'Up to the present time England has made no great and lasting impress on the Indians except as the introducer of an improved and effective military system.' So wrote J. D. Cunningham, the historian of the Sikhs, in 1849. Cunningham was an acute observer: there is little doubt that to a very considerable extent the British owed their position in India to superior military technology, and then to their readiness to employ large numbers of Indian soldiers and, what was more, to pay them regularly. Not even the 'Europeanised' armies of Tipu Sultan, Mahadji Sindia and Ranjit Singh, had been able to withstand the assault of the British East India Company's disciplined troops. The fact that British power in India in the mid-nineteenth century was so dependent on the sepoys was what made the 'Mutiny' of 1857, for the British, such a serious matter. Yet the 1857 Revolt was not as serious as it might have been. It was primarily an army affair; civil disturbances in 1857 were secondary, sporadic and frequently related to army unrest. These facts in themselves may be an indication of the veracity of Cunningham's assertions about the limited nature of the British impact on the country at large. But the argument need not be so tenuous.

'In Calcutta', Cunningham tells us, 'Englishmen are numerous, and their wealth, intelligence and political position render their influence

Professor Morris David Morris has assisted me with his comments on this paper. He is shortly to publish in the Indian Economic and Social History Review an article on reinterpreting India's economic history which will be of great relevance to some of the issues discussed here.

overwhelming; but this mental predominance decreases so rapidly that it is felt only in fair sized towns within fifty miles of the capital, and it is but faintly revived in the populous cities of Benares, Delhi, Puna and Hyderabad. In historians' discussions of the impact on India there has certainly tended to be, until recently, an inordinate concentration on Bengal, and especially on the intellectual life of the city of Calcutta. But now a brilliant young Indian historian has shown us that even Bengal in the earlier nineteenth century remained 'basically traditional, and continued to be subjected to a strong rural pull', and that the 'English-knowing' Bengali intelligentsia, even in the late 1850s, quite possibly numbered not much more than 800. The real attitude to the new learning of many even in this group was summed up by Lord Ellenborough: 'English means rupees.' In any case, there was little to be ashamed of in the old learning; the eighteenth century, we now have to admit, was not an age of cultural 'decadence' in India. Furthermore, it appears that the ideas of Rammohan Roy, the great but somewhat isolated 'moderniser' of the earlier years of the nineteenth century, were based on Indian traditional modes of thought to a greater extent than has hitherto been realised.

Intellectual continuity between the 'pre-British' and 'British' periods was paralleled by a certain amount of continuity in the urban economic sphere, more especially in western India. Most of those Indians who played a leading rôle in the Bombay commercial boom in the years prior to the great crashes of the 1860s were Gujaratis, men from an area which had been involved in overseas trade and commerce for centuries, ever since Roman times, if not before.

There was also another type of continuity, subtle yet important,
between the eighteenth century and the following years: continuity in the realm of the myths and traditions by which any social order is to a large extent sustained. In his extraordinarily perceptive volume entitled *Twilight of the Mughals*, published in 1951, Dr. Percival Spear showed that for many years after the turn of the nineteenth century the British still regularly offered *nazr*, or solemn tribute, to the Delhi personage who continued to think of himself as the Mughal Emperor — who, in fact, with some justification, persisted in thinking of himself as Emperor until the final debacle of 1858. The Mughal court, according to Dr. Spear, continued to hope that 'the wheel of fortune might yet turn to make possible the reunion of actual to nominal authority'.

In *Twilight of the Mughals* Dr. Spear wrote as though he had little doubt that 'actual' authority was in the hands of the British from the early days of the nineteenth century. And he merely qualified some remarks about the 'degeneracy of Hindustan' in the immediately preceding years. Dr. Spear was apparently still essentially a believer in the occurrence of the 'great anarchy', followed by the 'English peace'. 'The whole machinery of government had broken down and had to be reconstructed,' he had written elsewhere. 'The primary task of the British was the re-establishment of order and the organisation of law . . . . This work was well and truly done, having the whole-hearted support of the peaceful population. It is, perhaps, the one part of the British achievement which has never been seriously challenged.'

