

This book is an introduction to the Indian Subcontinent and its three largest countries – India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. I hope and believe that it will be of use to students in history, geography, development studies, sociology and politics – and also to the lay reader who simply wishes to understand a little about this cultural heartland. I have long felt that students in many subjects and many departments are asked too soon to get down to the details of this period or that, this part of India or Pakistan, or that, before they had some understanding of the broader context. I have tried to provide that broader context – to give the kind of launching pad from which those who are interested in learning and researching in more detail can then move on. I have tried to do so as much from an emotive point of view as a detached and ‘objective’ point of view. What I have therefore tried to do is to tell a story chronologically – beginning in the geological past and continuing to the present day. At different points in this chronological story I take time to spin out some of the threads that might otherwise have been dealt with systematically – for example on caste, or on the management of water resources. The organising lynch-pin of this story is a geo-political one. The theme to which the book constantly returns is the relationship between society and the organisation of territory – as states and empires, as monarchic realms and as representative democracies – and the development culturally, linguistically, economically of the ever-changing pattern of states. For this reason, this book could not have been published by an Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi author in his/her own country. Both peer pressure and legal constraint forbid the telling of disputes from an opponent’s point of view, and prohibit the publication of maps with counterclaims shown clearly on them.

Human society exists because of what the word society implies. It implies a degree of co-operation and order or, in other words, the antithesis of anarchy. But anarchy can and does break out, at any scale from violence within the family to the outbreak of war between states. Throughout history social organisations of increasing scale have tried to control anarchy within, thereby implicitly leaving a residual anarchy without. Family units are grouped in tribes or clan units, traders and artisans are grouped in leagues and guilds, amalgams of both are subjected to empire. Empires then both wax and wane. In Europe a new system of states emerged after the anarchy of the 30 Years War, when the Treaty of Westphalia was signed in 1648 and the final vestiges of the Holy Roman Empire were dismantled. The modern states gained internal strength and cohesion, but were competitors with each other, and quite frequently at war. For this reason the international system of states which Europe has more or less imposed on the world has been called *The anarchical Society* by Hedley Bull (1977), an analyst of international relations. The

story of South Asia is a story partly about its indigenous political and cultural forms, and partly the story of the invasion and implantation of foreign forms, including most recently the European idea of sovereign states. These successor states have engaged in competitive warfare – in other words have resorted to international anarchy. The book, therefore, is also concerned with South Asia’s engagement with Europe – Britain in particular – and the external world.

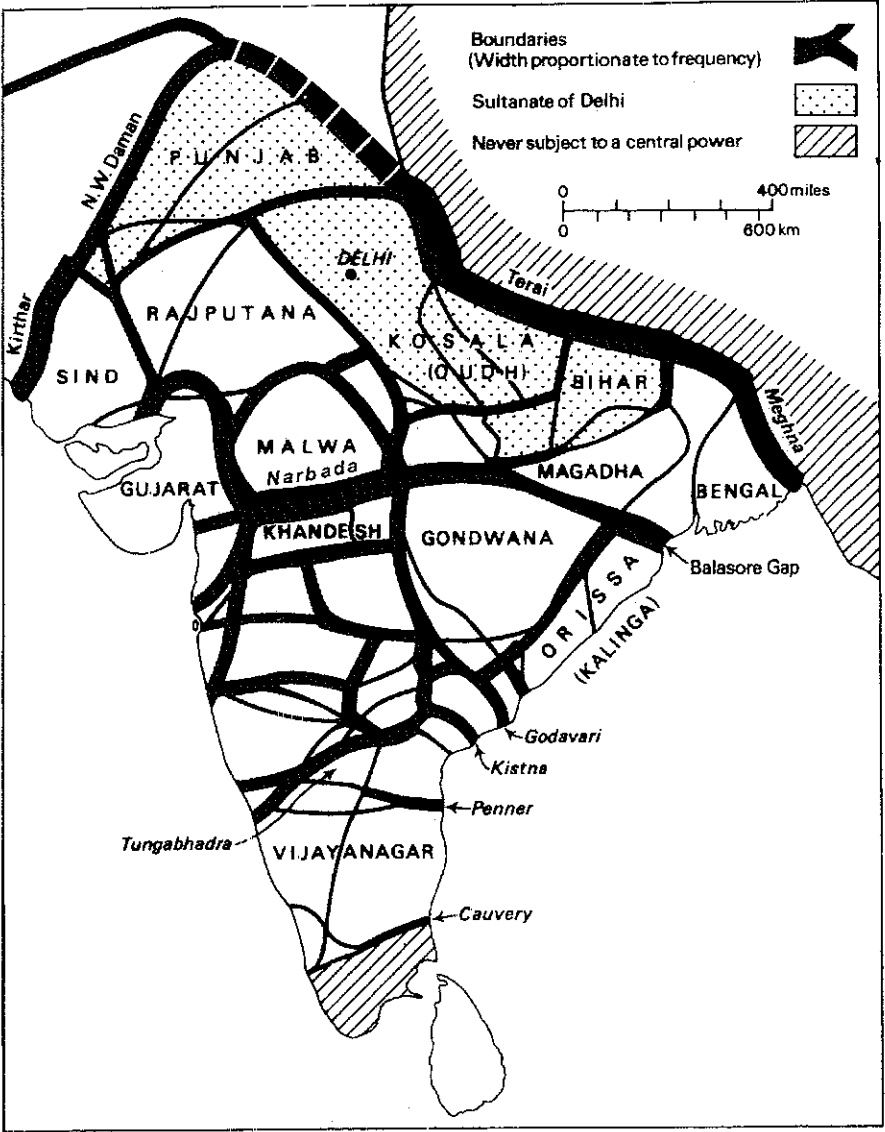
I cannot conceal the fact that I am British and that that fact on its own could explain why I became interested in South Asia in the first place. The British involvement has left permanent marks in British culture as much as the British left marks in South Asia. Quite a few words in common currency in English have their origins in India. Bungalows are houses of Bengal: their inhabitants may sleep on divans which take their name from the Mughal tax officials – the Diwans – via the cushions they sat upon – and perhaps asleep on their divan people wear their pyjamas – the ‘leg garment’ of Punjab. The juggernauts that oppress small rural roads in England are named not after Prussian militarists, but the Lord Jagannath, whose image is taken through Puri in Orissa (one of the states of India) in a wheeled chariot, beneath whose wheels his devotees would throw themselves to be crushed. Thugs originally committed Thuggee, ritual murder, in the name of the Gods of destruction. Weekend sailors sail in Catamarans, though not the ‘bound wood’ of the original Tamil. The army wears khaki (‘khak’ means dust) uniforms. The Labour party has Holy Cows, expert commentators are pundits, and we hear of the Moguls (Mughals) of British Industry. The involvement has of course not ended. Since the 1950s Britain has received several waves of immigrants of South Asian descent, directly from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and also indirectly from the Asian communities expelled from east Africa. The South Asian diaspora in Britain is a large one, contributing much to the new multi-cultural Britain. I do not know, but I suspect, that more mosques, Sikh gurdwaras and Hindu temples have been built in the last two decades than Christian churches (some inhabiting the disused churches and chapels – a kind of architectural apostasy?). There are now more people of South Asian descent living in Britain than ever there were Britons in India. And both the marriage trade and the tourist trade sends a steady stream of Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Britons in both directions. The British in general seem to have fallen in love with Indian curries – and interestingly the title ‘Indian’ restaurant retains the imperial idea of greater India – since only a few style themselves as specifically Pakistani or Bangladeshi cuisine. But for me the most enduring connection is the number of close friends I have made in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh and with immigrant friends from South Asia living in Britain and elsewhere. This book is written in warmest appreciation of these friendships. I hope I have written something that will help those who have no contact with, and little understanding of, South Asia to learn something of the outlines of the history and culture and politics of this cultural heartland – home to one quarter of the world’s population.

It might seem as if the current political map of sovereign states has some permanence: but much of that permanence is in the perception of it, not the reality. The United Nations charter subscribes to the idea that there are such things as

sovereign states, and that interference by other states in the internal affairs of others is 'illegal' – although actually the level of interference by multi-national forces in the affairs of 'weak' states has increased markedly since the end of the Cold War. The European student knows that for a 'long time' there have been such countries as 'France' or 'Britain', and yet a moment's reflection reminds us of the changing German-French border in the region of the Rhineland, or the Schleswig-Holstein question and the demarcation of the southern Danish border, or the acquisition by Hitler by treaty before the 2nd World War of the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia. More recently the USSR has dissolved, and Yugoslavia has fractured violently – the latter being one illustration where there has been intervention by both the UN and NATO.

Figure F.1 shows a map, which depicts the frequency with which certain borders have been used in South Asia. We may argue about the exact status of a border – whether it was or was not between truly sovereign states, we may argue about the meaning of 'state' at different times, but the generality of the map still conveys a point. To the European there may always have been only one 'India', but it is a sub-continental name. There is only one North America, but within that there have been many states and empires too, and the persistence of a unified Canada has sometimes been in doubt. Today there are three major states in South Asia – India, Pakistan and Bangladesh (the others are Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives). These three have been born out of the India which the British ruled more or less as a totality – but even this is a mighty simplification.

First let us look at the land which the British finally controlled within their Indian Empire (Figure 4.2) and compare it with Figure F.1. It is immediately obvious that the valley of Assam has rarely been part of the South Asian system, and that the 'most frequent' border of the north-east is drawn across the mouth of the valley where it joins the Bengali plains. The people of Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram and other north-eastern states share less in common with the north Indian heartland than many other people of the modern Republic, and there are continuing political tensions between them and the Government in Delhi, resulting still in armed insurgency. And when the British came to leave, they did not divide their Indian empire into three, but into two – the state of India, and the state of Pakistan, which was in two geographically separated parts. The Eastern Wing of Pakistan was formed by partitioning Bengal more or less along one of the lines which is shown on Figure F.1 as a minor and 'infrequent' boundary. In turn this Eastern part of Pakistan achieved its independence in 1971-2 and became Bangladesh. Was that the end of the story? This book is not a futurology, and so the only truthful answer to that question is; I do not know. But, we do know that an extremist group in Punjab took armed insurgency to try to force the independence of 'Khalistan' for the Sikhs. The future of Kashmir is unsettled, as a bitter struggle between Kashmiri groups, India and Pakistan shows little sign of resolution. We do know that there is tension between the different regions of Pakistan. And although it is not a topic discussed in any detail in this book, we do know that the problem of the Tamil North of Sri Lanka has not been resolved, and that India has been involved because of



**Figure F.1 The Relative Permanence of Former Boundaries in India**  
Source Day (1949)  
Note This map is subjective and illustrative rather than proven. At some times, for example Assam was not as isolated as implied here. The general point, that some boundaries do recur, is valid, and the thicker lines are reasonable indicators of regional divisions.

its own Tamil population, and that the Dravidian South of India also has its independence movements.

Where do we start with such a story? Clearly we can start by saying something about the area under discussion. It is geographically distinctive, a subcontinent of plains and hills and rivers, bounded by massive mountains and by the sea. It is what the political geographers call a geo-political region, that is to say, a region derived from geographical features which give it a unity within which cultural, political and economic processes of integration can occur. There is no determinism in this, but a simple statement about the backcloth against which history is played out. There is no determinism which ordains that there will be a single cultural area, but within such regions cultures do often integrate and assimilate. Indeed it is the pervasiveness of Hinduism and its syncretic abilities which has provided a cultural unity to much of South Asia. Islam came of course (in historical terms as a recent cultural invader) and in resisting integration within the manifold of Hinduism sowed the seeds that led to partition and the creation of Pakistan. Even then the six or so centuries of Muslim supremacy resulted in a distinctive Indian Islam – Islam-i-Hind. So the division of South Asia into the current states is very much a matter of division within the region, and still the political and sometimes military struggles between these states is very much a regional affair, even if it concerns external allies. In response to this fact the states of the region have formed their own South Asian Association or Regional Co-operation.

If there is no determinism to state formation, what is it that enables areas to be integrated in one sovereign state? The forces of integration may be conveniently classified under three headings, with perhaps a fourth subheading. Again and again we will return to these three groups of forces, and in the summary at the end I shall trace the path of history again expounding them more fully.

There are 'identitive' forces, those forces of common identity which link people together and which bring them to a tacit agreement that they constitute the political group or arena within which final arbitration occurs. These are the bonds of language, or ethnicity, or religion, or ideology. Sometimes the identity is almost a utology – as with the case of nationalism. Identitive bonds need not be congruent. The Swiss have a very clear national identity but neither a common language nor common religion. In modern India there is religious continuity between north and south which crosses an extremely wide linguistic gulf.

There are 'utilitarian' forces – those bonds of common material interests which mean that it is in the interests of the different component parts of an integrated unit to stay integrated. There are now strong utilitarian bonds between the British and the rest of the European Union. Most of the British are aware of the damage that would be done to the UK economy if they were to withdraw. Through history utilitarian bonds have sometimes been immediately obvious to the populace, as with the case of dependency on river waters from adjoining areas, but quite often they are not so obvious. And of course they have changed with time: the integration of the global economy has a strength now which was unimaginable a few centuries ago when the process first started as European traders first reached India by sea.

Technological change has changed the nature of utilitarian bonds faster than any comparable force has been able to change the nature of identitive bonds.

There are 'coercive' bonds. Simply put, force can be used to carve out a state and to hold it together. But force alone is expensive: the costs of maintaining armies of occupation and the sluggish economy of a hostile populace combine to ensure that as soon as possible other bonds must be developed to maintain the hegemony, and that can lead to political dialogue and perhaps changing identitive bonds. Commonly, in history, force has been an initiator of integration – but rarely has it been the prime integrator for long periods.

The fourth type of bonds I group as a sub-class. They are those which I attribute to administrative technology and administrative skill. There are examples from South Asia, as from elsewhere, of Empires which appeared remarkably large for their historical epoch – often short-lived – but which cannot be explained by the identitive bonds of the mass of the populace, least of all – given primitive transport technology – by utilitarian bonds, nor solely by coercive bonds. Behind them were some of the great imperial figures of history, who devised political systems of accountability and land and resource management that extended their empires far, and enabled the ruling classes to reproduce themselves over a few generations, sometimes fostering their cohesion with new identities. The ways in which these bonds can be reinforced are often complex and subtle: local leaders can be recruited by an alien élite who reward them with rank and security.

As I have said, my approach in elaborating on these themes in this book is mostly, but not completely, chronological. The early chapters give some understanding of the environment of South Asia, and of the early history of settlement and culture which I use as a base to explain something of the contemporary form of Hinduism. Similarly, the chapter on the Muslim invasions is used as an excuse to say much about contemporary Islam in South Asia. The involvement of the British is considered mostly chronologically, but there are certain issues in the changing nature of the Indian economy and of resource development which are dealt with in a more systematic way. Independence and Partition are looked at from several geo-political perspectives, which then widens out to consider international relations both within South Asia and with the outside powers. There the book ends – but not of course the story which can be followed daily in newspapers and magazines as it continues to unfold.

#### *A Note on Dates*

Dates Before the Christian Era are given as BC. For dates since 0 AD, the AD is omitted.

#### *A Note on Spellings*

For many terms taken directly from Indian languages, there has been no standard transliteration into English. Over time the fashionable ways of making transliterations

has changed – so over time the transliterations may vary greatly, the changes often loosely tied to tacit notions of political correctness. Versions used in the British imperial period have by and large been substituted now with more ‘up-to-date’ versions. This means the reader may have to use his/her imagination when perusing the literature to realise when two spellings refer to the same word. As examples consider: Muslim, Moslem, Moslim – any of which in older texts may be replaced by Mohammedan, Muhammadan, Mahometan, Musselman etc. The Mughals may even be Moguls or Moghuls. The Kalifat movement may be referred to as the Kilafat, Caliphate, Kalifate movement. The River Kavari is also the Kaveri or Cauvery; the Jumna the Yamuna. The ritual self-immolation of a widow is suttee or sati. Poona is now Pune; Bombay has become Mumbai; Calcutta, Kolkota; and Simla, Shimla etc. More confusingly, Madras has become Chennai (officially – but many Madrasis will not use the word.) In this book I have tried to be consistent with spellings, but I have probably failed. In general I use the spelling of a place which was common at the historical time about which I write.

A Note on Maps

This is a monotone book and not a colour-printed atlas with large plates; therefore, some of the maps shown are not necessarily the ‘best’ or most authoritative. The maps of early Hindu Empires and the Mughal Empire, taken from Davies (1959), are simple and effective in suggesting the broad ideas, but may be misleading in some respects. The reader is referred to Schwartzberg (1992) for detailed material.

Foreword to the 2nd Edition

The subtitle of the first edition of *The Geopolitics of South Asia*, published in 2000, was: - *From Early Empires, to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*. That there is a second edition with a changed subtitle so soon afterwards reflects two things. The first is the critical welcome given to the first edition, for which I am very grateful. The second is the American “War Against Terrorism” waged against Osama bin Laden and the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the threat of war between nuclear-armed Pakistan and India over insurgency in Kashmir.

I am glad to say that the main framework and arguments of the first edition have remained intact, and that the recent events have not caused me to change any of my previous conclusions. I have taken the chance to up-date different parts, and to write a little more on Kashmir. More significantly I have written a completely new chapter on the North-West Frontier and Afghanistan, drawing attention to the repetitive, disastrous, and damaging pattern of external incursions into that benighted country from the earliest of times. So, although I can say that current events have not changed my arguments and conclusions, they have compelled me to spell out much more clearly the geopolitical significance of the north-west, and to underline some of the religious and cultural problems of the subcontinent.

It is of course natural to dwell on ‘Recent Events’, as they knock history from this course to that. Sir Richard Temple’s *Survey of India* published in 1880, which is cited in the main text, starts his 29th and concluding chapter (see Table 4.3 below) with “Recent War in Afghanistan”, and ends the chapter with “Virtues and merits of the character of the Natives – Their general contentment under British rule – Happy prospect rising before them”.

By contrast, I have chosen not to concentrate on the Recent Events in Afghanistan and the American-dominated coalition war against the Taliban and al-Qaida. Instead, my treatment of Afghanistan and the North-West Frontier expands on the security issues of the 19th and 20th Centuries. The relevance of these to the contemporary situation is very clear. As for the recent events of 2001-02, I note them and make some acerbic comments about the failures of Western policy, but it is too early to discern whether current action (or inaction) will break the mould of history and lead to the establishment of an integrated, democratic and modern Afghanistan. My hunch is that it will not, that the Americans are as self-deluding as Sir Richard Temple, that they will leave without knowing how to replace tribalism and warlordism, and without either the will or means to invest in economic development. I see little chance of a ‘happy prospect rising before’ the people of South Asia until and unless both the internal nations and the external powers realise that security is not just a matter of reactive and crippling expensive military ‘defence’ against force, but a matter of pro-active education and development. Just a few modern swords can make so very many ploughshares.

# Acknowledgements and a Lament

It is usual to start with the acknowledgements, and to end with a disclaimer on behalf of the named persons, that all remaining fault and error is the author's alone. However, in a book of this historical and inter-disciplinary sweep, the chances of residual error are high, and the occurrence of contesting interpretation certain. So I wish to start by accepting responsibility for all fault and error.

Then, without in the slightest implicating any of them in these faults and errors, I wish very sincerely to thank the following. Firstly, the many students I have taught over the years, who have challenged my ideas, and provided me with new clues and references. Their feedback has been of inestimable value. Next I wish to thank John Harriss for reading and commenting on an earlier version of the script, and Joe Schwartzberg for very generously going through the current text with a fine tooth comb. Next I wish to thank Mike Young and Arthur Shelley, of Cambridge University Department of Geography, and Catherine Lawrence and Claire Ivison of SOAS Department of Geography for their preparation of many of the maps; and above all Chris Beacock of Lancaster University Department of Geography, for completing the maps and also for painstaking efforts in preparing camera ready copy. Finally, I would like to thank the Indian Institute of Advanced Study at Shimla for bestowing a Fellowship on me, during which, amongst other things, I undertook the work on International Harmony and Stability repeated in Chapter 12 and the Appendix.

