

## Conclusions

For the Europeans who came from societies on the brink of political and industrial revolution, the pace of social change in pre-colonial Asia seemed glacially slow. And in their eyes the cycles of its politics represented little more than the degeneration of once awesome despotisms. But from the Asian standpoint, the two centuries before the heyday of European dominance in the mid-nineteenth century was a period of rapid change. It witnessed the creation of new types of states and new social classes as surely as it marked the decline of the old. Three broad forces were at work. First, coastal and inter-Asian trade were expanding rapidly. Rising European demand, partly fuelled by the distant discovery of New World silver, had caused a chain reaction in Asian commerce.<sup>1</sup> It enriched some Asian lords and merchants and created a new economic balance between the coastal regions and the populous interior of the continent. Secondly, the domestication of epidemic disease and relative political security triggered a widespread advance in population and cultivated acreage. This was most evident in China but it appeared also in South and West Asia, though subject here to frequent setbacks.<sup>2</sup> The consequent expansion of the internal market provided new opportunities for inland traders as various as the Shansi bankers of north China, the southern Chinese who spread into South-East Asia, and the Punjabi traders who linked late Mughal north India with the Central Asian Khanates. At the same time, a growing population tended to advantage landlords and office-holders serving rulers who now required a more detailed control over agrarian resources. Both groups profited from the general monetisation of the

<sup>1</sup> E.g., J. F. Richards, 'Mughal state finance and the pre-modern world economy', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, xxiii (1981), 285-308; F. Perlin, 'Some central problems concerning the proto-industrialisation thesis and pre-colonial South Asia', mimeo., History Department, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, 1981; J. Brenning, 'Silver in seventeenth-century Surat: monetary movements and the price revolution in Mughal India', paper presented to comparative world history workshop in pre-modern monetary history, Madison, 1977; C. A. Bayly, 'Putting together the eighteenth century: trade, money and the pre-colonial political order', paper presented to Leiden workshop on comparative colonial history, 1981.

<sup>2</sup> W. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (London, 1977).

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Asian economies. Finally, new military technology spreading from European and Ottoman sources upset the political balance and galvanised the finances of eastern kingdoms. Compact despotisms fortified with Turkish-style ordnance or European musketry emerged within the ambit of the old empires. This is one feature common to powers as diverse as Mahomed Ali's Egypt, Hyder Ali's Mysore or the regional commanders of the Tung-chih restoration in mid-nineteenth-century China.

These tendencies can also be recognised in pre-British India. But they were often localised or incoherent, and have been lost amidst the annals of Mughal decline and European expansion. It will be years before the uniformities and links can be plainly seen beneath the variety of eighteenth-century society and politics. But the emerging synthesis is likely to upset our picture of the nineteenth century by predating many of the changes which were once thought to be characteristic of the colonial period. One good starting point for an analysis of the society of eighteenth-century north India is its recently reconstructed political history. In many ways, it is better to think of decentralisation or of the commercialisation of power within the Mughal polity than of anarchy. Between 1720 and 1740 Mughal magnates began to amalgamate provincial offices which had once been separate and to found new dynasties. These regimes developed closer links with rural society and favoured the petty rulers of the countryside by allowing generous perquisites and remissions. Even the Hindu and Sikh warrior states which were in open revolt against the empire retained much of the Mughal revenue machinery and continued to operate within a loose imperial system of honours and legitimacy which still centred on Delhi.

