

Questioning Roy's Interpretation

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**Questioning Roy's Interpretation**

Tirthankar Roy's "The Economic Legacies of Colonial Rule in India: Another Look" (EPW, 11 April 2015) was expectedly stimulating and informative—but I would like to raise a couple of questions.

First, the role of expatriate technologists in the pre-independence and even the post-independence Indian industrial development, regardless of ownership or management, is certainly a subject of interest, as is the effort to develop Indian expertise. Given the detailed census figures for Europeans and their characteristics it should be possible to quantify it.

Second, some of the transfers of ownership and management may be described as Roy does: "A series of hostile takeovers by opportunistic Indian families with help from cynical politicians sealed the fate of global firms. Most of them were then run down by their new Indian owners." As usual which global firms are involved is a complex question, but if we mean the main commodity traders throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, some of whom also had significant manufacturing operations, their withdrawal was already at an advanced stage by the time of India's independence. This was, undoubtedly, motivated, at least in part, by anxieties about what the end of British rule would bring, but it was also motivated by the fact that the families involved did not have anyone interested in continuing the business. The role of "cynical politicians" was limited.

In a number of cases the sales were to families who had been closely involved with that particular commodity trading firm, sometimes for generations. In other cases there was clear complementarity with the purchasers' other business. Nonetheless it is probably the case that most commercial transactions exploit opportunities.

I have just had a chance to read E V Sassoon's *Diaries* for the period 1927 to 1945, which have been donated by his family to the Southern Methodist University, and neither his sale of what became The Indian United Mills to a group of leading businessmen, several of whom had been active in the cotton industry

and business, nor the sale of Raymond Mills to the Singhania family seem to fit Roy's description. But each family firm clearly had a different story.

As to what all the Indian owners did, that is an empirical question. The impression that one gathers from sources and evidence is that some managed well, others less so. But the generally sad history of the cotton textile industry suggests that there may be some more general factors operating here as well.

Finally, I do note that Roy's reading of this is quite different from that offered by Maria Misra's *Business, Race and Politics in British India*.

Thomas Timberg

ARLINGTON, THE US

**UAPA: Political Vendetta**

Coordination of Democratic Rights Organisations (CDRO) unequivocally condemns the judgment of the Midnapore (West Bengal) District and Sessions Court on 12 May 2015, which convicted Chatradhar Mahato, spokesperson of the People's Committee Against Police Atrocities (PCPA) of Lalgargh, along with Sukhshanti Baske, treasurer of the PCPA, Sambhu Soren and Sagun Murmu, members of PCPA and Raja (Tinku) Sarkhel and Prasun Chattopadhyay, members of Gana Pratirodh Manch for sedition and waging war against the state. The first four, namely, Mahato, Baske, Soren and Murmu, have also been convicted under the draconian Unlawful Activities (Prevention) act (UAPA), which are the first convictions under this act in West Bengal. They have all been sentenced to life imprisonment under charges of sedition. We consider this judgment to be not only a travesty of justice, but also a political attempt by the state to send a message to peoples' movements across West Bengal and India that any dissent against the state and any democratic opposition to the ruling classes will be severely dealt with, including through adverse judicial pronouncements.

The Lalgargh movement, of which these people were participants, was an uprising of the Adivasi-Moolvasi people of Jangalmahal against police repression