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The British conquered India within two generations, not only because of their military superiority, but also because they deployed a sophisticated intelligence system. In a penetrating account of the evolution of British intelligence gathering in India between the wars of annexation in 1793–1818 and the aftermath of the Mutiny-Rebellion of 1857, C.A. Bayly shows how networks of Indian running-spies and political secretaries were recruited by the British to secure military, political and social information about their subjects. He also examines the social and intellectual origins of these 'native informants', and considers how the colonial authorities interpreted and often misinterpreted the information they supplied. As Professor Bayly demonstrates, it was their misunderstanding of the subtleties of Indian politics and values which ultimately contributed to the failure of the British to anticipate the rebellions and mutinies of 1857. He argues, however, that even before this India's complex systems of debate and communication were challenging the political and intellectual dominance of the European rulers.

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# Empire and information

## *Intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780–1870*

C.A. Bayly

*University of Cambridge*

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C. A. Bayly
Frontmatter
More information

# Contents

*List of maps* *page* viii
*Preface* ix
*Glossary* xi
*List of abbreviations* xiii

Introduction 1

1 Prologue: surveillance and communication in early modern India 10

2 Political intelligence and indigenous informants during the conquest of India, *c.* 1785–1815 56

3 Misinformation and failure on the fringes of empire 97

4 Between human intelligence and colonial knowledge 142

5 The Indian ecumene: an indigenous public sphere 180

6 Useful knowledge and godly society, *c.* 1830–50 212

7 Colonial controversies: astronomers and physicians 247

8 Colonial controversies: language and land 284

9 The information order, the Rebellion of 1857–9 and pacification 315

10 Epilogue: information, surveillance and the public arena after the Rebellion 338

Conclusion: 'Knowing the country' 365

*Bibliography* 377
*Index* 401



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C. A. Bayly
Frontmatter
More information

# Maps

1. The Indian subcontinent *c.* 1800 *page* 11
2. The Ganges–Jumna Valley in the early nineteenth century 57
3. Nepal and Burma 98–9



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C. A. Bayly
Frontmatter
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# Preface

The germ of an idea for a history book is often sown by a contemporary moment. Coming back to India from east and south-east Asia one time in the later 1980s, I was struck by several paradoxes. In India, a society where literacy still struggled around the 40 or 50 per cent level, there flourished a massive publishing industry working in numerous languages and a vigorous, not to say violent, free press which made its contemporaries in 'educated' and 'technological' south-east and east Asia look tame and controlled. In this poor society, some forms of political and social knowledge were remarkably widely diffused: apparently uneducated people would come up to one in the bazaar to discourse on the demerits of Baroness Thatcher or Mr Gorbachev, while educated people in east and south-east Asia, let alone Britain, seemed to struggle to understand anything of the external world. Another paradox: an Indian government which was as inquisitive and paper-obsessed as its colonial ancestor was constantly putting its foot wrong because it was seemingly so ill-informed about happenings in the states and localities. This set me thinking about a study of the 'information order' of British India, a topic that would occupy the dead ground between what is now a vibrant social history of India and its apparently lifeless intellectual history.

This study is mainly concerned with the Hindi-speaking areas of north India, but it reaches out to other regions when particularly important changes originated there. What was emerging in the nineteenth century was, after all, an all-India information order. Equally, in the first chapter I have glanced backwards into the pre-colonial period with some trepidation, but with a firm conviction that historians of Mughal India and the eighteenth century need to be alerted to these important issues. One final point: this book often deals with the colonial power's Indian informants. In the absence of a modern nationalism, these men should not be regarded as 'informers' or traitors. In fact, it was from the descendants of the informants that many of the future nationalists would be drawn.

Large numbers of librarians, archivists and scholars have helped me in



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this venture. I can only mention a few individuals. At the India Office Library (Oriental and India Office Collections, British Library), Richard Bingle was unfailingly friendly and helpful. At the Centre of South Asian Studies in Cambridge, Lionel Carter responded cheerfully to endless requests for bibliographical help. The following have all provided assistance and advice, though they bear no responsibility for my use of it: Peter Burke, Stephen Blake, Nigel Chancellor, Simon Digby, Michael Fisher, Sumit Guha, Joanna Innes, Muzaffar Alam, Norbert Peabody, Anil Sethi and Thant Myint-U. Katherine Prior proved a just and eagle-eyed critic of the manuscript; among the other readers of parts of the manuscript who provided valuable comments were the readers for Cambridge University Press, Gordon Johnson, Richard Drayton and Robert Travers. Susan Bayly listened patiently to my ramblings on this subject over several years and heroically read rough early drafts. The book is dedicated to the memory of my father, Roy Ernest Bayly, Master Mariner (1917–94), who first told me stories of the East, but sadly did not live to see the book completed.

