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# *Introduction*

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Most of the articles in this special issue were presented at a conference held at Trinity College, Cambridge, in May 2014 in honour of David Washbrook, to mark his 65th birthday. As a Festschrift, it is unusual: its authors are drawn not only from the ranks of Washbrook's students, but also include his collaborators and colleagues. But it is, we hope, more than a commemorative volume. Inspired by David Washbrook's work, the articles not only speak to the rich range of topics he has taken up in his distinguished career, they also reflect important new directions in the economic and social history of India, and Asia more broadly.

David Washbrook, as this brief introduction will show, has many facets as an inspirational scholar and teacher, but in retrospect, the best way to describe him is as a historian of modernity in India. He began his career studying the politics of South India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The questions he pursued thereafter led him to range out from that base in colonial Madras—temporally back to earlier times, and forwards to more recent ones, and spatially to the subcontinent as a whole. Thematically, his scope grew wider still. Comparative questions of modernity have taken Washbrook into the territories bounded by the Indian Ocean and beyond: he has been a significant voice in the burgeoning field of global history, and the study of the Indian diaspora.

In 1975 and 1976, David Washbrook published two major works, both on politics in South India during the heyday of British colonial rule. The first, *South India: Political Institutions and Political Change,*

*1880–1940*, was co-authored with Christopher Baker (a contributor to this volume). The second, *The Emergence of Provincial Politics: The Madras Presidency, 1870–1920*, was based on Washbrook's doctoral thesis.[1] These two works were part of a spate of publications by historians at Cambridge that led to a major, and controversial, reconceptualization of politics in British India. The Cambridge School, as it has come to be known, is often treated as speaking with one voice, and the significant differences within the group often go unrecognized.

Washbrook's early works, for all their Cambridge imprimatur, stand out for their attention to economic conflict. In these monographs, and in his substantial article 'Country politics', published in *Modern Asian Studies* in 1973,[2] political economy and inequality, along the lines of both caste and class, are so central to the analysis that some have seen evidence here of a Marxist-inflected approach to history. Washbrook would revisit these topics in later years in a series of ground-breaking essays, including 'Land and labour in late eighteenth century South India: the golden age of the pariah',[3] and his classic article on law in colonial India, which explored the peculiarities of Indian colonial capitalism from the vantage point of 'effective property right in land'.[4] This was, and remains, one of the most successful and widely cited articles ever to appear in the pages of *Modern Asian Studies*.

In the 1980s and 1990s, then, Washbrook developed into an essayist of extraordinary flair, scope, and ambition. His greatest essays have spawned several distinguished doctoral theses, and they continue to leave their imprint on the subject today as basic guides to the history of modern South Asia.

Several contributions to this special issue take these early writings by Washbrook as their point of departure. Rosalind O'Hanlon, who has co-authored significant works with Washbrook, draws on his path-breaking discussion of caste to examine the long history of debates on that institution in western India. While O'Hanlon acknowledges

[1] C. J. Baker and D. A. Washbrook, *South India: Political Institutions and Political Change, 1880–1940*, Delhi: Macmillan, 1975; D. A. Washbrook, *The Emergence of Provincial Politics: The Madras Presidency, 1870–1920*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.

[2] David Washbrook, 'Country politics: Madras 1880 to 1930', *Modern Asian Studies*, 7(3) 1973, pp. 475–531.

[3] D. Washbrook, 'Land and labour in late eighteenth century South India: the golden age of the pariah' in Peter Robb (ed.), *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994.

