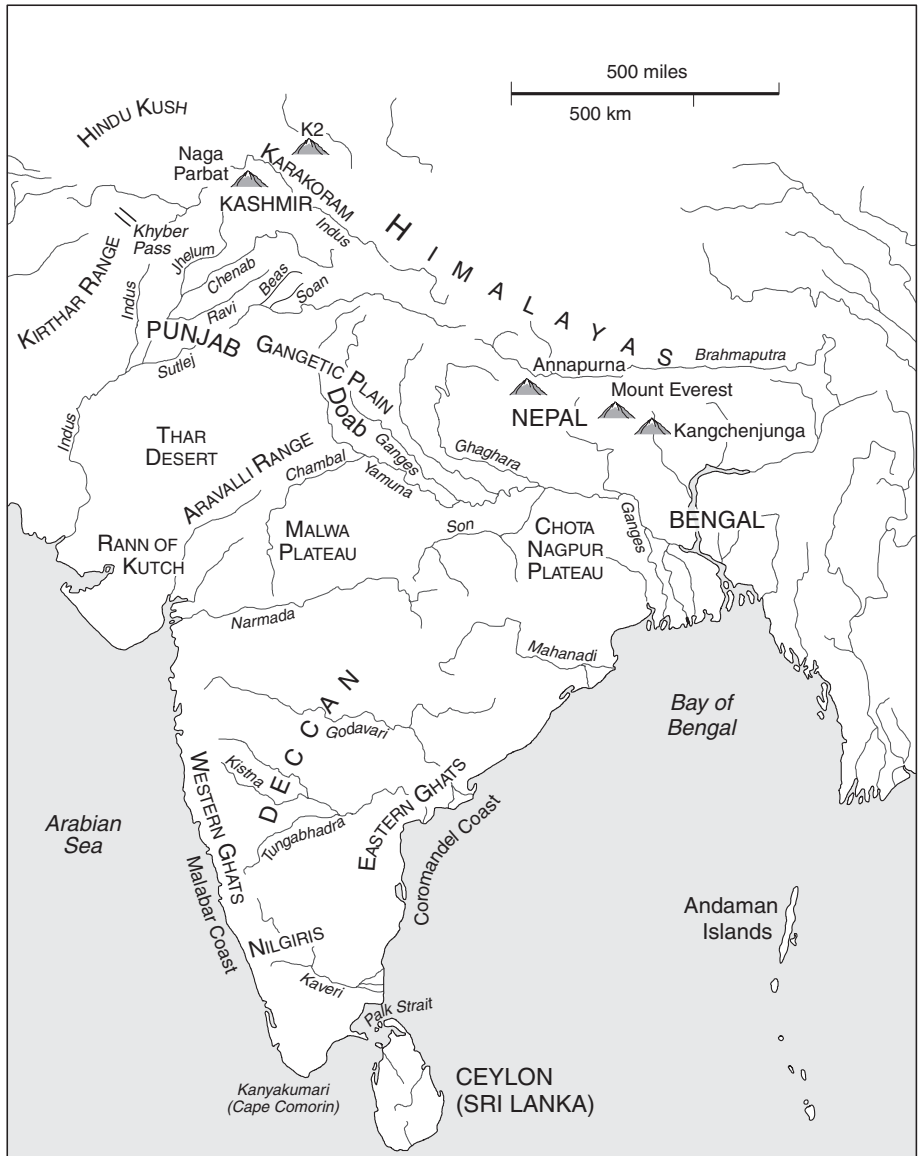
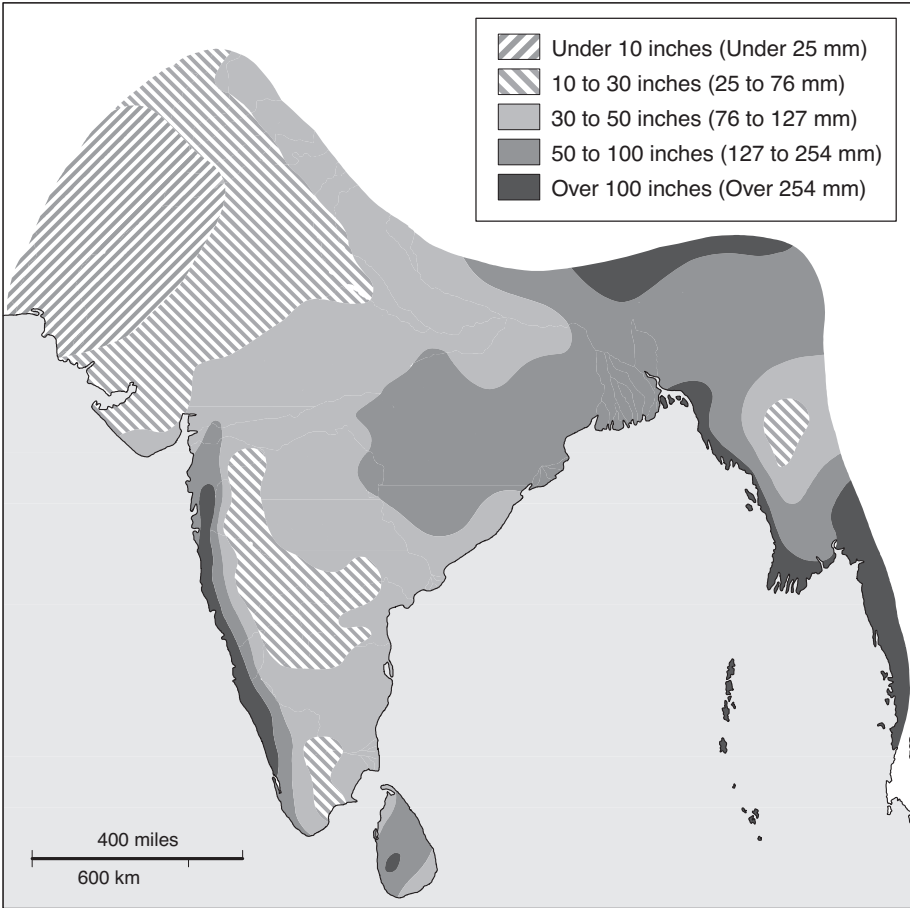




**Map 1** India today.



**Map 2** Physical features.



**Map 3** Annual rainfall.



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## [1] *INTRODUCTION*

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WRITING history involves the selective compression of time; recency has a decided priority. Only a fraction of the number of pages given to the contemporary period of less than two centuries are devoted here to tracing the formation of Indian civilization, from about 7000 BCE to 500 CE. This is often the case for general histories and the practice may be justified on the grounds that for writer and reader alike the more recent is often more familiar as well as better documented. In addition, the historian of the present necessarily applies the tools and methods peculiar to his or her own time. All of this suggests that books of history could be read from the present backwards to the past, in the way they are implicitly framed if not actually written.

In addition to distortion in time resulting from uneven proportions of the extant historical evidence, a selective factor is at work which has much to do with the interests and knowledge of historians within each time period, with their ideas of what at each point in time is significant for developments that subsequently took place. And, finally, it must be admitted that a selection is made of that material which seems to the historian most curious and engaging. Thus a book of history is something like a building where the historian and reader stand outside and peer into the windows, one after another, and find each sometimes murky, sometimes curtained, sometimes giving on to dramatic scenes, and sometimes on to settings of the most humdrum sort. We can only make a few inferences about what lies within the walls between, and the historian chooses which windows to linger over. This, then, is a personal 'take'.

Although historians may view and even create their histories back-to-front, the results of this view are presented here, for readability, as a kind of narrative, perhaps even as an epic drama nine thousand years long, with a monumental setting, cast of characters and even a denouement: the present. By way of prologue, this chapter will first introduce the setting by discussing India as a physical landform. We shall then consider the characters by looking, not at individuals, but at the roles they play when organized into communities and states and the ways in which community and state exclude, coexist with and modify each other. It must be borne in mind that the discussion of community and state is not a synopsis of the history to follow; it is intended merely as a description of the political contexts in which that action will take place.

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## *THE PHYSICAL SETTING*

In addition to the distortion of time, writing history also invites a distortion of familiar shapes. In the case of the Indian subcontinent, the familiar shape at first glance resembles a triangle or diamond hanging with its apex to the south. Much of it, however, is pressed up against the Asian landmass. The area that is modern Pakistan faces the northwest, from which numerous invaders and settlers penetrated the territory. It is bounded to the north by the Himalaya Mountains, the highest in the world, and by progressively lower flanking ranges which reach to the sea to the east and west. To the east, it nestles up against Myanmar (Burma) in the form of Assam and Bangladesh. The southern tip of the triangle or diamond terminates at Kanyakumari (Cape Comorin). To the east and to the west of this peninsula are the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, gulfs of the Indian Ocean. Beyond the Bay of Bengal lie the islands and peninsulas that constitute Southeast Asia, which historically has had close commercial and cultural links with the Indian mainland.

As a landform, the Indian subcontinent has not changed over the course of human history, but as a concept what we will call India did not always appear as it does on modern maps. The mountain ranges separating the landmass defined by the Indo-Gangetic river systems have never impeded the passage of people and their products, material and intellectual; from the era before there were datable documents we have inherited an orally preserved body of literature and archaeological evidence of continuous relations between the people of the Indus region and those of western and central Asia. Artefacts found on scattered sites connect the early cities of western India with those of Mesopotamia in southwestern Asia from about 3000 BCE. Shared hymns connect Aryan settlers south of the Himalayas with Indo-European speakers of the Iranian plateau from whom they separated around 2000 BCE. Thus an accurate depiction of early 'India' would extend well into Central Asia and Iran (while attenuating the links between those living in the Indus region and the peninsula). Moreover, the extension of India to the northwest, and a mental map to reflect this, persisted well into medieval times. India shared with the Iranian world to the west a common hazard from and reaction to Mongols and Afghans, to whom must be attributed significant influence upon both Indians and Iranians.

