The making of India's modernity

In terms of thematic exploration, David Arnold's book on technological modernity in colonial India, which covers the period between the 1880s and the 1960s, is seminal. In the current historiography, there is hardly any book which includes sewing machine, bicycle, rice mill, and typewriter in one single account that tells us the story of modern India that unfolded at the intersections of technology, state and society.[1]

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

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

Arnold rightly observes that the little that exists on the history of technology, which includes his own earlier works, has remained focussed on big-scale technology. They explore the big politics of imperialism, nationalism and capitalism. There is, therefore, a need to look at small-scale technologies. However, intimacies, domesticities, and other such quotidian markers/formations are not necessarily a function of the scale of technologies. If a group of girls riding on bicycles sang away, quite literally, their free-spirited pedalling across the serene landscape as one towards love and freedom which no one should try to stop (the famous song *main chali, main chali* from the movie Padosan, 1968) then almost two decades earlier a song picturised in a railway carriage amusingly chronicled the enactment of some other everyday practices such as sleeping, playing cards and not least eating (the song *rail mein jiya mora* from the movie Ankhen, 1950). Further, Bhojpuri folksongs from the early twentieth century on railways and steamships (the big technologies) very vividly depicted the intimate everyday relationship around conjugality, family life, and domestic existence (or lack of it).

The argument that technology did not need to be big to be significant is absolutely valid, but equally true (and I assume Arnold will agree as he himself uses Nirad Chaudhuri's reminiscences of the sound of steamers, pp17-18) is that the 'everyday' does not need to be necessarily located in something that is plebeian, subaltern, and small. Everyday is not a function of scale. Railways and sewing machines were both part of the same everyday – at individual and social levels. And the colonialists/corporatists displayed the same kind of prejudices in relation to both: as Singer agents thought Indians incapable to use their machines, so did the agents of railway companies a few decades earlier. If Singer claimed to have helped Indians move towards better civilization, so did the power of steam.

Influenced by the 'social construction of technology' theory (SCOT), Arnold's second theoretical intervention is to rescue the social history of these technologies, which were all imported in their provenance, from an instrumental relationship of transfer and diffusion from the West to the East. This relates to the scale of history and history writing in which he admits of not looking at the technical make-up of the machine, but in exploring how they became part of the social and political processes of change in specific localities; how in India they became carriers as well as sites of issues such as race, class and gender (12).

All technologies and commodities covered in this study were global in their reach and introduced in India largely but not exclusively through the network of imperialism, but their 'creative appropriation' in different settings gave them context-specific meanings. It is the context of the social which is at the heart of this book, which ties the global, the imperial and the local in an un-formulaic way. Given the ascendancy of formulaic ways of doing global history through connections and comparisons, I find this approach of not letting the 'social' go adrift refreshingly important (see the brief comment on 38). Once again, it must be stated that the cultural adaptation of technology is not specific to small or big.
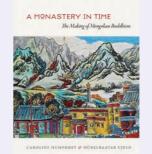
Global technologies & colonial state
The foreignness of these technologies invariably leads Arnold to raise the question of their relation with colonial state power. Most of the big and small technologies were thought of first serving the state power. He says, unlike western societies where commerce, industry, and civil society played a more dominant role in fashioning technological modernity, in India the colonial state remained the leading user and publicist of these technologies (148).

The making of Mongolian Buddhism

As I was reading through *A Monastery in Time,* it occurred to me how the publication of this book, and the more recent volume *Mongolian Buddhism in History, Culture and Society,*[1] suggests that Mongolian Buddhism is slowly becoming a meaningful academic study, quite distinct from the Tibetan Buddhism from which it initially developed. Scholars of religion and history, as well as individuals and organizations involved in cultural preservation, are ever more focused on understanding how Buddhism in the Mongolian ethnic region (including areas that are nowadays considered politically part of Russia and China, in addition to Mongolia itself) has morphed, over the centuries and under many diverse influences, into what it is today. Such scholarship, moreover, contributes to an enrichment, not only of our understanding of the past, but of our involvement in the contemporary development of Inner Asia.

Simon Wickhamsmith

CAROLINE HUMPHREY AND HÜRELBAATAR UJEED'S book seeks to answer a fundamental question: "What does it mean to be a Buddhist in a Mongolian way?" (p1) Their site of enquiry is the monastery at Mergen, in the southwestern region of Inner Mongolia. The book traces multiple trajectories through time and history, mapping the lived experience of Mergen's community of monks and their relationship with the complex spiritual and cultural meanings of Buddhism, within the personal and social contexts of religious practice. The authors' study is based upon two decades of fieldwork, and its value lies squarely in their intimate relationship with the community and in the profound reach of their ethnography.

The ideas that unfold over the course of the book's ten chapters are presented through an approach which, while personal, allows the subjects to speak directly to the reader. Thus we have a cast of characters – people, deities and spirits, religious texts and artifacts – through whose stories the greater story and key questions surrounding the monastery's historical and religious development are explored.

