Knowledge appropriation

Turning social research into political action in colonial India

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In this essay, I will discuss a conflation of knowledge and demands for political reform in mid-nineteenth-century India.[1] At the centre of my discussion is an objection to the often-reiterated argument that emphasizes how colonial forms of knowledge underpinned the British regime in its bid to control and subjugate Indians. Rather, I would suggest that Indians appropriated and put to work data and institutional forms for making and communicating knowledge that the British initially had monopolized, in political activities challenging the British administration.

My discussion is empirically grounded in events in Bombay from the 1850s to 1870s, when a group of Indian activists, influenced by new ways to view society through a lens of socio-economic investigation, challenged the institutional design and policies of the British administration at a time of rapid transformation of the city's environment. What I intend to show is not simply that demands for political reform existed during the period under review here, but that a shift could be traced in the source of legitimization activists used when acting politically, the institutions they turned to as platforms for their actions, and the knowledge they relied on to substantiate their critique of the British administration.

Contrary to earlier critiques of British rule that had been voiced in, for example, Bengal a few decades earlier, the criticism that concerns us here did not, as it developed, refer to the ways in which British rule infringed on traditional ways of life, or indigenous systems of knowledge, morals, or beliefs. Neither was legitimization sought in theories

of laissez-faire political economy nor lofty political philosophy. Instead, demands for the reform of political institutions were made with reference to conditions of society, life, and economic activity, and the effects policy and political decisions were having on those conditions.

Activists criticized the ways in which British rule contradicted itself when depicting a vision for modern society introduced through the Imperial connection, while at the same time upholding a system of government that worked against India in moving towards that bright future. It was a criticism of the unrealized prospects of modern life, as it were, or sometimes, of modern life inverted: unsanitary privies instead of modern city quarters; disenfranchised subjects rather than citizens, and high mortality rates instead of public health.

Dismayed, activists in Bombay turned to political institutions close at hand with calls for political reform. When trying to bring their arguments to fruition, they translated into their own world a political vocabulary that could hold reference to changing societies and economies, and that linked demands on the political executive to forms of statistics, and socially concerned philosophy and economics.

Such a vocabulary was just emerging in Europe. In India, as was the case in, for example, Britain, this new political language was connected to social investigations and substantiated through collected and processed data pointing towards trends in society or shifting conditions of life. The information was partly obtained by Indian political activists themselves through their affiliations to various institutions, but more predominantly, as we shall see, through a close reading of the communications of various departments of the British government in India.

A social history of social research

For decades, historians and sociologists have been turning their searchlights towards the social histories of their own disciplines, to be faced with the startling realization that not only the labours of other people, but ours too, form part of history. Yet, although gestures towards a social history of social science have been around for almost as long as there has been talk of a scientific approach to society, the sophistication and depth that characterizes an expanding research field is more recent (Burke 2000; Wagner & Wittrock 1991). Moreover, in a new development, scholars have begun adding to social histories of social science a range of alternative sites beyond academia, where various forms of

social investigation were conducted, shifting focus from social science to social research, and from the institutionalization of social knowledge to the making of such knowledge through a variety of practices (for example, Camic et al. 2011: ch. 1).

Within this burgeoning field, it is suggested that historicizing social research is not about testing evidence articulated historically by social investigations in a processes of interdisciplinary self-correction, but about analysing the conditions and milieus in which evidence took shape. Social research and the making of social knowledge are influenced by surrounding societal processes. It becomes evident that wider political dimensions and relations of power must come to the fore in a social history of social studies. We need to look into what social and political forces influenced milieus and defined the parameters, within which social knowledge formed and was put into practice.

With this in mind, scholars remind us that the period when research into social and human conditions established itself and began to permeate public debates in the Western world, was also one of rapid European imperial expansion. It has been argued that much of the conceptual core and early evidence of social research developed in close touch with an imperial infrastructure of patronage, institutions, and networks (Connell 2007). Not only did modern European empires function as vast grids of flows of information and data (Hodge 2011), but social researchers also travelled within this grid, taking up posts in several locations in the empire during their careers (Aspengren 2011).

