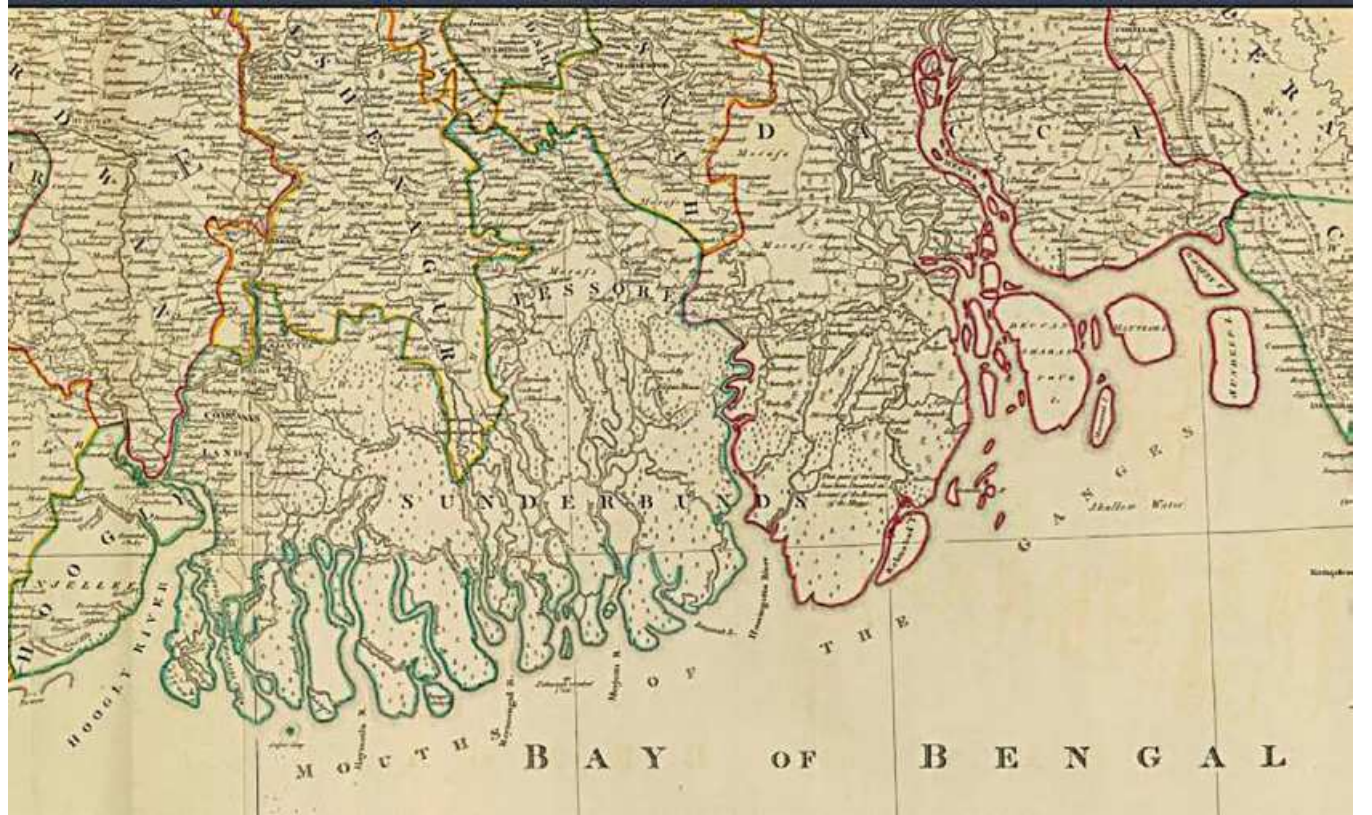


A Hindu village in a clearing, the Sundarbans. 1843. Sketch by Frederic Peter Layard (1818-1891). Worked up from an earlier sketch of January 1839.



