Continuity and Change:
The Eighteenth Century and
Indian Historiography

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Introduction: The Historiographical Divide

In the early nineteenth century four gentlemen met in the house of a friend in London. Two of them had returned from India, the third had come to solicit their views on sending his son to India and the fourth narrated this story. Knowing little about India and claiming that whatever little knowledge existed was contradictory, the father of the son was advised by one of the India-returned gentlemen, who claimed to have had spent twenty-five years in India, to "keep your son at home". He said that those who see India in a positive way do so because of their little experience. The climate of India stood first in his list of condemnation – "in India, every gale carries disease on its wings, and leaves bile and debility behind it". The ruins and desolation, that is, the landscape, came second; the ruins nonetheless were not the result of human agency but of nature, of solstitial [sic] rains and equinoctial hurricanes. The third obvious link to this setting was the production of a weak European body, "a bundle of infirmity; a walking automation; a miserable Don Gonzalez Pacheco". The natives of Hindustan were not even deemed worthy enough to be spoken about; their four cardinal vices – "lust, lying, avarice, and hypocrisy" – summed it all up. The fourth object of his ridicule was English society, which he described as divided into two, formal and familiar; the first being "all ceremony and silence, the other all levity and noise'" If you were fortunate enough to be invited among the formalists, he said, after enduring "three hours of melancholy gabble, you at least [will] steal out of the room, hungry, drowsy, jaded and grumbling, lamenting your hard lot, and execrating the mosquitoes!"

Hearing this when the father had almost decided to keep his

son at home, another gentleman, who had spent twenty-three years in India, intervened to say something against the "poetical imagination of his friend". In his own words, he could not remain silent hearing India satirized and abused. On leaving India, whose "air is salubrious, the soil fruitful, and the inhabitants wide and benevolent", he claimed no one can miss the sentiment of regret. The purpose of this characterisation, he made it clear, was not to create an image of wonder but to lessen the prejudice. He challenged the view that Indian nature caused debility; he rather blamed the intemperance and idleness of individuals for this. He concluded by condemning the home climate as "pernicious" and the home society where he was insulted and harassed in every street and where he scarcely returned from a public place without being pickpocketed (The contrast, or opinions on India 1816).

Few themes in modern Indian historiography have generated so fruitful (and at times acrimonious) a discussion as the eighteenth century 'change and continuity'. The core of this debate, as far as the British rule in India (for the period 1760s-1850s) was concerned, revolves round a set of simple questions: did the British rule in India unleash a disruptive force that subdued its economy and inferiorised its political culture? Was the rule a direct imposition of western notions of sovereignty and governance or was it representative of an ongoing socio-economic change in South Asia? In other words, as succinctly put by Eric Stokes (1973) decades ago, did the rule symbolise 'revolution' (sudden radical departure) or 'evolution'. The answer, however, is not so simple – as the writings of historians working on this period have revealed. In many ways the story presented above animates the long historiographical debate that has taken place on the nature of colonial rule in India. While the historians remain divided on the exact nature of colonial rule and the varying degrees of change and continuity, the contemporary actors were also opposed in their characterisation of what they meant by India and being in India. Hostile and sympathetic views existed amongst people of the same generation.In the recent past, notably in the 1980s, there was a series of seminal interventions that remoulded our understanding of the nature of colonial rule in India. The literature is too vast to be individually included here and there are, however, good reviews of this new 'historiographical turn'.[1] In brief, it can be said that the dominant existing view – that showcased the nationalist and Marxist

concerns of political economy, colonization, dependency and, not least, racial violence imputing that colonialism, right from its early days in the 1760s, signalled a period of decline, depravity and inferiority came under serious revision. At least, for those aspects that dealt with political economy, trade and commerce, culture of governance and production of knowledge. It is worth noting that this new intervention, as it widely came to be labelled as 'revisionist historiography', acquired a status of mainstream framework for understanding early colonial rule. As a result, a number of regional studies emerged that closely documented and analysed the nature of interaction between colonial and 'indigenous' ideologies of rule, between European and native merchants, the role of market and organisation of trade, and so on (Chatterjee 1996; Subramanian 1987; Datta 2000). The theme of knowledge production was seemingly a later addition; the initial focus was on the nexus between political power and trade: on the growth of insidious power of an intermediary merchant class that increasingly came to influence the political processes during the period between the 1720s and 1780s (a rough periodisation). The group was called the 'portfolio capitalists' and the process the 'commercialisation of royal power' (Subrahmanyam and Bayly 1988).

The 1980s was also a period that witnessed the development of another strand of historiographical take on this period. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (Said 1978) was enthusiastically received by a host of scholars, and its theoretical insights were deployed to go beyond the realm of the socio-economic 'materialist' explorations into the understanding of ideological and discursive strategies of colonial rule. A major section of the practitioners of this strand of scholarly pursuit coalesced around the 'Subaltern Studies' group. One must point out that this was itself regarded as a 'cultural turn' within the Subaltern Studies, and therefore it would be unfair to characterize the nature of the Subaltern Studies as the one closely tied to the 'postcolonial moods' right from the beginning. After this turn, however, the main thrust was to understand how the idea of Otherness was textually constructed in the logic of 'rule of difference'. The colonial imagination on the one hand to discover, demarcate and differentiate and on the other to order, categorize, catalogue and regulate meant that colonial discursive strategies wielded profound power that fundamentally reshaped the colonial identity and society. The 'non-amenable' and 'irreconcilable' position, as William Pinch identifies between these two strands, is however puzzlingly

played out broadly on two different turfs of historical timeline (Pinch 1999). While the 'early modern group' in Pinch's words (by which he means the practitioners of revisionist historiography) focused primarily on the period of the eighteenth century, historians and anthropologists akin to 'late subaltern/postmodernist' moods wrote, with very rare and seminal exceptions (Guha 1963; Cohn 1985), wrote largely on the post mid-nineteenth century period. While the earlier group focused on the nature of the state formation in the eighteenth century – first amongst post-Mughal regional successor-states and later the colonial-Company state – the latter group concentrated on the theme of domination and subordination of marginal groups and the ways to retrieve their voices from hegemonic colonial discourses.

