

POLITICAL ECONOMY AND SOCIETY IN INDIA: A Historiographical Survey

In the mid-1990s, there was an important scholarly addition to Indian history, which began with the disclaimer that issues related to nationalism, imperialism and Euro-centric models were not important historiographical concerns [Heitzman 1997]. However, it is an understanding of precisely these analytical and substantive contexts that have provided the independence and critical space to historical scholarship in India. It is therefore relevant to understand the location and agendas that frame historiography and their role in shaping the methodologies and analyses of scholars [Thapar 1975; Mahajan 2000]. Moving beyond the colonialist and nationalist frames, historical studies on India over the past six decades have engaged with an interrogation of the political economy and society across the premodern and modern periods. In this essay, I discuss the historiographical parameters within which such studies have been undertaken, beginning with a focus from the early historic period to contemporary times.

I

A number of scholars had begun researching and writing on aspects of

material life and social change in premodern India since the 1950s, focusing on particular aspects of agrarian history [Kosambi 1956; I. Habib 1963], the nature of social relations [R. S. Sharma 1958; S. N. Hasan 1964], and the growth and transformation of the peasantry [Karashima 1966]. Kosambi and Sharma gave importance to iron technology in the transformation of a pastoral society to an agrarian settled one in the early historic period while Thapar had argued that surpluses could be generated, indeed conceived as not merely economic but social products, only with the transition from lineage-based societies to settled state societies [Thapar 1984]. While there have been some criticisms raised over some of the assumptions in the analysis resting on technological determinants of change, such as the viability of large-scale clearance of forests using axes [N. Ray 1976], there appears to be little doubt that the archaeological culture marked by the Northern Black Polished Ware pottery in the Ganga valley, dated broadly between c. 700–100 BCE, yielded larger settlements than the preceding phase marked by the Painted Grey Ware, suggesting the accumulation of a substantial agrarian surplus that could sustain the newly emergent urban centers [Ray and Chattopadhyaya 2000:196–97]. A recent monograph reiterates the significance of iron technology in engendering transformations in the political economy, and locates the roots of ideological ferment in the sixth century BCE to the dialectics of transformation engendered by technological innovation in north India [Shrimali 2007].

It has been argued that the north Indian centric histories have failed to take cognizance of different chronological and material phases in peninsular India, where the early historical period can hazily be gleaned from the 3rd century BCE, and more clearly from the turn of the century [H. P. Ray 1986; Morrison 1995]. In the context of the Tamil region, a host of studies have focused on the literary evidence, dated between the 3rd century BCE and the 3rd century CE, anthologized as the Sangam corpus [Zvelebil 1973; Narayanan 1988]. It has been argued that despite the presence of iron artefacts in the archaeological record known from megalithic burials, there was no indication that there was any corresponding technological innovation or application that would transform pastoral societies into agrarian ones capable of producing surpluses to sustain more complex stratified societies [Veluthat 1997; Gurukkal 2010]. Discussions on sources [Devadevan 2006; Zvelebil 1973; Ticken 2001] and structural transformations, and the limitations imposed by sources and ecology in the early historical period have dominated the analysis [Gurukkal 1995]. In the context of the Deccan, the archaeological evidence from sites like Adam indicates agrarian intensification and

seasonal cropping although largely it is the megalithic culture that predominates the pre-Satavahana period [Morrison 1995; H. P. Ray 1986]. While questions have been raised about how much credit goes to the polity in the expansion of agriculture, there is attestation in inscriptional records that along with merchants, the state also supported the building of reservoirs and wells [H. P. Ray 1986]. Rice cultivation, which requires intensive labor and plentiful water, is known from a large number of sites, and the presence of other crops such as barley, wheat, and millet suggest the practice of multicropping, in prestate and state societies [Morrison 1995].

Karl Marx had referred to the state as an excrescence of society [Skalnik 1981:341], and consonant with this understanding historians have preferred to analyze the state as rooted to economic and social processes. Most of the historical studies on India irrespective of context have linked the growth of agrarian economies to the rise and consolidation of state power. The study of the state has consequently received significant attention in the early historical Indian context. From the seminal work of R. S. Sharma that attempted to locate the forces of production in the early historic period in north India that led to the growth of early states predicated on limited slave labor and other forms of servitude [R. S. Sharma 1983] to the non-Marxian analysis of the transition from lineage-based society to state in early historic India [Thapar 1984], the evolution of political institutions and the concomitant growth of class society were key elements to understanding the state in early India [D. N. Jha 1971]. A study that has focused on the growth of monarchy in early India sees the *rāja* or king emerging out of the *viś* or lineage group, and needing to negotiate not merely with other *viśpati* but also at the local level with heads of households [K. Roy 1994]. The parallels drawn between the *rāja* and the *grhapati* or householder in the post-Vedic *sūtra* literature were manifold: both were lords of their ritual and social spaces; both ensured production, distribution and reproduction; both were constituted within patrilineal kinship structures. The rituals were seen as legitimizing devices used in the proliferation of the concept of patrilineal kingship as well as patrilineal households [K. Roy 1994:280–82, 294].

