




HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEW

# Re-Thinking the ‘Social’ in British Colonial and South Asian History

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## Abstract

This historiographical review engages with recent works in British colonial and South Asian history that shed light on the emergence of the concept of ‘society’ or the ‘social’ in South Asia. The review explores three main areas for the study of the social concept including: scholarship on liberalism and colonial law; histories of colonial sociology and knowledge production; and materialist histories of political economy and concept formation. The review then outlines some avenues for further research, focusing particularly on questions of form, language, and translation that have largely been overlooked in existing scholarship. It suggests that while there are robust accounts of the uses of the social concept in South Asia, what is missing is a consideration of the vernacular histories of this concept, including how it came to be articulated in South Asian languages. Ultimately, the review makes the case that conceptual history must take into account both the historical transformations that produced certain concepts as well as the languages and aesthetic and documentary forms through which we come to know those concepts.

In a now classic essay written nearly forty years ago, David Washbrook argued that the study of South Asian history had contributed to and been transformed by two major historiographical developments. First, scholarship on South Asia’s role as a hub of early modern trade had shaped the emergent field of ‘world history’ and showed how networks of production and exchange connected South Asia to the Indian Ocean world and beyond. Second, the rise of ‘sociological history’ had brought attention to previously overlooked historical actors, such as mercantile groups and scribal communities, who played an influential role in early modern South Asian states and societies. This latter field of South Asian social history, Washbrook argued, had contributed to wider debates about such historical dynamics as the development of capitalism and class formation. Yet, at the same time, he noted that it threw into question social history’s ‘ethnocentric conceptual schema inherited by Western social

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science from nineteenth century positivism and still informing a surprisingly wide range of its assumptions'.<sup>1</sup> One such concept, and one that was foundational to the enterprise of social history, is 'society' itself. As a category of historical analysis, 'society' most often refers to a sphere of collective human existence, which it demarcates as being distinct from the state, as the domain of labour and production, and as the repository of shared customs and institutions. In many ways, much of the influential revisionist scholarship in South Asian history in the late 1970s and 1980s to which Washbrook referred came to be framed as a study of this sphere as it developed in the South Asian or the Indian context. As the field moved away from state centred accounts of the transition to colonialism, 'Indian society' (and its differently scaled variations like North Indian society, agrarian society, and so on) became key organizing categories for a spate of new histories focused on 'intermediary' figures, such as merchants, bankers, and scribes, all of whom thus came to populate the domain of the social.<sup>2</sup>

Appearing in the late 1980s, Washbrook's article was also contemporaneous to the growth of Subaltern Studies and cultural history approaches in South Asian studies, which were often pitted against this revisionist social history as they turned the attention of the field towards questions of cultural representation, historical difference, and discursive production. Yet, despite their much-touted oppositional focuses, both social history and cultural history seemed to have a shared investment in the category of 'Indian society' as constituting a distinct historical entity. Where they focused their differences, rather, was on the question of the extent to which this entity was impacted by colonial rule and whether pre-colonial Indian social and cultural forms endured or were restructured by colonialism. Thus, amidst debates on the rupture of colonial rule versus the resilience of native agency or on the transformative impact of colonial knowledge systems versus the persistence of indigenous information orders, 'Indian society' remained a remarkably stable category of analysis and, in some ways, an unspoken point of agreement across the historiographical divide.<sup>3</sup>

In recent years, as these older debates between social history and cultural history have begun to fade, new archival directions and cross-disciplinary interventions have enabled a more critical interrogation of the concept of 'Indian society'. Historians of South Asia have increasingly turned to previously unexplored vernacular and regional archives to shed new light on domains such as caste, gender, and sexuality, particularly how they came to be governed through modalities like law and political economy, which in turn has refracted back the constructedness of concepts like the 'social'.

<sup>1</sup> D. A. Washbrook, 'Progress and problems: South Asian economic and social history c. 1720–1860', *Modern Asian Studies*, 22 (1988), pp. 57–96.

<sup>2</sup> A paradigmatic work in this tradition is C. A. Bayly, *Rulers, townsmen, and bazaars: North Indian society in the age of British expansion, 1770–1870* (Cambridge, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, the contrasting approaches offered by Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: the British in India* (Princeton, NJ, 1996); and C.A. Bayly, *Empire and information: intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge, 1996). Despite their different positions, both Cohn and Bayly use 'Indian society' as a foundational premise in their works.

Moreover, the rising prominence of the British empire as a site of study for the field of political theory, especially related to the history of liberalism, has opened up new avenues of inquiry into colonial and Indian social and political thought. As a result, in the last couple of decades, a vibrant body of critically informed scholarship on the concept of 'society' in South Asia has come to the fore. These are not simply new social and intellectual histories of South Asia (though, they are that as well), but rather they are social and intellectual histories that refuse to take the 'social' or 'society' as a given category of analysis. Instead, these works not only examine the historical production of the social concept, but also explore its uses by the colonial state and Indian thinkers alike. This historiographical review engages with a number of these works. Specifically, it traces the recent study of the social concept in South Asian history to three particular areas of inquiry: histories of liberalism and colonial law; histories of colonial sociology and knowledge production; and materialist histories of political economy that emphasize the socio-historical production of concepts.<sup>4</sup> I suggest that what differentiates these areas, in part, are methodological differences over how to study the social, whether as a response to colonial liberalism, as an object of colonial governance, or as an effect of global historical transformations.

The review begins with a brief overview of the social concept in European intellectual history to elucidate the stakes of this historiographical inquiry as they pertain to South Asian history. It then turns to each of the three areas mentioned above. Following this discussion, the final part of the review then outlines some avenues for further research, focusing particularly on questions of form and language that have largely been overlooked in existing scholarship. I suggest that while there are robust accounts of the uses of the social concept in South Asia, what is missing is a consideration of the vernacular histories of this concept, including how it came to be articulated in South Asian languages. What, for instance, might we learn by tracing the conceptual histories of *jamāʿat* or *moʿāsharat* (Urdu terms for 'society') or of *samāj* (Hindi term for 'society')? And what might the longer histories of these concepts reveal about the early modern roots of the social concept in South Asia, particularly its relationship to early modern civic and commercial change? In posing such questions, the purpose is not to look for pre-modern analogs for 'society' or to suggest that this concept always already existed in pre-modern South Asian intellectual worlds. Rather, the line of inquiry such questions would open up is: what kinds of historical transformations enabled concepts like, say, *jamāʿat* to be interpellated as 'society'? Questions such as these would, I argue, allow for a consideration of both cultural and material change in the same frame. Ultimately, then, the review will make a case that conceptual histories must take into account both the historical transformations that

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<sup>4</sup> My concern here is primarily with works that interrogate the 'social' as a concept rather than those that deal with histories of public life generally. As such, I do not engage here with the wealth of excellent recent work on South Asian public spheres, including on language and print culture. On the analytical distinctions between the 'social' and the 'public', see Hannah Arendt, *The human condition* (Chicago, IL, 1958), pp. 22–78.

produced certain concepts and the languages and aesthetic and documentary forms through which we come to know those concepts.