If the conjectural map of India can be altered to encompass western Asia and Iran, a similar reshaping of the familiar inverted triangle of the subcontinent occurs to the southeast. Historical contacts with Southeast Asia date from the time of the Mauryan king Ashoka, when Buddhist missionaries were sent to Sri Lanka and beyond. By the early years of the common era our mental map of India must take in many places to the south and include kingdoms on the mainland and in the islands to the southeast which were the beneficiaries of a transfer of Indic cultural elements and a rich trade with the Pallavas and Cholas of the southern peninsula. Accordingly, the Pallavan capital of Kanchipuram and the Chola capitals at Tanjavur or

Gangaikondacholapuram, in their respective times, might be considered centres of an extended Indian polity that reached well beyond the shores of the subcontinent. It was from these shores and those across the peninsula in Malabar that Islam, too, was carried to the Malay peninsula and the Indonesian archipelago in later times. All of this points to relations as dense, significant and enduring as those between regions within the subcontinent as conventionally viewed, and the historical imagination must be taught to adjust the mind's map to register these interactions.

Historically and prehistorically, west Asian peoples have drifted or thundered into the Indian subcontinent from what is now Iran and Central Asia, whose rulers have even occasionally, as in the case of the Persian Achaemenids (sixth to fourth centuries BCE), tried to assimilate parts of the subcontinent. The mountainous isolation from Tibet, however, was so much sharper that only once, early in the twentieth century, was it successfully invaded from India.

The climate of the Indian subcontinent is exceedingly variegated, ranging from the snow-capped Himalayas to the baking plains of the north and the hot humid coastal plains of the south, from the Thal and Thar deserts in the northwest to the abundantly watered regions of the northeast and the southwest. South of the Himalayas runs the broad continuous band of the Indus and Ganges river plains, whose connectedness played such a large role in enabling the rise of early empires. Further south, ranges of mountains and plateaus run down the peninsula to the southern tip and tend to compartmentalize the terrain of the whole of peninsular India. These features made for the greater historical isolation and smaller political units of the south compared to the north. Thus, as will be seen, physiography shaped the political as well as the economic and social history of the people.

India is monsoonal, swept by the rain-bearing clouds that move seasonally across Asia, so that most of its rainfall occurs within a period of only a few months. The natural maximum precipitation of the subcontinent occurs in winter in the northwest, in summer across the broad centre and on the west coast, and in October and November on the eastern peninsula and Sri Lanka.

Every Indian crop season was and remains shaped by the monsoon, its timing and amplitude. Even with the construction of modern irrigation works, their supplies of water depended on monsoons and the melting of the snow cover of the Himalayan Range. Monsoonal rains renewed ground water that supplied wells, or filled the small reservoirs formed by reinforcing natural drainage ponds with earthen embankments. Proverbs in all Indian languages preserve the lore associated with anticipating the monsoon and with defensive cultivation practices in the event of delays. Thus do economic and cultural activities combine to avert the terrors of 'great hungers'. The concentration of rainfall, and its failure in some years, has frequently crippled agricultural production; man-made attempts to counteract this unreliability, mostly through irrigation schemes, have had political and environmental effects of their own.

In tropical climates it is available moisture, in both amount and distribution over the year, more than seasonal variations of temperature, that determines

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agricultural productivity, and, in the past, the population densities thereby sustained. Ancient and medieval cities depended on their local water supplies and the fruitfulness of their hinterlands. This condition applied even to those whose *raison d'être* seemed primarily to function as trading posts, or as religious or political centres. When water or wood failed, cities declined or were abandoned. An example of this was the sudden evacuation of the royal city of Fatehpur Sikri, built by the great Akbar during the sixteenth century and deserted after only fourteen years of use when the water situation became intolerable.

### EVIDENCE OF PHYSICAL CHANGE

The huge South Asian population comprises one-fifth of that of the world. Its sustenance still depends to an extent not yet sufficiently appreciated on the forests and supplies of water. Hence, evidence of changes in river courses, of the advance of deserts and of the destruction of woodlands, as well as soil erosion and sedimentary deposits, in the course of the human prehistory and history of the subcontinent is of enduring interest and significance.

Evidence of climate change in prehistory can now be obtained from such sources as radiocarbon dating, tree rings and pollen counts. This evidence indicates a period of greater rainfall in northwestern India and Baluchistan (in modern Pakistan) commencing about ten thousand years ago and reaching a peak about 3000 BCE, shortly prior to the period of the growth of the early Harappan settlements. Thereafter, precipitation gradually declined. The current rejection of conquest by Aryan invaders as an explanation of the mysterious end of the great Harappan cities, with their elaborate urban planning and sophisticated sanitary engineering, together with the apparent diffusion eastward and southward of patterns of concentrated settlement, has stimulated a variety of environmental hypotheses. These include climate change, floods, changes in the course of the Indus River and its tributaries and/or the exhaustion of local wood supplies, caused in part at least by the profligate consumption of fuel for the baking of bricks, the smelting of copper and other human uses.

It is generally conceded that deforestation contributes to soil erosion, the silting of rivers and the loss of underground water. Forests have always had a spiritual meaning for Indians. They figure prominently in their sacred texts and epics, and in Indian conceptions of the proper conduct of the human life cycle. The final, ideal and culminating stages were to be spent in contemplation in the forest, and mountain dwellers have often had, for both religious and economic reasons, traditions of strict forest conservation or replenishment.

Deforestation often occurs as an unintended outcome of human activities, yet there is literary evidence that deliberate deforestation took place as early as the vedic period. When Aryan settlers turned from nomadism to sedentary agriculture, forests that were found inconvenient for farming were wilfully torched; as usual, responsibility for human action was attributed to a god, in this case Agni, the god of fire:

Mathava, the Videgha [a clan or tribe], was at that time on [or in] the [river] Sarasvati. He [Agni] thence went burning along this earth towards the east; and Gotama Rahugana and the Videgha Mathava followed after him as he was burning along. He burnt over [dried up?] all these rivers. Now that [river], which is called 'Sadanira', flows from the northern [Himalaya] mountains: that one he did not burn over. That one the Brahmans did not cross in former times, thinking, 'it has not been burnt over by Agni Vaisvanara' ... At that time [the land east of the Sadanira] was very uncultivated, very marshy, because it had not been tasted by Agni Vaisvanara.<sup>1</sup>

The connectedness and fertility of the Indo-Gangetic plain meant it could support a very large and dense population – today 40 per cent of the whole of India – amenable to unified rule and the development of steep social hierarchies.

In the north, copper objects were found at Mehrgarh, a site dated as far back as the fifth millennium BCE, and there are hymns in the *Rigveda*, thought to have been composed before 1000 BCE, which mention the use of iron in arrows and axes used as weapons. (Their use for forest clearance seems to have occurred only several centuries later.) South of the Gangetic plain, population was dense in the smaller alluvial tracts, but sparser elsewhere. Less connectedness meant a slower pace of cultural diffusion, and a later passage from the stone age to the use of iron, which was not accomplished until the end of the first millennium BCE (apparently without an intermediate copper or bronze age).

## THE SOUTHERN PENINSULA

In addition to the smaller expanses and greater variety of environments, the southern peninsula was also influenced by the greater proximity to the sea. While inland localities tended to be more isolated from each other, the coasts were in contact with the outside world at an early date. It is even possible that immigrants of Mediterranean stock came by sea to settle in remote antiquity, and certainly cultural as well as economic goods flowed in both directions before the common era. The enduring impact of the Tamil kings who dominated the eastern part of the peninsula in the early first millennium BCE is attested in the remains of the much later Cambodian kingdom of Angkor and in Sri Lanka and the Malay peninsula. Chinese records mention Kanchipuram as an important trade centre in the second century BCE, and Roman sources mention other entrepôts of the Coromandel coast.

Trade on the Malabar, or western, coast was of even greater antiquity. Before the middle of the fifth millennium BCE, cedars were exported to pharaonic Egypt and Mesopotamia, and hardwoods appear to have been transported to ancient Ur in the third millennium. At least one Harappan site in Gujarat suggests a sea connection with west Asia 4000 years ago. By the beginning of the common era, traders were depositing goods in western ports to be carried over land routes – which can still be traced by the finding of Roman coin hoards – to the east. Jewish traders from the Middle East settled

in Cochin, on the Malabar coast, where until recently their descendants still lived.

By the thirteenth century CE, however, this sea trade on the part of Indians had largely ended. By then Muslim traders dominated the Indian Ocean trade routes, while the internal trade in the peninsula had become better organized and more important. From around the ninth century, associations of wealthy merchants, linked together in 'guilds', merged into the local merchant groups which were already integrated into advanced agrarian communities, and these were increasingly connected with each other. The importance of external trade to south India diminished and was not to be regenerated until the advent of European dominance. Indeed, by the thirteenth century, Indians appeared to consider seagoing a sort of folly that could be prompted only by greed; a royal inscription of that period speaks of 'those [foreigners] who have incurred the great risk of a sea-voyage with the thought that wealth is more valuable than even life'.<sup>2</sup>

In any case, the peninsular environment, with its separated river basins and dry upland interior, gave rise to historically persistent forms of social and economic organization. Indians themselves recognized the overwhelming influence of variations in the environment in which they lived; the Tamils identified five 'landscapes' in their early poetry, each associated with particular aspects of the usual poetic subject matter, sex and violence. The sea coast was connected with low-caste fishermen, their frequent separation from their wives and pitched battles; the hills were the setting of pre-nuptial courtship and cattle raids. The dry lands, the forest and the cultivated plains, too, had their own associations with love and war.

