton came from Tripura.54 Sylhet’s first resident Collector, Robert Lindsay, dramatised the commercial value of the mountains by buying limestone and burnt lime to sell in Dhaka, Calcutta, and elsewhere. He even once had built four sea-going ships on mountain tops, using local forest timber; and then had the ships filled with mountain products and to sail on the flood to Bakarganj, where his agents sold forest products and bought rice to sell in Madras.55

These ships perhaps returned to Calcutta or Chittagong with cowry shells, Sylhet’s only coin.56 Each part of 18th century Bengal had its own monetary identity, acquired in mobile geographies of commodity exchange. In 1787, for example, most coins in Rangpur were French Arcot Rupees, minted in Pondicherry, and Narayani Rupees, minted by rajas in Cooch Behar; while in nearby Mymensingh, English Arcot Rupees prevailed; because
Rangpur did heavy trade with Cooch Behar and Chandranagore, while Mymensingh sold its rice in Calcutta. Specific coins also attached to individual commodities, as in Dinaipur, where merchants used Sonaut Rupees to buy rice and other grains, while they used French and English Arcots to buy ghee and oil, and used only French Arcots to buy hemp and gunny. Locally dominant metal coins came from far away, most of all, from Arcot and Pondicherry, and cowries came from the Maldives.

Sylhet depended entirely on cowries, tiny shells from the Maldives that served as the cheapest coin all around the Indian Ocean and in south-east Asia, and Africa. Bengal was a major cowry market, and there was virtually no metal coin to be found in Sylhet in the late 18th century, when people imported almost nothing from downstream, except the cowries that merchants brought from the Maldives, stored in Dhaka and Calcutta, and carried to Sylhet in boats that returned with rice and upland products.

The only political force at work shaping Sylhet cowry country was a negative one: that is, the weakness of regional states. English observers believed that cowries reigned in Sylhet because the people could only afford the cheapest coin. But because barter trades flourished alongside cowry exchange, it can be said that cowries also functioned to bridge the gap between barter and commerce in local markets. Cowry country had a south-western borderland, around Habiganj, where silver rupees circulated, indicating that cowry country coincided with the spatial dispersion of markets connecting hills and plains around Sylhet. The repeated depiction of Sylhet as a ‘mountain region’, from the 14th century onward, also reinforces the idea that mountains and lowlands comprised a diverse yet coherent economic space of mobility where cowries articulated a distinctive market territory around 18th century Sylhet.

**Expansive Territorialism**

In 1765, Sylhet – till then a ‘faujdari’ (military district) of Bengal Nawabs became a frontier district of Bengal Presidency. Despite its large area and population, Sylhet was poor revenue territory. In 1783, the Dinaipur zamindar spent more on religious events than Sylhet district paid revenue. In 1785, the Rajshahi zamindar’s monthly tax (‘kist’) exceeded Sylhet’s annual tax assessment (‘jamma’). Yet the Company increased Sylhet taxation as much as possible. The Nawab’s regime had collected 3,50,000 kahans of cowries in Sylhet, all spent locally, and there was virtually no metal coin to be found in Sylhet in the late 18th century, when people imported almost nothing from downstream, except the cowries that merchants brought from the Maldives, stored in Dhaka and Calcutta, and carried to Sylhet in boats that returned with rice and upland products.

But revenue collections stagnated below 70 per cent of jamma until 1788, when they began a steep climb, approaching 100 per cent by 1790. This increase came with expansion of Company authority over farms that became tax-paying private property. In 1784, “upwards of 4,000 independent proprietors of the soil” paid land taxes; in 1795, 26,000; and in 1798, 27,000. In 1785, remittances to Calcutta began a steady climb, and in the 1790s, with the addition of the region around Habiganj, Sylhet district began to look like a money-maker for the Raj, though a small one compared to other Bengal districts.

In Sylhet (as in Chittagong), Company revenue came from small village landlords, not big zamindars, merchant magnates, or big ‘jotedar’ tenants who dominate the agrarian history of Bengal. Even the smallest Sylheti landowners rarely tilled their land, but rather employed tenants and labourers. To secure assets against calamity, locally dominant families held land in several places and combined various sources of income, including commerce, which made them central figures in local markets and revenue operations. For tenants and labourers, mobility remained an always-open option. Most tenants were ‘paikash’ or non-resident tenants, who received no occupancy rights but did receive agricultural and subsistence inputs from landowners who needed to attract them to clear and cultivate land. Landless workers also lived mobile lives. Some would have come from tribal societies that moved among hills and plains and merged with lowland societies at the lowest ranks. Seasonal migrant workers often came from far away to bring in the harvest and return home with boatloads of rice.

