Introduction

From the outside, the market in India is often seen as an exchange arena bound by state-imposed rules. Those within – buyers and sellers, producers and consumers, brokers and advertisers, financiers and debtors, police and inspectors – understand it differently. Such parties collude and compete in myriad everyday activities. These include those of accumulation and circulation, of production and speculation, and of arbitrage and management.

Involved actors, in short, experience the Indian market dissimilarly from the ways in which many planners and policymakers comprehend it. This market is best understood as an ensemble of practices and institutions. It has active and reactive patterns of economic and sociocultural practices, flexible adjustment and coping mechanisms,

* The editors offer gratitude to the participants, reviewers, and discussants, as well as institutions that nurtured this project. Peter van der Veer at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen, as well as Ravi Ahuja and Patrick Eisenlohr at the Centre for Modern Indian Studies (CeMIS) at the University of Göttingen sponsored the workshop in December 2016 that was this collaboration’s genesis. Leiden University’s Asian Modernities and Traditions program offered a publication grant that facilitated an editorial meeting and copy-editing assistance. Beyond intellectual interlocutors, we give thanks to those who enabled this book to come to fruition: Shashi Chandok, Debjani Mazumdar, Michaela Dimmers, and, at Cambridge University Press, our editor, Phil Good.

1 For an impressive argument on the treatment of markets and the market in economics, cf. Hodgson (2001). However, even approaches rooted in institutional economics, old and new, frequently highlight bureaucratic rule setting for markets, whether state-led or corporate, for instance Galbraith (1967). We do not contest the centrality of state or corporate planning for markets yet wish to point out how these are perceived by many Indian market actors as one among many elements shaping the structure of markets. This selective adherence and deliberate evasion thereby allows market participants to navigate framing rules in line with their different needs instead of merely adjusting to their seeming preeminence.
unforeseen contingencies and aberrations, and strategies of ambiguity and transgression. Transactional agents navigate gray areas and tacit understandings. They reproduce durable informal relations and customary practices. These dynamics only partially relate to state-led market-framing processes.

Today, India has an enormous, locally integrated and globally connected, and fast-moving economy. A corresponding interest in its commercial life has emerged with curious observers seeking empirical grounding and historical precision. Yet the sedimented streams of exchange on the subcontinent frequently remain elusive to academic inquiry. In spite of having spawned a large body of literature, Indian markets remain analytically opaque and underspecified.

Why is this so? For one, actually existing market histories and practices may misalign with conceptual categories. Writing on socioeconomic processes in India has its own vocabularies. Privilege is, within mainstream economics, accorded to neoclassical conceptions cut and pasted to South Asia (Bhagwati & Panagariya 2013). In the broader social sciences, the cluster of keywords generated by this literature hints at reigning preoccupations. These include “informality,” the “nation-state,” “capitalism,” “modernity,” “tradition,” “rationality,” “efficiency,” “exploitation,” “neoliberalism,” and even varied meanings attributed to broad conceptions such as “embeddedness” (Chakrabarty 1989; Harriss-White & Jan 2012; Roy 2003; van Schendel & Abraham 2005). Assumptions of a unified, territorially bounded, and transparently readable market can render external or invisible – as historical facts and as everyday practices – the workings of finance and trade at the edges and interstices of this construct. These are commerce’s hidden corners and blind spots, of which we simply do not know enough, and which unfold at different altitudes of transactional practice.

This book’s collaborators see an opportunity here to offer new conceptualizations and analyses of markets that build on prior scholarship. Our approaches bridge a range of approaches in the social sciences and history. We analyze the knotty interdependence of legal, extra-legal, and outlawed markets. We emphasize the intersecting institutional, social, and moral dimensions that condition commercial life. We underline the braiding of community and capital, of socially embedded and legally enforced transactions. This focus accounts for complexity in how things are valued, advertised, circulated, and regulated. By doing so, this book
shows that Indian markets – contemporary and historical alike – have depth and scale, and express character and specificity. While we can observe a deepening of capitalist orientation and commodification, and radical transformations even in recent times, other segments of market activity rely on modes of operation existing in parallel to or even in contravention of these processes. To get at this complexity, this book offers conceptual rubrics and unexpected entry points for the range of audiences below.

First, within the broader study of modern South Asia, this book aspires to theoretical ambition, disciplinary plurality, and timeliness. We draw inspiration from other domains where the convergence of historical and ethnographic perspectives has proved productive: public culture, the nation-state, everyday life, ethics, and cities (Bates & Mio 2015; Breckenridge 1995; Fuller & Benei 2001; Mines & Lamb 2010; Pandian & Ali 2010). Yet this plurality of approaches has been lacking in the study of markets. This is a surprising gap, for transactional life suffuses Indian society – from daily rituals to national elections – and one that we address.

Second, beyond regional specialists, this approach to exchange is relevant to the broader global south. India, like countries in Asia, Africa, and the Americas, was shaped by shared configurations of colonial regulation and overlapping sovereignty. The themes we take up in this volume – around commerce’s competing orbits, cultural anchoring, and plastic accommodation – will resonate with observers of other postcolonial societies.