For regions outside the Gangetic core, the transformation from prestate to state society is attributed to the Mauryan expansion into peripheral regions such as Deccan and Kalinga [Seneviratne 1981]; however, there have been contestations of the idea of any simplistic separation of “primary” and “secondary” state formations [Gurukkal 1995]. The Satavahanas, who were a small prestate tribal polity [Parasher-Sen

1993], in the first century BCE emerged and grew as a political power establishing a state society. One of the primary arguments in favor of internal processes of change is the wide prevalence of pre-Satavahana coins, ranging spatially from those of the Kurus, with the appellation Mahārāṭhi, in Brahmapuri (Kolhapur) to that of the Simhagoṣṭhis in Bhattiprolu (Andhra), known from the relic casket inscription of the *pramukha* Kuberaka, some of which continue to appear during the Satavahana period as well [Chattopadhyaya 2003]. In the Tamil region, it appears that there were three levels at which political power could be located in the early historical period: that of the *vēntar* or kings, *vēlir* or tribal chiefs of the hilly regions, and *kilār* or local elites [Mahalakshmi 2009]. However, while an incipient state structure, with a class of producers and a class of non-producing elites, is apparent, the lack of institutional means through which resources could be harnessed, redistributed, and channelized for further investment, and the emphasis on war and cattle raids, and the loot and plunder generated therein, saw the accumulated wealth redistributed to the tribal community through prestation and for services rendered [Mahalakshmi 2009].

It has recently been pointed out that despite all the semantic shifts in the meaning of “social history” as a category of analysis, an inquiry in this field would entail the study of the structure of relations within a social formation, with the caveat that the field is too vast to ever be comprehensively studied even in a given context particularly in the Indian subcontinent [Chattopadhyaya 2009]. Inevitably, concerns related to contemporary Indian society provide a clue to the range of themes, beginning from caste and its relation to class, gender, community, tribe, etc. The significance of pastoralism in the earliest extant literary sources is seen from the references to cattle wealth, booty, and pasture lands [Pande 1984:70–75]. However, the mention of specialized crafts and professions, and particularly the presence of agrarian activity by the beginning of the first millennium BCE, reflects the transition from a pastoral society to an agrarian one [Pande 1984; V. Jha 1991]. Even in the earliest text, the *R̥g Veda*, scholars have highlighted the distinction that was being made between the *kṣetra* or agricultural field and the *urvarā* or arable land on the one hand and the *khilya* or waste land, the *gavyūti* or pasture, and *araṇya* or forest on the other [Pande 1984:74]. Can we see the emergence of a distinctive class-based society, premised on the control over the labor of non-kin groups, on the basis of the mention of the category *dāsa*, which has been translated as “slave” by several scholars [V. Jha 1991:3]? References to *karmāra* or smiths, *takṣan* or carpenter, *kulāla* or potter reflect diversification of professions but there is no clear

indication that these were hereditary professions nor of their assignment within any hierarchical order [V. Jha 1991:23–24]. The *dāsa* as a category refers perhaps to those groups who were conquered and performed domestic and other forms of labor within the patriarchal household, and therefore this cannot be understood as denoting a “slave” mode of production [Kosambi 1956:98]. It is from the later Vedic corpus of literature that we clearly see the proliferation of crafts and new specialized occupations coming up. It is also obvious that the division of labor, craft specialization, and surplus production indicated by later Vedic literature found classification within the exploitative structure of *varṇa* and *jāti*. The caste system has been seen as a fallout of the evolving class society of the later Vedic times, which in the period after united the priestly and warrior classes of *brāhmaṇa* and *ṣatriya* to exploit the *vaiśya* peasant and *śūdra* helot [Kosambi 1956:110]. It is in the post-Vedic society that the manifestation of this structure concomitant with the growth of state is known [V. Jha 1991; Jaiswal 2008; U. Chakravarti 2003; K. Roy 1994; V. Jha 1997].

