Introduction

The originality and the humanity of Rajnarayan Chandavarkar's work, which infuse the essays contained in this volume, may be traced in some measure to his own experience as an Indian in England as well as to the intellectual milieu in which he found himself during his formative undergraduate and postgraduate years in Cambridge. These essays also reflect his enduring love of storytelling.

By all accounts, not least his own, Raj had an idyllic, big-city childhood in Bombay in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1971, he won a British Council scholarship to study for two years at Lancing College. He claimed that, for him, the great attraction of Lancing was that it had a particularly impressive cricket field, was close to the Sussex County Cricket Ground and was in reachable distance of Lords.[1] After Lancing, he spent a further five years as a student at Cambridge University where he obtained a BA and then a PhD. He went on to research fellowships at Trinity College and the Centre for South Asian Studies and then to a lectureship in Indian History.

It was Raj's spirit of adventure (and his love of cricket) that sent him to England. And then the trajectory of a distinguished academic career which kept him there. To understand his work, it is first important to understand that he never intended to leave India for good; and that on his frequent trips to India and to his beloved Bombay he always saw himself as an exile, though by happenstance rather than by choice, coming home. It was this love of both the country and city of his birth which spurred Raj's research and which shines through much of his writing.

When it came to Bombay, Raj was neither selective in his affections, whether it be of workers in Bombay's mills, the fishermen of the Worli slum or the inhabitants of the gracious mansions on Malabar Hill, nor was he uncritical of the political and economic interests which were responsible for their existence or, in the case of the mill districts, their decline. Coming from a family which, both before and after Independence,

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[1] Information from Andrew Larcombe, Lancing, 1968–73.

had a distinguished record of public service, Raj regretted the loss of
the idealism which had inspired some of the best and brightest Indians
to dedicate their lives to creating a secular and egalitarian state. But he
was also intrigued by the effects of the liberalizing of India's economy
which resulted in the great show of conspicuous consumption to be found
today in the high-rises, the supermarkets, the clogged roads of Bombay
and the society pages of *The Times of India.* And which exist alongside
the enduring poverty of much of the city's inhabitants.

Raj's refusal in his work to employ fixed categories, such as class, caste,
race and culture, to explain human action at both the individual and the
social level also arose, in some measure, from his personal experience
of such labelling. Although an Indian, he was hard put to identify any
essential 'Indianness' which might unite the inhabitants of the subcon-
tinent, let alone his own family or the millions of other inhabitants of
Bombay. Conversely, neither did he recognize an essential 'Britishness'
from which he might be forever excluded. Thus, he wrote in 1990, about
the Empire builders in India:[2]

> To suggest that the history of the sub-continent since the mid-18th century pri-
> marily consisted of a continuing clash between British values and Indian tradition
> is to flatten and distort the subject. At one level, the very notion that there was
> a single, consistent interpretation of British values is scarcely plausible and it is
> hard to imagine how some essence of Britishness might be identified or distilled.
> Moreover, its purveyors in India were usually unlikely agents. Many merchants,
> officers and even civil servants were drawn from marginal groups in British soci-
> ety, often from the Celtic fringe, sometimes from social and political outgroups
> seeking advancement through the Colonial Service, not infrequently from the
> ranks of adventurers and misfits who found outdoor relief, moral as well as mate-
> rial, in the Empire. They were out of step by a generation with the moods and
> fashions of the Mother Country and their disappointment with and alienation
> from a world which had changed utterly beyond their fond recall. On the other
> hand, the notion of an undifferentiated, unchanging Indian tradition in a land
> of innumerable languages, almost every faith known to man and every form of
> social organisation known to anthropology, from hunter-gatherers to urban work-
> ing classes, from nomadic pastorialists to suave industrialists, ought to stupefy
> the imagination.

Indeed, if Raj loved but did not idealize India, the same might be
said of his relationship with Britain. It is true that his description of
British society as experienced by the increasing number of subcontinental

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[2] 'India for the English', a review of Penderel Moon, *The British Conquest and Dominion
of India* (London: Duckworth, 1983), Geeta Mehta, *Raj* (London: Cape, 1989) and
Trevor Royle, *The Last Days of the Raj* (London: Joseph, 1989), *London Review of Books*;
reprinted in *The Times of India Review of Books*, 1, 1, August/September 1990, 66–7.

visitors in the 1920s and 1930s as one characterized by 'lengthening dole queues and tawdry suburbs, its flying ducks and spotted dicks, its dreary pubs and weekly baths' might in some way mirror his own experience of fetching up at an English public school in the 1970s.[3] Nonetheless he also recognized and enjoyed the cosmopolitanism of its cities, the openness of its scholarship and the lack of any deadening sense of an essential Britishness which our present politicians are so anxious to revive (or, in truth, as Raj would have argued, invent).

