

THE ANARCHY

The Relentless Rise of
the East India Company

WILLIAM DALRYMPLE

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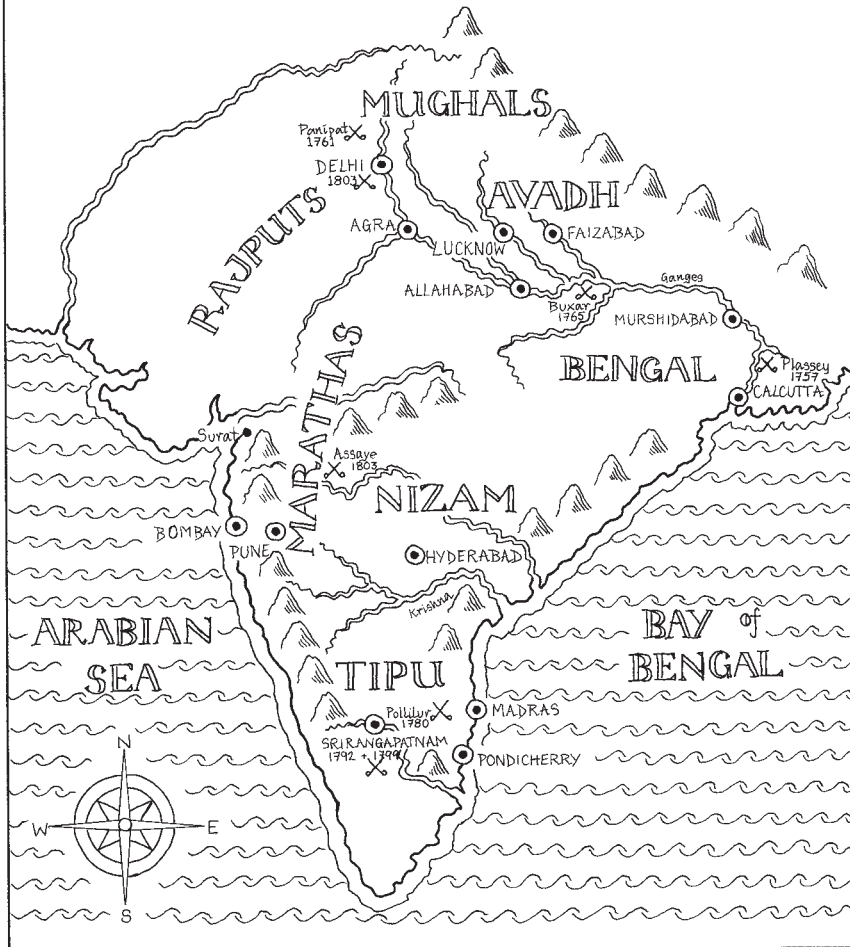
A commercial company enslaved a nation comprising two hundred million people.

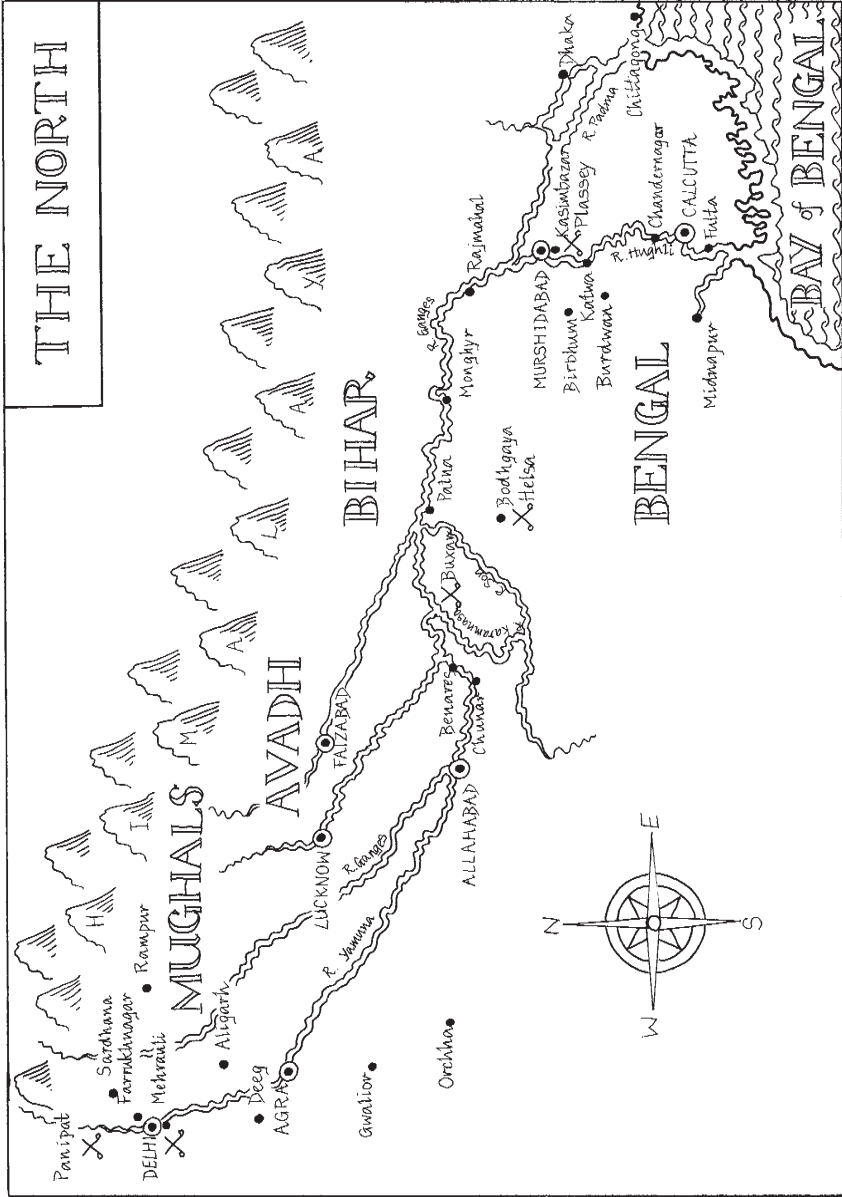
Leo Tolstoy, Letter to a Hindu, 14 December 1908

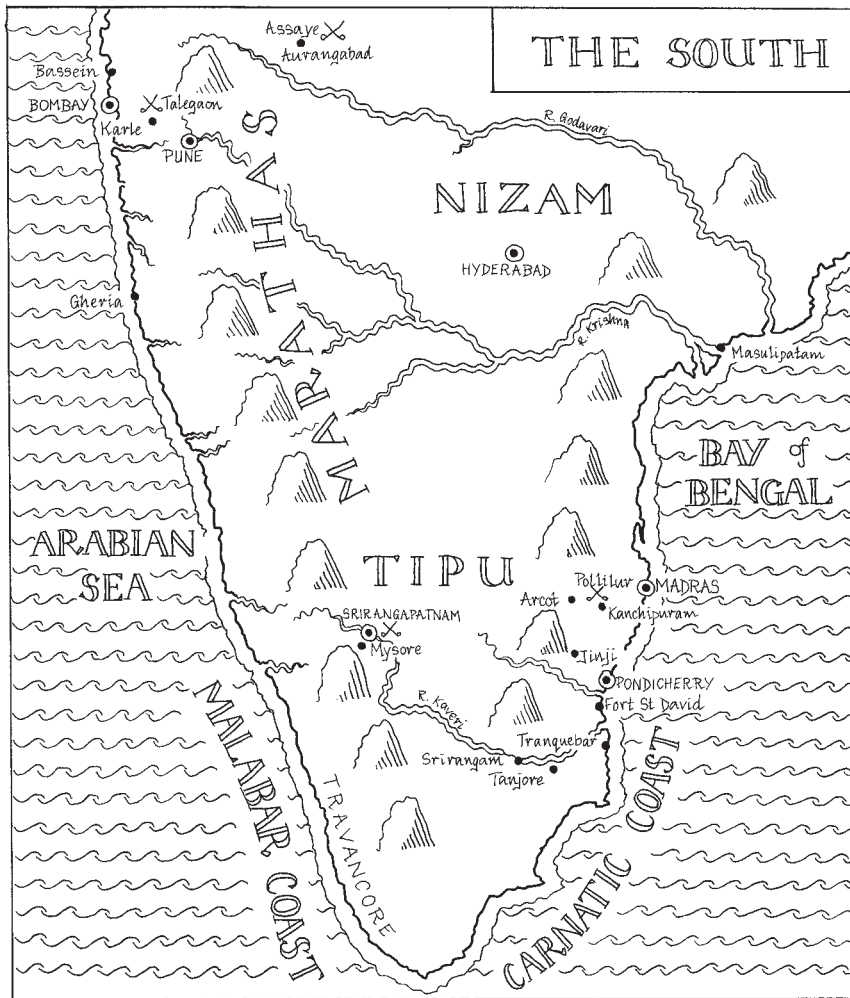
Corporations have neither bodies to be punished, nor souls to be condemned, they therefore do as they like.

Edward, First Baron Thurlow (1731–1806), the Lord Chancellor during the impeachment of Warren Hastings

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY INDIA







Dramatis Personae

I. THE BRITISH

Robert Clive, 1st Baron Clive

1725–74

East India Company accountant who rose through his remarkable military talents to be Governor of Bengal. Thickset, laconic, but fiercely ambitious and unusually forceful, he proved to be a violent and ruthless but extremely capable leader of the Company and its military forces in India. He had a streetfighter's eye for sizing up an opponent, a talent at seizing the opportunities presented by happenchance, a willingness to take great risks and a breathtaking, aggressive audacity. It was he who established the political and military supremacy of the East India Company in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, and laid the foundations for British rule in India.

Warren Hastings

1732–1818

Scholar and linguist who was the first Governor of the Presidency of Fort William, the head of the Supreme Council of Bengal and the de facto first Governor General of India from 1773 to 1785. Plain-living, scholarly, diligent and austere workaholic, he was a noted Indophile who in his youth fought hard against the looting of Bengal by his colleagues. However his feud with Philip Francis led to him being accused of corruption and he was impeached by Parliament. After a long and very public trial he was finally acquitted in 1795.

Philip Francis*1740–1818*

Irish-born politician and scheming polemicist, thought to be the author of *The Letters of Junius*, and the chief opponent and antagonist of Warren Hastings. Wrongly convinced that Hastings was the source of all corruption in Bengal, and ambitious to replace him as Governor General, he pursued Hastings from 1774 until his death. Having failed to kill Hastings in a duel, and instead receiving a pistol ball in his own ribs, he returned to London where his accusations eventually led to the impeachment of both Hastings and his Chief Justice, Elijah Impey. Both were ultimately acquitted.

Charles Cornwallis, 1st Marquess Cornwallis*1738–1805*

Having surrendered British forces in North America to a combined American and French force at the Siege of Yorktown in 1781, Cornwallis was recruited as Governor General of India by the East India Company to stop the same happening there. A surprisingly energetic administrator, he introduced the Permanent Settlement, which increased Company land revenues in Bengal, and defeated Tipu Sultan in the 1782 Third Anglo-Mysore War.

Richard Colley Wellesley, 1st Marquess Wellesley*1760–1842*

Governor General of India who conquered more of India than Napoleon did of Europe. Despising the mercantile spirit of the East India Company, and answering instead to the dictates of his Francophobe friend Dundas, President of the Board of Trade, he used the East India Company's armies and resources successfully to wage the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War, which ended with the killing of Tipu Sultan and the destruction of his capital in 1799, then the Second Anglo-Maratha War, which led to the defeat of the armies of both Scindia and Holkar in 1803. By this time he had expelled the last French units from India and given the East India Company control of most of the subcontinent south of the Punjab.

Colonel Arthur Wellesley*1769–1852*

Governor of Mysore and ‘Chief Political and Military Officer in the Deccan and Southern Maratha Country’, he helped defeat the armies of Tipu in 1799 and those of the Marathas in 1803. Later famous as the Duke of Wellington.

Gerald, 1st Viscount Lake*1744–1808*

Lord Lake, who liked to claim descent from the Arthurian hero Lancelot of the Lake, was not a man who admired diplomacy: ‘Damn your writing,’ he is alleged to have cried at an army bookkeeper. ‘Mind your fighting!’ Although sixty years old, and a veteran of the Seven Years War and the American War of Independence, where he fought against Washington at Yorktown, he was famous for his boyish charm and immense energy, often rising at 2 a.m. to be ready to lead the march, blue eyes flashing. He was Wellesley’s very capable Commander in Chief and in 1803 was put in charge of defeating the Maratha armies of Hindustan in the northern theatre of operations.

Edward Clive, 1st Earl of Powis*1754–1839*

Son of Robert Clive (‘Clive of India’), he was the notably unintelligent Governor of Madras

2. THE FRENCH

Joseph-François Dupleix*1697–1764*

Governor General of the French establishments in India, who lost the Carnatic Wars in southern India to the young Robert Clive.

Michel Joachim Marie Raymond*1755–98*

Mercenary commander of the French Battalion in Hyderabad.

General Pierre Cuiller-Perron*1755–1834*

Perron was the son of a Provençal weaver who succeeded the far more capable Benoît de Boigne as Commander of Scindia's regiments. He lived with his troops a hundred miles to the south-east of Delhi in the great fortress of Aligarh, but in 1803 betrayed his men in return for a promise by the Company to let him leave India with his life savings.

3. THE MUGHALS

Alamgir Aurangzeb*1618–1707*

Charmless and puritanical Mughal Emperor, whose overly ambitious conquest of the Deccan first brought Mughal dominions to their widest extent, then led to their eventual collapse. His alienation of the Empire's Hindu population, and especially the Rajput allies, by his religious bigotry accelerated the collapse of the Empire after his death.

Muhammad Shah Rangila*1702–48*

Effete Mughal aesthete whose administrative carelessness and lack of military talent led to his defeat by the Persian warlord Nader Shah at the Battle of Karnal in 1739. Nader Shah looted Mughal Delhi, taking away with him the Peacock Throne, into which was embedded the legendary Koh-i-Noor diamond. He returned to Persia, leaving Muhammad Shah a powerless king with an empty treasury and the Mughal Empire bankrupt and fractured beyond repair.

Ghazi ud-Din Khan, Imad ul-Mulk*1736–1800*

The teenage megalomaniac grandson of Nizam ul-Mulk, 1st Nizam of Hyderabad. He first turned on and defeated his patron, Safdar Jung, in 1753, then blinded, imprisoned and finally murdered his Emperor, Ahmad Shah, in 1754. Having placed Alamgir II on the throne in his stead, he then tried to capture and kill the latter's son, Shah Alam, and finally assassinated his own puppet Emperor in 1759. He fled Delhi after the rise of the Afghan Najib ud-Daula, who succeeded him as effective Governor of Delhi.

Alamgir II*1699–1759*

The son of the Emperor Jahandar Shah, and the father of Shah Alam II, he was taken out from the Salatin Cage and made puppet Emperor by Imad ul-Mulk in 1754, only to be assassinated on his orders in Feroz Shah Kotla in 1759, four years later.

Shah Alam*1728–1806*

Handsome and talented Mughal prince whose life was dogged by defeat and bad luck but who showed an extraordinary determination through horrific trials. As a boy he had seen Nadir Shah ride into Delhi and loot it. He later escaped Imad ul-Mulk's attempt to assassinate him and survived repeated battles with Clive. He fought the Company at Patna and Buxar, awarded the Diwani to Clive at Allahabad and defied Warren Hastings by his cross-country trek back to Delhi. There, with Mirza Najaf Khan, against all the odds he nearly succeeded in rebuilding the empire of his ancestors; only to see it vanish like a mirage after the premature death of that last great Mughal general. Finally, at his lowest point, the Emperor was assaulted and blinded by his psychotic former favourite, Ghulam Qadir. Despite these trials he never gave up, and only briefly – after the rape of his family and his blinding by the Rohillas – did he allow himself to give way to despair. In the most adverse circumstances imaginable, that of the Great Anarchy, he ruled over a court of high culture, and as well as writing fine verse himself he was a generous patron to poets, scholars and artists.

4. THE NAWABS

Aliverdi Khan, Nawab of Bengal*1671–1756*

Aliverdi Khan, who was of mixed Arab and Afshar Turkman stock, came to power in 1740 in Bengal, the richest province of the Mughal Empire, in a military coup financed and masterminded by the immensely powerful Jagat Seth bankers. A cat-loving epicure who loved to fill his evenings with good food, books and stories, after defeating the Marathas he created in Murshidabad a strong and dazzling Shia court culture, and a stable political, economic and political centre which was a rare island of calm and prosperity amid the anarchy of Mughal decline.

Siraj ud-Daula, Nawab of Bengal

1733–57

Grandson of Aliverdi Khan and the man whose attack on the East India Company factories in Kasimbazar and Calcutta began the Company's conquest of Bengal. Not one of the many sources for the period – Persian, Bengali, Mughal, French, Dutch or English – has a good word to say about Siraj: according to Jean Law, who was his political ally, 'His reputation was the worst imaginable.' The most damning portrait of him, however, was painted by his own cousin, Ghulam Hussain Khan, who had been part of his staff and was profoundly shocked by the man he depicts as a serial bisexual rapist and psychopath: 'His character was a mix of ignorance and profligacy,' he wrote.

Mir Jafar, Nawab of Bengal

c. 1691–1765

An uneducated Arab soldier of fortune originally from the Shia shrine town of Najaf, he had played his part in many of Aliverdi's most crucial victories against the Marathas, and led the successful attack on Calcutta for Siraj ud-Daula in 1756. He joined the conspiracy hatched by the Jagat Seths to replace Siraj ud-Daula with his own rule, and soon found himself the puppet ruler of Bengal at the whim of the East India Company. Robert Clive rightly described him as 'a prince of little capacity'.

Mir Qasim, Nawab of Bengal

d. 1763

Mir Qasim was as different a man as could be imagined from his chaotic and uneducated father-in-law, Mir Jafar. Of noble Persian extraction, though born on his father's estates near Patna, Mir Qasim was small in frame, with little military experience, but young, capable, intelligent and, above all, determined. He conspired with the Company to replace the incompetent Mir Jafar in a coup in 1760 and succeeded in creating a tightly run state with a modern infantry army. But within three years he ended up coming into conflict with the Company and in 1765 what remained of his forces were finally defeated at the Battle of Buxar. He fled westwards and died in poverty near Agra.

Shuja ud-Daula, Nawab of Avadh

1732–74

Shuja ud-Daula, son of the great Mughal Vizier Safdar Jung and his successor as Nawab of Avadh, was a giant of a man. Nearly seven feet

tall, with oiled moustaches that projected from his face like a pair of outstretched eagle's wings, he was a man of immense physical strength. By 1763, he was past his prime, but still reputedly strong enough to cut off the head of a buffalo with a single swing of his sword, or lift up two of his officers, one in each hand. His vices were his overweening ambition, his haughty self-importance and his inflated opinion of his own abilities. This was something that immediately struck the urbane intellectual Ghulam Hussain Khan, who regarded him as a slight liability, every bit as foolish as he was bold. Shuja, he wrote, 'was equally proud and ignorant ...' He was defeated by the Company at the Battle of Buxar in 1765 and replaced by Clive back on the throne of Avadh, where he ruled until the end of his life as a close ally of the EIC.

5. THE ROHILLAS

Najib Khan Yusufzai, Najib ud-Daula

d. 1770

Former Yusufzai Pashtun horse dealer who served the Mughals as a cavalry commander, but deserted to Ahmad Shah Durrani during his invasion of 1757. He became Ahmad Shah's Governor of Delhi, based for the final part of his career in his eponymous capital of Najibabad, near Saharanpur, until his death in 1770.

