

THE NEW CAMBRIDGE HISTORY
OF INDIA

*Indian society and the making of
the British Empire*

THE NEW CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF INDIA

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Although the original *Cambridge History of India*, published between 1922 and 1937, did much to formulate a chronology for Indian history and describe the administrative structures of government in India, it has inevitably been overtaken by the mass of new research published over the last fifty years.

Designed to take full account of recent scholarship and changing conceptions of South Asia's historical development, *The New Cambridge History of India* will be published as a series of short, self-contained volumes, each dealing with a separate theme and written by a single person. Within an overall four-part structure, thirty-one complementary volumes in uniform format will be published. As before, each will conclude with a substantial bibliographical essay designed to lead non-specialists further into the literature.

The four parts planned are as follows:

- I The Mughals and their contemporaries
- II Indian states and the transition to colonialism
- III The Indian Empire and the beginnings of modern society
- IV The evolution of contemporary South Asia

A list of individual titles in preparation will be found at the end of the volume.



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II · 1

*Indian society and the making of
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CONTENTS

<i>List of maps</i>	vi
<i>General editor's preface</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
Introduction	I
1 India in the eighteenth century. The formation of states and social groups	7
2 Indian capital and the emergence of colonial society	45
3 The crisis of the Indian state, 1780–1820	79
4 The consolidation and failure of the East India Company's state, 1818–57	106
5 Peasant and Brahmin: consolidating 'traditional' society	136
6 Rebellion and reconstruction	169
Conclusion. The first age of colonialism in India	200
<i>Glossary of Indian terms</i>	207
<i>Bibliographical essay</i>	212
<i>Index</i>	224

MAPS

1 India under the later Mughals	17
2 British expansion: north India, 1750–1860	52
3 South India: physical and towns	54
4 British expansion: south India, 1750–1820	88
5 British India: economic and social	137

GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

The New Cambridge History of India covers the period from the beginning of the sixteenth century. In some respects it marks a radical change in the style of Cambridge Histories, but in others the editors feel that they are working firmly within an established academic tradition.

During the summer of 1896, F. W. Maitland and Lord Acton between them evolved the idea for a comprehensive modern history. By the end of the year the Syndics of the University Press had committed themselves to the *Cambridge Modern History*, and Lord Acton had been put in charge of it. It was hoped that publication would begin in 1899 and be completed by 1904, but the first volume in fact came out in 1902 and the last in 1910, with additional volumes of tables and maps in 1911 and 1912.

The *History* was a great success, and it was followed by a whole series of distinctive Cambridge Histories covering English Literature, the Ancient World, India, British Foreign Policy, Economic History, Medieval History, the British Empire, Africa, China and Latin America; and even now other new series are being prepared. Indeed, the various Histories have given the Press notable strength in the publication of general reference books in the arts and social sciences.

What has made the Cambridge Histories so distinctive is that they have never been simply dictionaries or encyclopedias. The Histories have, in H. A. L. Fisher's words, always been 'written by an army of specialists concentrating the latest results of special study'. Yet as Acton agreed with the Syndics in 1896, they have not been mere compilations of existing material but original works. Undoubtedly many of the Histories are uneven in quality, some have become out of date very rapidly, but their virtue has been that they have consistently done more than simply record an existing state of knowledge: they have tended to focus interest on research and they have provided a massive stimulus to further work. This has made their publication doubly worthwhile and has distinguished them intellectually from other sorts of reference book. The editors of the *New Cambridge History of India* have acknowledged this in their work.

GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

The original *Cambridge History of India* was published between 1922 and 1937. It was planned in six volumes, but of these, volume 2 dealing with the period between the first century A.D. and the Muslim invasion of India never appeared. Some of the material is still of value, but in many respects it is now out of date. The last fifty years have seen a great deal of new research on India, and a striking feature of recent work has been to cast doubt on the validity of the quite arbitrary chronological and categorical way in which Indian history has been conventionally divided.

The editors decided that it would not be academically desirable to prepare a new *History of India* using the traditional format. The selective nature of research on Indian history over the past half-century would doom such a project from the start and the whole of Indian history could not be covered in an even or comprehensive manner. They concluded that the best scheme would be to have a *History* divided into four overlapping chronological volumes, each containing about eight short books on individual themes or subjects. Although in extent the work will therefore be equivalent to a dozen massive tomes of the traditional sort, in form the *New Cambridge History of India* will appear as a shelf full of separate but complementary parts. Accordingly, the main divisions are between I. *The Mughals and their Contemporaries*, II. *Indian States and the Transition to Colonialism*, III. *The Indian Empire and the Beginnings of Modern Society*, and IV. *The Evolution of Contemporary South Asia*.

Just as the books within these volumes are complementary so too do they intersect with each other, both thematically and chronologically. As the books appear they are intended to give a view of the subject as it now stands and to act as a stimulus to further research. We do not expect the *New Cambridge History of India* to be the last word on the subject but an essential voice in the continuing discourse about it.

PREFACE

The aim of this work is rather different from that of earlier Cambridge *Histories*, including the old *Cambridge History of India*, v (1929) and the more recent *Cambridge Economic History of India*, 2 vols (1982 and 1983). All these works attempted to one degree or another to be ‘authoritative’, ‘definitive’ or at the very least, to provide a good deal of basic factual material. This volume cannot hope to do that in view of its length and the complexity of the subject. Besides, the notion of a Western history seeking to be authoritative, in some sense to master India, has become a little dubious. Rather, this should be seen as an attempt to provide a single author’s synthesis of some of the more important work and themes which have appeared in historical studies of India, written in the subcontinent and outside, over the last twenty years. As such the book is partial, argumentative and thematic, rather than exhaustive, balanced and chronological.

The book deliberately deals with some episodes and types of history which were the staple of the older volumes, notably the conquests in India under Lord Wellesley and the Rebellion of 1857. This is because history cannot be written without the history of events, and because however subtly refracting are the mirrors through which area specialists now see India, these events remain critical to non-specialist understanding of the subcontinent, and indeed of world history. At the same time some current specialist themes, ecological change and the nature of resistance, for instance, have received attention because they demand some treatment at an all-India level. Other subjects, the history of the poor, of changes in the micro-economy of the districts, of specific policies implemented by provincial colonial governments: these are better tackled by the regional and thematic volumes which will appear in this series.

Much of the historical writing on India since 1960 has been a persuasive attempt to argue the importance of regionalism: political, economic and cultural. This volume notes regional differences as far as possible, but attempts to draw themes together at an all-India level. This is not because the powerful case for different regional histories

PREFACE

has been ignored, simply that most regional and local studies assume the existence of processes working at a broader level, and if only for heuristic reasons these should be considered in their own right.

For the same reason I have not hesitated to use terms such as 'capitalist', 'class', 'class formation', 'bureaucracy', 'aristocracy' and 'gentry' in my analysis. This is because I consider, firstly, that there were indigenous concepts and understandings of the social order which very closely approximated to these Western terms, though of course, one must always bear in mind the uniqueness of Indian cultural and social forms. There are dangers in glib comparison, but on the other side excessive Orientalist purism has done little except make India seem peculiar to the outside world. These terms are also employed because general changes in India's and the world's economy and governance during the period considered here were, in fact, bringing into being social groups and relationships which were similar to those of contemporary western Europe. These groups and relationships never lost their specifically Indian character but they are nevertheless amenable to comparison at an international level.

I have used the less 'corrupt' Anglo-Indian forms of Indian place-names and personal names used by the early twentieth-century literature. Poona is English for Pune, and Ganges for Ganga, as surely as Munich is for München and Florence for Firenze. On the other hand, I have not suppressed Indian names and terms simply to make things easy for a Western audience since audiences who read English are no longer overwhelmingly Western. In the old days the British used to like India without Indians and Indian words as they liked France without the French and French words. Those days are gone.

My colleagues will know where in this book their work has been drawn upon, even if they are not directly referred to. I hope that it has not been distorted too much in the process. But some more specific debts must be acknowledged. Among many institutions in India the staff of the Connemara Library, Madras and Professor Mehboob Pasha and the staff of the Muhammadan Public Library, Madras, provided invaluable assistance. I must also acknowledge the help of Sri V.A. Sundaram, I.A.S. Among those who have provided useful criticism are Susan Bayly, Sugata Bose, Raj Chandavarkar, Sunil Chander, Hiram Morgan, David Washbrook and above all Peter Marshall who patiently corrected far too many errors. They are warmly thanked.

PREFACE

Finally, Neil McKendrick, David Fieldhouse and Graeme Rennie helped this project to completion in an indirect, but no less important manner. I am very grateful to them.

C. A. BAYLY

Note on annotation

The policy of the series is to provide bibliographical and reference material in the essay (below, pp. 212–30). However, footnotes and references have been considered appropriate in the case of (a) direct quotations; (b) unpublished material; or (c) less well-known works.

INTRODUCTION

When H. H. Dodwell published his fifth volume of the *Cambridge History of India* in 1929, this book also became the fourth volume of the *Cambridge History of the British Empire*. The aim of the work was to chronicle the conquest of India by British arms and its transformation by British institutions. This must have seemed a very appropriate theme in the years just preceding the Statute of Westminster of 1931, which laid new foundations for the British Empire and Commonwealth. But since that date there has been a considerable change of perspective. Historians working after 1929 have, if anything, emphasised the importance of India to Britain's world rôle in the nineteenth century even more strongly. However, the nature and extent of India's transformation has been vigorously debated from perspectives that would have seemed alien, even offensive to the interwar authors.

The importance of India for Britain's imperial system lay in both the military and economic fields. Seizure of the cash land revenues of India between 1757 and 1818 made it possible for Britain to build up one of the largest European-style standing armies in the world, thus critically augmenting British land forces which were small and logistically backward except for a few years during the final struggle with Napoleon. This Indian army was used in large measure to hold down the subcontinent itself, but after 1790 it was increasingly employed to forward British interests in southern and eastern Asia and the Middle East. More symbolically, the Indian army opened up a second front, as it were, against the other great Eurasian land powers, Russia, the Ottomans, France and Austria. This reinforced the significance of the dominance of the Royal Navy at sea. From its Indian base Britain had already begun to construct informal empires of influence and trade in the Middle East, on the China coast and in East Africa during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. The campaign against the French in Egypt in 1801 and the seizure of the Cape of Good Hope in 1795 and 1806 anticipated at key points the global strategy of Victorian England.

Scarcely less significant was the Indian contribution to Britain's

INTRODUCTION

growing economic power. Though it is unlikely that East Indian fortunes made a critical contribution to the British industrial revolution, Indian raw material exports, notably cotton and opium shipped to Europe and Asia, helped balance Britain's whole Asian trade, while India's revenues were a significant indirect subsidy to the exchequer. True, Asian trade still only represented about 16 per cent of Britain's global trade in 1820. But India was already becoming a fair field for the exports of the key sector of Britain's industrial economy, the textile industry, and a market whose importance was to be greatly increased after the improvement in communications in the 1850s. India also provided cheap raw materials and indentured labour which had begun to open up valuable plantation economies in Sri Lanka, the Caribbean and Mauritius before mid-century.

However, this perspective from the history of the British Empire has come to seem rather restricted since 1929. For the East India Company's conquest and patchy exploitation of India can also be seen more broadly as one of the first and most striking examples of the forging of dependent economic relations between the north European world economy and non-European societies, a process which later engulfed much of the rest of Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Far East. Though its per-capita income was certainly much lower than western Europe's, Asia still remained in 1700 the world's major centre of artisan production and accounted for a huge slice of world trade, consonant with its 70 per cent share of the world's population. Europeans were already important to Asian economies in that they provided much of the silver imports which helped Asia's great kingdoms to expand and develop. But their rôle in internal trade and even in inter-Asian trade remained relatively small. That situation was significantly altered by 1800, and transformed by 1860. By this time Europeans controlled the largest and most valuable parts of inter-Asian trade and Asia's international trade, while also commanding the most valuable parts of her internal economy. The epochal growth of differentials in income between Asians and Europeans that followed the shift of Asian economies from being producers and exporters of artisan products to mere exporters of agricultural raw materials is only now being reversed in parts of East Asia.