In spite of this slight uneven ground of temporality, the debates on the eighteenth-century transition remain highly polarized. For those who see the English East India Company's rule as a force of disruption, the period was characterised by decline and increasing deprivation of the local population in the field of economy, and with the imposition of new forms of sovereignty and governance in the field of polity. These forms of governance as represented by 'ethics' of codification of law and texts marked a fundamental change in the ways the pre-colonial shared and plural forms of sovereignty were devised and practised. Arguably, the rationalist, modernist, unitary and bureaucratic notions of sovereignty and governance were imposed on the colonial society without any mediation and adaptation. The contractualization of power driven by the force of 'rationalist codification' was a part of colonial project, and apparently well-thought of and successfully implemented, that came into force right from the inception of the colonial rule in India. This is a broad summary extracted from a number of works and therefore it does inflict the violence of generalisation. However, the implication of these core ideas have proved wide-reaching as has been shown in a number of scholarly works in different fields of historical investigation, such as the issue of the economic effects of colonial rule, the culture of violence and racism, the ideology of governance, the cartographic mapping of the empire and not least the travelling gaze of the Europeans. In each of these cases, with or without any adherence to ambivalent practices of colonial rule, there is a certain degree of emphasis on the processes of objectification (of landscape and proprietorial relationships, for instance), codification (of texts and laws), and standardization (through insistence on caste and religion that envisaged that these were the

'pure' categories revealing the true social order of the colonial society) that were initiated by the colonial rule, or more aptly, are told to be the specific products of colonial state formation.

What is significant in this historiographical divide is that the temporal location of colonialism itself has become highly contested. When did colonialism start in India? Is colonialism to be understood as a set of institutions and practices with a recognizable and specific form of governance (either imposed or evolved) or as a set of representations along cultural values that worked in a connected and continued fashion from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? Most scholars would tend to broadly agree with the former position; however, the flourishing field of 'colonial discourse analysis' – a shorthand which is often (albeit sometimes inadequately) used to describe the second 'turn' of the 1980s, – has led some scholars, with a mandatory disclaimer of professing no teleology, to argue that seventeenth century travelogues, for instance, do lay down the foundation for or provide the background to the imperial world (Singh 1996: 19-47). The forceful argument made by Bernard Cohn to pay critical and close attention to cultural forms of colonial domination, what he called the 'investigative modalities' of colonial rule that included themes such as textual translation, observation and travel, and enumerative ordering techniques such as census and museum, can hardly be held directly responsible for promoting this line of approach. Nevertheless, by highlighting the *inventive* power of colonial words, Cohn's works do provide a theoretical basis for scholars who wish to see the 'invented' India as a site of alterity and otherness vis-à-vis a European hierarchy of difference to trace the 'incipient colonial ideology' in the seventeenth-century European literature on India. The dichotomous framework (for instance, Christian/heathen, civilised/barbaric, law/custom, words/commands and not least, object/substance) as seen in the travel and ethnographic literature from the seventeenth century arguably established the European rhetorical and imaginative dominance that set the stage for the British Empire in India (ibid.).

In contrast to Singh's thesis (and also Cohn's), Pinch in his reading of the early seventeenth-century encounter between Mughal emperor Jahangir and the British ambassador to India, Thomas Roe, challenges the rigidity of the claim that Europeans only lived in the world of 'signs and correspondences', in which the price of an object overrode the symbolic and cultural value (substance) of it. In spite of the differences between Europeans and Indians, Pinch argues, there remained the possibility in

which the 'cognitive world of each dissolved into the other' (Pinch 1999: 405). In his essay Pinch focuses on the seventeenth century; other scholars from within the field of 'discourse analysis' have questioned the polarity and bifocalism of this 'colonial encounter' for the subsequent period. It has been argued that the relationship between the coloniser and colonised was 'not explicable in terms of an allegory of otherness' (Suleri 1992: 3).

If one stretches this point a bit further, we can notice how power-ful the dichotomies of 'hate' and 'sympathy' still are – as encapsulated in the opening story – in the way the debates on this period continue. When David Arnold – self-admittedly following Cohn – (Arnold 2005: 4) argued that the Indian landscape was systematically brought under the gaze and control of European eyes leading to codification of spaces and dispossession of native peoples, Vinita Damodaran, in her review of his work, reminded the reader that 'Far from being proponents of an all-embracing Orientalist prejudices, Europeans (until the mid-nineteenth century) frequently approached Asia, Africa and the Americas in many different ways, described the new world in minutest detail and often with sympathy.' (Damodaran 2007: 711) Gordon Stewart's stimulating account of George Bogle's journey into Tibet in the late eighteenth cen-tury brings out the multifaceted role of travel in the age of the Enlight-enment and empire. First, travel created conditions for meeting points of different enlightenments, second, it was a means of acquiring reputa-tion and manliness, to 'jolt out some of the arrogant principles' (Stewart 2009: 29); and third, and most importantly, it was 'not only the medium to re-enact cultural differences […] but on the contrary, to transcend the boundaries' (Ibid.: 49).