But this 'one part of the British achievement' is, in fact, now being challenged, and with some success. It is being challenged, as perhaps one might expect, by a group of Indian historians. Several of the members of this sophisticated group are or have been associated with the Department of History at Aligarh Muslim University, but not all are Muslims by origin. If there is a dominant trend in their writings it is, perhaps, in the direction of an undogmatic Marxism — certainly a secular, scholarly concern with 'economic' as well as 'political' factors. The 'Aligarh' group do not completely deny that some parts of India were troubled in the later eighteenth century. All that they claim is that 'the “great anarchy” was neither as widespread nor as prolonged as it has been made out to be'.
'Aligarh' historians of agrarian economic conditions in the eighteenth century and earlier would appear to have significant consequences, not yet fully recognised, for our understanding of certain aspects of early nineteenth century rural India — the India beyond Calcutta and other 'populous cities'.

It is worthwhile clarifying first what we mean when we speak of 'government' and 'polities', and hence of 'misrule' and 'anarchy' in India. Politics has always had various levels in the sub-continent. At one level, the 'imperial' level, there may well have been disintegration in the later eighteenth century. Imperial powers, in fact, have rarely dominated large sections of India for any considerable length of time. But disintegration at the imperial level did not necessarily lead to disintegration at the village, district or regional levels. Especially, perhaps, in the eighteenth century, institutions of village self-government seem to have provided, in some parts of India, the administrative continuity that may have been lacking at higher levels. That is the meaning of a phrase used by a South Indian chronicler about the ministers of the last king of Golkonda: they 'governed by means of the inhabitants of the country'. That is the meaning, too, of Charles Metcalfe's oft-quoted words about the villages of the Delhi territory: 'The village communities are little republics, having nearly everything they want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down. Revolution succeeds to revolution. Hindoo, Patan, Mogul, Mahratta, Sikh, English, are all masters in turn, but the village communities remain the same.' Metcalfe's picture was probably somewhat idealised. He may also have over-emphasised lack of change in the village. Even so, it seems that Metcalfe saw the vital point about the villages of the Delhi territory: that social life had not broken down in them in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

It is, of course, impossible to generalise about village life in all parts of India at any one time. So, too, is it impossible to generalise about political life at the district and regional levels. But it can be said that what was happening in much of India in the eighteenth...

17 Metcalfe, Minute of 7 November 1830, quoted John William Kaye, The Life and Correspondence of Charles, Lord Metcalfe, London, 1854, II, 191. Louis-Laurent Dolisy, Comte de Modave, a French adventurer in India, to some extent confirms Metcalfe's picture so far as the larger villages of the Delhi area in the 1770s were concerned; he even uses the word 'republics' to describe them. See excerpts from his manuscript 'Journal du voyage du Bengale à Delhi', trans. Jadunath Sarkar, Islamic Culture (Hyderabad), IX (1937), especially p. 387.
SOME CONTINUITIES IN INDIAN HISTORY

