

# Indian Saltpetre and the Political Economy of Bay of Bengal

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## **Abstract**

The dominant course of historical research associated with European intervention in the Bay of Bengal as a catalyst of change. To the Imperialist point of view the coming of European Traders in the shores of the Bay of Bengal denoted drastic changes for the indigenous commodities and communities of the Eastern region of the Indian Subcontinent. With the establishment of the European commerce, the regional commodities became exposed to a larger European market that transformed their economic and commercial prospect. In contrast to this Eurocentric argument, scholars have highlighted the significance of the commodities of the Eastern region that in the first instance lured the European Companies to begin trade in the region. As explored off late, historians trace the transformation of the material entity of commodities produced in the region through their diverse usages in the distant European cities. The development of the material-based enquiry, in recent years made significant impact that furthered the understanding of the historical influence of the trade network associated to the region of Bay of Bengal. Nevertheless, to this robust field of historical pursuit, this study seeks to add the dimension of the impact of the region over the European warfare since the late half of the seventeenth century. Due to the production of saltpeter in the eastern parts of the Subcontinent, the latter half of the seventeenth century witnessed significant increase in European trading establishment in the Bay of Bengal region. As this paper seeks to locate, trade in saltpeter was crucial to both European military development, and the Bay of Bengal trade nexus.

**Key word:** *Bay of Bengal, regional commodities, material, material-based enquiry, saltpeter, military*

Historical studies devoted to Bay of Bengal for a long period, found its importance as in the commercial sphere of Indian Ocean following the Portuguese “unofficial empire”. As the Portuguese traders settled in the eastern peripheries by sixteenth century, it was believed to usher a substantial phase of commerce for the region. To this Eurocentric trajectory, Portuguese empire followed by other European trading companies in the Bay was responsible in the transformation of the region of significant commercial activity within the Indian Ocean trading network. However, little but crucial intervention into this discourse occurred in recent times situating the northern part of Bay of Bengal as a fulcrum of change for the socio-economic, political structures of the region. With a *longue duree* approach, these historical enquiries unpacked substantive evidences that explore Northern Bay of

Bengal as an active zone of commerce since ninth century AD till twentieth century. Within the territories of the Bay of Bengal, specifically highlighting the Northern Bay regions, which have been systematically neglected till now. Within this prevailing structure of discourse the significance of Bay of Bengal, the northern part remains as sphere of influence for the east and the South eastern region. However as this paper, contends that significance of this region was much beyond its geographical boundaries of Eastern part of hemisphere. Going beyond region of Bay of Bengal and South China Sea, this paper sees the Bay to be the fulcrum of military revolution for the western European nation since the early modern period.

Bay of Bengal first made its appearance in western imagination through the works of Ptolemy. Bay where Ganges jutted into the sea marked the final boundaries of India in the east. "Gangeticus Bay as termed by Ptolemy reckoned to be an integral part of Indian Territory beyond which the eastern land situated. These Ptolemaic ideas of the northern Bay region ebbed out gradually with the growth of Roman trade with India. In India the coastal plains of the Southern Bay of Bengal region emerged as chief centres Roman commerce. This trade linkages fostered imagination of the southern part of the Bay of Bengal as they appear frequently in Roman texts from this era. Contemporary Chinese texts reveal similar trends of description of the littoral plane of southern Bay of Bengal. Contemporary Roman and Chinese sources' depiction of the southern Bay of Bengal are in contrast to the conspicuous absence of the northern Bay of Bengal around the Bengal coast. This depiction was the material outcome of the commercial traffic, that involved Rome, India, China in Indian Ocean network throughout fifth century AD (Rennell, 1781). From ninth century AD, Arab texts located Bay of Bengal in their writings giving a glimpse of the contemporary commercial scenario. They reflect similar narrative as their Chinese counterparts, who were involved in similar trade routes. As their treaded path involved around Indian Ocean and the southern region of the Bay of Bengal, where Sri Lanka emerged as interface of the western and eastern commerce, the northern Bay of Bengal region remained largely ignored in the body narrative. Only in the texts of the famous Venetian traveller Marco Polo from fourteenth century, a reference of Bay region and its littoral are available. To this traveller lay the credit of delineating the trade network that crisscrossed the Bay of Bengal and connected China, the Far East with the Eastern parts of India, and its extensive hinterland till the Central Asia. Nevertheless, the significance of the northern Bay region remains obscured from the popular imagination. However, in contrast to the southern part of the Bay of Bengal the Northern Bay region subjected to less historical attention its less economic activity. Historians argue, lack of historical consciousness towards northern Bay region was the dominated due to shift in the commercial transaction which focussed more on the Indian ocean region, and the Southern Bay region due to its role as interface to the Roman Arab and Chinese trade network (Mukherjee, 2017,). By ninth century Sri

