

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Empire, sociality, and political economy in colonial Bengal

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Abstract

How to conceptualize the broad dissemination of economic concepts in colonial South Asia? This article uses an essay by a mid-nineteenth-century Bengali, Peary Chand Mitra, as a point of departure to approach this problem in South Asian historiography. In the first part, the essay locates the conditions of possibility for Mitra's political-economic analysis of Bengal's agrarian social order within an imperial and commercial space of extended interdependencies. The aim is not to explain the specificity of Mitra's politics so much as to highlight his recourse to political-economic concepts to ground his analysis. In the second part, the essay suggests that the grounding of political economy's colonial histories within histories of imperial space needs to be supplemented by closer attention to new normative impulses and aspirations emerging directly from agrarian society in the region. This second emphasis provides better grounds for grasping the depth and durability of political economy's reach into political and ethical claims across social space in the Subcontinent in the twentieth century. It thus broaches the necessity of subaltern histories of political economy.

Key words: Bengal; capitalism; empire; political economy; property

How to think about the history of economic thought in South Asia? The question should weigh heavily on those of us who grapple with the histories of colonial and postcolonial societies, where political economy was commonly identified as the product of a specifically European scientific development. Broadly speaking, there have been two answers to this question in the historiography. On the one hand, whether understood as a foreign import or a development of the colonial situation itself, political economy has been characterized in nominalist terms as a technology of colonial power, legitimizing European rule over the non-European colonized, helping to render subject populations fixed, knowable, and governable, and underwriting the maintenance and development of the fiscal and political infrastructures of the colonial state and metropolitan economies.¹ On the other hand, in contrast to this particularizing and historicizing approach, historians invoke economic concepts – often without a great deal of epistemological anxiety – to explain dimensions of collective life and social relations in colonial and postcolonial South Asia, on the usually implicit understanding that those concepts can be used to make sense of universal aspects of human behavior.² This universalism has been implicit to the marginalist premises of most twentieth-century economics (including the economics of

¹Thus Ranajit Guha and Sudipta Sen analyzed the political economy of the East India Company in terms of a bourgeois-colonial assault on the moral economy of Bengal: Guha 1996 [1963]; Sen 1998. Dipesh Chakrabarty has emphasized the irreducible parochialism of economic abstractions as artifacts of the coloniality of epistemic modernity: Chakrabarty 2000, especially chapter 2 and 3. Jon Wilson, Rachel Sturman, Rahul Govind, and Upal Chakrabarti have explored the primacy of the political in colonial histories of political economy: Wilson 2008; Sturman 2012; Govind 2011; Chakrabarti 2020.

²The deployment of rational choice analysis against the anthropological inclinations of the Subalternists in the work of Vivek Chibber arguably represents the most explicit and trenchant defense of this kind of position. See Chibber 2013.

twentieth-century Indian nationalists), and by extension to a great deal of economic history.³ It also represents a fundamental assumption for any attempt to discover an Indian history of economics in the long *durée*, insofar as such a history must assume the universality of the problem-spaces that economic discourse inhabits, even if it grasps the historical particularity of “economic analysis.”⁴

This paper is neither a research article nor a review essay. Rather, I sketch an approach that I believe moves beyond both the alternatives just sketched, by seeking to rethink the history of the emergence of the social sciences in colonial Bengal from a radically different set of conceptual and interpretive pre-suppositions. If, as Bill Sewell suggests, the impulse to social-scientific inquiry lies in our response to the “mysteriousness” that characterizes “the ultimate ground of our being” – a response provoked by the opacity of the social structures that constitute “the interdependence of human relations” – then the history of economic thought represents an intellectual response to the peculiar forms of social opacity that economic concepts claim to grasp.⁵ In that case, the history of economic thought in South Asia becomes an inquiry into the conditions under which it made sense to “think economically” about the forms and practices of collective life. Against the epistemological uncertainty resulting from the critique of colonial knowledge, such an approach must recognize the seriousness of the intellectual endeavor that economic thought embodies, and whose concepts (I believe) have become indispensable to the understanding of social interdependence in colonial and postcolonial South Asia. But against the dogmatically ahistorical assumptions of economic universalism, it must also take seriously the historicity of the economic concepts that represent the medium of a social-scientific project whose epistemic coherence only began to crystallize in the eighteenth century. The problem of the emergence of political economy in colonial South Asia thus becomes a question not only of political and intellectual history, but also of social history – specifically, the question of how the problem of self-reflection and self-knowledge came to find in economic concepts an appropriate medium of inquiry.

