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ARTICLE

How Did Bengal Become a Society?

Andrew Sartori [ID]

Department of History, New York University, New York, USA
Email: asartori@nyu.edu

Abstract

Starting in the nineteenth century, 'society' emerged as a new object of contemplation, a new conception of historicity, and a new framework of norms in Bengal. This article asks what kind of epistemological project this turn to the social represented, and what its emergence suggests about the historical circumstances that underwrote its conditions of possibility. I suggest that, beyond the narrower framework of colonial knowledge, the social emerged as a reflexive inquiry into the ways in which the conditions of collective and individual life were being transformed by practices of interdependence that defied containment to regional geographies.

Since the nineteenth century, Bengali writers have looked to the concept of 'society' as the ground and measure of human life. In the mid-1880s, Bankimchandra Chatterjee reconstructed Krishna's life and character to portray a simultaneously divine and historical figure who manifested the substance of the social character of humanity (*manushyatva*) within the perfected personhood of harmonized human virtues. The social, as a domain of functional interdependencies and ethical hierarchies whose most perfect realization was to be found in Hinduism, provided Bankim with a normative standpoint for an escape from the humiliations of colonial subjection.[1] In 1904, Shibnath Shastri explained that, to write a biography of Ramtanu Lahiri, a nineteenth-century Brahmo educationist, 'it would be necessary to undertake an account of the internal social history of Bengal'.[2] By this 'social history' he meant a history of the nineteenth-century intellectual ferment among English-educated Bengalis that had generated the impulses to social and religious reform so closely associated with Young Bengal and

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[1] Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in global concept history: culturalism in the age of capital* (Chicago, IL, 2008), ch. 4.

[2] Shibnath Shastri, *Ramtanu Lahiri o tatkalin bangasamaj* (Ramtanu Lahiri and the Bengali society of that time) (Calcutta, 1909; orig. edn 1904), preface.

Brahmoism. It was also in 1904 that Rabindranath Tagore delivered one of his most famous speeches, 'Swadeshi society', which stressed the peculiarly sociable disposition of Bengalis, and Indians more generally, who were characterologically driven to establish 'a relationship of kinship between man and man', and who were deeply averse to instrumentalizing such relationships. Unlike in England, where the state's engrossment of responsibility for collective concerns left atomized individuals to pursue their own private pleasures, in India collective life was directly present in the thick interconnections that bound individuals to each other.[3]

In 1932, Bipin Chandra Pal gave summary expression to a historical sensibility that had served as one of his core ideological commitments as a leader of the Swadeshi movement: 'To truly understand the individual, we must see him in and through his social setting; and to correctly appraise social values, we must see Society in and through the life and aspirations, the struggles and achievements of its individual human units.' He explained that, if he had made so bold as to present his own life story, it was not in the spirit of that 'old individualism' that saw in history nothing but 'the Biographies of the Great Men that stood at the top-wave of the social movements of their time'. Rather, it was in the hope that the story of his life, like that of even the very humblest and the very vilest, might find its true value 'as a revelation, an explanation and interpretation of the hidden currents of social history and evolution'. Seen in this light, he suggested, 'every biography is a social history'.[4] To understand any life was necessarily to enquire into the society within which it had been lived. The social was the horizon of understanding human existence, and was to be found even in the intimate scale of an individual life.

If we query for a moment its apparent self-evidence, how should we make sense of the ascendance of this understanding of 'the social' as the defining condition of human historicity? The case of Bengal can be nothing more than a case, for it is a question that could be posed of just about any regional history. I am not a social historian (much as I regret the deficiency), so I will not in this article offer anything remotely recognizable as social history, global or otherwise. Instead, I address a different problem, one more suited to an intellectual historian, but not I hope therefore irrelevant to the collective endeavour that this special issue represents. The plausibility of a project of 'global social history' turns, first, on social history's epistemological purchase (as a form of enquiry) on the diverse regional histories that traverse global space; and second, on the systemic interconnectedness of institutions and practices across those dispersed regional histories. I propose that these two premises might be connected to each other. The social, I will suggest, emerged across global space as a framework of reflexive enquiry into the historical condition of human existence, inextricably bound to the extension of forms of interdependence that defied containment to regional geographies. If the

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[3] Rabindranath Thakur, *Svadeshi samaj* (Indigenous society) (Calcutta, 1962), pp. 5–34.
[4] Bipin Chandra Pal, *Memories of my life and times* (Calcutta, 1932), pp. ix–x.

history of the social is itself a global history, it should be unsurprising that the project of social history should admit of the possibility of a 'global' approach.

I

That the history of conceptions of human society exceeds any ready-made geography or chronology is a simple enough reflex of the inescapable fact that humans seem to have, everywhere and always, a sociable disposition (howsoever unsociable that sociability may often prove to be). Given the cognitive capacities and affective entanglements of the species, it is hardly surprising when humans at any time and in any place should have developed a consciousness, and an analytical and normative repertoire of concepts, to articulate their ineluctable and constitutive entrenchment in forms of inter-subjective relationality. This is true even (or perhaps especially) if the determinations and significance of such sociability are not by their nature transparently self-evident to those who inhabit it. 'We continually experience the inadequacy of our semiotic knowledge, our inability to control the consequences or recognize the conditions of our actions', Bill Sewell has observed. This condition 'makes the interdependence of human relations which we call the social seem impossibly vast and unmasterable, constantly reinstating its mysteriousness as the ultimate ground of our being'.[5] These elusive and protean qualities are precisely what incite the human urge to figure the social as an object of reflection.

