



A HISTORY OF STATE AND RELIGION IN INDIA

Ian Copland, Ian Mabbett, Asim Roy, Kate Brittlebank
and Adam Bowles

A History of State and Religion in India

Offering the first long-duration analysis of the relationship between the state and religion in South Asia, this book looks at the nature and origins of Indian secularism. It interrogates the proposition that communalism in India is wholly a product of colonial policy and modernisation, questions whether the Indian state has generally been a benign, or disruptive, influence on public religious life, and evaluates the claim that the region has spawned a culture of practical toleration.

The book is structured around six key arenas of interaction between state and religion: cow worship and sacrifice, control of temples and shrines, religious festivals and processions, proselytising and conversion, communal riots, and religious teaching/doctrine and family law. It offers a challenging argument about the role of the state in religious life in a historical continuum, and identifies points of similarity and contrast between periods and regimes. The book makes a significant contribution to the literature on South Asian History and Religion.

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First published 2012
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group,
an informa business*

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

A history of state and religion in India/Ian Copland . . . [et al.].

p. cm. – (Routledge studies in South Asian history)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Religion and state – India – History. 2. Secularism – India.

3. India – Religion. I. Copland, Ian, 1943–

BL2003.H57 2001

211'.60954094 – dc23

2011034946

ISBN: 978–0–415–58066–3 (hbk)

ISBN: 978–0–203–12694–3 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Florence Production Ltd, Stoodleigh, Devon

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Preface

This book is somewhat unusual in the fields of South Asian Studies, and history more generally, in having multiple authors. It was conceived thus – as a joint project – in part because of the sheer breadth of the topic. None of us, we reckoned, had the expertise required to do full justice to it alone. But we also saw that co-authorship had the potential to open up interesting avenues of cross-fertilisation that might, in the end, lead to a sum greater than the parts. Certainly, we were aware that a collaborative approach would pose challenges – five scholars coming from different disciplines, some modernists, others used to writing about the pre-modern; it was likely that there would be disagreements, at least at first instance. And so there were; at times our workshops witnessed some pretty robust debate. Nevertheless, what follows represents a consensus, one that we believe succeeds in presenting an original exploration of a set of issues in Indian history that have not hitherto been well identified, and that develops an integrated and coherent approach to the problems of interpretation that arise.

Research for the book was funded by a large Discovery Grant from the Australian Research Council; the generous assistance of the ARC is gratefully acknowledged. The authors would also like to thank, in no special order: the Rockefeller Foundation Study and Conference Center, Bellagio, Italy, and the Bharat Itihas Samshodhak Mandal, Pune, for their hospitality; Bain Attwood, David Garrioch and Al Thomson of the School of Philosophy, History and International Studies at Monash University for their helpful comments on earlier drafts; Kara Rasmanis, Cartographer in the School of Geography and Environmental Science at Monash University, for drawing the maps; Jayant Bapat of the Monash Asia Institute, for supplying translations of a number of Marathi documents; the staffs of the Indian National Archives New Delhi, the US National Archives and Records Administration, Washington DC, and the British Library, London; Barbara Metcalf of the University of California, for her encouragement and stimulating critiques; and Matthew Groves of the Faculty of Law at Monash University for tracking down relevant cases in the Indian Law Reports and patiently tutoring the rest of us in some of the finer points of English public law.

A note on style

With regard to people's names and other proper nouns, in order to facilitate ease of reading for the non-specialist, we have aimed for simple and/or familiar spelling, rather than adhere to any particular system.

In the transliteration of names originating in Sanskrit and related ancient languages, we have accordingly adopted spellings that are appropriate when diacritics are not used (e.g. Krishna, Kushana, Ashoka). However, technical terms unfamiliar in English usage are italicized as foreign words, as are quoted phrases in ancient languages, and in these cases the standard diacritics are employed (e.g. *varṇāśramadharmā*, *śivaliṅga*, *ṛta*). Many terms, though of Sanskrit origin, are often used in simplified forms adapted to modern Indian languages or to English, and we have generally not attempted to restore them to pure forms.

In the transliteration of the Perso-Arabic script, we have followed the system adopted by F. Steingass in his *Comprehensive Persian–English Dictionary*, with the following exceptions: the *izāfat* is indicated by *–i* attached to the preceding word; the letters *khā* and *ghain* are transliterated *kh* and *gh*; the letter *zāl* is transliterated *dh*.

Abbreviations

AICC	All-India Congress Committee
AIR	All-India Recorder
AP	Andhra Pradesh
<i>AŚ</i>	<i>Arthaśāstra</i>
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BJS	Bharatiya Jana Sangh
BOC	Board of Control
<i>Bṛh U</i>	<i>Bṛhadāranyaka Upanishad</i>
BSF	Border Security Force
BSP	Bahujan Samaj Party
CA	Constituent Assembly
<i>C.I.I.</i>	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum</i>
CLA	Central Legislative Assembly
CMS	Church Mission Society
CP	Central Provinces
CPC	Criminal Procedure Code
CRP	Central Reserve Police
CWC	Congress Working Committee
DC	Deputy Commissioner
DI	District Inspector (of Police)
DM	District Magistrate
DSP	Deputy Superintendent of Police
<i>E.I.</i>	<i>Epigraphia Indica</i>
IAS	Indian Administrative Service
ICS	Indian Civil Service
IG	Inspector-General (of Police)
INC	Indian National Congress
IOR	India Office Records, British Library
IPC	Indian Penal Code
IPS	Indian Police Service
KPCC	Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee
MAO	Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College
MB	Madhya Bharat

MHA	Ministry of Home Affairs
<i>Mn</i>	<i>Manusmriti</i>
MOS	Ministry of States
MP	Madhya Pradesh
NAI	National Archives of India, New Delhi
NARA	National Archives and Records Administration, Washington DC
NDA	National Democratic Alliance
NMML	Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi
NWP	North-Western Provinces
OBCs	Other Backward Castes
PCC	Pradesh Congress Committee
<i>PP</i>	<i>Parliamentary Papers</i>
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
<i>RV</i>	<i>Rg Veda</i>
SP	Superintendent of Police
<i>SPD</i>	<i>Selections from the Satara Rajas' and Peshwas' Diaries</i>
<i>SSRPD</i>	<i>Selections from the Peshwa Daftar</i>
UP	United Provinces/Uttar Pradesh
UPA	United Progressive Alliance
VHP	Vishwa Hindu Parishad

1 Introduction

A crisis of secularism?

In the aftermath of the November 2008 terrorist attack on Mumbai, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh took pains to emphasise in his communications with foreign leaders that it had been established that the assailants were Pakistanis, not home-grown Muslims. Among India's 150 million Muslims 'not one has been found to have joined the ranks of al-Qaeda'. This, he went on, was due to India 'being a secular democracy where all religions are free to practise their respective faiths without fear, without favour'.¹ The statement has a familiar ring. For the past sixty years, secularism has been part and parcel both of India's self-identity, and of its image abroad. 'We must never forget', the country's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru wrote to state chief ministers in 1954, 'that we take pride in having a secular state'.² For Nehru 'having a secular state' was a crucial mark of modernity. 'We have only done something which every country does, except [for] a few misguided and backward countries', he assured the Constituent Assembly (CA) when the issue was being debated there.³ Other members of India's post-colonial ruling class supported a secularist stance because it seemed the best way to enshrine full and equal toleration for the country's plurality of religions.

Independent India's adoption of secularism as a guiding principle of its statecraft was warmly welcomed in the West. In particular, it was greeted enthusiastically by many Western academics. In 1969 an American political scientist, Frank van Aalst, called 'the formation of the Indian secular state' a 'major event in contemporary world history'.⁴ The hype derived in part from a sense of ownership. Secularism, the theory that governments ought to have no religious connection, nor indeed anything to do with matters of religious belief or ritual, is manifestly a Western invention, specifically a product of the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment. From late medieval times, the political and social dominance of the Catholic Church was challenged by rising territorial states controlled by dynastic princes. As part of this process, the conduct of public affairs was gradually taken away from clergymen and given into the hands of lay officials or 'seculars', a step that some have seen as the birth of bureaucracy. A century later, Enlightenment philosophers contributed the proposition that human affairs should be guided by the test of

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'reason', and that government should be a rational process, grounded, as the American Declaration of Independence put it, in 'the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God'. As for the term itself, 'secularism' was coined in the early 1850s by the English radical and atheist G.J. Holyoake (1817–1906) and given its current frame of reference around the turn of the twentieth century by the German sociologists Weber and Troeltsch.⁵

The secular state was created to reduce the potential for politico-religious conflict in society. Arguably, it succeeded. At the peace settlement of Westphalia in 1648, which terminated the bitter and devastating Thirty Years War, the principle was laid down that, while territorial rulers would continue to be allowed to determine the religion of the state, other modes of worship would be tolerated. This agreement effectively removed religion as a *casus belli*, and brought the era of sectarian warfare in Europe to a close. Moreover, it managed to do so without compromising the core concerns of either the politicians or the clergy. The classic formulation of the secular state doctrine, however, was produced a century and a half later by the American Congress, in the shape of the First Amendment of 1791. Its key sentence reads: 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the exercise thereof'. President Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to the Danbury Baptists' Association in 1802, likened this arrangement to building 'a wall of separation between the church and the state'.⁶ The metaphor is apt, because a wall serves to bar egress in two directions. The Baptists, President Jefferson was saying, had nothing to fear from the state because it was barred by the First Amendment clauses from either promoting the interests of any one sect above others, or interfering with their worship. And the same theme has been echoed in numerous American Supreme Court judgments defending the separation principle. As Justice Black noted in *Engel*:

By the time of the adoption of the Constitution . . . there was widespread awareness among many Americans of the dangers of a union of Church and State. These people knew some of them from bitter personal experience that one of the greatest dangers to the freedom of the individual to worship in his own way lay in the Government's placing its official stamp . . . upon one kind of prayer and [on] one particular form of religious service. They [also] knew the anguish, hardship and bitter strife that could come when zealous religious groups struggled with one another to obtain the Government's stamp of approval.⁷

But if the secular state in its modern form took hold first in the United States, it quickly won fans in other political cultures too, and not just in Europe and the British colonies of settlement. In the 1920s Kemal Pasha turned post-Ottoman Turkey into the most secular state the world had seen thus far. By the 1940s the model had become so universal that Nehru could claim, with scant exaggeration, that in launching India on a secular path he was 'only doing something which every country does'. Meanwhile, at least in the West,

societies at large became increasingly secularised – a tendency that many at the time put down to a simple loss of religious conviction, but which Max Weber later attributed to a broader malaise that he called ‘disenchantment’. As his contemporary, fellow sociologist Émile Durkheim, opined wryly, ‘the old gods are growing old or are already dead’.⁸ For a time, secularism looked unstoppable.

But no longer: the tide has well and truly turned. Outside the West, belief in the supernatural remained consistently strong throughout secularism’s heyday, and in recent years it has made a strong comeback there too. David Barnett and Todd Johnson estimate that between 1970 and 2000 the world’s Christian population increased at a significantly faster rate than the population at large in that period.⁹ Obviously, part of this growth was due to natural factors, but most of it resulted from conversions, especially of Hispanics in Central America, to various forms of Evangelical Protestantism. The rise of Evangelical Christianity can be seen, as Peter Berger points out, as a direct reaction to the ubiquitous ‘presence of secularising forces’, which the ‘religious Right’ believes have precipitated a moral collapse of society.¹⁰ The Evangelicals are not alone in repudiating secular values, however. ‘Counter-secularisation’, to use Berger’s term, is a key plank in the ideology of Islamic fundamentalists; and also of the Catholic Church, particularly since the accession of Pope Benedict XVI. Long known for its condemnation of abortion and homosexuality, the Roman Church has now fastened its gaze on the whole edifice of political secularism, Australia’s Cardinal Pell denouncing ‘secular democracy’ as a system lacking in ‘moral vision’, the Pope telling his bishops that God must be allowed back into public life.¹¹ We would be wise not to overestimate the novelty of these developments. The history of the secular state is riddled with compromises. Despite an evidently fierce commitment to the doctrine of separation, the US government allows generous tax exemptions to religious institutions and requires public students, at the start of the school day, to pledge allegiance to ‘one nation under God’; Australia’s federal parliament begins each session with a recitation of the Lord’s Prayer; by law Britain’s head of state must be an Anglican; and so on. Nevertheless, it is hard to disagree with Berger’s contention that the late twentieth century saw a ‘retreat’ from secularism across the world. Does this mean that secularism as a form of governance is in crisis?

In India, certainly, that perception is widespread. Needless to say, the South Asian region has not been immune from the growth of religious fundamentalism: one has only to think of Pakistan and the Taliban. However, if ‘Islamism’ has tended to monopolise the headlines, Hinduism, too, has become increasingly politicised during the last quarter of a century with the rise to prominence and power of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which aggressively markets the notion that India should be governed in the interests, primarily, of its Hindu majority. Moreover, although the BJP has tried valiantly to muddy the waters by insisting that this policy represents ‘positive’ or true secularism, in distinction to the ‘pseudo-secularism’ bequeathed by Nehru to

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its main rival, the Congress, the party has made it abundantly clear, repeatedly, by its actions, that it is no friend of Enlightenment secularism as defined above. At Ayodhya, on 6 December 1992, a strong detachment of Uttar Pradesh armed constabulary, posted there with a brief to guard the Babri Masjid, a contested Muslim shrine, watched passively while a mob of Hindu zealots tore down the structure with their bare hands. It subsequently came to light that they had been ordered to stand down by the BJP state government. A decade later another BJP-led government, in Gujarat, outraged by an attack by Muslims on a train carrying Hindu pilgrims, abetted, perhaps orchestrated, a general pogrom against Muslim residents of Ahmedabad, which the local police, again, did very little to impede.¹² More generally, the BJP has a history of using religious themes and symbols to connect to its core Hindu constituency, as when, in 1990, a batch of party heavyweights, led by President L.K. Advani, took themselves on a flamboyant cross-country *yātrā* (pilgrimage) in a Toyota truck decked out to resemble an Aryan chariot. But the BJP is just one of a network of like-minded Hindu organisations. Another that warrants mention here is the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), or World Hindu Council, formed in 1964. The VHP promotes a stripped-down and ostensibly ‘reformed’ Hinduism centred on the heroic figure of Rama; it makes adept use of modern media; and last but not least, in a substantial departure from Hindu tradition, it actively proselytises with a view to making converts, not least overseas. Significantly, in all these respects the VHP strikingly mirrors Evangelical Protestantism.¹³

Thus, in many ways, the Indian story replicates the global one; however, there is one important difference. In India, the ‘counter-secularisation’ push has been joined by a clutch of liberal intellectuals, members of a cohort that in the West, and in India too until recently, has always been vocal in its support for the concept of the secular state. The first to break ranks was social psychologist Ashis Nandy, in 1985; shortly thereafter, the cause of dissent was taken up by the eminent sociologist T.N. Madan. Since then, many public commentators have contributed their say for and against. The resultant debate has given rise to at least a hundred books, articles and edited collections, many of them canvassing the proposition that India faces a secularism ‘crisis’. In no other part of the world has the issue provoked so much thought – or heat!¹⁴ Nevertheless, it is not necessary for present purposes, to discuss this literature in detail; we need merely identify its main contentions, which can be reduced to five: first, that secularism is a concept alien to Indian traditions and the Indian psyche, ‘borrowed from Western history’;¹⁵ second, that it is based upon the erroneous supposition that, with advances in material culture, people are likely to turn ‘more and more . . . away from religion’;¹⁶ third, that it has been foisted on India by an unrepresentative and deluded intelligentsia ‘which wants to shape the majority in its own image’;¹⁷ fourth, that the secular state can only operate successfully in relationship to an ‘organised’ religion that has a clear-cut administrative hierarchy, and ecclesiastical laws, and that recognises a ‘sacred-secular dichotomy’, none of which conditions are present in

Hinduism,¹⁸ and fifth that, for all its reputation for ‘hard-headed statecraft’, the modern state, handcuffed by secularism, has failed to deal effectively with religious or communal fanaticism, indeed has become itself a cause and instrument of communal violence.¹⁹ The last claim is clearly the most germane to the theme of this book, and will be considered at length later.

For now, though, let us take the statement at its face value. What does it say about the state? It says that the state is the enemy. This is a very extreme proposition and a very bleak characterisation of a venerable institution that, according to one authority, may have ‘antedated writing’.²⁰ But does the problem lie with the institution per se or with what the state has become? The secular state is a modern invention. Nandy and Madan are in good company in suggesting that the modern Indian state has developed pathological features. For the past two decades scholars such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gyan Prakash and Partha Chatterjee have been bringing a post-colonial gaze to bear on the Indian national project. Their inquiries raise awkward and profound questions. Can there be such a thing as an ‘Indian’ trajectory of modernity, distinct from the European one? Has modernity in India delivered on its promises? In particular, has the modern state made a constructive use of its unprecedented power and capacity? On the latter point, the verdict of these revisionists is quite dire: the Indian state proclaims itself to be a protector of minorities, but over the past century it has operated increasingly as an engine of ethno-cultural homogenisation. The modern state, they conclude, abominates difference. Maybe it is time to ‘reconsider presuppositions regarding what the state is or ought to be’?²¹ Certainly, these are issues that we will need to pursue. Still, it is easy to see in the light of atrocities such as Ayodhya and Gujarat why, fairly or not, the Indian state is currently on the nose; and why some are bracketing the ‘crisis of secularism’ in India with a larger ‘crisis of the state’.²²

The state–society relationship

States have been in existence ever since human communities outgrew the ties of kinship; today they cover the whole planet. This ubiquity suggests that they serve a useful function, beyond mere personal aggrandisement. Arguably, modern states, in fact, serve a multiplicity of functions: so much so that Michel Foucault has educated us to think of the state as an *assemblage* of dispersed governmental practices and forms of rule.²³ At first, though, and until quite recently, states were set up principally to protect their subjects and citizens, and their property, from violence and mayhem, and to keep society at large from being reduced to a condition of anarchy. It was, of course, a step that involved an element of risk. A ruler who turned bad would be hard to get rid of. Inevitably, too, becoming part of a state involved a loss of individual liberty and freedom of action. It meant acquiescing in the state’s right to make laws, and enforce them, and accepting that only the state could legitimately use force to achieve its ends. But most people thought this was a reasonable price to pay for survival and far better than the alternative: a ‘natural’ life that was

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‘nasty, brutish and short’. So, in essence, runs the classical Western theory of state formation as penned in the seventeenth century by Thomas Hobbes.²⁴

And much earlier Indian philosophers were saying rather similar things. If Hobbes had been able to read the *Rāmāyana*, he would no doubt have approved its metaphorical likening of pristine humanity to fishes in a pool, feverishly eating (and being eaten). The sage Narada explains that states became necessary when ‘the practice of duty . . . died out among mankind’.²⁵ ‘All creatures live happily in the world if they are protected by kings like children are protected by their parents’, the *Mahābhārata* tells us.²⁶ Some Indologists indeed think that these early first-millennium texts contain at least an implicit notion of a social contract.²⁷

But if states have an acknowledged protective role vis-à-vis society, to what extent did this encompass the domain of religion? Not surprisingly, most analysts of the history of the institution agree that the nature of the state–religion relationship has varied widely across time and space. S. Rokkan conjectures that there are three basic types of ‘secular–religious differentiation’: minimal, intermediate and maximal.²⁸ Hugh Urban’s complex taxonomy recognises eight categories of ‘primary strategic relations’ between ‘political and religious power’.²⁹ Yet there is a solid consensus that, for good reasons, the two have always been connected. Demonstrating piety, patronising religious causes and receiving endorsement from religious leaders are ways in which governments can establish or reinforce their legitimacy. According to Weber, religious or charismatic sanction is the ‘ultimate source of legitimation for temporal power’.³⁰ At the same time, because of its charismatic power, religion is something states cannot afford to take lightly. The perceived mastery exercised by elite religious professionals, such as priests, in respect of transcendental forces, gives them ‘political’ power over people anxious to ward off supernatural threats, or acquire access to spiritual healing. This makes them not only *like* secular administrators but also potentially dangerous competitors for the loyalty and affection of the masses. Self-interest therefore requires that states keep a sharp eye on what religious professionals are saying and doing.

One of the main aims of this study, then, will be to try to fix where India broadly sits within the minimal/maximal spectrum. Of course the nexus is unlikely to have remained static during the three millennia of recorded Indian history, and it is precisely to give full rein to the ways the relationship may have evolved that we have elected to adopt a historical approach to the subject. Nevertheless it is important that we come, finally, to a conclusion that leans one way or the other, because the issue is an extremely crucial and controversial one in Indian studies and touches upon several of its dominant paradigms.

One of these concerns the South Asia state; scholarship about governance in India has persistently stressed its fragility. At first sight this judgement may look counterfactual for the region has clearly, over the centuries, spawned countless big and small states, as well as several empires. But consider: not many of these periods of integrated governance were long-lasting; and they were punctuated by substantial interregnums. Kingdoms rose and fell with

great regularity. Commonly, this is viewed as a product of the subcontinent's geography, which invited almost incessant conquests from the north-west, but failed to provide kingdom-sized boundaries, in the form of physical features, capable of holding back the waves of political turbulence that rippled far and wide every time a major war broke out.³¹ Even more frequently, though, the explanation is couched in structural terms. Indian states were 'unstable' because they relied on ties of personal loyalty, and thus were liable to internal fracturing, and because they lacked deep roots in society, which was to a large extent self-governing. Probably the best-known exposition of this view was penned by Karl Marx in the mid-nineteenth century. Drawing upon reports compiled by early British colonial administrators, which stressed the 'self-government' possessed by India's villages, Marx concluded that:

India . . . could not escape the fate of being conquered, and the whole of her past history, if it be anything, is the history of the successive conquests she has undergone. Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history. What we call its history, is but the history of the successive invaders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchangeable society.³²

To put this more theoretically, Marx identified a sharp discontinuity between the political superstructure, composed of 'despotic' but administratively ineffectual kingdoms, and the social base, composed of a myriad of isolated village 'republics', whose inhabitants' lives were organised not according to law but according to custom, locally enforced by village and caste *panchayats*. As the late Eric Stokes remarked, if we accept this formulation, we are effectively saying that 'society was capable of ordering itself almost independently of superior political authority'.³³ Of course, Marx did not have the last word. Scholarship has moved on a great deal in the last century and a half. Today, Asian despotism has been displaced by the notion of the 'segmentary state', which Burton Stein brought across from African studies; and by Hermann Kulke's model, in which state power is simultaneously exercised in a given area by several competing authorities, including locally autonomous 'corporate institutions'.³⁴ However, while these recent interventions (grounded, as Marx's wasn't, in detailed empirical evidence) have undoubtedly changed the way we look at the pre-modern state, it would be fair to say that they have not demolished the substance of his paradigm: the notion of a disjuncture between the superstructure and the base. Stein's account of the last great pre-modern Hindu kingdom in southern India, Vijayanagara, reveals a state lacking adequate resources and handicapped by a 'primitive' administration; Sunil Khilnani's impression of other polities of the period is similar.³⁵

But if the Indian state was typically 'weak', as the paradigm has it, was it because of structural factors or because, thanks to the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the social base, it simply had less to do in respect of that core protective role mentioned above? For instance, did the pre-modern Indian state

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have much less to contend with in the way of religious or ‘communal’ violence? There is something of a consensus among South Asian scholars that a spirit of *communitas*, even if now on the decline, was a commonplace of life in Indian villages and neighbourhoods in pre-modern times; and many commentators think this moral economy may have acted as a deterrent to open conflict. Nandy is one. On the subject of pre-modern communal riots he observes: ‘no one [has] produced an iota of evidence to show that such conflicts existed on a large scale and involved religious communities as they are presently defined’.³⁶ His choice of words, though, is interesting; the qualification at the end leaves open the possibility of low-level violence short of what is now understood to constitute a ‘riot’. We think this caution well merited. Frankly, we would be surprised if our inquiry finds no evidence of religious violence anywhere across the vast span of pre-colonial Indian history.

For one thing, if the proposition turns out to be true, it would mean that India was different to most other contemporary societies about which we have reliable information. Take Spain and France. In medieval Spain and early modern France, collective violence against non-Catholic minorities was so commonplace and happened so regularly (often a short time after, or in conjunction with, Christian calendrical festivals) that scholars such as Natalie Davis and David Nirenberg believe that it needs to be seen as a legitimating and normative phenomenon that, at the end of the day, may actually have helped society to cohere. Davis opines:

I would suggest that they [pogroms against Jews and Huguenots] can be reduced to a repertory of actions, derived from the Bible, from the liturgy, from the [examples set by the] . . . political authority, or from traditions of popular folk justice, intended to purify the [dominant] religious community and humiliate the [religious] enemy, and thus make him less harmful.³⁷

Nirenberg goes further. He reads the Spanish evidence as pointing to a symbiotic link between acts of performative collective violence and ‘the coexistence of majority and minorities’. Indeed, he thinks that the latter may have been ‘in part predicated on such violence’.³⁸ To be sure, one cannot assume that, because things happened in a certain way in one part of the world, they must have happened that way in other parts too. Ancient India had institutions, such as the caste system, that were *sui generis*. But we are not convinced such differences make cross-cultural comparisons vacuous. The Western experience suggests possibilities that warrant investigation. We do not hold with the view that maintains that people in early South Asia behaved differently from people elsewhere because they subscribed to a unique culture.

Similarly, for all that Indian political society has obviously changed greatly over the last couple of millennia, it is worth keeping in mind what happens today. Periodically, groups belonging to different religions, mostly groups of Muslims and Hindus living, as Nandy points out, in cities, become embroiled

in fights, or ‘riots’ as the government likes to call them. Usually, these encounters start with disputes about which of two conflicting sacred rituals should take precedence. For instance, Muslims insist on the right to pray in silence; while Hindu processions tend to be noisy affairs. Should Hindus be required to stop playing music when they pass mosques, especially at prayer times? That has always been the dominant Muslim position. Likewise, until recently, Muslims in India celebrated the annual feast of ‘Idu’l-Azhā by sacrificing cows. To most Hindus, the cow is a sacred animal. During the colonial period, attempts by Hindus to prevent this ritual slaughter led to numerous showdowns. If these issues caused tension and sometimes outbreaks of open violence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, why did they not provoke similar reactions earlier?

To be sure, better data about communal interrelationships at the grass-roots level would be useful. Thanks to the efforts of Steven Wilkinson and Ashutosh Varshney, we now have a reasonably complete statistical record of the major communal events of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.³⁹ However, it is unlikely, given the lack, for pre-modern India, of the kinds of records that are available for the colonial and post-colonial periods, that we will ever get an equivalent data set for pre-modern India. Mughal administrators were not by any means unobservant, but their accounts have little to say about local matters that lay beyond their official remit. Accordingly, the absence of references in these records to communal clashes may not be statistically significant.

Still, there are ample sources for pre-colonial India (textual, epigraphic, pictorial) that bear upon the issues we want to look at; for example, the Mauryan emperor Ashoka’s edicts about Buddhism; the *Arthasāstra* attributed to Kautilya; inscriptions on stone and copper recording royal grants of land to temples; accounts of visitors; gazetteers; Mughal imperial *farmāns* regulating cow-killing; and hundreds more in similar vein. The problem is not so much an absence of evidence, but *how to read* what we have. Consider the rich description left behind by the Muslim scholar al-Biruni of Indian life as he encountered it in the eleventh century. Attached to the court of Mahmud of Ghazni, typically pictured as a fanatical iconoclast, al-Biruni, it must be said, shares something of his master’s bigoted contempt for the Hindu religion. He praises Mahmud’s ‘wonderful exploits’ in smashing Hindu temples, and offers a sneering description of the ‘tricks and deceits’ practised on the populace by the Hindu priesthood. And he is equally scornful on the subject of idol worship. Yet these specious comments are intermixed with a great deal of informed and balanced reportage. For example, he does not pretend that Mahmud’s incursions had no effect on relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. They caused, he admits, ‘the most inveterate aversion towards . . . Muslims’. Similarly, he is very complimentary about Hindu philosophy, and acknowledges that the religion was about much more than flamboyant images, which, he agrees, were mainly designed for consumption by ‘uneducated low-class people’. Further on, the book records that al-Biruni

learned Sanskrit and acquired a circle of close Hindu friends.⁴⁰ Some texts, such as the above, are ambiguous. Others *look* clear-cut but have a hidden agenda. Many sources on ancient India are of this kind. They proclaim authenticity; but this is pretence. What they actually describe is an ideal: the way things are *supposed* to work according to Hindu scriptures. Obviously, such sources need to be approached with caution. Still, with that proviso, they can tell us much that is helpful. They can tell us how Brahmans *aspired* to live; more generally, they can tell us what behaviours this elite thought acceptable, and what deviant; utilised imaginatively enough, they can even furnish ‘negative’ evidence as to how people lower down the social scale *actually* behaved. Much of the analysis in the early part of this book derives from just such a lateral reading.

The second dominant paradigm in Indian studies that bears directly on our topic is that generally associated with acclaimed French sociologist Louis Dumont (though it is one that more recently has received considerable support from the interventions of Indian sociologist T.N. Madan discussed earlier). As elaborated in his classic monograph, *Homo Hierarchicus*,⁴¹ and a raft of seminal articles, Dumont’s view of the relationship between state and society in traditional India portrays the political realm of the king as secondary to, and wholly encompassed by, the sacred world of *dharma* (which can be translated as ‘duty’, or ‘righteous conduct’; see [Chapter 2](#)) presided over by the Brahmans. According to this schema, there is a natural tension between the priesthood and the secular rulers. But, crucially for Dumont’s theory, the Brahmans have the last word. In the hierarchy of caste, Brahmans take precedence over royal Kshatriyas. As a result, the priests get to exert a social authority that limits and restricts the secular political order. ‘Temporal authority is guaranteed through the personal relationship [between king and royal priest] in which it gives preeminence over itself to spiritual authority incarnated in the *purohit*’.⁴² Rulers, of course, were important (as we have seen) in ancient India and have a role to play too in Dumont’s conception. But it is primarily, in his eyes, a role geared to support orthodoxy. The king’s duty, his *rajādharma*, is to promote the prosperity of the country by financing the construction of temples and shrines, making land grants to Brahmans, enforcing social laws and protecting cows. Additionally, the participation of the king may be necessary for the proper performance of some rituals, especially sacrificial rituals. Nowhere here is an acknowledgement that Indian rulers might have an authority, or for that matter a *raison d’être*, independent of religion. As a fan of this view, Robert Baird, puts it, the ‘primary role’ of the early Indian state was ‘to promote *dharma*’.⁴³ Not surprisingly, this is also the way the ‘classical’ Indian system is treated in the aforementioned taxonomy of politico-religious relationships by Urban, which lists India as the pre-eminent example of Type 2: ‘Religious Authority above Political Power’.

Dumont’s interpretation has its critics, Nicholas Dirks among the more notable.⁴⁴ Yet it has proved, as these things go, remarkably resilient, perhaps because it resonates so well with the older (but also persistent) view of India

as a site steeped in traditions, where religion is a ‘way of life’. Despite its Orientalist overtones, this is clearly a comfortable mythology for most Indians as it is (and has long been) for many Westerners. Thus Dutch academic Ralph Buultjens can confidently assert that ‘the imagination, the minds and the hearts of the peoples of the subcontinent were profoundly shaped by religion’.⁴⁵

It will be seen that these two approaches, the Marxian and the Dumontian, though informed by different interests, neatly complement one another. Put together, they add up to a totalising picture of Indian history and society that says, essentially, that the state, in South Asia, has always been an institution *primarily and mainly at the service of religion*. A weighty view, then, and one that requires respect. But we remain sceptical. For if the political entity always looks to the religious for legitimation, what room does that leave for the exercise, even if minimal, of autonomous political will?

Getting there

A publishing house that we approached early on in respect to this project at once put us in touch with the editor of their Religious Studies series; a colleague to whom we talked about it immediately jumped to the conclusion that we were writing yet another book about ‘Indian secularism’; others got the gist but presumed the outcome would be a series of discrete essays, not a jointly authored monograph. These misperceptions suggest to us two things: first, that the study of South Asia has become very compartmentalised; and, second, that we have set ourselves a pretty daunting task. Therefore, before we get into the substance of the inquiry, some clarifications may be in order. Specifically what is our goal, and how do we propose to get there?

To start with the misperceptions, the focus of this study is not, at least primarily, to explain how and why India adopted secularism. As the foregoing discussion indicates, this is certainly one of our concerns; but it is not the major one. By the same token we are definitely interested both in religion as a concept, and in the evolution of religious belief and practice in South Asia. These must be matters of concern for us, if the project is to do more than just document governmental attitudes and policies. Yet, as the title makes clear, our focus is state-centred. Our interest is in how the state, or, more generally, the domain of politics, has *intersected*, over the course of Indian history, with the domain of religion. Did Indian states typically engage closely with religious life, as the conventional picture outlined in the previous section would suggest, or did they generally adopt something that we might recognise as the equivalent of a ‘secular’ posture? And, if the former, were they active partners, or passive servants? Did Indian rulers ever try to influence debates about theology? Did they ever attempt to regulate popular worship? And, if they did, were they, in turn, shaped, to some extent, by that engagement? However, if the book has a political slant, it seeks to extend the debate about the nature of the Indian state by looking at it as a constant work in progress rather than as some timeless form of ‘polity’. Its methodology is historical, not sociological. We take this

approach not simply because we happen to be historians, but because we believe that comparing the relationship to religion of various Indian regimes, of different types, *across time* can provide insights into the big issues of faith and power we are exploring that cannot be accessed by looking at discrete political models or broadly defined ‘traditions’. Structuralism has its virtues, but it is not a helpful guide to the political. Annales School luminary Le Roy Ladourie once remarked, apropos the *Ancien Régime* in France, that it was a period when ‘nothing happened’. He may have been speaking tongue-in-cheek, but his point is clear. We do not share this indifference to high-level politics. Our reading of history suggests to us that governments matter. Indeed, it tells us that, at times, even outstanding individuals can make a difference. Indian history would surely have taken a different course if Ashoka had not embraced Buddhism, and if Mohandas Gandhi had not returned from South Africa. Thus the chapters in this book are organised around what have been recognised as significant turning points in India’s story – points where, arguably, new elements came into play and new extraneous factors came to bear upon the relationship between state and religion in the subcontinent. Prima facie, the arrival of Islam, the growth of Sikhism, the establishment of Islamic states, the coming of colonialism and the advent of ‘secular’ democracy all constituted episodes of this kind. Whether, in fact, they were remains, of course, to be seen.

A diachronic approach poses significant challenges. ‘To survey the relationships of government to religions throughout the vast sweep of Indian history’, Ainslie Embree observes, by way of explanation as to why he has confined his own take on this theme to the modern period, ‘would require a very large book’.⁴⁶ It would, if one tried to write it in the form of a continuous narrative. And big books are not easy, these days, to place with publishers. But we don’t intend to go down that road. Yes, our exposition will proceed, in the main, chronologically; but it will be *an argument*, illustrated by selective case studies. True, this option also has its hazards. What is typical? What exceptional? Can any regime be representative of more than itself? Equally, we are mindful of the danger, in looking for a representative sample, of mechanically lumping together different regimes solely on the basis that they were part of some continuously self-reproducing ‘Hindu’ or ‘Islamic’ tradition of governance. In some ways, these difficulties are reduced as one gets closer to the present day; since *c.* 1850 there has been only one important state in the region. But not completely; for the idea that the British Raj or the Indian Union were and are entirely unitary, monolithic, formations, is simply naive. The reality is perhaps easier to see in the post-colonial case, where there is a transparent constitutional division of powers between the central government and the various state governments, the latter of which do not, these days, usually answer to the same party-political masters. But any scholar who has done serious work on the Raj will tell you that it, too, was riven with intergovernmental bureaucratic rivalries. These often translated into fierce disagreements about what was ‘best for India’. Thus, while there was always

an ‘official’ British policy on religion, in practice different administrative approaches competed for sanction. Alert to these traps, we have sought to strike an intellectually defensible balance between projecting the big picture, and giving expression to the rich variety of voices that strove to be heard within, and to speak for, the governments examined in this book, including (though this has been more difficult to manage) those of earlier vintage.

But in the end the biggest challenge we faced was thrown up by our large stock of raw data. Making sense of this was hard: not simply because of its mass, which forced us to make endless choices in respect of what to use, and what to discard, but because it was often, at first glance, quite opaque. To jump ahead for a moment, consider the challenge posed by Gandhi’s voluminous writings and speeches. As remarked earlier, Gandhi was a man who definitely had an impact. And he had a great deal to say, during his long career, on the subject of the interplay of politics and religion. But what exactly *was* his message? In his presidential speech to the Congress annual session of 1924, he opined that Indians belonging to different religions could resolve their differences if left alone by the colonial state.⁴⁷ In 1942, he wrote that: ‘Religion is a personal matter which should have no place in politics’.⁴⁸ And, in 1947, he editorialised in his newspaper *Harijan*: ‘A society . . . which depends wholly or partly on state aid for the existence of religion . . . does not deserve, or better still, does not have any religion worth the name’.⁴⁹ This sounds very much like the discourse of an avowed secularist. Yet in his *Autobiography*, first published in the 1920s, he declares that: ‘those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means’.⁵⁰ And speaking in London in 1931, he assured his audience that the purpose of his visit, while ostensibly political, was really spiritual for ‘my politics are not divorced from spirituality, from religion’.⁵¹ These are definitely *not* secularist statements, at least measured against the Enlightenment standpoint. Moreover, if we are interested in Gandhi’s impact on the politico-religious relationship in India, we must also consider how his message was understood by his legions of followers. Shahid Amin demonstrates that the peasants of Gorakhpur signed up, in 1921, to the Non-Cooperation Movement in part because they became convinced that Gandhi possessed miraculous powers.⁵² Others were moved by his *sannyāsī*-like asceticism and fluent command of scripture. Not for nothing is the ‘Mahatma’, for Morris-Jones, the exemplar par excellence of ‘saintly’ politics. ‘Did Gandhi, then, secularize religion or did he sacralize politics?’⁵³ Madan’s question neatly sums up the conundrum. However, the way it is framed points to a further danger inherent in handling large bodies of evidence, namely the danger of thinking that there is always a fundamental ‘truth’ to be discovered there if only one searches long and hard enough. We have tried, in the chapters that follow, to avoid falling into this conceptual trap by treating the contradictions thrown up by our evidence as predictable and, by and large, explicable, products of their specific place and time.

To recap, then, we seek in this book to *map* the interconnections between religion and governance in India over the *longue durée*. When was the relationship close? When was it more distant? If close, where did the balance of influence lie: with the physically powerful realm of the ruler/state, or with the transcendently sanctioned domain of the priesthood? More particularly, we want to investigate the ‘prehistory’ of Indian religious conflict to test the proposition advanced by Nandy and Madan, among others, that the state has little to offer as a mediator in this arena and that the best guarantee of communal harmony has always been the ingrained notion, at the grass-roots level, of an overriding ‘moral economy’ that recognised the right of all the inhabitants of the village or *mohulla* to life and livelihood. If we can identify a clear trajectory in the history of local religious violence – one, say, of growing frequency and severity as we move from the pre-modern period to the colonial period – this will help to resolve the long-debated issue, revived by the Nandy–Madan interventions, of whether communal conflict is primarily a product of clashing beliefs, or insecure identities, or largely an outcome of material factors, such as economic deprivation or political factors such as manipulation by the state.

In testing these hypotheses, the book will continue to make use, as we have done in this chapter, of conventional labels. We will continue to talk about ‘religion’ and about ‘faith’ and about ‘secularism’, and so forth. Nevertheless, we will try to make it clear as we go how far these terms are merely conventional and how far they limit or obscure the historical actuality of what is being described. In this way, the study will illuminate how a careless use of categories such as ‘religious’, and ‘secular’, or terms such as ‘syncretic’, or ‘tolerant’, may mask, or distort, important features of the historical dynamics of Indian cultural practice.

Finally, we would like to think that this inquiry has the potential to contribute to some of the more philosophical questions that attach to discussions about state, society and religion. For example, were the statesmen of the Enlightenment correct in assuming that the domains of politics and belief can be separated? Are governments compromised or diminished by giving support to faith-based organisations? If so, what is it *appropriate* for governments to do in this arena? How far should they go beyond merely ‘keeping the peace’? Is it incumbent upon them to intervene actively to *protect* the customary religious practices of the citizenry against attack or encroachment? Is religion a valuable check on state power? When and why, to paraphrase Susanne Rudolph, does religion divide people and when and why does it bring them together?⁵⁴ Some readers may think these questions overly judgemental for a book that proclaims itself a work of history. They are certainly difficult questions, and we do not expect to be able to come up with clear-cut, definitive answers; but we think we owe it to ourselves, as social scientists in the broader sense, to put them in the frame.

2 Religion and state formation

Interpretations

The Indologist A.K. Narain puts the problem we are facing in this chapter about religion and governance in early India succinctly:

The role of religion in the history and civilization of India has been overstated time and again. Yet, we hardly find much discussion of the [actual] religious policy of the kings of ancient India, perhaps with the notable exception of Ashoka . . . What could be studied as [the] king's behavior, or policy in its own right, got lost in the all-absorbing system of values as propounded by the religious systems of the political theorists.¹

Narain rightly points out that concrete information about government in early India is embedded in religious contexts, and difficult to disentangle. This makes our task of unravelling the role that government played in this period difficult, but not insuperable, if we preface it by framing some useful questions. For instance, how, in historical reality, did the systems of values as propounded within the Sanskrit texts mesh with the political preoccupations of rulers? In matters of religious policy, how did they perceive their real interests and purposes? Of course, our treatment of such questions across centuries must necessarily deal in very broad brush-strokes. The present chapter and the following two, which deal with the whole of what might be called 'ancient India', cannot altogether avoid risks of oversimplification, of blurring important distinctions and of attributing questionable solidity and universality to trends, periods or movements that actually mask a plethora of disordered and contradictory phenomena. But a 'big picture' approach can also reveal larger, informative patterns.

Thus, we think that the pattern of three successive 'periods' of Indian history implied by the concerns of these three chapters – the first on the Vedic period, the second on what is frequently misleadingly called the 'Buddhist' period (Buddhism being never more than one of a number of competing teachings), and the third on the subsequent 'classical' age that witnessed a 'brahmanic revival' and the rise of 'Hinduism' – can be justified, at least at one level, as a way of arranging the subject matter conveniently. But if we assume that this

tidy threefold pattern mirrors the structure of history itself, we risk begging important questions; even the meaning and use of such basic concepts as 'religion' and 'Hinduism' have been contested.

Nevertheless, let us accept, provisionally, that there is a core Indian religious tradition that took shape in ancient times, embodied in an orthodoxy that can be called Hinduism and a way of life informed by Sanskritic civilisation. The religion, the way of life and the civilisation all took shape during the last millennium BC and the first few centuries AD; they identify for us the classical 'Indian' traditions that developed alongside, and in interaction with, the rise of states and the institution of kingship. Our first three chapters therefore converge upon the growth of these classical traditions from the beginning of history in South Asia to the crystallisation of what we call the 'Hindu orthodoxy'.

The custodians of the core orthodox religious culture are of course the Brahman priests, who in early times pretty much monopolised advanced literary education and who came to figure prominently as government advisers and administrators. Alongside the Brahmanical orthodoxy were various heterodox teachings, notably Jainism and Buddhism, which were sometimes richly patronised by rulers alongside, or even in preference to, the Brahmanical orthodoxy. That much is clear; however, to go further is to enter into controversy.

For some observers, Indian history has always been steeped in religious lore and tradition and cannot be understood apart from them. For others, Indian religion is an artefact of historical sources, and merely confuses the picture; people's ideas and behaviour were shaped, they say, by an underlying network of power relations, not religion.

Let us take, first, the former view. Notions of sacredness, made persuasive by the role of Gandhi in modern times, seem deeply embedded in Indian culture. Towards the end of this book we discuss the making of the modern Indian Constitution. We show there that the 'secularism' that informs the Constitution did not permeate the ruling mentality all that deeply; certainly, it has not dulled the Indian fascination with sacred essence and the belief that it can be discovered lurking in the timeless domain of Indian cultural and geographic space. In 1962, in the course of a frontier dispute, units of the People's Liberation Army of China intruded upon Indian-claimed land, prompting the Lok Sabha to pass a resolution demanding that the army be ordered to 'drive out the aggressors from the sacred soil of India.'² The soil in question, though remote, barren and largely uninhabited, was still 'sacred'. This episode illustrates how readily it occurs to observers, Indians and non-Indians alike, to apply the language of religious discourse to the subcontinent. In the same vein, we find an influential strand in modern scholarship advancing the proposition that religion in traditional Indian society took precedence over politics, thereby defining the functions and setting the boundaries of government activity.

This tendency was briefly remarked upon in the previous chapter; for convenience's sake, we may call it the 'Dumontian tendency', because, these days, it is most closely associated with the renowned French sociologist Louis Dumont. According to Dumont, at some point in the life of India's ancient 'Aryan' society, kingship became a partially secularised institution. Previously, he argues, a more primeval arrangement had applied, in which the power-holders were religious figures; after the two roles were separated, the emerging secular power came to be subordinated to, and 'encompassed' by, the religious.³ Even today, caste society in India is firmly embedded in a religious system, so it is not a great leap to imagine that still more in early times the operation of political power was constrained and 'encompassed' by the authority of Brahman priests, who were, and still are, seen as authentic spokesmen for the overarching principles of religious duty, or *dharma*.⁴ As Susan Bayly puts it:

Unlike other societies which possess the cognitive capacity to recognize and exalt individual prowess and achievement in the worldly sphere, Dumont argues that in the Hindu social order, the worldly achiever and doer of active this-worldly deeds performs a less exalted task than that of the 'pure' and therefore superior Brahman.⁵

Such ideas have played an important part in shaping modern images of traditional Indian society, culture and history, and the behaviour of its citizens is still felt to be, exceptionally, suffused by religious principles.⁶

Dumont's focus upon the centrality of the relationship between the priestly (*Brāhmaṇa*) and the warrior-noble (*Kṣatriya*) orders in Indian society reflected deeply entrenched notions in early twentieth-century French sociology. Especially influential were those arising from the work of Georges Dumézil, whose theory of 'tripartite ideology' held that the social organisation of Indo-European communities everywhere followed a similar generic pattern that had been laid down in prehistoric times; according to this template, the population was divided into three hierarchical estates or orders, namely priests, military overlords and economically productive workers.⁷ This threefold scheme precisely mirrors the ancient form of the Indian *varna* classification system that underpins the caste system, which recognises three hereditary classes of priests, warrior-nobles and productive classes (*vaishya*). A fourth *varna*, made up of *Śūdras*, or menials, was added later as the section of the population recognised as being of good descent (the *ārya*) expanded, and came to incorporate as menial aliens many non-*ārya* people.

This threefold scheme therefore is not just a construction of French savants; it has deep Indian roots, and it invites us to regard Indian society, ancient and modern, as a special case – a social system in which two distinct elites, kept apart by rules of heredity, stand upon two distinct foundations of power and authority over the mass of the producers; the baronial elite of warrior-nobles and the sacerdotal elite of Brahmans may be either rivals for power, or

partners, but the overarching world view that defines them unambiguously gives primacy to the Brahmanical order, and unambiguously mandated it to pronounce on the legitimacy of, and set the limits of, that which fell into the realm of the secular.

The elites, then, are separate; but the relationship between religious and secular affairs that this claimed religious primacy is supposed to bring about appears to involve their constant interpenetration. The result is not simply that everything looks, from the Dumontian viewpoint, religious; it might often be the opposite. Putting Brahmins into secular affairs can secularise the former as much as it can sanctify the latter. Much more than is often recognised, the history of Brahmins in Indian public life often celebrates remarkably secular-looking values. For example, the pre-eminent text on the management of political affairs, the *Arthaśāstra*, is a Brahmanical creation that explicitly sites itself within the orthodox Brahmanical corpus; yet the principles that it offers for a king's conduct of his affairs are decidedly unspiritual, if not cynically Machiavellian.⁸ Again, if we look at the *R̥g Veda*, the most sacred text of all among the Hindu scriptures, we find that the invoking of gods – the business of most of the hymns that constitute the work – is directed to the satisfaction of remarkably unspiritual desires, such as the attainment of wealth and strong sons, outcomes that will bring practical benefits. In all sorts of ways that defeat the expectations bred by Western rationalist assumptions about the meaning of religion, sacred and profane categories are intermingled without apparent discontinuity. Of the seeming worldliness of the text, Wendy Doniger writes: 'Rather than characterizing the ritual world of the *R̥g Veda* as worldly, one might do better to characterize the non-ritual Vedic world as sacred.'⁹

So it has long seemed natural to seek religious explanations of Indian traditions. But this mode of interpretation has not by any means remained immune from attack. The nature of the historical sources, which consist pre-eminently of religious texts, is an obvious potential source of misinterpretation; and opponents have raised further objections.

First, there are what we could call philosophical objections. There is a view that religion is a nineteenth-century invention. In the domain of critical theory, scholars debate the grounds on which things might, cogently, be held to exist. The existence of Hinduism has been challenged, first on the score that religion as a whole is an artificial concept and thus does not correspond to anything that existed before the concept was invented, and, second, on the score that whether or not there is such a thing as religion, there is certainly no such religion as Hinduism, since the latter is an artificial construct, engineered by the projection, upon South Asian society, of certain anachronistic ideas entertained by outsiders. People working within this scholarly domain might expect that the present volume should be, in essence, a contribution to exactly this debate if it is to have legitimacy. *Prima facie*, it might seem that a study of the spheres of Indian religion and politics needs, at the outset, to justify its answers to the frequently advanced claims that question the very existence of these spheres.

Such is nevertheless not a major concern here – or at least in the terms just indicated. Our concerns and methods will emerge in what follows, but it is important, in the meantime, to notice the character of the philosophical challenge of modern critical theory. At its most radical, the latter might seem to invite from its opponents the caricature of it as a doctrine that nothing is real except the writings of nineteenth-century German philosophers, and of their French, and other, latter-day disciples. As American political scientist Paul Brass once, ‘only half-joking’, wrote, it can sometimes appear that ‘Everything was invented in the nineteenth century.’¹⁰

Such a characterisation dramatises the recent tendency to question the historical reality of cultural forms once widely assumed to be independently real. As early as 1964, Wilfred Cantwell Smith argued against the usefulness of the whole concept of religion, which he denigrated as a superimposed label likely to reify and falsify.¹¹ More recently, S.N. Balagunadhara has claimed that religion cannot be identified as a cultural universal, and that Hinduism is nothing more than an ‘imaginary entity’.¹² Likewise, Timothy Fitzgerald thinks that the term ‘religion’, invented in the West, is not amenable to cross-cultural application.¹³ Similar postmodern critiques have been advanced by Russell McCutcheon and others.¹⁴ On the other side of the debate, ‘Hinduism’ has been defended as a valid category, and a real thing, by a number of eminent scholars, including Sweetman, Doniger, Lorenzen and Pennington.¹⁵

The philosophical disagreement underlying this debate bears directly upon the nature of reality. For some scholars, categories such as ‘Hinduism’ have no empirical reality but are verbal constructions; for others, such things have essential natures of their own.

Of course, at one level, as Wendy Doniger has noted: ‘Naming is always a matter of the convenience of the namers . . . ALL categories are constructed.’¹⁶ This goes not just for social and cultural concepts such as Hinduism, but also common nouns. An ocean wave lacks substantial persistence; it is, nevertheless, a construction useful for the purposes of communication; an atom, despite its etymology, is made up of its parts. None of this detracts from the usefulness of words such as ‘wave’ or ‘atom’. Common nouns, denoting things that are deemed real, help us to identify persisting patterns in nature. Likewise, social and cultural concepts may be said to be valid if they successfully identify persisting patterns in history, even patterns with blurred edges. Hinduism, as a cluster of beliefs and practices surrounding the Brahmanic orthodoxy and its attitude to the Vedas, marks such a persisting pattern. Some commentators may err in treating ‘Hinduism’ too much as simply a ‘way of talking’, or in representing it as having an indestructible essence, but, either way, surely we can have a useful discussion of what sustains the persisting pattern without appealing to ontology?

Our preference, then, with regard to this debate about categories, is to opt for a middle position, which B.K. Pennington has called ‘soft essentialism’. We accept the essential reality of Hinduism, but we want to emphasise its malleability and responsiveness to historical conditions.

We now turn from the philosophical critique of religion to the historical study of it, with particular reference to how historians have sought to fit religion into the political story of the rise of states. For quite a long while now, historians have tended to view religion as a sort of opiate, concocted and administered by elites. This interpretation commonly shares with the Dumontian thesis the claim that religion became a very important agent in caste society; however, instead of treating religious belief and practice as the authentic expression, in some sense, of the 'soul' of a civilisation, it sees religion, rather, as an instrument deliberately used by power-seekers.

For many commentators on the rise of state power in agrarian societies, priests have their *raison d'être* as legitimators of secular power, which might otherwise not have commanded the allegiance of the populace. More particularly, Ernst Gellner has written of the advent of states in agrarian societies as a process involving manipulation of the agricultural surplus by rising elites, political and religious. According to Gellner, the roles of these elites could be characterised as those of coercers and legitimators, respectively – evidence of a kind of specialisation indicative of a quite complex division of labour.¹⁷ It is possible, though, to treat the role of religious traditions even more behaviouristically: some people would explain power relations without interposing any airy superstructural 'belief system' into the causal chain at all, and regard naked coercion as the whole story. S. Sanderson has claimed a major role for coercion in the rise of the state, a view that leaves little room for the active role of religious belief: 'Agrarian societies are held together not by any sort of ideological consensus or common world-outlook but by military force.'¹⁸

Theorists of the sociology of legitimacy and state power normally do not go quite as far as Sanderson, however. In some views, institutional religion in agrarian societies has generally had an ambivalent relationship with political power, sometimes standing outside it and assessing its values critically, sometimes adapting itself to the outlook and attitudes implicit in loyalty to the state. In a study of the interaction between religious, economic and social forces in Sri Lanka in historical times, R.A.L.H. Gunawardana coined the term 'antagonistic symbiosis' to describe this ambivalent relationship.¹⁹ Steven Collins accepts the validity of Gunawardana's concept and uses it to describe the social and political role of Theravada Buddhism more generally, writing: 'The Buddhist monkhood, as holder of ideological power, was capable of both co-operating with those who held political, military and economic power, and of challenging them.'²⁰ Even if one accepts power as a main driving force in the evolution of culture, religion does not have to be a mere tool of political competition; it embodies a variety of cultural forms. As Giddens observes: 'Religion is a framework of thought and social organisation through which many aspects of life in traditional states may be filtered, including innovative forces and schismatic ones.'²¹

In the more theoretical literature, then, we find a variety of approaches. When we look, though, more particularly at the scholarship on Indian society, we

find a tendency to identify the Brahmanical religious tradition as a sort of strategy to secure power on behalf of either (or both) of two gangs of elite power-seekers, namely the Brahmans and the Kshatriyas. In many of the earlier historical studies of ancient India, and indeed in some later ones too, the Brahmans are represented either as dutiful servants who use their knowledge to help prop up the authority of the temporal lords, or as their rivals for social eminence who elaborated myths about privileged Brahmanical access to the gods in order to enhance their own position.²² The influence of non-Brahmanical sects such as Buddhism, which eventually came to be recognised, by many of the major Indian kingdoms, including the Mauryan Empire, as having an equivalent orthodoxy, has been attributed, similarly, by some scholars, to their role as allies of political power-holders.²³

However, as reflection should show, arguments about the social dissemination of ideas as a means to power, when they are advanced as explanations for the rise of Brahmanical religion, rather beg the question. To whatever extent a people can be said to have accepted a particular power structure through having a belief system imposed upon them, they must have been ready to accept the authority of those who imposed it upon them before the imposition took place. The belief systems as such cannot be used to explain the preconditions of their own arising.²⁴

In the scholarship on the relationship between priestly religion and the role of kings in the rise of states in general, or in India in particular, although many studies offer astutely nuanced interpretations, it is possible to detect in a great deal of at least the earlier literature on the subject a type of assumption that is shared with the 'Dumontian thesis' and has been keenly criticised by Margaret Archer as the 'myth of cultural integration'. This myth is the supposition that a cultural system can be treated as a coherent whole that is expressive of the consistent outlook of an entire population. The system really speaks for a monolithic society. Logical consistency is imagined to enable sets of ideas to be imposed upon people and social uniformity is imagined to be 'produced by the imposition of culture . . . by one set of people on another'.²⁵

In fact – particularly if 'culture' is the special preserve of an identifiable elite group – the ordinary people may respond with various degrees of ignorance, indifference or even hostility to attempts to impose cultural rules upon them. Steven Collins points out that 'it is unknowable just how far teachings on death, wisdom, happiness and so forth [may] have been internalized by the majority of any population'.²⁶ Again, we can agree with Anthony Giddens that ordinary people in the lower orders of society need not share the ideas and ideals of the claimed 'high culture' of elites.²⁷ We do not end up gaining much understanding of the appeal of a faith by supposing that it was convenient for the purposes of a certain elite class to impose it upon other people to make them submissive.