Lanka emerged as the nodal point of the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal trade route where both Arabs and Chinese traders coincided. This epistemological similarity of modern historiography to early medieval and medieval texts of Roman and Chinese, Arab world available since ninth century AD this paucity of historical literature, identified by scholars as the result of geographical mutilation. William Van Schendel, sees the laxity as general trend, emerged in the recent epistemology incorporates the area study. Schendel sees it as the geographies of ignorance and been the subject of the mutilation of cartography. He writes;

“anyone interested in finding fairly detailed modern maps showing the region covering Burma, Northeast India, Bangladesh, and neighbouring parts of China knows that these do not exist. This is a region that is always a victim of cartographic surgery. Maps of Southeast Asia may not even include the northern and western parts of Burma, let alone the neighbouring areas of India and Bangladesh. (10) And maps of South Asia not infrequently present Northeast India (and sometimes Bangladesh) as an inconvenient outlier that is relegated to an inset. Odd bits of Tibet and Yunnan may show up in far corners merely because of the need to fill up the rectangular shape of the map” (Schendel, 2002).

Schendel (2002) adds that the four geographical zones such as East Asia, South East Asia, South Asia and Central Asia termed as irrelevant dictated by arbitrary decisions undertaken within conference rooms. In effect, absence in maps translated into in lack of academic pursuit regarding this region. Rila Mukherje (Mukherjee, 2011), sees the lack of systematic enquiry about northern Bay of Bengal region, and its littoral an outcome of academic and cartographic mutilation. In an insightful volume deriving the issue from the Schendel’s viewpoint she argues” the neglect” to echo in academic circle as the result of the antagonistic relationship shared by states with the countries adjacent to the northern Bay of Bengal region and its littoral. Mukherjee by referring Willem Van Schendel , finds the region’s shared, language affinities, religious and cultural similarities as an outcome of the ancient trade networks and ecological conditions presently been relegated to the margins of the ten valleys ( China , Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia ,Thailand ,Burma , India, Bangladesh , Bhutan , Nepal ) a result of political antagonism.

But she furthers this argument by arguing that this trend echoed in academic studies too: “This neglect is also echoed in academic studies of states along the northern Bay of Bengal. While these countries literally fall of the map, due to the frontierization of nation-states, we may see them also as a cross-road” (Mukherjee, 2011).

By reading into the documentation of the trade networks, across the Bay of Bengal from the earliest times with a *longue duree* approach, Mukherjee argues the balance could be redressed. In a recent insightful volume, Mukherjee designated the significance and the necessity of the study of the Northern Bay of Bengal region. The locus of the study extreme eastern , South Asia , that is Bengal and the lands to its north-east that juts into Burma and China identifies to be the most ignored, although,

as argued has been historically influential in determining its distinctive economic, cultural and political identity. These affinities were primarily dictated by the commercial links and the trade networks which crisscrossed the Northern Bay region and its littoral. The significance of the Northern Bay of Bengal was that it connected the extended hinterland in the west from Central Asia with China and South East Asia in the east for centuries. The bay with its waterscape mediated the transition of Central Asian goods in to the markets of China and South East Asia and vice versa. These commercial practices, pointed out to generate a shared identity within the region itself. Furthermore the shared climate of the region, reflected in commercial connections, enabled it to engage in a similar trading practice, with agricultural surpluses and higher population density became conducive to the state formation. Nevertheless the fulcrum of the historical changes as identified by Mukherjee, were the commercial networks of the region that marked a continuum of evolution and not a break (Mukherjee, 2011). The importance of the Northern Bay of Bengal as an interface of historical change with recent historical enquiry enlarged the boundary of historical episteme towards the region. Nevertheless, because of its focus on the region and its centrality in shaping the socio-cultural and political structures of the immediate region, with commerce as the catalyst of change, these studies, remains limited in the scope of enquiry. Since, sixteenth century with the consolidation of the Mughal authority over the North Indian region and later over Bengal by seventeenth century, the latter region became a part of the north Indian hinterland which corresponded with its dissociation with the Bay littoral. The rise of Mughal administration over Bengal identified to be significant in effect to its political integration under the Mughal order, as narrative towards the region grew to perceive it from the North Indian focal point. Thus the extreme eastern lands that comprised the deltaic Bengal with its Bay littoral, in official trajectory viewed in its different regional specificities. This imagination was further triggered by the failure of the Mughal navy's inability to manoeuvre into intricate water passages and the deltaic soil which proved unsupportive of the Mughal cavalry. Thus the deltaic south became part of the distinctive region to be termed as land of unmanageable recalcitrant subjects, as against northern and central Bengal which grew to be associated more with the north Indian Gangetic plain and less as a part of the Gangetic delta plain where it jutted into the sea. Scholars argue the historical role of Bay of Bengal in connecting China to South Asia through innumerable Southeast Asian waterscapes have largely been ignored since Mughal reign over the province (Mukherjee, 2017,). The ascendancy of Mughal order made it a part of mainland north Indian plain by systematically dissociating the imagination from its Bay littoral. Bengal and its littoral due to this administrative change were therefore understood as a distinctive zone dissociated from the its extensive Northern Bay of Bengal region. A perspective as argued dominated even the British administrative narrative. Due to this body of narrative recent studies highlighted the centrality of Bengal and northern Bay of Bengal over the region of East