Political decentralisation encouraged the growing economic vitality of small places away from the imperial capitals. Magnates and gentry employed by the regional states founded fixed markets and settled colonies of specialist cultivators around them. While the merchants of the great Mughal towns faced disorder, local traders extended their branch agencies to secure the flows of artisan products and provided advances for the fine crops which the local aristocracies and armies needed. Religious foundations continued to flourish as pious rulers displayed their faith in eclectic religious patronage. This pattern was widespread throughout India. Islands of high farming and commercial enterprise existed around the courts and camps of all the lavish-spending contemporary nobilities. The environs of Hyderabad were settled with new colonies of farmers. The Maratha princes encouraged cash-cropping and artisan ventures around their capitals at Poona, Nagpur or Gwalior as their peasant parsimony gave way to Mughal

luxury. Hyder Ali's Mysore was run like a huge estate.<sup>3</sup> Even in the far south the warrior *poligars* founded fort-mart centres which drew in petty local entrepreneurs and laid the foundations for later commercial enterprise.<sup>4</sup>

There was also another pattern which cannot be ignored. The desire to paint a more balanced picture of the 'Black Century' should not obscure the existence of large tracts where political change actually produced a serious decline in local commerce and agriculture. This decline was not necessarily the result of war itself; for the military engagements of post-Mughal India were generally small-scale affairs. Sometimes decline resulted simply from the orderly movement of aristocracies, capital or skills from one centre to another and the subsequent realignment of trade and production. Physical movement was an integral part of the eighteenth-century social order and should not be regarded as a pathological feature. Sometimes, however, these patches of decline were the consequence of banditry or warfare in areas where agriculture was fragile and heavily dependent on artificial irrigation. This was the case in the tracts north and west of Delhi. But the drier areas near Madras, for instance, were also greatly at risk from an interruption in the repair of village water tanks like that that took place after the invasions of the Mysore rulers.

The first chapters of this book tried to rectify the picture of economic collapse without retreating to a stereotype of 'Traditional India' where cultural and political norms worked in an economic vacuum. First, it was suggested, the areas of decline were quite limited in extent. Secondly, their existence actually advantaged the richer and more stable territories which preyed on them. Thirdly, the farmers, merchants and aristocrats of the stable areas were already expanding outward to colonise the waste before the imposition of the British Peace at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Most important, however, is the subtle social change which was taking place in the stable zones even during the most war-scarred decades of the century. The 'farming' to magnates of the perquisites of kingship – the commercialisation of royal power – had been a feature of the later Mughal empire. These regional dynasts pushed the process further. The new nobility was drawn from entrepreneurs who could mobilise both military forces and capital. And even regimes of pioneer peasants such as the Marathas, Jats or Sikhs needed entrepreneurs of

<sup>3</sup> Asok Sen, 'A pre-British economic formation', in B. De (ed.), *Perspectives in the Social Sciences*, 1 (Calcutta, 1977), 46–119.

<sup>4</sup> B. Stein, *Peasant State and Society in South India* (Delhi, 1980); D. Ludden, 'Ecological zones and the cultural economy of irrigation in southern Tamilnadu', *South Asia*, vi (1978), 1–15; C. Baker, *An India Rural Economy, 1880–1955*, Oxford, 1984.

this sort once they had ceased to be expansive movements of plunder and protest and became settled kingdoms. However, the fortunes of these new magnates and fiscal barons themselves rested on the networks of skill and credit created by moneylenders, stewards and service gentry – people whose families had long acquaintance with the management of bazaars and revenue papers.

These groups of intermediaries between state and agrarian society demonstrated great resilience during the political flux of the eighteenth century. But they also provided the British merchants and administrators with the keys to the vast resources of inland India. Much of the book has dealt with two sections of the intermediate classes: the trading community and the service gentry.

On the face of it, the eighteenth century was a bad time for Indian commercial towns and traders. Along the coasts, the British established an unshakeable hegemony. The old oligarchies of Indian Ocean trade which dated back before the time of Vasco da Gama were strangled by piracy and internal depredation. Ancient Gujarati houses declined in Bengal and their native western India at the same time as revolt against the Mughal empire severed their internal routes. Disruption of demand in the Ottoman and Iranian empires or in the Arab lands dealt a savage blow to the west coast ports, while the decline of the Dutch and wars in the extreme south marked the passing of an age here also.