The development of political economy was bound up in the history of the emergence of commerce as a key dimension of interstate competition starting in the sixteenth and seventeenth century; but it was in the eighteenth century that the conceptual repertoire developed to make sense of the relationship between commerce and the state became a basis for rethinking the nature of social interdependence more generally.⁶ The historicization of the social sciences as instruments of domination has most often turned on a critique of social-scientific abstraction as intrinsically bound to the operation of modern power. But the mode of abstraction that has been the object of critique in (post-)colonial studies is overwhelmingly taxonomic in nature; that is to say, an abstraction that is in essence a form of generalization, a conceptual abstraction away from the more fluid forms of interaction and intimacy that characterize lived experience, the product of a reduction of the number of qualities that characterize empirical reality to arrive at more capacious categories that are also correlatively less accurate and less flexible. Power enters into this process in determining the sets that are to be formed out of such generalizations (e.g., “castes,” “Muslims”), an analysis based on the contention that the construction of such abstractions by the colonial state produces both epistemological and practical effects that serve to render a population governable. But when applied to social interdependence in general, economic concepts represent a mode of abstraction that is fundamentally different from these taxonomic forms. The abstractions of political economy are not primarily generalizations, but rather real abstractions, abstractions that refer to forms of human relationship that are themselves abstract and opaque in nature. These abstractions, while themselves necessarily “conceptual” in nature, nonetheless do not turn on a “thinning” of the empirical in quite the same sense. Categories like “value” or “capital” name structured and structuring forms of relationship that turn on radically abstract practices of interdependence. The object of economic abstraction is thus itself already abstract. This is surely what Adam Smith was already intuiting when he argued early in the *Wealth of Nations* that commercial

³Hodgson 2001. For a discussion of the Indian case specifically, see Karak 2020.

⁴Dasgupta 1993, pp. 6–7.

⁵Sewell 2005, p. 352.

⁶Sartori 2016; Hont 2005; Hundert 1994.

society was not based on personal relations of benevolence, but rather was the unintended consequence of the pursuit of individual interests in an ever-increasingly complex division of labor that evacuated relationships of interdependence of any personal or direct content. In the Marxian tradition, this Smithian insight has been elaborated into an account that hitches the historical emergence and development of economic thought to the emergence and development of capitalism as a historical form of life in which labor primarily functions as a means to acquire the goods of others.⁷ From that perspective, the elaboration of political-economic abstraction was object-driven; that is, as Theodore Adorno put it, conceptual abstraction was already “implicit in society in its objective form” before it “came into being in the head of a sociological theoretician.”⁸

The history of economic abstraction raises fundamental questions about the degree to which the domain of social relations in the age of capital can be adequately characterized in the ethnographic or phenomenological terms of the richness and fluidity of social life. By the same token, economic abstraction poses profound questions about the historical conditions of possibility for the emergent plausibility and epistemic vigor of political economy in the South Asian context, and ultimately within the vernacular political and social imaginations of South Asians themselves. If political economy has emerged into epistemic significance in different places at different points in time, then it might well serve as an index of a much broader set of practical transformations in the constitution of collective life. Read symptomatically, the history of political economy might perhaps serve as a bellwether of the emergence of new problems in the conceptualization and practice of collective life in South Asia. In that case, the interpretive problem is not primarily to understand what particular forms of political economy were embraced, nor to identify the social or political positions of those who advanced some specific set of arguments. It is rather to understand the circumstances under which political economy as such assumed importance as an epistemic framework for the analysis of collective life and for the voicing of political arguments. What follows makes no claim to resolve such enormous problems. Only further research can offer concrete answers. This essay is merely exploratory in nature, in the hope that other researchers will carry the discussion forward.

The political economy of empire

I begin with a brief reading of a text by Peary Chand Mitra (1814–83), a prominent mid-nineteenth-century Bengali man of letters and businessman. Mitra was a central figure in the Young Bengal group formed around Henry Derozio at Calcutta’s Hindu College, as well as a prominent early representative of a Bengali discourse of political economy. The problem that presented itself starkly to Bengali literati of his generation when they contemplated their place within the emergent colonial economy of the mid-nineteenth century was this: The Indian soil produced a multitude of commercially significant products that colonial writers increasingly reveled in itemizing. It was also home to a vast supply of labor to work it. Yet India’s prodigious combination of the powers of labor and land seemed to result only in disappointing levels of prosperity in India.