Map of the Sundarbans by James Rennell, 1794

# The Sundarban Plan

## Early attempts to reclaim the Sundarbans (1784-1800)

JAMES WESTLAND

Tilman Henckell [Judge and Magistrate of Jessore] at an early period of his magistracy, turned his attention to the Sundarbans, and he was the founder of the system of reclamation which is now converting these great forests into immense rice tracts. The route from the eastern districts to Calcutta passed at that time by nearly the same river-courses which it follows now — by Kochua, Khulna, Chandkhali, and by the river leading past Kaliganj. But this route was then south of

could be established, for they were all in the Sundarban forest; at each of them also some tracts of land were brought under cultivation. From some correspondence in the beginning of 1794, it would appear that Henckell paid in a great measure out of his private purse for these reclamations. Possibly he had his outlay afterwards reimbursed to him.

On 4th April 1784 Mr. Henckell submitted to the Board his scheme for the reclamation of the Sundarbans. He proposed granting plots of land, on favorable terms, to people undertaking to reclaim them. The terms were these: the grantee or "talukdar" was to retain 200 biggas of land for himself; upon the rest he would be chargeable with Government revenue, according to the amount he brought under cultivation. The revenue was to be for the first three years nothing; fourth year, 2 annas; fifth, 4 annas; sixth, 6 annas; seventh and succeeding years, 8 annas. It does not appear that the grantee was bound to bring under cultivation any specified amount within a fixed time.

Henckell urged the scheme both because it would bring in a revenue from lands which then were totally unproductive, and because the cultivation would, by its peculiar nature, form a grand reservoir for rice against seasons of drought or famine, as the crops grown in the Sundarbans were little dependent upon rainfall.

Another part of the scheme, which we have alluded to before, was the establishment of a sort of convict colony in some part of the Sundarbans, but that part of it was never carried out. The Sundarban plan, as it was then called, was approved by the Board and was speedily brought into operation, Henckell being made "superintendent for cultivating the Sundarbans" (it must be remembered he was not then collector).

In 1787 Henckell already looked on the scheme as a "great success," and reported that many zemindars had come forward and taken grants, and that 21,000 biggas were already under cultivation. He had largely interested himself in the plan, and had even personally advanced money to taluqdars to carry it out.

Henckell had foreseen the probability of disputes arising with Zamindars who possessed the lands adjoining these grants, and accordingly, in August 1786, he caused the whole of the boundary between the zemindars' lands and the Sundarbans to be marked off with bamboo stakes. This boundary was, of course, far from easy to determine. The

unreclaimed belonged to no pergunnah at all and therefore was within no zemindar's settlements.

Mr. Henckell was not wrong in his anticipations regarding disputes, and in 1788 he writes almost despairingly to the Board. The zemindars were making claims to the lands which had been granted to the taluqdars. The zemindars would not assert any specific boundaries to their estates, but whenever any land was brought under cultivation, they would make the demand that it was within their limits. They were taking up and bringing under ryottee cultivation small patches of land here and there in the interior in order to show, by bringing the land upon their rent-roll, that it was theirs. And not only were they making claims, but they were enforcing them; the Selimabad zemindars especially were interfering with the cultivation and forcibly opposing the taluqdars.

Mr. Henckell for two years repeatedly urged the Board to interfere to protect the taluqdars, and wished an order to be issued upon the zemindars that within three months they should declare their boundaries, so that he might have them finally determined. The present unsettled state of affairs was ruining the whole scheme. The taluqdars in possession had for some time continued to pay their revenue, in the hope of having matters settled, but were latterly falling in arrear; and though Mr. Henckell held applications for 200,000 biggas from new proposing taluqdars, he delayed making the grants until he could be quite certain whether the lands were his to grant.

In a letter of 26th March 1790 a statement is made of the progress of the scheme. The grants which had been made were

Year	Land (bigha)
1785	21,000
1787	13,094
1788	8,113
1789	1,603

The grants were being made latterly in smaller numbers for the reason given above; but Henckell said that were matters only settled, he would likely grant 100,000 biggas in 1790. Revenue became payable first in 1788, the demand for that year being Rs. 2,625; by 1793 there would be a demand of Rs. 20,540 on

prosperous, but in some others much land had been brought under cultivation. In most of the instances, however, the disputes originated by the zemindars were keeping matters in a backward state.