century was that the various provinces of the Mughal empire — Bengal and Oudh, for example — were, under ambitious rulers, becoming de facto more and more independent of Delhi, although generally they took great care not to declare themselves de jure independent. It seems fairly clear that so far as Bengal, the province about which we know most, is concerned, this process of increasing de facto independence was not at first accompanied by a decline in ordered life. If anything, the reverse occurred. Bengal under Murshid Quli Khan, Shuja-ud-din Khan and even under Alivardi Khan — that is, in effect, Bengal from the early years of the eighteenth century until the year before the Battle of Plassey in 1757 — was a reasonably well-regulated, prosperous province. To a large extent it was the British themselves who, from 1756 onwards, created the conditions of disorder in which eventually they had to intervene and take over the provincial administration, if only to safeguard their trade. The case of Oudh is particularly interesting since, in a somewhat attenuated form, Oudh continued to have a semi-independent existence until its final annexation in 1856. In fact one suspects that it is from reports on early nineteenth century Oudh — with its quarrelsome landholders and their armed retainers — that a good many notions about pre-British India originate. Yet Herman Merivale, who completed Herbert Edwardes’s Life of Sir Henry Lawrence, had this to say about Oudh: “Misgoverned it had been and disgracefully; but not to that extent which really comes home to the mass of the population, and paralyses industry.” And there is a passage in Sleeman’s record of a Journey through the Kingdom of Oude which appears to support this view: “The King of Oude in a letter, dated the 31st August 1823, tells the Resident, ‘That the villages and estates of the large refractory talookdars are as flourishing and populous as they can possibly be; and there are many estates among them which yield more than two and three times the amount at which they have been assessed . . . .” This picture is a very fair one and as applicable to the state of Oude now as in 1823.’ It was on the estates of the smaller, weaker taluqdars that the plunder and the killings occurred.

The writings of the Aligarh group lead one to suspect that the situation in parts of northern India during the eighteenth century, and especially the later eighteenth century, was somewhat similar to that in Oudh in the first half of the nineteenth century: order and

---

19 Herbert B. Edwardes and Herman Merivale, Life of Sir Henry Lawrence, London, 1873, p. 549.
20 W. H. Sleeman, A Journey through the Kingdom of Oude in 1849-1850; by Direction of the Right Hon. the Earl of Dalhousie, Governor-General. With Private Correspondence relative to the Annexation of Oude to British India, 2 vols., London, 1858, I, 57. Sleeman was the Company’s Resident at the Oudh Court from 1849 to 1856. He generally paints a dark picture of Oudh affairs, but, as the correspondence at the end of vol. II of his Journey shows, he was opposed to annexation.
prosperity where men of substance were in control (although they might be virtually independent of the imperial and the provincial authorities), disorder and poverty where small men struggled for power. Partly as a result of what the Aligarh group term the ‘crisis of the jagirdari system’, there was, towards the end of Aurangzeb’s reign, a decided increase in the number of small, weak landholders.21 There was also, however, a considerable rise in the numbers of zamindar-i-zor-talab, that is, landholders who paid land revenue to a superior authority only when it was forced from them.22 Such zamindars were undoubtedly sometimes extortionate in extracting revenue (or ‘rent’, as the early British administrators often called it) from the peasants within their territories; indeed, it must be noted that Professor Nurul Hasan, the head of the History Department at Aligarh, believes that this was generally the case and that in many zor-talab areas there was a consequent serious decline in agricultural productivity and the condition of the peasantry.23 But some of Nurul Hasan’s younger protégés, notably Dr. Norman Ahmad Siddiqi, do not altogether agree. In the eighteenth century, according to Dr. Siddiqi, there was an acceleration of a process that had been noticed by François Bernier in the previous century.24 If a landholder was too oppressive he could be deserted by his peasantry, who would fly to a landholder who would treat them better. For an essential feature of Mughal India is that, generally speaking, there was not, as there is today, a shortage of land; rather, there was a shortage of men to work the land, and thus provide revenue for the holders of that land. In some cases, legal attempts were made to tie the peasants to the land, but they appear to have been frequently unsuccessful.25 Dr. Siddiqi argues, then, that the ultimate threat of the flight of their peasantry must have induced amongst many landholders a measure

---

21 Satish Chandra, p. xvi; Irfan Habib, The Agrarian System of Mughal India (1556-1707), Bombay, 1963, pp. 260-70. A jagir was a grant of the right to collect land revenue from a certain stretch of territory. By the eighteenth century many jagirs were not large enough to support their holders’ pretensions. There were, in fact, too many jagirs in the Mughal empire, mainly as a result of Aurangzeb’s lavish grant of jagirs as rewards to followers during his long military campaigns in the south of India. Because of the shortage of profitable jagirs men now began to look for the opportunity of simply seizing control of stretches of territory. Cf. the great eighteenth century Muslim theologian Shah Waliullah: ‘Jagirs should not be given to petty Mansabdars. They do not succeed in establishing their control over their Jagirs and so they farm out its [sic] revenues to contractors. Thus, they aggravate the miseries of the peasants and the difficulties of the State.’ Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, ‘Shah Wali-ullah Dehlavi and Indian Politics in the 18th Century’, Islamic Culture, XXV (1951), 139.