Now the lament, which will be understood by most of my British colleagues and some overseas. I first went to India early in 1970; 30 years ago and after I had completed a PhD on the unrelated topic of Systems Theory I was funded by a 'Hayter' grant financed by the UK Government through the UGC to preserve a stock of area expertise within Britain. When I came back I was so enthused by South Asia that I proposed this book to Academic Press, and signed a contract to write it. My early drafts were justly savaged by unknown referees, and Academic Press in the interim published a book stemming from my thesis on Systems Theory. Some ten years later the commissioning editor of Academic Press moved, and while emptying his files found the old contract which he returned to me for disposal. But I had not stopped writing the book. In 1988 I moved from Cambridge to SOAS (at interview I promised this book was almost ready for the press), where my colleague Tony Allan observed that the pay-off from the Hayter investment was very long term (there were others who went to SOAS who had had similar support in other disciplines). At SOAS the regional expertise around me put some justified further dents in drafts of the MSS which I shared with colleagues. Then in 1994 I moved to Lancaster, where, after further elaboration, finally I have decided that I am probably not going to improve substantially on what I have written. Not only has this book been 30

years in the making, I now think it had to be 30 years in the writing. To the extent that I have been successful in integrating different disciplines over such an historical time span, then I know I could not have done it as a short-term exercise.

My lament is that in these days of the Research Assessment Exercise held at circa 5-year intervals, few young academics could expect the toleration of their Head of Department for spending time on such a long-term project. In some fields it might not matter: in the areas of cross-cultural understanding, which are the most significant problem areas confronting human-kind as a species at present (all others including global environmental problems boil down at implementation stage to cross-cultural understanding) long term investment in expertise is essential. So the lament is actually the greatest acknowledgement of all. I thank the trust, true creativity, farsightedness and collegiality of the British university system as it was, before oxymoronic 'Conservative reformers' engineered its downfall.

## Acknowledgements for the 2nd Edition

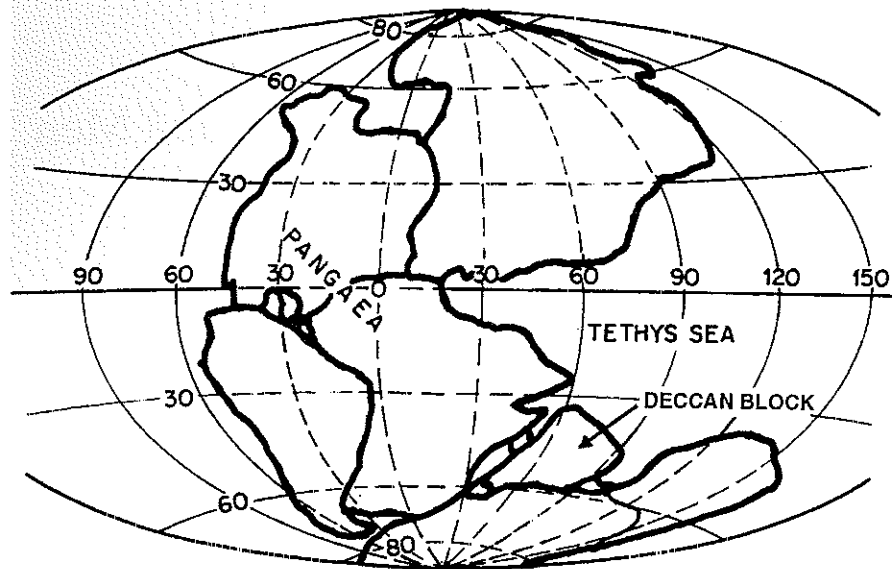
My first thanks go to Val Rose of Ashgate for proposing a second edition. My next thanks go to my father, who has lost none of the proof-reading skills he had in his forty years as a technical editor, and who at the age of 92 has shown a much more acute grasp of spelling, grammar and punctuation than I have ever had. Thanks also for extensive comments and feedback from Bob Bradnock and Christina Coleman. I also wish to re-iterate the thanks expressed in the first edition to Chris Beacock, who has again had to labour with preparing maps and the camera-ready copy. The quality of Figure 5.1, which he has prepared from original material, makes me wish he had re-drawn all the illustrations. But that would have taken too much time. Maybe, one day, in a 3rd edition that will be achieved.

# Brahma and Manu: Of Mountains and Rivers, Gods and Men

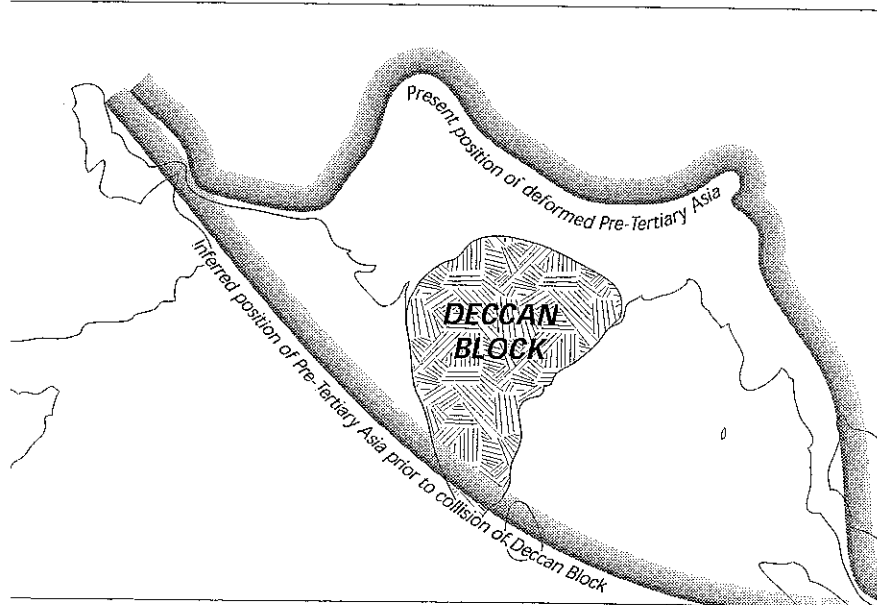
## 1.1 The Land

Our understanding of the formation of the continents has been revolutionised over the last few decades. The Earth's outer crust is now thought to be made up of fairly rigid plates – of differing sizes and irregular shapes – which have been moving relative to each other for at least 1000 million years. About 400 million years ago these were grouped together in one piece – a super-continent called Pangea. This split into two parts – a Northern part known as Laurasia, and a Southern part called Gondwanaland. Between the two lay what is known as the Tethys Sea – which remains now in the remnant string of 'middle earth' seas – the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, the Black Sea and Caspian and the trough of the Ganges Valley. Both the Northern Laurasian part and the Southern Gondwanaland part then split. One split common to both runs down the middle of the two Atlantic oceans – so the fact that the eastern coastline of the Americas 'fits' the western coastline of Europe and Africa is not an accident. The Atlantic split is not the only split that occurred in the Southern part – Gondwanaland. The Antarctic broke off and drifted towards the south pole, Australia drifted Eastwards (relatively) and about 200 million years ago what was to become the Deccan block broke off, and began to drift across the Indian ocean (Figure 1.1). For more than 100 million years it was isolated – hence its flora and fauna could evolve in a distinctive manner similar to that of Madagascar and Australia. Then about 80 MA (million years ago), it struck into the Southern flank of Laurasia (Figure 1.2), and began to push the edge up – lifting both the Tibetan plateau and beginning the process – which has not ended – of pushing up the Himalayas, partly from the sea-bed rocks of the Tethys Sea. So what had been a fairly straight line from the Straits of Hormuz at the mouth of the Persian Gulf to Malaysia became severely dented. The Deccan Block is still pushing north at about 6 cms a year – so the Himalayas are also continuing to rise – at an average of between 1 and 9 cms a year. The front ranges, the Mahabharat that separates Kathmandu from the Indian plains and the Siwaliks, began their uplift 200,000 years ago – well within the time period of human settlement – and so recent in terms of Earth history that if the earth has lasted for one year, then this event started in the last 23 minutes.

The raising of the Himalayas has meant that the northward seasonal march of the meteorological equator known as 'the zone of tropical convergence' gets delayed through the long, dry and very hot summer, until it suddenly bursts at the beginning of what we call the monsoon. Because the mountains have been raised so high, the



**Figure 1.1 Pangaea**  
Source: Lapidus (1987)



**Figure 1.2 The Dented Southern Flank of Asia**  
Source: Tapponier (1986)

monsoon no longer reaches across the mountains into Tibet – which has become an arid as well as a high plateau. But the amount of water that the monsoon releases on the mountains and plains is exceptional even by equatorial standards. The depth of moisture bearing air is about 6,000 metres – three times as deep as in the other Asian monsoons. South Asia boasts the world's wettest place – Mawsynram, just north of Bangladesh on the southern flank of Meghalaya block. This amount of water falling on the world's highest and youngest mountains inevitably means that natural rates of erosion are extremely high, and the volume of silt brought down to the plains by the Indus, the Ganges and the Brahmaputra are amongst the highest river-borne loads on earth. The Indo-Gangetic plains are the world's largest riverine lowland deposits – in places perhaps up to 5 kms thick, – and they result in two massive deltas – the Indus and the Ganges-Brahmaputra. The latter is – one almost feels like saying 'of course' – the world's largest, with sediments up to 22 kms deep – and deposition which continues 2000 nautical miles into the Bay of Bengal. Other massive rivers, tributaries of these river systems, show equally dynamic behaviour. The Kosi in north Bihar has migrated 100 kms west across its own fan of deposits in the last 250 years: the Beas, one of the five rivers of the Punjab, was captured by another, the Chenab, in 1790. In the Bengal delta the flow of water has shifted over the last few centuries from the western distributaries to the eastern, reducing the water flow past Calcutta – a fact which will be seen to be important in later chapters of this book.

When the tide recedes from a sandy beach, the many small rivulets that form and drain the small springs and rock pools shift their courses many times in an afternoon, capturing each other, forming braided patterns and deltas, and leaving abandoned courses etched on the flat surface. Indra, the God of the rains, from his loftier vision of time, must have watched such a ceaseless patterning of the plains of India. In the mythology of India the Holy River Sarasvati ran to the sea, and there is little doubt that once there was a river that left the Punjab and reached the sea at the Rann of Kutch. The divide between the Indus and the Ganges is so slight that it may well have been the Yamuna (Jumna), which was later captured by a tributary of the Ganges. At any rate, there are marks left on the landscape, and the dry bed of the misfit Ghaggar peters out after it has left the Punjab, now in places reinvigorated by the canals of modern man, like streams on the beach reinvigorated by scheming children with spades and buckets. In Pakistan the Hakra marks a continuation of the old course. The rivers soak into the plains, and provide the ground water for the wells of time immemorial. Upon the rivers and their waters and their silt, so much of life depends and has so long depended, but always subject to their wanton floods and shifting moods, that it is no wonder that they have become revered and holy in themselves. And the land whence they originate is truly the abode of the Gods. That so many of them issue from sources so close to each other must surely show where heaven reaches down and touches the earth. Could this be the centre of the world?

Thus it is quite clear that the sub-continent is aptly named. It is part of Asia, and yet it is not – it is a geological and climatic region in its own right, cut-off from



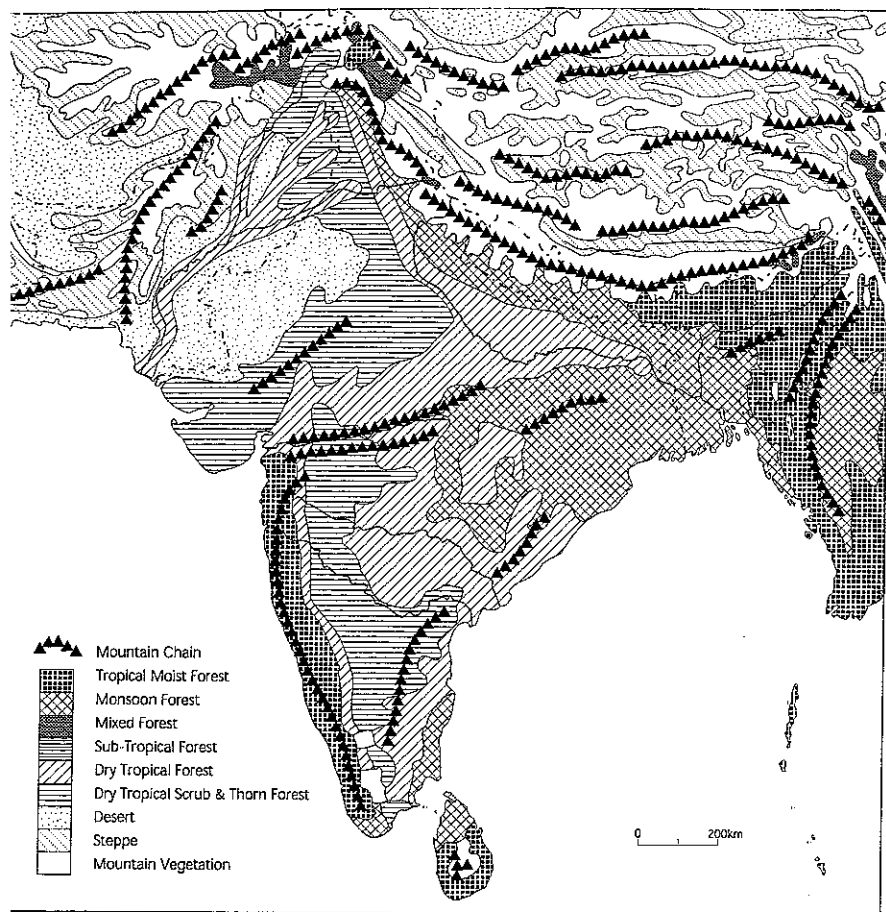


Figure 1.3 The Natural Vegetation of South Asia and Principal Mountain Ranges

inland Asia on its landward sides by high and difficult mountains. These form one of the three major elements of the sub-continent's geology. They together with the second zone – the great riverine lowlands – constitute one of the most dynamic physical regions on earth. The last major element is the old Deccan block, peninsular India, thought to be rigid and stable – though there have been some major and expected earthquakes within the block itself. This is the fragment of Gondwanaland which takes its name from the Gond tribe of Madhya Pradesh, where some of the geology was first studied. Even despite the different history of human settlement and the different climate, the Deccan block remains sufficiently like East and South Africa (see Morgan (1993) for an examination of the similarities) for it to be used in fooling the public: when Richard Attenborough produced his film 'Gandhi' he shot all its 'South Africa' location scenes in India.

The physical regionalisation of South Asia (Figure 1.3) is not quite completed by the demarcation of these three geological zones. Although the monsoon may give the East of the country and parts of the south extremely heavy precipitation, this is not true of the north-western parts of the Deccan, where rainfall is unreliable, and least of all of the north-west of the subcontinent – in the middle and lower Indus valley (Sind) and Rajasthan in India – regions straddled by the shifting sands of the Thar desert.

The obvious physical distinctiveness of South Asia is partly the cause of its equally distinctive culture. The physical geography has created barriers that surround the sub-continent, defending it against all but the most determined invaders. West of the Himalayas are the adjacent great mountain systems of the Hindu Kush and the Pamirs, stretching over the nexus of boundaries separating Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Central Asian republics, India and China. And south from the Hindu Kush run the mountain ranges that skirt the west flank of the Indus Basin in the Northwest Frontier Province and Baluchistan. It is a wall around India's fertile garden, but not quite as impenetrable as the Himalayas. Beyond the wall there lie two great cradles of the human race and their civilisations – the Iranian Plateau and the foreland that is now in the republics of Central Asia. The Europeans can recoil even now from their long historical memory of the latter, the hearth of the invading Huns and Gengis Khan, and the many other waves of invasion that have emanated from its core, almost absorbing western Europe into the Eurasian Heartland. But in learning our history thus we tend to overlook the fact that these same hordes could also have twisted south and then east, to penetrate the fabled fertile garden beyond the jagged dry mountains of India's northwest. Like a badly-thatched roof, they can inhibit average rainfall, but not downpours and deluges.

In the north-east in Assam, beyond Bengal, the border with Burma is defended by young mountains that are often covered in a nearly impenetrable jungle. Here the thatched roof is even better proof than that in the northwest – although in this century it was nearly breached by the Japanese whose invasion of India in the 2nd World War was finally stalled at Kohima and Imphal.

The deltas and river lowlands present a different kind of boundary to the outside world. There are fewer easily navigated waterways in the Indus delta than the Bengal delta – and of course the delta leads nowhere except into a desert. On the other hand in Bengal the sea, the rivers and the land inter-digitate with each other over an area of 30,000 square miles. And this land is highly productive too – and the rivers naturally full of fish. Here is an area where sea-borne trade has been known for centuries, and which can admit a naval power of sufficient strength to gain a toe-hold.

For the Europeans, Africa south of the Sahara was the last great unknown continent partly because it is so hard to penetrate into its interior. Most of the continent is a plateau, with steep escarpments near the sea on all sides. It is not possible to navigate up the rivers such as the Congo or the Orange, and even in the railway age the escarpments have presented great difficulties. The Deccan of India is part of the same terrain. It is skirted on the west by the savage escarpment of the



Ghats which overlook the Arabian sea. The coastal strip is narrow and does not lead inland easily anywhere. For the most part the drainage of the Deccan is east to the Bay of Bengal, threading through the lower and disjointed Eastern Ghats, sometimes in impressive gorges. Here on the eastern coast there are several bigger coastal plains and productive deltas – of the Mahanadi, Krishna-Godavari and Kaveri – but the peninsular rivers lack water from snow-melt in the hot season which the Himalayan Ganges and Brahmaputra continue to receive. Hence these deltas do not provide the same kind of rivers and the same possibilities for navigation. Further, there are no attractive anchorages on the east coast.

The peninsula is divided from the northern plains not by one but by several boundary lines. In the north, two contrary rivers flow from east to west – the Tapti and the Narmada – which make a line on the map which has been redrawn by many kingdoms and empires, dividing the Northern empires of the Plains from the Deccan Plateaux. Further south, there is another such line along the Krishna, which demarcates the most recalcitrant parts of the southern peninsula.

## 1.2 The People

It seems likely that the earliest still identifiable groups of people in the subcontinent were what are now called Vedoids (a name taken from the Vedda tribe of Sri Lanka and not to be confused with the Vedas (texts) of the Aryans), sometimes termed proto-australoid because of their similarities with the Australoid type. The first major group to invade, settle and to remain important today were the Dravidians, whose descendants in 'purest' form are in the south of modern India. The Dravidians are dark-skinned and short – neither factor being without contemporary significance. It is not possible to work out in any detail how different racial groups have migrated into India since then, since there is a continuum of mixing of characteristics throughout the sub-continent, and already by the first millennium BC the population was possibly 100,000,000 strong (somewhere near 10% of the current figure), implying a massive gene pool from which backward extrapolation would be extremely difficult. Attempts by physical anthropologists such as Risley (1915) to use cephalic and nasal indices to distinguish between higher and lower castes are now largely discredited, but there are physical anthropologists who identify visible regional differences. The people of Ladakh and many other mountain areas are Mongoloid. In the north-east in Bengal and Orissa it is thought the original Dravidian type became mixed later with mongoloid blood to form the basis of the Bengali nation. In the north-west (e.g. Punjab) people are on average fairer skinned, and a small proportion have blue eyes.

Our understanding of early Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic cultures in the sub-continent is weak. The archaeological record for this period, for whatever reason, is not as strong as in Africa. Our understanding of prehistoric South Asia improves dramatically from the time of the Indus Civilisation. Recent interest in desertification and the changing margins of many of the world's deserts has, coupled

with the explosion of interest in Indian archaeology that followed the discovery after the First World War of the cities of the Harappan civilisation, whose greatest city, Mohenjo Daro by the Indus in modern Pakistan, revealed a magnificence of early urban life in the subcontinent previously undreamt of.

A tentative chronology has been proposed by Goudie, Allchin, Hegde (1973) for this corner of India which suggests that this civilization flourished in a wetter phase than now prevails. The culture at its height extended from the Aravallis and the Punjab (many sites have been found by the course of the Sarasvati/Ghaggar) east to the Ganga – Yamuna Doab, to the seaward end of the Narmada (sometimes Nerbada or even Nerbuda), and across the mouths of the Indus far into Baluchistan. It is now evident that throughout the period floods were a recurrent problem at many sites, but despite such vicissitudes the civilisation achieved a high form. In Mohenjo Daro buildings on a regular plan were built of regular baked bricks – and the city served by proper sanitary drains and public granaries. Huge tanks, skilfully proofed, stored water. In the third millennium BC the population of some cities may have been as much as 35,000. And it is evident that it traded with the Mesopotamian cities by land and sea.

The sophistication of the mature Indus civilisation is well attested in the work of Allchin and Allchin (1982). Their concern is more to examine the nature of the civilisation than to document its history. Most people agree that a combination of changing environmental factors – and possibly even tectonic activity that might have caused the rivers to shift – would have weakened the society to the point where it may have been open to external assault. The more colourful view is that the end of Mohenjo Daro was as rapid and sudden as the apocalypse of Judgement Day. Sir Mortimer Wheeler summarised the shock by saying that it ended 'at four o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon'. But in the view of the Allchins, though the end of the city itself may have been cataclysmic, the civilisation and its technology survived, mostly in rural production and rural areas, to become the seed of the Ganges Civilisation of 500 BC, even if that newer civilisation was dominated by a new people who learnt from the older ways.