How, then, was political power sustained? To be sure, explanations of political behaviour that appeal to the interests of the leaders of particular groups in amassing power for themselves tell part of the story. If, however, the sole

motive at play anywhere is a desire for power, there is no disincentive, beyond perhaps the fear of being spied upon and unmasked by secret agents, to discourage ambitious followers from betraying their leaders and staging coups or assassinations at every opportunity (like the priests at the Grove of Nemi). Groups so motivated would probably have no natural cohesion and would be likely to dissolve quickly; a network of secret police and informers might delay the process,²⁸ but eventually the universal climate of fear and distrust will infect the cohesion and reliability of the secret police apparatus; even core institutions of political power are unlikely to survive such a vicious downward spiral of betrayal and violence.

In bad times this sort of thing can often happen, but history shows that bad times are not permanent and inevitable. The mechanism of naked personal power-hunger is complemented by an alternative one that often acts to maintain a degree of political stability; most people (and that goes for a large proportion of both the leaders and the led) prefer to live within ordered and orderly systems (or, if you like, moral economies). In addition, people tend to recognise their shared interest in living harmoniously together. But if this natural instinct for collective harmony is to be maintained, there needs to be some sort of code defining 'proper behaviour' for each type of individual. Such a code does not have to be explicitly religious, but it is historically typical that religious ideas are enlisted in support of the code.

In what follows, it will be necessary to pick out a path that leads between the Dumontian thesis, according primacy to religion as an encompassing and quasi-autonomous agent, and the revisionist 'secular' interpretations. Overenthusiasm for hard-headed secular realism can lead, as they say, to the baby being thrown away with the bath-water. However concrete and physical, behaviour must be inspired by beliefs (such as religious allegiance) and values (such as trust and loyalty). Quite possibly, in the complex relationship between governance and religion in the long ago Indian past, religious ideas served not just to rationalise individual self-interest or group or economic interests, but to order and guide everyday life.

Ancient Indians were certainly influenced by the material interest of the groups to which they belonged, whatever the religious texts might have said; but we cannot assume that we know just what these groups, which shaped people's motives, amounted to. They were not necessarily *the* Brahmans or *the* Kshatriyas, viewed as agglutinative wholes, as conspiracies; more probably they were locally defined coalitions of power and influence that, sadly, the extant sources do not often allow us to recognise. Political actions appear to have been most generally motivated by all sorts of local factors such as kin connections, folk customs and traditions, and relations of dependence or exchange among communities in particular places, rather than by loyalty to India-wide classes or social orders. That said, we need to probe further, and the logical place to start is the age of the Vedas, the most ancient historical period. Here we find that tribal cohesion appears to be the most powerful cement.

The Vedic Age

In approaching the story of Indian politics and religion, we must perforce leave out of the account the history of the Indus Valley Civilisation, in the north-west of the subcontinent, where India's first urbanisation took place. Known archaeologically as Harappa, after one of the main urban sites, it flourished in parts of the third and second millennia BC and achieved a remarkable level of technical development, including a written language. Paradoxically, its career counts for us as prehistory, despite it possessing written records, because its writing remains undeciphered; the succeeding Vedic period counts as history, even though it had no writing, because its literature was transmitted orally and later written down.

Marking the beginning of Sanskrit literature, the Vedas are the religious scriptures of the 'Aryans', a linguistic term denoting an originally nomadic people from Central Asia who slowly spread across northern India, in decentralised clan formations, after the metropolitan Harappan Civilisation had faded. What can these texts tell us about the social and political contexts of ancient India?

They were composed long before writing was invented, and travelled through space and time with the history of the people who memorised and recited them. In the process, the culture to which the texts belonged spread across the north of India from west to east over the period of about a millennium, starting from about 1500 BC, though some elements of the earliest stratum of the Vedas originated even earlier, within the lore of Central Asian nomadic communities that had not yet entered the subcontinent. Certainly, the liturgical language, archaic Sanskrit, belongs within the Indo-European language family, which, in prehistoric times, was dispersed in various directions from its home somewhere in the hill pasture regions north-west of India to the zones in India, Persia and Europe where languages of Indo-Aryan derivation subsequently flourished. At any rate, a capital fact about the history of the Sanskrit-based culture during its first millennium is that it is a history of inexorable and radical transformation: the culture's ethnic, geographical and economic foundations all shifted dramatically.

First, as for ethnicity, the Vedic culture spread well beyond direct descendants of those who originated it. These, as the Vedas tell us, identified themselves as *ārya*, 'noble', a term that has since given arduous scholarly service as an ethnic, linguistic or cultural label subjected to various conflicting interpretations.²⁹ As time passed, many communities unrelated by blood came to be co-opted within the Aryan fold, including no doubt disparate groups of indigenous people practising varieties of simple agriculture, horticulture, or hunting and gathering, already living in territories reached by the earlier pastoralist Aryans. Over the following centuries miscegenation and migration diluted drastically the blood lines of whatever original 'Aryan' stock we might identify.

Geographically, no one place within India can be identified as the real or original home of ‘Aryan’ culture. Early strata of the Vedic literature indicate that its authors belonged to pastoral tribes in the north-west, particularly the Punjab. Their traditions were passed on to an expanding population as they spread eastward; in time, ironically, the original north-western home of the early Vedic people, continuing to be occupied by an atomised tribal society of herdsmen, came to be regarded as a remote frontier land contaminated by alien cultures, while the newly settled lands around the middle course of the Ganges and the Ganges-Yamuna *doab* came to be looked on as the real Aryan heartland, the sacred ‘Āryāvarta’. From the middle of the last millennium BC, as the period of the composition of the Vedic texts came to an end, ‘Vedic’, ‘Sanskrit’ or ‘Aryan’ society (however we choose to identify it) spread still further eastward, down the lower course of the Ganges towards the Bay of Bengal. In this area, India’s second urbanisation took place. Cities were constructed, and rapidly evolved into political and economic power-houses, from which ‘Aryan’ culture – though much changed from its earliest embodiment in the Sanskrit sources – was thereafter projected far and wide with the extension of empires and trade routes.

Thus ethnic and geographical transformations were energised by shifting and developing ways of life. The early Vedic texts portray a society of clan-conscious nomadic groups, proud of their warrior skill, protective of the sacred purity of their shared culture, and disposed to measure success by ownership of cows and strong sons. The communities sought pastures along routes through the Himalayan foothills and southward from this corridor to the Ganges; at every point they mingled with farmers; and in the latter stages of this easterly push, as agriculture advanced, farming became the occupation of the majority. Coincidentally, the application of long-familiar iron-making techniques to agriculture at this time helped to underpin the production of grain and provide the surpluses demanded by local headmen, which surpluses, in turn, allowed the cities to grow bigger, as administrative headquarters, centres of ritual, fortifications, garrisons and market sites. Last but not least, advancing craft specialisation and the emergence of long-distance trade supplied the trappings of a truly urbane society. By the fourth century BC, urban life in India was distinguished by commerce, coinage, written language, iron tools and utensils applied to both household and farm purposes, and a high degree of sophistication in the arts and crafts.

Also, significantly for our story, the Vedic period was characterised by the evolution of kingship from a position of tribal leadership to one of supreme authority over settled populations, with attendant control of manpower. These features of the period therefore identify it as one in which we should seek the origin and early growth of temporal and sacred power as intersecting and interacting institutions. We are not dealing here with a single particular state of affairs that can be studied as a unit; we are dealing with a period of major transformation – Indian society was very different at the end of it from what it had been at the beginning.

There are four Vedas; the most voluminous, and the main foundation of mythic lore upon which the edifice of Vedic religion stands, is the first, the *R̥g Veda*, which contains 1,028 hymns, mostly odes to gods, that are divided into ten books, averaging about ten verses to a hymn. The first and the tenth were probably composed somewhat later than the rest. Books 2–9, which focus upon the praises of often warlike deities associated closely with forces of nature, accordingly reflect the conditions experienced by the Vedic tribes as they spread across the north-west in the second millennium BC. In the later Vedic literature, belonging to the earlier centuries of the first millennium BC – as the Aryan tribes spread eastward and became settled agriculturalists – we find reflected the traces of a more elaborate society in which specialist priests codified an increasingly elaborate body of hymns, chants and liturgy, often with the patronage of leaders, *rājan*, who were emerging as real kings. These developments are to some extent reflected in the first and last books of the *R̥g Veda* and in three later Vedas, the *Sāma*, *Yajur* and *Atharva*, which contain chants, liturgy and incantations or spells. Appended to the Vedas are some further classes of texts, perhaps from around the eighth to the sixth centuries BC, which are storehouses of ritual lore, myths, liturgical prescriptions and didactic stories: the *Brāhmaṇas*, the *Āraṇyakas* and the earliest of the Upanishads. Texts of this last category are especially famed as the repositories of incipient metaphysical speculation.

Now, the contents of most of these texts, though for centuries the subject of abundant scholarly research in India and beyond, do not offer much to help us answer questions about the policy area, for example how government dealt with religious institutions, issues such as are discussed extensively in later chapters. After all, ‘government’ in any relevant sense was barely coming into existence. There are, however, several useful lessons to be learned from the general character of the Vedic hymns for our purposes.

Hymns eulogising gods, constituting the main content of the *R̥g Veda*, evidently received extensive liturgical use, and during the millennia following their composition the Vedas came to be regarded as the supreme repository of sacred truths holding authority within the core religious orthodoxy.

Generally, each hymn is dedicated to one particular god, or else to two or more regarded as being inseparably bound together. Many hymns, though, also mention other divinities linked in various ways to the one primarily addressed. The three gods that figure most often as the primary targets of eulogy are Indra, Agni and Soma, of whom the latter two derive their power in large part from processes of sacrificial ritual. Thus Agni is not visualised solely as a fire god, or the Fire God; he is known through the kindling of fire for the sacrifice, in which he is specially embodied, although he is also identified with fire in general. In a sense, then, he *is* the sacrifice:

I praise Agni, the leading priest (*purohita*), the god and ministrant (*rtvij*) of the sacrifice, the invoker (*hotr*), the supreme bestower of treasure (1.1.1).

The *purohita*, the *ṛtvij* and the *hotṛ* were three of the various classes of Vedic priest. *Purohita*, literally the ‘one placed in front’, over time came to be used as the term for a domestic priest or chaplain; a *purohita* of a ruler, however, could be more like an archbishop, with a leading public role:

O Soma of widespread fame, give comfort to our heart when we drink you; be good to us as a father is to his son, or a friend to a friend; extend the span of our years of life (8.48.4).

Soma, an intoxicating drink pressed from a mountain plant, was central to Vedic sacrifices, and very frequently apostrophised as a deity in Vedic hymns, with the whole of Book 9 dedicated to him.

The Vedic gods are envisaged, then, within a frame of reference shaped primarily by the procedures of sacrificial ritual; but many of them have, as well, mythologies crediting them with achievements in the world outside the sacrifice. Chief is Indra, lord of the gods, who has been called a national hero of the ‘Aryan’ Vedic communities; he is eulogised in about a quarter of the hymns of the *Rg Veda*, and is, above all, renowned for his exploits in slaying the serpent demon Vritra, thereafter freeing the cows that had been stolen and penned in a cave by the leader of a marauding enemy host named Vala:

O peoples, [know that] he is Indra who slew the serpent and released the seven streams (*saptasindhūn*), who prised open [the grasp of] Vala and set loose the cows, who brought forth fire between two rocks, and who is victorious in battle (2.12.3).

The emphasis, here, upon heroic exploits illustrates the warrior ethos, which fashioned the links between leadership and religion. The early Vedic ‘Aryans’ effected a stridently martial culture. Yet, while rival Aryan tribes may have fought each other, they shared the same set of gods, and recognised as common foes the various hostile peoples occasionally mentioned in the scriptures, their identities camouflaged behind mythical stories of divine battles with demons such as the one above.

Indeed, the myth of Indra’s conquests displays several levels of symbolism. Vala may on one level represent the demonic power responsible for drought, but on another he is the leader of an enemy tribe – of a people referred to as the Pasis who were said to scorn the Vedic gods. Other aliens are called Dasas and Dasyus. In the following verse, we are told that Indra has ‘suppressed and done away with the Dasa colour’ (*dāsavarṇamadharam guhākah*; 2.12.4). So some, at least, of the enemies of the Veda-transmitting people had darker skins. In later Classical Sanskrit, *dāsa* means ‘slave’.

What are the criteria by which these Vedic Aryans should be identified? Since the Vedas are religious texts, it is not surprising that analysis of the references in them to alien groups tends to show that the distinction between ‘Aryans’ and ‘non-Aryans’ is primarily a religious one.³⁰ But various factors

are likely to have been at play, including physical appearance and language alongside ritual. Also, we must remember that the ‘Vedic period’, so called, was not an age of stable equilibrium. In the early stages of their migration into the Punjab, the Veda-transmitting communities are likely to have been much more racially distinct than later, and more exclusively given to herding; by the end of the period they had spread across most of the north, they were turning into agricultural and even urban settlements, and their original lines of biological descent had become extremely diluted. Thus, later generations of the populations recognising themselves as ‘Aryan’ gradually became less easily distinguishable biologically and economically from the despised non-Aryans; perhaps, in part, for that very reason, cultural markers distinguishing high inherited status became more important.

Political power was embodied in dominion, *kśatra*, exercised by pre-eminently military leaders known as *rājans*. These leaders depended for recognition upon acceptance by the class of tribal seniors, heads of important families, called *rājanya*. At first, perhaps, the *rājans* were only tribal leaders looked to for protection, and who served mainly to maintain the cohesion of groups of herdsmen. Yet such cohesion was important for survival. Large groups, especially if they were prepared to pool their resources (wagons, herds, skills) were better able to mount successful raids on rivals and defend themselves against them. However, an effective group could not continue to grow forever; an upper limit was imposed by the continuous dissension that flourished among the tribesfolk, *rājanyas* and others. Under the circumstances, the best means of promoting unity, in the communal interest, lay in privileging whatever customs had brought together the *rājanya*; by this means they could become familiar with each other’s personal qualities and motivations, and reminded of their shared interests and the rewards of mutual cooperation. Sacrifices at which divine blessings were sought from the gods for collectivities of supplicants performed exactly this function:

O Heaven and Earth, great [gods], being thus praised, grant us great fame (*mahi śravah*) and exalted dominion (*bṛhat kśatram*). Bestow upon us creditable strength by which we may constantly extend [power] over the peoples (*kṛshītis tatanāma viśvahā*) (1.160.5).

Further, by bowing down together in front of the gods, the Aryans gave concrete expression to a sense of common purpose and shared felicity beyond the grave:

May I reach that precious abode [of Vishnu], where men devoted to the gods revel (1.154.5).

And shared aspiration, after communion with particular gods, implied shared goals in life on earth, with clearly identified benefits:

Through Agni are to be gained wealth and prosperity day after day, glorious and endowed to the full with heroes (1.1.3).

Finally, the prayer for strong sons who will distinguish themselves in battle is a constant refrain; innumerable hymns include the same petition that asks of the gods: ‘O mighty ones, grant us wealth, associated with fine heroes’ (1.85.12).

These are not the sentiments of settled agriculturalists wedded to the soil. The military ethos of the Vedic communities is manifested in the fascination of Indra’s valorous exploits and the universal desire for virile heroes (*vīra*). These are the priorities of martial folk. As was to be the case so often throughout later centuries, the pastoralists of the north-western hill country followed a way of life that gave them a decisive military edge over the farmers of the lowlands; hardy, skilled with horses, and free to choose where, and when, to attack, they were able to dominate the more sedentary communities in the river valleys. During the Vedic period, as in the course of later incursions, mobile groups well supplied with horses and martial values confronted a variety of disparate communities, many of which were made sitting targets by their dependence upon their fields.

The Aryans had an intensely particularistic oral culture. The hymns of the *R̥g Veda* allude richly to a complex body of lore shared by and well suited to a mobile and scattered population. The relations among the tribes were subjected to shifting patterns of hostility or allegiance. But they clung fiercely to the myths, rituals and cosmology transmitted through the Vedas and their associated lore as ways of expressing their shared cultural identity, marking them off from the alien populations they encountered. Lore thus defined and defended a perceived unity of ancient Indian civilisation even while, in practice, migrations and economic adaptations were eroding the distinctive Aryan identity.

These circumstances dictated a particular style of religious document; every Vedic hymn was not only a prayer or a eulogy, but also a celebration of what was remembered in common by the congregants who met to attend the sacrifice or other public rituals. Extended families could split, with component groups taking their cattle and household goods off in different directions, or, for all sorts of political or economic reasons, they could try to combine – but as people moved from camp to camp or pasture to pasture they carried with them in their heads a sort of database, encyclopaedic in its abundance of detail, containing, in allusive form, the curricula vitae of the gods who lived all around them in the natural environment. This was a marvellous resource for them. There was not just one god for each face-to-face community; their peripatetic way of life, with frequent fusion or fission of communities, was far too fluid for that. Rather, particular gods would be worshipped on certain occasions. Further, by mentioning any one attribute or exploit of that god, the priests automatically evoked other gods known for their exhibition of the same characteristics. Indeed, the identity of each deity had a propensity to flow into

those of others. Hence, the Vedic hymns were very allusive. In this they are quite unlike religious documents of other types (such as Buddhist texts) that were designed to appeal universally, to people of any origin, and regardless of their natal culture. In the Vedas, by contrast, each verse was expected to evoke a node in a tangled web of folk memories:

The Angirasas, O Agni, found you, hidden away, in your resting-place in every wood. As such, you take birth when rubbed with vigour; it is you whom men have called the son of strength, O Angiras (5.11.6).

This verse is taken at random. However, it is entirely typical. Its allusiveness would have made it baffling to outsiders. The Angirasas were a mythical family of priests supposed to have instituted the sacrifice; they are said to have summoned the god of fire, Agni, by means of the friction of the sacrificial fire-stick. At the same time, Agni the god is reckoned to have been the chief of the Angiras family.

The identities and attributes of the various Vedic divinities were knotted into a complex network of images connected by powerful currents of imaginative energy. Here, for example, is a scholarly description of Mitra, who may have had a Persian origin (in the *Avesta*, Mithra is a sun god):

The association of Mitra with Varuna is so intimate that he is addressed alone in one hymn only (3.59) . . . His separate character appears somewhat indefinite. Uttering his voice, he marshals men and watches the tillers with unwinking eye. He is the great Āditya [sun] who marshals, *yatayati*, the people, and the epithet *yatayaj-jana*, ‘arraying men together’, appears to be peculiarly his. Savitri (1.25) is identified with Mitra because of his laws, and Vishnu (1.154) takes his three steps by the laws of Mitra: statements indicating that Mitra regulates the course of the sun. Agni, who goes at the head of the dawns (that is to say, is kindled before dawn), produces Mitra, and when kindled is Mitra. In the Atharvaveda, Mitra at sunrise is contrasted with Varuna in the evening, and in the Brāhmanas Mitra is connected with day, Varuna with night.³¹

Thus the gods were not unique lords of separate communities commanding the exclusive loyalty of particular sects; on the contrary, their very identities were ravelled together like the fabric of the constantly shifting, dividing and merging groups of the largely nomadic society of that time. They commanded honour and deference, but not exclusive love or devotion, which was a much later development in Hindu orthodoxy. Their various functions and attributes were widely shared and gave them partly interchangeable identities, intersections in a complex network.

To be sure it comes easily, in discussing Vedic religion, to think of ‘sacrifice’ and ‘ritual’ as largely overlapping categories, the former being a specific organised form of the latter, but we should heed Heesterman’s careful

distinction between the two; for him, ritual is a Brahmanical elaboration, introduced later, that masked the real character of the original sacrificial practices that were carried on before, or outside, the Vedic Brahmanical tradition, and turned them into mere performances or representations, denuded of the vital ‘agonistic’ content that sacrifices had once possessed. The prototypical sacrifice, in this view, was pre-eminently a heroic exploit, in which the sacrificer (*yajamāna*) was not (as later) a lord or patron who paid for priests to conduct a ritual but a warrior who risked his life in conflict.³²

Yet sacrifice lay at the very heart of the Vedic religion, and retained profound symbolic importance within the evolution of later Hinduism; it had to mean something real to its earliest participants. We may make allowances for the likelihood that many ordinary folk were sceptical about the practical efficacy of the ritual. For all we know, indeed, ancient Indians may have often railed against the seeming pointlessness of priestly mumbo-jumbo, commiserated with each other about the boring nature of the great public sacrifices, and taken consolation from the knowledge that good meat and drink were usually supplied on these occasions. Perhaps they complained that cultural integration was a myth. We can imagine, too, how in later times a sacrifice might appear to curious onlookers as a sort of jamboree or carnival, or an occasion for lavish expenditure, or a showpiece for priestly self-advertisement.

Yet, when it began, it spoke to its participants about life and death; the beliefs explicit in its liturgy expressed ideas that mattered intensely. In later, more evolved, forms of Vedic ritual, the increasingly elaborate and solemn manoeuvres of the various priests could be interpreted as either an assertion of a Brahmanical monopoly upon sacramental access to the gods, or as some kind of sacerdotal mystification, or as mere poetic waffle, but behind it lay a serious belief that the gods were real and powerful, and could be contacted through the energy of a community’s shared hopes and fears, channelled through appropriate solemn ritual.

These considerations are not simply academic. They matter to the subject at hand, for it is in the orbit of the Vedic sacrifice that we can see the beginnings of complex political institutions. Kings evolved from the *rājans* mentioned in the *Rg Veda*, and the *rājans* were able to announce and assert their possession of ‘royal’ authority through their patronage of sacrifice. In Sanskrit, a ‘sacrificer’ (*yajamāna*) is not the priest, but the one who pays the priest’s honorarium (*dakṣhiṇā*) and sponsors the occasion.

It was suggested above that, to understand the links between religion and secular power in ancient India, it is necessary to look beyond theories of coercion. With that aim in mind, let us try to set out, simply and specifically, what it is that we think, outside the frame of power, links the two. In a word, it is *trust*.

Even in a moderately complex society, it is scarcely possible to go through life without confronting the (excruciating) necessity to place trust in people external to the family, sometimes even strangers. In ancient India, political

institutions were unstable, warfare was endemic, and enemies were ubiquitous. Nevertheless, there could be no stable routines of public life, no sense of security, no economic progress, if groups and organisations could never rely upon each other to behave in expected ways. Trust was essential. Religion served to define and dramatise trust by identifying those to whom one could reliably give it and providing an intensely practical training in ways of life that would project one as trustworthy to particular others.

The point becomes clear from the very beginning of our story, coinciding as it does with the spread of the ideas embodied in the Vedas. The lesson to be learned here, though, is not that kingship originated with the sanction of priestly ritual and therefore represents the subordination of political institutions to religion. For one thing, coronation ceremonies everywhere can be read as implying some such subordination, but it is a purely ceremonial subordination specific to a ritual occasion, and implies no necessary relationship to real power relations. For another, while the priests may have elaborated the ritual required for the legitimisation of kingship, they were in an important sense in the subordinate role, dependent upon the *yajamāna* for the sacrifice to be possible. What does matter is more prosaic, namely that we can see illustrated in the conduct of the sacrifice the powerful concentration of a small community's hopes and fears. And it is in this respect, especially, that religion comes in. In the sharing of ritual, people learned to depend upon each other and came to appreciate the vital interests they held in common. Religion sanctifies the trust that people must repose in each other.

The *rājan*'s special and indispensable role is to make the occasion possible. His resources and prowess, aided by the gods, will be crucial to the future success of the community. Belief in the reality of these Vedic gods may have become increasingly wrapped in learned doctrine and secondary myths, but it was sustained for as long as the sacrifices remained central to religious life by a shared conviction that such belief better explained the hazards of life, and fortune, than anything else.

Rājans were like gods in people's eyes because they made contact with the divine world through sacrifice; in turn, having a relationship with the divine clearly augmented their power to protect the community, which nourished the sense of mutual dependence. The Maruts, the storm gods, are said to be, like *rājans*, of terrifying appearance (*rājana iva tveṣamasamdr̥śo*) (*RV* 1.85.8). Vāta, the wind god, is 'the king of all this world' (10.108.2); Soma is a king, implored to bestow his grace (8.48.8); Yama, lord of the beyond, is king of the dead (10.14.14).

The Vedic *rājan*'s function as protector and war leader doubled that of the gods. People needed leaders who would protect them and whom they could trust. Religious ritual offered a science by which bonds with such leaders could be forged and strengthened. And the sonorous language of royal divinity provided a kind of 'shorthand' for this science.

The emergence of territorial kingdoms

The emphasis so far has been upon the distinctive character of the sacrifices sponsored by *rājans* as a dramatisation of the bonds that were meant to obtain between leaders and followers. They helped to define, thus, a small community of trust – and it would be fair to suppose that this psychology, however attenuated, continued to operate as a rationale for public religious ritual during later periods of change.

But, as time passed, by insensible gradations culture inexorably changed, and the original significance of the Vedic hymns was transformed along with the nature of the religion itself. The public sacrifices of the Vedic heyday gave way to an emphasis upon private events and domestic ritual, and the gods of the old Vedic pantheon came to be treated more as cogs in the machinery of priestly ritual, rather than powerful autonomous agents. Thus the most successful cults in later Hinduism, focused on the super-deities Vishnu and Shiva, bore very little resemblance to those of the *Ṛg Veda*. To be sure, the sacred texts continued to be significant, in some ways more than ever, but they played a different part in social articulation. The natural presumption must be that the continued ritual recitation of verses from the Vedic hymns was designed to invoke the past, designed to link the devotee to that glorious pristine age when divine powers had revealed themselves, when the sacred institutions were born, when the founding fathers of the community had defined the paths that were to be followed by later generations. Repetition of appropriate ritual invocations allowed him, or her, to tap into the sacred energy imparted by whatever divine agencies were deemed currently to hold power over the community.³³

So, a sense of continuity with the past fostered an attachment to the Vedic heritage; still, obviously, cultural change did not occur independently of other sorts of change, in economic and political conditions for instance. Important for our story was the growing power of kings, helped along by bigger armies and evolving military know-how, which eventually enabled them to sever the lingering restraints on their authority imposed by kinship ties. One indicator of this decisive shift in the status of the *rājan* was the adoption by India's regional rulers, during the earlier part of the first millennium BC, of ever grander titles suggestive of higher and higher degrees of military prowess and glory. Thus the title *mahārāja*, 'great king', identified one who had scored a great victory, echoing the heroic deeds of Indra:

Before slaying Vṛtra he was Indra, it is true; but after slaying Vṛtra he was Mahendra ['Great Indra'], even as a *rājan* becomes a *mahārāja* after obtaining a victory.³⁴

Other terms were applied to leaders on the strength of earned eminence and glory; these included *ekarājya* (sole kingship), or *adhirāja* (overlord).³⁵ Superior kings, in turn, brought lesser kings within their sphere of power.

Also, as agriculture advanced and herdsmen turned into farmers, classifications of kinship became inadequate to define the many sorts of relationship that grew up in the course of social interaction and new sorts of hierarchical status appeared. The changing uses of words such as *viś* (people of a community) and *grāma* (perhaps in earlier times a term for a mobile pastoral group, but, by the time of the *Brāhmaṇa* texts, one that designated a settlement under the headship of a chieftain claiming Kshatriya rank) point to some of the shifts in social and political relationships that were taking place as the population grew, mixed and spread.³⁶ Unfortunately, the later Vedic texts do not provide a clear picture of the social organisation of the period or of the origins of the ranked groups that they name. Nevertheless, the texts offer evidence of major transformations taking place behind the mask of continuity represented by their religious categories. For instance, the *rājasūya* sacrifice, the royal anointing ceremony described in the *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa*, can be understood as an elaborate symbolic representation of the aspiration of the rising chieftains of the period to become kings over multiple communities, each aspirant uniting, in his own person, the legitimacy of a single shared stream of claimed genealogical descent.³⁷

Apparently, during the later Vedic age, processes of state formation were unfolding in the Ganges Valley. Thanks to recent advances in archaeology, this development can now be mapped with greater precision. For instance, it seems that, by the sixth century BC, large urban settlements were growing up along the middle course of the Ganges river at sites such as Kausambi, replete with massive public works indicative of the control of manpower on a very large scale; and that, over the next couple of centuries, further downstream, major cities came into being as political centres of competing kingdoms with substantial armies and imperial ambitions.³⁸

It is not immediately obvious, though, how this process was linked to people's motives, interests and behaviour. Early Vedic society, as we have seen, was very fragmented, being made up of small groups that formed alliances only in war. It follows that the creation of a qualitatively different sort of political unit, a state, must have required a massive reconceptualisation of the individual's place in the world, and a transfer of loyalty to a more distant, and less accountable, source of authority. It is possible to imagine practical reasons why it might be advantageous for local communities to adopt such ideas, but the process would certainly require a reconfiguration of religious beliefs, providing at least a semblance of continuity with the old Vedic doctrines underlying sacrificial ritual.³⁹

At this point it is useful to take account of the layering of relationships implicit in the claims made by Vedic sacrificial religion upon its adherents. Earlier we argued that the sacrifice provided a language that aided the conceptualisation of a projection from the loyalties of a small group, to the solidarity of a larger community within which political institutions could take root. On one level, the sacrifice validates a community of trust uniting the participants at the ritual, for the latter are people who know each other and

have come together to will that unseen powers should fulfil their shared hopes or protect them from what they fear most; the ritual dramatises their relations to each other and makes explicit their shared interest. On another level, though, the rehearsal of the sacred lore in any group is a ritual confirmation of the vital shared interest of all those who can call themselves Aryans, and are thus able to recognise the powerful bonds that unite them and define their special place in relation to the gods and to the earth. In short, the religious culture as a whole serves to make real and vivid a larger community of interest, through which people are able confidently to distinguish between those whom they should be able to trust in issues arising between themselves and threatening aliens, and those whom it would be prudent to keep at arm's length.

Thus religious practice served to nurture trust and solidarity both within the face-to-face community and among all those who could recognise themselves as brethren sharing a common destiny within the wider world. Now it was precisely in the interaction between these two levels that politics entered the dynamics of early Indian culture. Kingship developed by a *process of projection* from the rituals of small-group leadership to those of the larger collectivities that were starting to emerge among the subcontinent's growing, and increasingly agricultural, and settled, population.

Where survival is at stake, ideas of identity matter. Ordinary people need to be convinced that the group they are thinking of joining is substantial and powerful, and embodies their deeply felt values, before fully trusting their security to its leaders. Beliefs about power and values thus find expression in religious lore; ritual sacrifices bind individuals together. This makes the links between particular sacrifices and particular degrees of political power crucial. Texts declared that sacrifices were necessary for the assumption of rank. Before he could call himself a *rājan*, a man needed first to perform the *rājasūya* sacrifice; a person aspiring to the still more eminent rank of *samrāj* was required to perform a *vājapeya* sacrifice.⁴⁰ Only a truly ambitious (or reckless) ruler, though, would have dared to celebrate the hallowed *aśvamedha* sacrifice, for it involved letting a horse roam free for a year and then having to make good an effective claim to dominion over all the places where it had wandered. Rightly, Hermann Kulke suggests that a close association existed between the *śrauta* (public Vedic) rituals and the process of state formation. The rituals 'not only reflected, but sometimes even influenced socio-political developments through their impact on "public" opinion', he argues.⁴¹

In very broad terms, then, we can now describe the connection between Vedic religion and the evolution of political institutions. Vedic society was quite fluid; mobile groups migrated with their herds and flocks, or (as agriculture and permanent settlements developed) continued to identify themselves as the direct descendants of such groups. Communities may have split apart or coalesced quite frequently, but while they held together each, necessarily, recognised a strong shared interest in cooperation for survival, while those individuals who enjoyed some favourable combination of

distinguished birth, great wealth in livestock and multiple strong sons were likely to acquire the means and the authority to sponsor sacrifices.

Clearly, the rise of powerful chieftains was a necessary precondition for urbanisation and state formation; these questing chiefs demonstrated their power, in the first instance, by ‘adding value’ to the capabilities of the communities they led by organising them – prompting them to undertake important functions and constructions – in this way demonstrating that ‘communities’ can be more than the sum of the people in them.⁴²

Vedic religion addressed a tangled network of gods, many of whom tended to blur into each other. And Vedic society was a tangled network of tribal groups, many of which, likewise, tended to blur into each other. By the end of the Vedic period, though, the great public sacrifices integral to the life of small face-to-face communities had been superseded by a new set of emergent institutions.

One was kingship, which became more territorial; another was the large town supported by a network of agricultural hinterlands. In subsequent centuries, the Vedic sacrifices were honoured chiefly as a nostalgic memory, though some kings revived the *aśvamedha* sacrifice to mark their claims to *imperium*. Eventually, the priests became clients of the rulers in their urban capitals. The texts that have survived from this era, notably the *Brāhmaṇas*, allude to some of these changes. They speak, for instance, of the beginnings of a regular state apparatus. Around the king there is a retinue of dignitaries, *ratnins* (literally, ‘bestowers of wealth’), who represent, if not quite a Weberian bureaucracy, then at least something closely antecedent to it.⁴³ The *ratnins* are listed in several later Vedic texts; in one ritual mentioned there, the king was required to visit the house of each *ratnin* and make offerings to the appropriate god there. We can also observe in the texts that followed the Vedas proper (the *Brāhmaṇas* and the early Upanishads) a novel readiness on the part of the scholarly Brahmins to accept that the Kshatriyas (the warrior nobility, meaning, in effect, the *rājans*) were people of high status, even, in some cases, according them superiority over their own class.

This volte-face in attitudes reflects the changed environment of the emerging territorial state, where a king was no longer *primus inter pares* but a commanding figure surrounded by the panoply of office. He was no longer just a sponsor of sacrifices, he was a patron; and if the following tale about King Janaka, ruler of a thriving kingdom somewhere near modern Delhi, is to be believed, a patron clothed in magnificence:

Janaka, Lord of Videha, once set out to perform a sacrifice at which he intended to give lavish gifts to the officiating priests. Brahmins from the Kuru and Pañcāla regions had flocked there for the occasion, and Janaka of Videha wanted to find out which of those Brahmins was the most learned in the Vedas. So he corralled a thousand cows; to the horns of each cow were tied ten pieces of gold.⁴⁴

The crucial moment in the evolution of any territorial state comes with the transfer of loyalty from a small group, united mainly by a sense of kinship, to the leader of a much larger collectivity that is able to offer a more encompassing and permanent form of protection and practical advantage. Once this occurs, the dramatisation of the shared interests of the group can no longer be enacted in a face-to-face conclave of the local *rājanya* elite at a sacrifice. It requires instead the reassurance that a relatively distant ruler has, within him, all the sanctity and all the access to divine power that the rituals surrounding the old sacrifices were supposed to mediate. In ritual terms, therefore, it became necessary to suppose that the sacred energy concentrated in the sacrifices had generated a superordinate power, lodged in the person of the exalted Kshatriya. As the *Bhradāranyaka Upanishad* felicitously expresses it, ‘In the beginning this world was only *brahman*, only one. Because it was only one, Brahman had not fully developed. [Accordingly,] It then created the ruling power, a form superior to and surpassing itself.’⁴⁵ In this new order of things, it was possible to look up to kings as being superior, even to priests:

‘Let me come to you as your pupil,’ said Gārgya. Ajātaśatru replied, ‘Isn’t it a reversal of the norm for a Brahmin to become the pupil of a Kshatriya, thinking “He will tell me the formulation of truth (*Brahman*)”?’ But I will see to it that you perceive it clearly.’⁴⁶

But was this a recipe for symbiosis or bitter rivalry?

The foregoing discussion has demonstrated how the twin concepts of Kshatriya power and Brahmanical access to divine energy became interwoven in the Indian world view. After the Vedic period, kingdoms based on the wealth and manpower of large cities emerged, and the old ways of the tribal ritual were marginalised; individuals sought to identify with an encompassing collectivity, which could be relied upon to give them protection and to which, in turn, they could fittingly offer loyalty. From that point onwards, relations between rulers and religious institutions fluctuated cyclically in accordance with various factors that will be explored in the following two chapters.

3 Orthodoxies in competition and the birth of empire

A society in flux

Many difficulties confront the historian of Vedic India, most of them arising from the limitations of the Vedic texts as sources for the *realia* of Indian life, but at least these texts identify for us a core tradition of myth and ritual, transmitted by priests, which were accepted by the society as revelations of a coherent truth.¹ The prominence of this Great Tradition, easily recognisable as ‘religious’ by virtue of its priesthood and its worship of gods, makes it easy for us to take as given the character of ‘religion’ for the purpose of studying the period.

However, in turning to the following periods of Indian history, we can no longer work with unanalysed assumptions. In the present chapter, we confront a period running, very roughly, from 500 BC to the second century AD. During this time, there was a quite marked weakening of Brahmanical Vedic orthodoxy, as a raft of variant doctrines, very different in character from Vedic Brahmanism, appeared on the scene, gained extensive followings and came to be abundantly patronised by powerful rulers.

The Protean character of the kaleidoscope of teachings and practices that inspired these new schools challenges most conventional understandings of what religion actually means. The sects that emerged were often in conflict with each other, and not all of them are easily recognisable as religious systems. Furthermore, and partly as a result of this complexity, we find that multiple and often incommensurable definitions of religion are implied in the relevant scholarly literature. Therefore, part of the business of this chapter must be with the nature of ‘religion’; and our first task will be to arrive at a pragmatic understanding of what religion meant in the context of the period under discussion.

A second preliminary caveat is that it will not be possible in the context of this one chapter to do justice to all the relevant historical developments, seminal though many of them may be. Any attempt to provide a narrative account of the history of the various kingdoms set up during this period, both by native dynasties and by successful invaders from outside, would result in the chapter being swamped by a bewildering mass of detail. Nevertheless, it will be

possible to give somewhat closer attention to one episode in the surviving political record that provides striking testimony to the changing relationship between evolving religious forms and the institutions of power: the imperial reign of the Mauryan ruler Ashoka.

In the millennium following the Vedic period, there arose a mosaic of competing kingdoms. The growing forces of urbanisation, state formation and commerce outstripped the capacity of the orthodox Vedic Brahmanism inherited with the Vedas to supply the necessary cement. New processes were called into being, and new divergent sects arose. The Brahmans remained a hereditary class, qualified for priesthood by descent, and were still, often as not, treated as indispensable intermediaries for gaining access to powerful gods, or as men of learning, worthy to serve rulers in high positions; but these were only a minority. Particularly in the north-east, they became, as a class, too numerous for all of them to seem special. This loss of status had economic consequences. Many Brahmans, unless they had land to farm or rent, were reduced to making a living as scribes, or petty officials, or even as common pedlars of amulets for healing. The Sanskrit language, the special preserve of the Brahmans and the foundation of their scholarship, was not yet as it later became, a standard language of the courts; during this time the favoured medium for diplomatic and other forms of communication in the emerging regional kingdoms was a variety of regional dialects collectively known as Prakrit.²

Rulers continued to support religion, but the shape of religious practice and belief was shifting quite drastically around them, prompting teachings that explicitly rejected everything to do with Brahmanism. Over the following centuries, indeed for the best part of a millennium, even among the descendants of the 'Aryans', the hegemonic Brahman-sponsored orthodoxy was widely questioned. Further, the rulers of the rising kingdoms and empires of the age frequently paid close attention to the new sects, extending lavish patronage to their (often anti-Brahmanical) organisations and ideas. Largely uninterested in worship or sacrifice, they advanced notions of cosmic law that paid little heed to divine action.

Meanwhile, alongside these cultural and religious changes, massive developments were taking place in the economic, social and political spheres. From the sixth century BC, the archaeological record displays an accelerating trend to urbanisation in the north-east of the subcontinent, with quite large settlements appearing in the Ganges–Yamuna area. This was made possible, scholars think, by the lift in productivity generated by the shift from pastoralism to agriculture. Perhaps the oldest of the city sites that have been located is Rajgir, which appears to have been surrounded by sizeable defensive ramparts; others identified by archaeologists as dating from about the same time, that is, the late sixth century BC, include Atranjikhera, Campa, Ujjain and Rajghat. Sites from the fifth and fourth centuries BC are still richer. They record the planting of a swathe of new towns including Sravasti, Tripuri, Vesali and – last but not least – Pataliputra.³ But the advent of big towns also suggests an

increasingly centralised control of manpower, which can only mean that there were now, in place, one or more effective political authorities. These were, of course, the kingdoms mentioned above. They arose, especially, on the lower course of the Ganges, sustained by the rising agricultural surplus. Among these kingdoms, Magadha (based initially at Rajgir and thereafter at Pataliputra) succeeded eventually in dominating the rest, and it became the home territory of India's first great historical empire.

The foundations of the Mauryan kingdom were laid by the first ruler of that name, Chandragupta, who built up a huge army and made extensive conquests, profiting from the disorder let loose by the retreat of Alexander the Great. By the end of his reign, the Mauryan state exercised dominion over at least the north central part of the subcontinent, and its power and wealth are suggested by the magnificence of the capital, Pataliputra, which is attested to by the account of the first Greek ambassador to the Mauryan court, Megasthenes. And two further iconic sources also speak to the greatness of the Mauryan polity. According to tradition, the standard Sanskrit text on government, the *Arthasāstra*, which prescribes in remarkable detail the elements its author thinks are required for the creation and management of an elaborate system of administration, was written by none other than Chandragupta's minister Kautilya. Second, Chandragupta's grandson Ashoka had inscriptions engraved on rocks and pillars at sites scattered over most of the country, embodying his religious policy in detail.

However, we need to treat these sources with caution. Particular doubts have been voiced about the authenticity of the tradition identifying the *Arthasāstra* with Kautilya;⁴ Megasthenes' account, which survives only in fragments, is not free of fanciful elements, which somewhat reduces its value; and the evidence of Ashoka's inscriptional claims also demands a carefully nuanced interpretation. Still, at its height, the Mauryan Empire can be said to represent an extraordinary – if perhaps precarious – extension of territorial dominion, albeit one probably based less upon formal bureaucratic control than upon the military edge of its armies over competitors and, later, on the mystique of its rulers.

Mauryan rulers often favoured the rash of new sects that had sprung up, partly at least in opposition to the Brahmanical orthodoxy – sects such as the Buddhists, the Jains and the Ajivikas. During the life of the dynasty they became well entrenched in society, and remained so for a long time. That said, the rulers who followed Ashoka hardly left a mark, and the Mauryan Empire itself gradually wasted away. The last emperor, who ruled over a much reduced territory, was assassinated by the Brahman general Pushyamitra Sunga, who inaugurated a minor dynasty in 185 BC.

For the next four centuries or so, the north of India was constantly destabilised by waves of foreign invaders/immigrants who intermittently poured through the Karakoram passes of the far north-west. The Yavanas (Greeks), the Shakas (Scythians), the Kushanas (who began their wanderings in China), and others of this ilk, created a series of vigorous but unstable

empires in the Gangetic plain; later, some of them extended their sway into parts of the Deccan. But, eventually, all these formations crumbled and fragmented, and their descendants melted into indigenous society as groups of local nobility. The political map of India during all these centuries thus exhibits a kaleidoscope of constantly forming and fragmenting constellations of power, some created by conquerors from the north-west, others by native Indian lineages.

Like the Mauryans, many of these immigrant dynasties extended their favour to the Buddhists. The Hellenistic ruler Menander is supposed, by tradition, to have invited the renowned Buddhist Nagasena to his court; one important Buddhist text takes the form of a dialogue between Milinda (that is, Menander) and Nagasena. Likewise, Buddhism acquired influence under the Kushana ruler Kanishka, widely believed to have come to power in AD 78 (though Kushana chronology remains subject to grave doubts), who is supposed to have convened a Buddhist Council to overhaul texts and teachings. And Buddhism also benefited from the patronage of the Deccan-based Satavahana Empire, which lasted from about 200 BC to about AD 200 and, in its earlier career, held sway over the entire southern part of the subcontinent, as far as the Krishna delta in modern-day Tamilnadu; during this period, Amaravati, the Satavahana city on the banks of the Krishna, became famous as a Buddhist centre of learning.

Apart from Jainism, which still survives, all the non-Brahmanical sects – even the most successful of them, Buddhism – were destined in the long run to retreat and decline into a patchwork of regional religious affiliations. But for centuries they were a dominant force in Indian thought and life, and even in their decline they exhibited great tenacity. Buddhism did not vanish from Indian soil until the fourteenth century, if then. Throughout the period under review, empires came and went, but the increasingly diverse religious sects and schools put down deep roots.

The taxonomy of religion in a pluralistic culture

The study of religion in South Asia teems with multiple conflicting assumptions, hermeneutical principles and methodological concepts; their variety is much too great to allow any prolonged investigation of them here. However, problems of method cannot be ignored; here we need at least to recognise some of the contrasting ways in which Indian religions can be conceptualised.

The approaches to the study of religion in India relevant to our purpose can be grouped into a number of categories, beginning with the three that have been discussed in the previous chapter.

In *Category 1*, which we have labelled the ‘Dumontian thesis’, religion is viewed as an autonomous agent determining the thought world of a civilisation and defining the boundaries of political action. Kings, here, are agents of an essentially religious system of belief, which accounts for religious

preoccupations even of rulers who supported non-Brahmanical religions. As noted above, Ashoka's code of *dhamma* involved respect for all religious figures, brahmins and wandering monks alike.

In *Category 2*, religion is an artificial category. The claim is that 'religion' per se (or, if not, at least 'Hinduism') has no essence or natural unity of its own, but is an arbitrary label for varieties of adaptive social behaviour. This line of thought distrusts the idea of an autochthonous religious tradition existing independently within the foundations of a culture.⁵ For some who hold this view of religion, the behaviour of rulers logically may be accounted for in all sorts of ways; patronage of religious groups could be simply a pragmatic tactic to attract approval from significant groups of subjects.

In *Category 3*, the standard Marxist approach, religion is an opiate concocted and administered by elites. The originators were either Brahmins wishing to use religion as an instrument to enhance their power, or *brahmanas* and *kshatriyas* in concert. On this view, political involvement in religious affairs demands to be interpreted in relation to the class interests of dominant groups seeking to maximise their influence.

In *Category 4*, religion is conceived as morality or spirituality, and therefore quite differently from the way it was conceived in Brahmanical teachings and public sacrificial practices. 'Spirit' here is considered to be something real and quite distinct from physical processes.⁶ Spirituality can be identified for instance in the beliefs characterising *bhakti*, or devotional religion, which hypostatise the relationship between the worshipper and the worshipped.

In *Category 5*, too, religion is seen as spirituality, but (in stark contrast to the view discussed just above) is considered to be for that very reason divorced from the characters both of Brahmanical teachings and of royal ritual, since 'spirituality' was absent from the *raison d'être* of both Brahman and *Kshatriya*. Brahman texts were not spiritual because they amounted purely to a form of technology based on the Vedas; and the institution of kingship was not religious either because it was a 'superstitious mechanism' originating from rituals associated with local chthonic gods.⁷ Derrett's excellent work deserves more detailed attention than can be afforded here, but, safe to say, it points to specific cases where royal power appears likely to have been quite capable of overriding the opposition of religious institutions.

In *Category 6*, religion is *dharma*.⁸ An 'emic' method of study requires the use of indigenous categories. *Dharma* is a fundamental principle of Indian thought and one that has evolved through many meanings: the principle of cosmic creation; a prop between heaven and earth put in place by a divine cosmogonic power; the impersonal order of the cosmos; the principle of harmony and stability; obligatory ritual; the ethical code that governs a person's station in life; truth; true doctrine; moral law; law; righteousness; Buddhism; and, finally, in a technical Buddhist philosophical sense, the fundamental forces or elements that build the universe.⁹ This understanding of religion in India is perfectly compatible with the Dumontian thesis (*Category 1*): since many

Brahmanic texts contain sections on *rajadharmā*, or the duty required of kings, kingship is, on this view, at least theoretically legitimised by religious principles.

In *Category 7*, religion is law: in the body of texts called the *Dharmaśāstras* is an enormous body of legal prescriptions, relating to the definition of criminal offences, and the penalties to be imposed upon conviction of them, civil obligations, trial procedures, and so forth. While we are not sure that they took precedence over royal edicts or local custom, they carried great prestige. Even the colonial British Raj saw fit to sanction their use as a supplementary body of authority. Yet these nominally legal texts are, at the same time, religious texts. The ‘law’ they prescribe tends to sanctify custom (*ācāra*) and local tradition, which can shade into religion (see the following category).

In *Category 8*, religion is local custom, a matter of local myths and rites; popular religious beliefs shaped the justifications for customs and traditions. Local customs can be identified as one pole, the demands of a centralised secular state as the other. The most notable exponent of this view is probably Ashis Nandy.¹⁰

In *Category 9*, religion is defined as ‘irrational’ belief. According to this view, we might use the term ‘religion’ as a label for all customs and beliefs regarded as ‘irrational’, in order to contrast them with a scientific and ‘rational’ world view. Thus the *Arthaśāstra* might be judged to be rational and practical and, therefore, by definition, not religious.¹¹ Such an interpretation accords with the view that rulers had an overwhelmingly practical, and even instrumental, approach to religion, which was seen as a convenient set of levers for the manipulation of their subjects.

In *Category 10*, religion is equated with the quest for salvation. Such an approach necessarily shifts the focus to *moksha* – release from *karma* and from rebirth. Buddhism and Jainism are two bodies of early salvation-centred teachings. Brahmanical orthodoxy also incorporated *moksha*; however, Buddhism and Jainism stress impersonal forces, not divine agency, as the former does.

In *Category 11*, religion is code for social morality. In the study of *Indian* religion this definition is not a complicating issue, but it is quite important as an issue in the study of religion generally (very relevant, for example, to the question of whether Confucianism is a religion); and it certainly deserves to be kept in mind when we take up the similarly vexed issue of Ashoka’s code of *dharma*.

Lastly, in *Category 12*, religion is the worship of one or several gods. Interestingly, this sort of definition is the one most likely to be found in a small dictionary of English, but is least likely to be useful in a study of India, most of whose religious teachings fall lavishly outside its parameters. Religion as worship (whether ritualistic or devotional) is strong, but not invariably dominant, in earlier and later forms of Brahmanism; other sects (notably Jainism and Buddhism) in their earlier, or perhaps more accurately their

clerical or scholarly forms, commonly denied the value of worship as such; nevertheless, later on, in its Mahayana form, Buddhism gravitated towards a sort of de facto theism.

This listing of ways of understanding religion in ancient India serves the purpose of demonstrating the insidious complexity of the subject. Where the field of study is a kaleidoscope, we must recognise the danger of imposing arbitrary patterns upon it in the service of tendentious interpretations. Still, the original question remains: if religions are real things, what are they, at any rate within Indian culture?

We would like to begin by proposing that, alongside 'religion', it is appropriate to distinguish *cosmology* as an associated category. Most of us want to believe that our lives have meaning and purpose, preferably within some sort of grand scheme. A cosmology is such a scheme. It helps people to make sense of their strongest feelings, and justifies their self-sacrifices.

A religion is not a cosmology; nevertheless, religious systems commonly seek to anchor their doctrines in some such philosophical scheme, often one already embedded in the culture of the society. Thereafter, the religion may become more or less identified with the cosmology; it may refine its details or even reinterpret it; it may shed it in the course of migrating to a different culture in favour of local cosmological beliefs; or it may carry an existing set of cosmological beliefs with it to the new culture (as Indian cosmological ideas travelled with Buddhism to China and elsewhere). Indeed, it is possible for religion and cosmology to fuse. But, of the two, cosmology tends to be more rooted in the cultural soil and less changeable.

A religion should look like a system of belief and practice shared by a community whose members believe that life is profoundly influenced, if not ultimately governed, by energies that originate from an invisible realm and produce effects that directly go to the gratification (or thwarting) of human desires and interests. Such a system draws upon a cosmological scheme to describe the relationship between the worldly and the invisible realms, accepting that normally there is a barrier between the two not readily breached by human initiative, but that by the adoption of special means (ritual, prayer, devotion, meditation, access to esoteric knowledge, steadfastly moral behaviour, or whatever else might be involved) a breakthrough from the worldly to the transcendent may be achieved and direct two-way contact established between the human and transcendent realms. A religious community elaborates its cosmological beliefs, making them explicit, and trains its members in ways of contacting the transcendental plane. Political leaders are expected to share the cosmological beliefs of the society. Kings in ancient India had the wealth to sponsor sacrifices and other enabling rituals, and the power (*daṇḍa*) to punish immorality and reward virtue. Sacrifices, rituals and morality all figure abundantly in the technology of communication between the sacred and the profane. It came to be widely accepted that it was part of the king's *dharma* to protect and promote this technology.

With this in mind, we can now move on to our next task: to fit into Indian history the most prominent feature of the period covered by this chapter, namely the rise of non-Brahmanical sects of wandering monks, the *śramaṇas*, who not only deliberately rejected the Vedic worship of gods, but challenged the entire framework of Brahmanic orthodoxy by introducing their audiences to a universe of impersonal forces through the lens of an austere nihilistic-looking eschatology.

Śramaṇas

Around about the sixth century BC, a new type of religious movement became conspicuous, centred on the teachings of wandering monks wedded to poverty, who lived on alms as they walked from place to place. Their teachings were diverse, but they all rejected both the sanctity of the Vedas and the Brahmans' hereditary claim that they were needed to mediate contact with the invisible world.

They also subscribed, by and large, to the principle known as *karma*, the principle that human actions produce results that determine the quality of the future – results that do not just happen naturally, through the operation of physical laws, but through direct action upon the moral and psychological character of the subject's subsequent experience, either later in life or in a subsequent rebirth. In other words, it was coming to be believed, axiomatically, that people transmigrate through countless successive lives (whether in human form or some other), that good actions produce good results such as good fortune or rebirth in a more favourable condition of life, and that bad actions produce bad results, similarly.

The term for this concept, 'karma', is now virtually an English word and we propose to follow this conventional usage. Note, however, that the parent Sanskrit word *karman* literally means 'work' – in religious contexts commonly 'practice', 'ritual action' or 'observance'. The extension of this meaning that developed in association with the belief in transmigration was that the effects in our lives of sacred or invisible energies are not confined to those of our action, or 'work', performed in a specifically religious context (such as sacrifice, ritual or prayer); *any* action is liable to result in a necessary consequence, good or bad, for the subject.

It has been abundantly debated whether these influential ideas, which first became explicit in Brahmanical texts only with the post-Vedic Upanishads, originally grew out of the Brahmanical tradition itself on the basis of Vedic precedents (which we might call the orthogenetic interpretation) or came from somewhere else, such as the folk beliefs of non-Aryan populations incorporated within the fold of Aryan civilisation as it spread. These opposed theories both tend to hypostasise a culture's ideas and practices as rigid essences or structures that must be *either* home-grown *or* introduced; but there is a further option, namely the possibility that changing social and economic circumstances

somehow caused local people to find such beliefs acceptable and attractive independently of the nature of their cultural transmission.

Here, it can only be said that the issue is unresolved. While it is true that the Vedas contain various references to possible *post mortem* destinies in an underworld presided over by Yama, the god of death, or in the company of various other deities or ancestors, such references do not demonstrate any well-formulated theory of regular transmigration governed by karma; they display a state of ideas that could alternatively lead on to such a theory, or not. But by the time of the early Upanishads, perhaps between the eighth and sixth centuries BC, karma theory appears to have been taking definite shape both within, and outside, Brahmanical thought.¹²

Approximately at this time or only slightly later, the wandering monks, *śramaṇas*, began to flourish. Among these, the Jain and Buddhist monks both developed their own particular, and contrasting, theories of karma. For the Jains, karma denoted not so much a law of consequences as a quasi-physical commodity engendered by human action, a sort of deposit that clung invisibly to a person and subsequently worked its effects, dragging the subject down to wallow among the troubles and dangers of the cycle of rebirths.¹³ Buddhists were mocked by other schools when they claimed, on the contrary, that what produced the later consequence was not concrete action as such, but the moral quality of the mind that produced it; only if there was a blameworthy psychological state behind the action would a bad result follow.

This concern with morality was perfectly consistent with the Buddhists' readiness to hold people responsible for their own misfortunes, even in cases where (from a modern perspective) such misfortunes were categorically not their own fault. Whatever a person experienced in life, said the Buddhists, was ultimately the result of his or her own karma, even though the responsible actions might have taken place in a previous lifetime. Indeed, this was so much of an iron law that (at any rate in some of the earlier formulations of the doctrine) almost no exemption was permitted, even in cases where victims were placed in desperate straits.¹⁴ Thus bad karma had to be reckoned responsible for the misfortunes of people who found themselves in lowly or despised positions, or were regarded as inferior types, or who lived on the edges of civilised society.¹⁵ As in so many matters, though, the passage of time wrought compromises, and in various ways many in the Buddhist schools (especially after the rise of Mahayana) adjusted their interpretation of karma to allow for the transference of merit, so that a person's bad karma might be mitigated by something other than his or her own efforts. Brahmanism's funerary rituals, involving the making of *śrāddha* offerings to pious ancestors, to ease the passage of the deceased towards the next life, thus contradicted strict karma theory. The Jains, on the other hand, remained steadfast in refusing to countenance this sort of convenient merit-transfer mechanism, which may be one reason why their religion never attained a mass following.

