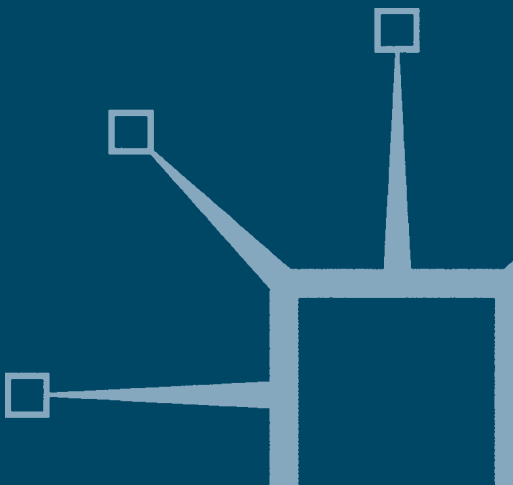
palgrave
macmillan

The Domination of Strangers

Modern Governance in Eastern India, 1780–1835

Jon E. Wilson



Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series

General Editors: Megan Vaughan, Kings' College, Cambridge and Richard Drayton, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge

This informative series covers the broad span of modern imperial history while also exploring the recent developments in former colonial states where residues of empire can still be found. The books provide in-depth examinations of empires as competing and complementary power structures encouraging the reader to reconsider their understanding of international and world history during recent centuries.

Titles include:

Sunil S. Amrith
DECOLONIZING INTERNATIONAL HEALTH
India and Southeast Asia, 1930–65

Tony Ballantyne
ORIENTALISM AND RACE
Aryanism in the British Empire

Robert J. Blyth
THE EMPIRE OF THE RAJ
Eastern Africa and the Middle East, 1858–1947

Roy Bridges (*editor*)
IMPERIALISM, DECOLONIZATION AND AFRICA
Studies Presented to John Hargreaves

L.J. Butler
COPPER EMPIRE
Mining and the Colonial State in Northern Rhodesia, c.1930–64

T.J. Cribb (*editor*)
IMAGINED COMMONWEALTH
Cambridge Essays on Commonwealth and International Literature in English

Michael S. Dodson
ORIENTALISM, EMPIRE AND NATIONAL CULTURE
India, 1770–1880

B.D. Hopkins
THE MAKING OF MODERN AFGHANISTAN

Ronald Hyam
BRITAIN'S IMPERIAL CENTURY, 1815–1914: A STUDY OF EMPIRE AND EXPANSION
Third Edition

Robin Jeffrey
POLITICS, WOMEN AND WELL-BEING
How Kerala became a 'Model'

Gerold Krozewski
MONEY AND THE END OF EMPIRE
British International Economic Policy and the Colonies, 1947–58

Sloan Mahone and Megan Vaughan (*editors*)
PSYCHIATRY AND EMPIRE

Javed Majeed
AUTOBIOGRAPHY, TRAVEL AND POST-NATIONAL IDENTITY

Francine McKenzie
REDEFINING THE BONDS OF COMMONWEALTH 1939–1948
The Politics of Preference

Gabriel Paquette
ENLIGHTENMENT, GOVERNANCE AND REFORM IN SPAIN AND ITS EMPIRE
1759–1808

John Singleton and Paul Robertson
ECONOMIC RELATIONS BETWEEN BRITAIN AND AUSTRALASIA 1945–1970

Kim A. Wagner (*editor*)
THUGGEE
Banditry and the British in Early Nineteenth-Century India

Jon E. Wilson
THE DOMINATION OF STRANGERS
Modern Governance in Eastern India, 1780–1835

Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series
Series Standing Order ISBN 978–0–333–91908–8 (Hardback)
978–0–333–91909–5 (Paperback)
(*outside North America only*)

You can receive future titles in this series as they are published by placing a standing order. Please contact your bookseller or, in case of difficulty, write to us at the address below with your name and address, the title of the series and the ISBN quoted above.

Customer Services Department, Macmillan Distribution Ltd, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS, England

The Domination of Strangers

Modern Governance in Eastern India, 1780–1835

Jon E. Wilson

palgrave
macmillan

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2008 978-0-230-57453-3

First published 2008 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

ISBN 978-1-349-36533-3 ISBN 978-0-230-58439-6 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9780230584396

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08

for Elaine

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

List of Map and Illustrations

Map

Figures

Preface and Acknowledgements

This book challenges the claim that European attempts to dominate the rest of the world were part of an intellectually coherent project. In the last few years that claim has been made forcefully by scholars wishing to 'make empire whole again', as Madhavi Kale puts it, whether they are critical or supportive of empire.[1] The book criticises such accounts by showing how colonial practice produced strange and deeply ambivalent forms of thought that nonetheless became fundamentally intertwined with the practices and concepts of modern European politics. Britain's first modern state emerged in Bengal, it argues, but it suggests that it was the indecisive and ambivalent character of colonial political thought that marked its modernity more than anything else. Instead of using artificially constructed canons of 'western' political theory, it attempts to find a more historically realistic vocabulary for discussing both Western and non-Western political practice. That vocabulary needs, above all, to be able to explain why highly abstract forms of 'theory' had more purchase over practical life in some contexts more than others.

