Modern Asian Studies (2022), **56**, 1183–1221
doi:10.1017/S0026749X21000317

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Communities of skill in the age of capitalism: Handloom weavers in twentieth-century United Provinces, India

Santosh Kumar Rai

Department of History, University of Delhi, Delhi, India
Email: skrai@history.du.ac.in

(Received 14 March 2020; revised 16 June 2021; accepted 21 June 2021)

Abstract

The role of skills has been eclipsed in the transition from an agrarian-craft economy rooted in hand-labour in small households to a modern political economy where productive work takes place outside the household, in offices and factories. Yet the ideological erasure of skilled work should not be confused with its actual disappearance. Precisely because such work was typically construed as private and unimportant, the embedded hierarchies and skills that shaped the handloom weaving industry in the North Indian province of United Provinces under colonial rule could escape systematic conversion to capitalist structures. Skill as human capital constituted the capitalist labour processes in the modern handloom industry, not as an abstract act, but as a historical experience. Handloom workers were reproduced, generationally, socially, and hierarchically, through the passing on of skilled labour within the unorganized informal sector of handloom weaving. Thus the stuff of community skills should move beyond its projection as either 'endangered' or 'regressive' to explore its access to capitalist structures and the exploitative networks that contain, transmit, and enable the production of skills.

Keywords: Skill; handloom; weavers; United Provinces; colonialism

Introduction

Ever since scientific knowledge produced between 1650 and 1850 has figured in definitions of the rise of modernity, 'making' and 'knowing' have been viewed as belonging to different types and orders of knowledge. Skilling and making have been associated with how-to and hands-on information, oriented to a particular situation or product, often informal and tacit; knowing has been related to theoretical, propositional, and abstract knowledge, including natural

science.[1] Value was added to the initiative of change as the idea of progress introduced the notion that new technology is always better than the old. It was assumed that because handloom technology is old, it was outdated and unsustainable. Thus, the global transition from an agrarian-craft economy rooted in hand-labour in small households to a modern political economy in which productive work is defined as taking place outside the household has eluded the issue of skill. However, this generalization does not work because of a certain communitarian genealogy of skills. Indigenous production systems also continued to hold considerable populations in their grip, prescribing indigenous living and labour conditions as well as resonating with social and moral relations.

This article is a close study of communities of Muslim Julaha handloom weavers located in the weaving centres of Banaras, Azamgarh, Gorakhpur, and Faizabad divisions in the twentieth-century United Provinces in India. It examines the sites, evolution, and process of the formation of skill within labour processes, in the context of the linkage of the handloom to capitalist structures. It also explores the complex interconnections between skills and social and economic structures of production and the ways in which 'craft' knowledge and skills came to be connected and reproduced in the context of their relation to capital and modernity. Here the weaving communities emerge as active agents who chose to define, preserve, and reinvent skills in the face of increasing yarn prices in early twentieth century. Some relatively neglected spheres of history—of the material and social history of the formation of skill by workers at the site of production, of the informal sector, and of the interface between community-based craft knowledge and capital, and modern markets as they emerged historically—form the context of the narrative.

This article is premised on an understanding that although traditional skills have a significant position in the Indian handloom industry, they have remained neglected and undervalued in works on Indian labour history. This devaluation stems both from the Eurocentric knowledge discourse which represents skill-based knowledge as backward, unscientific, archaic, and unworthy of scholarly engagement and the Indian nationalists who sustain their arguments in terms of the effects of colonialism by narrowly focusing on the loss of work and income. The 'deindustrialization' of the Indian economy, which lamented the loss of traditional independent occupations yet excluded skill from any analyses of the labour process, became popular academic parlance.[2]

[1] Pamela H. Smith, Amy R. W. Meyers and Harold J. Cook (eds), *Ways of Making and Knowing: The Material Culture of Empirical Knowledge* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

[2] Bipan Chandra, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India: Economic Policies of Indian National Leadership, 1880–1905* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1966); R. C. Dutt, *The Economic History of India under Early British Rule: From the Rise of British Power in 1757 to the Accession of Queen Victoria in 1837* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1902), Vol. I, pp. ix–x; R. Palme Dutt, *India Today* (Bombay: People's Publishing House, 1949), p. 165; M. K. Gandhi, 'At the Call of the Country', *Young India*, 21 July 1920; Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (rpt; New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 300; A. Moin Zaidi (ed.), *A Tryst with Destiny: A Study of Economic Policy Resolutions of the Indian National Congress Passed during the Last 100 Years*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000317 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Moving beyond these reductionist arguments, I assert that the role of skill as human capital is crucial to the very constitution of capitalist yet home-based labour processes, not as an abstract act but as part of the historical experience of colonialism in the modern handloom industry. Within this framework, it is essential to define skills as the result of a social process that has produced inequities that reflect existing structures of power. However, we still lack a social theory to help artisans understand how to reconcile older ideas of culture and technology with the new social reality. The domain of skills provides this leeway. The working class of the unorganized informal handloom sector was reproduced generationally, socially, and hierarchically through the passing on of weaving skills. Thus the narrative of community skills needs to be taken beyond its projections as either endangered or regressive to explore its access to capitalist structures and the exploitative networks that contain, transmit, and enable the production of skills. Here the intersection between making and knowing, particularly the ways in which artisanal skills influenced the formulation of a scientific view or scholarly higher learning trying to uncover an 'artisan epistemology',[3] is an issue worth exploring in the Indian scenario as well.

A consistent argument in the works of Douglas Haynes and Tirthankar Roy is the way in which the weavers adapted, or failed to adapt, to technological changes and improvements in productivity in quite different ways across the many regions of India.[4] Picking up on this logic, this article makes a case for Eastern United Provinces, beyond the works of Nita Kumar and Gyanendra Pandey produced in the 1980s.[5] This requires an investigation into the rather complex and shifting situations faced by the weavers and their efforts to cope not only with the changing role of merchants, moneylenders, and *grihastas* (mediators); constantly shifting markets; and socioeconomic conditions, but also the active contours of regional politics. The existing historiography has underlined that the handloom sector underwent drastic changes in terms of skills, inputs like designs, market trends, changing patterns, and weaver responses. However, with reference to United Provinces, it is necessary to

(New Delhi: Indian Institute of Applied Political Research, 1985), p. 54; Amiya Kumar Bagchi, 'De-Industrialization in Gangetic Bihar, 1809–1901', in *Essays in Honour of S. C. Sarkar*, (ed.) Barun De (Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1978), pp. 499–522; M. Vicziany, 'The De-Industrialisation of India in the Nineteenth Century: A Methodological Critique of A. K. Bagchi', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1979, pp. 105–43.

[3] Pamela H. Smith, *The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 59. Smith believes that from roughly 1450 to 1650, the exploration and experience of nature was dominated by what she calls the 'artisanal epistemology', the conviction that practice, not theory, was the primary mode of engagement with the world.

[4] Douglas E. Haynes, *Small Town Capitalism in Western India: Artisans, Merchants, and the Making of the Informal Economy, 1870–1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Tirthankar Roy, *Traditional Industry in the Economy of Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[5] Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990); Nita Kumar, *The Artisans of Banaras: Popular Culture and Identity, 1880–1986* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988). While Pandey traces the roots of communal categories in colonial discourse through the case of Muslim Julaha weavers, Kumar integrates culture with work processes and the everyday life of artisans of Banaras.

inquire whether these changes could accommodate the interests of those Julaha weavers who, rather than giving up their occupation or migrating to new destinations, were still practising their skills and knowledge, honed over centuries. With the prevalence of local community-based labour relations being formed parallel to the rise and advance of broader market economies, one cannot predict a smooth transition from one type of labour relation to another. Their skills had social, economic, political, and cultural meanings, which were consequently related to forms of individual and collective agency among weavers.

I locate the social practice of 'skilling' in handloom weaving and its recasting of the profession of weaving to argue that there is a world beyond paternalistic subordination where the marginalized producers and their community networks responded in varied, even contradictory, yet skilled ways to ensure their survival and reproduce their occupation. Here we find the multidimensional accounts of skills at work in myriad informal situations within the political and economic conditions of knowledge and skills that intermingle with cultures of production, work, and circulation, and fertilize each other in a diverse set of responses. It is necessary to revisit the history of skills in global labour history, largely as a contribution to the chronicle of social relations vis-à-vis the production of knowledge. An alternative approach is required to a traditional interpretation whereby the emergence of the sciences in the early modern period is seen as an affair of the mind only.

This article is divided into four parts. In the first part, I survey the skill question (its absence and presence) within the wider historiography on the artisanal industry and culture vis-à-vis the Orientalist, Marxist, and revisionist discourses on artisans and skills, and recent writings on skill training institutions. The second part situates the innovative survival methods of the small-scale handloom structures within the local history of weaving in United Provinces which interacted with capitalist developments, the colonial state, and the intricate web of local power relations of the industry to emphasize the continued significance of craft and skill over a long history of transitions. The third part sketches the transformation of skills at the different sites of production regarding family and invisible female labour, and the shift to the *karkhana* as a capitalist yet community-based network of exploitation and functional hierarchy of caste. Finally, the fourth part discusses the discourse of technology and skills negotiating with the web of controls operating through apprenticeship practices and the state's pedagogical efforts which are driven by a simple contradiction between capital and labour.

Skill in historiography

The place of skill is coming back, at least in European historiography, so as to observe and build understanding of not only the process of learning weaving, design, and business, but also how this knowledge worked, was preserved, and developed in the communities of practice. With a concern for tackling the questions of exclusion, discrimination, and inequality, there is a growing realization that the nature of modern knowledge systems is such that economic

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000317 Published online by Cambridge University Press

inequality always goes together with social inequality—in terms of gender, race, education, intergenerational relations, health, mobility, and so on—in a perverse, self-reinforcing loop. A growing number of European historians like Joel Mokyr, P. K. O' Brien, Maxine Berg, and S. R. Epstein have begun to shift their focus away from 'knowledge' to move back towards 'skill' and the social processes through which ways of commodification were redefined.[6] It is essential to understand the processes of the capitalization of the handloom in which various elements—be they weavers, looms, techniques, or work culture—are transformed. These issues have to be examined around the concrete and the abstract, the material and the ideological edifice of the global frontiers of capital. In Europe, the relationship between the material culture of skill and the making of knowledge has been interpreted around the development of science. Of late, the knowledge of craft is also being explained around theoretical underpinnings and the vernacular theories that guided the practices of artisans.[7]

Joel Mokyr discusses the creation of a gentlemanly capitalism in case of Britain before arguing that

> what set Britain apart from other European countries was not its capacity to accumulate more and better science or even a higher propensity to invent but the much higher level of competence of its skilled workers. Britain could draw on a large cadre of highly skilled craftsmen and technicians. These people might not have been the fleshy inventors who came up with the revolutionary insights, but they were those who could read a blueprint, understood practical technicalities such as tolerance, lubrication, tension, and torque and had experience with the qualities of iron, wood, leather and other materials.[8]

John R. Harris too describes these skilled workers as 'unanalysable pieces of expertise or the "knacks" of the trade—that is to say, knowledge is primarily tacit and could not be learnt except through experience and imitation'.[9] So in Britain's well-known success story, the entrepreneurs of the Industrial Revolution, together with the engineers, skilled craftsmen, and inventors,

[6] Joel Mokyr, *The Gifts of Athena. Historical Origins of the Knowledge Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); P. K. O'Brien, 'Historical Foundations for a Global Perspective on the Emergence of a Western European Regime for the Discovery, Development, and Diffusion of Useful and Reliable Knowledge', *Journal of Global History*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2013, pp. 1–24; Maxine Berg, 'Craft and Small Scale Production in the Global Economy: Gujarat and Kachchh in the Eighteenth and Twenty-first Centuries', *Itinerario*, vol. 37, 2013, pp. 23–45; S. R. Epstein and M. Prak (eds), *Guilds, Innovation and the European Economy, 1400–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[7] Pamela H. Smith, Amy R. W. Meyers and Herold J. Cook (eds), *Ways of Making and Knowing: The Material Culture of Empirical Knowledge* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

[8] Joel Mokyr, 'Entrepreneurship and the Industrial Revolution in Britain', in *The Invention of Enterprise: Entrepreneurship from Ancient Mesopotamia to Modern Times*, (eds) David S. Landes, Joel Mokyr and William Baumol (Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 183–210.

