

Previewing Harvard-Tufts Conference: Tariq Omar Ali on the Partition of Labor and Capital

Sunday 16 October 2022, by [ALI Tariq Omar](#), [Mittal Institute](#) (Date first published: 5 October 2022).

Mittal Institute: Professor Ali, we're really looking forward to your talk today at the Harvard-Tufts Conference. Before we jump into that, could you tell us a little bit about your first book, *A Local History of Global Capital: Jute and Peasant Life in the Bengal Delta*. Why was it interesting to use jute as the lens?

Tariq Omar Ali: I think Americans might know jute as burlap, but before we had containers and before plastics, these jute sacks of various kinds were the packaging material of world trade. So any sugar or grain or flower, or even bacon, would have been packed in jute. Most things you would have consumed in the 19th and early 20th centuries would have at some point been wrapped in jute in world travel. So jute became a really important global commodity—the second most consumed plant fiber after cotton. In fact, more jute was consumed than silk or hemp or wool.

It was a really major plant commodity, but, unlike cotton and unlike many other commodities, it was only grown in Bengal—or about 80 to 90 percent of it was grown in Bengal. So it was a global commodity that was produced only in one region, which allowed me to study that one region and its relationship to global capital in interesting ways because of its concentration of production in one place.

Mittal Institute: The book really looks at the material life and culture of the peasantry connected to jute during this time. What did you learn about the everyday lives of these men and women?

Tariq Omar Ali: One of the things that jute does, of course, is it ties up the peasant to global rhythms of prices and commodities and the global economy. As the global economy goes up, the cultivators tend to do well, and when the global economy goes down, they tend to get destroyed.

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So in a period where jute cultivators were doing quite well—when jute prices were high compared to the prices of the things they would consume— they would buy. In the late-19th century, we see peasant life being completely transformed through what I call “agrarian consumerism.” New kinds of products entered the rural homestead: corrugated iron sheets, kerosene oil lamps, German-made toys. The village bazaar became a very vibrant place with many different kinds of consumer goods, and I argue that out of these consumer goods, jute-cultivating households form new kinds of life; new kinds of domestic ways of eating; new ways of leisure; new ways of spending their lives essentially.

But that's the good period, and all students of the global economy know that the good periods always run out. It's probably something worth thinking about at this moment!

When the good times ran out around World War One, particularly with the global Great Depression, there was a push towards immigration. Jute was no longer profitable, no longer driving consumerism. And we see all kinds of literature about austerity, about cutting down and making do with less and about the relationship between austerity and Islam. Islam being a religion of balanced household budgets, of consuming within your means, and of working harder to produce the things yourself rather than buying it from market.

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And also in this period of immigration, we see ideas of Pakistan emerge in the jute-cultivating Bengal Delta. The idea that Pakistan will be a kind of a peasant utopia, where prices will be fair; where land rights will be fair; where access to commons will be unlimited. So there's a way in which Pakistan is broadly construed as a sort of utopian vision of the future at a time of great immigration. And of course, the idea of Pakistan really takes hold during the periods of the famine, the great Bengal famine, because what immigration ultimately culminates in is the death of 3- to 4-million people of Bengal in 1943-44. The idea of Pakistan around this time, and especially after the famine, really takes hold amongst the jute cultivators of Bengal.

Mittal Institute: The panel discussion this week commemorates 75 years since Partition of British India, where your first book leaves off. Could you talk about your new research, particularly the partitions of labor and capital, and preview your talk for us?

Tariq Omar Ali: This talk is based on my current, ongoing project, and my basic premise is that one of the ways we can think of Partition is that there was this thing called the colonial economy of Bengal in Asia, a Kolkata-centric economic territory—a space, a real physical space carved out by railways, by steamboats, by telegraph lines, by postal services—where jute moves from East Bengal to Kolkata and from Assam to Kolkata, and all these circulations associated with it creates this space—and then Partition divides this space up.

And what happens after Partition is that the two nation states, India and Pakistan, set about a very deliberate planned policy of disentangling this old colonial space, dismantling it, breaking it down, breaking it down into pieces of land, into trees, into people, into individuals and assigning them a nationality.

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And what I'm saying is that it's out of these broken down, divided up pieces that they put back together something called an Indian economy or a Pakistani economy. The project that I'm trying to do will tell the story, not through state policy, but through the things that are being taken out of the colonial economy and being put into new beings formed in the process of the formation of national economies.

There are three things I look at in the talk. One is steamboats on the Ganges that go from Kolkata to

Assam, and how the steamboats and their routes are divided between the two nations. I also look at how the crews, the people who work on the steamboats, are divided between the nations, and how they themselves determine the terms of their division, the terms of their partition, through a series of strikes.

I also look at the partition of the agrarian economy, where I focus not on cultivable land, but on homestead assets—the targeted iron roof on their homes, fruit-bearing trees, timber trees, and how those are divided—how literally trees and homes and buildings were divided between India and Pakistan.

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And lastly, I look at the eastern borders of Bangladesh, what I call the borders between the hills and the plains. Those borders are amazing; they're very intricately carved out the planes from the surrounding Asam three hills. It's a very clear, fully drawn line and look at how that border between the hills and the plains after Partition become militarized. Peasants who would access the hills as commons—to graze cattle, to collect firewood to, to cut down bamboo for construction material—they were being blocked or being taxed very highly, and they would get into conflicts with newly posted border guards who were militarizing the border, and that border actually becomes almost a war zone. For the first in the first years of Partition, there were really organized protest groups of plain-land peasants going into the hills and burning down forest offices—spectacular stuff: kidnapping elephants and bringing them back to Pakistan, for instance. That's one of the stories I'll tell at the talk, so I'll leave it there.

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P.S.

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