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978-0-521-86145-8 - Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India: The British in Bengal

Robert Travers

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Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India

Robert Travers' analysis of British conquests in late eighteenth-century India shows how new ideas were formulated about the construction of empire. After the British East India Company conquered the vast province of Bengal, Britons confronted the apparent anomaly of a European trading company acting as an Indian ruler. Responding to a prolonged crisis of imperial legitimacy, British officials in Bengal tried to build their authority on the basis of an 'ancient constitution', supposedly discovered among the remnants of the declining Mughal Empire. In the search for an indigenous constitution, British political concepts were redeployed and redefined on the Indian frontier of empire, while stereotypes about 'oriental despotism' were challenged by the encounter with sophisticated Indian state forms. This highly original book uncovers a forgotten style of imperial state-building based on constitutional restoration, and in the process opens up new points of connection between British, imperial and South Asian history.

ROBERT TRAVERS is Assistant Professor in History at Cornell University. He has written articles in *Modern Asian Studies*, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* and *Past and Present*.

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Preface and acknowledgements

This study originated in my fascination with the thought-worlds of British imperialists, and a sense that the ideological origins of British rule in India needed revisiting in the light of recent work on eighteenth-century British politics and political thought. As I was writing this book, an ‘imperial turn’ in the writing of British and European history has focused new attention on the role of empire in the political culture of eighteenth-century Britain, and in the intellectual culture of the enlightenment. My own study aims to contribute to these exciting revisions by providing an intellectual history of British politics and policy-making in Bengal, the ‘bridgehead’ to empire in eighteenth-century India.

This is not an intellectual history in the sense of being a history of intellectuals or of intellectual movements. Rather, following David Armitage’s recent formulation, this is a study of how ‘various conceptions of the British Empire arose in the competitive context of political argument’.¹ I am concerned with how policy-makers in Bengal sought to justify their political actions with reference to certain ‘conventions, norms and modes of legitimation’ operating in the wider sphere of British politics.² I argue that British conceptions of empire were also shaped by tense encounters with indigenous political culture. The twin dynamics of imperial legitimation and colonial governance led British officials to engage creatively with India’s pre-colonial past, and especially with the history of the Mughal empire. British rulers attempted to legitimize their own power on the basis of an imagined form of constitutionality, supposedly discovered among the remnants of Mughal power in the province of Bengal.

The terms ‘British’ and ‘Indian’ as used in this book require some explanation. This study is mainly about elite British men who filled the

¹ David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 5.

² John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 32.

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high civilian ranks of the East India Company service in India, and elite politicians at home. It does not give a full account of the broad spectrum of those making up the 'British' communities in eighteenth-century India, which included Scots, Welsh, Irish and other 'Europeans', women as well as men, spanning from wealthy elites to poor soldiers. The East India Company was still often referred to as the 'English East India Company', though historians have suggested it was an important institution for forging a unified sense of 'Britishness'.³ On the Indian side, even though some recent scholarship has argued that Indian nationalism had deep roots in early modern regional and imperial forms of patriotism, nevertheless, the term 'Indian' carries unavoidably anachronistic associations with the modern Indian nation state.⁴ I use the term as a necessary shorthand, but it could be misleading if it was read to ascribe a homogenous 'national' identity to the diverse indigenous peoples brought under British rule.

This is a study of British political argument set in the context of political and social change. I have tried to describe and analyse changes at the level of political ideology rather than systematically discussing the extent to which particular ideological representations accurately reflected political events. There is relatively little in this work about the growth and uses of the British armies in India, about the establishment of British monopolies, or about bribe-taking and other scandals. This is partly because these subjects have been extensively studied before, but also because British attempts to justify their empire often skirted around its most problematic features.

This book is a poor form of tribute, but a tribute nonetheless, to the many wonderful teachers who led me to history and helped me to try it for myself. Mark Stephenson was the most demanding and inspiring history teacher any young person could wish for. Like all the best teachers, he strove through his own example to communicate the thrill of intellectual discovery. He would never have written a book about British India which paid so little attention to account books, cotton piece-goods and sailing ships, or to farmers and their crops. As an undergraduate, David Abulafia, Anna Abulafia, Christopher Brooke, Christine Carpenter and Mark Bailey were brilliant guides to medieval European history, as David Fieldhouse, Chris Bayly, Susan Bayly and Gordon Johnson were for imperial history and the history of colonial India.

³ See H. V. Bowen, *The Business of Empire. The East India Company and Imperial Britain, 1756–1833* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 275; Linda Colley, *Britons. Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (1st edn. London, 1992, repr. 1994), pp. 127–9.