Consequently, the following chapters are indebted to my own immersion in the real world of political and institutional practice in different locations: as a councillor in the London Borough of Waltham Forest between 2002 and 2006; as an academic at King's College London; and as a close observer of Indian and in particular Bangladeshi politics; I would like to thank friends and colleagues in each place. Publication of this book was made possible by financial support from a number of institutions: the American Social Science Research Council, the Arts and Humanities Research Board and later Arts and Humanities Research Council, ASAF Foundation in Dhaka, the British Academy, Scoulouli Foundation at the Institute of Historical Research, Humanities School of King's College London, Oxford University Beit Fund, St Anthony's College Stahl Fund and St Hugh's College Oxford. I am grateful to the British Library for giving permission to reproduce a number of images.

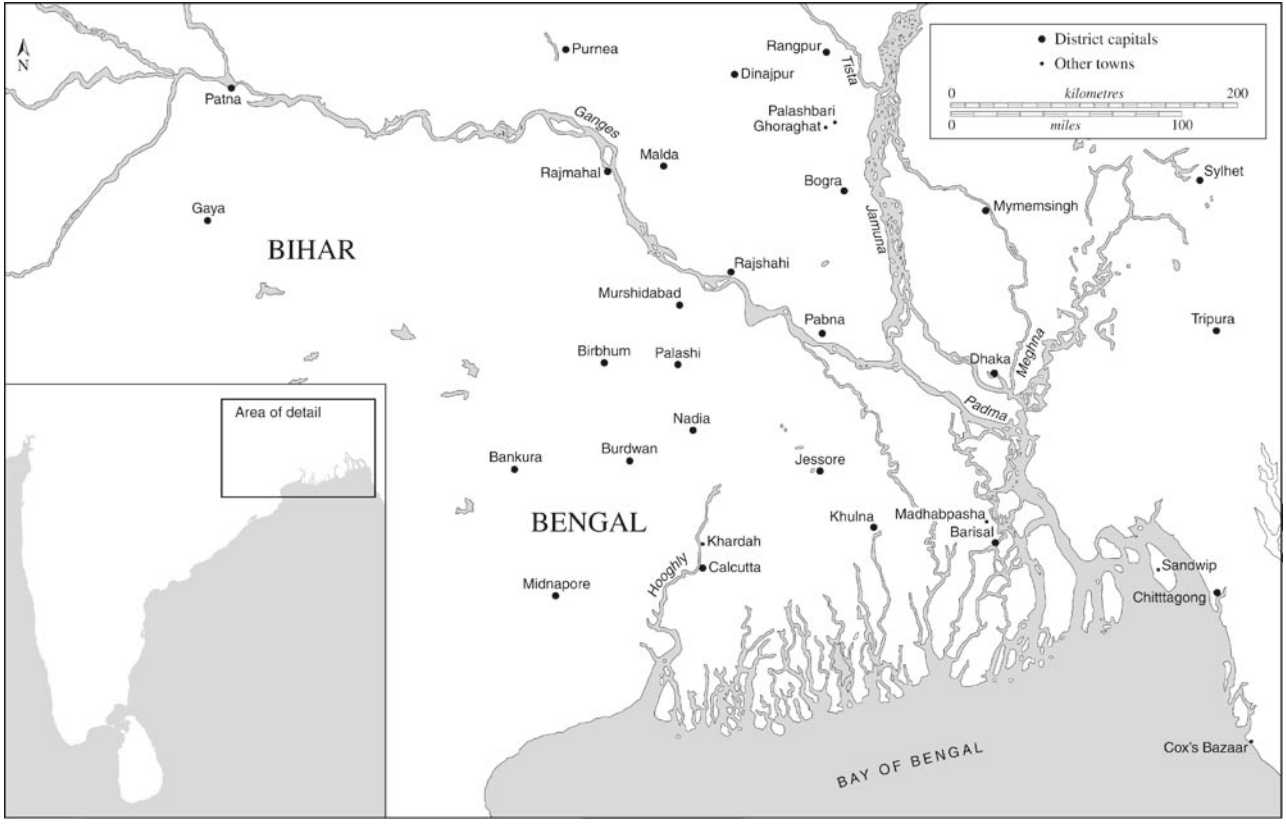
Research was conducted at archives in Britain, India and Bangladesh. Without exception archivists in each place have been efficient and helpful. But in particular I would like to thank Professor Sharif Uddin Ahmed, until recently Director of the National Archives in Dhaka. Historians of Bengal are indebted to him for having run one of the best organised, most dynamic and most ambitious archival repositories in the world. Professor Ahmed and many others have ensured that Dhaka has been a hospitable second home over the last few years. I hope this book and future work begins to return their generosity.