of real concern for the sound administration and the prosperity of their estates.\textsuperscript{26}

One would like to see a little more evidence to support this assertion. In the meantime, however, it adds to our doubts as to whether the ‘peace’ of the early nineteenth century in India was peculiarly ‘English’.

* * *

The ‘English peace’, of course, is often seen mainly as the background to the formation of ‘administrative policy’. So far as ‘revenue systems’ are concerned it is surely stressing the obvious to say that the British were not working on a \textit{tabula rasa}: there were \textit{zamindari} systems, of various varieties, in Bengal, and \textit{ryotwari} systems, again of various varieties, in South India, long before the coming of the British. The Permanent Settlement in Bengal can hardly be said to have diminished the power of the \textit{zamindars}. ‘The landlord created at the Permanent Settlement’, wrote Carstairs in his book \textit{The Little World of an Indian District Officer}, ‘was lord of the soil, subject to the payment of a quit-revenue. For generations afterwards, like the medieval baron of our own country, he held his position by his own power.’\textsuperscript{27} The \textit{zamindar} often had his own ‘courts’ which made a mockery of the system of justice offered by the British. Police, and the law of landlord and tenant, did not come until the great period of the Bengal Legislative Council, in the fifties, sixties and seventies of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{28} Moreover, 1793 was not ‘the date of the Permanent Settlement’ so far as many parts of the Bengal Presidency were concerned; it was still being imposed in peripheral areas in 1860.\textsuperscript{29} The making of revenue settlements in all parts of India was often a long drawn-out affair, the more so, perhaps, in the \textit{ryotwari} areas of Bombay and Madras. Measurement, field surveys, investigations of old records — all took much time, especially in view of the hindrances offered by long established local centres of power.

The nature of these local hindrances in parts of North India was hinted at by Metcalfe; similar phenomena in South India have recently been investigated by the American historian Robert Eric

\textsuperscript{26} Noman Ahmad Siddiqi, ‘The Classification of Villages under the Mughals’, IESHR, I, 3 (1964), 76-77. Siddiqi cites the manual \textit{Hidayat-ul-Qawaid} (Aligarh Muslim University mss.), compiled in 1714, probably in Bihar. The appropriate extract is translated in Habib, p. 336. Habib believes that at times peasants migrated long distances (p. 117), but he may not be in complete agreement with Siddiqi over the importance of peasant migration (see pp. 115 and 329). An excellent discussion of the problems raised, on the whole favourable to Siddiqi, is Tapan Raychaudhuri, ‘The Agrarian System of Mughal India’ (a review article on Habib’s book), \textit{Enquiry} (Delhi), New Series, II, 1 (Old Series No. 10) (Spring 1965), especially pp. 102-7.

\textsuperscript{27} R. Carstairs, \textit{The Little World of an Indian District Officer}, London, 1912, p. 17.

\textsuperscript{28} ibid., p. 9.

Frykenberg, in his study of *Guntur District 1788-1848: A History of Local Influence and Central Authority in South India*. This book, and two of Dr. Frykenberg's supplementary articles, provide important additional evidence for the view that, at the local level, the administrative impact of the British in the early years of the nineteenth century was often minimal. Guntur had been part of the Hyderabad state, but had passed into British hands in 1788. Dr. Frykenberg's book is to a large extent a record of the attempts of the villages of the district, and especially the Karnams, or village accountants, to shut out the influence of the new British administration. They were generally successful in their attempts, just as they had generally managed to insulate themselves and their villages from central authority in the past. Often the Karnams were closely connected with the Sheristadar, the chief Indian official in the British Collector's office. It was not until the eighteen-forties that the British became aware of the true state of things in Guntur district. And Dr. Frykenberg believes that Guntur was no isolated case. 'Power became caught and tangled in the webs of village, caste and family influence', he writes. 'The strength of the Madras Presidency was tied to the earth by countless tiny threads and was made captive to Lilliputian systems of power.'