By the thirteenth century, within the agrarian setting, three basic environmental types, each with variant forms, were identified; these correlated strongly (though less romantically) with the economic and social patterns of the inhabitants: those which were based on highly controlled and reliable irrigation from wells or tanks; those based on rainfall alone; and those which combined the two. Only on the west coast did reliable, heavy monsoons assure sufficient moisture for wet-rice cultivation by individual household-based estates, without the need for supra-local cooperation or regulation. At the other extreme, the poor soils and sparse rainfall of the dry lands could support only scattered populations who grew millet and relied to a large extent on animal husbandry for their livelihood.

Where moisture was reliable, the land supported large populations of religious and military specialists (brahmans and warrior-kings); here the division of labour and the status hierarchy were most elaborate. In the arid zones, by contrast, the division of labour was at its simplest, there was little differentiation of status and rank, and few brahmans or temples were to be found: a state of affairs often termed 'tribal', where everyone was poor. In both of these contrasting environments, ironically, the actual productive processes were highly routinized, with little opportunity for skill or initiative on the part of the cultivators. The semi-dry, or mixed, ecotype, however, did provide opportunities for a mobile, independent and skilful peasantry (who were called 'sat', i.e. clean, shudras); there merchants and artisans also enjoyed relatively high

status and were linked to the dominant landed peasants. These three general regimes, and their associated social patterns, often endured well into the nineteenth century.

With the coming of Europeans in the seventeenth century, the Indian landscape came to be viewed from a new perspective. For Europeans, the tropics represented both paradise and peril. From late antiquity at least, earthly Edens had often been situated by western imagination in the valley of the Ganges (which was considered one of the rivers of paradise) or at Kanyakumari in the south. But the climate of the tropics was fraught with danger to northerners, physical and moral, as well as promise of voluptuous ease. Diseases of all kinds flourished in the energy-sapping temperatures. Moreover, the monsoonal distribution of the rainfall meant the regular loss of water and the soil needed for maximum productivity. Floods, earthquakes, droughts and famines were frequent.

The Europeans, who were at first traders and then colonizers, had an interest in extracting the maximum amount of profitable agricultural produce, and also in assuring that the labour force did not starve, but reproduced itself reliably. The extent to which these interests conflicted depended upon how secure they considered their tenure as traders, loggers, planters or revenue collectors. To protect the health and interests of the Europeans, many of the officials and employees who were sent out to survey and administer the distant tropical Edens that promised to yield so much wealth were medically and hence scientifically trained. They were also steeped in Enlightenment and Romantic philosophies, and often became fascinated by the beautiful and exotic flora and fauna, to the extent that they sometimes took positions contrary to the aims of their commercial employers. Eventually, once the colonial government felt itself securely established, they were actually able to exert considerable influence on the state in favour of 'protection' of the forests and wildlife, as they saw it. Thus the commercial and political purposes of the imperialists were sometimes at variance, the latter requiring stability and long-term power and revenue, the former quick and maximum profit.

The general result was that the idea of 'protection' was often twisted to mean protection against the local inhabitants and their traditional rights to use the forests; that such use was often environmentally beneficial was not recognized. Instead, 'protection' was made an excuse for the state to seize control of what had been held in common and to use it arbitrarily in service of the policy of the moment – a practice that persisted into Independence and still endures. Hence, on the whole, perhaps, the early botanists and conservationists were more successful in developing the roots of western environmentalism than in affording any real protection to the forests, soils and water supplies of the tropics; during the British colonial period, in both the north and the south, some areas of forest were laid waste in favour of tea, coffee and rubber plantations, and, under the pressure of the growing populations of peasant agriculturalists, even larger areas were cleared of their wild vegetative cover. Many of these policies and attitudes have survived Independence and contribute to the environmental problems of today.

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## *THE SOCIAL SETTING*

We have seen that the physical setting has played a very important role in shaping the social groups which arise within that setting. Yet it is not possible to reduce India's history to the study of the influence of nature on culture; the culture of the subcontinent assumes forms which take on a life of their own. In the pages that follow, two of these forms in particular are emphasized. It will be seen that these forms – communities and states – play principal roles in the epic which follows. This introduction will merely sketch them and suggest a rather schematic overview of how one arose from, coexisted alongside and eventually annihilated the other.

Two aspects of the idea of 'community' in India should be noted. The first is that from an early time communities were in some sort of relationship with states. The relations could be mutual and symbiotically nurturing, such as those between ruling lineages of clans and the generality of clansmen which long endured in Rajasthan. Alternatively, relations between communities and states could be confrontational, as they were in some instances between Muslim rulers and the communities they designated 'Hindu'.

The second is that of 'communalism', which has been a well-recognized feature of the politics of the subcontinent from the 1920s on, whenever diverse political constituencies were mobilized for parliamentary and extraparliamentary activities by appeals to religious, linguistic and ethnic affiliations and loyalties. Whether as 'vote-banks' or as instant mobs, the success of communal appeals has repeatedly raised questions about the purported 'secularism' of the Congress movement and party. But consciousness of community or 'communalism' is, arguably, an older phenomenon, and appears to be a consequence of perceived threats from other communities or from states. In short, a sort of community-for-itself has a long history in India.

The earliest communities of which we have some knowledge were those that existed before there were states. These were neolithic settlements scattered over much of the subcontinent. The oldest of which we have record is the site of Mehrgarh, excavated by French archaeologists in northern Baluchistan, modern Pakistan. Human occupation there dates from 7000 to 3500 BCE. What we know of Mehrgarh and other early communities is limited, of course: something of its food (cultivated grains such as wheat and hunted animals such as the swamp deer), its domestic architecture, tools, the layout of its settlements and burial grounds. About the community consciousness of neolithic society we can only speculate, but we can trace the development of later settlements. One settlement of the medieval age, the city of Vijayanagara, grew from a small locality sacred to Jainas and to Shiva worshippers to become the capital of a kingdom ruling a substantial part of peninsular India, and one of the great cities of the world from 1336 CE to 1565. Then it was sacked and subsequently reduced to a tiny hamlet of cultivators visited today by a handful of tourists.

Recent settlements have been created and developed in other ways, too. A forested tract used by slash-and-burn cultivators became the Tata Iron and Steel Works in 1907 and, as the city of Jamshedpur in Bihar, remains a major

industrial centre. Among the latest communities to be founded is Auroville, at the other end of the subcontinent in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu; this was set up with financial aid from the United Nations to foster the humanistic and religious movement inspired by Aurobindo Ghosh, a charismatic teacher-politician. Thus, community formation and change do not characterize only the earliest period of the history with which we are concerned.

Three interlinked aspects of social organization form a framework for examining the themes of community and state formations in India. These are: structures of productive organization extant in the various periods examined; politics; and the dominant ideologies, often religious, evolved by the states and social collectivities that supported and were supported by them.

## ECONOMY AND SOCIETY

With respect to the first of these aspects, I assume that all social relations and institutions are shaped, though not completely determined, by the extant systems of production and the places of particular groups within productive systems. In the period before social classes as we know them became clearly identifiable, about 300 years ago, entitlements to the use of productive resources such as arable and pasture lands, mines, fisheries and labour supposedly arose from kinship or co-residence in a locality; but even in very early times, in India as elsewhere, resources and access to them were often within the gift of powerful men, who thereby imposed individual, heritable claims upon collective ownership, which has declined precipitately in the recent past.

Commerce was another source of wealth as well as a persistent link with the larger world. To a modern world that despite decades of economic growth makes India a synonym for massive poverty, it may be surprising to learn that for almost the whole of its past, India was regarded as a place of fabulous wealth and exquisite artefacts. Hegel spoke for generations of Europeans when he told his Heidelberg history students during the 1820s:

India as a *Land of Desire* forms an essential element in General History. From the most ancient times downwards, all nations have directed their wishes and longings to gaining access to the treasures of this land of marvels, the most costly which the Earth presents; treasures of Nature – pearls, diamonds, perfumes, rose-essences, elephants, lions, etc. – as also the treasure of wisdom. The way by which these treasures have passed to the West, has at all times been a matter of World-historical importance, bound up with the fate of nations.<sup>3</sup>

The Romans had sought the ‘treasures of nature’ and those created by Indian craftsmen so assiduously that their emperor, Hadrian, banned the export of precious metals to pay for Indian products lest Rome’s gold and silver be drained away.

## THE ANTIQUITY OF STATES

Politically, the consideration of Indian state formation must reach back very far in time, since Indian states are nearly as old as any in the world.

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Impressively large polities, dating from 2500 BCE, seemed to be implied by the ruins of vast cities in the northwestern subcontinent. Yet little is known about the governments of the Indus cities of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, how they were organized or by whom they were ruled. Nor are we able to form such judgements about any polities older than those observed and recorded by the conquering army of Alexander the Great, around 325 BCE. Around 270 BCE, the first Indian documentary records, issued by the Buddhist king Ashoka, were added to the Greek source. Though Ashoka's inscriptions were deciphered in the nineteenth century, we still cannot be sure about the political formation that existed under this Mauryan king, much less under the kingdom's founder, Ashoka's grandfather Chandragupta, who was possibly a contemporary of Alexander. Evidence in the form of a Sanskrit treatise called the *Arthashastra* – depicting a centralized, tyrannical, spy-ridden and compulsively controlling regime – probably does not pertain to Mauryan times. If its political world was not pure theory, it could only have been achieved within a small city-state, not a realm as vast as that defined by the distribution of Ashoka's inscriptions, over some 1500 miles from Afghanistan to southern India. What local political institutions might have been, far from the radiance of kings, remains unsettled historiographically, as the discussion below will make clear; and, since that is the case, the interface between community and state is frequently a matter of historiographical contention, and likely to remain so.