Raj came to his studies in Cambridge at a time when 'social history' was accepted by many historians across the world as the most fruitful and engaging approach to an understanding of the past. Often termed 'history from below' because it eschewed the minutiae of high politics for descriptions of the quotidian experience of the 'common' people, it would be wrong to say, as some have argued, that it was history with the politics removed.[4] It is true that on its margins social history could lapse into antiquarianism by focusing simply on some aspect of popular culture divorced from the larger forces which might have shaped it.[5] However, the best social history, including that written by Raj himself, recognized not only the extent to which agencies of the state shaped social relations but also how at certain moments even the most marginal or powerless social groups might themselves circumscribe the actions of the state. Thus although Raj was sometimes described as a labour historian, that was no more an apt description of his work than if he were referred to as a historian of the state or indeed of capitalism, since in his view, to understand one, it was necessary to understand all.[6]

For those who like Raj came of age as historians in the 1970s and 1980s, Cambridge University provided a particularly rich seam of scholarship. On the one hand, the university boasted some of the best 'traditional' historians of their day, perhaps most notably Henry Pelling and Sir Geoffrey Elton, whose work, although divided by time and ideology, examined the links between political institutions and governance.[7] In the field of imperial history, the university also had a roster of influential

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[3] *Ibid.*, 67.

[4] See, for example, Miles Taylor, 'The Beginnings of Modern British Social History?', *History Workshop Journal*, 43, Spring 1997, 155–76.

[5] Which might explain why, for some historians, the step from social history to cultural history was an easy one to take.

[6] Thus, Raj's first monograph was entitled *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay* (Cambridge University Press: 1994).

[7] For Pelling, see *The Origin of the Labour Party, 1880 to 1900* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954) and for Elton see *The Tudor Revolution in Government* (Cambridge University Press: 1953).

historians, including Eric Stokes,[8] Jack Gallagher[9] and Anil Seal, who supervised Raj's PhD.[10] In particular, Gallagher and Seal were credited with initiating a particular approach to Indian and indeed imperial history, which has come to be labelled as the 'Cambridge School'. A central assumption of the Cambridge School was that Indian nationalism was the product of elite Indians' reaction to shifts in colonial policy. Nationalist ideas and ideology were thus understood as little more than a facade for power struggles between colonial officials and wealthy and powerful Indians, but also within this group of Indian elites.[11] It is certainly possible to detect in Raj's work the influence of the Cambridge School. Thus, Raj took the view that colonial discourse and the discourse of Indian elites both before and after Independence did share a common concern. However, by contrast with the Cambridge School, Raj identified this concern as reaching beyond the mere question of who would handle the levers of state power. Instead he argued that the concern which the colonial state and its Indian successors shared in common was the need to discipline labour.[12] Hence, it should not be surprising, as Raj argued, that the Indian elites in the run-up to Independence and beyond characterized the working population much as it had been characterized by the colonial state, as marked by political volatility, indiscipline and sectionalism, and that they used key colonial institutions, most notably the police and the army, to discipline workers, often more brutally than had been the case under colonial rule.[13]

If the Cambridge School influenced to some extent Raj's characterization of the Indian state, he nonetheless took its assumptions in a wholly original direction. Indeed, to a great extent the originality of his work lay not simply in his willingness to reinterpret historical accounts of the Indian state in its transition from colonialism to independence, but also to reinterpret accounts of English industrialization, social relations and political discourse in light of his own discoveries from Indian history.

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[8] Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians in India* (Oxford University Press: 1959).

[9] Alice Denny, Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians* (London: Macmillan, 1961).

[10] Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press: 1968).

[11] I am grateful to Dr Eleanor Newbigin for this description of the Cambridge School. Raj's critique of the school is dealt with later in this introduction.

[12] Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *Imperial Power and Popular Politics: Class, Resistance and the State in India, 1850–1950* (Cambridge University Press: 1998), p. 23.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 16. Chandavarkar further elaborated these ideas in his essay, 'Customs of Governance: Colonialism and Democracy in Twentieth Century India', *Modern Asian Studies*, 41, 3, 2007, 441–70. See below.