and Southeast Asia. Furthermore, it also addresses the significant role of Northern Bay region in the Indian Ocean commercial circle. However as, this paper offers a shift from this trajectory, by arguing how Bengal and Bay as a region continued to remain the focus of British mercantile and colonial imagination. As Bengal littoral and the northern Bay region was the only passage to British military resource and the gunpowder artillery empire, the region emerged as central to British imagination from the second half of the seventeenth century and prevailed throughout the colonial period. To English East India Company and Britain Bihar, Bengal and its estuary, and the northern Bay of Bengal region was crucial interface on which depended the fate of the British artillery empire. The gunpowder central to the eighteenth century British military strategy drew its entire resource of saltpetre, from Bihar Bengal region, Bihar was the primary grounds of saltpetre production, from where due to its heavy weightage, the saltpetre were transported through the river passages towards south in the Murshidabad of Bengal. From thence the Saltpetre through their specific boats came down to Calcutta, and was shipped to the England bound vessels. In a series of insightful studies on the Indian saltpetre, scholars have pointed out the centrality of the Bihar and Bengal to British military might (Frey, 2009; Cressy, 2013). Due to this fact, the Bay region stood crucial to English commercial and military strategy (Buchanan, 2016). The English establishment at the mouth of the estuary was designated to control the mouth of Ganges. The martial propensity dictated British to gather knowledge about the Bay and the Gangetic delta, since the navigability of its vessels were largely affected by the dangerous cyclones that frequented the region.

One of the earliest English accounts of Bengal and its Bay comes from the travel accounts of Edward Terry. Although his accounts critiqued for its generalisation, yet his delineation of Bengal, and its gulf (Bay of Bengal,) was perceived in the context of the eastern countries adjacent to the Northern Bay region, till China. In contrast to the contemporary European imagination, that located Bengal and China adjacent territories, he saw the region as part of the Gulf, adjacent to which was Bengal, and various other eastern countries, and China. Describing the region of Bengal and the east, Terry wrote:

“Gor: the chief city so called. It is full of mountaynes. The persilis (Saraswati) which dischargeth it selfe in Ganges, beginnes in is. Pitan; the chiefe city so called. The river Kanda watert it, and falls into Ganges in the confines thereof. Kandua: the chiefe is called Karkatenka. The river Sersily parts it from Pitan. That and Gor are the north east bounds of this great monarchie. Patna (Bihar) the chiefe city so called. The river Ganges bounds it on the west, Sersily on the east. It is very fertile province. Jesual the chiefe citie called Rajapore. It lyeth east of Patna....Udessa the chiefe citie called Jokanat. It is the most remote part east of all this kingdome. Bengala; a most spacious and fruitful kingdome, limited by the gulfes of the same name, wherein the river Ganges, divided in foure great

currents, loseth it selfe”.

Terry’s account remains insightful as it sees the commercial network that connected Central Asia, North India, to the extreme south East Asia, and China in totality, and locates the active participation of Indian merchants in long distance trade both overland and sea.

“And here a great error in our geographers must not escape mee. Who in their globes , and maps make India and China neighbours, when large countries are interposed betwixt them; which great distance will appeare by the long travel of the Indian merchants ,who are usually in their journey and returne more than two years from Agra to the walls of China. The length of those forenamed provinces is, North West to south-east, at the least one thousand courses, every Indian course being two English miles. North and South, the extent thereof is about fouteene hundred miles; the southern most part lying in twentie degrees, and the northernmost in fortie three of north latitude. The breadth of this empire is, north-east and to south-west, about fifteen hundred miles.”