## IDEOLOGY

Ideology is the third and final dimension to be given importance in this book. Ideology consists of expressed ideas, not hidden motives, and concerns the ways in which Indians explained their world to each other, beginning with the composition of the Sanskrit hymns that comprise the *Rigveda*, the earliest Indian religious texts. Although the means for understanding ideological forms are usually preserved in writing, the vedic hymns were for centuries transmitted orally, and also elaborated by other orally transmitted 'texts', the Brahmanas and Upanishads, whose philosophical contributions have excited the admiration and high appreciation implied by the label 'civilization' in the estimation of both ancient and contemporary peoples. Moreover, the religious and philosophical achievements of Indian civilization did not mark only the early phases of Indian history, but continued through the later ancient and medieval periods, bolstered by 'law books' and codes that were intended to cover proper or advantageous behaviour in all aspects of life.

'Civilization', with its connotation of a high level of cultural development, is marked conventionally by such attributes as the adoption of writing and the construction of monumental urban environments, yet when and in what manner such markers occurred in India remains controversial. The limited number of samples of an as yet undeciphered script found on small clay seals in the settlements of the Indus basin has created doubt about the appropriateness of the term 'Indus Civilization' and encouraged the more modest appellation of 'Harappan Culture'. Ironically, when the temporal

focus shifts to the Gupta age, and a great literature flourished which informs us about all aspects of Gupta life, we find few cities like the ancient Indus urban settlements. Instead there were settlements not much larger than modern villages.

## COLONIZATION AND COMMERCE

Until recently, little was known of the prehistory of India, and it was widely thought that the first urban settlements in the subcontinent – Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa – were colonies of Mesopotamia, planted around the third millennium BCE. This diffusionist explanation for India's ancient cities has now been rejected, and centres of civil organization are believed to be an indigenous part of India's earliest past.

On the other hand, it is tempting to treat the development of a civilization as ancient and as rich as that of India in isolation from the larger world, as if it were a world unto itself. The same sort of distortion arises in the quest for understanding China. Assuredly, in both of these ancient and culturally diverse societies, the determining forces for historical development and change were generated from within – at least until the epoch of European imperialism, which, in both cases, occupied brief moments of long historical trajectories. Nevertheless, well before Europeans appeared on the scene, external influences intruded at numerous strategic moments to shift the direction of development, to quicken or slow the pace of it and, above all, to alter the structure of movement – the underlying dynamic elements comprising the whole of the civilization and the place and significance of its parts in relation to that whole.

The early centuries of the present era, which saw the rise of the Guptas, were also a period of intensive interactions between the peoples of India and those of Rome and the eastern Mediterranean. Far from developing in isolation, from the earliest times of their history, Indians were a part of the larger world with respect to which their communities, cultures and states were partly shaped. A continuing theme in the historical evolution of India pertains to the connections with the world beyond, and, of course, to the reciprocal process of the influence of India on the wider world.

The subcontinent shelters one of the largest Muslim populations of any modern state; most Indian Muslims are descendants not of colonists but of converts to that faith during the seven centuries when it was the religion of the northern Indian political elite. On the other hand, the distinctively Indian religion of Buddhism, which commands the faithful adherence of major populations in Asia, is almost absent in India itself, despite modern attempts to revive it.

The influence of Buddhism abroad in ancient and medieval times was enhanced by India's numerous centres of learning, which offered hospitality and instruction to monks from China and Southeast Asia for many centuries. At the same time, intensive commercial relations with Southeast Asian communities led to the establishment there of religious practices and styles of kingships drawn from Sanskrit texts. This required the learning of the Sanskrit

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language by Southeast Asians, first in India, then later in schools set up in their own lands in one of the first deliberate 'modernizations'.

The traces of India's commercial interactions with the larger world reach back to prehistoric times and are found in archaeological deposits of Indian products scattered to the west and to the east, as well as in signs of the reciprocal import into the subcontinent of Chinese ceramics, aromatic woods from Java and precious stones and inscribed seals from the fertile crescent. It was not only Indian ideas of religion or statecraft, but wealth and goods, that lured first Arabs, then Turkic Muslims and later Europeans, first to loot, then to conquer.

Other traces of interaction are found in the bone structures and skin colours of the faces encountered in the streets of contemporary Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. All of these manifestations of openness on the part of the peoples of the Indian subcontinent to others belie the popular tendency to suppose that India was ever isolated from the forces and influences of the world beyond, and hence not amenable to explanation in any terms but 'its own', whatever those are considered to be. From the first, the making of India involved what was beyond the subcontinent.

## STATES AND COMMUNITIES IN INDIAN HISTORY

'Indian exceptionalism', the belief that India is *sui generis*, and can be understood only in its own special terms, has long existed in western social science, and especially when considering civil society. A related question is whether the Indian people can be said to have had the institutional base upon which modern states and societies can be formed; that is, whether modern Indians are capable of progressing towards the secular, pluralistic and modern society that supposedly characterizes the 'First World', or whether theirs is a separate destiny, shared with other 'Third World' peoples, of distorted particularisms and intolerance. Since the explosion at Ayodhya in December 1992, doubts will surely have resurfaced on this point.

Ayodhya and the extension of its violence into Bombay and elsewhere was the clearest sign that we have had about the present strength of forces that will determine whether secularism or sustained communal violence prevails in India. Doubts were inevitably raised about whether India, even with its post-independence history of free elections and democratic institutions and its advanced scientific and industrial institutions, had escaped its legacy of intercommunity competition, which had already produced partitions of the subcontinent. Is India to be judged by the general terms of those purportedly Enlightenment values of modernity or according to its new solipsisms? Will Indian violence in the name of communities and their alleged pasts of glory and shame continue to justify the exclusion of India as a suitable object for modernity?

Here I intend to sketch the relationship between communities and states over the millennia for which we possess any evidence, no matter how speculative, to attempt to put these questions into perspective. During these millennia local and small societies of considerable complexity constituted 'civil society'

before there were formal states; later they coexisted with states for over a millennium, until subordinated by the twin influences of the modern state and capitalism. During this latest period, communities in India have been transmuted from functioning societies cohabiting particular places into metaphors, synecdochic emblems, usually of a religious sort and at the service of political groupings and their interests. If one of the consequences of this reduction of communities from genuine and comprehensive social institutions to mere signs is the violence waged by majority Hindus against minority Muslims and *dalits* (oppressed castes), can the transformation be understood, if not reversed? And what are the intellectual implications in comparative social scientific and in political terms, if these are applied?

The notion of 'community' occupied an important place in the Enlightenment project of seventeenth-century Europeans upon which the modernization theories of 'normal' social science are based. 'Natural rights', it was thought, stemmed from 'natural communities' and protected the autonomy of towns, social estates and individuals from absolutist monarchs. This theory found its fullest expression in the writings of Locke and Montesquieu, who agreed about the connection of rights and communities, but configured the relationship between kings and their subjects differently. Locke posited that 'natural communities' existed prior to states, with whose rulers they engaged on a conditional contractual basis, while Montesquieu understood community and state to arise simultaneously, with a contractual relationship between them to limit the oppression of the state. Both of these formulations attribute first importance to subjective rights, and these rights are seen to lodge in the community.

From such formulations, it was but a short step to Hegel's assertion that community rather than contract was the source of statehood and that the foundation of the state was 'love'. Affective binding was thus at once the foundation of the family and the foundation of 'civil society', as 'universal family', itself. Hegel united the ideas of Locke and Montesquieu at the time that such radical understandings about civil society and the state as those of Thomas Paine, and a 'public' and 'public opinion', emerged in Europe capable of formulating and publicizing nationalist doctrines. At the same time, too, capitalism was laying a new foundation for both states and societies.

Non-European societies, of whatever antiquity and however much admired, were long thought to be largely outside these developments. As the subjects of oriental despots and later as colonized subjects, they were denied the rich medieval European tradition of rights as free citizens; as colonized subjects, they were even deprived of the benefits of capitalism while serving and even financing part of European capitalist development, in the manner that India helped to fund British industrial development for a century. Still, the notion of community continued to loom large within the entire post-Lockean narrative, and eventually it was accepted that 'community' and 'state' have as much conceptual validity for India as for Europe.

While there have been doubts about whether pre-modern Asians could be thought to possess 'civil society', there have been fewer doubts about the state: Asia has known states as general political formations as early as Europe, if not

earlier. But these were deemed to be states of another sort and were denied the developmental potential of pre-modern European states, in particular of the absolutist centralized monarchies of France, Spain and England. These kingdoms, as Perry Anderson observed, shattered the ‘parcelized’ sovereignty of medieval social formations and opened the way for the modern state: unified territorially, centralized administratively and possessed of all coercive means. The modern state was considered *the* state; all other political forms merely approached this universal type. Some peoples – notably Europeans – were destined to attain that sort of state in accordance with an evolutionary logic that cast other peoples – such as Indians – on to history’s wayside, to be subjugated to the rule of others.

## THE SEGMENTARY STATE

I disagree with this Eurocentric political formulation. Colonial subjugation during the eighteenth century altered and may have distorted the trajectory of state formation in India, but even before the imposition of British dominance, and very likely as a precondition of that dominance, relations between states and historic urban and rural communities had changed irreversibly. During the eighteenth century there is clear evidence of class-divided societies in many of the advanced parts of the subcontinent and, along with that, a radically different enstructuration of civil institutions.