Colonialism's forms of knowledge

In Imperial overseas possessions such as India, professional institutions for social studies, as per design, were kept underdeveloped when compared to Europe, leaving social knowledge to gather in two domains outside academia. First and most voluminously, knowledge formed in relation to the functions of the colonial administration—that is, social investigations, and scientific idioms and methods, were adopted by colonial administrators in their day-to-day work in the colony with the primary objective of facilitating their tasks. The collection of social knowledge in India, as well as in Europe, contributed to forms of modern statecraft (Wagner 2001). Second, social knowledge coalesced in various associations in civil society, formally outside but sometimes connected to branches of the administration through people

and offices. These associations could be part of wider communal social reform movements, but more often they were modelled after learned societies in Britain.

Historians have just begun to look into the transactions of a selection of learned societies in colonial territories from a science perspective (Raj 2007), but very little has been said about the role they played in the making or communication of social knowledge. Rather, it is the first domain—social knowledge formed within or in close connection to the colonial administration—that has caught the eye of scholars in recent decades. Much of the research has been carried out in studies under a broad denomination of colonialism's forms of knowledge.

The historical anthropologist Bernhard Cohn's pioneering studies in this field resulted in a series of articles on India from the mid-1970s onwards. Many of the articles were brought together in two influential collections of essays: *An Anthropologist among Historians*, and *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge* (Cohn 1990, 1996). In both these works, Cohn investigates how British nineteenth-century research into the life and landscapes of India produced information that could be integrated into ideologies of rule and practices of administration.

Social knowledge to Cohn was what helped the British to mark India as different, and this difference was what justified prolonged colonial rule. Indeed, for the British in India, suggests Cohn, the formation of knowledge of their Indian dependency was intimately bound up with their will to govern. In fact, he argues, knowledge coming out of various 'investigative modalities'—the term Cohn uses to conceptualize ways of defining, collecting, and presenting valuable information—'was to enable the British to classify, categorize, and bound up the vast social world that was India so that it could be controlled' (Cohn 1996: 5). Cohn goes on to exemplify his assertion with studies of the British attempts to map Indian societies by taking censuses and surveys, by decoding Indian systems of law and codifying South Asian languages, and by turning Indian objects into 'things' that could be exhibited and fitted into a British view of evolutionary history, crowned by European culture.

The idea of the connections between colonial knowledge and colonial control developed by Cohn was taken up by a generation of influential students of colonial history (Dirks 2001; Goswami 2004; Prakash 1999). It seemed that Cohn managed to establish the existence of a concrete link between knowledge and power in a colonial situation that Michel

Foucault had suggested for early modern Europe, and by staying more focused on his sources than had Edward Said, who had argued along similar lines, Cohn seemed more plausible in his conclusions than did Said (Said 1978). It is much to Cohn's credit that decades later his approach is readily accepted among historians of knowledge-making within the Empire.

This essay, however, will question Cohn's model by pointing to the ways in which data produced by the British administration concerning Bombay's and India's social and economic realities, the infrastructure to communicate such data, and the vocabularies to deal with new findings were put to use by Indian political activists to enhance their agency, and to build and sustain political action directed at the British. Far from being tied down by knowledge about their social world, Indian activists integrated it into their demands for political reform.

The shifting milieu of mid-nineteenth-century Bombay

During the mid nineteenth century, Bombay City, the then capital of Bombay Presidency, was known to be different: it was cosmopolitan, in some respects wealthy, and saw considerable assets in indigenous hands. The decades surrounding 1850 proved to be a highly formative and dynamic period when Bombay saw many new impulses in commerce, political thought, science, and education. At the time the city was connected to other trading nodes in East Asia, Europe, the Indian Ocean, the Middle East, and the Persian Gulf. Many of those active in public affairs in Bombay during the period under review were looking outwards, taking in this wider world, and were more in tune with parliamentary dealings in London or developments in Canton than with the proceedings of the ailing Mughal court in Delhi.

