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Beating the Boundaries: South Asian History, *c.* 1700–1850

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The conference on 'South Asia and World Capitalism' at Tufts University was intended to point to ways in which South Asian scholars might play a more active role in debates about the origin of the modern world economic and political order. Of course, South Asian historians, anthropologists and economists have considered the region's role in the wider world for many decades now. But their contribution has been recognized less, and has been less significant in generating new approaches, than the parallel efforts of specialists on Latin America ('Dependency Theory'), and on East and South East Asia (peasant 'moral economy' and comparative sociology of scientific knowledge). Scholars of these areas have, it seems, made more acceptable interventions, notably in development and underdevelopment theory, and in the analysis of the colonial and post-colonial state.

Several intellectual obstacles have stood in the way of a more fruitful debate between South Asian scholars and their peers. The area-studies rubric itself tended to emphasize the particular and special in South Asia rather than the comparable and general. Perhaps this was because in the 1960s India appeared to have had more 'success' in insulating itself against the inroads of the colonial- and western-dominated post-colonial world, and to have preserved its 'traditional' cultures, something which seemed less true of these other regions. The powerful and creative fusion of Indology and Indian sociology which produced the models of Indian civilization of Louis Dumont and the 'South Asian mind' of the Chicago group tended to represent India as a polar opposite to Western ideology and the

'Western mind', or at least as a remarkable special case. This meant that India was pre-eminently the place to look for *hierarchy* (Appadurai: 1987), while egalitarian tribal organization, social forms which emphasize sharing and brotherhood or anti-hierarchical movements—all of which tend to detract from the exceptional status of India as a culture essentially defined by hierarchy—have until recently been marginalized in the scholarly debate. Thirdly, an overconcern with formal empire as structure, whether in the form of the Mughal empire, Vijayanagar or the British empire, has tended to distort social and economic analysis towards social groups supposedly working within such polities—landed elites, settled peasants, or specialist merchants—as opposed to social organizations or patterns of special knowledge which operated outside or on the margins of them—nomads, tribals, mobile peasants and agricultural specialists, bards, medical specialists and unorganized networks of devotees, for instance. Finally, to a greater degree than in other area studies, South Asian studies have been bedevilled by a radical separation of the interests of those concerned with culture, intention and meaning, and those concerned with the unintended consequences of action, with social processes and economy. This arose orginally from the clash between the tradition of Indology, which was textually based, and the more pragmatic concern for social and economic analysis associated with the British colonial tradition of writing about India and the work of its nationalist critics.

All these obstacles are perceptibly shifting and dissolving. Ironically, pressure on finances and employment has encouraged co-operation between different centres of area studies and the merging of programmes and interests under the rubric of comparative historical and anthropological studies. This has begun to break down the geographical isolation implicit in an over-rigid and often anachronistic use of the concept 'South Asia'. Comparison is again in favour, more as a heuristic device than an attempt to find general principles of social evolution as it was in the 1960s. Programmes are in train to compare and contrast Islam in South and South East Asia, to compare West and South Asia within the world economy, to compare the role of Indian businessmen in the subcontinent with those in Fiji, the Caribbean and East Africa, and so on. What has been called post-modernist anthropology now also emphasizes the need for a multiplicity of vantage points and voices. Though this can lead in the direction of fragmentation, it has at least had the merit of throwing doubt on the search for one hegemonic description or formula for South Asian society, and of initiating a thorough critique of the discourses which led us towards that search in the first place.

The dominant interest in the formal structures of empire also appears to be weakening. Land-revenue systems—the equivalent for the historian of hierarchy—bulk less large than they did even ten years ago. Other modes of surplus extraction are now receiving greater attention in both pre-colonial and in colonial states (e.g. Bose: 1986) as the history of capital and labour is reintegrated with the history of 'land'. Historical periodicizations long accepted are now being challenged. The 'long' eighteenth century now seems to be a fruitful meeting ground for 'medieval' and 'modern' historians (cf. Stein: 1985b; Washbrook: 1988). Again, a new historical sociology of knowledge might now be constructed which would begin to breach the tradition of separatism, even hostility between those who work on social structure and those who work on ideology (or more recently 'discourse'). Most important, the rewriting of European history itself, especially of what has been called proto-industrialization, has made it possible to see South Asia as something more than a residual category of secular underdevelopment. Once the teleology of mass industrialization, western-style, is abandoned, many features of the Indian past begin to look more interesting again (Chandavarkar: 1985).

