



Knowing the Country: Empire and Information in India

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Knowing the Country: Empire and Information in India

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Kingsley Martin's critique of imperialism was born out of socialist rationalism and long overseas lecture tours. But in Leonard Woolf, his friend and periodic replacement at the offices of the *New Statesman*, we have a confidant who had, for several years before 1914, abandoned the rarefied circles of Bloomsbury, to become a civil administrator in Ceylon. Woolf's experience of colonial government had soured him from the beginning. He came to feel that the British were eternally shut out from knowledge of the lives of the Ceylonese subjects by an almost palpable curtain of ignorance and racial prejudice.¹ Those temples of accumulated colonial knowledge, the district offices where he worked, were 'great monuments of official incompetence, bottlenecks of delay'. When he tried to galvanize into action these places of sacred lore, the squeals of rage, from Briton and Ceylonese alike, were louder than if he had trespassed into the holiest Buddhist shrine. Yet, for all that, Woolf remained a devout believer in the individualist myth that sustained colonial rule: the ideal of the lone colonial officer and sage, standing at the centre of a web of untainted knowledge, the man who 'knows the country'. British rule might be saved from damnation if liberal judgement were based on pure information. The problem was that, at some level, information had to come from a

This paper was originally given in May 1990 as the annual Kingsley Memorial Lecture under the auspices of the Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge. I am greatly honoured that the Committee of Management asked me to give the lecture. I am indebted to my Cambridge colleagues for help, and especially, to Dr Susan Bayly, Dr Seema Alavi, Dr Katherine Prior and Dr Radhika Singha. I have also benefited from the comments of members of seminars at the Queen's University, Belfast, and the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Professor Michael Fisher has done pioneering work on the Persian newsletter system. It is hoped that our papers strengthen one another.

¹ L. Woolf, *Autobiography*, vol. i, 1880–1911, pp. 162–5.

'native informant', an agent, a spy, an 'approver' who turned King's Evidence, and, by their very nature, such agencies could not be trusted.

It is because of this dilemma, one feels, that the world of the news-collector, the spy and the exotic informant exercised such a strong fascination for the British mind in the East. It is a thread running through the few classics of Anglo-Indian literature. Meadows Taylor's, *Memoirs of a Thug*, published in 1839, concerns the secret lore of the stranglers. *Kim* was trained as a spy for the Great Game of espionage against the Russians in central Asia. John Masters, an underrated author, returned constantly to the theme of Englishmen or Eurasians who penetrated oriental knowledge in novels such as *The Night Runners of Bengal*, which concerns the Mutiny, and the *Venus of Konpara* which deals with the subtle machinations of 'tribal' people within a native state.

These literary themes had an early and classic statement in a revealing passage at the beginning of Sir John Kaye's great history of the Indian mutiny and rebellion of 1857–59. 'We know little of Native Indian society', he wrote,² 'beyond its merest externals, the colour of the people's skins, the form of their garments, the outer aspects of their houses. That History while it states broad results, can often only surmise causes . . .'. Indeed, 'our' ignorance was matched by 'their' subtle lines of information and secret knowledges. 'It is a fact that there is a certain description of news, which travels in India, from one station to another with a rapidity almost electric'; it conveyed 'an uneasy feeling—an impression that something had happened, "though they [the British] could not discern the shape thereof"'. It was as likely as not to have been conveyed by a venerable, bearded 'native of respectable aspect . . . who salaamed an English gentleman' from his ambling pony as he passed, though all the while he was the veritable 'messenger of evil'. The passage suggests that, for Kaye, the 'respectable native' is a Muslim *maulavi* or a learned servant of a native court. Kaye goes on later to implicate in clandestine communication that other great agent of malign intelligence for the British, 'the Dharma Sabha of Bengal', 'the Great Brahminical Institution'.³

The theme of this paper is the creation and atrophy of channels of information between subject and ruler in colonial south Asia, which made Empire possible, but also defined the roles of some important groups in its society. Yet this issue touches not only the British

² Kaye's and Malleson's *History of the Indian Mutiny of 1857–8*, i, Sir John Kaye (1897–98; reprint, London, 1971), 361.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 363.

Empire. Indigenous Indian polities, it will be argued, were constituted to an unusual degree through their networks of espionage and information collection, and peculiarly vulnerable to the distortion or contamination of these networks.

Here we can do little more than survey a large area of evidence and scholarship. But the paper suggests that to view south Asian society and its states from the perspective of the accumulation and transmission of information might bring significant benefits. This approach might help, for instance, to focus more usefully the debate between those who see south Asian regimes, including the British Raj, as loose, superficial structures and those who see in them powerful agents of centralization. Any 'centralization' of military or fiscal resources implies some prior collation of information about their distribution and the knowledge to determine their optimal use. So networks of information gathering, spies, informers and collators of gossip, were more than useful adjuncts to power and legitimacy. They were integral to them.

Again, an approach to the problems of south Asian government and society along these lines may help to demonstrate how 'oriental knowledge' was actually generated in detail, and to illuminate in particular the role of 'native informants' in its creation.⁴ How, and by whom, one might ask, were the 'decentred discourses' of Indian society 'centred' and formed into those knowledges which, it is asserted, sustained colonial power?

Intelligence Agencies in Indian Political Theory and Practice

Several historians have noted that traditional Indian sources consider the issue of intelligence and political communication in considerable detail. From the time of the *Artha Shastra*, Hindu texts elaborated on the importance of intelligence-gathering by ambassadors in enemy kingdoms, and of spies and informers within the home kingdom.⁵ The

⁴ See, e.g., Shahid Amin (ed.), W. Crooke, *A Glossary of North Indian Peasant Life* (reprint, Delhi, 1989), editor's introduction, pp. xxx–xxxiii; B. Cohn has been concerned with British knowledge of Indian society throughout his career: see, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi, 1987); more recently, 'The command of language and the language of command' in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies*, iv (Delhi, 1985). Dr Sandria Freitag has recently been writing on the approver (criminal informer) system in unpublished papers. For the anthropological interest in the 'native informant', M. Fisher, *Writing Culture* (London, 1988).

⁵ Wendy Doniger with Brian K. Smith (ed., trans.), *The Laws of Manu* (London, 1991), pp. 151, 225–6.

king's cunning knowledge (*rajniti*) was generated by his success in training his spies, his 'eyes and ears'. His enlightened knowledge (*buddhi*) was then to work on the pool of information created by able sleuths. For instance, a Hindu treatise of the fifteenth century A.D., derived ultimately from the *Artha Shastra*, remarked on the duties of ambassadors:

An ambassador should secretly communicate with the spies of his own lord stationed in places of pilgrimage, hermitages and temples, in the guise of hermits pretending to study the sastras [holy books].⁶

As, in a sacrifice priests are guided by the Vedic Sutras [chants or hymns], so the king can undertake any action guided by the spies. Spies should be carefully fashioned for their assignments like vessels for a ritual.⁷

Wandering spies may be of reckless type, mendicant or recluse type, sacrificer or black magician type and poisoner type, or in the guise of persons of noble character.⁸

Spies, then, are more than the 'low informers' of Tudor England, more even than the 'secret servants' of the Hanoverians; in the world of Indian statecraft they were a vital adjunct of kingship. Mobile spies, like a secret army, should concert with other intelligence agents and penetrate enemy coalitions at key points of social and political fracture. They should approach, particularly, 'disaffected officers, frontier guards and foresters'.⁹

This tradition, and the texts associated with it, highlight important aspects of Indian conceptions of surveillance, spying and information-collection. First, despite the popular conception that the Arthashastric tradition was 'machiavellian'—that is that it begins with an assumption that all men are 'evil'—there is no suggestion that covert political arts stand outside dharmic morality, let alone raj-dharma. Secondly, the tradition, by mentioning the Sutras, the Shastras and the Hindu holy places, indirectly associates one level of intelligence and information-gathering with brahminical or high caste status. By later convention, the best and 'most intelligent' spies were brahmins, whose activities could be masked by their residual priestly role. This was a tradition noted by Europeans, including the British, who in the later eighteenth century began to recruit Indian intelligence experts to their service.¹⁰

⁶ Rajendra Lal Mitra (ed.), *The Nitisara [Elements of polity] by Kamandaki* revised with an English translation by Sisir Kumar Mitra (Calcutta, 1982), p. 262.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

¹⁰ Note by Agnew to Sloper, ? 1787, regarding Col. Fullarton's reorganization of the Hircarrah System, Home Miscellaneous vol. 84, Oriental and India Office

On the other hand, the texts associate the king through tracking and spying during military campaigns with the forests, and by implication with 'tribal' people. Tribals (*atavika bala*) are mentioned as a branch of the royal army.¹¹ Yet the terms 'tribal' and 'forester' are inadequate translations. What is indicated in the texts is the inhabitants of the domain beyond the arable, the domain of magic, hunting, asceticism and the arts of tracking and spying on animals and man. Kings, and even gods, might take on the characteristics of huntsmen to track their enemies through the jungle. There are several occasions in the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* when gods and kings in double disguise penetrate the enemy's camp by pretending to be a 'forester'. Indeed, rather than being marginal, the domain of the forest lay quite close to the heart of kingship. Kings formed their armies, in part, from the men of the forests who traditionally added auspiciousness to his reign by placing the *tilak* mark on his brow and employing magic (a covert ritual art) and spying (a covert political art) on his behalf. In recent times a close relationship continued to exist between king and 'tribal'. For instance, there was a ritual and military bond between the Maratha kings and the Bhils,¹² and between the kings of north Malabar and the Kurichiyan and Kurumba hillmen. These people sustained the famous freedom-fighter Kerala Varma, the Palassi Raja, for many years in his guerrilla war against the British between 1798 and 1806, warning him of the enemy's approach and showing him the pathways.¹³

The great importance of surveillance and information-collection for Indian kingship was a reflection of social complexity. Despite its great size India was an information-rich society. From an early period large proportions of the population travelled long distances in connection with marriage, pilgrimage, and networks of trade and marketing.

Records, London (OIOR) (hereafter, Home Misc.), pp. 911–23; S. C. Hill's notes in the Home Misc. series catalogue records under this item that de Souza had also reported the employment of Brahmins as intelligence agents at the time of the first Portuguese contact with India.

¹¹ Mitra (ed.), *Nitisara*, pp. 389, 397 (but 'foresters' by their very nature are not to be trusted).

¹² A. M. Deshpande, *John Briggs in Maharashtra: A Study of District Administration under Early British Rule* (Delhi, 1987), pp. 70–110, briefly mentions arrangements between Maratha rulers and the Bhils; Briggs's report on Maratha–Bhil relations is in Pol. and Secret Cons. vol. 60, 22 June 1825, OIOR, cited in Stewart N. Gordon, 'Bhils and the Idea of a Criminal Tribe in Nineteenth-century India', in Anand A. Yang (ed.), *Crime and Criminality in British India* (Tucson, 1985), pp. 128–39.

¹³ William Logan, *Malabar* (reprint Madras, 1951), i, 542, 546, iii, 364–7, for Kurichiyan, Kurumbas and the Palassi Raja; see also, A. D. Luiz, *The Tribes of Kerala* (Delhi, 1962), p. 110; for a general narrative of the revolt, Home Misc. vol. 607.

Amongst the higher castes rules of endogamy and exogamy imposed patterns of long-distance marriage which required continued communication with distant towns and villages. The repute of the great all-India pilgrimage centres was spread by word of mouth and texts in their honour. From the sixteenth century at least bodies of pilgrims as large as 100,000 traversed huge distances from central and south India to attend the great centres of the Ganges.¹⁴ Money was generally used in these networks from the thirteenth century or before. The variety of local coinages did not imply a lack of economic integration. Flows of written communication between merchants dispersed and collected information on the prices of metals and produce, and on local events which might impinge on trade.