⁴ C. A. Bayly, *Origins of Nationality in South Asia. Patriotism and Ethical Government in the Making of Modern India* (New Delhi, 1998).

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David Smith gave me great encouragement at an important time. It was my enormous good fortune that Chris Bayly agreed to become my graduate supervisor. His unfailing personal kindness and intellectual generosity provide an inspiring example for a young historian. The breadth and depth of his historical imagination is something always to aspire to.

Peter Marshall offered generous assistance throughout the writing of this book. Many others gave valuable advice and support, among whom I would like particularly to thank: Muzaffar Alam, Seema Alavi, David Armitage, Bernard Bailyn, Ian Barrow, Sugata Bose, Huw Bowen, Kunal and Shubra Chakrabarti, Raj Chandavarkar, Linda Colley, Lizzie Collingham, Jeff Dolven, Natasha Eaton, Noah Feldman, Michael Fisher, Joseph Glenmullen, Jacob Hacker, Doug Haynes, Patrice Higonnet, Gene Irschick, Mary Lewis, Neil McKendrick, Tom and Barbara Metcalf, Steve Pincus, Maya Jasanoff, Mark Kishlansky, Susan Pedersen, Doug Peers, Katharine Prior, Emma Rothschild, Penny Sinanoglou, Mary Steadly, Judith Surkis, David Washbrook, Jon Wilson, Kathleen Wilson and Nur Yalman. I have been immensely lucky to benefit from the stimulating intellectual life of the history departments at Harvard and Cornell, and I thank all my colleagues and students warmly. Rachel Weil and Philip Stern took time out of busy schedules to provide astute comments on a late draft of this book, and for that I am immensely grateful. Thanks also to my excellent research assistants, Kambiz Behi and Amanda Hamilton. Needless to say, responsibility for any mistakes is entirely my own.

The Harvard Society of Fellows and the Milton Fund at Harvard University provided financial support for my research. At the Harvard Society of Fellows, Diana Morse is the presiding genius, and I have much to thank her for. Janet Hatch and her team in the Harvard history department, Patricia Craig and the other staff members at the Center for European Studies in Harvard, and Judy Burkhard and her crew in the Cornell history department have consistently put up with my administrative failings and provided unstinting support for my teaching and research. Grateful thanks go to many librarians and archivists, especially those at the Cambridge University Library and the British Library (especially the fantastic staff in the OIOC), in Calcutta at the State Archives of West Bengal, the National Library and the Victoria Memorial, and in America at the Harvard and the Cornell libraries.

Maureen McLane has been an immense source of moral, intellectual and comedic support throughout the writing of this book. Varsha Ghosh has cheerfully come to the rescue on numerous occasions. My parents, Pru and Chris, tactfully stopped asking many years ago when this book

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would be finished; for that and for many other reasons I thank them. My sister Olivia has been a constant source of strength and love, and she let me live in her house while I was conducting research in London. My children, Ravi and Lila, light up my life. And last, but most of all, I thank Durba Ghosh, my best friend and my best colleague, for countless and undreamt of blessings. I can confidently say that no one will be more relieved that I have finished this book than her!

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Abbreviations and note on currency

Add. MSS	Additional Manuscripts
<i>AHR</i>	<i>American Historical Review</i>
BL	British Library, London
BLC	Bengal Law Consultations
BPC	Bengal Public Consultations
BRC	Bengal Revenue Consultations
BSC	Bengal Secret Consultations
COC	Committee of Circuit, 1772–3
CRO	County Record Office
Ct. of D.	Court of Directors
<i>EHR</i>	<i>English Historical Review</i>
<i>FWIH</i>	<i>Fort William – India House Correspondence</i>
<i>HCSP</i>	<i>House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century</i> , Sheila Lambert (ed.), 145 vols. (Wilmington, Del., 1975)
HM	Home Miscellaneous
<i>IESHR</i>	<i>Indian Economic and Social History Review</i>
IOR	India Office Records
<i>JBS</i>	<i>Journal of British Studies</i>
<i>JICH</i>	<i>Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History</i>
<i>MAS</i>	<i>Modern Asian Studies</i>
MP	Proceedings of Controlling Committee of Revenue at Murshidabad
MSS Eur.	European Manuscripts, Oriental and India Office Collections, British Library
NCHI	New Cambridge History of India
<i>OHBE</i>	<i>Oxford History of the British Empire</i>
OIOC	Oriental and India Office Collections
<i>RCHC</i>	<i>Reports from Committees of the House of Commons</i>

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The Fifth Report *The Fifth Report from the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Affairs of the East India Company, 28 July, 1812*, W. K. Firminger (ed.), 3 vols. (London, 1917–18)

Note on currency

There were many denominations of coin circulating in eighteenth-century Bengal. Most often, figures for rupees refer to ‘current rupees’, a standard unit of account. P.J. Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes. The British in Bengal in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1976) estimated that one lakh of current rupees (Rs 100,000) was roughly equal to £11,000 before 1770, and £10,000 afterwards.

