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Edited by Edmund Leach and S. N. Mukherjee
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EDITED BY
EDMUND LEACH
AND
S. N. MUKHERJEE



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CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>Editors' Introduction</i>	ix
1 The Mughal <i>Mansabdari</i> System <i>by</i> PERCIVAL SPEAR, <i>Fellow of Selwyn College, Cambridge</i>	1
2 Traditional Elites in the Great Rebellion of 1857: Some Aspects of Rural Revolt in the Upper and Central Doab <i>by</i> ERIC STOKES, <i>Smuts Professor of the History of the British Commonwealth, University of Cambridge</i>	16
3 Class, Caste and Politics in Calcutta, 1815–38 <i>by</i> S. N. MUKHERJEE, <i>lately Editor, Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, New Delhi</i>	33
4 Competing Elites in Bombay City Politics in the Mid-Nineteenth Century (1852–83) <i>by</i> CHRISTINE DOBBIN, <i>Research Fellow, Department of Pacific History, Australian National University</i>	79
5 Chitpavan Brahmins and Politics in Western India in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries <i>by</i> GORDON JOHNSON, <i>Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge</i>	95
6 The Landed Gentry of the Telengana, Andhra Pradesh <i>by</i> HUGH GRAY, <i>M.P., Honorary Lecturer in Sociology, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London</i>	119
7 Candidates for the 1967 General Elections in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh <i>by</i> DAGMAR BERNSTORFF, <i>Seminar für Internationale Politik, University of Munich</i>	136
8 M. N. Roy and Radical Humanism: The Ideology of an Indian Intellectual Elite <i>by</i> D. G. DALTON, <i>Lecturer in Politics, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London</i>	152
9 The Academic Profession in India <i>by</i> EDWARD SHILS, <i>Fellow of King's College, Cambridge</i>	172

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-10765-5 - Elites in South Asia
 Edited by Edmund Leach and S. N. Mukherjee
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

vi	CONTENTS	
10	The Merchants of Surat, <i>c.</i> 1700–50 by ASHIN DAS GUPTA, <i>Presidency College, Calcutta</i>	<i>page</i> 201
11	European and Indian Entrepreneurship in India, 1900–30 by AMIYA KUMAR BAGCHI, <i>Professor of Economics, Presidency College, Calcutta</i>	223
	<i>Index</i>	257
	MAPS	
1	The Agra region	<i>page</i> 17
2	Western India	<i>at end of volume</i>

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10765-5 - Elites in South Asia
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Frontmatter
[More information](#)

PREFACE

The Editors wish to express their thanks to the Master and Fellows of St John's College, Cambridge, for the facilities which they provided in April 1968 and which made it possible to hold the Seminar of which this book is the final outcome. They also wish to thank all those connected with the Cambridge Centre of South Asian Studies who helped in the organization of this enterprise, but in particular they wish to record their thanks to Mr B. H. Farmer, the Director of the Centre, and to Mrs C. Brown, the Director's Secretary. Further, they wish to record their thanks to all those who participated in the Seminar itself, not only those who contributed papers but those who offered comments in the open discussions. Many of the contributions from this last category of collaborator were extremely valuable, and some have been incorporated, unacknowledged, in the text of the revised papers which we now submit for our readers' approval. Finally, the Editors, in their personal capacities, would like to record their thanks to the various members of the staff of the Cambridge University Press who have helped to guide the project from typescript to printed page.

E. R. L.
S. N. M.

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Frontmatter
[More information](#)

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

All the papers in this collection were originally prepared for a two day seminar held at St John's College, Cambridge, in April 1968 under the auspices of the University Centre of South Asian Studies. The seminar carried the general title 'Elites in South Asia', but the contributors were allowed to decide for themselves just what they should mean by the term 'elite', and they have taken full advantage of this latitude. Some of our authors have used the term in Pareto's sense to mean those who exercise influence within any specialized sector of society: in this sense there may be elites among artists or schoolmasters or trade union officials quite regardless of their social class origins or their political status; others concern themselves exclusively with a political elite considered as a decision-making segment of an economically powerful ruling class; others again have had in mind Mosca's model of an open ruling class—the Power Elite of C. Wright Mills—which recruits its members from many different sectional elites within the total society on a more or less transient basis.

In the history of sociological thought the concept of 'elites' has been closely bound up with the theory of the 'circulation of elites' which derives from Mosca and Pareto and which, in its historical origins, stands in polar opposition to the Marxist theory of permanent struggle between fixed classes of owners and producers. In practice, the two types of theory are not necessarily mutually incompatible. Elitist analysis is concerned with how individuals are recruited into positions of personal influence as part of a political process. In Marxist analysis, on the other hand, the emphasis is on the nature of political domination and its ultimate dependence on the control of strategic institutions within the economic infra-structure of society. An integration of the two lines of approach is perfectly feasible, but nothing of this sort has been attempted in this book. The various elites which are described are simply samples drawn from different Indian localities at different historical periods. Collectively they demonstrate that political influence may derive from many different sources—from scholarship or mercantile skill as well as caste status or property in land—but they do not add up to an integrated whole. Our authors have not described, or attempted to describe, the Power Elite of contemporary India.