Raj's early work advanced three novel and significant arguments in the field of Indian history. The first was a rejection of a teleological approach to the emergence of socialism and trade unions, to be found in both Marxist and functionalist accounts of industrialization, and which were based on the belief that in the 'West', as Raj put it, 'economic development determined the character of labour, its social organization and its political consciousness'.[14] In Raj's view, such an assumption would of course fail to account for the political activism of Indian workers and the rise of the trade unions at a level of industrialization which had yet to 'evolve' to the stage at which such organizations had emerged in the West. Nor could it explain why, in Bombay, at least, the sectionalism of the workforce was exacerbated by the process of industrialization, when according to teleological accounts the reverse should have been the case.

Secondly, Raj eschewed cultural explanations, which were increasingly called in aid by historians, both of India and the West, to account for the actions of workers. In relation to India, such cultural explanations might take two forms. Indian industrial workers might be characterized as belonging to broad categories which would also be found in the West and which carried with them certain assumptions about the behaviour of those who belonged. Such categories might include 'the casual workers' who were deemed to lack the discipline of industrial workers and whose attributes included a propensity to violence and a lack of class-consciousness. Or, those employed in Indian industry might be described as 'peasants temporarily in proletarian garb' and hence characterized by a passivity in the face of exploitation and a disinclination to organize to protect their positions in the urban environment through collective action.[15] Furthermore, cultural explanations which applied specifically to the Indian working class might be used to explain these same characteristics. Hence, the sectionalism of the working class might be attributed to the importance of caste and religion to the self-identity of Indian workers and hence supply an explanation for the fact that industrial action was often short-lived. Interestingly, Raj pointed out that a number of these characteristics attributed to Indian workers by latter-day academics could be found in the discourses of the Indian ruling elites, both colonial and post-colonial. Thus, Raj rejected the essentialism which cultural explanations brought to the study of the Indian proletariat, much as he had rejected it for himself.

A third important thread running through Raj's early writing was his belief that the question to be answered in relation to India's workers was

[14] Chandavarkar, *Imperial Power*, pp. 6–8.
[15] Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India*, p. 166.

not why their political organization and their strikes were often short-
lived but rather why these took place at all. Thus, he upended the usual
assumption which both Marxist and cultural historians brought to their
study of the subcontinent which was that the factionalism which char-
acterized industrial relations and workers' politics was a function of the
'backwardness' of Indian workers in comparison with workers in the
'mature' industrial economies of the West. By contrast Raj argued that
the political consciousness of Indian workers could not be read off from
the level of industrialization in India but, rather, that

> the political consciousness of the working classes appeared to be shaped crucially
> by their experience of, and their relationship with, the state. Their solidarities
> were not the natural outcome of popular culture or a reflex of the specific char-
> acter of production relations, but, rather, they were politically constituted, and
> as such they were contingent, sometimes transient and even evanescent. The
> politics of the working classes had therefore to be situated in the wider context
> of the social and political alignments which shaped them.[16]

It followed from this, that to explain workers' politics and their rela-
tionship to the state it was necessary to know not only the material
conditions in which the workers lived but also the power relations which
were embedded in their neighbourhoods, since 'the social and political
alignments of the working-class neighbourhoods reached out to wider
arenas of politics, encompassing the colonial state and political organiza-
tions at various levels': a far cry indeed from the concern for elite politics
of the Cambridge School. Indeed, in his later essay, 'Customs of Gov-
ernance', Raj posited that, following Independence, the neighbourhood
power brokers such as landlords, jobbers and local politicians owed their
sway in working-class neighbourhoods to their ability to extract favours
from the state, just as the state used these same power brokers to disci-
pline labour.[17]

It is undoubtedly the case that inspiration for these arguments lay not
primarily in previous studies of the Indian state, society or indeed of
industrialization. Rather, Raj's understanding of the nature of the inter-
action between the state and the urban working class drew its inspiration
primarily from writing in English social history: most notably from the
work of E. P. Thompson and then Gareth Stedman Jones, who taught
Raj as an undergraduate.

