Colonial Weaving Schools and the New ‘Middleman’: United Provinces, India, 1905-1925

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Abstract

Leslie Hempson: Colonial Weaving Schools and the New ‘Middleman’: United Provinces, India, 1905-1925
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At the beginning of the twentieth century, colonial officials stationed in the United Provinces, India established a series of weaving schools. Founded as a means of instructing weavers in ‘modern’ production techniques, weaving schools performed a variety of other functions as well, chief among them the supply of essential inputs like loom accessories and yarn to weavers and the consumption of weavers’ finished goods. Although colonial officials held the Indian middleman responsible for weavers’ economic struggles, they did not abandon the middleman’s project altogether. On the contrary, even while vilifying the Indian merchant-moneylender, they established elaborate mechanisms for duplicating many of his functions, usually through the medium of the weaving school. The logic the British attributed to their interventions in the Indian textile industry marked them as special kinds of middlemen, however, ones who might be more appropriately labeled patrons.
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CHAPTER 1

THE MAKING OF THE COLONIAL WEAVING SCHOOL AND THE INDIAN MIDDLEMAN

In 1867 the nationalist intellectual Dadabhai Naoroji famously accused the British of “bleeding” India dry through the imposition of economic policies that robbed the subcontinent of its wealth.1 As his critique gained force in the final decades of the nineteenth century, appraisals of colonial rule highlighting the British threat to native textile production became more and more widespread. Such appraisals, which posited a decline in the Indian handloom industry since the advent of British rule, almost always cast the British as villains intent on the deindustrialization of South Asia.2 Unsurprisingly, colonial officials disagreed, in the process ‘discovering’ an entirely different set of villains: the Indian merchant-moneylenders who served as liaisons between weavers and the larger market. According to British officers, these middlemen had turned Indian weavers into “slaves” by restricting the latter’s access to raw materials and markets, thus ensnaring them in relationships of virtually unassailable dependency. In order for weavers to prosper, the “bond of practical serfdom” that tied them to the unscrupulous

1 See, for example, Dadabhai Naoroji, Poverty and Un-British Rule in India (London: S. Sonnenschein, 1901), 216. For an elaboration of Naoroji’s argument, see Romesh Chunder Dutt, The Economic History of India in the Victorian Age from the Accession of Queen Victoria in 1837 to the Commencement of the Twentieth Century (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956), first published in 1903.

middleman would have to be broken, most likely by the British themselves. Although colonial officials made numerous attempts to do just that, they simultaneously embraced many of the functions of the middleman, re-inscribing them with a new set of meanings.

In this paper I argue that the weaving schools established by British officers at the beginning of the twentieth century should be understood as a new variety of middleman. Founded as a means of instructing weavers in ‘modern’ production techniques, weaving schools performed a variety of other functions as well, chief among them the supply of essential inputs like loom accessories and yarn to weavers and the consumption of weavers’ finished goods. Since in many provinces weaving schools represented the single largest colonial intervention in the textile industry in the twenty-year period between 1905 and 1925, they were of great symbolic and practical importance, not least because they relied upon new forms of organization to achieve their aims. Still, although weavers were unaccustomed to learning about weaving within the four walls of the weaving school, they were intimately familiar with the concept of the middleman.

Although the institution of the middleman changed significantly—and frequently—in the centuries preceding the establishment of colonial weaving schools, some of its primary functions did not. For instance, even as middlemen increasingly assumed responsibility for the patronage of local religious festivals at the beginning of the nineteenth century, they continued to facilitate the flow of raw materials and manufactures between weavers and markets. Indeed, for the purposes of this paper,

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3 See IND file 64, 1908, U.P. State Archives for a particularly pointed example. (Henceforth material obtained from the U.P. State Archives will be cited with file number and date only.)

4 C. A. Bayly describes the rise of a new type of north Indian middleman at the beginning of the long nineteenth century in *Rulers, Townsmen, and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British*
the latter function—the supply of inputs and disposal of finished goods—is the essential thread connecting one generation of middlemen to the next. While colonial officials did not locate themselves within this long line of middlemen, neither did they abandon the middleman’s project altogether. On the contrary, even while vilifying the Indian merchant-moneylender, they established elaborate mechanisms for duplicating many of his functions, usually through the medium of the weaving school. The logic the British attributed to their interventions in the Indian textile industry marked them as special kinds of middlemen, however, ones who might be more appropriately labeled patrons.

The distinction between a middleman and patron is difficult to articulate, not least because the two are occasionally employed as synonyms. However, it seems to me that at least two characteristics distinguish one from the other. First, a patron provides aid to beneficiaries primarily as a means of underlining or augmenting his/her status. As a result, economic gain, though it might be a byproduct of this relationship, is not its fundamental aim. Second, a middleman provides assistance to others primarily as a means of improving his/her financial position. While the middleman might occasionally engage in transactions that promise no immediate gain—for example, by donating food grains to weavers during times of market slowdown—he/she does so with the expectation that such transactions will engender even greater gains later. The line between the middleman and patron is not firm, of course; a single individual can act as a patron in one area of life and a middleman in

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another—or even simultaneously as both. In fact, as I will discuss extensively in a later section, colonial officials charged with governing weaving schools asserted that the best middleman was actually a patron, one who could intervene in market relations without being subsumed by them.

In the following section I provide a brief history of the middleman and patron in pre-colonial and colonial north India. In doing so, I focus primarily on the weaving industry, which constitutes the subject of this study. Next, I sketch a broad outline of the colonial weaving school, followed by a discussion of British conceptions of the Indian middleman. Finally, I examine the ways in which weaving schools duplicated the functions of the middleman and the logic they attributed to that duplication. Although such an exploration could conceivably locate itself almost anywhere in the subcontinent, the United Provinces (UP) is the site of this study. Besides the logistical constraints that make it difficult to conduct an all-India study—the structure of the weaving industry varies considerably by region—other factors make UP an ideal setting. First, because colonial weaving schools were originally established in southern, eastern, and western India and only later transported to the north, a UP-focus allows the reader to encounter the weaving school in a slightly more ‘developed’ form. Second, because in the wake of the revolt of 1857 many of the most contentious debates about the proper organization of Indian society focused on the north, the UP middleman attracted substantial attention from colonial authorities, perhaps even more than his/her counterparts in other regions of India.

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6 The UP weaving school was not a mere derivative of weaving schools established in other parts of the subcontinent, of course. However, as a ‘second-generation’ school it combined features of other provinces’ schools in unique ways.
A Brief History of the Middleman and Patron

A history of middlemen and patrons affiliated with the north Indian weaving industry could easily occupy several volumes. In this section, I sketch only a rough outline of the middleman and patron, paying special attention to the two functions detailed above: the provision of essential inputs to weavers and the consumption of weavers’ finished goods. Although the patron, in particular, performs a host of other tasks as well, these two are the ones that link the colonial weaving school to its predecessors. Taking 1700 as a starting point, I work my way ‘forward’ in time. 

The British were not the first rulers of India to enjoy a special relationship with cloth. As C. A. Bayly argues in his account of *swadeshi*, or home industry, cloth enjoyed a unique position in preindustrial India because of its ability to symbolize social status and transform the “moral and physical being” of its wearer. As a result, cloth was never “merely” a commodity, even when the Mughal empire and its ‘successors’ adopted more and more of the trappings of a fully commercialized economy. Because notables, be they emperors or caste headmen, derived much of their legitimacy from the consumption and redistribution of their subjects’ produce, artisans grew accustomed to the presence of patrons whose obligation it was to

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7 1700 is not an entirely arbitrary starting point in that the death of Aurangzeb seven years later is often identified as the moment at which the Mughal empire began to ‘decline.’ Though overstated, the ‘decline’ of the Mughal empire at the beginning of the eighteenth century did provide an opportunity for new classes of Indians to perform some of the patronage and other functions previously reserved to the Mughal elite.

