

Ian C. Wendt
Washington State University
iwendt@wsu.edu

*400 Years of Decline?: Understanding the changing structure of the
South Indian textile industry*

Historical narratives about economies and societies exert powerful influences on the ways we interpret the past. Of course historical narratives analyze continuity and change over time; but more importantly, historical narratives also make subjective value judgments regarding the nature of change and continuity. The world is constantly changing. Within the context of complex transitions, such as industrialization, historians may evaluate change and continuity in powerful, conflicting, value based terms. This paper will focus on how historians have valued and characterized industrialization within different regional and national historical traditions. Characterizations of decline, stagnation, growth, transformation, agency and oppression stem from subjective judgments that about changing economies. Strikingly, the parameters, plot and discourse of many historical analyses of industrialization are powerfully influenced by the dominant regional or national historical narratives.

This paper compares historical narratives about the textile industries of Japan, Southeast Asia and India during the 18th and 19th centuries, and then it offers a revision of the dominant story of the South Indian textile industry.

Narratives about modern economies are dominated by the major transitions engendered by industrialization. The story of the Industrial Revolution is a celebratory European, and North American, narrative describing a rapid, radical transformation of western economies and societies during the 18th and 19th centuries. But with time, historians have recognized the complexity of these changes, and usually speak now of a process of industrialization, which recognizes long term, uneven transitions, changing labor relations and capital accumulations, and complex results for differing socio-economic groups. The timing, scope, values and direction of industrialization have all become subjects of debate. Historians recognize that industrialization has a pre-history, often called proto-industrialization. Moreover,

industrialization is not inevitable or perhaps not even permanent, as exemplified in debates over de-industrialization.

Even stories about pre-industrialized economies from around the world, particularly in the early modern world, are shaped by our awareness of what came after. The local experiences of industrialization during the 18th and 19th centuries direct our inquiries into the earlier periods. Some of the most prominent components of all of these narratives are:

- Economic growth, transition, technological development;
- Realignment of social, economic and structural relations within production and commerce;
- Outside intervention, world economy, colonialism/imperialism;
- Continuity and decline.

Agency is central to all historical narratives about the nature and meaning of industrialization. Identifying and characterizing internal or local autonomy is a basic goal in many stories of successful industrialization. Finally, the story of economic development cannot be divorced from the national myth. Indeed, the experience of industrialization is often central to the national historical narrative.

Textile industries are fundamental to the experiences as well as the narratives of industrialization in many regions. The stories of economic, technological and social change within the context of industrialization, proto-industrialization, and de-industrialization are often preoccupied with cloth production and commerce, particularly cotton cloth. Industrialization is about machines and engines applied to production resulting in changing labor, capital, and commercial structures and relations. In almost every part of the world, one of the first industries that these changes were applied to was the textile industry, especially cotton textile industry.

This paper is divided into four parts. It begins by comparing the dominant historical narratives about the modern economies, particularly the textile industries, of South Asia, especially South India, with cases from Southeast Asia and Japan. Second, it relates these narratives to the regional economic performance of the textile industries of these regions during the 18th and 19th centuries. Thus we will compare not only the narratives but also what seems to have happened. These comparisons provide remarkable contrasts in both the experiences and the subjective evaluations of historical change and continuity through the

process of industrialization. Then, given that broad context, the paper examines the South Indian case much more closely. The third section examines the historiography of the South Indian textile industry from the 17th century forward, identifying recurring, key aspects of a dominant narrative of decline. The fourth section of the paper examines the historical transitions within the structure of the cotton textile industry from the early modern period through the early processes of industrialization in the 19th century. This analysis suggests a different way of understanding the story of industrialization, and perhaps a revision of the dominant narrative.

Comparison of narratives about textile industry and industrialization in Japan, Southeast Asia and India

Here is a broad overview of the respective historical narratives about the textile industries of 18th and 19th century Japan, Southeast Asia and India. The Japanese narrative celebrates the successful transition from isolation to industrialization. It emphasizes internal agency. Western influence and competition were important, but not dominating or determinative. Japanese industrialization is a Japanese success story about technological adoption, entrepreneurship, and rapid internal political, economic and social transformation. Contemporary historical narratives about Southeast Asian textile industry emphasize autonomy amidst constant external influence. In Indonesia, Thailand or the Philippines, whether the textile industry was growing or shrinking, internal autonomy is the central theme. Finally, the story of Indian or South Asian textile industry is a persistent narrative of lost wealth and decline, dating to as early as the 17th century and recurring through the 20th century, due to European intervention, colonialism and stagnant social structures. The Indian narrative furnishes the archetypical story of de-industrialization. Economic historians are preoccupied with understanding what went wrong or what stopped the progress and turned wealth into poverty.