[9] John R. Harris, 'Skills, Coal and British Industry in the Eighteenth Century', in his *Essays in Industry and Technology in the Eighteenth Century* (Ashgate: Variorum, 1992), p. 33.

created a modern sector in which technological progress thrived and which eventually turned into a modern economy. In fact, the institutional causes of Britain's high level of competence have been less connected with institutions of formal education and more with the result of skill and apprenticeship.[10]

However, unlike the Western craft communities where modern knowledge implied fundamental changes and ruptures in the structure of thinking, in the colonial world it has been, and is still, a problematic and controversial issue.[11] In this discourse, there is a universal understanding that craft knowledge was never codified. It remained tacit or embodied in fragile objects and ceases to exist with the death of artisans and artisanal cultures. The gulf between these two converging narratives was manifest in almost every aspect of social and cultural discourse. One of the questions underlying this 'great divergence' debate is the significance of industrial skills. Claims have been made about industrial products in various parts of the world, but systematic comparisons are still underdeveloped.

Rather, in the existing academic discourse there is a distraction as the South Asian skilled artisan proves to be a backward and conservative person who refuses to negotiate with institutions of modernity. Here, while talking about skill, one needs to assess the relationship between factors like religion, caste, and capital. The compulsions of capital restricted skills within the specific context of social capital, which was never allowed to be progressive. In fact, until the 1990s, the community was the fulcrum of handloom production as very few job opportunities were available on the open market. Besides backwardness or reluctance or numerical strength, the use of invisible labour and skilling through entrepreneurship made negotiations with modern practices of production quite difficult and complex. However, in the case of the global South, knowledge has emerged from different disciplines which do not necessarily deal with varied learning processes, cultures, or worldviews. The archives of modernity—both colonial and nationalist—have developed a four-dimensional discourse in relation to issues of skilling in the case of India, namely colonial Orientalist discourse, nationalist narratives, modern European historiography, and post-colonial historiographical interpretation.

The first approach scrutinizes the term 'skill' to look at its changing meanings within the colonial and metropolitan context to assess it vis-à-vis modern knowledge discourse. Colonial officials created and sustained (mis)translations between indigenous skills and Anglo-European categories of knowledge. Research by Nadeem Omar Tarar shows that the debates on the art school curriculum within the Indian civil and educational bureaucracy in the last quarter of the nineteenth century made a fundamental shift in the theoretical and

[10] Mokyr, 'Entrepreneurship and the Industrial Revolution in Britain', pp. 183–210.

[11] For some, modernity meant sticking only to the hardware and to palpable and physical needs, such as economic progress, social welfare, human development, and technology, without challenging the fundamentals of society. The Western definition of modernity was even deemed detrimental to and jeopardizing the essence and identity of the community. For others, modernity has been a universal heritage that celebrates human agency, reason, and freedom of thought and expression and should, therefore, be locally appropriated as well.

methodological basis of art education in colonial art schools, which were founded for the revival of Oriental arts and craftsmanship through Western ideas of visual literacy. An analysis of the founding decades of the Mayo School of Art demonstrates the intersection of aesthetic discourses in art education with Orientalist views of Indian society as a traditional, tribal, caste-based one. The colonial sociology of occupational castes became the conduit to recruit and train artisan castes in the Mayo School of Art. While this colonial policy in Punjab favoured artisan castes in their occupational careers, it restricted the enterprising students of artisan families who wished to pursue their careers independent of their hereditary associations.[12]

Whatever was non-industrial became a type of nostalgic utopia for intellectuals in both Britain and India. For example, William Morris, George Birdwood, Ananda Coomarswamy, and E. B. Havell, among others, were constantly working towards and writing about the preservation and protection of Indian artisans from industrialization. The prospective subjects of transformation became objects of romanticism. Indian nationalist aspirations added to the polarized idea of non-industrial versus industrial, so when the issue of the protection and revival of craft items came about, it had to be fitted into the market. An Indian nationalist economic critique of British rule, articulated chiefly by Romesh Chunder Dutt and Dadabhai Naoroji at the end of the nineteenth century, focused on the decline of the textile industry due to the import of English cloth and yarn.[13] To underline a classic case of Orientalist–nationalist paradox, we are not aware whether Orientalist E. B. Havell and nationalist Mahatma Gandhi ever interacted or read each other's works, yet one can see a drastic similarity between the thoughts of the two in terms of plans to revive Indian crafts. It was in terms of objectives that their ideas differed in important ways, and were articulated at different times in different contexts. Havell was among those leading European romantic intellectuals who were aiming to promote Indian arts and crafts as a purely cultural and moral endeavour. With his limited Orientalist objective of appreciating handloom in terms of its artistic value, Havell could not perceive the political uses of the crafts or cloth, unlike Gandhi who gave the handloom political overtones within the binary of imperialism and Swadeshi nationalism, appreciating its power as a national idiom of Swadeshi seeking political independence.[14] The romanticized version of non-industrialism inspired by John Ruskin influenced Gandhi and his plan for Indian society. The notion of labour became teleological as he believed that 'a life of labour that is the life of the tiller of the soil and the handicraft man is the life worth living'.[15] The Gandhian idea of khadi as a part of the notion of a self-sufficient economy also strengthened the thinking around

[12] Nadeem Omar Tarar, 'From "Primitive" Artisans to "Modern" Craftsmen: Colonialism, Culture, and Art Education in the Late Nineteenth-Century Punjab', *South Asian Studies*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2011, pp. 199–219.

[13] Dutt, *The Economic History of India under Early British Rule*, pp. ix–x.

[14] Abigail McGowan, *Crafting the Nation in Colonial India* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), Introduction.

[15] M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography of the Story of My Experiments with Truth*, translated from Gujarati by Mahadev Desai (rpt; Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 2018), p. 360.

the preservation and protection of the crafts. In spite of his philosophical base, Gandhi's approach could facilitate neither transformation nor transition. Rather, his vision to universalize spinning and weaving for everyone as a means of Swadeshi empowerment made the traditional weavers' claim to skilled expertise redundant. Skill as a resource lost its utility as both Orientalists and nationalists promoted their vision about the preservation of the artisan and his craft.

A parallel Orientalist discourse of British administrator-scholars like Alfred Chatterton reasoned that the absence of formal education was the basic cause of the craftsmen's lack of progress. Chatterton spearheaded the colonial government's policies to ascertain whether the handloom weavers could improve their status if modern machines could be introduced.[16] There are examples that show that by the early twentieth century artisans were given opportunities to experiment with the reorganization of production and new technologies. Now they had the 'option' to choose between indigenous technologies and European machinery.[17] However, in the debate regarding the status or utility of the crafts' techniques, the voice of the craftsmen was missing. The whole argument regarding the difference or similarity of traditional crafts versus modern industry was discussed around the paradigm of the economic modernization of India.[18] The interface between traditional craft and modern industry in India, unlike Europe, was not about transformation but polarization, where support for change came from the supporters of Western techniques, while the opponents from the same arena were against any such transition. Thus the colonized material culture continued to polarize craft and modern industries as two different worlds and experiences. However, this story is being revisited even in the metropolitan world. In Europe, in what Mokyr has shown as the linear path of 'great convergence' where the ideological position and material culture of transformation both supported each other, we know that there was a tense relationship between craft knowledge and scientific knowledge, and the trajectory of the transition from craft production to industrial production.[19] Certainly the differences of the colonial context vis-a-vis the metropolitan world were many, though there were also certain overlaps between the European and Indian scenarios in terms of intellectual concerns which saw

[16] Alfred Chatterton, *Agricultural and Industrial Problems in India* (Madras: G. A. Natesan and Co., 1904), p. 37.

[17] Alfred Chatterton, 'The Salem Weaving Factory', in *The Industrial Conference held at Surat, December 1907: Full Text of papers Read at and Submitted to it* (Madras: G. A. Natesan and Co., 1908), pp. 247–67; Tirthankar Roy, 'Out of Tradition: Master Artisans and Economic Change in Colonial India', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 66, no. 4, 2007, pp. 963–91.

[18] McGowan, *Crafting the Nation*, p. 69.

[19] Lissa Roberts, Simon Schaffer and Peter Dear (eds), *The Mindful Hand: Inquiry and Invention from the Late Renaissance to Early Industrialization* (Amsterdam: Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences, 2007). This collection of articles demonstrates that what we often discuss in terms of the histories of (theoretically driven) science and (manually driven) technology could be appropriately discussed in terms of the history of natural inquiry and invention, a complex history in which the work of the mind and of the hand cannot be so easily separated. Rather, their interaction has historically informed both material production and knowledge production.

crafts either as purely decorative or the nation's cultural products to be saved from the trauma of industrialization.[20]

In such a scenario the skill of craftsmen was overshadowed by the discourse of knowledge. The relationship between workers and their skills became insignificant in the face of an assumed sense of their backwardness. Both British officials and Indian intellectuals were almost on the same paternalistic page, convinced of the need to protect Indian crafts. Rather than empowering the artisan with a capacity for action, a discourse of subordination was created and enabled. Even contemporary scholarship's discussions about craft in general and weaving in particular hinges on the usual arguments about factors like societal backwardness, the phenomenon of caste, and the lack of initiative on the part of artisans, situating a polarized Indian handloom industry vis-à-vis Western industrial enterprise.[21] The context of the linkage of the economy to capitalist production and the colonial economy mediated this discourse on skills and their assessment.

In classical Indian Marxist writings, the significance of skills has been attributed to 'the existence of a very numerous class of artisans and craftsmen able to live at very low wages'. Quoting foreign travellers like Bernier and Palserat, Irfan Habib argued that the very number of skilled craftsmen would militate against labour-saving techniques.[22] This argument attributes the relatively high degree of skill specialization itself to the low wages prevailing in India.

Maxine Berg argued that it is time to re-examine craft and small-scale manufacturing within histories of industrialization, both Western and Eastern, and to reflect on the long survival and adaptation of artisanal production in our globalized world of production and consumption. She reflects on small-scale industrial structures in the current globalized environment, emphasizing the continued significance of craft and skill over a long history of global transitions to discuss the past and future of craft and skill in the industry of the global economy.[23] With such a backdrop and European claims of 'great divergence', 'useful knowledge' and 'knowledge economy' are the new buzzwords to carry out any study of artisans. Some historians on South Asia, notably Tirthankar Roy, David Washbrook, and Prasannan Parthasarathi, have initiated a debate on useful knowledge and skill. Tirthankar Roy argued that India's resource endowments explain both low investment levels and the resulting lack of productivity growth. According to Roy, the scarcity and resulting high cost of capital and skilled labour in India meant that Indian industry was best suited to be 'a vast world of traditional manufacturing,

[20] Ananda Coomaraswamy, *The Indian Craftsman* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt Ltd, 1989 [1909]); Mohandas K. Gandhi, 'Indian Art, Its Neglect', *Young India*, vol. 1, no. 8, 31 May 1919; Zoë Thomas, 'Between Art and Commerce: Women, Business Ownership, and the Arts and Crafts Movement', *Past and Present*, vol. 247, no. 1, May 2020, pp. 151–96.

[21] McGowan, *Crafting the Nation*, p. 89.

[22] Irfan Habib, 'The Technology and Economy of Mughal India', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1980, pp. 1–34.

[23] Maxine Berg, 'Skill, Craft and Histories of Industrialisation in Europe and Asia', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 24, 2014, pp. 127–48.

consisting of tool-based industrial production performed in homes or small workshops'.[24] Rather than examining the fate of the producers—weavers and spinners—Roy was interested in how industry adapted to institutional changes to survive. In his arguments, the entrepreneur weaver-capitalist, who emerged during this process of change and symbolized change, seems to be the most admired factor. Economic and social historians have yet to learn to recognize skill in the stories, to look beyond the manual labour to the skill. Values of productivity, efficiency, and standardization have to be understood differently. One requires situating weavers as technologists and innovators to the core, much more sustainable than many so-called modern technocrats, who had the ability to produce fabrics that consistently satisfied customers' need for beauty and novelty. Prasannan Parthasarathi improved upon both Mokyr and Roy to present an overview of the demographic and economic structures in India to stress that the country was a highly commercialized economy, where factors like caste, family, and household structures did not hinder economic growth. For him, revisiting the 'historical evidence' largely created by European observers could be vital to apprehend the 'state of knowledge and skill'.[25]

This debate on skills extends to contemporary popular discourse as well as policymakers' views in thinking of them as outdated and unsustainable objects of charity, or as traditional heritage best found in museums and brought out for special occasions. Questions about boundaries of difference, inclusion, and exclusion arise. The attempts to establish a primordial right to certain practices and skills are, however, often politically employed in order to respond to and include as well as exclude others. Thus questions of belonging or not belonging to the stereotype of modernity entail practical and political implications, and in the colonial as well as the post-colonial world the very acts of inclusion and exclusion, identification, and struggles over categories of knowledge and skill have become more topical than their interdependence. In this new model, the work performed by weavers became invisible, even though such artisans and other small commodity producers continued to contribute to their households in the same way as factory workers. Perhaps the fact that the character of the Indian workforce is predominantly rural and the number of skilled labourers employed in the formal sector has been relatively small is responsible for such exclusions.