In 1798, a statistically average Sylhet village would have held a tiny population of about 70 people and four landed estates (‘taluks’), each estate representing one extended family, its dependents and servants. Local farming territory expanded in compact areas scattered across the land, as dominant families spread their influence and vied for land and labour. Many such families held the title of Chaudhuri, which Mughals used to denote sub-zamindari authority and which spread among Sylhet gentry to become a family name. Mughal governors anointed few if any major zamindars, one of whom an early Collector called the ‘only true zamindar’ in the Sylhet District, because he had received a Mughal jaghir for protecting Mughal territory against Khasi incursions.

Unconquered Mughal opponents still exercised power in Sylhet in the early Company decades. Khasis ruled the northern mountains, Jaintia Khasi rajas held land in the north and east, Cachar rajas held the Barak Valley, and Tripura rajas ruled southern uplands. The Mughals had kept them all at bay with arms and land grants, but the main source of Mughal strength locally seems to have been several thousand local landed patriarchs who acquired the title of Chaudhuri as they bowed to the Mughals.

By 1778, when the first English Collector arrived and the District Records begin, the titular name, Chaudhuri, was a purely local asset in Sylhet, where local patriarchs expanded their reach as rulers in the hills also extended their powers in the plains. Like Mughals and Nawabs, the English lacked power in the mountains and focused their attention on the lowlands, from which they eventually extended lowland power farther into uplands than any predecessor. Here as elsewhere in British India, the 19th century conquest of mountains by lowland territorialism became a topographical signature of modernity.

The Company’s early steps set the modern trajectory, by separating Company lowlands from the highlands. Collectors settled borders with Cachar, Jaintia, Tripura by transacting with established Rajas, who had long experience with lowland rulers. Khasis in northern mountains posed a more difficult problem, because they had never submitted to Mughal or Nawabi authority and their people still scattered across the land north of the Surma, while some distant relatives – frontier settlers below the mountains, called Bengali Khasis – emerged from alliances between Khasis and Bengalis and defied the authority of Company and Khasi rulers alike.

Agrarian lowlanders and Khasi peoples conceived territorialism quite differently. For the Company, as for the Mughals, territory was land; but for Khasi, territory was Khasi people. As the
English sought to fix boundaries of state territory, Khasi territory moved and scattered with Khasi settlements. Khasi rulers in the hills presumed authority over Khasi communities living in territory where the Company claimed exclusive authority over all the land and inhabitants. These conflicting visions of territory produced serious conflict in the 1780s.

In 1789, following many skirmishes, mountain Khasis and Bengali Khasis attacked Company settlements, and the Collector summoned troops to push Khasis into the hills.86 This accomplished, in 1790, he declared an absolute boundary at the base of the hills and prohibited Khasis from owning land in the plains, to vitiate future claims by Khasi rulers to Company land. Hill trades hence came under strict regulation. A modern border came into being, which would eventually separate Indian Meghalaya from Bangladeshi Sylhet.87

Khasi hills thus acquired an official ethnic identity, as hill Khasis became official aliens in the plains. By 1797, Bengali farmers paying Company revenue had colonised land formerly held by Bengali Khasis,88 whose land the Company expropriated and who faded from history with the separation of Bengali and Khasi ethnic territories. This same border also confirmed Khasi authority, however, in what eventually became Meghalaya, as Cachar, Jaintia, and Tripura remained open frontiers for lowland settlers, who swarmed into the frontiers after 1800, while few lowlanders ever settled in Khasi mountains.

In the 19th century, Sylhet territorialism also moved into its southern mountain frontiers, behind Maulvi Bazar and Habiganj, where English-owned tea estates took the land of forest peoples. These mountains and their inhabitants were fanned out into plains east of the Meghna, and extended across Tripura, Manipur, Chittagong and Burma. Mountain societies remained mobile, as their land fell to the steady influx of lowland colonisers. Ethnic conflict over land ensued, along with complex cultural mixing and tense ambiguities of political authority.89 Like Khasis in the north, Tripuri people in the south continued to live, settle, work, and move across the uplands and lowlands, as they became official aliens in the plains; but unlike the Meghalaya mountains, Tripura frontiers in southern Sylhet remained open for lowland territorial expansion, like Cachar and Jaintia.

