The making of India’s modernity

In terms of thematic exploration, David Arnold’s book on technological modernity in colonial India, which covers the period between the 1880s and the 1960s, is seminal. In the current historiography, there is hardly any book which includes sewing machine, bicycle, rice mill, and typewriter in one single account that tells us the story of modern India that unfolded at the intersections of technology, state and society.

Reviewed publication:

TWO IMPORTANT ASPECTS related to the theoretical positioning of the book need brief comments. One relates to the scale of technology; and two, the scale of history and history writing.

Technology: A function of scale & site of social issues
On the first: the book makes a very pertinent claim that “Technology did not need to be big to be significant, audible, visible, and everyday” (10). Arnold claims that much of the existing historiography in South Asia has remained focussed on railways, irrigation (and very recently on telegraph) as main technological movers of the nineteenth century. Against this, he presents his justification of studying “everyday technologies” because “they frequently possessed an intimacy, a companionable association with family life and domestic existence, which bigger machines lacked” (11-12).

Arnold rightly observes that the little that exists on the history of technology, which includes his own earlier works, has remained focussed on big-scale technology. They explore the big politics of imperialism, nationalism and capitalism. There is, therefore, a need to look at small-scale technologies. However, intimacies, domesticities, and other such quotidian markers/formations are not necessarily a function of the scale of technologies. If a group of girls riding on bicycles sang away, quite literally, their free-spirited pedalling across the serene landscape as one towards love and freedom which no one should try to stop (the famous song main chali, main chali from the movie Padosan, 1968) then almost two decades earlier

a song pictured in a railway carriage amusingly chronicled the enactment of some other everyday practices such as playing cards and not least counting (the song níri jiyó miro from the movie Ankhon, 1950). Further, Bhojpuri folk songs from the early twentieth century on railways and steamships (the big technologies) very vividly depicted the intimate everyday relationship around conjugalty, family life, and domestic existence (or lack of it).

The argument that technology did not need to be big to be significant is absolutely valid, but equally true (and I assume Arnold will agree as he himself uses Nirad Chaudhuri’s reminiscences of the sound of steamers, pp778) is that the ‘everyday’ does not need to be necessarily located in something that is plebeian, subaltern, and small. Everyday is not a function of scale. Railways and sewing machines were both part of the same everyday – at individual and social levels. And the colonialists/corporatists displayed the same kind of prejudices in relation to both: as Singer agents thought Indians incapable to use their machines, so did the agents of railway companies a few decades earlier. If Singer claimed to have helped Indians move towards better civilisation, so did the power of steam.

Influenced by the ‘social construction of technology’ theory (SCOT), Arnold’s second theoretical intervention is to rescue the social-historical thrust of these technologies, which were all imported in their provenance, from an instrumental relationship of transfer and diffusion from the West to the East. This relates to the scale of history and history writing in which he admits of not looking at the technical make-up of the machine, but in exploring how they became part of the social and political processes of change in specific localities; how in India they became carriers as well as sites of issues such as race, class and gender (72).

All technologies and commodities covered in this study were global in their reach and introduced in India largely but not exclusively through the network of imperialism, but their ‘creative appropriation’ in different settings gave them context-specific meanings. Is it the context of the social which is at the heart of this book, which ties the global, the imperial and the local in an un-formulaic way. Given the ascendency of formulaic ways of doing global history through connections and comparisons, I find this approach of not letting the ‘social’ go adrift refreshingly important (see the brief comment on 38).

Once again, it must be stated that the cultural adaptation of technology is not specific to small or big.

Global technologies & colonial state
The foreignness of these technologies invariably leads Arnold to raise the question of their relation with colonial state power. Most of the big and small technologies were thought of first serving the state power. He says, unlike western societies where commerce, industry, and civil society played a more dominant role in fashioning technological modernity, in India the colonial state remained the leading user and publicist of these technologies (148).

