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‘The State in Disguise of a Merchant’: Extractive Administration in British India, 1784-1834

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An argument in state formation theory—particularly the development of the state's fiscal infrastructure—holds that the form of a state's administration is shaped by rulers' attempts to maximize resource extraction as constrained by local social structure. This view, however, does not adequately account for the variation in administration in British colonial India ca. 1784-1834. The British developed at least two systems for extracting land revenue. To account for this variation, I offer an approach derived from pragmatist theories of action which emphasizes contingent administrative development and fluid standards adjudicating between competing models of rule. Further, I suggest administrative variation was at least partially formed by struggles between administrations over visions of the imperial bond with Indian subjects and that this struggle had a fractal structure.

...the India Company became to be what it is, a great Empire carrying on subordinately (under the public authority), a great commerce. It became that thing which was supposed by the Roman Law so unsuitable, the same power was a Trader, the same power was a Lord...In fact, [the Company] is a State in Disguise of a Merchant, a great public office in disguise of a Countinghouse...--Edmund Burke, 1788

Introduction

Why do the organizational forms of state extractive apparatuses vary? Do they become more bureaucratic as states modernize? Or do features of state and social structure determine efficient deviations from the bureaucratic ideal type? Do state extractive apparatuses develop towards an efficient, rational, and effective ideal over time, or does their efficiency reflect rulers' efforts to maximize revenue as constrained by local social structure?

In this paper I explore these questions by studying the British colonial presence in India from 1784 to 1834. The East India Company (hereafter EIC) grappled with the reality of governing and extracting resources from territory in India, so administrators had to decide how to organize administration. I argue that different conceptualizations of the relationship of rule between Anglo administrators and their Indian subjects derived substantially different crystallizations of administrative action—structural organizations of administration, its coordination with central authority, and conceptions of proper administrative ethics and action. Conceptions of rule did not *cause* the crystallizations, but rather organized how administrators answered the same question—how revenue was to be collected in an enormous agricultural economy—and how they pursued the same goals—the improvement of the Indian economy and maximization of the land revenue. Moreover, the systems developed in symbolic competition, as administrators critiqued competing revenue settlements and justified their own.

Early British colonial India is an excellent place to study the development of state extractive apparatuses. The revenue systems in India developed as the EIC transitioned from a mercantile trading organization to a territorial sovereignty of ambiguous pedigree, so it was there that the British most openly questioned what government meant, what it took to govern “well,” and how best to extract revenue for EIC investors and the British state. Moreover, the variability of Indian social structure, composed of myriad different agricultural systems, cultural legacies, and local societies, also meant that the British colonial attempt to interpret Indian society presents an opportunity to investigate theories about why extractive apparatuses vary. The British presence in India is also important because the uncertainty of the EIC’s fiscal status and its relation to the British state

underscores the ambiguity under which administrative decisions are often made. Despite a rhetoric of profit maximization, efficiency, and effectiveness, it was unclear at the time—as it is in retrospect—what the standards were by which the two systems were judged, who was supposed to make the decision, and what precisely the EIC’s financial role, relationship, and responsibility to the British state was.

I proceed by reviewing explanations for why state extractive apparatuses vary. General theories of state formation have emphasized the causes and consequences of bureaucratization as a whole, but specific theories of extractive apparatus have relied on rational choice mechanisms to explain deviations away from the bureaucratic ideal type and changes in administrative structure. They assert that state extractive apparatuses reflect constraints of the underlying social structure they govern.

But the rational choice arguments assume a theory of action that has come under attack. I review a model of extractive apparatus formation that relies on a combination of pragmatic microfoundations and a form of realist macrosociology to account for variations in state extractive apparatus. This approach inverts the style of explanation characteristic of rational choice explanations, because instead of confining the explanations away from indigenous social structure to an “error term”—treating them as exogenous influences that cannot be explained in the model—an approach based on pragmatist microfoundations and relational realism centralizes this complexity. It asks not how the variation in extractive apparatus in India resulted from the operation of a universal mechanism in a mono-causal, “thin” environment, but rather how different processes came together to produce change and how they crystallized into durable form.

In the next section, I outline the different causal processes that created the imperative to reform the EIC’s administration. The Company was swept up in transformations of its material and theoretical political economy; its relationship to the domestic British state, changes in the geopolitical situation of England, Britain, and the Mughal empire on the Indian subcontinent; changes in the moral understanding of the self and its relationship others; and, crucially, the imperial territorialization of the EIC’s rule in India that highlighted the entanglement of the Company’s role as both merchant and sovereign. These forces intertwined to form an event—the powerful yet diffuse call to reform the administration of India by disentangling the EIC’s servants’ roles.

This call for reform set a new process in motion, the results of which I trace in the following section. The *zemindari* system determined the structure of land tenure and revenue extraction, developed primarily in Bengal. The *ryotwari* system, by contrast, was eventually implemented in Madras and throughout much of India. I compare the two systems using a framework derived from Weber. Both systems challenge traditional accounts of bureaucratization. The *zemindari* settlement dictated a relatively internally bureaucratic administration, but relied almost exclusively on indirect contact with its subjects, especially where taxation was concerned. The *ryotwari* system, meanwhile, was relatively unbureaucratic but was a comparatively more direct form of rule.

After laying out how extractive administrations in India varied, I return to the reflection hypothesis and analyze each system’s relationship to Indian social structure. Based on an analysis of a specific tax district—the Baramahal, where both systems were tried—I show that neither was a conclusively closer “fit” for Indian society or closer to how the Mughals had operated. Of course the British reflected aspects of Indian society,

but they did so unevenly; they were predisposed to see some features of the Indian agrarian economy as more natural than others. Moreover, neither system clearly generated more revenue and proponents of both systems argued for them in the same terms of efficiency, effectiveness, and economic progress. The reflection hypothesis therefore cannot account for why extractive administration varied in India.

Finally, I present an account of the dynamics of debates surrounding the implementation of the ryotwari and zemindari systems in Madras. I argue that these debates took on a fractal structure; that is, thinking about the nature of Indian subjects was repeatedly articulated in terms of their fundamental similarity to or difference from the British. Moreover, I show that this division ramified into justifications for the ryotwari and zemindari forms of revenue extraction.

Extraction and State Formation

The major explanation for the variation of extractive administration comes from a combination of general theories of state formation and the specific study of “fiscal sociology.” The literature converges on the “reflection hypothesis”—the idea that organizational regimes reflect an optimum fit between rulers’ maximization and obstacles presented by local social structure.

Though it harkens back to Schumpeter (1991), the theme of action within structural constraint is pronounced in Levi’s *Of Rule and Revenue* (1988). Outlining a theory of the “predatory state,” she argues that extractive regimes vary because rulers desire to maximize revenues given their “relative bargaining power,” and the “transaction costs” and “discount rates” of a particular tax policy—that is, how effectively an

administration has monopolized coercive; how “expensive” it is to implement and enforce a particular tax policy; and how far into the future effects of the policy are projected. These structural constraints are determined in turn by a state’s economic structure, its international context, and its form of government. Thus, extractive administrations vary because of the *constraints* placed on policymakers, and not because of, say, positive cultural dispositions.¹

Campbell (1993:173-5) constructs a similar “conceptual model” determining tax policy variation, and consequently the shape and operation of an extractive regime. State leaders attempt to respond to fiscal crises, which emerge as a result of war, economic changes, or the decay of previous administrations. However, the way in which they respond is determined by the complex interaction of relative political representation of different parties, the structure of the state and its extant capacity to collect taxes, and the overall balance of class and interest group pressure on policymakers.²

This line of argument about variation in extractive administration fully matures in the work of Kiser and his collaborators (Kiser and Baer 2005; Kiser and Cai 2003; Kiser and Hechter 1998; Kiser and Linton 2001; Kiser and Schneider 1994). They argue that non-bureaucratic administrative apparatuses can, under certain circumstances, be more efficient than bureaucratic alternatives. The smaller the country, the less likely that the administrative apparatus will have fixed administrative rules; the simpler the bureaucratic tasks, the less likely officials will be hired on merit; the less robust the monitoring capacity, the more likely that officials will be made residual claimants to their positions and the more likely the apparatuses will be redundant. (1994:192) The incentives and

¹ Though Levi notes that ideology can be a resource for rulers, she leaves it out of her model. (1988:21-2)

² Campbell also notes the dearth of literature on the cultural determinants of tax policy. (172-3)

motivations of officials need to not be only instrumental (2005), but the microfoundations of the model nonetheless remain in “agency theory.”

This relative consensus—that extractive administration’s variation is determined by a “best fit” between rulers’ efforts at maximization and the constraints presented by ambient social structure—can be called the reflection hypothesis because extractive administration *reflects* the social structure in which it exists.

Realism, Crystallization, and Action

This analysis shifts direction from methods typically used to evaluate the reflection hypothesis in two ways. The first shift grounds the microfoundations of administrative morphology to pragmatist approaches to action, rather than assuming rational, maximizing actors. The second constructs an account based in a combination of realism and Sewell’s “eventful temporality.” (2005) Thus, instead of accounting for variability in state administration by assuming a universal analytic model, this approach explains how ordered systems of administration emerged from intersecting causal pathways and through action undertaken in stochastic environments.

The “reflection hypothesis” is both an empirical and methodological approach. It proposes a model of human action which assumes that actors are rational, self-interested maximizers (Kiser and Schneider 1994:190), so it takes what should be an empirical question as an analytic assumption. (Adams 1999) The reflection hypothesis thus centers around a “goal-directed” model of action which characterizes both rational maximization models and theories of culture in which actors strive to fulfill cultural values rather than

rational aims. (Biernacki 2005; Whitford 2002) (This helps to explain why Kiser and Baer are so easily able to integrate substantive rationality into their model; 2005.)

