

Research Article

Landscape Aesthetics of Remoteness in the Indian Himalayas

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Abstract

This paper examines the pictorial practices of landscape painting in colonial British art and the textual practice of colonial travel writing to examine the landscape aesthetics of remoteness in the Indian Himalayas. It argues that neither the ‘picturesque’ nor the ‘sublime’ genre of colonial landscape paintings can describe the representation of the marginalised geographies of the Indian Himalayas and the colonial impetus to engineer them. By offering a paradigm of the landscape aesthetics of remoteness, this paper demonstrates how remoteness is aesthetically reproduced in the colonial visual imagination, which informs the mapping, engineering and transformation of the Himalayan landscape. It examines the landscape aesthetics in the travelogue and its accompanying illustrations of aquatints in the works of James B. Fraser (1820a, b) and of the lithographs and accompanying text in the work of Thomas Daniell (c.1800) for the North-Western Himalayan region in India. The paper situates these representations of colonial landscape paintings in a broader study of ‘landscape and power’ (Mitchell 1994). It analyses the pictorial and textual practices through the dialectic of the ‘interior’ and the ‘frontier’ that produces the landscape aesthetic of remoteness and provides a new paradigm for studying landscapes and their representation.

Keywords

remoteness, Himalayas, landscape painting, landscape aesthetics, travel writing

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Introduction

The Himalayan landscape has been an abiding subject of travel writing and production of art including the travel of spies, administrators, reconnaissance agents for mapping and surveillance, mountaineers and trekkers, saints, mendicants, pilgrims and vagabonds – folding together a myriad of people and their relationships with the Himalayas in addition to those who live and work here. Prominent among them is the genre of colonial landscape paintings. The Indian Himalayan landscape paintings were mostly produced and circulated in early nineteenth-century India and Britain as part of the broader genre of Indian landscapes, particularly through the works of artists like Thomas and William Daniell, Samuel Davis and Edward Lear. The proliferation of the ‘landscape aesthetic’ (Mitchell 1994) of terra incognita in colonial landscape paintings, and ‘remoteness’ in travel writing (administrative and vernacular) from the early nineteenth century lend themselves to modes of ‘engineering’ the mountainous landscape that shaped the emergence of new routes and modes of travel. In his account of ‘communication’ in colonial Bihar, Sinha (2014) urges us to braid the discursive representations of space (in travelogues, administrative gazetteers) with material representations (maps and construction of transport systems) in order to see how they both inform each other especially in the genre of ‘office tours’, ‘inspection’ and ‘opening up the interior’. My study draws from such approaches to examine the pictorial practices of landscape painting and the textual practices of travel writing embedded in the landscape and its transformations (Mitchell 1994, Cosgrove and Daniels 1988).

The Indian Himalayan landscape paintings in early nineteenth-century India and Britain circulated as part of the broader genre of Indian landscapes. Whereas colonial hill stations were usually the sites for renderings of ‘picturesque’ India (Pradhan 2017, Banerjee 2014, Ray 2013, Kennedy 1996), the ‘wilderness’, vastness and non-urban-ness of the rest of the Indian Himalayas

were characterized as ‘sublime’. My study of colonial landscape paintings shifts our attention to those sites in the Indian Himalayas that emerge out of a ‘remote aesthetic’ (neither picturesque nor sublime), and the impetus to transform it through ‘a vast program of public works, reorganizing the spatial frame of the social and economic life’ (Pradhan 2017: 133) crucially embedded in the interplay between material transformation, ‘civil’ engineering, forced labor and resource extraction. The genre of colonial landscape paintings and its interplay with the genre of colonial travel writing is a crucial way to understand how remoteness is produced as a category. The aesthetic of remoteness produced in such visual and textual records is reflective of how the gaze of travel writing and artistic reproduction can fix people and places in space and time (Arnold 2006, Pratt 1992) along with the impetus to ‘improve’ them. The cartographic rendering of such landscapes and their administration also relies on earlier records and thereby reproduces their gaze. By centering on the aesthetic of remoteness, this paper provides a paradigm for examining such records, especially concerning the Himalayas. The aesthetics of remoteness are the political field on which the colonization and transformation of Himalayan territory is based, and therefore crucial to examine.

The ‘frontier’ geography of the Himalayan region, along with the ‘interior’ gaze of travellers and administrators (re)produces the landscape aesthetic of remoteness, which is reinscribed in the routes and networks of the ‘imperial eyes’ (Pratt 1992). In his definitive essay on remoteness, Ardener suggests that ‘distance lends enhancement if not enchantment to the anthropological vision’ (1987, 2012: 89). The remoteness that characterizes the Himalayan landscapes produces both enhancement and enchantment throughout the colonial, nationalist and postcolonial histories of the region. Remoteness in this sense is not merely topographical but also topological such that the relationships of identity and mobility that it characterizes are also rendered remote. In his study of remoteness in the

Gilgit-Baltistan region of Northern Pakistan, Hussain (2015) describes the persistence of remoteness as a category for the Shimshalis of the Hunza Valley despite their many encounters with the world and connections with various socio-spatial domains including nationalism, transhumance migration, international tourism and environmentalism. Remoteness, Hussain argues, like modernity, is an unfinished project. The construction of remoteness therefore entails the contradictions of making something, that can be easily worked into the nationalized territorial imagination, 'remote', and also provides the ground for integration into broader geographies (Mathur 2015, Harms et al 2014).

By offering a paradigm of the landscape aesthetics of remoteness, this paper demonstrates how remoteness is aesthetically reproduced in the colonial visual imagination, which informs the mapping, engineering and transformation of the Himalayan landscape. Remoteness transcends the pictorial conventions of 'picturesque' and 'sublime' through which the dominant analysis of colonial landscape art history has been undertaken and also interlinks both of them when seen through the lens of remoteness. This paper examines the landscape aesthetics in the work of two colonial figures and landscape painters – James B. Fraser's travelogue *Journal of a Tour through the Himala Mountains* (1820a) and its accompanying illustrations in a set of twenty aquatints – *A View in the Himala Mountains* (1820b) and Thomas Daniell's *Oriental Scenery IV* (1807), one of a collection of six volumes of lithographs and its accompanying text. The paper situates both of these, which together constitute one of the earliest representations of the North-west Indian Himalayas in Company Painting, in a broader study of 'landscape and power' which considers landscape as an instrument of cultural force and not merely as an object to be seen or a text to be read (Mitchell 1994).

