

## THEME ONE

# BRICKS, BEADS AND BONES

## THE HARAPPAN CIVILISATION

The Harappan seal (Fig.1.1) is possibly the most distinctive artefact of the Harappan or Indus valley civilisation. Made of a stone called steatite, seals like this one often contain animal motifs and signs from a script that remains undeciphered. Yet we know a great deal about the lives of the people who lived in the region from what they left behind – their houses, pots, ornaments, tools and seals – in other words, from archaeological evidence. Let us see *what* we know about the Harappan civilisation, and *how* we know about it. We will explore *how* archaeological material is interpreted and *how* interpretations sometimes change. Of course, there are some aspects of the civilisation that are as yet unknown and may even remain so.



Fig. 1.1  
A Harappan seal

### Terms, places, times

The Indus valley civilisation is also called the Harappan culture. Archaeologists use the term “culture” for a group of objects, distinctive in style, that are usually found together within a specific geographical area and period of time. In the case of the Harappan culture, these distinctive objects include seals, beads, weights, stone blades (Fig. 2.2) and even baked bricks. These objects were found from areas as far apart as Afghanistan, Jammu, Baluchistan (Pakistan) and Gujarat (Map 1).

Named after Harappa, the first site where this unique culture was discovered (p. 6), the civilisation is dated between c. 2600 and 1900 BCE. There were earlier and later cultures, often called Early Harappan and Late Harappan, in the same area. The Harappan civilisation is sometimes called the Mature Harappan culture to distinguish it from these cultures.



Fig. 1.2  
Beads, weights, blades

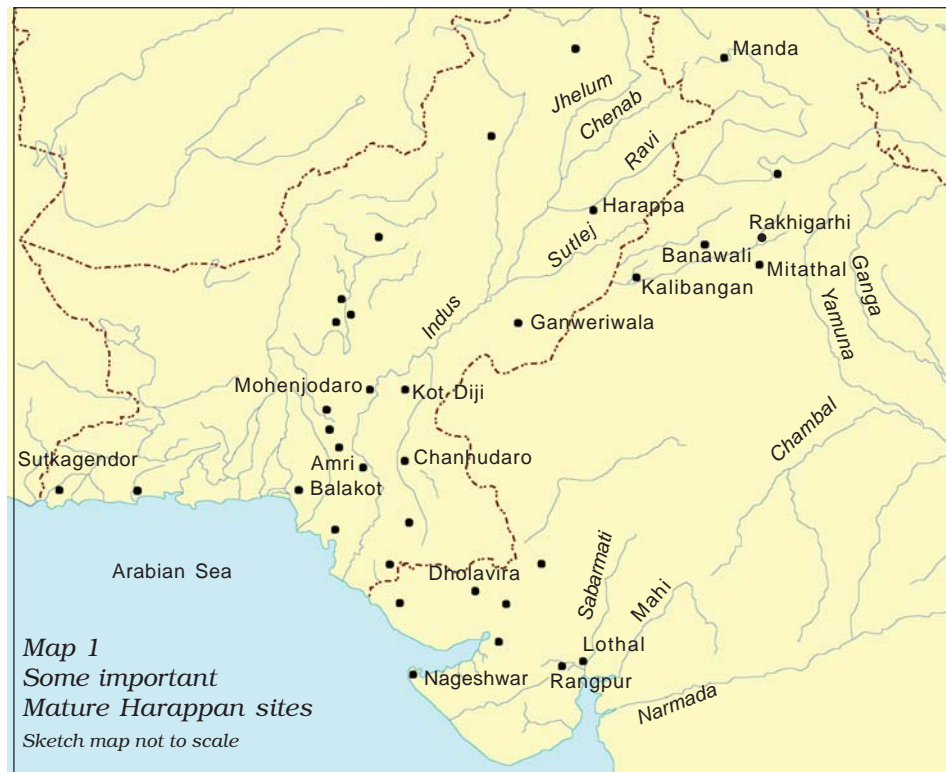
You will find certain abbreviations, related to dates, in this book.

**BP** stands for Before Present

**BCE** stands for Before Common Era

**CE** stands for the Common Era. The present year is 2007 according to this dating system.

**c.** stands for the Latin word circa and means "approximate."



Map 1  
Some important  
Mature Harappan sites  
Sketch map not to scale

### Early and Mature Harappan cultures

Look at these figures for the number of settlements in Sind and Cholistan (the desert area of Pakistan bordering the Thar Desert).

	SIND	CHOLISTAN
Total number of sites	106	239
Early Harappan sites	52	37
Mature Harappan sites	65	136
Mature Harappan settlements on new sites	43	132
Early Harappan sites abandoned	29	33

## 1. BEGINNINGS

There were several archaeological cultures in the region prior to the Mature Harappan. These cultures were associated with distinctive pottery, evidence of agriculture and pastoralism, and some crafts. Settlements were generally small, and there were virtually no large buildings. It appears that there was a break between the Early Harappan and the Harappan civilisation, evident from large-scale burning at some sites, as well as the abandonment of certain settlements.

## 2. SUBSISTENCE STRATEGIES

If you look at Maps 1 and 2 you will notice that the Mature Harappan culture developed in some of the areas occupied by the Early Harappan cultures. These cultures also shared certain common elements including subsistence strategies. The Harappans ate a wide range of plant and animal products, including fish. Archaeologists have been able to reconstruct dietary practices from finds of charred grains and seeds. These are studied by archaeo-botanists, who are specialists in ancient plant remains. Grains

found at Harappan sites include wheat, barley, lentil, chickpea and sesame. Millets are found from sites in Gujarat. Finds of rice are relatively rare.

Animal bones found at Harappan sites include those of cattle, sheep, goat, buffalo and pig. Studies done by archaeo-zoologists or zoo-archaeologists indicate that these animals were domesticated. Bones of wild species such as boar, deer and *gharial* are also found. We do not know whether the Harappans hunted these animals themselves or obtained meat from other hunting communities. Bones of fish and fowl are also found.

### 2.1 Agricultural technologies

While the prevalence of agriculture is indicated by finds of grain, it is more difficult to reconstruct actual agricultural practices. Were seeds broadcast (scattered) on ploughed lands? Representations on seals and terracotta sculpture indicate that the bull was known, and archaeologists extrapolate from this that oxen were used for ploughing. Moreover, terracotta models of the plough have been found at sites in Cholistan and at Banawali (Haryana). Archaeologists have also found evidence of a ploughed field at Kalibangan (Rajasthan), associated with Early Harappan levels (see p. 20). The field had two sets of furrows at right angles to each other, suggesting that two different crops were grown together.

Archaeologists have also tried to identify the tools used for harvesting. Did the Harappans use stone blades set in wooden handles or did they use metal tools?

Most Harappan sites are located in semi-arid lands, where irrigation was probably required for agriculture. Traces of canals have been found at the Harappan site of Shortughai in Afghanistan, but not in Punjab or Sind. It is possible that ancient

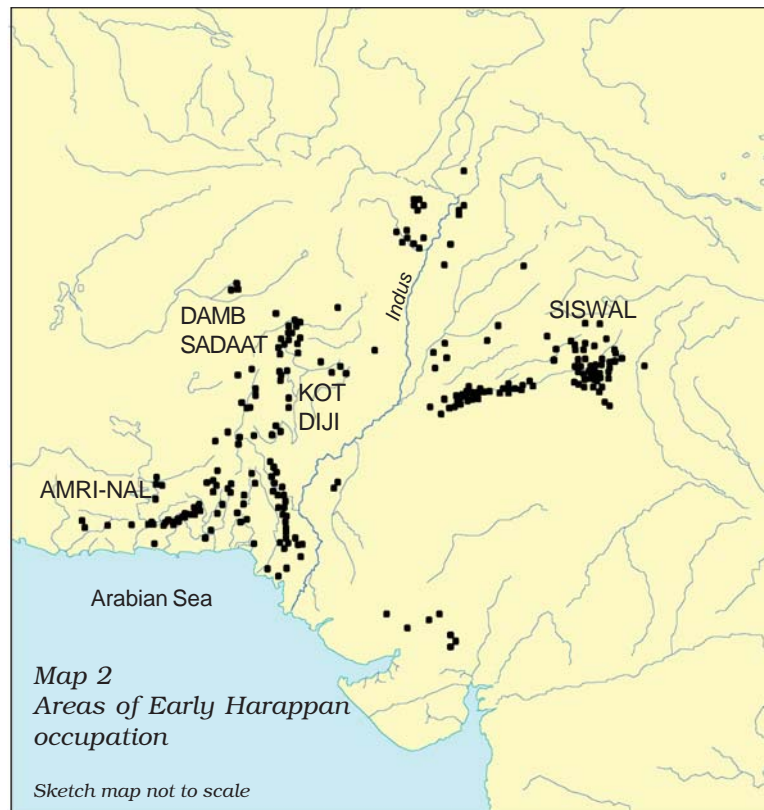


Fig. 1.3  
A terracotta bull



### ➔ Discuss...

Are there any similarities or differences in the distribution of settlements shown on Maps 1 and 2?



Fig. 1.4  
Copper tools

➤ Do you think these tools could have been used for harvesting?

Fig. 1.5  
Reservoir at Dholavira  
Note the masonry work.



### ➤ Discuss...

What is the evidence used by archaeologists to reconstruct dietary practices?

canals silted up long ago. It is also likely that water drawn from wells was used for irrigation. Besides, water reservoirs found in Dholavira (Gujarat) may have been used to store water for agriculture.

Source 1

### How artefacts are identified

Processing of food required grinding equipment as well as vessels for mixing, blending and cooking. These were made of stone, metal and terracotta. This is an excerpt from one of the earliest reports on excavations at Mohenjodaro, the best-known Harappan site:

Saddle querns ... are found in considerable numbers ... and they seem to have been the only means in use for grinding cereals. As a rule, they were roughly made of hard, gritty, igneous rock or sandstone and mostly show signs of hard usage. As their bases are usually convex, they must have been set in the earth or in mud to prevent their rocking. Two main types have been found: those on which another smaller stone was pushed or rolled to and fro, and others with which a second stone was used as a pounder, eventually making a large cavity in the nether stone. Querns of the former type were probably used solely for grain; the second type possibly only for pounding herbs and spices for making curries. In fact, stones of this latter type are dubbed "curry stones" by our workmen and our cook asked for the loan of one from the museum for use in the kitchen.

FROM ERNEST MACKAY, *Excavations at Mohenjodaro*, 1937.

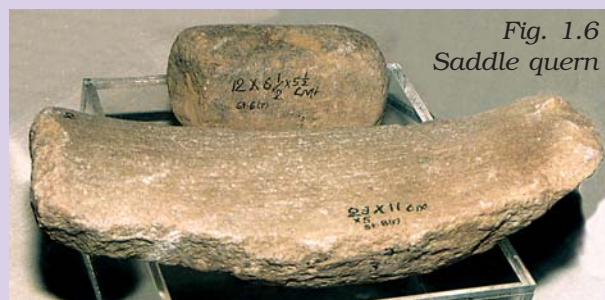


Fig. 1.6  
Saddle quern

➤ Archaeologists use present-day analogies to try and understand what ancient artefacts were used for. Mackay was comparing present-day querns with what he found. Is this a useful strategy?

### 3. MOHENJODARO

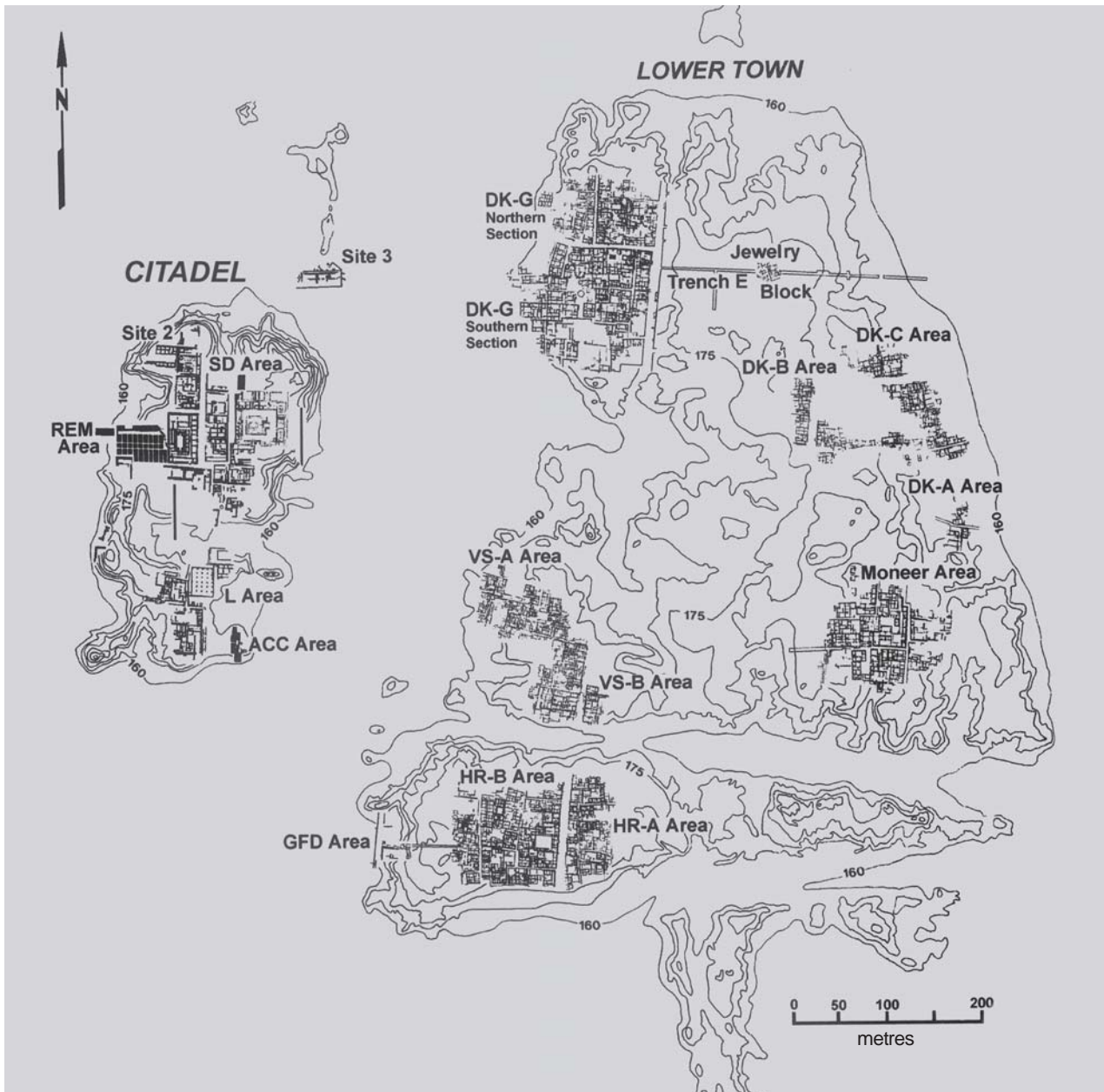
#### A PLANNED URBAN CENTRE

Perhaps the most unique feature of the Harappan civilisation was the development of urban centres. Let us look at one such centre, Mohenjodaro, more closely. Although Mohenjodaro is the most well-known site, the first site to be discovered was Harappa.

The settlement is divided into two sections, one smaller but higher and the other much larger but

Fig. 1.7  
Layout of Mohenjodaro

➡ How is the Lower Town different from the Citadel?



### The plight of Harappa

Although Harappa was the first site to be discovered, it was badly destroyed by brick robbers. As early as 1875, Alexander Cunningham, the first Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), often called the father of Indian archaeology, noted that the amount of brick taken from the ancient site was enough to lay bricks for “about 100 miles” of the railway line between Lahore and Multan. Thus, many of the ancient structures at the site were damaged. In contrast, Mohenjodaro was far better preserved.

lower. Archaeologists designate these as the Citadel and the Lower Town respectively. The Citadel owes its height to the fact that buildings were constructed on mud brick platforms. It was walled, which meant that it was physically separated from the Lower Town.

The Lower Town was also walled. Several buildings were built on platforms, which served as foundations. It has been calculated that if one labourer moved roughly a cubic metre of earth daily, just to put the foundations in place it would have required four million person-days, in other words, mobilising labour on a very large scale.

Consider something else. Once the platforms were in place, all building activity within the city was restricted to a fixed area on the platforms. So it seems that the settlement was first planned and then implemented accordingly. Other signs of planning include bricks, which, whether sun-dried or baked, were of a standardised ratio, where the length and breadth were four times and twice the height respectively. Such bricks were used at all Harappan settlements.

### 3.1 Laying out drains

One of the most distinctive features of Harappan cities was the carefully planned drainage system. If you look at the plan of the Lower Town you will notice that roads and streets were laid out along an approximate “grid” pattern, intersecting at right angles. It seems that streets with drains were laid out first and then houses built along them. If domestic waste water had to flow into the street drains, every house needed to have at least one wall along a street.

Fig. 1.8

A drain in Mohenjodaro  
Notice the huge opening of the drain.



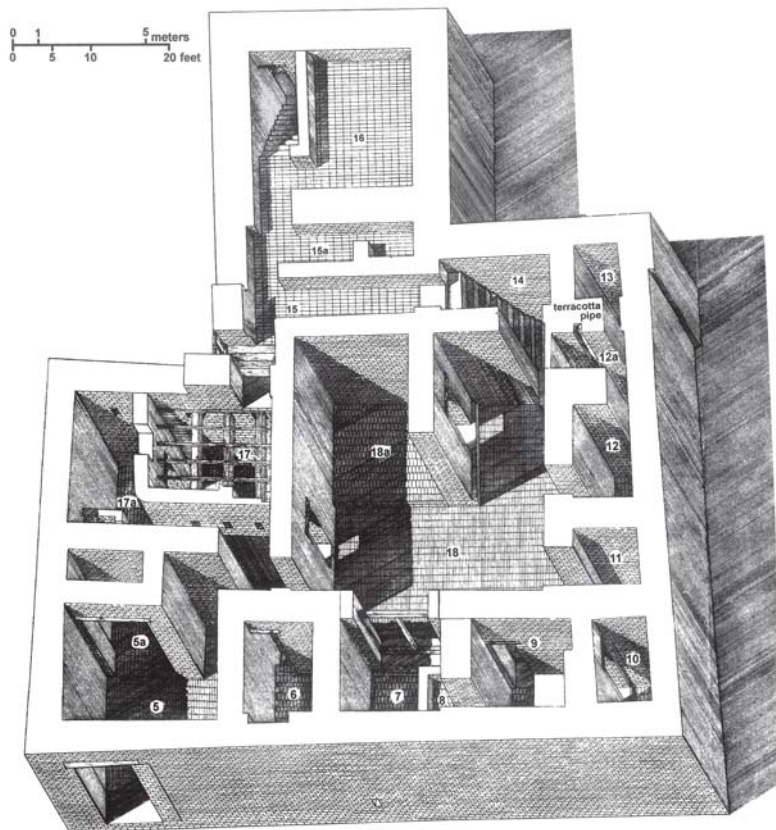
### Citadels

While most Harappan settlements have a small high western part and a larger lower eastern section, there are variations. At sites such as Dholavira and Lothal (Gujarat), the entire settlement was fortified, and sections within the town were also separated by walls. The Citadel within Lothal was not walled off, but was built at a height.

### 3.2 Domestic architecture

The Lower Town at Mohenjodaro provides examples of residential buildings. Many were centred on a courtyard, with rooms on all sides. The courtyard was probably the centre of activities such as cooking and weaving, particularly during hot and dry weather. What is also interesting is an apparent concern for privacy: there are no windows in the walls along the ground level. Besides, the main entrance does not give a direct view of the interior or the courtyard.

Every house had its own bathroom paved with bricks, with drains connected through the wall to the street drains. Some houses have remains of staircases to reach a second storey or the roof. Many houses had wells, often in a room that could be reached from the outside and perhaps used by passers-by. Scholars have estimated that the total number of wells in Mohenjodaro was about 700.



➡ Where is the courtyard? Where are the two staircases? What is the entrance to the house like?

Source 2

### The most ancient system yet discovered

About the drains, Mackay noted: "It is certainly the most complete ancient system as yet discovered." Every house was connected to the street drains. The main channels were made of bricks set in mortar and were covered with loose bricks that could be removed for cleaning. In some cases, limestone was used for the covers. House drains first emptied into a sump or cesspit into which solid matter settled while waste water flowed out into the street drains. Very long drainage channels were provided at intervals with sumps for cleaning. It is a wonder of archaeology that "little heaps of material, mostly sand, have frequently been found lying alongside drainage channels, which shows ... that the debris was not always carted away when the drain was cleared".

FROM ERNEST MACKAY, *Hduo|#Logxv Flylolvdwlrq*, 1948.

Drainage systems were not unique to the larger cities, but were found in smaller settlements as well. At Lothal for example, while houses were built of mud bricks, drains were made of burnt bricks.

Fig. 1.9

This is an isometric drawing of a large house in Mohenjodaro. There was a well in room no 6.

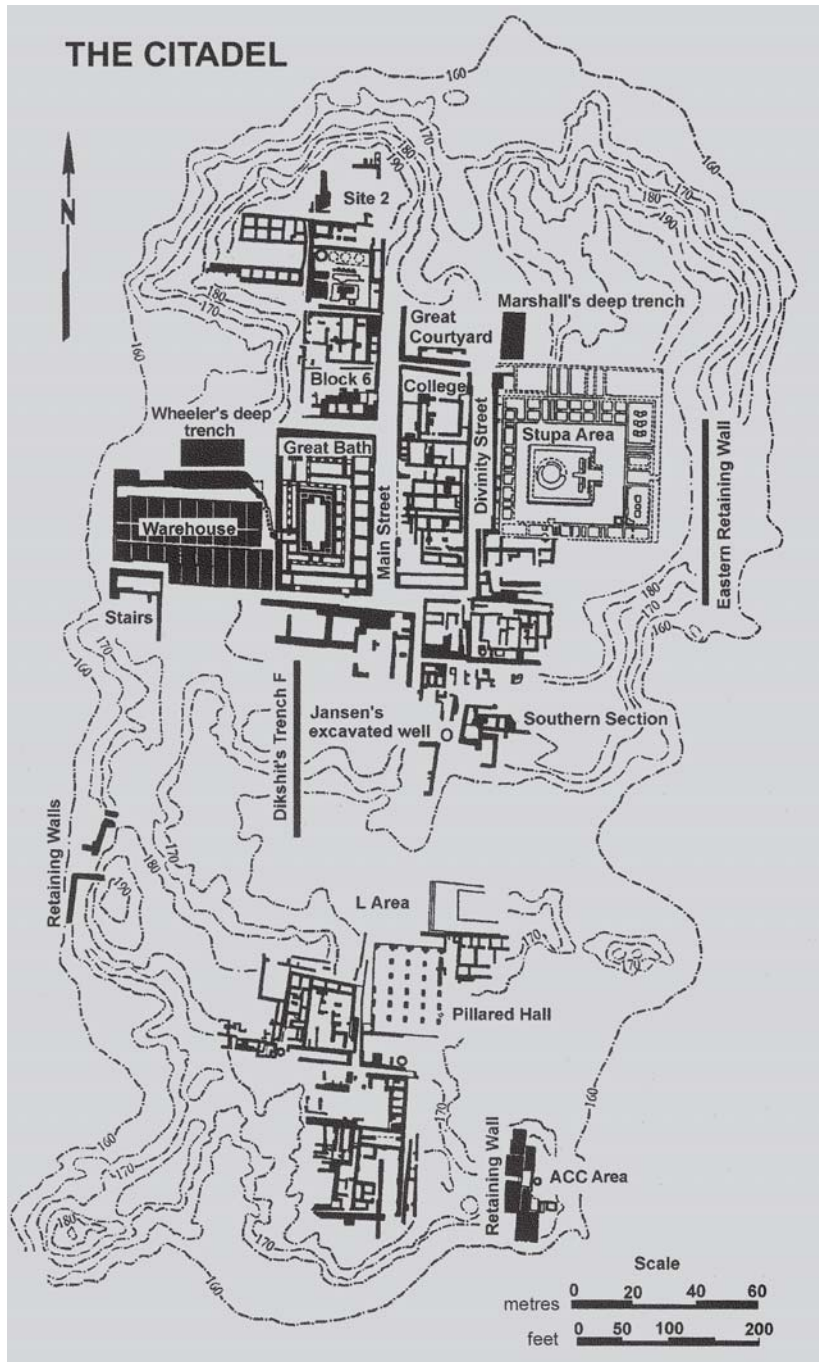


Fig. 1.10  
Plan of the Citadel

### 3.3 The Citadel

It is on the Citadel that we find evidence of structures that were probably used for special public purposes. These include the warehouse – a massive structure of which the lower brick portions remain, while the upper portions, probably of wood, decayed long ago – and the Great Bath.

The Great Bath was a large rectangular tank in a courtyard surrounded by a corridor on all four sides. There were two flights of steps on the north and south leading into the tank, which was made watertight by setting bricks on edge and using a mortar of gypsum. There were rooms on three sides, in one of which was a large well. Water from the tank flowed into a huge drain. Across a lane to the north lay a smaller building with eight bathrooms, four on each side of a corridor, with drains from each bathroom connecting to a drain that ran along the corridor. The uniqueness of the structure, as well as the *context* in which it was found (the Citadel, with several distinctive buildings), has led scholars

to suggest that it was meant for some kind of a special ritual bath.

#### ➤ Discuss...

Which of the architectural features of Mohenjodaro indicate planning?

➤ Are there other structures on the Citadel apart from the warehouse and the Great Bath?



## 4. TRACKING SOCIAL DIFFERENCES

### 4.1 Burials

Archaeologists generally use certain strategies to find out whether there were social or economic differences amongst people living within a particular culture. These include studying burials. You are probably familiar with the massive pyramids of Egypt, some of which were contemporaneous with the Harappan civilisation. Many of these pyramids were royal burials, where enormous quantities of wealth was buried.

At burials in Harappan sites the dead were generally laid in pits. Sometimes, there were differences in the way the burial pit was made – in some instances, the hollowed-out spaces were lined with bricks. Could these variations be an indication of social differences? We are not sure.

Some graves contain pottery and ornaments, perhaps indicating a belief that these could be used in the afterlife. Jewellery has been found in burials of both men and women. In fact, in the excavations at the cemetery in Harappa in the mid-1980s, an ornament consisting of three shell rings, a jasper (a kind of semi-precious stone) bead and hundreds of micro beads was found near the skull of a male. In some instances the dead were buried with copper mirrors. But on the whole, it appears that the Harappans did not believe in burying precious things with the dead.

### 4.2 Looking for “luxuries”

Another strategy to identify social differences is to study artefacts, which archaeologists broadly classify as utilitarian and luxuries. The first category includes objects of daily use made fairly easily out of ordinary materials such as stone or clay. These include querns, pottery, needles, flesh-rubbers (body scrubbers), etc., and are usually found distributed throughout settlements. Archaeologists assume objects were luxuries if they are rare or made from costly, non-local materials or with complicated technologies. Thus, little pots of faience (a material made of ground sand or silica mixed with colour and a gum and then fired) were probably considered precious because they were difficult to make.

The situation becomes more complicated when we find what seem to be articles of daily



Fig. 1.11  
A copper mirror

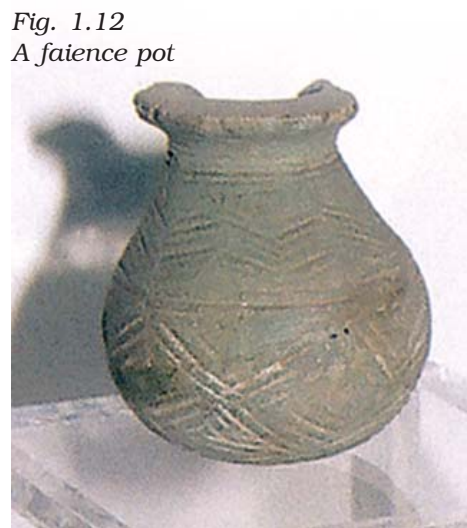


Fig. 1.12  
A faience pot

*Hoard*s are objects kept carefully by people, often inside containers such as pots. Such hoards can be of jewellery or metal objects saved for reuse by metalworkers. If for some reason the original owners do not retrieve them, they remain where they are left till some archaeologist finds them.

### ➔ Discuss...

What are the modes of disposal of the dead prevalent at present? To what extent do these represent social differences?

use, such as spindle whorls made of rare materials such as faience. Do we classify these as utilitarian or luxuries?

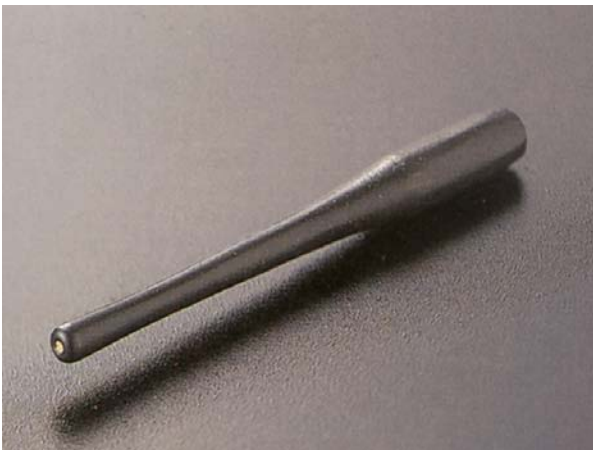
If we study the distribution of such artefacts, we find that rare objects made of valuable materials are generally concentrated in large settlements like Mohenjodaro and Harappa and are rarely found in the smaller settlements. For example, miniature pots of faience, perhaps used as perfume bottles, are found mostly in Mohenjodaro and Harappa, and there are none from small settlements like Kalibangan. Gold too was rare, and as at present, probably precious – all the gold jewellery found at Harappan sites was recovered from hoards.

## 5. FINDING OUT ABOUT CRAFT PRODUCTION

Locate Chanhudaro on Map 1. This is a tiny settlement (less than 7 hectares) as compared to Mohenjodaro (125 hectares), almost exclusively devoted to craft production, including bead-making, shell-cutting, metal-working, seal-making and weight-making.

The variety of materials used to make beads is remarkable: stones like carnelian (of a beautiful red colour), jasper, crystal, quartz and steatite; metals like copper, bronze and gold; and shell, faience and terracotta or burnt clay. Some beads were made of two or more stones, cemented together, some of stone with gold caps. The shapes were numerous – disc-shaped, cylindrical, spherical, barrel-shaped, segmented. Some were decorated by incising or painting, and some had designs etched onto them.

Fig. 1.13  
A tool and beads



Techniques for making beads differed according to the material. Steatite, a very soft stone, was easily worked. Some beads were moulded out of a paste made with steatite powder. This permitted making a variety of shapes, unlike the geometrical forms made out of harder stones. How the steatite micro bead was made remains a puzzle for archaeologists studying ancient technology.

Archaeologists' experiments have revealed that the red colour of carnelian was obtained by firing the yellowish raw material and beads at various stages of production. Nodules were chipped into rough shapes, and then finely flaked into the final form. Grinding, polishing and drilling completed the process. Specialised drills have been found at Chanhudaro, Lothal and more recently at Dholavira.

If you locate Nageshwar and Balakot on Map 1, you will notice that both settlements are near the coast. These were specialised centres for making shell objects – including bangles, ladles and inlay – which were taken to other settlements. Similarly, it is likely that finished products (such as beads) from Chanhudaro and Lothal were taken to the large urban centres such as Mohenjodaro and Harappa.



### 5.1 Identifying centres of production

In order to identify centres of craft production, archaeologists usually look for the following: raw material such as stone nodules, whole shells, copper ore; tools; unfinished objects; rejects and waste material. In fact, waste is one of the best indicators of craft work. For instance, if shell or stone is cut to make objects, then pieces of these materials will be discarded as waste at the place of production.

Fig. 1.15  
A terracotta figurine

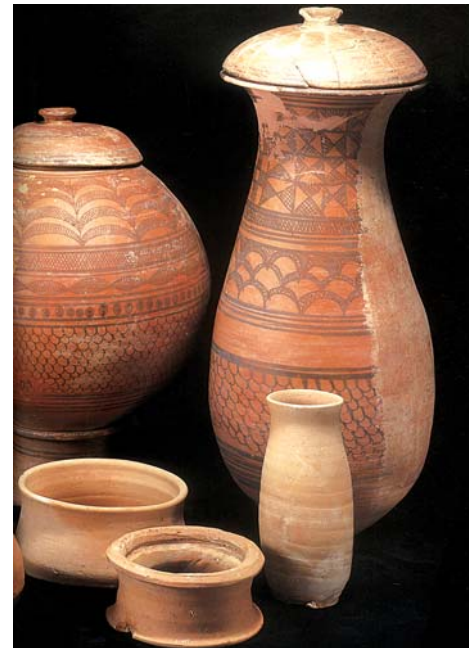


Fig. 1.14  
Pottery

Some of these can be seen in the National Museum, Delhi or in the site museum at Lothal.

### ➔ Discuss...

Should the stone artefacts illustrated in the chapter be considered as utilitarian objects or as luxuries? Are there any that may fall into both categories?



*Fig.1.16*  
*Copper and bronze vessels*

Sometimes, larger waste pieces were used up to make smaller objects, but minuscule bits were usually left in the work area. These traces suggest that apart from small, specialised centres, craft production was also undertaken in large cities such as Mohenjodaro and Harappa.

## 6. STRATEGIES FOR PROCURING MATERIALS

As is obvious, a variety of materials was used for craft production. While some such as clay were locally available, many such as stone, timber and metal had to be procured from outside the alluvial plain. Terracotta toy models of bullock carts suggest that this was one important means of transporting goods and people across land routes. Riverine routes along the Indus and its tributaries, as well as coastal routes were also probably used.

### 6.1 Materials from the subcontinent and beyond

The Harappans procured materials for craft production in various ways. For instance, they established settlements such as Nageshwar and Balakot in areas where shell was available. Other such sites were Shortughai, in far-off Afghanistan, near the best source of lapis lazuli, a blue stone that was apparently very highly valued, and Lothal which was near sources of carnelian (from Bharuch in Gujarat), steatite (from south Rajasthan and north Gujarat) and metal (from Rajasthan).

Another strategy for procuring raw materials may have been to send expeditions to areas such as the Khetri region of Rajasthan (for copper) and south India (for gold). These expeditions established communication with local communities. Occasional finds of Harappan artefacts such as steatite micro beads in these areas are indications of such contact. There is evidence in the Khetri area for what archaeologists call the Ganeshwar-Jodhpura culture, with its distinctive non-Harappan pottery and an unusual wealth of copper objects. It is possible that the inhabitants of this region supplied copper to the Harappans.

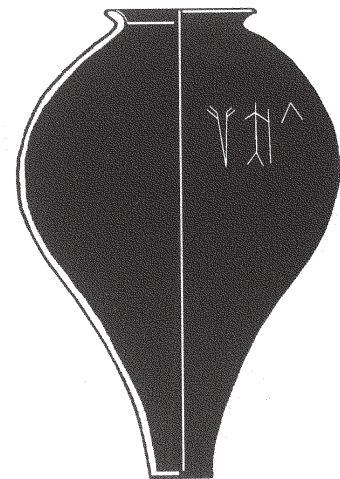


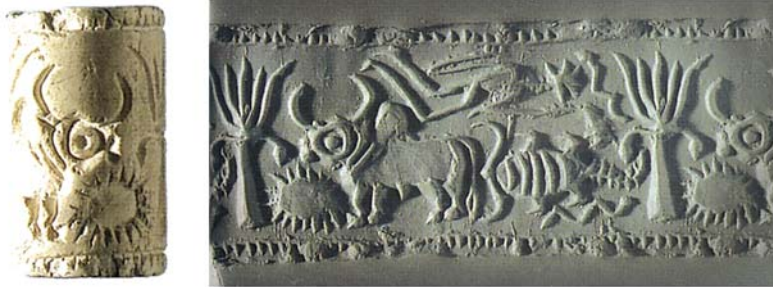
### 6.2 Contact with distant lands

Recent archaeological finds suggest that copper was also probably brought from Oman, on the south-eastern tip of the Arabian peninsula. Chemical analyses have shown that both the Omani copper and Harappan artefacts have traces of nickel, suggesting a common origin. There are other traces of contact as well. A distinctive type of vessel, a large Harappan jar coated with a thick layer of black clay has been found at Omani sites. Such thick coatings prevent the percolation of liquids. We do not know what was carried in these vessels, but it is possible that the Harappans exchanged the contents of these vessels for Omani copper.

Mesopotamian texts datable to the third millennium BCE refer to copper coming from a region called Magan, perhaps a name for Oman, and interestingly enough copper found at

Fig. 1.17  
A Harappan jar found in Oman





*Fig. 1.18*  
This is a cylinder seal, typical of Mesopotamia, but the humped bull motif on it appears to be derived from the Indus region.

Mesopotamian sites also contains traces of nickel. Other archaeological finds suggestive of long-distance contacts include Harappan seals, weights, dice and beads. In this context, it is worth noting that Mesopotamian texts

mention contact with regions named Dilmun (probably the island of Bahrain), Magan and Meluhha, possibly the Harappan region. They mention the products from Meluhha: carnelian, lapis lazuli, copper, gold, and varieties of wood. A Mesopotamian myth says of Meluhha: "May your bird be the *haja*-bird, may its call be heard in the royal palace." Some archaeologists think the *haja*-bird was the peacock. Did it get this name

from its call? It is likely that communication with Oman,

Bahrain or Mesopotamia was by sea. Mesopotamian texts refer to Meluhha as a land of seafarers. Besides, we find depictions of ships and boats on seals.

*Fig. 1.19*  
The round "Persian Gulf" seal found in Bahrain sometimes carries Harappan motifs. Interestingly, local "Dilmun" weights followed the Harappan standard.



*Fig. 1.20*  
Seal depicting a boat



### ➔ Discuss...

What were the possible routes from the Harappan region to Oman, Dilmun and Mesopotamia?

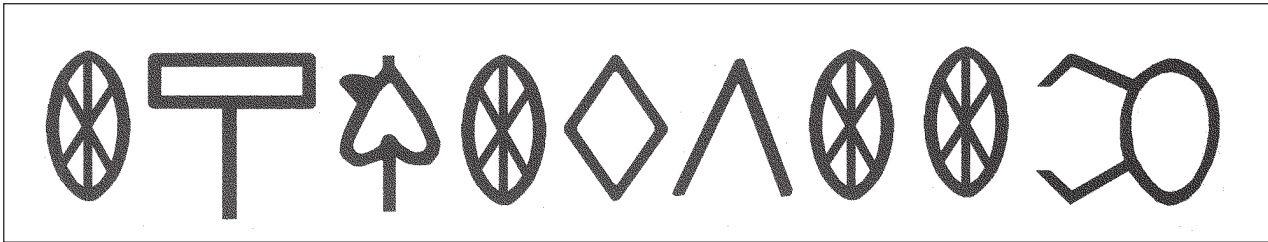


Fig. 1.21  
Letters on an ancient signboard

## 7. SEALS, SCRIPT, WEIGHTS

### 7.1 Seals and sealings

Seals and sealings were used to facilitate long-distance communication. Imagine a bag of goods being sent from one place to another. Its mouth was tied with rope and on the knot was affixed some wet clay on which one or more seals were pressed, leaving an impression. If the bag reached with its sealing intact, it meant that it had not been tampered with. The sealing also conveyed the identity of the sender.

### 7.2 An enigmatic script

Harappan seals usually have a line of writing, probably containing the name and title of the owner. Scholars have also suggested that the motif (generally an animal) conveyed a meaning to those who could not read.

Most inscriptions are short, the longest containing about 26 signs. Although the script remains undeciphered to date, it was evidently not alphabetical (where each sign stands for a vowel or a consonant) as it has just too many signs – somewhere between 375 and 400. It is apparent that the script was written from right to left as some seals show a wider spacing on the right and cramping on the left, as if the engraver began working from the right and then ran out of space.

Consider the variety of objects on which writing has been found: seals, copper tools, rims of jars, copper and terracotta tablets, jewellery, bone rods, even an ancient signboard! Remember, there may have been writing on perishable materials too. Could this mean that literacy was widespread?

### 7.3 Weights

Exchanges were regulated by a precise system of weights, usually made of a stone called chert and generally cubical (Fig. 1.2), with no markings. The



Fig. 1.22  
A sealing from Ropar

➡ How many seals are impressed on this piece of clay?

### ➡ Discuss...

What are some of the present-day methods used for long-distance exchange of goods? What are their advantages and problems?

lower denominations of weights were binary (1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, etc. up to 12,800), while the higher denominations followed the decimal system. The smaller weights were probably used for weighing jewellery and beads. Metal scale-pans have also been found.

## 8. ANCIENT AUTHORITY

There are indications of complex decisions being taken and implemented in Harappan society. Take for instance, the extraordinary uniformity of Harappan artefacts as evident in pottery (Fig. 1.14), seals, weights and bricks. Notably, bricks, though obviously not produced in any single centre, were of a uniform ratio throughout the region, from Jammu to Gujarat. We have also seen that settlements were strategically set up in specific locations for various reasons. Besides, labour was mobilised for making bricks and for the construction of massive walls and platforms.

Who organised these activities?

### 8.1 Palaces and kings

If we look for a centre of power or for depictions of people in power, archaeological records provide no immediate answers. A large building found at Mohenjodaro was labelled as a palace by archaeologists but no spectacular finds were associated with it. A stone statue was labelled and continues to be known as the “priest-king”. This is because archaeologists were familiar with Mesopotamian history and its “priest-kings” and have found parallels in the Indus region. But as we will see (p.23), the ritual practices of the Harappan civilisation are not well understood yet nor are there any means of knowing whether those who performed them also held political power.

Some archaeologists are of the opinion that Harappan society had no rulers, and that everybody enjoyed equal status. Others feel there was no single ruler but several, that Mohenjodaro had a separate ruler, Harappa another, and so forth. Yet others argue that there was a single state, given the similarity in artefacts, the evidence for planned settlements, the standardised ratio of brick size, and the establishment of settlements near sources of raw



Fig. 1.23  
A “priest-king”

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### ➤ Discuss...

Could everybody in Harappan society have been equal?



material. As of now, the last theory seems the most plausible, as it is unlikely that entire communities could have collectively made and implemented such complex decisions.

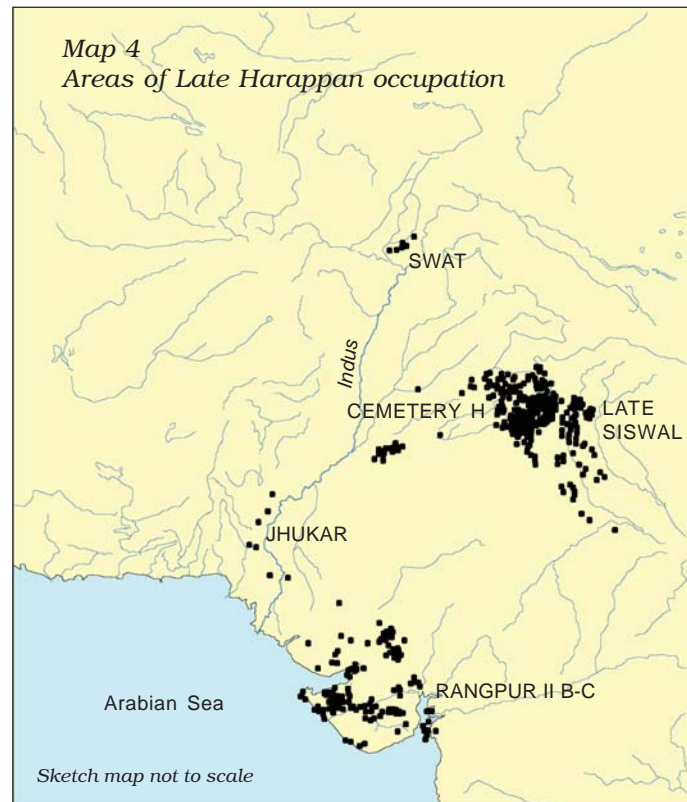
## 9. THE END OF THE CIVILISATION

There is evidence that by c. 1800 BCE most of the Mature Harappan sites in regions such as Cholistan had been abandoned. Simultaneously, there was an expansion of population into new settlements in Gujarat, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh.

In the few Harappan sites that continued to be occupied after 1900 BCE there appears to have been a transformation of material culture, marked by the disappearance of the distinctive artefacts of the civilisation – weights, seals, special beads. Writing, long-distance trade, and craft specialisation also disappeared. In general, far fewer materials were used to make far fewer things. House construction techniques deteriorated and large public structures were no longer produced. Overall, artefacts and settlements indicate a rural way of life in what are called “Late Harappan” or “successor cultures”.

What brought about these changes? Several explanations have been put forward. These range from climatic change, deforestation, excessive floods, the shifting and/or drying up of rivers, to overuse of the landscape. Some of these “causes” may hold for certain settlements, but they do not explain the collapse of the entire civilisation.

It appears that a strong unifying element, perhaps the Harappan state, came to an end. This is evidenced by the disappearance of seals, the script, distinctive beads and pottery, the shift from a standardised weight system to the use of local weights; and the decline and abandonment of cities. The subcontinent would have to wait for over a millennium for new cities to develop in a completely different region.



## Source 3

## Evidence of an “invasion”

Deadman Lane is a narrow alley, varying from 3 to 6 feet in width ... At the point where the lane turns westward, part of a skull and the bones of the thorax and upper arm of an adult were discovered, all in very friable condition, at a depth of 4 ft 2 in. The body lay on its back diagonally across the lane. Fifteen inches to the west were a few fragments of a tiny skull. It is to these remains that the lane owes its name.

FROM JOHN MARSHALL, *Prakhyaṅgādur#dḡḡ#wkḡ#Lḡḡv#Flylḡlvdwlrq*, 1931.

Sixteen skeletons of people with the ornaments that they were wearing when they died were found from the same part of Mohenjodaro in 1925.

Much later, in 1947, R.E.M. Wheeler, then Director-General of the ASI, tried to correlate this archaeological evidence with that of the *ḡlḡyḡḡd/#the earliest known text in the subcontinent*. He wrote:

The *ḡlḡyḡḡd* mentions *sxḡl*, meaning rampart, fort or stronghold. Indra, the Aryan war-god is called *sxudḡḡdud*, the fort-destroyer.

Where are – or were – these citadels? It has in the past been supposed that they were mythical ... The recent excavation of Harappa may be thought to have changed the picture. Here we have a highly evolved civilisation of essentially non-Aryan type, now known to have employed massive fortifications ... What destroyed this firmly settled civilisation? Climatic, economic or political deterioration may have weakened it, but its ultimate extinction is more likely to have been completed by deliberate and large-scale destruction. It may be no mere chance that at a late period of Mohenjodaro men, women, and children, appear to have been massacred there. On circumstantial evidence, Indra stands accused.

FROM R.E.M. WHEELER, “Harappa 1946”, *Dḡflḡḡw#Lḡḡld/#1947*.

In the 1960s, the evidence of a massacre in Mohenjodaro was questioned by an archaeologist named George Dales. He demonstrated that the skeletons found at the site did not belong to the same period:

Whereas a couple of them definitely seem to indicate a slaughter, *ḡ* the bulk of the bones were found in contexts suggesting burials of the sloppiest and most irreverent nature. There is no destruction level covering the latest period of the city, no sign of extensive burning, no bodies of warriors clad in armour and surrounded by the weapons of war. The citadel, the only fortified part of the city, yielded no evidence of a final defence.

FROM G.F. DALES, “The Mythical Massacre at Mohenjodaro”, *H{shḡlwrq#1964*.

As you can see, a careful re-examination of the data can sometimes lead to a reversal of earlier interpretations.

### ➔ Discuss...

What are the similarities and differences between Maps 1, 2 and 4?

## 10. DISCOVERING THE HARAPPAN CIVILISATION

So far, we have examined facets of the Harappan civilisation in the context of how archaeologists have used evidence from material remains to piece together parts of a fascinating history. However, there is another story as well – about how archaeologists “discovered” the civilisation.

When Harappan cities fell into ruin, people gradually forgot all about them. When men and women began living in the area millennia later, they did not know what to make of the strange artefacts that occasionally surfaced, washed by floods or exposed by soil erosion, or turned up while ploughing a field, or digging for treasure.

### 10.1 Cunningham’s confusion

When Cunningham, the first Director-General of the ASI, began archaeological excavations in the mid-nineteenth century, archaeologists preferred to use the written word (texts and inscriptions) as a guide to investigations. In fact, Cunningham’s main interest was in the archaeology of the Early Historic (c. sixth century BCE-fourth century CE) and later periods. He used the accounts left by Chinese Buddhist pilgrims who had visited the subcontinent between the fourth and seventh centuries CE to locate early settlements. Cunningham also collected, documented and translated inscriptions found during his surveys. When he excavated sites he tended to recover artefacts that he thought had cultural value.

A site like Harappa, which was not part of the itinerary of the Chinese pilgrims and was not known as an Early Historic city, did not fit very neatly within his framework of investigation. So, although Harappan artefacts were found fairly often during the nineteenth century and some of these reached Cunningham, he did not realise how old these were.

A Harappan seal was given to Cunningham by an Englishman. He noted the object, but unsuccessfully tried to place it within the time-frame with which he was familiar. This was because he, like many others, thought that Indian history began with the first cities in the Ganga valley (see Chapter 2). Given his specific focus, it is not surprising that he missed the significance of Harappa.

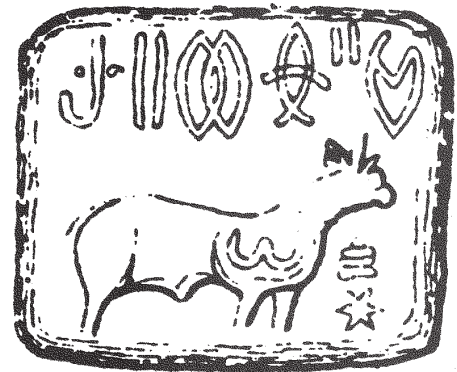


Fig. 1.24  
Cunningham's sketch of the first-known seal from Harappa

### Sites, mounds, layers

Archaeological sites are formed through the production, use and discarding of materials and structures. When people continue to live in the same place, their constant use and reuse of the landscape results in the build up of occupational debris, called a mound. Brief or permanent abandonment results in alteration of the landscape by wind or water activity and erosion. Occupations are detected by traces of ancient materials found in layers, which differ from one another in colour, texture and the artefacts that are found in them. Abandonment or desertions, what are called "sterile layers", can be identified by the absence of such traces.

Generally, the lowest layers are the oldest and the highest are the most recent. The study of these layers is called stratigraphy. Artefacts found in layers can be assigned to specific periods and can thus provide the chronology for a site.

### 10.2 A new old civilisation

Subsequently, seals were discovered at Harappa by archaeologists such as Daya Ram Sahni in the early decades of the twentieth century, in layers that were definitely much older than Early Historic levels. It was then that their significance began to be realised. Another archaeologist, Rakhal Das Banerji found similar seals at Mohenjodaro, leading to the conjecture that these sites were part of a single archaeological culture. Based on these finds, in 1924, John Marshall, Director-General of the ASI, announced the discovery of a new civilisation in the Indus valley to the world. As S.N. Roy noted in *The Story of Indian Archaeology*, "Marshall left India three thousand years older than he had found her." This was because similar, till-then-unidentified seals were found at excavations at Mesopotamian sites. It was then that the world knew not only of a new civilisation, but also of one contemporaneous with Mesopotamia.

In fact, John Marshall's stint as Director-General of the ASI marked a major change in Indian archaeology. He was the first professional archaeologist to work in India, and brought his experience of working in Greece and Crete to the field. More importantly, though like Cunningham he too was interested in spectacular finds, he was equally keen to look for patterns of everyday life.

Marshall tended to excavate along regular horizontal units, measured uniformly throughout the mound, ignoring the stratigraphy of the site. This meant that all the artefacts recovered from the same unit were grouped together, even if they were found at different stratigraphic layers. As a result, valuable

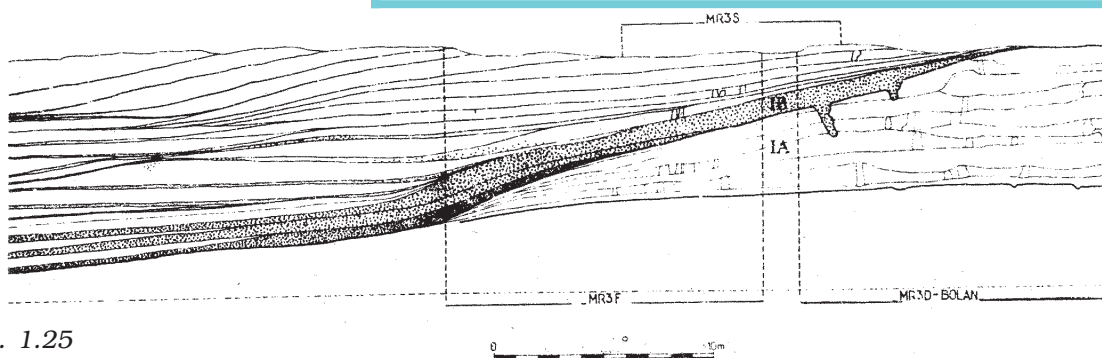


Fig. 1.25  
The stratigraphy of a small mound  
Notice that the layers are not exactly horizontal.

information about the context of these finds was irretrievably lost.

### 10.3 New techniques and questions

It was R.E.M. Wheeler, after he took over as Director-General of the ASI in 1944, who rectified this problem. Wheeler recognised that it was necessary to follow the stratigraphy of the mound rather than dig mechanically along uniform horizontal lines. Moreover, as an ex-army brigadier, he brought with him a military precision to the practice of archaeology.

The frontiers of the Harappan civilisation have little or no connection with present-day national boundaries. However, with the partition of the subcontinent and the creation of Pakistan, the major sites are now in Pakistani territory. This has spurred Indian archaeologists to try and locate sites in India. An extensive survey in Kutch has revealed a number of Harappan settlements and explorations in Punjab and Haryana have added to the list of Harappan sites. While Kalibangan, Lothal, Rakhi Garhi and most recently Dholavira have been discovered, explored and excavated as part of these efforts, fresh explorations continue.

Over the decades, new issues have assumed importance. Where some archaeologists are often keen to obtain a cultural sequence, others try to understand the logic underlying the location of specific sites. They also grapple with the wealth of artefacts, trying to figure out the functions these may have served.

Since the 1980s, there has also been growing international interest in Harappan archaeology. Specialists from the subcontinent and abroad have been jointly working at both Harappa and Mohenjodaro. They are using modern scientific techniques including surface exploration to recover traces of clay, stone, metal and plant and animal remains as well as to minutely analyse every scrap of available evidence. These explorations promise to yield interesting results in the future.

### ➤ Discuss...

Which of the themes in this chapter would have interested Cunningham? Which are the issues that have been of interest since 1947?

### Wheeler at Harappa

Early archaeologists were often driven by a sense of adventure. This is what Wheeler wrote about his experience at Harappa:

It was, I recall, on a warm May night in 1944 that a four miles' *wrqtjd-ride* brought me as the newly appointed Director General of the Archaeological Survey with my local Muslim officer from a little railway-station labelled "Harappa" along a deep sand track to a small rest-house beside the moonlit mounds of the ancient site. Warned by my anxious colleague that we must start our inspection at 5.30 next morning and finish by 7.30 "after which it would be too hot", we turned in with the dark figure of the *sxqnd-zdod* crouched patiently in the entrance and the night air rent by innumerable jackals in the neighbouring wilderness.

Next morning, punctually at 5.30, our little procession started out towards the sandy heaps. Within ten minutes I stopped and rubbed my eyes as I gazed upon the tallest mound, scarcely trusting my vision. Six hours later my embarrassed staff and I were still toiling with picks and knives under the blazing sun, the mad sahib (I am afraid) setting a relentless pace.

FROM R.E.M. WHEELER,  
P|#Dufkdhrorjlfdo#Plvvlrq  
wr#Logld#dog#Schlwdb/# 1976.

## 11. PROBLEMS OF PIECING TOGETHER THE PAST

As we have seen, it is not the Harappan script that helps in understanding the ancient civilisation. Rather, it is material evidence that allows archaeologists to better reconstruct Harappan life. This material could be pottery, tools, ornaments, household objects, etc. Organic materials such as cloth, leather, wood and reeds generally decompose, especially in tropical regions. What survive are stone, burnt clay (or terracotta), metal, etc.

It is also important to remember that only broken or useless objects would have been thrown away. Other things would probably have been recycled. Consequently, valuable artefacts that are found intact were either lost in the past or hoarded and never retrieved. In other words, such finds are accidental rather than typical.

### 11.1 Classifying finds

Recovering artefacts is just the beginning of the archaeological enterprise. Archaeologists then classify their finds. One simple principle of classification is in terms of material, such as stone, clay, metal, bone, ivory, etc. The second, and more complicated, is in terms of function: archaeologists have to decide whether, for instance, an artefact is a tool or an ornament, or both, or something meant for ritual use.

An understanding of the function of an artefact is often shaped by its resemblance with present-day things – beads, querns, stone blades and pots are obvious examples. Archaeologists also try to identify the function of an artefact by investigating the context in which it was found: was it found in a house, in a drain, in a grave, in a kiln?

Sometimes, archaeologists have to take recourse to indirect evidence. For instance, though there are traces of cotton at some Harappan sites, to find out about clothing we have to depend on indirect evidence including depictions in sculpture.

Archaeologists have to develop frames of reference. We have seen that the first Harappan seal that was found could not be understood till archaeologists had a context in which to place it – both in terms of the cultural sequence in which it was found, and in terms of a comparison with finds in Mesopotamia.

### 11.2 Problems of interpretation

The problems of archaeological interpretation are perhaps most evident in attempts to reconstruct religious practices. Early archaeologists thought that certain objects which seemed unusual or unfamiliar may have had a religious significance. These included terracotta figurines of women, heavily jewelled, some with elaborate head-dresses. These were regarded as mother goddesses. Rare stone statuary of men in an almost standardised posture, seated with one hand on the knee – such as the “priest-king” – was also similarly classified. In other instances, structures have been assigned ritual significance. These include the Great Bath and fire altars found at Kalibangan and Lothal.

Attempts have also been made to reconstruct religious beliefs and practices by examining seals, some of which seem to depict ritual scenes. Others, with plant motifs, are thought to indicate nature worship. Some animals – such as the one-horned animal, often called the “unicorn” – depicted on seals seem to be mythical, composite creatures. In some seals, a figure shown seated cross-legged in a “yogic” posture, sometimes surrounded by animals, has been regarded as a depiction of “proto-Shiva”, that is, an early form of one of the major deities of Hinduism. Besides, conical stone objects have been classified as *lingas*.

Many reconstructions of Harappan religion are made on the assumption that later traditions provide parallels with earlier ones. This is because archaeologists often move from the known to the unknown, that is, from the present to the past. While this is plausible in the case of stone querns and pots, it becomes more speculative when we extend it to “religious” symbols.

Let us look, for instance, at the “proto-Shiva” seals. The earliest religious text, the *Rigveda* (compiled c. 1500-1000 BCE) mentions a god named Rudra, which is a name used for Shiva in later Puranic traditions (in the first millennium CE; see also Chapter 4). However, unlike Shiva, Rudra in the *Rigveda* is neither depicted as Pashupati (lord of animals in general and cattle in particular), nor as a yogi. In other words, this depiction does not match the description of Rudra in the *Rigveda*. Is this, then, possibly a shaman as some scholars have suggested?



Fig. 1.26  
Was this a mother goddess?



Fig. 1.27  
A “proto-Shiva” seal

A *linga* is a polished stone that is worshipped as a symbol of Shiva.

*Shamans* are men and women who claim magical and healing powers, as well as an ability to communicate with the other world.

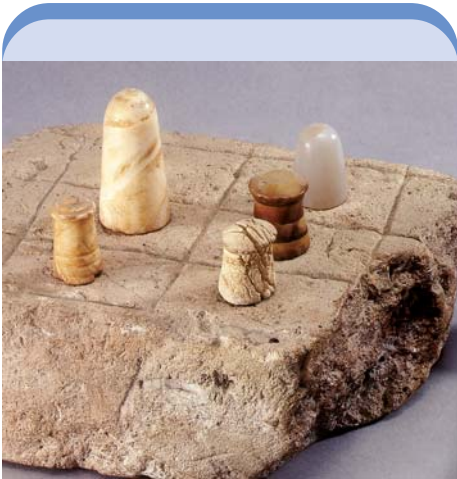


Fig. 1.28  
Gamesmen or lingas?

This is what Mackay, one of the earliest excavators, had to say about these stones:

Various small cones made of lapis lazuli, jasper, chalcedony, and other stones, most beautifully cut and finished, and less than two inches in height, are also thought to be *olqjdv#ŷ* on the other hand, it is just as possible that they were used in the board-games ...

FROM ERNEST MACKAY, *Hāuo|*  
*lgxv#Flylolvdwlrq*, 1948.

### ➔ Discuss...

What are the aspects of Harappan economy that have been reconstructed from archaeological evidence?

What has been achieved after so many decades of archaeological work? We have a fairly good idea of the Harappan economy. We have been able to tease out social differences and we have some idea of how the civilisation functioned. It is really not clear how much more we would know if the script were to be deciphered. If a bilingual inscription is found, questions about the languages spoken by the Harappans could perhaps be put to rest.

Several reconstructions remain speculative at present. Was the Great Bath a ritual structure? How widespread was literacy? Why do Harappan cemeteries show little social differentiation? Also unanswered are questions on gender – did women make pottery or did they only paint pots (as at present)? What about other craftspersons? What were the terracotta female figurines used for? Very few scholars have investigated issues of gender in the context of the Harappan civilisation and this is a whole new area for future work.



Fig. 1.29  
A terracotta cart



### TIMELINE 1

#### MAJOR PERIODS IN EARLY INDIAN ARCHAEOLOGY

2 million BP (BEFORE PRESENT)	Lower Palaeolithic
80,000	Middle Palaeolithic
35,000	Upper Palaeolithic
12,000	Mesolithic
10,000	Neolithic (early agriculturists and pastoralists)
6,000	Chalcolithic (first use of copper)
2600 BCE	Harappan civilisation
1000 BCE	Early iron, megalithic burials
600 BCE-400 CE	Early Historic

*(Note: All dates are approximate. Besides, there are wide variations in developments in different parts of the subcontinent. Dates indicated are for the earliest evidence of each phase.)*

### TIMELINE 2

#### MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS IN HARAPPAN ARCHAEOLOGY

##### **Nineteenth century**

1875	Report of Alexander Cunningham on Harappan seal
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##### **Twentieth century**

1921	M.S. Vats begins excavations at Harappa
1925	Excavations begin at Mohenjodaro
1946	R.E.M. Wheeler excavates at Harappa
1955	S.R. Rao begins excavations at Lothal
1960	B.B. Lal and B.K. Thapar begin excavations at Kalibangan
1974	M.R. Mughal begins explorations in Bahawalpur
1980	A team of German and Italian archaeologists begins surface explorations at Mohenjodaro
1986	American team begins excavations at Harappa
1990	R.S. Bisht begins excavations at Dholavira



Fig. 1.30  
A Harappan burial



**ANSWER IN  
100-150 WORDS**

1. List the items of food available to people in Harappan cities. Identify the groups who would have provided these.
2. How do archaeologists trace socio-economic differences in Harappan society? What are the differences that they notice?
3. Would you agree that the drainage system in Harappan cities indicates town planning? Give reasons for your answer.
4. List the materials used to make beads in the Harappan civilisation. Describe the process by which any one kind of bead was made.
5. Look at Fig. 1.30 and describe what you see. How is the body placed? What are the objects placed near it? Are there any artefacts on the body? Do these indicate the sex of the skeleton?



### WRITE A SHORT ESSAY (ABOUT 500 WORDS) ON THE FOLLOWING:

6. Describe some of the distinctive features of Mohenjodaro.
7. List the raw materials required for craft production in the Harappan civilisation and discuss how these might have been obtained.
8. Discuss how archaeologists reconstruct the past.
9. Discuss the functions that may have been performed by rulers in Harappan society.



### MAP WORK

10. On Map 1, use a pencil to circle sites where evidence of agriculture has been recovered. Mark an X against sites where there is evidence of craft production and R against sites where raw materials were found.



### PROJECT (ANY ONE)

11. Find out if there are any museums in your town. Visit one of them and write a report on any ten items, describing how old they are, where they were found, and why you think they are on display.
12. Collect illustrations of ten things made of stone, metal and clay produced and used at present. Match these with the pictures of the Harappan civilisation in this chapter, and discuss the similarities and differences that you find.



#### If you would like to know more, read:

Raymond and Bridget Allchin. 1997. *Ruins of the Indus Valley Civilization*. Viking, New Delhi.

G.L. Possehl. 2003. *The Indus Civilization*. Vistaar, New Delhi.

Shereen Ratnagar. 2001. *The Harappan Civilization*. Tulika, New Delhi.



#### For more information, you could visit:

<http://www.harappa.com/har/harres0.html>

## THEME TWO

# KINGS, FARMERS AND TOWNS

## EARLY STATES AND ECONOMIES

(C. 600 BCE-600 CE)

There were several developments in different parts of the subcontinent during the long span of 1,500 years following the end of the Harappan civilisation. This was also the period during which the *Rigveda* was composed by people living along the Indus and its tributaries. Agricultural



Fig. 2.1  
An inscription, Sanchi  
(Madhya Pradesh),  
c. second century BCE

settlements emerged in many parts of the subcontinent, including north India, the Deccan Plateau, and parts of Karnataka. Besides, there is evidence of pastoral populations in the Deccan and further south. New modes of disposal of the dead, including the making of elaborate stone structures known as megaliths, emerged in central and south India from the first millennium BCE. In many cases, the dead were buried with a rich range of iron tools and weapons.

From c. sixth century BCE, there is evidence that there were other trends as well. Perhaps the most visible was the emergence of early states, empires and kingdoms. Underlying these political processes were other changes, evident in the ways in which agricultural production was organised. Simultaneously, new towns appeared almost throughout the subcontinent.

Historians attempt to understand these developments by drawing on a range of sources – inscriptions, texts, coins and visual material. As we will see, this is a complex process. You will also notice that these sources do not tell the entire story.

### 1. PRINSEP AND PIYADASSI

Some of the most momentous developments in Indian epigraphy took place in the 1830s. This was when James Prinsep, an officer in the mint of the East India Company, deciphered Brahmi and Kharosthi, two scripts used in the earliest inscriptions and coins. He found that most of these mentioned a king referred to as Piyadassi – meaning “pleasant to behold”; there were a few inscriptions which also

*Epigraphy* is the study of inscriptions.

referred to the king as Asoka, one of the most famous rulers known from Buddhist texts.

This gave a new direction to investigations into early Indian political history as European and Indian scholars used inscriptions and texts composed in a variety of languages to reconstruct the lineages of major dynasties that had ruled the subcontinent. As a result, the broad contours of political history were in place by the early decades of the twentieth century.

Subsequently, scholars began to shift their focus to the *context* of political history, investigating whether there were connections between political changes and economic and social developments. It was soon realised that while there were links, these were not always simple or direct.

## 2. THE EARLIEST STATES



### 2.1 The sixteen mahajanapadas

The sixth century BCE is often regarded as a major turning point in early Indian history. It is an era associated with early states, cities, the growing use of iron, the development of coinage, etc. It also witnessed the growth of diverse systems of thought, including Buddhism and Jainism. Early Buddhist and Jaina texts (see also Chapter 4) mention, amongst other things, sixteen states known as *mahajanapadas*. Although the lists vary, some names such as Vajji, Magadha, Koshala, Kuru, Panchala, Gandhara and Avanti occur frequently. Clearly, these were amongst the most important *mahajanapadas*.

While most *mahajanapadas* were ruled by kings, some, known as *ganas* or *sanghas*, were oligarchies (p. 30), where power was shared by a number of men, often collectively called *rajas*. Both Mahavira and the Buddha (Chapter 4) belonged to such *ganas*. In some instances, as in the case of the Vajji *sangha*, the *rajas* probably controlled resources such as land collectively. Although their histories are often difficult to reconstruct due to the lack of sources, some of these states lasted for nearly a thousand years.

Each *mahajanapada* had a capital city, which was often fortified. Maintaining these fortified cities as well as providing for incipient armies and bureaucracies required resources. From c. sixth

### Inscriptions

Inscriptions are writings engraved on hard surfaces such as stone, metal or pottery. They usually record the achievements, activities or ideas of those who commissioned them and include the exploits of kings, or donations made by women and men to religious institutions. Inscriptions are virtually permanent records, some of which carry dates. Others are dated on the basis of script or styles of writing, with a fair amount of precision. For instance, in c. 250 BCE the letter “a” was written like this: . By c. 500 CE, it was written like this: .

The earliest inscriptions were in Prakrit, a name for languages used by ordinary people. Names of rulers such as Ajatasattu and Asoka, known from Prakrit texts and inscriptions, have been spelt in their Prakrit forms in this chapter. You will also find terms in languages such as Pali, Tamil and Sanskrit, which too were used to write inscriptions and texts. It is possible that people spoke in other languages as well, even though these were not used for writing.

*Janapada*, meaning the land where a *jana* (a people, clan or tribe) sets its foot or settles. It is a word used in both Prakrit and Sanskrit.



➡ Which were the areas where states and cities were most densely clustered?

*Oligarchy* refers to a form of government where power is exercised by a group of men. The Roman Republic, about which you read last year, was an oligarchy in spite of its name.

century BCE onwards, Brahmanas began composing Sanskrit texts known as the Dharmasutras. These laid down norms for rulers (as well as for other social categories), who were ideally expected to be Kshatriyas (see also Chapter 3). Rulers were advised to collect taxes and tribute from cultivators, traders and artisans. Were resources also procured from pastoralists and forest peoples? We do not really know. What we do know is that raids on neighbouring states were recognised as a legitimate means of acquiring wealth. Gradually, some states acquired standing armies and maintained regular bureaucracies. Others continued to depend on militia, recruited, more often than not, from the peasantry.

## 2.2 First amongst the sixteen: Magadha

Between the sixth and the fourth centuries BCE, Magadha (in present-day Bihar) became the most powerful *mahajanapada*. Modern historians explain this development in a variety of ways: Magadha was a region where agriculture was especially productive. Besides, iron mines (in present-day Jharkhand) were accessible and provided resources for tools and weapons. Elephants, an important component of the army, were found in forests in the region. Also, the Ganga and its tributaries provided a means of cheap and convenient communication. However, early Buddhist and Jaina writers who wrote about Magadha attributed its power to the policies of individuals: ruthlessly ambitious kings of whom Bimbisara, Ajatasattu and Mahapadma Nanda are the best known, and their ministers, who helped implement their policies.

Initially, Rajagaha (the Prakrit name for present-day Rajgir in Bihar) was the capital of Magadha. Interestingly, the old name means “house of the king”. Rajagaha was a fortified settlement, located amongst hills. Later, in the fourth century BCE, the capital was shifted to Pataliputra, present-day Patna, commanding routes of communication along the Ganga.

### ➔ Discuss...

What are the different explanations offered by early writers and present-day historians for the growth of Magadhan power?

Fig. 2.2  
Fortification walls at Rajgir

➔ Why were these walls built?



### Languages and scripts

Most Asokan inscriptions were in the Prakrit language while those in the northwest of the subcontinent were in Aramaic and Greek. Most Prakrit inscriptions were written in the Brahmi script; however, some, in the northwest, were written in Kharosthi. The Aramaic and Greek scripts were used for inscriptions in Afghanistan.



Fig. 2.3  
The lion capital

➔ Why is the lion capital considered important today?

## 3. AN EARLY EMPIRE

The growth of Magadha culminated in the emergence of the Mauryan Empire. Chandragupta Maurya, who founded the empire (c. 321 BCE), extended control as far northwest as Afghanistan and Baluchistan, and his grandson Asoka, arguably the most famous ruler of early India, conquered Kalinga (present-day coastal Orissa).

### 3.1 Finding out about the Mauryas

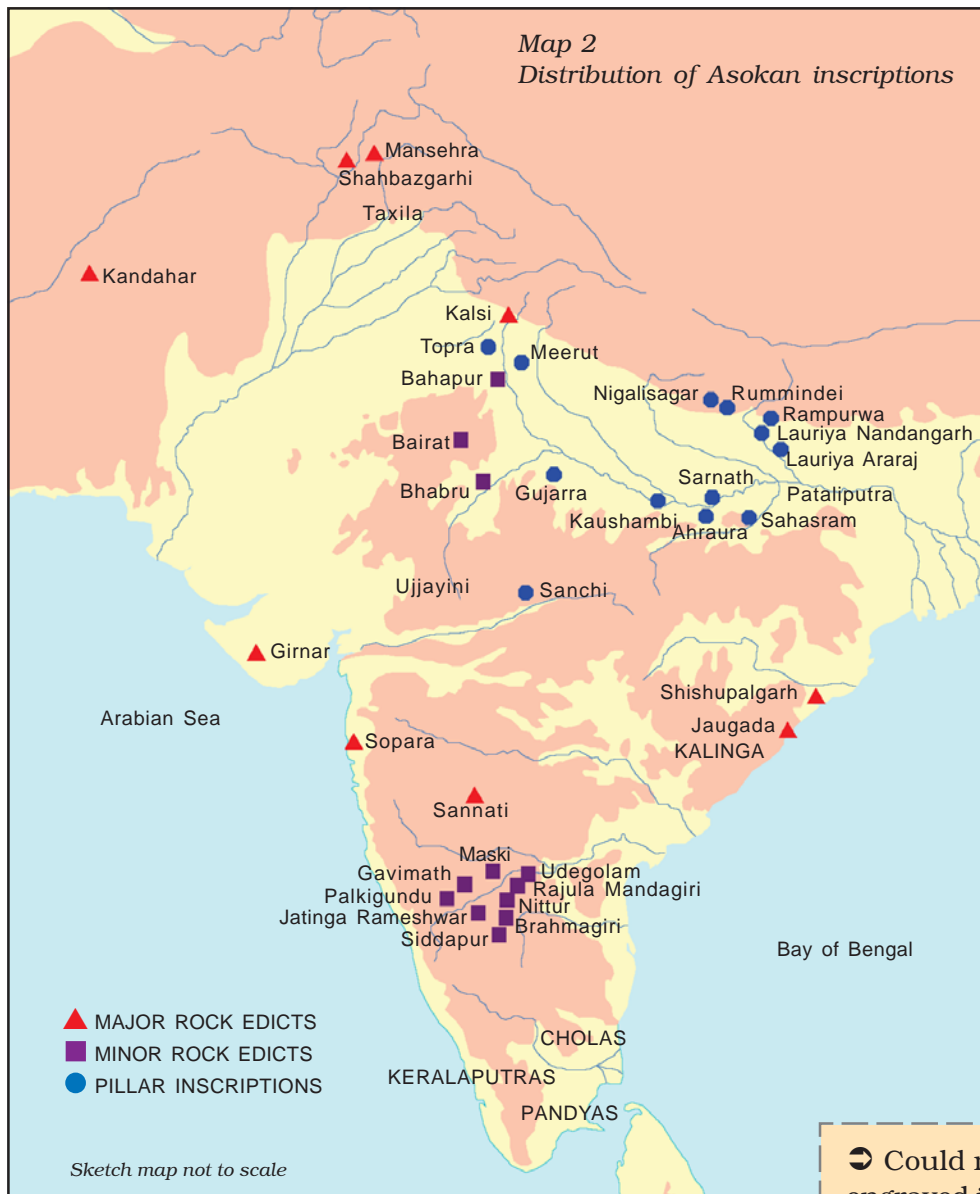
Historians have used a variety of sources to reconstruct the history of the Mauryan Empire. These include archaeological finds, especially sculpture. Also valuable are contemporary works, such as the account of Megasthenes (a Greek ambassador to the court of Chandragupta Maurya), which survives in fragments. Another source that is often used is the *Arthashastra*, parts of which were probably composed by Kautilya or Chanakya, traditionally believed to be the minister of Chandragupta. Besides, the Mauryas are mentioned in later Buddhist, Jaina and Puranic literature, as well as in Sanskrit literary works. While these are useful, the inscriptions of Asoka (c. 272/268-231 BCE) on rocks and pillars are often regarded as amongst the most valuable sources.

Asoka was the first ruler who inscribed his messages to his subjects and officials on stone surfaces – natural rocks as well as polished pillars. He used the inscriptions to proclaim what he understood to be *dhamma*. This included respect towards elders, generosity towards Brahmanas and those who renounced worldly life, treating slaves and servants kindly, and respect for religions and traditions other than one's own.

### 3.2 Administering the empire

There were five major political centres in the empire – the capital Pataliputra and the provincial centres of Taxila, Ujjayini, Tosali and Suvarnagiri, all mentioned in Asokan inscriptions. If we examine the content of these inscriptions, we find virtually the same message engraved everywhere – from the present-day North West Frontier Provinces of Pakistan, to Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Uttaranchal in India. Could this vast empire have had a uniform administrative system? Historians have increasingly come to realise that





this is unlikely. The regions included within the empire were just too diverse. Imagine the contrast between the hilly terrain of Afghanistan and the coast of Orissa.

It is likely that administrative control was strongest in areas around the capital and the provincial centres. These centres were carefully chosen, both Taxila and Ujjayini being situated on important long-distance trade routes, while Suvarnagiri (literally, the golden mountain) was possibly important for tapping the gold mines of Karnataka.

Source 1

### What the king's officials did

Here is an excerpt from the account of Megasthenes:

Of the great officers of state, some ... superintend the rivers, measure the land, as is done in Egypt, and inspect the sluices by which water is let out from the main canals into their branches, so that every one may have an equal supply of it. The same persons have charge also of the huntsmen, and are entrusted with the power of rewarding or punishing them according to their deserts. They collect the taxes, and superintend the occupations connected with land; as those of the woodcutters, the carpenters, the blacksmiths, and the miners.

➔ Why were officials appointed to supervise these occupational groups?

### ➔ Discuss...

Read the excerpts from *Megasthenes and the Arthashastra* (Sources 1 and 2). To what extent do you think these texts are useful in reconstructing a history of Mauryan administration?

Communication along both land and riverine routes was vital for the existence of the empire. Journeys from the centre to the provinces could have taken weeks if not months. This meant arranging for provisions as well as protection for those who were on the move. It is obvious that the army was an important means for ensuring the latter. Megasthenes mentions a committee with six subcommittees for coordinating military activity. Of these, one looked after the navy, the second managed transport and provisions, the third was responsible for foot-soldiers, the fourth for horses, the fifth for chariots and the sixth for elephants. The activities of the second subcommittee were rather varied: arranging for bullock carts to carry equipment, procuring food for soldiers and fodder for animals, and recruiting servants and artisans to look after the soldiers.

Asoka also tried to hold his empire together by propagating *dhamma*, the principles of which, as we have seen, were simple and virtually universally applicable. This, according to him, would ensure the well-being of people in this world and the next. Special officers, known as the *dhamma mahamatta*, were appointed to spread the message of *dhamma*.

### 3.3 How important was the empire?

When historians began reconstructing early Indian history in the nineteenth century, the emergence of the Mauryan Empire was regarded as a major landmark. India was then under colonial rule, and was part of the British empire. Nineteenth and early twentieth century Indian historians found the possibility that there was an empire in early India both challenging and exciting. Also, some of the archaeological finds associated with the Mauryas, including stone sculpture, were considered to be examples of the spectacular art typical of empires. Many of these historians found the message on Asokan inscriptions very different from that of most other rulers, suggesting that Asoka was more powerful and industrious, as also more humble than later rulers who adopted grandiose titles. So it is not surprising that nationalist leaders in the twentieth century regarded him as an inspiring figure.

Yet, how important was the Mauryan Empire? It lasted for about 150 years, which is not a very long time in the vast span of the history of the subcontinent. Besides, if you look at Map 2, you will notice that the empire did not encompass the entire subcontinent. And even within the frontiers of the empire, control was not uniform. By the second century BCE, new chiefdoms and kingdoms emerged in several parts of the subcontinent.

## 4. NEW NOTIONS OF KINGSHIP

### 4.1 Chiefs and kings in the south

The new kingdoms that emerged in the Deccan and further south, including the chiefdoms of the Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas in Tamilakam (the name of the ancient Tamil country, which included parts of present-day Andhra Pradesh and Kerala, in addition to Tamil Nadu), proved to be stable and prosperous.

#### Chiefs and chiefdoms

A chief is a powerful man whose position may or may not be hereditary. He derives support from his kinfolk. His functions may include performing special rituals, leadership in warfare, and arbitrating disputes. He receives gifts from his subordinates (unlike kings who usually collect taxes) and often distributes these amongst his supporters. Generally, there are no regular armies and officials in chiefdoms.

We know about these states from a variety of sources. For instance, the early Tamil Sangam texts (see also Chapter 3) contain poems describing chiefs and the ways in which they acquired and distributed resources.

Many chiefs and kings, including the Satavahanas who ruled over parts of western and central India (c. second century BCE–second century CE) and the Shakas, a people of Central Asian origin who established kingdoms in the north-western and western parts of the subcontinent, derived revenues from long-distance trade. Their social origins were often obscure, but, as we will see in the case of the Satavahanas (Chapter 3), once they acquired power they attempted to claim social status in a variety of ways.

Source 2

#### Capturing elephants for the army

The *Duṅḁvud* lays down minute details of administrative and military organisation. This is what it says about how to capture elephants:

Guards of elephant forests, assisted by those who rear elephants, those who enchain the legs of elephants, those who guard the boundaries, those who live in forests, as well as by those who nurse elephants, shall, with the help of five or seven female elephants to help in tethering wild ones, trace the whereabouts of herds of elephants by following the course of urine and dung left by elephants.

According to Greek sources, the Mauryan ruler had a standing army of 600,000 foot-soldiers, 30,000 cavalry and 9,000 elephants. Some historians consider these accounts to be exaggerated.

➔ If the Greek accounts were true, what kinds of resources do you think the Mauryan ruler would have required to maintain such a large army?

Source 3

### The Pandya chief Senguttuvan visits the forest

This is an excerpt from the *Veludssol*, an epic written in Tamil:

(When he visited the forest) people came down the mountain, singing and dancing ... just as the defeated show respect to the victorious king, so did they bring gifts – ivory, fragrant wood, fans made of the hair of deer, honey, sandalwood, red ochre, antimony, turmeric, cardamom, pepper, etc. ... they brought coconuts, mangoes, medicinal plants, fruits, onions, sugarcane, flowers, areca nut, bananas, baby tigers, lions, elephants, monkeys, bear, deer, musk deer, fox, peacocks, musk cat, wild cocks, speaking parrots, etc. ...

➡ Why did people bring these gifts? What would the chief have used these for?

### 4.2 Divine kings

One means of claiming high status was to identify with a variety of deities. This strategy is best exemplified by the Kushanas (c. first century BCE–first century CE), who ruled over a vast kingdom extending from Central Asia to northwest India. Their history has been reconstructed from inscriptions and textual traditions. The notions of kingship they wished to project are perhaps best evidenced in their coins and sculpture.

Colossal statues of Kushana rulers have been found installed in a shrine at Mat near Mathura (Uttar Pradesh). Similar statues have been found in a shrine in Afghanistan as well. Some historians feel this indicates that the Kushanas considered themselves godlike. Many Kushana rulers also adopted the title *devaputra*, or “son of god”, possibly inspired by Chinese rulers who called themselves sons of heaven.

By the fourth century there is evidence of larger states, including the Gupta Empire. Many of these depended on *samantas*, men who maintained themselves through local resources including control over land. They offered homage and provided military support to rulers. Powerful *samantas* could become kings: conversely, weak rulers might find themselves being reduced to positions of subordination.

Histories of the Gupta rulers have been reconstructed from literature, coins and inscriptions, including *prashastis*, composed in praise of kings in particular, and patrons in general, by poets. While historians often attempt to draw factual information from such compositions, those who composed and read them often treasured them as works of poetry



Fig. 2.4

A Kushana coin

Obverse: King Kanishka

Reverse: A deity

➡ How has the king been portrayed?

rather than as accounts that were literally true. The *Prayaga Prashasti* (also known as the Allahabad Pillar Inscription) composed in Sanskrit by Harishena, the court poet of Samudragupta, arguably the most powerful of the Gupta rulers (c. fourth century CE), is a case in point.

Source 4

### In praise of Samudragupta

This is an excerpt from the सुद|दृढ  
सुखद्वल=

He was without an antagonist on earth; he, by the overflowing of the multitude of (his) many good qualities adorned by hundreds of good actions, has wiped off the fame of other kings with the soles of (his) feet; (he is) सुखद्वल (the Supreme Being), being the cause of the prosperity of the good and the destruction of the bad (he is) incomprehensible; (he is) one whose tender heart can be captured only by devotion and humility; (he is) possessed of compassion; (he is) the giver of many hundred-thousands of cows; (his) mind has received ceremonial initiation for the uplift of the miserable, the poor, the forlorn and the suffering; (he is) resplendent and embodied kindness to mankind; (he is) equal to (the gods) Kubera (the god of wealth), Varuna (the god of the ocean), Indra (the god of rains) and Yama (the god of death)...

Fig. 2.5  
Sandstone sculpture of a  
Kushana king

➔ What are the elements in the sculpture that suggest that this is an image of a king?



### ➔ Discuss...

Why do you think kings claimed divine status?

Source 5

### The Sudarshana (beautiful) lake in Gujarat

Find Girnar on Map 2. The Sudarshana lake was an artificial reservoir. We know about it from a rock inscription (f. second century CE) in Sanskrit, composed to record the achievements of the Shaka ruler Rudradaman.

The inscription mentions that the lake, with embankments and water channels, was built by a local governor during the rule of the Mauryas. However, a terrible storm broke the embankments and water gushed out of the lake. Rudradaman, who was then ruling in the area, claimed to have got the lake repaired using his own resources, without imposing any tax on his subjects.

Another inscription on the same rock (f. fifth century) mentions how one of the rulers of the Gupta dynasty got the lake repaired once again.

➔ Why did rulers make arrangements for irrigation?

*Transplantation* is used for paddy cultivation in areas where water is plentiful. Here, seeds are first broadcast; when the saplings have grown they are transplanted in waterlogged fields. This ensures a higher ratio of survival of saplings and higher yields.

## 5. A CHANGING COUNTRYSIDE

### 5.1 Popular perceptions of kings

What did subjects think about their rulers? Obviously, inscriptions do not provide all the answers. In fact, ordinary people rarely left accounts of their thoughts and experiences. Nevertheless, historians have tried to solve this problem by examining stories contained in anthologies such as the *Jatakas* and the *Panchatantra*. Many of these stories probably originated as popular oral tales that were later committed to writing. The *Jatakas* were written in Pali around the middle of the first millennium CE.

One story known as the *Gandatindu Jataka* describes the plight of the subjects of a wicked king; these included elderly women and men, cultivators, herders, village boys and even animals. When the king went in disguise to find out what his subjects thought about him, each one of them cursed him for their miseries, complaining that they were attacked by robbers at night and by tax collectors during the day. To escape from this situation, people abandoned their village and went to live in the forest.

As this story indicates, the relationship between a king and his subjects, especially the rural population, could often be strained – kings frequently tried to fill their coffers by demanding high taxes, and peasants particularly found such demands oppressive. Escaping into the forest remained an option, as reflected in the *Jataka* story. Meanwhile, other strategies aimed at increasing production to meet growing demand for taxes also came to be adopted.

### 5.2 Strategies for increasing production

One such strategy was the shift to plough agriculture, which spread in fertile alluvial river valleys such as those of the Ganga and the Kaveri from c. sixth century BCE. The iron-tipped ploughshare was used to turn the alluvial soil in areas which had high rainfall. Moreover, in some parts of the Ganga valley, production of paddy was dramatically increased by the introduction of transplantation, although this meant back-breaking work for the producer.

While the iron ploughshare led to a growth in agricultural productivity, its use was restricted to certain parts of the subcontinent – cultivators in

areas which were semi-arid, such as parts of Punjab and Rajasthan did not adopt it till the twentieth century, and those living in hilly tracts in the north-eastern and central parts of the subcontinent practised hoe agriculture, which was much better suited to the terrain.

Another strategy adopted to increase agricultural production was the use of irrigation, through wells and tanks, and less commonly, canals. Communities as well as individuals organised the construction of irrigation works. The latter, usually powerful men including kings, often recorded such activities in inscriptions.

### 5.3 Differences in rural society

While these technologies often led to an increase in production, the benefits were very uneven. What is evident is that there was a growing differentiation amongst people engaged in agriculture – stories, especially within the Buddhist tradition, refer to landless agricultural labourers, small peasants, as well as large landholders. The term *gahapati* was often used in Pali texts to designate the second and third categories. The large landholders, as well as the village headman (whose position was often hereditary), emerged as powerful figures, and often exercised control over other cultivators. Early Tamil literature (the Sangam texts) also mentions different categories of people living in the villages – large landowners or *vellalar*, ploughmen or *uzhavar* and slaves or *adimai*. It is likely that these differences were based on differential access to land, labour and some of the new technologies. In such a situation, questions of control over land must have become crucial, as these were often discussed in legal texts.

#### **Gahapati**

A *gahapati* was the owner, master or head of a household, who exercised control over the women, children, slaves and workers who shared a common residence. He was also the owner of the resources – land, animals and other things – that belonged to the household. Sometimes the term was used as a marker of status for men belonging to the urban elite, including wealthy merchants.

Source 6

#### **The importance of boundaries**

The *Dharmasūtra* is one of the best-known legal texts of early India, written in Sanskrit and compiled between the second century BCE and the second century CE. This is what the text advises the king to do:

Seeing that in the world controversies constantly arise due to the ignorance of boundaries, he should ... have ... concealed boundary markers buried – stones, bones, cow's hair, chaff, ashes, potsherds, dried cow dung, bricks, coal, pebbles and sand. He should also have other similar substances that would not decay in the soil buried as hidden markers at the intersection of boundaries.

➔ Would these boundary markers have been adequate to resolve disputes?

Source 7

### Life in a small village

The *Kāvya-kāvalī* is a biography of Harshavardhana, the ruler of Kanauj (see Map 3), composed in Sanskrit by his court poet, Banabhatta (c. seventh century CE). This is an excerpt from the text, an extremely rare representation of life in a settlement on the outskirts of a forest in the Vindhyas:

The outskirts being for the most part forest, many parcels of rice-land, threshing ground and arable land were being apportioned by small farmers ... it was mainly spade culture ... owing to the difficulty of ploughing the sparsely scattered fields covered with grass, with their few clear spaces, their black soil stiff as black iron ...

There were people moving along with bundles of bark ... countless sacks of plucked flowers, ... loads of flax and hemp bundles, quantities of honey, peacocks' tail feathers, wreaths of wax, logs, and grass. Village wives hastened en route for neighbouring villages, all intent on thoughts of sale and bearing on their heads baskets filled with various gathered forest fruits.

➡ How would you classify the people described in the text in terms of their occupations?

### 5.4 Land grants and new rural elites

From the early centuries of the Common Era, we find grants of land being made, many of which were recorded in inscriptions. Some of these inscriptions were on stone, but most were on copper plates (Fig. 13) which were probably given as a record of the transaction to those who received the land. The records that have survived are generally about grants to religious institutions or to Brahmanas. Most inscriptions were in Sanskrit. In some cases, and especially from the seventh century onwards, part of the inscription was in Sanskrit, while the rest was in a local language such as Tamil or Telugu. Let us look at one such inscription more closely.

Prabhavati Gupta was the daughter of one of the most important rulers in early Indian history, Chandragupta II (c. 375-415 CE). She was married into another important ruling family, that of the Vakatakas, who were powerful in the Deccan (see Map 3). According to Sanskrit legal texts, women were not supposed to have independent access to resources such as land. However, the inscription indicates that Prabhavati had access to land, which she then granted. This may have been because she was a queen (one of the few known from early Indian history), and her situation was therefore exceptional. It is also possible that the provisions of legal texts were not uniformly implemented.

The inscription also gives us an idea about rural populations – these included Brahmanas and peasants, as well as others who were expected to provide a range of produce to the king or his representatives. And according to the inscription, they would have to obey the new lord of the village, and perhaps pay him all these dues.

Land grants such as this one have been found in several parts of the country. There were regional variations in the sizes of land donated – ranging from small plots to vast stretches of uncultivated land – and the rights given to donees (the recipients of the grant). The impact of land grants is a subject of heated debate among historians. Some feel that land grants were part of a strategy adopted by ruling lineages to extend agriculture to new areas. Others suggest that land grants were indicative of weakening political power: as kings were losing control over their *samantas*, they tried to win allies



by making grants of land. They also feel that kings tried to project themselves as supermen (as we saw in the previous section) *because* they were losing control: they wanted to present at least a façade of power.

Source 8

### Prabhavati Gupta and the village of Danguna

This is what Prabhavati Gupta states in her inscription:

Prabhavati Gupta ... commands the  $\text{j\ddot{u}d\dot{p}d\dot{n}xw\dot{x}p\dot{e}l\dot{q}d\dot{v}}$  (householders/peasants living in the village), Brahmanas and others living in the village of Danguna ...

“Be it known to you that on the twelfth (lunar day) of the bright (fortnight) of Karttika, we have, in order to increase our religious merit donated this village with the pouring out of water, to the Acharya (teacher) Chanalasvamin ... You should obey all (his) commands ...

We confer on (him) the following exemptions typical of an  $\text{d\dot{j}u\dot{d}k\dot{d}u\dot{d}\#y}$  (this village is) not to be entered by soldiers and policemen; (it is) exempt from (the obligation to provide) grass, (animal) hides as seats, and charcoal (to touring royal officers); exempt from (the royal prerogative of) purchasing fermenting liquors and digging (salt); exempt from (the right to) mines and  $\text{n\dot{k}d\dot{g}l\dot{u}d}$  trees; exempt from (the obligation to supply) flowers and milk; (it is donated) together with (the right to) hidden treasures and deposits (and) together with major and minor taxes ...”

This charter has been written in the thirteenth (regnal) year. (It has been) engraved by Chakradasa.

➔ What were the things produced in the village?

An *agrahara* was land granted to a Brahmana, who was usually exempted from paying land revenue and other dues to the king, and was often given the right to collect these dues from the local people.

Land grants provide some insight into the relationship between cultivators and the state. However, there were people who were often beyond the reach of officials or *samantas*: pastoralists, fisherfolk and hunter-gatherers, mobile or semi-sedentary artisans and shifting cultivators. Generally, such groups did not keep detailed records of their lives and transactions.

### ➔ Discuss...

Find out whether plough agriculture, irrigation and transplantation are prevalent in your state. If not, are there any alternative systems in use?

### The history of Pataliputra

Each city had a history of its own. Pataliputra, for instance, began as a village known as Pataligrama. Then, in the fifth century BCE, the Magadhan rulers decided to shift their capital from Rajagaha to this settlement and renamed it. By the fourth century BCE, it was the capital of the Mauryan Empire and one of the largest cities in Asia. Subsequently, its importance apparently declined. When the Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang visited the city in the seventh century CE, he found it in ruins, and with a very small population.

## 6. TOWNS AND TRADE

### 6.1 New cities

Let us retrace our steps back to the urban centres that emerged in several parts of the subcontinent from c. sixth century BCE. As we have seen, many of these were capitals of *mahajanapadas*. Virtually all major towns were located along routes of communication. Some such as Pataliputra were on riverine routes. Others, such as Ujjayini, were along land routes, and yet others, such as Puhar, were near the coast, from where sea routes began. Many cities like Mathura were bustling centres of commercial, cultural and political activity.

### 6.2 Urban populations:

#### Elites and craftspersons

We have seen that kings and ruling elites lived in fortified cities. Although it is difficult to conduct extensive excavations at most sites because people live in these areas even today (unlike the Harappan cities), a wide range of artefacts have been recovered from them. These include fine pottery bowls and dishes, with a glossy finish, known as Northern Black Polished Ware, probably used by rich people, and ornaments, tools, weapons, vessels, figurines, made of a wide range of materials – gold, silver, copper, bronze, ivory, glass, shell and terracotta.

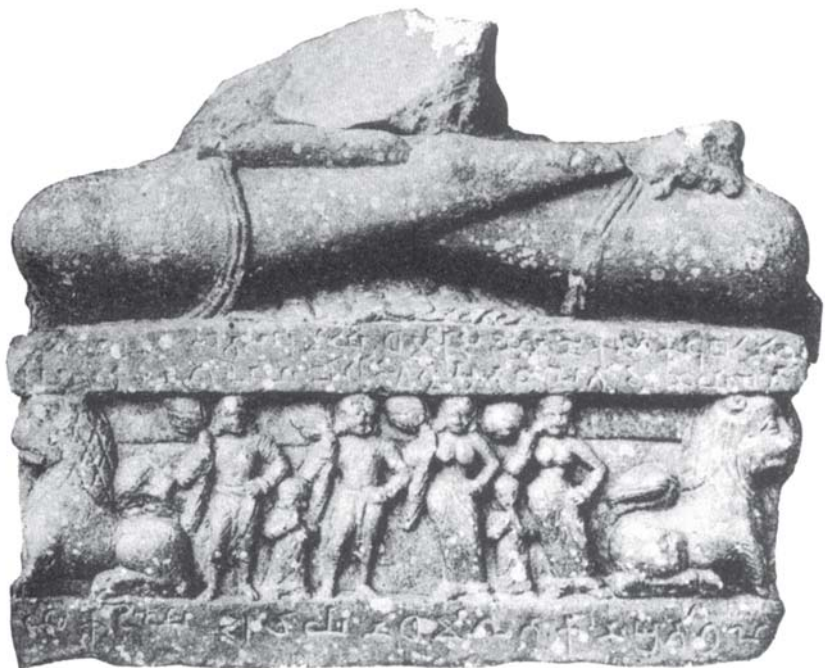


Fig. 2.6

#### The gift of an image

This is part of an image from Mathura. On the pedestal is a Prakrit inscription, mentioning that a woman named Nagapiya, the wife of a goldsmith (*sovanika*) named Dharmaka, installed this image in a shrine.



By the second century BCE, we find short votive inscriptions in a number of cities. These mention the name of the donor, and sometimes specify his/her occupation as well. They tell us about people who lived in towns: washing folk, weavers, scribes, carpenters, potters, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, officials, religious teachers, merchants and kings.

Sometimes, guilds or *shrenis*, organisations of craft producers and merchants, are mentioned as well. These guilds probably procured raw materials, regulated production, and marketed the finished product. It is likely that craftsmen used a range of iron tools to meet the growing demands of urban elites.

➡ Were there any cities in the region where the Harappan civilisation flourished in the third millennium BCE?

Votive inscriptions record gifts made to religious institutions.

Source 9

### The Malabar coast (present-day Kerala)

Here is an excerpt from *Shulsaṅkṛiṃ* (written in the 1st century CE), composed by an anonymous Greek sailor (fl. first century CE):

They (i.e. traders from abroad) send large ships to these market-towns on account of the great quantity and bulk of pepper and malabathrum (possibly cinnamon, produced in these regions). There are imported here, in the first place, a great quantity of coin; topaz ... antimony (a mineral used as a colouring substance), coral, crude glass, copper, tin, lead ... There is exported pepper, which is produced in quantity in only one region near these markets ... Besides this there are exported great quantities of fine pearls, ivory, silk cloth, ... transparent stones of all kinds, diamonds and sapphires, and tortoise shell.

Archaeological evidence of a bead-making industry, using precious and semi-precious stones, has been found in Kodumanal (Tamil Nadu). It is likely that local traders brought the stones mentioned in the *Shulsaṅkṛiṃ* from sites such as these to the coastal ports.

➡ Why did the author compile this list?

“*Periplus*” is a Greek word meaning sailing around and “*Erythraean*” was the Greek name for the Red Sea.

### 6.3 Trade in the subcontinent and beyond

From the sixth century BCE, land and river routes criss-crossed the subcontinent and extended in various directions – overland into Central Asia and beyond, and overseas, from ports that dotted the coastline – extending across the Arabian Sea to East and North Africa and West Asia, and through the Bay of Bengal to Southeast Asia and China. Rulers often attempted to control these routes, possibly by offering protection for a price.

Those who traversed these routes included peddlers who probably travelled on foot and merchants who travelled with caravans of bullock carts and pack-animals. Also, there were seafarers, whose ventures were risky but highly profitable. Successful merchants, designated as *masattuvan* in Tamil and *setthis* and *sattavahas* in Prakrit, could become enormously rich. A wide range of goods were carried from one place to another – salt, grain, cloth, metal ores and finished products, stone, timber, medicinal plants, to name a few. Spices, especially pepper, were in high demand in the Roman Empire, as were textiles and medicinal plants, and these were all transported across the Arabian Sea to the Mediterranean.

### 6.4 Coins and kings

To some extent, exchanges were facilitated by the introduction of coinage. Punch-marked coins made of silver and copper (c. sixth century BCE onwards) were amongst the earliest to be minted and used. These have been recovered from excavations at a number of sites throughout the subcontinent. Numismatists have studied these and other coins to reconstruct possible commercial networks.

Attempts made to identify the symbols on punch-marked coins with specific ruling dynasties, including the Mauryas, suggest that these were issued by kings. It is also likely that merchants, bankers and townspeople issued some of these coins. The first coins to bear the names and images of rulers were issued by the Indo-Greeks, who established control over the north-western part of the subcontinent c. second century BCE.

The first gold coins were issued c. first century CE by the Kushanas. These were virtually identical in weight with those issued by contemporary Roman

emperors and the Parthian rulers of Iran, and have been found from several sites in north India and Central Asia. The widespread use of gold coins indicates the enormous value of the transactions that were taking place. Besides, hoards of Roman coins have been found from archaeological sites in south India. It is obvious that networks of trade were not confined within political boundaries: south India was not part of the Roman Empire, but there were close connections through trade.

Coins were also issued by tribal republics such as that of the Yaudheyas of Punjab and Haryana (c. first century CE). Archaeologists have unearthed several thousand copper coins issued by the Yaudheyas, pointing to the latter's interest and participation in economic exchanges.

Some of the most spectacular gold coins were issued by the Gupta rulers. The earliest issues are remarkable for their purity. These coins facilitated long-distance transactions from which kings also benefited.

From c. sixth century CE onwards, finds of gold coins taper off. Does this indicate that there was some kind of an economic crisis? Historians are divided on this issue. Some suggest that with the collapse of the Western Roman Empire long-distance trade declined, and this affected the prosperity of the states, communities and regions that had benefited from it. Others argue that new towns and networks of trade started emerging around this time. They also point out that though finds of coins of that time are fewer, coins continue to be mentioned in inscriptions and texts. Could it be that there are fewer finds because coins were in circulation rather than being hoarded?



Fig. 2.9  
A Gupta coin

*Numismatics* is the study of coins, including visual elements such as scripts and images, metallurgical analysis and the contexts in which they have been found.



Fig. 2.7  
A punch-marked coin, so named because symbols were punched or stamped onto the metal surface



Fig. 2.8  
A Yaudheya coin

### ➡ Discuss...

What are the transactions involved in trade? Which of these transactions are apparent from the sources mentioned? Are there any that are not evident from the sources?

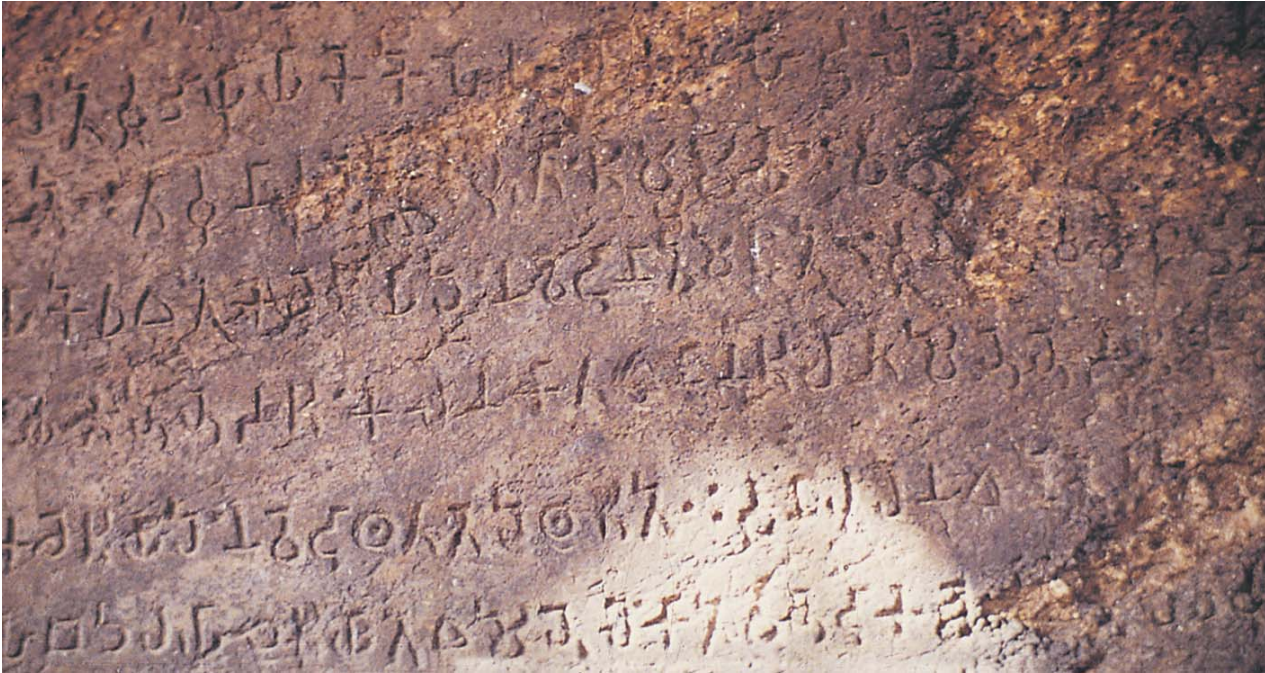


Fig. 2.10  
An Asokan inscription

†	क
८	च
⌒	व
५	द
४	म
।	र

Fig. 2.11  
Asokan Brahmi with Devanagari  
equivalents

☞ Do some Devanagari letters appear similar to Brahmi? Are there any that seem different?

## 7. BACK TO BASICS

### HOW ARE INSCRIPTIONS DECIPHERED?

So far, we have been studying excerpts from inscriptions amongst other things. But how do historians find out what is written on them?

#### 7.1 Deciphering Brahmi

Most scripts used to write modern Indian languages are derived from Brahmi, the script used in most Asokan inscriptions. From the late eighteenth century, European scholars aided by Indian pandits worked backwards from contemporary Bengali and Devanagari (the script used to write Hindi) manuscripts, comparing their letters with older specimens.

Scholars who studied early inscriptions sometimes assumed these were in Sanskrit, although the earliest inscriptions were, in fact, in Prakrit. It was only after decades of painstaking investigations by several epigraphists that James Prinsep was able to decipher Asokan Brahmi in 1838.

#### 7.2 How Kharosthi was read

The story of the decipherment of Kharosthi, the script used in inscriptions in the northwest, is different. Here, finds of coins of Indo-Greek kings who ruled over the area (c. second-first centuries BCE) have

facilitated matters. These coins contain the names of kings written in Greek and Kharosthi scripts. European scholars who could read the former compared the letters. For instance, the symbol for “a” could be found in both scripts for writing names such as Apollodotus. With Prinsep identifying the language of the Kharosthi inscriptions as Prakrit, it became possible to read longer inscriptions as well.

### 7.3 Historical evidence from inscriptions

To find out how epigraphists and historians work, let us look at two Asokan inscriptions more closely.

Note that the name of the ruler, Asoka, is not mentioned in the inscription (Source 10). What is used instead are titles adopted by the ruler – *devanampiya*, often translated as “beloved of the gods” and *piyadassi*, or “pleasant to behold”. The name Asoka is mentioned in some other inscriptions, which also contain these titles. After examining all these inscriptions, and finding that they match in terms of content, style, language and palaeography, epigraphists have concluded that they were issued by the same ruler.

You may also have noticed that Asoka claims that earlier rulers had no arrangements to receive reports. If you consider the political history of the subcontinent prior to Asoka, do you think this statement is true? Historians have to constantly assess statements made in inscriptions to judge whether they are true, plausible or exaggerations.

Did you notice that there are words within brackets? Epigraphists sometimes add these to make the meaning of sentences clear. This has to be done carefully, to ensure that the intended meaning of the author is not changed.

Source 10

### The orders of the king

Thus speaks king Devanampiya Piyadassi:

In the past, there were no arrangements for disposing affairs, nor for receiving regular reports. But I have made the following (arrangement). *Sdwlyhgchdv* should report to me about the affairs of the people at all times, anywhere, whether I am eating, in the inner apartment, in the bedroom, in the cow pen, being carried (possibly in a palanquin), or in the garden. And I will dispose of the affairs of the people everywhere.

➔ Epigraphists have translated the term *pativedaka* as reporter. In what ways would the functions of the *pativedaka* have been different from those we generally associate with reporters today?



Fig. 2.12  
A coin of the Indo-Greek king  
Menander

Source 11

### The anguish of the king

When the king Devanampiya Piyadassi had been ruling for eight years, the (country of the) Kalingas (present-day coastal Orissa) was conquered by (him).

One hundred and fifty thousand men were deported, a hundred thousand were killed, and many more died.

After that, now that (the country of) the Kalingas has been taken, Devanampiya (is devoted) to an intense study of Dhamma, to the love of Dhamma, and to instructing (the people) in Dhamma.

This is the repentance of Devanampiya on account of his conquest of the (country of the) Kalingas.

For this is considered very painful and deplorable by Devanampiya that, while one is conquering an unconquered (country) slaughter, death and deportation of people (take place) there ...

Historians have to make other assessments as well. If a king's orders were inscribed on natural rocks near cities or important routes of communication, would passers-by have stopped to read these? Most people were probably not literate. Did everybody throughout the subcontinent understand the Prakrit used in Pataliputra? Would the orders of the king have been followed? Answers to such questions are not always easy to find.

Some of these problems are evident if we look at an Asokan inscription (Source 11), which has often been interpreted as reflecting the anguish of the ruler, as well as marking a change in his attitude towards warfare. As we shall see, the situation becomes more complex once we move beyond reading the inscription at face value.

While Asokan inscriptions have been found in present-day Orissa, the one depicting his anguish is missing. In other words, the inscription has not been found in the region that was conquered. What are we to make of that? Is it that the anguish of the recent conquest was too painful in the region, and therefore the ruler was unable to address the issue?

## 8. THE LIMITATIONS OF INSCRIPTIONAL EVIDENCE

By now it is probably evident that there are limits to what epigraphy can reveal. Sometimes, there are technical limitations: letters are very faintly engraved, and thus reconstructions are uncertain. Also, inscriptions may be damaged or letters missing. Besides, it is not always easy to be sure about the exact meaning of the words used in inscriptions, some of which may be specific to a particular place or time. If you go through an epigraphical journal (some are listed in Timeline 2), you will realise that scholars are constantly debating and discussing alternative ways of reading inscriptions.

Although several thousand inscriptions have been discovered, not all have been deciphered, published and translated. Besides, many more inscriptions must have existed, which have not survived the ravages of time. So what is available at present is probably only a fraction of what was inscribed.

There is another, perhaps more fundamental, problem: not everything that we may consider

### ➔ Discuss...

Look at Map 2 and discuss the location of Asokan inscriptions. Do you notice any patterns?



politically or economically significant was necessarily recorded in inscriptions. For instance, routine agricultural practices and the joys and sorrows of daily existence find no mention in inscriptions, which focus, more often than not, on grand, unique events. Besides, the content of inscriptions almost invariably projects the perspective of the person(s) who commissioned them. As such, they need to be juxtaposed with other perspectives so as to arrive at a better understanding of the past.

Thus epigraphy alone does not provide a full understanding of political and economic history. Also, historians often question both old and new evidence. Scholars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were primarily interested in the histories of kings. From the mid-twentieth century onwards, issues such as economic change, and the ways in which different social groups emerged have assumed far more importance. Recent decades have seen a much greater preoccupation with histories of marginalised groups. This will probably lead to fresh investigations of old sources, and the development of new strategies of analysis.

Fig. 2.13  
A copperplate inscription from  
Karnataka, c. sixth century CE



## TIMELINE 1

### MAJOR POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS

c.600-500 BCE	Paddy transplantation; urbanisation in the Ganga valley; <i>mahajanapadas</i> ; punch-marked coins
c. 500-400 BCE	Rulers of Magadha consolidate power
c. 327-325 BCE	Invasion of Alexander of Macedon
c. 321 BCE	Accession of Chandragupta Maurya
c. 272/268-231 BCE	Reign of Asoka
c. 185 BCE	End of the Mauryan empire
c. 200-100 BCE	Indo-Greek rule in the northwest; Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas in south India; Satavahanas in the Deccan
c. 100 BCE-200 CE	Shaka (peoples from Central Asia) rulers in the northwest; Roman trade; gold coinage
c. 78 CE?	Accession of Kanishka
c.100-200 CE	Earliest inscriptional evidence of land grants by Satavahana and Shaka rulers
c. 320 CE	Beginning of Gupta rule
c. 335-375 CE	Samudragupta
c. 375-415 CE	Chandragupta II; Vakatakas in the Deccan
c. 500-600 CE	Rise of the Chalukyas in Karnataka and of the Pallavas in Tamil Nadu
c. 606-647 CE	Harshavardhana king of Kanauj; Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang comes in search of Buddhist texts
c. 712	Arabs conquer Sind

*(Note: It is difficult to date economic developments precisely. Also, there are enormous subcontinental variations which have not been indicated in the timeline. Only the earliest dates for specific developments have been given. The date of Kanishka's accession is not certain and this has been marked with a "?")*

## TIMELINE 2 MAJOR ADVANCES IN EPIGRAPHY

### Eighteenth century

1784	Founding of the Asiatic Society (Bengal)
------	--

### Nineteenth century

1810s	Colin Mackenzie collects over 8,000 inscriptions in Sanskrit and Dravidian languages
-------	--

1838	Decipherment of Asokan Brahmi by James Prinsep
------	--

1877	Alexander Cunningham publishes a set of Asokan inscriptions
------	---

1886	First issue of <i>Epigraphia Carnatica</i> , a journal of south Indian inscriptions
------	---

1888	First issue of <i>Epigraphia Indica</i>
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### Twentieth century

1965-66	D.C. Sircar publishes <i>Indian Epigraphy</i> and <i>Indian Epigraphical Glossary</i>
---------	---



### ANSWER IN 100-150 WORDS

1. Discuss the evidence of craft production in Early Historic cities. In what ways is this different from the evidence from Harappan cities?
2. Describe the salient features of *mahajanapadas*.
3. How do historians reconstruct the lives of ordinary people?
4. Compare and contrast the list of things given to the Pandyan chief (Source 3) with those produced in the village of Danguna (Source 8). Do you notice any similarities or differences?
5. List some of the problems faced by epigraphists.