“In the fertile districts of Lower Bengal, so bountifully intersected by noble rivers,” Peary Chand Mitra wrote in the *Calcutta Review* in 1846, “there is to be found a community leading a life such as to call forth sympathy and commiseration.” The community in question was that of the “Bengal Ryot,” the lowest link in the chain of revenue obligations that channeled a share of the value of the agricultural product, via a hierarchy of rent receivers, into the East India Company’s treasury. The Bengal ryot “lives by the sweat of his brow,” embracing pursuits that are “primeval” in their universal importance. In a country where “wealth... consists mainly of its agricultural resources,” it is the ryot “who clears and fertilizes the land... It is he who supplies the necessaries of life – infuses activity and vigor into commerce, and keeps up the vitality of the whole country.” Yet this humble community of

⁷For a more general statement of the broadly Marxian approach endorsed here, see Sartori 2013; and see also Sartori 2020b.

⁸Adorno 2000, pp. 31–32.

producers presents itself to the interested inquirer as “an ignorant, degraded, and oppressed race” in desperate need of “greater consideration and protection.”⁹

This plight, Mitra argued, stemmed from a historical diremption between the rights of labor and the norms of governance. Under ancient Hindu rule, the right of property had remained in the hands of those who first cleared and cultivated the land, in keeping with the unambiguously universal mandate of Lockean natural law. The sovereign demanded tax rather than rent, and assigned the duties of its collection to intermediaries holding revenue estates.¹⁰ This accommodation between private right and public need was continued under Muslim regimes, who may have been “bigoted” and “intolerant,” but nonetheless “respected (at least in theory) private property.”¹¹ It was only with the ascension of the East India Company, he argued, that the novel doctrine of the state’s universal proprietorship over the lands had been established. It was the East India Company that had transformed zamindars, who had previously combined their official functions as revenue collectors on behalf of the sovereign with participation in a paternalistic moral economy, into absolute proprietors of a revenue estate they had previously held in the state’s interest in the soil’s product. The dispossession of the vast mass of ryots was compounded by their expulsion from any protections whatsoever against the arbitrary demands of this new “landed aristocracy,” who overstepped the boundaries between legitimate rental demands and a rackrent that depleted the capital stock of their tenants.¹² The result was a conflict between the natural rights of labor and the norms upon which the sovereign power staked its authority over the land – that is, the doctrine of universal proprietorship that was “an exotic in this country,” introduced by British colonial rule.¹³ The result had been both the erosion of zamindari benevolence, and a system of endemic poverty in a region whose fertility had always blessed labor with bountiful rewards. If zamindars wished to be loved by their tenants, they would need to protect them from excessive demands so as to unleash them from their dependence on exploitative moneylenders, and allow them to accumulate the capital upon which future agricultural improvement (and in turn, the zamindar’s own long-term prosperity as a landlord) necessarily depended. It was English education that would impart them this new capacity of self-interested benevolence.¹⁴

Was Mitra’s essay an early instance of nationalist political economy? Probably not. He could be a ferocious critic of the Company state and its abuses, but the standpoint of that criticism was always a higher and more equitable realization of the imperial relation. Mitra was bound to British rule both by his commercial interests and by the social prestige of his education.¹⁵ His argument did rest on the primordial wealth-producing powers of the land, pointing forward to the autarkic imagination of Congress nationalism. Yet it also rested on a conception of a system of interdependencies in which the “happiness of one man is so linked with that of another, that the reciprocation of good is the most distinct and positive intention of the Lord of the Universe.”¹⁶ This providential interlinking of happiness within the realm of economic sociality traveled along paths defined by “noble rivers” and their “tributary streams and rivulets,” which served as “links of communication” for a “bustle of traffic” that, while reaching far up into northern and eastern India, ultimately flowed into the Bay of Bengal and from there on to a wider world of maritime commerce.¹⁷ The standpoint of Mitra’s critique of zamindari was thus premised on the normalized fit between the agrarian producer and the networks of imperial integration. Agrarian Bengal had become visible as a space of impoverished pathology precisely by its location within this skein of imperial and international relationships and their promise of an expanded space of providential interdependence. If these connections had

⁹Mitra 1846.

¹⁰Mitra, 1846 307, 316.

¹¹Mitra, 1846 310.

¹²Mitra, 1846 316–17.

¹³Mitra, 1846 316.

¹⁴Mitra, 1846 350–52.

¹⁵Sarkar 2019.

¹⁶Mitra, 1846 351.

¹⁷Mitra, 1846 305.

failed to produce a reciprocity of good, then it was the result of the distortive effects of the monopoly powers of the East India Company state and the petty despotisms (“A Zemindari is in miniature a kingdom”¹⁸) that were the consequences of its institutional innovations. Mitra’s aim was to bring the imperial-cum-commercial and regional-cum-agrarian into a relation of rational mutual articulation by restoring the proper relation between political authority and economic sociality. This was his project of political economy, and it was a project that was profoundly rooted in the institutional and commercial space of empire. It pointed not to the dismantling of imperial connection for the realization of its aspirations, but to the realization of ideals of mutual exchange through the institutional vehicle of the imperial connection.

