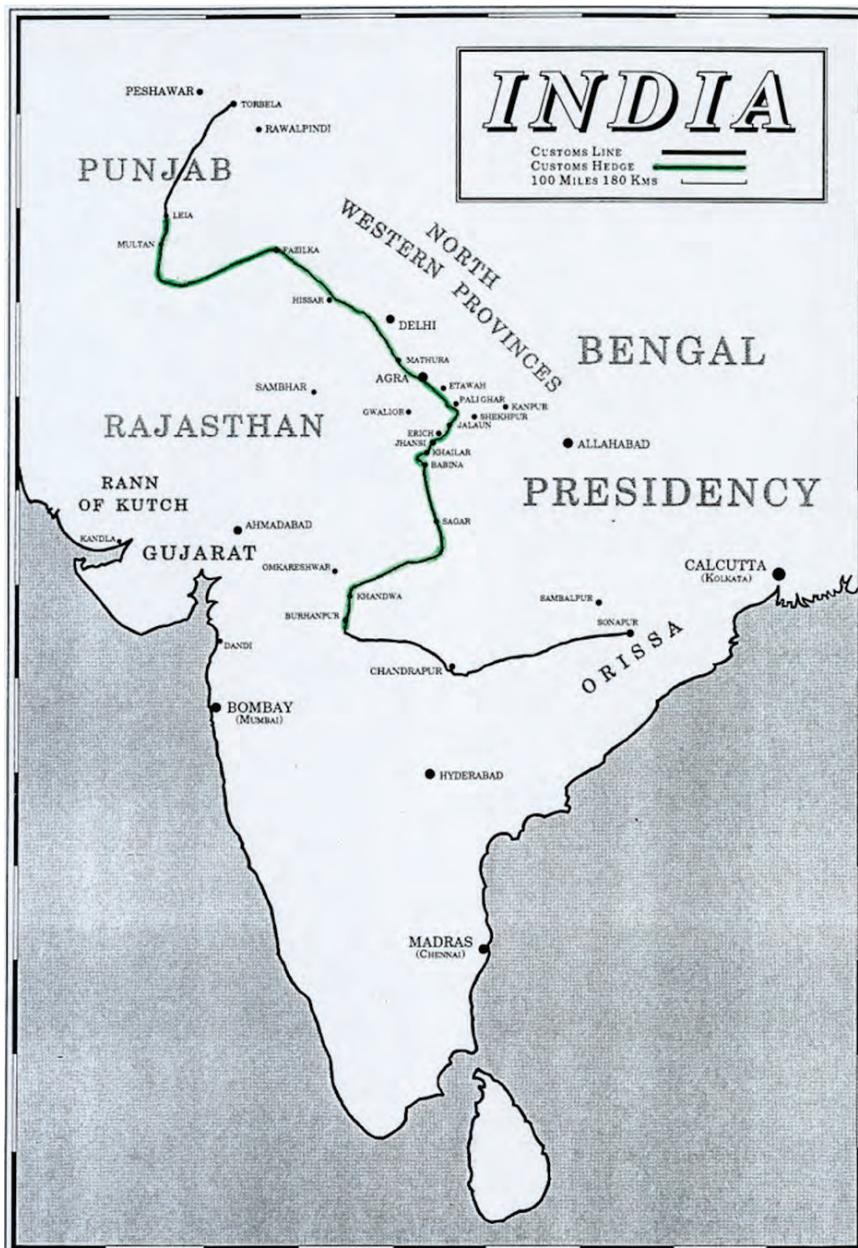


The Great Hedge of India

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In 1995, I purchased a copy of *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official* by Sir William Sleeman (Sleeman, 1844) in a second-hand bookshop. This book was first published in 1844, but the copy that I bought was from an edition of 1893 that had been edited by Vincent Arthur Smith, an officer in the India Civil Service. It had numerous explanatory footnotes. Sleeman's text had a brief reference to a customs post at Horal in central India. This was a surprise to me as I had not known that there were any inland customs barriers in British India. Fortunately, Smith had added a footnote with a quotation from a book by Sir John and Richard Strachey, *The Finances and Public Works of India, 1869-1881* (John and Strachey, 1882):

To secure the levy of a duty on salt [...] there grew up gradually a monstrous system, to which it would be almost impossible to find a parallel in any tolerably civilised country. A Customs Line was established which stretched across the whole of India, which in 1869 extended from the Indus to the Mahanadi in Madras, a distance of 2 300 miles [3 700 km]; and it was guarded by nearly 12 000 men [...]. It would have stretched from London to Constantinople [...] It consisted principally on an immense impenetrable Hedge of thorny trees and bushes.

The Stracheys' book cited a report by the Commissioner for Inland Customs for 1869-1870.

To my surprise, when I checked the two standard histories of India published by the Oxford and Cambridge University presses, there was no mention of this barrier, nor in other histories that I consulted. I managed, however, to locate the printed report for 1869-1870, and for several other years, in the collections transferred to the British Library from the old India Office. (It seems that there are no copies in India.)

The Inland Customs Line was established in 1823 to enforce a very high tax on salt levied in the eastern third of British India, an area of 500 000 square miles (1 295 000 sq km) in which there is very little natural salt. It was designed to prevent smuggling from the rest of India, where many places have salt. There was also a small tax on sugar coming in the reverse direction. Originally it was merely a line of customs posts guarding roads and rivers. Eventually the portion that ran from the River Indus almost to the eastern ocean was made into a thorn Hedge. Ideally this was 12 feet (3.7 m) high and 14 feet (4.3 m) thick at the base. Much of the Hedge was planted on an embankment. There were also cuttings to take it through hills. In 1879 the salt tax was equalised across India and the Customs Line abandoned. The reports described the gradual consolidation of the Hedge, its realignments as the British acquired more territory, and its routes. There was a small map too.