This approach, however, has been challenged by pragmatist theories of action. These interventions can be summarized by three points:

(1) People change goals based on the actions they undertake. This reverses one of the central imageries of both theories of rational action and classical models of cultural conduct. Instead of positing abstract ends to be pursued—whether cultural values or utility maximization—in this formulation “the repertoires precede the choice of ends. They delimit the challenges that agents choose to deal with, and they lend actions similar styles of organization even when the ends of the action vary.” (Biernacki 2005:76) Thus the focus shifts from the ultimate, transcendental ends of actions to outlining why and how particular styles of action arise and are transposed from one place to another.

(2) Pragmatist theories of action also emphasize the process of typifying a particular setting of action. Advocates of a strict means/ends logic abstract settings of action into particular “games” *a priori*, but a pragmatic approach emphasizes how the process of construing a setting as a type of game is itself a social process among and between actors. (Biernacki 2005:79) By this view, games do not hold in a universal or abstract way; rather, the “gameness” of a setting—and the types of games taking place, intertwining, and interpenetrating—become empirical questions.

(3) Finally, action *unfolds*; it is not passively observed and calculated. (Whitford 2002:338-340) Goal oriented action imagines actors standing outside of situations, rank-ordering preferences and then selecting among them. A pragmatist approach, on the contrary, emphasizes the imbrication of actors within action, and the sometimes

surprising and unexpected ways in which this affects their decisions. Moreover, actions does not occur in empty space. What one group does affects what another group is doing or will do, and hence it is crucial to account for how decisions are made with *lateral* effects, and over time. Rather than passively adapting to an environment, then, people actively remake it over time.³

The structure of macro-sociological explanations change when they are based on pragmatist theories of action. For one, in contrast to Kiser and Hechter’s (1991) well-known model, explanation is *not* a function of deducing strictly testable, falsifiable propositions from a set of unvarying, covering laws. Rather, because of its emphasis on the ambiguity of situations, its centralization of how and why situations come to be viewed as problematic and the deployment of multiple schemas and understandings to make sense of them, and its emphasis on the intertwining of the form of action undertaken and the goals it pursues, pragmatist microfoundations emphasize the complexity and multi-causal determination of events.

The position articulated here is advocated by Somers (1998), Gorski (2004), and Steinmetz (1998; 2004). All three articulate a form of realism, whether “pragmatic,” “relational,” “constructive” or “critical.” But the fundamental contrast with Kiser and Hechter’s approach is that each points towards multi-causal explanation. This approach conceptualizes social reality as a space of intersecting and intertwining causal processes. Empirical reality—that is, the things that we can observe—are in turn the expressions of these intertwinings and represent the “surface” of these processes.

Because the forces that cause any particular outcome represent the intersection of any number of different pathways, the causal chains leading to outcomes are not always

³ This is consonant with resource dependence organizational analysis. (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978)

universal or stable. That is, the same process can have different, or even opposite, causal effects when intertwined with different processes. In Steinmetz’s words, “an event is not explicable in terms of a single causal mechanism (that is, not explicable in terms of a single theory) and the notion that the same type of event may be caused by different (sets of) mechanisms.” (1998:173)

This approach, it should be emphasized, does not abandon general, scientific explanation in favor of ad-hoc multicausality. Rather, it attends to the boundaries and conditions of any given causal explanation, “building models to fit our substantive problems and *not the other way round.*” (Somers 1998:773) The use of a particular approach—in this, case, the rational choice model advocated by Kiser or the processual one I will articulate below—is to be judged by its utility in accounting for the variation observed in India. (Gorski 2004)

So what does a social-scientific explanation based on this form of realist historical sociology look like? It begins with articulating causal processes that affected the outcome that one is trying to explain. Here, I seek to explain why state extractive apparatus varied in British Colonial India. This means that I will articulate the forces in India and Britain that drove change in extractive administration. This approach then seeks to explain how the causal processes described compounded one another, creating an event (Sewell 2005; Steinmetz 1998:180) which was then modularized, codified, and objectified as a “solution” to the “problem” of how to simultaneously rule and extract resources in India.

Thus, accounting for administrative variation in India requires three things: (1) outlining the casual processes which seem to have intertwined to produce the conditions

for the objectification to take place; (2) specifying the temporal sequence that produced the event; (3) providing an explanation for the crystallization of the event into a modularized form. (Gorski 2004:16-8)

“A State in Disguise of a Merchant”—EIC Expansion in India, Scandal and “Reform”

So why did the EIC need to be reformed in the first place? This section recapitulates the EIC’s history and outlines its organizational dynamics. It then shows how the timing and nature of the reform undertaken—a process of disentangling the roles of administrators—resulted from four causal processes intersecting: changes in political economy, the EIC and Britain’s geopolitical position, moral economy, and empire.

*A brief history of the East India Company and its dynamics*⁴

The East India Company was founded in 1600 to compete with the Dutch for access to the Indonesian spice islands. Direct access to them, however, proved costly and ineffective, and was abandoned in favor of trade items, bought with exported silver, from the Indian subcontinent. Until the middle of the 17th century specific voyages were organized around joint-stock investments; after that the EIC was permanently capitalized.

The English crown briefly deregulated trade with India in the late 17th century—there were competing companies between 1698 and 1702—but the EIC was granted a new monopoly charter in 1709. The charter’s terms demanded that the EIC float all of its liquid capital as a loan to the British state, meaning that the Company had to turn to

⁴ This history is a composite of a variety of different sources. (Bayly 1988; 1989; Bowen 1991; 1998; 2006; Lawson 1993; Marshall 1993; 1997; 1998; Philips 1961; Ray 1998; Sutherland 1952)

public debt financing for its operations. EIC bonds, in addition to stock in the company, subsequently became a foundational investment for British capital markets.

[Map 1 about here.]

The EIC’s fiscal and organizational structure remained substantially unchanged until the second half of the 18th century, when events in India led to its wholesale transformation. In 1756, goaded by the French, the Muslim ruler of Bengal, Siraj-ud-Daula, captured Calcutta. Robert Clive, then governor of Bengal, subsequently defeated Daula at the battle of Plassey in 1757, replacing him with a friendly ruler, Mir Jafar. Plassey was followed by the battle of Buxar in 1763, after which the exiled Mughal emperor granted the *diwani*, or legal right to collect taxes, to the EIC for the whole province of Bengal. Meanwhile, in South India geopolitical competition with the French through proxy Indian states led to the subordination of the Nizam of Hyderabad as a client to the EIC in 1761. Thus, by 1765 the EIC was an Indian territorial power which held legitimacy (through control over the Mughal emperor) and territorial dominion over substantial portions of the South and East of the subcontinent.

After the grant of the *diwani*, EIC territorial expansion accelerated in spite of orders to the contrary from London. Since the Company now controlled a territorial state in Bengal and was a major political player in Madras, it was drawn to an even greater degree into complicated interstate relationships that characterized late 18th century India.

[Map 2 about here.]

The EIC’s new territorial possessions were enormous. When the British gained control of Bengal, for example, they became responsible for the government of 20 million people and the collection of about 3 million pounds in revenue. (By contrast, the

population of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland in 1750 was about 10 million. (Anderson 1996:210)) By 1818, when the British defeated the last of the smaller but militarily tenacious South Indian states, the EIC’s revenues in India were estimated to be 15 million pounds per annum, equivalent to a quarter of the domestic British states’.

The new territorial possessions did not, however, return a financial windfall. As the EIC territorialized in India, a complex fiscal crisis ensued, which telegraphed into a credit crisis within the Indian economy and back to London through the EIC’s complex international credit network. Fiscal crisis was compounded by increased civil administration and military expenses in India. Consequently, the Company repeatedly defaulted on its payments to the British state in the last quarter of the 18th century, and was bailed out to avoid a general bond failure.

The EIC’s actions in India and its financial health thus became an increasing object of public and government scrutiny at the close of the 18th century. Parliament investigated the EIC’s administration of India through rival committees. The Select Committee began investigating the Bengal judicial system but quickly expanded to all of the Company’s administrative conduct. A second committee, the Secret Committee, lodged direct proposals for reform. Both explored and publicized the “unjust” government practiced by EIC officials and portrayed them as rapacious scoundrels bent on personal gain at the expense of Indian peasants.

Parliamentary investigation of EIC scandals in India resulted in a major reorganization of relationship between the Company and British state. Pitt’s India Act of 1784 established a Board of Control, appointed by parliament, with veto power over decisions and correspondence between the EIC and administrators in India. The EIC’s

Court of Directors retained power to appoint policy-level Indian administrators, but in practice they could only veto of the Board’s decisions. The Directors, however, still controlled patronage over lower-level civil service and military appointments.

After its reorganization, the EIC retained commercial monopoly in India until 1813 and in China until 1834. It continued military operations and territorial expansion throughout the subcontinent. However, after the Sepoy rebellion of 1857, in which Indian soldiers, or sepoy, employed by the EIC rebelled and attempted to reinstall the Mughal emperor, the EIC was formally disbanded and its administrative functions were taken over by the British state in 1858.

The Scandal of ‘The State in Disguise of a Merchant’

To focus the explanation of the development of state extractive administration in India, the charge to reform the EIC and the dynamics of the Company’s institutional crisis need to be explained. The EIC existed for 258 years, so *why* was it reformed when it was, and what accounts for that reform’s shape? Below I argue the EIC’s emergence as a territorial entity with an abstract yet powerful imperative to disentangle administrators’ roles was generated by the intersection of the changing political economy of the EIC—and the *theorization* of that political economy—Britain’s and the EIC’s changing geopolitical stature, a transformed moral economy, and the process of empire, which entailed regulation of difference and similarity and emphasized the distance over which the British had to rule.

Political Economy—Mercantilism’s Intellectual and Organizational Transformation

The broad shape of political economy in 17th and 18th century Europe as it applied to mercantile trading companies was a key causal processes intertwined with extractive administration in India. This transformation was itself an intertwining of changes in the political economy of the Company and in the way that political economists theorized the Company’s actions.

