

Imagining a Sociology of South Asia: 1840-1870

Yesterday's lecture considered South Asia's early nineteenth century 'moment' of constitutional liberalism at the beginning of the nineteenth century. During the 1810s and '20s, Indian intellectuals fashioned, from international, British colonial and indigenous sources, a series of political concepts that they deemed appropriate to the Subcontinent's aspirations. These ideas were to be constantly reinvented and modified both during and since the colonial period. Central concepts included the idea of a unified India, a representative constitution, the empowered Indian juror, the *panchayat* (a local judicial body), the 'drain of wealth' from the subcontinent and an Indian 'public' supported by a free press.

These ideas emerged against the background of a series of reformations in this-worldly religion in which vedantic Hinduism (and on the Muslim side, renovated Islam) were proposed as appropriate complements and inspirations for a new public sphere. In order to demonstrate the trans-national reach of these ideological changes and the manner in which they became embodied in different social contexts, I pointed to analogous and connected developments in Ceylon and Southeast Asia.

These ideas were located within a specific set of political debates that emerged in the immediate aftermath of the world wide revolutionary wars. I was concerned not to 'reduce' them to simple reflections of contemporary social history or products of a vague 'colonial modernity'. Equally, I did not want to treat these ideas as 'high' political theory, divorced from life and marching through history in a teleological pattern. Nineteenth-century liberalism was a set of sensibilities, embodied ideas and programmes, rather than a defined set of ideas. The Indian liberalisms of the 1810s differed in important respects from the

Indian liberalisms of the 1860s, let alone the 1940s. This first liberal constitutional ‘moment’ was by its very nature trans-national. This did not mean that the Indian intellectuals who engaged with these issues were simply uttering a ‘derivative discourse’ that was, in some sense, inauthentic. Instead, they cannibalised, modified and reworked these concepts in a radically different context. Rammohan and his generation inflected them with a specifically Indian historicity; they linked them back to specifically Indic conceptions of moral and political good. They began to create analogies between their own lived experience as members of a subordinated subject ‘Hindoo race’ and the revolutionary changes that they saw across the world.

The years between the constitutional moment of the 1810s and ‘20s and the so-called crisis of British liberalism in the 1880s saw massive social and economic change in India. India’s textile exports collapsed and manufactured imports flooded down the new railway lines. Agrarian revolt became common in a landscape scarred by famine and high revenue demand. An indigenous middle class emerged in the port cities and their hinterlands. Indians reflected on these changes and placed them in the context of events in the wider world: further waves of revolution, imperialist wars and the slow growth of popular government in Europe and the United States. They established further analogies and considered new historical conjunctures.

One set of ideas, in particular, gained wide currency during these years. This was the notion that India was divided by class and caste, that the very organization of society was imperfect, and not simply the morality of its rulers, which had been Rammohan’s refrain. There emerged a new understanding of human community, its history and its future: it required what I will call a ‘sociological imagination.’ To see society as structurally imperfect involved imagining a good society. Sudipta Kaviraj has pointed to the importance of Indian

appropriations of the idea of *samaj* or 'society.' I am arguing that an even more radical set of ideological changes occurred between 1830 and 1870. The consequence was the emergence of what I will be calling critical and benign sociologies and an energised Indian historicity, more complex, analogical and global in its reach than the ones created by Rammohan and his contemporaries.

Two ideological irritants, as it were, which helped produce these new visions of a defective and a good society were the growing anti-landlordism and the latent republicanism which influenced educated Indian youth. Even before Rammohan's death some voices were heard condemning him for a lack of radicalism on agrarian issues. By contrast, Rammohan's conservative opponents denounced him as *adhunik* 'a modern', an enemy of the 'faith of our fathers,' *sanatan dharm*, a Christian, or even worse *arhat*, a Buddhist.

The intellectual shifts of the 1830s, '40s and early '50s saw the emergence of several new themes. What the historian B B Majumdar called the 'philosophical radicals', disciples of the Eurasian radical, Henry Derozio, opened up a wide debate on religion. Derozio taught at Calcutta's main higher education establishment, the Hindoo College. But parents of its Hindu students accused him of atheism and had him dismissed.¹ Derozio's mixture of Tom Paine's revolutionary principles with David Hume's agnosticism was rather strong medicine for Calcutta in the 1840s. Yet his intellectual legacy was a pervasive scepticism about caste, custom and authority. This persisted even amongst those moderate liberals and devotees of 'religions of mankind' who held the stage in India over the next generation.