Even the physical means of transport were more developed than it might appear, at least during the dry season. The people of the north Indian plains had devised a variety of forms of fast wheeled transport using camels, ponies and small horses.¹⁵ River transport was also well developed. During the height of the Mughal empire there were more than 200,000 river boatmen on the route between Delhi and Bengal alone.¹⁶ On the eve of the introduction of railways a British postal official demonstrated that traffic on the major north Indian roads was considerably higher than that on European roads before the coming of the railways; as much as ten per cent of the population per annum was estimated to have undertaken a journey that required staying away at least one night.¹⁷ Social communication was proportionately dense. All the great Indian states and empires attempted to foster and organize these extensive networks through systems of runners and intelligence-gatherers (*harkaras* lit. 'do-alls', factotums, and *kasids*, Arabic for runner).¹⁸ Along with the provision of mints, or of rest-houses and serais for merchants, the smooth functioning and protection of the runner system was itself an important manifestation of successful kingship.

However, flows of information and news were unevenly distributed in space, in time, and between different social groups. For one thing,

¹⁴ See, e.g., S. M. Bhardwaj, *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India. A Study in Cultural Geography* (Berkeley, 1973); K. H. Prior, 'The British Administration of Hinduism in North India, 1780–1900', unpubl. Ph.D. diss., University of Cambridge, 1990.

¹⁵ J. Deloche, 'Wheeled Transport in North India', paper given at the Leiden-Amsterdam conference on technology transfer, June 1991.

¹⁶ H. K. Naqvi, *Urban Centres and Industries in Upper India* (London, 1968).

¹⁷ [A. Postmaster], *Project for a Railway in India* (London, 1846), pp. 10–20.

¹⁸ H. Yule and A. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson* (London, 1903), pp. 430, 262–3; H. H. Wilson, *A Glossary of Judicial and Revenue Terms* (London, 1855), p. 199.

the monsoons had a profound impact. During a full four months of the year—from late May to September in north India—roads were often impassable, warfare changed tempo, trade and pilgrimage were severely curtailed. By tradition the king retreated into his monsoon palace, adopting a reclusive, almost priestly character and storing up spiritual energy. The cycle of social and ritual life slowed almost to a dead stop. Information from outside was often reduced to a trickle. Small kingdoms went through an annual metamorphosis. A British report of 1799 contends that it was necessary to more than double the numbers of runners on a given communications route during the monsoons;¹⁹ even during the dry season runners should be no more than six miles apart in difficult terrain.²⁰

The great aspirants to continental empire, the Mughals in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the Marathas and the British in the eighteenth century, could not afford the luxury of this altered state. Their armies and siege trains had to be ready to move to a specified place immediately the rains ended to snuff out the enemy coalitions that took to plunder as the floods went down. Otherwise the campaigning season was too short. Worse, they would lose control of the first or autumn harvest upon which all wealth and power depended. These Indian emperors crossed the Rubicon not once, but every year as the flood plains dwindled. In order to know where to dispatch their massive forces, and against whom, in this annual military gamble, the great kings desperately needed regular and prior news reports despatched by secret pathways which bypassed the floods.

Secondly, the cultural, linguistic and religious heterogeneity of the country put a premium on accurate intelligence. India was a densely-knit society, never a ‘subsistence economy’ for at least two millennia. But information tended to pass along specialist networks in inaccessible forms. Merchants, for instance, had their professional knowledge. While account books had attained a pattern common to most parts of India by the seventeenth century, individual merchant groups and families within them, employed different types of merchant shorthand and argot (*mahajani*) which cloaked their secrets. Travelling Islamic sufi mystics or Hindu ascetics on pilgrimage, carried large quantities

¹⁹ W. Palmer, Resident at Poona to Lord Mornington, 6 July 1799, Home Misc. vol. 574.

²⁰ Resdt Mysore to Sec. Govt, Fort St George, 20 Nov. 1799, ‘Refusal of the Peshwa to admit the establishment of a post through their territory’, 1659, Board’s Collections, OIOR (hereafter BC).

of information, but their networks did not merge, even if they crossed. Periodic migrants carried information about particular communities in local languages. Public knowledge, if we can call it that, was dense, but it was specialized and the lines of communication which brought it were fragmented. Empires and states therefore positioned newswriters and spies carefully, to tie together bundles of information from different cultural networks, and to pass them to the centre, the imperial cities or camps.

Surveillance and Moral Suasion: The Heart of Indian Government

Under the Emperor Akbar, the flow of information was at times very rich. Even Aurangzeb, who tried in his first twenty years to reconsolidate the Empire on personal loyalties and Islamic piety, received huge quantities of written reports. Consequently, resources could be collected and used effectively. By contrast, the failure of Empire after 1680 was reflected in, possibly even implicated with, a failure of knowledge, of the flow of information, and of the central ruling elite's canny understanding of local circumstances. The same can be said about the more effective of the 'successor states' of the Mughal dominion through to the kingdom of Ranjit Singh in the early nineteenth century.

The formal structure has often been described.²¹ Imperial newswriters (*the waqyanavis*) collected and processed the information collected by the newswriters placed in every subdistrict throughout the Empire. These men wrote regular reports on the doings of officials and local magnates, on plunderers and malefactors, occasionally on the affairs of merchants. They gathered material from other officials: local judges and the officers commanding in the cities. The emperors and provincial governors also maintained sets of secret agents and writers (*the khufia navis*) who could act as a check on the other writers and postal officials.²² The newsreports (*akhbarat*) were copied to the imperial centre and to other officials. Officials routinely divulged their contents to other literate men, so that the contents of the weekly or even daily newsreport, fleshed out in private newsreports and mer-

²¹ M. A. Nayem, *Evolution of Postal Communications and Administration in the Deccan (from 1294 A.D. to the Formation of the Hyderabad State in 1724 A.D.)* (Hyderabad, 1969), provides one of the best overviews; *Ain-i-Akbari*, trans. Francis Gladwin as *Ayeen Akbery or the Institutes of the Emperor Akber* (London, 1800), i, 213.

²² Nayem, *Postal Communications*, p. 5.

chant letters, were the main item of discussion in the morning bazaar. As in the Hindu texts on kingship, so in the great administrative manuals of the empire, including the *Ain-i-Akbari*, the function and duties of the newswriters are detailed with care. Fragmented and increasingly farmed out to private hands, this system was still capable of mobilizing a huge amount of information as late as the 1850s, when the newsreports were still being read by the oriental linguists of the English East India Company. The mass of official documents and orders along with private letters was transported across the country by a dense network of runners and camel *harkaras* maintained by village cesses or by the funds of private individuals. Akbar reorganized the runner or *harkara* system and strengthened the powers of the networks of *dak darugas* or 'postmasters general' who forwarded official letters and reports alongside private ones.²³

The effectiveness of the system depended not only on the loyalty, conscientiousness and sophistication of the personnel who manned it, but also on the social context in which it was set. At the height of the Mughal Empire in north India, literacy in both reading and writing was probably not notably high by east Asian or European standards. Judging by the situation in the late eighteenth century, admittedly after a century of political flux, and only in north India, perhaps 8% to 10% of the adult male population could read and write.²⁴ Yet the interleaving of Hindu commercial intelligence and book-keeping with the tradition of Indo-Muslim aristocratic literacy made the pool of talent a powerful one. Nor in this culture was the collection of information divorced from more abstract and structured thought. Important Mughal historians, for instance, were sons or relatives of newswriters.²⁵ Practical skills such as accountancy (*siyiq*) attracted increasing numbers of manuals.²⁶ Local descriptions and histories, once rather formal lists of holy men, rulers, climes and products in the Islamic classical style, appear to have become more complex, and more cognisant of local economic and social conditions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.²⁷

²³ M. F. Lokhandawala (ed., trans.), *Mirat-i-Ahmadi* (Baroda, 1965), pp. 357–8.

²⁴ Little work has been done on this issue but see J. Hagen, 'Indigenous Society . . . and Education in Patna District, 1811–1951', unpubl. diss. University of Virginia, 1981.

²⁵ A. Schimmel, *Islamic Literatures of India; History of Indian Literature*, viii, i (Wiesbaden, 1973), 47.

²⁶ *Siyiq* or accountancy was a science which linked the world of the Hindu merchant and the Muslim *mutsaddi* or manager.

²⁷ C. Curwen (ed.), *The Balwantramah or Tuhfa-i-Toza* (Allahabad, 1875) and

The world of the Indo-Islamic literati was not only subject to a system of reportage, it also initiated a dialogue on rights and duties with its rulers. The local memorial attested often by 'the Sheikhs, Sayyids, *karoris* [local office-holders] and *mahajans* [respectable merchants] of a locality incorporated and enhanced the sense of the neighbourhood, of the *qasbah* and its dependencies.²⁸ Such memorials (*mahzars* and *surathals*)²⁹ were not simply by-products of 'government'; they were the essence of righteous rule, a dialogue on rights and duties between subject and ruler. The ideology of *sharia* afforded by Hindu and local custom was the informing spirit of the state. Terms such as 'recalcitrant' and 'stiff-necked' seen in these documents were not simply terms of abuse, they were statements that the zamindars and magnates referred to lay outside the discourse of Timurid rule and Mughal respectability. The good subject was to submit himself voluntarily to the will of the ruler, as a son to a father, or a believer to God.

Systems which historians have tended to classify as 'administration' and 'police' are better seen as agencies of surveillance and persuasion, and both exhortation and information-collection were equally important. The hierarchy of rural 'police' running down from the circle chief (*daroga*) to the inspector (*thanadar*), the armed constable (*barkandazi*), and police *harkara* was one such agency. In major cities the *kotwal* headed a similar chain of command which connected with the watchmen of the different city quarters.³⁰

Indo-Persian political culture had also thrown up more specialized surveillance systems. Two important examples of these were irrigation canal guards and moral regulators (*muhtasibs*). Canal guards for the great Ali Mardan Khan system near Delhi were drawn from the Rajput communities of the eastern Gangetic plain (the *Purbiyas*). This was probably an attempt to avoid collusion on the part of the guards with local zamindars who were constantly seeking to make illegal

Khairuddin Muhammad Illahabadi, 'Tarikh-i-Jaunpur' (trans.), Cambridge University Library, MSS; cf. for a statistical and topographical work similar to that of European contemporaries, Bahadur Singh, 'Yadgar-i-Bahaduri', MS Add. 30786, British Library.

²⁸ G. N. Saletore (ed.), *A Calendar of Oriental Records: U.P. State Records Series*, iii, pp. 1–13 for examples of *mahzars* from 1658–1813.

²⁹ See Wilson, *Glossary* p. 494; *surathals* were still in use, attested by the law officers and *raises* in the early days of British rule; see, e.g., attested *suratal* from Pargana Daroga Cowreea Telhanee, 12 Oct. 1803, 'Disturbances in the Conquered and Ceded Provinces', 2954, Board's Collections, F/4/169, IOL (hereafter, BC).

