



Review of India, Modernity and the Great Divergence: Mysore and Gujarat (17th to 19th C.)

Kaveh Yazdani. *India, Modernity and the Great Divergence: Mysore and Gujarat (17th to 19th C.)* 2017. Leiden: Brill. 669 pages, ISBN 978-9-0043-3078-8 Cloth (\$246.00)

Kaveh Yazdani's *India, Modernity, and the Great Divergence* (2017) is an exciting, creative proposition that synthesizes several perspectives within the historical social sciences that are not typically put in conversation with one another. The book asks ambitious, big, questions, and provides a detailed account of the pre-capitalist political economy of Mysore and Gujarat—two regions that are often overlooked in the existing literature on transitions to capitalism.

The book begins with a theoretical discussion of Orientalism, Eurocentrism, Modernity, and Capitalism, which situates the book both in the political economy of the world-system, but also postcolonial theory and transitions to modernity. Yazdani, then, poses the question of why did Europe first make the transition to capitalism and not Western India? The following section of the book compares intellectual developments, including those in science and technology, political systems, art, culture, and the development of a public sphere in Europe compared to Western India. From this comparative exercise, he concludes that Asia was often just as dynamic as Europe when it came to ideas, culture, and science and technology. Then, Yazdani spends the bulk of the book detailing the political economy of first Mysore, and then Gujarat, crafting a detailed picture of economy, political bureaucracy, transportation and infrastructure, military, and role of religion in each empire. The book concludes by summarizing the lessons learned about the transition to modernity as seen from early modern Mysore and Gujarat. Namely, that, on the one hand, “non-Westerners ... miss the opportunity to accredit and harness the civilisational achievements of the



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Occident (e.g. democracy and human rights)” while “‘Third World’ elites use colonialism as a pretext to detract from their own responsibilities” (576). And on the other, “Eurocentrics do not accept the significance of Asio-African influences on the rise of the west and the socio-economic potentialities of core areas in Asia” (576).

While the book makes an important contribution to our understanding of transitions to modernity, I have three main critiques. First, I found the guiding question problematic; I found the theoretical discussion imprecise in a way that inhibited the efficacy of the argument; and finally, I had a few methodological concerns.

The central question of the book is why did Europe lead the transition to capitalism and not Western India? This question does not do justice to the creative theoretical framework crafted by Yazdani. Given the strong theoretical orientation of historical social science research on transitions to modernity, this counterfactual as the guiding question for the book lacks theoretical grounding. The transition to capitalism involved reconstituting the world based on an entirely different logic of power. Therefore, the region that was dominant in the declining mode of production likely would not be able to recognize that mode of production as dying—just as a world-hegemon in decline usually doubles down on its logic of power rather than conceding to its inevitable decline. Even if the Asian Empires were able to register this profound shift in the global logic of power, there were many elite stakeholders invested in that dying logic of power. It seems theoretically unlikely that the dominant world regions would abandon systems that benefitted them for an entirely different logic of power whose benefits had yet to be proven. Europe’s early transition to capitalism had much to do with the fact that it was ‘backward’ and ‘underdeveloped’ compared to the Asian empires. One could make analogies to the fact that the semi-periphery is the most creative and dynamic space in the capitalist world system *because* it is not a dominant space within the capitalist world-system. The semi-periphery, given its structural location, has some interest in subverting existing structures and relations of power, and also some resources by which to do so. Similarly, Europe as a periphery before the transition to capitalism had more of a stake in subverting existing power relations, but one would expect that South Asia, as one of the dominant regions of the pre-capitalist world system, would have little interest in completely upending existing logics of power from which they benefited.

Relatedly, I also take issue with the assumption implicit in this question that capitalism was the default trajectory toward global ‘progress.’ As Yazdani aptly shows us, Safavid Western Asia and Mughal India in particular had great “cultural, scientific, technological and intellectual dynamism, critical thinking, the spirit of curiosity” (69), etc., but why should it be assumed that the presence of these factors should necessarily engender a transition to capitalism? It strikes me as a bit Eurocentrist to assume that capitalism – an economic strategy employed by Europe that

allowed it to become the dominant world region – would be the inevitable destination of global ‘progress.’

Part of the issue with the question results from the fact that the theoretical discussion does little to help frame where Yazdani positions himself relative to the many disparate theoretical traditions he creatively draws upon. As such, this section of the book reads more as a summary of what others have said rather than Yazdani’s own views. In addition to not being terribly critical of existing theories of transition, it is also rather imprecise, leaving a good deal of ambiguity as to where Yazdani locates himself relative to the literature, and more importantly, how certain contested terms and concepts are applied in the book. By way of a few examples, Yazdani claims financialization to be solely a 20th century development (29), but then later applies the concept to pre-modern Western Asia (42). The discussion of modes of production is similarly confusing. Yazdani claims that “modes of production ... were determined by the particular geo-climatic, socio-economic, and political conditions of different localities” and that “mode of production, in some measure, depends on the region” (20). But later on this same page, he switches back to a more Marxian conceptualization of modes of production, claiming the 16th through the 18th centuries as a period of transition in which pre-capitalist and capitalist modes of production overlapped.