In the last decade, substantial work has been done on the acquisition of skills through both formal and informal training, and new knowledge about apprentices has been acquired. Research on guilds has also brought to light new evidence about the masters. Arun Kumar explained how the meaning of skill and skill training was produced through the interaction of the colonial

[24] Tirthankar Roy, 'Economic History and Modern India: Redefining the Link', *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 16, no. 3, Summer 2002, pp. 109–30.

[25] Tirthankar Roy, 'Knowledge and Divergence from the Perspective of Early Modern India', *Journal of Global History*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2008, pp. 361–87; David Washbrook, 'India in the Early Modern World Economy: Modes of Production, Reproduction and Exchange', *Journal of Global History*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2007, pp. 87–112; Prasannan Parthasarathi, *Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia Did Not: Global Economic Divergence, 1600–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

educational system and industrial actors in modern India. Highlighting the discourse of skill production and transference, his work shows the ruptures in the story of colonial skill development.[26] Shahana Bhattacharya focused on state organized technical education in the field of leather production so as to locate its history within a wider discourse of social and economic structures, prevailing ideologies, and notions of skill.[27] She shows that technical institutes remained the preserve of educated elite castes and the mass of 'outcaste' labourers continued to perform degraded manual labour.

These articles diverge from an earlier argument made by Tirthankar Roy who, by stressing the capacity of master artisans to innovate and by suggesting that individuals were the agents of innovation, refocused attention on the skilled individual within a complex discourse of modernization in a traditional society.[28] In a way both Bhattacharya and Kumar, being methodologically conscious of the historical context of the production of skill, do not take it as only an individual enterprise. This has been the domain of skill where popular claims for decentring or decolonizing Eurocentric theorizing and disciplinary claims are taken up. As seen earlier in this article, even in the European case, recent scholarship has revisited the cognitive sites of knowledge production and explored the artisan dimension of the Scientific Revolution, in the process showing how the worlds of science and crafts intersected in much more complex—and intensive—ways than was previously imagined. Although manual labour and theoretical invention might now seem separate ventures, they are closely linked processes. As Lissa Roberts and Simon Schaffer observed, 'knowledge was made in contexts of application, disciplines were fluid, work took place across many social sites, and there was pervasive reflection on the grounds of knowledge in the process of making knowledge'.[29]

To draw the analogy, the social organization of artisanal production in colonial India rested on a labour process that utilized the unremunerated and grossly under-remunerated work of family labour. Sugata Bose noted, with reference to the peasant economy, that 'expanded commodity production for the capitalist world market was achieved efficiently and cheaply without resort to the formal commodification of labor'.[30] Similarly, the refusal to be reduced to a commodity was itself a result of successful resistance by weaving communities

[26] Arun Kumar, 'Skilling and Its Histories: Labour Market, Technical Knowledge and the Meaning of Skilled Workers in Colonial India (1880–1910)', *Journal of South Asian Development*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2018, pp. 249–71.

[27] Shahana Bhattacharya, 'Transforming Skin, Changing Caste: Technical Education in Leather Production in India, 1900–1950', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2018, pp. 307–44.

[28] Roy, 'Out of Tradition', pp. 963–91.

[29] Lissa Roberts and Simon Schaffer, 'Preface', in *The Mindful Hand: Inquiry and Invention from the Late Renaissance to Early Industrialisation*, (eds) Lissa Roberts, Simon Schaffer and Peter Dear (Amsterdam: Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, 2007), p. xix.

[30] Sugata Bose, 'A History of the Indian Economy in Asian and Global Contexts1810s–2010s', in *Emerging States and Economies: Their Origins, Drivers, and Challenges Ahead*, (eds) T. Shiraishi and T. Sonobe (Singapore: Springer, 2019), p. 143.

determined to retain access to a combination of skill and production-based entitlement. This very urge for survival provokes a belief that the social world of artisans requires being seen beyond the binary of homogeneous indigenous and foreign structures of skill and knowledge before being broadly understood, shaped, and reshaped. While skill functioned as a commodity and a social process, equally it acted as a bridge between people and society articulating and impacting on heterogeneous processes of production. Processes of skilling reached and operated at the different sites of production, simultaneously remaining muted while acting amid the societal transformations of work, politics, and infrastructure. Rather than dialoguing for or against the too-long-neglected 'artisanal' epistemology and morality of traditional skill vis-a vis modern knowledge, one seeks to inquire when and where they continue to be articulated in everyday life? For example, the uses, implementations, applications, platforms, spaces, and circuits of skill reflected, addressed, and reshaped questions of personhood, caste, community, nationality, labour, welfare and socioeconomic inclusion or exclusion within formal and informal networks and community landscapes; and with notions of labour value and culture, performance, habitus, access, and affect. Here skill as intangible evidence can be used to explore the overlapping and established notions of identity, especially to consider the (hierarchical) structures of society and examine how community boundaries were drawn and redrawn, how spaces were imagined, and occupational memberships granted or denied. Here, traditional forms of domination, control, and resistance (including, but not limited to modern understandings of power, race, gender, caste, and class), articulated and challenged within the context of skilling, are the basic premises of the inquiry.

Capitalist modernization and the skills of survival

Within the wider historiography on artisanal industry and culture in South Asian labour and economic history referred to above, there is an urgent need to explore a neglected but growing field of skill formation in the context of handloom weaving. Moving beyond the skill question (its absence and presence) within the historiography, there is an equal need to simultaneously explore the discourse of artisans and skills, and skill training institutions in the local history of weaving in North India which interacted with capitalist developments (yarn prices, demand for clothes, the rise of the textile industry, competition from China and Japan), the colonial state, and the intricate web of local power relations of the industry. The argument is that skills did not disappear with mechanization and were, in fact, critical to the survival of, first, handloom weaving and, then, power-loom weaving in twentieth-century India.

Even before identifying these issues one needs to remember that the work culture of South Asian craft communities has been shaped by external influences and internal changes since their interface with modernity. The tremendous impact of colonialism, the massive power of globalization, and the unprecedented revolution in market culture have accelerated the transition from a traditional community where values and norms are deeply rooted in

history to a social group that has been exposed to modernization for the last two centuries. Here deskilling and reskilling have been continuous processes where technological imperialism and nationalist knowledge discourse are not necessarily the only categories to define the history of skill.

In fact, in spite of social, political, and economic constraints, all those who wanted to make the best use of the education or professional skill or the life cycle they had maintained or achieved, or even for the sheer sense of survival, had to connect themselves to whatever limited opportunities they were offered, both by the labour market and by the demand for their skilled expertise in the consumer market. Thus, for these colonial subjects the disruption of existing social and economic models was not easier. The terms of negotiation were possible only by making the best use of the knowledge they had acquired both through generational transfer and colonial technical institutions. The precarious survival of the weaver was made possible as much through community networks as by modernizing their skill through multi-source learning, collaborative knowledge, or mechanized techniques. In fact, the survival of skill was secured only by everyday negotiation and struggle to reimagine the restructuring of operational perspectives within the immediate context of a shifting material existence.

Within this premise falls eastern Uttar Pradesh, basking in the glory of its ancient handloom textile industry. Kautilya acknowledged Banaras and Allahabad (*Vatsa Desa*) as centres for the manufacture of the finest cotton fabrics.[31] The proficiency of Muslim Julaha weavers lay in their adaptation to the craft during the medieval period. The lower-caste urban artisans who converted to Islam during this time cultivated it as a hereditary skill. The persona of medieval Bhakti poet-saint Kabir emerges as the metaphor for this occupation. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Mauwaals (the weavers who migrated from Mau to Banaras in the eighteenth century) had become an important community in the textile landscape and their work was acknowledged in a citation at the Lucknow exhibition of 1835. While the Banarasiwaals (weavers originally from Banaras) had concentrated their skill on finer fabrics, the Mauwaals were able to expand to a whole new range of designs, textures, and products in silk and gold: the *Kamkhwab*, satin, and *takhtposh* (cover cloth) for which Banaras was well known. The Mauwaals' contribution lay in creating heavier and more expensive textiles. They understood the importance of innovation due to their previous experiences of survival through experiments at Azamgarh, and created a different, mixed variety of products that ensured growth. They created special yarn motifs. The Banarasiwaal weavers' saris, dupattas, dhotis, turbans, handkerchiefs, bridal veils, sashes, caps, and yards of plain, striped, and checked fabrics too were eagerly sought after. Their designs, in both geometric and floral patterns, were as varied as their clients. The introduction of satin into Banaras came through Mau in the nineteenth

[31] Jogesh Chandra Ray, 'Textile Industry in Ancient India', *Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1917, pp. 181–86, 206–07.

century.[32] Silk cloth was only one among many cloth products in the early nineteenth century in the eastern United Provinces.[33]

The process of change is associated with the interface of local weaving communities with merchant capitalism. European colonial commercial intervention in the eastern United Provinces started much later—at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1801, it was being reported still that 'weavers and artisans, as they are all freemen; they work by the piece, by contract or by the day, as they can agree one with another'.[34] Considerable diversity and demand in terms of products, the organizational base, as well as in relations between sectors within the production structure governed the prosperity of this sector. Broadly, one group consisted of weavers who manufactured fine silk clothes on complicated looms; the other comprised those who wove coarse clothes.[35] However, within two years of the cession of the eastern districts, the British East India Company's commercial residents had replaced the previously active contractors and agents of the Company and begun direct purchases. Now a new mediator, the *gumashta*, became the interface between native production and the procurement network of the Company. Due to changing British stakes, the Company's practices did not last for long as it was compelled to withdraw from its Indian textile business by the second decade of the nineteenth century. Subsequently, master weavers, instead of supervising the process of weaving, began to control the production process as a personal business concern. They moved into the space vacated by the Company *gumashtas* and became the interface between production and marketing systems. The new credit and marketing chain also emphasized its dominance over the local production process. Gradually, a new term '*grihasta*'[36] came into circulation to identify such mediators in the handloom industry of the eastern United Provinces.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, and into the twentieth century, there were periods of crisis, some linked with changing demand for the products, others with famines and disease (which killed both weavers and consumers). Moderately skilled weavers suffered more because of competition from machine-made cloth, but highly skilled weavers making the 'highest grade fabrics' also found their market shrinking through the abolition of the Delhi and

[32] A. Yusuf Ali, *A Monograph on Silk Fabrics Produced in the North-Western Provinces and Oudh* (Allahabad: Government Press, 1900), p. 105.

[33] William Hoey, *A Monograph on Trade and Manufacture in Northern India* (Lucknow: American Methodist Mission Press, 1880), pp. 100, 103, 110, 123; *Report on the Railway-Borne Traffic of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh, during the year ending 31 March 1884* (Allahabad: Government Press, 1884), Appendix A, p. ii.

[34] Thomas Henchman, *Observations on the Report of the Directors of the East India Company respecting the Trade between India and Europe* (2nd edn; London: T. Gillet, 1802), p. 55.

[35] W. C. Benett, *A Gazetteer of the Province of Oudh* (rpt; Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1993), Vol. II, p. 490.

[36] Initially a master weaver, by the early twentieth century the *grihasta* had become a petty handloom entrepreneur: Santosh Kumar Rai, 'Becoming a Grihasta: Hierarchies of Work among Handloom Weavers in early Twentieth Century United Provinces, India', in *Rethinking Work: Global Historical and Sociological Perspectives*, (eds) Rana Behal, Alice Mah and Babacar Fall (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2011), pp. 73–88.

Lucknow courts. The exquisitely woven brocades and *Kamkhwab*s of Banaras could easily have found an expandable market through promotion. This was equally true of the satin fabrics of Azamgarh, but 'there is no regular demand for them and no attempt to create a demand'. Only casual travellers attracted by their beauty occasionally acquired them. Muslin was no longer a famous product but there were 'a few families' in Azamgarh who made it even then, 'if you care to order it'.[37] Banaras was still a centre of a thriving trade in silk of every description, from the finest piece of *Kamkhwab*, which decorated rank and nobility, down to the plainest scarf or chaddar worn by men of moderate means.[38] Yet some types of specialized cloth production were declining in the other region: 'A small quantity of *jamdani* (a fine hand woven figured and damasked fabric) is still woven, especially as borders for caps, but with the change in the sartorian (sic) taste of the Indian upper classes, the demand for this fabric is steadily falling.'[39]

A shift towards new types of products helped the weavers negotiate tough times. The traditional sector put up a stiff resistance and the survival of handloom weaving depended on locality-based skills and connections with new markets in regional contexts. Thus diversifying to specific products and demands, along with a stagnant market, was the new local context for the weaving communities of the *qasba*s of the eastern United Provinces. We may get a glimpse of the life cycle of the handloom industry in which the processes of economic dislocation and survival were played out in the social milieu of the two important *qasba*s of Maunath Bhanjan and Mubarakpur. After a gradual revival from the early decades of the twentieth century, Mau diversified its cloth production, which required varied types of skills, thus accommodating different weaver groups in large numbers. Cotton production also helped in creating secondary support clusters in nearby localities. In comparison, Mubarakpur weavers were more inclined towards and interested in silk cloth production which required huge investment and very specific training and skills. This limitation curtailed the possibility of accommodating a large number of weavers and workers in the secondary work of production.

