

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-19333-7 — Small Town Capitalism in Western India  
Artisans, Merchants, and the Making of the Informal Economy, 1870–1960  
Douglas E. Haynes  
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## Introduction

Ever since Lord Bentinck reported in 1834 that “the bones of the cotton weavers are bleaching the plains of India,” the fate of artisans has assumed a central place in discussions of the South Asian economy. Yet in a curious way, the history of artisans and artisan production during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has only begun to be written. Rich works on peasant agriculture during British rule exist for many parts of India, and a number of similarly valuable case studies of large industries and of industrial workers have now been published. To date, however, there have been no comparable regional histories of the artisanal economy and of small-scale production. This study seeks to examine artisan cloth manufacture in the Bombay Presidency – and the Bombay State of post-independence India – between 1870 and 1960. By following smallish actors and their creative attempts to adapt to the changing character of colonialism, the circumstances of World War II, and the environment of early post-independence India, it seeks to offer an alternative understanding of industrial change, one that better accounts for the shape of the contemporary economy. Rather than focus on factory production in major urban centres, I trace here the development of the capitalism of small towns.

Any attempt to consider the history of South Asian artisans must encounter perceptions that survive from the colonial period and from the independence struggle.<sup>1</sup> For Indian nationalists, the artisan – particularly the handloom weaver – was a powerful symbol of India’s

<sup>1</sup> A particularly rich treatment of these perceptions can be found in Abigail McGowan, *Crafting the Nation in Colonial India* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

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fate under colonialism. Crafts producers were viewed as emblematic of the self-contained, self-sufficient society that was thought to have once existed. Their world, it was argued, was subjected to the disruptive effects of the Industrial Revolution and the competition of European textiles, especially from Lancashire. Nationalists conceived of artisans largely as figures external to capitalism, that is, as victims subject to its harsh impact, hardly as persons involved in shaping the structures of India's regional economies themselves. In retrospect, most nationalist leaders, including Gandhi, appear to have been almost oblivious to the ways in which the actual economy of artisan production was changing around them. Weavers, dyers, printers, and gold-thread producers in early-twentieth-century India used different raw materials in manufacturing textiles than their pre-colonial counterparts; they produced different kinds of cloth for different kinds of markets; they frequently migrated over long distances to small weaving towns where they fashioned new forms of community; they often deployed novel techniques of production; and they became involved in subjecting wage labourers in their workshops to changing regimes of control. In short, they were not "traditional" figures carrying on their professions in a timeless fashion; they were participants in processes of change that characterised the larger sub-continent.

The primary concern of this study is to capture the role of artisans (and merchants who traded in cloth produced by artisans) as social actors who played a vital part in shaping the character of the western Indian economy. It stresses the heterogeneity of the processes involved in the making of regional capitalism, both because the case of artisan production contrasts sharply with that of the large textile factories that have been the focus of most existing studies of industrialisation, and because the patterns of change within the artisan economy themselves were so diverse. At the same time, it highlights the growth of a rather unique social formation, which I term "weaver capitalism," in the small manufacturing places of the Bombay Presidency.

The need for such a study becomes clear from only a brief examination of the overall significance of artisan industry. However many small producers were displaced during colonial rule, handloom weaving and other forms of artisan cloth production remained major sources of employment in the first half of the twentieth century. At the all-India level, one government officer noted in 1935: "[F]or every worker employed in cotton mills there are five employed in handloom weaving." At least ten million

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people at the time depended on weaving for their living.<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that the Bombay Presidency was the centre of India's large-scale textile industry, artisan producers of cloth in the province far outnumbered those employed by the mills up to and after independence. In 1911, there were 290,000 "home workers" making cotton or silk textiles in the Bombay Presidency, a figure that would not have included many dyers, embroiderers, printers, and gold-thread makers; by contrast, the textile mills gave employment to 195,000.<sup>3</sup> An estimate in the early 1920s indicated that more than 800,000 people depended wholly or largely on handloom weaving for their subsistence.<sup>4</sup> Yet although the factories of Bombay and Ahmedabad and workers in those factories have received considerable scholarly attention,<sup>5</sup> there have been no significant historical studies of handloom weavers, dyers, and other craftspeople in western India during this period, nor any book-length study about such artisans for any region of South Asia. The contrast seems even more striking when the literature on jute mills, railroad building, and coal mines is considered.

