

The Transition to a Colonial Economy: Weavers, Merchants and Kings in South India, 1720–1800. By Prasanna Parthasarathi. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. xii + 165 pp. Figures, tables. Cloth, \$55.00. ISBN 0-521-57042-5.

Reviewed by Kenneth R. Hall

This book addresses the South Indian weaving community of eighteenth-century India, its response to the economic and commercial opportunities of that era, and the impact of British East India Company colonial rule on this community. It is not the tale of initially impoverished laborers, but of artisan communities with a good deal of control over their own economic welfare, until the Company “violate[d] . . . deeply held notions of just rulership and a moral polity” (p. 130). Earlier South Indian polities adhered to local cultural constraints on a ruler’s initiatives against his subjects; in contrast, the British placed few limits on the use of force to overcome local resistance to the imperial objectives of their rule in India.

Parthasarathi provides a useful summary of prior debate on the circumstances and results of the transition to British rule in India. Was there an abrupt break with the past? Were there continuities or discontinuities of existing institutions? Was British rule good or bad for India? Did Indians lapse into socioeconomic stagnation because they were marginalized by British imperialism, or were they in part handicapped by their own “primordialism” (p. 2, n. 7)?

In this exhaustive study of the British East India Company records, Parthasarathi provides a microstudy of the South Indian agricultural community in the eighteenth-century precolonial era, which is characterized as a period of commercial expansion and relative prosperity for weavers and agriculturalists. Yes, the prices of South Indian textiles were low compared with prices charged for European textiles in Western marketplaces. But South Indian weavers had a lower relative cost of living due to the substantially higher level of agricultural productivity in the region. Parthasarathi asserts that this local prosperity attracted high levels of local investment. Agricultural land quality increased as new lands were cleared and irrigation systems built. In a region of labor shortage and worker mobility, the agricultural sector traditionally had to pay high wages in order to recruit the necessary labor.

The early-eighteenth-century weaving/cloth production system in South India was based on contracts between local cloth merchants and head weavers, and between head weavers and the artisans who completed the assignments; weavers received advances in kind (e.g., thread) or in cash and returned a finished product to their financial patron. This networking did not enslave the weavers within a system of debt-bondage, but provided them with a source of financial security

and semi-independence. Weavers might even negate their contracts by selling their finished cloth to the highest bidder and thereafter repay their advance. Merchants who attempted to assert control were defeated by the weavers' refusals to work for them. Weavers, after all, could always find another market for their cloth. In the first half of the eighteenth-century, therefore, the European company merchants had to operate in a competitive marketplace, in which they came up against local merchants as well as each other.

In the late 1860s, the British East India Company tried to bypass the local merchant intermediaries by negotiating directly with the weavers. This initially benefited the weavers, because the British company representatives provided a more secure source of credit. But when the British required local weavers to produce exclusively for the company and stipulated that the textiles must be of lower cost and higher quality, the weavers refused to go along and walked away from their contracts. They also supplied the British with cloth of lesser quality as a way of protesting their substandard rate of pay. The company eventually forged contractual alliances with select local merchant-intermediaries, offering them a guaranteed source of credit and the backing of company sepoy troops, who were deployed to enforce weaving standards and impose a cloth monopoly. Weavers protested periodically against these aggressive initiatives between 1768 and 1798, but by 1800 they no longer were able to resist the company's authority. Parthasarathi concludes that the circumstances of the company's eighteenth-century experiences in the South India cloth trade, coupled with its continuing need to show a profit from the sale of Indian textiles in European markets, logically dictated the development of the early imperial policies in South India.

I take exception to several of Parthasarathi's points. First, he is overly general in his depiction of the state and society before the eighteenth century. I would especially like to have been given more details about the continuing legacy of South India's Vijayanagara polity, and how the changing merchant/state relations prior to 1800 help explain eighteenth-century events. Second, Parthasarathi should have incorporated the broader scholarly literature on precolonial and colonial peasant communities (beyond the almost exclusively South Asia-based articles from the Subaltern Studies group that he cites), notably the work of James Scott on the *Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976) and *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), which explore issues of local protest and resistance to a center's authority. Third, consideration of the South Indian weavers sense of communal identity and subsequent empowerment within the context of caste, which the author acknowledges but does not pursue, would have been interesting. He also discounts the value of the South Indian artisan caste histories, which others have found to have some historical merit. Fourth, Parthasarathi might have examined the external networks established by the South Indian

weaving communities, as these would have had an impact on local production, tracing how they changed as the company asserted its monopoly over the market (e.g., Claude Markovits, *The Global World of Indian Merchants 1750–1947: Traders of Sind from Bukhara to Panama* [2000]).

Fifth, although Parthasarathi's study is solidly based on the company records, recent studies demonstrate the value of pairing these records with those of individual private traders who were also on the spot and in contact with their business partners in England (e.g., Anthony Webster, *Gentlemen Capitalists: British Imperialism in South East Asia, 1770–1890* [1998]). There is no attempt to go outside English-language and Tamil sources in order to incorporate records from the other European companies (e.g., French and Danish) that were competitors in South India during this time.

In sum, Parthasarathi has written an important and thought-provoking revisionist study of eighteenth-century South India's developing political economy. While falling short of being the definitive analysis, Parthasarathi's findings and interpretations raise substantive questions that can fruitfully be addressed in subsequent research.

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