

The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900-1940. By Rajnarayan Chandavarkar. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Pp. xviii, 468. \$69.95.

The stated purpose of this interesting book is “to examine the social formation of the working classes, both as it was influenced by and as it shaped the nature and development of industrial capitalism in colonial India” (p. 1). The author begins by discussing the “theoretical” problems to be addressed, which are largely the issues of how and whether class consciousness developed in the circumstances of Indian industrialization. Then the author sets the scene: Bombay in the early twentieth century. There is an excellent description of the rise of Bombay as a manufacturing center, of the workers lifestyles, and of their recruitment to the industrial labor force. The second part of the book is a detailed study of the cotton textile industry in Bombay: the strategies of the entrepreneurs, the organization of work in the mills, and the attempted “rationalization” of work in the mills in the 1920s and 1930s. The book has an extensive bibliography of official reports and other works on labor in Bombay which will be valuable to anyone doing research in this area.

The “theoretical” framework the author starts from is a sociological tradition heavily influenced by Marxist dogma on class and capitalism, on exploiters and the exploited. The author as a true scholar tests theory against the facts, and finds the theory lacking. Workers and labor markets in Indian industrialization do not fit the crude conceptions of Western sociology. Workers had important and complex relationships based on kinship, on neighborhood, and on caste, as well as on class solidarity. The work force itself was not segmented rigidly into a labor aristocracy with permanent well paid

jobs and a casual labor sector. “Far from a sharp distinction between a ‘labour aristocracy’ of factory workers and the rest of the working classes, there were numerous gradations of skill, status and income between them. Wage levels in one sector of the labor force were not determined in a market entirely divorced from every other.” (p. 122).

This is, however, only going to be the blinding light of revelation to those who have been imprisoned in the dark cage of modern sociological theory. To many these findings would be much as you would expect in any market economy. The author’s search for class consciousness also sometimes has the flavor of a medieval disquisition on essences, as in

“If Bombay’s workers retained their rural ties, they cannot be characterized as peasants temporarily in proletarian garb” (p. 166). So they are in essence proletarians, not peasants. What does that mean?

In the section on the cotton industry I had more dispute with the facts the author claimed to have uncovered. He focuses on the strategy of Indian managers, and finds much fault with it. His basic assumption is that competition is destructive, and he is thus disturbed to find evidence that the Bombay industry was highly competitive (“the tendency towards combination and collusion remained weak” (p. 240)). He accepts at face value the many complaints about managerial performance made in every country for every industry, even though they are often contradictory. On page 240 he notes sadly that in slumps the Bombay mills “produce whatever might be expected to sell immediately”, yet on page 258 the industry in the 1920s slump is criticized for producing the same goods as before “without regard to whether these find a ready market”

He argues in general that managers pursued a short run strategy to maximize profits which implied retaining old machinery for long periods and so not using the most advanced techniques, and not pursuing the most efficient use of labor. On the issue of technique the records of Platt's, a major supplier of machinery to the many textile industries around the world shows no sign that Indian mills were purchasing other than the latest designs available. And retention of machinery for long periods was a common characteristic of the entire textile industry. Nor do textile experts visiting India in the first three decades of the twentieth century remark on any clear technological lag. What they do remark on is the fact that Indian mills would use three to six times as many workers for a given amount of machinery as in countries such as the U. S. A.. This is where the book would seemingly be able to offer its most original contribution through the authors close reading of the sources. But the story told is not illuminating. The author assumes excess manning was a strategy designed to squeeze the maximum utilization out of machinery (though in fact Indian machine utilization rates were not particularly high). But India consistently had excess manning on tasks like doffing where there is not tradeoff between manning levels and machine utilization.

This is a work of great erudition. But unfortunately it casts little light on the great mystery of Indian colonial history. India, a complex society with a considerable cadre of entrepreneurs, security of property, very cheap labor, unhindered imports of the most advanced technology, and unfettered access to huge markets in Britain was unable to rapidly industrialize. Why?

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