The uphill march of lowland territorialism accelerated after 1800, 1880 and 1947.90 More and more Hindus, Muslims, and Christians made mountains their private property. Hill peoples became minorities in the hills.91 After 1947, mobility among peoples variously invested in mountain resources fell into but also afloat of territorial strictures imposed by national states. As a result, we have, on the one hand, this placid imagery from the hills presumed authority over Khasi communities living in territory where the Company claimed exclusive authority over all the land and inhabitants. These conflicting visions of territory produced serious conflict in the 1780s.

On August 5, 2002, the Daily Star reported that Bangladesh forest department officials and ‘bands of local miscreants’ had forcefully evicted from forests in Moulibazar Zila 20 of 1,000 Khasi families growing betel there for generations. This one eviction drive (among many) had killed one person and injured several others, as part of an effort to create an eco-park as a tourist attraction.93 On February 2, 2002, Frontline reported much worse violence on the Indian side of the border:

Ethnic violence in...Tripura and Assam claimed 56 lives with a span of 10 days in mid-January. The victims were Bengalis and Hindi-speaking Biharis and the killers were tribal extremists belonging to the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB)...The tribal militants in Tripura, who belong to either the NLFT or the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF), have persistently followed a policy of ethnic cleansing. They want Bengalis to move out of the state where the tribal people once formed the majority community. Militant tribal leaders know that they cannot achieve this objective, as Bengalis now constitute over 60 per cent of the state’s population...Extremists in Tripura enjoy an operational advantage as the State is surrounded on three sides by Bangladesh. They have their hideouts in Bangladesh where they find easy shelter when under pressure from the security forces.94

Sylheti Territory

Human mobility changed the cultural mix of societies in the region as Sylhet district moved – four times – among state jurisdictions. During a century in Bengal Presidency (1765-1874), Sylhet inhabited moving frontiers of British imperialism, which spread to borders of Burma and China and, for the first time, surrounded Sylhet with state boundaries on all sides. In this context, a mixed flow of immigrants arrived, including tea plantation workers, whose English employers captured Sylhet’s southern hills and led Sylhet district into an Assam ‘Planters’ Raj’.95 In 1871, people classified as Hindu and Muslim in the census each comprised half the district population, and brahmans were 6 per cent of Hindus,96 more than in most predominantly Hindu regions of British India.97 In 1900, Sylhet’s cultural mix included a Sylheti literary movement, led by Maulvi Abdul Karim, who printed books in his Siloti Nagri font, at his Islamia Press,98 and flourishing traditions of Sanskrit scholarship.99

The Muslim population apparently began its proportionate rise after 1808, when an estimate of a 2:3 ratio of Muslims to Hindus implies a Muslim increase by one-third in the next six decades, to generate a 1:1 ratio in 1871.100 After the move to Assam, the proportion of Muslims rose in each census.101 Immigration was clearly the cause. In 1911, people reportedly born in Mymensingham composed 31 per cent of the population of the Assam valley (including Sylhet), and they numbered 63 per cent in 1931.102 This mobility then acquired new territorial meaning. In 1931, the Assam Census Report called Muslim Bengalis ‘invaders’ and the Assam Congress resolved to move Sylhet out of Assam.103 The Partition Plan produced a Sylhet referendum, after which, a truncated Sylhet district entered East Pakistan,104 as the region acquired its current perimeter. After Partition, immigration radically transformed Sylhet: in the decade after 1961, the population grew 37 per cent; and in the decade after 1971, it grew 22 per cent.105 A hundred thousand Muslim Bengalis moved out of Assam into Sylhet’s haor basin, where land still lay open for colonisation.106 In 1951, the proportion of Muslims reached 68 per cent, and then rose faster.107

The Sylhet region today has a distinct territorial identity, and ‘Sylheti’ merits designation as a regional ethnicity in Bangladesh. Historically, Sylheti identity includes a long association with...
Sylheti language differs markedly from standard Bengali. The Sylheti literary movement that began in 1860 has been revived in recent decades. Socially, Sylhetis seem ‘clannish’, the word I hear most often when Sylhetis in Dhaka describe their marriage strategies and business networks. Sylhetis have a reputation for conservative gender relations, manifest publicly by pardah, as in hr communities, where Muslim women from other districts work in agriculture, but Sylhetis do not. Shah Jalal represents a spiritual centre for regional piety in Sylhet, where people identify most intensely with his legacy.

