Journal of Agrarian Change

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Journal of Agrarian Change

BOOK REVIEW

Labors of Division: Global Capitalism and the Emergence of the Peasant in Colonial Panjab

By Navyug Gill, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2024. 376 pp. $130 (hbk); $32 (pbk). ISBN: 9781503636958; ISBN: 9781503637498

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Received: 29 May 2025 | **Revised:** 29 May 2025 | **Accepted:** 6 June 2025

Colonial Punjab, the erstwhile province that included the present-day Indian and Pakistani subnational states of Punjab and the Indian state of Haryana, occupies a pivotal place in the history and politics of South Asia. It has also been a distinguished site for the study of colonialism, especially the phase of British rule inaugurated by the transfer of authority from the East India Company to the Crown in 1858.

If the dominant colonial perception rendered Punjab an exemplary province, 'one of the most stable, loyal, and economically prosperous provinces in all of British India' (Condos 2017, 9), postcolonial scholars have had to contend with its deeply contradictory place in the conjoined careers of colonialism and capitalism in South Asia—as a relatively late addition to Britain's territorial empire that became the proving ground for a new type of colonial governance ('The Punjab School'), as a recipient of colonial state investment in irrigation and transportation infrastructures that transformed it into a major export region, as a quiescent province that supplied vast numbers of men to the imperial army, and as a prosperous agricultural region whose peasantry nevertheless became disposed to chronic indebtedness. In the post-Independence period, Punjab became the epicentre of the Green Revolution, cementing its place as India's 'breadbasket'. These qualities have contributed to Punjab's enduring importance in debates on capitalist transition, economic development and agrarian political economy in colonial and postcolonial India.[1]

Navyug Gill confronts many of these contradictions in *Labors of Division*, his densely woven 'history of the division of labor' in colonial Punjab.[2] He examines the novel form of social hierarchy brought into existence by the colonial reconfiguration of ascriptive and religious difference in Punjabi society. The book is organized into five chapters with an introduction and a brief conclusion. The first four chapters explore the colonial mediation of labour, caste hierarchy and religious identity in Punjab. The last chapter develops a postcolonial critique of 'the peasant' as a category in political economic thought. Gill's emphasis on colonial difference-making as a constitutive dimension of capitalist development locates his study within a loosely bound stream of postcolonial scholarship that attends to the frictions, concordances and trajectories generated by capital's encounters with—and metabolizations of—cultural heterogeneity and native forms of social order (see for instance Gidwani 2008; Sartori 2014; Ali 2018; Khan 2021).

Labors of Division seeks to provide a concrete alternative to the dominant European 'narrative of accumulation' that has 'stealthily generated a set of expectations for the histories of all other societies' (Gill 2024, 58). In this regard, the rejection of

what Harry Harootunian (2015) has called the 'hegemonic unilinearism' of both (dominant) Marxist and bourgeois historiographies of capitalism propels Gill's narrative, whose stakes are conveyed in this evocative counterfactual,

> [...] rather than London, what if Marx had been in Lahore or Ludhiana in the mid-nineteenth century and had to explain accumulation from that vantage point? What archive would he have used, and how would that have shaped the process he would have witnessed and described? And, what sort of narrative of global capitalism would thereby emerge?
>
> (2024, 62–63)

This horizon orients the two interrelated tasks of *Labors of Division*, namely, to show how the Punjabi peasant was produced by the colonial state and, in so doing, to reveal the *telos* underlying inherited political economic conceptualizations of 'the peasant'. This dual imperative lends the book a kind of narratological thickness. Gill draws together sources typically kept apart and reads them in ethnographically and linguistically sensitive ways toward unexpected evidentiary ends, all the while punctuating his historical studies with conceptual reflections and theoretical provocations.