³⁰ Statements by the Indian judges of Mirzapur and Benares on the 'police' of the cities, 1786–90, published in G. N. Saletore (ed.), *Banaras Affairs*, i (Allahabad, nd.), pp. 63–138.

cuttings in the canals and drain off the water.³¹ The *muhtasib*'s function or duty of moral surveillance was reinforced by Aurangzeb in the late seventeenth century.³² His target was drinkers, prostitutes, eunuch-makers, hoarders, forestallers, forgers, and others who violated God's law. However, as the famous eighteenth-century Bengali statesman Hakim Reza Khan acknowledged, the rigorous application of *sharia* by the *muhtasib* agency was impossible given the constant complaints of the 'tribe of Hindus'.³³

There is little early evidence on the detailed working of these systems, but written correspondence between darogas and their subordinates during the early stages of the Gurkha War, 1814–16, in Gorakhpur, Tirhut and adjoining parts of Awadh, reveals the surveillance authorities at work before British rule had significantly altered their operations.³⁴ Surprisingly, even the lower levels of these officials communicated with their seniors by letter, and filed complex reports. The constable or *daroga's harkaras* in turn gleaned their information from community watchmen (*pasobans*)³⁵ and also from 'foresters' (*bantirias*).³⁶ These were persons, often from hunting and pastoralist backgrounds themselves, who held land revenue grants in the Terai in

³¹ G. Blane, Superintendent of the Canal, to Ochterlony, Resident at Delhi, N. K. Sinha (ed.), *Selections from Ochterlony Papers (1818–25) in the National Archives of India* (Calcutta, 1964), pp. 122–35. Blane mentions 'Buxarie' and 'Porubee' mutsaddis and bildars associated with the Mughal Daroga of the canal in the early eighteenth century; J. F. Richards (ed.), *Document Forms for Official Orders of Appointment in the Mughal Empire* (Cambridge, 1986), doc. 224b.

³² M. Z. Siddiqi, 'The Muhtasib under Aurangzeb', *Medieval India Quarterly* 5 (1963), 113–19.

³³ Murshidabad Procs, 2 July 1771, Range 69, OIOR, cited in A. M. Khan, *The Transition in Bengal. A Study of Sayid Mahomed Reza Khan* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 279.

³⁴ See, e.g., report from the Daroga of Bansee 20 Jan., 1815, Home Misc. 651, OIOR, ff. 625, and extensive correspondence between inferior 'police' officials in British territory in Awadh in Home Misc. 649.

³⁵ *Pasobans* were often Pasis, a ritually low caste in Hindustan; another village spy and the runner, associated with the *patwari*, who often appears in the correspondence was the *goret*. Runners (*daurias* here) of the *dak* in pre-colonial Benares were supposed to be Chamars, a low caste, but in the cities Chamars had apparently compounded their service and had people employed on the sums they raised (see, Saletore (ed.), *Banaras Affairs*, i, p. 88, reply by Ibrahim Ali Khan. In Maharashtra village watchmen were Mahars who removed dead cattle, ran errands for village officers, kept watch on the village property and 'were generally principal witnesses in disputes about boundaries of fields, etc.' (I. Karve and V. Dandekar, *Anthropometric Measurements of Maharashtra* (Poona, 1951), p. 35); this association of the lowest level of information collection with low caste, or outcaste tribal status, paralleling the role of the Brahmin at the apex, also applied to runners, see below fn. 69).

³⁶ Translation of a Report from Daroga of Pallee, Gorakhpur, 28 Dec. 1814, Home Misc. 649; for *bantiria*, see Wilson, *Glossary*, p. 157.

return for their services as intelligence agents. The *daroga* and his men also made use of the informal networks of information run by the local landholders, the pupils of Vaishnavite 'monasteries' and people going on pilgrimage. In fact, the whole operation bore a remarkable similarity to the one described in the arhashastric texts.

Some preliminary points about the role of intelligence-gathering in pre-colonial polities do seem to emerge. Intelligence was designed to alert the ruler to infractions of moral law and true obedience rather than simply to punish 'crime'. For the latter was really the preserve of the community. The agents of intelligence were also the agents of persuasion and compromise, the men who sought to reassure the populace of the omniscience of the emperor's gaze. To this end the armed constable carried the badge of the emperor (the *mohur* or royal image). John Richards recently described the Mughal system as a 'powerful' and 'centralising' one.³⁷ Others, from contemporary observers to recent historians, have seen it as weak and ineffective. The impression of weakness has arisen partly because people have assumed that the absorption of a vast amount of revenue in 'collection charges' and service grants was similar to what the British in the nineteenth century saw as 'defalcations from the revenue': dead losses to the state. However, if we see Indo-Persian 'administration' as an exercise in surveillance and persuasion, then its workings indeed seem powerful, flexible, and intricate. It resembled a delicate filature of information and guidance threading in and out of complex local patterns of communication and loyalty. On the other hand, the weakness of the system was its over-dependence on a few key individuals and their loyalty, and on a general inclination to submit to royal authority. The boundary between flexibility and breakdown could be easily crossed.

There is one final point about the language of communication in detail within the lower echelons of the state: description by caste played an important if not yet dominant part in it. In the ordinary language of *mahzars* and *surathals*, caste names are used routinely, especially for the poor and for Hindus.³⁸ In the *darogas'* cor-

³⁷ Richards, *Document Forms*, p. 10; for the alternative view, e.g. as early as 1678, Charnock wrote that the 'King's *husbul-hukm* [exalted order] is of as small value as an ordinary governor's', cited in Ian Bruce Watson, *Foundation for Empire. English Private Trade in India, 1650-1760* (Delhi, 1980), p. 284.

³⁸ See, e.g., Arzee of Thanadar of Lowtun (?) nr. Nichlour, 13 Jan. 1815, Home Misc. 651, pp. 460-1. Here the Thanadar's and Daroga's reports list the castes of villagers who have lost their property to the Nepalis; cf. Saletore, *Oriental Records*, iii, 34 (sale deed, 1677), 50 (agreement, 1801); in documents such as these, caste attribu-

respondence caste names are one part of a grid which also includes landholding status and Mughal conceptions of honour and respectability. The use of all these social markers made it possible for an official or a resident body to convey to the ruler very precise social information—the feel of a village or a local conflict—with great ease and dispatch. Before jumping to conclusions about the colonial ‘creation’ of caste categories, historians and sociologists might well note that caste description had already become an aspect of administrative language in pre-colonial states, and one which was abstracted from hierarchical relations in the locality.

From the locally resident bodies of scholars and officials the information networks available to the state threaded out into the wider society: bazaar writers, beggars, holy men, midwives, informers, professional forgers, prostitutes and temple-dancers plied information-rich trades between communities and regions. Within communities, in turn, barbers, midwives, bards and the messengers of caste panchayats trafficked in the information which kept the community itself informed and self-conscious. From time to time, these agencies were coopted into the service of indigenous and colonial authority. Indeed, the source of the power and influence of several problematic groups or categories in Indian society becomes clearer if we consider them in relation to transactions in information. Here three groups, already alluded to, seem noteworthy: religious specialists and astrologers, women and so-called Indian tribal people.

The Sufi orders, those mystical adepts of Islamic knowledge, played an important part in indigenous medicine. They gave counsel to the barren, disturbed and mentally-ill, but had their finger on the pulse of the whole social body.³⁹ Astute kings and nobles took trouble to consult their assessments of local feeling as well as their religious knowledge. Manucci, the Venetian, mentions the throngs of ‘worldly mendicants’ (*fakhirs*) who made assignations and passed information, especially among the women’s quarters of the great households.⁴⁰ Again, astrologers and sooth-sayers, a critical social group unduly ignored by scholars, provided a vast private intelligence service on day-to-day matters, as well as the motions of the stars: ‘even the bazaars swarm with these folk, and by this means they find out all tions are used unsystematically, but by the 1830s they are invariably used in criminal cases.

³⁹ Sudhir Kakar, *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors. A Psychological Enquiry into India and its Teaching Traditions* (Delhi, 1982).

⁴⁰ Niccolao Manucci, *Storio do Mogor, or Mogul India, 1653–1703. Translated by W. Irvine* (London, 1907), ii, 11–12.

that passes in the houses.⁴¹ Some groups acahieved quite an extraordinary geographical range. The *unani hakims* or itinerant doctors of Peshawar ventured annually as far afield as Bokhara and the Deccan, dispensing medicine, spiritual advice and magical spells. One of the most knowledgeable groups in Indo-Muslim society, they were successfully pumped for information by members of Elphinstone's mission to Kabul, 1808–11.⁴²

In a society characterized by extended marriage networks and upper-class polygamy, women in general were a critical source of intelligence, not simply carriers of wealth or political alliance. Women retained connections and sources of information in their far-distant home territories. Newsreports were read in princely harems;⁴³ royal ladies were judged by their ability to act as intermediaries in diplomatic manoeuvring; the emperors married often, and with care, to maximize intelligence as much as to secure support. Within communities midwives could convey and collect information, usually hidden from the eyes of the male ruler. In fact, women's influence in pre-colonial society was greatly enhanced by their access to, and collation of, political and community information.

As we have suggested, one of the richest sources of all were the so-called 'tribal people' of the Indian subcontinent. This 'difficult category' of nomads, hunter-gatherers, archers and people who just don't fit into anybody else's models, are often defined in both histories and anthropologies as outsiders. They were supposedly cut off from Hindu and Muslim society by language, religion or kinship structure. At best they are conceded military prowess and the capacity to make dangerous magic. Yet, paradoxically, until recent times 'tribals' were found right at the heart of state power. It becomes easier to understand them if we consider the cunning skills they had, and could deploy in the wider society. Tribal people knew the paths, the routeways, the products of the forest, the care of animals, the backways, the location of water and forage, the quickest way to move men and information from one place to another: not surprising, then, that the classical texts refer to tribal people as another critical limb of army and state.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, i, 213.

⁴² Reports on Elphinstone's mission to Kabul, Home Misc. 658, f. 383.

⁴³ Nayeem, *Postal Communications*, p. 6, notes that the intelligence reports were generally read by the Mughal Emperor at night in his private quarters; rulers had traditionally used marriage to wives from different regions to increase knowledge and surveillance, see e.g., H. K. Sherwani, *The Bahmanis of the Deccan* (Hyderabad, 1953), pp. 144–5.

One particular group, the Bedas⁴⁴ of the central Indian plateau are an instructive case. They played an important part in the emergence of the kingdom of Mysore to subcontinental power in the eighteenth century, but also founded their own ruling houses. On the face of it, it is difficult to understand them at all. They appear at different points as hunters, archers, sappers and miners, and as magicians; their women are sometimes temple dancers and courtesans. What was most important was not their lineage structure, relative purity, or magical prowess—the staples of historical anthropology—but the fact that all their activities formed an interlocking package of skills in information, spying, and the use of long-distance connections. As ‘foresters’ their knowledge of wood made them adepts at archery and the making of props for siege tunnels. Their movement with armies made it possible for them to place their women as temple dancers or as great men’s concubines. Since the ability to read songs and ballads was a prerequisite for a successful singer and dancer, these women were among the few members of their sex who were both literate and had regular access to men.⁴⁵ They became an important information network. ‘Tribal’ people were also disproportionately represented among the official runners and spies. The spy-masters appear to have been Brahmins or Muslims operating from large cities, mosques and temples. But the runners themselves were drawn from tribal people such as the Ramnad Kallars in south India,⁴⁶ Bhils and Kolis in the west, and Kurumbas in the southwest.⁴⁷

Caste, class, ‘tribe’, state, ‘colonial discourse’—all those incubuses of Indian history and anthropology, and presumably of the sociology of other societies too—appear in a significantly different light from the vantage point of transactions in information and special knowledge.

Information and Political Decline

What of limitations and decay of Indian states? The argument is not simply that the decay of information was an important and revealing

⁴⁴ *History of Ayder Ali Khan Nabob-Behadur*, by N.N.D.L.T. [de la Tour] (London, 1784), i, 40 on the ‘Bayaderes’; cf. Hamilton Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, etc.* (London, 1811), i, 178–9.

⁴⁵ See Balfour’s *Encyclopedias of Southern Asia . . .* (Madras, 1873), i, 925, ‘Deva Dasa’.

⁴⁶ Fullarton’s Hircarrahs, Home Misc. 84.