The Board, however, were not persuaded by these facts and figures, and were not nearly so keen about the scheme as Mr. Henckell. They had already withdrawn, on the score of expense, the establishments which had been placed at the three ganjes (Kochua, Chandkhali, and Henckellganj,) to promote and manage the scheme and to manage the small Government estates formed by the clearings at these three places (These establishments had police duties also, being intended to act, as occasion required, against robbers). The present expenditure and the prospects of litigation apparently were not to their minds justified by the chances of future revenue, and in 1790 they practically abandoned the scheme to take its chances.

Next year the collector writes the scheme had begun to fail from the above causes, and some zemindars had succeeded in showing that the taluqdars' lands were within their settlements and in having them dispossessed. So a new settlement was made of all such grants as were affected by these considerations, namely, the old terms were applied to that part of the lands which remained after the exclusion of what belonged to the zemindars, and a certain amount of revenue continued still to be realized from them. But no more grants were made, and we find the Board even in 1796 refusing to entertain an application on the ground that the extent of the zemindars' claims was not yet decided. The question, in fact, was whether the permanent settlement proclamation had not vested in the zemindars the proprietary right over the whole Sundarbans.

The old grants, too, began to decline. Kalidaspur and Muhammadabad, once the most prosperous, fell so far into jungle that they were unable to bear their assessment. They were relinquished by the grantees in 1798 and became Government estates. When Kalidaspur was thus bought in by Government, there was hardly an inhabitant on it. Chandkhali, too, which was a Government clearing, began to relapse about 1796; but apparently it was redeemed, for we find it in 1808 in the hands of a farmer.

However, after a season of adversity matters began to look brighter, and in 1802 the improvement was so great, that the collector proposed to send

About 1814 a measurement was made by native ameens, but it was pronounced unreliable, the grantees having bribed the ameens to understate the cultivation. And finally, in 1816, a measurement was being carried out by a Mr. Smith, apparently an assistant collector. About 1807, also, applications for grants, which had for a long time ceased, began to come in.

Of Henckellganj the subsequent history is this. After regaining a long time the property of Government, the raja of Nuddea claimed the reclaimed land, on the ground that it was part of the village Parbatpur, or Bangalpara, which was within his permanent settlement. The judge of Jessore, finding that it was so, decreed possession to the raja as zemindar, but as Government had spent so much money on its reclamation, the judge declared they might continue to possess as ryots, paying rent to the raja at pergunnah rates. When the case was appealed to Calcutta, the Government got still harder terms: it might retain the ganj alone (the place where the houses and market grounds were), paying rent of course to the raja, but would have to give up the cultivated land. The rent of the ganj was then about Rs. 550. But a brilliant idea struck the Board. If the raja was entitled to become a proprietor under the permanent settlement of Henckellganj, the revenue he would get from it must be added to the other assets of his zemindari (which it had not been of course), and his assessment must be increased by the assessment on Henckellganj, that is, ten-elevenths of the net revenue. The collector was accordingly directed to assess this addition to the raja's zemindari. These proceedings lasted from 1802 to 1804.

The raja was not at all prepared to find that he had to render to the Government ten-elevenths of what he had gained by his decree, and he steadily refused to take the settlement which the Board offered to him at Rs. 531. The estate was consequently continually given out in farm, the zemindari allowance being kept for the raja. The raja finally sold all his rights for Rs. 8,001 to one Radhamohan Chaudhri, who in 1814 accepted the settlement, which had then increased to Rs. 872.

Chandkhali I have not much information about. When at the place I made some inquiries, and was told it was reclaimed by Henckell; whether for himself or on the part of Government, was not stated. After that it was sold (probably by Government) to one Rupram Mazumdar, and he transferred it to its present proprietor, Umanath Chaudhri of Satkhira. Kochua was at a very early period claimed by the Selimabad zemindars, but whether given up to them or not I do not know.