[4] D. A. Washbrook, 'Law, state and agrarian society in colonial India', *Modern Asian Studies*, 15(3) 1981, pp. 649–721.

the impact of these debates of the colonial state's policies in the nineteenth century, she cautions that 'western India's long tradition of argumentation about caste ... reminds us that caste, as explicit or implicit hierarchy, is—and has always been—very much more than an epiphenomenon of the state, and sustained strongly in the domains of family and personal life, bodily comportment, and religious practice'. Prasannan Parthasarathi draws inspiration from Washbrook's integration of ecology and agriculture, in particular the famous distinction between 'wet' and 'dry' districts that was the basis for his analysis of country politics. Parthasarathi, however, takes a more explicitly environmental or ecological approach than Washbrook to the South Indian landscape and focuses on water and the ways in which it was manipulated in the nineteenth century. He argues that beyond the Cauvery Delta, the tank, which stored river and rainwater, was the key to South India's pre-colonial water control system. From the late nineteenth century, tanks were replaced by wells, which the British believed to be more famine-proof in monsoonal conditions. But, as Parthasarathi shows, this proved to be a less durable system of water control, leading to chronic crises and grave ecological difficulties by the closing decades of the twentieth century.

The articles by Crispin Bates and Marina Carter, on sirdars, labour recruitment, and migration to Mauritius, and by Joya Chatterji, on immobility in the age of migration, are in the spirit of Washbrook's interest in history from below. The sirdar's role in India has been examined by others in great depth. Here Bates and Carter give us a rich exploration of the role of the sirdar beyond India's shores, looking at how they recruited workers, facilitated their transport, and supervised and represented them in the plantations of Mauritius. Bates and Carter conclude their article with reflections on the long history of such intermediaries in India. Even today, campaigns are waged against the corruption of such figures. 'Time and again this discourse concerns itself with getting rid of the "fixers" and "sleazy" or "tyrannical" middlemen,' Bates and Carter write, as they deploy transnational sources to question this familiar stereotype. Chatterji is also concerned with migration, but asks a question that has not been posed before. Why did some people—'stayers-on' Chatterji calls them—not move, despite 'violence, impoverishment and social boycott'? Chatterji's answer is novel and complex, suggesting a mixture of 'deficits', which inhibit mobility, and 'overabundant' social obligations, which tie down some people to places we might expect them to want to leave.

Washbrook's next phase as a historian inspires our second set of articles. In the early 1980s, he shifted his focus from colonial India to the 'long' eighteenth century. Historians have acknowledged for some time that this was a crucial phase in modern India's history—see, for example, Eric Stokes' classic article, 'The first century of British colonial rule'[5]— but for almost as long, they have neglected it. Washbrook, along with Christopher Bayly and Frank Perlin, reinvigorated the study of this period, and their pioneering work played a major role in several of the key debates that took place on the nature of the pre-colonial Indian order, the origins of British rule, and its impact.

Washbrook's answers to these questions were presented most forcefully in a 1988 essay, also published in this journal, 'Progress and problems: South Asian economic and social history *c.*1720–1860'.[6] Washbrook argued that eighteenth-century India developed a form of capitalism; that modernity in India was, in important respects, a capitalist phenomenon; and that 'in a certain sense, colonialism was the logical outcome of South Asia's own history of capitalist development'.

In this volume, Samira Sheikh develops this theme, and the provocative insights to which it has led, but from an unfamiliar angle. She explores the workings of capitalism in early nineteenth-century Gujarat through the career of Jibhabhu, an enterprising widow from a family 'firm', whose business was collecting land revenue. In western India, Sheikh shows, this class of financiers was put out of business once the English East India Company consolidated its power in the region. Sheikh writes: 'In 1772 the British needed Lallubhai [Jibhabhu's husband] to help them set up shop and were willing to grant him what he asked for. By 1807, the firm's services were a necessary but temporary evil... Left vulnerable by the new state's emphasis on profit and lacking the gender, caste, or community resources that might have allowed her to turn her landholdings into heritable princely status, Jibhabhu faded from view after 1810.' The 'capitalists' of western India, seen as essential during the rise and consolidation of Company power, were tossed aside when they were no longer needed.

David Ludden, in his contribution to this special issue, looks at the same period, but in eastern India. Drawing again upon Washbrook's

[5] Eric Stokes, 'The first century of British colonial rule in India: social revolution or social stagnation?', *Past and Present*, 58, 1973, pp. 136–60.

