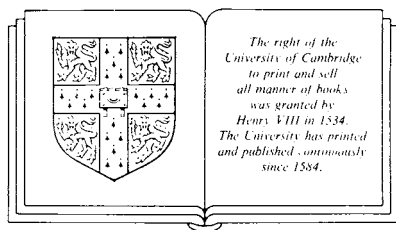


A History of Christianity in India

1707–1858

STEPHEN NEILL F.B.A.



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I · India and Political Change

1706–86

I THE INDIAN REVOLUTIONS

When Aurungzīb died, he was still ruling with despotic, though not everywhere accepted, authority over a vast empire, with a surface of something like a million square miles and a population of perhaps 170 million subjects. Only the emperor of China could be in any way compared in authority with him. The Mughul empire was not as strong as it appeared, but it was still immensely strong. It was true that Aurungzīb had designated no unquestioned heir; but this had happened in the past and it could be supposed that, among the contending princes, one would show himself indubitably superior to the others and would take possession of the vacant throne. (Actually this did not happen, and there was no obviously suitable candidate for the succession.) There seemed no convincing reason to doubt that the Mughul dominion would have a long and successful future before it.

The Europeans by contrast were a quite insignificant factor in the situation. Only the Portuguese, in some small regions, had made themselves actually possessors of Indian land and of sovereignty where they had settled. The others – French, British, Danes, Dutch – were dependent on the favour of Indian potentates, obtained from them the use of certain lands and duly paid the rent whose payment was the condition of their survival. The idea of European dominion on a large scale was entertained only by a small number of visionaries.

Nothing turned out as had been expected.

In 1807 the Mughul dominion was no more than the shadow of a shade, the Mughul emperor a pensioner depending on British bounty and on British help for such authority as it was still within his power to exercise. The British had made themselves masters of the greater part of the country, with only one great enemy, the Sikh power, still to overcome. They were well on the way to the accomplishment of their greatest achievement – that unity of the entire sub-continent which had eluded the ambitions of Mauryas and Mughuls alike.

There is very little in history that can be accurately foreseen, and much that turns out otherwise than has been foreseen. As the Mughul powers

declined, India fell back increasingly into the situation that had frequently existed in the past: of a number of rival powers, none strong enough to establish itself over more than a limited area. At the middle of the eighteenth century there were five main blocs of power in India. One of these might have emerged as the supreme power, but, as often before, rivalry and ambition made this impossible; divided India fell a victim to the one power which was strong enough to tackle each of the others in turn, and by military excellence or by superior diplomacy to reduce them to the status of dependants. The British had arrived.

It could well have happened that the European powers, having fallen into the trap of fighting out their European quarrels on Indian soil, might each have so reduced the power of the others that no one of them would have been a serious contender for the supreme power. In point of fact, it seemed for a good many years that, if one European power was to emerge greatly superior in power to the others, this power was more likely to be France than Britain. As history moved forward, it was a combination of better support from home, greater competence in the training of Indian troops for battle, superior military skill and a large slice of luck that in the end gave the prize to the British and not to the French.

Few had foreseen this possibility. The Europeans had come to trade; the majority of them would have been quite content with favourable conditions for trade, and with the measure of tranquillity without which trade becomes impossible. The Indians then, as often since, had greatly underestimated both the power that lay behind the insignificant British presence in India and the persistence of the British in pressing forward to the fulfilment of their aims. With hindsight it is possible to see a certain inevitability in British progress in India; it was not clear at the time. When things were happening, few realised their significance; when the result was achieved, it came to almost everyone as a surprise.

There are many interesting, indeed exciting, events in the history of India in the eighteenth century. But perhaps, seen in the context of wider history, those events which certainly changed the entire character and situation of India may be seen as having a significance in the whole history of the human race. This was the first example of a direct confrontation over a long period of two civilisations of wholly different origins and developments, and therefore may be seen as having a special significance in the age-long and toilsome effort of the human race towards the production of one world.

For three thousand years, 4000-1000 BC, civilisation, as distinct from culture, was more or less concentrated in the area of the great rivers Nile, Euphrates and Tigris. Then followed the great outward explosion of civilisation and of the human race. With the great westward migration of the Aryans emerged the civilisations of Greece and Rome, which eventually took

shape in the Eastern and Western empires, the former of which lasted for a thousand years. The basis and the inspiration of these empires was Christian. At much the same time an eastward migration laid the foundation of Chinese culture and the Chinese empire, with its extended influence in Japan and Korea. The teachings of Confucius were the extraordinarily perdurable cement which held together over many centuries a stable Confucian society. Some of the Aryans moved south-eastwards, and by AD 1000 had coalesced, with a number of other races, in what we know as Indian civilisation. Here the penetrating influence was Hinduism in one of its many and varied forms. Hinduism had given up its extension towards south-east Asia; the inner extension went on, as more and more of the simple people of remote and mountainous regions were brought within the capacious embrace of the Hindu system.