By the late 18th century, the EIC largely made its money from the Tea Trade with China. However, a central problem for the Company was that Indian and Chinese merchants had little interest in products from England—mainly linens and woolens inappropriate for an Indian climate. Therefore, the company had long had an unusual exemption from mercantilist doctrine—it was permitted to export bullion. Mercantilism linked actual stores of money with wealth, so it was not surprising that this was one of the signs of privilege that was most frequently attacked by the company’s opponents.

The grant of the *diwani* over Bengal, then, at first seemed like a solution to this problem. If the EIC could collect the money necessary to purchase tea in China directly from land revenues, it could stop exporting precious metals and hence deny its detractors a crucial rhetorical point, to say nothing of improving profits. Ceasing bullion imports, however, disrupted a worldwide economic chain in which bullion flowed from Central America through Europe and into Asia. This had the effect of deflating, and in some cases demonetizing, sectors of the Indian economy. (Chaudhuri 1978)

Deflation was compounded by the way that the EIC remunerated its administrators. Salaries were small by the standards of the day, and the EIC monopolized transport and sale of goods from India to England. However, Company servants were permitted to trade independently of their roles in the EIC on the Indian subcontinent.

Military officers also gained huge “presents” through the service to indigenous rulers and local military and political conflicts. Supporting the winner of an internecine struggle for a client state of the EIC could be personally profitable—Robert Clive, an extreme example to be sure, was thought to have amassed a total fortune of over 400,000 pounds. (Marshall 1976:236)

This “country trade” had long been accepted practice in the EIC, but as it became a territorial presence in India this form of remuneration became problematic for two reasons. First, the country trade complicated the EIC’s role as a state on the subcontinent and made administrative coherence more difficult. (This point will be discussed below.) But more important for political economy, the country trade was also indirectly responsible for part of the EIC’s fiscal crisis, because it linked the EIC into the Indian monetary system through “bills of exchange”⁵. The demonetization of the Indian economy telegraphed back to England—because bills of exchange issued in India were redeemable in London and ultimately backed by bond issues in the London capital market—and threatened to disrupt the domestic British economy itself. (Bowen 1998:188-190; 2006:35-7) Ironically enough, then, this crisis was driven by an effort to secure greater profit for company investors and insulate the EIC from criticism in Britain.

But this structural crisis of political economy did not cause reform in and of itself. It was combined with changing theories of political economy. Arguments for both free trade and the EIC’s continued monopoly had been lodged since the 17th century (Barber 1975:70-71), but it was only with the Company’s territorialization that criticism of the EIC found coherent expression for a wide audience in Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*. Territorial sovereignty and commercial enterprise were fundamentally

⁵ On bills of exchange, see Marshall. (1976:214-256)

incompatible, Smith argued; a sovereign sought to maximize the profits of Indian producers because he identified with their interest, and a commercial body sought to minimize them, to secure its own profit. Smith continued that a political presence in India should not be terminated so long as English enterprise there was threatened by European competitors, but emphasized that the political and commercial roles of the EIC should be disentangled. (Barber 1975:97-100) To paraphrase Edmund Burke, the EIC could not continue as a state disguised as a merchant.

Geopolitics—It’s all about France

A second process structuring calls to reform the EIC was its changing place in geopolitical competition. Though the Company had been founded as a monopoly enterprise specifically geared towards competition with European rivals; though it had been embroiled in trade wars with the Dutch, Portuguese, and French for much of the 17th and 18th centuries; and though, finally, it fiscally and navally supported the British state; the EIC’s position changed radically after Plassey.

The essence of this change was the territorialization of the EIC’s power in India and the concomitant complications. Suddenly the EIC was charged with the administration of a large territory and militarized its presence. From being a commercial entity operating in India, the EIC’s new territorial power meant that it had to participate in the intertwined politics and economics of the Indian interstate system more forcefully than before.⁶ (Bayly 1988:48) This was true both of the EIC’s official activities—their

⁶ Traditional historiography of British expansion in India argues that the decline of the Mughal Empire created conditions of political and economic disorder that the EIC, perhaps unwillingly, had to stabilize. Recent work—particularly that of Marshall (1993; 1997; 1998:esp. 495-6) and Bayly (1988)—

trade became so large that it was put on the political radar screen of local rulers (Marshall 1998:488-9)—and of the country trade in India.

The territorialization of the EIC changed the significance of the country trade, because the imbrication of EIC servants with local credit networks jeopardized the political EIC’s security in India and London.⁷ For example, a famous scandal occurred in Madras in 1775 when the members of the Governor’s council impeached and imprisoned the governor, Lord Pigot. They did so because they had invested money with Indian moneylenders, who then loaned the money to the Nawab of Arcot—a strategic threat to the EIC in South India. Thus, when Pigot decided to strip the Nawab of a revenue-producing province, members of the Governor’s council stood to lose their investments. Scandals like this one occurred frequently during the late 18th century and into the 19th and were heavily publicized in London, especially by the Parliamentary committees investigating the Company. (Bayly 1988:58-9)

The process of territorialization generated new divisions within the EIC and made previously tolerated practices problematic. In particular, the Board of Control’s imposition of military rule over India through the appointment of Charles Cornwallis as Governor-General in 1789 caused resentment and instantiated a division between military and civilian administrators within the EIC.

acknowledges the impact of the loss of Mughal hegemony but also emphasizes Indian political and economic vibrancy as the British began to expand.

⁷ Julia Adams provides a useful analysis of controlling agents of mercantile trading companies in a colonial setting. She argues that competition between the British and Dutch east India Companies led to a loss of control over the actions of its agents in the field, as Dutch agents of the VOC traded increasingly with English merchants. Her analysis ends in the late 17th century, but a very similar problem—the difficulty of controlling Company agents and preventing them effectively from participating in private trade—was a key cause of both British territorial expansion and the subsequent crisis of nascent British rule in India. (Adams 1996)

Moral Economy—Disentangling Interest from Ethics and Sovereignty from Commerce

The changing geopolitical context of Britain in the world and the EIC in India, and the transformations of the EIC’s political economy were important, but they also connected with a broad transformation in ethical sensibilities about obligations of one person to another. This transformation, underway in England throughout the 18th century, had two dimensions. The first was linked to capitalism—and especially the degree to which market participation and the institutionalization of contracts increased the ambit of moral responsibility and encouraged people to think about the distant consequences of their actions. This reverses classical understandings of the role of markets in sociology; as they grew, they created the institutional foundations for *enlarging* the sphere of moral concern for others, rather than contracting it. (Haskell 1998a; 1998b) The second dimension of the transformation in moral understandings in the 18th century was the publicity of “distant suffering.” As they were publicized, the moral entanglements of British mercantile servants and citizens acting abroad became increasingly spectacular—that is, they were drawn increasingly into a network of obligation among the domestic British public that demanded action. (Boltanski 1999) This transformation led to the broad imperative by the late 18th century, especially as scandals throughout the empire were publicized, to do *something*. But what?

Empire—Catalyzing Difference and Similarity over Distance

The combination of the EIC’s changing actual and theorized political economy, geopolitical standing in Europe and India, and changes in the view of the self and moral accountability for suffering developed into a crisis, but the shape of the transformation

had yet to be determined. Under what concrete conditions would administration actually function? And to what extent did it matter that India was far away and seemed decisively “different” than England?

To understand these questions, it is useful to articulate what empire entails.⁸ In brief, imperial rule is a kind of rule whereby the seeming difference—cultural, economic, or political—of a subject people is forefronted and problematic. How are people to be governed? In terms of their fundamental similarity to the imperial society, or in terms of their decisive, and perhaps permanent, difference? This is a crucial process because, as others have suggested (Cooper 2005a; 2005b), imperial rule implies responsibility for a subject population. If the British were sovereigns of India, and not merely a commercial presence, and the Indians were seen as fundamentally similar to domestic British subjects, then the British regime there had the same responsibility to ensure their welfare just as it would their own subjects. Similarity required that the British take responsibility for the welfare of their Indian subjects in order to justify their rule.

British rule in India also presented a danger if India represented a fundamentally different society (or set of societies) than England. This was the danger of contamination by the Indian “other”—a general worry that EIC administrators would “go native” and become, themselves, “Asiatic despots,” like the Mughals were thought to have been. (Bowen 1998) This fear collided with concerns that the British parliament itself would be captured by nabobs⁹ purchasing seats in parliament through the rotten borough system. (Lawson and Phillips 1984)

⁸ Empire is rarely studied directly in sociology, but for exemplary recent exceptions see Steinmetz (2003; 2005; 2006; 2007) and Go (2000; 2004).

⁹ The term is a pejorative anglicization of the Urdu word “nawab” and was used to refer to returning EIC “company men” who had made fortunes in the east.

The two different approaches implied different stances on social knowledge. That is, if Indian society was fundamentally similar to a British one, then the methods of rule adopted in Britain, or even Ireland or Scotland, could be transposed with ease to India. If, however, Indian society was irrevocably different, then the problem of gathering knowledge about it was of paramount importance. (Bayly 1993; Cohn 1996)

There worries about the similarity or difference of Indian subjects were compounded by the material distance of rule. India was very far away from London, and it took messages an average of six months—going one-way—to reach it in the 18th century. This distance had the effect of abstracting administrative directives for India; London could demand reform—and they did—but they could not control the changes’ concrete shape. The EIC’s Court of Directors well summarized the situation in 1829:

In the ordinary course of Indian administration much must always be left to the discretion of the local governments and unless upon general policy and personal cases it rarely occurs that instructions from hence can reach India before the time for acting upon them is gone by. This is a necessary consequence of the great distance between the two countries, the rapid succession of events in India which are seldom long foreseen even by those who are on the spot, and the importance of the ruling authorities there acting with promptitude and decision and adapting their measure on their own responsibility to the varying emergencies of the hour. These circumstances unavoidably regulate by do not exclude the controlling authority of the Court of Directors. Without defeating the intention of parliament they point out the best and indeed the only mode in which these intentions can be practically fulfilled. (Quoted in (Philips 1961:22))

It is worth emphasizing, though, that the twin authorities in London still exerted one crucial means of control: they could appoint and recall administrative officials.

