

Patterns that endure

THE WEALTH NETWORKS: HOW ROADS, RIVERS AND SEAS SHAPED INDIA

By Akshay Chavan,
Penguin Business, ₹999

History, Akshay Chavan asserts, not only repeats itself but also follows patterns. In this book, he traces anew the intricate patterns of networks and nodes that have defined India's ancient and colonial histories, inevitably through trade, conquest and ensuing cultural exchanges. Chavan seeks to invert dominant narratives by highlighting trading caravans and merchant ships instead of kings and their reigns and recounting the subcontinent's history from its peninsular tracts before traversing northwards. This reasserts focus on the commodities themselves — what went out or flowed into each region and the transport modes and routes that governed their distribution, dictated prices and, eventually, fostered great cities and cultural edifices from initial humble crossover or break-of-bulk points. The Deccan and southern India are thus accorded greater focus, given that from early Arabs to latter-day Europeans, everyone traded first along its shores, thereby counteracting the apparent hegemony that realms north of the Vindhayas have garnered in India's historical narratives.

Chavan commences by posing simple queries — why were grand monuments like Khajuraho or Ajanta built in remote places? What were the reasons behind the geographical spread of a certain community's diaspora or the sites chosen for cities and forts by rulers? — and ties these inevi-

tably to the flow of goods, labour and wealth along existing trading routes. He divides the subcontinent into 15 networks and their constituent nodes based on an individualistic mix of terrain, soil, climatic regimes, mineral wealth and water resources, which, combined with political power, furthered the production of regionally unique goods for consumption and trade. From Patna's saltpetre to Golconda's diamonds, and the Occident's desire for Calicut's pepper and the Deccan's cotton, numerous examples are parsed apart and discussed through entwined strands, much like the Bengal delta's great riverine trading networks through which outflowed indigo, opium and tea.

Religion, as a driving factor of economic base creation, is illustrated through temple towns where devotion and pilgrimage concentrated learning, capital and creativity. India's global pre-eminence during this period is denoted through links like Chennai with Acapulco, Kutch with Zanzibar, and Calicut to Cairo. Chavan provides an authoritative account that chronologically and cartographically pieces together the subcontinent's economic history, underpinned by its vast and diverse geography, waves of conquests and phases of cultural re-making, linked by continuous movement of goods and people, both indigenous and foreign. The distinct influences of climate and topography are highlighted succinctly, although the book stops short of ascribing the manifest patterns to environmental determinism or the Marxian view of an economic base governing political superstructures. Instead, it espouses the untiring human endeavour that



A Deccani cotton mill

has continued to feed materialistic demand and supply chains and striven for innovations through the ages to not only meet basic needs but also satisfy the enduring want for commodities of beauty and luxury.

Engaging and erudite, the book is an insightful lens for understanding India's historical intra-regional and country-wide economic geographies whose surmises remain valid today, being still governed largely by geomorphology, weather and political compulsions. Chavan reasserts how geographical inertia of economic activities has promoted specialisation and creation of goods of high value: the proclamations and disputes between states over geographical indication tags are an ample reminder of this. With several photographs, maps and sketches, the book can serve academicians as well as those curious about India's historical regional ethnicities, cultures, economic strengths and societal disparities. In a country being linked by high-speed transit corridors across industrial hubs and special economic zones, this book is a reminder of how these modern wealth nodes and networks are largely renewed manifestations of age-old trading patterns modified by time, technology, transportation modes and environmental changes.

Priyank Patel