But even for international trade and the coastal economies, this picture of collapse is too stark. True, indigo and cloth exports through Surat fell off, but Malwa opium was still sold in vast quantities throughout West Asian markets.<sup>5</sup> Coastal trade down the length of the Gujarat and Konkan coasts remained buoyant.<sup>6</sup> Cloth exports from eastern India to Europe and South-East Asia were still considerable in the second half of the century.<sup>7</sup> The hardy overland trade to Central Asia in gold and luxury produce often managed to reroute itself in the face of political turbulence. Thus the volume of shipping in Indian ports controlled by Asians remained surprisingly large in the early years of the nineteenth century. Only on the lucrative China routes were the Europeans utterly dominant. And even in Bengal where the Company and the agency houses were building up their own exclusive society, the death-knell of international trading ventures pioneered by local men awaited the Scottish and Marwari deluge of the mid-nineteenth

<sup>5</sup> See, Bombay Commercial Proceedings and Reports, 1780–1820, IOL.

<sup>6</sup> S. C. Ghosh (ed.), *Journal of a Route through the Peninsula of Guzerat in the years 1809–10* (New Delhi, n.d.).

<sup>7</sup> D. Washbrook, 'Some notes on market relations and the development of the economy of South India, c. 1750–1850', paper presented to Leiden workshop on comparative colonial history, 1981.

century.<sup>8</sup> In fact the reduction of Indian merchants to a position of dependence within the Asian trading world was not assured until after 1850 when the high-speed ship and the electric telegraph revolutionised commercial information and risks.<sup>9</sup>

During the eighteenth century great volumes of Indian produce continued to find their way to foreign markets albeit by different hands and through different ports than a century earlier. This helped to keep the inland trade routes moving. But there were also internal sources of commercial vitality. The vast trade of the Indian interior continued to dwarf its external trade. Of course, it is important not to exaggerate; in many areas, volumes may well have declined between 1720 and 1800. But what is striking is the rise of rich overland trade routes to compensate for the clogging of the great Mughal arteries. Indian trading institutions were well adapted to move nimbly in the wake of the new aristocratic consumers and protectors. The persistence of revenue-payment in cash – and in similar orders of magnitude to those paid in the later Mughal empire – provides the simplest and most telling evidence of the capacity of the commercial community to adjust to new political conditions.

Yet the question at issue is not simply one of the shifts of routes or the percentage rise and fall of trades. More significant was the role of commercial people in society at large. For the 'Black Century' saw the redeployment of merchant capital within India, not its destruction. Increasingly, control of land or men became ineffective without access to silver, credit and markets. The extraction of revenue from the peasantry was facilitated by the village trader. Revenue-farmers could not farm without merchants; and the dominance of the new magnates of the countryside was enforced in silver rupees as much as by the iron-shod staff. In an age of cash-hungry small states, it is not surprising that commercial people subtly extended their influence. Few aspired to the dangerous heights briefly commanded by the great Hindu merchants of Bengal, the Jagat Seths. But in many parts of the country, commercial men in cartel could 'command the state' in the matter of revenue.

This represented more than the emergence of a new elite within the politics of the successor regimes. The influence of the commercial houses straddled the realms of the petty states and linked up with new patterns of commerce in more stable parts of the countryside. It was the harbinger of a slow social change, not merely a cyclical modification in

<sup>8</sup> B. Kling, *Partner in Empire. Dwarakanath Tagore and the Age of Enterprise in Eastern India* (Berkeley, 1976).

<sup>9</sup> M. Vicziany, 'Bombay merchants and structural changes in the export community, 1850-1880', in K. Chaudhuri and C. Dewey (eds), *Economy and Society* (Delhi, 1979), pp. 163-96.

the composition of the ruling class. But at the same time, these developments did not amount to the emergence of an Indian bourgeoisie. Capital controlled by traders and revenue-farmers was becoming a junior partner in the politics of the land; kingship was being commercialised. But capital was not being applied directly in the creation of new modes of production, nor were landed magnates giving place to capitalists.