Along with scepticism, an understated republicanism gained adherents. *The Times* had called Rammohan a 'republican' in its obituary of him. Until his last years Rammohan had

certainly kept himself apart from the symbols of monarchy. But his stance was more akin to that of Benjamin Franklin before the American Revolution than to Tom Paine: he simply ignored monarchy and its representatives while he was in India. The sons of Hindu landholders and merchants who were educated in the Hindoo College during 1840s and '50s were more committed to republicanism and popular representation. They read Paine along with histories of revolutionary America and France. The tricolour was hoisted on the Ochterloney monument in central Calcutta during the French Revolution of 1830. In 1843, someone calling himself an 'Old Hindoo' published a series of articles on the grievances of India, praising French revolutionary principles in the newspaper the, *Bengal Hurkaru*. His targets included Indian landholders and princes. The liberal British newspaper, *Friend of India*, advised him to read more history before praising a movement that 'would have turned the [river] Hoogly into a revolutionary torrent, and established a permanent guillotine in Tank Square [in central Calcutta].'² In 1848, again, reformers in Calcutta demanded representation in the British Parliament, when the nearby French settlement of Chandernagore sent representatives to the French Assembly. This demand was also received with ridicule even by the liberal Anglo Indian press.³ Yet it is possible to detect an underlying concern among the expatriates. Ireland and continental Europe were reported to be 'on the brink of anarchy'⁴ while Britain itself was suffering the 'vile conspiracy of Chartist agitation.'⁵ The second revolutionary conjuncture was close at hand, and Young India was intimately aware of it.

The spread of anti-landlordism and republican sentiment informed the Indian intelligentsia's discovery of class and positional social subordination during these years. It presaged the emergence of the powerful and enduring Indian left, at odds with the very social order from which its members had emerged. Intellectual 'influence' from outside was

undoubtedly important, but only when combined with powerful internal symbols that generated political 'affect' and ideas within India itself.

Even before 1848, Derozio's radical students had gone much further than Rammohan in criticizing the agrarian system of Bengal and the burdens it put on the 'poorer classes' and the 'poor labourer.'⁶ Over the next two decades, the 'ryot', a word meaning the generic 'subject' in Mughal India, became synonymous with 'the peasant.' Common subjects were now seen by Indian intellectuals, not as victims of particular oppressions by the powerful, but as figures structurally subordinated within an internally conflicted hierarchy. Indians knew little of the emerging classical Marxism, but the notion of class and 'le paysan' propounded in Comte and Saint Simon accorded with this new sensibility concerning poverty, which had developed with their increasingly common journeys into the Bengal or Madras countryside.

There were three further appropriations from outside: the distant effects of Chartism in Britain, the American debate about slavery and Christian evangelists' hostility to the agrarian system in Bengal. The first of these- the radical Chartist critique of British society and discovery of the 'working man'- was signalled by the appearance in India in 1843 of the British radical, George Thompson.

George Thompson (1804-78) was in many ways a younger version of Buckingham, the friend of Rammohan, discussed yesterday. Thompson emerged as an opponent of slavery in Liverpool and later as an associate of Joseph Hume in the National Parliamentary Reform Association. He visited the United States on several occasions to agitate against slavery and was considered by John Bright to have been 'the liberator of the slaves in the English colonies.'⁷ An MP, prophetically from Tower Hamlets in East London, though never a

Chartist leader as such, he emphasised the need for Indians to organise and bring their grievances to the attention of the British electorate because it was the British people that 'make Parliament.' Thompson viewed the Indian associations as the equivalent to the electoral reform societies with which he had worked in the 1820s in Britain. Important here was the Indian Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge which had been founded about 1840, in the main by people who had been members of Derozio's Academic Association in the Hindoo College.

In the speeches during his tour, Thompson and his Indian hosts discussed representative government, the utility of 'combination,' the diffusion of information in India and Britain and the unity of mankind. It helped create both what I call a critical and also a benign sociology, quite at odds with representations of Indian society purveyed by colonial officials. Many of Thompson's themes echoed those of the Chartists in Britain, especially their hostility to monopoly and privilege, but also the police as a system of 'oppression' and the corruption of local officials. Yet alongside their concern for peasants and labourers as classes, the new generation of leaders began to summon up powerful visions of a prosperous, industrialised India with an educated populace. Thompson himself orated on the need for 'an Indian Sheffield, and Indian Birmingham'⁸ a theme taken up in almost the same year by the Indian traveller, Bholanauth Chunder. This vision of a new society was supported by picture of a past Indian golden age. Dakshinaranjan Mookerjee argued in *The Bengal Spectator*, even before Thompson arrived, that under Indian governments the free tenant had once been the owner of his land.⁹ A committee set up in the year of Thompson's visit set itself to collect information on abuses such as rack-renting and illegal exactions on the peasant with a view to the 'restoration of the patriarchal system which so long and happily existed.'¹⁰