Sylheti identity is also invested in nature. Alongside the Bangladeshi nationality of nature in Bangladesh, we find a Sylheti identity of nature in Sylhet. Tourist advertisements, like the one above, represent a unique Sylhet landscape, where plans for an eco park on a national forest land brought the expulsion of Khasi above, represent a unique Sylhet landscape, where plans for an eco park on a national forest land brought the expulsion of Khasi.

Local Territory

In 19th century Sylhet, local landed families held local authority. Recording, adjudicating, and protecting private property rights became the main function of government. Government never meddled in local estates. The Rent Act of 1859 had no impact. When Sylhet moved into Assam, it escaped later Bengal tenancy reforms. Local Sylhet territorialism became a constituent of modern governance and of Sylhet regional identity, which however distinctive, reflects a broader pattern, because all across the land that became Bangladesh, British authority attached itself to the local gentry. Trends after 1947 nationalised this pattern. In 1951, Zamindari Abolition in east Pakistan multiplied private property rights and produced new forms of tenancy. At the same time, the 1945 Famine Inquiry Commission’s conclusion that requisitioning rice for public distribution lay beyond the state’s capacity in Bengal proved prophetic, when Pakistan state requisitions produced intense local opposition, stoked violence against Hindu traders, and helped to kill the Muslim League in east Pakistan, in the 1954 elections. In the Pakistan context, Bengali visions of Bangladesh developed inside local traditions of local authority.

Sylheti nonetheless constitute locality in their own distinctive cultural terms, as a place of belonging; and also, in standard political and economic terms, as a spatial domain for local investments. Being well placed in local society provides key people with privileged access to networks of connectivity that expand their opportunities in wider worlds of mobility. In Sylhet, intersections of mobility and territorialism assume a distinctive regional form inside social spaces composed of Sylheti ‘gushti’ (patrilinages).

These intersections appear in various geographical domains, where territorialism meets mobility. One is the Haor Basin. A haor is a deep radial depression that fills up to the brim and often overflows with the monsoon, and dry up sufficiently for boro rice cultivation between January and May. Farming communities occupy natural ridges and built-up land around the lakes, lapped by deep waters that cover haors from June to December. There are countless haors in Sylhet, but the western Haor Basin is entirely covered with haors and deeply flooded annually by meandering branches of the Surma and Kushiara. In this area, investments in agriculture have been hard to secure and large tracts remained open for new colonisation as late as 1950. Compact enclaves (‘bari’) of related families (‘gushti’) form settlements on haor lands, where local Sylheti landlords held sway, before 1950, and locals reproduced landlordism thereafter, as the land filled up with immigrant settlers. Communities establish residential sites based on their common place of origin; occupational and religious groups also formed mini-territories on haor ridges. As in most of agrarian south Asia, micro-ethnic partitions of local agrarian territory occurred as the region attained an overarching ethnic identity defined by the cultural affinities of the major landowning groups. Today, the regional identity is Bengali Muslim, in the frame of Bangladesh, and Sylheti, in the frame of Sylhet.

Topography articulates inequality among families on haor land. Higher, wider ridges are wealthier and more populous. Lower lands that extend across deeper, wider hoar lakes host more precarious, poorer communities, filled with seasonal migrants who still come to harvest boro crops. On the widest, richest hoar ridges, wealthier families live on higher land, less vulnerable to flooding. Upwardly mobile families buy higher, more profitable farmland, just below the hoar ridge; and they live in higher, drier residential sites, atop the ridge. Poorer and downwardly mobile families can buy more land at lower prices for housing at the lowest edge of ridge, nearest the lake, where their homes feel the lapping of floods; and they can also buy farmland more cheaply farther out in the haor lakes, where floods come sooner, lands produce less, and work is harder and less profitable.

We find a different but also typically Sylheti intersection of mobility and territorialism in and around the towns of Sylhet, Sunamganj, Moulvibazar, and Habiganj, which provide sites for local investments by Sylheti families most visibly marked big, fancy, brightly painted houses. These houses belong to families in gushti whose men went to London, generations ago – some as early as the late 18th century – originally as workers on ships, who eventually opened restaurants. British immigration laws of the 20th century restricted Sylheti immigration to the relatives of earlier Sylheti settlers in London, and fostered a Sylheti monopoly of the London ‘Indian restaurant’ business. Today, Sylheti Londoni families have created a mobile territory of business activity, anchored in Sylhet and London, composed of Bangladesh and UK citizens. In recent decades, these transnational locals have been most active in organisations devoted to making Sylheti language, literature, and regional identity more publicly visible.

