

*Agrarian Localities: Political economy as local power in early nineteenth-century British India**

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Abstract

This article writes the agrarian history of an obscure locality, Cuttack, in early-nineteenth-century British India. In doing so, instead of exalting the explanatory power of the local, or the particular, it interrogates the category of the ‘local’ itself by demonstrating how it was assembled as the object of agrarian governance in British India through a densely interwoven network of discursive practices. I present this network as various inter-regional practices and debates over agrarian governance in British India and some methodological debates of political economy in contemporary Britain. This article argues that the governmental engagement with locally specific, indigenous forms of interrelationship between landed property and political power in British India can be more productively understood as internal to the transformed vocabulary of contemporary political economy, rather than lying outside it, amid the pragmatism and contingency of governance. Accordingly, it shows how the particularity of agrarian relations in a locality was produced out of a host of reconfigurations, over different moments and sites, of a universal classificatory grid. In the process, I question those histories of British India which, being rooted in a series of hierarchized binary oppositions, like inside–outside, abstract–concrete, or universal–particular, reproduce the rationality of colonial governance.

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Introduction: beyond the inside–outside of agrarian pasts

This article seeks to write the agrarian history of an obscure locality—Cuttack, the nineteenth division of the Bengal Presidency—in early-nineteenth-century British India. In doing so, it does not exalt the analytical power of the local, as the empirical or the particular. I do not argue that the agrarian relations of a locality need to be conceptualized as an empirically specific set of relations which can be understood only from within the peculiarity of their own context. On the contrary, I interrogate the category of the ‘local’ itself. I argue that the nature of the agrarian relations of a locality was not comprehended by colonial governance as being generated by the empirically specific circumstances of that locality. Instead, what was staged as the ‘empirically specific’ was assembled as the general object of agrarian governance through a densely interwoven network of discursive practices during this period in British India. I trace this network through an integrated analytical space, which brings together various inter-regional practices and debates over agrarian governance in British India and some methodological debates in the field of political economy in contemporary Britain. The topography of agrarian relations in any locality during this period, I argue, was, therefore, not *sui generis*, or irreducibly singular, emanating out of its organic, internal character. Rather, it was produced out of complex constellations of categories of knowledge and practices of governance. Accordingly, this article argues that the specific character of agrarian relations in a locality was produced out of a host of reconfigurations, over different moments and different sites, of a classificatory grid. This grid, which I call the ‘local’, described, produced, and governed localities in British India as different ensembles of property and political power.

During the same period, as the last part of the article demonstrates, different ensembles of property and political power in different nations emerged as the object of knowledge of political economy in Britain, through sharp methodological debates over the categories of ‘theory’ and ‘practice’. It was argued in these debates that the twin pillars of political economy, namely the spheres of ‘production’ and ‘distribution’, all over the world, were shaped differently depending upon different national configurations of interrelationships between political power and forms of property in land. This article also demonstrates how *comparison* was mobilized as a powerful discursive tool in the production of the ‘local’, or the ‘empirically specific’, both

in the inter-regional practices of agrarian governance in British India as well as in the debates over the epistemological object of political economy in contemporary Britain.

A great variety of works in South Asian agrarian history use the 'local' as a powerful explanatory category. These works argue that the past, and the present, of agrarian societies in South Asia were inescapably defined by what went on at the level of the small, the specific, or the local. This isolation of the spatial level is also an analytical one. The simultaneous identification of the small as a distinct geographical site and a potent explanatory tool is based on a series of hierarchized categorial binaries. These binaries—between abstract and concrete, universal and particular, theory and empiricism, imperial and local—are the epistemological conditions of possibility for the analytical isolation of the local. Thus, the local is fashioned out of a seamless interweaving of geographical and epistemological metaphors. In these works, it stands for any form of social reality which, by being located at a geographical distance from the centre, seem to be necessarily capable of lying in a space epistemologically distant and different from the universal.

This article admits the analytical power of the local, but refuses to equate the local to a locality. Instead of positing the local as a particular geographical space, or an empirically specific set of conditions which has the power of transforming everything that comes into it from outside, it questions the very binary of inside–outside. It recasts the local as all those empirically specific situations which emerged within a general analytical space through ceaseless transformations of powerful categorial and institutional rationalities. I read the formation of the 'local' here through a reading of the various discontinuous lines that were spun around the analytical space of agrarian governance and political economy. I conceptualize this space following Deleuze's reading of Foucault's *dispositif*. Deleuze notes that the *dispositif* or apparatus is,

a tangle, a multilinear ensemble. It is composed of lines, each having a different nature. And the lines in the apparatus do not surround systems which are homogeneous in their own right, object, subject, language, and so on, but follow directions, trace balances which are always off balance, now drawing together and then distancing themselves from one another.¹

¹ Gilles Deleuze, 'What Is a *Dispositif*?' in Timothy J. Armstrong (ed.), *Michel Foucault, Philosopher* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 159.

I argue that this apparatus can be made visible through these various sites of transformation, where the 'local' was produced in myriad manners, from political economy in Britain to the locality of Cuttack in British India.

Political economic theory and agrarian power in localities have usually been posed as oppositions in the agrarian histories of nineteenth-century British India. Even Eric Stokes—who demonstrates how Ricardian political economy, through its conduit in the form of James Mill, significantly shaped the core of agrarian governance in different localities of British India over the nineteenth century²—revises his argument in his later work, suggesting that while colonial policy cannot be 'reduced entirely to a near-sighted pragmatism'³, 'the last word appeared to lie with *local* society irrespective of *European* intentions and attitudes'.⁴ Many works argue that colonial theory, or European ideas, could not successfully make sense of the specificity of agrarian conditions in Indian society. Ratnalekha Ray, for example, notes that in Bengal, the permanent settlement could not fundamentally change the social structure, because the British failed to understand that it was the local, village-level elites who wielded power in indigenous agrarian society, rather than the big landlords, or the *zemindars*.⁵ This was due to the erroneous application of the physiocratic theory of 'improvement' to a social context which had its own empirically specific character. However, the empirically specific set of conditions marked in these works as being characteristic of agrarian power in Bengal assumes a general

² Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989). As examples of works which have argued, from a variety of perspectives that metropolitan theory influenced colonial governance, see Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal: A Paper on the Idea of Permanent Settlement* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996 [1963]); Robert Travers, *Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India: The British Bengal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Richard Drayton, *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the 'Improvement' of the World* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2005); Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism* (India: Permanent Black, 2010); and Lynn Zastoupil, *John Stuart Mill and India* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

³ Eric Stokes, *The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33, emphasis mine.

⁵ Ratnalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society: 1760–1850* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1979). For a further development of this line of argument in the context of Bengal, see Sirajul Islam, *Bengal Land Tenure: The Origin and Growth of Intermediate Interests in the 19th Century* (Rotterdam: Comparative Asian Studies Programme, 1985), p. 15.

significance when we find studies focusing on agrarian relations in other parts of British India coming to similar conclusions.⁶ The village is erected as a general analytical category in these works, yet explained as an empirically specific one.

Studies highlighting the force of village-level groups do not recognize, because of their uncritical celebration of indigeneity, that the rise of these groups did not necessarily indicate a failure of metropolitan 'theory' to reckon with indigenous 'empirical' reality. Neither did their acceptance imply an overturning of the former by the latter. These 'empirical' conditions were not outside, or opposed to, the governmental rationality. On the contrary, as I argue, they were actively produced as different articulations of a general classificatory grid. This grid, which I call the 'local', was established by a complex network of practices of agrarian governance. These practices construed the village *zemindar* as the authentic proprietor of land in India, and accordingly made sense of empirically specific agrarian relations in different localities in terms of different degrees of deviations from this authentic form of property ownership. In other words, this article argues that the 'empirical' was not outside the 'theoretical'. Rather it can more productively be seen as generated by a different 'theoretical', or a different interpretation of contemporary political economy in Britain.

Agrarian histories upholding such indigenous 'empirical' reality also argue that colonial policy worked within a grammar of expediency and pragmatism, articulating itself as various accommodative reactions to the specificities of agrarian localities. Accordingly, they argue that such contingent policies cannot be read in terms of contemporary political-economic discourse.⁷ What this argument poses as local exigencies or the specific character of an agrarian locality, is demonstrated in this article as constituted by the mobilization of the

⁶ For similar arguments made in the context of the agrarian relations of southern and western India, respectively, see R. E. Frykenberg, 'Village Strength in South India' in R. E. Frykenberg (ed.), *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), pp. 217–26; and Neil Charlesworth, *Peasants and Imperial Rule: Agriculture and Agrarian Society in the Bombay Presidency, 1850–1935* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁷ Thomas R. Metcalf, *Land, Landlords, and the British Raj: Northern India in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 54. Two other classic examples of this perspective are: J. Rosselli, 'Theory and Practice in North India', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 8:2, 1971, pp. 134–63; and Neil Rabinoy, 'System v. Expediency: The Reality of Land Revenue Administration in the Bombay Presidency 1812–1820', *Modern Asian Studies*, 9:4, 1975, pp. 529–46.

category of 'local', both in the domain of agrarian governance and political-economic theory. The last part of this article describes the redefinition of the fundamental categories of contemporary political economy in the language of power. Due to this, 'production' was seen as conditioned by the field of 'distribution', which was, in turn, construed as an ensemble of property and political power, varying across the world. By this epistemological move, I argue, specificity, indigeneity, empiricism, and local power became key conceptual constituents of political economy. They were no longer considered as opposed to, or outside of the universality of political-economic categories.⁸ On the contrary, they became the defining markers of a new kind of universality, of a new programme of totalization. This article narrates the process which made the 'local' internal to the core of political economy. Thus, what Stokes, Ray, and others posit as the clash between theory and empirical reality, I argue, is produced by discursive practices, and, therefore, internal to the apparatus itself.