Seen from that very broad perspective, we might suspend nominalist hesitations to propose, a priori, that social thought – that is, the ongoing attempts to figure 'society' as an object of reflection – is a quintessentially human form of enquiry, universal to the species. We might also anticipate, empirically, that we will find across space and time a very wide variety of vocabularies, concepts, and discourses oriented to the most fundamental concerns of social thought. *Renxing* and *guanxi* in Chinese, the concepts of *asabiyya*, *'umran*, and *tamaddun* in the Islamic world, *ubuntu* and its cognates in Bantu languages, and *dharma*, *mandala*, and *samaj* in Sanskrit and the Sanskritized lexicons of South Asia, are all examples of terms that have been invoked as key elements in attempted reconstructions of diverse implicit theories of social being beyond the classical Western canon of 'social theory'.[6]

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[5] William H. Sewell Jr, *Logics of history: social theory and social transformation* (Chicago, IL, 2005), p. 352.

[6] On *renxing* and the Confucian theory of relational personhood, see Roger T. Ames, *Confucian role ethics: a vocabulary* (Hong Kong, 2011). Fei Xiaotong identified *guanxi* as the central concept for a comprehensive theory of Chinese social relations in *From the soil: the foundations of Chinese society*, trans. Gary G. Hamilton and Wang Zheng (Berkeley, CA, 1992; orig. edn 1947). On al-Tusi's Aristotelianism, see Antony Black, *The history of Islamic political thought* (Edinburgh, 2011), ch. 15. For a discussion of Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddima*, see Robert Irwin, *Ibn Khaldun: an intellectual biography* (Princeton, NJ, 2018), esp. pp. 45–9. On *ubuntu*, see Michael Onyebuchi Eze, *Intellectual history in contemporary South Africa* (New York, NY, 2010). And for discussions of Sanskritic and neo-classical social theory, see Daya Krishna, *The problematic and conceptual structure of classical Indian thought about man, society, and polity* (Delhi, 1996); Aditya Nigam, *Decolonizing theory: thinking across traditions*

Even those of us who eschew nominalism as a philosophical position, however, are not at leisure to ignore the concerns raised by nominalism as a methodological consideration. Debates about the foundations, extent, and ethics of human sociability transcended their celebrated staging among the Stoics and Epicureans of Hellenistic antiquity. But when we narrate these debates as part of a larger story about the comparative development of social thought, the object that emerges as the master sign of this comparative intellectual project appears to be somewhat narrower: 'the social' or 'society'. And it was among the literate elites of early modern Europe that the far-reaching and transformative impacts on epistemological, normative, and political premises produced by what Hannah Arendt called the 'emergence of society', or the 'rise of the social', were forcefully registered.[7]

Arendt's narrative swept blurrily across two millennia, starting from Greek antiquity, and her attitude towards historical analysis was blasé to say the least. But intellectual historians have applied themselves with more care to the history of the emergence of 'society' as a *Grundbegriff* in early modern Europe. Thomas Aquinas knew that 'homo naturaliter est animal sociale' ('man is naturally a social animal').[8] Both the potentially contractualist and corporatist implications of this claim would be elaborated as central themes in the vibrant Neo-Scholasticism of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Catholic Europe.[9] This Aristotelian tradition resonated in turn with the Stoic tradition's insistence that *societas* was a key condition for the cultivation of virtuous living in harmony with the laws of nature, even if it was rooted in a utilitarian interdependence born of individual human frailty.[10] Hugo Grotius embraced a scepticism that stripped away the premises of natural law to minimalist premises rooted in the individual right to self-preservation.[11] In the process, however, he was nonetheless moved to invoke an innate *appetitus societatis* (appetite for society) as a device to secure the compatibility of purely subjective natural rights with a motivation to sustain the principles of justice that were a prerequisite of collective existence.[12] Meanwhile, neo-Augustinian thinkers – Pierre Nicole, François duc de la

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(New Delhi, 2020), ch. 4; and Swarupa Gupta, *Notions of nationhood in Bengal: perspectives on samaj, c. 1867–1905* (Leiden, 2009).

[7] Hannah Arendt, *Human condition* (Chicago, IL, 1998; orig. edn 1958), p. 38.

[8] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, book 1, question 96, article 4.

[9] Francesca Trivellato, *The promise and peril of credit: what a forgotten legend about Jews and finance tells us about the making of European commercial society* (Princeton, NJ, 2019), ch. 3; John Finnis, *Natural law and natural rights* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 184–8. For a concise statement of the contractualist impulse, see Francisco de Vitoria, 'On civil power', in Anthony Pagden and Jeremy Lawrance, eds., *Francisco de Vitoria: political writings* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 6–10.

[10] Quentin Skinner, *The foundations of modern political thought, volume two: the age of reformation* (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 135–73; Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On duties*, ed. M. T. Griffin and E. M. Atkins (Cambridge, 1991), esp. book 1, §§49–59, pp. 152–60.