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# Glossary

| | |
|---|---|
| akhbarat | a newsletter; cf. khabr: news; akhbar: newspaper. |
| Agarwal | a north Indian merchant caste. |
| banian | an agent or intermediary; cf. bania: a merchant. |
| banka | a 'bravo' or 'wide-boy'. |
| Banjara | pack-bullock owner. |
| bantiria | a forest watchman (Gorakhpur area). |
| Bedar | a 'tribal' and hunter community (Mysore area). |
| bhakti | devotion to god (Hinduism). |
| Brahmin | the Hindu priestly caste. |
| dak | post, conveyance of mail or people; cf. dak daroga: head postman; dak dauria: runner. |
| Dharma | righteousness (Hinduism); loosely 'religion'. |
| chaukidar | a watchman. |
| dacoitee | gang robbery. |
| dubash | an agent (lit. 'man of two languages'). |
| Devanagari | the Sanskrit alphabet, used for modern Hindi. |
| gorait | a village watchman (Banaras area). |
| Gosain | a Hindu mendicant of Vaishnavite sect (q.v.). |
| Gujar | a pastoralist and agriculturalist caste of north India. |
| hakim | a physician in the Greek-Islamic tradition. |
| harkara | an intelligence agent (lit. 'do-all'). |
| insha | the science of letter-writing: letter book. |
| jasus | spy. |
| Jat | a middle agriculturalist caste of north India. |
| jyotish | a Hindu astronomer/astrologer. |
| Kallar | a pastoralist and military caste of south India. |
| Kayastha | north Indian writer caste. |
| Khattri | a north Indian commercial and administrative caste. |
| kanungo | a rural registrar under the Mughals. |
| kassid | a runner. |
| kazi | a Muslim judge: under the British a registrar in a city. |
| kotwal | city magistrate: under the British the police chief. |



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| | |
|---|---|
| Kumboh | a (Muslim) writer community (Punjab). |
| mahajan | merchant title (lit. 'great man'). |
| mahzar | a representation to authority. |
| majlis | an assembly, usually for Muslims. |
| maulvi | a Muslim cleric. |
| 'Mewia' | a central Indian runner and tracker community. |
| mufti | expounder of law in a Muslim city. |
| muhtasib | superintendent of markets and morals. |
| Nyaya | a system of Hindu logic and philosophy. |
| Mug | [Magh] the Bengali name for Arakanese Buddhists. |
| munshi | a writer; secretary. |
| mushairah | a poetic competition. |
| nawab | deputy (to the Mughal emperor); a quasi-royal title in the eighteenth century; hence 'nabob'. |
| panchang | almanac. |
| panchayat | a tribunal or council. |
| pandit | a Hindu teacher, often Brahmin. |
| patwari | the village accountant. |
| pir | a title for a charismatic Muslim sufi teacher (q.v). |
| Purana | cosmologies and divine legends of medieval Hinduism. |
| qasbah | a small town often of Muslim foundation. |
| Rajput | the military north Indian royal and warrior caste. |
| sabha | meeting. |
| samaj | society, association. |
| sarkar | government. |
| sati | widow-burning. |
| Shaivite | a devotee of the deity Lord Shiva. |
| shastrartha | a formal Sanskrit debate. |
| Shia | the largest minority within Islam. |
| Siddhanta | 'correct doctrines': Indian astronomy based on precise observation. |
| Sufi | an adept of mystical and esoteric knowledge within Islam. |
| Sunni | the majority sect within Islam. |
| surathal | a representation to authority. |
| Usuli | a school of Islamic law stressing rational interpretation. |
| vaidya | a physician within the Hindu tradition. |
| Vaishnavite | a devotee of the deity Lord Vishnu. |
| waqai navis | cf. waqai nigar: newswriter. |
| zamindar | a landowner. |

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# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| Actg | Acting. |
| BC | Boards Collections, OIOC. |
| BL | British Library. |
| *CPC* | *Calendar of Persian Correspondence.* |
| Cons. | Consultations. |
| CUL | Cambridge University Library. |
| Dty | Deputy. |
| GG | Governor-General. |
| *HI* | Elliot, H.M. and J. Dowson, *The History of Indian told by its own Historians.* |
| HM | Home Miscellaneous Series, OIOC. |
| *IESHR* | *Indian Economic and Social History Review.* |
| *JAS* | *Journal of Asian Studies.* |
| *JBRS* | *Journal of the Burma Research Society* |
| *LH* | Garcin de Tassy, J.H., *Histoire de la Littérature Hindouie et Hindoustanie.* |
| *MAS* | *Modern Asian Studies.* |
| NAI | National Archives of India, New Delhi. |
| NWP | North-Western Provinces. |
| OIOC | Oriental and India Office Collections, British Library. |
| Resdt | Resident. |
| UPCRO | Uttar Pradesh Central Records Office, Allahabad. |

*Note on transliteration*

English transliterations of south Asian words have been in continuous change since 1750. To preserve original usages would give rise to archaicism and inconsistency, but modern scientific transliteration can obscure well-known names and places. Compromise and a degree of inconsistency is unavoidable. In the case of place-names, I have used the forms common in the later British gazetteers, except where contemporary Indian English usage has substituted acceptable alternatives (e.g.,



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Kanpur, Pune, Banaras). In the case of personal names I have used modern transliteration except where famous individuals are still known by contemporary forms (e.g., Muhammad Shah, Ram Mohun Roy), or where the indigenous form is uncertain, in which case I have preserved 'corrupt' contemporary versions. With other words, I have used commonly accepted modern forms (thus 'kazi', but 'qasbah'). I have also preserved the transliterations used by modern translators even where they are variants of the norm.

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