[in abbreviated form...]

Japanese economy and society were isolated until well into the 19th century. Its forced engagement with the world economy is famous. It embraced that contact and engaged western competition. Japanese officers, entrepreneurs and laborers rapidly transformed their economy,

politics and society. Japan's opening and transformation into a state with an economy and military that rivaled the West was so rapid, that scholars have been prompted to search for preexisting conditions that could have enabled Japan's precipitous rise. The importance of precedents for economic growth and change from Tokugawa Japan are constantly emphasized. In addition, Japan was active in its adoption and importation of western technology, sending students abroad to identify technologies and techniques. Japan succeeded in its competition, but it maintained its cultural autonomy and its internal agency. The distinctive organization and success of new cotton textile mills in Japan exemplifies this agency. The "hybrid technology" created within the silk reeling industry exhibited both adoption and adaptation of technology. Finally, the continuity of highly specialized, hand loom textile industries such as kimonos also reflects cultural autonomy.

The Japanese narrative of industrialization is quite similar to the western story. Industrialization and development are good. Japan and its historians celebrate its success.

In Southeast Asia we will examine three major case studies from the 18th and 19th centuries: Western Indonesia (Jambi, Palembang and Java), Philippines (Iloilo), and upland Thailand.

The old narrative of Southeast Asian history argued that Southeast Asia had always been colonized and peripheral. Its culture, economy and politics were always characterized as under the dominance of some other center – India, China, the Muslim world, and finally Europe – from the 1st century through the 20th century. National narratives did not essentially alter this story, though they did recenter the story by offering a teleological story of the proto-nation.

But for the last generation, the entire scholarship of Southeast Asia has focused on cultural autonomy and internal agency. Yes Southeast Asia has been connected with the world throughout its history. But that contact did not ever undermine its uniqueness or agency. Southeast Asian cultures, societies and economies selectively adopted and adapted external ideas, techniques and technologies. Its external connections are its strength not its weakness.

The examples of Sumatra and Java, Iloilo, and Thailand each demonstrate the continuing importance of outside influences, but emphasize the cultural autonomy of Southeast Asian culture. In each case, Indian, Muslim and Chinese motifs and influenced shaped early modern traditions. But during the 18th and 19th centuries, local textile production flourished.

Later in the 19th century, textile production declined in the face of colonial obstruction, imperial competition from the world economy, and the proliferation of cash crop economies. Nevertheless, the historiography emphasizes cultural autonomy and the survival of indigenous traditions.

[again, abbreviated]

Cultural autonomy is particularly potent in the study of textiles in Southeast Asia, because patterned cloths are accepted as carriers of important cultural meaning. Therefore, European colonialism, despite its powerful effects on textile production and trade, is just one more incarnation of foreign influence that does not fundamentally alter the nature of Southeast Asian culture, in this case, textile industry. Despite the disruption, the scholarship emphasizes cultural continuity.

The first component of the historical narrative of the economy of India, particularly the textile industry, is that India used to be rich. The second component of the narrative is that India's economy declined and became poor. But what caused the decline? The two central instigators are first, western economic and political exploitation, particularly British colonialism, and second, internal social structures and technological stagnation. Few historical themes are viewed with as much simultaneous excitement and pessimism as the textile industry in India. Generations of historians have been at pains to argue both that textile industry in South Asia made major contributions to the world economy and that it suffered massive decline in the face of European corporate and colonial exploitation. The nationalist narrative expressed this story nearly a century ago. Even with revisions that roundly criticize the nation as well as the colonial state, the narrative remains fundamentally similar. [Note examples.]

