The Impure Genealogies of the Vernacular

In a conversation with Haridas Mukhopadhyay in June, 1944, Benoy Sarkar proposed his new program for pedagogical reform in Bengal.¹ The targeted age group for the primary wave of reform was fourteen to eighteen, during which Bengali students of those days were made to study for their Matriculation, IA, and ISC examinations. Sarkar thought that it would be ideal to divide the students at the pre-Matriculation class into two groups and send one half of them for vocational or technical training at institutes particularly designed for this purpose. The courses that were to be introduced in these schools were multifarious, ranging from machinery, agriculture, nursing and home management to music and wrestling. “My formula is very easy,” Sarkar told his interviewer. “I want to see exactly the same number of boys and girls of nineteen to twenty-two in these engineering, health and welfare, medical and commercial colleges as in the so-called institutes for higher studies.”²

One year later, in March, 1945, he again invoked this program in the context of producing engineers in the country.³ Once again in a similar conversation with Mukhopadhyay, Sarkar emphasized the need for engineers in the project of nation building. He expressed his disappointment at the dearth of trained engineers in Bengal. Citing an example from pre-War France, he pointed out that the perfect ratio of engineers-to-workers should be one to sixty – a level which was quite difficult to achieve at the current state of the country. However, he did not lose his hope. Indomitably optimistic as he was, he proposed to build three hundred basic engineering schools and enlist at least

² Sarkar cited in ibid, 694.
³ Sarkar cited in ibid, 798-808.
half of the total student population in these schools. “But the factories are the real schools and colleges for machinery and engineering,” he did not forget to add. There the youngsters would get the practical experience of “fiddling with the machines and mixing poisonous liquids and gases.”

Mary Morgan and Marcel Boumans claim that the movement from a metaphor to a two-dimensional or three-dimensional model will have two effects. First, it will increase the level of difficulty in adjustments due to the complex interactions between the material constraints and the commitments to theory. But, as they point out, the same move will also provide a sharper outlook leading to a better understanding of the world. Metaphors, when translated into machines, provide “insights that are closely related to an engineer’s way of understanding.”

But what do they mean specifically by “an engineer’s way of understanding?” Citing Eugene Ferguson’s work where as a quality of “good engineering” is described the attribute of “intuition and non-verbal thinking,” Morgan and Boumans point out that “an engineer learns to understand the world through the eyes and fingers” – by storing and applying “sensory information – visual, tactile, muscular, visceral, aural, olfactory, and gustatory.” In other words, the engineer learns to understand the world by encountering it “physically,” by translating her experience into sensory information, and by accepting the risk of accidents that may happen during these “bodily” encounters. Modeling, therefore, becomes a form of engineering where, to have a better demonstration of the world, one needs to have a physical connection with it.

In Sarkar’s demand for more engineers for the nation, we perceive a similar urgency to connect with the world physically. His first encounter with the world of engineering took place during the Swadeshi mobilization when Nagen Rakshit, a trained engineer, joined as his colleague in the faculty at the Bengal National College: “In my eyes, the workshop of the machines [jauṭrāpātīr kārkhand] was a new world, and Nagen was its god, its avatar.” Clearly, Sarkar and his friends at that time saw a potential of transcendence in the act of engineering from the world of colonial domination and embraced the ideal of machines as a sign of social progress. In his later works, when he was campaigning for the reconfiguration of the social with an organicist predilection, his insistence on

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4 Sarkar cited in ibid, 800.
5 Sarkar cited in ibid, 799.
7 Ibid.
the pedagogical necessity of engineering suggests that he was still planning to realize this potential through numerous bodily encounters with the world – by dirtying hands in the factories and gathering information from the fields of experience. For Sarkar, hence, the question of modeling the social was also one of engineering it, realizing its machinic potential and reconfiguring its elements in a risky adventure of physical proximity with the multitude.

It has been my objective in this thesis to map the genealogy of these adventures and misadventures, intermittently attached to each other in various folds of history. Throughout this dissertation, I have tried to show how the conceptual framework of “modeling” is helpful to explore the translational modalities in colonial Bengal. The practice of modeling was dispersed through these modalities and delimited a vernacular domain which was primarily characterized by equivalence, and not by difference alone. The moments of socialization thus engendered were also premised on this principle of equivalence and the economic experts were entrusted with the responsibility of devising various techniques of translation as appropriation of certain metaphors into these modalities of equivalence.