All these arguments would have been understood by the authors of 1929, even though they would have given much more weight to the political rather than economic aspects of European dominion in Asia.

INTRODUCTION

Where they would have differed much more from recent historians was in their estimation of the causes of the East India Company's rise to power and the depth and the nature of Britain's transformation of India. The *Cambridge History* starts from the assumption that the centralised Mughal empire was in purely degenerative decline, along with the Indian economy and society. Consequently, the English East India Company was forced to intervene in order to protect its own trade and the political stability of its clients. Now, however, the Mughal empire seems a much less substantial hegemony, its decline a much more complex and ambiguous process, and the society of eighteenth-century India more varied than the stereotype of decline and anarchy which is the unwritten emblem of the authors of 1929.

The crisis of eighteenth-century India now appears to have three distinct aspects. First, there were cumulative indigenous changes reflecting commercialisation, the formation of social groups and political transformation within the subcontinent itself. Secondly, there was the level of the wider crisis of west and south Asia which was signalled by the decline of the great Islamic empires, the Mughals and their contemporaries the Ottomans and the Safavids. Thirdly, there was the massive expansion of European production and trade during the eighteenth century and the development of more aggressive national states in Europe which were indirectly echoed in the more assertive policies of the European companies in India from the 1730s, and notably of the English Company after 1757.

The first and second chapters of this book deal with the Indian aspect of the crisis and concentrate on commercialisation and political change within India itself. One of the interesting revisions which has arisen out of recent studies of the late-Mughal period and the early eighteenth century is the view that the decline of the Mughals resulted in a sense from the very success of their earlier expansion. Local gentry, Hindu and Muslim, prospered in Mughal service or flourished under their loose régime and began to separate themselves off as a more stable landlord element throughout much of northern India. It was not so much impoverished peasants but substantial yeomen and prosperous farmers already drawn into the Mughals' cash and service nexus, who revolted against Delhi in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. Hindu and Jain moneylenders and merchants, who were the oil which worked the expansion of commodity production and the Mughals' taxation systems, easily provided the economic

INTRODUCTION

basis for the local kingdoms and provincial magnates that ultimately supplanted the power of Delhi, or emerged to prominence in areas where the Mughal writ had never run. Commercial growth which had succoured the power of Delhi ultimately eroded it. Commercial men, scribal families and local gentry consolidated their power at the expense of the centre. Many of these elements later provided capital, knowledge and support for the East India Company, thus becoming its uneasy collaborators in the creation of colonial India.

However, these processes of economic change, and the emergence of regional kingdoms in eighteenth-century India were fraught with conflict. Wars between the Mughals and their recalcitrant subalterns damaged trade and production in many areas even if commercialisation and the creation of kingdoms fostered it in others. India's crisis, then, reflected the conflict between many types of military, merchant and political entrepreneur wishing to capitalise on the buoyant trade and production of the Mughal realm. In the early eighteenth century this conflict was supercharged with a wider regional conflict reflecting commercialisation and a crisis of empire throughout the whole central and eastern Islamic world. In 1739 a Persian army invaded India and conquered Delhi. In the 1750s and 1760s Afghans invaded north India, following their harrying of Iran. The military and tribal leaders of these regions had also been drawn into the wider mercantile and political world of the great Islamic empires. Now they too demanded their patrimony in silver, booty and land-control as those older supremacies dissolved.

Yet the third, and widest, level of conflict was associated with the growing power of the Europeans who had for long operated on the fringes of Asian trade and politics. Asia still remained marginal to European trade and world power; until 1820 the Caribbean and the Americas were vastly more important. Yet the increase of European, and especially British trading activity and commercial power had already transferred much of the most valuable areas of inter-Asian trade into British ships before 1750. Burgeoning private trade and the ruthless creation of monopolies in tropical produce by the East India Companies had bitten deep into the wealth of coastal India by the 1780s. To begin with, as the second chapter of this book shows, Europeans working in India were dependent on the support of Indian commercial groups which had augmented their own wealth and influence during the transformation and commercialisation of the late Mughal

INTRODUCTION

empire. In a sense Indian capital and expertise was drawn inexorably into a partnership with the alien invader. But in time the English East India Company began to create its own state using the territorial revenues of Bengal. This fusion of military and commercial power revealed the Europeans achieving on a larger and more ominous scale what Indian local rulers had been doing for the last century. The demands for tribute, the sale of military power for protection and the growth of European inland trade all conspired to erode the foundations of regional and local kingdoms in the subcontinent's interior.

This expansion was a slow, piecemeal penetration using lines of power and flows of commodities and silver which already existed. But two developments transformed the crisis and speeded it up after 1780. These new forces are dealt with in Chapter Three. First, was the change in the ideology and grasp of the state in Europe which accompanied the French revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. The French threat to Britain and its overseas possessions was well understood by Dodwell and his generation. But the matter went deeper. War galvanised the whole taxation and political base of British society. The reaction of gentry and merchant was distantly reflected in the governor-generalship of Wellesley (1798–1805) when the Company went on a general offensive against oriental government in India which was now legitimised by a true imperialist ideology.

Secondly, the stakes in India had been raised by the emergence of more powerful and determined kingdoms in the shape of Mysore in the south and the Marathas in the west. These realms also sought to harness and canalise the buoyant trade and production which had been given play during the expansion of the seventeenth century. Yet, unable to deploy power at sea and restricted to less productive inland tracts of India, these powers withered and were defeated. Nevertheless, their resistance and response forced the British to construct yet more powerful armies and also significantly changed the social and economic face of large parts of inland India. Indians remained, therefore, active agents and not simply passive bystanders and victims in the creation of colonial India.

There were thus many threads of continuity between pre-colonial India and the India of the Company. One thread was commercialisation and the marketing of political power. This had created many of the conditions for the decline of Mughal hegemony and had provided the Europeans with the tools to unlock the wealth of inland India. As

INTRODUCTION

the British sought to tax the subcontinent and also to extract commodities for international trade from her, Indian commercial people continued to underpin the growth of imperium. On the fringes of the colonial state Indian capital, peasant colonists and inferior administrators played a vital part in the subordination of tribal and nomadic peoples and culture to the discipline of production for the market. Indian gentry, now transformed into landlords, and scribal people also supported a political framework within which the conflicts which arose from these social changes could be accommodated. India was made tributary to the capitalist world system, but the dynamism of its deeper social changes and the endemic resistance of its rural leadership helped determine the nature and extent of the subcontinent's tribute. The first chapter therefore begins by considering some general social and political changes which seem to emerge from the complex historical record of late pre-colonial India.

CHAPTER 1

INDIA IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY: THE FORMATION OF STATES AND SOCIAL GROUPS

India in 1700 had a population of some 180 million people, a figure which represented about 20 per cent of the population of the entire world. Over much of this huge land mass from Kashmir in the north to the upland plateau of the Deccan in the south, the Mughal dynasty at Delhi fought to maintain an hegemony which had been consolidated in the second half of the sixteenth century by the Emperor Akbar. In the farther south of the peninsula Hindu warrior chieftains vied for control of villages, many claiming parcels of the authority of the Hindu Vijayanagar kingdom which had faded from the scene in the later sixteenth century.

Under the Emperor Aurangzeb (1658–1707) the Muslim power at Delhi still shook the world. The Emperor remained capable of commanding a remarkable concentration of soldiers and treasure, if only in certain places and during some months of the year. In the 1680s the Mughals had destroyed the last independent Muslim kingdoms of the Deccan. In the following generation they continued to expand. Their lieutenants pushed down to the south-eastern coast and began to demand tribute from the Hindu warrior chiefs of all but the most remote parts of the former Vijayanagar domain. In 1689 they had beaten off the threat from the Hindu Maratha warriors of the western Deccan and had savagely executed their war-leader, Shambaji. In 1700 the Maratha capital, Satara, was taken by the Emperor's siege trains. Even in the north Mughal power was still strong. In 1716 they had suppressed a revolt of Sikh landholders and farmers in the Punjab. By the time of Aurangzeb's death imperial finances were already in disarray, strained to breaking point by the need to maintain constant campaigns throughout the whole subcontinent. After 1712, the imperial centre was immobilised by factional conflicts which culminated in the murder of the Emperor Furrukhsiyar in 1719. Despite this, however, Indian notables and Europeans trading from the ports of the coast still regarded the Mughal emperor as one of the great kings of the world.

The decline of Mughal power over the next century was dramatic. Though historians in the last two generations have begun to ask questions about the nature of the Mughal empire, particularly about the degree to which it ever was a centralised state, there can be no doubt that politics in the subcontinent underwent a significant change. The main problem for the Mughals, even at their height, was the restiveness of the Hindu warriors and peasant farmers, buoyed up with new wealth from trade and military service and harassed by the demands of the Mughal tax-gatherers. Hindu landholders of the warrior Rajput and Jat castes flew into rebellion whenever they sensed the central power was weak. The Marathas, and, later, the Sikhs, recovered from their defeats in the opening years of the eighteenth century. By the 1730s the rich lands of Malwa to the south of Delhi had become subject to the Maratha warriors of the Deccan. Delhi's treasury already suffering shrinking inflows from the Punjab and Awadh was further depleted. So the emperor faced the invasion of the Persian monarch Nadir Shah in 1739 unsure of the loyalty of his own great commanders but certain that the Hindu landholders would 'raise their heads in revolt' as soon as the Shah's armies set foot in Hindustan.

Hereafter the decline of imperial power speeded up. Provincial governors in Awadh, Bengal and the Deccan surreptitiously consolidated their own regional bases of power in the aftermath of the Persian, and later the Afghan, invasions (1759–61). In 1757 the English East India Company seized control of the rich province of Bengal, and in 1759 it rolled up the last vestiges of Mughal influence at Surat on the west coast. After a brief rearguard action in defence of the core area of Delhi the Mughal emperor submitted in 1784 to the 'protection' of the greatest of the Maratha war chiefs, Mahadji Scindia. With the defeat of the Marathas by the British armies of Lord Lake in 1803, Delhi was occupied by the Company, and the Mughal was reduced in European eyes to the status of a pathetic 'tinsel sovereign', surrounded by the emaciated ladies of his harem and chamberlains who maintained the shadow of his authority through the reiteration of court rituals.

The suddenness of the collapse of Mughal power and magnificence astonished European contemporaries and appalled the Muslim poets and learned men for whom the Delhi throne had been an ancient and venerated source of patronage. For many historians of the recent past the twilight of the Mughals and the eighteenth-century 'anarchy' con-

INDIA IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

tinued to be the only important set of events in the history of eighteenth-century India. Yet this perspective, concentrating as it does on Delhi, on the politics of the court and the decline of the Mughal grand army, seems now, for all its drama, not so much wrong as manifestly inadequate as a theme with which to encompass the changes overtaking the subcontinent.

IMPERIAL DECLINE AND THE CONSOLIDATION OF SOCIAL GROUPS

One new perspective has already emerged, though research is still at a very basic stage. The eighteenth century saw not so much the decline of the Mughal ruling élite, but its transformation and the ascent of inferior social groups to overt political power. The great households of the Mughal nobility (called *umara*; generally persons with an official rank: *mansab*) were not a class as such, but they evidently did have considerable influence on the nature of social organisation in Mughal India. Merchant groups, free cavalry soldiers and Hindu administrators all worked within their ambit. Noble households had considerable economic influence; in Bengal they participated in external trade. Elsewhere they sold grain and probably lent money to the non-Muslim commercial communities. In the eighteenth century such households broke up and dispersed alongside their exemplar, the Mughal court, or they were radically transformed. In the early eighteenth century the system of assignments of revenue on which the noble households had subsisted began to break down. Too many new nobles were absorbed into the system as Aurangzeb made his conquests in the south and tried to placate its indigenous nobility. Local revolts cut into the rents and customs dues on which the nobles lived, while the imperial treasury became less and less able to pay cash salaries.

