



Karolina Hutková. *The English East India Company's Silk Enterprise in Bengal, 1750-1850.* Rochester: Boydell Press, 2019. xii + 257 pp. \$120.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-78327-394-2.

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Discontinuities in the Indian Silk Industry

Karolina Hutkova's book, *The English India Company's Silk Enterprise in Bengal*, has two objectives. The first is to show that mercantilist policies helped to make the East India Company's silk enterprise in Bengal a success. The second is to argue that the eventual decline of the silk industry in Bengal during the nineteenth century was due to the abandonment of mercantilism in favor of laissez-faire policies in Britain. Hutkova's engagement with political economy in this book allows her to demonstrate how contemporary ideas in Britain influenced, developed, and eventually led to the decline of the silk industry in its colony in Bengal. Meanwhile, by employing methodologies of business history the author is able to utilize business models to try and understand the silk enterprise of the East India Company in Bengal during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. This permits the author to place the silk enterprise in Bengal within the structural confines of a business and systematically analyze it by introducing different variables like political, economic, and social factors. The author deserves praise for navigating an array of complicated issues like the global silk supply chain, intellectual debates on political economy, and interregional technological transfers, to

present a clear picture of the silk industry during the early modern period.

According to Hutkova, the English East India Company's acquisition of both political and economic control over the Indian province of Bengal in the middle of the eighteenth century was accompanied by a simultaneous increase in its financial liabilities. Because the company relied heavily on the revenue extracted from Bengal to pay off those liabilities, it needed to come up with a better way of transferring its income from Bengal to Britain. Options such as shipping bullion from Bengal to Britain or drawing bills of exchange were considered too unwieldy, so the East India Company decided to invest in producing what it called the "choicest goods" (p. 51). The idea was that the company would invest in producing these goods in Bengal and then earn profits by exporting them. Now, in the eighteenth century neither India nor Britain was among the premier silk producers of the world; that honor went to different regions in Italy, France, and China. Due to the prevalent mercantilist policies in Britain, importation of silk fabric was prohibited to protect the silk industry there. But these protectionist measures did not apply to raw silk (one of the abovementioned "choicest goods") and so Britain became the target mar-

ket for the East India Company to export the raw silk it was producing in Bengal. But the company soon realized that the silk being produced in Bengal was of such low quality that it would not meet the demands of the British market, so several steps were taken to improve its quality. Many European experts from Britain, France, and Italy were sent to Bengal to study and effect changes to the raw silk manufacturing industry there. These changes not only introduced new technologies but also led to organizational changes through the establishment of Italian-style filatures for silk reeling in Bengal. The results of such efforts became obvious as the quality of raw silk being produced in Bengal improved and it became the largest raw silk exporter to Britain between 1773 and 1829 (p. 105). But unfortunately for the English East Indian Company this success story did not last long, as the mercantilist protectionist policies that backed its silk enterprise gradually began to lose steam in Britain by the end of the eighteenth century and were reversed by the nineteenth century. The new type of political economy that replaced mercantilism was based on ideas of *laissez-faire*, which advocated the removal of all barriers to trade and business and aimed to demolish the monopolies created by protectionism. As such the East India Company was soon in the crosshairs of this new political economy, first losing its monopoly over the Indian trade and then being forced to sell its silk enterprise in 1833. But the private entrepreneurs who took over from the company's silk business had neither the political and economic clout nor the technical know-how to sustain the silk industry in Bengal. Consequently, the raw silk-exporting industry of Bengal went into a permanent downward spiral, and by the 1870s its share in the market had become "negligible" (p. 164).