In the second millennium BC, or perhaps earlier, the people we call the Aryans began to migrate out of the heartland of Central Asia. They moved north and west towards Europe, and also south and east to India. Some were fair-haired and blue-eyed, they spoke a language which was derived from a lost stem which is the base of all Indo-European languages. In northern Europe some of their descendants became the Scandinavian tribes, whose mythology shares much in common with the mythology of the Aryans of India. Linguistically, in Europe, Lithuanian is closest to Sanskrit. They represent the archetypal Aryan that Hitler wanted to re-establish as a master race – and from India he adopted the 'swastika' – a symbol both of 'luck' and sometimes of the sun – as the emblem of his hegemonic project.

In Asia Minor (modern Turkey) the Aryans became dominant in the later stages of the Hittite empire (c. 2000-1000 BC), and ultimately their descendants and their languages became the basis for Greek and Roman civilisations. In India their descendants gave India its classical language, Sanskrit, once thought when

first encountered by 'modern' Europeans to be the original Indo-European stem language, but since proved to be another off-shoot of the lost stem. It took indeed several generations of contact between the 'modern' and 'enlightened' Europeans and India to realise the extent and depth of these relationships, partly because the 'orient' had become associated with barbaric power, which must by definition be alien, and because during Europe's renaissance the great powers of Islam had driven a wedge between far Asia and Europe. The 'otherness' of the East is of course the basis for Said's (1978) critique of 'Orientalism' – the implicit disparagement of the East in much western scholarship.

The Aryans were a pastoral people, and they reached the Indus plains at a time when the Harappan civilisation was waning. Bolstered by the traditions of their oral history as recorded in the Vedas (the 'Truth' or the 'Wisdom'), the sacred hymns of the Aryans (very, very roughly analogous to the Jewish psalms) for a while the view was held that they absorbed little of what was there before them. But it now seems likely that even such important Hindu Gods as Siva and perhaps such common Hindu practice as phallus worship, and certainly the technology of the ox-cart, were adopted from their predecessors. Thapar (1992) has summarised how our knowledge and interpretation of early Indian society is constantly reviewed.

We have some idea of these early times because the priestly caste of the Hindus, the Brahmins, have jealously guarded the Vedas. There are four sets – the oldest known as the Rig-veda, was composed about the time of their first arrival in the Punjab. From it we can get an idea of the geography of the land of the Sapta-Sindhu (they recognised seven (sapta) rivers in the Indus where now we know the Indus and the five of Punjab (Punjab meaning Panch (five) ab (river)). It was a land of cold winters and hot summers, and unreliable rain which could fall in either winter or summer.

South lay the land of Vitra – the land of drought – the present lower Indus Valley and the Thar Desert. To the east lay the land of both Vitra and Indra – drought and rain, or in other words quite clearly the monsoon lands of the Ganges basin.

The Aryans pushed east to this land of Vitra and Indra and intermarried with the indigenous Dasyus (Dravidian people and tribal groups), but also treated them as beneath and below them. So we now come to the highly contentious and charged topic of the origins of caste – whether it is in a sense theological, or functional, or racial. In India sometimes the word *varna* is used instead of caste, and it means 'colour'. On average it is probably possible in any region to identify a colour gradient from fairer skinned higher castes to darker skinned lower castes. The marriage adverts of present Indian newspapers frequently refer to the 'wheaten complexion' (fair skinned face) of a high caste bride. In other words, the caste may have originated in the limitation of intermarriage between conquerors and conquered who had different racial characteristics. This is a topic to which we will have to return.

The Aryans also began to adopt the ways of the agriculturists of the plains, in the days of the Rig Veda cultivating barley in the Punjab, and later in the Ganges lowlands to the east and south both wheat and rice. From the Vedas, Saxena (1968) has been able to sketch a convincing picture of their agriculture, and for me one of

the exciting details is to learn that it was already organised according to the *nakshatra* (literally 'asterisms') an astronomical calendar of 24 divisions (as opposed to our twelve months). Farmers were enjoined to sow in Rohini, exactly as even now in Bihar farmers use the same calendar and still sow in Rohini (Chapman, 1983).

It was not an easy task to tame the landscape. The tropical deciduous forests (losing their leaves in the hot dry season) thick with teak, sal, simul and sisoo, and in Bengal with bamboo thickets as well, was stocked with a fearsome fauna – tigers and elephants (often more dangerous), snakes and boars, and disease. The forest demons were not far from the early wooden stockades.

### 1.3 Society Crystallises

In the thousand years from the first of several Aryan waves of invasion to the Mauryan Empire that followed, Hinduism (as we now know it) began to take its early shape. It seems there was little or no political unity or cohesion between the many small states, and indeed even the idea of 'state' or 'polity' may be inappropriate. Society was organised more on clan lines. But these tribal origins became associated with segregated lines of marriage and descent, with guilds and crafts, and ultimately crystallised into a caste system. I use the word 'crystallise', because it carries with it some idea of permanence – a settling out into a final form. Clearly nothing in human culture does ever achieve a final unchanging form – but nevertheless although the expression of caste may have weakened and strengthened, and changed in other ways over time, one of the distinguishing marks of caste in India has been its remarkable persistence and longevity as a system. It was a problem that bothered Karl Marx – who predicted that society would move from feudalism through a class conscious phase of capitalism before achieving socialism – and here was a society that seemed to stand outside of this progression.

The explanation of caste can take many forms. To some it can be explained as *sui generis* – a thing unto itself – unlike anything at other times or in other cultures – and therefore it can be explained by Hinduism in its own terms. For others, it has to be explained comparatively, that it is the Indian realisation of a form that can occur in other guises elsewhere – and sometimes the black-white divide in the USA is quoted as a parallel. Historically we need look no further than to Japan in the early 19th Century before the Meiji Restoration to recognise another rigid caste society – which is still not completely erased from the cultural record. In Japan the 'problem' of untouchability still adheres to the descendants of the untouchable (cleaners and sweepers) caste – although it is something which receives little publicity. Go back further in time and in Europe in the Middle Ages there were hereditary crafts and guilds, and much further back in time unequal citizens and slaves in Greece, and another caste system in Egypt.

Within Hinduism there is a theoretical or theological explanation of what caste is – although this theory is a simple and high level abstraction which often bears little relation to caste in its practical form. Therefore, in saying the following, be

warned that I am generalising and simplifying perhaps excessively. In the next chapter the whole subject of caste and Hinduism will be greatly expanded.

In theory there is a four-fold division of varnas – at the top there are the priestly castes of the Brahmins, followed by the warrior caste (Kshatriya), then the merchants and landowners (the Vaisya), and finally the Sudras who are labourers and menials. There is a fifth group of outcastes and untouchables – but the distinction between them and the fourth group is complicated and varied, and we will deal with this in the next chapter too. The reality of the system is that there is a definition of what constitutes a caste group which is separate from this theology. Groups called castes exist: these are explained by mapping them on to this four-fold system – which is, I repeat, essentially a theoretical abstraction. The definition of caste is based upon the pillars of marriage (it is only possible to marry within one's own caste – it is therefore heavily tied up with lineage and genetics), of occupation (a caste in theory will have only a traditional occupation, and in practice will certainly exclude many demeaning occupations from any consideration), of pollution (members of a caste may be polluted by eating food prepared or touched by other castes, and the higher the caste the more stringent the separation), and of ritual hierarchical status (some castes are superior to other castes, a fact which is acknowledged by virtually any two castes in relation to each other).

This empirical definition when applied to India will indicate that there are thousands of castes, all perhaps theoretically identifiable with the fourfold division, but separated by region and language as well as marriage and other barriers. Currently it is commoner to term the four-fold theoretical division to be 'caste' and the actual 90,000 or so endogamous marriage groups, grouped in perhaps 3,000 sub-castes, to be *jatis* (*jati* = birth).

There is one fact that must be stressed here, because it may well escape the reader's attention otherwise. The south of the subcontinent retained Dravidian languages (Figure 1.4) – which in the current day are known as Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, and Tamil. The greatest linguistic divide between Europe and the southern tip of India is therefore in India itself. English is more akin to Bengali or Hindi, than either of those to Tamil. Despite this and the political separation of north and south throughout most of history, the south is thoroughly Hinduised, and indeed there is in many ways a stronger Brahmin presence and tradition in the south than in the north. It is a remarkable fact, and of course this cultural continuity across such a linguistic divide is one of the reasons why India is 'India'. It is a fact which has not been well explained, but which could in part be a phenomenon strengthened in the last 800 years by Muslim pressure in the north.

#### 1.4 The Epic Ages

The Mauryan age (321 BC to 185 BC) coincides with what is known as the age of the Epics. It was then that the events described in the epic texts (akin to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*) of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana were written down. Both concern

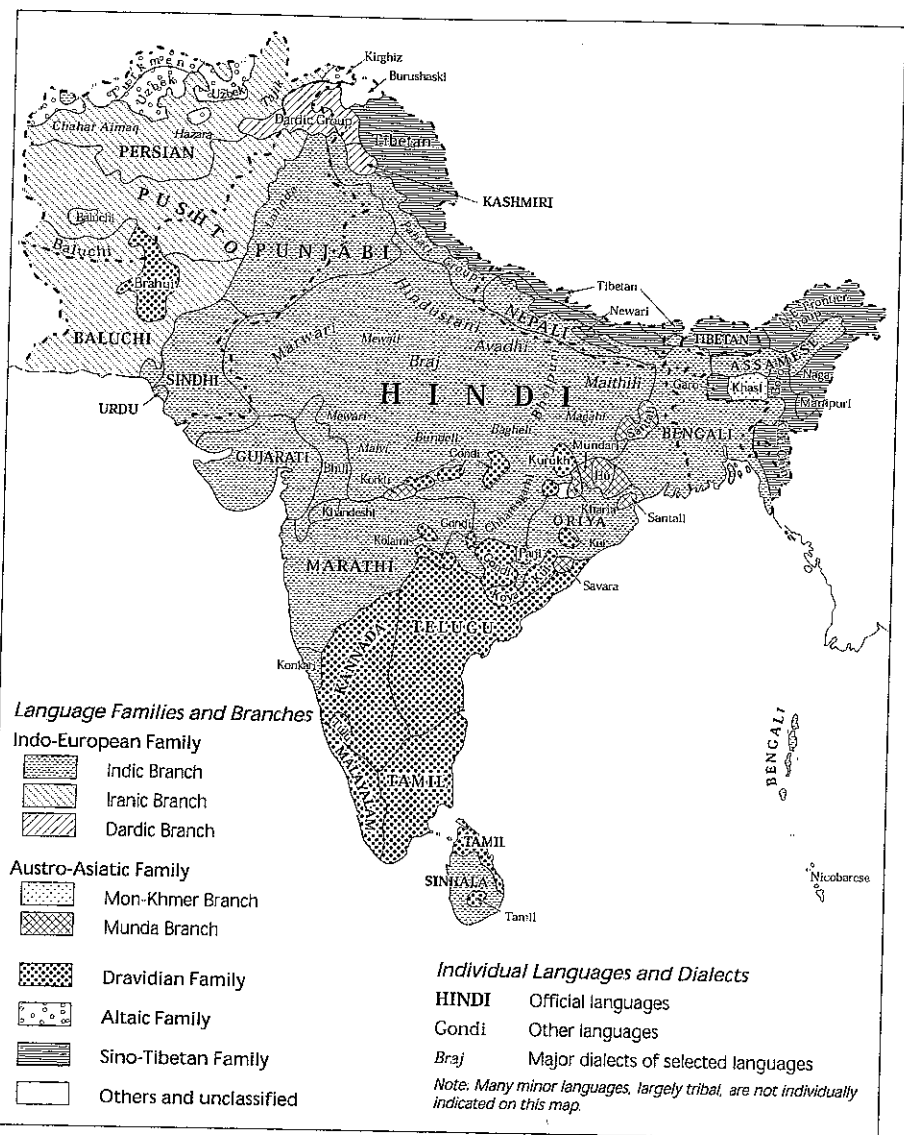
warfare and the struggles for dominion over lands and kingdoms, and the instatement of lawful dynasties. There is little doubt that they have their origin in historical fact but the narration has assumed the proportions of spiritual dialogue at the highest level. They contain discourses about the nature of man and his relation to God, and of man's role in this world. The Mahabharata includes within it the Bhagavad Gita – the Song of the Lord. It is not a revealed holy word like the Koran or such as many Christians believe the New Testament to be, but its status for many Hindus is very nearly that – and in hotel rooms where in the west one might find a Bible, in India you are likely to find the Gita.

In it, Arjuna argues with the God Krishna, who at first is in disguise, as to whether or not he should wage war against his relatives and his former friends over a disputed inheritance. He is told that it is the duty of the warrior to fight in a righteous war. The man who seeks God must also seek detachment, must accept both good and evil, heat and cold, praise and blame, be tied to no-one and despise no-one, but above all fulfil his duty and obligation.

Arjuna went forth into the dreadful battle at Kurukshetra, and won. Kurukshetra is near Panipat, a town a little to the north and west of Delhi. It is on the divide between the Indus and the Ganges, between the erratic climate of the Sapta Sindhu (the Punjab) and the land of Vitra and Indra, the monsoon lands wherein India's agricultural heart has always lain. At Panipat many centuries later the Muslim invaders fought to break into India.

The philosophy of the Epic age stems from the Upanishads, (which originate in the period between the Vedic and Epic), a collection of discourses taught from teacher to student (who sat upright facing his mentor) about the nature of the universe and man. The world and the universe is unitary, in it all is Brahma, beyond definition and impersonal, but found through contemplation and meditation. It is an abstract view of cosmic completeness. This philosophy is not equally accessible to all men since their intellectual abilities vary – and hence the deification of so many of the heroes of the epics, who became allegorical representatives of the abstract ideals. The philosophical importance of the Upanishads continues to this day: they became the basis of the Vedantas (that which concludes the Vedas) which are the basis of contemporary Hindu philosophy.

Before we jump too far, let us stay for a moment in the 6th Century BC. Although we recognise now the legacy of the philosophy of the period which by now included the doctrine of reincarnation, there were also for the ordinary people the rites, sacrifices and prayers of everyday religion, and the strife and violence of society around them. Much of it was what we would now call pagan or near pagan, and much of it very similar to the practices of the Scandinavian tribes, distant Aryan cousins. It was in this real world that there occurred two reformist revolts, Buddhism and Jainism.



**Figure 1.4 The Distribution of Languages in South Asia**

Source: Schwartzberg (1992)

### 1.5 The New Religions

Buddhism was founded by a Kshatriya Prince of North India, Gautama (sometimes Gotama) who lived from c 562-483 B.C. He strove for eight years in meditation under a peepal tree at Bodh Gaya (in modern Bihar), and finally achieved enlightenment. He became the Buddha, and preached his gospel of detachment, of peace and love, of the Path to Nirvana to the people of North India. The second was systematised by Mahavira, known as Jina, the conqueror, whence the name Jainism. Like Buddhism it, too, preached the sanctity of life and the path of non-violence and detachment. Both were also anti-caste, believing in the essential equality of man. Both found adherents more from the non-Brahmanical castes than the Brahmanical ones. Buddhism spread throughout India, and might perhaps even have become the dominant religion of India, except that the Brahmins fought vigorously to keep alive the doctrine of inequality and their own ritual superior status. It then spread beyond India, into Afghanistan (but whence later it was vanquished by Islam), Central Asia, Tibet, China and Japan, Indo-China and Sri Lanka. Jainism never spread so far. Its strict enforcement of non-violence went so far as to exclude even agriculture, since the plough damaged insects. For most Jains it became a sect associated with trade and traders. The Jains are now mostly found in West India, mostly in business and trade, but also still with a strong intellectual and ascetic tradition.

We are now approaching the beginnings of recorded history, and the first of the great Indian Empires. But before we consider this period, I wish to reflect a little more on what has been said so far. And at the risk of confusion I wish to introduce yet another of the great literary works of early India. These are the Puranas, the many folk histories and the genealogies (many invented or 'improved') of the early kings of the Vedic people. The Puranas were transmitted, and therefore presumably adorned, orally for many centuries, and were written down at various dates between 500 B.C. and 500 A.D. But they encode and encapsulate so much.

The first King of India was Manu Svayambhu (the self-born Manu) born directly from Brahma, the god of all, and (s)he was hermaphroditic. From him there sprang a line of descendants who gave the earth its name, and cleared the forests, cultivated the land, and introduced commerce and cattle breeding. But the most famous Manu was the tenth, who was warned by the God Vishnu of a great flood that was to come. Manu built a boat to carry his family and the seven sages to safety, and the boat was towed by Vishnu, who had taken the form of a fish, to a high mountain, where they waited till the floods subsided and Manu's family could re-people the earth. From his hermaphroditic son there issued the two lines of descent, the Lunar and the Solar, which include the names of all the King's until the Epic Age, so that the list finally fits with Rama the hero of the Ramayana who lived at Ayodhya (the site in recent years of the struggle between Muslims and Hindus over the replacement of a mosque by a Hindu temple.)

The story of the flood is so common to so many religions – the parallels with Noah and his ark are obvious – that one cannot help wonder whether or not it has a common beginning in Mesopotamia, or whether it is simply a recurrent

theme among the early civilisations, many of which were in riverine valleys in highly seasonal climates.

Even more than the the Vedas do, the Puranas contain a great deal of geographical information, much of it fascinating. The world is like a lotus (as one version depicts it) with at the centre the great Mount Meru, and around it the eight petals of the eight lands of the world, one of which, to the south, is Bharat (India). On the summit of Meru is the vast city of Brahma, enclosed by the Ganges. The river issues from the foot of Vishnu above, washes the Lunar orb and falls here from the sky, encircles the city and then divides into four mighty rivers flowing in four directions, north, east, south and west. These are the Sita, the Alakananda, the Chaksu and the Bhadra. The first flows east through the country of Bhadrasha to the ocean, the Alakananda flows south to Bharat, and then divides into seven and flows to the sea. The Chaksu flows west, and the Bhadra north across Uttarakuru to the northern sea. The Sita has been identified with the Yarkand, the Chaksu with the Oxus, the Alakananda with the Indus certainly, and perhaps the Indus and Ganges. (One of the two major head rivers of the Ganges is currently known as the Alaknanda.) The last is unidentified. The rivers flow through regions whose people are described and named. Obviously identification becomes even more tenuous here, but clearly some haunting early memory survives. The name Bharat which is used in India to identify itself (it is what is written in Hindi on postage stamps) is said to derive from king Bharat, a descendent of the mythical king and law giver Manu Svayambhuva (see chapter 2 on Hinduism). As a name it therefore evokes explicit cultural and religious origins.

The great Mt Meru may refer to the Pamirs, the pivot of Asia, where Tibet, India, Central Asia and Afghanistan grasp each other. From this mountain stronghold the rivers flow in many directions to many seas, some inland, like the Aral sea, some to the oceans. The Aryans came from somewhere beyond the Oxus and crossed it on their way to India. It is a curious river dribbling to the Aral Sea, but it crops up in many stories of the Aryans themselves, the Persians, and the Bactrian Greeks. Another version would have Meru and the city of Brahma at Lake Manasowar, 700 miles east and south at the origin of the Sutlej and near the source of the Brahmaputra-Tsang-po.

What is clearly of most importance is not the accuracy of the memories found in the Puranas, but the deeply ingrained memory of an origin near these life-giving rivers, which spout from the home of the Gods where the great snows fall from the sky. These memories are part of the history and mythology of Hinduism, part of the blend of legend and reality, and reach into our own age. No wonder the Ganges is still Holy, that the Himalayas are revered by the people of the plains who have never seen them, and that Kashmir is not a trifling piece of land to be given to whosoever demands it.

It is evident that the authors of the Puranas knew much about the people of the Deccan, but equally that the Vindhya range had prevented them from penetrating far south. This folk history is, then, North Indian.