## I

In European intellectual history, the semantic and conceptual field of the social concept has been well-mapped. Philip Withington has shown, for instance, that the term ‘society’ began to appear with frequency in titles of English books from about the 1570s onwards to refer primarily to idealized forms of voluntary association, and it was not until the mid-seventeenth century that it began to acquire the meaning of a general sphere of human relations.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, in the French context, Keith Baker has argued that in the early seventeenth century and before, the term ‘société’ had a range of ‘voluntaristic’ meanings, implying friendship, fellowship, partnership, consortium, and so on, whereas in Enlightenment thought beginning in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the term began to acquire a broader meaning of ‘society as the basic form of collective human existence’.<sup>6</sup> Conceptually, the development of the social concept is often associated with what Sheldon Wolin, Karl Polanyi, and others have called the ‘discovery of society’.<sup>7</sup> Wolin traced this discovery to ideological transformations in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He identified two distinct intellectual traditions in which we can read the elaboration of a concept of society. The first was a motley set of Enlightenment and post-French Revolution thinkers, such as Montesquieu, Burke, Comte, and Tocqueville, all of whom, Wolin argued, saw political authority as resting on densely woven networks of private association, social ranks and distinctions, and local ties and loyalties.<sup>8</sup> The second tradition was that of Lockean liberalism, an ideology forged amidst the overlapping upheavals of late seventeenth-century England including the struggle between parliament and the monarchy, a growing world of commerce, and an expanding overseas empire. Wolin argued that the concept of society emerged in John Locke’s theory of government, which envisioned the state of nature as a pre-political community of property owners. This theoretical move, Wolin argued, naturalized the existence of the social by situating it as historically prior to the political. Moreover, by associating the origins of property with this pre-political community, rather than with the political order, Locke appeared to assert the sovereignty of society as the realm of production and exchange.

<sup>5</sup> Philip Withington, *Society in early modern England: the vernacular origins of some powerful ideas* (Cambridge, 2010), ch. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Keith Michael Baker, ‘Enlightenment and the institution of society’, in Willem Melching and Wyger Velema, eds., *Main trends in cultural history: ten essays* (Amsterdam, 1994), pp. 95–120. Building on Baker’s argument, Yair Mintzker has shown that the term ‘social’ began to appear in French Enlightenment works around the mid-1740s. See Yair Mintzker, ‘“A word newly introduced into language”: the appearance and spread of “social” in French enlightened thought, 1745–1765’, *History of European Ideas*, 34 (2008), pp. 500–13.

<sup>7</sup> Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and vision: continuity and innovation in Western political thought* (Princeton, NJ, 2004), p. 273; Karl Polanyi, *The great transformation* (New York, NY, 1944).

<sup>8</sup> Wolin, *Politics and vision*, pp. 260–1.

Society in liberal thought, thus, came to be seen as a 'self-subsistent entity' that constituted its own autonomous sphere of human activity distinct from the state.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, Polanyi was concerned with explaining the emergence of 'economic society', which he argued was linked to the expansion of the market system in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In particular, he traced the idea of society to concerns about scarcity in a rapidly commercializing world. Polanyi read these concerns in the works of Joseph Townsend, and later in Thomas Malthus and David Ricardo among others, who, according to him, argued that the production and distribution of wealth was ultimately determined by certain natural principles, such as the laws of population or the fertility of soil. At the same time, widespread monetization, increasing integration of markets, and the regularization of prices and incomes all appeared to convey an air of inescapability to the force of economic laws, a sense that these laws were somehow 'natural' and spontaneously operating. Polanyi argued that the identification of these dynamics suggested the existence of a 'new realm' that was synonymous with 'economic society'.<sup>10</sup> Crucially, for Polanyi, because this realm was understood as being governed by natural principles, it was taken to mean that society was 'not subject to the laws of the state, but, on the contrary, subjected the state to its own laws'.<sup>11</sup> In this account too, as in Wolin's, the social dislodged the primacy of the political, making the latter subject to the imperatives of wealth production. As Wolin put it, the discovery of society relegated the state merely to the role of 'maintaining conditions which permitted society to go about the basic task of producing'.<sup>12</sup>

The linking of commercial expansion and the discovery of society highlights the privileged role accorded to the discipline of political economy in histories of the social concept. Both Wolin and Polanyi identified political economy as the quintessential 'science of society' inasmuch as this discipline took society – that is, the sphere of commerce in their accounts – for its main object of analysis. Yet, as Andrew Sartori recently argued, political economy was not always concerned with the category of society. According to Sartori, the central concern of political economic discourse at its moment of origin in the seventeenth century was not the structure of domestic society, but rather the dynamics of overseas and colonial trade and relationship between states. Political economy's transformation into a 'science of society', he argued, was a result of internalizing the concept of commercial dependence between colony and metropole as a way to understand the growing fact of commercial transformation domestically.<sup>13</sup> For Sartori, then, the vector of change that came to

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 280.

<sup>10</sup> Polanyi, *The great transformation*, p. 120.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>12</sup> Wolin, *Politics and vision*, p. 273.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Sartori, 'From statecraft to social science in early modern English political economy', *Critical Historical Studies* (2016), pp. 181–214.

embed the concept of 'society' in political economy was early modern commerce and overseas trade.

Turning this lens back on to the South Asian context, we might begin by asking whether the development of the social concept in South Asia followed the same historical path as in Europe, or whether it had its own particular trajectory. Was the social concept a product of internal dynamics of change from within India, or was it imported from Europe? And, what role did colonialism play in its development? The scholarship discussed in the next three sections touches on questions such as these. These works approach the emergence of the social concept from a number of different angles, including as a response to colonial law and liberal governmentality or as historically produced by the transformative impact of capitalist restructuring. At the same time, as I discuss in the final section, the semantic and vernacular terrain of the social concept in South Asia remains unexplored.