One of the finer examples of a pragmatist reading of agrarian society can be found in an article written by David Washbrook. Washbrook argues that contradictory articulations of law played a crucial role in the development of India's agrarian society under British rule. While on the one hand the law created provisions for the development of an individualist, market-oriented society, on the other it continued to limit the same sphere by preserving the traditional rights and privileges of communities. He interprets the course of agrarian legislation in the light of this model of the law, as constituted by two-way movements, of acting as both the transformative vector of European theory and the conservative support to indigenous empirical conditions. He argues that in this manner, the early Raj reinforced existing, local, indigenous power relations.⁹ This analysis, as is evident, maintains the theory–empiricism, metropolitan–local binary. It fails to realize that restriction of the landlords' rights was not antithetical to intentions of creating a market-based agrarian society, as the 'tenants', or 'village *zemindars*', whose rights were upheld after the permanent settlement, were imagined as approximating the figure of peasant-

⁸ Andrew Sartori makes a similar argument about the deployment of category of custom in debates over the Bengal Rent Act of 1859. He traces the political economic articulation of custom to a Lockean discourse of property rights. See Andrew Sartori, 'A Liberal Discourse of Custom in Colonial Bengal', *Past and Present*, 212, August 2011, pp. 163–97.

⁹ D. A. Washbrook, 'Law, State and Agrarian Society in Colonial India', *Modern Asian Studies*, 15:3, 1981, p. 664.

proprietors, better suited than big landlords to promote an agrarian capitalism. Neeladri Bhattacharya makes this insightful critique in a review of agrarian histories of colonial India.¹⁰

I add to this by pointing out that the indigenous was in any case internal to political economy. Its supposed *preservation* was, thus, different modes of its *production* by the varied articulations of the 'local', both within practices of agrarian governance and debates of political economy. This article is a critique of all those historiographical positions which reproduce the discursive binary of inside–outside. It argues that the 'local', or the 'empirical' conditions of nations/localities, were posed as hierarchized constellations of property and political power in both the practices of agrarian governance in British India, and in political-economic debates in Britain. It demonstrates how this was crucial for the determination of agrarian relations in the different localities of British India through a variety of regionally interconnected debates and practices. In tracing these movements I keep going out of, and coming back to, the locality of Cuttack in order to show how localities were entangled in complex circuitous networks, which ranged from political-economic debates to quotidian governance.

I have chosen Cuttack, because in the organization of its agrarian relations this obscure locality received a distinct kind of governmental attention. Right from the beginning it was set up as an anomalous zone. In spite of being a part of the Bengal Presidency, a permanent *zemindary* settlement—the framework within which revenue was collected in the greater part of this presidency—was never introduced in Cuttack. During the initial years, settlements spanning brief periods, such as one, three, or five years, were made with *zemindars*. Very soon, changes were introduced in the nature of land settlement in several areas of Cuttack. More significant changes were introduced over the years 1837–45 when an extensive survey and settlement operation was launched in Cuttack, which fixed rents and classified proprietary titles to lands. Most importantly, throughout the first half of the nineteenth century an intense debate went on at various levels of the imperial bureaucracy regarding the distinctiveness of the agrarian conditions of Cuttack. It is in the light of this debate that the Bengal Code—the regulations pertaining primarily to revenue

¹⁰ Neeladri Bhattacharya, 'Colonial State and Agrarian Society' in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Romila Thapar (eds), *Situating Indian History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 134–35.

administration—was perceived as inapplicable to the local conditions of Cuttack.¹¹

The pinnacle of this attention was reached when Cuttack found an exclusive mention in John Stuart Mill's 'Memorandum of the Improvements In the Administration of India During the Last Thirty Years' presented in 1858 to the British parliament. Mill argued that Cuttack represented the best system of settlement, which combined the respective advantages of both *ryotwari* (cultivator-based revenue settlement) and *mahalwari* (revenue settlement based on clusters of villages). It was a territory which, despite being in Bengal, was not governed according to the Bengal Code. Yet, Mill argued that it should serve as the leading model of agrarian governance, and proposed its extension to other recently conquered territories of the Company.¹² Cuttack was simultaneously anomalous and exemplary. This article questions this idea of the exclusivity of Cuttack, and by extension, of other localities in British India, by arguing that the empirically specific/local was produced out of complex discursive practices of knowledge and governance.

A report, a rebellion, and the ordering of difference

The earliest presentation to the British parliament of a comprehensive discussion on governance in British India was made in the 'Fifth Report from the Select Committee of East India Affairs' in 1812. Through a detailed discussion of the operation of the Bengal Code, or the model of governance established in the Bengal Presidency in 1793, the report argued that it was ill-suited to several 'local' conditions. Based on administrative experience from various regions of British India, the report presented evidence of 'local' differences in the forms of land tenures. The evidence emerged from experiences in governance in the old and new areas of the Bengal Presidency and also in the presidency of Fort St George. By demonstrating the unsuitability

¹¹ See N. R. Patnaik (ed.), *Economic History of Orissa* (New Delhi: Indus, 1997); K. M. Patra, *Orissa under the East India Company* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1971); and T. K. Mukhopadhyay, *The Agrarian Society of Orissa: Nineteenth Century* (Kolkata: Progressive Publishers, 2008).

¹² John Stuart Mill, 'Memorandum of the Improvements in the Administration of India During the Last Thirty Years' (1858), in J. M. Robson, M. Moir, and Z. Moir (eds), *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, XXX—Writings on India* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), pp. 127–28.

of the Bengal Code to some of both the old and newly acquired territories of the Company, the report pointed out that significant alterations were made in the revenue administration of these areas. These new arrangements were considered to be more sensitive to 'local' conditions, and consequently, highly successful in effecting improvement in the material conditions of these places.

It was noted in the report that the model of permanent settlement of revenue with *zemindars* established by the Bengal Code faced severe opposition from a number of localities. In all these areas, government officers pointed out, 'local' circumstances did not warrant the settlement of revenue with *zemindars*. Among the old territories of the Company, the *zemindary* settlement was first contradicted in Benares in 1795, as the principal landholders of Benares seemed to differ substantially from the figure of the *zemindar*. Proprietary rights in land in Benares were vested in groups described in the report as 'village zemindars'. The report noted:

The village zemindar of Benares appears to be the mokuddum found in certain parts of Bahar, and the Potal of the Carnatic, both of whom are headmen of villages, who are responsible to the government, for maintaining and promoting the cultivation of the land, and who in the first-mentioned portions of territory possessed the right of disposing of their situations by sale or gift to others ...¹³

The greatest challenge to the Bengal Code came from the presidency of Fort St George. The report noted that in many parts of this presidency, 'local' conditions did not allow an unmodified application of the Code. Representations from collectors in different divisions produced significant changes in the revenue policy of the Code. In some parts of this presidency, the revenue arrangement was made with individual cultivators or *ryots*, while in some other areas a 'village settlement' was adopted by which the 'chief cultivators' of villages engaged for the revenue. Generally, the report argued in favour of the mode of revenue settlement with the *ryots*. It stated that the *ryotwar* system of revenue management had contributed much to the improvement of the province, and disallowed the exactions of the village headmen or the superior *ryots*.¹⁴

¹³ 'The Fifth Report from the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company', *Parliamentary Papers*, 1812, House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online, p. 47.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

I argue that the conceptual grid within which the critique of the Bengal Code was organized in the 'Fifth Report' was the category of the 'local'. The 'local' signified *difference* in the relationship between property and political power, distributed over a range of geographical localities. The property-power complex of each locality was interpreted by the report as *particular* manifestations of a *general*, national, Hindu/Indian ensemble of property and political power. This ordering of difference was framed by a hierarchy. An ancient Hindu/Indian form of the property-power complex was construed as the authentic one, and proprietary power relations particular to each locality were assessed in terms of their distance/difference from the former. The report pointed out that originally, during this ancient Hindu period, apart from the sovereign, only the *ryots*, or peasant cultivators, held proprietary rights in land. Other groups on the land, like the 'village headmen', 'chief cultivators', or the *zamindars*, emerged as usurpers of those rights during the subsequent period of tyrannical Muslim rule. The report recognized certain areas of the presidency of Fort St George as containing, in their form of land tenures, traces of this original proprietary relation.