## 1.6 The First Empire

Oil that is spread on water often splits and regroups into separated fragments. After the Aryans came to India their contacts across the North West frontier (the leaky thatched roof) broke, and they became an 'Indian' people, much as the Mughals would do millennia later. So the passes of the North West became a frontier to be defended against other incursions. In 516 BC the Persians under Darius conquered the North Punjab and proclaimed it the 20th satrapy (province) of their empire. In 334 BC Alexander the Great crossed the Hellespont into Asia Minor and within 11 years had subdued the Persians, taken Egypt and Syria, marched into Afghanistan and passed by Kandahar, Ghazni and Kabul north to the Oxus. He went beyond it to found on the Jaxartes (Syr Darya) the city of Alexandreschate, 3,500 miles east of his native Greece. Having secured these lands of Bactria (the name survives as Balk in modern Afghanistan) and Sogdiana he decided to complete the Empire by taking over the Persian 20th satrapy. In 326 BC he reached the Indus, which he crossed 16 miles north of Attock. He then entered the city of Taxila near modern Islamabad/Rawalpindi. What the Greeks found amazed them. Here was a great civilisation, but replete with some barbaric sacrifices, and customs such as suttee (the immolation of surviving widows) which horrified the British 2,000 years later, and replete with marriage markets and the non-violent naked ascetic Jains.

Pressing east again, Alexander found his crossing of the Jhelum contested by the army of Paurava, superior in numbers and equipped with what must have seemed like tanks to the Greeks – fighting elephants. But the Macedonian cavalry outflanked the elephants and stampeded them with trumpet blasts, so that in the end they proved a greater danger to their own side. Alexander won, and presumably stood on the gateway of India. Indeed he wanted to continue down the Ganges valley, but his army refused. Instead he withdrew south down the Indus valley, leaving behind Greek Governors in his new domains. His army then returned through the horrific desert wilderness of the Makran coast, suffering privations of hunger and thirst. He himself died of a fever at Babylon. He was aged 33.

Dying so soon after his triumphs, it seems that his empire did not for long hold together, but yet there remained in Afghanistan, central Asia and North West India a Greco-Bhuddist culture that left an evolving imprint over centuries. The archaeological site of the city of Taxila dates from this period. To the Indian kings the event seemed peripheral and little is said about it. But it proved an event which transmitted considerable knowledge of, and fascination about, the fabled lands of India to the ancient Europeans.

In north India in 323 BC political power was seized by a young man called Chandragupta Maurya. He united many of the petty kingdoms, chiefdoms and republics of the Ganges valley in one empire, based on his capital city at Patuliputra near present Patna. His empire was well administered, though inevitably given the communications technology of the time, significant power and responsibility was devolved on the five viceroys of his five provinces. It was a rich empire, trading abroad with China and Egypt. It was well armed, with a standing army of 600,000.

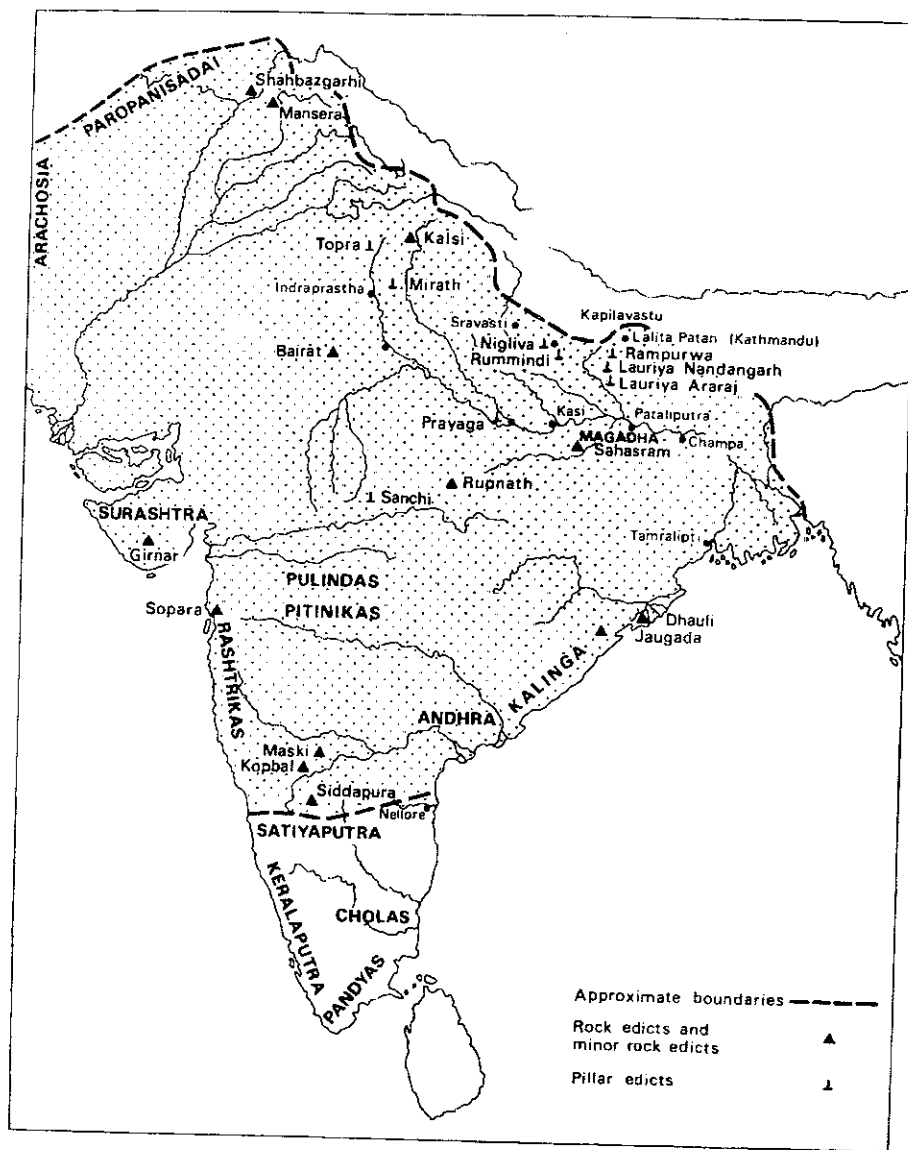


Figure 1.5 The Empire of Kala Asoka

Source: Davies (1959)

His fabled capital was, though, built of wood: for on the great young river lowlands stone is hard to find (Even today road builders bake bricks and crush them to produce a hard-core foundation.)

Chandragupta's son extended the empire as far South as Mysore. He in turn was succeeded by his son, the great Asoka. The empire (Figure 1.5) he inherited linked north with south, yet there was a hole in its eastern flank, which hindered coastal communication in the Bay of Bengal. In Orissa the Kalingas stubbornly remained independent and hostile. Asoka subdued them in a bloody, relentless campaign that is reported to have caused directly 100,000 deaths, the deportation of 150,000 and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of others through starvation. From this he gained the epithet of Kala (Black) Asoka. The experience was traumatic. In his triumph, Asoka renounced violence and embraced Buddhism, and his own concept of a new moral order.

The empire he ruled was the greatest in extent of all until the peak of the Mughal Empire, and the peak of the British. It was effectively administered, with a hierarchy of officials that reached down to accountants in each village. The taxes raised were spent on roads and irrigation, tree planting and well-digging, and the maintenance of his army. He is reputed to have had an effective state police-force too, effectively an internal political espionage system. The exact extent of his empire remains conjectural. He left behind many stone pillars on which were carved edicts about his concept of Dharma, his concept of obligation and duty. It is these which are used principally to assess the extent of his empire. (The surviving capital of a stone pillar from Sarnath, a buddhist monastery erected where Buddha preached his first sermon, is capped by the heads of four lions looking outward. This is the emblem of the government of the modern Republic of India.) But of course many neighbouring princes who were effectively independent might have humoured the imperial power by agreeing to their erection. We cannot be sure then of the exact extent of his power. We do know that after the war with the Kalingas he negotiated treaties with the remaining independent states in the south and did not try to subdue them militarily. And we also know that he sent missionaries abroad to spread the Buddha's gospel – to Sri Lanka, and west to Egypt and Greece. This has led to a suspicion that many of the stories about Christ may have been borrowed from or influenced by stories about the Buddha. There are many similarities – including wilderness and temptation, revelation and their respective sermons on the mount.

At the end of his reign it seems likely that the empire was already faltering. The reasons why are not known, and are presumably many and complex. In a way though, to write of the decline of empire is perhaps wrong. The empire of this period, given the distribution of the population, the wild jungles, the difficulty of transport particularly north to south, must be the exception to be explained, not the norm whose absence requires explanation. The technical mastery of iron production may be one key. Clearly administration is another key, and clearly the development of an extensive and effective administration was due to remarkable men. But it was bound to face a problem that was common to the Mughal empire later, and was shared by

the Spanish Empire of the New World too, and which also in Rhodesia-Zimbabwe plagued the last days of British imperial power in Africa

In the struggle for conquest the élite beneath the Emperor needed to stand shoulder to shoulder and support each other. But once each was alone as deputed ruler of his own vice-royalty, his interests would become literally rooted in his own area. Pressures could develop to suggest that local interests are different from central ones, and that the remittance of revenue to a central authority should be scaled down in favour of local accumulations of wealth and the associated patronage and power. There were probably also strains at the centre simply emanating from the scale of public expenditure.

The perpetuation of empire required loyalty to a central concept of state. The state was embodied in the emperor, who had a reciprocal obligation to uphold the social order. This is not mere surmise since political theories of the responsibilities of the monarch were debated and recorded. One treatise, the Artha-Sastra, believed to have been written by Chandragupta's prime minister Kautilya, displays in great detail the workings and principles of the empire. Principles of foreign policy – my enemy's enemy is my friend for example – were clearly enunciated. The right to depose a monarch who does not uphold his contract is well attested. But the social order which the monarch should defend was still basically the order of caste, and this was local and fragmentary. There were certainly continuing struggles between the various castes, because of the asymmetries of economic, ritual, and political power. The Vaisyas developed economic power, and struggled against their political inferiority to the Brahmins. Although there is an old adage 'divide and rule', there is always the possibility, as perhaps later the British realised, of 'divide and it will fall apart'.

Whether it was because Asoka's successor lacked his outstanding statecraft, whether no man could have maintained the cohesion of the disparate social groups, or whether it was economic decline, the fact is the Mauryan Empire shrank soon after Asoka's death back into the northern river plains, and even there it shattered into many smaller states. This was presumably part cause and part effect of yet more invasions from the northwest. The Bactrian Greeks were driven south and east from the Oxus by the Scythians, and after them came the Kushans, a branch of the Yueh-chi tribe(s) (originating in China), whose greatest ruler Kanishka established a vast empire centred on Peshawar. He, too, became a Buddhist, although by now (c 150) that faith had become one of icons and temples and the many incarnations of Buddha.

### 1.7 The Hindu Empires

The next truly Indian empire to arise in the Ganges plain was that of the Guptas, which reached its greatest territorial extent under Chandragupta II (385-413). This again dissolved back into a pattern of petty states, until a new dominant ruler, Harsha,

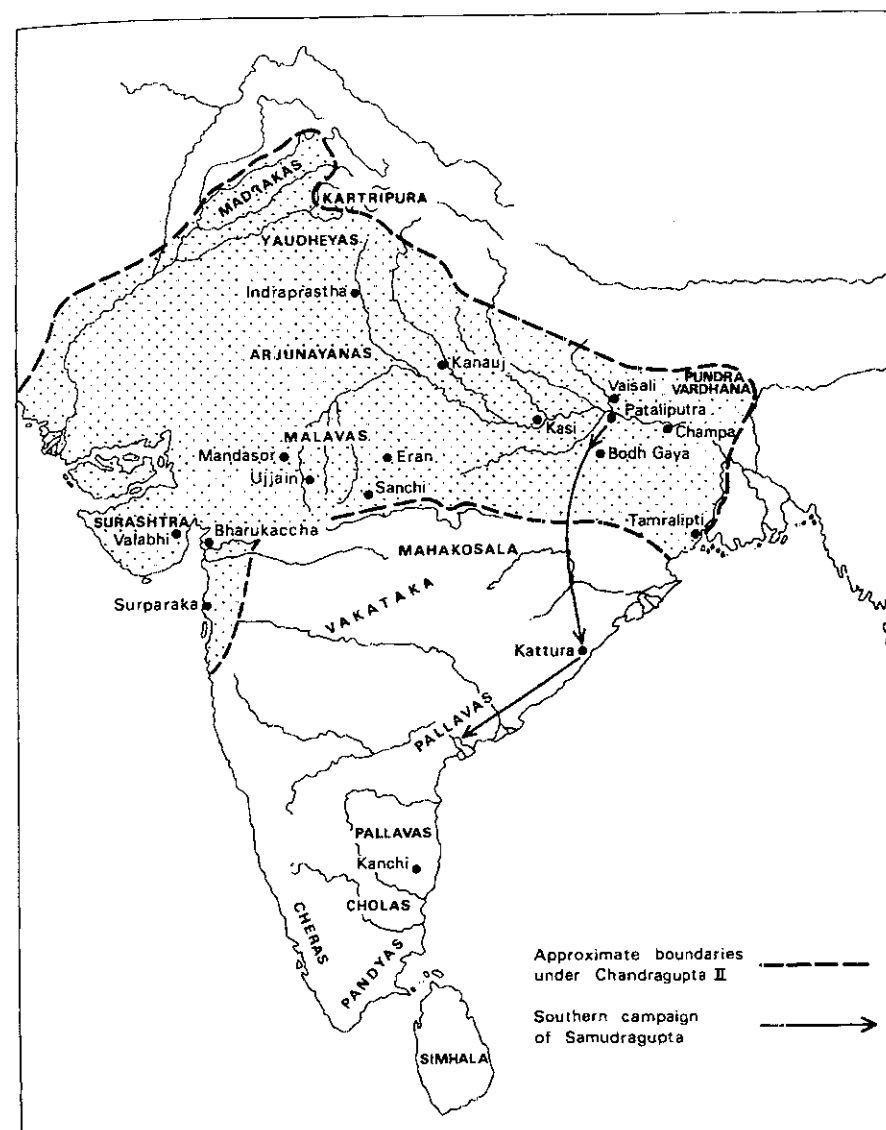


Figure 1.6 The Gupta Empire

Source Davies (1959)



emerged from c. 606 (Figure 1.6). As had Asoka's empire, this imperial power also interested itself in science and learning. Arybhata in 499 put forward the proposition that the earth was a sphere rotating on its own axis, and that the shadow of the earth falling on the moon was the cause of lunar eclipses. Iron working reached a famous peak – a stainless steel pillar, now erected near the Qutb Minar outside Delhi, is unrusting to this day. How it was made is still not known. And a thousand years before Voltaire parodied the ridiculous simplicity of western science's notions of cause and effect, Hindu philosophers grappled with the problems of multiple causation. Though it was firmly a Hindu empire in which the Brahmins codified Hindu law to a greater extent than previously, Buddhism was still strong and sponsored the great University at Nalanda in Bihar. It attracted scholars from many lands, and much of what is known about the empire has reached us particularly through the writings of Chinese pilgrims and travellers.

But it was not a time of peace. The Huns were constantly warring on the western margins, and after Harsha the empire collapsed. From then until the Muslim invasions North India was a shifting kaleidoscope of warring states. It stands as a Dark Age about which little is known. One group of invaders does, however, need special mention. These were the Rajputs, who established themselves as Hindu rulers in what is now Rajasthan. Their rule was legitimised by the guardians of the social order, the Brahmins, who went to great lengths to establish for them a Kshatriya status, by inventing a genealogy that gave them a descent in the lines of the sun and the moon from King Manu of the Puranas. They were, and are, a martial people, who had elaborate rituals of chivalry and arms, not unlike the knights of our middle ages. Like the Scottish clans they waged war against each other, and seldom did they present a unified alliance to the outside world. They proclaimed themselves the swords of Hinduism, but their endless vendettas prevented them from expanding south and east.

In the south in the Deccan, indeed new and independent Hindu kingdoms arose, often dominated by the Dravidian Tamils. The armies of Rajendra Chola campaigned as far north as Orissa, and the majesty of Vijayanagar and its huge capital city Hampi was probably unrivalled at its peak anywhere else in South Asia. The ruins still visible certainly constitute one of the world's great archaeological sites.

### 1.8 Concluding Remarks

The material in this chapter has already touched on many of the main themes that thread through this book. Firstly, it is clear that we are dealing with a well-defined region, within which there is the possibility for extensive and interconnected settlement – particularly in the Ganges valley. Just how distinctive this area is globally can be discovered by considering Cohen's (1963) geopolitical account of the world – to which we will return again in the concluding chapters. Briefly, the world is divided into two major geo-strategic zones, corresponding somewhat with Mackinder's famous division first published in 1904. On the one hand there is the

heartland of the old world – the land empires of Czarist Russia and China, succeeded by the Soviet and Communist Chinese empires, and more recently, of course, by the Commonwealth of Independent States. The other region is the region of maritime trade and movement – Europe and Africa and the Americas, where settlement is largely coastal in orientation. These two geo-strategic regions provide different possibilities for movement and trade – the silk roads on the one hand, the trade winds on the other. They are subdivided into geo-political regions, zones of geographical contiguity which provide a framework for the common evolution of culture and for common economic and political action. This is not deterministic – in the sense that common action has to result – it is more permissive and suggestive of what might happen. In this schema South Asia – the only so-styled 'sub-continent' on earth – has a unique designation. It is a geo-political region in its own right, belonging to neither geo-strategic region. It is a zone where culture and power can develop in their own right, with only infrequent interference by the forces of either of the two geo-strategic regions – and then usually incorporating the intervention rather than being subjected to it.

Given the possibility that this geo-political region will be integrated, we can then ask how the different forces of integration might work. In the early phases of pre-history and history to which we have referred so far, it seems that transport technology was so weakly developed that there would be little chance of developing much utilitarian integration. We may say this even with respect to the Mauryan empire, in which roads were developed, but not everywhere, and as much for military reasons as for trade – a parallel with the Roman roads. Certainly the rivers of the Ganges valley provided then the best possibility for major movement – and it is the Ganges valley either in its lower parts near current Patna or its higher parts near Agra and Delhi (on the tributary Yamuna) which provide the core region for urban development and empire building in the post-Harappan phases. Next we come to the idea of identitive integration. This is a slippery concept to apply to these early stages – we do not know enough about the sentiment of the common people, nor the unarticulated assumptions of acceptable social order and the modes of expression of fealty and power. We can say that a quite remarkable continuity of Hindu culture seemed to have developed through the region, even if with many local variations – but that culture was itself divisive, a society of differentiated groups which in some sense might make an organic whole, but in other senses provides all sorts of possibilities for divergent interests. Language also provides little scope for identitive integration. Perhaps we may interpret Asoka's attempt to impose Buddhism as some kind of quest for identitive integration – but it did not take root nor work in that way. This leaves us, therefore, with coercive integration – and that was common to the founding of the early empires. But force is expensive, and when the possibility of new conquests diminishes, so the costs of maintaining the armies falls back on the existing tax base rather than new plunder. At this point the ability of an Emperor to manage efficiently the affairs of state becomes critical – it is the fourth (sub-category) of the forces of integration. There is no doubt that in the Mauryan and the Gupta empires these skills were for a while evident. But in the long run it seems as if these

empires could offer no 'value-added' by remaining intact as opposed to breaking apart – and indeed perhaps the reverse, that maintaining their integration was an inflationary cost that exceeded the benefits that flowed

Let me emphasise that what I am saying is highly conjectural – but the questions raised by these themes are valid, and as the book progresses it will become easier and less conjectural to answer the same questions the nearer we get to our own time.

## Chapter 2

# Hinduism: The Manifold of Man and God

### 2.1 An Unrevealed Truth

Precisely because it appears so different, based on ideas and ideals which are quite often very different from those of Europe, Indian civilisation for the Europeans has always had a certain mystique about it. These values are, of course, partly bound up in what the European likes to term 'religion' – contrasting the Christian basis of European culture with the Hindu- and Muslim-dominated culture of India. In the next chapter, which deals with the Muslim invasions of India and the establishment of Islamic empires, we will introduce some of the ideals underlying Islam. In this chapter I try and give the reader some empathetic understanding of Hinduism – but let me stress immediately that the idea that it is a 'religion' in the same sense as Christianity is not helpful at all. Hinduism is often been described as a way of life – it is not separate from secular life – indeed the concept of secular life is very difficult for many Hindus to embrace. Hindu society does have its immediate and observable characteristics which attracted the attention of European travellers – the ornate temples, some with erotic carvings, the division of society into castes, a few of which were associated when the Europeans first contacted India with horrific practices such as *suttee* (the self immolation of a new widow upon her husband's funeral pyre). But these 'characteristics' say little about Hinduism itself, no more than the clothes a person wears reveal their state of mind. What matters more is a basic understanding of the principles from which such apparently 'strange' customs could emerge. I assume the reader has an understanding of western Christian culture (even if not a practising adherent). I will take great liberties in order to try to expose by contrast with Hinduism some of the fundamental tenets on which this 'Christian' life may be based.