## II

Historians of colonial liberalism have often pointed to the early decades of the nineteenth century as the historical moment that saw the earliest Indian articulations of 'society' as a distinct entity as part of a broader discourse of Indian liberalism. As Jon Wilson has argued, these articulations were a way to assert the historical particularity of Indian customs and cultural practices against the coercive and classificatory interventions of the colonial state's legal and administrative machinery.<sup>14</sup> The wider argument of Wilson's book, *The domination of strangers* (2008), traces the rise of this state machinery in Bengal in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Wilson shows that East India Company rule in Bengal during this period was characterized by the project of creating a modern form of distant, impersonal governance, or a kind of 'stranger state'. Wilson argues that, unlike early modern states both in India and in Europe, in which there was some sense of personal familiarity between the ruler and the ruled, modern governance was marked by a utilitarian governing mentality based on the creation of abstract rules, written regulation, and generalized administrative categories. According to Wilson, the Company state's turn to this detached form of governance in Bengal was driven both by the need to stabilize revenue collection following the financial and political crises of the 1780s, as well as by the sense of deep anxiety and uncertainty experienced by colonial officials as they attempted to make sense of an unfamiliar world.<sup>15</sup> Thus, in the three decades that followed, Wilson argues, a governing ideology of colonial legal positivism emerged that attempted to objectify and impose meaning on what the colonial state perceived to be a chaotic and bewildering field of social practices, such as through the codification

<sup>14</sup> Jon Wilson, *The domination of strangers: modern governance in eastern India, 1780-1835* (New York, NY, 2008), p. 164.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3. For a new reading of early Company state formation in Bengal that emphasizes how Company governance drew on late Mughal ideologies and bureaucratic infrastructures, see Robert Travers, *Empires of complaints: Mughal law and the making of British India, 1765-1793* (Cambridge, 2022).

of laws and the creation of abstract categories like 'Hindu joint family' or the 'Bengali landholder'. Ultimately, it was in response to this regime of estranged, impersonal utilitarian logic that Indian ideas of society emerged.

Crucially, according to Wilson, these ideas of society were part of an emerging rhetoric of Indian liberalism, the clearest example of which he reads in the writings of Rammohun Roy in the 1820s and early 1830s. Wilson identifies several key features of this rhetoric as it pertained to the formulation of the social concept. First, Rammohun made a sharp distinction between the state (*sarkār*) and society (*samāj*), noting that the latter existed as a discrete, self-contained entity entirely apart from the domain of politics and statecraft. Second, he made a case for the historical continuity of Indian *samāj*, arguing that it had persisted autonomously for centuries as a bedrock of Indian civilization. Rammohun used the concept of *samāj* to challenge denigrating representations of Indian civilization as despotic by arguing, in Wilson's words, that 'ancient Indian civilization was founded on the existence of a realm of un-coerced sociability ruled by consensus, separate from the sphere of government'.<sup>16</sup> Third, Rammohun emphasized the distinctiveness of the rules and customs that governed this realm, including the importance of certain types of dress, religious rites, and inheritance practices. In doing so, his concept of *samāj* came to be defined in specifically Hindu Bengali terms. *Samāj*, in Rammohun's words, was the 'social institution of Hindu Bengal'.<sup>17</sup>

There are some similarities, as well as important differences, between Rammohun's understanding of the social and the Wolinian reading of the social in Locke's liberalism. Similar to Wolin's account of Locke, Rammohun saw the social as a distinct entity, not only preceding the political but also serving ideologically to delimit it. Moreover, Rammohun, like Locke, saw property as a social institution, one which had its origins in society. Yet, the moment of social contract in Locke that led to the formation of government was missing from Rammohun's vision of *samāj*. Whereas in Locke's theory autonomous social actors consented amongst themselves to enter into political society, Rammohun's social actors remained distant from politics. As Wilson argues, Rammohun's understanding of ancient Indian history entailed a Brahmanical vision of upper caste Hindus as 'essentially anti-political beings', who eschewed what they saw as the self-interested domain of politics to engage instead in the 'free exercise of reason in the social sphere'.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, as Wilson showed, later generations of Bengali intellectuals, such as Rabindranath Tagore, pointed to this contrasting understanding of society as a key point of difference between India and Britain. Speaking in 1904, Tagore argued that, in Britain, society depended upon the actions of government, whereas in India he claimed that 'the *Sarkar* has no relations with our social organization'.<sup>19</sup> This estranged orientation to politics, itself a kind of mirror image of the state's estrangement from society that Wilson describes

<sup>16</sup> Wilson, *The domination of strangers*, p. 168.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 170–1.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

in his book, ultimately brings into focus the influence of colonial rule on the formation of Indian ideological categories. It recalls, in particular, Partha Chatterjee's classic argument that anti-colonial nationalism was formed in opposition to the modular categories offered up by Europe.<sup>20</sup> In a somewhat similar move, Wilson suggests that Indian thinkers defined society in opposition to what they took to be the role of society in Britain.

While Wilson's account emphasizes the role of ideological contestation, particularly in response to colonial legal positivism, another perspective shows how the social concept came to be embedded in the law itself. This latter approach is taken by Rachel Sturman's *The government of social life in colonial India: liberalism, religious law, and women's rights* (2012). The central question that Sturman's work asks is how the colonial state attempted to devise forms of legal governance adequate to what it perceived to be the Indian social. Focusing on the Bombay Presidency from the early nineteenth century onwards, when the Company gained control of the region following the defeat of the Marathas in 1818, Sturman argues that the colonial state in Bombay created, in essence, a secular Hindu law to govern matters that it designated as social, such as marriage, family, property, and hereditary offices.<sup>21</sup> This governing mentality, she shows, served to reify the idea of 'social life' as a distinct object of politico-legal governance.

Sturman, like Wilson, situates the social question within the history of liberalism, arguing that the colonial state's mode of governance in Bombay is best characterized by the framework of liberal governmentality. In effect, the colonial state sought to enforce its power through the management of the social domain and did so by enacting a liberal theory of society, which envisioned a model of equal and autonomous actors exchanging commensurate property forms (as Sturman shows, this meant caste Hindu men). This required, in India as elsewhere, a process of secularization, which Sturman describes as the divestment of ritual status to produce forms of equivalence recognized by the state.<sup>22</sup> Thus, for example, she analyses the case of *inam*, a hereditary land grant from the sovereign that had historically conferred certain privileges on the land holder, such as entitlement to revenue and the power to exert local sovereignty. The colonial state increasingly began to tighten policies pertaining to *inam* grants in the 1840s and 1850s, eventually rescinding their special status and converting them into regular landed estates.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Hindu family law became 'secularized' as it came to be structured primarily around the question of rights (as opposed to, say, ritual entitlement or honour). Sturman traces the changing treatment of the Hindu joint family in law, showing how sons and fathers were increasingly positioned as full legal subjects, such as by gaining greater rights to dispense their individual shares of family

<sup>20</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The nation and its fragments: colonial and postcolonial histories* (Princeton, NJ, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> Rachel Sturman, *The government of social life in colonial India: liberalism, religious law, and women's rights* (Cambridge, 2012).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 54–7.



property. At the same time, women's agency was treated as incommensurable in relation to men, rendering them incomplete legal subjects with a different and limited access to property rights.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the ways in which Hindu personal law came to be oriented towards a determination of commensurability and legal right showed, for Sturman, that liberal theories of property and personhood shaped the governance of social life in India.