Within this interpretive grid, time and space were the twin markers of distance/difference. The 'local' performed this analytical function. It was both a point and a range. It acted as both particularity and generality. In the 'local', time and space defined each other. Every locality, as a space *different* from the original, was also explained by practices of governance as a time *distant* from the ancient. Accordingly, the report identified 'local' forms of land tenures as corrupt versions of an originary and authentic form of proprietary relation, between the government and the cultivator, which existed in the ancient times, when India was under Hindu rule. In this manner, it inaugurated the analytical mode by which a particular combination of property and political power was repeatedly represented as the authentic national form, and by extension, agrarian relations in each and every locality were perceived as derivations of this form with varying authenticity. The logic of the 'local' was established as all-pervasive.

Cuttack was soon harnessed into this analytical space, whereby the initial inexplicability of an insurgent moment in this new division of the Bengal Presidency was quickly tamed by the calm calculus of the 'local'. In the spirit of the 'Fifth Report', a permanent settlement of land revenue with *zamindars* was opposed in Cuttack as well. The Company acquired Cuttack in 1803. From then, a number of short-term land revenue settlements were carried out in the province. As I

mentioned earlier, in spite of the introduction of the Bengal Code of Regulations, the policy of permanent settlement was not extended to Cuttack. In 1817, an insurrection spread rapidly over parts of Cuttack. The insurrection was led by a group of *paiks*, who were the landed military servants of the raja of Khoordah, a region in Cuttack. After the conquest of Cuttack, the Company's government introduced changes in the mode of settlement of Khoordah. Earlier, when the area was ruled by the Marathas, the raja paid only a nominal tribute to the rulers for his lands. But when the British occupied Cuttack, the raja tried to resist them. The British defeated and deposed the raja, and resumed his estate. Later, when the raja was released, he was asked to engage for the estate, but only against a regular revenue payment. He refused, which resulted in the government leasing out his estate to revenue farmers. The estate consisted of numerous rent-free lands gifted to the *paiks*. One of the raja's principal servants, the commander of his *paiks*, was Bakshi Jagabandhu. Bakshi owned several rent-free areas of land, which were also resumed by the government.

These matters appear to be a necessary background to the acts of agitation in Khoordah, as the Cuttack-based officials argued that these acts were led by Bakshi and committed in the raja's name. The magistrate reported to authorities in Calcutta that,

I have no doubt of the proceedings of the Insurgents being countenanced and secretly encouraged by the Rajah Makoond Dea, they repeatedly call upon his name in their violent acts, and the Buxee Jugbundoo issues all orders in the Raja's name ...¹⁵

Authorities in Fort William, the headquarters of the Bengal Presidency, however, perceived the event in a very different way. From the very beginning, they saw the insurrection as symptomatic of a general failure of governance in Cuttack.¹⁶ Due to this perception, a number of investigations were carried out in different branches of the administration in Cuttack. Questions of land revenue occupied a substantial space in these enquiries. The revenue department at Fort William noted, 'We see reason to apprehend ... that the Bengal

¹⁵ 4 April 1817, *Bengal Judicial Consultations* (henceforth *BJC*), India Office Records, British Library, London.

¹⁶ That is why, within a month of the reporting of the insurrection, it was pointed out that, 'although I have discovered nothing calculated to remove the suspicion, that the Rajah of Khoordah is the immediate instigator of the disturbances ... I lament to state that there are some grounds to believe that a much more general spirit of disaffection at present exists in that District ...' 11 April 1817, *BJC*.

system of Revenue Law has in some respects, been ill-adapted to the District of Cuttack.¹⁷

I argue that the topography of authenticity in the forms of interrelations between property and political power, as expressed in the logic of the 'local', was posed as the central object of contention in the aftermath of the insurrection in Cuttack in the same way it was framed in the 'Fifth Report'. The particular construal of the category of the 'local' in the report was, however, symptomatic of a more general governmental rationality which expressed interest in proprietary relations characterizing different localities, and tried to make sense of this difference as variations of an authentic property-power complex. Articulations of this rationality reverberated at every level of the imperial bureaucracy.¹⁸ Thus, informed by the same logic, the Court of Directors in London urged the Bengal government to gather 'more complete information . . . regarding . . . the nature of the rights and privileges enjoyed by the different class of persons who have an interest in the soil from the zemindar down to the actual cultivator of the land'.¹⁹

Following these orders, the collector and the commissioner in Cuttack reported on the forms of land tenures in Cuttack. Both pointed out that in Cuttack, previous to the British occupation, the agents of government in revenue affairs were not *zemindars*. They were mostly village headmen, with different names in different parts of the district. The commissioner, Walter Ewer, pointed out in a part of his report, that,

by the ancient original institutions of the country the ryots of every Mouzah under the immediate direction and management of their Pudhon Mundel or Moquddum were the only class besides the sovereign who could claim a proprietary right in the soil . . . they once enjoyed the privilege of paying their revenue direct to the state,

¹⁷ 17 July 1818, *Proceedings Connected with the Recent Disturbances in Cuttack, Examiner's Office, 1819 (Volume 1)*, India Office Records, British Library, London.

¹⁸ It was being argued that the permanent settlement of Bengal had mistakenly established the *zemindars*, or big landlords, as the exclusive proprietors of the soil. In doing this it had swept away a great variety of proprietary rights possessed by different kinds of landholders. See 'Minute by the Right hon. the Governor-General, on the Revenue Administration of the Presidency of Fort William, 21 September 1815' in *Report from the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company 1831-32*, House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online, n.d., Appendix 9, Revenue, p. 84.

¹⁹ '24 October 1817' in S. C. De (ed.), *Guide to Orissan Records, Volume II* (Bhubaneswar: Orissa State Archives, 1961), p. 116.

and ... no middleman had anciently a right to intervene between them and the Government ...²⁰

But the commissioner also argued that it was difficult to trace historically at what point in time the system changed. During the British occupation, it was found that in most parts of the district the *mokuddums* were preponderantly in charge of revenue affairs.

Ewer further noted that, historically, Cuttack was divided into two administrative units, one known as Rajwareh, and the other known as Mughalbundee. Khoordah was the principal unit of Rajwareh, the seat of the ancient raja of Orissa. Ewer argued that,

the Political state of Khoorda ... previous to the conquest ... by the British arms exhibited an exact picture in miniature of the condition of Orissa under its ancient native sovereigns antecedent to the Mogul invasion and ... that condition much resembled what I am informed is still observable in some of the Hindoo states of Hindostan and the Deccan.²¹

The collector and the commissioner then inferred that, since in ancient times the entire province of Cuttack was the territory of the raja of Khoordah, the forms of land tenures in Khoordah would indicate the original system of revenue management prevailing throughout the division. In this manner, they came to the conclusion that the 'pudhan in Khoordah appears to be precisely what the mokuddums are in the Moghulbundee'.²² The commissioner's report finally recommended future settlements to be made with *mokuddums* or *pudhans* as the supposedly original, ancient revenue managers of the country.

The logic of the 'local' that emerged in the 'Fifth Report' as the principle for classifying landed property rights in the different localities was echoed in the aftermath of the rebellion in Cuttack. Since the original peasant cultivator who shared a proprietary right with the state could not be recovered in Cuttack, the *pudhans/mokuddums* were considered nearest to, and the *zemindear* furthest from, the original proprietary figure. It is evident that the figure of the *pudhan* (and that of the *mokuddum*) was rediscovered with a corresponding reconstruction of a putative ancient Hindu form of administration in Orissa, the present territorial remnant of which was taken as Khoordah, the seat of the raja. It is by reimagining the forms of land tenures in Khoordah

²⁰ '18 April 1818' in *Revenue Proceedings Relative to the Late Disturbances in Cuttack*, Vol. 2, Examiner's Office, 1819, emphasis mine.

²¹ Ibid.

²² '3 April, 1818' in *Revenue Proceedings Relative to the Late Disturbances in Cuttack*, Vol. 2, Examiner's Office, 1819.

as the symbols of an ancient Hindu administration, and projecting this imagination onto the rest of Cuttack, that the authenticity of the *pudhan* was consolidated. This is how the ‘local’ of Cuttack was reintegrated to that of the nation. This principle of ordering difference was inaugurated in the ‘Fifth Report’ and re-enacted in Cuttack. Figures and relations existing at that time on the lands of Cuttack were visualized as living embodiments of an authentic spatio-temporal point—the ‘Hindu/Indian’ ‘local’.

Geographies of comparison: ‘Cuttack’ and ‘India’

Immediately after the rebellion, in 1821, Andrew Stirling, one of the leading administrators of Cuttack, wrote the ‘Minute on Tenures in Orissa’. The minute was subsequently published, in 1822, in the form of a book entitled *An Account, Geographical, Statistical and Historical of Orissa Proper, Or Cuttack*. I regard Stirling’s work as both the first systematic treatise on the land tenures of Cuttack, and also as one of those expositions which forged a definitive link between the ‘local’ of ‘Cuttack’ and ‘India’. In a sense, Stirling’s propositions rearticulated the representations of the ‘local’ that informed the official reaction to the rebellion. But it elaborated upon the assumptions inherent in those discussions. Stirling’s text described the lands of Cuttack as inhabited by an immense variety of figures, only in order to invest each one of them with the traces of the ‘local’ that encapsulated lands all over ‘India’. Here, the staging of *diversity* was constitutive of a centralizing operation, which eventually harnessed and reintegrated all its elements to a single analytical trope.

