

Meghna Chaudhuri

“A Measure of Value: Life, Land and Nation in South Asia 1850-1950”

**Report on Research Conducted with the aid of The History Project and the  
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I approached the four months of research I conducted in London and Edinburgh with a set of three interrelated questions. First, how did the market for life insurance expand in South Asia in the late-nineteenth century in conjunction with the growth of companies in general in the region? Second, in what ways did state developmentalist project coincide in their ends if not their intentions with the enumerative and disciplinary aspects of the commercialization of life in South Asia? And finally, how did the assessment of land come to be associated with the value of life and vice versa?

1912 was the year that commenced any sort of official regulation of the life insurance business in India. Henry Meikle, who served as actuary to a number of British Indian firms, was deemed the only person qualified to be appointed to the new post of Government Actuary. As the life insurance business transitioned from being a completely unregulated field to being the object of various governmental interventions, Meikle was charged with writing up a report on the state of the life insurance in India, which he did for twelve years from 1912 to 1926. These reports do the important work of bringing together information on life insurance in India prior to 1912, which is otherwise largely absent in the historical record. While my project has taken off from the sudden explosion of businesses claiming to sell “life insurance” at the turn of the century, it is only in these reports that I have encountered the exact number of such businesses existing in 1905 - when the boom in the business was at its highest. Not only have I learnt that 1200 such companies had sprouted almost overnight in 1905, but that by 1914, only 45 of them remained in existence.

The records of British companies operating in India are the only extant records pertaining to South Asian populations. The records of Indian companies, or

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companies incorporated in India, have not survived. Social histories of life insurance in Britain have drawn significantly from the records of companies itself in order to reconstruct the norms through which life insurance played a part in classifying populations. These classifications were apparently based on a scientific political economic assessment of national health, and thus wealth, but were deeply racialized assessments. In South Asia, it appears the government accepted a standard addition of 7 years to the European mortality tables for Indians, even as they sought accurate mortality calculations that could then be “applicable to the population as a whole, to selected Indian male lives assured, to the wild Hazaras from across the frontiers, to the widows of P and O lascars.”<sup>1</sup> Indian companies, though exhorted to compile and tabulate what information they could from the policies they held, could not in this short period of time get any useful information together. In the absence of such mortality data as the basis of and for actuarial calculations, the government looked to the statistics made available by the newly instated census (1901) taking programme. Here too, a racialized basis for life expectancy was posited. It was deemed that rates “derived from the Indian census are not of much practical use to life insurance companies except for indicating the relative vitality in different parts of the country.”<sup>2</sup> “Vitality” of course stood in for a racialized political economy of life, with the highly educated Parsee community at the top of the ladder, followed by Hindu Brahmins specifically and at the bottom were Indian Muslims.<sup>3</sup>

The reports also provide crucial information on the effect on capital investments and re-investment during World War I in India. The depreciation of securities led to a shrinking of business in general, but because Indian companies were largely new and

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<sup>1</sup> Report of the Actuary to the Government of India for the Year 1919.

<sup>2</sup> Report of Actuary of the Government of India for the Year 1926

<sup>3</sup> Report of the Actuary of the Government of India for the Year 1924.

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did not have sizeable reserve funds, in the post-war years the increased reserves created during the war helped spur the increase in the market for life insurance as a form of manageable risk amongst a broadening Indian base.

I spent the Fall of 2015 researching at insurance company archives across the UK; in Norwich, Cambridge and London. As I went through what I had learnt from these records of insurance companies the following spring, I began to refocus my dissertation away from a sole focus on life insurance to other kinds of financial instruments. The question for my dissertation became: how did the value of life and land come to be intertwined in late colonial India? It had become clear to me that not only do detailed archives for life insurance not exist for South Asia, but its relative success in an agrarian context in the region, could not be understood without understanding other developments in agrarian finance around the same time.