One of the major insights of Wilson's and Sturman's work is to denaturalize the relationship between the colonial state and Indian society. It was not a given that something called 'social life' would come to be within the regulatory ambit of the state; rather, this link was historically constructed, contingent upon certain transformations of state practice, and it both relied upon and, in turn, shaped the category of the social. Moreover, the focus on colonial law as the instrument effecting these transformations speaks to the seemingly paradoxical relationship between colonial liberalism and the emergent concept of society. As Sturman argues, colonial personal law was concerned with transforming bodily, customary, or ritual differences into commensurate forms of legal right, thus revealing at its core the liberal universalist vision of society as a network of abstract equivalence between people. Yet, as she also shows, this project was riven with contradictions. In attempting to account for and address various forms of difference, colonial law ended up either reproducing these differences or, as Wilson argues, prompted a defence of Indian society as a unique historical formation. Colonial liberalism, in other words, provided an uneven but productive field for the emergence of the social concept.

### III

The political transformations wrought by the Mutiny of 1857 and the subsequent transfer of power from Company to Crown brought about a shift both in imperial ideology and in colonial understandings of Indian society. As Karuna Mantena shows, British imperial thinkers increasingly turned to culturalist justifications for empire to explain the perceived failures of liberal reform. As she argues, theorists like Henry Maine conceptualized India as a model of a 'traditional society' to argue that it was mired in certain primitive and customary modes of organization and, thus, impervious to change.<sup>25</sup> The conceptualization of India as a 'traditional society' was also aligned with the development of a colonial sociology in the second half of the nineteenth century, as embodied in an assemblage of new institutions, practices, and forms of knowledge designed to observe the newly discovered entity called society. The collection of statistical information, the proliferation of gazetteers and district reports, and the development of the census in the 1870s, to name a few, all speak to this impulse to define and apprehend the social. Indeed, it is for good reason that the late nineteenth-century colonial state has been described as an 'ethnographic state', one which inscribed new categories of enumeration

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 3.

<sup>25</sup> Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of empire: Henry Maine and the ends of liberal imperialism* (Princeton, NJ, 2010).

and classification designed to observe 'Indian society', but which also ended up reshaping the category itself.<sup>26</sup> In particular, historians have argued that colonial sociology produced a conception of 'Indian society' as a cluster of different communities (as opposed to the dominant European conception of society as constituted by individual subjects). This 'colonial genealogy of society', as Gyan Prakash termed it, ultimately had the effect of designating some issues, particularly those relating to caste and religion, as being 'social' rather than 'political'.<sup>27</sup> In doing so, colonial sociology shaped the contours and limits of the political domain in India.

This historical cleavage between the social and the political effected by colonial sociology had far-reaching implications for nationalist and imperial politics in the early twentieth century, as Mrinalini Sinha explores in *Specters of Mother India: the global restructuring of an empire* (2006).<sup>28</sup> Sinha's work traces the aftermath of the publication of the American writer Katherine Mayo's controversial book *Mother India* (1927). Mayo's book, billed as a journalistic exposé of Indian society and its various 'social' ills, sparked a global outcry when it was published in 1927. Mayo had argued that certain practices that contributed to the subordination of women in India, such as child marriage, were intrinsic to the very nature of Indian society and to Hinduism in particular. In this way, by attributing the cause of India's 'backwardness' to its social domain, as opposed to its political system, Mayo's book functioned as a defence of colonial rule and as a way to argue that Indians were unfit for self-government. Sinha argues that Mayo's view was rooted in a colonial sociology that privileged community as the fundamental building block of Indian society. Moreover, in this view, women's agency was defined primarily in relation to their community and its perceived norms and customs. Thus, any question of women's rights or status became a matter for the social domain rather than the political.

Yet, as Sinha also argues, the colonial separation between the social and the political was ultimately unstable, and its fault lines were laid bare in the heated debates that followed the publication of *Mother India*. In particular, Sinha shows that Indian women activists responded to Mayo's book by launching a campaign to ban child marriage, an effort that faced significant opposition from the colonial state. Sinha reads this moment as a 'crisis in the dominant colonial sociology of India'.<sup>29</sup> In essence, by exposing the colonial state's opposition to their cause, Indian women repudiated the charge that practices like child marriage were somehow inherent in the nature of Indian society. Inverting Mayo's critique of Indian 'social' ills, they showed that in fact it was the political domain occupied by the colonial state that was the main impediment to change. The campaign eventually culminated in the passage of the Child

<sup>26</sup> Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of mind: colonialism and the making of modern India* (Princeton, NJ, 2001).

<sup>27</sup> Gyan Prakash, 'The colonial genealogy of society: community and political modernity in India', in Patrick Joyce, ed., *The social in question: new bearings in history and the social sciences* (London and New York, NY, 2002), pp. 81–96.

<sup>28</sup> Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: the global restructuring of an empire* (Durham, NC, and London, 2006).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Marriage Restraint Act in 1929, a landmark legislation that applied uniformly to all religious communities, thus also challenging the notion that women's interests had to be mediated through their communities. By delinking women's rights from the claims of community, the legislation marked an instance when Indian women were interpellated by the colonial state as individual subjects. Sinha argues that although this moment was short-lived, particularly as women's political agency came to be subsumed by communal and nationalist politics in the 1930s, it nevertheless represented a historical conjuncture when 'the social and the political were brought into alignment'.<sup>30</sup>

One of the main implications of Sinha's work is to show that invocation of the 'social' as a distinct sphere of native tradition functioned as a way to defer or elide political change (or to act as an 'alibi' for empire, as Mantena memorably put it). It also became a way to preserve certain practices and hierarchies by removing them from the reach of the state. Rupa Viswanath has explored these 'strategies of evasion' in relation to caste exclusion in her book *The Pariah problem* (2014).<sup>31</sup> The book traces the history of how Protestant missionaries, reformers, and colonial state officials in Madras in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries conceptualized the problem of untouchability and Dalit oppression. Viswanath shows that the 'Pariah problem', as it came to be named, was shaped by the understanding that caste, despite being rooted in the political economy of agrarian labour, was fundamentally religious in character. Pioneered by missionaries in the post-1857 period when the colonial state purported to adopt a stance of neutrality in religious matters, this definition of caste as a religious phenomenon was, thus, deployed by caste elites as a way to argue against state interference in alleviating discrimination. In essence, severing the political economic function of caste from its ritualistic aspects enabled its structural persistence. Viswanath's argument about this conceptual division between the 'civil' and 'religious' aspects of caste accords broadly with the historiographical view that colonial sociology cordoned off religion as a distinct and defining feature of the social in India.<sup>32</sup> Yet, Viswanath's focus is more on political contestation rather than on instruments of colonial sociology. For her, the ideological production of caste as a religious matter was produced by alliances between upper caste landlords, colonial state officials, and missionaries (or what she calls the 'caste-state nexus') in efforts to 'evade' political interventions to transform this regime of agrarian domination and labour control.<sup>33</sup>