One last example: modernity, capitalism and ‘rise of the west’ are employed early on in the text but not defined until much later, making it unclear for most of the introductory chapter what Yazdani means by ‘modernity’ vis-a-vis other related concepts. Even once these terms are defined, as they are employed throughout the book it remains unclear how Yazdani understands ‘modernity’ and ‘capitalism’ as distinct concepts. He offers this explanation, “capitalism has been the prime mover of modernity” but this does not imply that capitalism and modernity “were actually interconnected or reinforced each other” (30). This working definition is particularly puzzling given that the conclusion argues for ‘modernity’ as better than the ‘rise of the west’ as the conceptual lens to understand transitions in the early modern period. Capitalism does not figure in to this part of Yazdani’s discussion. It appears a few pages later in the conclusion and is framed as a discussion distinct from the literature on transitions to modernity. While the theory chapter sets up a related concept of capitalism and modernity, the conclusion fails to offer a singular explanation for these transitions as seen from Western India. Certainly, theoretical originality is no crime, and Yazdani’s effort to incorporate several theoretical traditions that are not typically put in conversation with each other is one of the most exciting aspects of the book. But inconsistencies in the conceptualization and employment of key theoretical concepts detracts from the overall argument, making it more difficult for the reader to determine exactly what is Yazdani’s contribution to theory building and to our understanding of capitalism and modernity.

Finally, I have a few comments on methods and data. Nearly everyone from North America and Europe who does work in India faces challenges, and in the book, Yazdani notes his particular challenges as a Berliner in India. I commend Yazdani for his openness around the issues he faced, and there certainly needs to be more conversations about obstacles to doing historical work in India as a ‘foreigner.’ Historical social science of the Global South is far more challenging and at times dangerous than working in archives and fieldwork sites in the Global North, and it is up to those of us who do it to educate our colleagues working in the Global North as to just how different it can be. As such, the risks and challenges Yazdani and other researchers face should be taken into account when evaluating scholarship. Additionally, for a dissertation book as this one appears to be, there are additional limitations and professional time constraints, particularly so in the German context where a dissertation must be a published book within two years after the defense, thereby compounding the time and resource constraints of the PhD.

However, given less than ideal conditions and constraints for Global North scholars working in the Global South, particularly in the early stages of the career, creative strategies need to be undertaken in order to ensure that the final product doesn’t suffer from these obstacles. Yazdani spent 4 months in three of the four archives he visited in India and most of the documents from that short research trip, because of challenges he faced in India, didn’t make it into the final product. The few sources from archives in India are mostly East India Company records, not indigenous perspectives. The vast majority of the primary sources in the book are European colonial records from European colonial archives. This, of course, is not an inherently problematic research strategy, but given the stated task of the book to evaluate the political economy of Western India during this key period of transition, it is essential to not solely depict the region from the European perspective. Yazdani appears acritical in his read of these East India Company sources, seems to take them at face value, and rarely compliments or contrasts them with archival sources penned by the Mughals or those from other South Asian Empires and Kingdoms. If he was unable to find indigenous perspectives, which admittedly would be an extremely difficult and time consuming task, perhaps Yazdani could have looked to Safavid sources that described the Mughal Empire for a contrasting, non-European view, especially since throughout the book he makes some interesting connections and comparisons between the Mughals and Safavids, or even, perhaps, to Ottoman and/or Chinese sources.

Yazdani’s approach to data collection and analysis could explain why the end product seems to reflect the European viewpoint more so than the Western Indian viewpoint. But the methodological problems are not solely a reflection of the particular archives Yazdani visited; they also reflect his comparative approach in the second part of the book. He levies these East India Company records to engage in a Eurocentrism through comparison. Some comparisons I found

problematic included his discussion of European intellectuals compared to Mughal and Safavid intellectuals (see p. 78); his discussion of sharia versus parliamentary democracy (see p. 79); moveable type versus Nastali'q script (p. 107), but the two most egregious comparisons were in comparing Mughal art to European art and European to Indian coffee house culture.

