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Neeladri Bhattacharya, *The Great Agrarian Conquest: The Colonial Reshaping of a Rural World*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019. ISBN: 978-1-4384-7739-8 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-4384-7740-4 (paper)

Lineages of the Agrarian Modern: Conquest and Colonial History in South Asia

The Great Agrarian Conquest begins and ends with a colonial official on horseback. Henry Lawrence's book, *Adventures of an Officer in the Punjaub*, written in 1846, tells the story of a European traveler, Bellasis, on horseback making his way to Maharaja Ranjit Singh's court at Lahore. On his travels, Bellasis is confronted by Nand Singh, the premier's second-in-command. Bellasis easily defeats Singh, first in the open field, then in front of Ranjit Singh, demonstrating his ample talents with the horse. The European command of the horse, in the author Lawrence's imagination, Bhattacharya argues, was a metaphor for conquest. Lawrence would later become the governor of Punjab, and *Adventures* explicated his ideal of governance – strong yet gentle and caring. The book closes with another colonial official, Malcolm Darling, riding through Punjab in the 1940s where he spent most of his career as an administrator. Darling's memoir is about anything but conquest. Instead, it reveals how grand colonial dreams of creating an ordered agrarian society founded upon secure law and property failed. *The Great Agrarian Conquest* is set amidst colonial dreams and tragedy, while asking a fundamental question – why and how does a colonizer attempt to take control of a complex landscape and peoples?

The book is the culmination of decades of work on the agrarian history of modern Punjab and South Asia, as well as colonialism more generally. However, Bhattacharya's work represents much more than this, and is at once postcolonial Indian historiography and shows how the agrarian remains foundational in rethinking the nature of colonial rule. Several of the chapters have appeared in publications elsewhere, the earliest, to give the reader an indication of the timespan of production, was in 1983 (Bhattacharya 1983). The book originated through Bhattacharya's course on agrarian structure at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in 1982-83 (Nair 2018). The broader historiographical claims have surfaced in

Bhattacharya's recorded lectures on "Historical Method", delivered at the University, where Bhattacharya taught for over four decades in different forms, which has circulated far and wide. *The Great Agrarian Conquest* represents an almost impossible effort to integrate these various strands, including Bhattacharya's writings on agrarian history, teaching on historical methods, and wider engagement with education and critical history in postcolonial India.

This review essay examines *The Great Agrarian Conquest* and its milieu in three parts. First, it looks at the theoretical move the book makes, in its broad context, as it developed from a doctoral dissertation in the late 1970s to 2018. It shows how Bhattacharya follows the arc of Indian and global historiography in thinking through the Marxist and cultural studies frameworks. In doing so, the book attempts to rethink the rich paradigm of South Asian agrarian history. Second, the essay shows how the book innovatively questions the very category of "the agrarian". At its strongest, the text is a tour de force showing how colonial ideology, native structures, lived life, and temporality together forged a new *form* of the agrarian. Third, the essay argues that in focusing on the twin planks of Marxist historiography at large and the "cultural turn", Bhattacharya does not fully consider new historiographies of the agrarian order of colonialism, namely, the history of political thought, histories of science and technology, environmental history, and commodity history. While the book evidently engages all strands deeply, it doesn't fully acknowledge the ways in which these new works put economy in conversation with cultural worlds. The essay suggests that *The Great Agrarian Conquest* is an effort that transcends agrarian history to uncover the roots of colonial rule. In doing so, however, it is unclear how Bhattacharya seeks to place agrarian history within 19th century liberal political thought and increasingly global capitalist markets.

From Economy to Culture: Rethinking the Agrarian

Trained in the 1970s, Bhattacharya's own education and early scholarship was molded in the shadow of British Marxist history. Inspired by E.P. Thompson, historians in India set out to investigate the worlds of peasants and workers, who through this Marxian framework were the spearhead of social change (Sarkar 2009). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Jawaharlal

Nehru University was a space in which Marxist student leaders, who would go on to become leaders of the various strands of the Communist Party of India, flourished. Simultaneously, in the 1970s, there was major upheaval in the Indian countryside as traditional landlords started losing control of lands, new methods of mechanization were introduced, and foreign aid poured in, all of which culminated in India's "Green Revolution". In this atmosphere, scholars were interested in decentering the framework of nationalism which had emerged in the wake of Indian independence in 1947 (Seal 1968). Scholarship inevitably turned to Western Marxism for an explanation on what happened and was happening to Indian agriculture.

