

The Transition from Animal Capital to Land Capital in Colonial Punjab, 1850-1900

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Abstract: The social hierarchies produced by animal capital in precolonial Punjab conditioned the manner in which Punjabis integrated themselves into a colonial state-building project whose understanding of class was predicated on capital in the form of land. Marx's confinement of pastoralism to precapitalist modes of production leaves us with few theoretical tools with which to understand animals' simultaneous material and symbolic qualities. Bourdieu's idea of symbolic capital helps explain these joint qualities, but a new concept of animal capital better explains the symbolic and material value of an organism capable of reproduction. Social relations of production organized around animal capital in Punjab included cattle theft, an act mediated by class. Men at the top of this class hierarchy first made the transition from animal capital to land capital, as they sought the physical and symbolic support of the colonial state in their competition with each other. As the state transformed the landscape, it created a cultivating society that reproduced the class hierarchies of herding society. Thus the postcolonial "feudal" lineages are really a bourgeois class produced by the transition from animal to land capital.

The transformation of Punjab into a "hydraulic society," and into a Green-Revolution breadbasket of both India and Pakistan, is well-known even beyond the cadre of the region's historians (Ali 1988, Islam 1997, Worster 1987).² However, the dense images of Punjabi cultivation in twentieth century politics, film, and scholarship obscure the historical centrality of animals³ to the material and cultural life of Punjab, and indeed serve to cloud the colonial and class origins of that transformation. From colonial armchair ethnography (Darling 1925) to the *New Cambridge History of India's* sole volume devoted to Punjab (Grewal 1990) to a recent volume reconsidering the notion of Punjabi identity (Malhotra and Mir 2012), animals, if they appear at all, do so as an environmental given or input to the process of cultivation carried out by a highly egalitarian peasantry. Thus even in Imran Ali's foundational reading of the colonial state's social engineering efforts in Punjab's canal colonies, the state comes off as a sort of *deus*

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² While the definition and boundaries of the region of Punjab have been much debated, I proceed from the definition given in Grewal (1974), which was grounded in administrative units set out in both Mughal and colonial times.

³ While there is a lively discussion in the field of animal studies, and in some cases in socialist theory (Benton 1993), regarding the human-animal boundary and which organisms qualify as animals, I do not wish to make a contribution here. The animals I refer to in this article are all domesticates and all ungulates: bovines, camels, and ovines.

ex machina inserting an undifferentiated mass of pastoralist locals into a peasantry built largely of colonists from Punjab's central districts. With a closer investigation into the social and material lives of those pastoralists, one may reach the conclusion that the colonial state did not simply create capitalists (or "feudals," in the current popular press) *ex nihilo*; it created both capitalists and the conditions for capitalists by drawing on the social structures and dynamics it found, just prior to Punjab's formal annexation in 1849.

The theoretical tools with which to analyze the class character of early- or pre-colonial pastoralist societies remain somewhat limited. Marx paid little attention to pastoralists and even less to how one might think about animals within pastoralist societies. Bourdieu's concept of social capital helps to explain the ways that animals can mediate material and symbolic exchanges between people, even though Bourdieu limited his concept in ways that prevent its application to the case of early colonial Punjab. In order to better capture the interconvertibility of the material and symbolic value of animals and its effects on the social relations of production of Punjab's pre-colonial and early colonial environment, I prefer to use the term "animal capital." While Nicole Shukin (2009) also used this term to cope with the material and symbolic value of animals, her focus on tracking "animal signs through market cultures" in postindustrial societies calls for a recalibration of the term in order to make it more historically applicable (Shukin 2009, 42). Thus I argue that the social classes produced by and reproducing animal capital in precolonial Punjab conditioned the manner in which Punjabis integrated themselves into a colonial state-building project whose understanding of class was predicated on capital in the form of land, i.e. real estate.

