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David Ludden

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

This book is about history's attachment to land. It considers the present day in the context of the past two millennia, because a wide historical view is needed to appreciate the ideas that shape contemporary mentalities, and because earthly environments today are being shaped by long-term historical forces. As the book goes on, I consider some elements of Eurasian history and introduce some ideas about geography, technology, patriarchy, ritual, ecology, and other subjects that situate South Asian farmers in their wider world. I also indicate that more research into the historical dynamics of territoriality is needed to improve our knowledge of culture and political economy. But, like other volumes in *The New Cambridge History of India*, the main goal of this book is to draw together research by many scholars on a coherent set of historical themes without rehearsing academic debates or piling up citations. The bibliographical essay is a guide to relevant literature that sprawls across the disciplines of history, anthropology, economics, geography, political science, and rural sociology. I apologise for not covering many regions well enough and particularly for slighting Assam, Baluchistan, Chhattisgarh, Kerala, Nepal, Orissa, and Sri Lanka. This failure results partly from the state of research but mostly from my own inability to compile appropriate data in the time and space allotted. For these reasons, territories in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan form my central subject matter.

The marginality of agrarian history demands attention. It is not unique to South Asia, but proportionately more books do seem to treat the agrarian past in Europe, the Americas, Russia, China, and Japan. Though culture and political economy are not more detached from the land in South Asia than elsewhere, scholars would seem to think so. This may reflect a more general alienation. As the urban middle-class intelligentsia came into being in the modern world economy, they wove the countryside into their epics of nationality, and, to this day, agrarian history evokes interest to the extent that country folk represent national identity. Everywhere, agrarian history is submerged in the historiography of nations and states. We need to keep this in mind because

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[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

historical knowing is a force in modern transformations of the world and a tool for making the country in the image of the nation. National histories have formed territoriality and incorporated rustic folk into the project of modernity, so the past of its peasantry maps the rise of national power on the land. Modernity's general alienation from its agrarian environment pervades agrarian studies, and when combined with orientalist stereotypes, it simply pushed peasants more deeply into the margins of history in South Asia than elsewhere. Because villages there seemed totally traditional, lacking any inherent drive to modernity, they were assumed to have no actual history, only timeless permanence. Studies of the rural past thus recounted the incorporation and subordination of villagers by city folk. Urban elites made nations, and they made the history that brought South Asia from ancient times to the present. The village past seemed to be a permanent affliction.

There is much to learn on the margins of history. Most evidence on the agrarian past continues to be unused today, not because it is inaccessible but because it has seemed uninteresting and unimportant for the history of modernity; and we can use this neglect to measure the blinkers of modern minds. If we want to understand modernity as a moment of human history, agrarian history is a good place to look and South Asia is a good place to work, because here modern machineries of knowing have mangled less of the original data. In Europe, the Americas, and East Asia, scholars have constructed rural history as the legacy and memory of modernity and they have built national identity on a solid agrarian footing. In South Asia, domineering epistemologies of nationality have not paved over so much of the landscape or cemented together the past of nations and of peasants so comprehensively. Villages fit much more firmly and neatly into national histories in France, England, the United States, China, and Japan than they do in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. The lasting force of regional diversity in South Asia derives from the fact that, historically, its agrarian territories have marched to different drummers, and even in different directions. Scholars have repeatedly argued that agrarian South Asia evades the discipline of progress. All the histories of all the empires and nations in South Asia could never capture the history of all its peoples.

With this in view, I want to explore agrarian history outside modernity's construction of the past. Life on the land seems to entangle, confront, and suffuse modernity without being overwhelmed or

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[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

absorbed by it; and, when urban middle-class scholars write agrarian history, we stumble repeatedly and awkwardly upon this stubborn, enticing otherness. The misty longevity and persistent localism of agrarian history resist narration and escape the grids of time and space that define national history. Narratives cannot untangle all the rhythms of agrarian change or trace all the lines of movement in apparently stable rustic routines. Agrarian South Asia thus provides a historical vantage point from which to reconsider modernity and nationality. For this purpose, we need an extended chronology for tracing the rise of contemporary conditions. In this book, history's trajectory is not moving toward national independence or national development but rather into the trends that influence agrarian environments today. These trends represent other histories that are still unfolding inside national states but outside their control, in small-scale agrarian territories which have never been fully defined by modern nationality. These territories have their own histories in which local struggles are tangled up with national and international institutions and also with global networks of power, mobility, and communication.