To be sure, the founding fathers among the main *śramaṇa* schools were not primarily concerned with good and bad karma – for them, and for their most sincere disciples, the goal of the religious life, their pursuit of self-discipline and meditation, was not to cultivate good karma but *to eradicate it altogether*, in order that they should not be reborn into the doleful round of limited, insecure, often painful and generally deluded existence in the finite world, but rather be released into that nameless blissful state that is beyond all states. However, although the original teachings of the wandering monks were directed to this ultimate salvation, the doctrine of karma nevertheless grew deep roots in Indian cosmology, and potential patrons of the monks (such as ministers, merchants and, not least, kings) were likely to be a receptive audience for sermons on this theme. It is, therefore, natural to ask: in what ways, given the widespread currency of belief in karma, did religious ideas influence government?

As is quite understandable, historians have often been disposed to emphasise the role of bad karma. For example, Romila Thapar avers that the teaching of karma served to reconcile people to their lot in life; however much the subaltern class may have laboured under oppression, the teaching that it was all merited (as a result of past bad karma) had the effect of discouraging dissent and unrest and encouraging the acceptance of political authority.¹⁶

This interpretation may well identify a way in which people sometimes thought. As we noticed above, though, it is incomplete as an explanation of the readiness of any population to accept harsh authority. Subjects would not accept oppressive rule simply as a result of being told, by the authorities, that their suffering was the result of bad karma. They might then be understandably angry. But they *might* be moved to resign themselves to an unhappy condition if they *already* believed that all their misfortunes arose from bad karma; and this depressing truth would have been easier to internalise if it was mediated by a cosmological scheme that made sense of unpredicted misfortune by relating it to an ultimately just and rewarding universal order.

As for *rulers* and *officials*, they, like their subjects, could interpret cosmological principles as they chose; they could regard karma either as a blanket of quietism, sapping the peoples' will to action, or as a spur to initiative and endeavour. Nonetheless, it appears that rulers of the late first millennium BC were more commonly inspired by the hope of good karma – pre-eminently such as would lead to rebirth in heaven. This was one reason they gave strong support to the *śramaṇas*, by providing them, for example, with lodging places for the rainy season, feasts for groups of visiting monks, ceremonial gifts of cloth for their robes each year, and audiences at which their advice on matters of state would be solicited, thereby turning them (albeit willy-nilly) into establishment figures. For those who took the theory of karma seriously, any meritorious action held the potential to sow the seeds of future blessings.¹⁷

The karma doctrine is not the whole story, though. The monks did not become the recipients of royal favour just because their teachings included karma (in fact, to confuse the picture, their highest and most arcane doctrines

emphasised something quite different – salvation – which involved the *eradication* of karma). But, before we pursue the question of why so many nascent Indian states embraced the *śramaṇas* and their karma teachings, we need to explain how and why the monks became important. We shall concentrate here on those who professed Buddhism – not because they were unique, as all the new sects had a monastic aspect, but because, as indicated above, Buddhism generated a large body of scripture that constitutes one of the best sources for this period.

Views about the conditions in which Buddhism made its appeal generally favour one of two contradictory theses.¹⁸ The first is that the monks' teachings happened to be of just the sort that would appeal to the rulers and officials of the new centralised states of the Ganges Valley. The learned Brahmins, though still prized as advisers, were disposed by their training to favour the old particularistic culture, replete with its heavily ritualised and exclusive style of religion; they stood for values unsuited to the administrative needs of a state apparatus that was responsible for revenue collection and security across a large territory thronged with agricultural villages. Many in the rural populations inhabiting this territory were new to the experience of being dominated by an urban society with an 'Aryan' upper crust, and Brahmin ways were totally foreign to them. Something like Buddhism, with its universal values, was likely to attract them.

The thesis that Buddhism by its nature admirably served the interests of the rising monarchical state has been argued for in various ways. As noticed earlier, Romila Thapar argues that Buddhism's endorsement of the doctrine of karma helped to reconcile people to their lot, and thus made them easier to control. Others have argued, rather similarly, that Buddhism, in contrast to Brahminic values, was a more appropriate ideology for the administration of civil society because it offered scientific values and practical codes of behaviour,¹⁹ or because its rejection of Vedic and Brahminic authority made it a natural ally of the Kshatriya aristocracy, which had long been in competition with the Brahmins for socio-economic control over the countryside,²⁰ or because the nobility may have been willing to cooperate with the orders of monks in the management of relations with local populations in the larger interest of the state,²¹ or because the Buddhist *sangha* possibly saw its interest as lying in tactical cooperation with the state, and thereby gaining access to endowments from rulers and other powerful patrons.²² On the surface all these theories are quite convincing. They go to show that, from several perspectives, the Buddhists can be seen as natural allies of the emerging monarchical states of this period, many of them still fairly insecure.

On the other hand, curiously, others find it just as natural to attribute Buddhism's appeal to its aptness as a voice of protest against the harsh and impersonal domination of the (increasingly) leviathan Indian state. This interpretation precisely contradicts the first in seeking to account for the same phenomenon: the rise of Buddhism.

Scholars favouring this second line of argument emphasise Buddhism's rejection of arbitrary authority; Brahmans, the Buddhists taught, are fallible humans, deserving of no special reverence; in the end, we should trust not the learning of priests, but whatever answers to our questions actually work in practice. According to the canonical *suttas*, the Buddha advised:

Do not believe in anything merely on the authority of your teachers and elders. Do not believe in traditions [simply] because they have been handed down for many generations. But after observation and analysis, when you find that anything agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it.²³

Buddhism's no-nonsense dismissal of Brahmanical mystique and the emphasis it placed on self-reliance are attributes that most likely would have appealed to people who found themselves oppressed and cramped by the constrictions of authority.

For one thing, Buddhism could articulate the grievances of a noble class becoming marginalised by the king's centralisation of power.²⁴ It could similarly serve as a vehicle for the distress of people reeling from excessive taxation or other demands.²⁵ Victims of the corruption and injustice endemic in royal government at this time could find in the Buddhist message both validation of dissidence and spiritual solace.²⁶ Further, it could be argued that the citizens of these emerging states found the ideal of non-violence towards all living creatures, *ahiṃsā* (a principle that was strong in Buddhism and even more so in Jainism), an attractive sort of morality in contrast to the royal state's taste for a philosophy of coercion, force being seen as the most cost-efficient way of keeping the multitudes in line.²⁷ What is more, kings were forever waging wars, and doubtless their subjects often suffered as a result. One can understand how people cast down by the power-plays of the rich and great might have been drawn to teaching that predicated sorrow as a fundamental condition of human existence.²⁸ So, it has been argued, the hardships of plebeian life under pushy kings made it natural for people to turn for comfort to a religious teaching that not only agreed with their experience, but gave them some reassurance of a better life after death, if not before. 'In this environment', remarks Warder, 'Buddhism, and to a lesser extent Jainism, reflect[ed] the desire to . . . evade or soften autocratic government.'²⁹

It would thus appear that Buddhism appealed to those who ran the governments of the assertive kingdoms of the eastern Gangetic region because it neatly articulated their world view, legitimated their political authority and provided a theoretical framework for the administration of a multicultural state. *At the same time*, it appealed to people who had suffered from the activities of these very same governments.

In fact, both sets of arguments are, in particular ways, simultaneously true. By the same token, both have weaknesses that need to be exposed.

On the one hand, Buddhism, it can be argued, offered cogent reasons for adopting the notably austere and rigorous way of life of a wandering monk, yet what appeal could such a life have for kings bent on conquest (or for the members of their bureaucracies)?

On the other hand, quite the opposite argument requires us to suppose that recruits for the monkhood fled the cities for the monasteries because they were substantially more oppressed and unhappy than their Vedic tribal ancestors had been. But evidence for that assertion is lacking. So far as we can judge, life was not getting worse in the kingdoms of the Ganges valley.

Nevertheless, both of these opposite arguments contain elements of truth. To see how they can be made to fit, we need to start with some basic facts about the wandering holy men. First, they were ascetics. Asceticism, of varying degrees of rigorousness, was then, and has ever since remained, a type of religious vocation in India; its reputation was and is ambivalent, but the dedication of ascetics has generally been respected as a route to spiritual advance. The Jains were especially rigorous, seeing self-mortification as a direct means to get rid of karma; the other early grouping of ascetics, the Ajivakas, was rather less given to self-mortification, and the Buddhists again still less so, but all ate only what they needed, and only alms given by others, were (according to the rules) strictly celibate and spent much of their time on the move, 'roughing it'.

This rugged form of life was inspired by a cosmological vision that required a sort of social self-erasure. All their practices symbolised this. By eating leftovers they caused no food to be specially cultivated or slaughtered; by sleeping under trees they caused no solid permanent dwellings to be built; by making robes of rags rudely stitched together they caused no cloth to be woven specially for them (though this soon became a symbolic ideal, not common practice). Early Buddhism, in short, celebrated the ideal of the 'four *nissayas*' (resources): living 'under a tree' and living only on scraps, on what could be recycled from rubbish heaps, and on what was produced by their own bodies. Although these practices were soon enough compromised in practice, they offered a clear symbol: the monks were not truly 'there'; they trod a metaphorical path that led, beyond life in the world, to salvation (for, at its most extreme, the spiritual quest involved leaving karma itself behind – and not being reborn). Headed down this path of spiritual cultivation, the monks immersed themselves in quiet meditation interspersed by rigorous exercises designed to get rid of attachment to worldly objects; just as the Jaina sought to rub away his karma so that there would be no more rebirth for him, the *bhikkhu* tried to crush, at source, every impulse to hanker after the things of the mundane world, and physical removal from sources of temptation was part of this. Thus: 'Happy is the avoidance of harm, restraining oneself from [doing injury to] living creatures in the world. Happy is freedom from passion, passing beyond the world of desire.'³⁰

And this was more easily achieved in remote and secluded places – never entirely out of range of habited areas where alms could be obtained – but

certainly quiet and still: ‘The Blessed One favours lodging in the remote wilderness among woods and forests, where there is scarcely a sound, scarcely a noise, pervaded by loneliness, utterly secluded and suitable for solitary meditation.’³¹

All the features of wandering monkish life so far reviewed enhanced the monks’ image of mysterious power. Monks who disappeared into the surrounding dark forest, or emerged from it, could be presumed to be in communion with invisible sources of occult energy; and surely that was how the villagers would have seen an ascetic practice such as *tapas* (literally, ‘heat’); to the uninitiated they would have looked like ways of accessing super-powers. True, the core teachings from which the monks drew their inspiration were quite different from local folk beliefs, but part of the monks’ appeal to the wider population lay in their ability to feed upon the sensibilities of rural villagers brought up in animistic oral traditions.

Yet, reclusive wandering was just one pole of the monkish life. *Śramaṇas* became well known in society. Processions of monks, with their trademark alms bowls, became over time familiar to everybody. Moreover, wherever there was an audience, the monks would take time to teach people about the *dhamma*. Often, too, they would linger a while, especially during the rainy season when travel was difficult, taking advantage of the free accommodation available to them in the towns in the homes of Buddhist sympathisers. There was thus plenty of opportunity for the laity to meet monks and listen to what they had to say. And we must remember, too, that in areas remote from administrative centres, or in thinly populated hilly areas, the people they encountered tended to belong to isolated communities, which in some cases would have had no knowledge of any Sanskrit-related language and would have been totally baffled by the whole vocabulary of the mainly city-centred ‘Aryan’ lore and civilisation.

This is precisely the point at which we can recognise the nature of the role played by the *śramaṇas* in the provinces of the expanding states of the late first millennium BC. It was basically a transitional role. As the centuries passed, metropolitan civilisation in India became cosmopolitan; eventually, as populations increased and spread, local communities became more familiar with each other through trade, conquest, migration, diplomacy and fortune-hunting. Presently, the Brahmans and their lore – for all its highly culture-specific nature – came to be well known almost everywhere. Yet, before this could happen, during the transitional period during which urban-based Sanskrit culture galloped out from the thriving cities into a hinterland populated mostly by unknown alien communities, and before cultural homogenisation and consolidation brought them all into its social net, the wandering monks were by far the best-equipped members of society to act as mediators between the metropolitan and local cultures. This was their heyday.

Bear in mind also, in this context, that villagers would have been, at least initially, at a serious disadvantage when it came to dealing with the representatives of city life who came their way: officials with orders to extract levies

on agricultural produce or to recruit soldiers; entrepreneurs eager to ransack the environment for lumber and metals or peddle strange and exotic goods; rogues intent on cheating and robbing; men, in short, not exactly overflowing with benevolent feelings and intentions, and wholly indifferent to the effect they were having on local structures of custom and organisation. How was this bleak new order to be resisted? How was it to be borne? The villagers realised they needed help.

The *śramaṇas* were as if heaven-sent to sympathetically interpret the metropolitan culture to the locals and provide them with disinterested advice. Some (like the Buddha) had social confidence and status back in the towns, and could deal successfully with the official representatives of the state on their behalf. (Even today, a like process continues in some Asian Buddhist countries, and is well documented.³²) Furthermore, monks had credibility; they were understood to have explicitly distanced themselves from the vested interests associated with the state; and they advertised this anonymity and detachment by their speech, their deportment, their clothing, their diet and by their habit of periodically disappearing into the wilderness. They were relaxed and approachable. They even made the locals feel better about themselves by becoming dependent upon them for food!

In brief, during the period of transition – while outlying communities were being painfully drawn into the ambit of the city-based kingdoms and compelled by this process to make sense of a suddenly fractured social world, and redefine their identities – it was the wandering monks, figures of trust, who assisted in their adjustment. And they did this especially by supplying a consistent religious teaching – one, importantly, not rooted in a highly particularistic tradition opaque to those not brought up in it. Through this teaching they supplied a clear and simple set of behavioural principles that gave even marginalised people an opportunity to identify a secure place for themselves in the order of things, and to take a measure of control over their lives.

It is essential, then, to recognise that this involvement of the wandering monks in local society, however profoundly important it may have been for the subsequent career of Buddhism, nevertheless, paradoxically, was not something that the monks themselves (those at least serious in their dedication to the authentic teaching) had set out to achieve; it was only reluctantly, at first, and in the guise of duty, that they exchanged teaching of the *dhamma* for the necessities of life that local people could provide. Yet because the monkish lifestyle was awe-inspiring and they needed the monks to help them with advice and mediation in their dealings with authority, local communities entreated and intrigued to keep them from wandering off. More especially, they tried to turn them into something approaching parish priests, by persuading them to attend local ritual occasions. Doubtless, the monks varied greatly in their response to these pressures according to temperament. But, if some stoutly resisted the pull of common humanity, others gave in to it, probably, if recent analogies from mainland Southeast Asia are any guide,³³ a large minority.

It remains now to explore what this meant for the involvement of Buddhism with the royal governments. The first thing that needs to be emphasised here is that, although *śramaṇas* craved quiet places in which to meditate, their wanderings led them constantly back and forth between the wilderness and the settled areas, large cities as well as remote hamlets. They were almost as frequently seen in the public spaces of Rajagrha or Sravasti as in the rude streets of the rural villages, or among goatherds on lonely hillsides, and one reason for this was that the nature of the *dhamma* that they taught, and their success in teaching it to the non-Aryan subjects of the kingdom, made them important to the state's purposes. From the point of view of the ruler of a multicultural kingdom – even a ruler of recognised Aryan purity – the Brahman custodians of the old Vedic traditions were not really his best allies when it came to cultivating the allegiance of all the diverse groups in the kingdom. What was wanted in this respect was not a spirit of exclusive and inward-looking antique 'ritualism' (as outsiders might see it) that was difficult to learn about and directed to the worship of obscure gods, but something that could reach out to all tribes and races. So, as sovereign, the ruler experienced a conflict of interests. On the one hand, he owed inherited loyalty to the standards and values represented by the court Brahmans. On the other hand, he owed it to himself and his dynasty to protect and nurture the regime by insuring it against internal conflicts and splits. Duty clashed with expediency. As Paul Mus notes, in respect of the initial expansion of the Vedic tribes:

When a Vedic chief came to settle for the first time inside a strictly 'Indian' territory, and one in which he certainly had around him more local subjects than kin, in the long run he had to come to terms with all of them. It was in his person, as it was under his power, that the two races began to constitute a single people, both recognizing him as their king. Now it happened to be precisely the case that in his person the two beliefs could unite, and the two images of royalty could overlap fairly neatly, although with two distinct backgrounds.³⁴

To be successful in this regard, a ruler needed the support of men of influence and high reputation who could make cultural bonds between his metropolitan capital and the still-to-be assimilated minority cultures in the countryside. Ideally, such men would have the capacity to impart, to these unruly populations, a set of universal values, values that could make sense to any people, from any culture. Such, certainly, was the Buddhist *dhamma*. The stories it comported were scrupulously composed to appeal to basic common sense; they were without theological presuppositions or cryptic allusions to the particular myths and practices of a restricted group. Their message was positive, reassuring and inclusive. This was precisely the sort of inclusive programme that would allow a monarchical state to reach out to its subjects in the absence of a common culture and language.

The needs of the expanding Indian state and the proselytising aims of the itinerant *śramaṇas* were not, of course, identical. But, from the government's point of view, the fit was ideal. Accordingly, officials did everything they could to make the monks, some of them, as we observed earlier, by origin cultivated and cosmopolitan men (like the Buddha himself), welcome at court. To be sure, specific evidence of rulers consulting *śramaṇas* is patchy; but the notion is given some prominence in the Buddhist canon, which includes stories of the Buddha being sought out and asked for advice by the kings of Magadha and Koshala, the two kingdoms that he is said to have visited most frequently. Again, some of his senior disciples are reported to have been consulted occasionally by rulers or their councillors. While the stories in which these meetings figure are sometimes disturbingly embellished in fanciful ways, historical evidence from later times, that Indian rulers were keenly interested in Buddhist teaching and Buddhist organisation, lends them credibility. Accordingly, it is reasonable to infer that rulers in the early stages of Buddhism's rise also took a practical interest in the *dhamma* as a partner in the state-building project.

Empire and the religious policies of Ashoka

The rise of the *śramaṇas*, then, began with a movement towards reclusiveness and asceticism, yet the very success achieved by the ascetics made them politically valuable. States could see their potential. Monks found themselves incorporated, as paradigms of morality and respectability, within the state-sanctioned social order. This process of royal co-option is portrayed with striking vividness in the inscriptions of Ashoka (whose reign is usually dated c.269–232 BC), the third ruler of the Mauryan dynasty, which are not just the earliest surviving pieces of Indian epigraphic evidence, but a strikingly personal record of aspiration, charting the ambitions of a monarch painfully anxious to realise on earth his vision of ideal rule.

The inscriptions consist of proclamations duplicated at different sites throughout the empire. They are scattered over most of the subcontinent, except the extreme south. They contain messages that the emperor wished to communicate to his officials and subjects everywhere, and for the most part they fall into a series of numbered rock edicts and a set of pillar edicts engraved on great stone columns.³⁵ With a few exceptions, they are all in the Prakrit language, but there are regional variations of dialect, and some minor variations arising from the vagaries of their transmission from emperor to local scribe.³⁶ In Afghanistan, a few Ashokan inscriptions in Greek and Aramaic have been found.

Beyond the inscriptions independent corroboration is scarce, though Pali Buddhist texts offer stories of debated authenticity; for example, they tell of Ashoka's early career, claiming that he first patronised both Buddhism and Jainism but came to identify himself as a follower of Buddhist teaching

through the influence of a young monk, Nyagrodha. Ananda W.P. Guruge has attempted to harmonise the somewhat ill-matching data of Pali texts and Ashokan inscriptions.³⁷

So it is on the inscriptions that we must primarily rely; but they contain abundant evidence on our topic, couched in language that speaks to us directly across the ages with evident candour.³⁸ Let us begin with Pillar Edict 6. Here, Ashoka tells us that after twelve years of his reign he began the practice of promulgating inscriptions about the *dhamma*, his code of moral behaviour, ‘for the welfare and happiness of the world’.³⁹

This concept of *dhamma* is central to Ashoka’s religious governance. He appears to have been completely dedicated to a program of *dhammavijaya*, conquest by *dhamma*, in contrast to the style of military conquest traditionally pursued by rulers in search of fame. For him, the only sort of merit truly worth striving for was the merit that would produce rewards in the next world as well as this world; his attachment to such values can be seen as a lifelong quest to atone for the horrors of war that he experienced early in his reign when his army successfully conquered Kalinga in the east:

The country of the Kālingas was conquered by king Priyadarshi [‘beloved of the gods’, regnal name adopted by Ashoka], eight years after his coronation. In this war in Kalinga, men and animals numbering one hundred and fifty thousand were deported thence, as many as one hundred thousand were killed there, and many times that number died. After that, now that the country of the Kālingas has been taken, the Beloved of the Gods has been devoted to the study of *dhamma*, the love of *dhamma*, and the instruction of people in *dhamma*. This is due to the repentance of the Beloved of the Gods on having conquered the country of the Kālingas.⁴⁰

The Kalinga War marked a watershed; afterwards Ashoka’s career took a new turn. The whole tenor of the subsequent proclamations speaks of a resolution, by the king, to tread a new path – guided by the principles of morality, harmony and peace. It is interesting, though, that the edict recording this forthright profession of remorse is omitted from the two sets of rock edicts actually situated in the region of Kalinga – at Dhauli and Jaugada. Scholars have discussed this, sometimes supposing that the war referred to may be a fiction, or (more plausibly) that, if he had not in fact conquered more than the coastal strip of Kalinga territory, there would have been sensitive diplomatic considerations.⁴¹

What did *dhamma* portend for Ashoka? It is the Prakrit equivalent of the Sanskrit *dharma*, carrying the same heavy luggage of multiple connotations. In Buddhist usage it denotes the teaching, or ‘law’, of Buddhism itself, one of the ‘three jewels’ of the religion along with the Buddha and the *sangha* (the Buddhist order of monks). It is not surprising that, as a Buddhist, Ashoka refers in some of his inscriptions to the Buddhist teaching as the *dhamma*.⁴² Elsewhere, though, Ashoka construes the term more broadly. A consistent

theme in the inscriptions is that people should live in harmony and respect one another. Rock Edict 12, addressed to the members of the various sects and groups, urges them to practise *dhamma* by restraint in speech, especially by moderation in praise of their own sect and criticism of others.⁴³ It would be incorrect to identify Ashoka's *dhamma* exclusively with Buddhism, especially since the *śramaṇas* and the Brahmans are frequently twinned in the inscriptions as estimable groups of people worthy of equal respect.

Rock Edict 11 is typical of the corpus. It says that *dhamma* is constituted by good behaviour towards slaves and servants, obedience to parents, and generosity to friends, relatives, Brahmans and *śramaṇas*, and the avoidance of killing. Through the observance of *dhamma*, 'happiness may be attained in this world, and in the next world by the gift of *dhamma* there is merit without end'.⁴⁴ Significantly, in the inscriptions written in Greek or Aramaic, *dhamma* is represented by the Greek *eusebeia*, 'piety', and the Aramaic *qsyt*, 'truth'. And a Greek inscription from Kandahar infers that part of *dhamma* was devotion to the ruler.⁴⁵ These themes are pervasive throughout the inscriptions, demonstrating that Ashoka was preoccupied by the task of broadcasting throughout his vast dominions the principles of a code of moral behaviour, to be supervised by the ruler, which he believed capable of leading the pious to heaven. By the same token, however, the Ashokan vision is hostile towards petty ritual observances, although such practices must have been pervasive everywhere. Rock Edict 9, for instance, refers dismissively to the ceremonies performed on occasions such as illness, marriages, births and journeys: 'Women especially perform various ceremonies of this sort, which are trivial and meaningless. If such ceremonies must be performed, they do not have much effect.'⁴⁶

Ashoka's vision of *dhamma* must, therefore, be distinguished both from the ritual practices favoured by local cults and from the virtuoso asceticism of the *śramaṇa* orders. It was essentially a code of social morality linked to the virtue of the ruler and to popular notions of karmic merit leading to heaven (*svarga*). The concept of heaven is frequently mentioned, whereas more esoteric Buddhist notions such as *nirvāṇa* are not. The *dhamma* was therefore not so much a sectarian doctrine, as a universal message designed to appeal to all subjects. A ruler who sought to unify beneath his sceptre not only the inheritors of the old 'Aryan' cultural traditions, but also a whole range of tribals and aliens, needed to appeal to religious values of the maximum abstraction and universality.

Yet, although he offered support to several sects, Ashoka evidently found Buddhism, with its promise of comfort for suffering humanity, especially congenial. The first of the series of Minor Rock Edicts says that, at the time of the inscription, he had been a lay follower of the Buddha's teachings for two and a half years, and that for over a year he had been 'intimately associated' with the monks (*sangha upayīte*) of the Brahmagiri and Siddapura monasteries.⁴⁷ Other inscriptions have him enshrining Buddha relics, visiting Rummīndei, the reputed site of the Buddha's birth, and other sites associated

with the life of the Buddha,⁴⁸ and sponsoring major construction and maintenance works.⁴⁹ Traditions current in later centuries attribute to him the building of 84,000 Buddhist *stūpas*, with the Buddha's authentic relics redistributed in repositories across his empire.

In some edicts, he directly addresses the Buddhist order, apparently as patron and overlord.⁵⁰ In Minor Rock Edict 3, the famous 'Bairat-Calcutta' inscription, the king sees fit to declare to the monks what texts they should particularly study, giving a list of seven that have been matched with passages from the extant Buddhist canon, belonging to the class of texts on discipline, the *Vinaya*, suggesting perhaps an assumption of authority *ex officio* over religious institutions; in particular, the last line of the Edict, 'This is written so that they [the monks and lay followers] shall know my intention (*abhipreta*)', has been seen as a warning to the Buddhist order that it should fall in line with the ruler's creed.⁵¹ This evidence flies in the face of the Dumontian notion that the political function in India was traditionally subordinated to the authority of organised religion. To the extent that he could, Ashoka was willing and ready to manipulate religious institutions.

But this does not make him a dictator or anything like one. In the famous 'Schism Edict' found in inscriptions at Kausambi, Sanchi and Sarnath, Ashoka warns that whoever provokes schism in the *sangha* must wear white (like a layman) and live outside monastic accommodation.⁵² (An additional section in the Sarnath version has appeared to many translators to say that lay appointees should attend ceremonial meetings of the monks, the fortnightly *uposatha* vigil, to monitor their compliance.) Such edicts have often given the impression that Ashoka was trying to gain control over the internal affairs of the Buddhist order as a whole. But Heinz Bechert has argued convincingly that, in addressing himself to 'the *sangha*', the ruler was using the term in its specific early meaning to denote just a local Buddhist community, typically a small group of monks who came together for the formal ceremonies that expressed their unity.⁵³ In the area of the imperial capital, it appears that Ashoka had been much exercised over the disunity of the local *sangha*; if so, his efforts to regularise its affairs can be seen as an attempt to reinforce the existing disciplinary code governing the procedures for the formation of monastic groups.

It might seem, too, from the passage in the Sarnath version of the inscription that, in sending officers to supervise the conduct of the *uposatha*, Ashoka was asserting control over religious functions. However, the words used, much discussed by scholars, may well mean much less than the clumsy bureaucratic interference that the words suggest. Ashoka would not have been likely to interfere directly with the *uposatha*, the formal conclave of monks for the recital of the rules of the order. According to Herman Tiekens, the presence of officials was tolerated on the specific understanding that they did not intrude upon the ritual itself; the reference, he suggests, is probably to the process of screening that went on beforehand, which was designed to weed

out any visiting monks who seemed likely to disrupt the harmony of the *sangha*. This screening process needed help from the secular authorities to make it effective.⁵⁴ Such assistance should not be confused with domination by the temporal power. But the real meaning of the ‘Schism Edict’ is obstinately unclear, and scholarly efforts to unravel it are ongoing.⁵⁵

Certainly, Ashoka could command religious activities. Traditions, detailed in Pali sources, declare that he was the sponsor of a great Buddhist Council, at which virulent disputes within the order, generally over issues of discipline, were aired and resolved under the chairmanship of Moggaliputta. That some such meeting took place is attested by sources belonging to other schools besides the Theravada, but it is not easy to extract from the Buddhist texts completely indisputable historical information about the king’s role in Buddhist history.

But let us return for a moment to the governance aspect. Rock Edict 5 is important in describing an institution composed of senior officials known as *dhammahāmatas*, ‘commissioners of the *dhamma*’.⁵⁶ These commissioners are said to be ‘busy in all sects, establishing *dhamma*, increasing the interest in *dhamma*, and attending to the welfare and happiness of those who are devoted to *dhamma*’. They are described as operating even in remote frontier areas. Their functions apparently included the supervision of prisoners and the poor, sick and old, and the administration of charitable organisations devoted to the *dhamma*.

Clearly, if numerous enough, and well funded, such officials could have been an influential force. Moreover, the inscriptions refer in various places to policies and decrees that must have been intended at least to have a practical effect. They report orders for the provision of shade trees alongside roads, the building of reservoirs and the supplying of medicinal herbs; there was evidently, too, much construction work, a lot of it directed to Buddhist monuments, some on a huge scale. In various places it is recorded that the king took responsibility for the administration of justice, and that he asserted the right to declare amnesties for prisoners at his pleasure. Ashoka was definitely no mere ceremonial figurehead.

But this still leaves open the question raised earlier about the extent, and degree of centralisation, of the Mauryan Empire, even at its putative height during Ashoka’s reign. Some scholars insist that the empire was an immensely centralised one, an administrative machine with armies of officials assiduously carrying out the orders of the ruler. But, to repeat, the evidence for this assertion rests heavily on the distribution of the inscriptions; and we tend to think it should be distrusted, if only on grounds of improbability. If the inscriptions are any sort of guide to its actual administrative framework, Ashoka’s empire was huge. Given the relatively primitive state of communications at the time, it is highly unlikely that tight administrative control could have been exercised over all the Mauryan dominions; even with the most sophisticated communications infrastructure that can be postulated, officials situated in the outer

provinces would have been unable to receive a reply from the imperial capital in less than two months, or reinforcements to deal with a local difficulty in less than four.⁵⁷

The somewhat scanty references in the inscriptions to the administrative structure of the empire confirm that the Mauryan state did have a local presence in many regions of at least northern India. Yet they also support the above assessment that central control was weak. Rock Edict 16 refers to inspection tours by senior officials based at viceregal centres (Ujjain, Taxila); they were undertaken apparently every year or every three years. Such inspections may well have occurred, but we can have no idea how effective they were in enforcing imperial decisions. Major Rock Edict 3 refers obscurely to officials (*yutta*) and councils (*parisā*) who are to receive Ashoka's orders, but it can be questioned how far this designates a chain of command originating from a powerful centre. On the contrary, A.A. Vigasin concludes, we think correctly:

So the actual structure of the Mauryan 'empire' had nothing to do with bureaucracy and centralization of power . . . The mission of the legates sent from the capital at intervals of five years was to a certain extent ceremonial in nature. Such messengers demonstrated to the population 'the righteousness' of the King. They also expected the local authorities to be 'righteous'. In the absence of bureaucracy, however, the actual power was mostly in the hands of the local aristocracy and traditional social and political institutions.⁵⁸

Perhaps Rock Edict 13 provides a more accurate picture. It asserts that, everywhere within the realm of the emperor and even outside it, people 'are conforming to the instructions in *dhamma*'.⁵⁹ Such passages reveal that, in Ashoka's mind, what mattered was that the *idea* of universal peace and harmony under the emperor's benign supervision was successfully implanted. His life's work consisted in the broadcasting of this vision, which presupposed that, where the seeds of *dhamma* were sown, the shoots would come forth automatically, even in territories not actually under any sort of Mauryan rule at all.

Clearly, the whole emphasis of the inscriptions is upon spreading the spirit of the *dhamma*, exhorting holy men and lay people to live in harmony, in the manner of most of the passages referred to above. Rarely are specific government activities throughout the whole empire referred to. This leaves us unsure how far the claims in the inscriptions to a general oversight advanced by the ruler were backed up by a constant official presence of the central imperial power in the provinces.⁶⁰ Perhaps the point can be overstated: for a while, certainly during Ashoka's reign, the wealth and comparatively dense population of the home territory around Pataliputra would have given the nucleus of the empire a clear edge over the developing outer provinces in economic and military power, one that could perhaps have served to attract a

degree of local deference even after the emperor, by his own account, had abjured further military conquest. What is clear, though, is that Ashoka's whole focus was upon the moral paradigm represented by *dhamma*, which, abetted by the example of holy men, was intended to inspire peace and harmony among his subjects. His concern was to ensure that the subjects should recognise the depth of his fatherly care for them. As a rock edict intones:

All men are my children (*save munise* [Dhauri]/*sava-munā* [Jaugada] *pajā mamā*). As on behalf of [my own] children I desire that they may be provided with complete welfare and happiness both in this world and in the next, the same I desire also on behalf of [all] men.⁶¹

This bespeaks a sort of moral overlordship; its acceptance by the subjects, however, would have hinged upon their readiness to acknowledge Ashoka's quasi-spiritual guardianship. And he understood that. In some inscriptions, Ashoka speaks repeatedly of his desire that subjects should have confidence (*asvāsa*) in his intentions towards them.⁶² Here, we see again the role of trust, articulated essentially through the language of religion, in giving expression to the sense of common purpose that a people could discover in their shared cosmological belief.

Ashoka discovered in the idea of the *dhamma* a vision of life lived in peace and harmony under the umbrella of a just and benevolent ruler 'beloved of the gods' (a claim that hinted at divine appointment). This utopian vision was not embodied in particular administrative institutions or in the administration of any specific territory; it was, rather, universal. Implicitly therefore, it contradicted the legitimacy of other nominally sovereign rulers throughout the subcontinent; indeed, Ashoka seems to have been convinced that the mere transmission of *dhamma* would suffice to incorporate, within his domains, any and all foreign territories to which knowledge of it extended.⁶³ Here, we see an integration of political theory within a cosmological vision. As we turn to the later centuries in which Brahmanism became dominant again, we need to recognise the influence of this sort of cosmological thinking.

4 Kings and sects

Commerce and the rise of devotional religion

Early Indian history bears the stamp of geography: routes of conquest in pre-colonial Asia were overland, and the subcontinent became a cul-de-sac for successive waves of invasion, bounded by coasts and mountain ranges but with entry points via the north-western passes, through which passed successive onslaughts of equestrian invaders whose mobile way of life gave them a military edge over the sedentary agriculturalists of the northern plains. From the time of Alexander the Great onwards, though, these invaders increasingly came from centres of cosmopolitan civilisation, and (unlike the nomads who repeatedly invaded China) constantly and irremediably disrupted the homogeneity of Indian society and culture. For one thing, they clung obstinately to their original distinct and vigorous identities as Hellenes, Parthians, Scythians, Kushanas and Huns; for another, they remained wedded to the aristocratic warrior ethos. Proudly different, it is no wonder that they were constantly in conflict with local peoples.

These frequent and abrasive incursions produced a ripple effect across northern India and then southward into the Deccan. Contending with threats from one direction, rulers were distracted from borders on the opposite side; neighbouring kingdoms took military advantage and expanded, thereby inviting the attention of their own rivals further away. This pattern of dog-eat-dog interstate relationships is totally explicit in the *Arthaśāstra*.¹ The dynastic record is literally thronged with regimes displacing one another, conquering, then collapsing as their own vassals made bids for independence in their turn. In an arena made up of jostling states lacking secure borders, survival required constant engagement with potential or actual enemies, and the loyalty of supporters could not be kept without a continually replenished store of wealth and territory to reward them; this, in turn, required constant attempts to make conquests. In the *Arthaśāstra*, for the purpose of theorising about statecraft, a king is designated as *vijigishu*, ‘the one desirous of conquest’.

Chronic instability profoundly influenced culture. It was a society dominated politically by a turbulent warrior aristocracy, in which kingdoms with secure frontiers and permanent institutions of civil administration were always striven for, but seldom achieved. Stimulated by a near constant series of invasions,

a bewildering multitude of diverse local social systems, patronage networks and religious institutions rose and fell, competing for the patronage of rulers. No broad generalisations can unravel the complexity of such a fractured history. Perhaps the most important generalisations that need to be made here go to *why* it was so complex: we would suggest that, in a nutshell, military turbulence created chronic political instability, which allowed the florescence of local power constellations and of autonomous religious communities. To put it another way, we would say that civil society remained undeveloped, and religious institutions highly evolved but rather fragmented and centrifugal in organisation.

Accordingly, the function of early Indian kingship was different from that of any government we would recognise as such. To be accepted, it needed pre-eminently to provide protection from the violence and manifest injustice at large in society. To do this, it had to negotiate with a plenitude of local interests (land-owning families, craft guilds, villages, tribal chiefs, temples, monasteries and wandering religious teachers). It needed to convince people that it presided over a just and harmonious natural order, radiating waves of peace and justice powerful enough to overcome the opposite forces originating from a turbulent periphery. Happily, this ideal of a polarised natural order, in which immorality was repelled from a centre of purity, coincided to a considerable degree with the notions of *dharma* and cosmic equilibrium made explicit in religious doctrine (which is why religious teachings were not kept apart from more 'secular' discourse). This set of relationships, which remained fairly constant through the first millennium and beyond, forms the background to the more specific developments we review in this chapter.

One of the earliest of these developments was the growth of long-distance trade across South Asia, which occurred around the beginning of the Christian era. In the long run, influxes of wealth at nodes in trade networks could work against the interests of the centralised state, for such places could evade a ruler's full control. They were liable to attract alien adventurers and to fuel administrative corruption. As the *Arthaśāstra* notes, 'When officials are going about their business, it is impossible to know when they are appropriating the wealth [of the treasury], just as when fish swim in the sea it is impossible to know when they are drinking the sea's water.'² However, in India, the institution of kingship was not generally strong enough to overawe all the interest groups in the country; it was able, though, to negotiate with them and to try to exploit them. Traders were the kings' prime targets. Texts such as the *Arthaśāstra* and the *Dharmaśāstras* give the impression that royal bureaucracies and local lords alike regarded commerce as a good taxable resource.

The involvement of foreign traders in Indian affairs on a substantial scale was first boosted by the strong Roman interest. Gold was important in it. The opening up of land and sea routes to South Asia from the eastern Mediterranean paved the way for the importation into the subcontinent of large quantities of Roman gold, and much of it arrived at southern ports, fuelling the regional

economy. For example, we learn from Tamil sources that a great deal of the imported Roman gold went on the purchase of pepper:

Sacks of pepper are brought from the houses to the market; the gold received from the ships, in exchange for articles sold, is brought on shore in barges at Muchiri, where the music of the surging sea never ceases and where Kuttuvan [a Chera king] presents to visitors the rare products of the seas and mountains.³

During the Satavahana period and thereafter, cities appeared at many sites in the Deccan along the major trade routes. Local resources were exploited vigorously, and crafts flourished. The opening up of the Indian south was not then a mere secondary effect, limited to the initiatives of Romans,⁴ or northerners.⁵

Here we emphasise two facts about the rise of commercial centres. The first is that, as has just been noted, rulers in an unstable political environment, as India was, generally saw these centres as resources to be taxed rather than as threats to be opposed. The second is that, concurrently with the rise of commercial centres, and not altogether coincidentally, a new devotional stream in religious practice was emerging – *bhakti*, or devotion.

Bhakti arose in the early part of the first millennium and can be seen as an offshoot of the growing impact of trade routes upon urbanisation. The term is an abstract Sanskrit noun derived from *bhaj*, ‘to share’, and variously meant the distribution of sacrificial offerings, the enjoyment (of offered food or of merit ritually acquired), community worship, love or adoration.⁶ It became a groundswell undulating through Indian society, affecting all major religious systems.

Devotional religion was not strong in Vedic times. Certainly, Vedic tribesmen had been, formally, devoted to their gods, but their emotion was probably more like the awe felt by a petitioner in the presence of a great patron; and the gods were configured in ways that were curiously abstract and impersonal. As for the *śramaṇa* doctrines such as Buddhism, the spiritual energies invoked were even less personal. At least as originally conceptualised by the scholarly monks, karma and *nirvāṇa* were abstractions unaffected by prayers, offerings or devotion.

How, and why, did this new strain of worship emerge? Let us take Buddhism first. Devotionalism came to be explicit, and official, chiefly within the framework of the ‘reformist’ movement of Mahayana Buddhism, which arose during the first couple of centuries AD. There has been much debate about the origins of Mahayana, questioning especially how far it was a new and separate movement.⁷ Here we must confine ourselves to noting the important role of lay devotional tendencies that were present within Buddhism from the earliest times; even before there was any talk of ‘Mahayana’, the latter encompassed a vast array of beliefs and practices. Since monks are recruited from the laity, ‘official’ Buddhism inevitably came to reflect such features of traditional belief

and practice. Mahayana was not a separate organisation but a trend, increasingly accepted by respected monks, towards the veneration of the Buddha, in practice, as a living presence.⁸ It treated *stūpa* sites as prime sources of beneficent spiritual energy, as if the Buddha himself were personally present in them. Early Buddhism in general seems, in practice if not in theory, to have drawn quite extensively from the folk beliefs of the little tradition; and among these borrowings was the idea that powerful sacred energies emanated from sanctified objects or sites, such as stupas.⁹ Mahayana texts focused upon teachings that allowed the impulse to *bhakti* or devotion full play, especially the doctrine that the historical Buddha (now visualised as a kind of magic projection) was just one of three glorious embodiments of the eternal Buddha, enshrined in the truths of his *dhamma*.¹⁰ The omnipresent Buddha came to be celebrated in the new Mahayana texts, such as the *Lotus Sutra*, as an eternal source of illumination to the universe.¹¹

As for the Brahmanic religion, alongside the ancient Vedic texts innumerable cults, sacred images, teachings, stories, pilgrimages and other ritual paraphernalia were increasingly incorporated in lay practice. So long as they did not explicitly reject Vedic, or Brahmanical, authority, they could be reinterpreted and assimilated within the prevailing orthodoxy – ‘Sanskritized’, in M.N. Srinivas’s term – by the adoption of appropriate validating names and myths.

Vishnu, especially, became central to *bhakti* worship. The great god appears in the Vedas as a dwarf, Vishnu Trivikrama, who, in three gigantic strides, encompasses the cosmos and defeats the demon king Bali,¹² but is not a major divinity. However, by the middle part of the first millennium AD he was for a while pre-eminent, and a particular style of Vishnu image marks the spread of the cult in places drawn together by networks of maritime commerce, particularly in the Indian-influenced cultures of Southeast Asia.¹³ Vishnu’s aptness to absorb cults of other pre-existing divinities was facilitated by the Vaishnavite doctrine of the avatar, the ‘descent’ (*avatāra*) of a god upon earth in a physical form; this allowed deities worshipped by regional cults to be incorporated within his ambit. For example, a local cowherd deity, Krishna, became Vishnu’s eighth avatar. Krishna’s importance is reflected by the fact that he is cast as the protagonist of the *Bhagavadgītā* (a small but significant and celebrated part of the vast *Mahābhārata* epic described below), which teaches that any devotee who reaches out to the ‘the love of Krishna’ can expect salvation.¹⁴

Was there a link between the expansion of long-distance trade and the rise of *bhakti*? It is hard to ignore the synchronicity.

In ancient India there was no basic infrastructure of banking, finance and law, and society was criss-crossed by barriers of ancestry, language, religion and political loyalty, making strangers of neighbours. Yet, if they hoped to turn a profit, merchants *had* to repose a modicum of trust in their suppliers and clients. What was wanted to resolve this dilemma was a way for people to recognise others who could be trusted. The latter would have to possess a culture just like one’s own, and that culture would preferably enjoin sincere

dedication to a demanding discipline of moral purity, a high degree of selfless concern for others and perhaps acceptance of the universal claims of a greater power. Devotional religious observance was ready-made for this prescription since it demanded submission to a higher power and imposed the discipline of pious actions. Sharing such an ideology, individuals of different backgrounds could meet on common terms and trust each other.

Buddhism, prominent along the long-distance trade routes, fitted the bill. Once it incorporated sincere devotion to the Buddha as an accessible presence, Buddhism leaped from port to port with the sea traders; and, as it spread, merchants could form bonds with co-religionists in distant places. Later, though, it was forced to compete for the loyalties of the traders with the Brahmanic cults of Vishnu (and then Shiva). The comparison with movements in the Christian West such as the Quakers, who also thrived on the rise of international commerce, is compelling.

The career of the third-century Kingdom of the Ikshvakus, centred on the city of Nagarjunakonda, on the Krishna River, offers, in its lavish archaeological remains, an epitome of the rise of *bhakti* within the Buddhist culture of a commercial city. A study of this evidence by H. Sarkar has shown how a tendency to make Buddha images and stupas foci of devotion, even by monks, gathered momentum across successive generations.¹⁵

The ‘Brahmanical Revival’ and ‘Puranic Hinduism’

But, in the long run, it was not Buddhism that became the dominant preferred orthodoxy. Time was on the side of the Brahmins. Thanks, ironically, to the teachings of the monks, outlying local communities gradually came to comprehend the culture of the urban state quite well. Meanwhile, as the urban centres projected their power and culture further into the hinterland, groups of Brahmins (*agrahāras*) were sent out to colonise rural areas under royal endowments, which made Brahmanical culture more familiar and less threatening in the provinces.

This process encapsulates the way Brahmanism, during the centuries of the first millennium, evolved into a new synthesis. Local gods were recognised as special forms of Brahmanical deities, and localised rituals and stories were reinterpreted as expressions of the Vedic world view, and added to the corpus of Brahmanical legend and myth. Yet, rather like a python swallowing its prey whole, Brahmanism’s feats of incorporation changed and distended its shape. Although a ‘synthesis’ was produced, of a sort, its ingredients were so diverse that it is reasonable to question whether they actually constituted a unified whole. A practical justification for treating them as such is simply that, on the whole, eventually, most Brahmins did so.

Some have seen these developments as signposts of a ‘Brahmanical Revival’. But, like so many widely used terms in Indian history, this is a misnomer, at least as applied to the early centuries of the first millennium, since, even during the heyday of the *śramaṇa* sects, Brahmanism was never totally eclipsed. By

the time of the Guptas (fourth–sixth centuries), Sanskrit had come to be re-established as the paramount orthodox literary language. During the previous centuries, while Buddhism and other sects were flourishing, Prakrit dialects had been favoured by the scribes of many rulers and many sects, but side by side with these languages, Sanskrit had continued to be employed, and many landmark works, contributing to the renewal of the Brahmanical tradition, came to be written in that medium.

Most important of these in many ways was the *Mahābhārata*, a massive work containing 100,000 or so verses as well as long prose sections. Running through it is the story of the apocalyptic conflict between the Kaurava and Pandava clans, but the narrative thread is easy to lose amid the plethora of other elements: sacred teachings, myths and legends, cosmological explanations, and a profuse collection of didactic texts incorporating miscellaneous teachings collected from the Vedic period onwards. Among its contents, one section demands special notice: the *Bhagavadgītā* ('Song of the Blessed One') mentioned in passing above, because it articulates more precisely and evocatively than any other piece of scripture a distinctive new religious teaching encapsulating the main pathways to salvation, namely sacred knowledge (*jñāna*), good works (*karman*),¹⁶ ascetic meditation (*yoga*) and devotion (*bhakti*). Although traditionally attributed to the sage Vyasa, the text is recognisably a compilation. In its extant form the text belongs to the early centuries of the first millennium.

The *Mahābhārata* is one of India's two renowned religious epics. The other, the *Rāmāyana*, is a much shorter work, though scarcely less famous, and the source of innumerable themes and images pervasive in art, iconography and literature. Written according to tradition by the sage-poet Valmiki, it tells of the righteous prince Rama, who eventually came to be regarded as a form of Vishnu. The core of the story tells of Rama's adventures as he seeks to rescue his wife Sita from the clutches of the demon Ravana. But, perhaps, the most enduring moral of the story is not simply that good must in the end triumph over evil, but that kings are vital agents in upholding morality and righteousness on earth. After the rescue, Rama is pictured inaugurating an era of glorious rule, Ramraj, which ever since has been quoted (see below) as a symbol, or ideal, of righteous government. Both epics, however, celebrate a vision of governance guided by *dharma*.

So, at least by the time of the Guptas but probably centuries earlier, a revived Brahmanic orthodoxy was emerging as a new universal teaching, increasingly capable of replacing that of the monks. 'Purānic Hinduism' is a term often used to denote this development. The Puranas, composed over a long period, contain, like the epics, some ancient oral materials, but were not fixed in their known written form until the first half of the first millennium. In total they number scores. Nonetheless, conventionally, there are said to be eighteen major and eighteen minor ones; some of the better known of the major Puranas are (in alphabetical order) the *Bhāgavata*, *Brahma*, *Brahmāṇḍa*, *Mārkaṇḍeya*, *Matsya*, *Padma*, *Skanda*, *Varāha* and *Vishnu*. Most of these had been compiled

by the Gupta period. Many of the minor ones were produced later, in some cases to order as foundational charters for emerging guru-led sects (of which we shall have more to say later). In short, with their legends, their lists of past kings mingling real people with mythical figures, and their associations with notable sacred sites, the Puranas provided ‘cosmological charters’, certifying, for each community, its unique place in the universe; in this way, people’s loyalties to local gods and shrines became slowly linked to a wider explanatory framework, which was, at once, coherent and all-encompassing, and which bound them together to an extent well beyond the capacity of the political or ‘national’ institutions of those times.

The Brahman class, though, stood in an ambivalent relationship to this evolving ideological framework. Arguably, the Brahmanical ‘revival’ successfully entrenched Sanskrit and the notion of Brahmanical authority within the spreading cosmopolitan culture. Yet, while it gave honour to Brahmanic religion, it required it to coexist with a motley assemblage of cults and myths. Such paraphernalia were unlikely to appeal to those Brahmans who still clung obstinately to notions of Vedic purity, or who were having trouble adjusting to the awkward fact that priests were increasingly signing up to become handmaidens to brash and sometimes foreign-born rulers exercising more and more power over ever larger areas. One such traditionalist, Mayurasharman, who, according to tradition, fell foul of the Pallava rulers of Kanchi, became an outlaw, and founded his own dynasty, the Kadamba, in the middle of the fourth century, lamented:

Alas! In the age of Kali, brahmanhood is helpless against the kshatra; for what can be more pitiful than this, that even after I have given full satisfaction to my gurus and studied my śākhā [branch of Vedic study] with great effort, the realization of my spiritual aim should depend on the king?¹⁷

Here was a man sincerely devoted to Vedic traditions for whom the Hindu project of incorporation simply did not work.

Nevertheless, from other points of view, it did work. It absorbed all manner of incompatible systems that technically did not belong together; totally different gods and goddesses came to be ‘officially’ identified as multiple manifestations of a single underlying reality; and even Buddhism was reined in by the ingenious device of labelling the Buddha as Vishnu’s ninth *avatāra*. And this was no trick; it was achieved through the application of a profound metaphysical doctrine, first embodied in the Upanishads and encapsulated there in the famous equation of Atman and Brahman, of the self and the universe.¹⁸

Eventually, the notion that there was an underlying unity to the Hindu system was conceptualised in the idea of *varṇāśramadharma*, literally the *dharma* or divinely appointed duty of the four orders of society and the four ideal stages of life as lived by a Brahman (student of the Vedas, householder, resident of a religious hermitage, and wandering mendicant). By extension, the term came

to apply to the settled order of things that a good king must protect, even, if necessary, by coercive means. A modern writer, glossing what the laws of Manu have to say on this subject, opines:

the violation . . . of *varṇāśramadharmā* by the subjects was firmly resisted by the king. It was the noble task of the ruling authorities to sustain the social order and to prevent confusion and undesirable amalgamation of the high and low castes.¹⁹

Taken literally, this obligation would have required a sovereign to ensure that all his subjects were exactly observing the various responsibilities imposed on them by their hereditary caste membership and stages of life.

What made sense of this ideal for people was that the *varṇāśramadharmā* concept connoted the proper observance of religious duty. Whatever the actual origin of local practices, Brahmanical orthodoxy held a large umbrella over them all. While he ruled, Skanda Gupta boasted in an inscription, no subject would dare deviate from his religious duty.²⁰ Kings were powerful agents of compliance. Moreover, this global vision of orthodoxy was also underpinned by the cosmological principles of karma and transmigration. The *smṛti* texts warned darkly that, if a ruler did *not* fully uphold the moral order, chaos would follow, and all classes would desert their duty.²¹ The evil consequences of a failure by the ruler to maintain social harmony were, therefore, considered as much an effect of cosmic forces as of bad administrative management; good or bad outcomes for the country were *both* products of *karmic* consequence.²² This is quite different from the modern concept of ‘good government’.

It is against the backdrop of the various developments we have been tracing in this section – the proliferation of cities, and of commerce, the revival of Brahmanism, and the rise of devotional religion – that the polity of the imperial Guptas – arguably the most extensive of the millennium – needs to be considered.

Looked at from the viewpoint of administration, the ‘empire’ of the Guptas seems hardly to deserve that epithet. Although older maps show Chandra Gupta I (r. 319–35) and his immediate successors Samudra Gupta (r. 335–75), Chandra Gupta II (r. 375–413), Kumara Gupta (r. 413–54) and Skanda Gupta (r. 455–67) ruling over a vast domain covering most of the subcontinent, beyond the territories around the capital, the dominion of the Guptas seems to have been exercised through overlordship and delegation to vassals rather than through an integrated type of administration. Samudra Gupta’s famous pillar inscription, for instance, carefully details the processes by which the various zones of his dominions were assembled: some, it appears, were given over to the care of pre-existing kings confirmed in office after conquest; others were left in the hands of former rivals forced, or induced, to submit. In speaking of religious patronage during the Gupta period, therefore, we need often to refer to other rulers besides the Gupta emperors themselves.

Within the various royal courts, the Guptas' and others', Vedic religion was still patronised. Some Gupta rulers, notably Samudra Gupta and Kumara Gupta, had the *śvamedha* sacrifice performed in proclamation of their imperial achievement.²³ But Vedic practices were increasingly overshadowed by the luxuriant new growth of cults, rituals, myths and iconography. The Gupta rulers, like the Gangas and Pallavas of the south, were patrons of Vishnu, and strongly influenced by the new devotional tendencies. For instance, an inscription on the Mehrauli Iron Pillar makes clear that the king Chandra (whose identity is not quite clear) caused the pillar to be erected chiefly as a testament to his love for the deity: 'with emotion', it reads, 'the King established this lofty banner of Lord Vishnu on Vishnupada Hill.'²⁴ Vaishnavism had its roots in the Vedic religion but (as noticed above) extended its domain over many post-Vedic developments. One Vaishnavite sect was that of the Bhagavatas, a sect that originated in perhaps Mauryan times in the north, which worshipped Vishnu as himself, and in the forms of Krishna and Hari.²⁵

Vishnu's avatars (as above) were part of a vast variety of images and sectarian allegiances incorporated under the broad rubric of Vaishnavism, and many of these figure in Gupta statuary and inscriptions. However, Shiva, too, was becoming a prime object of devotion within the emerging Hindu synthesis; indeed, would become in later centuries the principal one across large parts of the subcontinent. Shaivism (the cult of Shiva) was directly patronised by dynasties such as the Vakatakas and Bharashivas,²⁶ and inscriptions left by Gupta scribes record endowments by prominent individuals, including ministers, for the creation of Shiva temples, Shiva statues and Shiva lingas.²⁷ There was no restriction. Royal servants could freely sponsor endowments directed at other sects, even where the dominant religious tendency was Vaishnavite; for example, Virasena, a minister, endowed a Shaivite cave temple, claiming to be doing so purely out of devotion (*bhaktiyā*).²⁸

Notwithstanding the prevailing royal preference for Vaishnavism, Buddhism still flourished. Its iconography is rich during the Gupta period. On every hand there are inscriptions recording grants by the great men of the land to Buddhist institutions, as well as abundant evidence of buildings and statuary. More surprisingly, we learn that committed Buddhists could obtain high rank and rich rewards for their military services.²⁹ At the start of the fifth century, a Chinese pilgrim, Faxian (Fa-hsien), wrote that 'the Law of the Buddha is universally honoured'.³⁰

Thus the so-called Brahmanical revival did not lead to the suppression of other religious persuasions. Older cults acquired an ever richer literature and history, hosts of local and regional cults evolved, and a huge variety of local practices were brought, piecemeal, under the umbrella of Brahmanical orthodoxy.

The Gupta period – by any measure a splendid one culturally – has attracted much attention from historians; there has been a trend to reappraise the dynasty in recent decades. Some historians, notably S.R. Goyal, seek to

consolidate its image as an age of glory. For Goyal, the chief architect of the Gupta cultural achievement was Samudra Gupta: ‘Samudragupta appears as the best answer which the Hindu society gave to the Buddhist ideal and example set by Aśoka.’³¹ Goyal further contrasts the strong ‘martial’ spirit epitomised by Samudra Gupta with what he characterises as the softening, debilitating influence of Buddhism. The latter, he concludes, was the main cause of the corruption, and resulting decline, of Gupta power.³² Some scholars are unconvinced by Goyal’s interpretation.³³ And, in particular, many are sceptical about his notion of a ‘golden age’; as the Marxist historian, D.N. Jha, remarks sardonically: ‘For the upper classes all periods in history have been golden; for the masses, none.’³⁴

Divine kings and mythical heroes

Did Indians in the pre-Muslim period believe, or did rulers or their sycophants seek explicitly to persuade the subjects, that kings were actually gods in human form?