The appropriation of aspects of Chartist ideology in the decade after Thompson's was clear in the pages of the English and vernacular press. The editor of the pro-landlord Indian-owned newspaper, the *Hindoo Patriot*, noted with concern the appearance of the radical British journal the *Rationalist* in Calcutta. He feared that its rhetoric would stoke up hostility to the class of landlords itself, rather than settle for a perfectly proper campaign to eliminate particular abuses. In the years preceding the American Civil War, Indian commentators also used the analogy of plantation slavery to dramatise the plight of the peasant. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was read, discussed and translated into Bengali. Student activists even offered a prize for a Bengali novel that would treat the oppressions of the peasantry in the same manner. This offended the *Hindoo Patriot*, which wrote that Bengal landlords had nothing in common with vulgar Americans. It further argued that the Bengal peasant, while not a free yeoman, was certainly not a slave. The closest analogy was the English 'operative' tied to incessant labour in the factory.¹¹ When indigo peasants formed combinations based on oath taking (*dharmaghat*), this was very close to the English 'strike', the paper noted. The writer in the *Hindoo Patriot* deployed arguments about cooperative practice and legal status to illustrate the difference between slave and peasant. He also cited several examples of what we would now call social mobility out of the peasantry into landholding and money-lending occupations, notably the case of the prosperous East Bengal Kaibarta caste. Here we see an indigenous sociology was developing.

Apart from peasant grievances, the existence of class domination was sharply demonstrated to Indian radicals by the fate of the Indian 'coolie' as the international economy developed rapidly in the 1840s and indentured labour flowed out to Mauritius, Africa and the West Indies. A large prison-like establishment near Calcutta, which held coolies as they awaited transportation, became a potent local symbol of coercion and the loss of freedom.

These classic liberal themes were given added power by the humiliation that some Indians felt in seeing their countrymen set adrift to lose caste on the *kala pani*, the black and polluting waters of the ocean. Calcutta liberals had set up a committee to discourage the emigration of indentured labour as early as 1835¹² and the staunching of this ‘drain of labour’ as much as the ‘drain of wealth’ from the country quickly became a major theme in political debate. Thus it was the emerging intelligentsia’s lived experience, the turning inward of a sociological gaze and virtuosity at deploying analogy, which was critical. It brought into being both a critical and a benign sociology, subtly at odds with most representations of Indian society by colonial officials. This was no simple prostration before ‘derivative’ discourse or conquest by a colonial episteme.

The invention of class in India took place without direct reference to the emerging European Marxist tradition. But Bengali intellectuals did allude to a weak British version of historical materialism in the guise of the work of Henry Thomas Buckle, author of *The Development of Civilisation in England*. Buckle accounted for the difference between Eastern and Western civilisation by asserting that, whereas in the West man had overcome the brute forces of nature, in the East he still battled them. In the West man’s labour was turned to the accumulation of knowledge, while in the East, only a small class of priests and renouncers could be spared from everyday agrarian toil, and these turned to profitless contemplation. Thus the ‘advance of European civilisation was characterised by a continuously diminishing influence of physical laws and a continuously increasing influence of mental laws.’ Buckle engrafted onto this a cursory theory of oriental despotism that was illustrated with a number of Indian examples. The historian, B B Majumdar, writing in the 1930s, argued that Buckle had drawn his evidence on Bengal from the contemporary essays of the Calcutta radical and Derozian, Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee. Mukherjee was a devotee of Rousseau and Tom Paine,

who argued that the proper purpose of government was to succour the weak and maintain a natural god-given equality. He held that an ancient Indian egalitarian society had been overthrown by the selfish acts of the Brahmin priesthood. The Brahmins had ‘sowed the seeds of alienation, disorder and anarchy, disserving the joint and aggregate interests of the commonwealth, implanting vicious sectarian and caste conflicts,’ which had persisted to the present day.¹³ From this early period arose the degradation and misery of the Bengal peasantry.

Whether Buckle was influenced by Mukherjee or not- and if he was it would have been one of the first direct Indian interventions in modern European philosophy- it is important that the Indian writer had introduced a notion of class domination, class interest and class conflict into Rammohan’s scheme of the ancient Indian constitution. Even though he was a Brahmin himself, Mukherjee thrust into Indian debate, almost for the first time, a violent critique of the Brahmin caste as an oppressive social group, not simply a corrupted hierarchy, that went far beyond Rammohan’s distaste for idolatry. Twenty years later another Bengali radical, Kishorichand Mitra, deployed a more elaborate version of Buckle’s theory of ‘man against nature’ to explain agrarian poverty in Bengal. By the 1870s Romesh Chandra Dutt and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee had a fully developed analysis of agrarian Bengal, which they regarded as structurally oppressive as well as unjust and unnatural.

I now briefly move south down the Bay of Bengal to Ceylon. My aim is to illustrate the point that the emergence of a benign sociology for colonial Asia was both a trans-national phenomenon, and also one locally embodied in quite different social contexts. The example shows how the ideologies of the 1848 revolutions in Europe were appropriated and set to work in Ceylon even more dramatically than were Chartist ideas, or the debate about

Caribbean and American slavery, in India. The Ceylonese background to these events was the fiscal and ideological crisis of Viscount Torrington's administration in the island between 1845 and 1850, presided over by Lord Grey and James Stephen, early liberal imperialists, in the Colonial Office in London.