Even so, the papers do share one important common parameter; all are concerned with Indian elites in the context of British influence and its aftermath, and in this particular the problems which they delineate are by no means peculiar to the Indian subcontinent. Nearly all the

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

'developing countries' of contemporary Asia, Africa and Latin America are entangled with their post-colonial heritage even though in the Latin American case the colonialist phase itself is now receding into the background. The history of political elitism in all these countries has been similar. In the immediate post-colonial period power first came into the hands of men who had been educated according to the cultural and political conventions of the oppressors whom they had helped to overthrow. Their political respectability depended on a double criterion; they needed to have demonstrated their hostility to the colonial power, yet they also had to exhibit professional competence of a kind which the colonial authorities would themselves recognize. Nehru, the jailbird, terrorist, agitator, who overnight became an honoured international statesman, Prime Minister of India, admired as a Harrovian and graduate of Trinity College, Cambridge, is but one example among many. An Oxbridge, L.S.E. or Sandhurst background, plus a pre-Independence sentence of imprisonment, has been almost a prerequisite for post-Independence leadership in any British ex-colonial territory, and very similar principles apply to the former colonial territories of France and Holland. This phase is transient and is itself a developing process. In India, as early as the second decade of this century, influence began to shift away from anglophile, ultra-Anglicized servants of the Raj into the hands of nationalist leaders of 'non-co-operation' and 'civil disobedience'. Both groups were members of the same social class with much the same kind of background education, but the nationalists constituted among themselves an elite of a new kind, and it was to members of this latter group that the British finally handed over the reins of political authority. Since Independence this devolution has proceeded further. Ultimate power still rests with a limited elite who are members of a quite narrowly defined social class, but the principles of recruitment to this elite tend to change. Close familiarity with the values of English upper middle class culture becomes less and less relevant.

In the light of the importance of elites in the contemporary political situation, it was appropriate that the seminar should examine other Indian contexts in which membership of an elite has depended on social background rather than economic circumstance, and several of the papers in this collection in fact have this orientation. But, in practice, for most of our authors, theory has been of minor relevance; the word 'elite' then implies no more than 'the men at the top', whatever the particular context of discussion happens to be.

Spear starts the ball rolling with a step back into pre-British India. His *mansabdars* were the 'feudal barons' of the Mughal Emperors; they were an elite in that they were 'a selected cross-section of the

landed aristocrats of India'. Spear both compares and contrasts the role of this elite in Mughal India with the part played by the Civil Service both in modern Britain and in British India. His argument implies that, at least in embryo, the *mansabdari* came close to being a bureaucracy in the Weberian sense, a view which surely stretches this ideal type concept some way beyond its normal limits? However, Spear's most significant point is the emphasis which he places on the interdependence of *mansabdar* authority and Mughal authority. Because of this relationship they could not survive the establishment of British rule. In sharp contrast, more orthodox, formally bureaucratic, civil service elites have often shown themselves remarkably resilient in the face of drastic changes of regime.

Stokes's paper is a re-analysis of a paradox of the Indian Mutiny period, the circumstance that it appeared to the British officials of the time that: 'the agricultural labouring class—the class who above all others have derived the most benefit from our rule were the most hostile to its continuance. Whilst the large proprietors who have suffered under our rule almost to a man stood with us.'

Stokes examines the background to this proposition as revealed by the history of land and taxation policy in the region between Delhi and Agra during the period 1840–57. He shows on the one hand that, owing to misunderstanding of the social facts, the policy of the British officials often had precisely the opposite consequences to what was intended, but he also shows that land law innovations did not, as is commonly supposed, simply impoverish the 'traditional elite' of rural landlords in favour of the urban trading and money-lending classes. It tended rather to induce a circulation of property rights among different sectors of the traditional elite so that advantage and disadvantage were roughly balanced. Consequently, in the crisis situation of 1857, the 'local magnate class' did not act as a unity: 'the breakdown of British authority so far from throwing the elite wholly on the side of rebellion split it raggedly down the middle, so that even within the same district magnate and peasant proprietors of the same caste could react in quite opposite directions'.

With Mukherjee, Dobbin and Johnson we move to problems of elitism in the nineteenth-century cities of Calcutta, Bombay and Poona. Here the distinction between ruling class and political elite becomes more meaningful. Mukherjee tries to relate the politics of Calcutta to the class system and caste structure of the city at that period. Dobbin describes the situation in Bombay where elite groups of varied origin were competing against each other to achieve political domination. Although she closes her study at 1883, her conclusions seem highly topical. She observes that even a century ago the men who achieved

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

political eminence on the all-India stage, and even internationally, often failed to maintain control of the local politics in their home city. This can still happen, but the significance of such inconsistency may be very different in the context of an independent India from what it was under the aegis of the British Raj. Johnson's paper comes to grips directly with the key issue: 'The first Indian nationalists came from small well-defined social groups occupying privileged positions within their own provinces. Although differing from each other in many ways these provincial elites were drawn into continental politics by shared interest in British rule.'