However, within this historiographical divide, there is seemingly a big grey zone of overlap, which unwittingly goes unrecognised in the way that arguments are read and presented. For instance, very few scholars would deny that Orientalism and Orientalist projects, inten-tionally or unintentionally, abetted colonialism (N. Dirks in summaris-ing Cohn's approach, Dirks 2004) but also there would be very few of them who would deny the active role of native participation (out of fear, greed or coercion) in the formation of colonial knowledge or the claim that colonial discourses on Indian landscape and culture were ridden with contradictions. There are also elements of change and shifts within scholarly writings that must be accounted for, or at least the way these writings engaged with. Pinch points out an interesting fact that C.A.

Bayly had singled out one of Cohn's early essays on structural change and continuity as a "major theoretical springboard for his own arguments of long-term continuities in Indian society history independent of colonial policies" (Pinch 1999: 395). However, Cohn's later emphasis on bringing out "the distorting influence of colonial history and western scientific categories" on the one hand and "the active and dynamic basis of Indian tradition" on the other, somehow for historians such as Bayly did not resonate with their understanding of colonial power and knowledge – although Bayly accepted the fact that by the 1820s colonialism led to the creation of useful knowledge (in turn leading to a decline of affective knowledge of pre-colonial polities). Instead, Bayly, argued that, first, the colonial stereotypes were reflections of weakness rather than a gauge of hegemony; and second, these stereotypes emerged in the "zone of ignorance" (Bayly 1996).

And similarly, as Seema Alavi has shown in her crisp introduction to *The Eighteenth Century in India* (Alavi, 2007), the revisionist position is also not homogenous. On the issue of the resilience of the indigenous political economies in south India, she shows the differences existing between the views of Burton Stein and D. Washbrook (Alavi 2007). Bayly's earlier position largely treated the East India Company as one of the 'Indian states' on two accounts: one, the Company was forced to play like an 'Indian' player in the game of power struggle during the time of regional assertions by relying on indigenous capital and intermediary groups; and second, the Company, once it was able to succeed over other players, crafted its rule on the existing military-fiscal system (Bayly 1994). Alavi refers to a body of work that came out in the 1990s, which in her words, 'reinforced the revisionist position' but they also complicated the above arguments (Alavi 2002: 35). This new body of work 'implicitly suggests that the critical changes that Bayly located in the 1830s "age of reforms" prefigured in the eighteenth century itself' (ibid.). In the light of these new interventions in the 1990s, Bayly himself has revised and, more importantly, clearly outlined his understanding of the nature of the early colonial state (Bayly 1994). The emphasis in this latter essay is on both aspects: the nature of the colonial state formation (a theme that was central to his earlier writings) and the nature of the colonial state. Bayly summarizes the debate and the divide by referring to the works of Burton Stein, Frank Perlin and Andre Wink (interestingly labelling them as adopting an 'oriental' approach) who, according to him, argued that the British in India were successful

because they managed to build their state machinery upon the existing system of revenue extraction and military tradition, in short, the military fiscalism of the Mughal rulers.

In Bayly's earlier writings, particularly in *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, his own position was very similar (Bayly 1983), although he does not put himself under the label of 'orientals'. However, in the essay under discussion, so far as the nature of colonial/Company state is concerned, Bayly clearly admits that the 'Company's regime was evidently something more than a white Mughal Empire' (Bayly 1994: 324).

We will return to some of these points in the following section but one of the results of the coming together of these two 'turns', together with a body of literature that lies in the overlapping zone of 'continuity and change', is the extreme richness and diversification of research themes: from classical topics of revenue and administrative history to the production of knowledge, and from the nature of British society in India to that of forms of colonial aesthetics, mapping picturesque representations and the imperial travelling gaze.

However, diversification is not the only virtue of this body of scholarship. The eighteenth-century debate has also remained fortunate in creating intense debate and exchange on topics that attracted scholars' attention two or three generations ago. Revisiting the older scholarship has resulted in a formidable and vast body of research, as identified by Douglas E. Haynes and Ian J. Barrow in their stock-taking introduction to a special volume on the eighteenth-century India (Barrow & Haynes 2004). Many arguments, as Haynes and Barrow rightly point out, run contradictory to each other; some remain unclear in their implications about coming closer to forming any coherent articulation on the period. Recent years have seen some valuable contributions that have tried to synthesise these arguments, including the one referred above. However, writing in 2004, Haynes and Barrow state that the form and character of colonialism between 1780 and 1840 still remain quite unclear although some of the concerns related to the nature of colonial transition were attracting a new generation of historians (ibid.).

The purpose of this review, however, is not to give any better and coherent overview of the period but to take into account some of the new writings on the period. The idea is to tease out the main arguments of the recent interventions on the transition debate and put these in dialogue with some of the core arguments presented in the

earlier body of work. In terms of readership, this essay is directed more towards the undergraduate and graduate students of South Asian history who might feel overwhelmed (I for one surely did) by a number of overlapping and conflicting arguments on this theme rather than towards proposing any programmatic approach in the field of eighteenth century research.

