The Tarai: A Part of Moghlan or Gorkha? Perspectives from the Time of the Anglo-Gorkha War (1814-1816)

Bernardo Michael

Messiah College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya

Recommended Citation
Michael, Bernardo. 2010. The Tarai: A Part of Moghlan or Gorkha? Perspectives from the Time of the Anglo-Gorkha War (1814-1816). HIMALAYA 29(1). Available at: https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol29/iss1/1

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License.
The Tarai has always been considered an integral part of the modern Nepali state. However, the status of this important stretch of territory was open to ambiguity and flux in much of the period prior to the Anglo-Gorkha War of 1814-1816. A host of petty hill principalities and little kingdoms, further south in Moghlan (the plains of North India below the foothills of the Himalaya) constantly competed to control these lands and their resources. Furthermore, a web of tenurial, taxation, and hierarchical political relationships knitted the lands of the Tarai to those of Moghlan. For the rulers of the emerging kingdom of Gorkha, governance of the Tarai posed the usual set of dilemmas and possibilities—disputes with neighboring little kingdoms and problems of revenue administration mediated their efforts to tap the valuable agrarian resources of these lands. Gorkha was also increasingly drawn into a series of disputes with an emerging territorial power in north India—the East India Company. Company officials increasingly articulated their claims in terms of the establishment of clear territorial boundaries all the while choosing to ignore the web of tenurial, taxation, and political relationships that had traditionally constituted territory in South Asia. The Anglo-Gorkha War of 1814-1816 resulted in the delineation of the boundaries between Gorkha and the Company state. Nepal’s Tarai as we know it emerged, it might be argued, out of the historical specificities of that colonial encounter and its aftermath, an encounter that affirmed the geographical credentials of the modern state in South Asia—occupying a definite portion of the earth’s surface, and divided into non-overlapping divisions and sub-divisions.

INTRODUCTION

Nepal’s Tarai constitutes an important strip of land that presents the southern face of the country. In recent times it has been viewed as a natural, and inalienable part of the Nepali state. However, this was not the case prior to the early nineteenth century. Historically, the lands of the Tarai fluctuated back and forth between the hill kingdoms nestled in the foothills and mid-hills of the Himalaya and the little kingdoms of the north Indian plains further south. Frequent disputes and transfers marked the histories of these lands. In the early nineteenth century these lands formed part of a fuzzy and shifting frontier that became the subject of dispute between the English East India Company and the Himalayan kingdom of Gorkha (see Map 1). The Gorkhalis made a distinction between these Tarai lands and the Indo-Gangetic plains (Moghlan) lying further south. Gorkhali claims to Tarai lands were usually made on grounds of a host of tribute, taxation, and tenurial claims they had inherited by virtue of territorial conquest. The truth was that there were a number of other states, in the hills and plains, including the East India Company, which had similar claims. This left the lands of the Tarai inextricably intertwined with lands lying in Moghlan as well as in the mid Hills of the Himalaya.

These territorial disputes resulted in the outbreak of the Anglo-Gorkha war in 1814 which ended in 1816 with the defeat of Gorkha and the demarcation of the modern Indo-Nepal boundary. The Anglo-Gorkha war has been examined by historians who have often portrayed the event from nationalist, diplomatic and military perspectives (Rana 1970; Husain 1970; Shaha 1990; Pemble 1971; Khanduri 1997; Pant 1963 [2021 B.S.]). What has been missed in these accounts is a detailed examination of the territorial disputes that led to the war along with the issue of spatiality that animated them. Including questions of space in such a study steers our inquiry towards a better understanding of the organization of territory along the Anglo-Gorkha frontier, something that has eluded previous writings on the Anglo-Gorkha War (but see Stiller 1974; Burghart 1984; DesChene 1991).

In order to better understand the organization of territory along the Anglo-Gorkha frontier, this paper is also informed by the wider multi-disciplinary liter-
The Nepali Tarai took nearly a hundred years (1760-1860) to crystallize in its present form. It emerged out of a process of territorial consolidation as the Gorkhali state expanded from the mid-eighteenth century, conquering hill kingdoms and laying claim to their possessions in the plains (see Map 1). By 1810 Gorkha’s possessions stretched to their maximum extent ever—from Bhutan in the East to Kangra in the west. Later, the 1814 war with the British resulted in a dramatic reduction in Gorkha’s territorial extent. However, some of the Tarai lands lying between the Mahakali and Karnali rivers (also called the Naya Muluk) were restored to Gorkha following the military assistance provided to the British to suppress the Revolt of 1857.

In eighteenth century Gorkhali documents the eastern Tarai finds initial reference as the ‘tarriani’—the strip of thickly forested plains covering the districts of Chitwan, Parsa, Bara, Rautahat, Saptari and Mahottari (F. Buchanan-Buchanan-Hamilton, 1971: 62, 101-117). These tarriani districts were divided and subdivided into divisions called parganas (parganna in Gorkhali documents), tappas (tappe/tape in Gorkhali records), and tarafs in, though not always, descending order. In 1762, the Gorkhali ruler Prithvinarayan Shah toppled the hill kingdom of Makwanpur and laid claim to its possessions
in the tarriani. It is in making such territorial claims, in a piecemeal fashion, that the Gorkhali were able to extend their sway over what is today called the Tarai (D.R. Regmi 1975: 161-166; M.C. Regmi 1971, 1978, 1984, 1995). Prominent among the claims was the pargana of Thathar (Tauter in British documents). 1