**If you would like to know more, read:**

D.N. Jha. 2004.

Hdu|#Lgld=#D#Frgflvh#Klvru | 1  
Manohar, New Delhi.

R. Salomon. 1998.

Lgldq##Hsljudsk|#Munshiram  
Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd,  
New Delhi.

R.S. Sharma. 1983.

Pdwhuldo#Fexwuh#dog#Vrflbo  
Inupdlrq#lq#Hdu|#Lgldl  
Macmillan, New Delhi.

D.C. Sircar. 1975.

Lqvfulswlrqv#ri#Dvmdl  
Publications Division, Ministry of  
Information and Broadcasting,  
Government of India, New Delhi.

Romila Thapar. 1997.

Dvmd#dog#wkh#Ghfolq#ri#wkh  
Pdxu|dv1#Oxford University Press,  
New Delhi.



**WRITE A SHORT ESSAY (ABOUT 500 WORDS) ON THE FOLLOWING:**

6. Discuss the main features of Mauryan administration. Which of these elements are evident in the Asokan inscriptions that you have studied?
7. This is a statement made by one of the best-known epigraphists of the twentieth century, D.C. Sircar: "There is no aspect of life, culture and activities of the Indians that is not reflected in inscriptions." Discuss.
8. Discuss the notions of kingship that developed in the post-Mauryan period.
9. To what extent were agricultural practices transformed in the period under consideration?



**MAP WORK**

10. Compare Maps 1 and 2, and list the *mahajanapadas* that might have been included in the Mauryan Empire. Are any Asokan inscriptions found in these areas?



**PROJECT (ANY ONE)**

11. Collect newspapers for one month. Cut and paste all the statements made by government officials about public works. Note what the reports say about the resources required for such projects, how the resources are mobilised and the objective of the project. Who issues these statements, and how and why are they communicated? Compare and contrast these with the evidence from inscriptions discussed in this chapter. What are the similarities and differences that you notice?
12. Collect five different kinds of currency notes and coins in circulation today. For each one of these, describe what you see on the obverse and the reverse (the front and the back). Prepare a report on the common features as well as the differences in terms of pictures, scripts and languages, size, shape and any other element that you find significant. Compare these with the coins shown in this chapter, discussing the materials used, the techniques of minting, the visual symbols and their significance and the possible functions that coins may have had.



**For more information, you could visit:**

<http://projectsouthasia.sdstate.edu/Docs/index.html>

## THEME THREE

# KINSHIP, CASTE AND CLASS

## EARLY SOCIETIES

(c. 600 BCE-600 CE)

In the previous chapter we saw that there were several changes in economic and political life between c. 600 BCE and 600 CE. Some of these changes influenced societies as well. For instance, the extension of agriculture into forested areas transformed the lives of forest dwellers; craft specialists often emerged as distinct social groups; the unequal distribution of wealth sharpened social differences.

Historians often use textual traditions to understand these processes. Some texts lay down norms of social behaviour; others describe and occasionally comment on a wide range of social situations and practices. We can also catch a glimpse of some social actors from inscriptions. As we will see, each text (and inscription) was written from the perspective of specific social categories. So we need to keep in mind *who* composed *what* and for *whom*. We also need to consider the language used, and the ways in which the text circulated. Used carefully, texts allow us to piece together attitudes and practices that shaped social histories.

In focusing on the *Mahabharata*, a colossal epic running in its present form into over 100,000 verses with depictions of a wide range of social categories and situations, we draw on one of the richest texts of the subcontinent. It was composed over a period of about 1,000 years (c. 500 BCE onwards), and some of the stories it contains may have been in circulation even earlier. The central story is about two sets of warring cousins. The text also contains sections laying down norms of behaviour for various social groups. Occasionally (though not always), the principal characters seem to follow these norms. What does conformity with norms and deviations from them signify?



*Fig. 3.1*  
A terracotta sculpture depicting a scene from the Mahabharata (West Bengal), c. seventeenth century

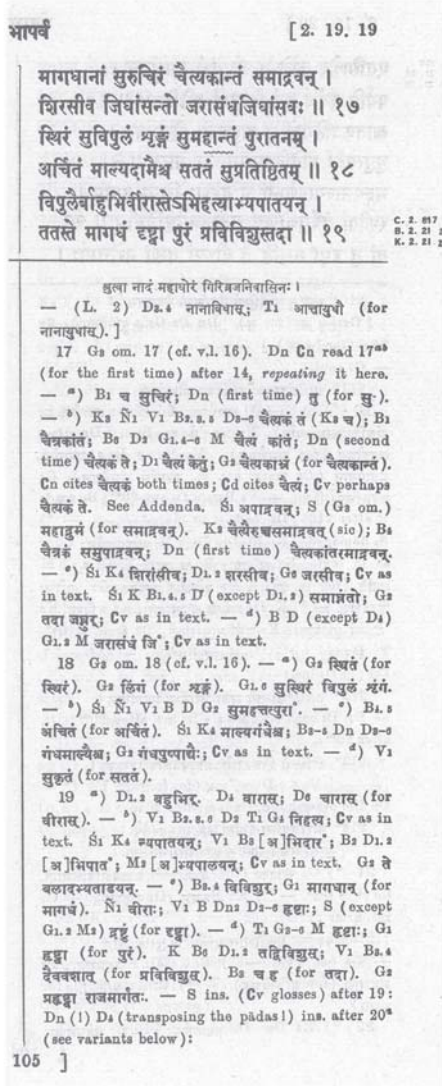


Fig. 3.2

A section of a page from the Critical Edition

The section printed in large bold letters is part of the main text. The smaller print lists variations in different manuscripts, which were carefully catalogued.

## 1. THE CRITICAL EDITION OF THE MAHABHARATA

One of the most ambitious projects of scholarship began in 1919, under the leadership of a noted Indian Sanskritist, V.S. Sukthankar. A team comprising dozens of scholars initiated the task of preparing a critical edition of the *Mahabharata*. What exactly did this involve? Initially, it meant collecting Sanskrit manuscripts of the text, written in a variety of scripts, from different parts of the country.

The team worked out a method of comparing verses from each manuscript. Ultimately, they selected the verses that appeared common to most versions and published these in several volumes, running into over 13,000 pages. The project took 47 years to complete. Two things became apparent: there were several common elements in the Sanskrit versions of the story, evident in manuscripts found all over the subcontinent, from Kashmir and Nepal in the north to Kerala and Tamil Nadu in the south. Also evident were enormous regional variations in the ways in which the text had been transmitted over the centuries. These variations were documented in footnotes and appendices to the main text. Taken together, more than half the 13,000 pages are devoted to these variations.

In a sense, these variations are reflective of the complex processes that shaped early (and later) social histories – through dialogues between dominant traditions and resilient local ideas and practices. These dialogues are characterised by moments of conflict as well as consensus.

Our understanding of these processes is derived primarily from texts written in Sanskrit by and for Brahmanas. When issues of social history were explored for the first time by historians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they tended to take these texts at face value – believing that everything that was laid down in these texts was actually practised. Subsequently, scholars began studying other traditions, from works in Pali, Prakrit and Tamil. These studies indicated that the ideas contained in normative Sanskrit texts were on the whole recognised as authoritative: they were also questioned and occasionally even rejected. It is important to keep this in mind as we examine how historians reconstruct social histories.

## 2. KINSHIP AND MARRIAGE

### MANY RULES AND VARIED PRACTICES

#### 2.1 Finding out about families

We often take family life for granted. However, you may have noticed that not all families are identical: they vary in terms of numbers of members, their relationship with one another as well as the kinds of activities they share. Often people belonging to the same family share food and other resources, and live, work and perform rituals together. Families are usually parts of larger networks of people defined as relatives, or to use a more technical term, *kinfolk*. While familial ties are often regarded as “natural” and based on blood, they are defined in many different ways. For instance, some societies regard cousins as being blood relations, whereas others do not.

For early societies, historians can retrieve information about elite families fairly easily; it is, however, far more difficult to reconstruct the familial relationships of ordinary people. Historians also investigate and analyse *attitudes* towards family and kinship. These are important, because they provide an insight into people’s thinking; it is likely that some of these ideas would have shaped their actions, just as actions may have led to changes in attitudes.

#### 2.2 The ideal of patriliney

Can we identify points when kinship relations changed? At one level, the *Mahabharata* is a story about this. It describes a feud over land and power between two groups of cousins, the Kauravas and the Pandavas, who belonged to a single ruling family, that of the Kurus, a lineage dominating one of the *janapadas* (Chapter 2, Map 1). Ultimately, the conflict ended in a battle, in which the Pandavas emerged victorious. After that, patrilineal succession was proclaimed. While patriliney had existed prior to the composition of the epic, the central story of the *Mahabharata* reinforced the idea that it was valuable. Under patriliney, sons could claim the resources (including the throne in the case of kings) of their fathers when the latter died.

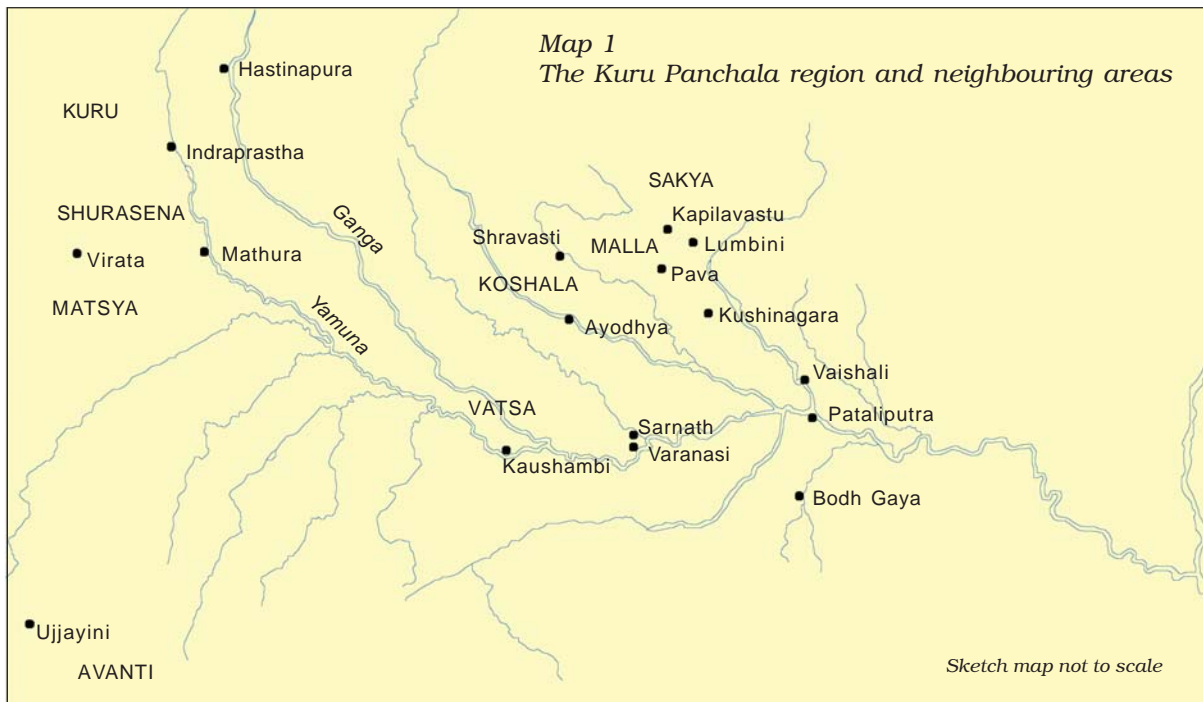
Most ruling dynasties (c. sixth century BCE onwards) claimed to follow this system, although there were variations in practice: sometimes there were no sons,

#### Terms for family and kin

Sanskrit texts use the term *maṅḍal* to designate families and *maṅḍalī* for the larger network of kinfolk. The term *yaṅḍalī* is used for lineage.

*Patriliney* means tracing descent from father to son, grandson and so on.

*Matriliney* is the term used when descent is traced through the mother.



in some situations brothers succeeded one another, sometimes other kinsmen claimed the throne, and, in very exceptional circumstances, women such as Prabhavati Gupta (Chapter 2) exercised power.

The concern with patriliney was not unique to ruling families. It is evident in mantras in ritual texts such as the *Rigveda*. It is possible that these attitudes were shared by wealthy men and those who claimed high status, including Brahmanas.

Source 1

### Producing “fine sons”

Here is an excerpt of a mantra from the *Ujygd/#* which was probably inserted in the text  $\approx 1000$  BCE, to be chanted by the priest while conducting the marriage ritual. It is used in many Hindu weddings even today:

I free her from here, but not from there. I have bound her firmly there, so that through the grace of Indra she will have fine sons and be fortunate in her husband’s love.

Indra was one of the principal deities# a god of valour, warfare and rain. “Here” and “there” refer to the father’s and husband’s house respectively.

☞ In the context of the mantra, discuss the implications of marriage from the point of view of the bride and groom. Are the implications identical, or are there differences?



Source 2

### Why kinfolk quarrelled

This is an excerpt from the *Dhṛiṣṭya* (literally, the first section) of the Sanskrit *Pañcātara*, describing why conflicts arose amongst the Kauravas and Pandavas:

The Kauravas were the ... sons of Dhritarashtra, and the Pandavas ... were their cousins. Since Dhritarashtra was blind, his younger brother Pandu ascended the throne of Hastinapura (see Map 1) ... However, after the premature death of Pandu, Dhritarashtra became king, as the royal princes were still very young. As the princes grew up together, the citizens of Hastinapura began to express their preference for the Pandavas, for they were more capable and virtuous than the Kauravas. This made Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kauravas, jealous. He approached his father and said, "You yourself did not receive the throne, although it fell to you, because of your defect. If the Pandava receives the patrimony from Pandu, his son will surely inherit it in turn, and so will his son, and his. We ourselves with our sons shall be excluded from the royal succession and become of slight regard in the eyes of the world, lord of the earth!"

Passages such as these may not have been literally true, but they give us an idea about what those who wrote the text thought. Sometimes, as in this case, they contain conflicting ideas.

➔ Read the passage and list the different criteria suggested for becoming king. Of these, how important was birth in a particular family? Which of these criteria seem justified? Are there any that strike you as unjust?

### 2.3 Rules of marriage

While sons were important for the continuity of the patrilineage, daughters were viewed rather differently within this framework. They had no claims to the resources of the household. At the same time, marrying them into families outside the kin was considered desirable. This system, called exogamy (literally, marrying outside), meant that the lives of young girls and women belonging to families that claimed high status were often carefully regulated to ensure that they were married at the "right" time and to the "right" person. This gave rise to the belief that *kanyadana* or the gift of a daughter in marriage was an important religious duty of the father.

With the emergence of new towns (Chapter 2), social life became more complex. People from near

### Types of marriages

*Āgāra* refers to marriage within a unit – this could be a kin group, caste, or a group living in the same locality.

*Āgāra* refers to marriage outside the unit.

*Āgāra* is the practice of a man having several wives.

*Āgāra* is the practice of a woman having several husbands.

Source 3

### Eight forms of marriage

Here are the first, fourth, fifth and sixth forms of marriage from the षड्विधविवाहः=

First: The gift of a daughter, after dressing her in costly clothes and honouring her with presents of jewels, to a man learned in the Veda whom the father himself invites.

Fourth: The gift of a daughter by the father after he has addressed the couple with the text, “May both of you perform your duties together”, and has shown honour to the bridegroom.

Fifth: When the bridegroom receives a maiden, after having given as much wealth as he can afford to the kinsmen and to the bride herself, according to his own will.

Sixth: The voluntary union of a maiden and her lover ... which springs from desire ...

- ➔ For each of the forms, discuss whether the decision about the marriage was taken by
- the bride,
  - the bridegroom,
  - the father of the bride,
  - the father of the bridegroom,
  - any other person.

and far met to buy and sell their products and share ideas in the urban milieu. This may have led to a questioning of earlier beliefs and practices (see also Chapter 4). Faced with this challenge, the Brahmanas responded by laying down codes of social behaviour in great detail. These were meant to be followed by Brahmanas in particular and the rest of society in general. From c. 500 BCE, these norms were compiled in Sanskrit texts known as the Dharmasutras and Dharmashastras. The most important of such works, the *Manusmriti*, was compiled between c. 200 BCE and 200 CE.

While the Brahmana authors of these texts claimed that their point of view had universal validity and that what they prescribed had to be obeyed by everybody, it is likely that real social relations were more complicated. Besides, given the regional diversity within the subcontinent and the difficulties of communication, the influence of Brahmanas was by no means all-pervasive.

What is interesting is that the Dharmasutras and Dharmashastras recognised as many as eight forms of marriage. Of these, the first four were considered as “good” while the remaining were condemned. It is possible that these were practised by those who did not accept Brahmanical norms.

#### 2.4 The *gotra* of women

One Brahmanical practice, evident from c. 1000 BCE onwards, was to classify people (especially Brahmanas) in terms of *gotras*. Each *gotra* was named after a Vedic seer, and all those who belonged to the same *gotra* were regarded as his descendants. Two rules about *gotra* were particularly important: women were expected to give up their father’s *gotra* and adopt that of their husband on marriage and members of the same *gotra* could not marry.

One way to find out whether this was commonly followed is to consider the names of men and women, which were sometimes derived from *gotra* names. These names are available for powerful ruling lineages such as the Satavahanas who ruled over parts of western India and the Deccan (c. second century BCE-second century CE). Several of their inscriptions have been recovered, which allow historians to trace family ties, including marriages.

Source 4

### Names of Satavahana kings from inscriptions

These are the names of several generations of Satavahana rulers, recovered from inscriptions. Note the uniform title  $\text{राजा}$ . Also note the following word, which ends with the term  $\text{सख्य}$ , a Prakrit word meaning “son”. The term Gotami-puta means “son of Gotami”. Names like Gotami and Vasithi are feminine forms of Gotama and Vasistha, Vedic seers after whom  $\text{जगद्व}$  were named<sup>1</sup>

**raja Gotami-puta Siri-Satakani**

**raja Vasithi-puta (sami-) Siri-Pulumayi**

**raja Gotami-puta sami-Siri-Yana-Satakani**

**raja Madhari-puta svami-Sakasena**

**raja Vasathi-puta Chatarapana-Satakani**

**raja Hariti-puta Vinhukada  
Chutukulanamda-Satakamni**

**raja Gotami-puta Siri-Vijaya- Satakani**

➔ How many Gotami-putas and how many Vasithi (alternative spelling Vasathi)-putas are there?



Fig. 3.3

*A Satavahana ruler and his wife*

This is one of the rare sculptural depictions of a ruler from the wall of a cave donated to Buddhist monks. This sculpture dates to c. second century BCE.

### Metronymics in the Upanishads

The  $\text{तैत्तिरीय}$  |  $\text{उपनिषद्}$  / one of the earliest Upanishads (see also Chapter 4), contains a list of successive generations of teachers and students, many of whom were designated by metronymics.

Source 5

### A mother's advice

The *Mahabharata* describes how, when war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas became almost inevitable, Gandhari made one last appeal to her eldest son Duryodhana:

By making peace you honour your father and me, as well as your well-wishers ... it is the wise man in control of his senses who guards his kingdom. Greed and anger drag a man away from his profits; by defeating these two enemies a king conquers the earth ... You will happily enjoy the earth, my son, along with the wise and heroic Pandavas ... There is no good in a war, no law (*dharma*) and profit (*artha*), let alone happiness; nor is there (necessarily) victory in the end – don't set your mind on war ...

Duryodhana did not listen to this advice and fought and lost the war.

➔ Does this passage give you an idea about the way in which mothers were viewed in early Indian societies?

### ➔ Discuss...

How are children named today? Are these ways of naming similar to or different from those described in this section?

Some of the Satavahana rulers were polygynous (that is, had more than one wife). An examination of the names of women who married Satavahana rulers indicates that many of them had names derived from *gotras* such as Gotama and Vasistha, their father's *gotras*. They evidently retained these names instead of adopting names derived from their husband's *gotra* name as they were required to do according to the Brahmanical rules. What is also apparent is that some of these women belonged to the same *gotra*. As is obvious, this ran counter to the ideal of exogamy recommended in the Brahmanical texts. In fact, it exemplified an alternative practice, that of endogamy or marriage within the kin group, which was (and is) prevalent amongst several communities in south India. Such marriages amongst kinfolk (such as cousins) ensured a close-knit community.

It is likely that there were variations in other parts of the subcontinent as well, but as yet it has not been possible to reconstruct specific details.

### 2.5 Were mothers important?

We have seen that Satavahana rulers were identified through metonymics (names derived from that of the mother). Although this may suggest that mothers were important, we need to be cautious before we arrive at any conclusion. In the case of the Satavahanas we know that succession to the throne was generally patrilineal.



Fig. 3.4

A battle scene

This is amongst the earliest sculptural depictions of a scene from the *Mahabharata*, a terracotta sculpture from the walls of a temple in Ahichchhatra (Uttar Pradesh), c. fifth century CE.

### 3. SOCIAL DIFFERENCES: WITHIN AND BEYOND THE FRAMEWORK OF CASTE

You are probably familiar with the term caste, which refers to a set of hierarchically ordered social categories. The ideal order was laid down in the Dharmasutras and Dharmashastras. Brahmanas claimed that this order, in which they were ranked first, was divinely ordained, while placing groups classified as Shudras and “untouchables” at the very bottom of the social order. Positions within the order were supposedly determined by birth.

#### 3.1 The “right” occupation

The Dharmasutras and Dharmashastras also contained rules about the ideal “occupations” of the four categories or *varnas*. Brahmanas were supposed to study and teach the Vedas, perform sacrifices and get sacrifices performed, and give and receive gifts. Kshatriyas were to engage in warfare, protect people and administer justice, study the Vedas, get sacrifices performed, and make gifts. The last three “occupations” were also assigned to the Vaishyas, who were in addition expected to engage in agriculture, pastoralism and trade. Shudras were assigned only one occupation – that of serving the three “higher” *varnas*.

The Brahmanas evolved two or three strategies for enforcing these norms. One, as we have just seen, was to assert that the *varna* order was of divine origin. Second, they advised kings to ensure that these norms were followed within their kingdoms. And third, they attempted to persuade people that their status was determined by birth. However, this was not always easy. So prescriptions were often reinforced by stories told in the *Mahabharata* and other texts.

Source 6

#### A divine order?

To justify their claims, Brahmanas often cited a verse from a hymn in the *Ujyhg* known as the *Sxuxvkd#vxnwd*, describing the sacrifice of *Sxuxvkd/#* the primeval man. All the elements of the universe, including the four social categories, were supposed to have emanated from his body:

The Brahmana was his mouth, of his arms was made the Kshatriya<sup>1</sup>

His thighs became the Vaishya# of his feet the Shudra#was born<sup>1</sup>

➡ Why do you think the Brahmanas quoted this verse frequently?

Source 7

**“Proper” social roles**

Here is a story from the *Dharmasutras* of the *Āśhvaśāstra*—

Once Drona, a Brahmana who taught archery to the Kuru princes, was approached by Ekalavya, a forest-dwelling *śūdras* (a hunting community). When Drona, who knew the *śūdras*, refused to have him as his pupil, Ekalavya returned to the forest, prepared an image of Drona out of clay, and treating it as his teacher, began to practise on his own. In due course, he acquired great skill in archery. One day, the Kuru princes went hunting and their dog, wandering in the woods, came upon Ekalavya. When the dog smelt the dark *śūdras* wrapped in black deer skin, his body caked with dirt, it began to bark. Annoyed, Ekalavya shot seven arrows into its mouth. When the dog returned to the Pandavas, they were amazed at this superb display of archery. They tracked down Ekalavya, who introduced himself as a pupil of Drona.

Drona had once told his favourite student Arjuna, that he would be unrivalled amongst his pupils. Arjuna now reminded Drona about this. Drona approached Ekalavya, who immediately acknowledged and honoured him as his teacher. When Drona demanded his right thumb as his fee, Ekalavya unhesitatingly cut it off and offered it. But thereafter, when he shot with his remaining fingers, he was no longer as fast as he had been before. Thus, Drona kept his word: no one was better than Arjuna.

➤ What message do you think this story was meant to convey to the *nishadas*? What message would it convey to Kshatriyas? Do you think that Drona, as a Brahmana, was acting according to the *Dharmasutras* when he was teaching archery?

**3.2 Non-Kshatriya kings**

According to the *Shastras*, only Kshatriyas could be kings. However, several important ruling lineages probably had different origins. The social background of the Mauryas, who ruled over a large empire, has been hotly debated. While later Buddhist texts suggested they were Kshatriyas, Brahmanical texts described them as being of “low” origin. The Shungas and Kanvas, the immediate successors of the Mauryas, were Brahmanas. In fact, political power was effectively open to anyone who could muster support and resources, and rarely depended on birth as a Kshatriya.

Other rulers, such as the Shakas who came from Central Asia, were regarded as *mlechchhas*,

barbarians or outsiders by the Brahmanas. However, one of the earliest inscriptions in Sanskrit describes how Rudradaman, the best-known Shaka ruler (c. second century CE), rebuilt Sudarshana lake (Chapter 2). This suggests that powerful *mlechchhas* were familiar with Sanskritic traditions.

It is also interesting that the best-known ruler of the Satavahana dynasty, Gotami-puta Siri-Satakani, claimed to be both a unique Brahmana (*eka bamhana*) and a destroyer of the pride of Kshatriyas. He also claimed to have ensured that there was no intermarriage amongst members of the four *varnas*. At the same time, he entered into a marriage alliance with the kin of Rudradaman.

As you can see from this example, integration within the framework of caste was often a complicated process. The Satavahanas claimed to be Brahmanas, whereas according to the Brahmanas, kings ought to have been Kshatriyas. They claimed to uphold the fourfold *varna* order, but entered into marriage alliances with people who were supposed to be excluded from the system. And, as we have seen, they practised endogamy instead of the exogamous system recommended in the Brahmanical texts.

### 3.3 *Jatis* and social mobility

These complexities are reflected in another term used in texts to refer to social categories – *jati*. In Brahmanical theory, *jati*, like *varna*, was based on birth. However, while the number of *varnas* was fixed at four, there was no restriction on the number of *jatis*. In fact, whenever Brahmanical authorities encountered new groups – for instance, people living in forests such as the *nishadas* – or wanted to assign a name to occupational categories such as the goldsmith or *suvarnakara*, which did not easily fit into the fourfold *varna* system, they classified them as a *jati*. *Jatis* which shared a common occupation or profession were sometimes organised into *shrenis* or guilds.

We seldom come across documents that record the histories of these groups. But there are exceptions. One interesting stone inscription (c. fifth century CE), found in Mandasor (Madhya Pradesh), records the history of a guild of silk weavers who originally lived in Lata (Gujarat), from where they



Fig. 3.5  
Silver coin depicting a Shaka ruler,  
c. fourth century CE

### The case of the merchants

Sanskrit texts and inscriptions used the term *vaishya* to designate merchants. While trade was defined as an occupation for Vaishyas in the Shastras, a more complex situation is evident in plays such as the *Mudrarakshasa* written by Shudraka (fl. fourth century CE). Here, the hero Charudatta was described as both a Brahmana and a *vaishya* or merchant. And a fifth-century inscription describes two brothers who made a donation for the construction of a temple as

➔ Do you think the silk weavers were following the occupation laid down for them in the Shastras?

migrated to Mandasor, then known as Dashapura. It states that they undertook the difficult journey along with their children and kinfolk, as they had heard about the greatness of the local king, and wanted to settle in his kingdom.

The inscription provides a fascinating glimpse of complex social processes and provides insights into the nature of guilds or *shrenis*. Although membership was based on a shared craft specialisation, some members adopted other occupations. It also indicates that the members shared more than a common profession – they collectively decided to invest their wealth, earned through their craft, to construct a splendid temple in honour of the sun god.

Source 8

### What the silk weavers did

Here is an excerpt from the inscription, which is in Sanskrit:

Some are intensely attached to music (so) pleasing to the ear; others, being proud of (the authorship of) a hundred excellent biographies, are conversant with wonderful tales; (others), filled with humility, are absorbed in excellent religious discourses; ... some excel in their own religious rites; likewise by others, who were self-possessed, the science of (Vedic) astronomy was mastered; and others, valorous in battle, even today forcibly cause harm to the enemies.

### 3.4 Beyond the four *varnas*: Integration

Given the diversity of the subcontinent, there were, and always have been, populations whose social practices were not influenced by Brahmanical ideas. When they figure in Sanskrit texts, they are often described as odd, uncivilised, or even animal-like. In some instances, these included forest-dwellers – for whom hunting and gathering remained an important means of subsistence. Categories such as the *nishada*, to which Ekalavya is supposed to have belonged, are examples of this.

Others who were viewed with suspicion included populations such as nomadic pastoralists, who could not be easily accommodated within the framework of settled agriculturists. Sometimes those who spoke non-Sanskritic languages were labelled as



*mlechchhas* and looked down upon. There was nonetheless also a sharing of ideas and beliefs between these people. The nature of relations is evident in some stories in the *Mahabharata*.

Source 9

### A tiger-like husband

This is a summary of a story from the *Draupadi* of the *Pandava*—

The Pandavas had fled into the forest. They were tired and fell asleep; only Bhima, the second Pandava, renowned for his prowess, was keeping watch. A man-eating *udrak* caught the scent of the Pandavas and sent his sister Hidimba to capture them. She fell in love with Bhima, transformed herself into a lovely maiden and proposed to him. He refused. Meanwhile, the *udrak* arrived and challenged Bhima to a wrestling match. Bhima accepted the challenge and killed him. The others woke up hearing the noise. Hidimba introduced herself, and declared her love for Bhima. She told Kunti: “I have forsaken my friends, my *gokul* and my kin; and good lady, chosen your tiger-like son for my man ... whether you think me a fool, or your devoted servant, let me join you, great lady, with your son as my husband.”

Ultimately, Yudhishthira agreed to the marriage on condition that they would spend the day together but that Bhima would return every night. The couple roamed all over the world during the day. In due course Hidimba gave birth to a *udrak* boy named Ghatotkacha. Then the mother and son left the Pandavas. Ghatotkacha promised to return to the Pandavas whenever they needed him.

Some historians suggest that the term *udrak* is used to describe people whose practices differed from those laid down in Brahmanical texts.

➔ Identify the practices described in this passage which seem non-Brahmanical.

### 3.5 Beyond the four *varnas*

#### Subordination and conflict

While the Brahmanas considered some people as being outside the system, they also developed a sharper social divide by classifying certain social categories as “untouchable”. This rested on a notion that certain activities, especially those connected with the performance of rituals, were sacred and by

extension “pure”. Those who considered themselves pure avoided taking food from those they designated as “untouchable”. In sharp contrast to the purity aspect, some activities were regarded as particularly “polluting”. These included handling corpses and dead animals. Those who performed such tasks, designated as *chandalas*, were placed at the very bottom of the hierarchy. Their touch and, in some cases, even seeing them was regarded as “polluting” by those who claimed to be at the top of the social order.

The *Manusmriti* laid down the “duties” of the *chandalas*. They had to live outside the village, use discarded utensils, and wear clothes of the dead and ornaments of iron. They could not walk about in villages and cities at night. They had to dispose of the bodies of those who had no relatives and serve as executioners. Much later, the Chinese Buddhist monk Fa Xian (c. fifth century CE) wrote that “untouchables” had to sound a clapper in the streets so that people could avoid seeing them. Another Chinese pilgrim, Xuan Zang (c. seventh century), observed that executioners and scavengers were forced to live outside the city.

By examining non-Brahmanical texts which depict the lives of *chandalas*, historians have tried to find out whether *chandalas* accepted the life of degradation prescribed in the *Shastras*. Sometimes, these depictions correspond with those in the Brahmanical texts. But occasionally, there are hints of different social realities.

Fig. 3.6  
Depiction of a mendicant seeking alms, stone sculpture (Gandhara)  
c. third century, CE



Source 10

### The Bodhisatta as a *chandala*

Did *chandala* resist the attempts to push them to the bottom of the social order? Read this story, which is part of the *Pāṭiśākhya*, a Pali text, where the Bodhisatta (the Buddha in a previous birth) is identified as a *chandala*.

Once, the Bodhisatta was born outside the city of Banaras as a *chandala* son and named Matanga. One day, when he had gone to the city on some work, he encountered Dittha Mangalika, the daughter of a merchant. When she saw him, she exclaimed "I have seen something inauspicious" and washed her eyes. The angry hangers-on then beat him up. In protest, he went and lay down at the door of her father's house. On the seventh day they brought out the girl and gave her to him. She carried the starving Matanga back to the *chandala* settlement. Once he returned home, he decided to renounce the world. After attaining spiritual powers, he returned to Banaras and married her. A son named Mandavya Kumara was born to them. He learnt the three Vedas as he grew up and began to provide food to 16,000 Brahmanas every day.

One day, Matanga, dressed in rags, with a clay alms bowl in his hand, arrived at his son's doorstep and begged for food. Mandavya replied that he looked like an outcaste and was unworthy of alms; the food was meant for the Brahmanas. Matanga said: "Those who are proud of their birth and are ignorant do not deserve gifts. On the contrary, those who are free from vices are worthy of offerings." Mandavya lost his temper and asked his servants to throw the man out. Matanga rose in the air and disappeared. When Dittha Mangalika learnt about the incident, she followed Matanga and begged his forgiveness. He asked her to take a bit of the leftover from his bowl and give it to Mandavya and the Brahmanas ...

➤ Identify elements in the story that suggest that it was written from the perspective of Matanga.

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#### ➤ Discuss...

Which of the sources mentioned in this section suggest that people followed the occupations laid down by Brahmanas? Which sources suggest other possibilities?

## 4. BEYOND BIRTH

### RESOURCES AND STATUS

If you recall the economic relations discussed in Chapter 2, you will realise that slaves, landless agricultural labourers, hunters, fisherfolk, pastoralists, peasants, village headmen, craftspersons, merchants and kings emerged as social actors in different parts of the subcontinent. Their social positions were often shaped by their access to economic resources. Here we will examine the social implications of access to resources in certain specific situations.

#### 4.1 Gendered access to property

Consider first a critical episode in the *Mahabharata*. During the course of the long-drawn rivalry between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, Duryodhana invited Yudhisthira to a game of dice. The latter, who was deceived by his rival, staked his gold, elephants, chariots, slaves, army, treasury, kingdom, the property of his subjects, his brothers and finally himself and lost all. Then he staked their common wife Draupadi and lost her too.

Issues of ownership, foregrounded in stories such as this one (Source 11), also figure in the Dharmasutras and Dharmashastras. According to the *Manusmriti*, the paternal estate was to be divided equally amongst sons after the death of the parents, with a special share for the eldest. Women could not claim a share of these resources.

However, women were allowed to retain the gifts they received on the occasion of their marriage as *stridhana* (literally, a woman's wealth). This could be inherited by their children, without the husband having any claim on it. At the same time, the *Manusmriti* warned women against hoarding family property, or even their own valuables, without the husband's permission.

You have read about wealthy women such as the Vakataka queen Prabhavati Gupta (Chapter 2). However, cumulative evidence – both epigraphic and textual – suggests that while upper-class women may have had access to resources, land, cattle and money were generally controlled by men. In other words, social differences between men and women were sharpened because of the differences in access to resources.

Source 11

#### Draupadi's question

Draupadi is supposed to have asked Yudhisthira whether he had lost himself before staking her. Two contrary opinions were expressed in response to this question.

One, that even if Yudhisthira had lost himself earlier, his wife remained under his control, so he could stake her.

Two, that an unfree man (as Yudhisthira was when he had lost himself) could not stake another person.

The matter remained unresolved; ultimately, Dhritarashtra restored to the Pandavas and Draupadi their personal freedom.

➡ Do you think that this episode suggests that wives could be treated as the property of their husbands?

Source 12

### How could men and women acquire wealth?

For men, the *Pdpxvplw1* declares, there are seven means of acquiring wealth: inheritance, finding, purchase, conquest, investment, work, and acceptance of gifts from good people.

For women, there are six means of acquiring wealth: what was given in front of the fire (marriage) or the bridal procession, or as a token of affection, and what she got from her brother, mother or father. She could also acquire wealth through any subsequent gift and whatever her “affectionate” husband might give her.

➔ Compare and contrast the ways in which men and women could acquire wealth.

#### 4.2 *Varna* and access to property

According to the Brahmanical texts, another criterion (apart from gender) for regulating access to wealth was *varna*. As we saw earlier, the only “occupation” prescribed for Shudras was servitude, while a variety of occupations were listed for men of the first three *varnas*. If these provisions were actually implemented, the wealthiest men would have been the Brahmanas and the Kshatriyas. That this corresponded to some extent with social realities is evident from descriptions of priests and kings in other textual traditions. Kings are almost invariably depicted as wealthy; priests are also generally shown to be rich, though there are occasional depictions of the poor Brahmana.

At another level, even as the Brahmanical view of society was codified in the Dharmasutras and Dharmashastras, other traditions developed critiques of the *varna* order. Some of the best-known of these were developed within early Buddhism (c. sixth century BCE onwards; see also Chapter 4). The Buddhists recognised that there were differences in society, but did not regard these as natural or inflexible. They also rejected the idea of claims to status on the basis of birth.

## Source 13

**The wealthy Shudra**

This story, based on a Buddhist text in Pali known as the *Paṃkṣāpāṇāyana* is part of a dialogue between a king named Avantiputta and a disciple of the Buddha named Kachchana. While it may not be literally true, it reveals Buddhist attitudes towards *śūdrā*.

Avantiputta asked Kachchana what he thought about Brahmanas who held that they were the best caste and that all other castes were low; that Brahmanas were a fair caste while all other castes were dark; that only Brahmanas were pure, not non-Brahmanas; that Brahmanas were sons of Brahma, born of his mouth, born of Brahma, formed by Brahma, heirs to Brahma.

Kachchana replied: "What if a Shudra were wealthy ... would another Shudra#...or a Kshatriya or a Brahmana or a Vaishya ... speak politely to him?"

Avantiputta replied that if a Shudra had wealth or corn or gold or silver, he could have as his obedient servant another Shudra to get up earlier than he, to go to rest later, to carry out his orders, to speak politely; or he could even have a Kshatriya or a Brahmana or a Vaishya as his obedient servant.

Kachchana asked: "This being so, are not these four *śūdrā*#exactly the same?"

Avantiputta conceded that there was no difference amongst the *śūdrā*#on this count.

➤ Read Avantiputta's first statement again. What are the ideas in it that are derived from Brahmanical texts/traditions? Can you identify the source of any of these? What, according to this text, explains social difference?

### 4.3 An alternative social scenario: Sharing wealth

So far we have been examining situations where people either claimed or were assigned status on the basis of their wealth. However, there were other possibilities as well; situations where men who were generous were respected, while those who were miserly or simply accumulated wealth for themselves were despised. One area where these values were cherished was ancient Tamilakam, where, as we saw earlier (Chapter 2), there were several chiefdoms around 2,000 years ago. Amongst other things, the chiefs were patrons of bards and poets who sang their praise. Poems included in the Tamil Sangam anthologies often illuminate social and economic

relationships, suggesting that while there were differences between rich and poor, those who controlled resources were also expected to share them.

Source 14

### The poor generous chief

In this composition from the *Sxudqduxux*, one of the anthologies of poems of the Tamil Sangam literature (1st century CE), a bard describes his patron to other poets thus :

He (i.e. the patron) doesn't have the wealth to lavish on others everyday

Nor does he have the pettiness to say that he has nothing and so refuse!

...

he lives in Irantai (a place) and is generous. He is an enemy to the hunger of bards!

If you wish to cure your poverty, come along with me, bards whose lips are so skilled!

If we request him, showing him our ribs thin with hunger, he will go to the blacksmith of his village

And will say to that man of powerful hands:

"Shape me a long spear for war, one that has a straight blade!"

➔ What are the strategies which the bard uses to try and persuade the chief to be generous? What is the chief expected to do to acquire wealth in order to give some to the bards?

### ➔ Discuss...

How do social relationships operate in present-day societies? Are there any similarities or differences with patterns of the past?

Fig. 3.7

A chief and his follower, stone sculpture, Amaravati (Andhra Pradesh), c. second century CE

➔ How has the sculptor shown the difference between the chief and his follower?



## 5. EXPLAINING SOCIAL DIFFERENCES: A SOCIAL CONTRACT

The Buddhists also developed an alternative understanding of social inequalities, and of the institutions required to regulate social conflict. In a myth found in a text known as the *Sutta Pitaka* they suggested that originally human beings did not have fully evolved bodily forms, nor was the world of plants fully developed. All beings lived in an idyllic state of peace, taking from nature only what they needed for each meal.

However, there was a gradual deterioration of this state as human beings became increasingly greedy, vindictive and deceitful. This led them to wonder: “What if we were to select a certain being who should be wrathful when indignation is right, who should censure that which should rightly be censured and should banish him who deserves to be banished? We will give him in return a proportion of the rice ... chosen by the whole people, he will be known as *mahasammata*, the great elect.”

This suggests that the institution of kingship was based on human choice, with taxes as a form of payment for services rendered by the king. At the same time, it reveals recognition of human agency in creating and institutionalising economic and social relations. There are other implications as well. For instance, if human beings were responsible for the creation of the system, they could also change it in future.

## 6. HANDLING TEXTS

### HISTORIANS AND THE *MAHABHARATA*

If you look through the sources cited in this chapter once more you will notice that historians consider several elements when they analyse texts. They examine whether texts were written in Prakrit, Pali or Tamil, *languages* that were probably used by ordinary people, or in Sanskrit, a language meant almost exclusively for priests and elites. They also consider the *kinds* of text. Were these mantras, learnt and chanted by ritual specialists, or stories that people could have read, or heard, and then retold if they found them interesting? Besides, they try to find out about the *author(s)* whose perspectives and ideas shaped the text, as well as the intended



*audience*, as, very often, authors keep the interests of their audience in mind while composing their work. And they try and ascertain the possible *date* of the composition or compilation of the texts as well as the *place* where they may have been composed. It is only after making these assessments that they draw on the *content* of texts to arrive at an understanding of their historical significance. As you can imagine, this is a particularly difficult task for a text as complex as the *Mahabharata*.

### 6.1 Language and content

Let us look at the language of the text. The version of the *Mahabharata* we have been considering is in Sanskrit (although there are versions in other languages as well). However, the Sanskrit used in the *Mahabharata* is far simpler than that of the Vedas, or of the *prashastis* discussed in Chapter 2. As such, it was probably widely understood.

Historians usually classify the contents of the present text under two broad heads – sections that contain stories, designated as the *narrative*, and sections that contain prescriptions about social norms, designated as *didactic*. This division is by no means watertight – the didactic sections include stories, and the narrative often contains a social message. However, generally historians agree that the *Mahabharata* was meant to be a dramatic, moving story, and that the didactic portions were probably added later.

*Didactic* refers to something that is meant for purposes of instruction.



Fig. 3.8

*Krishna advises Arjuna on the battlefield*

This painting dates to the eighteenth century. Perhaps the most important didactic section of the *Mahabharata* is the *Bhagavad Gita*, which contains the advice offered by Lord Krishna to Arjuna. This scene is frequently depicted in painting and sculpture.

Interestingly, the text is described as an *itihasa* within early Sanskrit tradition. The literal meaning of the term is “thus it was”, which is why it is generally translated as “history”. Was there a real war that was remembered in the epic? We are not sure. Some historians think that the memory of an actual conflict amongst kinfolk was preserved in the narrative; others point out that there is no other corroborative evidence of the battle.

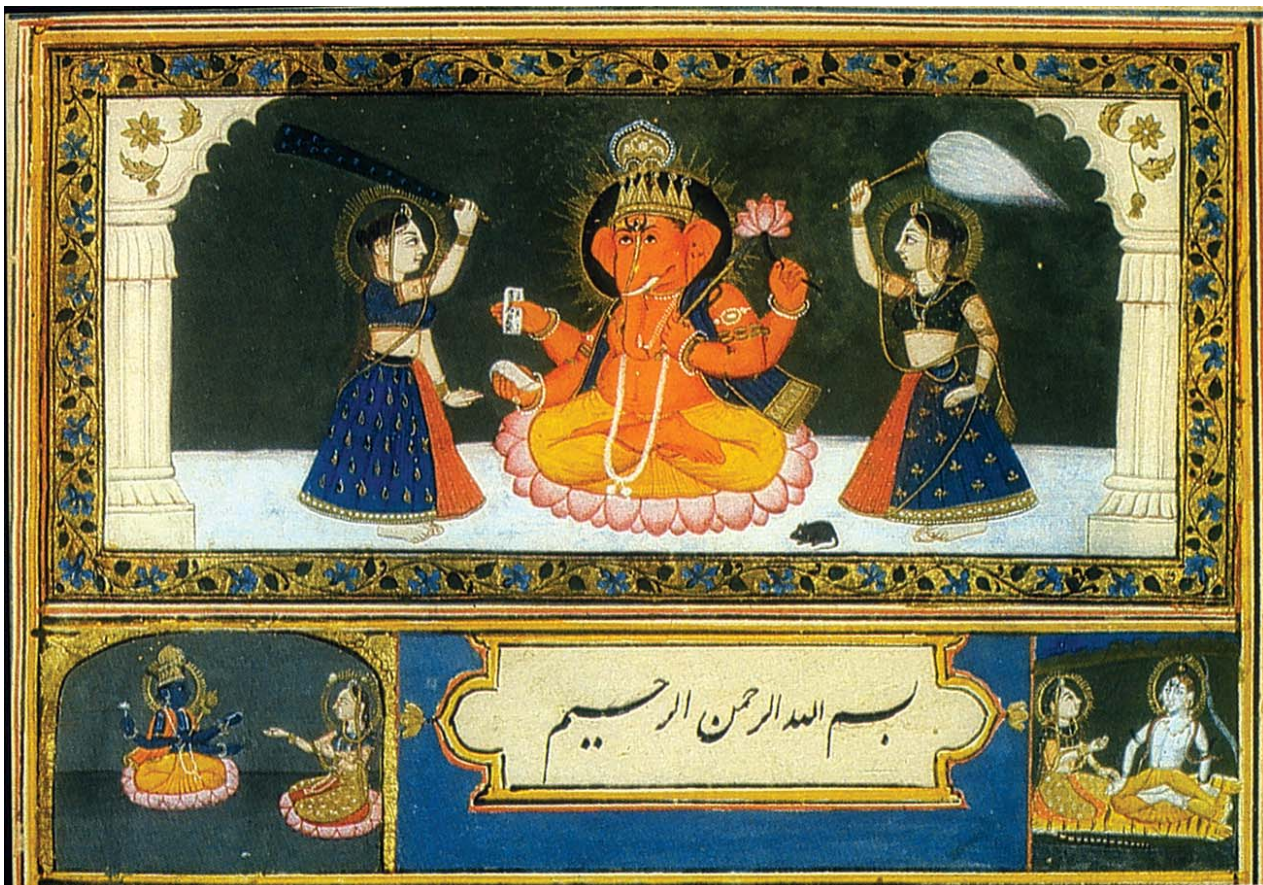
### 6.2 Author(s) and dates

Who wrote the text? This is a question to which there are several answers. The original story was probably composed by charioteer-bards known as *sutas* who generally accompanied Kshatriya warriors to the battlefield and composed poems celebrating their victories and other achievements. These compositions circulated orally. Then, from the fifth century BCE, Brahmanas took over the story and began to commit it to writing. This was the time when chiefdoms such as those of the Kurus and

Fig. 3.9

#### Lord Ganesha the scribe

According to tradition, Vyasa dictated the text to the deity. This illustration is from a Persian translation of the *Mahabharata*, c. 1740-50.



Panchalas, around whom the story of the epic revolves, were gradually becoming kingdoms. Did the new kings want their *itihasa* to be recorded and preserved more systematically? It is also possible that the upheavals that often accompanied the establishment of these states, where old social values were often replaced by new norms, are reflected in some parts of the story.

We notice another phase in the composition of the text between c. 200 BCE and 200 CE. This was the period when the worship of Vishnu was growing in importance, and Krishna, one of the important figures of the epic, was coming to be identified with Vishnu. Subsequently, between c. 200 and 400 CE, large didactic sections resembling the *Manusmriti* were added. With these additions, a text which initially perhaps had less than 10,000 verses grew to comprise about 100,000 verses. This enormous composition is traditionally attributed to a sage named Vyasa.

### **6.3 The search for convergence**

The *Mahabharata*, like any major epic, contains vivid descriptions of battles, forests, palaces and settlements. In 1951-52, the archaeologist B.B. Lal excavated at a village named Hastinapura in Meerut (Uttar Pradesh). Was this the Hastinapura of the epic? While the similarity in names could be coincidental, the location of the site in the Upper Ganga doab, where the Kuru kingdom was situated, suggests that it may have been the capital of the Kurus mentioned in the text.

Lal found evidence of five occupational levels, of which the second and third are of interest to us. This is what Lal noted about the houses in the second phase (c. twelfth-seventh centuries BCE): "Within the limited area excavated, no definite plans of houses were obtained, but walls of mud and mud-bricks were duly encountered. The discovery of mud-plaster with prominent reed-marks suggested that some of the houses had reed walls plastered over with mud." For the third phase (c. sixth-third centuries BCE), he noted: "Houses of this period were built of mud-brick as well as burnt bricks. Soakage jars and brick drains were used for draining out refuse water, while terracotta ring-wells may have been used both as wells and drainage pits."

Source 15

### Hastinapura

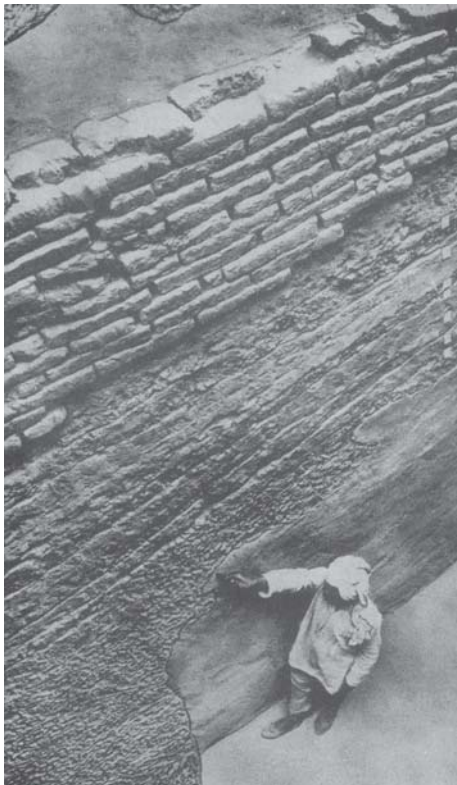
This is how the city is described in the *Dharmashastras* of the *Pandava*—

The city, bursting like the ocean, packed with hundreds of mansions, displayed with its gateways, arches and turrets like massing clouds the splendour of Great Indra's city.

➤ Do you think Lal's finds match the description of Hastinapura in the epic?

Fig. 3.10

A wall excavated at Hastinapura



Was the description of the city in the epic added after the main narrative had been composed, when (after the sixth century BCE) urban centres flourished in the region? Or was it a flight of poetic fancy, which cannot always be verified by comparisons with other kinds of evidence?

Consider another instance. One of the most challenging episodes in the *Mahabharata* is Draupadi's marriage with the Pandavas, an instance of polyandry that is central to the narrative. If we examine the section of the epic that describes this event, it is evident that the author(s) attempted to explain it in a variety of ways.

Source 16

### Draupadi's marriage

Drupada, the king of Panchala, organised a competition where the challenge was to string a bow and hit a target; the winner would be chosen to marry his daughter Draupadi. Arjuna was victorious and was garlanded by Draupadi. The Pandavas returned with her to their mother Kunti, who, even before she saw them, asked them to share whatever they had got. She realised her mistake when she saw Draupadi, but her command could not be violated. After much deliberation, Yudhishthira decided that Draupadi would be their common wife.

When Drupada was told about this, he protested. However, the seer Vyasa arrived and told him that the Pandavas were in reality incarnations of Indra, whose wife had been reborn as Draupadi, and they were thus destined for each other.

Vyasa added that in another instance a young woman had prayed to Shiva for a husband, and in her enthusiasm, had prayed five times instead of once. This woman was now reborn as Draupadi, and Shiva had fulfilled her prayers. Convinced by these stories, Drupada consented to the marriage.

➤ Why do you think the author(s) offered three explanations for a single episode?

Present-day historians suggest that the fact that the author(s) describe a polyandrous union indicates that polyandry may have been prevalent amongst ruling elites at some point of time. At the same time, the fact that so many different explanations are offered for the episode (Source 16) suggests that polyandry gradually fell into disfavour amongst the Brahmanas, who reworked and developed the text through the centuries.

Some historians note that while the practice of polyandry may have seemed unusual or even undesirable from the Brahmanical point of view, it was (and is) prevalent in the Himalayan region. Others suggest that there may have been a shortage of women during times of warfare, and this led to polyandry. In other words, it was attributed to a situation of crisis.

Some early sources suggest that polyandry was not the only or even the most prevalent form of marriage. Why then did the author(s) choose to associate this practice with the central characters of the *Mahabharata*? We need to remember that creative literature often has its own narrative requirements and does not always literally reflect social realities.

## 7. A DYNAMIC TEXT

The growth of the *Mahabharata* did not stop with the Sanskrit version. Over the centuries, versions of the epic were written in a variety of languages through an ongoing process of dialogue between peoples, communities, and those who wrote the texts. Several stories that originated in specific regions or circulated amongst certain people found their way into the epic. At the same time, the central story of the epic was often retold in different ways. And episodes were depicted in sculpture and painting. They also provided themes for a wide range of performing arts – plays, dance and other kinds of narrations.

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### ➔ Discuss...

Read the excerpts from the *Mahabharata* included in this chapter once more. For each of these, discuss whether they could have been literally true. What do these excerpts tell us about those who composed the text? What do they tell us about those who must have read or heard the epic?

Most retellings or re-enactments of the epic draw on the main narrative in creative ways. Let us look at one example, an episode from the *Mahabharata* that has been transformed by Mahashweta Devi, a contemporary Bengali writer known for raising her voice against all forms of exploitation and oppression. In this particular instance, she works out alternative possibilities from the main story of the *Mahabharata* and draws attention to questions on which the Sanskrit text is silent.

The Sanskrit text describes how Duryodhana plotted to kill the Pandavas by inviting them to stay in a specially prepared house of lac, which he planned to set on fire. Forewarned, the Pandavas dug a tunnel to ensure their escape. Then Kunti arranged for a feast. While most of the invitees were Brahmanas, a *nishada* woman came with her five sons. When they were satiated with drink and fell off to sleep, the Pandavas escaped, setting fire to the house. When the bodies of the woman and her sons were discovered, people thought that the Pandavas were dead.

In her short story titled “Kunti O Nishadi”, Mahashweta Devi takes up the narrative from where the *Mahabharata* ends it. She sets the story in a forest, where Kunti retires after the war. Kunti now has time to reflect on her past, and often confesses to what she regards as her failings, talking with the earth, the symbol of nature. Every day she sees the *nishadas* who come to collect wood, honey, tubers and roots. One *nishadi* (a *nishada* woman) often listens to Kunti when she talks with the earth.

One day, there was something in the air; the animals were fleeing the forest. Kunti noticed that the *nishadi* was watching her, and was startled when she spoke to her and asked if she remembered the house of lac. Yes, Kunti said, she did. Did she remember a certain elderly *nishadi* and her five young sons? And that she had served them wine till they were senseless, while she escaped with her own sons? That *nishadi* ... “Not you!” Kunti exclaimed. The *nishadi* replied that the woman who was killed had been her mother-in-law. She added that while Kunti had been reflecting on her past, not once did she remember the six innocent lives that were lost because she had wanted to save herself and her sons. As they spoke, the flames drew nearer. The *nishadi* escaped to safety, but Kunti remained where she was.

### TIMELINE 1 MAJOR TEXTUAL TRADITIONS

c. 500 BCE	<i>Ashtadhyayi</i> of Panini, a work on Sanskrit grammar
c. 500-200 BCE	Major Dharmasutras (in Sanskrit)
c. 500-100 BCE	Early Buddhist texts including the <i>Tripitaka</i> (in Pali)
c. 500 BCE-400 CE	<i>Ramayana</i> and <i>Mahabharata</i> (in Sanskrit)
c. 200 BCE-200 CE	<i>Manusmriti</i> (in Sanskrit); composition and compilation of Tamil Sangam literature
c. 100 CE	<i>Charaka</i> and <i>Sushruta Samhitas</i> , works on medicine (in Sanskrit)
c. 200 CE onwards	Compilation of the <i>Puranas</i> (in Sanskrit)
c. 300 CE	<i>Natyashastra</i> of Bharata, a work on dramaturgy (in Sanskrit)
c. 300-600 CE	Other Dharmashastras (in Sanskrit)
c. 400-500 CE	Sanskrit plays including the works of Kalidasa; works on astronomy and mathematics by Aryabhata and Varahamihira (in Sanskrit); compilation of Jaina works (in Prakrit)

### TIMELINE 2 MAJOR LANDMARKS IN THE STUDY OF THE *MAHABHARATA*

#### Twentieth century

1919-66	Preparation and publication of the Critical Edition of the <i>Mahabharata</i>
1973	J.A.B. van Buitenen begins English translation of the Critical Edition; remains incomplete after his death in 1978


**ANSWER IN 100-150 WORDS**

1. Explain why patriliney may have been particularly important among elite families.
2. Discuss whether kings in early states were invariably Kshatriyas.
3. Compare and contrast the *dharma* or norms mentioned in the stories of Drona, Hidimba and Matanga.
4. In what ways was the Buddhist theory of a social contract different from the Brahmanical view of society derived from the *Purusha sukta*?
5. The following is an excerpt from the *Mahabharata*, in which Yudhishthira, the eldest Pandava, speaks to Sanjaya, a messenger:

Sanjaya, convey my respectful greetings to all the Brahmanas and the chief priest of the house of Dhritarashtra. I bow respectfully to teacher Drona ... I hold the feet of our preceptor Kripa ... (and) the chief of the Kurus, the great Bhishma. I bow respectfully to the old king (Dhritarashtra). I greet and ask after the health of his son Duryodhana and his younger brother ... Also greet all the young Kuru warriors who are our brothers, sons and grandsons ... Greet above all him, who is to us like father and mother, the wise Vidura (born of a slave woman) ... I bow to the elderly ladies who are known as our mothers. To those who are our wives you say this, "I hope they are well-protected"... Our daughters-in-law born of good families and mothers of children greet on my behalf. Embrace for me those who are our daughters ... The beautiful, fragrant, well-dressed courtesans of ours you should also greet. Greet the slave women and their children, greet the aged, the maimed (and) the helpless ...

Try and identify the criteria used to make this list – in terms of age, gender, kinship ties. Are there any other criteria? For each category, explain why they are placed in a particular position in the list.





### WRITE A SHORT ESSAY (ABOUT 500 WORDS) ON THE FOLLOWING:

6. This is what a famous historian of Indian literature, Maurice Winternitz, wrote about the *Mahabharata*: “just because the Mahabharata represents more of an entire literature ... and contains so much and so many kinds of things, ... (it) gives(s) us an insight into the most profound depths of the soul of the Indian folk.” Discuss.
7. Discuss whether the *Mahabharata* could have been the work of a single author.
8. How important were gender differences in early societies? Give reasons for your answer.
9. Discuss the evidence that suggests that Brahmanical prescriptions about kinship and marriage were not universally followed.



### MAP WORK

10. Compare the map in this chapter with Map 1 in Chapter 2. List the *mahajanapadas* and cities located near the Kuru-Panchala lands.



### PROJECT (ANY ONE)

11. Find out about retellings of the *Mahabharata* in other languages. Discuss how they handle any two of the episodes of the text described in this chapter, explaining any similarities or differences that you notice.
12. Imagine that you are an author and rewrite the story of Ekalavya from a perspective of your choice.



#### If you would like to know more, read:

Uma Chakravarti. 2006.  
Hyhu|gd|#Olyhv/#Hyhu|gd|  
Klwru|hv1#Tulika, New Delhi.

Irawati Karve. 1968.  
Nlqvkl#Rujdq|vdw|rq#lq#Lq|d1  
Asia Publishing House, Bombay.

R.S. Sharma. 1983.  
Shuvshfwlyhv#lq#Vr|ldo#dgg  
Hfrqplf#Klwru|#ri#Hdu|#Lq|d1  
Munshiram Manoharlal,  
New Delhi.

V.S. Sukthankar. 1957.  
Rq#wkh#Phdq|qj#ri#wkh  
Pdkdekduwd1#Asiatic Society of  
Bombay, Bombay.

Romila Thapar. 2000.  
Exowub#sdwv=#Hvd|v#lq#Hdu|  
Lq|d1#Klwru|#Oxford University  
Press, New Delhi.



#### For more information, you could visit:

<http://bombay.indology.info/mahabharata/statement.html>

## THEME FOUR

# THINKERS, BELIEFS AND BUILDINGS

## CULTURAL DEVELOPMENTS

(C. 600 BCE - 600 CE)



Fig. 4.1  
A sculpture from Sanchi

In this chapter we shall go on a long journey across a thousand years to read about philosophers and their attempts to understand the world they inhabited. We will also see how their ideas were compiled as oral and written texts as well as expressed in architecture and sculpture. These are indicative of the enduring influence these thinkers had on people. While we will be focusing on Buddhism, it is important to remember that this tradition did not develop in isolation – there were several other traditions, each engaged in debates and dialogues with the others.

The sources that historians use to reconstruct this exciting world of ideas and beliefs include Buddhist, Jaina and Brahmanical texts, as well as a large and impressive body of material remains including monuments and inscriptions. Among the best preserved monuments of the time is the stupa at Sanchi which is a major focus in this chapter.

Fig. 4.2  
Shahjehan Begum



## 1. A GLIMPSE OF SANCHI

### Sanchi in the nineteenth century

The most wonderful ancient buildings in the state of Bhopal are at Sanchi Kanakhera, a small village under the brow of a hill some 20 miles north-east of Bhopal which we visited yesterday. We inspected the stone sculptures and statues of the Buddha and an ancient gateway ... The ruins appear to be the object of great interest to European gentlemen. Major Alexander Cunningham ... stayed several weeks in this neighbourhood and examined these ruins most carefully. He took drawings of the place, deciphered the inscription, and bored shafts down these domes. The results of his investigations were described by him in an English work ...

FROM SHAHJEHAN BEGUM, NAWAB OF BHOPAL (ruled 1868-1901),  
with the original text in Urdu, translated by H.D. Barstow, 1876.

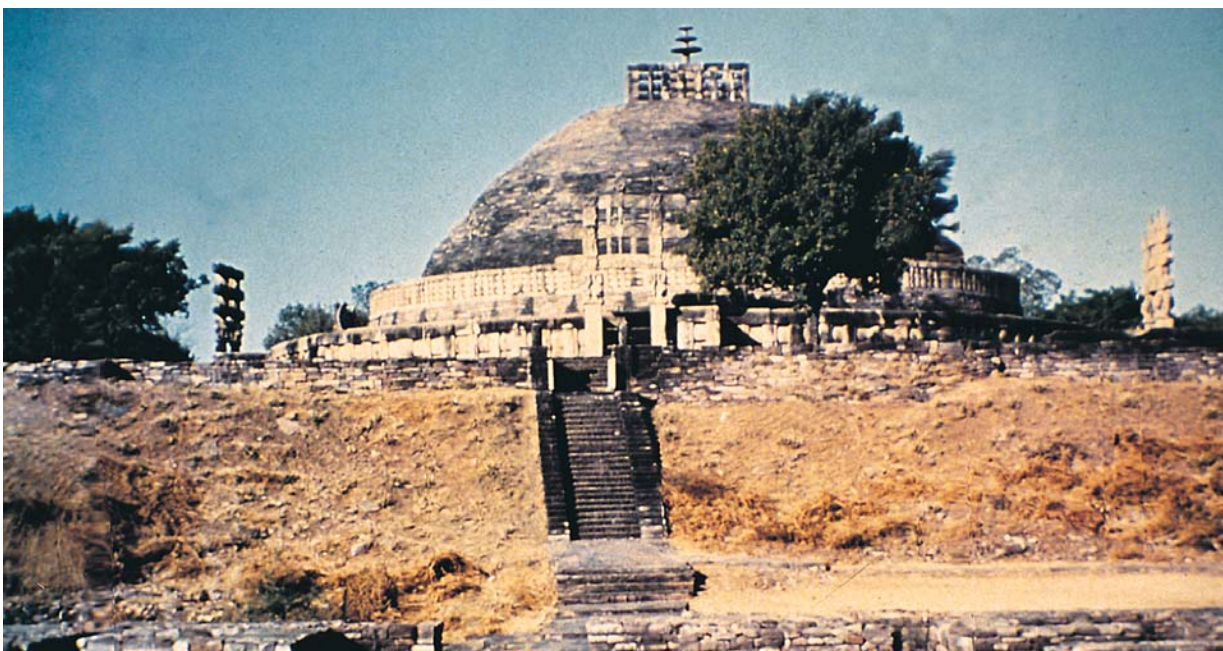
Nineteenth-century Europeans were very interested in the stupa at Sanchi. In fact, the French sought Shahjehan Begum's permission to take away the eastern gateway, which was the best preserved, to be displayed in a museum in France. For a while some Englishmen also wanted to do the same, but fortunately both the French and the English were satisfied with carefully prepared plaster-cast copies and the original remained at the site, part of the Bhopal state.

The rulers of Bhopal, Shahjehan Begum and her successor Sultan Jehan Begum, provided money for the preservation of the ancient site. No wonder then that John Marshall dedicated his important volumes on Sanchi to Sultan Jehan. She funded the museum that was built there as well as the guesthouse where he lived and wrote the volumes. She also funded the publication of the volumes. So if the stupa complex has survived, it is in no small measure due to wise decisions, and to good luck in escaping the eyes of railway contractors, builders, and those looking for finds to carry away to the museums of Europe. One of the most important Buddhist centres, the discovery of Sanchi has vastly transformed our understanding of early Buddhism. Today it stands testimony to the successful restoration and preservation of a key archaeological site by the Archaeological Survey of India.

*Fig. 4.3*

*The Great Stupa at Sanchi*

If you travel from Delhi to Bhopal by train, you will see the majestic stupa complex on top of a hill, crowning it as it were. If you request the guard he will stop the train at the little station of Sanchi for two minutes – enough time for you to get down. As you climb up the hill you can see the complex of structures: a large mound and other monuments including a temple built in the fifth century.



### ➔ Discuss...

Compare what Shahjehan Begum described with what you see in Fig. 3. What similarities and differences do you notice?

Source 1

#### A prayer to Agni

Here are two verses from the *Ṛgveda* invoking Agni, the god of fire, often identified with the sacrificial fire, into which offerings were made so as to reach the other deities:

Bring, O strong one, this sacrifice of ours to the gods,  
O wise one, as a liberal giver.  
Bestow on us, O priest,  
abundant food. Agni, obtain,  
by sacrificing, mighty wealth  
for us.

Procure, O Agni, for ever  
to him who prays to you (the  
gift of) nourishment, the  
wonderful cow. May a son be  
ours, offspring that continues  
our line ...

Verses such as these were composed in a special kind of Sanskrit, known as Vedic Sanskrit. They were taught orally to men belonging to priestly families.

➔ List the objectives of the sacrifice.

But what is the significance of this monument? Why was the mound built and what did it contain? Why is there a stone railing around it? Who built the complex or paid for its construction? When was it “discovered”? There is a fascinating story that we can uncover at Sanchi for which we must combine information from texts, sculpture, architecture and inscriptions. Let us begin by exploring the background of the early Buddhist tradition.

## 2. THE BACKGROUND:

### SACRIFICES AND DEBATES

The mid-first millennium BCE is often regarded as a turning point in world history: it saw the emergence of thinkers such as Zarathustra in Iran, Kong Zi in China, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle in Greece, and Mahavira and Gautama Buddha, among many others, in India. They tried to understand the mysteries of existence and the relationship between human beings and the cosmic order. This was also the time when new kingdoms and cities were developing and social and economic life was changing in a variety of ways in the Ganga valley (Chapters 2 and 3). These thinkers attempted to understand these developments as well.

#### 2.1 The sacrificial tradition

There were several pre-existing traditions of thought, religious belief and practice, including the early Vedic tradition, known from the *Rigveda*, compiled between c.1500 and 1000 BCE. The *Rigveda* consists of hymns in praise of a variety of deities, especially Agni, Indra and Soma. Many of these hymns were chanted when sacrifices were performed, where people prayed for cattle, sons, good health, long life, etc.

At first, sacrifices were performed collectively. Later (c. 1000 BCE-500 BCE onwards) some were performed by the heads of households for the well-being of the domestic unit. More elaborate sacrifices, such as the *rajasuya* and *ashvamedha*, were performed by chiefs and kings who depended on Brahmana priests to conduct the ritual.

#### 2.2 New questions

Many ideas found in the Upanishads (c. sixth century BCE onwards) show that people were curious about the meaning of life, the possibility of life after death,

and rebirth. Was rebirth due to past actions? Such issues were hotly debated. Thinkers were concerned with understanding and expressing the nature of the ultimate reality. And others, outside the Vedic tradition, asked whether or not there even was a single ultimate reality. People also began speculating on the significance of the sacrificial tradition.

### 2.3 Debates and discussions

We get a glimpse of lively discussions and debates from Buddhist texts, which mention as many as 64 sects or schools of thought. Teachers travelled from place to place, trying to convince one another as well as laypersons, about the validity of their philosophy or the way they understood the world. Debates took place in the *kutagarashala* – literally, a hut with a pointed roof – or in groves where travelling mendicants halted. If a philosopher succeeded in convincing one of his rivals, the followers of the latter also became his disciples. So support for any particular sect could grow and shrink over time.

Many of these teachers, including Mahavira and the Buddha, questioned the authority of the Vedas. They also emphasised individual agency – suggesting that men and women could strive to attain liberation from the trials and tribulations of worldly existence. This was in marked contrast to the Brahmanical position, wherein, as we have seen, an individual's existence was thought to be determined by his or her birth in a specific caste or gender.

Source 2

#### Verses from the Upanishads

Here are two verses from the *Fkkdqgrj | d#Xsdq1vkdg/#a* text composed in Sanskrit in the sixth century BCE:

##### The nature of the self

This self of mine within the heart, is smaller than paddy or barley or mustard or millet or the kernel of a seed of millet. This self of mine within the heart is greater than the earth, greater than the intermediate space, greater than heaven, greater than these worlds.

##### The true sacrifice

This one (the wind) that blows, this is surely a sacrifice ... While moving, it sanctifies all this; therefore it is indeed a sacrifice.

### How Buddhist texts were prepared and preserved

The Buddha (and other teachers) taught orally – through discussion and debate. Men and women (perhaps children as well) attended these discourses and discussed what they heard. None of the Buddha’s speeches were written down during his lifetime. After his death (5<sup>th</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> century BCE) his teachings were compiled by his disciples at a council of “elders” or senior monks at Vesali (Pali for Vaishali in present-day Bihar). These compilations were known as *Tripiṭaka* – literally, three baskets to hold different types of texts. They were first transmitted orally and then written and classified according to length as well as subject matter.

The *Vinaya Piṭaka* included rules and regulations for those who joined the *śrāmaṇa* or monastic order; the Buddha’s teachings were included in the *Sūtra Piṭaka*; and the *Abhidharma Piṭaka* dealt with philosophical matters. Each *piṭaka* comprised a number of individual texts. Later, commentaries were written on these texts by Buddhist scholars.

As Buddhism travelled to new regions such as Sri Lanka, other texts such as the *Maṅgala* (literally, the chronicle of the island) and *Maṅgala* (the great chronicle) were written, containing regional histories of Buddhism. Many of these works contained biographies of the Buddha. Some of the oldest texts are in Pali, while later compositions are in Sanskrit.

When Buddhism spread to East Asia, pilgrims such as Fa Xian and Xuan Zang travelled all the way from China to India in search of texts. These they took back to their own country, where they were translated by scholars. Indian Buddhist teachers also travelled to faraway places, carrying texts to disseminate the teachings of the Buddha.

Buddhist texts were preserved in manuscripts for several centuries in monasteries in different parts of Asia. Modern translations have been prepared from Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan texts.



Fig. 4.4  
A Buddhist manuscript in Sanskrit, c. twelfth century

Source 3

### Fatalists and materialists?

Here is an excerpt from the *Vāṅmāñśī*, describing a conversation between king Ajatasattu, the ruler of Magadha, and the Buddha:

On one occasion King Ajatasattu visited the Buddha and described what another teacher, named Makkhali Gosala, had told him:

“Though the wise should hope, by this virtue ... by this penance I will gain karma ... and the fool should by the same means hope to gradually rid himself of his karma, neither of them can do it. Pleasure and pain, measured out as it were, cannot be altered in the course of *vāpṛvāḍ* (transmigration). It can neither be lessened or increased ... just as a ball of string will when thrown unwind to its full length, so fool and wise alike will take their course and make an end of sorrow.”

And this is what a philosopher named Ajita Kesakambalin taught:

“There is no such thing, O king, as alms or sacrifice, or offerings ... there is no such thing as this world or the next ...

A human being is made up of the four elements. When he dies the earthy in him returns to the earth, the fluid to water, the heat to fire, the windy to air, and his senses pass into space ...

The talk of gifts is a doctrine of fools, an empty lie ... fools and wise alike are cut off and perish. They do not survive after death.”

The first teacher belonged to the tradition of the Ajivikas. They have often been described as fatalists: those who believe that everything is predetermined. The second teacher belonged to the tradition of the Lokayatas, usually described as materialists. Texts from these traditions have not survived, so we know about them only from the works of other traditions.

➔ Do you think it is appropriate to describe these men as fatalists or materialists?

### ➔ Discuss...

What are the problems in reconstructing histories of ideas and beliefs when texts are not available or have not survived?



Fig. 4.5  
An image of a tirthankara from  
Mathura, c. third century CE

### 3. BEYOND WORLDLY PLEASURES

#### THE MESSAGE OF MAHAVIRA

The basic philosophy of the Jainas was already in existence in north India before the birth of Vardhamana, who came to be known as Mahavira, in the sixth century BCE. According to Jaina tradition, Mahavira was preceded by 23 other teachers or *tirthankaras* – literally, those who guide men and women across the river of existence.

The most important idea in Jainism is that the entire world is animated: even stones, rocks and water have life. Non-injury to living beings, especially to humans, animals, plants and insects, is central to Jaina philosophy. In fact the principle of ahimsa, emphasised within Jainism, has left its mark on Indian thinking as a whole. According to Jaina teachings, the cycle of birth and rebirth is shaped through karma. Asceticism and penance are required to free oneself from the cycle of karma. This can be achieved only by renouncing the world; therefore, monastic existence is a necessary condition of salvation. Jaina monks and nuns took five vows: to abstain from killing, stealing and lying; to observe celibacy; and to abstain from possessing property.

Source 4

#### The world beyond the palace

Just as the Buddha's teachings were compiled by his followers, the teachings of Mahavira were also recorded by his disciples. These were often in the form of stories, which could appeal to ordinary people. Here is one example, from a Prakrit text known as the *Xwwdudgk|d|dqd#Vxswd/* describing how a queen named Kamalavati tried to persuade her husband to renounce the world:

If the whole world and all its treasures were yours, you would not be satisfied, nor would all this be able to save you. When you die, O king and leave all things behind, *gkdppd* alone, and nothing else, will save you. As a bird dislikes the cage, so do I dislike (the world). I shall live as a nun without offspring, without desire, without the love of gain, and without hatred ...

Those who have enjoyed pleasures and renounced them, move about like the wind, and go wherever they please, unchecked like birds in their flight ...

Leave your large kingdom ... abandon what pleases the senses, be without attachment and property, then practise severe penance, being firm of energy ...

➔ Which of the arguments advanced by the queen do you find most convincing?



### 3.1 The spread of Jainism

Gradually, Jainism spread to many parts of India. Like the Buddhists, Jaina scholars produced a wealth of literature in a variety of languages – Prakrit, Sanskrit and Tamil. For centuries, manuscripts of these texts were carefully preserved in libraries attached to temples.

Some of the earliest stone sculptures associated with religious traditions were produced by devotees of the Jaina *tirthankaras*, and have been recovered from several sites throughout the subcontinent.

#### ➔ Discuss...

Is ahimsa relevant in the twenty-first century?



Fig. 4.6  
A page from a fourteenth-century Jain manuscript

## 4. THE BUDDHA AND THE QUEST FOR ENLIGHTENMENT

One of the most influential teachers of the time was the Buddha. Over the centuries, his message spread across the subcontinent and beyond – through Central Asia to China, Korea and Japan, and through Sri Lanka, across the seas to Myanmar, Thailand and Indonesia.

How do we know about the Buddha’s teachings? These have been reconstructed by carefully editing, translating and analysing the Buddhist texts mentioned earlier. Historians have also tried to reconstruct details of his life from hagiographies. Many of these were written down at least a century after the time of the Buddha, in an attempt to preserve memories of the great teacher.

According to these traditions, Siddhartha, as the Buddha was named at birth, was the son of a chief

➔ Can you identify the script?

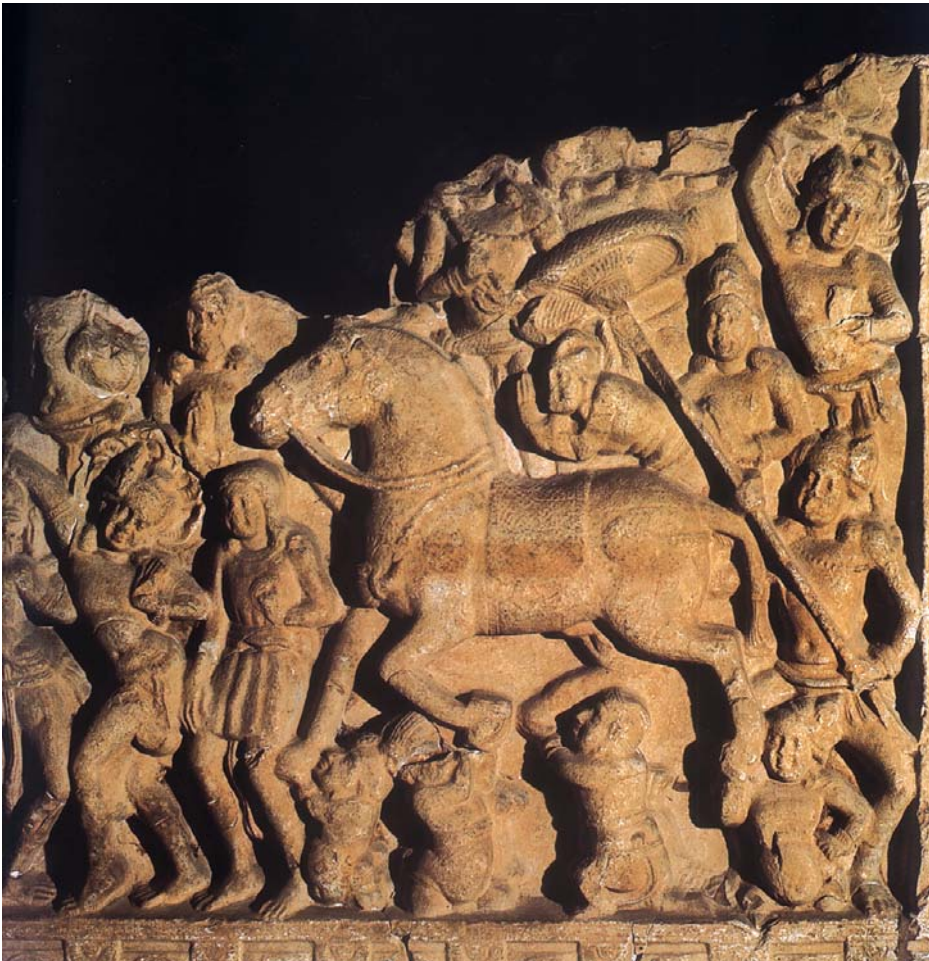
*Hagiography* is a biography of a saint or religious leader. Hagiographies often praise the saint’s achievements, and may not always be literally accurate. They are important because they tell us about the beliefs of the followers of that particular tradition.

of the Sakya clan. He had a sheltered upbringing within the palace, insulated from the harsh realities of life. One day he persuaded his charioteer to take him into the city. His first journey into the world outside was traumatic. He was deeply anguished when he saw an old man, a sick man and a corpse. He realised in that moment that the decay and destruction of the human body was inevitable. He also saw a homeless mendicant, who, it seemed to him, had come to terms with old age, disease and death, and found peace. Siddhartha decided that he too would adopt the same path. Soon after, he left the palace and set out in search of his own truth.

Siddhartha explored several paths including bodily mortification which led him to a situation of near death. Abandoning these extreme methods, he meditated for several days and finally attained enlightenment. After this he came to be known as the Buddha or the Enlightened One. For the rest of his life, he taught *dhamma* or the path of righteous living.

Fig. 4.7

A sculpture (c. 200 CE) from Amaravati (Andhra Pradesh), depicting the departure of the Buddha from his palace




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### ➤ Discuss...

If you did not know about the life of the Buddha, would you be able to tell what the sculpture depicts?

## 5. THE TEACHINGS OF THE BUDDHA

The Buddha's teachings have been reconstructed from stories, found mainly in the *Sutta Pitaka*. Although some stories describe his miraculous powers, others suggest that the Buddha tried to convince people through reason and persuasion rather than through displays of supernatural power. For instance, when a grief-stricken woman whose child had died came to the Buddha, he gently convinced her about the inevitability of death rather than bring her son back to life. These stories were narrated in the language spoken by ordinary people so that these could be easily understood.

According to Buddhist philosophy, the world is transient (*anicca*) and constantly changing; it is also soulless (*anatta*) as there is nothing permanent or eternal in it. Within this transient world, sorrow (*dukkha*) is intrinsic to human existence. It is by following the path of moderation between severe penance and self-indulgence that human beings can rise above these worldly troubles. In the earliest forms of Buddhism, whether or not god existed was irrelevant.

Source 5

### Buddhism in practice

This is an excerpt from the *Vasudhārā Sūtra*, and contains the advice given by the Buddha to a wealthy householder named Sigala:

In five ways should a master look after his servants and employees ... by assigning them work according to their strength, by supplying them with food and wages, by tending them in sickness; by sharing delicacies with them and by granting leave at times ...

In five ways should the clansmen look after the needs of *vāṇiṣṭhā* (those who have renounced the world) and Brahmanas: by affection in act and speech and mind, by keeping open house to them and supplying their worldly needs.

There are similar instructions to Sigala about how to behave with his parents, teacher and wife.

➔ Suggest what the instructions regarding parents, teacher and wife may have been.

---

### ➔ Discuss...

Compare the Buddha's advice to Sigala with Asoka's advice to his subjects (Chapter 2). Do you notice any similarities and differences?

The Buddha regarded the social world as the creation of humans rather than of divine origin. Therefore, he advised kings and *gahapatis* (see also Chapter 2) to be humane and ethical. Individual effort was expected to transform social relations.

The Buddha emphasised individual agency and righteous action as the means to escape from the cycle of rebirth and attain self-realisation and *nibbana*, literally the extinguishing of the ego and desire – and thus end the cycle of suffering for those who renounced the world. According to Buddhist tradition, his last words to his followers were: “Be lamps unto yourselves as all of you must work out your own liberation.”

## 6. FOLLOWERS OF THE BUDDHA

Soon there grew a body of disciples of the Buddha and he founded a *sangha*, an organisation of monks who too became teachers of *dhamma*. These monks lived simply, possessing only the essential requisites for survival, such as a bowl to receive food once a day from the laity. As they lived on alms, they were known as *bhikkhus*.

Initially, only men were allowed into the *sangha*, but later women also came to be admitted. According to Buddhist texts, this was made possible through the mediation of Ananda, one of the Buddha's dearest disciples, who persuaded him to allow women into the *sangha*. The Buddha's foster mother, Mahapajapati Gotami was the first woman to be ordained as a *bhikkhuni*. Many women who entered the *sangha* became teachers of *dhamma* and went on to become *theris*, or respected women who had attained liberation.

The Buddha's followers came from many social groups. They included kings, wealthy men and *gahapatis*, and also humbler folk: workers, slaves and craftspeople. Once within the *sangha*, all were regarded as equal, having shed their earlier social identities on becoming *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis*. The internal functioning of the *sangha* was based on the traditions of *ganas* and *sanghas*, where consensus was arrived at through discussions. If that failed, decisions were taken by a vote on the subject.

Source 6

### The Therigatha

This unique Buddhist text, part of the *Vandana*, is a collection of verses composed by *ek*. It provides an insight into women's social and spiritual experiences. Punna, a *gāḷī* or slave woman, went to the river each morning to fetch water for her master's household. There she would daily see a Brahmana performing bathing rituals. One morning she spoke to him. The following are verses composed by Punna, recording her conversation with the Brahmana:

I am a water carrier:  
Even in the cold  
I have always gone down to the water  
frightened of punishment  
Or the angry words of high class women.  
So what are you afraid of Brahmana/  
That makes you go down to the water  
(Though) your limbs shake with the bitter cold?

The Brahmana replied:  
I am doing good to prevent evil;  
anyone young or old  
who has done something bad  
is freed by washing in water.

Punna said:  
Whoever told you  
You are freed from evil by washing in the water?...  
In that case all the frogs and turtles  
Would go to heaven, and so would the water snakes  
and crocodiles!  
(Instead) Don't do that thing,  
the fear of which  
leads you to the water.  
Stop now Brahmana!  
Save your skin from the cold ...

➔ Which of the teachings of the Buddha are evident in this composition?

Fig. 4.8  
A woman water-carrier, Mathura,  
c. third century CE



Source 7

### Rules for monks and nuns

These are some of the rules laid down in the  $\Upsilon\lambda\sigma\delta\mid d$   $S\lambda\omega\eta d=$

When a new felt (blanket/rug) has been made by a  $ek\lambda\eta\eta\kappa\alpha$ , it is to be kept for (at least) six years. If after less than six years he should have another new felt (blanket/rug) made, regardless of whether or not he has disposed of the first, then – unless he has been authorised by the  $ek\lambda\eta\eta\kappa\alpha\upsilon$  – it is to be forfeited and confessed.

In case a  $ek\lambda\eta\eta\kappa\alpha$  arriving at a family residence is presented with cakes or cooked grain-meal, he may accept two or three bowlfuls if he so desires. If he should accept more than that, it is to be confessed. Having accepted the two or three bowlfuls and having taken them from there, he is to share them among the  $ek\lambda\eta\eta\kappa\alpha\upsilon$ . This is the proper course here.

Should any  $ek\lambda\eta\eta\kappa\alpha$ , having set out bedding in a lodging belonging to the  $\nu\delta\sigma\eta\kappa\delta\#$  – or having had it set out – and then on departing neither put it away nor have it put away, or should he go without taking leave, it is to be confessed.

➔ Can you explain why these rules were framed?

Buddhism grew rapidly both during the lifetime of the Buddha and after his death, as it appealed to many people dissatisfied with existing religious practices and confused by the rapid social changes taking place around them. The importance attached to conduct and values rather than claims of superiority based on birth, the emphasis placed on *metta* (fellow feeling) and *karuna* (compassion), especially for those who were younger and weaker than oneself, were ideas that drew men and women to Buddhist teachings.

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➔ Discuss...

Why do you think a *dasi* like Punna wanted to join the *sangha*?

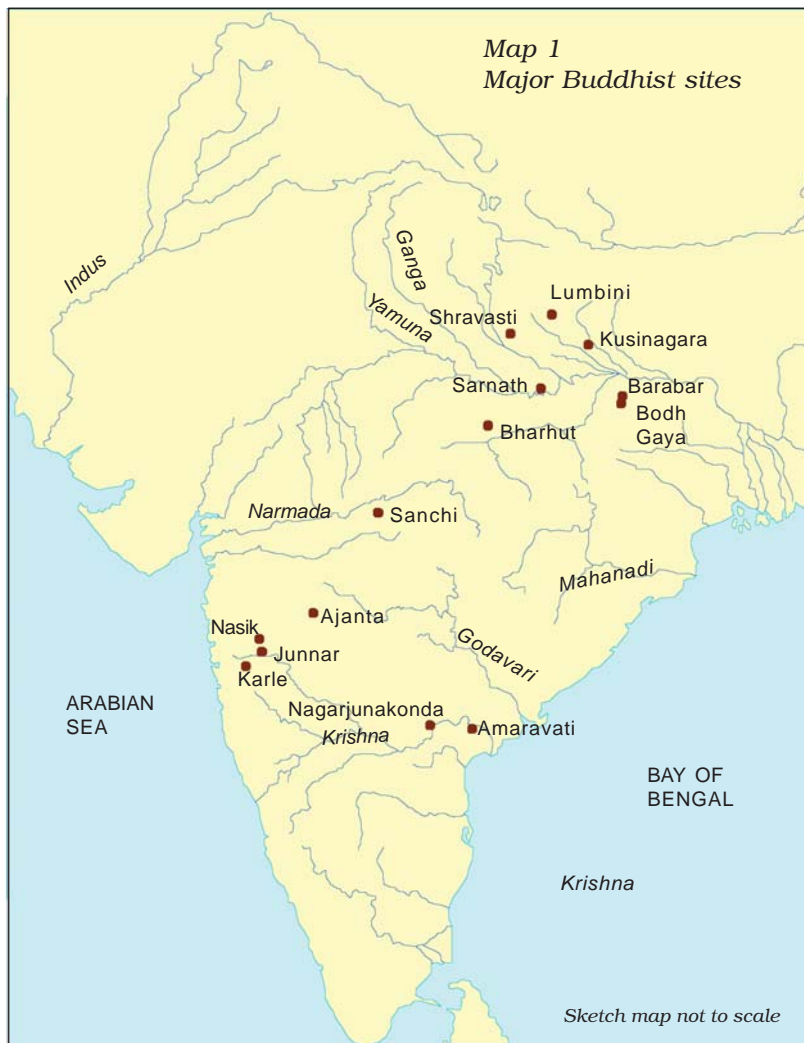
## 7. STUPAS

We have seen that Buddhist ideas and practices emerged out of a process of dialogue with other traditions – including those of the Brahmanas, Jainas and several others, not all of whose ideas and practices were preserved in texts. Some of these interactions can be seen in the ways in which sacred places came to be identified.

From earliest times, people tended to regard certain places as sacred. These included sites with special trees or unique rocks, or sites of awe-inspiring natural beauty. These sites, with small shrines attached to them, were sometimes described as *chaityas*.

Buddhist literature mentions several *chaityas*. It also describes places associated with the

*Chaitya* may also have been derived from the word *chita*, meaning a funeral pyre, and by extension a funerary mound.



Buddha's life – where he was born (Lumbini), where he attained enlightenment (Bodhi Gaya), where he gave his first sermon (Sarnath) and where he attained *nibbana* (Kusinagara). Gradually, each of these places came to be regarded as sacred. We know that about 200 years after the time of the Buddha, Asoka erected a pillar at Lumbini to mark the fact that he had visited the place.

Source 8

### Why were stupas built

This is an excerpt from the *Asoka's edicts*, part of the *Asoka's edicts*.

As the Buddha lay dying, Ananda asked him:

“What are we to do Lord, with the remains of the Tathagata (another name for the Buddha)?”

The Buddha replied: “Hinder not yourselves Ananda by honouring the remains of the Tathagata. Be zealous, be intent on your own good.”

But when pressed further, the Buddha said:

“At the four crossroads they should erect a *stupa* (Pali for stupa) to the Tathagata. And whosoever shall there place garlands or perfume ... or make a salutation there, or become in its presence calm of heart, that shall long be to them for a profit and joy.”

➔ Look at Fig. 4.15 and see whether you can identify some of these practices.

### 7.1 Why were stupas built

There were other places too that were regarded as sacred. This was because relics of the Buddha such as his bodily remains or objects used by him were buried there. These were mounds known as stupas.

The tradition of erecting stupas may have been pre-Buddhist, but they came to be associated with Buddhism. Since they contained relics regarded as sacred, the entire stupa came to be venerated as an emblem of both the Buddha and Buddhism. According to a Buddhist text known as the *Ashokavadana*, Asoka distributed portions of the Buddha's relics to every important town and ordered the construction of stupas over them. By the second century BCE a number of stupas, including those at Bharhut, Sanchi and Sarnath (Map 1), had been built.

### 7.2 How were stupas built

Inscriptions found on the railings and pillars of stupas record donations made for building and decorating them. Some donations were made by kings such as the Satavahanas; others were made by guilds, such as that of the ivory workers who financed part of one of the gateways at Sanchi. Hundreds of donations were made by women and men who mention their names, sometimes adding the name of the place from where they came, as well as their occupations and names of their relatives. *Bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* also contributed towards building these monuments.

### 7.3 The structure of the stupa

The stupa (a Sanskrit word meaning a heap) originated as a simple semi-circular mound of earth, later called *anda*. Gradually, it evolved into a more complex structure, balancing round and square shapes. Above the *anda* was the *harmika*, a balcony-like structure that represented the abode of the gods.





**Fig. 4.9**  
A votive inscription from Sanchi  
Hundreds of similar inscriptions  
have also been found at Bharhut  
and Amaravati.

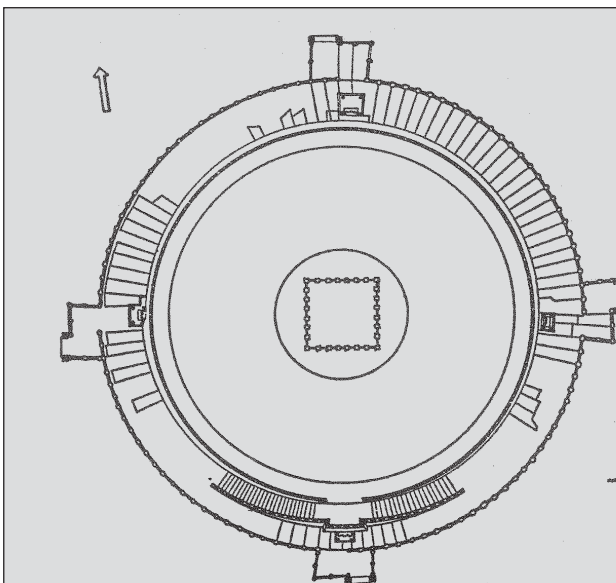
Arising from the *harmika* was a mast called the *yashti*, often surmounted by a *chhatra* or umbrella. Around the mound was a railing, separating the sacred space from the secular world.

The early stupas at Sanchi and Bharhut were plain except for the stone railings, which resembled a bamboo or wooden fence, and the gateways, which were richly carved and installed at the four cardinal points. Worshippers entered through the eastern gateway and walked around the mound in a clockwise direction keeping the mound on the right, imitating the sun's course through the sky. Later, the mound of the stupas came to be elaborately carved with niches and sculptures as at Amaravati, and Shah-ji-ki-Dheri in Peshawar (Pakistan).

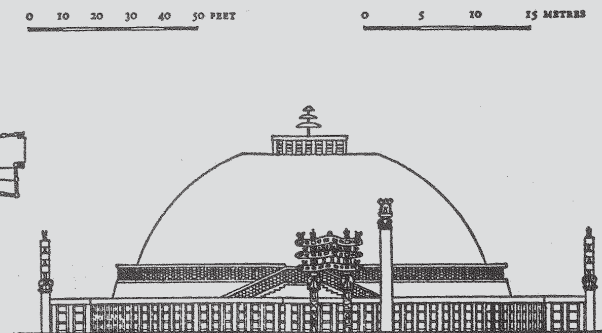
➔ **Discuss...**

What are the similarities and differences between the plan of the Great Stupa, Sanchi (Fig. 4.10a) and the photograph (Fig. 4.3)?

➔ What are the features of the building that are clearest in the plan? What are the features that are best seen in the elevation?



**Fig. 4.10a**  
Plan of the Great Stupa at Sanchi  
A plan provides a horizontal perspective of a building.



**Fig. 10b**  
An elevation of the Great Stupa  
An elevation provides a vertical perspective.

## 8. “DISCOVERING” STUPAS

### THE FATE OF AMARAVATI AND SANCHI

Each stupa has a history of its own – as we have just seen, some of these are histories of how they were built. But there are histories of discoveries as well, and let us now turn to some of these. In 1796, a local raja who wanted to build a temple stumbled upon the ruins of the stupa at Amaravati. He decided to use the stone, and thought there might be some treasure buried in what seemed to be a hill. Some years later, a British official named Colin Mackenzie (see also Chapter 7) visited the site. Although he found several pieces of sculpture and made detailed drawings of them, these reports were never published.

*Fig. 4.11*  
The eastern gateway, Sanchi  
Notice the vibrant sculpture.



In 1854, Walter Elliot, the commissioner of Guntur (Andhra Pradesh), visited Amaravati and collected several sculpture panels and took them away to Madras. (These came to be called the Elliot marbles after him.) He also discovered the remains of the western gateway and came to the conclusion that the structure at Amaravati was one of the largest and most magnificent Buddhist stupas ever built. By the 1850s, some of the slabs from Amaravati had begun to be taken to different places: to the Asiatic Society of Bengal at Calcutta, to the India Office in Madras and some even to London. It was not unusual to find these sculptures adorning the gardens of British administrators. In fact, any new official in the area continued to remove sculptures from the site on the grounds that earlier officials had done the same.

One of the few men who had a different point of view was an archaeologist named H.H. Cole. He wrote: “It seems to me a suicidal and indefensible policy to allow the country to be looted of original works of ancient art.” He believed that museums should have plaster-cast facsimiles of sculpture, whereas the originals should remain

where they had been found. Unfortunately, Cole did not succeed in convincing the authorities about Amaravati, although his plea for *in situ* preservation was adopted in the case of Sanchi.

Why did Sanchi survive while Amaravati did not? Perhaps Amaravati was discovered before scholars understood the value of the finds and realised how critical it was to preserve things where they had been found instead of removing them from the site. When Sanchi was “discovered” in 1818, three of its four gateways were still standing, the fourth was lying on the spot where it had fallen and the mound was in good condition. Even so, it was suggested that the gateway be taken to either Paris or London; finally a number of factors helped to keep Sanchi as it was, and so it stands, whereas the *mahachaitya* at Amaravati is now just an insignificant little mound, totally denuded of its former glory.

## 9. SCULPTURE

We have just seen how sculptures were removed from stupas and transported all the way to Europe. This happened partly because those who saw them considered them to be beautiful and valuable, and wanted to keep them for themselves. Let us look at some of these more closely.

### 9.1 Stories in stone

You may have seen wandering storytellers carrying scrolls (*charanachitras*) of cloth or paper with pictures on them and pointing to the pictures as they tell the story.

Look at Figure 4.13. At first sight the sculpture seems to depict a rural scene, with thatched huts and trees. However, art historians who have carefully studied the sculpture at Sanchi identify it as a scene from the *Vessantara Jataka*. This is a story about a generous prince who gave away everything to a Brahmana, and went to live in the forest with his wife and children. As you can see in this

### ➔ Discuss...

Read Section 1 again.  
Give your reasons why Sanchi survived.

*In situ* means on the spot.

Fig. 4.12

A section of the gateway

Do you think the sculptors at Sanchi wanted to depict a scroll being unfurled?

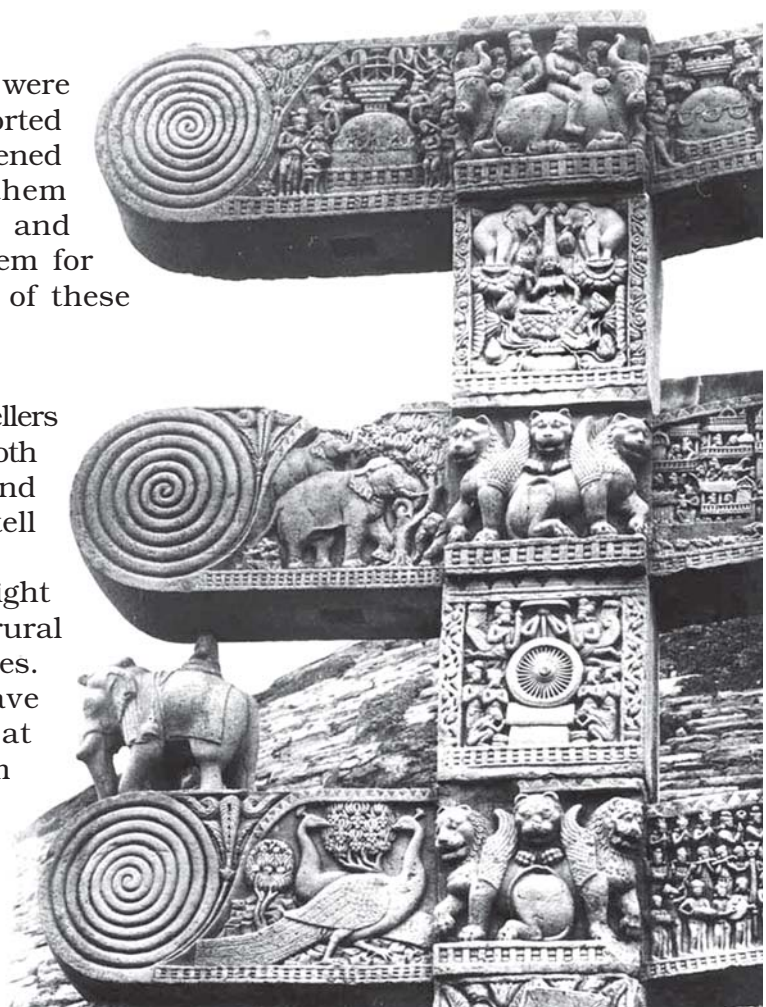




Fig. 4.13  
A part of the northern gateway

case, historians often try to understand the meaning of sculpture by comparing it with textual evidence.

### 9.2 Symbols of worship

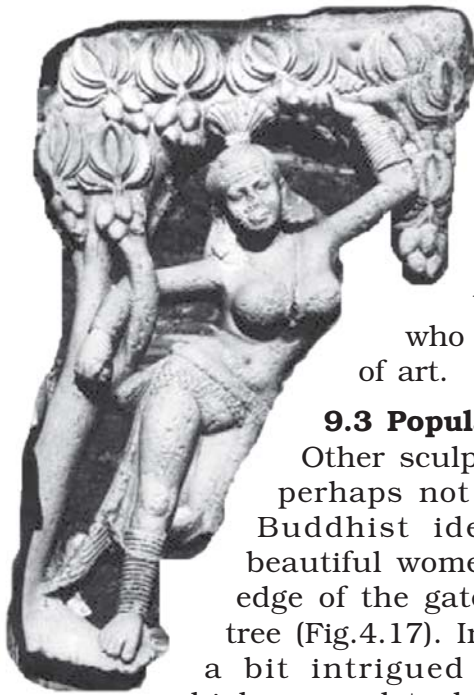
Art historians had to acquire familiarity with hagiographies of the Buddha in order to understand Buddhist sculpture. According to hagiographies, the Buddha attained enlightenment while meditating under a tree. Many early sculptors did not show the Buddha in human form – instead, they showed his presence through symbols. The empty seat (Fig. 4.14) was meant to indicate the meditation of the Buddha, and the stupa (Fig. 4.15) was meant to represent the *mahaparinibbana*. Another frequently used symbol was the wheel (Fig. 4.16). This stood for the first sermon of the Buddha, delivered at Sarnath. As is obvious, such sculptures cannot be understood literally – for instance, the tree does not stand

Fig. 4.14 (far right)  
Worshipping the Bodhi tree  
Notice the tree, the seat, and the people around it.

Fig. 4.15 (middle right)  
Worshipping the stupa

Fig. 4.16 (below)  
Setting in motion the wheel of dharma





simply for a tree, but symbolises an event in the life of the Buddha. In order to understand such symbols, historians have to familiarise themselves with the traditions of those who produced these works of art.

Fig. 4.17  
*The woman at the gate*

### 9.3 Popular traditions

Other sculptures at Sanchi were perhaps not directly inspired by Buddhist ideas. These include beautiful women swinging from the edge of the gateway, holding onto a tree (Fig.4.17). Initially, scholars were a bit intrigued about this image, which seemed to have little to do with renunciation. However, after examining other literary traditions, they realised that it could be a representation of what is described in Sanskrit as a *shalabhanjika*. According to popular belief, this was a woman whose touch caused trees to flower and bear fruit. It is likely that this was regarded as an auspicious symbol and integrated into the decoration of the stupa. The *shalabhanjika* motif suggests that many people who turned to Buddhism enriched it with their own pre-Buddhist and even non-Buddhist beliefs, practices and ideas. Some of the recurrent motifs in the sculpture at Sanchi were evidently derived from these traditions.

There are other images as well. For instance, some of the finest depictions of animals are found there. These animals include elephants, horses, monkeys and cattle. While the *Jatakas* contain several animal stories that are depicted at Sanchi, it is likely that many of these animals were carved to create lively scenes to draw viewers. Also, animals were often used as symbols of human attributes. Elephants, for example, were depicted to signify strength and wisdom.

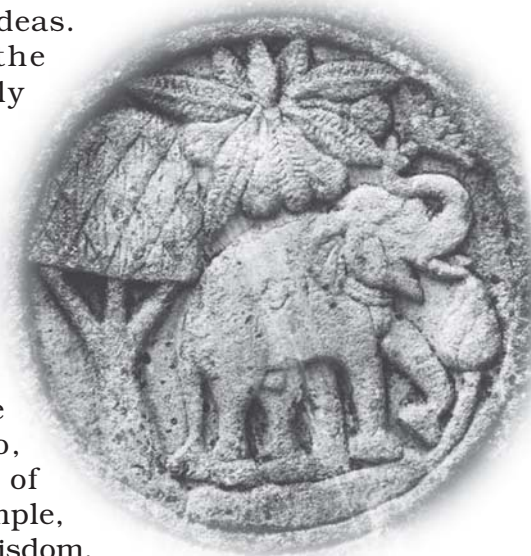


Fig. 4.18  
*An elephant at Sanchi*



Fig. 4.19  
Gajalakshmi

Fig. 4.20  
A painting from Ajanta  
Note the seated figure and those  
serving him.

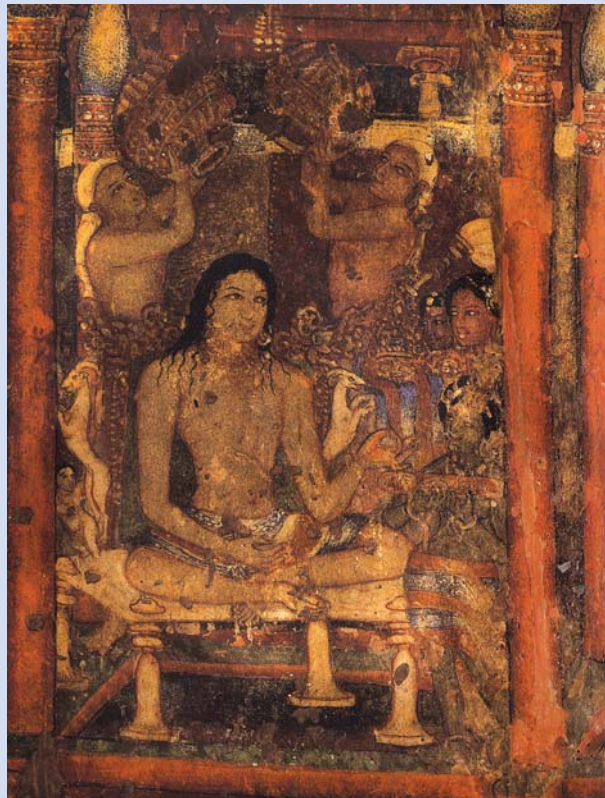
Fig. 4.21  
A serpent at Sanchi



### Paintings from the past

While stone sculpture survives the ravages of time and is therefore most easily available to the historian, other visual means of communication, including paintings, were also used in the past. Those that have survived best are on walls of caves, of which those from Ajanta (Maharashtra) are the most famous.

The paintings at Ajanta depict stories from the *Mahābhārata*. These include depictions of courtly life, processions, men and women at work, and festivals. The artists used the technique of shading to give a three-dimensional quality. Some of the paintings are extremely naturalistic.



Another motif is that of a woman surrounded by lotuses and elephants (Fig. 4.19), which seem to be sprinkling water on her as if performing an *abhisheka* or consecration. While some historians identify the figure as Maya, the mother of the Buddha, others identify her with a popular goddess, Gajalakshmi – literally, the goddess of good fortune – who is associated with elephants. It is also possible that

devotees who saw these sculptures identified the figure with both Maya and Gajalakshmi.

Consider, too, the serpent, which is found on several pillars (Fig. 4.21). This motif seems to be derived from popular traditions, which were not always recorded in texts. Interestingly, one of the earliest modern art historians, James Fergusson, considered Sanchi to be a centre of tree and serpent worship. He was not familiar with Buddhist literature – most of which had not yet been translated – and arrived at this conclusion by studying only the images on their own.

## 10. NEW RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

### 10.1 The development of Mahayana Buddhism

By the first century CE, there is evidence of changes in Buddhist ideas and practices. Early Buddhist teachings had given great importance to self-effort in achieving *nibbana*. Besides, the Buddha was regarded as a human being who attained enlightenment and *nibbana* through his own efforts. However, gradually the idea of a saviour emerged. It was believed that he was the one who could ensure salvation. Simultaneously, the concept of the Bodhisatta also developed. Bodhisattas were perceived as deeply compassionate beings who accumulated merit through their efforts but used this not to attain *nibbana* and thereby abandon the world, but to help others. The worship of images of the Buddha and Bodhisattas became an important part of this tradition.

This new way of thinking was called Mahayana – literally, the “great vehicle”. Those who adopted these beliefs described the older tradition as Hinayana or the “lesser vehicle”.

#### Hinayana or Theravada?

Supporters of Mahayana regarded other Buddhists as followers of Hinayana. However, followers of the older tradition described themselves as *skhayaḍḍhāv*, that is, those who followed the path of old, respected teachers, the *skhāv*.

#### ➔ Discuss...

Bone, terracotta and metal can also be used for sculpture. Find out more about these.

Fig. 4.22  
An image of the Buddha from Mathura, c. first century CE



### 10.2 The growth of Puranic Hinduism

The notion of a saviour was not unique to Buddhism. We find similar ideas being developed in different ways within traditions that we now consider part of Hinduism. These included Vaishnavism (a form of Hinduism within which Vishnu was worshipped as the principal deity) and Shaivism (a tradition within which Shiva was regarded as the chief god), in which there was growing emphasis on the worship of a chosen deity. In such worship the bond between the devotee and the god was visualised as one of love and devotion, or *bhakti*.

Fig. 4.23

The Varaha or boar avatar of Vishnu rescuing the earth goddess, Aihole (Karnataka) c. sixth century CE

➤ What does the proportion of the figures suggest?



In the case of Vaishnavism, cults developed around the various avatars or incarnations of the deity. Ten avatars were recognised within the tradition. These were forms that the deity was believed to have assumed in order to save the world whenever it was threatened by disorder and destruction because of the dominance of evil forces. It is likely that different avatars were popular in different parts of the country. Recognising each of these local deities as a form of Vishnu was one way of creating a more unified religious tradition.

Some of these forms were represented in sculptures, as were other deities. Shiva, for instance, was symbolised by the *linga*, although he was occasionally represented in human form too. All such representations depicted a complex set of ideas about the deities and their attributes through symbols such as head-dresses, ornaments and *ayudhas* – weapons or auspicious objects the deities hold in their hands – how they are seated, etc.

To understand the meanings of these sculptures historians





*Fig. 4.24*

*An image of Durga, Mahabalipuram (Tamil Nadu), c. sixth century CE*

have to be familiar with the stories behind them – many of which are contained in the Puranas, compiled by Brahmanas (by about the middle of the first millennium CE). They contained much that had been composed and been in circulation for centuries, including stories about gods and goddesses. Generally, they were written in simple Sanskrit verse, and were meant to be read aloud to everybody, including women and Shudras, who did not have access to Vedic learning.

Much of what is contained in the Puranas evolved through interaction amongst people – priests, merchants, and ordinary men and women who travelled from place to place sharing ideas and beliefs. We know for instance that Vasudeva-Krishna was an important deity in the Mathura region. Over centuries, his worship spread to other parts of the country as well.

### **10.3 Building temples**

Around the time that the stupas at sites such as Sanchi were acquiring their present form, the first temples to house images of gods and goddesses were also being built. The early temple was a small square room, called the *garbhagriha*, with a single doorway for the worshipper to enter and offer worship to the image. Gradually, a tall structure, known as the

➤ Identify the ways in which the artists have depicted movement. Find out more about the story depicted in this sculpture.



Fig. 4.25  
A temple in Deogarh  
(Uttar Pradesh), c. fifth century CE

➔ Identify the remains of the *shikhara* and the entrance to the *garbhagriha*.

*shikhara*, was built over the central shrine. Temple walls were often decorated with sculpture. Later temples became far more elaborate – with assembly halls, huge walls and gateways, and arrangements for supplying water (see also Chapter 7).

One of the unique features of early temples was that some of these were hollowed out of huge rocks, as artificial caves. The tradition of building artificial caves was an old one. Some of the earliest (Fig. 4.27)



Fig. 4.26  
Vishnu reclining on the serpent  
Sheshnag, sculpture from Deogarh  
(Uttar Pradesh), c. fifth century CE

of these were constructed in the third century BCE on the orders of Asoka for renouncers who belonged to the Ajivika sect.

This tradition evolved through various stages and culminated much later – in the eighth century – in the carving out of an entire temple, that of Kailashnatha (a name of Shiva).

A copperplate inscription records the amazement of the chief sculptor after he completed the temple at Ellora: “Oh how did I make it!”



Fig. 4.27  
Entrance to a cave at Barabar  
(Bihar), c. third century BCE

Fig. 4.28  
Kailashnatha Temple, Ellora  
(Maharashtra). This entire structure  
is carved out of a single piece of  
rock.

## 11. CAN WE “SEE” EVERYTHING?

By now you have had a glimpse of the rich visual traditions that existed in the past – expressed in brick and stone architecture, sculpture and painting. We have seen that much has been destroyed and lost over the centuries. Nevertheless, what remains and has been preserved conveys a sense of the vision of the artists, sculptors, masons and architects who created these spectacular works. Yet, do we always automatically understand what they wanted to convey? Can we ever know what these images meant to people who saw them and venerated them about 2,000 years ago?

### 11.1 Grappling with the unfamiliar

It will be useful to recall that when nineteenth-century European scholars first saw some of the sculptures of gods and goddesses, they could not understand what these were about. Sometimes, they were horrified by what seemed to them grotesque

figures, with multiple arms and heads or with combinations of human and animal forms.