Industrialization is often characterized as foreign and often negative. Competition is unfair and destructive. Continuity is preferred, particularly the continuity of the handloom industry. Weavers are central protagonists of textile industry narratives. Paradoxically, the failure to fully industrialize is also negative. There is historical analysis of industrialization and larger scale firms in the 19th century. But research on the continuity and decline of handicrafts is more prominent. There is debate about the period, the nature, and the causes of decline. Was it the late 18th or 19th century or later? Was the decline absolute or only relative to the broader economy? Nevertheless, the story focuses on decline. The most famous narrative argues that de-industrialization resulted from the combined effects of colonial tax

policies, malice or ineptitude, as well as mechanized cloth imports and maritime market replacement. The story concludes that this brought about large scale agrarianization and impoverishment of diverse, specialized artisan producers. As we will see below, almost regardless of the period of inquiry, a study of textile industry in early modern or modern South Asia will begin with wealth and end with decline.

Historical experience versus historical narrative in Japan, Southeast Asia and India

The historical experiences of these regions differed just as their narratives differed. But a comparison of these differences highlights the subjective nature of historical narratives and the power of regional or national narratives to shape the evaluation of continuity and change.

Japan experience of industrialization was a rapid transition, initiated from the outside, but developed from within through introduction of a mechanized cotton textile industry. Japan experienced a major decline of handicraft textile production. A few high culture markets remain. But few historians choose to regret the decline in handloom weavers. And no one characterizes this transition as a damaging attack by outside, colonial forces.

Arguably, Southeast Asia experienced a more profound decline in indigenous handicraft textile production than South Asia did. But because cloth is a recognized symbol of Southeast Asian cultural meaning, the survival of the cloth and the techniques of its production are celebrated amidst outside influence.

Finally, India has experienced far greater continuity of handloom cloth production and commerce than any region of the world I can think of. Weavers continue to participate in the complex mixed mechanized textile industry of 20th and 21st century India, which includes combinations of hand looms and power looms in small and medium scale workshops and factories. There is major continuity in terms of female fashions and handicraft motifs and techniques. In addition, there is a growing global market for India handicrafts. By what valuation is this decline or failure? It certainly can be characterized in those terms; but in a broad comparative context such a subjective valuation is striking.

400 years of decline? – The historiography of the South Indian textile industry

Given the broad comparative context from the preceding sections, a specific analysis of the overarching narratives that shape the historiography of the South Indian textile industry is very interesting. Almost without reference to the period under analysis, the overarching narrative begins with wealth and ends with decline. Beginning in the 17th century, historians have noted evidence of decline. In fairness, few if any of the historians below would accept that the textile industry declined for 400 years. Nevertheless, the dominant narrative of decline and the pessimism regarding industrialization and de-industrialization is potent back as far as the 17th century. At the outset I must express my debt to each of the authors I will critique. My work benefits from and builds on theirs. This critique of the broad narrative of decline that recurs in the historiography is not a rejection of the substance of their analyses of the structures of textile production and commerce or of the details of continuity and change over time. It is an effort to consciously examine the narrative of decline that dominates our valuations of the changing modern textile industry and the broader Indian economy and society generally.

Vijaya Ramaswamy's analysis of medieval weavers and textile industry in South India ends in the 17th century. At one level her pessimism and sense of decline dates from the fall of the Vijayanagara Empire in the later 16th century. But her greatest criticism is reserved for the arrival of the Dutch and English East India Companies, which she credits with limiting weaver creativity and mobility, forcing the production standardized export cloths, and the construction of proto-colonial black towns dating from early in the 17th century. To date the decline of the textile industry to such an early date is remarkable since in 1600 the South Indian textile industry had not even begun its major period of early modern growth wherein its production and commerce would reach markets in East Asia, Africa, Europe and even the Americas.

Tapan Raychaudhuri examined textile trade in some detail within his analysis of the Dutch Jan Company in the 17th century Coromandel. He noted a clear sense of decline dating from the late 17th century, when the Dutch shifted their procurement from Pulicat and the northern Coromandel to Nagapattinam in the south. J.J. Brenning expressed a more qualified sense of decline in the same period. His analysis of 17th century textile production and trade in the northern Coromandel clearly has a sense of the continuing flourishing of the textile industry into the 18th century. Nevertheless, he viewed the conquest of southern India by the Mughals as marking a major shift, a decline, in the history of textile production and trade in the Krishna-Godavari Deltas,

The 18th century has also witnessed narratives of marked decline. Sinnappah Arasaratnam expressed repeated pessimism regarding the extension of British colonial power into South India during the 18th century. This expansion was accompanied by monopolistic commercial goals (sometimes realized), abuse of South Indian weavers and merchants, and gradual decline of the textile industry. Kanakalatha Mukund examined textile trade in South India between 1650 and 1750 in some detail in the context of her research on Tamil merchant society. She concluded that after 1725, textile commerce experienced a marked decline, and Tamil merchants were impoverished and broken.