What we can see is the creation of a unified merchant class. Groups of entrepreneurs in money and credit were consolidating themselves yet more rapidly within the interstices of small, commercialised and bureaucratic monarchies. Their independence was expressed through corporate institutions and rights which were recognised by the rulers. Paradoxically, the disturbed conditions of the eighteenth century tended to increase the homogeneity and independence of these solidarities. The needs of revenue-extraction and the consumption of aristocrats in small centres pulled the great merchants of the towns into the bazaars and *ganjs*, and brought the petty traders of the localities into the cities. The decline of some of the old Muslim and Gujarati traders with their continental networks meant that local merchant groups united by culture and religion were able to control the whole hierarchy of centres from peasant market to urban entrepôt.

This was happening across the subcontinent. In many parts of the country, inferior merchant groups aggrandised themselves at the expense of the cosmopolitan oligarchs of the past. In our area it was Chaube Brahmins, Rajasthani Bohras, Agarwals and eastern Khattris who were to form the trading and urban elites of the future. In the Punjab it was the Nanakpanthi Khattris and Aroras associated with the Sikhs, who took over from their more Islamicised caste fellows. In the south, Kannada merchants and local Chettis slipped into positions occupied by the old Armenian, Jewish and Vaishya firms. However, the story did not end here. It was from the groups of local merchants whose fortunes greatly improved with the commercialisation of power in the eighteenth century that much of India's modern industrial and business class has been recruited.

It is now a truism of colonial historiography that Europeans could not have established their trade and administration in Asia or Africa without the compliance of key people in indigenous societies. This book has tried to give such an assumption greater depth and precision in the case of India. We start from the proposition that the pace of 'expansion' and the form of the colonial relationship was determined mainly by the form of the society penetrated in the years before the full force of industrialisation was brought to bear on the non-European world.

To begin with, the theory and practice of Indian states – in particular their limited notions of authority or territorial integrity – were crucial. The coastal kingdoms of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries had put up only intermittent resistance to the Portuguese interlopers because they did not consider sea trade and the 'business of merchants' to be important matters for kings.<sup>10</sup> This was in sharp contrast, for instance, to the case of China where ancient notions of the subordination of foreign traders as 'tribute bearers' and the apparatus of detailed state control of trade through trade guilds (*hongs*) long frustrated the foreigners. In China, the Europeans had to launch a direct assault on a continental empire before they could prise away further commercial privileges. In India, however, the relationship between trade and power was highly ambiguous. The notion of 'farming out' rights, including rights over trade and markets, was designed to raise cash. But the redistribution of rights and duties was also an expression of the corporate nature of kingship. This created a peculiarly loose-textured political system in which a ruler could alienate much of his revenue and control without affecting his status as a king. So in India merchant corporations could quietly service and encourage European interlopers with impunity. Yet since trade required protection, the Europeans were forced gradually to assimilate the functions of the ruler themselves.

The British were able to exploit the ambiguous relationship between ruler and merchant in Indian political practice. But they were also advantaged by changes which had taken place since the Mughal heyday. The expansion of the merchant class and town-building under the successor states provided them with networks of facilities which transported their trade goods, supported their armies and underpinned their revenue systems. Without the trader-bankers of Benares or Surat, the British would have found it infinitely more difficult to succour their fragile outposts in Bombay and Madras from the surplus revenues of rich Bengal. Again, the high consumption of the new regional and local aristocracies of the Mughal decline provided capital to revitalise tracts which had fallen out of cultivation. The expansion of settled agriculture and commerce from the nodes of high farming to which they had retreated since the 1740s was beginning before the British established their Peace; and it occurred in areas where their writ did not run.