I have argued that, in the nineteenth century, these modalities of equivalence assumed two principal forms in the area of pedagogical reform – linguistic equivalence and equivalence of illustration. In case of the former, at the centre of the pedagogical discourses, the question of suitability of the economic discipline in foreign conditions was predominant, as the principal modality of equivalence was conceived in terms of transparency between the language of the original texts and that of their translation. With formalization of the pedagogical sites and intervention by a group of translator-writers in the second half of the nineteenth century, a new modality of equivalence was introduced. These writers shifted the emphasis from the basic principles of the discipline to “concrete” illustrations of those principles and refurbished the logic of transparency by appropriating the “original” metaphors like the one of the pin factory inducing social division of labor in a “familiar” domain of socialization. Gopaul Dutt, one of the writers of the textbooks for Bengali children, even replaced the original Biblical example in Richard Whately’s original text with the event of Mutiny from contemporary history of colonial India and upheld the point of comprehensibility originating from familiarity with the illustrations. This logic of familiarity was also entertained in the official strands of the colonial state and made way for another modality of equivalence in the twentieth century – the experiential modality of equivalence.
This experiential modality, I have shown, was able to appropriate the organicist metaphor of the social in such a way that the “risk” in liberal governmentality was exposed in various encounters with the fields of experience, and a double movement of translation between experience and data cleared a vernacular domain premised on the machinic imagination of the social on one hand and the logic of indigenous self-governance on the other. We have encountered one form of this machinic socialization in Michel Foucault’s discussion of “human capital” in the context of neoliberal thinking in the post-War period. There the machinic metaphor was introduced in connection with the reconceptualization of labor and capital as part of a project of extending the domain of economic rationality to even the presumably non-human actions. In the colonial context, as I have pointed out in chapters four and five, this machinic potential was realized in the organicist conception of the social and particularly in Radhakamal Mukerjee’s scheme of ensuring “physiological justice” by redistribution of “energy.” In that sense, it was also a moment of capitalizing the human body as what Foucault called an “ability-machine” – a conglomerate of skills and abilities premised on the developments in the field of genetics and supplemented by a theory of racial classification. By introducing the colony to the history of the economic discipline, I have attempted to problematize the linear chronologies of history of ideas and question the narratives of scientific progress spread all over the world with equal intensity and similar propensity. This necessarily entails a relocation of the colony as integral to the history of the economic discipline, and not as its unmediated “outside.”

Once this fiction of the outside is overturned, we may also start to question the local/global dichotomy through which the vernacular domain is contextualized in the colony. But, it will be too simplistic to imagine that the constitution of the vernacular domain and its relation to a global network of dissemination of the economic discipline were carried out all over the world with same concerns and similar institutional prerogatives. In Timothy Mitchell’s *Carbon Democracy*, for example, we encounter an almost analogous narrative of vernacular economics, but not quite. In a fascinating account of the discovery, extraction, and distribution of carbon-based fossil fuels like coal and oil in the Middle East, Mitchell studies how the redesigning of the political climate in west Asia was attempted by engineering a democratic space of subject formation and governmentalization of the state. It is not a novel observation that, with the increase in the use of oil as the most potent form

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10 Ibid, 226.
of fuel all over the world, the political importance of the Middle East in the European and American blocks shot up, resulting mutual conflicts and two Gulf Wars in the last couple of decades. Mitchell’s contribution is that he points out the linkage between the technologies of fuel extraction or the machinic networks of its distribution and the impulses of importing the Western notion of “democracy” to disperse the effects of modernization by manufacturing model citizens adaptive and conducive to such humongous transformations. He is not arguing that the anomalies and conflicts that presented themselves during the process were results of trying to obtain “carbon copies” of Western democracies in the Middle East without bothering about the geopolitical and cultural specificities of the region. Rather he asks, “[W]hat if democracies are not carbon copies, but carbon-based?” Then he locates how the notion of democracy in post-War America and Europe was itself coterminous with the history of fossil fuels being extracted, distributed, transformed into energy and money through intricate networks of capital and technical innovations.

In many ways, this history is similar to the one I have tried to trace in this dissertation. In Mitchell’s framework too, there was an implication that the field of translation and application of Western values, concepts, and categories – for example, the colony – is not autonomous and pre-given in relation to the pedagogical and governmental networks through which they are disseminated in that same field. Although he does not specify, but one can also discern an anxiety with the symmetrical distribution of agency between human and non-human networks in his history of fossil fuels. However, the narrative that I have presented in the previous chapters differs from his in two ways. First of all, Mitchell does not address the mediations between different networks that converged and interacted with each other to constitute the “carbon democracies” and, thus, tends to overlook the material processes through which certain metaphors – the carbonic one being the most crucial of them – were translated into physical models in the context of democratization of the Middle East. As a result, it seems that there cannot be any conversation between the conventional critique of Western modernity as an instrument of carbon copy and the internalization of the carbonic metaphor within the technologies of democratic politics. Although this formulation manages to tarnish the differential autonomy of the “outside,” it also runs of the risk of emerging as a totalized and unproblematic alternative to the earlier formulations that Mitchell so eagerly wants to disown. In the first part of my dissertation, I have tried to argue that, without specifying the translational modalities of mediations between networks, one cannot locate the diverse asymmetries that inform