These early scholars tried to make sense of what appeared to be strange images by comparing them with sculpture with which they were familiar, that from ancient Greece. While they often found early Indian sculpture inferior to the works of Greek artists, they were very excited when they discovered images of the Buddha and Bodhisattas that were evidently based on Greek models. These were, more often than not, found in the northwest, in cities such as Taxila and Peshawar, where Indo-Greek rulers had established kingdoms in the second century BCE. As these images were closest to the Greek statues these scholars were familiar with, they were considered to be the best examples of early Indian art. In effect, these scholars adopted a strategy we all frequently use – devising yardsticks derived from the familiar to make sense of the unfamiliar.

### 11.2 If text and image do not match ...

Consider another problem. We have seen that art historians often draw upon textual traditions to understand the meaning of sculptures. While this is certainly a far more efficacious strategy than comparing Indian images with Greek statues, it is not always easy to use. One of the most intriguing examples of this is a famous sculpture along a huge rock surface in Mahabalipuram (Tamil Nadu).

Clearly, Fig. 4.30 is a vivid depiction of a story. But which story is it? Art historians have searched through the Puranas to identify it and are sharply divided in their opinions. Some feel that this depicts the descent of the river Ganga from heaven – the

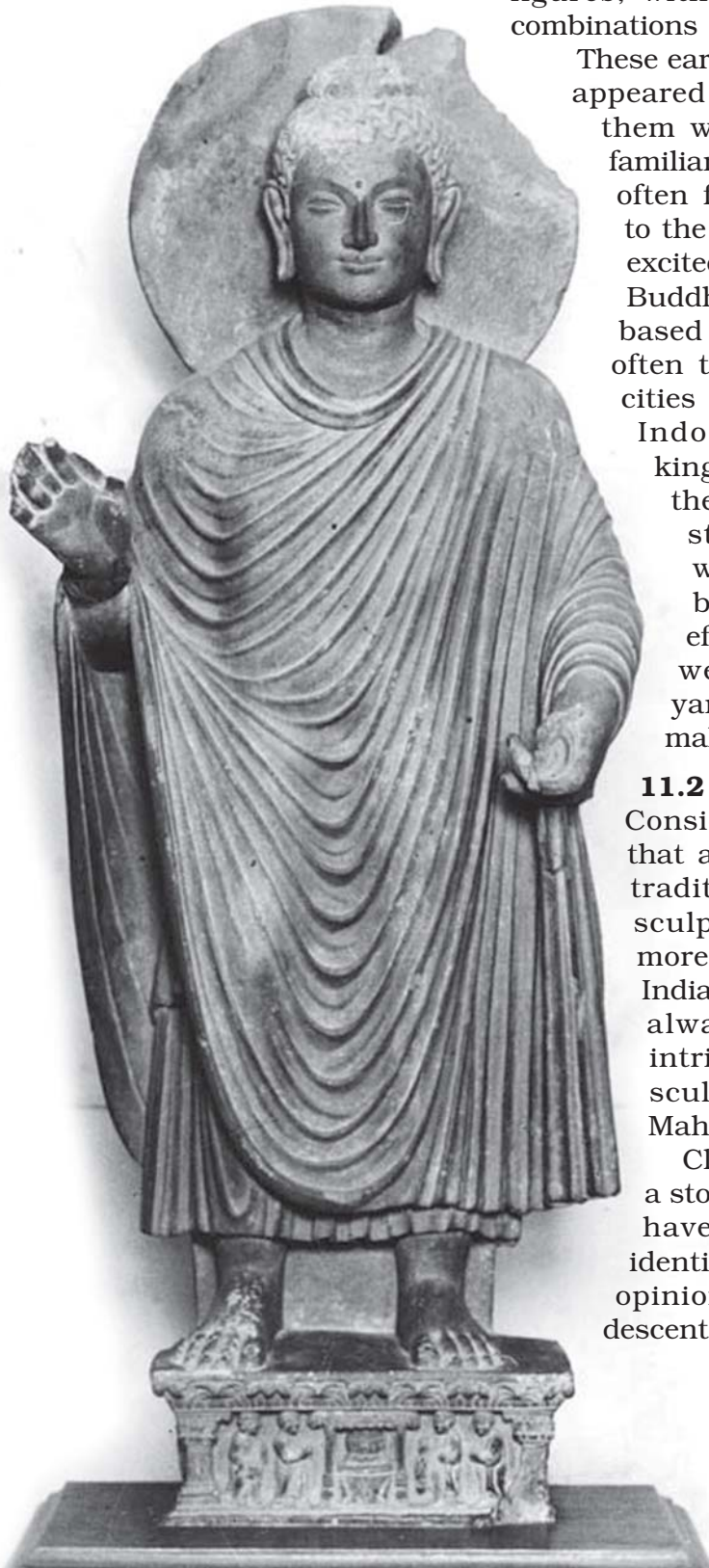


Fig. 4.29

*A Bodhisattva from Gandhara*

Note the clothes and the hairstyle.

natural cleft through the centre of the rock surface might represent the river. The story itself is narrated in the Puranas and the epics. Others feel that it represents a story from the *Mahabharata* – Arjuna doing penance on the river bank in order to acquire arms – pointing to the central figure of an ascetic.

Finally, remember that many rituals, religious beliefs and practices were not recorded in a permanent, visible form – as monuments, or sculpture, or even paintings. These included daily practices, as well as those associated with special occasions. Many communities and peoples may not have felt the need for keeping lasting records, even as they may have had vibrant traditions of religious activities and philosophical ideas. In fact, the spectacular instances we have focused on in this chapter are just the tip of the iceberg.

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➔ Discuss...

Describe any religious activity you have seen. Is it permanently recorded in any form?

Fig. 4.30  
A sculpture in Mahabalipuram



### TIMELINE 1 MAJOR RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENTS

c. 1500-1000 BCE	Early Vedic traditions
c. 1000-500 BCE	Later Vedic traditions
c. sixth century BCE	Early Upanishads; Jainism, Buddhism
c. third century BCE	First stupas
c. second century BCE onwards	Development of Mahayana Buddhism, Vaishnavism, Shaivism and goddess cults
c. third century CE	Earliest temples

### TIMELINE 2 LANDMARKS IN THE DISCOVERY AND PRESERVATION OF EARLY MONUMENTS AND SCULPTURE

#### Nineteenth century

1814	Founding of the Indian Museum, Calcutta
1834	Publication of <i>Essay on the Architecture of the Hindus</i> , by Ram Raja; Cunningham explores the stupa at Sarnath
1835-1842	James Fergusson surveys major archaeological sites
1851	Establishment of the Government Museum, Madras
1854	Alexander Cunningham publishes <i>Bhilsa Topes</i> , one of the earliest works on Sanchi
1878	Rajendra Lala Mitra publishes <i>Buddha Gaya: The Heritage of Sakya Muni</i>
1880	H.H. Cole appointed Curator of Ancient Monuments
1888	Passing of the Treasure Trove Act, giving the government the right to acquire all objects of archaeological interest

#### Twentieth century

1914	John Marshall and Alfred Foucher publish <i>The Monuments of Sanchi</i>
1923	John Marshall publishes the <i>Conservation Manual</i>
1955	Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru lays the foundation stone of the National Museum, New Delhi
1989	Sanchi declared a World Heritage Site



### ANSWER IN 100-150 WORDS

1. Were the ideas of the Upanishadic thinkers different from those of the fatalists and materialists? Give reasons for your answer.
2. Summarise the central teachings of Jainism.
3. Discuss the role of the begums of Bhopal in preserving the stupa at Sanchi.
4. Read this short inscription and answer:

In the year 33 of the *maharaja* Huvishka (a Kushana ruler), in the first month of the hot season on the eighth day, a Bodhisatta was set up at Madhuvanaka by the *bhikkhuni* Dhanavati, the sister's daughter of the *bhikkhuni* Buddhamita, who knows the *Tipitaka*, the female pupil of the *bhikkhu* Bala, who knows the *Tipitaka*, together with her father and mother.

- (a) How did Dhanavati date her inscription?
  - (b) Why do you think she installed an image of the Bodhisatta?
  - (c) Who were the relatives she mentioned?
  - (d) What Buddhist text did she know?
  - (e) From whom did she learn this text?
5. Why do you think women and men joined the *sangha*?

Fig. 4.31  
A sculpture in Sanchi

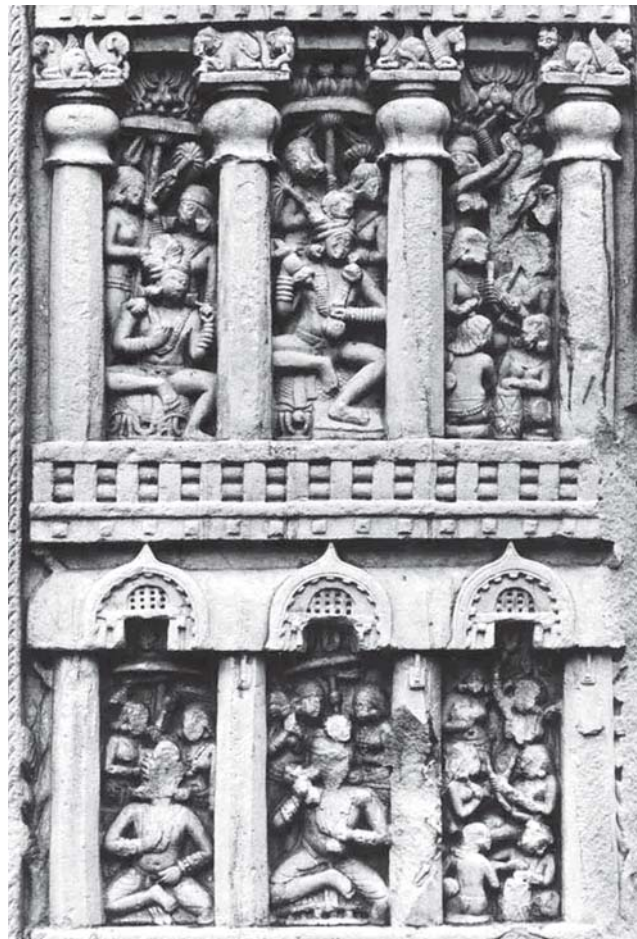




**WRITE A SHORT ESSAY (ABOUT 500 WORDS) ON THE FOLLOWING:**

6. To what extent does knowledge of Buddhist literature help in understanding the sculpture at Sanchi?
7. Figs. 4.32 and 4.33 are two scenes from Sanchi. Describe what you see in each of them, focusing on the architecture, plants and animals, and the activities. Identify which one shows a rural scene and which an urban scene, giving reasons for your answer.
8. Discuss the development in sculpture and architecture associated with the rise of Vaishnavism and Shaivism.
9. Discuss how and why stupas were built.

*Fig. 4.33*



*Fig. 4.32*







### MAP WORK

10. On an outline world map, mark the areas to which Buddhism spread. Trace the land and sea routes from the subcontinent to these areas.



### PROJECT (ANY ONE)

11. Of the religious traditions discussed in this chapter, is there any that is practised in your neighbourhood? What are the religious texts used today, and how are they preserved and transmitted? Are images used in worship? If so, are these similar to or different from those described in this chapter? Describe the buildings used for religious activities today, comparing them with early stupas and temples.
12. Collect at least five pictures of sculpture or painting, belonging to different periods and regions, on the religious traditions described in this chapter. Remove their captions, and show each one to two people, and ask them to describe what they see. Compare their descriptions and prepare a report on your findings.



### If you would like to know more, read:

A.L. Basham. 1985.

Wkh#Zrghu#wkdw#zdv#Lqgld.

Rupa, #Calcutta.

N.N. Bhattacharyya. 1996.

Lqgldq#Uholjlrzv#Klvwvulrjudsk|1

Munshiram Manoharlal,

New Delhi.

M.K. Dhavalikar. 2003.

Prqxphqwd#Ohjdf|#ri#Vdqfkl1

Oxford University Press,

New Delhi.

Paul Dundas. 1992.

Wkh#Mdlqv1

Routledge, London.

Gavin Flood. 2004.

Lqwgxgfwlrg#wr#Klqgxlvp.

Cambridge University Press,

Cambridge.

Richard F. Gombrich. 1988.

Wkhudygd#Exggk1vp=#D#Vrflco

Klvwru|#iurp#Dqflhqw#Ehgduhv#wr

Prghuq#Frorper. Routledge

and Kegan Paul, London.

Benjamin Rowland. 1967.

Wkh#Dw#dg#Dufklwhfwxuh#ri

Lqgld=#Exggk1vw2Klqgx2Mdlq1

Penguin Books,

Harmondsworth.



### For more information, you could visit:

<http://dsal.uchicago.edu/images/aais/>

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*Archaeological Survey of India and National Museum,  
New Delhi*

*Fig. 1.7, 1.9, 1.10, 1.17, 1.18, 1.19, 1.21, 1.24:*

*Prof. Gregory L. Possehl*

*Fig. 1.27:*

*Centre for Cultural Resources and Training, New Delhi*

### Theme 2

*Fig. 2.1: American Institute of Indian Studies, Gurgaon*

*Fig. 2.2, 2.6: Archaeological Survey of India*

*Fig. 2.3, 2.5, 2.10:*

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*Fig. 2.8: Wikipedia*

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*Fig. 3.1, 3.10: Archaeological Survey of India*

*Fig. 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6, 3.7, 3.8, 3.9: National Museum,  
New Delhi*

### Theme 4

*Fig. 4.1, 4.5, 4.8, 4.9, 4.12, 4.13, 4.14, 4.15, 4.16, 4.17, 4.18, 4.19, 4.21, 4.22, 4.23, 4.24, 4.25, 4.26, 4.27, 4.29, 4.31, fig 4.32 and 33 in exercise:*

*American Institute of Indian Studies, Gurgaon*

*Fig. 4.2: Wikipedia*

*Fig. 4.3, 4.11, 4.28, 4.30:*

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*Fig. 4.4, 4.6, 4.7, 4.20: National Museum, New Delhi*

## THEME FIVE

# THROUGH THE EYES OF TRAVELLERS

## PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIETY

### (C. TENTH TO SEVENTEENTH CENTURY)

Women and men have travelled in search of work, to escape from natural disasters, as traders, merchants, soldiers, priests, pilgrims, or driven by a sense of adventure. Those who visit or come to stay in a new land invariably encounter a world that is different: in terms of the landscape or physical environment as well as customs, languages, beliefs and practices of people. Many of them try to adapt to these differences; others, somewhat exceptional, note them carefully in *accounts*, generally recording what they find unusual or remarkable. Unfortunately, we have practically no accounts of travel left by women, though we know that they travelled.

The accounts that survive are often varied in terms of their subject matter. Some deal with affairs of the court, while others are mainly focused on religious issues, or architectural features and monuments. For example, one of the most important descriptions of the city of Vijayanagara (Chapter 7) in the fifteenth century comes from Abdur Razzaq Samarqandi, a diplomat who came visiting from Herat.

In a few cases, travellers did not go to distant lands. For example, in the Mughal Empire (Chapters 8 and 9), administrators sometimes travelled within the empire and recorded their observations. Some of them were interested in looking at popular customs and the folklore and traditions of their own land.

In this chapter we shall see how our knowledge of the past can be enriched through a consideration of descriptions of social life provided by travellers who visited the subcontinent, focusing on the accounts of three men: Al-Biruni who came from Uzbekistan (eleventh century), Ibn Battuta who came from Morocco, in northwestern Africa (fourteenth century) and the Frenchman François Bernier (seventeenth century).



Fig. 5.1a  
Paan leaves

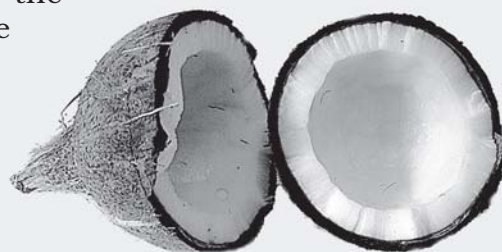


Fig. 5.1b  
A coconut  
The coconut and the *paan* were things that struck many travellers as unusual.

Source 1

**Al-Biruni's objectives**

Al-Biruni described his work as:

a help to those who want to discuss religious questions with them (the Hindus), and as a repertory of information to those who want to associate with them.

➔ Read the excerpt from Al-Biruni (Source 5) and discuss whether his work met these objectives.

**Translating texts, sharing ideas**

Al-Biruni's expertise in several languages allowed him to compare languages and translate texts. He translated several Sanskrit works, including Patanjali's work on grammar, into Arabic. For his Brahmana friends, he translated the works of Euclid (a Greek mathematician) into Sanskrit.

As these authors came from vastly different social and cultural environments, they were often more attentive to everyday activities and practices which were taken for granted by indigenous writers, for whom these were routine matters, not worthy of being recorded. It is this difference in perspective that makes the accounts of travellers interesting. Who did these travellers write for? As we will see, the answers vary from one instance to the next.

**1. AL-BIRUNI AND THE KITAB-UL-HIND****1.1 From Khwarizm to the Punjab**

Al-Biruni was born in 973, in Khwarizm in present-day Uzbekistan. Khwarizm was an important centre of learning, and Al-Biruni received the best education available at the time. He was well versed in several languages: Syriac, Arabic, Persian, Hebrew and Sanskrit. Although he did not know Greek, he was familiar with the works of Plato and other Greek philosophers, having read them in Arabic translations. In 1017, when Sultan Mahmud invaded Khwarizm, he took several scholars and poets back to his capital, Ghazni; Al-Biruni was one of them. He arrived in Ghazni as a hostage, but gradually developed a liking for the city, where he spent the rest of his life until his death at the age of 70.

It was in Ghazni that Al-Biruni developed an interest in India. This was not unusual. Sanskrit works on astronomy, mathematics and medicine had been translated into Arabic from the eighth century onwards. When the Punjab became a part of the Ghaznavid empire, contacts with the local population helped create an environment of mutual trust and understanding. Al-Biruni spent years in the company of Brahmana priests and scholars, learning Sanskrit, and studying religious and philosophical texts. While his itinerary is not clear, it is likely that he travelled widely in the Punjab and parts of northern India.

Travel literature was already an accepted part of Arabic literature by the time he wrote. This literature dealt with lands as far apart as the Sahara desert in the west to the River Volga in the north. So, while

few people in India would have read Al-Biruni before 1500, many others outside India may have done so.

### 1.2 The *Kitab-ul-Hind*

Al-Biruni's *Kitab-ul-Hind*, written in Arabic, is simple and lucid. It is a voluminous text, divided into 80 chapters on subjects such as religion and philosophy, festivals, astronomy, alchemy, manners and customs, social life, weights and measures, iconography, laws and metrology.

Generally (though not always), Al-Biruni adopted a distinctive structure in each chapter, beginning with a question, following this up with a description based on Sanskritic traditions, and concluding with a comparison with other cultures. Some present-day scholars have argued that this almost geometric structure, remarkable for its precision and predictability, owed much to his mathematical orientation.

Al-Biruni, who wrote in Arabic, probably intended his work for peoples living along the frontiers of the subcontinent. He was familiar with translations and adaptations of Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit texts into Arabic – these ranged from fables to works on astronomy and medicine. However, he was also critical about the ways in which these texts were written, and clearly wanted to improve on them.

*Metrology* is the science of measurement.

### Hindu

The term “Hindu” was derived from an Old Persian word, used c. sixth-fifth centuries BCE, to refer to the region east of the river Sindhu (Indus). The Arabs continued the Persian usage and called this region “al-Hind” and its people “Hindi”. Later the Turks referred to the people east of the Indus as “Hindu”, their land as “Hindustan”, and their language as “Hindavi”. None of these expressions indicated the religious identity of the people. It was much later that the term developed religious connotations.

### ➔ Discuss...

If Al-Biruni lived in the twenty-first century, which are the areas of the world where he could have been easily understood, if he still knew the same languages?



Fig. 5.2

An illustration from a thirteenth-century Arabic manuscript showing the Athenian statesman and poet Solon, who lived in the sixth century BCE, addressing his students. Notice the clothes they are shown in.

➔ Are these clothes Greek or Arabian?

Source 2

### The bird leaves its nest

This is an excerpt from the *Rihla*:

My departure from Tangier, my birthplace, took place on Thursday ... I set out alone, having neither fellow-traveller ... nor caravan whose party I might join, but swayed by an overmastering impulse within me and a desire long-cherished in my bosom to visit these illustrious sanctuaries. So I braced my resolution to quit all my dear ones, female and male, and forsook my home as birds forsake their nests ... My age at that time was twenty-two years.

Ibn Battuta returned home in 1354, about 30 years after he had set out.

Fig. 5.3

Robbers attacking travellers, a sixteenth-century Mughal painting

➔ How can you distinguish the travellers from the robbers?



## 2. IBN BATTUTA'S RIHLA

### 2.1 An early globe-trotter

Ibn Battuta's book of travels, called *Rihla*, written in Arabic, provides extremely rich and interesting details about the social and cultural life in the subcontinent in the fourteenth century. This Moroccan traveller was born in Tangier into one of the most respectable and educated families known for their expertise in Islamic religious law or *shari'a*. True to the tradition of his family, Ibn Battuta received literary and scholastic education when he was quite young.

Unlike most other members of his class, Ibn Battuta considered experience gained through travels to be a more important source of knowledge than books. He just loved travelling, and went to far-off places, exploring new worlds and peoples. Before he set off for India in 1332-33, he had made pilgrimage trips to Mecca, and had already travelled extensively in Syria, Iraq, Persia, Yemen, Oman and a few trading ports on the coast of East Africa.

Travelling overland through Central Asia, Ibn Battuta reached Sind in 1333. He had heard about Muhammad bin Tughlaq, the Sultan of Delhi, and lured by his reputation as a generous patron of arts and letters, set off for Delhi, passing through Multan and Uch. The Sultan was impressed by his scholarship, and appointed him the *qazi* or judge of Delhi. He remained in that position for several years, until he fell out of favour and was thrown into prison. Once the misunderstanding between him and the Sultan was cleared, he was restored to imperial service, and was ordered in 1342 to proceed to China as the Sultan's envoy to the Mongol ruler.

With the new assignment, Ibn Battuta proceeded to the Malabar coast through central India. From Malabar he went to the Maldives, where he stayed for eighteen months as the *qazi*, but eventually decided to proceed to Sri Lanka. He then went back once more to the Malabar coast and the Maldives, and before resuming his mission to China, visited Bengal and Assam as well. He took a ship to Sumatra, and from there another ship for the Chinese port town of



Zaytun (now known as Quanzhou). He travelled extensively in China, going as far as Beijing, but did not stay for long, deciding to return home in 1347. His account is often compared with that of Marco Polo, who visited China (and also India) from his home base in Venice in the late thirteenth century.

Ibn Battuta meticulously recorded his observations about new cultures, peoples, beliefs, values, etc. We need to bear in mind that this globe-trotter was travelling in the fourteenth century, when it was much more arduous and hazardous to travel than it is today. According to Ibn Battuta, it took forty days to travel from Multan to Delhi and about fifty days from Sind to Delhi. The distance from Daulatabad to Delhi was covered in forty days, while that from Gwalior to Delhi took ten days.

*Fig. 5.4*  
A boat carrying passengers,  
a terracotta sculpture from  
a temple in Bengal  
(c. seventeenth-eighteenth centuries)

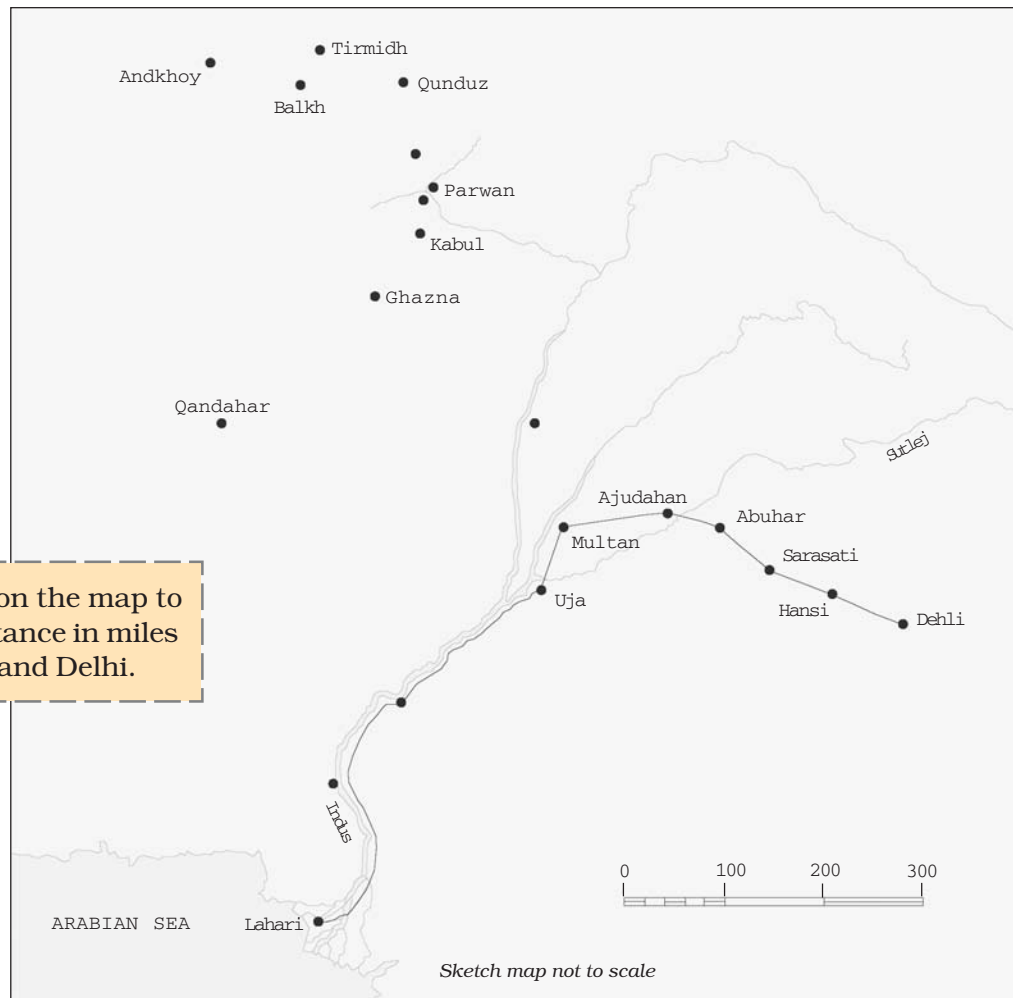
➔ Why do you think some of the passengers are carrying arms?

### The lonely traveller

Robbers were not the only hazard on long journeys: the traveller could feel homesick, or fall ill. Here is an excerpt from the *Rihla*:

I was attacked by the fever, and I actually tied myself on the saddle with a turban-cloth in case I should fall off by reason of my weakness ... So at last we reached the town of Tunis, and the townsfolk came out to welcome the *shaikh* ... and ... the son of the *qazi* ... On all sides they came forward with greetings and questions to one another, but not a soul said a word of greeting to me, since there was none of them I knew. I felt so sad at heart on account of my loneliness that I could not restrain the tears that started to my eyes, and wept bitterly. But one of the pilgrims, realising the cause of my distress, came up to me with a greeting ...

**Map 1**  
*Places visited by Ibn Battuta in Afghanistan, Sind and Punjab*  
 Many of the place-names have been spelt as Ibn Battuta would have known them.



Travelling was also more insecure: Ibn Battuta was attacked by bands of robbers several times. In fact he preferred travelling in a caravan along with companions, but this did not deter highway robbers. While travelling from Multan to Delhi, for instance, his caravan was attacked and many of his fellow travellers lost their lives; those travellers who survived, including Ibn Battuta, were severely wounded.

## 2.2 The “enjoyment of curiosities”

As we have seen, Ibn Battuta was an inveterate traveller who spent several years travelling through north Africa, West Asia and parts of Central Asia (he may even have visited Russia), the Indian subcontinent and China, before returning to his native land, Morocco. When he returned, the local ruler issued instructions that his stories be recorded.



## Source 3

**Education and entertainment**

This is what Ibn Juzayy, who was deputed to write what Ibn Battuta dictated, said in his introduction:

A gracious direction was transmitted (by the ruler) that he (Ibn Battuta) should dictate an account of the cities which he had seen in his travel, and of the interesting events which had clung to his memory, and that he should speak of those whom he had met of the rulers of countries, of their distinguished men of learning, and their pious saints. Accordingly, he dictated upon these subjects a narrative which gave entertainment to the mind and delight to the ears and eyes, with a variety of curious particulars by the exposition of which he gave edification and of marvellous things, by referring to which he aroused interest.

**In the footsteps of Ibn Battuta**

In the centuries between 1400 and 1800 visitors to India wrote a number of travelogues in Persian. At the same time, Indian visitors to Central Asia, Iran and the Ottoman empire also sometimes wrote about their experiences. These writers followed in the footsteps of Al-Biruni and Ibn Battuta, and had sometimes read these earlier authors.

Among the best known of these writers were Abdur Razzaq Samarqandi, who visited south India in the 1440s, Mahmud Wali Balkhi, who travelled very widely in the 1620s, and Shaikh Ali Hazin, who came to north India in the 1740s. Some of these authors were fascinated by India, and one of them – Mahmud Balkhi – even became a sort of *sanyasi* for a time. Others such as Hazin were disappointed and even disgusted with India, where they expected to receive a red carpet treatment. Most of them saw India as a land of wonders.

**➔ Discuss...**

Compare the objectives of Al-Biruni and Ibn Battuta in writing their accounts.



Fig. 5.5  
An eighteenth-century painting depicting travellers gathered around a campfire



*Fig. 5.6*  
A seventeenth-century painting depicting Bernier in European clothes



### 3. FRANÇOIS BERNIER

#### A DOCTOR WITH A DIFFERENCE

Once the Portuguese arrived in India in about 1500, a number of them wrote detailed accounts regarding Indian social customs and religious practices. A few of them, such as the Jesuit Roberto Nobili, even translated Indian texts into European languages.

Among the best known of the Portuguese writers is Duarte Barbosa, who wrote a detailed account of trade and society in south India. Later, after 1600, we find growing numbers of Dutch, English and French travellers coming to India. One of the most famous was the French jeweller Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, who travelled to India at least six times. He was particularly fascinated with the trading conditions in India, and compared India to Iran and the Ottoman empire. Some of these travellers, like the Italian doctor Manucci, never returned to Europe, and settled down in India.

François Bernier, a Frenchman, was a doctor, political philosopher and historian. Like many others, he came to the Mughal Empire in search of opportunities. He was in India for twelve years, from 1656 to 1668, and was closely associated with the Mughal court, as a physician to Prince Dara Shukoh, the eldest son of Emperor Shah Jahan, and later as an intellectual and scientist, with Danishmand Khan, an Armenian noble at the Mughal court.

#### 3.1 Comparing “East” and “West”

Bernier travelled to several parts of the country, and wrote accounts of what he saw, frequently comparing what he saw in India with the situation in Europe. He dedicated his major writing to Louis XIV, the king of France, and many of his other works were written in the form of letters to influential officials and ministers. In virtually every instance Bernier described what he saw in India as a bleak situation in comparison to developments in Europe. As we will see, this assessment was not always accurate. However, when his works were published, Bernier’s writings became extremely popular.

*Fig. 5.7*  
A painting depicting Tavernier in Indian clothes

Source 4

### Travelling with the Mughal army

Bernier often travelled with the army. This is an excerpt from his description of the army's march to Kashmir:

I am expected to keep two good Turkoman horses, and I also take with me a powerful Persian camel and driver, a groom for my horses, a cook and a servant to go before my horse with a flask of water in his hand, according to the custom of the country. I am also provided with every useful article, such as a tent of moderate size, a carpet, a portable bed made of four very strong but light canes, a pillow, a mattress, round leather table-cloths used at meals, some few napkins of dyed cloth, three small bags with culinary utensils which are all placed in a large bag, and this bag is again carried in a very capacious and strong double sack or net made of leather thongs. This double sack likewise contains the provisions, linen and wearing apparel, both of master and servants. I have taken care to lay in a stock of excellent rice for five or six days' consumption, of sweet biscuits flavoured with anise (a herb), of limes and sugar. Nor have I forgotten a linen bag with its small iron hook for the purpose of suspending and draining *dahi* or curds; nothing being considered so refreshing in this country as lemonade and *dahi*.

➔ What are the things from Bernier's list that you would take on a journey today?

Bernier's works were published in France in 1670-71 and translated into English, Dutch, German and Italian within the next five years. Between 1670 and 1725 his account was reprinted eight times in French, and by 1684 it had been reprinted three times in English. This was in marked contrast to the accounts in Arabic and Persian, which circulated as manuscripts and were generally not published before 1800.

### The creation and circulation of ideas about India

The writings of European travellers helped produce an image of India for Europeans through the printing and circulation of their books. Later, after 1750, when Indians like Shaikh Itisamuddin and Mirza Abu Talib visited Europe and confronted this image that Europeans had of their society, they tried to influence it by producing their own version of matters.

### ➔ Discuss...

There is a very rich travel literature in Indian languages. Find out about travel writers in the language you use at home. Read one such account and describe the areas visited by the traveller, what s/he saw, and why s/he wrote the account.

### A language with an enormous range

Al-Biruni described Sanskrit as follows:

If you want to conquer this difficulty (i.e. to learn Sanskrit), you will not find it easy, because the language is of an enormous range, both in words and inflections, something like the Arabic, calling one and the same thing by various names, both original and derivative, and using one and the same word for a variety of subjects, which, in order to be properly understood, must be distinguished from each other by various qualifying epithets.

### God knows best!

Travellers did not always believe what they were told. When faced with the story of a wooden idol that supposedly lasted for 216,432 years, Al-Biruni asks:

How, then, could wood have lasted such a length of time, and particularly in a place where the air and the soil are rather wet? God knows best!

## 4. MAKING SENSE OF AN ALIEN WORLD AL-BIRUNI AND THE SANSKRITIC TRADITION

### 4.1 Overcoming barriers to understanding

As we have seen, travellers often compared what they saw in the subcontinent with practices with which they were familiar. Each traveller adopted distinct strategies to understand what they observed. Al-Biruni, for instance, was aware of the problems inherent in the task he had set himself. He discussed several “barriers” that he felt obstructed understanding. The first amongst these was language. According to him, Sanskrit was so different from Arabic and Persian that ideas and concepts could not be easily translated from one language into another.

The second barrier he identified was the difference in religious beliefs and practices. The self-absorption and consequent insularity of the local population according to him, constituted the third barrier. What is interesting is that even though he was aware of these problems, Al-Biruni depended almost exclusively on the works of Brahmanas, often citing passages from the Vedas, the Puranas, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the works of Patanjali, the *Manusmriti*, etc., to provide an understanding of Indian society.

### 4.2 Al-Biruni’s description of the caste system

Al-Biruni tried to explain the caste system by looking for parallels in other societies. He noted that in ancient Persia, four social categories were recognised: those of knights and princes; monks, fire-priests and lawyers; physicians, astronomers and other scientists; and finally, peasants and artisans. In other words, he attempted to suggest that social divisions were not unique to India. At the same time he pointed out that within Islam all men were considered equal, differing only in their observance of piety.

In spite of his acceptance of the Brahmanical description of the caste system, Al-Biruni disapproved of the notion of pollution. He remarked that everything which falls into a state of impurity strives and succeeds in regaining its original condition of purity. The sun cleanses the air, and the salt in the sea prevents the water from becoming polluted. If it

were not so, insisted Al-Biruni, life on earth would have been impossible. The conception of social pollution, intrinsic to the caste system, was according to him, contrary to the laws of nature.

Source 5

### The system of varnas

This is Al-Biruni's account of the system of varnas:

The highest caste are the Brahmana, of whom the books of the Hindus tell us that they were created from the head of Brahman. And as the Brahman is only another name for the force called *nature*, and the head is the highest part of the ... body, the Brahmana are the choice part of the whole genus. Therefore the Hindus consider them as the very best of mankind.

The next caste are the Kshatriya, who were created, as they say, from the shoulders and hands of Brahman. Their degree is not much below that of the Brahmana.

After them follow the Vaishya, who were created from the thigh of Brahman.

The Shudra, who were created from his feet . . .

Between the latter two classes there is no very great distance. Much, however, as these classes differ from each other, they live together in the same towns and villages, mixed together in the same houses and lodgings.

➔ Compare what Al-Biruni wrote with Source 6, Chapter 3. Do you notice any similarities and differences? Do you think Al-Biruni depended only on Sanskrit texts for his information and understanding of Indian society?

As we have seen, Al-Biruni's description of the caste system was deeply influenced by his study of normative Sanskrit texts which laid down the rules governing the system from the point of view of the Brahmanas. However, in real life the system was not quite as rigid. For instance, the categories defined as *antyaja* (literally, born outside the system) were often expected to provide inexpensive labour to both peasants and zamindars (see also Chapter 8). In other words, while they were often subjected to social oppression, they were included within economic networks.

### ➔ Discuss...

How important is knowledge of the language of the area for a traveller from a different region?

## 5. IBN BATTUTA AND THE EXCITEMENT OF THE UNFAMILIAR

By the time Ibn Battuta arrived in Delhi in the fourteenth century, the subcontinent was part of a global network of communication that stretched from China in the east to north-west Africa and Europe in the west. As we have seen, Ibn Battuta himself travelled extensively through these lands, visiting sacred shrines, spending time with learned men and rulers, often officiating as *qazi*, and enjoying the cosmopolitan culture of urban centres where people who spoke Arabic, Persian, Turkish and other languages, shared ideas, information and anecdotes. These included stories about men noted for their piety, kings who could be both cruel and generous, and about the lives of ordinary men and women; anything that was unfamiliar was particularly highlighted in order to ensure that the listener or the reader was suitably impressed by accounts of distant yet accessible worlds.

### 5.1 The coconut and the *paan*

Some of the best examples of Ibn Battuta's strategies of representation are evident in the ways in which he described the coconut and the *paan*, two kinds of plant produce that were completely unfamiliar to his audience.

Source 6

#### Nuts like a man's head

The following is how Ibn Battuta described the coconut:

These trees are among the most peculiar trees in kind and most astonishing in habit. They look exactly like date-palms, without any difference between them except that the one produces nuts as its fruits and the other produces dates. The nut of a coconut tree resembles a man's head, for in it are what look like two eyes and a mouth, and the inside of it when it is green looks like the brain, and attached to it is a fibre which looks like hair. They make from this cords with which they sew up ships instead of (using) iron nails, and they (also) make from it cables for vessels.

➔ What are the comparisons that Ibn Battuta makes to give his readers an idea about what coconuts looked like? Do you think these are appropriate? How does he convey a sense that this fruit is unusual? How accurate is his description?

Source 7

#### The *paan*

Read Ibn Battuta's description of the *paan*:

The betel is a tree which is cultivated in the same manner as the grape-vine; ... The betel has no fruit and is grown only for the sake of its leaves ... The manner of its use is that before eating it one takes areca nut; this is like a nutmeg but is broken up until it is reduced to small pellets, and one places these in his mouth and chews them. Then he takes the leaves of betel, puts a little chalk on them, and masticates them along with the betel.

➔ Why do you think this attracted Ibn Battuta's attention? Is there anything you would like to add to this description?

## 5.2 Ibn Battuta and Indian cities

Ibn Battuta found cities in the subcontinent full of exciting opportunities for those who had the necessary drive, resources and skills. They were densely populated and prosperous, except for the occasional disruptions caused by wars and invasions. It appears from Ibn Battuta's account that most cities had crowded streets and bright and colourful markets that were stacked with a wide variety of goods. Ibn Battuta described Delhi as a vast city, with a great population, the largest in India. Daulatabad (in Maharashtra) was no less, and easily rivalled Delhi in size.

Source 8

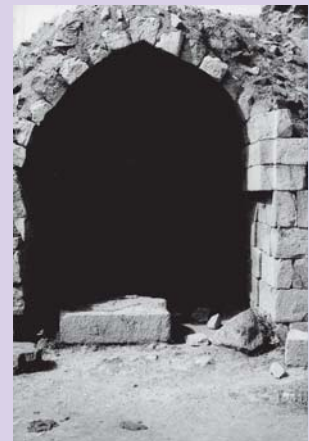
➔ What were the architectural features that Ibn Battuta noted?

Compare this description with the illustrations of the city shown in Figs. 5.8 and 5.9.

### Dehli

Here is an excerpt from Ibn Battuta's account of Delhi, often spelt as Dehli in texts of the period:

The city of Dehli covers a wide area and has a large population ... The rampart round the city is without parallel. The breadth of its wall is eleven cubits; and inside it are houses for the night sentry and gate-keepers. Inside the ramparts, there are store-houses for storing edibles, magazines, ammunition, ballistas and siege machines. The grains that are stored (in these ramparts) can last for a long time, without rotting ... In the interior of the rampart, horsemen as well as infantrymen move from one end of the city to another. The rampart is pierced through by windows which open on the side of the city, and it is through these windows that light enters inside. The lower part of the rampart is built of stone; the upper part of bricks. It has many towers close to one another. There are twenty eight gates of this city which are called *darwaza*, and of these, the Budaun *darwaza* is the greatest; inside the Mandwi *darwaza* there is a grain market; adjacent to the Gul *darwaza* there is an orchard ... It (the city of Dehli) has a fine cemetery in which graves have domes over them, and those that do not have a dome, have an arch, for sure. In the cemetery



they sow flowers such as tuberose, jasmine, wild rose, etc.; and flowers blossom there in all seasons.

Fig. 5.8 (top)  
An arch in Tughlakabad,  
Delhi

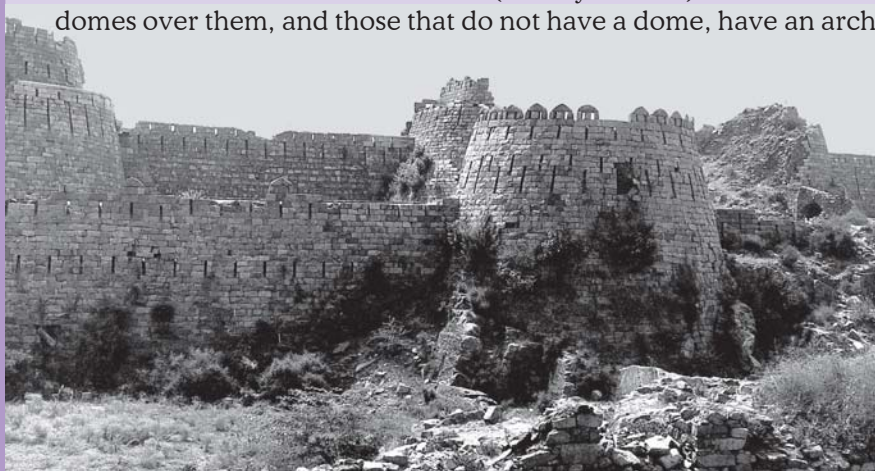


Fig. 5.9 (left)  
Part of the fortification  
wall of the settlement



*Fig. 5.10*  
Ikat weaving patterns such as this were adopted and modified at several coastal production centres in the subcontinent and in Southeast Asia.

➤ Why do you think Ibn Battuta highlighted these activities in his description?

The bazaars were not only places of economic transactions, but also the hub of social and cultural activities. Most bazaars had a mosque and a temple, and in some of them at least, spaces were marked for public performances by dancers, musicians and singers.

While Ibn Battuta was not particularly concerned with explaining the prosperity of towns, historians have used his account to suggest that towns derived a significant portion of their wealth through the appropriation of surplus from villages. Ibn Battuta found Indian agriculture very productive because of the fertility of the soil, which allowed farmers to cultivate two crops a year. He also noted that the subcontinent was well integrated with inter-Asian networks of trade and commerce, with Indian manufactures being in great demand in both West Asia and Southeast Asia, fetching huge profits for artisans and merchants. Indian textiles, particularly cotton cloth, fine muslins, silks, brocade and satin, were in great demand. Ibn Battuta informs us that certain varieties of fine muslin were so expensive that they could be worn only by the nobles and the very rich.

Source 9

### Music in the market

Read Ibn Battuta's description of Daulatabad:

In Daulatabad there is a market place for male and female singers, which is known as Tarabad. It is one of the greatest and most beautiful bazaars. It has numerous shops and every shop has a door which leads into the house of the owner ... The shops are decorated with carpets and at the centre of a shop there is a swing on which sits the female singer. She is decked with all kinds of finery and her female attendants swing her. In the middle of the market place there stands a large cupola, which is carpeted and decorated and in which the chief of the musicians takes his place every Thursday after the dawn prayers, accompanied by his servants and slaves. The female singers come in successive crowds, sing before him and dance until dusk after which he withdraws. In this bazaar there are mosques for offering prayers ... One of the Hindu rulers ... alighted at the cupola every time he passed by this market place, and the female singers would sing before him. Even some Muslim rulers did the same.



### 5.3 A unique system of communication

The state evidently took special measures to encourage merchants. Almost all trade routes were well supplied with inns and guest houses. Ibn Battuta was also amazed by the efficiency of the postal system which allowed merchants to not only send information and remit credit across long distances, but also to dispatch goods required at short notice. The postal system was so efficient that while it took fifty days to reach Delhi from Sind, the news reports of spies would reach the Sultan through the postal system in just five days.

Source 10

#### On horse and on foot

This is how Ibn Battuta describes the postal system:

In India the postal system is of two kinds. The horse-post, called *uluq*, is run by royal horses stationed at a distance of every four miles. The foot-post has three stations per mile; it is called *dawa*, that is one-third of a mile ... Now, at every third of a mile there is a well-populated village, outside which are three pavilions in which sit men with girded loins ready to start. Each of them carries a rod, two cubits in length, with copper bells at the top. When the courier starts from the city he holds the letter in one hand and the rod with its bells on the other; and he runs as fast as he can. When the men in the pavilion hear the ringing of the bell they get ready. As soon as the courier reaches them, one of them takes the letter from his hand and runs at top speed shaking the rod all the while until he reaches the next *dawa*. And the same process continues till the letter reaches its destination. This foot-post is quicker than the horse-post; and often it is used to transport the fruits of Khurasan which are much desired in India.

➡ Do you think the foot-post system could have operated throughout the subcontinent?

#### A strange nation?

The travelogue of Abdur Razzaq written in the 1440s is an interesting mixture of emotions and perceptions. On the one hand, he did not appreciate what he saw in the port of Calicut (present-day Kozhikode) in Kerala, which was populated by “a people the likes of whom I had never imagined”, describing them as “a strange nation”.

Later in his visit to India, he arrived in Mangalore, and crossed the Western Ghats. Here he saw a temple that filled him with admiration:

Within three leagues (about nine miles of Mangalore, I saw an idol-house the likes of which is not to be found in all the world. It was a square, approximately ten yards a side, five yards in height, all covered with cast bronze, with four porticos. In the entrance portico was a statue in the likeness of a human being, full stature, made of gold. It had two red rubies for eyes, so cunningly made that you would say it could see. What craft and artisanship!

#### ➡ Discuss...

How did Ibn Battuta handle the problem of describing things or situations to people who had not seen or experienced them?

## 6. BERNIER AND THE “DEGENERATE” EAST

If Ibn Battuta chose to describe everything that impressed and excited him because of its novelty, François Bernier belonged to a different intellectual tradition. He was far more preoccupied with comparing and contrasting what he saw in India with the situation in Europe in general and France in particular, focusing on situations which he considered depressing. His idea seems to have been to influence policy-makers and the intelligentsia to ensure that they made what he considered to be the “right” decisions.

Bernier’s *Travels in the Mughal Empire* is marked by detailed observations, critical insights and reflection. His account contains discussions trying to place the history of the Mughals within some sort of a universal framework. He constantly compared Mughal India with contemporary Europe, generally emphasising the superiority of the latter. His representation of India works on the model of binary opposition, where India is presented as the inverse of Europe. He also ordered the perceived differences hierarchically, so that India appeared to be inferior to the Western world.

### 6.1 The question of landownership

According to Bernier, one of the fundamental differences between Mughal India and Europe was the lack of private property in land in the former. He was a firm believer in the virtues of private property, and saw crown ownership of land as being harmful for both the state and its people. He thought that in the Mughal Empire the emperor owned all the land and distributed it among his nobles, and that this had disastrous consequences for the economy and society. This perception was not unique to Bernier, but is found in most travellers’ accounts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Owing to crown ownership of land, argued Bernier, landholders could not pass on their land to their children. So they were averse to any long-term investment in the sustenance and expansion of production. The absence of private property in land had, therefore, prevented the emergence of the class of “improving” landlords (as in Western Europe) with

### Widespread poverty

Pelsaert, a Dutch traveller, visited the subcontinent during the early decades of the seventeenth century. Like Bernier, he was shocked to see the widespread poverty, “poverty so great and miserable that the life of the people can be depicted or accurately described only as the home of stark want and the dwelling place of bitter woe”. Holding the state responsible, he says: “So much is wrung from the peasants that even dry bread is scarcely left to fill their stomachs.”

a concern to maintain or improve the land. It had led to the uniform ruination of agriculture, excessive oppression of the peasantry and a continuous decline in the living standards of all sections of society, except the ruling aristocracy.

Source 11

### The poor peasant

An excerpt from Bernier's description of the peasantry in the countryside:

Of the vast tracts of country constituting the empire of Hindustan, many are little more than sand, or barren mountains, badly cultivated, and thinly populated. Even a considerable portion of the good land remains untilled for want of labourers; many of whom perish in consequence of the bad treatment they experience from Governors. The poor people, when they become incapable of discharging the demands of their rapacious lords, are not only often deprived of the means of subsistence, but are also made to lose their children, who are carried away as slaves. Thus, it happens that the peasantry, driven to despair by so excessive a tyranny, abandon the country.

In this instance, Bernier was participating in contemporary debates in Europe concerning the nature of state and society, and intended that his description of Mughal India would serve as a warning to those who did not recognise the "merits" of private property.

➔ What, according to Bernier, were the problems faced by peasants in the subcontinent? Do you think his description would have served to strengthen his case?

As an extension of this, Bernier described Indian society as consisting of undifferentiated masses of impoverished people, subjugated by a small minority of a very rich and powerful ruling class. Between the poorest of the poor and the richest of the rich, there was no social group or class worth the name. Bernier confidently asserted: "There is no middle state in India."

Fig. 5.11  
Drawings such as this nineteenth-century example often reinforced the notion of an unchanging rural society.



Source 12

### A warning for Europe

Bernier warned that if European kings followed the Mughal model:

Their kingdoms would be very far from being well-cultivated and peopled, so well built, so rich, so polite and flourishing as we see them. Our kings are otherwise rich and powerful; and we must avow that they are much better and more royally served. They would soon be kings of deserts and solitudes, of beggars and barbarians, such as those are whom I have been representing (the Mughals) ... We should find the great Cities and the great Burroughs (boroughs) rendered uninhabitable because of ill air, and to fall to ruine (ruin) without any bodies (anybody) taking care of repairing them; the hillocks abandon'd, and the fields overspread with bushes, or fill'd with pestilential marishes (marshes), as hath been already intimated.

➤ How does Bernier depict a scenario of doom? Once you have read Chapters 8 and 9, return to this description and analyse it again.

This, then, is how Bernier saw the Mughal Empire – its king was the king of “beggars and barbarians”; its cities and towns were ruined and contaminated with “ill air”; and its fields, “overspread with bushes” and full of “pestilential marishes”. And, all this was because of one reason: crown ownership of land.

Curiously, none of the Mughal official documents suggest that the state was the sole owner of land. For instance, Abu'l Fazl, the sixteenth-century official chronicler of Akbar's reign, describes the land revenue as “remunerations of sovereignty”, a claim made by the ruler on his subjects for the protection he provided rather than as rent on land that he owned. It is possible that European travellers regarded such claims as rent because land revenue demands were often very high. However, this was actually not a rent or even a land tax, but a tax on the crop (for more details, see Chapter 8).

Bernier's descriptions influenced Western theorists from the eighteenth century onwards. The French philosopher Montesquieu, for instance, used this account to develop the idea of oriental despotism, according to which rulers in Asia (the Orient or the East) enjoyed absolute authority over their subjects, who were kept in conditions of subjugation and poverty, arguing that all land belonged to the king and that private property was non-existent. According to this view, everybody, except the emperor and his nobles, barely managed to survive.

This idea was further developed as the concept of the Asiatic mode of production by Karl Marx in the nineteenth century. He argued that in India (and other Asian countries), before colonialism, surplus was appropriated by the state. This led to the emergence of a society that was composed of a large number of autonomous and (internally) egalitarian village communities. The imperial court presided over these village communities, respecting their autonomy as long as the flow of surplus was unimpeded. This was regarded as a stagnant system.

However, as we will see (Chapter 8), this picture of rural society was far from true. In fact, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, rural society was characterised by considerable social and economic differentiation. At one end of the spectrum were the big zamindars, who enjoyed superior rights in land and, at the other, the “untouchable” landless

labourers. In between was the big peasant, who used hired labour and engaged in commodity production, and the smaller peasant who could barely produce for his subsistence.

### 6.2 A more complex social reality

While Bernier's preoccupation with projecting the Mughal state as tyrannical is obvious, his descriptions occasionally hint at a more complex social reality. For instance, he felt that artisans had no incentive to improve the quality of their manufactures, since profits were appropriated by the state. Manufactures were, consequently, everywhere in decline. At the same time, he conceded that vast quantities of the world's precious metals flowed into India, as manufactures were exported in exchange for gold and silver. He also noticed the existence of a prosperous merchant community, engaged in long-distance exchange.

Source 13

#### A different socio-economic scenario

Read this excerpt from Bernier's description of both agriculture and craft production:

It is important to observe, that of this vast tract of country, a large portion is extremely fertile; the large kingdom of Bengale (Bengal), for instance, surpassing Egypt itself, not only in the production of rice, corn, and other necessaries of life, but of innumerable articles of commerce which are not cultivated in Egypt; such as silks, cotton, and indigo. There are also many parts of the Indies, where the population is sufficiently abundant, and the land pretty well tilled; and where the artisan, although naturally indolent, is yet compelled by necessity or otherwise to employ himself in manufacturing carpets, brocades, embroideries, gold and silver cloths, and the various sorts of silk and cotton goods, which are used in the country or exported abroad.

It should not escape notice that gold and silver, after circulating in every other quarter of the globe, come at length to be swallowed up, lost in some measure, in Hindustan.

➡ In what ways is the description in this excerpt different from that in Source 11?



Fig. 5.12  
A gold spoon studded with emeralds and rubies, an example of the dexterity of Mughal artisans

Source 14

### The imperial *karkhanas*

Bernier is perhaps the only historian who provides a detailed account of the working of the imperial *karkhanas* or workshops:

Large halls are seen at many places, called *karkhanas* or workshops for the artisans. In one hall, embroiderers are busily employed, superintended by a master. In another, you see the goldsmiths; in a third, painters; in a fourth, varnishers in lacquer-work; in a fifth, joiners, turners, tailors and shoe-makers; in a sixth, manufacturers of silk, brocade and fine muslins ...

The artisans come every morning to their *karkhanas* where they remain employed the whole day; and in the evening return to their homes. In this quiet regular manner, their time glides away; no one aspiring for any improvement in the condition of life wherein he happens to be born.

➤ How does Bernier convey a sense that although there was a great deal of activity, there was little progress?

In fact, during the seventeenth century about 15 per cent of the population lived in towns. This was, on average, higher than the proportion of urban population in Western Europe in the same period. In spite of this Bernier described Mughal cities as “camp towns”, by which he meant towns that owed their existence, and depended for their survival, on the imperial camp. He believed that these came into existence when the imperial court moved in and rapidly declined when it moved out. He suggested that they did not have viable social and economic foundations but were dependent on imperial patronage.

As in the case of the question of landownership, Bernier was drawing an oversimplified picture. There were all kinds of towns: manufacturing towns, trading towns, port-towns, sacred centres, pilgrimage towns, etc. Their existence is an index of the prosperity of merchant communities and professional classes.

Merchants often had strong community or kin ties, and were organised into their own caste-cum-occupational bodies. In western India these groups were called *mahajans*, and their chief, the *sheth*. In urban centres such as Ahmedabad the *mahajans* were collectively represented by the chief of the merchant community who was called the *nagarsheth*.

Other urban groups included professional classes such as physicians (*hakim* or *vaid*), teachers (*pundit* or *mulla*), lawyers (*wakil*), painters, architects, musicians, calligraphers, etc. While some depended on imperial patronage, many made their living by serving other patrons, while still others served ordinary people in crowded markets or bazaars.

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### ➤ Discuss...

Why do you think scholars like Bernier chose to compare India with Europe?

## 7. WOMEN

### SLAVES, SATI AND LABOURERS

Travellers who left written accounts were generally men who were interested in and sometimes intrigued by the condition of women in the subcontinent. Sometimes they took social inequities for granted as a “natural” state of affairs. For instance, slaves were openly sold in markets, like any other commodity, and were regularly exchanged as gifts. When Ibn Battuta reached Sind he purchased “horses, camels and slaves” as gifts for Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq. When he reached Multan, he presented the governor with, “a slave and horse together with raisins and almonds”. Muhammad bin Tughlaq, informs Ibn Battuta, was so happy with the sermon of a preacher named Nasiruddin that he gave him “a hundred thousand *tankas* (coins) and two hundred slaves”.

It appears from Ibn Battuta’s account that there was considerable differentiation among slaves. Some female slaves in the service of the Sultan were experts in music and dance, and Ibn Battuta enjoyed their performance at the wedding of the Sultan’s sister. Female slaves were also employed by the Sultan to keep a watch on his nobles.

Slaves were generally used for domestic labour, and Ibn Battuta found their services particularly indispensable for carrying women and men on palanquins or *dola*. The price of slaves, particularly female slaves required for domestic labour, was very low, and most families who could afford to do so kept at least one or two of them.

Contemporary European travellers and writers often highlighted the treatment of women as a crucial marker of difference between Western and Eastern societies. Not surprisingly, Bernier chose the practice of sati for detailed description. He noted that while some women seemed to embrace death cheerfully, others were forced to die.

Source 15

#### Slave women

Ibn Battuta informs us:

It is the habit of the emperor ... to keep with every noble, great or small, one of his slaves who spies on the nobles. He also appoints female scavengers who enter the houses unannounced; and to them the slave girls communicate all the information they possess.

Most female slaves were captured in raids and expeditions.

Source 16

#### The child sati

This is perhaps one of the most poignant descriptions by Bernier:

At Lahore I saw a most beautiful young widow sacrificed, who could not, I think, have been more than twelve years of age. The poor little creature appeared more dead than alive when she approached the dreadful pit: the agony of her mind cannot be described; she trembled and wept bitterly; but three or four of the Brahmanas, assisted by an old woman who held her under the arm, forced the unwilling victim toward the fatal spot, seated her on the wood, tied her hands and feet, lest she should run away, and in that situation the innocent creature was burnt alive. I found it difficult to repress my feelings and to prevent their bursting forth into clamorous and unavailing rage ...

### ➔ Discuss...

Why do you think the lives of ordinary women workers did not attract the attention of travellers such as Ibn Battuta and Bernier?

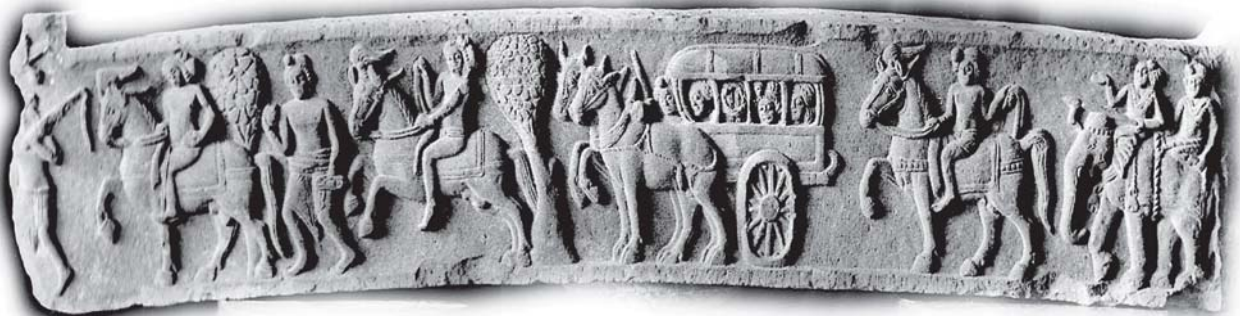
However, women's lives revolved around much else besides the practice of sati. Their labour was crucial in both agricultural and non-agricultural production. Women from merchant families participated in commercial activities, sometimes even taking mercantile disputes to the court of law. It therefore seems unlikely that women were confined to the private spaces of their homes.

You may have noticed that travellers' accounts provide us with a tantalising glimpse of the lives of men and women during these centuries. However, their observations were often shaped by the contexts from which they came. At the same time, there were many aspects of social life that these travellers did not notice.

Also relatively unknown are the experiences and observations of men (and possibly women) from the subcontinent who crossed seas and mountains and ventured into lands beyond the subcontinent. What did they see and hear? How were their relations with peoples of distant lands shaped? What were the languages they used? These and other questions will hopefully be systematically addressed by historians in the years to come.

Fig. 5.13  
A sculpted panel from Mathura depicting travellers

➔ What are the various modes of transport that are shown?





## TIMELINE

### SOME TRAVELLERS WHO LEFT ACCOUNTS

#### Tenth-eleventh centuries

973-1048	Muhammad ibn Ahmad Abu Raihan al-Biruni (from Uzbekistan)
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#### Thirteenth century

1254-1323	Marco Polo (from Italy)
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#### Fourteenth century

1304-77	Ibn Battuta (from Morocco)
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#### Fifteenth century

1413-82	Abd al-Razzaq Kamal al-Din ibn Ishaq al-Samarqandi (from Samarqand)
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1466-72 (years spent in India)	Afanasii Nikitich Nikitin (fifteenth century, from Russia)
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#### Sixteenth century

1518 (visit to India)	Duarte Barbosa, d. 1521 (from Portugal)
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1562 (year of death)	Seydi Ali Reis (from Turkey)
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1536-1600	Antonio Monserrate (from Spain)
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#### Seventeenth century

1626-31 (years spent in India)	Mahmud Wali Balkhi (from Balkh)
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1600-67	Peter Mundy (from England)
---------	----------------------------

1605-89	Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (from France)
---------	---------------------------------------

1620-88	François Bernier (from France)
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*Note: Unless otherwise indicated, the dates mentioned are those of the lifespan of the traveller.*



### ANSWER IN 100-150 WORDS

1. Write a note on the *Kitab-ul-Hind*.
2. Compare and contrast the perspectives from which Ibn Battuta and Bernier wrote their accounts of their travels in India.
3. Discuss the picture of urban centres that emerges from Bernier's account.
4. Analyse the evidence for slavery provided by Ibn Battuta.
5. What were the elements of the practice of sati that drew the attention of Bernier?



### WRITE A SHORT ESSAY (ABOUT 250-300 WORDS) ON THE FOLLOWING:

6. Discuss Al-Biruni's understanding of the caste system.
7. Do you think Ibn Battuta's account is useful in arriving at an understanding of life in contemporary urban centres? Give reasons for your answer.
8. Discuss the extent to which Bernier's account enables historians to reconstruct contemporary rural society.
9. Read this excerpt from Bernier:

Numerous are the instances of handsome pieces of workmanship made by persons destitute of tools, and who can scarcely be said to have received instruction from a master. Sometimes they imitate so perfectly articles of European manufacture that the difference between the original and copy can hardly be discerned. Among other things, the Indians make excellent muskets, and fowling-pieces, and such beautiful gold ornaments that it may be doubted if the exquisite workmanship of those articles can be exceeded by any European goldsmith. I have often admired the beauty, softness, and delicacy of their paintings.

List the crafts mentioned in the passage. Compare these with the descriptions of artisanal activity in the chapter.



### MAP WORK

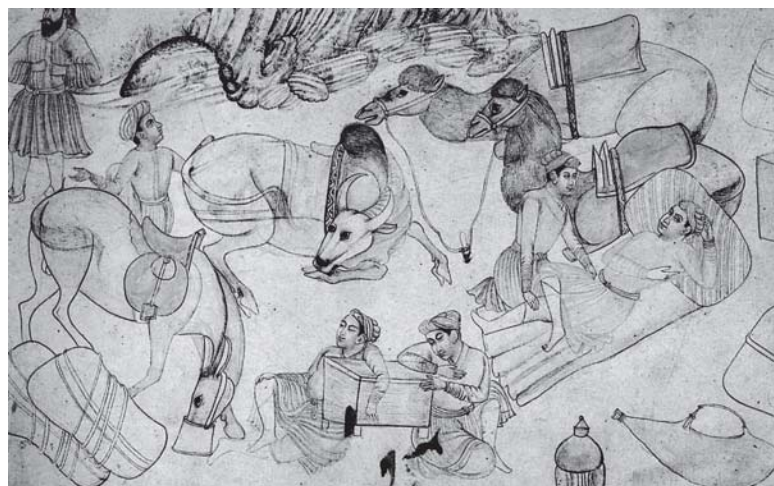
10. On an outline map of the world mark the countries visited by Ibn Battuta. What are the seas that he may have crossed?



### PROJECTS (CHOOSE ONE)

11. Interview any one of your older relatives (mother/father/grandparents/uncles/aunts) who has travelled outside your town or village. Find out (a) where they went, (b) how they travelled, (c) how long did it take, (d) why did they travel (e) and did they face any difficulties. List as many similarities and differences that they may have noticed between their place of residence and the place they visited, focusing on language, clothes, food, customs, buildings, roads, the lives of men and women. Write a report on your findings.
12. For any one of the travellers mentioned in the chapter, find out more about his life and writings. Prepare a report on his travels, noting in particular how he described society, and comparing these descriptions with the excerpts included in the chapter.

Fig. 5.14  
A painting depicting travellers at rest



### If you would like to know more, read:

Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. 2006. *Indo-Persian Travels in the Age of Discoveries, 1400-1800*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Catherine Asher and Cynthia Talbot. 2006. *India Before Europe*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

François Bernier. nd. *Travels in the Mogul Empire AD 1656-1668*. Low Price Publications, New Delhi.

H.A.R. Gibb (ed.). 1993. *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*. Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi.

Mushirul Hasan (ed.). 2005. *Westward Bound: Travels of Mirza Abu Talib*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

H.K. Kaul (ed.). 1997. *Travellers' India – an Anthology*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Jean-Baptiste Tavernier. 1993. *Travels in India*. Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi.



### For more information, you could visit:

[www.edumaritime.org](http://www.edumaritime.org)

## THEME SIX

# BHAKTI-SUFI TRADITIONS

## CHANGES IN RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND DEVOTIONAL TEXTS (C. EIGHTH TO EIGHTEENTH CENTURY)

We saw in Chapter 4 that by the mid-first millennium CE the landscape of the subcontinent was dotted with a variety of religious structures – stupas, monasteries, temples. If these typified certain religious beliefs and practices, others have been reconstructed from textual traditions, including the Puranas, many of which received their present shape around the same time, and yet others remain only faintly visible in textual and visual records.

New textual sources available from this period include compositions attributed to poet-saints, most of whom expressed themselves orally in regional languages used by ordinary people. These compositions, which were often set to music, were compiled by disciples or devotees, generally after the death of the poet-saint. What is more, these traditions were fluid – generations of devotees tended to elaborate on the original message, and occasionally modified or even abandoned some of the ideas that appeared problematic or irrelevant in different political, social or cultural contexts. Using these sources thus poses a challenge to historians.

Historians also draw on hagiographies or biographies of saints written by their followers (or members of their religious sect). These may not be literally accurate, but allow a glimpse into the ways in which devotees perceived the lives of these path-breaking women and men.

As we will see, these sources provide us with insights into a scenario characterised by dynamism and diversity. Let us look at some elements of these more closely.



*Fig. 6.1*

*A twelfth-century bronze sculpture of Manikkavachakar, a devotee of Shiva who composed beautiful devotional songs in Tamil*

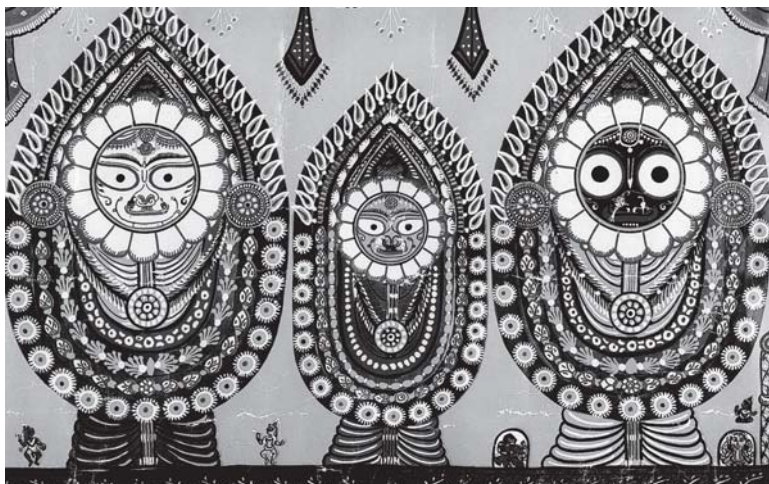
## 1. A MOSAIC OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

Perhaps the most striking feature of this phase is the increasing visibility of a wide range of gods and goddesses in sculpture as well as in texts. At one level, this indicates the continued and even extended worship of the major deities – Vishnu, Shiva and the goddess – each of whom was visualised in a variety of forms.

### 1.1 The integration of cults

Historians who have tried to understand these developments suggest that there were at least two processes at work. One was a process of disseminating Brahmanical ideas. This is exemplified by the composition, compilation and preservation of Puranic texts in simple Sanskrit verse, explicitly meant to be accessible to women and Shudras, who were generally excluded from Vedic learning. At the same time, there was a second process at work – that of the Brahmanas accepting and reworking the beliefs and practices of these and other social categories. In fact, many beliefs and practices were shaped through a continuous dialogue between what sociologists have described as “great” Sanskritic Puranic traditions and “little” traditions throughout the land.

One of the most striking examples of this process is evident at Puri, Orissa, where the principal deity was identified, by the twelfth century, as Jagannatha (literally, the lord of the world), a form of Vishnu.



### “Great” and “little” traditions

The terms great and little traditions were coined by a sociologist named Robert Redfield in the twentieth century to describe the cultural practices of peasant societies. He found that peasants observed rituals and customs that emanated from dominant social categories, including priests and rulers. These he classified as part of a great tradition. At the same time, peasants also followed local practices that did not necessarily correspond with those of the great tradition. These he included within the category of little tradition. He also noticed that both great and little traditions changed over time, through a process of interaction.

While scholars accept the significance of these categories and processes, they are often uncomfortable with the hierarchy suggested by the terms great and little. The use of quotation marks for “great” and “little” is one way of indicating this.

Fig. 6.2  
Jagannatha (extreme right) with his sister Subhadra (centre) and his brother Balarama (left)

If you compare Fig. 6.2 with Fig. 4.26 (Chapter 4) you will notice that the deity is represented in a very different way. In this instance, a local deity, whose image was and continues to be made of wood by local tribal specialists, was recognised as a form of Vishnu. At the same time, Vishnu was visualised in a way that was very different from that in other parts of the country.

Such instances of integration are evident amongst goddess cults as well. Worship of the goddess, often simply in the form of a stone smeared with ochre, was evidently widespread. These local deities were often incorporated within the Puranic framework by providing them with an identity as a wife of the principal male deities – sometimes they were equated with Lakshmi, the wife of Vishnu, in other instances, with Parvati, the wife of Shiva.

*Fig. 6.3  
Sculpture of a Buddhist goddess,  
Marichi (c. tenth century, Bihar),  
an example of the process of  
integration of different religious  
beliefs and practices*



### **1.2 Difference and conflict**

Often associated with the goddess were forms of worship that were classified as Tantric. Tantric practices were widespread in several parts of the subcontinent – they were open to women and men, and practitioners often ignored differences of caste and class within the ritual context. Many of these ideas influenced Shaivism as well as Buddhism, especially in the eastern, northern and southern parts of the subcontinent.

All of these somewhat divergent and even disparate beliefs and practices would come to be classified as Hindu over the course of the next millennium. The divergence is perhaps most stark if we compare Vedic and Puranic traditions. The principal deities of the Vedic pantheon, Agni, Indra and Soma, become marginal figures, rarely visible in textual or visual representations. And while we can catch a glimpse of Vishnu, Shiva and the goddess in Vedic mantras, these have little in common with the elaborate Puranic mythologies. However, in spite of these obvious discrepancies, the Vedas continued to be revered as authoritative.

Not surprisingly, there were sometimes conflicts as well – those who valued the Vedic tradition often condemned practices that went beyond the closely regulated contact with the divine through the performance of sacrifices or precisely chanted mantras. On the other hand those engaged in Tantric practices

frequently ignored the authority of the Vedas. Also, devotees often tended to project their chosen deity, either Vishnu or Shiva, as supreme. Relations with other traditions, such as Buddhism or Jainism, were also often fraught with tension if not open conflict.

The traditions of devotion or bhakti need to be located within this context. Devotional worship had a long history of almost a thousand years before the period we are considering. During this time, expressions of devotion ranged from the routine worship of deities within temples to ecstatic adoration where devotees attained a trance-like state. The singing and chanting of devotional compositions was often a part of such modes of worship. This was particularly true of the Vaishnava and Shaiva sects.

## 2. POEMS OF PRAYER

### EARLY TRADITIONS OF BHAKTI

In the course of the evolution of these forms of worship, in many instances, poet-saints emerged as leaders around whom there developed a community of devotees. Further, while Brahmanas remained important intermediaries between gods and devotees in several forms of bhakti, these traditions also accommodated and acknowledged women and the “lower castes”, categories considered ineligible for liberation within the orthodox Brahmanical framework. What also characterised traditions of bhakti was a remarkable diversity.

At a different level, historians of religion often classify bhakti traditions into two broad categories: *saguna* (with attributes) and *nirguna* (without attributes). The former included traditions that focused on the worship of specific deities such as Shiva, Vishnu and his avatars (incarnations) and forms of the goddess or Devi, all often conceptualised in anthropomorphic forms. *Nirguna* bhakti on the other hand was worship of an abstract form of god.

#### 2.1 The Alvars and Nayanars of Tamil Nadu

Some of the earliest bhakti movements (c. sixth century) were led by the Alvars (literally, those who are “immersed” in devotion to Vishnu) and Nayanars (literally, leaders who were devotees of Shiva). They travelled from place to place singing hymns in Tamil in praise of their gods.

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#### ➔ Discuss...

Find out about gods and goddesses worshipped in your town or village, noting their names and the ways in which they are depicted. Describe the rituals that are performed.

## Source 1

### The *chaturvedin* (Brahmana versed in the four Vedas) and the “outcaste”

This is an excerpt from a composition of an Alvar named Tondaradippodi, who was a Brahmana:

You (Vishnu) manifestly like those “servants” who express their love for your feet, though they may be born outcastes, more than the *Chaturvedins* who are strangers and without allegiance to your service.

➡ Do you think Tondaradippodi was opposed to the caste system?

## Source 2

### Shastras or devotion?

This is a verse composed by Appar, a Nayanar saint:

O rogues who quote the law books,  
Of what use are your *gotra* and *kula*?

Just bow to Marperu’s lord (Shiva who resides in Marperu, in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu) as your sole refuge.

➡ Are there any similarities or differences in the attitudes of Tondaradippodi and Appar towards Brahmanas?

During their travels the Alvars and Nayanars identified certain shrines as abodes of their chosen deities. Very often large temples were later built at these sacred places. These developed as centres of pilgrimage. Singing compositions of these poet-saints became part of temple rituals in these shrines, as did worship of the saints’ images.

### 2.2 Attitudes towards caste

Some historians suggest that the Alvars and Nayanars initiated a movement of protest against the caste system and the dominance of Brahmanas or at least attempted to reform the system. To some extent this is corroborated by the fact that bhaktas hailed from diverse social backgrounds ranging from Brahmanas to artisans and cultivators and even from castes considered “untouchable”.

The importance of the traditions of the Alvars and Nayanars was sometimes indicated by the claim that their compositions were as important as the Vedas. For instance, one of the major anthologies of compositions by the Alvars, the *Nalayira Divyaprabandham*, was frequently described as the Tamil Veda, thus claiming that the text was as significant as the four Vedas in Sanskrit that were cherished by the Brahmanas.

### 2.3 Women devotees

Perhaps one of the most striking features of these traditions was the presence of women. For instance, the compositions of Andal, a woman Alvar, were widely sung (and continue to be sung to date). Andal saw herself as the beloved of Vishnu; her verses express her love for the deity. Another woman, Karaikkal Ammaiyar, a devotee of Shiva, adopted the path of extreme asceticism in order to attain

### Compilations of devotional literature

By the tenth century the compositions of the 12 Alvars were compiled in an anthology known as the *Nalayira Divyaprabandham* (“Four Thousand Sacred Compositions”).

The poems of Appar, Sambandar and Sundarar form the *Tevaram*, a collection that was compiled and classified in the tenth century on the basis of the music of the songs.



her goal. Her compositions were preserved within the Nayanar tradition. These women renounced their social obligations, but did not join an alternative order or become nuns. Their very existence and their compositions posed a challenge to patriarchal norms.

Source 3

### A demon?

This is an excerpt from a poem by Karaikkal Ammaiyar in which she describes herself:

The female *Pey* (demoness)  
with . . . bulging veins,  
protruding eyes, white teeth and shrunken stomach,  
red haired and jutting teeth  
lengthy shins extending till the ankles,  
shouts and wails  
while wandering in the forest.  
This is the forest of Alankatu,  
which is the home of our father (Shiva)  
who dances ... with his matted hair  
thrown in all eight directions, and with cool limbs.

➔ List the ways in which Karaikkal Ammaiyar depicts herself as presenting a contrast to traditional notions of feminine beauty.

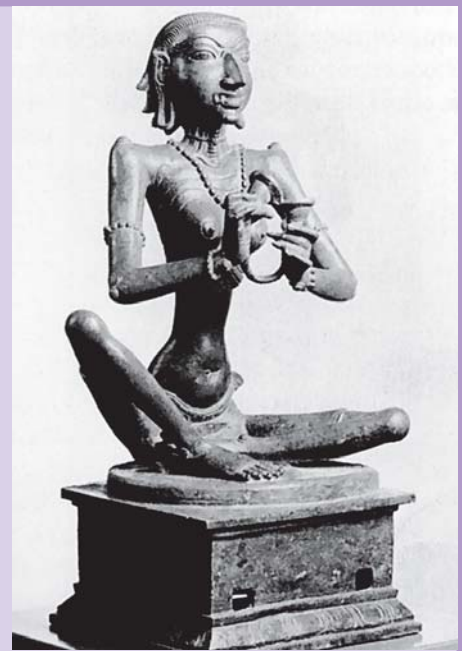


Fig. 6.4  
A twelfth-century bronze image  
of Karaikkal Ammaiyar

## 2.4 Relations with the state

We saw in Chapter 2 that there were several important chiefdoms in the Tamil region in the early first millennium CE. From the second half of the first millennium there is evidence for states, including those of the Pallavas and Pandyas (c. sixth to ninth centuries CE). While Buddhism and Jainism had been prevalent in this region for several centuries, drawing support from merchant and artisan communities, these religious traditions received occasional royal patronage.

Interestingly, one of the major themes in Tamil bhakti hymns is the poets' opposition to Buddhism and Jainism. This is particularly marked in the

compositions of the Nayanars. Historians have attempted to explain this hostility by suggesting that it was due to competition between members of other religious traditions for royal patronage. What is evident is that the powerful Chola rulers (ninth to thirteenth centuries) supported Brahmanical and bhakti traditions, making land grants and constructing temples for Vishnu and Shiva.

In fact, some of the most magnificent Shiva temples, including those at Chidambaram, Thanjavur and Gangaikondacholapuram, were constructed under the patronage of Chola rulers. This was also the period when some of the most spectacular representations of Shiva in bronze sculpture were produced. Clearly, the visions of the Nayanars inspired artists.

Both Nayanars and Alvars were revered by the Vellala peasants. Not surprisingly, rulers tried to win their support as well. The Chola kings, for instance, often attempted to claim divine support and proclaim their own power and status by building

splendid temples that were adorned with stone and metal sculpture to recreate the visions of these popular saints who sang in the language of the people.

These kings also introduced the singing of Tamil Shaiva hymns in the temples under royal patronage, taking the initiative to collect and organise them into a text (*Tevaram*). Further, inscriptional evidence from around 945 suggests that the Chola ruler Parantaka I had consecrated metal images of Appar, Sambandar and Sundarar in a Shiva temple. These were carried in processions during the festivals of these saints.

Fig. 6.5  
An image of Shiva as Nataraja



### ➤ Discuss...

Why do you think kings were interested in proclaiming their connections with bhaktas?

### 3. THE VIRASHAIVA TRADITION IN KARNATAKA

The twelfth century witnessed the emergence of a new movement in Karnataka, led by a Brahmana named Basavanna (1106-68) who was initially a Jaina and a minister in the court of a Chalukya king. His followers were known as Virashaivas (heroes of Shiva) or Lingayats (wearers of the *linga*).

Lingayats continue to be an important community in the region to date. They worship Shiva in his manifestation as a *linga*, and men usually wear a small *linga* in a silver case on a loop strung over the left shoulder. Those who are revered include the *jangama* or wandering monks. Lingayats believe that on death the devotee will be united with Shiva and will not return to this world. Therefore they do not practise funerary rites such as cremation, prescribed in the Dharmashastras. Instead, they ceremonially bury their dead.

The Lingayats challenged the idea of caste and the “pollution” attributed to certain groups by Brahmanas. They also questioned the theory of rebirth. These won them followers amongst those who were marginalised within the Brahmanical social order. The Lingayats also encouraged certain practices disapproved in the Dharmashastras, such as post-puberty marriage and the remarriage of widows. Our understanding of the Virashaiva tradition is derived from *vachanas* (literally, sayings) composed in Kannada by women and men who joined the movement.

Source 4

#### Rituals and the real world

Here is a *vachana* composed by Basavanna:

When they see a serpent carved in stone they pour milk on it.

If a real serpent comes they say: “Kill. Kill.”

To the servant of the god who could eat if served they say: “Go away! Go away!”

But to the image of the god which cannot eat they offer dishes of food.

➔ Describe Basavanna’s attitude towards rituals. How does he attempt to convince the listener?

#### New religious developments

This period also witnessed two major developments. On the one hand, many ideas of the Tamil bhaktas (especially the Vaishnavas) were incorporated within the Sanskrit tradition, culminating in the composition of one of the best-known Puranas, the *Bhagavata Purana*. Second, we find the development of traditions of bhakti in Maharashtra in the thirteenth century.

## 4. RELIGIOUS FERMENT IN NORTH INDIA

During the same period, in north India deities such as Vishnu and Shiva were worshipped in temples, often built with the support of rulers. However, historians have not found evidence of anything resembling the compositions of the Alvars and Nayanars till the fourteenth century. How do we account for this difference?

Some historians point out that in north India this was the period when several Rajput states emerged. In most of these states Brahmanas occupied positions of importance, performing a range of secular and ritual functions. There seems to have been little or no attempt to challenge their position directly.



*Fig. 6.6*  
Fragment of a page from the *Qur'an*, belonging to a manuscript dating to the eighth or ninth century

At the same time other religious leaders, who did not function within the orthodox Brahmanical framework, were gaining ground. These included the Naths, Jogis and Siddhas. Many of them came from artisanal groups, including weavers, who were becoming increasingly important with the development of organised craft production. Demand for such production grew with the emergence of new urban centres, and long-distance trade with Central Asia and West Asia.

Many of these new religious leaders questioned the authority of the Vedas, and

expressed themselves in languages spoken by ordinary people, which developed over centuries into the ones used today. However, in spite of their popularity these religious leaders were not in a position to win the support of the ruling elites.

A new element in this situation was the coming of the Turks which culminated in the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate (thirteenth century). This undermined the power of many of the Rajput states and the Brahmanas who were associated with these kingdoms. This was accompanied by marked changes in the realm of culture and religion. The coming of the sufis (Section 6) was a significant part of these developments.

## 5. NEW STRANDS IN THE FABRIC ISLAMIC TRADITIONS

Just as the regions within the subcontinent were not isolated from one another, so too, contact with lands beyond the seas and mountains had existed for millennia. Arab merchants, for instance, frequented ports along the western coast in the first millennium CE, while Central Asian peoples settled in the north-western parts of the subcontinent during the same period. From the seventh century, with the advent of Islam, these regions became part of what is often termed the Islamic world.

### 5.1 Faiths of rulers and subjects

One axis of understanding the significance of these connections that is frequently adopted is to focus on the religions of ruling elites. In 711 an Arab general named Muhammad Qasim conquered Sind, which became part of the Caliph's domain. Later (c. thirteenth century) the Turks and Afghans established the Delhi Sultanate. This was followed by the formation of Sultanates in the Deccan and other parts of the subcontinent; Islam was an acknowledged religion of rulers in several areas. This continued with the establishment of the Mughal Empire in the sixteenth century as well as in many of the regional states that emerged in the eighteenth century.

Theoretically, Muslim rulers were to be guided by the *ulama*, who were expected to ensure that they ruled according to the *shari'a*. Clearly, the situation was complicated in the subcontinent, where there were populations that did not subscribe to Islam.

It is in this context that the category of the *zimmi*, meaning protected (derived from the Arabic word *zimma*, protection) developed for peoples who followed revealed scriptures, such as the Jews and Christians, and lived under Muslim rulership. They paid a tax called *jizya* and gained the right to be protected by Muslims. In India this status was extended to Hindus as well. As you will see (Chapter 9), rulers such as the Mughals came to regard themselves as emperors of not just Muslims but of all peoples.

In effect, rulers often adopted a fairly flexible policy towards their subjects. For instance, several rulers gave land endowments and granted tax exemptions to Hindu, Jaina, Zoroastrian, Christian and Jewish religious institutions and also expressed respect and

*Ulama* (plural of *alim*, or one who knows) are scholars of Islamic studies. As preservers of this tradition they perform various religious, juridical and teaching functions.

### Shari'a

The *shari'a* is the law governing the Muslim community. It is based on the Qur'an and the *hadis*, traditions of the Prophet including a record of his remembered words and deeds.

With the expansion of Islamic rule outside Arabia, in areas where customs and traditions were different, *qiyas* (reasoning by analogy) and *ijma* (consensus of the community) were recognised as two other sources of legislation. Thus, the *shari'a* evolved from the Qur'an, *hadis*, *qiyas* and *ijma*.

devotion towards non-Muslim religious leaders. These grants were made by several Mughal rulers, including Akbar and Aurangzeb.

Source 5

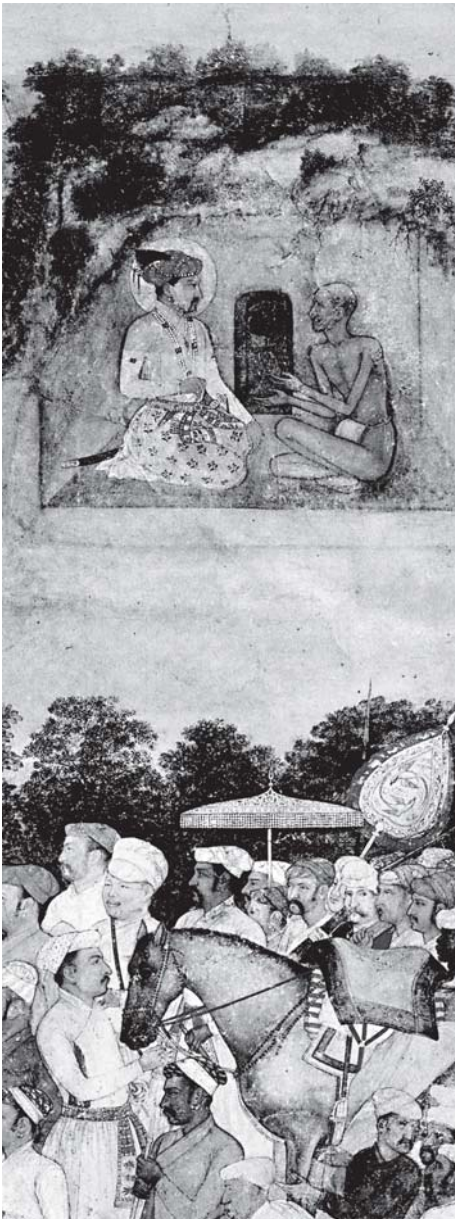
### A church in Khambat

This is an excerpt from a *farman* (imperial order) issued by Akbar in 1598:

Whereas it reached our eminent and holy notice that the *padris* (fathers) of the Holy Society of Jesus wish to build a house of prayer (church) in the city of Kambayat (Khambat, in Gujarat); therefore an exalted mandate ... is being issued, ... that the dignitaries of the city of Kambayat should in no case stand in their way but should allow them to build a church so that they may engage themselves in their own worship. It is necessary that the order of the Emperor should be obeyed in every way.

➤ Who were the people from whom Akbar anticipated opposition to his order?

Fig. 6.7  
A Mughal painting depicting  
Emperor Jahangir with a Jogi



Source 6

### Reverence for the Jogi

Here is an excerpt from a letter written by Aurangzeb to a Jogi in 1661-62:

The possessor of the sublime station, Shiv Murat, Guru Anand Nath Jio!

May your Reverence remain in peace and happiness ever under the protection of Sri Shiv Jio!

... A piece of cloth for the cloak and a sum of twenty five rupees which have been sent as an offering will reach (Your Reverence) ... Your Reverence may write to us whenever there is any service which can be rendered by us.

➤ Identify the deity worshipped by the Jogi. Describe the attitude of the emperor towards the Jogi.

### 5.2 The popular practice of Islam

The developments that followed the coming of Islam were not confined to ruling elites; in fact they permeated far and wide, through the subcontinent, amongst different social strata – peasants, artisans, warriors, merchants, to name a few. All those who adopted Islam accepted, in principle, the five “pillars” of the faith: that there is one God, Allah, and Prophet Muhammad is his messenger (*shahada*); offering prayers five times a day (*namaz/salat*); giving alms (*zakat*); fasting during the month of Ramzan (*sawm*); and performing the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*).

However, these universal features were often overlaid with diversities in practice derived from sectarian affiliations (Sunni, Shi’a), and the influence of local customary practices of converts from different social milieus. For example, the Khojahs, a branch of the Ismailis (a Shi’a sect), developed new modes of communication, disseminating ideas derived from the Qur’an through indigenous literary genres. These included the *ginan* (derived from the Sanskrit *jnana*, meaning “knowledge”), devotional poems in Punjabi, Multani, Sindhi, Kachchi, Hindi and Gujarati, sung in special *ragas* during daily prayer meetings.

Elsewhere, Arab Muslim traders who settled along the Malabar coast (Kerala) adopted the local language, Malayalam. They also adopted local customs such as matriliney (Chapter 3) and matrilocal residence.

The complex blend of a universal faith with local traditions is perhaps best exemplified in the architecture of mosques. Some architectural features

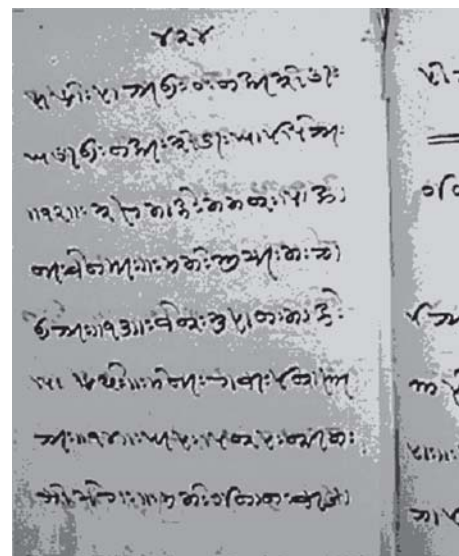


Fig. 6.8

A Khojaki manuscript

The *ginan* were transmitted orally before being recorded in the Khojaki script that was derived from the local *landa* (“clipped” mercantile script) used by the linguistically diverse community of Khojahs in the Punjab, Sind and Gujarat.

*Matrilocal* residence is a practice where women after marriage remain in their natal home with their children and the husbands may come to stay with them.



Fig. 6.9

A mosque in Kerala,  
c. thirteenth century

Note the *shikhara*-like roof.



Fig. 6.10  
Atiya mosque, Mymensingh district,  
Bangladesh, built with brick, 1609



Fig. 6.11  
The Shah Hamadan mosque in  
Srinagar, on the banks of the  
Jhelum, is often regarded as the  
“jewel in the crown” of all the  
existing mosques of Kashmir.  
Built in 1395, it is one of the best  
examples of Kashmiri wooden  
architecture. Notice the spire and  
the beautifully carved eaves. It is  
decorated with papier mache.

of mosques are universal – such as their orientation towards Mecca, evident in the placement of the *mihrab* (prayer niche) and the *minbar* (pulpit). However, there are several features that show variations – such as roofs and building materials (see Figs. 6.9, 6.10 and 6.11).

### 5.3 Names for communities

We often take the terms Hindu and Muslim for granted, as labels for religious communities. Yet, these terms did not gain currency for a very long time. Historians who have studied Sanskrit texts and inscriptions dating between the eighth and fourteenth centuries point out that the term *musalman* or Muslim was virtually never used. Instead, people were occasionally identified in terms of the region from which they came. So, the Turkish rulers were designated as Turushka, Tajika were people from Tajikistan and Parashika were people from Persia. Sometimes, terms used for other peoples were applied to the new migrants. For instance, the Turks and Afghans were referred to as Shakas (Chapters 2 and 3) and Yavanas (a term used for Greeks).

A more general term for these migrant communities was *mlechchha*, indicating that they did not observe the norms of caste society and spoke languages that were not derived from Sanskrit. Such terms sometimes had a derogatory connotation, but they rarely denoted a distinct religious community of Muslims in opposition to Hindus. And as we saw (Chapter 5), the term “Hindu” was used in a variety of ways, not necessarily restricted to a religious connotation.

### ➔ Discuss...

Find out more about the architecture of mosques in your village or town. What are the materials used to build mosques? Are these locally available? Are there any distinctive architectural features?



## 6. THE GROWTH OF SUFISM

In the early centuries of Islam a group of religious-minded people called sufis turned to asceticism and mysticism in protest against the growing materialism of the Caliphate as a religious and political institution. They were critical of the dogmatic definitions and scholastic methods of interpreting the Qur'an and *sunna* (traditions of the Prophet) adopted by theologians. Instead, they laid emphasis on seeking salvation through intense devotion and love for God by following His commands, and by following the example of the Prophet Muhammad whom they regarded as a perfect human being. The sufis thus sought an interpretation of the Qur'an on the basis of their personal experience.

### 6.1 Khanqahs and silsilas

By the eleventh century Sufism evolved into a well-developed movement with a body of literature on Quranic studies and sufi practices. Institutionally, the sufis began to organise communities around the hospice or *khanqah* (Persian) controlled by a teaching master known as *shaikh* (in Arabic), *pir* or *murshid* (in Persian). He enrolled disciples (*murids*) and appointed a successor (*khalifa*). He established rules for spiritual conduct and interaction between inmates as well as between laypersons and the master.

Sufi *silsilas* began to crystallise in different parts of the Islamic world around the twelfth century. The word *silsila* literally means a chain, signifying a continuous link between master and disciple, stretching as an unbroken spiritual genealogy to the Prophet Muhammad. It was through this channel that spiritual power and blessings were transmitted to devotees. Special rituals of initiation were developed in which initiates took an oath of allegiance, wore a patched garment, and shaved their hair.

When the *shaikh* died, his tomb-shrine (*dargah*, a Persian term meaning court) became the centre of devotion for his followers. This encouraged the practice of pilgrimage or *ziyarat* to his grave, particularly on his death anniversary or *urs* (or marriage, signifying the union of his soul with God). This was because people believed that in death saints were united with God, and were thus closer to Him than when living. People sought their blessings to attain material and spiritual benefits. Thus evolved the cult of the *shaikh* revered as *wali*.

### Sufism and *tasawwuf*

Sufism is an English word coined in the nineteenth century. The word used for Sufism in Islamic texts is *tasawwuf*. Historians have understood this term in several ways. According to some scholars, it is derived from *suf*, meaning wool, referring to the coarse woollen clothes worn by sufis. Others derive it from *safa*, meaning purity. It may also have been derived from *suffa*, the platform outside the Prophet's mosque, where a group of close followers assembled to learn about the faith.

### Names of silsilas

Most sufi lineages were named after a founding figure. For example, the Qadiri order was named after Shaikh Abd'ul Qadir Jilani. However, some like the Chishti order, were named after their place of origin, in this case the town of Chisht in central Afghanistan.

*Wali* (plural *auliya*) or friend of God was a sufi who claimed proximity to Allah, acquiring His Grace (*barakat*) to perform miracles (*karamat*).

### ➔ Discuss...

Are there any *khanqahs* or *dargahs* in your town or village? Find out when these were built, and what are the activities associated with them. Are there other places where religious men and women meet or live?

## 6.2 Outside the *khanqah*

Some mystics initiated movements based on a radical interpretation of sufi ideals. Many scorned the *khanqah* and took to mendicancy and observed celibacy. They ignored rituals and observed extreme forms of asceticism. They were known by different names – Qalandars, Madaris, Malangs, Haidaris, etc. Because of their deliberate defiance of the *shari'a* they were often referred to as *be-shari'a*, in contrast to the *ba-shari'a* sufis who complied with it.

## 7. THE CHISHTIS IN THE SUBCONTINENT

Of the groups of sufis who migrated to India in the late twelfth century, the Chishtis were the most influential. This was because they adapted successfully to the local environment and adopted several features of Indian devotional traditions.

### 7.1 Life in the Chishti *khanqah*

The *khanqah* was the centre of social life. We know about Shaikh Nizamuddin's hospice (c. fourteenth century) on the banks of the river Yamuna in Ghiyaspur, on the outskirts of what was then the city of Delhi. It comprised several small rooms and a big hall (*jama'at khana*) where the inmates and visitors lived and prayed. The inmates included family members of the Shaikh, his attendants and disciples. The Shaikh lived in a small room on the roof of the hall where he met visitors in the morning and evening. A veranda surrounded the courtyard, and a boundary wall ran around the complex. On one occasion, fearing a Mongol invasion, people from the neighbouring areas flocked into the *khanqah* to seek refuge.

#### MAJOR TEACHERS OF THE CHISHTI SILSILA

SUFI TEACHERS	YEAR OF DEATH	LOCATION OF DARGAH
Shaikh Muinuddin Sijzi	1235	Ajmer (Rajasthan)
Khwaja Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki	1235	Delhi
Shaikh Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar	1265	Ajodhan (Pakistan)
Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya	1325	Delhi
Shaikh Nasiruddin Chiragh-i Dehli	1356	Delhi

There was an open kitchen (*langar*), run on *futih* (unasked-for charity). From morning till late night people from all walks of life – soldiers, slaves, singers, merchants, poets, travellers, rich and poor, Hindu *jogis* (yogi) and *qalandars* – came seeking discipleship, amulets for healing, and the intercession of the Shaikh in various matters. Other visitors included poets such as Amir Hasan Sijzi and Amir Khusrau and the court historian Ziyauddin Barani, all of whom wrote about the Shaikh. Practices that were adopted, including bowing before the Shaikh, offering water to visitors, shaving the heads of initiates, and yogic exercises, represented attempts to assimilate local traditions.

Shaikh Nizamuddin appointed several spiritual successors and deputed them to set up hospices in various parts of the subcontinent. As a result the teachings, practices and organisation of the Chishtis as well as the fame of the Shaikh spread rapidly. This in turn drew pilgrims to his shrine, and also to the shrines of his spiritual ancestors.

### 7.2 Chishti devotionalism: *ziyarat* and *qawwali*

Pilgrimage, called *ziyarat*, to tombs of sufi saints is prevalent all over the Muslim world. This practice is an occasion for seeking the sufi's spiritual grace (*barakat*). For more than seven centuries people of various creeds, classes and social backgrounds have expressed their devotion at the *dargahs* of the five great Chishti saints (see chart on p.154). Amongst these, the most revered shrine is that of Khwaja Muinuddin, popularly known as "Gharib Nawaz" (comforter of the poor).

The earliest textual references to Khwaja Muinuddin's *dargah* date to the fourteenth century. It was evidently popular because of the austerity and piety of its Shaikh, the greatness of his spiritual successors, and the patronage of royal visitors. Muhammad bin Tughlaq (ruled, 1324-51) was the

Fig. 6.12  
A seventeenth-century painting of  
Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya and  
his disciple Amir Khusrau

➔ Describe how the artist differentiates between the Shaikh and his disciple.

### The story of Data Ganj Bakhsh

In 1039 Abu'l Hasan al Hujwiri, a native of Hujwir near Ghazni in Afghanistan, was forced to cross the Indus as a captive of the invading Turkish army. He settled in Lahore and wrote a book in Persian called the *Kashf-ul-Mahjub* (Unveiling of the Veiled) to explain the meaning of *tasawwuf*, and those who practised it, that is, the sufi.

Hujwiri died in 1073 and was buried in Lahore. The grandson of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni constructed a tomb over his grave, and this tomb-shrine became a site of pilgrimage for his devotees, especially on his death anniversary.

Even today Hujwiri is revered as Data Ganj Bakhsh or "Giver who bestows treasures" and his mausoleum is called Data Darbar or "Court of the Giver".



first Sultan to visit the shrine, but the earliest construction to house the tomb was funded in the late fifteenth century by Sultan Ghiyasuddin Khalji of Malwa. Since the shrine was located on the trade route linking Delhi and Gujarat, it attracted a lot of travellers.

By the sixteenth century the shrine had become very popular; in fact it was the spirited singing of pilgrims bound for Ajmer that inspired Akbar to visit the tomb. He went there fourteen times, sometimes two or three times a year, to seek blessings for new conquests, fulfilment of vows, and the birth of sons. He maintained this tradition until 1580. Each of these visits was celebrated by generous gifts, which were recorded in imperial documents. For example, in 1568 he offered a huge cauldron (*degh*) to facilitate cooking for pilgrims. He also had a mosque constructed within the compound of the *dargah*.

Fig. 6.13  
Shaikhs greeting the Mughal emperor Jahangir on his pilgrimage to Ajmer, painting by an artist named Manohar, c. 1615

➔ Find his signature on the painting.



Source 7

### The pilgrimage of the Mughal princess Jahanara, 1643

The following is an excerpt from Jahanara's biography of Shaikh Muinuddin Chishti, titled *Munis al Arwah* (The Confidant of Spirits):

After praising the one God ... this lowly *faqira* (humble soul) Jahanara ... went from the capital Agra in the company of my great father (Emperor Shah Jahan) towards the pure region of incomparable Ajmer ... I was committed to this idea, that every day in every station I would perform two cycles of optional prayer ...

For several days ... I did not sleep on a leopard skin at night, I did not extend my feet in the direction of the blessed sanctuary of the revered saving master, and I did not turn my back towards him. I passed the days beneath the trees.

On Thursday, the fourth of the blessed month of Ramzan, I attained the happiness of pilgrimage to the illuminated and the perfumed tomb ... With an hour of daylight remaining, I went to the holy sanctuary and rubbed my pale face with the dust of that threshold. From the doorway to the blessed tomb I went barefoot, kissing the ground. Having entered the dome, I went around the light-filled tomb of my master seven times ... Finally, with my own hand I put the finest quality of *itar* on the perfumed tomb of the revered one, and having taken off the rose scarf that I had on my head, I placed it on the top of the blessed tomb ...

➤ What are the gestures that Jahanara records to indicate her devotion to the Shaikh? How does she suggest that the *dargah* was a special place?

Also part of *ziyarat* is the use of music and dance including mystical chants performed by specially trained musicians or *qawwals* to evoke divine ecstasy. The sufis remember God either by reciting the *zikr* (the Divine Names) or evoking His Presence through *sama'* (literally, "audition") or performance of mystical music. *Sama'* was integral to the Chishtis, and exemplified interaction with indigenous devotional traditions.

### The lamp of the entire land

Each sufi shrine was associated with distinctive features. This is what an eighteenth-century visitor from the Deccan, Dargah Quli Khan, wrote about the shrine of Nasiruddin Chiragh-i Dehli in his *Muraqqa-i Dehli* (Album of Delhi):

The Shaikh (in the grave) is not the lamp of Delhi but of the entire country. People turn up there in crowds, particularly on Sunday. In the month of Diwali the entire population of Delhi visits it and stays in tents around the spring tank for days. They take baths to obtain cures from chronic diseases. Muslims and Hindus pay visits in the same spirit. From morning till evening people come and also make themselves busy in merrymaking in the shade of the trees.

### Amir Khusrau and the *qaul*

Amir Khusrau (1253-1325), the great poet, musician and disciple of Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya, gave a unique form to the Chishti *sama'* by introducing the *qaul* (Arabic word meaning "saying"), a hymn sung at the opening or closing of *qawwali*. This was followed by sufi poetry in Persian, Hindavi or Urdu, and sometimes using words from all of these languages. *Qawwals* (those who sing these songs) at the shrine of Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya always start their recital with the *qaul*. Today *qawwali* is performed in shrines all over the subcontinent.



Fig. 6.14  
Qawwali at the dargah of  
Nizamuddin Auliya

➔ In what ways are the ideas and modes of expression used in this song similar to or different from those used by Jahanara to describe her *ziyarat* (Source 7)?

### 7.3 Languages and communication

It was not just in *sama'* that the Chishtis adopted local languages. In Delhi, those associated with the Chishti *silsila* conversed in Hindavi, the language of the people. Other sufis such as Baba Farid composed verses in the local language, which were incorporated in the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Yet others composed long poems or *masnavis* to express ideas of divine love using human love as an allegory. For example, the *prem-akhyan* (love story) *Padmavat* composed by Malik Muhammad Jayasi revolved around the romance of Padmini and Ratansen, the king of Chittor. Their trials were symbolic of the soul's journey to the divine. Such poetic compositions were often recited in hospices, usually during *sama'*.

A different genre of sufi poetry was composed in and around the town of Bijapur, Karnataka. These were short poems in Dakhani (a variant of Urdu) attributed to Chishti sufis who lived in this region during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These poems were probably sung by women while performing household chores like grinding grain and spinning. Other compositions were in the form of *lurinama* or lullabies and *shadinama* or wedding songs. It is likely that the sufis of this region were inspired by the pre-existing bhakti tradition of the Kannada *vachanas* of the Lingayats and the Marathi *abhangs* of the *sants* of Pandharpur. It is through this medium that Islam gradually gained a place in the villages of the Deccan.

Source 8

#### Charkhanama

A song set to the rhythm of the spinning wheel:

As you take the cotton, you do *zikh-i jali*  
As you separate the cotton you should do *zikh-i qalbi*  
And as you spool the thread you should do *zikh-i aini*  
*Zikh* should be uttered from the stomach through the chest,  
And threaded through the throat.  
The threads of breath should be counted one by one,  
oh sister.  
Up to twenty four thousand.  
Do this day and night,  
And offer this to your *pir* as a gift.

#### 7.4 Sufis and the state

A major feature of the Chishti tradition was austerity, including maintaining a distance from worldly power. However, this was by no means a situation of absolute isolation from political power. The sufis accepted unsolicited grants and donations from the political elites. The Sultans in turn set up charitable trusts (*auqaf*) as endowments for hospices and granted tax-free land (*inam*).

The Chishtis accepted donations in cash and kind. Rather than accumulate donations, they preferred to use these fully on immediate requirements such as food, clothes, living quarters and ritual necessities (such as *sama*). All this enhanced the moral authority of the *shaikhs*, which in turn attracted people from all walks of life. Further, their piety and scholarship, and people's belief in their miraculous powers made sufis popular among the masses, whose support kings wished to secure.

Kings did not simply need to demonstrate their association with sufis; they also required legitimation from them. When the Turks set up the Delhi Sultanate, they resisted the insistence of the *ulama* on imposing *shari'a* as state law because they anticipated opposition from their subjects, the majority of whom were non-Muslims. The Sultans then sought out the sufis – who derived their authority directly from God – and did not depend on jurists to interpret the *shari'a*.

Besides, it was believed that the *auliya* could intercede with God in order to improve the material and spiritual conditions of ordinary human beings. This explains why kings often wanted their tombs to be in the vicinity of sufi shrines and hospices.

However, there were instances of conflict between the Sultans and the sufis. To assert their authority, both expected that certain rituals be performed such as prostration and kissing of the feet. Occasionally the sufi *shaikh* was addressed with high-sounding titles. For example, the disciples of Nizamuddin Auliya addressed him as *sultan-ul-mashaikh* (literally, Sultan amongst *shaikhs*).

#### Sufis and the state

Other sufis such as the Suhrawardi under the Delhi Sultans and the Naqshbandi under the Mughals were also associated with the state. However, the modes of their association were not the same as those of the Chishtis. In some cases, sufis accepted courtly offices.

## Source 9

### ➔ Discuss...

What are the potential sources of conflict in the relationship between religious and political leaders?

➔ What aspects of the relationship between the sufis and the state do you think are best illustrated in this account? What does the account tell us about the modes of communication between the Shaikh and his disciples?

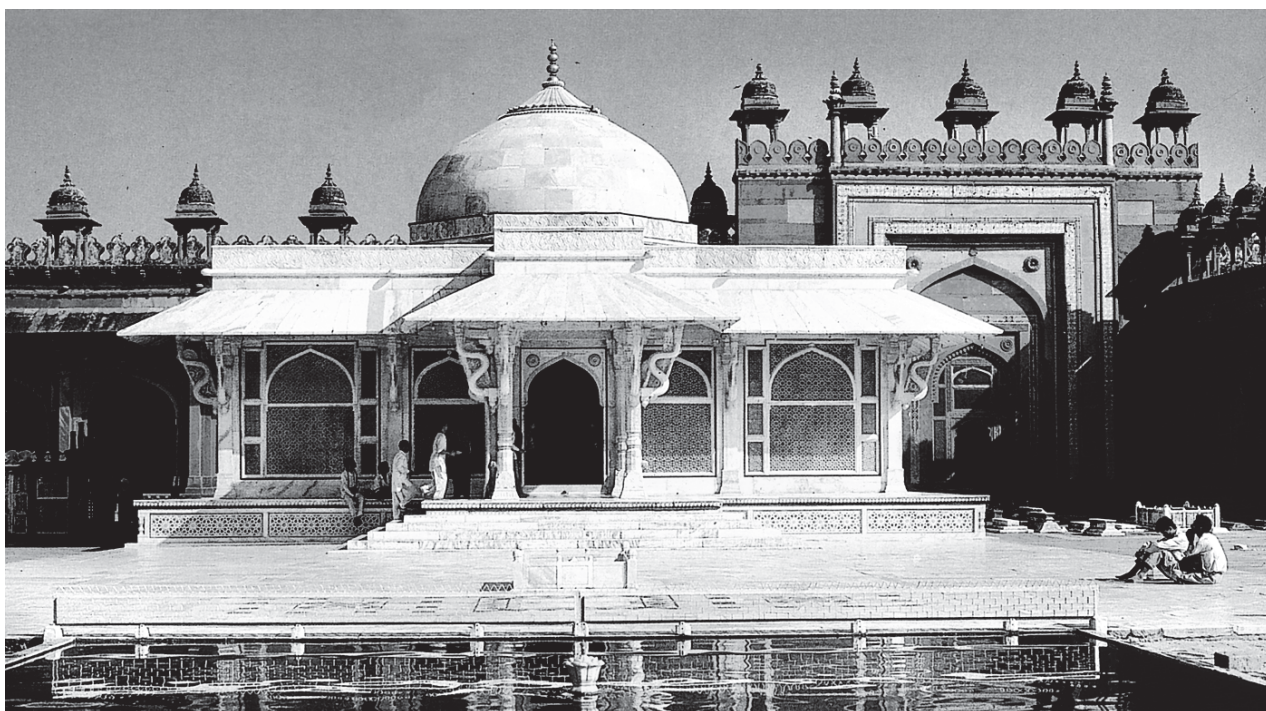
*Fig. 6.15*  
The dargah of Shaikh Salim Chishti (a direct descendant of Baba Farid) constructed in Fatehpur Sikri, Akbar's capital, symbolised the bond between the Chishtis and the Mughal state.

### Declining a royal gift

This excerpt from a sufi text describes the proceedings at Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya's hospice in 1313:

I (the author, Amir Hasan Sijzi) had the good fortune of kissing his (Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya's) feet ... At this time a local ruler had sent him the deed of ownership to two gardens and much land, along with the provisions and tools for their maintenance. The ruler had also made it clear that he was relinquishing all his rights to both the gardens and land. The master ... had not accepted that gift. Instead, he had lamented: "What have I to do with gardens and fields and lands? ... None of ... our spiritual masters had engaged in such activity."

Then he told an appropriate story: "... Sultan Ghiyasuddin, who at that time was still known as Ulugh Khan, came to visit Shaikh Fariduddin (and) offered some money and ownership deeds for four villages to the Shaikh, the money being for the benefit of the dervishes (sufis), and the land for his use. Smiling, Shaikh al Islam (Fariduddin) said: 'Give me the money. I will dispense it to the dervishes. But as for those land deeds, keep them. There are many who long for them. Give them away to such persons.'





## 8. NEW DEVOTIONAL PATHS DIALOGUE AND DISSENT IN NORTHERN INDIA

Many poet-saints engaged in explicit and implicit dialogue with these new social situations, ideas and institutions. Let us now see how this dialogue found expression. We focus here on three of the most influential figures of the time.

### 8.1 Weaving a divine fabric: Kabir

Kabir (c. fourteenth-fifteenth centuries) is perhaps one of the most outstanding examples of a poet-saint who emerged within this context. Historians have painstakingly tried to reconstruct his life and times through a study of compositions attributed to him as well as later hagiographies. Such exercises have proved to be challenging on a number of counts.

Verses ascribed to Kabir have been compiled in three distinct but overlapping traditions. The *Kabir Bijak* is preserved by the Kabirpanth (the path or sect of Kabir) in Varanasi and elsewhere in Uttar Pradesh; the *Kabir Granthavali* is associated with the Dadupanth in Rajasthan, and many of his compositions are found in the *Adi Granth Sahib* (see Section 8.2). All these manuscript compilations were made long after the death of Kabir. By the nineteenth century, anthologies of verses attributed to him circulated in print in regions as far apart as Bengal, Gujarat and Maharashtra.

Kabir's poems have survived in several languages and dialects; and some are composed in the special language of *nirguna* poets, the *sant bhasha*. Others, known as *ulatbansi* (upside-down sayings), are written in a form in which everyday meanings are inverted. These hint at the difficulties of capturing the nature of the Ultimate Reality in words: expressions such as "the lotus which blooms without flower" or the "fire raging in the ocean" convey a sense of Kabir's mystical experiences.

Also striking is the range of traditions Kabir drew on to describe the Ultimate Reality. These include Islam: he described the Ultimate Reality as Allah, Khuda, Hazrat and Pir. He also used terms drawn from Vedantic traditions, *alakh* (the unseen), *nirakar* (formless), Brahman, Atman, etc. Other terms with mystical connotations such as *shabda* (sound) or *shunya* (emptiness) were drawn from yogic traditions.