The proprietorship to the Thathar pragannas seems to have fluctuated in the past. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the rights to these pragannas shifted back and forth between the royal family of Makwanpur and the fauzdars of Tirhut in present-day Bihar. 2 By the end of the seventeenth century the Thathar pragannas were integrated into Makwanpur’s territories on the condition that the rajas of Makwanpur would have to pay an annual peshkash (tribute) in elephants at the Tirhut fauzdar’s office at Darbhanga. In this manner, the Thathar pragannas became dependent on sarkar Tirhut and by extension, the suba of Bengal. The fall of Makwanpur to Gorkha in 1762, and Bengal to the British in 1765, placed the Thathar pragannas under a new layer of overlords. In 1771 Dinanath Upadhyaya the Gorkhali vakil was deputed to Darbhanga to present Gorkha’s case for possession of the Thathar pragannas (Narharinath 1955: 4-7). The vakil also indicated Gorkha’s willingness to pay tribute to the Company in the form of elephants. The elephants were required to be 8½ “hauts” in size, though this size was increased over the years, following some dispute between the Makwani raja and the fauzdar of Darbhanga. Subsequently, the Company recognized Gorkha’s claim to the Thathar praganna while at the same time accepting the Thathar pragannas subordinate relationship to sarkar Tirhut, suba Bengal (now under Company rule). Older customary rituals cementing this tributary relationship were also preserved. So, following the arrival of the customary tribute, the Gorkhali raja’s representative received two horses and two khillats in pieces of cloth from the rajas of Tirhut. Gorkha continued to collect taxes from the Thathar pragannas and pay tribute in elephants right up to 1801, when the practice was discontinued under the terms of a commercial treaty of 1801 signed between Gorkha and the Company.

The Thathar pragannas have never been conclusively identified. Maharaja Shitab Rai the diwan (chief of the revenue department) at Patna noted in 1771 that the Thathar pragannas were bounded on the west by pargana Mehsi (in Champaran), on the east by sarkar Purnea, on the south by the river Gandaki, and on the north by Gorkha’s tarriani. The area falling in between corresponds roughly to the districts of Mahottari, Sarlahi, probably parts of Rautahat (now in Nepal), the northern reaches of sarkar Tirhut (now in Bihar), and other lands in present-day north India (Ahmad 1958; Pradhan 1990: 72-83; D.R. Regmi 1975: 183, 186, 193, 195, 197, 249-250). The praganna was itself made up of 23 mahals. 3 These mahals might have been constituted by clusters of villages, lying in a non-contiguous manner (?) and scattered over the forested possessions of Gorkha’s Tarai as well as the northern reaches of Tirhut and it adjacent districts.

It is the spatial implications of these claims that are of interest to us. The Thathar pragannas in the last quarter of the eighteenth century became a patch of territory where two states enjoyed overlapping claims—Gorkha and the Company state. The Gorkhalis inherited these territorial claims from preceding regimes (the kingdom of Makwanpur, and the authorities in Tirhut) by virtue of their conquest of the Makwani kingdom. As was usually the custom, they continued the older tribute relationship of presenting elephants, this time to the East India Company. Not much else is known about the Thathar pragannas. Like many administrative divisions of their time, the Tauter pragannas disappeared from the historical record by the early nineteenth century. It is possible that the praganna was broken up and incorporated into Gorkha’s Eastern Tarai districts as well as into territories lying in India.

A similar set of entanglements bound the tappe of Rautahat in Gorkha’s eastern Tarai. 5 Tappe Rautahat belonged to the former kingdom of Makwanpur whose rulers had granted it to one Mirza Abdullah Beg as a reward for services performed. The Gorkhals now claimed this Tarai dependency by virtue of their conquest of Makwanpur in 1762 and accordingly petitioned the British. This combined with the maneuverings of local rajas, landlords, officials, and migratory labor to leave the tappe of Rautahat riddled with all kinds of competing territorial claims based on tenurial and taxation rights. Agents along both sides of the [then] Anglo-Gorkha frontier rendered ineligible the ownership of this district. The tappe of Rautahat for all practical purposes lay ill-defined, internally incoherent, and subject to frequent changes in its organization and layout. Some of these competing claims would contribute to the outbreak of the Anglo-Gorkha war in 1814, such as the

---

1. The Gorkhalis defeated expeditions sent by the Nawab of Bengal under Gurgin Khan (1763) and the East India Company (1767) under Captain George Kinloch. For details see “An Account of the Origins, Progress and Termination of Captain Kinloch’s Expedition to Napaal, 1767, Memorandum Containing Minutes and Dispatches by Governor-Generals, Item 1, Foreign Miscellaneous, no. 8, NAI. Kinloch remained in the Tarai districts of Bara, Parsa and Rautahat occupying them for over 3 years. For details about the Kinloch expedition see, Journal of Captain George Kinloch on the expedition to Napaal begun the 26th August, 1767, Add. Mss. 6633 Western Manuscripts, BL.

2. A fauzdar is a military official in charge of prosecuting criminal matters in a district.

3. References to the Thathar pragannas may be found in the following: Raja Shitab Roy’s Account of Pargannah Tauter Belonging to Sirkar Tirhut of Bihar Province, 30 July1771, Proceedings of the Comptrolling Council of Revenue at Patna (CCRP), vol. 1, 1 January 1771 to 30 July 1771, WBSC; Letter of J. Kieghly, Collector of Tirhut to the CCRP, 14 February, 1772, in Procs. CCRP, vol. 3, p. 79 (with translation of a letter from Prithvinarayan Shah enclosed), WBSC.

4. The 23 mahals were—Thathar, Nandrakajouly, Assiloo, Abijoot, Beja, Muerraphore Narahad, Bikerrya, Beera, Mande, Jumna, Resary and 5 other unnamed mahals, Shahpore, Geladypore, Bumnran Malki, Jery and 3 other named mahals. See Shitab Rai’s Account, cited above.

5. This tappe once belonged to the older pargana of Simraon (praganna Gadh Simraon in Gorkhali documents).
disputes over 22 villages on the southern boundaries of Ratahat (Michael 1999). Ultimately, it was the Company state’s decision in 1783 to restore Rautahat to Gorkha, and the subsequent boundary delineations of the 1820s that would place Rautahat firmly within the confines of Gorkha’s Tarai.