However, other social groups which had long been forming, though politically dwarfed by the Mughal nobility, began to emerge more clearly into the limelight. First, there were the Hindu and Muslim entrepreneurs in revenue – the so-called revenue farmers. These men, often relations of the old nobility, sometimes local princes or simply adventurers, combined military power with expertise in managing cash and local trade. Their households were organised on principles similar to that of the older nobility, but their relationship to the

regional rulers was largely mercenary and contractual. They took a 'farm' of the revenue of a given territory in return for a cash payment to the ruler, and hoped to benefit from the difference between what they had paid and what they could collect. They were not bound by loyalty or by the military ethos which had sustained the mansabdars. Such men attracted condemnation from the more traditional commentators of the period. Yet they were an indication of the fact that the commercial economy survived and even expanded in the eighteenth century, as the scramble for cash revenues and control over production and labour intensified.

Secondly, Indian merchants who were largely Hindus of the 'traditional' commercial castes or Jains appear to have become politically more important in the eighteenth century. The commercial interest had always been crucial in the organisation of the great Mughals' revenue and the trade in agricultural products and artisan goods which sustained it, but had never achieved much political visibility. With the decline of the nobility this situation began to change. Rather than receiving capital from the nobles, big merchant houses now lent money to rulers and nobles. As the Mughal treasury collapsed they became more important in India's capital markets, moving money from one part of the country to another with their credit notes. In this capacity they came into contact with foreign merchants, supplied them with resources, and at the same time benefited from the Europeans' own growing political significance. By the middle of the eighteenth century the indigenous merchant people were a powerful interest in all the major states which had emerged from the decline of the Delhi power. Even in the far south where the Mughals had never had much control, combinations of revenue farmers and local merchants wielded much influence in the politics of the small military kingdoms.

Thirdly, many of the features of the nineteenth-century landed class were consolidated in the eighteenth century. The weakening of Mughal power enabled local gentry to seize privileges which they had once been denied. Zamindars (landholders) began to tax markets and trade and to seize prebendal lands which the Mughal élites had once tried to keep out of their hands. Families of servants of the Mughals and relatives of the old nobility bought up proprietorial rights over land or quietly converted non-hereditary into hereditary rights. To some extent the Mughals were forced to acquiesce in this 'rise of the

gentry' since they needed local support in their battles against the Marathas or Sikhs. But often these insurgent warrior groups themselves attained the rôle of a gentry in their localities, controlling labour and production and carving out effective proprietary rights in land. Strong kinship links at the sub-district (*pargana*) level facilitated their survival in the face of state demands.

In the midst of military conflict and disruption, therefore, the eighteenth century witnessed a significant stage in the formation of the social order of modern India. These developments were themselves the culmination of the slow commercialisation of India under the loose but dynamic Mughal hegemony. Commercialisation meant much more than the slow increase in the use of money in the economy. It meant the use of objective monetary values to express social relationships. Royal 'shares' in produce were expanded creating a need for new markets and financial institutions. Such shares and privileges were increasingly sold on the market. Rents, houses, the proprietary rights of landholders and headmen were more regularly exchanged by sale and mortgage. Statuses and offices were leased and sub-leased. Developments of this sort were also speeded by the growing contacts between India and the European international economy which facilitated commercialisation through imports of bullion and demand for artisan products. The receding tide of Mughal rule, as it were, revealed these slowly consolidating interests in Indian society. Yet at the same time Mughal decline was itself a result of the creation of new wealth and social power in the provinces where it could not easily be controlled by the distant monarch in Delhi. It was, after all, many of the areas and groups which had been most successful in the seventeenth century who revolted against or surreptitiously withdrew from under the Mughal umbrella in the eighteenth. The same areas and groups – Bengal, the commercial communities, the new gentry – in turn became the foundation of the British colonial régime.

How far can these social groups which became more politically powerful in the eighteenth century be considered 'classes', even in the looser sense in which the word is applied to pre-capitalist interests? Certainly, some of the more rigid orientalist interpretations which emphasised the unique and incomparable features of the Indian social scene appear less convincing now. Caste, for instance, was not an immutable 'given' of Indian society. Castes were constantly in the process of formation and change, notably in periods such as the

eighteenth century when political authority was very fluid. Again, Indians of the pre-colonial period certainly possessed categories of social distinction which reflected differences of economic power. In addition to words such as *zamindar* or *raiyat* (agrarian dependent) which reflected legal statuses on the land, there were words such as *bhadralog*, *bhallalog* and *ashraf* in common use in north India and Bengal which implied 'gentry' and comprised notions of landed economic power as well as status. These were terms which at this time were applied to members of different castes and religious communities. So too the term *mahajan* (lit. 'great man') was often applied to merchant people across the lines of caste in the same way as *bakkal* ('grocer') could be a derogatory equivalent. There were also a variety of words which designated a managerial class (*mutsaddi*, *amlah*) and also inferior agrarian interests (for instance, *malik* or agrarian boss).

In addition contemporary writers, amidst their bitter complaints about political decline, seem to be aware of social changes. The Persian chroniclers savage the growing pretensions of *bhumias* or 'little rural potentates'; the rise of low men devoid of proper training in accounts and 'grocers' into positions of trust is denounced. Doubtless there were some such cries of woe in earlier periods of Indo-Islamic history, but perhaps they can be seen to have much greater meaning in a period when the commercial economy and a literate political culture capable of recording rights and power had penetrated so much deeper.

To this extent the interests which come into sharper relief during the 'decline of the Mughals' might be regarded as 'classes' in a loose sense, and the collisions between different groups might be seen as 'class conflict'. Moreover, the form of the post-Mughal state itself across India was very widely determined by the growing power of landlords, literate administrative people and Indian capitalists. As we shall see in Chapter 2 merchant people restricted the authority of the rulers of Bengal and Benares after the second decade of the eighteenth century.

However, contemporaries do not seem to have thought of these shifts primarily in terms of regional or all-India 'classes'. Agrarian magnates sought to establish Jat or Sikh or Maratha kingdoms of righteousness, not landlord power, even if the occasion for their conflicts with the Mughals was often conflicts over revenues or the destination of the agrarian surplus. Merchants and revenue farmers became more influential in the post-Mughal states; kingship became

more commercialised. But the rhetoric and aims of politics remained very much what they had been under the Mughals. These were not Indian varieties of mercantile states. A balance must be struck therefore between emphasising the particular features of Indian tradition, worship and patronage which went into the making of the late Mughal order and the unintended consequences of political and economic changes which were tending to consolidate new types of power across the subcontinent. 'Class formation' would at best be a shorthand, and an inadequate shorthand at that.

VARIETIES OF POWER IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY INDIA

Commercialisation and group formation provide themes which run through the whole period covered by this book. Another such theme, then, is the differentiated and hierarchical nature of power in India which means that localities could sometimes be shielded from changes at a wider level. This theme creates ambiguity and contradictions in historical analysis. But it is important to stress that 'empire' and 'state' always remained limited political entities in India. This was not because India was a society dominated by caste in which the state could not take root, as many orientalists have asserted, but because there were many sharers in the dignity and power of kingship with overlapping rights and obligations.

The Mughals claimed universal dominion; sometimes they achieved political dominance in India. But for the majority of their Hindu subjects power and authority in India had always been more like a complicated hierarchy than a scheme of 'administration' or 'government'. The Mughal emperor was *Shah-an-Shah*, 'king of kings', rather than king of India. He was the highest manifestation of sovereignty, the court of final appeal, for Muslims an earthly successor to aspects of the authority of the Prophet Muhammad. Yet many of the attributes of what we would call the state pertained not to the emperor or his lieutenants, but to the Hindu kings of the localities, the rajas or to the notables who controlled resources and authority in the villages. The emperor's power and wealth could be great, but only if he was skilled in extracting money, soldiers and devotion from other kings. He was a marshal of kings, an entrepreneur in power. His tools were at once the

INDIAN SOCIETY AND THE MAKING OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

siege-train and the royal honours given out at the great assemblies (*darbars*).

Even the rajas, for all their importance as guardians of the caste order and sacrificers-in-chief of the Hindu religion were dependent in turn on the warrior farmers who controlled the villages. These village magnates also participated in the mystique of kingship. Ultimately they were the real lords of men and resources in India. It was the build-up in the Punjab and western India, and the Ganges valley, of dissident coalitions of such magnates, determined to fight off demands for taxes and assert their status as warrior kings or gentry in their own right which spelled the end of the all-India hegemony of the Mughals.

Some historians have described this political system in terms of 'levels of power'. This is useful provided one remembers that there was constant interaction, alliance making and alliance breaking between powers at these different levels. Even under strong emperors, the hierarchy was always shifting and realigning. Village farmer-warriors could overrun their neighbours, collect revenue from the villages and become recognised as rajas by the imperial court. Equally, servants of the court, Muslims from outside India as much as Muslims and Hindus from within India, could use their authority to build up landholdings around the small towns and become local magnates.

This chapter starts by examining the changes in the imperial hegemony during the eighteenth century, then moves to the petty kingdoms and finally to the magnates of the villages who controlled production. There follows a discussion of the Indian economy and society in the eighteenth century. Yet these divisions only constitute a device for organising themes. Developments at all these levels and in all these domains were linked.

THE PERSISTENCE OF MUGHAL CULTURE

One reason that the 'fall of the Mughal empire' now appears a rather limited theme around which to organise the record of the eighteenth century is that the emperor continued to be a fount of authority throughout India long after his military power had atrophied. If anything the sacred mystique of the imperial person increased after 1707. The emperor Muhammad Shah (1719–48) once again asserted the imperial right to adjudicate between different Muslim schools of law which had been foresworn by the purist Aurangzeb. He also resumed

use of the title 'Heir of Ali' (son-in-law of the Prophet) and reinstated the office of imperial chronicler, emphasising again the emperor's role as the shadow of God on earth.¹ During the wars which occurred after 1759 between factions of Mughal notables, the Marathas and the British, possession of the imperial person and imperial proclamations became an important resource for aspiring kingmakers. The value of the royal charisma grew in importance even as the royal purse emptied.

All powers seeking to establish their rule in eighteenth-century India needed to acquire imperial titles and rights. The Sikhs and the Marathas, for instance, represented traditions which might seem to refute the right of a Muslim state to rule them. The Sikhs derived authority from their holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib, while the Marathas developed and extended the ideal of Hindu kingship expressed in the protection of brahmins, holy cattle and holy places. Yet the rulers of both these warrior polities sought to become agents of Mughal sovereignty. The Maratha king Shahu had walked barefoot and made obeisance at the tomb of the Emperor Aurangzeb at Khulda-bad in 1714; Mahadji Scindia, the greatest Maratha warlord towards the end of the century, received the title of Regent Plenipotentiary of the empire when he became dominant at Delhi in 1784. The Sikhs, unbending as they seemed to be in hostility to the monarchs who had slain several of their great religious teachers, made ceremonial offerings to the throne in 1783, as they sought to strengthen their political position in the environs of the capital.

Even when regional viceroys had begun to found dynasties and engross imperial offices and perquisites, the emperor's ultimate authority, as opposed to his power, was rarely challenged. The rulers of Bengal, Hyderabad, Awadh and the Carnatic held off from seeking the title of emperor or invading his quasi-religious functions. Certainly, the Nawab of the Carnatic (Arcot) delighted in the appellation of 'Sultan of India' conferred on him by the citizens of the holy city of Mecca in return for charitable offerings.² The rulers of Awadh at the beginning of the nineteenth century – encouraged by British officials – attempted to assert their equality with Delhi as 'universal kings' of the

¹ Muzaffar Alam, 'Mughal imperial decline and the province', unpub. Ph.D. diss. Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1981, p. 8.

