Small Town Capitalism in Western India

This book charts the history of artisan production and marketing in the Bombay Presidency from 1870 to 1960. Although the textile mills of western India’s biggest cities have been the subject of many rich studies, the role of artisan producers located in the region’s small towns has been virtually ignored. Based on extensive archival research as well as numerous interviews with participants in the handloom and powerloom industries, this book explores the role of weavers, merchants, consumers, and labourers in the making of what the author calls “small town capitalism.” By focusing on the politics of negotiation and resistance in local workshops, the book challenges conventional narratives of industrial change. The book provides the first in-depth work on the origins of powerloom manufacture in South Asia. It affords unique insights into the social and economic experience of small town artisans as well as the informal economy of late colonial and early post-independence India.

This book is dedicated to the late Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, Ghanshyam Shah, and my past and present colleagues at the Centre for Social Studies
Cambridge Studies in Indian History and Society

C. A. Bayly
Vere Harmsworth Professor of Imperial and Naval History, University of Cambridge, and Fellow of St Catharine’s College

Gordon Johnson
President Emeritus, Wolfson College, University of Cambridge

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Small Town Capitalism in Western India

Artisans, Merchants, and the Making of the Informal Economy, 1870–1960

DOUGLAS E. HAYNES

Dartmouth College
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The idea for this book originated when I was working on the political history of Surat in western India. During the course of my research, I found that Surat had largely been a city of artisanal industries during the late colonial period. The discovery that the economy of an entire urban centre could depend on these kinds of industries surprised me, largely because I had been conditioned by discussions of “de-industrialisation” to assume that they must have dwindled into unimportance. The relative absence of studies on such industries at the time clearly constituted a major gap in the literature on India’s economic history. I decided that I would try to examine the history of artisan production in future research. Eager to broaden out from a study focused on a single place, I chose to look at artisan cloth producers in the Bombay Presidency as a whole.

When I began my research, I saw little relevance of my project to an appreciation of India’s contemporary economy. During the early 1990s, Surat had become a city of considerable powerloom production, perhaps the largest textile centre in India; few obvious signs remained of the once significant manufacture of silk and cotton cloth by handloom. I originally assumed that the handloom industry had died out sometime late in the colonial period because small producers had lost the ability to compete with these new mechanized industries. A real change in my perspective took place when I started to search out people who had participated in the handloom industry as workers, workshop owners, or cloth merchants. To my surprise, some of these individuals or their offspring were now industrialists and cloth sellers in the modern textile economy; I discovered that the fathers, grandfathers, and uncles of many contemporary businessmen had once been involved in handloom manufacture and had
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adopted powerlooms in their workshops between 1925 and 1945. Some retired textile workers had once been wage labourers in the handloom industry. They often had entered employment in powerloom production when weaving by hand declined, sometimes finding their new forms of work better paying and less physically demanding. At the same time, they became subordinated within new kinds of capitalist structures.

Initially, I was concerned that I was gathering more material from these interviews about the origins and shape of early powerloom production than I was about the handlooms, the main focus of my archival work. Yet gradually I came to recognize that the rigid compartmentalisation maintained in government policy and in scholarship between “handloom” and “powerloom” had long been responsible for creating major blindnesses about important patterns of change. Only when historians are willing to relax the limitations imposed by these categories can they begin to understand the processes involved in the construction of India’s contemporary textile industry. In effect, this study has become an examination of the origins of post-independence forms of industrial capitalism as well as an analysis of artisan production of cloth during the colonial period. Here, I can carry this study only up to about 1960; any discussion of later developments will have to be sketchy or reserved for later works.

Carrying out a project based on oral history as well as archival research has brought with it considerable personal as well as intellectual rewards. I was invited into the homes, workshops, and offices of the more than two hundred artisans, workers, merchants, industrialists, and trade-union leaders that I interviewed. They not only recounted their personal and familial histories, but also they often offered me their hospitality, sometimes in ways that seemed to exceed their means. A few workers trusted me with accounts of their pasts that might have put their jobs or reputations at some risk if these accounts had become widely known. I certainly appreciate the concerns of a couple of individuals who preferred not to talk with me under such circumstances. I cannot thank all those I interviewed by name here; indeed, doing so might create difficulties for a few of them. I do want to single out some individuals whom I can name and who provided further help well beyond the interview itself: Khalil Ansari, N. Dikonda, Atmaram Hathiwala, Datta Karve, V. R. Madoor, and M.Y. Momin. I would also like to thank several special contacts in the weaving towns who became absorbed in my project and who went out of their way to facilitate my research by locating persons I might interview: Hasmukh Talia in Surat; Mansoor Ansari, Shankar Kane, and Sanjay Lahoti in Bhiwandi; and R. G. Mhetras in Solapur.
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My greatest debts are to Tirthankar Roy and the late Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, whose work, intellectual comradeship, and friendship have influenced this work in too many ways to be enumerated. Some of the discussion of migration comes out of an earlier article on migration
Preface

I co-authored with Tirthankar. He has never hesitated to provide comments and offer his collegiality, even as sections of this study offered criticism of some of his conclusions. I have no doubt that this book would have been a much stronger one if I had had a chance to get more of Raj’s feedback; his tragic death has impoverished the whole field of South Asian social and economic history. Prasannan Parthasarathi, both through the intellectual influence of his writings and through comments on the manuscript, has also had an important impact on the final shape of this book. More recently, Abigail McGowan has offered a parallel source of friendship and intellectual inspiration and has provided comments on the entire manuscript.

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Chapter 4 is drawn heavily from my article, “The Labour Process in the Bombay Handloom Industry,” MAS, v. 42, no. 1, Jan. 2008, pp. 1–45. I wish to thank the journal’s editors for allowing me to republish much of this article in a somewhat modified form.

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Abbreviations

BEISC  Bombay Economic and Industrial Survey Committee
BPBEC  Bombay Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee
JD  Judicial Department
MSA  Maharashtra State Archives
RD  Revenue Department
RSS  Revision Survey Settlement
Selections  Selections from the Record of the Bombay Government