The Western mind is peculiarly partitional. It likes to put things in boxes, to call this sacred, that profane; to label some things religious, and some secular or temporal. Hinduism is therefore labelled by Westerners a religion, as though that were a separate box in the scheme of life. But to a Hindu, the word religion would have no particular meaning. 'Hinduism' simply means the ways of Hindu society, a society or societies of people found living by and beyond the Indus river, whence the name originates. As we have already seen these people have many languages, and are descended from many invading groups. They have a long folk memory and history, stretching back to the Aryans and before. It goes without saying that they have their ways of life, and that there will be many ways of life in South

Asia, and that many of these ways will have influenced each other, as neighbouring cultures often do.

What they do not have is a single dogmatic revealed source of truth. They do not have 'a religion', a 'privileged revelation by God to man on earth'. The Christians do have a privileged source, the testament of Christ. They have a creed, which adherents profess in order to demonstrate their acceptance of the dogma. They can do this because God spoke directly to them, by placing his son on earth, God Incarnate. For any other man to claim he is God would be blasphemy. The Muslims do not have access to God via God Incarnate, since Mohammed was the Holy Prophet of God, but not God himself. But in other ways his function was similar to Christ's. He enabled God's dictation of the Koran to be written down, so that it is God's word, a direct revelation, and not simply Mohammed's own inspiration. The two revealed religions have similar accounts of the origin of the world, in the Christian case in the Old Testament book of Genesis. A 'religion' which has no revealed dogmatic truth still must confront the questions of Genesis, but its answers are not constrained by a single revelation. The next section will take a closer look at Hindu concepts of genesis.

## 2.2 Cosmologies East and West

The Christian Old Testament has a simple account of the origin of the Universe. God is separate from and above and beyond the world, and he made it. The world has a material existence, it is an objective reality. The last of God's acts of creation was to place man (and woman taken from man) in the garden of Eden. The creation is there for man to enjoy, it is his birthright. But the Garden does have its dangers, and Evil tempts man away from righteous living. The existence of evil in a world purpose-built by God is of course a theological problem which is never resolved. The purpose of man's struggle on earth is to enable his soul to achieve salvation in heaven in the afterlife.

Note that this Universe is basically objective: that there is a material world which can be explained by the laws of physics and chemistry – themselves part of God's universal design. God is separate, beyond and outside of it. Our souls, when they become detached from this physical world, will go out and beyond it to this other place where God resides. Each of us has one soul – it is an individual soul, which even in death does not lose that individuality.

Modern scientific cosmology does not take the earth to be the centre of the universe, and all but the most extreme would accept that our planet is part of a solar system, itself part of a galaxy, itself part of a galactic cluster, itself part of the universe. Most people who have a view on the matter currently accept the big-bang hypothesis of the origin of the universe. Once there was a singularity, all matter was compressed in a single point. This exploded, throwing matter in all directions. Locally, under the force of gravity, some matter drew together, and under pressure began nuclear fusion, to give us suns and radiant energy. Other smaller concentrations

of matter have formed planets, which can support life in the right conditions near the suns.

What we do not know at the moment is whether the universe will expand forever, or whether these forces of attraction will eventually start drawing the galaxies together, and then all matter back in on itself to form another singularity, and another big bang. The cosmologists are working on the data collection and theoretical models that may be able to answer this question.

The general process is easy enough to grasp. The Bang produces chaos and random scattering. Out of that chaos order emerges. In that order life is created, but by a peculiar twist. The concentration of matter produces a sun which will eventually die out, but while it continues to radiate energy (low entropy), life can be supported by degrading that energy (to high entropy – or disorder). In doing this life is not breaking the second law of thermodynamics – that everything is going to a more and more degraded state, that eventually there will be no free energy left for work, that the universe is running down. What life does is roughly analogous to what a kettle achieves while gas is burnt beneath it: it gets hotter, and for a while it may be hotter than its surroundings, although if the gas is turned off, in the end it will lose heat to the surrounding area and the kettle and its surroundings will have an equal temperature. So for a while there was a local structure – a hot kettle against a cold background – which represents a *local* 'reversal' of the universal trend to heat death. But that could only be achieved by degrading the gas from a useful state (unburned) to an unusable state.

Plant life creates structure by degrading solar energy. Animals eat that high-order vegetation, and by degrading it build their own structures – which may be food to yet other animals in the food chain. Life is structure and life exists by degrading structure. Life is the summit of the balance of the forces of construction and destruction.

If there is in Hinduism no revealed total truth, no central dogma, but a variety of beliefs and customs, why call it one religion? From the philosophy of the Vedas and the Epics, which has never stopped evolving, there are some ideas which have a consensus appeal, and some sort of universal validity for all Hindus. Although the word God is wrong, I will use it as the best approximation, to say that many, perhaps most, Hindus believe there is one God, or Life Force, and one alone, and that this God is Brahma, the force of the Universe itself, or sometimes simply pure 'energy'. Brahma is not separate from the Universe, not outside it. 'He' is it. The whole creation is one, and all is Brahma. Brahma wakes and sleeps, and the Universe goes through cycles of re-creation and collapse. Order is born out of chaos, to collapse into chaos again. In all there is a struggle between creation and destruction. And both are necessary. They are two aspects that are split apart as order is created, and re-unite as disorder is re-established. These two aspects are often associated within Hinduism by the God in the form of Vishnu the Creator – or the form of Shiva the Destroyer.

This cosmology has numbers attached to it. Each cycle of the Universe, from one big bang to the next, is 100 years of Brahma's life. One day of this cycle is

equivalent to a Kalpa, itself equal to 4,320 million earth years. Further subdivisions of subdivisions of the Kalpa take us to the current Kali Yuga (Black Age, an Age of Destruction) in which we live. It will last 432,000 years, out of which 5071 have already passed<sup>1</sup>. (Wheeler, 1973: 466)

Everything in this Universe is Brahma, even you and me. Brahma is in everything. There is no distinction between the sacred and the profane. Everything is holy. If you say to me you are God, this is self-evident, not blasphemy. There is no Garden of Eden in which man and woman were placed last: they and the animals are all parts of the creation. And within it destruction is as important as construction.

We do have souls that can outlive our current incarnation – but the individuality of them is expressed in another way. We are fragments of the Brahma, and want re-absorption with the Brahma, that is the loss and extinction of individuality. At a simple level the path to absorption is expressed by many Hindus as a path through many re-incarnations, each being better than the previous one if merit has been earned. The highest achievement is escape from the wheel of rebirth.

### 2.3 The Three Paths to God

Most Hindu thought stresses the fact that there are many ways to God – and although some sects may stress one rather than another, each can tolerate and sympathise with other views. The path to God through true knowledge, *jnana*, is often associated with intellectuals and ascetics, with philosophical contemplation, and with high Brahminism. There is a path through *karma*, right action, with those involved in the physical practicalities of every-day life. It means that man has a duty and action to perform, and that the completion of such dutiful action is in harmony with the divine working of the Universe. Rejection of right action is against universal harmony. Since, as we shall see, there are duties associated with each caste, *karma* has often been associated with the duties of caste and the achievement of a better incarnation in the next life. Then there is *bhakti*, devotion or ritual, which is the praise and thanksgiving due to God. Many groups, perhaps particularly of the poorer and lower castes, celebrate God joyously with singing and music, for hour upon noisy hour, partly inducing changes of consciousness through the repetition of sounds. Ritual of such sort can, of course, bring enormous solace to the human soul.

In the Christian Church we can draw some *very approximate* parallels between these three ways and parts of a single service. There is knowledge as enshrined in the reading of the lessons and the sermon of the priest, there is action of a dutiful and practical kind in alms giving, and there is ritual in the singing of hymns and the chanting of prayers. What is very different in the Christian church is the whole concept of a service, that the whole group of devotees come together at a fixed time, and in an enclosed building usually. The Hindu goes to the temple certainly on particular feast days, but in general as and when he or she feels. It is an individual

<sup>1</sup> There are other Yugas – for example Ages of Construction – and other lengths

unorchestrated act. The temple usually has little space for more than a few individuals at a time to approach its sacred shrine. And 'religion' is not something that belongs to the temple: all life is religious. Bathing in the morning has a ritual value. Religion is not as partitioned off as with most western practitioners.

An aspect of Hinduism that attracted derogatory judgement from many Europeans is its apparent polytheistic nature – that there is an enormous pantheon of Gods – from the Goddess of Wealth Lakshmi, revered by traders; the Goddess of Knowledge, Saraswati, revered by students; and the Gods of strength such as Ganesh, the elephant-headed God; and Gods of Cunning such as the monkey God Hanuman – to so many others. By contrast Christianity is supposed to be monotheistic like Judaism and Islam – which is possibly the most incisively monotheistic of all. But Christianity starts by confusing God with a Trinity of God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, and continues by adding quite a number of orders of Angels and Archangels whose exact theological status has provided legendary grounds for dispute, although no-one doubts that angels are half-bird, and all appear rather androgynous and are rarely properly sexed.

Hinduism is monotheistic – in that all is Brahma – but there are many ways in which different aspects of the whole may be revealed, including by the different avatars or (loosely) 'incarnations' or manifestations of God – including those just mentioned and many more besides. Different village communities will have different local deities who in turn may be different manifestations of some of the better known Gods. Sometimes the symbol for the god may be an almost abstract form – a small phallus representing energy and life – or, like Ganesh, may be much more representational.

The link between Hinduism and the geography of India is explicit – it is perhaps as a religion more closely tied to its land than any other. To go overseas is forbidden by caste rules for many Indians – Gandhi broke with his caste's tradition when he went first to England then to South Africa. Mountains are holy, glaciers are holy, trees are holy, the rivers are holy, none more so than Mother Ganges – in whose waters all would wish their ashes to be scattered. Confluences are holy, none more so than the Sangam at Allahabad between the Ganges and the Yamuna. The great festival of the Kumbh Mela occurs every three years, rotating between Haridwar where the Ganges debouches from the hills onto the plain, Allahabad, Ujjain and Nasik (the last is outside of the Ganges Basin). During the auspicious month of the 2001 Kumbh Mela, according to the Government of Uttar Pradesh, perhaps as many as 100 million pilgrims came to Allahabad, a city whose normal population is 1 million. On January 24th, 30 million people managed to bathe in the river at the holy confluence. It is the greatest number of people ever gathered together at one place on earth for one purpose – and, incidentally, a testimony to the phenomenal organisation of the Indian authorities.

## 2.4 Lineage and Caste

After the Roman invasions of Britain a new aristocratic stratum formed above the tribal British. When the Normans came they too formed an aristocracy above the complex of Celts, Saxons and Vikings. Suppose over the centuries the different peoples that had invaded Britain stayed distinct from each other, and only intermarried in their own groups, and different groups followed different traditional occupations, then the British would have had a caste system too. Many authors have said that the British used to have a caste system, and indeed still do have, meaning that we have a class system in which people marry within their own social groups, and are even recruited for education and work in their own social groups. Who you are and who you know may be more important for entry into a stockbroking firm than simple talent.

A purist definition of caste would exclude the British system, although in comparative sociological work the question has been asked whether the black-white divide in the USA is an early form of a caste system. The definition in India is of a group who by prescription can only intermarry (they practice endogamy), and who can eat with each other without polluting each other. Pollution can be defined as a contact which breaks the rules of that caste in a defiling manner, such that the polluted person has to undertake ritual cleansing. Do not think that I am trying to link pollution with sin, but it may help to understand ritual cleansing if for a moment one considers the Christian – particularly Catholic – ritual of Confession, which can bring absolution, a kind of spiritual ablution.

Because castes are marriage groups, a caste is essentially preserving a particular gene pool over time and through many generations. (This does not mean that these gene pools are greatly different from each other: it seems that over time there are periods of greater and lesser rigidity). In this there is a clue to the fact that in India individualism has a lesser value than in the egocentric West. The group matters more. Everything in India is group oriented, be it in an extended family, or in the wider caste or community. The sublimation of self to group is not necessarily to be seen as a 'cost' only, it can relieve people of the responsibility and tension of striving to mould their own destiny, and it can provide a supportive framework.

The effect of this attitude is far reaching, and was little understood by the British for a long time. For example, in property matters the basic concept of ownership can be very different. A man does not own his land: he holds it on trust for his lineage. He, therefore, ought not to sell it – and this simple fact explains why there is such a slothful land market even today, particularly in some rural areas, and why prices for such land as is bought and sold appear economically irrational. It also prevents modern banks from taking rural land as loan collateral, since they have found that often forfeited land cannot be sold on an open market, when adjacent farmers know to whose lineage it belongs. Imagine that the Duke of Bedford in Britain sold Woburn Abbey, his ancestral home, to invest it in casinos in Las Vegas. Probably many Britons would think he did not have the right, that he did not truly own it as an individual, but that he held the estate in trust for his heirs. Loyalty to

kin also explains what outsiders often see as corruption and nepotism in political life, when for example Mrs Gandhi promoted her favoured son Sanjay. But it would be disloyal for the family not to promote its own – something which the common person fully understands.

## 2.5 The Thousands of Separate Castes in India

Using the definition of the group that intermarries there are thousands of different castes (*jatis*) in India. Many are fairly limited in their distribution, being a group in some linguistic or geographical area. In modern life, though, some castes have scattered widely, indeed world-wide. Each caste is usually recognisable by the family name used – a little bit as though the Scots recognise the Frasers, MacDonalds and the Crawfords as separate clans by their names. Most caste members will still recognise each other and help each other, even if they are scattered world-wide, and sometimes there are strong caste associations, which maintain ties with their ancestral hearths.

In any one area in India there will be some number of castes, let us say twenty or thirty in a cluster of villages. These are ranked hierarchically, with some being at the top of the hierarchy and some at the bottom. Caste members will know what their position in this ranking is. The rank will be determined by historical custom, itself tied to occupation, ritual cleanliness, and local mythology. There will be some approximate ranking between the castes and the four-fold division of the Laws of Manu – that is to say castes will claim and be recognised as having the status of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya or Sudra. There is a complication with the last group to which I will return.

The first class is of course the Brahmins. The Brahmins are sometimes known as twice-born – not meaning that they are necessarily in their second incarnation (these could go on countlessly), but that in this life on this earth they are born once for real and are then born again when at the age of about eight they are ritually initiated in a ceremony lasting three days into the rights and privileges of their caste. Thereafter they may and do wear the 'sacred thread' made from fine spun strands of cotton, from left shoulder diagonally to right hip. Members of the Kshatriya and Vaisya classes of castes also often wear the thread, but are not initiated in the same way, and do not have the right to learn the Vedas as a Brahmin does. These first three groups are often referred to as 'Caste Hindus' – a confusing term which would be better rendered by the term 'High Caste Hindus'. The Sudras never wear a thread, and are low caste.

The complication to which I referred is that at the lower level of the hierarchy there are groups whose occupations or origins make them particularly inferior or polluting. For example, the sweepers, who clean sewers, are called 'untouchables', and some Brahmins may even feel defiled simply by seeing them. In many areas there is, therefore, a fifth class – the untouchables who are lower than Sudras. Another group who are sometimes put in this fifth class are the tribal peoples particularly from

and near hill regions, who have themselves not accepted the Hindu framework of life nor the pantheon of Hindu Gods. They are often incorporated into modern economic life at the lowest levels. The exact distinction between Sudras and untouchables and others, or the incorporation of lower groups into the Sudra class, will vary from locality to locality, and is in any case an approximate mapping of real castes to theoretical classes. It would be the same (almost) if in Britain one tried to match families to Classes – e.g. working class, middle class. The latter are theoretical abstractions and rarely fit well, hence the endless qualifications of 'upper' or 'lower' middle class.

It is often said that the Hindi word for caste is Varna, which literally means colour. Those nearest the pure Aryans are the lightest coloured, and those nearest the Sudra or Adivasi (Tribal) base the darkest colour. And indeed there are colour gradients. In general, the highest castes in any area are lighter skinned. But there is also a regional colour gradient, from the lightest in the north and west to darkest in the south. There is no doubt that colour has played a part in the Indian perception of status. The Indians in East Africa were inclined to treat the Negro as inferior, from within the Hindu scheme of recognition. And it will not have escaped the reader's attention that the Europeans were seen when they arrived to have the physical characteristics of extreme high castes (but paradoxically in their personal habits they were basely unclean and they were meat eaters too). Modern India has legislated to remove the stigma of low caste status, and government has defined a list of the castes and tribes of any area which are to be given positive discrimination in education and public sector jobs. They are known as the Scheduled Castes and Tribes since the names are listed in two Schedules of the Constitution.

Each caste has been associated with particular occupations – in this sense the guilds of mediaeval Europe also came close to being caste-like structures. The list in Table 2.1 shows the castes noted by Wiser (1936) in a village he studied in North India in 1935. Together in any one cluster of villages (not in one village) there would normally be the range of occupations necessary to run the economy. Exchange within the economy was mostly, and sometimes still is, non-monetary. Instead a Barber, a Washerman, a Carpenter etc., will serve a local land-owning family, and their fathers will have served the fathers of the landlords in their time. Payment would be in kind (usually food) at harvest, and in customary amounts – so there is no economic 'market' in which a clearing price is set. The system is known as Jajmani – reciprocal obligation and service. It is often described as exploitation by high caste of low castes, but that is too simplistic, although undoubtedly there can be such exploitation. The patron has an obligation to his service castes, and if the carpenter dies, then he will bring the children up to their status in life as carpenters. Another criticism is that there is usually one dominant land-owning class in any one area, who control all activity through their control of land. Although often true, the origins of this are easily understood. Settlement of any area was not haphazard, but organised by a dominant caste, say Kshatriya Rajputs in some area of north India. They would organise the clearing of the land, and introduce the service castes to the area. Society itself then constitutes a totality, and all are sharing in the economy of the area. The

**Table 2.1 The Castes Present in "Karimpur" (Wiser, 1936)**

Rank	Name	Traditional Occupation
Brahmin	Brahmin	Priest/teacher
	Bhat	Bard and genealogist
Kshatriya	Kyasth	Accountant
	Sunar	Goldsmith
Vaisya	none	
Sudra	Mali	Florist/gardener
	Kachhi	Vegetable grower
	Lodha	Rice grower
	Barhai	Carpenter
	Nai	Barber
	Kahar	Water bearer
	Gadariya	Shepherd
	Bharbhunja	Grain parcher
	Darzi	Seamster
	Kumhar	Potter
Outcaste	Mahajan	Tradesman
	Teli	Oil presser
	Dhobi	Washerman
	Dhanuk	Mat maker
	Chamar	Leather worker
	Bhangi	Sweeper and Cesspool cleaner
	Faqir	Hereditary Muslim beggar
	Manihar	Muslim glass bangle seller
	Dhina	Muslim cotton carder
	Tawaif	Muslim dancing girl

Rajputs are then not so much owners as the trustees and managers of land. It is true that over time they may develop a more private concept of ownership, particularly if prompted by poorly-comprehending external institutions such as an imported English legal system, and the introduction of a money economy.

The reason why the system may appear pernicious to the outsider is because the division of labour in society is associated with hierarchical values – that there are 'higher' and more powerful groups – who can exploit in the way that Marx saw the capitalist exploit the worker. The point is valid, because there is a ranking of castes, tied up with the concept of pollution, and indeed there are some jobs in society



which are more onerous and more dangerous than others. It also struck Europeans as pernicious in another way. Justice and law were not universal. Each caste was responsible for maintaining the behaviour of its own members – the Panchayat was a council of elders (traditionally five in number) from a caste who deliberated on the behaviour of miscreants and meted out justice. But no high caste person could ever appear before representatives of lower castes. Contemporary village Panchayats in modern India use the same name but are in effect the lowest rank of local government, elected in at least a semi-democratic way and supposed to be much more inclusive.

## 2.6 Pollution and the Hierarchy of Caste

A westerner in India is often appalled at first glance by the squalor and filth of public places, particularly in towns. It is usually explained by the lack of garbage collection services, of sufficient sewers and sanitation systems, and by the pressure of population. Go back a little over a century in the UK and you would have found filth in the streets and open sewers too. But the modern Briton has come to expect that there are public lavatories, and that they should be used when in public. He/she has also come to rely on Public Health Acts which require kitchens in restaurants and pubs to be clean, and the utensils for public use to be cleaned. How would one behave if none of this were true?