The two Transitions of the Eighteenth Century

Seema Alavi in her introduction to *The Eighteenth Century in India* draws attention to two transitions that characterized the period. One is the transition from the Mughal state to regional successor states (Awadh, Bengal, Hyderabad being the most prominent) in the first half of the eighteenth century; the other is the rise of the English East India Company as a sort of Company/colonial state in the late eighteenth century (Alavi 2007). In a recent article, Jon. E Wilson claims that these two transitions are 'two very different sets of arguments' (Wilson 2007: 954). Wilson's own intervention is definitely one of the most challenging in recent years and this review will take up his argument in some detail in the later section. But his contention that the two transitions emerged from or led to two very different sets of arguments appears to be only partly correct. In the debates on the first transition, the core issue at stake is the nature of the Mughal state. The older view that the Mughal rule created a centralised political and fiscal system (Habib 2002; Ali 2003) has been revised by forwarding a set of interrelated arguments. First, the Mughal state itself was evolving during the course of the seventeenth century, for instance, the growing importance of sea-borne and maritime trade; increasing centralization and agrarian expansion were the features of the period between 1650-1700. Second, certain regions such as Bengal did not see deeper penetration of Mughal bureaucracy, in fact, the Mughal *jaghirdars* remained dependent on local intermediaries and *zamindars*. Third, the rise of the regional centralisation that took place in the early eighteenth century created varied regional patterns of alliances and dependencies.

For instance, in Bengal under Murshid Quli Khan the extent of *khalisa* land grew at the expense of the *zamindars* but, in the Punjab, Mughal nobles allied with local mercantile groups making the latter important subordinate allies (Alam and Subrahmanyam 2001). This strand of revisionism that is directly related to questioning the centrality of Mughal

political and economic structures and emphasising regional dynamism, does not necessarily see the Company rule as an extension of the ongoing changes. So, it is a different topical concern within the revisionist literature on the eighteenth century, which validates Wilson's point. Also, it is important to mention here that some of the critique of the revisionist writings is not based on the 'factual' grounds of, say, the rise of intermediaries. For instance, both sides agree that despite being disproved by the Mughals, the number of *ijaradars* (revenue farmers) significantly grew in the eighteenth century. The dispute is on their socio-economic role. The increased sale of revenue farming leading to the rise of *ijaradars* led Bayly to see in them the rise of the intermediary class, for Habib they symbolised an instrument of oppression leading to agrarian decline. Rajat Datta has criticized Habib's position that *ijaradari* system had ruinous effects, argued on the following grounds: first, in places such as Rajasthan an *ijara* contract was formalised not on assessed revenue (*jama*) but on the actual realized amount (*hasil*) of the previous five to seven years; second, ijara amounts fluctuated; third, *ijaradars* in places such as Mysore were held accountable to reimburse certain classes of peasants if the latter had fled due to the former's oppression; fourth, Datta argues that there existed also in Bengal a chain of responsibilities to check *ijaradars* (Datta 2003).

Nevertheless, apart from the revision of the nature of the Mughal state, historians working on the early eighteenth century have also talked about two other key issues: trade and fiscal arrangements. It is in connection with these two aspects with the concept of regional dynamism of the period between 1700 and the 1760s that it appears that the two transitions are interlinked, at least for some of the historians who build up their arguments along the 'continuity' framework. Rajat Datta in his work on Bengal, shows two crucial developments. First, the decline of the Mughal Empire did not weaken the networks of trade. In fact, the period underwent increased commercialisation. Second, the growing control of the Nawabi state over land (which was a change from the Mughal period as pointed out above) and the increased revenue demand did not undermine the commercial growth in this period (Datta 2003, 2000). In fact, even in the contested factional politics of Bihar and contested agrarian conditions, Muzaffar Alam shows that 'consistent economic growth and prosperity' took place (Alam 2003).

There is yet again an interesting overlap or shift, whichever way one sees it, in the broad contours of the historiographical debate. Scholars

such as Sushil Chaudhury may not agree with the 'core' of the revision-ist understanding that denies to see the second half of the eighteenth century under the Company rule as a period of sharp decline (Chaudhury 1995), yet as Washbrook has pointed out, they too accept that the first half was the period of prosperity, which is a significant departure from the older generation of Mughal historians who saw the collapse of the centralized Mughal state leading to political chaos and economic decline (Washbrook 2001). In this regard, therefore, accounts on the economic history of the immediate post-Mughal phase (1700-50), at least for Ben-gal, seems to have reached a consensual state.

However, for historians unlike Chaudhury, who traced continuity in commercial and fiscal arrangements that survived the rapid political changes, it was important to show that the disappearance of the Mughal Empire neither led to the political chaos nor to a uniform economic de-cline in the first half of the eighteenth century. It was equally important to show that centralisation of regional powers and emergence of portfolio capitalists were the strong features of the pre-colonial times. The political assertion of regional powers was intricately related to the rise of the new powerful intermediary groups that increasingly became a part of a range of governmental practices; the two most important being bankers who financed these states, and revenue farmers and other intermediaries who intricately became part of the political formation. It is not so much of a surprise to see the centrality of agrarian and commercial intermediaries in Bayly's accounts, both of which crossed their ways in the formation of regional states. They signified a process of economic prosperity and po-litical change. The Company closely interacted and depended on this set of people in its process to acquire political power: the Company needed them. As Sanjay Subrahmanyam and C. A. Bayly have argued, it was the increased role of the merchant capital in state and military finance that 'materially aided the rise to power' of the Company (Subrahmanyam and Bayly 1988: 418). It was on their prosperity (and conflicts) that the colo-nial state grafted itself. Ironically, it was the same class of portfolio capi-talists who by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were 'se-verely limited in their prospects, and ultimately swept away' (Ibid.: 402).

