



Everyday Technology: Machines and the Making of India's Modernity (science.culture)

By David Arnold

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In 1909 Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, on his way back to South Africa from London, wrote his now celebrated tract *Hind Swaraj*, laying out his vision for the future of India and famously rejecting the technological innovations of Western civilization. Despite his protestations, Western technology endured and helped to make India one of the leading economies in our globalized world. Few would question the dominant role that technology plays in modern life, but to fully understand how India first advanced into technological modernity, argues David Arnold, we must consider the technology of the everyday.

Everyday Technology is a pioneering account of how small machines and consumer goods that originated in Europe and North America became objects of everyday use in India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Rather than investigate “big” technologies such as railways and irrigation projects, Arnold examines the assimilation and appropriation of bicycles, rice mills, sewing machines, and typewriters in India, and follows their impact on the ways in which people worked and traveled, the clothes they wore, and the kind of food they ate. But the effects of these machines were not limited to the daily rituals of Indian society, and Arnold demonstrates how such small-scale technologies became integral to new ways of thinking about class, race, and gender, as well as about the politics of colonial rule and Indian nationhood.

Arnold’s fascinating book offers new perspectives on the globalization of modern technologies and shows us that to truly understand what modernity became, we need to look at the everyday experiences of people in all walks of life, taking stock of how they repurposed small technologies to reinvent their world and themselves.

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Editorial Review

Review

“*Everyday Technology* organizes an enormous amount of unfamiliar detail on a hitherto largely neglected subject, reinforced with copious statistics and illustrated with some appealing historical and contemporary images. It is enlivened by apt quotations from novels and films of the period.”

(Andrew Robinson *Nature*)

“Fascinating.”

(V. V. Raman, Rochester Institute of Technology *Choice*)

“In this fascinating study, David Arnold casts his eye over a range of much smaller and humbler machines which, nonetheless, have transformed the “everyday” lives of the people using them. He explores the histories of the bicycle, the sewing machine, the typewriter, the gramophone and the rice mill in the context of colonial India.”

(*Times Literary Supplement*)

“Arnold paints a detailed and informative picture of the diffusion and adoption of four ‘small’ technologies embodied in the sewing machine, the bicycle, the typewriter, and the rice mill. Given the smaller size and scope of these goods, and the uses that they were put to, the author’s narrative does not remain mired in the sterile world of officialdom. Instead, he is incessantly led, by the very nature of the task at hand, into the homes, offices, and streets of colonial India; into the life and world of the common man. This focus on the subaltern world, far away from the centers of power, and the author’s masterful rendition of it in lucid prose, is one of the highlights of the book. . . . An interesting and informative work that all students of Indian economic history can read with both profit and pleasure. . . . Arnold’s book is bound to provide an enlightening glimpse into the lives of the common man and his relationship with technology during the later years of British rule in India.”

(G. P. Manish, Troy University *EH.Net*)

“Exploring small technologies that swiftly passed into the realm of everyday life in India, David Arnold’s remarkable book offers nothing less than a new perspective on technology and modernity. Clear, insightful, and compelling from start to finish, *Everyday Technology* uses the sewing machine, typewriter, bicycle, and rice mill to offer us a history of the ‘subaltern engagement with the machine’ that brings to life the ways that ordinary people wove such new technologies into their everyday existence under conditions of colonialism. Arnold’s attention to the small allows a street-level view of the relationships between technology and race, gender, class, and authority. His focus on ordinary technologies in ordinary life paradoxically provides a deeper understanding of the profundity of the social and technological transformations taking place, adding texture to our understanding of the character and emergence of technological modernities in the twentieth century.”

(Suzanne Moon, University of Oklahoma)

“In an age that has been captivated by the potential and perils of the large-scale, fossil fuel–driven technologies of the industrial watershed, David Arnold reminds us of the pervasive impact of more modest but nonetheless ingenious machines. Drawing on a diverse range of sources and compelling case examples, he explores the transformative effects of small-scale technologies, including bicycles and sewing machines,

on the politics, production, social relations, and everyday lives of the peoples of India—and implicitly those of most of humanity over the past half millennium.”

(Michael Adas, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey)

“David Arnold’s brilliant and imaginative history of everyday technology effectively refashions the very story of India’s modernity. The ubiquitous bicycle, the once-popular mechanical sewing machine, the still extant typewriter, and the rice mill that straddles rural-urban divides have all found their historian in the author of *Colonizing the Body*. Arnold has, once again, broken new ground in South Asian history.”

(Dipesh Chakrabarty, University of Chicago)

“*Everyday Technology* is a lucid, engaging work on acculturation of modern technology in India. Rather than focusing on the usual ‘big’ projects such as railways and hydroelectric plants that require large capital investment, David Arnold takes on the ‘small’ technologies of modern life that changed the everyday lives of millions of Indians. He thus shifts the focus on agency in the history of technology: from inventors to adapters and users, and from an emphasis on how the imperial West viewed its technological other to how India ‘imagined itself.’ Arnold’s erudition and imagination will be attractive to both scholars and lay audiences.”

(Swati Chattopadhyay, University of California, Santa Barbara)

About the Author

David Arnold is professor emeritus of Asian and global history in the Department of History at the University of Warwick. Among his numerous works are *Science, Technology and Medicine in Colonial India; Gandhi; and The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze: India, Landscape, and Science, 1800–1856*.

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