Equally important, artisanal activity contributed significantly to the larger structures that have come to characterise the industrial economy of India in recent decades. Today, the manufacture of cloth by small producers using electric power in the old handloom towns, often in firms headed by descendants of the original artisan-entrepreneurs, has assumed massive proportions. The mills of western India have been in serious decline; they now make only a small portion of the country's cloth requirements. By the 1990s, the centres of Surat and Bhiwandi each officially possessed about 250,000 looms, most of which were located in workshops with less than thirty workers. This figure was greater than the number of looms

<sup>2</sup> NAI, Department of Industries and Labour (Industries), 1935, File I-354 (6), p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Census of India figures cited in Robert Ewbank, *A Manual for Co-operative Societies in the Bombay Presidency* (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1914), p. 51. These figures almost certainly understate the relative size of those involved in artisanal production because of the large number of working dependents and of artisans employed in subsidiary occupations (dyeing, etc.).

<sup>4</sup> *Annual Report of the Department of Industries, 1922–3*, pp. 6–7.

<sup>5</sup> Just some of the more prominent studies are: Makrand Mehta, *The Ahmedabad Cotton Textile Industry: Genesis and Growth* (Ahmedabad: New Order Book Co., 1982); Sujata Patel, *The Making of Industrial Relations: The Ahmedabad Textile Industry, 1918–1939* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987); Morris D. Morris, *The Emergence of an Industrial Labor Force in India: A Study of the Bombay Cotton Mills, 1854–1947* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965); Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–1940* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

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in any of the great manufacturing towns of Britain at the height of its industrial dominance; unofficial estimates suggest an even larger industry today.<sup>6</sup> Although there have perhaps been hundreds of studies on British textiles during the nineteenth century, the history of India's small-scale powerloom industry is virtually unknown, even to specialists working on South Asia.

In short, the obsession of historians with the first phase of western Indian industrialisation – during which factory owners created the large-scale textile mills that came to constitute a significant source of industrial growth – has caused them to ignore this second major phase associated with small producers, one that ultimately has proven more critical to the current contours of the Indian economy. Sociologists and anthropologists working on the contemporary period have long recognised the multiplicity of structural forms and labour arrangements that characterise Indian industry, arguing that small units based on “informal” principles of organisation should be seen as integral parts of India's capitalist economy, not as relics of a pre-capitalist order.<sup>7</sup> Their work, however, typically does little to explore the historical processes involved in shaping the informal or unorganised sector or the ways in which these industries have related to the “formal” sector over time.<sup>8</sup> This gap in the literature

<sup>6</sup> Estimates in 2010 suggest there may be more than 600,000 looms in both of these centres. For the decline of western Indian mills, see, for instance, Jan Breman, *Working in the Mill No More* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004); Darryl D'Monte, *Ripping the Fabric: The Decline of Mumbai and Its Mills* (New Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). In 1916, the largest centre in Britain had 112,000 looms; Lancashire as a whole had 809,000. T. Worall, *Cotton Spinners' Directory*, 32nd edition (Oldham, 1916), p. 13. My thanks to Douglas Farnie for this reference.