[11] Richard Tuck, *Natural rights theories: their origins and development* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 72–4.

[12] Hans W. Blom, 'Sociability and Hugo Grotius', *History of European Ideas*, 41 (2015), pp. 589–604. See also Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of trade: international competition and the nation-state in historical perspective* (Cambridge, MA, 2005), pp. 159–84; Catherine Larrère, *L'invention de l'économie au XVIIIe siècle. Du droit natural à la physiocratie* (Paris, 1992).

Rochefoucauld, Blaise Pascal, Pierre Bayle, and ultimately Bernard Mandeville – ruthlessly unveiled all claims to genuine virtue as the rank self-regard of a corrupt postlapsarian humanity; instead, they grasped at 'society' as a superficial simulation of virtue that would nonetheless suffice to sustain the fabric of collective life.[13]

Society thus emerged as a dual form: at once a fabric woven of the utilitarian means 'for the mutual satisfaction of [individual] needs', and the overarching framework of justice and obligation that sustained the co-existence upon which the opportunity for such contractual utility rested.[14] It appealed precisely as a 'middle ground' that mediated the stark alternative (in philosophical terms) between dogmatic authority and anomic scepticism, and (in political terms) between arbitrary authority and the cacophony of self-interest.[15] The conception of the state as a 'civil society', as envisioned by Locke, thus began to be displaced in the early eighteenth century by a conception of a dynamic relationship conjoining private interests and sovereign power – a state embedded within and spatially congruent with '*a* society'.[16] By the end of the eighteenth century, the social was thoroughly established as a ubiquitous concept in European debates about ethical, political, and economic issues.

It was therefore a very peculiar set of problems bequeathed by the early modern reception of Aristotelianism, Stoicism, Epicureanism, Augustinianism, and natural jurisprudence that set the groundwork for the explosion in the usage of the term 'society' in the eighteenth century. This was true not only in the directly normative forms of discourse crowned by canonical classics like Adam Smith's *Theory of moral sentiments* (1759) or the Baron d'Holbach's *Système sociale* (1773), but also in the new forms of descriptive and explanatory analysis characteristic of the contemporaneous 'economic turn', led by an

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[13] Jean-Claude Perrot, *Une histoire intellectuelle de l'économie politique* (Paris, 1992), pp. 333–54; E. J. Hundert, *The Enlightenment's fable: Bernard Mandeville and the discovery of society* (Cambridge, 1994); Hont, *Jealousy of trade*, pp. 47–51; Michael Moriarty, *Disguised vices: theories of virtue in early modern French thought* (Oxford, 2011); John Robertson, *The case for Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples, 1680–1760* (Cambridge, 2005).

[14] The quote is from Antoine Furetière's *Dictionnaire universel*, published in Amsterdam in 1690, cited from Daniel Gordon, *Citizens without sovereignty: equality and sociability in French thought, 1670–1789* (Princeton, NJ, 1994), p. 52. On the connection between the seventeenth-century natural law tradition and the pervasive eighteenth-century Francophone preoccupations with both utilitarian contractualism and natural sociability, see Henry C. Clark, *Compass of society: commerce and absolutism in old-regime France* (Lanham, MD, 2007), pp. 95–6.

[15] Keith Michael Baker, 'Enlightenment and the institution of society: notes for a conceptual history', in Willem Melching and Wyger Velema, eds., *Main trends in cultural history: ten essays* (Amsterdam, 1994), pp. 95–120; Gordon, *Citizens without sovereignty*, pp. 54–61.

[16] Clark, *Compass of society*, pp. 75–108; Larrère, *L'invention de l'économie*, esp. chs. 5 and 7. Adam Smith could speak of 'commercial society' as a system of interdependencies 'not originally the effect of any human wisdom', and prima facie unrelated to the geography of polity, but could also invoke the sovereign's duty 'of protecting the society from the violence and invasion of other independent societies'. See *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan (2 vols., Chicago, IL, 1976), I (bk I, ch. 2), p. 17, and II (bk. IV, ch. 9), p. 208.

exploding interest in political economy.[17] It was in this spirit that Istvan Hont, who elsewhere pitched an Epicurean reading of Smith against rival Stoic interpretations, could pithily suggest that 'Smith's notion of commercial society originated in Pufendorf's amendment to Hobbes's theory of the "state of nature".'[18]

What such an account implies, of course, is the deeply contingent circumstances and parochial origins of 'the social' as a concept and as an epistemic problem-space. From that vantage, the aggregation of wide-ranging concerns across time and space under the umbrella of social thought arises from a set of concerns and questions that are much narrower in their significance – and hence operate as a kind of universalizing distortion, or even erasure, of the differences and disjunctures that interrupt the transparency of any possible conception of the human as a social being. Humans have always lived together, but the idea that that togetherness should correlatively be considered as the basis for a primordial orientation to 'social thought' is an unwarrantedly narrow construal. Society names an epistemic object for those of us who are heirs of the specifically European conceptual developments out of which it emerged. There is no reason to assume that other historical agents have necessarily been moved by the same intellectual impulse. Thus Talal Asad, summarizing an impulse shared across a range of postcolonial critics, insists that, 'as a continuous exploration of received ideas of the way given modes of life hang together', anthropology must 'break out of the coercive constraints of Sociological Truth – the axiom that the social is the ground of being'.[19]

