

Yazdani, Kaveh: *India, Modernity and the Great Divergence. Mysore and Gujarat (17th to 19th C.)*. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers 2017. ISBN: 9789004330788; xxxii, 669 S.

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The cover of Yazdani's book is telling. It depicts the „British infantry of East India Company fighting against Mysorean and French troops at the Battle of Cuddalore, 1st of July 1783“, painted by Richard Simkin in 1890. While British superiority is visualized by the larger number of combatants, the perfectly ordered and uniform movement of the East India Company troops, the Mysorean counterpart is painted in disarray, including partly injured soldiers at the outset of losing the battle – the battle for modernity.

‘India, Modernity and the Great Divergence’ asks why the transition from agrarian socio-economic formations to a predominantly industrial capitalist socio-economic system first occurred in Western Europe and not in advanced regions of Asia, such as China or pre-colonial India. Yazdani addresses these questions through the use of two theoretical concepts: ‘transition’ and ‘modernity’. The main objective of this book is to counter the dualistic, but still dominant traditions of Eurocentrists on the one hand and reverse-‘Orientalists’ on the other (p. 61). Thereby, the bulk of this book focuses on Gujarat and Mysore and their actual development in the global context, not least because both states encountered British domination only by the turn of the eighteenth century and thus, provides a glimpse of ‘authentic’¹ Indian history.

In the introductory chapter Yazdani begins by providing working definitions of Orientalism, Eurocentrism, Modes of Production and Modernity. Especially the definition of the latter bears the potential of interdisciplinary applicability. He defines modernity as follows: In the abstract sense, „Modernity radically transformed the economic, social, political, judicial, military, epistemological, cognitive and techno-scientific structures of society, as well as the basis of energy consump-

tion. Significantly, human social relations and the relationship between humans and nature, humans and society and humans and God/Gods were transformed in a way unknown to ‘pre-modern’ humans.“ (p. 23)

In a number of influential publications, the West is associated with being the maker of universal modernity and thus, setting the pattern of development for all societies as a universal linear history (p. 23, note 57). This dominant tradition assumes that there was a rupture between modernity and tradition, the former statically constituting the ‘present’, whereas the latter is supposed to represent the ‘past’. But Yazdani clarifies that „modernity does not necessarily stand in contrast to tradition“ (p. 23). In fact, despite substitutions of the old with new forms and the continuity of pre-modern structures, certain ostensibly ‘traditional’ elements may even function as a ‘transitory carrier’ of the long-term process towards modernity. Although the reader may be pleased to be given precise definitions, the work could have profited from a methodological distinction between ‘modernity as an analytical toolkit’ and ‘modernity as an intra-European ideology of progress and development’. For the sake of clarification, one may call the former the ‘ontological concept of modernity’ and the latter the ‘hegemonic perception of modernity’. The same distinctions count for ‘Eurocentrism’ and ‘Orientalism’. Whereas the ‘ontological conceptualization’ of the very category serves as a gateway to ‘objectively’ discover and investigate history, the ‘hegemonic perception’ of modernity, tinted in deliberate ideological biases, more often than not remains a point of entry to assess ‘non-European’ states according to European standards.²

¹ i.e. pre-colonial history or indigenous history

² This has been addressed by Yazdani himself. At a public lecture held at the Humboldt University in Berlin he referred to the historian Michael Mitterauer, who, similar to Wolfgang Schluchter, distinguished between ‘heuristic Eurocentrism’ and ‘identificatory Eurocentrism’ which resonates with the critique that is being suggested in this review. While Mitterauer defines ‘heuristic Eurocentrism’ (in a Weberian tradition) as a tool that is devoid of any valuation of non-European countries, ‘identificatory Eurocentrism’, by contrast, is inextricably linked to patriotism, nationalism and chauvinism. K. Yazdani, lecture delivered at the Institute of Asian and African Studies, Humboldt Univer-

What is more, this introductory chapter could also have benefited from an additional section on the 'transitional period' that the author considers to be a highly dynamic process containing different phases in itself (p. 22, note 55). However, Yazdani suggests historicizing 'modernity' with the aid of three phases: early modernity (10th to 15th century), middle modernity (15th to 18th century) and late modernity (1830 to 1960s). This innovative periodization constitutes one of the many key contributions of this book.

Moreover, Yazdani's book consists of an intriguing quantity and quality of empirical evidence, with which he is able to enlighten the reader with detailed information on the very similarities and differences between 'middle modern' India and Europe.

In Chapter 1 the author contrasts the development of philosophical and scientific discussions in Europe and South Asia, inferring that the degree of rationalization and secularization were indeed hindering and/or facilitating the very progress. However, the questioning of tradition and the curiosity vis-à-vis Europe in Mughal India as well as the emergence of a 'public sphere' in pre-colonial India are indicating that a transitional phase always combines both traditional and modern elements.

Chapter 2 and 3 examine the secularization of society, institutional efficiency, property rights, the nascent bourgeois class consciousness, inter-communal and proto-national identity formations in Mysore and Gujarat. Yazdani concludes that both states, although very different in terms of trading establishments and relations between state and society, were less developed compared to parts of seventeenth and eighteenth century Western Europe. But meanwhile, the author argues that although the position of higher education, secular philosophical and scientific advancements and the rationalization of societies was much more evident in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe, it is most significant to acknowledge India's transition from an 'anthropocentric' to a 'bibliocentric' mode of learning and dealing with knowledge (p. 105) which included the gradual shift from learning under the close guidance of teachers and tutors to a more au-

tonomous reading and copying of books and written documents.³ These changes suggest that Indo-Persian elites and intellectuals endorsed the printing press already prior to colonial influences (p. 106) and, in fact, showed critical reflection towards the values and traditions eminent in Europe (p. 84).

Political revolutions, inter-communal and national identity formation beyond the social constructions of caste and religious affiliation, as well as a bourgeois class consciousness were almost completely lacking in the development of Mysore and Gujarat in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This contributes, in Yazdani's account, to the missing unification of forces and solidarity that is crucial for any protection against external powers, i.e. the British domination over India.

The social position of women is identified as being one of the denominators for assessing the level of modernity. Hence, the author emphasizes that in contrast to females in a number of European countries, Muslim women in pre-colonial urban India possessed more property rights. However, this does not necessarily reflect 'progressive' gender relations. By contrast, the author argues that, in Europe, there was a transition towards gender equality that was unparalleled in South and West Asia (p. 557). Interestingly enough, he also emphasizes that traditional forms of business organization did not contradict modern forms of economic activity, but somewhat to the contrary, „enterprises based on kinship and family ties were at the very crux of industrial capitalism because they provided for global networks, trust and capital“ (p. 563).

Yazdani concludes that pre-colonial India embraced both 'traditional' and 'modern' elements and warns not to undervalue or exaggerate the patterns of 'middle modern' India (p. 560). Rather, Yazdani recapitulates: „[T]he transition from *middle* to *late modernity* was a gradual process and characterized by the synchronous presence of different modes of production and historical times“ (p. 562). Hence, economic development consists of different stages, co-existing at the same time and

sity, Berlin, June 26, 2017.

³ Nile Green, The Uses of Books in a Late Mughal Takiyya. Persianate Knowledge Between Person and Paper, in: Modern Asian Studies 44 (2010), pp. 241–265.

unfolding both continuous as much as contingent patterns.

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