Stirling began with a natural division of the lands. He noted that the country could be divided into three regions which were, ‘The marshy woodland tract which extends along the sea shore . . . The plain and open country between this and the hills . . . and . . . The hill country.’²³ He redescribed these three divisions as two, in terms of the land tenures that populated them. He noted that,

The first and third are known to the natives as the Eastern and Western Rajwara or Zemindara, that is, the country occupied by the ancient feudal Chieftains, Khandaits, Zemindars or Poligars of Orissa; and the second, as the Mogulbundi or Khaliseh, being that from which the indigenous sovereigns

²³ A. Stirling, *An Account, Geographical, Statistical and Historical of Orissa Proper, Or Cuttack* (No publisher, 1822), p. 5.

and the Mogul conquerors of the country, derived the chief part of their land revenue ...²⁴

I have shown in the previous section that a similar division of the lands of Cuttack was made in the investigations following the rebellion, and the 'Rajwara' was identified as the authentic form of the 'local', its tenures consisting of the remnants of the ancient Hindu form of administration. But Stirling's scheme had greater ambitions. It conjured up a gigantic spatio-temporal canvas on which the 'local' of Cuttack was joined to not only an ancient Hindu India, but to lands and times far beyond it.

In his first move, he took the 'local' to a different part of the world. He remarked that,

In surveying attentively the ancient Political Institutions of Orissa as connected with the tenure of land, it is impossible not to be struck with the marked resemblance which many of their features exhibit to the system of European policy called the feudal ...²⁵

In the very next line he noted that,

the comparison might be extended to India generally, and that a careful enquirer would not fail to discern in every quarter of the country, obvious traces of the former existence of such a system, however irregularly defined, and liable to variation in the details, from local peculiarities.²⁶

In support of his representations, Stirling referred to similar opinions of other experienced administrators, working in different parts of British India.

For example, he argued that Sir J. Malcolm, in his report on Malwa, noted that land administration in the Rajput principalities differed little from the feudal system that existed in Europe. Further, Stirling observed that 'every one knows that ... anciently *all* principalities and kingdoms might in one sense be designated as Rajput'.²⁷ Similar views, Stirling argued, were held by Captain MacMurdo in a paper on the province of Cutch. This was the scale of the 'local' in Stirling's text. It encompassed a spatio-temporal range, which could simultaneously incorporate Cuttack, an ancient Hindu (Rajput) India, and a feudal

²⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 56.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 56-57.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 57.

Europe.²⁸ From here, Stirling proceeded to a meticulous grounding of the 'local' in the lands of Cuttack.

Property and political power were viewed as an interconstitutive complex by Stirling. The various proprietary relations characterizing the lands of the Rajwareh and the Mughalbandi were seen as deeply marked and shaped by different forms of political power. The chiefs inhabiting the Rajwareh, whom Stirling called the 'feudal lords', all belonged to the Cshetriya caste.²⁹ The Mughalbandi, under the Mughal administration, ceased to be the territory of the Gajapati, and came under the direct management of the Mughals. The revenue officers of the state here were known by the names of *chowdris*, *talukdars*, *vilaity canoongoes*, *mokuddums*, and others. Against the performance of various tasks related to revenue collection and everyday social governance, they received certain perquisites on the natural resources, and a certain percentage of the revenue of that area. Stirling argued that the British government misconstrued each of these officers existing in the Mughalbandi as the absolute proprietors of lands.

As is evident, Stirling's text was an operation in disentangling the different lineages of the 'local'. Stirling separated the Rajwareh from the Mughalbandi on the basis of the different relations between property and political power that marked these lands. Proprietary rights in the soil itself, according to Stirling's representations, could never be located in the varied repertoire of tenures in Cuttack. But this right did not exhaust the domain of property in India. For Stirling, landed property in India existed both in the soil and in the offices of revenue management. Most importantly, these two forms of proprietary rights reflected the different ways in which property and political power were related. In the form of tenure imprinted with ancient Hindu administrative principles, the sovereign and the peasant cultivators were co-proprietors of the land, whereas in the other forms, it was a collective of various revenue managers whose proprietary rights were vested in their offices. Taken together, they

²⁸ Norbert Peabody argues that James Tod made similar use of the category 'feudal' in describing the social and political organization of the Rajputs of Rajasthan. See Norbert Peabody, 'Tod's Rajasthan and the Boundaries of Imperial Rule in Nineteenth-Century India', *Modern Asian Studies*, 30:1, 1996, p. 198.

²⁹ Stirling, *An Account*, p. 65. He further pointed out that these chiefs never had a right of property in the soil itself. That right belonged only to the actual cultivators of the soil under the ancient Hindu government, but he did not find any traces of it in Cuttack. Further, almost echoing the discussion in the 'Fifth Report', he noted that such a right was existent in other parts of India, like Canara and Malabar.

constituted the 'local', and, consequently, the object of agrarian governance in different localities.

These different proprietary rights were, however, hierarchized in terms of the varying respectability of their lineages. Stirling's classification represented one of the several significant ongoing attempts, at various levels of the apparatus of governance, to assign the different proprietary relations existing in different localities definite locations in the hierarchy. His text served as a critical point of reference for future administrators of Cuttack, although it was never blindly followed. The hierarchy it established would be reinterpreted in the 1830s and 1840s during the settlement of Cuttack to re-cognize various agrarian groups in terms of new lineages and new identities. This is how the 'local' was invoked, time and again, as a spatio-temporal grid distributing the authentic complex of property and political power of India, in and beyond Cuttack, as complex constellations of multiple relations of power—between various landholding groups, and also between the former and the state.

The hot seat of contention over questions of settlement during the first three decades of the nineteenth century was, however, not located in Cuttack. The biggest territorial acquisition of the Company at the turn of the century was a region called the 'Ceded and Conquered Provinces'. Situated in the northwest of India, this area was conquered between 1801 and 1803. It consisted of the districts of Bareilly, Moradabad, Farrakkhabad, Etawah, Kanpur, Allahabad, Gorakhpur, Saharanpur, Aligarh, Agra, and Bundelkhand.³⁰ The history of settlements in this region was similar to that of Cuttack. From the time of its conquest, a series of short-term settlements were carried out under the promise of a Bengal-type permanent settlement in the near future. However, the promise was never fulfilled.³¹ Subsequently, a new model of settlement for this region was gradually assembled under the leadership of Holt Mackenzie, secretary to the Territorial Department of the government of Bengal. In developing this new model of settlement, once again a variety of power relations between landholders of different descriptions and the state were established as the object of agrarian governance. These relations were classified into varying degrees of authenticity by drawing up connections within their spatio-temporal roots. In the

³⁰ Imtiaz Husain, *Land Revenue Policy in North India: The Ceded and Conquered Provinces, 1801–33* (Calcutta and New Delhi: New Age Publishers, 1967), p. 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

process, the logic of the 'local' was redeployed in a manner similar to, yet different from, its previous articulations.

In 1819, Mackenzie wrote a memorandum on the land and people of the Ceded and Conquered Provinces, reflecting on the past settlements in the region and putting forward a detailed plan for a future one. He believed that since proprietary rights in land are plural and partial, it was imperative to protect each, because superior holders had a tendency to usurp the rights of inferior ones.³² The discussion on proprietary rights here grafted itself onto new figures and new relationships. Mackenzie noted that in this region, in spite of the presence of big landholders, 'the rights of the village Zemindars, as the chief cultivators and sole owners of the land . . . were fully recognised, even where the revenue of Government were received from Talukdars or other superior holders'.³³ Henceforth, Mackenzie directed all his energies to disentangle the figure of the village *zemindar* from a complex web of relations around land. He represented most of these relations as spurious, deceitful, or subordinate in relation to that true right of property in land, which he claimed to be the privilege of the village *zemindar*. In claiming greater authenticity for him, Mackenzie simultaneously defined many more figures as related to land in other, less authentic, proprietary capacities.

The *talukdar*, he argued, 'appears seldom to have pretended to be more than the Collector of the revenue of Government, claiming, indeed, sometimes a hereditary interest in the advantages of the office, but urging no pretension to a property in the soil'.³⁴ These tenures, he pointed out, were created in the recent past. The village *zemindars*, on the other hand, 'were the immemorial occupants of the soil; they cultivated generation from generation. They gave, sold and mortgaged their lands at will'.³⁵ Mackenzie noted that originally, the proprietary right of these village *zemindars* was an absolute one; that is, they had both a right to the soil as well as a right to their share of the income from it. However, through force, fraud, or deception superior holders snatched these rights away from them.³⁶ There were

³² 'Memorandum by the Secretary regarding the past settlements of the Ceded and Conquered Provinces, with heads of a plan for the permanent settlement of those Provinces, 1 July 1819', *Selections from Revenue Records, North-West Provinces, 1822-1833* (Allahabad: North-Western Provinces Government Press, 1872), p. 75.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 88, emphasis mine.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

instances, however, where the village *zemindars* were found existing as undisturbed, sole proprietors of their lands. Mackenzie described them as *putteedari* tenures, where the lands of villages were held by a multitude of sharers, called *putteedars*.