TALUQA MATKA

There is ample evidence that other parts of Gorkha’s expanding Tarai lay entangled with authorities and lands lying further south in Moghlan. Take for instance the lands straddling the Gorakhpur-Butwal frontier. Like lands lying elsewhere along the Anglo-Gorkha frontier, these territories too were carved into divisions such as pragannas, taluqa, and tappes whose political, tenurial, and taxation affiliations sometimes made it hard to discern if they belonged to Gorkha or to authorities lying to the south. Once again, Gorkha’s disputes with the Company arose when the former inherited claims to the Tarai lands of defeated hill kingdoms.

The case of taluqa Matka (in Kapilbastu district in present-day Nepal) is an example of such disputes. Prior to 1786, the taluqa of Matka belonged to the hill kingdom of Gulmi. It had been made up of 18 or 19 tappes. Some time after 1768, this taluqa became the subject of dispute between the rajas of Gulmi and Palpa. There are conflicting accounts of how the kingdom of Palpa developed a claim to this taluqa. Kanak Nidhi Tiwari, the vakhil of the raja of Palpa noted that in 1786, Gulmi, along with the hill kingdoms of Khanchi and Argha were incorporated into the Palpali raj as a reward for the Palpali assistance provided during Gorkha’s western campaigns. According to the quanungo (accountant) of pragana Ratanpur Bansi (Gorakhpur district), when the Gulmi raja’s power declined, the Palpali raja (Mukund Sen II, 1752-1782) executed a kabuliyat for the 17 tappes with Sitaram, the amil (revenue collector) of nawab Shujauddaulah in pragana Bansi. The raja of Gulmi complained that the Palpali raja had wrested the taluqa from him by paying a nazrana (present) to the amil of pragana Bansi under whose collection charge the taluqa lay. The ajas of Gulmi were never happy with this arrangement and thus between 1786-1814, the taluqa remained disputed between the rajas of Gulmi and Palpa. This left uncertain the territorial connections of the taluqa.

But the matter did not end there. In 1786, the Gorkhalis confirmed the Palpali raja’s rights of possession to taluqa Matka. At the same time, the Palpa raja got his rights to the taluqa of Matka confirmed by nawab Asafuddaulah of Awadh and had it included in the settlement of the pragannas of Tilpur and Binayakpur. In 1799, the Palpali raja’s possessions were again confirmed by the Gorkha raja. I might add that it seems to have been a common practice for a landholder or ruler to receive confirmation of his territorial possessions from two or more superior authorities. This was necessary if this lesser landholder were to survive politically, and tenurially. This must have happened sometime between 1786 (the year in which Butwal secured Matka) and 1793, the year in which the Palpali raja Mahadan Sen (1782-1793) died. Matka appears had over time become detached from the pragana of Ratanpur Bansi and attached to the kingdom of Palpa. Further confirmations of this grant from the nawab of Awadh and the Gorkhali rajas resulted in the taluqa of Matka being attached to the dominions of Gorkha, as well as Awadh.

From this it is clear that the taluqa of Matka displayed spatial dynamics common to the fiscal divisions on the Gorakhpur-Butwal frontier (and elsewhere). The taluqa belonged at various times to the pragannas of Ratanpur Bansi and Binayakpur, the little kingdoms of Gulmi and Palpa, and later to Awadh, Gorkha, and the East India Company. By 1814, prior to the Anglo-Gorkha War, these fluctuations in the political and fiscal attachments of the taluqa Matka had rendered its actual location problematic for Company officials who were not willing to entertain the competing and overlapping claims of other parties. Company officials increasingly viewed their territories as being distinct, well bounded, and non-overlapping, a vision easily disrupted by these competing hierarchies of agrarian relationships that left territories ill defined, overlapping, intertwined, and dispersed. A very similar set of circumstances informed the histories of divisions along the Gorakhpur-Butwal frontier: viz. the taluqa of Khajahani Bhandar, the pragannas of Ratanpur Bansi, Tilpur and Binayakpur, and the tappas of Dholiya Bhandar and Sheoraj. Sheoraj in par-

6. This taluqa had been the subject of a long-standing dispute between the rajas of Gulmi and Palpa. I have come across no conclusive evidence as to who the original possessor of this taluqa was. The earliest recorded instance of a dispute between the two rajas seems to have taken place in 1768 A.D. (A. Ross, Collector of Gorakhpur to BOR (with enclosures), 9 June 1804, Letters Issued Register, GCR, basta 16, vol. 3, RSA).

7. The physical size and internal divisions of a fiscal division was amenable to variations. This was because of numerous disputes taking place between the holders of various kinds of rights. For instance, both the rajas of Gulmi and Palpa, laid claim to the taluqa of Matka. The former claimed that this taluqa contained 19 tappas while the latter argued that it comprised 18 tappas. At the same time some of these rulers were politically subordinate to multiple overlords, such as the Company State, Gorkha and Awadh. So, Babu Nar Bhupal Shah, the manager of the Gulmi raja, stated that the Company was the master of Gulmi and Butwal in the plains, while the raja of Gorakhpur was their master in the hills. See “List of tappas of Purganah Mutka, Received 14 March 1804, in Claim of the Nepali Government to possess the Zamindarry of Butaul,” Boards Collections, F/4/185, IOR, APAC, BL.


9. See Translation of the deposition of Semnarayan, quanungo of Bansi on 24 April 1804, Boards Collection, F/4/185, pp. 236-60, IOR, APAC, BL.