During this period, when rising yarn prices were lowering weavers' wages, it seemed logical to the colonial ideologues that weavers would have to increase productivity to make up for the loss in wages. The state's policy recommended mechanizing the loom. But the weavers' solution countered this idea. If yarn prices increased, then they would use less yarn, increase the amount of work they put into the warp, learn more intricate skills, and attempt to carve out a share of the market for luxury products. In essence, they used an older technique that was slower, rather than new ones that speeded up production. This was innovation that went backwards on the productivity and

[37] H. Dupernex, *People's Banks for Northern India: A Handbook to the Organization of Credit on Cooperative Basis* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Company, 1900), pp. 103–04.

[38] *Report of the First Indian Industrial Conference held at Benares on Saturday, the 30th December, 1905* (Allahabad: The Indian Press, 1906), pp. 131, 140.

[39] A. C. Chatterjee, *Notes on the Industries of the United Provinces* (Allahabad: Government Press, 1908), p. 19.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000317 Published online by Cambridge University Press

efficiency scale, but forwards on the scale of the beauty and quality of specific products. Weavers had to choose—not productivity over beauty, or tradition over modernity, or even market over heritage—to consistently maintain a balance between the two constantly overlapping contexts. In 1902, at around the time weavers in Banaras were preparing to attend an industrial exhibition in Delhi to showcase their brocades and saris and demonstrate their techniques, aniline dyes began replacing vegetable dyes in this region.[40] But even in the 1920s, the weavers remained sceptical about the use of artificial colours and they were so strongly against it that the 'Julahas used to outcast [*sic*] if any of them used aniline dyes'.[41] Skilled weavers quickly realized the utility of original dyes for the durability and charm of their products. The revival of the silk industry without any local support (particularly raw material), except the skilled labour of the weavers, was due to the special nature of the products and the versatility of the producers. To this end, the technique and loom did not compete; they worked together. This was how weavers reinvented weaving and turned the crisis in yarn prices and the market into a skill that sustained thousands. Historical information about such material conditions of production and use, and exploring artisans' skills at work, has been minimal. By the early twentieth century, the different branches of the silk industry in Banaras again underwent major changes. Although the demand for certain types of Banaras silk still existed in almost all parts of northern India, there were indications that the market was becoming smaller. Further, by this time silk from Japan and China was emerging as a potential threat.[42] It was suggested that if the Indian silk industry was to hold its own against foreign competition, it had to organize itself along modern lines. Official inquiries were being made to explore possibilities. By the 1920s, the handloom textile industry of the region had become synonymous with the silk sari industry. The fusion of pre-Islamic patterns with Islamic ones, aided by a local climate that was conducive to silk handloom weaving, put the eastern United Provinces at the helm of silk weaving activities. Silk sari production in this region proved to be a skilful shift by weavers responding to changing demands and fashion. Thus traditional artisanal skills, along with specific changes in consumer patterns, became a major survival strategy. Weavers' adaptation to foreign silk yarn and Indian mill-made yarn was a major symbol of a compromise between the traditional mode of production and modern circumstances.[43] Silk cloth emerged as an arena of a more specific production mechanism. The ingenuity of the artisans and changing market trends resulted in the production of a variety of fabrics. Again in the late 1930s, fabricated and duplicated foreign products began to hurt the expertise of indigenous weaving in

[40] *Bharat Jiwan*, Newspaper, 15 October 1906.

[41] 'Pandit Champa Ram Misra, B.A., Deputy Director of Industries, United Provinces', *Report of the United Provinces Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee*, 4 vols (henceforth RUPPBEC), *1929–30*, Vol. III, Evidence (Allahabad: Government Press, 1930), p. 379.

[42] Revival of Silk Industry in India, January 1921, A, Proceedings nos. 40–2, Industries Department, File 590/1915, Box 201, Uttar Pradesh State Archive, Lucknow (henceforth UPSA).

[43] Thomas M. Ainscough, *Department of Overseas Trade, Conditions and Prospects of United Kingdom Trade in India*, *1930–1*, *Report* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1932), pp. 67–68.

the silk weaving sector. Embroidered and printed saris of Japanese crepe now began competing with genuine silk saris from Banaras, in spite of the fact that the local weavers did their best to introduce new designs. The response to such threats came not from capitalist relations but from modifications in the skills required. Now the ordinary *garha* and *dosuti* cloth was being utilized for a new style of printing for the export trade, thereby increasing the demand for it. In Azamgarh district, the Maunath Bhanjan textile store remained the centre of *garha* and *dosuti* varieties. One major innovation was the revival of the use of *moonia* and *dugabia* cloth, which had been previously abandoned for want of patronage, in saris.[44]

The quality and type of fabrics could indicate the occupational status and artisanship of the weavers. Better quality and higher priced fabric required greater artisanship, labour, and financial investment. Opportunities were more readily available for highly skilled weavers. So skill was becoming a class-oriented acquisition; artisans with ordinary skills would have to migrate due to the lack of demand for their products. However, such power relations were not merely skill-based and had to be redefined in terms of the dominance of capital, design, and marketing vis-à-vis weaving. By the early decades of the twentieth century, diversification into the specialized production of higher-value products and the production structure entrenched in silk weaving resulted in fluctuations in the already shifting power structure. The demand for selected and specific products forced weavers to compress labour costs, which further saw the hierarchical segmentation of the industry according to the type of cloth, cost of raw material, and the degree of organization of investment and marketing. The requirement for costly yarn and gold thread made this skill-based work subordinate to the mediators.

The production of silk fabrics, especially those of high quality, required a strong organizational effort because it called for different, and sometimes very specialized, skills. The requirements of capital investment, raw material, and labour forms conditioned this sector to certain new terms. The province was not known for raw silk production, so the required quantities were mostly imported from foreign countries through the seaport at Bombay, with this shift being taken over by modern textile firms.[45] The subsequent loss of traditional skills, changing patterns of cloth consumption and use of raw material, and the rise of *grihastas*, along with a corresponding new hierarchy among producers need to be understood in this context. The difficulty of managing in its entirety the complex technological cycle, which would have required a large capital outlay, and the abrupt fluctuations that are typical of an activity largely dependent on foreign markets for the supply of raw material and the sale of its articles, discouraged locating the different production stages in a single place. The system adopted in the *qasbas* of the eastern United Provinces was a network of scattered workplaces run by their owners with varying degrees of

[44] *Administration Report of the Department of Industries and Commerce, United Provinces, for the year ending 31 March 1939* (Allahabad: Government Press, 1940), pp. 13, 16.

[45] 'Notes and Orders on Manufacture of Kashi Silk in the United Provinces', Industries Department, File 52/1908, Box 87, UPSA.

autonomy and linked by the initiative of the handloom entrepreneur (*grihasta*) with the cloth manufacturer (Julaha). However, the degree of dissemination and decentralization of operations was not the same across the handloom sector. The *grihasta* was the only owner of the raw material and semi-finished products, and from his workshop directed the transformation process at all stages. The offshoot of the colonial *aurang*,[46] the *karkhana*, gradually replaced the households as the directional centre of the entire manufacturing system, but it did not house all the material transformations, and the initial stages of the working cycle—the spinning, dyeing and winding, throwing, warping—took place in different skilled artisans' houses. In short, the *grihasta* outsourced most of the productive activity.

In a way, people who connected the informal world of weavers with the formal projects of capital and modernity—particularly master-weavers and middlemen—became powerful as they controlled information and trade.[47] This monopoly was based on an informal apprenticeship system and the control of human capital, and was tied to a closed network of weavers and their families. It was able to function in full force without the backing of any formal institutions as long as favourable local circumstances and the means and motivation to maintain it existed. By the second decade of the twentieth century community forms of patronage or modern trade unions had emerged as the primary strategic institutions resorted to by weaving households. Small weavers, when interfacing with a mediated market or forced into mechanized production, became more vulnerable to the practices of capital. This kind of instability leads to fatigue and, after repeated failure, to despair.

Changing life cycles

The abovementioned interface of traditional patterns, evolving skills, and new circumstances made the weaving sector so vulnerable that the survival of artisan labour structures and their skill depended on either a guild or a social community. What sustained handloom weaving were informal relations—in weaver households, between families, of caste, with the master-weavers, with patrons. All such institutions have traditionally been offered as explanations for the survival of artisan labour structures and their skill. However, such networks of handloom weaving were not sufficient to prevent the decline without capitalist interest and investment in handloom institutions. Whenever weavers interacted with the formal institutions of modernity—for credit, branding, trading, marketing, legal protection from power-loom

[46] 'Aurang' is a Persian-language term for a warehouse or workshop; it is sometimes also applied to a factory or *karkhana*. From the eighteenth century onwards European trading establishments, particularly those of the British East India Company in South Asia where procured native goods were stored or piece goods items were manufactured by indigenous artisans, were known as Aurang.

[47] Vijaya Ramaswamy, 'The Genesis and Historical Role of the Master Weavers in South Indian Textile Production', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. 28, no. 3, 1985, pp. 294–325; Santosh Kumar Rai, 'Weaving Hierarchies: Production Networks of the Handloom Industry in Colonial Eastern Uttar Pradesh', *Studies in History*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2012, pp. 203–30.

imitations, research—the modern knowledge discourse rendered weavers helpless. A literary imagining of the weavers' lifecycle in *Jhini Bini Chadariya*,[48] a Hindi novel based on the weavers of Banaras and written in the 1980s by Abdul Bismillah, takes us to a frozen-in-time, retrospective history of the weak and weary world of weavers. They do not fall victim to their circumstances but rather fight to change them and to break away from this traditional cycle of misery and exploitation, only to discover that the Hajis[49] and the *grihastas* of the community guard all points of exit—political, economic, and religious. In a contextual perspective, Bismillah's study of the weavers detects different sub-cultures, each with a distinct world, within the composite weavers' culture. Metaphorically, the life cycle of the weavers symbolizes the changing social-religious-economic world, the world of awareness, and the experiences of having different shades within domestic and work life. If one situates the life experiences of weavers in this region and beyond merely within the paradigm of industrialization and modernization, there is a risk of economic reductionism, as production goes beyond technique and labour and is linked to social processes and organizations. Crafts are not paradoxical to modern forms of production. Thus dichotomies of economic versus social are not valid, as this description shows. Now the weaving households faced competition from the emerging *karkhana* system, closely knitted around the same community networks, and gender and caste relations in the handloom work culture were being redefined.

Family, women, and labour

In labour-intensive, low-cost household production, the structure of the production process was defined by the need to purchase yarn and pay for the living expenses of the weaver and his dependants while the cloth was being woven. These unequal connections operated through the social power balance of community, and those in families (husbands and wives, parents and children) found new meanings in the bargaining situations of labour markets. The entire community chain active in the process of handloom production in this micro-region was appropriated in a new relation of commodity production. The nature of household space for work ensured that informality in the production process remained untouched, yet skills were so interconnected with division of labour that the following categories of labourers and weavers evolved:[50]

1. *Janana* and *Jodia*: Unpaid household labour of the family's women and children.
2. *Majur*: wage labourers without their own means of production, including low-caste Hindu weavers.

[48] Abdul Bismillah, *Jhini Bini Chadariya* (Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 1987).

[49] An honorific title for the Muslims who successfully complete the pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca.

[50] 'Pandit Champa Ram Misra, B.A., Deputy Director of Industries, United Provinces', *RUPPBEC, 1929–30*, Vol. III, Evidence, p. 363.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000317 Published online by Cambridge University Press

3. *Bani Karigar*: Weavers with looms but dependent on the master weaver (*grihasta*) for raw materials.
4. *Karigar*: Self-employed weavers with looms and other means of production.
5. *Grihasta*: the interface between production and marketing.