The imagination of Bengal along with the Bay region gives a glimpse of the earliest of the English accounts about region. By the latter half of the seventeenth century, Thomas Bowrey, an interloper who later joined the English East India Company services, by travelling through the sea route gathered information about the existing trading networks within the Bay. His accounts which later published under the name of the “A geographical Account of the Countries Round the Bay of Bengal” was significant in unveiling the variegated commercial transactions criss crossed the northern Bay region. From the coast of Coromandel moved northward towards the Gangetic deltaic coast. A detail description of the extensive littoral addressed the various commercial practices, and involvement of the indigenous merchants along with the European establishment and other specifications that distinguished every segment of the Bay from the other. The segments of his accounts, divided broadly in context to the coasts that surround the Bay of Bengal from south to North towards Bengal and extended till today’s entire the Chinese coast of Achin. Beginning with the Coromandel Coast, the following chapters focused on the coast of Gingalee (Golconda), Orissa, Bengala, Arakan and ends with the Coast of Achin. To Bowrey the Bay of Bengal region extended from the coast of Coromandel to the Coast of Achin represented as singular unit of commercial sphere. However, this commercial unit was intercepted with variegated practices, that distinguished each region, and its trade practices from the other. The importance of this enquiry as Bowrey himself noted was the significance of the Bay of Bengal region to the English Nation. The account gives an insightful glimpse into the contemporary seventeenth century English East India Company establishments at different centres along the Bay region. Furthermore a detailed account of the Bengal underlined the significance of the region to English commerce. Accounts of the region of Bengal coast comprised of an extensive hinterland, that included Dacca, Cuttack, Ganges and Hoogly Rivers, Hoogly town Cossimbazar, and

Pattana. All these centres grew more significant in the following centuries. To Bowrey, mapping of the Northern Bay region therefore perceived the Coastal Bengal, deltaic Bengal, and Northern and central Bengal till the Gangetic Bihar to be a part of the Bay littoral in contrast to the Mughal imagination (Bowrey, 1997). Furthermore Bowrey's account of the Bengala with its variegated littoral and of its difficulties of the navigability in the northern Bay region near the estuary was primarily determined the manoeuvre of the saltpetre boats. The detailed account of the various types of boats used to transport salt petre from Patna to Bengal and later to Calcutta for the London bound vessels comprised a significant proportion in his account. Bowrey writes:

“(Bengala) it is one of the largest and most Potent Kingdoms of Hindostan, Containing a Circuit not less than English miles, blessed with many fine Rivers that Issue out into the Sea or Gulph of Bengala (the term Bay came into vogue latter, as the term Gulph was suppressed and replaced by the English connotation of the region as Bay), vizt. Between Point Palmeris (the Exterme thereof) and the Arackan Shore, the whole Extent of the bay beinge about 300 English miles Over, Some of which are navigable both for great and Small Ships, together with many Other conveniences, this Kingdome is now become most famous and Flourishinge. First for the great River of Ganges, and the many large and faire arms thereof, Upon the banks of which are seated many faire villages, delicate Groves and Fruitful lands, affordinge great plenty of sugars, Cottons, Lacca, honey, beeswax, butter, Oyles, Rice, Gramme, with many Other beneficiall Commodities to satisfye this and many Other Kingdoms. Many both great and small ships, both English, Dutch and Portugalls doe annually resort to lade and transport Sundry Commodities hence, and great Commerce goeth on into most parts of accompt in India, Persia, Arabia, China and South Seas” (Bowrey, 1997)

Bengal, as summed up by Bowrey, was the land crisscrossed by the Ganges and several other rivers. It comprised of an extended zone, in which were Orissa, Patna, and the eastern lands of Dacca and the coast and its proximity to the sea.

“Some 20 leagues from the Sea, and Soe upwards this country is blessed with many faire Villages and Market towns, fine green banks, and delicate groves, with store of brave fish ponds, good store of Venison and wilde fowle” (Bowrey, 1997).