Source 10

### The One Lord

Here is a composition attributed to Kabir:

Tell me, brother, how can there be

No one lord of the world but two?

Who led you so astray?

God is called by many names:

Names like Allah, Ram, Karim, Keshav, Hari, and Hazrat.

Gold may be shaped into rings and bangles.

Isn't it gold all the same?

Distinctions are only words we invent ...

Kabir says they are both mistaken.

Neither can find the only Ram. One kills the goat, the other cows.

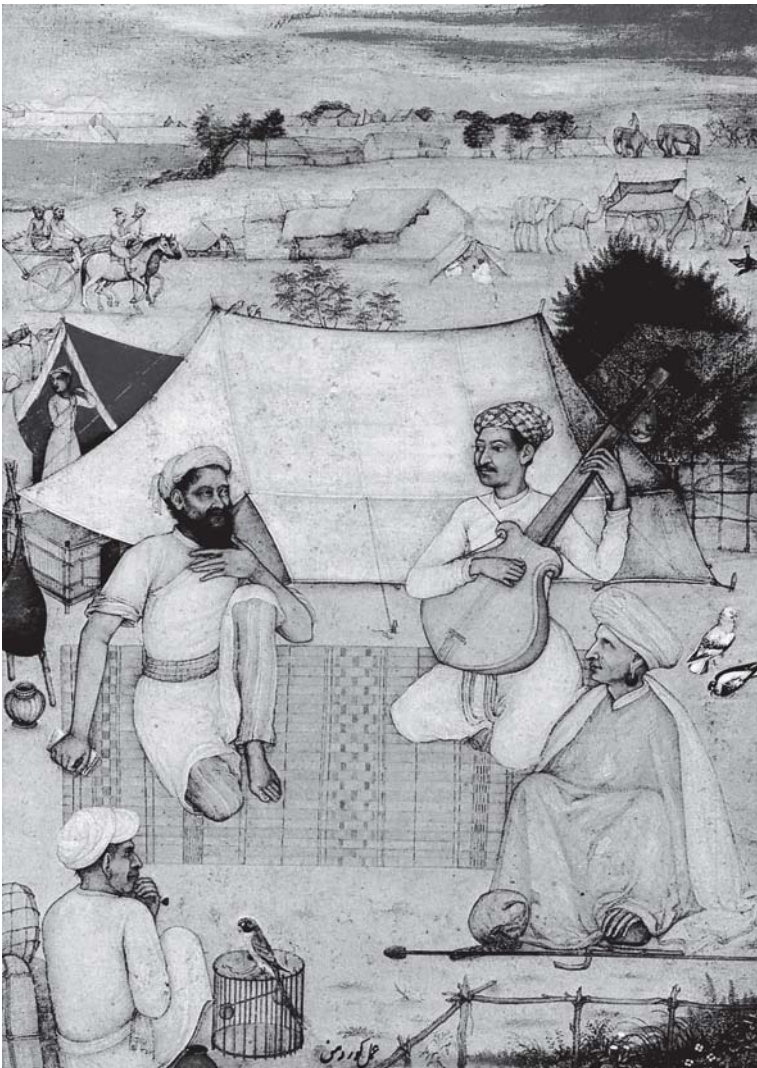
They waste their lives in disputation.

➤ What is Kabir's argument against the distinction made between gods of different communities?

Diverse and sometimes conflicting ideas are expressed in these poems. Some poems draw on Islamic ideas and use monotheism and iconoclasm to attack Hindu polytheism and idol worship; others use the sufi concept of *zikr* and *ishq* (love) to express the Hindu practice of *nam-simaran* (remembrance of God's name).

Were all these composed by Kabir? We may never be able to tell with certainty, although scholars have tried to analyse the language, style and content to establish which verses could be Kabir's. What this rich corpus of verses also signifies is that Kabir was and is to the present a source of inspiration for those who questioned entrenched religious and social institutions, ideas and practices in their search for the Divine.

Fig. 6.16  
Roadside musicians, a seventeenth-century Mughal painting  
It is likely that the compositions of the *sants* were sung by such musicians.



Just as Kabir's ideas probably crystallised through dialogue and debate (explicit or implicit) with the traditions of sufis and yogis in the region of Awadh (part of present-day Uttar Pradesh), his legacy was claimed by several groups, who remembered him and continue to do so.

This is most evident in later debates about whether he was a Hindu or a Muslim by birth, debates that are reflected in hagiographies. Many of these were composed from the seventeenth century onwards, about 200 years after Kabir's lifetime.

Hagiographies within the Vaishnava tradition attempted to suggest that he was born a Hindu, Kabirdas (Kabir itself is an Arabic word meaning "great"), but was raised by a poor Muslim family belonging to the community of weavers or *julahas*, who were relatively recent converts to Islam. They also suggested that he was initiated into bhakti by a guru, perhaps Ramananda.

However, the verses attributed to Kabir use the words *guru* and *satguru*, but do not mention the name of any specific preceptor. Historians have pointed out that it is very difficult to establish that Ramananda and Kabir were contemporaries, without assigning improbably long lives to either or both. So, while traditions linking the two cannot be accepted at face value, they show how important the legacy of Kabir was for later generations.

### **8.2 Baba Guru Nanak and the Sacred Word**

Baba Guru Nanak (1469-1539) was born in a Hindu merchant family in a village called Nankana Sahib near the river Ravi in the predominantly Muslim Punjab. He trained to be an accountant and studied Persian. He was married at a young age but he spent most of his time among sufis and bhaktas. He also travelled widely.

The message of Baba Guru Nanak is spelt out in his hymns and teachings. These suggest that he advocated a form of *nirguna* bhakti. He firmly repudiated the external practices of the religions he saw around him. He rejected sacrifices, ritual baths, image worship, austerities and the scriptures of both Hindus and Muslims. For Baba Guru Nanak, the Absolute or “*rab*” had no gender or form. He proposed a simple way to connect to the Divine by remembering and repeating the Divine Name, expressing his ideas through hymns called “*shabad*” in Punjabi, the language of the region. Baba Guru Nanak would sing these compositions in various *ragas* while his attendant Mardana played the *rabab*.

Baba Guru Nanak organised his followers into a community. He set up rules for congregational worship (*sangat*) involving collective recitation. He appointed one of his disciples, Angad, to succeed him as the preceptor (*guru*), and this practice was followed for nearly 200 years.

It appears that Baba Guru Nanak did not wish to establish a new religion, but after his death his followers consolidated their own practices and distinguished themselves from both Hindus and Muslims. The fifth preceptor, Guru Arjan, compiled Baba Guru Nanak’s hymns along with those of his four successors and other religious poets like Baba Farid, Ravidas (also known as Raidas) and Kabir in the *Adi Granth Sahib*. These hymns, called “*gurbani*”, are composed in various

languages. In the late seventeenth century the tenth preceptor, Guru Gobind Singh, included the compositions of the ninth guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur, and this scripture was called the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Guru Gobind Singh also laid the foundation of the Khalsa Panth (army of the pure) and defined its five symbols: uncut hair, a dagger, a pair of shorts, a comb and a steel bangle. Under him the community got consolidated as a socio-religious and military force.

### 8.3 Mirabai, the devotee princess

Mirabai (c. fifteenth-sixteenth centuries) is perhaps the best-known woman poet within the bhakti tradition. Biographies have been reconstructed primarily from the *bhajans* attributed to her, which were transmitted orally for centuries. According to these, she was a Rajput princess from Merta in Marwar who was married against her wishes to a prince of the Sisodia clan of Mewar, Rajasthan. She defied her husband and did not submit to the traditional role of wife and mother, instead recognising Krishna, the *avatar* of Vishnu, as her lover. Her in-laws tried to poison her, but she escaped from the palace to live as a wandering singer composing songs that are characterised by intense expressions of emotion.

Fig. 6.17  
A fifteenth-century stone sculpture (Tamil Nadu) depicting Krishna playing the flute, a form of the deity worshipped by Mirabai



Source 11

#### Love for the Lord

This is part of a song attributed to Mirabai:

I will build a funeral pyre of sandalwood and aloe;  
Light it by your own hand  
When I am burned away to cinders;  
Smear this ash upon your limbs.  
... let flame be lost in flame.

In another verse, she sings:

What can Mewar's ruler do to me?  
If God is angry, all is lost,  
But what can the Rana do?

➔ What does this indicate about Mirabai's attitude towards the king?

According to some traditions, her preceptor was Raidas, a leather worker. This would indicate her defiance of the norms of caste society. After rejecting the comforts of her husband's palace, she is supposed to have donned the white robes of a widow or the saffron robe of the renouncer.

Although Mirabai did not attract a sect or group of followers, she has been recognised as a source of inspiration for centuries. Her songs continue to be sung by women and men, especially those who are poor and considered "low caste" in Gujarat and Rajasthan.

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### ➔ Discuss...

Why do you think the traditions of Kabir, Baba Guru Nanak and Mirabai remain significant in the twenty-first century?

## 9. RECONSTRUCTING HISTORIES OF RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

We have seen that historians draw on a variety of sources to reconstruct histories of religious traditions – these include sculpture, architecture, stories about religious preceptors, compositions attributed to women and men engaged in the quest of understanding the nature of the Divine.

As we have seen in Chapters 1 and 4, sculpture and architecture can only be understood if we have a grasp of the context – the ideas, beliefs and practices of those who produced and used these images and buildings. What about textual traditions regarding religious beliefs? If you return to the sources in this chapter, you will notice that they include a wide variety, written in several different languages and styles. They range from the apparently simple, direct language of the *vachanas* of Basavanna to the ornate Persian of the *farman* of the Mughal emperors. Understanding each type of text requires different skills: apart from a familiarity with several languages, the historian has to be aware of the subtle variations in style that characterise each genre.

### Shankaradeva

In the late fifteenth century, Shankaradeva emerged as one of the leading proponents of Vaishnavism in Assam. His teachings, often known as the Bhagavati dharma because they were based on the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Bhagavata Purana*, focused on absolute surrender to the supreme deity, in this case Vishnu. He emphasised the need for *naam kirtan*, recitation of the names of the lord in *sat sanga* or congregations of pious devotees. He also encouraged the establishment of *satra* or monasteries for the transmission of spiritual knowledge, and *naam ghar* or prayer halls. Many of these institutions and practices continue to flourish in the region. His major compositions include the *Kirtana-ghosha*.

### Varieties of sources used to reconstruct the history of sufi traditions

A wide range of texts were produced in and around sufi *khanqahs*. These included:

1. Treatises or manuals dealing with sufi thought and practices – The *Kashf-ul-Mahjub* of Ali bin Usman Hujwiri (died c. 1071) is an example of this genre. It enables historians to see how traditions outside the subcontinent influenced sufi thought in India.

2. *Malfuzat* (literally, “uttered”; conversations of sufi saints) – An early text on *malfuzat* is the *Fawa'id-al-Fu'ad*, a collection of conversations of Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya, compiled by Amir Hasan Sijzi Dehlavi, a noted Persian poet. Source 9 contains an excerpt from this text. *Malfuzats* were compiled by different sufi *silsilas* with the permission of the *shaikhs*; these had obvious didactic purposes. Several examples have been found from different parts of the subcontinent, including the Deccan. They were compiled over several centuries.

3. *Maktubat* (literally, “written” collections of letters); letters written by sufi masters, addressed to their disciples and associates – While these tell us about the *shaikh's* experience of religious truth that he wanted to share with others, they also reflect the life conditions of the recipients and are responses to their aspirations and difficulties, both spiritual and mundane. The letters, known as *Maktubat-i Imam Rabbani*, of the noted seventeenth-century Naqshbandi Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi (d.1624), whose ideology is often contrasted with the liberal and non-sectarian views of Akbar, are amongst those most frequently discussed by scholars.

4. *Tazkiras* (literally, “to mention and memorialise”; biographical accounts of saints) – The fourteenth-century *Siyar-ul-Auliya* of Mir Khwurd Kirmani was the first sufi *tazkira* written in India. It dealt principally with the Chishti saints. The most famous *tazkira* is the *Akhbar-ul-Akhyar* of Abdul Haqq Muhaddis Dehlavi (d. 1642). The authors of the *tazkiras* often sought to establish the precedence of their own orders and glorify their spiritual genealogies. Many details are often implausible, full of elements of the fantastic. Still they are of great value for historians and help them to understand more fully the nature of the tradition.

Remember that each of the traditions we have been considering in this chapter generated a wide range of textual and oral modes of communication, some of which have been preserved, many of which have been modified in the process of transmission, and others are probably lost forever.

Virtually all these religious traditions continue to flourish to date. This continuity has certain advantages for historians as it allows them to compare contemporary practices with those described in textual traditions or shown in old paintings and to trace changes. At the same time, because these traditions are part of peoples' lived beliefs and practices, there is often a lack of acceptance of the possibility that these may have changed over time. The challenge for historians is to undertake such investigations with sensitivity, while at the same time recognising that religious traditions, like other traditions, are dynamic and change over time.

### TIMELINE

#### SOME MAJOR RELIGIOUS TEACHERS IN THE SUBCONTINENT

c. 500-800 CE	Appar, Sambandar, Sundaramurti in Tamil Nadu
c. 800-900	Nammalvar, Manikkavachakar, Andal, Tondaradippodi in Tamil Nadu
c.1000-1100	Al Hujwiri, Data Ganj Bakhsh in the Punjab; Ramanujacharya in Tamil Nadu
c.1100-1200	Basavanna in Karnataka
c.1200-1300	Jnanadeva, Muktabai in Maharashtra; Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti in Rajasthan; Bahauddin Zakariyya and Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar in the Punjab; Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki in Delhi
c.1300-1400	Lal Ded in Kashmir; Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sind; Nizamuddin Auliya in Delhi; Ramananda in Uttar Pradesh; Chokhamela in Maharashtra; Sharafuddin Yahya Maneri in Bihar
c.1400-1500	Kabir, Raidas, Surdas in Uttar Pradesh; Baba Guru Nanak in the Punjab; Vallabhacharya in Gujarat; Abdullah Shattari in Gwalior; Muhammad Shah Alam in Gujarat; Mir Sayyid Muhammad Gesu Daraz in Gulbarga, Shankaradeva in Assam; Tukaram in Maharashtra
c.1500-1600	Sri Chaitanya in Bengal; Mirabai in Rajasthan; Shaikh Abdul Quddus Gangohi, Malik Muhammad Jaisi, Tulsidas in Uttar Pradesh
c.1600-1700	Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi in Haryana; Miyan Mir in the Punjab

*Note: These time frames indicate the approximate period during which these teachers lived.*



### ANSWER IN 100-150 WORDS

1. Explain with examples what historians mean by the integration of cults.
2. To what extent do you think the architecture of mosques in the subcontinent reflects a combination of universal ideals and local traditions?
3. What were the similarities and differences between the *be-shari'a* and *ba-shari'a* sufi traditions?
4. Discuss the ways in which the Alvars, Nayanars and Virashaivas expressed critiques of the caste system.
5. Describe the major teachings of either Kabir or Baba Guru Nanak, and the ways in which these have been transmitted.



### WRITE A SHORT ESSAY (ABOUT 250-300 WORDS) ON THE FOLLOWING:

6. Discuss the major beliefs and practices that characterised Sufism.
7. Examine how and why rulers tried to establish connections with the traditions of the Nayanars and the sufis.
8. Analyse, with illustrations, why bhakti and sufi thinkers adopted a variety of languages in which to express their opinions.
9. Read any five of the sources included in this chapter and discuss the social and religious ideas that are expressed in them.



### MAP WORK

10. On an outline map of India, plot three major sufi shrines, and three places associated with temples (one each of a form of Vishnu, Shiva and the goddess).





### PROJECTS (CHOOSE ONE)

11. Choose any two of the religious teachers/thinkers/saints mentioned in this chapter, and find out more about their lives and teachings. Prepare a report about the area and the times in which they lived, their major ideas, how we know about them, and why you think they are important.
12. Find out more about practices of pilgrimage associated with the shrines mentioned in this chapter. Are these pilgrimages still undertaken? When are these shrines visited? Who visits these shrines? Why do they do so? What are the activities associated with these pilgrimages?

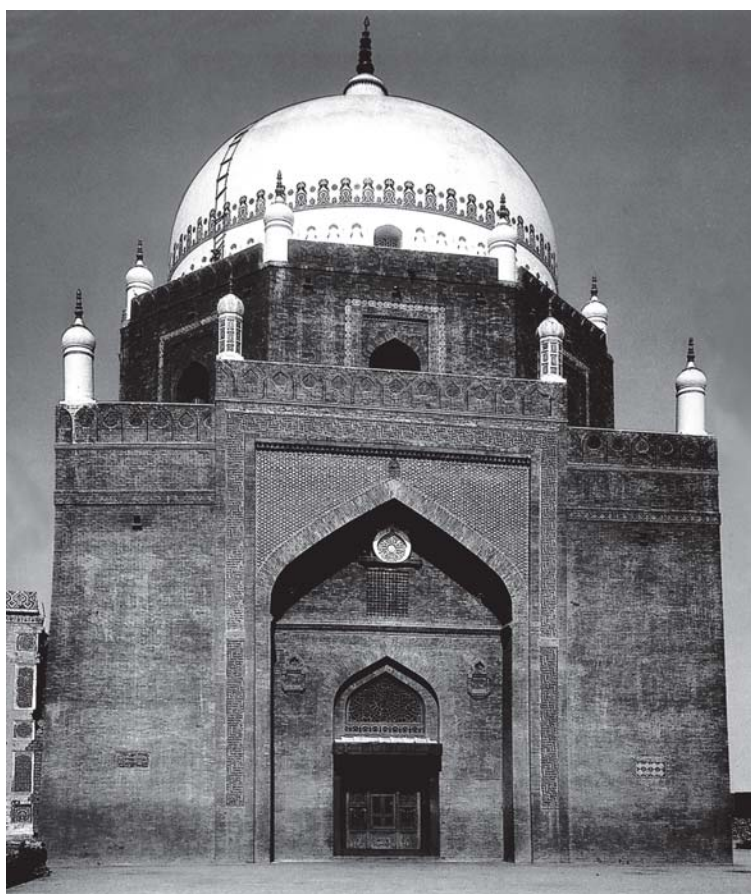


Fig. 6.18  
The dargah of Shaikh Bahauddin Zakariya,  
Multan (Pakistan)



#### If you would like to know more, read:

Richard M. Eaton (ed). 2003.  
*India's Islamic Traditions*.  
Oxford University Press,  
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John Stratton Hawley. 2005.  
*Three Bhakti Voices  
Mirabai, Surdas and Kabir  
in their times and ours*.  
Oxford University Press,  
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Oxford University Press,  
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Penguin, New Delhi.

Annemarie Schimmel. 1975.  
*Mystical Dimensions of Islam*.  
University of North Carolina  
Press, Chapel Hill.

David Smith. 1998.  
*The Dance of Siva: Religion  
Art and Poetry in South India*.  
Cambridge University Press,  
New Delhi.

Charlotte Vaudeville. 1997.  
*A Weaver Named Kabir*.  
Oxford University Press,  
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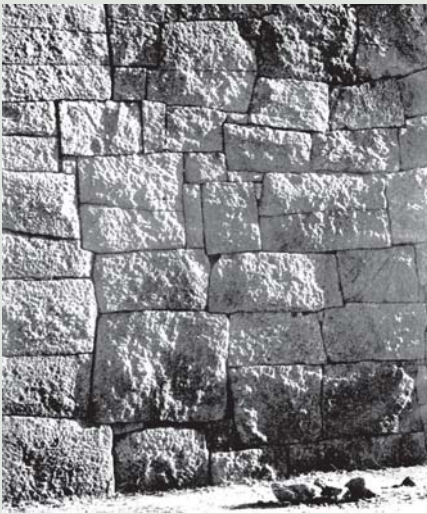
#### For more information, you could visit:

<http://www.alif-india.com>



## THEME SEVEN

# AN IMPERIAL CAPITAL VIJAYANAGARA (C. FOURTEENTH TO SIXTEENTH CENTURY)



*Fig. 7.1*  
*A part of the stone wall that was  
built around the city of Vijayanagara*

Vijayanagara or “city of victory” was the name of both a city and an empire. The empire was founded in the fourteenth century. In its heyday it stretched from the river Krishna in the north to the extreme south of the peninsula. In 1565 the city was sacked and subsequently deserted. Although it fell into ruin in the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries, it lived on in the memories of people living in the Krishna-Tungabhadra doab. They remembered it as Hampi, a name derived from that of the local mother goddess, Pampadevi. These oral traditions combined with archaeological finds, monuments and inscriptions and other records helped scholars to rediscover the Vijayanagara Empire.

### 1. THE DISCOVERY OF HAMPI

The ruins at Hampi were brought to light in 1800 by an engineer and antiquarian named Colonel Colin Mackenzie. An employee of the English East India Company, he prepared the first survey map of the site. Much of the initial information he received was based on the memories of priests of the Virupaksha temple and the shrine of Pampadevi. Subsequently, from 1856, photographers began to record the monuments which enabled scholars to study them. As early as 1836 epigraphists began collecting several dozen inscriptions found at this and other temples at Hampi. In an effort to reconstruct the history of the city and the empire, historians collated information from these sources with accounts of foreign travellers and other literature written in Telugu, Kannada, Tamil and Sanskrit.

Source 1

### Colin Mackenzie

Born in 1754, Colin Mackenzie became famous as an engineer, surveyor and cartographer. In 1815 he was appointed the first Surveyor General of India, a post he held till his death in 1821. He embarked on collecting local histories and surveying historic sites in order to better understand India's past and make governance of the colony easier. He says that "it struggled long under the miseries of bad management ... before the South came under the benign influence of the British government". By studying Vijayanagara, Mackenzie believed that the East India Company could gain "much useful information on many of these institutions, laws and customs whose influence still prevails among the various Tribes of Natives forming the general mass of the population to this day".

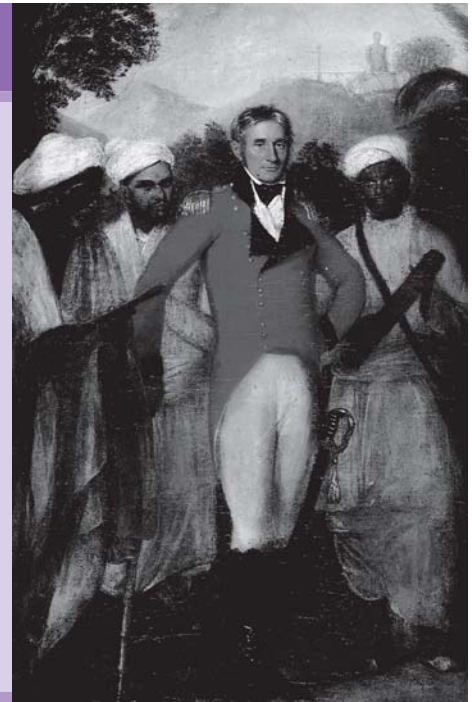


Fig. 7.2

#### Mackenzie and his assistants

This is a copy by an unknown artist of an oil painting by the portrait painter Thomas Hickey. It dates to c.1825 and belongs to the collection of the Royal Asiatic Society of Britain and Ireland. On Mackenzie's left is his peon Kistnaji holding a telescope, on his right are Brahmana assistants – a Jaina pandit (right) and behind him the Telugu Brahmana Cauvellery Ventak Letchmiah.

## 2. RAYAS, NAYAKAS AND SULTANS

According to tradition and epigraphic evidence two brothers, Harihara and Bukka, founded the Vijayanagara Empire in 1336. This empire included within its fluctuating frontiers peoples who spoke different languages and followed different religious traditions.

On their northern frontier, the Vijayanagara kings competed with contemporary rulers – including the Sultans of the Deccan and the Gajapati rulers of Orissa – for control of the fertile river valleys and the resources generated by lucrative overseas trade. At the same time, interaction between these states led to sharing of ideas, especially in the field of architecture. The rulers of Vijayanagara borrowed concepts and building techniques which they then developed further.

### Karnataka samrajyamu

While historians use the term Vijayanagara Empire, contemporaries described it as the *karnataka samrajyamu*.

➔ How has the artist portrayed Mackenzie and his indigenous informers? What ideas about him and his informants are sought to be impressed upon the viewers?

Fig. 7.3  
The gopuram or gateway of the  
Brihadishvara temple at Thanjavur



### Elephants, horses and men

*Gajapati* literally means lord of elephants. This was the name of a ruling lineage that was very powerful in Orissa in the fifteenth century. In the popular traditions of Vijayanagara the Deccan Sultans are termed as *ashvapati* or lord of horses and the *rayas* are called *narapati* or lord of men.

Some of the areas that were incorporated within the empire had witnessed the development of powerful states such as those of the Cholas in Tamil Nadu and the Hoysalas in Karnataka. Ruling elites in these areas had extended patronage to elaborate temples such as the Brihadishvara temple at Thanjavur and the Chennakeshava temple at Belur. The rulers of Vijayanagara, who called themselves *rayas*, built on these traditions and carried them, as we will see, literally to new heights.

#### 2.1 Kings and traders

As warfare during these times depended upon effective cavalry, the import of horses from Arabia and Central Asia was very important for rival kingdoms. This trade was initially controlled by Arab traders. Local communities of merchants known as *kudirai chettis* or horse merchants also participated in these exchanges. From 1498 other actors appeared on the scene. These were the Portuguese, who arrived on the west coast of the subcontinent and attempted to establish trading and military stations. Their superior military technology, especially the use of muskets, enabled them to become important players in the tangled politics of the period.

In fact, Vijayanagara was also noted for its markets dealing in spices, textiles and precious stones. Trade was often regarded as a status symbol for such cities, which boasted of a wealthy population that demanded high-value exotic goods, especially precious stones and jewellery. The revenue derived

from trade in turn contributed significantly to the prosperity of the state.

## 2.2 The apogee and decline of the empire

Within the polity, claimants to power included members of the ruling lineage as well as military commanders. The first dynasty, known as the Sangama dynasty, exercised control till 1485. They were supplanted by the Saluvas, military commanders, who remained in power till 1503 when they were replaced by the Tuluvas. Krishnadeva Raya belonged to the Tuluva dynasty.

Krishnadeva Raya's rule was characterised by expansion and consolidation. This was the time when the land between the Tungabhadra and Krishna rivers (the Raichur doab) was acquired (1512), the rulers of Orissa were subdued (1514) and severe defeats were inflicted on the Sultan of Bijapur (1520). Although the kingdom remained in a constant state of military preparedness, it flourished under conditions of unparalleled peace and prosperity. Krishnadeva Raya is credited with building some fine temples and adding impressive *gopurams* to many important south Indian temples. He also founded a suburban township near Vijayanagara called Nagalapuram after his mother. Some of the most detailed descriptions of Vijayanagara come from his time or just after.

Strain began to show within the imperial structure following Krishnadeva Raya's death in 1529. His successors were troubled by rebellious *nayakas* or military chiefs. By 1542 control at the centre had shifted to another ruling lineage, that of the Aravidu, which remained in power till the end of the seventeenth century. During this period, as indeed earlier, the military ambitions of the rulers of Vijayanagara as well as those of the Deccan Sultanates resulted in shifting alignments. Eventually this led to an alliance of the Sultanates against Vijayanagara. In 1565 Rama Raya, the chief minister of Vijayanagara, led the army into battle at Rakshasi-Tangadi (also known as Talikota), where his forces were routed by the combined armies of Bijapur, Ahmadnagar and Golconda. The victorious armies sacked the city of Vijayanagara. The city was totally abandoned within a few years. Now the focus of the empire shifted to the east where the Aravidu

Source 2

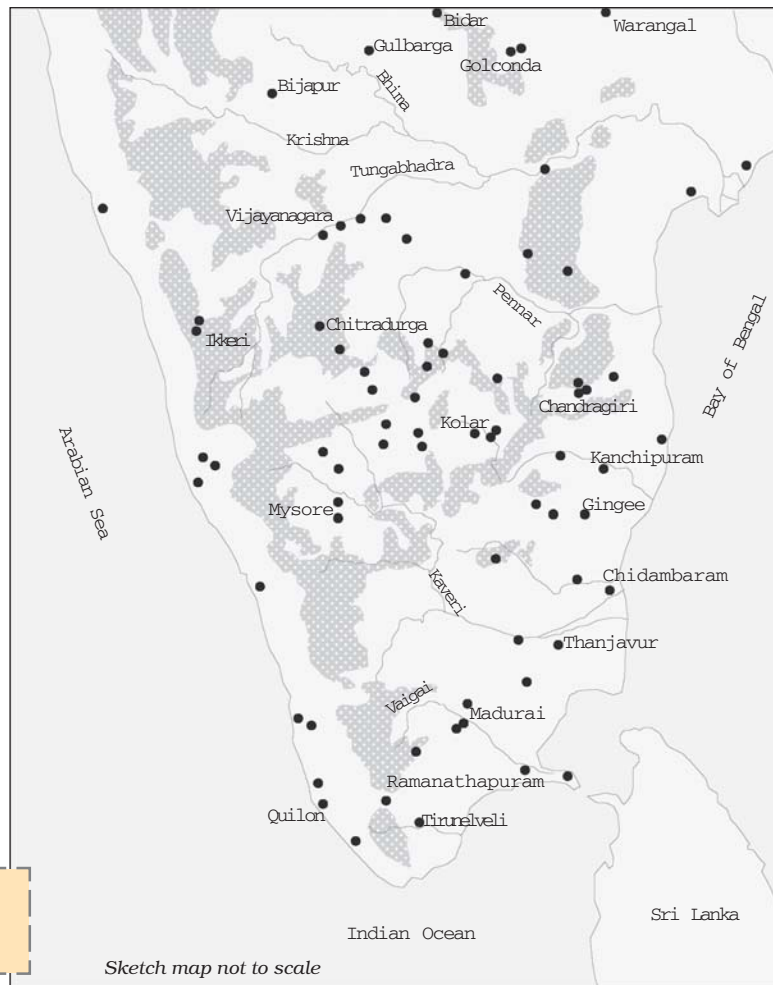
### Kings and traders

Krishnadeva Raya (ruled 1509-29), the most famous ruler of Vijayanagara, composed a work on statecraft in Telugu known as the *Amuktamalyada*. About traders he wrote:

A king should improve the harbours of his country and so encourage its commerce that horses, elephants, precious gems, sandalwood, pearls and other articles are freely imported ... He should arrange that the foreign sailors who land in his country on account of storms, illness and exhaustion are looked after in a suitable manner ... Make the merchants of distant foreign countries who import elephants and good horses be attached to yourself by providing them with daily audience, presents and allowing decent profits. Then those articles will never go to your enemies.

➔ Why do you think the king was interested in encouraging trade? Which groups of people would have benefited from these transactions?

Map 1  
South India,  
c. fourteenth-eighteenth century



➡ Identify the present-day states that formed part of the empire.

*Yavana* is a Sanskrit word used for the Greeks and other peoples who entered the subcontinent from the north west.

dynasty ruled from Penukonda and later from Chandragiri (near Tirupati).

Although the armies of the Sultans were responsible for the destruction of the city of Vijayanagara, relations between the Sultans and the *rayas* were not always or inevitably hostile, in spite of religious differences. Krishnadeva Raya, for example, supported some claimants to power in the Sultanates and took pride in the title “establisher of the Yavana kingdom”. Similarly, the Sultan of Bijapur intervened to resolve succession disputes in Vijayanagara following the death of Krishnadeva Raya. In fact the Vijayanagara kings were keen to ensure the stability of the Sultanates and vice versa. It was the adventurous policy of Rama Raya who tried to play off one Sultan against another that led the Sultans to combine together and decisively defeat him.

### 2.3 The *rayas* and the *nayakas*

Among those who exercised power in the empire were military chiefs who usually controlled forts and had armed supporters. These chiefs often moved from one area to another, and in many cases were accompanied by peasants looking for fertile land on which to settle. These chiefs were known as *nayakas* and they usually spoke Telugu or Kannada. Many *nayakas* submitted to the authority of the kings of Vijayanagara but they often rebelled and had to be subdued by military action.

The *amara-nayaka* system was a major political innovation of the Vijayanagara Empire. It is likely that many features of this system were derived from the *iqta* system of the Delhi Sultanate.

The *amara-nayakas* were military commanders who were given territories to govern by the *raya*. They collected taxes and other dues from peasants, craftspersons and traders in the area. They retained part of the revenue for personal use and for maintaining a stipulated contingent of horses and elephants. These contingents provided the Vijayanagara kings with an effective fighting force with which they brought the entire southern peninsula under their control. Some of the revenue was also used for the maintenance of temples and irrigation works.

The *amara-nayakas* sent tribute to the king annually and personally appeared in the royal court with gifts to express their loyalty. Kings occasionally asserted their control over them by transferring them from one place to another. However, during the course of the seventeenth century, many of these *nayakas* established independent kingdoms. This hastened the collapse of the central imperial structure.

*Amara* is believed to be derived from the Sanskrit word *samara*, meaning battle or war. It also resembles the Persian term *amir*, meaning a high noble.

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### ➔ Discuss...

Locate Chandragiri, Madurai, Ikkeri, Thanjavur and Mysore, all centres of *nayaka* power, on Map 1. Discuss the ways in which rivers and hills may have facilitated or hindered communication with Vijayanagara in each case.

### 3. VIJAYANAGARA

#### THE CAPITAL AND ITS ENVIRONS

Like most capitals, Vijayanagara, was characterised by a distinctive physical layout and building style.

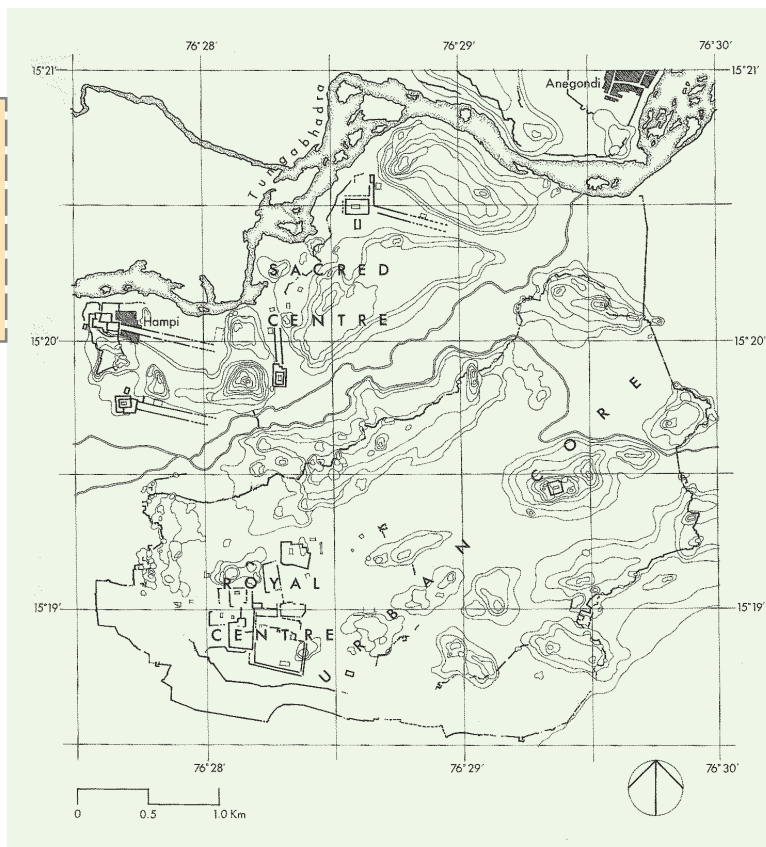
Fig. 7.4  
Plan of Vijayanagara

➔ Identify three major zones on the plan. Look at the central part. Can you see channels connecting up with the river? See how many fortification walls you can trace. Was the sacred centre fortified?

#### Finding out about the city

A large number of inscriptions of the kings of Vijayanagara and their *nayakas* recording donations to temples as well as describing important events have been recovered. Several travellers visited the city and wrote about it. Notable among their accounts are those of an Italian trader named Nicolo de Conti, an ambassador named Abdur Razzaq sent by the ruler of Persia, a merchant named Afanasii Nikitin from Russia, all of whom visited the city in the fifteenth century, and those of Duarte Barbosa, Domingo Paes and Fernao Nuniz from Portugal, who came in the sixteenth century.

➔ Would you find these features in a city today? Why do you think the gardens and water bodies were selected for special mention by Paes?



Source 3

#### A sprawling city

This is an excerpt from Domingo Paes's description of Vijayanagara:

The size of this city I do not write here, because it cannot all be seen from any one spot, but I climbed a hill whence I could see a great part of it; I could not see it all because it lies between several ranges of hills. What I saw from thence seemed to me as large as Rome, and very beautiful to the sight; there are many groves of trees within it, in the gardens of the houses, and many conduits of water which flow into the midst of it, and in places there are lakes; and the king has close to his palace a palm-grove and other rich fruit-bearing trees.



### 3.1 Water resources

The most striking feature about the location of Vijayanagara is the natural basin formed by the river Tungabhadra which flows in a north-easterly direction. The surrounding landscape is characterised by stunning granite hills that seem to form a girdle around the city. A number of streams flow down to the river from these rocky outcrops.

In almost all cases embankments were built along these streams to create reservoirs of varying sizes. As this is one of the most arid zones of the peninsula, elaborate arrangements had to be made to store rainwater and conduct it to the city. The most important such tank was built in the early years of the fifteenth century and is now called Kamalapuram tank. Water from this tank not only irrigated fields nearby but was also conducted through a channel to the “royal centre”.

One of the most prominent waterworks to be seen among the ruins is the Hiriya canal. This canal drew water from a dam across the Tungabhadra and irrigated the cultivated valley that separated the “sacred centre” from the “urban core”. This was apparently built by kings of the Sangama dynasty.

### 3.2 Fortifications and roads

Before we examine the different parts of the city in detail let us look at what enclosed them all – the great fortress walls. Abdur Razzaq, an ambassador sent by the ruler of Persia to Calicut (present-day Kozhikode) in the fifteenth century, was greatly impressed by the fortifications, and mentioned seven lines of forts. These encircled not only the city but also its agricultural hinterland and forests. The outermost wall linked the hills surrounding the city. The massive masonry construction was slightly tapered. No mortar or cementing agent was employed anywhere in the construction. The stone blocks were wedge shaped, which held them in place, and the inner portion of the walls was of earth packed with rubble. Square or rectangular bastions projected outwards.

What was most significant about this fortification is that it enclosed agricultural tracts. Abdur Razzaq noted that “between the first, second and the third walls there are cultivated fields, gardens and houses”. And Paes observed: “From this first circuit until you

Source 4

#### How tanks were built

About a tank constructed by Krishnadeva Raya, Paes wrote:

The king made a tank ... at the mouth of two hills so that all the water which comes from either one side or the other collects there; and, besides this, water comes to it from more than three leagues (approximately 15 kilometres) by pipes which run along the lower parts of the range outside. This water is brought from a lake which itself overflows into a little river. The tank has three large pillars handsomely carved with figures; these connect above with certain pipes by which they get water when they have to irrigate their gardens and rice-fields. In order to make this tank the said king broke down a hill ... In the tank I saw so many people at work that there must have been fifteen or twenty thousand men, looking like ants ...

Fig. 7.5  
An aqueduct leading into the royal centre



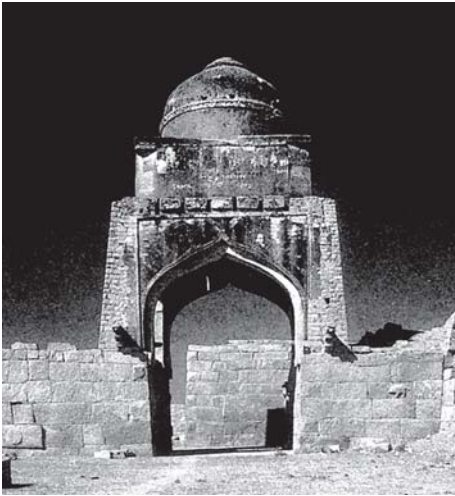


Fig. 7.6  
A gateway in the fortification wall

➔ Describe the similarities and differences between these two entrances. Why do you think the rulers of Vijayanagara adopted elements of Indo-Islamic architecture?

Fig. 7.7  
A gopuram



enter the city there is a great distance, in which are fields in which they sow rice and have many gardens and much water, in which water comes from two lakes." These statements have been corroborated by present-day archaeologists, who have also found evidence of an agricultural tract between the sacred centre and the urban core. This tract was serviced by an elaborate canal system drawing water from the Tungabhadra.

Why do you think agricultural tracts were incorporated within the fortified area? Often, the objective of medieval sieges was to starve the defenders into submission. These sieges could last for several months and sometimes even years. Normally rulers tried to be prepared for such situations by building large granaries within fortified areas. The rulers of Vijayanagara adopted a more expensive and elaborate strategy of protecting the agricultural belt itself.

A second line of fortification went round the inner core of the urban complex, and a third line surrounded the royal centre, within which each set of major buildings was surrounded by its own high walls.

The fort was entered through well-guarded gates, which linked the city to the major roads. Gateways were distinctive architectural features that often defined the structures to which they regulated access. The arch on the gateway leading into the fortified settlement as well as the dome over the gate (Fig. 7.6) are regarded as typical features of the architecture introduced by the Turkish Sultans. Art historians refer to this style as Indo-Islamic, as it grew continually through interaction with local building practices in different regions.

Archaeologists have studied roads within the city and those leading out from it. These have been identified by tracing paths through gateways, as well as by finds of pavements. Roads generally wound around through the valleys, avoiding rocky terrain. Some of the most important roads extended from temple gateways, and were lined by bazaars.

### 3.3 The urban core

Moving along the roads leading into the urban core, there is relatively little archaeological evidence of the houses of ordinary people. Archaeologists have

found fine Chinese porcelain in some areas, including in the north-eastern corner of the urban core and suggest that these areas may have been occupied by rich traders. This was also the Muslim residential quarter. Tombs and mosques located here have distinctive functions, yet their architecture resembles that of the *mandapas* found in the temples of Hampi.

This is how the sixteenth-century Portuguese traveller Barbosa described the houses of ordinary people, which have not survived: “The other houses of the people are thatched, but nonetheless well built and arranged according to occupations, in long streets with many open places.”

Field surveys indicate that the entire area was dotted with numerous shrines and small temples, pointing to the prevalence of a variety of cults, perhaps supported by different communities. The surveys also indicate that wells, rainwater tanks as well as temple tanks may have served as sources of water to the ordinary town dwellers.



#### 4. THE ROYAL CENTRE

The royal centre was located in the south-western part of the settlement. Although designated as a royal centre, it included over 60 temples. Clearly, the patronage of temples and cults was important for rulers who were trying to establish and legitimise their authority through association with the divinities housed in the shrines.

About thirty building complexes have been identified as palaces. These are relatively large structures that do not seem to have been associated



Fig. 7.8  
Part of an excavated pavement



Fig. 7.9  
Shards of Chinese porcelain

➔ What kinds of vessels do you think these shards were originally parts of?

Fig. 7.10  
A mosque in Vijayanagara

➔ Does the mosque have the typical features of Indo-Islamic architecture?

#### ➔ Discuss...

Compare the layout of Vijayanagara with that of your town or village.

### A House of Victory?

This is what Paes had to say about the audience hall and the *mahanavami dibba*, which together he called the “House of Victory”:

These buildings have two platforms one above the other, beautifully sculpted ... On the upper platform ... in this House of Victory the king has a room made of cloth ... where the idol has a shrine ... and in the other in the middle is placed a dais on which stands a throne of state, (the crown and the royal anklet) ...



Fig. 7.11  
The mahanavami dibba

with ritual functions. One difference between these structures and temples is that the latter were constructed entirely of masonry, while the superstructure of the secular buildings was made of perishable materials.

#### 4.1 The *mahanavami dibba*

Some of the more distinctive structures in the area have been assigned names based on the form of the buildings as well as their functions. The “king’s palace” is the largest of the enclosures but has not yielded definitive evidence of being a royal residence. It has two of the most impressive platforms, usually called the “audience hall” and the “*mahanavami dibba*”. The entire complex is surrounded by high double walls with a street running between them. The audience hall is a high platform with slots for wooden pillars at close and regular intervals. It had a staircase going up to the second floor, which rested on these pillars. The pillars being closely spaced, would have left little free space and thus it is not clear what the hall was used for.

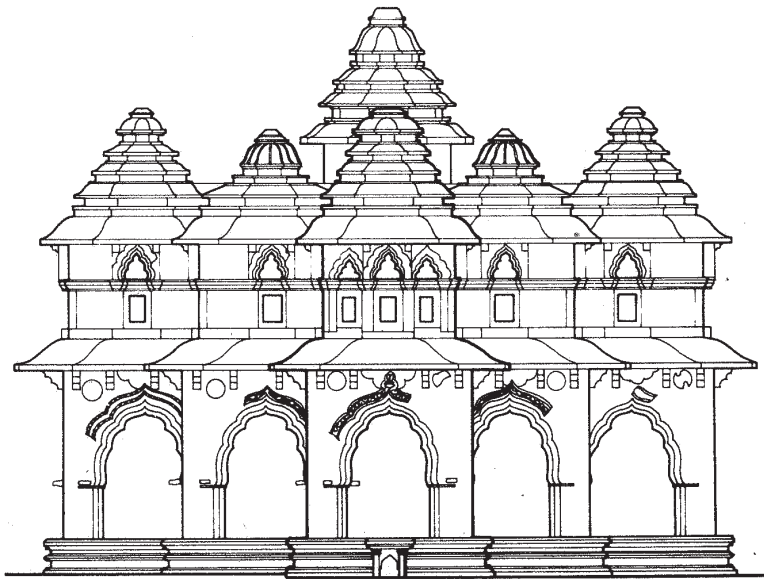
Located on one of the highest points in the city, the “*mahanavami dibba*” is a massive platform rising from a base of about 11,000 sq. ft to a height of 40 ft. There is evidence that it supported a wooden structure. The base of the platform is covered with relief carvings (Fig. 7.12).

Rituals associated with the structure probably coincided with Mahanavami (literally, the great ninth day) of the ten-day Hindu festival during the autumn months of September and October, known variously as Dusehra (northern India), Durga Puja (in Bengal)



Fig. 7.12  
Carvings on the mahanavami dibba

➡ Can you identify the themes of the carvings?



and Navaratri or Mahanavami (in peninsular India). The Vijayanagara kings displayed their prestige, power and suzerainty on this occasion.

The ceremonies performed on the occasion included worship of the image, worship of the state horse, and the sacrifice of buffaloes and other animals. Dances, wrestling matches, and processions of caparisoned horses, elephants and chariots and soldiers, as well as ritual presentations before the king and his guests by the chief *nayakas* and subordinate kings marked the occasion. These ceremonies were imbued with deep symbolic meanings. On the last day of the festival the king inspected his army and the armies of the *nayakas* in a grand ceremony in an open field. On this occasion the *nayakas* brought rich gifts for the king as well as the stipulated tribute.

Was the “*mahanavami dibba*” that stands today the centre of this elaborate ritual? Scholars have pointed out that the space surrounding the structure does not seem to have been adequate for elaborate processions of armed men, women, and large numbers of animals. Like some of the other structures in the royal centre, it remains an enigma.

#### 4.2 Other buildings in the royal centre

One of the most beautiful buildings in the royal centre is the Lotus Mahal, so named by British travellers in the nineteenth century. While the name is certainly romantic, historians are not quite sure

Fig. 7.13

An elevation drawing of the Lotus Mahal

An elevation is a vertical view of any object or structure. It gives you an idea of features that cannot be seen in a photograph. Notice the arches. These were probably inspired by Indo-Islamic techniques.

➔ Compare Figs. 7.13 and 7.15, and make a list of the features that are common to both, as well as those that can be seen in only one. Also compare the arch in Fig. 7.14 with the arch in Fig. 7.6. The Lotus Mahal had nine towers – a high central one, and eight along the sides. How many can you see in the photograph and how many in the elevation? If you had to rename the Lotus Mahal, what would you call it?

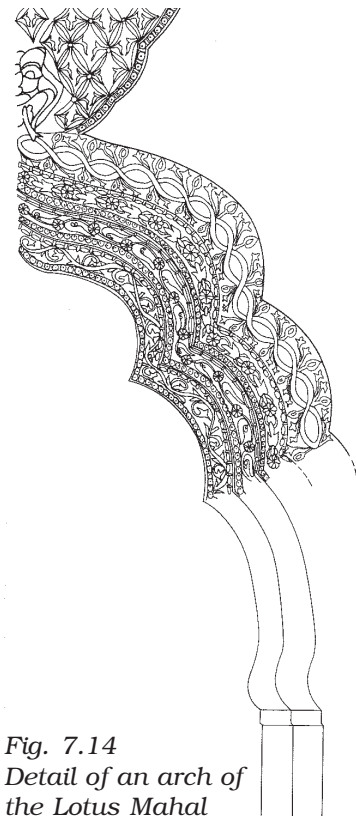


Fig. 7.14

Detail of an arch of the Lotus Mahal

Fig. 7.15  
A photograph of the Lotus Mahal



➔ Compare Figs. 7.16 a and 7.16 b with Fig. 7.17, making a list of features visible in each one. Do you think these were actually elephant stables?

what the building was used for. One suggestion, found in a map drawn by Mackenzie, is that it may have been a council chamber, a place where the king met his advisers.

While most temples were located in the sacred centre, there were several in the royal centre as well.

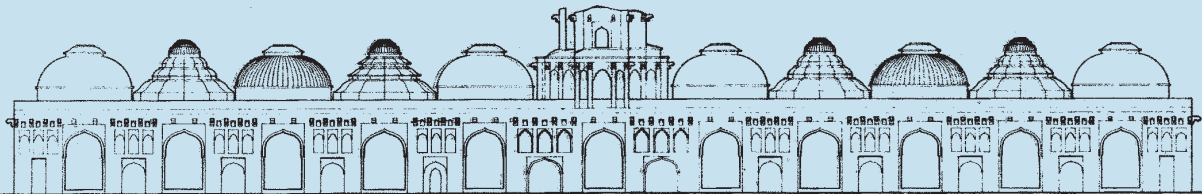


Fig. 7.16 a Elevation of the “elephant stables”



Fig. 7.16 b Plan of the “elephant stables”. A plan gives a horizontal view of a structure.



Fig. 7.17 “Elephant stables” located close to the Lotus Mahal

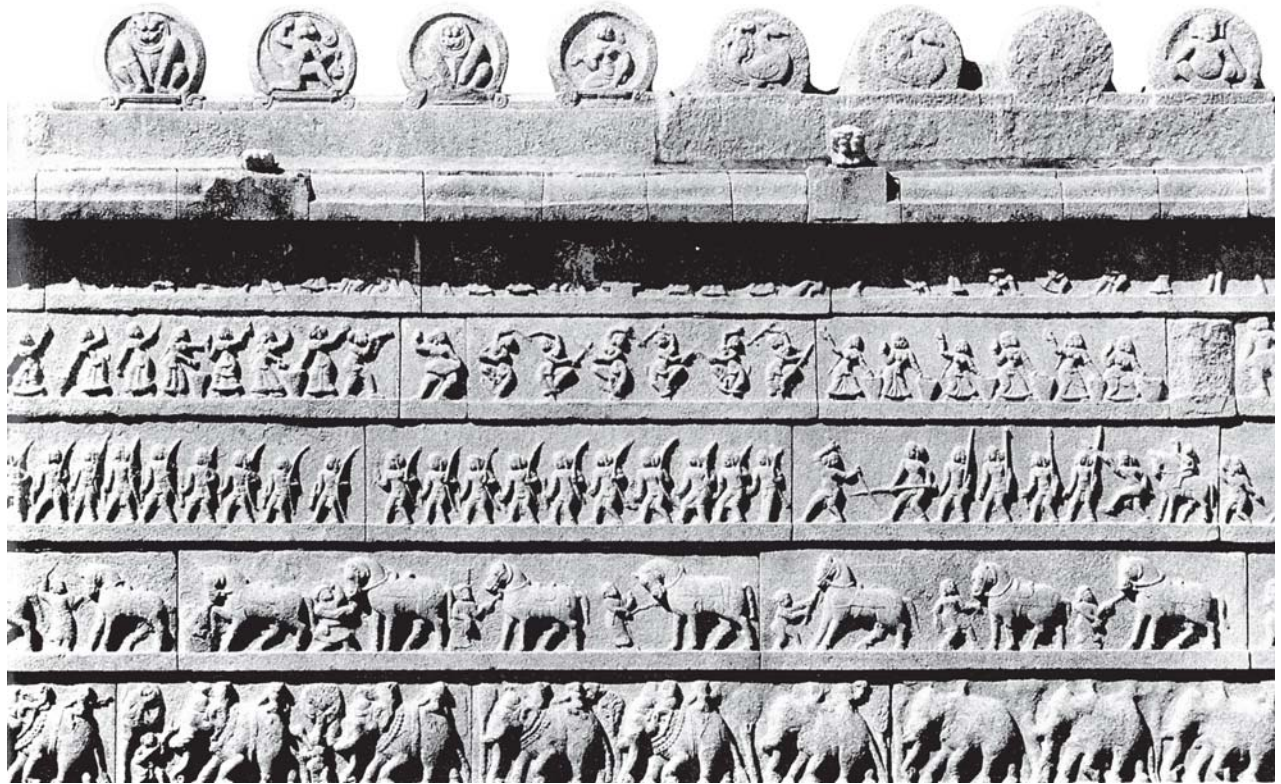


Fig. 7.18  
Sculpture from the Hazara Rama temple

➔ Can you identify scenes of dancing?  
Why do you think elephants and horses  
were depicted on the panels?

One of the most spectacular of these is one known as the Hazara Rama temple. This was probably meant to be used only by the king and his family. The images in the central shrine are missing; however, sculpted panels on the walls survive. These include scenes from the *Ramayana* sculpted on the inner walls of the shrine.

While many of the structures at Vijayanagara were destroyed when the city was sacked, traditions of building palatial structures were continued by the *nayakas*. Many of these buildings have survived.

### ➔ Discuss...

Why did the *nayakas* continue with the building traditions of the rulers of Vijayanagara?



Fig. 7.19  
Interior of the audience hall  
at Madurai  
Note the arches.

## 5. THE SACRED CENTRE

### 5.1 Choosing a capital

We now move to the rocky northern end of the city on the banks of the Tungabhadra. According to local tradition, these hills sheltered the monkey kingdom of Vali and Sugriva mentioned in the *Ramayana*. Other traditions suggest that Pampadevi, the local mother goddess, did penance in these hills in order to marry Virupaksha, the guardian deity of the kingdom, also recognised as a form of Shiva. To this day this marriage is celebrated annually in the Virupaksha temple. Among these hills are found Jaina temples of the pre-Vijayanagara period as well. In other words, this area was associated with several sacred traditions.

Temple building in the region had a long history, going back to dynasties such as the Pallavas, Chalukyas, Hoysalas and Cholas. Rulers very often encouraged temple building as a means of associating themselves with the divine – often, the deity was explicitly or implicitly identified with the king. Temples also functioned as centres of learning. Besides, rulers and others often granted land and other resources for the maintenance of temples. Consequently, temples developed as significant religious, social, cultural and economic centres. From the point of view of the rulers, constructing, repairing and maintaining temples were important means of winning support and recognition for their power, wealth and piety.

It is likely that the very choice of the site of Vijayanagara was inspired by the existence of the shrines of Virupaksha and Pampadevi. In fact the Vijayanagara kings claimed to rule on behalf of the god Virupaksha. All royal orders were signed “Shri Virupaksha”, usually in the Kannada script. Rulers also indicated their close links with the gods by using the title “Hindu Suratrana”. This was a Sanskritisation of the Arabic term Sultan, meaning king, so it literally meant Hindu Sultan.

Even as they drew on earlier traditions, the rulers of Vijayanagara innovated and developed these. Royal portrait sculpture was now displayed in temples, and the king’s visits to temples were treated as important state occasions on which he was accompanied by the important *nayakas* of the empire.





Fig. 7.20  
An aerial view of the  
Virupaksha temple

### 5.2. Gopurams and mandapas

In terms of temple architecture, by this period certain new features were in evidence. These included structures of immense scale that must have been a mark of imperial authority, best exemplified by the *raya gopurams* (Fig. 7.7) or royal gateways that often dwarfed the towers on the central shrines, and signalled the presence of the temple from a great

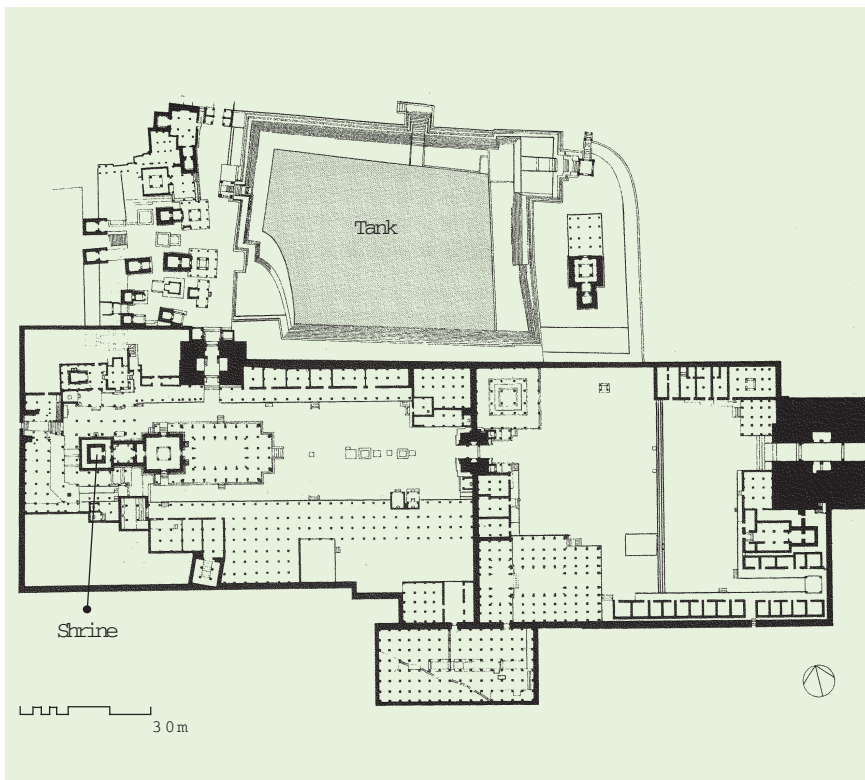


Fig. 7.21  
A plan of the Virupaksha  
temple  
Most of the square  
structures are shrines.  
The two major gateways  
are shaded in black.  
Each tiny dot represents  
a pillar. Rows of pillars  
arranged in lines  
within a square or  
rectangular frame appear  
to demarcate major halls,  
pavilions and corridors.

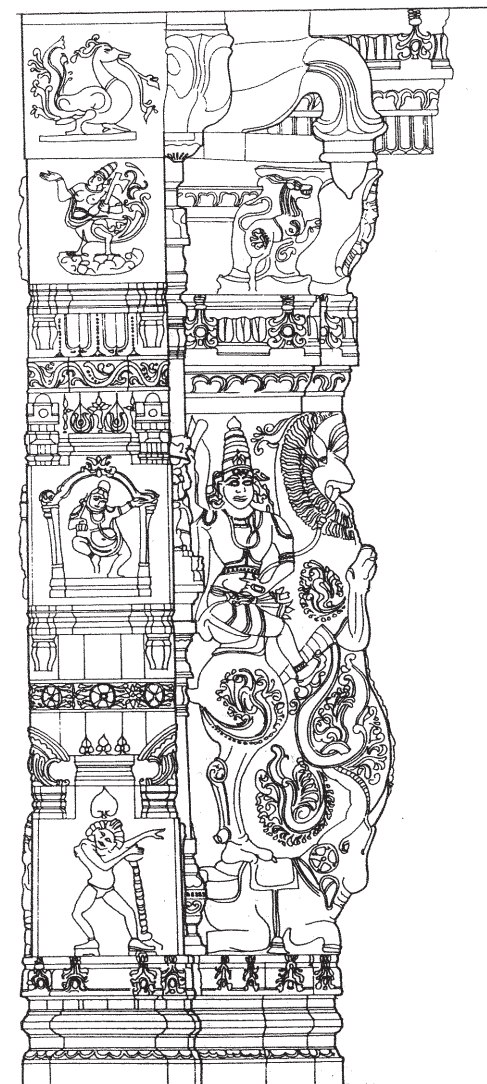
➡ Using the scale in the plan, measure the distance from the main *gopuram* to the central shrine. What would have been the easiest access from the tank to the shrine?

Fig. 7.22  
A kalyana mandapa, meant to  
celebrate divine weddings



Fig. 7.23  
A line drawing of a sculpted pillar

➔ Describe what you see on  
the pillar.



distance. They were also probably meant as reminders of the power of kings, able to command the resources, techniques and skills needed to construct these towering gateways. Other distinctive features include *mandapas* or pavilions and long, pillared corridors that often ran around the shrines within the temple complex. Let us look at two temples more closely – the Virupaksha temple and the Vitthala temple.

The Virupaksha temple was built over centuries. While inscriptions suggest that the earliest shrine dated to the ninth-tenth centuries, it was substantially enlarged with the establishment of the Vijayanagara Empire. The hall in front of the main shrine was built by Krishnadeva Raya to mark his accession. This was decorated with delicately carved pillars. He is also credited with

the construction of the eastern *gopuram*. These additions meant that the central shrine came to occupy a relatively small part of the complex.

The halls in the temple were used for a variety of purposes. Some were spaces in which the images of gods were placed to witness special programmes of music, dance, drama, etc. Others were used to celebrate the marriages of deities, and yet others were meant for the deities to swing in. Special images, distinct from those kept in the small central shrine, were used on these occasions.

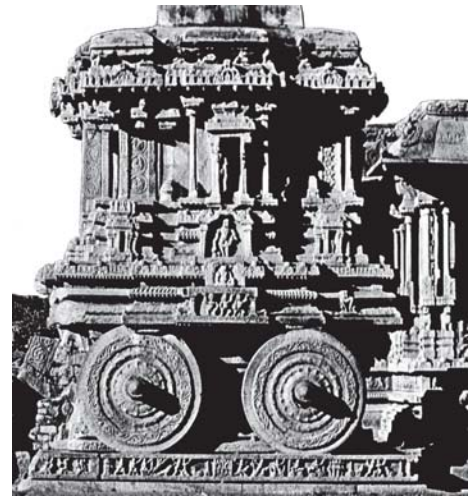


Fig. 7.24  
The chariot of the Vitthala temple

➔ Do you think chariots would have actually been built like this?



Fig. 7.25  
Swing pavilion from Gingee

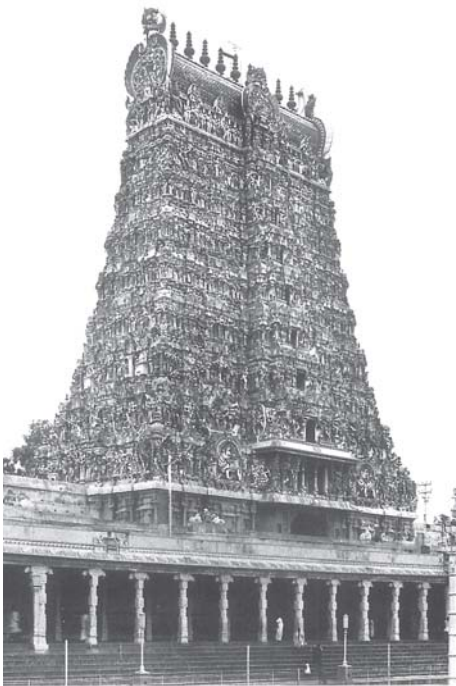


Fig. 7.26  
A gopuram built by the nayakas  
of Madurai

Another shrine, the Vitthala temple, is also interesting. Here, the principal deity was Vitthala, a form of Vishnu generally worshipped in Maharashtra. The introduction of the worship of the deity in Karnataka is another indication of the ways in which the rulers of Vijayanagara drew on different traditions to create an imperial culture. As in the case of other temples, this temple too has several halls and a unique shrine designed as a chariot (Fig. 7.24).

A characteristic feature of the temple complexes is the chariot streets that extended from the temple *gopuram* in a straight line. These streets were paved with stone slabs and lined with pillared pavilions in which merchants set up their shops.

Just as the *nayakas* continued with and elaborated on traditions of fortification, so they did with traditions of temple building. In fact, some of the most spectacular *gopurams* were also built by the local *nayakas*.

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### ➔ Discuss...

How and why did the rulers of Vijayanagara adopt and adapt earlier traditions of ritual architecture?

## 6. PLOTTING PALACES, TEMPLES AND BAZAARS

We have been examining a wealth of information on Vijayanagara – photographs, plans, elevations of structures and sculpture. How was all of this produced? After the initial surveys by Mackenzie, information was pieced together from travellers' accounts and inscriptions. Through the twentieth century, the site was preserved by the Archaeological Survey of India and the Karnataka Department of Archaeology and Museums. In 1976, Hampi was recognised as a site of national importance. Then, in the early 1980s, an important project was launched to document the material remains at Vijayanagara in detail, through extensive and intensive surveys, using a variety of recording techniques. Over nearly twenty years, dozens of

scholars from all over the world worked to compile and preserve this information.

Let us look at just one part of this enormous exercise – mapping – in more detail. The first step was to divide the entire area into a set of 25 squares, each designated by a letter of the alphabet. Then, each of the small squares was subdivided into a set of even smaller squares. But this was not all: each of these smaller squares was further subdivided into yet smaller units.

As you can see, these detailed surveys have been extremely painstaking, and have recovered and documented traces of thousands of structures – from tiny shrines and residences to elaborate temples. They have also led to the recovery of traces of roads, paths, bazaars, etc.

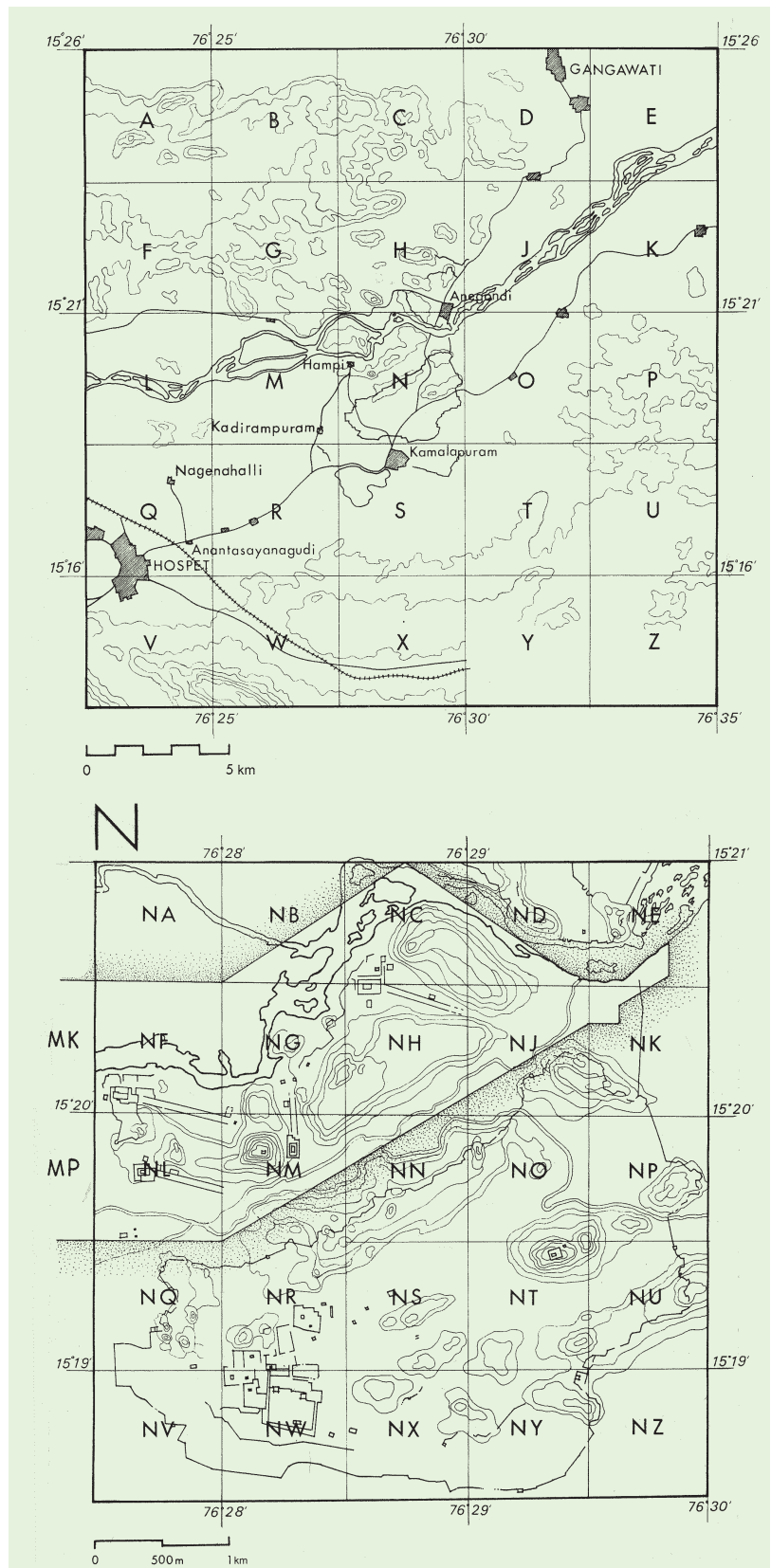


Fig. 7.27  
A detailed map of the site  
(top right)

➡ Which is the letter of the alphabet that was not used? Using the scale in the map, measure the length of any one of the small squares.

Fig. 7.28  
Square N of Fig. 7.27 (right)

➡ What is the scale used on this map?

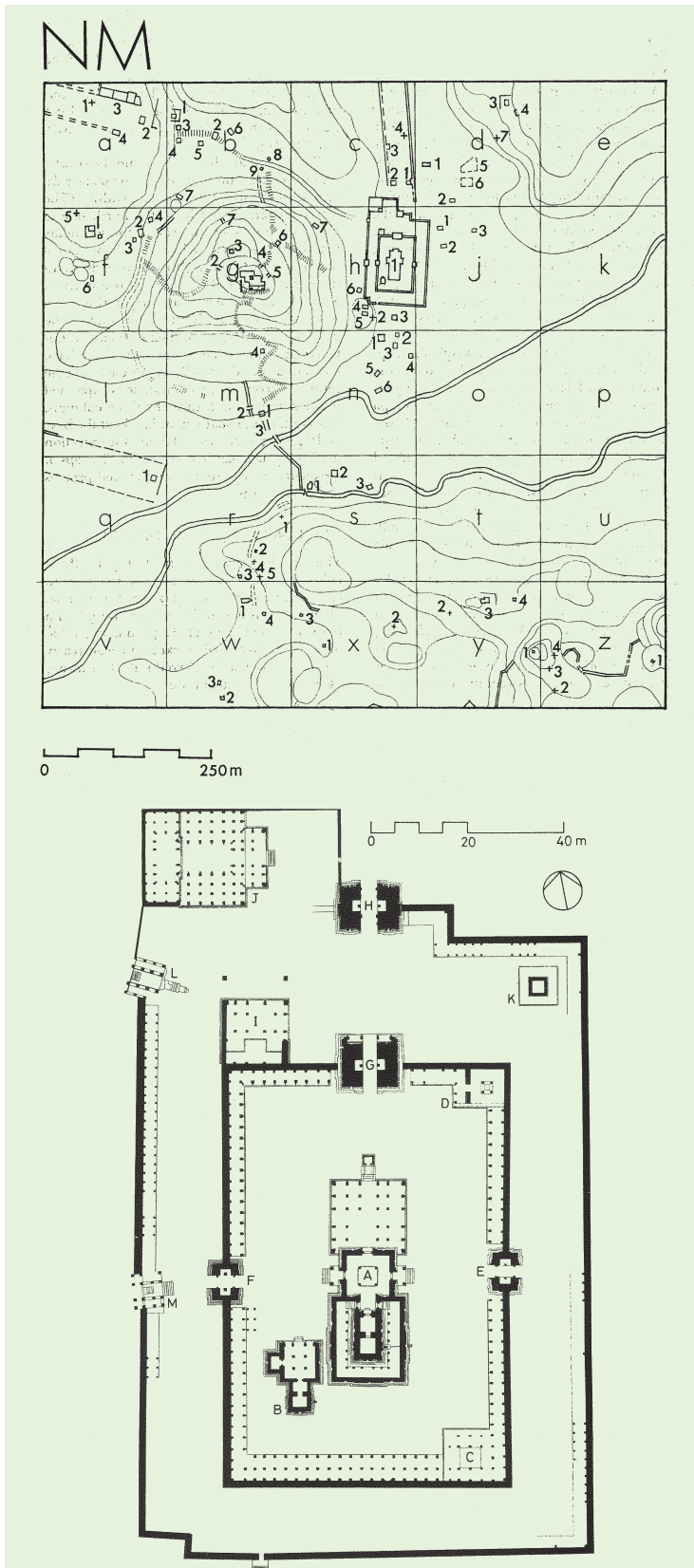


Fig. 7.29  
Square NM of Fig. 7.28

➤ Identify a temple.  
Look for walls, a central shrine, and traces of paths leading to the temple. Name the squares on the map which contain the plan of the temple.

The latter have been located through finds of pillar bases and platforms – all that remain of thriving markets.

It is worth remembering something that John M. Fritz, George Michell and M.S. Nagaraja Rao, who worked for years at the site, wrote: “In our study of these monuments of Vijayanagara we have to imagine a whole series of vanished wooden elements – columns, brackets, beams, ceilings, overhanging eaves, and towers – decorated with plaster and painted, perhaps brightly.”

Although wooden structures are lost, and only stone structures survive, the descriptions left by travellers allow us to reconstruct some aspects of the vibrant life of the times.

Fig. 7.30  
Plan of the temple in Fig 7.29

➤ Identify the *gopuram*, halls, colonnades and central shrine. Which areas would you pass through to reach the central shrine from the outer entrance?

Source 5

### The bazaar

Paes gives a vivid description of the bazaar:

Going forward, you have a broad and beautiful street ... In this street live many merchants, and there you will find all sorts of rubies, and diamonds, and emeralds, and pearls, and seed-pearls, and cloths, and every other sort of thing there is on earth and that you may wish to buy. Then you have there every evening a fair where they sell many common horses and nags, and also many citrons, and limes, and oranges, and grapes, and every other kind of garden stuff, and wood; you have all in this street.

More generally, he described the city as being “the best-provided city in the world” with the markets “stocked with provisions such as rice, wheat, grains, India corn and a certain amount of barley and beans, moong, pulses and horse-gram” all of which were cheaply and abundantly available. According to Fernao Nuniz, the Vijayanagara markets were “overflowing with abundance of fruits, grapes and oranges, limes, pomegranates, jackfruit and mangoes and all very cheap”. Meat too was sold in abundance in the marketplaces. Nuniz describes “mutton, pork, venison, partridges, hares, doves, quail and all kinds of birds, sparrows, rats and cats and lizards” as being sold in the market of Bisnaga (Vijayanagara).

## 7. QUESTIONS IN SEARCH OF ANSWERS

Buildings that survive tell us about the way spaces were organised and used, how they were built, with what materials and techniques. For example, we can assess the defence requirements and military preparedness of a city by studying its fortifications. Buildings also tell us about the spread of ideas and cultural influences if we compare them with buildings in other places. They convey ideas which the builders or their patrons wished to project. They are often suffused with symbols which are a product of their cultural context. These we can understand when we combine information from other sources like literature, inscriptions and popular traditions.

### Krishnadeva Raya

To recapitulate about some of the problems of perspective, look at this beautiful statue of Krishnadeva Raya placed on the *gopuram* of the temple at Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu. This is obviously the way in which the ruler wanted to project himself.

And this is how Paes describes the king:

Of medium height, and of fair complexion and good figure, rather fat than thin; he has on his face signs of smallpox.

Fig. 7.31



Investigations of architectural features do not tell us what ordinary men, women and children, comprising the vast majority of the people who lived in the city and its outskirts, thought about these impressive buildings. Would they have had access to any of the areas within the royal centre or the sacred centre? Would they hurry past the sculpture, or would they pause to see, reflect and try and understand its complicated symbolism? And what did the people who worked on these colossal construction projects think of the enterprises to which they had contributed their labour?

While rulers took all important decisions about the buildings to be constructed, the site, the material to be used and the style to be followed, who possessed the specialised knowledge required for such enormous enterprises? Who drew up the plans for the buildings? Where did the masons, stonecutters, sculptors who did the actual building come from? Were they captured during war from neighbouring regions? What kind of wages did they get? Who supervised the building activity? How was building material transported and where did it come from? These are some of the questions that we cannot answer by merely looking at the buildings or their remains. Continuing research using other sources might provide some further clues.



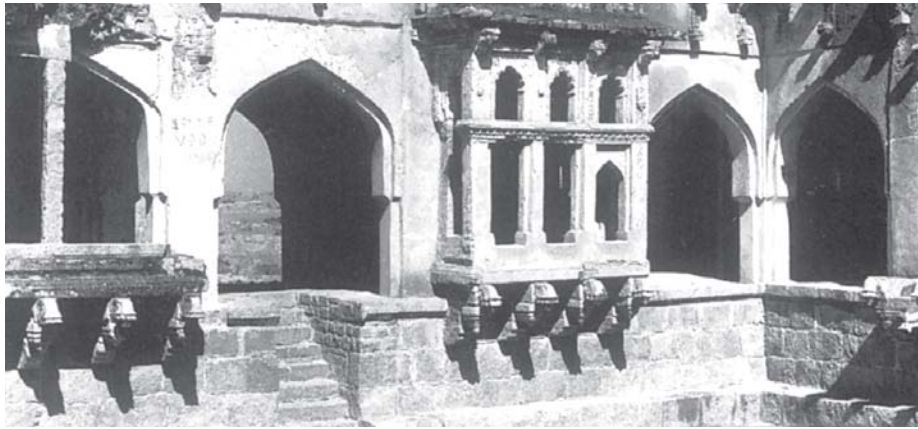


Fig. 7.32  
Part of a structure known  
as the queen's bath

### TIMELINE 1 MAJOR POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

c . 1200-1300	Establishment of the Delhi Sultanate (1206)
c . 1300-1400	Establishment of the Vijayanagara Empire (1336?); establishment of the Bahmani kingdom (1347); Sultanates in Jaunpur, Kashmir and Madura
c . 1400-1500	Establishment of the Gajapati kingdom of Orissa (1435); Establishment of the Sultanates of Gujarat and Malwa; Emergence of the Sultanates of Ahmadnagar, Bijapur and Berar (1490)
c . 1500-1600	Conquest of Goa by the Portuguese (1510); Collapse of the Bahmani kingdom, emergence of the Sultanate of Golconda (1518); Establishment of the Mughal empire by Babur (1526)

*Note: Question mark indicates uncertain date.*

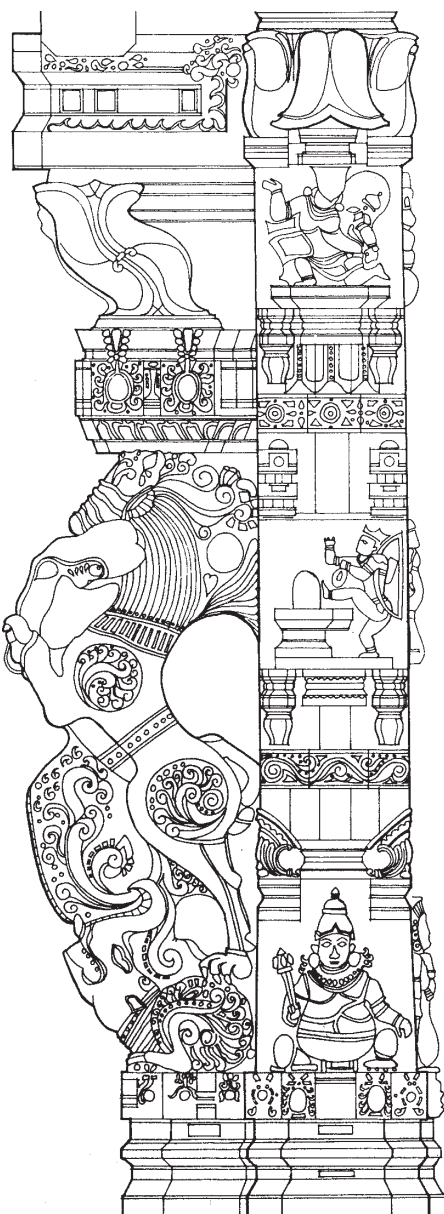
### TIMELINE 2 LANDMARKS IN THE DISCOVERY AND CONSERVATION OF VIJAYANAGARA

1800	Colin Mackenzie visits Vijayanagara
1856	Alexander Greenlaw takes the first detailed photographs of archaeological remains at Hampi
1876	J.F. Fleet begins documenting the inscriptions on the temple walls at the site
1902	Conservation begins under John Marshall
1986	Hampi declared a World Heritage site by UNESCO



### ANSWER IN 100-150 WORDS

Fig. 7.33



1. What have been the methods used to study the ruins of Hampi over the last two centuries? In what way do you think they would have complemented the information provided by the priests of the Virupaksha temple?
2. How were the water requirements of Vijayanagara met?
3. What do you think were the advantages and disadvantages of enclosing agricultural land within the fortified area of the city?
4. What do you think was the significance of the rituals associated with the *mahanavami dibba*?
5. Fig. 7.33 is an illustration of another pillar from the Virupaksha temple. Do you notice any floral motifs? What are the animals shown? Why do you think they are depicted? Describe the human figures shown.



### WRITE A SHORT ESSAY (ABOUT 250-300 WORDS) ON THE FOLLOWING:

6. Discuss whether the term “royal centre” is an appropriate description for the part of the city for which it is used.
7. What does the architecture of buildings like the Lotus Mahal and elephant stables tell us about the rulers who commissioned them?
8. What are the architectural traditions that inspired the architects of Vijayanagara? How did they transform these traditions?
9. What impression of the lives of the ordinary people of Vijayanagara can you cull from the various descriptions in the chapter?



### MAP WORK

10. On an outline map of the world, mark approximately Italy, Portugal, Iran and Russia. Trace the routes the travellers mentioned on p.176 would have taken to reach Vijayanagara.



### PROJECT (CHOOSE ONE)

11. Find out more about any one of the major cities which flourished in the subcontinent during c. fourteenth-seventeenth centuries. Describe the architecture of the city. Are there any features to suggest that these were political centres? Are there buildings that were ritually significant? Is there an area for commercial activities? What are the features that distinguish the urban layout from that of surrounding areas?
12. Visit a religious building in your neighbourhood. Describe, with sketches, its roof, pillars and arches if any, corridors, passages, halls, entrance, water supply, etc. Compare these features with those of the Virupaksha temple. Describe what each part of the building is used for. Find out about its history.



#### If you would like to know more, read:

Vasundhara Filliozat. 2006 (rpt).  
*Vijayanagara*.  
National Book Trust,  
New Delhi.

George Michell. 1995.  
*Architecture and Art of  
Southern India*.  
Cambridge University Press,  
Cambridge.

K.A. Nilakanta Sastri. 1955.  
*A History of South India*.  
Oxford University Press,  
New Delhi.

Burton Stein. 1989.  
*Vijayanagara (The New  
Cambridge History of India  
Vol.1, Part 2)*.  
Foundation Books, New Delhi.



#### For more information, you could visit:

[http://www.museum.upenn.edu/new/research/Exp\\_Rese\\_Disc/Asia/vrp/HTML/Vijay\\_Hist.shtml](http://www.museum.upenn.edu/new/research/Exp_Rese_Disc/Asia/vrp/HTML/Vijay_Hist.shtml)

## THEME EIGHT

# PEASANTS, ZAMINDARS AND THE STATE

## AGRARIAN SOCIETY AND THE MUGHAL EMPIRE (C. SIXTEENTH-SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES)

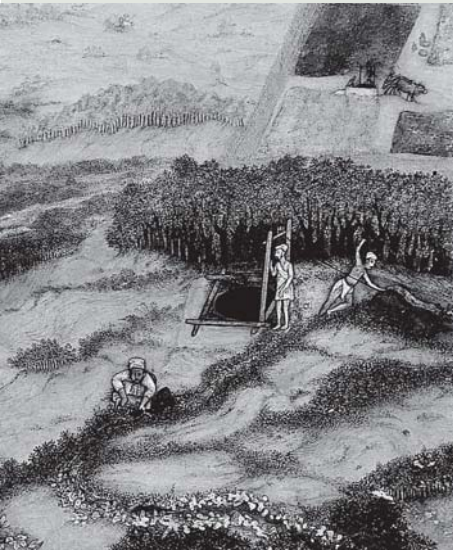


Fig. 8.1  
A rural scene  
Detail from a seventeenth-century  
Mughal painting

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries about 85 per cent of the population of India lived in its villages. Both peasants and landed elites were involved in agricultural production and claimed rights to a share of the produce. This created relationships of cooperation, competition and conflict among them. The sum of these *agrarian* relationships made up rural society.

At the same time agencies from outside also entered into the rural world. Most important among these was the Mughal state, which derived the bulk of its income from agricultural production. Agents of the state – revenue assessors, collectors, record keepers – sought to control rural society so as to ensure that cultivation took place and the state got its regular share of taxes from the produce. Since many crops were grown for sale, trade, money and markets entered the villages and linked the agricultural areas with the towns.

### 1. PEASANTS AND AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION

The basic unit of agricultural society was the village, inhabited by peasants who performed the manifold seasonal tasks that made up agricultural production throughout the year – tilling the soil, sowing seeds, harvesting the crop when it was ripe. Further, they contributed their labour to the production of agro-based goods such as sugar and oil.

But rural India was not characterised by settled peasant production alone. Several kinds of areas such as large tracts of dry land or hilly regions were not cultivable in the same way as the more fertile

expanses of land. In addition, forest areas made up a substantial proportion of territory. We need to keep this varied topography in mind when discussing agrarian society.

### **1.1 Looking for sources**

Our understanding of the workings of rural society does not come from those who worked the land, as peasants did not write about themselves. Our major source for the agrarian history of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries are chronicles and documents from the Mughal court (see also Chapter 9).

One of the most important chronicles was the *Ain-i Akbari* (in short the *Ain*, see also Section 8) authored by Akbar's court historian Abu'l Fazl. This text meticulously recorded the arrangements made by the state to ensure cultivation, to enable the collection of revenue by the agencies of the state and to regulate the relationship between the state and rural magnates, the zamindars.

The central purpose of the *Ain* was to present a vision of Akbar's empire where social harmony was provided by a strong ruling class. Any revolt or assertion of autonomous power against the Mughal state was, in the eyes of the author of the *Ain*, predestined to fail. In other words, whatever we learn from the *Ain* about peasants remains a view from the top.

Fortunately, however, the account of the *Ain* can be supplemented by descriptions contained in sources emanating from regions away from the Mughal capital. These include detailed revenue records from Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Further, the extensive records of the East India Company (see also Chapter 10) provide us with useful descriptions of agrarian relations in eastern India. All these sources record instances of conflicts between peasants, zamindars and the state. In the process they give us an insight into peasants' perception of and their expectations of fairness from the state.

### **1.2 Peasants and their lands**

The term which Indo-Persian sources of the Mughal period most frequently used to denote a peasant was *raiyyat* (plural, *riaya*) or *muzarian*. In addition, we also encounter the terms *kisan* or *asami*. Sources of the seventeenth century refer to two kinds of peasants – *khud-kashta* and *pahi-kashta*. The former

Source 1

### Peasants on the move

This was a feature of agrarian society which struck a keen observer like Babur, the first Mughal emperor, forcefully enough for him to write about it in the *Babur Nama*, his memoirs:

In Hindustan hamlets and villages, towns indeed, are depopulated and set up in a moment! If the people of a large town, one inhabited for years even, flee from it, they do it in such a way that not a sign or trace of them remains in a day and a half. On the other hand, if they fix their eyes on a place to settle, they need not dig water courses because their crops are all rain-grown, and as the population of Hindustan is unlimited it swarms in. They make a tank or a well; they need not build houses or set up walls ... *khas*-grass abounds, wood is unlimited, huts are made, and straightaway there is a village or a town!

➡ Describe the aspects of agricultural life that struck Babur as particular to regions in northern India.

were residents of the village in which they held their lands. The latter were non-resident cultivators who belonged to some other village, but cultivated lands elsewhere on a contractual basis. People became *pahi-kashta* either out of choice – for example, when terms of revenue in a distant village were more favourable – or out of compulsion – for example, forced by economic distress after a famine.

Seldom did the average peasant of north India possess more than a pair of bullocks and two ploughs; most possessed even less. In Gujarat peasants possessing about six acres of land were considered to be affluent; in Bengal, on the other hand, five acres was the upper limit of an average peasant farm; 10 acres would make one a rich *asami*. Cultivation was based on the principle of individual ownership. Peasant lands were bought and sold in the same way as the lands of other property owners.

This nineteenth-century description of peasant holdings in the Delhi-Agra region would apply equally to the seventeenth century:

The cultivating peasants (*asamis*), who plough up the fields, mark the limits of each field, for identification and demarcation, with borders of (raised) earth, brick and thorn so that *thousands of such fields* may be counted in a village.

### 1.3 Irrigation and technology

The abundance of land, available labour and the mobility of peasants were three factors that accounted for the constant expansion of agriculture. Since the primary purpose of agriculture is to feed people, basic staples such as rice, wheat or millets were the most frequently cultivated crops. Areas which received 40 inches or more of rainfall a year were generally rice-producing zones, followed by wheat and millets, corresponding to a descending scale of precipitation.

Monsoons remained the backbone of Indian agriculture, as they are even today. But there were crops which required additional water. Artificial systems of irrigation had to be devised for this.

Source 2

### Irrigating trees and fields

This is an excerpt from the *Babur Nama* that describes the irrigation devices the emperor observed in northern India:

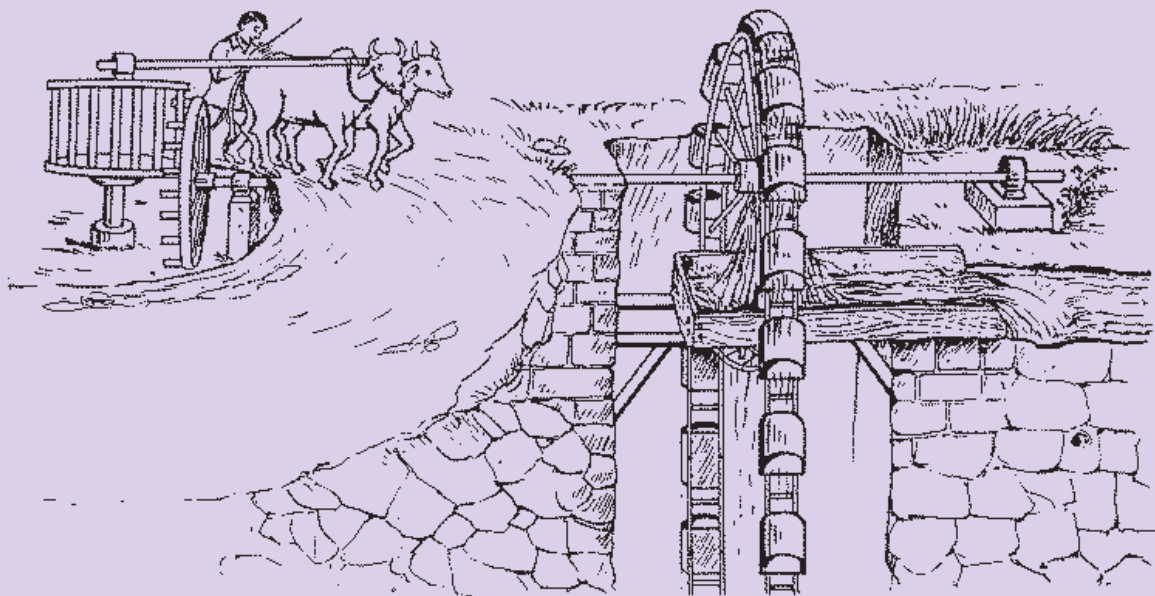
The greater part of Hindustan country is situated on level land. Many though its towns and cultivated lands are, it nowhere has running waters ... For ... water is not at all a necessity in cultivating crops and orchards. Autumn crops grow by the downpour of the rains themselves; and strange it is that spring crops grow even when no rains fall. (However) to young trees water is made to flow by means of buckets or wheels ...

In Lahore, Dipalpur (both in present-day Pakistan) and those other parts, people water by means of a wheel. They make two circles of rope long enough to suit the depths of the well, fix strips of wood between them, and on these fasten pitchers. The ropes with the wood and attached pitchers are put over the wheel-well. At one end of the wheel-axle a second wheel is fixed, and close to it another on an upright axle. The last wheel the bullock turns; its teeth catch in the teeth of the second (wheel), and thus the wheel with the pitchers is turned. A trough is set where the water empties from the pitchers and from this the water is conveyed everywhere.

In Agra, Chandwar, Bayana (all in present-day Uttar Pradesh) and those parts again, people water with a bucket ... At the well-edge they set up a fork of wood, having a roller adjusted between the forks, tie a rope to a large bucket, put the rope over a roller, and tie its other end to the bullock. One person must drive the bullock, another empty the bucket.

➤ Compare the irrigation devices observed by Babur with what you have learnt about irrigation in Vijayanagara (Chapter 7). What kind of resources would each of these systems require? Which systems could ensure the participation of peasants in improving agricultural technology?

Fig. 8.2  
A reconstructed Persian wheel, described here



### The spread of tobacco

This plant, which arrived first in the Deccan, spread to northern India in the early years of the seventeenth century. The *Ain* does not mention tobacco in the lists of crops in northern India. Akbar and his nobles came across tobacco for the first time in 1604. At this time smoking tobacco (in *hookahs* or *chillums*) seems to have caught on in a big way. Jahangir was so concerned about its addiction that he banned it. This was totally ineffective because by the end of the seventeenth century, tobacco had become a major article of consumption, cultivation and trade all over India.

### Agricultural prosperity and population growth

One important outcome of such varied and flexible forms of agricultural production was a slow demographic growth. Despite periodic disruptions caused by famines and epidemics, India's population increased, according to calculations by economic historians, by about 50 million people between 1600 and 1800, which is an increase of about 33 per cent over 200 years.

Irrigation projects received state support as well. For example, in northern India the state undertook digging of new canals (*nahr, nala*) and also repaired old ones like the *shahnahr* in the Punjab during Shah Jahan's reign.

Though agriculture was labour intensive, peasants did use technologies that often harnessed cattle energy. One example was the wooden plough, which was light and easily assembled with an iron tip or coulter. It therefore did not make deep furrows, which preserved the moisture better during the intensely hot months. A drill, pulled by a pair of giant oxen, was used to plant seeds, but broadcasting of seed was the most prevalent method. Hoeing and weeding were done simultaneously using a narrow iron blade with a small wooden handle.

#### 1.4 An abundance of crops

Agriculture was organised around two major seasonal cycles, the *kharif* (autumn) and the *rabi* (spring). This would mean that most regions, except those terrains that were the most arid or inhospitable, produced a minimum of two crops a year (*do-fasla*), whereas some, where rainfall or irrigation assured a continuous supply of water, even gave three crops. This ensured an enormous variety of produce. For instance, we are told in the *Ain* that the Mughal provinces of Agra produced 39 varieties of crops and Delhi produced 43 over the two seasons. Bengal produced 50 varieties of rice alone.

However, the focus on the cultivation of basic staples did not mean that agriculture in medieval India was only for subsistence. We often come across the term *jins-i kamil* (literally, perfect crops) in our sources. The Mughal state also encouraged peasants to cultivate such crops as they brought in more revenue. Crops such as cotton and sugarcane were *jins-i kamil* par excellence. Cotton was grown over a great swathe of territory spread over central India and the Deccan plateau, whereas Bengal was famous for its sugar. Such cash crops would also include various sorts of oilseeds (for example, mustard) and lentils. This shows how subsistence and commercial production were closely intertwined in an average peasant's holding.

During the seventeenth century several new crops from different parts of the world reached the Indian



subcontinent. Maize (*makka*), for example, was introduced into India via Africa and Spain and by the seventeenth century it was being listed as one of the major crops of western India. Vegetables like tomatoes, potatoes and chillies were introduced from the New World at this time, as were fruits like the pineapple and the papaya.

## 2. THE VILLAGE COMMUNITY

The above account makes it clear that agricultural production involved the intensive participation and initiative of the peasantry. How did this affect the structure of agrarian relations in Mughal society? To find out, let us look at the social groups involved in agricultural expansion, and at their relationships and conflicts.

We have seen that peasants held their lands in individual ownership. At the same time they belonged to a collective village community as far as many aspects of their social existence were concerned. There were three constituents of this community – the cultivators, the panchayat, and the village headman (*muqaddam* or *mandal*).

### 2.1 Caste and the rural milieu

Deep inequities on the basis of caste and other caste-like distinctions meant that the cultivators were a highly heterogeneous group. Among those who tilled the land, there was a sizeable number who worked as menials or agricultural labourers (*majur*).

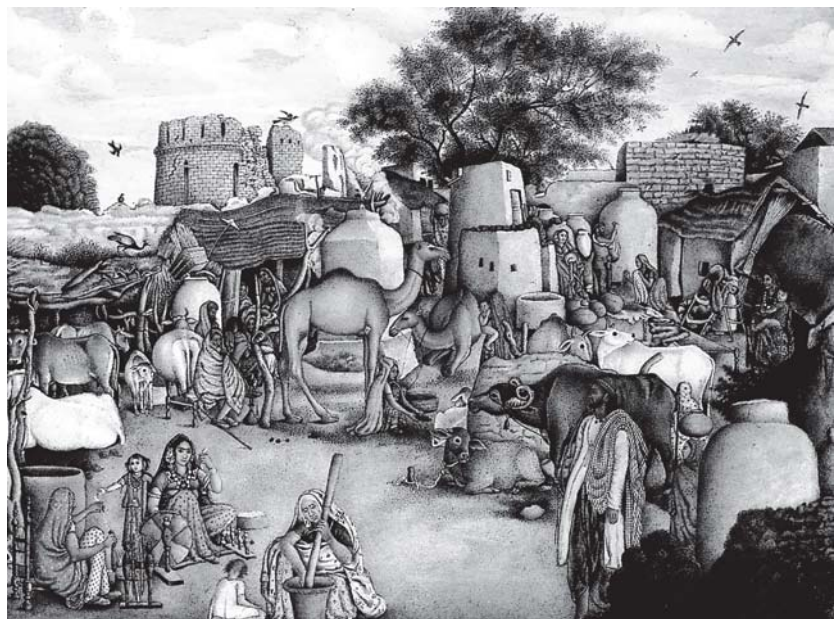
Despite the abundance of cultivable land, certain caste groups were assigned menial tasks and thus relegated to poverty. Though there was no census at that time, the little data that we have suggest that such groups comprised a large section of the village population, had the least resources and were constrained by their position in the caste hierarchy, much like the Dalits of modern India. Such distinctions had begun permeating into other

### ➔ Discuss...

Identify the technologies and agricultural practices described in this section that appear similar to or different from those described in Chapter 2.

Fig. 8.3  
An early nineteenth-century painting depicting a village in the Punjab

➔ Describe what women and men are shown doing in the illustration as well as the architecture of the village.



communities too. In Muslim communities menials like the *halalkhoran* (scavengers) were housed outside the boundaries of the village; similarly the *mallahzadas* (literally, sons of boatmen) in Bihar were comparable to slaves.

There was a direct correlation between caste, poverty and social status at the lower strata of society. Such correlations were not so marked at intermediate levels. In a manual from seventeenth-century Marwar, Rajputs are mentioned as peasants, sharing the same space with Jats, who were accorded a lower status in the caste hierarchy. The Gauravas, who cultivated land around Vrindavan (Uttar Pradesh), sought Rajput status in the seventeenth century. Castes such as the Ahirs, Gujars and Malis rose in the hierarchy because of the profitability of cattle rearing and horticulture. In the eastern regions, intermediate pastoral and fishing castes like the Sadgops and Kaivartas acquired the status of peasants.

## 2.2 Panchayats and headmen

The village panchayat was an assembly of elders, usually important people of the village with hereditary rights over their property. In mixed-caste villages, the panchayat was usually a heterogeneous body. An oligarchy, the panchayat represented various castes and communities in the village, though the village menial-cum-agricultural worker was unlikely to be represented there. The decisions made by these panchayats were binding on the members.

The panchayat was headed by a headman known as *muqaddam* or *mandal*. Some sources suggest that the headman was chosen through the consensus of the village elders, and that this choice had to be ratified by the zamindar. Headmen held office as long as they enjoyed the confidence of the village elders, failing which they could be dismissed by them. The chief function of the headman was to supervise the preparation of village accounts, assisted by the accountant or *patwari* of the panchayat.

The panchayat derived its funds from contributions made by individuals to a common financial pool. These funds were used for defraying the costs of entertaining revenue officials who visited the village from time to time. Expenses for community welfare activities such as tiding over

### Corrupt mandals

The *mandals* often misused their positions. They were principally accused of defrauding village accounts in connivance with the *patwari*, and for underassessing the revenue they owed from their own lands in order to pass the additional burden on to the smaller cultivator.

natural calamities (like floods), were also met from these funds. Often these funds were also deployed in construction of a bund or digging a canal which peasants usually could not afford to do on their own.

One important function of the *panchayat* was to ensure that caste boundaries among the various communities inhabiting the village were upheld. In eastern India all marriages were held in the

presence of the *mandal*. In other words one of the duties of the village headman was to oversee the conduct of the members of the village community “chiefly to prevent any offence against their caste”.

Panchayats also had the authority to levy fines and inflict more serious forms of punishment like expulsion from the community. The latter was a drastic step and was in most cases meted out for a limited period. It meant that a person forced to leave the village became an outcaste and lost his right to practise his profession. Such a measure was intended as a deterrent to violation of caste norms.

In addition to the village panchayat each caste or jati in the village had its own jati panchayat. These panchayats wielded considerable power in rural society. In Rajasthan jati panchayats arbitrated civil disputes between members of different castes. They mediated in contested claims on land, decided whether marriages were performed according to the norms laid down by a particular caste group, determined who had ritual precedence in village functions, and so on. In most cases, except in matters of criminal justice, the state respected the decisions of jati panchayats.

Archival records from western India – notably Rajasthan and Maharashtra – contain petitions presented to the panchayat complaining about extortionate taxation or the demand for unpaid labour (*begar*) imposed by the “superior” castes or officials of the state. These petitions were usually made by villagers, from the lowest rungs of rural society. Often petitions were made collectively as

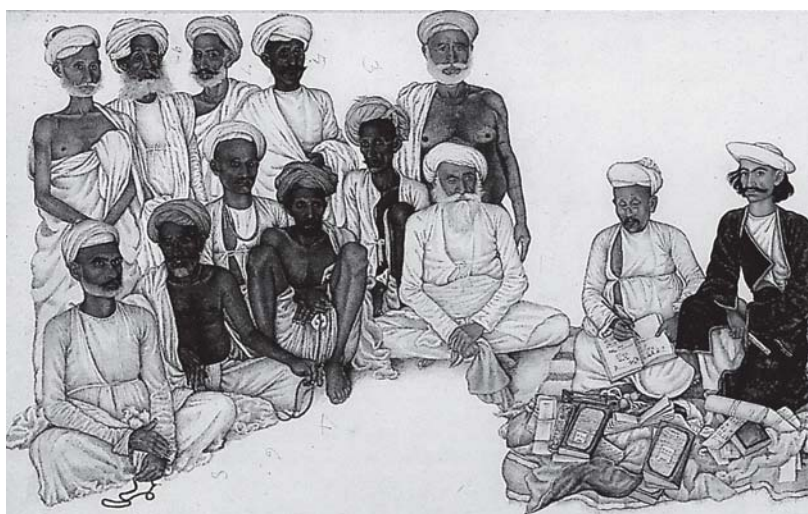


Fig. 8.4  
An early nineteenth-century painting depicting a meeting of village elders and tax collectors

➔ How has the artist differentiated between the village elders and the tax collectors?

well, by a caste group or a community protesting against what they considered were morally illegitimate demands on the part of elite groups. These included excessive tax demands which, especially in times of drought or other disasters, endangered the peasants' subsistence. In the eyes of the petitioners the right to the basic minimum for survival was sanctioned by custom. They regarded the village panchayat as the court of appeal that would ensure that the state carried out its moral obligations and guaranteed justice.

The decision of the panchayat in conflicts between "lower-caste" peasants and state officials or the local zamindar could vary from case to case. In cases of excessive revenue demands, the panchayat often suggested compromise. In cases where reconciliation failed, peasants took recourse to more drastic forms of resistance, such as deserting the village. The relatively easy availability of uncultivated land and the competition over labour resources made this an effective weapon in the hands of cultivators.

**2.3 Village artisans**

Another interesting aspect of the village was the elaborate relationship of exchange between different producers. Marathi documents and village surveys made in the early years of British rule have revealed the existence of substantial numbers of artisans, sometimes as high as 25 per cent of the total households in the villages.

At times, however, the distinction between artisans and peasants in village society was a fluid one, as many groups performed the tasks of both. Cultivators and their families would also participate in craft production – such as dyeing, textile printing, baking and firing of pottery, making and repairing

Fig. 8.5  
A seventeenth-century painting depicting textile production

➔ Describe the activities that are shown in the illustration.



agricultural implements. Phases in the agricultural calendar when there was a relative lull in activity, as between sowing and weeding or between weeding and harvesting, were a time when cultivators could engage in artisanal production.

Village artisans – potters, blacksmiths, carpenters, barbers, even goldsmiths – provided specialised services in return for which they were compensated by villagers by a variety of means. The most common way of doing so was by giving them a share of the harvest, or an allotment of land, perhaps cultivable wastes, which was likely to be decided by the panchayat. In Maharashtra such lands became the artisans' *miras* or *watan* – their hereditary holding.

Another variant of this was a system where artisans and individual peasant households entered into a mutually negotiated system of remuneration, most of the time goods for services. For example, eighteenth-century records tell us of zamindars in Bengal who remunerated blacksmiths, carpenters, even goldsmiths for their work by paying them “a small daily allowance and diet money”. This later came to be described as the *jajmani* system, though the term was not in vogue in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Such evidence is interesting because it indicates the intricate ways in which exchange networks operated at the micro-level of the village. Cash remuneration was not entirely unknown either.

#### **2.4 A “little republic”?**

How does one understand the significance of the village community? Some British officials in the nineteenth century saw the village as a “little republic” made up of fraternal partners sharing resources and labour in a collective. However, this was not a sign of rural egalitarianism. There was individual ownership of assets and deep inequities based on caste and gender distinctions. A group of powerful individuals decided the affairs of the village, exploited the weaker sections and had the authority to dispense justice.

More importantly, a cash nexus had already developed through trade between villages and towns. In the Mughal heartland too, revenue was assessed and collected in cash. Artisans producing for the export market (for example, weavers) received their

### Money in the village

The seventeenth-century French traveller Jean-Baptiste Tavernier found it remarkable that in “India a village must be very small indeed if it has not a money-changer called a Shroff. (They) act as bankers to make remittances of money (and who) enhance the rupee as they please for paisa and the paisa for these (cowrie) shells”.



Fig. 8.6  
A shroff at work

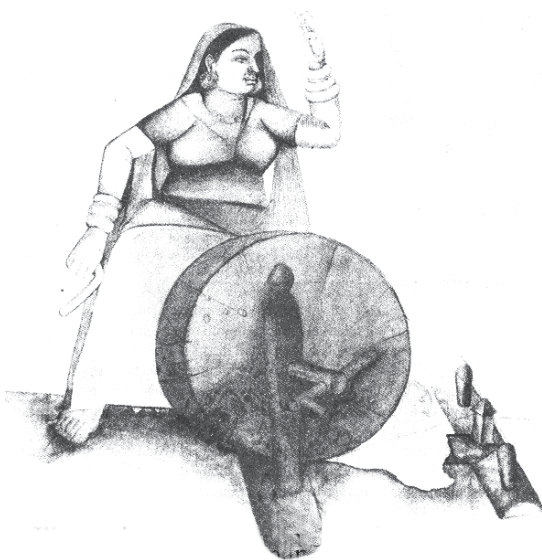


Fig. 8.7  
A woman spinning thread

advances or wages in cash, as did producers of commercial products like cotton, silk or indigo.

### ➔ Discuss...

In what ways do you think the panchayats described in this section were similar to or different from present-day gram panchayats?

## 3. WOMEN IN AGRARIAN SOCIETY

As you may have observed in many different societies, the production process often involves men and women performing certain specified roles. In the contexts that we are exploring, women and men had to work shoulder to shoulder in the fields. Men tilled and ploughed, while women sowed, weeded, threshed and winnowed the harvest. With the growth of nucleated villages and expansion in individuated peasant farming, which characterised medieval Indian agriculture, the basis of production was the labour and resources of the entire household. Naturally, a gendered segregation between the home (for women) and the world (for men) was not possible in this context. Nonetheless biases related to women's biological functions did continue. Menstruating women, for instance, were not allowed to touch the plough or the potter's wheel in western India, or enter the groves where betel-leaves (*paan*) were grown in Bengal.

Artisanal tasks such as spinning yarn, sifting and kneading clay for pottery, and embroidery were among the many aspects of production dependent on female labour. The more commercialised the product, the greater the demand on women's labour to produce it. In fact, peasant and artisan women worked not only in the fields, but even went to the houses of their employers or to the markets if necessary.

Women were considered an important resource in agrarian society also because they were child bearers in a society dependent on labour. At the same time, high mortality rates among women – owing to malnutrition, frequent pregnancies, death during childbirth – often meant a shortage of wives. This led to the emergence of social customs in peasant and artisan communities that were distinct from

those prevalent among elite groups. Marriages in many rural communities required the payment of bride-price rather than dowry to the bride's family. Remarriage was considered legitimate both among divorced and widowed women.

The importance attached to women as a reproductive force also meant that the fear of losing control over them was great. According to established social norms, the household was headed by a male. Thus women were kept under strict control by the male members of the family and the community. They could inflict draconian punishments if they suspected infidelity on the part of women.

Documents from Western India – Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra – record petitions sent by women to the village panchayat, seeking redress and justice. Wives protested against the infidelity of their husbands or the neglect of the wife and children by the male head of the household, the *grihasthi*. While male infidelity was not always punished, the state and “superior” caste groups did intervene when it came to ensuring that the family was adequately provided for. In most cases when women petitioned to the panchayat, their names were excluded from the record: the petitioner was referred to as the mother, sister or wife of the male head of the household.

Amongst the landed gentry, women had the right to inherit property. Instances from the Punjab show that women, including widows, actively participated in the rural land market as sellers of property inherited by them. Hindu and Muslim women inherited zamindaris which they were free to sell or mortgage. Women zamindars were known in eighteenth-century Bengal. In fact, one of the biggest and most famous of the eighteenth-century zamindaris, that of Rajshahi, had a woman at the helm.



Fig. 8.8 a  
The construction of Fatehpur Sikri – women crushing stones

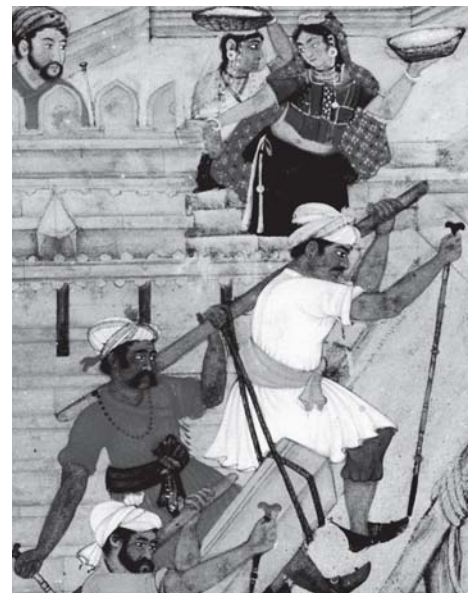


Fig. 8.8 b  
Women carrying loads  
Migrant women from neighbouring villages often worked at such construction sites.

### ➤ Discuss...

Are there any differences in the access men and women have to agricultural land in your state?

## 4. FORESTS AND TRIBES

### 4.1 Beyond settled villages

There was more to rural India than sedentary agriculture. Apart from the intensively cultivated provinces in northern and north-western India, huge swathes of forests – dense forest (*jangal*) or scrubland (*kharbandi*) – existed all over eastern India, central India, northern India (including the Terai on the Indo-Nepal border), Jharkhand, and in peninsular India down the Western Ghats and the Deccan plateau. Though it is nearly impossible to set an all-India average of the forest cover for this period, informed conjectures based on contemporary sources suggest an average of 40 per cent.

Forest dwellers were termed *jangli* in contemporary texts. Being *jangli*, however, did not mean an absence of “civilisation”, as popular usage of the term today seems to connote. Rather, the term described those whose livelihood came from the gathering of forest produce, hunting and shifting agriculture. These activities were largely season specific. Among the Bhils, for example, spring was reserved for collecting forest produce, summer for fishing, the monsoon months for cultivation, and autumn and winter for hunting. Such a sequence presumed and perpetuated mobility, which was a distinctive feature of tribes inhabiting these forests.

For the state, the forest was a subversive place – a place of refuge (*mawas*) for troublemakers. Once again, we turn to Babur who says that jungles provided a good defence “behind which the people of the pargana become stubbornly rebellious and pay no taxes”.

### 4.2 Inroads into forests

External forces entered the forest in different ways. For instance, the state required elephants for the army. So the *peshkash* levied from forest people often included a supply of elephants.

Fig. 8.9  
Painting of Shah Jahan hunting  
nilgais (from the *Badshah Nama*)

➤ Describe what you see in this painting. What is the symbolic element that helps establish the connection between the hunt and ideal justice?





In the Mughal political ideology, the hunt symbolised the overwhelming concern of the state to ensure justice to all its subjects, rich and poor. Regular hunting expeditions, so court historians tell us, enabled the emperor to travel across the extensive territories of his empire and personally attend to the grievances of its inhabitants. The hunt was a subject frequently painted by court artists. The painter resorted to the device of inserting a small scene somewhere in the picture that functioned as a symbol of a harmonious reign.

*Pargana* was an administrative subdivision of a Mughal province.

*Peshkash* was a form of tribute collected by the Mughal state.