Empire as a process has a final property that deserves emphasis: it is fractal. (Abbott 2001; Maier 2006:10) This means that the overall articulation of similarity and difference reappears repeatedly at different levels of analysis, and though the terrain of debate shifts and vocabulary articulating concerns changes—sometimes dramatically—the fundamental distinction between the two is repeated again and again.

After 1784, then, there was an imperative to reform the EIC’s administration, eliminating the perceived excesses which had refracted back into scandal in London. But beyond abstract injunctions, the Company could offer little guidance and exert little control over the *details* and structure of the administration as it was enacted on the ground. As will be shown in the next section, this latitude meant substantially different organizations of the British administration in India which coalesced around understandings of the Indians as either similar to or different from the British.

The Consolidation of British Rule in India—Ryots and Zemindars

Comparing two systems of EIC extractive administration in India requires a common vocabulary. Based in the work of Weber on administration and bureaucracy¹⁰, this section outlines four dimensions of state administration by combining structural and cultural effects along an administration’s internal and external dimensions. (See Table 1.)

Table 1. Analytic Dimensions of State Extractive Administration		
	<i>Internal</i> (Intra-admin.)	<i>External</i> (Extra-admin.)
<i>Structural</i> (Organizational)	Organizational	Coordinate
<i>Cultural</i> (Ethical)	Dispositional	Directive

The best-known of these four fields is the structural/internal field, which ranges from a variety of “traditional” administrative arrangements to what Weber calls “modern officialdom” or bureaucracy. It is structural in the sense that it is characterized by a formal organization, and it is internal to an administration because it is concerned with the relationship between and characteristics of offices *within* the administration. Weber

¹⁰ The discussion of these four fields is based on several of Weber’s essays (unless otherwise noted): “Politics as a Vocation,” “Science as a Vocation,” “Bureaucracy,” and “Structures of Power”; pages 77-128, 129-156, 159-179, and 196-244 in (Gerth and Mills 1946)

lists these characteristics: bureaucratic offices must have defined, stable jurisdictional areas; they must have a clear hierarchy; they must be based on a system of written files; they demand expert training of their occupant; they require “the full working capacity of the official”; and the organization operates by learnable, codified rules.

But administration, when considered as a facet of state formation, is than internal organizational structure. Indeed, state administration is composed of discreet, and sometimes even competing, organizations. Thus an administration’s coordination between its different levels and its relationship to some controlling sovereign is analytically centralized. This coordination ranges from tight, centrally controlled systems of power to more diffuse networks of administration with multiple layers of and sometimes overlapping jurisdiction and responsibility. (Migdal 2001)

The central coordination of administration also implies increased “breadth” and “depth” of the state’s reach into its subjects’ everyday lives. A state might have a fairly tightly controlled administration, but one that competes with a variety of other administrative organizations within its territory (the church, or strong local municipal administrations, for example). However, insofar as states coordinate administrations under the aegis of their authority they appear, from the perspective of their subjects, to intervene increasingly in the conduct of everyday life.¹¹

A state administration’s degree of bureaucratization and its internal coordination among different state agencies and external coordination with the sovereign, because they are fundamentally structural, are only part of the full analytic complexity of administrative formation. Weber also draws attention to cultural factors. It is not just a

¹¹ This point goes beyond Weber’s framework and draws from (Tilly 1990, 96-103) and (Gorski 2003, 166-8) Gorski in particular reflects a concern for this everyday regulation of action by the state—“the conduct of conduct,” or governmentality. (Foucault, Burchell, Gordon, and Miller 1991)

question of how different positions within the administration are arrayed, but also of what the administrators believe their conduct and their interactions with the subjects of state administration¹². Thus cultural aspects of administration can also be divided into internal and external dimensions. The cultural internal facet represents the ethos or motivating spirit of administration. This field of administrative analysis is dispositional. It ranges from a view of administrative office as a heritable source of private wealth to a highly specialized, professionalized ethic of public service. In Weber’s terminology, the ethic of office ranges from *avocational* office holding where administration is secured by personal or traditional loyalty, to office holding *as a vocation*, where administrators owe loyalty to an abstract notion of duty and to impersonal rules and regulations.

Finally, administration has an external cultural dimension. Bureaucratic administrators discharge their office “without regard for persons,” reducing their connection with their subjects to a highly rationalized relationship governed by a stable set of general rules. This transforms the relationship of rule—at least from the perspective of administrators themselves—from a set of paternal, highly reciprocal and customary systems to an atomized, rationalized, depersonalized relationship.¹³

Problems of Rule in British India

By 1784, the institutional arrangement guided the development of administration in India had been laid. The Company’s domestic rule was divided between a Board of

¹² Weber is particularly clear about what this ethical commitment might look like when discussing the kind of “ethic of responsibility” required for politics (Gerth and Mills, 121). The commitment for modern administrative officials, meanwhile, is *sine ira et studio*—the discharge of office “without scorn or bias” (95).

¹³ Of course, there is yet another complication, because this typology only considers the attitudes of the administrators themselves. To completely understand the formation of an administration and its possibility of actually exerting authority in a particular society, one must also consider why the subjects of the administration obey. (Weber 1978)

Control—which was explicitly part of the British government—with veto power and the Court of Directors, who were theoretically answerable to the stockholders of the Company itself. The multifaceted crisis which generated this reformed institutional arrangement had also led to an injunction to reform the administration of the EIC.

This section analyzes the responses to that call for reform. Indian administrators' responses from 1784 to about 1834—when both administrative arrangements became increasingly affected by utilitarianism (Stokes 1959)—fell into two main categories. Both were deployments of different ideas about how to rule, and both systems grappled with a relationship of rule in different ways. Some administrators saw the Indians as fundamentally *similar* to British subjects. They developed the zemindari system in Bengal as “a frank attempt to apply the English Whig philosophy of government” to India. (Stokes 1959:5) Other administrators saw the Indians as conclusively *different* than the British, and the form of administration that emerged was based on the cultural view of that bond. These views catalyzed into the ryotwari system in Madras, and were influenced by Edmund Burke's political philosophy (Stokes 1959:15). Advocates of ryotwari sought to preserve a romantic, paternalist ethos of rule. Judged by the intent of the European theories that inspired them, the object of the ryotwari system was thus to *preserve* Indian society as much as possible, and the zemindari system sought to *transform* it into a European image.

This section briefly recapitulates the rise and consolidation of both systems, and then analyzes documents advocating each. It emphasizes the degree to which different concepts of rule reflected back into substantially different ways of organizing British administration and demanded different moral commitments and modes of bureaucratic

action by the administrators themselves. In short, advocates of the *ryotwari* and *zemindari* systems of administration answered the call to reform differently.

Each system sought solutions to a common set of problems. First and foremost, since one of the major causes of the reform of the administration had been repeated financial crises by the Company, each administrative settlement revolved around the most “efficient” means of collecting property and agricultural taxes on land. Who was to collect the land revenue, and how were they to do it? As a consequence of this duty, each system also had to grapple with the appropriate powers for state officials to carry out their duties. Third, because the Company had become a territorial power and had nominally assumed the duty of government from the Mughal emperor, it also was confronted with the problem of maintaining order. Finally, and also related to all three of these factors, the Company required a judicial apparatus capable of interfacing with Indian society to adjudicate civil and criminal disputes.

‘To Disregard all Conditions of Persons’—The Zemindari Settlement in Bengal

The first of these two systems was called “*zemindari*” because it collected revenue from zemindars, or local magnates who were thought to be large landholders. It originated under the Governor-Generalship of Charles Cornwallis and was codified in the “Bengal Permanent Settlement” of 1793. Its main proponents were two of Cornwallis’ aides, Sir Francis Place and Charles Grant. It developed in opposition to the earlier tax-farming system of double government practiced by Clive, in which estates were auctioned for a fixed period to the highest bidder (Guha 1963, 16). By the mid 1790s, it

was the administrative orthodoxy in India, and such “permanent settlements” were to be expanded southwards into the rapidly growing Madras presidency.

“Permanence” meant that the taxes from government would never be raised, and it was hoped that this fixture would create a will to improve and expand the agriculture. The revenue was to be collected from the zemindars on behalf of the ryots, or actual cultivators of the land. The settlement thus envisioned the zemindars as the owners of the land, and the ryots as their legal tenants.¹⁴

The organizational consequences of the permanent settlement were also related to Cornwallis’ mandate to reform the EIC’s Anglo administration. At the same time details of the permanent settlement were being developed, Cornwallis instituted nearly ideal-typical Weberian bureaucratic reforms. Administrators were to be paid a living salary so they would no longer engage in the country trade, and were to take on highly specialized administrative tasks based on good record keeping and strict hierarchy. Importantly, the office of the district collector, responsible for the actual collection of land revenue from the zemindars, was to be conclusively separated from both the magistrate of the district, who administered civil law, and the captain of the police.

The collectors of the revenue must not only be divested of the power of deciding upon their own acts, but rendered amenable for them to the courts of judicature; and collect the public dues, subject to a personal prosecution for every exaction exceeding the amount which they are authorized to demand on behalf of the public, and for every deviation from the regulations prescribed for the collection of it. No power will then exist in the country by which the rights vested in the landholders by the regulations can be infringed or the value of landed property affected. *Bengal Civil Code, 1793, (Quoted in Stokes 1959, 6)*

In other words, civil, military, and fiscal authority was split under the zemindari model.

¹⁴ One of the prime sources for this discussion of the features of the zemindari settlement is the *5th Report*, pages 43-55. While the *5th Report* ended up advocating a ryotwari land settlement and hence probably exaggerated the shortcomings of the Bengal Permanent Settlement, it accurately reported the administrative features of the zemindari system and collects important primary documents.

