

YAZDANI, KAVEH. *India, Modernity and the Great Divergence. Mysore and Gujarat (17th to 19th C.).* [Library of Economic History, vol. 8.] Brill, Leiden 2017. xxxii, 669 pp. Maps. € 205.00; \$246.00.

The question that constitutes the point of departure of this ambitious book by Kaveh Yazdani, is why pre-colonial India did not experience the growth of industrial capitalism, while “advanced parts of Europe” (p. 6) did. This is a subject that has, in the last few years, increasingly invited the attention of scholars who seek to understand developments in the global economy within the prism of the Great Divergence. Recent literature has shed some light on the origins of this economic disparity by, amongst other things, underlining the deleterious effect that colonialism had on the South Asian economy, while simultaneously highlighting the need for further research.¹

In his own contribution to this debate, Yazdani chooses to study two South Asian regions, Gujarat and Mysore, extrapolating therefrom a general view of the subcontinent’s preparedness for capitalism in the period spanning the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. This preparedness is measured by the catch-all term modernity, which Yazdani understands as a “long-term process” that “radically transformed the economic, social, political, judicial, military, epistemological, cognitive and techno-scientific structures of society, as well as the basis of energy consumption” (p.23). Given this ample definition, it is as unsurprising that Yazdani’s argument spans 576 pages, as that it features forays into

social relations, agriculture, commerce, manufacture, science and technology, the military establishment, administration, governance and power structures [...] education, intellectual currents, mobility, transport and infrastructure, living standards, property rights, commercial rules and regulations, legal practices, the status of women, as well as the impact of caste and religion (p.17).

Even the most seasoned global historian might be somewhat taken aback by this research agenda, to say nothing of area specialists, who might devote an entire lifetime to the exploration of at most a handful of these aspects.

This book consists of an introduction, three chapters, and an epilogue. After providing an overview of his method and sources, Yazdani uses the first chapter to sketch the South Asian context against which the specific cases of Mysore and Gujarat might be read. Here, he argues that neither critical thinking, nor intellectual curiosity were absent in precolonial South Asia, as evidenced, for instance, by the eagerness of Indo-Persian elites to learn about contemporary European intellectual fashions (pp. 70–71). South Asians were making their way to Europe and writing about what they saw there, as well as writing histories in a decidedly “modern” way. Samplings of evidence pertaining to scientific knowledge, technological invention, art, and the public sphere substantiate Yazdani’s argument that those who purport a “rise of the West” have frequently underestimated the dynamism of pre-colonial South Asia’s intellectual life. Yazdani lends nuance to this narrative, without challenging the premise of European superiority.

1. Prasannan Parthasarathi, *Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia Did Not. Global Economic Divergence, 1600–1850* (Cambridge, 2011). For an assessment of Parthasarathi’s argument and of the state of art in general, see Ulbe Bosma, “Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia Did Not”, *International Review of Social History*, 59:1 (2014), pp. 119–130.

Chapter two considers the case of precolonial Mysore. It is, however, devoted principally to the eighteenth century, to the reigns of Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan. Through a combination of primary sources (amongst which the hot potato that is the account of Francis Buchanan-Hamilton) and secondary literature, Yazdani demonstrates that the indicators of what he deems to be modernity – most notably, the presence of wage labour, commercialization, urbanization, the development of military technology, the trappings of a bureaucratic state, and increased agrarian production – were present in varying degrees in eighteenth-century Mysore. Indeed, the policies of Haidar and Tipu (for which Yazdani uses the term “Etatization”: the state’s appropriation of the means of production in a pre-national context), even appear to have nudged along progress on some of these fronts. For instance, like other rulers before him, Tipu appears to have actively sought the extension of the agrarian frontier by colonizing uncultivated land, building irrigation works, and subordinating intransigent rural intermediaries and chieftains (*poligars*). These measures appear to have attained a modicum of success, although Yazdani is careful to underline the difficulty of reaching any definitive conclusions about agrarian productivity, given the meagre data available. It is, however, surprising that the *Banjara* nomads – who Yazdani concedes played an important role in networks of exchange (p.231) – receive so little attention in the section on mobility. Moreover, given the significant historical presence of (nomadic) pastoralists in both of Yazdani’s regions of study, they would seem to warrant at least a mention in a study that also addresses the subject of rural productivity.