The debates of the 1970s sought to figure Indian agrarian space within categories derived from the transition debate in Europe (Aston and Philpin 1995). The debates among scholars, taking place among the lively pages of *Economic and Political Weekly* among other places, included questions such as: Was Indian agriculture semi-feudal or proto-capitalist (Patnaik 1990)? How did colonialism bring about the transition to capitalism in India? Was it through colonial connection of the India peasant to global markets, lenders who created money exchange, or the introduction of private property? The scholar that Bhattacharya most closely engages with is Jairus Banaji, who refused to circumscribe Indian agrarian relations within "modes" of European transition. Banaji's departure is to reject the idea of "stage-ism", or the idea that the agrarian operates through modes such as slavery, feudalism, and capitalism. Rather, operating through the category of labor, Banaji (2010) argued that subsumption of labor existed across time, in multiple rather than singular ways. Nevertheless, Bhattacharya (2013) suggested that many of these works, including Banaji's, did not seek to understand how the everyday world of the peasant and agrarian laborer refigured the regimes of control. "History", in this debate, as Bhattacharya (2013: 32) powerfully argued in a review and critique of Jairus Banaji's (2010) book *History as Theory*, "becomes a lineage of capital".

It is precisely this framework, not just of Marxism, but of the rhythms of capital directing the passage of history, that *The Great Agrarian Conquest* seeks to escape. Deeply

influenced by the writings of Bourdieu, De Certeau, Natalie Zemon Davis, and others, the book shows how economy and culture shape and sustain one another in forming the agrarian order. The first chapter sets this stage exploring the tensions present in masculine paternalism as a means of conquering the agrarian. Lord Dalhousie, the Governor General of India, viewed Henry Lawrence's paternalism and conciliatory, even romantic, attitudes towards natives with infuriation and replaced him with his more utilitarian brother John. As Bhattacharya shows, "[i]f Henry personified the ideology of the soldier-civilian, the official on horseback dispensing quick justice, John emphasized long hours in the kutcherry [local revenue office] and the careful auditing of finance and revenue" (p.32). It is this ideological tension that animates the book, of a colonial order premised on closely engaging with the society it was entering versus one determined to transform it in its own image.

While paternalism and imposition are themes that find voice in almost every chapter of the book, they are most pertinent in chapters six, seven and eight. From the 1860s onward, colonial rule was fairly established in Punjab. Chapter seven begins with the emergence of an archetypal peasant. The colonial government slowly started displacing pastoralists and replacing them with willing settled cultivators. Yet, as Bhattacharya shows, this process was hardly linear and without contestation. Colonial ethnographies of the countryside and law, which were instruments of re-ordering agrarian society, found the native voice entering in numerous and unexpected ways. Colonial ethnographies, which sought to gather information from the institution of authority in the village, often the headman or the priest, invented tradition, as they saw it. As Bhattacharya argues, colonialism drew deeply from Punjab's pre-colonial past, which was in itself often an invention, to make sense of how to conquer it. Similarly, the colonial state, often using the law, created institutions such lambardars or village headmen, who were seen as figures as authority within the village, to be co-opted into the new rural order.

Further, new laws were also a terrain of contestation, central to the making of the agrarian "habitus". In what is the densest part of the book, Bhattacharya shows how colonial law sought to construct patrimonial society and coparcenary brotherhood as a cornerstone of

agrarian improvement. Bhattacharya uses a number of court cases to demonstrate the importance of law, mainly dealing with the division of property. While the Punjab government was fearful of land fragmentation, the colonial government sought to institute laws that codified certain forms of succession. However, these were keenly contested in the courts, and as in many parts of India agrarian land law was largely decided in courthouses. Court decisions sometimes displaced the agnates, and sometimes gave new male patriarchs power, and therefore "new strategies" were devised by peasant families to ensure control of property following the tenancy acts. Adoption, wills (as writing started to become a familiar practice), and gifts were all used to preserve the coparcenary. Delving into cases, Bhattacharya shows how "[t]he brotherhood as a collective did not struggle against the individual: individuals used the language of brotherhood to further individuated interest" (p.283). Custom was invented, entered the official colonial record, and proprietors used it to try and "play the market".

What is the Agrarian?

In the 1970s, Marxist debates around agrarian history aimed to uncover the material conditions behind India's impoverishment. Bhattacharya's strongest argument is to turn to cultural studies to understand how discourse, culture, and the everyday world of the agriculturalist transformed agrarian history. Chapters two, three and four are dedicated to understanding how colonial categories were produced. That is, rather than taking terms such as the "village" or "tenant" for granted, Bhattacharya asks how these emerged through the colonial record in Punjab. The tenant and landlord, for instance, were foundational categories in British society. Broadly, the colonial government in Punjab believed that in order for a productive agrarian society to emerge, the replication of these categories was essential. Some of the finest lines and chapters of this book explore how colonialism created the meaning of the Indian "agrarian". Indeed, Bhattacharya introduces the book as unpacking the "notion of the agrarian", which he suggests, is often "taken for granted". The creation, consolidation, and remaking of categories such as "tenancies, tenures, properties, habitations" for

Bhattacharya are critical to understand how colonialism refigured agrarian society in Punjab. The path to understanding why these categories emerged is to ask why peasant agriculture became the "norm within the rural" and "naturalised as the universal rural" (p.1).

