



BOOK REVIEW

Assembling the Local: Political Economy and Agrarian Governance in British India

By Upal Chakrabarti. 228 pp. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021.

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Upal Chakrabarti's *Assembling the Local* revises the epistemic foundations, organising discourse and embedded practices of political economy in early nineteenth-century India. Taking Cuttack as his site of enquiry, Chakrabarti's monograph grounds the universalising expanse of the discipline within the 'local'. Bernard Williams once remarked on the classificatory mismatch between the analytical and continental philosophical traditions in Europe—the former characterised by its qualities, the latter geographically. Noting a similar problem in the universal/local dyad, Chakrabarti restores conceptual parity.

Before coming to what the 'local' was, let us consider what Chakrabarti argues it was not. The 'local' was not a blank geographical point on which colonial liberalism, produced through the discipline of political economy, was enacted. Neither was it a concrete space as opposed to an abstraction or organising principle for colonial governance. The 'local' was therefore not an impediment that political economy needed to overcome in order to achieve its universalist ambitions. Chakrabarti elides the geographic limitations of the 'local' and elevates it as a force within the apparatus (*dispositif*) of early nineteenth-century governance; the 'local' acts as a conceptual category (abstract) rather than a concrete place (particular). Accordingly, while the monograph *places* Cuttack as the site of investigation, Chakrabarti urges readers to think of the 'local' modularly—one that 'involves but is not constitutive of fixed geographical locales' (p. 3).

The repositioning of the 'local' in these terms offers Chakrabarti a series of useful insights into the epistemic claims of this phase of liberalism. He shows how the scientific claims of liberal thought were established when political economy took production as its object of study. Agrarian governance therefore translated as the management of customary power that varied regionally yet determined production collectively. The art of governance, or the 'political' in political economy, was to enable the conditions of production without interfering in the production process itself, thus connoting 'a mode of reflecting on the economy of power in society' (p. 22). This reflection inspired a 'practice of governance' that both generated and operated through an apparatus. What distinguishes the apparatus from ideology was that, within the former, heterogenous and even oppositional elements functioned within a collective logic without succumbing to a reductionist assimilation. When heterogenous elements functioned harmoniously, without compromising on their essential heterogeneity, the epistemic scope of political economy conceptually expanded to include both universalism and difference within its field of investigation. The universal claims of political economy therefore emerged from its

ability to ‘generate organize and explain difference’ (p. 27) or ‘to universalize as and in difference’ (p. 48). The sophistication of the argument lies in the reading of ‘difference’ as a force of assimilation rather than as an element of opposition for the purposes of a universalising imperialism.

Chakrabarti shows how the epistemic foundations of political economy were reworked by theorists such as William Whewell and Richard Jones in the colony, as they elevated inductivism over an abstract deduction. They emphasised that ‘facts’ that were emerging from particular socio-economic contexts or the ‘local’ and ‘colligated’ these ‘observed particulars by imposing on them a concept’ (p. 30). Such manoeuvres functioned alongside the ways in which political economy manifests in actual governmental practice and reports, particularly highlighted in the context of rent. Chakrabarti skilfully argues that, from the point of view of company governance, rent was ‘comprehended less as a measure of differential fertility and more as a power differential’ (p. 53). The formulation established the company within a longer lineage of agrarian rule that understood property as the right or power to collect rent rather than the ability to own or alienate land. So, as in Cuttack, whenever the government chose to fix rents at lower values than the full estimate, they allowed producers to possess a part of their produce and thereby recognised their proprietary rights. As per Chakrabarti, ‘wherever rent disappeared so did property’ (p. 53). This determination produced what he describes as the ‘property–power complex’. In managing this complex, agrarian governance emerged as a ‘particular articulation of political economy, one that establishes as its object of enquiry the inter-relationship between property and power’ (p. 60). In decoding and defining this relation, political economy understood the institution of property as a way of managing and distributing the production of land and labour. Within this schema, the ‘local’ emerged as a classificatory framework, indexing both the variation and the resemblance between an imagined yet autochthonous ‘Indian relation between property and power’ (p. 73).