Viswanath argues that these evasions persisted into the era of mass nationalism and the emergence of native representative institutions, though this time under the guise of a new conceptual object she calls the 'national social'. In the early twentieth century, as the colonial government devolved local powers to legislative councils under the system of dyarchy, Dalits began to

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> Rupa Viswanath, *The Pariah problem: caste, religion, and the social in modern India* (New York, NY, 2014), p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

enter representative bodies and claim political rights for themselves. Yet, their claims were once again sidelined by arguing that the proper sphere for their resolution was society and not politics. Caste elites argued that issues pertaining to caste discrimination (such as access to public roads, for instance) were ‘social’ disabilities that would be resolved through progressive reforms from within Indian society rather than through governmental action.<sup>34</sup> This ‘national social’, Viswanath argues, represented a subtle but important shift in the logic of evasion: unlike colonial understandings of Indian society, the nationalist imaginary of Indian society was not that of a realm of timeless and static tradition to be protected from state interference, but rather as the cradle of nation building. As Viswanath argues, the national social was imagined as ‘the progressive nationalist hearth, where social reform, it was promised, would proceed apace’.<sup>35</sup> Ultimately, for Viswanath, this constant deferral of structural change buttressed by invocations of the ‘social’ has continued well into the post-colonial era. As she puts it, ‘The notion of an autonomous social that cannot and should not be pushed too fast into change or reform continues to inform public discourse in India today and implicitly to justify the nonenforcement of laws and protections for Dalits that were enshrined in the Indian constitution.’<sup>36</sup> As in Sinha’s narrative, the ‘social’ thus continued to shape the limits and possibilities of politics.

Although they narrate quite different histories, what unites Sinha’s and Viswanath’s works is their insistence on treating the ‘social’ not only as a historical formation but also as a field of knowledge that generated and organized a wide range of claims pertaining to categories like caste and gender. In doing so, they draw attention to the methodological assumptions and disciplinary boundaries that often underpin the historical study of such categories. If caste or gender has come to be the remit of social history (or of the social sciences more broadly), as is so often taken as a default assumption, then its study must also attend to how these categories came to be located in the conceptual domain of the social in the first place. The fact that caste was defined as a religious phenomenon or that religion was defined as a feature of the social in India was not a random classification, but rather part of a specific political project in a particular historical context. There is, thus, a need to interrogate both the historical production of these categories as well as the conceptual fields and forms of knowledge that came to encompass them.

Recent scholarship has built on these insights to explore further the links between the colonial construction and regulation of caste, gender, and sexuality and modern social science as a whole. Perhaps the most powerful intervention in this vein is Durba Mitra’s work *Indian sex life: sexuality and the colonial origins of modern social thought* (2020). Exploring the entangled history of sexuality and the sciences of society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Bengal, Mitra argues that the colonial state’s regulation of prostitution and what it classified as ‘deviant female sexuality’ was

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., ch. 9.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

foundational to the development of modern social theory in India.<sup>37</sup> Crucially, for Mitra, it was not just that female sexuality became an object of inquiry for social science, but rather that it emerged as a central organizing category for a whole host of social scientific discourses and repertoires. She traces a range of methods, techniques, and discursive fields that underpinned the study of Indian society – from philological analysis and legal surveys to ethnology, sociology, forensics, and popular literature – and shows how the figure of the prostitute appeared again and again as the locus of investigation. As she puts it, deviant female sexuality became the ‘primary “grid” for comprehending social life in this period’.<sup>38</sup> Mitra’s work is, thus, not only a conceptual history of the figure of the prostitute, but also a critical history of ‘society’ and its forms of knowledge.

Ultimately, what many of the works discussed in this and the previous section share is a commitment to placing colonialism at the centre of their analyses of knowledge production and concept formation. There are several methodological implications of this move as they relate to the history of the social concept in India (and, indeed, the history of Indian ideological forms more broadly). First, this argument suggests that the social concept emerged in India as a result of relatively short-run transformations brought about by colonial rule, as opposed to being produced through internal dynamics or by longer-term, pre-colonial vectors of historical change. Second, this approach analyses the production of the social concept primarily, though not exclusively, by tracing shifts in ideology and political argument. Thus, in studying conceptual history, these approaches ultimately privilege the role of the colonial state, the transnational circulation of forms and ideas, and shifts in ideology, argument, and discourse.

#### IV

In contrast to scholarship that has emphasized the colonial context in the formation of the social concept, a recent vein of historiography has focused instead on historical transformations brought about by the expansion of capitalism. This work represents a significant historiographical challenge to scholarship that has primarily focused on colonialism as the agent of change in South Asian history. This work emerged, in part, as a critique of the Subaltern Studies school of historiography and its emphasis on alterity and the difference of Indian historical experience. More broadly, it was also a response to the ‘cultural turn’ of the 1980s and 1990s and its focus on studying representation, performance, and discursive production. As a response to these trends, this scholarship is grounded instead in an analytical framework that seeks to explain conceptual change through material transformation. In doing so, it seeks to situate India within broader trends in global history, showing how Indian society experienced some of the same historical forces and

<sup>37</sup> Durba Mitra, *Indian sex life: sexuality and the colonial origins of modern social thought* (Princeton, NJ, 2020).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

global processes as other parts of the world, even if the particularities of colonialism inflected these impacts in specific ways.

A key work in this vein is Manu Goswami's revisionist account of Indian nationalism, *Producing India: from colonial economy to national space* (2004).<sup>39</sup> Although the key category for Goswami is the nation, and not society, the theoretical innovation of her work invites us not only to interrogate the conceptual relationship between nation and society, but also to rethink the historical production of concepts more broadly. In particular, Goswami critiques what she calls 'methodological nationalism', which she defines as 'the common practice of presupposing, rather than examining, the sociohistorical production of such categories as a national space and national economy and the closely related failure to analyze the specific global field within and against which specific nationalist movements emerged'.<sup>40</sup> Goswami argues that methodological nationalism is part of a broader 'nation-state centric bias' in historical and social scientific scholarship that treats categories like 'society' and 'economy' as if they just happen to correspond spatially to the territorial borders of the nation-state.<sup>41</sup> For Goswami, taking this apparent spatial concurrence as a given fact amounts to replicating the logic of nationalist discourse when in fact the task ought to be to show how this discourse was historically produced.

Goswami's approach to studying the emergence of nationalism is to foreground material shifts and global political economic transformations that produced India as a geographically distinct national entity and economy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She argues that the global expansion of capitalism and the territorialization of state power in the second half of the nineteenth century, as reflected in practices such as the growth of railways and infrastructure, introduction of a single currency and a national budget, proliferation of maps and land surveys, and so on, transformed India into a single unit of governance, or what she calls 'colonial state space'.<sup>42</sup> Yet, these processes of integration also generated their own forms of inequality and underdevelopment, both within colonial India and on an imperial scale as India became increasingly subordinated to a Britain-centred global economy. Anti-colonial thinkers challenged this unequal political economy of empire and, drawing on examples of other projects of national development, envisioned India as an economically sovereign national space, even as their territorial conceptions remained rooted in the spatial configuration of colonial state space. Anti-colonial nationalism was, thus, borne of the same set of historical forces that produced modern colonialism and not from some primordial indigenous domain untouched by colonial and capitalist modernity.