8 Bayly, The Origins of Swadeshi (Home Industry): Cloth and Indian Society, 1700-1930, in Arjun Appadurai, ed., The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986): 285-321. Bayly argues that the “moral and physical being of the wearer/recipient was perceived to be actually changed by the innate qualities of the cloth or the spirit and substance it conveyed,” in other words, the pollution or purity believed to reside in the very weaves of the cloth (286-7). *Swadeshi* refers most narrowly to economic goods produced within India. Its definition was subsequently expanded to include schools and colleges run exclusively by Indians. The British proposal to partition Bengal in eastern India in 1905 spawned the swadeshi movement, which promoted the boycott of foreign goods and expanded domestic production as a means of combating the perceived injustices of British rule.

Although the rise of British rule in India coincided with—and sometimes even prompted—the decline of royal patronage networks, colonial officials did not always attempt to replace them. In fact, Bayly suggests that the “failure of British government to purchase artisan wares—its failure to engage in reciprocal transactions in return for tribute or to provide service—amounted to a crisis of legitimacy for it.” While colonial officials undoubtedly rejected many of the styles of patronage favored by their predecessors, they did not abandon the patronage of cloth entirely, a matter to which I will return later. Regardless, their arrival did create openings for new classes of Indians to assume responsibility for patronage and other functions that had previously been the sole preserve of the Mughal elite. Before proceeding to a discussion of these new classes of patrons, however, I will describe the activities of the middlemen who, along with Bayly’s emperors and headmen, served as bulwarks of the Indian textile trade.

At approximately the same time that north Indian notables were symbolically and practically consuming artisanal cloth, Indian middlemen were competing with the British for control of the South Asian weaving industry. Since the structure of the industry was such that weavers relied upon the institution of the middleman to facilitate the flow of raw materials and commodities, middlemen effectively controlled the industry. For example, because most weavers lacked specialized...

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10 The jajmani system provides an alternative model for thinking about the patronage of cloth and other artisanal goods. Defined by Peter Mayer as the “exclusive property right possessed by a member of an artisan or service caste to serve a specific patron family,” it is usually discussed within the context of a village economy (360). Though certainly not the ‘timeless’ system described by some scholars, it posits, nonetheless, a social structure in which patrons have an obligation to consume the cloth and other goods produced by their dependents. Charlotte and William Wiser are generally credited with providing the first account of the jajmani system in Behind Mud Walls (New York: R. R. Smith, 1930). William Wiser subsequently published a more detailed exploration of the system in The Hindu Jajmani System: A Socio-Economic System Interrelating Members of a Hindu Village Community in Services (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1988). For a critique of previous accounts of the jajmani system, see Peter Mayer’s “Inventing Village Tradition: The Late 19th Century Origins of the North Indian ‘Jajmani System’, Modern Asian Studies 27.2 (May, 1993): 357-95.

knowledge of markets, especially those geared towards long-distance trade, they relied upon middlemen to sell their goods, rarely coming into direct contact with consumers. Additionally, when they could not procure yarn on their own—usually because of insufficient credit or a lack of cloth for exchange—they took advances of cash and/or raw materials from other middlemen. From at least the second half of the eighteenth century, the East India Company (EIC) worked to eliminate the middlemen who supplied advances to weavers according to an arrangement Tirthankar Roy terms “price contract.” In contrast to the “putting-out system” prevalent in England at the time, Indian weavers maintained control over their manufactures even after accepting advances from creditors. Indeed, those Company servants who managed to gain control over the labor of weavers increasingly paid them not with cash, but yarn, and forbade them from selling their wares outside of the Company. Many weavers changed profession in response, but others refused to completely cut off relations with the Indian middlemen who had financed their craft for so long. Though often avaricious, these middlemen were also deeply embedded in local communities and, thus, difficult to dislodge.

Nevertheless, especially in north India, the social composition of the merchant classes that financed the cloth trade changed dramatically at the end of the eighteenth century.

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12 Roy, Artisans, 75. See also S. Arasaratnam, “Weavers, Merchants, and Company: The Handloom Industry in Southeastern India, 1750-90,” in Tirthankar Roy, ed., Cloth and Commerce: Textiles in Colonial India (Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 1996): 85-114. The terms price and wage contract, of course, owe an intellectual debt to Weber and Marx. The East India Company was an English joint-stock company that exercised a monopoly over trade with India for almost two hundred years. The Company did not limit itself to trade, however; with the aid of a standing army, it assumed control over large tracts of Indian soil, as well as revenue collection privileges. Private European merchants also competed with their Indian counterparts. The literature on them is thin, however, at least in comparison to that on the Company, and will not be discussed in this paper.

13 Arasaratnam, 87. According to the terms of the “putting out system” merchants gained control over weavers’ manufactures by providing them with cash or material advances.

century and beginning of the nineteenth. Hindu family firms, many of them of Agarwal and Khattri origin, assumed control of the banking industry in major urban centers and, with it, some of the political authority that had previously resided with the Mughals and their successors. Although banking, or mahajani, remained the primary pursuit of such families, many poured large sums of money into trade as well, particularly that associated with cloth, grains, and sugar. In addition, the family firm helped to support local government through the provision of loans and service on various boards. Hindu banking families further strengthened their hold on north Indian urban spaces by patronizing religious functions, formerly the preserve of the royalty as well as landholding elites. While the accomplishments of these banker-merchants were substantial, they occurred within the context of a steadily encroaching EIC, and ultimately the establishment of crown rule. As a result, middlemen and the weavers who obtained credit from them had increasingly to contend with the flows of Lancashire textiles that threatened to overwhelm sections of the Indian weaving industry.

Though rarely described as such in histories of Indian textiles, some weavers can themselves be labeled middlemen or patrons at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. As Roy argues in a series of monographs and articles, the Indian weaving industry became increasingly commercialized in the second half of the nineteenth century, meaning that market transactions—as a percentage of total transactions—increased. Commercialization and the rise of

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16 Roy lists several characteristics of “commercialization,” among them “a shift away from production for one’s own use, or for use as gifts and tributes, to production for the market, especially the non-local market”; “a shift from local to long-distance trades”; and “an expansion in demand” in Traditional Industry in the Economy of Colonial India (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 25.
large, extra-local markets, in turn, created opportunities for capital to accumulate in
the hands of certain weavers, some of whom established handloom factories and even purchased powerlooms. These “capitalist” weavers, as Roy calls them, also
discovered ways of procuring yarn and prosecuting trade without the intervention of
merchants and other middlemen. Although they often hired family members to work
for them in their factories, capitalist weavers played an important role in centralizing
production, mainly by supplanting ‘traditional’ models of production in which unpaid
family members assisted individual weavers within the confines of a single home.17
In addition, the ‘new’ weaver became a leader of the community, one who assisted
less credit-worthy weavers with securing raw materials, dispensed technical advice,
and contributed to the acquisition of common social goods.18 Since many of these
transformations gained force at the beginning of the twentieth century, they constitute
one of the frameworks within which the colonial weaving school project emerged.