If the dynamic changes in Indian commerce and politics provided much of the force behind the British advance, they also limited its impact and formed its character. The Europeans did well enough out of India; but not as well as they intended. The relationship between trade

<sup>10</sup> M. N. Pearson, *Merchants and Rulers in Gujarat. The Response to the Portuguese in the Sixteenth Century* (Berkeley, 1976).

and power which tempted them into formal control of the continent also locked them out of detailed management of agrarian production. The peasant family farm and the merchant family firm were sophisticated institutions which responded vigorously to the possibility of profit. But their perception of the meaning of profit was determined by the context of institutions within which they were set, and dominated by considerations of security. They were too well adapted to be swept aside by European business methods, but they signally failed to provide the basis for a capitalist transformation or even a revolution in cash-cropping. Here there is a sharp contrast, for instance, with the case of Dutch Java. In Java, the Chinese merchant communities were outsiders rather than the oil of the petty kingdoms; dues were still paid largely in kind, and the internal market was less developed. Early experiments with cash revenue failed, so the Dutch were forced to employ a radical new means for the exploitation of Java in the Cultivation System. This gave them direct access to the labour and product of the peasant family farm. In a sense then, it was the very sophistication of the internal market and merchant institutions which sealed the British out of their Indian agrarian societies.

Historians have been preoccupied with two processes which link pre-colonial society with the colonial period and supply an internal dynamic to Indian history. First there has been much consideration of the evolution over the long term of the institutions of caste.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, dominant groups of landholders and peasants in various parts of the country have been traced through from Mughal times to the present.<sup>12</sup> This study has highlighted the evolution of two other groups. Primarily, it has traced the creation of a unified merchant class within a Vaishnavite and urban setting. But we have also isolated the development (and frustration) in parts of north India of a 'service gentry' against a largely Islamic and small town background. Both these themes seem capable of illuminating events as diverse and as separated in time as the decline of the Mughals, the rise of the Company, the 1857 Revolt and the origins of nationalism and 'communalism'.

The term service gentry emphasised the dual role of these families as state servants and *rentier* landlords. The keynote of Mughal rule had been size and centralisation. The massive army required to buttress imperial control over half South Asia and much of Central Asia created a compact bureaucratic nobility and large cities. But over time, lesser soldiers and clerical servants of the empire began to accumulate power

<sup>11</sup> Especially, F. Conlon, *A Caste in a changing world. The Chitrapur Saraswat Brahmins, 1700-1935* (London, 1977); K. Leonard, *The Kayasths of Hyderabad* (Berkeley, 1978).

<sup>12</sup> E.g., Metcalf, *Landlords*; Kessinger, *Vilayatpur*; Pradhan, *Jats of Northern India*.

and resources away from the centres of imperial pomp, in small towns which had often started life as the residences of Muslim holy men and artisans. At first the emperors set their face against such a development, but the accumulation of land-rights went ahead regardless. In later years, the rulers came to see this rurally based gentry as an important ally in their incessant battles with the Hindu clan leaders. The gentry steered an uneasy course through the shoals of eighteenth-century politics. Yet eighteenth-century changes often extended their control of land-rights and production around their small town centres. Successor states provided them with patronage and protection; in turn, they offered military and clerical expertise. Sometimes they avoided the consequence of local political decline because, like the Hindu trading or priestly corporations, their networks ran all over the country. Many of the apparently rootless families of administrators gathered in the great cities kept one foot in small centres which they called home (*watan*) and to which they remitted money.

How widely across the subcontinent did this occur? Obviously, the class of service gentry was not as fundamental to the Indian social order as it was in China. But even in those areas where Muslim influence was weak, there were other groups in an analogous position linking state to agrarian society, yet vulnerable to changes in either. Throughout Hindustan, Bihar and Central India, *qasbah* settlements of the classic sort existed; though families of Hindus who were skilled in the Persian court culture often stood alongside the aristocratic Muslim gentleman. In the Punjab the eruption of the Sikhs levelled away many *qasbahs* and their denizens, but it created in turn its own class of literate pensioners settled in small centres. In Maharashtra in the eighteenth century there is evidence of the consolidation of a kind of gentry between the substantial peasant and the state,<sup>13</sup> though control of village office and perquisites was more important here than *rentier* landownership. True, in the long run the fickleness of state patronage and the limited yields of agriculture in the Deccan aborted the development of a cohesive gentry of office-holders. But the point is that even within this fragile system of pre-colonial Hindu states, there developed an intermediate class between state and the substantial peasant in the form of a group of hereditary office-holders.