Mitra was obviously not innovating a political economy for agrarian India *ex nihilo*. He was intervening in a much broader field of already existing debates about the place of Indian producers within the political economy of the British Empire. By the 1840s, these were debates that had long ranged beyond the enduringly pressing concerns over securing political order, regulating markets, and maintaining and growing the Company’s fiscal capacities, to encompass the decline of textile exports, an expanding export market for agricultural products, an expanding import market for British textiles, and the actual and potential role of British capital in commercial farming and agricultural improvement. The East India Company had been a lightning rod for debates about English commercial policy and state financing since the seventeenth-century. Its importation of inexpensive and high-quality Indian manufactures had provided an important provocation to the development of both commercial policy and technical innovation in Europe.¹⁹ It had served successively as a lynchpin to the fiscal strategies of Stuart centralization, the financial networks of Whig oligarchy, and the turn to coercive extraction after the Seven Years War.²⁰ India had thus been central to debates about the purposes and propriety of British imperial expansion, about the legitimacy of competing articulations among commerce, finance, and political power, and thus ultimately about the very form of the British state on both its metropolitan and imperial scales.

It is thus unsurprising that India was a long-established and pervasive theme in the developing discourse of political economy.²¹ Adam Smith was building on a long history of English political argument when he placed the expropriation of the Company’s commercial monopoly, and its assumption of sovereign functions in India, at the core of his defense of the natural system of liberty. Conversely, political economy would assume a crucial place in British policy making, especially in the wake of the East India Company’s accession to power in a region where extensive early-modern dynamics of commercialization were what had drawn European merchants in the first place.²² The best ways to capitalize on the commercial possibilities opened up by Company rule were fiercely debated from the 1760s; James Stuart advised the Company directly on the problem of Bengal’s coinage scarcity in 1772; Philip Francis sketched a physiocratic scheme for a “restoration” of Bengal’s landed gentry through a “permanent settlement” of land revenues.²³ The surge of free-trade attacks on the Company monopoly in the context of the charter renewal of 1813 brought political-economic discourse into even greater prominence as a framework for conceptualizing India’s possible futures within the empire. Free traders imagined the intensified commercial integration of India into circuits of imperial commerce through the dismantling of the Company’s privileges, the diversification of agricultural production oriented to imperial markets, the growing demand for British manufactures, and even the emancipation of British manufacturing from its dependence on American slavery.²⁴

¹⁸Mitra, 1846 352.

¹⁹Parthasarathi 2011.

²⁰Brenner 2003; Pincus 2009, ch. 12; Vaughn 2019.

²¹Barber 1975.

²²On the dynamism of the eighteenth century in South Asia generally, see Perlin 1983, as well as the essays in Alavi 2001, and Marshall 2003; and on commercialization in Bengal in particular, see especially Datta 2000 and Mukherjee 2011.

²³Leonard 2014; Travers 2009, ch. 6; Guha, 1996 [1963]; Sen, 1998.

²⁴There is a vast pamphlet literature clustered around the charter renewals of 1813 and 1833. See for one early example: [Anonymous] 1812, esp. 26–27; and for a key example of British abolitionist arguments about the place of India in the

To think about Bengal in the language of political economy was thus implicitly to embed it within the sprawling skein of imperial institutional and commercial networks; while to condemn the terms of East India Company rule in the language of political economy was to demand a transformation in Bengal's place within that skein rather than to imagine an exit from it.

The prosperity of families like Mittra's was to a great extent the product of participation in the colonial land, revenue, and commercial markets of the early colonial period; and their leading voices were located in and around Calcutta, not only the political capital of British India but also its most important commercial entrepot east of the Cape of Good Hope. Mittra was himself directly involved in the city's import/export business. It is hardly surprising then that he should have turned to political economy when he sought to address colonial authorities on issues of policy or law. But beyond this, English-educated Bengalis like Mittra were also well positioned to recognize and embrace the normative possibilities implicit in the forms of interdependence that political economy analyzed. As I argued at greater length elsewhere, early nineteenth-century Bengali liberalism is a key case in point, with its embrace of the logic of commodity exchange as a standpoint for the critique of both Hindu religious practices and the institutions of colonial rule.²⁵ Rammohan Roy was among the first and most prominent figures to articulate relatively sophisticated political-economic arguments concerning both the Company's commercial monopoly and the relations between zamindars and tenants – and he developed these arguments in close collaboration with James Silk Buckingham, the radical publisher of the *Calcutta Journal*, with whom he shared a much broader vision of the relationship between Indian reform and the larger cause of the “liberal international.”²⁶ Seen from this perspective, it was as the occupant of a node in imperial space that Mittra was able to analyze agrarian Bengal as a problem of political economy, rather than as the colonial subject of a political regime or as an intellectual rooted in a directly regional intellectual, social, or economic history.