In this scheme of analysis, the second transition is closely linked to the social and economic outcomes of the first transition. In other words, the whole 'continuity' paradigm that suggested to treat the Company state that was consolidating its political power on the back of the rich, prosperous and politically active socio-economic intermediary class would

have fallen flat had the 'revisionist' historians stuck to the framework of a universal economic decline in the aftermath of the disintegration of the Mughal Empire. Unlike Wilson, Alavi is alert in recognising this connection; she says that the studies on regional polities that challenge the theory of post-Mughal 'crisis' are central to the analysis of the early colonial state, which has been explained as 'being shaped by the referents of indigenous political economies'. In fact, Wilson also comments in the same essay comments that 'In a society in which "trade" and "sovereignty" were closely entwined, and politics was becoming rapidly commercialized, explaining the English Company's transition from merchant to ruler is not a difficult task.' (Wilson 2007: 958). Wilson definitely would not disprove of the observation that what has now become relatively easier (the task of explaining this transition) has a long history of almost three decades of historiographical exchanges, polarizations, shifts and revisions. What happened when the Company turned into a ruler is still a highly debatable issue, as Wilson's own review of Sudipta Sen's work suggests (Wilson 2004).

Colonial governance

As mentioned in the introduction to this essay, the nature of colonial rule in the late eighteenth century has once again become a site of heated exchange. It has also encouraged a varied proliferation of research themes. Some of the older themes such as revenue extraction mechanism, pace of economic growth and market organisation still attract scholarly attention but not in the same way as in the 1980s. There is a slight shift perceivable in the approach towards the subject. The minute socio-economic history of commodity trade, agrarian expansion and mercantile networks has given way to the study of ideas and ideologies of governance. This section takes up two recent works on these themes. The exclusion of some other recent works on the related themes of transition is purely intentional to keep the thematic focus of this essay intact on the nature of the colonial state formation, the theme that we have been predominantly discussing so far.

In understanding the ideological framework of the colonial state and the processes that affected its formation, one recent emphasis is on delineating the balance between the metropolitan imperial influence and the local Indian conditions. This is the thrust of a set of questions that

Washbrook recently raised in his writings. He asks:

Were 'Indian' and 'European' interests always juxtaposed? Did the conquest take place through the impact of a superior exogenous force – wholly formed and fashioned outside South Asia – on a pristine, indigenous and (proto-national) culture? Or were, at this time, India and European interests and identities deeply entangled and did the 'conquest' – if it can be so called – take place because of cleavages and conflicts within a common South Asian polity (or perhaps, more properly, a Euro-Asian one)? How far the Fstructuring of juxtaposed 'Indian and 'British' identities and interests a consequence of the conquest rather than its cause? (Washbrook 2001: 374-75)

Washbrook's own answer is that the distinctive features of high imperialism (based on domination and exploitation) cannot be read back into the eighteenth century. Despite the state's strength in undermining the pluralistic and dynamic character of early eighteenth-century India, the colonial state's nature was affected and influenced by the existing Indian conditions. For him, as Bayly had argued in his earlier works, the colonial break became obvious in the decades of the 1820s and 1830s.

In the article we discussed above, Bayly deals with the same question – that is, about the balance between metropolitan and local factors. According to him, two areas that made the Company state very distinct from indigenous polities and also characterized its expansionist nature were, first, a rigorous tradition of administrative accountancy, and second, an ideology of transcendent law and sovereignty. He concludes that in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the Company's personnel already widely subscribed to an absolute notion of the rights of their state and of the 'rule of law', which was partly derived from the metropolitan political culture. It appears to the present reviewer that this line of inquiry has led the historian to revise his earlier periodization; Bayly says, 'Broadly, for the period before 1765, it can be argued that the East India Company was one of the Indian players, but difficult to argue so for the period afterwards' (Bayly 1994: 338). However, turning to the state formation process, he also makes it clear that the colonial state was not identical to the metropolitan state, and once again takes up the role of indigenous Indian system. The colonial state formation was also linked, he argues, to the nature of indigenous social and political conflicts, which were three in nature:

a) clashes resulting from the decline of the central authority of the Mughal Empire,

b) consequences of the formation of states in the periphery, and,

c) attempts made by rulers and commercial elites to control trade and production.

All these were independently taking place. In other words, the Company's presence in South Asia did not 'create' these political and economic conditions but rather got enmeshed in these conflicts that influenced its state formation.

Robert Travers' study of ideologies that led to the formation of colonial state goes in the same direction. He states that 'British imperial ideology was formed at the intersection of exported European concepts and appropriated indigenous categories that were put to new uses by the colonial state' (Travers 2007: 14). Situating his study between two conventional dates and events of colonial rule, 1757 (the battle of Plassey) as the starting point, and 1793 (the inception of Permanent Settlement) as the closing date, Travers' study moves along London and Bengal to chart the complexities of different ideological frameworks such as ancient constitutionalism and despotism that the colonial state struggled with.

Let us eke out a chronological development of colonial shifting ideologies from Travers' account. This is not to simplify the historical complexity of engagements that he deftly presents but to allow us to better grasp the broader contours of colonial state-formation as they unfolded in the last forty years of the eighteenth century. Against the backdrop of the Company's growing financial troubles, the period from the late 1760s to that of the early 1780s was largely dominated by the debates on restoration of Mughal constitution as a guiding framework for colonial rule. Mughal constitution together with its baggage of absolutism, despotism and tyranny on the one hand, and clarity, fixity and notion of property on the other, was the central debating ground in these decades. These were the competing understandings of the Mughal constitutionalism which, as P. J. Marshall has pointed out, were 'heavily tinged with differing British assumptions and also reflecting the varied agendas of Indian informants' (Marshall 2008: 1284). Each of the three main actors involved in this – Warren Hastings, Philip Francis and Edmund Burke – used the language of Mughal constitution but to different purposes.