Working with Talal Asad in New York sparked many of the initial ideas that were later developed in these pages. Over the years since then, Talal has been an acute critic and interlocutor. David Washbrook supervised the dissertation that this book grew out of, and has been a source of support since. Since examining the doctoral thesis this book grew out of, Chris Bayly has offered constant engagement and an endless source of advice. Three friends have been constant intellectual allies, collaborators and sparring partners, helping shape my thinking the most over the last decade: Shruti Kapila, Iftekhar Iqbal and Laura Roush. Hussein Agrama, Talal Asad, Chris Bayly, Jim Bjork, Michael Dodson, Carrie Gibson, Shruti Kapila, Elaine Lester, Michael Lobban, Maleiha Malik, Benjamin Page, Javed Majeed, Andrew Sartori, Adam Sutcliffe and Tim Wilson commented on chapters; Nandini Chatterjee, Iftekhar Iqbal, Robert Travers and Nick Wilson read the entire manuscript. Their very detailed engagement has made it much better than it would have been otherwise. In addition, comments from or conversations with Rushanara Ali, Claire Anderson, Duncan Bell, Ujjayan Bhattacharya, Ritu Birla, Rajat Datta, Faisal Devji, Andrew Dilley, Richard Drayton, Serena Ferente, Durba Ghosh, Catherine Hall, Joanna Innes, Sirajul Islam, Ayesha Jalal, Ruby Lal, Ian McBride, Nuru Huda Monsur, Andrew Porter, Emma Page, Paul Readman, Sarah Stockwell, Mohammed Tabishat, Richard Vinen, Rupa Viswanath and Tim Wilson were significant, sparking many of the ideas in the pages below. I am grateful to Naomi Hossein, Alfaz Hossein, Kathy Hossain, Dipu Moni, Nurul Huda Monsur, Tawfique Nawaz, Tawquir Nawaz, Deepavali Nawaz, Iftekhar Iqbal and Rizwana Siddiqua for making Dhaka a second home for so many years. The corridors of King's College London history department are amongst the most intellectually stimulating places I know. I'd like to thank colleagues and students there, particularly participants in my third-year class 'The Making of the Colonial Regime' during the last two years. Richard Drayton's enthusiasm for this book led to its publication by Palgrave Macmillan; I'd like to thank Richard, Michael Strang and Ruth Ireland for making the process of publication so easy. My family, Dot Wilson, Rod Wilson and Tim Wilson have been a source of immense support and intellectual excitement. Elaine Lester has changed my life in ways I could never imagine; I have her to thank for everything.

March 2008

Abbreviations

Add Mss	Additional Manuscripts, British Library
BJC	Bengal Judicial Consultations
BL	British Library
BRC	Bengal Revenue Consultations
CoD	Court of Directors
CRO	County Record Office
CSSH	*Comparative Studies in Society and History*
DR	District Records
FWIH	*Fort William-India House Correspondence* (22 vols, Delhi, 1949–1985)
HCSP	*House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth-Century, 1715–1800*
IESHR	*Indian Economic and Social History Review*
IOR	India Office Records, Asia, Africa and Pacific Collections, British Library
MAS	*Modern Asian Studies*
Mss Eur	European Manuscripts, Asia, Africa and Pacific Collections, British Library
NAB	National Archives of Bangladesh
n.p.	no page numbers
PP	*Parliamentary Papers*
PRO	Public Record Office manuscripts, National Archives, London
SDA	*Sadr Diwani Adalat* (referred to by British officials as the Sudder Dewanny Adawlut)
WBSA	West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata



Map 1 Map of Bengal and Bihar.

1
Introduction

Modern states treat their subjects as strangers. But in many places in Europe and Asia, before the late eighteenth century, governance was based on a model of familiar relations between ruler and ruled. Early modern commentators wrote as if personal familiarity was an important aspect of political conduct. In this idiom governance was regarded as a form of face-to-face exchange in which rulers needed to constantly gauge the people's affection to them. The visibility of the prince and the possibility of coming into his presence were crucial to South Asian politics before British rule. The most important treatises on politics and ethics in early modern India were concerned with the skilful balance between persuasion and chastisement needed to maintain the affection and awe of the population.[1] The same was true in Europe, for writers as different as Baldassarre Castiglione and Niccolo Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, William Paley and Edmund Burke, all of whom saw the relationship between ruler and ruled as a process of continual interaction based on familiarity between the two.[2]

Many of the regimes that emerged across the globe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were different. They treated their subjects as unfamiliar beings who needed to be ruled using techniques of governance that did not presume prior familiarity. The inhabitants of those states were subject to grand strategies, objective forms of statistical knowledge and abstract codes of law. Though they often spoke of the need for rulers to be sympathetic to the welfare of the governed, few were concerned with the degree of affection existing between ruler and ruled.

Such modern regimes act on their subjects in two ways as noted by the German sociologist Georg Simmel in his 1906 essay on 'The Stranger'.[3] Not being connected 'through established ties of kinship, locality, and occupation' to those they rule, strangers adopt an attitude of objectivity which is passive and detached. Simmel noted that '[o]bjectivity may be defined as freedom: the objective individual is bound by no commitments which could prejudice his perception, understanding or evaluation of the given'. But such freedom creates an unnerving, anxiety-inducing degree of uncertainty about

how to judge and what to do. As a result, modern governance is marked by indecision and ambivalence.[4]

Secondly, the stranger's objectivity 'finds practical expression in the more abstract nature of the [subject's] relation to him'. Modern states do not consider their subjects as unique, particular individuals, 'but [instead] as strangers of a particular type'. Rather than the complex, inter-subjective forms of ethical practice that constituted the early modern polity, the modern state attempts to govern its subjects with general, abstract rules.[5]

This book examines the emergence of such a modern form of governance in colonial Bengal, showing how the characteristics Simmel noted became central to British rule in India. Bengal was the first large area of territory that came under the direct rule of the English East India Company. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, its people were governed in a heterogeneous series of regional and Indian-wide sovereignties, including both the Mughal empire and a patchwork of local principalities. Taking advantage of a complex set of revolutions in Bengali politics, by the mid-1760s the Company established a form of political authority backed by military power. To begin with, though, British rule was rooted in familiar networks of friendship and enmity that extended from the provincial capital in Murshidabad, to Calcutta and London. This book shows how a dramatic rupture occurred in the culture of politics in Bengal from the mid-1780s onwards, as a crisis in Britain's worldwide empire intersected with the unstable politics of war, revenue collection and British governance in India. The response, over the next 50 years, was the emergence of a form of governance in British-ruled India that treated its subjects as strangers for the first time.