Seen from this general perspective, it is clearly a mistake to dismiss Mittra for his failure to live up to the norm of a “national bourgeoisie” rooted in its command over capitalist production, precisely because Mittra's economic thought is deeply alien to the spatiality of nationhood, even when it speaks on behalf of Britain's Indian subjects. To narrate the history of economic argument in early nineteenth-century India is to trace its embeddedness within a larger constellation of imperial and economic connections, and thus to locate it in imperial (rather than regional or national) space. Obviously, by the end of the nineteenth century, an explicitly nationalist political economy would emerge in South Asia, including in Bengal. But even the nationalist ambition to align the space of the realization of value with the space of its production – the project, that is, of *Swadeshi* – was itself a response to the decomposition of an earlier liberal political economy in the face of emergent contradictions of an imperial state operating under the constraints of capitalist reproduction, rather than the expression of some enduringly autonomous regional development.²⁷

Economy and society

The result of an approach that emphasizes the embeddedness of colonial discourses of political economy within imperial space is a history that tends to focus on the kinds of elite and/or mobile actors who were self-consciously situated at the intersection of regional realities on the one hand and the far-flung sinews of British imperial space on the other. Nationalist political economy sought to bring capital circuits into alignment with India's value-producing capacities through the political agency of a national state (however conceived). But a skeptic might well wonder: to whom did India's product appear as value? That is, where the great Congress political economists might have

struggle against Lancashire's dependence on American cotton, see Thompson and Robert 1836. See also generally Barber, 1975; Ambirajan 1978; and for the broader context of a vision of British free trade hegemony, Semmel 1970, ch. 6.

²⁵Cf. Sartori 2008, chapter 3.

²⁶Bayly 2007.

²⁷Goswami 2004; Sartori 2008.

looked at agrarian producers as producers of quantities of value, did the producers themselves imagine their product or their laboring activity in these same terms? Is this another example of the “rough translation” of complex life worlds into social scientific categories that Dipesh Chakrabarty has written about?²⁸ Recognizing that both nationalist political economy and the imperial political economy out of whose crisis it was born were forms of knowledge closely bound to the practices of imperial spatiality allows us to track the development of the main currents of economic discourse in India. But it tells us very little about the relationship that political economy might have had, as a form of knowledge, to agrarian producers. Perhaps producers inhabited forms of life that remained subordinated to capital only through the externality of capital’s coercive mechanisms. In that case, shouldn’t we revert to the conclusion that political economy is just another imposition of colonial power, with no real grasp of the forms of life that agrarian producers inhabited? The nationalist argument that the producers of wealth never enjoyed the wealth they produced required an explanation of what underlay this apparently paradoxical state of affairs. Political economy was a way of framing an answer to that question, and it pointed to the structures of coercion that underpinned the regime of extraction and asymmetrical exchange. But the actual agrarian producer remains a kind of cipher in such an account – a figure that is oppressed and exploited by the kinds of practices that political economy names and analyzes, but nonetheless who stands beyond the epistemic limit of that naming and analysis. For the producer, political economy could only have been the name of a system of practices that oppressed them. In an older Marxist idiom, this would have been termed a condition of “semi-feudalism.”²⁹

When political economists confronted this limit themselves, they were often inclined to affirm it as a marker of difference. By insisting that “Indian political economy” had to grasp the peculiar ethical constitution of Indian collective life, nationalists proceeded enthusiastically in the footsteps of Henry Maine and John Stuart Mill to explore the degree to which political economy (at least as received from Europe) was not a universal science, but rather one more narrowly fitted to a particular form of society.³⁰ On the one hand, political economists continued to operate on the understanding that there were objective discrete quantities properly termed “rent,” “profit,” and “wages” that constituted the aggregate product, even if the empirical revenues ostensibly distributed as “rent,” “profit,” and “wages,” and the mechanisms that governed their distribution, varied across space and time in both quantity and principle from those underlying objective principles. On the other hand, to the extent that the relationship between the form of knowledge and the form of society that it took as its object was grasped self-consciously by political economists in the later nineteenth century, it seemed to mark a sociological boundary to political economy’s relevance in the subcontinent. The variation between observable distributive practice and underlying quantities thus became a central concern. These limitations represent a potential point of departure into a history of political economy in India that goes beyond the more narrowly circumscribed institutional spaces of empire to reach into the history of sociality.