Both conceptually and geographically, the ‘local’ collapsed into the village that acted as the ‘real’ site of governance. Emblematic of the property–power complex, the village was a cluster of (local) power relations and a collective territorial unit that maximised production. Importantly, Chakrabarti’s ‘village’ operates distinctly within the governing apparatus of the early nineteenth century, as opposed to what it came to later represent—a self-sufficient, customary site for traditional social relations—in the latter half of the century. While surveys and maps produced this village as a territorial unit of governance, political economy conjured an atavistic yet incomplete figure of the ‘landholder’ as the authentic proprietor in each locality. Managing both became ‘internal to the governmental/political economic reason’ of Company Rule (p. 112).

The monograph may easily be placed alongside any theoretically innovative studies of colonial liberal discourse, including those of Andrew Sartori, Bhavani Raman, and Karuna Mantena—scholars whom Chakrabarti acknowledges and builds upon. This scholarship has reworked the binaries of colonial discourse—especially those between private property/collective rights or custom/law, etc. Instead of treating binaries as contradictions within a framework, they are reintegrated within a single operative logic, or apparatus of governance. In doing so, they push past the overt epistemic claims of political economy and expose how colonial liberalism both internalised and utilised that which it considered to be outside its theoretical arch. Chakrabarti argues similarly when he abandons the analytical value of dichotomies such as metropole–colony, universal–concrete, abstract–particular and theory–practice. Instead, he places weighted emphasis on how these binaries worked symbiotically to constitute an immanent field of discourse, actualised and witnessed in an ‘art of governance’.

What makes this monograph remarkable is the chosen period of study. Chakrabarti’s type of argument is more commonly applied to the second half of the nineteenth century,

during the period of Indirect Rule. It was then that concepts such as ‘custom’, ‘pluralism’, and ‘evolution’ were accommodated within the scope of universal history, especially in property, law, and governance. Putatively, it was then that governance was reformulated to accommodate the doctrine of cultural difference and in order to expand commercial cultivation. These changes that followed the revolt of 1857 were contrasted to the period of early nineteenth-century utilitarianism, when colonial difference was seen as a hindrance to the universal aspirations of liberalism. Chakrabarti’s close study of Cuttack, however, shows how the ‘local’ already acted as an organisational principle of difference in the early nineteenth century, thus connecting company with Crown rule. The study therefore establishes an unbroken genealogy of governance between the two periods that includes ideas related to the self-limitation of power and the recognition of custom, and the seeing of wealth management as a matter of production rather than extraction alone.

Despite its compelling argument, the book raises some questions. First, Chakrabarti’s framework regarding the property–power complex describes the formal relations of property vis-à-vis governance too neatly—a feature that is common to works on political economy that quarry and thereby risk overdetermining a legal archive. Such a reading of law abstracts complex social relations into conceptually formal units that fit into an apparatus. Were such categories as neat within official discourse? Does Chakrabarti’s political economy—one that wrestles with contingent and localised differences of property, rent, and power—give too much epistemic surety to the liberal apparatus? If, like capital, colonial governance constantly internalised and made imminent that which stood outside its conceptual framework, then what room is left for seeing ‘difference’ as anxiety, wonder, and even failure in the context of colonial rule?

Secondly, if the ‘local’ is de-fetishised as a ‘concrete particular’ and presented as an organising principle within the schema of universal abstraction, could this argument apply to universalism, too? Could ‘abstractions’—deterritorialised and circulating as universals—be ‘located’ within the operating logic of ‘concrete particulars’? The question could be addressed by documenting the role of capital in constructing the property–power–sovereignty complex and the relations of labour and production. The importance of capital, extended through usury, played an important part in shaping the terms of commercial cultivation and land rights in the latter half of the nineteenth century. What was its role in the first half? If the local could conceptualise difference within a universal schema, then how were the abstractions of capital (usurious or otherwise) ‘localised’ in the discourse of political economy and in governance?

These questions aside, this empirically rich and theoretically nuanced book is undoubtedly an important intervention in the historiography of political economy in early colonial liberalism, revising both its timelines and *modus operandi*.