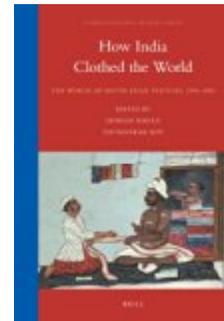


Giorgio Riello, Tirthankar Roy, eds. *How India Clothed the World: The World of South Asian Textiles, 1500-1850*. Global Economic History Series. Leiden: Brill, 2009. Illustrations, maps, tables. xxxiv + 489 pp. \$189.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-17653-9.

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Indian Textiles and the Global Economy

This handsome edited book, the fourth volume in the Global Economic History series edited by Maarten Prak and Jan Luiten van Zenden, examines the history of Indian cloth between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. It consists of fifteen essays, most contributed by well-known senior historians though a few have been written by younger scholars who have done major new empirical research. The book is divided into three sections. The first explores the movement of Indian cloth and cotton in the world economy before 1850. Included here are essays covering several centuries by Anthony Reid on Southeast Asia, Pedro Machado on the eastern coastal regions of Africa, and Joseph Inikori on West Africa. H. V. Bowen, who discusses Indian cotton in China during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and Kaoru Sugihara, who examines the intra-Asian trade in the first half of the nineteenth century, provide essays that are less directly centered on the theme of cloth but that nonetheless make significant contributions to understanding India's connections to the larger economy of Asia. The second section is composed of essays on the character of textile manufacture within South Asia by David Washbrook and Ian Wendt on South India, Om Prakash on Bengal, and Lakshmi Subramanian on Gujarat, while Bishnupriya Gupta contributes an essay on South Asia as a whole. Finally, the last section looks at the effects of the trade in Indian textiles on Europe as well as the issue of "deindustrialization" on the subcontinent, with pieces by Giorgio Riello, Beverly Lemire, George Bryan Souza, Maxine Berg, and Prasan-

nan Parthasarathi. By including studies on such a wide range of topics, this volume documents the multiple ways in which Indian textiles became involved in the world economy and the character of the decline in their importance.

The essays in the initial section especially highlight South Asia's links to non-European regions. Particularly stimulating here are the pieces by Machado and Inikori on Africa. Using Portuguese sources that have previously been little explored, Machado shows that western Indian textiles generated a significant demand in East and Southeast Africa both as consumer items and as a medium of exchange for ivory and slaves. He highlights the role of high-caste Indian merchants, or Vaniyas, who came to assume a central position in commercial networks along the eastern coast of Africa, both because they were able to develop strong understandings of African cloth preferences and because they forged effective methods of procuring textiles from artisans in Gujarat. Machado's research suggests that the decline of commerce in Indian textiles in Africa only took place several decades into the nineteenth century, much later and more gradually than existing literature suggests. After demonstrating the considerable dynamism of textile production and interregional commerce in West Africa through the seventeenth century, Inikori discusses the effects of imported textiles, both Indian and European, on the region. He argues that these imports and the slave trade (in which cloth played a significant part)

had a disruptive impact on western African commercial and industrial activity. Less convincingly, he argues that cloth imports served to inhibit the potential of West Africa for “proto-industrialization” (in which merchants become intensively involved in processes of commercial manufacture). He thus resorts to a flawed model whose evolutionary implications have largely lost favor in a European context due to the lack of any proven relationship between industry in regions where production was organized on a “proto-industrial” basis before 1750 and later patterns of industrialization. Though he might have avoided suggesting that a particular path to development was in the making, Inikori does furnish valuable evidence for the effects of the trade in Indian (and European) cottons on West African textile production.

The essays in the second section on the Indian context will seem somewhat less original to specialists but they make a vital contribution to the overall shape of the volume. South Asian historians have written extensively on cloth manufacture in India during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the authors featured here have long made important contributions to this literature. To some extent, their essays highlight existing findings for a new audience, though often with some fresh twists. Washbrook points out the vast dimensions of textile production in southern India through the eighteenth century, the role of textiles in the commercialization of the economy, and the relocation of cotton weaving from the interior to the coastal centers as European demand grew. He hypothesizes that commercial manufacture attracted weavers because of the freedom and security from famine that cash earnings offered, but he also suggests that over time the movement toward the coasts rendered the textile industry more vulnerable to political instability and to European efforts to establish control over weavers. Prakash provides some fascinating and compelling detail from Dutch records to provide substantiation for the well-established argument that textile manufacture in Bengal during the late eighteenth century shifted from market-determined forms of production to forms shaped by coercion, and that this had harmful effects on the economic health of the textile industry. Drawing on her considerable research on Surat, Subramanian argues that efforts to develop stronger controls over weavers and merchant-intermediaries were made by the English East India Company in western India as well. But her work also shows that undercontractors possessed significant room to maneuver there throughout the eighteenth century, in part because of the fractured character of British power before 1800 and in part because of the

importance of the demand from other European companies. Gupta, seemingly in sharp contrast to Prakash, suggests that the East India Company’s assumption of political control did not lead easily to control over India’s textile trade, pointing to significant evidence of the continued importance of commercial competition from Asian merchants in global markets. He attributes the failure of the company to obtain sufficient supplies and the reduction of weavers’ earnings less to the impact of coercion than to the increased costs of production in India and to stable or even declining prices in Europe. The contrasts in position between the various authors over the extent and impact of coercion provide a valuable overview of the state of the literature (though they may illuminate regional differences as well), and the editors were wise in not imposing any uniform argument on this section.