Animal capital and social capital

If the relatively new term “animal capital” is required to understand the relations of rural production in southwestern Punjab in the nineteenth century, one must explain the shortcomings of older socialist terminology. Ted Benton (1987) made a foundational critique of Marx’s view of the limits of an abstract nature to provide raw materials for productive processes; however, Benton’s focus on the abstract nature serves to magnify what little Marx said about animals. This is even clearer in Benton’s later work on animal rights (1993). Marx’s definition of capital emerged from his understanding of forms of property and relations of production obtaining in cultivating societies, in both feudalism and capitalism; his treatment of animal husbandry was thus very limited. Marx’s descriptions of pastoralist societies appear only in his discussions of precapitalist social formations, in which property, rather than capital, has a central role. Marx understood precapitalist property in the forms of animal and land, but only the latter formed the root of pastoralists’ natural conditions of production:

Among nomadic pastoral tribes . . . the earth, like all other conditions of nature, appears in its elementary boundlessness, e.g. in the Asian steppes and the Asian high plateaux. It is grazed, etc., consumed by the herds, which provide the nomadic peoples with their substance. They regard it as their property, though never fixing that property. This is the case with the hunting grounds of the wild Indian tribes of America: the tribe considers a certain region as its hunting territory and maintains it by force against other tribes, or seeks to expel other tribes from the territory they claim. Among the nomadic pastoral tribes the community is in fact always united, a travelling party, caravan, horde, and the forms of higher and lower rank develop out of the conditions of this mode of life. What is *appropriated* and *reproduced* is here only the herd and not the soil...(Marx 1965, 88-9, emphasis in original)

While territory and property are conflated meanings for land in this passage, animals are nevertheless recognized as the material basis for the social relations of production—the “appropriation” and “reproduction” of animals. Elsewhere, though, Marx left animals marginalized or silent in his analysis: as part of an abstract term like “nature,” as a one-dimensional foil to “man,” or as an inferred component of concepts like “means of production.” (Tucker 1978, 75-7, 150) Marx’s confinement of pastoralism to precapitalist (and in most cases

prefeudal) modes of production leaves us with few, if any, theoretical tools with which to understand animals' simultaneous material and symbolic qualities.

Pierre Bourdieu developed the idea of symbolic capital to explain what one might call uneconomic activity, or the linkage between “the ‘cultural’ sphere of capitalist societies” and “the logic of interested calculation.” Bourdieu contended that in order to explain these phenomena, one must extend to all transactions the analytical framework of capital, so that both material and symbolic goods express or store value. Bourdieu explained that material and symbolic capital enjoyed “perfect interconvertibility,” and in fact many transactions embodied “a conversion of material capital into symbolic capital itself reconvertible into material capital.” (Bourdieu 1977, 177-80) Bourdieu noted that often one may accumulate symbolic capital only at the expense of material capital, yet the exhibition of symbolic capital (which itself requires some material expenditure) provides one mechanism for the attraction of further capital (Bourdieu 1977, 180-1). However, the purpose of symbolic capital is the forging and binding of unequal social relations: “Gentle, hidden exploitation is the form taken by man’s exploitation of man whenever overt, brutal exploitation is impossible” (Bourdieu 1977, 192). The exploitation here is hidden because symbolic capital must disguise its origin in material capital (Bourdieu 1977, 183). Bourdieu did not explicitly include animals under the category of symbolic capital, and in fact one might exclude them, as symbolic capital cannot be quantified. Nevertheless, symbolic capital gets us closer to understanding animals in the colonial context.

Nicole Shukin’s book-length development of the term animal capital makes an important contribution to the social theory of animals under capitalism, but it has some limitations that require some modification in order to make it applicable to the case of colonial Punjab. Shukin explicitly locates her work in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, or more to the point,

the “Fordist and post-Fordist eras” (Shukin 2009, 7). In part Shukin focuses on this period in order to grapple with the problem of cultural studies’ tendency to theorize animals in the abstract; her remedy is to pose animal capital to explain “the semiotic currency of animal signs *and* the carnal traffic in animal substances” (Shukin 2009, 7, emphasis in original). Her emphasis on animal *substances* is certainly appropriate to the Fordist era but difficult to translate to the context of colonial Punjab, where entire animals were as important, if not more so, than their substances or effects. Shukin’s treatment of the colonial, though firmly embedded in the first half (at least) of her stated period, appears only spectrally in her book, mainly as a passing precedent for the circulation of animal images in the postcolonial era (Shukin 2009, 165) or in reference to the colonial stereotype (of humans) as an analogue for animal signs (6). If, as many scholars have argued, European capital formation and accumulation was part of and dependent on their colonial enterprises, surely a concept as important as animal capital needs to account for the interconvertibility of symbolic and especially material value of animals at the onset of colonial rule in a particular locality.