Third, this book seeks to rejuvenate the comparative analysis of markets and displace the dominance of Euro-American templates. Classical thinkers such as Karl Marx and Max Weber, for example, took seriously the counterpoising of Indian and European commerce as a way to understand the past and future of global capitalism (Anderson 2010; Weber 1958 [1916–1917]). Yet many commentators since presume a Euro-American vanguard to which non-Western countries such as India either imitate or deviate (Ferguson 2008). Such a modular and teleological approach is untenable. If anything, recent crises suggest that ideas of Western capitalism’s seemingly foundational rationality and prosperity are misplaced (Piketty 2014).

Contributors to this volume thus perceive capitalism’s unfolding from fresh angles that, in turn, may facilitate reevaluations of markets in Europe and North America. Ours is one moment in a wider
conversation about the past, present, and future of global and local exchange (Graeber 2011; Parthasarathi 2011). This book seeks to reshape questions on markets that anthropologists, political scientists, historians, and heterodox economists will pose in future years. To detail this ambition, we now turn to the historical and social context of Indian markets, before describing thematic rubrics and individual chapters.

Background

India is a major world economy, in contemporary and historical terms. Well before the onset of European colonialism in the fifteenth century, the subcontinent was a key transregional hub for finance and trade in the Indian Ocean. The tentacles of Indian bankers and traders stretched to Central Asian bazaars, the East African littoral, and Southeast Asia’s plantations (Amrith 2013; Gupta 2001; Machado 2014; Markovits 2000; Perlin 1993; Ray 1995; Rudner 1989). Through the colonial period, India remained a sophisticated entrepôt, dotted with nodes for collection and distribution (Bayly 1983; Chandavarkar 1994; Yang 1998). The subcontinent also endured as a manufacturing hub for commodities sent far afield, such as textiles, opium, and jute (Ali 2018; Dossal 1991; Farooqui 2006; Haynes 2012; Parthasarathi 2009).

This volume builds on earlier empirical work, using Indian markets as an entry point to broaden our general understanding of socioeconomic life. We flesh out the empirics of exchange and material aspects of commercial activity (Harriss-White 2003). Contributors provide historical texture to aspects of Indian law and regulation necessary to understand how markets unfolded in practice (Birla 2009; De 2018; Goswami 2004). They touch on moral, ritual, and cosmological notions that have been central to generating value and circulating things (Appadurai 1986; Bear 2015; Gell 2006 [1999]; Parry 1989; Raheja 1988). Finally, our writers delve into social concepts of trust, reputation, speculation, and reciprocity that underlie transactional life (Bayly 1983; Puri 2014).

We also seek coverage of newer aspects of commercial activity on the subcontinent, and links between historical and more recent changes. Since the 1990s and its integration with global capitalism, India’s economy has radically transformed. Realms such as microfinance or
commercial medicine have become markets unto themselves (Kar 2018; Pande 2014). The shopping mall and the free trade zone are now elevated aspirational symbols (Cross 2014). Property construction and urban redevelopment are a major theater for commercial competition and collusion (Bear 2015; Searle 2016). The emergence of the entrepreneurial subject and the monetization of cultural selves attend these processes (Besky 2014; Gooptu 2013). Public culture and mass media, in marketing brands and in producing content, bolster this commercialization (Mazzarella 2003; Nakassis 2016). Speculative jockeying, illicit flows, and criminal capture increasingly mark domains of exchange (Abraham & van Schendel 2005; Appadurai 2015; Harris-White & Michelutti 2019). Indian markets depend on (and promote) concrete infrastructure such as energy and transport and cultural intangibles such as value systems. They encompass newly commodified things and ideas as well as formerly unmonetized spaces (such as the domestic realm) and selves (such as aspirational consumption and labor discipline) (Harriss-White 2005; Huws 2003).

This volume is a comprehensive response to such established inquiries and emerging conditions. It offers historical depth, empirical texture, and political focus to the analysis of Indian markets, taking the conversation further. Our venture entails a broad conceptual approach, bringing various disciplinary backgrounds into one discussion in order to emphasize the complexity of the topic we are studying. We now specify how this conversation is organized, and the overarching concepts that scaffold individual chapters.

**Thematic Orientation**

This book celebrates a plurality of approaches to markets and exchange in India. We encompass and validate a range of historical and social science understandings. The usual ambition of a state-of-the-art venture is to take a combative posture: to exclude and renounce flawed or incomplete ideas.

We take a different tack: this volume acknowledges and builds on productive streams of previous inquiry in the social sciences and humanities. In so doing, we recognize the situation of scholarship in the twenty-first century. A wide spectrum of concepts and methods inform social, economic, and political processes, no less than in science. Some of these approaches are grooved into old disciplinary divides, some
straddle them. The proliferation of newer keywords and subfields further fissions our conversation.

The authors in this volume offer robust frames for comprehension that promote an understanding of modern economic processes in India. Yet we do not subsume the book’s constituent heterogeneity into a singular explanatory framework. Neither do we truncate the tension between overlapping labels and fluid readings. The reader engages with historians, anthropologists, geographers, and political economists on their own terms. Our contributors use concepts located or homed on their disciplinary planets and radiating across a shared scholarly galaxy.

In the following sections, we offer three thematic rubrics that organize this collective inquiry. The first is “embedded exchange”; the second, “contested jurisdiction”; and the third, “pliable markets.” These should be understood as windows onto overlapping terrain rather than discrete molds of segregated content. Indeed, the friction between contributors’ nomenclature and technique is deliberately left intact. In our view, theoretical discrepancy is not an obstacle to overcome. In the context of this book, it is a critical asset to cultivate. By doing so, we bring out the richness of discrete approaches to markets in India.