The "village", used both by Gandhi and by postcolonial sociologists to categorize the essence of Indian society, is the most apposite example to show how categories of governance emerged. The co-constitution of these categories was at once through British ideology as well as the power of the coparcenary brotherhood. The colonial state, eager to establish settled agriculture as the normative economic and social setup in Punjab, began to imagine and create villages even where none existed. The village surveys in Punjab began in the 1850s, with colonial officials assessing "boundaries, customs, peoples, soils, fields, rights and obligations … A register of holdings (jamabandi) was to specify the land held by each owner in a village and the rent or revenue he was expected to pay" (p.73-74). John Lawrence sought to capture every single detail, with "scientific precision", to understand the archetypal village. Each method of survey, however, proved inaccurate on reflection, and the subsequent method was presented as an improvement on what came before. These surveys relied on ethnography and questionnaires, while ensuring that costs remained low. Therefore, at different times different officials had power and authority to present ethnographic evidence of what constituted the village. Initially, amins were replaced by patwaris, both of whom were village officials during the pre-colonial era. After the 1860s famine, questions were raised of the competence of patwaris and their training in "professional survey methods". The village eventually emerged in the image of the "estate", or the main fiscal and administrative unit. Here, Bhattacharya makes an important point about how ideas in the metropole, such as the "estate", translated on to the colony. Colonial officials were aware that the villages were loose agglomerations, often having little in common with neighbors. Yet, the idea of the village was not merely a fiscal entity, but was imbued with property relations and created new modes of proprietorial engagement within the village. It was also far from egalitarian. As they were created from image, narration, and observation, women and lower caste tenants and

laborers were denied membership in the "male coparcenary community" and the "right to be classified as proprietors".

While not directly engaging with several older and more recent works on British history that have sought to understand the colonial agrarian order as constitutive as liberal political thought in Britain, this book nevertheless is an important intervention. Scholars have dissected the governing logic of the colonial state in India, namely, the sweeping ideology of liberalism. While older scholarship examined how ideas such as British utilitarianism played out in the Indian context, new scholarship argues that colonialism was not a context where ideas were applied, but forged (Stokes 1989). Uday Mehta (1999) argued that liberal thought in the 19th century was premised on the othering of the colonial subject. This was not an aberration in British political thought, Mehta argued, but part of its constitution. Karuna Mantena (2010) sought to historicize and refine this conception in light of Henry Maine and others who believed that preserving traditional society, i.e. the Indian village, was central to governing British India. This signaled a strong impulse of paternalism within Victorian colonial governments which viewed traditional societies as both an ideal type and vulnerable to modernity. Andrew Sartori's (2014) influential book, which deployed custom as an anchor, showed how the Bengali peasant embraced liberalism as a critique of both capitalism and colonialism. The question that Bhattacharya poses is how to move from this intellectual history of British political thought to its practical manifestations in the fields of Punjab. Yet, in uncovering how categories such as the village, tenant, and landlord emerged, *The Great Agrarian Conquest* does not fully trace how this traveled into and formed the logic of metropolitan thought. In answering how the everyday logic of colonial governance shaped its intellectual practice, or indeed understanding why it did not, would have shown how the conquest of agrarian landscapes in India shaped metropolitan attitudes and thinking (Cooper and Stoler 1997).

In its treatment of the archive and sources, *The Great Agrarian Conquest* also differs with some of the most influential studies of South Asian peasant society, including the works of Bernard Cohn (1996) and the Subaltern Studies Collective. Cohn's work argued that

colonial instruments such as the census reified Indian society in different ways, creating new and unfamiliar categories. Ranajit Guha (1988) and a strand of the Subaltern Studies Collective suggested that the colonial archive fundamentally mis-represented the peasant. In Guha's methodology, the manner in which to understand peasant resistance was to subvert the colonial archive, and imbue different meanings on words that often figured as descriptors for peasants. In contrast, for Bhattacharya, it was the realm of practice where both categories of thought as well as resistance emerged in the colonial archive as an everyday phenomenon. Therefore, the colonial state itself, as Bhattacharya shows, was constantly in conflict within itself. For instance, in chapter eight, as part of an effort to map the diverse landscape of Punjab composed of grasslands, forests, and arable land, pillars were erected to demarcate what belonged to villages, pastoralists, and the state. While Baden-Powell, who served as the chief commissioner of forests, strongly argued that village officials such as tehsildar constantly shifted these pillars and had their palms greased, the Revenue Department was of the firm opinion that these officials were a representative of the state. For Bhattacharya, therefore, the colonial archive is always partial and fragmented in nature, often revealing as much about colonial logic as it did about the society it sought to govern.