However, and rather than viewing the repertoire of the Company Paintings of the Indian landscape, and particularly that

of the Himalayas as the 'dreamwork of imperialism' (Mitchell 1994), and a process of colonization fully realized, this paper argues that the landscape aesthetics of remoteness should be situated in the dialectical relationship between the interior and the frontier. It also argues for a study of the enactment of the incomplete project of colonialism in the 'middle ground' (White 1991) of its events and actors rather than only from the vantage of either the metropolis or the periphery. In doing so, this paper shifts our attention towards the sites of representation, production and circulation of Indian landscape paintings in general and of the Indian Himalayas in particular that are not limited either by colonial urban development or by the impressions of wilderness. Whereas sites like Delhi, Calcutta and Madras are usually the sites for colonial picturesque renderings of the Indian landscape, colonial hill stations like Shimla, Darjeeling and Ooty constitute the sites of such representation as far as the Indian Himalayas are concerned. On the other hand, most of the Indian mountainscapes have been studied as representations of the sublime. The sheer landform of the Indian Himalayas and the scale of human effort required to navigate and surround it renders itself very well to the demands of 'sublime' representation especially when it could not be tamed or domesticated by the picturesque vantage of colonial hill stations. This paper offers a paradigm of the landscape aesthetics of remoteness characterized by the articulation of the frontier-interior dialectic through a study of colonial landscape paintings.

I. Landscape Painting and the Indian Himalayas in the early nineteenth century: James Fraser and *The Ridge and fort at Jytock*

The names of the earliest British landscape painters in India from the eighteenth century onwards can be recalled in the same tradition as the landscape painters in Britain, in order of influence and by the genres of paintings they produced.¹ James Baillie Fraser, acknowledged for providing

one of the earliest representations of the Indian Himalayan landscape, especially the source of the sacred rivers of Ganga and Yamuna, and for also being the ‘first’ European to visit Gangotri and Jamnotri, is one of such artists. So are Thomas Daniell, uncle and William Daniell, nephew who went on to produce a large corpus of work on India over ten years from their first visit in 1786 (Sutton 1954; Archer 1969, 1980; Shellim 1979). Among the two sets of aquatints of Indian landscapes produced by Fraser as an amateur painter during his nearly ten years stay in India² this paper looks at one of his landmark pieces of painting and travel writing. Titled *Journal of a Tour through the Himala Mountains*, Fraser’s travel journal was published in 1820 by Rodwell and Martin in London, the same year that they also published a set of twenty aquatints by Fraser titled *A View in the Himala Mountains* as illustrations for this journal. The other set of landscape paintings and accompanying text it examines is Thomas Daniell’s *Oriental Scenery IV* (1807) which has lithographs of some of the earliest landscape paintings by the British of the North-western Himalayas from this region. According to Archer and Falk (1989), James Fraser may have seen the aquatint rendering of Thomas and William Daniell’s landscape paintings of the Himalayas, which were published as part of *Oriental Scenery IV* in 1804. The Fraser brothers travelled through routes similar to and close on the heels of the Daniells. The Daniells themselves were determined to emulate and surpass William Hodges, a pupil of the British painter Richard Wilson, and his *Select Views in India* (1785–88) (Tillotson 1990). During their journey towards the north, the Daniells had stayed with Samuel Davis, the draftsman and surveyor of Samuel Turner’s mission to Bhutan and Tibet in 1783, and it was Davis who had encouraged the Daniells to go up to the Himalayan mountains. Therefore, not only the ‘landscape aesthetics’ (Mitchell 1994) of the Indian Himalayas but even the circuits of itineraries through which it was articulated and represented were reproduced in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Company painting.³

The aquatint through which I examine the landscape aesthetics of remoteness in the work of James Fraser is plate number 4 titled *The Ridge and fort at Jytock*. The fort at Jytock (Jaithak) in the North-western Himalayas in India was sieged by the British forces at the end of the Anglo-Gurkha war, which culminated in 1816. Beginning with the East India Company’s activities in India, and especially during the late eighteenth century, the question of state formation in the British Empire was vested with the question of expanding and settling frontiers, the legacy of which survives in the postcolonial politics of borderlands and nationalism across South Asia. James Fraser hadn’t arrived at Fort Jytock entirely by either chance or design. His younger brother William Fraser, who had risen in the ranks as a Company official had been appointed first, as the Political Agent of the Nepal War in 1814 and then as the Commander for the Affairs of Garhwal in 1815 to oversee the new land settlement after the war. The Anglo-Nepalese War, also known as the Gurkha War or the Anglo-Gurkha War, was fought between the East India Company and the Nepalese Gurkhas between 1814 and 1816, in one of the Company’s first bids to expand its territorial control beyond India. It was a war in which the Company troops had to reckon with the Gurkha troops on many fronts before securing a difficult victory in 1816. The Anglo-Gurkha war was itself a culmination of the ‘territorial disputes that emerged along the common frontiers of the Gurkha kingdom (present-day Nepal) and the English East India Company’ (Michael 2014: 2). The ‘spatial anxiety’ (ibid) of the Company and its officials in settling the frontier was further complicated by the processes in such non-state spaces – of local power and influence which they had to contest with while they surveyed and re-ordered the frontier to settle it. More specially, British interest in Nepal centred on its significance as a conduit of trade with Tibet and China and that Nepal itself also could be a lucrative source of timber, spices and other commodities. As a function of his position, William Fraser had been tasked to recruit local people to



Figure 1: James B. Fraser's 'The ridge and fort of Jytock' from *Views in the Himala Mountains* (Robert Havell and Son), Plate 4, Aquatint, 59 x 43 cm. The British Library, London

serve in the irregular force in support of the Company's troops and to settle claims to land and land revenue amongst the local kings and chieftains as well as between the Company and such local elites. During this period, the Company had decided to draw towards their side the expelled chiefs and subjects of the hill principalities reduced by the Gurkhas (Alavi 1995). It is important to note that while recruiting local people as irregular support, William Fraser ended up recruiting a few Gurkha soldiers who were first enlisted in the British Army during this time and went on to become one of the oldest serving battalions in the British Army as well as the army of independent India.

