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INTRODUCTION

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

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

Scarcely less significant was the Indian contribution to Britain's

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

IMPERIAL DECLINE AND
THE CONSOLIDATION OF SOCIAL GROUPS

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

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

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

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

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