Exploitation has been a preponderant theme in works dealing with colonialism.\(^1\) And historical analyses of British Colonialism in India are no exception. The thrust of most of the works in this genre is that the colonial government consciously and deliberately pursued policies and programmes directed towards exploiting the resources of the subject country for the benefit of the metropolitan power, in a way that had disastrous consequences for the economy and polity of the colony. The ‘mystic bond of racial affinity’ among the top echelons of the ruling bureaucracy did the rest.\(^2\) Originating with the writings of an influential group of publicists during the last quarter of the 19th century, this line of reasoning received emphatic support from nationalist leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru during India’s freedom movement.\(^3\) However, most of the authentic works pursuing this approach came out during the first two decades of Independence, investigating it with a measure of near finality.

\(^1\) An earlier version of this paper was presented at the XI International Economic History Congress in Milan in 1994 and published in *Developing Economies*, 34:1 (March 1996).

\(^2\) Perhaps the most prestigious of the works in this category are B. Chandra, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India* (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1966); and A. K. Bagchi, *Private Investment in India*, 1900–1939 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972). The quote, originally from a 1944 position paper of the All-India Manufacturers’ Organization, is approvingly included in Bagchi 1972:166. Also see Bipan Chandra’s T. Raychaudhuri’s and Toru Matsui’s essays in *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 5:1 (March 1968) discussing M. D. Morris, *Towards a Reinterpretation of Nineteenth Century Indian Economic History,* appearing in the same issue, which is less hostile to the colonial regime.

Almost as a rule, these works have concentrated on what the colonizers did—or did not do. It seems to me, however, that looking at the other side of the coin, i.e. how the colonized viewed the institutions and instrumentalities of the colonizer, may unfold some crucial dimensions of colonialism that the exploitation paradigm alone may remain oblivious to. The purpose of this paper is to open up this line of enquiry through an analysis of the choice of technologies by Indian promoters of modern industries for their industrial ventures during the colonial times.

The Textile Producers

Our discussion must start off with the cotton textile industry because this field was a challenge for Indian entrepreneurship at the first stage of the country’s industrialization. Overcoming heavy odds—an indifferent and sometimes even hostile government, deficient labour supply, and practically no experience in setting up or managing modern industrial ventures—the Indians developed an industry that was almost an exclusive preserve of Manchester, which never looked kindly at the prospects of rising competition from a colony. While the management structure and ownership pattern of the Indian mills bore no resemblance whatsoever to those of the British textile companies, the manufacturing system was an exact replica of Manchester’s. This was not only true of the technology—spinning and weaving machinery was of the same type—but it was also true of the physical layout of the premises and arrangement of the facilities which were similar to those in Manchester. During the early years of the industry, when no alternative had yet been developed, this was understandable. But even subsequently when mechanical devices were available that were more compatible with the Indian conditions, the Indians, by and large, continued to patronize the technology that the British manufacturers favoured.

Perhaps the most telling example is that of the persistence of the mule spindle in Indian cotton mills. Developed first in 1779 in Great Britain, it had become, as a result of subsequent improvements, the most favoured spinning technology throughout the world by the time India launched its textile industry in the mid-1850s. Although technological experts in the United States had been experimenting with a new device, the ring spindle, since the 1830s, this still suffered from many technical limitations and had not yet come in general use even in the