² M. H. Nainar (ed.), 'Tuzak-i-Wallajahi', *Sources of the History of the Nawwabs of the Carnatic, Madras Islamic Series*, 4 (Madras, 1956), 244ff.

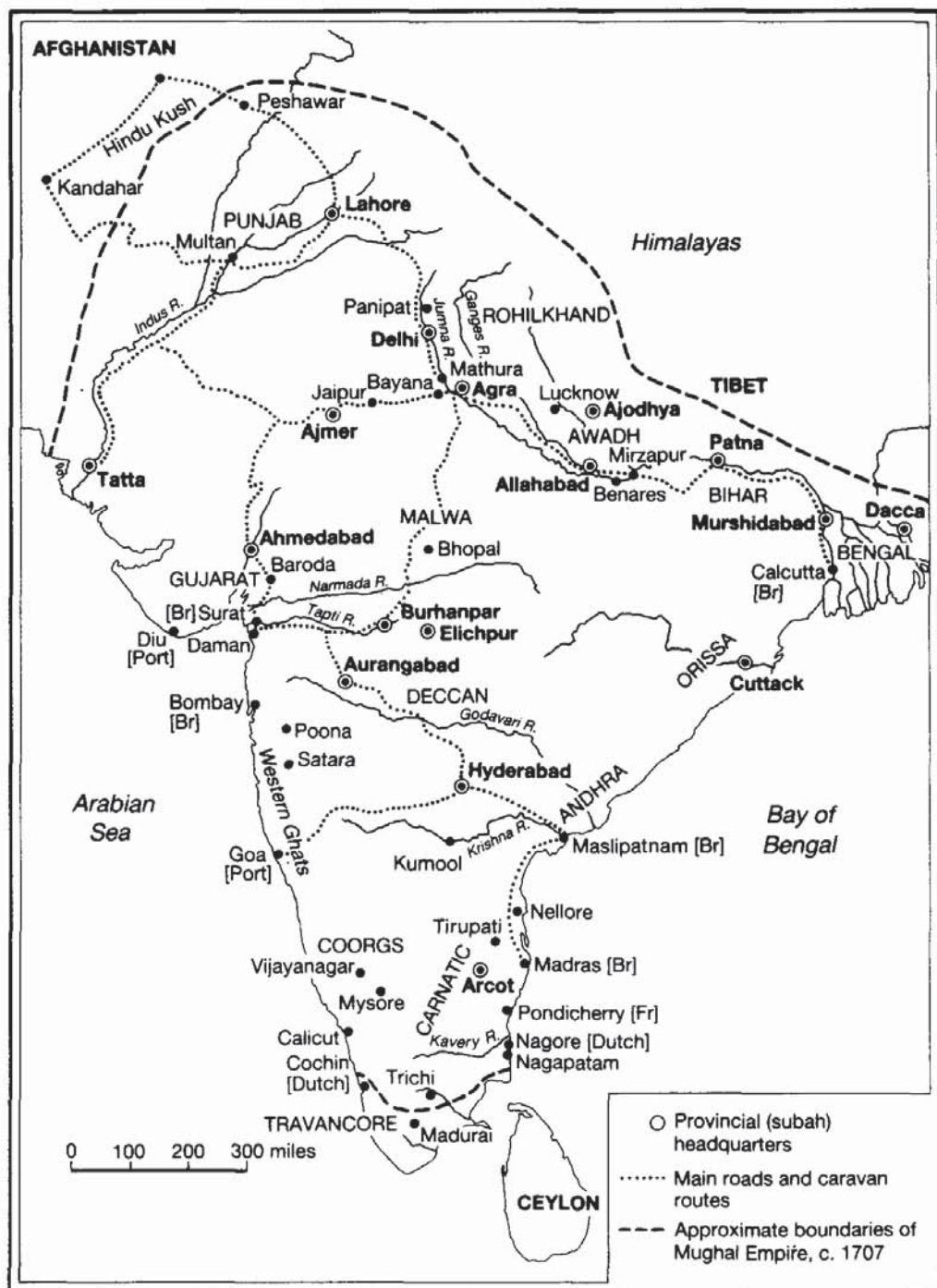
Shia branch of Islam.³ But these developments had little wider significance. Only Tipu Sultan of Mysore, uneasy as a newcomer with the traditions of the Indo-Persian nobility and contemptuous of the flaccidity of Mughal power, took up the title of emperor. Even Tipu maintained a respectful communication with the imperial court. So it is not surprising that the British too maintained the form of imperial grants and participated in the rites of Mughal authority – at least down to 1848. Richard Wellesley, Governor-General 1798–1805, warned his aides to show respect to the Emperor as ‘almost every class of people ... continue to acknowledge his nominal authority’⁴ during the most expansive period of empire-building, and it is arguable that British success was facilitated by this scrupulous regard for Mughal authority.

A second reason why the fall of the Mughal empire seems an inadequate general theme is that the spirit of Mughal administration went marching on even when Delhi’s military power lay mouldering in the grave. In the south the frontier of Muslim rule continued to expand with the fall of the Hindu Nayaks of Trichinopoly to the Carnatic rulers in 1732 and the later expansions by their successors into the lands of the chieftains of the far south. The rule of the Nawabs of the Carnatic was often no more than a loose hegemony, but the Hindu warlords were invested with the titles of Mughal dignity while Mughal-style jurisconsults (*kazis*), urban executives (*kotwals*), authorities in law (*muftis*) and revenue agents were appointed. Even where non-Muslim kings came to power the forms of the old system were usually maintained. The Muslim officers continued to play an important part in the politics of holy Benares even after a Hindu raja engrossed power in 1738. In the early nineteenth century the new Sikh ruler of all-Punjab appointed Muslims as judicial officers in the city of Lahore. Very often the new rulers (and this included the English East India Company) issued their coinage from Mughal-style mints with the Mughal emperor’s name prominently displayed. Prayers for the emperor were still said in mosques throughout India.

The agents who maintained and spread this administrative culture were drawn from the petty Muslim gentry of north and central India, from central Asian or Persian immigrants, and in the Deccan and the

³ M. Fisher, ‘The imperial court and the province: a social and administrative history of pre-British Awadh’, unpub. Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1978.

⁴ M. Martin (ed.), *The Despatches, Minutes and Correspondence of the Marquess Wellesley, K.G.* (London, 1837), iv, 153.



1 India under the later Mughals

south, from Hindus of the writer castes who had taken to Persian learning. They were all influenced by the classical tradition of administrative practice summed up in the Emperor Akbar's great Domesday book of India the *Ain-i-Akbari* (*circa* 1590) and later manuals on land-revenue management. This notable expansion of the Mughal style of government drew learned men of the Muslim gentry into new regions. Citizens of Delhi and Agra went east to Bengal, just as Hindu Bengalis were to follow British administration west into upper India in the next century. One of the most ancient and prestigious of the Muslim service clans of the west coast, the Navaiyt lineage, found office in the frontier state of Arcot and in the kingdom of Mysore which only fell to a Muslim ruler, Haidar Ali, in 1761. Learned men and soldier-administrators of the northern Indian Muslim religious schools took service in the new realm of Bhopal which only stabilised in the first decade of the nineteenth century.

Even if in matters of authority and administrative culture there was much continuity between the highpoint of Mughal hegemony and the eighteenth century, surely the mechanics of political power were drastically modified? Here too the record seems less clear-cut than it did sixty years ago. Certainly political authorities based on India's ancient ecological and cultural regions became significant after 1707. Yet this 'decentralisation' of politics was itself anticipated by the very successes of Mughal expansion. It was on the basis of the expanding commercial economy of the seventeenth century and the slow accumulation of wealth by literate Muslim gentry, Hindu landholders and merchants that the quasi-kingdoms of the eighteenth century were built.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE MUGHAL PROVINCES

The most striking political change of the eighteenth century was the long metamorphosis of Mughal provincial government which led to the creation of autonomous kingdoms in Bengal, Awadh and Hyderabad. Alongside them the Hindu Marathas and Sikhs created political systems within the ambit of the imperial domains which also made use of many of the administrative methods of the Mughals. Ironically, these new political formations derived in part from attempts by the Mughals to strengthen the foundations of their rule. Murshid Kuli

Khan, the Mughal governor who stands as lineal predecessor of the independent Nawabs of Bengal, was sent by the emperor to rationalise the finances of this rich province in 1704. He consolidated and brought to obedience the great Hindu and Muslim zamindars (landholders) of Bengal. In the process the offices of revenue manager (*diwan*) and governor (*subahdar*) which previous emperors had tried to keep separate were gradually amalgamated. Murshid Kuli Khan and his successors, notably the Nawab Alivardi Khan (1740–56), also began to fill local offices and confer revenue grants on their own dependants, and slowly slipped out of control of Delhi. Until 1739, and Nadir Shah's invasion of the capital, the large Bengal revenue was religiously sent to Delhi, but thereafter remittances became less regular. The emperor was often in the hands of enemies of the Bengal régime; the commercial links which alone made the remittance of silver possible withered as Delhi consumed less of Bengal's fine cotton goods; and Bengal itself was financially hard-pressed in the aftermath of Maratha invasions in 1742 and 1744.

Factional conflict at Delhi and the impotence of the emperor after 1712 strengthened these tendencies towards provincial autonomy. A long struggle in the 1720s between leaders of the Indian-born faction at court and notables of Iranian or Central Asian origin encouraged Asaf Jah (Nizam-ul-Mulk), Aurangzeb's former commander, to build up a power base in the high plains of the Deccan which by the time of his death in 1748 had become a recognisable political entity (though not a centralised realm) and precursor of the later princely state of Hyderabad. The Persian-born war leader Saadat Khan (Burhun-ul-Mulk), who became vazir or viceroy of the Empire, similarly moved his political base from Delhi to the rich but turbulent province of Awadh in the 1720s and 30s when his enemies triumphed at the court. As in Bengal these potentates amalgamated offices which the Mughals had tried to keep separate, though their bases of power were the offices of governor (*subahdar*) rather than revenue manager (*diwan*) as in Bengal. Early on Asaf Jah and Saadat Khan began again to ensure that their descendants inherited these newly amalgamated offices in what was a clear break with Mughal tradition. All these grandees were in a position to enhance their independence when Delhi fell to Iranian and Afghan invaders in 1739 and 1759–61, though they continued to supply and aid the imperial court until the end of the century.

The spirit and forms of Mughal provincial government changed

only slowly. Asaf Jah's testament to his successors, recorded in 1748, urges them to respect the emperor as overlord and not to threaten the hierarchy of rulers. Since the Deccan had once been made up of six different Muslim kingdoms, 'it is right that the ancient families of the realm should be properly looked after', though none should be allowed to accumulate offices. The ruler of Hyderabad should seek accord with the Maratha zamindars, 'but he should maintain preeminent the dignity and prestige of Islam and never allow them to overstep the bounds'.⁵ This old policy of enticement and suasion of local élites would best be pursued if the ruler moved around the country in tents, but he should allow the soldiers regular leave in order for them to father children. The tactics and goals of the eighteenth-century potentates were not greatly different from those of previous Mughal governors, only their tenure was more permanent and the ability of Delhi to discipline them much reduced.

The regional power-holders also inherited the problems of previous Mughal governors. In Bengal, where the Hindu landholders were more pacific and the money economy and trade was more developed, the nawabs and later the British had some hope of regular revenues and a degree of control. In Awadh the picture was mixed; Saadat Khan chastised the fiercely independent Rajput landholders of the central and southern territories, but warrior domains and revenue peculators quickly asserted themselves if the centre was momentarily deflected. In the Deccan and the Carnatic the neo-Mughal régimes flourished only fitfully, dependent on many cross-cutting alliances with local Telugu and Maratha chieftains. Yet, to an extent, Hyderabad was able to utilise the memory of the authority of the old, independent Deccani sultanates, and the Nawabs of the Carnatic, that of Vijayanagar.