Though weaving in the eastern United Provinces sustained a large population, initially few labourers worked for wages in cash. A tradition of home-based production removed space constraints and enabled the unpaid labour of women and children. Weavers' family members, irrespective of age or sex, supplied all the labour needed for this occupation. The preparatory processes for the actual weaving were usually undertaken by women, and sometimes they even wove. However, the act of women weaving was a domestic affair. The home-based production of Banarasi saris, for example, involved a number of pre-weaving and post-weaving activities. The yarn—called *katan*—had to be reeled, bleached, and dyed. The dyed yarn was then prepared for *tana* (warp) and *bana* (weft). Four to five people were required to reel the warp. The length of yarn reeled on a five-foot warp cylinder could be sufficient for up to six saris. Yarn for the weft was reeled into small cylinders in a process locally known as *nari bharna* (filling the bobbin). A *charkha* (spinning wheel) was used for reeling the yarn on to the *nari* and this was usually done by women. *Nari bharna* was a continuous process, which was repeated by children for as long as the loom was running.

This segmentation of work was reflected in terms of earnings also. Though male weavers earned a living from their labour, spinning was often unpaid when it was performed by wives.[51] In 1906 it was reported 'What their earnings are is very difficult to estimate as the price they receive for their clothes include the earnings of women and children on the preliminary operations of wrapping and sizing.'[52] The Census report of 1911 observed that 'The women of the artisan classes generally relieve their husbands of the lighter and simpler forms of labour...the weaver's wife spin[s] the thread.'[53] In fact, female support was found to be so crucial for running weaving as a home industry that non-weavers trained at the United Provinces weaving schools could not succeed in this occupation. The Weaving Schools Committee, established in 1924 by the Industries Department of the United Provinces, did not come across a single non-weaver ex-student who was carrying on the profession independently. The main reason cited for this failure was the supposed lack of assistance from various members of his family in the conduct of his business—'He will also have no community to help him'[54]—and his margin

[51] *Royal Commission on Labour in India, Evidence*, Vol. III, Part I: Central Provinces and United Provinces (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1930), pp. 137, 173.

[52] S. H. Fremantle, *Report on the Supply of Labour in the United Provinces and Bengal* (Nainital: Superintendent of Government Press, United Provinces, 1906), p. 108.

[53] *East India (Census): General Report of The Census of India, 1911* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1914), p. 411.

[54] Note by the Chairman, Makbul Hosain, Report of the Weaving Schools Committee, Industries Department, File 407/1920, UPSA, p. 51.

of profit from the business therefore would have been lower than that of a weaver.

The shift to the *karkhana* system meant that women were excluded from some of their prescribed duties, as the *purdah* system ensured that they could not visit an unfamiliar men's domain like the neighbourhood *karkhana*. The survival of weaving as a household-based profession was thus also linked to the reluctance of male weavers to abandon the help of this unpaid female labour. The use of new technology therefore had to be accommodated within this set-up. The dominance of husbands and fathers in the familial skill, and the lack of alternatives for women, other than time-consuming household tasks, gave women little opportunity to develop their weaving capabilities.

During such transformational conflicts, in acknowledging that skills play an important role, one is introduced to the concept of unpaid work. The binary of household and workshop was also the polarity of wage labour and unpaid labour. In household-based production, unpaid labour was carried out by the women, whose role and place remained minimized owing to the non-gendered history of skills in weaving. Capitalism introduced the concept of wage labour and has characterized this work as productive through the creation of surplus value, while unpaid family work is seen as unproductive. While women's labour was made invisible under capitalism, it is also true that their abilities were not particularly valued or regarded as skills or work even in 'traditional' pre-capitalist society. This notion of labour happens to be different as well as similar to the sweated labour of women at the bottom of capitalist supply chains. Women in agriculture and as keepers of the domestic household have played an equal part in productive labour. In the report submitted to the Dufferin Enquiry of 1888, the Collector of Ghazipur noted that usually the women of rural weaver families were also working as agricultural labourers to add some more pennies to the income of the household, like the three daughters-in-law of Raza Julaha of Usia village in the district.[55] Women were usually not allowed to perform the work of weaving. In the case of Barabanki weavers, the non-participation of women in direct weaving has been explained in terms of treating weaving as masculine work.[56] However, the Dufferin Enquiry noted that 'the employment of women would probably mean a further lowering of wages, and—what is worse—it would increase the opportunity for man to sit idle'.[57]

However, the preparatory jobs are unpaid tasks and therefore not work in the eyes of the neoliberal economists, while the patriarchy deemed them to be part of women's household duties. The conditions of work for the women and girls who toiled at the bottom of supply chains before and after the apparel was made (by both hand or machine) is not part of the narrative.

[55] Letter from E. Rose, Collector Ghazipur, to J. J. F. Lumsden, Commissioner, Banaras Division, no. 2420/VII–49, dated 10 April 1888, Economic condition of the agricultural and labouring classes in India, Revenue (Scarcity) Department, File16/1888, Box 1, para. 17, UPSA.

[56] Deepak Mehta, *Work, Ritual, Biography: A Muslim Community in North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[57] Kunwar Jagdish Prasad, *Monograph on Carpet Making in the United Provinces* (Allahabad: Government Press, 1907), p. 5.

These workers have been historically oppressed in terms of wages as invisible labour. The 'gendered' organization of the workshop is based on an axiom, namely women's alleged incompetence, whose 'natural' sorts of know-how confine them to unpaid domestic tasks.[58] Women's exclusion from work management is one of the important facts of the social history of weaving and it is worth future research dwelling on the matter of gendered skills.

Rise of the karkhana *and community*

It was with the emergence of the *karkhana* that the change became more visible in terms of labour discipline, a transformation that began controlling and affecting skill and its operation. This was a major shift as, within the household, discipline as a category of control was not required. New status organizations were coming up in the form of the *karkhana*, though these were governed by kinship and community ties only. With the rise of such new social categories, the production process moved beyond both the institutional binaries of the public authority of the state and the private sphere of the household.

By the first decade of the twentieth century, due to shifts to specialized production, skill-based hierarchies in the production structure became fairly entrenched in silk weaving. These hierarchies were strongly correlated with the segmentation of the industry by types of cloth, cost of raw material, and the degree of organization of investment and marketing. The availability of costly yarn and gold thread made skill-based work subordinate to the mediators. Based on their skill and products, Banaras silk weavers were generally found to be of three types:[59]

(a) Sari and dupatta makers: theirs was the largest business because there was great demand for these garments from pilgrims.
(b) Brocade weavers.
(c) Plain Kashi (Cossi) silk weavers.

By the 1940s, the hold of merchant middleman-dealers-*karkhanadar*s had been further entrenched[60] as the *karkhanadari* system with its elaborate expansion became increasingly dominant. Now skills were becoming marginalized

[58] There are works dealing with issues of gender, labour, and patriarchy in organized industries by Mark Holmstrom, *Industry and Inequality: The Social Anthropology of Indian Labour* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); J. Krishnamurty (ed.), *Women in Colonial India, Essays on Survival, Work and the State* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press,1989); Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India. The Bengal Jute Industry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Samita Sen, 'Gender and Class: Women in Indian Industry, 1890–1990', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2008, pp. 75–116. However, there is a dearth of such research in the informal sector, particularly weaving.

[59] Notes on Encouragement of Indigenous Industries by J. Hope Simpson, C. S., Registrar, Co-operative Credit Societies, United Provinces, on the Banaras Silk Weavers' Co-operative Central Association, Limited, Miscellaneous Department, File 80/1907, Box 22, UPSA.

[60] *Report of the Fact Finding Committee (handloom and mills), 1942*, Chairman, P. J. Thomas (henceforth RFFC) (Delhi: Ministry of Commerce, 1942), pp. 71, 78, 85.

vis-à-vis capitalist relations of production. It was noted that among the weavers working for the silk *karkhanadar*s, three modes of work existed:[61]

1) *Karigari*, where the artisan was a mere wage earner. The *karkhanadar* supplied looms and yarn and the place of work was at the *karkhana*.
2) *Bani*, when the *karkhanadar* gave the warp, gold thread, and yarn for the weft and the design. The artisan wove at home and got a piece-wage under the advance system.
3) *Karkhanadar*, who simply passed on orders for cloth of standard designs and provided some cash advance to the workman who wove at his home with his implements and raw material.

Here the numbers of weavers working directly with the *karkhanadar*s fluctuated depending on factors like wages, cost of raw material, and their sense of independence achieved by from working at home.

The skilled weavers who neither owned looms nor could afford raw materials would perhaps be employed as wage earners on a handloom by the trader or *grihasta*, where they were supplied with the raw materials and even looms, working at either the master's place or their own. Now, the production system too underwent change based on the two methods of *bani*/*baki* and *adhiya* or *lagaar*.[62] *Baki* or an advance was given on a systematic basis to weavers by factory employers in order to retain a skilled labour force. This system, also called *baqidari* or deferred payment, was based on the partial payment of wages to the workers to adjust the remaining balance against the given advance. Even piece-based cloth production did not allow weavers to manage their time because of the skill requirements expected from them; production was linked to their skill yet the amount of money advanced became the key factor in deciding the actual days of labour required to claim wages. To keep the loom running continuously, the yarn had to be secured by paying a higher price on credit. Though the whole demand–supply cycle was dependent on the skill and labour of such weavers, their poverty was fixed in the work culture. Their lack of control over raw materials, crippled access to market, and illiteracy made weavers a permanent object of cheating in market transactions. The system of payment against manufactured cloth was planned in such a way that the manufacturers had to wait until the cloth was sold to receive payment from the brokers (along with the usual reductions and cuts in payment).

[61] 'Pandit Champa Ram Misra, B.A., Deputy Director of Industries, United Provinces', *RUPPBEC, 1929–30*, Vol. III, Evidence, p. 363.

[62] *Bani* consisted of a putting-out system by which a master weaver provides his labourers with handlooms, raw materials, and sari designs. Weavers were bound to give the saris to the master weaver and receive fixed wages in return. These wages represented payment for the previous saris given to the master weaver. In the post-independence period, due to increased demand, the relationship between the *grihasta* and his *karigar* changed. In Mubarakpur now, the *Lagaar* system prevails. In this system, the *karigar* also shares the profit in the sale of cloth, especially saris. It is a kind of partnership during days of prosperity. However, even now, if any defect is detected, the profit of the *karigar* is reduced.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000317 Published online by Cambridge University Press

More than the skill of weavers, this scenario was tied up with the availability and cost of the raw material. Wherever the raw material was costly and the finished products had no certain sale or were easily spoilt (for example, silk, gold and silver thread, *kamdani*, and *zardozi* work) it was beyond the means of the weavers to work independently. Such procurements were invariably controlled by the merchant middlemen and *karkhanadar*s. The risks involved for the middlemen in such industries were minor due to the extremely low wages paid to the workmen and the high profits obtained from the sale of the finished products.[63] The supply of imported yarn in almost all the cases was dependent on dealers as *karkhanadar*s were not directly involved in the import of yarn. Gold threads were also procured through dealers. The artisans working directly for dealers were entirely in the hands of these middlemen who advanced them the yarn and procured the manufactured product either as a purchase or on a commission basis. This change hardened the hierarchies and worsened the working conditions of the weavers. They found that costly raw material, yarn, designs, and dye made their skill a secondary proposition. The entrenchment of the wholesale dealers and *karkhanadar*s ensured that a mass of weavers remained dependent on the advance system for their survival or were reduced to the position of wage-earning weavers.[64]

As far as the social configuration of producers and capitalists in the early twentieth-century United Provinces was concerned, there is a perception that employment opportunities for poorer Muslims were limited because the *bazaar*s, *mandi*s, and many small-scale industries were dominated by Hindu merchants and traders who were apprehensive about employing Muslims. There were only a handful of Muslim entrepreneurs, most of whom usually specialized in a few trades and industries in which Muslim workers were also employed. They remained stuck in the skill and services in which they had been historically engaged and poorer illiterate Muslims crowded into these occupations in the absence of other avenues of employment.[65] However, one cannot generalize this argument for the whole community of the Muslim Julaha weavers. From the All India Momin Conference resolutions and Census reports of the early twentieth century, it emerges that due to the dislocation of the handloom economy, a large number of Julaha Ansaris shifted to other occupations; as a result, in the 1930s, only half of the Julaha Momin population could be identified with the handloom industry.[66] Yet, expertise in the traditional skill and psychological engagement with the occupation of weaving kept 50 per cent of Muslim Julaha weavers attached to their

[63] *RUPPBEC*, 1929–30, Vol. II, p. 371.

[64] Rai, 'Weaving Hierarchies', pp. 203–30; A. C. Chatterjee, *Notes on the Industries of the United Provinces* (Allahabad: Government Press, 1908), pp. 19, 21; *Indian Industrial Commission, Minutes of Evidence, 1916–17, Delhi, United Provinces and Bihar and Orissa*, Vol. I, Appendix II (Calcutta: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1917).

[65] Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth Century India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 256–57.