<sup>7</sup> For a small sampling of the literature, see Mark Holmström, *Industry and Inequality: The Social Anthropology of Indian Labour* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Maria Mies, *The Lace Makers of Narsapur: Indian Housewives Produce for the World Market* (London: Zed Press, 1982); Anita Kelles-Viitanen, *Invisible Hands: Women in Home-Based Production* (New Delhi: Sage, 1987); Clare Wilkinson-Weber, *Embroidering Lives: Women's Work and Skill in the Lucknow Embroidery Industry* (Albany N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1999); Manjit Singh, *The Political Economy of Unorganised Industry: A Study of the Labour Process* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1990); Jan Breman, *Footloose Labour: Working in India's Internal Economy* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Sharad Chari, *Fraternal Capital: Peasant-Workers, Self-Made Men, and Globalization in Provincial India* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Geert de Neve, *The Everyday Politics of Labour: Working Lives in India's Informal Economy* (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2005); Barbara Harriss-White, *India Working: Essays on Society and Economy* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> The best available studies are Chari, *Fraternal Capital*, written by a geographer but containing three substantial historical chapters, and Tirthankar Roy's second book,

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has led to incomplete understandings about processes of change, such as the tendency to attribute the proliferation of small firms and mechanisms of out-contracting mainly to “globalisation” and the policies of the neo-liberal state since the 1980s. Although such views have partial validity, the rapid growth of the powerloom sector in recent decades would not have been possible if central features of small town capitalism – the role of artisan and peasant entrepreneurs, patterns of accumulation at the local level, flexible methods for the deployment of new technologies and skills, and innovative approaches to mobilising pools of labour – had not been firmly in place before 1980. The political economy of the late colonial and Nehruvian periods was critical to fostering a climate conducive to the explosive development of powerloom production during the 1980s and 1990s. Thus this book in effect examines the early stages of the formation of what was to become the contemporary industrial order.

The assertion that an artisan-based capitalism was growing even in the heyday of the large factory – a key conclusion of this study – runs counter to traditional understandings of industrialisation in South Asia. Historians influenced by the modernisation school and by Marxist approaches once viewed factories as forerunners of the kind of society India either would inevitably build or should build, whether it was to be founded on the principles of capitalism or of socialism. As Rajnarayan Chandavarkar has pointed out, they saw industrial change largely as a product of diffusion from Europe. In their view, he suggests, “it [industrialisation] was a technologically determined process beyond the realm of social choice ... it was a serial process whose imperatives were similar in each case ... it was inevitably and inexorably progressive ... flowing from the West, it constituted the only dynamic force acting upon a passive ‘indigenous economy.’”<sup>9</sup> Although this view distorted our understandings of how large-scale industries developed, as Chandavarkar has argued, it

*Traditional Industry in the Economy of Colonial India* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), which includes a series of chapters on particular industries at the all-India level but stops in 1947.

<sup>9</sup> Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, “Industrialization in India before 1947: Conventional Approaches and Alternative Perspectives,” *Imperial Power and Popular Politics: Class Resistance and the State in India, c. 1850–1950* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 30–73. Even Morris Morris, who did so much to emphasise the significance of artisans in his articles, chose in his seminal chapter on industrialisation in the *Cambridge Economic History of India* to relegate handloom production to a few pages, and left ambiguous whether the history of the handlooms should be considered an integral part of “industrial development.” See “The Growth of Large-Scale Industry to 1947,” *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, ed. Dharma Kumar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 553–676.

also left little room for appreciating the role of small producers in the larger history of the industrial economy. The failure to bring such actors into the study of modern capitalism was strongly affected by the binary categories informing historical research: handloom and powerloom, craft and industry, artisan and worker, and the informal and formal sectors. The first element in each set of pairs was in effect often placed outside history. The boundaries established by these categories seriously discouraged research across their lines.

A study of small producers centres an understanding of industrial capitalism squarely in the history of the broader structures of the regional economy rather than in Europe or the colonial ports of India. This study will emphasise the involvement of a variety of actors – merchants, weavers, and artisan-labourers – located mostly in the towns and small cities in the western Indian *mofussil*. The great mill cities of Bombay and Ahmedabad will receive comparatively little attention in this work. Instead, smaller places like Surat, Sholapur, Bhiwandi, Malegaon, Yeola, Ilkal, and Ichalkaranji will assume a more prominent place.

