

Company of Kinsmen: Enterprise and community in South Asian history 1700-1940

The book narrates how cooperative communities of merchants, bankers, peasants, workers, and artisans contributed to economic change in India in the last three centuries, and why they survived to the present day.

Communities form, among other reasons, to serve economic interests. One of these is to regulate access to shared assets, such as capital, skill, land, trade secret, or jobs, by making members follow rules that protect these assets from encroachment.

The book shows that, from the eighteenth century in India, changing conditions made these rules unstable.

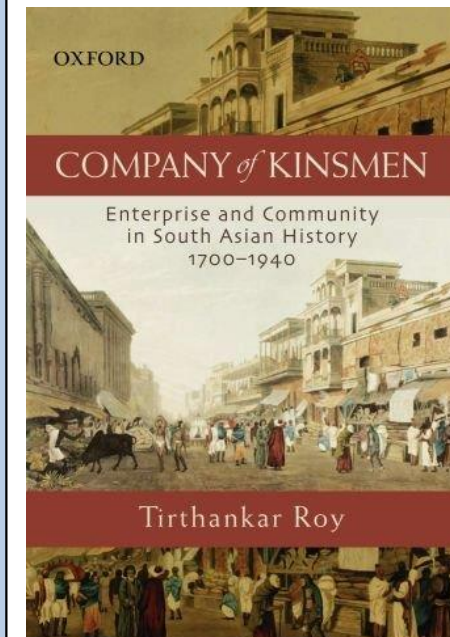
The story contains three propositions.

First, the internal cohesion of communities had owed less to caste or religion and more to the politics of law, that is, the role of the king as guarantor of juridical autonomy of professional groups. The British colonial state made this guarantee weaker than before by creating courts where the juridical autonomy of the community could be tested and challenged.

Second, new (European) actors who did not share local tradition made community rules sometimes unworkable and disputatious.

Do we then see dissolution of communities? We do not. And here comes the third proposition.

Strengthening collective bond was one of the strategies that individuals adopted when entering unknown forms of enterprise, or transacting with unknown people. The outcome, then, was a presence of opposite tendencies, which explains why communities survived to the present day while battling challenges from within and without.



.. a real tour de force
Claude Markovits,
Economic History
Review