If the zemindari settlement’s watchwords were the government’s noninterference in its subjects’ lives and reliance on the zemindars’ responsibility for collecting revenue from the cultivators themselves, what ethics were demanded of the Anglo collectors? At least in theory, the settlement demanded an ethic of local knowledge by which administrators would be able to accurately and effectively exert authority over their own native collectors, called tehsildars and over the zemindars themselves. John Shore, not an advocate of all parts of the zemindari settlement but an able aide to Cornwallis who nonetheless agreed on the central administrative features advocated, described the relationship this way:

[The tehsildar, or indigenous assistant revenue officer] will regulate his conduct by the estimate which he forms of the abilities of the collector under whose authority he is places; if he knows him to be vigilant, active, and well-informed, he will be cautious [sic], diligent, and honest: if he supposes him to be otherwise, and that he can misbehave with impunity, he will intrigue with under-renters, or abuse his influence, withhold true knowledge, and impose upon his principle misinformation. The plan in its detail, by fixing the rents, removes a grand opportunity of abuse in the tehsildar. (1789, 488 in Firminger)¹⁵

This arrangement seemed problematic to Shore (as it would to the founders of the ryotwari settlement) because it assumed too much skill on the part of the Anglo administrators:

The objections which I have gone through, may be reduced in great measure, to the detail of the system, and the difficulty of executing and controlling it. The collector of Tirhoot with great candour, acknowledged this; and with a diffidence which is highly to his honour, observes, that many evils must be inevitably present themselves under the superintendence of men of an ordinary stamp, in the execution of systems adapted to the genius and comprehension of a favored few. (1789, 488 in Firminger)¹⁶

¹⁵ “Firminger” refers to the report issued by the Select Committee concerning administrative policy in 1812. Though edited and developed by advocates of the ryotwari settlement including Thomas Munro (Stein 1989), it reviewed the previous administrative practices in India and reprinted many crucial primary documents. (Firminger 1812)

¹⁶ This was the prime point of disagreement between Shore and Cornwallis. Shore believe the permanent settlement could not be undertaken because the administration—and by extension the EIC—did not understand the country well enough to settle revenues forever. In the context of this statement, Shore did not believe administrators could be “well informed.”

However, if the zemindari system represented a relatively strict bureaucracy, especially in contrast to the EIC’s previous system of double rule, it is important to emphasize that as a system of *state* administration it remained more or less indirect. Because it was based in part on Whig principals of minimal government, the state’s bureaucratic apparatus and organization was kept within the narrow confines of internal fiscal administration, and the actual collection of taxes and interaction with the daily lives of the Company’s subjects was kept to a minimum:

...the introduction of a new order of things, which should have for its foundation, the security of individual property, and the administration of justice, criminal and civil, by rules which were to disregard all conditions of persons, and in their operation, be free of influence or control from the government itself. (*5th Report from the Select Committee*, quoted in Stokes 1959, 4)

There were to be two systems of administration: one European and the other Indian. In other words, the newly bureaucratized system of administration stopped at its point of interface with Indian society.

These reforms relied on a conception of the Indians that assumed British institutions like the rule of law and minimal government could transform Bengal’s society into a model of Britain. If only the demands for land revenue could be fixed, it was imagined, then the zemindars would replicate the behavior of the improving English gentry and institute a revolution in Indian agriculture. If only a minimal government could be instituted, it was hoped, Indian society would become a cheaply governed domain. And if only administration could be bureaucratized, the specter of government despotism would be erased. As Shore wrote of the necessity of the rule of law:

We are not to depend upon the virtues of abilities of the natives only; our reliance must be placed upon the restrictions of our own laws, and upon an undeviating enforcement of them; and the same real and abilities that can control the conduct of a farmer, may direct and restrain that of a zemindar, admitting self-interest, in opposition to public good, to have equal operation with regard to both. (1789, in Firminger 481)

While these ideas were based on a conception of Indian difference, that difference concealed a fundamental presumption of similarity; the Indians’ interests were thought to be transformable through institutions of government imported from Britain.

‘This Village Revolution’—The Ryotwari System in Madras

The ryotwari settlement, meanwhile, began its gestation with Thomas Munro’s appointment to the Baramahal district in southern India under Alexander Read in 1792. Munro developed the *ryotwari* system out of a series of practical experiences and investigations of “the actual conditions of the people” in the various places where he was stationed in the Kanara and then the Ceded Districts gained from the ruler of Mysore in 1800. His performance instituting the ryotwari settlement in the Ceded Districts influenced the domestic government to accept the ryotwari over the Zemindari settlement, as did his perceived expertise and knowledge of Indian society and mastery of local vernaculars. (Beaglehole 1966, 101) Once the domestic government had been won over, Munro was dispatched back to India as special commissioner to see that the ryotwari settlement was implemented in Madras¹⁷.

Munro is usually considered to be the father of the ryotwari settlement, although a number of other figures were important in its development. He is also produced the most important and coherent articulation justifying the ryotwari settlement, which is contained in his massive administrative minute: “On the state of the country and the condition of its

¹⁷ It is worth noting, however, that while the ryotwari settlement replaced the zemindari as the administrative orthodoxy in India, the zemindari system remained in Bengal. It was only dismantled during the push for Indian independence and both systems have had significant economic and social ramifications to the present day (Banerjee and Iyer 2005). Moreover, as discussed below, the conversion of the Board of Control to ryotwari changed the terrain of debate but did not extinguish it.

people” written December 31st 1824. Written during Munro’s tenure as governor of Madras, the minute summarized his administrative experience. (Beaglehole 1966, 121)

Like the advocates of the Bengal Permanent Settlement, Munro’s point of departure is a consideration of the imperial relationship with the Indians and an acknowledgement of the problematic foundations of British power. However, whereas the Bengal Permanent Settlement responded to this difference by attempting to replicate British agrarian social relationships—or at least its idealization of those relationships—Munro’s fundamental commitment was to knowledge of the Indians and their political and social institutions. His vision of the foundations of British power in India led him to attempt to preserve what he considered to be extant institutions as much as possible.

After a substantial investigation of those institutions, Munro concluded that the best means of settling the revenue—the one that most closely mapped onto extant Indian institutions, in his estimation—was a direct settlement with the individual cultivators, the ryots. The settlement, moreover, would be variable each year depending on which fields were in cultivation. It would demand an enormous survey of all agricultural holdings under British dominion; the value of each piece of farmland would have to be assessed, and allowance would have to be made for contesting and resurveying as appropriate.

The commitment to knowledge and reflection of Indian institutions—or, it must be stressed, the British vision of those institutions—and its concomitant conclusion that the revenue ought to be settled directly with the ryots had critical implications for the architecture of administration that developed around the administration. First, in terms of its vision of the directive dimension of administration, or the relationship between the administration and its subjects, the justification for the ryotwari land settlement and the

consequent administration was based on an inversion of the reasoning that founded the Bengal Settlement’s position. Simply put, English administrative institutions could not be implanted into India’s alien surroundings and be expected to function in the same way because they grew from fundamentally imperial roots.

We suppose our laws are founded on just principles, and that they must therefore have the same beneficial operation here [in India] as at home; but we forget that one great first principle, the freedom of the people, from which they derive their influence, does not exist here. Our institutions here, not resting on the same foundation as those of a free country, cannot be made to act in the same way. We cannot make the inanimate corpse perform the functions of a living body; we must, therefore, in making regulations here, think only their probable effect in this country, not of what such regulations have or might have in England...Though the Rayets frequently complain of illegal exactions, they very seldom resist them; they more commonly submit without complaining, and they often abscond when they have no longer the means of paying them...as, therefore, they will not protect themselves by resisting injustice, we must endeavour to protect them by laws, which would be unnecessary in England, or in almost any country not under foreign dominion... (Munro, in Gleig, 379)

Essentially, then, while the zemindari system obscured the imperial nature of British authority in India the ryotwari system confronted it (Metcalf 1994).¹⁸

The reasoning behind settlement with individual ryots, and the recognition of the perceived difference of the relationship between the administration and its subjects, also implied a different coordination of the government with institutions of local rule. If the government’s role in the Bengal Permanent Settlement was to avoid imposing on the lives of its subjects, in the ryotwari settlement the central government was also responsible for the functioning of collection all the way down to the individual ryot.

We erroneously think that all that is necessary for the permanent settlement of a country is, that Government should limit its own demand, and that it is of no consequence by whom this demand is collected; and that provided the amount be not exceeded, the Rayet is not injured, whether he pay it to the officer of Government, or to a newly-created Zemindar landlord. But nothing can be more unfounded than this opinion, or more mischievous in its operation...Every proprietor or Rayet, great and small, ought to pay his own rent and that of his tenants, when he has any, to the Government officer. If, instead of doing this, some hundreds of proprietary Rayets are made to pay their public

¹⁸ Metcalf also argues that British imperial rule can be characterized by divergent understandings of their relationship with the Indians, but I use the conceptualization somewhat differently: while Metcalf emphasizes this process as one of self-justification, the argument here is that these latent understandings were important because of the way they were consequential for the development of administration.

rents to a Zemindar, they will soon lose their independence, become his tenants, and probably end by sinking into the class of labourers. (Munro, 382 in Gleig)

The zemindari settlement was so pernicious for Munro because it threatened “innovation,” or the transformation and destruction of “ancient offices and institutions”:

Such an innovation [as permanent settlement with the zemindars represented] would be much more fatal to the old rights of property than conquest by a foreign enemy; for such a conquest, though it overthrew the Government, would leave the people in their former condition. But this internal change, this village revolution, changes every thing, and throws both influence and property into new hands; it deranges the order of society; it depresses one class of men for the sake of raising another; it weakens the respect and authority of ancient offices and institutions, and the local administration conducted by their means is rendered much more difficult. (ibid.)