The first and most obvious answer is to keep oneself to oneself. If there is little contact, there will be little disease transmitted. This is a lesson which can put cleanliness into the realm of morality (This lesson is being re-learned now that there is a new sexually transmitted disease around. The safest way to avoid AIDS is not to have sex, or observe complete lifelong fidelity within marriage.) Among the precautions against the transmission of common complaints customarily observed in India are the following. Firstly, you should only eat food prepared within your own social group. Secondly, you should be more and more cautious of food which is potentially riskier and riskier, and, thirdly, you should be more and more cautious of groups who have more and more health-hazarding occupations. Take all these to extremes and you may find people who will only eat food they have prepared themselves, who are strictly vegetarian, and who will not even countenance being looked at by a more polluting individual. This is the kind of extreme in orthodox Brahminism sometimes caricatured in literature. Stories abound of Brahmins travelling (somewhat reluctantly) on a pilgrimage with all their own pots and pans, and taking flasks of their own well-water with them (from a well forbidden to untouchables).

The necessity of vegetarianism can of course spring from religious conviction – but there is also a practical side to that too. Meat in tropical countries which have no freezing system, and where the humidity can for some months of the year preclude drying, does, of course, putrefy quickly. The easiest way to keep an animal fresh is not to kill it: so there is a virtue in killing small animals, most of which can

be eaten at one sitting. Hence, chickens will be safer than goats if part of the goat has to be kept a little longer: and goats will be safer than buffalo. The safety of meat will also be associated with the diet of the animal. The pig is a turd-eating animal that can clean open sewers of anything. It therefore can and does eat human excrement, and can thereby pass on such things as liver flukes and other parasites. Again, in the modern West we rely on health laboratories. Every pig slaughtered is inspected for infection before it is sold. To the meat eaters of the West, there has until recently been an accepted standard that meat eating, which is expensive, is the higher end of the dietary scale. But in India, for all the reasons given, a vegetarian diet is at the highest end. The sweeper who owns no land, cleans the drains, keeps pigs, because one of his only resources is the refuse of society. There is a theory that vegetarianism limits the extent to which agriculture can improve the value of its product, and that vegetarianism has played its role in the persistence of rural poverty.

The venerated cow also attracts attention – is it not irrational to think a cow holy? It is indeed irrational to have so many cows in India – it has the highest bovine stock of any nation and many are poor specimens and many are strays eking out a living on urban rubbish dumps. But the reason for the cow's sanctity is not hard to find. In an agrarian society such as India's, the cow and the bullock pull the ploughs, pull the carts on dirt roads, eat the weeds pulled from fields and other crop residues, and provide dung. The latter is of course often used for fuel and manure – but it also has another essential use. To thresh a crop (treading it with cows) requires a hard floor which is uncracked. A mud floor dried in the sun will crack, but a floor whose top layer is a mixture of dung and mud does not – it dries hard and smooth like cement. Without dung, threshing is extremely difficult. In other words, the cow is the pivot of agrarian society. It makes sense to revere it, and to accept the added bonus of the small yield of milk and ghee (clarified butter) it may give.

The origins of an elaborate hierarchy of pollution and of dietary custom can therefore be readily understood, and then in turn the relationship of this with other aspects of hierarchy. This gives rise to the possibility that status can be lost by breaking these customary rules, or even by trying to improve status, by adopting higher ranking rules. I have known vegetarians, who have been advised by their doctor to eat eggs to improve their protein intake, be most particular to ensure their eggs are vegetarian ones – that is those laid by hens which have not been impregnated by a cock. The other way round there are people who reject meat which once they ate, in order to enhance their status. In general such altered behaviour does not happen at an individual level, but is followed by social groups. Over time and very slowly, there is mobility in the society. But it tends to be (outside of modern urban society) a mobility of groups – castes slowly inching their way up, over perhaps centuries. It is a process known as Sanskritisation.

## 2.7 Maya

It is often said that the Hindus have a sense of other-worldliness, and that they reject



this world as an illusion – Maya. There are many different forms and explanations of Maya, so there is no simple single interpretation I can offer here. But, as we have noted above, the Christian view of the world somehow accepts the objective and external nature of the material world, through which the soul passes once in its incarnation. Many Hindus do not necessarily accept this duality, and maintain that the one God who created everything is everything, and the material forms are not separable from the rest of creation, that we cannot sense them as objective externalities, but imagine them. This can lead to an egocentric view – since if all is in the imagination, it is only in one's own imagination, but yet which is a fragment of the totality of the interconnected Universe/God. But there are also other interpretations that appeal to all of us. In the West there is a strong contemporary resurgence of interest in mind-body problems – particularly in the fields of the sciences of consciousness – which is being approached with great publicity from the material/physical side of Cartesian dualism. Ever greater attempts are made to understand how a physical brain can give rise to such a thing as self-awareness. In traditional Hindu thought more attention has been paid to understanding the mind-body relationship from the phenomenon of consciousness itself, one of the chosen paths being through meditation. If human beings try to strip themselves of all pretence, all mannerisms of behaviour, to find the basic essence of themselves, in the end there is nothing left to be a basic essence other than pure spirit devoid of intent, which is the denial of individuality and agency, but a locus of understanding. So our humanity is in a sense nothing other than mannerism and pretence, self-generated, and to that extent not real but illusory. Buddhism – which emerged out of Hinduism – has a very clear enunciation of the role of consciousness, its physical roots, and the doctrine of *Anatta* (the denial of an individual and separate soul):-

'There is no unmoving mover behind the movement. It is only movement. It is not correct to say that life is moving, but life is movement itself. Life and movement are not two different things. In other words, there is no thinker behind the thought. Thought itself is the thinker. If you remove the thought, there is no thinker to be found. Here we cannot fail to notice how this Buddhist view is diametrically opposed to the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*: "I Think, therefore I am"' (Rahula, 1967:26).

## 2.8 Caste and Hinduism in the Contemporary Era

This book is written in a semi-chronological manner – but in the introduction I pointed out that some issues would be developed further at convenient junctures. It is inevitable that at this stage I should say something about caste in more contemporary India. Many people have supposed that urbanisation and industrialisation would subvert caste and 'modernise' India. In the sense that a caste represents a marriage group, this has not happened. The vast majority of marriages are still arranged – very few couples manage to marry outside their caste. New technologies have created new jobs, but it is clear that in any small town particular castes will probably have

monopolised any type of new job – being a secretary for example. In some sense there are even new 'castes' – such as (though this is highly contentious and reflects the debate about the colour bar in the USA) the descendants of mixed English-Indian marriages now known as Anglo-Indians, who virtually monopolised the middle managerial grades of the railways. The persistence of caste and its inegalitarian impact is recognised by legislation that reserves particular quotas of places in education for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, and particular numbers of jobs in the public sector – this is often discussed in the current press by reference to enactment of the 'reservation' recommendations of the Mandal Commission. In attempting to make the less equal equal by making them more equal, the divisions of caste are written into the fabric of political life. There are backlashes from the middle-ranking castes, who feel excluded by the quota takers from jobs they are better qualified to take. Some of these backlashes have taken widespread and violent form.

In each age the expression of caste may have become weaker or stronger, and may be re-invented in different ways, as this Reservation crisis of the 1990s has shown. Each age too can re-interpret the significance of caste in the past. In this current age of the quest for 'sustainable development' one of the recent re-inventions is of an original Indian caste society which was ecologically benign. In this view (Gadgil and Guha, 1992) different castes had access to differing resources in the local ecosystem, so that competition for any particular resource was avoided; over-exploitation was therefore also avoided, and the stewardship of each resource that goes with a continuing lineage was well established. In their view, modernisation since the advent of the British has corrupted the system and rendered it unsustainable. There is, however, little evidence to support the imagination of a golden environmental past dependent specifically on caste structure. The castes of India have been associated with an agrarian and craft-industry type of economy which has for centuries both cleared new land, and abandoned older land when over-use led to diminishing yields.

The current political and ecological debates have one thing in common. India in the late 1990s has experienced a Hindu resurgence, and the secularism initially adopted by independent India is under threat. A Hindu revival is bound to open the question which Gandhi never wanted to answer – is it possible for Hinduism to survive without the institution of caste?

## 2.9 Concluding Remarks

The India that Islam encountered, first by Arab traders isolated wandering mystics – the Sufis – and only later by military invasion, was a world of all-embracing sanctity, of many Gods and none, of idol worship, of meditation, of world renunciation, of venerated cows, and of the inequality of man. Hinduism is highly varied and flexible in many ways, and is not dogmatic in matters of theology even if it is dogmatic in matters of caste. Indian society has indeed often been described as syncretic – able to absorb influences and even contradictory ideas from many diverse cultures and

sources. Though this self-same Hinduism has given South Asia much of its sense of cultural identity and indeed marks the region out as one of Earth's great cultural hearths, it ought also to be apparent that it does not really offer the kind of identitive bonding that would, in the absence of other bonds, lead to the political integration of the area. Its provides an over-arching system – which permits and celebrates difference and diversity, dividing as much as uniting

It was to this world that came the new truth of the one true God. There is no God but God, Allah the Compassionate, the Merciful. The faith is known as Islam – meaning submission, to the will of Allah. The adherents are Muslims, 'those who submit'. Submission, not absorption, was what the Muslims demanded in their earliest raids, and which they revived from time to time throughout the period of their dominion

## Chapter 3

# Islam: Submission to the One True God

### 3.1 The Prophet

In the period corresponding to the depths of the Dark Ages in Europe, the Arabian peninsula was also in disarray. The peoples of the area were divided by religion and by tribe, and dominated or exploited by the outside powers of Persia and the Greek empire of Constantinople. In many ways the factionalism might have resembled the divisions of modern Lebanon – not only were there different major religions such as Judaism and Christianity, there were also many different sects within these religions, and also many pagan and polytheistic faiths. It seems likely that one of the gods in Mecca who had popular support was called Allah, and indeed that among the polytheists Allah was becoming established as the leading God. But the greatest difference between modern Lebanon and Arabia in 570 was of course that there was as yet no Islam, and the Koran (Quran) had not yet been written.

Mohammed the Prophet, was born circa 570, at Mecca not far from the Red Sea. He was obviously interested in and influenced by local theological disputes, and by reformists in Mecca who were neither Christian nor Jew, but who were monotheistic. He was also a contemplative man, who spent time in meditation on Mt. Hira nearby. He was forty years old or thereabouts when he received his first divine revelation from God via the angel Gabriel. Some legends would have it that there was a single revelation of the whole Koran in one night, but it seems much more likely that both the revelations themselves and the subsequent recording of them were more sporadic than that, probably over the length of Mohammed's prophetic period (610-630). But whichever way, Mohammed was chosen as God's messenger on earth, to be the Seal of the Prophets – that is to say the last of the great line of prophets, after whom no others would follow. The Koran is divided into 114 chapters of unequal length, the shortest containing only 3 short verses, the longest containing 306 long verses. Islamic and non-Islamic scholars agree that the Koran has remained essentially unchanged, and is therefore still in the authentic original form.

The earlier prophets were the Prophets of the Jewish Old Testament, and the great prophet of the New Testament, Jesus Christ. Islam completes the line of evolution of these religions, and completes the revelation of God to man. There is no God but God, the Almighty, who was given the name which was most understandable in Mecca – Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful. Mohammed revealed that the Christians had gone astray – that Christ was not God incarnate, though indeed a man

of God, and that the Christians had erroneously and needlessly built an intercessory barrier between man and God.

Mohammed preached his gospel and gathered disciples around him. As with any other new sect that threatened orthodoxy, it was also seen as politically threatening, and it was not long before persecution started. In 622 Mohammed fled from Mecca to Medina. The Hijra, as the flight is known, is the starting date of the Muslim calendar. From Medina, Mohammed and his followers organised first armed resistance and then armed triumph over their enemies. The combination of the all-encompassing dogma of the Koran and the fanatical devotion of the new adherents proved an extraordinarily powerful mix. A new religion had been born, and soon unified the Arabs with each other and against the Greeks and Persians in turn, expelling them from Arabia. By the time of his death in 632 Mohammed had triumphed on earth to create a new kingdom for God, and had shown wisdom in its administration, courage and skill in its defence, and love and leadership for his adherents. His domestic circumstances were simple and unostentatious. His devout nature was beyond question. Where once tribe and kinship had created faction and division, there was a new and greater principle of faith in the one true God.

### 3.2 The Word of Allah

Allah created the earth and all things in it, and created man and put him in the garden. There is then an external earthly world, and we live in it as individuals but once. By serving God's will we shall attain heaven, a delectable place of beauty and leisure. By following Satan, the fallen angel, we will surely end in Hell. But God has revealed to us in the Koran precisely how we may follow his will and reach heaven. It is the comprehensiveness of the Koran that gives it such authority and appeal. It also should be learnt by heart by all Muslims at an early age – indeed learning the Koran by heart for many constitutes their sole formal education, even in places as far from Mecca as Bengal and Indonesia. And no matter where Islam has spread, the recitation is still in the original Arabic. The Book itself, even by those who do not accept its divine origin, is nevertheless credited with maintaining the literary beauty and integrity and homogeneity of Arabic over such a wide area of the earth. One of the mysteries surrounding it is how an illiterate and poorly educated man (or so legend would have Mohammed) could have written such a work – but the answer is that he was responsible for seeing that it was transcribed. In translation into other languages it loses the strong rhythms, poetry and cadences of the original, and therefore much of its beauty and power.

Islam is a proselytising religion, and in theory it gives those who are confronted with it three choices – to accept and submit (a Muslim is 'one who submits': Islam is 'submission' or 'faith'); to pay a financial homage but to remain unconverted; or obviously to resist and risk war, enslavement and execution. The carrot is as attractive as the stick is fearsome. Muslims believe in the equality of man, and in a strict ethical code. It has given people born both high and low a common brotherhood

– and in the Islamic world over the centuries that followed Mohammed there seemed to be even greater social mobility than in many other contemporary societies, and many histories of rapid rises from the ranks to exalted positions. In terms of individual observance, Islam is said to have five pillars: 1) The Profession of Faith which must be made publicly at least once in an individual's lifetime: "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his Prophet." It defines the membership of an individual in the Islamic community. 2) Prayer or rather the duty of five daily periods of prayers. The first prayer is offered before sunrise, the second in the very early afternoon, the third in the late afternoon, the fourth immediately after sunset, and the fifth before retiring and before midnight, all facing towards Mecca. Special early afternoon prayers are offered on Fridays at the mosque, where the Muslim men congregate. 3) Almsgiving – the payment of zakat. This was originally the tax levied by Muhammad primarily to help the poor. It is now voluntary, but commonplace, and used to promote Islam as well as for poor relief. 4) Fasting during the month of Ramadan (Because the Islamic calendar is lunar, the time during the solar year when Ramadan will fall changes). During the fasting month, one must refrain from eating, drinking, smoking, and sexual intercourse from dawn until sunset. At the end of Ramadan is the festival of Eid. 5) Pilgrimage to Mecca. Every adult Muslim who is physically and economically able to do so is enjoined to make this pilgrimage, the Hajj, at least once in his or her lifetime. During recent years, air travel has allowed Muslims from all parts of the world to perform the pilgrimage, and the annual number is now in millions. Those who have participated often speak of the profoundly moving experience of participating with so many others of every tongue and colour and level of education, but all meeting as equals. On return to their homes, pilgrims thereafter may be deferentially addressed with the title Haji. The pilgrimage obviously promotes political solidarity in the Muslim world.

Besides these five basic institutions, other important laws of Islam include the prohibition of alcohol consumption and of eating the flesh of swine. In prayer much of the Koran will be recited – and the word itself means 'recitation'. The Muslim must make no idol, nor any image of any of God's creatures. This injunction is intelligible in its origin, but has had a possibly unforeseen effect – that much art associated with the Muslim world is abstract in pattern, and in the form of calligraphy associated with the Koran it has achieved spectacular magnificence. The Muslim accepts the distinction between the physical world and the spirit of man (though believing in the ultimate resurrection of the body), but does not accept the difference between the spiritual and the secular. Whereas in Christ's gospel Caesar's government is accepted as lawful, the only state acknowledged in Islam is Islam itself – as so well displayed during Mohammed's life. The prophet was in many ways a man of peace and toleration – and indeed Islam permits the non-believer to pay his small tax and continue in his own faith. But what it will not do is allow the non-believer any political power or responsibility. This means in practice it can be difficult for an Islamic country to tolerate and administer ambitious non-Muslims, a point of importance to the story that follows. And it also means that 'law' – Islamic law –

regulates more of an individual's life than civil law does in the West – where some aspects of moral law are voluntary.

### 3.3 Muslim Law: The Sharia

The Koran is detailed and specific on the laws relating to the economy and to society. Amongst the many codes are those that forbid usury, which means not the charging of excessive interest, but the charging of any interest at all. In the modern world there are Banks in the Middle East which work on Islamic principles, essentially becoming equity sharers in risk rather than secured lenders. The codes of marriage and divorce, and of property inheritance, and many other things, are all spelt out. The treatment of women is often picked out in Europe as being degrading. Women appear to be second class citizens, and certainly in a Muslim country women's liberation movements as known in the west would not be acceptable to the orthodox. But in Mohammed's time the laws he laid down were a great advance for the status of women. They were guaranteed rights in property and a share in their family wealth – and were no longer merely slaves and chattels. Muslim marriage contracts include within them the terms of the settlement on the wife in the event of a divorce. There must be many western women who wish our legal codes were so advanced.

Muslim law has two major sources – the Koran which is a comprehensive guide to righteous living, and the Hadiths. These are the customs and habits which the Prophet is known to have followed in his lifetime – graced by divine revelation. The collection of 2,762 Hadiths by the early cleric Bukhari is venerated by Muslims as second only to the Koran itself. The interpretation of these together has resulted in the system of Sharia law which is recognised by most Muslim societies in some variant or other. In one basic respect it is profoundly different from, say, English law. Since they are part of God's revealed truth they cannot be changed by custom, and in essence no man has the authority to change them. Nor in theory will they ever be changed, since Mohammed was the last of the prophets. But of course in practice variation and flexibility in interpretation is possible, but usually the subject of fierce wrangling by lawyers and priests.

The appeal of this dogmatic religion has the same foundation as the appeal of dogmatic Roman Catholicism, or as once dogmatic Marxism had. Paradoxically, dogma may give people freedom. If we do not know what we can or cannot do, if we have few rules or bend those that exist, then we continually trip ourselves up by doing things which later we regret (if one's reach exceeds one's grasp, one is due for a fall), and we are continually hurt or frustrated in a society in which others may not adhere to expectations, and in our turn cause hurt and frustration. In addition, constant uncertainty requires constant attention and is ultimately fatiguing, and promotes withdrawal. By contrast if one is certain of the universe of behaviour, the bounds drawn around one's actions and responsibilities, and those of one's fellow men, then that certainty gives liberation, to act freely without fear or guilt in the

known universe. The faithful who find this freedom with each other may find it difficult to be tolerant of those who do not live in this same universe.

### 3.4 The Spreading Fire

The armies of Islam, 'Fired by their new faith.' (Robinson, 1982:23), triumphed rapidly in North Africa and in the East. Within one hundred years of Mohammed's death the war cry of the Muslim warrior "Allahu Akbar" (God is Great) – was heard at city gates in Spain and in Central Asia. The spread was rapid, but the society built was neither short-lived nor superficial. The Arabic Empire centred on the Caliphs (Khalifa – the Successor) in Baghdad became a bastion of patronage of the applied and theoretical sciences, and of music and literature. Much that Europe later believed it had rediscovered during the Renaissance of the learning of the Classical World was in fact knowledge which the Muslims had both kept alive and developed during the period of their dominance. Much of it was also knowledge that the Muslims gained from India and transmitted to Europe in mathematics, astronomy and medicine.

But not all was war without and tranquillity within. The Caliph, or Successor, guardian of the faithful, was supposedly elected. But after a few such elections, the post became hereditary, and the Caliph became in effect an 'Emperor'. But one group rejected the Caliph's leadership and claimed that it should be in the hands of the descendants of Mohammed's son-in-law Ali. This schism has led over time to doctrinal differences, and the emergence of the two major branches of Islam, the majority Sunni group (including most Arabs) and the minority Shi'ite group, found in many areas but in their strongest concentration and in the majority in Iran (Persia). This split is as great as the split between the Eastern Orthodox churches and the Roman churches in Christianity (although many Christians in Western Europe see the greatest split in Christianity to be between Protestant and Catholic, a division which underlies the troubles in Ireland). For Sunnis the authority of their faith is found in the consensus of the community and the texts of Islam (Koran, Sahria, Hadiths). For the Shias, authority was and is found within Muhammed's line of descent. Divine leadership was provided by the imams (literally leaders) who had the status of the divine on earth. Mohammed's grandson Husain became imam of the Shias, but was killed at Karbala (on the Euphrates and not far south of Baghdad) during an insurrection against the then caliph Yazid. The spiritual authority of the later imams became interwoven with the dynastic succession of the Safavid empire in Persia (modern Iran), where today the climax of the religious year is the mourning, on the 10th day of Muharram, of the slaughter of Husain. Shia and Sunni may both recite the same Koran in the same Arabic, they may go to Mecca together on the Haj, but both now carry with them a weight of history.