The identification is quite explicit in some early *Dharmaśāstra* sources; Manu says: ‘A king, even when he is a child, must not be despised as a [mere] mortal man; for this [individual] is a great deity taking the form of a human;’³⁵ which might be taken to suggest either that ancient Indians were pathetically gullible, easy prey for brainwashing by sinister myrmidons of tyrants, or that the Brahmanical eulogists lived in a dream world of their own. We suggest that both these views are false.

The relationship between kingship and divinity might be interpreted in several ways. Burton Stein asserts that it is only in their initial stages that the *Dharmaśāstras* make a clear identification; the later texts, he believes, those belonging broadly to the period of the Guptas, stopped short of declaring kings to be gods in human form but, instead, treated kingship as a divine quality – not the same thing at all.³⁶ Stein notes that texts show antipathy towards Brahmans, and some forbid the performance of the *aśvamedha* and *rājasūya* sacrifices (although, as already observed, several of the early empire-building Gupta kings were keen to revive the Vedic *aśvamedha* for the sake of their glory).

Occasionally, the equivalence of a king to a god or gods is explicit, as in the Bilsad inscription of Kumara Gupta, which declares him to be the ‘equal’ (*samasya*) of the gods Dhanada, Varuna, Indra and Antaka – an invocation of the four guardian deities of the cardinal points of the compass, implying a dominion extending in all directions.³⁷ Similarly, virtual divinity was often claimed for kings in official eulogies (*praśasti*); the author of the panegyric of Samudra Gupta inscribed on the Allahabad Pillar, Harisena, described his royal patron as ‘the Supreme Being (*purusha*) beyond [human] comprehension’ and as the one ‘who is the cause of the rise and dissolution of good and bad’.³⁸ Elsewhere in the same composition Harisena calls him ‘a god who has taken his abode in the world’.³⁹ This sort of overblown and fanciful terminology,

of course, was purely formulaic, a poetic convention. It is only sensible to understand it as a message that the king so lauded occupied the ritual centre of the kingdom and was responsible under the gods for the protection of subjects. The king in this case was, by virtue of his office, a special sort of sacrificer.

There are various subtle gradations between the two positions of identifying a king with a god outright, and declaring that he acts in conformity with some divine command. Describing the function of kingship as ‘divine’ is just one of them.⁴⁰ But the distinction between divine king and divine kingship points in the right direction: the identification of king with god is most commonly made subtly and indirectly, by insinuation or allegory.⁴¹ Poets and sculptors placed kings in contexts that obviously resembled those of gods. For instance, in the Kushana period, rulers were assimilated to deities by the custom of placing statues of them in *devakula* shrines. A statue of the greatest of them, Kanishka, bore the title *devaputra*.⁴² And allegory may be implicit in imagery, as for example in the temple reliefs at Vaikuntha Perumal, which make an ‘unstated analogy between the epic heroes and the reigning Pallava king’.⁴³ We might see the instinct for allegorical assimilation, too, in the Gupta kings’ liking for the cult of Varaha, the boar incarnation of Vishnu, which saved the earth from a great flood.⁴⁴

In all this deliberate juxtaposition of kingship and divinity, we see the working out of a cosmography that aspires to inscribe the human microcosm upon the divine macrocosm. The parallelism might be called propaganda, but it is not just fanciful hyperbole. Behind it is a belief that, if the ceremonial centre of a kingdom is in all the ritually relevant ways made to mirror the structure and symbolism of heavenly realms, it might thereby be really tuned in to the heavens, like a radio receiver, and allow divine energy to flow down. It is like a Vedic sacrifice writ large. It implied a practical message to the effect that a king who employed all the best scribes, poets, sculptors and architects should be worth obeying, both because he could afford to do so and because their work might attract divine blessings.

So it was not so much that Indians could be made to believe their rulers were more than human – it was, rather, that they believed divinity to be manifested on earth by ritual conjuration.

A full understanding of the luminosity of Indian kingship, though, requires us to introduce yet another archetype – that of the man of prowess. The man of prowess is not really divine, but has heroic powers.⁴⁵ This ideal may well be applicable to the image of power broadcast by Gupta rulers. Certainly, it is commonly celebrated in the aforementioned *praśasti* poems, which feature on numerous inscriptions from this era. The Junagadh rock inscription of Skanda Gupta, who doubtless had to contend with waves of invaders, is a case in point:

Victorious for ever is Skandagupta, whose chest is clasped by [the goddess] Śrī, who has engendered valour by his own arms and has become

overlord of lords . . . who is the abode of kingly qualities, is of profuse glory; [and] who, when his father attained to the companionship of the gods, humbled his enemies and made subject to himself the [whole] earth

. . .

And, moreover, he alone has conquered, whose fame enemies proclaim . . . with their pride broken down to the very root.⁴⁶

A heroic figure indeed!

This heroic image of kings can be contrasted with two other traditional ideals also identified by Burton Stein. One is the ritual ideal, represented by institutionally confirmed legitimacy sanctified by rituals under the control of priests, and the other is the moral ideal, represented by conformity to universal principles of righteousness as articulated by the cosmological systems of *śramaṇa* teachings, such as Buddhism.⁴⁷

An interesting application of this typology to the Gupta case has been made by David Lorenzen. Contrary to mainstream opinion, which ties Gupta legitimation pre-eminently to the authority of the Brahmans (the 'ritual' type of kingship in Stein's schema), Lorenzen holds that, in fact, the dynasty's predilection for projecting itself as a family of formidable warriors was part of a deliberate programme of legitimising royal authority by fostering the 'heroic' image.⁴⁸ Once their legitimacy was secure, he explains, they strongly emphasised this style, relying upon hyperbolic glorification of their exploits to impress their subjects. On this view, there would have been inbuilt tensions between kings and priests; the latter would have been seen as representing the interest of a particular group rather than that of the kingdom; if so, ambitious rulers would have needed to make a wider appeal. Interestingly, very few of the laudatory inscriptions composed at the behest of kings make any reference to Brahmans, or to Brahmanical teaching, the inscriptions of Samudra Gupta being perhaps the major exception, and an understandable one in Lorenzen's opinion because, in Samudra's reign, the dynasty's power was still being consolidated, so that priestly sanction could not be safely discarded. Yet, even in the case of Samudra, Lorenzen thinks the manner of his appeal to the 'Brahmanic' ideology expresses the values of Kshatriya heroism rather than those of Brahmanic ritual.

This interpretation is fascinating but vulnerable, though, to the claim that it is precarious – which leaves it up to us to consider what causal links might have existed between the words in the inscriptions and any disposition to submissiveness that the subjects might have displayed in consequence. The *praśasti* was a well-known poetic formula, and the part it played in the real world has to be judged by what we know of poetic formulae in the real world. Still, it deserves to be recognised as a pointer to the way things worked in a turbulent polity commanded by competing Kshatriya aspirants to power. The Brahmanic religion did not command general unquestioning faith; it was working very hard at becoming a universal ideology capable of providing a total world view, an explanation of the meaning of the universe that would

be suitable for a diverse population, but the endless syncretism and relabelling involved in this effort had damaged its integrity. As a work in progress, Hinduism could not yet be relied on to provide a reliable sanction for imperial authority.

Something more, therefore, was needed – a view of the emperor’s mission that could appeal to a fractured and fast-changing society. Such a view might well try to incorporate existing symbols, Brahmanical myths and legends, but it would also need to demonstrate to people the reasons why they should repose trust in the emperor. In the absence of such trust, he would have to compete, for their compliance, with all the local elites whose eminence lay in their descent from earlier power holders, or ‘those living on the name of Rajas’ (*rājaśabdopajīvin*), as the *Arthaśāstra* described them.⁴⁹ Again, arguably, the idea of the ruler as a Great Man – as an incarnation of the epic heroes – fitted the bill. An astute aspirant for power might well attempt to tie his own martial exploits to the heroic legends of the country, legends already half believed in as originating from a sacred past in which things worked as they were supposed to. The comfortable familiarity of stories known everywhere through the dissemination of Brahmanical lore combined with the sorts of exploits of conquest commemorated by Samudra Gupta’s pillar inscription to supply the necessary preconditions for the widespread appeal of the heroic image.

But pre-modern Indians did not associate divinity only with ethereal gods and their earthly instruments, kings; they also believed that the divine resided in structures located in the places where they sought contact with their deities. Influenced by the pervasive world view of Judaeo-Christian civilisation, modern Western understandings of religion tend to identify religious traditions by reference to texts and doctrines. If we apply that method to India, we run the risk of missing the crucial point that, for most ordinary devotees, rituals and sacred places hold the key to communicating with the divine.

This way of thinking has ancient roots. Long before Buddhist stupas or Hindu temples became sacred sites, attracting pilgrims and supplicants by the thousands, the so-called ‘little tradition’ of oral cultures in the villages entertained notions of divinity that perceived the presence of deities everywhere: in trees, caverns, burial mounds, fields, rivers, and even the soil itself. These conceptions of divine power carried over into the historical period; notwithstanding the increasingly sophisticated forms assumed by religious practice throughout the subcontinent, as the society became more literate and urban-based, rituals continued to be conducted at special places where sacred energy was deemed to be latent and available to be tapped through the prayers of supplicants. Although, by the middle of the first millennium, rough stones had been replaced by Buddhist stupas, and Shiva *linga*, and by statues of four-armed Vishnu carrying his emblems of divine majesty, place remained integral, and erudite texts were written in praise of it. Over time, a whole sacred geography was constructed, connecting major sites to powerful mythologies. In Shiva mythology, for example, the veneration of sites of pilgrimage, *tīrthas*, is linked to the marvellous story of the death of Sati, the

god's spouse. Tradition has it that Sati's corpse was carried the length and breadth of India by her grieving husband, during which time it broke into 108 pieces. The places where they are believed to have fallen to earth are said to embody the pure consciousness of the goddess. Many of these sites have become thriving centres of pilgrimage.⁵⁰

Buddhism's most conspicuous contribution to this new religious architecture was the stupa, a stone-clad dome-shaped structure raised over supposedly authentic relics of the Buddha (although eventually they were constructed in countless places for votive purposes). As noted above, especially with the rise of the Mahayana tendency, such monuments became a focus of powerful spiritual energy in the eyes of the faithful.⁵¹ But Buddhist architecture was embodied not only in stupas but also in cave temples formed by massive excavations of living rock. On Elephanta, an island near modern Mumbai, the early Kalacuri Dynasty (c.550–620) sponsored constructions that were partly caves, partly free-standing; at Ellora, from the sixth to the ninth centuries, more than thirty temples were cut into a steep hillside.

By contrast the Brahmanical orthodoxy did not start experimenting with forms of religious architecture involving durable materials for several more centuries, until Gupta times in fact; but from then on stone temples became increasingly prominent as sacred places, like petrified rituals causing ordinary space and time to be transcended and divine presence concentrated. Their original design was a simple one, centred on a plain rectangular hall, but as technology improved, other features were added until the effect became positively rococo: roofs were multiplied by the piling up of roofs on roofs to such an extent that they came to resemble pyramids; corners were multiplied by an accumulation of re-entrants, transforming the basic rectangular plan into a star shape; spires were multiplied in gothic profusion. Every surface came to be covered by jostling sculpture in bas-relief. Yet the basic elements of the classic temple are but three: the *garbhagrha*, or 'womb-house', within whose walls are enclosed the holy of holies (containing the cult icon, the prime source of divine energy); the *mandapa*, a pillared pavilion in which devotees can congregate, usually located directly adjacent to the *garbhagrha* and connected to it; and the *gopura*, functionally the gateway to the complex, but in southern temples a gateway conventionally surmounted by a soaring square tower, which could reach dizzying heights. Prominent early temple sites have been excavated at Aihole, Badami and Pattadakal; in the sixth century, a vast temple dedicated to Vishnu was built at Deogarh in Rajasthan.

For our theme of religion and governance, however, the most important thing to note about these magnificent buildings is the fact that their construction often became so massive that only those who commanded the networks of political power, such as kings, could afford to sponsor them, thus affirming the nexus between kings and the divine. Inscriptions left by donors to the Chidambaram complex show how the site 'supported and legitimized royal power'.⁵² The size of a small city, Chidambaram was 'ruled' by the god Shiva in his form as Nataraj, lord of the dance of creation; and like a human king,

he was surrounded by retainers: priests ('officials'), subordinate ritual functionaries, and a horde of menials stood ready to answer to his needs.

Through their sponsorship of these massive temple complexes, rulers sought to create, on earth, symbolic replicas of the heavenly domains celebrated in the myths of cosmic creation. The great temples were, in effect, cosmograms; the numerology of their dimensions and the symbolism of their sculptural ornamentation were designed to reflect features of the heavenly realms inhabited by the gods in whose honour they were built. To put it another way, the great temples were technical devices designed to achieve the elimination of the barrier between the sacred and profane worlds. Within the precincts of a temple, a devotee could be assured of gaining access to that other dimension.⁵³ Therefore, royal patronage for the construction of temples was not just an exercise in conspicuous expenditure, or a means for rulers to earn good karma for themselves; it was a way of situating their rule at the junction of human society and the cosmos. Communities, in turn, honoured the royal power and majesty that placed them in direct relationship with the divine powers that governed human destiny.

Hindu 'toleration'

Many scholars have felt impelled to emphasise the toleration of different sects and denominations evinced by Indian rulers. Weber declared: 'It is an undoubted fact that in India, religious and philosophical thinkers were able to enjoy perfect, nearly absolute, freedom for a long period.'⁵⁴

More recently, Manabendu Banerjee has noted that the Gupta kings made little effort to enforce their personal religious preference, Vaishnavism, on the court, explaining: 'their followers could belong to any sect or . . . religion'.⁵⁵ The conclusion, according to Banerjee, is irresistible, that 'the Gupta kings valued religious toleration much', and did what they could to buttress the 'amity and peace that [usually] prevailed among heterogeneous religious sects'.⁵⁶

It seems fairly clear that, traditionally in India, people readily transferred or distributed their allegiance between different sects, seeing no logical inconsistency in approaching different gods for different purposes, and that this apparently syncretic style of religious behaviour encouraged a relaxed attitude to what others did as well; evidently, too, rulers generally extended their acceptance of this practice. For example, the *Arthaśāstra* recommends that the ruler should build temples to Shiva and various other deities in his capital city.⁵⁷

The reign of Skanda Gupta, particularly, displays evidence of what a modern observer might categorise as 'tolerance' or 'catholicism'. He took the Vaishnavite title of Paramabhadra, and endowed a temple with an image of the 'Preserver'; yet a contemporary inscription refers to him as Skanda/Kartikeya, thereby associating the name Skanda with the primarily Shaivite myth cycle identifying Shiva with the war god, and Skanda; while some silver coins of the reign refer to the sun god.⁵⁸ Indeed, it seems that indifference to

what we might see as religious boundaries was extended, not only to the various sects of Hinduism, but to the far more obviously heterodox Buddhism. Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Faxian (Fa-hsien) was told of Indian kings who were stalwart Buddhist believers and who themselves often ritually served ceremonial food to the monks in person.⁵⁹

Much of the evidence, then, suggests that all the diverse religious sects were freely tolerated by a prevailing world view that was ready to acknowledge a certain common validity. Yet it is unlikely that such a view could rise to the status of cultural orthodoxy without friction. Although references to religious wars and persecutions are conspicuously absent from the historical record of ancient India, this does not rule out lesser types of conflict, and some scholars believe that there is indeed evidence of localised disagreement and resentment.

For example, Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty categorises the Gupta period as one in which partisan Brahmins and their supporters began to vent bitter hostility towards the various non-Brahmanical groups, particularly the Buddhists and Jains, who for so long had received lavish patronage from Indian rulers, especially (this apparently was part of the problem) rulers from dynasties of barbarian origin. In support, she points to the Puranas, citing the *Skandapurāna* story of King Ama, which represents him as an apostate corrupted by Jains, Manu's prohibition on honouring 'heretics', opinions by Yajñavalkya and Narada that heretics and atheists should not be permitted to act as trial witnesses, and denunciations of heterodox writings as 'scriptures of delusion' that pandered to the 'gullible'. Doniger concludes that the Puranas embodied an orthodoxy that asserted itself in polemical opposition to all heterodoxies. Further, she detects in these documents signs of acrimonious disputes starting to break out. Quoting from an unpublished thesis, she suggests the Puranas 'bear the scars of . . . battle to this day',⁶⁰ adding: 'the evidence of the Purānas and Dharmaśāstras may indicate that the attitude [of the orthodox Brahmins] to heretics and atheists became embittered in this period, losing ground that had been gained during the more loosely structured Śaka-Kushāna era' (although she notes that a partial recovery may have taken place later, 'under the influence of Tantrism').⁶¹ According to Doniger, then, it was during the Gupta period that the attack on heterodox groups and teachings crystallised. However, it is perfectly possible that the kinds of tensions O'Flaherty has identified in the Gupta period were present at other times too. For example, the *Arthaśāstra* gratuitously advises the agents of a king to help themselves, on behalf of the ruler, to the property of groups on the fringes of society who might not have powerful friends.⁶² Moreover, there are hints in scattered sources that the followers of orthodox Brahman teachers at times ganged up against Buddhist or Jain establishments that had lost their former patronage. Evidence of such clashes has been found, for instance, in the archaeological record of Buddhist sites such as Nagarjunakonda on the Krishna River. As one of the early archaeologists involved in excavating that site wrote:

The ruthless manner in which all the buildings at Nāgārjunakonda have been destroyed is simply appalling and cannot represent the work of treasure-seekers alone as so many of the pillars, statues and sculptures have been wantonly smashed to pieces . . . Local tradition relates that the great Hindu philosopher and teacher Śankarāchārya . . . came to Nāgārjunakonda with a host of followers and destroyed the Buddhist monuments. Be this as it may, the fact remains that the cultivated lands in the valley on which the ruined buildings stand represent a religious grant made to Śankarāchārya, and it was only with the sanction of the present Religious Head of the followers of this great teacher that I was able to conduct the excavations.⁶³

Doniger finds such rumours plausible. Referring to the tenth century, she writes:

Heresy was so widespread and so abhorred that Śiva himself was said to have become incarnate as the philosopher Śankara, in order to explain the Vedas, destroy the temples and books of the Jains, and massacre all who opposed him, particularly the Jains.⁶⁴

Still, hard evidence of religious persecution in these ancient times is scattered and fragmentary. In the absence of more solid evidence, the view has gained ground that pre-modern India had a cultural unity that precluded communal conflict, but we think that this picture is not sufficiently nuanced. Doniger's perception that there was widespread persecution of non-Brahmans during the first millennium may fairly represent the situation that arose at certain times, but we cannot be at all sure how widespread the phenomenon was, or at what times it was most marked.

Still, we should note that, simply as a matter of practical politics, there was at least one factor that would certainly have acted to limit the ferocity of any sectarian persecutions – the absence of a clear and powerful advantage at all times for kings in identifying themselves with the Brahman interest. No clear dividing line existed, in fact, between ruling families that were of 'genuine' 'Aryan' descent, and the rest; the ruling elite presided over heterogeneous populations within which Brahmanism, as an agent of Sanskritisation and as a common cultural denominator, was slowly feeling its way towards a new role, directed towards shaping an inclusive syncretism. Thus, the Brahmanical revival could not afford to go too far. Especially, it had to be very wary of attacking the prudent preference of kings for policies that had the capacity to attract wide support among the multiple disparate groups that constituted the citizenry. The Brahmins had to make do with whatever qualified honour they could find within the frame of an eclectic culture. Such structural constraints are likely to have kept them from striking at their enemies too wantonly.

Perhaps 'religious tolerance' and eclecticism followed from pragmatic policies rather from an ideological value. Narain argues that the establishment

of Brahmanical observances, and the patronage of priests, could become part of the Gupta synthesis because the Brahmins could be honoured without incurring any real threat to kings.⁶⁵ This is a crucial point, and it underlines the magnitude of the political shift that had occurred since the Vedic Age described in [Chapter 2](#): kings were now in charge and the Brahmins were subordinate to them; they had been contained.⁶⁶

The evolution of Hinduism

The interval between the fall of the Guptas and the rise of the Mughals in the sixteenth century is often labelled the ‘medieval’ period of Indian history. The term is, of course, borrowed from European history and carries the weight of that tradition, not least the implication that the period was something of a ‘dark’ age. We use it here to connote merely a ‘middle phase’ of the Indian story. Certainly, it features some new developments, for it was a time of Muslim invaders and dynasties proclaiming themselves as Islamic. Nevertheless, the pattern of cultural and political devolution that we have become familiar with continued; unstable warring states and a patchwork quilt of local communities intensely dedicated to their defining religious and social customs were its basic features. The prevailing trend was centrifugal, albeit with interruptions when the more successful Muslim dynasties unified large parts of India within their imperial domains; but in every case the dependence of rulers upon the fickle loyalty of ambitious nobles worked in the long run against the integrity of the state.

To start with the political, the record of post-Gupta dynasties and invasions is one of a litany of competing regimes, most of them announcing their appearance upon the stage of history with wars of conquest, but each of them, over time, weakening and eventually succumbing to rivals. A native Indian regime achieved brief but extensive power under King Harsha (r. 606–47), but his empire did not survive him and left only a tiny legacy; soon the memory of his reign had all but vanished.

The major disruptive forces were the renewed invasions from the north-west; between the Guptas and the Muslim incursions, the most notable was that of the Huns (*Hūnas*), who established a short-lived empire in northern India. From the eighth to the tenth centuries the dominant powers in the north were the Palas of Bihar and Bengal, a dynasty that richly patronised Buddhism but was the last major regime to do so, and the Gurjara-Pratiharas, ruling from Kanauj; it was they who were encountered by the first incursion of Muslim power, the Arab invaders of Sind in 711. It was in the major kingdoms of the south, however, that many of the important religious developments of this period originated, as we shall see. It is often supposed that, with the coming of the Muslims, Hindu governance and society stagnated – not so. The medieval age saw, on the contrary, an efflorescence of new ideas and networks, many of them associated with the *bhakti* movement and some representing subtle responses to the introduction, by way of the Muslim courts, of Islam

and Persian culture. The new forms of religion that sprang up, partly as a result of local initiatives and partly in response to external stimuli, from about the seventh century, would test further (without, perhaps, destroying) the notion that there was a single overarching Brahmanical orthodoxy deserving of the name Hinduism.

One of them was *tantra*, not a distinct new sect, but a movement, originating largely in local practices found particularly in the hilly regions of the north and north-east, and operating inside the existing traditions. Hence there emerged a Hindu tantra and a Buddhist tantra with their own lines of teachers, myths and iconography, texts and practices.

A *tantra* is a loom or frame; the texts that became known as tantras acquired the name because they provided frameworks for teaching and instruction; but like the practices of the devotees, they were transmitted secretly, and their contents are often cryptic and obscure. In many cases, it appears that their prescriptions may have been intended as codes or symbols pointing to insights achieved through yogic meditation. However, symbolic or not, tantric teachings often appear antinomian, absolving their disciples from strict adherence to orthodox principles of morality, and in many Hindu circles even down to the present day, tantra, so called, has been seen as synonymous with debasement, corruption and immorality.

Originally associated with folk beliefs, folk medicine and goddess cults, tantra eventually acquired sophisticated forms, with written texts, sponsorship by dignitaries with court connections and well-reputed teachers with large followings. Disciples of the craft studied yogic techniques of meditation, seeking to realise within themselves types of experience that transcended normal existence. At the same time, they urged their acolytes to experiment in ways that confronted and mocked proprieties. They put great store on female divinities, and recommended meditation in cremation grounds, full of the scent of transience, corruption and death. Indeed, if some tantric texts are taken literally, sexual intercourse with fellow disciples was also part of the programme. Meditation was focused upon waking Kundalini, the serpent goddess said to reside at the base of the spine. When Kundalini is activated, she rises up through the body, and with her ascent comes increasing enlightenment. Full spiritual illumination is gifted to the seeker when she reaches a point above the skull.

The tantric movement was at its height between the eighth and the eleventh centuries; thereafter, it continued as a significant if sometimes shadowy component of Hinduism and Buddhism. To some extent the movement remained associated with the fringes of society, tribal and lower caste peoples, which in the long run damaged its reputation; but in certain phases – especially in eleventh-century Kashmir – it acquired considerable prestige. On both counts, it inevitably fell foul of Brahmanical orthodoxy. Nor were relations made easier by the claim of some tantric groups that, through the use of their special techniques, they had attained insights that trumped the wisdom of the Vedas; some acknowledged the Vedas as sacred; some rejected them. Still,

we can recognise in all of them a type of religious movement that shied away from the approved routes to enlightenment; contact with the sacred was not to be made through Vedic study, or sitting at the feet of a Brahman, or conducting sacrifices in the old tradition associated with the Vedas, or appropriate ritual at a sacred site or in a regular temple – rather, on the contrary, sacredness was to be discovered within one’s own body, one’s own self, and the ladder by which one climbed was supplied not by any Brahman but by a guru who might come from any caste.

What is more, much the same sort of thing was happening to Hinduism and Buddhism; as centuries passed, popular devotion came to be more and more attached to the persons of famous teachers (*gurus*) and the often radically egalitarian messages contained in their poems and teachings. Many attributes of these men (and sometimes women) made them special; but perhaps the most important was their pedigree. Gurus inherited knowledge and power through a long process of apprenticeship at the feet of a master that culminated in a rite of initiation into a lineage of teachers (*paramparā*). Each time a guru passed on, a worthy successor took his place, inheriting, not simply his predecessor’s spiritual authority, but that of all the masters who had preceded him, a chain that stretched back endlessly into a legendary past. A guru’s lineage afforded him legitimacy in much the same way that a royal lineage established the right to rule of a king. Saturated in charisma, gurus not surprisingly acquired, in many cases, wide renown, and built up mass followings, and sometimes set themselves up quite literally as the rulers of new sects.⁶⁷

Like the tantric movement, the guru tradition did not fit easily within the old Brahmanical framework. Yet, it is not correct to infer that its more populist appeal was less legitimate than ‘real’ Brahmanism or ‘real’ Buddhism, since the teachings offered by both were explicitly grounded in authentic gods celebrated in Brahmanic literature or in the Buddhist *sūtras*. From the sacrificial rituals of the Vedas to the philosophical truths of the Brahmanas, from the Puranas and their pantheon of gods and goddesses to the popular gurus and ‘saints’, who preached the way of devotion, the evolution of the religion we call Hinduism had always been organic and self-validating. Moreover, those who study religious history well know how unrealistic it is to expect that a faith must always possess a fixed core, an abstract unchangeable essence. Major religions are constantly seen to assume new forms that, on the surface, appear to flatly contradict their own heredity yet manage to display, across many lifetimes, a profound sense of authentic continuity. So it was with the devotional form of Hindu religion that thrived during India’s medieval age. Its early growth was inspired and guided by legendary figures such as the twelve Alvars, poet-saints of the Tamil country who lived between the sixth and ninth centuries, and wrote verses addressed to the cluster of deities associated with Vishnu.⁶⁸ Later, other much-revered teachers spread the message of *bhakti* to the west, north and Bengal: Ramanuja, whose devotional poems, written in the early twelfth century, inspired a tradition of teaching in

temple schools, thereby helping to spread devotional Vaishnavism among the masses; Basava (1106–67), who joined devotional religion with tantric practices and temple ritual to create the stridently anti-Brahman Lingayat movement; the Maharashtrian saint Namadeva, founder of the Varakari or ‘pilgrim’ Panth, who promoted the idea that the highest state of spirituality could be attained by the mundane householder; Vallabhacharya, a fervent missionary for Krishna during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries; and Ramdas, who popularised the worship of Vishnu in his incarnation as Rama, and became the mentor of the Maratha king Shivaji, to name just a few.

The *bhakti* movement, then, was a constantly evolving and multifaceted thing that resists easy summation and simple categorisation. Even the notion that it was, in essence, a Vaishnavite phenomenon is not correct, for there was also a Shaivite stream of devotion that ran parallel to the Vaishnavite one; again, it was particularly strong in the Tamil country, where the Alvars had their counterpoint in the Nayanars, whose oeuvre inspired generations of the devotees and attracted the extensive patronage of rulers, especially the Cholas between the ninth and the thirteenth centuries.⁶⁹ Some devotional movements were accepting of Brahmanical rituals and texts, while others were fierce in their rejection of them; some were passionately devoted to one god, others fervid in exalting the divine Absolute; some were loyal supporters of kings, others revolutionary in their insistence upon the primacy of inner illumination and in their calculated appeal to the deprived, and the weak. Some, as we shall see in the next chapter, even aspired to reach across the theoretical divide between Hinduism and Islam. What is certain, however, is that all these movements struck a chord with millions of ordinary people of low caste who could recognise in the path of *bhakti* a route that gave them hope of something better in the next life. Such a message may have implicitly undermined the legitimacy of temporal authority in the way that it bypassed the claims of kings and Brahmans in favour of a direct communion between the worshipper and God; even so, the great reservoir of human emotion that it called forth required rulers to give it their blessing.

To conclude: the rich diversity of religious life in pre-modern India went hand in glove with political instability. Stable ethnic states with secure and centralised civil administrations did not and could not develop as a standard type. Instead, the political landscape was cluttered with competing and generally ramshackle empires depending upon shifting alliances and vassalage. These states could sometimes acquire dominion over substantial areas, but they did not possess durable institutions. Therefore, cultural pluralism became the norm – stifling the possibility of an alliance, as happened in the West, between the political authority and a dominant church (although, as we have seen, particular dynasties often sponsored their favourite cults generously). Political power and influence required, instead, at all levels, separate negotiations with a plethora of local communities and groups looking for protection and security.

In this environment, monastic and Brahmanical organisations came to acquire the paradoxical characteristics that stamp traditional Indian religious culture. First, the ephemeral nature of political power in early India, lodged in persons and kinship networks rather than anything like a 'state', meant that the sort of community identity to which people formed emotional attachments, sufficient to inspire commitment and self-sacrifice, was more likely to be defined in cultural terms than in country-wide (or 'national') or political terms. Local gods and temples were more fixed and permanent markers of identity than palaces, and these locally defined loyalties were apt to find expression in the vocabulary of sects, rituals and shrines rather than that of political or legal principles. Second, although religious institutions were not embodied in stable national hierarchies, they could be dominant within particular communities; there they took the place that would otherwise have been filled by vigorous political institutions. Anthropologist Mary Douglas has advanced an interpretation of the cultural dynamics of social groups that associates the dominance of ritual with highly developed group loyalty and cohesion (natural where power relations are insecure and unstable) and with hierarchical organisation (natural where people depend heavily on protection).⁷⁰ India is a classic exemplar of the operation of both these principles.

This is not the same thing, though, as saying that daily life in early India was dominated by 'religion'; the same scene could be described, in another sense, as one of pervasive politicisation: the corollary of political instability was the reproduction at lower levels of superior power structures, as Declan Quigley has insightfully argued.⁷¹ Again, we would hold that political power, for all its fragility, was never in thrall to religious power. Kings were not shackled by priestly interpretations of *dharma*. The *Dharmaśāstras* could be conveniently interpreted to suit or bypassed altogether by appeals to other criteria of moral authority such as the *smṛtis* or the customs of elders. On the contrary, rulers sometimes invaded territory that supposedly belonged wholly to the religious professionals, such as the preservation of the distinctions of caste, as indeed A.M. Hocart recognised long ago, when he opined that the caste system could be understood as an institutionalisation of political power, centred upon concepts of kingship.⁷²

The Indian kings were not despots. Although their power was absolute in the sense that it was not formally limited by constitutions, they had to wage a relentless struggle against other powerful stakeholders in society for every bit of authority they exerted. Thus, religion and politics were intertwined; ritual claims and struggles for authority ran through the whole hierarchy from the village to the palace. However, this acknowledgement of a cosmological claim needs to be clearly understood for what it was. We are not entitled to treat it as evidence that kings were powerful; rather, in the light of the foregoing discussion, it may be closer to the mark to suggest that kingship was a religious office because political institutions were weak. Individual kings might have great (or little) power according to their success in negotiating with, or defeating, the many parties inhabiting the political domain. But, in a

society where warfare was endemic, and technology rudimentary, institutions of governance did not, and perhaps could not, put down deep roots. As a result, people's prime political loyalties were commanded not by Indian states, such as they were, but by the persons and dynasties in whose name they functioned.

This pattern would continue under the following centuries of Muslim power. It would not be broken, basically, until British colonial rule over the subcontinent was consolidated in the late nineteenth century.

5 Dār-ul-Islām

A new message

Tradition has it that, in AD 610, an Arab merchant named Muhammad was visited, while meditating in a cave in the hills behind Mecca, by the Archangel Gabriel, who told the shocked and at first disbelieving man that he had been chosen to receive, and pass on, God's final message to humanity. There followed the first of a series of divine revelations vouchsafed to the Messenger over the next two decades, initially in Mecca and then, after the emigration of 622, in Medina. Faithfully recorded by Muhammad's early followers, these insights were later gathered together and rendered into book form as the Qur'an, or 'recitation'. The world had a new creed. It spread quickly, indeed more quickly than any previous religion had done. By the beginning of the eighth century, it had reached the shores of the subcontinent. By 1600, perhaps one in every ten persons living in South Asia was a professing Musalman.¹ Today, the region is home to the largest concentration of Muslims on the planet.

How and why did this seismic shift in the Indian religious landscape come about? Over the hundred-odd years that this vexed question has been debated within the context of modern scholarship, broadly two types of explanation have been proffered, the simple and the complex. However, before taking these up, we need to clarify a common point of ambiguity. When we speak of the 'spread of Islam', we are talking not of one process but two: religious transmission; and the transplantation of Muslim power – what is sometimes called 'Islamicisation'. The two, as we shall show, are *linked*; but they are not the same, and South Asia offers a very clear demonstration of their divergence. Since Islam came to India from the Middle East, its imprint should have been greatest in the north and west, least in the east and south. But modern demographic evidence paints a somewhat muddier picture. When the first all-Indian census was taken in 1871, it revealed, to the surprise of many contemporaries, significant pockets of Muslims in southern India (notably in the Malabar District) and Muslim majorities in Bengal and Kashmir. These were among the last areas of South Asia to fall under Muslim governance, and they formed the furthest frontiers in India of Islamic military and political expansion. Sent to govern Bengal in the mid-sixteenth century, Zahid Beg protested that no better place could have been found to ensure that he suffered

an early death.² Moreover, Muslims did not wait for the banners of Islam to be unfurled to go there; they entered the Kashmir Valley a good fifty years before it became a Muslim province, and colonised the ports of the peninsular coasts while the region was still under the rule of the Hindu Cholas. In the latter case, the Faithful were simply doing what their Arab forebears had done, tracking the flow of ocean commerce and plugging into ‘the region’s wide-ranging maritime trading networks’.³ On the face of it, these sharp disjunctures undercut the importance of the force factor: ‘if Islamization had ever been a function of military or political force’, Richard Eaton reasons, ‘. . . those areas [of India] exposed most intensively to rule by Muslim dynasties would in modern times contain the greatest number of Muslims’.⁴

Other areas, though, as Eaton notes, *did* experience sustained and lasting political penetration by Muslim armies and states. This was the South Asian variant of a process of expansion that goes back to the very beginnings of the history of the religion, when the infant Islamic community (*umma*) at Medina came under savage retributive attack by affronted and booty-lusting Bedouin forces loyal to the Quraysh tribal leaders of Mecca. Faced with extermination the Muslims raised an army. It proved a formidable instrument, not just for defence, but for expansion: sustained by religious zeal, and capably led (often from the front) by the Prophet, it inflicted a series of defeats on the tribes that climaxed in the taking of Mecca in 630; then, after Muhammad’s death, it was unleashed on the settled regions of Palestine, Syria, Persia and North Africa – a wildly ambitious strategy given that two great empires, the Byzantine and the Sassanid, stood in the way, but which, again, for reasons that are still the subject of much contention, succeeded totally, with Iraq falling in 635, Palestine and Mesopotamia in 637, and Egypt in 641. A second phase of this war of conquest, some think designed to push Islamic power as far as China by way of a gigantic pincer movement north and south of the Himalayan spine, saw an invasion of Sind, and the establishment there, in 711, of the first Muslim state in the subcontinent.

One motive, perhaps the principal one, for these far-reaching military campaigns, was the command given to Muhammad by Allah to disseminate his final message among humankind. The Prophet’s successors, the so-called Righteous Caliphs, declared that they were engaged in a *jihād*, or ‘struggle’ in the path of God, which some contemporaries and most later critics interpreted as meaning a ‘holy war’. And it cannot be doubted that many who fought in the campaigns did so in the firm expectation that, if they were killed, they would receive the reward promised in the Qur’an to martyrs – an immediate translation to Paradise. At the same time, the mantle of *ghāzī*, ‘warrior in defence of Islam’, sat easily on the shoulders of martial nomadic peoples accustomed to blood-feuds – such as the Arabs and the Turks (who later on carried the flag of Islam to northern India). ‘Ala’uddin Ghuri, a Turkish convert who laid waste to Afghanistan, was known as the ‘world burner’;⁵ and Sultan Shihabuddin, who consolidated Muslim rule over Kashmir during the fourteenth century, is described in a contemporary chronicle as a man

‘infused with a zeal for . . . destroying the temples and idols of the infidels’.⁶ However, if *jihād* was sometimes employed for less than noble purposes by men eager for glory and killing, it proved a highly efficacious tool for bringing new Muslims into the fold. Victorious armies at this time were universally cruel towards captives; enslavement was their usual fate. Still, the Qur’an urged leniency: ‘if they repent and are firm in devotion [as new converts to Islam] then let them go their way’.⁷ As the Arab armies swept across the Middle East and North Africa, many of the vanquished evidently chose this path. According to Persian sources, ‘forced’ conversions, in the context of military campaigns, occurred in India too.⁸

Paralleling this simple explanation focused on power, and somewhat at odds with it, is another that posits the peaceful spread of the faith through voluntary conversion. It, too, has a solid logical foundation. Islam has many attractions. It emphasises brotherhood and equality, and advises the cultivation of noble values such as patience, generosity and humility; its rules, which include dietary restrictions, an obligation upon believers to pray five times a day at appointed hours and fast during the month of Ramadan (when Gabriel first appeared to Muhammad), the payment of a religious tax, and Abrahamic injunctions against killing and adultery, are clear and relatively few; and it holds out the promise that, on Judgement Day, the pious will inherit a bountiful afterlife in Paradise, described in the Qur’an as a place filled with ‘fruit-laden’ trees, and ‘gushing’ springs, and fowls ready to eat, and ‘virgins full of love’,⁹ a fate that many (especially, perhaps, men) may well have seen as a more pleasant fate than an endless succession of rebirths. Moreover, becoming a Muslim is rather easy. It requires, essentially, the recitation of the *kalima*, the profession that there is ‘no god but God and Muhammad is the Prophet of God’. ‘This simple creed’, Sir Thomas Arnold wrote in his classic study of the proselytisation of Islam, ‘demands no great trial of faith . . . and is within the compass of the meanest intelligence’.¹⁰ Although one might cavil at Arnold’s condescension, the religion *is* easily comprehended. Also, its teachings are easily accessible, being contained, to all intents and purposes, in one book. Eaton reminds us, intriguingly, that the spread of Islam into Bengal coincided with the diffusion there of the technology of paper-making.¹¹ Another alluring feature of Islam, for many, was the institution of congregational worship. When Sa’id bin Hasan, a native of Alexandria, entered a mosque for the first time in 1298, he was overcome by a ‘deep feeling of awe’, which intensified as the Friday communal prayers began. ‘I was mightily uplifted’, he confessed, ‘for the rows of the Muslims appeared to me like rows of angels.’ He converted that day.¹² Anecdotal evidence suggests that many Indians may have been similarly affected. Lastly, the ritual practices enjoined by Islam with regard to diet and bodily functions (for example, defecation) and the general requirement that males be circumcised ‘had the effect of making members constantly recognisable to one another’;¹³ this would have reinforced communal bonding, and made it more difficult for converts to recant. The message was a powerful one; and for the most part, in India at least, it

was well served by its emissaries. To a greater extent than in most other regions where Islam eventually took hold, in South Asia the selling of the message to the masses was left to Sufis, Islamic mystics, originally lonely and isolated seekers after truth, but by the start of the second millennium organised into a number of hierarchically structured missionary orders, among which the Qadiri, the Kubrawi, the Qalandar and, especially, the Chishti came to preponderate in the subcontinent. And Sufis were the ideal missionaries for India because they expressed their piety in ways that people within the Brahmanical tradition could easily relate to. Mainstream, or Sunni, Muslims are required to obey God's laws as revealed to them by the Prophet; Sufis do not reject this obligation but they also strive to achieve a direct understanding of God's purposes by forging a personal relationship with Him based on love; to that end they employ a variety of mind-liberating techniques such as the repeated chanting of the holy name (*dhikr*), 'whirling' and asceticism (Sufi means 'wool', a reference to the coarse garments favoured by early practitioners). Firdausi Sufi master Shaikh Sharifuddin Manyari, who worked in Bihar in the late fourteenth century, told his students that they could expect to become 'emaciated by devotional aspiration'.¹⁴ The Sufi gospel of love thus had much in common with *bhakti*; and Hindus and Buddhists are acculturated to admire renouncers. Also, given to introspection, the Sufis liked to locate their *khānqāhs* or 'refuges' in remote settings; in India this preference led them to opt for small towns or villages rather than established centres of Islam, which enhanced their access to the local population.¹⁵ And it helped, too, that some Sufis gained a reputation as powerful miracle-workers. Mir Saiyyid 'Ali Hamadani, who proselytised in Kashmir in the 1380s, was said to have caused a levitating priest of Kali to plummet to the ground; the traveller Ibn Battuta says he saw a Sufi of the Haydarī order plunge into a hot fire and emerge with not the trace of a burn on his shirt.¹⁶ We know that many Indians were seduced by the charisma of these Sufi adepts, since even to this day the tombs of famous *pīrs* remain a popular destination for Hindu pilgrims.

There is a vein of truth, then, in both these simple models. But they beg important questions. Was the spreading of the faith through force mandatory; and how, in practice, was it prosecuted? How was Islam explained and 'sold' to peoples lacking any ethnic or cultural connection to the Arabic world, and who had no knowledge of Arabic, the sacred language? Did the coming of Islam to the subcontinent provide opportunities outside and beyond the spiritual realm? Modern research has gone some way to answering these questions by complicating the simple paradigms expounded above.

Much of this new work has concentrated on rethinking the process of conversion: was a formulaic recitation of the *kalima* really sufficient to make someone a Muslim? Did the Indian converts who went through this induction process fully understand the spiritual commitment implicit in the words? Did they realise that embracing Islam might carry a price? Or did they expect that life would go on pretty much as before? Most scholars now think that

conversion was rarely instantaneous, that it typically involved, at first, only a shallow commitment to the new faith, and that the consequences were generally more social than spiritually transformative. In part, this is because, as noted above, the sources for the new religion were veiled to most Indians by the barrier of language; for a long time, aspiring converts had to make do with what they were told. Frustrated by this lack, some Bengali noviciates appealed to their instructors to translate basic texts into the vernacular to allow them to ‘perform duties according to scriptures’,¹⁷ and eventually this was done; but other Sufi *pīrs* refused to impugn their beloved religion by dissociating it from its Arabic and Persian roots, and the latter found the going tough. Even the renowned Saiyyid Hamadani conceded that the Kashmiri peasants he was trying to convert had difficulty grasping the meaning of his lectures.¹⁸ As for the pious Muslims of the cities, many remained sceptical of the whole Sufi missionary enterprise, and advised keeping religious instruction to the bare minimum for all non-elites: ‘the mean and the lowborn [should learn] . . . nothing more than the mandates about prayer, fasting, alms-giving, and the pilgrimage to Mecca, along with some chapters of the Qur’an’, wrote one fourteenth-century luminary.¹⁹ But, if the message was often lost in non-translation, it also struggled to retain its integrity within the Indian cultural environment. Indians were steeped in mythology; they were used to encountering new gods and ingesting heroic sagas about such gods; so, when Muslim missionaries told them about Allah and how he had chosen Muhammad to be his representative on earth, and about the martial exploits of the Righteous Caliphs, Indians had no trouble relating to these stories. However, they put their own gloss on them. Allah became yet another god requiring supplication; the Prophet was taken to be an *avatāra*, sent down from heaven to restore righteousness; the Caliphs were given Kshatriya genealogies. What they found much harder to accept was the idea that Islam was unique, that it, alone, projected God’s truth. Accordingly, Islam took hold much more readily when it was proselytised by local agents and through the medium of vernacular languages and cultural forms. For instance, the Ishma‘ilis won many Sindhi Hindus to their version of Islam by proclaiming that ‘Ali, the fourth Caliph, was the long-awaited tenth incarnation of Vishnu. In Bengal, the project to make Islam more marketable by localising it reached its apogee with Saiyyid Sultan’s late sixteenth-century poetic retelling of the Qur’anic story of human evolution, which has the first man, Adam, alighting on an island in the Bay of Bengal and being instructed by the Archangel Gabriel to start tilling the rich lands of the Ganges delta.²⁰ It is hard, though, to know quite how to assess the contribution of these ‘cultural mediators’. On the one hand, it is probable that, without them, the message of Islam would never have penetrated as far as it did; clearly, their interventions were crucial to the eventual Islamicisation of eastern Bengal; on the other, they ensured that the ‘cult of Allah’, to use Eaton’s phrase,²¹ would remain, for generations, a work in progress. Still, if becoming Muslim in Bengal initially meant little more than ‘moving out of

one community to another’,²² the fact that Muslims for a long time remained blind to religious boundaries may well have helped insulate the society from systemic communal conflict (a point we shall return to in [Chapter 7](#)).

The debate continues. Nonetheless, most scholars are of the view that Islam took hold in the Indian subcontinent as a result of missionary efforts of one kind or another. The simple explanation that it was imposed through conquest has been largely dismissed on the grounds that little evidence of Muslim rulers or military commanders attempting to coerce subjugated populations to convert has been found. Despite that, we would like to argue that power *did* play an important role in the *process of Islamicisation* in India – a concept, bear in mind, that has a wider application than just ‘conversion’.

Political authority, backed by military force, was essential to the establishment of a proper Muslim society, a *dār-ul-Islām*. An ‘abode of Islam’ needed mosques, *dargāhs* (tombs) and *madrāsas*; it needed jurists learned in the *sharī‘a*, the holy law; it needed, above all, to be safe and secure, free from any impediments to worship. States ruled over by Muslims, sultanates, provided these requisites. Muslim regimes in India spent lavishly on religious infrastructure and on stipends for Islamic scholars and teachers. Firuz Tughluq, the Sultan of Delhi (r. 1351–88) gifted land for Sufi *khānqāhs*, oversaw the building of four mosques, and a *madrasa*, and founded scores of new Muslim settlements, two of which, Hissar and Jaunpur, grew into large towns. Sultan Sikandar of Kashmir (r. 1389–1413), known as the ‘idol-breaker’, endowed land and houses to ‘*ulamā*, and Sufis (such as Saiyyid Hamadani) built rest-houses for pilgrims, and commissioned an architect from Persia to design a new Jama Masjid for his capital, Srinagar, which still stands. Bahmani Sultan Ahmad (r. 1422–36), had a vast *dargāh* erected over the grave at Gulbarga of Gesu Daraz, the Sufi *pīr* who had helped him win power.²³ Other examples could be cited. Further, India’s sultanates drew people like magnets. Muslims from across the Islamic world sought their patronage and protection. Artisans came, and writers, and Sufis. In 1393, 300 Saiyyids arrived in Srinagar;²⁴ during the reign of ‘Adil Shahi Sultan Ibrahim II ‘thousands of musicians’, along with similar numbers of Sufis, scribes, artists, poets and calligraphers, are said to have flocked to his capital at Bijapur.²⁵ The immigrants came from Arabia and Mesopotamia, even Abyssinia, but especially from Persia and Central Asia. Iranians were particularly in demand because Persian had become the *lingua franca* of the Islamicate, and a talisman of high civilisation. ‘The Courts of the Indian Mahometan kings are full of them’, reported the French jeweller Chardin, who passed through Tehran in 1609. ‘As soon as any of them are well established, they send for their families and friends, who go willingly where fortune invites them.’ India, he added, was reputed to be a ‘most plentyful’ place.²⁶

Not all were economic migrants, however; at various times, refugees swelled their ranks, as when, during the thirteenth century, Delhi became a haven for Central Asian escapees from the hordes of Chinggis Khan and Persians fleeing

Baghdad after its sack by his son, Hulagu. Also, we should not assume that Indian sultans were just passive beneficiaries of this human tide; they manipulated it. Enterprising rulers actively recruited professionals, and distinguished scholars, to fill administrative gaps and add to the lustre of their courts; and when, as periodically happened, immigrant numbers outran the capacity of existing cities, pressure was applied to encourage them to move on, which led to the establishment of new Muslim settlements within and sometimes beyond the Islamicate. Notably, during the reign of Muhammad bin Tughluq (1325–51) around 10 per cent of the Muslims living in Delhi were forcibly relocated over several years to Devagiri, to spearhead the Sultan's strategy of southerly expansion.²⁷ Political power facilitated the disbursement of Muslim populations, and these outflows, in turn, helped extend the sway of India's Islamic states. While historians of the Middle East and North Africa have long appreciated the key role that this 'internal frontier' played in the dynamic of Islamic expansion, studies of India have chosen to emphasise instead the factor of conversion, on the ground that most South Asian Muslims, today, are considered to be descended from converts. We believe that the colonisation of the hinterland of the subcontinent 'by urban residents who were already Muslim',²⁸ and who, of course, also spawned generations of descendants, warrants equal, if not greater, emphasis, because, in the new political conditions introduced by the Islamic conquest, they represented something of an elite.

Finally, although Indian rulers appear to have eschewed, almost universally, the way of *jihād*, the establishment of powerful Islamic states in northern India and the Deccan contributed materially to the work of conversion. On the one hand, these states provided financial and other support to the preaching of the Sufis. On the other, their reputation for munificence prompted some elite Indians to convert voluntarily in the knowledge that, as Muslims, they would pay less tax and be eligible for senior positions in the military and at court that would otherwise be out of reach. Sultan Firuz Shah of Delhi, for instance, persuaded a number of Brahmans and Rajputs to embrace Islam by rewarding them with 'presents and honours';²⁹ while '24,000 staunch infidels' were induced to convert during the reign of Sultan Muhammad Shah of Kashmir by what a chronicler of the time dubbed, euphemistically, 'elaborate arrangements'.³⁰ And, at the other end of the social scale, tens of thousands of low-born Hindus became Muslims as a result of their taking employment as servants and menials in royal and aristocratic households (though it would be a stretch to call such conversions voluntary). Islam caught on among Indians partly because it 'was the religion of the politically dominant',³¹ which not only endowed it with glamour and the trappings of majesty, but may have suggested to some that the Qur'an spoke truly in claiming that Allah the Merciful watched out for the interests of the Faithful.

The sultanates, then, played a crucial role in the Islamicisation of Medieval India. Nevertheless, important as it was, that achievement was actually quite incidental to their main *raison d'être*.

Mosque and throne

The template for all future Muslim states was inscribed, at the very beginning of Islamic history, in far-off Medina. Specifically, the pattern was carved out by Muhammad, who combined in his person three offices that, in complex societies, are usually filled separately: those of Prophet, community leader, and ‘Commander of the Faithful’ in the field. This led to a blurring of the lines, but also an ordering. Muhammad made it clear that he was first and foremost the Messenger of God and that his other more secular roles were accessory to his religious mission. Accordingly, government came to be seen in the Muslim world as a necessary if slightly unsavoury device to ensure that Muslims obeyed God and kept the rules prescribed by the religion. Political power had to be acquired, and used, in order to put things right. As the medieval jurist al-Marwadi noted wryly, quoting a Hadith of the Prophet: ‘God restrains more through the sultan than the Qur’an’.³² Thus, when Muhammad died, in June 632, the inner circle at Medina hastened to choose a new leader to defend the community and the religion; one of his first Companions, Abu Bakr, was selected. He took the title of *khalīfa*, or ‘deputy’, which acknowledged that, while he, and those who followed him in the office, had no prophetic claim, they had rightfully, by dint of consensus, inherited all his secular roles along with, very importantly, his supreme authority over the community. The consensus, as such, did not last long; it broke down when the fourth caliph, ‘Ali, the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, was murdered in 661. Thereafter, most successions were decided by force of arms, a development that led the ‘partisans of ‘Ali’, or Shi‘as, to turn aside completely from the institution in favour of a different conception of leadership grounded in the idea that Muhammad had imparted to ‘Ali additional secret knowledge of God’s design. Nonetheless, most Muslims, those who would come to be known as Sunnis, continued to regard the Caliph as their rightful ruler, regardless of his antecedents.

Accordingly, in Sunni Islam at least, a distinction is acknowledged between sacred and secular authority, even if both are squarely underpinned by the Qur’anic injunction to ‘Obey God and obey the Prophet and those among you who hold authority’,³³ which was interpreted to mean, initially, the caliphs, and later Muslim rulers generally. However, this distinction never evolved, as it did in the Christian West, into a doctrine of the separation of religion and politics. Rather, the two came to be seen as inextricably and harmoniously linked, an ideal articulated succinctly and emphatically by the traveller, scholar, polymath and commentator, al-Biruni, early in the eleventh century. The state, he wrote:

[necessarily] rests in some degree on religion; these *twins*, state and religion, are in perfect harmony, and their union represents the highest development of human society, all that man can possibly desire.³⁴

This idea of the interpenetration of religion and state was sustainable in Islam because, as noted above, the function of Muslim governance was primarily to support the faith. It was to protect the *umma* and uphold the sacred law, the *sharī'a*.³⁵ As a natural corollary to the inseparability of the *sharī'a* from religion, the triangular axis of the state, law and religion came to be generally viewed, within the various schools of Islamic jurisprudence, as inseparable, and this too is the popular understanding of Muslim believers, even to the present day.

Yet it was just as well that the persistence of these principles did not render the Islamic polity inert and incapable of change, for it soon had to deal with a number of new challenges, most of them, ironically, a consequence of its own runaway expansion, which saw the religion take root across parts of the old Byzantine Empire and in North Africa, Iran, Central Asia and India. These places all had a significantly more complex political, social and cultural make-up than the Arabs were used to, and the rich and hoary Persian civilisation in particular proved difficult to assimilate, though the Shi'as eventually found the soil there more congenial than did the Sunnis. At the same time, the polity had to take account of the changing nature of the office of caliph; under the Umayyads (661–748) and the Abbasids (749–1258), it became increasingly dynastic and kingly, tendencies that sat awkwardly with the prescriptions of *sharī'a*. And, last but not least, the growing size of the Islamicate presented a huge logistical challenge given that long-distance travel during these times was difficult and slow. Put simply, the caliphate in its original form could not be sustained.

Two types of adaptation ensued. First, on the practical side, political power within the Islamicate became decentralised. Outlying areas (such as Sind) were given over to the control of governors, initially caliphal appointees, but, as time went by, more and more self-made warlords. Nominally deputies of the caliph, the tyranny of distance permitted these *sultāns* and *amīrs* to act independently. Further, given this imperative, the theory of Islamic governance was quietly and pragmatically expanded to make room for sultanates in the divinely sanctioned political order. Key figures in this tactical revisionism were the aforementioned Baghdad-based jurist al-Marwadi (974–1058), who argued that the rulers of the successor states could justly lay claim to the loyalty of Muslims in their territories because they exercised legal authority as delegates of the Abbasid Caliphate, and the Sufi philosopher and teacher Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111), who declared in his *Nasīhat al-Mulūk*, addressed to the Seljuk Sultan Sunjar bin Malik, that the latter was entitled to exercise 'constituent authority' because he had been formally appointed by the caliph and had taken an oath of allegiance to him.³⁶ Of course, it was mainly pretence, but it held up for want of a more durable arrangement; indeed, it continued to be trotted out occasionally long after the caliphate had been brought crashing down by the Mongols. Significantly, though, after the sack of Baghdad, the term *khilāfat* began to be used in Muslim circles as a synonym for kingdom.³⁷

The sultans who came to power in South Asia not unnaturally took the question of their legitimacy very seriously, and most of them were happy to exploit the convenient fiction that they were anointed agents of the caliphate. All the thirteenth-century Turkic sultans of Delhi had the reigning Abbasid caliph's name inscribed on their coins and, after the fall of the Abbasids in 1258, Sultan Muhammad bin Tughluq made contact with a descendant of the family who had fled to Egypt and assumed the caliphal title, which led to his being invested by an emissary from Cairo in 1344. Thirteen years later, another envoy bestowed the title 'Chief of the Sultans' on his successor Firuz.³⁸ Others, alternatively, attempted to establish a connection to the Prophet and the exemplary community of early Medina. The Turkic-Mongol family who seized power in Delhi in 1414 styled themselves Saiyyids (a name that asserted that they were descended from the line of the Prophet himself); while the founder of the Bahmani kingdom, Hasan Bahmani Shah, reputedly justified his rise to power by comparing it to the passing of Muhammad's mantle to Abu Bakr and, thence, in an uninterrupted line of succession, to his contemporary and patron, the Chishti Shaikh Zainuddin Shirazi (d. 1369).³⁹ But Islamic rulers also needed to be accepted as legitimate sovereigns by their subjects or, at least, by those elements of the Muslim population that were powerful enough to pose a threat if they chose to go down that road. And especially important in this respect were the religious elites, including the *imāms* who led the Friday prayers, and the '*ulamā*, jurists and scholars respected for their knowledge of the sacred law. The inclusion of the ruler's name in the *khuṭba*, the sermon delivered each Friday by the *imām*, was the most public and weighty signifier of the legality, according to Islamic norms, of his sovereignty. As for the '*ulamā*, their acknowledged right to pronounce on the lawfulness of state policies made them at once potentially useful allies and dangerous opponents; indeed, some law schools speculated that the accession of an Islamic king was not valid until it had been confirmed by a vote of prominent scholars. Ruling an Islamic state, any state, is not possible without at least the tacit backing of the dominant groups in society. For the rulers of medieval India, winning and holding the support of the religious elites was thus a major objective.