The construction of the ryotwari coordination of central and local authority is as striking as it is paradoxical. The goal of the system was to attempt to *preserve* extant Indian institutions, and indeed its prime accusation was that the permanent settlement was responsible for their destruction. However, it should be noted that the ryotwari settlement’s mechanism for the preservation of those institutions—the only way to fend off the “village revolution” threatened by the zemindari settlement—was the direct intervention of the central revenue authority, in the person of the district collector, into the minutiae of the tax collection.

In terms of the organizational field, settlement with individual ryots meant that the ryotwari settlement was debureaucratized, especially when compared relatively with the Bengal Permanent Settlement. Whereas under the zemindari settlement juridical and fiscal authority was separated both in principal and in practice, under the ryotwari settlement it was crucial for the efficiency of the administration that they be merged:

...we must...invest the collector and magistrate, the person most interested in their welfare, with power to secure them from exaction, but authorizing him to make summary inquiry into all illegal exactions, to recover the amount, to restore whatever is recovered to the Rayets, and to punish the offenders. (Munro, in Gleig, 379)

A similar sentiment was put even more clearly by Charles Metcalfe, a follower of Munro’s and proponent of the ryotwari settlement . According to Metcalfe,

Revenue, judicial, and when practicable, military powers also, should be exercised by the same person; union, not division, should be the order of our rule. Confidence [in the Company’s civil servants], not distrust, should be the engine to work with. (Kaye, *Papers of Metcalfe*, quoted in Stokes, 22; parenthetical remark original.)

The union of administrative authority reflected in the ryotwari land settlement required skilled administrators in whom confidence could be invested. Rather than being able to master the “general principles,” or abstract laws of political economy that Munro thought had guided administrative action in Bengal, administrators under the ryotwari settlement were to be guided by practical experience and detailed local knowledge.

The duties of the collector of a province should be such as to make it imperative on him to know the real state of the country, the amount of the assessment paid by the different classes of the inhabitants, its effects upon them, but especially upon the Rayets, in promoting or discouraging industry, and in rendering them satisfied or discontented with their rules, and to know all the details of internal administration by which the revenue is developed and realized; for it is only by possessing such knowledge that he can understand either what are the actual resources of the country, or the means by which they may be improved, or furnish useful information to Government. (Munro, in Gleig, 365)

The investment of the powers of government in a single individual, direct coordination of central authority with local action, and the action of talented, knowledgeable, active administrators all complemented the directive dimension of administration. Increasingly direct contact with the daily lives of the administration’s subjects would make government more responsive to its subjects’ needs and consequently more secure. It also would represent government in a way thought to be comprehensible to its subjects. (Munro, in Gleig, 357)

Table 2. Relative Variations in Indian Administrative Structures				
Imperial Bond	Similarity		Difference	
Administration	Zemindari		Ryotwari	
	<i>Internal</i>	<i>External</i>	<i>Internal</i>	<i>External</i>
<i>Structural</i>	Bureaucratic	Indirect Rule	Semibureaucratic	Direct Rule
<i>Cultural</i>	Vocational	Rational/Legal	Vocational	Charismatic/Paternal

In closing, is it worthwhile to directly compare them in terms of the typology of state administration. The results are presented in table 2. The two systems differed most markedly in the organizational, coordinate, and directive dimensions. Both systems of administration were organizationally bureaucratic in comparison to the previous mode of EIC double government, but the ryotwari settlement was debureaucratized compared to the zemindari. The functions of fiscal, police, and judicial authority were to be merged into a single individual. It was the opposite in the zemindari settlement. The two systems also had very different visions of the coordination of central and local authority: the zemindari settlement sought to minimize contact between the government and its subjects, advocating a model in which government and administration itself were seen as evils. The ryotwari system, by contrast, sought to reach as deeply as possible into the lives of its subjects, involving the district collector in the minutiae of land revenue surveys and revenue collection.

These differences were also evident in the contrasting visions of the directive relationship between the administration and its subjects. The zemindari settlement, as noted, rested on a notion that the EIC's Indian subjects were similar enough to the British that a proper institutional environment could transform them, and hence the Indian economy, into an image of Britain. The ryotwari settlement was more pessimistic about such prospects, and recognized both the imperial foundations of the EIC's power, and the fundamental gap of difference that was unlikely to be bridged. Finally, both systems seem to demand a similar type of ethical commitment from their administrators—hard work, knowledge of local circumstances, and attentive discharge of office were crucial.

However, these characteristics were thought to be exceptional in the zemindari settlement, while in the ryotwari they were essential.

Evaluating the Reflection Hypothesis

Having articulated the ways in which the two of the British revenue systems in India, the ryotwari and zemindari land settlements, clustered around different conceptions of the imperial bond, let us now apply the reflection hypothesis. Recall that the reflection hypothesis asserts that a state’s extractive administrative structure because revenue maximization efforts change to fit characteristics of a given social structure. Applied to India, the British extracted as much revenue as they could by accommodating different Indian social structures in different places. Therefore, the ryotwari and zemindari systems were different because they developed to “fit” social-structural differences in Bengal and Madras.

I suggest below that this application is inadequate for two sets of reasons. First, it provides an inadequate account for the empirical variation in actual extraction that took place, or the ways in which decisions were made between the two different systems. Simply, the systems were not instituted based on which one was more effective at extracting resources. And if revenue maximization *were* the criterion used, then the decisions made were counterinductive.

Second, the reflection hypothesis also ignores lateral competition between the two systems. The ryotwari and zemindari systems—and the conceptions of rule for which they were avatars—were fashioned in relation to one another. This dynamic, however, is disallowed by the largely bilateral conception of administrative formation offered by the

reflection hypothesis. To substantiate this, I will offer a fractal account of the development of the two systems—and in particular, how their conflict articulated along the shifting and uncertain terrain of administrative development in Madras.

Uneven Reflections and Uncertain Decisions—Administrative Competition in Madras

Both the ryotwari and zemindari systems were a decisive departure from the “traditional” system characteristic of Mughal rule because they instituted the notion of private property. This fundamentally separated what had been a unified system of political and economic authority, leading to seemingly irrational economic action of the zemindars and mirasidars in south India. (Dirks 1986) Both systems introduced the notion that someone held the land as property and was responsible for it. However, *where* property rights were located in Indian social structure depended on each system’s view of the imperial bond.

In the case of the zemindari system, Indians were perceived to be fundamentally similar in the sense of being equally responsive to political institutions and controls as the English. Advocates of the zemindari system thus looked at Indian society and saw a class that seemed the most similar to the English improving gentry. By locating property rights in their hands, it was thought, they could recreate the agricultural improvements characteristic of 18th century England. Indeed, this was the goal of the Bengal Permanent Settlement. (Guha 1963; Stokes 1959)

The ryotwari system is somewhat more complicated. It acknowledged that Indian social structures and political institutions were fundamentally different from British ones, and that therefore organizations of extractive administration like the Bengal Permanent

Settlement that assumed similarity would fail. But while acknowledging difference laid the foundation for a paternalistic form of rule that sought to protect Indian society from the perceived tyranny of the zemindars enabled by the Bengal Permanent Settlement, it also made possible a form of property relations that was unthinkable in England: the state itself owned the land and leased it to ryots on a yearly basis. (Kaye 1853, 145) Moreover, the ryotwari system self-consciously generalized attractive aspects of Indian society. Thus Munro wrote that

The object of the Rayetwar settlement is to make the Rayets of other districts like those of Canara—enjoying their lands as private property at a fixed rent—Some Rayets in every district are now in this condition—all may be brought to it gradually. (Munro, quoted in Beaglehole, 133)

This is a crucial point for the reflection hypothesis, because it shows that even the system that most self-consciously tried to reflect the local structure of Indian society emphasized aspects of that society—in this case, the rights of small peasant cultivators—that it found most attractive.

This generalization of ryotwari land tenure by its advocates was also noticed by its opponents. Thus, when Munro began to advocate for the ryotwari system upon his return to India in 1818 as special commissioner, John Hodgson of the Madras Board of Revenue criticized the ryotwari system’s historical foundations. As Stein puts it, Hodgson thought “...the present ryotwar ‘rules’ merely imposed the practices of one part of Madras—its backward dry zone—over the rest of the presidency.” (Stein 1989:214)

But if the two systems were both substantial alterations from Mughal forms of rule—which themselves cannot be assumed to be especially “efficient”—then on what basis were decisions between the two systems made? It does not seem to have been on the basis of pure extraction capability. During the formative years of the two regimes,

the two systems were sometimes put into place sequentially in the same district. If the reflection hypothesis were sufficient to explain administrative variation, we would see that one would be a “closer” fit to local social structure and thus would garner higher tax revenues than the other.

However, this does not turn out to be true. From 1792 to 1834, British administrators experimented with different land settlements in different places throughout India, but especially in the Madras presidency. One such district was the Baramahal, which came under British administration when it was ceded to the Madras presidency by Tipu Sultan of Mysore in 1792. Cornwallis appointed Read and Munro to settle the land revenue. Though originally charged with laying the groundwork for a permanent settlement similar to Bengal's, from 1792 to 1799 they worked outside the purview of the Madras board and developed the roots of the ryotwari settlement. (Beaglehole 1966:12-34; Mukherjee 1962; Stein 1989)

Munro and Read felt that the ryotwari settlement in the Baramahal had a closer continuity with revenue assessment under the Mughals (Beaglehole, 18). However, because shifting from the originally declared lease system to an annual ryotwari settlement meant an opportunity for ryots to stop cultivating marginal lands without still having to pay taxes on them, the land revenues fell with the implementation between 1796 and 1798. (Beaglehole, 30) Even though Read and Munro argued that the decline in revenue would be made up for by future gains as the settlement stabilized, in immediate terms the implementation of the ryotwari system caused revenues to fall.

The ryotwari system, however it affected the revenue, did not last in the Baramahal. Read and Munro were recalled into military service from their administrative

duties when hostilities broke out again between the EIC and Tipu Sultan in 1799. Meanwhile, the Madras Board of Revenue, still convinced of the efficacy of the Bengal Permanent Settlement, decided to implement it in the Baramahal and did so between 1802 and 1805.