Zabita Khan Rohilla

d. 1785

Rohilla chieftain who fought at Panipat and rebelled repeatedly against Shah Alam. He was the son of Najib ud-Daula and the father of Ghulam Qadir.

Ghulam Qadir Khan Rohilla

c. 1765–1787

Ghulam Qadir was the son of Zabita Khan Rohilla. He was captured by Shah Alam at the fall of Ghausgarh in 1772 and taken back to Delhi where he was brought up as an imperial prince in Qudsia Bagh. Some sources indicate that he was a favourite of Shah Alam and may even have become his catamite. In 1788, possibly in revenge for offences at this time, he attacked Delhi, looted the Red Fort, tortured and raped the imperial household and blinded Shah Alam. He was eventually captured and himself tortured to death by the Maratha troops of Mahadji Scindia.

6. THE SULTANS OF MYSORE

Haidar Ali*d. 1782*

Officer in the Mysore army who overthrew the Wadyar Rajas of Mysore in 1761 and seized power in their place. Having learned modern infantry warfare by observing French tactics, he offered strong resistance to the East India Company, gaining his most notable victory alongside his son Tipu Sultan at Pollilur in 1780.

Tipu Sultan*1750–99*

Warrior Sultan of Mysore, who defeated the East India Company in several campaigns, most notably alongside his father Haidar Ali at the Battle of Pollilur in 1780. He succeeded his father in 1782 and ruled with great efficiency and imagination during peace, but with great brutality in war. He was forced to cede half his kingdom to Lord Cornwallis's Triple Alliance with the Marathas and Hyderabadis in 1792 and was finally defeated and killed by Lord Wellesley in 1799.

7. THE MARATHAS

Chhatrapati Shivaji Bhonsle*d. 1680*

Maratha war leader who carved out a kingdom in the Deccan from the ruins of the Adil Shahi Sultanate of Bijapur and then fought against the Mughal Empire, which had conquered Bijapur in 1686. Having turned himself into the nemesis of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, he built forts, created a navy and raided deep into Mughal territory. He was crowned Chhatrapati, or Lord of the Umbrella, at two successive coronation ceremonies at Raigad towards the end of his life in 1674.

Nana Phadnavis*1742–1800*

Pune-based statesman and minister to the Peshwas, known as 'the Maratha Machiavelli'. He was one of the first to realise that the East India Company posed an existential threat to India and tried to organise

a Triple Alliance with the Hyderabadis and the Sultans of Mysore to drive them out, but failed to carry the project through to its conclusion.

Tukoji Holkar

1723–97I

Dashing Maratha chieftain who survived the Battle of Panipat to become the great rival of Mahadji Scindia in north India.

Mahadji Scindia

1730–94

Maratha chieftain and statesman who was the most powerful Indian ruler in northern Hindustan for twenty years, from the 1770s onwards. Badly wounded at the Battle of Panipat in 1761, he limped for the rest of his life and became hugely fat, but he was a shrewd politician who took Shah Alam under his wing from 1771 onwards and turned the Mughals into Maratha puppets. He created a powerful modern army under the Savoyard General Benoît de Boigne, but towards the end of his life his rivalry with Tukoji Holkar and his unilateral peace with the East India Company at the Treaty of Salbai both did much to undermine Maratha unity and created the conditions for the final Company victory over the Marathas nine years after his death.

Peshwa Baji Rao II

1775–1851

The Last Peshwa of the Maratha Empire, who ruled from 1795–1818. When he first succeeded to the *musnud* he was slight, timid, unconfident-looking boy of twenty-one with a weak chin and a downy upper lip. He quickly showed himself comprehensively unequal to the challenge of holding together the different factions that made up his Maratha power base, and the treaty he signed with the East India Company at Bassein in 1802 led to the final unravelling of the great Maratha Confederacy.

Daulat Rao Scindia

1779–1827

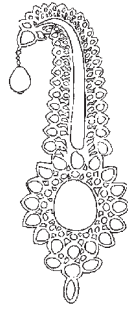
When Mahadji Scindia died in 1794, his successor, Daulat Rao, was only fifteen. The boy inherited the magnificent army that Benoît de Boigne trained up for his predecessor, but he showed little vision or talent in its

deployment. His rivalry with the Holkars and failure to come together and create a common front against the East India Company led to the disastrous Second Anglo-Maratha War of 1803. This left the East India Company the paramount power in India and paved the way for the British Raj.

Jaswant Rao Holkar

1776–1811

Jaswant Rao was the illegitimate son of Tukoji Holkar by a concubine. A remarkable war leader, he showed less grasp of diplomacy and allowed the East India Company fatally to divide the Maratha Confederacy, defeating Scindia first and then forcing him into surrender the following year. This left the Company in possession of most of Hindustan by the end of 1803.



Introduction

One of the very first Indian words to enter the English language was the Hindustani slang for plunder: *loot*. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, this word was rarely heard outside the plains of north India until the late eighteenth century, when it suddenly became a common term across Britain. To understand how and why it took root and flourished in so distant a landscape, one need only visit Powis Castle in the Welsh Marches.

The last hereditary Welsh prince, the memorably named Owain Gruffydd ap Gwenwynwyn, built Powis Castle as a craggy fort in the thirteenth century; the estate was his reward for abandoning Wales to the rule of the English monarchy. But its most spectacular treasures date from a much later period of English conquest and appropriation.

For Powis is simply awash with loot from India, room after room of imperial plunder, extracted by the East India Company (EIC) in the eighteenth century. There are more Mughal artefacts stacked in this private house in the Welsh countryside than are on display in any one place in India – even the National Museum in Delhi. The riches include hookahs of burnished gold inlaid with empurpled ebony; superbly inscribed Badakhshan spinels and jewelled daggers; gleaming rubies the

colour of pigeon's blood, and scatterings of lizard-green emeralds. There are tiger's heads set with sapphires and yellow topaz; ornaments of jade and ivory; silken hangings embroidered with poppies and lotuses; statues of Hindu gods and coats of elephant armour. In pride of place stand two great war trophies taken after their owners had been defeated and killed: the palanquin Siraj ud-Daula, the Nawab of Bengal, left behind when he fled the battlefield of Plassey, and the campaign tent of Tipu Sultan, the Tiger of Mysore.

Such is the dazzle of these treasures that, as a visitor last summer, I nearly missed the huge framed canvas that explains how all this loot came to be here. The picture hangs in the shadows over a doorway in a wooden chamber at the top of a dark, oak-panelled staircase. It is not a masterpiece, but it does repay close study. An effete Indian prince, wearing cloth of gold, sits high on his throne under a silken canopy. On his left stand scimitar- and spear-carrying officers from his own army; to his right, a group of powdered and periwigged Georgian gentlemen. The prince is eagerly thrusting a scroll into the hands of a slightly overweight Englishman in a red frock coat.

The painting shows a scene from August 1765, when the young Mughal emperor Shah Alam, exiled from Delhi and defeated by East India Company troops, was forced into what we would now call an act of involuntary privatisation. The scroll is an order to dismiss his own Mughal revenue officials in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and replace them with a set of English traders appointed by Robert Clive – the new governor of Bengal – and the directors of the Company, whom the document describes as ‘the high and mighty, the noblest of exalted nobles, the chief of illustrious warriors, our faithful servants and sincere well-wishers, worthy of our royal favours, the English Company’. The collecting of Mughal taxes was henceforth subcontracted to a powerful multinational corporation – whose revenue-collecting operations were protected by its own private army.

The Company had been authorised by its founding charter to ‘wage war’ and had been using violence to gain its ends since it boarded and captured a Portuguese vessel on its maiden voyage in 1602. Moreover, it had controlled small areas around its Indian settlements since the 1630s.¹ Nevertheless, 1765 was really the moment that the East India Company ceased to be anything even distantly resembling a conventional trading corporation, dealing in silks and spices, and became something

altogether much more unusual. Within a few months, 250 company clerks, backed by the military force of 20,000 locally recruited Indian soldiers, had become the effective rulers of the richest Mughal provinces. An international corporation was in the process of transforming itself into an aggressive colonial power.

By 1803, when its private army had grown to nearly 200,000 men, it had swiftly subdued or directly seized an entire subcontinent. Astonishingly, this took less than half a century. The first serious territorial conquests began in Bengal in 1756; forty-seven years later, the Company's reach extended as far north as the Mughal capital of Delhi, and almost all of India south of that city was by then effectively ruled from a boardroom in the City of London. 'What honour is left to us?' asked a Mughal official, 'when we have to take orders from a handful of traders who have not yet learned to wash their bottoms?'²

We still talk about the British conquering India, but that phrase disguises a more sinister reality. It was not the British government that began seizing great chunks of India in the mid-eighteenth century, but a dangerously unregulated private company headquartered in one small office, five windows wide, in London, and managed in India by a violent, utterly ruthless and intermittently mentally unstable corporate predator – Clive. India's transition to colonialism took place under a for-profit corporation, which existed entirely for the purpose of enriching its investors.

At the height of the Victorian period in the mid-nineteenth century there was a strong sense of embarrassment about the shady, brutal and mercantile way the British had founded the Raj. The Victorians thought the real stuff of history was the politics of the nation state. This, not the economics of corrupt corporations, they believed was the fundamental unit of study and the real driver of transformation in human affairs. Moreover, they liked to think of the empire as a *mission civilisatrice*: a benign national transfer of knowledge, railways and the arts of civilisation from West to East, and there was a calculated and deliberate amnesia about the corporate looting that opened British rule in India.

A second picture, this one commissioned from William Rothenstein to be painted onto the walls of the House of Commons, shows how successfully the official memory of this process was spun and subtly reworked by the Victorians. It can still be found in St Stephen's Hall,

the echoing reception area of the Westminster Parliament. The painting was part of a series of murals entitled *The Building of Britain*. It features what the Hanging Committee at the time regarded as the highlights and turning points of British history: King Alfred defeating the Danes in 877, the parliamentary union of England and Scotland in 1707, and so on.

The fresco in this series that deals with India shows another image of a Mughal prince sitting on a raised dais, under a canopy. Again, we are in a court setting, with bowing attendants on all sides and trumpets blowing, and again an Englishman is standing in front of the Mughal. But this time the balance of power is very different.

Sir Thomas Roe, the ambassador sent by James I to the Mughal court, is shown before the Emperor Jahangir in 1614 – at a time when the Mughal empire was still at its richest and most powerful. Jahangir inherited from his father Akbar one of the two wealthiest polities in the world, rivalled only by Ming China. His lands stretched through most of India, all of what is now Pakistan and Bangladesh, and most of Afghanistan. He ruled over five times the population commanded by the Ottomans – roughly 100 million people – and his subjects produced around a quarter of all global manufactures.

Jahangir's father Akbar had flirted with a project to civilise India's European immigrants, whom he described as 'an assemblage of savages', but later dropped the plan as unworkable. Jahangir, who had a taste for exotica and wild beasts, welcomed Sir Thomas Roe with the same enthusiasm he had shown for the arrival of the first turkey in India, and questioned Roe closely on the oddities of Europe. For the committee who planned the House of Commons paintings, this marked the beginning of British engagement with India: two nation states coming into direct contact for the first time. Yet, as the first chapter of this book shows, British relations with India actually began not with diplomacy and the meeting of royal envoys, but with a trade mission led by Captain William Hawkins, a bibulous Company sea dog who, on arrival in Agra, accepted a wife offered to him by the emperor and merrily brought her back to England. This was a version of history the House of Commons Hanging Committee chose to forget.

In many ways the East India Company was a model of commercial efficiency: one hundred years into its history, it had only thirty-five permanent employees in its head office. Nevertheless, that skeleton staff executed a corporate coup unparalleled in history: the military

conquest, subjugation and plunder of vast tracts of southern Asia. It almost certainly remains the supreme act of corporate violence in world history.

Historians propose many reasons for the astonishing success of the Company: the fracturing of Mughal India into tiny, competing states; the military edge that Frederick the Great's military innovations had given the European Companies; and particularly the innovations in European governance, taxation and banking that allowed the Company to raise vast sums of ready money at a moment's notice. For behind the scarlet uniforms and the Palladian palaces, the tiger shoots and the polkas at Government House always lay the balance sheets of the Company's accountants, with their ledgers laying out profit and loss, and the Company's fluctuating share price on the London Stock Exchange.

Yet perhaps the most crucial factor of all was the support that the East India Company enjoyed from the British Parliament. The relationship between them grew steadily more symbiotic throughout the eighteenth century until eventually it turned into something we might today call a public-private partnership. Returned nabobs like Clive used their wealth to buy both MPs and parliamentary seats – the famous Rotten Boroughs. In turn, Parliament backed the Company with state power: the ships and soldiers that were needed when the French and British East India Companies trained their guns on each other.

For the Company always had two targets in its sights: one was the lands where its business was conducted; but the other was the country that gave it birth, as its lawyers and lobbyists and MP shareholders slowly and subtly worked to influence and subvert the legislation of Parliament in its favour. Indeed, the East India Company probably invented corporate lobbying. In 1693, less than a century after its foundation, the EIC was discovered for the first time to be using its own shares for buying parliamentarians, annually shelling out £1,200 a year to prominent MPs and ministers. The parliamentary investigation into this, the world's first corporate lobbying scandal, found the EIC guilty of bribery and insider trading, and led to the impeachment of the Lord President of the Council, and the imprisonment of the Company's Governor.

Although its total trading capital was permanently lent to the British state, when it suited, the East India Company made much of its legal separation from the government. It argued forcefully, and successfully, that the document signed by Shah Alam in 1765 – known as the

Diwani – was the legal property of the Company, not the Crown, even though the government had spent an enormous sum on naval and military operations protecting the EIC's Indian acquisitions. But the MPs who voted to uphold this legal distinction were not exactly neutral: nearly a quarter of them held Company stock, which would have plummeted in value had the Crown taken over. For the same reason, the need to protect the Company from foreign competition became a major aim of British foreign policy.

The transaction depicted in the painting was to have catastrophic consequences. As with all such corporations, then as now, the EIC was answerable only to its shareholders. With no stake in the just governance of the region, or its long-term well-being, the Company's rule quickly turned into the straightforward pillage of Bengal, and the rapid transfer westwards of its wealth.

Before long the province, already devastated by war, was struck down by the famine of 1769, then further ruined by high taxation. Company tax collectors were guilty of what was then described as the 'shaking of the pagoda tree' – what today would be described as major human rights violations committed in the process of gathering taxes. Bengal's wealth rapidly drained into Britain, while its prosperous weavers and artisans were coerced 'like so many slaves' by their new masters.

A good proportion of the loot of Bengal went directly into Clive's pocket. He returned to Britain with a personal fortune, then valued at £234,000, that made him the richest self-made man in Europe. After the Battle of Plassey in 1757 – a victory that owed as much to treachery, forged contracts, bankers and bribes as it did to military prowess – he transferred to the EIC treasury no less than £2.5 million* seized from the defeated rulers of Bengal – unprecedented sums at the time. No great sophistication was required. The entire contents of the Bengal treasury were simply loaded into one hundred boats and floated down the Ganges from the Nawab of Bengal's palace in Murshidabad to Fort William, the Company's Calcutta headquarters. A portion of the proceeds was later spent rebuilding Powis.

The painting of Clive and Shah Alam at Powis is subtly deceptive: the painter, Benjamin West, had never been to India. Even at the time,

* £262.5 million today.

a reviewer noted that the mosque in the background bore a suspiciously strong resemblance 'to our venerable dome of St Paul'. In reality, there had been no grand public ceremony. The transfer took place privately, inside Clive's tent, which had just been erected on the parade ground of the newly seized Mughal fort at Allahabad. As for Shah Alam's silken throne, it was in fact Clive's armchair, which for the occasion had been hoisted on to his dining-room table and covered with a chintz bedspread.

Later, the British dignified the document by calling it the Treaty of Allahabad, though Clive had dictated the terms and a terrified Shah Alam had simply waved them through. As the contemporary Mughal historian Ghulam Hussain Khan put it: 'A business of such magnitude, and which at any other time would have required the sending of wise ambassadors and able negotiators, and much negotiation and contention with the ministers, was done and finished in less time than would usually have been taken up for the sale of a jack-ass, or a beast of burden, or a head of cattle.'³

Before long the EIC was straddling the globe. Almost single-handedly it reversed the balance of trade, which from Roman times on had led to a continual drain of Western bullion eastwards. The EIC ferried opium east to China, and in due course fought the Opium Wars in order to seize an offshore base at Hong Kong and safeguard its profitable monopoly in narcotics.

To the West it shipped Chinese tea to Massachusetts, where its dumping in Boston harbour triggered the American War of Independence. Indeed, one of the principal fears of the American Patriots in the run-up to the war was that Parliament would unleash the East India Company in the Americas to loot there as it had done in India. In November 1773, the Patriot John Dickinson described EIC tea as 'accursed Trash', and compared the potential future regime of the East India Company in America to being 'devoured by Rats'. This 'almost bankrupt Company', he said, having been occupied in wreaking 'the most unparalleled Barbarities, Extortions and Monopolies' in Bengal, had now 'cast their Eyes on America, as a new Theatre, whereon to exercise their Talents of Rapine, Oppression and Cruelty'.⁴

By 1803, when the EIC captured the Mughal capital of Delhi, and within it, the sightless monarch, Shah Alam, sitting blinded in his ruined palace, the Company had trained up a private security force of around 200,000 – twice the size of the British army – and marshalled more firepower than any nation state in Asia.

A mere handful of businessmen from a distant island on the rim of Europe now ruled dominions that stretched continuously across northern India from Delhi in the west to Assam in the east. Almost the entire east coast was in the Company's hands, together with all the most strategic points on the west coast between Gujarat and Cape Comorin. In just over forty years they had made themselves masters of almost all the subcontinent, whose inhabitants numbered 50 to 60 million, succeeding an empire where even minor provincial nawabs and governors ruled over vast areas, larger in both size and population than the biggest countries of Europe.

The EIC was, as one of its directors admitted, 'an empire within an empire', with the power to make war or peace anywhere in the East. It had also by this stage created a vast and sophisticated administration and civil service, built much of London's Docklands and come close to generating nearly half of Britain's trade. No wonder that the EIC now referred to itself as 'the grandest society of merchants in the Universe'.

Yet, like more recent mega-corporations, the EIC proved at once hugely powerful and oddly vulnerable to economic uncertainty. Only seven years after the granting of the Diwani, when the Company's share price had doubled overnight after it acquired the wealth of the treasury of Bengal, the East India bubble burst after plunder and famine in Bengal led to massive shortfalls in expected land revenues. The EIC was left with debts of £1.5 million and a bill of £1 million* in unpaid tax owed to the Crown. When knowledge of this became public, thirty banks collapsed like dominoes across Europe, bringing trade to a standstill.

In a scene that seems horribly familiar to us today, this corporation had to come clean and ask for a massive government bailout. On 15 July 1772, the directors of the East India Company applied to the Bank of England for a loan of £400,000. A fortnight later, they returned, asking for an additional £300,000. The bank raised only £200,000.** By August, the directors were whispering to the government that they would actually need an unprecedented sum of a further £1 million. The official report the following year, written by Edmund Burke, foresaw that the EIC's financial problems could, potentially, 'like a mill-stone, drag [the government] down into an unfathomable abyss ... This cursed

* £157.5 million and £105 million today.

** £400,000 = £42 million; £300,000 = £31.5 million; £200,000 = £21 million today.

Company would, at last, like a viper, be the destruction of the country which fostered it at its bosom.’

But the East India Company really was too big to fail. So it was that the following year, in 1773, the world’s first aggressive multinational corporation was saved by one of history’s first mega-bailouts – the first example of a nation state extracting, as its price for saving a failing corporation, the right to regulate and severely rein it in.