That style of administration was very different from the way people had been ruled in mid-eighteenth-century Bengal. But it also differed from the style of governance at home in Britain, where for the most part political leaders continued to encounter their subjects as familiars, often as friends or enemies. In Britain, strangeness did not characterise the relationship between state and society, or government and population as a whole.[6] By contrast, India's British rulers were preoccupied with the administration of new abstract types such as the Indian landholder, the peasant proprietor or the Hindu widow, categories whose genealogy will be charted in the pages below. So whilst English land law continued to be based on the heterogeneity of uncodified local rights, the British state in Bengal tried to define a single general type of propertied subject in written rules; a type often referred to with the word 'landholder' or *zamindar*. Although the families from which the British collected revenue remained changed little from the 1810s, British officials rapidly moved from one conception of the rights of the landholder to another. Without sustained engagement with Bengali ways of life, officers suffered from exactly the kind of anxious intellectual freedom that Simmel discussed.

In part this book tells the story of the official mind that ruled Bengal between the 1780s and the 1830s, a set of mentalities very different from those which governed Britain or considered imperial politics in the metropolis.[7] It shows how colonial thought came to be dominated by an obsession with the search for general, abstract rules, which could be applied mechanistically by an authoritarian state. That cluster of ideas and instincts might be referred to as colonial legal posivitism; it could also be described with Bernard Williams' term 'government house utilitarianism', a phrase referring to the practical political philosophy of an elite with an abstract and idealised definition of public welfare not shared by the population at large.[8] Revising many of the arguments of Eric Stokes' *English Utilitarianism and India*, the following chapters nonetheless offer a genealogy of this utilitarian governing mentality in a colonial environment. But they also suggest that such a genealogy needs to explain how a rule-based approach to human interaction diffused itself amongst sections of Bengal's elites. As the final chapter of the book illustrates, the very idea of Indian 'society' articulated by Calcutta-based Indian intellectuals in the first half of the nineteenth century was in part dependent on these strands of colonial thought.

The book places the process of colonial governance occurring in the specific location of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Bengal within a broader context, examining its relationship to an enduring story about changing practices of governance told by philosophers and historians interested in other parts of the world. Historically-minded philosophers from Max Weber to Michel Foucault and beyond, as well as conceptually minded British historians such as Oliver MacDonagh and Eric Stokes, argue that a dramatic transformation in the ideologies and practices of government occurred in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which went on to have an extraordinary impact on the rest of the world. Each explained the emergence of modern politics and the modern state in very different ways; but their concerns overlap. They note that the modern forms of governance which had come into existence in nineteenth-century Europe shared an attempt to target populations with general categories and rules, supposedly for their own welfare; to create permanent and hierarchical agencies to produce and enforce those norms; and to produce new ideas about how to manage the frontier between society's autonomous self-regulation and the intervention of the state: in other words, they were characterised by governmentality, bureaucracy and liberalism.[9] And from Eric Stokes to Partha Chatterjee onwards, scholars concerned with the colonial transformation of Asia examine the process and implications by which these ideas and practices were transported from Europe to the colonial world.

This book is influenced by these arguments about the emergence of political modernity in Europe and the rest of the world. But it suggests that attention to the early history of colonialism in Bengal allows them to be reworked in two respects. First of all, the book shows how the emergence

of new forms of governance occurred from the anxious, insecure attitude to Indian society which politicians and administrators had during these years; they did not develop from a confident desire to transform South Asia or impose a coherent political ideology rooted in the continuities of European intellectual history upon the rest of the world. In particular, the following chapters suggest that colonial Bengal's political modernity needs first of all to be rooted in the complex set of responses to a complex, multi-layered series of imperial crises that occurred within British rule in Bengal in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.

Secondly, the book suggests that events and processes outside Europe were central to the making of modern forms of rule in Asia and elsewhere, including in Europe itself. The colonial regime that developed in Bengal was not the product of the centrifugal flow of ideas or practices from metropole to colony; centripetal forces, in which concepts and practices flowed from the 'periphery' to the imperial 'centre', were more important. Many characteristics of 'British' political modernity emerged in colonial India before they occurred in Britain itself. A positivistic conception of law as the command of the sovereign developed first in India, as did a mechanistic idea of the state, and a perception, shared by rulers and subjects, of the population as a body of people united by a common culture, not merely common allegiance to political institutions. None of these were significant in Britain before the colonial encounter.