The Colonial Weaving School

British administrators established weaving schools throughout India in the first
decade of the twentieth century with the intention of modernizing artisanal
production.19 Convinced that weavers could increase the quantity and quality of their
output by learning new skills and acquiring new technologies, colonial officials
conceived of weaving schools as spaces in which ignorant, if capable, artisans would
be instructed in modern weaving techniques. Although nominally under the control

17 For a description of this model, see Kumar.
18 For a detailed discussion of the rise of the “capitalist” weaver, see Roy, “Acceptance,” particularly
520-31.
19 A comprehensive history of colonial weaving schools would require at least an entire book. For a
discussion of the theory of “crafts difference” that lay at the heart of the weaving school project, see
Abigail McGowan, Crafting the Nation in Colonial India (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
of provincial authorities, the earliest weaving schools—clustered primarily in the
former presidencies of Bengal, Bombay, and Madras—relied upon the leadership of
British industrial reformers like Alfred Chatterton and E. B. Havell for the
development of curricula and recruitment of instructors. Colonial faith in the
capacity of science to make production more efficient and rational imbued weaving
schools with an almost transformative power: expose Indian weavers to ‘modern’
modes of production, or so the logic went, and they themselves will revitalize the
weaving industry. Impressed by such claims, British officials stationed outside of
the former presidencies asked Chatterton, Havell, and others for assistance in
establishing their own schools.

Although no two weaving schools were identical, a brief discussion of the
Hewett School, UP’s first, will acquaint the reader with the broad contours of the
weaving school project. Established in March 1907 with the assistance of several
wealthy zamindars, or landholders, and the Bara Banki district board, the Hewett
School provided instruction in ‘modern’ weaving techniques to almost three hundred

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20 REV file 1211, 1906; IND file 64, 1908. Some schools, although government-operated and funded,
were classified as private for record-keeping purposes (IND file 428, 1908).

21 For a discussion of science and its central role in the colonial project, see Gyan Prakash, Another
and David Arnold, Science, Technology, and Medicine in Colonial India (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 2000).

22 The weaving school project attracted support from British administrators for other reasons as well,
reasons indicative of the importance the British attached to the Indian weaving industry. The second
largest employer of Indians after agriculture, weaving played a critical role in the maintenance of a
stable Indian economy. Though colonial officials had little incentive to encourage the development of
textile mills capable of competing with Lancashire and Manchester, many viewed handloom
weaving—the primary mode of production in South Asia—as relatively unthreatening and, hence,
worthy of assistance. In addition, the British were keenly aware that nationalist leaders attracted
supporters in part by accusing the government of devastating the Indian handloom industry through the
imposition of unfavorable trade policies. The swadeshi movement, for example, mobilized opposition
to the proposed partition of Bengal in part by encouraging the boycott of British cloth. Finally, colonial
rule, though coercive, relied on public demonstrations of paternalism to legitimize itself. Because some
sections of the Indian handloom industry had become deeply impoverished by the beginning of the
twentieth century, colonial officials—at least those concerned with preserving the moral stature of the
state—had little choice but to come to their aid.
students in its first two years of existence. Though a committee of “private
gentlemen” soon assumed control of the school’s day-to-day operations, the UP state
government allocated annual grants ranging in value from 3,000 to 5,000 rupees and
monitored the school’s long-term progress. Students, some of whom hailed from
“non-weaving” backgrounds and even areas outside the district, were required to
purchase new handlooms—at a cost of Rs.150-200—before formally enrolling. After enrolling, they could pursue courses in spinning, weaving, hosiery, carpet-
making, and dyeing, some designed for workmen, others for those who wished to
serve as instructors in other educational institutions. The vast majority of graduates,
at least according to figures kept by the school, found work as weavers: in September
1911, for example, the Hewett School reported that over ten percent of its graduates
worked as weaving instructors while at least seventy-five percent of the remainder
were employed as weavers. Many of those listed as weavers did not work from
home, however, as British officials expected, but within the confines of a weaving
shed or even a textile mill.


24 In comparison, the district board contributed over 15,000 rupees to the school during its first two years of operations. Three talugdars contributed a total of almost 13,000 rupees during the same time period (IND file 428, 1908).

25 IND file 428, 1908. Although colonial officials never define what it means to come from a “non-
weaving” background, they presumably mean those individuals whose kinship groups did not
traditionally practice weaving as an occupation. In the British mind, the tie between occupation and
caste was almost absolute.

26 Most weaving schools, despite their name, provided instruction in activities that were not, strictly
speaking, weaving; most schools offered courses in spinning and processing techniques, for example.

27 IND file 428, 1908.

28 Since for centuries most Indian weavers utilized their homes as dual domestic-work spaces, drawing
upon the labor of relatives to prepare warfs and assist with other processing techniques, British
administrators expected that this model would predominate even after the introduction of weaving
schools. What the British failed to recognize, however, was that even before the start of the twentieth
Essential to the Hewett School’s educational mission was the organizational structure adopted to encourage it. The Bara Banki district board donated several buildings to the school for use as classrooms, and the school itself constructed four boarding houses: one each for Hindu male, Hindu female, Muslim male, and Muslim female students. In addition, within several months of its establishment, the school had already purchased almost seventy-five looms—most of them Salvation Army models—for use as instructional tools; it subsequently trained employees to construct replicas of these looms, which it then sold to nearby “branch” factories. The school also developed a policy of providing yarn, silk, and other essential materials to the district’s weavers at cost price and selling weavers’ finished goods for them, an innovation I will discuss in greater detail shortly. The school’s board even reported providing instruction to the employees of branch factories and facilitating the sale of cloth produced by those factories. The organization of Hewett School changed dramatically in the decades following its establishment, of course, as did the UP weaving school project more generally.

Because high-ranking officials, most notably the Lieutenant Governor of the province, repeatedly expressed displeasure with the performance of UP weaving century some weavers had established weaving sheds in which a handful—or even dozens—of weavers worked together in a single workspace.

29 Women could enroll only in the hosiery and embroidery wings of the school, which were kept distinct from the weaving department. School officials took great pains to convince the district’s middle class families that their daughters would be safe in the school, going so far as to allocate funds for the hire of porters and doolis, a form of conveyance, to transport the daughters of “good families” to class each day (IND file 428, 1908).

30 Although officials do not define branch factory in the folios I examined, the institution is presumably quite similar to the weaving sheds defined above. By the end of 1912 the school had allegedly sold seventy-eight Salvation Army looms to the six branch factories located in the district (Ibid).

31 Ibid. Sherring, Deputy Commissioner of Bara Banki and head of the committee that oversaw the Hewett School, reported that the school collected woven goods from weavers then sold them to a Lucknow-based firm at ten percent profit. The Lucknow-based firm then disposed of these goods in a larger market.

32 Ibid.
schools, the twenty-year period from 1905 to 1925 witnessed a flurry of activity as the government worked to develop increasingly efficient schools. For example, although the first four weaving schools were opened at Bara Banki, Moradabad, Saharanpur, and Tanda in 1907, the Saharanpur school was quickly shifted to Deoband and the Tanda institute threatened with elimination.\(^{33}\) By 1914 four new schools—one each at Almora, Muzaffarnagar, Sandila, and Shahjahanpur—had opened and the Deoband school returned to Saharanpur.\(^{34}\) In the meantime, the provincial government approved the founding of an experimental weaving station at Benares, which in addition to its work developing improved weaving technologies, would exert managerial control over the other schools.\(^{35}\) The experimental weaving station became a central weaving institute in 1915, a year that also heralded the launch of two peripatetic weaving schools.\(^{36}\) The establishment of a store that would supply raw materials to the weaving schools followed in 1916 as well as a school designed specifically for the employees of textile mills in 1924.\(^{37}\) In short, the mission of the UP weaving school had expanded so dramatically by 1925 that some of its functions would have been virtually unrecognizable to its predecessors.

Still, although the outward form of the weaving school changed substantially during the time period under consideration, colonial officials continued to measure success in similar ways. First, the government paid careful attention to the ability of schools to promote the adoption of new loom technologies. Because fly-shuttle

\(^{33}\) IND files 64, 1908 and 428,1908.