Wars of succession within the Islamic world were then as common as such wars in Europe, and, after its initial expansionary phase, the Islamic world often showed as many divisions and fractures as its contemporary Christian world, although

more often than not independent princes and kings still sought the titular legitimacy of recognition by the Caliph, as during the centuries of the Holy Roman Empire many monarchs in Europe sought legitimacy from the Pope. But, independent of Baghdad or not, still the warrior princes expanded the world of Islam outwards, preaching a religion which retained its principle identity in the comprehensive dogma of the Koran.

As with Christianity, Islam also spread by another means. There was, and is, a branch of mystics known as Sufis who can be compared very approximately with ascetic missionary monks in Christianity, sometimes preaching, sometimes renouncing the world and withdrawing from it. These mystics probably reached India and settled in Sind and Punjab before the military invasions of Arabs, Afghans and Turks. In many ways they acted as a bridge between Islam and Hinduism, since the latter, too, understands the nature of mystical contemplation and experience, and the quest for absorption in God. But the path of the mystic is not one easily followed by the majority, who dream of earthly as well as heavenly empires.

Besides mystics, Islam has also spawned its own puritanical reformers. Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab (1703-92) in the 18th Century led a campaign against the veneration of holy saints and of holy sites, such as Karbala. He forged alliances with the tribes of the Najd (central Arabia) including the chief of Dariya (near Riyadh) Muhammad Ibn Saud. This was not just a puritan reform, it was also a revolt against the Turkish Caliphate. Even after Wahhab's death, the movement continued with success in much of Arabia. In 1803 Wahhabis attacked Mecca, and even set about destroying the Prophet's tomb. Much of the rest of the Islamic world was horrified. The Pasha of Egypt finally defeated the Wahhabis in Dariya in 1818, and the movement scattered. Wahhabi theology had been well argued through and well spelt out, supported by a great literature. The sixth of its seven central tenets is the obligation to wage war on the infidel, regardless of one's own suffering. The impact of the movement lived on in Arabia, and across the Islamic world, even if Wahhabis are usually a small minority. They are commonly identified with the intolerant and more extreme expression of Islam.

### 3.5 The Submission of India

While the Arabian and Persian heartlands had been divided and embroiled in internecine struggle, the north-west passages into India had been fairly secure. Within India itself armed struggle between princes and states did not normally involve the sacking of temples – which were areas of sanctity *hors de combat*. Some of these temples had accumulated prodigious wealth, in golden idols and ornaments, and in precious stones. The temptation to invade this rich land was always present. Invasion needed sufficient power to force the north-west land routes, and perhaps too the confidence of the legitimacy of plunder.

The first attacks of Muslim Arabs on India were not motivated by such expectations, but were restricted to maritime invasions of Sind to control the pirates

who attacked ships in the Arabian Sea. The goals of these invasions were limited, and the invaders' relations with neighbouring Rajput States (Rajasthan) were not uneasy. This comparatively gentle contact between two religious systems and two trading heartlands was soon to be followed by persecution and destruction on an epic scale.

A former slave<sup>1</sup> had founded an independent Muslim kingdom in Afghanistan, based at the town of Ghazni, in c. 977. One of descendants, Mahmud, had become a skilful and powerful military leader, ruler of a large enough Afghan empire to draw on the resources necessary for the invasions of North West India. His invasions did not found a new kingdom in India, but constituted a series of deep penetrations for the purposes of plunder. In one attack in 1024 he crossed the Indian desert to attack the temple of Somnath in Kathiawar (the peninsula in modern south Gujarat) killing 50,000 'idolaters' and reaping a huge treasure of gold and jewels. The idol itself he took back to Ghazni, where it was smashed into pieces and buried beneath a mosque, so the faithful could trample it under foot. He took the temple gates too (Nine hundred years later the British tried to persuade the Hindus of North India that they had recaptured the gates in Ghazni, and had retored them to India, avenging this slight.) Other Muslim rulers in subsequent years followed similar policies, until finally came the attempt to invade India proper. First in 1191 and then again in 1192 Muhammed Ghori tried to force his way beyond the Punjab plains into the Gangetic lowlands – and met a Rajput army at Tarain (also spelt Taraori), northwest of Delhi near Panipat. Fast-moving horse cavalry confronted slow but mighty elephants. The brotherhood of Islam confronted the fractious Rajput lineages of Kshatriya castes. Men who knew they would go straight to heaven if they died in battle, confronted a society in which the pacifism of Buddhism and Jainism had sometimes echoed, and one in which battle could be ritualised.

Mohammad Ghori won. Within two years Bihar had fallen, and shortly after that Bengal was taken too. The invasion of north India was complete. One of Ghori's successors, Iltutmish was recognised in 1226 by the Caliph of Baghdad to be Sultan of India. The seed of the independent Muslim empires of India had been sown, in rich and fertile ground.

### 3.6 Persecution and Resistance

The new Sultanate (Figure 3.1) was based on Delhi, and included most of north India to the fringes of the Deccan within its sway. Its source of wealth was overwhelmingly agricultural – agricultural taxes of one sort or another were the basis to maintain the military levies that tried to repress incipient rebellion. Other means of increasing the treasury included the taxes on infidels, and the plunder acquired from the destruction of some Hindu shrines.

<sup>1</sup> The word 'slave' is technically correct but does not do justice to the position. Many of these were military officers who had high rank open to them. See the comments on the Delhi Sultanate which follow.

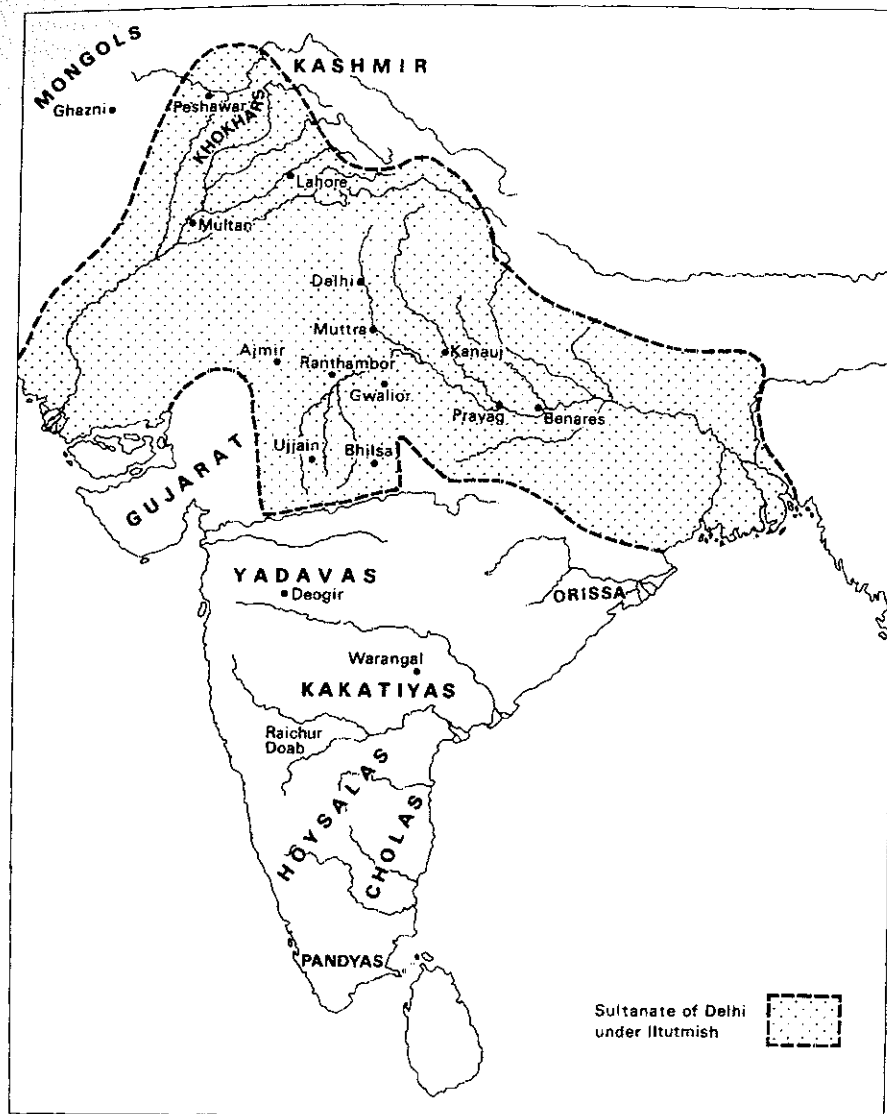


Figure 3.1 The Delhi Sultanate

Source: Davies (1959)

'Empire' was founded on some contradictory bases. The new Muslim rulers kept distinct from their subjects, and were an élite who held dogmatic and 'superior' ideas and ideals, much as in later centuries the British would presume a superiority of their own 'civilisation'. But these Muslim rulers had made India their home, and so were part of India yet not of it. The opposition of ruler to ruled was one way in which the rulers would need each other and maintain a supportive collective integrity. But distinctiveness and intolerance leads to rejection, which force must contain, and force is expensive. There were indeed periods under the Sultanate when economic repression almost matched the military repression it supported. There was also accommodation, with recruitment of both Indian converts to Islam and of Hindus into state service. The social organisation of the élite was also complex and disciplined – many of the élite within the Turkish groups being 'slaves', a status which actually gave them preferment in the upper echelons of the complex of military and political power.

A second problem the rulers faced was that the source of revenue, agriculture, was as wide-spread as the people. This meant that a system of collection had to be maintained in every village of every province, and yet somehow this surplus had to be centralised or controlled from the centre to ensure the dominance of the Sultanate. Tax officers called *Muqtis* were appointed, who had the duty to transmit the assessed revenue to Delhi, deducting what was necessary for the maintenance of a levy of troops. In addition, some persons were given rights in the revenue of large or small tracts of land – *iqtar* holders – in return for their military service. None of these rights were heritable, and indeed could even be rotated during the lifetime of the officials. This was necessary to prevent the coalition of the officials' interests with local dignitaries, which would be the basis for a new landed class and the dissolution of the Sultanate – and at the end of the Sultanate this was indeed one of the processes fostering its dissolution. By contrast, it took much less time for the Norman barons of England to become a landed aristocracy with vested hereditary interests in land, and to be at war with each other.

Where movement in the northern river plains was easier, the small empire of the north more or less held together, even if wracked from time to time by wars of succession and secession. All of these were dangerous, exposing the dissenting state to the possibility of Rajput ascendancy, or further invasions from the north and west into Sind and Punjab. And indeed all of these things did happen from time to time. Mongol raids were common from the middle of the 13th Century, and in 1303 a large army even invested Delhi. The border in the north-west receded beyond the Indus back towards Afghanistan whenever the Mongols themselves were divided, but would press again as far as the neck of fertile land between the Punjab and Delhi, where Panipat and Kurukshetra are located, whenever they were united.

Nor were the southern borders secure. The Deccan was always beckoning, and offering that last route to cohesion and integrity – unity in pursuit of common conquest and profit, and some iconoclastic service to Islam too. The tribute exacted became an important source for financing the defence of the north-west. So at various times military expeditions penetrated into the Deccan interior, but none of



them secured for the Sultanate a lasting extension in the south even though Hindu dynasties were toppled. The problem was simply that there were too many jungle hill ridges, too many empty and wild marchlands between one settled river basin and the next, to be able to maintain continuous and effective lines of communication. When permanent garrisons were attempted in the Deccan, for example by Qutb ud Din Khalji (ruled 1316-20), the costs proved a drain on the resources of the Sultanate.

To name names, after Ghoris came briefly Qutb, who built the tall stone tower, the Qutb Minar, which stands outside New Delhi, the world's highest free-standing (238 feet) stone-built tower to this day. Then came Aram Shah, and after him Iltutmish, who was succeeded, strangely, by his daughter Raziya. She was supposed to have mastered all the virtues of statecraft and had the resolve to make a great monarch: but she had the ineradicable liability of being a woman in a Muslim state. She was murdered in 1240. Ala-ud-din (1296-1316) pressed to expand the 'empire' in many directions, and during his siege of Rajput Chitor the royal women there committed mass self-immolation – *jauhar* – to avoid the potential rape and consequential pollution that defeat would bring – a ritual to be repeated in the city's history. Md. ibn Tughlag (1320-90) was something of a megalomaniac, who moved his capital city and its population away from Delhi to the Deccan. He also built the walled city to be seen still just south of New Delhi. Muhammad (1324-1352) attempted both to develop a permanent capital in the Deccan near current Daulatabad, and also to capture both Peshawar and much of Afghanistan. To finance the costs of these enterprises, he even introduced a token currency – which prompted local revolt and dissension. Firoz-Shah was by contrast a wiser, and benign ruler, though still a purist Muslim. He began the famous irrigation canal near Delhi, later repaired both by the Moguls and then in turn the British. In 1398 Delhi was completely sacked by Timur the Lame, otherwise known as Tamerlane. He left a governor, and withdrew to his empire in Persia, Afghanistan and Central Asia (centred on Samarkand), but his governor was soon replaced by Bahlul Lodi, of the *ancien régime*. He in turn was followed by Ibrahim Lodi, the last of the Sultans, who died when the Moguls burst into India in 1526.

At different times the different provinces of the Sultanate owed more or less allegiance to the central power – and indeed independent dynasties ruled from time to time in Bengal and many of the Deccan provinces. Ala-ud-din Hasan, appointed by the Sultan to govern the north Deccan, established himself as an independent monarch in 1347. The Bahman dynasty he founded at Gulbarga lasted 150 years. The cohesion and impact of the Sultanate can thus perhaps be overstated – but for simple reasons. Iconoclasts, they destroyed much of the Hindu and Buddhist heritage, and they also took a great interest in their own history. They cultivated the arts and literature, and had their sagas recorded in poetry and prose – not particularly objective, but yet making an imprint to this day on our appreciation of their might. They built mausolea and mosques and seminaries, that still dot the plains around Delhi, some of which have now been brought within the built-up area of metropolitan Delhi. Lodi Gardens around the Lodi mausolea is one of Delhi's open parks, a kind

of Hyde Park or Regent's Park. But the greatest monument is still living. It was during the Sultanate that a version of Hindustani used by the military became mixed with Persian and Arabic words, and written in the Arabic script. This is the origin of Urdu, the distinctive language of India's distinctive Islam.

### 3.7 Vijayanagar

Though there were embassies from North to South and vice versa, and even from time to time contracted marriages between Hindu royalty from the south and Muslim rulers from the north, much of the south retained its independence and cultural identity. It reached its climax in the two-and-a-half century-long kingdom of Vijayanagar, founded in the middle of the southern peninsula on the banks of the Tungabhadra river in 1336. The city near modern Hampi was a fortified area with outer perimeter walls variously given as 24 or 60 miles in circumference. It was a city of great wealth, and carefully developed technology in, for example, irrigation systems that still mark the landscape to this day. The society was not one that would be attractive to the non-Hindu – mass *suttee* was committed at royal funerals, and even low caste women were sometimes buried alive with their deceased husbands. When finally it was subdued by the combined forces of many northern states in 1565, the city was plundered and deserted completely. The ruined city lies to this day, its ruined marble palaces and great temples a major monument to Hindu architecture. However, it is not necessary, nor possible for reasons of space, to examine in depth in this book the Southern dynasties that were not incorporated in the northern Empires.

### 3.8 Second Foundation: The Mughal Empire

If ever there were a man whose own descent moulded him to be a man pivotal in history, a man who made the times as much as the times could make the man, then that man must surely have been Babur, the first Mughal Emperor of India, who was descended on his father's side from the great Timur, who had in his time sacked Delhi, and on his mother's side from Ghenghis Khan. He was only 12 when he succeeded to the governorship of Ferghana, north of modern Afghanistan. But he was ousted from his principality by the Usbeks, and marched south to make himself master of the kingdom of Kabul. Having already become a migrant monarch, and skilled in warfare, it is not surprising that the fabled riches of India, below the passes which he commanded from Kabul, would prove a temptation. In the cold season of 1525 he crossed the Indus with 12,000 men, a rather small contingent with which to attempt to take the Afghan Sultanate of Delhi.

Ibrahim Lodi, the Sultan, awaited him 50 miles west of Delhi at Panipat (near Kurukshetra) with 100,000 men and 1,000 war elephants, presumably not too anxious about the outcome. But Babur had with him, like Alexander the Great in his



time, fast cavalry that could outflank the elephants, and even more importantly, for the first time in a major battle in India, he had artillery; and he was about to exploit his technical superiority in just the way that, in later centuries, the British would mercilessly use their field guns. At the end of the day the Sultan was dead and so were 15,000 of his troops. Babur occupied without further dispute first Delhi and then Agra.

Babur and his Turkish<sup>2</sup> nobility were now relatively secure: but whether they would like their new acquisition and stay was another question. The heat and desiccation of the hot season, and then the humid oppression of the monsoon, followed the early victory, and many of his army were inclined to withdraw. The principal Rajput leader was also ready to persuade them that this would be the right thing to do. Rana Sangha Sisodia saw in the defeat of the Afghans of the Sultanate his chance to establish Rajput dominion in north India, an India which even Babur seemed profoundly to dislike, lacking as it did to his mind convivial people, cold water, melons, good horses, good architecture and many other niceties. Sangha marched on Babur with a force again (so it is said) of 100,000 seasoned men, fighting in a country with which they were accustomed. It was no easy feat for Babur again to persuade his men to arms again, against an apparently superior host. But such were his powers of leadership and persuasion that he did, and at Kanhawa (Kanhua) in 1527, south of Agra, the wheeling cavalry of the Mughals ripped the Rajput army to pieces. Perhaps it had been after all a positive event, since now there was no military power left in Hindustan (North India) to dispute the sovereignty of the new aristocracy. Neither would it matter much to the Hindu masses of the north since the new Islamic regime was not so very different from the previous Islamic regime which it replaced, provided that it too exercised some degree of toleration of the different customs of the people.

### 3.9 Imperial Government under Akbar

The India bequeathed to Babur by the Afghans, who had always had a loose confederacy and who usually disputed the succession to the Sultanate, consequentially lacked established institutions of government, although periodic attempts at well-devised revenue systems had taken place. It was therefore necessary in Babur's eyes to set about creating those instruments which would translate military victory into secure dominion and lasting hegemony. Babur died too soon to achieve much in this way, and his successor Humayun, was for a time evicted from the throne, by an Afghan, Sher Shah, who is credited with some of the administrative reforms Babur knew to be necessary but never managed to complete. It was Humayun's son,

<sup>2</sup> The word does not mean they came from Turkey. There were several Turkish tribes in central Asia, some of whom (the Moguls) went to India, some of whom went earlier to what is now Turkey. The Moguls were thus related to the Turks of modern Turkey, but not from Turkey.