All these modified provincial authorities gave Mughal élites the chance to deepen their hold on power in the regions, if they were clever and persistent. In the Deccan as in other parts of the empire Mughal military officers had once lived on assignments of revenue which were constantly changed to prevent them being transformed into heritable rental holdings. In the later eighteenth century in some parts of Hyderabad such grants did, however, tend to become hereditary. This created a more settled landholding class which negotiated its revenues and military commitments through agents settled in Hydera-

⁵ Nizam-ul Mulk's Testament, 1164 Hegira, Yusuf Husain Khan, *Nizamu'l Mulk Asaf Jah I* (Bangalore, 1936), pp. 284–90.

bad city. In Awadh and Bengal clients and family members of the new ruling houses were also able to amass large bundles of proprietary rights and rights to farm revenue from the state which in course of time became hereditary estates (*zamindaris* in Bengal; *talukdaris* in Awadh and Hyderabad). Seeking allies in local society the regional rulers allowed locally resident Muslim families to build up areas of revenue-free land acquired during the later Mughal period and convert them into fuller proprietary rights. In this way they hoped to contain the power of the indigenous (largely Hindu) clans more effectively. It is an apparent paradox that during the 'fall of the Mughal empire' many families of former Mughal servants were able to establish a much closer control over the resources of the countryside and become local power-holders. Once again, it was the very success of processes of change set moving during Mughal expansion which helped undermine the fabric of their empire.

In the same way the transformed Mughal provinces provided a context in which entrepreneurs in revenue and trade could function, as the next chapter will demonstrate. In the early eighteenth century the rulers of Hyderabad, Awadh, Bengal and even the hard-pressed administration in Delhi tried to continue Mughal military practice and Mughal military salaries. In the second half of the century European weapons, methods and military advisers became more common. All this needed money and Hindu trader bankers or Muslim revenue farmers who could provide capital became increasingly influential. The Jagat Seths (Hindu bankers) became the key force in Bengal politics; Agarwal bankers 'commanded the state' as far as revenue matters were concerned in Benares. Even in the Maratha states banking firms became overt actors in local politics.

WARRIOR STATES AND MUGHAL PRACTICE

The great non-Muslim warrior states – Marathas Sikhs and Jats – represented, of course, something more than simple devolutions of Mughal power to the provinces. The elements of continuity and change are quite difficult to distinguish, however. The rise of these warriors did reflect popular movements of peasant insurgency directed in part against the Indo-Muslim aristocracy. The Marathas drew their strength from the ordinary peasant and pastoralist castes of western India, now under arms and aspiring to the life-style of the ancient

Hindu kings. Maratha victories fostered a sense of community identity expressed through the Marathi language and Hindu devotional religion. The Brahmin administrators who increased their power in the first half of the eighteenth century pictured the Maratha state as a classic 'Brahmin' kingdom, protecting the holy places and sacred cattle. The Sikh leaders who dominated the Punjab after the Afghan invasion of north India during 1759–61 were often of humble origins – the descendants of Jat peasants, village servants and pastoralists from the dry west of the Punjab. Their sense of identity too, nurtured through the military brotherhood of the Khalsa (founded 1699), was sharpened by both political and religious conflict with the Mughals. To emphasise their Hindu and Sikh beliefs the leaders of all these movements tried hard to ban the slaughter of sacred cattle in the lands they conquered.

Yet the relation between Hindu and Sikh and the Muslim empire was ambiguous and became more so as the century moved on. Rebellion and schism had been the essential force behind Mughal expansion, indeed behind the expansion of Islam throughout west and south Asia. Rebellion did not imply a total severance of political relations or the creation of sharply defined territorial entities. The treaties made between the Mughal and the Marathas at the beginning of the century and in the 1780s, therefore, continued to recognise the position of the emperor as pinnacle of the hierarchy of kings. Even the new Sikh rulers patronised Muslim holy men; they established police officers and jurisconsults modelled on the Mughal officers and used Mughal methods of revenue collection. The trend was most strikingly illustrated in the case of the Jat state of Bharatpur near Delhi. Here the ruler Suraj Mal began to expel his own clansmen and caste fellows from positions of power during the 1750s and imported the whole panoply of Mughal revenue collection in their stead. Even on the fringes of the Maratha domains where the Marathas had once taken their feared 'portion' of the revenue (or *chauth*) from farmers, their plundering incursions had given way to an efficient form of the Mughal revenue system by the 1760s. As Maratha power moved north during the 1770s and 1780s with the emergence of the great war lord Mahadji Scindia from beneath the hegemony of Poona the Mughal elements in their régime became more marked. Mahadji's army in the late 1780s had as many Muslim as Hindu soldiers (drilled often by Europeans) and the basis of his revenue collection was in the environs

of the old Mughal capital of Agra. Those movements which began as plebeian reactions against Mughal domination came to prosecute the aims of Mughal rule with its own methods.

THE EVOLUTION OF LOCAL KINGDOMS

The Mughal model was influential throughout India. But on the fringes of these semi-autonomous regional states or operating within their domain existed a host of smaller kingdoms which owed them only nominal allegiance. Muslim chroniclers often viewed this lowest rung in the hierarchy of kings in India as little more than a rabble of bucolic landholders or recalcitrant chiefs. However, they often represented the remnants of constellations of Hindu polities, built on the power and expressing the values of the dominant landholding communities which had once ruled the country without much intervention from above. They were important because they provided the context within which economic and cultural change occurred and also because it was by the suborning of these smaller entities as much as by the penetration of the regional powers that the British came to dominate the subcontinent.

These kingdoms had different origins and related in different ways to the organisation of power and production in the countryside. One great swathe of such kingdoms running from Gujarat in the west to Awadh in the east had been created by the expansion and migration of the Rajputs ('sons of princes'). The Rajputs were the archetypal Hindu warrior order. It appears to have been a much looser category in the pre-colonial period than it became in the nineteenth century when stricter endogamy and aspirations to purity in life-style became common among the princes protected by the British. Many Rajputs in the eighteenth century belonged to shifting bands of professional soldiers who attracted followers by marrying women from lower caste Hindu or even Muslim families. This Rajput world was topped out, particularly in Rajasthan, by a constellation of kingdoms which had survived for generations sometimes in conflict with the Mughals, sometimes as their servants. These were not, of course, centralised or territorial states. Rival rulers often held assignments of revenue in each others' domains. Moreover the possibilities for the aggrandisement of any one state had been limited both by the power of Muslim armies and by the fact that the most exalted families had to marry with fam-

ties removed by many degrees of relationship from their own clans. This tended to fragment and diffuse power among the Rajput kings.

In the Deccan and the south the rôle of the Rajputs was filled by Telugu-speaking warriors who had also spread into the rich river valleys of the Tamil country over many generations. Untouched until the seventeenth century by the levelling tendencies of the great Mughal revenue systems, these potentates supported the great temples such as Tirupati and Madurai, and venerated Vaishnavite sectarian leaders who became their gurus or religious teachers. In this way they were assimilated into the ancient culture of the south. The Hindu dominion of Vijayanagar which had exercised a loose authority over much of the south until the late sixteenth century had established a style of kingship, worship and religious art which continued to be represented by potentates such as the rulers of Madurai and Mysore. But power was highly diffuse with war-band leaders from yet less Hinduised groups on the fringes of settled agriculture (the so-called poligars or *palaiyakkars* of the warrior tribal Kallars and Maravas) exercising the functions of protection and tribute taking in the villages on behalf of their nominal overlords.

Alongside the transformed remnants of the older systems of Hindu states stood a number of kingdoms more recently established by warriors or clever entrepreneurs in the management of land revenues, usually rising from the flotsam and jetsam of the Muslim conquest states of the north and the Deccan. Afghan warrior mercenaries had established compact sultanates around several armed base-camps throughout India. Some had preceded Mughal rule in the 1680s; others had arisen as its servants, still others as a result of the emperors' attempts to retain their power after 1707. Notable examples of Afghan sultanates were the Rohilla kingdoms near Delhi; the principalities of Bhopal and Mandu in central India; and the southern Afghans of Ginjee, Nellore and the far south. To create such kingdoms the military powers like their regional overlords and rivals needed financial expertise and the aid of men of capital to help the aspiring ruler to remit an initial revenue payment to an overlord. Some of the most impressive petty kingdoms therefore came to light as farms of revenue in which capitalist-warriors began to exercise kingly powers. The Raj of Benares adopted many of the styles of patronage and worship supposedly characteristic of ancient Hindu kings. Yet in practice the reason that Mansa Ram was able to survive as revenue farmer and later

maharaja in the Awadh domains (from 1738) was that he had the financial support of the Hindu bankers of Benares and the military support of his rural clansmen. Some eighteenth-century magnates of Bengal – notably the great zamindari of Burdwan – originated as similar bundles of revenue-collecting rights acquired in the service of Mughal governors.

Finally, there was a range of local powers which still lay largely outside the Hindu and Muslim polities which were built up on the rich produce of the valleys and plains. The distinction between 'tribal' and Hindu India was never simple or static. But throughout north and central India and the Western Ghats (hills) were peoples only lightly touched by the major cultures and religions who lived in part by the skills of the pastoralist, the slash-and-burn farmer or the hunter and gatherer. Some of these peoples had chieftains who were designated rajas by outside potentates, though often the individual nomadic camp or hunting family was the key political unit and the state hardly existed as an entity.

The relationship between these petty kingdoms and local forms of production varied greatly. Sometimes as in the newly powerful state of Travancore on the south-west coast or Maratha Tanjore on the east coast, rulers intervened very closely in the production of rice or other valuable crops, controlling them through royal granaries and monopolies. In some cases rulers even controlled their own bands of ploughmen to increase the resources of the king's 'demesne'. However, the general trend was towards something approximating to the Mughal system – payment of tax in coin and the predominance of peasant farming. Between about 1600 and 1780 for instance the old Hindu state of Mysore progressively upped its nominal tax revenue from under 10 per cent of the gross produce to about 40 per cent under Tipu Sultan in the 1790s. Of course much of the enhanced total was never collected, but the growing costs of warfare and a desire for a new grandiose form of kingship spread across the subcontinent. As in the regional dominions, therefore, literate and numerate service families became increasingly important in the affairs of these local kingdoms. Moneylenders and bulk traders set up in their domains as guarantors of revenue and provisioners of their courts.

Petty kingdoms continued to retain their identity, their cults and their own form of political organisation. Still, the outward forms of Mughal practice at least were widely adopted. In the same way the

influx of service personnel from outside encouraged rulers to adopt the forms of worship and religious patronage common in the world of the larger states. As the Maravar and Kallar warlords of Tamilnadu fashioned themselves into Hindu kings, they imported Brahmins and Brahmin rituals from the great temple centres of the south. As Afghan rulers in the western Ganges plain and the southern Deccan gained a more stable hold on their realms, new Islamic seminaries and libraries were founded while the teachers of the Naqshbandi order of Sufi mystics fanned out into new territories. What emerged was not an orthodox or standard pattern of religious practice so much as a subtle and sometimes conflict-ridden accommodation between outside forms of religious practice and local deities and cult saints. The tendency was towards greater complexity and richness of religious and cultural tradition rather than towards homogeneity.

The eighteenth century did not therefore see a resolution of the old tensions between the regional and imperial hegemonies and local kingdoms, so much as an interpenetration of these forms of power. Despite the high level of violence and destruction this eased the path to dominion of the more enterprising warriors and their administrative and capitalist clients. There were, however, two important conditions for the survival and even development of complex states and administrative forms. First, there needed to be some degree of stability in the villages – some persistent authority to provide a link between the peasantry and the warriors who lived off them. Secondly, production and trade needed to survive at a sufficiently high level to provide a constant supply of services and cash for the élites. The chapter now turns to these issues.

