

As a pre-dissertation grant recipient, I spent a month in Kolkata conducting archival research. My research was focused on the formation of the popular sovereignty discourse in colonial India, especially colonial Bengal. In particular, I traced how the figure of the people appeared in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century archive of colonial Indian political thought. The nineteenth-century archive accessed in Kolkata—especially the works of Surendranath Banerjea and Bipinchandra Pal—helped me to reconstruct the political vision that underwrote the politics of gradual reformism. To begin with, this study brought to the fore a point of crucial insight: the concept of the people, in its formative period, was conceived in constitutive reference to its absent sovereignty. The lack of sovereignty associated with the figure of the people facilitated a turn to theorizing self-government as a process generative of peoplehood. However, the rejection of gradual reformism in the wake of the swaraj movement would bring this crisis to a sharp relief. As colonial Indian thinkers began to make claim of immediate self-rule, the dilemma-ridden space between the absent ground of popular sovereignty and the unacceptable imperial sovereign would occupy the forefront of colonial political thought.

This research hopefully will enable me to make two specific contributions. As a historical study, its foregrounding of the theoretical dilemma faced by colonial thinkers in adopting the popular sovereignty discourse helps problematize the prevalent genealogies of democracy in the colonial world. It shows that the colonial theories of democracy had to engage with a conceptually prior discursive uncertainty over the figure of the people itself—a concept of the people generated in the crucible of colonialism. The historical aim of the dissertation partly lies in excavating how the developmental paradigm shaped colonial conceptualizations of the people, and how anticolonial appropriation of the developmentalist discourse produced a theory of democracy in terms of its people-making power. This focus on the colonial problem of peoplehood will allow this project to show the constitutive place of developmental reasoning in colonial reconstructions of political concepts, underscoring both the creative uses of the theme by anticolonial thinkers and the challenge it nevertheless posed, and continues to pose, to instituting democracy. The postcolonial founding, across nations like India and Bangladesh, institutionalized this conceptualization of democracy as a people-making process. At the heart of this project, therefore, will lie the claim that the (anti-)colonial accounts of democracy were distinguished precisely because of their simultaneous attempt to grapple with the general problem of democracy (i.e., what would make a particular form of rule democratic) and the impure time of developmentalism within which the figure of the demos appeared. The larger aspiration of this project is to go beyond this developmentalist picture of democracy, to retrieve resources from the anticolonial tradition itself to offer glimpses into a political horizon where the question of “underdevelopment” does not foreclose the possibility of enacting the people from the fullness of their otherwise destitute present.