The question with which this leaves us, however, is how to connect the contingency of the concept of the social to its extraordinary transnational and translational embrace over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[20] When we narrate the history of the social in terms of the peculiar contingencies of the early modern reception of Aristotelianism, Stoicism, Epicureanism, Augustinianism, and natural jurisprudence, and correlatively sustain a nominalist scepticism concerning the object realm to which it refers, we eliminate any ready-made grounds for making sense of the articulation of social thought beyond the conjunctural compulsions of the intellectual space from which it emerged in the first place. On the one hand, this is a powerful space-clearing gesture that makes it possible for us to return to the problem of the social as a historical problem. On the other hand, it leaves us with an obvious interpretive deficit in the face of the level of expansive geographical transmissibility on the part of the society-concept.

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[17] Gordon, *Citizens without sovereignty*, p. 54; Steven Kaplan and Sophus Reinert, eds., *The economic turn: recasting political economy in Enlightenment Europe* (London, 2019), chs. 1 and 22.

[18] Hont, *Jealousy of trade*, p. 38; Istvan Hont, *Politics in commercial society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith* (Cambridge, MA, 2015), pp. 15–22, 29–32; Vivienne Brown, *Adam Smith's discourse: canonicity, commerce, and conscience* (London, 1994); Pierre Force, *Self-interest before Adam Smith: a genealogy of economic science* (Cambridge, 2009), esp. ch. 2.

[19] Talal Asad, 'Response', in David Scott and Charles Hirschkind, eds., *Powers of the secular modern: Talal Asad and his interlocutors* (Stanford, CA, 2006), p. 206.

[20] See, for example, the essays in Hagen Schultz-Forberg, ed., *A global conceptual history of Asia, 1860–1940* (London, 2014); and Omnia El Shakry, *The great social laboratory: subjects of knowledge in colonial and postcolonial Egypt* (Stanford, CA, 2007).

In the absence of any presumptively compelling epistemological basis for motivating a global history of the social, I can think of only three broad approaches that address this deficit. First, where there is no rational reason to adopt the social as an interpretive framework, its adoption suggests a relationship of domination. In this case, the global history of the society-concept is part and parcel of the history of colonial power. Second, where the concept has been incorporated into some established set of interpretive patterns alien to those from which it emerged – say, the repertoire of classical references available to Chinese or Persianate literati as a result of their own dynamic histories of reception and reinvention – this suggests that the society-concept was being domesticated to help work through intellectual problems potentially quite foreign to the intellectual world from which the concept emerged. In this case, the global history of the concept is part and parcel of the history of cultural hybridization. This in turn was a process in which the 'global spread and transformation of ideas' could open onto a 'converse process by which major traditions of non-Western political thought were transformed and used to interpret modernity, confront colonial rule, and, in some cases, to transform Western political and ethical ideas themselves'.[21] These further possibilities imply, however, that there was some shared problem-space that traversed the differences between intellectual traditions. They therefore entail the possibility of a third approach: to find a way back to a realist account of the society-concept's relationship to its field of reference, but in a way that respects the demonstrated contingencies of its emergence.

All three of these broad approaches identify important dimensions of the larger historical process, but it is the third that I am primarily interested in here. And from this perspective, one striking feature of the development of the concept of society in early modern Europe is the thematic pervasiveness of the normative challenges and possibilities presented by extended commercial interdependence, as a peculiar kind of abstract sociability that I will call, for the sake of terminological convenience, *sociality*. Commerce could, as the physiocrats interpreted it, be seen as a bond that tied individual agency 'to the unlimited development of networks of sociability'.[22] It did not follow, however, that the resultant sociability was correlatively present to the cognition of agents participating as nodes within that network. The discourse around the social developed in tandem with concerns about the normative and pragmatic significance of extending and intensifying practices of sociality. In the process, it produced an exceptionally articulate analytical repertoire for grasping the practical anatomy of sociality as a form of interdependence mediated by exchange. Adam Smith observed in his *Theory of moral sentiments*,

> though among the different members of the society there should be no mutual love and affection, the society, though less happy and agreeable, will not necessarily be dissolved. Society may subsist among different

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[21] Shruti Kapila and Faisal Devji, eds., *Political thought in action: the Bhagavad Gita and modern India* (Cambridge, 2013), p. x.

[22] Larrère, *L'invention de l'économie*, p. 309.

men, as among different merchants, from a sense of its utility, without any mutual love or affection; and though no man in it should owe any obligation, or be bound in gratitude to any other, it may still be upheld by a mercenary exchange of good offices according to an agreed valuation.[23]

This Mandevillean observation – that society might exist in the peculiar form of a blind sociability, that is, without being intentionally present in the minds of those who constituted it through their actions – was the hinge between Smith's normative theory and his political economy. To the same degree, its example highlights a key driver of the broad and dynamic conceptual field to which it belonged.