⁴⁷ Tribal people from the Western Ghats were employed as runners and escorts of the pepper crop along the hill routeways; later they were recruited as guides and pioneers in the war against the Palassi Raja. W. Logan, *Malabar Gazetteer*, iii, 364–7; Home Misc. 607; cf. *Mirat-i-Ahmadi*, p. 780.

aspect of what is called the decline of the Mughals. But more: that Indian polities (and here I would include the East India Company) were *peculiarly* vulnerable to the decline of their agents of information; that the Mughals' access to knowledge, for instance, may in some cases have decayed more rapidly than their military or financial resources.

The first point is the simple one: that the links between the rich pools of local information and the imperial centre were highly vulnerable. The colonies of literate men planted in a huge hinterland—the men who provided the newsreports and memorials—were sometimes easily isolated and silenced. After 1670, the Mughal Empire foundered into crisis in central India. It was fighting the powerful mobile army of the Hindu Marathas. The Marathas, a fighting peasant alliance, rich in local knowledge, were able to intercept the imperial messengers, suborn the merchant firms and their postal systems, and displace the newswriters and imperial agents from the networks of small towns. Despite the large amount of information mobilized by surveillance agencies at their height, the emperor might find himself without 'eyes or ears'.⁴⁸

More ominously, the sectional interests of the information-gatherers might pollute and frustrate the imperial system itself. John Fryer, who visited the Emperor in the 1680s, remarked that the great nobles and administration 'live[d] lazily and in pay',⁴⁹ during the protracted campaigning. They had an interest in keeping the war spluttering on. So did the newswriters and literati whose wealth and influence were sustained by war. 'Notwithstanding all the formidable numbers' of the Mughal army, 'while the generals and *Vocanovices* [newswriters] consult to deceive the Emperor, on whom he depends for a true state of things',⁵⁰ the Emperor could never deliver a decisive blow. When, in 1683, the Moghuls stumbled into war with the English East India Company, the Emperor claimed, probably quite genuinely, that he simply had not been informed that serious conflicts had arisen between the English factors and his local governors.⁵¹ Both parties were attempting to conceal their illicit profits.

⁴⁸ J. N. Sarkar, *The House of Shivaji* (Delhi, 1940), p. 150, Shivaji was able to use merchant networks to convey his jewellery and private notes between Agra and Aurangabad. The Emperor sent messengers to search all fakhirs and tried to close the ghats (presumably through his Bhil feudatories).

⁴⁹ J. Fryer, *A New Account of the East Indies and Persia* (reprint London, 1909), ii, 49, 52, cited in Ian Bruce Watson, *Foundation for Empire. English Private Trade in India, 1659–1760* (New Delhi, 1980), p. 282.

⁵⁰ Fryer, *New Account*, ii, 52.

⁵¹ Watson, *Foundation*, p. 283.

Thirdly, overstrained imperial agents of control seem to have been diverted into the pursuit of information of a largely symbolic or ideological sort. One need not assume, of course, that the newswriter or memorialist system was ever simply a matter of practical reason or an empirical data-search. It was always, in part, a symbolic affirmation of the omnipresence of the imperial gaze. The Emperors wanted prior warning of faction and disorder not so much to administer but to anticipate infractions of religious law and insults to royal honour. After 1671 the Emperor Aurangzeb devoted an important part of his intelligence system, including the revived *muhtasib* agency, to extirpating moral crime, particularly drinking and the propagation of false Islamic beliefs. What might be called an 'information panic' set in. The functioning of the intelligence agencies of the Empire were set lumbering off at a tangent in the search for 'drinkers' and 'heretics', as the bases of legitimacy of the empire were reorientated.⁵²

Such weaknesses and distortions might be fatally intertwined as they were in the Punjab where, after 1704, the Mughals were grappling with the formidable Sikhs. Rumours were heard that Hindu newswriters had connived with the Sikhs, and were allegedly denying the imperial armies vital information about the whereabouts of the enemy's cavalry forces. The centre therefore ordered that all Hindus, many of whom were Khattris with contacts to the local business communities and the Sikh Panth itself, should be dismissed from the office of newswriter, and that all newswriters should be forced to have their beards cut in the Muslim style.⁵³ Hereafter, the imperial forces were steadily worn down and defeated in the Punjab. Muzaffar Alam's work suggests that, in important respects, this was because they no longer knew what was happening, estranged as they were from a set of people who had unique access to both political and commercial intelligence.

Clearly problems of the raising and deployment of resources remained central to the failure of the Timurid empire. In Rajasthan during the imperial crisis following Aurangzeb's death imperial ambassadors and informants progressively failed to perform their surveillance duties because the centre was unable to mobilize the will and resources to pay them.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the speed of the Mughal

⁵² Richards, *Document Forms*, no. 230b ('abolisher of forbidden beliefs').

⁵³ Muzaffar Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India* (Delhi, 1986), pp. 197–9.

⁵⁴ G. D. Sharma (ed.), *Vakil Reports Mahrajgan (1693–1712 A.D.)* (New Delhi, 1987), see, e.g., nos 68, 78, 79, 81, 86.

debacle is still in need of explanation, particularly since some historians have painted a rosy picture of its health as late as 1700. It may well be that a system whose effectiveness depended so heavily on the twin tactics of surveillance and persuasion was liable to degenerate particularly fast when a few key men, albeit deeply rooted in the community, were removed. To return again to the Gurkha war episode, when this system was still working in the fringes of the province of Awadh, it is notable that the Gurkhas themselves went to considerable trouble to seize the *darogas* and *thanadars* in person.⁵⁵ If these eyes, ears and representatives of the enemy state could be eliminated, the whole delicate politics of moral suasion of communities would unravel.

Surveillance and Control: The Eighteenth Century

With the decline of the Mughal empire, the centrally controlled system of newswriters began to disintegrate. In its place a multilateral system, linking together the major post-Mughal polities, began to emerge. The great rulers—the Nawab Vazir, the Nizam, the Marathas and the East India Company—all continued to maintain *vakils* or ambassadors, and alongside them newswriters, at each others' courts. Official newswriters appointed by the respective rulers disseminated information on the courts' daily round, its devotions and major political events. In parallel with this, newswriters assigned by the foreign powers also transmitted private political information to their employers. Confidential agents working on behalf of states, and individual political leaders, submitted further political intelligence and undertook secret missions for their principals. The complex factional politics of the eighteenth century depended on an intricate underpinning of agencies of information—and disinformation—staffed at the senior levels by Muslim literati and Hindu pensmen, mainly Kayasthas and Khattris.

The emergence of regional states within the penumbra of Mughal legitimacy did not necessarily bring about the breakdown of those patterns of inter-regional communication which were accessible at least to the more privileged subjects. Postal systems spanned regional and local states, though, with the decline of Mughal authority, conflicts over their control could be intense. Right at the end of the

⁵⁵ See, e.g., translation of a report from Motilal, Thanadar of Natchloul, 25 Jan. 1815, encl. in R. Martin to John Adam, 29 Jan. 1815, Home Misc. 649.

century, for instance, Muhammad Waris was daroga of the dak at Cuttack. His establishment of runners regularly sent the letters of the Cuttack agents of local Indian bankers to their Agarwal principals in upper India.⁵⁶ He also despatched the letters of the Maratha rulers of Orissa throughout eastern India. In due course, he had been appointed postmaster by the British to link together their agencies in Madras and Bengal. In this way tacit agreements by ruling powers to patronize the same postmasters could keep an integrated mail and intelligence system working. But there were strains. Muhammad Waris, a wealthy shipowner and trader,⁵⁷ flourished until he was inveigled by the British into intercepting and passing on to them the Maratha mails. When the Maratha governor of Cuttack accidentally got to know of this, he seized Muhammad Waris's property and threatened to blow him from a gun. Nevertheless, interstate postal systems such as this continued to cross huge distances and zones of war. Despite a generation of troubles throughout the northwest, in 1808 the runner from Kabul still brought newsletters and information to Benares in forty days. He was able to report on events even further to the west in Persia.⁵⁸

Some disruption to long-distance communication inevitably occurred. Agents working within the ambit of the Mughal political culture, for instance, appear to have found it difficult to obtain reliable information on events occurring in the Punjab or the Jat territories for long periods of the eighteenth century.⁵⁹ Merchants were sometimes unable to maintain commercial relations over relatively short distances when war had interdicted the movement of commercial letters. In 1801–03, for instance, it was difficult to procure in Benares a credit note on Muttra and Agra only a few hundred miles away.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ 'Donation to Mohamed Wauris in consequences of the losses he sustained in the performance of his duty as Dawk Moonshee of Cuttack', Aug. 1808, 5444, BC F/4/236.

⁵⁷ Examination of Mahomed Wauris, *ibid.*

⁵⁸ Edmonstone to Elphinstone, 5 Dec. 1808 encloses, T. Brooke, Benares, to Edmonstone, 20 June 1808, Home Misc. 657; Edmondstone's minute, 'Memorandum respecting the credibility of the supposed intrigue between Raja Ranjeet Singh and Amrut Row', 28 Aug. 1808. Home Misc. 592. There were doubts whether the runner could actually have travelled these vast distances (Lahore Benares in 35 days; Kabul Agra in 38 days) in the time stated, but not that communications were still open.

⁵⁹ S. Gole (ed.), *Maps of Mughal India drawn by Col. Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Gentil ...* (London, 1988). Gentil's maps, drawn from indigenous local sources, have almost no information relating to the Jat territories.

⁶⁰ Agent to the Governor-General, Benares to Military Secretary to Commander in Chief, 25 Nov. 1804, Benares, Agency Proceedings, U.P. Central Record Office, Allahabad.

Within their respective territories, the regional states attempted to maintain or enhance the existing methods of surveillance and suasion. Awadh and Bengal deepened the newswriter and *muhtasib* systems alongside effective postal services until they were eroded or closed down after British annexation. The British, for instance, considered Shuja-ud Daulah, Nawab of Awadh, 'the best informed man in Hindostan'. In the state of Jaipur, a dense volume of reporting on revenue and political matters reached the court until about 1755.⁶¹ Rulers also continued to manipulate informal networks of communication with great skill. In Mysore, Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan appear to have made good use of the extensive contacts of sufi brotherhoods⁶² to gather information and even recruits for their military activities. At the same time they tapped into the special knowledge of the 'tribal' people of the Deccan upland.

How did the widespread resort of the regional states to the practice of 'farming-out' revenue to great magnates affect the flow of information? This policy was designed to maximize revenue and minimize the risks of collection in times of adversity. But one of its many disadvantages was that it might erode the knowledge-base of ruler. It may be significant, for instance, that the decline in regular reporting by local officials to the Jaipur durbar after 1750 coincided with the entrenching in the state of the revenue-farming system.⁶³ Again, in Awadh after 1775, the regime appears to have colluded in staunching the flows of revenue and political information from the outlying revenue-farming magnates precisely in order to deny the British knowledge of where the state's resources were hidden.⁶⁴ What happened to the local newswriter system in areas ruled by revenue-farmers remains unclear. However, it is interesting to note that one of the baits offered to the British by a would-be usurper of the throne of Awadh in 1807 was that, along with customs receipts, the Company would have newswriters 'stationed with every aumil [revenue-farmer]'.⁶⁵ This was an

⁶¹ M. Bajekal, 'The State and the Rural Grain Market in Eighteenth-century Eastern India', in S. Subrahmanyam (ed.), *Merchants, Markets and the State in Early Modern India* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 90–121, gives a good indication of the range of detailed revenue and agricultural information coming into Jaipur.

⁶² W. Kirkpatrick, *Select Letters of Tipoo Sultan to Various Public Functionaries ...* (London, 1811), pp. 304–5, circular letter 16 May 1786 to Pirzadas at shrines outside Mysore; cf. p. 385.

⁶³ Bajekal, 'State and Rural Grain Market' (see note 61).

⁶⁴ R. Barnett, *North India Between Empires, Awadh, the Mughals and the British, 1720–1801* (Berkeley, 1980), pp. 213–22.