I

The beginning of these processes was noted by one Indian observer of British rule. Writing in 1784 about the revolutions that had occurred in the province of Bengal since the decline of Mughal power, Ghulam Hussein Khan Tabatabai (*c.*1727–1797) noted the 'declining state of the country'. He had spent most of his life moving through India in the service of the Mughal regime, writing his *Seir Mutaquerin* ('View of modern times') 20 years after the British had begun to assert their political dominance in India for the first time. From the early 1760s his career and income were bound to the fate of the Company in the eastern province of Bengal.[10] Despite these long-standing colonial connections, Ghulam Hussein's work emphasised the British role in the process of decline. After observing their government for two decades, Ghulam Hussein was clear that Bengal's new rulers were 'quite alien to this country', 'strangers to the methods of raising tribute, as well as to the maxims of estimating the revenues or of comprehending the ways of tax-gathering'. Ghulam Hussein differentiated the practice of the British from India's pre-colonial Mughal rulers. The Mughals had 'lived among their people'. The British, by contrast, exchanged information with Indian subjects without effectively imbibing Indian ways of life. They hid themselves away in their own world of

institutions and ideas rather than effectively engaging with the population they ruled.[11]

Ghulam Hussein believed the strange relationship Britons had towards Indian society had something to do with the way they used writing. British rule seemed rooted in the physical exchange of written words between the officers of the East India Company. It was, he said, 'a standing rule with them',

> that whatever anything remarkable they heard from any man versed in business, or even from any other individual, was immediately set in writing in a kind of book consisting of a few blank leaves, which most of them carry about, and which they put together afterwards, and bind like a book for future use.

The Company's officers were constantly 'endeavouring to engage [Indians] in conversation, especially upon the politics of the country'. But those conversations did not consist of a proper dialogue. Ghulam Hussein continued,

> so soon as an Englishman could pick up anything relative to the laws or business of this land, he would immediately set it down in writing, and lay it up in store for the use of another Englishmen.

'Matters have come to such a pass', he argued,

> that the Books and Memorandum composed by the English . . . have come to be trusted as so many vouchers; whereas they are only some faint idea of the exterior and bark, but not the pith or real reason of these institutions.[12]

The texts the British produced were signs empty of significance. Written by a class of officials who saw themselves as strangers to India, Ghulam Hussein argued, they contained knowledge of a kind but not the wisdom that came from familiar forms of interaction which could effectively guide action.

One metaphor stands out in Ghulam Hussein's account. The Mughal official described how officials engaged with Bengal's population as if they were 'pictures on a wall'.[13] British officials encountered their subjects as static objects of scrutiny, whose lives were governed by stable patterns and structures that could be represented objectively, like a picture, from a distant perspective. The problem, Ghulam Hussein suggested, was that British officers rarely perceived themselves as active participants in the everyday lives of those they governed. One of the major themes of this book is the way Company officials maintained an estranged relationship from Indian society, avoiding interaction that would have enabled them to engage in the tactical game of Indian politics on its own terms.

Ghulam Hussein's history of British rule in India was interested in practices, affections and experience. The Indian nobleman thought the British were strangers because they did not embody the habit and skill proper to a ruler and had not learnt the forms of conduct that allowed the sovereign to 'inquire into the characters and tempers of men' and govern each accordingly. For him, intelligence was not purely cognitive or primarily linguistic. Ghulam Hussein inhabited an Aristotelian early modern world in which good governance depended on the cultivation of practical virtues through training, experience and personal forms of familiar interaction rather than the possession of abstract knowledge.[14] Governance was an inter-subjective form of ethical practice that could not be adequately described with written rules. From within a practical tradition that valued the ruler's ability to make 'personal inquiry into the circumstances of his suitors', the aloof perspective the British adopted appeared strange.

Two centuries or more after Ghulam Hussein wrote, scholars tend to critically examine colonial representations and discourse rather than look at institutions or practices when they discuss the British regime in India. Following the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978, many have noted how the British represented India as inferior, backward and unchanging, then shown how Indians resisted by imagining themselves differently afterwards.[15] Others explain the introduction of European ideas about politics and economics to the subcontinent, illustrating how new, modern notions of the state, civil society and market economics transformed (or did not transform) Indian society.[16] Underlying these trends in the history of colonialism is the assumption that humans are fundamentally representational beings, whose ability to use language to construct coherent concepts of the world in their minds is the most important factor in determining how they engage with the world in practice. The problem with this kind of cultural history is that it does not explain why an instance of discourse or a form of representation occurs at a particular place at a specific point in time; nor does it help understand where that discourse comes from.[17] All it offers is a static account of the attitudes Europeans had about Indians written in particular texts, which remain unconnected to an understanding of the power relations that led them to be articulated, the purposes they were put and the instruments which used them at a particular moment in the flow of time.[18] What is missing is an interpretation of the historical process by which a particular form of discourse comes into being and then has an effect on the world around it; of the relationship between the general categories of discourse and the events within which they occurred.

In part, the following pages offer an account of the ideas and discourses of governance that the British in the early colonial period used to govern in the province of Bengal. The book pays special attention to the texts through which the process of colonial governance, in particular the governance of property, was conducted. But the analysis here concerns the forms

of experience, practice and instinct that led British officials and their Indian interlocutors to use texts in a particular way to begin with. That experience was defined by the complex set of practical purposes which colonial officials in Bengal tried to fulfil; much of the time, it was driven by the often-rootless effort of officials to find categories and concepts that allowed them to practically understand what it was they did when they acted to fulfil those purposes. British rule in early colonial India was underwritten by an anxious search for semantic coherence. The argument here is that that search was one of the most important forces shaping the development of politics in colonial South Asia, in particular in creating a transformation or rupture in political practice and thought.