Source 3

### Clearance of forests for agricultural settlements

This is an excerpt from a sixteenth-century Bengali poem, *Chandimangala*, composed by Mukundaram Chakrabarti. The hero of the poem, Kalaketu, set up a kingdom by clearing forests:

Hearing the news, outsiders came from various lands.  
 Kalaketu then bought and distributed among them  
 Heavy knives, axes, battle-axes and pikes.  
 From the north came the Das (people)  
 One hundred of them advanced.  
 They were struck with wonder on seeing Kalaketu  
 Who distributed betel-nut to each of them.  
 From the south came the harvesters  
 Five hundred of them under one organiser.  
 From the west came Zafar Mian,  
 Together with twenty-two thousand men.  
 Sulaimani beads in their hands  
 They chanted the names of their *pir* and *paighambar*  
 (Prophet).  
 Having cleared the forest  
 They established markets.  
 Hundreds and hundreds of foreigners  
 Ate and entered the forest.  
 Hearing the sound of the axe,  
 Tigers became apprehensive and ran away, roaring.

➔ What forms of intrusion into the forest does the text evoke? Compare its message with that of the miniature painting in Fig. 8.9. Who are the people identified as “foreigners” from the perspective of the forest dwellers?

Source 4

### Trade between the hill tribes and the plains, c. 1595

This is how Abu'l Fazl describes the transactions between the hill tribes and the plains in the *suba* of Awadh (part of present-day Uttar Pradesh):

From the northern mountains quantities of goods are carried on the backs of men, of stout ponies and of goats, such as gold, copper, lead, musk, tails of the *kutas* cow (the yak), honey, *chuk* (an acid composed of orange juice and lemon boiled together), pomegranate seed, ginger, long pepper, *majith* (a plant producing a red dye) root, borax, zedoary (a root resembling turmeric), wax, woollen stuffs, wooden ware, hawks, falcons, black falcons, merlins (a kind of bird), and other articles. In exchange they carry back white and coloured cloths, amber, salt, asafoetida, ornaments, glass and earthen ware.

➔ What are the modes of transport described in this passage? Why do you think they were used? Explain what each of the articles brought from the plains to the hills may have been used for.

Fig. 8.10  
A peasant and a hunter listening to a sufi singer



The spread of commercial agriculture was an important external factor that impinged on the lives of those who lived in the forests. Forest products – like honey, beeswax and gum lac – were in great demand. Some, such as gum lac, became major items of overseas export from India in the seventeenth century. Elephants were also captured and sold. Trade involved an exchange of commodities through barter as well. Some tribes, like the Lohanis in the Punjab, were engaged in overland trade, between India and Afghanistan, and in the town-country trade in the Punjab itself.

Social factors too wrought changes in the lives of forest dwellers. Like the “big men” of the village community, tribes also had their chieftains. Many tribal chiefs had become zamindars, some even became kings. For this they required to build up an army. They recruited people from their lineage groups or demanded that their fraternity provide military service. Tribes in the Sind region had armies comprising 6,000 cavalry and 7,000 infantry. In Assam, the Ahom kings had their *paiks*, people who were obliged to render military service in exchange for land. The capture of wild elephants was declared a royal monopoly by the Ahom kings.

Though the transition from a tribal to a monarchical system had started much earlier, the process seems to have become fully developed only by the sixteenth century. This can be seen from the *Ain*'s observations on the existence of tribal kingdoms in the north-east. War was a common occurrence. For instance, the Koch kings fought and subjugated a number of neighbouring tribes in a long sequence of wars through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

New cultural influences also began to penetrate into forested zones. Some historians have indeed suggested that sufi saints (*pirs*) played a major role in the slow acceptance of Islam among agricultural communities emerging in newly colonised places (see also Chapter 6).

## 5. THE ZAMINDARS

Our story of agrarian relations in Mughal India will not be complete without referring to a class of people in the countryside that lived off agriculture but did not participate directly in the processes of agricultural production. These were the zamindars who were landed proprietors who also enjoyed certain social and economic privileges by virtue of their superior status in rural society. Caste was one factor that accounted for the elevated status of zamindars; another factor was that they performed certain services (*khidmat*) for the state.

The zamindars held extensive personal lands termed *milkiyat*, meaning property. *Milkiyat* lands were cultivated for the private use of zamindars, often with the help of hired or servile labour. The zamindars could sell, bequeath or mortgage these lands at will.

Zamindars also derived their power from the fact that they could often collect revenue on behalf of the state, a service for which they were compensated financially. Control over military resources was another source of power. Most zamindars had fortresses (*qilachas*) as well as an armed contingent comprising units of cavalry, artillery and infantry.

Thus if we visualise social relations in the Mughal countryside as a pyramid, zamindars clearly constituted its very narrow apex. Abu'l Fazl's account indicates that an "upper-caste", Brahmana-Rajput

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### ➔ Discuss...

Find out which areas are currently identified as forest zones in your state. Is life in these areas changing today? Are the factors responsible for these changes different from or identical to those mentioned in this section?

combine had already established firm control over rural society. It also reflects a fairly large representation from the so-called intermediate castes, as we saw earlier, as well as a liberal sprinkling of Muslim zamindaris.

Contemporary documents give an impression that conquest may have been the source of the origin of some zamindaris. The dispossession of weaker people by a powerful military chieftain was quite often a way of expanding a zamindari. It is, however, unlikely that the state would have allowed such a show of aggression by a zamindar unless he had been confirmed by an imperial order (*sanad*).

More important were the slow processes of zamindari consolidation, which are also documented in sources. These involved colonisation of new lands, by transfer of rights, by order of the state and by purchase. These were the processes which perhaps permitted people belonging to the relatively “lower” castes to enter the rank of zamindars as zamindaris were bought and sold quite briskly in this period.

A combination of factors also allowed the consolidation of clan- or lineage-based zamindaris. For example, the Rajputs and Jats adopted these strategies to consolidate their control over vast swathes of territory in northern India. Likewise, peasant-pastoralists (like the Sadgops) carved out powerful zamindaris in areas of central and south-western Bengal.

Zamindars spearheaded the colonisation of agricultural land, and helped in settling cultivators by providing them with the means of cultivation, including cash loans. The buying and selling of zamindaris accelerated the process of monetisation in the countryside. In addition, zamindars sold the produce from their *milkiyat* lands. There is evidence to show that zamindars often established markets (*haats*) to which peasants also came to sell their produce.

Although there can be little doubt that zamindars were an exploitative class, their relationship with the peasantry had an element of reciprocity, paternalism and patronage. Two aspects reinforce this view. First, the bhakti saints, who eloquently condemned caste-based and other forms of oppression (see also Chapter 6), did not portray the zamindars (or, interestingly, the moneylender) as exploiters or oppressors of the peasantry. Usually it was the

### A parallel army!

According to the *Ain*, the combined military strength of the zamindars in Mughal India was 384,558 cavalry, 4,277,057 infantry, 1,863 elephants, 4,260 cannons, and 4,500 boats.

revenue official of the state who was the object of their ire. Second, in a large number of agrarian uprisings which erupted in north India in the seventeenth century, zamindars often received the support of the peasantry in their struggle against the state.

## 6. LAND REVENUE SYSTEM

Revenue from the land was the economic mainstay of the Mughal Empire. It was therefore vital for the state to create an administrative apparatus to ensure control over agricultural production, and to fix and collect revenue from across the length and breadth of the rapidly expanding empire. This apparatus included the office (*daftar*) of the *diwan* who was responsible for supervising the fiscal system of the empire. Thus revenue officials and record keepers penetrated the agricultural domain and became a decisive agent in shaping agrarian relations.

The Mughal state tried to first acquire specific information about the extent of the agricultural lands in the empire and what these lands produced before fixing the burden of taxes on people. The land revenue arrangements consisted of two stages – first, assessment and then actual collection. The *jama* was the amount assessed, as opposed to *hasil*, the amount collected. In his list of duties of the *amil-guzar* or revenue collector, Akbar decreed that while he should strive to make cultivators pay in cash, the option of payment in kind was also to be kept open. While fixing revenue, the attempt of the state was to maximise its claims. The scope of actually realising these claims was, however, sometimes thwarted by local conditions.

Both cultivated and cultivable lands were measured in each province. The *Ain* compiled the aggregates of such lands during Akbar's rule. Efforts to measure lands continued under subsequent emperors. For instance, in 1665, Aurangzeb expressly instructed his revenue officials to prepare annual records of the number of cultivators in each village (Source 7). Yet not all areas were measured successfully. As we have seen, forests covered huge areas of the subcontinent and thus remained unmeasured.

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### ➔ Discuss...

The zamindari system was abolished in India after Independence. Read through this section and identify reasons why this was done.

Source 5

Amin was an official responsible for ensuring that imperial regulations were carried out in the provinces.

**Classification of lands under Akbar**

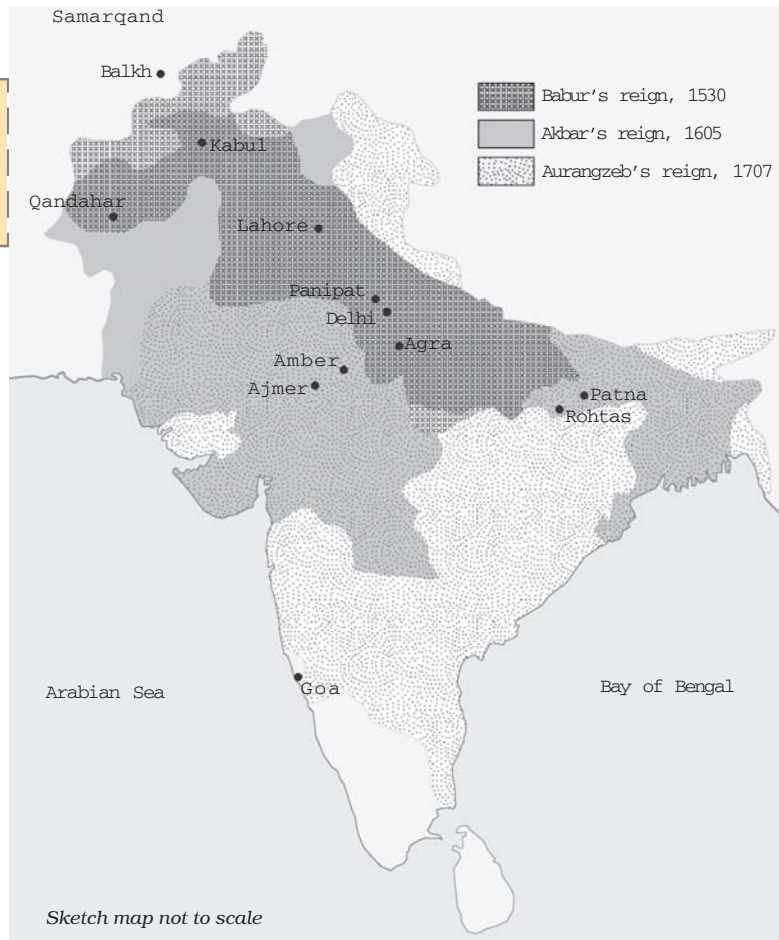
The following is a listing of criteria of classification excerpted from the *Ain*:

The Emperor Akbar in his profound sagacity classified the lands and fixed a different revenue to be paid by each. *Polaj* is land which is annually cultivated for each crop in succession and is never allowed to lie fallow. *Parauti* is land left out of cultivation for a time that it may recover its strength. *Chachar* is land that has lain fallow for three or four years. *Banjar* is land uncultivated for five years and more. Of the first two kinds of land, there are three classes, good, middling, and bad. They add together the produce of each sort, and the third of this represents the medium produce, one-third part of which is exacted as the Royal dues.

➡ What principles did the Mughal state follow while classifying lands in its territories? How was revenue assessed?

Map 1  
The expansion of the Mughal Empire

➡ What impact do you think the expansion of the empire would have had on land revenue collection?



**The mansabdari system**  
The Mughal administrative system had at its apex a military-cum-bureaucratic apparatus (*mansabdari*) which was responsible for looking after the civil and military affairs of the state. Some *mansabdars* were paid in cash (*naqdi*), while the majority of them were paid through assignments of revenue (*jagirs*) in different regions of the empire. They were transferred periodically. See also Chapter 9.

## Source 6

## Cash or kind?

The *Ain* on land revenue collection:

Let him (the *amil-guzar*) not make it a practice of taking only in cash but also in kind. The latter is effected in several ways. First, *kankut* : in the Hindi language *kan* signifies grain, and *kut*, estimates ... If any doubts arise, the crops should be cut and estimated in three lots, the good, the middling, and the inferior, and the hesitation removed. Often, too, the land taken by appraisalment, gives a sufficiently accurate return. Secondly, *batai*, also called *bhaoli*, the crops are reaped and stacked and divided by agreement in the presence of the parties. But in this case several intelligent inspectors are required; otherwise, the evil-minded and false are given to deception. Thirdly, *khet-batai*, when they divide the fields after they are sown. Fourthly, *lang batai*, after cutting the grain, they form it in heaps and divide it among themselves, and each takes his share home and turns it to profit.

➔ What difference would each of the systems of assessment and collection of revenue have made to the cultivator?

## Source 7

The *jama*

This is an excerpt from Aurangzeb's order to his revenue official, 1665:

He should direct the *amins* of the *parganas* that they should discover the actual conditions of cultivation (*maujudat*), village by village, peasant-wise (*asamiwar*), and after minute scrutiny, assess the *jama*, keeping in view the financial interests (*kifayat*) of the government, and the welfare of the peasantry.

➔ Why do you think the emperor insisted on a detailed survey?

## ➔ Discuss...

Would you consider the land revenue system of the Mughals as a flexible one?

## 7. THE FLOW OF SILVER

The Mughal Empire was among the large territorial empires in Asia that had managed to consolidate power and resources during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These empires were the Ming (China), Safavid (Iran) and Ottoman (Turkey). The political stability achieved by all these empires helped create vibrant networks of overland trade from China to the Mediterranean Sea. Voyages of discovery and the opening up of the New World resulted in a massive expansion of Asia's (particularly India's) trade with Europe. This resulted in a greater geographical diversity of India's overseas trade as well as an



Fig. 8.11  
A silver rupya issued by Akbar  
(obverse and reverse)



Fig. 8.12  
A silver rupya issued by Aurangzeb

expansion in the commodity composition of this trade. An expanding trade brought in huge amounts of silver bullion into Asia to pay for goods procured from India, and a large part of that bullion gravitated towards India. This was good for India as it did not have natural resources of silver. As a result, the period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries was also marked by a remarkable stability in the availability of metal currency, particularly the silver *rupya* in India. This facilitated an unprecedented expansion of minting of coins and the circulation of money in the economy as well as the ability of the Mughal state to extract taxes and revenue in cash.

The testimony of an Italian traveller, Giovanni Careri, who passed through India c. 1690, provides a graphic account about the way silver travelled across the globe to reach India. It also gives us an idea of the phenomenal amounts of cash and commodity transactions in seventeenth-century India.

Fig. 8.13  
An example of textiles produced in the subcontinent to meet the demands of European markets



### ➔ Discuss...

Find out whether there are any taxes on agricultural production at present in your state. Explain the similarities and differences between Mughal fiscal policies and those adopted by present-day state governments.



Source 8

### How silver came to India

This excerpt from Giovanni Careri's account (based on Bernier's account) gives an idea of the enormous amount of wealth that found its way into the Mughal Empire:

That the Reader may form some idea of the Wealth of this (Mughal) Empire, he is to observe that all the Gold and Silver, which circulates throughout the World at last Centres here. It is well known that as much of it comes out of America, after running through several Kingdoms of Europe, goes partly into Turkey (Turkey), for several sorts of Commodities; and part into Persia, by the way of Smirna for Silk. Now the Turks not being able to abstain from Coffee, which comes from Hyeman (Oman), and Arabia ... nor Persia, Arabia, and the Turks themselves to go without the commodities of India, send vast quantities of Mony (money) to Moka (Mocha) on the Red Sea, near Babel Mandel; to Bassora (Basra) at the bottom of the Persian Gulgh (Gulf); ... which is afterwards sent over in Ships to Indostan (Hindustan). Besides the Indian, Dutch, English, and Portuguese Ships, that every Year carry the Commodities of Indostan, to Pegu, Tanasserri (parts of Myanmar), Siam (Thailand), Ceylon (Sri Lanka) ... the Maldive Islands, Mozambique and other Places, must of necessity convey much Gold and Silver thither, from those Countries. All that the Dutch fetch from the Mines in Japan, sooner or later, goes to Indostan; and the goods carry'd hence into Europe, whether to France, England, or Portugal, are all purchas'd for ready Mony, which remains there.

## 8. THE *AIN-I AKBARI* OF ABU'L FAZL ALLAMI

The *Ain-i Akbari* was the culmination of a large historical, administrative project of classification undertaken by Abu'l Fazl at the order of Emperor Akbar. It was completed in 1598, the forty-second regnal year of the emperor, after having gone through five revisions. The *Ain* was part of a larger project of history writing commissioned by Akbar. This history, known as the *Akbar Nama*, comprised three books. The first two provided a historical narrative. We will look at these parts more closely in Chapter 9. The *Ain-i Akbari*, the third book, was organised as a compendium of imperial regulations and a gazetteer of the empire.

The *Ain* gives detailed accounts of the organisation of the court, administration and army, the sources of revenue and the physical layout of the provinces of Akbar's empire and the literary, cultural and religious traditions of the people. Along with a description of the various departments of Akbar's government and elaborate descriptions of the

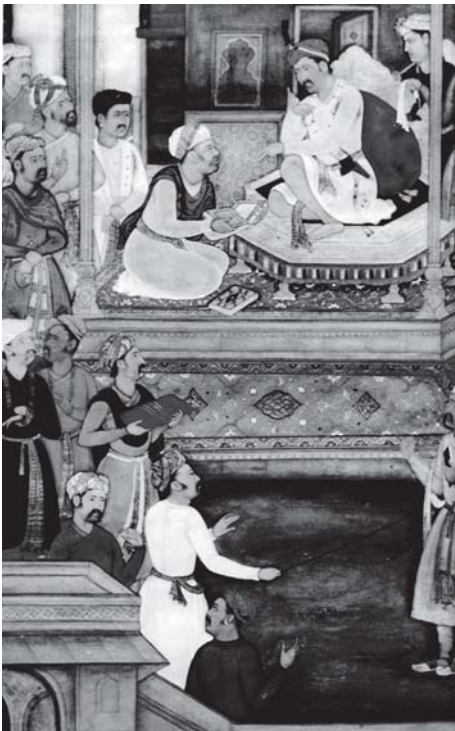


Fig. 8.14  
Abu'l Fazl presenting the  
manuscript of the completed  
Akbar Nama to his patron

various provinces (*subas*) of the empire, the *Ain* gives us intricate quantitative information of those provinces.

Collecting and compiling this information systematically was an important imperial exercise. It informed the emperor about the varied and diverse customs and practices prevailing across his extensive territories. The *Ain* is therefore a mine of information for us about the Mughal Empire during Akbar's reign. It is important, however, to keep in mind that this is a view of the regions from the centre, a view of society from its apex.

The *Ain* is made up of five books (*daftar*s), of which the first three books describe the administration. The first book, called *manzil-abadi*, concerns the imperial household and its maintenance. The second book, *sipah-abadi*, covers the military and civil administration and the establishment of servants. This book includes notices and short biographical sketches of imperial officials (*mansabdars*), learned men, poets and artists.

The third book, *mulk-abadi*, is the one which deals with the fiscal side of the empire and provides rich quantitative information on revenue rates, followed by the "Account of the Twelve Provinces". This section has detailed statistical information, which includes the geographic, topographic and economic profile of all *subas* and their administrative and fiscal divisions (*sarkars*, *parganas* and *mahals*), total measured area, and assessed revenue (*jama*).

After setting out details at the *suba* level, the *Ain* goes on to give a detailed picture of the *sarkars* below the *suba*. This it does in the form of tables, which have eight columns giving the following information: (1) *parganat/mahal*; (2) *qila* (forts); (3) *arazi* and *zamin-i paimuda* (measured area); (4) *naqdi*, revenue assessed in cash; (5) *suyurghal*, grants of revenue in charity; (6) zamindars; columns 7 and 8 contain details of the castes of these zamindars, and their troops including their horsemen (*sawar*), foot-soldiers (*piyada*) and elephants (*fil*). The *mulk-abadi* gives a fascinating, detailed and highly complex view of agrarian society in northern India. The fourth and fifth books (*daftar*s) deal with the religious, literary and cultural traditions of the people of India and also contain a collection of Akbar's "auspicious sayings".

Source 9

### “Moistening the rose garden of fortune”

In this extract Abu'l Fazl gives a vivid account of how and from whom he collected his information:

... to Abu'l Fazl, son of Mubarak ... this sublime mandate was given. “Write with the pen of sincerity the account of the glorious events and of our dominion-conquering victories ... Assuredly, I spent much labour and research in collecting the records and narratives of His Majesty's actions and I was a long time interrogating the servants of the State and the old members of the illustrious family. I examined both prudent, truth-speaking old men and active-minded, right-actioned young ones and reduced their statements to writing. The Royal commands were issued to the provinces, that those who from old service remembered, with certainty or with admixture of doubt, the events of the past, should copy out the notes and memoranda and transit them to the court. (Then) a second command shone forth from the holy Presence-chamber; to wit – that the materials which had been collected should be ... recited in the royal hearing, and whatever might have to be written down afterwards, should be introduced into the noble volume as a supplement, and that such details as on account of the minuteness of the inquiries and the *minutae* of affairs, (which) could not then be brought to an end, should be inserted afterwards at my leisure.

Being relieved by this royal order – the interpreter of the Divine ordinance – from the secret anxiety of my heart, I proceeded to reduce into writing the rough draughts (drafts) which were void of the grace of arrangement and style. I obtained the chronicle of events beginning at the Nineteenth Year of the Divine Era, when the Record Office was established by the enlightened intellect of His Majesty, and from its rich pages, I gathered the accounts of many events. Great pains too, were taken to procure the originals or copies of most of the orders which had been issued to the provinces from the Accession up to the present-day ... I also took much trouble to incorporate many of the reports which ministers and high officials had submitted, about the affairs of the empire and the events of foreign countries. And my labour-loving soul was satiated by the apparatus of inquiry and research. I also exerted myself energetically to collect the rough notes and memoranda of sagacious and well-informed men. By these means, I constructed a reservoir for irrigating and moistening the rose garden of fortune (the *Akbar Nama*).

➤ List all the sources that Abu'l Fazl used to compile his work. Which of these sources would have been most useful for arriving at an understanding of agrarian relations? To what extent do you think his work would have been influenced by his relationship with Akbar?

### Translating the *Ain*

Given the importance of the *Ain*, it has been translated for use by a number of scholars. Henry Blochmann edited it and the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta (present-day Kolkata), published it in its Bibliotheca Indica series. The book has also been translated into English in three volumes. The standard translation of Volume 1 is that of Henry Blochmann (Calcutta 1873). The other two volumes were translated by H.S. Jarrett (Calcutta 1891 and 1894).

Although the *Ain* was officially sponsored to record detailed information to facilitate Emperor Akbar govern his empire, it was much more than a reproduction of official papers. That the manuscript was revised five times by the author would suggest a high degree of caution on the part of Abu'l Fazl and a search for authenticity. For instance, oral testimonies were cross-checked and verified before being incorporated as “facts” in the chronicle. In the quantitative sections, all numeric data were reproduced in words so as to minimise the chances of subsequent transcriptional errors.

Historians who have carefully studied the *Ain* point out that it is not without its problems. Numerous errors in totalling have been detected. These are ascribed to simple slips of arithmetic or of transcription by Abu'l Fazl's assistants. These are generally minor and do not detract from the overall quantitative veracity of the manuals.

Another limitation of the *Ain* is the somewhat skewed nature of the quantitative data. Data were not collected uniformly from all provinces. For instance, while for many *subas* detailed information was compiled about the caste composition of the zamindars, such information is not available for Bengal and Orissa. Further, while the fiscal data from the *subas* is remarkable for its richness, some equally vital parameters such as prices and wages from these same areas are not as well documented. The detailed list of prices and wages that the *Ain* does provide is mainly derived from data pertaining to areas in or around the imperial capital of Agra, and is therefore of limited relevance for the rest of the country.

These limitations notwithstanding, the *Ain* remains an extraordinary document of its times. By providing fascinating glimpses into the structure and organisation of the Mughal Empire and by giving us quantitative information about its products and people, Abu'l Fazl achieved a major breakthrough in the tradition of medieval chroniclers who wrote mostly about remarkable political events – wars, conquests, political machinations, and dynastic turmoil. Information about the country, its people

and its products was mentioned only incidentally and as embellishments to the essentially political thrust of the narrative.

The *Ain* completely departed from this tradition as it recorded information about the *empire* and the *people* of India, and thus constitutes a benchmark for studying India at the turn of the seventeenth century. The value of the *Ain*'s quantitative evidence is uncontested where the study of agrarian relations is concerned. But it is the information it contains on people, their professions and trades and on the imperial establishment and the *grandees* of the empire which enables historians to reconstruct the social fabric of India at that time.

### TIMELINE

#### LANDMARKS IN THE HISTORY OF THE MUGHAL EMPIRE

1526	Babur defeats Ibrahim Lodi, the Delhi Sultan, at Panipat, becomes the first Mughal emperor
1530-40	First phase of Humayun's reign
1540-55	Humayun defeated by Sher Shah, in exile at the Safavid court
1555-56	Humayun regains lost territories
1556-1605	Reign of Akbar
1605-27	Reign of Jahangir
1628-58	Reign of Shah Jahan
1658-1707	Reign of Aurangzeb
1739	Nadir Shah invades India and sacks Delhi
1761	Ahmad Shah Abdali defeats the Marathas in the third battle of Panipat
1765	The <i>diwani</i> of Bengal transferred to the East India Company
1857	Last Mughal ruler, Bahadur Shah II, deposed by the British and exiled to Rangoon (present day Yangon, Myanmar)



### ANSWER IN 100-150 WORDS

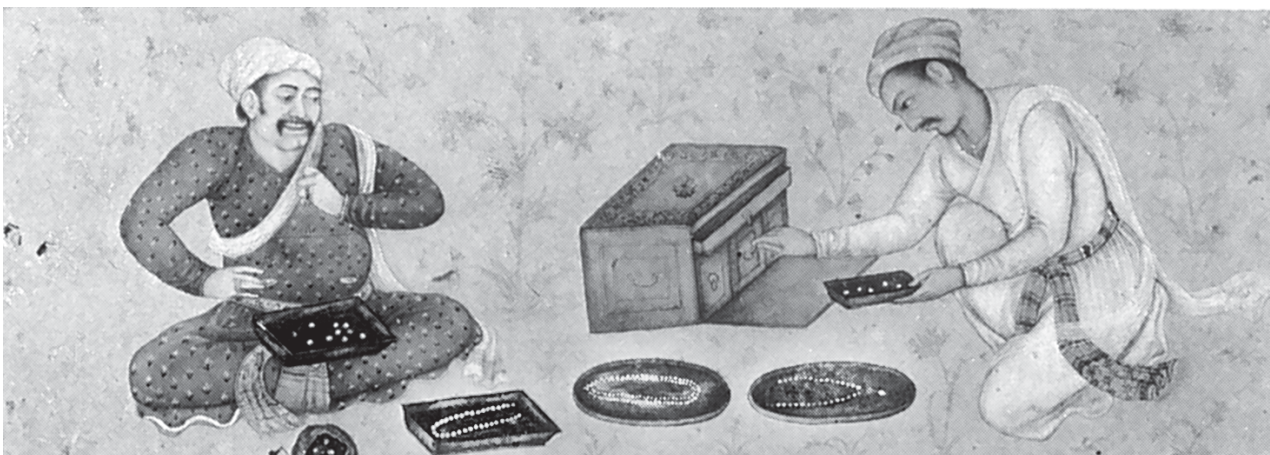
1. What are the problems in using the *Ain* as a source for reconstructing agrarian history? How do historians deal with this situation?
2. To what extent is it possible to characterise agricultural production in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries as subsistence agriculture? Give reasons for your answer.
3. Describe the role played by women in agricultural production.
4. Discuss, with examples, the significance of monetary transactions during the period under consideration.
5. Examine the evidence that suggests that land revenue was important for the Mughal fiscal system.



### WRITE A SHORT ESSAY (ABOUT 250-300 WORDS) ON THE FOLLOWING:

6. To what extent do you think caste was a factor in influencing social and economic relations in agrarian society?
7. How were the lives of forest dwellers transformed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries?
8. Examine the role played by zamindars in Mughal India.
9. Discuss the ways in which panchayats and village headmen regulated rural society.

*Fig. 8.15*  
A seventeenth-century painting depicting jewellers





### MAP WORK

10. On an outline map of the world, mark the areas which had economic links with the Mughal Empire, and trace out possible routes of communication.



### PROJECT (CHOOSE ONE)

11. Visit a neighbouring village. Find out how many people live there, which crops are grown, which animals are raised, which artisanal groups reside there, whether women own land, how the local panchayat functions. Compare this information with what you have learnt about the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries, noting similarities and differences. Explain both the changes and the continuities that you find.
12. Select a small section of the *Ain* (10-12 pages, available online at the website indicated below). Read it carefully and prepare a report on how it can be used by a historian.

Fig. 8.16  
A painting depicting a woman selling sweets



### If you would like to know more, read:

Sumit Guha. 1999.  
*Environment and Ethnicity in India*.  
Cambridge University Press,  
Cambridge.

Irfan Habib. 1999.  
*The Agrarian System of Mughal India 1556-1707* (Second edition).  
Oxford University Press,  
New Delhi.

W.H. Moreland. 1983 (rpt).  
*India at the Death of Akbar: An Economic Study*.  
Oriental, New Delhi.

Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib (eds). 2004.  
*The Cambridge Economic History of India. Vol.1*.  
Orient Longman, New Delhi.

Dietmar Rothermund. 1993.  
*An Economic History of India – from Pre-colonial Times to 1991*.  
Routledge, London.

Sanjay Subrahmanyam (ed.).1994.  
*Money and the Market in India, 1100-1700*.  
Oxford University Press,  
New Delhi.



### For more information, you could visit:

<http://persian.packhum.org/persianindex.jsp?serv=pf&file=00702053&ct=0>





## THEME NINE

# KINGS AND CHRONICLES

## THE MUGHAL COURTS

### (C. SIXTEENTH-SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES)

The rulers of the Mughal Empire saw themselves as appointed by Divine Will to rule over a large and heterogeneous populace. Although this grand vision was often circumscribed by actual

political circumstances, it remained important. One way of transmitting this vision was through the writing of dynastic histories. The Mughal kings commissioned court historians to write accounts. These accounts recorded the events of the emperor's time. In addition, their writers collected vast amounts of information from the regions of the subcontinent to help the rulers govern their domain.

Modern historians writing in English have termed this genre of texts *chronicles*, as they present a continuous chronological record of events. Chronicles are an indispensable source for any scholar wishing to write a history of the Mughals. At one level they were a repository of factual information about the institutions of the Mughal state, painstakingly collected and classified by

individuals closely connected with the court. At the same time these texts were intended as conveyors of meanings that the Mughal rulers sought to impose on their domain. They therefore give us a glimpse into how imperial ideologies were created and disseminated. This chapter will look at the workings of this rich and fascinating dimension of the Mughal Empire.

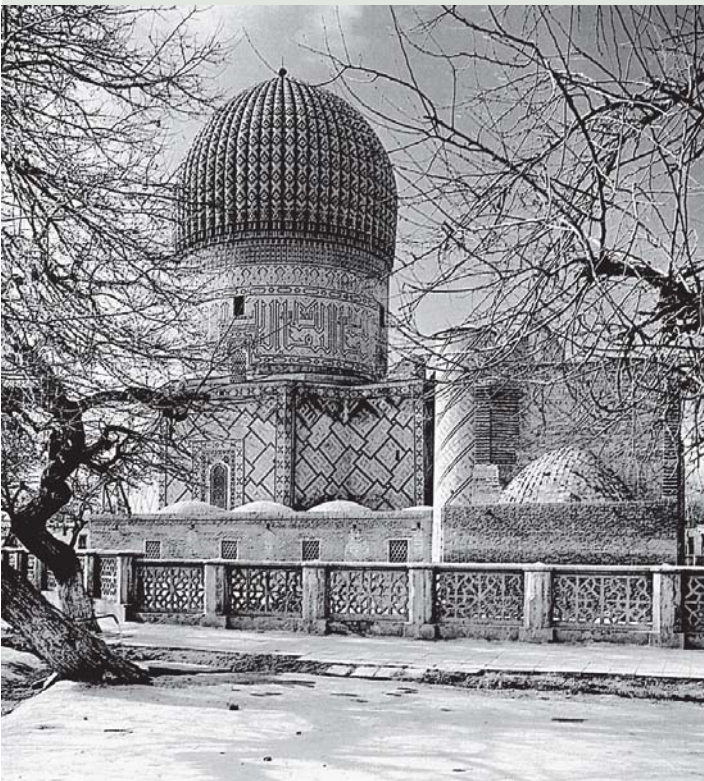


Fig. 9.1  
The mausoleum of Timur at  
Samarqand, 1404

## 1. THE MUGHALS AND THEIR EMPIRE

The name Mughal derives from Mongol. Though today the term evokes the grandeur of an empire, it was not the name the rulers of the dynasty chose for themselves. They referred to themselves as Timurids, as descendants of the Turkish ruler Timur on the paternal side. Babur, the first Mughal ruler, was related to Ghenghiz Khan from his mother's side. He spoke Turkish and referred derisively to the Mongols as barbaric hordes.

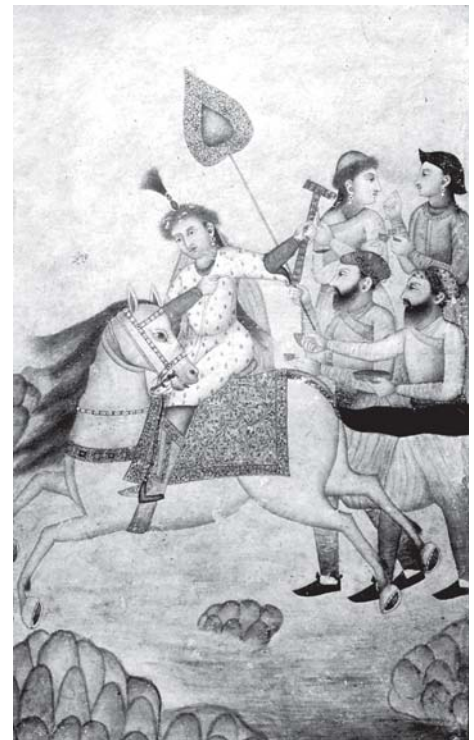
During the sixteenth century, Europeans used the term Mughal to describe the Indian rulers of this branch of the family. Over the past centuries the word has been frequently used – even the name Mowgli, the young hero of Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*, is derived from it.

The empire was carved out of a number of regional states of India through conquests and political alliances between the Mughals and local chieftains. The founder of the empire, Zahiruddin Babur, was driven from his Central Asian homeland, Farghana, by the warring Uzbeks. He first established himself at Kabul and then in 1526 pushed further into the Indian subcontinent in search of territories and resources to satisfy the needs of the members of his clan.

His successor, Nasiruddin Humayun (1530-40, 1555-56) expanded the frontiers of the empire, but lost it to the Afghan leader Sher Shah Sur, who drove him into exile. Humayun took refuge in the court of the Safavid ruler of Iran. In 1555 Humayun defeated the Surs, but died a year later.

Many consider Jalaluddin Akbar (1556-1605) the greatest of all the Mughal emperors, for he not only expanded but also consolidated his empire, making it the largest, strongest and richest kingdom of his time. Akbar succeeded in extending the frontiers of the empire to the Hindukush mountains, and checked the expansionist designs of the Uzbeks of Turan (Central Asia) and the Safavids of Iran. Akbar had three fairly able successors in Jahangir (1605-27), Shah Jahan (1628-58) and Aurangzeb (1658-1707), much as their characters varied. Under them the territorial expansion continued, though at a much reduced pace. The three rulers maintained and consolidated the various instruments of governance.

*Fig. 9.2*  
An eighteenth-century depiction of Humayun's wife Nadira crossing the desert of Rajasthan



### ➔ Discuss...

Find out whether the state in which you live formed part of the Mughal Empire.

Were there any changes in the area as a result of the establishment of the empire? If your state was not part of the empire, find out more about contemporary regional rulers – their origins and policies. What kind of records did they maintain?

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the institutions of an imperial structure were created. These included effective methods of administration and taxation. The visible centre of Mughal power was the court. Here political alliances and relationships were forged, status and hierarchies defined. The political system devised by the Mughals was based on a combination of military power and conscious policy to accommodate the different traditions they encountered in the subcontinent.

After 1707, following the death of Aurangzeb, the power of the dynasty diminished. In place of the vast apparatus of empire controlled from Delhi, Agra or Lahore – the different capital cities – regional powers acquired greater autonomy. Yet symbolically the prestige of the Mughal ruler did not lose its aura. In 1857 the last scion of this dynasty, Bahadur Shah Zafar II, was overthrown by the British.

## 2. THE PRODUCTION OF CHRONICLES

Chronicles commissioned by the Mughal emperors are an important source for studying the empire and its court. They were written in order to project a vision of an enlightened kingdom to all those who came under its umbrella. At the same time they were meant to convey to those who resisted the rule of the Mughals that all resistance was destined to fail. Also, the rulers wanted to ensure that there was an account of their rule for posterity.

The authors of Mughal chronicles were invariably courtiers. The histories they wrote focused on events centred on the ruler, his family, the court and nobles, wars and administrative arrangements. Their titles, such as the *Akbar Nama*, *Shahjahan Nama*, *Alamgir Nama*, that is, the story of Akbar, Shah Jahan and Alamgir (a title of the Mughal ruler Aurangzeb), suggest that in the eyes of their authors the history of the empire and the court was synonymous with that of the emperor.

### 2.1 From Turkish to Persian

Mughal court chronicles were written in Persian. Under the Sultans of Delhi it flourished as a language of the court and of literary writings, alongside north Indian languages, especially Hindavi and its regional variants. As the Mughals were Chaghtai Turks by origin, Turkish was their mother

*Chaghtai* Turks traced descent from the eldest son of Ghengiz Khan.

tongue. Their first ruler Babur wrote poetry and his memoirs in this language.

It was Akbar who consciously set out to make Persian the leading language of the Mughal court. Cultural and intellectual contacts with Iran, as well as a regular stream of Iranian and Central Asian migrants seeking positions at the Mughal court, might have motivated the emperor to adopt the language. Persian was elevated to a language of empire, conferring power and prestige on those who had a command of it. It was spoken by the king, the royal household and the elite at court. Further, it became the language of administration at all levels so that accountants, clerks and other functionaries also learnt it.

Even when Persian was not directly used, its vocabulary and idiom heavily influenced the language of official records in Rajasthani and Marathi and even Tamil. Since the people using Persian in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries came from many different regions of the subcontinent and spoke other Indian languages, Persian too became Indianised by absorbing local idioms. A new language, Urdu, sprang from the interaction of Persian with Hindavi.

Mughal chronicles such as the *Akbar Nama* were written in Persian, others, like Babur's memoirs, were translated from the Turkish into the Persian *Babur Nama*. Translations of Sanskrit texts such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* into Persian were commissioned by the Mughal emperors. The *Mahabharata* was translated as the *Razmnama* (Book of Wars).

## 2.2 The making of manuscripts

All books in Mughal India were manuscripts, that is, they were handwritten. The centre of manuscript production was the imperial *kitabkhana*. Although *kitabkhana* can be translated as library, it was a scriptorium, that is, a place where the emperor's collection of manuscripts was kept and new manuscripts were produced.

The creation of a manuscript involved a number of people performing a variety of tasks. Paper makers were needed to prepare the folios of the manuscript, scribes or calligraphers to copy the text, gilders to illuminate the pages, painters to illustrate scenes

### The flight of the written word

In Abu'l Fazl's words:

The written word may embody the wisdom of bygone ages and may become a means to intellectual progress. The spoken word goes to the heart of those who are present to hear it. The written word gives wisdom to those who are near and far. If it was not for the written word, the spoken word would soon die, and no keepsake would be left us from those who are passed away. Superficial observers see in the letter a dark figure, but the deep-sighted see in it a lamp of wisdom (*chirag-i shinasai*). The written word looks black, notwithstanding the thousand rays within it, or it is a light with a mole on it that wards off the evil eye. A letter (*khat*) is the portrait of wisdom; a rough sketch from the realm of ideas; a dark light ushering in day; a black cloud pregnant with knowledge; speaking though dumb; stationary yet travelling; stretched on the sheet, and yet soaring upwards.



Fig. 9.3

A folio in nastaliq, the work of Muhammad Husayn of Kashmir (c.1575-1605), one of the finest calligraphers at Akbar's court, who was honoured with the title "zarrin qalam" (golden pen) in recognition of the perfectly proportioned curvature of his letters

The calligrapher has signed his name on the lower section of the page, taking up almost one-fourth of its space.

from the text, bookbinders to gather the individual folios and set them within ornamental covers. The finished manuscript was seen as a precious object, a work of intellectual wealth and beauty. It exemplified the power of its patron, the Mughal emperor, to bring such beauty into being.

At the same time some of the people involved in the actual production of the manuscript also got recognition in the form of titles and awards. Of these, calligraphers and painters held a high social standing while others, such as paper makers or bookbinders, have remained anonymous artisans.

Calligraphy, the art of handwriting, was considered a skill of great importance. It was practised using different styles. Akbar's favourite was the *nastaliq*, a fluid style with long horizontal strokes. It is written using a piece of trimmed reed with a tip of five to 10 mm called *qalam*, dipped in carbon ink (*siyah*). The nib of the *qalam* is usually split in the middle to facilitate the absorption of ink.

### ➔ Discuss...

In what ways do you think the production of books today is similar to or different from the ways in which Mughal chronicles were produced?

### 3. THE PAINTED IMAGE

As we read in the previous section, painters too were involved in the production of Mughal manuscripts. Chronicles narrating the events of a Mughal emperor's reign contained, alongside the written text, images that described an event in visual form. When scenes or themes in a book were to be given visual expression, the scribe left blank spaces on nearby pages; paintings, executed separately by artists, were inserted to accompany what was described in words. These paintings were miniatures, and could therefore be passed around for viewing and mounting on the pages of manuscripts.

Paintings served not only to enhance the beauty of a book, but were believed to possess special powers of communicating ideas about the kingdom and the power of kings in ways that the written medium could not. The historian Abu'l Fazl described painting as a "magical art": in his view it had the power to make inanimate objects look as if they possessed life.

The production of paintings portraying the emperor, his court and the people who were part of it, was a source of constant tension between rulers and representatives of the Muslim orthodoxy, the *ulama*. The latter did not fail to invoke the Islamic prohibition of the portrayal of human beings enshrined in the Qur'an as well as the *hadis*, which described an incident from the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Here the Prophet is cited as having forbidden the depiction of living beings in a naturalistic manner as it would suggest that the artist was seeking to appropriate the power of creation. This was a function that was believed to belong exclusively to God.

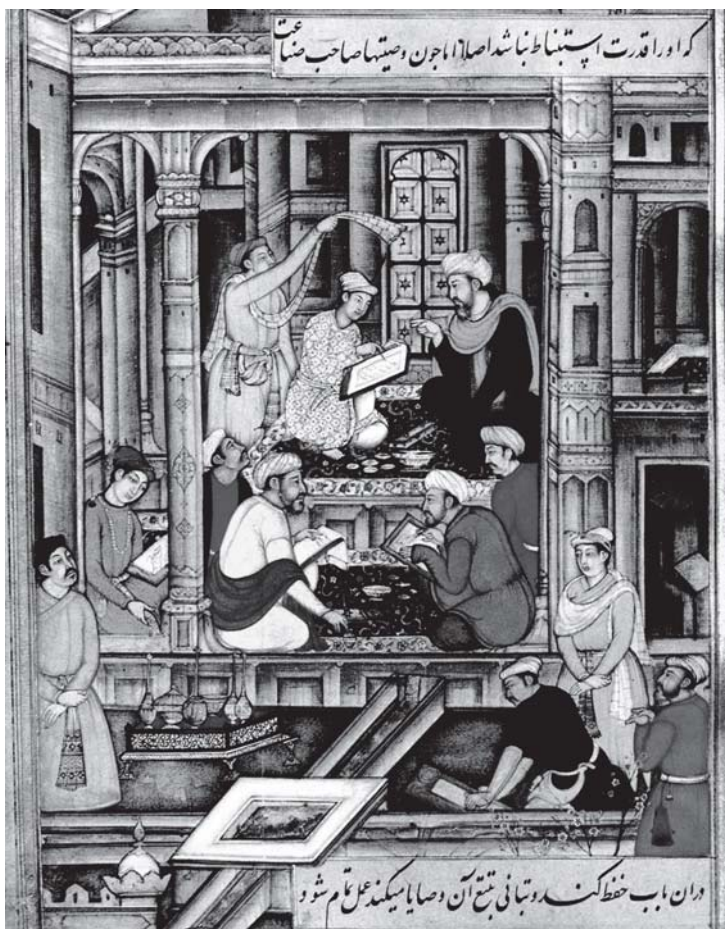


Fig. 9.4  
A Mughal kitabkhana

➔ Identify the different tasks involved in the production of a Mughal manuscript depicted in this miniature.

Source 1

### In praise of *taswir*

Abu'l Fazl held the art of painting in high esteem:

Drawing the likeness of anything is called *taswir*. His Majesty from his earliest youth, has shown a great predilection for this art, and gives it every encouragement, as he looks upon it as a means both of study and amusement. A very large number of painters have been set to work. Each week, several supervisors and clerks of the imperial workshop submit before the emperor the work done by each artist, and His Majesty gives a reward and increases the monthly salaries of the artists according to the excellence displayed. ... Most excellent painters are now to be found, and masterpieces, worthy of a Bihzad, may be placed at the side of the wonderful works of the European painters who have attained worldwide fame. The minuteness in detail, the general finish and the boldness of execution now observed in pictures are incomparable; even inanimate objects look as if they have life. More than a hundred painters have become famous masters of the art. This is especially true of the Hindu artists. Their pictures surpass our conception of things. Few, indeed, in the whole world are found equal to them.

➔ Why did Abu'l Fazl consider the art of painting important? How did he seek to legitimise this art?

Yet interpretations of the *shari'a* changed with time. The body of Islamic tradition was interpreted in different ways by various social groups. Frequently each group put forward an understanding of tradition that would best suit their political needs. Muslim rulers in many Asian regions during centuries of empire building regularly commissioned artists to paint their portraits and scenes of life in their kingdoms. The Safavid kings of Iran, for example, patronised the finest artists, who were trained in workshops set up at court. The names of painters – such as that of Bihzad – contributed to spreading the cultural fame of the Safavid court far and wide.

Artists from Iran also made their way to Mughal India. Some were brought to the Mughal court, as in the case of Mir Sayyid Ali and Abdus Samad, who were made to accompany Emperor Humayun to Delhi. Others migrated in search of opportunities to win patronage and prestige. A conflict between the emperor and the spokesmen of orthodox Muslim opinion on the question of visual representations of living beings was a source of tension at the Mughal court. Akbar's court historian Abu'l Fazl cites the emperor as saying: "There are many that hate painting, but such men I dislike. It appears to me that an artist has a unique way of recognising God when he must come to feel that he cannot bestow life on his work ..."

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### ➔ Discuss...

Compare the painter's representation (Fig. 9.4) of literary and artistic production with that of Abu'l Fazl (Source 1).

## 4. THE AKBAR NAMA AND THE BADSHAH NAMA

Among the important illustrated Mughal chronicles the *Akbar Nama* and *Badshah Nama* (The Chronicle of a King) are the most well known. Each manuscript contained an average of 150 full- or double-page paintings of battles, sieges, hunts, building construction, court scenes, etc.

The author of the *Akbar Nama*, Abu'l Fazl grew up in the Mughal capital of Agra. He was widely read in Arabic, Persian, Greek philosophy and Sufism. Moreover, he was a forceful debater and independent thinker who consistently opposed the views of the conservative *ulama*. These qualities impressed Akbar, who found Abu'l Fazl ideally suited as an adviser and a spokesperson for his policies. One major

objective of the emperor was to free the state from the control of religious orthodoxy. In his role as court historian, Abu'l Fazl both shaped and articulated the ideas associated with the reign of Akbar.

Beginning in 1589, Abu'l Fazl worked on the *Akbar Nama* for thirteen years, repeatedly revising the draft. The chronicle is based on a range of sources, including actual records of events (*waqai*), official documents and oral testimonies of knowledgeable persons.

The *Akbar Nama* is divided into three books of which the first two are chronicles. The third book is the *Ain-i Akbari*. The first volume contains the history of mankind from Adam to one celestial cycle of Akbar's life (30 years). The second volume closes in the forty-sixth regnal year (1601) of Akbar. The very next year Abu'l Fazl fell victim to a conspiracy hatched by Prince Salim, and was murdered by his accomplice, Bir Singh Bundela.

The *Akbar Nama* was written to provide a detailed description of Akbar's reign in the traditional diachronic sense of recording politically significant events across time, as well as in the more novel sense of giving a synchronic picture of all aspects of Akbar's empire – geographic, social, administrative and cultural – without reference to chronology. In the *Ain-i Akbari* the Mughal Empire is presented as having a diverse population consisting of Hindus, Jainas, Buddhists and Muslims and a composite culture.

Abu'l Fazl wrote in a language that was ornate and which attached importance to diction and rhythm, as texts were often read aloud. This Indo-Persian style was patronised at court, and there were a large number of writers who wanted to write like Abu'l Fazl.

A pupil of Abu'l Fazl, Abdul Hamid Lahori is known as the author of the *Badshah Nama*. Emperor Shah Jahan, hearing of his talents, commissioned him to write a history of his reign modelled on the *Akbar Nama*. The *Badshah Nama* is this official history in three volumes (*daftars*) of ten lunar years each. Lahori wrote the first and second *daftars* comprising the first two decades of the emperor's rule (1627-47); these volumes were later revised by Sadullah Khan, Shah Jahan's *wazir*. Infirmities of old age prevented Lahori from proceeding with the third decade which was then chronicled by the historian Waris.

A *diachronic* account traces developments over time, whereas a *synchronic* account depicts one or several situations at one particular moment or point of time.

### Travels of the *Badshah Nama*

Gift of precious manuscripts was an established diplomatic custom under the Mughals. In emulation of this, the Nawab of Awadh gifted the illustrated *Badshah Nama* to King George III in 1799. Since then it has been preserved in the English Royal Collections, now at Windsor Castle.

In 1994, conservation work required the bound manuscript to be taken apart. This made it possible to exhibit the paintings, and in 1997 for the first time, the *Badshah Nama* paintings were shown in exhibitions in New Delhi, London and Washington.



During the colonial period, British administrators began to study Indian history and to create an archive of knowledge about the subcontinent to help them better understand the people and the cultures of the empire they sought to rule. The Asiatic Society of Bengal, founded by Sir William Jones in 1784, undertook the editing, printing and translation of many Indian manuscripts.

Edited versions of the *Akbar Nama* and *Badshah Nama* were first published by the Asiatic Society in the nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century the *Akbar Nama* was translated into English by Henry Beveridge after years of hard labour. Only excerpts of the *Badshah Nama* have been translated into English to date; the text in its entirety still awaits translation.

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### ➞ Discuss...

Find out whether there was a tradition of illustrating manuscripts in your town or village. Who prepared these manuscripts? What were the subjects that they dealt with? How were these manuscripts preserved?

## 5. THE IDEAL KINGDOM

### 5.1 A divine light

Court chroniclers drew upon many sources to show that the power of the Mughal kings came directly from God. One of the legends they narrated was that of the Mongol queen Alanqua, who was impregnated by a ray of sunshine while resting in her tent. The offspring she bore carried this Divine Light and passed it on from generation to generation.

Abu'l Fazl placed Mughal kingship as the highest station in the hierarchy of objects receiving light emanating from God (*farr-i izadi*). Here he was inspired by a famous Iranian sufi, Shihabuddin Suhrawardi (d. 1191) who first developed this idea. According to this idea, there was a hierarchy in which the Divine Light was transmitted to the king who then became the source of spiritual guidance for his subjects.

Paintings that accompanied the narrative of the chronicles transmitted these ideas in a way that

### The transmission of notions of luminosity

The origins of Suhrawardi's philosophy went back to Plato's *Republic*, where God is represented by the symbol of the sun. Suhrawardi's writings were universally read in the Islamic world. They were studied by Shaikh Mubarak, who transmitted their ideas to his sons, Faizi and Abu'l Fazl, who were trained under him.



Fig. 9.5

This painting by Abu'l Hasan shows Jahangir dressed in resplendent clothes and jewels, holding up a portrait of his father Akbar.

Akbar is dressed in white, associated in sufi traditions with the enlightened soul. He proffers a globe, symbolic of dynastic authority.

In the Mughal empire there was no law laying down which of the emperor's sons would succeed to the throne. This meant that every dynastic change was accompanied and decided by a fratricidal war. Towards the end of Akbar's reign, Prince Salim revolted against his father, seized power and assumed the title of Jahangir.

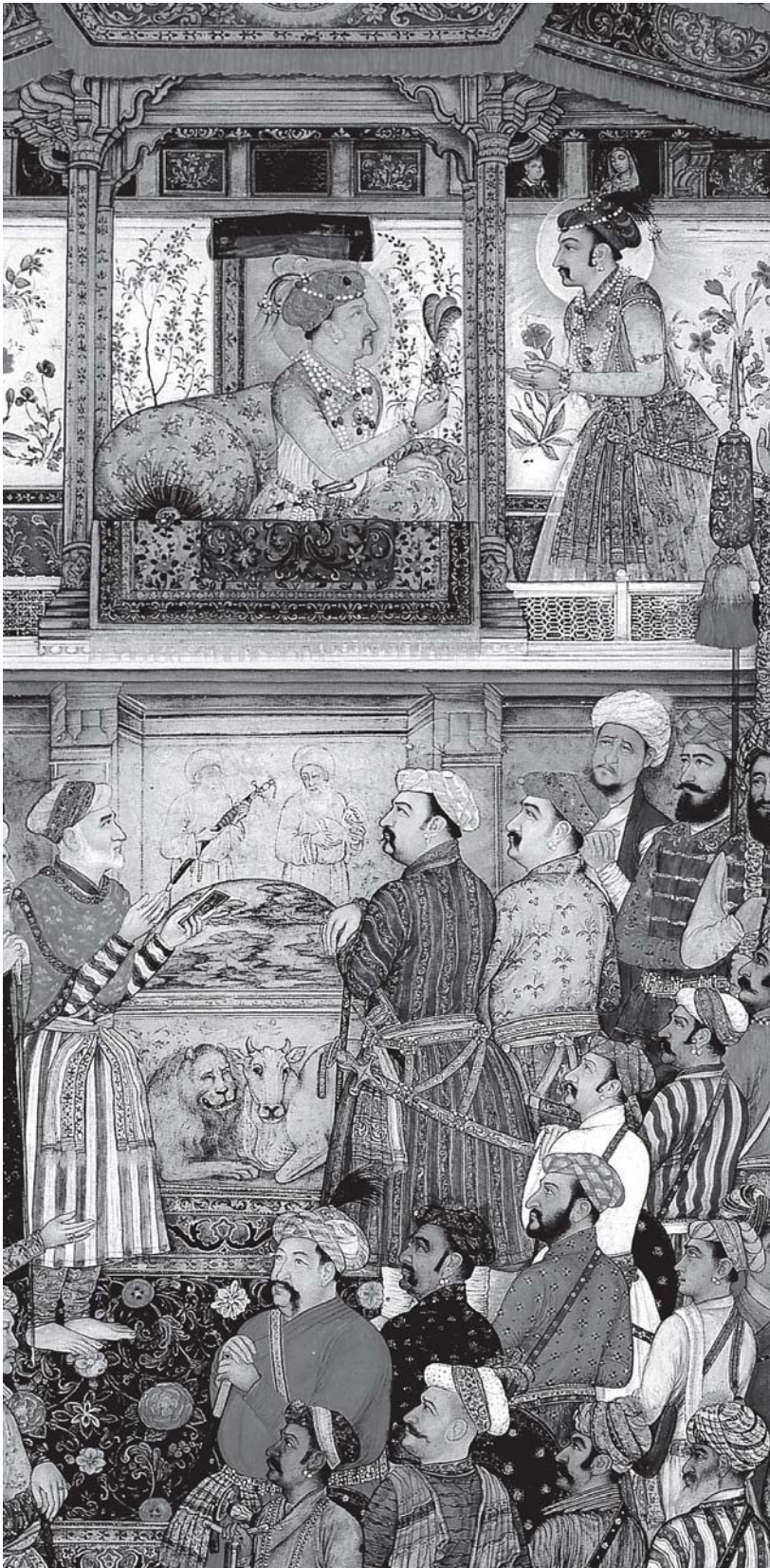
➡ How does this painting describe the relationship between father and son? Why do you think Mughal artists frequently portrayed emperors against dark or dull backgrounds? What are the sources of light in this painting?

left a lasting impression on the minds of viewers. Mughal artists, from the seventeenth century onwards, began to portray emperors wearing the halo, which they saw on European paintings of Christ and the Virgin Mary to symbolise the light of God.

### 5.2 A unifying force

Mughal chronicles present the empire as comprising many different ethnic and religious communities – Hindus, Jainas, Zoroastrians and Muslims. As the source of all peace and stability the emperor stood above all religious and ethnic groups, mediated among them, and ensured that justice and peace prevailed. Abu'l Fazl describes the ideal of *sulh-i kul* (absolute peace) as the cornerstone of enlightened rule. In *sulh-i kul* all religions and schools of thought had freedom of expression but on condition that they did not undermine the authority of the state or fight among themselves.

The ideal of *sulh-i kul* was implemented through state policies – the nobility under the Mughals was a composite one comprising Iranis, Turanis, Afghans, Rajputs, Deccanis – all of whom were given positions and awards purely on the basis of their service and



loyalty to the king. Further, Akbar abolished the tax on pilgrimage in 1563 and *jizya* in 1564 as the two were based on religious discrimination. Instructions were sent to officers of the empire to follow the precept of *sulh-i kul* in administration.

All Mughal emperors gave grants to support the building and maintenance of places of worship. Even when temples were destroyed during war, grants were later issued for their repair – as we know from the reigns of Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb. However, during the reign of the latter, the *jizya* was re-imposed on non-Muslim subjects.

### 5.3 Just sovereignty as social contract

Abu'l Fazl defined sovereignty as a social contract: the emperor protects the four essences of his subjects, namely, life (*jan*), property (*mal*), honour (*namus*) and faith (*din*), and in return demands obedience and a share of resources. Only just sovereigns were thought to be able to honour the contract with power and Divine guidance.

Fig. 9.6  
Jahangir presenting Prince Khurram with a turban jewel  
Scene from the *Badshah Nama*  
painted by the artist Payag,  
c.1640.

Fig. 9.7  
*Jahangir shooting the figure of poverty, painting by the artist Abu'l Hasan*

The artist has enveloped the target in a dark cloud to suggest that this is not a real person, but a human form used to symbolise an abstract quality. Such a mode of personification in art and literature is termed allegory. The Chain of Justice is shown descending from heaven. This is how Jahangir described the Chain of Justice in his memoirs:

After my accession, the first order that I gave was for the fastening up of the Chain of Justice, so that if those engaged in the administration of justice should delay or practise hypocrisy in the matter of those seeking justice, the oppressed might come to this chain and shake it so that its noise might attract attention. The chain was made of pure gold, 30 *gaz* in length and containing 60 bells.

➤ Identify and interpret the symbols in the painting. Summarise the message of this painting.



A number of symbols were created for visual representation of the idea of justice which came to stand for the highest virtue of Mughal monarchy. One of the favourite symbols used by artists was the motif of the lion and the lamb (or goat) peacefully nestling next to each other. This was meant to signify a realm where both the strong and the weak could exist in harmony. Court scenes from the illustrated *Badshah Nama* place such motifs in a niche directly below the emperor's throne (see Fig. 9.6).

### ➤ Discuss...

Why was justice regarded as such an important virtue of monarchy in the Mughal Empire?

## 6. CAPITALS AND COURTS

### 6.1 Capital cities

The heart of the Mughal Empire was its capital city, where the court assembled. The capital cities of the Mughals frequently shifted during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Babur took over the Lodi capital of Agra, though during the four years of his reign the court was frequently on the move. During the 1560s Akbar had the fort of Agra constructed with red sandstone quarried from the adjoining regions.

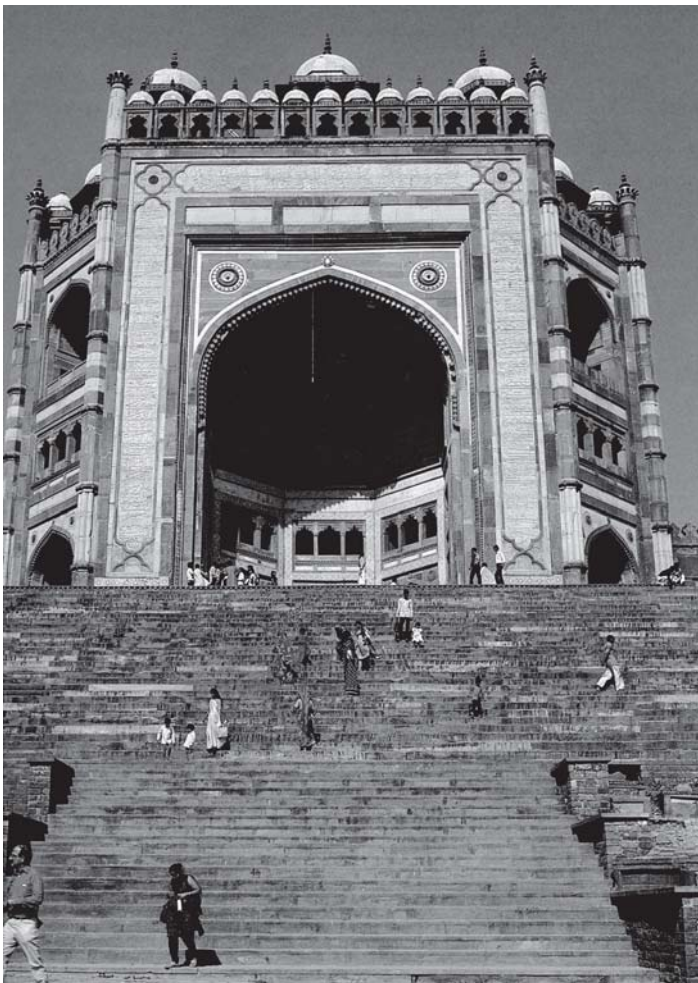
In the 1570s he decided to build a new capital, Fatehpur Sikri. One of the reasons prompting this may have been that Sikri was located on the direct road to Ajmer, where the *dargah* of Shaikh Muinuddin Chishti had become an important pilgrimage centre. The Mughal emperors entered into a close relationship with sufis of the Chishti

*silsila*. Akbar commissioned the construction of a white marble tomb for Shaikh Salim Chishti next to the majestic Friday mosque at Sikri. The enormous arched gateway (Buland Darwaza) was meant to remind visitors of the Mughal victory in Gujarat. In 1585 the capital was transferred to Lahore to bring the north-west under greater control and Akbar closely watched the frontier for thirteen years.

Shah Jahan pursued sound fiscal policies and accumulated enough money to indulge his passion for building. Building activity in monarchical cultures, as you have seen in the case of earlier rulers, was the most visible and tangible sign of dynastic power, wealth and prestige. In the case of Muslim rulers it was also considered an act of piety.

In 1648 the court, army and household moved from Agra to the newly completed imperial capital, Shahjahanabad. It was a new addition to the old residential city of Delhi, with the Red Fort, the Jama Masjid, a tree-lined esplanade with

Fig. 9.8  
The Buland Darwaza,  
Fatehpur Sikri



bazaars (Chandni Chowk) and spacious homes for the nobility. Shah Jahan's new city was appropriate to a more formal vision of a grand monarchy.

## 6.2 The Mughal court

The physical arrangement of the court, focused on the sovereign, mirrored his status as the heart of society. Its centrepiece was therefore the throne, the *takht*, which gave physical form to the function of the sovereign as *axis mundi*. The canopy, a symbol of kingship in India for a millennium, was believed to separate the radiance of the sun from that of the sovereign.

Chronicles lay down with great precision the rules defining status amongst the Mughal elites. In court, status was determined by spatial proximity to the king. The place accorded to a courtier by the ruler was a sign of his importance in the eyes of the emperor. Once the emperor sat on the throne, no one was permitted to move from his position or to leave without permission. Social control in court society was exercised through carefully defining in

*Axis mundi* is a Latin phrase for a pillar or pole that is visualised as the support of the earth.

Source 2

### Darbar-i Akbari

Abu'l Fazl gives a vivid account of Akbar's darbar:

Whenever His Majesty (Akbar) holds court (*darbar*) a large drum is beaten, the sounds of which are accompanied by Divine praise. In this manner, people of all classes receive notice. His Majesty's sons and grandchildren, the grandees of the Court, and all other men who have admittance, attend to make the *kornish*, and remain standing in their proper places. Learned men of renown and skilful mechanics pay their respects; and the officers of justice present their reports. His Majesty, with his usual insights, gives orders, and settles everything in a satisfactory manner. During the whole time, skilful gladiators and wrestlers from all countries hold themselves in readiness, and singers, male and female, are in waiting. Clever jugglers and funny tumblers also are anxious to exhibit their dexterity and agility.

➡ Describe the main activities taking place in the darbar.

*Kornish* was a form of ceremonial salutation in which the courtier placed the palm of his right hand against his forehead and bent his head. It suggested that the subject placed his head – the seat of the senses and the mind – into the hand of humility, presenting it to the royal assembly

*Chahar taslim* is a mode of salutation which begins with placing the back of the right hand on the ground, and raising it gently till the person stands erect, when he puts the palm of his hand upon the crown of his head. It is done four (*chahar*) times. *Taslim* literally means submission.

*Shab-i barat* is the full moon night on the 14 Shaban, the eighth month of the *hijri* calendar, and is celebrated with prayers and fireworks in the subcontinent. It is the night when the destinies of the Muslims for the coming year are said to be determined and sins forgiven.

full detail the forms of address, courtesies and speech which were acceptable in court. The slightest infringement of etiquette was noticed and punished on the spot.

The forms of salutation to the ruler indicated the person's status in the hierarchy: deeper prostration represented higher status. The highest form of submission was *sijda* or complete prostration. Under Shah Jahan these rituals were replaced with *chahar taslim* and *zaminbos* (kissing the ground).

The protocols governing diplomatic envoys at the Mughal court were equally explicit. An ambassador presented to the Mughal emperor was expected to offer an acceptable form of greeting – either by bowing deeply or kissing the ground, or else to follow the Persian custom of clasping one's hands in front of the chest. Thomas Roe, the English envoy of James I, simply bowed before Jahangir according to European custom, and further shocked the court by demanding a chair.

The emperor began his day at sunrise with personal religious devotions or prayers, and then appeared on a small balcony, the *jharoka*, facing the east. Below, a crowd of people (soldiers, merchants, craftsmen, peasants, women with sick children) waited for a view, *darshan*, of the emperor. *Jharoka darshan* was introduced by Akbar with the objective of broadening the acceptance of the imperial authority as part of popular faith.

### The jewelled throne

This is how Shah Jahan's jewelled throne (*takht-i murassa*) in the hall of public audience in the Agra palace is described in the *Badshah Nama*:

This gorgeous structure has a canopy supported by twelve-sided pillars and measures five cubits in height from the flight of steps to the overhanging dome. On His Majesty's coronation, he had commanded that 86 lakh worth of gems and precious stones, and one lakh *tolas* of gold worth another 14 lakh, should be used in decorating it. ... The throne was completed in the course of seven years, and among the precious stones used upon it was a ruby worth one lakh of rupees that Shah Abbas Safavi had sent to the late emperor Jahangir. And on this ruby were inscribed the names of the great emperor Timur Sahib-i qiran, Mirza Shahrukh, Mirza Ulugh Beg, and Shah Abbas as well as the names of the emperors Akbar, Jahangir, and that of His Majesty himself.

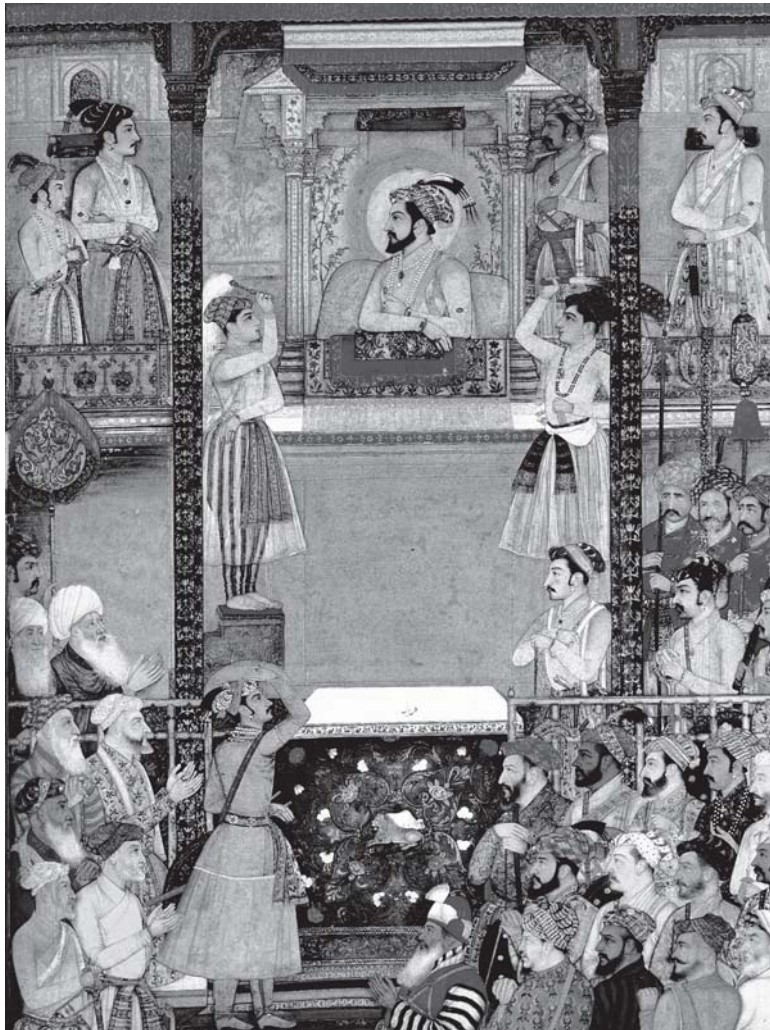


Fig. 9.9  
Shah Jahan honouring Prince Aurangzeb at Agra before his wedding, painting by Payag in the *Badshah Nama*

➔ Identify the emperor. Aurangzeb is shown dressed in a yellow *jama* (upper garment) and green jacket with little blossoms. How is he placed and what does his gesture to his father suggest? How are the courtiers shown? Can you locate figures with big turbans to the left? These are depictions of scholars.

After spending an hour at the *jharoka*, the emperor walked to the public hall of audience (*diwan-i am*) to conduct the primary business of his government. State officials presented reports and made requests. Two hours later, the emperor was in the *diwan-i khas* to hold private audiences and discuss confidential matters. High ministers of state placed their petitions before him and tax officials presented their accounts. Occasionally, the emperor viewed the works of highly reputed artists or building plans of architects (*mimar*).

On special occasions such as the anniversary of accession to the throne, Id, Shab-i barat and Holi, the court was full of life. Perfumed candles set in rich holders and palace walls festooned with colourful hangings made a tremendous impression on visitors. The Mughal kings celebrated three major



Fig. 9.10  
Prince Khurram being weighed in precious metals in a ceremony called *jashn-i wazn* or *tula dan* (from *Jahangir's memoirs*)



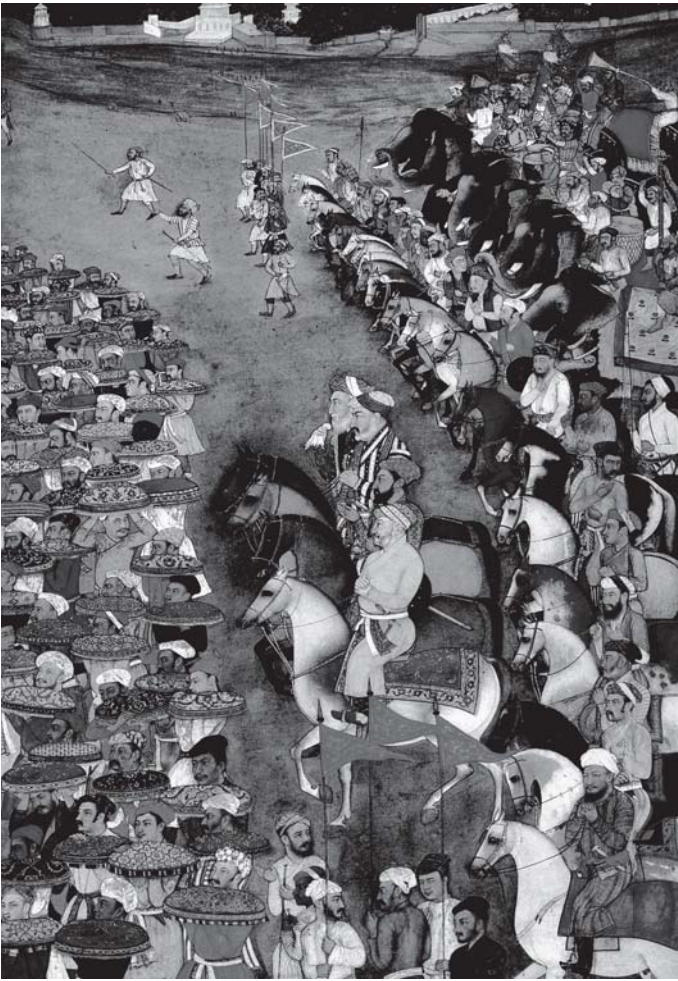


Fig. 9.11a  
*Dara Shukoh's wedding*

Weddings were celebrated lavishly in the imperial household. In 1633 the wedding of Dara Shukoh and Nadira, the daughter of Prince Parwez, was arranged by Princess Jahanara and Sati un Nisa Khanum, the chief maid of the late empress, Mumtaz Mahal. An exhibition of the wedding gifts was arranged in the *diwan-i am*. In the afternoon the emperor and the ladies of the harem paid a visit to it, and in the evening nobles were allowed access. The bride's mother similarly arranged her presents in the same hall and Shah Jahan went to see them. The *hinabandi* (application of henna dye) ceremony was performed in the *diwan-i khas*. Betel leaf (*paan*), cardamom and dry fruit were distributed among the attendants of the court. The total cost of the wedding was Rs 32 lakh, of which Rs six lakh was contributed by the imperial treasury, Rs 16 lakh by Jahanara (including the amount earlier set aside by Mumtaz Mahal) and the rest by the bride's mother. These paintings from the *Badshah Nama* depict some of the activities associated with the occasion.

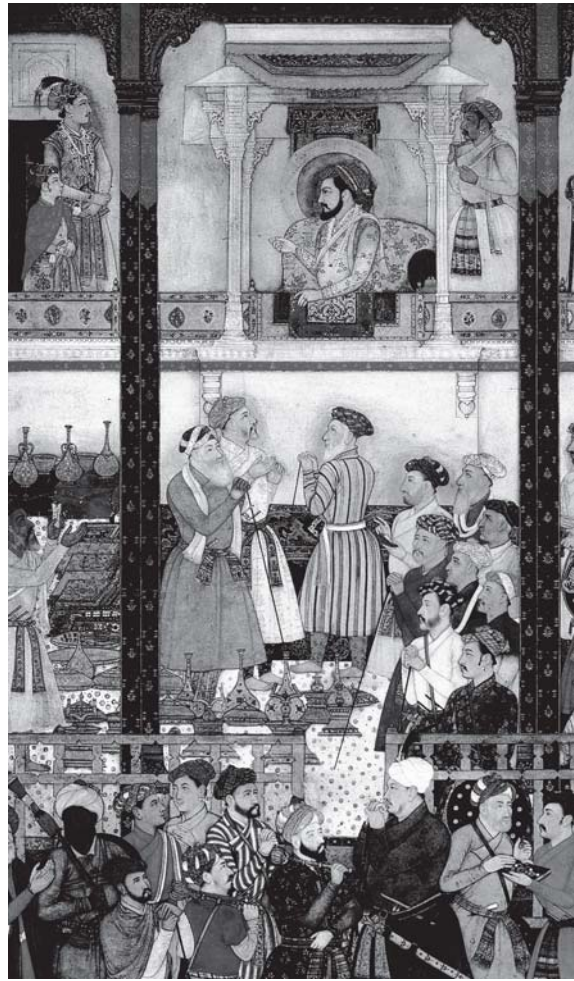


Fig. 9.11b

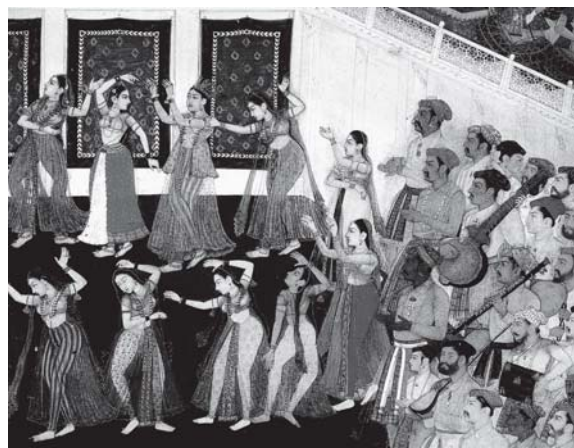


Fig. 9.11c

➔ Describe what you see in the pictures.

festivals a year: the solar and lunar birthdays of the monarch and Nauroz, the Iranian New Year on the vernal equinox. On his birthdays, the monarch was weighed against various commodities which were then distributed in charity.

### 6.3 Titles and gifts

Grand titles were adopted by the Mughal emperors at the time of coronation or after a victory over an enemy. High-sounding and rhythmic, they created an atmosphere of awe in the audience when announced by ushers (*naqib*). Mughal coins carried the full title of the reigning emperor with regal protocol.

The granting of titles to men of merit was an important aspect of Mughal polity. A man's ascent in the court hierarchy could be traced through the titles he held. The title Asaf Khan for one of the highest ministers originated with Asaf, the legendary minister of the prophet king Sulaiman (Solomon). The title Mirza Raja was accorded by Aurangzeb to his two highest-ranking nobles, Jai Singh and Jaswant Singh. Titles could be earned or paid for. Mir Khan offered Rs one lakh to Aurangzeb for the letter *alif*, that is A, to be added to his name to make it Amir Khan.

Other awards included the robe of honour (*khilat*), a garment once worn by the emperor and imbued with his benediction. One gift, the *sarapa* ("head to foot"), consisted of a tunic, a turban and a sash (*patka*). Jewelled ornaments were often given as gifts by the emperor. The lotus blossom set with jewels (*padma murassa*) was given only in exceptional circumstances.

A courtier never approached the emperor empty handed: he offered either a small sum of money (*nazr*) or a large amount (*peshkash*). In diplomatic relations, gifts were regarded as a sign of honour and respect. Ambassadors performed the important function of negotiating treaties and relationships between competing political powers. In such a context gifts had an important symbolic role. Thomas Roe was disappointed when a ring he had presented to Asaf Khan was returned to him for the reason that it was worth merely 400 rupees.

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### ➔ Discuss...

Are some of the rituals and practices associated with the Mughals followed by present-day political leaders?

Fig. 9.12  
A Mughal turban box



## 7. THE IMPERIAL HOUSEHOLD

The term “harem” is frequently used to refer to the domestic world of the Mughals. It originates in the Persian word *haram*, meaning a sacred place. The Mughal household consisted of the emperor’s wives and concubines, his near and distant relatives (mother, step- and foster-mothers, sisters, daughters, daughters-in-law, aunts, children, etc.), and female servants and slaves. Polygamy was practised widely in the Indian subcontinent, especially among the ruling groups.

Both for the Rajput clans as well as the Mughals marriage was a way of cementing political relationships and forging alliances. The gift of territory was often accompanied by the gift of a daughter in marriage. This ensured a continuing hierarchical relationship between ruling groups. It was through the link of marriage and the relationships that developed as a result that the Mughals were able to form a vast kinship network that linked them to important groups and helped to hold a vast empire together.

In the Mughal household a distinction was maintained between wives who came from royal families (*begams*), and other wives (*aghas*) who were not of noble birth. The *begams*, married after receiving huge amounts of cash and valuables as dower (*mahr*), naturally received a higher status and greater attention from their husbands than did *aghas*. The concubines (*aghacha* or the lesser *agha*) occupied the lowest position in the hierarchy of females intimately related to royalty. They all received monthly allowances in cash, supplemented with gifts according to their status. The lineage-based family structure was not entirely static. The *agha* and the *aghacha* could rise to the position of a *begam* depending on the husband’s will, and provided that he did not already have four wives. Love and motherhood played important roles in elevating such women to the status of legally wedded wives.

Apart from wives, numerous male and female slaves populated the Mughal household. The tasks they performed varied from the most mundane to those requiring skill, tact and intelligence. Slave eunuchs (*khwajasara*) moved between the external and

Fig. 9.13  
Part of the inner apartments in  
Fatehpur Sikri



internal life of the household as guards, servants, and also as agents for women dabbling in commerce.

After Nur Jahan, Mughal queens and princesses began to control significant financial resources. Shah Jahan's daughters Jahanara and Roshanara enjoyed an annual income often equal to that of high imperial *mansabdars*. Jahanara, in addition, received revenues from the port city of Surat, which was a lucrative centre of overseas trade.

Control over resources enabled important women of the Mughal household to commission buildings and gardens. Jahanara participated in many architectural projects of Shah Jahan's new capital, Shahjahanabad (Delhi). Among these was an imposing double-storeyed caravanserai with a courtyard and garden. The bazaar of Chandni Chowk, the throbbing centre of Shahjahanabad, was designed by Jahanara.

An interesting book giving us a glimpse into the domestic world of the Mughals is the *Humayun Nama* written by Gulbadan Begum. Gulbadan was the daughter of Babur, Humayun's sister and Akbar's aunt. Gulbadan could write fluently in Turkish and Persian. When Akbar commissioned Abu'l Fazl to write a history of his reign, he requested his aunt to record her memoirs of earlier times under Babur and Humayun, for Abu'l Fazl to draw upon.

What Gulbadan wrote was no eulogy of the Mughal emperors. Rather she described in great detail the conflicts and tensions among the princes and kings and the important mediating role elderly women of the family played in resolving some of these conflicts.

➔ Describe the activities that the artist has depicted in each of the sections of the painting. On the basis of the tasks being performed by different people, identify the members of the imperial establishment that make up the scene.

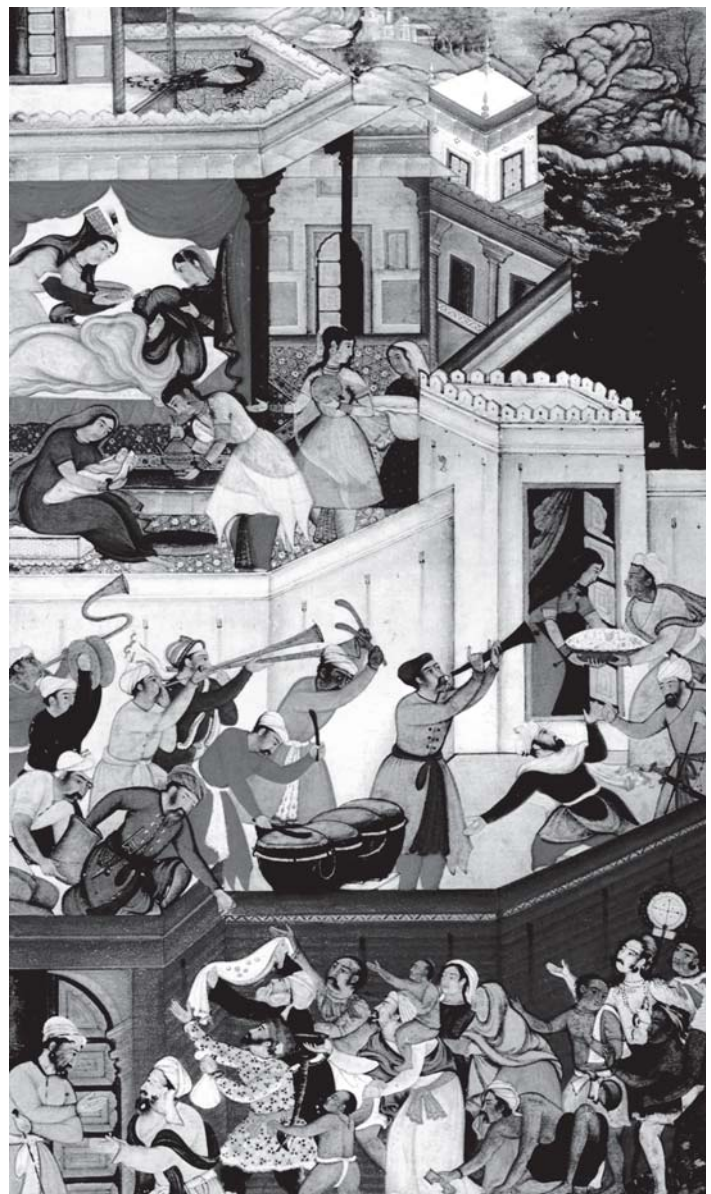


Fig. 9.14  
Birth of Prince Salim at Fatehpur Sikri,  
painted by Ramdas, Akbar Nama

## 8. THE IMPERIAL OFFICIALS

### 8.1 Recruitment and rank

Mughal chronicles, especially the *Akbar Nama*, have bequeathed a vision of empire in which agency rests almost solely with the emperor, while the rest of the kingdom has been portrayed as following his orders. Yet if we look more closely at the rich information these histories provide about the apparatus of the Mughal state, we may be able to understand the ways in which the imperial organisation was dependent on several different institutions to be able to function effectively. One important pillar of the Mughal state was its corps of officers, also referred to by historians collectively as the nobility.

The nobility was recruited from diverse ethnic and religious groups. This ensured that no faction was large enough to challenge the authority of the state. The officer corps of the Mughals was described as a bouquet of flowers (*guldasta*) held together by loyalty to the emperor. In Akbar's imperial service, Turani and Iranian nobles were present from the earliest phase of carving out a political dominion. Many had accompanied Humayun; others migrated later to the Mughal court.

### The Mughal nobility

This is how Chandrabhan Barahman described the Mughal nobility in his book *Char Chaman* (Four Gardens), written during the reign of Shah Jahan:

People from many races (Arabs, Iranians, Turks, Tajiks, Kurds, Tatars, Russians, Abyssinians, and so on) and from many countries (Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Arabia, Iran, Khurasan, Turan) – in fact, different groups and classes of people from all societies – have sought refuge in the imperial court, as well as different groups from India, men with knowledge and skills as well as warriors, for example, Bukharis and Bhakkaris, Saiyyads of genuine lineage, Shaikhzadas with noble ancestry, Afghan tribes such as the Lodis, Rohillas, Yusufzai, and castes of Rajputs, who were to be addressed as *rana*, *raja*, *rao* and *rayan* – i.e. Rathor, Sisodia, Kachhwaha, Hada, Gaur, Chauhan, Panwar, Bhaduriya, Solanki, Bundela, Shekhawat, and all the other Indian tribes, such as Ghakkar, Khokar, Baluchi, and others who wielded the sword, and *mansabs* from 100 to 7000 *zat*, likewise landowners from the steppes and mountains, from the regions of Karnataka, Bengal, Assam, Udaipur, Srinagar, Kumaon, Tibet and Kishtwar and so on – whole tribes and groups of them have been privileged to kiss the threshold of the imperial court (i.e. attend the court or find employment).

Two ruling groups of Indian origin entered the imperial service from 1560 onwards: the Rajputs and the Indian Muslims (Shaikhzadas). The first to join was a Rajput chief, Raja Bharmal Kachhwaha of Amber, to whose daughter Akbar got married. Members of Hindu castes inclined towards education and accountancy were also promoted, a famous example being Akbar's finance minister, Raja Todar Mal, who belonged to the Khatri caste.

Iranians gained high offices under Jahangir, whose politically influential queen, Nur Jahan (d. 1645), was an Iranian. Aurangzeb appointed Rajputs to high positions, and under him the Marathas accounted for a sizeable number within the body of officers.

All holders of government offices held ranks (*mansabs*) comprising two numerical designations: *zat* which was an indicator of position in the imperial hierarchy and the salary of the official (*mansabdar*), and *sawar* which indicated the number of horsemen he was required to maintain in service. In the seventeenth century, *mansabdars* of 1,000 *zat* or above ranked as nobles (*umara*, which is the plural of *amir*).

The nobles participated in military campaigns with their armies and also served as officers of the empire in the provinces. Each military commander recruited, equipped and trained the main striking arm of the Mughal army, the cavalry. The troopers maintained superior horses branded on the flank by the imperial mark (*dagh*). The emperor personally reviewed changes in rank, titles and official postings for all except the lowest-ranked officers. Akbar, who designed the *mansab* system, also established spiritual relationships with a select band of his nobility by treating them as his disciples (*murid*).

For members of the nobility, imperial service was a way of acquiring power, wealth and the highest possible reputation. A person wishing to join the service petitioned through a noble, who presented a *tajwiz* to the emperor. If the applicant was found suitable a *mansab* was granted to him. The *mir bakhshi* (paymaster general) stood in open court on the right of the emperor and presented all candidates for appointment or promotion, while his office prepared orders bearing his seal and signature as well as those of the emperor. There were two other important ministers at the centre: the *diwan-i ala*

Source 3

### Nobles at court

The Jesuit priest Father Antonio Monserrate, resident at the court of Akbar, noticed:

In order to prevent the great nobles becoming insolent through the unchallenged enjoyment of power, the King summons them to court and gives them imperious commands, as though they were his slaves. The obedience to these commands ill suits their exalted rank and dignity.

➔ What does Father Monserrate's observation suggest about the relationship between the Mughal emperor and his officials?

*Tajwiz* was a petition presented by a nobleman to the emperor, recommending that an applicant be recruited as *mansabdar*.

(finance minister) and *sadr-us sudur* (minister of grants or *madad-i maash*, and in charge of appointing local judges or *qazis*). The three ministers occasionally came together as an advisory body, but were independent of each other. Akbar with these and other advisers shaped the administrative, fiscal and monetary institutions of the empire.

Nobles stationed at the court (*tainat-i rakab*) were a reserve force to be deputed to a province or military campaign. They were duty-bound to appear twice daily, morning and evening, to express submission to the emperor in the public audience hall. They shared the responsibility for guarding the emperor and his household round the clock.

### **8.2 Information and empire**

The keeping of exact and detailed records was a major concern of the Mughal administration. The *mir bakhshi* supervised the corps of court writers (*waqia nawis*) who recorded all applications and documents presented to the court, and all imperial orders (*farman*). In addition, agents (*wakil*) of nobles and regional rulers recorded the entire proceedings of the court under the heading “News from the Exalted Court” (*Akhbarat-i Darbar-i Mualla*) with the date and time of the court session (*pahar*). The *akhbarat* contained all kinds of information such as attendance at the court, grant of offices and titles, diplomatic missions, presents received, or the enquiries made by the emperor about the health of an officer. This information is valuable for writing the history of the public and private lives of kings and nobles.

News reports and important official documents travelled across the length and breadth of the regions under Mughal rule by imperial post. Round-the-clock relays of foot-runners (*qasid* or *pathmar*) carried papers rolled up in bamboo containers. The emperor received reports from even distant provincial capitals within a few days. Agents of nobles posted outside the capital and Rajput princes and tributary rulers all assiduously copied these announcements and sent their contents by messenger back to their masters. The empire was connected by a surprisingly rapid information loop for public news.

### 8.3 Beyond the centre: provincial administration

The division of functions established at the centre was replicated in the provinces (*subas*) where the ministers had their corresponding subordinates (*diwan*, *bakhshi* and *sadr*). The head of the provincial administration was the governor (*subadar*) who reported directly to the emperor.

The *sarkars*, into which each *suba* was divided, often overlapped with the jurisdiction of *faujdar*s (commandants) who were deployed with contingents of heavy cavalry and musketeers in districts. The local administration was looked after at the level of the *pargana* (sub-district) by three semi-hereditary officers, the *qanungo* (keeper of revenue records), the *chaudhuri* (in charge of revenue collection) and the *qazi*.

Each department of administration maintained a large support staff of clerks, accountants, auditors, messengers, and other functionaries who were technically qualified officials, functioning in accordance with standardised rules and procedures, and generating copious written orders and records. Persian was made the language of administration throughout, but local languages were used for village accounts.

The Mughal chroniclers usually portrayed the emperor and his court as controlling the entire administrative apparatus down to the village level. Yet, as you have seen (Chapter 8), this could hardly have been a process free of tension. The relationship between local landed magnates, the zamindars, and the representatives of the Mughal emperor was sometimes marked by conflicts over authority and a share of the resources. The zamindars often succeeded in mobilising peasant support against the state.

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#### ➔ Discuss...

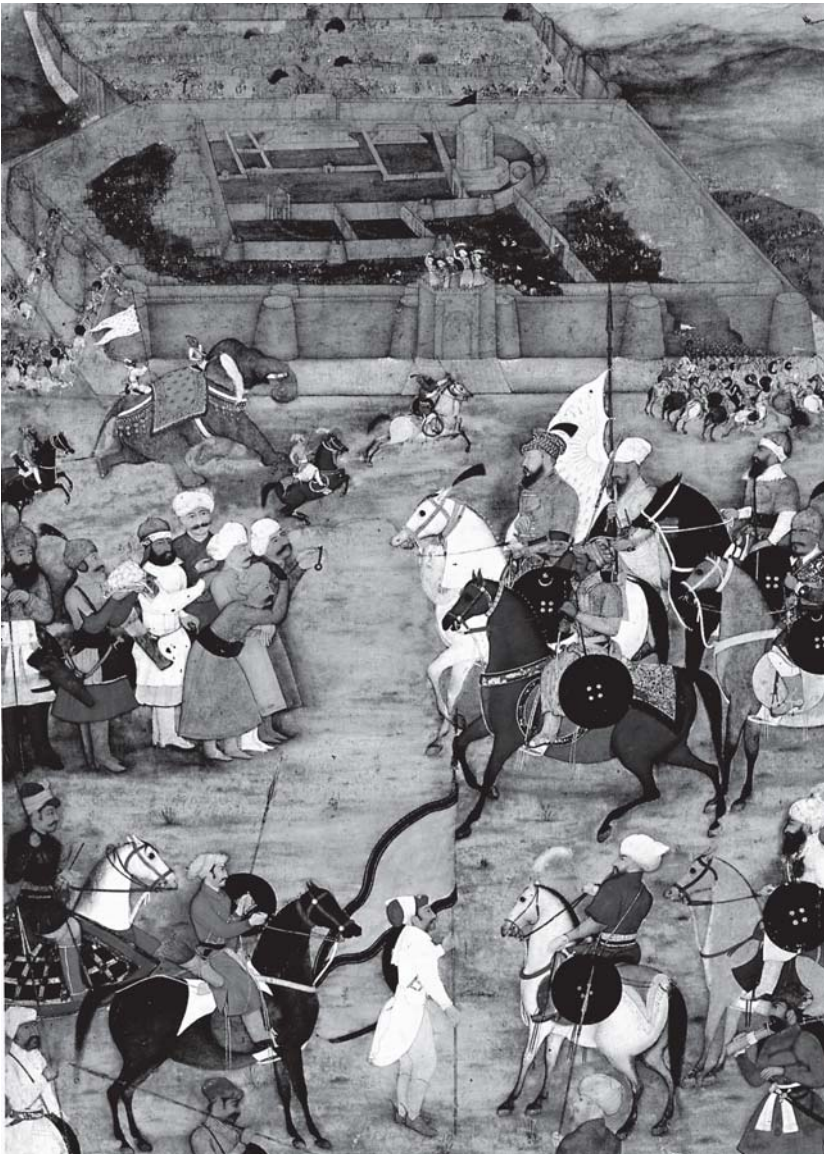
Read Section 2, Chapter 8 once more and discuss the extent to which the emperor's presence may have been felt in villages.



## 9. BEYOND THE FRONTIERS

Writers of chronicles list many high-sounding titles assumed by the Mughal emperors. These included general titles such as Shahenshah (King of Kings) or specific titles assumed by individual kings upon ascending the throne, such as Jahangir (World-Seizer), or Shah Jahan (King of the World). The chroniclers often drew on these titles and their meanings to reiterate the claims of the Mughal emperors to uncontested territorial and political control. Yet the same contemporary histories provide accounts of diplomatic relationships and conflicts with neighbouring political powers.

Fig. 9.15  
*The siege of Qandahar*



These reflect some tension and political rivalry arising from competing regional interests.

### 9.1 The Safavids and Qandahar

The political and diplomatic relations between the Mughal kings and the neighbouring countries of Iran and Turan hinged on the control of the frontier defined by the Hindukush mountains that separated Afghanistan from the regions of Iran and Central Asia. All conquerors who sought to make their way into the Indian subcontinent had to cross the Hindukush to have access to north India. A constant aim of Mughal policy was to ward off this potential danger by controlling strategic outposts – notably Kabul and Qandahar.

Qandahar was a bone of contention between the Safavids and the Mughals. The fortress-town had initially been in the possession of



*Fig. 9.16*  
*Jahangir's dream*

An inscription on this miniature records that Jahangir commissioned Abu'l Hasan to render in painting a dream the emperor had had recently. Abu'l Hasan painted this scene portraying the two rulers – Jahangir and the Safavid Shah Abbas – in friendly embrace. Both kings are depicted in their traditional costumes. The figure of the Shah is based upon portraits made by Bishandas who accompanied the Mughal embassy to Iran in 1613. This gave a sense of authenticity to a scene which is fictional, as the two rulers had never met.

Look at the painting carefully. How is the relationship between Jahangir and Shah Abbas shown? Compare their physique and postures. What do the animals stand for? What does the map suggest?

Humayun, reconquered in 1595 by Akbar. While the Safavid court retained diplomatic relations with the Mughals, it continued to stake claims to Qandahar. In 1613 Jahangir sent a diplomatic envoy to the court of Shah Abbas to plead the Mughal case for retaining Qandahar, but the mission failed. In the winter of 1622 a Persian army besieged Qandahar. The ill-prepared Mughal garrison was defeated and had to surrender the fortress and the city to the Safavids.

### **9.2 The Ottomans: pilgrimage and trade**

The relationship between the Mughals and the Ottomans was marked by the concern to ensure free movement for merchants and pilgrims in the territories under Ottoman control. This was especially true for the Hijaz, that part of Ottoman Arabia where the important pilgrim centres of Mecca and Medina were located. The Mughal emperor usually combined religion and commerce by exporting valuable merchandise to Aden and Mokha, both Red Sea ports, and distributing the proceeds

of the sales in charity to the keepers of shrines and religious men there. However, when Aurangzeb discovered cases of misappropriation of funds sent to Arabia, he favoured their distribution in India which, he thought, “was as much a house of God as Mecca”.

### 9.3 Jesuits at the Mughal court

Europe received knowledge of India through the accounts of Jesuit missionaries, travellers, merchants and diplomats. The Jesuit accounts are the earliest impressions of the Mughal court ever recorded by European writers.

Following the discovery of a direct sea route to India at the end of the fifteenth century, Portuguese merchants established a network of trading stations in coastal cities. The Portuguese king was also interested in the propagation of Christianity with the help of the missionaries of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits). The Christian missions to India during the sixteenth century were part of this process of trade and empire building.

Akbar was curious about Christianity and dispatched an embassy to Goa to invite Jesuit priests. The first Jesuit mission reached the Mughal court at Fatehpur Sikri in 1580 and stayed for about two years. The Jesuits spoke to Akbar about Christianity and debated its virtues with the *ulama*. Two more missions were sent to the Mughal court at Lahore, in 1591 and 1595.

The Jesuit accounts are based on personal observation and shed light on the character and mind of the emperor. At public assemblies the Jesuits were assigned places in close proximity to Akbar’s throne. They accompanied him on his campaigns, tutored his children, and were often companions of his leisure hours. The Jesuit accounts corroborate the information given in Persian chronicles about state officials and the general conditions of life in Mughal times.

Source 4

#### The accessible emperor

In the account of his experiences, Monserrate, who was a member of the first Jesuit mission, says:

It is hard to exaggerate how accessible he (Akbar) makes himself to all who wish audience of him. For he creates an opportunity almost every day for any of the common people or of the nobles to see him and to converse with him; and he endeavours to show himself pleasant-spoken and affable rather than severe towards all who come to speak with him. It is very remarkable how great an effect this courtesy and affability has in attaching him to the minds of his subjects.

➡ Compare this account with Source 2.

#### ➡ Discuss...

What were the considerations that shaped the relations of the Mughal rulers with their contemporaries?

## 10. QUESTIONING FORMAL RELIGION

The high respect shown by Akbar towards the members of the Jesuit mission impressed them deeply. They interpreted the emperor's open interest in the doctrines of Christianity as a sign of his acceptance of their faith. This can be understood in the light of the prevailing climate of religious intolerance in Western Europe. Monserrate remarked that "the king cared little that in allowing everyone to follow his religion he was in reality violating all".

Akbar's quest for religious knowledge led to interfaith debates in the *ibadat khana* at Fatehpur Sikri between learned Muslims, Hindus, Jainas, Parsis and Christians. Akbar's religious views matured as he queried scholars of different religions and sects and gathered knowledge about their doctrines. Increasingly, he moved away from the orthodox Islamic ways of understanding religions towards a self-conceived eclectic form of divine worship focused on light and the sun. We have seen that Akbar and Abu'l Fazl created a philosophy of light and used it to shape the image of the king and ideology of the state. In this, a divinely inspired individual has supreme sovereignty over his people and complete control over his enemies.



Fig. 9.17  
Religious debates  
in the court  
Padre Rudolf  
Acquaviva was the  
leader of the first  
Jesuit mission.  
His name is  
written on top of  
the painting.

### Hom in the haram

This is an excerpt from Abdul Qadir Badauni's *Muntakhab-ut Tawarikh*. A theologian and a courtier, Badauni was critical of his employer's policies and did not wish to make the contents of his book public.

From early youth, in compliment to his wives, the daughters of Rajas of Hind, His Majesty had been performing *hom* in the *haram*, which is a ceremony derived from fire-worship (*atish-parasti*). But on the New Year of the twenty-fifth regnal year (1578) he prostrated publicly before the sun and the fire. In the evening the whole Court had to rise up respectfully when the lamps and candles were lighted.

These ideas were in harmony with the perspective of the court chroniclers who give us a sense of the processes by which the Mughal rulers could effectively assimilate such a heterogeneous populace within an imperial edifice. The name of the dynasty continued to enjoy legitimacy in the subcontinent for a century and a half, even after its geographical extent and the political control it exercised had diminished considerably.

Fig. 9.18  
Blue tiles from a shrine in Multan,  
brought by migrant artisans  
from Iran



## TIMELINE

### SOME MAJOR MUGHAL CHRONICLES AND MEMOIRS

c. 1530	Manuscript of Babur's memoirs in Turkish – saved from a storm – becomes part of the family collection of the Timurids
c. 1587	Gulbadan Begum begins to write the <i>Humayun Nama</i>
1589	Babur's memoirs translated into Persian as <i>Babur Nama</i>
1589-1602	Abu'l Fazl works on the <i>Akbar Nama</i>
1605-22	Jahangir writes his memoirs, the <i>Jahangir Nama</i>
1639-47	Lahori composes the first two <i>daftars</i> of the <i>Badshah Nama</i>
c. 1650	Muhammad Waris begins to chronicle the third decade of Shah Jahan's reign
1668	<i>Alamgir Nama</i> , a history of the first ten years of Aurangzeb's reign compiled by Muhammad Kazim



### ANSWER IN 100-150 WORDS

1. Describe the process of manuscript production in the Mughal court.
2. In what ways would the daily routine and special festivities associated with the Mughal court have conveyed a sense of the power of the emperor?
3. Assess the role played by women of the imperial household in the Mughal Empire.
4. What were the concerns that shaped Mughal policies and attitudes towards regions outside the subcontinent?
5. Discuss the major features of Mughal provincial administration. How did the centre control the provinces?



### WRITE A SHORT ESSAY (ABOUT 250-300 WORDS) ON THE FOLLOWING:

6. Discuss, with examples, the distinctive features of Mughal chronicles.
7. To what extent do you think the visual material presented in this chapter corresponds with Abu'l Fazl's description of the *taswir* (Source 1)?
8. What were the distinctive features of the Mughal nobility? How was their relationship with the emperor shaped?
9. Identify the elements that went into the making of the Mughal ideal of kingship.

Fig. 9.19  
Many Mughal manuscripts contained drawings of birds





**If you would like to know more, read:**

Bamber Gascoigne. 1971.  
*The Great Moghuls.*  
Jonathan Cape Ltd., London.

Shireen Moosvi. 2006 (rpt).  
*Episodes in the Life of Akbar.*  
National Book Trust,  
New Delhi.

Harbans Mukhia. 2004.  
*The Mughals of India.* Blackwell,  
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John F. Richards. 1996.  
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(The New Cambridge History  
of India, Vol.1).  
Cambridge University Press,  
Cambridge.

Annemarie Schimmel. 2005.  
*The Empire of the Great Mughals:  
History, Art and Culture.*  
Oxford University Press,  
New Delhi.



**For more information,  
you could visit:**  
[www.mughalgardens.org](http://www.mughalgardens.org)



**MAP WORK**

10. On an outline map of the world, plot the areas with which the Mughals had political and cultural relations.



**PROJECT (CHOOSE ONE)**

11. Find out more about any one Mughal chronicle. Prepare a report describing the author, and the language, style and content of the text. Describe at least two visuals used to illustrate the chronicle of your choice, focusing on the symbols used to indicate the power of the emperor.
12. Prepare a report comparing the present-day system of government with the Mughal court and administration, focusing on ideals of rulership, court rituals, and means of recruitment into the imperial service, highlighting the similarities and differences that you notice.



Fig. 9.20  
A Mughal painting depicting  
squirrels on a tree

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### Theme 5

- Fig. 5.1: Ritu Topa.  
Fig. 5.2: Henri Stierlin, *The Cultural History of the Arabs*, Aurum Press, London, 1981.  
Fig. 5.4, 5.13: FICCI, *Footprints of Enterprise: Indian Business Through the Ages*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999.  
Fig. 5.5: Calcutta Art Gallery, printed in E.B. Havell, *The Art Heritage of India*, D.B. Taraporevala Sons & Co., Bombay, 1964.  
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Fig. 5.10: Rosemary Crill, *Indian Ikat Textiles*, Weatherhill, London, 1998.  
Fig. 5.11, 5.14: C.A. Bayly (ed). *An Illustrated History of Modern India, 1600-1947*, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1991.

### Theme 6

- Fig. 6.1: Susan L. Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India*, Weatherhill, New York, 1993.  
Fig. 6.3, 6.17: Jim Masselos, Jackie Menzies and Pratapaditya Pal, *Dancing to the Flute: Music and Dance in Indian Art*, The Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, 1997.  
Fig. 6.4, 6.5: Benjamin Rowland, *The Art and Architecture of India*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1970.  
Fig. 6.6: Henri Stierlin, *The Cultural History of the Arabs*, Aurum Press, London, 1981.  
Fig. 6.8: [http://www.us.iis.ac.uk/view\\_article.asp/ContentID=104228](http://www.us.iis.ac.uk/view_article.asp/ContentID=104228)  
Fig. 6.9: <http://www.thekkepuram.ourfamily.com/miskal.htm>  
Fig. 6.10: [http://a-bangladesh.com/banglapedia/Images/A\\_0350A.JPG](http://a-bangladesh.com/banglapedia/Images/A_0350A.JPG)  
Fig. 6.11: foziaqazi@kashmirvision.com  
Fig. 6.12: Stuart Cary Welch, *Indian Art and Culture 1300-1900*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1985.  
Fig. 6.13: Bamber Gascoigne, *The Great Moghuls*, Jonathan Cape Ltd., London, 1971.  
Fig. 6.15: CCRT.  
Fig. 6.16: C. A. Bayly (ed). *An Illustrated History of Modern India, 1600-1947*, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1991.  
Fig. 6.18: Ahmad Nabi Khan, *Islamic Architecture in Pakistan*, National Hijra Council, Islamabad, 1990.

### Theme 7

- Fig. 7.1, 7.11, 7.12, 7.14, 7.15, 7.16, 7.18: Vasundhara Filliozat and George Michell (eds), *The Splendours of Vijayanagara*, Marg Publications, Bombay, 1981.  
Fig. 7.2: C.A. Bayly (ed). *An Illustrated History of Modern India, 1600-1947*, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1991.



- Fig. 7.3: Susan L. Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India*, Weatherhill, New York, 1993.
- Fig. 7.4, 7.6, 7.7, 7.20, 7.23, 7.26, 7.27, 7.32: George Michell, *Architecture and Art of South India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995.
- Fig. 7.5, 7.8, 7.9, 7.21 [http://www.museum.upenn.edu/new/research/Exp\\_Rese\\_Disc/Asia/vrp/HTML/Vijay\\_Hist.shtml](http://www.museum.upenn.edu/new/research/Exp_Rese_Disc/Asia/vrp/HTML/Vijay_Hist.shtml)
- Fig 7.10: Catherine B. Asher and Cynthia Talbot. *India Before Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006.
- Fig. 7.17, 7.22, 7.24, 7.28, 7.29, 7.30, 7.31, 7.33: George Michell and M.B.Wagoner, *Vijayanagara: Architectural Inventory of the Sacred Centre*, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi.
- Fig. 7.25: CCRT.

### Theme 8

- Fig. 8.1, 8.9: Milo Cleveland Beach and Ebba Koch, *King of the World*, Sackler Gallery, New York, 1997.
- Fig. 8.3: India Office Library, printed in C.A. Bailey (ed). *An Illustrated History of Modern India, 1600-1947*, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1991.
- Fig. 8.4: Harvard University Art Museum, printed in Stuart Cary Welch, *Indian Art and Culture 1300-1900*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1985.
- Fig. 8.6, 8.11, 8.12, 8.14: C.A. Bayly (ed). *An Illustrated History of Modern India, 1600-1947*, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1991.
- Fig. 8.13, 8.15: Bamber Gascoigne, *The Great Moghuls*, Jonathan Cape Ltd., London, 1971.

### Theme 9

- Fig. 9.1, 9.2, 9.12, 9.13, 9.19: Bamber Gascoigne, *The Great Moghuls*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1971.
- Fig. 9.3, 9.4, 9.17: Michael Brand and Glenn D. Lowry, *Akbar's India*, New York, 1986.
- Fig. 9.5, 9.15: Amina Okada, *Indian Miniatures of the Mughal Court*.
- Fig. 9.6, 9.7: *The Jahangirnama* (tr. Wheeler Thackston)
- Fig. 9.8: Photograph Friedrich Huneke.
- Fig. 9.9, 9.11 a, b, c : Milo Cleveland Beach and Ebba Koch, *King of the World*, Sackler Gallery, New York, 1997.
- Fig. 9.10, 9.16, 9.20: Stuart Carey Welch, *Imperial Mughal Painting*, George Braziller, New York, 1978.
- Fig. 9.14: Geeti Sen, *Paintings from the Akbarnama*.
- Fig. 9.18: Hermann Forkl et al. (eds), *Die Gärten des Islam*.

## THEME TEN

# COLONIALISM AND THE COUNTRYSIDE

## EXPLORING OFFICIAL ARCHIVES

In this chapter you will see what colonial rule meant to those who lived in the countryside. You will meet the zamindars of Bengal, travel to the Rajmahal hills where the Paharias and the Santhals lived, and then move west to the Deccan. You will look at the way the English East India Company (E.I.C.) established its raj in the countryside, implemented its revenue policies, what these policies meant to different sections of people, and how they changed everyday lives.

Laws introduced by the state have consequences for people: they determine to an extent who grows richer and who poorer, who acquires new land and who loses the land they have lived on, where peasants go when they need money. As you will see, however, people were not only subject to the working of laws, they also resisted the law by acting according to what they believed to be just. In doing so people defined the way in which laws operated, thereby modifying their consequences.

You will also come to know about the sources that tell us about these histories, and the problems historians face in interpreting them. You will read about revenue records and surveys, journals and accounts left by surveyors and travellers, and reports produced by enquiry commissions.



*Fig. 10.1*  
*Cotton being carried from the village to the mandi,*  
*Illustrated London News, 20 April 1861*

## 1. BENGAL AND THE ZAMINDARS

As you know, colonial rule was first established in Bengal. It is here that the earliest attempts were made to reorder rural society and establish a new regime of land rights and a new revenue system. Let us see what happened in Bengal in the early years of Company (E.I.C.) rule.

### 1.1 An auction in Burdwan

In 1797 there was an auction in Burdwan (present-day Bardhaman). It was a big public event. A number of *mahals* (estates) held by the Raja of Burdwan were being sold. The Permanent Settlement had come into operation in 1793. The East India Company had fixed the revenue that each zamindar had to pay. The estates of those who failed to pay were to be auctioned to recover the revenue. Since the raja had accumulated huge arrears, his estates had been put up for auction.

Numerous purchasers came to the auction and the estates were sold to the highest bidder. But the Collector soon discovered a strange twist to the tale. Many of the purchasers turned out to be servants and agents of the raja who had bought the lands on behalf of their master. Over 95 per cent of the sale at the auction was fictitious. The raja's estates had been publicly sold, but he remained in control of his zamindari.

Why had the raja failed to pay the revenue? Who were the purchasers at the auction? What does the story tell us about what was happening in the rural areas of eastern India at that time?

### 1.2 The problem of unpaid revenue

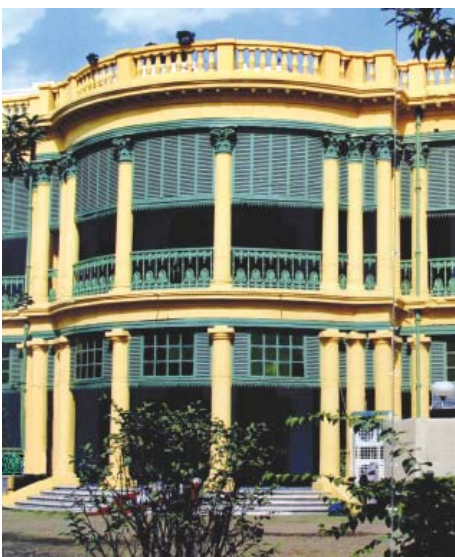
The estates of the Burdwan raj were not the only ones sold during the closing years of the eighteenth century. Over 75 per cent of the zamindaris changed hands after the Permanent Settlement.

In introducing the Permanent Settlement, British officials hoped to resolve the problems they had been facing since the conquest of Bengal. By the 1770s, the rural economy in Bengal was in crisis, with recurrent famines and declining agricultural output. Officials felt that agriculture, trade and the revenue resources of the state could all be developed by encouraging investment in agriculture. This could be done by securing rights of property and permanently fixing the rates of

Raja (literally king) was a term that was often used to designate powerful zamindars.