The problem to be solved is: what gave one such potential power group the necessary advantage over its rivals? Johnson takes the Chitpavan Brahmins of Maharashtra as a case in point. He examines the 'distinctive contribution Chitpavan Brahmins made to Indian political life', but he also examines the sources of their short-lived success. His conclusion is that the significant factor was not caste as such, but the development within certain sections of this caste of an English-educated elite. Education gave these people the political know-how to operate effectively with British-derived institutions. Admittedly, their high caste status gave them an initial advantage in gaining access to a British-style education, but they then used their educational advantages to try to maintain Brahmin domination, an objective in which they were ultimately unsuccessful.

Gray's paper is a contemporary study designed to show what has happened to the traditional feudal aristocracy in Andhra Pradesh in the circumstances of post-Independence India. The conclusion seems to be that the old guard squirearchy have shown themselves very resourceful in adapting themselves to the new political institutions, or perhaps to adapting the new institutions to themselves. A large part of Gray's paper is taken up with a case study of a single village, and one cannot help wondering how far the author is justified in using this example as a basis for his wider generalizations.

Bernstorff's contribution is likewise strictly contemporary. She makes a detailed study of the thirty-four candidates who stood for the seven constituencies in the Old Town of Hyderabad during the general election of 1967. Her conclusion is that the candidates 'represent a new elite which is not linked to the established elites. However, they belong to a small stratum in Indian society, the educated middle class.' 'Educated' in this context means, of course, 'educated into a partly Anglicized culture'. This is an important finding, though not unexpected, but one could have wished that our author had developed her conclusions rather further. 'By education and occupation none of [the candidates] can be considered as belonging to the lower classes...

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

xiii

No candidate is from a scheduled caste, but a few belong to lower Shudra castes. Politics provide a channel for social mobility, but the climb is slow. . . .’

Dalton is concerned with the intellectual development of M. N. Roy from an early nationalist phase, through his career as a Marxist, when he was quite explicitly alienated from the Indian nationalist tradition, to the final phase when he renounced Communism and identified himself as a ‘radical humanist’. Dalton’s thesis is that in the amalgam of Indian and European ideas which contributed to Roy’s thought it was the elements derived from Gandhi and traditional Hindu mysticism which ultimately became dominant. Roy, argues Dalton, is not to be regarded as a solitary eccentric; the evolution of his thinking is matched elsewhere: ‘Radical humanism, which is synonymous with the mature political and social thought of M. N. Roy, will be considered here as the ideology of an intellectual elite’.

A sentence on the first page of Shils’ paper sets its theme: ‘in the land of the *guru* the profession which has taken over his obligations is held in low esteem by those who practise it and by others’. In India, as elsewhere, the academics form an important elite; yet, compared with their Euro-American counterparts, they seem to carry little influence and receive extremely meagre material rewards. Shils maps out the anatomy and depressing implications of this situation, which, for a country struggling to achieve economic modernity, may be extremely serious. But he does not despair. Despite the shortcomings of the academics ‘something does get done, and India, as we know it, would not exist without them’.

The two final papers, those of Das Gupta and Bagchi, are both concerned with economic elites and are nicely contrasted. Das Gupta’s piece relates to a period before the establishment of British political authority but is concerned with Indian entrepreneurs who made their fortunes by engaging in trade with Europeans. Bagchi, on the other hand, focuses attention on the period 1900–30 when the British political power was fully dominant. He re-examines the conventional proposition that the economic stagnation of India under the British is properly attributed to such factors as caste restrictions and other-worldly value systems. The evidence, he suggests, points to quite other conclusions. He shows how the British used their political influence to help British companies maintain a stranglehold on the Indian economy; and it was the inefficiency of British-controlled enterprise rather than the lack of initiative on the part of Indian industrialists which was ultimately responsible for the persistence of economic backwardness in India right through the first half of the twentieth century. In this paper, as in others, we meet with the phenomenon that, under colonial conditions, an

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Edited by Edmund Leach and S. N. Mukherjee

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiv

INTRODUCTION

elite group which partly adopts the value system of the alien rulers stands to gain very markedly in the process. In the case of British India, one outstanding example of this process was the industrial success of the Parsis. Bagchi has looked at the relevant historical evidence through the eyes of an economist, and more sociologically minded readers may find his analysis only partly convincing. Even so he clearly establishes his case that the conventional explanations which attribute to the Parsis a special capability for business efficiency cannot be sustained.

And that may be the right point at which to stop. The merit of the seminar to which these papers were originally contributed was that it was inter-disciplinary. Historians, sociologists and economists with a common territorial interest met to discuss a common theme. As was to be expected the level of communication was not always very high. The sociologists thought that the historians and the economists were simple-minded, the historians thought the sociologists were ignorant, but all the participants, as well as the readers of this book, were faced with kinds of evidence which was unfamiliar and were compelled to recognize that the facts of Indian social history fit very badly with the conventional clichés of Indian social historians. The sundry authors have not shown that anything is generally true about the elites of South Asia; they have, however, demonstrated that quite a number of things are not true, and that wholly negative conclusions may in the end be very worth while.

E. R. LEACH

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