When Raj came to write his PhD dissertation in the late 1970s, E. P.
Thompson was a commanding figure in the field of social history and

[16] Chandavarkar, *Imperial Power*, p. 9.
[17] Chandavarkar, 'Customs of Governance', 457.

his masterpiece was the book *The Making of the English Working Class*.[18]
Although, as Raj noted, the book did not entirely escape the tendency
to measure political consciousness against levels of industrialization,[19]
nonetheless, 'The conceptual originality of *The Making* was, of course,
to have represented class as a historical, rather than a structural fact, and
the outcome of agency and struggle, experience and consciousness.'[20]
He might have added that the breadth of Thompson's research which
encompassed not only the material conditions of the working class and
their politics but also the biographies of those individuals who played a
role in forging the latter struck a chord with his own attraction to the
telling of stories in the writing of history. In a coruscating essay on how
historians involved in Subaltern Studies had adopted but misunderstood
Thompson, Raj points out that Thompson, in his later work,[21] retreated
from his teleological view of the link between class-consciousness and
industrial development, which on its face would have precluded the
idea that the Indian proletariat in the first half of the twentieth cen-
tury might have joined trade unions and participated in political action.
Rather Thompson elaborated on the idea of 'class struggle without class',
which posited, as Raj put it, that: 'Since class consciousness was the prod-
uct, not the prediction, of historical experience, class struggle preceded
its emergence and indeed, facilitated its development.'[22]

The assumption that class-consciousness was an outcome of specific
historical circumstances rather than a reflection of the level of industri-
alization in a given society of course played a major role in Raj's own
work, including his first book, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism*. But
part of the originality of Raj's work was to show how the process of indus-
trialization itself, the methods of labour recruitment and discipline, the
links between the country and the city maintained by workers and the
power structures of the Bombay mill districts might not only exacerbate

[18] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1977, first
published 1963).

[19] Most notably the Irish. Thompson described the Irish workers in much the same terms
as had been employed by nineteenth-century observers, as 'unmoulded by the indus-
trial work-discipline' and therefore useful to employers for jobs which did not require
'methodical application' but a 'spendthrift expense of sheer physical energy' married in
Thompson's account 'to boisterous relaxation'. Thompson, *The Making of the English
Working Class*, p. 473.

[20] Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, '"The Making of the Working Class": E. P. Thompson and
Indian History', *History Workshop Journal*, 43, Spring 1997, 179.

[21] Edward Thompson, 'Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle Without
Class?', *Social History*, 3, May 1978, 133–65; Edward Thompson, *Customs in Com-
mon* (London: Penguin, 1993, first published 1991), pp. 16–96.

[22] Chandavarkar, 'The Making of the Working Class', 180–1.

divisions in the workforce, based on caste and religion, but at other times facilitate and support united action against the employers and the state.

At the same time as Thompson was adopting a less deterministic view of the links between industrialization and class-consciousness, Gareth Stedman Jones published his own magisterial study of the relationship between poverty and politics in late nineteenth-century London, *Outcast London*.[23] This too had a profound influence on Raj's thought. In *Outcast London*, Stedman Jones discussed the issue of poverty and politics in three contexts. The first was a study of the casual poor, in late Victorian London, who made up a considerable proportion of London's workforce unlike in other areas of England which depended upon factory labour. The second was a consideration of how the housing question came to be seen, by the wealthy of London, as inextricably linked to the 'problem' of casual labour. The third was an account of how the ruling classes developed strategies for relieving the poverty of casual workers, which depended upon how they were perceived: as demoralized and lacking the attributes of foresight and discipline which were seen to characterize factory labour. In Raj's own work it is possible to detect the influence of *Outcast London*, but again it is possible to see how he developed these ideas further in the Indian context, perhaps most directly in his argument that ruling-class perceptions of casual workers, often shared by historians of Indian industry, bore no relationship to the actual genesis and attributes of this group. Indeed, he showed how maintaining a supply of casual labour was essential to the millowners' strategies, which depended upon the jobber system, and was therefore a product of industrialization in Bombay rather than the remnants of a pre-industrial economy. He also demonstrated that the terms in which casual labourers were described by capitalists and the state in India were eerily similar to those deployed by the wealthy of late nineteenth-century London and, as in London, they both fed ruling-class anxieties and legitimized the use of the police and the army to discipline them.

While Stedman Jones's *Outcast London* may have found echoes in Raj's first book, it was Stedman Jones's later work, *Languages of Class*,[24] and in particular the seminal essay 'Rethinking Chartism',[25] which were a key influence on Raj's subsequent analysis of working-class politics. According to Stedman Jones, Chartists saw themselves as part of a political movement. However, he goes on to argue that for both the

[23] Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between the Classes in Victorian Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

[24] Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History 1832–1982* (Cambridge University Press: 1983).