The issue here is not to legislate a difference between premodern sociability and modern sociality. It is no news to historians that money, credit, and markets have played an extensive (and opaque) role in people's lives far beyond the narrow geographical and chronological confines of early modern and modern Europe. It is rather to suggest that the contingencies of textual reception that shaped the emergence of society as an object worthy of serious epistemic attention took as the premise of their relevance the expanding role of commercial interdependence and innovative monetary and credit practices in political and ethical reasoning. These were processes that operated across an extended (and connected) Afro-Eurasian geography, but that were experienced with peculiar intensity in Europe – whether because of the peculiar compulsions of the European state-system, or because of a deeper elaboration of complex credit institutions as a supplement for scarce currency media.[24] Through its referential connection to these practices, the history of the concept of society became part and parcel of a larger history of the experience of sociality driven by the global history of capitalism (understood as a historically determinate form of sociality rather than as a particular configuration of class relations).[25]

We can see the importance of the referential dimension of this conceptual history most clearly in the subsequent dissemination of the society-concept

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[23] Adam Smith, *Theory of moral sentiments*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge, 2004), p. 100.

[24] See, for example, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Of *imârat* and *tijârat*: Asian merchants and state power in the western Indian Ocean, 1400 to 1750', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 37 (1995), pp. 750–80; Tansen Sen, 'The impact of Zheng He's expeditions on Indian Ocean interactions', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 79 (2016), pp. 609–36; and Tansen Sen, *India, China, and the world: a connected history* (London, 2017), ch. 3. While financial instruments combining credit and exchange functions were known 'in the medieval Islamic world and in parts of early-modern Asia', Francesca Trivellato has noted that 'outside of Europe there existed no international financial fairs dedicated exclusively to the purchase and sale of bills of exchange or equally complex legal norms overseeing these credit instruments'. Trivellato, 'Credit, honor, and the early modern French legend of the Jewish invention of bills of exchange', *Journal of Modern History*, 84 (2012), pp. 289–334, at p. 291, n. 4. For further elaboration of divergent developments in monetary and credit practices across Eurasia, see Akinobu Kuroda, *A global history of money* (New York, NY, 2020).

[25] Moishe Postone, *Time, labour, and social domination: a reinterpretation of Marx's critical theory* (Cambridge, 1993).

across distinct intellectual communities with their distinct fields of textual authority. Across the world, words were repurposed, and neologisms crafted, to render the concept of the social articulable. Despite the diverse conceptual norms and transmissions that these communities sustained, the problem-space that society named came to assume intellectual salience, and the social came to be deemed worthy of epistemic attention. That it did so in no small part by becoming entangled in pre-existing semiotic and textual networks of association – possibly with their own early modern engagements with the problem of sociality – does not alter the basic insight that the global history of the social is inseparable from global histories of sociality, or that the extending reach of such sociality was in turn intimately bound to the global history of capitalism.[26]

Seen from this perspective, the conceptual history of the social is bound to the global history of sociality; the very project of social history must be understood to be premised on a global history of interconnected social transformations; and so the question of 'global social history' is inscribed into the constitutive fabric of the conceptual history that underpins the global proliferation of the social as an element of conceptual life. I do not mean to suggest that what social historians study must necessarily be 'sociality' in this more restrictive sense, but rather that the affirmation of the history of social phenomena as epistemically significant is grounded in the experiential uncertainties generated by the historical intensification of global entanglements as a condition of sociality driven by the extension of capitalist social relations. We cannot be certain, in any specific empirical instance, that the articulation of a concept of society directly implies the existence of a form of sociality, global or otherwise. People use words in highly contingent and deeply unexpected ways. I would nonetheless insist that the global embrace of the society-concept, seen as a secular trend, is best understood in its referential relationship to practical transformations in the constitution of collective life that systemically implicate diverse localities in global relationships of abstract interdependence.[27]

II

Sudipta Kaviraj has observed that

It is a curious fact of intellectual history that India had highly developed traditions of philosophical reflection, but none of these took 'society' or social principles, like justice, as a serious object of analytical attention. Although classical Indian philosophy developed highly sophisticated and intricate traditions of thinking on logic, metaphysics, epistemology, and aesthetics, there is hardly any application of these skills of distinction,

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[26] Cf. Andrew Sartori, 'Property and political norms: Hanafi juristic discourse in agrarian Bengal', *Modern Intellectual History*, 17 (2020), pp. 471–85.

[27] On the place of systemic integration in the project of global history, see Sebastian Conrad, *What is global history?* (Princeton, NJ, 2016), esp. ch. 5.

analysis, elaboration, or critical debate to social problems in a narrower sense: like justification of the caste system.[28]

Obviously, this broad characterization will admit of qualification – with one eye on the exploration of ethical contradictions in the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the other on the millennium-long availability of Islamic and Persianate textual traditions in South Asia. Even so, it provides a kind of benchmark for the observation that to live in complex institutional arrangements with others (that is, 'socially') should not necessarily or correlatively be taken to imply any vigorous intellectual orientation to the question of the social.