\(^{34}\) IND file 71, 1914. Mau, Budaun, and Etawah received fixed schools by 1920-1 and Hapur, Jaswantnagar, Jaunpur, Sambhal, and Ghazipur by 1922. See IND file 820, 1922.

\(^{35}\) IND files 428, 1911 and 71, 1914.

\(^{36}\) IND files 308, 1915 and 431, 1915.

\(^{37}\) IND files 195, 1916 and 176, 1925.
handlooms, such as the Serampore and Salvation Army varieties, appeared more efficient than the pit looms worked by many Indian weavers at the beginning of the twentieth century, school officials kept careful records of the number of looms sold each month to current and former students.\(^{38}\) In fact, when one UP-based school failed to convince local weavers to adopt the Serampore loom, the government threatened it with closure.\(^{39}\) Second, British administrators expected that graduates of weaving schools would pursue careers as weavers and collected statistics on the number who actually did so.\(^{40}\) Though some officials assumed that instruction in new technologies and weaving techniques would increase productivity to such an extent that only the most incompetent graduates would be forced to exit the weaving industry, others recognized that high input costs and uncertain markets threatened to render irrelevant any productivity gains. As a result, the latter group worked to ensure that weaving schools functioned not only as educational institutions, but as intermediaries between weavers and the market.

British Conceptions of the Indian Middleman

The attempts of colonial officials to establish a network of weaving schools capable of mediating between weavers and the market cannot be understood without first examining the criteria these officials employed to assess the Indian ‘middleman’. After all, as I discuss in greater detail below, British officials acknowledged the importance of the figure of the middleman even as they condemned the individuals who performed the middleman’s functions. Who, then, was the Indian middleman,

\(^{38}\) See, for example, IND files 64, 1908; 428, 1908; and 226, 1909.

\(^{39}\) See IND file 64, 1908. Colonial officials admitted, however, that the weavers of Tanda had little incentive to adopt the Serampore loom, which performed only slightly better than the local loom in a handweaving competition.

\(^{40}\) See, for example, IND files 428, 1908; and 226, 1909.
and in what ways did he fall short of the ideal imagined by the colonial state? The answers to these questions will provide us with a framework for evaluating the constitution of weaving schools as a new type of middleman.

Colonial officials called the Indian merchant-moneylenders who mediated between weavers and the market by several names, all of which, in their hands at least, possessed a uniformly negative connotation. While the first two, bania and mahajan, were Indian caste and occupational markers, the third, middleman, was an English term with a long genealogy in British history. Because the meanings of bania and mahajan vary slightly according to regional location, it is difficult, even undesirable, to provide a comprehensive definition.\(^{41}\) However, at the most basic level, both refer to an individual who works as a trader and/or moneylender. Given the intermediary functions of the trader and moneylender, it is perhaps no surprise that the British also described them as middlemen. What is more striking is the great disdain with which colonial officials viewed the activities of these middlemen, disdain that appears directly linked to the latter’s participation in the market.\(^{42}\)

District magistrates and the Lieutenant Governor alike portrayed mahajans and banias as greedy businessmen unconcerned with anything but turning a profit. For instance, the commissioner of Fyzabad district merely expressed common sense when he reported that mahajans were largely responsible for the suffering of local weavers known as Julahas. Lamenting that “practically all the Julahas are bound hand and foot to a mahajan or some rich employer of their own caste,” he warned: “Neither of

\(^{41}\) I will employ the term mahajan more frequently than bania in this paper for the simple reason that colonial officials did so. However, the same argument applies to both.

\(^{42}\) I will not attempt here to provide a comprehensive definition of the market. However, for the purposes of this paper market refers to the actual and conceptual space envisioned by liberal theory as the site of exchange of goods and services.
these classes are at all anxious that the Julahas should secure their independence.” 43

Other officials charged with improving the economic health of the UP weaving industry asserted that their chief aim was to “eliminate” or “exclude” the middleman. 44 While most officials appear to have believed that the reasons for the middleman’s exclusion were so self-evident as not to warrant articulation, the Lieutenant Governor offered a particularly forceful justification: mahajans and banias were “capitalists.” 45

The Lieutenant Governor made this statement in the context of a 1908 discussion about the Tanda weaving school, which had largely failed to attract and retain students. Although three other schools had also opened the year before, Tanda alone among them was judged an unmitigated failure and threatened with closure. Rejecting the advice of the provincial inspector of weaving schools, who urged that Tanda be closed immediately, the Lieutenant Governor ordered the appointment of a new committee to oversee the school. 46 The old committee, which counted three mahajans among its members, could not be relied upon to act in the best interest of the weavers it claimed to serve. As a result, when constituting a new committee:

It is important, if possible, to obtain for members of it, not capitalists whose aim is to keep the weaver class in a state of dependence on themselves or whose business will be affected adversely by an improvement in the weavers’ position, but intelligent men with time to devote to the school and its problems, who are not privately interested. 47

43 IND file 64, 1908.

44 IND files 428, 1908 and 590, 1915. See also IND file 820, 1928.

45 IND file 64, 1908.

46 The inspector of weaving schools cited the “hostile attitude of leading weavers” as an insurmountable obstacle (Ibid).

47 Ibid.
The juxtaposition of “capitalists” to “intelligent men…who are not privately interested” is a critical one. By learning more about the identity of both, we can, in turn, determine why mahajans were considered capitalists whose commercial interests disqualified them from participation in the governance of weaving schools.

Although the Lieutenant Governor and his subordinates tell us very little about the constitution of a new Tanda oversight committee, they draw an implicit comparison between the Tanda committee and its counterpart in Saharanpur. The site of a weaving school opened at the same time as Tanda, Saharanpur was located hundreds of miles away in the northwestern corner of UP. For reasons that are not entirely clear, three of the seven members of the Saharanpur oversight committee were zamindars. The remainder were current or retired government officials, only one of them an Englishman.48 By contrast, the Tanda committee included three mahajans, two government officials, three Julahas, and two or three additional weavers who did not belong to the Julaha community.49 Though the provincial government shifted the Saharanpur school to nearby Deoband in 1909, it did so for reasons unrelated to the composition of the oversight committee. On the contrary, files prepared by the industry department portray the Saharanpur committee as superior to the Tanda one.

48 H. C. Ferard, collector, magistrate and chairman of the Saharanpur district board, was ex-officio chairman of the committee, while Babu Durga Prasad, retired deputy collector, was its secretary. The remaining government officials were M. Mohini Mohan Lal, tahsildar, and A. C. Chatarji, officer on special deputy. Chaudhri Shib Sahai and M. Mohammad Naim Khan are both listed as zamindars, while B. Joti Prasad was a zamindar and vakil, or lawyer. Khan also served as vice chairman of the committee (IND file 64, 1908).

49 The subdivisional officer of Tanda tahsil and the tahsildar, neither of whom is named, were president and vice-president respectively. Babu Tirloki Nath, a mahajan, served as treasurer, while Babu Girdhar Lal and Babu Shunurain Lal were also mahajans. The three Julahas on the committee are Din Muhammad, Ramzan, and Abdul Said. The “two or three other weavers” are unnamed. After six months, Babu Shunurain, Abdul Said, and the unnamed weavers were removed from the committee, “as it was found that they were giving no assistance” (IND file 64, 1908).
While two features—the inclusion of mahajans and weavers—distinguished the Tanda committee from its Saharanpuri counterpart, colonial officials attached importance to only the former. In a lengthy communication to the Lieutenant Governor, J. W. Hose, Secretary to the Government of the United Provinces, asserted that “the very men are on the [Tanda] committee who ought not to be.” The men in question were Babus Tirloki Nath, Girdhar Lal, and Shivnarayan Lal, all of them local cloth merchants. In Hose’s telling:

Tirloki Nath, the [committee’s] treasurer, is (or belongs to the family of) the largest mahajan…He no doubt has a number of weavers in his hands, and realizes that the school will overturn his ‘raj.’ Shivnarayan is related to him and is not a very reputable character…Both he and Girdhar Lal are themselves interested in the cloth trade, both weaving and printing. With workers as they are they get cheap labour and good incomes.\(^5\)

In other words, mahajans’ private ‘interests’ rendered them suspect, making their inclusion on weaving school committees undesirable.