At first view, the painting appears land-locked, almost gridlocked by the mountains. The mountain line or the horizon imposes an elevation that doesn't seem to become a vantage point; it limits and blocks the view. The gradient of the rising mountains, from the vision of the viewer, is also pronounced,

like a topographical sketch of the mountain where the eye of the viewer can trace the contours of elevation in the painting. Fraser, while painting for the illustrations to accompany the journal was keen that the aquatint illustrations be an exercise in a 'tolerably accurate survey of the country' for amassing the 'materials for a map', being of the view that a geographer was comparable to a statesman (Fraser 1820a: vii). He had arrived at Jytock (Jaithak, the site of the fort) in March 1815 from Delhi, accompanying General Martindell's troops.⁴ Stationed at Blackhill, the campsite for the British troops, Fraser described the 'face of the country around Jytock' to be 'peculiarly rugged' (Fraser 1820a: 61). For Fraser, the 'wild and singular sharp ridges' scarcely 'afford room for footing' (ibid: 61) and the 'ravines that separate these hills have a no less savage character' (ibid: 62). Such a representation of the landscape is not merely a physical description but also aims to convey the implicit heroic value in being

able to traverse and conquer such terrain and capturing the sublime. It also lends itself to the strategic military value that the region held for the advancing British troops and their efforts to move the influence and control of the Nepali kingdom out of the region. It is therefore at once an introduction of the region, as well as its evaluation. The association of the travelling artist with the mobilization and the movement of the Company troops is clearly represented throughout the journal and is best represented in this aquatint.⁵

A closer look at the painting suggests that the landscape as represented doesn't intend to reveal – rather, it appears to be conceived as a landscape that conceals – it conceals the view, it conceals the inhabitants of the region and most importantly, it even seems to conceal the possibilities in and of the landscape as represented in its remoteness. In his account of the travelling to Fort Jytock and beyond, James Fraser provides vivid and repetitive descriptions of 'a steep and rugged ascent' and the fatigue of 'a march of nearly forty miles' (1820a: 58-59) that suggests the scale and volume of the military movement that Fraser was a part of even if not directly involved with. He describes the territory that he is moving through as 'rugged' and 'savage' as including the villages in the region, which, according to Fraser 'depopulated by the severity of the conquerors, do not excite disgust, at least not interest' (ibid: 65). In his part geographic and part ethnographic venture, quickly collapsing into one, Fraser goes ahead to lend the metaphors for the landscape to the people associated with it:

The inhabitants of the country surrounding the capital, and the districts in its vicinity, are not calculated to excite much interest either from character or appearance. Generally speaking, they are contemptible in size, mean in aspect, cringing in address; their intellect appears degraded, and their ignorance almost brutal. (1820a: 66-67)

In lending the quality of land to the quality of its inhabitants, Fraser reproduces the

landscape aesthetics of remoteness into ethnographic aesthetics of remoteness – the natives are degraded, uninteresting and gross, a people whose origin forms a 'curious subject of inquiry' (1820a: 71) – the subject of the 'remote history of an aboriginal people' (ibid: 72). Thus, the ravines are as rugged and as savage as its inhabitants which together cannot be considered either as picturesque or sublime but must be characterized in terms of their remoteness not only from the British troops, travellers and administrators but also from their counterparts in the lowlands who can be more easily classified, understood and explained without being rendered 'remote'.⁶

Whereas the inhabitants of the villages in the region occupied a frontier that the Company wanted to settle, they were characterized by the kind of remoteness attributed to the 'interior' – closed off by the rugged mountains and savage ravines, which according to Fraser characterized them as people preoccupied with the 'subsistence of the everyday' (1820a: 62). Fraser considers that even though the tracts in some of these areas may have been rich and populous, they were 'insulated and small in proportion to the vast space that is incapable of cultivation, mountainous and wild' (ibid: 73), and for which the 'revenue could have never been large'. The steep terrain of the mountains, rising from the foreground onwards as represented in Fraser's painting, makes it difficult to imagine the agricultural prospects of the landscape. It appears heavily forested, the cover of which cannot be penetrated even to determine the kinds of trees and other growth that may be beneath it, marked by a conspicuous absence of detail. Even though the expanse of the landscape spreads out, the entire scene appears automatically enclosed by the contours of the rising terrain, rendered 'interior' to its topography.

Given how the view of *Fort Jytock* is blocked and locked, it only promises to reveal something or hold out a possibility if one were to follow the march of the soldiers through it. The landlocked appearance of the painting with a rather restricted horizon makes it



Figure 2: Details of the 'middle ground', Fraser (1820b).

difficult to distinguish between the classic background, foreground and middle ground planes in the aquatint since the painting seems to rise from the foreground upwards rather than lend itself to distinct planes of vision. However, upon a still closer look, it is easier to locate distinct planes of vision, which are related to and shaped by the movement of the troop of soldiers upwards on the hill. It is in this upward movement of the troops that the landscape seems to reveal itself and its affordances. Some of these clues can be found in the representation of the camping site of the troops in what appears as the middle ground of the painting.

While following the movement of the troops upwards in the hills, we can notice the figure of a soldier discernibly dressed in a British uniform followed by another soldier in a native uniform and preceded by native soldiers atop elephants, describing to the viewer that these marching troops consist native soldiers as they do British soldiers. James Fraser had accompanied his brother William Fraser who was commissioned to recruit locals for irregular support for

the British troops during the war. In this painting, James Fraser depicts both British and local troops, who may have been recruited by William.