As it happened, I was scheduled to visit India in 1996 to visit friends in a small village that was situated close to the line of the old Hedge. I thought that I could get them to show me its remnants. The village would have been about 20 miles (32 km) inside the area enclosed by the Hedge. Its inhabitants would have been starved of cheap salt and been forced to pay a salt tax equivalent to about two month's income.

To my astonishment no one had heard of the Hedge. I questioned the older inhabitants without success. Moreover, when I hired a vehicle to explore nearby areas on which the Hedge would have stood there was no sign of any remnants. This was not so surprising as everywhere was cultivated. However, no one in those places had any knowledge or memories of the great Hedge. Since many of those I interviewed were much older than me, and my own grandfather had told me of things he had seen in years prior to the abandonment of the Hedge, a Hedge which would have scarred the landscape for some years afterwards, I was mystified.

Back in Britain, I searched for more accurate maps so as to fix the exact location of the Hedge. Such maps proved elusive until I found a set of maps of Agra District in the Royal Geographical Society. On these, one inch to the mile maps, dated 1879, there was a line of trees clearly labelled as the customs line. I went back to India in 1997 and tramped

the fields of Agra. Flood irrigation had levelled the landscape and nothing remained. Hereditary landowners and farmers knew nothing of the Hedge.

Returning to Britain, I looked at various maps (mostly low-scale) that I found in British libraries, I began to realise that the Hedge, which had often been the boundary between Princely States and British India, was now a road. The government had used the land acquired for the Hedge for road-building, and thus obliterated any remains.

When I returned to India in 1998, I started to look at places where for some reason the modern road did not follow the old state boundary. Using a Global Positioning System (GPS) I walked the old boundaries in these areas, but without success. However, by chance in one of these places, I met an old monk who knew of what he called “the old line”. He showed me a line of widely spaced tamarind trees that ran across the fields. They ran very close to where I had calculated the Hedge would have run and I had read that tamarind trees had been planted to give shade to patrolling customs officers. There was no sign, however, of any of the barrier’s thorn trees. Nevertheless, I was fairly confident that I had found some sign of the customs line.

I had a small-scale map that showed the customs line as running between the rivers Yamuna and Chambal, close to where they meet. This, I reasoned, might be a good place to look. I went to a nearby town and met an old man who knew of what he called the “Parmait Lain”, although he had no idea of what its function was. This description, which alluded to the customs permit that was needed to cross the line, I had come across in an old map lettered in Hindi and Urdu. However, he told me, the very road we were standing on was built on top of it some years ago.

Nevertheless, I decided to walk along the bank of the River Chambal to where I had calculated that the line diverged from the new road and crossed the river. At this spot there was a small village called Pali Ghar. There I found a retired college principal, Mr Chauvanji, who assured me that I was indeed in the right place. He took me to the edge of the village where, on top of a substantial embankment, a line of thorn trees wended its way north. We walked along the embankment until, after a few hundred yards (metres), it came to a deep cutting that took the line through some crumbling hills. Beyond the hills, it once again ran along an embankment before coming to a halt as it merged with a new road. I was confident that I had found a surviving stretch of the great Hedge. Mr Chauvanji reinforced my confidence by telling me of how, when he was a child, old men had reminisced. They had told of the high price of salt, of smugglers, and of how customs officers had shouted messages from mouth to mouth along the line for many miles.

My GPS reading at Pali Ghar was 26° 32.2’ N, 79° 09.2’ E. If this reading is put into Google Earth, the embankment of the Hedge is clearly visible – but only if you already know it is there.

I published my finding in *The Great Hedge of India* (Moxham, 2001). It received wide publicity both in the press and on air. I fully expected people to come forward to tell me that they knew all about the Hedge and had written about it years before, but no. Indeed many thought the book was a hoax. It may be that the huge amount of coverage given to Gandhi’s famous campaign against the later small tax on salt had obscured any memory of the earlier much larger tax and its Hedge. I appealed for anyone who knew of a photograph to contact me, but nothing happened.

The one interesting communication I received was from Richard Hingley, a Roman archaeologist, who cited a passage about the Hedge from *Essays* (Pelham, 1911). Haverfield likened the Hedge to barriers built across Germany by the Romans in the second century. Interestingly, the wooden stakes of one of these barriers were found near Gunzenhausen in 1894. Haverfield, who had excellent connections in India, also tried to find a photograph of the Indian Hedge but failed.

In 2013, I went to Pakistan hoping to see if anything remained of that part of the Hedge which is now situated in that country. I looked at some of the western section, coming from the Indus, but the landscape had been levelled for flood irrigation and there was nothing to be seen. No one I spoke to knew of the Hedge. The eastern portion, which ran to the border with modern India, was controlled by the Taliban. I did not visit.

Why the Hedge disappeared from memory is rather difficult to fathom. The emphasis on Gandhi's campaign was probably one factor, as was the obliteration of remnants by roads. There would appear to be no copies of the detailed colonial annual reports in either India or Pakistan, and the copies in the British Library are poorly catalogued and have yet to be digitalised, all of which would make research by scholars difficult. The peasants, who would have been most affected by the high tax and the obstruction of the barrier, were mostly illiterate and would have left no written record. Nevertheless, it is surprising that more folk-memory has not survived.

References

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