It was also a period of great expansion of the city proper. Bombay was long India's largest city, second only in size to London in the British Empire. The most remarkable growth outside the confines of the harbour began in the 1850s, when the first cotton textile mills were erected in the city. British opium exports to China were reined in, and Indian merchants involved in the trade channelled their capital elsewhere, primarily into the emerging cotton textile industry. Along with New York and Liverpool, Bombay became one of the main marketplaces for the global cotton trade, and the cotton textile industry would form the backbone of much of the city's life for decades.

Industrial growth brought new demands for labour. Predominately male manual workers arrived from the Konkan area of the Presidency, accelerating the existing migration patterns (Conlon 1985). In fact, the period saw a massive increase in Bombay's population. An account from the later 1840s suggests 500,000 inhabitants, and by 1864, according to the first census taken in Bombay, and to which I will return later, the population had risen to over 800,000.

At this point, the cotton textile industry had just received a remarkable boost. The American Civil War increased demand for Indian cotton, at the same time as cotton prices skyrocketed. Fortunes made by Indian merchant houses were ploughed into the stock market and urban land, creating a series of bubbles. After a few years, the stock markets and land markets imploded, and Bombay slumped into a severe economic crisis. Merchants went bankrupt, workers began to migrate from Bombay, and the size of the population fell, so that in 1872, according to a second census, it was only around 645,000 (Edwardes 1909: 163–5).

The population's rapid growth and later fluctuations in size put the city's economy and environment under considerable pressure; a situation reflected in the political agitation and public debates of the time (Chandavarkar 2009). It is true, as has been argued, that the British Government of Bombay, in whom final authority was vested, did very little to address the rising sanitary crises (Dossal 1996: 135). However, most decisions regarding the upkeep of the everyday urban environment, and how to finance its maintenance or transformation through taxes and duties, went through the municipality.

It was the Municipal Commissioner and the services and institutions at his disposal that decided, among other things, where to put up gas lighting, where to construct sewers, drainage, and water supplies, how to regulate housing, when to broaden roads or adjust the salaries of those sweeping the roads, where to set up markets or parks, and how to regulate the work of butchers or laundries. During the late 1860s and early 1870s, the then Municipal Commissioner Arthur Crawford acted on some of these issues, and embarked on a costly and in many ways misguided project to 'improve' parts of Bombay, particularly the European quarters and commercial districts (Wacha 1913).

During this period of change mid century, an Indian reform-minded social segment emerged as a force in Bombay politics. They were led by politically astute activists, skilled in analysing official publications and statistics, and intent on reforming the political privileges of the

old Indian commercial interests, on one hand, and the institutional set-up and policies of the British administration, on the other. The reform activists were particularly critical of the ways in which the public administration in Bombay dealt with the city's sanitary crises, and of how the mismanagement and ineffective spending of public funds caused the British to raise taxes on their Indian subjects.

Instrumental in the rise of these political activists was the Elphinstone Institution, a school and later a college first founded in Bombay in 1834. Christine Dobbin (1972) argues in her seminal work on urban leadership in Bombay that the profile of the Elphinstone Institute gradually changed. Initially, it had catered to Indian students who belonged to social strata with a tradition of learning and government work, but with the coming of the 1850s and 1860s students from the commercial and middle classes also went through the new Elphinstone College (Perry 1871). Many of the Elphinstone graduates—Dadabhai Naoroji, Vishvanath H. Mandlik, Pherozeshah Mehta, Kashinath T. Telang, and Dinshaw Wacha, to name but a few—were to play important roles in bids for political reform, both for Bombay and for India as a whole.

Increasing demands for political reform

Initially, the new reformers in Bombay had held high hopes for the termination of the British East India Company and the establishment of Crown rule in India in 1858. For them, the transfer of power signalled an end to the Indian exception: they were no longer to be ruled by a company-state, but to be included in the wider family of Imperial subjects under the British monarch (Furdonjee 1853).

