The Textile Industry and the Economy of South India 1500-1800: Some Notes and Queries (Very Unfinished).

David Washbrook

Between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, India's textile industry made it one of the key centres of the then-emerging world economy. Of course, India's textiles had traded beyond its shores long before this: comprising (along with spices) the principal items in an Indian Ocean commerce, which stretched back into the mists of time. But the volume of transactions taking place from the sixteenth century appears of a wholly different order. The expansion was brought about, in part, by the addition of European demand to long-established Asian schedules. However, and even more, it was facilitated by new inflows of specie metal from the Americas and Japan, which in turn stimulated trade and consumption in many parts of the world; and also by improvements in long-distance shipping, which enabled goods to be carried farther and faster than ever before. When complaints could be heard in seventeenth-century Mexico that Indian textiles were threatening to 'de-industrialise' the local economy, the dawn of a new age in 'global economics' might be thought to have arrived.

Some of the effects of this transition on the economy (or economies) of India have been charted. Most notably, the impact of increased bullion flows on the monetary, fiscal and commercial systems has been the focus of concern. By common agreement, they led to the conversion of a copper- to a silver-based coinage, symbolised by the minting of Akbar's rupee; they also promoted increased demands for monetary payments within the revenue system, which in turn promoted a wider commercialisation of economic relationships. Old forms of credit and transfer-note expanded their usage and were joined by new forms, often derived either from Europe, on the one side, or contact with Chinese merchants, on the other. New financial services, such as insurance and the raising of joint-capital (beyond the bounds of caste and kinship), came to develop. The sophistication of India's monetary and financial systems, which underpinned its central role in world trade, is well-attested in the historical literature.

But of much less concern has been the impact on India's own 'productive' economy: how the relations of production, consumption and social reproduction may themselves have changed and 'developed' in relation to expanding trade and commercialisation. Om Prakash's pioneering studies of the Dutch in Bengal apart, there have been few attempts even to measure the likely quantitative consequences of the growth of the textile industry in any region during this period. And 'qualitative' studies of the way that economic institutions and organisations changed to accommodate increased bullion flows and trade demands have been almost wholly neglected – at least before the eighteenth century when they become part of another history (the 'pre-history' of colonialism).

Indeed, shadows (or premonitions) of the colonial future have tended to lie heavily over most interpretations of India's 'early modern' history, making it difficult for Indian historians of 'the nationalist age' to consider that anything positive can have come out of increasing contacts with the external world, especially where Europeans were involved. Sushil Choudhury has sought to deny the expansionary influence of European trade on Bengal, seeing it as parasitic on internal commerce. And Irfan Habib has cast doubt on whether rising bullion flows contributed so much to expanded production as rampant inflation. We may not have come far in the fifty years since K.M. Pannikar proclaimed India's own history dead from the day that Vasco da Gama set foot on Indian soil.

Of course, Habib’s perspectives are informed by very much more than post-colonial angst. Rather, they reflect, on the one side, a proper respect for the northern origins and connections of ‘Mughal’ state and society; and, on the other, a Marxist interest in the possibilities of the future. Thus he takes the influence of the Persian wheel and Persian loom on the economy as more significant than anything brought by sea from east or west. Thus, too, he is principally concerned with the ‘potentialities for capitalist development’ to be found in the Mughal era. However, both of these perspectives lead him to negative conclusions. On the one side, he sees the Mughal Empire as a revenue-hungry machine, sucking up most of the available surplus to feed the greed of an aristocratic nobility. Commercialisation here is ‘forced’ on peasants and artisans, who gain very little from it. And, on the other side, whatever productive ‘developments’ may have been facilitated by this commercialisation (and he has never denied that there were some), they did not lead to capitalist industrialisation – and thus represented a cul-de-sac. As a result, the overall impression which he offers of the ‘early modern’ Indian economy is one of stagnation: where very little changes for the better and, certainly during the eighteenth century, a great deal for the worse.

In recent years, Habib’s once-canonical interpretation has come to be questioned from many different angles and sources. The model of unilinear (and immanently universal) capitalist industrialisation, by which he judges India’s relative ‘failure’, no longer commands the status which once it did. Britain’s industrial revolution would now be seen as something historically unique rather than as a general standard against which the rest of the world’s economic history ought to be evaluated – and inevitably found wanting. Also, the causes of that revolution (even if it was a ‘revolution’) are now much at issue, making it harder to decide what may (or may not) have been significantly ‘missing’ in India’s case. The corollary to not being Britain need not necessarily be to be written off as 'stagnant'.