Animal capital operates in societies wherein animals are stores of wealth; produce wealth through generating labor, offspring, and marketable food, fiber, and other objects; and serve as the repository or conveyor of social and cultural meanings about, for example, power, masculinity, or justice. Thus the concept is applicable to precolonial and early colonial societies; colonial anthropologists apprehended the effects, at least, of animal capital. M. J. Herskovits in 1926 used the term “cattle complex” to describe uneconomic herd management, in which culling is infrequent and offtake low, resulting in a herd size that is greater than feasible or rational, in the neoclassical economists’ sense (Schneider 1981, 210; Evans-Pritchard 1940). Later anthropologists describing herders in Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Central Asia have

argued for the function of livestock as a repository of value or as a means of deferred payment (Schneider 1981, 212-4). In the Punjab case, colonial officers writing in the Jhang District Gazetteer of 1929 clearly had an idea that something beyond the economically rational affected the activity of animal herding, and that it had something to do with the credit of the herder (*Jhang District* 1930, 102). Some administrators in Punjab believed that cattle acted as a “representative of wealth,” and once the “surplus and unproductive stock” were eliminated, cattle could serve, more efficiently, as an “agency of wealth,” that is, as an input to the productive process of cultivation (*Report...cattle plagues* 1871, vii-viii). Clearly the symbolic value of animals in many places, including colonial Punjab, was widely understood, yet these animals were not fetishes or mere signs, as in Shukin’s formulation of animal capital. For Punjabis and their British rulers, animals had both a symbolic and material value on which social hierarchies could be built.

Animal Capital in Colonial Punjab

The term “animal capital” can describe the evidence pointing to class differentiation in pastoralist society in southwestern Punjab, marked by variations in herd size and animal species. Large herds did not represent an input in a large-scale production process of unprocessed dairy or meat but rather represented a highly visible store of animal capital to lend to dependents or to project an image of wealth (Stow 1910, 22-3). The higher value of bovine cattle, as opposed to the small ungulates, appears, for example, in the absence of small ungulates in the official discourse on cattle theft, in the prevalence of bovines in the folk literature of Punjab, and in the occasional flat comment that cattle owners “consider it beneath their dignity to own [sheep and goats], which are usually kept by Gujars or menials.” (Stow 1910, 45) Most colonial commentators on herd composition suggest that individual herders had herds of either large or

small species, but the composite herd of a *khan* and his dependents could include a wide variety of species.⁴ Owners of large herds were also successful cattle thieves or facilitators of cattle theft, and a socially ambitious owner of a small herd could accelerate his capital beyond natural reproduction rates only through the intervention of the *khans*. Thus accumulation of animal capital implied the exercise of domain, and vice versa, making the colonial conversion of domain into title a very significant process in the social history of Punjabi herders.

Stealing animals, exchanging stolen animals, and selling stolen animals constituted a net of transactions, called *rassagiri*, that marked and reinforced social relations between individual members of lineages, all of which had the effect of defining a man's social standing. While cattle theft in southwestern Punjab had been noticed by governments in Lahore since at least the seventeenth century, it did not become an administrative "problem" worthy of statistical record until annexation. The provincial number of cases of cattle theft reported annually in the 1850s ranged between five thousand and nine thousand, with unreported cases probably doubling that figure (Handa 1927, 57; *Report [for] 1855-56 inclusive*, 8). By the 1870s the annual rate of reported theft had dropped below three thousand, yet from year to year the number (and location) of thefts fluctuated based on changes in the value of animals due to droughts or fodder famines, or even the "increased readiness in the people to report offences." (Handa 1927, 57; *General report [for] 1865-66*, 18; *Report [for] 1867-68*, 40) As the value of real estate grew dramatically in the 1880s and especially the 1890s, the growing gap in value between real and moveable property led to some degree of indifference in governmental pursuit of the eradication of cattle theft (Thomson 1893, 4-5).

⁴ Central Asian in origin and widespread among Muslim names in South Asia, I use the term *khan* to refer to the head of a pastoralist lineage in southwestern Punjab.