Chapter 1 traces the prehistory of Punjab's annexation in 1849 and maps the intricacies of colonial territorialization in the subsequent decades. It analyzes the evolution of land revenue 'settlement', focusing on the forms of enumeration, classification and calculation through which the colonial bureaucratic apparatus rendered Punjab's society and environment legible for economic governance. In contradistinction to the forms of 'separation' (e.g., dispossessions and enclosures) that have traditionally accompanied capitalist development in the metropole, in Punjab, Gill argues, the colonial state catalysed capital accumulation by instituting a novel set of 'attachments' between specific castes, agrarian occupations and land ownership.

In one of his early-twentieth-century studies of the Punjabi countryside, the peripatetic civil servant Malcolm Darling proclaimed, 'in the Punjab [...] the peasant proprietor is everywhere predominant. And, what is more, he constitutes as fine raw material as can be found in any part of India' (Darling 1925: xiii; partially quoted in Gill, 2024, 251). Chapter 2 shows how this 'peasant proprietor' became naturalized in the epistemology of native difference through which the colonial state sought to understand the 'persistently fluid' social heterogeneity of rural Punjab (97). Gill reveals the profound challenges to colonial cognition posed by the traditional non-correspondence between social identity and laboring activity. 'Heterogeneous labor practices', he writes, 'precluded a singular agrarian subject' (117). The 'plurality of subjects engaged in various agrarian labors' and a correspondingly mutable division of labor were reflected in the lack of a unitary vernacular articulation of the peasant (96). Colonial officials thus encountered a panoply of Punjabi words—polysemous words that could denote different types of agricultural labour (*hali*), subregional variations of occupational designations (*kusan karsan*, *kirsan*) and words tied to caste identity (*jaat*)—that could stand in for the peasant or, in the colonial lexicon, 'the agriculturalist'.

Encounters with this terminological repertoire generated considerable confusion, anxiety and ambiguity, which were attenuated through the intensification of colonial ethnographic inquiry and statistical enumeration. By the early twentieth century, the state attached specific castes to specific types of labor, institutionalizing a fixed division of agrarian labor—the foundational distinction being 'agricultural' versus 'non-agricultural tribes'—based on (combinations of) ascriptive status and religious identity. The production of an axiomatic correspondence between occupation and identity, and its instrumentalization in colonial land and revenue policy, resulted in a dramatic reshuffling of agrarian social relations. On the one hand, inherited caste distinctions were transmuted into a rigid economic hierarchy. On the other hand, the legal inscription of 'agricultural' status as the basis of certain privileges generated a new politics of claim-making from groups denied that status.

Chapter 3 explores the interplay between colonial epistemology, legislation and class politics in relation to 'peasant indebtedness', a phenomenon that exercised colonial officials in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Here, Gill attempts to tease apart the contradictions ('illogics') of colonial capitalism through an account of the 'discordant, hostile, and overdetermined condition of cultivation under colonial rule' (171). He argues that the disquieting consequences of the capitalist property relations induced by the colonial state were managed through legislation (most notably the Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900) that further entrenched the distinction between agriculturalists and non-agriculturalists based on caste and religious identity. The colonial framework of racial ordering ascribed intrinsic economic habits to collective identity, which determined the state's legislative solutions and shaped the terms in which a class politics of property came to be articulated. The management of indebtedness, which Gill conceptualizes as an expression of the 'novel economic relationships' forged by the colonial state, through the restriction of land sales to non-agriculturalists, intensified caste-based economic polarization and 'consolidated a new rural hierarchy through caste-based control over land ownership' (161).

In India, the ossification of an agrarian division of labor based on the reification of putatively primordial sociocultural distinctions unfolded in highly variable, regionally specific ways. In Chapter 4, Gill historicizes caste in Punjab by reading colonial and early anthropological renderings of caste hierarchy alongside the centuries-long Punjabi tradition of 'radical social critique' that sought to challenge and undermine caste hierarchy. From the early modern period, political and spiritual traditions such as Sikhi, Sufi and Bhakti endowed Punjabi society with a unique set of cultural resources for subverting Brahmanical ideology and Vedic authority. 'This was a society still unequal but without automatic recourse to an ideology of inherent or preordained hierarchy' (193). As a result, Gill argues, 'the collective labors of cultivation' entailed regularized, quotidian transgressions of the varna logic of purity/pollution. Differentially caste-bound individuals performed similar work and ate similar types of food. At the same time, caste hierarchy functioned as the primary determinant of differences in compensation, 'upholding a stark disparity in returns' from the same types of labor (213).