The subsequent history of Sundarban reclamation is beyond my present intention. It is sufficient to notice that, starting from the beginning I have described, grants have continually increased and cultivations continually extended. A belt of Sundarban land, about twenty miles wide, has been reclaimed from forest and brought under cultivation since the time when Mr. Henckell established his outposts at Kochua, Chandkhali, and Henckellganj.

Sir James Westland KCSI (1842 – 1903) was a British financier and colonial administrator. He served as the collector and district magistrate of Jessore.

Note: This account is taken from *A Report on the District of Jessore: Its antiquities, its history and its commerce* authored by J. Westland. It was printed in 1871 at Bengal Secretariat Office, Calcutta.

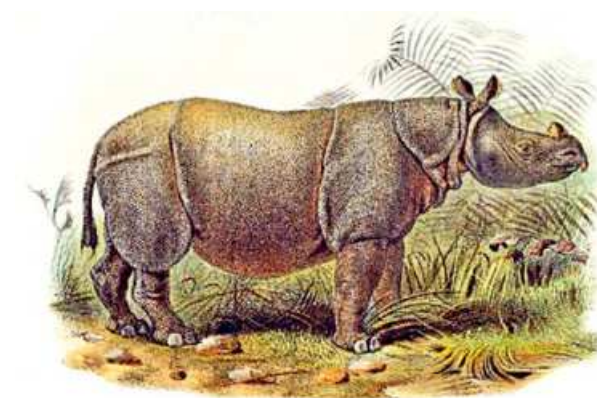


SOURCE: SOUTH ASIAN ARTS GROUP  
Puthis collected from the Sundarban.

the cultivated tracts, and for the most part lay through forest, no habitations being on either side. Cultivation had in some places been carried farther south—for example, in the pergunnahs of Hogla and Chirulia; but the above description for the most part held good.

Apparently about 1782 or 1783 Henckell established, for boats passing through this inhospitable tract, three ganjes, that is to say, places where travelers might meet with traders and provisions might be obtainable. One of these was at Kochua, on the eastern side of Jessore; one was at Chandkhali, now on the western side of the district, but then in the centre of the passage through it; and the third was at Henckellganj, then the western side of the district. This latter place is close to Bangalpara, a little west of Kaliganj, in the 24-Pergunnahs, and it was named after Mr. Henckell. When Mr. Henckell's agent was clearing the place (for it was jungle when first occupied), he was very much disturbed by tigers, who would make attacks upon his people, so he affixed to the place the name of Henckell, expecting that the tigers, dreading that name, would no more molest him; and the name adhered to the place ever after, until at last the survey authorities went round and, picking up the name only from native pronunciation, wrote it down "Hingulung" in their maps, and blotted out the history it contained.

In all the three places, in fact, clearings of jungle had to be made before the ganj



Extinct Indian Javan rhinoceros of the Sundarbans, drawing from 1877.

zemindars held their lands not by specific boundaries, but by pergunnahs, and as they extended their cultivation southward (as no doubt they did in some measure), they of course attached the newly cultivated land to the adjacent pergunnah. But as the pergunnahs were divisions which bore reference to the land revenue system, they did not extend southward of the cultivation, and land which was yet

grants already made, besides the revenue of the 100,000 biggas he would be able to give in 1790, which would be Rs. 12,500 in 1793, and Rs. 50,000 in 1203 1796. The names of the grants are given in the same letter; they almost all have names derived from those of the grantees— "Kalidaspur," "Muhammadabad," "Bhairabnagar," and so forth. The first two of these were apparently the most



Gangetic dolphin of the Sunderbans, drawing from 1894

ameens to measure how much land had been brought under cultivation, in order that the assessment might be increased. Nothing was done then, and the collector again in 1808 urged upon the Board an inquiry of this nature. He said that the amount cultivated by people who have no grants, or cultivated by grantees in excess of their assessment, might be 40,000 biggas.