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Glossary of Indian terms

Glossaries like this were often included in eighteenth-century British writings about India. They were part of an effort to translate Indian terms into fixed, normative meanings. It is part of the argument of this work that the meanings of these political and administrative categories were actually fluid and widely contested, and that they were being redefined in subtle or not-so-subtle ways by the British. Nonetheless, it may be helpful to provide here a very brief account of some important Indian terms that appear frequently in the chapters below.

This work follows the standard procedure of South Asian history of using the term ‘land revenues’ to refer to the land tax. Eighteenth-century British spellings of important terms will be given in brackets where appropriate. I have followed the form of transliteration of Indian words used in John McLane, *Land and Local Kingship in Eighteenth Century Bengal* (Cambridge, 1993).

<i>adalats</i>	name given to law courts established by the East India Company to administer justice to Indians
<i>amil</i>	(aumil) a revenue official appointed by the <i>navab</i> 's government
<i>band</i>	a dam in a river
<i>banyans</i>	commercial agents of British officials
<i>bigha</i>	measurement of an area of land; roughly equivalent to one-third of an acre
<i>dakaiti</i>	a term for criminals, often used by the British to refer to a kind of highway robber, regarded as professional criminals
<i>daroga</i>	used by the British to refer to the chief officers or superintendents of the criminal courts (<i>faujdari adalats</i>) established by the East India Company in 1772

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<i>diwan</i>	(dewan, duan) title of a Mughal officer of revenues and finance. The East India Company took the title of <i>diwan</i> of Bengal in 1765; the office of <i>diwan</i> was described by the contemporary historian Alexander Dow as ‘receiver-general of the imperial revenues’. The British tended to define the responsibilities of the <i>diwani</i> branch of Mughal government as pertaining to revenues and the civil law. <i>Diwan</i> was also a title given to Indian revenue officials under the Company government
<i>diwani adalat</i>	(dewanny adaulut) name given to courts of civil law established by the East India Company in 1772
<i>faujdar</i>	(fougedar) literally a ‘troop-commander’; applied to military officers of Mughal government with wide powers in local administration; defined by the British as officers of ‘police’
<i>faujdari adalat</i>	name given to criminal courts established by the East India Company in 1772
<i>firman/farman</i>	a Mughal imperial order
<i>ijara</i>	a temporary lease of revenue-collecting rights over an area of land, usually translated by the British as a ‘revenue farm’
<i>ijaradar</i>	person who holds an <i>ijara</i> , often termed ‘revenue farmer’
<i>jagir</i>	an assignment of revenues often granted to Mughal officials as a kind of salary
<i>jama</i>	(jumma) the land-revenue assessment or demand, as distinct from <i>hasil</i> , meaning the actual collections
<i>kacheri</i>	(cutcherry) a government office where records were kept and revenues received
<i>khalsa</i>	treasury or revenue department of the <i>nawab</i> ’s government, moved by the East India Company from Murshidabad to Calcutta in 1772
lakh	one-hundred thousand, as in 1 lakh rupees = 100,000
<i>mansabdar</i>	a member of the Mughal nobility, holding an official rank and title
<i>maulvi</i>	a Muslim scholar, especially a legal scholar
<i>mofussil</i>	Persian term widely used in India, meaning hinterland or interior of the country