The extension of commercial connections across Mongol-era Eurasia transitioned from around the sixteenth century in early modern South Asia (as in Europe) to accelerating processes of monetarization, commodification, capital accumulation, commercialization, marketization, and urbanization. These were dynamics that were connected with, but by no means simply derivative of, contemporary developments present in many other regions dispersed across Eurasia, Africa, and the Americas; and they constituted the basic conditions for the attraction of European intrusion into the Indian Ocean region, rather than emerging as the result of the arrival of Europeans.[29] These dynamics can only have resulted in a more intensive experience of 'sociality' (even if for some that experience took the immediate form of subordination, domination, and coercion, rather than the extended market participation in which many others were involved). Yet we know relatively little about the extent to which, or the forms in which, that experience was conceptualized (whether in normative or descriptive

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[28] Sudipta Kaviraj, 'Ideas of freedom in modern India', in Robert H. Taylor, ed., *The idea of freedom in Asia and Africa* (Stanford, CA, 2002), p. 101.

[29] On the extensive connectedness in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, see, for example, Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European hegemony: the world system A.D. 1250-1350* (New York, NY, 1989); and Prajakti Kalra, *The Silk Road and the political economy of the Mongol empire* (New York, NY, 2018). For just a sample of the relevant literature on the early modern period in South Asia, see Bin Yang, *Cowrie shells and cowrie money: a global history* (Oxford, 2019); Stephen Dale, *Indian merchants and Eurasian trade, 1600-1750* (Cambridge, 1994); Shami Ghosh, 'How should we approach the economy of "early modern India"', *Modern Asian Studies*, 49 (2015), pp. 1606–56; David Ludden, 'Urbanism and early modernity in the Tirunelveli region', *Bengal Past and Present*, 114 (1995), pp. 9–40; Frank Perlin, *The invisible city: monetary, administrative and popular infrastructures in Asia and Europe, 1500-1900* (Aldershot, 1993); Frank Perlin, *Unbroken landscape: commodity, category, sign and identity; their production as myth and knowledge from 1500* (Aldershot, 1994); John Richards, ed., *The imperial monetary system of the Mughal empire* (Delhi, 1987); Giorgio Riello, *Cotton: the fabric that made the modern world* (Cambridge, 2013); Sanjay Subrahmanyam, ed., *Money and the market in India, 1100-1700* (Delhi, 1994); David Washbrook, 'India in the early modern world economy: modes of production, reproduction, and exchange', *Journal of Global History*, 2 (2007), pp. 87–111; and David Washbrook, 'The textile industry and the economy of South India, 1500–1800', in Giorgio Riello and Tirthankar Roy, eds., *How India clothed the world: the world of South Asian textiles, 1500-1850* (Leiden, 2009), pp. 173–91. On Bengal specifically, see Rajat Datta, *Society, economy, and the market: commercialization in rural Bengal, c.1760-1800* (New Delhi, 2000); and Tilottama Mukherjee, *Political culture and economy in eighteenth-century Bengal: networks of exchange, consumption, and communication* (New Delhi, 2013).

terms) by the historical subjects who lived through these processes' everyday practical and ethical implications.[30]

What we do know is that the Bengali colonial public was born in the early nineteenth century with society already part of its conceptual repertoire. British debates about the East India Company's territorial expansion in India had been profoundly shaped by the political-economic defence of commercial society from monopoly, as well as Whig political discourses about the defence of society from the depredations of despotic authority. Adam Smith's denunciation of the East India Company and Edmund Burke's denunciation of Warren Hastings are the most famous exemplars of these distinct but interwoven traditions; but the wider conversations in which each was participating (including in Calcutta itself, where the future direction of Company rule was hotly contested) took it for granted that there was 'society' in India.[31] The *Calcutta Journal*, which James Silk Buckingham and Rammohan Roy co-owned from 1818 to 1823, was full of references not only to the myriad 'societies' organized and admired by the European denizens of Calcutta 'society', but also to the 'prospects', the 'regeneration', the 'peace and security', and 'the benefit of society' in its broader sense, including 'Indian society'.[32]

Rammohan had built his fortune in Company service, moneylending, revenue estates, and speculation in Company bonds, and he was self-consciously situated in a commercial node that connected inland to the Gangetic plain and outwards to the Bay of Bengal and beyond. It is perhaps not entirely surprising then that, as he acquired a mastery of English working for Company officials, he became well positioned to inhabit the conceptual problem-space of sociality as his own.[33] Throughout his writings he would invoke the enjoyment of 'the common comforts of society' and the 'natural texture of society' as a key measure against which polytheism, idolatry, ritual formalism, Brahmanical priestcraft, and sati were judged and found wanting.[34] Rammohan's earliest extant work, the *Tuhfat-al muwahiddin* (A gift to monotheists), composed around 1804 and addressed to a Persianate public, already drew on Indo-Islamic precedents to stress the 'social instinct in man' as the foundation of language, property, and justice.[35] He would go on to become a founding exponent of what Brian Hatcher has called 'bourgeois Hinduism',

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[30] A promising exception is Anirban Karak, 'Caste, capitalism, and subaltern aspirations in Bengal, c.1500–1859' (PhD thesis, New York University, 2023).

[31] On Burke, see Richard Bourke, *Empire and revolution: the political life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton, NJ, 2015). On debates in Calcutta, see James M. Vaughn, *The politics of empire at the accession of George III: the East India Company and the crisis and transformation of Britain's imperial state* (New Haven, CT, 2019), esp. ch. 3.