If we recognize the possibility that there were many routes to the modern world system, then the late-pre-colonial and early-colonial history of the subcontinent begins to seem a critical and creative period—not simply a hiatus between two empires, or the dark before the dawn of modernization. Many scholars have helped revalue our understanding of later-pre-colonial India. Several writers have demonstrated the sophistication, volume and adaptability of the great oceanic routes linking India to West and South East Asia (Chaudhuri: 1985; Arasaratnam: 1986; Prakash: 1985), and overland trade is once again receiving attention. The stereotype of pre-colonial Asian trades, namely that they were fragmented, volatile, luxury commerce of a peddling variety—an unjustified extension of the ideas of J. C. van Leur—has been decisively banished. The implication of much of the work on the Mughal and post-Mughal land-revenue systems is that there must have existed large-scale, flexible and integrated produce and labour markets in inland India. Another important contribution has been made by shifting attention from trade and artisan production to a more general consideration of the nature of pre-colonial economy and society. Several historians have argued for an indigenously-generated early capitalism, but one which was remarkably 'open' to influences from the wider world of Asian, and indeed European, demand (Subrahmanyam: 1986). This was a flexible economy in which resources could be moved and consolidated, where peasants could shift into artisan production in response to demand, and in which the state was much less extractive and aggressive than had been previously assumed. Whatever the problems with the term 'proto-capitalism' (Perlin: 1983a), the importance of the new approaches was that it allowed us to view many social institutions of South Asia in a new light because they liberated us from the tradition/modernity dichotomy and from the notion that political forms such as the Safavid empire, the Mughal empire or the Ottoman empire were decaying Oriental despotisms. Against this background the 'farming out' of land revenue to men of capital, denounced by many Muslim political theorists and later by colonial authorities, could be seen as an ameliorative system to bring new areas into cultivation (Wink: 1986); moneylending by military groups as a way of recycling plunder back into productive agricultural use; even warfare between emperor and king as a mechanism to limit the extractive power of the state.

Social and political changes previously understood as the degeneration of empire are now seen in more neutral terms. The political fragmentation of the Mughal empire—before 1760 at least—can be read as a process of state and class formation, a consequence of the very expansion of wealth, trade and opportunities which the Mughal dominion had made possible (Alam: 1986a; S. Chandra: 1986). The eighteenth-century successor states were regionally based entities in which Hindu merchant-moneylenders, Hindu and Muslim gentry, or revenue-farming enterprises could consolidate themselves and deepen their power over labour and production. All these changes were accompanied by severe economic disruption, peasant rebellion, political flux and foreign aggression; but much more was happening than can be accommodated in the simple notion of decline of empire or onset of colonialism.

Being open to the historiography of areas outside India also makes it possible to see that similar developments are being reconstructed by scholars for other parts of the world. 'Decentralization' or the rise of provincial elites within the Ottoman empire, for instance, has also come to be seen as something more than simple degeneration (Naff and Owen: 1977; Perry: 1979; al-Sayyid Marsot: 1984; Barnett: 1980). The more compact sultanates of the late Mamelukes in Egypt, Ali Bey for instance, or the Georgian Pashalik of Baghdad, or the *ayans* and notables of the northern parts of the Ottoman empire, have all been interpreted as flexible responses to new conditions rather than as unfruitful caesuras to the Islamic *ancien régime*.

Quite apart from the possibilities for general historiographical comparison, some important lines of more direct connection between 'India' and other parts of the Asian world merit new attention. These show that areas of 'India' were linked into broader inter-regional patterns and that, consequently, the causes of historical change within 'India' itself should sometimes be sought by examining the level of political and economic activity that lies between, as it were, local specificities of the subcontinent and the generalities of the international capitalist system. Headway has been made in the study of interconnections between trading communities across pre-colonial Asia. Much evidence has emerged of the close links between southern Muslim coastal communities of the Coromandel and Malabar coasts, north Ceylon, Acheh and Malaysia on the one side, and the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf on the other. These trades, even where attenuated during the eighteenth-century stagnation, survived into the colonial period. Links of religious observance followed and informed these patterns. Among the Moplas of the south-west coast strong links were maintained with the Hadhramaut and West Asia (Dale: 1980); Sufi shrines on the eastern Coromandel coast were linked in patterns that stretched out to Penang and finally to British Singapore (S. B. Bayly: 1990). Previously dismissed as Indian 'little traditions' within the Indian Islamic world, these can perhaps be seen as part of an expansive cultural movement. The role of Tamil merchant and scribal communities and even of Tamil dynasties in northern Ceylon in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Public Record Office, London COR, 334) suggests that studies of south India might fruitfully consider this Greater Tamil Nadu. It is only the fact that the East India Company ran British India while the Crown ran Ceylon that has obscured this ancient historical continuum.