⁶⁵ Enclosure (3) in Resdt. Lucknow to Govt. 24 Oct. 1807, 'Intrigues by members of the Vizier's family against him', BC 5584 (1807), F/4/248.

indication, perhaps, that the system had been deliberately allowed to atrophy in some parts of the territory.

One final point should be noted. The greater fluidity of politics and the precarious state of some channels of communication in conditions of fiscal ‘decentralization’ may have enhanced the importance of any agent who could combine an effective supra-local intelligence with access to money or military power. By the mid-eighteenth century, ‘private’ (or rather patrimonial) intelligence services operated by Indians, Armenians, and French, English and Eurasian entrepreneurs were beginning to make the running. Individuals such as Jean-Baptiste Gentil⁶⁶ the French representative in Awadh, William Bolts⁶⁷ and his Armenian agents, or Beni Ram Pandit,⁶⁸ the Maratha agent in Benares, have usually been studied as ‘private traders’. But one of the most important functions they served was the provision of political and commercial intelligence, sometimes on a purely competitive basis. It was to take the East India Company many decades to reverse this ‘privatisation’ of intelligence and information services.

It would be illuminating to examine the nature of the eighteenth-century Maratha states in terms of their mobilization and use of political and military information. Most interpretations of their success rely, not altogether convincingly, on assertions about their ‘guerrilla warfare’, wiry Deccan horses, or cultural homogeneity in the face of an effete Mughal Empire. But even a cursory inspection reveals the great density of written materials and of political and social information upon which their leaders could draw. The Peshwa’s Daftari (Chancellery) at Poona was one of the richest archives in south Asia. Massive details on revenue, political and social issues, down to infractions of caste rules at village level are recorded here. Maratha leaders, notably Nana Farnavis, had some of the most effective personal systems of information available to Indian politicians. In addition, the rapid transfer of information was guaranteed by a well-rooted system of public informants, runners and spies (*jasus=harkaras*) maintained by a cess on villages (the *jasudpatti*).⁶⁹ The *naiks* or headmen of the guild of runners and spies (‘the Jasud Runners’) represented a fusion

⁶⁶ For Gentil, see Gole, *Maps of Mughal India*, intro.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4, for Bolts’ role in supplying the British, Awadh and the French with information; for Bolts’ career see P. J. Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 115, 122, 123, 191–2.

⁶⁸ For Beni Ram Pandit see T. S. Shejwalkar (ed.), *Nagpur Affairs [a selection of Marathi letters from the Menavli Daftari]* (Poona, 1954), intro. p. xxiv.

⁶⁹ Wilson, *Dictionary of Judicial and Revenue Terms*, p. 234: The confusion of ‘spy’ and ‘runner’ perhaps explains the odd remark by Alexander Walker that in Gujarat

of the newswriter and spy systems. In the 1780s, they carried on 'a regular post between Poona and Nagpur and report[ed] on the daily activity of the Nagpur Court.'⁷⁰

Why this density of information flow? What does it tell us about the society of western India in the eighteenth century? Popular literacy does seem to have been somewhat higher here than in richer north India. Brahmin writers, literate intermediaries and village accountants were thickly clustered in the Maratha countryside. This was a relatively open society, both geographically and socially mobile. If not formally literate the Kunbi villager was well acquainted with the instruments of literacy, especially the songs and ballads associated with the saints of devotional Hinduism who had once flourished here. A dense pattern of pilgrimage tied the region together.⁷¹

In Marathi-speaking territories the Marathas were able to build their state from the bottom up, as it were. There was a constant exchange of information on everyday happenings, rights and duties, between the village leadership, the local Brahmin, the village accountant and the superior controllers of the state, now increasingly Brahmin literati. Many of these lineages and corporate bodies had their own archives, which in turn increased the level of knowledge available to the courts.⁷² For the Marathas information was agglutinative, stuck together by cultural contact, and by intense competition over the title to shares in produce. For all their sophistication, outside the northern plains the Mughals never did create more than islands of special correspondents and informants in a vast rural sea. But even the Marathas were vulnerable when, in 1761, they ventured apparently without route plans and clear information into northern India. Here, traversing an alien cultural zone, their armies were starved of intelligence, harried and ultimately crushed on the field of Panipat.⁷³

'spies' were also public executioners (thus attesting to their low or outcaste status), and rewarded by taking a handful of meal from sacks in the bazaar, Walker of Bowland Papers, Ms 13819, National Library of Scotland. I am indebted to Dr Dilip Menon for this reference.

⁷⁰ Shejwalkar, *Nagpur Affairs*, p. li.

⁷¹ See, e.g., G. A. Deleury, *The Cult of Vithoba* (Poona, 1960); M. J. Murray, 'Pandharpur', *Indian Antiquary* 11 (1882), 149–56.

⁷² Laurence W. Preston, *The Devs of Cincavad. A Lineage and the State in Maharashtra* (Cambridge, 1989).

⁷³ T. S. Shejwalkar, *Panipat 1761; Deccan College Monograph Series* (Poona, 1946), pp. 47, 69–70, the Peshwa received no letters from the Maratha camp during the crucial days before Panipat; they were all intercepted by Abdali patrols, or those of their local allies.

The East India Company and Indigenous Information Systems

With this contrast in mind, we can now pass on to the British Empire and the proud boast of the colonial official to 'know the country'. In the earliest days of the Company's factories, the English had already begun to use the *harkara* and *kasid* system of communication with each other, other Europeans and the Indian rulers. Dutch and English 'cussids' are frequently mentioned in the Fort William House Correspondence and other early sources. In one of the most dramatic examples of the 'sorry we haven't written' letter, the Surat Factors explained in 1665 that their silence could be explained by the fact that their runner had been consumed by 'a tyger'.⁷⁴ Alongside established runners, informal networks of Indian merchants passing into the interior and of the native women whom Company servants were wont to keep, supplied important local information. Finally, of course, the *dubash*, literally, master of 'two tongues', first emerged in his guise of interpreter.

However, as incidents such as the war with Aurangzeb and the Surman embassy to the Mughal Emperor revealed, the British knew little and understood less about the great states of the interior. This lack was progressively remedied between 1757 and 1820 as the Company drew into its orbit the main Indian intelligence systems and the critical clusters of native informants. The charge that the British never really understood what was happening in India, vigorously advanced by today's anti-orientalists, has some truth perhaps as far as deep sociological knowledge is concerned. By contrast, it was the very effectiveness of the British in penetrating Indian information systems at a pragmatic political and economic level which explains the speed and effectiveness of conquest. As Holkar, the Maratha chief wrote (somewhat disingenuously) in 1816: 'It is a favourite object of the British government to receive intelligence of all occurrences and transactions in every quarter'.⁷⁵ How was this penetration effected?

In the first place, the superiority of British resources told quite early. *Waqyanavis* and writer families throughout India, suffering from the decline of Mughal patronage, turned to British service to maintain the honour of their lineages. The family of the once-powerful Mughal Faujdar of Hughly, for instance, staffed many of the most important

⁷⁴ Sir W. Foster, CIE, *The English Factories in India, 1665–67* (London, 1923), p. 83
(??) Karwar Factors to Surat, 29 Aug. 1665.

⁷⁵ 'Objections to Kurreem Oollah', 5447, BC F/4/236.

confidential embassies between 1780 and 1820.⁷⁶ The British built up an efficient system of newswriters and intelligence agents around every one of their major residencies at Indian courts, as Michael Fisher shows.⁷⁷ The staff of agents to the Governor General residing at communications centres such as Benares and Delhi, collected and read the products of the newswriters stationed at different courts by the Indian powers. British skills in reading and interpreting the meaning of indigenous diplomatic papers also increased rapidly. From 1759 the large 'Persian correspondence' of the Bengal government was gradually systematized. A Persian Secretary and staff were appointed, separate from the Foreign and Political Department in the 1790s, and the Governor General's own private office developed its own matching expertise in 'country correspondence', or communication with the Indian powers.

To an extent it was the greater financial resources of the British which allowed them to buy their way into the news and postal services. Money talked; skilled newswriters were paid as much as Rs 300 per month,⁷⁸ while the most important native diplomatists and informants were given large landholdings in *jagir* at the termination of their services. These British gentlemen were, moreover, quite skilled at unravelling the chains of cultural connection that ran through the Asian aristocracy: the connections of Gosains, and hill Brahmins, of Mughals and Afghan horse-fanciers. The Delhi Residency, for instance, secured the services of the nephew of the Chief Minister of Afghanistan as a spy between 1803 and 1806.⁷⁹ It is also no doubt important that the British did, formally at least, inherit the legitimacy of the Mughal empire through their control of the Diwani of Bengal, and this gave a degree of legitimacy to their manipulation of the imperial systems of surveillance and information gathering.

Much the same was true of the downward-thrusting systems of surveillance represented by the sub-provincial newswriters, the *muhtasibs*, *darogas*, and other imperial officers. In due course, many of

⁷⁶ For the interconnections in British confidential service of descendants of the Faujdar and Kazi of Hooghly see, Secretary's Report on the examination of Mahomed Saudik and Mirza Bauker, Bengal Pol. Cons. 4 Jan. 1808, 5584, BC F/4/248.

⁷⁷ E.g., list of personnel of the intelligence department of the Delhi residency, 1814, see, Sinha (ed.), *Selections from the Ochterlony Papers*, p. 89; for an example of a newsletter, Michael H. Fisher, *A Clash of Cultures, Awadh, the British and the Mughals* (New Delhi, 1987), appendix iii, pp. 261–2.

⁷⁸ Rs 300 per month appears to have been standard for high grade writers and agents.

⁷⁹ 5565, BC F/4/247.

these offices were edged aside and replaced by agencies supposedly more directly dependent on British judges and magistrates. But before 1780 regular interrogation of indigenous officials on matters of revenue (*kanungos*), moral surveillance, (*kotwals* and *darogas*) and political infractions (*waqyanigars*) filled the British district archives with evidence which was put to effective use later, as the collectors slowly gained some degree of control over their charges.

We have already mentioned the emergence in the eighteenth century of 'private' information services associated with magnates and political servants who maintained interests over a wide area. These men and their descendants also played a critical role as the generation of 'native informants' who tied together the British conquest of India with their intrigues and contacts. Many came from traditional Islamic literati backgrounds. They included Mahomed Reza Khan,⁸⁰ a whole group of informants, diplomatists and *munshis* (secretaries) associated with the families of the former Kazi and Faujdar of Hughly,⁸¹ or Maulvi Abdul Kader Khan, confidential agent for the Marathas at Benares, who used his contacts in Nepal and upper India to the British advantage.⁸² This lineage of native experts passed on into the nineteenth century, culminating with the 'one-eyed Maulvi' from Ambala who helped William Hodson penetrate the defences of rebel Delhi,⁸³ and Maulvi Amir Ali who established a great network of collaborating magnates throughout Bihar and eastern India during the worst times of 1857.⁸⁴ But the British were also able to win over men from the writer-Brahmin connections in both north and south India whose acquaintance with Hindu patterns of pilgrimage, in particular, made them excellent intelligence officers.⁸⁵

By the turn of the century the first generation of old 'India hands'

⁸⁰ Khan, *The Transition in Bengal*.

⁸¹ See n. 76 above; another similar figure was Izatullah Khan, munshi of the Delhi residency who accompanied Moorcroft.

⁸² For the history of Kader Khan see 'Conduct of Molavee Abdool Kader in accepting from the late Nabob Vizier a jaghier whilst confidentially employed by the Resident at His Excellency's court', 5585, BC F/4/248; Wood to Fagan, 21 Jan. 1815, encloses minute by Abdul Kader Khan on the Terai, Home Misc. 649; his report on trade in Nepal, Benares Agency Records, 22 Jan. 1796, U.P. Records Office, Allahabad.