Among the more recent writings on caste, there are two critical works that cannot be ignored. Jaiswal refutes the assertion of “post-modern” and “neo-colonial” writers that the systematization and essentializing of caste and the creation of discrete categories was a product of colonial modernity [Jaiswal 2008]. D. D. Kosambi had argued in the 1950s that the entire history of the Indian subcontinent shows tribal elements being “fused into a general society” [Kosambi 1956]. Jaiswal has interrogated the racial assumption that caste endogamy was a result of the incomplete fusion of tribal elements into caste society. Her proposition is that “caste ideology evolves gradually in consonance with changing material conditions and is not a mental invention unrelated to its material roots.... Caste is not simply a matter of superiority of the pure over the impure but a form of exploitation which evolved in the process of enforcing subjection of women and weaker social groups” [Jaiswal 2008:5]. Chakravati, similarly, while dealing with the same set of sociological interpretations of caste, which seek to “mask” and obfuscate by posing a transhistorical or ahistorical structure to it, argues that the origins of caste has to be closely tied to the emergence of power structures, which sought to exert, maintain, and perpetuate their power through a system of cultural oppression—a “symbolic hegemony,” that was far worse than economic exploitation [U. Chakravarti 2003:6–8]. For Chakravarti and Jaiswal, class and caste are related but not identical in that class represents social stratification on the basis of a mode of production, while caste with its emphasis on endogamy was a means of regulating produc-

tion and reproducing patriarchies [U. Chakravarti 2003:27–30; Jaiswal 2008:5].

The complex process of class formation, social hierarchies, and status claims has been studied through an analysis of Pali texts belonging to the Buddhist tradition [Wagle 1966; U. Chakravarti 1989]. The members of the community, *viś*, were recognized as cultivators (*karṣaka*) in the Vedic literature but the expansion of agriculture, the growth of political structures, and the need for surplus extraction through the imposition of taxes saw the coalescing of class and caste to justify the growing divisions between the producers and the elites [I. Habib 1983]. The consolidation of class interests with the expansion of agrarian society can be seen in the manner in which the householder of the Vedic text metamorphosed into an important personage in post-Vedic times, with the Buddhist texts holding the landed householder or *gahapati* (*gr̥hapati*) in the highest regard. It has been argued that the caste system gave the veneer of acceptability to class difference within tribal society in the Gangetic plains [R. S. Sharma 1958; Kosambi 1956; I. Habib 1983]. What is interesting to note is that with the growth of an affluent landholding class, the ritual and political elites no longer had monopoly over status claims [U. Chakravarti 1989]. Their support to Buddhist institutions indicates their negotiation with social hierarchies as well [Shrimali 2007].

A field that has opened up within the domain of social history is the study of gender, through an interrogation of normative and narrative literature, coins, inscriptions, and visual art [K. Roy 2010; K. K. Shah 2001; Dehejia 1997]; the imposition of gender roles in ritual texts and codes [Jamison 1996; Leslie 1991]; the increasing patriarchal and patrilineal emphasis in the texts codifying rules for householders [Tyagi 2008]; and the range of practices and attitudes related to gender revealed in epic literature [Sh. Shah 1995; Sutherland 1989]. The stress on reproduction of the family and the productive patrilineal, patriarchal household is seen through close readings of texts and contexts [Mahalakshmi 2010].

II

It is primarily in the context of early medieval India that major historiographical debates in relation to the understanding of political economy have occurred. Nationalist narrative histories [Jayaswal 1924; Majumdar 1918; Ghoshal 1929], continuing in the vein of the colonialists [Mill 1817; Smith 1904], categorized Indian history broadly as Hindu, Muslim,

and British. This period was treated largely as the dark ages, and the latter part of it was seen as marking the transition from the ancient to medieval periods, a time when the “Hindu” kingdoms were making a last-ditch effort to preserve their sovereignty vis-à-vis the invading Muslim rulers. The interrogation of inscriptions and other sources and analysis of the increasing references to land grants, agrarian expansion, and rural settlements, particularly in the post-Gupta period, c. 6th–13th centuries CE, led to a radically different understanding of the period [Kosambi 1969; R. S. Sharma 1965]. What were the implications of land grants for an understanding of the nature of rural society and questions of control over the forces of production? The debate has carried on in the decades since with emphasis on quantification of evidence (1970s) and interrogation of categories such as serfdom (1980s) [Sharma and Jha 1974; D. N. Jha 1979; Shrimali 1993]. From the 1980s, the emphasis has been on integrative frameworks, with an emphasis on horizontal spread of rural settlements concomitant with the growth of local polities into supralocal powers, in an apparent bid to move the debate outside the centralization versus fragmentation and feudalization conundrum [Kulke 1982; Chattopadhyaya 1983].