[32] For example, *Calcutta Journal*, vol. 6, no. 249 (26 Nov. 1819), p. 174; vol. 1, no. 1 (2 Jan. 1821), pp. 210–11; vol. 1, no. 5 (5 Jan. 1822), pp. 52–6; vol. 3, no. 124 (24 May 1822), pp. 331–2; vol. 5, no. 252 (21 Oct. 1822), pp. 686–7.

[33] Ramaprasad Chunder and Jatindra Kumar Majumdar, eds., *Selections from official letters and documents relating to the life of Raja Rammohun Roy* (Calcutta, 1938), pp. xxiv–xlii.

[34] Jogendra Chunder Ghose, ed., *The English works of Raja Rammohun Roy* (4 vols., Calcutta, 1901), i, pp. 62, 97.

[35] Ghose, ed., *English works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, iv, p. 947. See also C. A. Bayly, *Recovering liberties: Indian thought in the age of liberalism and empire* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 36–7.

endorsing not the renunciant (*sannyasin*) but rather the pious (male) house-holder (*grihastha*) as the model subject of spiritual knowledge and righteous action. It was from this premise that he argued that an improved practice of soci-ability could guarantee 'both temporal and eternal happiness' as complementary rather than competing purposes.[36] Such sociability, based on a more equitable recognition of rights and duties and sustained by free public discourse, implied respect for the principle of property as a foundation (for both men and women) of intellectual, moral, and material independence. This Rammohan hitched in turn to the promise of free exchange (unleashed, that is, from the despotic yoke of the East India Company's monopoly) to deliver improved levels of gener-alized prosperity.[37] His enthusiastic identification with the causes of Iberian lib-eralism, the July Revolution, and British parliamentary reform suggests that he considered his political aspirations to be broadly in line with those of the 'liberal international' of the post-Napoleonic moment more generally.[38]

It is not my intention either to suggest that Rammohan was the font of all subsequent developments in Bengali intellectual history, or to drag the reader through some skeletally schematic account of the various trajectories of nineteenth-century Bengali social thought. Nonetheless, it is worth stressing that the preoccupation with the social (whether as a problem of solidarity, eth-ics, cultural assertion, or reform) would achieve a pervasive explicitness in the Bengali colonial public sphere that sharply diverged from the more protean ambiguities of whatever early modern engagements there may have been. Throughout the colonial period, society remained a problem-space rather than a concept that elicited consensus: there were few substantive claims shared between the bald declaration of Nrisinha Chandra Mukhurji (a profes-sor at Presidency College) that 'exchange is the root form of social bond', and Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay's conception of India as an inclusive composite of (male) householders, families, castes, and peoples, bound together through overlapping concentric circles of affection and obligation.[39] Yet they both iden-tified society as a primary object of their enquiries, and they both identified the fundamental problem that society named as the possibility of solidarity beyond the reach of personal proximity and affective immediacy, and at the limits of institutions of political authority. Mukhurji's outline of political econ-omy is unambiguous on this point. But Bhudeb too wrote to elicit and reinforce a consciousness of nationality that eluded spontaneous recognition because of

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[36] Ghose, ed., *English works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, I, p. 100; Brian A. Hatcher, *Bourgeois Hinduism, or faith of the modern Vedantists: rare discourses from early colonial Bengal* (New York, NY, 2008); Brian A. Hatcher, *Idioms of improvement: Vidyasagar and cultural encounter in Bengal* (Delhi, 1996), pp. 196–206; Bruce Carlisle Robertson, *Raja Rammohan Ray: the father of modern India* (Delhi, 1995), p. 170.

[37] Sartori, *Bengal in global concept history*, pp. 84–6.

[38] C. A. Bayly, 'Rammohan Roy and the advent of constitutional liberalism in India, 1800–30', *Modern Intellectual History*, 4 (2007), pp. 25–41.

[39] Nrisinha Chandra Mukhurji, *Arthaniti o arthabyabahar, or elements of political economy and money-matters in Bengali, founded on Whately, Mill, Fawcett and other standard authorities* (2nd edn, Calcutta, 1875), p. 138; Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, *Samajik prabandha* (Essays on society) (Hooghly, 1892).

the vast extent of its reach. He drew on a precolonial lexicon of *atmiyata*, *jati*, and *samaj*, even as he engaged with the writings of Auguste Comte (widely received in Bengal in the later nineteenth century[40]) as well as other leading authorities of nineteenth-century Europe. But the palimpsestic or hybrid nature of his social thought in no sense altered its standing *as* social thought, recognizable as such to any contemporary reader (whatever the specificities of their own location in global space) who was also grappling with the normative and pragmatic challenges presented by an opaque experience of sociality.[41]