With a change in regime, activists hoped that political dialogue between India and Britain would become more reliable, and that governing circles in London and Calcutta might become more responsive to public opinion. But as the new form of British rule lacked executive Indian representation, just as the East India Company had done, the only way to exercise influence, if at all, was through informal networks, civil society associations, and the press. Indian activists hoped that by such means their concerns and grievances would reach the ears of the British MPs, British administrators at the local and central level in India, and the reading public in Britain and in their own region (Cumpstone 1961).

Activists now began to argue for a reformation of the system of

government set up for India in order to keep up with the demands of a changing economy, urban expansion, and modern political trends. There were Bombay-based activists who suggested that India ought to have representation in the British Parliament along the lines of the French overseas possessions (East India Association 1874). Others argued for an Indian Parliament with oversight of the Government of India, and made up at least in part of elected representatives (Joshi 1876).

But most issues brought up by the activists in their demands for reform dealt with the ways in which they were kept out of local politics, leaving them with no say in decisions concerning the city as a whole (Mody 1921). It was, more particularly, the municipal system of government that was at the centre of the critique levelled by local reformers (Government of Bombay 1871). They demanded that Indians should have a say in decisions regarding the transformation of the urban environment, in the administration of the local budget, and in questions of municipal taxation (Mehta 1871).

Turning to how towns were governed in Britain, reformers made the case that decisions concerning everyday issues in Bombay ought to be decided by its inhabitants to a far greater extent than was then the case. They hoped to introduce what they called a popular element in municipal government, and in that way reduce the power exercised by the British over nominations and appointments to public offices. Activists also hoped to expand the franchise so that larger segments of society could participate in elections to local offices (Government of Bombay 1872).

Much of the political agitation of the time was channelled through two interconnected movements: the Municipal Reform Movement and the Ratepayer's Movement. Under their pressure, the British Municipal Commissioner and the Government of Bombay were forced to introduce selective institutional reforms, introducing a Town Council where a number of council members were to be elected by a restricted popular vote.

There were no issues yet that brought together the different parts of the country behind a common political aspiration—that would come later—although similar protests against the design of local and municipal government were seen elsewhere in India (Secretary of State 1871). Still, local politics embodied many demands that would later influence the early twentieth-century nationalist critique of British rule: a curb on British administrative expenditure; greater Indian presence in the

administration and representation in political affairs; and, connected to this, a questioning of the legitimacy of British taxation as long as Indians had little or no influence over the levy of those taxes (Bayly 1975).

Learned societies and mobilization for political reform

New demands for political change articulated by Indians took shape in a series of interconnected learned societies and civil society associations. Exclusively British or British-led learned societies had existed in India since the late eighteenth century. Bombay had trailed behind Calcutta in this, but in 1804 a Literary Society was founded in the city. Shortly after, the Indian Navy's Geographical Society and the Medical and Literary Society were founded, only to merge into the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (Wacha 1920).

However, between the 1850s and 1870s Bombay saw the founding of several learned associations modelled after traditional British societies, but with a predominantly Indian leadership and composition. These associations provided forums for debate in which official or unofficial information concerning social and economic life in Bombay and India was processed, checked, and translated into political argument. Some of the associations also took the initiative in political campaigns by issuing memorials and petitions to the British Parliament, India House, or the India Office in London, and to the governor in Bombay and the governor-general or viceroy in Delhi.

Many of the associations were connected to local newspapers or periodicals, so that views expressed at meetings spread quickly to the reading public. In their attempts to transform the politics of Bombay, and to draw London's attention to the plight of their city, reformists used these societies as a platform from where they could influence public opinion and channel demands for reform.

The first association dominated by Indians used to launch political demands was the Bombay Association. It was formed in 1852 in the thick of the debates over the renewal of the East India Company's charter. The Elphinstone graduate Dadabhai Naoroji helped found the association, and it was active throughout the 1850s, but it lost momentum during the early 1860s. However, local newspapers continued to view it as an organization that could channel public opinion to the British government, and its assistance was frequently asked for in political matters as late as the second half of the 1860s (Government of Bombay 1868).