[25] Gareth Stedman Jones, 'Rethinking Chartism', in *Languages of Class*, pp. 90–179.

contemporary opponents of the Chartists and for later historians it was
'the movement's class character, social composition, or more simply the
hunger and distress of which it was thought to be the manifestation,
rather than its platform or programme which have formed the focal point
of enquiry'.[26] By contrast, Stedman Jones argued for the importance
of language in shaping political movements rather than the reverse. He
writes,

We cannot therefore decode political language to reach a primal and material
expression of interest since it is the discursive structure of political language which
conceives and defines interest in the first place. What we must do therefore is to
study the production of interest, identification, grievance and aspiration within
political languages themselves.[27]

It followed from these assumptions that a particular political discourse
may co-exist or conflict with others or replace earlier discourses, and thus
one question it is necessary to ask is why at certain historic junctures this
discourse will be successful in engaging a particular social group. As
Stedman Jones writes in relation to Chartism,

A political movement is not simply a manifestation of distress and pain, its
existence is distinguished by a shared conviction articulating a political solution to
distress and a political diagnosis of its causes. To be successful, that is, to embed
itself in the assumptions of masses of people, a particular political vocabulary
must convey a practicable hope of a general alternative and a believable means
of realizing it such that potential recruits can think within its terms.[28]

In other words, according to Stedman Jones, 'it was not conscious-
ness (or ideology) that produced politics, but politics that produced
consciousness'.[29]

Already at the time of undertaking his doctoral research, Raj had begun
to question the essentialism which characterized so many studies of class,
on the one hand, and Indian workers on the other, and which, at their
not uncommon worst, combined the two. It was the work of Stedman
Jones which helped him to formulate a theoretical framework with which
to challenge essentialist accounts of the Indian working class and to go
on to argue that workers' identities whether they be of class, caste or
religion were historically contingent[30] and that power and politics at
the level of the state, the province and the neighbourhood shaped these

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 93.   [27] Stedman Jones, 'Introduction', in *Languages of Class*, pp. 21–2.
[28] Stedman Jones, 'Rethinking Chartism', in *Languages of Class*, p. 96.
[29] Stedman Jones, 'Introduction', in *Languages of Class*, p. 19.
[30] A view he elaborated further in his account of nationalist politics in his essay, 'Indian
Nationalism, 1914–1947: Ghandian Rhetoric, the Congress and the Working Classes',
in Chandavarkar, *Imperial Power*, pp. 266–326.

identities rather than the reverse. It was also inherent in Stedman Jones's emphasis on the contingency of political language and hence of individual and group identity that it undermined those historical accounts which emphasized the exceptionalism of India's industrial development and the growth of class-consciousness in its industrial workforce. Thus, Raj extrapolated from Stedman Jones's accounts of workers' politics, which emphasized the particularity of the historical circumstances that gave rise to them, to argue that in a sense all political movements are exceptional, in that they arise in particular circumstances, whether it be in England or in India. Thus, as Raj, in the introduction to *Imperial Power and Popular Politics*, noted,

The purposes of the colonial state would not have been served if they had not also been embedded in, and even influenced by, a wider political discourse in which diverse elements of Indian society shared. The process by which social groups were so defined and characterized in public discourse also created and developed political alignments and shaped social antagonisms which cut across class and caste, gender and community, religion and nation and sometimes reconstituted these old principles of social division.[31]

The originality of Raj's understanding of the process of industrialization and of workers' politics in India lay in some measure in his willingness to adopt concepts and arguments which had been framed by English historians, most notably E. P. Thompson and Gareth Stedman Jones, and to apply and develop them in an Indian context. Such an approach also owed something to the broader intellectual milieu which he inhabited during his period as a graduate student and research fellow in Cambridge. During the late seventies and the eighties, Cambridge boasted a cohort of young historians who identified themselves with a particular reading of social history very much in line with Raj's own. Perhaps remarkably, these historians whose subjects included a variety of countries and periods, from nineteenth-century London to twentieth-century Germany, from the rise of Nazism to the making of an English criminal class, understood themselves to be part of a shared project, and through seminars and less formal social gatherings exchanged ideas and developed arguments. It would be true to say that for those concerned, many of whom have themselves gone on to distinguished academic careers, their work was both enriched by and enriched Raj's own work on India and Bombay.

The essays gathered in this volume were written by Raj at various stages in what was to be his far-too-short career. Some represent interventions

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[31] Chandavarkar, 'Introduction', in *Imperial Power*, p. 14.