Mackenzie also observed that this did not necessarily mean that these village *zemindars* were the only cultivators of the soil. They often hired cultivators and slaves, depending on their caste and the extent of their possessions. These cultivators, or *khoodkasht ryots*, were mostly related to the village *zemindars*. Thus, where the village *zemindars* were cultivator-proprietors, Mackenzie considered 'the only real description of Khoodkasht Ryots to be of the family of the Zemindar'.³⁷ He further emphasized that although the *khoodkhasht ryots* in the older territories of Bengal did not presently enjoy such proprietary privileges, the way this tenure was imbricated in the authentic proprietary form of the village *zemindar* in the Northwestern Provinces, it clearly makes ground for the assumption that, 'the resident Ryots of Bengal were originally of the same class with the Village-Zemindars . . . vested with an equal right of property in the soil they occupied'.³⁸

Mackenzie's representations, I argue, created an opening for imagining a new form of interrelation between property and political power, by retaining, yet reinterpreting the older inventory of the 'local'. With the arrival of the figure of the village *zemindar*, the longstanding imagination of the *ryot*, or the cultivator-proprietor as the authentic proprietor, reflective of the ancient Hindu/Indian mode of administration, was significantly redefined. Invoking the logic of the 'local', Mackenzie could establish the village *zemindar* as the genuine proprietor by locating his origin in the *ryot* or the peasant-cultivator. Wherever he was not found as a cultivator-proprietor, Mackenzie could argue that his proprietary capacities were lost over time. This time was seen as one of corruption and invasion, when the predatory habits of big landlords, or the headmen from among the body of *ryots*, spoil the pristine status of the proprietor-*ryot*.

Once again the 'local' was deployed as the principle for classifying agrarian relations of particular spaces/localities as different forms of relations between property rights and political power, exhibiting varying degrees of authenticity, depending on their temporal distance from the ancient Hindu/Indian form of property-power complex. The

³⁷ Ibid., p. 96.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 97.

present time was seen as embodying corruptions of times past, just as the present space/land of the Northwestern Provinces, and even Bengal, was viewed as the degenerated form of an ancient Hindu India. What came out of these debates was, in turn, highly important for Cuttack.

Reaching the locality

Mackenzie's representations were to form the bulwark of the regulation following which the first survey and settlement took place in Cuttack between 1837 and 1843. But there was a considerable difference between Mackenzie's enunciations and the final formulation they acquired as a legislative enactment. In this section, I will follow those deliberations over which the 'local', as the object of agrarian governance, reached its most definite articulation in the first half of the nineteenth century. The authentic property-power relationship was reworked by the deliberations of Mackenzie, which established the *putteedari* as the most ancient and original form of tenure in 'India'. The *ryot*, as a co-proprietor of the state, was no longer envisioned as an individual figure. Henceforth, his proprietary identity was viewed in terms of his membership in the collective. He became a *ryot-in-the-collective*, and his proprietary status was seen as indissociable from this collectivity. Yet at the same time, an individual *ryot* had to be put forward as a representative figure of this collective. That is why Mackenzie wanted the revenue engagements to be made with one or two representatives of the multitude of village *zemindars* composing the *putteedari* tenure.³⁹

William Bentinck, the governor general at that time, was closely involved in all these discussions around issues of settlement. In 1832, Bentinck wrote a minute which further redefined the 'local', leading to the enactment of Regulation IX of 1833, under the guidelines of which the settlement in Cuttack took place. Bentinck, while retaining to a great extent Mackenzie's deployment of the logic of the 'local', created provisions for a significantly different interpretation of its tenets. Echoing Mackenzie's representations, Bentinck noted that the 'Putteedari is the original and natural tenure of all the lands

³⁹ Ibid., p. 150. See also, Holt Mackenzie, 'Memorandum', 1 July 1819, para. 414, as cited in Husain, *Land Revenue Policy*, p. 130.

in the Country.’⁴⁰ He argued, like Mackenzie, that the ‘Zemindari or Talukdari tenure is adventitious and artificial, being, generally speaking, a creation of the Moghul Government, and the Talukdar or Zemindar . . . himself being originally neither more nor less than a contractor with Government for its Revenue.’⁴¹

Yet he pointed out that even *zemindari* and *talukdari* tenures might possess authentic proprietary rights. He argued that those *zemindars* and *talukdars* who acquired their tenure from the ‘village community’ should be considered authentic proprietors.⁴² In this manner, by creating a scope for these tenures to become legitimately associated to the ‘village proprietors’, Bentinck enabled the domain of proprietary rights to expand in its scope, while remaining firmly rooted within its supposedly authentic form. Also, by stating that the *ryot*, as a member of this collective, was endowed with true proprietary rights, Bentinck repeated the recurrent representation that the authentic property-power complex in ‘India’ was that of a co-proprietorship between the sovereign and the cultivator.

Bentinck not only introduced a possibility for differentiation within the village proprietors. He added to the complexity of this classificatory logic by doing the same for the cultivators. He noted that the authentic *ryot*, possessing proprietary rights, was only one among the many cultivators bearing the same title. Bentinck argued that,

throughout the country there are three descriptions of ryots. The first class I consider as being to all intents and purposes proprietors of the lands which they cultivate, the second as having been originally tenants at will, but acquiring in course of time a prescriptive right of occupancy at fixed rates, and the third as mere contract cultivators.⁴³

Further, in describing the first kind, Bentinck, repeating earlier representations of the ‘*ryot-proprietor*’, gave the example of the *meerasidars* of Deccan.⁴⁴ The *meerasidars*, however, Bentinck observed, used to possess such proprietary rights during the ancient Hindu government. But over time, during the period of Muslim rule, their

⁴⁰ William Bentinck, ‘Minute on Land Tenures’ in *Circular Orders of the Sadar Board of Revenue at the Presidency of Fort William; Including the Rules of Practice for the Guidance of the Board and of the Commissioners of Revenue, from the Year 1788 to the End of August 1837*, India Office Records, British Library, London, 1838, pp. 317–51.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ In the ‘Fifth Report’ the ‘*ryot-proprietor*’ was discussed in terms of the same example.

proprietary profits were entirely extracted by the state as revenue. As a result they were reduced to the status of occupant-cultivators, or the 'ryot' of the second kind in Bentinck's scheme. In the present, therefore, Bentinck's scheme suggested, the class of authentic proprietor-ryots could not be found in its pristine form. It could only be traced through the class to which it got reduced over time, namely, the occupant cultivators. The threefold classification of ryots was thus reduced to a twofold one, using the recurring explanatory trope of the 'local'.⁴⁵

The same divisions, Bentinck noted, prevailed in Cuttack as well. There were the occupant-cultivators, having their residence and rates of rent fixed, and there were the migratory cultivators, or the *pykasht ryots*. The former, he also noted, were known as the *khloodkhast ryots* in Bengal. This is how, I will argue, Bentinck's analysis returned, after a full circle, to Mackenzie's portrayal of the *khloodkhast ryots* of Bengal as originally being of the same class as the proprietary ryots of the 'village communities'. In the course of these deliberations, however, Bentinck had expanded the scope of the field of proprietary rights by elaborating on the various figures of the ryots, *zemindars*, and *talukdars* as embodying legitimate, even if distant, legacies of the original collective of village proprietors. In a certain sense, therefore, Bentinck's scheme reinterpreted all these figures as ryots of varying lineages.

Finally, Bentinck resolved that wherever the *putteedari* tenure was found, engagements for the revenue of government would be made with the headmen, as representatives of the collective. In those situations where legitimate *talukdars* and *zemindars* existed, Bentinck noted, the rights of all subordinate landholders would be recorded, in order to fix equitably the legitimate distribution of power relations among them. Bentinck's resolutions received an official sanction in the enactment of Regulation IX of 1833. Four years later, settlement operations began in Cuttack.

The particular operation of the 'local', evident in Bentinck's assertions, proved decisive in determining the future of a host of village-level landholders in Cuttack. Arguments over the authentic proprietary status of these figures flew along circuitous pathways of the bureaucratic apparatus. In the course of the settlement of each and every village, these figures rose to prominence in a manner never known before. Settling the proprietary fate of these figures was also an exercise in ascertaining the place of Cuttack, as a locality, in the

⁴⁵ Bentinck, *Minute on Land Tenures*.

classificatory topography of the 'local'. But as we have seen through the episode of the *paik* rebellion and Stirling's minute on tenures, this process had begun long before the settlement.

