H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Douglas E. Haynes. *Small Town Capitalism in Western India: Artisans, Merchants and the Making of the Informal Economy, 1870–1960.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 344 S. ISBN 978-0-521-19333-7.

Reviewed by Sebastian Schwecke
Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (February, 2013)

D. E. Haynes: Small Town Capitalism in Western India

With *Small Town Capitalism in Western India* Douglas Haynes has provided an in-depth historiographical study of the Indian artisanal economy in colonial and early post-colonial India, which is exhaustive in detail and, at the same time, constitutes a welcome contribution to a shift in emphasis with regard to a number of debates on modern Indian history. While Haynes' work consciously starts as an attempt to provide an alternative framework to the de-industrialization paradigm, its actual contribution is larger than this: Haynes has provided a study which provides highly detailed insights into the actual livelihoods and living standards of artisans in the textile industry of western India, instead of focusing on the situation of the industry, and in this way he provides material that will be of high interest to scholars working on many different fields of modern Indian history, including among others work relations, labor conditions, gender relations, entrepreneurship and the development of capitalism in India, and migration. Though inspired by the work of other scholars, including both Tirthankar Roy and Jan Breman, the study critically engages with their approaches in an attempt to refute the tendencies of many historians to place the informal 'outside history' in a context in which clear boundaries between the formal and the informal are difficult to ascertain.

The originality of Haynes' approach lies in the precise combination of written and oral sources which was made possible by an almost two decades-long process of research that enables the author to give similar weight to oral sources and the documentary record. In combination, the two kinds of sources provide extremely valuable insights into the parts of the historical development that typically remain outside of the purview of 'formal' history. While Haynes has published parts of his research on the artisanal economy of western India in earlier articles, the book brings out a variety of new perspectives and does so, to put it simply, in an admirably comprehensive and stringent way. While it certainly does not provide a linear narrative of transition, it certainly constitutes a narrative of transition (or change) which benefits strongly from the scope of the book.

It starts with a contextual chapter, which serves to place a new perspective on the de-industrialization thesis. Far from being merely a revisionist historiography, the main point brought into the discourse by Haynes here is that while de-industrialization may not have been the straightforward process it has often been made out to be, the study of textile production in colonial India tends to be restricted to the displacement of artisans by the emerging textile mills or else to macro-level studies of the textile output. Both of these, Haynes argues, serve to conceal the rather complex and shifting situations faced by the weavers themselves or, in other words, of weavers' individual and collective agency and their efforts to cope in the face of rapidly changing markets and socioeconomic conditions. Haynes then continues to provide a thick description of the various layers of contextual parameters which made up the world of Indian weavers from the last decades of the 19th century to the early post-colonial period, covering among others the rise (and decline) of urban weaving centers, the development of consumption patterns and the attempts by weavers to find niche products to evade competition from Indian mills and imported textiles, and the changing role of merchants, moneylenders and *karkhandars* (workshop owners).

While these chapters focus on the ways in which weavers were able to cope with fluid conditions in the places where they were able to do so - and therefore tend to paint a picture of modest success - Haynes rectifies any such assumption in his depiction of the distressingly low living standards of most weavers in chapter 5 which forms an essential ingredient in his narrative that complements the earlier depiction of market changes. While a variety of weavers' entrepreneurial activities were crucial, according to the author, to cope

with the large-scale changes brought on by the newly emerging socioeconomic and political situations, they were able to safeguard the mass of the weavers' (partial) independence in the production process, though only at the high cost of continued poverty. The oral sources collected by Haynes are especially valuable in this part of his narrative to depict the continued trade-offs between the individual weaving families' struggle to safeguard their livelihoods and their attempts to maintain as much independence from the merchants, moneylenders, mill owners and *karkhandars* as well as from the colonial state's social programs in cases of famine.

Following the in-depth depiction of weavers' lives and livelihoods in colonial India, Haynes goes on to narrate the state's responses to the continued poverty of artisans, notably including the colonial state's failure to fully comprehend the functioning of the artisanal economy which according to the author provided one of the main obstacles to the success of limited welfare programs and the state's initial attempts to introduce cooperatives. In a welcome deviation from historiographical custom, Haynes draws a line of continuity from the late colonial state's small-scale industry policies directed at artisans to the opportunities and problems posed by the wartime economy of the 1940s and early post-colonial policies. In doing so, Haynes provides a detailed narrative of the incremental loss of control over artisanal production by the merchant-moneylender (*sahukar*) which, instead, increasingly shifted towards the *karkhandars* who were better placed to take advantage of the shifts in markets as well as in state policy and emerged as the focal points of the artisanal economy, often as heads of cooperatives and in close alliance with local political establishments, during the 1950s. This shift of control over the artisanal economy, according to the author, went hand in hand with a shift in 'the politics of the workshop': the organisation of artisanal labor in the face of state attempts to provide and extend labor regulation as well as the attempts of small-scale capitalists to counter and evade these regulations, at times in connivance with the representatives of the everyday state.

Douglas Haynes has provided one of the most interesting recent accounts of the history of labor in modern India, situated at the interface of the formal and the informal sector, and the laborious development of capitalism *within* the Indian economy. Crucially, though, Haynes' work is clearly transgressing the confines of labor history and will be of major interest to a much wider range of scholars of modern Indian history and society.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Sebastian Schwecke. Review of Haynes, Douglas E., *Small Town Capitalism in Western India: Artisans, Merchants and the Making of the Informal Economy, 1870–1960.* H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. February, 2013.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38256

Copyright © 2013 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.