**Embedded Exchange**

The history of the social sciences offers us a vital arena of contest around the idea of embedding, beginning with modernity as an era and as an idea. Fields such as economics and sociology emerged with industrial capitalism, global colonization, mass migration, and the nation-state. In social science narrations, modernity was seen to have disrupted earlier certainties. Tradition was dissolved, custom was superseded, and culture was displaced.

This preoccupation in the social sciences with the extent to which socioeconomic processes are integrated and ingrained still reverberates. Twentieth- and twenty-first-century analyses revolve around it. Put simply, one of capitalism’s effects is to extract value from production and surplus from labor. In so doing, it contrives to disembled the economy from society and politics. In Karl Polanyi’s influential analysis, Victorian England’s wage labor market manifests a rupture between capital and community (Polanyi 2001). In actual fact,
capitalism has only partially succeeded in this effort to disembed markets from society in some cases, meeting with resistance from various sources in others. Examples abound from around the world in which Polanyi’s rupture was far less pronounced.

There is a long line of scholarship on India influenced by these debates. For example, one focus has been how exchange is interwoven – or perhaps synonymous – with social relations and reciprocities (Laidlaw 1995; Parry 1989; Raheja 1988). This entwinement is visible in work on the jajmani system, entailing the customary circulation of gifts between elites and dependents (Wiser 1936). Beyond this, there are other codified social practices that inform economic traffic and behavior in the region. Among them are institutionalized forms anchored in precolonial institutions, such as debt bondage and caste and gender differentials in labor arrangements (Breman 2013). Land grants, such as inam or waqf, subject to religious jurisdiction and hereditary privilege, comprise another such expression. Analogously, one can examine semi-codified credit, insurance, and payment mechanisms, such as hundi or hawala, critical to transregional commerce (Martin 2009; Ray 1995). Such forms have exhibited a plasticity that was useful in Mughal-era commodity transfer, diaspora-led trade between the subcontinent and the Gulf, and in petty localized credit transactions. Customary payments and commission frameworks, such as hafta, dasturi, dalali, and batta, in evidence in the early colonial period, continue to inform brokerage activities and patron–client relationships. Reputational notions of trust and honesty, such as abru, sakh, and vishwaas, still condition commercial relations in Indian marketplaces (Bayly 1983; Rudner 1989).

Such a range of codified or semi-codified means and practices of organizing exchange – intersecting with regimes of agricultural and artisanal production – has been portrayed as central to the “bazaar economy.” This notion connects market nodes across the Indian Ocean to the subcontinent. The “rise and demise” of this bazaar economy in its specific South Asian context – theorized by Rajat Kanta Ray (1995) in terms of its gradual subordination to global capitalism in the colonial era with reference to world-systems theory – forms a consistent backdrop to historical studies of Indian markets. It is equally applicable to Polanyian ideas of the “Great Transformation.”

Observing practices of exchange in Indian markets, we can identify historical continuities in transactional grammars, as well as changes in
their meaning and applications in the encounter with global capitalism. These overlaps and evolutions have not been captured by the argument on the bazaar economy’s demise. Even the growing predominance of a capitalist world order reserves roles and creates uses for historically sedimented and socially embedded conceptions underlying exchange. These, in turn, affect the dominant principles of order in the economy.

These durable examples of how exchange has always been tethered to social practices and customary forms underline why this volume emphasizes markets, exchange, and transactions. Such a focus is in contrast to the emphasis on production and consumption that marks most inquiry into the Indian economy. In our collaboration, we use exchange to think about relationships and reciprocities. The term “transactions” enlarges the frame of action to refer to processes of exchange that can be durable but fast evolving, and have complexly entangled actors, even in the context of enduring relationships. The transactional is a realm that encompasses material exchanges, including ordinary market relations; and also denotes moral obligations and informational transfers.

It is helpful here to review how social scientists have approached embedded exchange in India. In the anthropology of South Asia, Fredrik Barth and McKim Marriott notably contributed to thinking about transactional culture. In his 1959 monograph, Political Leadership among the Swat Pathans, Barth saw the interactions between Pakhtun chiefs, followers, and saints, including gifting and hospitality, as conscious exchange activities. Chiefs recirculated harvest rents to others in public feasts, as prestations, and as credit. Barth’s “transactionalism” was a response to then-fashionable theories such as structural-functionalism and Marxism. In another work, Barth underlined the importance of nonmonetary reciprocal exchange between different Pathan qoum or groups. The perpetual swaps of services among segmented occupational groups could, Barth maintained, be seen as analogous to the Hindu jajmani system (Barth 1981: 27).

For our purposes, two points continue to be useful here for exchange relations on markets that have undergone significant transformations since this time. First, a society saturated by transactions – public gifting in Barth’s terms but also commodified market exchanges – means a social dimension that is incomplete and unfolding. Society does not exist without the perpetual labor of exchange. Second, the transactional here is not reducible to material expediency. The labor of the
social yokes together the practical, the ethical, and the cosmological. The exchanges between leaders and others are entangled with expressions of generosity – a commitment to living with others and a publicized concern with their welfare – and with a past and future.