Through all these centuries of development, Europe knew very little of China, and China knew nothing of Europe. There was much commerce between India and China but little exchange of culture. Europe had always known something of India, but dimly, and India's knowledge of Europe was scanty and largely fantastic. Humanity seemed to be divided not so much between rival systems and civilisations as between diverging patterns of civilisation, which were almost unaware of one another. The Muslim civilisation of the Middle East, the last of the world civilisations to develop, served to enhance division, rather than to promote communication and mutual understanding.

When the ships of Vasco da Gama anchored off the shores of India in 1498, an epoch ended; the barrier between the nations was breached. It is important not to underestimate the service rendered to mutual understanding by the Portuguese and other Europeans in the period between 1498 and the end of the eighteenth century. The science of Indology had been well and truly founded. Europeans had begun to be intensely interested in India, as is shown by the rapid sale of books dealing with Indian subjects in a number of languages. The first steps had been taken in the interpretation of Indian religions and philosophies to Western minds. Some Indians, a minority, had become interested in the West; the more percipient among them had realised the advantages accruing from acquaintance with a European language. Exchange of knowledge in the area of religion had been begun, though it cannot be said to have made notable progress. But, with the British conquest of India, some Europeans had made a beginning with a serious study of the religions of India. Some Indians had become aware of the Christian faith, though not as yet in any sense as a threat to their inherited systems of religious faith.

So three systems were now to be confronted with one another, each with a religious foundation whose penetrating power could not be denied. The

Muslim dominion was established on the unshakeable principle of the superiority of the Muslim to all others. Even the adherent of one of the religions of 'the book' could not hope for any kind of equality; the best he could aspire to was acceptance as one of the tolerated subordinate peoples. The unchanging factor in all the manifold forms of Hinduism was the basic principle of caste – that some human beings by their birth are inferior to others and cannot ever be anything else. The Christian tradition, though often violated in practice, rests on the firm conviction of the equality of all men in the sight of God. Confrontation of these different systems was inevitable; it was more than likely that confrontation would at times lead to violent conflict.

When Britain took over the direction of the destinies of India, the English people had been passing through an interesting series of political and social emergencies. George III had tried to put into execution the advice given to him by his mother – 'George, be a king' – only to find himself up against a force which even he could not master. England had reached the point of being convinced that in all English affairs Parliament is supreme; the day of unchallenged and unconditioned sovereignty was at an end. In India, Muslim and Hindu alike had lived for centuries under absolute and personal rule. This was no longer to be the case. England had fought and lost a war on the issue of 'no taxation without representation'. How the Indian peoples were to be constitutionally represented was a question that had had to be left for the future; but the wisest of British administrators were from the start aware that it must sooner or later be faced. English law had been built up slowly on the principle of the equality of all men before the law; it could not admit any difference, and could not accept the view that the killing of a Brahman was in some sense more heinous than the killing of a peasant. Wise men such as Warren Hastings laid it down firmly that, as far as possible, Indians must be governed in accordance with their own traditions and under the laws which they themselves had developed and accepted. But there were limits to this principle. There was a higher law to which all human laws must be regarded as subject. The Methodist revival had swept over England, and had brought it about that the cynical principle of Walpole that every man has his price would no longer be taken as acceptable; the integrity of the Indian civil service came to be universally accepted as exemplary. All these things were coming about in the second half of the eighteenth century; they could not be without effect on the British impact on India, and in course of time on the Indian understanding of the nature of government and society. Even if no Christian missionary had ever set foot in India, some influence of the Christian element in the British way of doing things would have made itself felt in India.

It happened that many of the leading figures in the British administration

in India were themselves convinced and committed Christians. (This is a point which has in many cases been overlooked by secular historians, both British and Indian.) Only in rare cases had these men been affected by the new evangelical enthusiasm; they represented for the most part the sober, unemotional, ethically determined form of English society of which Dr Samuel Johnson was the perfect representative. For the most part they were strict in not permitting their Christian convictions to impinge directly on their manner of carrying out their official duties, and had a scrupulous regard for the religious susceptibilities of those with whom they had to deal. But they were aware throughout of the existence of a higher power, and that man in authority is accountable to an authority higher even than that provided by a king in Parliament.