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<i>mufti</i>	a type of Muslim law officer, often translated as expounder of legal opinions
<i>naib</i>	deputy, as in <i>naib subahdar</i> , deputy governor
<i>nawab</i>	(Nabob) a provincial governor of the Mughal empire; the title given to the eighteenth-century Mughal governors of Bengal
<i>nawabi</i> <i>nizamat</i>	the system of government under the <i>nawabs</i> branch of Mughal government attached to the office of <i>nazim</i> , another term for a Mughal provincial governor. According to the leading <i>nawabi</i> official, Muhammad Reza Khan, the <i>nazim</i> enjoyed extensive powers over all spheres of administration in concert with the <i>diwan</i> , but the <i>nizamat</i> was interpreted by the British to mean criminal justice or ‘law and order’ as distinguished from civil justice and revenues
<i>nizamat adalat</i>	another name for a criminal court under the British; used especially for the <i>sadr</i> (chief) criminal court
<i>pandit</i>	(pundit) a Brahmin scholar; usually used by the British to refer to a scholar of Hindu law
<i>patta</i>	(potta) a document describing the terms for revenue payments on a plot of land, used by the British to try to fix the revenue demand on peasants
<i>puniya</i>	a ceremony held at the court of the <i>nawabs</i> each year at the beginning of the revenue cycle, in which major revenue payers came to Murshidabad to negotiate revenue levels. Abolished by the Company in 1772
<i>qanungo</i>	keeper of revenue records; sometimes translated as ‘registrar’
<i>qazi</i>	a Muslim judge, involved in various functions of local government
<i>raiyyat</i>	(ryot) Mughal term for a peasant, and more broadly, for a subject of the empire; used by the British to refer to peasant cultivators
<i>ray raiyan</i> <i>sanad</i>	(roy royan) the chief Indian officer in the <i>khalsa</i> (sunnud) a written document or order conferring office or privileges
sepoy	Indian infantry soldier in the Company’s armies
<i>subah</i>	a province under the Mughal empire
<i>tahsildar</i>	a government-appointed revenue collector

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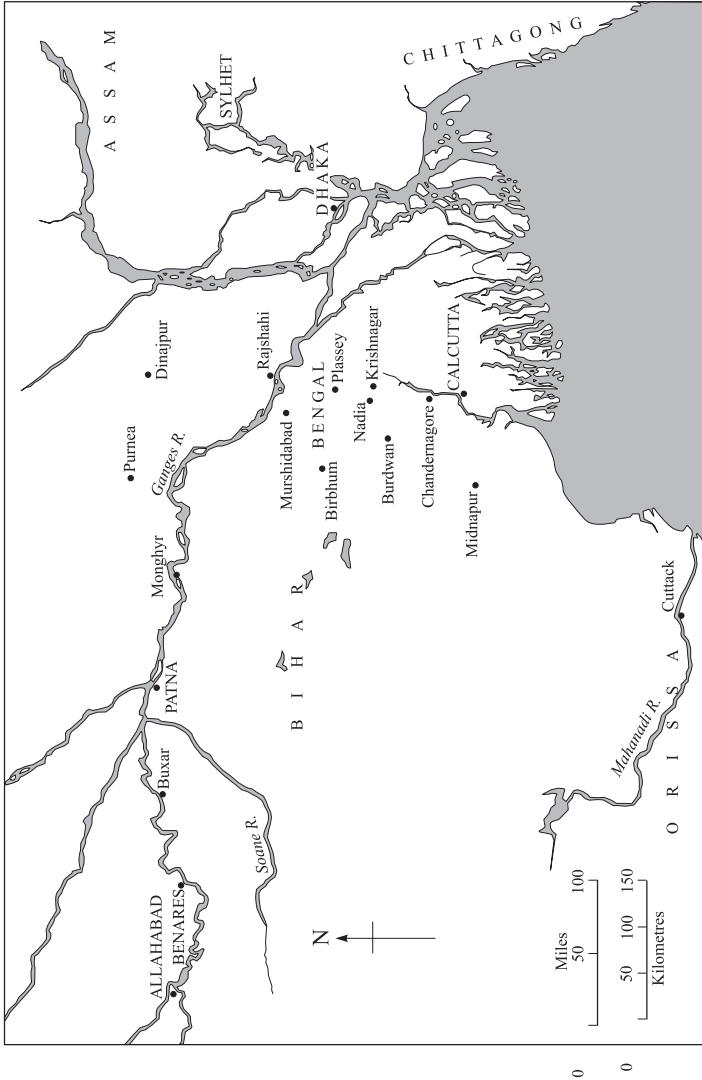
<i>taluqdar</i>	holder of a <i>taluq</i> , a form of land right ranking below a <i>zamindar</i>
<i>zamindar</i>	(<i>zemindar</i> , <i>zemidar</i>) literally meaning land (<i>zamin</i>) holder (<i>dar</i>), it was a Persian term applied by Mughal governments to a wide range of rural elites paying land revenues to the state. The exact nature of <i>zamindar</i> rights and duties was much disputed by the British, before <i>zamindars</i> were eventually defined as landowners
<i>zamindari</i>	the territory or jurisdiction of a <i>zamindar</i>

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Map of Bengal and Bihar in the eighteenth century. Adapted from A.M. Khan, *The Transition in Bengal, 1756—75: a study of Muhammad Reza Khan*, Cambridge, 1969.