A historical debate that Hutkova seems interested to get into in this book is the one on deindustrialization. According to her, the East India Company's initial success in its endeavors to produce raw silk in Bengal "challenges the perception" (p. 4) that exploitative British institutions caused

deindustrialization in India. She tries to prove her point in two ways, first by describing the peculiarities of silk manufacturing and then by comparing the European factory system with filatures established by the East India Company in Bengal for silk reeling. Hutkova shows that, unlike many other industries, raw silk cannot be produced by the primary sector alone, that is, sericulture. Silk requires activity in the secondary sector too, like reeling and throwing to produce raw silk that can be used for manufacturing silk fabrics. Under the East India Company these kinds of secondary-sector activities were being carried out in centralized locations like filatures, which Hutkova compares to the contemporary European factory system. This allows Hutkova to reexamine the popular notion in economic history that the factory production-based Industrial Revolution took place in Europe because high wages forced investments into highly productive labor-saving technologies. But Hutkova points out that these preconditions are not necessary for a successful centralized production process. She shows that the centralized silk-producing filatures in Bengal were so successful because they managed to maintain high productivity while keeping wages low. The author should be commended for presenting an alternate narrative to the mainstream views on the Industrial Revolution and for exploring other, parallel paths to growth. But does this really help Hutkova to challenge the deindustrialization thesis? The idea that the British East India Company converted India into a primary goods and raw material exporting economy from one that exported mostly manufactured goods forms a cornerstone of the deindustrialization thesis.[1] It is quite clearly mentioned by Hutkova that in the eighteenth century Bengal was producing both silk fabrics as well as raw silk, but since Britain had banned the importation of silk fabrics the East India Company encouraged its agents to concentrate on raw silk manufacturing in Bengal. Therefore, regardless of how successful the silk filatures were in Bengal, the outcome seems to support the deindustrialization thesis be-

cause the success was based on exporting raw silk from Bengal, a raw material used for producing silk fabrics. The support for this thesis is further strengthened because the concept of “drain of wealth” that is closely linked to it finds support in the text. Hutkova makes it very clear that the primary objective of the East India Company in investing and developing its silk enterprise in Bengal was to find an easier way to transport Bengal’s revenue to Britain. It is due to Hutkova’s claims of challenging the deindustrialization thesis while at the same time providing evidence that supports the thesis, that one is left to wonder if the debate here is only semantic in nature.

The treatment of archival sources in this book also deserves some scrutiny. Most of the primary sources are from archives located in or near London and, given the subject of the book, rightly belong either to the eighteenth or the nineteenth century. So, naturally, since most of these archival sources were originally written down by Europeans, they reflect the commonly held beliefs and prejudices of their period and demographic. It is our job as historians to interrogate these sources properly so that while extracting the information we need we are either able to separate ourselves from or at least point out to our readers, the beliefs and prejudices of the original creators of the source or document. Hutkova deserves praise for going through a huge number of primary sources, which has allowed her to present a well-structured argument in the book, but there are many occasions where a more thorough engagement with the sources could have been provided. It is due to the lack of such engagement that Indians in this book frequently come across as lazy, sly, and backward, while the English East India Company appears helpless, impotent, and bound by “market laws” (p. 81). Ironically, even though Hutkova does talk about the company waging war in India, when it comes to the silk industry it is the Indians who are projected as violent and oppressive, while the company is shown as helpless spectators to the said violence (for example, see pp. 102-103). After reading

the book, I am confident that Hutkova is more than capable of intensively engaging with the primary sources. So, the problem highlighted in this paragraph probably speaks more about the spatial limitations of the book than to the author’s capabilities.

Lastly, I must admit that initially I was a bit confused about what kind of space this book can occupy in historiography. Is this book a recommendation to reexamine the advantages of economic nationalism and protectionist policies of mercantilism? Or is this book a retelling of an event that challenges us epistemologically with regard to how we perceive and study political economy? But finally, I concluded that the best way to look at this book would be as a narrative of discontinuity that challenges the tautology of continuous economic growth that disregards shifts in political economy.

Note

[1]. For example, see Romesh Dutt, *The Economic History of India Under Early British Rule: From the Rise of the British Power in 1757 to the Accession of Queen Victoria in 1837* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Treubner & Co. Ltd, 1902), x.

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