In the eighteenth century the Christian missionary approach to India was strengthened by the participation for the first time of Protestants, in the first instance Germans, in the Christian approach to India. Before the end of the century, Germans had been joined by English missionaries, and a little later by Americans. The Roman Catholic missions naturally continued in existence. The Christian missions were still on such a small scale, and limited to such small areas of the country, as not yet to be felt by Indians as any threat to their established ways of doing things. This was something that would change with time. But already at the end of the eighteenth century Christianity in India had become part of world Christianity, and Indian Christians had become so much a part of the life of India that the destiny of the Christian churches in India had become inseparable from the destiny of India as a whole.

This implication of India in Christendom, and of the faith of Christendom in India, is the subject of this book.

2 DIVIDED INDIA

Mughul power had had its origins in the vigour and military skill of the hardy peoples of Central Asia, modified by elements of Persian culture and, after they had come to settle in India, by traditional Persian skills in diplomacy and administration. But marriage of Mughul leaders, generation after generation, with Indian princesses had reduced the Central Asian element in their descendants to little more than a memory, and may have accounted for a diminution in the inherited vigour of the race.

It was the misfortune of the Mughuls that the family, having in two centuries produced one really great ruler, one marked out by far more than ordinary ability, and two who could take rank with any other rulers of their time, by the beginning of the eighteenth century failed in the primary duty of a royal house – that of producing heirs capable of worthily carrying on the

succession.¹ Two Mughul rulers in that century managed to maintain themselves for considerable periods on the throne. But the first, Muhammad Shāh (1719–45), rarely succeeded in rousing himself to take that grip on affairs that the situation demanded. The long reign of the second, Shāh ʿĀlam II (1759–1806), was a series of tragedies. In 1788 he was blinded by a brutal Rohilla chief, Ghulām Qādir. At last in 1803 he was formally taken under the protection of the real rulers of the country, the English.

The historian is inclined to read back into eighteenth-century India ideas of loyalty which, though at home in some Western countries, had no lodgement at that time in the Indian mind. Loyalty may be to a family, to a common religion, to the memory of great events, or to a shared ideal of freedom or of political sophistication. None of these factors was effective in Mughul India. The term ‘empire’ implies a cohesion that was never really there; though the break-up of dominion began to become evident only after the death of Aurungzīb, the divisive forces had been operative long before that time.

There was no clear rule of hereditary succession. ‘The king is dead; long live the king’ makes possible the smooth transference of fealty from a dead sovereign to the one who is immediately recognised as his successor. If, as all too often happened, a number of rivals laid claim to the throne and were engaged in internecine conflict, loyalty to one could not be other than treachery to another.

Mughul rule was essentially foreign rule. A Muslim dynasty claimed to rule over a population which was mainly Hindu or Sikh. The policies of Aurungzīb had exacerbated the differences, but they had been there all the time; even the consummate skill of Akbar had not availed to eliminate the tension which existed between the one religious community and the other.

The attitude of the common people, the tillers of the soil on whom the prosperity of empires ultimately depends, was one not so much of loyalty as of submission, grateful if the ruler provided a satisfactory measure of order and security, resentful if his exactions passed beyond the limits of what was felt to be reasonable and lawful. Akbar had wisely laid it down that the tribute to be paid by the cultivator to the state as revenue must never exceed one third of the gross produce of the land. It seems that by the time of Aurungzīb that had been increased to at least a half. Moreover the ryot was not brought into direct contact with the highest authority, but was increasingly made subject to the rapacity of revenue farmers or other officials of minor but troublesome authority.

Part of the trouble was that the empire was just too large. Slowness and difficulty of communication made it almost impossible to maintain control by the centre over the more distant areas. Even Akbar had had to spend much time fighting for the maintenance of his authority. As the centre weakened,

there was inevitably a tendency for the governors of provinces to regard themselves as independent rulers, as sovereigns in their own right, even when they maintained a show of deference to the now shadowy imperial authority.