The mechanics of theft help demonstrate the material value of animal capital. Ordinarily thefts occurred at night, and animals were separated from their owners by men acting singly. The thief drove the animal as far as possible during the night, to be delivered to the shed at the well or house of an accomplice, or *beli* (*General report [for] 1861-62*, 15). The man who had initiated the theft did not himself convey the animal to market for sale. If the *beli* was not an important figure socially, then the *beli* took an estimate of the value of the animal and either sold it in a local market or conveyed it to a second *beli*, who would engage in the same appraisal process. If the *beli* was a man of high social standing, the initial thief usually was a retainer or dependant of the *beli*, who paid his dependant a cash sum which was a fraction, around 25%, of the *beli*'s estimated appraisal (*General report [for] 1861-62*, 16). In any case, a stolen animal could be moved quickly across an extensive territory, and "lines" of cooperating *belis* stretched from Multan to Lahore to Peshawar to Delhi.

In addition to demonstrating the material value of animals, cattle theft also had important cultural effects grounded in the symbolic value of animals. Obviously only a well-connected man could complete a theft without getting caught, and it is not surprising to learn that daughters were given in marriage only to those who had proven themselves by a successful theft (*General report [for] 1850-51 1854*, 179). In fact, a young man was not permitted to wear a turban, the most basic sign of masculinity, until he had completed a theft. Young men sought to show off their skill by stealing the most reputedly valuable animals. A successful theft presented a man as a viable social adult, and at the same time the number and value of his thefts helped determine a man's hierarchical position among his peers. It is tempting to conclude that, whereas Bourdieu's Kabyle gift-givers used symbolic capital to create social relations, Punjab's cattle thieves used animal capital for the same purpose.

From Animal Capital to Land Capital

Pastoral *khans*, who in precolonial times had negotiated relationships with extralocal political actors through ongoing exchanges, were the first to shift their reckoning of wealth from animal capital to real estate. Lower-ranking persons in herding societies soon followed. It may help in the first instance to see examples of pastoral *khans* becoming land owners. Some, like M. Ismail Khan Sial, were *jagirdars* or pensioners because they helped the British in military operations in 1846, 1848, or 1857.⁵ Administrators recorded some *khans*, like the Khagga Sayads of Jiwan Shah, as land owners because they exercised domain over villages (and probably paid their revenue under precolonial rulers such as Ranjit Singh) in cultivated zones. Some, like *zaildar* Nur Sial of Ranjit Kot, were able to lease, buy, or be awarded land because of the perks or relatively high pay of official posts. Prominent religious families of course became major land owners too, like Khem Singh Bedi and the Sayads of Shah Jiwana.

Government also looked very kindly on *khans*, such as Ghulam Kadir Khan Khakwani, who both spent money on irrigation infrastructure and made cultivators of herders. In this case, Ghulam Kadir Khan's father, Ghulam Mustafa Khan, had begun construction of the Hajiwah Canal, and the Lieutenant-Governor proposed to award Ghulam Kadir Khan 60,000 acres in consideration of the completion of the canal (Griffin 1879, 2).⁶ Of course such propositions would have had major implications for the world of social competition among *khans*; the Financial Commissioner warned that such a huge grant would make Khakwani "all powerful":

[Khakwani] tried unfairly to oust Machi[a] Langrial (the leading man of the pastoral tribes, and a man who has done excellent service) from his share in the Bar Barani lease of Khai during the course of this settlement, and, till some of his agents were convicted and severely punished, they

⁵ Since at least Mughal times, government awarded to an individual (*jagirdar*) the right to collect the state's share of the revenue in a particular place (*jagir*).

⁶Government in the end did award the 60,000 acres in 1880, with a formal deed of grant executed in 1886 (Conran and Craik 1910, ii, 311).

were in the habit of extorting fines for so-called cattle trespass by illegally imprisoning the herdsmen in his houses on the Hajiwah lands. (Lyll 1879)⁷

Despite this antagonism, rooted in competition over the exercise of domain upon which animal capital depended, the British government continued to rely on the Khakwani and Langrial *khans* to secure productive use of land, and with Ghulam Muhammad Daulatana to form “a chain of able and loyal zamindars, stretching down the whole way from Sarai Sidhu [on the Ravi River] to the Sutlej, who will be competent, and are at present disposed, to check cattle-thieving and escapes of criminals throughout the whole Ganji Bar.” Government maintained this chain by awarding grants of land to the Khakwani and Daulatana *khans* and renewing *bar barani* leases to all three (Perkins 1882, 5-8).