II

As has already been noted in this chapter, the rupturing force of colonialism can be associated with a number of concepts: capitalism, utilitarianism, bureaucracy, governmentality and, most recently, liberalism. The argument here is influenced by a recent emphasis on the close relationship between liberalism and empire in a number of recent works: in particular within the writing of C.A. Bayly, Uday Singh Mehta, Jennifer Pitts and Andrew Sartori.[19] As Bayly reminds us, liberalism comes in many different guises. Some varieties are historicist and intrinsically sceptical about the virtue of abstract forms of social analysis. But in the form that scholars have referred to it in their discussion of colonialism recently, liberalism tends to be characterised by its use of abstract or universalistic modes of thought, and its suspicion about the role of particular concrete situations or practical traditions in providing grounds for political action and thought.

Such, at least, is the way Uday Singh Mehta defines colonial liberalism in one of the most important books published in the last few decades in the field. Mehta suggests that the nineteenth-century liberal rhetoric of James and John Stuart Mill was marked above all by its sense of detachment from, and unfamiliarity with, the world it analysed. Liberalism's unfamiliarity with real life allowed it to 'compare and classify' different societies, constantly judging what it actually saw against an abstract set of normative standards, giving it an 'urge to dominate the world' as a consequence. Mehta finds this link between abstract universalism and the urge to both conceptually and materially dominate the world in British political thought from John Locke onwards. He contrasts the arrogance of imperial liberalism with the attention to the particularity of concrete situations and emphasis on lived experience found in the writings of the British politician Edmund Burke in particular.[20]

The argument of this book is strongly influenced by Mehta's work. The difference, however, lies in the concern here with the relationship between the complex, situated practice of colonial power and liberal ideas. Because

Liberalism and Empire does not locate the emergence of colonial liberalism within specific institutions or particular forms of life, its argument neglects the important role the anxieties and limitations of colonial practice had on liberal thought. Mehta suggests that British thought about ruling the empire had 'the quality of confidence, inner certainty, and the perspective from which unhindered judgements can be issued'.[21] Paying more attention to the practical situation of colonial liberals allows one to see how their thought was rooted in an intellectual context that was much less sure of itself than Mehta and others suggest.

So, officials in the subcontinent did not think that British rule in their Indian territories was safe even after the defeat of the Maratha polity in 1818; attention to the persistent and often rather anxious emphasis British officials placed on the need to expand the range of force at the Company's disposal until deep into the 1830s makes that much clear.[22] James Mill's *History of British India*, perhaps the founding text of imperial liberalism, was written in the anxious years of the Napoleonic Wars, when many in Europe and India feared the demise of the British state. As Chapter 6 argues, Mill's brand of colonial utilitarianism was as much a response to the anxious experience of colonial administration in these years as it was the product of confident metropolitan theory. The two 'reforming' Governor-Generals of the period, Cornwallis (1786–1793) and Bentinck (1828–1834), were sent to India to cut costs and curtail expensive wars. Land revenue in Bengal began to stabilise only in the 1810s; the Company's expenditure continued to exceed its income into the 1830s. If this was the 'Age of Uncertainty' in domestic British politics, as David Eastwood suggests, it was doubly so in the world of colonial governance.[23] Colonial utilitarianism and with it what Andrew Sartori calls the language of 'liberal abstraction' were formulated in India to overcome or circumvent the complex resistance of an intractable real world that from a British point of view often seemed impossible to understand or rule.[24]

Throughout the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries new forms of governance occurred both as India's colonial governors struggled to produce money and meaning from worlds of economic and social interaction they found unfamiliar, and as colonial subjects tried to make sense of being dominated by strangers. In the process, each created ideas that were very different from those that dominated political life in Britain or pre-colonial Bengal. The practice of British colonial existence in the subcontinent produced a sense of anxiety about these differences and about Britons' inability to be 'at home' in India, as Ranajit Guha puts it. These anxieties dramatically shaped the character of colonial rule.[25] Throughout the period examined in this book, the colonial state remained an unstable, restless entity, never quite certain what it was doing, how it should act or whom it was acting for. But such ambivalence should not be written off as a sign of colonial weakness, though;

it had very significant, often transformatory effects. As the work of Homi K. Bhabha emphasises, ambivalence was an unconscious source of colonial power.[26]

III

The rest of this introductory chapter develops some of the methodological and theoretical concerns that underpin the argument, looking first at the relationship between practice and thought, secondly at the strangely neglected role of time and temporality in studies of the colonial state. Readers concerned more with the historical argument than theory might want to skip to the next chapter; the methodological suggestions made in this section are implicit throughout the rest of the book. Together with the empirical material in the chapters which follow, they provide a framework for situating concepts and categories in the context of the constantly moving flow of colonial action, reading the published voice of the colonial state alongside and against the record of interactions and transactions from which that voice emanated.