The success of the British troops in the region was significantly dependent upon the success in recruiting soldiers from the 'highlanders' of these districts as well as the old soldiers and dependents of the ex-hill chiefs, who were now under Gurkha rule. Unless such support could be successfully enlisted, soldiers from different groups and regions of India had to be enlisted, among them – Marathas, Sikhs, and Pathans who became the face of the Company Sepoys in the regiments of the East India Company Army. The Company's intervention in Nepal did not begin with the Anglo-Nepalese war in 1814; it had first sent an expedition to Kathmandu in 1767 at the request of the then King of Nepal who was under siege by the Gurkha army. The expedition failed and the troops were forced to retreat. Even though the Company had managed to sign a treaty of friendship with Nepal by 1801, primarily to gain access to the Nepal valley as an entrepot for trans-Himalayan trade,

by 1804, the anti-company sentiment in Kathmandu had undermined the terms of the treaty and the Company resident was forced to withdraw from there. The Gurkha kingdom continued to expand during the next few years and began to encroach upon the company's territory in the North Indian plains, and the Company eventually declared war in 1814 as the Gurkhas became a military threat to the recently acquired territories, the concerns of a 'fledgling empire' (Das Chene 1991).

The British troops therefore needed the enlistment and support of the natives and the Gurkhas who, according to James Fraser were more accustomed to the 'irregular and rough ground' of the battlefield and could 'keep their footing when others lost theirs or were out breathed' (1820a: - others being the Marathas, the Sikhs and the Pathans who were not from the highlands). William Fraser had been successful in recruiting Gurkhas for policing and foraging before the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1815 and their success had increased the Company's admiration for the Gurkhas. According to Alavi (1995), the Company, unable to win over the personnel that constituted the military base of the Nepal kingdom even as it made overtures to the Gurkhas to desert from their army, had begun to invent its model of a Gurkha soldier – recruiting from among the men from Kumaon, Garhwal and Sirmour (adjoining hill territories) in the image of the 'Company Gurkha'.

According to Montgomery (1998) as boundary disputes between the Company and Nepal increased, there was a need to gather more information about the frontier and its settlement. However, the mountains presented a formidable barrier to gathering such information and operations. Bayly in his work on *Empire and Information* states that the British were confronted with a 'virtual information famine' about the India-Nepal border before the Anglo-Gurkha war (1996). The mountain terrain of warfare was expected to cause some difficulties, although it wasn't known; the military ability of the Gurkhas too could not be anticipated. According to Montgomery,

much of the intelligence the Company relied on was 'based on earlier traveller's accounts of Nepal and the Himalayas, reports by naturalists, ethnographers and ichthyologists, and surveys and statistical sketches which were collected in a somewhat ad hoc manner' that characterized the frontier as rugged and wild, especially due to the 'impregnable positions' of the mountains (1998: 36). The system and principle of revenue collection that the British built upon from the Mughal administration was based upon fixed and determinate boundaries which was also different from the Gurkha view of the rights to revenue collection.⁸

The elaborate and sophisticated movement of the troops upwards on the hill in *Fort Jytock*, and towards the campsite represents the recruitment and coordination efforts of William Fraser as far as it depicts both Company troops in British Uniform and both the Company Gurkha and the irregular forces of a few Gurkhas who could be enlisted, in native uniform. According to James Fraser, the severity of the Gurkha rule had made people 'reckless, broken spirited, bowed to the dust and subdued in mind and body' (1820a: 75). However, farther north and 'the farther removed from the seat of government, the more did the latent symptoms of anxiety to throw off the yoke evince themselves'. Given the understanding that enlistment into the Company troops was a 'welcome refuge' to those Kumaonis, Garhwalis and Sirmouris who had been 'dispossessed of their high political and military status by the Gurkha' (Alavi 1995: 275), William Fraser did not have much difficulty in recruiting from among these groups, unlike when he tried from among the Gurkhas.

Even as one can notice how the British troops seem to lead the charge up the hill in the painting, marked by their visible presence at the campsite and in the figure leading in the foreground, one cannot miss the native soldiers commanding and manoeuvring the elephants ahead of the British uniformed soldier. One is, therefore also left to wonder about the



Figures 3,4,5: Details of the movement of the troop and the campsite. Fraser (1820b)

campsite itself – which may serve both as a site of strategic planning among the British soldiers for the next offensive as well as a site for the potential recruitment of irregulars. However, in order to navigate through this terrain, the British troops would have to trust the locals, natives and highlanders, especially those whom Fraser considered ‘anxious to rise and assist the British to dispossess their late conquerors’ (82) and therefore much ‘information’ was to be gained ‘respecting the roads that lead from east to west’ (82). But instances of even those who had ‘evinced favorable sentiments towards us’ (85) going over to the enemy repeatedly highlight the ambivalence of this collaboration between the British troops and the native troops.

The middle ground of the campsite that reveals the mountainscape as situated in the broader strategic pragmatic of settling the frontier is at once also representative of the tensions of trust and reliance between the British and the natives from the ‘insulated interior’. The stereotypical accounts of the barbarous nature of the Gurkha rule that the Company was accustomed to were especially reliant on the accounts of Father Giuseppe, a Roman Catholic missionary who claimed to have travelled in Nepal between 1768 and 1789, which furthered the view of Nepal as a country waiting to be liberated from the ‘barbaric’ Gurkha rule. However, as the Company was to find out, even the British rhetoric of liberation from the oppressive rule of the Gurkhas in

its correspondence to hill chiefs was not successful in bringing the hill chiefs over to their side. Such a context of misrepresented interaction between the Company, the Gurkhas and the Company Gurkhas assumes an interesting dimension in understanding the construction of the 'Gurkha' identity as well as that of the 'remoteness' of the landscape in which it articulates itself.