[6] D. A. Washbrook, 'Progress and problems: South Asian economic and social history c.1720–1860', *Modern Asian Studies*, 22(1) 1988, pp. 57–96.

concept of country politics, which illuminated the links between agrarian environment and political economy, Ludden examines the transition to British rule in Sylhet in northern Bengal (later Assam). In Sylhet, a frontier area, the British priority was agrarian expansion in order to raise more revenue for the Company state. However, the low-lying lands in the region were prone to flooding, which led to moves to the highlands, where land grabs displaced and dispossessed the Khasia who inhabited these hills. Powerful Sylhet families, with the wherewithal to finance agricultural expansion and pay their cut in revenues to the British, benefited from this; allied with the British, they established their domination in areas where previously they had been excluded. In the process, Ludden argues, they established the northern boundary of Bengal.

In his analysis of the impact of early British rule in the Godavari district of South India, Jon Wilson argues for a singular definition of modernity. The modern state everywhere in the world, according to Wilson, was a hybrid of central authority and local power. In Godavari, however, the East India Company state 'disavowed and suppressed' local elements as 'archaic', in a process that crippled the state's administrative capacity and led to social and economic breakdown. The great famine of 1832–33 in the district was the most conspicuous manifestation of this political failure—between 1821 and 1842 the population of the district fell from 738,000 to 561,000 due to famine-related deaths and out-migration—but military security, water control, and agricultural productivity also suffered as a consequence of the Company's measures.

The first century of British rule in India is also the subject of Claude Markovits's contribution. It draws inspiration from another classic essay by Washbrook, 'The Indian economy and the British empire'.[7] While that essay focused on the high noon of British rule, Markovits pushes its insights back in time to argue that even in the Company period, India contributed significantly to the geopolitical demands of Britain's global empire. Indian troops were dispatched around the Indian Ocean and beyond—even reaching Egypt in the west and China in the east—in defence of British interests, from the Seven Years' War to the second Opium War of the late 1850s. Markovits notes that this deployment of the Company army was not without its critics, facing

[7] David Washbrook, 'The Indian economy and the British empire' in Douglas M. Peers and Nandini Gooptu (eds), *India and the British Empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

resistance from Indians, particularly labourers who were capable of mounting opposition to draconian treatment, but also from capitalists, who withheld funds to support Company undertakings after what, in retrospect, looks like a honeymoon phase in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

'The Indian economy and the British empire' was part of Washbrook's 'global turn'. This had actually begun a good 20 years before, with a critique of Immanuel Wallerstein's treatment of South Asia in his world system framework, published in *The Journal of Asian Studies*.[8] This engagement with global history deepened in subsequent years, and with it, a reciprocal enthusiasm for such approaches among a growing number of historians. As a member of the Global Economic History Network centred at the London School of Economics, in the early 2000s Washbrook contributed articles to the *Journal of Global History* as well as important edited collections.

In these writings Washbrook sought to show, first, that the history of India had to be seen within a larger framework, from the Indian Ocean to the world; second, that India was a key location for a number of global developments and institutions, not least the British empire; and, finally, that the path taken by the Indian economy had to be understood in light of other regions of the world. (Recall that Washbrook began his classic article on law with references to R. H. Tawney's *Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century* and E. P. Thompson's *Whigs and Hunters*, both of which showed how legal ideas and institutions could illuminate crucial aspects of social history.[9])

The final two articles that make up this issue in honour of David Washbrook build upon his 'global turn'. Christopher Baker, who early in his career was Washbrook's comrade-in arms in their combined assault on the politics of South India, switched his scholarly focus to Southeast Asia a number of years ago. Baker's contribution, co-authored with Pasuk Phongpaichit, is a compellingly argued exploration of why the rural economy appears to have been missing in early-modern Siam. They argue that because of its very high productivity, especially in comparison to other grains such as wheat or millets, rice could be grown in sufficient quantities

[8] David Washbrook, 'South Asia, the world system, and world capitalism', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 49(3) 1990, pp. 479–508.

[9] R. H. Tawney, *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century*, New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1912, and E. P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1975.

by 'part-time' or seasonal agriculturalists, whose lives were mainly based in urban areas. From the vantage point of Siam, Baker and Phongpaichit present a fascinating counterpoint to the organization of rice agriculture in South India, where, in stark contrast, rice production gave rise to a dense network of rural settlements and relatively small and few urban centres.