Fig. 10.2

*Burdwan raja's City Palace on Diamond Harbour Road, Calcutta*  
By the late nineteenth century many rich zamindars of Bengal had city palaces with ballrooms, large grounds, entrance porches supported by Corinthian columns like these.



revenue demand. If the revenue demand of the state was permanently fixed, then the Company could look forward to a regular flow of revenue, while entrepreneurs could feel sure of earning a profit from their investment, since the state would not siphon it off by increasing its claim. The process, officials hoped, would lead to the emergence of a class of yeomen farmers and rich landowners who would have the capital and enterprise to improve agriculture. Nurtured by the British, this class would also be loyal to the Company.

The problem, however, lay in identifying individuals who could both improve agriculture and contract to pay the fixed revenue to the state. After a prolonged debate amongst Company officials, the Permanent Settlement was made with the rajas and *talukdars* of Bengal. They were now classified as zamindars, and they had to pay the revenue demand that was fixed in perpetuity. In terms of this definition, the zamindar was not a landowner in the village, but a revenue Collector of the state.

Zamindars had several (sometimes as many as 400) villages under them. In Company calculations the villages within one zamindari formed one revenue estate. The Company fixed the total demand over the entire estate whose revenue the zamindar contracted to pay. The zamindar collected rent from the different villages, paid the revenue to the Company, and retained the difference as his income. He was expected to pay the Company regularly, failing which his estate could be auctioned.

### 1.3 Why zamindars defaulted on payments

Company officials felt that a fixed revenue demand would give zamindars a sense of security and, assured of returns on their investment, encourage them to improve their estates. In the early decades after the Permanent Settlement, however, zamindars regularly failed to pay the revenue demand and unpaid balances accumulated.

The reasons for this failure were various. First: the initial demands were very high. This was because it was felt that if the demand was fixed for all time to come, the Company would never be able to claim a share of increased income from land when prices rose and cultivation expanded. To minimise this anticipated loss, the Company pegged the revenue



Fig. 10.3  
Charles Cornwallis (1738-1805),  
painted by Thomas Gainsborough,  
1785

He was the commander of the British forces during the American War of Independence and the Governor General of Bengal when the Permanent Settlement was introduced there in 1793.

*Taluqdar* literally means “one who holds a *taluuq*” or a connection. *Taluq* came to refer to a territorial unit.

*Ryot* is the way the term *raiyyat*, used to designate peasants (Chapter 8), was spelt in British records. *Ryots* in Bengal did not always cultivate the land directly, but leased it out to under-*ryots*.

demand high, arguing that the burden on zamindars would gradually decline as agricultural production expanded and prices rose.

Second: this high demand was imposed in the 1790s, a time when the prices of agricultural produce were depressed, making it difficult for the *ryots* to pay their dues to the zamindar. If the zamindar could not collect the rent, how could he pay the Company? Third: the revenue was invariable, regardless of the harvest, and had to be paid punctually. In fact, according to the Sunset Law, if payment did not come in by sunset of the specified date, the zamindari was liable to be auctioned. Fourth: the Permanent Settlement initially limited the power of the zamindar to collect rent from the *ryot* and manage his zamindari.

The Company had recognised the zamindars as important, but it wanted to control and regulate them, subdue their authority and restrict their autonomy. The zamindars' troops were disbanded, customs duties abolished, and their "*cutcheries*" (courts) brought under the supervision of a Collector appointed by the Company. Zamindars lost their power to organise local justice and the local police. Over time the collectorate emerged as an alternative centre of authority, severely restricting what the zamindar could do. In one case, when a raja failed to pay the revenue, a Company official was speedily dispatched to his zamindari with explicit instructions "to take charge of the District and to use the most effectual means to destroy all the influence and the authority of the raja and his officers".

At the time of rent collection, an officer of the zamindar, usually the *amlah*, came around to the village. But rent collection was a perennial problem. Sometimes bad harvests and low prices made payment of dues difficult for the *ryots*. At other times *ryots* deliberately delayed payment. Rich *ryots* and village headmen – *jotedars* and *mandals* – were only too happy to see the zamindar in trouble. The zamindar could therefore not easily assert his power over them. Zamindars could prosecute defaulters, but the judicial process was long drawn. In Burdwan alone there were over 30,000 pending suits for arrears of rent payment in 1798.

#### 1.4 The rise of the *jotedars*

While many zamindars were facing a crisis at the end of the eighteenth century, a group of rich peasants were consolidating their position in the villages. In Francis Buchanan's survey of the Dinajpur district in North Bengal we have a vivid description of this class of rich peasants known as *jotedars*. By the early nineteenth century, *jotedars* had acquired vast areas of land – sometimes as much as several thousand acres. They controlled local trade as well as moneylending, exercising immense power over the poorer cultivators of the region. A large part of their land was cultivated through sharecroppers (*adhiyars* or *bargadars*) who brought their own ploughs, laboured in the field, and handed over half the produce to the *jotedars* after the harvest.

Within the villages, the power of *jotedars* was more effective than that of zamindars. Unlike zamindars who often lived in urban areas, *jotedars* were located in the villages and exercised direct control over a considerable section of poor villagers. They fiercely resisted efforts by zamindars to increase the *jama* of the village, prevented zamindari officials from executing their duties, mobilised *ryots* who were dependent on them, and deliberately delayed payments of revenue to the zamindar. In fact, when the estates of the zamindars were auctioned for failure to make revenue payment, *jotedars* were often amongst the purchasers.

The *jotedars* were most powerful in North Bengal, although rich peasants and village headmen were emerging as commanding figures in the countryside in other parts of Bengal as well. In some places they were called *haoladars*, elsewhere they were known as *gantidars* or *mandals*. Their rise inevitably weakened zamindari authority.

Fig. 10.4  
Bengal village scene, painted by George Chinnery, 1820  
Chinnery stayed in India for 23 years (1802-25), painting portraits, landscapes and scenes of the everyday life of the common people. *Jotedars* and moneylenders in rural Bengal lived in houses like the one you see on the right.



Source 1

### The *jotedars* of Dinajpur

Buchanan described the ways in which the *jotedars* of Dinajpur in North Bengal resisted being disciplined by the zamindar and undermined his power:

Landlords do not like this class of men, but it is evident that they are absolutely necessary, unless the landlords themselves would advance money to their necessitous tenantry ...

The *jotedars* who cultivate large portions of lands are very refractory, and know that the zamindars have no power over them. They pay only a few rupees on account of their revenue and then fall in balance almost every *kist* (instalment), they hold more lands than they are entitled to by their *pottahs* (deeds of contract). Should the zamindar's officers, in consequence, summon them to the *cutcherry*, and detain them for one or two hours with a view to reprimand them, they immediately go and complain at the Fouzdarry Thanna (police station) for imprisonment and at the munsiff's (a judicial officer at the lower court) *cutcherry* for being dishonoured and whilst the causes continue unsettled, they instigate the petty *ryots* not to pay their revenue consequently ...

➤ Describe the ways in which the *jotedars* resisted the authority of the zamindars.

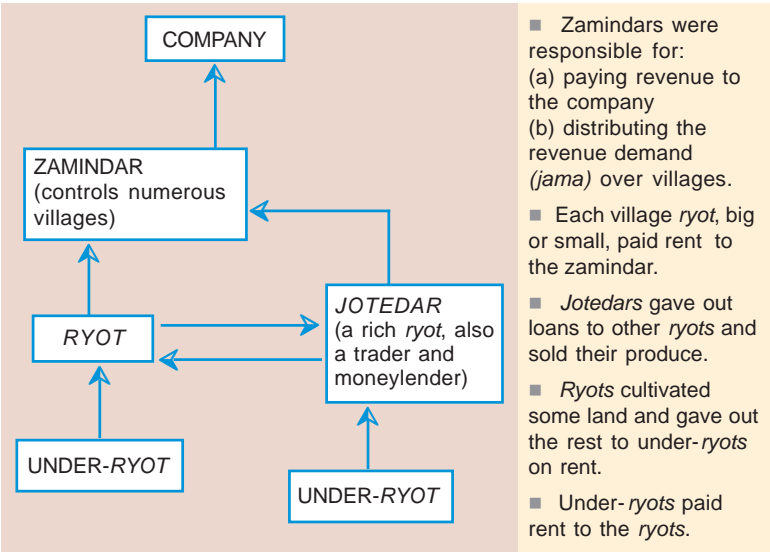


Fig. 10.5 Power in rural Bengal

➤ Read the text accompanying Fig. 10.5 carefully and insert the following terms in appropriate places along the arrows: rent, revenue, interest, loan, produce

### 1.5 The zamindars resist

The authority of the zamindars in rural areas, however, did not collapse. Faced with an exorbitantly high revenue demand and possible auction of their estates, they devised ways of surviving the pressures. New contexts produced new strategies.

Fictitious sale was one such strategy. It involved a series of manoeuvres. The Raja of Burdwan, for instance, first transferred some of his zamindari to his mother, since the Company had decreed that the property of women would not be taken over. Then, as a second move, his agents manipulated the auctions. The revenue demand of the Company was deliberately withheld, and unpaid balances were allowed to accumulate. When a part of the estate was auctioned, the zamindar's men bought the property, outbidding other purchasers. Subsequently they refused to pay up the purchase money, so that the estate had to be resold. Once again it was bought by the zamindar's agents, once again the purchase money was not paid, and once again there was an auction. This process was repeated endlessly, exhausting the state, and the other bidders at the auction. At last the estate was sold at a low price back to the zamindar. The

zamindar never paid the full revenue demand; the Company rarely recovered the unpaid balances that had piled up.

Such transactions happened on a grand scale. Between 1793 and 1801 four big zamindaris of Bengal, including Burdwan, made *benami* purchases that collectively yielded as much as Rs 30 lakh. Of the total sales at the auctions, over 15 per cent were fictitious.

There were other ways in which zamindars circumvented displacement. When people from outside the zamindari bought an estate at an auction, they could not always take possession. At times their agents would be attacked by *lathiyals* of the former zamindar. Sometimes even the *ryots* resisted the entry of outsiders. They felt bound to their own zamindar through a sense of loyalty and perceived him as a figure of authority and themselves as his *proja* (subjects). The sale of the zamindari disturbed their sense of identity, their pride. The zamindars therefore were not easily displaced.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century the depression in prices was over. Thus those who had survived the troubles of the 1790s consolidated their power. Rules of revenue payment were also made somewhat flexible. As a result, the zamindar's power over the villages was strengthened. It was only during the Great Depression of the 1930s that they finally collapsed and the *jotedars* consolidated their power in the countryside.

### 1.6 The Fifth Report

Many of the changes we are discussing were documented in detail in a report that was submitted to the British Parliament in 1813. It was the fifth of a series of reports on the administration and activities of the East India Company in India. Often referred to as the Fifth Report, it ran into 1002 pages, of which over 800 pages were appendices that reproduced petitions of zamindars and *ryots*, reports of collectors from different districts, statistical tables on revenue returns, and notes on the revenue and judicial administration of Bengal and Madras (present-day Tamil Nadu) written by officials.

From the time the Company established its rule in Bengal in the mid-1760s, its activities were closely watched and debated in England. There were many



*Fig. 10.6*  
 Maharaja Mehtab Chand (1820-79)  
 When the Permanent Settlement was imposed, Tejchand was the Raja of Burdwan. Subsequently under Mehtab Chand the estate prospered. Mehtab Chand helped the British during the Santhal rebellion and the 1857 revolt.

*Benami*, literally anonymous, is a term used in Hindi and several other Indian languages for transactions made in the name of a fictitious or relatively insignificant person, whereas the real beneficiary remains unnamed.

*Lathyal*, literally one who wields the *lathi* or stick, functioned as a strongman of the zamindar.



groups in Britain who were opposed to the monopoly that the East India Company had over trade with India and China. These groups wanted a revocation of the Royal Charter that gave the Company this monopoly. An increasing number of private traders wanted a share in the India trade, and the industrialists of Britain were keen to open up the Indian market for British manufactures. Many political groups argued that the conquest of Bengal was benefiting only the East India Company but not the British nation as a whole. Information about Company misrule and maladministration was hotly debated in Britain and incidents of the greed and corruption of Company officials were widely publicised in the press. The British Parliament passed a series of Acts in the late eighteenth century to regulate and control Company rule in India. It forced the Company to produce regular reports on the administration of India and appointed committees to enquire into the affairs of the Company. The Fifth Report was one such report produced by a Select Committee. It became the basis of intense parliamentary debates on the nature of the East India Company's rule in India.

Fig. 10.7

*Andul Raj Palace*

The ruins of palaces are a visible sign of the end of an era. Satyajit Ray's famous film *Jalshaghar*, on the decline of the aristocratic zamindari style of living, was shot in Andul Raj Palace.



For over a century and a half, the Fifth Report has shaped our conception of what happened in rural Bengal in the late eighteenth century. The evidence contained in the Fifth Report is invaluable. But official reports like this have to be read carefully. We need to know who wrote the reports and why they were written. In fact, recent researches show that the arguments and evidence offered by the Fifth Report cannot be accepted uncritically.

Researchers have carefully examined the archives of various Bengal zamindars and the local records of the districts to write about the history of colonial rule in rural Bengal. They indicate that, intent on criticising the maladministration of the company, the Fifth Report exaggerated the collapse of traditional zamindari power, as also overestimated the scale on which zamindars were losing their land. As we have seen, even when zamindaris were auctioned, zamindars were not always displaced, given the ingenious methods they used to retain their zamindaris.

Source 2

### From the Fifth Report

Referring to the condition of zamindars and the auction of lands, the Fifth Report stated:

The revenue was not realised with punctuality, and lands to a considerable extent were periodically exposed to sale by auction. In the native year 1203, corresponding with 1796-97, the land advertised for sale comprehended a *jumma* or assessment of *sicca* rupees 28,70,061, the extent of land actually sold bore a *jumma* or assessment of 14,18,756, and the amount of purchase money *sicca* rupees 17,90,416. In 1204, corresponding with 1797-98, the land advertised was for *sicca* rupees 26,66,191, the quantity sold was for *sicca* rupees 22,74,076, and the purchase money *sicca* rupees 21,47,580. Among the defaulters were some of the oldest families of the country. Such were the rajahs of Nuddea, Rajeshaye, Bishenpore (all districts of Bengal), ... and others, the dismemberment of whose estates at the end of each succeeding year, threatened them with poverty and ruin, and in some instances presented difficulties to the revenue officers, in their efforts to preserve undiminished the amount of public assessment.

➔ From the tone in which evidence is recorded, what do you think is the attitude of the report to the facts narrated? What is the Report trying to say through the figures? Can you think of any problem in making long-term generalisations from these figures of two years?

### ➔ Discuss...

Compare the account of the zamindars you have just read with that in Chapter 8.

## 2. THE HOE AND THE PLOUGH

Let us now shift our focus from the wetlands of Bengal to drier zones, from a region of settled cultivation to one where shifting agriculture was practised. You will see the changes that came about when the frontiers of the peasant economy expanded outwards, swallowing up pastures and forests in the Rajmahal hills. You will also see how these changes created a variety of conflicts within the region.

### 2.1 In the hills of Rajmahal

In the early nineteenth century, Buchanan travelled through the Rajmahal hills. From his description, the hills appeared impenetrable, a zone where few travellers ventured, an area that signified danger. Wherever he went, people were hostile, apprehensive of officials and unwilling to talk to them. In many instances they deserted their villages and absconded.

Who were these hill folk? Why were they so apprehensive of Buchanan's visit? Buchanan's journal gives us tantalising glimpses of these hill folk in the early nineteenth century. His journal was written as a diary of places he visited, people he encountered, and practices he saw. It raises questions in our mind, but does not always help us answer them. It tells us about a moment in time, but not about the longer history of people and places. For that historians have to turn to other records.

If we look at late-eighteenth-century revenue records, we learn that these hill folk were known as Paharias. They lived around the Rajmahal hills, subsisting on forest produce and practising shifting cultivation. They cleared patches of forest by cutting bushes and burning the undergrowth. On these patches, enriched by the potash from the ash, the Paharias grew a variety of pulses and millets for consumption. They scratched the ground lightly with hoes, cultivated the cleared land for a few years, then left it fallow so that it could recover its fertility, and moved to a new area.

From the forests they collected *mahua* (a flower) for food, silk cocoons and resin for sale, and wood for charcoal production. The undergrowth that spread like a mat below the trees and the patches of grass that covered the lands left fallow provided pasture for cattle.

### Who was Buchanan?

Francis Buchanan was a physician who came to India and served in the Bengal Medical Service (from 1794 to 1815). For a few years he was surgeon to the Governor-General of India, Lord Wellesley. During his stay in Calcutta (present-day Kolkata), he organised a zoo that became the Calcutta Alipore Zoo; he was also in charge of the Botanical Gardens for a short period. On the request of the Government of Bengal, he undertook detailed surveys of the areas under the jurisdiction of the British East India Company. In 1815 he fell ill and returned to England. Upon his mother's death, he inherited her property and assumed her family name Hamilton. So he is often called Buchanan-Hamilton.



Fig. 10.8

*A view of a hill village in Rajmahal, painted by William Hodges, 1782*

William Hodges was a British artist who accompanied Captain Cook on his second voyage to the Pacific (1772-75), and then came to India. In 1781 he became a friend of Augustus Cleveland, the Collector of Bhagalpur. On the invitation of Cleveland, Hodges accompanied him to the Jangal Mahals in 1782, and painted a set of aquatints. Like many other British painters of the time, Hodges searched for the picturesque. Artists in search of the picturesque were inspired by the ideals of Romanticism, a tradition of thought that celebrated nature and admired its magnificence and power. Romantics felt that to commune with nature the artist had to represent nature as an idyll, uncorrupted by modern civilisation, discover unknown landscapes, and appreciate the sublime play of light and shade. It is in search of this unknown that Hodges went to the Rajmahal hills. He found flat landscapes monotonous, and discovered beauty in roughness, irregularity and variety. A landscape that colonial officials found dangerous and wild, peopled by turbulent tribes, appears in the paintings of Hodges as exotic and idyllic.

➔ Look at the painting and identify the ways in which it represents the traditions of the picturesque.

The life of the Paharias – as hunters, shifting cultivators, food gatherers, charcoal producers, silkworm rearers – was thus intimately connected to the forest. They lived in hutments within tamarind groves, and rested in the shade of mango trees. They considered the entire region as their land, the basis

Aquatint is a picture produced by cutting into a copper sheet with acid and then printing it.



*Fig. 10.9*

*A view of Jangal territory,  
painted by William Hodges*

Here you can see the forested low hills and the rocky upper ranges, nowhere actually above 2,000 feet. By centring the hills and viewing them from below, Hodges emphasises their inaccessibility.

➤ Look at Figs. 10.8 and 10.9. Describe how the pictures represent the relationship between tribal people and nature.

of their identity as well as survival; and they resisted the intrusion of outsiders. Their chiefs maintained the unity of the group, settled disputes, and led the tribe in battles with other tribes and plainspeople.

With their base in the hills, the Paharias regularly raided the plains where settled agriculturists lived. These raids were necessary for survival, particularly in years of scarcity; they were a way of asserting power over settled communities; and they were a means of negotiating political relations with outsiders. The zamindars on the plains had to often purchase peace by paying a regular tribute to the hill chiefs. Traders similarly gave a small amount to the hill folk for permission to use the passes controlled by them. Once the toll was paid, the Paharia chiefs protected the traders, ensuring that their goods were not plundered by anyone.

This negotiated peace was somewhat fragile. It broke down in the last decades of the eighteenth century when the frontiers of settled agriculture were being aggressively extended in eastern India. The British encouraged forest clearance, and zamindars and *jotedars* turned uncultivated lands into rice fields. To the British, extension of settled agriculture was necessary to enlarge the sources of land revenue, produce crops for export, and establish the basis of a settled, ordered society. They also associated forests with wildness, and saw forest people as savage, unruly, primitive, and difficult to govern. So they felt that forests had to be cleared,

settled agriculture established, and forest people tamed, civilised and persuaded to give up hunting and take to plough agriculture.

As settled agriculture expanded, the area under forests and pastures contracted. This sharpened the conflict between hill folk and settled cultivators. The former began to raid settled villages with increasing regularity, carrying away food grains and cattle. Exasperated colonial officials tried desperately to control and subdue the Paharias. But they found the task difficult.

In the 1770s the British embarked on a brutal policy of extermination, hunting the Paharias down and killing them. Then, by the 1780s, Augustus Cleveland, the Collector of Bhagalpur, proposed a policy of pacification. Paharia chiefs were given an annual allowance and made responsible for the proper conduct of their men. They were expected to maintain order in their localities and discipline their own people. Many Paharia chiefs refused the allowances. Those who accepted, most often lost authority within the community. Being in the pay of the colonial government, they came to be perceived as subordinate employees or stipendiary chiefs.

As the pacification campaigns continued, the Paharias withdrew deep into the mountains, insulating themselves from hostile forces, and carrying on a war with outsiders. So when Buchanan travelled through the region in the winter of 1810-11 the Paharias naturally viewed him with suspicion and distrust. The experience of pacification campaigns and memories of brutal repression shaped their perception of British infiltration into the area. Every white man appeared to represent a power that was destroying their way of life and means of survival, snatching away their control over their forests and lands.

By this time in fact there were newer intimations of danger. Santhals were pouring into the area, clearing forests, cutting down timber, ploughing land and growing rice and cotton. As the lower hills were taken over by Santhal settlers, the Paharias receded deeper into the Rajmahal hills. If Paharia life was symbolised by the hoe, which they used for shifting cultivation, the settlers came to represent the power of the plough. The battle between the hoe and the plough was a long one.

## 2.2 The Santhals: Pioneer settlers

At the end of 1810, Buchanan crossed Ganjuria Pahar, which was part of the Rajmahal ranges, passed through the rocky country beyond, and reached a village. It was an old village but the land around had been recently cleared to extend cultivation. Looking at the landscape, Buchanan found evidence of the region having been transformed through “proper application of human labour”. He wrote: “Gunjuriya is just sufficiently cultivated to show what a glorious country this might be made. I think its beauty and riches might be made equal to almost any in the universe.” The soil here was rocky but “uncommonly fine”, and nowhere had Buchanan seen finer tobacco and mustard. On enquiry he discovered that the frontiers of cultivation here had been extended by the Santhals. They had moved into this area around 1800, displaced the hill folk who lived on these lower slopes, cleared the forests and settled the land.

How did the Santhals reach the Rajmahal hills? The Santhals had begun to come into Bengal around the 1780s. Zamindars hired them to reclaim land and expand cultivation, and British officials invited them to settle in the Jangal Mahals. Having failed to subdue the Paharias and transform them into settled agriculturists, the British turned to the Santhals. The Paharias refused to cut forests, resisted touching the plough, and continued to be

*Fig. 10.10*  
*Hill village in Santhal country,*  
Illustrated London News,  
23 February 1856

This village in the lower Rajmahal hills was sketched by Walter Sherwill in the early 1850s. The village appears to be peaceful, calm and idyllic. Life seems unaffected by the outside world.

➔ Contrast this image of the Santhal village with Fig. 10.12.



turbulent. The Santhals, by contrast, appeared to be ideal settlers, clearing forests and ploughing the land with vigour.

The Santhals were given land and persuaded to settle in the foothills of Rajmahal. By 1832 a large area of land was demarcated as Damin-i-Koh. This was declared to be the land of the Santhals. They were to live within it, practise plough agriculture, and become settled peasants. The land grant to the Santhals stipulated that at least one-tenth of the area was to be cleared and cultivated within the first ten years. The territory was surveyed and mapped. Enclosed with boundary pillars, it was separated from both the world of the settled agriculturists of the plains and the Paharias of the hills.

After the demarcation of Damin-i-Koh, Santhal settlements expanded rapidly. From 40 Santhal villages in the area in 1838, as many as 1,473 villages had come up by 1851. Over the same period, the Santhal population increased from a mere 3,000 to over 82,000. As cultivation expanded, an increased volume of revenue flowed into the Company's coffers.

Santhal myths and songs of the nineteenth century refer very frequently to a long history of travel: they represent the Santhal past as one of continuous mobility, a tireless search for a place to settle. Here in the Damin-i-Koh their journey seemed to have come to an end.

When the Santhals settled on the peripheries of the Rajmahal hills, the Paharias resisted but were ultimately forced to withdraw deeper into the hills. Restricted from moving down to the lower hills and valleys, they were confined to the dry interior and to the more barren and rocky upper hills. This severely affected their lives, impoverishing them in the long term. Shifting agriculture depended on the ability to move to newer and newer land and utilisation of the natural fertility of the soil. When the most fertile soils became inaccessible to them, being part of the Damin, the Paharias could not effectively sustain their mode of cultivation. When the forests of the region were cleared for cultivation the hunters amongst them also faced problems. The Santhals, by contrast, gave up their earlier life of mobility and settled down, cultivating a range of commercial crops for the market, and dealing with traders and moneylenders.





Fig. 10.11  
Sidhu Manjhi, the leader of the  
Santhal rebellion

The Santhals, however, soon found that the land they had brought under cultivation was slipping away from their hands. The state was levying heavy taxes on the land that the Santhals had cleared, moneylenders (*dikus*) were charging them high rates of interest and taking over the land when debts remained unpaid, and zamindars were asserting control over the Damini area.

By the 1850s, the Santhals felt that the time had come to rebel against zamindars, moneylenders and the colonial state, in order to create an ideal world for themselves where they would rule. It was after the Santhal Revolt (1855-56) that the Santhal Pargana was created, carving out 5,500 square miles from the districts of Bhagalpur and Birbhum. The colonial state hoped that by creating a new territory for the Santhals and imposing some special laws within it, the Santhals could be conciliated.

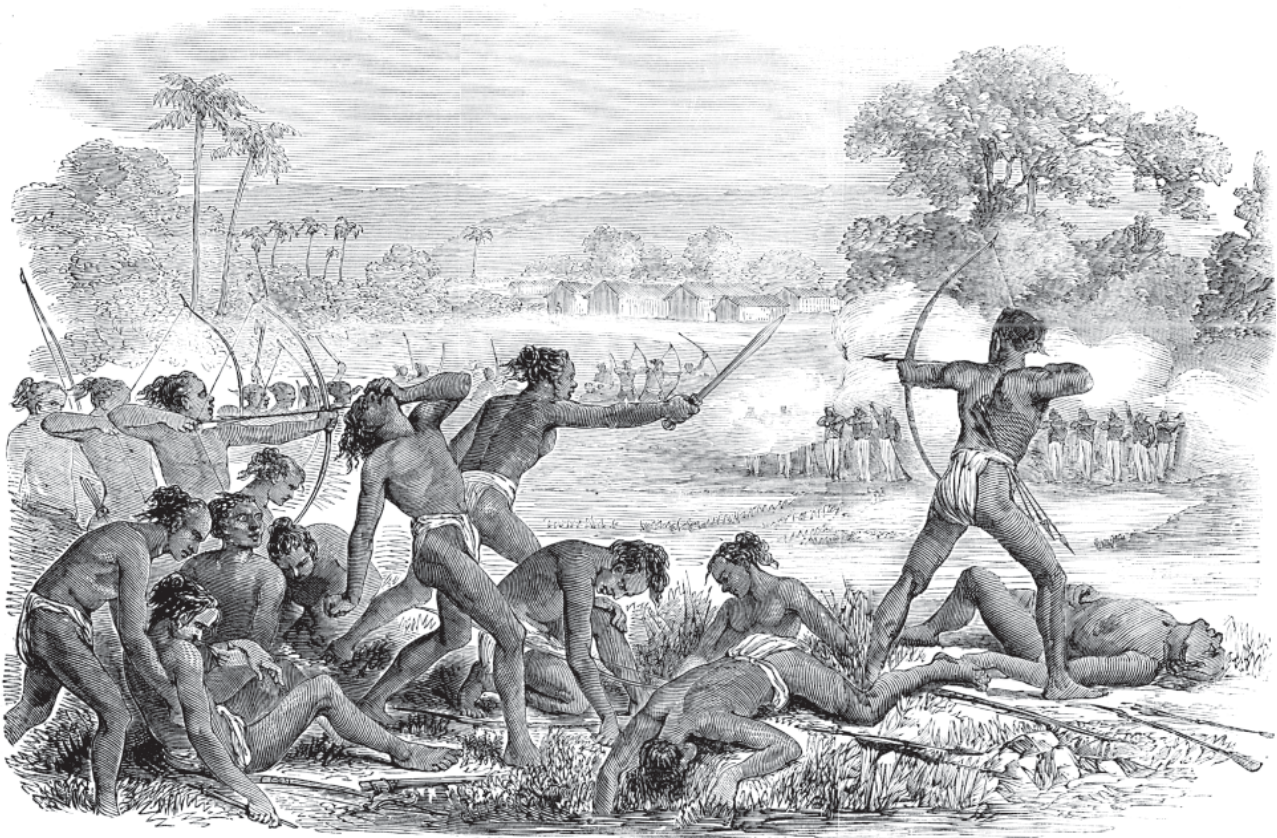


Fig. 10.12  
*Santhals fight the sepoys of the British Raj*, Illustrated London News, 23 February 1856  
The rebellion changed the British perception of the Santhals. Villages that had earlier seemed calm and peaceful (Fig. 10.10) now appeared to have become places of violent and savage deeds.



➤ Imagine you are a reader of the *Illustrated London News* in England. How will you react to the images depicted in Figs. 10.12, 10.13 and 10.14? What image of the Santhals would these pictures create in your mind?

*Fig. 10.13*

*Burning of Santhal villages, Illustrated London News, 23 February 1856*

After the rebellion was crushed, the region was searched, suspects were picked up, and villages set on fire. Images of the burning villages were shown to the public in England – once again as a demonstration of the might of the British and their ability to crush rebellion and impose colonial order.



*Fig. 10.14*

*Santhal prisoners being taken away, Illustrated London News, 1856*

Notice how images like this one seek to convey political messages. At the centre you can see British officials triumphantly riding on an elephant. One officer on a horse is smoking a hookah: a picture that emphasises that the time of trouble was over, the rebellion had been crushed. The rebels are now in chains, being taken away to jail escorted and surrounded by soldiers of the Company.

Source 3

### Buchanan on the Santhals

Buchanan wrote:

They are very clever in clearing new lands, but live meanly. Their huts have no fence, and the walls are made of small sticks placed upright, close together and plastered within with clay. They are small and slovenly, and too flat-roofed, with very little arch.

Source 4

### The rocks near Kaduya

Buchanan's journal is packed with observations like the following:

About a mile farther on, (I) came to a low ledge of rocks without any evident strata; it is a small grained granite with reddish feldspar, with quartz and black mica ... More than half a mile from thence, I came to another rock not stratified, and consisting of very fine-grained granite with yellowish feldspar, whitish quartz and black mica.

### 2.3 The accounts of Buchanan

We have been drawing on Buchanan's account, but while reading his reports we should not forget that he was an employee of the British East India Company. His journeys were not simply inspired by the love of landscape and the desire to discover the unknown. He marched everywhere with a large army of people – draughtsmen, surveyors, palanquin bearers, coolies. The costs of the travels were borne by the East India Company since it needed the information that Buchanan was expected to collect. Buchanan had specific instructions about what he had to look for and what he had to record. When he arrived at a village with his army of people, he was immediately perceived as an agent of the *sarkar*.

As the Company consolidated its power and expanded its commerce, it looked for natural resources it could control and exploit. It surveyed landscapes and revenue sources, organised voyages of discovery, and sent its geologists and geographers, its botanists and medical men to collect information. Buchanan, undoubtedly an extraordinary observer, was one such individual. Everywhere Buchanan went, he obsessively observed the stones and rocks and the different strata and layers of soil. He searched for minerals and stones that were commercially valuable, he recorded all signs of iron ore and mica, granite and saltpetre. He carefully observed local practices of salt-making and iron-ore-mining.

When Buchanan wrote about a landscape, he most often described not just what he saw, what the landscape was like, but also how it could be transformed and made more productive – what crops could be cultivated, which trees cut down, and which ones grown. And we must remember that his vision and his priorities were different from those of the local inhabitants: his assessment of what was necessary was shaped by the commercial concerns of the Company and modern Western notions of what constituted progress. He was inevitably critical of the lifestyles of forest dwellers and felt that forests had to be turned into agricultural lands.

Source 5

### On clearance and settled cultivation

Passing through one village in the lower Rajmahal hills, Buchanan wrote:

The view of the country is exceedingly fine, the cultivation, especially the narrow valleys of rice winding in all directions, the cleared lands with scattered trees, and the rocky hills are in perfection; all that is wanted is some appearance of progress in the area and a vastly extended and improved cultivation, of which the country is highly susceptible. Plantations of Asan and Palas, for Tassar (Tassar silk worms) and Lac, should occupy the place of woods to as great an extent as the demand will admit; the remainder might be all cleared, and the greater part cultivated, while what is not fit for the purpose, might rear Plamira (palmyra) and Mowa (*mahua*).

### ➔ Discuss...

What does Buchanan's description tell us about his ideas of development? Illustrate your argument by quoting from the excerpts. If you were a Paharia forest dweller how would you have reacted to these ideas?

## 3. A REVOLT IN THE COUNTRYSIDE THE BOMBAY DECCAN

You have read about how the lives of peasants and zamindars of colonial Bengal and the Paharias and Santhals of the Rajmahal hills were changing. Now let us move across to western India, and to a later period, and explore what was happening in the countryside in the Bombay Deccan.

One way of exploring such changes is by focusing on a peasant revolt. In such climactic times rebels express their anger and fury; they rise against what they perceive to be injustice and the causes of their suffering. If we try to understand the premises of their resentment, and peel the layers of their anger, we get a glimpse of their life and experience that is otherwise hidden from us. Revolts also produce records that historians can look at. Alarmed by the actions of rebels and keen on restoring order, state authorities do not simply repress a rebellion. They try and understand it, enquire into its causes so that policies can be formulated and peace established. These enquiries produce evidence that historians can explore.

Through the nineteenth century, peasants in various parts of India rose in revolt against

Source 6

### On that day in Supa

On 16 May 1875, the District Magistrate of Poona wrote to the Police Commissioner:

On arrival at Supa on Saturday 15 May I learnt of the disturbance.

One house of a moneylender was burnt down; about a dozen were forcibly broken into and completely gutted of their content. Account papers, bonds, grains, country cloth were burnt in the street where heaps of ashes are still to be seen.

The chief constable apprehended 50 persons. Stolen property worth Rs 2000 was recovered. The estimated loss is over Rs 25,000. Moneylenders claim it is over 1 lakh.

DECCAN RIOTS COMMISSION

A *sahukar* was someone who acted as both a moneylender and a trader.

➤ The words and terms used by a writer often tell us something about his or her prejudices. Read Source 7 carefully and pick out the terms that indicate any prejudices of the writer. Discuss how a *ryot* of the area would have described the same situation.

moneylenders and grain dealers. One such revolt occurred in 1875 in the Deccan.

### 3.1 Account books are burnt

The movement began at Supa, a large village in Poona (present-day Pune) district. It was a market centre where many shopkeepers and moneylenders lived. On 12 May 1875, *ryots* from surrounding rural areas gathered and attacked the shopkeepers, demanding their *bahi khatas* (account books) and debt bonds. They burnt the *khatas*, looted grain shops, and in some cases set fire to the houses of *sahukars*.

From Poona the revolt spread to Ahmednagar. Then over the next two months it spread even further, over an area of 6,500 square km. More than thirty villages were affected. Everywhere the pattern was the same: *sahukars* were attacked, account books burnt and debt bonds destroyed. Terrified of peasant attacks, the *sahukars* fled the villages, very often leaving their property and belongings behind.

As the revolt spread, British officials saw the spectre of 1857 (see Chapter 11). Police posts were established in villages to frighten rebellious peasants into submission. Troops were quickly called in; 951 people were arrested, and many convicted. But it took several months to bring the countryside under control.

Source 7

### A newspaper report

The following report, titled 'The ryot and the moneylender', appeared in the *Native Opinion* (6 June 1876), and was quoted in *Report of the Native Newspapers of Bombay*:

They (the *ryots*) first place spies on the boundaries of their villages to see if any Government officers come, and to give timely intimation of their arrival to the offenders. They then assemble in a body and go to the houses of their creditors, and demand from them a surrender of their bonds and other documents, and threaten them in case of refusal with assault and plunder. If any Government officer happens to approach the villages where the above is taking place, the spies give intimation to the offenders and the latter disperse in time.

Why the burning of bonds and deeds? Why this revolt? What does it tell us about the Deccan countryside and about agrarian changes under colonial rule? Let us look at this longer history of changes over the nineteenth century.

### 3.2 A new revenue system

As British rule expanded from Bengal to other parts of India, new systems of revenue were imposed. The Permanent Settlement was rarely extended to any region beyond Bengal.

Why was this so? One reason was that after 1810, agricultural prices rose, increasing the value of harvest produce, and enlarging the income of the Bengal zamindars. Since the revenue demand was fixed under the Permanent Settlement, the colonial state could not claim any share of this enhanced income. Keen on expanding its financial resources, the colonial government had to think of ways to maximise its land revenue. So in territories annexed in the nineteenth century, temporary revenue settlements were made.

There were other reasons too. When officials devise policies, their thinking is deeply shaped by economic theories they are familiar with. By the 1820s, the economist David Ricardo was a celebrated figure in England. Colonial officials had learnt Ricardian ideas during their college years. In Maharashtra when British officials set about formulating the terms of the early settlement in the 1820s, they operated with some of these ideas.

According to Ricardian ideas, a landowner should have a claim only to the “average rent” that prevailed at a given time. When the land yielded more than this “average rent”, the landowner had a surplus that the state needed to tax. If tax was not levied, cultivators were likely to turn into rentiers, and their surplus income was unlikely to be productively invested in the improvement of the land. Many British officials in India thought that the history of Bengal confirmed Ricardo’s theory. There the zamindars seemed to have turned into rentiers, leasing out land and living on the rental incomes. It was therefore necessary, the British officials now felt, to have a different system.

The revenue system that was introduced in the Bombay Deccan came to be known as the *ryotwari*

*Rentier* is a term used to designate people who live on rental income from property.

settlement. Unlike the Bengal system, the revenue was directly settled with the *ryot*. The average income from different types of soil was estimated, the revenue-paying capacity of the *ryot* was assessed and a proportion of it fixed as the share of the state. The lands were resurveyed every 30 years and the revenue rates increased. Therefore the revenue demand was no longer permanent.

### **3.3 Revenue demand and peasant debt**

The first revenue settlement in the Bombay Deccan was made in the 1820s. The revenue that was demanded was so high that in many places peasants deserted their villages and migrated to new regions. In areas of poor soil and fluctuating rainfall the problem was particularly acute. When rains failed and harvests were poor, peasants found it impossible to pay the revenue. However, the collectors in charge of revenue collection were keen on demonstrating their efficiency and pleasing their superiors. So they went about extracting payment with utmost severity. When someone failed to pay, his crops were seized and a fine was imposed on the whole village.

By the 1830s the problem became more severe. Prices of agricultural products fell sharply after 1832 and did not recover for over a decade and a half. This meant a further decline in peasants' income. At the same time the countryside was devastated by a famine that struck in the years 1832-34. One-third of the cattle of the Deccan were killed, and half the human population died. Those who survived had no agricultural stocks to see them through the crisis. Unpaid balances of revenue mounted.

How did cultivators live through such years? How did they pay the revenue, procure their consumption needs, purchase their ploughs and cattle, or get their children married?

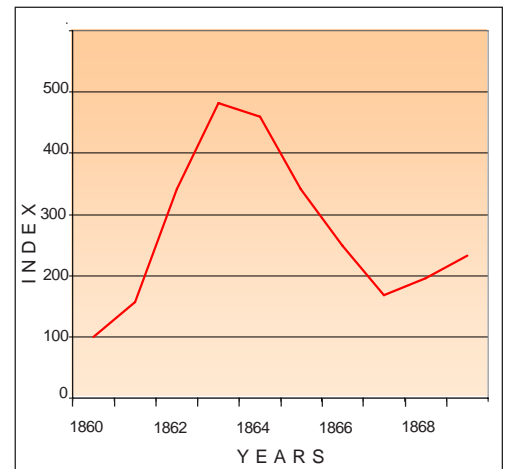
Inevitably, they borrowed. Revenue could rarely be paid without a loan from a moneylender. But once a loan was taken, the *ryot* found it difficult to pay it back. As debt mounted, and loans remained unpaid, peasants' dependence on moneylenders increased. They now needed loans even to buy their everyday needs and meet their production expenditure. By the 1840s, officials were finding evidence of alarming levels of peasant indebtedness everywhere.

By the mid-1840s there were signs of an economic recovery of sorts. Many British officials had begun to realise that the settlements of the 1820s had been harsh. The revenue demanded was exorbitant, the system rigid, and the peasant economy on the verge of collapse. So the revenue demand was moderated to encourage peasants to expand cultivation. After 1845 agricultural prices recovered steadily. Cultivators were now extending their acreage, moving into new areas, and transforming pastureland into cultivated fields. But to expand cultivation peasants needed more ploughs and cattle. They needed money to buy seeds and land. For all this they had to turn once again to moneylenders for loans.

**3.4 Then came the cotton boom**

Before the 1860s, three-fourths of raw cotton imports into Britain came from America. British cotton manufacturers had for long been worried about this dependence on American supplies. What would happen if this source was cut off? Troubled by this question, they eagerly looked for alternative sources of supply.

In 1857 the Cotton Supply Association was founded in Britain, and in 1859 the Manchester Cotton Company was formed. Their objective was “to encourage cotton production in every part of the world



*Fig. 10.15*  
The cotton boom  
The line in the graph indicates the rise and fall in cotton prices.

*Fig. 10.16*  
Carts transporting cotton halting under a banyan tree,  
Illustrated London News,  
13 December 1862





suited for its growth”. India was seen as a country that could supply cotton to Lancashire if the American supply dried up. It possessed suitable soil, a climate favourable to cotton cultivation, and cheap labour.

When the American Civil War broke out in 1861, a wave of panic spread through cotton circles in Britain. Raw cotton imports from America fell to less than three per cent of the normal: from over 2,000,000 bales (of 400 lbs each) in 1861 to 55,000 bales in 1862. Frantic messages were sent to India and elsewhere to increase cotton exports to Britain. In Bombay, cotton merchants visited the cotton districts to assess supplies and encourage cultivation. As cotton prices soared (see Fig. 10.15), export merchants in Bombay were keen to secure as much cotton as possible to meet the British demand. So they gave advances to urban *sahukars* who in turn extended credit to those rural moneylenders who promised to secure the produce. When there is a boom in the market credit flows easily, for those who give out loans feel secure about recovering their money.

➤ The three panels in Fig. 10.17 depict different modes of transporting cotton. Notice the bullocks collapsing under the weight of the cotton, the boulders on the road, and the huge pile of bales on the boat. What is the artist suggesting through these images?



Fig. 10.17

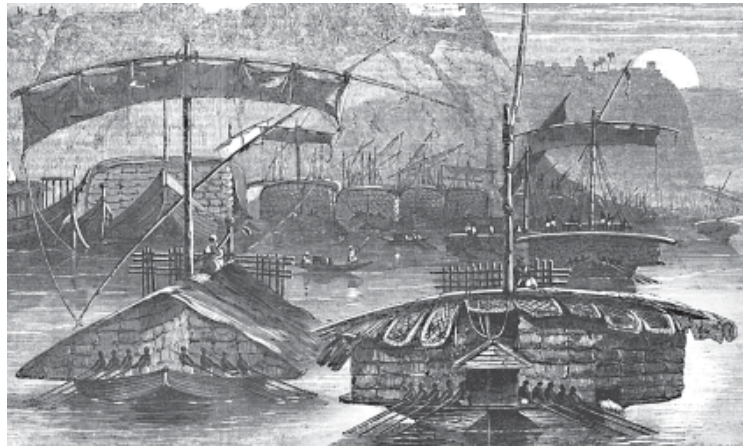
*Transporting cotton before the railway era*, Illustrated London News, 20 April 1861

When cotton supplies from America were cut off during the Civil War, Britain hoped that India would supply all the cotton that British industries needed. It began assessing the supply, examining the quality of cotton and studying the methods of production and marketing. This interest was reflected in the pages of the *Illustrated London News*.

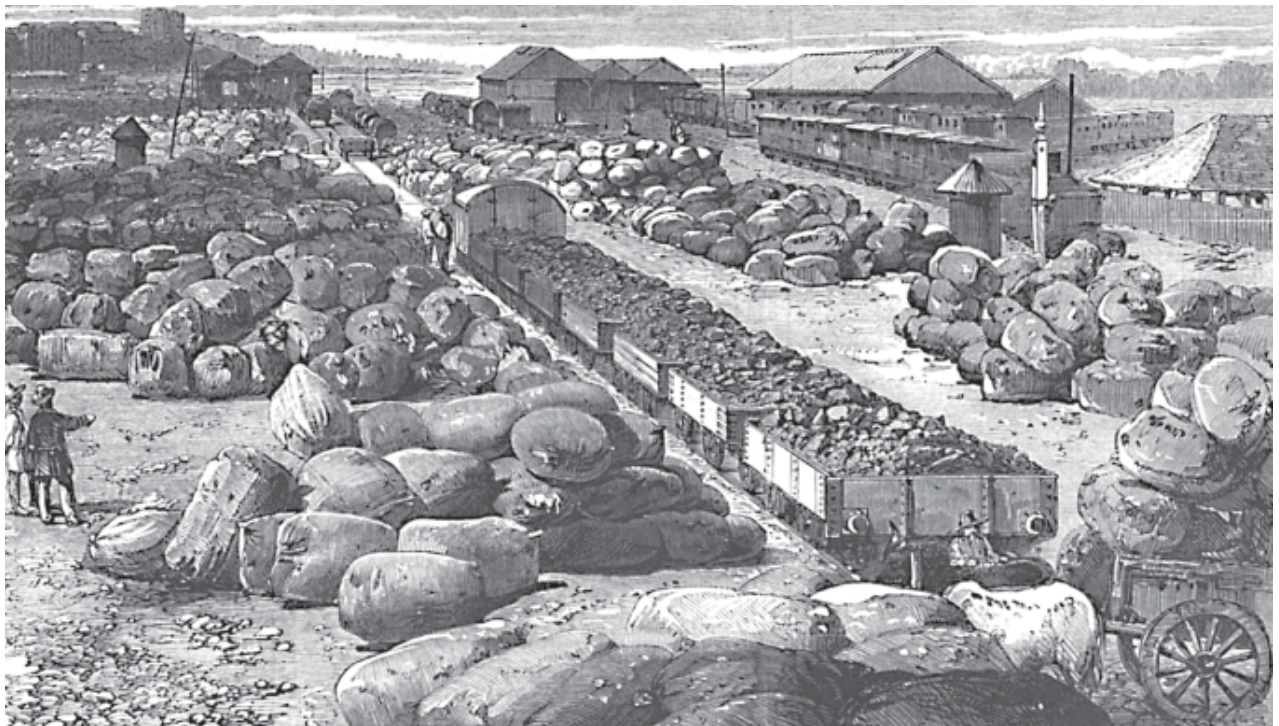
These developments had a profound impact on the Deccan countryside. The *ryots* in the Deccan villages suddenly found access to seemingly limitless credit. They were being given Rs 100 as advance for every acre they planted with cotton. *Sahukars* were more than willing to extend long-term loans.

While the American crisis continued, cotton production in the Bombay Deccan expanded. Between 1860 and 1864 cotton acreage doubled. By 1862 over 90 per cent of cotton imports into Britain were coming from India.

But these boom years did not bring prosperity to all cotton producers. Some rich peasants did gain, but for the large majority, cotton expansion meant heavier debt.



*Fig. 10.18*  
A fleet of boats carrying cotton bales down the Ganges from Mirzapur, Illustrated London News, 13 December 1862  
Before the railway age, the town of Mirzapur was a collection centre for cotton from the Deccan.



*Fig. 10.19*  
Cotton bales lying at the Bombay terminus of the Great Indian Peninsula Railway ready for shipment to England, Illustrated London News, 23 August 1862

Once the railways came up cotton supplies were not carried only on carts and boats. River traffic declined over time. But older modes of transport were not fully displaced. The loaded bullock cart in the foreground on the right is waiting to carry cotton bales from the railway station to the port.

Source 8

### A ryot petitions

This is an example of a petition from a *ryot* of the village of Mirajgaon, Taluka Karjat, to the Collector, Ahmednagar, Deccan Riots Commission:

The *sowkars* (*sahukars*) ... have of late begun to oppress us. As we cannot earn enough to defray our household expenses, we are actually forced to beg of them to provide us with money, clothes and grain, which we obtain from them not without great difficulty, nor without their compelling us to enter into hard conditions in the bond. Moreover the necessary clothes and grain are not sold to us at cash rates. The prices asked from us are generally twenty-five or fifty per cent more than demanded from customers making ready money payments ... The produce of our fields is also taken by the *sowkars*, who at the time of removing it assure us that it will be credited to our account, but they do not actually make any mention of it in the accounts. They also refuse to pass us any receipts for the produce so removed by them.

### 3.5 Credit dries up

While the boom lasted, cotton merchants in India had visions of capturing the world market in raw cotton, permanently displacing America. The editor of the *Bombay Gazette* had asked in 1861, “What can prevent India from supplanting the Slave States (of U.S.A.) as the feeder of Lancashire?” By 1865 these dreams were over. As the Civil War ended, cotton production in America revived and Indian cotton exports to Britain steadily declined.

Export merchants and *sahukars* in Maharashtra were no longer keen on extending long-term credit. They could see the demand for Indian cotton fall and cotton prices slide downwards. So they decided to close down their operations, restrict their advances to peasants, and demand repayment of outstanding debts.

While credit dried up, the revenue demand increased. The first revenue settlement, as we have seen, was in the 1820s and 1830s. Now it was time for the next. And in the new settlement, the demand was increased dramatically: from 50 to 100 per cent. How could *ryots* pay this inflated demand at a time when prices were falling and cotton fields disappearing? Yet again they had to turn to the moneylender. But the moneylender now refused loans. He no longer had confidence in the *ryots'* capacity to repay.

### 3.6 The experience of injustice

The refusal of moneylenders to extend loans enraged the *ryots*. What infuriated them was not simply that they had got deeper and deeper into debt, or that they were utterly dependent on the moneylender for survival, but that moneylenders were being insensitive to their plight. The moneylenders were violating the customary norms of the countryside.

Moneylending was certainly widespread before colonial rule and moneylenders were often powerful

➔ Explain the complaints that the *ryot* is making in the petition. Why was the harvest taken by the moneylenders not credited to the peasants' account? Why were peasants not given any receipts? If you were a moneylender what reasons would you give for these practices?

figures. A variety of customary norms regulated the relationship between the moneylender and the *ryot*. One general norm was that the interest charged could not be more than the principal. This was meant to limit the moneylender's exactions and defined what could be counted as "fair interest". Under colonial rule this norm broke down. In one of the many cases investigated by the Deccan Riots Commission, the moneylender had charged over Rs 2,000 as interest on a loan of Rs 100. In petition after petition, *ryots* complained of the injustice of such exactions and the violation of custom.

Source 9

### Deeds of hire

When debts mounted the peasant was unable to pay back the loan to the moneylender. He had no option but to give over all his possessions – land, carts, and animals – to the moneylender. But without animals he could not continue to cultivate. So he took land on rent and animals on hire. He now had to pay for the animals which had originally belonged to him. He had to sign a deed of hire stating very clearly that these animals and carts did not belong to him. In cases of conflict, these deeds could be enforced through the court.

The following is the text of a deed that a peasant signed in November 1873, from the records of the Deccan Riots Commission:

I have sold to you, on account of the debt due to you, my two carriages having iron axles, with their appurtenances and four bullocks ... I have taken from you on hire under (this) deed the very same two carriages and four bullocks. I shall pay every month the hire thereof at Rupees four a month, and obtain a receipt in your own handwriting. In the absence of a receipt I shall not contend that the hire had been paid.

➤ List all the commitments that the peasant is making in this deed. What does such a deed of hire tell us about the relationship between the peasant and the moneylender? How would it change the relationship between the peasant and the bullocks he previously owned?

The *ryots* came to see the moneylender as devious and deceitful. They complained of moneylenders manipulating laws and forging accounts. In 1859 the British passed a Limitation Law that stated that the loan bonds signed between moneylenders and *ryots* would have validity for only three years. This law was meant to check the accumulation of interest over time. The moneylender, however, turned

the law around, forcing the *ryot* to sign a new bond every three years. When a new bond was signed, the unpaid balance – that is, the original loan and the accumulated interest – was entered as the principal on which a new set of interest charges was calculated. In petitions that the Deccan Riots Commission collected, *ryots* described how this process worked (see Source 10) and how moneylenders used a variety of other means to short-change the *ryot*: they refused to give receipts when loans were repaid, entered fictitious figures in bonds, acquired the peasants' harvest at low prices, and ultimately took over peasants' property.

Deeds and bonds appeared as symbols of the new oppressive system. In the past such deeds had been rare. The British, however, were suspicious of transactions based on informal understanding, as was common in the past. The terms of transactions, they believed, had to be clearly, unambiguously and categorically stated in contracts, deeds and bonds, and regulated by law. Unless the deed or contract was legally enforceable, it had no value.

Over time, peasants came to associate the misery of their lives with the new regime of bonds and deeds. They were made to sign and put thumb impressions on documents, but they did not know what they were actually signing. They had no idea of the clauses that moneylenders inserted in the bonds. They feared the written word. But they had no choice because to survive they needed loans, and moneylenders were unwilling to give loans without legal bonds.

Source 10

### How debts mounted

In a petition to the Deccan Riots Commission a *ryot* explained how the system of loans worked:

A *sowkar* lends his debtor Rs 100 on bond at Rs 3-2 annas per cent per mensem. The latter agrees to pay the amount within eight days from the passing of the bond. Three years after the stipulated time for repaying the amount, the *sowkar* takes from his debtor another bond for the principal and interest together at the same rate of interest, and allows him 125 days' time to liquidate the debt. After the lapse of 3 years and 15 days a third bond is passed by the debtor ... (this process is repeated) at the end of 12 years ... his interest on Rs 1000 amounts to Rs 2028 -10 annas -3 paise.

➔ Calculate the rate of interest that the *ryot* was paying over the years.

#### 4. THE DECCAN RIOTS COMMISSION

When the revolt spread in the Deccan, the Government of Bombay was initially unwilling to see it as anything serious. But the Government of India, worried by the memory of 1857, pressurised the Government of Bombay to set up a commission of enquiry to investigate into the causes of the riots. The commission produced a report that was presented to the British Parliament in 1878.

This report, referred to as the Deccan Riots Report, provides historians with a range of sources for the study of the riot. The commission held enquiries in the districts where the riots spread, recorded statements of *ryots*, *sahukars* and eyewitnesses, compiled statistical data on revenue rates, prices and interest rates in different regions, and collated the reports sent by district collectors.

In looking at such sources we have to again remember that they are official sources and reflect official concerns and interpretations of events. The Deccan Riots Commission, for instance, was specifically asked to judge whether the level of government revenue demand was the cause of the revolt. And after presenting all the evidence, the commission reported that the government demand was not the cause of peasant anger. It was the moneylenders who were to blame. This argument is found very frequently in colonial records. This shows that there was a persistent reluctance on the part of the colonial government to admit that popular discontent was ever on account of government action.

Official reports, thus, are invaluable sources for the reconstruction of history. But they have to be always read with care and juxtaposed with evidence culled from newspapers, unofficial accounts, legal records and, where possible, oral sources.

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#### ➔ Discuss...

Check what rates of interest are charged in the region where you live at present. Find out whether these rates have changed over the last 50 years. Is there a variation in the rates paid by different groups of people? What are the reasons for the differences?

### TIMELINE

1765	English East India Company acquires Diwani of Bengal
1773	Regulating Act passed by the British Parliament to regulate the activities of the East India Company
1793	Permanent Settlement in Bengal
1800s	Santhals begin to come to the Rajmahal hills and settle there
1818	First revenue settlement in the Bombay Deccan
1820s	Agricultural prices begin to fall
1840s-50s	A slow process of agrarian expansion in the Bombay Deccan
1855-56	Santhal rebellion
1861	Cotton boom begins
1875	<i>Ryots</i> in Deccan villages rebel



Fig. 10.20  
A rural scene, painted by William Prinsep, 1820

### ANSWER IN 100-150 WORDS

1. Why was the *jotedar* a powerful figure in many areas of rural Bengal?
2. How did zamindars manage to retain control over their zamindaris?
3. How did the Paharias respond to the coming of outsiders?
4. Why did the Santhals rebel against British rule?
5. What explains the anger of the Deccan *ryots* against the moneylenders?



### WRITE A SHORT ESSAY (250-300 WORDS) ON THE FOLLOWING:

6. Why were many zamindaris auctioned after the Permanent Settlement?
7. In what way was the livelihood of the Paharias different from that of the Santhals?
8. How did the American Civil War affect the lives of *ryots* in India?
9. What are the problems of using official sources in writing about the history of peasants?



### MAP WORK

10. On an outline map of the subcontinent, mark out the areas described in this chapter. Find out whether there were other areas where the Permanent Settlement and the *ryotwari* system were prevalent and plot these on the map as well.



### PROJECTS (CHOOSE ONE)

11. Francis Buchanan published reports on several districts of eastern India. Read one report and collate the information available about rural society, focusing on the themes discussed in this chapter. Highlight the ways in which historians can use such texts.
12. In the region where you live, talk to the older people within a rural community and visit the fields they now cultivate. Find out what they produce, how they earn their livelihoods, what their parents did, what their sons and daughters do now, and how their lives have changed over the last 75 years. Write a report based on your findings.



### If you would like to know more, read:

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## REBELS AND THE RAJ

### THE REVOLT OF 1857 AND ITS REPRESENTATIONS

Late in the afternoon of 10 May 1857, the sepoys in the cantonment of Meerut broke out in mutiny. It began in the lines of the native infantry, spread very swiftly to the cavalry and then to the city. The ordinary people of the town and surrounding villages joined the sepoys. The sepoys captured the bell of arms where the arms and ammunition were kept and proceeded to attack white people, and to ransack and burn their bungalows and property. Government buildings – the record office, jail, court, post office, treasury, etc. – were destroyed and plundered. The telegraph line to Delhi was cut. As darkness descended, a group of sepoys rode off towards Delhi.



Fig. 11.1  
*Portrait of Bahadur Shah*

The sepoys arrived at the gates of the Red Fort early in the morning on 11 May. It was the month of Ramzan, the Muslim holy month of prayer and fasting. The old Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah, had just finished his prayers and meal before the sun rose and the fast began. He heard the commotion at the gates. The sepoys who had gathered under his window told him: “We have come from Meerut after killing all the Englishmen there, because they asked us to bite bullets that were coated with the fat of cows and pigs with our teeth. This has corrupted the faith of Hindus and Muslims alike.” Another group of sepoys also entered Delhi, and the ordinary people of the city joined them. Europeans were killed in large numbers; the rich of Delhi were attacked and looted. It was clear that Delhi had gone out of British control. Some sepoys rode into the Red Fort, without observing the elaborate court etiquette expected of them. They demanded that the emperor give them his blessings. Surrounded by the sepoys, Bahadur Shah had no other option but to comply. The revolt thus acquired a kind of legitimacy because it could now be carried on in the name of the Mughal emperor.

Through 12 and 13 May, North India remained quiet. Once word spread that Delhi had fallen to the rebels and Bahadur Shah had blessed the rebellion, events moved swiftly. Cantonment after cantonment in the Gangetic valley and some to the west of Delhi rose in mutiny.

## 1. PATTERN OF THE REBELLION

If one were to place the dates of these mutinies in chronological order, it would appear that as the news of the mutiny in one town travelled to the next the sepoys there took up arms. The sequence of events in every cantonment followed a similar pattern.

### 1.1 How the mutinies began

The sepoys began their action with a signal: in many places it was the firing of the evening gun or the sounding of the bugle. They first seized the bell of arms and plundered the treasury. They then attacked government buildings – the jail, treasury, telegraph office, record room, bungalows – burning all records. Everything and everybody connected with the white man became a target. Proclamations in Hindi, Urdu and Persian were put up in the cities calling upon the population, both Hindus and Muslims, to unite, rise and exterminate the *firangis*.

When ordinary people began joining the revolt, the targets of attack widened. In major towns like Lucknow, Kanpur and Bareilly, money-lenders and the rich also became the objects of rebel wrath. Peasants not only saw them as oppressors but also as allies of the British. In most places their houses were looted and destroyed. The mutiny in the sepoy ranks quickly became a rebellion. There was a general defiance of all kinds of authority and hierarchy.

*Bell of arms* is a storeroom in which weapons are kept.

*Firangi*, a term of Persian origin, possibly derived from Frank (from which France gets its name), is used in Urdu and Hindi, often in a derogatory sense, to designate foreigners.

Fig. 11.2  
Ordinary people join the sepoys in attacking the British in Lucknow.



In the months of May and June, the British had no answer to the actions of the rebels. Individual Britons tried to save their own lives and the lives of their families. British rule, as one British officer noted, “collapsed like a house made of cards”.

Source 1

### Ordinary life in extraordinary times

What happened in the cities during the months of the revolt? How did people live through those months of tumult? How was normal life affected? Reports from different cities tell us about the breakdown in routine activities. Read these reports from the *Delhi Urdu Akhbar*, 14 June 1857:

The same thing is true for vegetables and *saag* (spinach). People have been found to complain that even *kaddu* (pumpkin) and *baingan* (brinjal) cannot be found in the bazaars. Potatoes and *arui* (yam) when available are of stale and rotten variety, stored from before by farsighted *kunjras* (vegetable growers). From the gardens inside the city some produce does reach a few places but the poor and the middle class can only lick their lips and watch them (as they are earmarked for the select).

... There is something else that needs attention which is causing a lot of damage to the people which is that the water-carriers have stopped filling water. Poor *Shurfas* (gentility) are seen carrying water in pails on their shoulders and only then the necessary household tasks such as cooking, etc. can take place. The *halalkhors* (righteous) have become *haramkhors* (corrupt), many *mohallas* have not been able to earn for several days and if this situation continues then decay, death and disease will combine together to spoil the city's air and an epidemic will spread all over the city and even to areas adjacent and around.

➔ Read the two reports and the descriptions of what was happening in Delhi provided in the chapter. Remember that newspaper reports often express the prejudices of the reporter. How did *Delhi Urdu Akhbar* view the actions of the people?

### 1.2 Lines of communication

The reason for the similarity in the pattern of the revolt in different places lay partly in its planning and coordination. It is clear that there was communication between the sepoy lines of various cantonments. After the 7th Awadh Irregular Cavalry had refused to accept the new cartridges in early May, they wrote to the 48th Native Infantry that “they had acted for the faith and awaited the 48th's orders”. Sepoys or their emissaries moved from one station to another. People were thus planning and talking about the rebellion.

Source 2

### Sisten and the *tahsildar*

In the context of the communication of the message of revolt and mutiny, the experience of François Sisten, a native Christian police inspector in Sitapur, is telling. He had gone to Saharanpur to pay his respects to the magistrate. Sisten was dressed in Indian clothes and sitting cross-legged. A Muslim *tahsildar* from Bijnor entered the room; upon learning that Sisten was from Awadh, he enquired, "What news from Awadh? How does the work progress, brother?" Playing safe, Sisten replied, "If we have work in Awadh, your highness will know it." The *tahsildar* said, "Depend upon it, we will succeed this time. The direction of the business is in able hands." The *tahsildar* was later identified as the principal rebel leader of Bijnor.

➔ What does this conversation suggest about the ways in which plans were communicated and discussed by the rebels? Why did the *tahsildar* regard Sisten as a potential rebel?

The pattern of the mutinies and the pieces of evidence that suggest some sort of planning and coordination raise certain crucial questions. How were the plans made? Who were the planners? It is difficult on the basis of the available documents to provide direct answers to such questions. But one incident provides clues as to how the mutinies came to be so organised. Captain Hearsey of the Awadh Military Police had been given protection by his Indian subordinates during the mutiny. The 41st Native Infantry, which was stationed in the same place, insisted that since they had killed all their white officers, the Military Police should also kill Hearsey or deliver him as prisoner to the 41st. The Military Police refused to do either, and it was decided that the matter would be settled by a panchayat composed of native officers drawn from each regiment. Charles Ball, who wrote one of the earliest histories of the uprising, noted that panchayats were a nightly occurrence in the Kanpur sepoy lines. What this suggests is that some of the decisions were taken collectively. Given the fact that the sepoys lived in lines and shared a common lifestyle and that many of them came from the same caste, it is not difficult to imagine them sitting together to decide their own future. The sepoys were the makers of their own rebellion.

*Mutiny* – a collective disobedience of rules and regulations within the armed forces

*Revolt* – a rebellion of people against established authority and power. The terms 'revolt' and 'rebellion' can be used synonymously.

In the context of the revolt of 1857 the term revolt refers primarily to the uprising of the civilian population (peasants, zamindars, rajas, *jagirdars*) while the mutiny was of the sepoys.



Fig. 11.3  
Rani Lakshmi Bai, a popular image



Fig. 11.4  
Nana Sahib  
At the end of 1858, when the rebellion collapsed, Nana Sahib escaped to Nepal. The story of his escape added to the legend of Nana Sahib's courage and valour.

### 1.3 Leaders and followers

To fight the British, leadership and organisation were required. For these the rebels sometimes turned to those who had been leaders before the British conquest. One of the first acts of the sepoys of Meerut, as we saw, was to rush to Delhi and appeal to the old Mughal emperor to accept the leadership of the revolt. This acceptance of leadership took its time in coming. Bahadur Shah's first reaction was one of horror and rejection. It was only when some sepoys had moved into the Mughal court within the Red Fort, in defiance of normal court etiquette, that the old emperor, realising he had very few options, agreed to be the nominal leader of the rebellion.

Elsewhere, similar scenes were enacted though on a minor scale. In Kanpur, the sepoys and the people of the town gave Nana Sahib, the successor to Peshwa Baji Rao II, no choice save to join the revolt as their leader. In Jhansi, the rani was forced by the popular pressure around her to assume the leadership of the uprising. So was Kunwar Singh, a local zamindar in Arrah in Bihar. In Awadh, where the displacement of the popular Nawab Wajid Ali Shah and the annexation of the state were still very fresh in the memory of the people, the populace in Lucknow celebrated the fall of British rule by hailing Birjis Qadr, the young son of the Nawab, as their leader.

Not everywhere were the leaders people of the court – ranis, rajas, nawabs and *taluqdars*. Often the message of rebellion was carried by ordinary men and women and in places by religious men too. From Meerut, there were reports that a fakir had appeared riding on an elephant and that the sepoys were visiting him frequently. In Lucknow, after the annexation of Awadh, there were many religious leaders and self-styled prophets who preached the destruction of British rule.

Elsewhere, local leaders emerged, urging peasants, zamindars and tribals to revolt. Shah Mal mobilised the villagers of pargana Barout in Uttar Pradesh; Gonoo, a tribal cultivator of Singhbhum in Chotanagpur, became a rebel leader of the Kol tribals of the region.

## Two rebels of 1857

### Shah Mal

Shah Mal lived in a large village in pargana Barout in Uttar Pradesh. He belonged to a clan of Jat cultivators whose kinship ties extended over *chaurasee des* (eighty-four villages). The lands in the region were irrigated and fertile, with rich dark loam soil. Many of the villagers were prosperous and saw the British land revenue system as oppressive: the revenue demand was high and its collection inflexible. Consequently cultivators were losing land to outsiders, to traders and moneylenders who were coming into the area.

Shah Mal mobilised the headmen and cultivators of *chaurasee des*, moving at night from village to village, urging people to rebel against the British. As in many other places, the revolt against the British turned into a general rebellion against all signs of oppression and injustice. Cultivators left their fields and plundered the houses of moneylenders and traders. Displaced proprietors took possession of the lands they had lost. Shah Mal's men attacked government buildings, destroyed the bridge over the river, and dug up metalled roads – partly to prevent government forces from coming into the area, and partly because bridges and roads were seen as symbols of British rule. They sent supplies to the sepoys who had mutinied in Delhi and stopped all official communication between British headquarters and Meerut. Locally acknowledged as the Raja, Shah Mal took over the bungalow of an English officer, turned it into a “hall of justice”, settling disputes and dispensing judgments. He also set up an amazingly effective network of intelligence. For a period the people of the area felt that *firangi raj* was over, and their *raj* had come.

Shah Mal was killed in battle in July 1857.

### Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah

Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah was one of the many *maulvis* who played an important part in the revolt of 1857. Educated in Hyderabad, he became a preacher when young. In 1856, he was seen moving from village to village preaching *jihad* (religious war) against the British and urging people to rebel. He moved in a palanquin, with drumbeaters in front and followers at the rear. He was therefore popularly called Danka Shah – the *maulvi* with the drum (*danka*). British officials panicked as thousands began following the *maulvi* and many Muslims began seeing him as an inspired prophet. When he reached Lucknow in 1856, he was stopped by the police from preaching in the city. Subsequently, in 1857, he was jailed in Faizabad. When released, he was elected by the mutinous 22<sup>nd</sup> Native Infantry as their leader. He fought in the famous Battle of Chinhath in which the British forces under Henry Lawrence were defeated. He came to be known for his courage and power. Many people in fact believed that he was invincible, had magical powers, and could not be killed by the British. It was this belief that partly formed the basis of his authority.



Fig. 11.5  
Henry Hardinge, by Francis Grant,  
1849

As Governor General, Hardinge attempted to modernise the equipment of the army. The Enfield rifles that were introduced initially used the greased cartridges the sepoys rebelled against.

#### 1.4 Rumours and prophecies

Rumours and prophecies played a part in moving people to action. As we saw, the sepoys who had arrived in Delhi from Meerut had told Bahadur Shah about bullets coated with the fat of cows and pigs and that biting those bullets would corrupt their caste and religion. They were referring to the cartridges of the Enfield rifles which had just been given to them. The British tried to explain to the sepoys that this was not the case but the rumour that the new cartridges were greased with the fat of cows and pigs spread like wildfire across the sepoy lines of North India.

This is one rumour whose origin can be traced. Captain Wright, commandant of the Rifle Instruction Depot, reported that in the third week of January 1857 a “low-caste” *khalasi* who worked in the magazine in Dum Dum had asked a Brahmin sepoy for a drink of water from his *lota*. The sepoy had refused saying that the “lower caste’s” touch would defile the *lota*. The *khalasi* had reportedly retorted, “You will soon lose your caste, as ere long you will have to bite cartridges covered with the fat of cows and pigs.” We do not know the veracity of the report, but once this rumour started no amount of assurances from British officers could stop its circulation and the fear it spread among the sepoys.

This was not the only rumour that was circulating in North India at the beginning of 1857. There was the rumour that the British government had hatched a gigantic conspiracy to destroy the caste and religion of Hindus and Muslims. To this end, the rumours said, the British had mixed the bone dust of cows and pigs into the flour that was sold in the market. In towns and cantonments, sepoys and the common people refused to touch the *atta*. There was fear and suspicion that the British wanted to convert Indians to Christianity. Panic spread fast. British officers tried to allay their fears, but in vain. These fears stirred men to action. The response to the call for action was reinforced by the prophecy that British rule would come to an end on the centenary of the Battle of Plassey, on 23 June 1857.

Rumours were not the only thing circulating at the time. Reports came from various parts of North India that chapattis were being distributed from village to village. A person would come at night and

give a chapatti to the watchman of the village and ask him to make five more and distribute to the next village, and so on. The meaning and purpose of the distribution of the chapattis was not clear and is not clear even today. But there is no doubt that people read it as an omen of an upheaval.

### 1.5 Why did people believe in the rumours?

We cannot understand the power of rumours and prophecies in history by checking whether they are factually correct or not. We need to see what they reflect about the minds of people who believed them – their fears and apprehensions, their faiths and convictions. Rumours circulate only when they resonate with the deeper fears and suspicions of people.

The rumours in 1857 begin to make sense when seen in the context of the policies the British pursued from the late 1820s. As you know, from that time, under the leadership of Governor General Lord William Bentinck, the British adopted policies aimed at “reforming” Indian society by introducing Western education, Western ideas and Western institutions. With the cooperation of sections of Indian society they set up English-medium schools, colleges and universities which taught Western sciences and the liberal arts. The British established laws to abolish customs like sati (1829) and to permit the remarriage of Hindu widows.

On a variety of pleas, like misgovernment and the refusal to recognise adoption, the British annexed not only Awadh, but many other kingdoms and principalities like Jhansi and Satara. Once these territories were annexed, the British introduced their own system of administration, their own laws and their own methods of land settlement and land revenue collection. The cumulative impact of all this on the people of North India was profound.

It seemed to the people that all that they cherished and held sacred – from kings and socio-religious customs to patterns of landholding and revenue payment – was being destroyed and replaced by a system that was more impersonal, alien and oppressive. This perception was aggravated by the activities of Christian missionaries. In such a situation of uncertainty, rumours spread with remarkable swiftness.

To explore the basis of the revolt of 1857 in some detail, let us look at Awadh – one of the major centres where the drama of 1857 unfolded.

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### ➡ Discuss...

Read the section once more and explain the similarities and differences you notice in the ways in which leaders emerged during the revolt. For any two leaders, discuss why ordinary people were drawn to them.



## 2. AWADH IN REVOLT

### 2.1 “A cherry that will drop into our mouth one day”

In 1851 Governor General Lord Dalhousie described the kingdom of Awadh as “a cherry that will drop into our mouth one day”. Five years later, in 1856, the kingdom was formally annexed to the British Empire.

The conquest happened in stages. The Subsidiary Alliance had been imposed on Awadh in 1801. By the terms of this alliance the Nawab had to disband his military force, allow the British to position their troops within the kingdom, and act in accordance with the advice of the British Resident who was now to be attached to the court. Deprived of his armed forces, the Nawab became increasingly dependent on the British to maintain law and order within the kingdom. He could no longer assert control over the rebellious chiefs and *taluqdars*.

In the meantime the British became increasingly interested in acquiring the territory of Awadh. They felt that the soil there was good for producing indigo and cotton, and the region was ideally located to be developed into the principal market of Upper India. By the early 1850s, moreover, all the major areas of India had been conquered: the Maratha lands, the Doab, the Carnatic, the Punjab and Bengal. The takeover of Awadh in 1856 was expected to complete a process of territorial annexation that had begun with the conquest of Bengal almost a century earlier.

### 2.2 “The life was gone out of the body”

Lord Dalhousie’s annexations created disaffection in all the areas and principalities that were annexed but nowhere more so than in the kingdom of Awadh in the heart of North India. Here, Nawab Wajid Ali Shah was dethroned and exiled to Calcutta on the plea that the region was being misgoverned. The British government also wrongly assumed that Wajid Ali Shah was an unpopular ruler. On the contrary, he was widely loved, and when he left his beloved Lucknow, there were many who followed him all the way to Kanpur singing songs of lament.

The widespread sense of grief and loss at the Nawab’s exile was recorded by many contemporary observers. One of them wrote: “The life was gone out of the body, and the body of this town had been left lifeless ... there was no street or market and house

*Resident* was the designation of a representative of the Governor General who lived in a state which was not under direct British rule.

### Subsidiary Alliance

Subsidiary Alliance was a system devised by Lord Wellesley in 1798. All those who entered into such an alliance with the British had to accept certain terms and conditions:

(a) The British would be responsible for protecting their ally from external and internal threats to their power.

(b) In the territory of the ally, a British armed contingent would be stationed.

(c) The ally would have to provide the resources for maintaining this contingent.

(d) The ally could enter into agreements with other rulers or engage in warfare only with the permission of the British.



Map 1  
Territories under British control in 1857

Source 3

### The Nawab has left

Another song mourned the plight of the ruler who had to leave his motherland:

Noble and peasant all wept together  
and all the world wept and wailed  
Alas! The chief has bidden adieu to  
his country and gone abroad.

➔ Read the entire section and discuss why people mourned the departure of Wajid Ali Shah.

which did not wail out the cry of agony in separation of Jan-i-Alam.” One folk song bemoaned that “the honourable English came and took the country” (*Angrez Bahadur ain, mulk lai linho*).

This emotional upheaval was aggravated by immediate material losses. The removal of the Nawab led to the dissolution of the court and its culture. Thus a whole range of people – musicians, dancers, poets, artisans, cooks, retainers, administrative officials and so on – lost their livelihood.

### 2.3 *Firangi raj* and the end of a world

A chain of grievances in Awadh linked prince, *taluqdar*, peasant and sepoy. In different ways they came to identify *firangi raj* with the end of their world – the breakdown of things they valued, respected and held dear. A whole complex of emotions



Fig. 11.6  
A zamindar from Awadh, 1880

and issues, traditions and loyalties worked themselves out in the revolt of 1857. In Awadh, more than anywhere else, the revolt became an expression of popular resistance to an alien order.

The annexation displaced not just the Nawab. It also dispossessed the *taluqdars* of the region. The countryside of Awadh was dotted with the estates and forts of *taluqdars* who for many generations had controlled land and power in the countryside. Before the coming of the British, *taluqdars* maintained armed retainers, built forts, and enjoyed a degree of autonomy, as long as they accepted the suzerainty of the Nawab and paid the revenue of their *taluqs*. Some of the bigger *taluqdars* had as many as 12,000 foot-soldiers and even the smaller ones had about 200. The British were unwilling to tolerate the power of the *taluqdars*. Immediately after the annexation, the *taluqdars* were disarmed and their forts destroyed.

The British land revenue policy further undermined the position and authority of the *taluqdars*. After annexation, the first British revenue settlement, known as the Summary Settlement of 1856, was based on the assumption that the *taluqdars* were interlopers with no permanent stakes in land: they had established their hold over land through force and fraud. The Summary Settlement proceeded to remove the *taluqdars* wherever possible. Figures show that in pre-British times, *taluqdars* had held 67 per cent of the total number of villages in Awadh; by the Summary Settlement this number had come down to 38 per cent. The *taluqdars* of southern Awadh were the hardest hit and some lost more than half of the total number of villages they had previously held.

British land revenue officers believed that by removing *taluqdars* they would be able to settle the land with the actual owners of the soil and thus reduce the level of exploitation of peasants while increasing revenue returns for the state. But this did not happen in practice: revenue flows for the state increased but the burden of demand on the peasants did not decline. Officials soon found that large areas of Awadh were actually heavily overassessed: the increase of revenue demand in some places was from 30 to 70 per cent. Thus neither *taluqdars* nor peasants had any reasons to be happy with the annexation.

The dispossession of *talukdars* meant the breakdown of an entire social order. The ties of loyalty and patronage that had bound the peasant to the *talukdar* were disrupted. In pre-British times, the *talukdars* were oppressors but many of them also appeared to be generous father figures: they exacted a variety of dues from the peasant but were often considerate in times of need. Now, under the British, the peasant was directly exposed to overassessment of revenue and inflexible methods of collection. There was no longer any guarantee that in times of hardship or crop failure the revenue demand of the state would be reduced or collection postponed; or that in times of festivities the peasant would get the loan and support that the *talukdar* had earlier provided.

In areas like Awadh where resistance during 1857 was intense and long lasting, the fighting was carried out by *talukdars* and their peasants. Many of these *talukdars* were loyal to the Nawab of Awadh, and they joined Begum Hazrat Mahal (the wife of the Nawab) in Lucknow to fight the British; some even remained with her in defeat.

The grievances of the peasants were carried over into the sepoy lines since a vast majority of the sepoys were recruited from the villages of Awadh. For decades the sepoys had complained of low levels of pay and the difficulty of getting leave. By the 1850s there were other reasons for their discontent.

The relationship of the sepoys with their superior white officers underwent a significant change in the years preceding the uprising of 1857. In the 1820s, white officers made it a point to maintain friendly relations with the sepoys. They would take part in their leisure activities – they wrestled with them, fenced with them and went out hawking with them. Many of them were fluent in Hindustani and were familiar with the customs and culture of the country. These officers were disciplinarian and father figure rolled into one.

In the 1840s, this began to change. The officers developed a sense of superiority and started treating the sepoys as their racial inferiors, riding roughshod over their sensibilities. Abuse and physical violence became common and thus the distance between sepoys and officers grew. Trust was replaced by suspicion. The episode of the greased cartridges was a classic example of this.

Source 4

### What *talukdars* thought

The attitude of the *talukdars* was best expressed by Hanwant Singh, the Raja of Kalakankar, near Rae Bareilly. During the mutiny, Hanwant Singh had given shelter to a British officer, and conveyed him to safety. While taking leave of the officer, Hanwant Singh told him:

Sahib, your countrymen came into this country and drove out our King. You sent your officers round the districts to examine the titles to the estates. At one blow you took from me lands which from time immemorial had been in my family. I submitted. Suddenly misfortune fell upon you. The people of the land rose against you. You came to me whom you had despoiled. I have saved you. But now – now I march at the head of my retainers to Lucknow to try and drive you from the country.

➔ What does this excerpt tell you about the attitude of the *talukdars*? Who did Hanwant Singh mean by the people of the land? What reason does Hanwant Singh give for the anger of the people?

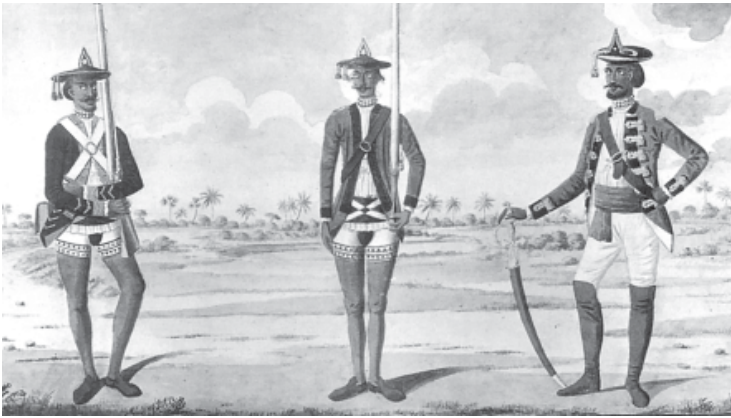


Fig. 11.7  
Bengal sepoy in European-style uniform

### ➔ Discuss...

Find out whether people in your state participated in the revolt of 1857. If they did, find out why they did so. If they did not, try and explain this.

It is also important to remember that close links existed between the sepoys and the rural world of North India. The large majority of the sepoys of the Bengal Army were recruited from the villages of Awadh and eastern Uttar Pradesh. Many of them were Brahmins or from the “upper” castes. Awadh was, in fact, called the “nursery of the Bengal Army”. The changes that the families of the sepoys saw around them and

the threats they perceived were quickly transmitted to the sepoy lines. In turn, the fears of the sepoys about the new cartridge, their grievances about leave, their grouse about the increasing misbehaviour and racial abuse on the part of their white officers were communicated back to the villages. This link between the sepoys and the rural world had important implications in the course of the uprising. When the sepoys defied their superior officers and took up arms they were joined very swiftly by their brethren in the villages. Everywhere, peasants poured into towns and joined the soldiers and the ordinary people of the towns in collective acts of rebellion.

### 3. WHAT THE REBELS WANTED

As victors, the British recorded their own trials and tribulations as well as their heroism. They dismissed the rebels as a bunch of ungrateful and barbaric people. The repression of the rebels also meant silencing of their voice. Few rebels had the opportunity of recording their version of events. Moreover, most of them were sepoys and ordinary people who were not literate. Thus, other than a few proclamations and *ishtahars* (notifications) issued by rebel leaders to propagate their ideas and persuade people to join the revolt, we do not have much that throws light on the perspective of the rebels. Attempts to reconstruct what happened in 1857 are thus heavily and inevitably dependent on what the British wrote. While these sources reveal the minds of officials, they tell us very little about what the rebels wanted.

### 3.1 The vision of unity

The rebel proclamations in 1857 repeatedly appealed to all sections of the population, irrespective of their caste and creed. Many of the proclamations were issued by Muslim princes or in their names but even these took care to address the sentiments of Hindus. The rebellion was seen as a war in which both Hindus and Muslims had equally to lose or gain. The *ishtahars* harked back to the pre-British Hindu-Muslim past and glorified the coexistence of different communities under the Mughal Empire. The proclamation that was issued under the name of Bahadur Shah appealed to the people to join the fight under the standards of both Muhammad and Mahavir. It was remarkable that during the uprising religious divisions between Hindus and Muslim were hardly noticeable despite British attempts to create such divisions. In Bareilly in western Uttar Pradesh, in December 1857, the British spent Rs 50,000 to incite the Hindu population against the Muslims. The attempt failed.

Source 5

#### The Azamgarh Proclamation, 25 August 1857

This is one of the main sources of our knowledge about what the rebels wanted:

It is well known to all, that in this age the people of Hindostan, both Hindoos and Mohammedans, are being ruined under the tyranny and the oppression of the infidel and treacherous English. It is therefore the bounden duty of all the wealthy people of India, especially those who have any sort of connection with the Mohammedan royal families, and are considered the pastors and masters of their people, to stake their lives and property for the well-being of the public. ...

Several of the Hindoo and Mussalman Chiefs, who have long since quitted their homes for the preservation of their religion, and have been trying their best to root out the English in India, have presented themselves to me, and taken part in the reigning Indian crusade, and it is more than probable that I shall very shortly receive succours from the West. Therefore for the information of the public, the present *Ishtahar*, consisting of several sections, is put in circulation and it is the imperative duty of all to take into their careful consideration, and abide by it. Parties anxious to participate in the common cause, but having no means to provide for themselves, shall receive their daily subsistence from me; and be it known to all, that the ancient works, both of the Hindoos and Mohammedans, the writings of miracle workers, and the calculation of the astrologers, pundits, ... all agree in asserting that the English will no longer have any footing in India or elsewhere. Therefore it is incumbent on all to give up the hope of the continuation of the British sway, side with me, and deserve the consideration of the Badshahi, or imperial government, by their individual exertion in

*contd*

Source 5 (contd)

promoting the common good, and thus attain their respective ends; otherwise if this golden opportunity slips away, they will have to repent for their folly, ... .

*Section I – Regarding Zemindars.* It is evident, that the British Government in making zemindary settlements have imposed exorbitant *Jumas* (revenue demand) and have disgraced and ruined several zemindars, by putting up their estates for public auction for arrears of rent, in so much, in the institution of a suit by a common Ryot, a maid servant, or a slave, the respectable zemindars are summoned into court, arrested, put in goal and disgraced. In litigation regarding zemindaries, the immense value of stamps, and other unnecessary expenses of the civil courts, ... are all calculated to impoverish the litigants. Besides this, the coffers of the zemindars are annually taxed with the subscription for schools, hospitals, roads, etc. Such extortions will have no manner of existence in the Badshahi Government; but on the contrary the *Jumas* will be light, the dignity and honour of the zemindars safe, and every zemindar will have absolute rule in his own zemindary ...

*Section II – Regarding Merchants.* It is plain that the infidel and treacherous British Government have monopolised the trade of all the fine and valuable merchandise, such as indigo, cloth, and other articles of shipping, leaving only the trade of trifles to the people, ... Besides this, the profits of the traders are taxed, with postages, tolls and subscriptions for schools, etc. Notwithstanding all these concessions, the merchants are liable to imprisonment and disgrace at the instance or complaint of a worthless man. When the Badshahi Government is established all these aforesaid fraudulent practices shall be dispensed with, and the trade of every article, without exception, both by land and water will be opened to the native merchants of India, ... It is therefore the duty of every merchant to take part in the war, and aid the Badshahi Government with his men and money, ... .

*Section III – Regarding Public Servants.* It is not a secret thing, that under the British Government, natives employed in the civil and military services have little respect, low pay, and no manner of influence; and all the posts of dignity and emolument in both the departments are exclusively bestowed on Englishmen, ... Therefore, all the natives in the British service ought to be alive to their religion and interest, and abjuring their loyalty to the English, side with the Badshahi Government, and obtain salaries of 200 and 300 rupees a month for the present, and be entitled to high posts in the future. ...

*Section IV – Regarding Artisans.* It is evident that the Europeans, by the introduction of English articles into India, have thrown the weavers, the cotton dressers, the carpenters, the blacksmiths, and the shoemakers, etc., out of employ, and have engrossed their occupations, so that every description of native artisan has been reduced to beggary. But under the Badshahi Government the native artisans will exclusively be employed in the service of the kings, the rajahs, and the rich; and this will no doubt ensure their prosperity. Therefore these artisans ought to renounce the English services, ... .

*Section V – Regarding Pundits, Fakirs and Other Learned Persons.* The pundits and fakirs being the guardians of the Hindoo and Mohammadan religions respectively, and the Europeans being the enemies of both the religions, and as at present a war is raging against the English on account of religion, the pundits and fakirs are bound to present themselves to me, and take their share in the holy war... .

➤ What are the issues against British rule highlighted in this proclamation?  
Read the section on each social group carefully. Notice the language in which the proclamation is formulated and the variety of sentiments it appeals to.

Source 6

### What the sepoys thought

This is one of the *arzis* (petition or application) of rebel sepoys that have survived:

A century ago the British arrived in Hindostan and gradually entertained troops in their service, and became masters of every state. Our forefathers have always served them, and we also entered their service ... By the mercy of God and with our assistance the British also conquered every place they liked, in which thousands of us, Hindostani men were sacrificed, but we never made any excuses or pretences nor revolted ...

But in the year eighteen fifty seven the British issued an order that new cartridges and muskets which had arrived from England were to be issued; in the former of which the fats of cows and pigs were mixed; and also that *attah* of wheat mixed with powdered bones was to be eaten; and even distributed them in every Regiment of infantry, cavalry and artillery ...

They gave these cartridges to the *sowars* (mounted soldiers) of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Light Cavalry, and ordered them to bite them; the troopers objected to it, and said that they would never bite them, for if they did, their religion and faith would be destroyed ... upon this the British officers paraded the men of the 3 Regiments and having prepared 1,400 English soldiers, and other Battalions of European troops and Horse Artillery, surrounded them, and placing six guns before each of the infantry regiments, loaded the guns with grape and made 84 new troopers prisoners, and put them in jail with irons on them ... The reason that the *sowars* of the Cantonment were put into jail was that we should be frightened into biting the new cartridges. On this account we and all our country-men having united together, have fought the British for the preservation of our faith ... we have been compelled to make war for two years and the Rajahs and Chiefs who are with us in faith and religion, are still so, and have undergone all sorts of trouble; we have fought for two years in order that our faith and religion may not be polluted. If the religion of a Hindoo or Mussalman is lost, what remains in the world?

➤ Compare the reasons for the mutiny as stated in the *arzi* with those mentioned by the *taluqdar* (Source 3).

### 3.2 Against the symbols of oppression

The proclamations completely rejected everything associated with British rule or *firangi raj* as they called it. They condemned the British for the annexations they had carried out and the treaties they had broken. The British, the rebel leaders said, could not be trusted.

What enraged the people was how British land revenue settlements had dispossessed landholders, both big and small, and foreign commerce had driven artisans and weavers to ruin. Every aspect of British rule was attacked and the *firangi* accused of destroying a way of life that was familiar and cherished. The rebels wanted to restore that world.



The proclamations expressed the widespread fear that the British were bent on destroying the caste and religions of Hindus and Muslims and converting them to Christianity – a fear that led people to believe many of the rumours that circulated at the time. People were urged to come together and fight to save their livelihood, their faith, their honour, their identity – a fight which was for the “greater public good”.

As noted earlier, in many places the rebellion against the British widened into an attack on all those who were seen as allies of the British or local oppressors. Often the rebels deliberately sought to humiliate the elites of a city. In the villages they burnt account books and ransacked moneylenders’ houses. This reflected an attempt to overturn traditional hierarchies, rebel against *all* oppressors. It presents a glimpse of an alternative vision, perhaps of a more egalitarian society. Such visions were not articulated in the proclamations which sought to unify all social groups in the fight against *firangi raj*.

### 3.3 The search for alternative power

Once British rule had collapsed, the rebels in places like Delhi, Lucknow and Kanpur tried to establish some kind of structure of authority and administration. This was, of course, short-lived but the attempts show that the rebel leadership wanted to restore the pre-British world of the eighteenth century. The leaders went back to the culture of the court. Appointments were made to various posts, arrangements made for the collection of land revenue and the payment of troops, orders issued to stop loot and plunder. Side by side plans were made to fight battles against the British. Chains of command were laid down in the army. In all this the rebels harked back to the eighteenth-century Mughal world – a world that became a symbol of all that had been lost.

The administrative structures established by the rebels were primarily aimed at meeting the demands of war. However, in most cases these structures could not survive the British onslaught. But in Awadh, where resistance to the British lasted longest, plans of counter-attack were being drawn up by the Lucknow court and hierarchies of command were in place as late as the last months of 1857 and the early part of 1858.

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#### ➔ Discuss...

What do you think are the major problems faced by historians in reconstructing the point of view of the rebels?

### 4. REPRESSION

It is clear from all accounts that we have of 1857 that the British did not have an easy time in putting down the rebellion.

Before sending out troops to reconquer North India, the British passed a series of laws to help them quell the insurgency. By a number of Acts, passed in May and June 1857, not only was the whole of North India put under martial law but military officers and even ordinary Britons were given the power to try and punish Indians suspected of rebellion. In other words, the ordinary processes of law and trial were suspended and it was put out that rebellion would have only one punishment – death.

Armed with these newly enacted special laws and the reinforcements brought in from Britain, the British began the task of suppressing the revolt. They, like the rebels, recognised the symbolic value of Delhi. The British thus mounted a two-pronged attack. One force moved from Calcutta into North India and the other from the Punjab – which was largely peaceful – to reconquer Delhi. British

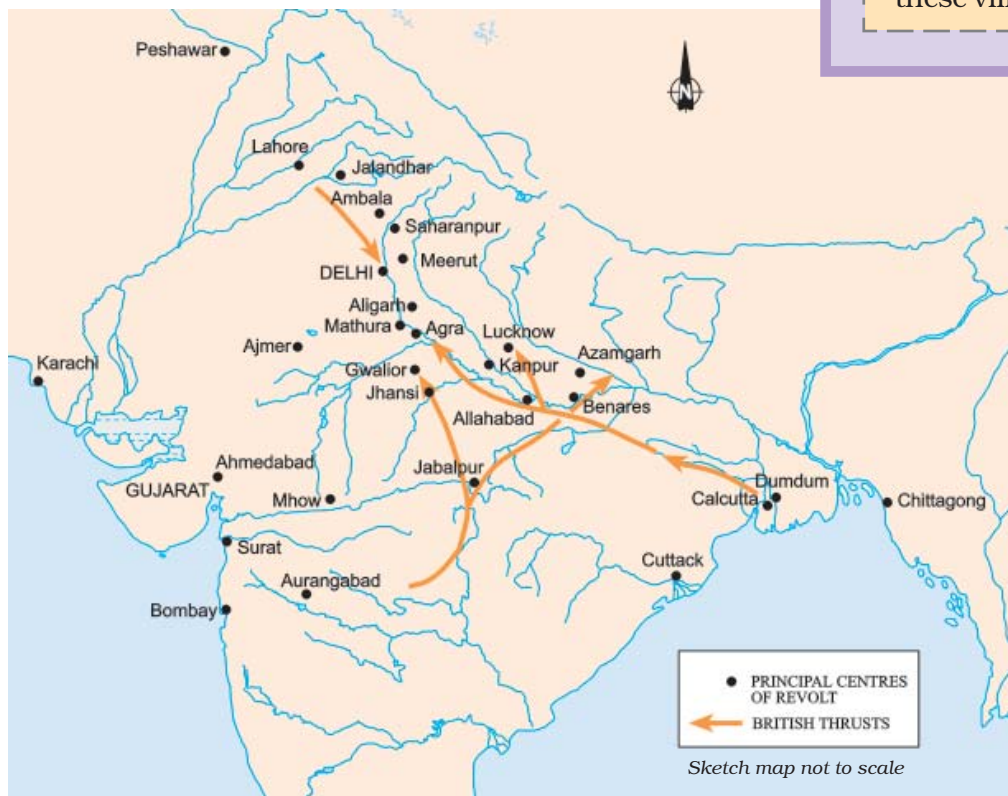
Source 7

#### Villagers as rebels

An officer reporting from rural Awadh (spelt as Oude in the following account) noted:

The Oude people are gradually pressing down on the line of communication from the North ... the Oude people are villagers ... these villagers are nearly intangible to Europeans melting away before them and collecting again. The Civil Authorities report these villagers to amount to a very large number of men, with a number of guns.

➤ What, according to this account, were the problems faced by the British in dealing with these villagers?



Map 2  
The map shows the important centres of revolt and the lines of British attack against the rebels.



*Fig. 11.8*  
A mosque on the Delhi Ridge,  
photograph by Felice Beato, 1857-58  
After 1857, British photographers  
recorded innumerable images of  
desolation and ruin.

attempts to recover Delhi began in earnest in early June 1857 but it was only in late September that the city was finally captured. The fighting and losses on both sides were heavy. One reason for this was the fact that rebels from all over North India had come to Delhi to defend the capital.

In the Gangetic plain too the progress of British reconquest was slow. The forces had to reconquer the area village by village. The countryside and the people around were entirely hostile. As soon as they began their counter-insurgency operations, the British realised that they were not dealing with a mere mutiny but an uprising that had huge popular support. In Awadh, for example, a British official called Forsyth estimated that three-fourths of the adult male population was in rebellion. The area was brought under control only in March 1858 after protracted fighting.

The British used military power on a gigantic scale. But this was not the only instrument they used. In large parts of present-day Uttar Pradesh, where big landholders and peasants had offered united resistance, the British tried to break up the unity by promising to give back to the big landholders their estates. Rebel landholders were dispossessed and the loyal rewarded. Many landholders died fighting the British or they escaped into Nepal where they died of illness or starvation.



*Fig. 11.9*  
Secundrah Bagh, Lucknow,  
photograph by Felice Beato,  
1858

Here we see four solitary figures within a desolate place that was once the pleasure garden built by Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. British forces led by Campbell killed over 2000 rebel sepoys who held the place in 1857. The skeletons strewn on the ground are meant to be a cold warning of the futility of rebellion.

## 5. IMAGES OF THE REVOLT

How do we know about the revolt, about the activities of the rebels and the measures of repression that we have been discussing?

As we have seen, we have very few records on the rebels' point of view. There are a few rebel proclamations and notifications, as also some letters that rebel leaders wrote. But historians till now have continued to discuss rebel actions primarily through accounts written by the British.

Official accounts, of course, abound: colonial administrators and military men left their versions in letters and diaries, autobiographies and official histories. We can also gauge the official mindset and the changing British attitudes through the innumerable memos and notes, assessments of situations, and reports that were produced. Many of these have now been collected in a set of volumes on mutiny records. These tell us about the fears and anxieties of officials and their perception of the rebels. The stories of the revolt that were published in British newspapers and magazines narrated in gory detail the violence of the mutineers – and these stories inflamed public feelings and provoked demands of retribution and revenge.

One important record of the mutiny is the pictorial images produced by the British and Indians: paintings, pencil drawings, etchings, posters, cartoons, bazaar prints. Let us look at some of them and see what they tell us.

### 5.1 Celebrating the saviours

British pictures offer a variety of images that were meant to provoke a range of different emotions and reactions. Some of them commemorate the British heroes who saved the English and repressed the rebels. "Relief of Lucknow", painted by Thomas Jones Barker in 1859, is an example of this type. When the rebel forces besieged Lucknow, Henry Lawrence, the Commissioner of Lucknow, collected the Christian population and took refuge in the heavily fortified Residency. Lawrence was killed but the Residency continued to be defended under the command of Colonel Inglis. On 25 September James Outram and Henry Havelock arrived, cut through the rebel forces, and reinforced the British garrisons. Twenty days later Colin Campbell, who



Fig. 11.10  
*"Relief of Lucknow", painted by  
 Thomas Jones Barker, 1859*

was appointed as the new Commander of British forces in India, came with his forces and rescued the besieged British garrison. In British accounts the siege of Lucknow became a story of survival, heroic resistance and the ultimate triumph of British power.

Barker's painting celebrates the moment of Campbell's entry. At the centre of the canvas are the British heroes – Campbell, Outram and Havelock. The gestures of the hands of those around lead the spectator's eyes towards the centre. The heroes stand on a ground that is well lit, with shadows in the foreground and the damaged Residency in the background. The dead and injured in the foreground are testimony to the suffering during the siege, while the triumphant figures of horses in the middle ground emphasise the fact that British power and control had been re-established. To the British public such paintings were reassuring. They created a sense that the time of trouble was past and the rebellion was over; the British were the victors.

### **5.2 English women and the honour of Britain**

Newspaper reports have a power over public imagination; they shape feelings and attitudes to events. Inflamed particularly by tales of violence

against women and children, there were public demands in Britain for revenge and retribution. The British government was asked to protect the honour of innocent women and ensure the safety of helpless children. Artists expressed as well as shaped these sentiments through their visual representations of trauma and suffering.

"In Memoriam" (Fig. 11.11) was painted by Joseph Noel Paton two years after the mutiny. You can see English women and children huddled in a circle, looking helpless and innocent, seemingly waiting for the inevitable – dishonour, violence and death. "In Memoriam" does not show gory violence; it only suggests it. It stirs up the spectator's imagination, and seeks to provoke anger and fury. It represents the rebels as violent and brutish, even though they remain invisible in the picture. In the background you can see the British rescue forces arriving as saviours.



Fig. 11.11  
"In Memoriam",  
by Joseph Noel Paton, 1859



Fig. 11.12  
Miss Wheeler defending herself  
against sepoys in Kanpur

In another set of sketches and paintings we see women in a different light. They appear heroic, defending themselves against the attack of rebels. Miss Wheeler in Figure 11.12 stands firmly at the centre, defending her honour, single-handedly killing the attacking rebels. As in all such British representations, the rebels are demonised. Here, four burly males with swords and guns are shown attacking a woman. The woman's struggle to save her honour and her life, in fact, is represented as having a deeper religious connotation: it is a battle to save the honour of Christianity. The book lying on the floor is the Bible.

### 5.3 Vengeance and retribution

As waves of anger and shock spread in Britain, demands for retribution grew louder. Visual representations and news about the revolt created a milieu in which violent repression and vengeance were seen as both necessary and just. It was as if justice demanded that the challenge to British honour and power be met ruthlessly. Threatened by the rebellion, the British felt that they had to demonstrate their invincibility. In one such image (Fig. 11.13) we see an allegorical female figure of justice with a sword in one hand and a shield in the other. Her posture is aggressive; her face expresses rage and the desire for revenge. She is trampling sepoys under her feet while a mass of Indian women with children cower with fear.

There were innumerable other pictures and cartoons in the British press that sanctioned brutal repression and violent reprisal.



Fig. 11.13  
*Justice*, Punch, 12 September 1857  
The caption at the bottom reads  
“The news of the terrible massacre  
at Cawnpore (Kanpur) produced  
an outburst of fiery indignation  
and wild desire for revenge  
throughout the whole of England.”



Fig. 11.14  
The caption at the bottom reads  
“The British Lion’s Vengeance on  
the Bengal Tiger”, *Punch*, 1857.

➤ What idea is the picture projecting? What is being expressed through the images of the lion and the tiger? What do the figures of the woman and the child depict?

#### 5.4 The performance of terror

The urge for vengeance and retribution was expressed in the brutal way in which the rebels were executed. They were blown from guns, or hanged from the gallows. Images of these executions were widely circulated through popular journals.

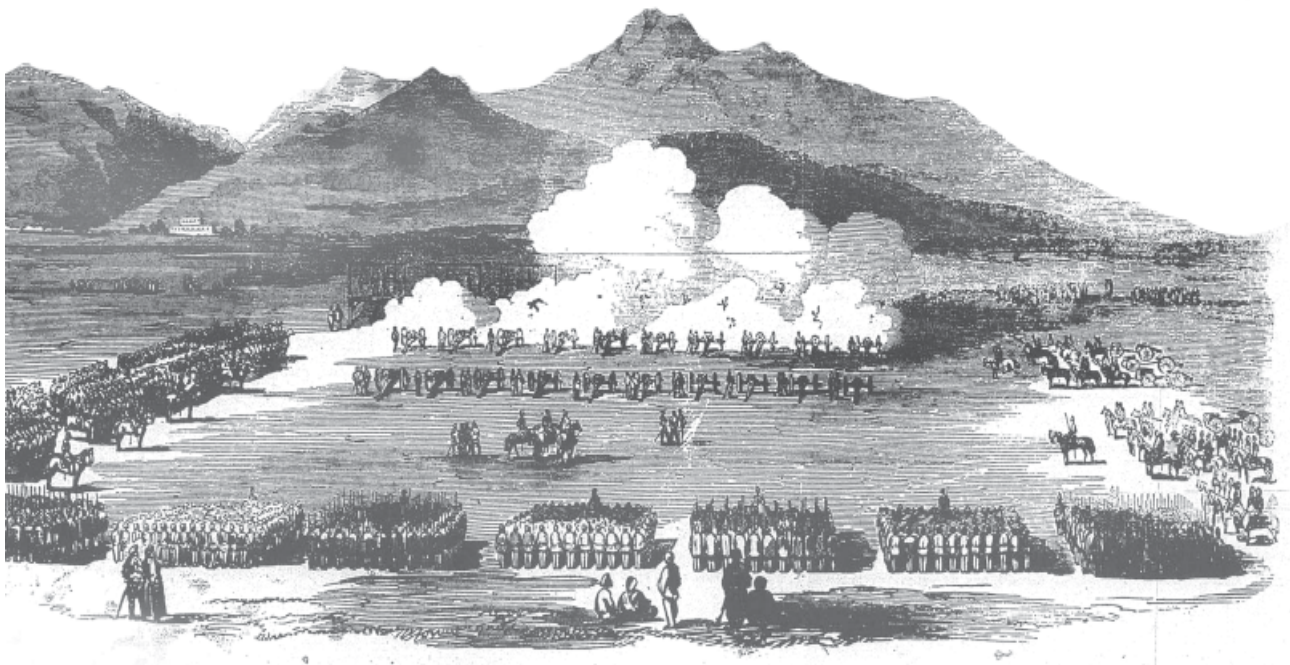


Fig. 11.15  
*Execution of mutineers in Peshawar: Blowing from the guns,*  
*Illustrated London News*, 3 October 1857

The scene of execution here appears to be a stage where a drama is being performed – an enactment of brutal power. Mounted soldiers and sepoys in uniform dominate the scene. They have to watch the execution of their fellow sepoys, and experience the chilling consequences of rebellion.





Fig. 11.16

*Execution of mutinous sepoys in Peshawar, Illustrated London News, 3 October 1857*

In this scene of execution 12 rebels hang in a row, with cannons all around them.

What you see is not routine punishment: it is the performance of terror. For it to instil fear among people, punishment could not be discreetly meted out in enclosed spaces. It had to be theatrically performed in the open.

### 5.5 No time for clemency

At a time when the clamour was for vengeance, pleas for moderation were ridiculed. When Governor General Canning declared that a gesture of leniency and a show of mercy would help in winning back the loyalty of the sepoys, he was mocked in the British press.

In one of the cartoons published in the pages of *Punch*, a British journal of comic satire, Canning is shown as a looming father figure, with his protective hand over the head of a sepoy who still holds an unsheathed sword in one hand and a dagger in the other, both dripping with blood (Fig.11.17) – an imagery that recurs in a number of British pictures of the time.



THE CLEMENCY OF CANNING.

Governor-General. "WELL, THEN, THEY SHAN'T BLOW HIM FROM NASTY GUNS; BUT HE MUST PROMISE TO BE A GOOD LITTLE SEPOY."

Fig. 11.17

*"The Clemency of Canning", Punch, 24 October 1857*

The caption at the bottom of the cartoon reads: "Governor General: 'Well, then they shan't blow him from nasty guns; but he must promise to be a good little sepoy'."

### 5.6 Nationalist imageries

The national movement in the twentieth century drew its inspiration from the events of 1857. A whole world of nationalist imagination was woven around the revolt. It was celebrated as the First War of Independence in which all sections of the people of India came together to fight against imperial rule.

Art and literature, as much as the writing of history, have helped in keeping alive the memory of 1857. The leaders of the revolt were presented as heroic figures leading the country into battle, rousing the people to righteous indignation against oppressive imperial rule. Heroic poems were written about the valour of the queen who, with a sword in one hand and the reins of her horse in the other, fought for the freedom of her motherland. Rani of Jhansi was represented as a masculine figure chasing the enemy, slaying British soldiers and valiantly fighting till her last. Children in many parts of India grow up reading the lines of Subhadra Kumari Chauhan: “*Khoob lari mardani woh to Jhansi wali rani thi*” (Like a man she fought, she was the Rani of Jhansi). In popular prints Rani Lakshmi Bai is usually portrayed in battle armour, with a sword in hand and riding a horse – a symbol of the determination to resist injustice and alien rule.

The images indicate how the painters who produced them perceived those events, what they felt, and what they sought to convey. Through the paintings and cartoons we know about the public that looked at the paintings, appreciated or criticised the images, and bought copies and reproductions to put up in their homes.

These images did not only reflect the emotions and feelings of the times in which they were produced. They also shaped sensibilities. Fed by the images that circulated in Britain, the public sanctioned the most brutal forms of repression of the rebels. On the other hand, nationalist imageries of the revolt helped shape the nationalist imagination.

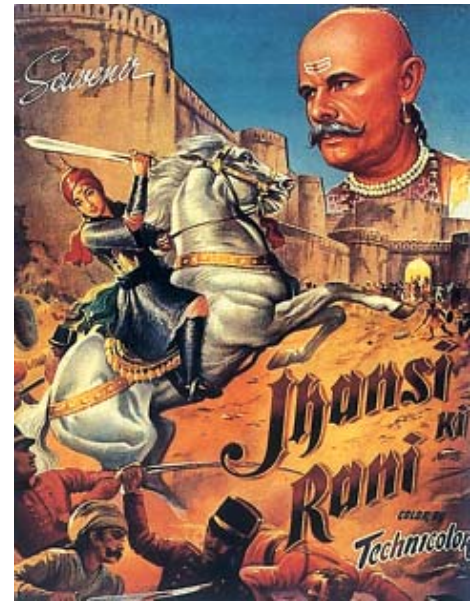


Fig. 11.18  
Films and posters have helped create the image of Rani Lakshmi Bai as a masculine warrior

#### ➔ Discuss...

Examine the elements in each of the visuals in this section and discuss how they allow you to identify the perspective of the artist.

## TIMELINE

1801	Subsidiary Alliance introduced by Wellesley in Awadh
1856	Nawab Wajid Ali Shah deposed; Awadh annexed
1856-57	Summary revenue settlements introduced in Awadh by the British
1857	
10 May	Mutiny starts in Meerut
11-12 May	Delhi garrisons revolt; Bahadur Shah accepts nominal leadership
20-27 May	Sepoys mutiny in Aligarh, Etawah, Mainpuri, Etah
30 May	Rising in Lucknow
May-June	Mutiny turns into a general revolt of the people
30 June	British suffer defeat in the battle of Chinhat
25 Sept	British forces under Havelock and Outram enter the Residency in Lucknow
July	Shah Mal killed in battle
1858	
June	Rani Jhansi killed in battle



### ANSWER IN 100-150 WORDS

Fig. 11.19  
Faces of rebels



1. Why did the mutinous sepoys in many places turn to erstwhile rulers to provide leadership to the revolt?
2. Discuss the evidence that indicates planning and coordination on the part of the rebels.
3. Discuss the extent to which religious beliefs shaped the events of 1857.
4. What were the measures taken to ensure unity among the rebels?
5. What steps did the British take to quell the uprising?



### WRITE A SHORT ESSAY (250-300 WORDS) ON THE FOLLOWING:

6. Why was the revolt particularly widespread in Awadh? What prompted the peasants, *taluqdars* and zamindars to join the revolt?
7. What did the rebels want? To what extent did the vision of different social groups differ?
8. What do visual representations tell us about the revolt of 1857? How do historians analyse these representations?
9. Examine any two sources presented in the chapter, choosing one visual and one text, and discuss how these represent the point of view of the victor and the vanquished.



### MAP WORK

10. On an outline map of India, mark Calcutta (Kolkata), Bombay (Mumbai) and Madras (Chennai), three major centres of British power in 1857. Refer to Maps 1 and 2 and plot the areas where the revolt was most widespread. How close or far were these areas from the colonial cities?



### PROJECTS (CHOOSE ONE)

11. Read a biography of any one of the leaders of the revolt of 1857. Check the sources used by the biographer. Do these include government reports, newspaper accounts, stories in regional languages, visual material, anything else? Do all the sources say the same thing, or are there differences? Prepare a report on your findings.
12. See a film made on the revolt of 1857 and write about the way it represents the revolt. How does it depict the British, the rebels, and those who remained loyal to the British? What does it say about peasants, city dwellers, tribals, zamindars and *taluqdars*? What kind of a response does the film seek to evoke?



#### If you would like to know more, read:

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'Four Rebels of Eighteen-Fifty-Seven', *Subaltern Studies, IV*.  
Oxford University Press, Delhi.

Rudrangshu Mukherjee. 1984.  
*Awadh in Revolt, 1857-58*.  
Oxford University Press, Delhi.

Tapti Roy. 2006.  
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Eric Stokes. 1980.  
*Peasants and the Raj*.  
Oxford University Press, Delhi.



#### You could visit:

<http://books.google.com>  
(for accounts of 1857 by British officials)

[www.copsey-family.org/allenc/lakshmibai/links.html](http://www.copsey-family.org/allenc/lakshmibai/links.html)  
(for letters of Rani Lakshmibai)

## THEME TWELVE

# COLONIAL CITIES

## URBANISATION, PLANNING AND ARCHITECTURE

In this chapter we will discuss the process of urbanisation in colonial India, explore the distinguishing characteristics of colonial cities and track social changes within them. We will look closely at developments in three big cities – Madras (Chennai), Calcutta (Kolkata) and Bombay (Mumbai).

All three were originally fishing and weaving villages. They became important centres of trade due to the economic activities of the English East India Company. Company agents settled in Madras in 1639 and in Calcutta in 1690. Bombay was given to the Company in 1661 by the English king, who had got it as part of his wife's dowry from the king of Portugal. The Company established trading and administrative offices in each of these settlements.



Fig. 12.1

*South-east view of Fort St George, Madras, by Thomas and William Daniell, based on a drawing by Daniell published in Oriental Scenery, 1798*

European ships carrying cargo dot the horizon. Country boats can be seen in the foreground.

By the middle of the nineteenth century these settlements had become big cities from where the new rulers controlled the country. Institutions were set up to regulate economic activity and demonstrate the authority of the new rulers. Indians experienced political domination in new ways in these cities. The layouts of Madras, Bombay and Calcutta were quite different from older Indian towns, and the buildings that were built in these cities bore the marks of their colonial origin. What do buildings express and what can architecture convey? This is a question that students of history need to ask.