Bicycles were distributed to help policing, typewriters in government offices and courts to speed up administrative work and efficiency, cars and telephones to speed up the movement of administrative personnel and information. The state was not the producer; in fact, within the ironic relationship between imperial protectionism and laissez-faire, American products (Singer sewing machines, Remington typewriters and Ford automobiles) dominated the Indian market. But the state significantly benefitted from this. These technologies strengthened the 'inner life of the state'. And they did so in phases. During the Second World War, for instance, the expansionary nature of the state in terms of being able to regulate the usages of these technologies was quite marked.

Yet this is only one part of the story. The social and political re-calibration of these technologies to either subvert the state power or to question the existing social identity was equally important and forceful, which Arnold lucidly demonstrates. Women working for communist organisations and low-caste villagers using bicycles, typewriters used for disseminating anti-colonial nationalist aspirations – they all point at colonial control that was leaky if not absent. They all show that the life of technology was beyond the simplistic control of the state. They all indicate that different social groups used these technologies to articulate the idea of modernity and modern self-hood.

Nature of technological modernity
What are the axes and scope of this technological modernity? Exploration of race, gender and class is obviously one way of knowing the nature of this modernity, which this book like many others especially on a colonial society, does. Numbers definitely are not on the side of showing the 'quantitative' axes of this modernity. In spite of the rapidity with which these commodities became part of Indian life, they were still used rather sparsely if compared with figures of other countries. Arnold is aware of this dilemma and hence the way out for him is to underscore the social, experiential and utopian articulations of this modernity. The mix of social life captured through visuals, literary works and films is interesting. The articulation of this modernity is tied to the manifold effects these different technologies produced on diverse social groups and classes.

Moving beyond the state and the enterprising initiatives of some Indians selling, part manufacturing, repairing, and assembling these products, Arnold leads us into the world of users and consumers. Did new technology such as sewing machines and typewriters require new skills? Who were the people that moved in to operate them? Did they lead to displacement of existing groups and skills? One gets glimpses of answers into these questions. Bicycles empowered rural folk and elite women; typewriters mainly remained within the confines of Anglo-Indian women in offices and scribal Indian men outside the courts; rice mills took away the work of poor women; and sewing machines tapped into the existing skills of *darzis,* but also became part of the reformist discourse of 'new women/new domesticity' of the late nineteenth century. The last enlarged the scope of domestic work for women.

Yet, many of the answers to the question of modernity are just about at the exploratory level. Bicycle races fitted into the notion of Bengali manliness, but did it also contribute to the emergence of a new sensibility and aesthetics of landscape, space and movement, and if yes, how? Did the new modernity based upon widespread use of sewing machines create a new culture of mass production and consumption? Was it linked to, if any, the emergence of new 'modern' fashion? How did the earlier individualized notion of work which darzis performed on the veranda of their masters/employers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries transform into a shop based work culture of the later period, in which these people were not the owners of their tools? Did technological modernity bring alienation and firmer labour control? Passages from literary sources on sewing machines (141-42), and work-related changes brought about by rice mills (134-40), are illuminating sections.

Typewriters brought bureaucratic utility and speed; it "transformed bureaucratic work regimes"; transformed the "ways in which novelists, journalists, politicians, and administrators pursued their daily work", but exactly how is not clear (56-7). I would imagine for a long time the typewriter functioned as a 'copying machine' producing the 'fair' and 'official' version of hand-written letters, petitions, judgements, news, and even academic theses. In fact, this was true for early day computers as well (people wrote on the paper and got it 'typed' with the only but significant difference of editing on the screen, which theoretically meant fewer errors in the final print, but only theoretically). It has only very recently happened that the machine has become an accompaniment of the user in the same way as her lunch box or smart phone are. The question remains how did the typewriter change, or not, the processes of thinking, reading, writing, and reporting. *Everyday Technology* can mark the beginning of a more systematic tapping into sources to unearth the complex social relationships around these technologies.

Conflict and resistance
If modernity is a product of conflictual claim and counter-claim making, then the history of technological modernity should also reflect the same – conflicts between social groups and classes. Arnold says that "there is little evidence of significant cultural resistance to sewing machines" (49), but what about resistance based upon capital and skill? Did the traditional catchment of darzis' work and clientele suffer because now women started sewing at home (and quite massively, with vernacular magazines publishing essays on how to sew different types of materials) or did the expanding market compensate for it (pp. 50-51)? The competitive clerical job market revolved around the skill of typewriting; what kind of social conflicts did it lead to? Arnold prefers to look at the history of interaction between technology and society through assimilation and acculturation; I wonder if there is more to be said about conflicts and dissonances; to be fair, they are not absent (most directly to be seen in the sections on traffic and roads, 162-64 and 167-71), but not adequately presented either.