As a precis of anglophone political economy, Mukhurji's Bangla textbook might seem, his selectivity aside, a slavish recension of colonial authorities, thinly tied in its theoretical presentation to the practical realities of the India that surrounded him. Social prestige and institutional power were no doubt a powerful force in shaping intellectual life in the colonial context (though a narrow focus on coloniality should not lead us to prematurely exonerate our scholarly selves of many of the same compulsions, even as we practise postcolonial critique). Mukhurji seemed to disregard outright the comparative sociology that had been elaborated over the preceding fifteen years in the writings of Henry Maine, according to whom the foundational status of exchange was confined to advanced civilizations (to whose ranks India did not belong).[42] Instead he presented exchange as a universal foundation of social solidarity, and characterized 'absolute property in land' in Lockean–Ricardian terms as a device for preserving the 'bonds of society' by guaranteeing a 'reward proportionate to the amount of labour we must do in order to make appropriate use of the land'.[43] These were, however, theoretical generalizations that resonated profoundly with ongoing policy discussions and debates that had occupied colonial officials over the preceding two decades as they negotiated endemic conflicts among landlords, their cultivating tenants, and European indigo planters, as well as with demands emerging from agrarian cultivators themselves, as they asserted permanent rights over the soil as a basis for extending their participation in market exchange.[44]

By the middle of the nineteenth century, political demands were emerging from agrarian society in forms that implicitly embraced 'society' as a norm binding together independent producers, who might yearn for productive households internally organized as models of gendered and generational hierarchy, but whose mutual engagements were structured as horizontal relationships, sanctioned by custom, but in accordance with the impersonal principle of an exchange of equivalents among property-owning (male) householders. (Obviously, such normative claims came nowhere close to describing the impossibly complex, and highly variable, realities of actual agrarian relations.) Within the logic of this discourse, the vaunted 'independence' of the Bengali

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[40] Geraldine Forbes, *Positivism in Bengal: a case study in the transmission and assimilation of an ideology* (Calcutta, 1975).

[41] On the indigenous roots of *samajik* discourse in Bengal, see Gupta, *Notions of nationhood*, esp. ch. 3.

[42] Henry Sumner Maine, *Village-communities in the East and West* (London, 1871).

[43] Mukhurji, *Arthaniti o arthabyabahar*, pp. 50–1.

[44] Andrew Sartori, *Liberalism in empire: an alternative history* (Oakland, CA, 2014), ch. 4.

cultivator in fact became another name for commercial *inter*dependence. Claims to withhold a portion of surplus from the landlord, or to refuse European planters' demands that they grow an unremunerative crop on undesirable terms, were premised on primordial rights over the soil, rooted in histories of reclamation and labour. Such rights over land were framed not as a basis of expanded autarchy, but rather as a basis for expanded cash-crop production, which in turn opened the possibility of expanded commercial access to petty consumables such as soap and corrugated tin.[45]

As households embraced high-value but expensive-to-cultivate cash crops oriented to overseas markets – notably, jute – their vulnerability to international price fluctuations intensified, while the web of indebtedness extended more deeply into the functioning of agrarian households.[46] These developments threatened the ideal of independence, but in ways that nonetheless only underlined the intensity of the experience of sociality to which the ideal of independence had been addressed in the first place. That sociality was, of course, also the product of much deeper histories of agrarian commercial participation that reached into the early modern period, especially in relation to rice and textile production.[47] Yet it was the deepening entanglement of regional agrarian reproduction with scales of capital circulation and commodity exchange extending far beyond the region (and, for that matter, far beyond the subcontinent) that seems to have rendered sociality into a sufficiently problematic dimension of agrarian experience to incite among rural Bengalis an extended engagement with the broader questions of social thought as the point of departure for the new political aspirations they were beginning to conceive. Indeed, by the time socialist organizers arrived in the agrarian hinterland to organize peasants behind their banner, whether they were greeted with enthusiasm or hostility, their basic claims about rights and equity, and about labour and property, were fully comprehensible to those they addressed.[48]

Seen from this perspective, social thought was not the prerogative of those who happened to have access to the lexicon of European social thought. Rather, the conjuncture of the practical concerns of agrarian actors with the availability of relatively sophisticated social thought in newspapers and legal debates opened novel spaces in which the discourse of society could find an object, even when no specific lexical item named that object directly.

Obviously, only the concerted effort of social historians could warrant the broad claims made in this article. Sociality is so broad a concept that it leaves any actual historical experience of social opacity, and any actual imbrication between the proximate and the distant in any particular location, almost entirely unspecified. Nonetheless, when we tie the history of the concept of

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[45] Tariq O. Ali, *A local history of global capital: jute and peasant life in the Bengal delta* (Princeton, NJ, 2018).

[46] Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal: economy, social structure and politics, 1919–1947* (Cambridge, 1986).

[47] Datta, *Society, economy, and the market*; Mukherjee, *Political culture and economy*; Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the economy of Bengal, 1630–1720* (Princeton, NJ, 1985).

[48] Sartori, *Liberalism in empire*, ch. 5.

society to the history of sociality, rather than more narrowly to the institutions of colonial domination with which it has historically been so closely associated, we open a window onto the relationship between the intellectual project of social history and the global history within which it has taken shape. It turns out that the conceptual history of the social belongs to the larger history of extended interdependencies that is at the core of global history. And it surely follows that the project of social history always took as its epistemic condition of possibility the global history of sociality rooted in the global history of capitalism. This suggests that social history cannot exist without implying the correlative reality of global social history, even if we are only beginning to imagine what such a historiography might concretely look like. I hope this special issue serves as a beginning to that endeavour.