Sharma and others have focused on land grants as indicative of the scale of control over the primary resource in a predominantly agrarian society [R. S. Sharma 1984]. Textual sources indicate that the king was considered the ultimate owner of the land and in this capacity he had the right to parcellize his control over land and the resources he extracted by means of taxes. While there was no indication of the peasant cultivator’s alienation from the means of production, he was not the ultimate beneficiary of the productive process. It is interesting to note that not only were lands granted but increasingly communal agrarian resources were also given away to the donee [R. S. Sharma 1984; V. M. Jha 2008].

There appears to be a consensus that the Gupta period saw forces of change that subsequently led to the growth of two important elements in the economy: the growth of landed intermediaries, and the expansion of agriculture and rural society [Chattopadhyaya 1994]. Related to the first, the presence of a category of titleholders called *sāmanta* was seen as reflecting a decentralized polity, who received their position and privileges from the king and were instrumental in alienating the actual producers from the fruits of their labor [R. S. Sharma 1965; I. Habib 1983; Yadava 1973]. The conceptual significance of the *sāmanta* from someone who was a neighbor [L. Gopal 1965] to a neighboring king in the classical political treatise *Arthaśāstra* [Kosambi 1956] to feudal baron has led scholars to in fact equate feudalism with *sāmantavād* [Chattopadhyaya 1994;

Shrimali 1993].

In the context of the expansion of agriculture, the inscriptional records provide ample evidence of the grant of lands—waste, fallow, and cultivated—to individuals and religious institutions [R. S. Sharma 2001]. The importance of agriculture can be seen in the production of treatises such as the 11th-century CE *Kṛṣi Parāśara*, which details different agricultural processes and throws light on the cropping patterns and crops grown in eastern India at this time [L. Gopal 1965; R. Chakravarti 2008]. Evidence from such texts has been corroborated with epigraphic evidence to show the cultivation of a variety of grains, pulses, oil-seeds, and cash crops, revealing a vibrant agrarian economy [V. M. Jha 2008]. A significant analysis of rural society draws our attention to the changing topography of the agrarian landscape by focusing on inscriptions from north Bengal, south Karnataka, and the Marwar region of Rajasthan, which in turn affected the nature of the village settlement itself [Chattopadhyaya 1990]. While there is no dearth of evidence to show that agriculture was the mainstay of the early medieval economy, the prevalence of agro-based craft production—the *cakrika* or oil press presents one kind of evidence for this, the inscriptional references to corporate trading bodies such as Manigramam and the Nandesis, the development of ports such as Kulottungapattanam and collection of tolls and taxes at these sites, and the flourishing of urban centers, referred to as *naḡaram* and *pattanam* in various sources, indicate a vibrant trading network across the sub-continent, with specific regional patterns as well [Chattopadhyaya 1994; R. Chakravarti 2002, 2008; Abraham 1988; Hall 1980; Champakalakshmi 1996].

It has been argued that rather than move between the perennially oscillating centralizing and decentralizing forces theories, the emphasis on growth of regional formations in the early medieval period, based on the study of records from Orissa, central India, and Rajasthan, indicates the transformation of essentially tribal polities into expanding state societies as lineages moved outside their local bases [Kulke 1982; Chattopadhyaya 1983]. The importance of ideological structures in providing legitimacy to the state is seen in the change of nomenclature of dynasties and cults with a decidedly tribal flavor into Brahmanical ones [Chattopadhyaya 2003]. Contesting the idea of ritual sovereignty [Stein 1980], scholars have stressed the socio-economic and political dimensions of religious institutions, as the state is seen as expanding its resource base by its land grants to temples and *brāhmaṇas* [Karashima 1984; U. Singh 1994; Champakalakshmi 1996; D. N. Jha 1979; Nandi 2000; Veluthat 1993; Stein 1980; Tirumalai 1987; Chakrabarti 2001; Kapur 2002]. The

proponents of the feudal view have focused on the nature of land rights, the growth of the land holding class, and the subordination of the rights of cultivators. On closely scrutinizing the role of the intermediate level of political authority, it has been found that the Chola state for instance attempted to centralize power by drawing local elites belonging to various sub-regions into the power structure at different time periods and using different mechanisms [Subbarayulu 1973; Heitzman 1997]. Trade and urbanization developed around the nuclei of exchange, *nagaram*, in the agrarian regions called the *nāḍu* [Hall 1980], and the state also is shown to have played a prominent role in this by the development of political and religious centers [Champakalakshmi 1996]. However, the most significant input has been in the methodological emphasis on statistical analysis of inscriptions [Karashima 1984; Subbarayulu 1973], which has facilitated the study of the frequency of political titles and revenue terms in Tamil inscriptions [Karashima 1984; Heitzman 1997].