⁸³ G. H. Hodson, *Twelve Years of a Soldier's Life in India; being Extracts from the Letters of Major S. W. R. Hodson, B.A.* (London, 1859), p. 197.

⁸⁴ Amir Ali was an official of the Patna court; his family was rewarded with a substantial zamindari.

⁸⁵ E.g., the attempts by Thomas Rutherford, Superintendent of the Postal and Intelligence Department, to use the hill Brahmin connections in intelligence activity against Nepal, 1814-16, Home Misc. 644-53.

among the British themselves was beginning to emerge. These were linguists and cultural experts—progenitors of the later official anthropologists—with a wide range of indigenous contacts who were often drawn from outside the main lines of civil and military officialdom. Several such as Hamilton Buchanan,⁸⁶ Thomas Rutherford,⁸⁷ and much later, E. G. Balfour⁸⁸ (all surgeons) and William Moorcroft (superintendent of the Pusa Stud in Bihar)⁸⁹ had scientific backgrounds. Often associated with the generation of high ‘orientalist knowledge’, these men were as important by virtue of the detailed pragmatic knowledge in geography, disease, and Indian material life which they could provide to the expanding Empire. Hamilton Buchanan’s statistical and topographical works have been mined by scholars seeking the lineage of British administrative treatises and ideological preconceptions. Less well known is the detailed information on routes, bridges, rivers and the location of villages which he gave to the invading Company armies during the Nepal War of 1814–16.⁹⁰

The significance of Indian merchants to the British in moving their financial resources around the subcontinent has been stressed in recent works.⁹¹ But merchants were also able to provide European officials and traders with an excellent general picture of economy and politics because their own information system was one of the fastest and most flexible in the country. Merchant-bankers, moreover, were one of the most reliable sources of information. In general, their material interests appeared to run parallel with those of the Company. But they were also totally dependent on it for the security of their families, homes and property and could afford no ‘treachery’.⁹² For this reason one of the main functions of Jonathan Duncan and later Agents to the Governor-General in the commercial centre of

⁸⁶ Marika Vicziany, ‘Imperialism, Botany and Statistics in Early Nineteenth Century India. The Surveys of Francis Buchanan (1762–1829)’, *Modern Asian Studies* 20, 4 (1986), 625–61.

⁸⁷ See, e.g., T. Rutherford to J. Adam, Sect. to Govt., 8 July 1814 and following correspondence, Home Misc. 644; R. H. Phillimore, *Historical Records of the Survey of India, ii, 1800–1815* (Dehra Dun, 1950), 40, 82, 90.

⁸⁸ Editor of *Encyclopedia of India and Southern Asia* (repr. Madras, 1873).

⁸⁹ W. Moorcroft to Adam, 17 Oct. 1814, and later corr. Home Misc. 646; G. Alder, *Beyond Bokhara. The Life of William Moorcroft, Asian Explorer and Pioneer Veterinary Surgeon, 1767–1825* (London, 1985).

⁹⁰ J. Adam to F. Buchanan, 28 July 1814; Buchanan to Adam, 19 Aug. 1814, Home Misc., 644, ff. 281–333.

⁹¹ See, e.g., Lakshmi Subramanian, ‘Banias and the British’, *Modern Asian Studies* 21, 3 (1987), 473–511; C. A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars* (Cambridge, 1983).

⁹² Adam to P. Bradshaw, 30 Sept. 1814, Home Misc. 644.

Benares was regularly to interview members of the great local firms such as that of Bhaiaram Gopal Das and Kashmiri Mull. With their continent-wide correspondents, they could explain how exchange rates were expected to affect British military and naval operations throughout India, the location of enemy armies and much other information and gossip that came their way.

This success in tapping into Indian information systems was not simply a feature of British relations with the Indian elites. The military, in particular, learned, admittedly somewhat slowly, to manipulate the *harkara* system on a massive scale to defend their vulnerable columns against the light cavalry attacks which were the hallmark of Mysore and Maratha warfare, and posed such a threat to the revenue-bearing villages held by the British. Col. Fullarton's recruitment of a huge Guide Establishment of 'hircarrahs' and Brahmin controllers from the Kallar 'tribal' state of Ramnad began to turn the tide of the 1780–84 Mysore war in favour of the British.⁹³ Runners and spies, often recruited from groups beyond the margins of the arable also played an important part in the Maratha campaigns of Wellesley, of Alexander Walker against the Palassi Raja, and of Ochterlony against the Gurkhas. From this point of view, the British recruitment of irregular cavalry regiments during the final wars of conquest, 1790–1818, should be seen as an attempt to enhance their intelligence gathering capacity as well as an augmentation of their simple military force.

British Control and Manipulation of Information

It would be wrong to think that the British simply 'hacked into' the Mughals' information systems and left them as they were. Significant changes, amounting in some sectors to a conceptual revolution, took place in the use of the products of surveillance.

The Mughals and later Indian powers had controlled the collection and use of information in two basic ways. First, they had appointed new and more reliable agencies to keep a check on ones that seemed to be failing. Moral suasion and punishment had been used to keep officers on the straight and narrow. In exceptional circumstances new 'intendants' might be established, like the ones set up by Aurangzeb

⁹³ Fullarton's Hircarrahs system, Home Misc. 84, ff. 911–23. Fullarton obtained from the Tondaiman Raja of Ramnad, 'a body of colleries [kallars] who were perfectly acquainted with all the bye-ways of the country'.

to prevent the dissemination of Ismaili views, or of drinking. Secondly, the tone of the discourse of royal rights and popular obligations had a kind of corrective tendency. To be castigated as a 'troublemaker', a *fitna*-monger, or stiff-necked in imperial pronouncements undoubtedly had some impact in an aristocratic society thirsting for royal honour.

In the days of Clive and Warren Hastings notions of personal loyalty and the discourse of royal rights were deployed by the British to check the doings of their officers of surveillance and others in much the same way. The Company was used to its Indian officers resorting to intrigue and faction against it. But personal reprimand and disgrace do not seem to have been afforded strongly with the western European concept of 'treason'.⁹⁴ Amongst its own officers the Company allowed a good deal of latitude for personal correspondence even with potential enemies (though anything concerning the French was more severely controlled). Again, if the content of transactions and communications often concerned somewhat sordid matters of personal perquisites, the contemporary ideologies of 'improvement' and 'enlightenment' did set limits to what could be known and disseminated among Company officials. James Hicky's *Calcutta Gazette* was given a lot of latitude, but its lurid details of the financial and sexual peccadillos of the British in Bengal finally broke the patience of government.⁹⁵

With Cornwallis and Wellesley we find the Company, now under pressure from both European and Indian enemies, deploying a more strident rhetoric of imperial loyalty and racial superiority to control the boundaries of political language and information.⁹⁶ At the same time the government began to resort to a much more direct control of information agencies both Indian and European. If strict control of what people can know is one of the hallmarks of the modern state, then it was between 1790 and 1820 that such a state emerged in India. Military officers were refused permission to correspond with newspapers on 'public matters',⁹⁷ and there began the long duel

⁹⁴ See, e.g., the case of Nand Kumar, letter out 24 Feb. 1761, *Imperial Record Department. Calendar of Persian Correspondence* (Calcutta, 1911–), ii, p. 67. He had engaged in 'treasonable behaviour' by dealing with the Company's enemies, but his actions 'did not come under the tenor' of the Company's law, so he was merely 'disgraced' for what turned out to be a short time.

⁹⁵ *Bengal Gazette*, 21 April 1781; M. K. Chanda, *History of the English Press in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1987), pp. 1–4.

⁹⁶ C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian. The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (London, 1989).

⁹⁷ Circular by P. A. Agnew, 4 Dec. 1799, Home Misc. 457, p. 176.

between the Anglo-Indian press and officialdom which rumbled on into the later nineteenth century.⁹⁸ Under Wellesley a stricter control over secret information was one of the main impetuses towards the creation of the Governor-General's private secretariat.⁹⁹

The Company meanwhile adopted a number of important innovations in its political relations with Indian states. The Intelligence and Postal Departments of the major residencies and of the Company's army were generally expanded in size and importance. Efforts were made to strengthen and develop postal communications directly under control of the Presidency governments.¹⁰⁰ In conquered and ceded territories there was discussion of the suppression of 'native daiks' in order to bring all postal communications within the Company's orbit.¹⁰¹ In general this was not effected, though in time Indian-run postal systems did tend to give way to official ones, which directly benefited the government's finances through the sale of stamps. There is a good deal of research waiting to be done on the implication of postal charges for the passage of information within the Indian population. But the high cost of postage stamps throughout the early nineteenth century suggests that the benefits of improved basic communications may well not have trickled down to the middle and poorer strata of the population.¹⁰²

The fiercest battles over information took place with the Indian states. After 1793, for instance, the British used the excuse of Awadh's dire financial situation to persuade it to give up appointing its own newswriters to the Maratha court and those of other Indian states.¹⁰³ This followed a general policy by which the Company sought to try to restrict bilateral and multilateral communications between native

⁹⁸ See, e.g., J. Natarajan, *History of Indian Journalism* (New Delhi, 1955); S. P. Sen (ed.), *The Indian Press* (Calcutta, 1967); N. G. Barrier, *Banned. Controversial Literature and Political Control in British India, 1907-47* (New Delhi, 1976), intro. For the liberalization of the press see J. W. Kaye (ed.), *Selections from the Papers of Lord Metcalfe* (London, 1855), p. 197. Minute of 16 May 1835; for connection of government servants with the press, Minute of 29 Dec. 1829, *ibid.*, p. 311.

⁹⁹ 'New arrangements of the Governor-General's Private Office and of the Secretary's Office of the Political Department', 2375, BC F/4/128.

¹⁰⁰ See, e.g., A. G. Sen, *The Post Office of India, or a Historical Review of its Rise, Progress, Regulation and General Administration* (Calcutta, 1875).

¹⁰¹ Actg Magt, Mirzapur to Postmaster General, Calcutta, 11 October 1810, Mirzapur Judicial Records issued vol. 74, U.P. Central Records Office, Allahabad. The report said that an ancient and effective dak existed in Awadh; six people in Mirzapur alone ran postal services for merchants and others and retained 'cossidars'.

¹⁰² *Benares Recorder*, 8 Jan. 1846, comments on heavy postage on indigenous newspapers.

¹⁰³ Cherry to Shore, 11 Aug. 1795, Home Misc. 577.

powers and insert itself as the only channel of information between them. For their part, Indian powers did attempt to prohibit the spread of Company intelligence-gathering and postal arrangements on their own territories. Between 1799 and 1801, for instance, the Peshwa held at bay attempts to establish postal communications from Bombay to Poona and Mysore to Poona.¹⁰⁴ Not only were postal *harkaras* a possible source of enemy intelligence during war, but one imagines that since protection of *dak* was a prerogative of kings, this arrangement would have cast doubt on the Peshwa's sovereignty. Ultimately, *force majeure* settled the issue and by the end of the Maratha wars in 1818 western India was fully incorporated into the Company's information systems. The issue, however, was not a simple one of cause and effect. It was the very penetration of British intelligence-gathering systems and the effectiveness of the *harkara* establishment which helped the British to gain the military upper hand in the first place.

It was also during this period that communication and contact with enemies during times of war, previously perfectly compatible with the Indian notion of political intrigue or *fitna*, was outlawed. Henceforth all contact by ambassador, post or confidential agent with an enemy power was deemed sedition by the Company. The *cause célèbre* was the discovery of 'treasonable' correspondence between the Nawab of Arcot and Tipu Sultan after the fall of Seringapatam in 1799. This discovery led on directly to the fall of the Arcot regime, now tainted with disloyalty in British eyes.¹⁰⁵ It was to no effect that the advisers of the Peshwa's house claimed that it was commonly accepted in the 'practice of native powers' that enemies might carry on communication during times of war.¹⁰⁶ Now the state had established impermeable boundaries during wartime and their transgression was criminalized.