Even before Torrington's arrival, the Ceylon Government, had been gripped by a bout of 'Smithianism' -free-trade fundamentalism- as expatriate plantations gradually changed practices of labour and production on the island. Free traders demanded the end of government monopolies and taxes on imports and exports, which had persisted from the days of the Dutch administration before 1798. The urge to free trade, however, coincided with a significant commercial depression on the island, reflecting world-wide economic problems. In order to repair its finances the Ceylon government moved smartly from indirect taxation on trade and incomes to direct taxation. It imposed new taxes on houses, guns, dogs, legal documents and markets, while corvee labour was re-imposed on the peasantry.

The result was a series of large-scale protests in which Europeans, mixed race burghers, Tamils, Cingalese, cultivators, lords and Buddhist priests all took part. In the interior, the realm of the old Kandyan kingdom, a kind of patriotic resistance built up under the leadership of a royal pretender. This movement articulated a new form of Buddhist revival. Buddhist institutions had been badly affected by evangelical pressure on the British government to withdraw from the support of 'heathen' institutions, something that had also occurred in India. The emergence in the later nineteenth century of a kind of 'Protestant Buddhist' ideology, hostile to missionaries, Hindu influences and the colonial state, was an indirect result of this.

At the same time, burghers and British expatriates in and around Colombo became very active in movements of petitioning and protest. These transformed and expanded contemporary ideas of political liberty in Europe. The key figure here was a Colombo medical officer, Dr Christopher Elliott. Elliott was a Scots-Irish radical of Baptist confession. Baptists, as governor Torrington pointedly remarked, were very active in radical agitations in Canada, the West Indies and Australia, quite apart from Ireland itself. But, as editor of the *Colombo Observer*, it was to the ideas of the French revolutions that Elliott turned. His letter in the *Observer* on 3 July 1848, urged the people of Ceylon to follow the example of France and to refuse to pay the new taxes.¹⁴ Elliott argued, as the paper had been doing for some time, that the only guarantee against arbitrary government was the institution of a full democratic franchise. This should be based on complete racial equality.

Though it was never fully implemented there, this democratic constitution was to follow the model of the south Indian French colony of Pondicherry, which had formally been enfranchised by the revolutionaries of 1848.¹⁵ Here again we glimpse a set of trans-national contacts. Torrington, for his part, dismissed the agitation as a product of the mixed-race burgher class. Having ‘no principle of nationality whatever’, he claimed, their minds are consequently not filled with enlarged views in general, and the peculiarity of their position engenders an uneasiness of feeling which is not traceable in their minds to any distinct cause—but the establishments of newspapers and the low personalities of one of them, the *Colombo Observer*, gives food for their querulousness.’¹⁶ Elliott was particularly dangerous because he travelled the country, meeting Hindu and Buddhist chiefs and priests. Worse, on some issues he had the tacit support of the Chief Justice, and communicated with British radicals including Joseph Hume.¹⁷

The constitutional liberal moment of the 1820s was followed, therefore, by an intellectual and political shift. This produced a debate about democratic empowerment linked to a sense of structural racial and class oppression in Asian port cities and their hinterlands. The new inward, sociological gaze observed social groups rather than ritual orders. It referred to structural oppression, not bad government. It compared societies rather than, as earlier 'constitutions.' Finally, it saw historical conjuncture itself as the driver of change rather than the rise or decline of virtue.

What was being created here was what the American sociologist C Wright Mills called a 'sociological imagination': the capacity to conceive biography, history and a concept of society as an interlinked, composite phenomenon. Mills's formulation anticipated Reinhardt Koselleck's theorising of the manner in which history was energised to create new horizons of what he calls 'social expectation' in eighteenth century Europe. To adapt Mills's words, Indians (and later other Asians) strove for 'a quality of mind that [would] help them to use information and develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves.'¹⁸ Rammohan's generation had been aware of personal disempowerment within the Hindu family and colonial system, but they did not yet have a clear way of linking this with the wider problems of the social body as a man-made set of interconnected social groups.

No doubt some feature of existing patterns of thought, such as the classical Sanskrit interest in classifying and counting, and Indo-Muslim theories of ethical government played a part. Yet particularly formative here was the gathering assault on Indian civilization *tout court* by James Mill and the missionaries, the complexity of multiple translation, the tremors of global economic and political conjuncture and the loss of personal and social freedoms. The

emergence of a centralised bureaucracy, but one lacking in intimacy or sympathy, forced Indians to consider the relationship of state to their emerging civil society. The influx of persuasive theorising associated with Paine, Saint Simon, Comte, Bentham and John Stuart Mill gave the new sociological imagination a language of politics with which to work, but it did not create it.

At this point, I want to mention the South Asian order of knowledge more broadly. Many of the figures I will be discussing in this lecture and the next, including writers such as Bholanauth Chunder, R C Dutt, B M Malabari and Dadhabhai Naoroji, were political economists of a sort. They tried to turn travel narratives, statistical debates or early sociological investigations into means of empathizing with the lands and peoples of Southern Asia. But they were also deeply interested in the Asian religious inheritance. R C Dutt, for instance, travelling the Bengal waterways as an assistant magistrate in the 1870s, filled his boat with British government blue books, but also took copies of the classical philosophical and religious texts. He wrote simultaneously about the Bengal economy and the religion of ancient India.