This book does not aim to provide a complete history of the East India Company, still less an economic analysis of its business operations. Instead it is an attempt to answer the question of how a single business operation, based in one London office complex, managed to replace the mighty Mughal Empire as masters of the vast subcontinent between the years 1756 and 1803.

It tells the story of how the Company defeated its principal rivals – the nawabs of Bengal and Avadh, Tipu Sultan’s Mysore Sultanate and the great Maratha Confederacy – to take under its own wing the Emperor Shah Alam, a man whose fate it was to witness the entire story of the Company’s fifty-year-long assault on India and its rise from a humble trading company to a fully fledged imperial power. Indeed, the life of Shah Alam forms a spine of the narrative which follows.

It is now the established view that, contrary to the writings of earlier generations of historians, the eighteenth century was not a ‘Dark Age’ in India. The political decline of the Mughal imperium resulted, rather, in an economic resurgence in other parts of the subcontinent, and much recent academic research has been dedicated to deepening our understanding of that proposition.⁵ All this brilliant work on regional resurgence does not, however, alter the reality of the Anarchy, which undoubtedly did disrupt the Mughal heartlands, especially around Delhi and Agra, for most of the eighteenth century. As Fakir Khair ud-Din Illahabadi put it, ‘disorder and corruption no longer sought to hide themselves and the once peaceful realm of India became the abode of Anarchy (*dâr al-amn-i Hindûstân dâr al-fitan gashî*). In time, there

was no real substance to the Mughal monarchy, it had faded to a mere name or shadow.⁶

Given the reality of the Anarchy is something recorded not just by a few disconsolate Mughal gentlemen like Fakir Khair ud-Din and Ghulam Hussain Khan, but by every single traveller in the period, I believe that the process of revisionism may have gone a little too far. From Law and Modave to Pollier and Franklin, almost all eyewitnesses of late eighteenth-century India remark, over and over again, on the endless bloodshed and chaos of the period, and the difficulty of travelling safely through much of the country without a heavily armed escort. Indeed, it was these eyewitnesses who first gave currency to the notion of a Great Anarchy.

The Company's many wars and its looting of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, particularly between the 1750s and 1770s, hugely added to this disruption, and in regions very far from Delhi. This is the reason I have given this book its title. There is clearly a difficult balance to be struck between the fraught, chaotic and very violent military history of the period, and the long-term consolidation of new political, economic and social formations of the kind that Richard Barnett and my old Cambridge professor Chris Bayly did so much to illuminate. I am not sure anyone has yet worked out how these different levels of action and analysis fit together, but this book is an attempt to square that circle.

The Anarchy is based mainly on the Company's own voluminous miles of records. The documents from its head office, and the despatches of its Indian operatives to the directors in Leadenhall Street, now fill the vaults of the British Library in London. The often fuller and more revealing records of the Company's Indian headquarters in Government House and Fort William, Calcutta, can today be found in the National Archives of India (NAI) in New Delhi, and it is there that I have concentrated my research.

The eighteenth-century records in the NAI are, however, much more elusive than those of their well-catalogued nineteenth-century collections, and for the first weeks I struggled even to locate most of the indexes, something that was eventually cracked by the NAI's brilliant and ever-patient Jaya Ravindran and Anumita Bannerjee, who between them scoured the back rooms and stores until they succeeded in finding them. The rewards were remarkable. Within weeks I was holding in my

hands the original intelligence report from Port Lorient that led to the Company ordering the Governor, Roger Drake, to rebuild the walls of Calcutta, the *casus belli* that first provoked Siraj ud-Daula, as well as Clive's initial despatch from the battlefield of Plassey.

These English-language Company records I have used alongside the excellent Persian-language histories produced by highly educated Mughal historians, noblemen, *munishis* and scribes throughout the eighteenth century. The best of these, the *Seir Mutaqherin*, or *Review of Modern Times* by the brilliant young Mughal historian Ghulam Hussain Khan, is by far the most perceptive Indian source for the period, and has been available in English since the 1790s. But many other equally revealing Persian-language histories of the time remain both untranslated and unpublished.

These I have used extensively with the assistance of my long-term collaborator Bruce Wannell, whose superb translations of more obscure sources such as the *Ibrat Nama*, or *Book of Admonition* of Fakir Khair ud-Din Illahabadi, or the *Tarikh-i Muzaffari* of Mohammad Ali Khan Ansari of Panipat, produced over many months while staying in his tent in the garden of my Mehrauli goat farm, have been transformative for this project, as has been his unrivalled knowledge of both eighteenth-century India and the wider Islamic world. I am particularly grateful to Bruce for the time he spent in the MAAPRI Research Institute in Tonk, Rajasthan, translating a previously unused biography of Shah Alam, the *Shah Alam Nama* of Munshi Munna Lal, and for his discussions in Pondicherry with Jean Deloche, which ultimately resulted in his exquisite renderings of several previously untranslated and largely unused eighteenth-century French sources, such as the memoirs of Gentil, Madec, Law and especially the wonderful *Voyages* of the Comte de Modave, an urbane friend and neighbour of Voltaire from Grenoble, who casts a sophisticated, sardonic and perceptive eye on the eighteenth-century scene, from the wide boulevards of Company Calcutta to the ruins of Shah Alam's decaying capital in Delhi.



Over six years of work on the Company I have accumulated many debts. Firstly, my thanks are also due to Lily Tekseng for her months of slog, typing out the manuscripts I dug up in the Indian National Archives, and my sister-in-law Katy Rowan and Harpavan Manku, who performed a similar task in London, both battling successfully with the copperplate of the Company's official records and the private correspondence of Clive, Hastings, Cornwallis and Wellesley. I am also thankful to Aliya Naqvi and Katherine Butler Schofield for their beautiful renderings of Shah Alam's own verse.

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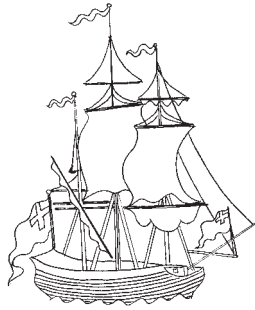
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William Dalrymple
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I

1599

On 24 September 1599, while William Shakespeare was pondering a draft of *Hamlet* in his house downriver from the Globe in Southwark, a mile to the north, barely twenty minutes' walk across the Thames, a motley group of Londoners was gathering in a rambling, half-timbered building lit by many-mullioned Tudor windows.¹

Even at the time the meeting was recognised as historic, and notaries were present with ink and quill to keep a record of the unusually diverse cross section of Elizabethan London that came that day to the Founders' Hall, off Moorgate Fields.² At the top of the social scale, hung with his golden chain of office, there was the stout figure of the Lord Mayor himself, Sir Stephen Soame, robed in scarlet fustian. He was accompanied by two of his predecessors in office and several senior Aldermen of the City – buttery Elizabethan burghers, their white-bearded faces nestling in a feathery tangle of cambric ruffs.³ The most powerful of these was the gravely goateed, ermine-trimmed and stovepipe-hatted figure of Sir Thomas Smythe, Auditor of the City of London, who had made a fortune importing currants from the Greek islands and spices from Aleppo. A few years earlier 'Auditor Smythe' had

helped form the Levant Company as a vehicle for his trading voyages; this meeting was his initiative.⁴

Besides these portly pillars of the City of London were many less exalted merchants hopeful of increasing their fortunes, as well as a scattering of ambitious and upwardly mobile men of more humble estate, whose professions the notaries dutifully noted down: grocers, drapers and haberdashers, a 'clotheworker', a 'vintener', a 'letherseller' and a 'skinner'.⁵ There were a few scarred soldiers, mariners and bearded adventurers from the docks at Woolwich and Deptford, surf-battered sea dogs, some of whom had fought against the Spanish Armada a decade earlier, all doublets and gold earrings, with their sea dirks tucked discreetly into their belts. Several of these deckhands and mizzen-masters had seen action with Drake and Raleigh against Spanish treasure ships in the warmer waters of the Caribbean, and now described themselves to the notaries, in the polite Elizabethan euphemism, as 'privateers'. There was also a clutch of explorers and travellers who had ventured further afield: the Arctic explorer William Baffin, for example, after whom the polar bay was named. Finally, also taking careful notes, was the self-described 'historiographer of the voyages of the East Indies', the young Richard Hakluyt, who had been paid £11 10s* by the adventurers for compiling all that was then known in England about the Spice Routes.⁶

Such a varied group would rarely be seen under one roof, but all had gathered with one purpose: to petition the ageing Queen Elizabeth I, then a bewigged and painted woman of sixty-six, to start up a company 'to venter in the pretended voiage to ye Est Indies and other Ilands and Cuntries thereabouts there to make trade ... by buying or bartering of suche goodes, wares, jewelles or merchaundize as those Ilands or Cuntries may yeld or afforthe ... (the whiche it maie please the Lorde to prosper)'.⁷

Smythe had gathered 101 of the richer merchants two days earlier and pressed them to commit to individual subscriptions ranging from £100 to £3,000 – considerable sums in those days. In all Smythe raised £30,133 6s. 8d.** This the investors did by drawing up a contract and adding their contribution in the subscription book 'written with there owne

* About £1,200 today.

** The modern equivalences of these sums are: £100 to £3,000 = £10,000 to £300,000 today; £30, 133 6s. 8d. = over £3 million today.

hands', so they declared, 'for the honour of our native country and for the advancement of trade and merchandise within this realm of England'.



It is always a mistake to read history backwards. We know that the East India Company (EIC) eventually grew to control almost half the world's trade and become the most powerful corporation in history, as Edmund Burke famously put it, 'a state in the guise of a merchant'. In retrospect, the rise of the Company seems almost inevitable. But that was not how it looked in 1599, for at its founding few enterprises could have seemed less sure of success.

At that time England was a relatively impoverished, largely agricultural country, which had spent almost a century at war with itself over the most divisive subject of the time: religion.⁸ In the course of this, in what seemed to many of its wisest minds an act of wilful self-harm, the English had unilaterally cut themselves off from the most powerful institution in Europe, so turning themselves in the eyes of many Europeans into something of a pariah nation. As a result, isolated from their baffled neighbours, the English were forced to scour the globe for new markets and commercial openings further afield. This they did with a piratical enthusiasm.

Sir Francis Drake set the tone. Drake had made his name in the early 1560s as a buccaneer raiding Spanish mule trains laden with silver on their way from mine to port along the Panama isthmus. With some of the profits of these raids, Drake had set off in 1577 on his three-year circumnavigation of the globe in the *Golden Hinde*. This was only the third time a global voyage had ever been attempted, and it was made possible by developments in compasses and astrolabes – as well as by worsening relations with Spain and Portugal.⁹

Drake had set sail in 'great hope of gold [and] silver ... spices drugs, cochineal', and his voyage was sustained throughout by intermittent raids on Iberian shipping. Following his capture of a particularly well-laden Portuguese carrack, Drake returned home with a cargo 'very richly fraught with gold, silver, pearls and precious stones', valued at over

£100,000,* one of the most profitable of all the voyages of discovery. This harrying and scavenging off the earlier and richer Iberian empires that then controlled South and Central America was licensed by the Crown and was essentially a form of Elizabethan state-sanctioned organised crime controlled by the oligarchs of Whitehall and Charing Cross. When Drake's rival, Sir Walter Raleigh, and his crew returned from a similar raid, they were immediately denounced by the Spanish ambassador as 'Pirates, pirates, pirates'.¹⁰

Many of those the Spanish ambassador would also have considered pirates were present that day in the Founders' Hall. The Company's potential investors knew that this group of mariners and adventurers, whatever their talents as freebooters, had to date shown little success in the more demanding skills of long-distance trade or in the art of planting and patiently sustaining viable colonies. Indeed, compared to many of their European neighbours, the English were rank amateurs at both endeavours.

Their search for the legendary North West Passage to the Spice Islands had ended disastrously, not in the Moluccas, as planned, but instead on the edge of the Arctic Circle, with their galleons stuck fast in pack ice, their battered hulls punctured by icebergs and their pike-wielding crew mauled by polar bears.¹¹ They had also failed at protecting their infant Protestant plantations in Ireland which were under severe attack in 1599. English attempts to bully their way into the Caribbean slave trade had come to nothing, while attempts to plant an English colony in North America had ended in outright disaster.

In 1584 Sir Walter Raleigh had founded the first British settlement on Roanoke Island, south of Chesapeake Bay, in an area he named Virginia, after his monarch. But the colony survived barely a year and was abandoned by June 1586 when the relief fleet arrived to find the settlement deserted. A shipload of eager new colonists jumped ashore to find both the stockade and the houses within completely dismantled and nothing to indicate the fate of the settlers except a single skeleton – and the name of the local Indian tribe, CROATOAN, carved in capital letters into a tree. There was simply no sign of the 90 men, 17 women and 11 children whom Raleigh had left there only two years earlier. It was as if the settlers had vanished into thin air.¹²

* Over £10 million today.

Even the two most experienced mariners and Eastern explorers in London, both of whom were present in the Founders' Hall, had arrived back from their travels with little more than wonderful tales to show for their efforts, and with neither crews nor cargoes intact.

Ralph Fitch was the first. In 1583 he had set out from Falmouth on the *Tyger*. Sent to the East to buy spices by Auditor Smythe's new Levant Company, Fitch had gone overland from the Levantine coast via Aleppo, but had only got as far as Hormuz before he was arrested as a spy by the Portuguese. From there he was sent in chains to Goa where they threatened to subject him to the *strappado* – the Inquisition's answer to bungee jumping, where a man was dropped from a height attached to a rope. The bone-jarring jerk when the rope halted his rapid descent was said to be even more exquisitely agonising than the rack, the Elizabethans' own preferred form of torture.

Fitch was helped to escape by Fr Thomas Stevens, an English Jesuit long based in Goa, who stood surety for him, and he duly succeeded in travelling through the rich Sultanates of the Deccan to the sixteenth-century Mughal capital of Agra, and hence, via Bengal, to the Moluccas.¹³ On his return to London three years later, he regaled the city with his traveller's tales and became such a celebrity that his ship was mentioned by Shakespeare in *Macbeth*: 'her husband is to Aleppo gone, master o' th' *Tiger*'. But while Fitch brought back many enticing details of the pepper trade, he had arrived home with no actual pepper.¹⁴

The Levant Company's next attempt to break into the spice trade, this time by the sea route, was even more of a disaster. Sir James Lancaster's 1591 voyage into the Indian Ocean was the first English attempt to reach the East via the Cape. Both its funding, and its armed shipping, was provided by Auditor Smythe and his Levant Company. But in the event, only one of Lancaster's four ships, the *Edward Bonaventure*, made it back from the Indies, and that on a skeleton crew. The last survivors, five men and a boy, worked it home with its cargo of pepper which they had earlier looted from a passing Portuguese ship. Lancaster himself, marooned on the Comoro Islands with the rest of his crew after he was shipwrecked during a cyclone, finally found his way home in 1594. On the way he had been stuck in the doldrums, ravaged by scurvy, lost three ships and seen almost all his fellow crew members speared to death by angry islanders. It was lucky that the Levant Company had deep pockets, for the voyage was a devastating financial failure.¹⁵

In contrast to these ragged buccaneers, their more sophisticated Portuguese and Spanish rivals had been busy for over a century establishing profitable and cosmopolitan empires that ranged across the globe – empires whose massive imports of New World gold had turned Spain into the richest country in Europe, and given Portugal control of the seas and spices of the East, so bringing it in a close second place. Indeed, the only rival of the Iberians, gallingly for the English, was the tiny and newly independent republic of Holland, whose population was less than half that of England, and which had thrown off the rule of Spain only twenty years earlier, in 1579.

It was the recent astonishing success of the Dutch that had brought this diverse group of Londoners together. Three months earlier, on 19 July, Admiral Jacob Corneliszoon van Neck of the Dutch Compagnie Van Verre – the Company of Distant Lands – had successfully returned from Indonesia with a vast cargo of spices – 800 tons of pepper, 200 tons of cloves and great quantities of cinnamon and nutmeg. The voyage made an unprecedented 400 per cent profit: ‘There never arrived in Holland ships so richly laden,’ wrote one envious Levant Company observer.¹⁶

By August, following this ‘suesse of the viage performed by the Dutche nation’, English merchants had begun discussing the possibilities of setting up a company to make similar voyages to buy spices not, as before, from Middle Eastern middlemen, who trebled the price as their commission, but instead direct from the producers, half the way around the world, in the East Indies. The prime movers in this initiative were again Smythe’s cabal of Levant Company merchants who realised, as one wrote from the Greek island of Chios, that this Dutch ‘trading to the Indies has clean overthrown our dealings to Aleppo’.¹⁷

The final straw was when the Dutch sent a delegation to London to try to buy up English shipping for further voyages eastwards. This was too much for the pride of Elizabethan London. The Amsterdam Agents, waiting in the Old Steelyard of the Hamburg Company, were told, ‘Our merchants of London have need of all our ships and none to sell to the Dutch. We ourselves intend forthwith to have trade with the East Indies.’¹⁸ The meeting at the Founders’ Hall was the direct result of that retort. As they told Elizabeth’s Privy Council in their petition, they were moved ‘with no less affection to advance the trade of their native country than the Dutch merchants were to benefit their commonwealth ... For the honour of our native country and the

advancement of trade ... to set forth a voyage this present year to the East Indies.¹⁹

Fully one-quarter of the subscribers to the voyage, and seven of the original fifteen directors of the enterprise, were the Levant Company grandees. They feared, with reason, that the Dutch had ruined their existing investment in the spice trade, and they provided not only one-third of the subscription, but also many of the ships and the offices where the initial meetings took place. 'The Company of Merchants of London trading to the East Indies' was thus originally an outgrowth of the Levant Company and a mechanism for its shareholders to extend its existing trade to the Far East by developing the sea route, and to raise as much new capital as possible.²⁰

This was the reason Smythe and his associates had decided to found a new company, and open it to any subscriber who would contribute, rather than merely extend the remit of their existing monopoly. For, unlike the Levant Company, which had a fixed board of fifty-three tightly knit subscribers, the EIC was from the very first conceived as a joint stock corporation, open to all investors. Smythe and his associates had decided that, because of the huge expenses and high risks involved, 'a trade so far remote cannot be managed but by a joint and united stock'.²¹ Costs were, after all, astronomically high. The commodities they wished to buy were extremely expensive and they were carried in huge and costly ships that needed to be manned by large crews and protected by artillery masters and professional musket-men. Moreover, even if everything went according to plan, there would be no return on investment for several years.

The idea of a joint stock company was one of Tudor England's most brilliant and revolutionary innovations. The spark of the idea sprang from the flint of the medieval craft guilds, where merchants and manufacturers could pool their resources to undertake ventures none could afford to make individually. But the crucial difference in a joint stock company was that the latter could bring in passive investors who had the cash to subscribe to a project but were not themselves involved in the running of it. Such shares could be bought and sold by anyone, and their price could rise or fall depending on demand and the success of the venture.

Such a company would be 'one body corporate and politick' – that is, it would be a corporation, and so could have a legal identity and a form of corporate immortality that allowed it to transcend the deaths

of individual shareholders, 'in like manner', wrote the legal scholar William Blackstone, 'as the River Thames is still the same river, though the parts which compose it are changing every instance'.²²

Forty years earlier, in 1553, a previous generation of London merchants had begun the process of founding the world's first chartered joint stock company: the Muscovy Company, or to give it its full and glorious title, The Mysterie and Companie of the Merchant Adventurers for the Discoverie of Regions, Dominions, Islands and Places Unknown.²³ The original aim was to explore an idea first mooted by classical geographers, who believed their world to be an island, surrounded by an ocean, which meant there had to be a northern route to the spices and gold of the Far East as well as that by the Cape – and that passage would be free from all Iberian rivalry.