10. The Palpali raja in question was Mukund Sen II (1752-82). The raja of Gulmi claimed that his family had held this taluqa for ten generations. Translation of an arzi from Shakti Prachand Shah, the minor raja of Gulmi, 17 January 1804, Boards Collection, F/4/185, pp. 46-50, IOR, APAC, BL.

11. For details of this dispute see “Questions put to Bandhu Khadka (?) vakil of the raja of Gulmi,” in Magistrates Procs. of the Faujdari Court, Zilla Gorakhpur, 7 March 1804, Boards Collections, F/4/185, pp. 207-20, IOR, APAC, BL.

12. Ibid.

particular would become the focus of Anglo-Gorkha dispute in the early nineteenth century.

**Tappe/ tapped Sheoraj**

Tappe/tapped Sheoraj, had long been attached to the hill principality of Pyuthana, and formed a part of its possessions in the plains. It had also been attached to the possessions of the raja of praganna Ratanpur Bansi who was a dependant of the nawab of Awadh. In November 1786, Pyuthana was forcibly incorporated into the territorial possessions of Gorkha (Giri, 1995 [2052 B.S.]: 20; D.R. Regmi 1975: 324). From then on, the Gorkhalis began to take a greater interest in managing the territorial possessions of the Pyuthana raja, including tappa Sheoraj. In 1795, Gorkhali officials were deputed from Kathmandu in order to survey those lands mortgaged by the Pyuthana raja (Giri 1995 [2052 B.S.]: 49).

In addition to this, the tappa itself lay mired in long history of disputes that preceded the Anglo-Gorkha disputes over it. The French traveler Tavernier who traveled through different parts of India in the mid-seventeenth century observed an intense struggle over this tappa between the rajas of Pyuthana and Butwal (Regmi 1975: 1:11). At the same time in 1782, Raja Kirtibam of the hill kingdom of Malebhum (Parbat) claimed the praganna of Bansi (and possibly by extension, the tappa of Sheoraj). At the time of the takeover of Sheoraj by Gorkha in 1786, the tappa was for purposes of revenue collection attached to the praganna of Ratanpur Bansi, in sarkar Gorakhpur. In 1790 after the Gorkhalis had taken possession of the tappa, a dispute arose between Gorkhali officials stationed there that the amils (revenue collectors) of praganna Bansi had encroached on tappa Sheoraj. In 1791 information about these disputes over the tappa of Sheoraj was sent to the Court of Directors in London by the Company's government at Calcutta. But the Governor-General's Council at Calcutta observed that the dispute over the tappa of Sheoraj was a trifling one, “not likely to lead to any serious consequences or embarrassing consequences.” Since Sheoraj at this time did not lie on the frontiers of the Company's territories, Company officials were content to treat this as a dispute primarially involving the kingdoms of Awadh and Gorkha. However, once the Company acquired territories in this region after the Treaty of Cession of 1801, they got drawn into the messy logic of these disputes. When this happened, as it did ten years later, the Company state would be once again confronted with the spatial legacies of such territorial disputes.

In August 1804 when Sheoraj's taxation arrears (apparently still payable at Bans) began to mount, the raja of Bans's officials stationed at that praganna demanded payment of these outstanding dues from the Gorkha raja. The outstanding balances due from Sheoraj rose from Rs. 2,656 in 1801-02 to Rs. 7,650 in 1803. The nawab of Awadh too had sent a complaint to Company authorities that outstanding arrears were due from the authorities of Sheoraj for the years prior to the Treaty of Cession of 1801. The Gorkha raja rejected these demands, arguing that since 1765 (1786?) Sheoraj, which had been a dependent of the hill kingdom of Pyuthan, had been incorporated into Gorkhali territory, following the latter's conquest by Gorkha. There seems to be some truth in this as Gorkhali records for the period refer to Sheoraj as belonging to zilla Pyuthana. Company officials also conducted an investigation into the matter and concluded that tappa Sheoraj by virtue of being attached to praganna Bans by its previous taxation relationship, actually formed a part of the Company's possessions. However, Company officials also admitted that the tappa of Sheoraj had for all practical purposes been in the possession of the Gorkhalis prior to Awadh's ceding of Gorakhpur to the Company in 1801. Documentary evidence from the Gorkhali side, while scarce, attests to the growing Gorkhali presence in Sheoraj, encouraging the reclamation of waste lands, clearing of forests, and granting of fresh lands in an effort to extend cultivation.

---

14. As in the case of most administrative divisions along the Anglo-Gorkha frontier, there is confusion as to whether Sheoraj was a tappa, praganna or taluqa. But for purposes of convenience I will use the terms tappa and praganna interchangeably since Sheoraj was claimed by parties lying on both sides of the Anglo-Gorkha frontier. At one time Sheoraj seems to have been attached to the praganna of Deokhuri. See Chaudhrai grant made to Jas Raj Chaudhari, from praganna Deokhuri-Sheoraj, 1796 AD., pokha 9, no. 8, Sno. 919, Lagat Phant, Kathmandu.

15. The Parbat raja mentioned only the praganna of Bansi and made no reference to tappa Sheoraj. But since Sheoraj was attached to Bansi, it is possible that the raja would have laid claim to it as well. However, I have been unable to discern the grounds on which the raja claimed praganna Bansi. See Letter of Kirtibam of Parbat to Governor-General Warren Hastings, 15 February 1782, CPC vol. 5, no. 378.

16. Details can be found in CPC vol. 9, no. 653; CPC vol. 9, no. 1737.

17. See Governor-General-in-Council's Political Letter to the Court of Directors, 4 August 1791, paragraphs 68-79, in *Fort William India-House Correspondence, 1787-1791*, vol. 16, p. 397.
records of Bahraich. It is probably with this in mind that the Governor-General Lord Minto displayed a willingness to surrender all claims to Sheoraj in 1810, provided the Gorkhalis refrained from “encroaching” anywhere else on the Gorakhpur-Butwal frontier. The Gorkhalis it appears never responded to this offer. Moreover between 1792-95 Sheoraj along with its parent pragana was separated from sarkar Gorakhpur and attached to the sarkar of Bahraich.