Indian intellectuals, unlike many of their European coevals, did not wish to purge the human sciences of the divine, or hive religion off into a separate realm. This was because according to the modernized Hindu or Parsi beliefs that they espoused, spirit moved in the world and through history. In all the major varieties of Hindu doctrine, conservative or modernist, there were no new revelations, only the evolution of divinity over time through nature and man. Consequently, the Indian reception of new scientific and human disciplines was always determined to some extent by the template of the existing hierarchy of knowledge. Thus Indian systems of knowledge were related to each other in a somewhat

different way from what was common, at least in North-western Protestant Europe. There was no need to 'expel' religion into its own area. For instance, as Geraldine Forbes has shown, Indian intellectuals took Comte's positivism to be a 'religion of mankind' rather than an endorsement of materialist scientific knowledge.¹⁹ Buckle's picture of the contestation between intellect and nature was subtly modified to produce a picture of mind working within nature. In turn, Darwin's 'dangerous idea' was re-spiritualised in India by the end of the nineteenth century to make it a theory of the evolution of deity through nature and history. Herbert Spencer was invoked, but in a manner which was decidedly Hindu.

This theme of spirit working through history gave rise, first, to a particular style of historicism. By the 1850s, Indian intellectuals' and some other Asian intellectuals' understandings of ancient and medieval history had formed themselves into a pattern that was to persist throughout the remainder of the century. In this view, ancient Hindu civilization had reached a peak that exceeded even that of the Greeks and Romans. Indian society had developed companionate marriage, representative political institutions and constitutional balance between Brahmins, warriors and the popular element. These themes were further developed in the learned Calcutta societies in the early 1860s, but by this time there had emerged two new arguments about the significance of technology and the centrality of race, which had not appeared in Rammohan's works. For instance, at the Bethune Society that brought together Britons and Indians, Raja Kali Krishna rose and recited Sanskrit verses to the effect that ancient Indian Aryan rulers understood the importance of building roads and canals, even railways. This intervention served several rhetorical purposes. The ancient Hindus had not only been great engineers but they were also benign cultural imperialists, especially in Southeast Asia.

Many Hindu writers depicted the Indian Middle Ages as a dark era of decline, as Hindu learning succumbed to Muslim tyranny. But it is important to recognise that this picture did not entirely prevail. As early as 1854, a series of ten articles in the *Hindoo Patriot* attacked the British official, Mounstuart Elphinstone's *History of India*.²⁰ This was one of the major European orientalist works propagating the 'black legend' of Islam. By contrast, in the *Patriot's* articles 'A comparison between the Muhammadan and British rulers of India' every single theme of later Indian secular historians from Jawaharlal Nehru to our contemporary, Irfan Habib, was anticipated. The Muslim rulers, it was said, lived in India and married with its people; they did not drain wealth from the country. After the early years of invasion few of them attacked Hindu temples or rites. Sufis and Hindu mystics embraced each other. Hindus and Muslims lived in brotherhood. British stereotypes of the immediate pre-colonial period were firmly contradicted. Bengali as well as Bombay, intellectuals were beginning to reassess the seventeenth-century western Indian Maratha kingdoms, emphasizing their plebeian origins and conciliar forms of government.

Indian litterateurs were also beginning to set the events of their modern history in a comparative, transnational framework. For the prolific journalist, Grish Chunder's Ghose's generation of the 1850s, education and pure deism and was eroding the stagnant despotism of the Company. This firmly set India in a modern world where similar struggles were taking place. Buckingham's old theme of the Company as an analogue of the 'Grand Turk' was revisited and reinforced. Ghose wrote extensively on the Indian Rebellion of 1857-59 as a leader-writer for the newspaper, *Hindoo Patriot*. Like many Bengalis he deprecated the Company's annexations, military-fiscal barbarity, and imperviousness to representative government. Yet he also feared anarchy and the racial backlash that vitiated British-Indian relations, as news of rebel successes filtered back to the Calcutta. A 'strike among the army

had been magnified into a national rebellion.’ But, Ghose implied, a national rebellion might well be on the horizon if the unofficial British (‘a parcel of factitious adventurers’) used this as an excuse to oppress newly educated Indians and further extend the pernicious system of Indigo cultivation. The revolts of the peasants cultivating India during 1860-1 were, he argued, popular revolts like the French revolution.