In studies that cover long periods of time, semantic problems abound. I employ place names from different epochs – calling ancient Kosala ‘the region of Lucknow’ or ‘Central Uttar Pradesh’, for instance – to enable the reader to keep track of various terms that attach to places over millennia. This anachronism also encourages a reader to imagine a distant past alive in the present; and, indeed, people build a future on a past that never really disappears. Common terms that I use for regions (Awadh, Deccan, Bengal, Punjab, Assam, Uttarakhand, Gujarat, Telangana, and such) refer broadly to old regions rather than to the strictly bounded territories of today. Modern cities and towns are useful landmarks, and contemporary political and administrative territories are convenient markers for large regions in all times. Modern district names help to identify small regions, but we need to keep in mind that district names and boundaries change, as do their identities within states and nations, especially after 1947. I use the district names for these geographical areas found in Joseph E. Schwartzberg, *A Historical Atlas of South Asia* (second impression, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1992, p. 79).¹ Many district names continued to be used after

¹ For regional names during the historical periods before and after 1200, see Joseph E. Schwartzberg, *A Historical Atlas of South Asia*, New Delhi, 1992, p. 137.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

1947 – though they have been changed with increasing frequency in the past twenty years – and whenever possible I refer to districts without naming the national state within which they lie. This helps to avoid the impression that the boundaries of contemporary states were inscribed on the agrarian landscape before 1947. The relationship between national territories and agrarian territory is a subject for discussion in chapters 1 and 4. When I use states within the Republic of India to discuss times before they were formed, I do so only for the purpose of location; and this does not imply that these political boundaries had some incipient historical reality in the distant past. The historical formation of modern political regions is discussed in chapters 3 and 4.

Many terms need to be handled carefully because they resonate with contemporary politics. When I refer to the Tamil, Telugu, or Kannada country, or to ‘the Marathi-speaking region’, I am simply referring to a widely recognised linguistic region, rather than to a linguistic state or cultural territory. The Tamil country, for instance, has always included many non-Tamil speakers, and much of its important literature is composed in languages other than Tamil. Referring to the south-eastern part of the coastal plain as ‘the Tamil coast’ does not mean that this is the only way or the best way to refer to this region; it is merely the most convenient for me here; and it also serves to remind us that agriculture occurs within culture. Similar caveats pertain to all sites with new meanings in cultural politics: I use ‘Bombay’ rather than ‘Mumbai’ because it is more recognisable. I use ‘Madras’ rather than ‘Chennai’, ‘Uttarakhand’ rather than ‘the Himalayan districts of Uttar Pradesh’. Terms for agricultural landscapes that pertain across the whole period of my discussion are defined in the last section of chapter 1. These landscapes are not meant to displace other regional terminologies; they simply help to organise regional complexity for an agrarian historical geography.

Personal names do not pose serious problems and their most commonly used forms are employed here. The names of groups, dynasties, and some events (such as the wars of 1857) are more troublesome. Group names often appear in personal names and they are almost always necessary for locating people in society. But in long stretches of historical time, groups move in and out of existence and group names change meaning very drastically. For instance, the term ‘Rajput’ acquired its modern meaning from the sixteenth century

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

(chapter 3), but with suitable caveats, and despite the controversial character of origin stories, I use these terms to indicate group characteristics, if not subjective identity, over a longer period of time. Other group names – such as Vellala, Jat, Kunbi, Maratha, and Marava – have also changed meanings but they can be used in a similar way. When I refer to the distant past of social groups whose present identities are marked by such terms, and when I speculate as to their social composition or activities before modern times, I often discuss the past in terms that people in these groups will not endorse today. The creators of social identities recount collective experience in terms that become part of human experience, but historians can tell other tales to indicate other aspects of the past. This difference is not just one of perspective, or a feature of insider and outsider subject positions. Because history reshuffles and redefines perspectives, we need to trace the emergence of subject positions historically, and this is most difficult when they are in the making, which many are today. Quickly changing, hotly contested social identities pose the most serious problem, for instance with groups identified as Untouchables, Harijans, and Dalits. I use the term ‘untouchable’ here to refer to the caste condition of this lowest-ranked group in the *varna* scheme, and ‘harijan’ and ‘dalit’ to refer to their representation and identity within modern political movements. Though the term ‘adivasi’ is preferable in our contemporary political context, the terminology of ‘tribes’ and ‘tribal peoples’ is much more common in the literature; it captures a critical feature of the cultural distinctiveness of these groups, and it attaches to the official census and legal category of ‘scheduled tribe’. I use ‘adivasi’, therefore, to refer to tribal peoples in their contemporary condition of political activity; and these tribal mobilizations form a theme in agrarian history that is central for understanding long-term change. Using any term to refer to a social group or population has the additional pitfall of implying that everyone in a group is the same, that collective identities are built into individuals, and that terms which have by convention come to identify a group are used by people in the group to represent themselves. Group names are deployed for various political, cultural, and rhetorical ends and terms that are used here have various connotations which cannot be controlled by any tricks of phrasing. Similarly, terms for religious groupings are quite contentious today, and I try to avoid using them except as general labels of cultural location.