Zamindars, on the other hand, not only served with distinction on the Saharanpur oversight committee but, in combination with members of the local district board, founded the Hewett weaving school in Bara Banki district in 1907. The first weaving school erected in UP, Hewett enjoyed a special status, both because it was named after the Lieutenant Governor J. P. Hewett and because many of its innovations were subsequently adopted by other schools. Although the provincial government donated over Rs. 11,000 to the school within two years of its founding, the district board and local zamindars donated even more: Rs. 19,000 and Rs. 15,000 respectively. The Raja of Jahangirabad, Sir Tasadduk Rasul Khan, contributed the lion’s share of the zamindari portion, with Rs. 10,000, followed by Rai Bahadur Rai Mahadeo Bali of Daryabad and Shaikh Naushad Ali Khan of Maila Raiganj with

\(^5\) Industry file 64, 1908 also refers to Shivnarayan Lal as Shiunarain Lal. Hose had previously served in Saharanpur district.
between Rs. 2,000 and 3,000 each. A short time later, the Raja’s wife Lady Tasadduk Rasul Khan donated an additional Rs. 2,000, presumably to the women’s wing of the school, which was opened in 1909.\textsuperscript{51} Although colonial officials do not report subsequent donations by Bara Banki’s landlords, it is possible that zamindars channeled future contributions through the district board. After all, as Thomas Metcalf argues, zamindars dominated many north Indian district boards from their founding in the 1880s until “well into the twentieth century.”\textsuperscript{52} Officials make no mention of donations from mahajans, suggesting either that mahajans directed their capital elsewhere or that their contributions were recorded differently from those made by zamindars.

What made zamindars more fit for service on weaving school oversight committees than mahajans? Why did the former donate large sums to the construction of the Hewett school, while the latter could be counted upon only to “strange” the weaving industry?\textsuperscript{53} Given the British propensity to ascribe dubious ‘interests’ to the mahajans (and banias) mentioned in their reports, the search for answers might most productively begin in the interstices between ‘interest’ and ‘disinterest’. Whereas colonial documents almost always portray mahajans as ‘interested’ parties, zamindars remain curiously ‘disinterested’, as though they moved through the world with no thought to personal gain. Since ‘interest’ in its most basic sense implies partiality, even concern for personal advantage, it is clear that the colonial discourse at work here assigns a different set of meanings to the term. After all, even the beneficent Sir Tasadduk Rasul Khan possessed interests of one type or

\textsuperscript{51} IND file 428, 1908.

\textsuperscript{52} Metcalf, \textit{Land}, 327.

\textsuperscript{53} IND file 428, 1908.
another. The problem with mahajans, then, was not that they possessed interests, but that they possessed interests of a particular variety, interests that were in some way distinct from those held by zamindars. In a nod to David Gilmartin, whose discussion of election law and the ‘people’ influences this paper, we might refer to such interests as ‘undue’ ones, thus distinguishing them from ‘due’, or legitimate, interests.\(^5\)

Though the ‘undue-ness’ of mahajans’ interests sprang, in large part, from their association with the market, changing forms of social organization also played an important role.

The relative balance of North Indian social forces underwent a massive transformation in the nineteenth century, particularly in the wake of the revolt of 1857-8. Though the East India Company succeeded in quashing the revolt, it had lost its hold over the subcontinent and was subsequently replaced by the British crown. Keen to avoid a repeat of the events of 1857-8, the crown identified classes of Indian society that (it believed) could be persuaded to support its rule and made plans to buttress their position. Zamindars, in particular, received special assistance even though many of them had armed and led entire villages against the British during the revolt. Indeed, the speed with which tenant farmers, some of them ‘beneficiaries’ of British land reforms, rallied around zamindars convinced British officials that zamindars were actually the “natural leaders of the people,” akin in some ways to the English landed gentry.\(^5\) As a result, these officials made numerous attempts to ensure the survival of the zamindari class, most notably through the Encumbered

\(^5\) David Gilmartin, “Election Law and the ‘People’ in Colonial and Postcolonial India,” in Dipesh Chakrabarty, Rochona Mazumdar, and Andrew Sartori, eds., *From the Colonial to the Postcolonial: India and Pakistan in Transition* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 55-82. Gilmartin’s focus is on ‘undue influence’ as it was constituted by election law.

Estates Act of 1870. According to the terms of the act, heavily indebted zamindars could entrust the management of their estates to the government for up to twenty years, during which time moneylenders could not possess or sell the land. Though reluctant to intervene so heavy-handedly in the Indian economy, colonial officials worried about the risks of allowing urban moneylenders to assume control of vast tracts of land. After all, in their minds, zamindars, and zamindars alone, were the class that would serve as a “stable conservative bulwark for the British raj.”

Mahajans, on the other hand, posed a more intractable threat to the continuation of the raj, in part because their rise coincided with the decline of the Mughal empire and its successor states. Increasingly dominated, at least in North India, by Hindu family firms, the mahajan class derived the bulk of its authority from the credit it controlled, which it extended to traders, artisans, and landholders. In addition, because of their links to supra-local social and credit networks, mahajans were uniquely poised to play an important role in the budding nationalist movement. Bayly argues that this role extended far beyond the provision of credit, however, to include the imparting of a “socially conservative” tinge to the Indian National Congress. Indeed, many of the most prominent mahajans were Hindus who channeled the “greater part of their social energy and optional patronage” to religious affairs. The cow protection movement, in particular, which is often credited with drawing boundaries between the Hindu and Muslim communities, consumed much of their attention.


Although mahajans’ social background accounts for some of the distrust with which British officials viewed them, the market itself accounts for even more. Indeed, at the heart of colonial economic policy lay two potentially contradictory visions of the market: while, on the one hand, individuals could make free economic choices within its confines, on the other, those choices were the outcome of selfish calculations and, hence, morally dubious. For example, the structures of debt employed by mahajans to maximize profit often constrained weavers’ ability to enter into economic relations with others, thus constituting the mahajan as a barrier to weavers’ freedom. As a result, the market-based patron or middleman was the worst type possible: instead of encouraging the formation of relationships based on mutual obligation, he/she acted entirely out of self-interest, thus ensnaring others in relationships of dependence.

To state this argument in a slightly different way, the market-based patron or middleman was the “capitalist” cited by the Lieutenant Governor in his discussion of the Tanda weaving school oversight committee. Unlike the ‘privately un-interested’ men who served as foils, the capitalist was “privately interested,” meaning that his interests—like those of any other capitalist—could be traced to the market. Those interests, in turn, because of their origins in the market, were selfish and morally dubious: in short, ‘undue’. Interests associated with non-market based patrons or middlemen, on the other hand, were the product of radically different calculations, calculations predicated on something besides ‘self-interest’. Because the second variety of interests were not of the market, they became a type of ‘disinterest’ when joined with the market. Since weaving schools operated at least partly within the confines of the market, colonial officials privileged ‘disinterest’ as a means of ensuring that market-based interests would not wreck the schools. The colonial
tendency to attribute certain qualities not to individuals but communities ensured that entire groups would be branded ‘interested’ or ‘disinterested’.\(^{58}\) While mahajans remained the chief ‘interested’ party for the duration of the weaving school project, two categories of ‘disinterest’ emerged.