Yazdani claims that European influence propelled Mughal art to become more 'sophisticated' over time. However, Yazdani does not present any evidence that the development of artistic movements in South Asia came from an awareness and replication of European forms; he only notes that Mughal visual art, music, and literature became more sophisticated over time (108), and notes that these developments coincided with increased European contact. However, the development of Mughal art could easily have occurred independently of European influence, and Yazdani himself leaves this possibility open when he writes, "we still know too little about how this change took place" (109). It is the very definition of Eurocentrism to assume, as Yazdani does, that non-Western culture is static and unchanging. And, furthermore, that increased contact between Asia and Europe necessarily influenced Asian art, but not European art. The fact that certain developments in Mughal art occur at the same time as the onset of British colonialism seems to be enough for Yazdani to assume a one-way causal relationship.

While admittedly, I know little about the history of Mughal art, I do know quite well that when Yazdani applies a similar line of argumentation to coffee house culture in 17th and 18th century South Asia – namely that since coffee house culture appears in the 17th century at the same time as India's encounter with Europe, it must be borrowed from Europe (110) – that this claim neglects the entire *longue durée* history of global coffee house culture. The diffusion of coffee house culture in South Asia, and Western India in particular, was tied to Arab-Islamic cultural diffusion through trade routes within the Indian Ocean, along with Western Indians making the pilgrimage to Mecca, and the cultural dominance of the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Empires within Afro-Eurasia. European coffee house culture itself was imported from Western Asia through long distance trade and didn't take off until much later than coffee house culture in Africa, Western Asia, and West and South India. In fact, European style coffee house culture was not brought to India until 1936.

Many of the economic, social, political, and military developments that Yazdani argues could have been part of a transition to modernity in Asia were simply the playing out of existing processes within the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Empires dating to their origins. Comparing Asia and Europe's relative sophistication with respect to say, art or coffee house culture, neglects the entangled histories of Asia and Europe, and in so doing, assumes that these social developments went one way—that they were endogenous to Europe and then adopted by the Asian Empires who saw the inherent virtue of these cultural forms. In many cases, the exact opposite occurred! The

comparative method that Yazdani employs obscures the ways in which early modern Europe borrowed from the Asian Empires, repackaged cultural forms and politico-economic processes, and then imposed them in this repackaged form on the rest of the world through colonialism. Comparison without this *longue durée* perspective fails to depict the ways in which the logics of power that allowed Asian Empires to dominate the pre-capitalist world-system were subverted by Europe as part of the transition to capitalism, when a world-historically distinct logic of power based on the endless accumulation of capital became, for the first time, a global possibility and eventually, a global norm.

My few critiques aside, the book is potentially of great interest to scholars of early modern political economy who are interested in learning more about these previously under-researched but critically important world regions of Mysore and Gujarat. In fact, given the recent scholarly interest in contemporary Gujarat as a result of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's development and propagation of what is commonly referred to as the 'Gujarat Model' of economic development, this book potentially provides an interesting *longue durée* perspective on recent politico-economic developments in India. Certainly, it reminds us that Gujarat has long been an important node in the global economy and that today's emphasis on its economic salience is nothing new.

Yazdani's project is an important and creative one in incorporating world-systems perspectives with poststructural theories. I found this proposition very exciting and I am extremely sympathetic to the challenges that such a hybrid approach can pose. The topic is fascinating, and the project is a creative, important one. However, in the absence of a strong theoretical framing of how exactly capitalist modernity is distinct from pre-capitalist political economy, it is hard to assess the evidence Yazdani presents on the political economy of pre-capitalist Mysore and Gujarat. The book provides excellently detailed description, which makes a convincing claim that these two political units were highly advanced parts of the world in the 17th through the 19th centuries.

However, I remain unconvinced by Yazdani's implication that well developed politico-economic structures necessarily mean that one should expect a transition to capitalism initiated by these regions. As Yazdani shows, Mysore and Gujarat had similar levels of agricultural productivity compared to Europe; militaries were comparably advanced; global trade was especially vibrant; urban density was present, as was intellectual dynamism. The presence of these developments, he argues, failed to spur a transition to modernity because "pre-modern patterns" (562) persisted. But whether or not pre-modern relations of production persist has little to do with the relative level of development of that region. Far more important is the question of what logic of power pre-modern relations of production serve. A classic example is slavery, which pre-dates

the capitalist mode of production but was used within the capitalist mode of production to further the aim of the endless accumulation of capital. The mere presence of pre-modern relations of production tells us little about the political economy of a region. Certainly, one can point to countless examples of pre-capitalist relations of production that have been recalibrated to the logic of power of the capitalist world-system. Therefore, without an answer to the question of how exactly power was accrued in the politico-economic context of pre-capitalist Gujarat and Mysore, compared to how it is accrued in the context of the capitalist world-system – that is, through the endless accumulation of capital – it is impossible to determine whether or why Gujarat and Mysore failed to lead the transition to capitalism.

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