Let us return to Mitra for a moment. At one level, the core of his argument was classically framed in the political idiom of radicalism, even if his own politics were anything but radical: the core of his critique was focused on the negative effects on the mass of producers of a monopolistic concentration of political authority.³¹ In order to consolidate the regularity of the colonial state’s revenues, even at the expense of due process and natural right, property had been first usurped by the colonial state, then delegated to unvirtuous landlords, and then finally eviscerated by interloping moneylenders.³² In this framework, the capacity of agrarian households to produce wealth was constrained by the ability of extra-economic actors to exploit and dominate their economic activity. But what was the form of

²⁸Chakrabarty 2000, 17, 20.

²⁹See Patnaik 1991. For a persuasive critique of the “semi-feudalism” framework, see Banaji 1977, pp. 1375–1404.

³⁰See Dasgupta 1993, 112–19, and Sartori 2008, chs. 4 and 5. Cf. Maine 1871, esp. lecture 6; Mill 1920, book 2, ch. 4. On the incoherence of the project of Indian Political Economy and its consequent trajectories in the twentieth century, see Karak 2020.

³¹When I say “radicalism” here, I have in mind the kind of politics discussed in Sewell 1994; Jones 1983, pp. 90–178.

³²Mitra, 1846 341.

this economic activity? Minimally, we might say that it was the quintessentially “economic” unit, the household (*oikia*) itself, that formed the core of this vision. But this would suggest a very minimalistic conception of the “economic” object of political economy, which would then be left as an epistemological project of interpreting (both empirically and normatively) the nature of the interface between autarkic households and political authority.

Yet as Mitra proceeded to elaborate the features of agrarian misery in Bengal, he suggested that, despite his own initial identification of the ryot as the one “who supplies the necessities of life” through the cultivation of the land, the ryot householder, the *grihasta*, was often to be distinguished from the actual cultivator of the soil, the *chasi*. The former, generally of higher caste, “let their lands to husbandmen, and receive a certain rent or a portion of the produce, or hire laborers to cultivate them, confining themselves to mere direction and supervision,” while the latter, generally of lower caste, “are in all cases the real agriculturists” who “either cultivate for themselves or for others or superintend their own cultivation.”³³ This implied that, beneath the structure of politically-constituted claims over the soil, represented by zamindars and the intermediate lease holders to whom they farmed portions of their revenue estate, there existed in the countryside a system of commercial interdependence that operated as a complex and spontaneous form of sociality, beyond the limits of the colonial imposition of a “rule of property.”³⁴ In that case, the critique of political corruption was also implicitly a defense of society as a system of interdependencies among households.

The fact that Mitra offered no critique of this form of sociality suggests that he considered it to be an element of the larger economic process that had been subjected from without to the distortive effects of the monopolization of state powers. This is confirmed by Mitra’s claim that agrarian immiseration turned on the ability of rent-receivers to charge a rackrent. By engrossing the proper returns on capital, rackrents not only inhibited the accumulation of capital which might otherwise be used to improve agriculture; but it further discouraged such investments in the first place by making improvements into a likely cause for increased rental demands down the line.³⁵ Mitra thus implied that, in the absence of the illegitimate intrusion of political power into the countryside, agrarian society would function through a system of interdependencies that provided the grounds not only for individual needs to be met, but also for the ongoing expansion of the mass of wealth available for distribution. Autarkic households, released from the grip of the permanent settlement, could aspire only to the fuller enjoyment of their own product. In contrast, a commercial society of the kind implied here by Mitra could beneficially participate in the expanded commercial circuits that hitched Bengal’s riverine ecology to Britain and beyond, further spurring both improvement and prosperity. In reality, the existing order generated only a travesty of such sociality: namely, the power of the moneylender, the *mahajan*, over agrarian producers. Yet this was itself the result of an immiseration that had left cultivators “living... from hand to mouth,” without any buffer against misfortune.³⁶ Mitra insisted that spontaneous commercial sociality rested on the recognition of the foundation of property in labor, both as a natural right and as a means to incentivize industriousness and investment in improvements to the soil – albeit without any clear specification of whether that right properly belonged in the hands of the *grihasta* or the *chasi*.³⁷ Beyond this, Mitra had very little to say about agrarian economy other than to damn the “radically wrong basis of the permanent settlement” and its many catastrophic sequelae.³⁸ Yet it was this premise of spontaneous sociality that underwrote the standpoint of his critique; that is, that the protection of producers would open the wellsprings of a general prosperity that would be as beneficial to zamindars and the colonial state as it would be to the ryots themselves.