Although the Muscovy Company directors soon came to the conclusion that the northern route did not exist, in the process of looking for it they discovered, and successfully traded along, a direct overland route with Persia via Russia. Before Ottoman Turkish conquests cut the road in 1580, they sent out six successful voyages to Isfahan and the other great bazaar towns of the region, and managed to post a respectable profit.²⁴

In 1555, the Muscovy Company was finally granted its royal charter laying out its privileges and responsibilities. By 1583 there were chartered Venice and Turkey companies, which merged in 1592 to become the Levant Company. The same year the slave-trading Sierra Leone Company was founded. The East India Company was thus following a fairly well-trod path, and its royal charter should have come through without complication. Moreover, the Queen wanted to keep the City on her side in case of a threatened rebellion by the unruly Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, and she proved surprisingly receptive to the petition.²⁵

But almost immediately orders came from the court of the Privy Council suspending both the formation of the Company and the preparations for the voyage. The peace negotiations with Spain which had followed the death of King Philip II in 1598 were progressing, and their lordships, 'thinking it more beneficiall ... to enterteyne a peace, than that the same should be hindered' by a quarrel, made the decision that the adventurers should 'proceede noe further in this matter for this yere'.

The merchants, none of whom were from the nobility, and so had little standing or influence at court, had no option but to wait. For twelve

months it looked as if the ambitious idea of founding an English company to trade with the East would remain just that – a midsummer dream.

It was only when the Spanish peace talks foundered in the summer of 1600 that the Privy Council had a change of heart and felt confident enough to stress the universal freedom of the seas and the right of all nations to send ships wherever they wished. Almost exactly a year after the petition had been drafted, on 23 September 1600, the subscribers were finally given the go-ahead: ‘It was her Majesty’s pleasure’, they were told, ‘that they shuld proceade in ther purpose ... and goe forward in the said viage.’²⁶



On 31 December 1600, the last day of the first year of the new century, the ‘Governor and Company of Merchants of London trading to the East Indies’, a group of 218 men, received their royal charter.²⁷

This turned out to offer far wider powers than the petitioners had perhaps expected or even hoped for. As well as freedom from all customs duties for their first six voyages, it gave them a British monopoly for fifteen years over ‘trade to the East Indies’, a vaguely defined area that was soon taken to encompass all trade and traffic between the Cape of Good Hope and the Strait of Magellan, as well as granting semi-sovereign privileges to rule territories and raise armies. The wording was sufficiently ambiguous to allow future generations of EIC officials to use it to claim jurisdiction over all English subjects in Asia, mint money, raise fortifications, make laws, wage war, conduct an independent foreign policy, hold courts, issue punishment, imprison English subjects and plant English settlements. It was not without foundation that a later critic and pamphleteer complained that the Company had been granted monopoly on ‘near two-third parts of the trading World’.²⁸ And though it took two and a half centuries for the potential to be realised, the wording of the EIC’s charter left open from the beginning the possibility of it becoming an imperial power, exercising sovereignty and controlling people and territory.²⁹

In the intervening year, the merchant adventurers had not been idle. They had been to Deptford to ‘view severall shippes’, one of which, the *May Flowre*, was later famous for a voyage heading in the opposite direction.³⁰ Four vessels had been bought and put into dry dock to be refitted. Given that time was of the essence, a barrel of beer a day was authorised ‘for the better holding together of the workemen from running from ther worke to drinke’. What was intended as the Company’s 900-ton flagship, a former privateering vessel, specifically built for raiding Spanish shipping in the Caribbean, the *Scourge of Malice* was renamed the *Red Dragon* so that it might sound a little less piratical.

Before long the adventurers had begun to purchase not only shipping, but new masts, anchors and rigging, and to begin constructing detailed inventories of their seafaring equipment – their ‘kedgers’, ‘drabblers’, ‘all standard rigging and running ropes’, ‘cables good and bad, a mayne course bonnet very good’ and ‘1 great warping hauser’. There was also the armament they would need: ‘40 muskets, 24 pikes ... 13 sackers, 2 fowlers, 25 barrelles of powder’ as well as the ‘Spunges, Ladles and Ramers’ for the cannon.³¹

They also set about energetically commissioning hogsheads to be filled with ‘biere, 170 tonnes, 40 tonnes of hogshed for Porke, 12 tonnes drie caske for Oatemeal, one tonne dryie caske for mustard seed, one tonne dry caske for Rice ... bisket well dried ... good fish ... very Dry’ as well as ‘120 oxen’ and ‘60 Tons of syder’. Meanwhile, the financiers among them began to collect £30,000* of bullion, as well as divers items to trade on arrival – what they termed an ‘investment’ of iron, tin and English broadcloth, all of which they hoped would be acceptable items to trade against Indonesian pepper, nutmeg, cloves, mace, cardamom and the other aromatic spices and jewels they hoped to bring home.³²

There was one last hiccup. In February 1601, the presiding genius of the nascent Company, Auditor Smythe, was briefly incarcerated in the Tower of London on a charge of complicity in the rebellion of the hot-headed Earl of Essex.³³ Nevertheless, only two months after the formal granting of their charter, on 13 February 1601, the refitted *Red Dragon* slipped its Woolwich moorings and glided through the cold February

* Over £3 million today.

Thames fog, followed closely by its three smaller escorts, the *Hector*, the *Susan* and the *Ascension*. In command again was the stern but now-chastened figure of Sir James Lancaster. Lancaster had learned several lessons from his previous adventures and brought along lemon juice to administer to his crew to prevent scurvy, and enough armament – no less than thirty-eight guns – to take on any competition he might encounter en route.³⁴

The voyage got off to an almost comically bad start. As they were leaving the Thames estuary, the wind dropped and for two months the fleet stood humiliatingly becalmed in the Channel, within sight of Dover. But the wind eventually picked up and by September the fleet had rounded the Cape, where it stopped in for provisions. Wishing to indicate to the waiting tribesmen that he wanted to buy meat, Lancaster, showing a linguistic aptitude that would come to distinguish English imperialism, ‘spake to them in cattel’s language . . . moath [‘moo’] for kine and oxen, and baah for sheep’. They then headed on to Mauritius where, on the shore, they found a series of carvings on a rock. It was not good news: five Dutch ships had recorded their visit only five months earlier.³⁵

It was not until June 1602 that Lancaster’s fleet made it to Acheh and began to negotiate with the Sultan for his spices. Shortly afterwards the crew spied a Portuguese carrack. Lancaster had been advised to conduct his men ‘in a merchantlike course’, but was also authorised to indulge in piracy against Spanish or Portuguese ships should ‘an opportunity be offered without prejudice or hazard’. He did not hesitate.

A year later, on 1 June 1603, rumours began to filter into London via France that the Company’s first fleet had returned safely into European waters. But it was not until 6 June that Lancaster finally anchored on the south coast at the Downs, ‘for which thanked be Almighty God who hath delivered us from infinite perils and dangers’.³⁶ This time Lancaster had brought back all four of his vessels, intact and fully loaded. He was carrying no less than 900 tons of pepper, cinnamon and cloves, much of it taken from the Portuguese carrack, which along with more spices bought in Acheh made the voyage an impressive 300 per cent profit.

It would be the first of fifteen more EIC expeditions that would set out over the next fifteen years. But the truth was that this was small fry compared with what the Dutch were already achieving on the other side of the Channel. For in March 1602, while Lancaster was still in the

Moluccas, the different Dutch East India Companies had all agreed to amalgamate and the Dutch East India Company, the VOC (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie), had received its state monopoly to trade with the East. When the Amsterdam accountants had totted up all the subscriptions, it was found that the VOC had raised almost ten times the capital base of the English EIC, and was immediately in a position to offer investors a 3,600 per cent dividend.³⁷

Compared to this, the English Company was for many years an extremely modest venture, and one with relatively limited ambitions. For all the initial excitement at the Founders' Hall, the merchants had raised only a relatively paltry £68,373 capital, as opposed to the Dutch who had by then pulled together a magnificent £550,000* for their rival venture. Since then, further Dutch subscriptions had poured in, while the English Company had, on the contrary, found it difficult to squeeze out even what the initial subscribers had promised.

In October 1599 the Company records contain the first complaints about the 'slacknes of many of the contributors who had sett down ther names' but had 'hitherto brought in noe moneys'. A few months later the directors began to threaten more severe sanctions against those who had failed to deliver on their promises at the Founders' Hall. On 11 January 1600 they 'ordered that any brother of this fellowship who shall ... have fallen into breach of any of ye ordinances ... then such person shall be committed to prison there to remaine duringe ye pleasure of ye generalitie'. A warrant was then issued for four persons to be committed to Marshalsea unless they paid up in four days.

The result of this inadequate funding was a small company with small fleets, and no permanent capital of its own, merely individual subscriptions for individual voyages. The English at this stage simply did not have the deep financial pockets of the Dutch. Moreover, Virginia and the New World had increasingly captured the imagination of the richer English nobles, not least because it seemed a more affordable and less risky option: the offer of ten shillings for a plot of 100 fertile acres in Virginia was a far more attractive option than £120** for ten volatile shares in East India stock. For the time being the EIC could hope for

* The modern equivalences of these sums are: £68,373 = £7,179,165 today; £550,00 = over £57 million today.

** £12,600 today.

no more than becoming very minor players in one of the richest, most sophisticated and competitive markets in the world.³⁸

Nor, with the serious risks involved, was the Company attracting the calibre of applicant it needed to make a success of its difficult venture. 'It is not uncommon to have them out of Newgate [prison], as several have confessed', reads one early Company letter complaining about the quality of its recruits, 'however those we can keep pretty much in order. But of late we have had some from [the lunatic asylum of] Bedlam.'³⁹ Already reports had come of Company servants 'dangerously disordering themselves with drink and whores', while another letter begs that the directors attempt to recruit 'civill, sober men' and that 'negligent or debauched persons or common drunkards should be discarded'.⁴⁰

Many more voyages set off throughout the early seventeenth century, mostly generating modest profits, but from the first the EIC was unable to prevail against better armed, better financed and more skilfully sailed fleets of Dutch East Indiamen. 'Theis [Dutch] buterboxes are groanne soe insolent,' complained one East India captain, 'that yf they be suffered but a whit longer, they will make claims to the whole Indies, so that no man shall trade but themselves or by thear leave; but I hoope to see their pride take a falle.'⁴¹ It was not, however, the Dutch whose pride was to be dented. In 1623, the English factory (trading station) at Amboina in the Moluccas was attacked by the Dutch VOC troops and ten Englishmen were tortured and killed. This opened several decades of conflict between England and Holland in which, despite occasional successes, the English consistently came off worse. At one point a Dutch fleet even sailed up the Thames and attacked Sheerness, destroying the ships in Chatham and Rochester dockyards.⁴²

After several more bruising encounters, the EIC directors decided they had little option but to leave the lucrative Spice Islands and their aromatic spice trade to the Dutch and focus instead on less competitive but potentially more promising sectors of the trade of Asia: fine cotton textiles, indigo and chintzes.

The source of all three of these luxuries was India.



On 28 August 1608, Captain William Hawkins, a bluff sea captain with the Third Voyage, anchored his ship, the *Hector*, off Surat, and so became the first commander of an EIC vessel to set foot on Indian soil.⁴³

India then had a population of 150 million – about a fifth of the world's total – and was producing about a quarter of global manufacturing; indeed, in many ways it was the world's industrial powerhouse and the world's leader in manufactured textiles. Not for nothing are so many English words connected with weaving – chintz, calico, shawl, pyjamas, khaki, dungarees, cummerbund, taffetas – of Indian origin.⁴⁴ It was certainly responsible for a much larger share of world trade than any comparable zone and the weight of its economic power even reached Mexico, whose textile manufacture suffered a crisis of 'de-industrialisation' due to Indian cloth imports.⁴⁵ In comparison, England then had just 5 per cent of India's population and was producing just under 3 per cent of the world's manufactured goods.⁴⁶ A good proportion of the profits on this found its way to the Mughal exchequer in Agra, making the Mughal Emperor, with an income of around £100 million,* by far the richest monarch in the world.

The Mughal capitals were the megacities of their day: 'They are second to none either in Asia or in Europe,' thought the Jesuit Fr Antonio Monserrate, 'with regards either to size, population, or wealth. Their cities are crowded with merchants, who gather from all over Asia. There is no art or craft which is not practised there.' Between 1586 and 1605, European silver flowed into the Mughal heartland at the astonishing rate of 18 metric tons a year, for as William Hawkins observed, 'all nations bring coyne and carry away commodities for the same'.⁴⁷ For their grubby contemporaries in the West, stumbling around in their codpieces, the silk-clad Mughals, dripping in jewels, were the living embodiment of wealth and power – a meaning that has remained impregnated in the word 'mogul' ever since.

By the early seventeenth century, Europeans had become used to easy military victories over the other peoples of the world. In the 1520s the Spanish had swept away the vast armies of the mighty Aztec Empire in a matter of months. In the Spice Islands of the Moluccas, the Dutch had recently begun to turn their cannons on the same rulers they had earlier traded with, slaughtering those islanders who rode out in canoes

* Over £10,000 million today.

to greet them, burning down their cities and seizing their ports. On one island alone, Lontor, 800 inhabitants were enslaved and forcibly deported to work on new Dutch spice plantations in Java; forty-seven chiefs were tortured and executed.⁴⁸

But as Captain Hawkins soon realised, there was no question of any European nation attempting to do this with the Great Mughals, not least because the Mughals kept a staggering 4 million men under arms.⁴⁹ When, in 1632, the Emperor discovered that the Portuguese had been building unauthorised fortifications and ‘dwellings of the utmost splendour and strength’ in Hughli in Bengal, as well as flouting Mughal rules by making forced conversions to Christianity, he commanded that the Portuguese settlement should be attacked and the Portuguese expelled.

The city fell to the Mughal armies within days and the attempts of the inhabitants to escape down the Ganges were thwarted by a boom ingeniously thrown across the river. Four hundred of the captured Portuguese prisoners ‘along with the idols of those erroneous infidels’ were then sent off to Agra to beg for mercy. Those who refused were ‘divided [as slaves] among the amirs’, according to the *Padshahnama*, ‘or held in prison and tortured. Most of them perished.’ There was nothing the Portuguese Viceroy of Goa could do about this.⁵⁰

With this in mind, the Company realised that if it was to trade successfully with the Mughals, it would need both partners and permissions, which meant establishing a relationship with the Mughal Emperor himself. It took Hawkins a year to reach Agra, which he managed to do dressed as an Afghan nobleman. Here he was briefly entertained by the Emperor, with whom he conversed in Turkish, before Jahangir lost interest in the semi-educated sea dog and sent him back home with the gift of an Armenian Christian wife. The mission achieved little, and soon afterwards another EIC fleet, captained by Sir Henry Middleton, was driven away from the Surat anchorage of Suvali – or ‘Swally Hole’ as the English mangled it – by local officials who ordered him to leave after threats from the Portuguese residents in the port.⁵¹

A new, more impressive mission was called for, and this time the Company persuaded King James to send a royal envoy. The man chosen was a courtier, MP, diplomat, Amazon explorer, Ambassador to the Sublime Porte and self-described ‘man of quality’, Sir Thomas Roe.⁵² In 1615 Roe finally arrived in Ajmer, bringing presents of ‘hunting dogges’ – English mastiffs and Irish greyhounds – an English state

coach, some Mannerist paintings, an English virginal and many crates of red wine for which he had heard Jahangir had a fondness; but Roe nevertheless had a series of difficult interviews with the Emperor. When he was finally granted an audience, and had made his obeisance, Roe wanted immediately to get to the point and raise the subject of trade and preferential customs duties, but the aesthete Emperor could barely conceal his boredom at such conversations.

Jahangir was, after all, an enormously sensitive, curious and intelligent man: observant of the world around him and a keen collector of its curiosities, from Venetian swords and globes to Safavid silks, jade pebbles and even narwhal teeth. A proud inheritor of the Indo-Mughal tradition of aesthetics and knowledge, as well as maintaining the Empire and commissioning great works of art, he took an active interest in goat and cheetah breeding, medicine and astronomy, and had an insatiable appetite for animal husbandry, like some Enlightenment landowner of a later generation.

This, not the mechanics of trade, was what interested him, and there followed several months of conversations with the two men talking at cross purposes. Roe would try to steer the talk towards commerce and diplomacy and the firmans (imperial orders) he wanted confirming 'his favour for an English factory' at Surat and 'to establish a firm and secure Trade and residence for my countrymen' in 'constant love and pease'; but Jahangir would assure him such workaday matters could wait, and instead counter with questions about the distant, foggy island Roe came from, the strange things that went on there and the art which it produced. Roe found that Jahangir 'expects great presents and jewels and regards no trade but what feeds his insatiable appetite after stones, riches and rare pieces of art'.⁵³

'He asked me what Present we would bring him,' Roe noted.

I answered the league [between England and Mughal India] was yet new, and very weake: that many curiosities were to be found in our Countrey of rare price and estimation, which the king would send, and the merchants seeke out in all parts of the world, if they were once made secure of a quiet trade and protection on honourable Conditions.

He asked what those curiosities were I mentioned, whether I meant jewels and rich stones. I answered No: that we did not thinke them

fit Presents to send backe, which were first brought from these parts, whereof he was the Chiefe Lord ... but that we sought to find things for his Majestie, as were rare here, and vnseene. He said it was very well: but that he desired an English horse ... So with many passages of jests, mirth, and bragges concerning the Arts of his Countrey, he fell to ask me questions, how often I drank a day, and how much, and what? What in England? What beere was? How made? And whether I could make it here. In all which I satisfied his great demands of State ...⁵⁴

Roe could on occasion be dismissively critical of Mughal rule – ‘religions infinite, laws none’ – but he was, despite himself, thoroughly dazzled. In a letter describing the Emperor’s birthday celebrations in 1616, written from the beautiful, half-ruined hilltop fortress of Mandu in central India to the future King Charles I in Whitehall, Roe reported that he had entered a world of almost unimaginable splendour.

The celebrations were held in a superbly designed ‘very large and beautifull Garden, the square within all water, on the sides flowres and trees, in the midst a Pinacle, where was prepared the scales ... of masse gold’ in which the Emperor would be weighed against jewels.