Comparing mid-century India with England in the 1640s and France in the 1790s, Ghose developed a political theory of social balance and applied it to the subcontinent. All successful government, he wrote, must judiciously combine ‘elements of stability and progress. When the two are not in equivalent proportions, society is not in a state of radical union, there is no internal cohesion of its parts.’²¹ As in 1640s England, ‘mechanical pressure’ from without might hold the polity together for a time, but then further conflict would be inevitable. Ghose wrote of the cycle of extremist rebellion and extreme reaction that occurred in England after 1642 and France after 1789. Society in England in 1642 ‘burst apart with a tremendous explosion’. Cromwell’s dictatorship briefly held it together, as Napoleon’s later did in France. Yet such ‘mechanical pressure’ from without could not re-forged social bonds. The centre could not hold. Conflict persisted for a generation in both countries. Government, in England, France and India needed to find ‘a balance between social order and progress.’ Certainly, the educated Indian should not be blamed. If the mutinous Indian soldiers of 1857 had been better educated and had been able to secure commissions in the army they would not have rebelled. For Ghose, therefore, education had become both the symbol of Indian loyalty and the only force that bound Indians to the Empire. It assumed the position that Indian investment in the Company’s bonds had held for Rammohan. It would be madness for the British to cease educational expansion on the

spurious ground that the half-educated were the most likely to become seditious. The 'stream of knowledge, once it begins to flow cannot be impeded.'²²

Ghose was assembling in his historical analysis an early form of dialectical political thought. Its sources are obscure, but there are some indications in his use of words. He had already adapted and reconstituted Comte's idea of the evolution of society through stages that almost inevitably involved conflict: 'we are now in a progressive state, on the trail of a better future', he wrote at the time of the indigo revolt.²³ He drew on James Mackintosh's *History of England* that used the example of the 1642 crisis to assert the need for governments to maintain a balance in times of crisis. But he was also attuned to some broader contemporary discussions. The idea that organisms were changed by 'mechanical pressure' from outside, but needed to attain internal balance was soon to emerge in both Darwin and Spencer. Walter Bagehot had begun to write in the *Economist* of the need for constitutions to embody elements of 'stability' and 'progress.' Finally, though Ghose as an idealistic liberal was wary of the neo-conservatism of the later Carlyle, he was aware of the great pessimist's works on the violent and continuing upheavals of the French revolutions.

In these emerging Indian histories, almost for the first time- to adapt the words of JGA Pocock in a different context- India began to play a major part on its own responsibility in the trans-national human drama of political progress. But coeval with the new historicism, Indians, along with Ceylonese and Malaysians began to further elaborate what I have called a benign sociology. I have already pointed to the emergence in India of the conception that society was a mechanical structure whose very organisation into castes and classes might be oppressive. Inseparable from this was a mode of analysis of contemporary Indian society that demonstrated the functionality and indeed superiority of many of its institutions to those of

the West. This 'benign sociology', a much more creative process, was a form of writing, and speaking back against the ideologues of Western supremacy. It created new modes of thought. In some respects, today's postcolonial critics and critical anthropologists have inherited its sensibilities. Benign sociology in Bengal took an institutional form with the formation of the Bengal Social Science Association in 1867 and the Ootepara Improvement Association about the same time. The BSSA's aim was the 'collection, arrangement and classification of facts bearing on the social intellectual and moral condition of the people.'²⁴ It was founded after the visit to India of the Unitarian champion of women's and children's causes, Mary Carpenter, who had met Rammohan in Bristol as a girl. Some of the BSSA's early presidents were European officials and judges. But its proceedings soon ventured into topics that these officials would have preferred not to consider. There was discussion of famine and the efficacy or otherwise of a poor law for Bengal.

The style of analysis had begun to emerge some years before the societies were founded. As early as 1854, Grish Chunder Ghose was speaking before the Bethune Society on 'the Hindoo social system.' He complimented his British colleagues on finally beginning to understand that Hinduism was more than a 'bundle of religious rites' and India was not simply a society corrupted by a false religion.²⁵ Nowhere else in the world was such a dense population maintained without a poor law, he noted. This was because of Hindu society's many mechanisms for gift exchange and mutual support. Nowhere else in the world, again, were so few women unmarried. The relative lack of domestic exploitation and mutual regard in India meant that 'in no country in the world is perpetrated crime so little as in India.' Drunkenness, the curse of Europe, had only begun to appear as a result of the spread of British vice. Ghose moved on to discuss the affective dimension of Hindu society, represented by kinship and popular merrymaking. It was wonderful, he said, that the relations

between a man and his father's sister's husband could be expressed in one word. Hindu festivals created *communitas* between classes and alleviated the drudgery of the working people in a manner that could not happen in Europe. All in all, 'India 'produced a society of all other nations on the earth, the least dependent on civil government for their well being.' The image of Indian society as a self-regulating series of organic segments independent of the state remains a key image in today's sociological literature. Conversely, 'in the eyes of the Hindoo, European communities appear devoid of all those elements which constitute true society among mankind.'²⁶ Ghose and the later speakers at the Calcutta societies were no doubt drawing on British literature that analysed the pleasures and pains of the English working classes and rural labourers. Yet they were also infusing these themes with notions of enjoyment (*lila, tamasha*) and beneficence (*kripa*) drawn more directly from indigenous sources.