The colonial imposition of a strict correspondence between caste and laboring activity entrenched a *modern* caste-based division of labor. It also spurred new forms of lower-caste organizing and struggle in early-twentieth-century Punjab, most notably the Ad Dharm movement that articulated a solidaristic politics of Dalit identity. Both were 'novel cultural and economic productions born of the same colonial encounter' (216). It is here that Gill's claims are articulated most sharply. In Punjab, the 'modernity' of caste resulted not from its 'invention' but from its *economization* under colonial rule, whereby a new set of material-economic relations was mapped onto a pre-existing social order, resulting in a new rural hierarchy with the hereditary landowning peasant on top and the landless cultivator at the bottom.

Shifting registers from detailed historical narrative to sweeping postcolonial critique, in Chapter 5, Gill develops a critical genealogy of 'the peasant' as a category in economic thought. Ranging across the writings of Smith, Marx, Lenin and Kautsky, Gill seeks to unearth the sources of what he calls 'a theory of inadequacy', or, what might more appropriately be termed, the metatheoretical assumptions vested in the theoretical figure of 'the peasant'. The central claim of this chapter is that since Adam Smith, the peasant has functioned as a synecdoche for a set of universal historical expectations—a kind of futurology—that haunt political economy. These expectations determine the temporalization of modern social development, wherein the unfolding of the capitalist mode of production necessarily entails the tendential extinction of the peasant. Gill argues that this unidirectional temporality is a European inheritance; the result of the universalization of a historical sequence based on the experiences of Western Europe. Thus, 'as Smith's discourse consolidates the past as the other of the present, the same logic operates to posit the peasant as the other of the worker [...] this is the implicit, unacknowledged history that trails the peasant as it traverses the world' (242). In Lenin and Kautsky's studies of the agrarian economy and the Marxist agrarian question they helped frame, Gill finds a strong echo of this 'elemental logic', which leads them both, despite their different conclusions, to posit trajectories and futures based on presumptions of the world-historical inadequacy of peasants and their inevitable transformation into workers (231).

In establishing the peasant as the Other of the proletariat, Gill argues that Marx's most prominent disciples failed to internalize an important epistemic lesson of his immanent critique: 'analytic categories are always flexible, evolving angles that reflect a specific location that illuminate certain functions within a given context'. There are no essential or inviolable laws of social development; 'there is no comprehensive, panoptic, or redemptive perch from which the mysteries of any society can observably and predictably unfold' (248). Gill claims that the study of actually existing 'hierarchies of agricultural production' has been hampered by the 'logic of temporal and material inferiority' through which classical political economy and classical agrarian Marxism have confronted the 'field of activity called "agriculture"' (250–251).

Returning to Gill's counterfactual, one could argue that the Marx of Ludhiana or Lahore would have incorporated into *Capital*'s conceptual apparatus a rejection of 'any linear causality that envisaged a singularly progressive movement from one period or mode of production to the next, as if it were a chain of connected links' (Harootunian 2015, 48; see also Ghosh 2024). This, in turn, might have led to greater theoretical emphasis on multilinear trajectories of accumulation, less focused on the problematics of real subsumption and relative surplus value, yielding perhaps an entirely different set of abstractions, but abstractions all the same. It is here, in the uneasy space between the abstract and the empirical concrete, between the totalizations *posited* by capital and the contingent 'process of its becoming', that the provocations of Chapter 5 ultimately deposit us (Marx 1993 [1939], 310). Gill cautions against reading his postcolonial critique as an affirmation of incommensurable particularisms or a rejection of Marxism. Yet, for him, the significance of the critique of political economy is not historical, nor even theoretical, but epistemological. It 'provides a vital means to interrogate any social and economic order presented as self-evident or natural' (253).

