

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

Review by Arun Kumar, Nottingham University

Upal Chakrabarti's *Assembling the Local* is a complex reading laden with unexplained jargons of the political economy discipline. However, it offers a fascinating understanding of how agrarian land revenue in the nineteenth century colonial India came to be based on a non-Ricardian understanding of rent. The book's focus is on Cuttack which was acquired by the East India Company (EIC) in 1803 from Marathas. However, the arguments of the book are located at the crossroad of colonial agrarian revenue policies and the British science of political economy. Eric Stokes' classic 1959 work established that David Ricardo's utilitarian rent theory had informed the agrarian revenue policies of the colonial state in the nineteenth century. Rent here was described as net produce after deducting wages and profits over invested capital stock from gross produce and was based on the assessment of the productivity/fertility difference of the soil. This theory was introduced to India through James Mill who made a case that the East India Company state could claim the whole rent as land in 'the orient', unlike in England where private property reigned, belonged to the state. Its practical inclusion in colonial agrarian policy, as Stokes noted, was through Holt Mackenzie who drafted the Regulation VII of 1822 that proposed a new land revenue settlement for the Ceded and Conquered Provinces acquired in 1803. In practice, the assessment of the productivity of land and deducing the net produce came to be a very difficult task. And as works of Asiya Siddiqi, John Rosselli, and Michael Mann (surprisingly overlooked by Chakrabarti) show that actual revenue came to be decided through varied methods, including, through the guess work/estimates of local officers. Chakrabarti argues against constructing analytical binaries of metropolitan abstract theories and ground realities in colonies which, he argues, has shaped much of existing works including that of Stokes, Lynn Zastoupil, Thomas Metcalf, and John Rosselli.

Chakrabarti suggests that the understanding of rent that came to define Holt Mackenzie's practices and of other revenue officials were grounded in a distinct political economy and agrarian rationality that saw rent as the marker and carrier of local power/sovereignty and proprietary relations. Rent, according to him, was decided by the 'reality of the field' (inherent land power relations in a locality), and not by the 'fertility of land' (Ricardian Rent theory) (p. 68). Chakrabarti argues that rent in the rationality of agrarian governance was not just claimed by the state, but it also came to be shared between actual (soil) owner of the land, hereditary managers of land, and revenue collectors of the state.

While initial revenue settlements in Cuttack were done with zamindars (elite landed class) for fixed years, later the colonial government carried out an extensive land survey (1837-45), determined proprietary land titles of various stakeholders, and fixed rents. In this revised revenue settlement, which was based on the principles of William Bentinck's Regulation IX of 1833, 'rent, as property, as sovereignty, was solely a marker of indigenous relations of property and sovereignty...' (p. 59). Zamindars were not totally derecognized as proprietors of land titles, but their privileges, claims over rent, and sovereignty over land came to be shared by other local/village level stakeholders such as sarberakars, mokuddums, and pudhans who were recognised in Cuttack as hereditary managers and as village officers having a particular share of the revenue collection (p. 147). This settlement was a move away from the logics of the Permanent revenue settlement that had located the property rights in

the figure of zamindar which came to be seen as a parasite unproductive figure in the rationality of colonial governance.

Away from Cuttack, contesting debates were also going on simultaneously in the discipline of political economy in the metropole. Here, Ricardian theory of rent had itself come under criticism and serious revision through works of Richard Jones, the chair of political economy and history at the East India College in Haileybury. Jones was influenced by inductivist approach of the science philosopher, William Whewell against the deductive approach of Ricardo. Jones' approach emphasized on accounting for diverse national/local conditions which structured important categories of political economy: rent, profit, and wage. He emphasized on distribution of surplus produce/rent among various stakeholders of land proprietorship as the defining criterion of agrarian production. Chakrabarti argues that this marked an epistemological shift in the science of political economy where rent was no longer seen as a phenomenon of differences in soil fertility (as Ricardians had conceptualised) but as a key characteristic of the distribution of the produce and a marker of sovereignty and proprietary relations. This shift allowed the *universal* science of political economy to account for *difference* and indigenous local land relations. Colonial agrarian governance rationality in India was also dealing with questions of accounting for local specificities of agrarian conditions. Jones suggested that property rights over land in India were plural and shared among various stakeholders such as, the state, local officials, and ryots. It was also a shift from James Mill who saw the state as a despotic landlord to John Stuart Mill (the son of James Mill) who saw land property rights in India dispersed.

What is not so clear from Chakrabarti's book is why was the EIC or its officials were interested in this Foucauldian reflexivity of 'the economy of power'—that is the 'self-limitation of sovereignty' [the liberal governance] by locating dispersed local powers over land. Why was the EIC state interested in sharing its revenue with local village level stakeholders? By delinking the rationality agrarian revenue governance from the thorny issue of the EIC officials' obsession over measuring a *high* revenue demand and its extraction from powerful local magnates vested with feudal power, Chakrabarti had produced an account of agrarian governance that proposes to read the self-limitation of colonial governance as merely a feature of liberalism and classical political economy. But could this also not be a limit of the colonial power to operate and govern the mighty local while in search of locating proprietary rights and local collaborators to secure maximum revenue?

Chakrabarti's book is a novel contribution to a now dead field of revenue agrarian history. His book historicises rent and agrarian governance practices of the colonial state by bringing together dispersed sites and making them to speak with each other, such as the debates happening in the science of political economy in Britain, specificities of land power relations in Cuttack, and discussions of local and imperial revenue officials.