[66] *The Indian Annual Register: An Annual Digest of Public Affairs of India*, Vol. I, January–June 1942, (ed.) Nripendra Nath Mitra (Calcutta: The Annual Register Office, 1943), pp. 329–30. Also, *The Indian Annual Register, January–June 1943*, Vol. I, 1944, pp. 290–92.

traditional skills. Even in the changed context, circumstances were not conducive to leaving or changing their hereditary occupation, even if it meant economic instability and displacement. A sense of dispossession and blocked or lost opportunities cannot be understood simply within a framework of Hindu–Muslim communal antagonism. While low-ranking Sunni Muslims constituted the main workforce, the wholesale business in silk fabrics belonged to the city's Hindu communities of traders, landlords, and moneylenders—such as the Gujaratis, Agrawalas, Punjabi Khattris, Marwaris, and Sindhis[67]—who had migrated to the city over the centuries. Over time, the main division of labour between Hindu and Muslim communities changed in terms of segregated control over the domains of production and trade. This equation gave newly emerging Muslim *grihasta*s and *karkhanadar*s an opportunity to polarize the poor Julaha weavers behind them. The new mechanism of advances and the position of *karkhanadars/grihasta*s in the community ensured the emergence of capitalist conditions that enabled connections, affiliations, and exclusions in the networked relationships of weaving communities. However, the economic polarization within the weaving community between those who controlled the production and the market and those who did the actual weaving was quite blurred by caste and communal and local solidarities in the case of eastern United Provinces. This development ensured that weavers and labourers would remain under a constant moral and social pressure to follow the 'capitalist mode of production'. So one has to locate the profit-skimming artisanal capitalists within a hierarchical social web of relations of production, where community/caste worked as a metaphor for exploitation. The Fact Finding Committee of 1942 noted: 'We fear that the majority of the employers operating in the hand weaving industry are persons who want to make quick profit by utilizing the skilled labour of a helpless working class at a nominal remuneration. In this respect the middlemen hailing from within the caste are often no better.'[68] This scenario reached an interesting climax when the Hindu Chamars who re-entered the weaving profession formed an alliance with the Muslim *karkhanadar*s. The division of labour along religious lines within the weaving industry, and the changes that this division underwent in the twentieth century, are entangled with the history of its communal relations and economic vicissitudes.[69]

The caste

Historically, the occupational community of weavers was constituted of diverse social groups. The functional weaving groups, that is the Julahas among Muslims and the Koris among Hindus, had fluid, changeable, and ambiguous religious and cultural identities.[70] S. H. Freemantle's 1906 report on labour

[67] Nita Kumar, *The Artisans of Banaras: Popular Culture and Identity, 1880–1986* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 80.

[68] *RFFC*, p. 79.

[69] M. Showeb, *Silk Handloom Industry of Varanasi: A Study of Socio-Economic Problems of Weavers* (Varanasi: Ganga Kaveri Publishing House, 1994), p. 81.

[70] Santosh Kumar Rai, 'Social Histories of Exclusion and Moments of Resistance: The Case of Muslim Julaha Weavers in Colonial United Provinces', *The Indian Economic and Social History*

in Uttar Pradesh, the 1923–24 UP District Industrial Surveys, and several other government reports provide vital information on the presence of various castes and communities in different industrial occupations.[71] These accounts offer several additional explanations for the Chamars' presence in 'non-traditional occupations' like textiles, emphasizing new opportunities created through the expansion of economic activity between the 1890s and the 1920s. However, as early as 1888, William Crooke pointed out that several Chamar families were full-time weavers in the rural areas of the western United Provinces, particularly in Etah district.[72] At this juncture, there emerged a parallel process in which the ever-evolving social status of the occupational category of weavers was transformed and categorized by Orientalist understanding of the Indian caste system. Weavers, until now a largely diverse occupational group, were set apart from each other, with the clearly allocated designations of Hindu Kori and Muslim Julaha,[73] in the colonial knowledge system and race science. When such a scenario coalesced with colonial governmentality, the occupation of weaving, rather than being a fluid social occupation which stratified the labourers, acquired the essential fixity of caste in terms of labour services. The issues of caste identity and community organization become crucial to explain skill, education, and earning levels. Caste and skill, and the relationship between the two, were becoming solidified in the light of pressures from the colonial regime. The Koris were now being included in the menial cultivating castes of Dravidian origin.[74] The realignment of caste and occupation, leading to the reformulation of identity, was an ongoing process. In 1880s, William Hoey's account on Lucknow noted that while the Kori weavers produced only the coarser varieties of cloth, the Julaha weavers had expertise in producing finer cloth.[75] Here the Muslim working class of weavers coexisted with the Hindu working class of weavers without any social classification. However, few years later, a sectarian categorization was made in a study of cotton weavers:

> The weavers are included in two castes, *Julahas* and *Koris:* the former being Muhammadans and the latter Hindus; but while the former are very zealous, calling themselves frequently Momin, *i.e.*, the Faithful, albeit somewhat incorrect in some of their practices, the *Koris* are far from being

Review, vol. 55, no. 4, 2018, pp. 549–74; S. K. Rai, 'The Fuzzy Boundaries: Julaha Weavers' Identity Formation in Early Twentieth Century United Provinces', *Indian Historical Review*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2013, pp. 117–43.

[71] S. H. Freemantle, *Report on the Supply of Labour in the United Provinces and Bengal* (Nainital: Superintendent of Government Press, United Provinces, 1906).

[72] William Crooke, 'Report on Etah District', in *A Collection of Papers Connected with an Inquiry into the Conditions of the Lower Classes of the Population, Especially in Agricultural Tracts, in the North-Western Provinces and Oudh, Instituted in 1887–88* (Allahabad: North-Western Provinces and Oudh Government Press, 1888), pp. 50–110.

[73] S. H. Hutton, *Caste in India: Its Nature, Functions, and Origins* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1951), pp. 121, 281; Rai, 'Social Histories of Exclusion'.

[74] William Crooke, *Native Races of the British Empire: Natives of Northern India* (London: Archibald Constable, 1907), p. 120.

[75] Hoey, *A Monograph of Trade and Manufacture*, pp. 123–24.

> good Hindus, eating beef and showing considerable affinities in their practices to some of the aboriginal tribes. The *Julahas* are, as a rule, more skilful workmen than the *Koris.*[76]

Chamars were engaged in myriad forms of labour in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Among them, those practising weaving were the poorest of all.[77] By the beginning of the twentieth century, unlike Julahas who were mostly tied to weaving, Koris previously engaged in the weaving of coarse cloth were increasingly diversified in different occupations.[78] This trend was almost similar to South India where the traditional practice of weaving coarse cloth by outcaste agrarian labour, working part time, was gradually declining.[79] However, while in South India the Untouchable castes did not come back to the occupation, in the North, at least in Banaras, as discussed below, after a pause, the Chamars rejoined the profession of silk cloth producers. At the beginning of the twentieth century, an official survey noted that Banaras silk weavers were principally Muslims but Kunbis, Ahirs, Koris, Brahmans, Rajputs, and others who learnt the work of weaving were also employed, while the 'lower castes of Hindus are generally excluded'.[80] The weavers with lesser skills, engaged in coarse weaving as a part-time occupation, along with other menial work, had neither the resources nor skill to innovate. Such weavers could not continue in their traditional occupation due to the increasing costs of raw material and living.[81] Thus they turned to factory work or agricultural employment. By the time of the 1931 Census, Koris were working in substantial numbers—15.6 per cent of the total industrial community—in the industrial city of Kanpur in comparison to the Julahas who comprised a mere 1.1 per cent.[82] A section of the low caste groups rejoined the occupation to specialize in the work of weaving, while another had turned to other kinds of labour by the 1930s. The social transfer of skills across communities was a new development from the 1930s when, apart from very poor Muslims, low-caste Hindu agricultural labourers were also recruited to work on a very low piece-rate basis. From the late 1920s, Chamar cultivators and landless labourers from nearby villages began to join the local weaving industry as apprentices on the handlooms of Muslim master weavers in Banaras. The backdrop of skill transfer involving Muslim master weavers and Chamar apprentices linked with sari production has been explained in terms of changing caste status and the desire for

[76] C. A. Silberrad, *A Monograph on Cotton Fabrics Produced in the North-Western Provinces and Oudh* (Allahabad: Government Press, 1898), p. 1.

[77] Ramnarayan S. Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2012), pp. 77–79.

[78] G.W. Briggs, *The Chamars* (rpt; Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1990), p. 25.

[79] Karuna Dietrich Wielenga, 'The Geography of Weaving in Early Nineteenth-Century South India', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2015, pp. 147–84.

[80] Ali, *A Monograph on Silk Fabrics*, p. 105.

[81] 'Witness, Sheo Narayan Juneja, Principal, Government Central Weaving Institute Benaras', *RUPPBEC, 1929–30*, Vol. III, Evidence, pp. 387–88.

[82] A. C. Turner, *Census of India, 1931*, Vol. XV: United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, Part I: Report (Allahabad: Government Press, 1933), pp. 422–23.

upward socioeconomic mobility.[83] Muslim weavers actively began to recruit Chamar workers 'as allies' within the heavily communalized context of the 1930s and in response to the Shudra (low caste) communities' visible appropriation of militant Hinduism. Manuela Ciotti lays out two conditions that facilitated Chamars' entry into the silk sari industry in the 1930s. First, the increased demand for silk saris in the 1920s created new economic opportunities and, second, a threatened Muslim community chose to establish a reliable economic relationship with 'low-caste Chamars as well as other Untouchable communities as allies'. She compares the skilled Chamar weavers of the silk industry in the 1930s with traditional rural Chamars who wove coarse cotton cloth to argue that it was in the city of Banaras that Chamars first moved to a non-traditional urban industrial occupation, in contrast to those who worked in the leather industries of Kanpur, an occupation regarded by many as more traditional.[84] This scenario in Banaras was different from the case of Bombay, where Dalits were refused entry into the weaving sheds in the textile mills due to their caste, even though they might have had the traditional skills, while non-traditional weaving middle-castes such as Marathas were acquiring and co-opting the skill of weaving as their community possession.[85] Here the tradition of caste status was being used to 'gain advantage in modernity'. Moreover, this development was also enforced with a sense of the economic benefits offered in the relatively well-paid weaving sections. It seems as if the possession of skill was defining the caste norms of weaving communities, as at this juncture the spatial interface of tradition and modernity was multidimensional. Contrary to the experience in Bombay, in Banaras Ciotti argues that weaving created a perfect opportunity for Chamars to engage in '"de-ideologising" work (to counter the tight link between work and Untouchable identity)'.[86] The patronage of the Chamars by Muslims in the weaving industry signified a new set of meanings about the worker–employer relationship to be conceptualized both in social and in economic terms. The option to move to a skill domain was inspired by new opportunities of sustenance as the association with skill was not a matter of honour but survival. Initially, the products of previously unskilled Hindu weavers proved to be poor-quality, low-cost goods with a limited market and poor returns. They were thought to be less skilled than Muslim Julahas. The looms continued to be owned by the trader and the weavers were paid a wage for their work.[87]

[83] Manuela Ciotti, 'Ethnohistories Behind Local and Global Bazaars: Chronicle of a Chamar Weaving Community in the Benaras Region', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2007, p. 321.

[84] Manuela Ciotti, *Retro-Modern India: Forging the Low-Caste Self* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 83, 92.

[85] Gopal Guru, 'Experience, Space and Justice', in *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*, (eds) Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 71–106.

[86] Ciotti, *Retro-Modern India*, p. 92.

[87] Ibid.

These scenarios cannot be explained in terms of skill alone. Skill and technique as both political and social issues were still permeating through caste under the prism of modernity, rather than just being the subject of developmental economics. Skill continued to be an elusive category within the social idiom of purity and pollution. The moment access to skill is decided on the basis of ritualism of caste hierarchy, skill becomes a social construct and certain people have to be necessarily deskilled from certain professions, as happened in the case of Mahars in the Bombay textile mills exemplified by Gopal Guru and referred to above. Thus, the moment skill transfer becomes a project of modern institutions and capital, segregation and identification of work, in spite of the apparent social claims, will take a utilitarian view of caste and gender identity. If a Chamar emerges as a worker in a leather factory or a handloom weaver becomes a mechanic in a powerloom factory, the particular identification with work may continue without a change in social identity due to the already existing social categorization identifying them with these tasks. This happens despite the fact that whenever a new technique is applied to old machinery, for instance the use of jacquard in the pit loom, it requires constant repair and other micro processes to be performed by the artisan alias mechanic, where he has to move beyond his traditionally allocated skill and identity. As happened in the case of Muslim weavers facilitating the re-entry of agricultural labourers, for the Chamars, in the relatively superior task of silk weaving, social context rather than merely skill or technique was the decisive factor. The social upliftment of the Chamars and, though limited, their liberation from upper caste landlords became possible due to their social alliance with the Muslims which was facilitated more by the requirements of labour and social needs than simply skill. Any shift cannot be merely connected to the use of technology and the use of machines. Here skill becomes an interchangeable category, along with the social interchangeability of the identity of a weaver and Chamar as a worker without much capitalist transformation.