Chapter three explores the “modernity” of precolonial Gujarat. Through frequent recourse to the rich historiography of the commercial world of the Indian Ocean, Yazdani demonstrates that Gujarat possessed some of the same markers of “modernity” as did Mysore. There is evidence of wage labour being used in the textile industry, manufacture, and commerce thrived, urbanization, too, was particularly advanced for the subcontinent, while agrarian productivity appears to have responded to the external demand for cash crops in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These conditions existed in Gujarat, despite the fact that, in contrast to Mysore, it lacked a centralized state structure. Yazdani devotes some space to the unsteady balance of power in the region, which merchant groups, landed magnates and chieftains, imperial agents, cultivators, and artisans all influenced in different measure. These nuances make this section an enjoyable read, and both more insightful and convincing than the rather one-dimensional account of Tipu’s government. The reader might, however, be struck by the disproportionate attention that ports, particularly Surat, receive, while the large peninsula of Kathiawar is discussed far less. Certainly, it is such cities that best fill the criteria that Yazdani is searching for. On the other hand, the answer to why Gujarat as a region did not develop industrial capitalism might be enriched by paying more attention to precisely those sub-regions that, as per Yazdani’s definition, appeared to be the least “modern”.

Indeed, this criticism is pertinent to Yazdani’s study in its entirety, which seems to rely for explanations not primarily upon the wealth of data that he has taken the considerable trouble of amassing, but on a body of theory informed mostly by European historical experience. Searching for evidence of Smithian growth and Marxian dialectics in precolonial South Asia, he has found these to be present in the subcontinent, albeit in less pronounced form than in the West. The more interesting question of why such was the case is, however, answered only superficially, with resort to several old chestnuts and a range of theory. Yet, a satisfactory explanation of this disparity would seem to call at least as much for an in-depth analysis of social dynamics in Mysore and Gujarat, as for a neat model.

For the most part, however, such an analysis is absent from this study. Instead, Yazdani points to a variety of sparsely explained factors that he claims were responsible for disrupting the transition of both Gujarat and Mysore from what he terms “middle modernity” to full-scale industrial capitalism. In Mysore, he suggests, it was the shallow roots of this “modernity” that presented the main obstacle. Much of the region’s eighteenth-century growth appears to have been a response to state policy, and the state was preoccupied with crafting itself in the image of Europe, thereby failing to harvest indigenous potential for the development of capitalism. At the same time, a similar preoccupation with (Western-style) “modernization” appears to have worked out better in Gujarat (p. 561). Here, Yazdani reads the presence of reformist social groups such as the Satya Narainis, as well as the interest in modernizing production methods along European lines (as visible in shipbuilding, for instance), as evidence of an organic push to become more like the “modern” West. Despite lagging behind northwestern Europe on the road to capitalism, Yazdani suggests that Gujarat might well have caught up with the competition, had it not been colonized by the British. Caste, too, makes several fleeting appearances in this book, as a constraint on South Asia’s modernization: it limited mobility in the labour market, it hindered the development of nationalism in the subcontinent, it obstructed innovation and the dissemination of knowledge, all this being asserted rather than demonstrated. What caste was, however, is not discussed in any depth. This is problematic, for caste practices were and continue to be closely bound to both time and space. “Caste” is almost as much of a catch-all as the term “modernity”, and an understanding of its workings calls for greater attention to context.

In the end, therefore, and surprisingly for a book so full of rich data, Yazdani’s conclusions present a somewhat too-schematic picture of developments in both Mysore and Gujarat. A deeper exploration of a few of the subjects he set out to study (perhaps at the expense of others), as well as an inquiry into the social dynamics of places that did not meet his criteria of “modernity” might have shed more light on mechanisms of capital accumulation in South Asia. It might also have gone a long way to reconfiguring often implicit assumptions about the historical unity of the subcontinent, assumptions that Yazdani is rightly critical of (p. 20) and that seem frequently to structure debates on the “Great Divergence”. Nevertheless, the reader will find this monumental study full of interesting material, even though it is underrepresented in the conclusions at the end of each chapter, as well as in the brief epilogue.

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