Sheoraj was also connected to lands in Moghlan thanks to numerous local disputes, as for instance with the neighboring tappa of Dhebarua lying in pragana Bansi. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, the tax-payer (malguzar) of tappa Dhebarua was involved in a protracted multi-cornered dispute with Gorkhali officials and Rajput and Tharu magnates. These disputes involved localized struggles to control various kinds of resources (such as crops, land, taxes), that initially at least, took little notice of the political and ethnic affiliations of the actors. For instance, Jurawan Chaudhuri, while being a Company subject, also possessed land in Gorkha’s territories. He was involved in a number of disputes with subjects and officials belonging to Gorkha and the Company. Such multi-cornered disputes often drew their social energies from localized systems of power and influence. It is only later that they assumed the dimensions of an “inter-state” question. The historical record belonging to this period speaks enough to reveal that local initiative was very visible, and probably formed a crucial prelude to the larger Anglo-Gorkha disputes that broke out on this frontier.

Thus, in 1813, tappa Sheoraj—wrecked by persistent multi-cornered disputes, and fluctuating political and fiscal relationships—had become an illegible landscape that eluded the centralizing thrust of both Gorkha and the Company. Indeed, in 1813 the Gorkhalis made several attempts to obtain records, win over local officials, and gauge the mind of amins or surveyors deputed by the Company to investigate the boundary question. Whatever the result of the investigations, by 1814 it was clear that senior Gorkhali officials were unwilling to consider Sheoraj as anything less than a part of Gorkha’s territorial possessions (ajasamma aafnu amval bhayako jag). The interesting conclusion from all this is that the tappa of Sheoraj possessed a fluctuating political, fiscal, and tenurial history. Between 1780-1814 it had become entangled with the agrarian histories of a number of pragannas (Bansi, Deokhori), little kingdoms (Pyuthana, Butwal, Bansi), and more powerful state formations (Awadh, Gorkha, and the East India Company). In 1814, while the Company was willing to relinquish its claims to Sheoraj, it was unwilling to do so for the same for the larger Butwal tarai, to which the Gorkhalis were also laying claim, by virtue of their incorporation of the Palpal kingdom into Gorkha (Ghimire 1988 [2055 B.S.]). Senior Company officials at Calcutta would argue that

No documents which have yet been submitted to the Governor-General, afford the least sanction to the authority which the raja of Napaul claims the right of introduction into the lowlands of Bootwal upon the ground of ancient usage, nor does the Governor-General admit the pretentions of the Raja to the management of that zamindaree upon any principle of Justice or of equity founded upon the authority which he exercises over the raja of Palpa, as a subject of the Government of Napaul. As a matter of right, therefore the Governor-General is resolved not to...

---

27. The name of the amins deputed is not mentioned. But it is possible that it might have referred to Paris Bradshaw, the Company’s officer deputed to look into the Anglo-Gorkha border disputes. Attempts were also made by Gorkhali officials like Kaji Amar Singh Thapa to influence local officials like quanungos, and possibly even Paris Bradshaw’s own munshi so as to conclude the investigations in their favor. See the following: Kaji Amar Singh Thapa to jernal (General) Bhim Sen Thapa and Ran Dhaw Thapa, n.d. (probably 1813) Bir Pustakalaya Aithikis Chittipatra Sangraha, no. 169, NAI, Kaji Amar Singh Thapa to jernal (General) Bhim Sen Thapa, April 1813, Bir Pustakalaya Aithikis Chittipatra Sangraha, no. 400, NAI. 28. Bir Pustakalaya Aithikis Chittipatra Sangraha, no. 400, NAI.

29. The raja of Gorkha in 2 letters sent in May and June 1814 would reassert Gorkha’s claims to this tappa. See Raja of Nepal to Governor-General, 4 May 1814 & 3 June 1814 in FS Cons. 23 June 1814, nos. 22 & 23, NAI.
to accede to the introduction of the authority of Napat, into the zamindaree in question... the Governor-General is of the opinion that the British Government would possess no security for the regular payment of the revenue by the officers of the Napat state should the lowlands of Bootwal be entrusted to the Rajah in farm (theka). 30

The dispute over the lowlands of Butwal became a prominent cause for the outbreak of the Anglo-Gorkha war in 1814. It was only after the Anglo-Gorkha war, and the demarcation of the Anglo-Gorkha boundary that tappa Sheoraj formally became a Gorkhali possession. The claims of the rulers of Pyuthana, to whom this tappa originally belonged, were forever silenced.

MORE TARAI-MOGHLAN ENTANGLEMENTS

Territorial disputes between kingdoms in the hills and plains over Tarai lands were present all along the emerging Anglo-Gorkha frontier in the decades prior to the outbreak of the Anglo-Gorkha war in 1814. Various kinds of tribute, taxation, and tenurial relationships left the Tarai entangled between hill and plains. For example, the taluqa of Khajahani Bhandar was disputed between the hill kingdoms of Khanchi and Palpa. At various times it had got attached to both these kingdoms, as well as to the praganna of Ratapur Bansi, and possibly even to the praganna of Binayakpur. 31 Khajahani was originally held by the rajas of Khanchi in the hills above Gorakhpur. 32 Later it went to Palpa following an agreement with Gorkha by which Palpa got the hill kingdoms of Guli, Argha and Khanchi in return for military assistance to Gorkha in its western military campaigns. 33 The Palpa rajas had been making making revenue collections in this taluqa since 1782. However, in the quanungo records of the period, the taluqa was entered as being united with the tappa of Sheoraj, which had been traditionally attached to the praganna of Bansi. 34