Despite her focus on political economic factors, Goswami does not ignore discursive and cultural shifts in the making of Indian nationalism. She looks, for instance, at geography textbooks that helped to circulate vernacular conceptions of India as *Bharat*, a specifically Hindu figuration of the nation as a

<sup>39</sup> Manu Goswami, *Producing India: from colonial economy to national space* (Chicago, IL, 2004).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

historically and geographically distinct entity, and shows how such representations sought to convey a greater organic unity between history, territory, and nationality.<sup>43</sup> But, for Goswami, such discursive and cultural imaginaries need to be explored alongside the material and political economic transformations that produced them, a methodology that she describes as tracking 'joint determinations between shifts in meaning and materiality'.<sup>44</sup> Writing against what she calls the 'representational glare of [the] discursivist turn', Goswami champions an approach that sees concepts and discourses as emerging out of material transformation.<sup>45</sup>

A similar approach animates Andrew Sartori's study, *Bengal in global concept history: culturalism in the age of capital* (2008), which applies a critical Marxist lens to studying the intellectual history of Bengal, and conceptual history more broadly, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>46</sup> The key problematic that Sartori is concerned with is that of how to write a history of a global concept like 'culture' and its emergence in a colonized place like Bengal. Sartori argues that intellectual histories of the non-West often fall into the trap of designating European colonialism as the sole vehicle for modernity (and, in doing so, reify Europe as representing the universal and the colonial world as the particular and thus always derivative of Europe). Or, to avoid this perceived pejorative valuation, they might try instead to search for the roots of modern concepts in pre-colonial conceptual realms, which they posit as being ultimately incommensurable to European concepts. Neither approach, Sartori argues, is sufficient in explaining both the global prevalence of certain concepts and the specificity of their local manifestations. What would it look like, his work invites us to consider, to acknowledge the Western origins of certain global concepts, yet also not see their adoption in the colonial world as derivative? The answer, for Sartori, is to locate ideas in the structure of social practices as shaped by global capitalist transformation.

Specifically, Sartori argues that the concept of 'culture' emerged in European philosophical thought in the eighteenth century to advance an argument for the 'underdetermination of human subjectivity', that is, the idea that human agency was fundamentally free to act in the world and was not delimited by nature.<sup>47</sup> From Europe, this concept circulated globally in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and was adopted across a wide range of linguistic and national contexts. But this global dissemination was not due to some 'republic of letters' style circulation of texts or imposed top-down by colonial pedagogical projects. Instead, this concept found global purchase because in each context it helped to make sense of a specific socio-historical change that was underway, namely the transformation of society through

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., particularly chs. 4-5.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>46</sup> Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in global concept history: culturalism in the age of capital* (Chicago, IL, 2008).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

the mediating role of labour in a system of capitalist exchange. In such a system, Sartori argues, human labour could be conceptualized either as a way to advance the private interests of individual subjects (a position that represented a liberal outlook), or as a way to contribute to the ethical actualization of the social body as a whole (what Sartori calls a culturalist outlook).<sup>48</sup> In other words, the culture concept's emphasis on the autonomy of human agency captured one of the ways of understanding the significance of the role of labour in a capitalist society.

In Bengal, these dual ideological orientations emerged out of the rise and eventual crisis of liberal political economy, each with its own theory of the social. In the early nineteenth century, Bengali peasant life began to be restructured through the expansion of capitalist commodity production. This involved a shift from subsistence farming to cash crops (particularly indigo), which led to the growth of monetization, increasing peasant reliance on credit, and the appearance of wage-like labour relations.<sup>49</sup> Bengali intellectuals made sense of these changes by articulating a liberal theory of society as a contractualist sphere of free exchange. Thus, unlike Wilson, who reads the emergence of Bengali liberalism as an ideological response to colonial utilitarianism, Sartori sees it instead as emerging out of the capitalist transformation of Bengali society. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, liberalism was increasingly under strain as Bengal's political economy faced a series of crises and restructuring. Sartori shows that, following a global financial crisis in 1848, indigo production in Bengal collapsed, leading to the withdrawal of Bengali capital from the commercial sphere. This, combined with the further integration and subordination of Bengal into a Britain-centred world economy, meant that liberal categories of commerce and free exchange no longer seemed relevant for Bengal and began to appear as foreign impositions on Bengal's customary modes of life. Bengali intellectuals, thus, turned to a culturalist ideology to make sense of their estrangement from liberal political economy. Drawing on neo-Vedantic, Hindu revivalist ideas, they began to conceive of labour in terms of ethical transformation and self-realization, lauding the virtues of 'India's cultural rather than Europe's material civilization'.<sup>50</sup> Thus, an indigenous understanding of culture in the garb of a revitalized Hinduism came to the fore.

Crucially, culturalism produced its own understanding of the social that challenged liberal theories of society. Sartori shows that the swadeshi movement, which called for a boycott of British goods and the promotion of indigenous manufactures in response to the colonial state's partitioning of Bengal in 1905, mounted a wide-ranging critique of liberalism from the perspective of culture. This critique was articulated through a religio-philosophical idiom of what Sartori calls 'Hindu idealism', which posited that because the world of phenomena was ultimately a reflection of divine transcendence, the way to achieve greater spiritual self-awareness was not

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50–1.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 2.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.



through a renunciation of the material realm, but rather through one's practical activity in it in service of others. Thus, in contrast to liberal conceptions of society as constituted by autonomous subjects pursuing their private interests, swadeshi Hindu nationalists had an organicist vision of society as an ethical sphere of action in which the productive labour of each individual contributed to the self-actualization of the social body as a whole. Sartori argues that, in conceptualizing society in this way, swadeshi nationalists were trying to grapple with the ways in which social interdependence produced by capitalism had come to structure Bengali life. Yet, by perceiving this transformation in terms of a binary of European commercial society in opposition to Indian ethical life, they ultimately misrecognized this form of interdependence. What they took to be a manifestation of European civilizational difference was, in fact, constitutive of capitalist social forms everywhere.

The main insight that follows from this analysis is that, for Sartori, society as a concept seeks to capture the structure of social relations produced by capitalism. As he writes, 'it is this peculiar form of abstract mediation (the mediation of social interdependence by the totality of productive labour) that is reified through the category of society'.<sup>51</sup> As such, this category can only have historical purchase in a place where such abstract mediation has taken place. Sartori, thus, argues that 'society' cannot be assumed as a foundational unit of historical or social scientific analysis, nor can it be applied to pre-modern and pre-capitalist social formations.<sup>52</sup> He notes, for instance, that there was no word in the Sanskrit tradition to denote 'society' in its modern sense and, thus, the task for historians is to account for 'the modern emergence of the need for such a term'.<sup>53</sup> This was the need to conceptualize the ways in which labour structured social relations. In short, for Sartori and for Marxian-oriented approaches more broadly, society emerged as a concept to describe capitalist social relations.