In place of the conventional view of the pre-modern state in south India, in my previous work I adopted the notion of the ‘segmentary state’ from its use by the African anthropologist Aidan Southall. The segmentary state differs both from the unitary state with its fixed territory, its centralized administration and coercive power, and from the ‘feudal’ polity, by which is meant a variety of political relationships, but most usually – as in the Anglo-French species – a form of prebendalism. In positive terms, the segmentary state is a political order in which:

- 1 There are numerous centres, or political domains.
- 2 Political power (in Indian classical reference, *kshatra*) and sovereignty (*rajadharmā*) are differentiated in such a way as to permit some power to be wielded by many notables, but full, royal sovereignty only by an anointed king.
- 3 All the numerous centres, or domains, have autonomous administrative capabilities and coercive means.
- 4 There is recognition by lesser political centres, often through ritual forms, of a single ritual centre and an anointed king.

In medieval south India, hundreds of local societies, called *nadu* in the inscriptions and literature of Chola times, constituted a communitarian structure, and were the fundamental components of society. The relationship between these hundreds of communities and the medieval Chola kings seemed crucial to me for an understanding of these, and perhaps other pre-industrial, societies. At the most general level, in this view a state is that political

formation comprising several or many communities, which, through their community political leaders (typically ‘chiefs’), acknowledge and often serve kings and accept and even participate in the anointed status of the latter.

‘Community’ in this usage is to be understood in its usual English meaning as simultaneously a people and a place, rather than in its limited sense of subcaste or religious group. In this sense, community pertains to shared sentiments and values; however, it is also about shared rights or entitlements over human and material resources, and thus, in particular, pertains to small, local spatial entities under conditions of pre-modern technology. It is because very localized affinities, sentiments and, especially, entitlements, as well as the cultural, social, and political means for defending them, continued to persist in India until well into contemporary times, that I have been encouraged to see segmentary political forms as extending into the nineteenth century, a perception that gives the concept considerable historiographical reach.

The earliest documentary sources from the subcontinent – those related to the career of the Buddha and the evolution of the *sangha* (congregation of monks) which transmitted his teachings – exemplify this type of community. The context is sectarian: the elaboration of doctrine. Later, medieval historical accounts of states and communities were embedded in inscriptions recording religious endowments by the devotees of Shiva or Vishnu, kings and their more affluent and respectable subjects. Again, the context is religious, not as an accident of documentary survivals, but as a reflection of the dominance of a discourse about worship and worshipping communities in relation to states and societies. Again, it was not an artefact of documentary survival that inscriptions virtually cease to record great events and their main actors by the year 1700. This was an era of state creation and of very much more powerful and grasping political authorities who notably failed to find an alternative language for expressing the totalities previously expressed through religion. Indeed, even as the twentieth century opened and communities, weakened by increasingly successful mercantilist regimes both prior to and during British hegemony, were assaulted by class divisions from within and by penetration by state powers from above, religious expressionism was still employed by the most vulnerable groups, those we now speak of as *dalits*.

## RESITUATING COMMUNITIES AND STATES

In the evolution of political forms in India, environmental factors, economic complexity and religious ideology all played important and interlinked roles. As a first step in delineating the long conjoined history of states and communities in the subcontinent, I propose the following chronological scheme:

- 1 Communities without states from BCE 7000 to 800.
- 2 Communities *as* states (‘great communities’) from BCE 800 to 300 CE, when the Gupta monarchy was founded.
- 3 Communities *and* states, 300 CE to 1700.

- 4 States without communities, from 1700 to the present, when the historic conception of 'community' had been reduced from what had been historically vital and changing community formations to decorticated shells of ideology.

## COMMUNITIES WITHOUT STATES

The idea of complex communities persisting over an extended period of time and space forced itself upon me some years ago when, in Paris, I visited the superb exhibition devoted to the microlithic site of Mehrgarh, near the Bolan Pass. This site had completely overturned previous beliefs about the pre- and proto-history of the subcontinent. It had long been held that the urban phase in the northwest was preceded by so shallow a pre-urban era that the cities of the Indus – Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa – must have been colonies of Mesopotamian city-states of the third millennium BCE. Civilization was thought then to have been introduced into the subcontinent in these western Asian colonies. But Mehrgarh's carbon-dated evidence of occupation shows that stone-using farmers and pastoralists lived in communities with large mud-brick storage buildings and other public structures, and sustained a variety of ceramic, metallic and textile industries between about 7000 and possibly 2000 BCE.

This back-projection of sophisticated community forms discredited and even reversed fundamental beliefs about colonization from Mesopotamia; it was rather the long delay in the development of urban forms that now required explanation. Moreover, Mehrgarh seemed to have been linked to other pre-urban sites in the northwest through pottery types and the signs of extensive trade networks and contact between Central Asia and Baluchistan, which suggested a wholly new sequencing of prehistory.

Among the newer views of scholars of Harappan culture is that complex chieftaincies rather than unified states were the prevailing political form, and that some of the urban places – simultaneously and successively – were actually independently governed 'gateways' to agrarian and pastoral hinterlands, trading centres rather than imperial capitals. Furthermore, the Harappan phase is now thought to have initiated a dispersal, beginning around 2000 BCE, in which urban centres moved south and west into the farming cultures of the Gangetic plain, Rajasthan and central and peninsular India. These later urban places were agrarian and iron-using chiefdoms that eventually attained quite extensive form in the *janapada* (clan territories) datable certainly from around 800 BCE and possibly earlier.

## COMMUNITIES AS STATES

Since the turn of the twentieth century, Indology and Indian history has recognized a type of polity, dubiously and always within inverted commas denoted 'republic'. These so-called 'republics', or *janapadas*, are far better viewed as 'communities as states'. In some reckonings, they existed from about 800 BCE

to the time of Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, conventionally ascribed to the fourth century BCE. As clan-based polities, janapadas have been identified from the Pali sources of early Buddhism and from Jaina texts; other sources, such as the *Mahabharata*, the *Arthashastra* and Panini's *Ashtadhyayi*, add to this evidence and also shift the ground of investigation from northwestern to northeastern India during the sixth to fourth centuries BCE.

Janapadas and mahajanapadas ('great communities') were seldom monarchical. According to R. S. Sharma and some other historians of ancient India, the social key to these regimes was *gana*, glossed by the term 'tribe'. Sharma sought to avoid reducing *gana* to simple blood affinity, choosing instead to take it to mean an association of people living in the same area. For others, the key term designating this form is *sangha*, or the combined *gana-sangha*, but there seems to be no significant difference in meaning among these terms, nor less general agreement about its being a distinctive form of political organization that may have come into existence around 800 BCE. This form was characterized by collegiate government; its leading members were recruited in part through birth in a particular place. Accordingly, eligibility derived partly from clan affiliation and corporate entitlements to status and property; the rest derived from individual achievement. In such polities there might or might not be one man bearing the title *raja* (king), but if there was, his authority would be circumscribed by a council.

There are models of non-monarchical governance dating from the later-vedic institutions called *sabha* and *samiti*, and these are assumed to be models for the 'Sixteen Mahajanapadas' known from later vedic as well as from Jaina texts. 'Mahajanapada' is translated, variously, as: realm, state, domain and political region. However, taking a somewhat more literal gloss and mindful of R. S. Sharma's distinctions, I prefer 'great community'; that is, a conjoint sense of people and place, the governance of which was often carried out by sophisticated and religiously legitimated collegial institutions. For this reason, I identify a long era – lasting from 800 BCE to 300 CE – as one during which communities *were* states. To hold that communities *as* states continued to exist in much of the subcontinent until the founding of the Gupta regime, and only then did a different style of monarchy take hold, one in which communities *and* monarchies simultaneously formed the basis of state regimes, contradicts much old and some new wisdom to be sure.

But I do not imply some sort of communal stasis; a picture of unchanging social forms might constitute yet another sort of 'orientalist' distortion. The work of Romila Thapar, for example, is rich in references to multiple modes of production, divisions of labour, social stratification and considerable urbanization as well. These endured well beyond the onset of monarchical polities on the order of Mauryan grandeur, as we are reminded by the work on early Rajputs by B. D. Chattopadhyaya; according to his argument, royal lineages among Rajputs were still emerging in the ninth century CE!

Was the Mauryan empire a monarchical form fundamentally different from mahajanapada communities *as* states? In one sense the answer must certainly be yes: there was a profound difference in the ideological content of the hegemonic expressions of Ashoka. His inscriptions were long held to delineate a

rule over a gigantic territory. The Mauryans, and before them the Magadha kings, did stimulate the development of state societies in south India. Yet the Mauryan kingdom did not become a model for later states; this was to be the accomplishment of the Guptas, who provided a template for a millennium of states by which, in part, we are able to define a medieval epoch in India.

The appearance of states in the south was initiated by the founding of the Pallava kingdom during the sixth century CE and owes much to the influence of external trade from the Gangetic basin and from the eastern Mediterranean. Beginning in the megalithic period of south India's Iron Age, and markedly during the last half of the first millennium BCE, an important shift of domination from the pastoral upland to the riverine plains occurred. Associated with this was the decline of an older elite of chiefly families in various parts, which were supplanted by a new elite formation. Among the Tamils the old chiefs were superseded by three new chiefly lines called *muventar*, who adopted the names of Chola, Chera and Pandya and founded kingdoms; the term *ventar* is used in the texts of the Tamil sangam to mean 'crowned king'. These kingdoms cannot have been much removed from the lineage structure from which they emerged when they were previously noticed in the Ashokan inscriptions, but they must have been based on complex sedentarized farming communities with some degree of commodity production in a number of riverine plains of the southern peninsula, even if they retained elements of an earlier pastoral society and economy.

