

Inching Towards the Metre: Reflections on Standardisation, Globalisation and Governance: Metrology in India, 1833-1956

Prof Aashish Velkar

University of Manchester

Date: 03.01.2018, Venue: P12 @ 2.30 PM

Abstract:

Enforcement of measurement standards in India was tied to shifting normative notions of planned economic development. Rethinking the links between metrology (weights and measures) and the state allows historians to probe the technologies of state governance. Historical narratives have over-emphasised the ability of the state to rule economic and social spaces through measurement systems. How various contending groups lay claim to such technologies remains imperfectly understood in the historiography. To some, measurements were a technology of economic coordination, to others they were a technology of governance; to others still it became a technology of planned development. Sites of calculation were also shaped in culturally sensitive ways. Besides increased quantification within bureaucracies, reforms had to be framed within everyday economic relationships. The nationalist state invoked 'Indian tradition' to enforce measurement standards and achieve planned economic development. A technocratic rationale had to be bolstered with the cultural authority of 'Indian science'. Metrology socially organises an inherently cognitive human activity. Governments use measurements to rule, businesses use them to compete, and people use them to mediate mundane social and economic activities. India's transition to the metric system occurred when this global technology was reconstituted to address these contending claims

Speaker Profile:

Aashish Velkar is Lecturer in Economic History, University of Manchester, with a PhD from London School of Economics. He specialises in histories of economic life and has published an award-winning monograph, *Markets and Measurements in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2012). He has also published in various international journals such as *Enterprise and Society* and was Research Fellow at Princeton University (2014-15). His forthcoming article in *Past & Present*, 'Rethinking Metrology, Nationalism, and Development in India (1833-1956)', explores the cultural and political economy of measurement systems.