In 1823, the Court of Directors argued in one of their dispatches, that Mr Kerr, erstwhile commissioner of Cuttack, 'found a class of persons who are called Mourousee Moquddums, and whom he recognized as possessing a right to the soil'.⁴⁶ The prospect of such a claim was immediately scrutinized using the logic of the 'local' by applying the same piece of 'empirical' evidence that was deployed in different contexts, from the 'Fifth Report' to Bentinck's minute, to explain the supposedly unique situation of Cuttack. The contextual was universalized, as the Court noted that,

The name suggests the idea of a similarity with the class of Meerasidars in some of the more Southern Provinces of India. That the foundation of the rights of these Meerasidars was laid in those of the proprietary class of ryots, known in your Provinces by the name of Khode Khast Ryots seems to be sufficiently ascertained. Where rights and prerogatives beyond those of proprietary ryots are claimed on the part of the Meerasidars they seem in all cases to have been those annexed to the head ryots, the managers of villages, and in many cases, when ages of exaction had destroyed the rights and obliterated the claims of the general class of Khode Khast ryots, the claims of the descendants of these headmen, under the title of Meerasidars, seem to be all that are recognised in existence of the rights of the proprietary ryots.⁴⁷

This dispatch marked the beginning of a serious consideration of the proprietary prospects of *mokuddums* in Cuttack. As it is evident, the Court found in the *mokuddums* the only legitimate traces of those proprietary rights which belonged to the *meerasidars* or *khoodekhast ryots* in ancient times. In this way, while the peasant cultivator's ancient proprietary status was retained, it was reinterpreted as belonging in the present to only a select few of those *ryots*, who were perceived as its authentic legatees. Such an interpretive strategy allowed a *ryot* to be defined as a peasant-cultivator; yet, at the same time, not all peasant-cultivators were considered proper *ryots*. It was also argued in the Court's dispatch that in Cuttack the true descendants of these village proprietors were the 'head *ryots*', or 'managers of villages', named

⁴⁶ Extract of a Despatch from the Honorable the Court of Directors dated the 10th December 1823, Acc. No. 12B, 13 August 1821 to 25 November 1825, *Revenue, Balasore District Records* (henceforth *BDR*), Orissa State Archives, Bhubaneswar.

⁴⁷ Extract of a Despatch'.

variously as 'mokuddums', 'serberakars', and 'pudhans'. Accordingly, it was considered absolutely crucial to decide their proprietary status.

Pudhans were found mostly in the district of Pooree, located in the southern part of Cuttack. In 1833, the collector of Pooree offered his opinion to the commissioner of Cuttack about the 'privileges to be awarded to the recorded zemindars and their subordinate mokuddums or pudhans'.⁴⁸ Wilkinson argued that these *zemindars* had purchased their situations from the *mokuddums* and *pudhans*. The latter, according to him, were 'the proprietors of the soil of their respective villages'.⁴⁹ In defining the status of these *mokuddums* and *pudhans*, who coexisted with *zemindars*, Wilkinson stated that they could be considered the sole proprietors. It must be remembered that Bentinck had argued in his minute that those *zemindars* who acquired their proprietary rights legitimately from the 'village proprietors' should be considered bona fide proprietors. In the same vein, regarding the apportionment of the *malikana*, or the proprietary allowance, Wilkinson insisted that 'the Mokuddums who pay through a zemindar cannot be considered the sole proprietors and the zemindars should have some proportion of the *Malikana*'.⁵⁰ In fact, Wilkinson referred to Bentinck's minute in confirmation of his views. Finally, he suggested that an equal share of both the *malikana* and the expenses of collection should be given to each of these proprietors, where they existed together.

The situation described by Wilkinson existed extensively in Cuttack. There were two kinds of landholders in almost all *mahals*, or units of settlement. On the one hand, there were persons known as *zemindars*, who had been treated as the engager of the government revenue in the years before the settlement. On the other, there were persons designated as *pudhans*, *mokuddums*, or *serberakars* who had been conceived, with varying emphasis, from the time of the rebellion until the present, as bearing traces of the original proprietary body of village *zemindars*. On the eve of the settlement, however, the critical attitude towards *zemindars*, characteristic of Mackenzie, was counterbalanced by Bentinck, who revalidated their authentic proprietary status. But despite such reinvigorated positions of support towards *zemindars*, the landholders in Cuttack considered as proximate to the village proprietors could not be marginalized in this complex and conflicting field of administrative practices.

⁴⁸ 9 July 1833, Acc. No. 28B, June 1829 to December 1830, *Revenue, BDR*.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Although the Sudder Board of Revenue⁵¹ clearly preferred the *zemindar* as the actual proprietor, they could not set aside other views. They had to take into account the proprietary prospects of those figures in Cuttack who resembled the village proprietors. Thus, they laid down a number of points which were to be investigated in every single instance of settlement, in order to discern whether the *mokuddums* were proprietors. Accordingly, rigorous scrutiny of the status of *mokuddums* was carried out in every estate; their proprietary future depended on success in this performative arena. But even when they were not considered proprietors, the *mokuddums* and *serberakars* of Cuttack were granted significant rights as hereditary managers.⁵² There were situations as well where the *mokuddums* and *serberakars* were granted different kinds of rights.

Wherever these *mokuddums* were identified as ‘*mowroosee*’, they were considered as real proprietors. It was noted, in the final settlement papers, that ‘The Mowroosee, or old hereditary Mokuddums, were doubtless the “rightful proprietors of the soil”, and their tenures are of a heritable and transferable nature.’⁵³ The *pu dhans*, found mostly in southern Cuttack, were treated in a light similar to *mowroosee mokuddums*. Their tenures were considered hereditary and transferable in nature, and they were also allowed *malikana*, being the exclusive engager of government revenue. The *serberakars*, however, were considered only as hereditary managers, and granted an allowance of either 15 or 20 per cent on the *jumma* (the amount of revenue fixed for each unit, payable to the government) as expenses of collection.

In the years following the completion of the settlement, incessant battles were fought over control of land in the judicial amphitheatres of Cuttack. Claims to possession of land, in a variety of ways, by a range of landholders, flooded the courts in the district. By the time of the settlement, a map of legitimacy had been established in Cuttack, which distributed different kinds of possessory and proprietary interests in land over a number of figures. But despite these emplotments, the proprietary field was never stable. It relentlessly churned conflicts between different agrarian groups

⁵¹ 12 November, 1833, Acc. No. 28B, June 1829 to December 1830, *Revenue, BDR*.

⁵² 12 January, 1838, No. 37, *Sadar Board of Revenue—Settlement Proceedings*, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata.

⁵³ ‘Papers on The Settlement of Cuttack and On The State Of The Tributary Mehals’, *Selections from the Records of the Bengal Government*, No. III, 19 (Calcutta: no publisher, 1851).

in the locality. Governmental practices tried to steer through the contestations and settle the issue of proprietorship according to its calculus of legitimacies. The logic of the 'local' expanded its ambit. But now different kinds of landholders in Cuttack used it to their respective, very different kinds of advantages, in the process changing its articulations. The *zemindars* and *talukdars* suddenly found themselves in tough combat with village proprietors of various sorts. The *serberakars* and *mokuddums* of Cuttack, who were identified by the settlement as legitimate holders of various kinds of proprietary privileges, became the immediate enemy of the *zemindars*. The *zemindars*, or the big landholders, had their authority fractured and distributed among these other smaller landholders. These *serberakars*, *mokuddums*, and *pudhans*, for the first time, riding on the wave of an overwhelming administrative admiration for village proprietors, wrenched an official sanction for their authority. In Cuttack, like everywhere else, the uncontested supremacy that the *zemindars* used to enjoy was eclipsed. There were new players in the field of power.⁵⁴

A new epistemological object of political economy

This article has demonstrated so far how a range of discursive practices construed the 'local', and localities plotted within this framework, as the object of agrarian governance in early-nineteenth-century British India. In this section, I will suggest that over the same period the 'local', or a mapping of territories in terms of different constellations of property and political power around land, was also becoming, in the course of a methodological debate, the transformed object of knowledge of political economy in Britain. Here I examine debates over the methodology of political economy in early-nineteenth-century Britain through the writings of some of the leading practitioners in this field. These contentions were structured primarily around the binary of theory and practice. This opposition was posited in the debates as also one between abstract and concrete, a priori and observational, universal and particular, deductive and inductive modes of acquiring knowledge about human societies. I argue that despite the visible opposition, there was an invisible analytical consensus in

⁵⁴ For a detailed study of these conflicts, see Upal Chakrabarti, 'Interconnections of the Political: British political economy, agrarian governance, and early nineteenth-century Cuttack', PhD thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2013, pp. 198–244.

them. Overwriting differences, each of these positions was couched in the language of universality. These were, however, articulations of different kinds of universality. In the process of becoming different, categories constituting one kind of universality were transformed into another. Their meanings changed.

The transformation in the epistemological object of political economy was informed by a certain critique of Ricardian political economy. This transformation took place as the chief categorial constituents of political economy—production and distribution—were redefined as contingent outcomes of globally varying ensembles of property and political power. In other words, it was argued that the meanings of production and distribution were conditioned by the different interrelations between property and political power in different nations of the world. This reconfiguration did not emerge only out of the ideas of those who identified themselves as Ricardo's methodological opponents. Even among Ricardians, there was a clear indication of this refashioning of political economy.

Through this reconfiguration, the fundamental categories of contemporary political economy were redefined in the language of power. 'Production' was seen as conditioned by the field of 'distribution', which was, in turn, construed as an ensemble of property and political power, varying across the world. By this epistemological move, I argue, particularity, indigeneity, and local power became key conceptual constituents of political economy. They were no longer considered as opposed to, or outside of, the universality of political-economic categories. On the contrary, they became the defining markers of a new kind of universality, of a new programme of totalization. In this way the logic of the 'local', or classification of geographical spaces in terms of varying expressions of interrelations between property and political power, became internal to the core of political economy, namely, production.