Similar patterns of service and commercial migration, with their concomitant cultural effects, influenced north India. Long-standing economic links existed between northern India and Iran and Central Asia, and between western India and the Red Sea or Persian Gulf. But beyond the charting of the exchange of commodities, little has been done to put the economies of these regions into the same frame. Little is known about the organization of trade caravans or of the role of unorganized petty traders and hucksters who moved between Iran, the Punjab and north India, or between the western Indian coast and the Persian Gulf and Red Sea. The importance of Muscat Arabs and Arabian sheikhs such as the Sharif of Mecca in the Indian coffee trade also needs to be investigated (e.g. India Office Library, Home Misc. 606). More important perhaps for an understanding of the eighteenth century is the continuing role of Afghan (and to a lesser extent Turkmen) soldiers in the military affairs of north India. The regular migration of central Afghan tribesmen (under the pressure of material expectation and land shortage) into the late-Mughal realm resulted in the creation of many new Afghan states in north India and central India in the course of the eighteenth century. These military rulers recreated in India a range of patronal agrestic relations which were typical of their home territories of Afghanistan. Such were the bondsmen called *fakhirs* in Afghanistan and *halis* in India (Elphinstone: [1815] 1972, II, 34). More attention needs also to be paid to the effects of the irruption of Afghan soldiers on the balance of politics in eighteenth-century India, particularly as its effects spread right to the far south of the subcontinent. The importance of the brief period of Afghan supremacy in north India at the end of the eighteenth century has been greatly underestimated as historians have hurried from the decline of the Mughals to the rise of the East India Company. And attention to the Afghans during this period might also have the effect of reviving interest in Sind and the Indus Valley, areas virtually unrepresented in the historiography because they represented a colonial frontier zone.

All these lacunae result, I think, from the unwritten teleology of Indian studies as well as from a false assumption about 'boundaries'. The teleology privileges the successful, the big capitalist, the peasant farmer, the European trader, the 'landlord', as against the 'unsuccessful' in Indian history—the free-cavalry soldier (Rohilla, Arab, Abyssinian), the 'pirate', the nomad, the petty huckster and the small merchant. Even that great loser of Indian historiography, the weaver, has received surprisingly little attention except when he has been studied in great towns selling to foreign traders.

The radical separation between ideology and structure has also tended to obscure a critical branch of scholarship which might help to bring the two together across another 'boundary' of the subject—the history of the sociology of knowledge. Pre-colonial scholars have been concerned above all with Islamic institutions and the Islamic syllabus, or 'technology'. With few exceptions, historians of the colonial period have been concerned with the creation of elites within formal educational institutions. Another area which must receive more attention is the sociology of knowledge which informed these institutions and motivated the teachers. For instance, syncretism in India under the later Mughals and the successor states has long been seen in religion and culture, not in the everyday arts or philosophies. But the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in India had produced, it seems, an incipient public culture of accounts, accountancy and accountability, representing a fusion between the huge numerate and literate sector of the Hindu Bania (or merchant order) and the rational legalism of the Muslim jurisconsul or of the Hindu officers who replicated his role in the successor states. The rapid elaboration and development of the science of accounting or accountancy—*ilm us siyaq*—is one indication of change. Significantly, several writers of such treatises during this period were members of Hindu clerical and commercial elites, also literate in Persian. In an important sense the generation and reinvention of castes within Hindu society—

groups such as the Kayasthas and Khattris—created new types of social groups. The court, writing, administration and accountancy as much as the temple, Brahmin and Veda formed the matrix for their identity. Similar 'public cultures' reflecting a creative adaptation to entrepreneurial opportunity may have been coming into existence in other parts of the Islamic East. For instance, one could compare the Indian example with the fusion of aspects of Chinese entrepreneurial capital, with the culture of the Javanese state and nobility, or with the mobility of rich peasant families into the status of literate sheikh entrepreneurs at village level in Egypt. These also indicate the dynamism of late-pre-colonial Asia.