Like others who have built family business domains in south Asia, Londoni Sylheti invest meticulously in marriage, religion, and other social activities to enhance their family status, cultural capital, and business assets (which include dependable partners, financiers, and employees). Young Sylheti women, born and raised in London, travel to their family’s home village in Sylhet to marry selected men from appropriate families. When immigration officials allow, the husband joins his wife in London to work in his father-in-law’s restaurant, while his wife, typically more educated and always more westernised, follows other suitable occupations. In time, sons-in-law can attain UK citizenship and thus the basis for a break with the family, but the independence of Londoni brides can cause more difficult problems. Should daughters marry men not of their parents’ choice in Sylhet, family struggles might ensue in which parents seek redress for the loss of honour and prospects, and as UK citizens, dissident Londoni
brides can enlist the help of the British High Commission in Dhaka to return independently to England. 124 

Londoni families seem to address their family legal dilemmas mostly by using local police and state courts, but less well-endowed Sylhetis often resort to informal mediation hearings, called ‘shalish’, a distinctive local institution in Bangladesh. Conflicts over land and other property preoccupy about half of all ‘shalish’ mediations,125 where local men of authority, convened ad hoc and case-by-case, sit to hear the troubles and make a judgment. Its informality makes the shalish difficult to historicise, but a new historical phase clearly began in 1993, when one Sylheti shalish issued a fatwa to punish a woman and her father for her ‘illicit’ marital union, by caning him and stoning her, after which, she committed suicide. 126 Similar events elsewhere have spurred public campaigns to reform the local shalish in conformity with Bangladesh national law.

Conclusion

Investments in nature in Sylhet operate in local, regional, and national territories that mobility has been reshaping for a very long time. Mobility is still reshaping Bangladesh. Activists, researchers, and officials travel the country to bring localities into the national project of development. Packed planes fly to and from London and Sylhet. Villagers flock to cities and to Persian Gulf economies that send funds back to support Islamic endeavours. International capital and commodity flows sustain a Bangladesh readymade garments industry to benefit consumers in American. The US government tries to force Bangladesh to export natural gas from Sylhet to India, to profit the US oil companies. Goods and people move massively across international borders. The Indian government decrees Bangladeshi ‘infiltrators’. The Indian military pushes Bengali Muslims into national borders. The Indian government decries Bangladeshi ‘filtrators’. The US government tries to force Bangladesh to export natural gas from Sylhet to India, to profit the US oil companies. Goods and people move massively across international borders. The Indian government decrees Bangladeshi ‘infiltrators’. The Indian military pushes Bengali Muslims into Bangladesh. Tripura rebels find refuge in mobile spaces that defy national maps.

Ideas and information that we use typically to comprehend such transactions between mobility and territorialism etch the black-and-white lines of national geography. History in Sylhet indicates a rather more complex, diverse spatial reality, composed of many grey areas and shifting, overlapping social spaces. By exploring the grey areas of history, we can better analyse modern structural transformations and discontinuities, which take shape at shifting intersections of mobility and territorialism.

The practical lesson is this: the mobility that characterises globalisation today operates simultaneously in many spatial and temporal registers, and forms many geographies, which coexist, conflict, and complicate one another, and have done for a very long time. In the modern world of capitalism, where investments move to places that provide the best returns, and dividends move into the hands of people ‘in the loop’ of capital accumulation;127 the biggest winners are the richest folks in rich countries and rich urban neighbourhoods; but local families constitute ‘the loop’ in countless localities, where the mobility of people, assets, and state power intersect in territories of capital accumulation. National politicians and intellectuals who work in shifting spatial domains that span local and global geographies would thus do well to abandon the idea that static national maps represent the basic facts of modern geography. 180

Notes

1 I presented an earlier version of this paper at the SSRC Conference on ‘Resources: Conceptions and Contestations’ Kathmandu, January 3-12, 2003. For this work, I depended on sabbatical research funding from the American Institute of Bangladesh Studies, American Council of Learned Societies, John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, and University of Pennsylvania. For research assistance, I thank Brooke Newborn and Richard Mo. For essential material, I owe special thanks to Sirajul Islam, M Mufakkarul Islam, and the staff at the Bangladesh National Archives, particularly its director, Sharif Uddin Ahmed. For ideas, I thank Bela Malik, Thomas Mathew, Taj J Hashmi, Manzurul Mannan, Samia Huq, and Jukhruful Binth Junaid. For useful comments and stimulating papers, I thank participants at the SSRC conference, particularly Amita Baviskar, Bina Agarwal, Michael Watts, Tanzi Li, and Anna Tsing. For help with all aspects of this work, I thank Dina Mahnaz Siddiqi.