The zemindari settlement continued until Munro convinced the London Board of Revenue to convert back to the ryotwari system, partially through his indirect hand in the issuing of the influential 5th *Report* to Parliament. Munro returned to India empowered to institute the ryotwari system, but the Madras Board of Revenue opposed him by interpreting the administrative commands from London so broadly that they also could be read as advocating the zemindari settlement. Munro was only able to implement the ryotwari settlement after 1820 when he became governor of the Madras presidency and was able to subordinate the Board of Revenue. (Beaglehole, 102-120)

From 1792 to 1820, then, the Baramahal had four different organizations of extractive administration. Between 1792 to 1794, it had fluctuating lease-based settlements; from 1794 to about 1802, it had an early version of the ryotwari settlement from 1802 to 1820 the zemindari system was predominate; and thereafter the ryotwari land settlement. If the initial implementation of the ryotwari settlement meant a fall in the land revenue (Mukherjee 1962:13), what was the subsequent effect of the other systems of extractive administration?

*Table. 3— Baramahal Land Revenues in Pounds, 1792-1835*¹⁹

Year	Land Revenue	Settlement Type
1792	84,583	Lease System
1796	9% below 1792	Ryotwari
1797	18% below 1792	Ryotwari
1798	147,642	Ryotwari

¹⁹ These data are drawn from Dykes (1853:421), Mukherjee (1962:11,13), and Stein (1989:44).

1805-6	182,348	Zemindari
1817	190,000	Village Lease (Zemindari)
1820-21	178,295	Ryotwari
1834-5	164,471	Ryotwari

As table 3 indicates, there is no correlation between the type of administration and the level of extraction in the Baramahal. Between 1805-6 and 1820-21, from the time when the zemindari system was first being implemented in the Baramahal to when it was finally being dismantled by a resurgent Munro, revenues fell from 182,348 to 178,295 pounds. However, even following the implementation of the ryotwari settlement, the land revenues of 1834-5 were still lower than the last year of the zemindari settlement, at 164,471 pounds. This data would seem to strongly suggest that the land revenues were not responsive to the organization of the British extractive apparatus, at least in its crucial formative phase.

This also suggests counterevidence against the reflection hypothesis. Again, if it were the case that either the ryotwari or zemindari systems of extractive administration were more compatible with Indian social structure, the land revenue would have risen when one system was implemented in the Baramahal compared to the other. However, *land revenues declined over the critical period of British experimentation*. This, combined with the uneven reflection of Indian social and political structures by both the zemindari and ryotwari settlements, places the reflection hypothesis in jeopardy.

Changing Structures of the Debate—Similarity and Difference Over Time

Of course, these revenue data by themselves would not disprove the reflection hypothesis. Many economic and social factors influenced the fate of the Baramahal—it was far from a natural experiment. There were famines throughout India as the

experiments in land administration were taking place, and lowering revenues as the system was implemented was excused by Read and Munro as a result of the very uncertainty of the local political and social structure. Furthermore, proponents of both systems argued that the installation of either would mean a temporary decrease in revenue, since both lowered assessments from those imposed by Mughal rulers. Finally, the Baramahal did not exist in a vacuum, because alternative systems were being developed as ryotwari was being implemented there.

The ryotwari and zemindari settlements were thus intertwined, especially as they were applied to Madras from the early 1790s until about 1820. In this section, I argue that the development of both systems in Madras, and the debates between them, had a fractal structure. If this is true, one would expect to see the debate over revenue collection to be concerned with difference and similarity repeat over time, even as one of the two perspectives seemingly triumphs.²⁰ For the purposes of this essay, however, I will concentrate on debates surrounding which revenue settlement would be pursued in the Madras presidency from the early 1790s until around 1820. I will further articulate a single step of this process, were Munro convinced William Bentinck, the Governor of Madras at the time, and the Board of Control in London to implement ryotwari on the basis of his assertion of superior knowledge of Indian social structure, hence shifting the terms of debate to the difference of the Indians.

Recall that the first, “original” distinction between similarity and difference, which roughly relates to zemindari and ryotwari respectively (as articulated above), depended on different views of the collector’s duties to collect information about Indian

²⁰ One should also be able to see the same debates occur between administrators within the two factions, and see the debates recur in different places throughout India. However, here I will concentrate to a single iteration of the fractal in a single location.

society. While the zemindari system viewed a collector’s knowledge of Indian society as an exceptional quality, the ryotwari system presumed that Indians were fundamentally different than the British, and hence required detailed knowledge from its collectors.

The zemindari settlement was slated to be imported whole cloth from Bengal and implemented in Madras. This was the official position of the Governor of Madras and Governor-General of India as late as 1802. Problems with the system were attributed to the precariousness of the leases awarded to the zemindars and not to a fundamental misunderstanding and difference of Indian subjects. (Firminger, iii, 173) The Madras Board of Revenue could still confidently quote the core of the BPS in 1799:

We find it convincingly argued, that a permanent assessment, upon the scale of the present ability of the country [i.e., a permanent zemindari settlement] must contain in its nature, a productive principle; that the possession of property, and the sure enjoyment of the benefits derivable from it, will awaken and stimulate industry, promote agriculture, extend improvement, establish credit, and augment the general wealth and prosperity. (1799, Firminger, iii, 172)

This position—based largely on the abstract virtues of disinterested government fostering economic conditions for economic prosperity—was no longer tenable once Munro was able, first, to convince Bentinck, governor of Madras, to implement ryotwari in 1806, and especially after Munro persuaded the board of control, partially through his influence on the publication of the *5th Report*, to implement ryotwari in 1812. Munro’s persuasion of Bentinck (1806, Firminger, iii, 468), first, and his influence on the Board of Control, second, was based on his expertise in revenue collection and perceived knowledge of Indian social structure. (Stein 1989:137-177)

That the judgment in favor of ryotwari—and affirming the difference of the Indian subjects—was handed down seemingly because of superior knowledge of Indian society decisively initiated the second iteration of the debate between the two systems.

Because Munro had been able to persuade the Governor of Madras and the Board of Control to pursue the ryotwari system, the proponents of the Bengal Permanent Settlement in the Madras presidency, and the opponents of the ryotwari scheme more broadly, had to adopt a key aspect of his argument: that systems of revenue extraction and administration could not be based purely in an abstract notion of actors, but had to be rooted in knowledge of the structure and history of Indian society.

Just such an alternative proved readily available, for while Munro and Read developed ryotwari in the Baramahal, Lionel Place developed a *mirasidari* settlement in the Chingelput from 1794 to 1799. The mirasidari settlement closely resembled the zemindari settlement, insofar as mirasidars were intermediaries in revenue collection and holders of the land, and insofar as it assumes the fundamental similarity of Indian subjects.²¹ But the mirasidari claim had the added benefit of being based, as Place claimed, on the “ancient habits and institutions” of the inhabitants. (1799, Firminger, iii, 151)

But while the ryotwari system advocated a wholesale preservation of Indian customs and institutions, the mirasidari and zemindari settlements continued to draw comparisons between Indian social structure and the structure of English agriculture, though the similarities were now derived from precedent in Indian society. For example, John Hodgson quoted from “an Introduction to the History of British India” in justifying the continuation of zemindari in Tinnevely in 1807, saying that despite claims to ultimate sovereignty over all land,

²¹ While the ryotwari and zemindari settlements referred to the actors with whom the government interacted, *mirasidars* were holders of traditional lease rights to collect revenue for the state. Hodgson suggested that the mirasidari system was functionally equivalent to the zemindari. (1807, Firminger, iii, 471) Munro likewise attacked mirasidari as a functional equivalent to zemindari in his 1824 minute.

The Hindoo kings were, in fact, merely the nominal proprietors of the soil; and the grants of land which they dispensed to their subjects, were given in perpetuity, without any claim, either expressed or implied, of an absolute paramount right in the property. The landholders [mirasidars], therefore, were in reality, the proprietors of the ground they possessed and cultivated; and the tenure by which they held it, very much resembled our soccage tenure in England, and the present day. (1807, Firminger, iii, 346)

This comparison with English subjects, derived from Indian precedent, allowed Hodgson, in another 1807 minute attacking the ryotwari settlement, to conclude that the zemindars were still similar enough to English landlords to seek to improve their agricultural holdings:

The permanent settlement ought to be made with zemindars, where zemindars exist; and that zemindars ought to be created where not are found. Because...the establishing of a permanent [agency between the government and ryots], is not a complete abolition of the ancient revenue system, not even an encroachment on it, but a confirmation of it; and because, in great estates, the proprietors have a deeper interest than revenue officers, in the improvement of their lands: that being better judges both of the nature of the soil, and of the circumstances of the ryots, they will be more likely to regulate their rent fairly... (1807, Firminger, iii, 482)

The “deeper interest” of landholders was to be protected, and the most salient similarity that remained for Hodgson and other advocates of a zemindari settlement was in the legal system. This was especially true after 1812, when the Board of Control ordered the ryotwari system implemented in Madras. To Hodgson, the chief objection to ryotwari in this circumstance, as he articulated in 1818, was the collapse of civil, legal, fiscal, and military authority into the Collector. (Stein, 215) Hodgson’s vision of the appropriate role of government was well expressed in his second 1807 minute, in a quotation from Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*:

The principle attention of the sovereign ought to be to encourage, by every means in his power, the attention both of the landlord and of the farmer, by allowing both to pursue their interest in their own way, and according to their own judgment; by giving to both the most perfect security, that they shall enjoy the full recompense of their own industry. (1807, Firminger, iii, 497)

This security, in Hodgson’s view, was militated against by an all-powerful collector allowed to arbitrarily demand revenues without recourse.