Similarly, the praganna of Tilpur was disputed between the rajas of Palpa and Bansi, being variously attached to the different kingdoms on the Gorakhpur-Butwal frontier. In another instance, the tappa of Dholiya Bhandar, lying to the north of praganna Bansi, was reputed at one time to have been attached to the praganna of Binayakpur. 35 This was alluded to in 1809. But this tappa belonged earlier to a Magar chieftain of Balihang (Baldyang). After the defeat of this chieftain by the combined forces of Gulmi, Argha, Khanchi and Palpa, this area first went to Khanchi (Subedi 1998 [2055 B.S.]: 43), 36 and then to the rajas of Palpa and Guli. 37 Elsewhere, between 1800 and 1814, numerous disputes raged on many sections of the frontier—Tirhut—38 reea-Morang, 39 and elsewhere. 40 Similar disputes are visible all along the Company's frontier with the states of Awadh, Rampur, Bharatpur, Bhutan, Kutch-Bihar and Bykantpur. Earlier in 1805, C. T. Metcalf had noted numerous complicated disputes pertaining to land rights on the territories of the rajas and zamindars lying west of the river Jamuna. 41 So complicated were these disputes that

Gorakhpur Kutcherry with other Reports, 25 July 1806-23 August 1806, Letters Issued Register, GCR, basta 16, vol. 116, pp. 547-596, RSA.

35. See Francis Buchanan-Hamilton's "An Account of the Northern Part of the District of Gorakhpur," Eur Mss D 91-93 and G 22-23, European Manuscripts, Vol. 2, pp. 147-148, IOR, APAC, BL (hereafter The Gorakhpur Report). There is some confusion about the actual location of this tappa. Buchanan-Hamilton mentions that they were once two tappas which had by 1809 (when Buchanan-Hamilton was in the area) become one, for reasons which are unclear. See The Gorakhpur Report, Vol. 1, p. 324. See also, Translation of deposition of Semnarayan, quanungo of Bansi, 24 April 1804, Boards Collections, F/4/185, pp. 256-60, IOR, APAC, BL.

36. After the fall of the Balihang kingdom, its hill territories went to Palpa, the tarai to Khanchi, and Balihang to Guli. ibid., p. 43.

37. The Guli raja is also reputed to have built two temples dedicated to his tutelary deity, Palata Devi in this tappa. See Buchanan-Hamilton, The Gorakhpur Report, vol. 1, p. 324.

38. For disputes on the Tirhut-Sarlahi frontier see the following translations of Report of rhesildar Fazl Ali of Turki, and kaifiyat (account) of Nadir Ali, daroga (police officer in-charge) of thana Raga sent to Collector of Tirhut, 16 September 1801, FS Proc. 16 September 1801, no. 3, NAI; Extracts of Judicial Department, no. 1831 containing letters from Magistrate of Tirhut, C. I. Sealy as well as Persian Translate relating to these disputes, January-February 1813, FS Proc. 14 June 1813, no. 47, NAI, Report of C. I. Sealy Magistrate of Tirhut to John Adam, Secretary to Government, Fort William, FS Consul. 16 August 1814, no. 20, NAI.

39. In 1809, on the Purne-Morang frontier a dispute arose over the lands pertaining to the village of Bhimnagar. It was resolved in 1811 when the “Gorkhalis” withdrew their claims. See Letter from the Governor-General, the Earl of Minto to Raja Girbana Juddha Bikram Shah of Gorkha, 5 June 1809, FP Consul. 13 June 1809, no. 72, NAI; Raja of Gorkha to the Governor-General 25 April 1810, FP Consul. 15 May 1810, no. 35, NAI; Raja of Gorkha to Mr. Lumsden, late Vice-President, received 11 July 1810, FP Consul. 12 October 1810, no. 172, NAI, Gorkhali sardar Gaj Singh Khatri to Gorkhali vakil, received 1 November 1810, FP Consul. 7 December 1810, no. 73, NAI; Raja of Gorkha to Governor-General, received 12 January 1811, FP Consul. 19 April 1811, no. 46, NAI. See also Stiller Typescript 2: 104-106. The Stiller Typescript is a transcription of 3 reels of microfilm documents obtained from the National Archives of India and preserved in the Tribhuwan Library (Kirtipur) by Father Ludwg F. Stiller, S.J.

40. These land disputes pertain to the Khairigah frontier in the west, and the Chittagong frontier in the northeast.

41. See Memorandum of British Possessions West of Jamuna by C. T. (in 1809, the Khanchi raja had granted a guthi (religious grant) in tappa Khajahani, in praganna Binayakpur. The rulers of Khanchi claimed the tappas of Khajahani, Chop and Gurhwat? (in the Butwal taluqa). See, RRC 4: 948-50.

32. This relationships is also confirmed in the petition of one Subah Lal Sahye [Shah?] to the British claiming ownership to the tappa of Sheoraj. Sahye's petition mentions that the tappa of Khajahani belonged to the districts of the Khanchi raj. See, Papers relating to the proposed grant of land to Soobah Lall Sahye, Boards Collections F/4/550, no. 13378, 21pps, IOR, APAC, BL.

33. See Reports and Observations submitted by Paris Bradshaw on the negotiations and correspondence with the Nepalese Commissioners, April-May 1813, FP Proc. 18 June 1813, nos. 18-24, NAI.

34. See Extract from John Routledge's Report on the Settlement of Butwal, 14 December 1802, in Letters Issued Register (December 1802-February 1804, GCR, basta 16, vol. 2, RSA, John Routledge to Lt. Governor-General and Board of Commissioners of the Ceded Districts, Boards Collections, F/4/185, p. 91-108, IOR, APAC, BL). For details pertaining to the praganna of Bansi see Translation of Procs. held in the
even a detailed inquiry would not have been able to resolve them. They left uncertain the rights to access and use of the agrarian resources (land, forest, taxation, and tribute paying) of these lands. They also left unclear the boundaries of villages and districts. Given the contested nature of these claims, tracts of land kept shuffling back and forth between competing parties, leaving fuzzy and ill-defined the organization and layout of territories along the inter-state frontiers.