Prasanna Parthasarathi's work makes a compelling argument that the textile industry was the first portion of South Indian society to experience the real power of colonialism during the 18th century, and that it was the harbinger of things to come in the 19th century. His central argument is that after 1760 with the conquest of significant and growing portions of South India, the English Company state exerted increasing colonial powers on textile merchants and weavers. It drastically weakened the bargaining power of weavers, cut out merchant brokers, mitigated any benefits from labor mobility, and defeated all weaver protest. After 1760 the textile industry declined.

Potkuchi Swarnalatha wrote a thoroughly researched dissertation on weaver society in the northern Coromandel between 1750 and 1850. She concluded that during the early 19th century the South Indian textile industry experienced significant decline in the face of competing and often conflicting colonial bureaucratic measures enacted by the commercial residents and revenue collectors of the English East India Company. Weavers in particular were squeezed between uncoordinated and competing claims of government commercial and revenue officials. Even more disastrous was the 1830 cessation of Company trade in the region's cloth, which left many weavers unemployed.

Oddly enough, it is only in the 19th century that we begin to find some significant debate on the existence or size of decline. Again we focus on South India. Konrad Specker has collected a great deal of data on weavers and looms in early 19th century South India. He argued that the early 19th century did *not* witness a marked decline in weavers. This is striking because by broad accounts of the merchants and markets for South Indian cloth, the 17th and 18th centuries were clearly periods of growth, whereas the 19th century saw declines in the external demands for South Indian cloth. Clearly the export markets declined, and weavers

shifted to producing coarser, cheaper cloths. Nevertheless, the data based on weaver populations is ambiguous enough to call into question the overall decline in weaving. Perhaps it was only a relative decline and not an absolute decline. Few would argue that the industry was experiencing growth. Dharma Kumar has similarly expressed a mixed sense of pessimism about the textile industry tempered by caution regarding data showing little decline in weaving. Nevertheless, Dharma Kumar does describe 19th century decline.

Without exception, each of these historians has emphasized the size, scope and vitality of textile production and/or trade during their period of analysis. Their analysis began with and was often marked by real enthusiasm for the society that produced and marketed cotton cloth in South India. But with few exceptions, they could not avoid the conclusion that their story must end with decline. The point is that the overarching master narrative remains the same – India was rich, but then it declined because of colonialism and, perhaps, social stagnation. But how can the industry with the greatest continuity have experienced decline for 400 years? Is that decline? Where is the celebration of internal agency and continuity?

Transitions in the structure of the South Indian textile industry

[very abbreviated]

Research on the textile industry has focused heavily on weavers and cloth merchants. The structure of the textile industry is universally described as highly specialized and diversified, with spinning, weaving washing, dyeing and trade performed by different professional groups. The broad characterization of textile producers and merchants is that they are largely male, professional, full-time, and specialized. (Spinners are an exception, but they occupy a very small place in the volume of the historiography.) This stands in stark contrast to regions like Southeast Asia and elsewhere wherein female part-time labor characterized textile production and even commerce. Recent scholarship on textile industry in India has altered this to emphasize that the family or household is the unit of production. Household production combined both male and female labor. As we have seen, decline in the textile industry is characterized in terms of de-industrialization, which forced professional artisans away from commercial-artisan production and into agriculture for which they had few skills and of course little or no land of their own.

My research on the structure of textile production during the late 17th and 18th centuries examines the textile industry in its broadest dimensions, from commercial agriculture to spinning to warping and weaving to cloth finishing to commerce and consumer. By carefully examining the rich archival data on the labor, productivity, input costs, wages and profits for each stage of production and commerce, my research reveals a highly detailed view of textile production. When the textile industry is viewed in its full dimensions, the focus on full-time professional artisans – particularly weavers – is demonstrably very limited.