Equally, the idea of an 'over-determining' Mughal (Oriental Despotic) state has come under serious challenge. More attention in recent years has been paid to its intermediary levels (Rajput clans, zemindars, mercantile mahajan, etc.), which would seem to have enjoyed a high measure of autonomy. According to Alam and Subrahmanyam, it was here, particularly, that the impact of deepening commercialisation might be seen – in expanding pockets of high farming and artisanal production, in trading profits which did not only line the pockets of the aristocracy and in the buying and selling of taxation (ie property) 'rights'. Following John Richards, it would now seem possible to argue that, at least during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Indian economy enjoyed a long period of relative prosperity and growth. Moreover, as Guha and Desai have suggested, population levels may not have been as stagnant as Habib supposed ('fixed' at c.160 million after 1600), but increased from c.120 million in 1500 to perhaps 160 million by the end of the seventeenth century. In pre-modern terms, population growth of 33%, even over two centuries, is not to be regarded as negligible.

Admittedly, during the eighteenth century, some of these 'advances' may have had problematic consequences and have reached awkward conclusions. The increasing wealth and prosperity of those occupying the intermediary levels of the Mughal Empire led to political challenges to central authority, especially in the maritime regions, which eventually broke its power – giving rise to attempts to construct new regional states in a context of escalating warfare. In its turn, these regional states fell dependent on the European powers controlling their flows of trade and specie. India's commercial revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries ended in colonial conquest in the eighteenth in circumstances which scarcely bespeak of economic growth. Severe disruptions due to warfare and famine swept many parts of the country, especially in the second half of the century, and Guha may well be right that population growth was not only checked, but fell back – before picking up again at the turn of the nineteenth century. Christopher Bayly is ‘over-read’ if he is taken to be saying more than that eighteenth-century ‘decline’ in north India was not as severe as once supposed, and that pockets of high production survived and re-constituted themselves – rather than that ‘decline’ did not happen at all.

However, problems at the end of a period are no reason for ignoring or downplaying what may have gone on in its earlier phases. The economy(-ies) of India did experience growth and expansion in the early modern era and it largely remains to be explained how this took place and what impact it made on the relations of production, consumption and social reproduction. Indeed, this side of the issue appears almost entirely unexplored. With the exception of Om Prakash’s work on Bengal, we have little idea what increases in productive capacity may have followed from the expansion of trade – and Prakash only concentrates on Dutch and English trade, which were but part of the ‘global’ whole. Nonetheless, Prakash’s statistics suggest that the question may have huge dimensions. He notes that, at one point in the late seventeenth century, 11% of the labour force of Bengal may have been working for the English and Dutch alone and, from the mid-seventeenth to early eighteenth centuries, foreign trade may have been responsible for a 40% growth in the region’s economy. If trade with other ‘factors’ is taken into account (including that for inland markets, which Sushil Choudhury holds to have been greater than that with Europeans), the scale of Bengal’s commercial economy becomes truly remarkable. It helps to explain why Adam Smith should have placed Bengal alongside Britain as a ‘commercial society’ at the highest level in his stadial theory of civilization. Admittedly, even by the later seventeenth century, Bengal had become by far India’s largest single manufacturing centre and entrepot for world trade. No other region could match its scale. But several others tried and commercial production also played a very major role in the economies of Coromandel and Gujarat/Maharashtra, as well as being dispersed through many points in hinterland north India. Statistical information on these other regions in less available, or at least has been less worked through, but we can surmise that commerce was highly influential on their production regimes.

But how was it accommodated to those regimes ? Here, more ghosts from past historiographies may stand in the way of finding answers. The idea of the self-sufficient ‘village community’ articulated by non-monetary ‘jajmani’ relations has proved very difficult to dispel. Any commercial relations which its members entered into (ie production for exchange) must needs be seen as ‘forced’ upon it, principally by the taxation system but also by moneylenders. Otherwise, it could have no use for ‘the market’ and monetary exchange. In this context, commercial production has sometimes been seen as grafted onto the village economy at the side; or else as reflecting principles of dualism in which peasants and artisans devoted part of their time to it (to pay dues and taxes) and part to feeding themselves or servicing their jajman. The two spheres existed side-by-side and did not impinge on each other. Chicherov conceived the village economy of sixteenth-century south India very much in this way: especially with weavers working part-time for commercial agents.