In Bengal, again, where the Islamic gentry was weak (outside the immediate environs of the Muslim cities of Dacca and Murshidabad) we can find analogies among the Hindu superior people – the rural

<sup>13</sup> F. Perlin, 'Of White Whale and countrymen', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, v (1978).

*bhadralog*.<sup>14</sup> By 1756, literate high caste men serving Muslim fiscal lords or Hindu rajas in the commercial tracts had established themselves as subordinate tenure-holders and had consolidated their position in semi-urban villages which they regarded as their homes. These Hindu service gentry did well out of the Permanent Settlement while at the same time they were tightening their grip on public office in colonial Calcutta. Thus, even the clerkly 'babu' of Victorian Calcutta – Macaulay's revenge as it seemed to many later administrators – did not spring fully formed from Britannia's helmet but bore witness to longer-term changes in the bazaars of rural Bengal.

The patchy emergence of this service gentry also aided the establishment of British rule and moulded the form of colonial society. The British could sweep away the rickety and 'corrupt' system of revenue-farming and turn fiscal lords into landholders. But they were only able to do this because they could recruit into their system sufficient numbers of the inferior servants of the old regimes. These provided the Europeans with skills to cut through the jungle of revenue management and with some ambivalent allies in rural society. But the perilous dominances of service gentry were also to provide an unstable element in the social politics of the later colonial period. Gentry frustration provided one of the ingredients for the combustible mixture of north Indian Muslim separatism after 1860. In Bengal, the *bhadralog* Hindu gentry, embattled in the professions and losing out in rural society, fought both the British and the rich farmers, sinking Bengali nationalism under the weight of terrorism, agrarian conflict and communal hatred. Surely, the decline of the literate gentry in the colonial period was as important a feature of colonial politics and colonial nationalism as the rise of the 'rich peasant'. Both concepts are crude, but both are capable of discovering unities in the perplexing diversity of Indian social history.

Consideration of the link between the state, the intermediate classes and agriculture suggests some new time-scales for Indian history. In the annals of events and policies, the old turning points – 1707, 1757, 1802 and 1857 – retain much of their importance. By contrast, in the slower moving agrarian economy the sea-change probably occurred after our period, in the 1890s. A widespread slowing in the pace of agricultural expansion about this time may have been related to the growing pressures of population on land. From here on the new rural elites took a bumpy ride through to the Great Depression of the 1930s when they

<sup>14</sup> Ratnalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Rural Society circa 1760–1850* (Delhi, 1979), pp. 27–33.



were faced with a crisis originating outside India. But this work has argued that for large parts of urban society and for the intermediate economy of artisans, traders and service people in the countryside, it was the rapid decline of the old polity in the third and fourth decades of the nineteenth century which represented the first major break with indigenous forms.

In the Ganges valley the eighteenth-century pattern was coming under great pressure by the later 1820s. Decentralisation of power and resources gave way to a new British centralisation. The boosting up of local economies by kingly and ritual expenditure gave way to cost cutting and deflation. By coincidence, some of the *démarches* against superior landholders and large military forces came at the same time as a series of dismal harvests and the pressures on merchants and landowners were increased by a series of hiccoughs in the export trades. The 1830s saw widespread disruption, but the decline of the old order was a long-term process. In Awadh, for instance, the coup de grâce was not delivered until after the Rebellion of 1857.

Historians of colonial rule have sometimes argued that capitalism rather than modern government was the most disruptive force unleashed by the European presence. In early nineteenth-century India commercial dislocation certainly derived from external crises. These partly reflected the rhythms of the European economies. The relentless drive for higher revenue yields by colonial officials and their retreat to a resolute philosophy of *laissez-faire* also reflected the distant nostrums of classical political economy. However, many of the weapons being used in the battle for the redistribution of India's resources had been fashioned by indigenous rulers. The real change was that whereas these earlier despotisms had been tempered by a political culture which insisted that rulers should offer service and great expenditures in return for high revenue demand, the British acknowledged few such restraints. The crisis of early colonial rule was a moral as much as an economic one.