First, those communities that derived their authority from outside the market could be classified as ‘disinterested’ and, hence, ideal candidates for inclusion on weaving school committees. Because zamindars accumulated influence largely through their ties to a particular piece of land and the peasants who cultivated it, they fit easily into this category. Although by the beginning of the twentieth century many zamindars participated in market-based transactions of one sort or another, such transactions did not lie at the heart of their ‘zamindar-ness’. More importantly, at least as far as weaving schools were concerned, zamindars rarely advanced credit and raw materials to weavers or facilitated the sale of finished goods.\(^{59}\) As a result, their relationship to weavers was in some ways quite different from that of mahajans, who, after all, derived much of their influence from their control of credit.

Nevertheless, it is striking that, according to this logic, zamindars’ putative distance from the market rendered them fit to oversee others’ negotiations of it. In other words, because the world of the zamindars was not one of capitalist exchange, but familial land and reciprocal social obligations, they could be counted upon to detach their interests from those of the weaver. In fact, their interests could not impinge upon the weaver, being ‘non-capitalist’ in nature and, hence, for all intents and purposes, not interests at all. Still, although colonial officials praised zamindars

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\(^{59}\) Weavers, of course, often paid a small annual fee to zamindars, usually based on the number of looms they worked. This fee took the form of cash, grain, or cloth.
for their financial contributions to the construction of weaving schools and service on oversight committees, they did not ask them to replace mahajans as mediators between weavers and the market. On the contrary, they encouraged zamindars to sponsor handloom exhibitions and promote the formation of cooperative banks, perhaps in an attempt to maintain British influence over weaving schools even while drawing upon landholders’ considerable financial and social resources. Thus, despite their constitution as a ‘disinterested’ lot, zamindars remained on the periphery of the weaving school project, leaving the actual prosecution of market transactions to colonial officials.

Second, those communities that operated simultaneously both inside and outside of the market could also be classified as ‘disinterested’, at least according to the logic at hand. Because they stood apart from the market even as they intervened within it, they managed to evade some of the societal pressures that entrapped mahajans. As a result, they possessed a capacity to act in the public good—i.e., without self-interest—that those confined exclusively to the market lacked. Unsurprisingly, colonial officials appear to be the only members of this category, likely because of their association with a political regime that could portray itself as not entirely of India even though forged within it. For example, when members of the UP Industry Department made plans to overhaul a state-run arts and crafts emporium, they described their efforts as attempts to strengthen the provincial economy. Although the emporium earned a profit of fifteen to twenty-five percent on each good sold and contracted with foreign buyers to ship large quantities of cloth, pottery, and brass work abroad, it was, colonial officials maintained, not a money-making venture, but the “best weapon in our campaign to help on the arts and crafts industries of the
Province.” By connecting UP to a global market, the state could ensure the viability of the region’s artisanal goods for many years to come.60

In some ways, the predicament of this second category of ‘disinterested’ persons resembles that of the ancient Indian king and free, rational individual cited by Gilmartin in his study of the people and religion.61 Drawing upon J. C. Heesterman’s discussion of the “conundrum of the king’s authority,” the idea that a sovereign derived his legitimacy from his simultaneous location within and outside of the community, Gilmartin argues that “the concept of the free, rational individual in fact moved the conundrum of kingly sovereignty within the self.”62 In other words, at the heart of the sovereign person lay a tension between the “capacity for free, rational choice” and the “reality of dependence and influence that inevitably encompassed individuals as they existed in the real world.” Since the capacity for free, rational choice necessarily entailed distance from worldly influence, the sovereign person also resided both within and apart from the world.63 Similarly, ‘disinterested’ communities of the second variety stood simultaneously inside and outside of the market.

Nevertheless, as Heesterman’s king and Gilmartin’s free, rational individual knew only too well, the tension between ‘inside-’ and ‘outside-ness’ was, at heart, irresolvable. Although on a conceptual level colonial officials could claim for themselves a space outside the purview of the market, in practice they often succumbed to the very ‘self-interest’ they decried in mahajans. For example, in 1922

60 IND file 228, 1919.


63 Gilmartin, “People,” 2.
a committee appointed to evaluate UP’s weaving schools found that the province’s Central Supply Store regularly charged prices above the market rate. Since, as I will discuss below, British officers established the Store in 1916 as a means of providing yarn to weavers at prices lower than those solicited by mahajans, the committee greeted this discovery with consternation, recommending the Store’s dissolution.⁶⁴ That the committee condemned the Store for its failure to resist the financial temptations of the market only highlights the importance colonial officials attached to ‘disinterest’ as well as the large degree to which they associated ‘interest’ with the ‘market’. Still, the British could not entirely abandon the market because while the mahajan and ‘interested’ Englishman were fundamentally dangerous, a patron-less market was equally so.

Moradabad, a town in western UP that housed one of the province’s weaving schools, attracted British attention precisely because its weavers did not rely upon mahajans to supply them with raw materials or consume their finished goods. On the contrary, as W. H. Moreland, UP’s Director of Land Records and Agriculture, proclaimed, the weavers of Moradabad were “free and not tied to the bania.” While this freedom was unusual and highly desirable, corresponding as it did with colonial efforts to “eliminate” the bania, it came at a considerable price to the weaver. As Moreland himself noted, the town’s weavers “pay dearly for freedom,” regularly purchasing raw materials at prices twenty percent greater than those charged by mahajans. In addition, because they lacked access to the credit that mahajans provided, they had to sell all of their cloth immediately instead of waiting until autumn when cloth prices rose significantly.⁶⁵ As a result, Moreland and his

⁶⁴ IND file 820, 1922. The UP government subsequently accepted this recommendation.
⁶⁵ IND file 226, 1909.
colleagues quickly concluded, it was not enough simply to free weavers from the clutches of mahajans: a new type of middleman had to be erected in the mahajan’s place, one who would help weavers to navigate the vagaries of the market without infringing upon their freedom. This new middleman would be a patron and a specifically British one at that.
CHAPTER 2
THE NEW PATRONAGE

Who was this new middleman and in what ways could he be distinguished from his (Indian) counterparts? What made him a patron and not simply a middleman? These questions are difficult to answer, at least partly because so much of the work performed by weaving schools was performed by mahajans as well. Nevertheless, a careful reading of weaving schools, especially one attuned to the exigencies outlined above, reveals that colonial weaving schools operated according to a distinctive logic: that of ‘disinterest’. Although elements of this logic surface in the writings of colonial officials, it is most clearly articulated through the functioning of weaving schools. In this section, I examine several of the weaving school’s functions, paying special attention to the central assumptions upon which they rested.

Perhaps because one of the weaving school’s primary aims was to aid weavers in the acquisition of new technologies, many of its earliest efforts focused on the dissemination of fly-shuttle handlooms. Colonial officials did not give these looms away, of course—that would encourage ‘dependency’ and require considerable expenditures; they did, however, sell looms at cost price, sometimes with very low rates of interest attached. The administrators of the Hewett School, for example, required students to buy a Salvation Army loom before enrolling—for the extraordinary sum of Rs. 150-200—while the Advisory Committee to the Experimental Weaving Institute at Benares recommended the establishment of a “hire-purchase” system, according to which students would complete their purchase

66 The Serampore and Salvation Army models were initially the most popular.
before graduating. The district schools at Tanda and Moradabad, on the other hand, advanced looms to graduates on the condition that they make monthly installment payments of Rs. 2-3 for one to two years. Schools reported relatively few purchases initially, but those numbers increased with time.