McKim Marriott is the other anthropologist of South Asia with a prominent focus on transactions as a fulcrum of social life. In the 1970s, he argued that South Asia “exhibits an elaborate transactional culture, characterized by explicit, institutionalized concern for givings and receivings of many kinds in kinship, work, and worship” (Marriott 1976: 109). For Marriott, matters of labor organization, status expression, public prestige, and political authority are not inscribed a priori but continually modified and refreshed through exchange. In other words, society does not exist as a passive externality or as a walled-off compartment but is constituted in and through exchange. An enduring and evolving set of relations is created and nurtured via transactions. This may include quotidian forms of communal exchange such as the sharing of food and drink. It also encompasses punctuated expectations and obligations: ritualized prestations, lifecycle gifts, and customary payments. The transactional realm’s temporal horizons are elastic, bringing a tool to market analysis that can be used beyond Marriott’s specifically South Asian emphasis (Appadurai 2015).

Other anthropologists have paid attention to this realm and have demonstrated how this rich universe of nonmarket exchange influences transactional grammars. In this literature, the back and forth of money, food, gifts, and substances is central to the dynamics of reproduction, boundary maintenance, and solidarity. Ethnographic studies of kinship and gender, for example, show how relations and relating are created through transactions. One repeated conception for articulating the import of both monetary as well as nonmonetary obligations on sociability is lena-dena (giving-and-taking). For example, Helen Lambert (2000) shows how relatedness, often seen as immutably fixed, can be actively modified by transactional means. Who is considered a relation may expand outside the boundaries of genealogy or blood via forms of reciprocal giving and taking.

This view is echoed in other ethnographies that describe customary forms of exchange. Gloria Raheja (1988: 222) shows that, in western India, the social idiom “to give from where one takes” rests on exchange both as a moral and material matter. Sylvia Vatuk (1972: 179) describes the incessant obligations of informal neighborly
relations in North India through the prism of *lena-dena*. Claire Snell-Rood (2015: 47), discussing women slum-dwellers in Delhi, notes their emphasis on mutual support – *sahara denallen*.*a*. Attention (*dyaan dena*), affection, care, and sustenance provided by friends and relations, constitute critical resources in a precarious environment. Indeed, giving-and-taking is intriguing because it moves our attention outside of sociological silos. The prevalence of such exchange suggests entanglements across religion and caste.

How does our use of the concept of “embedded exchange” build on and differentiate itself from such works? We do not merely denote how economic exchange is inserted or immersed in society. There are four dimensions of our usage worth elaborating.

First, we define embeddedness beyond the sphere of community or culture. Our contributors show how modern market pursuits are shaped by but not confined within durable lineages of caste, ethnicity, gender, or religion. This is important to flag, for the social science and history of India underlines endogamous communities as the locus of analysis. In such analyses, paternalistic codes, caste hierarchies, community solidarities, and patriarchal authority are reworked to serve modern capitalism (Chari 2004; Haynes 1999, 2012). Such scholarship shows how the Euro-American decoupling of capital and community is untenable in India (Birla 2009; Harriss-White 2003; Roy 2018).

Ethnic and religious affiliation, proximity to states, and control over markets privilege certain groups, consolidate authority, and maximize rents and profit. This is not to invite a reading of Indian markets as privileging the collective over the individual, compared to the West. We do not invent an Indian *homo collectivicus* to go along with *homo hierarchicus*. There is not a particularly “Indian” relationship between community and commerce. Community remains a locus of capital generation and accumulation on the subcontinent, although its importance is also coming under strain (Basile 2017).

At the same time, the individual must not be overlooked – and the rational, gain-maximizing and risk-minimizing individual of classical liberalism constitutes an example of a particular ideational structure of social embeddedness distinct in time and space. The social embeddings of markets in as well as beyond India do not

simply rest on collective or community structures. Equally relevant are processes of communication, information flows and perceptions of equity in exchange, rationalities, prices, opportunity, obligation, propriety, reputation, trust, and risk. Many of these matters touch on community – and may be rooted in community. Others remain centered on the individual, underpinning complex webs of structuring exchange relations.

To encapsulate, much inquiry into exchange’s immersion within sociality looks at bounded networks and community fealty at the heart of capitalism’s unfolding. The contributors to this volume enlarge this focus in their stress on the cross-cutting understandings and grammars that allow for trade across collective lines. As Bayly argues, historically in India, forms of arbitration, brokerage, and “mercantile honour and credit” breached community demarcations, creating “wider solidarities on merchant people” (Bayly 2011: 117). Building on these durabilities, we demonstrate how exchange is embedded within relations that exceed one’s social affiliation.

For example, Nikhil Rao shows how, in early colonial Bombay, a vibrant sphere of land use and transfer existed between native and migrant populations. Rather than a hermetic reproduction of community along exchange lines, his chapter suggests that crisscrossing customs allowed dissimilar actors to exchange and use land outside of state jurisdiction. Projit Mukharji’s chapter discusses the use of printed texts in eastern Indian bazaars in the nineteenth century. These supernatural guides offered merchants, creditors, and investors recipes for bolstering commercial fortune. Mukharji demonstrates how this corpus of knowledge was borrowed promiscuously from Muslim and Hindu religiosity and was employed within a heterogeneous market ecology. Early twentieth-century advertising, as Douglas Haynes shows, constitutes another intermingling of individual and collective aspects of exchange. The proliferation of regional marketing for health tonics, for example, targeted the modern consumer as an individual, yet relied on collectively constructed notions of desirability and anxiety. Advertising partially disembedded exchange from existing social networks, but also reconstituted them in new configurations. In all these cases, embedded exchange constitutes a transactional realm that touches on, yet eventually transgresses, a specific community.