The making of Mongolian Buddhism

As I was reading through A Monastery in Time, it occurred to me how the publication of this book, and the more recent volume Mongolian Buddhism in History, Culture and Society, suggests that Mongolian Buddhism is slowly becoming a meaningful academic study, quite distinct from the Tibetan Buddhism from which it initially developed. Scholars of religion and history, as well as individuals and organizations involved in cultural preservation, are ever more focused on understanding how Buddhism in the Mongolian ethnic region (including areas that are nowadays considered politically part of Russia and China, in addition to Mongolia itself) has morphed, over the centuries and under many diverse influences, into what it is today. Such scholarship, moreover, contributes to an enrichment, not only of our understanding of the past, but of our involvement in the contemporary development of Inner Asia.

Reviewed title:

CAROLINE HUMPHREY AND HÜRELBAATAR UJEED’S book seeks to answer a fundamental question: “What does it mean to be a Buddhist in a Mongolian way?” (1) Their site of enquiry is the monastery at Mergen, in the southwestern region of Inner Mongolia. The book traces multiple trajectories through time and history, mapping the lived experience of Mongol’s community of monks and their relationship with the complex spiritual and cultural meanings of Buddhism, within the personal and social contexts of religious practice. The authors’ study is based upon two decades of fieldwork, and its value lies squarely in their intimate relationship with the community and in the profound reach of their ethnography. The ideas that unfold over the course of the book’s ten chapters are presented through an approach which, while personal, allows the subjects to speak directly to the reader. Thus we have a cast of characters – people, deities and spirits, religious texts and artifacts – through whose stories the greater story and key questions surrounding the monastery’s historical and religious development are explored.

Simon Wickham-Smith
Bicycles were distributed to help policing, typewriters in government offices and courts to speed up administrative work and communication, and trains to speed up the movement of administrative personnel and information. The state was not the producer; in fact, within the ironic relationship between imperial modernity and local production of American products (Singer sewing machines, Remington typewriters and Ford automobiles) dominated the Indian market. But the state significant role played by non-state producers and technologies strengthened the ‘inner life of the state’. And they do so in phases. During the Second World War, for instance, the expansionary nature of the state in terms of being able to regulate the uses of these technologies was quite marked. Yet this is only one part of the story. The social and political re-calibration of these technologies to either subvert the state project or diffuse it in the interest of disseminating anti-colonial nationalism aspirations – they all point at colonial control that was feisty if not absent. They all show that the life of technology was beyond the simplistic control of the state. They all indicate that different social groups used these technologies to articulate the idea of modernity and modern selfhood.

Nature of technological modernity

What are the axes and scope of this technological modernity? Every writer has his own notion about it. I have a relatively one-way view of knowing the nature of this modernity, this book which like many others especially on a colonial society, does. Numbers definitely are not on the side of showing the ‘quantitative’ axes of this discussion. So this is a discussion built with the help of narratives, recipes, testimony for disseminating anti-colonial nationalist aspirations – they all point at colonial control that was feisty if not absent. They all show that the life of technology was beyond the simplistic control of the state. They all indicate that different social groups used these technologies to articulate the idea of modernity and modern selfhood. The Lama be drawn to Christopher Kaplonski’s important study Mongolia has placed them equally and together at the center of the Chinese government’s ongoing campaign against the Dalai Lama. Humphrey and Ujjed’s treatment of the political difficulties faced by the Mergen community, both during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and latterly amid the adapted structures against religion in general and the Dalai Lama in particular, highlights the ways in which everyone involved with the monastery has been taking part in a process of cultural and spiritual negotiation. The two lamas whose stories are central to the book’s narrative, Sengge Lama and the current Chori Lama Minghebatu, had both severely “struggled” during the Cultural Revolution, and both now keep relatively deep places in relation to the complex nexus of history, religious practice and culture that is Mergen Monastery’s ongoing experience. Sengge Lama in particular offers a striking commentary on this: he says, “A person who becomes old must place his history in safekeeping” (p386). This realization of the importance of preserving history, of preserving local and cultural knowledge for future generations (just as, Sengge Lama implies, Mergen Gegen himself had) appears as the intellectual bedrock of the Dalai Lama in particular, highlights the ways in which novelists, journalists, politicians, and administrators pursued their ‘daily work’, but exactly how is not clear (S6.7). I would imagine for a long time the typewriter functioned as a ‘copying machine’ producing the ‘far and topical’ version of hand-written letters, petitions, judgements, news, and even academic theses. In fact, this was true for early day as well as as people were still using it “it typed” with the only but significant difference of editing on the screen, which theoretically meant fewer errors in the final print, but only theoretically. It has only very recently happened that the machine has become an accompaniment of the user in the same way as her lunch box or phone are. The question remains how did the typewriter change, or not, the processes of thinking, reading, writing? Once the typewriter technology can mark the beginning of a more systematic tapping into sources to unearth the complex social relationships around these technologies.