Subsequent interventions in the textile industry, though they continued to prioritize the supply of handlooms to weavers, also promoted the dissemination of yarn and loom accessories like sleys. As with handlooms, colonial officials repeatedly announced their intention to sell yarn and loom accessories at cost price. Almost since their inception, for instance, the Hewett and Deoband weaving schools provided cost price yarn to local weavers, while the Moradabad school eventually did the same. The decentralized nature of these arrangements troubled the British, however, and they began to search for alternative models in which individual schools would not assume sole responsibility for providing weavers with raw materials. Finally, they settled upon the establishment of a central supply store, in the process creating a new, more wide-ranging middleman.

The Central Weaving Supply Store, opened at Cawnpore in 1916, was charged with supplying fly-shuttle sleys and yarn to district weaving schools and, through them, the province’s weavers. While Store employees procured yarn from local mills,

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67 IND files 428, 1908 and 38, 1912. Although Rs. 150-200 seems an improbably large sum for a handloom, it does appear to reflect the listed cost price of the Salvation Army model employed by the school. Regardless, administrators of Hewett School reported that even at a price of Rs. 150-200, they had no trouble finding willing buyers. They subsequently announced plans to manufacture their own model for Rs. 20, although it is unclear whether they ever managed to do so (IND file 428, 1908).

68 IND file 64, 1908. The looms associated with the Tanda and Moradabad schools cost significantly less than those associated with Hewett because they were less technologically ‘advanced.’ While Hewett encouraged its graduates to work on expensive frame looms that consumed massive amounts of space, Tanda and Moradabad promoted the use of less costly, less expansive pit looms. Tanda and Moradabad’s looms cost on average Rs. 30-50.

69 IND file 226, 1909.

70 The sley is the reed of a loom.

71 IND files 428, 1908 and 410, 1911.
they obtained sleys from the government-aided Carpentry School, which instructed some Indians in carpentry just as the weaving schools provided lessons in weaving. UP’s Director of Industries was so impressed with this model that he suggested the Store expand its operations to include the supply of sized warps and perhaps even the arrangement of dyeing services.  Since colonial officials considered the Store an essential component of the weaving school project, they placed the principal of the province’s premier weaving school in charge of its operations and accounts. In addition, they made a Rs. 50,000 advance to it in 1918, an astronomical sum at the time. Although the provincial government closed the Store in 1922, partly on the grounds that it charged prices above the market rate, it proposed a similar model for the districts: co-operative stores that would be housed in the same premises as district weaving schools and perform the same functions as the Central Weaving Supply Store, albeit on a smaller scale.

Colonial officials did not limit the weaving school project to the supply of handlooms and raw materials, however, but also established mechanisms for the disposal of weavers’ finished goods. As usual, the Hewett School pioneered this effort, pronouncing itself willing to purchase cloth from local weavers. It then sold this cloth, at a profit of approximately ten percent, to a Lucknow-based firm, which sold it once again to Indian or European consumers. Other schools established

72 In order to size a warp, the lengthwise yarns that are stretched across the frame of a loom before weaving, weavers had to apply an agent, such as starch, to the yarn in order to reduce breakage. According to colonial documents, weavers had a difficult time producing warps of uniform size, especially when those warps were of more than fifty yards in length. Furthermore, particularly after the introduction of chemical dyes to India, weavers experienced difficulty dyeing their cloth in an efficient manner. Because each dye required its own standing bath, weavers often wasted large quantities of dye upon a single piece of cloth (IND file 195, 1916).

73 IND file 195, 1916.

74 IND file 820, 1922.

75 IND file 428, 1908.
similar arrangements, although it is unclear whether they, too, employed firms to make sales on their behalf. Perhaps more ambitiously, the UP government established an emporium—first in Cawnpore, then in Lucknow—to market local textiles to national and international audiences. Though not attached to a weaving school, the emporium relied upon weaving school employees to identify textiles worthy of display.\textsuperscript{76} Indeed, partly through the efforts of the emporium, some of these textiles were featured at exhibitions in London and other European cities.\textsuperscript{77} While the emporium did not consume nearly as much cloth as the weaving schools, it, too, attempted to ensure that UP’s weavers would find a market for their goods. As one colonial administrator wrote, “[The emporium] is the best weapon in our campaign to help on the arts and crafts industries of the Province. It opens up a Provincial, all-India and world wide market to industries which previously had only a small local market.”\textsuperscript{78} In other words, by encouraging interest in UP textiles in other parts of the world, the government could facilitate their consumption.

While, on the surface, there appear to be many parallels between the weaving school project and the activities of the Indian middleman—both, after all, served as intermediaries between weavers and the market—colonial officials viewed the two as fundamentally unalike. This was not simply because the former manufactured ‘modern’ handlooms or managed emporia but because it did so ‘disinterestedly’, that is to say, in the manner of a patron. Although weaving schools were expected to earn enough through the sale of handlooms and cloth to cover some of their expenses, the provincial government did not contemplate removing them from its annual budget.

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{76} IND file, 228, 1919. The emporium made a profit of approximately fifteen to twenty-five percent on each sale. Europeans and Anglo-Indians made ninety-five percent of purchases.
\textsuperscript{77} IND file 436, 1919.
\textsuperscript{78} IND file 228, 1919.
\end{quote}
On the contrary, the Officiating Director of Industries, UP, informed the Upper India Chamber of Commerce in 1914 that the schools could not operate at anything other than a loss “unless run practically as a factory.” Since they would at that point cease to be schools, such a proposal was clearly preposterous.\footnote{IND file 71, 1914.} While an otherwise financially fastidious government’s support of a money-losing venture can be safely read as an indication that profit was not its only motive, the same can be said of the middleman, who, in addition to monetary gain, also valued his status in local society. As a result, it is important to consider two other features of the weaving school that distinguished it from the Indian middleman.

First, colonial officials’ celebration of ‘cost price’ marked them as patrons rather than middlemen. By insisting that the yarn and looms distributed by weaving schools be sold at ‘cost price’, they established a barometer by which all sales—even those conducted by other parties—could be evaluated. Furthermore, because the very term ‘cost price’ implies the absence of profit, the seller of ‘cost price’ goods can be said to derive no profit from his efforts. Since self-interest as measured by the pursuit of profit is the hallmark of the market, one who sells goods at cost price is by definition ‘disinterested’ and, thus, not of the market. While such a logic legitimized British interventions in the UP weaving industry, coding them as driven not by ‘interest’ but ‘disinterest’, it elided the extent to which ‘cost price’ was the byproduct of highly ‘interested’ calculations. For example, a wide variety of historically contingent factors influenced the valuation of raw materials and labor. When, as in the case of the handlooms manufactured by colonial weaving schools, the same party that determined the cost price also set the laborer’s wages, cost price was less a reflection of ‘neutral’ market mechanisms than the ‘interests’ of those in power.
Nevertheless, because cost price had acquired an aura of neutrality, it became a signal of the patron’s difference vis-à-vis the middleman.

Second, colonial officials’ attempts to recruit only individuals of “weaving backgrounds” for their schools marked these institutions as sites of patronage located outside of the market. In part because a 1922 review of UP weaving schools discovered that the majority of students at both fixed and peripatetic institutions were “non-weavers,” a committee charged with re-constituting the schools recommended that applicants from “hereditary weaving castes” be given priority in admissions and the awarding of scholarships. In fact, each school would be assigned at most two scholarships for “non-weavers,” to be awarded “not as a matter of course, but only when circumstances justified the award.” The rationale for this policy, according to the committee chair, was that:

The non-weaver can not have the same facilities as a weaver in carrying on hand-weaving as a home industry, inasmuch as he will lack the assistance of various members of his family in the conduct of his business. He will also have no community to help him.