[insert table]

Agrarian and female labor constituted the majority of total laborers, total labor volume, and even total value added on virtually all plain cloths in the early modern period. These kinds of labor were largely part-time or seasonal, non-professional labor. Spinners in particular contributed the largest single portion of all labor and value to plain cloths – ~55% of total laborers & ~40% of the total labor percentage. Agrarian households which included cotton cultivators, cleaners, and most spinners constituted about 85% of all laborers and more than 65% of total labor percentage. Female labor composed about 65% of all laborers and about 55% of total labor percentage in the textile industry as a whole.

By contrast weaving households composed just 10% of all textile industry households and contributed 20% of the total labor. All professional laborers, including weavers, washers, dyers and merchants composed only 12% of all households and 22% of the total labor.

In producing households female producers – who picked, cleaned and spun cotton into thread, prepared the warp for the loom, and assisted in washing and dyeing – contributed between one third and one half of cash household income in all but the richest households.

How does this alter our historical narrative about industrialization? To answer that question we must first answer the basic question of how the structure of this textile industry changed over the course of the 19th century. Admittedly, my research on the 19th or early 20th century is much less detailed than the early modern period. Nevertheless, this knowledge of the early modern structure allows us to make some fundamental conclusions about the changes wrought by industrialization in South India. Late 19th century and early 20th century sources clearly document the gradual spread and adoption of mechanized processes for cotton cleaning and spinning. Railways and cotton gins gradually replaced virtually all hand cotton cleaning. It is unclear how many spinners lost work. But decline in spinning seems much clearer than

decline of looms and weavers. Based on surveys of weavers during the 1890s, it is clear that weavers in the Madras Presidency were using machine spun yarn from Madras, Madurai, Coimbatore, Bombay and elsewhere.

Cotton cleaning and spinning were largely agrarian and female labor. Thus the result of 19th century industrialization was the gradual replacement of female and agrarian laborers. Even within the weaving process, warping machines were in use in large weaving centers in South India long before mechanized weaving became a factor. Once again, female labor was replaced first.

At another stage of the process, weavers also described the adoption of mineral aniline dyes and the purchase of mineral dyed thread. Mineral dyes had become of good comparable quality to vegetable dyes and they were cheaper and simpler to use. Mineral dyes were imported from Europe, particularly Germany. This additional level of industrialization served to limit the range of specialization by eliminating many dyeing activities as a separate specialized stage of production.

In addition, all of these forms of industrialization – railway transport of cotton, mechanized cotton cleaning and spinning (and warping), and the import of mineral dyes – served to sever the repeated ties between agrarian and artisan communities. Agrarian laborers were eliminated from the textile industry. Instead of buying thread from agrarian spinners, weavers bought it from urban markets or received it from merchants as an advance. Instead of purchasing vegetable dyes from commercial crop producers, weavers and dyers purchased mineral dyes in urban markets.

Therefore, rather than the agrarianization of the major portion of the professional textile industry (as described in de-industrialization), the 19th century processes of industrialization in South India brought about the masculinization/ de-feminization, urbanization/ de-agrarianization, the professionalization and the elimination of much seasonal and part-time labor in the modern textile industry. Indeed, the characterizations of the handicraft textile industry as male, professional and full-time seem to date more from the late 19th and early 20th centuries than from any previous time.

In conclusion, our failure to understand the true shape and size of the textile industry has led us to mischaracterize the results of industrialization. The textile industry did not

disappear and push weavers into agriculture en mass. Rather, the textile industry eliminated the labor of female and agrarian laborers. This transition effected a much larger number of households and laborers than the relative decline in weavers or looms. We do not yet know how these large numbers of female and agrarian producers responded. But it may have had profound consequences on the modern Indian economy.

Was this de-industrialization? I would argue that it was not. The larger demographic processes within the textile industry as a whole seem much more consistent with industrialization and mechanization processes in many parts of the world. This research contributes to a scholarship that recognizes that industrialization in South Asia was a complex process that resulted in mixed handicraft-machine industries that are in many ways unique to the history of South Asia.

Was this decline? Industrialization is a complex process everywhere in the world. It was and continues to be a disruptive transition in terms of labor, productivity, economic organization, capital accumulation, and technological diffusion. We have seen that the historiographies of different regions of the world have subjectively evaluated industrialization in many ways. Should we judge the diminution of handicraft weaver or spinner or cotton cleaner labor to be fundamentally negative? Should we laud the continuity of hand loom weaving and handicraft motifs and techniques that survive into the 21st century? I won't answer these questions. But I hope more of us will question dominant historical narratives, both celebratory and persistently negative.