In reviewing Richard Jones's book, *An Essay on the Distribution of Wealth and the Sources of Taxation*, William Whewell noted that, 'Political economy . . . must be concerned with the laws of the production and distribution of wealth as they actually operate in different countries and different forms of society. It must be a science concerned with actual facts and daily observations.'⁵⁵ Whewell was an old friend of

⁵⁵ William Whewell, 'Review of Richard Jones's *An Essay on the Distribution of Wealth and on the Sources of Taxation*', *British Critic, and Quarterly Theological Review*, 10:19, July 1831, p. 52.

Jones. Their friendship developed in Cambridge, where they met as students. In Cambridge, along with Charles Babbage and John Herschel, they had formed a group which thought similarly, in their respective areas of interest, about methodological questions involved in the formation of scientific knowledge. Other than Jones, the rest were all students of, and subsequently scholars in, the natural sciences. Whewell was the intellectual nerve centre of this group, who developed the philosophy of ‘inductivism’, which, he argued, was the only proper method of gaining true knowledge in any branch of science—natural, moral, or political.⁵⁶

Jones’s book, Whewell believed, was a fine example of the adoption of an inductivist approach to political economy. Whewell argued that it was particularly important to rebuild political economy as an inductive science, because most of its leading doctrines, claiming to explain complex issues affecting the lives and livelihoods of the masses, were false conclusions, yet at the same time influential enough to become part of popular common sense. Jones shared Whewell’s critique. In his book, as well as in other scattered pieces of writing, he made Ricardian political economy the central object of his criticism. Almost echoing Whewell’s words, Jones wrote in his book:

Mr. Ricardo was a man of talent, and he produced a system very ingeniously combined, of purely hypothetical truths; which, however, a single comprehensive glance at the world as it actually exists, is sufficient to show to be utterly inconsistent with the past and present condition of mankind.⁵⁷

These were the oppositions—theory–practice, hypothesis–observation, deductive–inductive. But they were not only used by the inductivist position. The theory–practice opposition featured in the writings of all leading political economists of this period, irrespective of their stated allegiances to any one of these methods. But despite this opposition, I argue, everyone worked very much *within* different frames of universal reasoning. In this sense, nothing in political economy was outside of what was identified in this methodological debate as the domain of ‘theory’. Yet, this opposition between theory and practice had the crucial effect of transforming Ricardian categories and producing other universalities. These

⁵⁶ See Laura Snyder, *The Philosophical Breakfast Club* (New York: Broadway Books, 2011).

⁵⁷ Richard Jones, *An Essay on the Distribution of Wealth and on the Sources of Taxation* (London: J. Murray, 1831), p. vii.

transformations, in turn, enabled the 'local' to become internal to political economy.

J. R. McCulloch used the theory–practice opposition to answer the criticism aimed at Ricardian political economy. As a committed Ricardian, he came out with a dismissive review of Jones's book in the *Edinburgh Review*. Accepting Jones's critique of Ricardo, McCulloch declared, 'Mr. Ricardo's book is one of *principle* only, and that it is not to be judged by a merely *practical* standard.'⁵⁸ He pointed out that the former restricted his researches, for example, his conclusions about rents to only those kinds of rents that were paid by farmers cultivating for profit under a system of free competition. In other words, McCulloch noted, Ricardo's work referred to 'rents as they actually exist in England, Holland, the United States, and a few other countries'.⁵⁹ Ricardo did not intend, McCulloch continued, to define, 'taxes on the land imposed by the sovereign, and the sums wrung by taskmasters from the reluctant labour of slaves, [as] rent',⁶⁰ just as he did not wish to call allowances to slaves in the West Indies 'wages'.

McCulloch initially seemed to argue that 'theory' is a mode of explanation which does not represent actual conditions of life. But later he noted that Ricardo's 'theory' does represent actual conditions of life, but not all of them. He retained both arguments: first, 'theory' and 'practice' were in opposition, and Ricardo's work did not cover practical situations—here 'theory' stood for free markets, and 'practice' for slavery; second, 'theory' and 'practice' were unified, one neatly representing the other, in this case Ricardo's work explaining rents in England, Holland, and the United States. Thus, 'theory' in political economy did not exclude the 'practical'. On the contrary, it was rooted in 'practical' conditions only. Despite this, for McCulloch, there were some forms of the 'practical' which did not feature in this debate. Among them were the slaves and the *ryots*. They were pre-epistemological, unworthy of being considered as part of the enlightened orbits of political economy, or knowledge.

Whewell and Jones pointed out that Ricardo's 'theory' was useless, because it failed to explain the greater part of the world. Whewell

⁵⁸ J. R. McCulloch, 'Review of Richard Jones's *An Essay on the Distribution of Wealth and on the Sources of Taxation*', *Edinburgh Review*, 54:107, September 1831, p. 85.

⁵⁹ McCulloch, 'Review', p. 86.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 87, 90.

argued that even if he accepted McCulloch's retort that Ricardo's definition of rent did not intend to cover all those payments which are commonly called rent,

the reader might be left to decide for himself which subject of inquiry may be the better worth his notice—the rents that are actually paid in *every* country, or the Ricardian rents, which are *not* those actually paid in *any* country.⁶¹

For Jones and Whewell, all along, it was a battle to prove greater universality. Thus, incorporating the 'practical', or the 'local/particular/indigenous', into their explanatory framework was an analytical move to achieve total universality. Whewell believed that Ricardo was powerless, as his 'theory' was fragile. In a letter to Jones, he wrote, 'You know as well as I do that those who theorise rightly are in the end the lords of the earth.'⁶² The programme of induction had the ambition of a supersynoptic gaze, which wished to wrap up, at a single glance, the infinite diversity of lives and livelihoods in the world into a single frame of explanation.

As it is evident, in the process of arguing about the appropriate methodology to be followed in political economic analysis, these debates started identifying the interrelationship between political power and property ownership—existing in different forms in different nations—as the primary object of knowledge of political economy. Categories like 'production' and 'distribution' were now understood as being dependent on this interrelationship. They were seen as being shaped differently in different nations. James Mill, an equally ardent devotee of Ricardo's system, followed the same trail in expressing his opinion on the question of representability. Like Whewell and Jones, he believed that a true 'theory' should be able to account for all 'practical' conditions of the world. But unlike McCulloch, he did not think that Ricardian categories only explained the 'practical' conditions of countries with a high population, free market, and a capitalist economy. For McCulloch, a difference in the structures of property ownership between England and the 'Eastern countries' made the Ricardian category of rent inapplicable to the latter. This was a view which perceived nations as expressions of different forms of linkages between property and political power. Therefore, in this

⁶¹ William Whewell (ed.), *Literary Remains, Consisting of Lectures and Tracts on Political Economy of the Late Rev. Richard Jones* (London: John Murray, 1859), pp. xii–xiii.

⁶² '1 July 1832' in I. Todhunter (ed.), *William Whewell, D.D. Master of Trinity College, Cambridge: An Account of His Writings with Selections from his Literary and Scientific Correspondence*, Vol. 2 (London: Macmillan and Co., 1876), p. 142.

scheme, 'despotism', as an absolute and arbitrary form of power rooted in the total ownership of property by the sovereign, defined all 'Eastern countries' as different from the free and individual forms of property ownership in England, which laid the foundation of its polity. Based on these assumptions, McCulloch reasoned that 'despotic' polities could be legitimate domains of political-economic inquiry, as they harboured those 'practical' conditions that the 'theory' of political economy did not need to address.

Mill, however, did not envision 'despotic' polities as lying beyond the scope of Ricardian political economy. Mill argued that not only the form of property ownership, but the category of 'property' itself in India was different from its European counterpart. But this did not make it incompatible with the Ricardian conceptualization of rent. In fact, Mill suggested that it was only in this form of property ownership, prevalent in India, where the state was the universal landlord, that the full rent could be the basis of the fund derived from taxation, as this was to be spent by the state on the improvement of the community. Here Mill's analysis took a turnaround, as he hierarchized *difference* in the reverse direction. The kind of linkage between property and political power he favoured was present in India and absent in Europe.