However, intellectual history has not been kind to the concept of ‘the village community’ which, certainly so far as self-subsistence is concerned, may largely have been a colonial invention: born of Europe’s recovery of its medieval past, bred to support imperialist theories of evolution and raised, certainly in the Indian context, to serve a very specific purpose. The idea of village self-sufficiency enabled British neo-

Ricardian taxation theorists to claim the right to extract all village ‘surplus’ in revenue without theoretically damaging the village’s ability to ‘satisfice’ and reproduce itself. That Indian nationalists (specifically Gandhi) then took the idea on and romanticised it -- to provide a model of ‘indigeneity’, free from all external influence -- hardly makes it any more useful an analytical tool.

It is not necessary to look very hard at the shape of the early modern Indian economy (certainly in the maritime regions) to appreciate that it cannot just have been the product of the marginal expansion of a series of subsistence-oriented village economies. Specialisation in many areas was highly marked. The finest textiles were woven in villages largely consisting of artisans (and sometimes assorted washers, painters and even spinners) who did very little else. The cotton they wove was brought to them from hundreds, sometimes thousands, of miles away – in Bengal’s case, even from Gujarat on the other side of the sub-continent. Not infrequently, the food that they ate had made a similarly long journey – in the case of central Coromandel, sometimes from Bengal. These extensive transaction were made possible by the development of a vast transport infrastructure -- of boats around the coastline (and, in Bengal, up the rivers) and of banjara cattle caravans inland -- whose very existence is difficult to reconcile with notions of self-subsisting villages.

Nor were extended relations of exchange confined just to artisanal villages and the major commercial centres. They reached into the heart of the ‘village’ itself. By far the largest capital item in farming was cattle. But cattle did not breed in the lowland deltas (which had the richest agricultural land). They had to be brought in from upland areas and were sold to local farmers. Equally, salt represents one of the most essential and basic items of diet, especially in tropical climates. However, it was produced only in certain areas (mostly on the coast) and traded throughout the hinterland. Similarly, iron, hardwoods (for the better sorts of village housing), refined textiles (silks) and various foodstuffs (not least areca nut for key ceremonials) were obtainable in most parts of the country only through trade. This was hardly an economy which had to be 'forced' into relations of exchange: it was to a large extent reproduced through them. But we know precious little about how those relations of exchange not immediately involved in the export trades were organised; nor how they related to the export economy; nor how they affected relations of production.

This, in turn, makes it very difficult to understand the wider impact made by the intensification of commercialisation from the sixteenth century. Did it slip into 'non-market' channels of exchange made long before it or did it cut new channels, shaping new kinds of relationships ? Did it rely on established institutions for its regulation and security or did it forge new ones ? Did it open out new possibilities for economic growth or was it constrained by old ones ? Perhaps most centrally, how did an economy apparently structured around rigid principles (of caste, kinship, fixed residence) accommodate itself to expanding volumes of commercial production ? What follows is an attempt to sketch a few answers for southern India.

South India

For most of the early modern period, southern India lay outside the boundaries of the Mughal Empire. This makes its experience somewhat untypical of the rest of India – but, in several respects, perhaps usefully so. Its history was not 'over-determined' by the institutions of the Empire; nor recovery of that history dominated by vast caches of imperial documentation. This makes it possible to examine more local-level institutions and relations, relevant to the economy, which elsewhere seem to be smothered by Mughal experience, both in fact and in archival resources. It also makes it possible to ask questions about the significance of the Mughal experience for the development of commerce and trade since the South possessed few of the structural attributes associated with Mughal rule. For example, it never accepted Akbar's silver rupee but remained, essentially, on a gold standard symbolised by the 'pagoda'. However, as it never standardised minting, its currency system may better be seen as based on bullion exchange – where, in fact, it also made use of silver and copper. Also, its taxation systems were not so dominated by demands for land revenue. While Burton Stein may have gone too far in supposing that land revenue was insignificant -- especially in the rice-producing river valleys where it remained collected in kind -- it does seem clear that taxes on commerce played a more prominent role in the finances of its states, such as they were. These states were predominantly small 'Nayak' or 'Sultanate' principalities – the Vijayanagar Empire, which in any event 'fell' in 1565, being more in the nature of an overlordship than a centralised, bureaucratic regime. Lack of an 'imperial' state also may be seen to have impacted on issues of infrastructure. By repute, there were no metalled roads in the south and hence very little in the way of wheeled transport. There were also no inter-riverine canals and most of the rivers were not navigable far into their reaches.