In theory, it should not have been difficult: mosque and throne were supposed to form a partnership. Muslims were required to obey their sultan, almost regardless of his virtues. Al-Ghazali advised, reluctantly:

An evil-doing and barbarous sultan, so long as he is supported by military force, so that he can only with difficulty be deposed and [at the cost of] . . . unendurable civil strife, must of necessity be left in possession and obedience must be rendered to him . . . the function of government in the various lands is carried out by means of Sultans, who owe allegiance to the Caliph . . . And whosoever exercises [that] independent authority, so long as he shows allegiance to the Caliph in the matter of his prerogatives

of the *khutba* and coinage, the same is a sultan, whose commands and judgements are valid in the several parts of the earth.⁴⁰

Ibn Taimiya (d. 1328), the respected Syrian jurist, agreed. Civil disobedience amounting to *fitna* ('sedition') was an 'unforgivable sin', permissible only where a ruler was guilty of violating sacred injunctions of the Qur'an and *sunna* (literally 'trodden path', but used by Muslims as a term for the exemplary practices of the Prophet).⁴¹ In turn, rulers were required to protect the religion, and its servants, and enforce *sharī'a*. For most sultans, even the less zealous ones, this 'eternal covenant between God and kings'⁴² presented no problem. First, the *sharī'a* was itself a very robust instrument of social control, and a powerful tool for restraining the restive nobility. Second, by the late medieval period, the majority of the schools of Islamic jurisprudence had embraced the notion that the law needed to be interpreted in the light of circumstance, and with regard to custom, that is to say, more flexibly, and had identified several intellectual strategies – consensual (*ijmā'*), analogical (*qiyās*) and rationalist (*ijtihād*) – for making judgments of that kind. Studies of the judiciary in the Sultanate period are few, but an analysis of rulings made by *qāzīs* attached to the court of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb suggest that they were informed, only superficially, by *sharī'a*, and gave far more weight to local custom.⁴³ Conservatives all, the architects of these innovations did not, for a minute, imagine they were ushering in a radical departure. Hadn't Allah revealed that he had sent Prophets to many countries, and gifted to each of them laws appropriate to their 'times and climes'? Nevertheless, they had a significant impact. In making the *sharī'a* more relevant but narrower in its purview, they reduced its capacity to serve (as theory dictated) as a check on royal despotism, by leaving more legal room for the enactment of secular regulations. While some rulers used this added licence to extend the reach of the state for utilitarian and even humanitarian purposes, others, such as Delhi Sultan 'Ala'uddin Khalji, exploited it to crush all who stood in their way. According to Sunni commentator Ziauddin Barani (c.1285–1357), 'Ala'uddin 'would inflict on opponents, real or suspected, cruelties not perpetrated [before] under any religion or faith.'⁴⁴ It was in this context that Sultan Firuz Tughluq was prepared to have a list of *sharī'a* laws inscribed for the edification of the public on a tower near the main mosque of Delhi, and Sultan Muhammad Shah of Kashmir could promise, in all sincerity, that public affairs during his reign would be conducted strictly according to the holy law.

Also, both sides saw advantages in forging a partnership. For the religious elites, becoming accredited to a court meant financial security, and access to influential men and women who could help them spread God's word. Invitations were highly prized. Barani, whose father, uncle and grandfather had all served the Delhi Sultanate, keenly aspired to follow them; recruited as an adviser to Sultan Muhammad bin Tughluq, he spent almost seventeen years in the inner sanctums of imperial power; was exiled from the court after Muhammad's death; and spent the rest of his life lobbying fruitlessly for his

banishment to be reversed. Not surprisingly, his famous work *Fatāwā-i-Jahāndārī*, written during this time, is quite bitter on the subject of royal vices, yet it still manages to recommend ‘gifts’ to ‘*ulamā*’ as a method of ‘expiation’.⁴⁵ Moreover, some of the religious professionals who found favour went on to make a mark on government policy. Barani says he did, though we need perhaps to treat his claims with a grain of salt. Hamadani took Sultan Qutbuddin of Kashmir under his wing and, according to a recent study, came to exercise a ‘complete’ sway over the mind of his protégé, which he used to get other Saiyyids posted to judicial and other offices in the sultanate and funds allocated for the endowment of *khānqāhs*.⁴⁶ A pious man, Sultan Firuz Shah nonetheless probably ordered the death, by burning, of a Brahman accused of blasphemy to appease his religious advisers. Not a particularly pious man, Sultan Muhammad ibn Tughluq made a very public pilgrimage to the shrine of the Chishti master Shaikh Muinuddin Chishti (d. 1236) at Ajmer, and helped carry the coffin of another Chishti saint, Nizamuddin of Delhi (1238–1325), to its last resting place.⁴⁷ And, from 1342 to 1532, fourteen successive sultans of Bengal pledged fealty to a local line of Sufi masters.⁴⁸ But the state, too, benefited from such gestures. The Sufis were widely venerated, and when a ruler was blessed by a prominent shaikh, people everywhere took notice. Likewise, religious patronage generally (so long as it was directed towards Islamic institutions) was deemed by most Muslims a proper and worthy objective of governance. Cooperation between ‘mosque’ and ‘throne’ paid mutual dividends.

Yet, inevitably, there were some tensions. During the reign of the second sultan of Delhi, Iltutmish (r. 1210–36), Saiyyid Nuruddin Mubarak Ghaznawi, a scholar who rose to the exalted position of the *Shaikh ul-Islām* of Delhi, publicly vented his displeasure at the ‘state laws’ that had been introduced by the Sultan, and at the conduct and etiquettes of Iltutmish and other contemporary rulers, which he declared ‘contrary’ to the principles of the *sharī‘a*. A later occupant of the throne of Delhi, Ghiyasuddin Balban (r. 1266–87), let it be known that theologians were not welcome at court. Other sultans listened politely to their *qāzīs* then followed their own inclinations. Bahmani Sultan Firuz (r. 1397–1422) fell out with the Chishti saint Gesu Daraz. Muhammad bin Tughluq quarrelled with another Chishti shaikh, Nasiruddin Chiragh-i Dilhi, and forced others of the order to vacate Delhi for Daulatabad.⁴⁹ The attachment of some ‘*ulamā*’ to the idea that government should rest on a contract between the caliph and the community, which they derived from the famous Hadith (saying) of the Prophet that ‘my *umma* shall never agree together upon an error’, was a persistent source of friction.

Further complicating the situation was the progressive assimilation of older, pre-Islamic concepts of absolutist monarchy, chiefly from Persia, into the polity. During the tenure of the ‘Abbasid Dynasty, the ancient Iranian text *Mirror for Princes* was translated into Arabic; several Islamised versions were published by caliphal scholars. These, in turn, inspired others to take up their pens. The result was a new genre of ethics (*akhlāq*), which became highly

popular throughout the Persianised world.⁵⁰ Its common theme was the celebration of the achievements of monarchy, and its chief model in that respect was the mighty pre-Islamic kingdom of Sassanid Persia. Firdawsi's epic portrayal of the Sassanid emperors in his *Shāhnāma*, completed in 1010, is now considered the classic of the form. Beyond that, though, and even more controversially, the *akhlāq* literature asserted that rulers had to be judged by a different standard because they were divinely anointed and answerable only to Allah. On the basis of this philosophical mandate, the later 'Abbasids began styling themselves as God's 'deputies'. After the collapse of the Caliphate in the thirteenth century, the theme was picked up by Saljuq Turk sultans of Central Asia, and thence by the so-called Slave Dynasty of Delhi after 1206, whose two most illustrious members, Iltutmish and Balban, claimed descent from an ancient line of Turanian kings, described themselves as 'shadows' of God, and cultivated a mantle of charisma. As Balban put it, mellifluously, 'the king's heart is the mirror of the divine attributes'.⁵¹ Subsequent sultans pushed the Persian monarchical style still further, making prostration a mandatory part of court protocol, and surrounding themselves with harems. Similar daring innovations were introduced at the courts of the Shi'a rulers of the medieval Deccan.

'To what extent did the Sufis cooperate with those who wielded political power?' Annemarie Schimmel asks.⁵² It is a tricky question. A sampling of the many hagiographic accounts of the lives of the Indian Sufi masters would suggest that Sufis not only served as advisers to numerous Indian rulers, but were willing *allies* in their policy of bolstering state power through territorial expansion and, indeed, were active *agents* of that expansionism. Certainly, the narratives of the Chishti saints read that way. According to the narrative of the Bahmani court poet 'Abdul Malik 'Isami, behind every successful Indian ruler was a Sufi shaikh; the kings might appear to run things but actually their Sufi 'protectors' held the reins. More particularly, 'Isami attributed the repulsion of the Mongols from the gates of Delhi in 1329 by Muhammad bin Tughluq to the charismatic power of the shrine of the founder of the Chishti order at Ajmer, granted to him as a special boon. Another account has Shaikh Nizamuddin, the head of the order at Delhi, remarking cavalierly in response to an inquiry from a visitor as to whether it was true that the Chishtis had helped procure Muhammad's peaceful accession: 'We have given him the kingdom.'⁵³ Such claims, and the apparent willingness of contemporary Indian Muslims to give credence to them, have led some scholars to suggest that the Chishti organisation played an important role during the medieval period in the 'launching of new Indo-Muslim states'.⁵⁴

But is this evidence that the political was in thrall to the religious? We don't think so. Take the point about state formation. Granted that the Chishtis, especially, appear to have given material assistance to a number of state projects of expansion – for example, Muhammad's push into the Deccan – both by giving their blessing to such projects, and, in some cases, personally participating in them, whose interests did these projects mainly serve?

Religious ends may have been served too, but there were easier and better ways to make converts, as the Sufis well knew from their long experience in the field, ways that did not involve the mediation of a brutish army (see above).

Also, it seems to us pretty clear that the religious elites could not afford openly to defy the authority of the state, since in the event of a confrontation the state was bound to prevail. It held most of the best cards. It may have been less morally powerful, but it had the support of thousands of armed men. And it had other resources too, especially money, which could be used to procure clients and purchase the silence of dissidents. The sultans of Bijapur, for instance, as Richard Eaton explains, ‘absorbed’ influential Sufis ‘into its fold’ by awarding rich land grants to the custodians of the tombs of deceased Sufi saints, which in turn afforded them an excuse to keep a watchful eye on the *sajjāda-nashīns* (the custodians of the tombs) and their acolytes.⁵⁵

Bruce Lawrence summarises the current scholarly consensus on the relationship between the state and the religious elites thus. It was a relationship, he says, ‘fraught with tension’ but one, nevertheless, whose ‘most frequent outcome’, at least with respect to the sultan–Sufi nexus, was ‘cooperation’. ‘That tradition continued throughout the Delhi Sultanate as well as in other parts of India, but it did not [significantly] supplant or erase the implicit rivalry between these two repositories of public authority.’⁵⁶

We have no quarrel with this finely balanced judgement; nonetheless we venture to offer two qualifications.

First, the term ‘cooperation’ implies that religious elites were keen to engage with the state. Some were, certainly; but others were not. Contemporaries often differentiated between two broad categories of ‘*ulamā*’, ‘*ulamā-i sū*’ (or ‘spiritual’ ‘*ulamā*’) and ‘*ulamā-i duniyā*’ (or ‘worldly’ ‘*ulamā*’). The former had a reputation for holding fast to their beliefs regardless of political pressure; the latter were thought to be more willing to compromise in the interests of consensus, and open to judicial or other state appointments. Likewise, a range of attitudes to the state and mundane affairs prevailed among the Sufis. Once the Sufis had shunned the material world altogether; by the late medieval period that extreme form of asceticism had given way to a more monastic type of discipline, but some orders still preferred to keep to themselves and others, such as the Shattari, remained firmly wedded to the mystical path. Even al-Ghazali, a moderate in this regard, occasionally warned his fellow Sufis against seeking contacts with royalty. In their willingness to establish close personal and administrative relationships with secular rulers, the Chishtis were somewhat atypical.

Second, it seems to us that, where cooperation occurred, it was nearly always on the state’s terms. India’s Muslim governments put into effect many policies and practices that flouted the spirit, if not the letter, of *sharī‘a*. Some of these – the supplementing of the sacred law by statutes and customary laws and the adoption of pretentious regal forms by the sultans – have already been noted. Another sharp break with tradition occurred in 1503, when Bijapur ruler Yusuf Adil Khan issued an edict promulgating the Shi‘a form of Islam as the

official religion of his state, a lead followed subsequently by several other Deccani rulers. All of these changes were formally opposed – but eventually accepted as *faits accomplis* – by the orthodox. Zia Barani vigorously denounced both the assumption of kingly pretensions by the sultans of Delhi and the willingness of his fellow courtiers to indulge them, even to the extent of prostrating themselves in the royal presence. But that did not stop him from seeking official patronage. As for the Sunni *‘ulamā* at the court of Bijapur, they were simply ‘bought off’, Daniela Bredi writes, with ‘a lavish distribution of royal favours’.⁵⁷

Islamicate India was not a Muslim theocracy. If any further evidence is needed on that point, one has only to look at how it allowed millions of non-Muslim subjects to coexist with the faithful within the boundaries of the *Dār-ul-Islām*.

Peoples of the Book

As the armies of the Righteous Caliphs swept across the Middle East, they came into contact with significant settled populations of Jews and Christians; later, in Iran, they encountered large numbers of Zoroastrians. Although there had already been a falling out with the Jews of Medina, initially Muhammad had looked to them for support against the tribal leaders of Mecca because of their religious heritage; the prophetic teachings of the Israeli prophets are faithfully recounted in the Qur’an and the Holy Book commands that they be shown respect. Similarly, Islam enjoins respect for Jesus, although it rejects (as it must) any suggestion that he was God’s son. These shared traditions, encapsulated in the expression ‘Peoples of the Book’, were taken to render Jews and Christians exempt from forced conversion. Moreover, this position sat comfortably with the oft-quoted Qur’anic injunction: ‘Let there be no compulsion in religion.’⁵⁸ Accordingly, the Medina leadership decided to extend protection, or *dhimmī* status, to the lives and properties of these fellow monotheists. In return for this guarantee, the *dhimmīs* were required to pay a tax called the *jizya*, which in spirit, if not necessarily financially, was meant to be harsh and demeaning (although some compensation was afforded, ironically, by the fact that, as non-Muslims, they did not have to pay the Islamic charitable levy, or *zakāt*, or render military service).

Initially, there was some reluctance to extend the guarantee to the Zoroastrians, on the grounds that they were sun-worshippers. But after further consideration they, too, were given dispensation as possessing a scripture that could be interpreted as monotheistic in temper. And over the following centuries some Islamic jurists, especially from the Maliki and Hanafi schools, began to argue that *all* non-Arabs should be similarly treated, even outright ‘pagans’. As it happened, the Hanafis were the dominant school in India. During the lifetime of the Sultanate, elaborate fictions were invented by leading *qāzīs* to persuade their royal masters that Hindus, Jains and Buddhists, too, should be classified as Peoples of the Book, such as that Rama and Krishna

were prophets and that Indians were ‘inwardly’ monotheists. Unlike the earlier compact made with the Jews and Christians, the so-called Covenant of ‘Umar, these legal opinions were not contractually binding on the political authorities; yet almost all Muslim rulers in India elected to regard them as such, because they resolved an intractable problem in a way that offered potentially important benefits to the Islamicate.

At its core the problem was one of numbers. As we noted above, estimates of the Muslim population of India in the late medieval period put it at about 5 per cent, rising to 10 per cent around 1600. Although the proportion may have been rather higher in the major Islamicate towns, even there Muslims would have been heavily outnumbered. In the early 1200s, the Wazir of Iltutmish likened their situation to salt in a dish. Conversion was adding to the Muslim population, but slowly. ‘Many Hindus know Islam to be a true religion’, lamented Delhi’s Nizamuddin Auliya, ‘but they do not accept it.’⁵⁹ The chances of a full-scale religious war succeeding in the subcontinent were minimal, and at the very least the waging of such a war would have put the Islamicate at considerable risk, for, even though the conquest had left no major Hindu states standing in northern India, others continued to hold out in the south, including, after 1340, the formidable Vijayanagara, and at a lower level, armed warrior lineages such as those of the Rajputs and the Kallars effectively controlled the countryside. Logistically, the case for ‘leaving well alone’ was unanswerable. Moreover, conciliating the population in this way left open the possibility of a rapprochement that would give the Islamic state access to valuable human resources. Balban reckoned that it took about 100,000 persons (officials, soldiers, menials and their dependants) to administer each of his provinces; furnishing such numbers from within the limited Muslim elite was never going to be easy, but there were plenty of non-Muslims available with equal or even superior skills and experience. Also, Hindus and Jains largely controlled the economy, especially sectors such as banking, a service crucially important to the state, given its dependence on cash advances to keep the administration afloat between harvests and to fund campaigns. Significantly, Barani says that that, when Firuz Tughluq arrived at Delhi in 1351 to claim the throne, the first people he met were the capital’s ‘market men, merchants . . . and *sarrāfs* [moneylenders]’.⁶⁰ These practical considerations, too, convinced India’s rulers to take a pragmatic line.

Accordingly, while some sultans were doubtless attracted by the idea of forging a *dīndārī*, or religious state, in the inhospitable environment of the subcontinent, only a few (notably Sikander in Kashmir) actually tried. The rest accepted that a truly Muslim state was an impossible dream. ‘I cannot [even] fulfil the duties of protecting the Faith’, Sultan Balban once confessed, in a moment of weakness.⁶² Even the zealous Barani regretfully conceded that a political compromise was the best that could be hoped for. Part of that compromise involved recognising and protecting non-Muslim liberties.

To be sure, the extent to which this was done varied from place to place and over time. However, for the most part, it seems that non-Muslims living

within the Islamicate were left free to worship in their own style. We know that, first, from the diatribes of the hardliners. Barani, for instance, writes exasperatedly that, even in Delhi, Hindus were taking out processions, sometimes within the shadow of the sultanate palace itself, replete with gongs and cymbals.⁶² Second, and perhaps more reliably, first-hand corroborative evidence has been found, in temple records, of the persistence of religious pilgrimages.⁶³ Third, at least one ruler, Bijapur Sultan Yusuf Adil Khan, made toleration an official policy when, in 1503, he issued an edict to that effect.⁶⁴ Again, the supposedly punitive *jizya* was often suspended or reduced or simply not collected, and, even when the tax *was* imposed to the hilt, it was hardly ever levied on priests or hermits or on the Brahmans as a class. As indicated above, these policies did not always meet with orthodox approval; still, the extent to which they *were* grounded in a consensus is quite remarkable. When Sultan Sikandar Lodi, a rare religious zealot, tried to extract a *fatwā* from his *qāzīs* authorising the prevention of ritual bathing by Hindu pilgrims at Thansewar, he was advised firmly that ‘old well-established religious practices’ could not be stopped.⁶⁵

Moreover, it is evident that non-Muslims were welcomed into the ranks of the rulers, indeed actively recruited. One Malik Nayak was taken into ‘Ala’uddin Khalji’s army and given command of 30,000 soldiers. He scored a signal victory over the Mongols in 1305. Muhammad bin Tughluq appointed Hindus to provincial governorships, and promoted a Brahman convert from Andhra, Maqbul, to the high position of *wazīr*, effectively making him his chief executive. Zafar Khan, son of another Hindu convert, became *sharābdār*, or ‘cupbearer’, to Firuz Shah and went on to found the Sultanate of Gujarat. During the reign of Ala’uddin Husain in Bengal, Brahmans and Kayasthas monopolised the posts of *wazīr*, commander of the sultan’s bodyguard, mint master and royal physician. Later, still more remarkably, a twelve-year-old convert, the son of a Hindu raja, was elevated to the throne of Bengal as Sultan Jalaluddin, with his father as regent.⁶⁶ Nor were such appointments always conditional on the aspirant changing his religion. Very senior ones normally were, and of course sultans had to be Muslim by definition; but there is no history of Hindus or Jains being excluded from government jobs solely for failing to convert. Indeed, we know that, in some departments such as the army, special facilities were occasionally provided to allow non-Muslim recruits to worship separately away from prying eyes.⁶⁷

Bear in mind, though, that these insights are all relatively recent: the first modern accounts of the medieval period, written a century and a half ago, painted a very different picture. Scholar-official Sir Henry Elliot, whose translations of selected Persian sources in the 1840s opened up the era to an English-speaking audience, warned his readers, in a preface, that the texts contained some grisly stories, stories of:

Hindus slain for disputing with Muhammadans, of general prohibitions against [Hindu] processions, worship and ablutions, and of other intolerant

measures, of idols mutilated, of temples razed, of forcible conversions and marriages, [and] of proscriptions and confiscations, of murders and massacres.⁶⁸

Purple prose indeed: but Elliot's bleak assessment of Muslim rule in India held Western historiography in thrall for decades. Even the sensible *Oxford History*, which appeared in 1909, creates the impression that many, if not most, of the Delhi sultans were 'worthless', 'evil', tyrannical, 'addicted to disgusting vice[s]', surrounded by 'scandalous debauchery' and 'guilty of acts which the pen shrinks from recording'.⁶⁹

How could these early scholars have got it so wrong? These days it is conventional to assert that Elliot, and his collaborator John Dowson, privileged the more partisan of the Persian accounts, and took many things out of context, in order to highlight the 'dramatic improvements' that had been wrought by British rule. But no one has ever accused them of actually falsifying their material. Modern translators contest some specifics but not the generalities. Thus, it is accepted that Mahmud of Ghazni's border raids at the beginning of the eleventh century, immediately before the Muslim conquest proper, were brutal and hugely destructive of life and property. 'The beauty of the Hindu architecture in Mathurā', writes Rizvi, 'impressed the Sultan, but his hatred of idols prevented him from sparing any [of its] temples.'⁷⁰ It is generally agreed, also, that several of the Sultans of Kashmir, notably Sikandar and Ali Shah (r. 1413–19), were religious fanatics who 'perpetuated atrocities'.⁷¹ Likewise, the modern view of 'Ala'uddin Khalji and Muhammad bin Tughluq is that they were very ruthless individuals. Nor did Islamic rule become softer over time. The Mughal Empire that replaced the Delhi Sultanate is often held up by nationalist Indian historians as an exemplar of good governance, yet, as we shall see in the next chapter, the Mughals were governors who brooked no opposition. And one does not have to look far to find, in the sources, examples of rusted-on intolerance and distrust towards non-Muslims; they are legion. Alam quotes the jurist Fakhr-i Mudabbir as recommending that the 'people of the zimma' should be prohibited from wearing Muslim dress or riding horses.⁷² Clearly, the record of the Muslims as rulers in India was far from unblemished, which leaves us with the question: what side of the coin predominated? The easy answer is that targeted acts of oppression towards non-Muslims by Muslim regimes were exceptional; however, we need to find a better explanation for the exceptions than the one implied by the original author of the *Oxford History* that they were aberrations caused by deficiencies of character. The work of Richard Eaton on temple destruction and desecration during the medieval period offers a useful way to reconceptualise the problem.

Eaton did something that seems not to have occurred to anyone previously. He scoured the available sources covering the period 1192–1729, roughly the era of Muslim rule in India, for references to attacks on temples. He found 'eighty instances of temple desecration whose historicity appears reasonably certain'. This was compelling evidence in itself. Even by the medieval period

there would have been thousands of shrines of one sort or another in the subcontinent. By that measure, eighty is not many. But then Eaton went a step further and looked at each incident *in situ*. He discovered two very interesting things: first, that most appeared to have taken place ‘on the cutting edge of a moving military frontier’; and, second, that, along with the plundering of the wealth of the temples, often their icons were removed as well, including large statues of gods and their vehicles, and subsequently put on display in Islamicate capitals. Taken together these features led him to conclude that the attacks were not random acts of religious zeal but calculated acts of humiliation, inflicted in the interest of advancing the cause of the conquest. Earlier, he notes in a codicil, Hindu states had done similar things, presumably for the same political reasons.⁷³ We find this logic convincing; indeed, we think that it can probably be applied, with equal force, to post-conquest revolts as well. Afzal Khan’s infamous attack, in 1659, on the temple of Vithoba, which took place in the midst of a major insurgency led by the Maratha warlord Shivaji (who later avenged the atrocity by personally gutting the Bijapur general under the cover of a parley), springs immediately to mind.

Religion, then, continued in the medieval period, as before, to inform the relations between the rulers and the ruled. It did so, however, in ways contingent on circumstance, and shaped by expediency rather than ideology. When Sultan ‘Ala’uddin Khalji asked his chief theologian Qazi Mughis ud-Din of Bayana to clarify the legal position of Hindus as ‘tax-payers’, the *qāzī* immediately jumped to the conclusion that the Sultan was thinking of reimposing the *jizya*, and launched into an appropriate tirade about Hindu ‘infidelity’. Much amused, ‘Ala’uddin explained that the inquiry stemmed from his desire to penalise some wealthy Hindu chiefs who had elected to defy authority of the state; the intention was to rein them in through economic measures. ‘Now you tell me’, he laughed, ‘that it is [actually] inculcated in the divine law that [all] the Hindus should be made obedient and submissive in the extreme.’⁷⁴ In fact, some historians would contend that, in so far as the governance of the Delhi Sultanate had an ideological dimension, its guiding principle was the pursuit of social justice, a claim given some credence by the rather modern-sounding assertion of a governor of Bengal that his ultimate aim as a ruler was to ensure that none of his subjects should have to ‘sleep naked and hungry’.⁷⁵

The coming of Islam to South Asia used to be viewed as a major watershed in the region’s past. The religion itself was seen as voracious and uncompromising, its bearers as fierce iconoclasts, and the ensuing Muslim conquest as a political tidal wave that swept away Hindu rule and opened up a ‘deep fault line’ in Indian society.⁷⁶ Even now, the first six or seven centuries of the second millennium are typically characterised, following the usage adopted by the *Oxford History*, as the Muslim Period. In the light of the foregoing discussion, this conceptualisation needs serious revision. Certainly, medieval India was a very violent place, especially, perhaps, at the top. Iltutmish was attacked and nearly killed while praying in a mosque; in 1260 Balban wrapped up a

successful campaign against a nest of rebels south of Delhi by having 200 of their leaders skinned from head to foot and stuffed with straw; ‘Ala’uddin Khalji ascended the throne over the body of the previous incumbent, his uncle, then killed off everybody who conceivably posed a threat to him; a dutiful minister who got in the way of Firuz Shah’s accession was treated ‘with kindness, but later . . . nevertheless killed’;⁷⁷ the Tughluq Dynasty was brought down by a prolonged struggle between the royal family and jealous members of the nobility; Timur’s invasion of 1398 ‘destroyed all semblance of government in upper India’ for nearly a generation;⁷⁸ and the ‘principal political event’ of the reign of Sikandar Lodi is said to have been the forced expulsion of his brother from the city of Jaunpur.⁷⁹ Murders, coups, rebellions, civil wars, family betrayals – sultanate history reads a bit like a gothic saga.

Yet these bloody events took place entirely within the bounded Islamic space of the *umma*. In each case, the antagonists and their victims were fellow Muslims. Thus, they serve to remind us how divided the Muslim ‘community’ has been ever since the days of the first caliphs, initially between Arabs and non-Arabs, then between Sunnis and Shi‘as and Shi‘as and Sufis. In India, these fractures were reproduced, and others added: Turks versus Afghans; Saiyyids versus Persians; Habshis versus Deccanis; perhaps the sharpest cleavage of all, though, in the subcontinent, was that between the members of the *umma* who traced their lineages back to Central Asia or Arabia and those who counted Buddhists and Hindus among their forebears. As time went by, this latter distinction hardened into the almost caste-like separation of *ashrāf* and *ajlāf*, which continues to sabotage relations among Muslims even today. What does all this say about the puissance of Islam to create political cohesion? First, it says that, at best, any cohesion achieved under its banner was likely to be, in the words of Michael Pearson, so ‘nebulous . . . as to be virtually meaningless’.⁸⁰ Second, the chequered record of the Muslim regimes in India highlights the persistence of ethnic ties within the fellowship of the Faithful, and also, to a lesser extent, class-based attachments that had the potential to transcend the religious divide. A hint of the latter is contained in the comment of a Delhi chronicler on the defection of a governor of Bengal that it had aroused the ire of the city folk ‘who counted’, ‘Muslims *and* Hindus’.⁸¹

None of the above, of course, would have seemed strange to contemporary Hindu observers of courtly affairs. Indians were used to such cleavages, indeed conceived them as proper, part of the *dharma*. All the same, it is interesting that they, too, generally used ethnic labels when referring to their foreign overlords, in preference to the more obvious epithet (more obvious to us, at any rate) of Muslim. The foreigners were described either generically as *yāvanas*, or as ‘Arabs’ or ‘Turks’. A vernacular history of the Kyamkanis, penned in the seventeenth century, which Cynthia Talbot has studied extensively, uses the word ‘Musalman’ (the Persian variant of ‘Muslim’) twice, ‘Turk’ six times.⁸² Blurring (or just ignoring) religious boundaries was again, as we have seen, something of a Hindu proclivity, but one is still struck by the willingness of many elite Indians, not simply to sign up for jobs with the

‘conquerors’ but to accept their overrule as legitimate and honourable. Still surviving, a well in Delhi, built to the order of a prosperous Multani merchant, carries an inscription that opens with an invocation to Ganapati and Shiva, but then goes on to heap praise on the incumbent sultan Balban, describing him as all-powerful yet beneficent, and likening him to Sesha the snake-god (a manifestation of Vishnu who effortlessly supports the whole weight of the world).⁸³ Another Hindu inscription describes the ‘Lord of Delhi’ as presiding over a ‘Ram-Raj’.⁸⁴ Whether such understandings percolated down to the substratum of the villages we just do not know; however, we do have on record the poetic utterances of numerous contemporary *bhakti* ‘saints’ that contain a similarly eclectic and accommodating message. Guru Nanak (1469–1538), the spiritual father of Sikhism, who was strongly influenced by his fellow Punjabi, the Sufi Shaikh Ibrahim Farid, wrote:

At God’s gate there dwelt thousands of Muhammads, thousands of
Brahmas, of Vishnus, and of Shivs [but]
There is one Lord over all . . . the Creator, whose name is true.⁸⁵

Kabir (1440–1518), from Benares, though nominally Muslim, insisted that he was a ‘child [both] of Allāh and of Rām’; the one he declared was his ‘Guru’, the other his ‘Pīr’.⁸⁶ The tenor of such statements, trenchantly monotheistic, yet not accepting of the uniqueness of Muhammad’s revelation, has suggested to some scholars that the *bhaktas* were seeking to reconcile, and harmonise, Hinduism and Islam. More broadly, they are seen as evidence that medieval India was in the process of forging a ‘composite’ culture in which religious difference was accepted rather than condemned.

However, the teachings of the saints were not just about love and understanding. Nanak accepted the validity of other faiths but was quite dogmatic about what constituted ‘right’ conduct; Kabir renounced difference, but denounced idolatry. As for the peasants and artisans who flocked to hear these charismatic men speak, while many may well have gone away inspired and anxious to greet their neighbours from other faiths in friendship, some, apparently, did not. Another north Indian *bhakta*, Dadu (1544–1603), confessed: ‘Fierce and terrible have they become, when they saw I was of neither faction’.⁸⁷ And Kabir acknowledged something similar: ‘The Hindu says that Ram is the beloved, the Turk says Rahim’, he observed, laconically. ‘Then they kill each other.’⁸⁸

Evidently – for all that non-Muslims were legally incorporated into the Islamicate and welcomed into the ranks of the ruling elite – religious conflict was not wholly absent during the Sultanate period, at the grass roots. We observed something similar, in [Chapter 4](#), of the previous millennium. But was such conflict typical or exceptional? The question is important and warrants further investigation; however, we will be much better placed to tackle it once we have looked at the religious understandings, attitudes and policies of the imperial Mughals.

6 The Mughal dispensation

‘Orthodoxy’, ‘heterodoxy’ and identity

The history of the Mughal Empire, especially the period 1526–1750, has until recently been viewed through the prism of Orientalist and colonial perceptions. As late as the 1990s, John Richards described the Mughal state as an ‘intensive, centralizing system which unified the subcontinent’.¹ However, this conception of ‘an all-powerful Leviathan’ is now regarded as flawed; it is seen as an ‘idealized vision of the British empire, projected backwards into the late sixteenth century’,² coloured by the ideas of eighteenth-century South Asian intellectuals who saw the end of the empire as a period of anarchy and decline. Today, a more nuanced picture holds centre stage. It is now argued that the Mughal imperium, even during its heyday from 1530–1750, underwent constant evolution – incorporating new regions, and making adjustments to fit in with disparate local conditions. The outcome of this process was that the empire ‘eventually resembled a “patchwork quilt” rather than a “wall-to-wall carpet”’.³ The implications of this less centralised understanding of the empire mean that it would be quite futile to attempt here a comprehensive analysis of how the state intervened in the religious lives of its subjects, a topic more suited to a monograph.

In this chapter, therefore, we intend instead to focus, more specifically, on the religious attitudes and policies of the so-called ‘great’ Mughal emperors, especially the last four, namely Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar (r. 1556–1605), Nuruddin Jahangir (r. 1605–27), Shah Jahan (r. 1627–58) and Aurangzeb Alamgir (r. 1658–1707), but we shall approach this topic in a different way than has been customary. In relation to this approach we note that another characteristic feature of the earlier historiography was its obsession with the personality of the Mughal emperors as drivers of the state, particularly with the apparently marked contrast, in this respect, between Akbar and Aurangzeb. The former was portrayed, often in glowing terms, for his ‘tolerance’ and ‘syncretic’ practices, while the latter was said to be a ‘puritan’. The reputation of the latter emperor has suffered particularly badly from this comparison. Even today, as Katherine Brown has noted, his ‘very name . . . seems to act in the popular imagination as a signifier of politico-religious bigotry and repression, regardless of [the] historical accuracy [of these claims]’.⁴ In addition,

there have been attempts to portray Akbar as somehow modern in his outlook, 'secular' even.⁵ The contrast between the two men has also been understood in terms of their respective heterodoxy and orthodoxy.

The difficulty with such a binary approach is that it oversimplifies what are in fact extremely complex issues. It regards as fixed what are actually changing concepts that are historically contingent. It is vital, therefore, to avoid anachronistic terms such as 'tolerant' or 'secular' when discussing South Asian religious practices of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Within Islam, notions of what constitutes 'orthodoxy' or 'heterodoxy' are variable and are constantly contested and redefined. Two significant aspects of orthodoxy are that it requires an ability to appeal to the authority of scripture (which itself undergoes redefinition and modification) and, perhaps more importantly, the power to determine correct or incorrect practice.⁶ What is orthodox in one period may not hold for another. Problematic, too, is the term 'syncretism', which presumes that religious categories, such as Hindu or Muslim, are also fixed. As Carl Ernst has noted, the proposition 'that religions can be mixed, also assumes that religions exist in a pure unadulterated state', which is clearly not the case.⁷ It is not the purpose of this chapter, therefore, to explore issues of heterodoxy and orthodoxy, per se, although practices to which the terms have been applied will be discussed.

We must, also, recognise the fluid nature of identity on the subcontinent during the pre-modern period, which has been commented on by numerous scholars.⁸ People could identify themselves in many ways, often simultaneously: by language, ethnicity, dress, customs, faith and religious practices; all these elements could serve to separate groups into 'them' and 'us' or, to use a more current term, to determine 'Otherness'. Religion at this time was rarely the primary signifier of a person's identity. Abu'l Fazl, Akbar's historian and panegyrist, for instance, was quite comfortable with describing Hindu Rajputs as '*mujāhidīn*', or 'warriors for Islam', when they fought for the emperor against other Rajputs. Similarly, rather than refer to Hemu – whom Akbar defeated at the great battle of Panipat in 1556 – as a '*kāfir*', or 'infidel', he thoughtfully placed the Hindu general, in his gazetteer of the realm, in the lowest sub-caste of Hindustani grain merchants, a different and perhaps more subtle kind of insult.⁹ Actually, the labelling of non-Muslims as infidels was quite common in Mughal official writing; but in most cases it was used merely as a description, rather than a term of abuse.¹⁰

None of this is to say that religion or faith played no role in the lives of South Asians at this time – quite the opposite – but how people perceived religion during the Mughal period cannot be equated with how it is understood today in the modern world. Additionally, by the end of the fifteenth century, Muslims of various persuasions were firmly established on the subcontinent and included in the range of groups legitimately vying for power; they were 'part of the scenery', so to speak. Significantly, from the point of view of this book, these groups would frequently draw upon, and appeal to, 'larger civilisational ideals', to strengthen their claims to legitimacy. The fluid nature

of identities in the Indo-Islamic world meant that both ‘particularistic categories’ and ‘larger framing systems of knowledge and order’ were elements in their construction.¹¹ Furthermore, it has been argued that it was the state that ‘stood at the nexus between the universal and the particular, between the legitimizing language of civilizational allegiance and local structures of power and social ordering’.¹² It is in this context that we must understand the religious attitudes and policies of the Mughal emperors as they sought to establish, maintain and hold on to power.

The victory of the Chaghatay Turk Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur in 1526, over the forces of Ibrahim Lodi, at the first battle of Panipat, north-west of Delhi, introduced a new element into the struggle for control of northern India, leading eventually to the subordination of the Afghans and the rise of Turks and Uzbeks as the dominant foreign elites. It also disrupted the power struggle between the Afghans and the Rajputs, with Babur subduing the latter during the following two years.¹³ Then, as a consequence of Babur’s successor Nasiruddin Humayun’s being forced to spend fifteen years abroad, from 1540 to 1555, and requiring Persian assistance to recapture the throne, and Akbar’s consolidation of alliances and conquests in the early part of his long reign, Rajputs and Iranis also, over time, became important members of the Mughal elite. And along with his incorporation of Rajputs, Akbar introduced Indian-born Muslims, or *shaikhzādas*, into the mix, as well as other Hindus, such as the scribal Khatri and Kayasthas. The dominant groups at the time of Akbar’s accession were the Turanis (a general term for Central Asians) and the Iranis. But, during Shah Jahan’s reign, the previously marginal Afghans (who were mostly Sunnis) became more influential along with Muslims and Hindu Marathas from the Deccan, although these last never attained the same degree of incorporation as the Rajputs had earlier. A further complication was that the Iranis were predominantly Shi’as. Despite this liability, they continued to be employed into Aurangzeb’s reign, as did Hindu officials, whose numbers actually increased after 1679.¹⁴ So, even though numbers fluctuated (generally, however, increasing over time in keeping with the Mughal Empire’s expansion down to the late seventeenth century), and the composition of the nobility varied slightly over the period under review, there is no evidence that the so-called orthodox Aurangzeb altered the practice of his predecessors in this regard.

In terms of religious allegiance, as well as Sunnis and Shi’as, who themselves were divided, the Muslim community of the Mughal Empire comprised a spectrum of Sufi orders of varying hues, and their followers, and a number of sects, including the millenarian Mahdawiyyas. The other main religious groups represented in the empire were the Hindu Vaishnavas, Shaivites and Shaktas, the Jains, the Sikhs and the Parsis (Zoroastrians). In addition, there was a tiny population of Jews living mostly along the western littoral in cities such as Cambay and Surat. Of course, if we were taking a wider approach, we would need to add the Syrian Christians, reputedly evangelised by Saint Thomas in the first century AD. They were not, however, at least initially, part of the empire; the Mughals first met with Christians

as a result of the Portuguese presence in Goa and the associated activities of Jesuit missionaries.¹⁵

Before considering the development of imperial ideology under Akbar, and its relationship with the religious policies and attitudes of the emperor, we need to review, in much greater detail, the significance of the Central Asian antecedents of the Mughal dynasty. Babur claimed Mongol descent both from Chinggis Khan through his mother, and through the paternal line from Timur, known in the West as Tamerlane – hence the dynastic appellation ‘Timurid’, by which the Mughals are generally known. The earlier Timurids were Sunni Muslims, adherents of the Hanafi school of law. However, their legitimating ideology also drew upon the pre-Islamic Chinggisid shamanistic tradition of descent from the mother goddess, Alanqua. Consequently, the Mughals inherited a Perso-Islamic and Turco-Mongol ideological mix; this brought with it a respect for the *Yasa* or legal code introduced by Chinggis. The attachment the Mughals showed to this familial inheritance continued throughout the life of the dynasty and was perhaps the most significant element in the construction of their imperial identity, with their links to their ancestral homeland of Transoxiana remaining strong.¹⁶

Imperial ideology

Akbar came to power upon the death of his father, Humayun, in 1556. He was only twelve years old, and one of Humayun’s nobles, the Persian Shi‘a Bairam Khan, acted as regent until 1560, when the teenaged emperor, encouraged by a disgruntled Turani faction at court, forced his resignation. Over the next two years, Akbar worked to exert his authority over the leaders of this group, in particular Adham Khan, who finally overstepped the mark by murdering the man Akbar had recently appointed as chief minister, or *wakīl*. Earlier, Adham Khan had caused outrage in courtly circles by his uncouth behaviour towards a defeated enemy, the Sultan of Malwa; although they had surrendered, the victorious general ordered the surviving Malwa troops (the Sultan had fled) slaughtered; the victims included women and children, Muslim theologians and Saiyyids (elite Muslims who, as we’ve seen, claim descent from the Prophet). The murder of the chief minister had taken place in his audience hall in the imperial palace; immediately following this final act, Adham Khan sought out Akbar and confronted him. In a rage, Akbar hurled him from a balcony, had him dragged back up and threw him down again to his death, an event later immortalised in chronicles and paintings. It was at this point in his reign that Akbar assumed full power and started to reorganise his empire including – perhaps not surprisingly – the abolition of the position of *wakīl*. In place of a single chief minister, he established four separate ministerial posts to oversee financial, military, household and religious affairs.¹⁷

Although veering towards the dramatic, this account of Akbar’s final assertion of power at court contains several features that are relevant to our discussion. The first is the hostility of the Sunni Turanis towards the Shi‘a

Persian, Bairam Khan, who was seen to be promoting his own brand of Islam, as well as his fellow religionists, through his appointment of a Shi'a to the post of *sadr*, the head of religious affairs. This meant that a Shi'a now controlled state religious patronage, and held in his purview grants, gifts and employment. This was not, then, simply a 'religious' dispute, but one firmly grounded in issues of preferment. Second, Adham Khan, a member of Akbar's inner circle as his foster brother,¹⁸ was prepared to resort to murder as a result of jealousy at the promotion of a rival to the position of chief minister. This episode, along with the general's subsequent death at Akbar's hands, demonstrates starkly the brutal reality of life at the Mughal court. Even virtual membership of the imperial family provided no protection from the emperor's wrath. Third, Adham Khan's wholesale killing of his captives in Malwa indicates how little religious affiliation meant if you were on the 'wrong' side. Although an apparently shocking act, Adham Khan was in fact adhering to Central Asian custom. Even so – and this is the final point – it caused a great deal of ill-feeling towards the empire and was thus not regarded favourably by Akbar. It was in conditions such as these, in the early 1560s, that the young emperor began to lay the foundations of his rule. What is often overlooked, though, in the historical image of the 'tolerant', 'syncretic' Akbar is that the full-blown ideology of empire (from which that characterisation arises) did not actually begin to emerge until the 1580s; prior to that period, the emperor's actions display a pragmatism that should alert us to the danger of viewing the later years of his reign either as representative of the whole or as a product of his personality.¹⁹

The historiography of Akbar's reign relies heavily on two texts, one produced at his request by Abu'l Fazl, the *Akbarnāma*, and the other the *Ā'īn-i Akbarī*, which is actually the former's final volume. In addition, the history produced by Abu'l Fazl's contemporary and critic al-Badauni provides a counterbalance. An earlier, incomplete history, though, commissioned by Akbar and commenced around 1581, the *Tārīkh-i Alfī*, which was superseded by the *Akbarnāma* in the 1790s, has been neglected; some scholars point out, in this regard, that it presents a quite different image of the emperor, one that appears to have been designed to present Akbar within a Muslim framework, as a *pādshāh-i Islām*, superior in that way even to the great Islamic hero Saladin, and as a ruler who saw himself as an arbitrator between Shi'as and Sunnis.²⁰ 'Because of the blessings of [Akbar's] justice', the text notes, '*kafirs* are shouldering the burdens of Islam.'²¹ It is more than likely that this text was aimed at external rivals as well as an internal readership – the Ottoman and Safavid rulers, for example, as well as Abdullah Khan, the ruler of the powerful Uzbek kingdom of Mavarannahr. Even so, the language in this earlier history indicates that Akbar was quite willing to make appeals to Islam when necessary. Letters to the Ottoman Sultan reveal this too, correspondence which shows that the Mughal emperor desired to prosecute *jihād* against the Portuguese, as a result of their hindering access to the holy sites of Mecca and Medina.²² And this side of his polity was further drawn out by the stance

of his half brother, Mirza Muhammad Hakim, who ruled virtually independently at Kabul until his death in 1585. Presiding over an overtly Sunni regime, Mirza Hakim had close relations with the Sunni Uzbek Abdullah Khan, as well as the Turanis at Akbar's court, and at times represented a real threat to Akbar. It is likely, therefore, that the complex power relations of Central and West Asia provided as much impetus to the compilation of the *Tārīkh-i Alfī* as did conditions on the subcontinent. Significantly, once Akbar felt more secure at home and conditions abroad had become more favourable, the project was abandoned in favour of the *Akbarnāma*.²³ It is this later history that sets out the imperial ideology that has become associated with Akbar.

The ideology of Abu'l Fazl's *Akbarnāma* is characterised by an eclectic mix of ideas that appear to draw upon a range of sources, and much print has been expended exploring the nature of these ideas and their respective Islamic and Indian origins.²⁴ The current consensus, however, is that the important intellectual constituents of the book are three: an illuminationist philosophy associating the emperor with divine light (*nūr*); its representation of Akbar as the Perfect Man; and its promotion of *ṣulḥ-i kul*, universal (religious) harmony or peace. Important expressions of these convictions were Akbar's famous royal cult, the *tauḥīd-i ilāhī* (divine monotheism), known more widely but incorrectly as the *dīn-i ilāhī*; his Sanskrit translation project; and the theological debates that took place in the 'Ibadat Khana, at the emperor's new capital of Fathpur Sikri. It is not necessary to consider these issues in great detail here; rather, we need to examine their context and what they tell us about Akbar and his religious policies.

As noted above, the official formulation of the new ideology in the *Akbarnama* did not commence until the 1590s, towards the end of Akbar's reign and following the abandonment of the *Tārīkh-i Alfī*. It thus marks the final, mature vision as articulated by Abu'l Fazl. It was also the culmination of many years of trial and error, intellectual ferment and changed circumstances. Primarily, of course, it was designed to have as wide appeal as possible, in light of the religious and ethnic diversity of the empire. But, as the *Tārīkh-i Alfī* indicates, this approach was only made possible by the emperor's increasingly unassailable position. The earlier years of his reign, prior to the 1580s, are characterised by the Islamic tone of his rule and the need to secure the support of, and bring to heel, a range of groups, notably the *'ulamā* and other key Muslims such as the Indian *shaikhzādas* and influential Sufis. This tactic was linked both to rapid territorial expansion and a series of major rebellions between 1562 and 1567. A proclamation of victory, to announce the reduction of the great Rajput forts of Ranthambor and Chitor, directed at officers in the Punjab, for example, is couched in language overtly designed to discourage any nascent thoughts of resistance:

As directed by the word of God, we, as far as it is within our power, remain busy in *jihad* and owing to the kindness of the supreme Lord, who is the promoter of our victories, we have succeeded in occupying a number of

forts and towns belonging to the infidels and have established Islam there. With the help of our bloodthirsty sword we have erased the signs of infidelity from their minds and have destroyed temples in those places and also all over Hindustan.²⁵

The pragmatic nature of such claims can clearly be seen when we contrast them with his strategy to win over and recruit the Rajput chiefs in the early 1560s, which involved marriage alliances and the abolition of both the pilgrimage tax in 1562 and the *jizya* in 1564.²⁶

Until 1579, Akbar also drew upon the support of the Chishtiyya Sufis, primarily those connected to the famous shrine of Muinuddin Chishti at Ajmer to which he made annual pilgrimage. The reach and power of the Chishti network was very considerable; and the order's history of helping to expand the Islamicate (see [Chapter 5](#)) would have been familiar to Akbar and his advisers. Hence, the Ajmer pilgrimages, which served both to display the emperor's piety and to impress imperial power on the local Rajputs. To cement this alliance, Akbar located his new capital, Fathpur Sikri, at the shrine of Shaikh Salim Chishti, who had accurately predicted the birth of his son Salim (later the emperor Jahangir). Again, in the latter part of his reign, from the 1580s onwards, Akbar felt that he no longer needed to place such reliance on Chishti political backing and the reflected charisma it imparted. However, the Mughal association with the Chishtis was revived under Jahangir and Shah Jahan. The link distinguished the Mughals from their Central Asian counterparts and their ancestors, whose Sufi order of choice had always been the Naqshbandiyya. In addition, the absorption of Gujarat into the empire in 1574 meant that the port of Surat was now available as a gateway to the Haj cities of Mecca and Medina. This provided Akbar with a new avenue for earning religious merit. For several years, Akbar lavishly sponsored annual Haj caravans under the direction of an appointed officer, the Mir Haj. He also increased the *waqf* or pious trust established by the former Sultan of Gujarat to help maintain the holy places in Mecca and Medina by alienating the revenues of several coastal villages.

It is from this period, too, that the so-called 'Infallibility Decree' of 1579 dates. Signed by most of the state's leading *'ulamā*, the proclamation acknowledged Akbar's ultimate authority over them in relation to resolving any disagreements about religious interpretation:

we have agreed that the rank of Sultan-i-'adl [just king] is higher in the eyes of God than the rank of Mujtahid [interpreter of Islamic law].

Further, we declare that the King of Islam, Amir of the Faithful, Shadow of God on the earth, Abul-fath Jalal-ud-Din Muhammad Akbar, Padshah Ghazi (May God his kingdom perpetuate) is a most wise, and a most Godfearing king.

Should, therefore, in future a religious question arise, regarding which the opinions of the Mujtahids differ and His Majesty in his penetrating

intellect and clear wisdom be inclined to adopt, for the benefit of the people and for the betterment of the administration of the country, any of the conflicting opinions which exist on that point he should issue an order to that effect.

. . . Any opposition on the part of his subjects to such an order passed by His Majesty shall involve damnation in the world to come and loss of property and religious privileges in this.²⁷

The Decree of 1579 here differs significantly from the *Akbarnama*, where kingship is understood to be conferred directly by God, and not dependent upon the sanction of intermediaries such as the '*ulamā*'. Accordingly, it seems to us likely that the ultimately unsuccessful policy of the Mazhar was designed to appeal, in the first instance, to the *shaikhzādas*, the newly incorporated Indian Muslims, many of whom were substantial landholders, more than it was intended to limit the powers of the '*ulamā*'.²⁸

On the face of it, the later image of Akbar as expressed in the *Akbarnāma* looks more humane; yet there is no reason to conclude that it was any the less pragmatic in purpose than the earlier formulation. Indeed, it has been remarked that the '*Ain-i Akbari*' shares a number of features with that much older Indian political treatise, extensively discussed above, the *Arthasāstra*:

Perceptible, for example, are the same elements of the kingdom . . . (minus the foreign ally), namely: the king, the royal household, the ministers, the army, the treasury and fortifications. There are also analogies in the call to expand the kingdom, the role of court astrologers and the importance of the elephant as guardian of the quarters of the earth. There are the shared emphases on the importance of reward and punishment in the management of royal affairs and the knowledge of human character necessary to avoid rewarding the bad and punishing the good.²⁹

It was a South Asian vision then, one designed for consumption within the empire, and it is in this light that we should see the Sanskrit translation project, which commenced in 1575.³⁰ The 'centrepiece' of the project was the translation of the *Mahābhārata*, under the Persian title *Razmnāma* or *The Book of War*. Other translations undertaken at the emperor's behest included the *Rāmayāna*, the *Yoga Vasishtha*, the *Harīvamsa*, works on mathematics and astronomy, and a history of Kashmir.

In his introduction to the *Mahābhārata*, Abu'l Fazl set out, in detail, the reasons for its translation, which Ernst summarises as five major objectives:

[R]educing sectarian fighting among both Muslims and Hindus; eroding the authority of all religious specialists over the masses; deflating Hindu bigotry towards Muslim provincialism by exposing Muslims to cosmologies much vaster than sacred history; and providing access to a major history of the past for the edification and guidance of rulers.³¹

The Persian title of the translation, though, is perhaps even more instructive, in that it emphasises the martial nature of the epic over its rich religious and didactic content. Furthermore, it is notable that the majority of Sanskrit texts translated at this time were treated as histories, rather than religious works. It was only later, during Shah Jahan's reign, under the intellectual stimulus of his son, Prince Dara Shukoh (d. 1659), that the attention of the Mughal state turned to metaphysical texts such as the Upanishads. A significant consequence of the translation project was that it led to a later interweaving of Persian and Indian dynastic histories, such that the Mughals were listed as 'Indian' rulers and the Udaipur and Sisodia Rajputs, for example, both imperial allies, traced their genealogies to Persian kings.

Central to the projection of Akbar as a universal ruler was the policy of *ṣulḥ-i kul*, universal harmony or peace, a concept with roots going back to the philosophy of the great mystic thinker and Sufi Ibn 'Arabi (1165–1240) and which is connected with the theory of *waḥdat ul-wujūd*, or 'unity of being' (see below). Under this policy, the king was committed to a kind of social contract, one that saw all religions as paths to God, and which admitted no distinction being made between subjects on the basis of their respective faiths. Additionally, some have posited that the influence of *akhlāqī* or ethical literature (see [Chapter 5](#)) can be discerned in this formulation, notably the work of Nasiruddin Tusi (1201–74), which was an inheritance from the earlier Timurids. This does not seem very likely, however, given that these texts are distinguished by a preoccupation with revealing a harmony between the temporal and the sacred.³² Non-juristic in nature, *akhlāqī* literature does not concern itself either with notions of *kufīr* (infidelity) or, indeed, with *dhimmīs*.³³ Even so, Abu'l Fazl's projection of the emperor as the just king differs from *akhlāqī* theory by representing the emperor's inner justice as being an endowment from God, as part of the divine bestowal of kingship.³⁴ Primarily, though, the ideas developed by Abu'l Fazl reflect the South Asian religious environment of the time, which was a result of centuries of Indo-Islamic interaction and accommodation on the subcontinent. Defining features of this milieu were an increasing emphasis on devotion to one God and a transcending of rigid faith categories such as 'Hindu' or 'Muslim'. Heirs to these developments were, among others, the Sikhs of the Punjab and the Gorakhnath Jogis of northern India with their Shaivite tradition of *hathayoga*.³⁵

The final aspect of Akbar's imperial ideology that requires comment here is related to the notion of divine effulgence. Abu'l Fazl wrote:

Royalty is a light emanating from God, a ray from the sun, the illuminator of the universe . . . Modern language calls this light *farr-i izidi* (the divine light) and the tongue of antiquity calls this light *kiyan khura* (the sublime halo). It is communicated by God to kings without the intermediate assistance of anyone, and men, in the presence of it, bend the forehead of praise towards the ground of submission . . . many excellent qualities

flow from this light . . . Thousands find rest in the love of the king; and sectarian differences do not raise the dust of strife.³⁶

Akbar is imbued with a divine light (*nūr*), which is displayed to his subjects through auspicious sight, or *darshan*, a practice associated with Hinduism and the worship of deities. Instead of an image in a temple, however, here, the focus of the devotee's rapt attention was the regal figure of the emperor seated in his *jhāroka-i darshan*, or public viewing window, which projected from an exterior wall of the palace. The use of the *jhāroka* was continued by Jahangir and Shah Jahan, who are very frequently (Jahangir sometimes, Shah Jahan always) shown in portraits illuminated with a gold nimbus or halo to denote the emanation of the divine light. But, interestingly, this was not the case with Akbar, whose 'illuminated status' was generally represented by less obvious means such as colour, composition or scale.³⁷ It was Shah Jahan who took the use of light symbolism to its apogee. It can be seen, particularly, in the Taj Mahal, the tomb he built for his wife Mumtaz Mahal, in which he is also interred. Bearing the official designation 'Rauza-i Munawwar', or 'Illuminated Tomb', its white marble signifies the light emanating from God.³⁸

It is tempting to see in Abu'l Fazl's vision a final resolution of how to appeal to the empire's many and diverse groups, both at court and more broadly. Evidence suggests, however, that this is too simplistic an understanding of how imperial loyalty was secured. For instance, Peter Hardy has pointed out that, although the *Akbarnāma* contains something for everyone, it also contains references that would *not* have been universally recognised. What Abu'l Fazl was doing, according to Hardy, 'was making suggestions to the suggestible', to people who sought service with Akbar 'for reasons other than that he fulfilled their aspirations for religious truth and [search] for general understanding'.³⁹ The real means for securing loyalty in the Mughal empire was based on direct personal contact with the emperor, and this held true as much for Aurangzeb as it did for Akbar, with the former maintaining the support of his senior 1,000 Rajput *manṣabdārs* through 'extensive face-to-face encounters'.⁴⁰ It is instructive to note, in this context, that the *tauḥīd-i ilāhī*, or royal cult, apparently modelled on the relationship between the Sufi *murshid* and his disciple, and clearly designed to secure loyalty, only applied to a small number of men and did not survive beyond the reign of Jahangir.