The proliferation of castes is one of the major features of this period as seen from inscriptional and literary sources [R. S. Sharma 1991; Talbot 2001a; Karashima 2001; Chakrabarti 2001]. In the Tamil region, it has been argued that the consolidation of caste identities, although on a different axis of right and left hand denominations, was reflected from the 12th century in the nature of imprecations, an epigraphic literary convention, against particular castes [Karashima 2009]. Class relations evolved in the regional contexts where the agrarian frontiers were expanding [U. Singh 1994; Veluthat 1993; D. N. Jha 2000]. Complex representations of gender relationships appear through a study of inscriptions, literature, and iconography, suggesting greater spaces for royal and other upper-class women [Talbot 2001a; Rangachari 2009; K. Roy 2010], temple women [Sen 1992; Orr 2000], and the reassertion of patriarchies [Mahalakshmi 2000].

III

In a long-term analysis of the characteristics of the Indian peasantry, Irfan Habib has pointed out that rather than look for disruptions with dynastic changes, or simplistically attribute social transformation to the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in the 13th century, we needed to scrutinize literary sources for the descriptions of rural society and particularly the peasant [I. Habib 1983]. Carrying forward the arguments made by scholars studying the early medieval period, who focused on the caste system to understand the position of peasant and artisanal classes,

Habib argues that the 13th century did not see any respite for the subjected castes. He also argued that the relations among different elements of rural society remained the same—the menial castes were subjected in much the same manner to the caste peasantry; the difference lay in the new structure within which these social relations were embedded. The Ghurid rulers brought with them a new system of territorial revenue assignments to military commanders—the *iqta* system during the period of the Delhi Sultanate and the *jagir* in Mughal times [I. Habib 1983]. The *iqta* was understood to be in lieu of salaries, and the *muqti* or assignee did not hold it in perpetuity to be passed on to his heirs [M. Habib and Nizami 1970]. Land revenue or *kharaj* was the main source of income for the state, and the significance of the revenue as a share of the produce and not as rent on land is seen from sources. Land was divided into the state lands—*khalisa*—and the revenue assignments or *iqtas*. It has been argued that in the 13th century land revenue was largely in the form of tribute, and it is only from the time of Alauddin Khalji (1296–1316 CE) that a systematization occurred through proper collection from the Khalisa particularly, which now extended throughout the fertile Doab region [S. Chandra 1997–99]. Realizing the significance of agriculture for the state, a 14th-century ruler is believed to have established a department to extend cultivation and determine cropping patterns. Among the changes introduced, the reduction of the area of wheat under cultivation and the extension of crops such as sugarcane, grapes, and dates is known, although we are also told that these were not successful measures.

Satish Chandra has argued that the Delhi Sultanate has to be understood in terms of the lack of political consolidation of north India and the presence of numerous small kingdoms that lacked “strategic consciousness” [S. Chandra 1997–99]. While some scholars had argued that the caste system may have hampered the mobilizing of sufficient military manpower [M. Habib 1952], Chandra refers to later sources indicating the presence of Jats, Meenas, and the generic *kuvarna* or lower castes in the armies of the local rulers. Some scholars have attributed the establishment of the sultanate to the superior military technology of the Turks [Digby 1971], particularly the use of the crossbow and horses [I. Habib 1983; Jackson 1999]. Satish Chandra, Irfan Habib, and other scholars have focused on the centralizing authority of the state as seen in the adoption of the *iqdadari* system, where the recipient of the grant was dependent totally on the largesse of the sultan. Attention has been drawn to the deliberate evocation of a unified identity of the new elites across the five dynasties of the Delhi Sultanate, where Turk versus non-

Turk symbolized the new relationship between ruler and ruled [S. Kumar 2006]. While some have focused on the pull and push factors that allowed military commanders to negotiate their own political terms in some regions, undermining the authority of the sultan in Delhi [S. Kumar 2007], others have emphasized the institutional measures—the organization of the court, nobility, and army, as well as experiments in the *iqta* system—that reveal the entrenched authority structures [S. Chandra 1996]. Scholars on south India have looked at the processes of integration in the Andhra region during the 11th and 12th centuries under the Kakatiyas, and the sultanate incursions into the region as not affecting the processes of agrarian expansion and regional power consolidation [Talbot 2001a; Wagoner 1999]. The consolidation of political authority across disparate linguistic regions of peninsular India in the Vijayanagara period and the process of feudalization that occurred in the Nayaka period in the 16th century has been understood through the study of inscriptions and literature composed in Sanskrit, Telugu, Kannada, Tamil, and Persian [Karashima 1992, 2002; Talbot 2001a]. Philip B. Wagoner has argued that the system of *nāyakattanam* in medieval south India is modeled on the *iqta* system of the Delhi Sultanate.