Hastings used it for two purposes: first, amidst the growing crisis and the inevitability of reform and greater involvement on the part of the Company, Hastings believed that a return to and restoration of the older Mughal institutions was the best way forward. Second, restoration was premised on the idea of an unfissured Mughal sovereignty of which the

Company, Hastings thought, was the direct inheritor. Pressed hard to raise greater revenue and introduce judicial reforms, Hastings validated his own understanding of sovereignty by claiming the sovereign status of the Mughal rulers. A key issue here was the right to private property in land. He recognized the hereditary rights of *zamindars* but, for him, previously the Mughal rulers and now the Company was the ultimate owner of the soil. Francis, on the other hand, did not rule out the despotic nature of the Mughals but, as Travers argues, 'separated Mughal despotism from the taint of arbitrary power' (Travers 2007: 218). He fiercely opposed Hastings' understanding of the nature of sovereignty. He argued that private property had flourished under the benevolent and moderate rule of the Mughal emperors. So far as opposition to Hastings was concerned, Burke and Francis were on the same side of the debate, but for the former the Mughal Empire was not a despotic regime. According to Burke, Mughal rule had stability, fixity and a legal basis of governance. It was on this point that he called Hastings' attempt to 'usurp' sovereignty under the name of Mughal constitutionalism a 'farce'. More so, this emphasis on Mughal constitutionalism was not only borne out of the Company's local political involvement in India but was synchronous with the British political culture of upholding constitutionalism as the form and ideology of governance. Another factor was the strong element of distrust that the Company officials had for each other. The fact that some of the officials returned to England as *nabobs* (Robert Clive, the governor of Bengal before Hastings is the best example), amidst the financial insolvency of the Company created demand for reforms and regulation. A part of Hastings' administrative reforms were therefore arising out of the financial and institutional crises that the Company was facing on its own account (Travers 2007).

Travers is definitely not the first scholar to point out the role of the Mughal constitution in the ideological formation of the colonial rule but he definitely goes beyond the standard accounts that show the symbolic value the colonial rulers put on the Mughal constitution. He shows how it influenced the way governance was imagined. Hastings, for instance, (and Francis believed the same) thought that British collectors should be withdrawn from the districts. They both considered country government to be in the hands of the natives (Ibid.: 223–24). Over a period of roughly twenty years (1760s and 1770s) the political dynamism, amidst some form of institutional continuity from the pre-colonial times, had definitely changed. The following two diagrams (as heuristic models) can serve to

understand this change. In Diagram 1, for regions such as Awadh and Bengal, the *nawabs* should have been in the centre of this configuration and the English East India Company a separate entity from the rest of the European companies (at least for the post-1757 period); the fact is that the Mughals did politically remain relevant, at least until 1764 (battle of Buxar), and also ideologically on the question of legitimacy and institutional practices of governance, even afterwards.
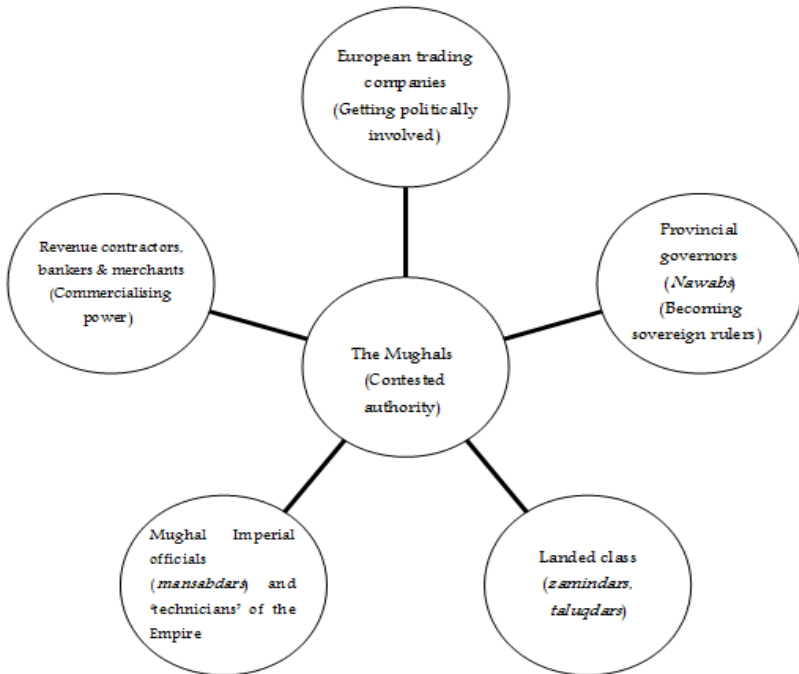