CHAPTER 1

AGRICULTURE

Most of human history in South Asia is a feature of life on the land, but most documents that we use to write agrarian history concern the state. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* set the tone by putting farming and herding under the heading of state revenue. Hundreds of thousands of stone and copper inscriptions appear in the first millennium of the Common Era (CE). Scattered across the land from Nepal to Sri Lanka, they documented agrarian conditions, but their purpose was rather to constitute medieval dynasties. After 1300, official documents narrate more and more powerful states. In the sixteenth century, Mughal sultans built South Asia's first empire of agrarian taxation, and their revenue assessments, collections, and entitlements produced more data on agrarian conditions than any previous regime. In 1595, Abu-l Fazl's *Ain-i Akbari* depicted agriculture in accounts of imperial finance. After 1760, English officials did the same. After 1870, nationalists rendered the country as part of the nation, and since 1947 agriculture has been a measure of national development. For two millennia, elites have recorded agrarian facts to bolster regimes and to mobilise the opposition, so we inherit a huge archive documenting agrarian aspects of historical states.

Over the centuries, however, agrarian history has also moved along in farming environments, outside the institutional structure of states, almost always connected in one way or another to state authority, but embedded basically in the everyday life of agricultural communities. Dynasties expand into agrarian space. Empires incorporate farm and forest, using various degrees and types of power, gaining here, losing there, adapting to local circumstances and modifying state institutions to embrace new regions of cultivation. Modern nations appropriate agrarian identity and territory. But politics condition agriculture without determining the logic of farming or the character of agrarian life; and country folk always seem to elude state control, even as some locals are sinews of state power in the village. Rulers and farmers – state power and agrarian social forces – interact historically and shape one another and, in this context, states tell only part of the story of the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

AGRICULTURE

agrarian past. Scholars need documentation produced outside the state and a critical perspective on official records to situate the historical imagination at the slippery articulation of state institutions and agrarian communities.

HISTORICITY

Maintaining this kind of perspective – seeing agrarian history askew of state power and reading official sources against the grain – becomes more difficult for the period after 1870, when documentation also becomes most plentiful. A respected modern scholarly canon and a vast modern official archive have colluded to make it difficult for scholars to imagine that agrarian *history* – as distinct from timeless, age-old, village tradition and peasant culture – has any real autonomy from the power of the state. Villagers, farmers, agricultural workers, forest cultivators, and pastoral peoples often appear in the dramas of history, but they most often appear to be moving on history's stage in reaction to state activity or in response to elite initiative, obeying or resisting controls imposed upon them by state institutions and by powerful, autonomous elites. The rustic world – both in itself and for itself – appears in such accounts to be an ancient repetition. Agrarian folk appear as a negative mirror image of all that is urban, industrial, and modern; not as makers of history, but rather as inhabitants of history, endowed with mentalities and memories which can be recovered, but not with creative powers to transform their world. Such an appearance took hold in the nineteenth century, as a very long trend of increasing state power in South Asia accelerated dramatically under British rule. A turning point occurred around 1870, by which time the institutions of imperial bureaucracy, ideologies of development, and analytical sciences of management had been combined with industrial technology to form the material and cultural context for agrarian life that we call modernity. Until then, official documents still recorded aspects of agrarian societies that eluded state control and official understanding, but, from this point onward, texts render the countryside through the lens of the modern state's minute and comprehensive managerial empiricism. Agrarian sites now appear as standardised objects of administration, policy debate, and political struggle. Idiosyncratic local histories and old agrarian territories were in effect buried by imperial modernity under mountains of homogeneous,

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

AGRICULTURE

official data, as villages, towns, districts, and provinces became standard units for conventional studies of politics, economics, culture, and society. The non-modern quality of the agrarian past became quaint stuff for gazetteers and folklore, irrelevant for history except as a reflection of archaic peasant memory and tradition – marginalia – cut off from the modern historical mainstream.

Modernity's understanding of the 'agrarian' focused first and foremost on matters of state policy, agricultural production, law and order, and resistance and rebellion. Agrarian history appeared first as a chronicle of state policy, whose impact was measured in the endless dance of numbers on agrarian taxation, rent, debt, cropping, output, living standards, technology, demography, land holding, contracts, marketing, and other money matters. For the city folk who worked in government and in the urban public sphere – the brains of modernity – rustic localities became alien, peripheral, and abstract. All the places, experiences, and circumstances 'out there' in the country became significant primarily as indicators of conditions and trends in modern state territory. To comprehend the country, modernity invented statistics and theories to capture the basic principles of agricultural production and rural society in parsimonious assumptions, models, and ideal types. Compact and comprehensive data informed theories of caste society, village tradition, capitalist transformations, agricultural improvement, and the market economy; these were formalised and packed into portable textbooks and handbooks. Farm statistics rolled off government presses. Official manuals codified agrarian administration. All things agrarian entered the book of the modern state. Agrarian facts entered modern minds through policy debates, statistical studies, guide books, travel maps, law reports, ethnography, news, and theories of modernity and tradition.