### Existing Approaches to the Artisan Economy

This book departs from prevailing historical approaches to the artisan economy in a number of important ways. Discussion of artisans once was dominated by the debate over “de-industrialisation.” According to the classical paradigm, the rise of the textile industry in Britain (and later in India) during the colonial period brought about a massive displacement of handloom weavers. Lacking the capacity to undersell products manufactured in modern mills, Indian artisans eventually were unable to subsist; large numbers were driven into the rural economy, where they were forced to survive by agricultural labour. In other words, developments outside India, primarily in the form of global capitalism, had a destructive effect on the small producer, who could not resist their impact. Although the sympathies of scholars advocating this position undoubtedly lay with the handloom weaver, cotton spinner, and dyer, they usually viewed artisans as powerless figures who necessarily had to succumb to the factory.

After the 1960s, a few economic historians began to criticise the de-industrialisation thesis, pointing especially to the large number of artisans who remained at the end of the colonial period. A spirited debate ensued in the pages of the field’s best journals, with both sides mustering

considerable statistical evidence to back their respective positions.<sup>10</sup> Yet whatever the truth behind the de-industrialisation debate – and I certainly agree that considerable decline in artisanal manufacture took place in different periods and different regions after 1800 – this discussion did little to illuminate the circumstances of those artisans who continued to practise their professions or their contribution to major economic developments. Ironically, whereas a rich literature existed on relations of production in artisanal industry during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,<sup>11</sup> there was little such treatment of artisans during more recent periods. Those who contested the de-industrialisation thesis occasionally acknowledged some artisanal agency – for instance, the willingness of

<sup>10</sup> For some of the important statements on this issue, see the debate prompted by Morris D. Morris, including Morris, “Towards a Reinterpretation of Nineteenth-Century Indian Economic History,” *IESHR* 5:1 (1968): 1–15; Toru Matsui, “The Nineteenth-Century Indian Economic History – A Review of a ‘Reinterpretation,’” *IESHR* 5:1 (1968): 17–33; Bipan Chandra, “Reinterpretation of Nineteenth Century Indian Economic History,” *IESHR* 5:1 (1968): 35–75; Tapan Raychaudhuri, “A Re-interpretation of Nineteenth Century Indian Economic History?,” *IESHR* 5:1 (1968): 77–100. See also Amiya Kumar Bagchi, “De-Industrialization in India in the Nineteenth Century: Some Theoretical Implications,” *The Journal of Development Studies* 12:2 (1976): 135–64 and Marika Vicziany, “The Deindustrialization of India in the Nineteenth Century: A Methodological Critique of Amiya Kumar Bagchi,” *IESHR* 16:2 (1979): 105–46; Michael J. Twomey, “Employment in Nineteenth Century Indian Textiles,” *Explorations in Economic History* 20:3 (1983): 37–57; and Colin Simmons, “‘Deindustrialization,’ Industrialization and the Indian Economy, c. 1850–1947,” *Modern Asian Studies* 19:3 (1985): 593–622; J. Krishnamurty, “Deindustrialization in Gangetic Bihar during the Nineteenth Century: Another Look at the Evidence,” *IESHR* 22:4 (1985): 399–416.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, K. N. Chaudhuri, “The Structure of Indian Textile Industry in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” *IESHR* 11:2–3 (1974): 127–82; Hameeda Hossain, “The Alienation of Weavers: Impact of the Conflict of the Revenue and Commercial Interests of the East India Company, 1750–1800,” *IESHR* 16:3 (1979): 323–45; S. Arasaratnam, “Weavers, Merchants and Company: The Handloom Industry in South-eastern India,” *IESHR* 17:3 (1980): 257–81; Frank Perlin, “Proto-Industrialization and Pre-colonial South Asia,” *Past and Present* 98 (1983): 30–95; Vijaya Ramaswamy, *Textiles and Weavers in Medieval South India* (Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Prasannan Parthasarathi, *The Transition to a Colonial Economy: Weavers, Merchants, and Kings in South India, 1720–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Rural Industry and Commercial Agriculture in Late Seventeenth-Century South-Eastern India,” *Past and Present* 126 (1990): 76–114; Lakshmi Subramanian, “Power and the Weave: Weavers, Merchants and Rulers in Eighteenth-Century Surat,” *Politics and Trade in the Indian Ocean World: Essays in Honour of Ashin Das Gupta*, eds. Ashin Das Gupta, Rudrangshu Mukherjee and Lakshmi Subramanian (Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 52–82; Om Prakash, “From Negotiation to Coercion: Textile Manufacturing in India in the Eighteenth Century,” *MAS* 41:6 (2007): 1331–68.