That this new image of Akbar really only appealed to those who wished to be persuaded is evident, too, in the way regional poets responded to him. In contemporary Rajasthani songs praising the emperor, he was portrayed as an incarnation of Rama, Lakshman, Krishna and Arjuna, the hero of the *Bhagavadgītā*. So great were Akbar's military victories, they shook the throne of Indra. Thus, rather than condemning his suzerainty over their maharajas, the poets lauded it. Nor did they condemn their chiefs for eventually submitting to Akbar – for the poets, the 'peace, stability and economic prosperity' resulting from the Mughal alliance provided the ideal conditions for literary patronage, on which they depended for their livelihoods.⁴¹ On the other hand,

an Orcha poet, Keshavdas, writing in honour of Jahangir in the 1610s, lavishly praised him while virtually ignoring his father, describing Jahangir as ‘master of both faiths’. What is relevant here is that Orcha’s king Singh Deo had orchestrated the assassination of Abu’l Fazl at the instigation of Jahangir (then Prince Salim) after the latter had risen against Akbar in 1600. Keshavdas, when composing his panegyric, was undoubtedly aware of the risks associated with offending Singh Deo, a patron on whose generosity he depended.⁴²

The pragmatism that lay behind the evolution of Akbar’s imperial ideology can also be seen throughout the reigns of his successors. During his unsuccessful rebellion against his father, Salim issued a *farmān* (an imperial order) to some local religious leaders. It made the following claim:

At the instigation of some mischievous persons, my father has abolished the arrangements for the maintenance of *khatib*, *ma’azzan* and *imam* in the mosques and prohibited the performance of *namaz* [prayer] in congregation. He has converted many of the mosques into store-houses and stables. It was improper on his part to have acted in this manner.⁴³

He then goes on to order the recipients of the document to resume paying the stipends of the mosque officials and to induce people to pray. Whether Akbar actually did issue such instructions is debatable, but it certainly appears that Salim was willing to use religion to appeal to disgruntled Muslims and gain support for his challenge against his father. Later, as emperor, he would praise Akbar for the harmonious relations between different faiths that obtained under his dispensation, contrasting them with the situation that existed in both Central Asia and Iran.⁴⁴ Yet it was Jahangir’s grandson, Aurangzeb, who perhaps most clearly articulated this pragmatism when he stated bluntly, in a letter to one of his officers:

What have worldly affairs to do with religion? And why should bigotry intrude into matters of religion? ‘For you there is your religion; and for me mine (*lakum dinkum wa ladin*)’. If the [Islamic] laws were followed it would have been necessary to annihilate all the Rajputs.⁴⁵

One might regard such pragmatism as hypocrisy, but that would be anachronistic. The rationale behind such an approach was perhaps most aptly put by Abu’l Fazl when he wrote that: ‘In his wisdom, the king will understand the spirit of the age and shape his plans accordingly.’⁴⁶

Dhimmīs, jizya and religious patronage

It is important to re-emphasise here that, in the period under review, and despite the pragmatic attitudes of the emperors, religion did matter to people, something that the emperors themselves knew only too well and, as we have seen, were prepared to utilise. This aspect is clearly displayed in relation to

both the imposition of the *jizya* under the Mughals, and state religious patronage.

Since the opinion of Hanafi jurists was that Hindus could be regarded as *ahl al-dhimma* (people living under Muslim protection, that is, *dhimmīs*), they could technically be subject to the *jizya*. As indicated earlier, Akbar abolished the tax in 1564 as part of his strategy to win over the Rajputs. At the time, this had precipitated an outcry from senior Muslim bureaucrats concerned about the loss of revenue, and from some of the '*ulamā*, the 'stiff-necked ones of the age', as Abu'l Fazl described them.⁴⁷ In the mid-1570s, however, according to Badauni, Akbar raised the issue of reinstating the tax, most likely as a means of appeasing senior '*ulamā*:

During those days (983/1575–76), His Majesty ordered Shaikh 'Abdu'n Nabi and Makhdumu'l Mulk to examine the matter and to decide the amount of *jizyah* to be levied on Hindus. They issued *farmans* in all directions; but these orders quickly disappeared, like a reflection on the water.⁴⁸

As much as some members of the '*ulamā* might have wished the emperor to conform to their idea of how a Muslim king should rule, it would be another 100 years before the tax was reinstated. The context of its reimposition under the emperor Aurangzeb is instructive.

Aurangzeb came to power in 1658, following a murderous civil war that began with the imprisonment of his father, Shah Jahan, and resulted in the deaths of his three brothers, Dara Shukoh, Muhammad Shuja and Murad Bakhsh. These events left a dark cloud hanging over Aurangzeb's reign and raised doubts about whether his rule was legitimate. It was this, rather than his 'puritanical', or 'orthodox', nature, that led him to take steps to appease the '*ulamā*, since the latter's support would be crucial if he was to have any hope of countering the accusations of illegitimacy that dogged him. Yet the '*ulamā* were not won over easily. Early in the reign, the chief *qāzī* stated that it would not be valid to read Aurangzeb's name in the *khutba*, or Friday sermon (which, as noted in Chapter 5, is the recognised method of acknowledging a king's legitimacy throughout the Muslim world), because Shah Jahan was still alive. A more compliant *qāzī*, however, then came to the rescue, declaring that it was valid to read Aurangzeb's name since Shah Jahan was too feeble to rule effectively. His reward from the emperor was an appointment as the state's senior judge, pointedly in the stead of his recalcitrant colleague.⁴⁹ Still, it is important to observe that, despite his difficulties with the '*ulamā*, Aurangzeb did not actually restore the tax on non-Muslims until 1679.

The reinstatement of the *jizya* was not without controversy and not surprisingly was driven by political expediency. In the late 1670s, Aurangzeb faced a crisis, with conditions deteriorating in the Deccan – following his expansion into that region from 1676 – and with the Rathor Rajputs in rebellion. The emperor also had a problem with the increasing numbers of

unemployed clerics in his empire. He therefore directed that the funds raised by the tax be used for charitable purposes to support the impoverished clerics (which included Sufis as well as *'ulamā*) and had a new separate department set up to administer the funds and appointed members of this group to oversee the funds, so as to alleviate their condition. As Satish Chandra has noted, this amounted in fact to 'a huge bribe' intended to win over the *'ulamā*; the emperor hoped that their gratitude for his largesse would lead them to rally the general Muslim population in support of his rule.⁵⁰ How successful this strategy was is unclear, however. For one thing, even after the *jizya* was reinstated, the emperor continued to face opposition from some members of the *'ulamā* – such as the *qāzī* who, in 1686, refused to declare that the war against the Deccani states of Bijapur and Golconda was a *jihad*.⁵¹

Also connected with Aurangzeb's need to mollify the Muslim theologians was his commissioning of the *Fatāwā-i Ālamgīrī*, a work intended to be the definitive text of Hanafi jurisprudence.⁵² This massive compendium was commenced about 1667 and took about eight years to complete. Although it was probably practically useful to have the authoritative Hanafi legal texts in India compiled into one work, the project was, of course, also a means for Aurangzeb to demonstrate his commitment to Islam, which is why the emperor involved himself personally in its compilation, maintaining from the start close contact with the men undertaking the task and correcting their efforts when he believed it was warranted. Yet not all members of the *'ulamā* supported the project; some, in fact, flatly refused to take part, either for religious reasons or because they were ideologically opposed to involvement with affairs of state.

Despite the emperor's close involvement with the compilation of the *Fatāwā*, however, in administering his realm he did not hesitate to depart from the opinions contained within it. He showed he was prepared to draw on all the four schools of law in order to achieve his objects – as well as taking into account customary law and local conditions. One revealing case in point was his response to a ruling of the chief *qāzī* in respect of a group of Muslims and Hindus accused of rebellion. The *qāzī* decreed that the Muslims should receive light punishments and the Hindus be released on condition that they converted. Aurangzeb's response was brusque: 'This decision is according to the Hanafi school; decide the case in some other way, [in order] that control over the kingdom might not be lost.'⁵³ In putting the safety of the realm first, he mirrored the priorities of his supposed opposite, Akbar.

In truth, the *'ulamā* were never a unified group. We have seen examples of that in the Sultanate period, and it was little different under the Mughals. Even Akbar, for all that he apparently pushed the boundaries of orthodoxy, had his supporters among the *'ulamā*, some coming forward to defend the emperor against the charge levelled by his conservative critics that he had actually left the fold of Islam. Moreover, the influence of the theologians during the Mughal era was nowhere near as great as has sometimes been imagined. They were often vociferous, but the state kept them at arm's length, using them

whenever necessary, but not allowing them to dictate policy. In the case of Aurangzeb, he had greater need to secure the theologians' support because of, as we noted earlier, the circumstances surrounding his ascent to power – which, incidentally, had caused a great deal of unease among many of his subjects – but even he was governed by expediency rather than piety.

Perhaps the most prominent of Akbar's critics – certainly the best remembered today – was the Naqshbandi Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi (1564–1624), known to his many admirers as the *mujaddid-i alf-i šani*, or 'renewer of the second millennium'. Scholars now argue that his and his order's influence on Akbar's successors has been somewhat exaggerated.⁵⁴ As will be recalled, the Central Asian Naqshbandi *silsila* had ancestral links with the Timurids that continued through the Mughal period. Even so, Jahangir did not hesitate to imprison Sirhindi when his activities threatened to precipitate public disturbances. Referring to the Shaikh in his memoirs as a 'charlatan', and a promoter of 'drivel', Jahangir wrote that Sirhindi:

appeared, in addition to his lack of wisdom and knowledge, to be extremely conceited and self-satisfied. I saw that the only thing to do with him was to let him spend a few days in prison so that the frenzy in his mind would settle down, as well as the uproar among the common folk. I turned him over to Rai Singhdalan to imprison in the fort of Gwalior.⁵⁵

Aurangzeb was kinder but still saw the Shaikh as a troublemaker.

What has been termed, generally, the Naqshbandi reaction, was once thought to be the main factor behind the adoption by the later emperors of a more Islamic tone in their governance; now we understand it, however, to have been more a dispute between Sufis, with the Sirhindi camp opposed to those who espoused the theory of *wahdat al-wujūd*, such as the Chishtis. The unity of being, they believed, was merely in the Sufi's perception (*shuhūd*) and not 'of being' – an illusion. They argued, too, that greater social distance should be maintained between Muslims and Hindus, fearing that, if the Hindus were encouraged, they would eventually overwhelm and obliterate the Islamicate. Also, Alam argues that, although apparently grounded in issues of theory, the combativeness of the two groups over the matter was much more likely connected with their changing relations with the political authorities.⁵⁶ A Chishti Shaikh, who felt he lacked influence over Aurangzeb, lamented:

the emperor of Hindustan is a descendant of Amir Timur and Amir Timur was spiritually attached to Shah-i Naqshband. These Turanians, all and every one of them, are connected with the Naqshbandi order and they do not attach value to any other *silsilah*.⁵⁷

This perception was in fact not correct, or at least in general, since both the Chishti and the Qadiriyya orders benefited at various times from links with all of the emperors. Shah Jahan, for example, had a close relationship with

the Qadiri Sufi, Shah Mir (d. 1633), a *waḥdat al-wujūd* believer, while also giving his support to votaries of *waḥdat al-shuhūd*.⁵⁸ And Aurangzeb's hostility towards the Chishti Shaikh Muhibullah is also informative in this context. The emperor took exception to the Shaikh's treatise *Risāla-i Taswīyya*, ostensibly on account of its *wujūdī* content, and threatened to burn it. He also had problems with the leading Qadiri teacher, Mulla Shah Badakshi, a disciple of Shah Mir, summoning him back to court (in the event unsuccessfully) from Kashmir. Muhibullah was also called to court but died before the summons could reach him. What is significant is that these two men were both close to Dara Shukoh, who was a Sufi adept, and the *Tārīkh-i Kashmīr* indicates that it was the Prince's opponents who had encouraged Aurangzeb to send for Mullah Shah.⁵⁹ The emperor's stated reason for executing Dara was not that he posed a conspicuous threat to his hold on the throne, but rather that he was an apostate, so we should not be surprised that he displayed open opposition to his brother's Sufi associates.

But Sufis were not the only recipients of official patronage; many groups and individuals bathed in the Mughal emperors' largesse. Public displays of religious piety were crucial in maintaining support, especially from what Jahangir referred to as 'the army of prayer'. Like most rulers on the sub-continent, the Mughals patronised both Muslim and non-Muslim institutions. They financed the building of mosques and the funding of temples alike; and they were broadly non-discriminatory in their allocation of *madad-i ma'āsh* grants, which provided rights to land revenue. Until 1690, though, the grants were not hereditary and the recipients had to petition for their renewal at the start of each emperor's reign.⁶⁰ And grants could be, and often were, withdrawn from holders who proved uncooperative. The resumption of these charitable grants was thus a powerful means of ensuring the allegiance of the religious elites.

And Mughal religious governance had other facets too. The emperors, from time to time, were called upon to mediate in sectarian disputes within and between the different faiths. Akbar, for example, was asked on one occasion to bring together two warring sections of the Jains, not by any means an easy task, but one that he appears to have carried out successfully. He also resolved succession and other disputes among the Sikhs, and was once asked to referee a pitched battle between two rival groups of *sannyasis* and yogis at a shrine near Kurukshetra.⁶¹ Royal patronage, too, was extended to non-Muslims. The Gorakhnath Yogis of Jakhbar received grants from the Mughals right up to the time of Aurangzeb, who nevertheless remained on cordial terms with their *mahant* or head, Anand Nath, as is shown by his letter to the Mahant dated AH 1072 (AD 1661–2).⁶² The Jains and the Yogis were groups that none of the emperors would wish to alienate: many of the former were rich merchants and bankers who provided 'men, money and resources' to the state,⁶³ while the Yogis held sway over extensive tracts of land in the Punjab (as, over time, did the Sikhs).

Nevertheless, the pragmatic nature of the state–religion relationship also meant that there were times when it soured. Under Jahangir both Sikhs and Jains incurred the emperor’s hostility; notoriously, the fifth Sikh Guru Arjun (1581–1606) was executed by Jahangir’s order, as a result, apparently, of his paying homage to Prince Khusrau, who was rebelling against his father.⁶⁴ And the same applied to the issue of temple destruction. As noted in [Chapter 5](#), such acts of this nature as occurred during the era of the Sultanate were generally carried out for reasons of political expediency, not as a result of religious zeal, and this was also the case under the Mughals. Even Aurangzeb, infamous in the old historiography as a destroyer of temples, actually built many more than he destroyed.⁶⁵

A matter of personal piety

We noted at the outset of this chapter that the Mughal state continued to evolve right down to 1750, adjusting to the prevailing conditions at any given time. But we have also seen that there was a great deal of continuity in the way the state functioned and its ideological underpinnings. In particular, we have argued that, rather than being driven by personality or religious inclination, the Mughal emperors adopted a course, in governing their empire, of pragmatism. Rather than personal faith, the dynasty drew primarily on its Central Asian inheritance – what has been described as ‘a Timurid stew of Perso-Islamic and Chinggisid systems of morality, ethics and law’⁶⁶ – in developing the character of its government and in expressing its identity. This is not to say that the emperors themselves did not have their own personal attitudes towards religious faith. Undoubtedly they did, but this was kept separate from their role as kings. They lived at a time when religion permeated all aspects of society and, as human beings, they were members of that society. In addition, their humanity meant that they also experienced familial attachments in varying degrees of intensity. Both Jahangir and Shah Jahan had favourite wives – Nur Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal, respectively – and we also know that Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb had favourite sons. In the case of the former it was Prince Dara Shukoh, in the case of the latter, Prince Muhammad A’zam Shah (1653–1707). It is of interest, however, that both these sons did not obviously resemble their fathers in the style of their lives yet, in the case of Dara Shukoh, Shah Jahan still considered him his heir apparent.

In this final section of the chapter, we investigate these familial relationships in order to demonstrate how personal piety played no role in imperial policy. Let us take, first, the relationship between Dara Shukoh and Shah Jahan. When the latter came to power on the death of Jahangir in 1627, he introduced a more Islamic tone to his reign. He adopted the title of *ghāzī*, ‘warrior in defence of Islam’, for example, and resumed the practice of sponsoring the pilgrimage caravans under the Mir Haj. And he used the religious card in his campaigns against the Shi‘a kingdoms of the Deccan, explaining that it was his duty to

stamp out heresy. Satish Chandra describes these developments as ‘a retrogression’ from the image of Akbar promoted by Abu’l Fazl,⁶⁷ yet, as we have seen, Shah Jahan continued to keep his distance from the *‘ulamā*, and did not openly discriminate on religious grounds when dispensing state patronage. Again, we have to take issue with Chandra’s interpretation of the apparent contradiction in the emperor’s political strategy as a ‘compromise’ that ‘rested on no clear principle save political expediency’ and was thus ‘unstable’. The term ‘compromise’ might be warranted if the emperor’s actions had been driven not by expediency but by personal piety, but they were not. This separation between personal religious faith and the exigencies of empire allows us to see how this apparently more ‘orthodox’ emperor could favour a son who is usually characterised as ‘heterodox’ over his younger brother. Dara Shukoh is well known for translating the Upanishads into Persian and for his views that these ancient metaphysical texts could be drawn on to assist in interpreting the Qur’an, God’s final revelation.⁶⁸ If *religious interests* had been a central qualification for the throne, one would have expected Shah Jahan to have chosen not Dara Shukoh, but Aurangzeb.

That Aurangzeb was devout and religiously conservative is not at issue here. Still, in a perceptive article, Katherine Brown has shown how this side of the man has been overestimated, in assessments of his policies, by her forensic analysis of his so-called ban on music in the late 1660s.⁶⁹ She shows that, instead of being empire-wide, as has been previously argued, the ban was meant merely to apply at court. And there too it was restricted to occasions presided over by the emperor; the rich musical life of the empire was allowed to continue unimpeded, with the role of the leading patron of music passing from Aurangzeb to his son Muhammad A’zam Shah, who drew praise for his musical discernment. Furthermore, the emperor offered material compensation to musicians who chose to continue to attend court but no longer play, either through an increase of their *mansab*, or rank, or through grants of land. Aurangzeb had been a connoisseur of music and his decision no longer to listen to it appears, primarily, to have been based on ‘religious conscience and dedication to weightier matters’⁷⁰ – in other words, only partly on religious grounds. Moreover, there were precedents for such a shift in attitude. Since the time of Akbar, the view had been held within Mughal male culture that a man should not allow music to interfere with his serious duties. Finally, the point that the ban was personal and not intended to apply to other members of the court is well brought out by a letter Aurangzeb wrote in 1690 to Muhammad A’zam, in which he commended to him the daily work and recreational practices of his own father, Shah Jahan:

After sunset he retired from the ‘Diwan-i-Am’ [hall of public audience], offered evening prayers and [then] entered his special private chamber. There were present sweet-tongued historians, eloquent story-tellers, sweet-voiced musicians . . . In short, His Majesty passed, till midnight, the hours of day and night, in this manner, and [thus] did justice to life and

sovereignty. As [my] paternal love regarding [my] son is from the heart [i.e., true] and not from the pen [i.e., false], I was obliged to write and inform [my] dear son what was good and valuable.⁷¹

There is no suggestion here that Aurangzeb wished to impose his decision to abstain from music on others. Nor did the fact that his son was now the leading Mughal patron of music earn him his father's condemnation.

Within Islam there is a conceptual distinction made between concern with the world (*jahāndārī*) and concern with the faith (*dīndārī*). The pragmatic approach of the Mughal emperors falls naturally into the category of *jahāndārī*, while *dīndārī* is the natural realm of the Sufis and the '*ulamā*.⁷² Yet, as we saw in Chapter 5, throughout its history, tensions always existed in Islam between the temporal, as manifested by kingship, and the divine. How these tensions have been resolved has been dictated by both cultural environment and historical circumstances. The Mughal emperors, ruling over a multi-faith and multi-ethnic community, really had little option in the matter of religious policy. Sensible men, they chose to stand above religion and pursue a policy of universal harmony or *ṣulḥ-i kul*. Yet they would have firmly rejected any allegation that, in so doing, they were not ruling as good Muslims, 'Shadows of God'. At the heart of Perso-Islamic notions of kingship is the concept of justice ('*adl*): a 'just' sovereign is one who maintains social harmony and does not discriminate between sections of his subjects. And the emperors themselves certainly understood that; indeed, there is little discernible difference between the approach taken by Akbar, in this respect, and that of his great-grandson. Akbar opined that 'Divine worship in monarchs consists of their justice and good administration', and that:

A king should make a distinction in his watch over the goods, the lives, the honour and the religion of his subjects. If those who are led away by greed and passion will not be reclaimed by admonition, they must be chastised.⁷³

'The anger of a monarch like his bounty is the source of national prosperity', he noted, while 'tyranny is unlawful in everyone, especially in a sovereign who is guardian of the world'.⁷⁴

These 'ties of protection and obedience', as Metcalf puts it,⁷⁵ are also evident in Aurangzeb's writings. In a letter to one of his sons, dated 1704, thus towards the end of his life, the old emperor wondered:

what answer we shall give on the day of judgement. The Holy and High God is just. If we appoint a tyrant [to a post], every act of oppression perpetrated by the oppressor appointed by us is just. It is we who allow oppression by giving power to tyrants and withholding justice from the oppressed.⁷⁶

And, in the same year, perhaps still weighed down by the issue of his legitimacy, he wrote to his eldest son, Prince Sultan Muhammad Muazzam:

I am not conscious of myself. [I do not know] who I am and where I go and what will happen to this sinner, full of sins. Now I will say good bye to everyone in this world and will entrust every one to the care of God. My famous and auspicious sons will not quarrel among themselves and allow a general massacre of the people who are the servants of God [after my death]. May God, the changer of hearts, make his Grace for the protection of the people who are his deposits [in this world] and His wonderful creatures, the light for the path of the kings [i.e., may God make the kings protect their subjects].⁷⁷

Nevertheless, on suspecting that ‘news writers’ had not furnished reliable information to Muhammad A’zam in relation to a plague of highway robbery in the Deccan, not far from where the Mughal southern army was quartered (in Ahmedabad and Burhanpur), he advised his son:

Carelessness and indifference are contrary to the way of [proper] kingship and sovereignty. [Now] you should appoint new reporters and give them warning and punish the former ones. Prepare an army to extirpate these ruffians and to free the royal road[s] from the machinations of these loafers.⁷⁸

Aurangzeb was as capable an administrator as his grandfather and arguably one of the greatest of the subcontinent’s pre-modern rulers; however, he ruled a hundred years after Akbar, and in very different circumstances. It is, therefore, the contingencies of their respective reigns that hold the key to understanding the religious policy of the Mughal emperors, not the degree of their personal piety or the quality of their religious predilections.

7 Cohesion and conflict

A prehistory of communalism?

In the previous several chapters we have seen evidence of a disposition on the part of rulers, ministers and the literati to accept the reality of social difference, and to endorse policies that were designed to bring the people of the subcontinent closer together. It is tempting to describe these inclinations and policies as gestures of ‘toleration’. However, it is questionable whether this principled modern term, grounded in the concept that all men and women are equal (and should be treated as such) is totally applicable to the world of the pre-modern. A subtle (but important) distinction needs to be drawn between policies and actions undertaken to render society more humane, and those designed to reduce the potential for social unrest. Similarly, we need to separate intentionality from contingency. As we saw in earlier chapters, Hindu culture arguably provided a framework congenial to acceptance of difference; notably, the proliferation, over the first millennium AD, of sects all claiming the sanction of orthodoxy made it hard to draw boundaries around notions of ‘us’ and ‘them’. And the demands of governance had a similar consequence. Hindu rulers found it politically advantageous to spread their patronage around; so (more surprisingly, given the Qur’an’s stance on idolatry) did their Muslim counterparts later on. As noted in [Chapter 5](#), the Islamicate found it useful to treat Hindus, Jains and other non-Muslims as *dhimmīs*, deserving of protection. None of these features, though, derived from a coherent philosophy of toleration.

Still, we would be foolish to underestimate their importance. Kingly pragmatism, especially, provided an exemplary model for the rest of society that certainly would have affected behaviour at the level of the courts and their urban clients – and maybe further down the social pyramid as well.

We say ‘maybe’, because it is difficult to speak with assurance of the *mentalité* or even of the actions of Indian subalterns during this time, because virtually all the sources we have at our disposal (the poems of some of the more radical *bhakti* saints, Kabir for example, being a conspicuous exception) are elite-generated and display scant interest in what the illiterate masses were thinking and doing. Nevertheless, there are hints here and there, some of them discussed in [Chapter 4](#). It will be recalled that Wendy Doniger, for example,

has found compelling evidence in the Puranic literature that the Brahmins as a class found it difficult to accept the challenge to orthodoxy (and, of course, their cultural hegemony) thrown out by socially diverse and ideologically dissident movements such as Buddhism. And the Muslim chronicles are even more revealing in this regard, providing occasional tantalising glimpses of actual grass-roots conflict. Clearly, this evidence goes against the dominant scholarly view of the pre-modern, in India, as a period free from communal clashes.

There are two sides to a coin; it is the same with society. Some individuals find it easier to cope with difference than others. There are good neighbours, and bad. As to why this is so, social psychologists debate the competing influences of nature and nurture. But theories about human nature do not explain why, in some places and at some times, large populations have shown a disposition to the first sort of behaviour rather than the second. Such variations, the manna of historians, invite contingent explanations that can be rooted in evidence, including, of course, quantitative evidence. In this case, the problem can be expressed thus: why did collective religiously linked violence in India become very much more intense and widespread during the colonial era, and why did it escalate still further after India became independent?

European thought during the revolutionary nineteenth century was manifestly optimistic about the future prospects for human society. Positivists and Marxists alike believed that civilisation was on an upward trajectory, heading towards a future free from sickness and poverty and inhabited by populations socialised, by education and benevolent laws, into respecting the wants of others. In this scenario, collective violence – especially, perhaps, religiously sanctioned violence – was expected to become more and more infrequent. The perception among Indian commentators – even the authors of the epics and Puranas, who explained that the world was locked cosmologically into a downward spiral – has always been different. Many Indian scholars insist that, at least in respect of social conflict, things were *better* in the past. Specifically, they believe that pre-modern India was characterised by a rare and enviable capacity for social harmony and peaceful coexistence, which they attribute to the ‘composite’ nature of its society. ‘Composite’ here is a portmanteau term implying plurality, syncretism and practical toleration. Since modern India is clearly not like this, it follows, according to this theory, that somewhere, somehow, along the way, the capacity of Indian society for toleration was eroded. As to by what, or whom, popular consensus holds that the main culprits were the pathologies of colonialism and Western modernity.¹ There is almost universal agreement, even among specialists, that ‘the quality and incidence of communal violence [in India] changed dramatically in the last third of the nineteenth century’.²

We do not have any quarrel with the proposition that relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in India deteriorated under British rule; official statistics, incomplete as they are, display a very dramatic upswing in the incidence and severity of religion-related ‘riots’ – to use the colonial

terminology – during the colonial period. Indeed, Chapters 9 and 10 will have much to say on that subject. Nevertheless, we do not, at this stage, wish to rule out the possibility that tendencies were already building in society that paved the way for the rise of ‘communalism’ in India. Perhaps communalism had a prehistory? If so, what were its precursors?

Several scholars over the last quarter of a century have broken with convention by looking for evidence of such a prehistory. Marc Gaborieau has trawled the documentary record from the eleventh century looking for hints of mutual Hindu–Muslim animosity;³ while Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Christopher Bayly have investigated examples of what could be termed inter-religious conflict from the medieval and early modern eras. This research has generated valuable insights that warrant our attention.

Their first discovery was just how much evidence of conflict lay buried beneath the surface of even the published chronicles. Subrahmanyam found a veritable profusion ‘especially from the first half of the eighteenth century’. He concluded that ‘medieval and late pre-colonial Indian society was violent and that the texts and ideological statements produced in the epoch are often suffused with this violence’. How could all this evidence have been missed, he wondered, at a time when interest in sectarian disputation in India had ‘reached industrial proportions’?⁴ And Bayly, too, was puzzled. Many of his fellow researchers appeared to be ‘only dimly aware that widespread contention of this sort ever took place before the end of Company rule, let alone in the eighteenth century’.⁵ The next point that struck these revisionists was how ‘remarkably similar’ the pre-modern conflicts they had uncovered appeared to be, both in ‘origins and form’, to those that had been examined for the colonial period.⁶ This pointed to a significant element of continuity with regard to religious conflict in India over the longer term, but it also raised the problem of ‘whether there existed or was coming to exist’ in early modern Indian society a ‘broader’ consciousness of ‘community’ in the modern sense of the term, such as would allow the application of the term ‘communalism’ to the earlier phases of that conflict.⁷

Bayly’s essay, in particular, has drawn much criticism. He has been accused of missing the point that communalism was ‘a form of colonialist knowledge’;⁸ of historical anachronism for consistently applying the terms communal and communalism to a period that knew nothing of such epithets; of trying to apply systemic analysis to relationships that, if not actually harmonious, were ‘*random* in their generation of conflict’;⁹ and of overdetermining the significance, in a pre-modern context, of the categories ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’. Some of these criticisms do him less than justice. For instance, he is well aware of the dangers of anachronism; and he uses terms such as Hindu and Muslim with great caution, observing that it was doubtful ‘whether there was ever an identifiable “Muslim”, “Hindu” or “Sikh” identity’ beyond ‘the particular circumstances of individual events or specific societies’.¹⁰ Yet there remain some major problems that need to be resolved before we can fully accept the proposition that communal conflict in India had an extensive prehistory. One

of these is the problem of separating extraneous conflicts between groups of people of different faiths from conflicts where religion was a major cause or pretext.

As Bayly rightly observes, ‘Discussions of the causes of religious and communal riots have *always* run into severe problems of logic and method.’¹¹ Offering easy answers even to apparently obvious matters can lead to hazardous assumptions. As we know from modern examples, conflicts involving people possessing different religious affiliations do not necessarily make them ‘religious’ in a ‘sectarian’ sense, let alone ‘communal’ in its special South Asian construction. The challenge is not, therefore, so much to identify the tangible ‘religious markers’ in ‘communal’ disputes (for instance, issues of precedence in the use of streets for religious processions, and between competing festivals, and quarrels over rights to the use of public space for the building of mosques, temples or *gurdwaras*) as to determine the salience of such religious components in reference to the participants and other interested parties. Again, it is often hard to disentangle religious motives from others having to do with broader elements of cultural social, economic and political life. This makes drawing a meaningful line of differentiation between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ concerns in most cases difficult, in some well nigh impossible. Generally, the best we can do is to make plain the linkage between the two strands, acknowledging that the drawing power of sustained communal struggles was ordinarily rooted in a blend of both. Notably, many of the pre-modern communal conflicts identified by Bayly are characterised by him as ‘reflections of severe local economic change which [had become] . . . confounded with ceremonial or religious disputes’.¹²

A second problem relates to the paradox alluded to at the beginning of the section. The revisionists and their critics seem almost to be talking about two different countries. One side would have us believe that pre-colonial Indian society was cohesive and tolerant, while the other insists that it was conflicted. Can both be right? Is it possible for religious riots to occur ‘in a predominantly syncretic culture’?¹³

Finally, there is the difficulty that – as Subrahmanyam acknowledges – most of the evidence for religious conflict in pre-modern South Asia comes from the eighteenth century. This century may not have been typical. It was the period immediately proximate to the colonial one, and it is possible that some of the new factors that historians think came into play with the advent of colonialism were already active, albeit on the periphery. Two of the riots frequently discussed in the literature on eighteenth-century communal violence took place in Surat, a trading port and the first Indian headquarters of the English East India Company;¹⁴ another showdown, precipitated by a collision between overlapping festivals, occurred in 1789 in Calcutta, by which time it had become the Company’s administrative capital and home to several hundred Europeans.¹⁵ By contrast, Delhi, the home of Shah Waliullah and the Tariqa’-i Muhammadiyah Islamic revival, and stronghold of powerful Hindu and Jain commercial magnates, renowned for their piety, appears to have remained

largely free of communal tension and conflict throughout the century.¹⁶ It is possible that the intrusion of European agency altered the communal equation; as Christians and beef-eaters, they were an added source of friction. Moreover, their presence changed things in a secondary way as well. We know a good deal about the Surat and Calcutta riots precisely because the English were there to observe and report.

Bayly does not directly consider this aspect. But he offers another perspective that may also help to resolve our paradox. As we shall demonstrate, in somewhat more detail, in the next chapter, the eighteenth century was a period of great and probably unusual political turbulence and socio-economic change. Bayly gives numerous examples of these features and several are especially germane to the argument being made here. First, he notes that, although colonies of Muslims had existed in Indian rural towns for centuries, the Muslim gentry-literati only began to 'acquire substantial zamindari rights around their rural seats' and thereby a presence in the countryside, during the 1700s.¹⁷ This expansion explains, he suggests, the 'land wars' of the eighteenth century, 'which saw the rise of agrarian Sikh and Hindu peasantry against Muslim rural gentry'.¹⁸ Second, he draws on his own work on north Indian towns to make the point that the conditions of the period favoured upward social mobility and facilitated the emergence of new entrepreneurially focused groups of merchants and artisans, again mostly non-Muslim. Third, Bayly finds evidence of a late flood of Muslim immigration into northern India, comprising military types, overwhelmingly Sunni and 'fundamentalist', from Turkey, Ethiopia, the Middle East and Afghanistan. He believes this influx changed the face of Muslim rule by ending the dominance of Iranis and Turanis at the Mughal court – groups that had been generally sympathetic to 'Indian' interests. Significantly, he says, these recent immigrants seem to have been prominent in some of the riots we know about from the 1720s.¹⁹ Bayly concludes that, on the evidence of the eighteenth century, religious conflict was likely to assume a communal form 'when local systems of bargaining and compromise', over festivals and the like, came under stress, as tended to occur during times of rapid social change:

ultimately, [that] . . . evidence . . . re-emphasize[s] the importance of pre-conditions in social structures for sustained communal violence. Analyses of consciousness seem to lead nowhere if taken out of context. Religious differences were more likely to become communal conflicts when they coincided with shifts in political and economic power.²⁰

This interpretation fits with contemporary data, which shows that places that have gone through a period of rapid inward migration are more likely to suffer communal outbreaks than places that have lost population.²¹ It is also borne out, as we shall see, by the colonial evidence.

Last but not least, Bayly canvasses the role of governance. He considers that 'the consolidation of regional states in the course of the eighteenth century

tended generally to strengthen the bonds of patronage and veneration [that stretched] across the boundaries of the major religions'.²² We will consider that claim in the next chapter. First, however, we need to clarify the practices of the previous Muslim polities in this regard.

Some case studies

As mentioned earlier, the written record left by Islamicate officials, scribes and hagiographers contains numerous references to religious disputes and a few descriptions of violent conflict between groups affiliated to different religions. One of the earliest such accounts comes to us courtesy of the pen of a learned émigré from Bukhara, Sadiduddin Muhammad 'Awfi, whose travels took him, in the early 1220s, to the town of Cambay on the western coast of India, then ruled by a Hindu king. Sadid found there 'a flourishing community of Muslim traders engaged in overseas trade between India, China and the Middle-Eastern countries'. To all appearances, he noted, these Muslims lived 'in perfect harmony with [the resident] non-Muslims'; and his co-religionists assured him that they 'enjoyed full religious freedom'. However, as 'Awfi inquired further, he learned that this had not always been so. There had been, in the not too distant past, at least one case of serious inter-religious violence. During the reign of an earlier raja, Jai Singh, the Muslims had built a mosque; subsequently, 'Hindus had set fire to it', destroying a minaret of the mosque used for 'making call to prayer'. This had triggered a riot, in which some eighty Muslims had been killed.²³ It would seem, then, that we are looking at a classic religious conflict. Yet some additional information provided by 'Awfi raises some doubt about this simple characterisation. He mentions a rumour to the effect that the local Zoroastrian (or Parsi) community, recent immigrants from Iran, had 'instigated' the Hindus to attack the Muslims.²⁴ Why? We know from later evidence that the Parsis have a talent for business. It is very likely that, by the 1220s, they were a leading if not controlling force within the Cambay trading economy. Perhaps they goaded the Hindus into assaulting the mosque in an attempt to counter the threat that the burgeoning activities of the Muslims posed to their profits? Perhaps they reckoned on driving a wedge between the Muslims and their Hindu clients? If that was so, the incident can be said to have been caused by an interplay of the 'religious' and the 'secular'.

We now move forward a hundred years to the second quarter of the fourteenth century, and to the remarkable account of another Muslim visitor, the renowned Moroccan scholar Ibn Battuta, which we have already drawn upon extensively in this volume. Around 1340, Battuta found himself in the southern town of Mangalore. This place, too, had a Hindu ruler. But Muslims were living there as well, according to the visitor about 4,000 of them, largely settled in one neighbourhood; again, as in Cambay, they were mainly traders and shopkeepers. Here, though, hostility between the two major communities seems to have been more entrenched: 'war frequently breaks out between

them', Battuta observes. Yet he goes on to note approvingly that the local Hindu ruler appeared well apprised of the danger and had shown no obvious partisanship towards his fellow Hindus. The traveller reasons that the king was eager to keep the conflicting groups in the town 'at peace because he needs the merchants'.²⁵ In his critique of this encounter, Marc Gaborieau reads three points of importance into Battuta's observation that we need to take cognisance of: it describes the religious communities as 'living separately'; it indicates that relations between them were often marked by hostility; and it underscores the role of the medieval ruler 'as an indispensable peace-maker', fully attuned to 'protecting the rights of religious communities other than his own'.²⁶

A window on our third case is provided by Abu'l Fazl, eminent scholar, courtier and disciple of the Mughal emperor Akbar (see [Chapter 6](#)). In 1567, the emperor and his favoured courtiers, Abu'l Fazl among them, were heading back to Delhi after touring the Punjab. Halting at the town of Thanesar, they found the place convulsed by a bitter and tangled dispute between two orders of Hindu ascetics, the Kurs and Puris, over access to a prime begging position at a nearby tank, a popular site for ritual bathing. According to Abu'l Fazl's account, the dispute had turned nasty; the Kurs had assaulted the Puris with fists and stones and evicted them from the coveted spot. At any rate, soon after the royal party made camp, the leader of the Puris arrived and petitioned the emperor to intervene on their behalf. Akbar heard the ascetic's plea then had the Pir of the Kur order brought before him. Asked for his version of events, the man insisted that the site belonged to the Kurs 'by inheritance', and warned that there would be further bloodshed if anyone tried to shift them. Annoyed by his intransigent tone, the emperor called the Kur leader's bluff and, when hostilities resumed, delegated some of his men to assist the outnumbered Puris. The Kurs were routed, and their Pir executed. 'The holy heart', Abu'l Fazl records, 'was highly delighted with this sport'.²⁷ Once again, we are faced with the difficulty of teasing out the religious from the secular, and for that matter from external agency. In this case it seems that the government was not just an arbiter, but an active participant.

Our final two case studies are both from the eighteenth century, which, on the evidence available to us, seems to have witnessed a rise in the incidence of communal encounters, although, as we noted in the previous section, that perception could be, in part, an artefact of the relatively richer evidence available to us for this period. The first is an encounter that occurred during the Holi festival of 1713 in Ahmedabad, which has gained quite a bit of academic attention recently.²⁸ Its trigger was a dispute between neighbours. On the eve of Holi, a Hindu householder, zealous to celebrate Holi with panache, built a bonfire in the street in front of his compound and lit it. His Muslim neighbour objected and petitioned the authorities to step in, claiming that the fire constituted a nuisance and a public danger. The dispute was referred upwards and eventually reached the desk of the highest official in Ahmedabad, the provincial governor. Although he shared the petitioner's Islamic faith, the

ṣūbadār dismissed his plaint. Much displeased, the local Muslim community vented their anger by killing a cow in the same public space, which led to a wider Hindu–Muslim confrontation resulting in a young Muslim’s death. After this turn of events, the Muslims sought the help of the *qāzī*, who, however, also ‘shut his door upon the people’, which led the group to ‘set fire’ to the judge’s house along with a score of Hindu houses and shops, though they failed to track down their other main target, a wealthy Hindu jeweller, known to be a close friend of the governor, Kapur Chand. Gradually, the disturbances subsided, but not before business in the town had come to a standstill. Subsequently, a new petition, this one in the name of Kapur Chand, but countersigned by the *ṣūbadār* and the judge, accusing the Muslims of wanton aggression, was sent directly to Delhi, where the Mughal emperor Muhammad Farrukhsiyar (r. 1713–19) adjudicated in favour of the complainants. There is no record of how this was received by Ahmedabad’s Hindus.²⁹

Our last example is an incident that took place in Delhi, the imperial capital, in 1729, and it bears several similarities to the preceding case: again a Hindu jeweller was involved; and again the trigger was supplied by a celebration, though in this case it may not have been religious – the sources are not entirely clear. At any rate, a group of Muslim shoe-sellers decided to let off fireworks, which resulted in some damage to a shop owned by the jeweller, one Shubh Karan.³⁰ Karan sent his armed guards to retaliate; at least one of the shoe-sellers was murdered. Tension quickly rose. Houses were torched and several jewellers’ shops, including Karan’s, looted. Fearing for his life, the jeweller took shelter with an aristocratic and influential Muslim, Sher Afghan Khan Panipati, who gave his word that Karan would not come to harm.³¹ The vengeful Muslim artisans had already beaten up the city’s chief *qāzī* and an attendant from its Friday Mosque ‘for having sided with the infidel criminal’; they now advanced on the house of Panipati. But before they could gain access, the imperial court of Delhi intervened. The Wazir was dispatched, with instructions from the emperor to apprehend Karan and put the jeweller on trial for having facilitated the deaths of the Muslims. With the arrival of the imperial soldiers, the Muslim mob melted away. Nevertheless, this did not quite bring matters to a close, because, when the imperial officers reached Panipati’s residence, the Muslim magnate stuck to his word and categorically refused to give Karan up.³² At length the man was taken into custody at sword-point.

What do these case studies tell us? They tell us several things, and provide a basis for speculation about others. First, the case studies show that pre-modern India was not free from religiously linked collective social violence that, in another era, would come to be called ‘communal’. Although we can’t generalise on the basis of a few incidents about how widespread such social violence was, nonetheless, they attest to its scale. At Cambay eighty people are said to have perished; at Ahmedabad, dwellings and religious buildings were destroyed and damaged. These incidents bear comparison with some of the bigger nineteenth-century riots we shall hear about in [Chapter 10](#).

However, second, our examples show that this violence, even when religiously motivated, was not always between Muslim and non-Muslim groups. At Thaneswar, the protagonists were all ‘Hindus’, members of two antagonistic ‘sects’, identified by Abu’l Fazl as ‘sannyasis’, but recognisable in the famous contemporary painting of the incident by Basawan (by the markings on the faces and bodies of the combatants) as Shaivites and Vaishnavas.³³

Third, while religion clearly played a part in all our case studies, it would be a misnomer to label them simply as ‘religious’; patently, other concerns – which we might render as secular – were present too. At Cambay, Mangalore and Ahmedabad, economic competition appears to have been a potent ingredient in the communal mix; at Delhi, class enmity seems to have been a factor; and, at Ahmedabad and Delhi, simple opportunism on the part of subaltern elements looking for easy pickings in the shops of jewellers was evident. We do not share the dismissive attitude of the dyed-in-the-wool dialectical materialists towards religious causes; it should not be assumed that people who claim religious inspiration for their actions are deceiving themselves. By the same token, it would be foolish of us not to acknowledge that there may well be – at the same time – non-religious motivations and considerations involved in such actions.

Fourth, it is evident that these conflicts did not (as is sometimes suggested, and as we bravely hypothesised in the first chapter) take place at a grass-roots level entirely below the radar of government, of the writ and reach of the Muslim sultanates and Hindu kingdoms. In all five cases rulers and officials eventually became involved and, in the end, imposed their sovereign will on the disputants. That said, however, our cases appear to indicate some important differences in the way pre-modern governments went about the task of grass-roots religious management as compared to later regimes. On the one hand, if Thaneswar is any guide, their intervention could be heavy-handed; no colonial official would have sent his men into the midst of a fracas in the way Akbar is reported to have done: whimsically, and with instructions to mete out summary justice. Again, compared to what would happen later under the Raj, it appears somewhat haphazard and ad hoc, dependent upon coincidence and outside agency rather than on routinised mechanisms of surveillance and control. Akbar just happened to be passing through Thaneswar when the dispute between the two groups of *sadhus* came to a head. At Cambay, royal intervention came in response to an appeal from the injured party: after the attack on the mosque, the *khāṭīb* (preacher) made his way to the court of the raja, situated some distance away in the town of Nahrwala; courtiers and officials conspired to prevent his access to the king for a considerable time, but at length he gained an audience and regaled the monarch with the harrowing details of what had transpired; the king was apparently so moved that he at once set sail, incognito, for Cambay, in order to investigate personally; so we are told was the dispute resolved to the ‘full satisfaction’ of the aggrieved Muslims.³⁴ Affairs seem to have been better organised in Mangalore; unfortunately, though, in the absence of details of particular interventions by

the ruler in Battuta's account, it is not exactly clear *how* he managed to 'keep' the two communities apart.

Fifth, even if it was sometimes draconian, governmental arbitration of religious disputes in the early modern era seems to have been consistently even-handed. The Raja of Cambay, a Hindu, found in favour of a Muslim; the Subadar of Ahmedabad, a Muslim, upheld the original complaint of a Hindu; Farrukhsiyar refused to be swayed by the fact that Shubh Karan was rich and had a powerful Muslim friend. These decisions savour of a healthy spirit of pragmatism. It paid the ruler of Mangalore to keep on good terms with the Muslim merchants because they paid taxes and made an important contribution to the prosperity of his realm; and the Mughal emperor could not afford to have a major bazaar in his capital shut down by civil disturbances. Nevertheless, they were not motivated by mere expediency; justice, also, was served and, at least in the Cambay case, something more. As the raja explained:

Since the dispute took place between people who belonged to two different religions, I took [it] . . . upon myself to enquire into this case. The Muslims have been subjected to tyranny and killed mercilessly. How could [I let] people, who reside in my country and have been granted full security . . . be oppressed?³⁵

Here, even-handedness is grounded in a notion of the state as a common weal, and of the ruler as protector of its minorities – an enlightened vision indeed.

Sixth – a related point – our case studies make clear that Muslims and Hindus in pre-modern India were not individually or collectively separated by faith in the way some hard-line contemporary commentators have insisted. The sources do not tell us, precisely, how Sher Khan Panapati and Shubh Karan became acquainted, but Panapati's willingness to provide shelter to the jeweller, and, still more, his readiness to suffer the dire wrath of the emperor, testify to the strength of their friendship.

To sum up: medieval and pre-modern India was not free from religiously linked, and in some cases religiously motivated, collective violence, but on the limited evidence we have at our disposal, it appears to have been infrequent, haphazard and localised. This begs the important question of whether we can fairly describe the events we have looked at as 'communal' events, in the sense of embodying a consciousness of community. How far did Hindus at this time perceive themselves as members of one faith? To what extent were Muslims impelled to act as a collective by dint of their profession of Islam? In short, is there any evidence that society, at this time, was beginning to polarise around religious sodalities inspired by a spirit or ideology of 'communalism'?

The great paradox

India is not a place that lends itself to easy generalisations; all too often we find ourselves in the position of having to reconcile seeming truths that are,

nevertheless, not wholly true, or sometimes true only for a part of the subcontinent or one component of its varied society. Thus we are cognisant that, embedded in our analysis of state and religion in medieval and early modern India, are two contrasting pictures of how people, in those times, professing different religions, interacted. In the previous section we demonstrated, with reference to a number of actual occurrences, that religion-linked violence was not by any means unknown in those centuries; earlier we reported well-informed testimony from contemporary travellers and officials to the effect that religious difference had never been an obstacle in India to peaceful coexistence, and that, especially at the elite level, but also at the grass roots, Indian society was characterised by a high degree of amity. On the face of it these two pictures constitute a paradox.

To be sure, we have been careful to avoid the suggestion that ‘communal’ conflict was rife. The few cases we looked at in the previous section do not, in themselves, add up to much and, considered in their entirety, the small number of such incidents about which we have documentation do not point to the phenomenon being widespread. Our best guess is that grass-roots religious violence, prior to the nineteenth century, was infrequent, localised and short-lived: not just because of the lack of contrary evidence but because there were good reasons for people to avoid conflict if at all possible.

Human beings are naturally gregarious; most people prefer to live in communities rather than in isolation. And this arrangement has other advantages, too. There is safety in numbers; a village can band together for defence against external predators. People living in communities have access to more specialised services and a greater range of products. Neighbours are close at hand to help in emergencies. There is a constant supply of gossip to enliven the daily grind. These benefits depend on the community’s members finding a way to coexist, at least to the point of economic functionality. Leather-workers may be untouchable, but turn them out and there is no one left to repair shoes. If the community is to work, its members have to learn to put their differences aside for the common good; and as with everything else this becomes easier with practice. As weeks and months pass, strangers, at first feared, morph into acquaintances. Trust is born. People begin to realise the value of striking up friendly working relationships and look for ways of entrenching these bonds in local custom. Some students of human behaviour, such as Victor Turner, believe that social bonding is a normative condition, and pre-modern India seems to bear out that contention.³⁶

What is more, there is an argument that pre-modern India was congenial to this process by reason of the plurality, diversity and inclusive slant of its belief systems. By the second millennium, ‘Hinduism’ alone comprised several streams and hundreds of individual sects, each focused on one or more gods (see [Chapter 4](#)). With so many avenues to the divine available, all of them able to claim legitimacy, devotees typically ‘shopped around’, taking what they needed from two, three or more cults and deities; and these ‘syncretic’ tendencies were if anything strengthened by the coming of Islam, which, as

mediated by the culturally friendly proselytising of the Sufis, added yet further to the array of sects and divine agents on offer (see [Chapter 5](#)). India's pluralist tradition blurred the line between orthodoxy and heresy, and made it difficult for any one set of believers to claim that they exclusively enjoyed the favour of the gods.

In turn, this philosophical tendency was bolstered by the inclusive example set by the country's rulers, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, who, by and large, foreswore policies that had the potential to offend sections of their subjects, generally chose to spread their religious patronage broadly between different faiths and sects, and occasionally attempted in their own right to set a good example for their subjects, by incorporating symbols and artefacts of other cultures into their personal repertoire. On his deathbed, the first Mughal emperor, Babur, advised his son Humayan to 'not allow religious prejudices to influence . . . his mind', and, in particular, to 'refrain from slaughter of cows'; exercising restraint in such matters would, he asserted, 'help you to obtain a hold on the hearts of the people'.³⁷ His grandson, Akbar, who, as noted above, abolished the *jizya* and the pilgrim tax with the same end in view, also proclaimed his inclusiveness by celebrating Hindu festivals such as Raksha-Bandhan and Diwali, eschewing meat dishes on certain days of the week, and appearing in public with a *tilak* mark on his forehead.

Yet we do not wish to suggest that these behavioural tendencies were constituent of a fixed, enclosed system impervious to change. That would not only be an a-historical proposition; it goes against the evidence. In time religious-linked violence would become commonplace. Although there remains a lively debate about precisely *when* the upward trajectory began, we know there was one.

If we think of the forces mentioned above as providing counterweights to social violence, they must, at some point, have begun to lose their traction, perhaps not by a lot, but sufficient to disturb what must have been a delicately balanced equilibrium. As noted above, many scholars think that the tipping point came with the arrival of colonialism and India's brutal introduction to the dislocating impact of modernisation. More particularly, it is argued that the nineteenth century assimilation, by Indian elites, of the heady Western ideas of nationality and national sovereignty led to a deliberate, 'instrumentalist', effort to raise and mobilise mass consciousness around the existence of an intrinsic *Indian* nationality, which eventually became institutionalised in the national movement led by the Congress. Later, we shall examine this strategy in some detail, but for now we simply emphasise the point that nationalism (and implicitly communalism) are generally believed to be modern developments that arose in reaction to the trauma of colonial subjection. The once highly regarded proposition that nationality is 'primordial', determined by physical and cultural factors such as 'race', language, religion and history, now has few adherents.

Recently, though, the Indian debate on the nationality question was revitalised by Rajat Ray's bold and persuasive monograph on pre-modern

mentality in South Asia, *The Felt Community*. Ray criticises the ‘instrumentalists’ for assuming that there was no kind of Indian consciousness before the coming of nationality and the nation state. Indians had possibly always identified with their *desh*, their country, and by the second millennium, if not before, this spirit of ‘patriotism’ had matured into a consciousness of commonality, of shared values. Doubtless there was not yet community in the modern sense, because the boundaries of this commonality were still fuzzy, and lacked ‘the power of organisation’; yet its pull was powerfully ‘felt’ by people across the length and breadth of the land, to the extent that a ‘community of sentiment’, knitted together by ‘love of . . . collective self’, could be said to have taken shape.³⁸ ‘Patriotism’, Ray opines (here taking a rather pointed dig at arch-instrumentalist Benedict Anderson),³⁹ ‘existed long before the modern state, the doctrine of popular sovereignty, print capitalism, standardised national languages and mass school syllabi.’⁴⁰ These consciousness-lifting agencies may have come into their own later, but pre-modern society did not need them since it already had mechanisms for disseminating ideas more than adequate for the ‘communication of . . . feeling’, such as the interactions that occurred in the bazaars, on pilgrimage trails, and at major festivals where Hindustani served as ‘a link language understood by the common people’.

Yet, even as Ray invokes the possibility of a proto-nationalism taking root in early modern India, he illustrates this in ways that suggest that the community of sentiment he identifies as Indian had strong links to religious affiliation. For instance, early on, glossing a text by the eighteenth-century historian Ghulam Hussain Khan, he notes: ‘In this late Mughal narrative, three circles are in constant overlap: the community of Muslim sentiment, the community of Hindu sentiment, and the community of anti-British sentiment.’⁴¹

Later on, Ray returns to this theme and develops it with reference to the Muslims, who he suggests were already disposed to think of themselves as a distinct commonality by virtue of their religion and membership of the *umma*, itself a putative community of sentiment. ‘A proselytising religion, one that is bent upon converting the followers of the other, is by implication endowed with a prior definition of the self’, he opines.⁴² In fact, Ray feels it was Muslim, or more particularly Arab, perceptions of ‘Hind’, that provided the catalyst for the growth, subsequently, of a Hindu ‘felt’ community by making the local population aware, as they had not been before, of their shared geography and heritage.

Although aspects of this reading are overly reductionist (as [Chapters 5 and 6](#) show elite Indian Muslims were neither a united group nor given to relentless proselytising), we think it offers a refreshing perspective on the medieval and early modern in South Asia that gets around the problem, noted above, of why ‘communal’ violence starts to increase in the eighteenth century, before the advent of high colonialism. And we find it plausible. It is absurd to suppose that pre-modern people in India did not concern themselves with issues of identity, did not ever ponder the question, ‘who am I?’, or were blind to the

existence of others pretty much like themselves and of others, again, who were visibly different. On the contrary, the preaching of the medieval *bhakti* saints – Kabir, Dadu, Nanak – which encouraged people to ignore putative religious boundaries,⁴³ demonstrates that they were an element of the medieval Indian *mentalité*. Also, Ray's use of the Weberian concept of a 'community of sentiment' avoids the anachronism trap. If pre-colonial expressions of corporate religious identity exist, we should not expect them to be precisely the same as modern, colonial or post-colonial identities. It is far more sensible, surely, to imagine the latter identities as grounded in pre-colonial prototypes. Continuity and transformation can exist, comfortably, side by side; and corporate identities, even modern ones, are patently not constructed out of nothing.

One would not expect to find in the pre-modern sharply defined identities bearing primordial templates. One would anticipate finding corporate identities rather like those Ray calls 'felt' communities, somewhat blurred and in flux, and certainly less fixed than we would ideally like as historians interested in linear narrative. But all this must remain hypothetical until we have reviewed the evidence.