As the Bombay Association began to wane, Naoroji founded the East India Association in London in 1867. The association soon set up a branch in Bombay, and branches elsewhere in the region were also considered. By design, the association took after the traditional learned societies, far more so than the Bombay Association had done. In setting up the East India Association in both London and Bombay, Naoroji hoped to bring to Westminster's attention the full range of the social, economic, and political issues facing Bombay, India, and beyond (East India Association 1867). The association held almost monthly meetings where discussion papers were presented and campaigns with political content launched. The association published a journal where most of the papers read during meetings were included. Initially the journal had a wide circulation, but funding was always an issue. It was published in English, but students at Bombay University formed a committee in order to translate it into the vernaculars (Government of Bombay 1869). From the later 1870s onwards the association lost its progressive drive when it was taken over by old British administrators. Members of a reformist bent began to look to the Indian National Congress instead.

Another learned society that was formed in close connection to the East India Association was the Poona Savarjanik Sabha. It was founded in 1870 after a first attempt as a local branch of the East India Association in 1867 was aborted. The Sabha too had well-established links to London, and there was a continuous exchange of letters, papers, and views between the Savarjaniks and the East India Association. The papers of the Sabha dealt primarily with socio-economic topics, and the association carried out socio-economic studies of its own. Again, most papers presented at the meetings of the Sabha were published in the association's own journal. The journal had a considerable circulation in western India, as it carried content in both Gujarati and English (Mehrotra 1969).

Newly established societies and associations played another political role: they acted as hosts and provided venues for political or civic meetings. One venue that was often used by the political reformists was the Framji Cowasjee Institute, which was established in 1864. Another venue popular for public debates or political addresses was the Mechanics Institute. It had been founded in 1841 by English mechanics at the Bombay Mint and Dockyard, but was given a place of its own by the Indian cotton mill magnate Albert Sassoon.

In addition, many of the political reform meetings were held at the Town Hall where the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society was housed.

Official statistics and political arguments for reform

The outcome of political agitation in terms of actual political change was often disappointing to those who participated. Yet the way political action was organizationally structured around the learned societies and civil society associations represented something new, as did the way political arguments were substantiated, for while the Indian political conversation of previous decades was sustained by references to and quotations from European or Indian philosophers, statesmen, or religious authorities, the political language of the activists in Bombay was infused with statistics and other forms of data. Social and economic 'facts' were considered tiny elements that could carry heavy political weight, and the political argument evolved around a marshalling of those 'facts'.

During the period in question, statistics were becoming increasingly available in Bombay. One could even argue that Bombay at this time saw a prime example of what Ian Hacking (1990: 2) has called an 'avalanche of printed numbers'. Hacking was referring to the way in which public offices and civil society institutions in early nineteenth-century Europe issued a mass of data concerning social and economic life, leading to an unprecedented availability, and use, of statistics. The emergence in Europe of this form of statistics is usually given as the period 1820–50 (Donnelly 1996: 228). In the case of Bombay, the statistics from government offices began to flow in the public debate at roughly the same time, but this was accentuated during the time of consolidation of the colonial state after 1858.

Official statistics were not always accurate, but were adduced in political arguments anyway. An often-cited source of data in writings on Indian or Bombay affairs was the *Parliamentary Returns of India Accounts*. These sets of data concerned British income and expenditure in India divided into regions and a wide variety of topics. Naoroji compiled various tables from the returns in order to single out what he conceived to be unsolicited flows of revenue from India to Britain. He also used the returns to draw attention to ill-advised British expenditure in India, well before he enlarged on his ideas in the economic theory known as the 'drain of wealth'.

Naoroji presented some of his first findings in 1867 in a paper given to the East India Association, and then he drew on statistics from the first decades of the nineteenth century right up to the previous year (Naoroji 1867). Other sources of the information that made its way into Naoroji's demands for political reform were the *Statistical Abstracts*. The *Abstracts* were compilations of statistics from reports and papers presented before the British Parliament and included among other things data on the population, commerce, infrastructure, debt, and education in India (HMSO 1873).

Other activists relied on digests of data presented in the *Statesman's Yearbook*. The *Yearbook* had first appeared in 1864, at the instance of Thomas Carlyle. It presented official statistics from several countries in the world, India among them. Kashinath T. Telang, another Elphinstone graduate, depended on this source in his frequent attacks on the British free trade lobby, for example, in a paper given at the Sassoon Mechanic's Institute (Telang 1877).