We are inclined to ask whether the British in India in the first half of the nineteenth century, like the Normans in England in the half century or so after 1066, did not provide at best an administrative suprastructure — and at worst, perhaps, a mere facade.

---

* * *

In spite of the possible ineffectiveness of British administrative systems in parts of India (and in spite of the laments of later British sponsored Famine Commissions and the nationalist writers who quarried in the report of those Commissions) there appears to have been a considerable amount of economic growth in the rural areas in the earlier nineteenth century. One recent writer speaks of 'the clearing of forests, the elimination of the waste, the suppression of the fallow, not to mention the growing regional specialisation and the shift of output from lower to higher value crops which seem to have marked the nineteenth century'. In the Poona, Sholapur, Dharwar and Ahmadnagar districts of the Bombay Presidency the cultivated area is said to have increased by a million and a half acres between 1840

---

31 See n. 16 above, and Frykenberg, 'Elite Groups in a South Indian District; 1788-1858', *Journal of Asian Studies*, XXIV, 2 (February 1965).
and 1850. In Madras, in the Chingleput district, the cultivated area nearly doubled between 1828-29 and 1850-51. In parts of Bengal there must have been a serious decline, fairly early in the nineteenth century, in the amount of jungle which could be cleared for new or renewed agricultural use. In some areas of what later became the United Provinces there appear to have been considerable increases during the century in the proportion of the cultivated area that was irrigated and the proportion that was double-cropped.

Such increases in productivity were, in fact, necessary to support steady, if in the earlier half of the century as yet hardly spectacular, increases in India's population. The population increase may have been, in turn, by some two-way process as yet but dimly understood by the demographers, to some extent a consequence of increased productivity. But the reason normally given for the population increase, and the increase in rural productivity (when that is noticed), is, of course, the coming of British 'law and order'. We have seen that the extent of disorder in the eighteenth century, and thus the extent of change in the nineteenth century, may well have been exaggerated. How, then, do we explain India's nineteenth century 'agricultural revolution'? One conceivable explanation is that it was largely the result of injections of capital into the economy through the activities of the European trading companies, in the days before territorial expansion


R. Green, Deccan Ryots and their Land Tenure, Bombay, 1852, p. 98, quoted Sovani, loc. cit.


At present the demographers appear to have produced little more than inspired guesses about the population of pre-British India; estimates for the nineteenth century years prior to the first All-India Census of 1871 also vary considerably, although local censuses were taken before 1871. Some of these local censuses are discussed in detail in Government of India, Office of the Registrar General, Census of India 1961: Report on the Population Estimates of India (1820-1830), ed. Durgaprasad Bhattacharya and Bibhavati Bhattacharya, New Delhi, 1964(?). Some incidental references to population increases are p. xix. This volume is the first volume to be published of a series of eight which will survey the years from the eighteenth century until 1870, and which, when complete, will provide us with a most valuable collection of population data. Kingsley Davis, The Population of India and Pakistan, Princeton, 1951, believes that the population of India in 1600 was probably about 125m. Davis is inclined to think that India's population remained virtually static at about 125m. for one and a half centuries, 'after which a gradual enhancement of growth began, accelerating as 1870 approached' (p. 26). One suspects that Davis's willingness to date the population rise from about 1750 may be the result of a simplistic belief that the coming of British 'law and order' to India may be dated from that time.

There are some interesting hints about the possible operation of such a process in an agricultural economy in E. F. Heckscher, 'Swedish Population Trends before the Industrial Revolution', Economic History Review, 2nd series, II, 3 (1950), especially pp. 270 and 275.