Technologies of production and vulnerability of skill

The above scenario goes against the dominant narrative that globalization and modernization created the conditions for a creative reorganization of the institutional structures and adaptation of technology within handloom production.[88] Here, rather than generalizing the process, the trajectories effectively working in South and western India require redefining and reworking, when moving northwards. In the United Provinces, the rise of Muslim-Grihastas as a class of artisan-entrepreneurs was not an easy or smooth process because of centuries-old networks of Bania merchants at the existing sites of handloom weaving. Certainly, the adoption of new tools and methods needed the agency of such sponsors. The lack of change was not always due to weavers not being amenable to change, as is usually argued. Rather, it was due to the unwillingness of merchant capitalists to take risks and provide incentive to weavers to

[88] Roy, *Traditional Industry*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000317 Published online by Cambridge University Press

effect the change. Here one has to remember that even minor changes in the initial phase require major investments for which the availability of cheap human labour was always a dampener.

Douglas Haynes has rightly indicated that the handloom weavers of western India relocated, when possible, to be near cloth and yarn markets, and to meet new types of consumer demand emerging in nearby new metropolitan cities like Bombay or Ahmedabad. This new generation could invest in new tools and processes, and thus defined the professional character of a number of industrial towns in western India. This reconstruction of the lives and handloom industry occurred where the refashioning of the caste and community idiom was possible. Thus in the new destinations of western India, the emergence of 'weaver-capitalists' was a far easier and smoother process. However, unlike the 'weaver capitalists'[89] of western India, who had the advantage of being at the new sites of production with new social spaces, this facility was not available in the human geography of the eastern United Provinces where handloom communities and towns had existed for so many centuries. The Julaha weavers relied on pre-existing social structures and sources of labour and skill, constantly intersecting with the colonial state, nationalist politics, and communal mobilization.

Production technology in the region remained more or less the same in the early twentieth century. The weaver sat on the edge of a pit dug in the dry mud floor of his house, the slay was practically on his lap, and the treadles to drive the machine were at his feet.[90] This simple pit loom was largely suitable for weaving plain or coarse cloth, which was sold to the poor and brought low returns. Over the centuries, the simple pit loom had undergone a few changes to alter the make-up of the industry—the *gathva* (handloom-held frame), introduced in the sixteenth century, and the jacquard loom, introduced in the 1920s, could well be the two most important technical innovations, and they altered the role and number of weavers working on a single loom. The *gathva* increased the productivity of the individual loom, but three men were needed to operate it. Joseph Jacquard's system for programming designs on fabrics, however, reduced the number of men working the loom to two: a weaver and his assistant (usually a 10- to 14-year-old boy paid by the day). The two simplifications introduced were the use of the jacquard machine in place of the intricate cotton-thread designs strung over the loom, and the adoption of the Hattersley domestic loom, both in about 1928.[91] Now the pit loom could be fitted with a throw or fly shuttle. When the jacquard machine was introduced, most textile production consisted of plain, unpatterned fabrics. Therefore, the new machine did not result in considerable unemployment. While traders believed these changes indicated a decline in traditional skill, weavers considered them only as labour-saving devices since this technical improvement left their existing skill untouched. But the introduction of the power loom in the mid-1930s was a technical revolution in the local textile

[89] Haynes, *Small Town Capitalism*.

[90] Hoey, *A Monograph on Trade and Manufacture*, p. 123.

[91] Emily DuBois, 'Banaras Brocade Weaving', *Ars Textrina: A Journal of Textiles and Costume*, vol. 3, May 1986.

industry. Coping with this was a major challenge for the handloom weavers. Unlike the jacquard machine, which was useful in the production of designed fabrics, the powerloom could produce almost any kind of fabric more quickly. The powerloom was effective, both in the manufacturing of competitive items that required careful handwork and for the production of plain fabrics.

Even then silk production was a sector in which modern technology failed to triumph over the skill and technology of production. The handloom industry was going through a critical transition in the vocation of 'design' in colonial India from the realm of handicrafts and the artisanal arts to a new social space of middle-class training and practice. This was quite apparent in the way that designing skills came to occupy a new median space between fine arts and crafts within the structures of skill pedagogy, and the way in which the figure of the professional designer (*nakshband*) monopolized the sector. This was mainly because silk designing was a significant factor in the highly competitive field of silk marketing. Even after the arrival of the powerloom, the old designs continued to be important in silk production, mainly because there was no alternative for the traditional technologies of handmade designs. The cloth designing sector was traditionally dominated by a skilled group of *nakshabands* (pattern makers). A brief discussion on the technology of pattern making would explain the reason for the dominance of local skill and technologies in the era of mechanization. The designs were first drawn on talc or paper and then the designer would make its model in cotton thread on small frames. This art was inherited and monopolized by a few families in Banaras. This monopoly over the skill of designing was a hurdle for the introduction of new and different designs as designers asked for large sums to create them as well as transfer them from paper to the yarn frame.[92] The design patterns, originally etched on mica and now drawn on graph paper, were transferred using threads onto a loom, enabling a pattern to be used repeatedly. To create these designs, the artist first drew out the entire concept on graph paper. Then small punch cards were created through which colour threads were passed at different stages as the cards hung on the sides of the loom. Depending on the design, these cards paddled in a systematic way so that the right pattern and colours could be picked up during the main weaving. Hundreds of such perforated cards were required to produce a single design. Depending on the complexity of the design, a normal sari required 15 days' to six months' work. By the 1920s, with the dominance of silk cloth in the industry, designers were doing brisk business with a growth in demand for new styles of fabric and new designs in prints. In Mau, one assistant designer was working exclusively on the sari borders required by the weavers. 'Shadow cloth' was produced in the modern designs and most of the centres were taking up this line. The 1939 report of the Industries and Commerce Department noted with satisfaction that 107 new designs had been introduced that year.[93] There were three fully functioning finishing factories at Tanda and

[92] Notes and Orders on Manufacture of Kashi Silk, File 52/1908, UPSA.

[93] *Administration Report of the Department of Industries and Commerce, United Provinces, for the year ending 31 March 1939* (Allahabad: Government Press, 1940), pp. 13, 16.

one at Mau. However, silk weaving was affected by the problem of fabricated and duplicated foreign products. Embroidered and printed saris of Japanese crepe competed with genuine silk saris from Banaras, although local weavers did their best to introduce new designs.[94] A sari had to be unique in quality, colour combination, design, and pattern. As a result, there was no uniformity in rates, which became a cause for rampant exploitation.

Reforms and apprenticeship

With such grey areas of interaction between hand-skill and machine-based productivity, the Department of Industries of the United Provinces continuously dealt with the issue of the adoption of new techniques and the introduction of the factory system. Officials viewed schooling in weaving as a part of larger economic reforms, designed to expand the vocational educational system and to provide opportunities for the weaver community. With this purpose, the agenda of mechanization propagated 'improved' technologies in the form of labour- and time-saving devices but took a cautious approach to introducing modern ideas in the artisanal sector. Initially, they did not introduce the powerloom as this would have implied an outright rejection of handloom weaving. Increased output of the handloom was directly connected to the time spent (wasted) by weavers in preparing the yarn. Technological reforms, therefore, concentrated on 'hand-powered' machinery, especially for processing yarn (for example, the slasher sixer, the warping mill). However, the effects of this experiment on actual skills and those of formal versus informal training have not received due attention. There is almost a sense of denial regarding the question of how weaver communities negotiated such transformation and how the 'skills at hand' became crucial in their survival, simply because there is little knowledge about the local histories of vocational education in weaving, especially regarding the contact between weaving schools and their professional student population, and the working-class culture of the weavers.

Tirthankar Roy shows that in certain respects social institutions fostering skill formation in India restricted the circulation of knowledge. In his view, contrary to the European case, in India the art of weaving was preserved in family, clan, and caste groups. In a context with a high degree of informality, 'with few exceptions, the apprentices were members of the household and … the family was the main vehicle of training'.[95] Thus, to reproduce the existing tacit knowledge it had to be passed on from generation to generation, and because the training of sons by their fathers was the rule rather than the exception (which was the case in Europe), boys were apprenticed within the family only. Experience acquired in traditional apprenticeship training varied widely, depending on local natural conditions, social traditions, and the

[94] Ibid., p. 13.

[95] Tirthankar Roy, 'Apprenticeship and Industrialization in India 1600–1930', in *Technology, Skills and the Pre-Modern Economy in the East and the West*, (eds) Maarten Prak and Jan Luiten van Zanden (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 69–92, 71, 77.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000317 Published online by Cambridge University Press

individual knowledge of the master. The skills and tacit knowledge of workers and the material conditions, for instance the availability of resources, were strongly dependent on local circumstances. For household production, Roy's articulation works, as the art of weaving was understood to be such that it could be learnt and perfected only in the family setting. The training of labour took place within the traditional informal apprenticeship system and was usually confined to relatives and men of that particular caste. E. B. Havell observed in 1921 that the 'government must try to reach fathers and uncles ... rather than take their sons and nephews away from them'.[96] The weft-yarn was used in a shuttle called *dharki*, which was thrown from side to side while weaving. Children in the household helped in the weaving process by throwing this shuttle while sitting beside the adult weaver on the loom. This was also a method to teach the children weaving.

However, the references from United Provinces at the beginning of the twentieth century show a changing pattern in apprenticeship, with the gradual shift of the production process from the household to the *karkhana*. Although this shift followed the trajectory of family, the *karkhana* and the state institutions were going haywire. The level of skill and training entered into a fuzzy area of capital beyond the prerogative of state and household. The shift from household production to *karkhana* meant the transformation of familial apprenticeships to forms of child labour. The types of training (that is, acquiring often tacit forms of knowledge that are nonetheless necessary to practise an occupation) play an essential role as a workshop could not function if preparatory tasks have not been performed beforehand. These ancillary works were assumed to be done by apprentices in the workshop. The use of child labour became vital in the *karkhana* system. In Kopaganj, one man with the help of two children could earn six annas daily.[97] In the *doria* system, children began by working on the spinning mill or by wrapping yarn, then they became assistant weavers, and by their late teens they had often become fully fledged weavers. In the *karkhana* system, the child apprentice was, in a sense, a commodity, exchanged between his parents and the employer. The parents or guardians who received the money were often destitute and had no other way to obtain credit. The parents used the loan to pay for a wedding or funeral, birth or treatment for illness, to pay off another loan, or just to secure food. The employers used the loan to secure indefinitely the cheapest possible form of labour. The *karkhanadar*s began to pay these apprentices their wages only when they had learnt to make the articles or after some period of apprenticeship.[98]

The idea of formal education was strengthened with the establishment of government weaving training schools in 1907. A practical difficulty in obtaining boys for the government weaving classes was the high advance paid by the

[96] Memorandum by E. B. Havell on Improvement of Indian Art and Crafts, Industries Department, File 172/1921, Box 239, UPSA.

[97] Fremantle, *Report on the Supply of Labour in the United Provinces and Bengal*, p. 108.

[98] 'Witness, Sheo Narayan Juneja, Principal, Government Central Weaving Institute Benaras', *RUPPBEC*, Vol. III, Evidence, p. 383.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000317 Published online by Cambridge University Press

weavers to the parents in Banaras.[99] Moreover, the feedback was quite dismal as the instructional staff at these schools failed to inculcate in trainees the requisite competence. Most of the teachers did not belong to the weaving communities and were deficient in practical weaving skills. In none of the schools was preliminary preparation of the yarn or finishing of the work taught satisfactorily, as the master weavers were themselves ignorant of the processes and indifferent to their own duties. Thus they failed to command the respect of the local weavers.[100] The requirement was for master craftsmen and not classroom lecturers. The realization came quite late in the 1940s that these institutions were 'modeled on schools and colleges of [a] literary type' and they were involved too much with the 'class and book method'.[101] Thus the methods and training were alienated from each other in terms of application. Taking the skill demonstrations and training out of the schools and locating it within the weaving communities' own spaces proved a more successful tactic.[102] In the peripatetic school at Alaipur in Banaras city, instructors started holding night classes at their own initiative. This was convenient because the professional Julahas could not spare time during the day (not a single daytime trainee was a weaver by caste), and they also required a little practice at the fly-shuttle loom to sharpen their skills since they already knew the basics.[103] When a branch school in the weavers' quarters was opened, for a short while 'it was attended by sons of regular weavers ... it also had great success in popularizing improved looms'.[104]

Another such example comes from the testimony of an affluent community leader who was also a weaving school official. In an application to the director of industries, United Provinces, lamenting the rejection of his application to be elevated to the post of principal, Khan Saheb Saiyid Amir Hasan (then officiating principal of the Government Central Weaving Institute, Banaras)[105] expressed his regret that no consideration had been given to his length of service and intensive efforts. He claimed that he had started the biggest weaving school in the United Provinces 20 years earlier when there were no government institutions at that level in India, in spite of the fact that he had no formal training. He added that at the time, powerloom training and foreign qualifications were not given any importance as they were not deemed useful for the handloom industry. In fact, he argued, those who had received such training in Japan had not managed to impress the public. He noted that he had acquired theoretical knowledge through available books and learnt fly-

[99] Memorandum by E. B. Havell on Improvement of Indian Art and Crafts, UPSA.