Such an approach relies on an understanding of political thought that does not begin with abstract forms of thought itself. Thought is always rooted in particular material and institutional situations. Writing and speech are produced in contexts structured by interactive forms of experience that cannot be expressed in purely abstract conceptual terms; there is no such thing as pure discourse, nor can the historical meaning of concepts be properly understood if placed in the context of nothing but other concepts. The varieties of political thought occur within worlds of action and interaction that their authors cannot fully control nor, more importantly, comprehend, so meaning can never be reduced to intention alone.[27] It is impossible to separate the structure of thought from the active contexts that produced it. 'Theory does not express, translate or serve to apply practice, it is practice', as Michel Foucault suggested. Or as Martin Heidegger put it, 'thinking acts insofar as it thinks'.[28]

The linguistic or discursive turn which colonial and South Asian history, along with other disciplines, has taken since the early 1980s has partly been associated with the influence of continental European philosophy, in particular perhaps the work of Michel Foucault. Yet this same intellectual heritage contains resources to critique an over-emphasis on the role of language or discourse. The 'discursive formations' that Foucault discussed were not unified by unitary concepts or stereotypes, nor concerned with a single object; they represented intellectual techniques embedded in specific institutions that oriented subjects to the world in very practical ways.[29] But there are limits to the Foucauldian approach. Even if it shows how discourse is an effect of both intellectual and institutional power, Foucault's genealogical method presents thought as something that is never baffled by its inability to construct stable

forms of meaning; systems of thought succeed one another without any crisis in between. Foucault's work does not offer a conceptual guide for explaining how concepts and categories emerge from the anxiety and uncertainty of experience as much as the successful exercise of the will to power. For a more practically-oriented approach to political thought, Foucault's work needs to be supplemented with reference to the philosopher who influenced Foucault's generation of theorists the most, Martin Heidegger.

For Heidegger, understanding comes first of all from the non-speculative practical relationship people have with the world as they go about their everyday lives, the way they engage in particular projects and try to achieve particular purposes. Heidegger uses the German word *verstehen* ('understanding') in a way that does not only imply abstract cognition, but includes the forms of unreflective practice often described with terms such as 'know-how' or 'skill', as well as the way sensations are responded to instinctively.[30] From Heidegger's point of view, the things and people subjects come across in the world are not initially encountered as objective entities present for detached, speculative observation, nor are they part of a mental discourse. So, the notebook which Ghulam Hussein Khan's British official picked up would not primarily be perceived *as* a 'notebook' with the attributes of notebook-ness about it; nor was the abstract representation of the Indian landholder whose words the official transcribed in the book present in the mind of the official beforehand either. Instead, the official just picked up the notebook in order to write down what his interlocutor said, in order to work out how much revenue a landholder needed to pay. Before being an object of thought they each were objects of use. Objects or concepts such as these are what Heidegger calls ready-to-hand in a world of purposive action that precedes reflection, a world that subjects practically 'grasp in advance' before they reflect cognitively upon it.

For Heidegger, '[t]he ready-to-hand is always understood in terms of a totality of *involvements*', which always already exists before an individual action.[31] The existence of the notebook, for example, in a revenue office makes no sense without the act of writing about Indian revenue-payers it was printed for, which in turn relies on the complex purposes underpinning the British presence in the subcontinent, most of which are not represented in any place in abstract terms. Of course, Heidegger notes that people do have concrete thoughts, and can speculate abstractly about things 'as they are' rather than merely as they are used. But this more abstract way of thinking is always derived from an unreflective understanding of the network of possibilities and encounters in which objects and concepts are first practically encountered. From this point of view, to write a history of colonial discourse one cannot merely consider the ways in which people have 'represented' India in an abstractly conceptual form, nor think about the 'ideologies' which were supposed to have guided them. More importantly, one must examine the practical, often unspoken purposes that made particular written texts

and descriptions about India meaningful (and here to be meaningful is to be useful) or meaningless at different points in time. Those purposes were often not present as a conscious intention in the mind of the actor before they performed an action.

The aims and purposes that officials were involved with in early colonial Bengal were many. They included the Company servant's desire to make enough money to return home wealthy, the demand for a stable source of revenue for the East India Company, to limit risky encounters with local inhabitants or reduce the amount of paperwork which had to be faced, all of which encompassed a certain set of conceptual and practical conditions, and involved the deployment of forms of knowledge to be achieved. On occasion the following chapters use terms such as 'colonialism' or 'the process of colonial rule' to describe the complex collection of interactions and purposes that clustered around the process of British governance in Bengal. Nonetheless such a heterogenous collection of purposes were not driven by a single dynamic; nor were they undergirded by a single ideology, although they did produce a particular style of thought. Not only did different purposes drive different elements within the colonial 'state' at any one moment, the characteristics of colonial governance changed significantly, as the meaning of terms such as 'Company servant', 'landholder' and even 'government' were transformed between the years that circumscribe the period covered in this book.