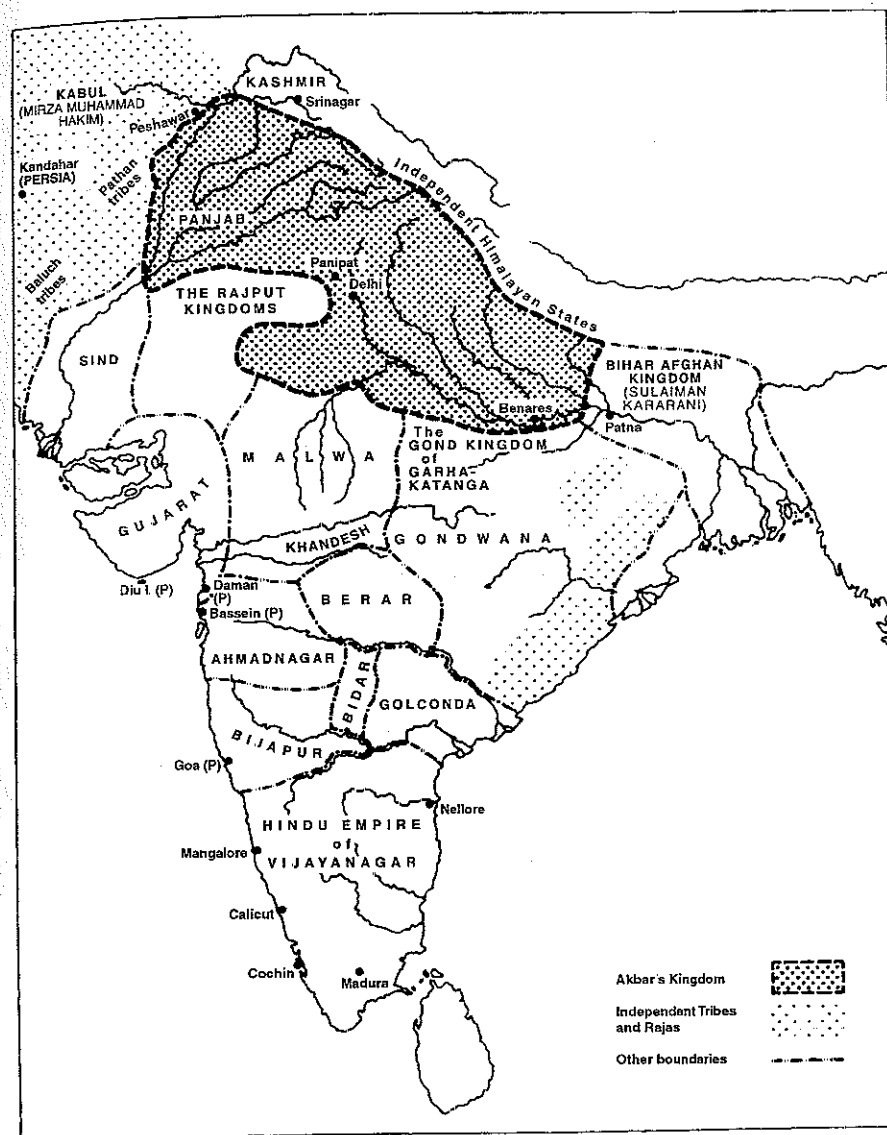


Figure 3.2 Akbar's Kingdom

Source. Davies (1959)

Babur's grandson, who finally forged the magnificent Empire that came to represent Total Power in the minds of contemporary Europeans – and has given us the common use of 'Mughal' to mean the ultimate wielders of power.

This man is known as Akbar, which simply means the Great, as Alexander had once been too. In Spear's *History of India* he is one of two Indian statesmen before the twentieth century to whom he accords the rank of 'world statesman'

He was born in 1542 in Sind while his father was a fugitive. He succeeded to the title in 1556 after his father Humayun had retaken Delhi and died in an accident: 'He fell down his library stairs, which was an appropriate end for a man of learning and culture' (Robinson 1991: 58). He then reigned until his death in 1605 – and the length of his reign was both testimony to his political abilities, and the opportunity to forge so much of what should be done. Of course, he was a skilled warrior, but he was no religious fanatic. He lifted discriminatory taxes from the unbelievers – the *jizya* tax – formed alliances by marriage with the potentially rebellious Rajputs, and recruited men of all creeds and races into his service. His power was in theory absolute, and in some ways one could almost say the same in practice. He could elevate the lowest to exalted positions, and punish with any degree of severity, including execution, any person, no matter how high, though clearly there were always political calculations involved in the exercise of such power.

Importantly, he owned all the land, and could both give and strip grants of rights in land. He could do so because the Emperor was the only embodiment of the existing concept of the State, and he could therefore use the power of the State as he personally wished, because there was no other way of expressing it. As had happened under the Sultans, in Akbar's state no official was allowed to establish hereditary rights in land. Such rights would have been the beginning of centrifugal and self-interested provincialism. It was the effective establishment of rights in land by the colonial aristocracy of the contemporary Spanish Empire that would ultimately lead to independence and fragmentation there. In our own time the establishment of white interests in land in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe extremely rapidly overcame the identitive links with Britain, and led to Ian Smith's rebellion. The Mughal emperor's concern to avoid such development is therefore understandable.

Territorially the empire was divided into provinces known as subahs, fifteen in Akbar's day, each governed by a subahdar – something akin to a viceroy. They are often referred to in English literature as satrapys, and a viceroy as a satrap, after the ancient Persian equivalent. Some of the subahdars controlled groups of provinces, which were then ruled by Nawabs. One such was the Nizam-ul-Mulk who controlled the Deccan provinces and from whom the title of the Nizam descended to the later independent princes of that area. Some – and here is a portent of the British Indian Empire – remained under the rule of indigenous princely houses, as in the case of Rajasthan under the vassal Rajputs, where principles of inheritance remained unaltered.

Below the province were the districts, forerunners of the districts of British India. At this level there was a split between the military commander, a salaried man known as the fujdar, and the revenue officer known as the dewan. The latter was

very often Hindu, and therefore may have been useful in some circumstances as an informant independent of the Foudar. Within a district a man of distinguished service might be given a grant in the revenue from a group of villages to reward him for past or present services. Such men were Jagirdars, holders of Jagirs. It is suggested that they could be a countervailing power to the Foudar to be used by the Emperor if necessary.

All of these offices were personally appointed by the Emperor, and although clearly in many cases this would be done on advice and without a personal meeting between the two, nevertheless in theory an imperial letter of appointment, a *firman*, was necessary, such firmans being read in public at the courts of the district. At greater distances from the Imperial court itself not only was it possible but also not infrequent, that forgeries were made of firmans, to dispute local appointments. The British and French would later become drawn into such intrigues.

The principle of the division of revenue collection from the administration of civil (and military) authority was a sound one too. A Foudar who raised his own revenues would have been less likely to send the appropriate tribute to the centre. If he was salaried and depended on centrally dispersed revenue, his ability to act independently was less.

The revenue was assessed and largely collected in coin. The monetisation of India, in silver, proceeded under the Mughals at an accelerating rate. Bayly (1983) even describes the empire as a great machine for the constant recycling of bullion, often moved in pack-trains under heavy military guard. Of course, it was both impractical and unnecessary to move all bullion taxes from the periphery to the centre to be disbursed again, and in practice it would be necessary only to move the net surpluses derived from imbalances in trade and the net receipts of central government. To do so meant that a system of banking and letters of credit were necessary – and in those days letters of credit would be honoured at a distance only between known and trusting bankers. Here we find another reason why the Dewans were so often Hindu. It was they, mostly castes of Kshatriya rank, who so often had the network of moneylenders that formed the basis of the banking system, and in its later years the empire rested financially on them and their services.

The central revenue and provincial revenues were dispersed for civil purposes (building roads and sometimes providing irrigation canals), but above all else were dispersed with largesse to the highly salaried military officials who maintained centrally and regionally the massive standing army of the empire. The army was colossal – Bayly estimates that at one time the livelihoods of perhaps as many as one quarter of the population were directly, or indirectly derived from military service, as dependants and camp followers. When an official was appointed, he would often select a new provincial capital, and suddenly the locus of expenditure would change. The local expenditure would raise demand and stimulate the economy locally, as farmers and artisans provided in exchange for cash, the needs of the army, sustained in turn by the cash taxes raised from the peasantry.

Military exercises and military campaigns at the borders were the essence of the lives of the ruling classes – no matter how much they were also patrons of music,

literature, art and learning at the courts. An Emperor on inspection might move with an army of 100,000. The British travellers who first came to India were astounded by the sight. Unlike the British armies that moved in columns undeployed, on the plains of India the Mughal army moved in full deployment, fanning out over the countryside apparently with little regard for roads.

These peregrinations were also perceptible at the largest scales. The Emperors themselves were also inveterate migratory builders, founding and developing new capitals, moving back to re-invigorate older ones. Akbar moved his capital south of Agra to Fatehpur Sikri – a fabled and beautiful sandstone city that by fate stands ghostly and unaltered to this day. It appears that by a twist of hydrological development or, less likely, climatic change, the city ran out of water, and was abandoned. At another scale, the Emperor could and did order the wholesale migration of populations from one district to another. This might have been for military whim, but more often was because some areas went into declining production after long years of heavy use, or because the rivers and the underground waters changed on the youthful plains of Hindustan. There was therefore a constant shifting of population densities – a kind of long term and gigantic swidden system. Abandoned land might revert to jungle, only to be re-exploited decades later. This is why on the immemorial plains of India the timeless and ancient villages might appear in one sense to be just that, but in another sense might actually have been occupied or re-occupied only in recent centuries. The unbroken continuity of village site demonstrated by the Danish churches of East Anglia or the Saxon churches of Kent is not so often replicated in this more ancient cultural heart.

### 3.10 The Empire in Extremis and Decline

Akbar's empire was not the zenith of Mughal territorial acquisition. After him successive emperors progressively pushed their power south into the Deccan, but as the land area increased, the stability and coherence of the empire internally seemed to decrease.

Jahangir succeeded in 1605, though his son raised a revolt against him at the behest of intriguing nobles, and was blinded and then poisoned by another. He was indolent and cruel, but a great patron of the arts. The routine deadly fight for succession followed his death in 1627, with one son blinding the other. The victor, who took the title Shah Jahan, built the Taj Mahal (1632-47) a mausoleum on the banks of the river Jumna (Yamuna) at Agra for his beloved consort Mumtaz Mahal, who bore him 14 children. It is worth dwelling on the implications of this event for a moment. Its construction and decoration involved artists and architects from France and Persia and elsewhere as well as from India, almost the best of the known world. The labour force was 20,000 – many of whom worked and died in squalor during the execution of the project. Wood was in short supply, so it was built with few derricks or other aerial hoists. Much of it was buried by 'scaffolding' of brick and earth while it was built, the final stage being, of course, the exhumation of the building. A

ramp on one side, up which bullock trains and elephants could pull large stones, is reputed to have been 2 miles long. The building rests on a series of wells which are effectively a form of piling in the riverine undersoils, the whole contained within a bracework of metal clad hardwoods. This provides stability and also a degree of insulation from earthquake shock. Each of the minarets is inclined 1 degree out from the vertical, so that in an earthquake they would be more inclined to fall away from the main building than on to it. It is faced in exquisite white marble, much of which at the lower levels is inlaid with semi-precious stones in beautiful *pietra dura*. In earlier times many parts were said to be inlaid also with precious stones. On the opposite bank of the River Jumna Shah Jahan planned to build himself a twin mausoleum in black marble, but he was overthrown by his son before he could do so, and was finally buried alongside his wife.

This story illustrates the availability of capital in the Empire, and the abundance of labour, and its squandering in unproductive investment (at the time, though its current value to the Indian tourist business might almost make it worthwhile). It is even said that the 'misuse' of this capital took people from the land and resulted in terrible famine, though almost certainly that famine would have had several coincident causes. At a time when European traders were amassing and re-investing capital productively, here was one of the world's great powers burying it, albeit exquisitely. But in terms of world history such a use of capital must be seen as the usual one. What was happening in Europe was what was novel, and it was the beginning of the revolution that would change the world economy.

Shah Jahan's favourite son Dara Shikoh was a religious thinker in the mould of Akbar – willing to debate with Hindu sages, and to seek accommodation between different theological systems. But he was executed by his younger brother Aurangzeb in 1659 for apostasy – i.e. heretical thought that did not give Islam unquestioning acceptance. In taking the throne, Aurangzeb also had two other brothers killed. This gives something of the measure of the man – and the three deaths might not have been out of total cynicism. We cannot be sure of his beliefs in his early life, but he certainly campaigned ceaselessly throughout the rest of his life to re-impose a strict Islam, and in death left instructions for the simplest of funerals, devoid of pomp, to be paid for by money he had earned by sewing caps, and money he had made by copying out the Koran was donated to Holy men. He died in military harness campaigning in the Deccan at the age of 88 – indeed the last years of his reign from 1681 to 1707 were one long campaign. He removed the capital from Delhi to Aurangabad in Maharashtra, to support these campaigns, and it is said one third of the population died in the move. He revoked the delicate balance with the Hindus within his empire, reimposed taxes on the unbelievers, smashed temples and idols, and even built a mosque in Benares (Varanasi) Hinduism's most holy city. He fell out with the Rajputs, and broke their forts and temples too. Before his death he had extended the Mughal empire to within a few score miles of the southern tip of India (Figure 3.3), but by the time of his death he was already in retreat back to the north Indian heartland. This final explosive expansion of the Mughal empire also seemed to signal its internal collapse and decay. In alienating Hindu functionaries

simultaneously united the aristocracy and offered the new wealth and power which was sought. But in addition perhaps Aurangzeb saw the possible loss of identity of the ruling class, and his return to Islamic fundamentalism, which set rulers against ruled, also re-united the rulers. Perhaps it was theologically inevitable, since, as we have seen, in the end the kind of compromise that Akbar attempted is impossible within dogmatic Islam. A religion with a revealed source of truth is not one which can freely evolve.

In the years of expansion under Aurangzeb all these features become most clearly seen with the continuing war against the Marathas, a group of Hindu castes of the high western Deccan, in Maharashtra. In the Deccan the Empire faced great problems. There was little utilitarian integration with North India, since transport was so poor and difficult. Coercion could perhaps be relied on so long as no local identitive force emerged. But in the mid-century under the leadership of a remarkable chief Sivaji, and uniting cultivator castes and Brahmins together, the Marathas emerged as a warrior Hindu force to lead successful revolts against Mughal power. They perhaps had learned something from the imperial masters, because above all they had learnt the value of the horse, of cavalry, and of mobility. They sacked the Mughal port of Surat on the west coast, and began to cut a swathe across India towards Bengal, thereby severing the communication between the North Indian heartland and the Deccan. But they never negotiated a tributary status to the Mughals as the Rajputs had done. The relentless years of guerrilla warfare turned them into a predatory and disruptive force, feared in much of India, but which ultimately left no lasting state behind them. After Aurangzeb's death, their power further expanded north, until even Delhi lay within their grasp. But the story of the resolution of their bid for power must await till we have dealt with other matters.

The Marathas were not the only new force to emerge in late Mughal India. Another, but not so significant till a century later, was the birth of a new religion in Punjab during Akbar's time – Sikhism. This had in its origins similarities with the origins of Jainism and Buddhism, in that it was a reformist revolt against inegalitarian Hinduism. But it was, of course, born into a new India that was embraced also by Islam. Sikhism has borrowed mysticism from the Hindus, and monotheism from the Muslims. It was founded by the first Guru, Nanak (1469-1538). The fifth Guru was put to death by Jahangir, partly because of events during his war of accession. Hostility between the Sikhs and Muslims grew, and reached a peak when the zealot Aurangzeb executed the ninth Guru, who refused to embrace Islam. The Sikhs, so distinguishable by their turbans, beards and swords, became at least in part a military brotherhood of the faithful, some of whom were fighting hard in the 1980s and early 1990s in independent India for that sovereign homeland (Khalistan) which briefly they enjoyed between the demise of the Mughals and the advent of the British.

### 3.11 The Legacy of Islam

The imprint of six centuries of Muslim rule left a legacy that would have to be considered in all future political and geographical calculations. The imprint was not so much in the physical fabric of the country. They had indeed built some roads, and done a little to improve irrigation. They had exacted as much as one third of the produce of the land as tax, but this wealth had mostly gone into the army, the palaces and tombs and the conspicuous consumption of the rulers. It has often proved difficult to re-invest surpluses cumulatively in agriculture (even in our age there are step-like shifts when yields could be raised by capital investment) and in the time of the Mughals the technology of agriculture was mostly unchanging. The possibility for capital accumulation in industry did not exist either – and given the number of artisans there was little pressure to innovate. But in the mind, the legacy was huge. Islam was implanted in India and did not die with the death of Islamic empires. There were many different kinds of Muslims in the subcontinent – all bound by the Koran, all in theory able to recite Arabic, but otherwise widely different, by mother tongue, and also still indeed by 'caste'. This sounds a contradiction: but many converts though embracing Islam had still retained the marriage groups from their original castes, as can be seen in Table 2.1 where the lowest caste of bangle seller and cotton carder etc. are recorded as Muslim. (I know of two families who were distillers and leather workers by caste until conversion two centuries ago. They are still following the same trades, and will not intermarry, despite the fact that they are the small Muslim and also economic élite of a small town. The distillers cannot, as Muslims, drink their own product.) In modern Pakistan there is a rough equivalence between what are called 'bradri' (also 'biradri'), a term used of kinship groups (it is also used in north India sometimes) – and what was once caste. After all, in Islam all men are equal; but there is nothing to say that people have to marry at random, no more than in Christian Europe upper class have to marry lower class.

Not surprisingly the society which was most Islamic from top to bottom was that of the Indus valley, from north to south, since here there had been countless invasions and settlements, by Turks, Mongols, Afghans, Persian and sea-borne Arabs. But it was not a particularly densely settled area, much of it being, before the irrigation schemes of the last 100 years, essentially semi-arid or arid and not very productive.

The most ancient and densely settled area of India was, of course, the Ganges valley – the seat of proud Hindu empires in the millennia before Islam arrived. Here was the wealth that had formed the basis of empire: this was the land ruled by the Muslim aristocracy for longest, and here by and large the Muslims were an urban élite – the obvious masters of the towns and cities, where they built their mosques and mausolea – but not so obvious in the countryside, even though there were and are Muslim cultivators in many villages. The same is true of the Deccan, under Muslim power for the least time of all in India, where the Muslims were a fort- or city-based

aristocracy Most of the Muslims of the peninsula are still urban, though there are areas of Muslim peasants, too, in the south

In all of these regions of course there were many converts, both high and low. Islam can have a particular appeal to the lower polluted castes, since it offers, in theory, equality and dignity. But the region which matters most where such conversions were overwhelming is the eastern part of Bengal. Here the peasantry almost en masse became Muslim. The most satisfactory explanation of many put forward for why here, and not in Bihar or Uttar Pradesh, is that the trade winds and the monsoon naturally link the middle-east with both Malabar and Bengal, and that Arab traders and missionaries came to both, before the Afghans invaded from Ghazni to found the Sultanate. (The same winds would later bring the British to Bengal.) It is also true that Golden Bengal was the source of fine silks and cottons, which attracted Mughal rulers in their turn. Whatever the reasons, it was here, far from the Indus Valley in the west, that there was the second great area of Muslim population.

An imprint of the Muslim empires writ large was of course the recognition by the populace at large of both the probability and even the desirability of Imperial power, which provided some stability and peace, and of the fact that there would be an administration which exacted from them the surplus product of the land to maintain that empire. The Mughals had a clear conception of the unity of India, including the South, even if they never really quite integrated the subcontinent. They had a vision of unity which the populace did not have, but their vision could be transferred to the populace at large, and during the British period it would grow deeper roots. The administrative glue of the empire, the system of revenue assessment and collection, would become in turn the basis of the British system.

The churches of England have many an effigy of a worthy knight lying on his tomb, each with sword in hand. On Shah Jahan's plain tomb in the Taj Mahal is a pen-holder, symbol of the ultimate power of administration.

### 3.12 Hindu-Muslim Relations

The Muslims and Hindus have therefore a long history of interrelating with each other. The two religions have affected each other through their adherents, some of them great statesmen or despots, some of them holy theologians, most of them the common people. There are three levels of relationship we will consider briefly here: that of grand politics, that of theology, and that of customary daily behaviour.

There is a history of Muslim-Hindu relations at the grand political level – of Firoz Shah or Aurangzeb centuries apart but both putting unbelievers to the sword, and smashing temples – or there is the inclusive and accommodating policy of Akbar intermarrying with the Rajputs, and freeing himself from strict dogma. At this level the British would also experiment with policies in later years – according to some, dividing in order to rule.

At the theological level, although Hindus were to some extent prepared to consider many of the ideas in Islam, and certainly had no reason not to be tolerant of

acceptance of its status as a revealed truth. This was bound to mean that theologians would fight periodically any relaxation in standards by their flock.

At the daily level of the ordinary populace, religious affiliation is identified not just by what the followers believe, but also by the patterns of dress and behaviour which adherents follow, to proclaim their own group identity and privileged group membership. There are rules of diet: Muslims do not eat pork, but do eat beef. Hindus of no rank will eat beef, even if the untouchable will eat a pig. Muslims go en masse to the plain and unadorned mosque free from any graven image on Friday to pray, and five times a day the Muezzin calls the faithful to prayer from the minaret (these days with electronic amplification to drown a whole city) and they bury their dead and hide their women in modesty, if not purdah. The Hindus cremate their dead in public at the burning ghats, and attend temples adorned with every kind of graven image, some of it explicitly sexual.

Though in many villages and towns Hindu and Muslim have lived peacefully as neighbours for generations, cultural differences can be exploited. There are ways which can be used in attempts to instigate riots. A moustachioed man in a turban can hurl a pig from a motorbike into a mosque. A man with a beard and a Muslim cap can slide past a wandering cow and slit its neck. Tear the veil of a Muslim woman. Smear the high-caste village well with blood. The effect of such insults is also much greater than a westerner might expect. Because individuality is much less important in India than in the west, group identity is much stronger. A slight against an individual which reflects religious affiliation can be felt by a whole community. There are, therefore, so many ways to start a communal riot in India. It is a potential that politicians have not always been afraid to utilise.