I end with another example of the forging of a benign, and in this case, comparative sociology that complemented the new historicism. Keshub Chunder Sen is known as mid-nineteenth century India's most important religious reformer, a later follower of Rammohan's Hindu Unitarianism, grouped in the Brahmo Samaj. He had been educated both in western languages and Sanskrit. He was also a natural sociologist. Sen's diaries of his tour to Ceylon in 1859 are full of social observations of the sort collected by British scholar officials, some of whom had been know to his own family. Yet in Sen's hands they were infused with a very different spirit.

Only twenty years old, Sen's idea was to travel to different parts of South Asia in order to bring into being 'a practical alliance in reform between the presidencies', the local colonial governments. This necessitated careful attention to religion, caste observances and social

status. There was more. In travelling beyond his native Calcutta for the first time, the young man wished to experience God's greatness by observing the unity of his creation, and the masterpiece within it: India. 'To realize the grandeur I undertook this journey', he wrote.²⁷ The grandeur was universal, but there was a strong sense here of 'soft' patriotism or humanist imperialism of the sort which came to its peak with the international seer Swami Vivekananda a generation later. 'Hail, fatherland, hail!' Sen exclaimed to his diary. Meeting diligent, imperialistic Christian missionaries during his travels, he envisioned a world when 'Brahmoism will find its place in every creek and corner of the habitable world.'²⁸

Sen's accounts of the passage down the River Bhairagati to the open sea echoed some tropes of Bengal's medieval Sanskrit poetry of spiritual travel, with which he must have been well acquainted. A more obvious stylistic point of reference was the western classics as reinterpreted in the Byronic tradition. Sen's desire to feel and demonstrate the presence of God through his creation is reminiscent of the view of the Christian missionary anthropologists in the Pacific. But there is no sense, as there is in these Christian works, of the presence of a saving Christ, let alone stories of martyred preachers dying at the hands of the heathen. This was a rigidly deistic depiction of life.

Sen's engagement with God's creation was detailed and sociological. He wanted, as he put it in the words of Bacon, 'to abridge travel with profit' to get to know the manners, customs, literary styles and forms of worship of the 'Cingalese.' Typically for the period, he noted physical types: the Ceylonese generally looked like Malays or Burmese, though some resembled 'Mussulmans, Firangees [Europeans] or even Bengalees.' He discussed Buddhism in Sanskrit with Buddhist priests. The superior priest was 'so black and rude-looking that it is difficult to distinguish him from a negro.' Here Sen revealed his version of modern Indian

racial hierarchy. Actual skin colour was significant in this classification, but deportment and beliefs played a more central role in it than it did for most contemporary Europeans.

Sen's most interesting observations related to caste and religion and here he employed methods of observation and analysis more 'scientific', precise and comparative than any earlier Asian traveller I know of and, indeed, most European ones. He met respectable members of the dominant Tamil-speaking elite, who wore half European clothes and had converted to a version of Christianity, yet lived with Buddhist wives. There was no obvious prejudice against eating with Christians and people in the interior had even begun to eat beef, he said. By contrast, the higher castes would not eat with the lower ones. Castes appeared to be occupational groups, comprised of fishermen, toddy tappers, washermen and the different ruling groups. Sen concluded that, in Ceylon, caste was a 'purely social and not a religious institution.' For in Bengal the mixing of religions would have been met with howls of protest by the orthodox. This distinction might appear unfounded to present-day anthropology. But Sen's observations were made at the close of a generation of religious conflict in Bengal, in which caste practice had been reinvented and hardened precisely as a response to Christian missionaries and other western influences. Sen's auto-ethnography was as perceptive as anything emerging from the works of contemporary British scholar officials and perhaps more so because of his Hindu background.

Keshub Chunder Sen wanted to distance himself as far as possible from western cultural influence and achieve an understanding of 'authentic' Ceylonese life uncontaminated by people 'dashed with foreign admixtures.' He set up an interview with a barber, the traditional purveyor of local information, and concluded that two principles determined Cingalese caste: 'The superiority or inferiority of castes may be determined by the privilege they have or have

not of using combs [in their hair] and becoming priests. He drew up a list of castes marked with an 'a' and 'b' to designate these privileges. His emphasis on deportment and religious office once again marks this out as a very sophisticated set of observations. Sen completed his fieldwork by attending a Cingalese spirit possession ritual that he called a 'devil dance.' This appears to have confirmed him in his view that southern Indian Hinduism was more corrupted than even that of Bengal.

Sen's diaries and reports to the Brahma Samaj became steadily less ethnographic and more vaguely spiritual in content after 1860. But they still represent a particular view of caste and religion across the subcontinent and beyond. India's benign sociologists and indigenous historicists had now constructed their own hierarchy of virtues and vices. These were significantly different from those of the colonial ethnographers. This allowed public men, such as Sen, to develop a style, which I call counter-preaching. Counter-preachers employed the oratorical style and public moralizing of the Gladstone era, yet turned it back on Asians' British critics. Sen's visit to England in the early 1880s saw him pitying and sympathizing with the British for their barbarous social mores and lack of faith. This stance of moral superiority has been characteristic of many later Indian celebrities who have visited Britain, from Mohandas Gandhi to the contemporary Bollywood actress, Shilpa Shetty.