Remember that architecture helps in giving ideas a shape in stone, brick, wood or plaster. From the bungalow of the government officer, the palatial house of the rich merchant to the humble hut of the labourer, buildings reflect social relations and identities in many ways.

## 1. TOWNS AND CITIES IN PRE-COLONIAL TIMES

Before we explore the growth of cities in the colonial period, let us look at urban centres during the centuries preceding British rule.

### 1.1 What gave towns their character?

Towns were often defined in opposition to rural areas. They came to represent specific forms of economic activities and cultures. In the countryside people subsisted by cultivating land, foraging in the forest, or rearing animals. Towns by contrast were peopled with artisans, traders, administrators and rulers. Towns dominated over the rural population, thriving on the surplus and taxes derived from agriculture. Towns and cities were often fortified by walls which symbolised their separation from the countryside.

However, the separation between town and country was fluid. Peasants travelled long distances on pilgrimage, passing through towns; they also flocked to towns during times of famine. Besides, there was a reverse flow of humans and goods from towns to villages. When towns were attacked, people often sought shelter in the countryside. Traders and peddlars took goods from the towns to sell in the villages, extending markets and creating new patterns of consumption.

Source 1

### Escaping to the countryside

This is how the famous poet Mirza Ghalib described what the people of Delhi did when the British forces occupied the city in 1857:

Smiting the enemy and driving him before them, the victors (i.e., the British) overran the city in all directions. All whom they found in the street they cut down ... For two to three days every road in the city, from the Kashmiri Gate to Chandni Chowk, was a battlefield. Three gates – the Ajmeri, the Turcoman and the Delhi – were still held by the rebels ... At the naked spectacle of this vengeful wrath and malevolent hatred the colour fled from men's faces, and a vast concourse of men and women ... took to precipitate flight through these three gates. Seeking the little villages and shrines outside the city, they drew breath to wait until such time as might favour their return.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the towns built by the Mughals were famous for their concentration of populations, their monumental buildings and their imperial grandeur and wealth. Agra, Delhi and Lahore were important centres of imperial administration and control. *Mansabdars* and *jagirdars* who were assigned territories in different parts of the empire usually maintained houses in these cities: residence in these centres of power was symbolic of the status and prestige of a noble.

The presence of the emperor and noblemen in these centres meant that a wide variety of services had to be provided. Artisans produced exclusive handicrafts for the households of nobles. Grain from the countryside was brought into urban markets for the town dwellers and the army. The treasury was also located in the imperial capital. Thus the revenues of the kingdom flowed into the capital regularly. The emperor lived in a fortified palace and the town was enclosed by a wall, with entry and exit being regulated by different gates. Within these towns were gardens, mosques, temples, tombs, colleges, bazaars and caravanserais. The focus of the town was oriented towards the palace and the principal mosque.

In the towns of South India such as Madurai and Kanchipuram the principal focus was the temple. These towns were also important commercial centres. Religious festivals often coincided with fairs, linking pilgrimage with trade. Generally, the ruler was the highest authority and the principal patron of religious institutions. The relationship that he had with other groups and classes determined their place in society and in the town.

Fig. 12.2

*Shahjahanabad in 1857*

The walls that surrounded the city were demolished after 1857. The Red Fort is on the river side.

At a distance on the ridge to the right, you can see the British settlements and the cantonment.



Medieval towns were places where everybody was expected to know their position in the social order dominated by the ruling elite. In North India, maintaining this order was the work of the imperial officer called the *kotwal* who oversaw the internal affairs and policing of the town.

### 1.2 Changes in the eighteenth century

All this started changing in the eighteenth century. With political and commercial realignments, old towns went into decline and new towns developed. The gradual erosion of Mughal power led to the demise of towns associated with their rule. The Mughal capitals, Delhi and Agra, lost their political authority. The growth of new regional powers was reflected in the increasing importance of regional capitals – Lucknow, Hyderabad, Seringapatam, Poona (present-day Pune), Nagpur, Baroda (present-day Vadodara) and Tanjore (present-day Thanjavur). Traders, administrators, artisans and others migrated from the old Mughal centres to these new capitals in search of work and patronage. Continuous warfare between the new kingdoms meant that mercenaries too found ready employment there. Some local notables and officials associated with Mughal rule in North India also used this opportunity to create new urban settlements such as the *qasbah* and *ganj*. However, the effects of political decentralisation were uneven. In some places there was renewed economic activity, in other places war, plunder and political uncertainty led to economic decline.

Changes in the networks of trade were reflected in the history of urban centres. The European commercial Companies had set up base in different places early during the Mughal era: the Portuguese in Panaji in 1510, the Dutch in Masulipatnam in 1605, the British in Madras in 1639 and the French in Pondicherry (present-day Puducherry) in 1673. With the expansion of commercial activity, towns grew around these trading centres. By the end of the eighteenth century the land-based empires in Asia were replaced by the powerful

### The *kotwal* of Delhi

Did you know that the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru's grandfather, Ganga Dhar Nehru, was the *kotwal* of Delhi before the Revolt of 1857? Read Jawaharlal Nehru, *Autobiography*, for more details.

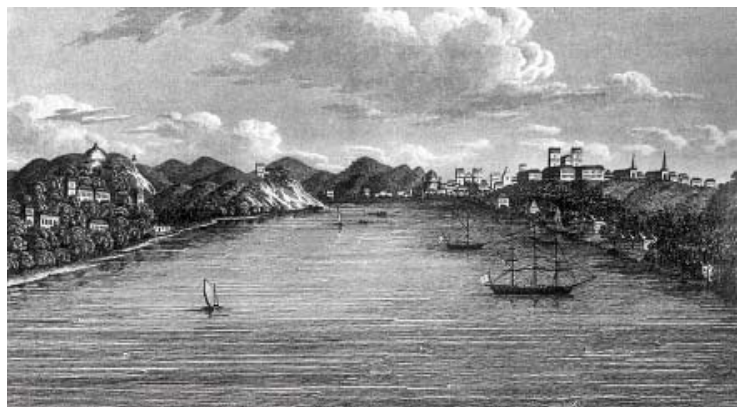
*Qasbah* is a small town in the countryside, often the seat of a local notable.

*Ganj* refers to a small fixed market.

Both *qasbah* and *ganj* dealt in cloth, fruit, vegetables and milk products. They provided for noble families and the army.

Fig. 12.3

A view of the city of Goa from the river, by J. Greig, 1812





### Names of cities

Madras, Bombay and Calcutta were the Anglicised names of villages where the British first set up trading posts. They are now known as Chennai, Mumbai and Kolkata respectively.

### ➔ Discuss...

Which building, institution or place is the principal focus of the town, city or village in which you live? Explore its history. Find out when it was built, who built it, why it was built, what functions it served and whether these functions have changed.

sea-based European empires. Forces of international trade, mercantilism and capitalism now came to define the nature of society.

From the mid-eighteenth century, there was a new phase of change. Commercial centres such as Surat, Masulipatnam and Dhaka, which had grown in the seventeenth century, declined when trade shifted to other places. As the British gradually acquired political control after the Battle of Plassey in 1757, and the trade of the English East India Company expanded, colonial port cities such as Madras, Calcutta and Bombay rapidly emerged as the new economic capitals. They also became centres of colonial administration and political power. New buildings and institutions developed, and urban spaces were ordered in new ways. New occupations developed and people flocked to these colonial cities. By about 1800, they were the biggest cities in India in terms of population.

## 2. FINDING OUT ABOUT COLONIAL CITIES

### 2.1 Colonial records and urban history

Colonial rule was based on the production of enormous amounts of data. The British kept detailed records of their trading activities in order to regulate their commercial affairs. To keep track of life in the growing cities, they carried out regular surveys, gathered statistical data, and published various official reports.

From the early years, the colonial government was keen on mapping. It felt that good maps were necessary to understand the landscape and know the topography. This knowledge would allow better control over the region. When towns began to grow, maps were prepared not only to plan the development of these towns but also to develop commerce and consolidate power. The town maps give information regarding the location of hills, rivers and vegetation, all important for planning structures for defence purposes. They also show the location of *ghats*, density and quality of houses and alignment of roads, used to gauge commercial possibilities and plan strategies of taxation.

From the late nineteenth century the British tried to raise money for administering towns through the systematic annual collection of municipal taxes. To avoid conflict they handed over some responsibilities to elected Indian representatives. Institutions like the municipal corporation with some popular

representation were meant to administer essential services such as water supply, sewerage, road building and public health. The activities of municipal corporations in turn generated a whole new set of records maintained in municipal record rooms.

The growth of cities was monitored through regular headcounts. By the mid-nineteenth century several local censuses had been carried out in different regions. The first all-India census was attempted in 1872. Thereafter, from 1881, decennial (conducted every ten years) censuses became a regular feature. This collection of data is an invaluable source for studying urbanisation in India.

When we look at these reports it appears that we have hard data to measure historical change. The endless pages of tables on disease and death, or the enumeration of people according to their age, sex, caste and occupation, provide a vast mass of figures that creates an illusion of concreteness. Historians have, however, found that the figures can be misleading. Before we use these figures we need to understand who collected the data, and why and how they were gathered. We also need to know what was measured and what was not.

The census operation, for instance, was a means by which social data were converted into convenient statistics about the population. But this process was riddled with ambiguity. The census commissioners devised categories for classifying different sections of the population. This classification was often arbitrary and failed to capture the fluid and overlapping identities of people. How was a person who was both an artisan and a trader to be classified? How was a person who cultivated his land and carted produce to the town to be enumerated? Was he a cultivator or a trader?

Often people themselves refused to cooperate or gave evasive answers to the census officials.

Fig. 12.4  
An old map of Bombay  
The encircled area marked "castle" was part of the fortified settlement. The dotted areas show the seven islands that were gradually joined through projects of reclamation.



### What maps reveal and conceal

The development of survey methods, accurate scientific instruments and British imperial needs meant that maps were prepared with great care. The Survey of India was established in 1878. While the maps that were prepared give us a lot of information, they also reflect the bias of the British rulers. Large settlements of the poor in towns went unmarked on maps because they seemed unimportant to the rulers. As a result it was assumed that these blank spaces on the map were available for other development schemes. When these schemes were undertaken, the poor were evicted.

For a long while they were suspicious of census operations and believed that enquiries were being conducted to impose new taxes. Upper-caste people were also unwilling to give any information regarding the women of their household: women were supposed to remain secluded within the interior of the household and not subjected to public gaze or public enquiry.

Census officials also found that people were claiming identities that they associated with higher status. For instance there were people in towns who were hawkers and went selling small articles during some seasons, while in other seasons they earned their livelihood through manual labour. Such people often told the census enumerators that they were traders, not labourers, for they regarded trade as a more respectable activity.

Similarly, the figures of mortality and disease were difficult to collect, for all deaths were not registered, and illness was not always reported, nor treated by licensed doctors. How then could cases of illness or death be accurately calculated?

Thus historians have to use sources like the census with great caution, keeping in mind their possible biases, recalculating figures and understanding what the figures do not tell. However, census, survey maps and records of institutions like the municipality help us to study colonial cities in greater detail than is possible for pre-colonial cities.

### 2.2 Trends of change

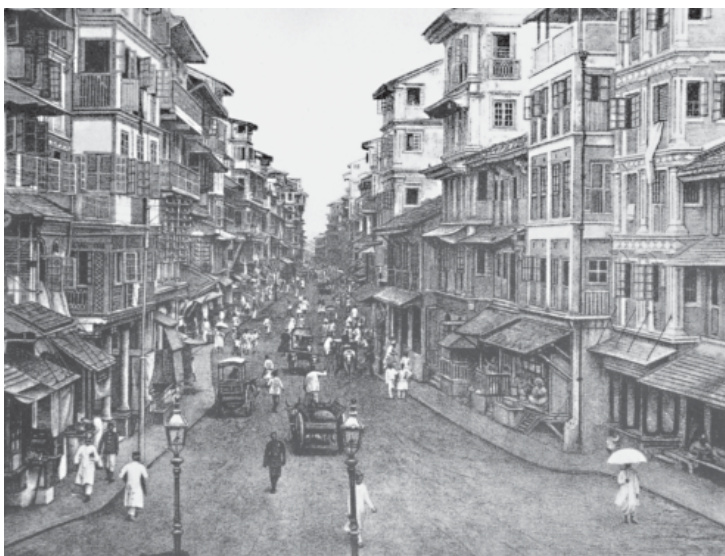
A careful study of censuses reveals some fascinating trends. After 1800, urbanisation in India was sluggish. All through the nineteenth century up to the first two decades of the twentieth, the proportion of the urban population to the total population in India was extremely low and had remained stagnant. This is clear from Figure 12.5. In the forty years between 1900 and 1940 the urban population increased from about 10 per cent of the total population to about 13 per cent.

Beneath this picture of changelessness, there were significant variations in the patterns of urban development in different regions. The smaller towns had little opportunity to grow economically. Calcutta, Bombay and Madras on the other hand grew rapidly and soon became sprawling cities. In other

words, the growth of these three cities as the new commercial and administrative centres was at the expense of other existing urban centres.

As the hub of the colonial economy, they functioned as collection depots for the export of Indian manufactures such as cotton textiles in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. After the Industrial Revolution in England, this trend was reversed and these cities instead became the entry point for British-manufactured goods and for the export of Indian raw materials. The nature of this economic activity sharply differentiated these colonial cities from India's traditional towns and urban settlements.

The introduction of railways in 1853 meant a change in the fortunes of towns. Economic activity gradually shifted away from traditional towns which were located along old routes and rivers. Every railway station became a collection depot for raw materials and a distribution point for imported goods. For instance, Mirzapur on the Ganges, which specialised in collecting cotton and cotton goods from the Deccan, declined when a railway link was made to Bombay (see Chapter 10, Figs. 10.18 and 10.19). With the expansion of the railway network, railway workshops and railway colonies were established. Railway towns like Jamalpur, Waltair and Bareilly developed.



Urbanisation in India 1891-1941	
Year	Percentage of urban population to total population
1891	9.4
1901	10.0
1911	9.4
1921	10.2
1931	11.1
1941	12.8

Fig. 12.5

➔ Discuss...

Study either some statistical data or maps of a city. Check who collected the data and why they were collected. What are the possible biases in such collections? What kind of information is excluded? For the maps, find out why they were drawn and whether they are equally detailed for all parts of the city.

Fig. 12.6

The Borah Bazaar in the Fort area, Bombay, 1885

As Bombay grew, even the fort area became congested. Traders, shopkeepers and service groups flowed into the area, numerous bazaars were established, and lofty structures came up. Worried by the congestion, the British made several attempts to push Indians out of the northern part of the Fort where the local communities had settled.

### 3. WHAT WERE THE NEW TOWNS LIKE?

#### 3.1 Ports, forts and centres for services



*Fig. 12.7*  
*The Old Fort Ghat in Calcutta, engraving by Thomas and William Daniell, 1787*

The Old Fort was on the water-front. The Company's goods were received here. The *ghat* continued to be used for bathing purposes by the local people.

By the eighteenth century Madras, Calcutta and Bombay had become important ports. The settlements that came up here were convenient points for collecting goods. The English East India Company built its factories (i.e., mercantile offices) there and because of competition among the European companies, fortified these settlements for protection. In

Madras, Fort St George, in Calcutta Fort William and in Bombay the Fort marked out the areas of British settlement. Indian merchants, artisans and other workers who had economic dealings with European merchants lived outside these forts in settlements of their own. Thus, from the beginning there were separate quarters for Europeans and Indians, which came to be labelled in contemporary writings as the "White Town" and "Black Town" respectively. Once the British captured political power these racial distinctions became sharper.

From the mid-nineteenth century the expanding network of railways linked these cities to the rest of the country. As a result the hinterland – the countryside from where raw materials and labour were drawn – became more closely linked to these port cities. Since raw material was transported to these cities for export and there was plentiful cheap labour available, it was convenient to set up modern factories there. After the 1850s, cotton mills were set up by Indian merchants and entrepreneurs in Bombay, and European-owned jute mills were established on the outskirts of Calcutta. This was the beginning of modern industrial development in India.

Although Calcutta, Bombay and Madras supplied raw materials for industry in England, and had emerged because of modern economic forces like capitalism, their economies were not primarily based on factory production. The majority of the working population in these cities belonged to what economists classify as the tertiary sector. There were only two

proper “industrial cities”: Kanpur, specialising in leather, woollen and cotton textiles, and Jamshedpur, specialising in steel. India never became a modern industrialised country, since discriminatory colonial policies limited the levels of industrial development. Calcutta, Bombay and Madras grew into large cities, but this did not signify any dramatic economic growth for colonial India as a whole.

### 3.2 A new urban milieu

Colonial cities reflected the mercantile culture of the new rulers. Political power and patronage shifted from Indian rulers to the merchants of the East India Company. Indians who worked as interpreters, middlemen, traders and suppliers of goods also had an important place in these new cities. Economic activity near the river or the sea led to the development of docks and *ghats*. Along the shore were godowns, mercantile offices, insurance agencies for shipping, transport depots, banking establishments. Further inland were the chief administrative offices of the Company. The Writers’ Building in Calcutta was one such office. Around the periphery of the Fort, European merchants and agents built palatial houses in European styles. Some built garden houses in the suburbs. Racially exclusive clubs, racecourses and theatres were also built for the ruling elite.

*Ionic* was one of the three orders (organisational systems) of Ancient Greek architecture, the other two being *Doric*, and *Corinthian*. One feature that distinguished each order was the style of the capital at the head of the columns. These forms were re-adapted in the Renaissance and Neo-classical forms of architecture.



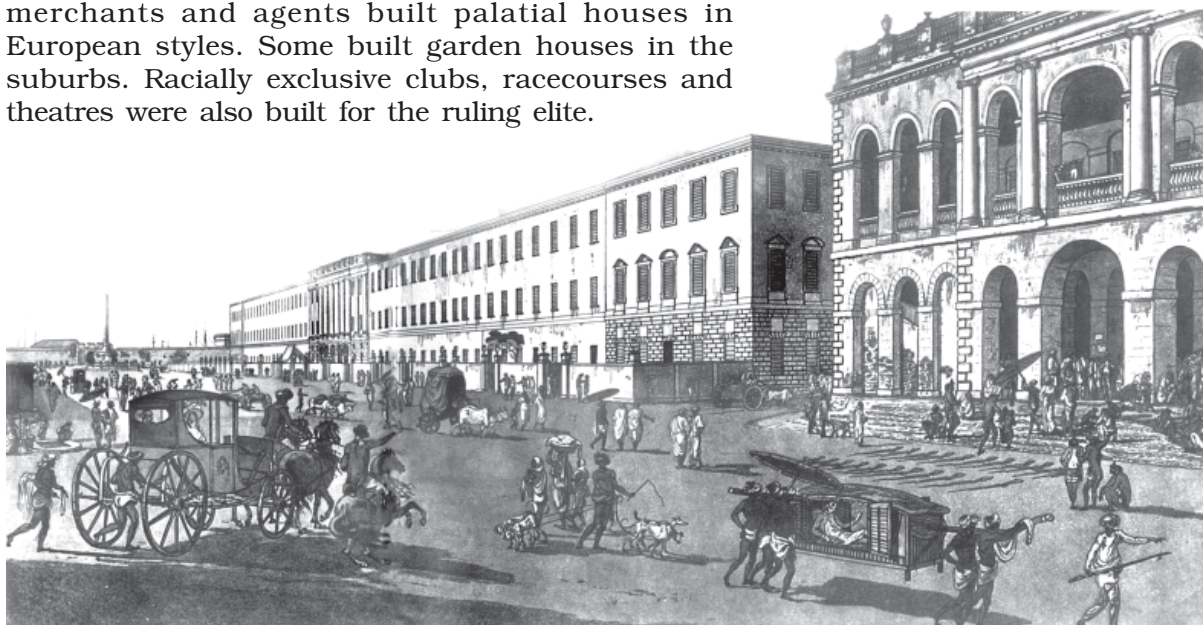
Doric capital



Ionic capital



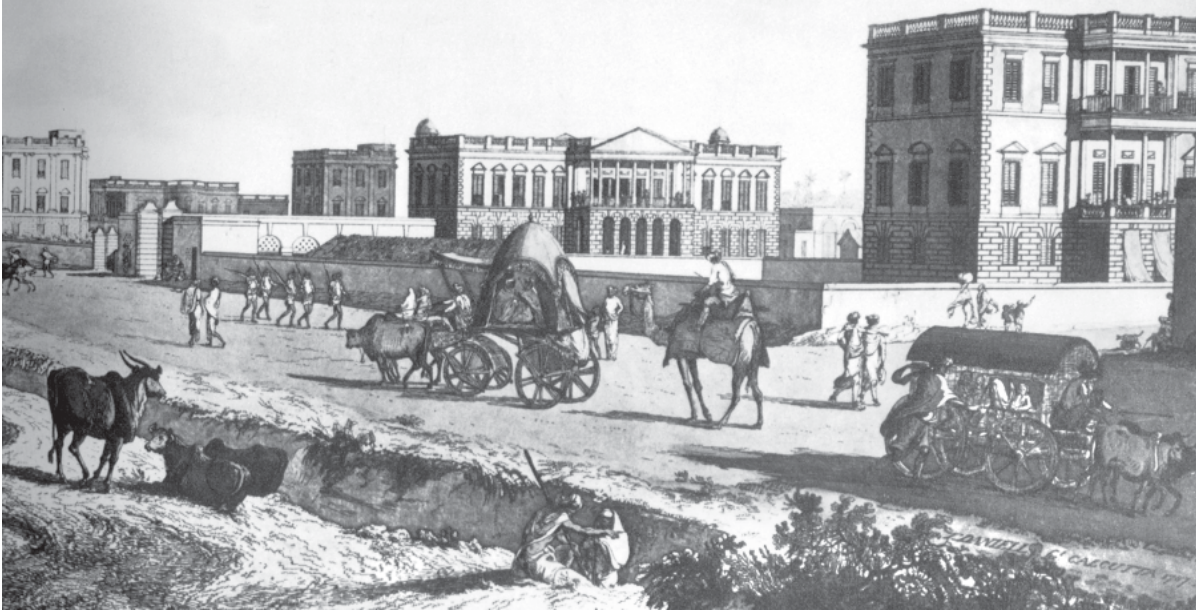
Corinthian capital



*Fig. 12.8*

*The Old Court House and Writers’ Building, engraving by Thomas and William Daniell, 1786*

The Court House on the right, with an open arcaded veranda and Ionic columns, was pulled down in 1792. Next to it is the Writers’ Building where the East India Company servants in India (known as Writers) stayed on arrival in the country. Later this building became a government office.



*Fig. 12.9*  
*The New Buildings at Chourangee (Chowringhee), engraving by Thomas and William Daniell, 1787*  
 Along the eastern side of the Maidan private houses of the British began coming up in the late eighteenth century. Most were in a Palladian style with pillared verandas that were meant to keep off the summer heat.



*Fig. 12.10*  
*The Marble Palace, Calcutta*  
 This is one of the most elaborate structures built by an Indian family belonging to the new urban elite.

The rich Indian agents and middlemen built large traditional courtyard houses in the Black Town in the vicinity of the bazaars. They bought up large tracts of land in the city as future investment. To impress their English masters they threw lavish parties during festivals. They also built temples to establish their status in society. The labouring poor provided a variety of services to their European and Indian masters as cooks, palanquin bearers, coachmen, guards, porters and construction and dock workers. They lived in makeshift huts in different parts of the city.

The nature of the colonial city changed further in the mid-nineteenth century. After the Revolt of 1857 British attitudes in India were shaped by a constant fear of rebellion. They felt that towns needed to be better defended, and white people had to live in more secure and segregated enclaves, away from the threat of the “natives”. Pasturelands and agricultural fields around the older towns were cleared, and new urban spaces called “Civil Lines” were set up. White people began to live in the Civil Lines. Cantonments—places where Indian troops under European command were stationed – were also developed as safe enclaves. These areas were separate from but attached to the Indian towns. With broad streets, bungalows set amidst large gardens, barracks, parade ground and church, they were meant as a



*Fig. 12.11*

*Chitpore Bazaar by Charles D'Oyly*  
Chitpore Bazaar was at the border of the Black Town and White Town in Calcutta. Notice the different types of houses here: the brick building of the wealthy landlord and the thatched huts of the poor. The temple in the picture, referred to by the British as the Black Pagoda, was built by a landlord, Govinda Ram Mitter, who lived here. Shaped by the language of race, even names were often coloured with blackness.

safe haven for Europeans as well as a model of ordered urban life in contrast to the densely built-up Indian towns.

For the British, the “Black” areas came to symbolise not only chaos and anarchy, but also filth and disease. For a long while the British were interested primarily in the cleanliness and hygiene of the “White” areas. But as epidemics of cholera and plague spread, killing thousands, colonial officials felt the need for more stringent measures of sanitation and public health. They feared that disease would spread from the “Black” to the “White” areas. From the 1860s and 1870s, stringent administrative measures regarding sanitation were implemented and building activity in the Indian towns was regulated. Underground piped water supply and sewerage and drainage systems were also put in place around this time. Sanitary vigilance thus became another way of regulating Indian towns.

### 3.3 The first hill stations

As in the case of cantonments, hill stations were a distinctive feature of colonial urban development. The founding and settling of hill stations was initially connected with the needs of the British army. Simla (present-day Shimla) was founded during the course of the Gurkha War (1815-16); the Anglo-Maratha War of 1818 led to British interest in Mount Abu; and Darjeeling was wrested from the rulers of Sikkim in 1835. Hill stations became strategic places for billeting troops, guarding frontiers and launching campaigns against enemy rulers.

➔ Look at Figures 12.8, 12.9 and 12.11. Notice the variety of activities on the streets. What do the activities tell us about the social life on the streets of Calcutta in the late eighteenth century?





*Fig. 12.12*  
A typical colonial house in Simla, an early-twentieth-century photograph  
Most probably it was the residence of Sir John Marshall.

*Fig. 12.13*  
A village near Manali, Himachal Pradesh  
While the British introduced colonial architectural styles in the hill stations, the local population often continued to live as before.



The temperate and cool climate of the Indian hills was seen as an advantage, particularly since the British associated hot weather with epidemics. Cholera and malaria were particularly feared and attempts were made to protect the army from these diseases. The overwhelming presence of the army made these stations a new kind of cantonment in the hills. These hill stations were also developed as sanitariums, i.e., places where soldiers could be sent for rest and recovery from illnesses.

Because the hill stations approximated the cold climates of Europe, they became an attractive destination for the new rulers. It became a practice for viceroys to move to hill stations during the summer months. In 1864 the Viceroy John Lawrence officially moved his council to Simla, setting seal to the practice of shifting capitals during the hot season. Simla also became the official residence of the commander-in-chief of the Indian army.

In the hill stations the British and other Europeans sought to recreate settlements that were reminiscent of home. The buildings were deliberately built in the European style. Individual houses followed the pattern of detached villas and cottages set amidst gardens. The Anglican Church and educational institutions represented British ideals. Even recreation activities came to be shaped by British cultural traditions. Thus social calls, teas, picnics, fetes, races and visits to the theatre became common among colonial officials in the hill stations.

The introduction of the railways made hill stations more accessible to a wide range of people including Indians. Upper-and middle-class Indians such as maharajas, lawyers and merchants were drawn to these stations because they afforded them a close proximity to the ruling British elite.

Hill stations were important for the colonial economy. With the setting up of tea and coffee plantations in the adjoining areas, an influx of immigrant labour from the plains began. This meant that hill stations no longer remained exclusive racial enclaves for Europeans in India.

### 3.4 Social life in the new cities

For the Indian population, the new cities were bewildering places where life seemed always in a flux. There was a dramatic contrast between extreme wealth and poverty.

New transport facilities such as horse-drawn carriages and, subsequently, trams and buses meant that people could live at a distance from the city centre. Over time there was a gradual separation of the place of work from the place of residence. Travelling from home to office or the factory was a completely new kind of experience.

Also, though the sense of coherence and familiarity of the old towns was no longer there, the creation of public places – for example, public parks, theatres and, from the twentieth century, cinema halls – provided exciting new forms of entertainment and social interaction.

Within the cities new social groups were formed and the old identities of people were no longer important. All classes of people were migrating to the big cities. There was an increasing demand for clerks, teachers, lawyers, doctors, engineers and accountants. As a result the “middle classes” increased. They had access to new educational institutions such as schools, colleges and libraries. As educated people, they could put forward their opinions on society and government in newspapers, journals and public meetings. A new public sphere of debate and discussion emerged. Social customs, norms and practices came to be questioned.

Social changes did not happen with ease. Cities, for instance, offered new opportunities for women. Middle-class women sought to express themselves through the medium of journals, autobiographies and books. But many people resented these attempts to change traditional patriarchal norms. Conservatives feared that the education of women would turn the world upside down, and threaten the basis of the entire social order. Even reformers who supported women’s education saw women primarily as mothers and wives, and wanted them to remain within the enclosed spaces of the household. Over time, women became more visible in public, as they entered new professions in the city as domestic



Fig. 12.14  
Trams on a road in Calcutta

### Amar Katha (My Story)

Binodini Dasi (1863-1941) was a pioneering figure in Bengali theatre in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and worked closely with the dramatist and director Girish Chandra Ghosh (1844-1912). She was one of the prime movers behind the setting up of the Star Theatre (1883) in Calcutta which became a centre for famous productions. Between 1910 and 1913 she serialised her autobiography, *Amar Katha (My Story)*. A remarkable personality, she exemplified the problem women faced in recasting their roles in society. She was a professional in the city, working in multiple spheres – as an actress, institution builder and author – but the patriarchal society of the time scorned her assertive public presence.



Fig. 12.15  
A late-nineteenth-century Kalighat painting

Male anxiety about female power was often expressed through the figure of the woman as a charmer who transformed men into sheep. As women began to be educated and moved out of the seclusion of their homes, such images of women began to proliferate in popular prints.

and factory workers, teachers, and theatre and film actresses. But for a long time women who moved out of the household into public spaces remained the objects of social censure.

Another new class within the cities was the labouring poor or the working class. Paupers from rural areas flocked to the cities in the hope of employment. Some saw cities as places of opportunity; others were attracted by the allure of a different way of life, by the desire to see things they had never seen before. To minimise costs of living in the city, most male migrants left their families behind in their village homes. Life in the city was a struggle: jobs were uncertain, food was expensive, and places to stay were difficult to afford. Yet the poor often created a lively urban culture of their own. They were enthusiastic participants in religious festivals, *tamashas* (folk theatre) and *swangs* (satires) which often mocked the pretensions of their masters, Indian and European.

### ➔ Discuss...

Which is the railway station closest to your residence? Find out when it was built and whether it was built to transport goods or people. Ask older people what they know about the station. How often do you go to the station and why?

#### Source 2

### Through the eyes of poor migrants

This is a *swang* that was popular amongst the inhabitants of *Jelepura* (Fishermen's quarter), Calcutta, in the early twentieth century:

*Dil-me ek bhavna se Kalkatta-me aya  
Kaisan kaisan maja ham hiya dekhne paya  
Ari-samaj, Brahma-samaj, girja, mahjid  
Ek lota-me milta – dudh, pani, sab chij  
Chhota bara admi sab, bahar kar ke dat  
Jhapat mar ke bolta hai, Angreji-me bat.*

With anticipation in my heart I came to Calcutta  
And what entertaining things I could see here!  
The Arya Samaj, Brahma Samaj, church and mosque –  
In one vessel you get everything – milk, water and all  
All men big and small show their teeth,  
And with a flourish they speak in English.

## 4. SEGREGATION, TOWN PLANNING AND ARCHITECTURE

### MADRAS, CALCUTTA AND BOMBAY

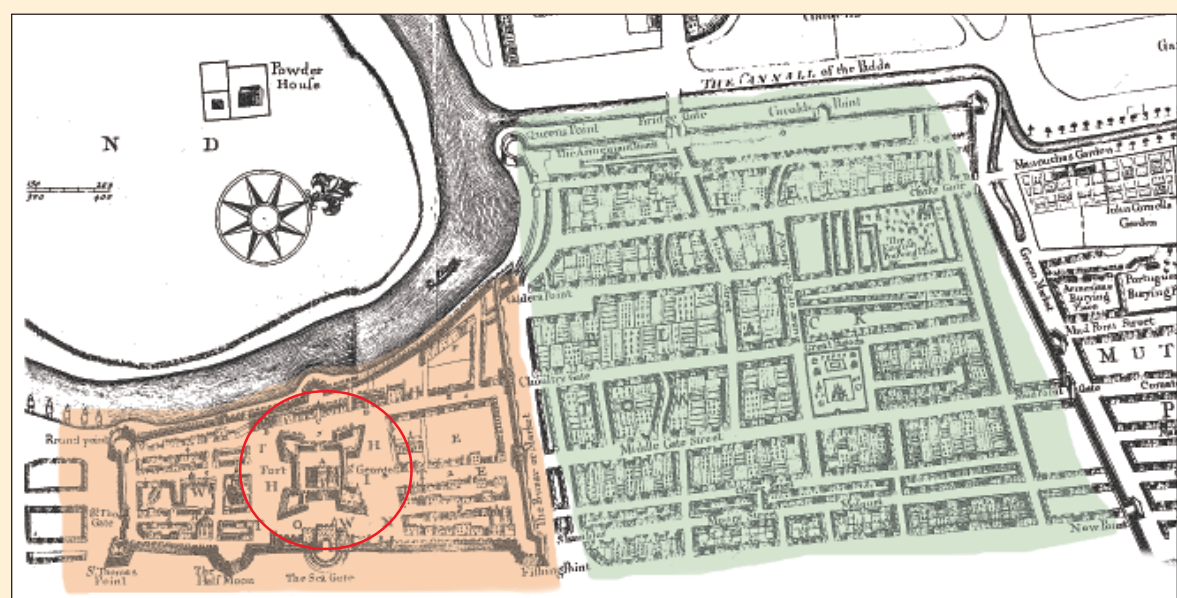
Madras, Calcutta and Bombay gradually developed into the biggest cities of colonial India. We have been examining some of the distinctive features of these cities in the preceding sections. Now we will look in detail at one characteristic for each city.

#### 4.1 Settlement and segregation in Madras

The Company had first set up its trading activities in the well-established port of Surat on the west coast. Subsequently the search for textiles brought British merchants to the east coast. In 1639 they constructed a trading post in Madraspatam. This settlement was locally known as Chenapattanam. The Company had purchased the right of settlement from the local Telugu lords, the Nayaks of Kalahasti, who were eager to support trading activity in the region. Rivalry (1746-63) with the French East India Company led the British to fortify Madras and give their representatives increased political and administrative functions. With the defeat of the French in 1761, Madras became more secure and began to grow into an important commercial town. It was here that the superiority of the British and the subordinate position of the Indian merchants was most apparent.

Fort St George became the nucleus of the White Town where most of the Europeans lived. Walls and bastions made this a distinct enclave. Colour and religion determined who was allowed to live within the Fort. The Company did not permit any marriages with Indians. Other than the English, the Dutch and Portuguese were allowed to stay here because they were European and Christian. The administrative and judicial systems also favoured the white population. Despite being few in number the Europeans were the rulers and the development of Madras followed the needs and convenience of the minority whites in the town.

The Black Town developed outside the Fort. It was laid out in straight lines, a characteristic of colonial towns. It was, however, demolished in the mid-1700s and the area was cleared for a security zone around the Fort. A new Black Town developed further to the north. This housed weavers, artisans, middlemen and interpreters who played a vital role in the Company trade.



*Fig. 12.16*

*A map of Madras*

The White Town around Fort St George is on the left, and the Old Black Town is on the right. Fort St George is marked with a circle. Notice how the Black Town was laid out.



*Fig. 12.17*

*Part of the Black Town, Madras, by Thomas and William Daniell, based on a drawing by Daniell published in Oriental Scenery, 1798*

The old Black Town was demolished to create the open space you see in this picture. Originally cleared as a line of fire, the open ground was later maintained as a green area. On the horizon you can see part of the new Black Town that came up at a distance from the Fort.

The new Black Town resembled traditional Indian towns, with living quarters built around its own temple and bazaar. On the narrow lanes that criss-crossed the township, there were distinct caste-specific neighbourhoods. Chintadripet was an area meant for weavers. Washermanpet was a colony of dyers and bleachers of cloth. Royapuram was a settlement for Christian boatmen who worked for the Company.

Madras developed by incorporating innumerable surrounding villages and by creating opportunities and spaces for a variety of communities. Several different communities came and settled in Madras, performing a range of economic functions. The *dubashes* were Indians who could speak two languages – the local language and English. They worked as agents and merchants, acting as intermediaries between Indian society and the British. They used their privileged position in government to acquire wealth. Their powerful position in society was established by their charitable works and patronage of temples in the Black Town.

Initially jobs with the Company were monopolised by the Vellalars, a rural caste who took advantage of the new opportunities provided by British rule. With the spread of English education in the nineteenth century, Brahmins started competing for similar positions in the administration. Telugu Komatis were a powerful commercial group that controlled the grain trade in the city. Gujarati bankers had also been present since the eighteenth century. Paraiyars and Vanniyars formed the labouring poor. The Nawab of Arcot settled in nearby Triplicane which became the nucleus of a substantial Muslim settlement. Mylapore and Triplicane were earlier Hindu religious centres that supported a large group of Brahmins. San Thome with its cathedral was the centre for Roman Catholics. All these settlements became part of Madras city. Thus the incorporation of many villages made Madras a city of wide expanse and low density. This was noticed by European travellers and commented on by officials.

*Pet* is a Tamil word meaning settlement, while *puram* is used for a village.

Fig. 12.18  
A garden house on Poonamalee Road



Source 3

### A rural city?

Read this excerpt on Madras from the *Imperial Gazetteer*, 1908:

... the better European residences are built in the midst of compounds which almost attain the dignity of parks; and rice-fields frequently wind in and out between these in almost rural fashion. Even in the most thickly peopled native quarters such as Black Town and Triplicane, there is little of the crowding found in many other towns ...

➤ Statements in reports often express the ideas of the reporter. What kind of an urban space is the reporter celebrating in the statement and what kind is he demeaning? Would you agree with these ideas?

As the British consolidated their power, resident Europeans began to move out of the Fort. Garden houses first started coming up along the two main arteries – Mount Road and Poonamalee Road – leading from the Fort to the cantonment. Wealthy Indians too started to live like the English. As a result many new suburbs were created from existing villages around the core of Madras. This was of course possible because the wealthy could afford transport. The poor settled in villages that were close to their place of work. The gradual urbanisation of Madras meant that the areas between these villages were brought within the city. As a result Madras had a semi-rural air about it.

#### 4.2 Town planning in Calcutta

Modern town planning began in the colonial cities. This required preparation of a layout of the entire urban space and regulation of urban land use. Planning was usually inspired by a vision of what the city should look like, how it would be developed and the way in which spaces would be organised and ordered. The ideology of “development” that this vision reflected presumed exercise of state power over urban lives and urban spaces.

There were many reasons why the British took upon themselves the task of town planning from the early years of their rule in Bengal. One immediate reason was defence. In 1756, Sirajudaula, the Nawab of Bengal, attacked Calcutta and sacked the small fort which the British traders had built as their depot for goods. The English East India Company traders had been continuously questioning the sovereignty of the Nawab. They were reluctant to pay customs duties, and refused to comply with the terms on which they were expected to operate. So Sirajudaula wanted to assert his authority.

Subsequently, in 1757, when Sirajudaula was defeated in the Battle of Plassey, the East India Company decided to build a new fort, one that could not be easily attacked. Calcutta had grown from three villages called Sutanati, Kolkata and Govindapur. The Company cleared a site in the southernmost village of Govindapur and the traders and weavers living there were asked to move out. Around the new Fort William they left a vast open space which came to be locally known as the Maidan or *gareer-math*.

This was done so that there would be no obstructions to a straight line of fire from the Fort against an advancing enemy army. Once the British became more confident about their permanent presence in Calcutta, they started moving out of the Fort and building residences along the periphery of the Maidan. That was how the English settlement in Calcutta gradually started taking shape. The vast open space around the Fort (which still exists) became a landmark, Calcutta's first significant town planning measure.

The history of town planning in Calcutta of course did not end with the building of Fort William and the Maidan. In 1798, Lord Wellesley became the Governor General. He built a massive palace, Government House, for himself in Calcutta, a building that was expected to convey the authority of the British. He became concerned about the condition of the Indian part of the city – the crowding, the excessive vegetation, the dirty tanks, the smells and poor drainage. These conditions worried the British because they believed at the time that poisonous gases from marshlands and pools of stagnant water were the cause of most diseases. The tropical climate itself was seen as unhealthy

### The line of fire

Interestingly, the pattern devised for Calcutta was replicated in many other towns. During the Revolt of 1857 many towns became rebel strongholds. After their victory the British proceeded to make these places safe for themselves. In Delhi for instance they took over the Red Fort and stationed an army there. Then they destroyed buildings close to the Fort creating a substantial empty space between the Indian neighbourhoods and the Fort. The logic was the same as in Calcutta a hundred years ago: a direct line of fire was considered essential, just in case the town rose up against *firangi raj* once again.



Fig. 12.19  
Government House, Calcutta, by Charles D'Oyly, 1848

The residence of the Governor General, the Government House, built by Wellesley, was meant to symbolise the grandeur of the Raj.



Fig. 12.20  
A bazaar leading to Chitpore Road  
in Calcutta

For local communities in the towns, the bazaar was a place of both commercial and social exchange. Europeans were fascinated by the bazaar but also saw it as an overcrowded and dirty place.



Source 4

**“For the regulation of  
nuisances of every  
description”**

By the early nineteenth century the British felt that permanent and public rules had to be formulated for regulating all aspects of social life. Even the construction of private buildings and public roads ought to conform to standardised rules that were clearly codified. In his Minute on Calcutta (1803) Wellesley wrote:

It is a primary duty of Government to provide for the health, safety and convenience of the inhabitants of this great town, by establishing a comprehensive system for the improvement of roads, streets, public drains, and water courses, and by fixing permanent rules for the construction and distribution of the houses and public edifices, and for the regulation of nuisances of every description.

and enervating. Creating open places in the city was one way of making the city healthier. Wellesley wrote a Minute (an administrative order) in 1803 on the need for town planning, and set up various committees for the purpose. Many bazaars, *ghats*, burial grounds, and tanneries were cleared or removed. From then on the notion of “public health” became an idea that was proclaimed in projects of town clearance and town planning.

After Wellesley’s departure the work of town planning was carried on by the Lottery Committee (1817) with the help of the government. The Lottery Committee was so named because funds for town improvement were raised through public lotteries. In other words, in the early decades of the nineteenth century raising funds for the city was still thought to be the responsibility of public-minded citizens and not exclusively that of the government. The Lottery Committee commissioned a new map of the city so as to get a comprehensive picture of Calcutta. Among the Committee’s major activities was road building in the Indian part of the city and clearing the river bank of “encroachments”. In its drive to make the Indian areas of Calcutta cleaner, the committee removed many huts and displaced the labouring poor, who were now pushed to the outskirts of Calcutta.

The threat of epidemics gave a further impetus to town planning in the next few decades. Cholera started spreading from 1817 and in 1896 plague made its appearance. The cause of these diseases had not

yet been established firmly by medical science. The government proceeded on the basis of the accepted theory of the time: that there was a direct correlation between living conditions and the spread of disease. Such views were supported by prominent Indian merchants in the city, such as Dwarkanath Tagore and Rustomjee Cowasjee, who felt that Calcutta needed to be made more healthy. Densely built-up areas were seen as insanitary since they obstructed direct sunlight and circulation of air. That was why working people's huts or "bustis" became the target of demolition. The poor in the city – workers, hawkers, artisans, porters and the unemployed – were once again forced to move to distant parts of the city. Frequent fires also led to stricter building regulations – for instance, thatched huts were banned in 1836 and tiled roofs made mandatory.

By the late nineteenth century, official intervention in the city became more stringent. Gone were the days when town planning was seen as a task to be shared by inhabitants and the government. Instead, the government took over all the initiatives for town planning including funding. This opportunity was used to clear more huts and develop the British portions of the town at the expense of other areas. The existing racial divide of the "White Town" and "Black Town" was reinforced by the new divide of "healthy" and "unhealthy". Indian representatives in the municipality protested against this unfair bias towards the development of the European parts of the town. Public protests against these government policies strengthened the feeling of anti-colonialism and nationalism among Indians.

Fig. 12.21

A part of the European town in Calcutta after the Lottery Committee improvements, from the plan by J.A. Schalch (1825). You can see the European houses with compounds.

➤ How does Wellesley define the duty of the government? Read this section and discuss what impact these ideas, if implemented, would have had on the Indians living in the city.

*Busti* (in Bengali and Hindi) originally meant neighbourhood or settlement. However, the British narrowed the sense of the word to mean makeshift huts built by the poor. In the late nineteenth century "bustis" and insanitary slums became synonymous in British records.





*Fig. 12.22*  
A busti in Calcutta

With the growth of their empire, the British became increasingly inclined to make cities like Calcutta, Bombay and Madras into impressive imperial capitals. It was as if the grandeur of the cities had to reflect the authority of imperial power. Town planning had to represent everything that the British claimed to stand for: rational ordering, meticulous execution, and Western aesthetic ideals. Cities had to be cleaned and ordered, planned and beautified.

#### **4.3 Architecture in Bombay**

If one way of realising this imperial vision was through town planning, the other was through embellishing cities with monumental buildings. Buildings in cities could include forts, government offices, educational institutions, religious structures, commemorative towers, commercial depots, or even docks and bridges. Although primarily serving functional needs like defence, administration and commerce these were rarely simple structures. They were often meant to represent ideas such as imperial power, nationalism and religious glory. Let us see how this is exemplified in the case of Bombay.

Bombay was initially seven islands. As the population grew, the islands were joined to create more space and they gradually fused into one big city. Bombay was the commercial capital of colonial India. As the premier port on the western coast it was the centre of international trade. By the end of the nineteenth century, half the imports and exports of India passed through Bombay. One important item of this trade was opium that the East India Company exported to China. Indian merchants and middlemen supplied and participated in this trade and they helped integrate Bombay's economy directly to Malwa, Rajasthan and Sind where opium was grown. This collaboration with the Company was profitable and led to the growth of an Indian capitalist class. Bombay's capitalists came from diverse communities such as Parsi, Marwari, Konkani Muslim, Gujarati Bania, Bohra, Jew and Armenian.

As you have read (Chapter 10), when the American Civil War started in 1861 cotton from the American South

stopped coming into the international market. This led to an upsurge of demand for Indian cotton, grown primarily in the Deccan. Once again Indian merchants and middlemen found an opportunity for earning huge profits. In 1869 the Suez Canal was opened and this further strengthened Bombay's links with the world economy. The Bombay government and Indian merchants used this opportunity to declare Bombay *Urbs Prima in Indis*, a Latin phrase meaning the most important city of India. By the late nineteenth century Indian merchants in Bombay were investing their wealth in new ventures such as cotton mills. They also patronised building activity in the city.

As Bombay's economy grew, from the mid-nineteenth century there was a need to expand railways and shipping and develop the administrative structure. Many new buildings were constructed at this time. These buildings reflected the culture and confidence of the rulers. The architectural style was usually European. This importation of European styles reflected the imperial vision in several ways. First, it expressed the British desire to create a familiar landscape in an alien country, and thus to feel at home in the colony. Second, the British felt that European styles would best symbolise their superiority, authority and power. Third, they thought that buildings that looked European would mark out the difference and distance between the colonial masters and their Indian subjects.

Initially, these buildings were at odds with the traditional Indian buildings. Gradually, Indians too got used to European architecture and made it their own. The British in turn adapted some Indian styles to suit their needs. One example is the bungalow which was used by government officers in Bombay and all over India. The name bungalow was derived from *bangla*, a traditional thatched Bengali hut. The colonial bungalow was set on extensive grounds which ensured privacy and marked a distance from the Indian world around. The traditional pitched roof and surrounding veranda kept the bungalow cool in the summer months. The compound had separate quarters for a retinue of domestic servants. The

Fig. 12.23  
A bungalow in Bombay,  
nineteenth century





*Fig. 12.24*  
The Town Hall in Bombay, which now houses the Asiatic Society of Bombay

*Pitched roof* is a term used by architects to describe a sloping roof. By the early twentieth century pitched roofs became less common in bungalows, although the general plan remained the same.

bungalows in the Civil Lines thus became a racially exclusive enclave in which the ruling classes could live self-sufficient lives without daily social contact with Indians.

For public buildings three broad architectural styles were used. Two of these were direct imports from fashions prevalent in England. The first was called neo-classical or the new classical. Its characteristics included construction of geometrical structures fronted with lofty pillars. It was derived from a style that was originally typical of buildings in ancient Rome, and was subsequently revived, re-adapted and made popular during the European Renaissance. It was considered particularly appropriate for the British Empire in India. The British imagined that a style that embodied the grandeur of imperial Rome could now be made to express the glory of imperial India. The Mediterranean origins of this architecture were also thought to be suitable for tropical weather. The Town Hall in Bombay (Fig. 12.24) was built in this style in 1833. Another group of commercial buildings, built during the cotton boom of the 1860s, was the Elphinstone Circle. Subsequently named Horniman Circle after an English editor who courageously supported Indian nationalists, this building was inspired from models in Italy. It made innovative use of covered arcades at ground level to shield the shopper and pedestrian from the fierce sun and rain of Bombay.

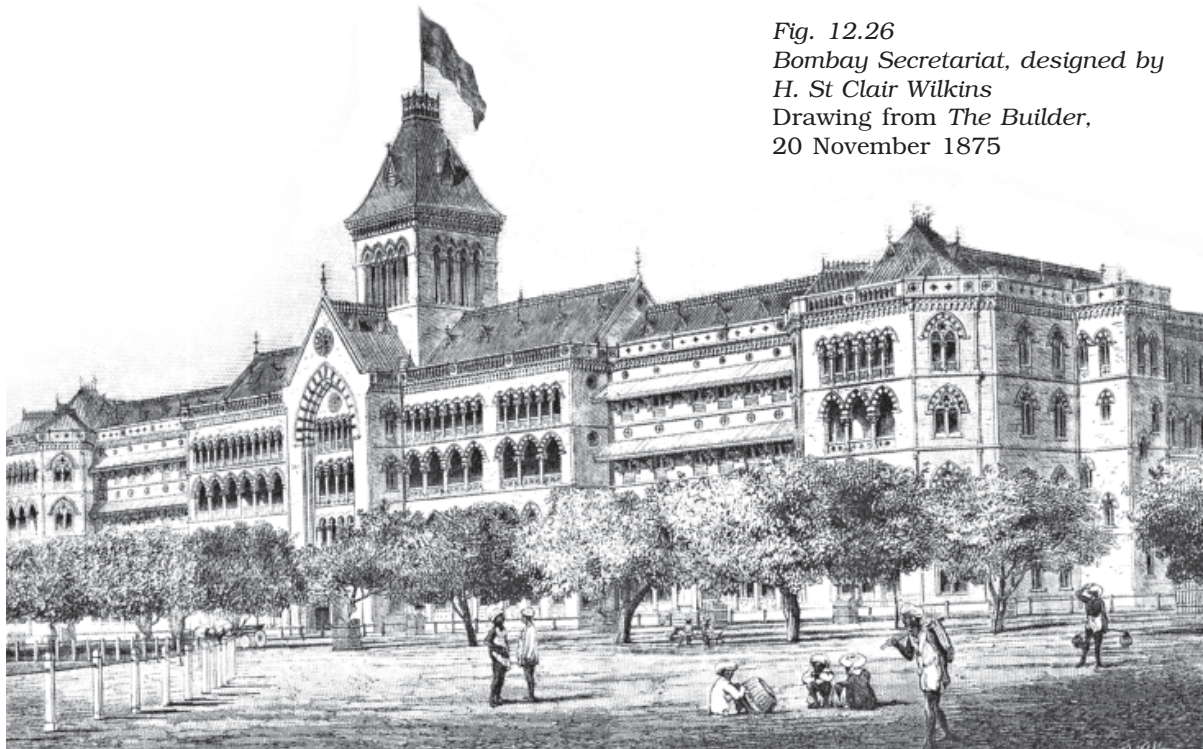


*Fig. 12.25*  
The Elphinstone Circle  
Note the pillars and arches, derived from Graeco-Roman architecture.

Another style that was extensively used was the neo-Gothic, characterised by high-pitched roofs, pointed arches and detailed decoration. The Gothic style had its roots in buildings, especially churches, built in northern Europe during the medieval period. The neo-Gothic or new Gothic style was revived in the mid-nineteenth century in England. This was the time when the government in Bombay was building its infrastructure and this style was adapted for Bombay. An impressive group of buildings facing the seafront including the Secretariat, University of Bombay and High Court were all built in this style.

Indians gave money for some of these buildings. The University Hall was made with money donated by Sir Cowasjee Jehangir Readymoney, a rich Parsi merchant. The University Library clock tower was similarly funded by the banker Premchand Roychand and was named after his mother as Rajabai Tower. Indian merchants were happy to adopt the neo-Gothic style since they believed that building styles, like many ideas brought in by the English, were progressive and would help make Bombay into a modern city.

However, the most spectacular example of the neo-Gothic style is the Victoria Terminus, the station and headquarters of the Great Indian Peninsular Railway Company. The British



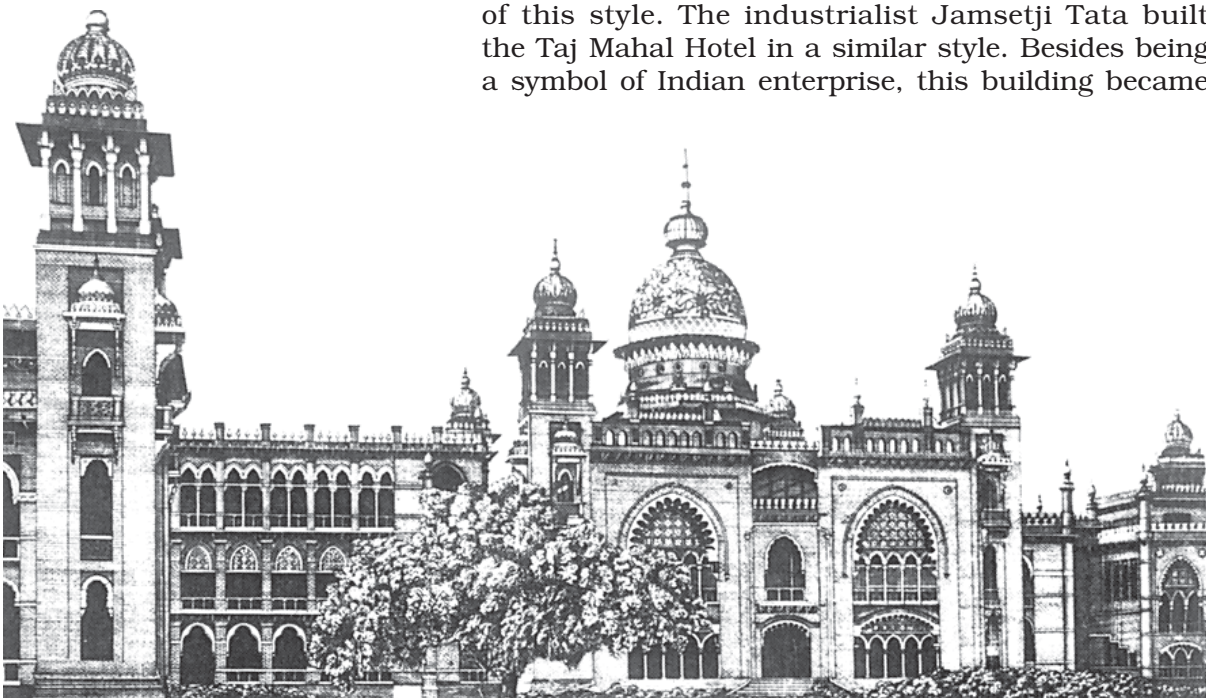
*Fig. 12.26*  
*Bombay Secretariat, designed by*  
*H. St Clair Wilkins*  
*Drawing from The Builder,*  
*20 November 1875*



Fig. 12.27  
Victoria Terminus Railway  
Station, designed by  
F.W. Stevens

Fig. 12.28  
Madras law courts

While Bombay remained the main centre of Gothic revival, Indo-Saracenic flourished in Madras. The design of the law courts combined Pathan elements with Gothic ones.



invested a lot in the design and construction of railway stations in cities, since they were proud of having successfully built an all-India railway network. As a group these buildings dominated the central Bombay skyline and their uniform neo-Gothic style gave a distinctive character to the city.

Towards the beginning of the twentieth century a new hybrid architectural style developed which combined the Indian with the European. This was called Indo-Saracenic. “Indo” was shorthand for Hindu and “Saracen” was a term Europeans used to designate Muslim. The inspiration for this style was medieval buildings in India with their domes, *chhatris*, *jalis*, arches. By integrating Indian and European styles in public architecture the British wanted to prove that they were legitimate rulers of India. The Gateway of India, built in the traditional Gujarati style to welcome King George V and Queen Mary to India in 1911, is the most famous example of this style. The industrialist Jamsetji Tata built the Taj Mahal Hotel in a similar style. Besides being a symbol of Indian enterprise, this building became

a challenge to the racially exclusive clubs and hotels maintained by the British.

In the more “Indian” localities of Bombay traditional styles of decoration and building predominated. The lack of space in the city and crowding led to a type of building unique to Bombay, the *chawl*, the multi-storeyed single-room apartments with long open corridors built around a courtyard. Such buildings which housed many families sharing common spaces helped in the growth of neighbourhood identity and solidarity.

## 5. WHAT BUILDINGS AND ARCHITECTURAL STYLES TELL US

Architecture reflects the aesthetic ideals prevalent at a time, and variations within those ideals. But, as we have seen, buildings also express the vision of those who build them. Rulers everywhere seek to express their power through buildings. So by looking at the architecture of a particular time, we can understand how power was conceived of and how it was expressed through structures and their attributes – bricks and stones, pillars and arches, soaring domes or vaulted roofs.

Architectural styles do not only reflect prevalent tastes. They mould tastes, popularise styles and shape the contours of culture. As we have seen, many Indians came to regard European styles of architecture as symbols of modernity and civilisation, and began adopting these styles. But not all Indians thought alike: many rejected European ideals and tried to retain indigenous styles; others accepted certain elements from the West that they saw as modern and combined these with elements drawn from local traditions. From the late nineteenth century we see efforts to define regional and national tastes that were different from the colonial ideal. Styles thus changed and developed through wider processes of cultural conflict. By looking at architecture therefore we can also understand the variety of forms in which cultural conflicts unfolded and political conflicts – between the imperial and the national, the national and the regional/local – were played out.



*Fig. 12.29*  
*The Municipal Corporation Building, Bombay, designed by F. W. Stevens in 1888*

Notice the fusion of Oriental and Gothic designs.



*Fig. 12.30*  
*A Bombay chawl*

### ➔ Discuss...

Choose a historical building that you admire. List its architectural attributes and find out about its style and why that particular style was adopted.



### TIMELINE

1500-1700	European trading companies establish bases in India: the Portuguese in Panaji in 1510; the Dutch in Masulipatnam, 1605; the British in Madras in 1639, in Bombay in 1661, and in Calcutta in 1690; the French in Pondicherry in 1673
1757	Decisive victory of the British in the Battle of Plassey; the British become rulers of Bengal
1773	Supreme Court set up in Calcutta by the East India Company
1803	Lord Wellesley's Minute on Calcutta town improvement
1818	British takeover of the Deccan; Bombay becomes the capital of the new province
1853	Railway from Bombay to Thane
1857	First spinning and weaving mill in Bombay
1857	Universities in Bombay, Madras and Calcutta
1870s	Beginning of elected representatives in municipalities
1881	Madras harbour completed
1896	First screening of a film at Watson's Hotel, Bombay
1896	Plague starts spreading to major cities
1911	Transfer of capital from Calcutta to Delhi



### ANSWER IN 100-150 WORDS

1. To what extent are census data useful in reconstructing patterns of urbanisation in the colonial context?
2. What do the terms "White" and "Black" Town signify?
3. How did prominent Indian merchants establish themselves in the colonial city?
4. Examine how concerns of defence and health gave shape to Calcutta.
5. What are the different colonial architectural styles which can be seen in Bombay city?



### WRITE A SHORT ESSAY (250-300 WORDS) ON THE FOLLOWING:

6. How were urban centres transformed during the eighteenth century?
7. What were the new kinds of public places that emerged in the colonial city? What functions did they serve?
8. What were the concerns that influenced town planning in the nineteenth century?
9. To what extent were social relations transformed in the new cities?



### MAP WORK

10. On an outline map of India, trace the major rivers and hill ranges. Plot ten cities mentioned in the chapter, including Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, and prepare a brief note on why the importance of any two cities that you have marked (one colonial and one pre-colonial) changed in the nineteenth century.



### PROJECT (CHOOSE ONE)

11. You have been reading about big colonial cities. Choose any small town with a long history. It could be a temple town, market town, administrative centre, a pilgrimage centre or a combination of these. Find out how the town was established, when it developed, and how its history changed during modern times.
12. Choose five different types of buildings in your town or village. For each of these, find out when it was built, how it was planned, how resources were obtained for its construction, and how long it took to build it. What do the architectural features of the buildings express?



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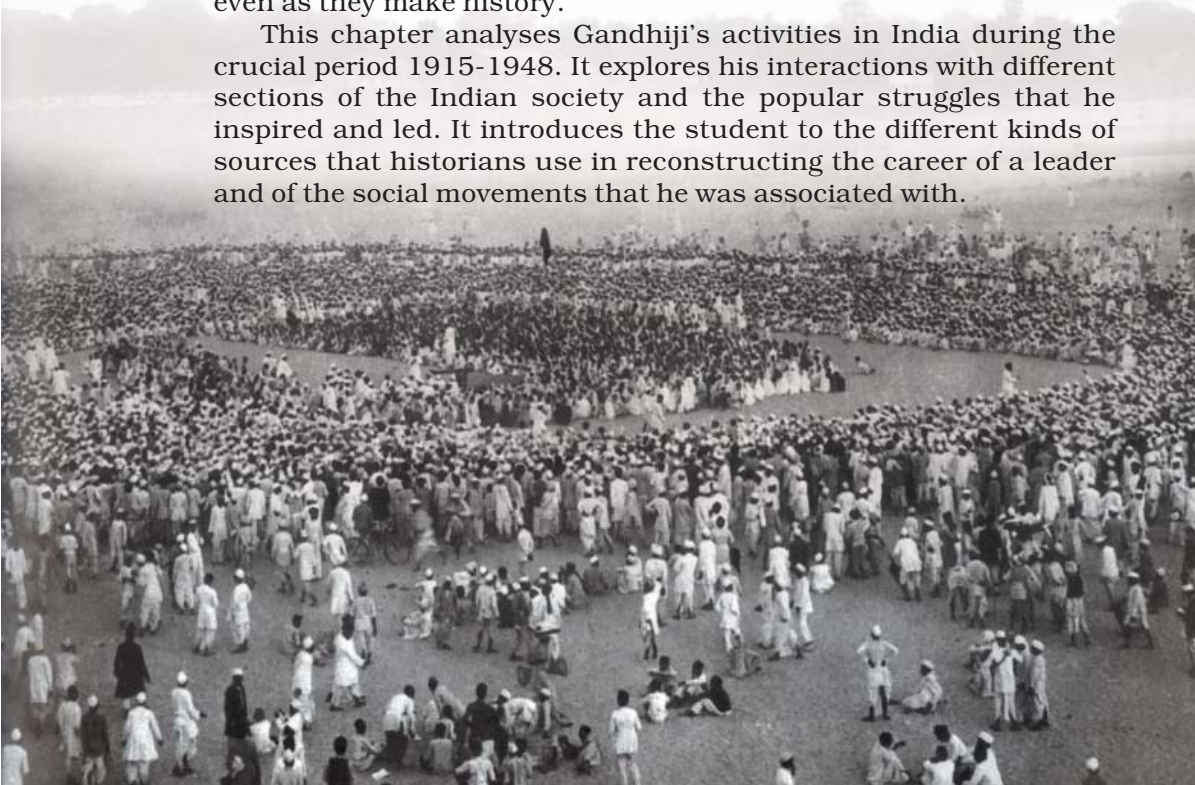
## THEME THIRTEEN

# MAHATMA GANDHI AND THE NATIONALIST MOVEMENT CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE AND BEYOND

In the history of nationalism a single individual is often identified with the making of a nation. Thus, for example, we associate Garibaldi with the making of Italy, George Washington with the American War of Independence, and Ho Chi Minh with the struggle to free Vietnam from colonial rule. In the same manner, Mahatma Gandhi has been regarded as the 'Father' of the Indian nation.

In so far as Gandhiji was the most influential and revered of all the leaders who participated in the freedom struggle, that characterisation is not misplaced. However, like Washington or Ho Chi-Minh, Mahatma Gandhi's political career was shaped and constrained by the society in which he lived. For individuals, even great ones, are made by history even as they make history.

This chapter analyses Gandhiji's activities in India during the crucial period 1915-1948. It explores his interactions with different sections of the Indian society and the popular struggles that he inspired and led. It introduces the student to the different kinds of sources that historians use in reconstructing the career of a leader and of the social movements that he was associated with.



*Fig. 13.1*  
*People gather on the banks of the Sabarmati River to hear Mahatma Gandhi speak before starting out on the Salt March in 1930*

## 1. A LEADER ANNOUNCES HIMSELF

In January 1915, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi returned to his homeland after two decades of residence abroad. These years had been spent for the most part in South Africa, where he went as a lawyer, and in time became a leader of the Indian community in that territory. As the historian Chandran Devanesan has remarked, South Africa was “the making of the Mahatma”. It was in South Africa that Mahatma Gandhi first forged the distinctive techniques of non-violent protest known as satyagraha, first promoted harmony between religions, and first alerted upper-caste Indians to their discriminatory treatment of low castes and women.

The India that Mahatma Gandhi came back to in 1915 was rather different from the one that he had left in 1893. Although still a colony of the British, it was far more active in a political sense. The Indian National Congress now had branches in most major cities and towns. Through the Swadeshi movement of 1905-07 it had greatly broadened its appeal among the middle classes. That movement had thrown up some towering leaders – among them Bal Gangadhar Tilak of Maharashtra, Bipin Chandra Pal of Bengal, and Lala Lajpat Rai of Punjab. The three were known as “Lal, Bal and Pal”, the alliteration conveying the all-India character of their struggle, since their native provinces were very distant from one another. Where these leaders advocated militant opposition to colonial rule, there was a group of “Moderates” who preferred a more gradual and persuasive approach. Among these Moderates was Gandhiji’s acknowledged political mentor, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, as well as Mohammad Ali Jinnah, who, like Gandhiji, was a lawyer of Gujarati extraction trained in London.

On Gokhale’s advice, Gandhiji spent a year travelling around British India, getting to know the land and its peoples. His first major public appearance was at the opening of the Banaras Hindu University (BHU) in February 1916. Among the invitees to

*Fig. 13.2*  
*Mahatma Gandhi in Johannesburg,*  
*South Africa, February 1908*



this event were the princes and philanthropists whose donations had contributed to the founding of the BHU. Also present were important leaders of the Congress, such as Annie Besant. Compared to these dignitaries, Gandhiji was relatively unknown. He had been invited on account of his work in South Africa, rather than his status within India.

When his turn came to speak, Gandhiji charged the Indian elite with a lack of concern for the labouring poor. The opening of the BHU, he said, was “certainly a most gorgeous show”. But he worried about the contrast between the “richly bedecked noblemen” present and “millions of the poor” Indians who were absent. Gandhiji told the privileged invitees that “there is no salvation for India unless you strip yourself of this jewellery and hold it in trust for your countrymen in India”. “There can be no spirit of self-government about us,” he went on, “if we take away or allow others to take away from the peasants almost the whole of the results of their labour. Our salvation can only come through the farmer. Neither the lawyers, nor the doctors, nor the rich landlords are going to secure it.”

The opening of the BHU was an occasion for celebration, marking as it did the opening of a nationalist university, sustained by Indian money and Indian initiative. But rather than adopt a tone of self-congratulation, Gandhiji chose instead to remind those present of the peasants and workers who constituted a majority of the Indian population, yet were unrepresented in the audience.

Gandhiji’s speech at Banaras in February 1916 was, at one level, merely a statement of fact – namely, that Indian nationalism was an elite phenomenon, a creation of lawyers and doctors and landlords. But, at another level, it was also a statement of intent – the first public announcement of Gandhiji’s own desire to make Indian nationalism more properly

*Fig. 13.3*  
*Mahatma Gandhi in Karachi,*  
*March 1916*



representative of the Indian people as a whole. In the last month of that year, Gandhiji was presented with an opportunity to put his precepts into practice. At the annual Congress, held in Lucknow in December 1916, he was approached by a peasant from Champaran in Bihar, who told him about the harsh treatment of peasants by British indigo planters.

## 2. THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF NON-COOPERATION

Mahatma Gandhi was to spend much of 1917 in Champaran, seeking to obtain for the peasants security of tenure as well as the freedom to cultivate the crops of their choice. The following year, 1918, Gandhiji was involved in two campaigns in his home state of Gujarat. First, he intervened in a labour dispute in Ahmedabad, demanding better working conditions for the textile mill workers. Then he joined peasants in Kheda in asking the state for the remission of taxes following the failure of their harvest.

These initiatives in Champaran, Ahmedabad and Kheda marked Gandhiji out as a nationalist with a deep sympathy for the poor. At the same time, these were all localised struggles. Then, in 1919, the colonial rulers delivered into Gandhiji's lap an issue from which he could construct a much wider movement. During the Great War of 1914-18, the British had instituted censorship of the press and permitted detention without trial. Now, on the recommendation of a committee chaired by Sir Sidney Rowlatt, these tough measures were continued. In response, Gandhiji called for a countrywide campaign against the "Rowlatt Act". In towns across North and West India, life came to a standstill, as shops shut down and schools closed in response to the *bandh* call. The protests were particularly intense in the Punjab, where many men had served on the British side in the War – expecting to be rewarded for their service. Instead they were given the Rowlatt Act. Gandhiji was detained while proceeding to the Punjab, even as prominent local Congressmen were arrested. The situation in the province grew progressively more tense, reaching a bloody climax in Amritsar in April 1919, when a British Brigadier ordered his troops to open fire on a nationalist meeting. More

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### ➔ Discuss...

Find out more about the national movement in India before 1915 and see whether Mahatma Gandhi's comments are justified.

than four hundred people were killed in what is known as the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.

It was the Rowlatt satyagraha that made Gandhiji a truly *national* leader. Emboldened by its success, Gandhiji called for a campaign of “non-cooperation” with British rule. Indians who wished colonialism to end were asked to stop attending schools, colleges and law courts, and not pay taxes. In sum, they were asked to adhere to a “renunciation of (all) voluntary association with the (British) Government”. If non-cooperation was effectively carried out, said Gandhiji, India would win swaraj within a year. To further broaden the struggle he had joined hands with the Khilafat Movement that sought to restore the Caliphate, a symbol of Pan-Islamism which had recently been abolished by the Turkish ruler Kemal Attaturk.

### 2.1 Knitting a popular movement

Gandhiji hoped that by coupling non-cooperation with Khilafat, India’s two major religious communities, Hindus and Muslims, could collectively bring an end to colonial rule. These movements certainly unleashed a surge of popular action that was altogether unprecedented in colonial India.

Students stopped going to schools and colleges run by the government. Lawyers refused to attend court. The working class went on strike in many towns and cities: according to official figures, there were 396 strikes in 1921, involving 600,000 workers and a loss of seven million workdays. The countryside was seething with discontent too. Hill tribes in northern Andhra violated the forest laws. Farmers in Awadh did not pay taxes. Peasants in Kumaun refused to carry loads for colonial officials. These protest movements were sometimes carried out in defiance of the local nationalist leadership. Peasants, workers, and others interpreted and acted upon the call to “non-cooperate” with colonial rule in ways that best suited their interests, rather than conform to the dictates laid down from above.

“Non-cooperation,” wrote Mahatma Gandhi’s American biographer Louis Fischer, “became the name of an epoch in the life of India and of Gandhiji. Non-cooperation was negative enough to be peaceful but positive enough to be effective. It entailed denial, renunciation, and self-discipline. It was training for

#### What was the Khilafat Movement?

The Khilafat Movement, (1919-1920) was a movement of Indian Muslims, led by Muhammad Ali and Shaukat Ali, that demanded the following: The Turkish Sultan or Khalifa must retain control over the Muslim sacred places in the erstwhile Ottoman empire; the *jazirat-ul-Arab* (Arabia, Syria, Iraq, Palestine) must remain under Muslim sovereignty; and the Khalifa must be left with sufficient territory to enable him to defend the Islamic faith. The Congress supported the movement and Mahatma Gandhi sought to conjoin it to the Non-cooperation Movement.

self-rule.” As a consequence of the Non-Cooperation Movement the British Raj was shaken to its foundations for the first time since the Revolt of 1857. Then, in February 1922, a group of peasants attacked and torched a police station in the hamlet of Chauri Chaura, in the United Provinces (now, Uttar Pradesh and Uttaranchal). Several constables perished in the conflagration. This act of violence prompted Gandhiji to call off the movement altogether. “No provocation,” he insisted, “can possibly justify (the) brutal murder of men who had been rendered defenceless and who had virtually thrown themselves on the mercy of the mob.”

During the Non-Cooperation Movement thousands of Indians were put in jail. Gandhiji himself was arrested in March 1922, and charged with sedition. The judge who presided over his trial, Justice C.N. Broomfield, made a remarkable speech while pronouncing his sentence. “It would be impossible to ignore the fact,” remarked the judge, “that you are in a different category from any person I have ever tried or am likely to try. It would be impossible to ignore the fact that, in the eyes of millions of your countrymen, you are a great patriot and a leader. Even those who differ from you in politics look upon you as a man of high ideals and of even saintly life.” Since Gandhiji had violated the law it was obligatory for the Bench to sentence him to six years’ imprisonment, but, said Judge Broomfield, “If the course of events in India should make it possible for the Government to reduce the period and release you, no one will be better pleased than I”.

## 2.2 A people’s leader

By 1922, Gandhiji had transformed Indian nationalism, thereby redeeming the promise he made in his BHU speech of February 1916. It was no longer a movement of professionals and intellectuals; now, hundreds of thousands of peasants, workers and artisans also participated in it. Many of them venerated Gandhiji, referring to him as their



*Fig. 13.4*  
Non-cooperation Movement,  
July 1922  
Foreign cloth being collected to  
be burnt in bonfires.



“Mahatma”. They appreciated the fact that he dressed like them, lived like them, and spoke their language. Unlike other leaders he did not stand apart from the common folk, but empathised and even identified with them.

This identification was strikingly reflected in his dress: while other nationalist leaders dressed formally, wearing a Western suit or an Indian *bandgala*, Gandhiji went among the people in a simple *dhoti* or loincloth. Meanwhile, he spent part of each day working on the *charkha* (spinning wheel), and encouraged other nationalists to do likewise. The act of spinning allowed Gandhiji to break the boundaries that prevailed within the traditional caste system, between mental labour and manual labour.

In a fascinating study, the historian Shahid Amin has traced the image of Mahatma Gandhi among the peasants of eastern Uttar Pradesh, as conveyed by reports and rumours in the local press. When he travelled through the region in February 1921, Gandhiji was received by adoring crowds everywhere.

Fig. 13.5

Mahatma Gandhi with the charkha has become the most abiding image of Indian nationalism.

In 1921, during a tour of South India, Gandhiji shaved his head and began wearing a loincloth in order to identify with the poor. His new appearance also came to symbolise asceticism and abstinence – qualities he celebrated in opposition to the consumerist culture of the modern world.

Source 1

### Charkha

Mahatma Gandhi was profoundly critical of the modern age in which machines enslaved humans and displaced labour. He saw the *charkha* as a symbol of a human society that would not glorify machines and technology. The spinning wheel, moreover, could provide the poor with supplementary income and make them self-reliant.



Fig. 13.5

What I object to, is the craze for machinery as such. The craze is for what they call labour-saving machinery. Men go on “saving labour”, till thousands are without work and thrown on the open streets to die of starvation. I want to save time and labour, not for a fraction of mankind, but for all; I want the concentration of wealth, not in the hands of few, but in the hands of all.

YOUNG INDIA, 13 NOVEMBER 1924

Khaddar does not seek to destroy all machinery but it does regulate its use and check its weedy growth. It uses machinery for the service of the poorest in their own cottages. The wheel is itself an exquisite piece of machinery.

YOUNG INDIA, 17 MARCH 1927

This is how a Hindi newspaper in Gorakhpur reported the atmosphere during his speeches:

At Bhatni Gandhiji addressed the local public and then the train started for Gorakhpur. There were not less than 15,000 to 20,000 people at Nunkhar, Deoria, Gauri Bazar, Chauri Chaura and Kusmhi (stations) ... Mahatmaji was very pleased to witness the scene at Kusmhi, as despite the fact that the station is in the middle of a jungle there were not less than 10,000 people here. Some, overcome with their love, were seen to be crying. At Deoria people wanted to give *bhent* (donations) to Gandhiji, but he asked them to give these at Gorakhpur. But at Chauri Chaura one Marwari gentleman managed to hand over something to him. Then there was no stopping. A sheet was spread and currency notes and coins started raining. It was a sight ... Outside the Gorakhpur station the Mahatma was stood on a high carriage and people had a good darshan of him for a couple of minutes.

Wherever Gandhiji went, rumours spread of his miraculous powers. In some places it was said that he had been sent by the King to redress the grievances of the farmers, and that he had the power to overrule all local officials. In other places it was claimed that Gandhiji's power was superior to that of the English monarch, and that with his arrival the colonial rulers would flee the district. There were also stories reporting dire consequences for those who opposed him; rumours spread of how villagers who criticised Gandhiji found their houses mysteriously falling apart or their crops failing.

Known variously as "Gandhi baba", "Gandhi Maharaj", or simply as "Mahatma", Gandhiji appeared to the Indian peasant as a saviour, who would rescue them from high taxes and oppressive officials and restore dignity and autonomy to their lives. Gandhiji's appeal among the poor, and peasants in particular, was enhanced by his ascetic lifestyle, and by his shrewd use of symbols such as the *dhoti* and the *charkha*. Mahatma Gandhi was by caste a merchant, and by profession a lawyer; but his simple lifestyle and love of working with his hands allowed him to empathise more fully with the labouring poor and for them, in turn, to empathise with him. Where most

Source 2

### The miraculous and the unbelievable

Local newspapers in the United Provinces recorded many of the rumours that circulated at that time. There were rumours that every person who wanted to test the power of the Mahatma had been surprised:

1. Sikandar Sahu from a village in Basti said on 15 February that he would believe in the Mahatmaji when the *karah* (boiling pan) full of sugar cane juice in his *karkhana* (where *gur* was produced) split into two. Immediately the *karah* actually split into two from the middle.
2. A cultivator in Azamgarh said that he would believe in the Mahatmaji's authenticity if sesamum sprouted on his field planted with wheat. Next day all the wheat in that field became sesamum.

contd

Source 2 (contd)

There were rumours that those who opposed Mahatma Gandhi invariably met with some tragedy.

1. A gentleman from Gorakhpur city questioned the need to ply the *charkha*. His house caught fire.
2. In April 1921 some people were gambling in a village of Uttar Pradesh. Someone told them to stop. Only one from amongst the group refused to stop and abused Gandhiji. The next day his goat was bitten by four of his own dogs.
3. In a village in Gorakhpur, the peasants resolved to give up drinking liquor. One person did not keep his promise. As soon as he started for the liquor shop brickbats started to rain in his path. When he spoke the name of Gandhiji the brickbats stopped flying.

FROM SHAHID AMIN, "GANDHI AS MAHATMA", *SUBALTERN STUDIES III*, OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, DELHI.

➡ You have read about rumours in Chapter 11 and seen that the circulation of rumours tells us about the structure of the belief of a time: they tell us about the mind of the people who believe in the rumours and the circumstances that make this belief possible. What do you think these rumours about Gandhiji reflect?

other politicians talked down to them, Gandhiji appeared not just to look like them, but to understand them and relate to their lives.

While Mahatma Gandhi's mass appeal was undoubtedly genuine – and in the context of Indian politics, without precedent – it must also be stressed that his success in broadening the basis of nationalism was based on careful organisation. New branches of the Congress were set up in various parts of India. A series of "Praja Mandals" were established to promote the nationalist creed in the princely states. Gandhiji encouraged the communication of the nationalist message in the mother tongue, rather than in the language of the rulers, English. Thus the provincial committees of the Congress were based on linguistic regions, rather than on the artificial boundaries of British India. In these different ways nationalism was taken to the farthest corners of the country and embraced by social groups previously untouched by it.

By now, among the supporters of the Congress were some very prosperous businessmen and industrialists. Indian entrepreneurs were quick to recognise that, in a free India, the favours enjoyed by their British competitors would come to an end. Some of these entrepreneurs, such as G.D. Birla, supported the national movement openly; others did so tacitly. Thus, among Gandhiji's admirers were both poor peasants and rich industrialists, although the reasons why peasants followed Gandhiji were somewhat different from, and perhaps opposed to, the reasons of the industrialists.

While Mahatma Gandhi's own role was vital, the growth of what we might call "Gandhian nationalism" also depended to a very substantial extent on his followers. Between 1917 and 1922, a group of highly talented Indians attached themselves to Gandhiji. They included Mahadev Desai, Vallabh Bhai Patel, J.B. Kripalani, Subhas Chandra Bose, Abul Kalam Azad, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sarojini Naidu, Govind Ballabh Pant and C. Rajagopalachari. Notably, these close associates of Gandhiji came from different regions as well as different religious traditions. In turn, they inspired countless other Indians to join the Congress and work for it.

Mahatma Gandhi was released from prison in February 1924, and now chose to devote his attention to the promotion of home-spun cloth (*khadi*), and

the abolition of untouchability. For, Gandhiji was as much a social reformer as he was a politician. He believed that in order to be worthy of freedom, Indians had to get rid of social evils such as child marriage and untouchability. Indians of one faith had also to cultivate a genuine tolerance for Indians of another – hence his emphasis on Hindu-Muslim harmony. Meanwhile, on the economic front Indians had to learn to become self-reliant – hence his stress on the significance of wearing *khadi* rather than mill-made cloth imported from overseas.

### 3. THE SALT SATYAGRAHA A CASE STUDY

For several years after the Non-cooperation Movement ended, Mahatma Gandhi focused on his social reform work. In 1928, however, he began to think of re-entering politics. That year there was an all-India campaign in opposition to the all-White Simon Commission, sent from England to enquire into conditions in the colony. Gandhiji did not himself participate in this movement, although he gave it his blessings, as he also did to a peasant satyagraha in Bardoli in the same year.

In the end of December 1929, the Congress held its annual session in the city of Lahore. The meeting was significant for two things: the election of Jawaharlal Nehru as President, signifying the passing of the baton of leadership to the younger generation; and the proclamation of commitment to “Purna Swaraj”, or complete independence. Now the pace of politics picked up once more. On 26 January 1930, “Independence Day” was observed, with the national flag being hoisted in different venues, and patriotic songs being sung. Gandhiji himself issued precise instructions as to how the day should be observed. “It would be good,” he said, “if the declaration [of Independence] is made by whole villages, whole cities even ... It would be well if all the meetings were held at the identical minute in all the places.”

Gandhiji suggested that the time of the meeting be advertised in the traditional way, by the beating of drums. The celebrations would begin with the hoisting of the national flag. The rest of the day would be spent “in doing some constructive work, whether it is spinning, or service of ‘untouchables’, or reunion of Hindus and Mussalmans, or prohibition work, or even all these

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#### ➤ Discuss...

What was Non-cooperation?  
Find out about the variety of ways in which different social groups participated in the movement.

together, which is not impossible". Participants would take a pledge affirming that it was "the inalienable right of the Indian people, as of any other people, to have freedom and to enjoy the fruits of their toil", and that "if any government deprives a people of these rights and oppresses them, the people have a further right to alter it or abolish it".

### 3.1 Dandi

Soon after the observance of this "Independence Day", Mahatma Gandhi announced that he would lead a march to break one of the most widely disliked laws in British India, which gave the state a monopoly in the manufacture and sale of salt. His picking on the salt monopoly was another illustration of Gandhiji's tactical wisdom. For in every Indian household, salt was indispensable; yet people were forbidden from making salt even for domestic use, compelling them to buy it from shops at a high price. The state monopoly over salt was deeply unpopular; by making it his target, Gandhiji hoped to mobilise a wider discontent against British rule.

*Fig. 13.6*  
*On the Dandi March,*  
*March 1930*



Where most Indians understood the significance of Gandhiji's challenge, the British Raj apparently did not. Although Gandhiji had given advance notice of his "Salt March" to the Viceroy Lord Irwin, Irwin failed to grasp the significance of the action. On 12 March 1930, Gandhiji began walking from his ashram at Sabarmati towards the ocean. He reached his destination three weeks later, making a fistful of salt as he did and thereby making himself a criminal in the eyes of the law. Meanwhile, parallel salt marches were being conducted in other parts of the country.



Fig. 13.7  
Satyagrahis picking up natural salt at the end of the Dandi March, 6 April 1930

Source 3

### Why the Salt Satyagraha?

Why was salt the symbol of protest? This is what Mahatma Gandhi wrote:

The volume of information being gained daily shows how wickedly the salt tax has been designed. In order to prevent the use of salt that has not paid the tax which is at times even fourteen times its value, the Government destroys the salt it cannot sell profitably. Thus it taxes the nation's vital necessity; it prevents the public from manufacturing it and destroys what nature manufactures without effort. No adjective is strong enough for characterising this wicked dog-in-the-manger policy. From various sources I hear tales of such wanton destruction of the nation's property in all parts of India. Maunds if not tons of salt are said to be destroyed on the Konkan coast. The same tale comes from Dandi. Wherever there is likelihood of natural salt being taken away by the people living in the neighbourhood of such areas for their personal use, salt officers are posted for the sole purpose of carrying on destruction. Thus valuable national property is destroyed at national expense and salt taken out of the mouths of the people.

The salt monopoly is thus a fourfold curse. It deprives the people of a valuable easy village industry, involves wanton destruction of property that nature produces in abundance, the destruction itself means more national expenditure, and fourthly, to crown this folly, an unheard-of tax of more than 1,000 per cent is exacted from a starving people.

This tax has remained so long because of the apathy of the general public. Now that it is sufficiently roused, the tax has to go. How soon it will be abolished depends upon the strength the people.

*THE COLLECTED WORKS OF MAHATMA GANDHI (CWMG), VOL. 49*

⇒ Why was salt destroyed by the colonial government? Why did Mahatma Gandhi consider the salt tax more oppressive than other taxes?

Source 4

### “Tomorrow we shall break the salt tax law”

On 5 April 1930, Mahatma Gandhi spoke at Dandi:

When I left Sabarmati with my companions for this seaside hamlet of Dandi, I was not certain in my mind that we would be allowed to reach this place. Even while I was at Sabarmati there was a rumour that I might be arrested. I had thought that the Government might perhaps let my party come as far as Dandi, but not me certainly. If someone says that this betrays imperfect faith on my part, I shall not deny the charge. That I have reached here is in no small measure due to the power of peace and non-violence: that power is universally felt. The Government may, if it wishes, congratulate itself on acting as it has done, for it could have arrested every one of us. In saying that it did not have the courage to arrest this army of peace, we praise it. It felt ashamed to arrest such an army. He is a civilised man who feels ashamed to do anything which his neighbours would disapprove. The Government deserves to be congratulated on not arresting us, even if it desisted only from fear of world opinion.

Tomorrow we shall break the salt tax law. Whether the Government will tolerate that is a different question. It may not tolerate it, but it deserves congratulations on the patience and forbearance it has displayed in regard to this party. ...

What if I and all the eminent leaders in Gujarat and in the rest of the country are arrested? This movement is based on the faith that when a whole nation is roused and on the march no leader is necessary.

CWMG, VOL. 49

➔ What does the speech tell us about how Gandhiji saw the colonial state?

As with Non-cooperation, apart from the officially sanctioned nationalist campaign, there were numerous other streams of protest. Across large parts of India, peasants breached the hated colonial forest laws that kept them and their cattle out of the woods in which they had once roamed freely. In some towns, factory workers went on strike while lawyers boycotted British courts and students refused to attend government-run educational institutions. As in 1920-22, now too Gandhiji's call had encouraged Indians of all classes to make manifest their own discontent with colonial rule. The rulers responded by detaining the dissenters. In the wake of the Salt March, nearly 60,000 Indians were arrested, among them, of course, Gandhiji himself.

The progress of Gandhiji's march to the seashore can be traced from the secret reports filed by the police officials deputed to monitor his movements. These reproduce the speeches he gave at the villages en route, in which he called upon local officials to renounce government employment and join the freedom struggle. In one village,

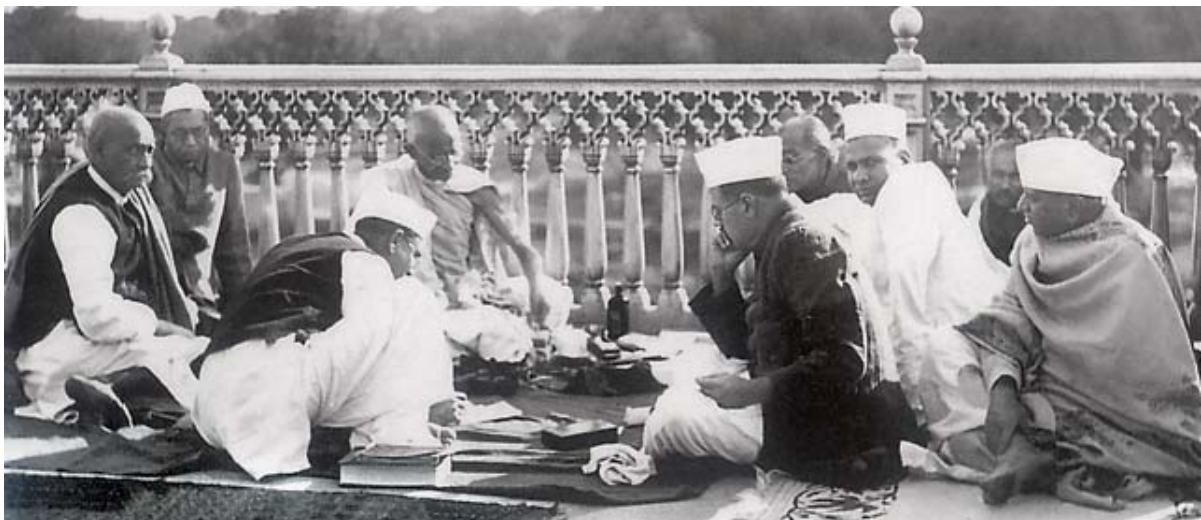
Wasna, Gandhiji told the upper castes that “if you are out for Swaraj you must serve untouchables. You won’t get Swaraj merely by the repeal of the salt taxes or other taxes. For Swaraj you must make amends for the wrongs which you did to the untouchables. For Swaraj, Hindus, Muslims, Parsis and Sikhs will have to unite. These are the steps towards Swaraj.” The police spies reported that Gandhiji’s meetings were very well attended, by villagers of all castes, and by women as well as men. They observed that thousands of volunteers were flocking to the nationalist cause. Among them were many officials, who had resigned from their posts with the colonial government. Writing to the government, the District Superintendent of Police remarked, “Mr Gandhi appeared calm and collected. He is gathering more strength as he proceeds.”

The progress of the Salt March can also be traced from another source: the American newsmagazine, *Time*. This, to begin with, scorned at Gandhiji’s looks, writing with disdain of his “spindly frame” and his “spidery loins”. Thus in its first report on the march, *Time* was deeply sceptical of the Salt March reaching its destination. It claimed that Gandhiji “sank to the ground” at the end of the second day’s walking; the magazine did not believe that “the emaciated saint would be physically able to go much further”. But within a week it had changed its mind. The massive popular following that the march had garnered, wrote *Time*, had made the British rulers “desperately anxious”. Gandhiji himself they now

*Fig. 13.8*

*After Mahatma Gandhi’s release from prison in January 1931, Congress leaders met at Allahabad to plan the future course of action.*

You can see (from right to left) Jawaharlal Nehru, Jinnah, Subhas Chandra Bose, Gandhiji, Mahadev Desai (in front), Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel.





Source 5

### The problem with separate electorates

At the Round Table Conference Mahatma Gandhi stated his arguments against separate electorates for the Depressed Classes:

Separate electorates to the “Untouchables” will ensure them bondage in perpetuity ... Do you want the “Untouchables” to remain “Untouchables” for ever? Well, the separate electorates would perpetuate the stigma. What is needed is destruction of “Untouchability”, and when you have done it, the bar-sinister, which has been imposed by an insolent “superior” class upon an “inferior” class will be destroyed. When you have destroyed the bar-sinister to whom will you give the separate electorates?

saluted as a “Saint” and “Statesman”, who was using “Christian acts as a weapon against men with Christian beliefs”.

### 3.2 Dialogues

The Salt March was notable for at least three reasons. First, it was this event that first brought Mahatma Gandhi to world attention. The march was widely covered by the European and American press. Second, it was the first nationalist activity in which women participated in large numbers. The socialist activist Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay had persuaded Gandhiji not to restrict the protests to men alone. Kamaladevi was herself one of numerous women who courted arrest by breaking the salt or liquor laws. Third, and perhaps most significant, it was the Salt March which forced upon the British the realisation that their Raj would not last forever, and that they would have to devolve some power to the Indians.

To that end, the British government convened a series of “Round Table Conferences” in London. The first meeting was held in November 1930, but without the pre-eminent political leader in India, thus rendering it an exercise in futility. Gandhiji was released from jail in January 1931 and the following month had several long meetings with the Viceroy. These culminated in what was called the “Gandhi-Irwin Pact”, by the terms of which civil disobedience would be called off, all prisoners released, and salt manufacture allowed along the coast. The pact was criticised by radical nationalists, for Gandhiji was unable to obtain from the Viceroy a commitment to political independence for Indians; he could obtain merely an assurance of talks towards that possible end.

A second Round Table Conference was held in London in the latter part of 1931. Here, Gandhiji represented the Congress. However, his claims that his party represented all of India came under challenge from three parties: from the Muslim League, which claimed to stand for the interests of the Muslim minority; from the Princes, who claimed that the Congress had no stake in their territories; and from the brilliant lawyer and thinker B.R. Ambedkar, who argued that Gandhiji and the Congress did not really represent the lowest castes.

The Conference in London was inconclusive, so Gandhiji returned to India and resumed civil disobedience. The new Viceroy, Lord Willingdon, was deeply unsympathetic to the Indian leader. In a private



*Fig. 13.9*  
At the Second Round Table Conference, London, November 1931 Mahatma Gandhi opposed the demand for separate electorates for "lower castes". He believed that this would prevent their integration into mainstream society and permanently segregate them from other caste Hindus.

letter to his sister, Willingdon wrote: "It's a beautiful world if it wasn't for Gandhi ... At the bottom of every move he makes which he always says is inspired by God, one discovers the political manoeuvre. I see the American Press is saying what a wonderful man he is ... But the fact is that we live in the midst of very unpractical, mystical, and superstitious folk who look upon Gandhi as something holy, ..."

In 1935, however, a new Government of India Act promised some form of representative government. Two years later, in an election held on the basis of a restricted franchise, the Congress won a comprehensive victory. Now eight out of 11 provinces had a Congress "Prime Minister", working under the supervision of a British Governor.

In September 1939, two years after the Congress ministries assumed office, the Second World War broke out. Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru had both been strongly critical of Hitler and the Nazis. Accordingly, they promised Congress support to the war effort if the British, in return, promised to grant India independence once hostilities ended.

Source 6

### Ambedkar on separate electorates

In response to Mahatma Gandhi's opposition to the demand for separate electorates for the Depressed Classes, Ambedkar wrote:

Here is a class which is undoubtedly not in a position to sustain itself in the struggle for existence. The religion, to which they are tied, instead of providing them an honourable place, brands them as lepers, not fit for ordinary intercourse. Economically, it is a class entirely dependent upon the high-caste Hindus for earning its daily bread with no independent way of living open to it. Nor are all ways closed by reason of the social prejudices of the Hindus but there is a definite attempt all through our Hindu Society to bolt every possible door so as not to allow the Depressed Classes any opportunity to rise in the scale of life.

In these circumstances, it would be granted by all fair-minded persons that as the only path for a community so handicapped to succeed in the struggle for life against organised tyranny, some share of political power in order that it may protect itself is a paramount necessity ...

FROM DR BABASAHEB AMBEDKAR, "WHAT CONGRESS AND GANDHI HAVE DONE TO THE UNTOUCHABLES", *WRITINGS AND SPEECHES*, VOL. 9, P. 312

*Fig. 13.10  
Mahatma Gandhi and Rajendra Prasad on their way to a meeting with the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, 13 October 1939*

In the meeting the nature of India's involvement in the War was discussed. When negotiations with the Viceroy broke down, the Congress ministries resigned.



*Fig. 13.11  
Mahatma Gandhi with Stafford Cripps, March 1942*



The offer was refused. In protest, the Congress ministries resigned in October 1939. Through 1940 and 1941, the Congress organised a series of individual satyagrahas to pressure the rulers to promise freedom once the war had ended.

Meanwhile, in March 1940, the Muslim League passed a resolution committing itself to the creation of a separate nation called "Pakistan". The political landscape was now complicated: it was no longer Indians versus the British; rather, it had become a three-way struggle between the Congress, the Muslim League, and the British. At this time Britain had an all-party government, whose Labour members were sympathetic to Indian aspirations, but whose Conservative Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, was a diehard imperialist who insisted that he had not been appointed the King's First Minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire. In the spring of 1942, Churchill was persuaded to send one of his ministers, Sir Stafford Cripps, to India to try and forge a compromise with Gandhiji and the Congress. Talks broke down, however, after the Congress insisted that if it was to help the British defend India from the Axis powers, then the Viceroy had first to appoint an Indian as the Defence Member of his Executive Council.

### ➔ Discuss...

Read Sources 5 and 6. Write an imaginary dialogue between Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi on the issue of separate electorates for the Depressed Classes.

#### 4. QUIT INDIA

After the failure of the Cripps Mission, Mahatma Gandhi decided to launch his third major movement against British rule. This was the “Quit India” campaign, which began in August 1942. Although Gandhiji was jailed at once, younger activists organised strikes and acts of sabotage all over the country. Particularly active in the underground resistance were socialist members of the Congress, such as Jayaprakash Narayan. In several districts, such as Satara in the west and Medinipur in the east, “independent” governments were proclaimed. The British responded with much force, yet it took more than a year to suppress the rebellion.

“Quit India” was genuinely a *mass* movement, bringing into its ambit hundreds of thousands of ordinary Indians. It especially energised the young who, in very large numbers, left their colleges to go to jail. However, while the Congress leaders languished in jail, Jinnah and his colleagues in the Muslim League worked patiently at expanding their influence. It was in these years that the League began to make a mark in the Punjab and Sind, provinces where it had previously had scarcely any presence.

In June 1944, with the end of the war in sight, Gandhiji was released from prison. Later that year

#### Satara, 1943

From the late nineteenth century, a non-Brahman movement, which opposed the caste system and landlordism, had developed in Maharashtra. This movement established links with the national movement by the 1930s.

In 1943, some of the younger leaders in the Satara district of Maharashtra set up a parallel government (*prati sarkar*), with volunteer corps (*seba dals*) and village units (*tufan dals*). They ran people’s courts and organised constructive work. Dominated by *kunbi* peasants and supported by dalits, the Satara *prati sarkar* functioned till the elections of 1946, despite government repression and, in the later stages, Congress disapproval.



Fig. 13.12  
Women’s procession in  
Bombay during the  
Quit India Movement

he held a series of meetings with Jinnah, seeking to bridge the gap between the Congress and the League. In 1945, a Labour government came to power in Britain and committed itself to granting independence to India. Meanwhile, back in India, the Viceroy, Lord Wavell, brought the Congress and the League together for a series of talks.

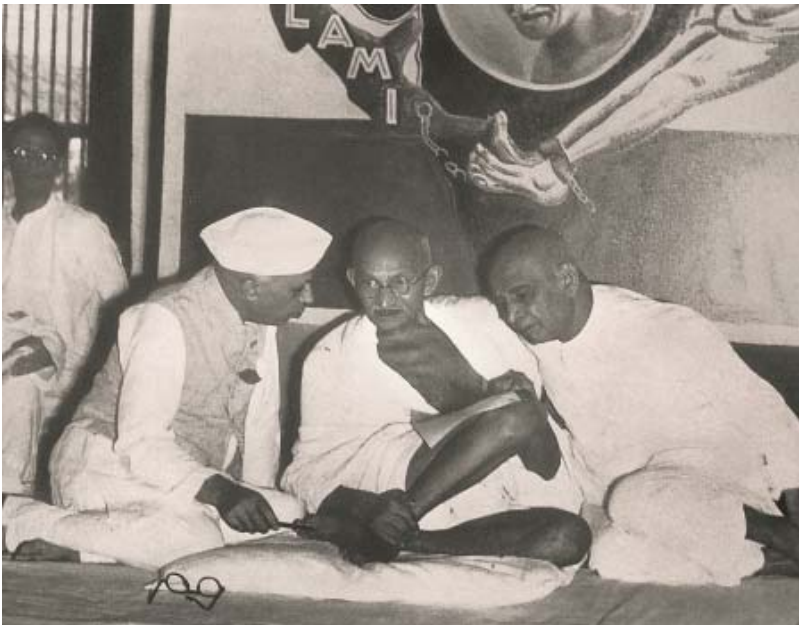
Early in 1946 fresh elections were held to the provincial legislatures. The Congress swept the “General” category, but in the seats specifically reserved for Muslims the League won an overwhelming majority. The political polarisation was complete. A Cabinet Mission sent in the summer of 1946 failed to get the Congress and the League to agree on a federal system that would keep India together while allowing the provinces a degree of autonomy. After the talks broke down, Jinnah called for a “Direct Action Day” to press the League’s demand for Pakistan. On the designated day, 16 August 1946, bloody riots broke out in Calcutta. The violence spread to rural Bengal, then to Bihar, and then across the country to the United Provinces and the Punjab. In some places, Muslims were the main sufferers, in other places, Hindus.

In February 1947, Wavell was replaced as Viceroy by Lord Mountbatten. Mountbatten called onelast round of talks, but when these too

proved inconclusive he announced that British India would be freed, but also divided. The formal transfer of power was fixed for 15 August. When that day came, it was celebrated with gusto in different parts of India. In Delhi, there was “prolonged applause” when the President of the Constituent Assembly began the meeting by invoking the Father of the Nation – Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Outside the Assembly, the crowds shouted “Mahatma Gandhi ki jai”.

*Fig. 13.13*

*Mahatma Gandhi conferring with Jawaharlal Nehru (on his right) and Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel (on his left)*  
Nehru and Patel represented two distinct political tendencies within the Congress – the socialist and the conservative. Mahatma Gandhi had to often mediate between these groups.



## 5. THE LAST HEROIC DAYS

As it happened, Mahatma Gandhi was not present at the festivities in the capital on 15 August 1947. He was in Calcutta, but he did not attend any function or hoist a flag there either. Gandhiji marked the day with a 24-hour fast. The freedom he had struggled so long for had come at an unacceptable price, with a nation divided and Hindus and Muslims at each other's throats.

Through September and October, writes his biographer D.G. Tendulkar, Gandhiji "went round hospitals and refugee camps giving consolation to distressed people". He "appealed to the Sikhs, the Hindus and the Muslims to forget the past and not to dwell on their sufferings but to extend the right hand of fellowship to each other, and to determine to live in peace ..."

At the initiative of Gandhiji and Nehru, the Congress now passed a resolution on "the rights of minorities". The party had never accepted the "two-nation theory": forced against its will to accept Partition, it still believed that "India is a land of many religions and many races, and must remain so". Whatever be the situation in Pakistan, India would be "a democratic secular State where all citizens enjoy full rights and are equally entitled to the protection of the State, irrespective of the religion to which they belong". The Congress wished to "assure the minorities in India that it will continue to protect, to the best of its ability, their citizen rights against aggression".

Many scholars have written of the months after Independence as being Gandhiji's "finest hour". After working to bring peace to Bengal, Gandhiji now shifted to Delhi, from where he hoped to move on to the riot-torn districts of Punjab. While in the capital, his meetings were disrupted by refugees who objected to readings from the Koran, or shouted slogans asking why he did not speak of the sufferings of those Hindus and Sikhs still living in Pakistan. In fact, as D.G. Tendulkar writes, Gandhiji "was equally concerned with the sufferings of the minority community in Pakistan. He would have liked to be able to go to their succour. But with

*Fig. 13.14*  
*On the way to a riot-torn village, 1947*





*Fig. 13.15*  
*The death of the Mahatma,*  
*a popular print*

In popular representations, Mahatma Gandhi was deified, and shown as the unifying force within the national movement. Here you can see Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel, representing two strands within the Congress, standing on two sides of Gandhi's pyre. Blessing them both from a heavenly realm, is Mahatma Gandhi, at the centre.

what face could he now go there, when he could not guarantee full redress to the Muslims in Delhi?"

There was an attempt on Gandhiji's life on 20 January 1948, but he carried on undaunted. On 26 January, he spoke at his prayer meeting of how that day had been celebrated in the past as Independence Day. Now freedom had come, but its first few months had been deeply disillusioning. However, he trusted that "the worst is over", that Indians would henceforth work collectively for the "equality of all classes and creeds, never the domination and superiority of the major community over a minor, however insignificant it may be in numbers or influence". He also permitted himself the hope "that though geographically and politically India is divided into two, at heart we shall ever be friends and brothers helping and respecting one another and be one for the outside world".

Gandhiji had fought a lifelong battle for a free and united India; and yet, when the country was divided, he urged that the two parts respect and befriend one another.

Other Indians were less forgiving. At his daily prayer meeting on the evening of 30 January, Gandhiji was shot dead by a young man. The assassin, who surrendered afterwards, was a Brahmin from Pune named Nathuram Godse, the editor of an extremist Hindu newspaper who had denounced Gandhiji as "an appeaser of Muslims".

Gandhiji's death led to an extraordinary outpouring of grief, with rich tributes being paid to him from across the political spectrum in India, and moving appreciations coming from such international figures as George Orwell and Albert Einstein. *Time* magazine, which had once mocked Gandhiji's physical size and seemingly non-rational ideas, now compared his martyrdom to that of Abraham Lincoln: it was a bigoted American who had killed Lincoln for believing that human beings were equal regardless of their race or skin colour; and it was a bigoted Hindu who had killed Gandhiji for believing that friendship was possible, indeed necessary, between Indians of different faiths. In this respect, as *Time* wrote, "The world knew that it had, in a sense too deep, too simple for the world to understand, connived at his (Gandhiji's) death as it had connived at Lincoln's."

## 6. KNOWING GANDHI

There are many different kinds of sources from which we can reconstruct the political career of Gandhiji and the history of the nationalist movement.

### 6.1 Public voice and private scripts

One important source is the writings and speeches of Mahatma Gandhi and his contemporaries, including both his associates and his political adversaries. Within these writings we need to distinguish between those that were meant for the public and those that were not. Speeches, for instance, allow us to hear the public voice of an individual, while private letters give us a glimpse of his or her private thoughts. In letters we see people expressing their anger and pain, their dismay and anxiety, their hopes and frustrations in ways in which they may not express themselves in public statements. But we must remember that this private-public distinction often breaks down. Many letters are written to individuals, and are therefore personal, but they are also meant for the public. The language of the letters is often shaped by the awareness that they may one day be published. Conversely, the fear that a letter may get into print often prevents people from expressing their opinion freely in personal letters. Mahatma Gandhi regularly published in his journal, *Harijan*, letters that others wrote to him. Nehru edited a collection of letters written to him during the national movement and published *A Bunch of Old Letters*.

Source 7

### One event through letters

In the 1920s, Jawaharlal Nehru was increasingly influenced by socialism, and he returned from Europe in 1928 deeply impressed with the Soviet Union. As he began working closely with the socialists (Jayaprakash Narayan, Narendra Dev, N.G. Ranga and others), a rift developed between the socialists and the conservatives within the Congress. After becoming the Congress President in 1936, Nehru spoke passionately against fascism, and upheld the demands of workers and peasants.

Worried by Nehru's socialist rhetoric, the conservatives, led by Rajendra Prasad and Sardar Patel, threatened to resign from the Working Committee, and some prominent industrialists in Bombay issued a statement attacking Nehru. Both Prasad and Nehru turned to Mahatma Gandhi and met him at his ashram at Wardha. The latter acted as the mediator, as he often did, restraining Nehru's radicalism and persuading Prasad and others to see the significance of Nehru's leadership.

In *A Bunch of Old Letters*, 1958, Nehru reprinted many of the letters that were exchanged at the time.

Read the extracts in the following pages.



Source 7 (contd)

### From A Bunch of Old Letters

*My dear Jawaharlalji,*

*Wardha, July 1, 1936*

Since we parted yesterday we have had a long conversation with Mahatmaji and a prolonged consultation among ourselves. We understand that you have felt much hurt by the course of action taken by us and particularly the tone of our letter has caused you much pain. It was never our intention either to embarrass you or to hurt you and if you had suggested or indicated that it hurt you we would have without the least hesitation amended or altered the letter. But we have decided to withdraw it and our resignation on a reconsideration of the whole situation.

We have felt that in all your utterances as published in the Press you have been speaking not so much on the general Congress programme as on a topic which has not been accepted by the Congress and in doing so you have been acting more as the mouthpiece of the minority of our colleagues on the Working Committee as also on the Congress than the mouthpiece of the majority which we expected you as Congress President to do.

There is regular continuous campaign against us treating us as persons whose time is over, who represent and stand for ideas that are worn out and that have no present value, who are only obstructing the progress of the country and who deserve to be cast out of the positions which they undeservedly hold ... we have felt that a great injustice has been and is being done to us by others, and we are not receiving the protection we are entitled from you as our colleague and as our President ...

*Yours sincerely  
Rajendra Prasad*

*My Dear Babu,*

*Allahabad, July 5, 1936*

I arrived here last night. Ever since I left Wardha I have been feeling weak in body and troubled in mind.

... Since my return from Europe, I found that meetings of the Working Committee exhaust me greatly; they have a devitalising effect on me and I have almost the feeling of being older in years after every fresh experience ...

I am grateful to you for all the trouble you took in smoothing over matters and in helping to avoid a crisis.

I read again Rajendra Babu's letter to me (the second one) and his formidable indictment of me ...

For however tenderly the fact may be stated, it amounts to this that I am an intolerable nuisance and the very qualities I possess – a measure of ability, energy, earnestness, some personality which has a vague appeal – become dangerous for they are harnessed to the wrong chariot (socialism). The conclusion from all this is obvious.

I have written at length, both in my book and subsequently, about my present ideas. There is no lack of material for me to be judged. Those views are not casual. They are part of me, and though I might change them or vary them in future, so long as I hold them I must give expression to them. Because I attached importance to a larger unity I tried to express them in the mildest way possible and more as an invitation to thought than as fixed conclusions. I saw no conflict in this approach and in anything that the Congress was doing. So far as the elections were concerned I felt that my approach was a definite asset to us as it enthused the masses. But my approach, mild and vague as it was, is considered dangerous and harmful by my colleagues. I was even told that my laying stress always on the poverty and unemployment in India was unwise, or at any rate the way I did it was wrong ...

You told me that you intended issuing some kind of a statement. I shall welcome this for I believe in every viewpoint being placed before the country.

*Yours affectionately  
Jawaharlal*

Source 7 (contd)

Segaon, July 15, 1936

*Dear Jawaharlal,*

Your letter is touching. You feel the most injured party. The fact is that your colleagues have lacked your courage and frankness. The result has been disastrous. I have always pleaded with them to speak to you freely and fearlessly. But having lacked the courage, whenever they have spoken they have done it clumsily and you have felt irritated. I tell you they have dreaded you, because of your irritability and impatience with them. They have chafed under your rebukes and magisterial manner and above all your arrogation of what has appeared to them your infallibility and superior knowledge. They feel you have treated them with scant courtesy and never defended them from socialist ridicule and even misrepresentation.

I have looked at the whole affair as a tragi-comedy. I would therefore like you to look at the whole thing in a lighter vein.

I suggested your name for the crown of thorns (Presidentship of the Congress). Keep it on, though the head be bruised. Resume your humour at the committee meetings. That is your most usual role, not that of care-worn, irritable man ready to burst on the slightest occasion.

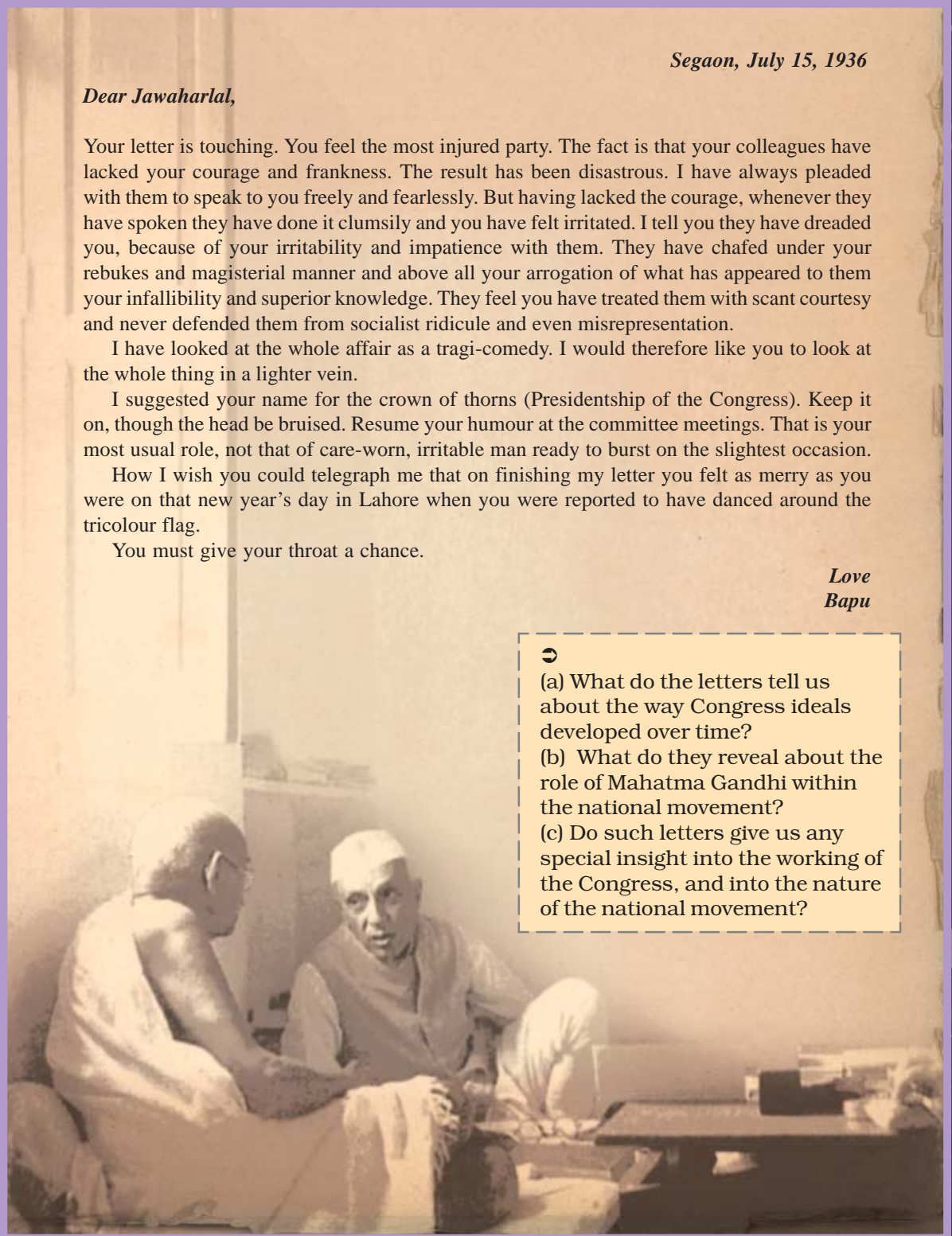
How I wish you could telegraph me that on finishing my letter you felt as merry as you were on that new year's day in Lahore when you were reported to have danced around the tricolour flag.