While talking about the 'creative misunderstandings' between Europeans and Indians in the region around the Great Lakes on what we now know as the US-Canada border, White (1991) frames his argument in terms of the problematique of the 'middle ground' – the place in between – between cultures, peoples, Empires and non-state world of villages from where arise shared meanings and practices of the middle ground (1991: xxvi). The campsite in the middle ground in this aquatint appears to function both as the literal and the metaphorical middle ground, where the itinerant political agency, army commander, travelling artist, company troops, native soldiers and the Gurkhas interact, and attribute meanings attached to the landscape and its inhabitants. While the company aimed to settle the frontier, it became hard for it to contend with the lack of knowledge about the region along with the ambivalence of depending upon the natives for navigating and occupying this territory. Much like how the members of the Iruquois confederacy in Upper Missouri were cast in the image of the Republican Indians by the portrait paintings by the Washington officials (Truettner 2010), as distinguished from the Noble Savage, the Gurkhas presented to the Company a curious case of a native representation that they were ambivalent about – characterized as barbaric and insolent in an unknown landscape while displaying the sophistication and resilience of an organized army. Such an ambivalence is also curiously represented in James Fraser's sketches of the Gurkhas where sometimes they are uniformed in a European manner which the then Gurkha king had already cast them in and sometimes, more enigmatically, in their native attire bearing traditional weapons.⁹ Therefore, when the

Company cast the other native soldiers in the image of the Company Gurkha, they also aimed to counter the ambivalence of the Gurkha identity by making them into Noble Savages. However, unlike the Noble Savages, the Gurkhas were not deemed expendable – rather they had to become allies of British colonialism and Nepal's crypto-colonialism, especially after the defeat of Nepal in the Anglo Gurkha war of 1815.

II. Landscape Painting and the Indian Himalayas in the early nineteenth century: Thomas Daniell and *The Rope Bridge at Serinagur*

'This bridge, which is 240 feet in length, is an ingenious contrivance, and so simple, that it may soon be erected and soon removed', Thomas Daniell wrote for the painting aptly titled *The Rope Bridge at Serinagur* (Oriental Scenery IV, 1807).

Apparently the 'first' Europeans to get to the northern region of Garhwal in the Indian Himalayas, the Daniells had started on their upward trek to the region in August 1788 to arrive at Srinagar on 28 April, 1789, when they made the first sketch of the rope bridge. *The Rope Bridge* is one of the few paintings of the Indian Himalayas in the early nineteenth century, and certainly the first of the North-Western Himalayan region by British landscape painters.

The work was first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1800 with the accompanying text – 'The Rope Bridge at Serinagur, in the Sevalic mountains, taken in the year 1789 during the evacuation of the city in consequence of the approach of a large army from Almorah, East Indies' (Shellim 1979). Nothing in the painting itself however conveys the significance and volatility of the 'the evacuation of the city' or 'the approach of a large army' (ibid). On the other hand, the illuminated and near translucent mountains fading into the horizon as if they are still further away from us seem to remind us of the 'remoteness' that the Daniells wanted to highlight, how the 'wrecked state of society under these petty chieftains, whose views of government are little better



Figure 6: The Rope Bridge at Serinagar c. 1800, Oil on canvas (relined). 32.25 x 40.75 (82 x 103.5). Yale Centre for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection. New Haven

than those of savages; and with whom all questions of justice and right are, as with duelists, referred to arms; considering, like them, no decision so correct, and so honourable, as those which have been recorded in the letters of blood' (Oriental Sceneries IV, 1807). The cityscape of Srinagar, the seat of the king of Garhwal, appears south from another settlement on the top of the hill, which forms the near center of the painting. The expanse of Srinagar is notable – on the bank of the river Alakhnanda behind the fort and the village of Ranihat on the opposite bank. The illuminated and near translucent mountainscape fading into the horizon as if they are still further away from the viewer and the dim view of the cityscape at the foothills seem to remind us of the eternal 'remoteness' that the Daniells wanted to highlight given how far they had gotten themselves, especially as the 'first' set of Europeans. The combination of the

sublime mountainscape on the horizon, the turbulent waters of the river in the foreground and the seemingly impregnable fort which functions to render the view 'remote' however is at once confronted by the expanse of Srinagar, Ranihat and habitation atop the hill.

It is the 'rope bridge' in the middle ground of the painting that operates as a switch between the represented 'remoteness' and the expanse of the settlement as well as the political volatility of the landscape; it is at once the medium and representation of this tension. More than the mountains on the horizon and the turbulent waters of the river in the foreground, the rope bridge emerges as the most sublime. Painted with a light stroke of the brush and a touch of paint that nearly merges into the river itself, it is only the rope bridge that can help the viewer cross the river to go further up, into the city of Srinagar and beyond. The

unsteadiness of a 240 feet long bridge that ‘may soon be erected and soon removed’ in a composition that is half land and half water only seems to pronounce the ‘remoteness’ of this view and suggests the painter’s conundrum in being unable to resolve the tension between the fragility and temporariness of the ‘rope bridge’ and the significance of the presence of a capital city, a seat of power, ‘Serinagur’ beyond it. It is also the rope bridge, which imparts itself to the title of the painting, that connects Srinagar to the world even if tentatively so and is the medium of movement during a siege that the Daniells describe.

Going by the text that accompanied the painting at the Royal Academy, the seemingly impregnable fort is about to be breached and the fragile and temporary bridge is the only escape route from the city. And even though Thomas Daniell describes it as an ‘an affecting scene’ and ‘a most melancholy example of the wrecked state of society’ (Oriental Scenery IV, 1807), it is hard to see how the rather small caravan of the king in the palanquin accompanied by a handful of soldiers and servants on the rope bridge represents the ‘evacuation of a city’ or a political coup. The course of the procession and the rope bridge, tethered on one side to the base of the fort on a strip of land and to a half-visible promontory on the other side, is abruptly cut off to deepen the effect of the ‘remoteness’ of the view, the fragility and unreliability of the bridge and the undecidedness of not just the course of the king and his men, but of the city and the kingdom.

By the time the Daniells exhibited this painting at the Royal Academy in 1800, the Garhwal region had only become more volatile. The Gurkhas from the bordering kingdom of Nepal wrested it from the King of Kumaun by 1803 and after the culmination of the Anglo-Gurkha war in 1815, it came under the rule of the British. The landscape paintings of the Indian Himalayas convey the tension between the perceived ‘remoteness’ of the region and the unfolding political and social dynamism that the Company painters confronted. This couldn’t be said more clearly, even if one

were to just glance at the watercolour for *The Rope Bridge at Serinagur* by Thomas Daniell (c. 1800), which records a different view. Unlike the oil painting, the fort is neither as high an obstruction to the view nor as seemingly impregnable, the waves in the river rise closer to the bridge and not merely in the foreground. The most striking contrast is, however, the course of the rope bridge to the other bank and the number of people on the bridge - men, women and children ‘evacuating the city’ with their possessions in tow with the royal entourage conspicuously missing. The rope bridge however appears similarly fragile and especially weighed under by the number of people using it. In the oil rendition to be exhibited at the Royal Academy, the large number of people is replaced by the royal entourage and the vision of the bridge cut off abruptly to render it more ‘remote’. The middle ground of the painting represented by the rope bridge is the site of action and movement during a situation of conflict which is improved through the landscape aesthetics of remoteness in the finally exhibited lithograph at the Royal Academy.

