

International networks and the birth of aircraft manufacture in India: Hindustan Aircraft Limited, c. 1940-55

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Abstract

This paper will examine the beginnings of aircraft manufacture and maintenance in India through a study of Hindustan Aircraft Limited (est. 1940). Promoted by industrialist Walchand Hirachand, HAL was set up with the help of capital (initially fifty per cent) from the Mysore Government, which also provided land and other facilities for the company's factory in Bangalore. The company, which was acquired by the Government of India soon afterwards, played a crucial role in the assembly and repair of fighter planes during World War II, and its successor company continues to be India's premier producer of military aircraft. There is as yet no detailed historical study that examines the founding and development of Hindustan Aircraft, although the broad timeline of events in the company's early years has been described in passing by historians of science and business in India. They have tended to see HAL primarily as an instance of colonial imperatives subjugating indigenous entrepreneurship and skill. This is in line with the larger historiography, which often sees science and technology (S&T) in India as being either 'colonial' or 'nationalist'. However, recent work has begun to emphasize the need to understand Indian S&T as an integral part of broader, often extra-imperial, networks. This paper will further develop this historiographical approach using archival material, government publications, published biographies, and the aeronautical press. The plant in Bangalore was commissioned by a team of American engineers under W.D. Pawley, who would arrange for manufacturing licences, machinery and materials through his American company, Intercontinent Corporation. These American experts supervised a team of Indian engineers and technicians; the factory was run by the US Army during the latter years of the war. The paper will argue that while Walchand's entrepreneurial efforts were no doubt vital to HAL's founding, the colonial government's position was not entirely uncooperative; indeed its response was a far more layered one that depended on political considerations and the exigencies of wartime. Nevertheless, other actors did play a key role. An examination of the training and recruitment of technical experts of HAL shows that at a time when colonial institutions were still geared primarily towards teaching civil engineering, American collaboration, Indian capital, the policies of the princely state of Mysore (and even, after Independence, German expertise) played an important role in the birth of the aeronautical industry in India.

Speaker Profile

A historian of science, technology and industry in South Asia, Dr Aparajith Ramnath is an Assistant Professor in Humanities and Liberal Arts at IIM Kozhikode. Aparajith has been an integral part of the effort to introduce business history into the management curriculum at IIMK, where he teaches the history of Indian business and the global history of industrialisation. Aparajith has a Bachelor's degree in electrical engineering from BITS Pilani and graduate degrees in the history of science, medicine and technology from Oxford University and Imperial College London. His monograph, *The Birth of an Indian Profession: Engineers, Industry and the State, 1900-47*, is currently under review. Aparajith is currently an International Scholar of the Society for the History of Technology.