All this might seem to make the south an unpropitious area for the development of a globally-significant commerce. But, in fact, this was not the case. Coromandel textiles and Malabar spices were known in the Roman world and to Sung and Ming China. Both played a crucial role in Indian Ocean trade throughout the medieval period and were the focus of attraction for the first European traders at the turn of the sixteenth century. Lack of land-transport infrastructure may have been overcome by the extensive use of coastal shipping around the peninsula (none of which is very far from the sea) and, on the eastern side, by a broad coastal plain which is relatively easy for pack bullocks to traverse. Pack-bullock caravans driven by lambadis (the southern equivalent of banjaras) were the ubiquitous means of land transport – bringing raw cotton, dry grains, iron and rough cloth from the interior to the coast and taking back salt, rice and fine cloth.

Vijaya Ramaswamy has argued that the principal centres of fine textile production in the medieval period lay in the environs of the major temples, which also would seem to have provided regulatory mechanisms (arbitration, 'licensing', etc.) over the trade. Here, as in many other areas, the temples supplemented or stood in for 'the state' in the organisation of society. Temples played a key role in validating property rights (usually defined in terms of discrete 'shares' in community assets). They were also engines of trade and investment, re-cycling 'donations' into irrigation works and cattle herds 'shared' among the donors. Indeed, their ritual forms patterned most species of economic transaction. While evidence of effective land 'sales' (ie sale of 'share rights' to land) dates back to the 11th century, technically they took the form of 'gifts' of land to a god, who then 'gifted' them to a third party in return for a 'donation' of money – which, in turn, was then 'gifted' to the first party. The gods stood at the centre of life in south India in every sense and their presence is an obvious reminder that 'exchange' can be driven by a logic, and depend on institutional arrangements, quite other than that supplied by 'the market'. Early commercialisation here penetrated a set of institutions established to supply the needs of communities of local worshippers and, for a very long time, remained dependent on them.

However, as Ramaswamy argues, the explosion of commercial activity taking place from the sixteenth century may well have begun to put a strain on these institutions. The most visible sign of this was the progressive shift of 'fine' textile production away from the environs (and protection) of the temples and towards the coastal settlements of the merchant traders – not only European but also Hindu and Muslim (Chulia or Marrakayar merchants, who commanded south-east Asian and some Gulf trade, were at least as important as Europeans into the eighteenth century). Certainly, by the later seventeenth century, it was the coastal settlements which dominated fine cotton textile production (if not necessarily silk) -- opening out questions about the 'new' organisation and regulation of the trade. However, from what can be made of their records, the Europeans were not eager to take on these responsibilities. Although endlessly 'petitioned' to arbitrate disputes and settle trade boundaries, they prevaricated: appealing to traditions of a state (which here did not exist) or to a religion which they misunderstood. The result may be seen as something of a 'bastardisation' of custom, which made the socio-political relations of the weaving settlements notoriously unstable. On the one hand, principles of caste hardened their edges – eschewing forms of hierarchical integration supervised by the temple to become more openly competitive. On the other, the traditional division between castes of the Left and Right Hand became swept up – as Arjun Appadurai has seen – into the struggle for market place between different merchant groups. Weaving villages could become extremely turbulent places: which, later in the eighteenth century, the Europeans (especially the English) would use as an excuse to try to enforce control over production.

But the shift towards new coastal settlements and forms of organisation also raised other issues. One concerned means of expanding production in an industry which was, if anything, becoming more caste-bound and rigid. The volume of demand increased rapidly and various expedients were tried to meet it. Looms were worked by more than one family across twenty-four hour periods. Possibilities of 'adoption' meant that discrete caste groups could increase their numbers faster than by biological reproduction. In some extreme cases, *paraiyans* were drafted in at night to produce secondary rough cloths on the looms used by ‘clean’ caste weavers in the day -- this latter necessitating purification rituals before day-work could begin and Komati cloth merchants wearing special gloves to touch ‘paraiyan’ cloth. As ever in India, expedients could be found to overcome structural difficulties. But the strains were unmistakable – and merchants, faced with ships to load before the winds changed, were long and vociferous in their complaints. One consequence was that, through much of this period, there was intense competition for skilled labour between different settlements and merchant groups – and labour moved regularly to where it was most wanted or better paid. Telugu-, Kannada- and Tamil-speaking weavers shifted through and across each other’s territories, leaving their distinctive marks behind them. But competitively-driven movement did not come without costs: from the mid-seventeenth century, there is a strong case that the price of Coromandel cloth was tending to rise.