As a contribution to the historiography of Punjab, *Labors of Division* makes for an interesting companion to Neeladri Bhattacharya's *The Great Agrarian Conquest* (Bhattacharya 2019). A magisterial summa of a decades-long intellectual journey, the latter is born of a Marxist historian's sustained engagements with the discursive and cultural turns,

> I do not believe that opening oneself to the discursive turn means renouncing the agrarian as a subject of study. Nor do I feel that a study of what was earlier seen as the sphere of the economic can, and ought to, be through a revival of economic history as it was practiced earlier. To rethink the agrarian we need to unpack it as a category and subject it to critical scrutiny.
>
> (2019, 11)

Training his sight on the cultural mediation of social, economic and environmental relations in colonial Punjab, Bhattacharya unearths the processes through which a 'normative rural' was produced by the colonial state. *Labors of Division* contributes to this cultural turn in South Asian 'economic' history by providing a complementary account of the constitution of what might be called the normative peasant. This methodological homology also leads to a homology of outcomes, prefigured in Gill's phrase, '[...] under colonialism in the shadow of global capital' (3). While Bhattacharya largely eschews the category of capital, Gill constructs his study firmly in relation to it. Yet the 'global capitalism' of Gill's subtitle is neither the *explanandum* nor exactly the *explanans* of *Labors of Division*. Rather, it is presumed to have a mute, world-historical existence, distantly shaping colonial ideology, epistemology and governmentality. Here, 'global capitalism' designates both the context of contexts and the predicate for 'the emergence of the peasant in colonial Panjab'.

Beyond the organization of labour in agriculture, there is little consideration of the wider relations of production and geographies of realization within which this labour process was embedded. This is surprising because, by the turn of the twentieth century, Punjab was one of the most important export regions in British India, its rural economy thoroughly intertwined with

international circuits of capital, interregional and transnational commodity chains, and the world division of labour. While Gill alludes to the generalization of 'capitalist volatility' in the Punjabi countryside, in his account, there is little interaction between the 'labours of cultivation' and the various personifications of capital that mediated commercial agriculture in colonial Punjab: indigenous merchants and bankers, commission agents, transnational commodity brokers, British managing agencies and so forth (Jan 2019; Tirmizey, 2024). In this regard, the *mandis* of central Punjab, the irrigated croplands of the canal colonies, the market towns of western Punjab and Sindh, and Karachi's bustling deepwater port were not simply subsumed by the 'shadow' of global capitalism but were constitutive of its late-nineteenth-century geographies.

These qualifications notwithstanding, *Labors of Division* is a major contribution to South Asian history and agrarian studies. It cuts through stilted debates on capitalist transition, revealing the profound limitations of their logical assumptions and conceptual vocabularies. Its most significant achievement is to show that in the land of the timeless peasant proprietor, the peasant was a concrescence of capitalist modernity. Equally important is Gill's exceptionally sophisticated historicization of the relation between caste, labor, and agrarian capital in colonial Punjab, a product of his refusal to separate the economic from the social and the cultural. As a whole, *Labors of Division* stands as a testament to the potential of anti-teleological histories of capitalism, relentlessly focused on the specificities of capital's operations in colonial societies, regardless of where they may lead.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Endnotes

[1] The South Asian iteration of the 'modes of production' debate was precipitated by the publication of a survey of large farms in Punjab (for an overview of the multi-part study, see Rudra 1970; on the debate, see Patnaik 1990).

[2] Gill uses the less common romanization, 'Panjab' (*Pañjāb*), which is a more appropriate transliteration from the Gurmukhi script and more reflective of the Persian origins of the name.

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