Of 'Hindu' and 'Muslim'

The term 'Muslim', meaning 'one who has surrendered' to God, relates of course to Islam, and therefore carries at the very least an implicit religious connotation. 'Hindu' is a different matter, since originally it had no specifically religious associations and was not even part of the vernacular. As noted above, the term was an imported one, coined by the Indo-Greeks who followed Alexander to describe peoples living on the eastern bank of the Indus River.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, the term gained currency, and during the later medieval period, around the fourteenth century, *Hindus themselves* started employing it in administrative and other contexts, thereby evincing, in some sense, a self-awareness of being 'Hindu'. One early example is an inscription of 1352 attributed to a ruler of the first dynasty of the Vijayanagara Empire, Bukka I, which refers to him as a 'Sultan among Hindu kings'.⁴⁵

But were these terms signifiers of putative community? Did they carry cultural or religious baggage?

As outsiders, the Muslims had no trouble distinguishing the many things that set them apart from the peoples they called Hindus. Hindu society was variously a source of marvel and disgust to the newcomers. We have already had cause to refer several times to the wonderful account by the polymath al-Biruni of his travels around northern India in the early eleventh century in the entourage of Mahmud of Ghazni: his *Kiṭāb al-Hind*; al-Biruni is a good guide on this matter, too. His appreciation of Indian literature, philosophy, medical science and mathematics was unbounded, but for all that he found the caste system, with its hierarchical concepts of pollution and 'untouchability', very

hard to accept. Hindus, he painfully affirmed, ‘differ from us in everything that other nations have in common’, and were ‘against all those who do not belong to them – against all foreigners’. He believed this attitude presented ‘the greatest obstacle’ to ‘any approach or understanding between Hindus and Muslims’.⁴⁶

As for the Hindus, it is clear from al-Biruni’s account that they too were perfectly capable of discerning differences between themselves and ‘foreigners’ and were every bit as ready to make prejudicial judgements about them; and his impression is confirmed by other documentary evidence. For instance, a recent penetrating study by Walter Slaje of the Sanskrit ‘Streams of Kings’ literature, which emanated from Kashmir in the wake of the famous poem by Kalhana, reveals the consistent opposition developed by writers in this genre between the ‘non-Hindu residents of Kashmir’ (described variously, though not necessarily synonymously, as *yāvanas*, *uruṣkas* and *mlecchas*) and those identified by the terms *dvija*, *brāhmaṇa* and *hindu(ka)*, who are, by implication, natives.⁴⁷ As Slaje notes, this was not simply a matter of a culturally neutral nomenclature denoting ethnicity, since the words are frequently used with reference to distinct cultural practices. Similarly, the fifteenth-century Gujarati poem *Kāṇhaḍade-Prabandha* by the Brahman Padmanabha, which celebrates the resistance of the Songiri Chauhan Rajputs of Jalor to the advancing legions of Sultan ‘Ala’uddin Khalji, consistently projects the Muslims and the Hindus as peoples hopelessly divided by culture and destined to quarrel. Thus, at one point, Padmanabha has Sultan ‘Ala’uddin retort to his daughter’s request that she be allowed to marry a local boy, Viramadev: ‘There is no marriage [allowed] between a Turk and Hindu.’⁴⁸ The angry and disappointed princess responds with a vigorous defence of Hindu virtues, but fails to sway her prejudiced father.⁴⁹

And there are rich examples, too, in the *bhakti* literature, though here the authors are just as likely to be critical of Brahmanical pretensions as of Islamic otherness. One is the *Kīrtilatā*, composed by a Brahman from Mithila named Vidyapati,⁵⁰ which describes the wanderings of the poet’s patron, the king Kirtisimha, exiled from his capital after his father is killed by a Muslim. At some stage the prince enters a town known as Janapura (which some commentators identify with Jaunpur), governed by a Muslim, Shah Ibrahim. This provides the occasion for the poet to describe a city sharply divided, geographically and aesthetically, along religious lines. The Hindus live in well-kept dwellings situated in aesthetically pleasing neighbourhoods; the ‘Turks’ reside in ugly buildings surrounded by dirt and chaos. Another is the much cited ‘Dialogue between a Hindu and Turk’, from the pen of the early sixteenth-century Maharasthrian *bhakti* poet Eknath. Despite his Brahmanical status, Eknath heavily criticised the hypocrisies that hid behind the façades of Hindu and Muslim pieties even as he sought some kind of common ground between them. Yet, at the same time, he projects, in the ‘Dialogue’, an image of two quite distinct communities:

The goal is one; the ways of worship are different.
 Listen to the dialogue between these two!
 The Turk calls the Hindu ‘Kafir!’
 The Hindu answers, ‘I will be polluted – get away!’
 A quarrel broke out between the two;
 A great controversy began.
 ‘O Brahman, listen to what I have to say:
 Your scripture is a mystery to everyone.
 God has hands and feet, you say –
 This is really impossible!’
 ‘Listen, you great fool of a Turk!
 See God in all living things.
 You haven’t grasped this point
 And so you have become a nihilist.’
 ‘Listen, Brahman dipper in water,
 You leap in the water like water ducks.’⁵¹

We find then, among both Muslim *and* Hindu observers of medieval culture, a widespread, and developing, concern with differences and social boundaries. Meanwhile, the same issues were being negotiated and acted out, at a mundane level, by people going about their daily lives, and Rajat Ray has some choice anecdotes that glaringly highlight the problems, rooted in beliefs and customs, that often attended such interactions. We are introduced to a Muslim who, when the time came for the Friday evening prayer, would at once order the expulsion from his house of any non-Muslims who happened to be visiting because he could not bring himself even to ‘look on the face of a Hindu during that night’;⁵² and to a Mughal officer at Lahore censured for standing up to greet a Hindu man he had mistaken for a Muslim because he was sporting a beard.⁵³ And we learn, too, of a fraught meeting between the ruler of Vijayanagara and the Sultan of Ahmednagar, at which the Sultan responded to the prince’s greeting by immediately washing his hands, which forced the insulted Hindu to follow his example, so as not to lose face.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, there is a question how far this growing perception of difference, as between Muslims and non-Muslims, was accompanied by a sense of belonging to some sort of community of sentiment and, if so, whether such identification disposed members of these putative collectivities to act collectively. Opinion is mixed. As David Lorenzen notes, the secular early history of the term ‘Hindu’ has led some scholars to assume that it was not employed with religious connotations until recent times.⁵⁵ Talbot and Wagoner are two. They believe the term did not invoke religion so much as geography and point out that such labels are frequently to be found in the Persian language documents issued by the Delhi Sultanate. Wagoner, in particular, sees the phrase as being an indication of the influence of Islamic political culture on Vijayanagara’s rulers, evident also, he thinks, in elite Vijayanagara dress codes, and in the blended architectural style of the kingdom’s

monuments.⁵⁶ But Lorenzen himself takes the opposite view. As already remarked, he is a vigorous opponent of those who would see 'Hindu', and 'Hinduism', as being colonial inventions and, like Ray, is convinced that many of the social expressions conventionally associated with modernity have pre-modern origins. One such precursor, he argues, was devotional religion. He sees *bhakti* as a ready-made ideological apparatus for the creation of a cohesive society, with indeed the potential to implant in the minds of its practitioners a sense of shared corporate identity (even if theological conceptions of *bhakti* tended to radically diverge in the extent of their commitment to the principle of social hierarchy, as encapsulated, for example, in the notion of *varṇāśramadharmā*).⁵⁷ And one might easily say the same of the 'Shastric' *bhakti* found in the Puranas; for all their multiple sectarian divergences, the Puranas display a remarkable consistency in their mythic components, regardless of the deity they were composed in honour of, or the sect they were designed to serve. Another who believes that the contemporary usage of 'Hindu' was underpinned by a putative religiosity is Hermann Kulke.⁵⁸

We share this position. It seems to us that, when 'Hindus' started using the term as a *self-designation*, they were grasping, perhaps unconsciously at first, towards a sense of corporate cultural identity, and one which, given that it was generally used in conjunction with, and in opposition to, terms such as *yāvana*, *uruṣka*, *mleccha* and *musulmān*, had definite religious connotations. And further support for this conclusion is provided by the above-mentioned texts analysed by Raeside and Lorenzen.

The Padmanabha poem's use of 'Hindus', in opposition to Muslims identified as *mlecchas*, suggests, to Raeside, an awareness of the layered nature of his native society; he thinks this indicates a sense of corporate identity having real social depth.⁵⁹ Likewise, the Brahman author of the *Kīrtilatā* has his itinerant king remarking: 'Hindus and Turks dwell side by side and mock one another's dharma.'⁶⁰ As Lorenzen points out, not least of the notable aspects of this passage is the poet's use of the term '*dharma*' in a manner that approximates the term 'religion', something that is conventionally thought of as a nineteenth-century innovation.⁶¹

Indeed, by the seventeenth century this usage seems to have become culturally embedded. A hagiography of the poet-saint Kabir, composed around 1600 by the Ramanandi scholar Anantadas, portrays him as operating in a cultural milieu where the notion of Hindus and Muslims as encoded communities defined by distinct brands of religiosity was becoming increasingly familiar.⁶² More specifically, the terms 'Hindu' and *hindudharma* appear no less than forty-eight times in Gauḍiya Vaiṣṇava texts produced in Bengal between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.⁶³ And, again, the context is quite instructive. Typically, these terms appear in situations that involve strained relations between Hindus and 'another group or type of people', variously described as 'Yavanas', 'Mlecchas' or 'Musulmans'. Furthermore, as O'Connell points out, they are never used in a 'manner intramural to the Hindu sphere'.⁶⁴ As for *hindudharma*, it invariably occurs in passages where

Hindus are mentioned in opposition to Muslims and, in some of these instances, different types of 'Hindus' are alluded to, speaking once again to a corporate identity embracing sectarian differences. Moreover, it is precisely in such contexts that the term *hindudharma* (meaning, here, law, custom, or perhaps even 'religion') is found, probably accounting for some of its earliest occurrences.⁶⁵

We are looking here at slow changes. Ray notes that it took all of five centuries, from its first usage in the ninth century by Arab geographers, for the word 'Hindu' to enter into general parlance. It probably took another two, at least, for political developments, people movements and the flowering of radical popular *bhakti* through the ministrations of charismatic teachers such as Kabir, Eknath and Ramdas of Maharashtra and Chaitanya of Bengal for a Hindu community of sentiment to begin to emerge. As for the Muslims, although it cannot be assumed that they were already a felt community by reason of their membership of the *umma* (which was in any case a global brotherhood, not at all specific to the subcontinent), they too were evolving as a group, during these centuries, in reaction to local conditions, circumstances and cultures. For a long time, however, the direction of this evolution was mainly towards assimilation and coalescence, rather than separateness. The discipline of Sufism in India was enriched by borrowings from *yoga* and other forms of Hindu asceticism; the practice of worshipping deceased *pīrs* as saints took hold; and in places such as Bengal and Kashmir, converts fashioned a form of Islam that suited their cultural needs. If this tendency had remained unchallenged, Muslims in India might never have evolved into a separate community of sentiment and, in the fullness of time, a political community bent on staking a separate national claim. But it was. Although the so-called Naqshbandi Reaction of the late sixteenth century did not, as once thought, cause Aurangzeb to scrap the Mughal tradition of bipartisanship, it did prompt the Islamic religious elite to take stock, and this led to a renewed emphasis on the importance of scriptural orthodoxy as a measure of belief and practice, a tendency that attained its intellectual zenith in the writings and teachings of Shah Waliullah (1703–62), who presided over an influential seminary in Delhi. Waliullah and his son Shah 'Abdul Aziz (1746–1824), who inherited the leadership of the seminary after his father's death, guided and inspired a generation of Sunni Muslims, particularly in northern India, and several went on to establish missionary movements dedicated to the ideal of purifying and reforming the Islamic religion. Among these 'fundamentalist' initiatives were the Wahabi-influenced Tariqah-i Muhammadiyah of Saiyyid Ahmad Bareilwi (1786–1831); the Fara'izi movement founded by Hajji Shari'atullah (1781–1840) and radicalised by his eldest son Titu Mir (1782–1831); and the more moderate Taiyyunis under Maulana Karamat 'Ali (1800–73). By insisting that their fellow Muslims followed exactly the divine commands enshrined in the Qur'an and renounced all forms of syncretic practice, these reformers reinforced the elements that distinguished Islam from other South Asian faiths, and heightened awareness among believers of what it meant to be Muslim.

If the above analysis is correct, then the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries represent a crucial watershed in Indian history. But in positing the genesis, during this period, of a sense of 'community' in South Asia, we must be careful not to get ahead of ourselves. We need, first, to remember the point made earlier that it took a long time for people to grasp and begin to internalise the idea that they might be part of something larger than their family or their caste – a broad collectivity defined by ties of sentiment. Second, we would be well advised to hesitate, given the inherent geographic, political and social complexities involved in this process of assimilation, before leaping to the conclusion that it amounted to a deliberate attempt to construct new 'pan-South Asian' forms of identity, which could be employed for political purposes.

As we shall demonstrate in the next chapter, which investigates how regional and Hindu themes were employed during the eighteenth century by the expanding Maratha state to mobilise popular support for its imperialism, we need to be cautious in reading too much into what may have been just an opportunistic alignment of interests. Although we shall find, for example, that some sense of common identity and purpose along these lines was evoked at one point between the Marathas and the Sondas on the grounds that they were both 'Hindus', it did not, in the event, provide a sufficient basis for the forging of a firm ongoing alliance. The history of early modern India is full of similar examples. In short, while emerging notions of shared corporate identity shaped by religion may have played a part in determining where and to whom people committed their loyalties, it was not the only factor, and possibly not the most important.⁶⁶ Certainly, during the eighteenth century, the potential to evoke a shared identity appears to have been just one of the many diplomatic tools that political elites had at their disposal in making claims on territory, or negotiating tributary relationships with competing political players.

8 The Maratha polity

A problematic century

Book-ended by two seemingly transformative phenomena – the decline of the Mughal Empire, following the death of the emperor Aurangzeb in 1707, and the emergence of the British Raj as the paramount power in the subcontinent in the early nineteenth century – the long eighteenth century has fascinated scholars interested in pinpointing key moments of social and political transition in South Asian history. Once the period was seen as the last blush of ‘traditional’ India, as a time of decline and stagnation awaiting the improving hand of British colonialism; now, while many scholars continue to point to continuities between the administrative and economic systems of the Mughals and the ‘successor’ states of the eighteenth century,¹ others stress the ways in which, particularly at the regional level, society and politics, during the 1700s, evolved and became reinvigorated.

There is not yet, though, much of a consensus; and Peter Marshall sees no sign of one emerging any time soon.² Scholars remain divided about the causes of the Mughal Empire’s decline, about the impact of British colonialism, and the broader effect of the century’s many wars on the level of industrial output, about why the Marathas fell short in their bid to fill the vacuum at the imperial centre, and, last but not least, about whether the eighteenth century qualifies as a turning point in the meta-narrative of Indian history. The one thing, perhaps, about which there is general agreement, is that the eighteenth century was a period of great turbulence, upheaval and violence.

It is not hard to see why: take the political story. In 1707, the Mughal Empire stretched from Kashmir to almost the tip of the peninsular, from Sind to the marches of eastern Bengal. True, it was under stress. Several regions were in open revolt and it was beset with financial problems, which modern scholarship has linked to structural failures in the *jagīr* system that supported the Mughal bureaucracy.³ Yet its power remained overwhelming, and even those who sought to dispute its administrative control of particular territories were accepting of its ultimate authority. It was a very different scene a hundred years on. There was still a Mughal emperor but he ruled little more than the city of Delhi – and that with the leave of the British. The empire had vanished decades earlier. By the 1720s, the Mughal *ṣūbadārs*, or governors of the

Deccan, Punjab, Bengal and Awadh, were ignoring orders from Delhi, including, as time went by, orders to supply troops for imperial campaigns and even for their own recall; by the 1730s they had morphed into quasi-independent dynastic rulers. Then, in 1739, the borders of the empire were penetrated for the first time in two centuries by an army under the command of the Persian king Nadir Shah. After routing an imperial force near Karnal, Nadir went on to sack Delhi. His depredations left thousands dead and the city and palace denuded of treasure. The event bequeathed to the English language a new word for despair. In the late 1750s, Delhi and the Punjab were ravaged yet again, and Bengal was invaded from the sea; by 1765 it had become a puppet state of the British. Meanwhile, the insurgencies that Aurangzeb had not quite managed to suppress claimed other provinces: by the 1720s the Jats were in control of the region south of Delhi, the Marathas, under Peshwa Baji Rao, of the western Deccan and Malwa; by the 1760s most of the Punjab was ruled by Sikh warlords. After this the Mughal Empire became a prize, rather than a player. The wars of the second half of the century were essentially about which of several regional powers – the English East India Company, the Maratha Confederacy, and Haidar Ali Khan's Mysore – would finally inherit its mantle.

Recently though, scholars have begun to interpret these happenings differently. While not seeking to deny the carnage and physical destruction wrought by the century's numerous wars and revolts, they have come to view its political upheavals and even its battles in a more positive light. Where colonial writers saw only 'anarchy',⁴ they perceive a steady process of reordering at work, one that carried potentialities for political and social renewal.

Three substantive claims underpin this bold reinterpretation: first, that the decline of the Mughal Empire did not lead to a general decline of administrative order and efficiency; second, that the chronic warfare of the period had less impact on the country's society and economy than used to be assumed; and, third, that the rising costs imposed by the adoption of new forms of military organisation and armament were actually a stimulus to administrative innovation. On the first point, the revisionists stress that what happened in the eighteenth century was a 'kind of political transformation',⁵ involving at the apex level a redistribution of power from the centre to the regions and, more broadly, 'a process of *localization* in the distribution and organisation of power'.⁶ There is no reason to think that this decentralisation led to a loss of expertise, since in the successor states that began life as Mughal provinces the same people generally remained in their posts, to be joined subsequently by other former Mughal officials, alienated by the faction fights being waged at the imperial court. Indeed, there is evidence that this dispersal of talent enriched many lower-level 'lordly courts' as well.⁷ As for the regional states that grew up in the wake of successful rebellions, the Pune Raj of the Marathas and the Sikh Kingdom of Lahore both incorporated Mughal symbols and forms into their governance, drawing from the 'library of categories and techniques' provided by contemporary and earlier Sultanate practices,⁸ while their rulers

freely aped the culture of Delhi just as the Rajputs had done earlier (Christopher Bayly suggesting that the Maratha chiefs had become ‘domesticated into a Mughal life style’).⁹ Of course, the new regional states were much smaller. However, in matters of governance bigger is not always better. On the contrary, reforms may be easier to implement on a smaller stage, as the examples of Bengal under Murshid Quli Khan, and post-1760 Mysore under Haidar and Tipu Sultan, attest.¹⁰ Tipu’s use of salaried officials to collect the *khalsa* revenue, in place of landed intermediaries, is in fact thought by some to have laid the foundations for the Ryotwari system introduced by the English East India Company in the 1830s.

On the second point, a careful analysis of the wars of the eighteenth century has shown that their geographical spread was far more limited than previously assumed, and that large parts of the subcontinent remained, at least directly, untouched by conflict; while detailed regional studies by the likes of Stewart Gordon and Muzaffar Alam have prompted a rethinking of the impact of eighteenth-century warfare on those regions that did feel its bite, such as Khandesh and Punjab. The great trading city of Surat was pillaged on several occasions by the Marathas, but each time it recovered. Other places displayed a similar resilience. Indeed, the whole economy remained by and large robust in the midst of adversity. While warfare and Maratha exactions took their toll on some regions, Rajasthan especially, others prospered, benefiting from the introduction of new crops such as opium and the rising European demand for Indian textiles. Moreover, some part, at least, of the mushroom growth experienced, during the eighteenth century, by north Indian towns such as Bareilly, Azamgarh, Benares and Bhopal, may have been due precisely to demand factors created by the requirements of warfare. As had earlier happened in Europe, from the late seventeenth century warfare in India was revolutionised by the introduction of firearms and artillery along with new defensive tactics involving disciplined formations of ‘heavy’ infantry. This revolution naturally had military repercussions (an increasing death toll for one), but it also had a major impact on administration, and the economy, as Burton Stein notes: ‘The manufacture and importation of firearms, and the import of war horses . . . entailed a critical dependence of military-regimes upon international trade and . . . internal commercial and banking interests.’ As in other countries military requirements ‘led to the development of [the] fiscal institutions required for their maintenance’.¹¹ In other words, ‘military-fiscalism’ (and this is the revisionist’s third point) got money circulating.

All this makes a lot of sense. At a theoretical level it shows that change need not be retrograde or productive of social chaos even when accompanied – as it was to a considerable extent in this case – by predatory violence.

Yet, from our perspective, this reinterpretation is curiously lacking. Most of the debate is about state formation and the economy; apart from Bayly, none of the major participants devotes much space to religion. Is it possible that assertions of faith and religious mobilisation were important elements in the eighteenth-century story of renewal?

Once, one would scarcely have needed to ask such questions. For a long time religion, and ideas of religious communalism, dominated the historiography of the period. Nationalist historians identified a phenomenon they labelled the 'Hindu Reaction'. In part, they attributed this reaction to the partisan policies followed by Aurangzeb in the latter portion of his reign (such as his reintroduction of the *jizya*), in part to a groundswell of 'patriotic' feeling, which they attributed to the messianic messages being spread by the *bhakti* saints. Among the finest of these nationalist writers was Marathi historian Govind Sardesai. In a lecture delivered at Patna University in 1926, entitled 'Maharashtra Dharma', Sardesai observed:

The first four Peshvas have left ample evidence of their having ever kept this ideal of Maharashtra Dharma before their eyes. In all their undertakings in the north, and their dealings with the Rajputs and other races, they steadily strove, not so much for empire or power, as for the release of the famous holy places of the Hindus [Benares, Prayag, Mathura etc.] from the Muhammadan hands . . .

A good example of such evidence, the historian suggested, was Maratha king Shahu's fervent declaration that his state belonged to 'Gods and Brahmans'.¹² Later in this chapter, we look at a number of similar Marathi texts. In fact, evidence of this kind is not all that hard to come by, and not only for Maharashtra. For instance, the Sikh revolt took wings when, on Baisakhi Day 1699, the tenth and last Guru (after Nanak), Gobind Singh, called a mass meeting, announced the formation of a new pan-Sikh community called the Khalsa (pure), set down strict rules for membership, which included total obedience to the teachings contained in the *Adi Granth*, and informed his audience that the Khalsa was fated to rule the Punjab. In the eighteenth century, as this goal looked more and more within reach, Jat Sikh war bands went into battle shouting 'Wah Guru'.¹³ More broadly, recent research has demonstrated that the Hindu kings of Rajasthan who reigned during this period, such as Maharaja Jai Singh II of Jaipur and Maharao Durjan Sal of Kotah, 'evinced a strong interest in religious affairs, particularly religious affairs having to do with the Vaishnava institutions' in their realms.¹⁴ As we know, there were precedents for this kind of behaviour. And the list could be extended. For instance, if we push back into the seventeenth century, we find that the first Hindus to rise against Aurangzeb, the Satnamis, were members of a militant sect.

But the Hindu Reaction hypothesis was always too simple; and with the appearance in 1964 of Irfan Habib's seminal essay, 'The Agrarian Causes of the Fall of the Mughal Empire', it began to unravel. Habib made out a convincing case that the 'the fall of the Mughal Empire proceeded directly from certain basic structural contradictions of the system on which it was based',¹⁵ and that the regional peasant revolts, which earlier generations of historians had seen as religiously inspired, were in fact classic class struggles

for land control. He dismissed the Hindu Reaction as a figment of the ‘sentiment of modern writers’.¹⁶ Although we believe this Marxist reinterpretation goes too far, we concur with Sanjay Subrahmanyam that it ‘is a gross over-simplification to argue that the collective organization [and actions] of all . . . non-Islamic sectarian groups was a mere reaction to Islam’, or, for that matter, to some perceived Islamic excesses of Muslim governance.¹⁷ The problematic of the eighteenth century cannot be solved with reference to one piece of the puzzle. Moreover, some earlier presumptions about the religious impact of Hinduism on the politics of eighteenth-century India have been exposed as errors or half truths. Modern researchers have found no evidence, for example, that Shivaji ever articulated a philosophy of Maharashtra Dharma, or that he was influenced by a coterie of Maharashtrian *bhakti* saints. Although a text by that name exists, it was written four centuries before Shivaji and deals mainly with relations between castes; there is no mention in it of a Hindu programme; while ‘recent evidence has shown that he did not [even] meet the main candidate for the role of advisor, Ramdas, until 1672’,¹⁸ by which time his rebellion had already begun. Finally, if religion was an important vehicle of political mobilisation during this period, it certainly did not serve to distinguish opposing sides. As we have seen in previous chapters, the Islamicate in India pursued a relentlessly pragmatic course when it came to religious affiliation, and did not systematically discriminate against non-Muslims, even as candidates for office. This rule continued to be observed, both in Delhi and in the regions. ‘Hindu and Muslim commanders in later Mughal campaigns made special provision for the prayers of both religions on their marches’, writes Bayly.¹⁹ Hindus filled senior positions in the government of Awadh; and the Ramanadis, a militant order of *sadhus*, provided warriors for the Nawab’s army. Last but not least, according to Muzaffar Alam, some Hindu zamindars and peasants in the region actually supported the Mughals ‘in their military expeditions against the rebels’.²⁰

The place of religion in the turbulent politics of eighteenth-century India remains a valid object of inquiry; but broad generalisations will no longer suffice. A more nuanced approach is called for. Since we cannot hope to provide that, in the space we have available, for all the regimes that contested for power during these hundred odd years, in the rest of the chapter we focus on just one, the Maratha Kingdom/Confederacy. First, we look at a range of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literary constructions of state-level political conflicts, generated in Maratha literary, often courtly, contexts. We then investigate some instances of Maratha governmental agencies intervening decisively (for better or worse) in matters that can be construed in some sense as ‘religious’. Finally, picking up on the issue that concluded [Chapter 7](#), we examine the possibility that there may have been continuities as between inter-sectarian conflicts and conflicts (expressed or actual) between groups aligning along broader corporate identities and competing for access to political and economic rights. This case study cannot speak for the whole, but it has the

potential to tell us much, since the Maratha state was arguably the most significant polity of the age.

The literary contours of religious discord

The emergence of terms of self-reference is, of course, a very important aspect of the process of the formation of corporate identity. Yet this is not the only way in which notions of group identity, and the sentiments and symbolic registers that underpin such notions, can be expressed and drawn upon in order to ideologically sustain political, territorial or military causes. If the gradual adoption in pre-modern India of 'Hindu' as an endonym typically (but not exclusively) occurred within contexts where the group was defined by being weighed against another sodality religiously and culturally codified as other, group-internal evocations of common sentiments underpinning corporate identities were not necessarily consistently marked by a recurring nomenclature, but rather through cultural practices and symbolic codes having deep historical resonances.

A famous and very public example of this strategy took place in 1674, when Shivaji engaged a Maharashtrian Brahman living in Benares to establish the pure Kshatriya descent of his own (possibly Shudra) lineage,²¹ and then had the same scholar lead Brahman priests in performing an *abhiṣeka* ceremony (the anointment of a ruler accompanying his coronation). In undergoing this ritual, Shivaji deliberately situated himself within a long tradition. His aim was to establish the legitimacy of his kingship in the eyes of Maharashtrian Brahmins (who dominated the official class) and potentially rival regional leaders (*deśmukhs*).²² The specific nature of the cultural currency being deployed in this case is suggested by a text written some twenty years later, the *Sabhāsad Bakhar*: 'Formerly, in the Krtayuga, Tretāyuga, Dvāpara and Kaliyugas [ages], many renowned kings sat on the lion's throne; all the rites described in the *śāstras* performed on those occasions were made ready now.'²³ Here, Shivaji is represented as the latest embodiment of a model of kingship which had specific cultural and religious connotations.

Subsequently, the same text describes the conferring, during the *abhisheka* ceremony, of Sanskrit designations on the Maratha king's eight ministers. This propagandising was not without historical precedent. Some scholars, in fact, have gone so far as to describe Shivaji as an early practitioner of Sanskritisation on the strength of his commissioning of a translation of Persian administrative terms into Sanskrit, which they see as foreshadowing an attempt to make Sanskrit the court and official language of the kingdom.²⁴ Although this plan – if plan it was – never came to fruition, Guha notes that the official Sanskritising of political discourse in Maharashtra continued into the reign of Shivaji's younger son Rajaram (r. 1689–1700) at a time when conflict with the imperial Mughals was especially fractious, warranting appeals to old ruling ideologies evoking distinct religiosities.²⁵

The deployment of cultural and religious symbolisms received sustained attention, as well, in the Sanskrit and Marathi court literature on Maharashtrian history, which started to appear in some abundance from the seventeenth century. Not surprisingly, Shivaji's coronation forms one of its key pivots, but it also deals with conflicts between the Marathas and their various regional competitors. In describing at length the Marathas' acquisition of territory, forts and wealth, and the growing recognition by other powers of their emerging status, this literature does not simply slate home the causes of such conflicts to the religious motivations of their protagonists; nor does it always depict putatively Islamic regimes as fanatically 'anti-Hindu'. Both the Sanskrit epic *Śivabhārata* and the *Paraśarāma Caritra* (both discussed further below) acknowledge that there had been righteous Muslim rulers in the past, a concession that supports Eaton's finding that groups identified as Turks in medieval Hindu inscriptions and chronicles were likely to be condemned as barbarians (*mleccha*) 'when they used their power to destroy social order, but praised and even imitated when they used it to preserve order'.²⁶ Rather the Maratha tales of battle and conquest are often framed in and woven through with a strong sense of community identity marked by distinct religiosities; in this way, they seek, by implication, to construct an opposition between an identifiably Hindu order and an Islamic disorder. While, in such cases, the political competitor as 'Muslim' is usually drawn with little nuance, the symbolic registers deployed by the Maratha authors often oscillate between pan-Indian and localised contexts by wedding historical events alternatively to Great Tradition Puranic myths and localised Deccani forms of religiosity (which carried powerful regional associations).

These aspects are especially evident in texts that touch on the sensitive subject of royal divinity. In the *Ājñāpatra*, a treatise on governance reputedly composed by the minister Ramchandrapant at the direction of Sambhaji, the king of the Kolhapur branch of the Maratha kingdom,²⁷ the 'Hindu king' is identified with god as a way of explaining the requirement that a prince be trained vigorously in the Shastras, writing and martial arts. In narrative texts more concerned with historical themes, on the other hand, the association of a ruler with divinity tends to follow the well-established theology of the *avatāra*, which holds that deities can and do descend from their heavenly abodes to incarnate on earth at times of particularly dire need. As we saw in [Chapter 4](#), this implicitly millenarian theology is ubiquitous in the Puranas and features substantially, too, in the great epics. Thus, the aforementioned *Sabhāsad Bakhar*, a chronicle of Shivaji's life penned by Krishnaji Anant Sabhasad at the command of Shivaji's second son Rajaram, frames its narrative of Shivaji's life with the bold assertion that he is an *avatāra* of the god Shiva. We are told that Shivaji's grandfather, Maloji Bhosale, had a dream in which Shiva told him that he would incarnate in his family in order to protect Brahmans and destroy *mlecchas*, before bestowing on them the sovereignty (*rājya*) of the Deccan. Again, it is recounted that, immediately after Shivaji was born, Shiva appeared in a dream to his mother, Jijabai, and informed her that he had

descended to earth in order to ‘perform many deeds’.²⁸ Finally, as the *Bakhar* nears its end, we learn that at the moment of his passing Shivaji was lifted up by envoys (*dūtas*) of Shiva and transported in a divine chariot (*vimāna*) to the home of the gods, Mount Kailash. The conferring of this transcendent gift on the king told readers that he had been, assuredly, a god incarnate.²⁹

The above story clearly evokes a well-established Puranic mythos. However, Shivaji is more commonly associated in the *Bakhar* with his tutelary deity Bhavani, a goddess whose seat is said to lie at Tuljapur, to the east of Pune. Bhavani’s frequent interventions reflect the well-known warrior/nurturer bivalency of the goddess in pan-South Asian traditions, and are further suggestive of the ‘possession cults’ often found in localised traditions associated with regional deities. In a reverse of the typical saviour as interventionist divinity model, Bhavani is often *Shivaji*’s saviour, stepping in at those moments in which the *avatāra*-king is under most duress. One of these moments was triggered by the advance into the Ghats of the forces of the Bijapur general Afzal Khan, which culminated, as already noted in [Chapter 5](#), in the two men meeting, under a flag of truce, in the king’s encampment. Having sworn vengeance on Afzal Khan for his desecration of her image in Tuljapur, Bhavani appears in Shivaji’s dreams and promises that she will help kill the iconoclast.³⁰ The success of this mission – as we noted in [Chapter 5](#), in 1659 Shivaji murders the general by ripping open his back with a steel claw – is attributed by Bhavani to herself acting through Shivaji, and guiding his claw; thus a working partnership is sealed. Bhavani promises to help with other great deeds in the future, while Shivaji agrees to establish a place for her worship at Pratapgad.³¹

Bhavani’s subsequent interventions are also recounted in the *Sabhāsad Bakhar*. They follow a similar pattern. The next takes place when Shivaji faces a testing showdown with the imperial troubleshooter Nawab Shaista Khan, who has been sent by Aurangzeb to arrest him. Bhavani enters Shivaji’s body and tells him how to defeat the Nawab (the Nawab ultimately survives, but less three fingers).³² Later, when Shivaji and Sambhaji are being held captive in Delhi, Bhavani again visits and tells Shivaji how she intends to use a ‘stupefying weapon’ to confuse their captors and thereby enable them to make their escape. In the event they do so, in baskets.³³ Later still, as he bathes in the Krishna River during a rest stop, in the midst of a campaign in the south, Shivaji has an epiphany, and resolves to sacrifice himself by cutting off his own head; Bhavani forestalls this by manifesting within his body.³⁴

The coordination of Shivaji’s two divine personas – each encoding a slightly different register of religiosity, the one on the pan-Indian level, the other on the local – receives explicit narrative attention when Shivaji is depicted – as, for example, at his coronation – worshipping both at once.³⁵ Similarly, both divinities are represented as inhabiting the same divine abode. As we have seen, Shivaji is described in the *Bakhar* as ascending upon his death to Kailash; this is Shiva’s home, but the author goes on to say that the king expects to ‘have *darśan*’ there with ‘Śrī’ (Bhavani).³⁶ Also interesting, and perhaps,

for us, more pertinent, is how the underpinning of Shivaji's religiosity through these associations is counterpoised to the religiosity of those with whom he struggles. Not all of Shivaji's opponents in the *Sabhāsad Bakhar* are Muslim; however, it is clearly of import for this text that the most significant ones are. Nor is an Islamic religiosity constructed with much nuance; essentially, it serves to set one corporate identity against another in order to legitimise and sustain a political objective. Consider the stereotyped words it places in the mouths of significant courtly figures as they react to and comment on Shivaji's successes and honours. The text would have us believe that the news of the slaying of Afzal Khan, the lifting of the Portuguese siege of Salher in 1672, and Shivaji's coronation excite a mixture of envy and admiration in Muslim circles. A princess of the Bijapur court, and the Mughal emperor in Delhi, are quoted as acknowledging that the Marathas, Shivaji especially, have divine protection. 'God has taken the sovereignty from the Muslims and conferred it on the Marathas', laments the princess.³⁷ Similarly, the *Sabhāsad Bakhar* has Aurangzeb refer to Shivaji not as a 'man' (*ādamī*) but as 'Satan' (*saitana*) (here employing an Arabic-influenced vocabulary reflecting the cultural and religious persuasions known or imagined to dominate the Delhi court).³⁸ Conversely, when the *Sabhāsad Bakhar* demonises Muslim rulers or commanders, they are assimilated to long-standing embodiments of cultural disorder, such as the barbarian *mlecchas*, or demon-incarnating warriors from the Puranic and epic stables.³⁹ Thus, it underlines the significance of Shivaji ascending the throne by explaining that the age was one ruled by *mleccha pādāsāhas*;⁴⁰ and excoriates Afzal Khan by comparing him to the evil Duryodhana (in opposition to Shivaji's Bhima); while the army of Nawab Shaista Khan is likened to the host of Ravana, and Afghan general Dilir Khan to a *rākṣasa*.⁴¹

Perhaps the *Sabhāsad Bakhar*'s most remarkable allusion to a Hindu religious identity occurs, though, in its treatment of the Rajput–Mughal alliance. Counter-factually, it juxtaposes the imperial Muslims against the Rajputs (although, of course, some Rajput kings by this time had thrown off the yoke and rebelled), yet manages to suggest that the Rajput alliance actually served Hindu interests because it mediated a relationship between the Mughals and Marathas that benefited the latter. This point is first articulated in the *Bakhar*'s description of general Nawab Shaista Khan's attempt, in 1660, to capture the key town of Pune. Shivaji is depicted as being disappointed by the fact that Shaista Khan's senior officers were all Muslims and did not include an 'honourable' Rajput, since it closed off the possibility of fruitful negotiations. Shivaji had been confident of evoking in such an envoy a common sense of Rajput identity since he too was a Rajput.⁴² Shaista Khan, on the other hand, a Muslim and a relative of the emperor, was much less likely to respond to appeals shaped by love of land and certainly not likely to be open to 'bribery and corruption'. Consequently, with little hope for conciliation, Shivaji resolves (with Bhavani's encouragement) to sneak into his quarters and attack Shaista Khan in the manner described above.⁴³ Shaista

Khan having failed, Aurangzeb then turns, so the story goes, to the accomplished general Mirza Raja Jai Singh, and instructs him to attack and capture Shivaji. Now Mirza Raja Jai Singh was a Kacchwaha Rajput, the ruler of Amber (present-day Jaipur) and a pillar of the Rajput–Mughal alliance. But the author of the *Bakhar* cannot let this detail spoil his story. Thus, he suggests that, despite Jai Singh's long service, the emperor remained uncertain of his loyalties, and worried about his possible susceptibility to Shivaji's 'Hindu' wiles. They might even conspire in a revolt (*phitavā*), Aurangzeb believes. Accordingly, says the *Bakhar*, the emperor confers command of part of the invading army on the Afghan (Pathan) noble Dilir Khan,⁴⁴ and instructs him to keep an eye out for treachery.⁴⁵ Jai Singh heads out from Delhi. After pondering Shivaji's successes against Afzhal Khan and Shaista Khan, he performs, with the aid of some Brahman priests, a ritual to invoke the aid of the formidable Bagalamukhi Kalaratri, a tantric goddess.

When Shivaji receives news of Jai Singh's and Dilir Khan's approach, he gathers his advisers. The latter, believing Jai Singh to be aware of the strategies those 'unwary Muslims', Afzhal Khan and Sharsta Khan, had fallen prey to, advises Shivaji to make peace with him. For his part the king was hopeful that the Rajput could be won over but remained anxious about Dilir Khan. And the goddess Bhavani, too, advises restraint; she will not help Shivaji to kill Jai Singh (a Hindu). Although he is destined to inherit the 'kingdom of the Deccan', she tells the king, that will not happen for some time. For now he will have to go to Delhi and submit to the emperor's authority. In the event, Jai Singh camps near Pune and sends an emissary to invite Shivaji to his camp for a face-to-face meeting; the emissary is instructed to invoke Shivaji's putative ethnic identity as a Sisodia Rajput in order to establish common ground for the negotiations. Flattered by this overture, Shivaji responds by ordering a learned scholar of the Shastras to deliver his message of acceptance to the general; these are treatises that the Rajput knows well, and so trust is established. When they finally meet, the two men quickly come to an agreement that Shivaji will go to Delhi with Jai Singh. A *pūjā* is then performed to confirm the joint decision.⁴⁶

Dilir Khan, though, is less than pleased and suspects a conspiracy, Hindu uniting with Hindu. He approaches Jai Singh and suggests that the commander invests the fort of Kondana while he tries to capture Purandhar (both of which are close to where Jai Singh has camped). Jai Singh demurs, but, regardless, Dilir Khan heads off. The Afghan army encircles the fort of Purandhar and lays siege. Hearing the news, and fearing that the fort might fall, Shivaji resolves to make a general peace with Jai Singh, even at the cost of giving up a number of his forts. The two meet again. Acknowledging their common *jāti*, Jai Singh promises to protect Shivaji. In return, Shivaji agrees to give him Purandhar fort, and promises to raise Jai Singh's standard there – although, significantly, he refuses to acknowledge Dilir Khan; honour will not allow him to 'give any credit' to a 'Muslim'. When Dilir Khan learns of this development he not unnaturally feels slighted, realising that the Rajput (Jai Singh) will get the credit (*vaśa*) for its conquest rather than he.⁴⁷

In this way, the *Sabhāsad Bakhar*'s account telescopes a series of events from around 1660 to 1665 into a continuous narrative that represents the Marathas as engaged in a contest of values. Although technically a document of surrender, Shivaji's agreement with Jai Singh is presented as a contract brokered between co-religionists, one that ignored, and thus mocked, the corporate religious identity of the Mughal emperor and his agents to whom Shivaji's ally (and subsequently the king himself) owed formal allegiance. But the most interesting aspect of the narration for our purposes is how it deliberately overlaps and collapses the categories of Maratha, Rajput and Hindu even as it unites them within one ritual, scholarly and moral landscape, and frames them in opposition to Mughal and Afghan. Although the designation 'Muslim' remains undeveloped within this framework, nevertheless, it haunts the edges of the frame, encoding the basis of opposition.

Of course, the text leaves much out that later scholarship has uncovered. For instance, we now know that Shivaji's relationship with Jai Singh was quite unlike that imagined in the *Sabhāsad Bakhar* as part of the interior, cultural politics of Maharashtra. Although perfectly willing to parley with Shivaji as a respected adversary, Jai Singh appears to have completely rejected him as a social equal, refusing to eat with him and declining to discuss the possibility of a marriage alliance between their families.⁴⁸

The narrative strategies of the *Sabhāsad Bakhar* are mirrored in other courtly Maratha writings of the period and indeed draw on a long tradition of South Asian narrative literature focused on historical themes. For instance, the late seventeenth-century Sanskrit *Śivabhārata* was composed by Shivaji's court poet Kavindra Paramananda on the explicit model of the great *Mahābhārata* epic (for example, 1.22, 29). While situating Shivaji's religiosity in relation to Bhavani (here named Tulaja, after her chief place of worship), who is acknowledged as his mentor and crusading instrument (1.11), the *Śivabhārata* develops an elaborate *avatāra* theology that connects Shivaji to Vishnu. The Maratha king is a portion of Vishnu made manifest to rescue the Earth from the demon-incarnating *mlecchas* who haunt the Delhi court (5.27–28, 32, 36 and 39). Vishnu resolves, in his role as the Preserver, to take human form to nurture *dharma*, slay the *yavanas* (Muslims), restore sacrifices, protect cows, and so on (5.55–57, 60).⁴⁹

Similar tendencies are found in the Marathi *Paraśarāma Caritra*, composed in 1773. This text is a history of the Brahman Peshwas, who seized control of the Maratha state from the family of Shivaji in the early eighteenth century and built it into the pre-eminent political power in the subcontinent before the coming of the British.⁵⁰ It varies from the texts discussed above, however, in attributing rises and falls in the fortunes of the Maratha state to the malevolent workings of Kali, the demonic manifestation of the last and worst of the four epochs. Kali's 'possession' of the Aurangzeb leads to the destruction of *varṇāśramadharmā*, sacred places and images and the butchering of cows; this onslaught is only arrested by the timely advent of Shivaji, the earthly incarnation of Shiva (3.19). But after Shivaji's death the Maratha Empire

succumbs to schism, the fortunes of the *mlecchas* recover, and *hindudharma* is oppressed yet again (3.26). Hindu customs are in decline and their putative defenders, the Kshatriyas, seem incapable of mounting an effective response (3.31–32). Accordingly, Vishnu once again takes human form as Parashurama. In this form he is renowned for destroying corrupt Kshatriyas. Specifically, he deposits a portion of himself in the lineage of the Brahman Balaji Vishvanath, who would later, after 1707, become the Peshwa (chief minister) of the Maratha king Shahu. History records that, thanks to his diligence, and that of his son, Bajirao I, the fortunes of the Marathas rapidly recovered. But the *Paraśarāma Caritra* tells it slightly differently. It holds that the Peshwas are divine agents, ‘bearers of the portion’ of Parashurama (see, for example, 4.26–27), sent to rule the Maratha kingdom and thereby defend Hindu *dharma* against the depredations of the *mlecchas*. Evidently, the religiosity that the word *dharma* encodes in this case is meant to be of a general nature: the deities, practices and mythological tropes are pan-South Asian, though reflecting the Brahmanic interests of the narrative’s subjects and author.

The deploying of recognisable tropes and cultural symbols in order to situate specific historical events within a pan-South Asian heroic mythology was a common feature of Indian writing in the vernacular in the late medieval and early modern periods. For literature of this type, a decline in *dharma* is always attributed to, or associated with, the arrival of an outsider, irreligious and demonically inspired *mleccha* usually identified as a Muslim; and its subsequent resuscitation is attributed to the emergence of a regal figure identified with an interventionist earthly-incarnating divinity. The Maratha literary response to the Mughals, therefore, inherited a tradition of heroic narrative that had already been well established,⁵¹ for similar traits can be discerned, for example, in the fourteenth-century Sanskrit *Madhurāvijaya* of Gangadevi,⁵² in the *Kāṇhaḍade Prabandha* (discussed in Chapter 7), from the fifteenth century, the *Ratnabāvanī* by the Brajbhasha poet Keshavdas,⁵³ and the Telugu *Rāyavācakamu*,⁵⁴ both from the sixteenth century, and the seventeenth-century *Raghunāthābhyudaya* of Ramabhadramba.⁵⁵ Sanskritist Sheldon Pollock documents a sharp upswing in the popularity of the *Rāmāyana* story from the eleventh century, as evidenced by the appearance of a clutch of new royal temples dedicated to Rama and a welter of literary associations of the god with Hindu kings in historical *mahākāvyas* and vernacular versions of the *Rāmāyana*. By way of explanation for this phenomenon, Pollock has pointed to the *Rāmāyana*’s theme of a struggle between good and evil as represented by the saviour *avatāra* Rama on the one hand, and the demonic *rākṣasas*, led by Ravana, on the other, as lending itself easily to appropriation by Hindus trying to make sense of the politico-cultural convulsions of the period. Just as Ravana in ages past had intruded upon the domestic peace of Ayodhya, so an alien presence from Central Asia had descended upon medieval India. It was an easy leap for the advisers of ‘Hindu’ kings such as Shivaji, engaged in a struggle with ‘Turks’ (usually identified as *mlecchas* or Muslims) to produce a script that associated them figuratively with the epic’s central proposition.⁵⁶

‘Religious others’ in the Maratha state

However, for all this emerging sense of a corporate Hindu identity and the adaptation of mythological precedence for the sustenance of political ambition, Maratha governance through the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, like that of most medieval and early modern South Asian regimes, was typically inclusive of groups regardless of their religious persuasion. To quote Barbara Metcalf on Muslim regimes, ‘Loyalty, not a distinctive Islamic ideology, held the state together.’⁵⁷ Even Aurangzeb, stereotyped in the popular imagination as a staunch Islamic revivalist with deep anti-Hindu inclinations, was, as we demonstrated in [Chapter 5](#), as much a sponsor of temples as a destroyer of them, and, when required, a patron of Brahmans besides.⁵⁸ The argument canvassed in that chapter that temple-destroying activities and other such cataclysmic events were generally driven by localised political contingencies, such as campaign strategies and internal power-struggles (for example, in the case of Aurangzeb’s destruction of temples at Mathura and Banaras, the aspirations of recalcitrant Mughal amirs, and the emergence of new political elites), can be applied, with precisely equal force, to the seismic irruptions of the eighteenth century. The same contingencies made it not merely advisable, but necessary, to bring non-Muslims (such as Jai Singh) into the bureaucracy.

In the Maratha domain, this principle applied in reverse. For pragmatic and political reasons, the Maratha administrations of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries found it expedient to open their doors to Muslims and other non-Hindus.⁵⁹ They gave them jobs, but other kinds of help as well. For example, the Pune and Satara archives contain numerous documents that detail the award of *ināms* (hereditary grants in return for service), revenue rights and allowances to Sufi saints (*SSRPD* 2.190, 5.253, 7.685; *SPD* 22.171, 200), Muslim families (*SSRPD* 7.758; *SPD* 39.86–87), mosques (*SSRPD* 2.170–172), mausoleums (*SSRPD* 2.191) and families of Muslim officers in the Maratha armies killed in battle (*SSRPD* 2.159); while the *Sabhāsad Bakhar* describes Shivaji as a patron of mosques.⁶⁰ Muslims were accepted into service under the Peshwas (*SPD* 17.170) just as they had been under Shivaji.⁶¹ Many attained a high rank.⁶² Sufi *pīrs* were frequently venerated (*SSRPD* 2.190), sometimes alongside Hindu saints, as, for example, with the gifts (*dakṣinā*) distributed after the completion of the Peshwas’ palace in Pune (*SSRPD* 2.336), or when, in an attempt to hasten the destruction of Ratangad Fort, promises of largesse were made both to a Hindu deity in a temple and to a *pīr* (*SSRPD* 2.172).⁶³ And the Sufis sometimes lent their expertise to the Maratha regimes as they had in earlier centuries provided services to the Muslim sultanates. When the English surgeon Thomas Broughton visited the camp of the Maratha general-turned-ruler Mahadji Sindhia in 1809, he was introduced to a Sufi *pīr* described as the general’s mentor.⁶⁴

Similar accommodations were extended to Jains and Parsis. B.G. Gokhale records that Jains were permitted to build a temple in Pune over the objections

of some local Hindus.⁶⁵ In 1753, the right of a Parsi to levy *chauth* (technically one quarter of the revenue) throughout Sarkar Surat was upheld by the Pune government (*SSRPD* 2.189).

But perhaps the most interesting and remarkable instances of Maratha liberality with regard to the non-Hindus in their territories are those that involved Portuguese Christians. In 1739, the Marathas attacked the Portuguese position at Bassein. After a sharp battle, the fort's outnumbered defenders requested a parley. They told the Marathas that they were ready to lay down their arms, but only on condition that all Christian priests in the city who wanted to leave were given free passage and that any Christians who stayed behind were protected and confirmed in their religious privileges. Apparently these demands were honoured.⁶⁶ Then, in the 1760s, a further series of boons were granted the Portuguese Christians. In one case, a priest was permitted to fire a cannon three times in honour of his 'goddess' (*SSRPD* 7.754); in another, a priest was given permission to take over a disused church in Revdanda (*SSRPD* 7.760); in a third, a priest was granted the right to use materials from disused local temples to build a church in Salsette (*SSRPD* 7.769). Later, in 1794, the Peshwa made a gift of land in Pune for the building of a church to serve his Portuguese and Goan gunners, and recruited a priest, at state expense, to minister to their needs.⁶⁷ Gokhale records that the latter were so grateful that they wove the emblem of the *Jaripatka* (the Peshwas' official flag) into the standard created for the new church.⁶⁸

However, if the Maratha polity incorporated a generally benign attitude to religious difference, there are a number of contexts in which it became sharply delineated, notably in regard to the protection of cows. Reverence towards cows, and their protection, is one of the defining themes of Hindu history in the subcontinent, and would become, in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a trigger for bitter communal conflict. Yet, despite what the Hindu Right says these days in its published literature, the sacredness of the cow was not always a mainstay of Hindu *dharmā*; in Aryan times cows were sacrificed on altars, and as late as the fourth century AD they were served up to guests in high-caste houses.⁶⁹ Perhaps the pivotal development that led to a change in attitude to Mother cow was the *bhakti* movement, and particularly the rise of the worship of Krishna (in his youth a cowherd), but the eighteenth century saw a reinforcement of this tradition as cow protection became, under the Marathas, a focal point for royal rhetoric aimed at rallying Hindu sentiment and bolstering the legitimacy of their rule.

Thus we find that, in the literary texts surveyed above, the treatment of cows is one of a number of tropes used to mark a primary difference between periods of rule by Hindus and Muslims respectively. In the *Shivabhārata* (5.40–43), the rise of Muslim power is associated with the neglect of the Vedas and rituals, the rise of 'barbarian' religions (*mlecchadharmas*), and the slaughter of cows, while 'the reign of Vishnu', incarnated as Shivaji (5.55–57), is associated with respect for Brahmans and protection for cows. Similarly, the *Paraśarāma*

Caritra (3.4–5) counts the emperor Aurangzeb's 'butchering' of cows as among the most heinous of his multiple crimes against *hindudharma*.⁷⁰ There was, though, of course, another side of this discursive coin, and it was exemplified by Naqshbandi Sufi Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi's view that an effective way to oppress Hindus and ensure the supremacy of Islam was by cow-sacrifice, 'one of the most glorious commandments of Islam in India'.⁷¹ Again, it is difficult to know how far rhetoric of this nature was translated into action outside the administrative frame of the state, but some interesting glimpses of grass-roots responses are contained in the English factory records for this period, for instance the revelation that, in 1670, their factory at Bhatkal, on the coast of the modern Karnataka, was attacked and its eighteen workers killed after an English bulldog owned by its captain mauled a cow attached to a local temple; and the disclosure that, ten years later, the crews of a pair of Company merchant ships berthed at Karwar became embroiled in a violent brawl with a crowd of local men enraged by the discovery that the sailors had seized a cow and killed it for food.⁷²

But the Maratha state did not react quite so viscerally. Certainly, the Marathas took extensive measures to inhibit cow-slaughter and punish its perpetrators. Yet, looked at more closely, this crackdown seems to have been enforced most rigorously along their frontiers, and therefore appears to be connected, at least in part, to the regime's need to assert control over recent territorial gains, and to shore up its support among the populace within a shifting political landscape. Cow protection provided the Maratha state with a *prima facie* claim to be accepted as politically legitimate within a certain Hindu cultural archetype of just rule. It also had the potential to forestall local conflicts arising as a result of the transgression of cultural values underpinning group solidarities. As such, cow protection took precedence over many other objectives of policy, including that of diplomatically incorporating other groups within the Maratha orbit. In 1683, Shivaji's son Sambhaji is said to have put to death a 'Mahomedan of rank' for having killed a cow 'for his meal'.⁷³ In the early 1760s, the Peshwa punished a *qāzī* for allowing a butcher, who had killed a cow, to go free on the payment of a modest fine (*SSRPD* 2.142). In 1775, two Muslim butchers in Pune were publicly executed for butchering a cow and selling its meat, while another butcher implicated in the same crime had his hands and feet severed; the men who bought the meat (mostly Muslims, but including at least one Chamar) were fined.⁷⁴ In 1789–90, with Mahadji Sindhia's elevation to the vice-regency of the Mughal Empire, an imperial *farmān* was issued prohibiting the killing of cows.⁷⁵ In 1793, three Mangs (a Dalit caste) who killed a cow had their right hands removed on the order of the Peshwa as a warning to the other Muslims newly arrived in the area (*SPD* 43.147; *SSRPD* 8.932).⁷⁶ Finally, although, as we have seen, the Portuguese priests in Bassein had been assured by the Maratha government that their customary rights would be protected, and, specifically, that they would be permitted to worship freely, they were warned that these concessions

did not extend to the butchering of cows.⁷⁷ When, despite this warning, cow-slaughter continued in the town, the government in the late 1790s moved to set up blockades around Bassein to stop beef carcasses being smuggled to the butchers of Mumbai and Salsette (*SPD* 43.148; *SSRPD* 5.240).

A further context in which religious difference was used as a primary marker of 'Hindu' corporate identity was in regard to the adjudication of rules governing social interaction. The Brahman Peshwas held strong convictions regarding social stratification, in line with Shastric lore and the Brahmanic social theories that underpinned it, and they expended considerable effort to manage the association of Muslims and Hindus in potentially polluting contexts,⁷⁸ which is to say, in respect of dining, sexual liaisons and the caste hierarchy. In such cases, it appears that, at least from an administrative point of view, Muslims were regarded as just one more *jāti* among many. A similar strategy, Norbert Peabody reports, was adopted by the pre-colonial rulers of the Kingdom of Marwar (Udaipur), as part of their seventeenth-century reworking of caste enumerations to fit the social needs of Rajasthan.⁷⁹ Yet the data found in the Peshwa *daftar* suggests that the Maratha case may have been different in respect of the ambit of its social controls. It can be assumed that most forms of commensal and sexual contact between Hindus and Muslims occurred at the lower levels of the social hierarchy; however, governmental surveillance under the Maratha polity took into account the fact that high-caste victims of war, such as Brahman soldiers captured and placed in polluting situations by their captors, might have 'lost caste' and be in need of rehabilitation. These included prisoners of war who had been compelled to eat beef, or even convert to Islam. Hindu law (or at least the more liberal versions of it) allowed for the readmission to caste in certain circumstances, on the performance of prescribed penances (*SSRPD* 8.1127);⁸⁰ however, the process required the sanction of some higher authority, such as a ruler. The Maratha government knew its rights in this matter and was determined to exercise them. Accordingly, the Peshwa was furious when he discovered that one of his subjects had taken food with a former prisoner converted to the Muslim faith who, though he had undergone a penance to purchase his readmittance to his caste, had done so without the sanction of the government (*SPD* 43.8, 107, 140). Needless to say, the man who transgressed the rules by dining with the Muslim convert in the first place also met with heavy censure.