The second set of issues raised by the expansion of the Coromandel textile industry concerns its supplies of both food and raw materials. Most of the major south Indian temples (certainly those which had large attached weaving industries) were in zones of ‘mixed’ (dry/wet) agriculture near to supplies of both rice and cotton. These zones experienced very considerable agricultural growth in the late medieval period, particularly as parts of an urbanisation process associated with the temple towns. Cotton production on ‘dry’ soils especially increased – driven by the spread of Telugu specialist cotton farmers throughout the south. Indeed, it was these mixed-zone farming regions which also gained from early commercial contacts with the Portuguese. They benefited most from the ‘American’ crops introduced at this time, which spread rapidly through the southern hinterland. Tobacco, chilli, tomato, papiya transformed southern dietary habits. They also contributed to commercialisation: where, especially in Andhra, chilli and tobacco became major cash crops.

However, the shift of the weaving industry towards the coasts cut across these developments. For the most part, it meant that textile production centres became far removed from the regions in the hinterland producing raw cotton. This, in turn, necessitated a substantial increase in lambadi traffic to make the connection – which may have had certain beneficial effects. The lambadis off-loaded raw cotton as they passed through the rice-growing river valleys and picked up spun-yarn along the way. They helped to spread cotton-spinning through the agrarian economies even of regions which did not produce the raw material, making spinning a ubiquitous by-employment which was useful in supplementing agricultural earnings. But there were also problematic consequences. Textile production became more dependent on extended transport routes, which were at risk of disruption; it also became dependent on market factors which were anything but reliable. Agriculturists tended to spin when agricultural work was low. There was a tendency, therefore, for thread to become short in supply when harvests were good and food cheap and plentiful; and, conversely, for thread to become cheap and plentiful when harvests were bad and food prices high. This made it difficult to co-ordinate and sustain production schedules. Also, this agrarian-industrial cycle did not necessarily coincide with the shifting wind patterns enabling ships to sail in and out of harbours.

The second -- and what could be an acute -- problem came from security of food supplies. This was relatively easily handled in the weaving centres which backed onto rice-producing river deltas -- classically, the Kaveri in the south and the Godaveri in the north. But elsewhere, there were perennial problems of food supply. These were especially acute in central Coromandel around the English centre of

Madras. By the early eighteenth century, the English were regularly having to import 15-20,000 tons of rice a year, mostly from Bengal. Indeed, the need for food proved a strong imperative for further and deeper commercialisation. As Tsukasa Mizushima has seen, the entire agricultural hinterland of Madras became devoted to supplying its markets with food (especially rice) and, at least by the mid-eighteenth century, price-consciousness deeply informed agricultural strategies. This extended even into the 'lower reaches' of agrarian society. Lambadi caravans brought dry grains from the interior, which were the preferred foods of *paraiyans* and low castes. The latter, who were mostly paid in 'shares' of the harvest, would sell their paddy to buy ragi and cholum -- deepening the grip of the price mechanism over the economy.

Nonetheless and in spite of these efforts, food insecurity remained a major difficulty for all those weaving centres not adjacent to stable sources of supply, which was most of them. The spectre of famine was a constant threat and it became noticeably more acute in the eighteenth century – when, for example, major famines hit central Coromandel in 1718-19, 1728-36, 1747, 1769, 1781-83, 1789, 1792 and 1798. These even precipitated something of a move back into the hinterland – towards the upper Kaveri 'Sultanate' created around Mysore by Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan. For a time 'Salem blues' became the favoured cloth of textile exporters. But by then, the best days of the southern weaving industry were already gone. From the late-seventeenth century, the Europeans at least had begun to turn their attention north -- towards Bengal where food was cheaper (and its security greater) and where caste was less an issue in the organisation of society. The south's initial and strong response to the new forces of commercialisation in the end somewhat petered out – in rising prices, declining foreign markets and bitter experiences of famine. Of course, a weaving industry certainly carried on into the early nineteenth century. But even by the 1730s, it was becoming a shadow of its former self.