Seen from Mitra’s stratospheric heights, a political economy of agrarian sociality emerged through the projection of colonial categories whose proper object was to be found in the imperial practices of

³³Mitra, 1846 325

³⁴For his critique of the effects of subinfeudation, see Mitra, 1846 pp. 320–23.

³⁵Mitra, 1846 316, 325, 331.

³⁶Mitra, 1846 327.

³⁷Mitra, 1846 316, 318

³⁸Mitra, 1846 342.

capitalist space-making onto complex agrarian realities that his analysis barely scratched. Yet the story is more complex than that, because the arguments that Mitra was making about spontaneous agrarian sociality found echoes, as I have argued at length elsewhere, in claims emerging directly from rural Bengal.³⁹ Already in the 1840s when Mitra was writing, Bengali cultivators – particularly in association with the popularity of the rigorist Faraizi movement that was influential and widespread in the deltaic regions of eastern Bengal, where a predominantly Muslim peasantry battled landlords and European indigo planters for control over shifting and juridically ambiguous alluvial islands, home to some of the most commercialized agriculture in the region – were challenging the premises of the adage that “*jor jar muluk tar*” (the country belongs to whoever has the power) with the slogan “*langol jar jomi tar*” (the land belongs to the one who ploughs it).⁴⁰ This presaged an enduring link between commercial agriculture and demands for the recognition of a proprietary interest in the soil on the part of the person (or heir of the person) who had cleared, improved, and cultivated the land. The struggle between cultivators and indigo planters, for instance, would intensify in the middle of the nineteenth century. Planters sought to displace the burden of risk associated with indigo cultivation onto cultivators even as they claimed the right to supervise and direct peasants as contracted labor. In response, cultivators renounced their obligations, insisting that the advance contracts that they had entered into were imposed coercively through a mixture of violence and debt peonage. Petitioners from Nadia district (in central Bengal) complained in 1859 that the local planter had “dispossessed them of the greater part of the estates that their forefathers did by their labor, and has driven them off from the abode of their ancestors.”⁴¹ This claim to an independent interest in the soil underpinned a correlative claim that peasant cultivators wanted planters to engage them in free contracts as, in one ryot’s terms, “a mere merchant,” with the plant “paid in cash right down” at full value, rather than as laborers hired and disciplined by planter capital.⁴² Shorn of the complication of tenure hierarchies and the correlative possibilities of coercive rent enhancements, the claim about the property-constituting powers of labor was central to the reframing of the interaction between planter and grower as one between two independent and equal parties. Similar claims were made against zamindars when they attempted to control ryots’ use of land, water, and trees on their holdings, or to enhance rents in response to ryot improvements.

Cultivators did not frame their objections to the terms of their obligations to planters or zamindars by invoking their desire to retain more of their product for autarkic consumption. Rather, their resentment turned on their inability to shift their production to more profitable cash crops like tobacco, dates, peppers, and sugar cane, the production of which would entwine the grower more intensely in commercial interdependencies beyond the mediation of colonial capital. This was the core of an emergent vision of an agrarian model of “independence” whose identification of commerce rather than subsistence as a normative foundation rested on the endorsement of the property-constituting powers of labor. I am not suggesting, to be clear, that the discourse of cultivator independence was in any sense an adequate representation of the complex realities of agrarian society; only that agrarian producers were themselves articulating a vision of agrarian sociality in these terms.

No one will suggest that Bengali cultivators were articulate or sophisticated political economists, so it might seem perverse to look for the history of political economy here. Yet the configuration of property, labor, and commodity production articulated in peasant protests against zamindar rent offensives and European planter coercion in fact already contained *in nuce* the conceptual elements for an emergent political economy of agrarian commercial society. It implied that action upon nature established reciprocal norms governing mutual obligation among people. The normative standpoint of this agrarian politics of independence was a conception of horizontal exchange relations among male

³⁹What follows draws very broadly from Sartori 2014, especially ch. 4.

⁴⁰For a larger perspective on the conflict between these two claims, see Sartori 2020a.

⁴¹Petition from Ram Gopaul Biswas and others, inhabitants of Poragatcha, Thana Hanskhally, Zilla Nuddea, to the Honorable Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, dated August 12, 1859, [Parliament, Great Britain] 1861, vol. 72, p. 139.