Mill noted that while in the major polities of Asia 'almost the whole expenses of the state have in all ages been defrayed from the rent of land',⁶³ in Europe it took place only in the remote past, when the sovereign was the proprietor of land. Interestingly, this equivalence between the European past and the Asian present was not cast in the mould of a progressivist hierarchy. Europe's present did not feature as the final teleological destination in Mill's analysis of the linkage between property and political power. Rather, Mill seemed to lament over Europe's present:

The benefits of the soil have ... over the greater part of the globe, been employed, first, to supply in whole, or for the greater part, the necessities of government, next to enrich the individual occupant. The most remarkable exception to this rule is in modern Europe. After the conquests of the Gothic nations, the land was thrown in great portions into the hands of the leading men; and they had power to make the taxes fall where they chose; they took care accordingly that they should fall any where rather than upon the land; that is, upon any body rather than themselves ... they not only threw the burden off their own shoulders, but taxed, as they have continued to do,

⁶³ James Mill, *Elements of Political Economy* (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1821), p. 198.

and sometimes on a progressive ration, to the present hour, the rest of the community for their benefit.⁶⁴

I have already argued that the linkage between property and political power was perceived to be the constitutive ground of this transformed political economy. This assumption was hidden in McCulloch, but was brought out in his review of Jones's work. James Mill established the relation between property and political power as the structuring principle of the field of political-economic knowledge. His elaboration of differences between the modes of property ownership and their attendant forms of political power in India and Europe was a necessary epistemological building block for his subsequent political-economic analysis, which was unambiguously Ricardian. But his vision, I will argue, expanded the theoretical scope of Ricardian political economy, by using it to explain conditions which were based on a linkage between property and political power radically different from that of England. Mill's reinterpretation of Ricardian political economy suggested that it was suited equally well to the property-power complex that it claimed to be based upon, and to conditions that were radically different. Thus, for Mill, Ricardian theory seemed to be valid for both 'free' and 'despotic' forms of property ownership, and the polities based on them. Mill unhesitatingly declared his appreciation for what he construed as the Indian forms of landed property, political power, and mode of taxation. His only problem was with the corrupt, uncertain, and unequal manner in which this system operated, which, he believed, would be remedied by the able governance of the British.

This is how Ricardian political economy was invested with a new universality. A return to the 'theory-practice' opposition at this point is imperative, as Mill was a seminal contributor to this methodological debate. In an imaginary dialogue entitled 'Theory and Practice', written for the *London and Westminster Review*, Mill analysed the problem. The essay presented a conversation between two men, marked 'X' and 'Y', where the former began by positing a total inconsistency between 'theory' and 'practice', while the latter gradually and successfully persuaded the former about the necessary unity between the two. Evidently, Mill imagined himself to be in the position of 'Y'.⁶⁵ For Mill, the value of 'theory' emerged

⁶⁴ James Mill, *History of British India*, Volume I, Book II, Fifth Edition with notes and continuation by H. H. Wilson (London: Routledge, 1997 [1858]), p. 226.

⁶⁵ James Mill, 'Theory and Practice', *London and Westminster Review*, 3:1, April 1836, pp. 223-34. It is worth noting here Robert Fenn's comment on this essay. Fenn

entirely from its ability to explain the greatest possible range of 'practice', which, in turn, was also a move to fashion a variety of 'local/particular/indigenous' contexts as the object of political economy.

Richard Jones wrote *An Essay on the Distribution of Wealth and on the Sources of Taxation* in 1831. In 1833, he was appointed as professor of political economy at King's College, London.⁶⁶ The *Essay* was a treatise on rent, and also the first part of a projected work on other major categories of political economy. Jones, however, was not a prolific writer. The other parts were never written. In 1835, Jones was appointed by the Court of Directors of the East India Company to the chair of political economy and history at the East India College at Haileybury. This appointment indicated that Jones's political economy had acquired a different kind of significance in contemporary Britain. Jones called his work a political economy of *nations*, which, I believe, made him important for an institution like the East India College at Haileybury. As is well known, the East India College was that pedagogical site where future administrators of British India were educated in all those branches of knowledge which were considered the intellectual backbone of governance. Political economy was one of the most important subjects in this curriculum of governance.⁶⁷

On being appointed as the professor of political economy at King's College, London, Jones gave a public lecture on what he considered to be the fundamental problem of this domain of knowledge. He argued that the main task of political economy was the analysis of 'differences in the productive power and operations of different nations'.⁶⁸ Political economy, as was commonly understood, produced knowledge of the laws governing production and distribution of wealth. Jones emphasized that although, temporally speaking, production preceded distribution, analytically considered, the latter should be the core area of inquiry in political economy. The mode of distribution of the surplus produce of the soil was embedded in the different forms of

argues that, 'If there was any aspect of Mill's intellectual efforts for the amelioration of society that he would have prided himself on, it would have been his emphasis on the necessary relation between correct theory and sound practice.' Robert Fenn, *James Mill's Political Thought* (New York and London: Garland, 1987), p. 128.

⁶⁶ Whewell (ed.), *Literary Remains*, p. xxii.

⁶⁷ In his political economy lectures at Haileybury, Jones taught concepts in this field through a discussion of the agrarian structure of various localities in British India. Whewell (ed.), *Literary Remains*, pp. 185–290.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 552, emphasis mine.

property ownership in different nations. These proprietary relations, in turn, expressed the organizing principle of political power in every society. The distribution of produce, in the form of property, he noted, 'has served, in the great majority of instances, to establish the first rude framework of political society'.⁶⁹

Therefore, in the Jonesian scheme of things, it was the mode of distribution which organized production, and, therefore, made production itself contingent—differently shaped according to different modes of distribution, which were also different expressions of political power.⁷⁰ From this point, Jones started outlining the emergence of different relations between political power and property over time in different nations. These relations determined the conditions and capacities of production in these nations. This was certainly a hierarchical scheme, although Jones remained cautious about extolling the virtues of advancement.⁷¹ He began with 'Asiatic nations', where the primary division of the surplus was between the sovereign, his officers, and the cultivators. Coming to eastern European nations, he noted that similar relations persisted between the bondsmen, the nobility, and the non-agricultural classes. As he came to countries of western Europe, particularly England, he argued that there was a notable difference in the structure of these relations. This change in the assemblage of proprietary relations and political power strikingly affected and improved the conditions under which production took place, or, in Jones's words, 'the management and productiveness of labour'.⁷²

Such was Jones's political-economic vision. I argue that he effected a major rewriting of the contemporary articulations of this field of knowledge. His political economy was historical, statistical, and even ethnographic.⁷³ He was not beyond the evolutionist universalism of his times. But, from within that, he engendered a framework which hooked the epistemological foundations of political economy to nationally varying ensembles of property and political power. He made political economy look more like a comparative political sociology of nations. Thus, what Jones and Whewell posited in this rewriting as 'inductivism', or the championing of 'facts' over abstract 'theory',

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 554.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 553.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 557–58.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 557.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 570.

can be more productively interpreted as a theoretical reconfiguration and a methodological diversification of political economy.⁷⁴ This reconfiguration opened up new pastures for the universality of political economic categories. It allowed the 'local' to become a category internal to political economy.⁷⁵

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to argue that the opposition between (colonial) metropolitan theory and indigenous empirical conditions, which is pervasively used by agrarian histories of South Asia to make sense of agrarian relations in different localities, needs to be rethought in the light of the category of the 'local' as it was produced by agrarian governance in British India and political economy in Britain during the early nineteenth century. The constitution of this category tells us that the 'empirical' was not outside the 'theoretical'; it can be more productively read as a different articulation of the latter. The two sides of the opposition cannot be thought of as analytically autonomous ones. They were produced by the same discursive operation.

The same opposition was posed in debates of political economy as that between abstract and concrete, or deductive and inductive.

⁷⁴ Mary Poovey, despite examining the inductivist intervention in the debates over formulation of objective knowledge in nineteenth-century Britain, fails to identify its universalizing aspirations and its underlying similarities with the a priori perspective of which it claimed to be a critique. See Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

⁷⁵ Richard Jones's location in contemporary political economy has not been adequately conceptualized. In the light of disciplinary traditions of economics, he has been classified as a historical/institutionalist economist. See Salim Rashid, 'Richard Jones and Baconian Historicism at Cambridge', *Journal of Economic Issues*, 13:1, 1979, pp. 159–73; and William L. Miller, 'Richard Jones's Contribution to the Theory of Rent', *History of Political Economy*, 9, 1977, pp. 346–65. References to him in the histories of British India are scanty and under-theorized. See Stokes, *The Peasant and the Raj*, pp. 94–97; C. A. Bayly, *The New Cambridge History of India, II. 1: Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 129; Peter Robb, *Ancient Rights and Future Comfort Bihar: The Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 and British Rule in India* (London: Curzon Press, 1997), p. 197. The only person to devote substantial conceptual attention to Jones is William Barber. But even he analyses Jones's work in terms of its self-styled inductivism, arguing that Jones, intuitively, had a more realistic understanding of Indian society. See William J. Barber, *British Economic Thought and India 1600–1858: A Study in the History of Development Economics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 194–210.

Both sides of the opposition, however, subscribed to universal forms of reasoning; in that sense both were forms of the 'theoretical'. But these debates transformed the epistemological object of political economy by presenting it as the 'empirical', or the 'local'. Thus, political economy in early-nineteenth-century Britain did not only consist of dehistoricized universals. It was undoubtedly constituted by abstractions, but of a different order. These abstractions took indigeneity and local interrelations between property and political power in different nations of the world as legitimate explanatory categories of political economy. Political power was not construed as *external* to the category of 'production' in this discourse.

Practices of agrarian governance in British India during the same period were informed by a governmental rationality which mapped localities in terms of their differences from, and resemblances to, an original, ancient, Hindu/Indian property-power complex. This logic enabled different localities to be comprehended as 'empirically specific' ones, but only from within a framework of the 'theoretical/universal', which was the authentic property-power complex. This analysis, I suggest, will help us understand the formation of agrarian societies in different localities as internal workings of political economy. It provides us with tools to figure out the 'empirical' conditions of every locality, but only in relation to the 'theoretical' (of political economy/governance) framework which produced the former.

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