Previously titled ‘Suspension Bridge over the Ganges’ and attributed to Samuel Davis, the confusion around the authorship of the watercolour is telling of the circulation of the landscape aesthetics of remoteness. Whether it was the north-west region of Garhwal (Daniells 1789, Fraser 1815) or north-eastern highlands of Bhutan and Tibet (1783), the Indian landscape, in general, but the Indian Himalayan landscape in particular, that was being represented and reproduced, was circumscribed by the same aesthetics – that of remoteness. Such a depiction was also characterized by the tensions it faced in its very reproduction and representation – of pre-colonial history, of settlement and strife that neither the ‘picturesque’ nor the ‘sublime’ could contend with and could be better understood when rendered ‘remote’. *The Rope Bridge at Serinagur* is a fine representation of the landscape aesthetics of remoteness in Company painting that significantly shaped the Indian Himalayas as terra incognita for a long time.



Figure 7: Watercolour of 'The Rope Bridge at Serinagur' c. 1800 by Thomas Daniell. Watercolor, with pen and brown ink and graphite on medium, moderately textured, cream-laid paper. Mount: 20 1/4 × 30 inches (51.4 × 76.2 cm), Sheet: 19 15/16 × 29 5/8 inches (50.6 × 75.2 cm). Yale Centre for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, New Haven.

III: Landscape aesthetics and the dialectics of remoteness

What Fraser and Daniell set up is a representation of the complex processes of exchange and action between the natives/locals and the Company troops in the middle ground of the dialectical relationship between the 'interior' and the 'frontier' as attributes of the landscape as well as those who inhabit it. Whether it is the 'interior' or the 'frontier', the power of the narrative action of the story told about them (in maps, surveys, travelogues, administrative accounts of tours and land settlements) or the landscape aesthetics of remoteness lies in setting 'a legitimate theatre for practical actions' (De Certeau 1984: 125). The Company's expansionist geopolitics and its claim to the territories on the India-Nepal border set up the 'theatre' for its counter-expansionist politics towards the Gurkha rule in Nepal to settle the frontier.

The classification of Gurkhas as a 'martial race'¹⁰ according to British military historians and administrators developed as a discourse on the Gurkha masculinity in the aftermath of the Anglo-Nepalese war (1814-1816). Prior constructions of the Gurkha as 'barbaric' and 'insolent' shifted to them being martial and warlike; this shift marked the 'discovery' of the Gurkhas by the British. Until the war, the British hadn't come in direct contact with them, and the relationship of the Company with the Nepalese kingdom was characterized by a volatile diplomatic equation. The Gurkhas were seen as both formidable opponents and potential allies, and the Company's insistence on recruiting the Gurkhas into its troops to occupy, settle and even expand the India-Nepal frontier only became stronger after the war.

Most studies of martial races and the recruitment of the Gurkhas into the Indian Army have focused on the latter half of the

nineteenth century when the idea appeared in its most recognizable form, especially after the 1857 rebellion (Barua 1995, Caplan 1995, Das Chene 1999). According to such a perspective, it was the part played by a limited battalion at Delhi during the rebellion by the soldiers that established the Gurkhas as being exceedingly brave and loyal and ensured that the British conferred martial race status upon them. However, the attempts of the Company to recruit Gurkhas even before the Anglo-Nepalese war in 1814, as we have noted, suggests that these conceptions of 'martial race' had emerged much earlier. In the history of the characterization of the Gurkhas as a 'martial race' before and certainly after the Anglo-Nepalese war in 1815, and formally institutionalised after 1857, we can chart a history of the changing British impressions of the Gurkha in the middle ground of their interactions.

The campsite and the bridge as the site of the interaction at both the metaphorical and literal middle ground of the landscapes present a question of the 'problem of authority'. By rendering such a landscape *remote*, Fraser and Daniell represent the ambivalence of what must be revealed and what must be concealed. Unlike the landscape paintings of the picturesque views of the colony, especially of the plantation colonial economies (Quilley 2003) that centre the political economy of the plantation, these paintings depict a military-pragmatic or geo-political view of the landscape.¹¹ Unlike the creolized landscapes of the West Indian plantations where the creolized white plantation owner could seemingly aspire to be the 'real' West Indian (Quilley 2003), the remote landscapes of the territory around Fort Jytock are outside the moral geography of the Empire, where neither the landscape nor an identity can be cultivated. Unlike the likeliness of the pastoral and imperial georgic genres in which the creolized landscapes could be reproduced and represented, there is (and ought to be) no correspondence between the frontier/interior and the metropolis. It is, therefore, remote in another sense too – this is neither the picturesque vantage of a hill town retreat nor the sublime

experience of an expedition, it is the ambivalence of remoteness that conceals more than it reveals. Such a landscape can also be distinguished from the experience and representation of American colonization and the Westward expansion of the frontier (Truettner 1991). Because of its crypto-colonial nature, Fort Jytock and its surrounding territory can neither emulate nor represent the geography of moral improvement like the creolized landscape or the 'settled West' does. Rather than the articulation of 'Manifest Destiny' assured in the images of the *West as America* (Truettner 1991), the representation of such ambivalent landscapes like *Fort Jytock* swings between the desire for control and the anxiety of the unknown, which is best represented through the landscape aesthetics of remoteness.¹² The representation of *Fort Jytock*, therefore, continuously contends with the tension of limiting and expanding territory which appears remote, not only in the sense of the rhetoric of distance that the expansion of the Empire into the colonies produces (i.e. the discourse on distance in time and 'civilization') but also the friction of distance (i.e. the distance in terms of physical speed and time), which is evident in most of the landscape paintings of the Indian Himalayas.