What is equally important is the use to which the Company officials put the vast accumulation of data from this continental intelligence and diplomatic system. Men such as N. B. Edmonstone or H. T. Prinsep who ran the Persian Department of the Government of India and the Persian branch of the Secret and Political Department in the early nineteenth century were some of the best linguists of the age.

¹⁰⁴ Palmer to Mornington, 10, 31 Dec. 1798, Home Misc. 574.

¹⁰⁵ Clive to Wellesley, 11 Aug. 1801, Home Misc. 464; for *fitna* cf. 'treason' see, A. Wink, *Land and Sovereignty in India* (Cambridge, 1986).

¹⁰⁶ Remarks of Nana Farnavis reported in Palmer to Mornington, 2 July 1799, Home Misc. 574.

They were also managers of information, who worked in a style derived from the inquisitorial methods of British departmental committees and Treasury Boards.¹⁰⁷

It would be unwise to underestimate the ‘archival depth’ of the eighteenth-century Indian powers or the capacity of the Indo-Muslim literati to convey information rapidly across political boundaries. It does seem, however, that the Company was able to manage the information it had collected in more complex and sophisticated ways. The Company instituted a system of cross-referencing and purposive distribution of written Indian intelligence which marked a considerable advance on earlier regimes. Information from newsletters, or residents’ and ambassadors’ reports was sorted into subject files and extensive political biographies were built up. It may be that well-informed individual officials of Indian states had been able to give interpretative depth to the disaggregated information available from the complex reports they received. But the Company’s routine processing of these records into widely disseminated printed packages marked a decisive break. After 1790 periodical literature such as the *Asiatick Researches*, *Asiatic Annual Register*, filling out the government gazettes, fed the products of Indian reports and newsletters to the wider European public.¹⁰⁸ This created an information-rich administrative and military service, but also identified private interests with those of the Company state, with which they had often been at odds in earlier periods. With the Napoleonic, Mysore and Maratha ‘threats’ all merging into one, empire loyalty and deference to officialdom provided an idiom in which this new rapprochement could be expressed.

However, the conceptual reach of the information accumulated and disseminated also changed. The few available studies of the form of indigenous records suggest that these could be statistically rich. Yet they were single-purpose, devoted to the taxation of houses in a bazaar or the computation of land-revenues, or separate political intelligence. The Company, however, began to build up banks of multi-purpose social data in conformity with the new European science of statistics. Indian data had apparently been ‘flat’ historically

¹⁰⁷ I am indebted to Joanna Innes for information on this issue and also to her unpublished paper ‘The Collection and Use of Information by Government [in England] circa 1690–1800.’

¹⁰⁸ See, e.g., Home Misc. 556, 557, 577, ‘Notes on Europeans and Asiatics’, and other similar personal intelligence files used both in London and Calcutta; cf. *The Asiatick Annual Register, or a View of the History of Hindostan for 1799* (London, 1800).

in general, looking back to rights and duties previously established. Company data was adjusted to fit ideas of economic and moral improvement which could potentially rank all societies, within and outside India, in a global hierarchy and pattern of development. The information so collected might or might not be used actually to prosecute such improvement, but it certainly had the effect of reinforcing Europeans' notions of their own historical superiority. Of course, earlier Arabic and Persian travelogues detailing the practice of savage people in unfriendly climes may well have exhibited a kind of sociological map of mankind to give meaning to the 'flatness' of their written records,¹⁰⁹ but the scale of the European effort was vastly greater.

Not only did the British accumulate information and interrogate society more systematically than their predecessors, but their knowledge also acquired a new territorial, truly three-dimensional form. James Rennell's surveys of the Company's territories of the 1760s and 1770s had not quite been modern maps.¹¹⁰ They had been visual depictions of routes, which pinpointed rivers, villages, wells and other geographical features which a military party might encounter on a march through a territory. They were similar to the route maps which Mughal commanders used.¹¹¹ However, after 1818, the Survey of India generally introduced trigonometrical methods. The boundaries of villages, subdivisions and districts were fixed. This was partly an aspect of the assertion of sovereignty. An eighteenth-century Indian ruler had rejected a British Survey on the grounds that it would 'cause a diminution of his dignity and honour in the eyes of neighbouring powers and foreigners'.¹¹² In the early nineteenth century, the trigonometrical pole replaced the Mughal's ox-tail standard as the symbol of authority. The survey was also clearly an aid to the practical aim of the collection of territorial revenue. To be a subject came to mean inhabiting a certain piece of land.

The ideal of informed British rule was beautifully illustrated in 1816 by the artist, Thomas Hickey's portrait of Colin Mackenzie, a

¹⁰⁹ Persian works such as the *Ain-i-Akbari*, or *Dabistan* which devotes much of their text to Hindu practices, or even topologies such as the 'Yadgar-i-Bahaduri' deploy 'sociological' information as part of a discourse of rule.

¹¹⁰ For Rennell's methods see his *Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan, or the Moguls Empire* (2nd edn, London, 1785), pp. i–viii.

¹¹¹ Gole, *Maps of Mughal India*.

¹¹² R. H. Phillimore, *Historical Records of the Survey of India*, iv vols (Dehra Dun, 1945–58), i, 23; for the implications of the use of trigonometrical surveys, see, D. Ludden, *Peasant History in South India* (Princeton, 1985), pp. 12–13, 177–8.

noted orientalist and first Surveyor-General of India, which hangs in the India Office Library.¹¹³ The redcoated Scotsman is shown surrounded by his Indian 'native informants'. They offer him a telescope with which to view the surveying poles, and bundles of Indian manuscripts. On a hill in the background stands the colossal tenth-century Jain statue of Bahubali at Shravanabelagola near Mysore, which Mackenzie has just surveyed and drawn. Thus the arcane knowledge of India, purely mysterious to an earlier age, is now reduced to scientific information. The Indian informants and learned men who are painted here helped Mackenzie draw up his reports. They include a Maratha Brahmin, a Jain and a Telugu Brahmin from the south. The pictures intend to show how the British had placed themselves at the centre of the richest skeins of oriental information and intelligence.

Epilogue: Colonial Data Panics and Imperfections

It would be tempting to leave the story there with European intelligence firmly in control of the subcontinent, the myriad channels of information from newswriters and native informants, approvers, spies and 'canny people' merging into great rivers of knowledge which flowed past Fort William in Calcutta. But that whiggish picture of the growth of information and the mobilization of state, and ultimately nation, by the steady accretion of communications—the model elaborated in the theories of the sociologist Karl Deutsch¹¹⁴—seems inappropriate to the history of India. Company, Crown and even, in a sense, the Indian National Congress, continued to be vulnerable to the atrophy of their information systems or their infiltration by middlemen with contrary interests. False information might give rise to damaging official convulsions, while true intelligence of danger was routinely misinterpreted or ignored. Despite fifty years of filling up red ledgers and blue books, or penning maps, the British were caught unawares by the mutinies and rebellions of 1857, and took months to rebuild an adequate intelligence service, despite the fact that they now possessed the electric telegraph.

The colonial power did, of course, throw a stronger and more regular beam into many areas of Indian life, but their knowledge of others was exiguous. Despite heroic exceptions, the British excluded themselves from the women's quarters and their associated networks

¹¹³ Thomas Hickey, 'Colonel Colin Mackenzie and his assistant', OIOR.

¹¹⁴ K. Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966).

of domestic information after 1800. Indo-Portuguese Christians and Eurasian officers such as James Skinner, who retained kinship links with Indians, remained useful, but were gradually excluded from a more racially conscious expatriate society.¹¹⁵ Again, well-informed officials sometimes made attempts to enlist the aid of information-rich servants of local communities, such as barbers, midwives and itinerant doctors. But usually the material such contacts could produce was subtly reworked by the time it reached the judge or collector, having been passed through the hands of many Indian agents.¹¹⁶ The British found it particularly difficult to make use of the knowledge of religious institutions, let alone the wandering religious mendicant. Indeed, these last were often treated as enemies and suspected of being agents of Thugs, Pindari raiders or disaffected Indian powers. Even the role of the canny knowledge of the tribal diminished in importance as warfare changed form and commercial logging speeded up. In turn, the distancing of these networks of information from the centres of political power depressed the significance of the groups whose importance they had once sustained. For instance, as royal women and the associated circles of literate ladies lost access to the arenas of power growing up around the British residencies, women in general lost part of their significance as independent political actors.¹¹⁷

Tapping into the dense webs of commercial and social knowledge which revolved around pilgrimage and the great fairs, the seed-bed of local politics, was to remain quite difficult for the British. Kipling's intelligence officers dressed as wandering holy men were, in general, a delicious invention. Instead, the colonial officials adopted two dubious procedures. First, they paid huge sums of money to spies or informers and empowered subordinate officials to collect information for them on matters of domestic life and family property. Innumerable petitions and depositions after riots denounce the Company's reliance on 'people of low character' who poke their noses into the business of

¹¹⁵ This point has been made by Seema Alavi; the 'invalid thana' which she discusses below was evidently also useful as an intelligence gathering institution.

¹¹⁶ One Guzra Bye, royal midwife, in Baroda supplied A. Walker with an account of female infanticide there, c. 1804, Walker of Bowland MSS 13651, National Library of Scotland (I am indebted to Dr Dilip Menon for this reference), but generally speaking, the British appear to have relied on reports from inferior police in their attack on infanticide.

¹¹⁷ There were, however, a few cases where British residents retained intimate contacts with Indian women formed in the course of official surveillance, see, e.g., the case of J. Kirkpatrick, Home Misc. 464.

the wealthy and respectable. The slow demise of the elite newswriter and the attested reports of the local notables was matched by the rise of the professional spy and official snooper and the hanger-on of the police *daroga*, a figure much nearer now to those despised 'spies' and informers of Stuart England. Orthodox outrage at the banning of *sati* was redoubled because it was the police *daroga* or his even lowlier agents who were to investigate reports of the practice.¹¹⁸ Officials of the Excise Department and poorly paid local police, the lowest of the low to many Indians, became key sources of social and political intelligence.

New and arbitrary centres of power were created by the amalgamation of surveillance systems which had previously been separate and designed to keep a check on each other. Despite the enormous volume of paper generated, attempts to gain control of village registrars and local revenue officials were frustrated by landlords' command of the networks of information. Networks of power and surveillance which under Indian powers had been kept separate, and endowed with moral and religious legitimacy, were unified under the influence of local magnates or the chief clerks of district offices. These agents regularly colluded in denying information to the distant British official struggling to maintain the coherence of correspondence in Persian, English and often a third regional language. The link between surveillance and moral suasion was now attenuated as the ruling power forfeited many of the props of cultural and religious legitimacy which had sustained pre-colonial rulers.

Secondly, since the British often found it difficult to secure reliable and regular sources of information from the great towns and bazaar villages, their own establishments were periodically convulsed by panics about the passage of arcane and esoteric knowledge between Indians. Before the 1857 Mutiny and Rebellion the famous *chapatis* passed from hand to hand and village to village were supposed to have signalled uprising. Fifty years later, in 1907, on the anniversary of the Mutiny, the European community across India was terrified by the prospect of wandering holy men smearing cow dung on trees. Was this another signal for a general massacre of Europeans?¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ *Parliamentary Papers on Hindoo Widows and Voluntary Immolations*, xviii, 1821, pp. 335ff; for the rising power of darogas and their informers, see J. R. McLane, 'Bengali Bandits, Police and Landlords after the Permanent Settlement', in Yang (ed.), *Crime and Criminality*, pp. 42–3.

¹¹⁹ Home Pol., July 1907, 24D, National Archives of India; the fear of Mutiny, cow protection, the old enemy the Holkar dynasty of Indore and Brahmins all gells into a nightmare here.