Second, we define embedded exchange as a transactional domain extant beyond locality as well as community. That is to say, a reader
will not see exchange here tethered to a static and bounded realm of place. Embedded exchange in this way exceeds not just social but also spatial markers. Here, we build on works that underline how Indian market activity, stretching back before colonial modernity, was entangled with extra-local spheres (Amrith 2013; Machado 2014; Markovits 2000; Ray 1995; Rudner 1989). David Rudner’s chapter illustrates, for instance, how embedded exchange has wide spatial latitude. He describes how Tamil financiers in the colonial period constructed a cross-oceanic banking empire between south India and Burma and Malaya. The Bay of Bengal proved an insufficient hindrance for close stitches between commercial investment in Southeast Asia and ritual reproduction in south India. Aditi Saraf’s chapter, on how contemporary cross-border traffic in Kashmir self-consciously references traditional transregional ties, provides another thematic example. As she shows, in her ethnographic study of the dance between suppliers and regulators on the fraught national border, what is embedded is not lodged within putatively natural national borders but exceeds them.

Third, our use of embedded exchange has a temporal as well as a social and spatial dimension. It can be easy to overlook the durability of networks, processes, and idioms when studying transactional activity due to the latter’s ephemeral appearance. Because exchange entails a prospective capacity to orient and navigate oneself, the endurance of anterior processes can be overlooked. Further increasing complexity are political and ideological ruptures, such as between colonial and postcolonial, or planned and laissez-faire economies. Such periodization obscures the contexts, continuities, and conditions that persistently inform exchange.

We emphasize embedded exchange in part to underscore how contemporary market forms, widely prevalent in India, have their own enduring lineages and entrenched temporalities. But rather than implying static continuity, these unfold from tactical adjustment and resourceful accommodation.

Illustrative examples are provided by Sebastian Schwecke and Andy Rotman’s chapters on contemporary transactional culture in Banaras. Both show the surprising agility of traders and financiers as they use notions of reputation and trust to broadcast their social authority and boost their market position. These mercantile codes and trading pieties were not invented recently; but they endure to this day and have successfully adjusted to changing circumstances. A very different
form of business acumen is described by Projit Mukharji, on the seemingly occult knowledge codified in Bengali bazaar guides, and their unproblematic intersection with business knowledge in alignment with colonial discourses on modernity. Sharing magical traditions from various communities and appealing to businesspeople across community divides, Mukharji discusses an alternative source of socially embedded norms and practices informing market decisions.

David Rudner shows how the Nattukottai Chettiar merchant caste nimbly adjusted their financial practices in response to colonial imperatives and opportunities. Modernity didn’t displace and subsume earlier caste-based banking. Rather, it provided fertile grounds on which the Chettiar could expand and consolidate their wealth. Thus, Rudner’s piece suggests that beyond the social location and spatial dispersal of exchange, a community–capital nexus evolved through distinct historical moments. Mekhala Krishnamurthy, instead, emphasizes how socially entrenched market activity can be through the associational structures of a single, spatially bounded locality: an agricultural mandi or wholesale market in central India. Her chapter analyzes the relational networks reaching out from the mandi to the state and vice versa, and their respective influences on the politics of the market as well as the political framing of the market. This interaction between the contextual specificities of local markets and regulatory intervention by the state resonates with Aditi Saraf’s study of trade relations across the Line of Control between India- and Pakistan-controlled Jammu and Kashmir. Here, the political imperatives of intermittent conflict and arbitrary détente shape a market that nevertheless remains rooted in what the state defines as tradition. Douglas Haynes’ chapter emphasizes how small-scale industrial entrepreneurs – in spite of their anchoring in local social structures – can act as agents of disembedding markets and reembed markets in new forms. It adds an important dimension to Polanyian discourses on markets that challenges the linearity of market trajectories in the unfolding of capitalism in India.

Fourth, and finally, our understanding of embedded exchange relates to moral aspects of market activity. A number of established studies emphasize the importance of ethical idioms and notions of distribution and reciprocity that are part and parcel of various South Asian cosmological systems (Besky 2014; Gregory 1997; Laidlaw 1995; Parry 1989). This strand of scholarship is in the background of our contributions here.
Andy Rotman, for example, describes the moral economy of the North Indian bazaar in Banaras. Such enduring exchange webs are sometimes seen as inevitably displaced by modern capitalism. Yet Rotman argues that urban merchants, hawkers, and consumers are immersed in a “matrix of affiliations” that serves to bind together the culture of piety and the culture of exchange. Here, exchange is emphatically embedded, in the signaling of divine fealty and social trust via pious performance. In Rotman’s analysis, the bazaar could not exist in an abstracted form, yet exchange is not anchored in any one community. Rather, it is imbricated in neighborhood and urban affinities that have plural religious markers, similar to notions of trust depicted by Sebastian Schwecke.

Ajay Gandhi’s chapter, on black money in India, also places importance on morality. Notions of injustice and unfairness turn those accused of having black money into synonyms for social subversion. Yet morality is not objectively absolute but about varied perspective; seen from the transactional horizon of usage, black money is sometimes more socially productive and relationally nurturing than its public vilification implies. Criminal markets, as depicted by Barbara Harriss-White and J. Jeyaranjan, necessarily rely on shared understandings of transactional moralities despite being marked as publicly debased. From a different perspective, Roger Begrich studies the transactional properties of alcohol in an Adivasi-dominated context in eastern India. In his fine-grained description of production and consumption’s usages and meanings, Begrich suggests that discrete ethical understandings attend alcohol’s commercial and customary intake.