Here attended the Nobilitie all sitting about it on Carpets until the King came; who at least appeared clothed, or rather laden with Diamonds, Rubies, Pearles, and other precious vanities, so great, so glorious! His head, necke, breast, armes, above the elbowes, at the wrists, his fingers each one with at least two or three Rings, are fettered with chaines of dyamonds, Rubies as great as Walnuts – some greater – and Pearles such as mine eyes were amazed at ... in jewells, which is one of his felicities, hee is the treasury of the world, buyeing all that comes, and heaping rich stones as if hee would rather build [with them] than wear them.⁵⁵

The Mughals, in return, were certainly curious about the English, but hardly overwhelmed. Jahangir greatly admired an English miniature of one of Roe’s girlfriends – maybe the Lady Huntingdon to whom he wrote passionately from ‘Indya’.⁵⁶ But Jahangir made a point of demonstrating to Roe that his artists could copy it so well that Roe could not tell copy from original. The English state coach was also admired,

but Jahangir had the slightly tatty Tudor interior trim immediately upgraded with Mughal cloth of gold and then again showed off the skills of the Mughal *kar-khana* by having the entire coach perfectly copied, in little over a week, so his beloved Empress, Nur Jahan, could have a coach of her own.⁵⁷

Meanwhile, Roe was vexed to discover that the Mughals regarded relations with the English as a very low priority. On arrival he was shoved into a substandard accommodation: only four caravanserai rooms allotted for the entire embassy and they 'no bigger than ovens, and in that shape, round at the top, no light but the door, and so little that the goods of two carts would fill them all'.⁵⁸ More humiliatingly still, his slightly shop-soiled presents were soon completely outshone by those of a rival Portuguese embassy who gave Jahangir 'jewels, Ballests [balas spinels] and Pearles with much disgrace to our English commoditie'.⁵⁹

When Roe eventually returned to England, after three weary years at court, he had obtained permission from Jahangir to build a factory (trading station) in Surat, an agreement 'for our reception and continuation in his domynions' and a couple of imperial firmans, limited in scope and content, but useful to flash at obstructive Mughal officials. Jahangir, however, made a deliberate point of not conceding any major trading privileges, possibly regarding it as beneath his dignity to do so.⁶⁰

The status of the English at the Mughal court in this period is perhaps most graphically illustrated by one of the most famous images of the period, a miniature by Jahangir's master artist, Bichitr. The conceit of the painting is how the pious Jahangir preferred the company of Sufis and saints to that of powerful princes. This was actually not as far-fetched as it might sound: one of Roe's most telling anecdotes relates how Jahangir amazed the English envoy by spending an hour chatting to a passing holy man he encountered on his travels:

a poor silly old man, all asht, ragd and patcht, with a young roague attending on him. This miserable wretch cloathed in rags, crowned with feathers, his Majestie talked with about an hour, with such familiaritie and shew of kindnesse, that it must needs argue an humilitie not found easily among Kings ... He took him up in his armes, which no cleanly body durst have touched, imbracing him, and three times laying his hand on his heart, calling him father, he

left him, and all of us, and me, in admiration of such a virtue in a heathen Prince.⁶¹

Bichitr illustrates this idea by showing Jahangir centre frame, sitting on a throne with the halo of Majesty glowing so brightly behind him that one of the putti, caught in flight from a Portuguese transfiguration, has to shield his eyes from the brightness of his radiance; another pair of putti are writing a banner reading ‘Allah Akbar! Oh king, may your age endure a thousand years!’ The Emperor turns to hand a Quran to a cumulus-bearded Sufi, spurning the outstretched hands of the Ottoman Sultan. As for James I, in his jewelled and egret-plumed hat and silver-white Jacobean doublet, he is relegated to the bottom left corner of the frame, below Jahangir’s feet and only just above Bichitr’s own self-portrait. The King shown in a three-quarter profile – an angle reserved in Mughal miniatures for the minor characters – with a look of vinegary sullenness on his face at his lowly place in the Mughal hierarchy.⁶² For all the reams written by Roe on Jahangir, the latter did not bother to mention Roe once in his voluminous diaries. These awkward, artless northern traders and supplicants would have to wait a century more before the Mughals deigned to take any real interest in them.

Yet for all its clumsiness, Roe’s mission was the beginning of a Mughal–Company relationship that would develop into something approaching a partnership and see the EIC gradually drawn into the Mughal nexus. Over the next 200 years it would slowly learn to operate skilfully within the Mughal system and to do so in the Mughal idiom, with its officials learning good Persian, the correct court etiquette, the art of bribing the right officials and, in time, outmanoeuvring all their rivals – Portuguese, Dutch and French – for imperial favour. Indeed, much of the Company’s success at this period was facilitated by its scrupulous regard for Mughal authority.⁶³ Before long, indeed, the Company would begin portraying itself to the Mughals, as the historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam has nicely described it, as ‘not a corporate entity but instead an anthropomorphized one, an Indo-Persian creature called *Kampani Bahadur*’.⁶⁴



On his return to London, Roe made it clear to the directors that force of arms was not an option when dealing with the Mughal Empire. 'A warre and traffic,' he wrote, 'are incompatible.' Indeed he advised against even fortified settlements and pointed out how 'the Portuguese many rich residences and territories [were] begging' their trade with unsupportable costs. Even if the Mughals were to allow the EIC a fort or two, he wrote, 'I would not accept one ... for without controversy it is an error to affect garrisons and land warrs in India.' Instead he recommended: 'Lett this be received as a rule, that if you will seek profit, seek it at sea and in a quiett trade.'⁶⁵

To begin with, the Company took his advice. Early EIC officials prided themselves on negotiating commercial privileges, rather than resorting to attacking strategic ports like the more excitable Portuguese, and it proved to be a strategy that paid handsome dividends. While Roe was busy charming Jahangir, another Company emissary, Captain Hippon, was despatched on the *Globe* to open the textile trade with the eastward-facing Coromandel coast and to establish a second factory at Masulipatnam, the port of the Mughal's great Deccani rivals, the diamond-rich Sultanate of Golconda, where could be bought the finest jewels and chintz in India.⁶⁶ A third factory dealing mainly with the trade in saltpetre – the active ingredient in gunpowder – opened shortly afterwards in Patna.

This trade in jewels, pepper, textiles and saltpetre soon resulted in even better returns than the Dutch trade in aromatic spices: by the 1630s the EIC was importing £1 million of pepper from India which, in a dramatic reversal of centuries of trading patterns, it now began exporting to Italy and the Middle East, through its sister the Levant Company. Thirty years later they were importing a quarter of a million pieces of cloth, nearly half of them from the Coromandel.⁶⁷ Losses were still heavy: between 1601 and 1640, the Company sent a total of 168 ships eastwards; only 104 arrived back again.⁶⁸ But the Company's balance sheets grew increasingly profitable, so much so that investors from around Europe began for the first time queuing up to buy EIC stock. In 1613 the subscription for the First Joint Stock raised £418,000. Four years later, in 1617, the subscription to Second Joint Stock pulled in a massive £1.6 million,*

* The modern equivalences of these sums are: £1 million = £105 million today; £418,000 = nearly £44 million today; £1.6 million = £168 million today.

turning the EIC for the first time into a financial colossus, at least by English standards.⁶⁹ The success of the EIC in turn stimulated not only the London docks but also the nascent London stock exchange. By the middle of the century half of those who were elected to the elite Court of Aldermen of the City of London were either Levant Company traders or EIC directors, or both.⁷⁰ One Company member, the early economic theorist Thomas Mun, wrote that the Company's trade was now 'the very *touchstone* of the Kingdom's prosperity'.⁷¹

It was not until 1626 that the EIC founded its first fortified Indian base, at Armagon, north of Pulicat, on the central Coromandel coast. It was soon crenellated and armed with twelve guns. But it was quickly and shoddily constructed, in addition to which it was found to be militarily indefensible, so was abandoned six years later in 1632 with little regret; as one factor put it, 'better lost than found'.⁷²

Two years later, the EIC tried again. The head of the Armagon factory, Francis Day, negotiated with the local governor of what was left of the waning and fragmented South Indian Vijayanagara empire for the right to build a new EIC fort above a fishing village called Madraspatnam, just north of the Portuguese settlement at San Thome. Again, it was neither commercial nor military considerations which dictated the choice of site. Day, it was said, had a liaison with a Tamil lady whose village lay inland from Madraspatnam. According to one contemporary source Day 'was so enamoured of her' and so anxious that their 'interviews' might be 'more frequent and uninterrupted' that his selection of the site of Fort St George lying immediately adjacent to her home village was a foregone conclusion.⁷³

This time the settlement – soon known simply as Madras – flourished. The Naik (governor) who leased the land said he was anxious for the area to 'flourish and grow rich', and had given Day the right to build 'a fort and castle', to trade customs free and to 'perpetually Injoy the priviledges of minatag[e]'. These were major concessions that the more powerful Mughals to the north would take nearly another century to yield.

Initially, there were 'only the French padres and about six fishermen, soe to intice inhabitants to people the place, a proclamation was made ... that for a terme of thirty years' no custom duties would be charged. Soon weavers and other artificers and traders began pouring in. Still more came once the fort walls had been erected, 'as the tymes are turned

upp syde downe', and the people of the coast were looking for exactly the security and protection the Company could provide.⁷⁴

Before long Madras had grown to be the first English colonial town in India with its own small civil administration, the status of a municipality and a population of 40,000. By the 1670s the town was even minting its own gold 'pagoda' coins, so named after the image of a temple that filled one side, with the monkey deity Hanuman on the reverse, both borrowed from the old Vijayanagara coinage.⁷⁵

The second big English settlement in India came into the hands of the Company via the Crown, which in turn received it as a wedding present from the Portuguese monarchy. In 1661, when Charles II married the Portuguese Infanta, Catherine of Braganza, part of her dowry, along with the port of Tangier, was the 'island of Bumbye'. In London there was initially much confusion as to its whereabouts, as the map which accompanied the Infanta's marriage contract went missing en route. No one at court seemed sure where 'Bumbye' was, though the Lord High Chancellor believed it to be 'somewhere near Brazil'.⁷⁶

It took some time to sort out this knotty issue, and even longer to gain actual control of the island, as the Portuguese governor had received no instructions to hand it over, and so understandably refused to do so. When Sir Abraham Shipman first arrived with 450 men to claim Bombay for the English in September 1662, his mission was blocked at gunpoint; it was a full three years before the British were finally able to take over, by which time the unfortunate Shipman, and all his officers bar one, had died of fever and heatstroke, waiting on a barren island to the south. When Shipman's secretary was finally allowed to land on Bombay island in 1665, only one ensign, two gunners and 111 subalterns were still alive to claim the new acquisition.⁷⁷

Despite this bumpy start, the island soon proved its worth: the Bombay archipelago turned out to have the best natural harbour in South Asia, and it quickly became the Company's major naval base in Asia, with the only dry dock where ships could be safely refitted during the monsoon. Before long it had eclipsed Surat as the main centre of EIC operations on the west coast, especially as the rowdy English were becoming less and less welcome there: 'Their private whorings, drunkenesse and such like ryotts ... breaking open warehouses and rackehowes [i.e. arrack bars] have hardened the hearts of the inhabitants against our very names,' wrote one weary EIC official. Little wonder that the British were soon

being reviled in the Surat streets ‘with the names of Ban-chude* and Betty-chude† which my modest language will not interpret’.⁷⁸

Within thirty years Bombay had grown to house a colonial population of 60,000 with a growing network of factories, law courts, an Anglican church and large white residential houses surrounding the fort and tumbling down the slope from Malabar Hill to the Governor’s estate on the seafront. It even had that essential amenity for any God-fearing seventeenth-century Protestant community, a scaffold where ‘witches’ were given a last chance to confess before their execution.⁷⁹ It also had its own small garrison of 300 English soldiers, ‘400 Topazes, 500 native militia and 300 Bhandaris [club-wielding toddy-tappers] that lookt after the woods of cocoes’. By the 1680s Bombay had briefly eclipsed Madras ‘as the seat of power and trade of the English in the East Indies’.⁸⁰

Meanwhile, in London, the Company directors were beginning to realise for the first time how powerful they were. In 1693, less than a century after its foundation, the Company was discovered to be using its own shares for buying the favours of parliamentarians, as it annually shelled out £1,200 a year to prominent MPs and ministers. The bribery, it turned out, went as high as the Solicitor General, who received £218, and the Attorney General, who received £545.^{**} The parliamentary investigation into this, the world’s first corporate lobbying scandal, found the EIC guilty of bribery and insider trading and led to the impeachment of the Lord President of the Council and the imprisonment of the Company’s Governor.

Only once during the seventeenth century did the Company try to use its strength against the Mughals, and then with catastrophic consequences. In 1681 the directorship was taken over by the recklessly aggressive Sir Josiah Child, who had started his career supplying beer

* Lit: ‘Sister-fucker’.

† Lit: ‘Daughter-fucker’. Yule, incidentally, includes both terms in *Hobson-Jobson*. He avoids giving direct translations of these still popular Hindustani endearments, saying merely that ‘Banchoot and Beteechoot [are] terms of abuse which we should hesitate to print if their odious meanings were not obscure “to the general”. If it were known to the Englishmen who sometimes use the words we believe there are few who would not shrink from such brutality.’

** The modern equivalences of these sums are: £1,200 = £126,000 today; £218 = £22,890 today; £545 = £57,225 today.

to the navy in Portsmouth, and who was described by the diarist John Evelyn as ‘an overgrown and suddenly monied man ... most sordidly avaricious’.⁸¹ In Bengal the factors had begun complaining, as Streynsham Master wrote to London, that ‘here every petty Officer makes a pray of us, abusing us at pleasure to Screw what they can out of us’. We are, he wrote, ‘despised and trampled upon’ by Mughal officials. This was indeed the case: the Nawab of Bengal, Shaista Khan, made no secret of his dislike of the Company and wrote to his friend and maternal nephew, the Emperor Aurangzeb, that ‘the English were a company of base, quarrelling people and foul dealers’.⁸²

Ignorant of the scale of Mughal power, Child made the foolish decision to react with force and attempt to teach the Mughals a lesson: ‘We have no remedy left,’ he wrote from the Company’s Court in Leadenhall Street, ‘but either to desert our trade, or we must draw the sword his Majesty has Intrusted us with, to vindicate the Rights and Honor of the English Nation in India.’⁸³ As a consequence, in 1686 a considerable fleet sailed from London to Bengal with 19 warships, 200 cannons and 600 soldiers. ‘It will,’ Child wrote, ‘become us to Seize what we cann & draw the English sword.’⁸⁴

But Child could not have chosen a worse moment to pick a fight with the Emperor of the richest kingdom on earth. The Mughals had just completed their conquest of the two great Deccani Sultanates of Bijapur and Golconda and seemed also to have driven the Marathas back into the hills whence they had come. The Mughal Empire had thus emerged as the unrivalled regional power, and its army was now able to focus exclusively on this new threat. The Mughal war machine swept away the English landing parties as easily as if it were swatting flies; soon the EIC factories at Hughli, Patna, Kasimbazar, Masulipatnam and Vizagapatam had all been seized and plundered, and the English had been expelled completely from Bengal. The Surat factory was closed and Bombay was blockaded.

The EIC had no option but to sue for peace and beg for the return of its factories and hard-earned trading privileges. They also had to petition for the release of its captured factors, many of whom were being paraded in chains through the streets or kept fettered in the Surat castle and the Dhaka Red Fort ‘in insufferable and tattered conditions ... like thieves and murders’.⁸⁵ When Aurangzeb heard that the EIC had ‘repented of their irregular proceedings’ and submitted to Mughal authority, the Emperor left the factors to lick their wounds for a while, then in 1690 graciously agreed to forgive them.

It was in the aftermath of this fiasco that a young factor named Job Charnock decided to found a new British base in Bengal to replace the lost factories that had just been destroyed. On 24 August 1690, with 'ye rains falling day and night', Charnock began planting his settlement on the swampy ground between the villages of Kalikata and Sutanuti, adjacent to a small Armenian trading station, and with a Portuguese one just across the river.

Job Charnock bought the future site of Calcutta, said the Scottish writer Alexander Hamilton, 'for the sake of a large shady tree', an odd choice, he thought, 'for he could not have found a more unhealthful Place on all the River'.⁸⁶ According to Hamilton's *New Account of the East Indies*: 'Mr Channock choosing the Ground of the Colony, where it now is, reigned more absolute than a *Rajah*':

The country about being overspread with *Paganism*, the Custom of Wives burning with their deceased Husbands is also practised here. Mr *Channock* went one Time with his guard of Soldiers, to see a young widow act that tragical Catastrophe, but he was so smitten with the Widow's Beauty, that he sent his guards to take her by Force from her Executioners, and conducted her to his own Lodgings. They lived lovingly many Years, and had several children. At length she died, after he had settled in *Calcutta*, but instead of converting her to *Christianity*, she made him a Proselyte to *Paganism*, and the only Part of *Christianity* that was remarkable in him, was burying her decently, and he built a Tomb over her, where all his Life after her Death, he kept the anniversary Day of her Death by sacrificing a Cock on her Tomb, after the *Pagan* Manner.⁸⁷

Mrs Charnock was not the only fatality. Within a year of the founding of the English settlement at Calcutta, there were 1,000 living in the settlement but already Hamilton was able to count 460 names in the burial book: indeed, so many died there that it is 'become a saying that they live like Englishmen and die like rotten sheep'.⁸⁸

Only one thing kept the settlement going: Bengal was 'the finest and most fruitful country in the world', according to the French traveller François Bernier. It was one of 'the richest most populous and best cultivated countries', agreed the Scot Alexander Dow. With its myriad weavers – 25,000 in Dhaka alone – and unrivalled luxury textile

production of silks and woven muslins of fabulous delicacy, it was by the end of the seventeenth century Europe's single most important supplier of goods in Asia and much the wealthiest region of the Mughal Empire, the place where fortunes could most easily be made. In the early years of the eighteenth century, the Dutch and English East India Companies between them shipped into Bengal cargoes worth around 4.15 million rupees* annually, 85 per cent of which was silver.⁸⁹

The Company existed to make money, and Bengal, they soon realised, was the best place to do it.



It was the death of Aurangzeb in 1707 that changed everything for the Company.

The Emperor, unloved by his father, grew up into a bitter and bigoted Islamic puritan, as intolerant as he was grimly dogmatic. He was a ruthlessly talented general and a brilliantly calculating strategist, but entirely lacked the winning charm of his predecessors. His rule became increasingly harsh, repressive and unpopular as he grew older. He made a clean break with the liberal and inclusive policies towards the Hindu majority of his subjects pioneered by his great-grandfather Akbar, and instead allowed the *ulama* to impose far stricter interpretations of Sharia law. Wine was banned, as was hashish, and the Emperor ended his personal patronage of musicians. He also ended Hindu customs adopted by the Mughals such as appearing daily to his subjects at the *jharoka* palace window in the centre of the royal apartments in the Red Fort. Around a dozen Hindu temples across the country were destroyed, and in 1672 he issued an order recalling all endowed land given to Hindus and reserved all future land grants for Muslims. In 1679 the Emperor reimposed the *jizya* tax on all non-Muslims that had been abolished by Akbar; he also executed Teg Bahadur, the ninth of the gurus of the Sikhs.⁹⁰

While it is true that Aurangzeb is a more complex and pragmatic figure than some of his critics allow, the religious wounds Aurangzeb

* £54 million today.

opened in India have never entirely healed, and at the time they tore the country in two.* Unable to trust anyone, Aurangzeb marched to and fro across the Empire, viciously putting down successive rebellions by his subjects. The Empire had been built on a pragmatic tolerance and an alliance with the Hindus, especially with the warrior Rajputs, who formed the core of the Mughal war machine. The pressure put on that alliance and the Emperor's retreat into bigotry helped to shatter the Mughal state and, on Aurangzeb's death, it finally lost them the backbone of their army.

But it was Aurangzeb's reckless expansion of the Empire into the Deccan, largely fought against the Shia Muslim states of Bijapur and Golconda, that did most to exhaust and overstretch the resources of the Empire. It also unleashed against the Mughals a new enemy that was as formidable as it was unexpected. Maratha peasants and landholders had once served in the armies of the Bijapur and Golconda. In the 1680s, after the Mughals conquered these two states, Maratha guerrilla raiders under the leadership of Shivaji Bhonsle, a charismatic Maratha Hindu warlord, began launching attacks against the Mughal armies occupying the Deccan. As one disapproving Mughal chronicler noted,

* According to the eminent historian Ishwari Prasad, of the Allahabad School, Aurangzeb was a 'bigoted Sunni intolerant of all forms of dissent', see I. Prasad, *The Mughal Empire*, Allahabad, 1974, p. 612. Jadunath Sarkar painted a very similar portrait over five volumes: Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Aurangzeb*, London, 1912–24. In recent years, there has been an effort to make over Aurangzeb's reputation as a bigot and to fact-check some of the more extreme claims made against him. The most interesting contribution was by Katherine Butler Brown, who pointed out that, far from ending musical production in the Empire, the reign of Aurangzeb actually produced more musical writing than the previous hundred years. See 'Did Aurangzeb ban Music?', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 41, no. 1 (2007), pp. 82–5. Also fascinating, though more controversial, was Audrey Truschke's *Aurangzeb: The Man and the Myth*, New Delhi, 2017, which turned the unfortunate American Sanskritist into a major hate figure of the Hindutva right wing. Munis D. Faruqi is working on a major new study of Aurangzeb, but in the meantime his *Princes of the Mughal Empire 1504–1719* (Cambridge, 2012) is full of illuminating insights on Aurangzeb. My own view is that, while Aurangzeb is certainly a more complex figure than his detractors allow, and that it is true that early in his career he did protect Brahmins, patronise Hindu institutions and Hindu noblemen, and that he consulted with Hindu astrologers and physicians to the end, he was still an unusually cold, ruthless and unpleasant character, and his aggression and charmlessness did do much to undermine the empire he worked so hard to keep together.