The pioneering work of Irfan Habib led to new digests of analysis for medieval Indian history, outside the bracket of Islamic history, popular in colonial, nationalist, and neo-imperialist historiography. The publication of his doctoral thesis on the agrarian system of the Mughal period stemmed from the same impulse that drove Kosambi and Sharma—to bring to the center stage of history writing an understanding of the socio-economic structures and transformations that affected the lives of the mass of ordinary people living in those times [I. Habib 1963]. In this analysis, the highly centralized Mughal state was dependent on revenues from agriculture, and as a result placed a heavy burden of taxation on the peasantry whereby the bulk of the peasantry lived on the barest minimum needed for subsistence. While trade and monetization occurred, it resulted in hoarding rather than redistribution, obstructing the transformation of the structure of production and exchange [Haider 2011]. A critique has been offered by scholars who see the growth of area under cultivation during these times as well as the introduction of new crops such as tobacco, maize, and chilli, and growth of cash crops such as indigo, cotton, and sugarcane to cater to the growing international networks of trade, resulting in the growth of portfolio capitalism [Datta 2000; Subrahmanyam 1990], mercantilist states [Stein 1998], and the proto middle classes of the colonial period [Bayly 1983]. It has been countered that the mercantile activity and rise of institutional support for trade was neither

sudden nor was it dissociated from state control [Chaudhury 1995; I. Habib 1963]. Also, the premise that the putting-out system and development of merchant capital could automatically lead to industrial capital has been rejected [I. Habib 1969].

Reiterating the position that the Mughal state was a highly centralized state, scholars have drawn attention to the nature of centralized bureaucratic structure, the composite nobility with its checks and balances, and the innovative theories of kingship that were established particularly during the time of Akbar [Ali 2001; Moosvi 2005]. In one interpretation, drawing upon the Weberian notion of patrimonial authority as an extension of the personal familial patriarchal power exercised by a leader over a larger social group, it has been argued that the Mughal state was a combination of the premodern patrimonial and early modern bureaucratic state [Blake 1979]. Thus, the text exemplar of the early Mughals, the *Ain-i-Akbari*, is seen as reflecting the ruler and his household at the center of all political and administrative activity. Still more recent scholarship engages with a Foucauldian interrogation of the truth claims of literary sources given the locus standi of the authors within the royal court [Mukhia 2004], and that there is an a priori assumption of the structure of the state which is belied when a processual analysis of political developments is undertaken [Alam and Subrahmanyam 1998]. In a bid to straddle the two poles of interpretation, it has been posited that a middle path of studying the imperial court and local politics engaging with political institutions as “units in action” would allow a view unto how structure and process constituted the Mughal state [F. Hasan 2004]. It has been pointed out by Shireen Moosvi in a rebuttal of these post-modern interpretations that anyone with a cursory awareness of the Persian sources in particular would find it difficult to ignore the extent of control of the Mughal state and its effect on different sections of society [Moosvi 2005].

In relation to the institutions of Jagirdari and Mansabdari, it has been shown that the ranking of nobility within the official hierarchy was dependent on the ability to maintain troopers and collect revenues to maintain them [S. Chandra 1959]. The Jagirdari system depended on the assignee of the *jagir* exacting the income or *hasil*, with a realistic assessment of the revenue or *jama* [S. Chandra 1997–99]. In relation to the Mansabdari system, it has been pointed out that while the system showed a measure of accommodation of different interests—Turani, Irani, Afghan, Shaikhzada, and Rajput, there were attempts to reduce salaries and to optimize the benefits of the system without any corresponding increase in ranks [S. Chandra 1997–99]. While the system of

military ranking or *mansab* was shown to be particular to the Indian context, an innovation of the time of Akbar, it has been posited that despite the similarities of the land revenue assignment or *jagir* with the earlier *iqta* system, the specific modalities of its working reveals its origins in Akbar's time [Ali 2006; Moosvi 2008]. An insightful work on the evolution of the zamindari system has thrown light on the close nexus between the class of landed elites and the state, despite both seeking to appropriate a large share of the produce from the primary producer [S. N. Hasan 1964]. The responsibility of the primary and secondary zamindars in squeezing the peasant until he was barely left with subsistence has been identified as one of the main reasons for the crisis in the Mughal state in the 17th and 18th centuries [I. Habib 1963; S. N. Hasan 1964].