As a whole, the essays on Indian textiles and the European economy contribute a new perspective to the literature about the causes of industrialization and the “great divergence” between Asia and Europe. They in effect challenge the binary image of a dynamic West and a stagnant South Asia by suggesting that it was involvement in the Indian textile trade before 1800 that often prompted innovation in Europe. Riello argues that European merchants, through a long period of “apprenticeship” in the Asian and East African markets, learned much about how to customize cotton textile products and develop trading methods to meet consumer demands. The accumulation of knowledge in this trade, he suggests, “should be seen an integral part of a narrative of economic development based upon cotton” (p. 346). Souza demonstrates how French merchants extensively investigated Indian techniques of handling materials and of printing and dyeing cloth, techniques that were considerably more sophisticated than the approaches used in Europe. He argues that such investigations allowed Europeans to “converge” with Indian cloth production methods before they could later “diverge” through new forms of rapid technological change (pp. 347-348). Berg argues that a search for *quality* (rather than cheapness), spawned in large part by the extensive consumption and trade in many varieties of luxury cotton cloth from Asia (especially calicoes), prompted European entrepreneurs to develop new methods of production during the late eighteenth century. Her analysis thus firmly places European industrialization in a global context of commercial interaction. Lemire’s fascinating contribution is the only essay on Europe not framed around the effort to explain later patterns of industrial change. It examines the role of Indian cloth in the generation of fashion-driven patterns

of consumption in Europe after 1500, and it particularly brings to light the way that men altered their styles of clothing in response to the new imports. Certainly, the emphasis given to the place of consumption in economic history is one of the great contributions of this volume.

Finally, in contrast to the other essays in this section, Parthasarathi focuses on the Indian side of the “great divergence.” He offers a strong defense of his controversial arguments made in previous writings contending that living standards of artisans in precolonial South India were relatively high on a world scale but then declined sharply after British control was established. He also provides significant evidence of “deindustrialization”—that is, the decline of employment and output—in the textile industry of South India during the nineteenth century. But unlike most scholars who have examined this subject, he places as much emphasis here on India’s loss of its global markets as on the impact of Lancashire imports into India in accounting for deindustrialization. Like Wendt’s piece earlier in the volume, Parthasarathi stresses the particularly steep decline of employment in hand spinning of yarn by women.

While it is hard to take the specific authors to task—all examine valuable subjects in original ways—the essays on Europe as a whole do overlook some interesting questions posed by scholars working on other regions. Why must the role of Indian cotton cloth in the West be analyzed primarily in light of arguments about the causes of later patterns of industrialization and the economic divergence between Europe and South Asia? Why not also examine, as the essays in the section on non-European regions do, the role of intermediary figures who carried Indian cloth to more localized buyers or the role of cloth in stimulating the circulation of other kinds of goods? In effect there is a certain lack of symmetry here between the approaches taken in the sections on Europe and those on Africa/Asia, one caused seemingly not by some flaw in the design of the volume but by a lack of “convergence” in the kinds of questions that have preoccupied specialists on the different regions.

A similar asymmetry occurs when authors throughout the volume consider the nineteenth century. There is a strong preoccupation with the issue of decline. Even Wendt’s valuable contribution, which critiques the tendency of scholars to view developments during this period in purely negative terms, and which argues that we should adopt a picture of stagnancy and growth differ-

entiated on the basis of artisanal specializations and gender, is framed around this topic. No doubt, the importance of the Indian textile industry in the global economy did contract over much of the nineteenth century. But the issue of deindustrialization comes across in this book as the only relevant intellectual concern when assessing this period, while such subjects as commercial networks, production relations, and living standards among those who persisted in the manufacture of cloth—and many hundreds of thousands did—are relegated to an insignificant place. This tendency is a bit surprising given the importance of these subjects in the essays covering seventeenth- and eighteenth-century textile manufacture and the fact that one of the editors, Tirthankar Roy, has repeatedly questioned the dominance of the deindustrialization narrative in his work. The volume thus does not provide a full sense of the ways the textile industry adapted to the loss of its global markets, a theme that seems very relevant to the overall purpose of the volume. Of course, these kinds of unevenness in perspective are common in any collection of essays, and they seem a minor concern when compared to the great strengths of the volume.

Discussion of this book demands a word about production value. This is a subject I would ordinarily ignore in a review due to considerations of space, but the editors and publishers have so far exceeded conventional standards that I cannot leave it unmentioned. Particularly noteworthy here is the provision of many high quality illustrations, quite a number in color. These, along with the excellent maps and tables, seriously inform the arguments made in the essays. Of course, the resulting price is one that few individuals will be able to afford; this book will be purchased mainly by libraries and other institutional buyers. But because of its appearance and the lucid character of the essays, it is unlikely that it will sit unused on library shelves; it should attract nonspecialists to pick it up and learn about the role of Indian cloth in the global economy.

Overall, this edited volume has many valuable individual essays—all are worth reading—but it is also one whose contribution as a whole surpasses that of its parts. There are few books that can equal its usefulness in providing readers with an appreciation of the variety of interconnections between different regions of the world before the nineteenth century. Cloth, it clearly demonstrates, is an invaluable entry point into global economic history.

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