The chapters that evoke embedded exchange demonstrate that we must be attentive to markets as social, spatial, genealogical, and moral bundles. Our contributors show that these interlaced webs of exchange and value are not separate from but constituted through gradations of community, geography, history, and ethics.

Contested Jurisdiction

Having described the necessity of anchoring exchange within a field of social reference points, we turn to the inescapability of power in structuring market activity. A second core premise of this volume is that multiple sovereignties, rather than a unitary state, frame transactional culture in India. These concurrent and sometimes contradictory
authorities swaying commercial practice are encapsulated by our notion of “contested jurisdiction.” There are two points here that are of particular importance. One regards the history of state regulation of market activity. The second concerns the issue of parallel and codependent authorities in exchange domains.

Despite the origins of regulatory intervention in India being traced to the second half of the nineteenth century, it was particularly with the late colonial state that robust interventions were enforced in market spheres (Goswami 2004; Tomlinson 2013). For example, the twentieth-century’s world wars occasioned wide powers to ration, prohibit, and control the movement of commodities. The Second World War, specifically, allowed for newfound state powers to survey and sanction market actors. In certain instances, postcolonial state intervention into markets reincarnated and deepened this late colonial template (De 2018).

Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century legislation – setting up business structures, enforcing contract formats, frameworks for registration, regulation, and incentivizing compliance, and even the state’s capacity to overrule market and property logics – was decisive for the proliferation of contemporary markets. This is perhaps more so than India’s post-Independence flirtation with a command economy, and its flourishes such as bank nationalization or the “license-permit raj.” Sudipta Sen’s and Ritu Birla’s interventions in the debate are particularly instructive. Sen provides an example of how exchange and authority were already intertwined during early colonial rule (Sen 1998). Birla’s study of the legal history of these framing exercises gives a renewed impetus to study the effects of late nineteenth-century legal developments on contemporary markets (Birla 2009). The corollary to her concept of the definition of the “proper swindle” by colonial market framing policies – depicted through a study of bankruptcy litigation in the aftermath of the introduction of limited liability – is the continued existence and scale of business practices the Indian state perceives as “improper.” This corollary depicts a realm of entrepreneurial techniques and market relations that evade or actively transgress the state’s sway over the market.

From the mid-twentieth century the increased intervention in the market by the Indian state also had a counterintuitive impact. At one level, it tightly regulated a licit sphere – the fantasy of the planner’s map corresponding to the actual city. But it also indirectly generated illicit
domains where vibrant commercial activity unfolded (Harriss-White 2003). Thus, state regulation, in its baroque complexity, created the grounds for evasion, manifest in the vibrant transactional dances reductively glossed as “corruption” and “informality.” The host of measures from the 1950s and 1970s, encapsulated in the phrase “license-permit raj,” shows this. In one sense, then, regulation creates the conditions for illegality and extra- legality. In other cases, the state regulates by not regulating and therefore by choosing not to impose its imprint on market segments.

Contestation should not, however, imply open conflict or a zero-sum competition for supremacy. In actual fact, markets are remarkably accommodating domains. We can usefully borrow insights here from the history and anthropology of Indian politics. Studies suggest that in precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial terms, monolithic forms of authority were not the norm; rather, fragmentary and codependent ones prevailed (Hansen 2005). If layered influence and overlapping adjudication define Indian political life, commercial activity, too, is marked by such contested jurisdiction. Therefore, a term like market authority needs to be specified, and not automatically conflated with the state. For indeed, there are spheres of market activity, such as urban property, where authorization depends on ethnic institutions and religious leaders, not state actors.

Several chapters suggest that rather than open friction between competing centers of authority, there is selective collusion and, indeed, selective scrutiny by the state in its various manifestations. The colonial and postcolonial state in India has intermittently inquired into market practices, and sporadically (sometimes arbitrarily) imposed its directives. The state is only one of the authorities which, at different scales, is relevant to transactional life. This partial authority and intermittent scrutiny no doubt shapes the jurisdictions of exchange: but it is better understood as a collaborative dance than an annihilatory battle. Contested jurisdiction here may mean the diverging imperatives of states and municipalities vis-à-vis the central government; how precolonial and colonial forms chafe against modern reforms; the clashing and converging operations of associations and unions as well as agents of the shadow economy; and how community and corporate forms of reputation, trust, and obligation are in tension with state extraction.

Several contributors to this volume illuminate such contested jurisdiction. Avoiding the presentism under which what we describe may be
analyzed as state dysfunction, cultural pathology, or customary patronage, our historical and contemporary examples show how Indian market life has a genealogical specificity and therefore a contemporary expression.

For example, Sebastian Schwecke suggests how North Indian financiers adapted to state banking reforms and money lending legislation during the twentieth century. His chapter suggests that informality is, at one level, the outcome of market framing processes. At another level, it is an ensemble of practices facilitating extra-legal business in contexts where the informal handling of business relations is comparatively more advantageous to entrepreneurs than adherence to the state’s regulatory demands. David Rudner describes Chettiar merchant-banking activities stretching, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, from south India to Southeast Asia. These were built on precocious modes of organization capable of synchronizing with, as well as tactically circumventing, the colonial state’s regulatory apparatus.