The Indian ideal of sovereignty had been closely linked to that of the *cakravartin*, the lord of the world, which once or twice had almost been realised on the Indian scene, and reappeared at intervals in the thoughts of men. Each of those who aimed at throwing off Mughul authority wanted to be not just a ruler, one among many, but to be *the* ruler, the one to whom all others would be subject. Thus each thought only in terms of his own interests. Treaties and agreements might be made, coalitions formed; but these could be broken as readily as they had been made. Hence the endless kaleidoscope of units forming, dividing and reforming by which the history of India in the eighteenth century is marked. It is not the case that that history is a story of little men without the greatness that had marked earlier years. There were men of considerable ability, more than one of whom might under more favourable circumstances have risen to imperial power. But one neutralised another. There was no idea of a division of territory and rule, and of friendly co-existence. Each momentary ally is also an enemy to be destroyed when the time has come. Though none may be strong enough to prevail over all the others and to reach the imperial summit, each is strong enough to prevent the others from attaining the desired goal. Thus none was able to exercise the fullness of his powers or to carry into effect the achievements of which he might otherwise have been capable. All the time there was waiting in the wings that shrewd, at times unscrupulous, and endlessly patient power that in the end was to step in and take over the supreme authority and to accomplish what other rulers had in vain tried to bring about – the unity of the whole sub-continent from the Khyber Pass to Cape Comorin.

If the Mughul dominion was destined to come to an end, it seemed for a good many years that the Marāthās were the claimants most likely to establish their claim to succession. Śivājī (d. 1680) had left his people with a great domain. It seemed that this might grow and spread until it embraced the greater part, if not the whole, of India. For a variety of reasons this never came about.

In the first place, the Marāthās never created a closely integrated dominion; their organisation resembled, rather, a somewhat loose pentarchy. The most dynamic centre, where a powerful *peshwā* ruled under the aegis of a fainéant king, was Poona. But in more or less close alliance with him were the *gaikwār* in Baroda, *holkar* in Indore, *scindia* in Gwālior, and *bhonsle* in Nāgpur. Each of these rulers had his own ambitions and personal concerns. Marāthās could unite against an enemy, but could again be quickly divided by jealousies and rivalries among themselves.

For all that, the Marāthās could on occasion turn out powerful armies. The aim was not so much to conquer and to administer as to raid and then return, taking away everything that could be moved, whether produce or money or (as not infrequently) women. The misery caused to the victim populations was intense. There was little security for life or property, and, when the exactions of the Marāthās had been met, only the stoical and invincible patience of the Indian peasant enabled him to survive.

During the eighteenth century the Marāthā character underwent considerable change. As with the Mughuls, the acquisition of power led to a softness and a life of luxury which contrast strangely with the austerity of the days of Śivājī, when under his leadership the sturdy race of hillmen stormed the fortresses of the Mughuls. The nobles began to adopt the ways of the older ruling powers, to build themselves lofty palaces and to fill them with objects of art such as they were not as yet able themselves to produce. Such a manner of living was not conducive to success in the hazardous military adventures which alone could open the way to universal dominion.

Śivājī left no successor equal to himself. But in the earlier years of the eighteenth century one Marāthā leader showed a capacity which, if he had lived, might have enabled him to transform the loose federation into a real empire. Historians have bestowed almost unstinted praise on the fighting Peshwā Bājī Rāo (c. 1700–40), both for his character and for his abilities. He was equally outstanding as soldier and as statesman; brave in the field and generous in victory; of commanding appearance and unequalled among his people as an orator. But Bājī Rāo died at about the age of forty-two, and there was no one to take his place.

For years the Marāthās had carried on a running war with the Mughuls, almost always to the disadvantage of the older power. In 1738 an even greater danger threatened the Mughul throne from a very different quarter. Two years earlier a Kurasāni adventurer, Nādīr Qulī, had dethroned the last of the Safavī line of Persian rulers and made himself master of Persia with the title Nādīr Shāh. Like many other rulers from Central Asia and Afghanistan, Nādīr Shāh had begun to cast his eyes on the fertile fields and the treasures of India. On 27 December 1738 he crossed the Indus. On 12 March 1739 he reached Delhi and camped in the Shālīmar gardens. There had been no siege and no victory; but in the tumult which naturally followed this foreign occupation a number of Persians had been engaged and killed by the inhabitants. Enraged beyond reason, Nādīr Shāh gave up the city to flames and its people to the sword. The slaughter lasted throughout a whole day; the number of those who perished has been very variously recorded, the highest estimate being 150,000, the lowest 8,000; the former is too high, the latter considerably too low.² On the following day Nādīr Shāh gave orders that the slaying and pillage were to cease; his orders were obeyed, but by this time a considerable part of the city had been destroyed.

It was no part of the intentions of Nādīr Shāh to set up a Persian dominion in India. Like so many of his predecessors he came to demonstrate military prowess and to enrich himself and his people. After a stay of little more than two months in Delhi, contemptuously leaving the ineffective Muhammad Shāh in his position as emperor, and carrying with him an enormous booty including the famous peacock throne of Shāh Jahān, he withdrew to his own country. The Persian invasion was not immediately fatal; but this demonstration of the feebleness of the Mughul regime was not lost on the many vultures standing round the injured body, concerned only to enrich themselves, and, if possible, to secure their own independence of the centre.