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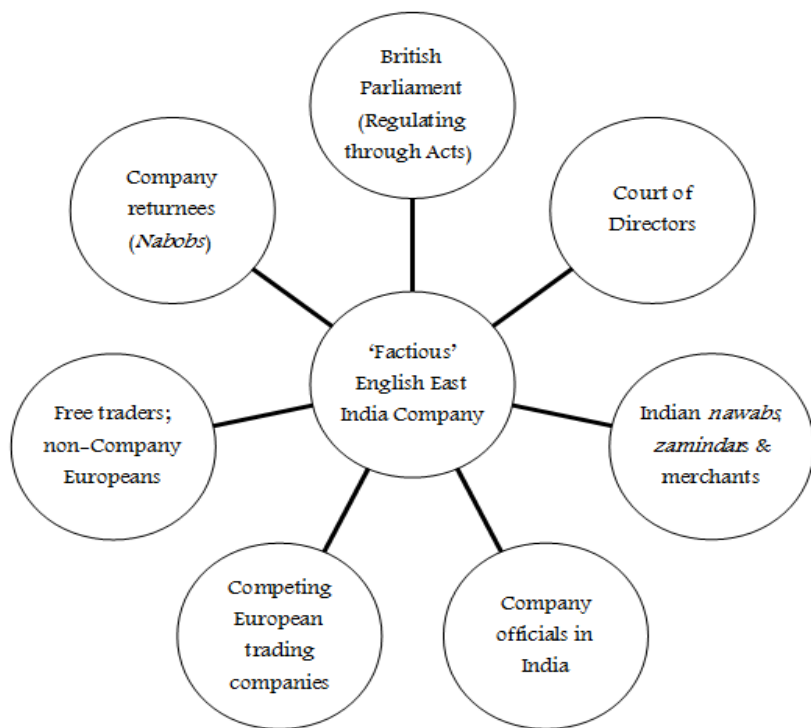Diagram 1: Political configuration before the Company took over

Diagram 2: The new Political Configuration, 1760s-1780s

Clearly, the Company worked amidst varying pull and push from different quarters, including its own officials whose involvement in private trade was partly responsible for the financial insolvency of the Company, which in turn was attracting greater regulating interference from the British Parliament. In this regard, some of the earlier arguments that the Company was *just* a mercantile body have been seriously revised. There was an element of truth in the conventional nationalist critique that even in the eighteenth century the Company did represent the British nation; that the tie between the Company and Parliament was not cosmetic (the Company officials in India certainly thought that they were representing the British nation and empire). This tie started becoming more pronounced from the 1780s onwards, leading to the implementation of the Permanent Settlement in Bengal (1793), which was touted as the 'new constitution'. As Travers shows, the language of Mughal constitutionalism was replaced by growing suspicion and mistrust of the native bureaucracy (ibid.: 205–08). 'Native depravity' was not just a cultural maxim but became crucial in shaping colonial governance.

Why did this change happen in the 1780s? One reason was the increased financial burden from the wars with Marathas and Tipu Sultan. Secure ways of raising revenue led to the argument that *zamindars* should be upheld with proprietary rights in land, which indeed happened in 1793 (ibid.: 208–210). This signified the growth of the centralized state, or what Wilson has described as 'the state as machine'. The imperial connections and the way that India was discussed in Britain were once again important factors in this change during the 1780s. Travers shows that Burke's speeches during Hastings' impeachment had two sides: one, demand for greater imperial sovereignty; two, his political analysis of Indian politics based upon an elevated conception of Mughal constitution. Through the latter, Burke narrowed the conceptual distance between Europe and Asia, but this strand of his argument was also the one that was less influential (ibid. 219–223). Travers concludes by saying that the coming of Cornwallis to India 'personified the new sense of imperial responsibility prescribed in the Pitt's Act' (ibid.: 212). This imperial responsibility meant that the Company state was ideally becoming 'a rule by administrative law created in a highly authoritarian structure of government' (ibid.: 244).

Much of the arguments squeezed out from Travers textured analysis also holds true for Wilson's *The Domination of Strangers* (2010). Both regard the period of the 1770s–80s as marked by crises and

anxiety, which shaped the new order that started emerging in the 1780s onwards. However, Wilson's treatment of the period, which is also slightly enlarged as he carries the story forward to 1835, is also (at least in thematic scope) different from Travers. This difference is well articulated by Wilson himself in his review of Travers' work. He says,

> One criticism of *Ideology and Empire*, then, is that it fails to account for the very radical way in which British concepts such as the 'ancient constitution', despotism or the right of conquest were reworked to find conceptual use in Bengal. One is left wondering what, precisely and practically, happens to concepts when they travel.[2]

Wilson tries to show not only the implementation of ancient constitutionalism but also of another important ideology, utilitarianism, in different spheres of governance: property, Hindu joint family and not least the indigenous 'liberal' critique that started to take shape from the 1820s.

There are three main arguments in *The Domination of Strangers* (Wilson 2010). First, the rise of modern colonial governance in Bengal was a function of colonial anxiety. The emergence of new forms of governance occurred from the anxious, insecure attitude to Indian society. They did not develop from a confident desire to transform South Asia or impose a coherent political ideology. In other words, crises led the state to acquire its 'colonial' character. Second, this is a story of a wider (global) phenomenon of the rise of modern states. Third, the relationship between 'coloniser' and 'colonised' that was based on strangeness, mutual suspicion and anxiety was not only limited to a narrow period of intensive colonial state formation but was a feature that kept reproducing itself throughout the rule. Wilson states that the 'new constitution of 1793 was an unsuccessful attempt to suppress those anxieties' (ibid.: 47).

Wilson's book has received wide and detailed engagement, and this review will not reproduce the arguments already raised in these writings but rather will stick to the nature of colonial state-formation and the ways in which Wilson presents it.[3] Taking Travers' and Wilson's books together, it definitely becomes clear that the 1780s formed a turning point in the history of colonial state-formation. Whether that formation crystallized into a confident bureaucratic structure of state – or remained ridden with anxiety – is a different matter. Like Travers, Wilson also traces the impe-

tus of this change in the financial and political situation of the early 1780s that signalled the demise of the debate on the 'ancient constitution'. The two standard reasons behind this change, he says, were first, the military-fiscal crisis and, second, the influence of British ideas. However, according to Wilson, these are not adequate and therefore need to be supplemented by two more conjectural factors: first, the part of the dynamics of British politics that lent significance on 'property' as a rallying point in political life; second, the changing structure of the Company service and officers' attitude towards life in India (Wilson 2010: 54 f.). The issue of property – the debate over the 'ancient' rights of *zamindars* over lands as well as their relation with the state – has already been commented upon.