What South Asian studies now badly needs is a new history of knowledge, something that transcends a simple concern with educational institutions or the normative values instilled through *pathshala* and *madrasa* (indigenous educational institutions). We need a typology of different systems of knowledge in the pre-colonial order to address the question of how specialist knowledge was aggregated and passed on, and how these different forms related to different types of society and state. Some evidence suggests, for instance, that pre-colonial 'literacy' (the ability to read and write, though not all readers were writers) was much more widespread in south India than it was in central north India (Hagen: 1981), and that 'specialists in accounting' were found in far greater numbers (Phillips: 1717). Did the greater flexibility and the small-scale nature of political systems in the south encourage literacy and numeracy, while the pervasive zamindari power of the north impeded it? An investigation of systems of knowledge would also have to take account of non-formal types of learning, notably the role of bards and astrologers which have been ignored in the search for the formal knowledge of historians and jurists, which is more compatible with western conceptions of 'science, law and religion'. Here the interests of students of ideology and consciousness overlap with those of economic and social historians.

However, at this point some fundamental difficulties come into sight. How are historians to view the transition from these dynamic political and commercial cultures of Asia before 1750 to colonial conquest by about 1820? Previous generations pointed to the expansion of the European economies themselves or to the decisive growth in the military and naval strength of European, and particularly British, power. But the present generation is uneasy with a purely Eurocentric argument because there was no simple connection in other parts of the world between the growing wealth of the West and direct imposition of colonial rule. It is difficult to see any fundamentally new economic drive emanating from the European economies before the first or second decade of the nineteenth century, when industrialized Britain and the Continental Blockade initiated a new search for markets for manufactured goods and the political power overseas to sustain them. And even then it was North and South America which were the main objects of economic assault. In fact total British trade with Asia fell from about 13.5 per cent to 9 per cent between 1780 and 1810—precisely when Britain's domination of India was completed, and when Britain also established its pre-eminence in the eastern archipelago as well as a sphere of influence in the Middle East. Military historians have demonstrated that European military superiority was very fragile in the late eighteenth century, and indeed that Asian powers were rapidly catching up in its last few decades. Even the strength of the European East India Companies was frequently at risk from bankruptcy, feuding and the conflict between private trading and commercial corporate interests.

Rather than seek reasons for the emergence of colonialism solely in the periphery or in Europe, it may be better to try to understand how changes in Asian societies were combined with or appropriated by colonialist initiatives set in motion by Europeans in Asia. Despite the flexible and dynamic nature of pre-colonial political commercial cultures, it is important to stress the degree of conflict to which they were prey. These conflicts (contradictions even) were inherent in their structure and not simply epiphenomena, and they became cumulative after 1700. There appear to be three complementary ways of approaching this issue.

First, even in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, influences from the international trading system and flows of bullion in the external economy may well have had significant consequences for inland Asian and Near Eastern economies. In Egypt, the French demand and supply of manufactures were already distorting indigenous commercial systems before 1750 with implications for other parts of the region (Raymond: 1973). Inflows of bullion into India were erratic, their impact on local economies regionally uneven, and possibly therefore a trigger to political conflict. Changing patterns of European consumption in commodities, such as silk from Iran and indigo from India, may also have had disruptive effects on political systems which had become partly dependent on trading bullion for goods.

Secondly, external influences became confounded with critical endogenous changes which resulted from uneven growth and group formation within Asian economies and societies. Inter-regional imbalances were often reflected in warfare and plunder which weakened Asian states at the very time when they faced increasing pressure from western arms. For instance, a turning point for much of West, Central and South Asia seems to have been the great 'tribal breakout' of Afghan, Persian and Turkmen groups between 1720 and 1760, which disrupted trade and cities and raised the cost of warfare and state-building especially in the eastern sector of 'Islamdom' (Bayly: 1988a). In the latter half of the century the rise of the Wahhabis and the knock-on effect on other Bedouin tribal groups put pressure on the southern part of the Ottoman empire and the Red Sea and Persian Gulf trades. What were the regional interconnections and forces lying behind these 'breakouts'? The military decline of the empires as a result of fiscal crises certainly gave the signal for tribal attack. But it should be emphasized that the groups involved were not isolated marginal people; they were, rather, elements which had done well as a result of the expansion of trade and service under the Mughal, Safavid and Ottoman empires but were increasingly feeling the pressure of governors and revenue-farmers. Indeed, Afghanistan, Iran, India and the southern regions of the Ottoman empire were part of a surprisingly integrated trading and commercial system before 1700. It was imbalances between the honours and remunerations flowing to different parts of this system which held the key to intensified conflict. There is a pressing need for historians of seventeenth and eighteenth-century India, Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia to co-operate and provide a general analysis of the nature and consequences of 'tribal outbreak' on economy and society.