You must give your throat a chance.

*Love  
Bapu*



- (a) What do the letters tell us about the way Congress ideals developed over time?
- (b) What do they reveal about the role of Mahatma Gandhi within the national movement?
- (c) Do such letters give us any special insight into the working of the Congress, and into the nature of the national movement?



### 6.2 Framing a picture

Autobiographies similarly give us an account of the past that is often rich in human detail. But here again we have to be careful of the way we read and interpret autobiographies. We need to remember that they are retrospective accounts written very often from memory. They tell us what the author could recollect, what he or she saw as important, or was keen on recounting, or how a person wanted his or her life to be viewed by others. Writing an autobiography is a way of framing a picture of yourself. So in reading these accounts we have to try and see what the author does not tell us; we need to understand the reasons for that silence – those wilful or unwitting acts of forgetting.

### 6.3 Through police eyes

Another vital source is government records, for the colonial rulers kept close tabs on those they regarded as critical of the government. The letters and reports written by policemen and other officials were secret at the time; but now can be accessed in archives.

Let us look at one such source: the fortnightly reports that were prepared by the Home Department from the early twentieth century. These reports were based on police information from the localities, but often expressed what the higher officials saw, or wanted to believe. While noticing the possibility of sedition and rebellion, they liked to assure themselves that these fears were unwarranted.

If you see the Fortnightly Reports for the period of the Salt March you will notice that the Home Department was unwilling to accept that Mahatma Gandhi's actions had evoked any enthusiastic response from the masses. The march was seen as a drama, an antic, a desperate effort to mobilise people who were unwilling to rise against the British and were busy with their daily schedules, happy under the Raj.

Fig. 13.16

Police clash with Congress volunteers in Bombay during the Civil Disobedience Movement.

➔ Can you see any conflict between this image and what was reported in the Fortnightly Reports of the police?



Source 8

### Fortnightly Reports of the Home Department (Confidential)

#### FOR THE FIRST HALF OF MARCH 1930

The rapid political developments in Gujarat are being closely watched here. To what extent and in what directions they will affect political condition in this province, it is difficult to surmise at present. The peasantry is for the moment engaged in harvesting a good rabi; students are pre-occupied with their impending examinations.

#### Central Provinces and Berar

The arrest of Mr. Vallabh Bhai Patel caused little excitement, except in Congress circles, but a meeting organised by the Nagpur Nagar Congress Committee to congratulate Gandhi on the start of his march was attended by a crowd of over 3000 people at Nagpur.

#### Bengal

The outstanding event of the past fortnight has been the start of Gandhi's campaign of civil disobedience. Mr. J.M. Sengupta has formed an All-Bengal Civil Disobedience Council, and the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee has formed an All Bengal Council of Disobedience. But beyond forming councils no active steps have yet been taken in the matter of civil disobedience in Bengal.

The reports from the districts show that the meetings that have been held excite little or no interest and leave no profound impression on the general population. It is noticeable, however, that ladies are attending these meetings in increasing numbers.

#### Bihar and Orissa

There is still little to report regarding Congress activity. There is a good deal of talk about a campaign to withhold payment of the chaukidari tax, but no area has yet been selected for experiment. The arrest of Gandhi is being

foretold freely but it seems quite possible that nonfulfilment of the forecast is upsetting plans.

#### Madras

The opening of Gandhi's civil disobedience campaign has completely overshadowed all other issues. General opinion inclines to regard his march as theatrical and his programme as impracticable, but as he is held in such personal reverence by the Hindu public generally, the possibility of arrest which he seems deliberately to be courting and its effect on the political situation are viewed with considerable misgiving.

The 12th of March was celebrated as the day of inaugurating the civil disobedience campaign. In Bombay the celebrations took the form of saluting the national flag in the morning.

#### Bombay

Press *Kesari* indulged in offensive language and in its usual attitude of blowing hot and cold wrote: "If the Government wants to test the power of Satyagraha, both its action and inaction will cause injury to it. If it arrests Gandhi it will incur the discontent of the nation; if it does not do that, the movement of civil disobedience will go on spreading. We therefore say that if the Government punishes Mr. Gandhi the nation will have won a victory, and if it lets him alone it will have won a still greater victory."

On the other hand the moderate paper *Vividh Vritt* pointed out the futility of the movement and opined that it could not achieve the end in view. It, however, reminded the government that repression would defeat its purpose.

*contd*

Source 8 (contd)

**FOR THE SECOND HALF OF MARCH 1930****Bengal**

Interest has continued to centre round Gandhi's march to the sea and the arrangements which he is making to initiate a campaign of civil disobedience. The extremist papers report his doings and speeches at great length and make a great display of the various meetings that are being held throughout Bengal and the resolutions passed thereat. But there is little enthusiasm for the form of civil disobedience favoured by Gandhi ...

Generally people are waiting to see what happens to Gandhi and the probability is that if any action is taken against him, a spark will be set to much inflammable material in Bengal. But the prospect of any serious conflagration is at present slight.

**Central Provinces and Berar**

In Nagpur these meetings were well attended and most of the schools and colleges were deserted on the 12th March to mark the inauguration of Gandhi's march.

The boycott of liquor shops and the infringement of forest laws appear to be the most probable line of attack.

**Punjab**

It seems not improbable that organised attempts will be made to break the Salt Law in the Jhelum district; that the agitation relating to the non-payment of the water-tax in Multan will be revived; and that some movement in connection with the National Flag will be started probably at Gujranwala.

**United Provinces**

Political activity has undoubtedly intensified during the last fortnight. The Congress party feels that it must do something spectacular to sustain public interest. Enrolment of volunteers, propaganda in villages, preparations for breaking

the salt laws on receipt of Mr. Gandhi's orders are reported from a number of districts.

**FOR THE FIRST HALF OF APRIL 1930****United Provinces**

Events have moved rapidly during the fortnight. Apart from political meetings, processions and the enrolment of volunteers, the Salt Act has been openly defied at Agra, Cawnpore, Benaras, Allahabad, Lucknow, Meerut, Rae Bareilly, Farukhabad, Etawah, Ballia and Mainpuri.

Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru was arrested at Cheoki railway station early on the morning of April 14 as he was proceeding to the Central Provinces to attend a meeting of Youth League. He was at once taken direct to Naini Central Jail, where he was tried and sentenced to six months simple imprisonment.

**Bihar and Orissa**

There have been, or are now materialising, spectacular, but small-scale, attempts at illicit salt manufacture in a few places ...

**Central Provinces**

In Jubbulpore Seth Govinddass has attempted to manufacture chemical salt at a cost many times in excess of the market price of clean salt.

**Madras**

Considerable opposition was shown at Vizagapatam to the Police when they attempted to seize salt made by boiling sea water, but elsewhere resistance to the seizure of illicit salt has been half hearted.

**Bengal**

In the mufassal efforts have been made to manufacture illicit salt, the main operation areas being the districts of 24-Parganas and Midnapore.

Very little salt has actually been manufactured and most of it has been confiscated and the utensils in which it was manufactured destroyed.

➤ Read the Fortnightly Reports carefully. Remember they are extracts from confidential reports of the colonial Home Department. These reports did not always accept what the police reported from different localities.

(1) How do you think the nature of the source affects what is being said in these reports? Write a short note illustrating your argument with quotations from the above text.

(2) Why do you think the Home Department was continuously reporting on what people thought about the possibility of Mahatma Gandhi's arrest? Reread what Gandhiji said about the question of arrests in his speech on 5 April 1930 at Dandi.

(3) Why do you think Mahatma Gandhi was not arrested?

(4) Why do you think the Home Department continued to say that the march was not evoking any response?

#### 6.4 From newspapers

One more important source is contemporary newspapers, published in English as well as in the different Indian languages, which tracked Mahatma Gandhi's movements and reported on his activities, and also represented what ordinary Indians thought of him. Newspaper accounts, however, should not be seen as unprejudiced. They were published by people who had their own political opinions and world views. These ideas shaped what was published and the way events were reported. The accounts that were published in a London newspaper would be different from the report in an Indian nationalist paper.

We need to look at these reports but should be careful while interpreting them. Every statement made in these cannot be accepted literally as representing what was happening on the ground. They often reflect the fears and anxieties of officials who were unable to control a movement and were anxious about its spread. They did not know whether to arrest Mahatma Gandhi or what an arrest would mean. The more the colonial state kept a watch on the public and its activities, the more it worried about the basis of its rule.

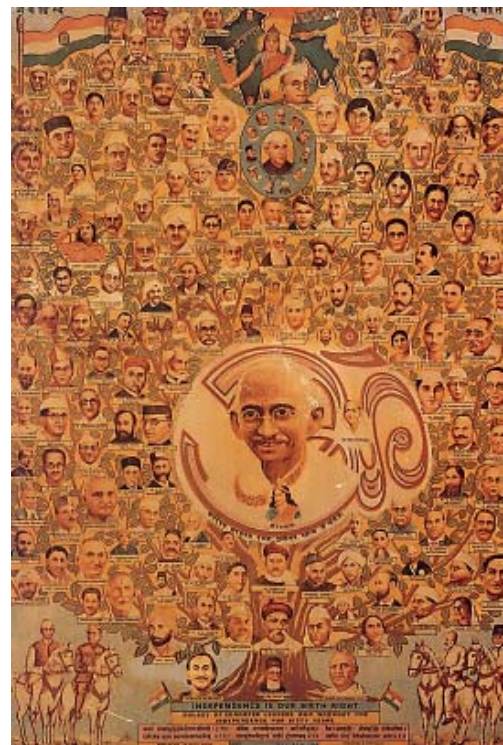


Fig. 13.17

*Pictures like this reveal how Mahatma Gandhi was perceived by people and represented in popular prints*

Within the tree of nationalism, Mahatma Gandhi appears as the looming central figure surrounded by small images of other leaders and sages.

### TIMELINE

1915	Mahatma Gandhi returns from South Africa
1917	Champaran movement
1918	Peasant movements in Kheda (Gujarat), and workers' movement in Ahmedabad
1919	Rowlatt Satyagraha (March-April)
1919	Jallianwala Bagh massacre (April)
1921	Non-cooperation and Khilafat Movements
1928	Peasant movement in Bardoli
1929	"Purna Swaraj" accepted as Congress goal at the Lahore Congress (December)
1930	Civil Disobedience Movement begins; Dandi March (March-April)
1931	Gandhi-Irwin Pact (March); Second Round Table Conference (December)
1935	Government of India Act promises some form of representative government
1939	Congress ministries resign
1942	Quit India Movement begins (August)
1946	Mahatma Gandhi visits Noakhali and other riot-torn areas to stop communal violence



### ANSWER IN 100-150 WORDS

1. How did Mahatma Gandhi seek to identify with the common people?
2. How was Mahatma Gandhi perceived by the peasants?
3. Why did the salt laws become an important issue of struggle?
4. Why are newspapers an important source for the study of the national movement?
5. Why was the *charkha* chosen as a symbol of nationalism?



### WRITE A SHORT ESSAY (250-300 WORDS) ON THE FOLLOWING:

6. How was non-cooperation a form of protest?
7. Why were the dialogues at the Round Table Conference inconclusive?
8. In what way did Mahatma Gandhi transform the nature of the national movement?
9. What do private letters and autobiographies tell us about an individual? How are these sources different from official accounts?



### MAP WORK

10. Find out about the route of the Dandi March. On a map of Gujarat plot the line of the march and mark the major towns and villages that it passed along the route.



### PROJECT (CHOOSE ONE)

11. Read any two autobiographies of nationalist leaders. Look at the different ways in which the authors represent their own life and times, and interpret the national movement. See how their views differ. Write an account based on your studies.
12. Choose any event that took place during the national movement. Try and read the letters and speeches of the leaders of the time. Some of these are now published. He could be a local leader from the region where you live. Try and see how the local leaders viewed the activities of the national leadership at the top. Write about the movement based on your reading.



### If you would like to know more, read:

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay. 2004. *From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India*. Orient Longman, New Delhi.

Sarvepalli Gopal. 1975. *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography, Volume I, 1889-1947*. Oxford University Press, Delhi.

David Hardiman. 2003. *Gandhi in His Time and Ours*. Permanent Black, New Delhi.

Gyanendra Pandey. 1978. *The Ascendancy of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, 1926-34*. Oxford University Press, Delhi.

Sumit Sarkar. 1983. *Modern India, 1885-1947*. Macmillan, New Delhi.



### You could visit:

<http://www.gandhiserve.org/cwmg/cwmg.html>  
(for Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi)



## THEME FOURTEEN

# UNDERSTANDING PARTITION

## POLITICS, MEMORIES, EXPERIENCES



*Fig. 14.1*

*Partition uprooted millions, transforming them into refugees, forcing them to begin life from scratch in new lands.*

We know that the joy of our country's independence from colonial rule in 1947 was tarnished by the violence and brutality of Partition. The Partition of British India into the sovereign states of India and Pakistan (with its western and eastern wings) led to many sudden developments. Thousands of lives were snuffed out, many others changed dramatically, cities changed, India changed, a new country was born, and there was unprecedented genocidal violence and migration.

This chapter will examine the history of Partition: why and how it happened as well as the harrowing experiences of ordinary people during the period 1946-50 and beyond. It will

also discuss how the history of these experiences can be reconstructed by talking to people and interviewing them, that is, through the use of oral history. At the same time, it will point out the strengths and limitations of oral history. Interviews can tell us about certain aspects of a society's past of which we may know very little or nothing from other types of sources. But they may not reveal very much about many matters whose history we would then need to build from other materials. We will return to this issue towards the end of the chapter.



Fig. 14.2  
Photographs give us a glimpse of the violence of that time.

## 1. SOME PARTITION EXPERIENCES

Here are three incidents narrated by people who experienced those trying times to a researcher in 1993. The informants were Pakistanis, the researcher Indian. The job of this researcher was to understand how those who had lived more or less harmoniously for generations inflicted so much violence on each other in 1947.

Source 1

### “I am simply returning my father’s *karz*, his debt”

This is what the researcher recorded:

During my visits to the History Department Library of Punjab University, Lahore, in the winter of 1992, the librarian, Abdul Latif, a pious middle-aged man, would help me a lot. He would go out of his way, well beyond the call of duty, to provide me with relevant material, meticulously keeping photocopies requested by me ready before my arrival the following morning. I found his attitude to my work so extraordinary that one day I could not help asking him, “Latif Sahib, why do you go out of your way to help me so much?” Latif Sahib glanced at his watch, grabbed his *namazi topi* and said, “I must go for *namaz* right now but I will answer your question on my return.” Stepping into his office half an hour later, he continued:

“Yes, your question. I ... I mean, my father belonged to Jammu, to a small village in Jammu district. This was a Hindu-dominated village and Hindu ruffians of the area massacred the hamlet’s Muslim population in August 1947. One late afternoon, when the Hindu mob had been at its furious worst, my father discovered he was perhaps the only Muslim youth of the village left alive. He had already lost his entire family in the butchery and was looking for ways of

escaping. Remembering a kind, elderly Hindu lady, a neighbour, he implored her to save him by offering him shelter at her place. The lady agreed to help father but said, 'Son, if you hide here, they will get both of us. This is of no use. You follow me to the spot where they have piled up the dead. You lie down there *as if dead* and I will dump a few dead-bodies on you. Lie there among the dead, son, as if dead *through the night* and run for your life towards Sialkot at the break of dawn tomorrow.'

"My father agreed to the proposal. Off they went to that spot, father lay on the ground and the old lady dumped a number of bodies on him. An hour or so later a group of armed Hindu hoodlums appeared. One of them yelled, 'Any life left in anybody?'" and the others started, with their crude staffs and guns, to feel for any trace of life in that heap. Somebody shouted, 'There is a wrist watch on that body!' and hit my father's fingers with the butt of his rifle. Father used to tell us how difficult it was for him to keep his outstretched palm, beneath the watch he was wearing, so utterly still. Somehow he succeeded for a few seconds until one of them said 'Oh, it's only a watch. Come let us leave, it is getting dark.' Fortunately, for Abbaji, they left and my father lay there in that wretchedness the whole night, literally running for his life at the first hint of light. He did not stop until he reached Sialkot.

"I help you because that Hindu *mai* helped my father. I am simply returning my father's *karz*, his debt."

"But I am *not* a Hindu," I said. "Mine is a Sikh family, at best a mixed Hindu-Sikh one."

"I do not know what your religion is with any surety. You do not wear uncut hair and you are not a Muslim. So, for me you are a Hindu and I do my little bit for you because a Hindu *mai* saved my father."

Source 2

**"For quite a few years now, I have not met a Punjabi Musalman"**

The researcher's second story is about the manager of a youth hostel in Lahore.

I had gone to the hostel looking for accommodation and had promptly declared my citizenship. "You are Indian, so I cannot allot you a room but I can offer you tea and a story," said the Manager. I couldn't have refused such a tempting offer. "In the early 1950s I was posted at Delhi," the Manager began. I was all ears:

"I was working as a clerk at the Pakistani High Commission there and I had been asked by a Lahori friend to deliver a *rukka* (a short handwritten note) to his erstwhile neighbour who now resided at Paharganj in Delhi. One day I rode out on my bicycle towards Paharganj and just as I crossed the cathedral at the Central Secretariat, spotting a Sikh cyclist I asked him in Punjabi, 'Sardarji, the way to Paharganj, please?'"

‘Are you a refugee?’ he asked.

‘No, I come from Lahore. I am Iqbal Ahmed.’

‘Iqbal Ahmed ... from Lahore? Stop!’

“That ‘Stop!’ sounded like a brute order to me and I instantly thought now I’ll be gone. This Sikh will finish me off. But there was no escaping the situation, so I stopped. The burly Sikh came running to me and gave me a mighty hug. Eyes moist, he said, ‘For quite a few years now, I have not met a Punjabi *Musalman*. I have been longing to meet one but you cannot find Punjabi-speaking *Musalmans* here.’”



Fig. 14.3  
Over 10 million people were uprooted from their homelands and forced to migrate.

Source 3

**“No, no! You can never be ours”**

This is the third story the researcher related:

I still vividly remember a man I met in Lahore in 1992. He mistook me to be a Pakistani studying abroad. For some reason he liked me. He urged me to return home after completing my studies to serve the *qaum* (nation). I told him I shall do so but, at some stage in the conversation, I added that my citizenship happens to be Indian. All of a sudden his tone changed, and much as he was restraining himself, he blurted out,

“Oh Indian! I had thought you were Pakistani.” I tried my best to impress upon him that I always see myself as South Asian. “No, no! You can never be ours. Your people wiped out my entire village in 1947, we are sworn enemies and shall always remain so.”



- (1) What do each of these sources show about the attitudes of the men who were talking with each other?
- (2) What do you think these stories reveal about the different memories that people carried about Partition?
- (3) How did the men identify themselves and one another?

**➔ Discuss...**

Assess the value of such stories in writing about Partition.

## 2. A MOMENTOUS MARKER

### 2.1 Partition or holocaust?

The narratives just presented point to the pervasive violence that characterised Partition. Several hundred thousand people were killed and innumerable women raped and abducted. Millions were uprooted, transformed into refugees in alien lands. It is impossible to arrive at any accurate estimate of casualties: informed and scholarly guesses vary from 200,000 to 500,000 people. In all probability, some 15 million had to move across hastily constructed frontiers separating India and Pakistan. As they stumbled across these “shadow lines” – the boundaries between the two new states were not officially known until two days *after* formal independence – they were rendered homeless, having suddenly lost all their immovable property and most of their movable assets, separated from many of their relatives and friends as well, torn asunder from their moorings, from their houses, fields and fortunes, from their childhood memories. Thus stripped of their local or regional cultures, they were forced to begin picking up their life from scratch.

*Fig. 14.4*  
*On carts with families and belongings, 1947*



Was this simply a *partition*, a more or less orderly constitutional arrangement, an agreed-upon division of territories and assets? Or should it be called a sixteen-month civil war, recognising that there were well-organised forces on both sides and concerted attempts to wipe out entire populations as enemies? The survivors themselves have often spoken of 1947 through other words: “*maashal-la*” (martial law), “*mara-mari*” (killings), and “*raula*”, or “*hullar*” (disturbance, tumult, uproar). Speaking of the killings, rape, arson, and loot that constituted Partition, contemporary observers and scholars have sometimes used the expression “holocaust” as well, primarily meaning destruction or slaughter on a mass scale.

Is this usage appropriate?

You would have read about the German Holocaust under the Nazis in Class IX. The term “holocaust” in a sense captures the gravity of what happened in the subcontinent in 1947, something that the mild term “partition” hides. It also helps to focus on why Partition, like the Holocaust in Germany, is *remembered* and referred to in our contemporary concerns so much. Yet, differences between the two events should not be overlooked. In 1947-48, the subcontinent did not witness any state-driven extermination as was the case with Nazi Germany where various modern techniques of control and organisation had been used. The “ethnic cleansing” that characterised the partition of India was carried out by self-styled representatives of religious communities rather than by state agencies.

## **2.2 The power of stereotypes**

India-haters in Pakistan and Pakistan-haters in India are both products of Partition. At times, some people mistakenly believe that the loyalties of Indian Muslims lie with Pakistan. The stereotype of extra-territorial, pan-Islamic loyalties comes fused with other highly objectionable ideas: Muslims are cruel, bigoted, unclean, descendants of invaders, while Hindus are kind, liberal, pure, children of the invaded. The journalist R.M. Murphy has shown that similar stereotypes proliferate in Pakistan. According to him, some Pakistanis feel that Muslims are fair, brave, monotheists and meat-eaters, while Hindus are dark, cowardly, polytheists and vegetarian. Some of these stereotypes pre-date Partition but there is no

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### ➔ Discuss...

Recall some stories of Partition you may have heard. Think of the way these have shaped your conception about different communities.

Try and imagine how the same stories would be narrated by different communities.

*Fig. 14.5*

*People took with them only what they could physically carry. Uprooting meant an immense sense of loss, a rupture with the place they had lived in for generations.*

doubt that they were immensely strengthened because of 1947. Every myth in these constructions has been systematically critiqued by historians. But in both countries voices of hatred do not mellow.

Partition generated memories, hatreds, stereotypes and identities that still continue to shape the history of people on both sides of the border. These hatreds have manifested themselves during inter-community conflicts, and communal clashes in turn have kept alive the memories of past violence. Stories of Partition violence are recounted by communal groups to deepen the divide between communities: creating in people's minds feelings of suspicion and distrust, consolidating the power of communal stereotypes, creating the deeply problematic notion that Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims are communities with sharply defined boundaries, and fundamentally opposed interests.

The relationship between Pakistan and India has been profoundly shaped by this legacy of Partition. Perceptions of communities on both sides have been structured by the conflicting memories of those momentous times.



### 3. WHY AND HOW DID PARTITION HAPPEN?

#### 3.1 Culminating point of a long history?

Some historians, both Indian and Pakistani, suggest that Mohammad Ali Jinnah's theory that the Hindus and Muslims in colonial India constituted two separate nations can be projected back into medieval history. They emphasise that the events of 1947 were intimately connected to the long history of Hindu-Muslim conflict throughout medieval and modern times. Such an argument does not recognise that the history of conflict between communities has coexisted with a long history of sharing, and of mutual cultural exchange. It also does not take into account the changing circumstances that shape people's thinking.

Some scholars see Partition as a culmination of a communal politics that started developing in the opening decades of the twentieth century. They suggest that separate electorates for Muslims, created by the colonial government in 1909 and expanded in 1919, crucially shaped the nature of communal politics. Separate electorates meant that Muslims could now elect their own representatives in designated constituencies. This created a temptation for politicians working within this system to use sectarian slogans and gather a following by distributing favours to their own religious groups. Religious identities thus acquired a functional use within a modern political system; and the logic of electoral politics deepened and hardened these identities. Community identities no longer indicated simple difference in faith and belief; they came to mean active opposition and hostility between communities. However, while separate electorates did have a profound impact on Indian politics, we should be careful not to over-emphasise their significance or to see Partition as a logical outcome of their working.

Communal identities were consolidated by a host of other developments in the early twentieth century. During the 1920s and early 1930s tension grew around a number of issues. Muslims were angered by "music-before-mosque", by the cow protection movement, and by the efforts of the Arya Samaj to bring back to the Hindu fold (*shuddhi*) those who had recently converted to Islam. Hindus were

#### The Lucknow Pact

The Lucknow Pact of December 1916 was an understanding between the Congress and the Muslim League (controlled by the UP-based "Young Party") whereby the Congress accepted separate electorates. The pact provided a joint political platform for the Moderates, Extremists and the Muslim League.

#### Arya Samaj

A North Indian Hindu reform organisation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly active in the Punjab, which sought to revive Vedic learning and combine it with modern education in the sciences.

*Music-before-mosque* : The playing of music by a religious procession outside a mosque at the time of *namaz* could lead to Hindu-Muslim violence. Orthodox Muslims saw this as an interference in their peaceful communion with God.



angered by the rapid spread of *tabligh* (propaganda) and *tanzim* (organisation) after 1923. As middle class publicists and communal activists sought to build greater solidarity within their communities, mobilising people against the other community, riots spread in different parts of the country. Every communal riot deepened differences between communities, creating disturbing memories of violence.

Yet it would be incorrect to see Partition as the outcome of a simple unfolding of communal tensions. As the protagonist of *Garm Hawa*, a film on Partition, puts it, “Communal discord happened even before 1947 but it had never led to the uprooting of millions from their homes” Partition was a qualitatively different phenomenon from earlier communal politics, and to understand it we need to look carefully at the events of the last decade of British rule.

### What is communalism?

There are many aspects to our identity. You are a girl or a boy, all of you are young persons, you belong to a certain village, city, district or state and speak certain languages. You are Indians but you are also world citizens. Income levels differ from family to family, hence all of us belong to some social class or the other. Most of us have a religion, and caste may play an important role in our lives. In other words, our identities have numerous features, they are complex. There are times, however, when people attach greater significance to certain chosen aspects of their identity such as religion. This in itself cannot be described as communal.

Communalism refers to a politics that seeks to unify one community around a religious identity in hostile opposition to another community. It seeks to define this community identity as fundamental and fixed. It attempts to consolidate this identity and present it as natural – as if people were born into the identity, as if the identities do not evolve through history over time. In order to unify the community, communalism suppresses distinctions within the community and emphasises the essential unity of the community against other communities.

One could say communalism nurtures a politics of hatred for an identified “other” – “Hindus” in the case of Muslim communalism, and “Muslims” in the case of Hindu communalism. This hatred feeds a politics of violence.

Communalism, then, is a particular kind of politicisation of religious identity, an ideology that seeks to promote conflict between religious communities. In the context of a multi-religious country, the phrase “religious nationalism” can come to acquire a similar meaning. In such a country, any attempt to see a religious community as a nation would mean sowing the seeds of antagonism against some other religion/s. M.A. Jinnah saw the Muslims of British India as a nation and desired that they obtain a nation-state for themselves.

### 3.2 The provincial elections of 1937 and the Congress ministries

In 1937, elections to the provincial legislatures were held for the first time. Only about 10 to 12 per cent of the population enjoyed the right to vote. The Congress did well in the elections, winning an absolute majority in five out of eleven provinces and forming governments in seven of them. It did badly in the constituencies reserved for Muslims, but the Muslim League also fared poorly, polling only 4.4 per cent of the total Muslim vote cast in this election. The League failed to win a single seat in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and could capture only two out of 84 reserved constituencies in the Punjab and three out of 33 in Sind.

In the United Provinces, the Muslim League wanted to form a joint government with the Congress. The Congress had won an absolute majority in the province, so it rejected the offer. Some scholars argue that this rejection convinced the League that if India remained united, then Muslims would find it difficult to gain political power because they would remain a minority. The League assumed, of course, that only a Muslim party could represent Muslim interests, and that the Congress was essentially a Hindu party. But Jinnah's insistence that the League be recognised as the "sole spokesman" of Muslims could convince few at the time. Though popular in the United Provinces, Bombay and Madras, social support for the League was still fairly weak in three of the provinces from which Pakistan was to be carved out just ten years later – Bengal, the NWFP and the Punjab. Even in Sind it failed to form a government. It was from this point onwards that the League doubled its efforts at expanding its social support.

The Congress ministries also contributed to the widening rift. In the United Provinces, the party had rejected the Muslim League proposal for a coalition government partly because the League tended to support landlordism, which the Congress wished to abolish, although the party had not yet taken any concrete steps in that direction. Nor did the Congress achieve any substantial gains in the "Muslim mass contact" programme it launched. In the end, the secular and radical rhetoric of the Congress merely alarmed conservative Muslims and the Muslim landed elite, without winning over the Muslim masses.

#### The Muslim League

Initially floated in Dhaka in 1906, the Muslim League was quickly taken over by the U.P.-based Muslim elite. The party began to make demands for autonomy for the Muslim-majority areas of the subcontinent and/or Pakistan in the 1940s.

#### Hindu Mahasabha

Founded in 1915, the Hindu Mahasabha was a Hindu party that remained confined to North India. It aimed to unite Hindu society by encouraging the Hindus to transcend the divisions of caste and sect. It sought to define Hindu identity in opposition to Muslim identity.

*Confederation* – in modern political language it refers to a union of fairly autonomous and sovereign states with a central government with delimited powers

### The name “Pakistan”

The name Pakistan or **Pak-stan** (from **P**unjab, **A**fghan, **K**ashmir, **S**ind and **B**aluchistan) was coined by a Punjabi Muslim student at Cambridge, Choudhry Rehmat Ali, who, in pamphlets written in 1933 and 1935, desired a separate national status for this new entity. No one took Rehmat Ali seriously in the 1930s, least of all the League and other Muslim leaders who dismissed his idea merely as a student’s dream.

Moreover, while the leading Congress leaders in the late 1930s insisted more than ever before on the need for secularism, these ideas were by no means universally shared lower down in the party hierarchy, or even by all Congress ministers. Maulana Azad, an important Congress leader, pointed out in 1937 that members of the Congress were not allowed to join the League, yet Congressmen were active in the Hindu Mahasabha—at least in the Central Provinces (present-day Madhya Pradesh). Only in December 1938 did the Congress Working Committee declare that Congress members could not be members of the Mahasabha. Incidentally, this was also the period when the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) were gaining strength. The latter spread from its Nagpur base to the United Provinces, the Punjab, and other parts of the country in the 1930s. By 1940, the RSS had over 100,000 trained and highly disciplined cadres pledged to an ideology of Hindu nationalism, convinced that India was a land of the Hindus.

### 3.3 The “Pakistan” Resolution

The Pakistan demand was formalised gradually. On 23 March 1940, the League moved a resolution demanding a measure of autonomy for the Muslim-majority areas of the subcontinent. This ambiguous resolution never mentioned partition or Pakistan. In fact Sikandar Hayat Khan, Punjab Premier and leader of the Unionist Party, who had drafted the resolution, declared in a Punjab assembly speech on 1 March 1941 that he was opposed to a Pakistan that would mean “Muslim Raj here and Hindu Raj elsewhere ... If Pakistan means unalloyed Muslim Raj in the Punjab then I will have nothing to do with it.” He reiterated his plea for a loose (united), confederation with considerable autonomy for the confederating units.

The origins of the Pakistan demand have also been traced back to the Urdu poet Mohammad Iqbal, the writer of “*Sare Jahan Se Achha Hindustan Hamara*”. In his presidential address to the Muslim League in 1930, the poet spoke of a need for a “North-West Indian Muslim state”. Iqbal, however, was not visualising the emergence of a new country in that speech but a reorganisation of Muslim-majority

areas in north-western India into an autonomous unit within a single, loosely structured Indian federation.

### 3.4 The suddenness of Partition

We have seen that the League itself was vague about its demand in 1940. There was a very short time – just seven years – between the first formal articulation of the demand for a measure of autonomy for the Muslim-majority areas of the subcontinent and Partition. No one knew what the creation of Pakistan meant, and how it might shape people's lives in the future. Many who migrated from their homelands in 1947 thought they would return as soon as peace prevailed again.

Initially even Muslim leaders did not seriously raise the demand for Pakistan as a sovereign state. In the beginning Jinnah himself may have seen the Pakistan idea as a bargaining counter, useful for blocking possible British concessions to the Congress and gaining additional favours for the Muslims. The pressure of the Second World War on the British delayed negotiations for independence for some time. Nonetheless, it was the massive Quit India Movement which started in 1942, and persisted despite intense repression, that brought the British Raj to its knees and compelled its officials to open a dialogue with Indian parties regarding a possible transfer of power.

### 3.5 Post-War developments

When negotiations were begun again in 1945, the British agreed to create an entirely Indian central Executive Council, except for the Viceroy and the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, as a preliminary step towards full independence. Discussions about the transfer of power broke down due to Jinnah's unrelenting demand that the League had an absolute right to choose all the Muslim members of the Executive Council and that there should be a kind of communal veto in the Council, with decisions opposed by Muslims needing a two-thirds majority. Given the existing political situation, the League's first demand was quite extraordinary, for a large section of the nationalist Muslims supported the Congress (its delegation for these discussions was headed by Maulana Azad), and in West Punjab members of the Unionist Party were

Source 4

### The Muslim League resolution of 1940

The League's resolution of 1940 demanded:

that geographically contiguous units are demarcated into regions, which should be so constituted, with such territorial readjustments as may be necessary, that the areas in which the Muslims are numerically in a majority as in the north-western and eastern zones of India should be grouped to constitute "Independent States", in which the constituent units shall be autonomous and sovereign.

➔ What was the League demanding? Was it demanding Pakistan as we know it today?



*Fig. 14.6*  
 Mahatma Gandhi with Mohammad  
 Ali Jinnah before a meeting with the  
 Viceroy in November 1939

largely Muslims. The British had no intention of annoying the Unionists who still controlled the Punjab government and had been consistently loyal to the British.

Provincial elections were again held in 1946. The Congress swept the general constituencies, capturing 91.3 per cent of the non-Muslim vote. The League's success in the seats reserved for Muslims was equally spectacular: it won all 30 reserved constituencies in the Centre with 86.6 per cent of the Muslim vote and 442 out of 509 seats in the provinces. Only as late as 1946, therefore, did the League establish itself as the dominant party among Muslim voters, seeking to vindicate its claim to be the "sole spokesman" of India's Muslims. You will, however, recall that the franchise was extremely limited. About 10 to 12 per cent of the population enjoyed the right to vote in the provincial elections and a mere one per cent in the elections for the Central Assembly.

### Unionist Party

A political party representing the interests of landholders – Hindu, Muslim and Sikh – in the Punjab. The party was particularly powerful during the period 1923-47.

### 3.6 A possible alternative to Partition

In March 1946 the British Cabinet sent a three-member mission to Delhi to examine the League's demand and to suggest a suitable political framework for a free India. The Cabinet Mission toured the country for three months and recommended a loose three-tier confederation. India was to remain united. It was to have a weak central government controlling only foreign affairs, defence and communications with the existing provincial assemblies being grouped into three sections while electing the constituent assembly: Section A for the Hindu-majority provinces, and Sections B and C for the Muslim-majority provinces of the north-west and the north-east (including Assam) respectively. The sections or groups of provinces would comprise various regional units. They would have the power to set up intermediate-level executives and legislatures of their own.

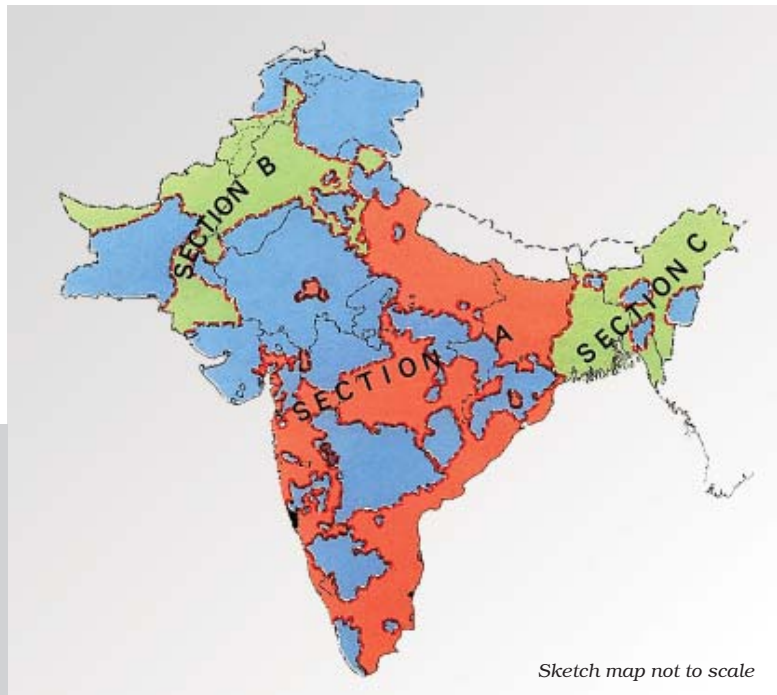
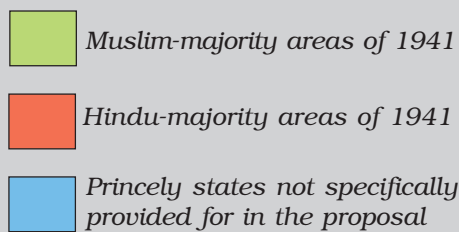
Initially all the major parties accepted this plan. But the agreement was short-lived because it was based on mutually opposed interpretations of the plan. The League wanted the grouping to be compulsory, with Sections B and C developing into strong entities with the right to secede from the Union in the future. The Congress wanted that provinces be given the right to join a group. It was not satisfied with the Mission's clarification that grouping would be compulsory at first, but provinces would have the right to opt out after the constitution had been finalised and new elections held in accordance with it. Ultimately, therefore, neither the League nor the Congress agreed to the Cabinet Mission's proposal. This was a most crucial juncture, because *after* this partition became more or less inevitable, with most of the Congress leaders agreeing to it, seeing it as tragic but unavoidable. Only Mahatma Gandhi and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan of the NWFP continued to firmly oppose the idea of partition.

*Secede* means to withdraw formally from an association or organisation.

*Fig. 14.7*  
Mahatma Gandhi in the NWFP, October 1938 with Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan (who came to be known as Frontier Gandhi), Sushila Nayar and Amtus Salem



Map 1  
The Cabinet Mission proposal for an Indian federation with three sections



#### Source 5

### “A voice in the wilderness”

Mahatma Gandhi knew that his was “a voice in the wilderness” but he nevertheless continued to oppose the idea of Partition:

But what a tragic change we see today. I wish the day may come again when Hindus and Muslims will do nothing without mutual consultation. I am day and night tormented by the question what I can do to hasten the coming of that day. I appeal to the League not to regard any Indian as its enemy ... Hindus and Muslims are born of the same soil. They have the same blood, eat the same food, drink the same water and speak the same language.

SPEECH AT PRAYER MEETING, 7 SEPTEMBER 1946,  
CWMG, VOL. 92, P.139

But I am firmly convinced that the Pakistan demand as put forward by the Muslim League is un-Islamic and I have not hesitated to call it sinful. Islam stands for the unity and brotherhood of mankind, not for disrupting the oneness of the human family. Therefore, those who want to divide India into possible warring groups are enemies alike of Islam and India. They may cut me to pieces but they cannot make me subscribe to something which I consider to be wrong.

HARIJAN, 26 SEPTEMBER 1946, CWMG, VOL. 92, P.229

➔ What are the arguments that Mahatma Gandhi offers in opposing the idea of Pakistan?



### 3.7 Towards Partition

After withdrawing its support to the Cabinet Mission plan, the Muslim League decided on “Direct Action” for winning its Pakistan demand. It announced 16 August 1946 as “Direct Action Day”. On this day, riots broke out in Calcutta, lasting several days and leaving several thousand people dead. By March 1947 violence spread to many parts of northern India.

It was in March 1947 that the Congress high command voted for dividing the Punjab into two halves, one with Muslim majority and the other with Hindu/Sikh majority; and it asked for the application of a similar principle to Bengal. By this time, given the numbers game, many Sikh leaders and Congressmen in the Punjab were convinced that Partition was a necessary evil, otherwise they would be swamped by Muslim majorities and Muslim leaders would dictate terms. In Bengal too a section of *bhadralok* Bengali Hindus, who wanted political power to remain with them, began to fear the “permanent tutelage of Muslims” (as one of their leaders put it). Since they were in a numerical minority, they felt that only a division of the province could ensure their political dominance.

Fig. 14.8

Rioters armed with iron rods and lathis on the streets of Calcutta, August 1946

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### ➔ Discuss...

It is evident from a reading of section 3 that a number of factors led to Partition. Which of these do you think were the most important and why?



## 4. THE WITHDRAWAL OF LAW AND ORDER



Fig. 14.9  
Through those blood-soaked months of 1946, violence and arson spread, killing thousands.

Source 6

### “Without a shot being fired”

This is what Moon wrote:

For over twenty-four hours riotous mobs were allowed to rage through this great commercial city unchallenged and unchecked. The finest bazaars were burnt to the ground without a shot being fired to disperse the incendiaries (i.e. those who stirred up conflict). The ... District Magistrate marched his (large police) force into the city and marched it out again without making any effective use of it at all ...

The bloodbath continued for about a year from March 1947 onwards. One main reason for this was the collapse of the institutions of governance. Penderel Moon, an administrator serving in Bahawalpur (in present-day Pakistan) at the time, noted how the police failed to fire even a single shot when arson and killings were taking place in Amritsar in March 1947.

Amritsar district became the scene of bloodshed later in the year when there was a complete breakdown of authority in the city. British officials did not know how to handle the situation: they were unwilling to take decisions, and hesitant to intervene. When panic-stricken people appealed for help, British officials asked them to contact Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabh Bhai Patel or M.A. Jinnah. Nobody knew who could exercise authority and power. The top leadership of the Indian parties, barring Mahatma Gandhi, were involved in negotiations regarding independence while many Indian civil servants in the affected provinces feared for their own lives and property. The British were busy preparing to quit India.

Problems were compounded because Indian soldiers and policemen came to act as Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs. As communal tension mounted,

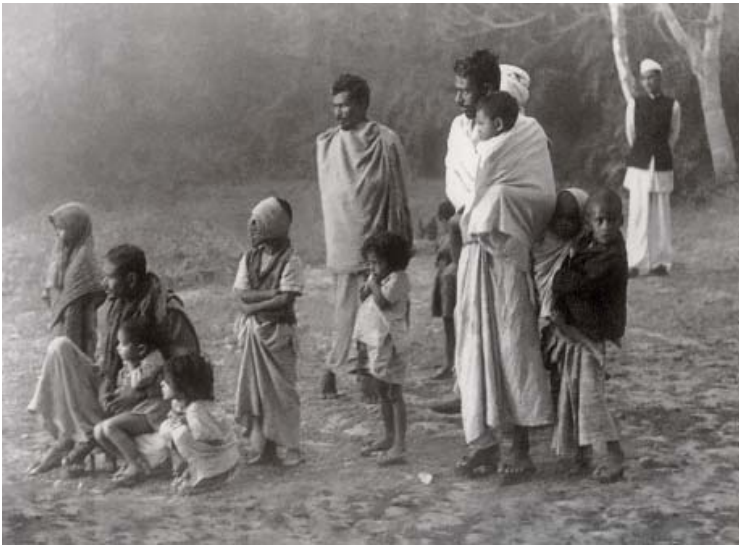
the professional commitment of those in uniform could not be relied upon. In many places not only did policemen help their co-religionists but they also attacked members of other communities.

#### 4.1 The one-man army

Amidst all this turmoil, one man's valiant efforts at restoring communal harmony bore fruit. The 77-year-old Gandhiji decided to stake his all in a bid to vindicate his lifelong principle of non-violence, and his conviction that people's hearts could be changed. He moved from the villages of Noakhali in East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) to the villages of Bihar and then to the riot-torn slums of Calcutta and Delhi, in a heroic effort to stop Hindus and Muslims kill each other, careful everywhere to reassure the minority community. In October 1946, Muslims in East Bengal targeted Hindus. Gandhiji visited the area, toured the villages on foot, and persuaded the local Muslims to guarantee the safety of Hindus. Similarly, in other places such as Delhi he tried to build a spirit of mutual trust and

*Fig. 14.10  
Villagers of Noakhali hope for a  
glimpse of Mahatma Gandhi*





*Fig. 14.11*  
Villagers of a riot-torn village  
awaiting the arrival of Mahatma  
Gandhi

confidence between the two communities. A Delhi Muslim, Shahid Ahmad Dehlavi, compelled to flee to a dirty, overcrowded camp in Purana Qila, likened Gandhiji's arrival in Delhi on 9 September 1947 to "the arrival of the rains after a particularly long and harsh summer". Dehlavi recalled in his memoir how Muslims said to one another: "Delhi will now be saved".

On 28 November 1947, on the occasion of Guru Nanak's birthday, when Gandhiji went to address a meeting of Sikhs at

Gurdwara Sisganj, he noticed that there was no Muslim on the Chandni Chowk road, the heart of old Delhi. "What could be more shameful for us," he asked during a speech that evening, "than the fact that not a single Muslim could be found in Chandni Chowk?" Gandhiji continued to be in Delhi, fighting the mentality of those who wished to drive out every Muslim from the city, seeing them as Pakistani. When he began a fast to bring about a change of heart, amazingly, many Hindu and Sikh migrants fasted with him.

The effect of the fast was "electric", wrote Maulana Azad. People began realising the folly of the pogrom they had unleashed on the city's Muslims but it was only Gandhiji's martyrdom that finally ended this macabre drama of violence. "The world veritably changed," many Delhi Muslims of the time recalled later.

### ➔ Discuss...

What did the British do to maintain peace when they were quitting India? And what did Mahatma Gandhi do in those trying times?

## 5. GENDERING PARTITION

### 5.1 "Recovering" women

In the last decade and a half, historians have been examining the experiences of ordinary people during the Partition. Scholars have written about the harrowing experiences of women in those violent times. Women were raped, abducted, sold, often many times over, forced to settle down to a new life with strangers in unknown circumstances. Deeply traumatised by all that they had undergone, some began to develop new family bonds in their changed

circumstances. But the Indian and Pakistani governments were insensitive to the complexities of human relationships. Believing the women to be on the wrong side of the border, they now tore them away from their new relatives, and sent them back to their earlier families or locations. They did not consult the concerned women, undermining their right to take decisions regarding their own lives. According to one estimate, 30,000 women were “recovered” overall, 22,000 Muslim women in India and 800 Hindu and Sikh women in Pakistan, in an operation that ended as late as 1954.

Source 7

### What “recovering” women meant

Here is the experience of a couple, recounted by Prakash Tandon in his *Punjabi Century*, an autobiographical social history of colonial Punjab:

In one instance, a Sikh youth who had run amuck during the Partition persuaded a massacring crowd to let him take away a young, beautiful Muslim girl. They got married, and slowly fell in love with each other. Gradually memories of her parents, who had been killed, and her former life faded. They were happy together, and a little boy was born. Soon, however, social workers and the police, labouring assiduously to recover abducted women, began to track down the couple. They made inquiries in the Sikh’s home-district of Jalandhar; he got scent of it and the family ran away to Calcutta. The social workers reached Calcutta. Meanwhile, the couple’s friends tried to obtain a stay-order from the court but the law was taking its ponderous course. From Calcutta the couple escaped to some obscure Punjab village, hoping that the police would fail to shadow them. But the police caught up with them and began to question them. His wife was expecting again and now nearing her time. The Sikh sent the little boy to his mother and took his wife to a sugar-cane field. He made her as comfortable as he could in a pit while he lay with a gun, waiting for the police, determined not to lose her while he was alive. In the pit he delivered her with his own hands. The next day she ran high fever, and in three days she was dead. He had not dared to take her to the hospital. He was so afraid the social workers and the police would take her away.



Fig. 14.12

*Women console each other as they hear of the death of their family members.*

Males died in larger numbers in the violence of rioting.

### 5.2 Preserving “honour”

Scholars have also shown how ideas of preserving community honour came into play in this period of extreme physical and psychological danger. This notion of honour drew upon a conception of masculinity defined as ownership of *zan* (women) and *zamin* (land), a notion of considerable antiquity in North Indian peasant societies. Virility, it was believed, lay in the ability to protect your possessions – *zan* and *zamin* – from being appropriated by outsiders. And quite frequently, conflict ensued over these two prime “possessions”. Often enough, women internalised the same values.

At times, therefore, when the men feared that “their” women – wives, daughters, sisters – would be violated by the “enemy”, they killed the women themselves. Urvashi Butalia in her book, *The Other Side of Silence*, narrates one such gruesome incident in the village of Thoa Khalsa, Rawalpindi district. During Partition, in this Sikh village, ninety women are said to have “voluntarily” jumped into a well rather than fall into “enemy” hands. The migrant refugees from this village still commemorate the event at a gurdwara in Delhi, referring to the deaths as martyrdom, not suicide. They believe that men at that time had to courageously accept the decision of women, and in some cases even persuade the women to kill themselves. On 13 March every year, when their “martyrdom” is celebrated, the incident is recounted to an audience of men, women and children. Women are exhorted to remember the sacrifice and bravery of their sisters and to cast themselves in the same mould.

For the community of survivors, the remembrance ritual helps keep the memory alive. What such rituals do not seek to remember, however, are the stories of all those who did not wish to die, and had to end their lives against their will.

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### ➤ Discuss...

What ideas led to the death and suffering of so many innocent women during the Partition?  
 Why did the Indian and Pakistani governments agree to exchange “their” women?  
 Do you think they were right in doing so?

## 6. REGIONAL VARIATIONS

The experiences of ordinary people we have been discussing so far relate to the north-western part of the subcontinent. What was the Partition like in Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Central India and the Deccan? While carnages occurred in Calcutta and Noakhali in 1946, the Partition was most bloody and destructive in the Punjab. The near-total displacement of Hindus and Sikhs eastwards into India from West Punjab and of almost all Punjabi-speaking Muslims to Pakistan happened in a relatively short period of two years between 1946 and 1948.

Many Muslim families of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh continued to migrate to Pakistan through the 1950s and early 1960s, although many chose to remain in India. Most of these Urdu-speaking people, known as *muhajirs* (migrants) in Pakistan moved to the Karachi-Hyderabad region in Sind.

In Bengal the migration was even more protracted, with people moving across a porous border. This also meant that the Bengali division produced a process of suffering that may have been less concentrated but was as agonising. Furthermore, unlike the Punjab, the exchange of population in Bengal was not near-total. Many Bengali Hindus remained in East Pakistan while many Bengali Muslims continued to live in West Bengal. Finally, Bengali Muslims (East Pakistanis) rejected Jinnah's two-nation theory through political action, breaking away from Pakistan and creating Bangladesh in 1971-72. Religious unity could not hold East and West Pakistan together.

There is, however, a huge similarity between the Punjab and Bengal experiences. In both these states, women and girls became prime targets of persecution. Attackers treated women's bodies as territory to be conquered. Dishonouring women of a community was seen as dishonouring the community itself, and a mode of taking revenge.

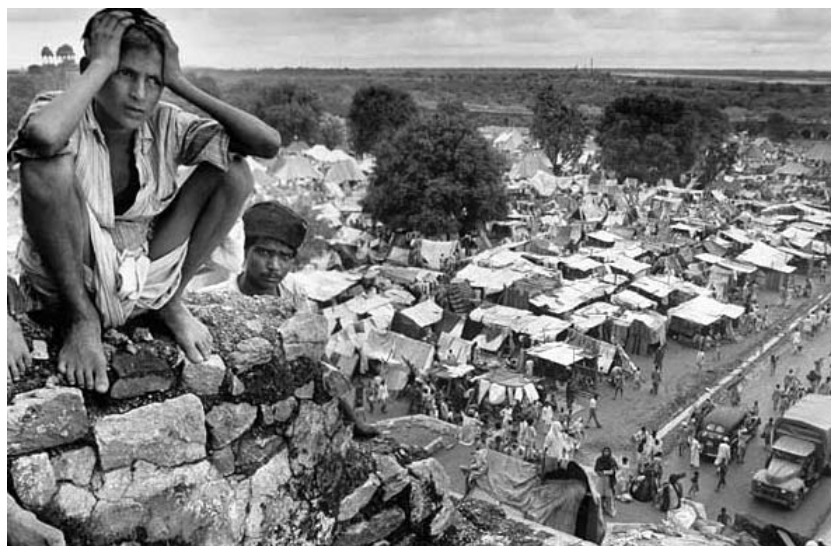


Fig. 14.13

*Faces of despair*

A massive refugee camp was set up in Purana Qila in 1947 as migrants came pouring in from different places.

### Fiction, Poetry, Films

Are you familiar with any short stories, novels, poems or films about Partition? More often than not, Partition literature and films represent this cataclysmic event in more insightful ways than do the works of historians. They seek to understand mass suffering and pain by focusing on an individual protagonist or small groups of ordinary people whose destinies were shaped by a big event over which they seemed to have no control. They record the anguish and the ambiguities of the times, the incomprehensible choices that many were confronted with. They register a sense of shock and bewilderment at the scale and magnitude of the violence, at human debasement and depravity. They also speak of hope and of the ways in which people overcame adversity.

Saadat Hasan Manto, a particularly gifted Urdu short-story writer, has this to say about his work:

For a long time I refused to accept the consequences of the revolution which was set off by the partition of the country. I still feel the same way; but I suppose, in the end, I came to accept this nightmarish reality without self-pity or despair. In the process I tried to retrieve from this man-made sea of blood, pearls of a rare hue, by writing about the single-minded dedication with which men had killed men, about the remorse felt by some of them, about the tears shed by murderers who could not understand why they still had some human feelings left. All this and more, I put in my book, *Siyah Hashiye* (Black Margins).

Partition literature and films exist in many languages, notably in Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, Bengali, Assamese and English. You may want to read writers such as Manto, Rajinder Singh Bedi (Urdu), Intizar Husain (Urdu), Bhisham Sahni (Hindi), Kamaleshwar (Hindi), Rahi Masoom Raza (Hindi), Narain Bharati (Sindhi), Sant Singh Sikhon (Punjabi), Narendranath Mitra (Bengali), Syed Waliullah (Bengali), Lalithambika Antharjanam (Malayalam), Amitav Ghosh (English) and Bapsi Sidhwa (English). Amrita Pritam, Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Dinesh Das have written memorable poems on Partition in Punjabi, Urdu and Bengali respectively. You may also want to see films directed by Ritwik Ghatak (*Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Subarnarekha*), M.S. Sathyu (*Garam Hawa*), Govind Nihalani (*Tamas*), and a play, *Jis Lahore Nahin Vekhya O Jamya-e-nai* (He Who Has Not Seen Lahore, Has Not Been Born) directed by Habib Tanvir.

#### ➔ Discuss...

Was your state or any neighbouring state affected by Partition? Find out how it affected the lives of men and women in the region and how they coped with the situation.

## 7. HELP, HUMANITY, HARMONY

Buried under the debris of the violence and pain of Partition is an enormous history of help, humanity and harmony. Many narratives such as Abdul Latif's poignant testimony, with which we began, reveal this. Historians have discovered numerous stories of how people helped each other during the Partition period, stories of caring and sharing, of the opening of new opportunities, and of triumph over trauma.

Consider, for instance, the work of Khushdeva Singh, a Sikh doctor specialising in the treatment of tuberculosis, posted at Dharampur in present-day Himachal Pradesh. Immersing himself in his work day and night, the doctor provided that rare healing touch, food, shelter, love and security to numerous migrants, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu alike. The residents of Dharampur developed the kind of faith and confidence in his humanity and generosity that the Delhi Muslims and others had in Gandhiji. One of them, Muhammad Umar, wrote to Khushdeva Singh: "With great humility I beg to state that I do not feel myself safe except under your protection. Therefore, in all kindness, be good enough to grant me a seat in your hospital."

We know about the gruelling relief work of this doctor from a memoir he entitled *Love is Stronger than Hate: A Remembrance of 1947*. Here, Singh describes his work as "humble efforts I made to discharge my duty as a human being to fellow human beings". He speaks most warmly of two short visits to Karachi in 1949. Old friends and those whom he



Source 8

### A small basket of grapes

This is what Khushdeva Singh writes about his experience during one of his visits to Karachi in 1949:

My friends took me to a room at the airport where we all sat down and talked ... (and) had lunch together. I had to travel from Karachi to London ... at 2.30 a.m. ... At 5.00 p.m. ... I told my friends that they had given me so generously of their time, I thought it would be too much for them to wait the whole night and suggested they must spare themselves the trouble. But nobody left until it was dinner time ... Then they said they were leaving and that I must have a little rest before emplaning. ... I got up at about 1.45 a.m. and, when I opened the door, I saw that all of them were still there ... They all accompanied me to the plane, and, before parting, presented me with a small basket of grapes. I had no words to express my gratitude for the overwhelming affection with which I was treated and the happiness this stopover had given me.

Fig. 14.14

*The refugee camps everywhere overflowed with people who needed not just food and shelter, but also love and compassion.*



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### ➔ Discuss...

Find out more about ways in which people supported one another and saved lives during Partition.

had helped at Dharampur spent a few memorable hours with him at Karachi airport. Six police constables, earlier acquaintances, walked him to the plane, saluting him as he entered it. "I acknowledged (the salute) with folded hands and tears in my eyes."

## 8. ORAL TESTIMONIES AND HISTORY

Have you taken note of the materials from which the history of Partition has been constructed in this chapter? Oral narratives, memoirs, diaries, family histories, first-hand written accounts – all these help us understand the trials and tribulations of ordinary people during the partition of the country. Millions of people viewed Partition in terms of the suffering and the challenges of the times. For them, it was no mere constitutional division or just the party politics of the Muslim League, Congress and others. For them, it meant the unexpected alterations in life as it unfolded between 1946 and 1950 and beyond, requiring psychological, emotional and social adjustments. As with the Holocaust in Germany, we should understand Partition not simply as a political event, but also through the meanings attached to it by those who lived it. Memories and experiences shape the reality of an event.

One of the strengths of personal reminiscence – one type of oral source – is that it helps us grasp experiences and memories in detail. It enables historians to write richly textured, vivid accounts of what happened to people during events such as Partition. It is impossible to extract this kind of information from government documents. The latter deal with policy and party matters and various state-sponsored schemes. In the case of Partition, government reports and files as well as the personal writings of its high-level functionaries throw ample light on negotiations between the British and the major political parties about the future of India or on the rehabilitation of refugees. They tell us little, however, about the day-to-day experiences of those affected by the government's decision to divide the country.

Oral history also allows historians to broaden the boundaries of their discipline by rescuing from oblivion the lived experiences of the poor and the powerless: those of, say, Abdul Latif's father; the women of Thoa Khalsa; the refugee who retailed

wheat at wholesale prices, eking out a paltry living by selling the gunny bags in which the wheat came; a middle-class Bengali widow bent double over road-laying work in Bihar; a Peshawari trader who thought it was wonderful to land a petty job in Cuttack upon migrating to India but asked: "Where is Cuttack, is it on the upper side of Hindustan or the lower; we haven't quite heard of it before in Peshawar?"

Thus, moving beyond the actions of the well off and the well known, the oral history of Partition has succeeded in exploring the experiences of those men and women whose existence has hitherto been ignored, taken for granted, or mentioned only in passing in mainstream history. This is significant because the histories that we read often regard the life and work of the mass of the people in the past as inaccessible or unimportant.

Yet, many historians still remain sceptical of oral history. They dismiss it because oral data seem to lack concreteness and the chronology they yield may be imprecise. Historians argue that the uniqueness of personal experience makes generalisation difficult: a large picture cannot be built from such micro-evidence, and one witness is no witness. They also think oral accounts are concerned with tangential issues, and that the small individual experiences which remain in memory are irrelevant to the unfolding of larger processes of history.

However, with regard to events such as the Partition in India and the Holocaust in Germany, there is no dearth of testimony about the different forms of distress that numerous people faced. So, there is ample evidence to figure out trends, to point out exceptions. By comparing statements, oral or written, by corroborating what they yield with findings from other sources, and by being vigilant about internal contradictions, historians can weigh the reliability of a given piece of evidence. Furthermore, if history has to accord presence to the ordinary and powerless, then the oral history of Partition is not concerned with tangential matters. The experiences it relates are central to the story, so much so that oral sources should be used to check other sources and vice versa. Different types of sources have to be tapped for answering different types of questions. Government reports, for instance, will tell us of the number of "recovered" women exchanged by the Indian and Pakistani states but it is the women who will tell us about their suffering.

We must realise, however, that oral data on Partition are not automatically or easily available. They have to be obtained through interviews that need to combine empathy with tact. In this context, one of the first difficulties is that protagonists may not want to talk about intensely personal experiences. Why, for instance, would a woman who has been raped want to disclose her tragedy to a total stranger? Interviewees have to often avoid enquiring into personal traumas. They have to build considerable rapport with respondents before they can obtain in-depth and meaningful data. Then, there are problems of memory. What people *remember* or *forget* about an event when they are interviewed a few decades later will depend in part on their experiences of the intervening years and on what has happened to their communities and nations during those years. The oral historian faces the daunting task of having to sift the “actual” experiences of Partition from a web of “constructed” memories.

In the final analysis, many different kinds of source materials have to be used to construct a comprehensive account of Partition, so that we see it not only as an event and process, but also understand the experiences of those who lived through those traumatic times.

Fig. 14.15  
Not everyone could travel by  
cart, not everyone could walk...



### TIMELINE

1930	The Urdu poet Mohammad Iqbal speaks of the need for a “North-West Indian Muslim state” as an autonomous unit within a single, loose Indian federation
1933	The name Pakistan or <i>Pak-stan</i> is coined by a Punjabi Muslim student at Cambridge, Choudhry Rehmat Ali
1937-39	Congress ministries come to power in seven out of 11 provinces of British India
1940	The Muslim League moves a resolution at Lahore demanding a measure of autonomy for the Muslim-majority areas
1946	Elections are held in the provinces. The Congress wins massively in the general constituencies. The League’s success in the Muslim seats is equally spectacular
March to June	The British Cabinet sends a three-member Cabinet Mission to Delhi
August	The Muslim League decides on “Direct Action” for winning Pakistan
16 August	Violence breaks out between Hindus-Sikhs and Muslims in Calcutta, lasting several days and leaving several thousand people dead
March 1947	The Congress high command votes for dividing the Punjab into Muslim-majority and Hindu/Sikh-majority halves and asks for the application of a similar principle to Bengal; the British begin to quit India
14-15 August 1947	Pakistan is formed; India gains independence. Mahatma Gandhi tours Noakhali in East Bengal to restore communal harmony



### ANSWER IN 100-150 WORDS

1. What did the Muslim League demand through its resolution of 1940?
2. Why did some people think of Partition as a very sudden development?
3. How did ordinary people view Partition?
4. What were Mahatma Gandhi’s arguments against Partition?
5. Why is Partition viewed as an extremely significant marker in South Asian history?



**If you would like to know more, read:**

Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (eds.). 2003. *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*. Stree, Kolkata.

Alok Bhalla (ed.). 1994. *Stories About the Partition of India, Vols. I, II, III*. Indus (Harper Collins), New Delhi.

Urvashi Butalia. 1998. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. Viking (Penguin Books), New Delhi.

Mushirul Hasan, ed. 1996. *India's Partition*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Gyanendra Pandey. 2001. *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Anita Inder Singh. 2006. *The Partition of India*. National Book Trust, New Delhi.



**WRITE A SHORT ESSAY (250-300 WORDS) ON THE FOLLOWING:**

6. Why was British India partitioned?
7. How did women experience Partition?
8. How did the Congress come to change its views on Partition?
9. Examine the strengths and limitations of oral history. How have oral-history techniques furthered our understanding of Partition?



**MAP WORK**

10. On an outline map of South Asia, mark out Sections A, B and C of the Cabinet Mission proposals. How is this map different from the political map of present-day South Asia?



**PROJECT (CHOOSE ONE)**

11. Find out about the ethnic violence that led to the partition of Yugoslavia. Compare your findings with what you have read about Partition in this chapter.
12. Find out whether there are any communities that have migrated to your city, town, village or any near-by place. (Your area may even have people who migrated to it during Partition.) Interview members of such communities and summarise your findings in a report. Ask people about the place they came from, the reasons for their migration, and their experiences. Also find out what changes the area witnessed as a result of this migration.

## THEME FIFTEEN

# FRAMING THE CONSTITUTION THE BEGINNING OF A NEW ERA

The Indian Constitution, which came into effect on 26 January 1950, has the dubious distinction of being the longest in the world. But its length and complexity are perhaps understandable when one considers the country's size and diversity. At Independence, India was not merely large and diverse, but also deeply divided. A Constitution designed to keep the country together, and to take it forward, had necessarily to be an elaborate, carefully-worked-out, and painstakingly drafted document. For one thing, it sought to heal wounds of the past and the present, to make Indians of different classes, castes and communities come together in a shared political experiment. For another, it sought to nurture democratic institutions in what had long been a culture of hierarchy and deference.

The Constitution of India was framed between December 1946 and December 1949. During this time its drafts were discussed clause by clause in the Constituent Assembly of India. In all, the Assembly



*Fig. 15.1*

*The Constitution was signed in December 1949 after three years of debate.*

held eleven sessions, with sittings spread over 165 days. In between the sessions, the work of revising and refining the drafts was carried out by various committees and sub-committees.

From your political science textbooks you know what the Constitution of India is, and you have seen how it has worked over the decades since Independence. This chapter will introduce you to the history that lies behind the Constitution, and the intense debates that were part of its making. If we try and hear the voices within the Constituent Assembly, we get an idea of the process through which the Constitution was framed and the vision of the new nation formulated.

## 1. A TUMULTUOUS TIME

The years immediately preceding the making of the Constitution had been exceptionally tumultuous: a time of great hope, but also of abject disappointment. On 15 August 1947, India had been made free, but it had also been divided. Fresh in popular memory were the Quit India struggle of 1942 – perhaps the most widespread popular movement against the British Raj – as well as the bid by Subhas Chandra Bose to win freedom through armed struggle with foreign aid. An even more recent upsurge had also evoked much popular sympathy – this was the rising of the ratings of the Royal Indian Navy in Bombay and other cities in the spring of 1946. Through the late 1940s there were periodic, if scattered, mass protests of workers and peasants in different parts of the country.

One striking feature of these popular upsurges was the degree of Hindu-Muslim unity they manifested. In contrast, the two leading Indian political parties, the Congress and the Muslim League, had repeatedly failed to arrive at a settlement that would bring about religious reconciliation and social harmony. The Great Calcutta Killings of August 1946 began a year of almost continuous rioting across northern and eastern India (see Chapters 13 and 14). The violence culminated in the massacres that accompanied the transfer of populations when the Partition of India was announced.

On Independence Day, 15 August 1947, there was an outburst of joy and hope, unforgettable for those who lived through that time. But innumerable Muslims in India, and Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan, were now faced with a cruel choice – the threat of



*Fig. 15.2*  
Images of desolation and destruction continued to haunt members of the Constituent Assembly.



*Fig. 15.3  
Jawaharlal Nehru speaking in the  
Constituent Assembly at midnight  
on 14 August 1947*

It was on this day that Nehru gave his famous speech that began with the following lines:

“Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom.”

sudden death or the squeezing of opportunities on the one side, and a forcible tearing away from their age-old roots on the other. Millions of refugees were on the move, Muslims into East and West Pakistan, Hindus and Sikhs into West Bengal and the eastern half of the Punjab. Many perished before they reached their destination.

Another, and scarcely less serious, problem faced by the new nation was that of the princely states. During the period of the Raj, approximately one-third of the area of the subcontinent was under the control of nawabs and maharajas who owed allegiance to the British Crown, but were otherwise left mostly free to rule – or misrule – their territory as they wished. When the British left India, the constitutional status of these princes remained ambiguous. As one contemporary observer remarked, some maharajas now began “to luxuriate in wild dreams of independent power in an India of many partitions”.

This was the background in which the Constituent Assembly met. How could the debates within the Assembly remain insulated from what was happening outside?

### **1.1 The making of the Constituent Assembly**

The members of the Constituent Assembly were chosen on the basis of the provincial elections of 1946. Apart from the members sent by the provinces of British India, the Assembly also had representatives of the princely states, sent as these states joined the Union one by one. The Muslim League chose to boycott the



early sittings (i.e., those held before 15 August 1947), making it effectively a one-party show as 82 per cent of the members of the Assembly were members of the Congress Party.

However, since the Congress was itself a broad front these members held a wide range of views. Some were atheists and secularists; others (in the words of an Anglo-Indian member, Frank Anthony) were “technically members of the Congress but spiritually members of the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha”. Some were socialists in their economic philosophy, others defenders of the rights of landlords. Aside from the diversity within it, the Congress also nominated independent members of different castes and religious groups, and tried to ensure representation of women. It particularly sought out law experts. The intense debates that took place within the Constituent Assembly reflected the diversity of opinions.

The discussions within the Constituent Assembly were also influenced by the opinions expressed by the public. As the deliberations continued, the arguments were reported in newspapers, and the proposals were publicly debated. Criticisms and counter-criticisms in the press in turn shaped the nature of the consensus that was ultimately reached on specific issues. In order to create a sense of collective participation the public was also asked for submissions. There were hundreds of responses, a sampling of which gives a clue to the conflicting interests that the lawmakers had to take account of. Thus the All India Varnashrama Swarajya Sangh (based in Calcutta) asked that the Constitution “be based on the principles laid down in ancient Hindu



*Fig. 15.4*  
*The Constituent Assembly in session*  
 Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel is seen seated second from right.

works". The prohibition of cow-slaughter and the closing down of abattoirs was particularly recommended. Low-caste groups demanded an end to "ill treatment by upper-caste people" and "reservation of separate seats on the basis of their population, in legislatures, government departments, and local bodies, etc." Linguistic minorities asked for "freedom of speech in (the) mother tongue" and the "redistribution of provinces on linguistic basis". Religious minorities asked for special safeguards. And bodies as varied as the District Teachers' Guild of Vizianagaram and the Central Jewish Board of Bombay requested "adequate representation on all public bodies including legislatures etc."

### **1.2 The dominant voices**

The Constituent Assembly had 300 members in all. Of these, six members played particularly important roles. Three were representatives of the Congress, namely, Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabh Bhai Patel and Rajendra Prasad. It was Nehru who moved the crucial "Objectives Resolution", as well as the resolution proposing that the National Flag of India be a "horizontal tricolour of saffron, white and dark green in equal proportion", with a wheel in navy blue at the centre. Patel, on the other hand, worked mostly behind the scenes, playing a key role in the drafting of several reports, and working to reconcile opposing points of view. Rajendra Prasad's role was as President of the Assembly, where he had to steer the discussion along constructive lines while making sure all members had a chance to speak.

Besides this Congress trio, a very important member of the Assembly was the lawyer and economist B.R. Ambedkar. During the period of British rule, Ambedkar had been a political opponent of the Congress; but, on the advice of Mahatma Gandhi, he was asked at Independence to join the Union Cabinet as law minister. In this capacity, he served as Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution. Serving with him were two other lawyers, K.M. Munshi from Gujarat and Alladi Krishnaswamy Aiyar from Madras, both of whom gave crucial inputs in the drafting of the Constitution.

These six members were given vital assistance by two civil servants. One was B. N. Rau, Constitutional Advisor to the Government of India, who prepared a series of background papers based on a close study of the political systems obtaining in other countries. The other was the Chief Draughtsman, S. N. Mukherjee, of whom Ambedkar

said that his “ability to put the most intricate proposals in the simplest and clearest legal form can rarely be equalled”.

Ambedkar himself had the responsibility of guiding the Draft Constitution through the Assembly. This took three years in all, with the printed record of the discussions taking up eleven bulky volumes. But while the process was long it was also extremely interesting. The members of the Constituent Assembly were eloquent in expressing their sometimes very divergent points of view. In their presentations we can discern many conflicting ideas of India – of what language Indians should speak, of what political and economic systems the nation should follow, of what moral values its citizens should uphold or disavow.

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### ➔ Discuss...

Look again at Chapters 13 and 14. Discuss how the political situation of the time may have shaped the nature of the debates within the Constituent Assembly.

*Fig. 15.5*  
*B. R. Ambedkar presiding over a discussion of the Hindu Code Bill*

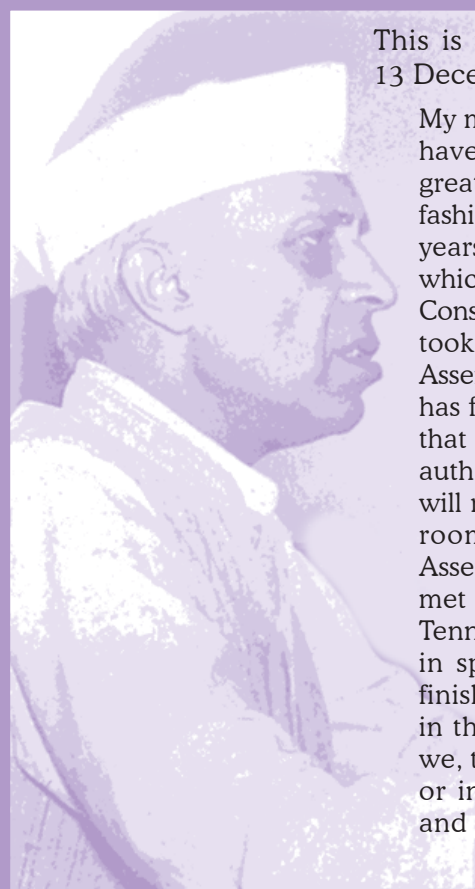


## 2. THE VISION OF THE CONSTITUTION

On 13 December 1946, Jawaharlal Nehru introduced the “Objectives Resolution” in the Constituent Assembly. It was a momentous resolution that outlined the defining ideals of the Constitution of Independent India, and provided the framework within which the work of constitution-making was to proceed. It proclaimed India to be an “Independent Sovereign Republic”, guaranteed its citizens justice, equality and freedom, and assured that “adequate safeguards shall be provided for minorities, backward and tribal areas, and Depressed and Other Backward Classes ...” After outlining these objectives, Nehru placed the Indian experiment in a broad historical perspective. As he spoke, he said, his mind went back to the historic efforts in the past to produce such documents of rights.

Source 1

### “We are not going just to copy”



This is what Jawaharlal Nehru said in his famous speech of 13 December 1946:

My mind goes back to the various Constituent Assemblies that have gone before and of what took place at the making of the great American nation when the fathers of that nation met and fashioned out a Constitution which has stood the test of so many years, more than a century and a half, and of the great nation which has resulted, which has been built up on the basis of that Constitution. My mind goes back to that mighty revolution which took place also over 150 years ago and to that Constituent Assembly that met in that gracious and lovely city of Paris which has fought so many battles for freedom, to the difficulties that that Constituent Assembly had and to how the King and other authorities came in its way, and still it continued. The House will remember that when these difficulties came and even the room for a meeting was denied to the then Constituent Assembly, they betook themselves to an open tennis court and met there and took the oath, which is called the Oath of the Tennis Court, that they continued meeting in spite of Kings, in spite of the others, and did not disperse till they had finished the task they had undertaken. Well, I trust that it is in that solemn spirit that we too are meeting here and that we, too, whether we meet in this chamber or other chambers, or in the fields or in the market-place, will go on meeting and continue our work till we have finished it.

*contd*

Source 1 (contd)

Then my mind goes back to a more recent revolution which gave rise to a new type of State, the revolution that took place in Russia and out of which has arisen the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics, another mighty country which is playing a tremendous part in the world, not only a mighty country but for us in India, a neighbouring country.

So our mind goes back to these great examples and we seek to learn from their success and to avoid their failures. Perhaps we may not be able to avoid failures because some measure of failure is inherent in human effort. Nevertheless, we shall advance, I am certain, in spite of obstructions and difficulties, and achieve and realise the dream that we have dreamt so long ...

We say that it is our firm and solemn resolve to have an independent sovereign republic. India is bound to be sovereign, it is bound to be independent and it is bound to be a republic ... Now, some friends have raised the question: "Why have you not put in the word 'democratic' here.?" Well, I told them that it is conceivable, of course, that a republic may not be democratic but the whole of our past is witness to this fact that we stand for democratic institutions. Obviously we are aiming at democracy and nothing less than a democracy. What form of democracy, what shape it might take is another matter. The democracies of the present day, many of them in Europe and elsewhere, have played a great part in the world's progress. Yet it may be doubtful if those democracies may not have to change their shape somewhat before long if they have to remain completely democratic. We are not going just to copy, I hope, a certain democratic procedure or an institution of a so-called democratic country. We may improve upon it. In any event whatever system of government we may establish here must fit in with the temper of our people and be acceptable to them. We stand for democracy. It will be for this House to determine what shape to give to that democracy, the fullest democracy, I hope. The House will notice that in this Resolution, although we have not used the word "democratic" because we thought it is obvious that the word "republic" contains that word and we did not want to use unnecessary words and redundant words, but we have done something much more than using the word. We have given the content of democracy in this Resolution and not only the content of democracy but the content, if I may say so, of economic democracy in this Resolution. Others might take objection to this Resolution on the ground that we have not said that it should be a Socialist State. Well, I stand for Socialism and, I hope, India will stand for Socialism and that India will go towards the constitution of a Socialist State and I do believe that the whole world will have to go that way.

CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY DEBATES (CAD), VOL.I



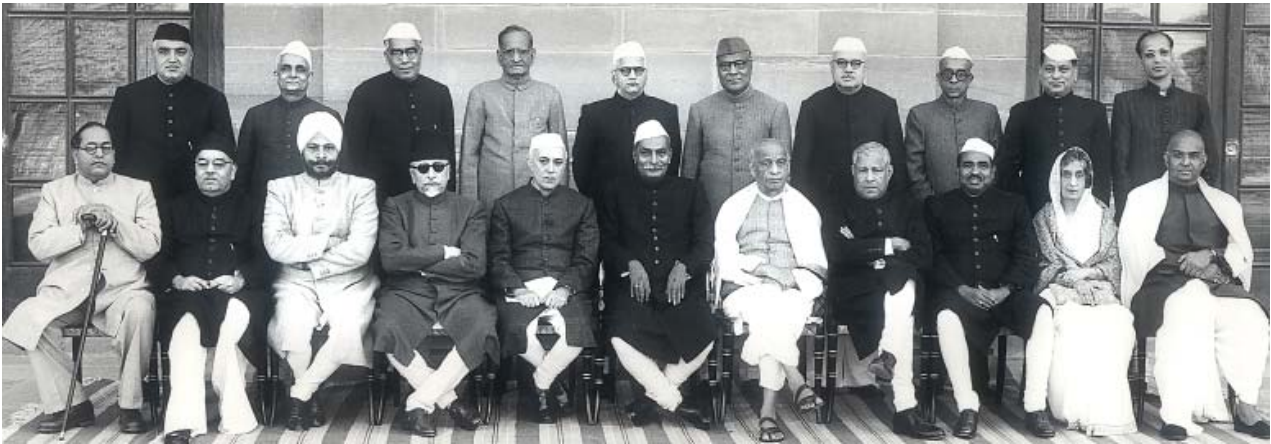
*Oath of the Tennis Court*

Nehru's speech (Source 1) merits careful scrutiny. What exactly was being stated here? What did Nehru's seemingly nostalgic return to the past reflect? What was he saying about the origin of the ideas embodied in the vision of the Constitution? In returning to the past and referring to the American and French Revolutions, Nehru was locating the history of constitution-making in India within a longer history of struggle for liberty and freedom. The momentous nature of the Indian project was emphasised by linking it to revolutionary moments in the past. But Nehru was not suggesting that those events were to provide any blueprint for the present; or that the ideas of those revolutions could be mechanically borrowed and applied in India. He did not define the specific form of democracy, and suggested that this had to be decided through deliberations. And he stressed that the ideals and provisions of the constitution introduced in India could not be just derived from elsewhere. "We are not going just to copy", he said. The system of government established in India, he declared, had to "fit in with the temper of our people and be acceptable to them". It was necessary to learn from the people of the West, from their achievements and failures, but the Western nations too had to learn from experiments elsewhere, they too had to change their own notions of democracy. The objective of the Indian Constitution would be to fuse the liberal ideas of democracy with the socialist idea of economic justice, and re-adapt and re-work all these ideas within the Indian context. Nehru's plea was for creative thinking about what was appropriate for India.

➤ What explanation does Jawaharlal Nehru give for not using the term "democratic" in the Objectives Resolution in Source 1?

### 2.1 The will of the people

A Communist member, Somnath Lahiri saw the dark hand of British imperialism hanging over the deliberations of the Constituent Assembly. He thus urged the members, and Indians in general, to fully free themselves from the influences of imperial rule. In the winter of 1946-47, as the Assembly deliberated, the British were still in India. An interim administration headed by Jawaharlal Nehru was in place, but it could only operate under the directions of the Viceroy and the British Government in London. Lahiri exhorted his colleagues to realise that the Constituent Assembly was British-made and was "working the British plans as the British should like it to be worked out".



*Fig. 15.6*

*Members of the Interim Government*

Rajendra Prasad is at the centre, with Jawaharlal Nehru on his right and Sardar Patel on his left. Sitting on the extreme left is B. R. Ambedkar and on the extreme right is Shyama Prasad Mukherjee.

Source 2

**“That is very good, Sir – bold words, noble words”**

Somnath Lahiri said:

Well, Sir, I must congratulate Pandit Nehru for the fine expression he gave to the spirit of the Indian people when he said that no imposition from the British will be accepted by the Indian people. Imposition would be resented and objected to, he said, and he added that if need be we will walk the valley of struggle. That is very good, Sir – bold words, noble words.

But the point is to see when and how are you going to apply that challenge. Well, Sir, the point is that the imposition is here right now. Not only has the British Plan made any future Constitution ... dependent on a treaty satisfactory to the Britisher but it suggests that for every little difference you will have to run to the Federal Court or dance attendance there in England; or to call on the British Prime Minister Clement Attlee or someone else. Not only is it a fact that this Constituent Assembly, whatever plans we may be hatching, we are under the shadow of British guns, British Army, their economic and financial stranglehold – which means that the final power is still in the British hands and the question of power has not yet been finally decided, which means the future is not yet completely in our hands. Not only that, but the statements made by Attlee and others recently have made it clear that if need be, they will even threaten you with division entirely. This means, Sir, there is no freedom in this country. As Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel put it some days ago, we have freedom only to fight among ourselves. That is the only freedom we have got ... Therefore, our humble suggestion is that it is not a question of getting something by working out this Plan but to declare independence here and now and call upon the Interim Government, call upon the people of India, to stop fratricidal warfare and look out against its enemy, which still has the whip hand, the British Imperialism – and go together to fight it and then resolve our claims afterwards when we will be free.

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Nehru admitted that most nationalist leaders had wanted a different kind of Constituent Assembly. It was also true, in a sense, that the British Government had a “hand in its birth”, and it had attached certain conditions within which the Assembly had to function. “But,” emphasised Nehru, “you must not ignore the source from which this Assembly derives its strength.” Nehru added:

Governments do not come into being by State Papers. Governments are, in fact the expression of the will of the people. We have met here today because of the strength of the people behind us and we shall go as far as the people – not of any party or group but the people as a whole – shall wish us to go. We should, therefore, always keep in mind the passions that lie in the hearts of the masses of the Indian people and try to fulfil them.

The Constituent Assembly was expected to express the aspirations of those who had participated in the movement for independence. Democracy, equality and justice were ideals that had become intimately associated with social struggles in India since the nineteenth century. When the social reformers in the nineteenth century opposed child marriage and demanded that widows be allowed to remarry, they were pleading for social justice. When Swami Vivekananda campaigned for a reform of Hinduism, he wanted religions to become more just. When Jyotiba Phule in Maharashtra pointed to the suffering of the depressed castes, or Communists and Socialists organised workers and peasants, they were demanding economic and social justice. The national movement against a government that was seen as oppressive and illegitimate was inevitably a struggle for democracy and justice, for citizens’ rights and equality.

In fact, as the demand for representation grew, the British had been forced to introduce a series of constitutional reforms. A number of Acts were passed (1909, 1919 and 1935), gradually enlarging the space for Indian participation in provincial governments. The executive was made partly responsible to the provincial legislature in 1919, and almost entirely so under the Government of India Act of 1935. When elections were held in 1937, under the 1935 Act, the Congress came to power in eight out of the 11 provinces.

➤ Why does the speaker in Source 2 think that the Constituent Assembly was under the shadow of British guns?

*Fig. 15.7*  
Edwin Montague (left) was the author of the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919 which allowed some form of representation in provincial legislative assemblies.





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### ➔ Discuss...

What were the ideas outlined by Jawaharlal Nehru in his speech on the Objectives Resolution?

Yet we should not see an unbroken continuity between the earlier constitutional developments and what happened in the three years from 1946. While the earlier constitutional experiments were in response to the growing demand for a representative government, the Acts (1909, 1919 and 1935) were not directly debated and formulated by Indians. They were enacted by the colonial government. The electorate that elected the provincial bodies had expanded over the years, but even in 1935 it remained limited to no more than 10 to 15 per cent of the adult population: there was no universal adult franchise. The legislatures elected under the 1935 Act operated within the framework of colonial rule, and were responsible to the Governor appointed by the British. The vision that Nehru was trying to outline on 13 December 1946 was of the Constitution of an independent, sovereign Republic of India.

## 3. DEFINING RIGHTS

How were the rights of individual citizens to be defined? Were the oppressed groups to have any special rights? What rights would minorities have? Who, in fact, could be defined as a minority? As the debate on the floor of the Constituent Assembly unfolded, it was clear that there were no collectively shared answers to any of these questions. The answers were evolved through the clash of opinions and the drama of individual encounters. In his inaugural speech, Nehru had invoked the “will of the people” and declared that the makers of the Constitution had to fulfil “the passions that lie in the hearts of the masses”. This was no easy task. With the anticipation of Independence, different groups expressed their will in different ways, and made different demands. These would have to be debated and conflicting ideas would have to be reconciled, before a consensus could be forged.

### 3.1 The problem with separate electorates

On 27 August 1947, B. Pocker Bahadur from Madras made a powerful plea for continuing separate electorates. Minorities exist in all lands, argued Bahadur; they could not be wished away, they could not be “erased out of existence”. The need was to create a political framework in which minorities could live in harmony with others, and the differences between communities could be minimised. This was possible only if minorities were well represented within the political system, their voices heard,

and their views taken into account. Only separate electorates would ensure that Muslims had a meaningful voice in the governance of the country. The needs of Muslims, Bahadur felt, could not be properly understood by non-Muslims; nor could a true representative of Muslims be chosen by people who did not belong to that community.

This demand for separate electorates provoked anger and dismay amongst most nationalists. In the passionate debate that followed, a range of arguments were offered against the demand. Most nationalists saw separate electorates as a measure deliberately introduced by the British to divide the people. "The English played their game under the cover of safeguards," R.V. Dhulekar told Bahadur. "With the help of it they allured you (the minorities) to a long lull. Give it up now ... Now there is no one to misguide you."

Partition had made nationalists fervently opposed to the idea of separate electorates. They were haunted by the fear of continued civil war, riots and violence. Separate electorates was a "poison that has entered the body politic of our country", declared Sardar Patel. It was a demand that had turned one community against another, divided the nation, caused bloodshed, and led to the tragic partition of the country. "Do you want peace in this land? If so do away with it (separate electorates)," urged Patel.

Source 3

**"The British element is gone, but they have left the mischief behind"**

Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel said:

It is no use saying that we ask for separate electorates, because it is good for us. We have heard it long enough. We have heard it for years, and as a result of this agitation we are now a separate nation ... Can you show me one free country where there are separate electorates? If so, I shall be prepared to accept it. But in this unfortunate country if this separate electorate is going to be persisted in, even after the division of the country, woe betide the country; it is not worth living in. Therefore, I say, it is not for my good alone, it is for your own good that I say it, forget the past. One day, we may be united ... The British element is gone, but they have left the mischief behind. We do not want to perpetuate that mischief. (Hear, hear). When the British introduced this element they had not expected that they will have to go so soon. They wanted it for their easy administration. That is all right. But they have left the legacy behind. Are we to get out of it or not?

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*Fig. 15.8*  
In the winter of 1946 Indian leaders went to London for what turned out to be a fruitless round of talks with British Prime Minister Attlee. (Left to right: Liaquat Ali, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Baldev Singh and Pethick-Lawrence)

Countering the demand for separate electorates, Govind Ballabh Pant declared that it was not only harmful for the nation but also for the minorities. He agreed with Bahadur that the success of a democracy was to be judged by the confidence it generated amongst different sections of people. He agreed too that every citizen in a free state should be treated in a manner that satisfied “not only his material wants but also his spiritual sense of self-respect”, and that the majority community had an obligation to try and understand the problems of minorities, and empathise with their aspirations. Yet Pant opposed the idea of separate electorates. It was a suicidal demand, he argued, that would permanently isolate the minorities, make them vulnerable, and deprive them of any effective say within the government.

Source 4

**“I believe separate electorates will be suicidal to the minorities”**

During the debate on 27 August 1947, Govind Ballabh Pant said:

I believe separate electorates will be suicidal to the minorities and will do them tremendous harm. If they are isolated for ever, they can never convert themselves into a majority and the feeling of frustration will cripple them even from the very beginning. What is it that you desire and what is our ultimate objective? Do the minorities always want to remain as minorities or do they ever expect to form an integral part of a great nation and as such to guide and control its destinies? If they do, can they ever achieve that aspiration and that ideal if they are isolated from the rest of the community? I think it would be extremely dangerous for them if they were segregated from the rest of the community and kept aloof in an air-tight compartment where they would have to rely on others even for the air they breath ... The minorities if they are returned by separate electorates can never have any effective voice.

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➤ Read Sources 3 and 4. What are the different arguments being put forward against separate electorates?

Behind all these arguments was the concern with the making of a unified nation state. In order to build political unity and forge a nation, every individual had to be moulded into a citizen of the State, each group

had to be assimilated within the nation. The Constitution would grant to citizens rights, but citizens had to offer their loyalty to the State. Communities could be recognised as cultural entities and assured cultural rights. Politically, however, members of all communities had to act as equal members of one State, or else there would be divided loyalties. “There is the unwholesome and to some extent degrading habit of thinking always in terms of communities and never in terms of citizens,” said Pant. And he added: “Let us remember that it is the citizen that must count. It is the citizen that forms the base as well as the summit of the social pyramid.” Even as the importance of community rights was being recognised, there was a lurking fear among many nationalists that this may lead to divided loyalties, and make it difficult to forge a strong nation and a strong State.

Not all Muslims supported the demand for separate electorates. Begum Aizaas Rasul, for instance, felt that separate electorates were self-destructive since they isolated the minorities from the majority. By 1949, most Muslim members of the Constituent Assembly were agreed that separate electorates were against the interests of the minorities. Instead Muslims needed to take an active part in the democratic process to ensure that they had a decisive voice in the political system.

### 3.2 “We will need much more than this Resolution”

While welcoming the Objectives Resolution, N.G. Ranga, a socialist who had been a leader of the peasant movement, urged that the term minorities be interpreted in economic terms. The real minorities for Ranga were the poor and the downtrodden. He welcomed the legal rights the Constitution was granting to each individual but pointed to its limits. In his opinion it was meaningless for the poor people in the villages to know that they now had the fundamental right to live, and to have full employment, or that they could have their meetings, their conferences, their associations and various other civil liberties. It was essential to create conditions where these constitutionally enshrined rights could be effectively enjoyed. For this they needed protection. “They need props. They need a ladder,” said Ranga.

Source 5

### “There cannot be any divided loyalty”

Govind Ballabh Pant argued that in order to become loyal citizens people had to stop focusing only on the community and the self:

For the success of democracy one must train himself in the art of self-discipline. In democracies one should care less for himself and more for others. There cannot be any divided loyalty. All loyalties must exclusively be centred round the State. If in a democracy, you create rival loyalties, or you create a system in which any individual or group, instead of suppressing his extravagance, cares nought for larger or other interests, then democracy is doomed.

CAD, VOL.II

➔ How does G. B. Pant define the attributes of a loyal citizen?

Source 6

**“The real minorities are the masses of this country”**

Welcoming the Objectives Resolution introduced by Jawaharlal Nehru, N.G. Ranga said:

Sir, there is a lot of talk about minorities. Who are the real minorities? Not the Hindus in the so-called Pakistan provinces, not the Sikhs, not even the Muslims. No, the real minorities are the masses of this country. These people are so depressed and oppressed and suppressed till now that they are not able to take advantage of the ordinary civil rights. What is the position? You go to the tribal areas. According to law, their own traditional law, their tribal law, their lands cannot be alienated. Yet our merchants go there, and in the so-called free market they are able to snatch their lands. Thus, even though the law goes against this snatching away of their lands, still the merchants are able to turn the tribal people into veritable slaves by various kinds of bonds, and make them hereditary bond-slaves. Let us go to the ordinary villagers. There goes the money-lender with his money and he is able to get the villagers in his pocket. There is the landlord himself, the zamindar, and the *malguzar* and there are the various other people who are able to exploit these poor villagers. There is no elementary education even among these people. These are the real minorities that need protection and assurances of protection. In order to give them the necessary protection, we will need much more than this Resolution ...

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➡ How is the notion of minority defined by Ranga?

Ranga also drew attention to the gulf that separated the broad masses of Indians and those claiming to speak on their behalf in the Constituent Assembly:

Whom are we supposed to represent? The ordinary masses of our country. And yet most of us do not belong to the masses themselves. We are of them, we wish to stand for them, but the masses themselves are not able to come up to the Constituent Assembly. It may take some time; in the meanwhile, we are here as their trustees, as their champions, and we are trying our best to speak for them.

One of the groups mentioned by Ranga, the tribals, had among its representatives to the Assembly the gifted orator Jaipal Singh. In welcoming the Objectives Resolution, Singh said:

... as an Adibasi, I am not expected to understand the legal intricacies of the Resolution. But my common sense tells me that every one of us should march in that road to freedom and fight together. Sir, if there is any group of Indian people that has been shabbily treated it is my people. They have been disgracefully treated, neglected for the last 6,000 years. ... The whole history of my people is one of continuous exploitation and dispossession by the non-aboriginals of India punctuated by rebellions and disorder, and yet I take Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru at his word. I take you all at your word that now we are going to start a new chapter, a new chapter of independent India where there is equality of opportunity, where no one would be neglected.

Singh spoke eloquently on the need to protect the tribes, and ensure conditions that could help them come up to the level of the general population. Tribes were not a numerical minority, he argued, but they needed protection. They had been dispossessed of the land they had settled, deprived of their forests and pastures, and forced to move in search of new homes. Perceiving them as primitive and backward, the rest of society had turned away from them, spurned them. He made a moving plea for breaking the emotional and physical distance that separated the tribals from the rest of society: "Our point is that you have got to mix with us. We are willing to mix with you ... ". Singh was not asking for separate electorates, but he felt that reservation of seats in the legislature was essential to allow tribals to represent themselves. It would be a way, he said, of compelling others to hear the voice of tribals, and come near them.

### **3.3 "We were suppressed for thousands of years"**

How were the rights of the Depressed Castes to be defined by the Constitution? During the national movement Ambedkar had demanded separate electorates for the Depressed Castes, and Mahatma Gandhi had opposed it, arguing that this would

Source 7

### “We want removal of our social disabilities”

Dakshayani Velayudhan from Madras, argued:

What we want is not all kinds of safeguards. It is the moral safeguard which gives protection to the underdogs of this country ... I refuse to believe that seventy million Harijans are to be considered as a minority ... what we want is the ... immediate removal of our social disabilities.’

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Source 8

### We have never asked for privileges

Hansa Mehta of Bombay demanded justice for women, not reserved seats, or separate electorates.

We have never asked for privileges. What we have asked for is social justice, economic justice, and political justice. We have asked for that equality which alone can be the basis of mutual respect and understanding, without which real cooperation is not possible between man and woman.

permanently segregate them from the rest of society. How could the Constituent Assembly resolve this opposition? What kinds of protection were the Depressed Castes to be provided?

Some members of the Depressed Castes emphasised that the problem of the “Untouchables” could not be resolved through protection and safeguards alone. Their disabilities were caused by the social norms and the moral values of caste society. Society had used their services and labour but kept them at a social distance, refusing to mix with them or dine with them or allow them entry into temples. “We have been suffering, but we are prepared to suffer no more,” said J. Nagappa from Madras. “We have realised our responsibilities. We know how to assert ourselves.”

Nagappa pointed out that numerically the Depressed Castes were not a minority: they formed between 20 and 25 per cent of the total population. Their suffering was due to their systematic marginalisation, not their numerical insignificance. They had no access to education, no share in the administration. Addressing the assembly, K.J. Khanderkar of the Central Provinces said:

We were suppressed for thousands of years. ... suppressed... to such an extent that neither our minds nor our bodies and now even our hearts work, nor are we able to march forward. This is the position.

After the Partition violence, Ambedkar too no longer argued for separate electorates. The Constituent Assembly finally recommended that untouchability be abolished, Hindu temples be thrown open to all castes, and seats in legislatures and jobs in government offices be reserved for the lowest castes. Many recognised that this could not solve all problems: social discrimination could not be erased only through constitutional legislation, there had to be a change in the attitudes within society. But the measures were welcomed by the democratic public.

### ➔ Discuss...

What were the different arguments that Jaipal Singh put forward in demanding protective measures for the tribals?

## 4. THE POWERS OF THE STATE

One of the topics most vigorously debated in the Constituent Assembly was the respective rights of the Central Government and the states. Among those arguing for a strong Centre was Jawaharlal Nehru. As he put it in a letter to the President of the Constituent Assembly, “Now that partition is a settled fact, ... it would be injurious to the interests of the country to provide for a weak central authority which would be incapable of ensuring peace, of coordinating vital matters of common concern and of speaking effectively for the whole country in the international sphere”.

The Draft Constitution provided for three lists of subjects: Union, State, and Concurrent. The subjects in the first list were to be the preserve of the Central Government, while those in the second list were vested with the states. As for the third list, here Centre and state shared responsibility. However, many more items were placed under exclusive Union control than in other federations, and more placed on the Concurrent list too than desired by the provinces. The Union also had control of minerals and key industries. Besides, Article 356 gave the Centre the powers to take over a state administration on the recommendation of the Governor.

The Constitution also mandated for a complex system of fiscal federalism. In the case of some taxes (for instance, customs duties and Company taxes) the Centre retained all the proceeds; in other cases (such as income tax and excise duties) it shared them with the states; in still other cases (for instance, estate duties) it assigned them wholly to the states. The states, meanwhile, could levy and collect certain taxes on their own: these included land and property taxes, sales tax, and the hugely profitable tax on bottled liquor.

### 4.1 “The centre is likely to break”

The rights of the states were most eloquently defended by K. Santhanam from Madras. A reallocation of powers was necessary, he felt, to strengthen not only the states but also the Centre. “There is almost an obsession that by adding all kinds of powers to the Centre we can make it strong.” This was a misconception, said Santhanam. If the Centre was overburdened with responsibilities, it could not function effectively. By relieving it of some of its functions, and transferring them to the states, the Centre could, in fact, be made stronger.



Source 9

### Who is a better patriot?

Sir A. Ramaswamy Mudaliar from Mysore said during the debate on 21 August 1947:

Let us not lay the flattering unction to our soul that we are better patriots if we propose a strong Centre and that those who advocate a more vigorous examination of these resources are people with not enough of national spirit or patriotism.

As for the states, Santhanam felt that the proposed allocation of powers would cripple them. The fiscal provisions would impoverish the provinces since most taxes, except land revenue, had been made the preserve of the Centre. Without finances how could the states undertake any project of development? “I do not want any constitution in which the Unit has to come to the Centre and say ‘I cannot educate my people. I cannot give sanitation, give me a dole for the improvement of roads, of industries.’ Let us rather wipe out the federal system and let us have Unitary system.” Santhanam predicted a dark future if the proposed distribution of powers was adopted without further scrutiny. In a few years, he said, all the provinces would rise in “revolt against the Centre”.

Many others from the provinces echoed the same fears. They fought hard for fewer items to be put on the Concurrent and Union lists. A member from Orissa warned that “the Centre is likely to break” since powers had been excessively centralised under the Constitution.

#### 4.2 “What we want today is a strong Government”

The argument for greater power to the provinces provoked a strong reaction in the Assembly. The need for a strong centre had been underlined on numerous occasions since the Constituent Assembly had begun its sessions. Ambedkar had declared that he wanted “a strong and united Centre (hear, hear) much stronger than the Centre we had created under the Government of India Act of 1935”. Reminding the members of the riots and violence that was ripping the nation apart, many members had repeatedly stated that the powers of the Centre had to be greatly strengthened to enable it to stop the communal frenzy. Reacting to the demands for giving power to the provinces, Gopalaswami Ayyangar declared that “the Centre should be made as strong as possible”. One member from the United Provinces, Balakrishna Sharma, reasoned at length that only a strong centre could plan for the well-being of the country, mobilise the available economic resources, establish a proper administration, and defend the country against foreign aggression.

Before Partition the Congress had agreed to grant considerable autonomy to the provinces. This had been part of an effort to assure the Muslim League that within the provinces where the Muslim League came

to power the Centre would not interfere. After Partition most nationalists changed their position because they felt that the earlier political pressures for a decentralised structure were no longer there.

There was already a unitary system in place, imposed by the colonial government. The violence of the times gave a further push to centralisation, now seen as necessary both to forestall chaos and to plan for the country's economic development. The Constitution thus showed a distinct bias towards the rights of the Union of India over those of its constituent states.

## 5. THE LANGUAGE OF THE NATION

How could the nation be forged when people in different regions spoke different languages, each associated with its own cultural heritage? How could people listen to each other, or connect with each other, if they did not know each other's language? Within the Constituent Assembly, the language issue was debated over many months, and often generated intense arguments.

By the 1930s, the Congress had accepted that Hindustani ought to be the national language. Mahatma Gandhi felt that everyone should speak in a language that common people could easily understand. Hindustani – a blend of Hindi and Urdu – was a popular language of a large section of the people of India, and it was a composite language enriched by the interaction of diverse cultures. Over the years it had incorporated words and terms from very many different sources, and was therefore understood by people from various regions. This multi-cultural language, Mahatma Gandhi thought, would be the ideal language of communication between diverse communities: it could unify Hindus and Muslims, and people of the north and the south.

From the end of the nineteenth century, however, Hindustani as a language had been gradually changing. As communal conflicts deepened, Hindi and Urdu also started growing apart. On the one hand, there was a move to Sanskritise Hindi, purging it of all words of Persian and Arabic origin. On the other hand, Urdu was being increasingly Persianised. As a consequence, language became associated with the politics of religious identities. Mahatma Gandhi, however, retained his faith in the composite character of Hindustani.

### ➔ Discuss...

What different arguments were put forward by those advocating a strong Centre?

Source 10

### What should the qualities of a national language be ?

A few months before his death Mahatma Gandhi reiterated his views on the language question:

This Hindustani should be neither Sanskritised Hindi nor Persianised Urdu but a happy combination of both. It should also freely admit words wherever necessary from the different regional languages and also assimilate words from foreign languages, provided that they can mix well and easily with our national language. Thus our national language must develop into a rich and powerful instrument capable of expressing the whole gamut of human thought and feelings. To confine oneself to Hindi or Urdu would be a crime against intelligence and the spirit of patriotism.

HARIJANSEVAK, 12 OCTOBER 1947

### 5.1 A plea for Hindi

In one of the earliest sessions of the Constituent Assembly, R. V. Dhulekar, a Congressman from the United Provinces, made an aggressive plea that Hindi be used as the language of constitution-making. When told that not everyone in the Assembly knew the language, Dhulekar retorted: “People who are present in this House to fashion a constitution for India and do not know Hindustani are not worthy to be members of this Assembly. They better leave.” As the House broke up in commotion over these remarks, Dhulekar proceeded with his speech in Hindi. On this occasion peace in the House was restored through Jawaharlal Nehru’s intervention, but the language issue continued to disrupt proceedings and agitate members over the subsequent three years.

Almost three years later, on 12 September 1947, Dhulekar’s speech on the language of the nation once again sparked off a huge storm. By now the Language Committee of the Constituent Assembly had produced its report and had thought of a compromise formula to resolve the deadlock between those who advocated Hindi as the national language and those who opposed it. It had decided, but not yet formally declared, that Hindi in the Devanagari script would be the official language, but the transition to Hindi would be gradual. For the first fifteen years, English would continue to be used for all official purposes. Each province was to be allowed to choose one of the regional languages for official work within the province. By referring to Hindi as the official rather than the national language, the Language Committee of the Constituent Assembly hoped to placate ruffled emotions and arrive at a solution that would be acceptable to all.

Dhulekar was not one who liked such an attitude of reconciliation. He wanted Hindi to be declared not an Official Language, but a National Language. He attacked those who protested that Hindi was being forced on the nation, and mocked at those who said, in the name of Mahatma Gandhi, that Hindustani rather than Hindi ought to be the national language.

Sir, nobody can be more happy than myself that Hindi has become the official language of the country ... Some say that it is a concession to Hindi language. I say “no”. It is a consummation of a historic process.

What particularly perturbed many members was the tone in which Dhulekar was arguing his case. Several times during his speech, the President of the Assembly interrupted Dhulekar and told him: "I do not think you are advancing your case by speaking like this." But Dhulekar continued nonetheless.

### **5.2 The fear of domination**

A day after Dhulekar spoke, Shrimati G. Durgabai from Madras explained her worries about the way the discussion was developing:

Mr President, the question of national language for India which was an almost agreed proposition until recently has suddenly become a highly controversial issue. Whether rightly or wrongly, the people of non-Hindi-speaking areas have been made to feel that this fight, or this attitude on behalf of the Hindi-speaking areas, is a fight for effectively preventing the natural influence of other powerful languages of India on the composite culture of this nation.

Durgabai informed the House that the opposition in the south against Hindi was very strong: "The opponents feel perhaps justly that this propaganda for Hindi cuts at the very root of the provincial languages ..." Yet, she along with many others had obeyed the call of Mahatma Gandhi and carried on Hindi propaganda in the south, braved resistance, started schools and conducted classes in Hindi. "Now what is the result of it all?" asked Durgabai. "I am shocked to see this agitation against the enthusiasm with which we took to Hindi in the early years of the century." She had accepted Hindustani as the language of the people, but now that language was being changed, words from Urdu and other regional languages were being taken out. Any move that eroded the inclusive and composite character of Hindustani, she felt, was bound to create anxieties and fears amongst different language groups.

As the discussion became acrimonious, many members appealed for a spirit of accommodation. A member from Bombay, Shri Shankarrao Deo stated that as a Congressman and a follower of Mahatma Gandhi he had accepted Hindustani as a language of the nation, but he warned: "if you want my whole-hearted support (for Hindi) you must not do now anything which may raise my suspicions and which

will strengthen my fears.” T. A. Ramalingam Chettiar from Madras emphasised that whatever was done had to be done with caution; the cause of Hindi would not be helped if it was pushed too aggressively. The fears of the people, even if they were unjustified, had to be allayed, or else “there will be bitter feelings left behind”. “When we want to live together and form a united nation,” he said, “there should be mutual adjustment and no question of forcing things on people ...”

The Constitution of India thus emerged through a process of intense debate and discussion. Many of its provisions were arrived at through a process of give-and-take, by forging a middle ground between two opposed positions.

However, on one central feature of the Constitution there was substantial agreement. This was on the granting of the vote to every adult Indian. This was an unprecedented act of faith, for in other democracies the vote had been granted slowly, and in stages. In countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, only men of property were first granted the vote; then, men with education were also allowed into the charmed circle. After a long and bitter struggle, men of working-class or peasant background were also given the right to vote. An even longer struggle was required to grant this right to women.

A second important feature of the Constitution was its emphasis on secularism. There was no ringing pronouncement of secularism in the Preamble, but operationally, its key features as understood in Indian contexts were spelled out in an exemplary manner. This was done through the carefully drafted series of Fundamental Rights to “freedom of religion” (Articles 25-28), “cultural and educational rights” (Articles 29, 30), and “rights to equality” (Articles 14, 16, 17). All religions were guaranteed equal treatment by the State and given the right to maintain charitable institutions. The State also sought to distance itself from religious communities, banning compulsory religious instructions in State-run

schools and colleges, and declaring religious discrimination in employment to be illegal. However, a certain legal space was created for social reform within communities, a space that was used to ban untouchability and introduce changes in personal and family laws. In the Indian variant of political secularism, then, there has been no absolute separation of State from religion, but a kind of judicious distance between the two.

The Constituent Assembly debates help us understand the many conflicting voices that had to be negotiated in framing the Constitution, and the many demands that were articulated. They tell us about the ideals that were invoked and the principles that the makers of the Constitution operated with. But in reading these debates we need to be aware that the ideals invoked were very often re-worked according to what seemed appropriate within a context. At times the members of the Assembly also changed their ideas as the debate unfolded over three years. Hearing others argue, some members rethought their positions, opening their minds to contrary views, while others changed their views in reaction to the events around.



*Fig. 15. 9  
B. R. Ambedkar and Rajendra Prasad greeting each other at the time of the handing over of the Constitution*

## TIMELINE

### 1945

26 July	Labour Government comes into power in Britain
December-January	General Elections in India

### 1946

16 May	Cabinet Mission announces its constitutional scheme
6 June	Muslim League accepts Cabinet Mission's constitutional scheme
16 June	Cabinet Mission presents scheme for the formation of an Interim Government at the Centre
2 September	Congress forms Interim Government with Nehru as the Vice-President
13 October	Muslim League decides to join the Interim Government
3-6 December	British Prime Minister, Attlee, meets some Indian leaders; talks fail
9 December	Constituent Assembly begins its sessions

### 1947

29 January	Muslim League demands dissolution of Constituent Assembly
16 July	Last meeting of the Interim Government
11 August	Jinnah elected President of the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan
14 August	Pakistan Independence; celebrations in Karachi
14-15 August	At midnight India celebrates Independence

### 1949

December	Constitution is signed
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### ANSWER IN 100-150 WORDS

1. What were the ideals expressed in the Objectives Resolution?
2. How was the term minority defined by different groups?
3. What were the arguments in favour of greater power to the provinces?
4. Why did Mahatma Gandhi think Hindustani should be the national language?



### WRITE A SHORT ESSAY (250-300 WORDS) ON THE FOLLOWING:

5. What historical forces shaped the vision of the Constitution?
6. Discuss the different arguments made in favour of protection of the oppressed groups.
7. What connection did some of the members of the Constituent Assembly make between the political situation of the time and the need for a strong Centre?
8. How did the Constituent Assembly seek to resolve the language controversy?



### PROJECT

9. Choose any one important constitutional change that has happened in recent years. Find out why the change was made, what different arguments were put forward for the change, and the historical background to the change. If you can, try and look at the Constitutional Assembly Debates (<http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/debates.htm>) to see how the issue was discussed at that time. Write about your findings.



### If you would like to know more, read:

Granville Austin. 1972.  
*The Indian Constitution: The Cornerstone of a Nation.*  
Oxford University Press,  
New Delhi.

Rajeev Bhargava. 2000.  
"Democratic Vision of a New Republic" in F. R. Frankel et al. eds, *Transforming India: Social and Political Dynamics of Democracy.*  
Oxford University Press,  
New Delhi.

Sumit Sarkar. 1983.  
"Indian Democracy: The Historical Inheritance" in Atul Kohli ed., *The Success of India's Democracy.*  
Cambridge University Press,  
Cambridge.

Sumit Sarkar. 1983.  
*Modern India: 1885-1947.*  
Macmillan, New Delhi.



### You could visit:

[parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/debates.htm](http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/debates.htm)

(for a digitalised version of the Constituent Assembly Debates)



## CREDITS FOR ILLUSTRATIONS

### Institutions

- Alkazi Foundation for the Arts, New Delhi  
(Figs. 11.6; 11.8; 12.12; 12.13)
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New Delhi (Fig. 13.15)
- Photo Division, Government of India, New Delhi  
(Figs. 14.3; 14.10; 15.3; 15.4; 15.5; 15.6; 15.9)
- The Osian's Archive and Library Collection, Mumbai  
(Figs. 11.9; 11.18; 13.17)
- Victoria Memorial Museum and Library, Kolkata  
(Fig. 10.6, 10.7)

### Journals

- Builder* (Figs. 12.26)
- Punch* (Figs. 11.13; 11.14; 11.17)
- The Illustrated London News* (Figs. 10.1; 10.10;  
10.11; 10.12; 10.13; 10.14; 10.16; 10.17; 10.18;  
10.19; 11.15; 11.16 )

### Books

- Bayly, C.A., *The Raj: India and the British 1600-1947*  
(Figs. 10.4; 11.10; 11.11; 12.27)
- Dalrymple, William, *The Last Mughal* (Fig. 11.1)
- Daniell, Thomas and William, *Views of Calcutta*  
(Figs. 12.7; 12.8; 12.9; 12.19)
- Evenson, Norma, *The Indian Metropolis: A View  
Toward the West* (Figs. 12.14; 12.16; 12.20;  
12.22; 12.23; 12.25; 12.29; 12.30)
- Metcalf, T.R., *An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture  
and British Raj* (Fig. 12.28)
- Publications Division, *Mahatma Gandhi* (many of the  
Figs. in Ch.14)
- Ruhe, Peter, *Gandhi* (Figs. 13.7; 13.11; 13.12 )
- Singh, Khushwant, *Train to Pakistan* (Figs. 15.1;  
15.4; 15.12; 15.13; 15.15)