The differences between the northern kingdoms that succeeded the lineage-based janapadas, described by Thapar, and the southern kingdoms which appeared later sprang from the different environmental and social substructures of the two regions. The core communities that formed the heartland of the Mauryans and their successors in the north were the farming villages of the Ganges basin. Between the border of Bengal and the intersection of the Ganges and the Yamuna a single extended riverine environment supported a homogeneous structure of communities. By contrast, most of the southern communities, except in some parts of the river valleys, retained a balance of the sedentary and pastoral activities consistent with the ecotypic cores and peripheries of the particular locality; hence, settlement units were accordingly more varied. Another important difference was the sea, and the advanced maritime commerce that, together with the intrusive commerce of the Mauryans into Karnataka, acted as a catalyst for the development of the southern kingdoms of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

While the reassertion of Brahmanical religious authority and Puranic Hinduism was a shared element between north and south, the fate of Jainism and Buddhism differed in interesting ways between the two regions. The accounts of the Gupta age emphasize the continued presence of Jaina and Buddhist institutions and the continuation of important writings in both beliefs. Buddhism flourished in Bengal along with Jainism for many centuries thereafter, whereas Buddhism began its long decline elsewhere partly as a result of the destruction wrought by the Hunic invasions in the northwest and partly as a result of the incorporation of the Buddha as an avatar in a revived worship of Vishnu. The practice of intermarriage among Buddhist and Vaishnava and

Saiva devotees in some of the great families of the time, including royalty, also contributed to the decline of Buddhism.

The peaceful displacement of Jainism and Buddhism in the north contrasts starkly with the violent suppression of both by devotees of the new devotional (*bhakti*) worship of Shiva in the south: the proudest boast of the new kings of the Pallava and Pandyan kingdoms was that they had slaughtered Jainas. Such claims have embarrassed modern historians but not moved them to offer explanations. One possible explanation for the violence could focus on the different ways in which commerce and communities were structured in the southern peninsula. Jainism, along with Buddhism, may be characterized as an ideology of transactionalism, a religious tradition whose core teachings are atheistic and ethical and whose social practices of moderation and conservancy appealed to merchants. They found pragmatic interactions governed by codes of decency more congenial to their commercial interests than the profligate norms of social interaction and ritual associated with the behaviour of even the most devout practitioners of bhakti worship.

In Karnataka, Jainism enjoyed a very long prominence as a major religion and attracted considerable royal patronage as a legacy of early Magadhan and Mauryan trade via the famous Dakshinapatha route from the Gangetic plain. This commercial connection continued during and after medieval times, and Gangetic products continued to find their way into the south. Jainas found niches in Karnatak culture that were denied to them among Tamils after the sixth century CE.

The adoption, indeed, the invention, of devotional practice and theology in the worship of Shiva and Vishnu among Tamils was conterminous with the establishment of the new kingdom of the Pallavas and the resurgence of one of the old *muventar*, the Pandyans. Bhakti Hinduism was made a central ideological element in both of these kingdoms. Not only were its kings devotees of the Puranic gods and generous benefactors of them and their Brahman priests through construction of temples and grants of land, they also claimed to have defeated kings who had been devoted to Buddhism. Such royal claims and their connection with state formation suggest the importance of revived Hinduism as an ideology of place. If it is appropriate to speak of Jainism and Buddhism as ideologies of transactionalism, as suggested above, it is equally fitting to see place/territoriality as the salient political element of bhakti worship. There is a persuasive fit between the structuring of communities among Tamils and the form of religion that Tamils made their own after the sixth century CE.

The composition of landed communities between that time and the much later period of the Vijayanagara kingdom is noteworthy. Beginning in the pre-state era, localities consisted of combinations of various ecotypic zones, from a simple upland/pastoral with plains/agricultural to more complex combinations of substantial wet zones, fed by rivers or tanks, with zones of mixed wet and dry cultivation and pasturage with herdsmen at the peripheries. In a few areas, such as segments of the Kaveri (Cauvery), Vaigai and Tambraparni basins, extended zones of irrigated cultivation made for considerable uniformity and the possibility of replications of localities resembling the practice of

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numerical clustering in the Gangetic basin; but that was exceptional. For the most part, community identity was culturally constructed by religious affiliation through temples housing the gods of particular places. The gods were patronized by specific landed groups, including their chiefs, who might be organized into discrete territorial hierarchies under great chiefly houses. Temple worship and patronage, and related processes involving communities, commerce and the formation of state regimes, set the foundations of early medieval society, in which new configurations of community and state emerged.

## COMMUNITIES AND STATES

Characterizing the politics of the medieval age remains difficult. Most of us who argue about the issue agree that it is essential to take into account both formal state structures – however we designate them – and a civil society that was still localized, or, as I would say, ‘communalized’, in the manner of the political regimes that seem to have become general around Gupta times, which I refer to as ‘communities *and* states’.

Of the early medieval state, B. D. Chattopadhyaya observes that the technological basis for something like a single subcontinental state was plainly non-existent. He notes that as late as the eleventh century there were about forty ruling houses in the subcontinent. The work of brahmins was the propagation of a theory of ‘state society’: the idea that the state was in and part of society as well as outside and regulative of it. They did this as cult leaders, ritual experts and priestly custodians of the numerous sacred centres that had begun to exist in early medieval times. Brahmins were also involved in yet another of the set of social transformations that, with the religious ones, mark the age: expanding caste institutions and agrarian settlement and production.

Communities existed in balanced relationships with states. Sometimes, as in the case of the Rajputs and the Orissan kinglets, states emerged directly from previous clan/communal formations; and sometimes, as in the case of the Cholas, imperial-like states emerged from local chiefdoms and endured without eliminating the stratum from which they emerged. This is a form I see dominating Indian politics until the eighteenth century, when the differentiated modern state comes into being in the subcontinent and, with that, the gradual decline of communities into mere shells of an ideological sort.

It was a gradual development. During the Mughal age, localized community institutions of clan, sect and caste were numerous and often embraced tens of thousands of people who were stratified in various ways, reflecting the ideologies of divine and royal honour, of caste and blood ties; local communities were also multiple, intersecting and cutting across one another to give multiple identities to family and individual sharers of collective property; extensive exchange relations traced a logic of redistribution according to differential ‘honour’ and ‘status’; and localized communities performed the juridical and political functions deemed to be appropriately theirs.

South Indian medieval polities could not be centralized and transformed from above, even by the powerful Mughals, not least because they failed to develop a bureaucratic structure to encompass and subdue the patrimonial formation of their base. On the contrary, the Mughal regime was itself transformed by developments from below, where local and regional institutions and rulers came into conflict with and undermined imperial authority. In southern, western and, to a degree, eastern India, a noticeable feature, perhaps dating back to the late medieval period but becoming clearer by the seventeenth century, was the rise of local 'lordships' or 'little kingships' out of community institutions.

In the north, where the Mughal empire came to rest upon and to utilize prior kingships based upon the clan structures of predatory Rajput warriors, the case was rather different. Because they were never expunged by Mughal authority, the re-emergence of the community-based polities that ultimately transformed the Mughal polity is not surprising. I say 'ultimately' because political developments took a long and twisting path beset by countless contingencies. The tendencies towards lordship existed at several different levels of the system, creating tension and conflict between regional and local would-be kings: resultant tensions and conflicts worked themselves out in different patterns in different places.

From the later seventeenth century, large numbers of lightly armed, fast-moving Central Asian cavalymen drifted into the South Asian plains, looking for military work or to found kingdoms of their own. They were widely available for hire by would-be overlords (whom they sometimes subsequently displaced). Their military techniques partially transformed the nature of warfare, undermining the supremacy previously attached to the heavy cavalry and siege equipment of the central Mughal armies. The new military cutting edge supplied by the tribal influx made it possible for often communally founded lordships to emancipate themselves further from the final sanctions of Mughal domination.

What emerged from these processes by the eighteenth century, in terms of authority and property rights, was a very different kind of state for all that it sometimes tried to hark back to the Mughal past. Perhaps the strongest consolidation of state authority occurred where regional cultures and political traditions were rooted in former Mughal provincial governorships or surviving medieval Hindu kingships. Rulers there sought to deepen and extend their claims to rights and resources over and within community institutions and over the local magnates sustained by those institutions. Effective demands for tax and tribute escalated and royal institutions sought to dominate and extract resources from commerce on a new scale, not least to pay for the mercenary armies on which rulers now depended.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, the effects of all this on concepts of property and the state were considerable. States sought to centralize their authority and control of resources as never before, confiscating or claiming power over much that previously had been held under community tenure. Yet two problems stood in the way of the realization of the 'dream of despotism' (dreamt most fully, perhaps, by Tipu Sultan of Mysore, who proposed nothing

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less than a total state economy). The first problem was, once more, the lack of a bureaucratic apparatus. Consequently, the administration of 'royal power' tended to be farmed out, usually for cash, to merchants, bankers and local notables within community institutions, a sort of 'commercialization of royal power'. There were rarely difficulties in finding willing financial agents: the new and expanding claims of royal power, besides providing lucrative perquisites, could be used by money men to wrest control of rights and resources from community institutions and to divert the resulting cash flows away from redistributive pathways and into their own pockets. Maharashtra, in the seventeenth century, witnessed the rise of 'great households' of administrators, including the Bhonsle house of Shahji and Shivaji, who bundled together collections of rights drawn both from 'the king' and from community institutions. The entitlements gained were administered promiscuously within the individual household economies. Recent research on Bengal, the south and Punjab has identified similar developments in these places.

The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century worlds of Shivaji and of Tipu Sultan mark the final stage in the proposed dialectic between communities and states over the long duration of Indian history. It is here that 'community' is divested of all purpose and meaning save the ideological; for that, a contextualizing of social and political relations within a class frame is required, a task that can be sketched here only in the briefest of terms.