POWER IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

Regional kingdoms and petty states were built up and collapsed quickly but there was more continuity of power in the villages. Throughout southern and western India local leadership remained in the hands of the village headmen (the *patel/munigar*) and their subordinates the accountants (*kurnam/kanikapillai*) and record keepers who together with related families made up the village élite. Often those village leaderships were bonded together at a wider level by kinship or economic interest into domains controlled by local magnates

(*deshmukhs* in the Deccan; *kavalgars* in Tamilnadu). The hereditary office-holding families could often be traced back many generations. They assigned land to landless villagers, fixed rents and were prominent in the village arbitration councils. In rice-growing areas they played a prominent part in the communal organisation of agricultural production. The state negotiated with the agrarian community through the office holders and they received payments and services both by virtue of their leadership in the village and their rôle in the state's revenue machinery. In western India an early British official said that 'the Patils are the most important functionaries in the villages, and perhaps the most important class in the country'.⁶ The headmen also played a crucial role in the religious life and ritual of the villages. They were protectors of the village deities; they were honoured during the great village festivals. The traveller Francis Buchanan was told by farmers in Coimbatore District of Madras that even if the state were to deprive the headmen of their political power 'the real hereditary muni-gar [Tamil for headman] will always continue to enjoy his rank as a chief; for he is the only person who can perform the annual sacrifice to the goddess Bhadra Kali, to whom in every village there is a temple as being the Grama Devata or village deity'.⁷

The nature of the village élite was rather different in north India. Here joint or individual proprietors excercised lordship rights over villages, controlling the waste and access to land along with ponds, trees and other sources of income. As in the south, this élite was predominantly drawn from high-caste peasant communities with a tradition of warfare, and these village magnates were often linked together by kinship bonds to form tight-knit blocs of power which coincided with the lowest unit of Mughal administration, the *pargana*. But it was rental income from tenants, along with these proprietary perquisites, rather than the rewards of village office which provided most of their livelihood. In part this difference reflected the superior agriculture of the Ganges valley which could support a rental profit of this sort (there were parts of the south, too, such as rich Tanjore district which also maintained joint proprietary communities – the *mirasidars*). In part it resulted from the failure of the state to penetrate

⁶ G. W. Forrest (ed.) M. Elphinstone, *Report on the Territories Conquered from the Peshwa* (London, 1884), p. 275.

⁷ Francis Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras through the countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar* (London, 1807), ii, 216.

beneath the armed peasant proprietor bodies. Even in the immediate environs of Delhi itself Mughal grandees had depended on the goodwill of headmen of the warrior-farmer communities.

During the eighteenth century the village notables came under various forms of pressure. In their search for revenue the regional and petty states almost always tried to gain a closer control over the headmen or village proprietors. Sometimes direct representatives of the state acquired revenue-collecting rights at the village level and eroded the power and perquisites of the headmen families. This was particularly true where the state was strong as in the Maratha territories around Poona between 1751 and 1818, or in Mysore where Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan tried to eliminate all intermediaries between themselves and the peasant farmers, subjecting them to new demands for the punctual payment of revenue. Elsewhere the absence of powerful authorities outside the village enhanced the authority of the élites as protectors and petty rulers of the villages.

In addition the village offices in the south and west were influenced by economic change. Village office as a source of profit could be shared, mortgaged or sold; through the offices of the headmen and the élites villages could borrow from moneylenders on security of their revenue. A brisk market developed in shares in the patel's right, in the joint mirasi tenures of the south and to a lesser extent in shares in village proprietors' rights of north India. The people who bought into shares in village office were usually other peasant leaders or local merchants. Interestingly, around Poona there is evidence that some of the great families of the Maratha state also built up bundles of rights of this sort to increase their local economic control. Such commercialisation had not yet created a village élite independent of moral status and political power as it came to do under the British. Nor had it created a market for individual peasant land as such. Yet it was an indication of the deep penetration of the money economy into the countryside and the fact that commercial change was compatible with political fluidity in pre-colonial India.

What is most striking about the meagre record of conditions in the villages at this period is its variety. Even during the worst period of the Anglo-Maratha wars observers noted that one village could be entirely desolate while the next, secure in the protection of some potentate, was dominated by prosperous farmers. A study from indigenous sources in Rajasthan reveals a rich peasant élite which accounted for

about 10 per cent of the rural population.⁸ The existence of such a group would clearly be dependent on well-developed internal markets and relative political stability. Given basic protection, though, it is not surprising that the subcontinent would support bodies of rich farmers and local magnates. Population density was low and there was much good land still to be taken under the plough. In areas of expanding agriculture it was not unusual to find agrarian magnates who owned and worked up to 200 acres of dry farm land through share-croppers or day-labourers and owned many plough teams. Such were the *jotedars* of north and east Bengal who actually controlled agriculture as inferior holders beneath the more famous *rentier* landlords – the zamindars. Rural magnates of this sort were also found in parts of south India where much smaller peasant holdings were the order of the day a century later after population pressure had worked its course.

It was shortage of labour rather than shortage of land which acted as the main constraint on agriculture. This helps explain the rather flexible society of the eighteenth century. ‘Traditional’ India has sometimes seemed to be hierarchical and static. But this was true of the ideal order of society rather than its actual workings. Men and skills were in short supply so that marriage outside caste groups was common. Great peasant caste-clusters such as the Kunbis of western India and the Jats of the north allowed their males to take concubines from related or lower caste groups. The sons of these liaisons were considered Jats or Kunbis in the next generation. Even some Rajput subcastes which were rigidly endogamous in the colonial period married outside caste in the eighteenth century. Caste status in the countryside was in fact a rather fluid matter. To some extent it was determined by how closely people adopted the ideal model of Brahmin or Warrior purity. More often than not the distinction between superior and inferior rural castes turned on the bearing of arms. In Gujarat at the end of Maratha rule the term Maratha with its connotation was generally applied to men of the Kunbi or peasant caste who carried weapons.⁹

Labour and skills could not always be acquired through marriage or domestic alliance. The force of political and religious power was also used to secure clients. This was all the more true since, as we now

⁸ Dilbagh Singh, ‘Local and land revenue administration of the state of Jaipur, c. 1750–1800’, unpub. Ph.D. diss. Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1975.

⁹ W. Hamilton, *A geographical, statistical and historical account of Hindustan and the adjacent countries* (London, 1820), p. 307; cf. R. O’Hanlon, *Caste, conflict and ideology* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 22–4.

know, the ideal order of village-level caste dependencies (called the *jajmani* or *balutadar* system) only supplied the most refined specialist craftsmen and ritual servants. Eighteenth-century Indians were not tied into immutable village bodies or always dominated by hereditary divisions of labour. So agrarian clients had often to be actively sought. Serfs were secured from tribal groups by war or through bonds of indebtedness contracted with the large bodies of inferior labouring caste people, notably the Chamars in the north and the Paraiyans in the south. The dependence of such groups was maintained not simply by force and economic disadvantage but also by subtle systems of belief which gave high-caste gentry an important role in the life rites of their dependants and *vice versa*.¹⁰

Did the dependence of inferior groups therefore increase in the eighteenth century? The evidence is both meagre and contradictory. Probably it is best to speak of this century as a period of widening regional differences, compared with the more coherent trends which have been discerned in the Mughal and British periods. Warfare and the problems of money supply in the late eighteenth century may well have reduced many poor peasants – ‘seekers of protection’ – to greater dependence on rich farmers, moneylenders, office-holders and sub-Mughal grandes. This was probably the dominant trend. On the other hand, the very lack of skilled labour and the desperate desire of petty régimes to enhance their cash revenue for military purposes meant that agrarian labourers prepared and able to migrate retained a good deal of bargaining power. Throughout the subcontinent day-labourers were said to have been better rewarded than established occupancy tenants who would not abandon their fields for reasons of sentiment. There are even some examples of labourers and share-croppers resisting landholders and yeomen by desertion or by participation in millenarian movements claiming to improve their lot on earth.

The same paradox can be seen in the relations between the agrarian states and unsettled, semi-nomadic or tribal peoples who occupied such a large part of the map of the subcontinent before colonial rule. Indian society as a pioneer society inevitably impinged on such groups. The Maratha rulers of the Deccan and central India pushed further into the forest homelands of the Bhil and Gond tribes, convert-

¹⁰ Gyan Prakash, ‘Reproducing inequality: spirit cults and labour relations in colonial eastern India’, *Modern Asian Studies*, xx, 2, 1986.

ing their tribal leaders into petty rajas and their tribesmen into bondsmen or tribute-givers. The great peasant communities continued their age-old migrations into the forests of the western Ghats or the jungles to the north and south of the Ganges Valley. Haidar and Tipu in Mysore invaded the tribal lands of the Coorgs in the 1770s and 80s and dragged many of them off to be Islamised and settled as agricultural servants near their capitals. But arable India and the state did not have it all its own way. With the weakening of the authority of Mughal rule and its clients in the north 'headless' nomadic and pastoral societies such as the Bhattis and Rangars in Haryana and Rajasthan managed to extend their tribal grazing grounds and areas of plunder once again.¹¹

Even in the Deccan and the south where the Mughal type of state was making some headway during the eighteenth century, the effect on tribal and nomadic groups was complex. The Bedar archers earned large sums of money from service as guerrilla fighters in the armies of Mysore. Northern followers of the Arcot Muslims were astonished by the Kallar tribals whom they saw as 'black complexioned people ... not pleasing to the eye who ate the raw flesh of animals such as the horse'.¹² Later the Arcot rulers and their allies of the French and English East India Companies recruited many Kallars and Maravars as irregulars. This speeded the development of a money economy and created more marked differences of wealth and power among the tribesmen.

Indian society in the eighteenth century was typical of other frontier societies in that the internal extent of the state's influence and of the arable economy with its more hierarchical landed society was constantly in flux. Migration was followed by counter-migration, especially across the great empty lands of the Deccan. Settled society and its values were not irrevocably divided from the frontier; they were in a state of mutual dependence. The tribesmen and nomads furnished the settled with beeswax, honey, spices, carriage, milk and soldiers. The settled provided the fringes with money, cloth and grain. The forest continued to play a part in the artistic and religious system of the settled. Muslim mystical teachers often started as 'forest fathers', while the unsettled and its peoples remained powerful carriers

¹¹ G. L. Devra, 'Efforts to check the problem of desertification in the north-west region of Rajasthan' unpub. paper, Department of History, Dungar College, Bikaner.

¹² Jaswant Rai, 'Sayeed Nama', tr. S. A. R. Bokhari, 'Carnatic under the Nawabs as revealed through the Sayeed Nama of Jaswant Rai', M.Litt. diss. University of Madras, 1965, p. 95.

INDIAN SOCIETY AND THE MAKING OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

of magic even for the Hindus who worshipped the high gods. On the other hand Brahmins and Muslim soldiers and administrators played a part in the rituals and beliefs of most of the tribal groups as they had done for many centuries. Brahmin administrators worked for the 'tribal' rajas of Coorg. In the Gond lands a superficial Hinduisation had been symbolised by an injunction by the new Maratha rulers of the late eighteenth century against the slaughter of holy cattle. Still, the old tribal gods were still worshipped and human sacrifice was recorded from time to time even in the colonial period.

ECONOMIC FOUNDATIONS OF POLITICAL POWER

The main forces working on any agrarian economy are population, the diffusion of basic forms of technology and management and the buoyancy of demand which set prices. Very little is known about any of these indicators for eighteenth-century India. What is known paints a more varied picture than the one of total decline which emerges from earlier literature. This is consistent with the political record of the century. The decline of Mughal hegemony allowed the further development of powerful commercial forces in the regions – a huge burst of entrepreneurship in power and money. Such interests often became locked in destructive conflict. However, there were forces partly independent of local political power which affected the political economy of eighteenth-century India – population growth, external trade and the seasons. It is to these influences that the chapter now turns.