With this aim in mind, I spent a fair chunk of my summer at the British Library, made possible by the History Project, researching the cooperative credit movement of the 1880s culminating in the Cooperative Credit Act of 1904 and what I discovered was the vast literature produced by British scholar-administrators on various forms of agrarian banks. A number of administrators who worked in Western India began to think about ways of addressing what the state had learnt through the Famine Commission report after the famine of 1878 and through the enquiries made during the making of the Agriculturists Loans Act 1884. These scholar-administrators extrapolated out of the testimonies of the peasants of the Deccan and came to articulate a specific type of governmental policy. Through their prolific writing in a number of unpublished reports across the 1880s and early 90s, state legislation began to focus on the development of capitalism in the agrarian countryside through the reform of credit networks. These networks were run entirely by village and district

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level moneylenders, and the moneylender was identified as the link in the chain between production and exports. The state’s antagonism toward the figure of the mahajan (moneylender) in the late nineteenth century is well documented. I was particularly interested however, in the ways in which discussions around the peasant as a figure who had to be taught thrift evolved through analyses of the impact of ponzi life insurance schemes in the countryside and the aftermath of events such as the Deccan riots.

Interestingly for my project, I found that scholar-administrators such as Sir Mackworth Young were very invested in “educating people in the commercial instinct” for “the intelligent well-to-do native who has not amassed wealth, but has begun to save for his old age.”<sup>4</sup> At the British Library, I discovered that a large number of these administrators not only saw fit to reference agrarian banking experiments in Italy, Germany, Ireland and Egypt, but they often advocated and succeeded in arranging trips to those countries in order to better observe the processes involved.<sup>5</sup> I was able to discover and access a large number of unpublished reports which will go towards an entirely new chapter of my dissertation which I was only able to conceptualize through these new materials.

And finally, I secured access to the archives of the Standard Life Insurance Company in Edinburgh and was allowed two half-day archival visits. The company does not typically open its archives to researchers and I took the help of the Prof. Michael Moss who wrote a history of the company in 2012 in identifying specific records I could then request to consult. While the archives were not as promising as I had initially hoped, I did find a smattering of interesting correlations through

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<sup>4</sup> Revenue and Statistical Department Papers, 1901. IOR/L/E/7/436

<sup>5</sup> H. Dupernex, *Village Banks: How to Organize Them and How to Work Them*; Allahabad: NWP and Oudh Govt. Press, 1901 and F.A. Nicholson, *Extract from the Report on Land and Agricultural Banks*; Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1901.

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observations in correspondence and minute books. For example, one official reporting from Calcutta to the Board in Edinburgh explained that whilst the market for life-insurance was not as big amidst Indians, that India was a country where “credit is freely granted, and hardly anyone pays any cash” and thus the principle of a credit economy on which an acceptance of life-insurance rested, already existed as economic common-sense in India.<sup>6</sup> Insights such as this along with the less exciting but nonetheless crucial yearly data on the Standard’s investments in India will help me fill out information absent in any other source material on the demographics of life insurance in South Asia in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Also of note is correlation between state census constructions of populations according to ethnic and religious groupings and how the market for life insurance organized around groups who were deemed less risky.

I have outlined some of the key re-orientations in my project as a result of the research conducted in the UK. Besides these broad categories of sources described above I also spent time going through a large number of pamphlets, poems, short pieces in chapbook form in Bengali and Hindi. These are part of the British Libraries’ Hindi and Bengali collections as well as J.F. Blumhardt’s collection of vernacular tracts for the British Museum in the late-nineteenth century. The nature of these sources is necessarily disparate but I was able to form impressions of how “wordly” matters such as commerce, money and modern society were being written about in non-English popular publications. These sources will augment arguments I hope to make throughout my dissertation and, in addition to vernacular print material I have looked at in India, comprise a separate chapter in it.

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<sup>6</sup> Report by Mr. Macnaughten on his visit to India, November 1922/February 1923; SL/A/3/1/31-34 Box 197

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I spent a total of four months in the UK supported in part by the History Project. This time allowed me to explore a range of sources that have either remained unconsidered or have not been put together in conjunction previously. My research plan and the organization of my dissertation was re-oriented as a result of this encounter with sources to do with the banking sector, state developmental projects and the life insurance market, where earlier I had been considering only the life insurance related archive.