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12 Ibid, 5.
these separate conceptions and, more importantly, cannot decipher the rules of these separations themselves. In that respect, even though Mitchell rescues the carbonic metaphor from the clutches of analogical reasoning and rehabilitates it in the universe of material networks, the very connections between the analogies and the materialities remain unexplored. One way of looking at these connections, as I have tried to show in this thesis, is perhaps to foreground the shifting character of the networks through which they are actualized. These actualizations happen especially in the domain of the vernacular where the conflicts between these analogies and materialities are mediated and, to some extent, mitigated, not necessarily through highlighting elements of difference in their autonomous ontologies, but by proposing moments of their convergence and equivalence, replacement and juxtaposition. The conceptual framework of translation dispersed through various modalities of equivalence enables to capture this shifting character of the networks of popularization in their operative details.

The second point of distinction is related to the first. In an attempt to showcase the all-inclusive nature of these global networks, Mitchell pays less attention to the exclusionist agendas of the same. A conspicuous absence of an important category in his account is that of race which occupied a central position in the discourses of progress in the colonial contexts and those of development even in the postcolonial situations. Mitchell’s narrative does not provide any clue as to how the question of race was encountered, engaged with, and resolved in the spreading out of networks of extraction and distribution of fossil fuels. It is easy to argue that capital and the machinic imaginations of democratic equivalence uprooted the troubling insignia of racial difference and initiated a unilateral trail of technocratic mediations. But, at the same time, it also required to explain whether and how this politics of exclusion played a constitutive role in the conception and deployment of these mediations. In the second part of my thesis, I have plotted the question of race in the shifting narratives of translational modalities and tried to reclaim a history of “human capital” in the colony differently conceived and dispersed from the metropole as evinced in Foucault’s lectures on biopolitics. In the third chapter, for example, the suspicion among the British officials about the intellectual capacity of the Indians to grasp the wisdom of political economy followed from the racist idea of a native subject lacking the skills to make use of the acquired knowledge in his life. Later this suspicion was deflated when the marker of difference was relocated in the realm of experience and socialization, demanding a modality of equivalence of illustrations to assuage such differences. In the fourth chapter, on the other hand, we see that, rather than resolving the question
of difference, there were attempts – especially by the native intellectuals in the early twentieth century – to bring in focus its various implications and concretize its location in the socialized conceptions of caste and communities. This move, however, gave birth to new modalities of equivalence and redefined the urge of social transformation in a strange coalition with the question of race. Even in Satis Mukherjee’s writings in *The Dawn* where the caste system was thought to preserve a spiritualist model of “social economy” superior to the materialistic presumptions of political economy, the transactions between caste and race were actualized in a composite framework of Comte’s positivism and Spencer’s social Darwinism. In the later decades, the mobility of the caste question within a hierarchical structure of racial difference was ensured by envisaging it as an element in a “materialist life history” of the Hindu nation and discovering in it the potential to assimilate the respective life histories of the nation and its people. This assimilation was proposed at least in two forms: by envisioning a theory of practice which inculcated physical proximity with the real fields of experience and by seeking an autonomous system of justice and insurance in a reorganized concept of caste in terms of physiological coordinates of action and redistribution of energy. Both views embraced the notion of organicist development of society that forged a challenge to the liberal orthodoxy of political economy. In a parallel movement, there were attempts to diffuse the connections between the biological concept of race and the socioeconomic concept of caste to mitigate the risks in these illiberal projects. In the fifth chapter of my thesis, I have shown how, quite ironically, this disconnection was attempted also by conflating the concepts of race and caste – but this time, within a technical domain of calculability mastered by a statistical expert with no apparent interest in upholding the cultural and sociological specificities of his field of study.