In their contribution, Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam move away from European and Ottoman sources to understand the world of the western Indian Ocean. In a call to historians to explore sources in other languages, they draw our attention to a little-used Arabic chronicle of Mecca to explore relations between Gujarat and the Red Sea in the early sixteenth century. This remarkable text reveals a dense network of connections hitherto little understood. Alam and Subrahmanyam conclude that 'a strong and quite regular political, commercial, and intellectual link existed between the Gujarat sultanate and Mecca, and that mercantile traffic between the Red Sea and the Gujarat ports (Cambay and Diu) was kept alive between the 1510s and 1530s by a number of participants both from South and West Asia, ranging from smaller individual entrepreneurs to the Gujarat sultans themselves'. They point to the new and important perspectives gained by casting the net wider to find other sources which throw light on the origin and nature of early modernity.

Any discussion of David Washbrook's contributions to history would be incomplete without mention of his flair for critique and taste for polemic. This was evident in a debate between Washbrook and Rosalind O'Hanlon, on the one hand, and Gyan Prakash, on the other, conducted in the pages of *Comparative Studies in Society and History*.[10] The subject was a big one: post-structuralism and the writing of history. Washbrook followed this up with an acid critique of colonial discourse theory and a forceful defence of a dialogic alternative in the *Oxford History of the British Empire*.[11] Alas, this special issue does not contain any comparable piece of polemic, but we direct interested readers to Washbrook's own, and delightfully caustic, writings.

[10] Rosalind O'Hanlon and David Washbrook, 'After Orientalism: culture, criticism, and politics in the Third World', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 34(1) 1992, pp. 141–67, and Gyan Prakash, 'Can the subaltern ride? A reply to O'Hanlon and Washbrook', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 34(1) 1992, pp. 168–84.

[11] D. A. Washbrook, 'India, 1818–1914: the two faces of colonialism' in Andrew Porter (ed.), *Oxford History of the British Empire, Vol. 3: The Nineteenth Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

The articles in this special issue look back to the work of David Washbrook for inspiration, but they look forward at the same time to new orientations in the economic and social history of Asia. In the last decade and a half, the rise of global history has given prominence to the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia, China, India, and other regions of Asia. Global historians have had success in decentring Europe, arguing for alternative trajectories of development, as did Washbrook himself. With their rethinking of the 'missing' rural economy of Siam, Baker and Phongpaichit form part of this important change in perspective. In their contribution, Alam and Subrahmanyam point to an important problem in global history, the neglect, relatively speaking, of non-European sources. The transcendence of Eurocentrism will require not only new frameworks but new sources.

The revival of interest in economic and social history in the last decade has meant the return to the forefront of familiar themes—above all, inequality, whether along the lines of gender, class or status. But they are now revivified by the 'cultural turn'. O'Hanlon's insistence on the importance of 'bodily comportment' for understandings of caste, for instance, owes much to the work of cultural historians. So too does Sheikh's attention to the perquisites of 'capitalist' status, such as palanquins, attendants, titles, and presentations of grain, yarn, and ghee, which she labels the 'performativity of tributes and gifts'.

Other themes are perhaps less familiar. Chatterji, for instance, draws upon the study of networks (with their origins in mathematics and computer science, and powerful spread to the natural and social sciences) to formulate a notion of 'network poverty' to explain why some people are immobile in a highly mobile world. She draws attention, too, to the fragility of networks: an insight that may prove to have traction of its own in a deglobalizing world. Other articles in this special issue open up new frameworks: Parthasarathi argues for a socially informed environmental history as he connects shifts in water regimes to the crisis of famine in late nineteenth-century South India. Such blending of environmental and other forms of history is likely to become the norm as we enter a new global era shaped by anthropogenic climate change.

We offer this Festschrift volume to continue to acknowledge, with gratitude, David Washbrook's contribution, in the certainty that he will be at the forefront of opening up new frameworks for the writing of economic and social history, as he has been for 40 years and more.