‘most of the men in the Maratha army are unendowed with illustrious birth, and husbandmen, carpenters and shopkeepers abound among their soldiery’.⁹¹ They were largely armed peasants; but they knew the country and they knew how to fight.

From the sparse uplands of the western Deccan, Shivaji led a prolonged and increasingly widespread peasant rebellion against the Mughals and their tax collectors. The Maratha light cavalry, armed with spears, were remarkable for their extreme mobility and the ability to make sorties far behind Mughal lines. They could cover fifty miles in a day because the cavalymen carried neither baggage nor provisions and instead lived off the country: Shivaji’s maxim was ‘no plunder, no pay’.⁹² One Jacobean traveller, Dr John Fryer of the EIC, noted that the ‘Naked, Starved Rascals’ who made up Shivaji’s army were armed with ‘only lances and long swords two inches wide’ and could not win battles in ‘a pitched Field’, but were supremely skilled at ‘Surprising and Ransacking’.⁹³

According to Fryer, Shivaji’s Marathas sensibly avoided pitched battles with the Mughal’s army, opting instead to ravage the centres of Mughal power until the economy collapsed. In 1663, Shivaji personally led a daring night raid on the palace of the Mughal headquarters in Pune, where he murdered the family of the Governor of the Deccan, Aurangzeb’s uncle, Shaista Khan. He also succeeded in cutting off the Governor’s finger.⁹⁴ In 1664, Shivaji’s peasant army raided the Mughal port of Surat, sacking its richly filled warehouses and extorting money from its many bankers. He did the same in 1670, and by the Marathas’ third visit in 1677 there was not even a hint of resistance.

In between the last two raids, Shivaji received, at his spectacular mountain fastness of Raigad, a Vedic consecration and coronation by the Varanasi pandit Gagabhatta, which was the ritual highlight of his career. This took place on 6 June 1674 and awarded him the status of the Lord of the Umbrella, *Chhatrapati*, and legitimate Hindu Emperor, or *Samrajyapada*. A second Tantric coronation followed shortly afterwards, which his followers believed gave him special access to the powers and blessings of three great goddesses of the Konkan mountains:

Sivaji entered the throne room with a sword and made blood sacrifices to the *lokapalas*, divinities who guard the worlds. The courtiers attending the ceremony were then asked to leave while auspicious

mantras were installed on the king's body to the accompaniment of music and the chanting of samans. Finally he mounted his lion throne, hailed by cries of 'Victory' from the audience. He empowered the throne with the mantras of the ten Vidyas. Through their power, a mighty splendour filled the throne-room. The Saktis held lamps in their hands and lustrated the king, who shone like Brahma.⁹⁵

Aurangzeb dismissed Shivaji as a 'desert rat'. But by the time of his death in 1680, Shivaji had turned himself into Aurangzeb's nemesis, leaving behind him a name as the great symbol of Hindu resistance and revival after 500 years of Islamic rule. Within a generation, Maratha writers had turned him into a demi-god. In the *Sivabharata* of Kaviraja Paramananda, for example, Shivaji reveals himself to be none other than Vishnu-incarnate:

I am Lord Vishnu,
Essence of all gods,
Manifest on earth
To remove the world's burden!
The Muslims are demons incarnate,
Arisen to flood the earth,
With their own religion.
Therefore I will destroy these demons
Who have taken the form of Muslims,
And I will spread the way of *dharma* fearlessly.⁹⁶

For many years the Mughal army fought back steadily, taking one Deccan hillfort after another, and for a while it looked like the imperial forces were slowly succeeding in crushing Maratha resistance as methodically as they did that of the Company. On 11 March 1689, the same year that the Emperor crushed the Company, Aurangzeb's armies captured Sambhaji, the eldest son and successor of Shivaji. The unfortunate prince was first humiliated by being forced to wear an absurd hat and being led into durbar on a camel. Then he was brutally tortured for a week. His eyes were stabbed out with nails. His tongue was cut out and his skin flayed with tiger claws before he was savagely put to death. The body was then thrown to the dogs while his head was stuffed with straw and sent on tour around the cities of the Deccan before being hung

on the Delhi Gate.⁹⁷ By 1700, the Emperor's siege trains had taken the Maratha capital, Satara. It briefly seemed as if Aurangzeb had finally gained victory over the Marathas, and, as the great Mughal historian Ghulam Hussain Khan put it, 'driven that restless nation from its own home and reduced it to taking shelter in skulking holes and in fastnesses'.⁹⁸

But in his last years, Aurangzeb's winning streak began to fail him. Avoiding pitched battles, the Marathas' predatory cavalry armies adopted guerrilla tactics, attacking Mughal supply trains and leaving the slow, heavily encumbered Mughal columns to starve or else return, outmanoeuvred, to their base in Aurangabad. The Emperor marched personally to take fort after fort, only to see each lost immediately his back was turned. 'So long as a single breath of this mortal life remains,' he wrote, 'there is no release from this labour and work.'⁹⁹

The Mughal Empire had reached its widest extent yet, stretching from Kabul to the Carnatic, but there was suddenly disruption everywhere. Towards the end it was no longer just the Marathas: by the 1680s there was now in addition a growing insurgency in the imperial heartlands from peasant desertion and rebellion among the Jats of the Gangetic Doab and the Sikhs of the Punjab. Across the Empire, the landowning zamindar gentry were breaking into revolt and openly battling tax assessments and attempts by the Mughal state to penetrate rural areas and regulate matters that had previously been left to the discretion of hereditary local rulers. Banditry became endemic: in the mid-1690s the Italian traveller Giovanni Gemelli Careri complained that Mughal India did not offer travellers 'safety from thieves'.¹⁰⁰ Even Aurangzeb's son Prince Akbar went over to the Rajputs and raised the standard of rebellion.

These different acts of resistance significantly diminished the flow of rents, customs and revenues to the exchequer, leading for the first time in Mughal history to a treasury struggling to pay for the costs of administering the Empire or provide salaries for its officials. As military expenses continued to climb, the cracks in the Mughal state widened into, first, fissures, then crevasses. According to a slightly later text, the *Abkam-i Alamgiri*, the Emperor himself acknowledged 'there is no province or district where the infidels have not raised a tumult, and since they are not chastised, they have established themselves everywhere. Most of the country has been rendered desolate and if any

place is inhabited, the peasants have probably come to terms with the robbers.¹⁰¹

On his deathbed, Aurangzeb acknowledged his failures in a sad and defeated letter to his son, Azam:

I came alone and I go as a stranger. The instant which has passed in power has left only sorrow behind it. I have not been the guardian and protector of the Empire. Life, so valuable, has been squandered in vain. God was in my heart but I could not see him. Life is transient. The past is gone and there is no hope for the future. The whole imperial army is like me: bewildered, perturbed, separated from God, quaking like quicksilver. I fear my punishment. Though I have a firm hope in God's grace, yet for my deeds anxiety ever remains with me.¹⁰²

Aurangzeb finally died on 20 February 1707. He was buried in a simple grave, open to the skies, not in Agra or in Delhi but at Khuldabad in the middle of the Deccan plateau he spent most of his adult life trying,¹⁰³ and failing, to bring to heel. In the years that followed his death, the authority of the Mughal state began to dissolve, first in the Deccan and then, as the Maratha armies headed northwards under their great war leader Baji Rao, in larger and larger areas of central and western India, too.

Mughal succession disputes and a string of weak and powerless emperors exacerbated the sense of imperial crisis: three emperors were murdered (one was, in addition, first blinded with a hot needle); the mother of one ruler was strangled and the father of another forced off a precipice on his elephant. In the worst year of all, 1719, four different Emperors occupied the Peacock Throne in rapid succession. According to the Mughal historian Khair ud-Din Illahabadi, 'The Emperor spent years – and fortunes – attempting to destroy the foundations of Maratha power, but this accursed tree could not be pulled up by the roots.'

From Babur to Aurangzeb, the Mughal monarchy of Hindustan had grown ever more powerful, but now there was war among his descendants each seeking to pull the other down. The monarch's suspicious attitude towards his ministers and the commanders habitual interfering beyond their remit, with short-sighted selfishness and dishonesty, only made matters worse. Disorder and corruption

no longer sought to hide themselves and the once peaceful realm of India became a lair of Anarchy.¹⁰⁴

On the ground, this meant devastating Maratha raids, leaving those villages under Mughal authority little more than piles of smoking cinders. The ruthlessness and cruelty of these guerrilla raids were legendary. A European traveller passing out of Aurangabad came across the aftermath of one of these Maratha attacks:

When we reached the frontier, we found all put to fire and sword. We camped out next to villages reduced to ashes, an indescribably horrid and distressing scene of humans and domestic animals burned and lying scattered about. Women clutching their children in their arms, men contorted, as they had been overtaken by death, some with hands and feet charred, others with only the trunk of the body recognisable: hideous corpses, some char-grilled, others utterly calcined black: a sight of horror such as I had never seen before. In the three villages we passed through, there must have been some 600 such disfigured human bodies.¹⁰⁵

Yet if the Marathas were violent in war, they could in times of peace be mild rulers.¹⁰⁶ Another French traveller noted, ‘The Marathas willingly ruin the land of their enemies with a truly detestable barbarity, but they faithfully maintain the peace with their allies, and in their own domains make agriculture and commerce flourish. When seen from the outside, this style of government is terrible, as the nation is naturally prone to brigandage; but seen from the inside, it is gentle and benevolent. The areas of India which have submitted to the Marathas are the happiest and most flourishing.’¹⁰⁷ By the early eighteenth century, the Marathas had fanned out to control much of central and western India. They were organised under five chieftains who constituted the Maratha Confederacy. These five chiefs established hereditary families which ruled over five different regions. The Peshwa – a Persian term for Prime Minister that the Bahmani Sultans had introduced in the fourteenth century – controlled Maharashtra and was head of the Confederacy, keeping up an active correspondence with all his regional governors. Bhonsle was in charge of Orissa, Gaekwad controlled Gujarat, Holkar dominated in central India and Scindia was in command of a growing

swathe of territory in Rajasthan and north India. The Marathas continued to use Mughal administrative procedures and practices, in most cases making the transition to their rule so smooth it was almost imperceptible.¹⁰⁸

In the face of ever-growing Maratha power, Mughal regional governors were increasingly left to fend for themselves, and several of these began to behave as if they were indeed independent rulers. In 1724, one of Aurangzeb's favourite generals and most cherished protégés, Chin Qilich Khan, Nizam ul-Mulk, left Delhi without the sanction of the young Emperor Muhammad Shah and set himself up as the regional Governor in the eastern Deccan, defeating the rival Governor appointed by the Emperor and building up his own power base in the city of Hyderabad. A similar process was under way in Avadh – roughly present-day Uttar Pradesh – where power was becoming concentrated in the hands of a Shia Persian immigrant, Nawab Sa'adat Khan, and his Nishapur-born nephew, son-in-law and eventual successor, Safdar Jung. Uncle and nephew became the main power brokers in the north, with their base at Faizabad in the heart of the Ganges plains.¹⁰⁹

The association of both governors with the imperial court, and their personal loyalty to the Emperor, was increasingly effected on their own terms and in their own interests. They still operated under the carapace of the Mughal state, and used the name of the Emperor to invoke authority, but on the ground their regional governates began to feel more and more like self-governing provinces under their own independent lines of rulers. In the event both men would go on to found dynasties that dominated large areas of India for a hundred years.

The one partial exception to this pattern was Bengal, where the Governor, a former Brahmin slave who had been converted to Islam, Murshid Quli Khan, remained fiercely loyal to the Emperor, and continued annually to send to Delhi half a million sterling of the revenues of that rich province. By the 1720s Bengal was providing most of the revenues of the central government, and to maintain the flow of funds Murshid Quli Khan became notorious for the harshness of his tax-collecting regime. Defaulters among the local gentry would be summoned to the Governor's eponymous new capital, Murshidabad, and there confined without food and drink. In winter, the Governor would order them to be stripped naked and doused with cold water. He then used to 'suspend the zamindars by the heels, and bastinado

[beat] them with a switch'. If this did not do the trick, defaulters would be thrown into a pit 'which was filled with human excrement in such a state of putrefaction as to be full of worms, and the stench was so offensive, that it almost suffocated anyone who came near it ... He also used to oblige them to wear long leather drawers, filled with live cats.'¹¹⁰

As the country grew increasingly anarchic, Murshid Quli Khan found innovative ways to get the annual tribute to Delhi. No longer did he send caravans of bullion guarded by battalions of armed men: the roads were now too disordered for that. Instead he used the credit networks of a family of Marwari Oswal Jain financiers, originally from Nagar in Jodhpur state, to whom in 1722 the Emperor had awarded the title the Jagat Seths, the Bankers of the World, as a hereditary distinction. Controlling the minting, collection and transfer of the revenues of the empire's richest province, from their magnificent Murshidabad palace the Jagat Seths exercised influence and power that were second only to the Governor himself, and they soon came to achieve a reputation akin to that of the Rothschilds in nineteenth-century Europe. The historian Ghulam Hussain Khan believed that 'their wealth was such that there is no mentioning it without seeming to exaggerate and to deal in extravagant fables'. A Bengali poet wrote: 'As the Ganges pours its water into the sea by a hundred mouths, so wealth flowed into the treasury of the Seths.'¹¹¹ Company commentators were equally dazzled: the historian Robert Orme, who knew Bengal intimately, described the then Jagat Seth as 'the greatest shroff and banker in the known world'.¹¹² Captain Fenwick, writing on the 'affairs of Bengal in 1747-48', referred to Mahtab Rai Jagat Seth as a 'favourite of the Nabob and a greater Banker than all in Lombard Street [the banking district of the City of London] joined together'.¹¹³

From an early period, East India Company officials realised that the Jagat Seths were their natural allies in the disordered Indian political scene, and that their interests in most matters coincided. They also took regular and liberal advantage of the Jagat Seths' credit facilities: between 1718 and 1730, the East India Company borrowed on average Rs400,000 annually from the firm.* In time, the alliance, 'based on reciprocity and mutual advantage' of these two financial giants, and the access these

* Over £5 million today.

Marwari bankers gave the EIC to streams of Indian finance, would radically change the course of Indian history.¹¹⁴

In the absence of firm Mughal control, the East India Company also realised it could now enforce its will in a way that would have been impossible a generation earlier. Even in the last fraying years of Aurangzeb's reign there had been signs that the Company was becoming less respectful of Mughal authority than it had once been. In 1701, Da'ud Khan, the Governor of the newly conquered Carnatic, complained about the lack of courtesy on the part of the Madras Council who, he said, treated him 'in the most cavalier manner ... They failed to reflect that they had enriched themselves in his country to a most extraordinary degree. He believed that they must have forgotten that he was General over the province of the Carnatic, and that since the fall of the Golconda kingdom they had rendered no account of their administration, good or bad ... Nor had they accounted for the revenues from tobacco, betel, wine et cetera, which reached a considerable sum every year.'¹¹⁵

The Company's emissary, Venetian adventurer Niccolao Manucci, who was now living as a doctor in Madras, replied that the EIC had transformed a sandy beach into a flourishing port; if Da'ud Khan was harsh and overtaxed them, the EIC would simply move its operations elsewhere. The losers would be the local weavers and merchants who earned his kingdom lakhs* of pagodas each year through trade with the foreigners. The tactic worked: Da'ud Khan backed off. In this way the EIC prefigured by 300 years the response of many modern corporates when faced with the regulating and taxation demands of the nation state: treat us with indulgence, they whisper, or we take our business elsewhere. It was certainly not the last time a ruler on this coastline would complain, like Da'ud Khan, that the 'hat-wearers had drunk the wine of arrogance'.

Nine years later, the EIC went much further. In response to the seizure of two Englishmen and a short siege by the Mughal Qiladar (fort keeper) of Jinji, the factors of Fort St David, a little to the south of Madras, took up arms. In 1710, they rode out of their fortifications near Cuddalore, broke through Mughal lines and laid waste to fifty-two towns and villages along the Coromandel coast, killing innocent villagers and destroying fields of crops containing thousands of pagodas of rice

* A lakh equals a hundred thousand.

awaiting harvest which, the Governor of Madras proudly reported, 'exasperated the enemy beyond reconciliation'. This was perhaps the first major act of violence by Englishmen against the ordinary people of India. It was two years before the EIC was reconciled with the local Mughal government, through the friendly mediation of the French Governor of Pondicherry. The directors in London approved of the measures taken: 'The natives there and elsewhere in India who have, or shall hear of it, will have a due impression made upon their minds of the English Courage and Conduct, and know that we were able to maintain a War against even so Potent a Prince.'¹¹⁶

In Bengal, Murshid Quli Khan had also become disgusted by the rudeness and bullying of the increasingly assertive Company officials in Calcutta and wrote to Delhi to make his feelings plain. 'I am scarce able to recount to you the abominable practices of these people,' he wrote.

When they first came to this country they petitioned the then government in a humble manner for the liberty to purchase a spot of ground to build a factory house upon, which was no sooner granted but they ran up a strong fort, surrounded it with a ditch which has communication with the river and mounted a great number of guns upon the walls. They have enticed several merchants and others to go and take protection under them and they collect a revenue which amounts to Rs100,000* ... They rob and plunder and carry a great number of the king's subjects of both sexes into slavery.¹¹⁷

By this time, however, officials in Delhi were occupied with more serious worries.



Delhi in 1737 had around 2 million inhabitants. Larger than London and Paris combined, it was still the most prosperous and magnificent

* Over £1 million today.

city between Ottoman Istanbul and imperial Edo (Tokyo). As the Empire fell apart around it, it hung like an overripe mango, huge and inviting, yet clearly in decay, ready to fall and disintegrate.

Despite growing intrigue, dissension and revolt, the Emperor still ruled from the Red Fort over a vast territory. His court was the school of manners for the whole region, as well as the major centre for the Indo-Islamic arts. Visitors invariably regarded it as the greatest and most sophisticated city in South Asia: 'Shahjahanabad was perfectly brilliant and heavily populated,' wrote the traveller Murtaza Husain, who saw the city in 1731. 'In the evening one could not move one *gaz* [yard] in Chandni Chowk or the Chowk of Sa'adullah Khan because of the great crowds of people.' The courtier and intellectual Anand Ram Mukhlis described the city as being 'like a cage of tumultuous nightingales'.¹¹⁸ According to the Mughal poet Hatim,

Delhi is not a city but a rose Garden,
Even its wastelands are more pleasing than an orchard.
Shy, beautiful women are the bloom of its bazaars,
Every corner adorned with greenery and elegant cypress trees.¹¹⁹

Ruling this rich, vulnerable empire was the effete Emperor Muhammad Shah – called Rangila, or Colourful, the Merry-Maker. He was an aesthete, much given to wearing ladies' *peshwaz* and shoes embroidered with pearls; he was also a discerning patron of music and painting. It was Muhammad Shah who brought the sitar and the tabla out of the folk milieu and into his court. He also showered his patronage on the Mughal miniature atelier neglected by Aurangzeb and his successors, commissioning bucolic scenes of Mughal court life: the palace Holi celebrations bathed in fabulous washes of red and orange; scenes of the Emperor going hawking along the Yamuna or visiting his walled pleasure gardens; or, more rarely, holding audiences with his ministers amid the flowerbeds and parterres of the Red Fort.¹²⁰

Muhammad Shah somehow managed to survive in power by the simple ruse of giving up any appearance of ruling: in the morning he watched partridge and elephant fights; in the afternoon he was entertained by jugglers, mime artists and conjurors. Politics he wisely left to his advisers and regents; and as his reign progressed, power ebbed

gently away from Delhi, as the regional Nawabs began to take their own decisions on all important matters of politics, economics, internal security and self-defence.