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handloom weavers to adopt foreign machine-made yarn – but they did not confront the binary image of dynamic, large industry and stagnant “traditional” industry; they thus perpetuated the view of artisans as figures outside capitalism, at best as survivors withstanding processes of modernisation.

After the mid-1980s, a number of studies began to address these limitations. A handful of historians have carefully examined the social circumstances of particular sets of artisans, explored the market for artisanal goods, and analysed relations of production.<sup>12</sup> Some have complicated the model of de-industrialisation considerably without breaking with it; others have found the model too limited for their investigations. Tirthankar Roy in particular has brought to light the dynamism of gold-thread producers, handloom weavers, carpet makers, and leather workers over wide parts of the Indian sub-continent during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> Roy treats artisan manufacture as being part of capitalist development.<sup>14</sup> He has also recognised considerable diversity in the experiences of artisans, often juxtaposing dynamic entrepreneurs and industries, which adapted to twentieth-century circumstance, with more stagnant producers who struggled to survive.<sup>15</sup>

This study certainly locates itself within the revisionist approach in which Roy is the leading figure; the influence of his scholarship will be self-evident to all familiar with it. Yet this book differs from Roy’s work in four significant ways. First, it delves more deeply into the household and workshop, and especially devotes significant attention to the

<sup>12</sup> For studies on artisan cloth production, see Christopher Baker, *An Indian Rural Economy, 1880–1955: The Tamilnad Countryside* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1984), ch. 5; Douglas Haynes, “The Dynamics of Continuity in Indian Domestic Industry,” *IESHR* 23:2 (1986): 127–49; Konrad Specker, “Madras Handlooms in The Nineteenth Century,” *IESHR* 26:2 (1989): 131–66; Peter Harnetty, “Deindustrialization Revisited: The Handloom Weavers of the Central Provinces of India, c. 1800–1947,” *MAS* 25:3 (1991): 455–510; Sumit Guha, “The Handloom Industry of Central India: 1825–1950,” *IESHR* 26:3 (1989): 297–318; Haruka Yanagisawa, “The Handloom Industry and Its Market Structure: The Case of the Madras Presidency in the First Half of the Twentieth Century,” *IESHR* 30:1 (1993): 1–27.

<sup>13</sup> Tirthankar Roy, *Artisans and Industrialization: Indian Weaving in the Twentieth Century* (Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Roy, *Traditional Industry in the Economy of Colonial India*.

<sup>14</sup> Roy, *Artisans and Industrialization*, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Tirthankar Roy, “Out of Tradition: Master Artisans and Economic Change in Colonial India,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 66:4 (2007): 963–91; Roy, “Consumption and Craftsmanship in India, 1870–1940,” in Douglas E. Haynes, Abigail McGowan, Tirthankar Roy, and Haruka Yanagisawa, eds. *Toward a History of Consumption in South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 268–98.