Some Tentative Conclusions

What conclusions might be drawn from this (all too) brief inquiry into the relationship of the southern textile industry to its wider economy ? A first set of questions, perhaps, concerns the character of commercialisation. Was it 'forced' or was it 'induced' ? The absence of pressures from a Mughal-style revenue system make it very difficult to see that it can have been forced. Southern peasants and artisans had long been involved in an exchange economy, albeit one which was not entirely 'market' based. Increasing flows of specie slipped into this system, progressively expanding but, before the later eighteenth century, not institutionally transforming it. Weavers had long worked simultaneously for money and for the gods and, at least in form, continued initially to do so -- their 'donations' to temples indicating their cultural orientations.

However, there is a puzzling feature in their eventual drift away from temple centres and towards the coasts. There cannot be much doubt that they did so in order to earn increased cash wages from merchants and companies becoming frenzied in their competition for scarce skilled labour. But what did money mean in an economy where the market had only a limited remit ? One possibility is that it meant 'freedom', both economically and socially. In the coastal settlements, strong opportunities for accumulation arose with certain weavers able to acquire several looms and become 'heads' in negotiations with merchants, if not merchant-entrepreneurs themselves. Also, as the turbulence of caste relations indicates, opportunities existed to challenge social hierarchies, more firmly-fixed in the ancient temple towns. But a second, and perhaps more plausible explanation, is -- ironically -- that money represented a passport to greater security. Indian economic history may not have given full due to the chronic instabilities of monsoon agriculture in a (late medieval/early modern) context marked by lack of control of river floods and of adequate water-storage facilities. In the south, local variations in annual production levels could be very high: in villages on the Krishna river system between 1772 and 1777, for example, they could be of the order to 80% in the same village. Local societies coped with this, in part, by being highly mobile -- with labour and capital 'chasing' water supplies. But also, they coped with it by developing extended exchange economies – so that supplies could be brought to drought areas from those enjoying 'plenty'. In the south, monetary relations, which facilitated exchange, were noticeably more highly developed in the 'dry' areas of cultivation – associated with the highest risks – than the more secure 'wet' areas. Money here, then, was meant to buy security: a chance to buy in, not least, to the thousands of tons of grain shipped to places like Madras in times of trouble. Commercial and subsistence-orientations were not necessarily juxtaposed in this context -- and India's notorious propensity to 'hoard' bullion, in part, may have reflected an attempt to develop insurance mechanisms.

But, ultimately, the south's insurance mechanisms did not work too well. What seem to have been expansionary sixteenth and seventeenth centuries gave way to a distinctly unfortunate eighteenth century. If failure to secure food supplies was one cause of this, attention needs to be paid to the links between 'industrial' wealth and agricultural investment, which may have been weak (in spite of efforts to improve them around weaving and urban areas). In Mizushima's Chingleput, for example, while some merchant-entrepreneurs bought share-rights and privileges in some villages, the agricultural context was by no means transformed. Most land continued to lie in the hands of near-rentier 'mirasidars' who invested little in the expansion of a production, which plainly did not keep pace with demand. The interface between the 'industrial' and agricultural economies remained far from smooth.

But could it have been that the sheer scale on which exchange relations now became extended made them increasingly vulnerable to risks and escalating transaction costs ? South Indian weavers were at the centre of – and therefore dependent on – networks stretching from markets in south-east Asia, the Gulf and Europe to deltaic rice-producing villages and upland cotton-producing villages; and also on a vast transport infrastructure linking them together. Problems at any point in this extended chain could have serious repercussions – and problems certainly began to arise from the later seventeenth century. Sanjay Subrahmanyam has been inclined to date the beginning of the decline of the southern textile industry from the 1680s: when the 'Persian' merchants who ran a major trade to the Gulf out of Masulipatam cut their purchases and began to move out. They did so partly in response to a sharp decline in their Gulf market; and partly in response to Aurangzeb's invasion of Golconda – which itself unleashed a cycle of instability and warfare across the south, which lasted for most of the next century.