The multivarious purposes that British officials attempted to fulfil in Bengal allowed them to interact with the similarly diverse purposes behind the actions of their Indian subjects in complex ways. Sometimes, where the purposes of each coincided, mutually meaningful dialogue occurred. More usually the colonial encounter was governed by the estranged and aloof approach noted by Ghulam Hussein Khan. Sometimes interaction occurred in acts of violence. Where an aloof and distinctively colonial relationship emerged between Europeans and Indians this was often simply because British officials and their South Asian interlocutors were trying to do two incompatible things: a landholder's desire to maximise his or her income or achieve greater autonomy clashed with the Company's demand for more resources; a political leader's attempt to retain the affection of his or her tenants working against the British attempt to adjudicate a property dispute, for example. This was not an encounter between interlocutors or antagonists who fully knew their own minds, who were able to satisfactorily realise their conscious or unconscious strategies at any one point in time. Instead of seeing the interaction between Britons and their South Asian subjects as a clash between predetermined subjectivities guided by abstract predetermined cultural representations or intentions (as a clash between the colonial state or Europe's 'modern regime of power' and Indian 'society' or 'culture', for example), the following chapters narrate the contingent fashion in which these aims interacted with one another to produce unexpected effects.

The most important, unifying phenomenon that any historical account of these complex interactions has to explain is the emergence of the colonial regime's peculiarly abstract, objectivising style of thought. Why, despite the chaos and complexity of colonial and Indian forms of life, were British officials ruled by the instinct to classify and generalise on such a large scale? Why was their response to uncertainty and ambivalence to produce general textual rules? Why did Indian elites follow suit, and define their own subjectivity with general social categories too?

The emergence of this peculiarly objectivising style of thought is a theme that will be addressed in detail in the chapters that follow through an empirical study of the archive of everyday, often local colonial administration and encounter. But the way Heidegger discussed human action helps frame this discussion. Heidegger noted that things are perceived as objective entities when they lose their place in the practical projects that people are trying to fulfil, as when a tool breaks, or perhaps a particular colonial category does not work in the course of revenue collection, for example. What the Oxford philosopher John Austin would have called an infelicitious performance forces the observer to ask what went wrong, and adopt a more detached approach and objective attitude to the situation. Only at the point when something loses its place in the network of active relationships, with 'the discontinuance of a specific manipulation in our concernful dealings', does it become an object of theoretical knowledge.[32] It is only when it is no longer of direct use that something is seen as an object with abstract properties, which obeys general rules for example. In colonial Bengal, abstraction and objectification did not occur as the result of the colonial regime's successful exercise of the will to power or knowledge; they were processes emerging from practical semantic crisis, in which concepts and practices could no longer be taken for granted as working in an unreflexive fashion.

In this process though, the object was not simply removed from its previous practical context. Examined in a more abstract fashion it was quickly placed in a different, more 'scientific' practical environment governed by the unreflexive manipulation of 'ready-to-hand' objects nonetheless. Theory, in other words, depends on a non-theoretical element or practical world as much as non-theoretical practice. 'Even in the ''most abstract'' way of working out problems and establishing what has been obtained, one manipulates equipment for writing, for example.'[33] In colonial Bengal, an abstract frame of thought produced not only a peculiar colonial discourse but its own practical institutions too.

Humans have always objectivised in this way. Writing in the second and third quarters of the twentieth century, Heidegger nonetheless noted that estranged ways of thinking which treated objects and people outside familiar, practical contexts had only been institutionalised within bureaucracy, academia or the market in recent times. Heidegger criticised his own age for its tendency to understand the world as a picture, comprehending human

existence through 'the representedness of beings', as if the world were a static object of scrutiny existing outside the observer, rather than a practical network of active involvements and encounters.[34] There is something uncannily Heideggerian about Ghulam Hussein Khan's suggestion that Company officials perceived Indians 'like pictures on a wall'. Perhaps this should not surprise us. In different ways, both Heidegger and Ghulam Hussein were heirs of an Aristotelian tradition that saw thought as the result of purposive practical action, not static, disembodied abstract reason.[35]

Ghulam Hussein's account of Britons' treating Indians 'like pictures on a wall' can be read as a description of the way British unfamiliarity and semantic uncertainty was followed by colonial disengagement and the production of far more abstract categories of thought. Later chapters of this book show how the kind of aloof relationship with Indian practice which Ghulam Hussein described produced the objectified categories of the colonial state, the Indian landholder and even Indian society in the early nineteenth century. But the British objectification of India was always shaped by an engagement with an Indian world that was itself continually changing and responding. Colonial governance was a process in which the colonial gaze was continually shifting focus in order to follow the fluid patterns of Indian social practice. Social objects moved rapidly between different frames of reference, as interpretative contexts were created to make sense of phenomenon that began to appear unfamiliar, were briefly understood with the construction of short-lived systems of colonial knowledge, only to move out of focus again of their own volition in their confrontation with colonial institutions. The result of this process was the transformation of the logic of British rule in India in a relatively short space of time; particular arguments went in and out of fashion very quickly. What remained consistent, however, was the state of restless unease in which colonial thought occurred.

IV

This book argues that time needs to play a more important role in the study of colonialism, for two reasons. Most obviously, historical time offers an analytical axis on which the specific character of colonial events needs to be plotted. The actions which made up colonial political culture occurred as a response to actions which occurred at specific past historical conjunctures. The new colonial political landscape which emerged by the mid-nineteenth century can be properly understood only if it is seen as the result of a dialectical process of change over time; as the consequence of a complex process of encounter and response, in which the thought and action of one subject emerges in retort to the subjectivity and actions of others at a previous particular moments.[36] For example, the colonial state that came into existence by the 1830s emerged as a response to the colonial regime which existed in the 1790s; Indian arguments about the self-sufficient nature of Indian society