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The English East India Company's Silk Enterprise in Bengal, 1750-1850: Economy, Empire and Business

By Karolina Hutková. London: Boydell Press, 2019. Pp 275.

Karolina Hutková's book is a welcome addition to our understanding of technology transfer in colonial context and its wider consequences on the colony and the metropole. The book focuses on English East India Company's (hereafter EEIC) "silk enterprise" in Bengal from 1750 to 1850.

The book sits at the intersection between global history, history of technology transfer, and business history in the eighteenth century and beyond. The narrative reflects overlapping strands of these distinct historiographies. The introduction situates EEIC's silk enterprise in the wider debates about the role and impact of EEIC's policies on Bengal's economy—and the history of EEIC and British political economy. The first chapter is an overview of the early modern silk industry across the globe. It also contextualizes EEIC's silk enterprise in Bengal. Next, the book shows how Britain's inability to produce raw silk necessitated the search for potential sources of supply (chapter 2). This need, Hutková argues, was underpinned by principles of Mercantilism. Consequently, Britain preferred a region within their expanding empire. Bengal became a "natural" choice, especially after the failed experiments with silk production in the Atlantic.

The book then discusses how EEIC embarked on its silk enterprise in Bengal (chapters 3 and 4) and why the peculiarities of silk production in Bengal made raw silk production a profitable venture (chapter 5).

The last two chapters focus on metropolitan Britain. The author argues that the aforementioned advantages were lost in the nineteenth century as *Laissez-Faire* became the preferred economic principle and EEIC lost its monopoly rights to trade in Asia (chapter 6).

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She then shows how disinclination in investing in raw silk production forced a formerly profitable sector to eventually disappear, with deleterious consequences for Bengal's economy (chapter 7).

The book makes an important contribution to the ongoing and contentious debates among historians and non-academics about the impact of imperial policies on economic fortunes of colonies. It also throws light on an instance of successful technology transfer in a colonial setting. Nevertheless, it is important to ask what is new about underlining how imperial policies did not have salutary impact on the economies of colonies. This is a lesser-known story, but there is no denying the idea of 'deindustrialization' as a consequence of imperial policies is time-worn. At a related level, there is an important inconsistency in the central hypothesis of the book. Hutková claims the "research challenges the perception that deindustrialization was the outcome of exploitative British institutions" (p. 4); yet in the same page she writes how the nineteenth century decline in raw silk production was an unintended result of shift to *LaissezFaire* policies in Britain. Unless the operative word here is "unintended"—and the author proffers evidence that is absent from the book—it is difficult to balance two such radically opposite views.

Technology transfer is an equally important theme of the book. Yet, is little use (except Ben Marsh's work on the United States) of the wider historiography of the subject—especially the recent literature about technology transfer in colonial South Asia, which focuses on limits (or lack thereof) of the process, including highlighting interactions between imported technologies and local societies. This absence of historiography in this book is particularly surprising, as some of the themes repeatedly underlined in the chapters (such as learning by doing, reliance on local knowledge, and resistance by silk farmers) show how even successful technology transfer in a colony was underpinned by more than financial investment and the desire for profit in the metropole.

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Also, the discussion is primarily about Britain and India, with a smattering of information about silk in early modern world—a rather diminutive outcome for a book explicitly conceptualized as a “global history” project (p. 7).

Overall, Hutkovà’s book adds to our knowledge of EEIC’s role as a manufacturer. It also underlines the significance of imperial policies and how shifting policies undermined even profitable ventures in a colony.

Aparajita Mukhopadhyay

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