Instabilities in foreign markets became increasingly chronic – with Dutch 'interference' squeezing the trade to south-east Asia and then tariff barriers going up in Europe. Domestically, post-Aurangzeb succession wars spread across the south, which could severely disrupt trade. Yarn and cloth were prize items of 'loot', lambadis were commandeered to move armies rather than cotton and grain, delicate irrigation systems were broken down by shifting political authority. If the records of the Maratha regime in Thanjavur can be believed, paddy production levels in the Kaveri delta (the south's great rice bowl) fell by 25% between 1720 and 1740 and by 25% again between 1740 and 1782 -- when Hyder Ali's deliberately destructive invasion broke up the residual irrigation works.

The cause of the longer-term problem appears to have been silting up of the Grand Anicut and the point of erstwhile division of the Kaveri and Coleroon at Tiruchirapalle, which was being besieged and exchanged between would-be potentates on a regular basis for almost half-a-century. The textile industry attempted to cope with all this as best it could – particularly, by becoming even more mobile. The principal weaving centres moved from north to central Coromandel, then inland, then farther south – wherever food and relative security were available. But prospects of expansion gave way more to the search for sheer survival. The extended exchange relations on which the industry depended made it highly vulnerable to changing political circumstances within India as much as without.

But could the effects of this, in some way, have been avoided or mitigated? As Karl Marx once put it, albeit in relation to the sensibilities of another age: “A nation and a woman are not forgiven for allowing the first available adventurer to violate them”. Given its dependence on extended exchange relations, the southern textile industry appears extraordinarily exposed to ‘violation’. As noted earlier, there is little sign that its institutional relations had been transformed by the experience of ‘advanced’ commercialisation. Dependent on sea-borne commerce, it is striking that none of its political powers (apart from a few small rajas on the west coast) should have sought to develop a navy and to contest a sea-power that fell easily into the hands of ‘foreign’ Europeans – who had little interest in using it for the benefit of southern society per se. It is equally striking that its relations of property and wealth should have continued to be expressed in the traditional terms of ‘share rights’ and temple endowments – albeit now in increasingly bastardised form. Eighteenth-century south India bears strict comparison to Ancien Regime France in that everything was for sale and offices, powers and honours were procured by people in ways which made nonsense of their derivation and supposed social meaning. An Idayan shepherd, such as the dubash to the French East India Company, Ananda Ranga Pillai, could ‘buy’ local chiefship rights in villages adjacent to Madras and even a mansabdarship in the Mughal Empire; Christian and Muslims could buy land rights in villages dedicated to local gods, whom they then had to propitiate at regular festivals; low castes and even paraiyans could buy kaniachi privileges alongside the upper castes.

However, the consequence of this ‘dummy’ continuity was that no effort was made to build new state and economic institutions, which might respond better to the circumstances of the times and provide greater security and stability to the economy – or almost no effort. There was the extremely valiant effort of Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan to build a major commercial state centred inland on Mysore. This involved -- once more – reconnecting the textile industry to ‘protectable’ supplies of food and cotton: by developing the headwaters of the Kaveri for grain production, while simultaneously drawing in weavers from across the south to centres close to cotton fields. Hyder even saw the necessity of naval power and developed plans to build a fleet, and his own fortified port at Mangalore. But he and Tipu were eventually undone not only by the power of the English, but also by the reaction of all their neighbours (Hyderabad, Travancore and the Marathas), who feared such an expansionary state on their doorsteps and ganged up with the English to bring Mysore to defeat. There was a serious lack of vision and understanding of the new times brought by extended commercialisation to south India, which, with the fall of Tipu, left the future in European hands.

And a very limited future it proved to be for the southern textile industry. The English were interested more in their own profits than the necessary development of the local economy and, as Prasannan Parthasarathi has seen, resorted to force and monopoly to reduce the industry to their needs – eliminating competition, lowering wages, controlling production schedules. As their political power spread across the south, they also cut off possibilities of the mobility, which once had been the response of weavers to hardship and oppression. At least post-1800, the industry became re-stabilised as Pax Britannica re-secured internal trade routes and, prior to 1830, some new overseas opportunities opened out. But it no longer produced the profits or sustained the numbers, which once it had done, and, from the ending of the Company's monopoly until the revival of trade (on new technologies and markets) in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, lived a shadowy existence -- overawed by the economy's reversion to agriculture and the near-universalisation of peasant petty commodity production. Not least for want of institution-building, a highly promising early modern history terminated in the dead-end of a distinctly colonial modernity.