Thus the shift that took place represented both continuity and change. After Munro convinced Bentinck in 1806 that ryotwari was the “best” system for Madras, opponents of his scheme in the Madras Board of Revenue adopted what they took to be a key aspect of the “difference” of Indian subjects—collecting knowledge of Indian society and basing administration on an appropriated image of Indian institutions and social structure. However, they articulated the same concerns in a fundamentally different way than Munro—they still sought to ground British administration in India on fundamentally *English* constitutional principles and English assumptions about economic behavior. Revenue collectors were not to hold judicial, magisterial, and military authority at once because, as Stein puts the point, “European principles of property and governance—including a state whose executive authority was circumscribed—would create in India what it was thought to have created in England” (215)—peace and prosperity.

Conclusion

This essay has been occupied with a central question: why do state extractive regimes vary? There are at least two ways of trying to explain this variation (Abbott 2004:3-40), especially when confronting the dizzying complexity on the Indian subcontinent in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. One can explain variation in terms of a single, fundamental model which has various exogenous influences altering its empirical effects. This is the project advocated by the reflection hypothesis’ proponents. Or one can try to outline the practical effects of causal processes and describe how they changed the outcomes that we witness. This is what I have tried to do.

This essay refocuses the discussion of extractive administration—and a state’s apparatus more generally—in three ways. First, rather than sidelining the question of

moral concerns, political exigencies, or even geopolitics as exogenous influences that account for the error term in an otherwise rational model, I have tried to centralize them as the crucial catalyzing influences that led to organizational change of British administration in the first place. Indeed, it is difficult to account for what took place in British India *without* understanding the domestic crisis faced by the EIC from new theorists of political economy, domestic fears of scandal and fortunes arriving from the East, and the threat posed by France both in Europe and the subcontinent.

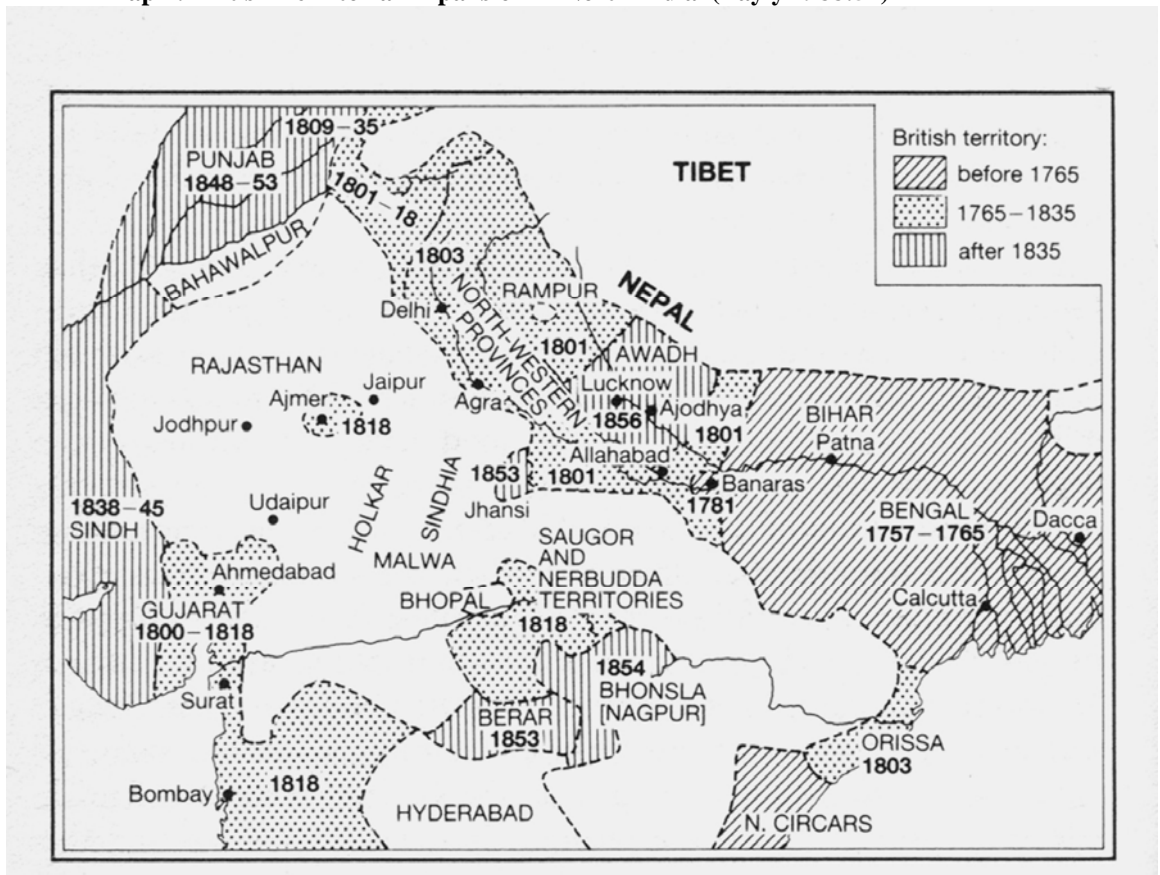
Second, I have tried to stress the uncertainty of the conditions under which EIC administrators operated, and the “fog of war” generated by the distance that the organization spanned. The EIC stretched from London to Calcutta and beyond and was linked together by a long network of information, fiscal technologies, and accounting systems that rival contemporary multinational corporations in their complexity and—at times—obscurity. As such, I have suggested that the means by which the ryotwari and zemindari systems were to be judged were hardly *only* those of their relative ability to maximize revenue. Both systems were justified in terms of the profits they would return the shareholders of the EIC and the domestic British state, but since both initially meant declining revenues and social disorganization, it makes little sense to use this criterion, in this case, as an *analytic* account to adjudicate their competition.

Third, mobilizing a realist methodological approach and combining it with an organization based on fractals, I have suggested that administrators’ conceptions of colonial Indian subjects as either fundamentally different from or similar to westerners crystallized alternate organizational forms—and different administrative techniques and practices—from intersecting causal processes.

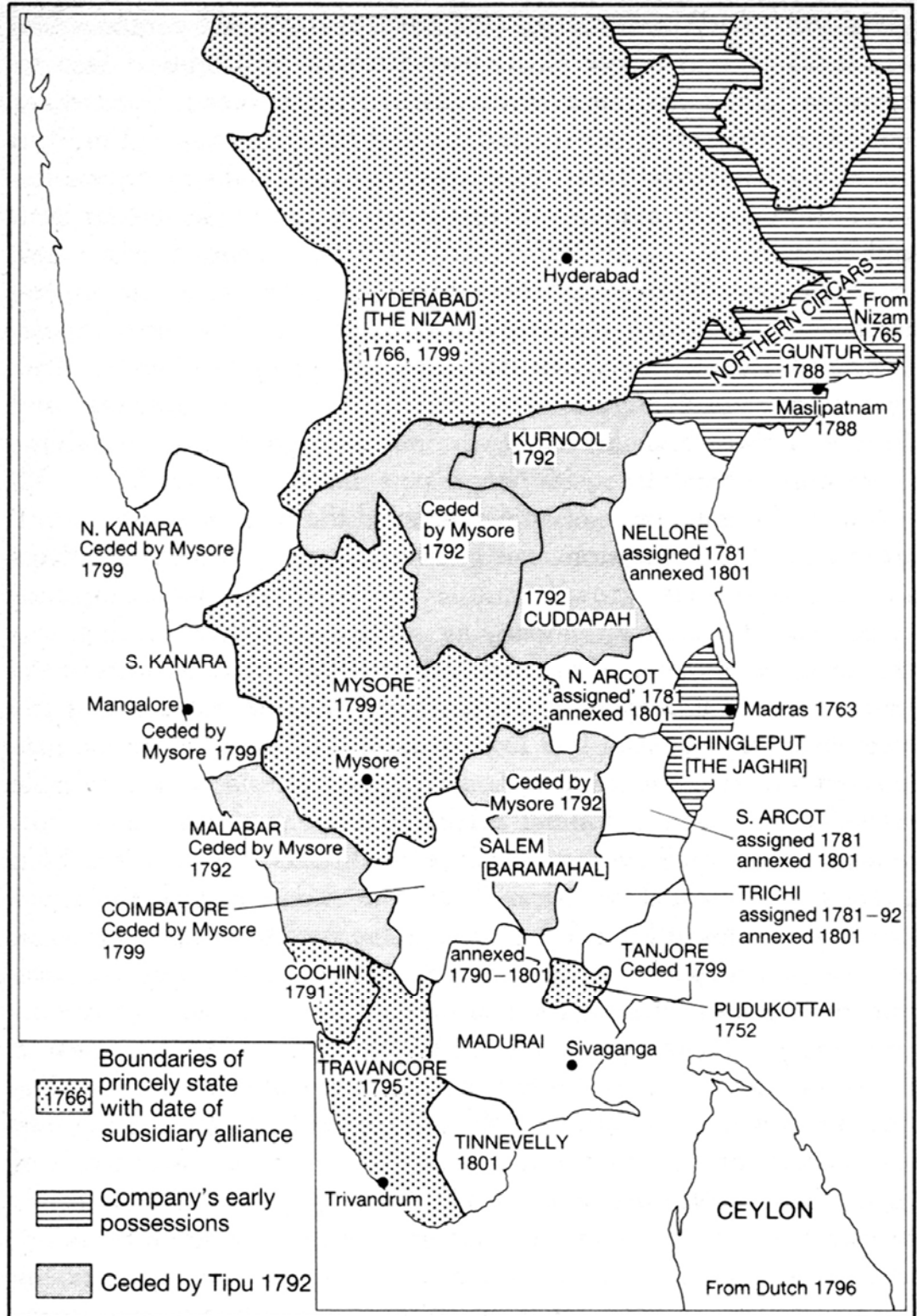
Rather than a teleological process of modernization or a rational optimization with ambient social structure, or a cultural “switchman,” the account of state administrative development articulated here emphasizes the relational, contingent character of administrative development.

Maps

Map 1: British Territorial Expansion in North India (Bayly 1988:52)



Map 2. British territorial expansion in South India (Bayly 1988:88)



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