‘This prince had been kept in the Salim-garh fort, living a soft and effeminate life,’ wrote the French traveller and mercenary Jean-Baptiste Gentil, ‘and now took the reins of government amid storms of chaos and disorder.’

He was young and lacked experience and so failed to notice that the imperial diadem he was wearing was none other than the head-band of a sacrificial animal, portending death. Nature lavished on him gentle manners and a peaceful character, but withheld that strength of character necessary in an absolute monarch – all the more necessary at a time when the grandees knew no law other than the survival of the fittest and no rule but that of might is right; and so this unhappy prince became the plaything, one after another, of all those who exercised authority in his name, who recognised that now-empty title, that shadow of a once august name, only when it served to legitimise their unlawful take-over of power. Thus in his reign, they carried out their criminal usurpations, dividing up the spoils of their unfortunate master, after destroying the remnants of his power.¹²¹

A French eyewitness, Joseph de Volton from Bar-le-Duc, wrote to the French Compagnie des Indes headquarters in Pondicherry giving his impressions of the growing crisis in the capital. According to a digest of his report:

the poor government of this empire seemed to prepare one for some coming catastrophe; the people were crushed under by the vexations of the grandees ... [Muhammad Shah] is a prince of a spirit so feeble that it bordered on imbecility, solely occupied with his pleasures ... The great Empire has been shaken since some time by diverse rebellions. The Marathas, a people of the Deccan who were at one time tributary, have shaken off the yoke, and they have even had the audacity to penetrate from one end of Hindustan in armed bodies, and to carry out a considerable pillage. The little resistance that they have encountered prefigures the facility with which anyone could seize hold of this Empire.¹²²

De Volton was right: as the Maratha armies swept ever further north, even the capital ceased to be secure. On 8 April 1737, a swift-moving warband under the young star commander of the Maratha Confederacy, Baji Rao, raided the outskirts of Agra and two days later appeared at the gates of Delhi, looting and burning the suburban villages of Malcha, Tal Katora, Palam and Mehrauli, where the Marathas made their camp in the shadow of the Qu'tb Minar, the victory tower which marked the arrival of the first Islamic conquerors of India 600 years earlier. The raiders dispersed when news came that Nawab Sa'adat Khan was approaching with his army from Avadh to head them off; but it was nevertheless an unprecedented insult to the Mughals and a blow to both their credibility and self-confidence.¹²³

Realising how far things had slipped, the Emperor called for Nizam ul-Mulk to come north to save Delhi: 'the old general had served with distinction under Aurangzeb,' wrote Ghulam Hussain Khan, 'and passed for a wolf that had seen much bad weather, and was much experienced in the ways of the world.'¹²⁴ The Nizam obeyed the summons, and gathered an army for the long trek north; but he realised that it was now no easy task to bring the Marathas to heel: 'the resources of the Marathas have doubled since the death of Aurangzeb,' he wrote to the Emperor, 'while the affairs of the Empire, on the contrary, have fallen into disorder. Signs of our decline have become manifest everywhere.'¹²⁵ The Mughal accountants would have backed the Nizam on this: by the 1730s the Marathas were collecting 1 million rupees* in tribute from the rich central Indian lands of Malwa alone, funds which were now effectively lost to the Mughals, whose treasury was correspondingly depleted.¹²⁶

The Nizam was right to be apprehensive. On 7 January 1738, Baji Rao's Maratha army surprised the Nizam near Bhopal, encircling and surrounding him. At first, Baji Rao was too intimidated to take on the Nizam's fortified position, but he attacked anyway and, somewhat to the surprise of both sides, defeated the veteran Mughal general. The captive Nizam pledged to get the grant of the governorship of Malwa for Baji Rao, hoping to turn the Maratha poachers into Mughal gamekeepers and co-opt them into the Mughal system.¹²⁷ But even as the Nizam was

* £13 million today.

making his way, humiliated, to Delhi, a much more serious threat to the Empire was manifesting itself to the north.

Nader Shah Afshar, born in Persian Khorasan, was the son of a humble shepherd and furrier. He had risen rapidly in the Safavid Persian army due to his remarkable military talents. He was just as tough, ruthless and efficient a figure as Muhammad Shah was artistic and chaotic. The finest pen portrait that survives of Nader was written by an urbane French Jesuit, Père Louis Bazin, who became Nader's personal physician. Bazin both admired and was horrified by the brutal yet commanding man he agreed to take care of: 'In spite of his humble birth, he seemed born for the throne,' wrote the Jesuit. 'Nature had given him all the great qualities that make a hero and even some of those that make a great king':

His beard, dyed black, was in stark contrast to his hair which had gone completely white; his natural constitution was strong and robust, of tall stature; his complexion was sombre and weather-beaten, with a longish face, an aquiline nose, and a well-shaped mouth but with the lower lip jutting out. He had small piercing eyes with a sharp and penetrating stare; his voice was rough and loud, though he managed to soften it on occasion, as self-interest or caprice demanded ...

He had no fixed abode – his court was his military camp; his palace was a tent, his throne was placed in the middle of weapons, and his closest confidants were his bravest warriors ... Intrepid in combat, he pushed bravery to the limits of rashness, and was always to be found in the midst of danger among his braves, as long as the action lasted ... Yet sordid avarice, and his unheard-of cruelties soon wearied his own people, and the excesses and horrors to which his violent and barbarous character led him made Persia weep and bleed: he was at once admired, feared and execrated ...¹²⁸

In 1732, Nader had seized the Persian throne in a military coup. Shortly afterwards he deposed the last infant Safavid prince, ending 200 years of Safavid rule. Seven years later, in the spring of 1739, he invaded Afghanistan. Even before he had left Isfahan, there were rumours that his real plan was to mount a raid on the treasures of Mughal Delhi, 'to pluck some golden feathers' from the Mughal peacock.¹²⁹

On 21 May, Nader Shah with a force of 80,000 fighting men crossed the border into the Mughal Empire, heading for the summer capital of Kabul, so beginning the first invasion of India for two centuries. The great Bala Hisar of Kabul surrendered at the end of June. Nader Shah then descended the Khyber. Less than three months later, at Karnal, one hundred miles north of Delhi, he defeated three merged Mughal armies – around a million men, some half of whom were fighters – with a relatively small but strictly disciplined force of 150,000 musketeers and Qizilbash horsemen armed with the latest military technology of the day: armour-penetrating, horse-mounted *jazair*, or swivel guns.

Nader Shah's job was certainly made much easier by the increasingly bitter divisions between Muhammad Shah's two principal generals, Sa'adat Khan and Nizam ul-Mulk. Sa'adat Khan arrived late at the Mughal camp, marching in from Avadh long after the Nizam had encamped, but, keen to show off his superior military abilities, decided to ride straight into battle without waiting for his exhausted soldiers to rest. Around noon on 13 February, he marched out of the earthwork defences erected by the Nizam to protect his troops, 'with headlong impetuosity misplaced in a commander', and against the advice of the Nizam, who remained behind, declaring that 'haste is of the devil'.¹³⁰ He was right to be cautious: Sa'adat Khan was walking straight into a carefully laid trap.

Nader Shah lured Sa'adat Khan's old-fashioned heavy Mughal cavalry – armoured cuirassiers fighting with long swords – into making a massed frontal charge. As they neared the Persian lines, Nader's light cavalry parted like a curtain, leaving the Mughals facing a long line of mounted musketeers, each of whom was armed with swivel guns. They fired at point-blank range. Within a few minutes, the flower of Mughal chivalry lay dead on the ground. As a Kashmiri observer, Abdul Karim Sharistani, put it, 'the army of Hindustan fought with bravery. But one cannot fight musket balls with arrows.'¹³¹

Having defeated the Mughals in an initial engagement, Nader Shah then managed to capture the Emperor himself by the simple ruse of inviting him to dinner, then refusing to let him leave.¹³² 'Here was an army of a million bold and well-equipped horsemen, held as it were in captivity, and all the resources of the Emperor and his grandees at the disposal of the Persians,' wrote Anand Ram Mukhlis. 'The Mughal monarchy appeared to be at an end.'¹³³ This was certainly the view of the ambassador of the Marathas, who fled the Mughal camp under cover of

darkness and made it back to Delhi by a circuitous route through the jungle, only to leave the same day, heading south as fast as he could. 'God has averted a great danger from me,' he wrote to his masters in Pune, 'and helped me escape with honour. The Mughal empire is at an end, and the Persian has begun.'¹³⁴

On 29 March, a week after Nader Shah's forces had entered the Mughal capital, a newswriter for the Dutch VOC sent a report in which he described Nader Shah's bloody massacre of the people of Delhi: 'the Iranians have behaved like animals,' he wrote. 'At least 100,000 people were killed. Nader Shah gave orders to kill anyone who defended himself. As a result it seemed as if it were raining blood, for the drains were streaming with it.'¹³⁵ Ghulam Hussain Khan recorded how, 'In an instant the soldiers getting on the tops of the houses commenced killing, slaughtering and plundering people's property, and carrying away their wives and daughters. Numbers of houses were set on fire and ruined.'¹³⁶

In addition to those killed, many Delhi women were enslaved. The entire quarter around the Jama Masjid was gutted. There was little armed resistance: 'The Persians laid violent hands on everything and everybody; cloth, jewels, dishes of gold and silver were all acceptable spoil,' wrote Anand Ram Mukhlis, who watched the destruction from his rooftop, 'resolving to fight to the death if necessary ... For a long time after, the streets remained strewn with corpses, as the walks of a garden are with dead flowers and leaves. The town was reduced to ashes, and had the appearance of plain consumed with fire. The ruin of its beautiful streets and buildings was such that the labour of years could alone restore the city to its former state of grandeur.'¹³⁷ The French Jesuits recorded that fires raged across the city for eight days and destroyed two of their churches.

The massacre continued until the Nizam went bareheaded, his hands tied with his turban, and begged Nader on his knees to spare the inhabitants and instead to take revenge on him. Nader Shah ordered his troops to stop the killing; they obeyed immediately. He did so, however, on the condition that the Nizam would give him 100 crore (1 billion) rupees* before he would agree to leave Delhi. 'The robbing, torture and plundering still continues,' noted a Dutch observer, 'but not, thankfully, the killing.'¹³⁸

* £13 billion today.

In the days that followed, the Nizam found himself in the unhappy position of having to loot his own city to pay the promised indemnity. The city was divided into five blocks and vast sums were demanded of each: 'Now commenced the work of spoliation,' remarked Anand Ram Mukhlis, 'watered by the tears of the people ... Not only was their money taken, but whole families were ruined. Many swallowed poison, and others ended their days with the stab of a knife ... In short the accumulated wealth of 348 years changed masters in a moment.'¹³⁹

The Persians could not believe the riches that were offered to them over the next few days. They had simply never seen anything like it. Nader's court historian, Mirza Mahdi Astarabadi, was wide-eyed: 'Within a very few days, the officials entrusted with sequestration of the royal treasuries and workshops finished their appointed tasks,' he wrote. 'There appeared oceans of pearls & coral, and mines full of gems, gold and silver vessels, cups and other items encrusted with precious jewels and other luxurious objects in such vast quantities that accountants and scribes even in their wildest dreams would be unable to encompass them in their accounts and records.'

Among the sequestered objects was the Peacock Throne whose imperial jewels were unrivalled even by the treasures of ancient kings: in the time of earlier Emperors of India, two crores worth* of jewels were used as encrustation to inlay this throne: the rarest spinels and rubies, the most brilliant diamonds, without parallel in any of the treasure of past or present kings, were transferred to Nader Shah's government treasury. During the period of our sojourn in Delhi, crores of rupees were extracted from the imperial treasuries. The military and landed nobility of the Mughal state, the grandees of the imperial capital, the independent rajas, the wealthy provincial governors – all sent contributions of crores of coined bullion and gems and jewel-encrusted imperial regalia and the rarest vessels as tributary gifts to the royal court of Nader Shah, in such quantities that beggar all description.¹⁴⁰

Nader never wished to rule India, just to plunder it for resources to fight his real enemies, the Russians and the Ottomans. Fifty-seven days

* £260 million today.

later, he returned to Persia carrying the pick of the treasures the Mughal Empire had amassed over its 200 years of sovereignty and conquest: a caravan of riches that included Jahangir's magnificent Peacock Throne, embedded in which was both the Koh-i-Noor diamond and the great Timur ruby. Nader Shah also took with him the Great Mughal Diamond, reputedly the largest in the world, along with the Koh-i-Noor's slightly larger, pinker 'sister', the Daria-i-Noor, and '700 elephants, 4,000 camels and 12,000 horses carrying wagons all laden with gold, silver and precious stones', worth in total an estimated £87.5 million* in the currency of the time.

In a single swift blow, Nader Shah had broken the Mughal spell. Muhammad Shah Rangila remained on the throne, but, with little remaining credibility or real power, he withdrew from public life, hardly leaving Delhi. As the Mughal historian Warid declared,

His Majesty, in order to soothe his heart afflicted by sad news, either visited the gardens to look at the newly planted trees, or rode out to hunt in the plains, while the vizier went to assuage his feelings by gazing at the lotuses in some pools situated four leagues from Delhi, where he would spend a month or more in tents, hunting fish in the rivers and deer in the plains. At such times, the Emperor and wazir alike lived in total forgetfulness of the business of the administration, the collection of the revenue, and the needs of the army. No one thought of guarding the realm and protecting the people, while daily the disturbances grew greater.¹⁴¹

The old Mughal elite realised that the end was in sight for their entire world. As the poet Hatim wrote:

Nobles are reduced to the status of grass cutters
 Palace-dwellers do not possess even ruins to give them shelter.
 Strange winds seem to blow in Delhi
 The nobles have fled from the cities
 Instead owls from the forest have descended on Shahjahanabad,
 And taken up residence in the courtyards of princes.

* Around £9,200 million today.

Many observers, like the nobleman Shakir Khan, put the blame on the corruption and decadence of society under Muhammad Shah, and turned to a more austere form of Islam in reaction to the Emperor's careless hedonism: 'At the beginning of this period,' he wrote, 'there was music and drinking, noisy entertainers and crowds of prostitutes, a time of foolery and joking, effeminacy, and chasing after transvestites.'

All pleasures, whether forbidden or not, were available and the voice of the spiritual authorities grew indistinct, drowned out in the uproar of partying. People got used to vice and forgot to promote what was decent, for the mirrors of their hearts could no longer reflect a virtuous face – so much so, that when the catastrophe happened and society was torn apart, it was no longer capable of being mended.

It soon reached a point where the contents of the private mansions and royal apartments, royal armouries, the royal wardrobe and furniture store, even the pots and pans out of the royal kitchen, the books from the royal library, the instruments from the lodge for royal fanfares and the drum-house, everything from the royal workshops, all were sold to shopkeepers and dealers. Most was used to pay off the arrears of the troops.¹⁴²

This was the moment that the two greatest regional governors, Nizam ul-Mulk and Safdar Jung, ceased to send their tax revenues to Delhi, so worsening the financial crisis of a Mughal state that was now on the verge of complete bankruptcy. The sudden impoverishment of Delhi meant that the administrative and military salaries could no longer be paid, and without fuel, the fire went out of the boiler house of Empire. The regional dynasties of governors consolidated their hold on power, now free from the control of Delhi. In just a few months, the Mughal Empire, built up over 150 years, shattered and fragmented like a mirror thrown from a first-storey window, leaving in its place glinting shards of a mosaic of smaller and more vulnerable successor states.

The days of huge imperial armies, financed by an overflowing treasury, had ended for ever. Instead, as authority disintegrated, everyone took measures for their own protection and India became a decentralised and disjointed but profoundly militarised society. Almost everybody

now carried weapons. Almost everybody was potentially a soldier. A military labour market sprang up across Hindustan – one of the most thriving free markets of fighting men anywhere in the world – all up for sale to the highest bidder. Indeed, warfare came to be regarded as a sort of business enterprise.¹⁴³ By the end of the eighteenth century, substantial sections of the peasantry were armed and spent part of their year as mercenaries serving in distant locations. Sometimes they moved their family and agricultural bases to take advantage of opportunities for military earnings. Meanwhile, the regional rulers they fought for had to find ways of paying for them and the expensive new armies they needed in order to compete with their rivals. To do this they developed new state instruments of bureaucracy and fiscal reputation, attempting to exercise a much deeper control over commerce and production than the Mughal regime they had replaced.¹⁴⁴

The most perceptive historian of eighteenth-century India, Ghulam Hussain Khan, could see only horror and anarchy in these developments: ‘Then it was,’ he wrote, ‘that the Sun of Justice and Equity, that had already been verging from the Meridien, inclined downwards, degree by degree, and at last entirely set in the Occident of ignorance, imprudence, violence and civil wars.’

It is from those times must be dated the sinking of rents, the decrease of husbandry, the distress of the people and their detestation of their Rulers. Nor was anything else thought of, but how to bring money to hand by any means whatever. This and this alone became the utmost ambition of all ranks.

It was in such an enfeebled state of the Empire, that there arose a new sort of men, who so far from setting up patterns of piety and virtue, squandered away the lives and properties of the poor with so much barefacedness, that other men, on beholding their conduct, became bolder and bolder, and practised the worst and ugliest action, without fear or remorse. From those men sprung an infinity of evil-doers, who plague the Indian world, and grind the faces of its wretched inhabitants ...

Evils are now arisen to such a height, as render a remedy impossible. It is a consequence of such wretched administrations that every part of India has gone to ruin. So that, comparing the present times with the past, one is apt to think that this world is overwhelmed with darkness.¹⁴⁵

But what appeared to be the end of an era in Delhi looked quite different in other parts of India, as a century of imperial centralisation gave way to a revival of regional identities and regional governance. Decline and disruption in the heartlands of Hindustan after 1707 was matched by growth and relative prosperity in the Mughal peripheries. Pune and the Maratha hills, flush with loot and overflowing tax revenues, entered their golden age. The Rohilla Afghans, the Sikhs of the Punjab and the Jats of Deeg and Bharatpur all began to carve independent states out of the cadaver of the Mughal Empire, and to assume the mantle of kingship and governance.

For Jaipur, Jodhpur, Udaipur and the other Rajput courts, this was also an age of empowerment and resurgence as they resumed their independence and, free from the tax burdens inherent in bowing to Mughal overlordship, began using their spare revenues to add opulent new palaces to their magnificent forts. In Avadh, the baroque palaces of Faizabad rose to rival those built by the Nizam in Hyderabad to the south. All these cities emerged as centres of literary, artistic and cultural patronage, so blossoming into places of remarkable cultural efflorescence.

Meanwhile, Benares emerged as a major centre of finance and commerce as well as a unique centre of religion, education and pilgrimage. In Bengal, Nadia was the centre of Sanskrit learning and a sophisticated centre for regional architectural and Hindustani musical excellence.

