

## **Iteration of Theory and Evidence**

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When I was in the archives in Mumbai in January 2023, I started reading the Mayor's Court Records from the 1770s. The choice of period might have occurred by chance, the serendipity of calling up certain volumes without a precise catalog. I usually work on the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. I came across a few cases in the 1770s where tradespeople, or even their wives, were engaging in investment activities. These were the economic transactions of people of modest means. For example, an oilmaker who had a significant estate at probate, a tindall's wife who was buying and selling property while he was away at sea, and butchers borrowing money from each other. These cases brought to mind the literature on the *middling sort*. On leaving the archives and going back to civilian life, I reread how the middling sort has been defined in English social history.

I could see that the archival work I did in Bombay was a little different both from the English social history concepts and from past research into colonial cities. I could see that the literature focused on either the wealthy merchants or the portly proletariat, that seafaring motley crew, even indebted labor or the poor, but not much on these enterprising tradespeople I was finding. I didn't at the time realize that it was tradespeople that I was interested in, but it came to me over time. So in December 2023, I went back to the archives and am now slowly chipping away at delineating a particular concept (the middling sort) borrowing from the literature in English social history and the existing literature on Bombay to add empirical heft to the idea. And I am at the same time, and through

engagement with archival cases, delineating what the concept is not – that it, it was about tradespeople and not about merchants wealthy or otherwise (since merchants by definition would be involved in speculative activities), that it didn't involve the big players (who were already accounted for in the literature). I am intrigued by tradespeople, whose investment might or might not center on their trade (that is, a butcher might be investing in hides or skins, but he could also be investing in property).

It is this moving between actual archival cases (empirics or data) and the literature (theory or concepts) that is called *iteration between theory and evidence*. This is why a 'literature review' must be a literature analysis.

For more on the topic you can read my earlier blog on Writing a Literature Review, here  
<https://sukritiissar.com/2021/04/06/how-to-write-a-literature-review/>