In this context, the urban middle classes invented an agrarian discourse that was preoccupied with matters of public policy. By 1870, agrarian conditions appeared most influentially in statistics that measured economic progress and government efforts to develop agriculture. By then, policy debates about rural India excited Indian middle-class intellectuals for whom modernity involved a cultural opposition between their own urbanity and the rural, rustic, tradition of the village. Already in the 1850s, when Karl Marx sat in London using East India Company dispatches to write about India for readers of the *New York Tribune*, a modern world information network was

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

AGRICULTURE

beginning to span urban sites of English literacy running from East Asia to Europe and the Americas; and all the English-speaking middle classes had soon formed a broadly similar sensibility toward agrarian issues, which emphasised the state's responsibility to facilitate the expansion of private production and wealth. Thus a book like Robert Mulhall's *The Progress of the World in Arts, Agriculture, Commerce, Manufacture, Instruction, Railways, and Public Wealth*, published in London (in 1880) came rapidly to Philadelphia and New York; and it described economic progress in terms that typified public discourse in British India. Though many urban intellectuals in South Asia knew the countryside personally – as landowners, merchants, bankers, and lawyers, and by their own family experience – their public discussions and formulations of agrarian knowledge did not highlight their own direct, intimate knowledge. Their sense of agrarian territory rested firmly on official knowledge. By 1880, competing interest groups were vocal in national policy debates concerning agriculture in Europe, America, and territories of the British empire spilling over into Africa, Australia, and the Caribbean,¹ and agrarian issues made a good public showing in British India during policy debates about taxation, land law, money lending, tenancy reform, tariffs and trade, irrigation expenditure, commodity crops (sugar, tobacco, indigo, cotton, tea, and opium), bonded labour, indenture, famines, land alienation, cooperative credit, survey and settlement, agricultural sciences, and forestry. More than any direct experience of village life, these debates informed the evolution of national ideas about the historical substance of agrarian South Asia.

The modern intelligentsia found their countryside in the interwoven discourses of empire and nationality. In the major urban centres of British India, national leaders among the Indian middle classes shared with Europeans an urban identity, alienated from the countryside. But at the same time, imperial ideology lumped all the natives together as native subjects, so India's political nationality evolved as intellectuals brought town and country together in the abstract opposition of 'Indian' and 'British'. This enabled Indian nationalists to produce a distinctively *national* sense of agrarian territory inside the British empire. Nationalism protected the cultural status of the urban middle

¹ Niek Koning, *The Failure of Agrarian Capitalism: Agrarian Politics in the UK, Germany, the Netherlands and the USA, 1846–1919*, London, 1994, pp. 167–9.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

AGRICULTURE

classes as it united peoples of India against the oppressions of colonialism. By promulgating modern ideas about religious community, racial identity, linguistic identity, national development, and political progress, middle-class leaders made the foreign character of British rule the central issue in agrarian history. They subsumed the history of all the national land and all the people of the nation into a unitary history of the Indian nation. Modern nationality made the Indian middle classes both equal to and superior to, both like and not like, their country cousins; equally native but more knowledgeable, articulate, international, and modern – ready for leadership. Educated leaders of the nation could speak for the country, on behalf of country folk. As a literate voice for illiterate people, a national intelligentsia could present agricultural problems to the public and represent the inarticulate ‘rural masses’. National voices expressed a distinctively middle-class middleness by translating (vernacular) village tradition into the (English) language of modernity. They made the problems of the country into a critique of colonial policy so as to make agrarian South Asia a colonial problem, calling out for national attention. By the 1850s, texts written along these lines appear in Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras; and from the 1870s, a national agrarian imagination formed among authors such as Dadabhai Naoroji, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Romesh Chandra Dutt, and M. G. Ranade. After 1870, novels, short stories, plays, poetry, and academic studies depicted the national countryside more and more frequently in a set of iconic images. By the 1920s, national agrarian studies were institutionalised in universities. National culture had subsumed agrarian territories.

Between 1870 and 1930, agrarian South Asia assumed its modern intellectual appearance and acquired its own history. Old orientalist and official knowledge – from the days of Company Raj – were still basic. But the conjuncture of famines (and, in Bengal, devastating cyclones) with the rise of the national intelligentsia in the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s made a deep, lasting impression. Agrarian localism and diversity dissolved into a national history of endemic village distress, calamity, and poverty that demanded urgent attention from progressive agents of development. After 1877, stereotypes of famine spread widely and quickly. To raise funds for his relief organisation in India, George Lambert rushed to America in 1898 to publish a book entitled *India, Horror-Stricken Empire (containing a full Account of the*