2 For example, Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1992.


9 Haroun er Rashid, Geography, pp 24. River action also depresses the haor. Sirajul Islam, Villages in the Haor Basin of Bangladesh, (Studies in Socio-Cultural Change in Rural Villages in Bangladesh, No 4.) Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo, 1985, pp 1-4.


11 Haroun er Rashid, Geography of Bangladesh, pp 55.

12 In the 1784 Gomati floods, vegetation could be seen only on the highest banks of tanks and ‘upon the boarder of the hills’. Comilla District Records, edited by Sirajul Islam, The Institute of Liberation Bangabandhu and Bangladesh Studies, Dhaka, 2000, p 98.

13 Bangladesh National Archives, Sylhet District Records, volume 293, pp 145-46, December 12, 1784. (Reference format hereafterSDR293.145-6:12Dec84). SDR293.155:8Apr85 reports expense of Rs 2,000 for renewing banks of the rivers ‘Surma, Coosearah, and Munnoo’, saying, ‘These banks have received no repairs for these last 15 years and were totally swept away in different places for the extent of many miles’. Similar events occurred along the Gomati, where river embankments built around 1710 broke in 1783. Comilla District Records, pp 62, 94-95, 97-99. The Sylhet District Records, edited by Walter K Firminger, Assam Secretariat Printing Office, Shillong, 1917, contains reprints of many SDR texts.


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Ludden, Agrarian History, pp 133-40.


Market places had thrived a thousand years earlier at the confluence of Meghna and the old Brahmaputra, in Wari-Bateswar and Bhairav Bazar, north-east of Dhaka, where archaeological data suggest trade with Gangetic and Indian Ocean ports. Chakrabarti, Ancient Bangladesh, pp 62-66.


Islam, Village Settlements in Different Subdivisions of Ancient Bengal, RK Maitra, Calcutta, 1967, p 258

Quoted in Eaton, Rise of Islam, p 258.


J B Bhattacharjee, ‘Dimasa State Formation’, pp 177-211.


Cotton goods were the main export from Sylhet, as Robert Lindsay, ‘Anecdotes of an Indian Agent’, pp 41-43. Lindsay reported that, ‘at least five hundred elephants were caught annually’, in the decade he lived in Sylhet (1778-1788). ‘Anecdotes’, p 190. Lindsay describes ‘khedah’ hunting techniques in ‘Anecdotes’, pp 190-97. Eliot was a major buyer, and the cowry trade was inextricably linked to it. Eliot was a major buyer, and the cowry trade was inextricably linked to it.

Sylhet History and Heritage, pp 133-40.


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See Ratna Ray, *The first available district budget, in 1794, shows a total annual expense of Rs 1,59,410, which at current exchange rate, translates into 8,36,900.*

Datta, *Society, Economy, and the Market*, pp 334. Revenue demand on Rajahshi Zamindari increased only by 18 percent from 1765 to 1784. 


Sujit Chaudhuri, *A 'god-sent opportunity', Seminar, online edition, h t t p : / / w w w . i n d i a - s e m i n a r . c o m / 2 0 0 2 / 5 1 0 / 5 1 0 0 7 / s u j i t / 1 9 9 5 . h tm.*


In 1947, Rabatari, Patherkandi, Badarpur and half of Karimganj thana left the former Karimganj sub-division of Sylhet to join the Cachar District of Assam; and in 1983, they became the Karimganj District.


See http://sylhetcity.net. Here are two examples: ‘Bride wanted for an attractive Sylheti Muslim male. He has a good job, business and lives in his own house. Bride should be attractive, educated and religious. Must be from a Sylheti Sunni family background’. ‘A bride required for an attractive Sylheti Muslim male. Groom is post graduate from Bangladesh. Elder brother is willing to pay for the return fare and other necessary expense’.


See for instance, *Daily Star*, August 20, 2002, front page story: ‘Two Bangladeshi workers were shot dead by Indian Khadia (tribesmen) aided by the BSF near Bichakhandi border under Gowainghat upazila Sunday night…. [when] two Bangladeshis …were returning home after working in the Bichakhandi stone quarry near the border...’


A bride required for an attractive Sylheti Muslim male. Groom is post graduate from Bangladesh. Elder brother is willing to pay for the return fare and other necessary expense’.


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