DEMARCATING THE ANGLO-GORKHA BOUNDARY

The formation of Nepal’s Tarai needs to be understood against this backdrop of entangled territories, recurring disputes and conflicted claims to land, taxes, and political authority. Gorkha’s Tarai districts had always been the subject of contention between the hill kingdoms and their neighbors in Moghlan. The rights to these territories fluctuated over time leaving these lands inextricably bound to political authorities in the hills and the plains. Faced with such illegible landscapes, the British would seek to reshuffle territories and render them visible through cartographic means. Colonial boundary formation became a critical process through which the Company state would demarcate territories. Gorkha’s Tarai was a product of this colonial anxiety and it could be argued that the Anglo-Gorkha war was fought by the Company state to resolve these spatial anxieties. It should then come as no surprise that following their victory over Gorkha in 1816, the Company state set about the task of formally demarcating the boundary separating the two states.

The Company began to institute measures for the demarcation of the Anglo-Gorkha boundary well before the conclusion of the war. In early December 1815, Company authorities instructed their officials on the frontier thus:

In determining the limits of the respective states, attention must be paid to the selection in all possible cases of natural and well defined boundary marks not liable to alterations or decay—when these cannot be had, as from the general course of the rivers in the Teraie and the distance of the forests, as His Lordship apprehends will be the case, artificial boundary marks must be resorted to.42

Following the cessation of hostilities in March 1816, negotiations began on the demarcation of boundaries. It was decided that the new boundary would be drawn 2 cos (about 4 miles) from the southernmost point of the old frontier.43 The line was to be a straight one.44 Where indentations occurred, exchanges of territory were to be made to keep the line direct. The term “tarai” also threw up some unexpected problems of definition. At the time of the boundary negotiations, the Gorkhalis used it to mean only the flatland up to the Bhabar forests, and not inclusive of these forests. The Company on the other hand used the term as a blanket to cover all the lands up to the foothills, inclusive of the Bhabar forests. The Gorkhalis ultimately agreed to the Company’s definition of the term.45 Furthermore, the Company decided that wherever possible, territories whose location rendered the boundary sinuous would be exchanged in order to keep the boundary line straight.46 The demarcation proceedings dragged on until 1821 when the entire Anglo-Gorkha boundary was demarcated as a line on the ground using masonry pillars (Hasrat 1970: 191; Shaha 1990: 148-149). This boundary was deemed sacred, and any attempts to violate it by Gorkha or any other indigenous power would be stiffly repulsed by the British.

Nevertheless, on the other side of the picture was the continual reaffirmation by the Company of the sanctity of the Anglo-Gorkha boundary. For example, in 1839, Gorkhali troops made a number of incursions into the Ramnagar area and laid claim to eleven villages. In 1803, these villages were originally granted as dowry to the Ramnagar raja’s son for marrying the daughter of the former Gorkhali raja Ran Bahadur Shah. The Gorkhalis claimed that since the queen had now died, these villages were due for resumption (Adhikari 1998 [2055 B.S.]: 70; Giri 1995 [2052 B.S.]: 20, 76). However, the Gorkhalis were forced to withdraw on seeing the British determination to use force to evict them. In another instance, in the 1860s Gorkha’s rulers discovered that the British no longer honored the terms of a Gorkhali religious land grant in Kendarnath, made at a time when Kumaon and Garhwal were Gorkhali possessions. When Jang Bahadur, the then Gorkhali Prime Minister complained to the British Resident in Kathmandu (about the British mismanagement of the Kendarnath hostel), he was told, “You can do what you like on lands situated in your territory; we can do what we like on ours” (Burghart 455, NAN).

44. In those areas where the hills ran in an East to West direction, all lowlands would go to the British, while the highlands to the Gorkhalis. But when the hills ran from North to South, then the low lands to the right and left of them were Gorkhalis. Also hills that were detached from the main ranges would have all the lowlands lying to the north of them placed under Gorkhali charge. See letter from the raja of Gorkha to E. Gardner, 2 October 1816, KRR R/5/37, pp. 73-74, IOR, APAC, BL. Raja to chauntra Bam Shah, 1 October 1816, KRR R/5/37, pp. 77-79, IOR, APAC, BL. The original Nepali version of this letter can be found in the Lal Mohar Collection, no. 455, NAN.

45. See E. Gardner to J. Adams, 14 July, 1816, FS Procs. 3 August 1816, no. 12, NAI.

46. Instructions from J. Adams, Secretary to Government to W F Clarke, Acting Magistrate of Saran, 17 December 1816, “Napal Correspondence,” 1 vol., Saran Collectorate Records, BSA; J. Adams, Secretary to Government to E. Gardner, Resident at Kathmandu, 5 May 1816, FS Procs. 4 May 1816, no. 70, NAI; Letter from Ujir Singh Thapa to Bhim Sen Thapa, no year, in Shahkalin Atishak Sikaitpatra Samgraha, ed. Shankarman Rupamshu (Kathmandu, 2023 B. S.), pp. 188-90. See especially p. 189.

Metcalfe, Assistant to the Governor-General, 1805 to 1807, Memoirs of the Survey of India, Memoir no. 19, SOIR, NAI.

42. Instructions from the Governor-General in Council to Lt. Col. Paris Bradshaw, FS Cons. 9 December 1815, no. 2, NAI.

43. See J. Adams, Secretary to Government to E. Gardner, Resident at Kathmandu, 4 May 1816, FS Procs. 4 May 1816, no. 70, NAI, FS Procs. 24 August, 1816, nos. 8-12, NAI.
In this manner, the reality of the boundary was driven home to the Gorkhalis. Today, despite occasional disputes between India and Nepal, the boundary continues to inform and give meaning to the lives of those millions of citizens on both sides, whose identities it has come to demarcate and fix.