## V

The different approaches explored in the above sections, thus, point to quite different ways of thinking about the social concept in South Asian history. Certainly, this is due in part to the fact that they are all interested in different historical questions that require different types of analytical engagement with the 'social'. Some of the works discussed above are interested in the 'social' as a concept as it was articulated by their historical actors, while others approach it as a category of analysis that helps to make sense of the past. The unique interventions of these works also point to avenues for further research. For instance, Goswami's and Sartori's socio-historical accounts of 'nation' and 'culture' underscore the fact that the historical production of the social concept is relatively underexplored in South Asian historiography, especially in relation to global historical change. Likewise, Wilson's argument about how South

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 154 and 257.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

Asian thinkers drew a dichotomy between *sarkār* (state) and *samāj* (society) is a reminder that the vernacular and conceptual terrain of the social concept is virtually unmapped, particularly when it comes to the terms and concepts in South Asian languages that came to be interpellated as ‘society’.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, the appearance of the social concept in South Asian languages was, as in European languages, a recasting of existing concepts. And, as in Europe, these concepts were not simply static and unchanging prior to the nineteenth century; on the contrary, they were subject to dynamics of change that determined the terms in which they would become available to nineteenth-century thinkers. Building on these works, then, what follows in this section are some reflections on the longer genealogy of the social concept in South Asia. In particular, I ask: how might we explore the social concept in a way that accounts for its semantic, conceptual, and historical specificity?

An in-depth answer to this question is outside the scope of this review and would depend, at least in its semantic dimensions, on the particular linguistic fields one considers. My own training is in the Indo-Persianate and Urdu traditions, so as an exploratory and somewhat speculative gesture, I consider here the example of the Urdu term *jamāʿat*. It was sometime in the second half of the nineteenth century that *jamāʿat* came to be placed in a translational relationship with the English concept ‘society’ as meaning a general sphere of human experience or a domain of civic life, whereas previously it had meant some type of group formation. How did this translational shift happen? To understand how *jamāʿat* became society, I propose we would need to trace not only the changing meanings of the term itself, but also the transformations of the historical forms to which the term referred. In other words, is it possible that Urdu translators chose this term as the translational equivalent for society because the concept they knew as *jamāʿat* was perhaps coming to resemble in some way the concept they encountered as ‘society’? Inquiring into this conceptual convergence might find, for instance, that *jamāʿat* (and its variants like *ijtimāʿ*, *majmaʿ*, and *jam*) appeared regularly in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Indo-Persian texts to refer to various types of groups and corporate forms, such as assemblies, troops, merchant collectives, or crowds of people.<sup>55</sup> A conceptual history of *jamāʿat* might explore the links between these usages to the expansion of new forms of civic and associational life in early modern South Asia that has been so richly detailed in an older generation of revisionist scholarship on the eighteenth century, particularly in North India.<sup>56</sup> Newer scholarship grounded in Indo-Persian and other Indian language archives has extended these insights to other regions and periods and added significantly to our understanding of voluntary association and corporate life in early modern South Asia. These works have showed the

<sup>54</sup> The vernacular and conceptual field of the social in Bengali has been briefly explored by Rochana Majumdar, ‘A conceptual history of the social: some reflections out of colonial Bengal’, in Michael Dodson and Brian Hatcher, eds., *Trans-colonial modernities in South Asia* (Abingdon, 2012).

<sup>55</sup> See, for instance, the usages of *majmaʿ* in seventeenth-century glossaries like *Sharfnama-i ahmad munūṛī*, British Library (BL) Add. MS 7678, fo. 34, and *Burhān qāṭiʿī*, BL Add. MS 16,751, fo. 77.

<sup>56</sup> Bayly, *Rulers, townsmen, and bazaars*.

strengthening of corporate identities, particularly those of mercantile bodies, religious groups, and caste- and occupation-based *mohallas* (neighbourhoods), driven by processes of commercialization and urbanization.<sup>57</sup> Engaging with these histories would enable us to historicize more precisely the formation of the languages of the social.

A history of *jamāʿat* might also interrogate the forms and genres of writing through which we come to know this concept such as by tracing how the expansion of associational and corporate life was registered in new documentary forms. Usages of *jamāʿat* can be found, for instance, in documents like merchant letters and legal paperwork. How did the formal qualities of these documents capture the socio-historical forms of *jamāʿat*? To take just one example, in his analysis of sales deeds (*baiʿnamas*) and legal testimonies (*mahzars*) from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Punjab and Gujarat, Farhat Hasan has traced the imprint of what he calls 'the community-*mohalla* compact of power relations' on everyday socio-legal transactions.<sup>58</sup> He shows that such transactions had to be verified by residents of the *mohalla*, who were included in the documents as witnesses, and a section of the document would list their names, caste groups, occupations, and sometimes even bodily descriptions of the transacting parties.<sup>59</sup> In this way, the form of the document itself sought to map the social positions of the corporate group that had produced it. Consideration of form and genre, too, then needs to be part of our investigation into the genealogy of the social.

If we extend this line of inquiry further into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, keeping an eye on the changing conceptual and linguistic valences of *jamāʿat*, we would find the concept gradually being brought into a translational relationship with English terms like company, as well as to refer to groups with specific national or cultural identities, such as the *jamāʿat-i afghani* (Afghan group or company) or the *jamāʿat-i inglīshi* (English group or company).<sup>60</sup> *Jamāʿat-i inglīshi* (or sometimes *jamāʿat-i anگریزی*) had been in longer usage as a reference to the East India Company specifically, but also began to appear in reference to the English more broadly as a group with specific customs (*rusūm*) and manners (*ʿādāt*).<sup>61</sup> The sense that those in a *jamāʿat* shared certain customs and manners would seem to add a new dimension to this conceptual field by linking group membership to historically differentiated ritual or customary practices. This shift can be traced in a number of Persian works in the early nineteenth century that sought to document the variety of these groups. In form, these works drew upon an older genre of *tārīkh* (historical narrative) literature, while also blending in local histories and proto-sociological

<sup>57</sup> See, for instance, Farhat Hasan, *State and locality in Mughal India: power relations in western India, c. 1572-1730* (Cambridge, 2004); Elizabeth Thelen, *Urban histories of Rajasthan: religion, politics, and society, 1550-1800* (Chicago, IL, 2022), especially ch. 5.

<sup>58</sup> Farhat Hasan, *Paper, performance, and the state: social change and political culture in Mughal India* (Cambridge, 2021), p. 30.