We know a great deal less about lower-class pastoralists as individuals, but as a class they clearly experienced this shift from animal capital to real estate differently from higher-class men and their families. For example, families of Upera Kharals in the lower Bari Doab region refused, during the processes of annexation, to be named as owners of more than a modest number of acres in the most arid part of the doab; they understood that a greater claim to land ownership meant a greater tax burden to the new state and also the obligation to aid that state in tracking stolen cattle over a wider area. Thus when the lower Chenab Canal opened in this region, government assigned land to them not as landowners but as *janglis*, a status assuring each family a grant of land unsustainably small in size (*Gazetteer of the Chenab Colony* 1905, 16-7). In general the lower class did not command the capital resources needed to make a lease or purchase of land, and in the early years of colonial rule they found it more profitable, or more

⁷ “Service” in this case refers to Langrial’s provision of camels to the army for service in the 1879 Qandahar campaign. Machhia and four others held the *bar barani* lease of Khai *taluga*, which comprised 261,855 acres, of which only 2,752 were under cultivation. (Chand, n.d., 706).

socially desirable, to maintain their animals rather than to sell off the herds to become tenant cultivators. However, the increasing ability of British administrators and ultimately Punjabi peasants to sustain land under cultivation and to convert pasture into cultivated area limited the efficiency and profitability of small-scale herding, so much so that a seven-acre plot of canal colony land appeared more desirable than either permanently migrating several hundred miles away or trying the impossible—to maintain herds on inadequate private real estate. At the close of the nineteenth century, both wealthy and poor pastoralists found it advantageous, perhaps grudgingly so, to engage in cultivation at the expense of herding.

The open power of animal capital was thus limited by the environmental transformation and social engineering programs of the colonial state. Yet those programs depended on, if they did not seek to reproduce, the class relationships that produced and were built by the operation of animal capital. Marxist theory alone cannot adequately explain this historical process: one should not too easily dismiss the culture of cattle theft as mere superstructure, as Punjabis clearly embedded animals into their material and ecological transactions. Men possessing animal capital tended to be first to transform it into capital in land and thus put at an advantage when the opening of perennial canals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries made central and western Punjab the domain of cultivators rather than of herders. Those giving up their animals for land later in this process tended to remain disadvantaged, though often keen to demonstrate their worth as cultivators in the capitalist environment of the canal colonies. Those still refusing to relinquish allegiance to animal capital tended to be either physically expelled from canal colony lands or reclassified as “criminal tribes.” Any colonial history, or history of environmental transformation of colonial Punjab, must take into account this shift from animal capital to real estate.

Does knowledge about the nature of animal capital in precolonial and early colonial Punjab help us to build socialism outside the capitalist core, or in Punjab in particular? Thinking about animals as a means of production doesn't get us very far. The transformation of at least some of the pastoralist *khans* into prominent land owners was possible not simply because of the massive organizational potential and looming threat of violence of the colonial state, but because the *khans* built their social, economic, and political power on local relationships mediated by animal capital. Not surprisingly, they sought the colonial state's power to exclude rivals from territory, even at the cost of substituting real estate for animal capital as the material base of their power. At the same time, *khans*-turned-landlords used their new power to promote their function as *belis* in the cultural economy of cattle theft which, strictly speaking, ran counter to the colonial state's notion of property. The *khan*-landowners' exercise of personal power *contra* the ostensible interests of the state became in at least one sense less theoretically troublesome, as the postcolonial state replaced the colonial, and landowners became "feudals" who used their control of land to control or populate the political class, in Pakistan especially. Despite this latter term's wide use in the press and among intellectual circles, the "feudals" are really a fully bourgeois class for itself, who populate the postcolonial state, and for whom that state serves to preserve and promote their class interests. Yet that national power continues to be grounded in social and cultural transactions derived from the era of animal capital. Any hope for building socialism in such environments must either detach the underprivileged from the symbolic meanings of these transactions or find some way to incorporate those meanings into the local languages and rhetorics of socialism.

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