⁴²*Report of the Indigo Commission* (1860), Minutes of Evidence, [Parliament, Great Britain] 1861, vol. 72-I, pp. 62–63.

property-owning householders, where the principle of equal exchange was governed by the mutual recognition established by the property-constituting powers of labor. (Such a vision was entirely compatible with intensely vertical norms of authority *within* the household, in relation to women, children, servants, hired laborers, subtenants, and sharecroppers.) Labor was being construed simultaneously as the constitutive principle of property, the principle underlying equal exchange, the means to produce agricultural commodities, and the means to acquire commodities produced by others.⁴³ Where labor both constituted a right to exchange and produced the commodity for exchange, the space within which the classical conception of “value” might emerge was already substantially in place. Where property was constituted by labor, the exchange of commodities represented the exchange of quantities of labor, and it took only the quantification of that labor to arrive at a theory of value as the principle of reciprocal equity in social relation. Labor thus became more than a mediation between life and nature; it became a social mediation that constituted a normative framework of collective interdependence in a commercial society. The unfolding of an agrarian politics in the early twentieth century not only reinforced this constellation of commitments; it also continuously implied the need for the further specifications of its quantitative implications – for instance, to determine the various distributive entitlements to a specific share in the product or degree of control over specific environmental resources among landlords, ryots, subtenants, and sharecroppers. By the time Communist political organizers started bringing Ricardian arguments about the rights of labor to the countryside, producers were already well equipped to understand the basic premises of the kinds of arguments they were making.

Political economy emerged here not out of the reception of a set of arguments already constituted elsewhere – the reception of European political economy in India – but rather as the necessary implication of a constellation of normative commitments that a commercialized peasantry embraced in the course of a series of struggles to realize a transformed vision of agrarian independence. This is not to deny that the actual elaboration of political-economic argument in the agrarian context would be largely drawn from a repertoire of arguments already elaborated by urban, educated Bengalis, British colonial officials, and political economists much farther afield. It is rather to insist that rural actors reached for these arguments in order to elaborate the implications of a set of commitments that they had arrived at through their own experiences of agrarian social relations.

The transformation in the epistemological status of political economy at stake in this argument is profound. The extent to which Mitra was able to inhabit a world of political-economic concepts was bound to his location within a social space defined by the extended interdependencies of the imperial and international circuits within which Calcutta was embedded. One could readily imagine that any agrarian actor petitioning colonial authorities or facing a colonial court would, if they were in a position to do so, speak the language spoken by political authority in order to authorize their claims.⁴⁴ But this represents a strategic use of political economy – that is, a hybridizing adaptation of political-economic concepts as a means to pursue aims (e.g., the intergenerational transmission of patrilineal substance) that were indifferent to the kinds of epistemic claims that political economy was equipped to make. In contrast, the kinds of claims that began to emerge from agrarian Bengal in the mid-nineteenth century were ones that posited political aims (e.g., a vision of propertied independence premised on commercial interdependence) that were internally structured by a rationality that was intrinsically commensurable with the epistemic logic of political economy.⁴⁵ Under these circumstances, political economy assumed an epistemological and normative vitality that, while never separable from the institutional structures of empire, was increasingly bound directly to specific dimensions of social practice in the countryside. From this point onwards, the discourse of political economy would possess a multiscalar complexity that functioned simultaneously at the level of

⁴³On the centrality of new practices of petty commodity consumption in nineteenth-century agrarian Bengal, see Ali 2018.

⁴⁴This is the primary mechanism emphasized by Rachel Sturman, 2012.

⁴⁵It should be clear from this that I am reading subaltern subjectivity in a way that differs fundamentally from the anthropologizing impulse that was pervasive in (though certainly not exhaustive of) the Subaltern Studies project.

agrarian social relations and at the level of the imperial/national complex that Goswami has analyzed. The politics of peasant independence would intersect with the politics of nationalism in complex ways in the twentieth century – but its core concerns were not driven by the framework of national poverty that was central to nationalist political economy. On the contrary, the language of rights that was fundamental to this peasant politics was often in profound tension with the language of sacrifice and hierarchical coordination that was central to nationalist conceptions.⁴⁶

The sociohistorical approach to the history of economic thought in South Asia has unsettled methodological nationalism. Now it must unsettle assumptions about the social spaces and discursive modes within which a history of political economy might be found. A subaltern history of political economy, where it is contemplated at all, might easily limit itself to the discovery that economic concepts have operated as palimpsests, overwriting a perduring subaltern alterity. But it might also try to understand how subaltern actors in particular places and times came to embrace economic concepts as a basis for framing norms and imagining futures. The complexity of that larger history has barely begun to be explored.

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⁴⁶See Sartori 2019.

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