

Rethinking Land rights in Early Colonial Bengal

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Abstract: In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, historians typically approached the issue of landed property in colonial India from the perspective of agrarian history. Thus, the famous eighteenth debates among British officials about the nature of land rights in Bengal, leading to the colonial recognition of zamindars as landed proprietors, was often treated as a critical moment in agrarian social relations, reframing relations between different layers of rural society. But recent historiography on the colonial 'rule of property' in Bengal has shifted away from British 'ideas' about land rights, or about the proper ordering of agrarian society, and has instead emphasized the close relationship between a state sponsored land market and the financial solvency of the early colonial state. The paper reviews recent historiography on the land market and state finance in early colonial India, and highlights the need to study changing early colonial policies of agrarian governance in India in relation to global commercial and financial networks.