Conflict and resistance

If modernity is a product of conflictual claim and counter-claim making, then the history of technological modernity should also represent the same – conflicts between social groups and classes. Arnold says that “there is no categorical ‘cultural resistance to sewing machines’” (49), but what about resistance based upon capital and skill? Did the traditional catchment of darzi’s work and clientele suffer because women started sewing at home (and quite massively, with vernacular magazines publishing essays on how to sew different types of materials) or did it compensate for it? (pp.50-51)? The competitive clerical job market revolved around the skill of typewriting, what kind of social conflicts did it lead to? Arnold prefers to look at the history of interaction between technology and society through assimilation and acculturation; I wonder if there is more to be said about conflicts and dissonances; to be fair, they are not absent. But more best to be seen if not isolated (weeds, roads, 162-64 and 167-71), but not adequately presented either.

Based largely on the biases for big technologies, Arnold revisits the temporal divide of technological modernity in India for the period of the 1830-1850s that saw railways, steamers, and telegraph creating a modern India (a bias that has its obvious origins in colonial claims), rather than the period between 1905 and 1914 – marked by the Swadeshi movement – that constituted the technological watershed. Not only had the influx of everyday consumption inspired this period but also the imaginaries of modern India. It is this extensive engagement with technology in both its supporting and opposing viewpoints (ranging between Saba and Nehru on one side and Gandhi on the other), that Arnold sees the constitution of modernity. The study of India’s modernity – derivative or otherwise – is being constantly traced from the times of the ‘1344’ Illuminati, the Swadeshi, Macaulay, census, ghojheebje, and hybrid Bengal cuisines. Now it has reached the shores of everyday machines, technologies and commodities. If it is a mere addition to the set of ideas on how Indians thought of themselves to be ‘modern’, or a potential new framework that would recast the historiographical thinking, is too easy to say.

Make in India

Finally, at least two ways, this book reiterates with contemporary Indian politics over technology, and the social perception of Indian skill, and thus unwittingly adds an interesting historical layer to it. Foreign capital and the current governmental slogan of ‘Make in India’ are not very far from how American firms like Dumplow promoted their products as “made in India, by Indians, for Indians” (100). There is no dichotomy between nationalistic manufacturing boost that present this government is spearheading (with the logo of the fist) and the inflow of foreign capital. In fact, the mechanisms of the two are inter-related; the only difference being the financial backing bowl in his mouth. Arnold’s treatment of the Swadeshi phase shows historical antecedents. Second, from repairing cycles on street pavements to that of fixing typewriters (and in the current age of unlocking and repairing all sorts of mobile phones), this book tells us that there is a serious history to be told about how India has achieved its worldwide status of ‘jugaad economy’. The production of many a commodity was stifled under colonialism – is the reason why he doesn’t channelize this on to fixing, assembling, repairing and selling, but not innovatively producing.

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References