I will now conclude. Last week I described how, in the early nineteenth century, the thought of a small number of Asian public men, notably Rammohan Roy and Munshi Abdullah, turned global, deploying concepts of constitution, representation and independence. Though I said little about analogies besides those being made to European liberalism, I suspect that the political thought of other traditions was also being trans-nationalized at this time. Rammohan himself converted the localized tradition of *vedantasastra* (the monotheistic texts of the

earliest Sanskrit religious poems) into an Indian version of this-worldly spirituality, 'Hindoo Unitarianism' as some called it. Similarly, Islamic concepts of *jihad* and *tanzimat* (reform) were being tested-at least theoretically- on a global field in South and Southeast Asia.

This second lecture has been concerned more with the lived experience of ideas than with theoretical debate in political economy, to which I will return tomorrow. Yet the formulations which had emerged by the 1870s, in the work of Grish Chunder Ghose, Keshab Sen and in turn in the early work of the political economist, Romesh Chunder Dutt, constituted a different sort of conceptual revolution: the emergence of a critical but also benign sociology and historiography of India and other parts of Asia. What seems most striking is the rapid emergence and deployment of the following concepts: structural social inequality: trans-national comparative sociology and historiography: social mobility: the analogy and contrast between India's 'revolutions', such as 1857, and those of the West. I argued that the deepening and enrichment of this gaze on present and past 'lived worlds' had several origins. In part, it reflected Asians' attempts to understand events: the outward ripples of the 1848 revolutions, the echoes of British Chartist agitation and the contemporary crisis of Indian labour, peasant and indentured. At the same time, subtler sensibilities and tropes were adapted by analogy from other world situations, notably the long debate on American slavery and moral assessments of the early crises of industrial society in Europe. Recent evaluations of nineteenth-century liberalism- British and Asian- have stressed the categorising, homogenising and hierarchy inherent in its projects. Liberals of all hues certainly wanted to produce free, pacific and productive citizens, located in educated conjugal families. But beyond this, their prescriptions, and the preferred means for their implementation, varied widely. For some at least, the project of emancipation broke free from and transcended any attempt to impose new regimens of self-discipline on the subject. If we read mid-nineteenth

century Asian liberals carefully, they emerge as complex thinkers, thoughtful, nuanced and creative, even if inevitably constrained by the politics and mentalities of their time.

¹ Henry Derozio to H. H. Wilson, 28 April, 1831, in Peary Chand Mitra, *A biographical sketch of David Hare* (Calcutta, W. Newman and Co, 1877), p.23

² *Friend of India*, 16 March, 1843; *Bengal Hurkaru*, 13, 15 February 1843; Majumdar, *Political Thought*, p. 84.

³ *Friend of India*, 10 August 1848.

⁴ *Friend of India*, 18 May 1848.

⁵ *Friend of India*, 7 September 1848.

⁶ *Gyannaneshun*, cited *India Gazette*, 10 May 1833; Majumdar, *Political Thought*, p. 104.

⁷ *Dictionary of National Biography* (1917), 19, 691. Holyoke, *Sixty years of an agitator's life* (London, 1892), I, 98

⁸ Thompson, *Addresses*, p. 167.

⁹ *Bengal Spectator*, 15 October 1842.

¹⁰ Introduction, by Narhari Kaviraj, R.C.Dutt, *The Peasantry of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1874, repr 1890), p. xxxvi

¹¹ *Hindu Patriot*, 12 April 1855.

¹² Mitra, *Hare*, pp. 69-70.

¹³ Majumdar, *Political thought*, p. 117, citing *Bengal Hurkaru*, 2 March 1843.

¹⁴ *Colombo Observer*, 3 July 1848.

¹⁵ K M de Silva (ed.) *Letters on Ceylon 1846-50. The administration of Viscount Torrington and the 'rebellion' of 1848* (Kandy, 1965), pp. 11-12

¹⁶ Torrington to Grey, 4 May 1848, *ibid.*, pp. 81-2.

¹⁷ Torrington to Grey, 14 October 1849, *ibid.*, p. 178.

¹⁸ C Wright Mills, *The Sociological imagination [fortieth anniversary edition with a new afterword by Tod Gilin]* (Oxford University Press, New York, 2000, 1959), p. 5.

¹⁹ Geraldine Forbes, *Positivism in Bengal. A case study in the transmission and assimilation of an ideology* (Delhi, 1998)

²⁰ *Hindoo Patriot*, May-June 1854.

²¹ 'The mutiny and the educated natives' a comment on the Lieutenant Governor's speech of April 1858, *ibid.*, p. 114.

²² *Ibid.* p. 118.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 75

²⁴ Ghose, *Life of Ghose*, p. 133.

²⁵ 'The Hindoo Social System', *Hindoo Patriot*, 27 July 1854.

²⁶ Hindoo Social System, *Works*, p. 180.

²⁷ Keshub Chunder Sen, *Book of pilgrimages*, p. 31

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 33