The story of the disintegration of the Mughul empire was not yet at an end. The hold of the Mughuls on the Deccan had always been precarious; by the middle of the eighteenth century it had ceased to exist except in name. The man who, almost single-handed, brought about this change, is commonly known by his title Nizām-ul-Mulk (1671-1748), though his personal name was Chīn Qīlīch Khān.³ This alien from Bokhara held numerous appointments in the civil service of the emperor, and at one time was the most powerful man in the empire. In 1713 he had been appointed governor of the six *subāhs* of the Deccan with the title Nizām-ul-Mulk Bahādur Fath Jang. After a number of vicissitudes the *nizām* was recalled to Delhi by Muhammad Shāh and appointed *vazīr*. An able and on the whole generous and upright ruler, the *nizām* desired to reorganise the entire government of the empire and to restore its prosperity by taking control out of the hands of a sycophantic and incompetent court. Before long he realised that the task was too great even for one of his unusual abilities; in December 1723 he turned his back on Delhi and returned to the Deccan.

From this time on Nizām-ul-Mulk was in all but name an independent sovereign. He remitted no revenue to Delhi. He made his own appointments and promotions. Though he was wise enough not to claim the title of king and did not issue coinage in his own name, in all other respects he assumed the attributes of sovereignty and ruled in Hyderabad as absolute monarch. His strong administration and sensible principles of finance relieved the peasantry of many of the unjust privations that they had endured; the fertile lands began to enjoy prosperity such as they had not known for a long time. In December 1732 the *nizām* reached an agreement with the Marāthās, under which by directing the attention of the *peshwā* to the possibility of the extension of Marāthā power in northern India, he found his hands left free to consolidate his own power in the south.

For a quarter of a century Nizām-ul-Mulk had been the most outstanding personality in the Mughul empire; he might even have become emperor, if the tradition is true that in 1739 Nādīr Shāh wished to set aside the feeble Muhammad Shāh in his favour. He was renowned both as soldier and as

diplomat; he was revered by the good and hated by the knaves. When he died, on 1 June 1748, worn out by years and labours, he had established essential independence for the extensive realm that he governed; and, although his successors were very far from being his equals, he had established a hereditary dynasty which was to outlast that of the Mughuls by almost a century.⁴

Bengal, with its teeming population and its endless watercourses, was another area over which the Mughuls had found it difficult to maintain effective control. In this area, as in the south, the dangerous principle had been adopted of intercalating between the emperor and the governors of the various provinces a viceroy to whom each governor would be immediately subordinate. This merely complicated the administration and did not increase efficiency. Bengal, Bihar and Orissa had been formed into a vicerealty. From 1726 to 1739 these provinces had been well and wisely governed by Shujā^c-ud-dīn.⁵ On his death, the governor of Bihar, ^cAlī Vardī Khān, obtained from the emperor a commission to succeed as viceroy, and on 12 May 1740 established himself at Murshidābād, the capital of Bengal, as viceroy of the three provinces, in nominal submission to the emperor at Delhi but in practice as independent ruler of a vast and populous region. In 1751 he was compelled to cede Orissa to the Marāthās; but two great provinces still remained under his rule. He died in 1756, leaving his realm to his grandson Sirāj-ud-daula, whose direct confrontation with the English was to lead him to irretrievable disaster.

One final calamity remains to be recorded. On the north-west frontier of India the Afghans were always restless, a menacing cloud which could never be completely dispersed. After the death of Nādīr Shāh in 1747, one of his officers, Ahmad Shāh, an Afghan of the Abdālī tribe, gradually made himself master of the whole of Afghanistan and assumed the title of king. Before long the mind of the new ruler, like that of so many of his predecessors, was set on foreign conquests. In 1756 he reached India, plundered Delhi and then withdrew, leaving his son Tīmūr Shāh as viceroy of Lahore. The Marāthās reacted vigorously. Their power was still great, and they were united as hardly ever before or since. Tīmūr Shāh was driven out and Lahore reoccupied. It seemed that for the moment at least the progress of the dragon was arrested.

Fate ruled otherwise. In August 1759 Ahmad Shāh Abdālī once again crossed the Indus. The Marāthās reacted vigorously to what they rightly regarded as a threat to the whole of India. The *peshwā* sent out invitations to rulers far and wide to join in the campaign. A highly experienced soldier, Sadāshiv Bhāu, was appointed as commander-in-chief.