CONCLUSION

Nepal’s Tarai emerged against this background of colonial spatial anxieties that sought to disentangle the intertwined territories of the two states. The Anglo-Gorkha war was followed by the establishment of a linear boundary to separate the territories of the two states. This serves as a timely reminder of the role of European colonization in the formation of the Tarai. It was the politics of British imperialism that created some of the critical conditions of possibility for the formation of Nepal’s Tarai districts. The Tarai was not some natural territorial container that formed an integral part of Nepal. Rather, its social production needs to be understood within the wider perspective of its entanglements elsewhere. More specifically, Nepal’s Tarai has always been closely connected to little kingdoms in the hills of Nepal, but it has always forged dense territorial bonds with lands to its south, in Moghlan. In the decades leading to the Anglo-Gorkha War, Gorkha’s Tarai districts were formed out of an underlying continuum of fluctuating rights—political, tenurial, and taxational—that connected them to the territories lying in the Hills of Gorkha as well as to the plains further south, in Moghlan. This regime of rights and relationships (of tribute, taxation and land grants) witnessed constant fluctuations, especially when newer sources of political authority emerged, such as Gorkha and the Company state. Together, such a regime of rights and relationships made up the bodies of precolonial states that straddled the Anglo-Gorkha frontier.

The loss of the western Tarai lands to the British after the Anglo-Gorkha war, their subsequent return to Nepal in 1860, and their territorial delineation through British surveying and mapping signaled the intervention of the colonial state and its technologies of rule (Cohn 1996). The Anglo-Gorkha War of 1814–1816, and the colonial demarcation of Gorkha’s Tarai, reflect one of the crucial moments in the geographical construction of the colonial state in South Asia—in the re-definition of its frontiers into linear boundaries, and the rearrangement of its provinces and districts. Colonial boundary formation, though an ill-coordinated project, was predicated on a fundamental principle—that states occupy a definite portion of the earth’s surface, and are divided into non-overlapping divisions and sub-divisions. This vision materialized in a piecemeal fashion throughout the colonial period. Thus, it might be argued that Nepal’s Tarai emerged as a clearly defined territorial entity discernible on a map, through a colonial encounter. Needless to say, this does not mean that Nepal’s Tarai lands are watertight spaces with no room for social overflows. Even today, the presence of boundary disputes between India and Nepal clearly show that this project of drawing modern boundaries will always be an unfinished one, because human actions can never be fully constrained by lines drawn on a map (see Van Schendel 2002). The interventions of history, the shared cultures of local communities on both sides of the boundary, trade practices, and the ongoing inter-state boundary disputes will always provide a counterfoil to the constraints of modern boundaries.

Integrating the Tarai’s history into a wider unfolding story of spatial and world historical connections confirms the benefits of an approach that is interdisciplinary and transnational such as those being attempted by writers of world history, the new imperial history, and the new military history (Bentley 1993; Michael, 2007; Pollock 1996; Cooper & Stoler 1997; Wilson, 2004; Chambers, II 1991; Simons 1999). They then create the possibility of writing a history of the Tarai in terms of its transnational entanglements and colonial genealogies that continue to provide an important historical context for understanding subsequent developments in this vital part of the country.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Kanak Mani Dixit, Arjun Guneratne, and George Varughese for the support and encouragement given, and Saranna and Sharon Michael for their assistance in producing the maps. Two anonymous reviewers for Himalaya provided valuable suggestions. At the Social Science Baha in Kathmandu, Sudhindra Sharma and Prabina Manandhar provided valuable logistical support. The usual caveats apply.

ABBREVIATIONS

| APAC | Asia, Pacific, Africa Collection |
| BOR | British Library, London |
| BSA | Bihar State Archives, Patna |
| Consl. | Consultation |
| CCRP | Comptrolling Council of Revenue at Patna |
| CPC | Calendar of Persian Correspondence |
| FP | Foreign Political |
| FS | Foreign Secret |
| GCR | Gorakhpur Collectorate Records, RSA, Allahabad |
| IOR | India Office Records |
| KRR | Kathmandu Residency Records, BL, London & NAN, Kathmandu |
| NAI | National Archives of India, New Delhi |
| NAN | National Archives of Nepal, Kathmandu |
| Procs. | Proceedings |
| PRNW | Papers Respecting the Nepal War |
| RRC | Regmi Research Collection, NAN |

---

47. A number of these disputes pertaining to the modern Nepal-Champaran boundary are recorded in the 54 files of the Search Series: Nepal Champaran Boundary, file 1-54, BSA.
REFERENCES


GLOSSARY

Bikhbunyadi Birta a category of usually tax free, inheritable land grants (birta) usually made on a lifetime basis to individuals

Bitalab Birta a birta grant made in lieu of specific services to be provided by the beneficiary

Chaudhari an official tax collector appointed in each Tarai praganna

Chaudhrai rights accruing to a chaudhari which often included a grant of land in lieu of services performed as chaudhari

Chautara a top ranking member of Gorkha’s royal elite usually of a ministerial rank and belonging to the royal family

Jemadar low ranking soldier, sometimes also head of servants

Kaji a senior member of Gorkha’s elite, higher in rank than a sardar and in charge of civil and military affairs

Kalabanjar uncultivated forest lands that if cleared are capable of high agricultural yields

Malguzar someone who pays revenue to a superior authority

Mauza village

Mofussil area away from the capital or headquarters, countryside.

Munshi scribe

Mutsaddi clerk

Quanungo/quanungoye accountant

Sadr capital, headquarters