To the south, in Tanjore, a little later, Carnatic music would begin to receive enlightened patronage from the Maratha court that had seized control of that ancient centre of Tamil culture. At the other end of the subcontinent, the Punjab hill states of the Himalayan foothills entered a period of astonishing creativity as small remote mountain kingdoms suddenly blossomed with artists, many of whom had been trained with metropolitan skills in the now-diminished Mughal ateliers, each family of painters competing with and inspiring each other in a manner comparable to the rival city states of Renaissance Italy. In this scenario, Guler and Jasrota stood in for San Gimignano and Urbino, small but wealthy hilltowns ruled by a court with an unusual interest in the arts, patronising and giving refuge to a small group of utterly exceptional artists.

However, the two powers which would make most use of the opportunities presented by the descent of the Mughal heartlands into Anarchy were not Indian at all. In Pondicherry and Madras, two rival

European trading companies, alerted to Mughal weakness and the now deeply divided and fragmented nature of authority in India, began to recruit their own private security forces and to train and give generous wages to locally recruited infantry troops.

As the EIC writer William Bolts later noted, seeing a handful of Persians take Delhi with such ease spurred the Europeans' dreams of conquests and Empire in India. Nader Shah had shown the way.



In the young French settlement of Pondicherry, on the warm, sandy Coromandel coast south of Madras, news of Nader Shah's invasion was being closely followed by the Compagnie des Indes' ambitious and dazzlingly capable new Director General, Joseph-François Dupleix. On 5 January 1739, even before Nader Shah had reached Karnal, Dupleix wrote, 'We are on the eve of a great revolution in this Empire.'

The weakness of the Mogol government gives ample grounds to believe Nader may very soon be master of this Empire. This revolution if it takes place, can only cause a *grand derangement* to trade. However it can only be advantageous to Europeans.¹⁴⁶

Dupleix had arrived in India as a young man, and had risen through the ranks as his employer, the French Compagnie des Indes, slowly grew and prospered. For the French had been relatively late to realise the possibilities inherent in trading with India. It was not until 1664 that they had set up a rival to the EIC; eight years later, they had founded Pondicherry, successfully bribing the Marathas to leave it alone on their periodic raids into the Carnatic.

In its first incarnation, the Compagnie lost substantial amounts of money and in 1719 it had to be refounded by the brilliant Lowland Scots financier John Law de Lauriston, who had fled from London to France after a duel and rose to become an adviser to the Regent Orléans. Law combined two small insolvent French Indies companies and raised enough money to make it a going concern. But the Compagnie des

Indes remained permanently underfunded. Unlike the EIC, which was owned by its shareholders, from the beginning the French Compagnie was partially a royal concern, run by aristocrats who, like their king, tended to be more interested in politics than trade; Dupleix was relatively unusual in that he was interested in both.¹⁴⁷

In 1742, aged nearly fifty, Dupleix moved south from running Chandernagar, the French base in Bengal, to take over as both Governor of Pondicherry and Director General of the Compagnie in India. As one of his first acts he got De Volton, his representative at the Mughal court, to petition the Emperor to make him a Nawab with the rank of 5,000 horse, and to give the French in Pondicherry the right to mint coins. When both wishes were instantly granted, Dupleix began to understand how far Mughal authority had been weakened by Nader Shah's invasion.¹⁴⁸

He made immediate plans to increase the Compagnie's military capability, and for the first time took the initiative to begin training up locally recruited Tamil-, Malayali- and Telugu-speaking warriors in modern European infantry tactics.¹⁴⁹ By 1746, two regiments of 'cypahes' (sepoys) had been formed, drilled, uniformed, armed and paid in the French manner. As his military commander, Dupleix appointed the talented Charles-Joseph Patissier, Marquis de Bussy, who had just moved from Ile de Bourbon – modern Mauritius – to Pondicherry as military ensign for the French Compagnie. Together the two would take the first steps to entangle the European trading companies in regional post-Mughal politics.

By the time Dupleix arrived in Pondicherry he had already made himself a mercantile fortune, and was keen to add to it. Like many of his British counterparts, he made more money through private trading schemes, often in partnership with Indian traders and moneylenders, than he did from his official salary. He therefore had a strong interest in both Companies remaining neutral as growing Anglo-French rivalry in Europe made war between the two increasingly likely.

France in the 1740s had by far the larger economy, double that of Britain; it also had three times the population and the largest army in Europe. Britain, however, had a much larger navy and was the dominant power on the seas; moreover, since the Glorious Revolution of 1688, it had more advanced financial institutions built with Dutch expertise, and capable of raising large amounts of war finance very quickly. Both

sides therefore had reason to believe that they could win a war against the other. Dupleix was keen that none of this should get in the way of his profitable trading operations. Consequently, as soon as news belatedly arrived from Europe that Britain and France had joined the War of Austrian Succession on opposing sides, Dupleix approached his EIC counterpart in Madras, Governor Morse, to assure him that the French in Pondicherry would not be the first aggressors.

Morse would personally have been happy to agree to such a pact of neutrality, but he knew what Dupleix did not: that a Royal Navy squadron had already been despatched eastwards and that it was expected any day. He therefore equivocated and told Dupleix he had no authority to make such a pact. The squadron arrived in February 1745, and promptly attacked and seized a number of French ships, among them one in which Dupleix had a large financial interest.¹⁵⁰

Dupleix made an attempt to secure compensation from Madras. But after being rebuffed he made the decision to strike back and get redress by force. He summoned a rival squadron from the French naval base at Ile de Bourbon, and sent his chief engineer, a Swiss mercenary named Paradis, to assess the defences of Madras. A month later he wrote to Mauritius that the ‘garrison, defences and governor of Madras were, alike, pitiable’. He then set about repairing the walls of Pondicherry with his own funds, while assuring his secretary, Ananda Ranga Pillai, that ‘the English Company is bound to die out. It has long been in an impecunious condition ... Mark my words. The truth of them will be brought home to you when you, ere long, find that my prophecy has been realised.’¹⁵¹

His reinforcements – around 4,000-strong and including several battalions of highly trained African slave troops and some state-of-the-art siege artillery – arrived in early September. Immediately, Dupleix took the initiative. His new regiments of sepoys and the African and French reinforcements from Mauritius were all sent north on troop transports overnight, supported by eight men-of-war. Landing just to the south of Madras, near St Thomas Mount, they then marched quickly north, moving in to invest the city from the opposite direction to that from which they were expected. In this way they appeared without warning behind the British lines and to the rear of the EIC defences. The siege began on 18 September with such an immense bombardment of mortars that the EIC’s nervous chief gunner, Mr Smith, died there and then of a heart attack.

Madras had a garrison of only 300, half of them Indo-Portuguese guards who had no wish to fight and die for their British employers. The other half were an untrained militia of portly, pink-faced British merchants. Within three days, having lost many of his troops to desertion, Governor Morse sought terms. On 20 September, after the loss of only six EIC lives and no French casualties at all, Madras surrendered to the French. Ananda Ranga Pillai gave a rather more colourful version of events in his diaries than the slightly unheroic events perhaps warranted: 'The French,' he wrote, 'hurled themselves against Madras as a lion rushes into a herd of elephants... They captured the Fort, planted their flag on the ramparts, and shone in Madras like the sun which spreads its beams over the whole world.'¹⁵²

The most significant incident in this war, however, took place a month later. The Mughal Nawab of the Carnatic, Anwar ud-Din, was furious with Dupleix for ignoring his orders by attacking Madras without his permission, and then insulting him by refusing to hand over the captured town to his authority. He had no intention of allowing a trading company to defy his rule in this manner, so he sent his son, Mahfuz Khan, with the entire Mughal army of the Carnatic, to punish the French.

On 24 October 1746, on the estuary of the Adyar River, Mahfuz Khan tried to block the passage of 700 French sepoy reinforcements under Paradis. The French beat off an attack by the 10,000 Mughal troopers with the help of sustained musketry, their infantry drawn up in ranks, file-firing and using grapeshot at close quarters in a way that had never before been seen in India. Ananda Ranga Pillai was again an eyewitness. 'M Paradis made a breastwork of Palmyra trees, on the strip of sand next to the sea,' he wrote,

and formed the soldiers and the sepoys into four divisions. He ordered each to engage a separate body of the enemy. He placed himself at the head of the foremost party. On this, three rockets and four cannon were fired by the Muhammadans. Their contents fell into the river, and caused no damage. The French then opened a volley of musketry on the enemy, killing numbers of them.

The Muhammadans threw down their arms and fled, with dishevelled hair and dress. Some fell dead in the act of flight. The loss thus caused to them was immense. Mafuz Khan also ran on foot, until he reached his elephant, and mounting this, quickly made his escape. He and his troops did not cease their flight until they reached

Kunattur. The rout was general, so much so that not a fly, not a sparrow, not a crow was to be seen in all Mylapore.¹⁵³

Another account – written by the court historian of the Nawabs of the Carnatic – claimed that the French attacked at night and ‘since the Nawab’s army had not the least suspicion of a night attack, they were unready, so the Mughal army got confused in the darkness’. Whatever the truth, the Battle of Adyar River proved a turning point in Indian history. Only two French sepoys were killed, while Mughal casualties were over 300. For the first time, techniques of eighteenth-century European warfare, developed in Prussia and tested on the battlefields of France and Flanders, had been tried out in India. It was immediately clear that nothing in the Mughal armoury could match their force.

Europeans had long suspected they were superior to the Mughals in tactical prowess, but they had not appreciated how great this advantage had become due to military developments in the previous half-century since 1687 when the pike-wielding Jacobean troops of Sir Josiah Child were quickly overwhelmed by Aurangzeb’s Mughal troopers. But the wars of late seventeenth-century Europe had seen rapid development in military tactics, particularly the widespread introduction of flintlock muskets and socket bayonets to replace pikes. The organisation of the infantry into battalions, regiments and brigades made continuous firing and complex battlefield manoeuvres by infantry a possibility. The standard infantry tactic was now a bayonet charge after devastating volley firing, supported by mobile and accurate field artillery. The invention of screws for elevating the guns gave the artillery greater precision and increased the firepower of the foot soldiers, giving them an edge in battle against cavalry. The Battle of Adyar River, the first time these tactics were tried out in India, had shown that a small body of infantry armed with the new flintlock muskets and bayonets, and supported by quick-firing mobile artillery, could now scatter a whole army just as easily as they could in Europe. The lesson was not forgotten. The trained sepoy with his file-firing muskets and hollow squares, and supported by artillery quick-firing grape and canister shot, would be an unstoppable force in Indian warfare for the next century.¹⁵⁴

Even before witnessing the Battle of Adyar River, Ananda Ranga Pillai had told Dupleix that 1,000 such French soldiers with cannon

and mines could conquer all of south India. Dupleix had replied that half that number, and two cannon, would suffice.

In the years that followed, both men would have ample opportunity to test this idea.



In 1749 news came from Europe that the War of the Austrian Succession had ended, and that at the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle it had been agreed that Madras should be restored to the EIC.

Peace, however, now proved more elusive: the dogs of war, once let slip, were not easily brought to heel. Rather than disbanding his new sepoy regiments, Dupleix decided to hire them out to his Indian allies, and to use them to gain both land and political influence.

The new Governor of Madras, Charles Floyer, wrote the following year that ‘in spite of peace, affairs are more embroiled than ever during the war owing to the artifices of Dupleix, who so hates the English as to be unable to refrain from underhand acts of hostility’.¹⁵⁵ The directors in London agreed that the Company must not again let down its guard: ‘Experience has proved that no Regard is paid by the French to the neutrality of the Mogul’s Dominions’,

and that were the Country [Mughal] Government willing to protect us, they are not able to do it against the French, who have little to lose, and are prone to violate the Laws of Nations to enrich themselves with plunder ... You have orders to make yourselves as secure as you can against the French or any other European Enemy ... His Majesty will support the Company in whatever they may think fit to do for their future Security; for though a Peace is now made with France, no one knows how long it may last, and when war breaks out, it is always too late to make Fortifications strong enough to make Defence against an Enterprising Enemy, as happened in Madras.¹⁵⁶

Soon both the British and the French were intriguing with the different states in the south, covertly offering to sell their military assistance in

return for influence, payments or land grants. In 1749, in return for a small trading port, the EIC became involved in its first attempt at what today would be called regime change, taking sides in a succession dispute in the Maratha kingdom of Tanjore. The attempted coup was a miserable failure.

Dupleix, however, had much more success as a military entrepreneur. His clients had to pay for their European weapons and troops in land grants and land revenue collection rights that would enable the French Compagnie to maintain its sepoy and finance its trade from Indian revenues rather than importing bullion from Europe. Dupleix sold his services as a mercenary first to one of the claimants to the throne of the Carnatic, and then, in a much more ambitious move, despatched the Marquis de Bussy to Hyderabad to take sides in the succession crisis that had followed the death of the region's most powerful Mughal overlord, Nizam ul-Mulk, as his sons fought for control of the Nizam's semi-detached fragment of the Mughal Empire. Dupleix was handsomely rewarded for his assistance with a present of £77,500, the high Mughal rank of Mansab of 7,000 horse – the equivalent of a Dukedom in Europe – the rich port of Masulipatnam and a *jagir* (a landed estate) worth £20,000.* Selling the services of his trained and disciplined troops, he soon realised, was an infinitely more profitable business than dealing in cotton textiles.

Dupleix's generalissimo, the Marquis de Bussy, who also made a fortune, could hardly believe the dramatic results his tiny mercenary force achieved as he marched through the Deccan: 'Kings have been placed on the throne with my hands,' he wrote to Dupleix in 1752, 'sustained by my forces, armies have been put to flight, towns taken by assault by a mere handful of my men, peace treaties concluded by my own mediation ... The honour of my nation has been taken to a pinnacle of glory, so that it has been preferred to all the others in Europe, and the interests of the Compagnie taken beyond its hopes and even its desires.'¹⁵⁷

In reality, however, these were all two-way transactions: weak Indian rulers of fragmented post-Mughal states offered large blocks of territory, or land revenue, to the different European Companies in return for military support. The warfare that followed, which usually involved

* The modern equivalences of these sums are: £77,500 = over £8 million today; £20,000 = £2 million today.

very small Company armies, was often incoherent and inconclusive, but it confirmed that the Europeans now had a clear and consistent military edge over Indian cavalry, and that small numbers of them were capable of altering the balance of power in the newly fractured political landscape that had followed the fall of the Mughal Empire.

The Carnatic Wars that rumbled on over the next decade might have had few conclusive or permanent strategic results, but they witnessed the transformation of the character of the two Companies from trading concerns to increasingly belligerent and militarised entities, part-textile exporters, part-pepper traders, part-revenue-collecting land-holding businesses, and now, most profitably of all, state-of-the-art mercenary outfits.

The British observed Dupleix's successes greedily: 'The policy of the Mughals is bad,' wrote one English soldier of fortune, Colonel Mills, 'their army worse; they are without a navy ... the country might be conquered and laid under contribution as easily as the Spaniards overwhelmed the naked Indians of America ...'¹⁵⁸ The new Governor of Madras, Thomas Saunders, agreed: 'The weakness of the Moors is now known,' he wrote, 'and 'tis certain any European nation resolved to war on them with a tolerable force may overrun the whole country.'¹⁵⁹



Looking back on the Carnatic Wars fifty years later, the urbane Comte de Modave blamed the hubris of his own French compatriots for bringing European rivalries and Anglo-French wars to Indian shores, and, through the pride and vaulting ambition of Dupleix and Bussy, destroying their own chances of a profitable trade.

They did this, he wrote, by forcing their British rivals to throw all their military resources into protecting what had already become far too profitable a trading business to abandon willingly. Writing towards the end of his life, with the benefit of hindsight, the Comte reminisced about where things had gone wrong in the Carnatic half a century earlier. 'The Mughal Empire held together while Aurangzeb reigned,' he wrote, 'and even for some years after he died in the early years of this century.'

For generally beneficial laws have a certain inner strength which allows them, for a time, to resist the assaults of anarchy. But at last, about forty years ago, a horrible chaos overtook the Mughal empire: any spark of good that Aurangzeb had done to promote commerce was snuffed out. Ruthlessly ambitious Europeans were no less deadly in these parts, as if Europe and America were too small a theatre of war for them to devour each other, pursuing chimeras of self-interest, and undertaking violent and unjust resolutions, they insisted on Asia too as the stage on which to act out their restless injustices.

The trade of the Mughal Empire was divided at the time between two national groups, the French and the English; for the Dutch had by now degenerated into base, avaricious toads squatting on their heaps of gold and spices, as if in apology for having once grabbed the empire of the Portuguese, and reducing them to nobodies.

A few passing successes, more apparent than real – for these came with a series of crushing defeats – dazzled the French and went to their heads: as if drunk, they now foolishly boasted they could take over all the trade of India. They were, however, inferior to the British in naval power, their Company was corrupt and its leadership grotesquely ignorant, their major undertakings at sea were all vitiated by causes too easy to guess (and which will alas endure as long as their monarchy) and therefore always failing: none of this could puncture their mad hopes of becoming the dominant power in India. They campaigned complacently, as if there could be no doubt of their success, and thus, inevitably, failed to secure what they wanted, and lost even what they might have kept.

The English were at that time concerned only in developing their trade from their bases in India, in all security. The administrators of that Company had never deviated from the fundamental purpose for which it had been incorporated ... It was the ill-judged, scheming ambitions of the French that roused English jealousy and greed.

For the former, this project of total domination was ruinously expensive and impossible to achieve, whereas for the latter it was indeed a tricky undertaking, but one promising great profits. The French rushed in impetuously, squandering money they could not afford to replace in mad undertakings; they were met by the English with implacable steadiness of purpose and constantly replenished

resources, and soon they were working to bring about what we had dreamed of and waiting for an opportunity to put us out of action, far from any possibility of causing them any trouble or of challenging the immense advantages they had secured.¹⁶⁰

That opportunity manifested itself even as the Carnatic Wars were grinding to an inconclusive end in the mid-1750s. For it was not just in India that Anglo-French rivalry was smouldering, ready to reignite at the slightest spark. Instead the trail of gunpowder which ignited the next round of Anglo-French conflict began far away from India, on the frozen borderlands of America and New France – what we today call Canada – between the great lakes and the headwaters of the Ohio River.

On 21 June 1752, a party of French Indians led by the French adventurer Charles Langlade, who had a Huron wife and was also influential among the Seneca, Iroquois and Micmac, led a war party of 240 warriors down Lake Huron, across Lake Erie and into the newly settled farmlands of British Ohio. Tomahawks at the ready, they fell on the British settlement of Pickawillany, achieving complete surprise. Only twenty British settlers managed to muster at the stockade. Of those, one was later scalped and another ceremonially boiled and the most delicious parts of his body eaten.¹⁶¹

The violent raid spread a sense of instability and even terror among British traders and settlers as far as New York and Virginia. Within months, regular French troops, supported by indigenous guides, auxiliaries and large numbers of Indian warriors were rumoured to be moving in large numbers into the headwaters of the Ohio Valley, and on 1 November the Governor of Virginia sent a 21-year-old militia volunteer north to investigate. His name was George Washington. So began the first act in what Americans still call the French and Indian Wars, and which is known in the rest of the world as the Seven Years War.¹⁶²

This time it would be total war, and properly global, fought on multiple continents and in ruthless advancement of worldwide British and French imperial interests. It would carry European arms and warfare from the Ohio to the Philippines, from Cuba to the coast of Nigeria, and from the Heights of Abraham outside Quebec to the marshy flatlands and mango groves of Plassey.

But the part of the globe it would transform most lastingly was India.