New Histories of the Agrarian, or Colonialism at Large

The book represents is a major contribution to a long and rich debate around agrarian history and political economy of South Asia. In setting out an argument that attempts to not merely engage the agrarian history of South Asia, but history writing as such, it is difficult to place this book's precise contribution to historiography. Surprisingly, the book does little to engage with three major themes that have given new life to agrarian history in modern South Asia, including the history of commodities, the history of science, and environmental history. All three strands are sufficiently present in the book to warrant a serious engagement with these literatures. In a riveting final two chapters, Bhattacharya turns his attention to the commons and the canals of Punjab, possibly the largest experiment in reclaiming and colonizing lands from "waste" through irrigation projects and scientific agriculture. In 1872, a series of fires

broke out across grasslands and agrarian fields in Punjab. These were difficult to control. Bhattacharya draws two conclusions from this episode. First, that it revealed the conflict between "science" and the language of paternalism. Fires were a fight for colonial terrain, between forest officials who had studied the landscape and wanted to criminalize communities they regarded as responsible for them, and revenue officials who believed that these measures were heavy handed and antithetical to encouraging productive cultivators. Second, turning to 1970s literature in the United States, Bhattacharya (p.376) shows how science gradually recognized that fires "dehydrated clayey moist soils, encouraged bacterial activity, increased soil fertility by supplying minerals, salts, and potash, promoted nitrification, cleared debris on the floor – allowing seeds to reach the soil – destroyed weeds and gregarious plant growth that displaced timber trees". The canal colonies were an experiment in the late 19th century to colonize forest lands, waste, and the commons to expand the arable frontier. As the American wheat market collapsed during this period, colonial officials saw Punjab as an ideal substitute. While early on colonists swarmed the region and displaced pastoral and forest dwelling communities, by the late 1930s the colonies were beset with saline lands, insufficient nitrogen in soils, and problems of labor shortage.

Science, the environment, and commodities therefore are a central part of Bhattacharya's narrative. However, for an explanatory framework, Bhattacharya turns to Lenin's theory of agrarian conquest. Drawing from Lenin on paths to agrarian conquest, Bhattacharya suggests that the canal colonies represented agrarian conquest from above, which sought to impose order on space. The book therefore moves from charting a paternalistic vision of ordering agrarian space to colonization of through force, law, and violence. While calling for examination of the colonial record in terms of everyday contestation in the lower courts, district and tehsil offices, no such explanation is offered to understand and place natural and non-human forces in this narrative. Perhaps even more surprising is the absence of commodity history, a field which has taken a decidedly global turn and increasingly embraced the relevance of science in shaping and being shaped by the commodities it sought to produce (Ali 2018; Beckert 2004; Kumar 2012; Woods 2017). All

three historiographic strands sit at the precise intersection of "the economy" and "culture" that Bhattacharya seeks to bridge. Yet these feel like "sub-arguments" in understanding the logics of the abstract force of colonialism and history writing more broadly.

In the epilogue, the analytic moves to tragedy. Bhattacharya dwells on the final travels of Malcolm Darling – an administrator, ethnographer and chronicler of Punjab – across the state in 1947. Darling, for Bhattacharya, is the broken figure of colonial rule. Darling's diary, *At Freedom's Door*, chronicles villages yearning for independence; the major themes that animate the text are "disavowal and rejection". The native, who Darling, on his arrival in 1926, believed wished to be governed by the British coloniser, now firmly said no. "Everywhere … [Darling] heard the cry of azadi", or freedom (p.458). Bhattacharya's consistent effort then is to uncover the habitus of such men, to understand what moved them and how they reacted to a new world around them. This is perhaps the greatest contribution of the book, to seamlessly move between registers as different as Marx and Bourdieu, and yet retain an enduring faithfulness to the fields of Punjab. It is therefore difficult to place Bhattacharya within or beyond the scholarship on agrarian history. As Bhattacharya shows, a single trope or analytic framework is insufficient to bring together the variety of means used to construct, retain and fortify colonial rule. Is, then, the product of culture and economy ultimately tragedy? Bhattacharya leaves the reader with several answers, not one, to the question he powerfully poses – how was the colonial agrarian modern forged?

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