Nikhil Rao looks at the competing and contradictory imperatives of a nonmonolithic, multilayered early colonial state in Bombay. He describes the vitality of overlapping jurisdictions in constituting urban property as a market. Colonial land tenures did not displace but were imbricated with precocious Maratha forms as well as pre-British Portuguese templates. Douglas Haynes’ chapter, in turn, on early twentieth-century advertising, studies the struggle of authority from an entirely different angle. Here, various market participants contended to establish their authority over consumer product meanings. Producers that directly communicate a product’s significance undercut their earlier reliance on the marketing services of merchants and traders. Haynes suggests how central the symbolic and discursive, as much as the regulatory and institutional, is to market life’s contested jurisdiction.

Moving to the contemporary era, Andy Rotman’s chapter, conversely, depicts the remarkable primacy of merchants and shopkeepers in the North Indian bazaar in controlling how their own reputations broadcast their products’ meanings. Despite competition from global branding norms and glossy shopping malls, bazaar actors retain an enduring socioeconomic clout. Barbara Harriss-White and J. Jeyaranjan, in their study of the illegal sand market in Tamil Nadu, illustrate an aspect of what one could generalize as
capture and release. They show how unevenly formulated regulation and irregularly implemented policing condition the contours of exchange. Criminal and shadow economies, no less than legal and legitimate ones, ingeniously accommodate regulatory sway and its abrupt vacuum. Matthew Hull examines, in contemporary Punjab, an uneven set of regulatory practices producing a lottery market. This is a sphere of tiered codependencies: the official Punjab lottery, those of other states, and illegal operators running competing numbers games. Regulation inadvertently creates the grounds for commercial activity outside the fold of legality: legal enforcement is parasitically used by less endowed actors to generate subsidiary market activity. The “overlapping orbits” between the Punjab state and other states, and between states and the central government, in regulatory and infrastructural terms, evolve into a lottery market defined both by mutual reliance and ongoing feuds.

Roger Begrich outlines the parallel and symbiotically intertwined networks of legal and illicit alcohol production among tribal communities in Jharkhand. These networks depend not only on their toleration by state authorities – in contrast to their less flexible demarcation in law – but on notions of custom-based solidarity between Adivasi bureaucrats and populations. As with the other chapters on contemporary markets, a seemingly clear cat-and-mouse game between state regulators and market actors shades into the gray of complicity and dissimulation. Finally, Mekhala Krishnamurthy analyzes how agricultural wholesale markets in Madhya Pradesh are state-authorized and framed yet have disparate authorities and imperatives that have significantly changed over time. New authorities and new roles emerge to realign state-society-market relations in postcolonial history.

The general point drawn from this thematic rubric of contested jurisdiction concerns the ways in which commercial competitors, in regulatory, infrastructural, symbolic, legal, and organizational terms, both converge and collaborate, and compete and combat. Far from being impeded by regulatory uniformity or consistency, market actors deftly accommodate what is capricious and plural. Historical and contemporary players in Indian markets, we suggest, are not impaired by or waiting for modernization or implementation; they move with the multiplicity of monarchs who exercise sway over commercial life.
Pliable Markets

Something that is pliable has both an elastic suppleness and bears influence from its surroundings. These meanings bear on this volume’s notion of “pliable markets.” We draw attention to the malleability of exchange activity as it unfolds in India; we further note how yielding and amenable market actors and spaces are.

The first meaning of pliability concerns the flexibility of markets as they expand and contract, bend and reconstitute, and develop new technologies that persist alongside old ones. Indian markets have adapted through colonial underdevelopment, enduring forms of social segmentation, and selective state interventions. We survey some of these, noting that the state itself creates markets within its operational orbit. Apart from well-elaborated markets in many goods and services, there are illicit ones such as those for exams, jobs, and basic services, and standardized and institutionalized quasi-markets. Then there are markets – for straightforwardly illegal goods as well as for lotteries, urban property, gold, alcohol, weapons, and cash itself – in which state regulation, sometimes inadvertently but also symbiotically, brings exchange activity into being. Finally, there are illegal markets in illegal commodities, among them drugs, body parts, trafficked women, and antiquities (Harriss-White & Michelutti 2019). This volume pinpoints such interdependent, co-constitutive, and fluid aspects of exchange in India.

The second level at which we suggest the value of the concept of pliable markets concerns the susceptibility of exchange to social, political, and moral influences. Pliability is manifested when exchange is capable of adjusting to, evading from, and coping with, government and community forms and practices. Markets can be seen as ensembles of factors or forces that oscillate, balance, or neutralize one another. Further, exchange at its elemental is about giving and receiving, a back and forth that has narrative and symbolic elements. Markets are crucial sites for meaning-making creatures because transactions are always politically shaped, socially influenced, and ethically attuned. Their pliability is partially an outcome of the need to operate under a range of allegedly noneconomic factors that suffuse their functioning, one that cannot, for instance, ignore the enduring relationship of market spheres to religious institutions and community authorities (Osella & Rudnyckyj 2017).
This volume looks at markets of various types. Its novelty is not just a focus on tangible commodities but also on immaterial value. Contributors identify vibrant spheres of exchange: in alcohol production and distribution, in sand mining and circulation, in lottery numbers and speculation, in money siphoning and redistribution, and in vernacular advertising and publication. They also describe domains of desire, anxiety, danger, transgression, and immorality in markets of advertising, moneylending, branding, and cash.