## DECORTICATED COMMUNITIES

Rural communities of eighteenth-century India were partly unified, but always stratified. Moreover, they were increasingly connected with and dependent upon, but also opposed to, the larger political, social and cultural world. That connection and dependency dated from the early medieval age when polities were constituted of state regimes *and* communities, and communities continued to have means of resistance. When entitlements were threatened from without, opposition was first articulated through assemblies of protest against what were considered unjust state demands. Dissent then proceeded to such measures as the withholding of taxes or labour services to state officials, and finally to armed opposition. The mobilization of resistance was facilitated (and even made possible) because rural communities retained the vestiges of belief that local entitlements of all sorts were shared (however unevenly) among the members of various groupings according to generally agreed rules of local origin.

By the eighteenth century, however, new conditions affecting the relationship between states and communities were in place. Communities had become increasingly divided and internally stratified according to wealth and the consequent ability of some individuals and households to buy the office of headman or accountant, to deploy freely their domestic resources of land and stock, to hire the labour of others and to enter into more or less advantageous share-cropping agreements. Entitlements were also affected by the perceived status of the claimant, whether individual or group, as resident in or foreign to the community. The inequality of access to benefits further intensified

during the colonial period and encouraged the generation of ideological surrogates for the weakening capacity for unified community action.

Wealthy members of communities, the holders of landed privilege during the eighteenth century and later, constituted a part of the emergent middle class of the nineteenth century. Its members became major commodity-producers, linked to urban markets and periodic rural markets, and thus ultimately to export production. Landlords hired labourers and specialists to irrigate and cultivate the fields they owned, and to transport the commodities produced. These agricultural capitalists were often drawn from ancient landed and chiefly families and clans; they constituted a small rural elite. More numerous were middle peasant households, of lower social standing and less wealth. Middling households in the countryside held small properties whose productivity was based upon family labour; they constituted part of a rapidly growing 'lower-middle class'. Included in the same category were households that lacked the means to exploit their often large holdings, and were therefore dependent upon the wealthier cultivators to lease their holdings at rates below the usual land tax. The bulk of these households were those who had acquired land on privileged revenue terms, priests or mullahs, temple and mosque officials, pensioned soldiers and village servants; the rental of their land to cultivators of independent means amounted to a disguised form of share-cropping.

It is easier to define classes of proprietors, holders of large and small properties, than it is to define something that would qualify as a 'proletariat'; indeed, the latter task even in today's India is a fraught exercise. During the eighteenth century a large underclass existed whose subsistence and very survival depended on money wages or on the consumption and production loans which they were, as coerced labourers, compelled to make. Estimating the size of this section of the agrarian population is obviously difficult, and little better than a broad range can be suggested. In highly commercialized, late eighteenth-century Bengal, an estimated 70 to 80 per cent of rural families had too little land, tools and stock to sustain themselves without wage labour for even a single season. However, in the dry Deccan districts of the Madras Presidency, at about the same time, the proportion of similarly impoverished and wage dependent cultivating families was about 35 per cent. The per capita consumption of this lowest stratum was about one-half that of the highest stratum, which suggests a flatter income distribution than in Bengal.

The underclass in eighteenth-century towns and cities is, if anything, more difficult to estimate, since the urban poor were less likely to be found in the records of revenue collections than the rural poor. A large urban pauper population – 'a sub-proletariat' of carters and casual labourers, and street vendors and artisans with paltry stocks and tools – must be assumed. In eighteenth-century towns like Madras, they could be a volatile and riotous presence.

In numerous rural and urban locales were formed important elements of the modern classes of India, including the petty bourgeoisies of the time. The pre-eminent non-agrarian capitalists of the eighteenth century were the moneyed revenue contractors. As fiscal agents of contemporary Indian

mercantilist regimes, they were able to extend the reach of the commercial and banking operations that initially made them eligible to farm taxes. Unquestionably, tax farming involved others as well. The petty tax contractors were village headmen, who acted as an important hinge between direct producers and the commodity networks of which they also formed a part. Direct investments in agrarian production were made by both large and small revenue contractors as suppliers of credit to producers with whom they had long-term share-cropping arrangements; all such investments and engagements were made more secure for the small or large capitalists by the police powers that accompanied revenue responsibilities. In addition, moneyed men, both great and small, enjoyed monopolistic powers over military contracting and immunities from ordinary business liabilities, as a result of the efforts of minor lords to foster mini-mercantilism in their small jurisdictions.

The building of mini-states during the eighteenth century carried forward earlier practices of major and minor rulers, which included establishing towns and markets, investing in roads, warehousing and forgoing the collection of trade taxes – for a time at least. By these means, the burden of paying the usual revenue was shifted to smaller merchants and artisan-traders.

The viability of smallholding landlords was delicately balanced. They required a certain prevailing level of capitalist development to entice rich peasants into leasing their low-rent holdings (an arrangement that enabled them to avoid higher, fixed, land revenue payments), and a political regime that permitted their petty privileges while maintaining tax demands on the smaller direct producers who provided a modest stream of rental income for those with landed privilege. Too much capitalism or too strong political regimes could and eventually did threaten the interests of this large rural middle stratum and thrust many former beneficiaries into a land market where they were relatively weak participants.

New towns were another kind of hinge between mercantilist and community structures, although town growth had long been fostered by religious developments as well. In south India, towns were the centres of temple and sect organization, contributing a diffuse ideological element to the political and economic functions of urban centres. Towns became the district and locality headquarters of the nineteenth-century Company and Imperial Raj. Militarily, they were the fortified garrisons of state regimes, the places where soldiers were provisioned and housed between forays to maintain order and to assist in the collection of the revenue by a tax contractor. Economically, they were the nodal points for bulking and distributing commodities that flowed to and from the coastal ports of high, international commerce. In cultural and ideological terms, towns harboured temples and mosques, sect and cultic centres, with their linkages to surrounding villages.

The rural hinterlands of small eighteenth-century towns anticipated the emergent modern classes as well. In addition to merchants, money-lenders, artisan-traders and others directly linked by economic activities with urban markets of all sorts, there were peasant-cultivators, who must also be placed on a class continuum along with the landless agrarian workers who formed a large underclass of wage-dependent labourers. Along with these groups, who

were rooted in the ancient community structures of India but possessed branches in the proliferating towns, the new lower-middle classes provided the major support for local cultural/ideological forms: religious institutions and practices, 'proper' caste relationships, and the entitlements they fought to preserve.

## THE ROLE OF RELIGION AND IDEOLOGY

Hinduism and caste relations must be situated within some general social context to provide them with useful ideological content rather than an undefined and vague global explanatory privilege. Caste, religion and values were defined by and to a degree fell under the custodianship of India's massive petty bourgeoisie, and caste and Hinduism were adopted by the colonial regime as a useful sociological analysis to support their subjugation of India. Eventually this handy structure of meaning was passed intact to the successor regime of independent India as well as to the normal social science of our own era.

State ideology during the eighteenth century was in most cases not very different from what it had been in medieval times. In the states ruled by Hindus, the state was the monarch, and his duty (*rajadharmā*) was to maintain something called *varnashramadharmā*; that is, the proper order of castes and the protection of the places in which Vishnu and Shiva were worshipped. Hindu rulers continued to celebrate their sovereignty with rituals dating from earlier times, such as the *mahanavami* in south India and *dasara* elsewhere. On the other hand, the militarized rule of Muslims, which was founded on patrimonial forms of sultanism developed in northern India from the fourteenth century, proliferated over most the subcontinent. Muslim rulers bothered less than Hindus about locating the source of their legitimacy; they did not even seek any sort of legitimating installation from whoever stood as Caliph in the Islamic world. The ideological poverty of eighteenth-century Indian states partly accounts for their fragility before the modest military threat of Europeans, including the English East India Company.

However, ideology flourished below the state level. In both Muslim and Hindu communities of the time, there were vigorous cultural movements of reform, synthesis and ideological reconstitution, and the main purveyors and foci of these movements were priests and mullahs, the intellectual guides of bazaar men, middle peasants and other refined and less-refined sections of both urban and rural society. The cultural politics in which they engaged was reflected in the urban disorder fomented in south India by the dual division of left and right castes and the proliferation of goddess shrines representing the tutelary deities of countrymen and townsmen in southern India, and it seems not to have been otherwise in the north as well.

Transformation and competition in localistic, communitarian groups during the colonial period continue to await investigation, especially the link between eighteenth-century communitarian self-consciousness, or 'communalism', and what are seen as 'communist' mobilizations of later times. From the early decades of the nineteenth century, the colonial regime was

determined to displace all foci of political loyalty that might endanger or merely limit the Raj; many institutions and individuals within community structures that refused subordination by the East India Company were laid waste. This included most of the 'poligars' in southern India and numerous 'recalcitrant' chiefs and rajas elsewhere. During the early nineteenth century, colonial 'founders' such as John Malcolm and Thomas Munro attended with care the way in which regional Indian authorities based their rule upon a variety of local authorities and hierarchies whose legitimacy, in turn, arose from linkages with dominant landed castes and important cultural institutions like temples, mosques, schools and seminaries.

## STATES WITHOUT COMMUNITIES; COMMUNITIES AS COMMUNALISM

By the later nineteenth century, after the great Mutiny of 1857, British policy was set to undermine the territorial basis of communities. This was accomplished partly by converting erstwhile locality chieftains into dependent landlords, breaking any that resisted the change; partly by atomizing previous territorial unities; partly by legal changes to individuate what had previously been group entitlements; and partly by favouring some groups and individuals over others. The scribal castes, especially the brahmans, flourished; Muslims, long held to be responsible for the Mutiny, suffered; most landlords benefited, while most tenants and landless labourers lost out.