Population growth was held back by epidemic disease and by periodic mortality from the failure of monsoon rains. In the long run the evidence from Mughal India suggests a gradual growth of population which may have reached 180 million for the whole of the subcontinent by 1750. Famines are recorded in central and western India for the 1680s and for 1702–4. But the first sixty years of the eighteenth century appear to have been relatively free from widespread famines, though the records of the Madurai Jesuit mission speak of severe distress in 1709 and 1733–5,¹³ and there were local scarcities in north India. Prices rose slowly through to the 1750s, at least in central and north India, and this probably reflects limited population growth.

¹³ R. Venkatarama Ayyar, *A Manual of the Puddukotai State* (2nd edn. Puddukotai, 1938–44), I, 312.

more than the growth of bullion imports from overseas since both rice and dry grains moved up. Some indication of population expansion may also be found in the inability of Bengal to supply its weavers with raw cotton by the 1740s. The scattered records of internal migration point to continuing expansion of settlement and arable farming in north and east Bengal, in the jungles of southern Bihar and the Ganges Valley. In the south the great peasant lineages appear to have slowly colonised the plains and hills, moving out from the already populous rice basins.

The terrible Bengal famine of 1769–70, when excessive rains led to crop failure and the death of at least 25 per cent of the population, broke this trend. There was also a severe famine in north India in 1783 and local scarcities in Rajasthan and the south in the following decade. Warfare in the years 1773–1810 also damaged agriculture, particularly in the Delhi region and the Carnatic. Armies spread diseases to populations already affected by malnutrition. Still, there are good reasons for doubting whether an earlier trend of population growth was decisively reversed. Population picked up rapidly in south Asia, particularly when, as in 1783, much of the livestock survived. In Bengal, at least, the labour market appears to have begun to turn against the uncured peasant farmer before the end of the century, suggesting population recovery. Quite high population densities are recorded in many of the famine districts in the early British censuses carried out in 1812 and 1813, though there were also patches of permanently ‘deserted villages’.

Slow agricultural improvement continued in many parts of India through to about 1760, and in some areas even after that date. This was despite political fluidity. There were of course significant examples of collapse. The great Mughal canal system north of Delhi fell into disuse sometime after 1740, while the sugar cane and indigo agriculture of this region and adjoining Punjab suffered from the tribulations of the Mughal élite and its merchant clients who had once put in stone wells in the environs of towns such as Panipat or Bayana. In the south the conflict between the Nawabs of Arcot and the Hindu rulers of Tanjore in the 1770s also damaged the delicate system of labour upon which the southern rice bowl subsisted.¹⁴ On the other hand there was new investment and expansion. The main roads of the growing state of

¹⁴ But production stayed high until this point and revived again after 1785, Appendix 21 to the *Fourth Report ... on the Affairs of the East India Company* (London, 1783).

Awadh were lined with new irrigation ponds and wells constructed by its aspiring gentry. The evidence also points to a substantial intensification of agriculture in the great warrior states of the south and west. Unbiased observers constantly praised the excellent agricultural management of the Maratha heartlands where low initial revenue rates encouraged expansion and investment. Haidar Ali's Mysore was regarded as 'a garden from end to end' and there was a great expansion of road and irrigation canal building. Most important, there was a continuing painful advance of pioneer peasant cultivation on the fringes of the arable economy which compensated for the fall-back of high farming in areas such as western Rajasthan or the eastern Punjab where the domain of nomadic and plundering groups seems to have temporarily increased after 1760.

This expansion and patchy growth was reflected in the vitality of demand in early-eighteenth-century India. Price series are quite fragmentary but those few that do exist indicate a steady trend, and in some cases movement upward until mid-century, albeit interrupted by the effects of periodic wars and local scarcities. Thereafter the series suggest great volatility connected with both political and climatic shocks, but significantly, a clear downward trend is not recorded until the beginning of the nineteenth century. Even if it is accepted that disturbances in the Mughal heartland of north India diminished the capacity of its élites to consume and protect, the nobility of the new political entities went a long way to make up for the decline. The Marathas acquired large quantities of grain, cattle and cloth from the Gangetic plain by trade; this has been obscured by the constant references in British and Mughal sources to their looting campaigns. Large volumes of cotton wool and hides from the northern Deccan, sugar from the Benares region and cloth from the Carnatic were sucked into the Mysore of the Sultans in the last thirty years of the century.

Foreign demand also persisted in adversity. Crises in western Asia combined with the impact of the initial Maratha invasions to damage the trade of the great Mughal seaport of Surat as early as 1720. There were also temporary setbacks in the trade of Bengal and the Carnatic as a result of the Anglo-French conflicts occasioned by the War of Austrian Succession and the Seven Years War, but the volume of cloths, saltpetre and other trade goods acquired by the English Company and other European merchants increased steadily through to

1770. By the 1790s new commodities – cotton wool from Gujarat and central India, Malwa opium and indigo – had partially made up for the decline of some of the old staples. Indian-owned shipping and Indian exporting merchants were under pressure everywhere and had gone into a steep decline after 1780. Indian merchants were excluded from free trade in many valuable commodities by British monopolies, especially after 1763. However, Indian goods were still transported in British, French and Arab shipping.

Demand from Europeans continued to be supplemented by that of the Indonesian archipelago which took large quantities of Madras cloths; west Asian demand in the form of the trading empire of Muscat had also revived by 1790. The greatest purchaser, the English East India Company, drastically changed its form of payment after 1757 with considerable implications for the internal economy. After Clive's conquest of Bengal the British increasingly used the proceeds of their new Bengal revenues to pay for the goods acquired from Bengal and eastern India. No longer did they need to bring in bullion from external sources on anything like the same scale. With the decline of Surat and the atrophy of the Mughal revenue system this presumably accounts for the complaints of dearer money and trade recession which were heard throughout north India in the 1760s. However, this down-turn should not be viewed as an apocalypse. The resulting tightening of money supply did not amount to an actual demonetisation of the economy, except possibly on the fringes. Indeed, the 'scarcity of money' may be connected with the even stronger incentive to maximise cash revenues and mobilise new agricultural resources found among rulers and élites during this period. Massive stores of precious metals had built up in India between 1600 and 1750. The dispersion of old hoards may have eased the money supply, while bullion continued to come in through Bombay, Madras and many smaller ports. Indian bankers and revenue farmers with ready cash consequently increased their importance in the political system.

The acid test of the capacity of India's huge internal economy to resist severe pressures of war and poor external trading conditions is the fact that revenue continued to be paid in cash in the second half of the eighteenth century. This indicates that peasants continued to produce for markets and that traders continued to pay them in silver rupees or other coinages. The volumes of collection in the Mughal empire's northern heartlands do not appear often to have fallen below

65 per cent of the *nominal* demand of the later Mughals while agricultural production probably intensified in the domains of the Marathas and Mysore.

It may be better to conceive of economic change as the interpenetration and conflicts between several levels of activity. These levels were closely related to the different levels of political power. The economy can be divided into three interlinked elements. First, the world of the great cities, of external trade and the trader-financiers who moved wealth around the subcontinent in the form of bullion and credit notes. Secondly, the 'intermediate economy' of mass artisan production, of small country towns, and of the petty farms or assignments of revenue, or shares in office which proliferated in the wake of state-building and expansion. Thirdly, the vast bulk of India's internal agrarian economy. This responded to changes in the other elements since it was affected by money supply, demand and protection. Yet it always retained a great deal of autonomy – as the petty village markets and local cattle fairs were only spasmodically and poorly linked to the subcontinental economy. How far did these elements demonstrate the capacity for development as opposed to a simple resilience in the face of adversity?

The pan-Indian economy of the towns and great trade routes undoubtedly suffered disruption and flux after 1707, though its stability before this date should probably not be overestimated. About 10 per cent of the population lived in towns of above 5,000 in 1800, but estimates of the percentage of urban dwellers under the Mughals vary from 7 per cent to 15 per cent.¹⁵ Key commercial towns of the earlier period – Surat, Ahmedabad, Maslipatnam and Dacca – suffered rapid decline. However, these were rapidly compensated for in the rise of British-controlled Bombay, Calcutta and Madras which will be discussed in the next chapter. Inland cities also suffered great vicissitudes. Delhi, Lahore, Agra and Burhanpur, which may have accounted for two million people in 1700, supported 500,000 at most by 1800. But several important new centres had established themselves in the meantime, sometimes on an earlier urban base. Lucknow, Hyderabad, Benares, the Maratha capitals, Mysore, Srirangapatam and Bangalore grew rapidly during the century as a reflection of the power of the re-

¹⁵ Irfan Habib and Tapan Raychaudhuri (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, i (Cambridge, 1982), 169. But Stephen Blake has much lower percentages, see his forthcoming article in *South Asia*.

gional dynasts. Trading cities such as Mirzapur, Kanpur or Baroda also sprang into life to service new external trades. The loss of services and accumulated wealth in these movements was probably considerable, but it is significant how quickly demand and production was made up from new sources. New overland trade routes emerged to compensate for the clogged Mughal trade arteries; production of Dacca and Murshidabad fine cloths held up remarkably to supply both Indian courts and the requirements of European companies. New commercial and credit networks run by mercantile castes in both east and western India acted as creditors both to Indian rulers and to the British. The great concentrations of military and urban populations under Aurangzeb may have dispersed. But urbanisation was more widely spread across the subcontinent by 1800.

In some of these centres there is evidence that merchant entrepreneurs gathered bodies of dependent weavers into something that approximated more to the conditions of wage-labour in factories. The cheapness of labour and relatively low technological level of weaving appears, however, to have perpetuated the tried system of advances and piece-work. Signs of a technological or institutional breakthrough in the weaving sector are too scattered to suggest any trend. The growing dominance of Europeans in India's external trade and of the English Company in the internal capital market suggests a clear limit to the autonomy of its capitalists.

A more important source of wealth for Indian trader-bankers was investment in political and military activity. Indigenous bankers were closely connected with the great families of revenue farmers, giving them advances on the security of their holdings. In several of the smaller eighteenth-century states trader-bankers were a key political group by the 1760s. Under the Mughals they may have been vital to the working of economy and society, but they never held open political power.

The problems of the great grid of subcontinental markets, production and capital does not necessarily imply that decline or disruption was universal or persistent in the other two elements of the economy. In fact, the presumption that the decline of a powerful, extractive all-India state in the form of the Mughal Empire brought misery seems a curious reflexive shadow thrown by the imperialists of the following century. In theory it is possible that the decline of such an empire could have led to a more intensive and efficient use of resources in the

INDIAN SOCIETY AND THE MAKING OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

still large regional entities that survived its demise. The record on the ground, once cleared of the biases of contemporary discourse, provides some evidence of economic growth. Rural fixed markets (*ganjs* in north India; *pettas* in the south) were being created in great numbers in the first half of the eighteenth century. In the much less favourable conditions after 1750 such markets were still appearing in Awadh, Maharashtra and peninsular India. The presence of substantial yeoman-magnates cultivating their lands with day-labourers, share-croppers and large teams of ploughs has already been noted in Bengal, Benares and the south. This sort of development was often associated with growth of new centres of artisan production directed at mass regional markets.

The fine spread of new élites and flexible political institutions across the country following the waning of Mughal power sometimes intensified such changes. The putting out to 'farm' of revenues – denounced by the old school of Mughal political economist was associated with growth in western Awadh under the great manager Almas Ali Khan and the Maratha territories under the peshwas even in the last quarter of the century. Elsewhere military magnates and gentry encouraged the settlement of agricultural specialists in order to raise the revenue potential of their fiefs. Trader-bankers, far from being unproductive usurers, invested in shares in the open and flexible village economies of Rajasthan and western India, providing relief in the event of bad seasons.

To understand the political economy of eighteenth-century India, we must therefore make a distinction between economic institutions and economic cycles. After 1760 many unfavourable trends began to operate on regional economies, though these were certainly not universal. However, long-term development of commercialisation in India – of credit, of markets and of the significance of traders and moneylenders – continued. It was these forms which facilitated, even attracted, British intervention and conquest.

