

Abstract

What happens when a state absorbs a historically stateless, tribal society, and what are the consequences and mechanisms of such a process? This paper uses a spatial regression discontinuity design to study the long-run effects of state exposure in a region in northeast India. At the turn of the 19th century the British Empire in the eastern front of India drew an imperial border that divided a tribal people into administered versus un-administered regions. I find that regions falling within the former British administrative border have higher years of schooling, higher rates of literacy, and more wealth today. Villages in the formerly administered regions also have better public goods/services and a smaller agricultural share in the labor force. Using census data I am also able to study time varying effects of this historical state exposure—gaps in literacy rates are very persistent with little signs of convergence even 70 years after independence in 1947. In uncovering deeper channels that are potentially driving these results, I find evidence of the emergence of pro-social traits: those formerly under the British state identify more strongly with non-kin members, reflecting an expansion of the in-group. This paper thus contributes to our understanding of the immediate changes that occur in a society transitioning from tribe to state.