The focus on particular regions such as Maharashtra [Fukazawa 1982; Wagle 1999; Kotani 2002], Bengal [Chaudhury 1995; Eaton 1993], Tamilnadu [Narayana Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam 1992; Karashima 2001], Andhra [Talbot 2001a, 2001b], Punjab [Alam 1986; Grewal 1990; Ch. Singh 1991], Rajasthan [D. Singh 1990], and Gujarat [F. Hasan 2004] have elucidated some of the historiographical arguments related to political economy discussed above.

In addition to the study of the peasantry and the political classes, many studies have focused on caste, class, and other social digits of organization in the medieval period [D. Singh 1990; Wagle 1999; Sahai 2006; Yamazaki 2005]. From the vantage point of gender studies, the study of Mughal domesticity has opened up new insights into the constitution of power relations, where the women were seen as not merely producing heirs but also investing in the future through their reproduction of social norms and rituals of authority [R. Lal 2005]. Studies on individual charismatic rulers such as Akbar have focused on the development of patriarchies in the medieval world, which were essential for the construction of the self-image of the ruler [O'Hanlon 2007]. The analysis of gender within the political economic framework through an understanding of labour, work, and domesticity has widened the scope of both gender history and political history [Moosvi 2008].

IV

The strength of the early nationalist intelligentsia in the late 19th and early twentieth century was that, despite their not being trained as historians in the modern sense, they provided a thorough critique of British colonial policies [B. Chandra 1966]. The sixties, in historiographical

terms, saw scholars revisiting the role of colonization, through a focus on issues of labor, foreign trade, and, most importantly, industry. The imperialist idea that colonialism had in fact helped India develop and that no such thing as deindustrialization of Indian economy had taken place reared its head again [Morris 1963]. The neo-colonial argument and its premises were thoroughly criticized by historians for its justification of contemporary vested interests in the question of development, which again stemmed from a perceived international division of labor between the erstwhile colonial and colonized economies [B. Chandra 1968; Raychaudhury 1968; Matsui 1968]. The digests of Morris's arguments have been resurrected partially in the second volume of Cambridge Economic History [Dh. Kumar 1983], and fully by contemporary scholars [T. Roy 2000; Ferguson 2002]. On the other hand, the choice of fragmentary evidence over aggregates, it has been argued, has led to the neo-colonialist position that the administrative and institutional benefits of colonialism outweighed its political and cultural ramifications [I. Habib 1995; U. Patnaik 2000; Moosvi 2011; A. Mukherjee 2002, 2008; Bagchi 1982, 2006; B. Chandra 2000; Sen 1992; Chatterjee 1992]. In these writings, the emphasis has been on the sustained colonial exploitation and disarticulation of the economy despite the apparent beneficial institutional structures, and on the declining indices of human development [I. Habib 2006; B. Chandra 1992]. Rather than look for the antecedents to colonial economic transformations in the premodern past, the "development of colonialism in tandem with industrial capitalism in Britain may be seen through the control of the economy and society by a foreign capitalist class, and as the integration of the colonized Indian economy and society with world capitalism over two centuries and in successive stages" [B. Chandra 1990]. Further, by inverting the neo-colonial argument on its head, it has been shown how Britain emerged as an empire as a result of colonial exploitation: appropriation of land revenue, seizure of capital as tribute, unequal exchanges between the industrialized economy with high labor productivity and a non-industrialized colonized economy with low productivity, and the new colonial-imperialist strategies through the transfer of "indentured" labor to British colonies [A. Mukherjee 2010]. The debate in its sophisticated form has revolved around whether colonialism could be understood as part of the larger capitalist development or whether it was a specific mode of production [B. Chandra 1981; Banaji 1972].

In an in-depth study of the economic and social parameters within which peasant agriculture was embedded, it has been pointed out that the colonial period saw a depression in agriculture because of the in-

creased impact of commercialization and the nature of structural transformation wrought by the colonial economy [Bose 1986; Chaudhuri 2008; Siddiqi 1973; S. Gopal 1965; Metcalf 1964; Sahoo 2004; Banerjee 1999; M. Mukherjee 2005]. The appropriation of what it understood to be the pre-modern state's economic policies resulted in a radical reformulation by the colonial state in different regions: "The Permanent Settlement of the land revenue in 1793 with the zamindars of Bengal accorded the property right to a class of people whose role in rural society as territorial magnates and tax-farmers had been to collect revenue and remit it to government, not to hold or exploit land as such" [Bose 1986:1]. The new tenancy systems in early colonial south India led to the structural transformation within rural communities, which not merely affected the pattern of land ownership and resulted in a more acute social stratification but also impinged on the size and utilization of communal lands [Yanagisawa 1996]. Such changes have been linked to the changing patterns of human settlement, particularly due to early nineteenth-century colonial policies in Tamilnadu such as the introduction of the raiyatwari settlement [Mizushima 1996].