Nevertheless, the idea of community as a local manifestation of some generalized morality continued, and in time new ways were devised for advancing the interests of certain groups through communalism. *Community* historically and at present is something into which Indians consider themselves to be born, socialized and ultimately bound to perpetuate. They are born in particular places with languages, social and caste groupings, political and cultural attachments. Territoriality and temporality, or history, have been and remain the critical dimensions of community. 'Communalism' is the means of mobilization, the symbols that stir people into action, often mass and violent action. There are well known examples of this, beginning with the formation of caste associations in response to the caste categories used in censuses by the British. The goals of these associations were to contest the rankings presumed by the colonizers and to challenge the denigration of lower-ranking castes by higher castes. Later in the nineteenth century, the 'cow protection' and 'script reform' movements – the latter being the demand for the replacement of Urdu, written in Persian script, by Hindi written in Devanagari – proved to be effective means of mobilizing Hindus against Muslims, often to protest against one or another local irritant or to achieve some local advantage.

To these revival and reform movements were added the politically focusing incentive of separate electorates. The Morley–Minto council reform of 1909 altered the way in which the seats that were opened to local electorates in the 1860s were now to be filled; Muslims were granted the power to elect their co-religionists to a set number of seats. This modest concession to popular political participation was seen by officials as promising simply to divide

Hindus from Muslims, but the inevitable concomitant of mass elections of the sort that India has known since independence is the minting of evocative, mobilizing symbols and slogans, which have served to emphasize social divisions of many sorts. Social revivalism and separate electorates acted together to redefine community once again through a process in which ethnic, linguistic and religious elements were taken to be constitutive of bounded, legal/administrative categories. This redefinition in the early twentieth century was to mark and mar Indian political life and to create the conditions – though not the necessity – for partition, a tragedy for Indian nationalism, but not the only one.

Nationalism intensified communalist activities in a number of ways. First came the manipulative reaction of the British to demands from educated Indians for participation in administrative roles and consultation in policy determination, as well as for government support of the Indian economy. The communal electorates of 1909 represented a shift in imperial policy from hostility to support for Muslims; henceforward, they, along with landlords, were to constitute a bulwark against Indian middle-class professional critics of the Raj.

But nationalists contributed yet more to communalist forms of organization and agitation. In 1925, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was founded as a cultural organization to make Hindu-ness (*'Hindutva'*) the ideological core of Indian political life and nationalist strivings, and it succeeded over the decades in winning the support of many within the Congress movement, including some of its leaders. In addition to the appeal to primordial religious sentiment, the religious component in nationalist politics reflected the weak and confused alternative ideological bases of Indian nationalism. Other organizations sprang from the RSS, among them the Vishva Hindu Parishad, the Bajrang Dal and the Bharatiya Janata Party. All were dedicated to the defeat of the secular programme of the National Congress.

During M. K. Gandhi's stewardship over the Congress, a mass movement was created to carry the freedom struggle forward after the First World War. At its Nagpur session of 1920, a new type of ideological saliency emerged, which would establish the basis for other kinds of communalist foci to trouble Indian politics into an indefinite future. The reforms of the Indian National Congress constitution urged by Gandhi at the Nagpur Congress made linguistic regions, rather than the British provinces, the basis for Congress organization and mobilization. Making language the foundation for political action and constitutional viability opened the Congress, as intended by Gandhi, to participation and even eventual leadership by those who had been excluded by elite dominance up to that time. Not only was there a class shift from higher professional, western-educated, urban men to lower-middle-class members of the humbler professions, such as teachers, but it also opened the possibility for peasant and other lower-middle-caste groups to advance their prospects against those with better educations and professional credentials, who had long ruled the party. At the same time, the popular religiosity of the respectable castes, the urban and rural lower-middle class, gained a new prominence, which was the most general public discourse of the twentieth

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century. Finally, the decision to eschew class demands within Congress programmes, upon which Gandhi had insisted, meant that other forms of mobilization took precedence – most persistently and dangerously, religious – while the demands for justice of India's poor were consistently denied. Gandhi wanted only a unified mass movement capable of freeing India from British rule, one without internal divisions and one that he could charismatically control.

The failure to free Indians from bigotry, poverty and oppression, after all the high hopes, ideals and claims, can make a half century of freedom from foreign rule appear ignoble. Community rhetoric, whether in linguistic or subnationalist, caste or Hindu-ness terms, has only increasingly served the classes that were formed by capitalism under colonial subjugation. The reasons for the failure to destroy communalism can be found in the use that was made of the 'community' idea by the colonial regime and its nationalist opponents alike. 'Community' was divested of its historic political, social, economic and cultural attributes in the course of the twentieth century; it remains a decorticated monstrosity, a husk of meaning, open to manipulation by conflicting groups and classes, most especially the godmen/politicians of the Indian petty bourgeoisie. The Indian nationalist movement chose not to contest class oppression; hence the ideal of 'community', recast as 'communalism', has become merely a rhetorical shell, though a flourishing one.

## FULL CIRCLE: THE OPPRESSED APPEAL TO RELIGION

Unnoticed until quite recently have been other voices who have also resorted to a religious idiom to press their appeals for justice. These groups were subordinate to, and victims of, that petty bourgeoisie which had succeeded in making religious communalism their ideology, just as the professional bourgeoisie made secularism theirs. In an era when there no longer exist whole and viable communities to extol or preserve, religion continues to provide a language for claims even when these are but the wistful and in the end ineffectual pleas of the oppressed who hope their oppressors can be blackmailed by tradition, shamed by old values into honourable conduct. Nevertheless, the effort on the part of dalits (oppressed) to use religious argumentation to advance their justice claims deserves brief notice at least.

Why should the very sections of Indian society whose ascriptive pollution has always barred them from ordinary religious participation now cast their appeals in religious terms? Historically, claims to social and religious justice were heard by kings and by agents of the gods, the priests and sect leaders who pronounced on behalf of the gods in their temples. The establishment of colonial authority during the late eighteenth century expunged most of the royal authority in the subcontinent in all but the princely states. In place of royal adjudication, Company courts were instituted whose remit was to administer a version of 'traditional' law according to British understandings of the ancient moral texts (*dharmashastra*). But courts could not fill the void left by the previous norms of consensual decision-making according to community usage and custom. Thus religion alone remained

as the basis of social adjudication, and Company policy was quite willing to leave to panchayats and mahants the settlement of disputes in which the colonial authority had no interest, such matters as who might or might not worship and have respectable status. It was to such bodies and in such terms that the most direct victims of petty bourgeois religious oppression were forced to appeal.

Communalist politics in India, like fundamentalist politics in the Middle East and the United States, reflect the interests and the fears of the large segment of national populations of the lower-middle class whose economic and social security is ever at hazard and is so perceived. From one quarter come the dangers of a modern capitalism which readily sunder forms of protection and petty privilege long enjoyed by small property holders and by members of humble professions. And from another quarter come the demands for social justice for the poorest in all societies, including India. During the twentieth century the poor were encouraged to want and expect better opportunities and resources by the promises of politicians. In India, with its robust democratic and electoral participation, these expectations were kept alive through frequent electoral campaigns. But the masses stand to gain, if they gain at all, from those only slightly better-off; the wealth of the very rich is never at risk. The lower-middle classes in India, as everywhere else it seems, wrapped the vulnerability of their economic position in religion symbols – saffron here, black there. In India, in Iran and in Texas, these symbols signify conventional righteousness and the preservation of things as they are. The very rich and powerful, associated in India with secularism, remind them of the better state to which they aspire, but also teach them how unlikely they are to achieve it. The very poor threaten a frightening alternative. Religion provides a surrogate discourse for the maintenance of the barely adequate in the face of dangerous kinds of change.

## *HISTORIAN'S CHOICE*

As already implied by the notion that a book like this could and perhaps should be written or read from the present to the past, it should be taken not as a recording of events as they sequentially unfolded in real time but rather as an accounting. In the first instance, it is an account of how that part of mankind that has inhabited the Indian subcontinent devised ways of coping with the variable habitats of its landform, of the ideas and institutions they invented to give shape and continuity to their societies, and of how they exploited opportunities and coped with threats from beyond their land, often by incorporating threatening outsiders.

But there is another accounting to be made as well: my own view of that long, complex history. That is the outcome of a complex of knowledge, experience and sentiments that have shaped my present attitudes and understanding of the history of the Indian subcontinent and influenced my evaluation of older historical views of events and processes as well as the newer interpretations that have not yet received much attention.

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An historian must be counted fortunate if important evidence comes to light such as to alter fundamental understandings. That happens only rarely when an historiography has existed for as long as that of India, about two centuries. More probable than new evidence are changes in methodology and theory requiring the re-evaluation of old evidence or the consideration of what had not previously been included as evidence. The past two decades have witnessed such new interpretations, and these, more than new evidence, have recast the framework for the understanding and appreciation of the Indian history presented here, and pointed to certain major themes in examining that history. One example is the rise of subaltern studies: writing history from below rather than concentrating so heavily upon the rulers and elite who have determined the written record, the artefacts and the archaeological remains of the past. Another is the rapidly proliferating field of gender studies: the consideration of the previously neglected (sinisterly less than) half of Indian humanity whose regulation nevertheless takes up so much time and space in the ideologies and thoughts of the historically and currently more powerful half. A third is the rise of environmental movements, in which India has played a pioneering role, both in the inspiration of Gandhian principles and in the world's first government-sponsored birth control programmes. Teasing out meaningful interpretations of events and conditions as they affected the relatively inarticulate and illiterate but numerous subordinate social groupings requires new attitudes, understandings and sensitivities to the vestiges of the past, which I am still struggling to attain.