To Bowrey, the imagination of Bengal with its vast hinterland was dictated by the commercial output of the region and its proximity to the sea, which made Europe-bound ships navigable throughout the year. Furthermore, the fluvial passages described in detail by Bowrey was to justify the variegated littoral plain of Bihar and Bengal utilised by the English Company and other European companies, left a detailed account of the various types of boats used to transport saltpetre to the coast of Bengal. Salt petre by the second half of the seventeenth century grew to be chief commodity for English trade along with the Calicoes and silk from the coast of Bengal. Patna was the centre of saltpetre procurement,

from which it was loaded on boats for Cossimbazar and from thence to Calcutta. Due to its weight, salt petre was necessarily transported through the river and not overland due to which the knowledge about the navigability of the Bihar and Bengal riverine network was essential to the East India Company. The description of Patna as part of Bengal coast therefore in Bowrey's imagination was dominated by the various river ways that made salt petre navigable and procurable by the English Company. Furthermore, the use of various boats in respect to the saltpetre transit through riverways essentially dictated the trail that contextualised the Geographical narrative of the Bay. The material world of the northern Bay region associated to the English commerce at one point become essentially dictated by the description of the transportation of salt petre through Bengal.

"The English East India Company have a factory in Pattana, adjoining to the cite, whence we have all (or the most part) of the Saltpetre Sent yearly for England...The Dutch have a Factory here also, for procuring of Saltpeter, but lived with little freedom or Enjoyment of any worldly pleasures here dareing not to presume to enter any of the Gates of the Citee without leave from Some of the great Officers. All the Saltpeter is Sent hence to Hugly in great flatt bottomed Vessels, of an excidinge strength, which are called *Patellas*.;each of them will bringe downe four, five, six thousands Bengalla mounds (the saltpetre mounds)" (Bowrey, 1997).

Several other kind of country boats that operated within these eastern littoral were further mentioned by Bowrey like the *Purgoo* which the English and the Dutch used to carry goods into the roads on board English and Dutch Ships. The Boora, a very floaty light boat was used carry saltpetre and other goods from Hooghly downwards. Bowrey described the Patella as very flat and burdensome that came down from with saltpetre and other goods (Bowrey, 1997). The observations might be considered an effective understanding of the riverine significance in saltpetre trading which is also an extension of Bernier's observation.

"Bengalle is also the principal emporium of saltpetre a prodigious quantity is importaed from Patna. It is carried down the Ganges with great facility, and the Dutch and the English send large cargoes to many part of the Indies, and to Europe"

Thomas Bowrey found that the only commodities of the kingdom that were yearly sent for England was saltpetre, of which great quantities were sent to England and Holland. The official English Company records echo similar trajectory in saltpetre interlinkages with the riverine ecosystem of northern Bay of Bengal. The "Bay" as an English establishment was constituted of the entire northern Bay of Bengal, with its extensive hinterland of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. The region's immense significance to English commerce can be understood from the Company correspondences dating back to the latter half of seventeenth century that stated about its substantial involvement in salt petre trade with other investments. Large vessels specifically designed for the "Bay and its coast"

were sent from England that were able to navigate and transit these Bengal commodities readily to England. In a letter dated (5<sup>th</sup> January 1680) to the Chief Factor of the Bay Job Charnock, the superiors in England directed him to prepare to send salt petre and other commodities as soon as the ships arrive in the Bay.

“This we have ordered to be sent to you by Express as as our ships shall arrive in your Bay and to desire you forthwith if this find you at Pattana to latter order with those you shall succeed as Chief and your Councill to provide and send down to Hughly in due time the quantity of Petre which we have ordered for this years shipping (which is a 1000 tons ) as wee suppose hath been already ordered to you from August and Councill at the Fort into whom we gave our orders for this purpose some months past overland which wee hope came to this hands” (Miscelleaneous Branch, Letter from Court, 1680-1681, National Archives India, 5 Jan 1680)

This letter also revealed that in order to navigate and ease the process of shipment in the Bay, specially designed three deck ships were sent by the English Company .

“But in regard wee do send two of our five three deck ships designed for your coast and Bay this yeare directly for the Bay ...” (Miscelleaneous Branch, Letter from Court, 1680-1681, National Archives India , 5 Jan 1680)