See, e.g., Spear, India, Pakistan, and the West, p. 127.
had become common. The comparative prosperity of the peasantry of Bengal in the eighteenth century may well have been to some extent connected with the activities of the companies; the ‘extraordinary prosperity’ of some of the peasants of Gujarat, noticed by Elphinstone in the early eighteen-twenties, was certainly related to the area’s long tradition of trade with the West and with Southeast Asia. But it is well to remember that the English in Bengal in the eighteenth century owed some of their commercial success to capital borrowed from Indian sources; and Gujarat’s commercial tradition, as we have pointed out, pre-dated the East India Companies by many centuries. Furthermore, the trade conducted by the Europeans in Bengal and Gujarat in the eighteenth century, like the trade which they conducted on the Coromandel coast in the seventeenth century, must surely be pronounced to be of a type that (when India as a whole is taken into account) ‘quantitatively, touched the mere fringe of the economy’.

Generally speaking, then, the major economic changes in the rural areas of India in the eighteenth century can hardly be said to have been the result of European activity. It is at this point that we must turn to some recent Indian studies, several of them emanating from members of the Aligarh group, on capital accumulation and on monetization in the eighteenth century and the Mughal period in general.

Dr. Irfan Habib has shown clearly that Mughal India saw the development of ‘a brisk market in commercial paper, a system of insurance and the rudiments of deposit banking’. Some Indian bankers in the eighteenth century were undoubtedly extremely wealthy. And according to Professor Satish Chandra, records have survived of a number of complaints about urban men of wealth speculating in land in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The very fact that such speculation could take place

---

46 For example, Fatehchand Jagat Seth, banker to the Nawab of Bengal and, indirectly, to quite a considerable extent, to the English East India Company in Bengal.
makes us query the received notion that land rights could not be bought and sold in pre-British India. An increasing number of instances of sale of land rights by North Indian zamindars and their ilk are, in fact, coming to light. And the zamindaran-i-zor-talab — sometimes going under the name of taluqdars — arrogated 'proprietary' rights to themselves whenever they could. There have been suggestions, furthermore, that in North India in the eighteenth century some of the ordinary peasants, the ryots, like the mirasdars of the Deccan at the same time, were considered to possess rights of 'sale, gift or mortgage'. Such suggestions conflict with the beliefs of Baden-Powell and others that the leaders of the type of North Indian village community described, for example, by Metcalfe, possessed primary control over the disposition of land within the village boundaries. Yet it seems possible that, in parts of North India between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries, there was a gradual movement away from communal control over land to something akin to its 'ownership' by family groups, if not by individuals.

Monetization appears to have been the result mainly of the Mughal attempt to collect land revenue in cash. The key figure in the collection of the land revenue was frequently the village money-lender-cum-trader — sometimes erroneously thought of as a comparative latecomer, one of the less desirable results of a supposed British insistence on laisser-faire. The money-lender looked after the payment of the peasant's land revenue; in return he received much of the peasant's surplus, and the peasant received advances of seed in the sowing season and foodgrains at lean times of the year.

We have, then, a certain amount of capital investment in the rural areas in the eighteenth century, the growth of a type of 'private property' in land, and the growth of monetisation — all prima facie conditions which could lead to substantial changes in agriculture. We have, it is worth noting, a series of factors that at first sight

---


52 Habib, The Agrarian System, p. 236. Other Muslim rulers in India before the Mughals had tried to collect revenue in cash, but not so successfully.

53 Ravinder Kumar, 'Rural Life in Western India on the Eve of the British Conquest', IESHR, II, 3 (July 1965), 206; Habib, pp. 78-79; Raychaudhuri, 'The Agrarian System', 117.
would seem to be not altogether different from those agricultural developments prior to the Meiji Restoration that provided a basis for so much of Japan’s nineteenth and twentieth century economic development. Yet historians of India seem unwilling to take the plunge and consider whether economic growth in nineteenth century rural India had its origin, at least to some extent, in changes which took place in pre-British times.