From the above description, one can sense that the purpose of this dissertation is to distance itself from both the economic determinism of old histories of ideas and the culturalist predilections of the new histories of ruptures. The histories of economic determinism had maintained its unity by emphasizing separation of different registers of sociality – mainly the economic and the cultural – and, when necessary, tried to explain the latter by the former, as we have seen in case of Bipan Chandra’s history of economic nationalism in India. On the other hand, the culturalist histories of rupture attempt to shatter this deterministic unity by proposing various narratives of conflation between the economic and cultural registers. But, in the final instance, these narratives too are plagued by the same problem of linear progression championed in the histories of ideas, as they do

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13 Chandra, *Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism In India*. 
not differentiate between the logics and the logistics of these separation and conflation.\(^\text{14}\) I have tried to argue in this dissertation that these logics are often indistinguishable, primarily because they are both governed by a principle of difference which is specific to the epistemic status of the economic discipline and the histories of its dissemination in the colony. Going back to the history of popularization of the economic discipline in colonial India, we see that the concerns with its applicability and usefulness in foreign conditions were premised on the same ideation of difference. It occupied a special position even in the pedagogical networks of colonialism with respects to other disciplines like geography or history which did not have to face the tension in the dichotomy between abstract laws and concrete fields of application. Political economy, in that sense, had to institute and exercise a system of difference from the very beginning of its career in the colony and the vernacular responses to this system were channelized through modalities of equivalence. It does not mean that there was an oppositional relationship between a colonial political economy and its vernacular subsidiaries. As I have tried to demonstrate throughout my thesis, the understanding of a bifurcation within the discipline was also a part of the mechanism of purification which shoves away the possibility of any mediation between disparate elements in an epistemic and political order.\(^\text{15}\) On the other hand, by relocating the colony in the debates about the justification of economic reason at the time of cultural difference, I have tried to show that it is not sufficient to point out the constitutive nature of the vernacular domain and the “impurities” in the consequent procedures of socialization; one has to explore how the discipline itself and its critical interlocutions are informed, endorsed, and constituted by the vernacular movements. In the context of the colony, it also made way for a national variety of the discipline which did not want a divorce from the orthodox version, but claimed an exclusive position riding on the specialty of knowledge that it offered through its “peculiar” predispositions. Hence, in 1918, Vaman Govind Kale, a professor of history and economics from Poona, wrote in the second edition of his book *Introduction to the Study of Indian Economics*:

\(^14\) A case in point is Andrew Sartori’s *Bengal in Global Concept History* where the “economic” impulses in the Swadeshi mobilization have been studied in connection with various “cultural” ideations. But it is not specifically argued how these so-called “different” registers were made part of a unified nationalist imaginary, how the logic of unification was standardized keeping in mind the epistemic specialty of the economic discipline, and how the pedagogical networks might have initiated the same process of unification.

\(^15\) I have discussed the concept of “purification” in the first and second chapters where I have shown how an interrogation of the moments of separation of different domains of knowledge production and political mobilization – especially between the natural and the social orders of things and beings – can suggest different histories of scientific progress and social reformulation. I have specifically demonstrated a possibility of such deviating histories in the context of the treatment of “rent” in David Ricardo’s and John Bates Clark’s works.
‘Indian Economics does’ not constitute a separate science or a branch of the science of Economics. But Indian Economics may well lay claim to respectful consideration like English Political Economy, for instance, as it deals with peculiar political, social, intellectual and economic conditions which constitute an important subject of research and study.\footnote{Vaman Govind Kale, \textit{Introduction to the Study of Indian Economics} (Poona: Aryabhushan Press, 1918), 2.}

The respect that Kale aspired to have commanded by introducing an Indian Economics dealing with peculiarly Indian conditions could not be placed “outside” to the economic discipline, as he clearly acknowledged its position within a mainstream pedagogical system of research and study. However, his insistence on drawing a parallel with English political economy reminds us of the demand by the textbook writers in nineteenth century colonial Bengal who wanted to replace the “original” English illustrations with those from the familiar conditions in the country.

This journey from the moments of popularization and vernacularization of the discipline to a standardized and consolidated branch of the discipline specifically designed for the students in the colony – and later in the postcolony – had a rich and extensive history of its own, if not entirely separate and distinguishable from the narrative I have presented so far. The humble purpose of my thesis has been to point out that the proposed separation between the academic and the vernacular as emphasized by David Ruccio and Alex Preda\footnote{Ruccio, “Introduction: What are Economic Representations and What’s at Stake?”; Preda, “Informative Prices, Rational Investors”} had a discernibly different career in the colony which, if recovered and studied in some detail, would problematize the logics of this separation in many ways. The vernacular tracks of the economic discipline often seem elusive and misleading from the high tower of implied superiority of the mainstream. When this great divide is challenged itself, the tracks emerge as part of our own everyday imaginaries, our own dreams and aspirations, our own convictions and calculations. Then it becomes difficult to ignore them as illegitimate fermentations of certain obscure individuals. Soon the obscurities come back and spread their tracks in the most enlightened corners of the academia. This dissertation has been a modest attempt to remind the necessity of locating these tracks and finding the moments of convergence and divergence between them in the various chronologies of their manifestation.