The early nationalist articulations of the nineteenth century, which presented an economic critique of colonialism for the first time and laid the foundations of the anti-colonial struggle, brought the idea of India being a nation in the making [Batabyal 2007]. The notion of unity in diversity that permeates the Indian political and societal ideal has been shown to be a cornerstone of the nationalist imagination [Mookerjee 1914; De 1996]. The expansion of nationalist agitation along modern and secular lines brought new classes and groups of people into the public sphere [Desai 1948; Menon 2003a; Nanda 2008; Krishan 2005; Krishna 1989]. The Indian National Movement and consequently the Indian Constitution has been seen as the ideational basket having entrenched the modernist notions of equality, justice, developmental pathway, and democracy into its ambit [Chaube 2000; Bhambhri 2008; Austin 1999; Shiva Rao 1966–67]. It is in this context that a phenomenon like communalism, which tried to define preexisting communities within a new definition of monolithic religious identity, was understood to be antithetical to the contemporary historical process of the national community in the making [B. Chandra 1984; Batabyal 2005]. Those who saw nationalism in terms of the imposition of the European modernist project [Nandy 1994; P. Chatterjee 1986] also perceived communalism as a category imposed by the nationalist leadership and later historians over what were essentially popular assertions by local communities [Pandey 1989].

The rise of communal politics since the 1980s with renewed fervor

has brought this historical contestation and contention deeper. Hindu communal mobilization has in fact a deeper connotation for the state and society, as seen in the political realm since the 1980s [A. Mukherjee 2008, 2010]. This has further brought attention to the legacy of India's national movement, where ideas of democracy and secularism appear to have been the key ideas of integration [Bhambhri 2008; Vanaik 1997]. This is also the period when the rapid economic restructuring has brought the issue of equity and justice into the discussion, where the nature of the developmental path to be traversed is being debated. The dependency theorists in the 1960s and 1970s had argued for the non-availability of the developmental path within the global economic structures of inequality [Frank 1969; Cardoso 1979], and therefore a need for global revolution [Wallerstein 1974; Amin 1976]. Conversely, it has been argued that development is not a zero-sum game and there are national pathways that can be seen as alternatives, and that individual developing countries can achieve development by breaking the disarticulating effects of the colonial economy [B. Chandra 2000]. In this sense, the economic rise of China, India, and Brazil has validated such a view. However, the new economic and socio-political realities have brought issues of equity and justice at a time of rapid development [U. Patnaik 2007; Dreze and Sen 2002; Sen 2007].

In this context, the new areas of research such as environmental history have allowed for the opening up of larger debates linked to global utilization and degradation of scarce natural resources such as forests [Gadgil 1993; Guha 1989; Rangarajan 1996; Ch. Singh 1998; Dangwal 2009; Prasad 2003, 2004; Grove 1995], water [D'Souza 2006], and the effects on human life [Pati and Dash 2002; Nag 2002]. Similarly, phenomena like drought and famine, which hitherto were treated as natural occurrences and analyzed primarily within the ambit of pure administrative history, have moved into the analytic domain of politics and human culpability [Batabyal 2005; Srimanjari 2009]. Studies on gender have focused on the opening up of spaces within the public domain [Menon 2003b; Thapar-Björkert 2006], the engagement with newer forms of patriarchy [Sangari and Vaid 1989], making visible violence and subordination through the intersticing of caste and gender norms [Chowdhry 2007], and explorations of sexuality and identity [M. Sinha 1995]. The disarticulation of ideas, politics, and policies at the regional and local level have led to the emergence of identity-based movements and articulations, be it of tribe [Saraswati 1991; S. Sinha 1982; Munda and Mullick 2003], Dalit [Narayan 2006; Pai 2002; Gupta 2004; Ilaiah 1996; Aloysius 1997; Jaffrelot 2003], or others [Nag 2002; Pradhan 1986; U. Patnaik

2007]. The focus has also been moved to larger movements, which cut across caste and other primordial identities, that have tried to innovate and link the local struggles with wider issues of entitlement, sustainability, and democratic forms of governance, so crucial to the early nationalist imaginings [Dwivedi 2006; Baviskar 1995; Mahajan 2008].

* I would like to acknowledge with gratitude Professor Noboru Karashima for suggesting that I undertake this work. Thanks are also due to Mr. Deepak Yadav and Ms. Neha Singh of the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, for their assistance.

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