A century later, the English correspondence, showed concern over establishment of harbour in the Bay to enhance the control and secure the newly established British state and commerce over the region. Scholars like G. J. Bryant, in an insightful work, outlined a systematic military strategy of the English East India Company to emerge in the latter half of the eighteenth century primarily concerned about the security of its commercial investments and the territories acquired in the vast regions of Bengal and Bihar. To this, as Bryant has underlined, the security and control of the Bay was of primary significance. A contemporary English East India Company correspondence emphasised Bryant’s thesis of the centrality of northern Bay region to English military strategy post 1757. The navigability of the Bay for English ships especially in time of war was the chief criterion that dictated British strategy throughout the latter half of the eighteenth century. The salt petre laden ships were of primary concern in times of war that to be secured from the hostile forces, which in this case was the French, who too operated in this region and procured saltpetre (Jha, 2013). Even after 1758, as the English acquired rights of monopoly over Bihar saltpetre, the security of saltpetre laden ships dictated military concerns of the English Company in the Bay. The enhancement of warships to secure the Bay was central to the British strategy during this period. As in a series of letters exchanged between the Governor General of Bengal in 1785 and his factors explicitly mentioned, the formation of a new harbour was mandatory to secure British state, and commerce in the Bay region. In a letter written to Benjamin Lacan, who conceived the idea of a new harbour in order to control the passage of Ganges

estuary to strengthen security of English state in the Bay, The Major General Archibold Campbell wrote:

Sir,

I am much obliged to you for the Papers and Plans for establishing a New Harbour in the Bay of Bengal, which I have pursued with great Satisfaction.

The more I consider the general state of Public Affairs at home and at abroad, and the Advantages which the nation will derive from a Harbour , so well situated for docking and refitting the King's Ships , as well as those of the East India Company, the more I am convinced of the utility of such a Plan at this juncture; as by that means ,the very serious difficulties experienced during the course of the last War, in affording early Protection to the Company's Possessions on the side of the Peninsula on that side of the Peninsula , will be completely and happily removed.

The great Labour and Exence you have so long zealously undertaken, for purpose of collecting every necessary information, which could tend to promote a Work of National Importance, does you infinite honour; and gives you, in my opinion, the highest claim to particular Encouragement and Support.

I am, with great regard,

(signed)

SIR,

Your most obedient, and most humble servant

ARCH<sup>d</sup> CAMPBELL

Major General

By the end of nineteenth century, a series of manuals about the Cyclonic prone climate of the northern Bay of Bengal region underscored the dominating prevalence of the Bay, deltaic Bengal and its littoral to the Colonial state. These manuals were directives published by the British authority to enlighten the British shipmen about the ecology of the northern Bay region and about its dangerous cyclone prone climate. By then with a systematic enquiry about the region, an epistemology of information was constructed that enabled the British administration to control and secure the Bay. The centrality of the northern Bay of Bengal, Bengal with its extensive hinterland, as this paper has tried to posit, was implicit to the materialisation of state formation. To the English East India Company, and later, to the British state, the northern Bay of Bengal was crucial to their Imperial strategy of state making, upon which stood the entire Eastern provinces of the colonial regime. As the historical development of the British dominance over the Subcontinent enunciates, the accession of British control over the northern Bay region enabled it to control the entire Bay of Bengal littoral. In contrast

to their predecessor, whose inability to manoeuvre in the Bay and the eastern deltaic plane of Bengal, to the British imperial imagination the control over this region was at the core of Imperial state formation. As the procurement of saltpetre was only accessible through these riverine passages, and exported through the Bay, the security of the region was a prime concern. Furthermore, beyond its immediate region, the northern Bay of Bengal remained to be centrally significant to British military revolution. With the acquisition of economic and territorial control since 1760, the British Company state was engaged in regulating and enhancing the means of communication. The impulse to maximize the revenue and to prevent “illegal trade” practices was at the core of the administrative strategy. Gradually by the nineteenth century, the introduction of the steamships that plied over the Ganges, and Railways, administrative concern and opening of the interiors for the global market became possible. This development viewed by scholars, was disguised under the “civilising mission” apparently, posited by the Colonial state as the beginning of the “Modern era”. The passage of commodities like saltpetre became easier with the introduction of the steam ships and the railways that allowed the British state to control further Eastern littoral (Sinha, 2012; Sen, December 1994). According to historian Daniel Headrick, due to steam ships the British military expedition and its consequent control over Burma was succeeded. The control over the northern Bay of Bengal, along with increasing navigability of the Bay littoral enhanced with the introduction of the technologies like, steamships and railways (Headrick, 1981). As the mobility of goods like saltpetre enhanced due to steamships and railways, the control over the Bay became further significant as the nautical manuals of the nineteenth century grew. The consolidation of British power over the northern Bay region, as this paper seeks to argue, was not only crucial but its influence extended the immediate boundaries of the territories. As the steamships and railways enhanced the navigability of the saltpetre boats from Bay to England, it furthered the military resource of the British state.

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