Perhaps the main reason for the existence of this state of affairs is that as yet few Indians are willing to admit that an agricultural revolution took place under British rule and, per contra, few non-Indian historians are aware of recent Indian claims about agrarian economic change in the eighteenth century. But doubtless there are other reasons. Much capital accumulation in the eighteenth century (though by no means all) seems to have been accumulation of essentially unproductive ‘usurers’ capital’. Land transfer by sale was quite possible in the eighteenth century, but it perhaps cannot be said to have been very common. Most important, possibly, is the fact that although as a result of the money-lender’s activities some money went out of the village in pre-British times, few commodities came back to be bought with money. Nevertheless it remains at least probable that the ‘seamless web’ argument applies here as to most history, and that many of the foundations of nineteenth century agricultural development in India were laid in the eighteenth century and earlier. Whether the foundations have yet been discovered must remain, for the present, a matter of debate.

To the continuities in eighteenth and early nineteenth century India that are already reasonably well recognised — continuities in the realms of culture, the urban economy and the symbols of legitimate rule — we must be prepared to add certain continuities in the rural administrative and rural economic spheres. Cunningham was probably right: in 1849, or thereabouts, the British had yet to make a significant imprint on much of India. The main impact had been the military one. Perhaps even in the military sphere the ‘myth’ of British military invincibility in India had yet to come into being; it may not have been born until the time of the failure of the Revolt of 1857. One is reminded of the continuities which the great Dutch scholar-administrator Jacob van Leur found in Indonesian history. The decisive break in Indonesian history, he insisted, did not come in the sixteenth or the seventeenth centuries, with the coming of the ships from western Europe. The eighteenth century, he claimed, 54 See Thomas C. Smith, The Agrarian Origins of Modern Japan, Stanford, 1959.

63 Narendra K. Sinha, The Economic History of Bengal; From Plassey to the Permanent Settlement, I, Calcutta, 1956, p. 141.


knew a mighty East, a rich fabric of a strong, broad weave with a more fragile Western warp inserted in it at broad intervals'. Van Leur appears to have been somewhat uncertain as to where a decisive break occurred in Indonesian history; his tendency, however, appears to have been to place it in the late nineteenth century. In India, too, if one were searching for a decisive break, one might find it in the years which followed the Mutiny, especially in the 1870s, as the graduates of the first three Indian universities, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras — founded in 1857, the year of the Great Revolt — began to come to the fore in politics. But in rural India the search for a real break might be a somewhat fruitless one. Just how much real effect were the British — or the nationalists, for that matter — having in the ordinary Indian village even in 1947? The distance between the suprastructure and the infrastructure remained vast. An English academic who served as an official in India in the last days of the raj, Professor Hugh Tinker, has commented that in his time in India he felt that ‘far from being the driver in control of an impressive machine he was more like a wanderer in a maze’. And this was not basically because of the disorganisation caused by nationalism and war. The raj had never been the Juggernaut it has sometimes been made out to be.

Yet it would be a mistake to see the problem simply in terms of Indians and Englishmen, in terms, perhaps, of either an ‘Asia-centric’ emphasis or a ‘Europe-centric’ emphasis. We have noted the sheer lack of communication between Indian and non-Indian historians over aspects of eighteenth and early nineteenth century Indian history — a lack of communication which arises to some extent from the persistence of old, pre-1947 attitudes. Indians are trying to ‘justify’ their eighteenth century past; Europeans are still attempting to ‘justify’ their eighteenth and nineteenth century activities in the East. But the time when ‘justification’, moral and otherwise, may have been felt to be necessary ought to have gone. Indian history, like Southeast Asian history according to a recent American scholar, has an ‘autonomy’ of its own: the colonial relationship is sometimes relevant to that history, but, in the social and economic spheres, anyway, it probably never dominates it. 

I. J. CATANACH

University of Canterbury