Throughout the nineteenth century the British worried about the arcane worshippers of the Goddess Kali, or later, radical Indian nationalists who passed easily along the lines of communication supposedly inaccessible to the European.¹²⁰

Far from being rational responses to the needs of the modern state, 'knowledge panics' sent official agencies through curious parabolas of growth. New agencies were formed. They built up huge data-bases and armies of informants. They developed their own lore, often in isolation from other departments of government. They then atrophied and became obsolescent. The Thuggee and Dacoitee Department, founded to suppress the ritualized strangling of travellers, went through many surprising metamorphoses. When the British were totally wrong-footed by the Mutiny—fighting again 'without eyes and ears'—Col. Hodson's Intelligence Department boomed,¹²¹ but later atrophied. In the 1900s, the Indian CID with its finger-printing and magic ink, enjoyed a brief period of fashion.¹²² Where the sensibilities of domestic and Anglo-Indian opinion converged in time, particular issues provoked the accumulation of masses of data: strangling and widow-burning before 1840, the 'demon drink' and excise violations in the 1800s and again in the 1880s¹²³—here there are clear echoes of the concerns of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb—'plague' in the 1890s.

It was not only special departments of this sort which fell into information-sclerosis. In some respects the whole vast apparatus of British rural control and reporting through the land-revenue systems was of a similar order. The blue books, survey and settlement reports which flooded into Calcutta could become curiously ritualized documents. The administration and its 'native informants' were habituated to discussion of certain well-worn topics. Striking social changes were often not reported to the administration because it did not ask. It remains uncertain how far the enormous volume of reporting on rent-

¹²⁰ Valentine Chirol, *Indian Unrest* (London, 1910), pp. 18, 27, 102, 103, 345–6.

¹²¹ See Hodson, *Twelve Years of a Soldier's Life*; Kaye and Malleson, *History*, ii, 136; iv, 55, 205, 207, 208.

¹²² R. Popplewell, 'The surveillance of Indian Revolutionaries in Great Britain and on the Continent', *Intelligence and National Security* 3, Jan. 1988, 56–77.

¹²³ Official debates about drink always appeared to have shown a dual aspect. Under the Mughals drinking was an infraction of moral law and an assault on the emperor's authority; Wellesley's campaign about illicit stills was connected with fears for revenue, but expressed in the language of evangelicalism; by the 1870s, the language was of moral purity, but an underlying concern was discipline among plantation workers. In each case surveillance systems displayed both moral and practical applications and could slip easily between these concerns.

rates, revenues and tenures was ever used for anything. It was not so much that the statistics and reports were flawed, though they probably were; or that the Government of India was a ‘mighty machine for doing nothing’. It was more often that it was very good at doing things it had done for many years, because they had been important many years before. In some departments, of course, the state did receive regular and untainted flows of information. But even here the social isolation and political biases of officials often meant that the intelligence was not read aright.

Then there was bureaucratic politics. Kipling’s short-story ‘Pig’ in *Plain Tales from the Hills* charts the course of a definitive survey of the Pig population of the Punjab. What drove the enormous machine of intelligence was Nafferton’s desire to be revenged on his colleague Pinecoffin, who had sold him a mad horse. Nafferton pestered him for more and more details on the distribution, food and welfare of the horrid, black *sus indicus* until Pinecoffin ‘sat up nights, reducing Pig to five places of decimals for the honour of his Service’. Kipling observes ‘Our Government is peculiar, it gushes on the agricultural and general information side. . . . The bigger man you are the more information and the greater trouble you can raise.’¹²⁴ Reality was even stranger. Several North-Western Provinces Censuses contained a multi-page report on the sub-district distribution of caste and tribe of eunuchs.

The fragmented, uneven and esoteric nature of these empires of information led Lord Curzon at the end of the century to abolish the vast mass of paper coming into the imperial administration. He saw clearly that the capacity of government to act was being eroded by its own information system. Atrophy of intelligence at the local level was paralleled by an overload of exotic information at the centre which was routinely misinterpreted because of the growing isolation of the official and European community from the mass of the population. As Lord Salisbury put it, with his usual mordant precision, the British were being overwhelmed by ‘Paper and “damned nigger”’, that is by the accumulation of useless information and growing racial prejudice.¹²⁵

A more serious problem for the future of the empire was the increasing capacity of its opponents within Indian society to mobilize their own sources of knowledge and information, to ‘discover India’ themselves. The rapid spread of lithographic and printing techniques at

¹²⁴ R. Kipling, ‘Pig’, *Plain Tales from the Hills* (London, 1911).

¹²⁵ Cited in D. Dilks, *Curzon in India*, i, *Achievement* (London, 1969), pp. 221–48.

first benefited European critics of the Government of India. Heavy fines on erring editors and publishers were maintained even when freedom of the press was formally conceded.¹²⁶ In general the burgeoning Indian press was viewed benignly. In the 1830s, when Lord William Bentinck was considering control of the infant vernacular press, the head of the Persian Office felt that there was little danger from the fourth estate. Indian newspapers had a circulation limited to the main cities. They printed either translations of articles in English newspapers or the reports of newswriters from up-country. He termed these news-sheets 'the true native intelligence'. Far from wishing to impede the flow of written information between Indians, he thought it good to diffuse among them the small pieces of useful information which would tend to their general enlightenment.¹²⁷

By the end of the century all was different. Now it was the government's fortnightly reports and political intelligence reports which were often no more than translations of items in the vernacular newspapers. The old newswriters of the localities had given way to a network of correspondents and public men who passed information to the burgeoning local press, libraries and associations. The key men in this bottom-up intelligence network combined western and indigenous education. Sometimes they came from similar circles or even the same families as those which had once provided the newswriters. The journalistic works of a writer and early nationalist such as Harish Chandra of Benares, reveal how he assembled many distinct sources of information. Other literati and public men scattered throughout north India are among his correspondents. So also were the British amateur ethnographers and writers who contributed to the ubiquitous local *Notes and Queries*.¹²⁸ But Harish Chandra also drew on family knowledge, information given by local businessmen, caste elders, the genealogical priests who kept shop at the great bathing places, and, sometimes, women's knowledge.¹²⁹

The picture should not be oversimplified. The colonial power could

¹²⁶ *Benares Recorder*, 30 April 1847.

¹²⁷ A. Stirling to Bentinck, encl. in Bentinck's Minute on the press, 6 Jan. 1829, C. H. Philips (ed.), *The Correspondence of Lord William Cavendish Bentinck* (Oxford, 1977), i, 139, there was a need to 'diffuse knowledge and excit[e] a spirit of enquiry and reflection among the natives of India'; cf. Metcalfe's minute of 16 May 1835, J. W. Kaye (ed.), *Selections from the Papers of Lord Metcalfe* (London, 1855), p. 197.

¹²⁸ See, e.g., 'Khattriyon ki Utpatti', *Bhartendu Granthavali* (Benares, 1964), iii, 247–9, where he refers to 'Sherring', 'John Muir', Guru Gobind Singh, Vedic and Muslim sources all within a few pages.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 3–20, 'Agrawalon ki Utpatti' which is based upon oral tradition, *vanshawalis* and literary sources British and traditional. Much of his knowledge of the

still muster vast quantities of information: much of it correct and some of it relevant. Some of it even led to action. Conversely, the information available to Indian elites was strikingly incomplete in certain areas. Lines of communication between the Hindu commercial and the Muslim administrative elites were becoming weaker. In the towns, knowledge of peasant and tribal life was minimal, as the novelist Prem Chand insisted. Nevertheless, the Indian ‘public man’ who emerged after 1860 stood at a critical point where several networks of intelligence stood interconnected. The knowledge of the bazaar, of the bathing festivals of temple and Muslim shrine could be welded into a powerful tool. As the Marathas in the seventeenth and eighteenth century used such an intelligence system to baffle an Emperor without eyes or ears, so their Victorian successors began to put the Viceroys on the defensive.

Curzon’s reforms along with the expansion of the Indian Criminal Investigation Department went some way to purging the colonial state’s information networks. Fortnightly intelligence reports from civil officers and police abstracts were systematized. Now they at least kept pace with the expansion of the Indian National Congress’s information drawn from local newspapers, Congress village organizers and a paraphernalia of reports and enquiries which mirrored the official ones. In the last stages of empire, and with the growing devolution of power to the provinces, the Raj took on some of the appearances of the ‘national security state’, when its knowledge of events ran ahead of its ability to do anything about them. Yet still the British were very often misinformed. They failed to predict the strength of the Khilafat agitation of 1919, and the Congress election victory of 1937. This was partly because officials were talking to the wrong people. They had good connections with landlords, princes, and secular liberal politicians. Their contacts among Hindu and Muslim religious leaders, village magnates and the vernacular intelligentsia were weak or filtered through the suspect channels of an interested police force. Even when good material came through, political prejudice ensured that intelligence was not acted upon with political foresight. The All-India Congress Committee could not deploy the financial resources open to the colonial state, but its increasing social depth enabled it more accurately to predict the political future—at least among Hindus.

history of Benares and its temples was built up by simply talking to priests, pandas and gosains.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to locate British attempts to generate and control information for conquest, trade and government in India within indigenous systems of surveillance and intelligence. This sort of exercise may help to give greater precision and context to analyses of 'colonial knowledge' or the role of the 'native informant', both of which have come to interest historians in the recent past. The information agencies of Indian rulers, both formal and informal, were particularly well developed. The newswriter system, with its many checks and balances was reinforced by a flexible system of surveillance and moral suasion which was deployed through local officials of what has come to be termed 'police'. All these agencies employed a large number of inferior agents—*harkaras*, *kasids*, and other spies and runners. Such agents were often members of low castes or tribal groups, and comprised a substantive service sector in information skills, the existence of which may require a re-evaluation of the role and importance of several ritual and occupational groupings whose functions are usually understood in terms of material production alone. These agents, in turn, were able to connect with the 'natural' information-brokers of the localities, barbers, midwives, village watchmen, astrologers and pilgrims. While these systems were powerful and flexible, they were easily subverted, a factor which may help to explain the relatively sudden collapse of several apparently stable Indian polities, including the Mughal Empire and, in 1857, the East India Company itself.

The British penetrated these Indian information systems very effectively and often quite quickly because they could deploy greater financial resources than their rivals, and also because they inherited the authority of the emperors and of the most powerful and well-informed local rulers in Bengal and Awadh. They significantly changed the methods by which such information was collated and diffused, especially through the introduction of the printing press and the elaboration of the idea of 'treason'. But they were less successful in controlling and evaluating flows of information within the localities. This is because they progressively distanced themselves from some of the most important information brokers of the villages and urban quarters, indigenous doctors, religious mendicants, tribals and women. From the point of view of information collection and control, Company Raj had become a modern state by 1800, but its informa-

tion-gathering agencies tended repeatedly to become clogged throughout the nineteenth century, as ideologically-generated ‘knowledge panics’ about arcane indigenous information set in. In all these events, Indians remained key players in the knowledge bazaar, at times reinforcing British prejudices, at times using their own stores of knowledge against colonial officials, and eventually coming to deploy a successful all-India intelligence system themselves in a printed and easily diffused medium. From this perspective, the study of information, knowledge and communications is an interesting project which might help close the deplorable gap between studies of economic structure, on the one hand, and of orientalism and ideology on the other.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ For a recent example of a social study based on the concept of communication see, Ian K. Steele, *The English Atlantic 1675–1740* (New York, 1986). My attention has also been drawn to I. Habib, ‘Postal Communications in Mughal India’, *Procs Ind. Hist. Congress*, 46th Session, pp. 236–52; M. Z. Siddiqi, ‘The Intelligence Service under the Mughals’, *Medieval India, a Miscellany*, 2 (London, 1972), pp. 54ff.