[100] Report of the Weaving Schools Committee, Industries Department, File 407/1920, UPSA, p. 13.

[101] Report of the Shri Ram Committee, Industries Department, United Provinces, File 37/1941, Box 435, UPSA, p. 5.

[102] *Report on the Administration of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh,* 1914–15 (Allahabad: Government Press, 1916), pp. 69, 41.

[103] Report of the Weaving Schools Committee, Industries Department, UPSA, p. 6.

[104] Report of the R. Burn Committee, Industries Department, File 287/1924, Appendix (Q), UPSA, p. 105.

[105] Copy of Application from Sayid Amir Hasan, dated March 31, 1927, Industries Department Progs., File 820/1922, Box 73, UPSA.

shuttle weaving at the Salvation Army, Bombay, extending his knowledge by visiting mills in Kanpur and Bombay on several occasions. As per his claim, his two most important achievements were:

1. Designing a hack and creel with 100 bobbins for warping, which he introduced in the weaving schools and among the weavers. This innovation was not known or used in the United Provinces until 1908, when Amir Hasan presented it at the Hewett Weaving School. From there it spread throughout the province, even to the remotest villages, and was much appreciated by the weavers.
2. Developing the so-called Hewett School sley. By 1927, the fly-shuttle sley was in general use, with about 25,000 of them utilized throughout the province. The Serampore loom, with its long and sharp pointed shuttle, on the other hand, was not approved of by the weavers as it could not take a big weft bobbin. Saiyid Amir Hasan claimed that he had made the fly-shuttle sley work with a bigger shuttle, solving their problem, and this became the Hewett School sley. It was very popular, though its inventor went largely unrecognized. This sley also won awards at the Allahabad exhibition.

Saiyid Amir Hasan claimed that not even the known weaving experts were able to improve upon his two innovations. This shows that familiarity with traditional occupational requirements and practical considerations were one of the first conditions for introducing successful reforms in weaving appliances. However, the presumed notion of superiority of modern techniques over traditional skills could never acknowledge such realities on the ground.

The weaving training schools symbolize a change in the location of analysis from the informal *sites* of skill production to the institutional *circulation* of knowledge, where different actors were supposed to receive, adapt, and transform technical knowledge in formal ways. The Industries Department of the United Provinces always referred to the 'improvement' rather than 'development' of the handloom industry and weaving. Before attributing the fault to 'obscure economic causes', the authorities were conscious about determining the role of methods of instructions and the existing organization. It was emphasized that:

> Unless a sympathetic interest is taken in a student's future career and unless he is encouraged to apply to school in cases of difficulty or when requiring employment the weaving schools will never produce any real impression on the textile industry.[106]

As per the weaving schools' survey of 1912–13, 'the number of improved looms purchased by the ex-students and now lying idle is a severe comment on the present state of affair'.[107] The inspection reports reiterated the fact that the

[106] Annual Report on Industrial Education for the Year 1912–13, Industries Department, UPSA, p. 20.
[107] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000317 Published online by Cambridge University Press

weaving instructions were generally faulty or incomplete and the instructional staff always inadequate. The apprentice weavers or the weavers with expertise in the 'desi karga' were apprehensive about the process of modernization and technical changes and used it as an excuse for leaving their training at the first opportunity:

> Unless a weaver is able to prepare his yarn for the loom correctly and properly finish his cloth for the market he is unable to earn a living by independent work. Unless he can effect small repairs and correctly adjust his loom he will probably discard it for the kargha sooner or later.[108]

The students trained in these schools were also found to be not competent enough to be recruited in the industrial sector as they found work in the large cotton mills extremely uncongenial.[109] However, such an issue could not be easily resolved as, in its colonial version, knowledge was a hierarchical arrangement, with theoretical knowledge in a written format being its highest, most developed form, while the artisanal practices were considered traditional or practical knowledge and positioned at the bottom. The assumptions and practices embedded in the official practices and weaving schools' network led to unequal access to opportunities as well as global and local markets. Whenever new skills were infused without actual appreciation of the situation on the ground, the modernization project was bound to fall short of official knowledge discourse.

This knowledge-skill binary of machine and handloom continued in the post-colonial period as well. In the initial planning processes envisaged as per the Gandhian vision, the development of the handloom sector was seen as a stimulation for rural development, being based on local resources, local craftsmanship, and catering primarily for local markets. In the initial decades subsequent to India's independence, all national policies emphasized this factor.[110] Handloom—like other handicrafts—became a national project. This ever-evolving project of national identity formation had to adapt to the ideals of the modernization theory of development, which takes tradition to be an obstacle to progress; yet crafts, as part of a larger cultural identity, were a primary ingredient in this project. However, by the second five-year plan, thinking at the apex policy level saw the handloom sector as a redundant profession and a burden on the government exchequer. Political leadership, in general, avoided taking up the cudgel on behalf of the artisan/weaver communities. This sector was seen in isolation from the rest of the economy and the stakeholders were thought to be stuck in their niche without the possibility of moving on. This situation 'encapsulated the dilemmas of the newly formed

[108] Ibid.

[109] Note by the Director of Industries on Organization of Instructions in the Handloom Weaving Industry, Industries Department, file 71/1914, Box 33, UPSA.

[110] *First Five Year Plan: A Draft Outline* (Delhi: Planning Commission, Govt. of India, 1951), p. 118; *Report on the Textile Enquiry Committee* (Delhi: Ministry of Commerce and Industries, Government of India, 1954), pp. 1–2.

nation-state: small-scale hand manufacture versus industrialization, tradition versus modernity, and the place of the past in the future'.[111] A self-contradictory policy framework continued to shape the weavers' training and technical education. The education programme could not match with local execution as repeated recommendations by different government committees and commissions were not taken seriously, and a scheme to ensure the supply of yarn would only be introduced by 1955. Ensuring a steady supply of raw material such as yarn, dyes, and chemicals to the state handloom organizations was a challenging task as these government agencies had no previous experience on which to build the set-up. This meant a gradual shift towards the creation of a new economic order for a newly independent country which would nurture and support existing structures and skills and develop the industrial sector.[112]

Conclusion

Recent historiography has been changing our awareness of science, technology, and 'useful knowledge' in the debate on the 'great divergence' between East and West. Simultaneously, there is a revisionist argument that, rather than being destroyed under the influence of colonialism, craft industries in South Asia were drastically reorganized and modernized in terms of skill, knowledge, and technology. This transition was hard on the workers but led to the revitalization of industries that remained traditional only in a categorical sense. This approach has opened a new line of inquiry for historians of premodern manufacturing enterprises under transitions to modernity to look at organizational change, regional diversity, and organizational complexity of the handloom industry. While acknowledging that handloom weaving was actually revived and, to some extent, thrived (though in some regions more than others), each setting needs to be explained uniquely, and not assumed to be the structural trend against which all others are measured. Thus interaction between Indian and European weaving practices may have resulted in as yet undocumented and unidentified modifications to weave patterns, cloth production, and fibre processing. The overall picture of the handloom sector in India could not be deduced on purely a priori grounds, but depended on such variables as the character of the particular product, region, mediators, and community in which the craft manufacturing was concentrated, and the distribution of employment in such occupations.

[111] Soumhya Venkatesan, *Craft Matters: Artisans, Development and the Indian Nation* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2009), pp. 31–32; *Second Five Year Plan (Report on Village and Small Scale Industries)* (New Delhi: Planning Commission, Government of India, 1956), p. 436.

[112] This dilemma of sectoral categorization was very much a reflection of the politics of development. Members of the Planning Commission, who had been trained in the economic policies applicable to industrial societies, had a similar approach to European economists. They viewed the handloom sector as a cottage industry, as a non-productive welfare activity; meanwhile, the Marxists saw it as exploitation of labour. To build an economic policy which saw the craft sector as an important part of development economics and to convince the Planning Commission to give it due importance was a tall order.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000317 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Within this premise, this article takes up the handloom industry of the United Provinces to deal with the questions of negotiations between the different meanings and processes of skill—for the producers, for the market, and for the state. There were different ways in which the knowledge of traditional handloom production coexisted with modern practices of capital. An intensive examination of material practices explores the methods of the weavers' engagement with the process of knowledge-making which involved extensive experimentation and observation. Here, the relation between the knowledge about handloom weaving and the practice of the skill, rather than being worlds apart, has been seen more as consisting of acts of adjustment and acquisition.

Beyond the mechanical skill-knowledge binary, this article moves the discussion to the 'men at the loom'—the Julaha weavers who are currently largely neglected by historiography despite forming the majority of the skilled workforce and providing one of the key mechanisms for the dissemination of innovation in the handloom sector. Rather than conceive of handloom weavers as a unitary or monolithic cultural category, I analyse the multiple, contested, and conflicting understandings around work culture, identity, and community power that shape the multi-paradigmatic and multi-locational selection of cultures of skill vis-à-vis knowledge discourse. I argue that the binary of artisanal and industrial labour requires a cautious approach in South Asia where family, workspaces, and occupational schools remained the sites of skill production and the movement towards modern knowledge-based scientific technology was not sudden. These were always in a state of flux, owing to the influence of the variety of agents who structured skill, including rulers, local communities, and individuals, with inclusion and exclusion operating along the axes of gender, caste, and social status.

Contemporary intellectuals were inclined either towards modern development, designed to bring increased returns to those with capital at the cost of those with labour and skill, or had a nostalgic view which imagined that the craft had to be protected within its own circumstances. The assumptions and practices embedded in mainstream official processes and mediators' networks led to unequal access to opportunities and to global and local markets. Thus when new skills were infused without an actual understanding of the context, the modernization project was bound to fall short of the official knowledge discourse. The colonial attempt to bring weavers into the weaving training schools and to make them participate in new ways of learning generally failed because the official process of the production of modern skills for the weaving sector had its own lacunae, with a white-collar approach to the training. The abysmal record of the governmental initiative was largely such because it discounted the selective adoption of the 'new' already present in the so-called traditional sector due to the neglect of the local organizational context. Therefore, there was not much enthusiasm for newly trained skilled labour and their utilization for actual unorganized weaving. A critical examination of the way in which skill in colonial India and post-colonial discourse has been reconfigured from above and below, as a social process, as personal or collective possession, as the means of facilitating labour and employment,

community building and policy making, both in the traditional community and modern state, is the basic premise.

Clearly, the development of skills could not be synonymous with mere modernization bereft of its social milieu. Parameters for assessing and evaluating outcomes also need to be based on a close understanding of context, and this often had to come through active involvement of the stakeholders within it. In that sense, there was more continuity than a break between state policies pursued by the colonial government and the post-independence dispensation. In a way I argue that a focus on skill as a social function reveals the contingent and contested nature of the processes of capital and the role of the state in their development, and the various forms of resistance and unintended consequences that emerge in their wake. It happens across artisanal communities as they increasingly foster their identities in ways that are deeply rooted in local skills. The problem of the relation between the economic and the sociocultural arises from a remarkable conceptual separation of production from culture—that is, from the distinction of the ways in which societies produce material goods from the ways in which they reproduce social relations. This process of separation is itself seen as a characteristic feature of modern knowledge discourse. Economists tend to isolate economic relations and to abstract them from the social relations which constitute them. The people produce socially through relations which define and order their world in morally significant ways. In fact, the platforms of skill, community, and locality are the micro-locations wherein economic processes and global actions are exercised and experimented with. Simultaneously, as and when processes of modernization threaten existing relations or the livelihoods of communities and localities by penetrating such traditional structures, aggressive attempts to negotiate with such processes emerge as the local/community response to modernization and globalization.

Competing interests. None.

Cite this article: Rai, Santosh Kumar. 2022. 'Communities of skill in the age of capitalism: Handloom weavers in twentieth-century United Provinces, India'. *Modern Asian Studies* 56 (4), pp. 1183–1221. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000317