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circumstances of *labour*. Roy's writings have certainly contributed to understanding structural relations within the artisan economy, and have especially highlighted the domination of merchants and *karkhana* (workshop) owners over household producers and wage employees. Roy's emphasis, however, is clearly on the master craftsman and his adaptations to the twentieth century; this focus contributes to a narrative of change that stresses amelioration over time. In this work, I give more equal weight to such "weaver-capitalists" and to the artisan-labourers who worked for them. This approach certainly highlights many less positive aspects of the artisanal economy: Ordinary workers had to cope with severe poverty, radical economic vicissitudes, and social dependence on bosses.

Second, this book analyses the specific processes that gave rise to changes in the regional economy. Roy's work has done much to elucidate some overall patterns of change, but given its all-India perspective, it cannot hope to explore the decision-making of entrepreneurs, the interactions between merchants and weaver-capitalists, and the contests between various capitalists and labourers that were critical to the forging of small town capitalism. A more microcosmic examination of one province in British India, with close attention to a small number of centres, permits an in-depth reconstruction of the agencies involved in the forging of the industrial economy. I examine here the "politics at the point of production"<sup>16</sup> that shaped workshop relations, influenced the adoption of new kinds of technology, and stimulated shifts in the kinds of cloth made and marketed. In effect, this study applies to smaller industries approaches taken by recent studies of textile factories, railroads, and coal and gold mines in examining both the ways capital has mobilised and disciplined labour and the ways workers' actions have compelled capitalists to adapt their strategies of control.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Tessie Liu, *The Weaver's Knot: The Contradictions of Class Struggle and Family Solidarity in Western France, 1750–1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 33; Paul Thompson, *The Nature of Work: An Introduction to Debates on the Labour Process* (London: Macmillan, 1985) and Michael Burawoy, *The Politics of Production: Factory Regimes under Capitalism and Socialism* (London: Verso, 1985). For a work that stresses the politics of labour in contemporary informal industry in India, see de Neve, *The Everyday Politics of Labour*.

<sup>17</sup> Ian Kerr, *Building the Railways of the Raj, 1850–1900* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995); Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India*; Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Subho Basu, *Does Class Matter? Colonial Capital and Workers' Resistance in Bengal, 1890–1937* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).

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By focusing more closely on historical contingency, the regional economy, and the politics of the workplace, moreover, my analysis raises questions about the value of any straightforward transitional narrative inherent in the unfolding of capitalism. Although he certainly disagrees with the view that all significant change was in the direction of large-scale industry, Roy still suggests that patterns of transformation *within* artisan manufacture reflect a more general process of modernisation characterised by a steady commercialisation of the economy, a shift from custom to contract in production relations, the proletarianisation of the work force, and other parallel tendencies. In early sections of this book, I explore pre-colonial artisanal manufacture, showing that many of the features associated with capitalist production were already present in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. More critically, I question the view that western-Indian manufacture by artisans moved towards any kind of universal shape during the late colonial period.<sup>18</sup> The implication that the organisation of production shifted from traditional to modern forms overlooks the ways in which the persistence and reproduction of non-contractual obligations based on caste, family and kinship, and social patronage were essential to the functioning of small town capitalism throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Because production relations were forged through interactions in the regional economy and in artisan workshops, they came to acquire very particular shapes in the towns and small cities of western India.

Finally, this study also relies on a chronological structure that cuts across conventional time frames. Works on artisan production, including Roy's two major books, have commonly focused on periods determined by major political developments: the late pre-colonial period, the initial phase after the establishment of British power, and the early twentieth century up to independence. Once one leaves behind debates about the impact of colonialism and recognises that the colonial state and global developments associated with British ascendancy were only two factors among many influencing change, the logic of a periodisation based on political chronology becomes increasingly tenuous. As I analysed some previously neglected patterns of change, such as the development of powerloom production, the year 1947 proved awkward as an ending point. Certainly most participants in local industries did not see independence as a crucial demarcation in their economic lives; indeed, it was

<sup>18</sup> These concepts have been critiqued by a number of scholars of large-scale industries as well, most notably Chandavarkar, "Industrialization in India."