Peasant economies are resilient. Soldiers and unemployed servants of declining rajas could often swell the ranks of agricultural workers. In time income from external trade filled the gap left by the decline of the old regime. Yet to a greater or lesser degree, the disruption of the regional and local kingdoms which had emerged after 1720 affected the performance of agriculture. Where new export trades developed rapidly or where there existed a landowning class deeply rooted in rural production, the effects were likely to be less than in tracts where service gentry, towns and warriors had been predominant. In Hindustan, the Doab and west suffered more than the east. For similar reasons, Maharashtra's rural economy seems to have been deeply affected by

political change. Sumit Guha has traced the origins of the prolonged price depression in the Deccan between 1820 and 1850 to the collapse of the Maratha aristocracy and the pressures on the institutions of rural credit unleashed by the colonial administration.<sup>15</sup> The contemporary price depression in Madras may have had similar origins. In Bengal also, the difficulties of the years between 1790 and 1820 appear to have arisen not only from forced land sales under the Permanent Settlement of revenue but also from the decay of the military forces which the Nawabi regime and the great landholders had placed in countless rural market places.

Changes in the theory and practice of Indian kingship were as important as the economic consequences of the demise of the old order. Indian peasant and merchant societies had their own organisations and sense of solidarity. But at the same time, the adjudication and patronage of rulers bound these units into wider groupings and mediated their conflicts. The end of royal patronage and the modification of old systems of urban and rural government sent out ripples of change which reached into even the most placid backwaters of community and religious life. Of course, this is not to say that the old regime had been unchanging. The sale of royal rights, the eruption of outside warrior rulers, the rise of the corporations, had all jarred relations between communities and changed the face of post-Mughal India in ways which brought despair to the poets and writers of the Delhi Silver Age. But the vigorous, opinionated government of the early Victorian years shook society even more aggressively with its peace than had the earlier warriors. The decline of the Muslim urban magistracy and the fading of royal and gentry power in the north exacerbated conflict between communities and economic groups. The Hindu-Muslim riots of the 1830s and the conflicts which boiled up in the Rebellion of 1857 have a common context here. But if we look to the south where royal Hindu power had been only lightly modified by Indo-Persian forms of government, similar changes can be seen. The uprooting of the *poligar* warrior chiefs in Tamilnadu and the decline of the Cochin and Travancore kingdoms along the Kerala coast exacerbated a whole range of religious and caste conflicts which helped give Madras Presidency its reputation for exotic social disorder in the later colonial era.<sup>16</sup>

If the decline of the old order in the middle third of the century proved a turning point in some parts of the economy and society, there

<sup>15</sup> S. Guha, 'The Bombay Deccan 1800-1930' (unpublished Cambridge Ph.D. dissertation, 1981), chs. 1-3.

<sup>16</sup> S. B. Kaufmann, 'Popular Christianity, caste and Hindu society in south India, 1800-1915' (unpublished Cambridge Ph.D. dissertation, 1980), ch. 5.

were continuities elsewhere. Corporate groups of service gentry and merchants also came under pressure during these years. But the broad sweep of their development reached through from the pre-colonial era to the later nineteenth century when they proved the recruiting ground for two key elements of the Indian middle classes.

In many parts of Asia and the Middle East the development of indigenous intermediate classes between the state and agrarian society provided the context for the establishment and ultimate demise of colonial rule. True, emperors, khedives, and other warlords occupied the front of the stage during the period of conquest and expansion; while towards the end of colonial rule, peasant rebellion gave a new dimension to nationalist movements. Yet the intermediate classes evolved throughout. In the early stages their form and outlook was crucial in determining the timing of European penetration. Later, the interests and ideologies of merchants and service gentry conditioned the speed with which colonial nationalists were prepared to enlist the volatile movements of the countryside in their struggles.

