

Kaveh Yazdani. *India, Modernity and the Great Divergence: Mysore and Gujarat (17th to 19th C.).*

Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2017. xxxii + 669 pp. \$246.00, cloth, ISBN 978-90-04-33079-5.

Reviewed by Georg Berkemer

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (December, 2017)

This book is monumental in many respects. While reading this weighty tome of exactly seven hundred pages, the old question of socioeconomic history may come to mind: why in the last three centuries did the west “rise” and the east “decline”? This question itself, as the book makes abundantly clear, reduces a whole bundle of entangled historical developments all over the world to the false simplicity of a reductionist Eurocentric view. From the vantage point of Yazdani’s global history, this question does not even make sense. Instead, Yazdani’s book takes two very diverse cases of historical trajectories towards a “modern”, i.e. capitalist, society and raises the question in each case in the negative: what made these promising cases fail? In the end, he uses his data for a three-point comparison: Mysore, Gujarat, England.

In accordance with this methodological approach, the book is divided into five sections. Two preliminary ones – both historiographical essays in themselves – provide the reader with, first, an introduction of the analytical tools used in the coming sections. Next, the multidimensional method of analysis is introduced in detail. Most important in these sections is Yazdani’s redefinition of the term “modernity” so that it fits his structural history. “Modern” in his global approach is dependent neither on Europe as the geographical centre nor as the internal clock of world history. Modernity no longer begins sometime be-

tween the renaissance and the revolutions of 16th century, but in Song China and Islamic Arabia (approx. 10th cent. CE). As a consequence, his periodization does away with the Eurocentric “middle ages” and subdivides “modern” into the sequence “early”, “middle”, and “late”. This implies a “simultaneity of the non-simultaneous” (p. 31), reminding one of Max Weber’s “medieval” social structure of the ancient north Indian Maurya empire.

The main part of the book uses the analytical dimensions introduced before in the two sections called “Mysore” and “Gujarat”. In its search for the capitalist mode of production, Smithian growth and labour as a commodity, the book appears a bit like the old series “History and culture of the Indian people”, in so far as it covers as many aspects of life as possible. However, the author has no nationalist agenda, but reviews huge amounts of historical sources and current literature pertaining to the question of modernity. Not only politics, commerce and technology are looked into, but also the state of the law, freedom of thought, gender relations, art and culture, philosophy and sciences, movement of people and ideas, and even the potential role of adverse climatic conditions such as monsoon and winter. The author convincingly argues that Mysore and Gujarat are the most likely test cases in South Asia for such a study. Both were well advanced on

their way towards a capitalist society when this road was closed to them.

Mysore's way to modernity is closely connected with the ascent of Hyder Ali to the de facto rulership in 1761 and ends in 1798. Hyder and his son Tippu Sultan formed with the aid of French experts a centralized state. The aim was to create a mercantilistic economic base for the maintenance of an army that could defeat the British in south India. Yazdani describes this state building as "Etatization": "The analysis at hand, however, suggests that Mysore was in a transitional phase, implying that the possibilities for a more or less homegrown process of industrialization were open, if all the tools, machines and innovations of the British Industrial Revolution would have become available." (p. 352). Parallels with Europe, here the German states, Austria-Hungary and France, to which at the time the British had no objection against the sale of industrial hardware, are evident. A curious lapse in an otherwise so well researched book: There never was a "German Emperor Friedrich II around 1774" to which Haider Ali is said to have written a letter (p. 288).

Very different from the outset to this fast and almost successful attempt to create a modern state, no-one in Gujarat ever attempted a deliberate modernization of its economy. Devoid of a central authority after the withdrawal of the Mogul empire, we find instead a strong mercantile class whose ways to do business came close to a capitalist mode of commerce. Gujarat was part of a world-wide commercial network since Roman times, and Yazdani observes an unbroken development based on agrarian surplus, a skilled labour force mainly in the textile industry and long-standing development and growth since the times of early modernity. Here, more than in the case of Mysore, potentially reverse systemic factors such as the traditionally weak state, the consequences of the decline of the Mogul empire, the dominance of the merchant class, continuous piracy, religious factors, weak monetization and

hoarding of precious metals can be analysed. While the older literature cites factors like these as causes for the failure of capitalism to appear, Yazdani sees them as difficulties similar to those in Continental Europe. "In short, the social structure of some manufacturing centres in Gujarat did not stand in opposition to capitalist social relations and offered potentialities for a transition towards proletarianization and factory work." (p. 368). He also emphasizes that the political influence of merchants was much higher than supposed by older literature. No strict separation between commerce and politics exists in contemporary sources (p. 406), neither does religion play a decisive role: "By all accounts the Hindu religion does not appear to have been an obstacle to merchant capitalist endeavours." (p. 513)

The last chapter, called "Epilogue", contains most of the author's answer to the initial set of questions concerning modernity and India's way towards it. Yazdani made it sufficiently clear in the previous chapters that there is no single path towards an "Indian modernity", neither within the paradigm of the conventional monolinear, Eurocentrist, and neo-liberal narratives, nor within their multilinear or multicentrist alternatives. Mysore and Gujarat - and other regions of the subcontinent one may add - have their very specific and diverse histories of development and stagnation. Given other circumstances one or the other may have made an early dash to the finish line. The "what if" of counterfactuality is not the topic of the last chapter, however. Instead, the author makes the point that a "late modern" India in which society might have taken the shape of British industrialization and capitalist labour conditions became impossible, despite Mysore's and Gujarat's separate and diverse tendencies towards it. Only when British romantic notions of India as a still living ancient society found themselves combined with concrete economic interests of the colonial state, "failure" became evident. The ideal India of the 19th century was an agrarian society. The British needed cheap labour for the procure-

ment of cash crops and raw materials to fuel their domestic industries and began to shape their colony to such a purpose. As a consequence, the 19th century saw a phase of de-industrialization (e.g. state of the art steam engines subject to discriminating tariffs), religious learning replacing secular education with the consequence of increasing analphabetism, and so on.

From the navigation act of 1651 to the 19th century exploitation of the global south, this tale is by no means a new one. It has a prominent place in apologetic debates where it serves as an excuse for the failure of southern elites to produce a sustainable economy. However, in the case at hand this argument gains a high level of conviction in the light of the data presented in the previous chapters, without playing into the hands of such ideologies.

This review is based on a print-on-demand volume. Exact appearance of the printed version, especially the maps, cannot be evaluated from the volume at hand. Besides the maps, it contains a glossary, a comprehensive bibliography, and several indices.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

Citation: Georg Berkemer. Review of Yazdani, Kaveh. *India, Modernity and the Great Divergence: Mysore and Gujarat (17th to 19th C.)*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. December, 2017.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=51214>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.