In his seminal study on *Communication and Colonialism in Eastern India*, Sinha (2012) suggests that the term 'interior' signified the commercial attributes, politico-administrative purposes and the sociological context (Sinha 2012: 22) of the spaces it enclosed – resource-rich sites that were neither materially nor morally developed. He is equally apt in pointing out that such a mobilization of the term 'interior' only became sharply focused by building upon the gaze of the 'general travellers and sojourning administrators' of the late eighteenth century. The journeys of such travellers and administrators were materially charted out on the same routes and through the same networks as the ones before them, thereby disciplining the gaze of the 'imperial eyes' (Pratt 1992). Therefore, places that could not be reached into or accessed through such a gaze continued to be characterized and conditioned as *remote*.

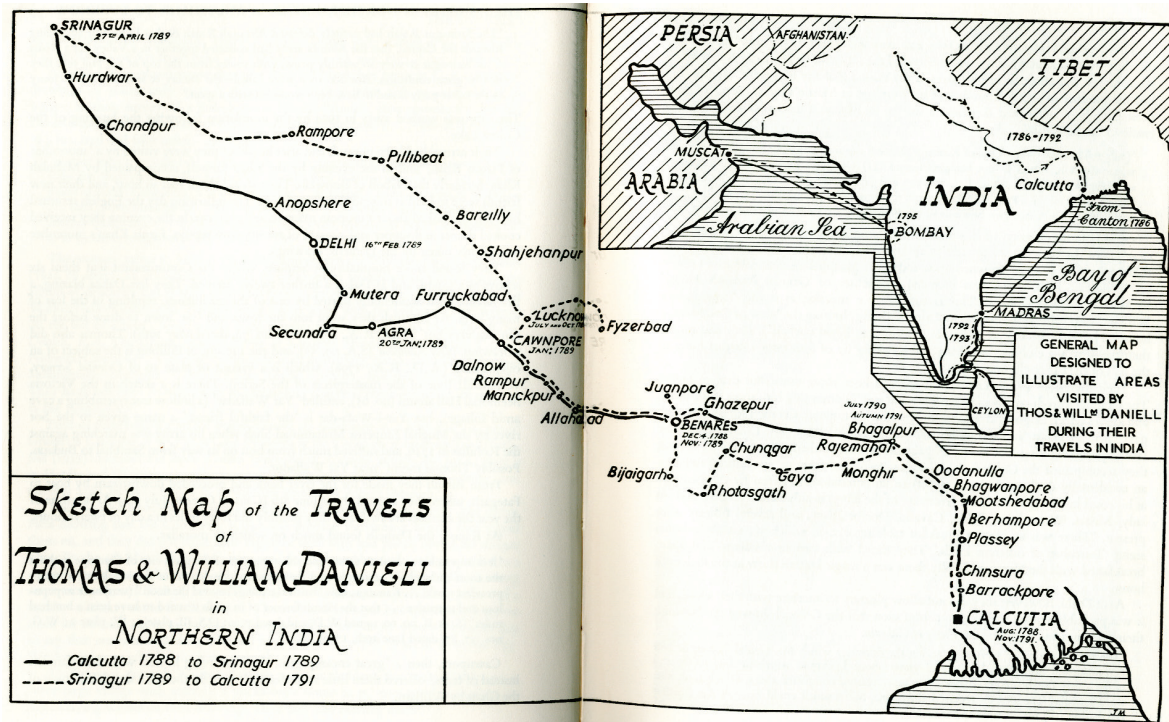


Figure 8: Route map of the travels of Thomas and William Daniell, 1789-1791 (Sutton 1954).

Most of such general travellers and sojourning administrators, including James Fraser and the Daniells arrived in India at the coast to one of the ports. Taking the coastal settlements and presidency capitals as the 'centre', the act of travelling inwards and upwards to the mainland, became an act of going into the 'interiors' (Sinha 2012: 33). Travelling to such interiors also lent credibility to the account of the 'imperial gaze', especially if one presented oneself as the 'first one' to arrive and describe the interior, constructing it to evoke the truth about the place itself. Fraser's admission of 'being recognized as the first European who had *penetrated* to several of the scenes described' (v: emphasis mine) especially 'respecting a tract of country so very little known' (v) provides us with a sense of how Fraser's travel into and upwards the country was framed by him as a travel into the unknown 'interior' of which –

The physical difficulties are so great, and the obstacles to making such results available to the public so numerous, that a very long time will, in all probability, elapse before any description of it can appear, and till then,

even so unsatisfactory an attempt as the present may be received with indulgence. (vii)

Thus, Fraser's account and representation of landscape was not only meant to discipline the native landscape but also the gaze of the subsequent travellers especially if Fraser was to continue being considered as the 'first' European to most of these sites in the North-western Indian Himalayas. However, given the cause of settling the frontiers, which was the primary aim of the troops and administrative officers that Fraser was travelling and touring with, it is interesting to note how the frontier could be rendered as the interior and the interior as the frontier. A characterization of the landscape and of the natives of the landscape as synonymous with each other constitutes an interesting dialectic of characterizing it as far out on the frontier while also attributing to it the kind of insular nature usually associated with the interior.

The aesthetics of remoteness exemplified in the Company landscape paintings which I have described here also become the premise for their incorporation into the

nationalized geography of India, akin to the analysis of Harms et al which describe remoteness as ‘a category subject to transformation by state agendas, majority politics, economic interests, and contested identities’ (2014). In the nationalised geography of India, the Himalayas are evaluated through the remoteness of frontiers and sacrality which are also the grounds for their integration into the nationalized cartography of India – as the guards of the Indian territory and also the source of its Hinduized sacred geography. The landscape aesthetic of remoteness and travel writing makes the distance malleable to the project of postcolonial nationalism such that remote areas become most crucial to the nationalist cartographic imagination.