INDIAN CULTURE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

In the commercial world the decline of Mughal hegemony gave free rein to forms of entrepreneurship throughout the subcontinent, but the result was to intensify conflict. An analogy can be made here with

developments in religious and social life. The creation of successor states allowed to deepen the existing synthesis between the 'high religion' of the Brahmins and the Kuranic schools and particular forms of worship in different regions of India. However, rapid change also led to religious conflict and the creation of strong religious identities whose consequences flowed over into the colonial period.

Eighteenth-century Europeans were still impressed by the richness of the high traditions of Hindu and Muslim civilisations in India and intrigued by their popular forms. Sir William Jones who founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal (1784) and the Frenchman A. Anquetil Duperron venerated the Hindu scriptures as manifestations of antiquity comparable with the relicts of ancient Greece and Rome. But discourse about Indian culture was already set into trends which would produce the early Victorian denunciations of 'superstition and barbarism'. The supercilious William Tennant condemned the domestic economy of Hindus for corruption and superstition which he thought laid the basis for 'public tyranny'. Francis Buchanan whose topographies and accounts provided models for later amateur British ethnographers compared Hinduism unfavourably with the ascetic Buddhism which he had encountered in Burma. More modern oriental scholarship has ignored or dismissed the record of the eighteenth century since it apparently threw up no great devotional poets and teachers of the Hindu tradition comparable with those who had flourished in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: notably Chaitanya in Bengal and Kabir in north India. Even the doctrinal vitality of Sikhism seemed to diminish after the death of Guru Gobind Singh in 1708.

Yet for all this the eighteenth century was a period of creativity in Indian religious and cultural life, not a sultry pause before the 'rediscovery' of Hinduism and Islam in the next century. The centres of the learned and philosophical Hinduism retained great vigour. Contemporary political change provided its own incentive for cultural reinterpretation. In the south the Maratha court of Tanjore presided over an outpouring of poetry, religion and dance in the first half of the century which resulted from the fusion of the ancient Vaishnavism of the south with the Shaivism and north Indian influences of the new rulers. Benares, strengthened by the continuation of all-India pilgrimage patterns, was vitalised by the influx of southern and Deccan Brahmins: its teaching institutions were likened to a university by European visi-

tors. New centres of learning also grew up. In Bengal the patronage of local magnates enhanced the ancient Vaishnavite centre of Nadia as a centre of scholarship in Sanskrit and the Dayabhaga Hindu law. It was these flourishing traditions which were taken as exemplars of Hinduism by the scholars of the later part of the century who worked for British patrons or who had knowledge of the western critical textual traditions. So Henry Colebrooke worked with a Nadia Brahmin when he sought to draw up a 'code of Hindoo law'. Jonathan Duncan, British Resident of Benares, elicited fitful and suspicious interest from Benares pandits when he tried to establish the Benares Hindoo College. In the south Raja Serfoji of Tanjore, who had been educated by Danish missionaries, resurrected the literary and musical traditions of his immediate predecessors with the eye of an enlightenment scholar.

Eighteenth-century Muslim learned men also propagated a vigorous, developing tradition. This was not surprising in view of the rapid changes which took place in the political and economic circumstances of Indian Islam. The growing influence of the Shia sect, expressed particularly in the new court of Awadh, combined with a sense of unease among Sunni Muslims throughout the world to provoke a major reassessment of thought and practice. In Delhi the famous teachers Shah Waliullah and Shah Abdul Aziz spanned the century with their flow of tracts and analyses of Islam's contemporary weakness. Naqshbandiya sufi teachers sought to strengthen the faith through a *rapprochement* of the learned and mystical patterns of Islamic practice and had established a large number of teaching institutions in the imperial capital and its environs before 1800.¹⁶ In the Punjab there was a vigorous development of the Chishti sufi order associated with a series of famous teachers whose shrines became the moral heart of the lives of Punjab's Muslims. The expanding Muslim states of the Deccan and southern India also drew in learned men from the north. The Nawab of Arcot venerated and maintained Maulana Abdul Ali Bahr-ul Ulum, teacher from the famous Lucknow seminary of Firangi Mahal,¹⁷ as well as Maulana Baqir Agha, representative in Arcot of the learned traditions

¹⁶ W. Fusfeld, 'The shaping of sufi leadership in Delhi: the Naqshbandiyya Mujaddidiya, 1750–1920', unpub. Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1981.

¹⁷ F. C. R. Robinson, 'The *ulama* of Firangi Mahal and their *adab*', in B. D. Metcalf (ed.), *Moral conduct and authority. The place of adab in South Asian Islam* (Berkeley, 1984).

of the Deccan.¹⁸ Everywhere the state-builders of the eighteenth century sought the solace of holy men and built up Islamic libraries. Rohilla Afghans, for instance, maintained a close link with men of the Naqshbandi order. Everywhere the Afghans established petty kingdoms from Rampur in the north to Nellore in Tamilnadu the chain of pupil-teacher relationships was expanded.

But it was not just the formal, learned traditions within Hinduism and Islam which took on new patterns. Popular cults and shrines displayed remarkable vigour, often in accommodation with practices drawn from the high traditions. All Indian rulers sought to secure their domains by linking themselves to centres of religious power, Hindu, Muslim and even Christian. Again the mobile warrior bands of the age were particularly favourable to the syncretic styles of religious practice which crossed the boundaries of the great faiths. In the north the Marathas supported the important shrine of Sheikh Muin-uddin Chishti in Ajmer, already a shrine of popular veneration for the Hindus of Rajasthan. In the south the Hindu Rajas of Tanjore and the severely Calvinistic Dutch merchants supported the shrine of Shaikh Shahul Hamid of Nagore, centre of an integrated network of Hindu, Christian and Muslim shrines which attracted veneration from the mercantile people of the Coromandel coast. On the south-west coast the expansionist rajas of Travancore adopted ceremonies of kingship representing the highest Brahminical aspirations. Yet in the coronation ceremony of his neighbour, the Raja of Cochin, local Jewish and Christian merchant people played an important symbolic rôle.

Developments in the religious practices of the ordinary townsmen and countrypeople are most difficult to chart for the eighteenth century. Among Hindus the devotional or *bhakti* cults appear to have maintained the popularity they achieved in the preaching phase of the previous two centuries. Ordinary people became followers of the popular cults associated with the Rama and Krishna cults of north India. Based on towns such as Brindaban, Ajodhya and Muttra, devotional religion was spread through the medium of the developing Hindi language, popular festivals and popular art. Local warfare seems even to have enhanced the popularity of these cults and the ascetic orders associated with them. Ascetics (Gosains and Bhairagis) had

¹⁸ M. Y. Kokan, *Arabic and Persian in the Carnatic* (Madras, 1976) p. 148; Zakira Ghose, 'Baquir Agha's contribution to Arabic, Persian and Urdu literatures', unpub. M.Litt. diss., Madras University, 1973.

forged themselves into powerful armed brotherhoods; they were also able to accumulate large quantities of capital because of their corporate organisation. Peasants and farmers looked to them for protection and finance in adversity and even donated their children to them in times of famine. In the same way the deification by ordinary Hindu and 'tribal' peoples of eighteenth-century Muslim and Hindu warriors speaks again of the capacity of ordinary Hindus to incorporate into their belief and imaginative world dangerous forces from the outside.

Of course, it has been said that developments such as these were no more than the sterile elaborations of traditions which were incapable of creativity. But this too needs examination since it echoes the missionaries' castigation of the 'meaningless ramblings' of the Brahmins, besides assuming the need for modernisation along Western lines. In fact, several of the traditions elaborated in the eighteenth centuries had distinctly practical applications. The Islamic teaching course, the Darz-i-Nizamiya developed at Firangi Mahal, Lucknow, owed its popularity in part to the fact that it provided an excellent education for the type of man of business needed in the contemporary courts as registrars, judges and revenue agents. The Delhi reformers similarly spent much of their time debating matters of inheritance, usury, relations with non-Muslims, particularly apposite to a period of rapid change. Again, the Usuli branch of Shia Islam which became established in the Awadh court emphasised rationalistic discrimination in matters of religious practice, an approach well suited to a kingdom grappling with problems of finance and British penetration.¹⁹

Nor was Hindu learning and religion 'otherworldly' to the point that it stultified beneficial social and economic change. Literacy in parts of north India may have been low by wider Asian standards.²⁰ However, letters supposedly from a Brahmin to Danish missionaries in Tranquebar and observations from a century later describe a well-developed system of pandit schools throughout the Tamil country. If a boy picked up the arithmetical forms taught here:

He may do anything in accounts, and may earn a very handsome maintenance in these countries, especially if he is capable of being an accountant in the

¹⁹ J. R. I. Cole, 'Imami Shi'ism from Iran to North India', unpub. Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1983.

²⁰ J. R. Hagen, 'Indigenous society, the political economy and colonial education in Patna district. A history of social change, 1811–1951', unpub. diss., University of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1981, p. 284.

Pagods [local silver coins], where receipts and disbursements are very different, and therefore the more difficult [1717].²¹

This widespread practical literacy is consonant with the mobility of men of the ordinary Tamil agricultural castes into the position of managing agents (*dubashes*) for both the incoming Mughal government and later the British.

A similar picture emerges from art. This was not a period of unrelieved stagnation despite the collapse of the culture of the great Mughal cities. It was during these years that the great schools of Indian music entrenched themselves in the regional power centres in both north and south India. Carnatic music was given a great impetus in the courts of Tanjore, while the Afghans of Farrukhabad also established a major tradition. The representation of devotion to God Krishna within the small states of the north is attested to by the vitality of the painting of Kangra and Rajasthan which broke away from the formalism of Mughal miniature painting. Even the architecture of the new centres such as Lucknow or Hyderabad or the Arcot palace at Chepauk, once considered 'baroque' or 'degenerate', can be regarded as a creative response to western European styles and an abandonment of the sombre formalism of the Mughal tradition.

Along with this vitality went conflict. The foundation in 1699 of the Sikh warrior brotherhood, the Khalsa, gave an added edge of communal solidarity, sometimes even aggression, to a movement which hitherto had been syncretic and lacking in militancy. The decline of empire saw an increasingly bitter conflict between the Sunni and Shia branches of Islam, while the implications for relations between Hindus and Muslims of the many and varied movements of Islamic reform were doubtful. As in the realms of politics and the economy, creativity and conflict were deeply interconnected.

The eighteenth century in India was neither a period of universal collapse nor one of easy social transformation. It saw rather a resilient adaptation to political and economic conflict by élites, merchants, peasants and artisans which favoured some of these groups at the expense of others. The myth of universal anarchy and the fall of the Mughal empire has proved persistent in part because it seems to offer an easy explanation for the speed with which the British were able to

²¹ 'Mr. Phillips', *An Account of the religion, manners and learning of the people of Mala-bar* (London, 1717), p. 66.

penetrate and dominate a subcontinent which had held them at bay for so long. But a more balanced and less pessimistic view can also help to explain western domination. For these positive changes in Indian society also helped the British. The growing divorce between the authority and the power of the Mughal helped the East India Company to establish legitimacy within the Indian system. In the same way the military and commercial sophistication of the Indian scene could be turned to the Company's advantage. By paying regular and generous wages its agents could sweep into service men of the north Indian soldier castes; its protection could procure the support of merchant credit-networks; its formal adherence to the science of Indo-Persian justice and revenue management attracted the service of the literate gentry both Hindu and Muslim. At a humbler level the spread of the skills of management, of money-changing and money-use provided the colonialists with the keys to unlock the wealth of Indian rural society. By buying into revenue-farms, monopolies and the political perquisites which had been the stock in trade of the eighteenth-century kingdoms, Company servants and free merchants effectively made the transition between trade and dominion before the authorities in England knew what was afoot. It is to these developments that the next chapter turns.