The most interesting point in Wilson's book (according to the present reviewer) concerns the second of the points mentioned above, which is about the changing attitude of the British in India. Here he argues that loneliness and feeling of strangeness became the dominant ways in which they saw themselves positioned in Indian society. An emotional gap, uneasiness and, in fact, an inability to connect with the ruled drove them more and more away from the participatory model of governance (which Hastings tried to follow) towards reliance on codified texts and abstracted rules. This was becoming a general feature amongst a bunch of officials posted in the 'interiors' of the country presiding over revenue and judicial matters. One of the reasons why a distant form of sovereignty developed during Cornwallis' times was because he was interacting with these officials (ibid.: 58–9). The lack of sentiment and affection also resulted in increasing disdain towards native informants.

It is interesting to note that, for the period when scholars from within the revisionist historiography (and otherwise) have suggested a relatively greater amount of dialogue and exchange between Europeans and natives in the formation of colonial knowledge (Bayly 1996), Wilson regards aloofness and lonely life as factors creating distance and lack of social communication. One can also argue here that loneliness and strangeness did not in any causal way lead to the lack of social communication. The same stock of strangeness that according to Wilson drove the officials towards 'textual' engagement could also be seen to be responsible for promoting administrative duties such as interior touring and personal pursuits, which were often marked by social communication. This, however, is a minor point.

In this changed context, when the ideological framework of the ancient or Mughal constitution collapsed under this new feeling of strange-

ness, Wilson argues that the latter drew its ideological support from the idea of despotism (Wilson 2010: 63–69). We have noted above how the Mughal constitutionalism was variously used by Hastings, Francis and Burke. This new use of despotism by the officials in the 1780s–90s was however not utilised to explain a political culture but the 'personality of Indians' (ibid.: 64), which justified the 'new constitution' based on codes and abstractions. The discussion on the different usages of despotism is illuminating. It once again shows how a same ideological apparatus was not only differently used by different people but also acquired new meanings at different points of time. At this point the readers might feel to know a little more than what the author has offered: of all the existing ideological frameworks, why did 'despotism' become the chosen one? The difficulty in answering this question is evident, as Wilson accepts that it is 'difficult to distinguish cause from effect' (ibid.: 67); that is, was the use of despotism an effect of the growing strangeness or a cause of it? So is the difficulty in actually locating the grounds that produced strangeness. He says: 'This anxious mood seems to have been the product of a range of contingent forces that are hard to disentangle from one another' (ibid.).

Within this set of factors, Wilson makes an interesting argument about the notion of 'home' while being away in a 'colony'. He argues that in the 1760s and 1770s, India offered a way to earn more money, rank and prestige in British society on one's return, but by the 1780s this had changed. 'Officers', he says, 'rarely went to India with a sense of adventure or opportunity, more likely resigning themselves to a tedious and uncomfortable 20 years in the Indian countryside […]' (ibid.). One can dig a lot of contrasting evidences from the archives of private letters, memoirs and diaries to suggest that, until the 1810s–20s, India as a colonial prize that could aid personal monetary fortune lingered deep in the ideas of the British families sending their sons to India. True, some showed great disappointment when they arrived in India but this is a different argument than saying that these young officers (usually fifteen to eighteen years old) did not see India as an opportunity. A more pronounced change in the attitude starts surfacing in the period of utilitarian reforms (under Governor-General Bentinck) of financial control over expenditure.

As far as the specificities of the 1780s in the colonial state formation are concerned, none of the remarks challenge the core of Wilson's argument, which is that 'Cornwallis and his colleagues believed that

experience of intellectual engagement with Indian could not be used to frame British rule' (ibid.: 73). This signified the starting point of a state based on abstracted laws. The success and limitation of this abstraction, the criss-cross of a mix of ideological and practical factors shaping those abstractions, and the native response to them is the subject of the remaining chapters of his book, which this review will not take into account. The debate on the eighteenth-century transition is marred by polemical and rhetorical charges, and if not for anything else but to keep that spirit alive, it would not be so ill-humoured to end this review by making one such comment. If strangeness and anxiety kept the colonial rule going for a little less than 200 years, one wonders what a confident and strong state would have done. If anxious encounters were capable of constantly forcing the colonial state to think anew in preserving and developing its strategies of rule based on the growing separation from the ruled society, then the degree of abstraction of social and political practices and violence that a confident colonial state would have inflicted is difficult to imagine. However, perhaps no modern state is so powerful or confident ever to attain such a degree of alienation. The development of the colonial state in India was part of the rise of modern states elsewhere; this is what Wilson puts forward. Are we then seeing the flourishing of two reverse but complementary currents of history writing on this period: in the 1990s, C.A. Bayly made an important call to return the British to South Asia; the recent intervention (read Wilson) proposes to put South Asia on a global eighteenth-century map.

Endnotes

1   A number of these essays are reproduced in the following volumes: Marshall 2003 and Alavi 2002.

2   Wilson, J.E. 2008. Review: Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India. The British in Bengal, *Reviews in History*, 697, http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/print/review/697 [retrieved 08.05.2012].

3   Stern, Philip 2009. Review: *The Domination of Strangers*. Modern Governance in Eastern India, 1780-1835, *Reviews in History*, 790, http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/print/review/790 [retrieved 08.05.2012].

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