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

Make in India
Finally, at least in two ways, this book reverberates with contemporary Indian politics over technology, and the social perception of Indian skill, and thus unwittingly adds an interesting historical layer to it. Foreign capital and the current governmental slogan of 'Make in India' are not very far from how American firms like Dunlop promoted their products as "made in India, by Indians, for Indians" (100). There is no dichotomy between nationalistic manufacturing boost that this present government is spearheading (with the logo of the lion) and the inflow of foreign capital. In fact, the mechanical robust lion can only survive with a financial begging bowl in his mouth. Arnold's treatment of the Swadeshi phase shows historical antecedents. Second, from repairing cycles on street pavements to that of fixing typewriters (and in the current age of unlocking and repairing all sorts of mobile phones), this book tells us that there is a serious history to be told about how India has achieved its worldwide status of *'jugaad* economy'. The production of many a commodity was stifled under colonialism – is this the reason that the skill got channelized into fixing, assembling, repairing and selling, but not innovatively producing?

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References
1 The reviewer has not looked into Wickramasinghe, N. 2014. Metallic Modern: Everyday Machine in Colonial Sri Lanka, New York: Berghahn Books, which also looks at some of the technologies covered in Arnold's book.

The expression of time in the title relates not only to the unfolding of history, but also to its collapse in day-to-day terms in the lives of these characters. The immanence in the ongoing experience of the monks today of religious leaders such as the Mergen Gegen (1717-1766), who was closely associated with the Mergen monastery, and whose Mongolian-language history of Buddhism *Altan Tobchi* is central to the monastery's self-aware preservation of Buddhist rituals in Mongolian, renders time – and so history, and so manifestation itself – a somewhat slippery study. Indeed, in their discussion of the concept of *sülde* (the 'spirit of invincibility' – see also the discussion of the translation of this term on pp.185-186), the authors show how this one word not only signifies several ideas – it "is associated with a radical vision of military power, with light and air, and with the aristocracy as the integrating skeleton of society" (p199) – but that it is also in some sense the verbal manifestation of relationships with entities such as the local deity Muna Khan or Mergen Gegen himself, and thereby (through the use of ritual) with the individual's sense of self. Through the telling of local legends and personal anecdotes, the authors are able to trace the development of several such disparate ideas, and so present a beautifully structured yet necessarily incomplete understanding of how Mongolian culture (including its pre-Buddhist shamanic culture) has framed and shaped Mongolian Buddhism. In this understanding, moreover, is revealed the significance of the conceptual and social distance that exists between the Tibetan and Mongolian manifestations of Buddhism.

The recent history, however, of both Tibet and Inner Mongolia has placed them equally and together at the center of the Chinese government's ongoing campaign against the Dalai Lama. Humphrey and Ujeed's treatment of the political difficulties faced by the Mergen community, both during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and latterly amid the adapted strictures against religion in general and the Dalai Lama in particular, highlights the ways in which everyone involved with the monastery has been taking part in a process of cultural and spiritual negotiation. The two lamas whose stories are central to the book's narrative, Sengge Lama and the current Chorji Lama Mönghebatu, had both severely "struggled" during the Cultural Revolution, and both now keenly grasp their places in relation to the complex nexus of history, religious practice and culture that is Mergen Monastery's ongoing experience. Sengge Lama in particular offers a striking commentary on this experience when he says, "A person who becomes old must place his history in safekeeping" (p286). This realization of the importance of preserving history, of preserving local and cultural knowledge for future generations (just as, Sengge Lama implies, Mergen Gegen himself had) appears as the intellectual bedrock upon which the book was originally conceived. Nonetheless, while the existence of this book cannot make up for the dearth of knowledgeable lamas of which Sengge Lama speaks (p286), its publication is at least a small step towards the awareness of western scholarship of Mergen Monastery's unique heritage.

But there is another aspect to this urge to "place … history in safekeeping". Right at the book's close, the authors point out that even those aspects of the culture of Mergen Monastery that might have seemed central to them, and which are indeed central to their book – "such as the great morality-infused structure at the center of Mergen Gegen's *Altan Tobci,* the nobles' cult of *sülde,* the mausoleums of heroic ancestors, or the relics of the 8th Mergen Gegen" (p385),

or even the primacy of the Mongolian language at the monastery as a medium for religion – nonetheless change, and are transformed over time by the currents and fashions of history. So the urge to preserve culture is itself recognized as an aspect of culture, and the wish of devout and culturally-aware practitioners and scholars to "safeguard" what they regard as significant should properly, I believe Humphrey and Ujeed subtly be saying, be seen as ephemeral, like the illusory play of water bubbles or rainbows mentioned in Buddhist teaching, and as ultimately representing the "creative tension between dispersion and centralizing acts of concentration" (p386).

This book seems destined to be a key text in the discussion of Mongolian Buddhism, and of the cultural history of Inner Mongolia during the present century. I would have welcomed more pictures to complement the vivid and descriptive writing style, and a more extensive and more topic-specific index, but such cavils should not detract from the fact that this is a most important and exciting contribution to the field of Mongolian Studies.

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References
1 Wallace, V.A. (ed.) 2015. *Mongolian Buddhism in History, Culture and Society,* New York: OUP. For full disclosure, I should admit here that I have a paper in this collection ("A Literary History of Buddhism in Mongolia"). The reader's attention should also be drawn to Christopher Kaplonski's important study *The Lama Question: Violence, Sovereignity, and Exception in Early Socialist Mongolia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014).