Finally, there were imbalances and conflicts which arose from growth and group formation within the regions themselves (Washbrook: 1988). In India, the appearance of anarchy in the mid and late eighteenth century reflected the concatenation of a wide range of conflicts: over land rights, for the redistribution of resources of silver bullion, for the control of labour which had arisen from the unbalanced earlier growth. Some could be considered manifestations of 'primitive accumulation', some of early capitalism, and some of attempts to tie down labour and create agrestic servitude consonant with a notion of feudalism. But the variety is very great and it would be hazardous to try an overall characterization.

How then did these conflicts contribute to the rise of European domination in Asia? In two main ways. Firstly, they cemented an alliance of convenience between Indian capitalists and entrepreneurs and the East India Company. The British, French and Dutch had been enabled to operate in India mainly because of the region's sophisticated and adaptable trading system and the commercialized form of its patterns of political power. In this India contrasted with China and the Ottoman empire, for instance, where sovereignty appears to have been more sharply demarcated from the commercial world. Economic symbiosis had created links of mutual economic interdependence and ultimately dependency. Robert Clive's *coup* of 1757 in Bengal was not only a *coup* by the East India Company against a Mughal successor state. It was also a *coup* by merchants and nobles who were heavily involved with Company trading in Bengal against a ruler who had tried to redefine that relationship. Everywhere in the subcontinent the British secured the acquiescence and often the financial support of groups of indigenous merchants, financiers and revenue-farmers who sought their system, oppressive as it was, as a sanctuary from uncertainty.

The second point is that the conflicts between regions, economic interests and social groups-in-formation which affected eighteenth-century India—and, it should be added, West and South East Asia—drove indigenous states to attempt a much closer and more intrusive husbanding of their own resources of trade, land revenue and political power. In many ways the attempt to create more compact and powerful states by Tipu Sultan of Mysore, the Raja of Travancore, or even Mir Kasim in Bengal, between 1760 and 1763, were paralleled elsewhere in Asia and the Middle East—Ali Bey in Egypt, the Georgians in Baghdad, the Qajar states in Iran. All represented attempts to monopolize, sedenterize and 'repeasantize' societies which had suffered earlier disruption, often as a result of 'tribal breakouts'. A more aggressive and competent colonialism which emerged in Great Britain after the defeats of the American Wars thus found itself facing Asian states in the process of redefining themselves.

However, these states now faced the more aggressive surrogates of the European nation-states in the form of the regional presidencies of the East India Company with threats they could not ignore. Attempts to stabilize their frontiers with fiscal alliances or by limited warfare led Company armies into direct conflict with these new kingdoms and sultanates, especially during the period 1780 to 1820. In some cases, as in Egypt, or the Ottoman province of Iraq or the Punjab, the colonial power was able only to define the boundaries of the influence of these states and exert some control over their external relations, while hoping gradually to prise trading concessions from them. Elsewhere the financial Black Hole of the Company required feeding from their revenues and resources. Notably in India and Java, direct administration was created because the piecemeal erosion of the indigenous states had created a situation of military insecurity for the Europeans.

Two final points need to be made. First, whether in quasi-independent, para-colonial states or in imperial provinces, local rulers and colonial authorities constructed during the early nineteenth century social systems which were compatible with the world market and local state-building from the detritus of earlier social and economic relationships. Commercialization, peasantization and reurbanization were carried out within the order established both by late indigenous states such as Qajar Iran, or Ranjit Singh's Punjab, or Muhammad Ali's Egypt, as well as in colonial provinces. On the other hand, the capture by the surrogate of a European nation-state of an imperial level of the Indian political economy did not even in the long term imply the destruction and assimilation of all other levels of

power. On the contrary, many existing interests within Indian and other Asian societies were able to establish privileged positions within the colonial system by exploiting the inherent contradiction between its need for military and financial security on the one hand, and the desire indirectly to foster social forms compatible with the expansion of capitalist relations on the other. Political resistance and economic compliance ensured that the segmented nature of the Indian political and economic order was actually perpetuated and even strengthened under colonialism. In this sense the *differential* effect of the expansion of the international capitalist system can only be understood in terms of the resilience and the adaptation of some features of the ancient regime.

This essay has suggested ways in which the historiography of South Asia could be revitalized by a re-examination of internal and external boundaries which the subject has inherited, often from the 'knowledge' of the colonial rulers. One way is to explore how processes which we have tended to regard as South Asian were tied into wider inter-regional social and economic patterns. Another is to examine periods which have been conventionally seen as hiatuses between periods that possess a clearly marked political or economic identity. A third is to investigate the sociology of knowledge as a way of bringing together the history of ideas and the history of knowledge. All these could add nuance, variety and meaning to the study of the evolving relationship between South Asia and World Capitalism.