

Politicizing Decline: Reformist Approaches to Indian Cash-Crop Production, 1835-1875

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By excavating debates that preoccupied members of the India Reform Society and East India Association, this chapter will illustrate how the promotion of development schemes could serve as a form of political censure. In doing so, it will qualify historical accounts of the rise of the Indian cotton export trade that have emphasized the role of a collusive, corporatist colonial state. Abolitionists and reformers in the early Victorian era were eager to encourage free-labor cultivation of Indian cotton and cash crops, but it soon became apparent that infrastructural improvement was only one component in a much grander project of tariff reform, land revenue revision, and European settlement. The difficulty of affixing responsibility for economic policy lingered; in the protests against fiscal oppression staged in the East India Company's Court of Proprietors, reformist stockholders denounced the prejudicial tariffs that inhibited the export of Indian manufactures and produce alike. India, they declared, should receive the commercial benefits of the Crown colonies rather than being classified as a foreign nation. The nascent sugarcane industry, in particular, would benefit from an equalization of duties, thereby providing former native artisans with an alternative mode of employment.

Throughout the mid-nineteenth century, the interests of the India reform community could align with those of the cotton lords of Lancashire, but their political objectives were not typically coterminous. Beyond their desire for a cheap, stable source of cotton, many mill owners were not overly concerned with the specific trajectory of India's economic development. Reformers recognized that mercantilist policies had long destabilized India's manufacturing sector; Manchester interests had seemingly violated their own free trade principles by demanding the imposition of discriminatory tariffs and governmental intervention in Indian markets. Despite this inconsistency, reformers entered into a fair weather alliance with the manufactures to shore up their own political capital. By the mid-1860s, however, it was clear that Manchester's apolitical lobbyists would not soon evolve into the agents of imperial oversight that some reformers envisioned.