The landscape aesthetic of remoteness doesn’t translate only as a genre but as a political aesthetic that informs the colonial view of the territory and its transformation as well as the postcolonial making of the nation-state. As Harms et al rightly point out, geographical distance is no longer the mainstay of remoteness in anthropology and ‘may be present in any site of anthropological inquiry’ (2014: 361). However, an aesthetic of remoteness that I have established through the study of Company landscape paintings and travel writing makes the distance malleable to the project of postcolonial nationalism such that remote areas become most crucial to the nationalist cartographic imagination. In her study of the mapping of ‘Mother India’ across media, Ramaswamy (2010) demonstrates how images do not merely represent history but also produce it. The landscape aesthetic of remoteness produced through the colonial paintings of the Himalayan region reifies remoteness and is also a cartographic exercise in the transformation of the landscape. Remoteness is a crucial historical characterization of the region and its landscape which is continually reproduced despite the material transformations in connectivity and mobility. The frontier geography of the Himalayas impart it a significant geopolitical value, yet one that is characterised predominantly by its mountainous terrain and unease of accessibility.

The construction of remoteness therefore entails the contradictions of making something, that can be easily worked into the nationalized territorial imagination, ‘remote’. Remoteness, ironically, also provides the ground for integration into broader geographies.

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Endnotes

1. William Hodges is credited as the earliest landscape painter followed by Francis Swain Ward, Thomas and William Daniell, Samuel Davis, George Chinnery, William Carpenter and Edward Lear among others (Tillotson 1990). James Fraser, while working on his drawings of the Himalayas in 1817 and sending them to London from Calcutta benefited from the friendship and guidance of William Havell, a professional artist who had accompanied Lord Amherst’s embassy to China in 1815-17 as the official draughtsman. Upon his return to England, Havell was employed by his uncle, Rodwell and Martin to engrave the paintings for Fraser’s *Views in the Himala Mountains*, which was published in 1820. James Fraser credited Havell in the preface of his journal without naming him – ‘the author enjoyed the advice of an eminent artist of this country during the period he was engaged in many of the later ones’ (1820a: 3). After Havell’s departure from Calcutta, James

Fraser took lessons from George Chinnery. For further information on James Fraser's time in India, please see Archer and Falk (1989). It is clear that even as an amateur landscape painter, Fraser was embedded in the network of British landscape painters who guided, encouraged and helped publish his work in the early nineteenth century.

2. James B. Fraser also produced another set of paintings on the views of the city of Calcutta published as *Views of Calcutta and its Environs* by Rodwell and Martin in London, 1824-6.

3. Rodwell and Martin, who published Fraser's travel journal advertised the aquatint plates as being uniform with Daniell's *Oriental Scenery* (1795-1808). According to Archer and Falk, 'the publishers can have had little doubt that the journal and its attendant plates of the foothills of the Himalayas which Thomas Daniell had included in part IV of the *Oriental Scenery*, of which no views of the area had hitherto been published' (1989: 49).

4. The Anglo-Gurkha war was fought on many fronts and Major General Martindell led the charge at Jaithak (Jytock). Martindell was appointed in place of General Gillespie after his death in December 1814 at Kalanga. The other fronts of the war were Makwanpur Gadhi, Jitgadh, Hariharpur Gadhi and Nalapani. The war ended with the signing of the Treaty of Sugauli in March 1816 by the arrangement of which the territories of Kumaun, Garhwal and Sikkim were ceded to the Company, and Nepal accepted the appointment of a British Resident in Kathmandu.

5. William and James Fraser set off on a long tour through the lower Himalayas in May 1815 while the siege of Jytock stagnated under General Martindell (Archer and Falk 1989)

6. The reproduction of the picturesque landscape of Indian cities like Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay and Madras and of the architectural heritage of Mughal and Deccan architecture (among others) across such spaces can be achieved since it can be rendered historical for it is shaped by the Company's colonial encounter with these sites in India along with the systems of administration and governance they inherited and built upon. However, the pre-colonial history of

areas like the India-Nepal frontier did not constitute history in the same sense and therefore could be best explained as remote and too remote to be history.

7. See Raab (2015) for the 'aesthetics of detail' in nineteenth century American landscape painting and its significance to the contemporary scientific discourse.

8. For further information on land revenue systems and disputes between the Company and Nepal, please see Michael (2013)

9. Such an account also helps us situate the construction of the Gurkha identity prior to and after the Anglo-Nepalese war (1814-16). The term Gurkha itself has a history of inventive efforts by Prithvi Narayan Shah, the king of Nepal (1762-74) who consolidated the Gurkha identity and rule over Nepal in the late eighteenth century. Prithvi Narayan Shah recruited from various 'hill tribes' to constitute the Gurkha army and assimilated various traditions in their training, disciplining and naming – among them being the influence of the European and Mughal military practices such as drills, colours and firelocks like the English army and a payment in the form of jagir like the Mughal army. Therefore, the Gurkhas that the English naturalized as a 'martial race' were themselves the product of a historical moment in Nepal.

10. The term 'martial race' ostensibly gained currency among the British administrators and military strategists after the 1857 rebellion when large numbers of British trained soldiers rebelled against the Company. Some groups that had remained loyal to the company were classified as 'martial' whereas the rest as non-martial.

11. The distinction between a political-economic view and a military-pragmatic or geo-political view is neither exhaustive nor exclusive. While the aim and efforts of the Company troops to settle the India-Nepal frontier in the run-up to the Anglo-Nepalese war to contain the growing influence of the Russian Empire towards Central Asia may be seen as a geo-political tactic, it was also an important manoeuvre to gain a foothold in Nepal to establish trade prospects into Tibet and further, a political-economic aspect. However, by pointing out these distinctions, this section wants to take into account the differences in the emphasis of the view

and representation of the landscape and not necessarily the modus operandi of mercantile-imperialism itself.

12. For a study of colonialism and landscape paintings, it is extremely important to distinguish between the experience of settler colonialism, non-settler colonialism (or franchise colonialism) and crypto-colonialism, rather than paint them with a broad-brush understanding of colonized landscapes. Such a distinction not only takes into account the historical specificity of the colonial experience in regions as different as North America and Australia (settler colonialism), India and Israel-Palestine (non-settler colonialism) and Nepal and Greece (crypto-colonialism) but also the diversity of their contemporaneous experience informed by such histories. For further discussion, please see Patrick Wolfe (2006).

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