For social statistics with a bearing on the sanitary crises in Bombay, activists consulted more specific sources. In 1844–8 and again in 1851, the East India Company, then in charge, had carried out smaller censuses in various places in India, but could not afford a thorough investigation and the results had never been printed. Later, the Indian Uprising in 1857 delayed a general census (Eden 1865). However, the British authorities in Bombay saw a pressing need for information on the population, and a new local Census Act was issued, paving the way for a census of the population in Bombay on 2 February 1864 (Government of Bombay 1864).

Yet for Indian reformers intent on engaging the administration in argument over public spending and sanitation, it was not so much the enumeration of the population in itself that became politicized, but the size of the population in relation to another set of data: the registration of deaths. Counting the dead had been an ongoing administrative practice, and now, with solid census results to hand, registered deaths could be calculated into a mortality rate. The mortality rate could then be compared with similar rates in other cities in the Empire. A high rate could indicate ineffective sanitation and healthcare, and would invite political criticism.

However, it was only in 1870, one year before the second census was to be taken in Bombay and in the midst of reform aspirations, that the mortality rate became a politically charged issue. Indian reformers

had challenged the then British Health Officer who argued that the mortality rate in Bombay had decreased considerably, having landed at the level of 17/1,000, a rate lower than in many British industrial towns. In his calculation of the rate, the Health Officer had relied on the census returns from 1864 to gauge the size of the population, and then used fresh death returns for 1869–70 as a numerator. The British administration, meanwhile, used the low mortality rate to vindicate its costly sanitation work, and to take the air out of the Indian activists' sails as they made their bid for political reform. The administration argued that tax money had been well spent; the results were widely published and applauded in London.

However, the low mortality rate was disputed by Indian reformists, who could see for themselves that life had not improved in Bombay. On the contrary, they argued, the sanitary situation was getting worse, and taxpayers' money continued to be wasted on ineffective measures. They also sensed, but could not prove, that the mortality rate was still high in Bombay.

They argued that the population in Bombay in 1870 had fallen considerably from 1864, when it was exceptionally large, and to divide the registered deaths in 1870 by the population size of 1864 when working out the mortality rate was erroneous, as it would produce far too low a figure. However, until a new census was taken, Indian activists could not prove the truth of their observation of population decrease, and, by extension, their criticism of the mortality rate. Subsequently, reformist activists used their newspapers and public platforms to push for a new census to be taken (Government of Bombay 1870).

Indeed, the second census, taken in Bombay in 1871, proved the activists right. It produced a figure for the city's population of about 645,000, establishing that it had fallen by some 160,000 inhabitants. The first joint analysis of the second Bombay census of 1871 and the registered deaths in the same year was provided by the Bombay Sanitary Officer in 1872, and corrected the mortality rate to 30.7/1,000, drastically higher than the figure presented only two years before (Army Sanitary Commissioner 1872). The new rate was quickly seized on by activists in Bombay, proving to their satisfaction their point about the dysfunctional municipal administration and ineffective public spending.

Conclusion

In this essay I have discussed a conflation of politics and knowledge that occurred in mid-nineteenth-century India. I have drawn attention to the ways in which social knowledge was integrated into the political action taken by Indian activists, and this, I hope, sheds some light on the fact that social research did not only prop up the mechanisms of control, but also sustained visions of greater Indian influence over political decision-making.

I think, given what I have presented here, that it is possible to argue that for activists engaged in political action in Bombay in the mid nineteenth century, social knowledge did not mark a difference: it mitigated it. Knowledge of their social world, and command of an infrastructure through which such knowledge could be formed and communicated, enabled activists to challenge a political set-up that marginalized their voices. Social research furnished a vocabulary, and statistics a visualization, with which the issues at hand were made intelligible to both sides. Social research lent legitimacy to opinion, but it also enabled actors to determine in a wider sense what should be defined as a political concern in a highly unequal modern political culture.

Notes