In Egypt, for instance, the village *sheikhs*, a class of petty landholders, office-holders and moneylenders, emerged as a key social group. Their origin lay in the interplay between a tax-gathering Muslim state and a peasant economy being drawn into the export markets in cotton and grain. From their ranks came petty officials and lower military officers. The dissidence of these rural notables gave urgency to the nationalist crises which drew Britain into Egypt in 1882 and forced her to pull out again after 1918. In China, the literate rural gentry and the merchants provided similar continuity. The picture here is more focused than it is in India. Gentry combined office-holding with landholding and even trade. They were both a class and a status group; while their grip on peasant society and local office had slowly tightened over several hundred years. 'Corrupt' gentry and merchants along the coast provided the contacts in local society which drew British opium into the interior. 'Patriotic' gentry pulled the imperial court into wars with the west after 1840. Ultimately, their successors combined with restive merchants to overthrow the regime and determine the nature of nationalist China in the twentieth century.

The complexity of the Indian subcontinent and the quirks of its historiography have made it difficult to establish such continuities in social history. There have been a few admirable studies of sections of the service or merchant classes over the long term. But these have concentrated on families, clans or castes as units, and it has been difficult to see how they relate to each other or to wider changes in the political economy. So far the sense that India had an indigenous history

which persisted, albeit in a modified form, into the colonial period is much easier to grasp for rural society. We can now at least trace the slow development of some of the peasant brotherhoods of the Punjab, or the great notables of Awadh from the Mughal period into the India of the National Congress.

This work has attempted to forge a further set of links between eras which have been fractured by the history of events, and it has suggested some new approaches to the study of Indian society. The possibility that pre-colonial India could have developed an indigenous middle class, or indeed any significant intermediate group between the state and agrarian society was denied by the classical theorists. In their different ways, both Marx and Weber implied that the cellular, caste-based society of India frustrated the development of wider solidarities except the state itself; and this was largely an agency of plunder. The denial of pre-colonial 'structural change' and the emphasis on family and caste groups by recent writers has done little to challenge these views. Yet some revision is necessary. This study has suggested that from late Mughal times at least kin groups of merchant people and service gentry were bonded together in ways which strengthened their economic control and sense of identity. Moreover, the weakening of the state in the eighteenth century enhanced the significance of these wider solidarities.

Of course, gentry and merchant groups could not form in a context in any way as favourable as that provided by Roman and feudal law in Europe. But some features of the Indian social order did encourage the consolidation of intermediate classes. Privileged tenure associated with religious endowment, for instance, provided both gentry and merchant people with long-term income and association with the management of property in particular centres. Again, trading links and the institutions of the market which had to cross caste boundaries created a sense of moral community between merchant people, ascetics and Brahmins, which extended to religious and, ultimately, to political action.

By comparison with developments in the west, these were weak forces for social change. Where the disruption of trade was widespread or rulers particularly fickle and oppressive in pre-colonial regimes, intermediate classes could be uprooted. Later, the colonial state severely curtailed their power by resuming privileged revenue grants and snapping the link between the commercial classes and revenue management. Weber too was right in this sense: though corporate solidarities breached the bounds of clan and caste, it proved difficult for the intermediate elements of Indian society to meld together across the religious and historical divide which separated merchant and priest from

Islamic service gentry. All the same, many distinct characteristics and institutions of the Indian middle classes of the later nineteenth century can be traced to the pre-British past. English education or the joint-stock company wreaked their changes on developing institutions and identities, not on a stagnant and fissiparous traditional society. Many features of India's recent history seem more comprehensible against this background. Whatever the merits of the press and parliamentary government, the persistence of the capacity for self-organisation outside the ambit of the state or the army owes much to the older tradition of solidarity represented by India's commercial and religious corporations.