In addition, because “the best form in which hand weaving deserves encouragement and can be expected to repay efforts at improvement is as a cottage industry” and the committee “did not come across a single non-weaver ex-student who was carrying on the profession independently at his own house,” it stood to reason that only ‘hereditary weaving castes’ could safeguard the ‘autonomy’ of the weaving industry.80

Implicit in the imagining of ‘hereditary weaving castes’ as ideal candidates for inclusion in weaving schools was the assumption that such castes were by nature ‘disinterested’. Although as Roy and others so convincingly show even ‘hereditary

80 IND file 820, 1922. Emphasis in the original.
weaving castes’ had been absorbed into networks of capitalist exchange by the end of the nineteenth century, colonial officials continued to imagine them as repositories of ‘traditional’ artisanry. As such, they could be said to reside in the same ‘non-market’ realm as the patron, the very one in which weaving schools attempted to locate themselves. That the constitution of certain categories of weavers as ‘disinterested’ required an almost willful disregard of the conditions in which those weavers lived is in itself quite interesting. More interesting, however, is that in order to establish weaving schools as sites of patronage, colonial officials had to demonstrate not only their own ‘disinterested-ness’ but that of participating weavers as well. After all, the inclusion of ‘interested’ weavers—in this case individuals of ‘non-weaving backgrounds’ who had entered the profession solely to make money—in the weaving school project would call into question the ‘disinterested-ness’ of the British themselves. And since ‘disinterest’ alone separated the patron from the middleman, colonial officials could not relinquish it without also surrendering the very basis of their political authority in the marketplace.

Conclusion

Although weaving schools ostensibly focused their efforts on the ‘revitalization’ of the UP textiles industry, they simultaneously made important contributions to the reimagining of political authority in early twentieth century India. Indeed, in the hands of the colonial state ‘disinterest’ became the primary marker of one’s ability to intervene legitimately in the market: because the middleman possessed an abundance of ‘interest’, his interventions could never be anything but illegitimate; the patron, on the contrary, wielded ‘disinterest’ as a badge of legitimacy. When viewed in this light the colonial state’s championing of the basic tenets of
liberal political economy in other contexts is all the more striking. At the heart of liberal political economy, after all, lay the conviction that the pursuit of self-interest within the parameters of the market was the surest and most efficient guarantee of collective interest. While such logic would seem at odds with that of ‘disinterest’, it actually co-existed in an acute yet irresolvable tension.

Given the symbolic importance of cloth to South Asian society, it is perhaps no surprise that M. K. Gandhi also attempted to define the legitimacy of political authority through the dual lens of textile production and consumption. Since at least 1909, in fact, he had encouraged doctors, lawyers, and other “wealthy” men to abandon their professions and devote themselves to the plying of the charkha, or spinning wheel. By the early 1920s when he entered nationalist politics in earnest, Gandhi called upon all Indians to work the charkha daily and clothe themselves exclusively in handspun, handwoven fabric. Although he praised spinning for the economic benefits it could convey, Gandhi portrayed the plying of the charkha as a profoundly political act, one capable of cultivating moral virtue in Indians while uniting them in opposition to the British. That khadi, as this handspun, handwoven fabric was known, derived much of its value from its ‘non-market’ character connects it to weaving schools and the politics of ‘disinterest’ in important ways.


82 M. K. Gandhi, Hind Swaraj, in Anthony Parel, ed., Hind Swaraj and Other Writings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 116-7; 109. Parel reports that in the first edition of Hind Swaraj Gandhi confused the handloom with the charkha, calling upon “wealthy” men to embrace the former instead of the latter. In subsequent editions, however, Gandhi replaced handloom with spinning wheel, explaining that in 1909 when he enjoyed his first “vision” of the spinning wheel, he “did not then know the distinction between the loom and the wheel and in Hind Swaraj used the word loom to mean wheel.”

83 Lisa Trivedi provides a particularly comprehensive discussion of khadi, one that draws heavily upon the field of visual culture, in Clothing Gandhi’s Nation: Homespun and Modern India (Bloomington:
While Gandhi gave no indication that the promotion of khadi might relate in any way to the colonial weaving school project, it is clear that the analysis developed above might be applied in part to the deployment of spinning as a political act. For example, Gandhi’s encouragement of hand-, as opposed to machine-, spinning can be situated within an extra-Indian debate on ‘crafts’ and their distinction from industrial goods. Although as Abigail McGowan informs us, ‘crafts’ rarely enjoyed a fixed meaning in either India or Britain, they almost always referred to objects produced through a “particular kind of labor process,” one that assumed a distinctive form only when viewed in the context of industrialization.84 Because hand labor was generally associated with ‘traditional’ artisanal economies assumed (often erroneously) to operate according to ‘non-market’ impulses, ‘crafts’ became by default a ‘disinterested’ field of play. In fact, since ‘crafts’ as a coherent “sector” owed its very existence to its difference vis-à-vis industrialization, it could not help but be the ‘non-market’ to industrialization’s ‘market’.85 As a result, at least as far as their aversion to the ‘self-interest’ of the market was concerned, Gandhi’s promotion of spinning and colonial officials’ promotion of weaving schools could be said to subscribe to a common set of values.


84 McGowan, 11-5. Emphasis in the original.

85 I borrow the word “sector” from McGowan, 13.
Nevertheless, the figure of the patron marks the limit to this common ground since, in contrast to Gandhi, the British highlighted the dangers of both an ‘interested’ middleman and a patron-less market. Both were equally threatening in British eyes, making the ministrations of a ‘disinterested’ patron the only acceptable remedy. Gandhi, on the other hand, though he advised the owners of textile mills to act as ‘trustees’ for their workers, seems to have conceived of hand-spinning as a patron-less activity best pursued in concert with other members of the community.\textsuperscript{86} While it is possible that the vast apparatus of khadi bhavans erected to facilitate the movement of cloth can be viewed as patrons of sorts, their establishment seems more a short-term ‘fix’ designed to get a fledgling khadi movement off the ground than a concerted effort to erect institutional patrons.\textsuperscript{87} Thus, in Gandhi’s reckoning it was enough for spinners themselves to be ‘disinterested’, meaning that they conceptualized their labor as a politico-spiritual exercise, one undertaken without any thought to personal gain.

Ultimately, it is important to ask whether the colonial state embraced weaving schools as a means of re-inscribing its authority as a patron in part because the weaving school was an institution and not an individual. After all, the construction of colonial legitimacy in late nineteenth and early twentieth century India often hinged upon the establishment of institutions like the district board and franchise that although not really removed from worldly influences could be portrayed as such.\textsuperscript{88}

Similarly, the urban co-operative societies that emerged at approximately the same time as weaving schools and catered to the same clientele were perceived as

\textsuperscript{86} For more on trusteeship, see Ajit K. Dasgupta, \textit{Gandhi’s Economic Thought} (London: Routledge, 1996), esp. ch. 6.

\textsuperscript{87} \textit{Bhavan}, which means house or building, was the name assigned to the institutions charged with collecting yarn and khadi and arranging for their distribution. The structural resemblance of khadi bhavans to colonial weaving schools is in some ways quite striking, a subject I hope to explore in a future paper.

\textsuperscript{88} For the franchise, see Gilmartin, “Election Law.”
legitimate by the British precisely because they had incorporated themselves. Unlike Heesterman’s king who demonstrated his authority by incorporating subjects into *himself*, the colonial state increasingly demonstrated its authority by incorporating citizen-subjects into *institutions*. That Gandhi took a rather different approach only underlines the range of options available to those interested in symbolically redefining the legitimacy of political authority during the late colonial period.
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