<sup>59</sup> Some of the documents that Hasan has analysed are collected in J. S. Grewal, *In the by-lanes of history: some Persian documents from a Punjab town* (Simla, 1975).

<sup>60</sup> See, for instance, in the *Tuhfa-t-ul ʿālam*, BL Add. MS 23,533, fos. 112b and 113.

<sup>61</sup> These usages appear in the *Mirāt al-ahwāl jahān numā* (1810), BL Add. MS 24,052, fo. 227.

descriptions of small towns (*qasbas*) and emerging urban locales that were growing in importance as regional centres of trade and commerce.<sup>62</sup>

Thus far, we have encountered *jamāʿat* primarily as a descriptive category in relation to group formations produced by early modern civic and commercial transformation. At what point, then, does it become an analytical category? An early usage in this vein appears in the 1846 Urdu translation of Francis Wayland's *Elements of political economy* (1837), in which the translator Dharam Narayan used *jamāʿat* as the translation for 'class'.<sup>63</sup> Wayland had argued that there were three forms or 'classes' of labour, which he defined in relation to the type of activity they performed. In his translation, Dharam Narayan referred to each of these three classes of labour as constituting a *jamāʿat*.<sup>64</sup> It was this transformation of *jamāʿat* as an abstract analytical category to classify certain occupational groups that perhaps allowed it to be recruited as a translational approximation of 'society'. Indeed, by the second half of the nineteenth century, *jamāʿat* had begun to acquire a broader, more expansive meaning as a sphere of civic action or even a fundamental aspect of humanity at large. We see these usages in a wide range of Urdu texts, including political economy translations, dictionaries, and novels. As an 1876 Urdu-to-English dictionary noted, *jamāʿat* meant 'A party of men; a company; corporation; body; society; community.'<sup>65</sup> Our conceptual history might connect these shifts in meaning to wider transformations in the group forms to which *jamāʿat* referred, including through processes of class formation, urbanization, and strengthening of occupational association in nineteenth-century India. We might also ask how, to draw on Sartori's argument, the transformation of *jamāʿat* into an abstract category reflected forms of abstraction produced by capitalist restructuring of social relations. And, likewise, how did the form of emergent genres, like the Urdu novel or the political economic treatise, capture these abstractions? Tracing semantic, conceptual, and historical change in this way would, thus, enable us to answer how *jamāʿat* became society.

The above brief sketch is certainly not an exhaustive genealogy of the *jamāʿat* concept, nor does it purport to offer a complete accounting of all Urdu concepts that came to be equated with 'society'. Rather, it is intended merely to explore how we might trace the longer-term development of South Asian concepts with an eye both on the political and economic transformations that undergirded their development and the languages, genres, and forms of knowledge through which we come to know those concepts. In tracing such a genealogy, I do not mean to suggest that there was an unbroken line of continuity between pre-colonial and colonial thought worlds or to claim that the modern concept of the social already existed in pre-colonial South Asian thought. Rather, the aim of such an approach would be to understand the long-

<sup>62</sup> An example of such a text is the *Mirāt-i aftāb numā*, BL Add. MS 16,697.

<sup>63</sup> Dharam Narayan, *Usul intizam al-Madan* (Delhi, 1846).

<sup>64</sup> See Francis Wayland, *Elements of political economy* (1837), ch. 2, and compare with Dharam Narayan's translation, pp. 15–16.

<sup>65</sup> Samuel Fallon, *A new Hindustani-English dictionary, with illustrations from Hindustani literature and folk-lore* (Benaras, 1876), p. 479.

term historical transformations that produced the social concept in modern South Asia. If the above conjecture is correct and the origins of this concept are located in the history of early modern corporate forms, then understanding this transformation would require taking into account not just the transformation of those corporate forms themselves, but also the transformation of linguistic and documentary forms associated with them. It is only then that we can account for the linguistic, conceptual, and historical specificity of a concept like 'society' in South Asia.

## VI

In a brief, but illuminating 2008 essay, occasioned by the twenty-fifth anniversary of the journal *Representations*, the historian James Vernon considered the question of how we might think about the relationship between social forms and aesthetic forms.<sup>66</sup> Reflecting on the legacy of *Representations*, Vernon wrote that the 'new historicist' approaches championed by the journal in the 1980s and 1990s had then opened up space for interdisciplinary inquiry by encouraging structurally oriented historians to consider the role of form and representation in social history. Unfortunately, since that time, Vernon argued, such interdisciplinarity had disappeared and a new disciplinary entrenchment had set in. As he observed, in the early years of the twenty-first century, literary studies and cultural studies scholars increasingly focused on form without an attendant interest in its historical production, while on the other hand, historians had begun to turn away from theory in favour of a 'new empiricism'.<sup>67</sup>

Yet, as the works examined in this review demonstrate, it is possible to have a theoretically sophisticated orientation to one's study of the social while still being historically grounded. Indeed, whether it is Wilson's insightful Heideggerian reading of colonial anxiety about being in an unfamiliar world and Mitra's and Sturman's compelling Foucauldian analyses of knowledge and colonial governmentality or Goswami's and Sartori's brilliantly ambitious project of a critical and non-deterministic Marxian intellectual history, these works certainly cannot be accused of turning away from theory. At the same time, Vernon's point about attention to discursive and aesthetic forms also remains important and suggests future pathways for the study of the social concept in South Asia, ones which take into account both form *and* context; both language *and* history. As an illustration of this imperative, Vernon offered in his essay a brief reading of *The Up Series*, a multigenerational television documentary that traced the lives of a group of children in post-war Britain as a way to understand the role of class in British society. Analysing how the aesthetic and formal aspects of the series had changed from its first instalment in 1964 to its seventh in 2005, Vernon asked: 'was [this] a change in the objective condition of society and its class formations or a change in the forms of knowledge and representation used to understand the social?'<sup>68</sup> His answer

<sup>66</sup> James Vernon, 'The social and its forms', *Representations*, 104 (2008), pp. 154–8.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

was that it was both and that the task of the historian was to explore both ‘the historical operation of form and how it shapes our understanding of the social’ as well as the ‘material consequences that...structure the lives of populations and much of their social relations’.<sup>69</sup> Applying this to our study of the social concept in South Asia, we might ask why and in what ways the semantic field of a concept like *jamāʿat* has changed over time. If Vernon is right, then the answer would seem to lie both in the material conditions described by those terms as well as in the aesthetic forms and forms of knowledge through which we come to know these concepts. Only then could we begin to have a deeper understanding of a concept as expansive and totalizing, and one that has become as naturalized in historical thinking, as ‘society’.

**Acknowledgements.** I thank Robert Travers, Nasrin Olla, and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. Any errors that remain are mine alone.

**Competing interests.** The author declares none.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

**Cite this article:** Siddiqui O (2024). Re-Thinking the ‘Social’ in British Colonial and South Asian History. *The Historical Journal* 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X24000578>