Thus, we have markets of stuff and markets of substanceless stuff. Markets here are considered material and immaterial forms that may be commodified, regulated, and circulated. Such markets are subject to informal or formal authority and framing. Abstracted and more embedded forms and transactions coexist and intersect. Within this ambit, this volume explores sand, alcohol, advertising, finance, brands, property, money and lotteries as markets. This focus helps us to underline that economic processes are absolutely central to Indian cultural, political, and moral matters.

The idea of distinct ruptures – say between colonial or postcolonial – is not as interesting as attention to how contemporary forms (waqf property), financial mechanisms (hundi) and commission frameworks (dalali) have their own lineages and continuities. Even the practice of the Indian state curtailing or impeding certain market operations and commodity circulations – from textiles, electronics and gold in the twentieth century, to lotteries, grain, alcohol and high-denomination banknotes in the twenty-first century – has a historicity. This is drawn out when contextualizing market framing and recognition. In this volume’s conversation with the wider literature on global capitalism and markets, we argue for attention to the genealogies of markets, not assuming a shared unfolding or operational universality.

Our contributors explore the workings of pliable markets in different ways. Both Ajay Gandhi and David Rudner’s chapters concern how monetary liquidity flows along relational ties. In Gandhi’s case, black money can be seen, despite the ideological demagoguery attending it, as buttressing community ties. Black money is pliability itself: a market of value that is not just bendable but, in nationalist discourse, spectral.

While markets for substanceless stuff encompass a much wider range of exchanges, one particularly evocative treatment of these markets can be seen in the market for spectrum (Bhatia 2019).
Gandhi argues that this seemingly obscure and immoral transactional market in black money is from a different perspective embodied in social investments and ties, and thus possibly productive. In Rudner’s case, merchant-caste banking hinges on social relationships: financial transactions cannot be disaggregated from kinship considerations. In Sebastian Schwecke’s chapter, financial transactions in North India depend on knowing and connecting. Trust and reputation emerge, in Schwecke’s analysis, as distinct arenas of exchange when the Indian state starts to enforce procedural forms for financial transactions.

Nikhil Rao discusses how Bombay’s peripheral land was transmuted, via legal rulings and municipal regulation, into parceled, commodified, and speculative property. Rao observes the scale of the city expanding as a market constitutes around land, an elastic commerce and culture eventually hardening into today’s Mumbai. Douglas Haynes describes how early twentieth-century vernacular advertising enabled commodities to acquire novel meanings in provincial settings. Well-being and domestic happiness become, for Indian producers, the grounds for expanding local markets in vernacular tonics and remedies. Aditi Saraf outlines how cross-border trade in militarized Kashmir expands and contracts with the vicissitudes of state authorities. There are officially approved regimes of nonmonetary barter and social imperatives toward risk and profit. Market actors at militarized crossings must adjust athletically to policy fluctuations affecting them. Matthew Hull depicts the fluidity of Punjab’s segmented lottery market in the face of regulatory realities and shifts. Various state lotteries joust with illegal lottery operators, each exploiting the particularities of legislation and bans, to fill a vacuum or take up more space. The chapter on illegal sand mining by Barbara Harriss-White and J. Jeyaranjan demonstrates the ways in which the structure of these markets shifts in line with changes in political power. Finally, Roger Begrich describes how Jharkhand alcohol producers attend to the different predicaments and expectations in selling the liquid. Production and circulation are highly contextual, meaning the market disappears and reconstitutes, with shifting regulative forces and community requirements.

These chapters show how Indian markets have an adaptive quality. Here a solid binary of informal and formal can no longer be tenable with such gradations and entanglements of (in-)formality. These expressions of the pliable market – in alcohol, lotteries, sand,
money, goods, and land – reiterate how markets, far from being static and sociologically bounded, exhibit a remarkable plasticity. They are enmeshed with and will accommodate to new geographies and diverse constituencies, bending to what is unpredictable and emergent.

Conclusion

Indian markets are not distinct entities removed from society and ought to be understood via their intricate links with state and society. Exchange can be more capaciously understood by accounting for its social embedding, its contested and concurrent authorities, and its malleable capacity. Celebrating the kaleidoscope of scholars inquiring into various Indian markets, our chapters address widely different domains, yet, reading them together, connections between embedded exchange, contested jurisdiction, and pliable markets proliferate.

This volume contains writing by anthropologists, historians, and political economists. With this diversity of disciplinary backgrounds, and the existing thematic rubrics, we simplify matters for the reader by ordering chapters historically. Starting with contributions broadly on early and late colonial era history, the contents shift towards the twentieth century, and onward into the contemporary period.

Over time – throughout this time – markets in India have changed significantly, although clearly not in a linear fashion. Instead, as we argue, the meaning of markets has constantly been renegotiated by a multitude of participants engaged in multifaceted forms of exchange. The contributors to this volume have not only striven to portray new angles and entry points for rethinking markets in line with the fascinating diversity of scholarly inquiry into this topic. At a more fundamental level, they have observed and celebrated the propensity and aptitude of market participants to rethink what markets mean to them.

References


Puri, SS 2014, *Speculation in Fixed Futures: An Ethnography of Betting in Between Legal and Illegal Economies at the Delhi Racecourse*, University of Copenhagen Press, Copenhagen.