As to interdictions in regard to sexual liaisons, Sumit Guha, in his article on Maratha penal practices, cites instances of Brahman women having associations with Muslim men that resulted in the latter being crushed by elephants.⁸¹ But Brahmans were not the ones to suffer the government's wrath. The papers of the police chief at Pune show that punishments were handed out across the entire range of *jātis*. For instance, a Lingayat prostitute was sanctioned for liaising with a Muslim man; a Pardeshi and a Bhoi were fined for purchasing food from a Muslim supplier; and a Kaikani woman was censured for eating with a Muslim.⁸²

Status and rivalry

Despite the gradual development in Maharashtra during the eighteenth century of a 'Hindu' consciousness incorporating, to a greater or lesser extent, distinct sodalities (for example, *jātis*, *varṇas*, *saṃpradāyas*), the deployment of this emerging form of identity as a political strategy by the rulers and ministers of the Maratha courts, and the strong attitude taken by the Maratha state to issues, such as cow-slaughter, that contained the potential to foster community, and perhaps even 'communal' discontent, it has to be said that violence between sodalities split along broadly religious lines, of the kind we examined in the previous chapter with respect to the territories under Muslim rule, was not a major factor in the Maratha dominions. This contrasts with the picture – such as it is – that we have of northern India during this period. There, it would appear, riots between communities professing to different religious affiliations did take place with some frequency. While the data are patchy, there is evidence that such riots occurred in Delhi, Ahmedabad, Agra, Kashmir, Benares and Surat.⁸³ The reasons for this geographical spread are not easy to find, and clearly more research is needed on the topic; yet we might be able here to shed some light as to why the Maratha territories remained largely free of 'communal' disturbances as these are usually defined.

Paradoxical though it may seem to say so, group violence that can be understood to be in some sense religious *did* occur under the Marathas. But what were its parameters? First, while this violence involved closely related groups that, in other contexts, might be grouped together as 'Hindu' or 'Muslim', it tended to be triggered by altercations over a fairly limited and specific number of interrelated issues, such as ritual precedence, processions and control of the occurrence or procedure of worship. These issues reflect a concern for status and for the revenue and rights that, in pre-modern Indian society, went along with this status. While they might look remarkably similar to the forms that 'communal' violence took during the colonial period, we would argue that they reflect, rather, an older form of Indian community, namely that of caste. Today, caste-related violence is far and away more serious than religious conflict; perhaps it has always been so. Yet it is seen as a separate issue rather than as another form of communalism. We think these two 'types' of violence bear comparison and ought to be considered together. In this we agree with Sanjay Subrahmanyam, who has observed that historians and sociologists have typically treated caste conflict as independent from religious or sectarian violence, despite their functional elements being similar.⁸⁴

Second, whether we categorise it as 'caste' violence or 'communal' violence, there is no doubt that the vast majority of conflicts that have, in some sense, a religious character, occurred between Hindu groups and individuals; to put it another way, we could say that they were *intra*-communal events. What were they like? What did they involve? A few examples will serve to demonstrate their general character. In one case, the owner of a temple, resentful that another temple had been built nearby, physically destroyed the

image of Pandurang that had been installed in the new building; in turn, twenty-five Brahmans associated with the latter temple went on an indefinite fast in an attempt to make the perpetrator pay for a replacement (*SPD* 43.128). In the 1760s, a dispute broke out between two Hindu yogis over the use of musical instruments (*SSRPD* 7.761); and around the same time the Lingayats took issue with the right of members of the Kasar caste to carry pots of water in their wedding processions (*SPD* 43.9; *SSRPD* 2.3, 8.1140). Then, in the 1780s, an argument flared over the question of the practices and status of the Mahanubhavs, a low caste who have long had an ambiguous position in the religious landscape of Maharashtra.⁸⁵ evidently the Mahanubhavs had been trying to recruit new adherents to their form of Hinduism by inducing village people to shave their heads and renounce their family deities; and they were accused of causing problems at some old temples dedicated to Shiva. The dispute focused on the question of the caste's orthodoxy, assessed by their conformity to the six canonical systems of Hindu philosophy. A conclave of Brahmans in Paithan decided against them, and ruled that they be 'excluded from all *dharma*' (*SSRPD* 8.1128).

Thus, if eighteenth-century Maharashtra was relatively untouched by what would come to be called 'communal' violence, this was partly because the energies people would expend in the nineteenth century, and later, defending 'religious' boundaries in the wider sense, were here mainly directed at asserting and defending more localised – what might be called 'sectarian' – rights, within the overarching panoply of Hinduism. In a recent article it has been contended that the reason this type of religious encounter, involving separate and distinct sodalities (for example, *jātis*, *varṇas*, *saṃpradāyas*) within the compass of Hindu belief, was more prevalent than the type that dominates the literature today, between 'Hindus' and 'Muslims', can be accounted for by particular modalities and ideologies of Maratha governance.⁸⁶ This hypothesis seems to us to hold the key to the question raised earlier. We note, in particular, the accommodating attitude of Maratha government agencies to people of different religious affiliations, the readiness of the government to intervene in matters, such as cow-slaughter, which had the potential to mobilise large-scale protest in numerically dominant communities, and the ruling regime's ideological stress on maintaining ritual distance between distinct sodalities and communities through the strict observance of rules of social interaction, which appears to have had the effect, on the one hand, of keeping Hindu and Muslim groups ritually separate (and therefore less likely to enter into potential situations of conflict) and, on the other hand, of increasing the likelihood that, when conflict did occur, it would be confined to closely ranked sodalities within the Hindu fold. With social status and civil rights implicitly linked, in the Maratha polity, to ritual rank, avenues to social, economic and political advancement were partially determined by the ability of groups and individuals to negotiate their position in the ritual hierarchy. Thus, for instance, repeated contestations over bathing rights at the Nasik Mela can be explained, in part, both by the status that the bathing order reflected, and by

the lucrative opportunities for revenue open to the groups who secured a priority position.⁸⁷

But even contests of this nature – between groups within the Hindu domain – posed a challenge to the authority of the Pune government, which rested very largely, as we have seen, on its claim to be seen as a righteous enforcer of the moral order; not surprisingly, it adopted a vigilant stance towards all disputes involving religious and social precedence. One of these, as noted above, was the issue of bathing rights at Nasik. At the Nasik Mela of 1789, Shaivite *sannyāsīs* and Vaishnavite *bairāgīs* engaged in a pitched battle over the bathing order that reportedly resulted in the deaths of 12,000 ascetics; the government responded by allocating separate bathing places to the two sects,⁸⁸ a solution subsequently imposed also at the Ujjain Mela, which the Marathas had helped to establish.⁸⁹ The caste hierarchy was another fertile source of trouble, particularly when it was connected to patronage, as, for instance, the award of hereditary estates or appointments to the headships of villages (for example, *SSRPD* 3.521–522); the shifting of such rights from one party to another was particularly tricky, since it often required an equivalent reordering of ritual precedence.⁹⁰ Again, it was the government's job to ensure that the proprieties of hierarchy were respected and that rightful claims did not go unsatisfied. Likewise, Maratha government intervention was required from time to time to settle disputes between rival orders of Vaidika Brahmans (*SPD* 43.69), disputes over the proper performance of funerary and wedding rites (*SPD* 43.126, 43.141), disputes over the competence of temple priests (*SSRPD* 2.6, 2.8, 3.164, 8.1132), disputes over the correct procedures to be followed in worship (*SSRPD* 2.3, 8.1140), and disputes over who should be allowed to enter a temple (*SSRPD* 7.752, 8.1129).

And still more did the Maratha state feel obliged to step in and exercise its power when (occasionally) religion-grounded disputes erupted among Muslims. On one occasion, it intervened to resolve an argument between two Sufi *pīrs* over whose *ta'ziya* should be given precedence in the Muharrum procession (*SPD* 43.33); on another occasion, it responded to a complaint from a Hindu dancing girl that a Muslim called Punjali had usurped the position of *imām* at a mosque in her neighbourhood, and lacked proper qualifications to lead the Friday prayers, by pronouncing the office vacant and ruling that the congregation should be allowed to seek out a new leader (*SSRPD* 7.770);⁹¹ on a third occasion, it revoked the *watan* that had been granted to a *qāzī* in Khatav (Satara district) after finding the judge guilty of the murder of a *mullah* with whom he had been feuding over the right to preach the Friday sermon in the town's main mosque (*SSRPD* 8.1141).

In its embrace of Hindu religion, the Maratha state was following a well-trodden path. As earlier chapters in this book demonstrated, from the moment the first states in South Asia were fashioned, religion has ever been utilised, with varying success, as a tool of governance. The Pune government's initiatives in this respect also serve to remind us that the tradition of Hindu kingship did not founder with the coming of the Islamicate, but continued,

albeit at a sub-imperial level, to flourish, innovate and inspire. One of its important innovations was the cultivation of a sentiment of loyalty and affection for Maharashtra *dharma*, which, arguably, anticipated the modern conception of community. Perhaps we are looking here at another example of Rajat Ray's 'felt community'.

Still, this general conclusion stands in some tension with the developing sense in the eighteenth century of a 'Hindu' identity (which the Marathas were key participants in) and the ways in which this identity was asserted in literary (and sometimes administrative) contexts against rival 'Muslim' or otherwise distinctly coded regimes. What might appear like 'communalism' remained largely, we contend, a literary venture, and one expressed only rarely in the broader public domain (perhaps, for example, in respect to cow-killing). In the administrative realm, the deployment of religious symbolisms attached to the notion of a Hindu corporate identity served, instead, mainly to legitimate claims to regional control and to shore up local support for forays against various opponents: upstart *deśmukhs*; regional rivals, such as the sultanates of Ahmedabad, Bijapur and Golconda; and, finally, though at first only nominally, the mighty Mughal Empire. Viewed in their regional context, the expressions of Hindu corporate identity that increasingly coloured eighteenth-century Maratha official discourse can be understood for what they were: as propagandist statements designed to win the hearts of a Maharashtrian audience and, perhaps, to some extent, those of a wider Hindu audience in the territories the Marathas had newly conquered. Thus, if we look at religiously coded violence for which there is either evidence in the administrative record or in literary production, during the period in which the Marathas became a dominant political force in India, we find that the common denominator is the 'group' – in all its various guises and levels of articulation. The group was the medium through which arguments for status, and the economic and political rights that went with that status, were articulated. The *type* of corporate identity expressed in such cases was a function of the *level* at which the claims were made.

In sum, the eighteenth century reveals itself, from the perspective of religious governance, as a fraught and complex period. Dominated politically by the Maratha ascendancy, its wars and revolts provided a platform for kings, ministers and poets at the Pune court to deploy and manipulate religious symbols to construct a regional corporate identity, tied to Puranic values and mythologies. Undertaken with the nominal aim of defending religion, but in fact mainly with a view to consolidating and strengthening the expanding Maratha state, this project afforded governmental agencies, groups and individuals an opportunity in their turn to make ambitious social and status claims within contested political and social arenas.

These various tendencies would grow, and multiply, over the following century on the much bigger political stage that came into being with the advent of the British Raj.

9 Colonial ‘neutrality’

Paradoxes

The British Raj was a new kind of Indian state. What made it so was not the fact that it was ‘foreign’, ruled over by white men, and controlled, in the last resort, from London, for many of its dynastic predecessors, including of course the Mughals, had also come from somewhere else, but the fact that it possessed unprecedented political power and administrative penetration, attributes that gave it the capacity to transform society in ways that no previous Indian regime had ever even aspired to. To put it another way, the Raj was different because it was ‘modern’.

The first precondition of sovereignty is a concentration of power in the hands of a central authority such that the ruler or government can make and enforce decisions, crush dissent and generally maintain order in the realm. The fully evolved Raj was by several orders of magnitude more powerful than any previous South Asian state: it possessed a large, well-trained and disciplined army, over 200,000 police, many of them also armed; the ability to get these forces quickly to political trouble spots via railway or road; and a formidable coercive armoury that, by the twentieth century, included repeating rifles, armoured cars, tear gas, military aircraft and machine guns. ‘No violent insurrection had much chance within Britain’s Indian Empire.’¹ Yet, while the British were perfectly willing to use force whenever their hold on the country appeared threatened, they did not use it routinely, and arguably did not need to because they had other assets to call on. Chief of these was administrative clout. The Raj, at its height, employed half a million officials; but more important than their sheer number was the way they were organised: into departmentalised cadres, each with a fixed set of responsibilities, a chain of command and a regularised system of promotion, all of which conduced to greater efficiency. The public service of the Raj was India’s first truly professionalised bureaucracy. And here, too, the British rulers were helped by their access to modern technologies and systems of record keeping. The key to governance is information. Thanks to the printing press, the cyclostyling machine (both in operation by the 1830s)² and, later on, the typewriter, the British Raj was able to process and store vastly more of it than any of its predecessors, an outcome also assisted by recourse to newly developed

procedures for the classification of administrative data according to 'rational' taxonomies embodied in written 'codes'. Of course all of this cost; and, in truth, a large part of the British Indian budget was devoted simply to supporting the governing apparatus – a third on the Indian Army and around a quarter on the civil administration, including pensions. Socially iniquitous as this fiscal regime clearly was, it suggests, nevertheless, that the Raj was an administration that had the capacity to continuously raise additional revenue.³ In this respect, too, it broke new ground. Last but not least, the British Raj was the first regime in Indian history that tried to *manage* the peoples it ruled, partly, of course, in order to better control them, but also to increase the wealth-generating potential of the subject population, to 'improve' it – an objective that carried, implicitly, both moral and economic connotations. This led, as we have seen, to assiduous information gathering; and gradually a formidable corpus of 'colonialist knowledge' about Indian society and economy was built up, which even many Indians came in time to accept as a scientific (and therefore 'true') representation of their world: a development that, along with the colonial government's claim to be interested in improvement, and its apparent willingness to govern according to fixed bureaucratic and legal norms, gave British rule a veneer of legitimacy. Michel Foucault contends that the state in Western Europe underwent a seismic reconfiguration from about the eighteenth century, as its primary focus shifted from defending and expanding the scope of royal sovereignty over territory to addressing the 'problem of population', by means of surveillance, data collection and the 'science and technique of intervention' in the economy – practices that constitute for him the discursive field of 'governmentality'.⁴ That colonial India seems to fit Foucault's paradigm is not surprising, given that several of the British philosophers of government who best exemplify the tendency he identifies, such as Jeremy Bentham and the Mills, James and John Stuart, were closely associated with the English East India Company, the organisation that administered Britain's Indian conquests.⁵

Thus, the Raj was admirably equipped, administratively, to follow in the footsteps of earlier regimes, which, as the previous chapters have shown, had always felt obliged to interact closely with the religious ideas and practices of the wider society. Indeed, in some respects, it was arguably better placed to impose itself on the religious life of the country than any of its predecessors. Yet, instinctively, it shrank from the task. On the contrary, it tried, initially, to separate itself entirely from Indian religious life. The Company's policy on religion was stated to be one 'of *non-interference* or *neutrality*',⁶ (a term that later came to embody, as we shall find, suggestions of even-handedness, but was initially used in the diplomatic sense of non-belligerency, that is, 'not involved'). More than able to make a difference, the British were unwilling to try. Their religious policy in India was grounded in paradox.

Why was the East India Company anxious to keep religion at arm's length? The main reason was that the Company's rulers were chary of intruding into an area of hotly held convictions that had the potential to turn volatile native

opinion against the government. At the start of the nineteenth century, the Raj we described earlier – fully blown as it were – was little more than a vision, and a dim one at that. It was strong militarily, but quite weak in other ways, especially on the intelligence front; it knew little about how Indian society and economy worked, or where political power was concentrated; it was unsure who to trust. Indeed, the Company is now seen by most scholars as something of a transitional regime, initially not very different from other Indian 'military fiscal' regimes of that period, such as Tipu Sultan's Mysore or Ranjit Singh's Kingdom of Lahore.⁷ Put simply, the East India Company did not yet possess (and understood that it did not) sufficient bureaucratic power to tackle big administrative challenges. Moreover, lacking accurate knowledge, the Company's rulers were easily swayed by rumour and the evidence of snap impressions, which convinced them that the new government was unpopular. Officials reported being stared at with open loathing, especially by Muslims. On tour in Central India, Sir William Sleeman was informed that the people there held the beef-eating British responsible for the failure of their crops and were 'beginning to wish their old Marāthā rulers in power again'.⁸ The Madras Board of Revenue's William J. Thackeray ruminated dolefully: 'we are . . . regarded with hate'.⁹ It seemed to the British that they had inherited a country of 'vicissitude and revolution'.¹⁰

Accordingly, the Company opted for a style of governance that was designed to make minimal demands on strategic stakeholders and avoid areas of controversy, such as religion. At the same time, it was realised that meddling with religion would only serve to draw attention to the awkward and sensitive fact that the Company state at its apex was a Christian regime. Again, folk wisdom held that Christianity was viewed by many Indians as a dangerous (because proselytising) faith; and this perception was given weight by the military mutiny at Vellore, near Madras, in 1807, ascribed to 'the suspicion generated in the minds of the Sepoys [native soldiers] of an intention on the part of our Government to compel them to become Christian'.¹¹ Perhaps, if there had been a larger existing Christian community in India, the Company's men might have been tempted to make more of their Christian heritage; as it was, they initially 'found in religion little ideological foundation for the exercise of imperial power'.¹² From many points of view 'non-intervention' was a wise policy for a foreign government that was still finding its feet in the subcontinent, and that still faced significant security challenges; one can see, too, that it came naturally to a set of rulers who still, to some extent, saw their primary role and *raison d'être* as the pursuit of commercial profit.

However, even as the policy of neutrality was being articulated, and enshrined in legislation such as the East India Company Act of 1797, fate and circumstance combined to undermine it. Bit by bit, the policy was compromised. Officially though, it remained in force, which might not have been a problem except for the fact that the multiplying lapses from it were never openly acknowledged as amounting to a contradiction. Looking ahead, one might suggest that the core paradox of the colonial state's relationship with

religion lay not in the false pretences that surrounded its claim to be apart from, and indifferent to, issues of faith, or that possibly the most powerful government in Indian history sought to have nothing to do with everyday religious management, but in the fact that – despite this self-denying ordinance – the Raj ended up behaving in respect of religion very much like the patrimonial regimes it had displaced.

Prisoners of power

Even as the Company tried to position itself outside religion, its arrival on Indian soil, as the de facto paramount power, ineluctably stirred the religious pot in ways both unforeseen and unwished by the Court of Directors and their servants in the subcontinent. At the outset of the nineteenth century, the social forms and mores delineated in earlier chapters were still deeply entrenched. Indian society remained pluralist – but functionally tolerant. Especially at the grass roots, people clung to an inherited belief in a moral economy that offered not just the right to physical subsistence, but also the right to worship the gods of their choosing. Yet, if the dominant religious ethos was tolerant, it was not absolutely so. In places where Great Tradition religions were more in evidence, such as urban centres, the tendency was for one religion – usually that of the local political power holders – to take precedence over all others in the celebration of public ritual. For example, in Delhi, where the Mughal Akbar II held court, the Muslim elite took it for granted that their religion, Islam, should have free rein. As Akbar's spiritual adviser Maulana Raffiuddin remarked bluntly: 'it was the King's duty to favour the Mussalmans *throughout*'.¹³ Conversely, the Hindus of Delhi – however much they might have disliked this arrangement – submitted to it stoically, spokesmen from the community telling the British resident that they would consider it a sufficient sop to their feelings if the Muslims consented to refrain from cow-killing 'openly in the Streets', since this was as lavish a concession 'as in a *Mohamedan City* they could reasonably expect'.¹⁴ Similarly, in Muslim-controlled Rohilkhand, Hindus 'had to accept marked inferiority in their religious display'.¹⁵

In so far as they knew of these hierarchies, Company officials ignored them; after all, they were committed to non-involvement. Therefore, when the pre-existing Muslim regimes in northern India were one by one supplanted by British governments, no executive authority was left in the region to enforce them. Non-Muslims, especially Hindu and Jain members of the commercial castes, not surprisingly took full advantage of this religious power vacuum. In 1803, shortly after the capture of Delhi by Lord Lake, a Jain financier raised a new temple and inaugurated it with a massive procession through the city. This affront to the status quo caused 'great indignation', and provoked a series of disturbances that culminated in a Muslim mob sacking and burning the temple.¹⁶

And the coming of British rule wrought unintended changes in other ways as well. For instance, non-Muslim elites gained confidence and political

leverage from their rapid penetration of the lower levels of the new colonial bureaucracy, which gave them insider access to British officials, while the extension of British control, although it fell short of inaugurating a 'Pax Britannica', led to a return, after a century marked by wars and social upheavals, to more settled conditions, which boosted trade and encouraged investment in infrastructure. The resultant upsurge in temple construction, and other forms of religious benefaction, greatly intensified sectarian competition in what had always been a highly combative arena. Last but not least, the voracious appetite of the conquerors for beef – by mid-century some 350,000 cows were being slaughtered every year simply to satisfy the needs of the Indian Army – helped inflame Hindu revivalist sentiment.

At the same time, the process of imperial expansion and conquest devolved upon the Company state a host of unlooked-for religious duties and obligations, ritualistic and managerial entanglements inherited, by default, from the Hindu and Muslim dynasties it had overthrown. These included the maintenance and repair of state-owned temples and shrines, the hiring and firing of priests, the provision of coolies and detachments of armed guards to assist at public festivals, and the regulation and taxing of pilgrims. In total, these requirements imposed a heavy additional administrative burden on the Company's local officers. More importantly, they compromised the neutrality principle. Although much of the work was of an administrative kind, secular rather than religious per se, it was not entirely so. In assuming responsibility for the great Vaishnavite temple at Tirupathi, the Madras government undertook to restrict entry to 'those caste[s] who have hitherto been admitted'.¹⁷ At Surat and Broach, it was given to the Company's officers to preside over the annual coconut-throwing festival, in which capacity they were required to beseech the river goddess to 'pardon all our sins'.¹⁸ At Puri, officials not only levied a pilgrim tax, but also collected fees on behalf of the temple *pandas*. Initially, the British were bemused by these legacies; but they seemed unavoidable, necessary in fact if British rule was going to fully satisfy the ingrained expectations of its new subjects that governments had a duty to the gods. British forces entering the celebrated shrine of Puri in 1803 were told that the presiding deity, Jagannath, had directed that 'the English Government was in future to be his guardian'; and later a Company official noted gloomily that the introduction of British superintendence at Puri appeared to have led to 'a belief among our Hindoo subjects that we encourage the worship of Juggernath'.¹⁹ The situation was bizarre. But what could be done? It came, literally, with the territory. As Tanjore Magistrate Kindersley recognised, 'the management of the Devasthanam [the state temples] has always been in the hands of the Government . . . and under all despotic Governments *must necessarily be so*'.²⁰ What is more, there was a significant compensation: the Company got to pocket the receipts from the taxes levied on pilgrims, the surplus after expenses generated by the three great Hindu pilgrimage centres of Gaya, Allahabad and Puri alone being reckoned, in 1836, at nearly Rs.375,000.²¹

Similarly, Indians raised under the dispossessed monarchical regimes carried over into the colonial sphere a habit of looking to the *sarkar* to resolve their sectarian quarrels; once convinced that the British had taken over, they started approaching them in the same supplicant spirit. For example, in 1809 a dispute arose, at Benares, around the future of a site called the Lat Bhairava, which housed a mosque but also a shrine dedicated to the god Hanuman. Local Muslims tolerated this intrusion while the Hindu structure remained small and crude, but when a Nagar Brahman began to reconstruct it using stone instead of mud, serious disturbances ensued that left at least thirty people dead and seventy injured. In the wake of the Benares riot, the town's Hindu leaders called on the Bengal government to take action to ensure:

That the Musalmans be not allowed to come to the places of our worship, or to kill cows, or for recreation and pleasure to pass along the roads frequented by the Hindoos in order that by this method a line may be distinctly drawn between us. You are yourself the distributor of justice and are acquainted with the Beyds [the Vedas], [the] Poorauns [Puranas] and [the] Shaster [Shastras]. Let such measures be adopted as may fix and confirm the Hindoo religion, establish a certain rule for the future, and adjust all differences.

The memorial ended bluntly: 'you are the ruling power – put a stop to this violence'.²² In the same vein, the Brahmans of Dharwar petitioned the Company, in 1835, 'to make some bundobust [regulation]' to prevent the town's Lingayats from carrying a pole topped by a severed arm, said to be a symbolic reference to the saintly Brahman guru Vyas – and thus egregiously offensive to them – through the streets of their neighbourhood.²³ These, and other similar requests, bear out Niels Brimnes' contention that the Company's Indian subjects, though wary of its Christian affiliations, nonetheless expected it to behave with respect to religion wholly like a traditional Indian ruling regime.²⁴

This thrust the British on to the horns of a dilemma. If they agreed to arbitrate in the ways their subjects wanted, they risked becoming entangled in sectarian disputation; yet remaining aloof was a risky proposition too. It could damage their fragile *izzat*, their moral authority as rulers. Moreover, non-intervention would not make the problems go away. Perhaps the sensible course was to intervene strategically, before disputes became violent. Convinced from years on the job that Indian society was hopelessly addicted to sectarian bickering, Judge Stuart of the Benares Circuit Court felt the government needed to introduce some degree of management simply in order 'to prevent this spirit [of naked rivalry] from breaking out into excess'.²⁵ Others, though, disagreed.

But on one point there was total unanimity: the government could not turn a blind eye to religious quarrels that endangered the public peace. Even the ultra-cautious, small government-minded Court of Directors accepted that the Company had a duty to protect lives and property. Beyond that, there was the atavistic fear, which the Company shared with its parent in London and

indeed with practically every government of that era, of the riotous urban 'mob', which was viewed both as a presumptive challenge to authority, and a potential danger to the security of the state. When mobs gathered, on whatever pretext, the knee-jerk reaction of the political elites was always to crush them: 'all rioting', wrote the gentle English poet Matthew Arnold, 'has to be put down with a strong hand'.²⁶ And in the light of 1776 and 1789, we can easily understand their paranoia. Revolutions had happened. And if English society was turbulent, and often lawless, how much greater was the danger posed to the precarious edifice of the Company's government by the teeming masses of India, which had repeatedly, as at Vellore and Benares, displayed an alarming penchant for contumacy? Bareilly district alone contained, perhaps, 100,000 demobilised Pathan soldiers in the 1820s, armed and at a loose end.²⁷ Following the 1809 Benares riot, Brooke, the local agent, urged that a large military force be 'permanently stationed in the City'.²⁸ So there, too, the same governmental rule of thumb came to be applied. As Major Birch, the District Commissioner of Amritsar, opined righteously: any 'glaring defiance of authority cannot, of course, be overlooked'.²⁹ This put public religious events squarely in the frame. When rival processions clashed, when heavy wooden processional cars got out of control and ran over bystanders,³⁰ when excited devotees burning effigies accidentally started fires, the Company state needed to show that it was master of the situation.

Finally, it is important to note that, notwithstanding its putatively Christian superstructure, the Raj was very much, in its make-up, an Indian institution. Not simply was it *composed*, in the main, of Indians, Indians also performed tasks vital to the running of the government bureaucracy as middle managers, inspectors, record keepers, interpreters and sub-district judges, roles that made them to a large extent the public face of the colonial state. When Robert Frykenberg, some years ago, referred to the Company's administration in Madras as 'a Hindu Raj', these are some of the features he had in mind.³¹ Moreover, in that the Indian servants of the *sarkār* were invariably from the local elites, high castes, or members of the Muslim *ashrāf*, they were literate, connected and often deeply immersed, spiritually and intellectually, in matters of religion. Sitaramsharan Bhagvan Prasad (1840–1932) worked for thirty years in the Bihar Education Department, but out of hours, and in retirement, he built up a large regional following as a thinker, teacher and publicist within the Vaishnava *bhakti* tradition. 'Love God, Government and goodness', he advised in one of his leaflets.³² Even as the government insisted that it had no interest in religious issues, the conspicuous presence in the bureaucracy of men like Prasad irrevocably branded it as a player.

Drawn inexorably into the maelstrom of Indian public ritual, the Company found it increasingly difficult to defend its original policy position that 'neutrality' meant 'non-intervention'. Accordingly, they started to talk about 'toleration', which bespoke 'even-handedness' rather than simple indifference. But what good was toleration by the state if it did not make a difference in society? Surely, as the Court reasoned in 1833, a religion 'could not properly

be said to be tolerated' if its worshippers were denied 'that ordinary degree of protection to which every citizen . . . is entitled at the hands of his Rulers'?³³ The arguments bounced back and forth between London and Calcutta for several years, until, in 1837, the governor-general Lord Auckland finally bit the bullet and asked his masters to approve the deployment of British power in 'support' of public toleration; specifically, he urged, the Company should deploy its executive power to prevent the rights of any 'sect' being trampled by another.³⁴ Notwithstanding some initial nervousness on the part of the Court, within a few years this proactive form of colonial 'neutrality' had become settled policy, and in 1849 Auckland's successor Dalhousie enshrined the principle in his proclamation establishing the Punjab Commission, which ordained that 'no man' would be allowed by the government 'to interfere with the practise by his neighbours of customs which that neighbour's religion permits'.³⁵

However, the decision by the Company to move to a more proactive position on religion raised another problem. Going into battle to uphold religious 'rights' was all well and good; but how were the British supposed to decide, among conflicting claims, which rights were real and worth defending, and which spurious? Clearly they needed a test: but what?

When the Company's agents first encountered this problem, by way of a petition to the Madras Council from the heads of the city's Left- and Right-Hand caste coalitions beseeching it to mediate their differences over the use of certain streets for wedding and funeral processions, the Council tried to respond juristically, by taking evidence from the parties; it sought, in this way, to devise a fool-proof 'Plan for adjusting everything'.³⁶ The strategy failed. The Council made a finding, but its rulings, and threats to exact reprisals if they were breached, were repeatedly ignored. Disputes continued. Gradually, the British came to see that the problem lay not just with deficiencies in the quality of information at their disposal, but with the whole approach: that any attempt to settle indigenous religious disputes according to abstract Western concepts of 'reason' and 'due process' was bound to fail because it took insufficient account of the cultural precepts that regulated Indian social interaction. Accordingly, the British now tried a different tack; they began directing their efforts at determining what arrangements local communities were actually willing to accept. In 1810, following yet another fruitless attempt to find an evidentiary solution to the Left Hand-Right Hand controversy, Madras Councillor Frederick Ellis minuted:

if it should appear that it [the form of burial preferred by the Left Hand] has been established among them as a religious ceremony and that they believe it [to be] obligatory, it would seem that they ought to be supported in the practice – it is not for our Government to adjust differences . . . orthodoxy and heterodoxy must from them meet with equal favor [*sic*], for they have to ascertain, and recognize, not the truth, but the *existence* of opinion.³⁷

Understandably, perhaps, it took a while for the rest of the Council to warm to this radical (though eminently logical) solution to the problem; nevertheless, ten years later, the Ellis approach was endorsed as official policy. In January 1821, District Magistrates (DMs) in Madras were duly instructed:

not to countenance [any] innovations in the ceremonies of the Natives, nor to sanction things innocent in themselves with reference to the natural rights of men if, according to established and general opinion, they were calculated to produce disaffection and disorder.³⁸

Although, as we shall see, the principle would undergo subtle shifts of interpretation over time in response to changing imperial goals and Indian political circumstances, adherence to *mamool*, or custom, remained for the next century and beyond the bedrock test, for the Raj, of whether a religious rite should be permitted or prohibited.

Early hopes that a 'map of custom' could be produced that would simplify and regularise official decision-making in respect of religious disputes quickly faded, though, once the British got down to the business of trying to establish what was 'customary' in each part of the country. Again, the object was frustrated by a general absence of clear documentation about the stance taken by previous ruling regimes, and by the sometimes wildly differing narratives of local religious history offered up in response to probes from district officials. Lacking reliable information, the British were often reduced to making arbitrary calls. In some cases, this resulted in spurious 'traditions' being invented under the aegis of colonial authority. And, even where the Company's men did manage to piece together a coherent version of what had gone before, that still left unresolved the question of what properly constituted custom. Was it what had applied under the previous rulers? Or was it what local communities, on balance, were prepared to tolerate? Interpretations varied. The Nizam Adawlat court at Gorakhpur in the North-Western Provinces (NWP) ruled, in 1808, that Muslims living in the town could not sacrifice cows because the practice had not been permitted 'under [the] Government of the Nawab Vazeer'.³⁹ The Commissioner of Agra, however, felt that 'In all matters in which religious prejudices are concerned' the 'right course' was 'to follow established [that is, popular] usage'.⁴⁰ Then again, some officials believed that the way forward was to even out local 'anomalies' by applying a regional standard, if one could be found; while others, such as Thomas Baber, the DM at Dharwar, cavilled at being restricted by a rule that locked them into privileging the religious rights of socially dominant groups, such as Brahmans – a course he confessed that ran 'contrary to my own sense of Justice'⁴¹ (and which also, arguably, sat uneasily with the Company's proclaimed stance of neutrality).

All in all, the administrative option seemed the least problematic, and so gradually became standard; and, moreover, was implemented with increasing rigidity as the years went by. Following the annexation of the Punjab in 1849, orders were issued forbidding Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs in the town of

Multan from making any renovations to their religious buildings that had the effect of making them bigger 'in any direction' than they had been during the rule of the former Sikh Kingdom.⁴² As Prior points out, this narrow construction of precedent led to an artificial freezing, in many places, of institutional and ritual practices that might otherwise have evolved, even syncretised, naturally in response to demographic and other social changes.

Theoretically, of course, almost any rule consistently enforced would have served. People forget. Memories blur. In time, with repetition, innovations morph into traditions. If the British had stuck to the rule of thumb that only public religious practices that had been approved by their predecessors would be tolerated, and applied that rule consistently and universally, much trouble might have been averted. But they did not.

The shadow of Christianity

The social, economic and intellectual currents that came together to make the nineteenth century in Britain an Age of Reform have been extensively discussed⁴³ and do not require extensive reiteration. It is sufficient to note that the common thrust of these currents was their emphasis on the possibility of constant, and continuing, *progress*, a vision rooted in the ideas of the Enlightenment but given added sustenance in Britain by the new wealth and economic and machine power unleashed by the Industrial Revolution. As the country itself was transformed and, by general consensus, greatly 'improved' by the application of steam technology, so various British thinkers, economists, philosophers, bureaucrats and novelists began to canvass the notion that society might be similarly 'improved': by individual 'self-help', by education, and by benevolent legislation aimed at securing what the Utilitarian Jeremy Bentham famously called, 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number'. To be sure, this vision presupposed a very much greater administrative presence for the state than had been the case hitherto. And, as remarked at the outset of the chapter, it would take time for the evolution of technology and bureaucratic governance to reach a point at which the state was capable of penetrating society sufficiently to fulfil this wider role efficiently. Nevertheless, the first prerequisite was for the governing class to *embrace* the project of governmentality – and in Britain this crucial mental shift happened around the 1820s and 1830s, at the very moment that the primary focus of Company rule in India moved from the military sphere to the administrative. This was significant, because, if the brutish classes of England were capable of being uplifted, then so too were the dark races of the subcontinent.

Indeed, in some ways, as Eric Stokes has suggested, India was a more promising target for governmental intervention in the name of improvement than Britain, because it offered greater freedom of manoeuvre, the Company Raj being (unlike its counterpart in Britain) a despotism.⁴⁴ Moreover, despotic rule, by its nature, was thought to demand a higher standard. As John Stuart Mill succinctly put it, in his celebrated discourse *On Liberty*, 'Despotism is a

legitimate mode of dealing with barbarians, provided [that] the end be their improvement.⁴⁵ So there, too, as we shall see shortly, governing power was increasingly harnessed to the rationalist goal of refashioning society in order to make it more productive. As it embraced reform, the Company naturally found it more and more difficult to espouse religious neutrality.

In the meantime, however, the Company was confronted by a much more militant and potentially damaging assault on that front in the shape of the Evangelical Movement. Evangelicalism was part of a broader tendency known as the 'Great Awakening', which took hold among Protestant Christian communities in Europe and colonial North America during the latter part of the eighteenth century. While mainstream Christian theology held that humankind was congenitally infected by the Original Sin of Adam and was therefore 'damned', the Evangelicals believed that God had provided a way out of this impasse by the 'sacrifice' of his 'only Son' Jesus. Redemption from sin, through the divine intercession of Christ, was available to all sinners truly willing to repent. Therefore, Evangelicals developed an interest in 'conversion' as a means of religious renewal. And this proselytising proclivity was reinforced by their conviction that spreading the word of God (as contained in the Bible) was not simply a beneficent act but a bounden duty, incumbent upon all believers. Importantly, too, because Evangelicalism rejected the Calvinist dogma that salvation was only available to an elect, the movement came to see its mission to convert the ungodly as a global one, unrestricted by race. As the veteran Lutheran C.F. Swartz reminded his friend Dr Gashim of the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge: 'our blessed Redeemer [Jesus] . . . commanded his Apostles to preach the Gospel to *all* nations'.⁴⁶ The proliferation at the end of the eighteenth century of Protestant missionary societies dedicated to carrying the Christian message to 'heathen' lands was a manifestation of that resolve.

From the start, India was viewed by British missionary societies as an especially attractive, indeed compelling, destination. It had a British government, which made it a relatively safe place to proselytise; it was fairly accessible; and it was home to a system of the 'grossest superstitions', which both mocked every tenet of Christian morality and doomed its followers to perdition. James Long of the Church Mission Society (CMS) reflected: 'the thought of 800 millions passing into eternity every thirty years without a ray of hope often overwhelms me'.⁴⁷ He was not alone. Moreover, if India represented, in the depths of its heathenism, a huge challenge, this actually encouraged the missionaries rather than deterred them. Confident of the Almighty's approval, they did not anticipate 'any difficulty in publishing the Gospel in India', for, once God's 'truth' had been made known surely the heathen would flock to be baptised?⁴⁸ In 1834, the Reverend William Bowley casually assured a Muslim in conversation 'that Christianity would be universal in about 50 years'.⁴⁹

Nevertheless, the missionary societies recognised that they faced, with respect to India, one rather serious practical difficulty: as noted above, the

Court had long regarded Christian proselytising as dangerous to the security of its Indian dominions. Admittedly, the outlook had brightened since Carey, Marshman and Ward had been unceremoniously evicted from Calcutta in 1795. Thanks to an Evangelical-led parliamentary coup in 1813, missionaries now had the right to reside, proselytise and open schools in the Company's territories. But the Court remained hostile. Following the 1813 vote, the Directors wrote to the President of the Board of Control (BOC) strongly deploring the outcome, which they described as an unwanted 'innovation upon the Indian system', likely to be 'attended with dangers'.⁵⁰ And the Company still had some cards to play. Clause 82 of the Charter Act allowed it to confine the missionaries to British territories acquired before 1 January 1800, which kept the Evangelists out of large parts of the interior, and away from places of extreme religious sanctity, such as Nasik and Puri. And it was able to use its executive power to block the erection of Christian churches in neighbourhoods favoured by high-caste Hindus, citing evidence of local opposition, and its 'paramount duty of preserving the public peace'.⁵¹

At one level, the missionary societies understood that, for these and other reasons, they remained beholden to the government, and that their work would be greatly aided if they had its cooperation. Yet, driven by the force of their convictions, they could not stop themselves from lecturing the Company on the manifest sinfulness of its administrative involvement with Hindu temples and festivals, Claudius Buchanan of the CMS accusing it of 'conniving' at practices that were 'immoral [and] irreconcilable [*sic*] with the laws of nature'.⁵² It was a position that resonated with the small but growing number of pious Company servants. As N.W. Kindersley, the Collector of Tanjore, reminded his Assistant, Robert Nelson, 'every act' they performed, in the Company's service, with regard to the administration of Hindu temples, made them accessories to the terrible 'sin of idolatry'.⁵³ More and more, Evangelically minded officials such as Kindersley and Nelson felt morally compromised by the neutrality policy.

But change was in the wind. India might have been physically remote, but it was not unreachable. A recent study has found that, in just one month of 1857 (admittedly an eventful year), some 20,000 private letters passed back and forth between correspondents in England and the subcontinent. And people also came and went, albeit, like the letters, slowly. These connections not only kept the 'Anglo-Indian' community in India in touch, but enabled it to contribute actively to metropolitan debates.⁵⁴ Much as they might have liked to, the Directors could not prevent this process of cross-fertilisation from reshaping attitudes. Englishmen everywhere, Charles Grant wrote pointedly, were part of a common 'Christian community'.⁵⁵ Mountstuart Elphinstone, the governor of Bombay, was part of the official generation that had forged the neutrality policy, and he continued to believe it was correct. Nevertheless, as a pragmatist, he recognised the necessity of appeasing an 'apparently influential portion of the community at home'.⁵⁶ His successor, Robert Grant, agreed. Public opinion might be fickle but it was 'entitled . . . to much consideration'.⁵⁷

More specifically, pressure for change was fuelled by the influx, from the 1820s, of English converts looking to pursue careers (or vocations) in the subcontinent. These included missionaries⁵⁸ and, importantly, a rash of newly minted administrators. By the early nineteenth century, Company service was starting to attract middle-class English boys bent not on fortune hunting (for those heydays had passed) but on carving out a reputation for themselves as trained professionals. Many of these recruits hailed from clerical families. Around 30 per cent had been educated at private academies run by members of the clergy. And, after 1805, all new recruits were required to attend the Company's finishing school at Haileybury, where they were lectured to by a teaching staff that included a number of Church of England clergymen and several noted Evangelicals, such as William Dealtry and W.E. Buckley, and which had been commanded by the Court of Directors to inculcate a respect for Christian values.⁵⁹ As junior civilians, these tyros found it hard going; those who failed to keep their religious zeal in check were carpeted and sometimes disciplined. But, as they rose up through the ranks, their influence mounted. In 1838, James Farish, a strict Evangelical and close friend of the combative Presbyterian missionary John Wilson, became Governor of Bombay. Around the same time, devout Anglican Charles Trevelyn took control of the Bengal Committee of Education. Over the following decade, a number of senior posts in the Presidency of Madras, including those of Chief Secretary and Chief Justice, fell into the hands of members of the so-called 'Missionary Party'.⁶⁰ By the time the Punjab Commission was established in 1849, under the inspirational leadership of the Scripture-quoting Lawrence brothers,⁶¹ Christianity had become the unofficial orthodoxy. Acknowledging this transformation, CMS Secretary William Keane went out of his way to commend 'the high . . . moral and religious character of the public servants of the East India Company' in evidence tendered to a parliamentary select committee in 1853.⁶²

Again, with the passing of time, the Company became less apprehensive about the risks of reform. With no further recurrences of unrest in the sepoy army, the shadows cast by Vellore and by the Barrackpore mutiny of 1824 gradually faded; and official anxieties were eased, too, by the seeming indifference of most Indians to the Christian message: except in the far south, notably in Tirunelveli District, there had been no general rush to convert. Meanwhile, along with other segments of British society, the Indian authorities grew more and more optimistic about the possibilities of social progress. It had long been a belief of the Court, in particular, that 'improvement' held the key, both to implanting a taste among Indians for European manufactures, and to enriching society to a level where at least the higher classes could afford to pay for them.⁶³ Now, they started to warm, also, to a still bolder conception, namely, of promoting cultural change as a way of binding the natives permanently to the British colonial yoke. By the 1830s, this project had firmed up into an extravagant scheme for the wholesale Westernisation of the Indian elite, designed to produce what new Law Member of the Calcutta Council, Thomas Macaulay, famously described in his Education Minute of February

1835 as 'a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect'.⁶⁴

As the clamour for civilisational change in India strengthened, there came a point when its siren call could no longer be resisted. Conventionally, this tipping point is often associated with the appointment in 1828 of Lord William Cavendish-Bentinck, an ardent Utilitarian, and a former president of his county branch of the CMS, as governor-general. However, the elevation, in 1830, of Charles Grant's son to the presidency of the BOC also helped to tip the scales, as did Macaulay's appointment a few years later to the governor-general's council. All Liberals, the three men came with reputations as staunch reformers, and each quickly put his stamp on India policy.

Perhaps the best-known outcome of this policy revolution is the law that Bentinck enacted, much against the advice of his Council, which made widow-burning a criminal offence;⁶⁵ but two others were more consequential: Macaulay's championing of Western education; and the Court's capitulation to the repeated urgings of Grant and the BOC that it fall into line with public opinion and alter its policy on lending government support to Hindu institutions.

To start with the second matter, the Court of Directors conveyed their new stance on the neutrality policy to Calcutta in a dispatch of February 1833. It ordered:

- 1 That the interference of British functionaries in the . . . management of native Temples, in the customs, habits and religious proceedings of their Priests . . . in the arrangement of their ceremonies, rites and festivals, and generally in the conduct of their interior economy, shall cease.
- 2 That the pilgrim tax shall everywhere be abolished.
- 3 That fines and offerings shall no longer be considered as sources of revenue by the British Government and . . . shall consequently no longer be collected or received by the Servants of the East India Company . . .
- 4 That in all matters relating to . . . worship . . . our native subjects [shall] be left entirely to themselves.

Although the Court went on to say that it did not expect the new rules to be implemented 'instantly', and that it was prepared to leave 'the details . . . the degree [and] the manner' of their implementation to the local authorities,⁶⁶ the dispatch came as a bombshell, and, predictably, reaction in many quarters of the subcontinent, echoing dire predictions from Conservative statesmen such as Lord Ellenborough of 'violence and massacre',⁶⁷ was icy. Many older hands felt the Court's requirements broke faith.⁶⁸ Others lamented the loss of customs that had given the British a precious opportunity to show 'some community of feeling' with the natives.⁶⁹ And others again feared the Court's decree spelt doom for the established policy of 'neutrality'. The 'spirit of our Policy . . .

has been entirely changed', fumed veteran Madras Councillor Charles May Lushington:

If our former mode of administration was calculated to conciliate the affections of our Native subjects, if we [have] obtained, and retained, our Empire by looking with indulgence at the religious prejudices of the Natives, it is equally certain that our recent Policy has effectively destroyed all Native confidence in our principles of toleration.

Lushington knew exactly where the pressure for change was coming from: it was being driven by 'sainted fanaticism'. But how, he wondered despondently, could the Court have allowed its judgement to be so 'perverted' by 'the trash' that had been served up to it by the missionary lobby?⁷⁰ As for the supreme government, while opinion at Calcutta was less openly hostile, it was nonetheless sceptical. Bentinck's successor Lord Auckland was also a Liberal appointment; however, he lacked his predecessor's ideological enthusiasms. For Auckland, Hindu festivals no more threatened the moral standing of British rule than May Day, Halloween, Harvest-Home and other pagan relics threatened the Christian life of rural England.⁷¹ Moreover, he found the Court's fourth point, which suggested that the best way to deal with native worship, henceforth, was, actually, not to deal with it at all, deeply disturbing. Taking the Court's offer of discretion at its face value, Auckland tried to buy time, which enraged the Evangelicals. Pro-Christian officials in Madras circulated a memorial denouncing Auckland to the Court; and the Commander-in-Chief of Madras, Sir Philip Maitland, ostentatiously resigned, telling the Duke of Richmond that he'd done so with the intention of goading the Court into action.⁷²

Put on the spot by Maitland's resignation, the Directors were further embarrassed by the public outcry that followed. They were also shaken by a series of critical petitions from their own shareholders represented in the Court of Proprietors.⁷³ They instructed the governor-general to stop stalling, conform to their orders, and implement the new policy forthwith. On 3 May 1840 (inauspiciously, in the midst of a tropical cyclone), a ceremony was held at Puri to mark the discontinuance of the pilgrim tax at the Jagannath Temple. A few weeks later the equivalent taxes at Gaya and Allahabad were abolished. By orders of April 1841, Company servants, including soldiers, were banned from taking part in native rituals. And, by 1842, the control of most major public temples had been transferred into the hands of local native committees of trustees. The Directors congratulated themselves on having finally overseen a formal separation of government from religion.

This brings us to the second topic of education. As noted above, the British, by the 1830s, had come round to view that the acculturation of the Indian elites to British norms and values was not only sound policy, but also achievable by way of English education, which was understood to mean a modern type of education delivered through the medium of English. Yet, while

the government now embraced the teaching of Western education enthusiastically in the abstract, it was chary about using public funds for that purpose. General administrative costs were rising, and tax receipts had been hit by the 1830s' price depression. By the middle of the decade the Indian budget was sliding into deficit.⁷⁴ The obvious solution was to get institutions in the private sector to help carry the burden, and the obvious candidates were the cashed-up mission societies. By happy coincidence, the missionaries had recently embraced education as their preferred proselytising strategy. It seemed to offer potentially huge benefits, particularly privileged access to the children of the Indian elites. Through a Western education, the missionaries reckoned, the ripe minds of young Indians could be purged of their irrational superstitions and readied to receive the teachings of Christ. Thus a marriage of convenience was consummated. For their part, the missionary societies gained a licence to purvey education to the Indian masses plus a generous continuing governmental subsidy. For its part, the East India Company got the schools it required very cheaply, for perhaps a tenth of the cost of a fully publicly funded system.⁷⁵ What needs emphasising here, though, is the cultural impact of this outsourcing policy. By the 1850s, four out of every five students in the English/modern sector were being educated by Christian missionaries.⁷⁶ It gave them a tremendous reach. To be sure, mission schools taught secular subjects too, but selling Christianity was always their core business, and they pushed it hard. Students attending mission schools were not permitted to graduate until they had demonstrated, in end of year public examinations, that they had mastered its fundamentals. Surprisingly, perhaps, this process of indoctrination generated very few conversions. Nevertheless, it contributed to the growing popular impression that Christian doctrines and ethics were integral to the project of British rule.

And other signs pointed in the same direction. 'To whatever part of the world the English people go', *The Times* remarked fervently, 'they carry their Church with them.'⁷⁷ By mid-century, Christian churches and meeting houses had become, indeed, a part of the urban Indian landscape. Moreover, the expatriate British wore their Christianity proudly and openly; and some, against orders, openly promoted it. The Judge of Fatehpur, Robert Tucker, had four stone pillars, inscribed with the Ten Commandments, erected at the city gates. Colonel S.G. Wheeler, commanding officer of the 34th Native Infantry, stationed at Barrackpore, read from the Gospels to soldiers on parade. Others proselytised prisoners in jails, and even lunatics in government asylums.⁷⁸ Finally, although the Company repeatedly denied that it aspired to the mass conversion of the natives, this message was undercut by the increasingly pro-Christian orientation of its reform programme. Twelve months after the 'withdrawal' orders of 1833, Macaulay's Law Commission recommended, against English precedent, that encouraging a person to change his or her religion 'should not be considered a crime'.⁷⁹ Then, in 1838, the state extended its patronage to mission schools. This was followed by two conspicuously invasive pieces of social legislation: the Caste Disabilities Removal Act of 1850,

which allowed Christian converts to inherit ancestral property, and the Hindu Widow's Remarriage Act of 1856. Lastly, in a landmark dispatch of 1854, BOC chief Sir Charles Wood sanctioned the placing of Bibles in government school libraries and the teaching of Christianity to willing public students after normal school hours.

The uncomfortable truth, rarely acknowledged by historians, is that, by the 1840s, many if not most Company officials were privately of the view that India was destined to become a Christian country and that the state had a duty to assist in the realisation of this destiny. The Punjab Financial Commissioner, Daniel McLeod, called on the government to 'avow and evince our preference for that religion'.⁸⁰ Another Punjab stalwart, Herbert Edwardes, opined: 'I believe . . . that there is nothing for it but to stand forward in future and govern India on openly Xian principles, encouraging [the spread of] Xianity as much as ever we can.'⁸¹ Contemporary critic and religious historian John Kaye expected to see 'State patronage of Christian education within fifteen years'.⁸² Madras judge T.H. Lewin, sacked in 1847 for attacking the pro-Christian sympathies of the governor, the Marquis of Tweeddale, told a gathering of Brahman supporters after his dismissal that 'the next step' was likely to be 'an open and undisguised' attempt by the Raj to 'force Christianity upon the Hindus'.⁸³ Had political circumstances in India remained constant, these extravagant forecasts might well have come to pass. We shall never know. By 1858, the counterfactual moment had passed, never to return.

Aftermath

The Great Revolt that broke out at Meerut in May 1857 caught the authorities by surprise. It should not have done. For decades Indians had been voicing, and sometimes enacting, their hostility both to the general reformist thrust of Company policies and, particularly, to the Christian missionaries who were widely presumed to be its clients. Muslim convert Abdul Masih was nearly lynched when he returned to his home city of Lucknow; several mission schools in Bengal were picketed, two forced to close, following reports that some of their pupils had secretly apostatised; when several students attending the Scottish Free Church institution in Madras converted to Christianity in 1837, 70,000 Hindus signed a petition of protest; and when two Parsi boys in Bombay were baptised while in the care of the Presbyterian missionary John Wilson, Wilson and his young protégés were abused and jostled by frenzied relatives threatening to 'dash out' their brains.⁸⁴ Around the same time, four apostates in a Bengal village were attacked with swords; another, in the town of Howrah, was beaten to death; at Cuddapah, an English sub-collector died trying to rescue a missionary family from a Muslim mob; and in 1845 a crowd of Hindus ransacked and burned houses belonging to converts in the Madras district of Nellore.⁸⁵

All of these incidents, and others, were on record at headquarters; in addition, the Raj had access to intelligence reports showing that many of its

measures had not gone down well with sections of the subject population. Yet it felt no real sense of alarm. At worst, it expected further brushfires that it was confident it could easily extinguish. Accordingly, the government was totally unprepared for the conflagration that swept across northern India in the summer of 1857. In its scale, spread and ferocity, the Great Revolt was beyond anything the Europeans had encountered in Asia previously; indeed, it went way beyond their worst nightmares. Officials likened it to a pandemic of 'madness'.⁸⁶ It precipitated, in turn, shock, trauma and deep introspection – and not just in the narrow circles of the Company. During, and long after, the 'red years' of 1857–8, all of British political society struggled to understand what had prompted the Revolt, and what it signified. Historians still do. But most agree that it was a watershed event. In the words of Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph: 'A new discourse began after the 1857 revolt.'⁸⁷

At the heart of this rethinking of the imperial project in India lay the question of religion. Certainly, native fears about the government's intentions with respect to religion did not constitute the sole, or perhaps even the main, cause of the 1857 upheaval. Modern research on, particularly, the agrarian dimension of the Revolt has made that clear.⁸⁸ Yet, as Rudrangshu Mukherjee notes, religion was definitely 'the rallying cry of the rebellion', and seems to have been, to judge from the movement's propaganda, a genuine concern, at least of the insurgent leaders.⁸⁹ What is more, it was the religious theme that registered, primarily, with the official mind. 'It is firmly believed', the Viceroy Earl Canning wrote in 1859, 'that we . . . made men soldiers and . . . ordered them to lick Cartridges, in order to convert them'.⁹⁰ Increasingly, therefore, especially at Westminster, the Revolt came to be seen as a massive repudiation of the invasive reformist policies that had characterised the British governance of India since the late 1830s. For example, Sir Charles Wood, who, as President of the BOC, had overseen many of the Dalhousie-era reforms, now accepted that it had been a 'mistake' to try to impose on India 'a system foreign to the habits and wishes of the people'.⁹¹ Accordingly, the politicians bent their minds to replacing these discredited initiatives with policies designed to appease native opinion and thus shore up the battered edifice of British rule in the subcontinent. In the religious field, this change of direction was heralded by the Royal Proclamation of November 1858. Drafted in the new India Office, and couched in language deliberately reminiscent of the Company's earliest pronouncements on the subject at the beginning of the century, it promised Indians of all faiths 'equal and impartial protection of the law', and enjoined 'all those . . . in authority under us' in India to 'abstain from *all interference* with the religious belief *or worship* of any of our subjects, on pain of our highest displeasure'.⁹² Shortly afterwards, Canning's government launched a crackdown on official contact with Christian missionaries and lay preaching to sepoys and prisoners, an edict aimed especially at the Evangelical members of the Punjab Commission – in the governor-general's opinion, a nest of 'wrongheaded, unscrupulous fanatics'.⁹³ Meanwhile, letters went out instructing the Indian authorities to tread warily in the area of social reform

and, in particular, to eschew laws tampering with customs, however repugnant, which had scriptural sanction. But the 'danger' of pell-mell reform was only one of the strategic 'lessons' that the British took from the insurgency. Another, prompted by the non-belligerency of most of the tributary princely states, which was interpreted, by Canning and others, as gesture of 'loyalty' on the part of their rulers, was that the most efficient way to control Indian society was by enlisting the cooperation of powerful and respected intermediaries, its 'natural leaders' as a later Viceroy described them.⁹⁴ This led to the forging of closer ties with the princes, and with the landed gentry, and sometimes, at the more local level, with religious leaders such as the *sajjāda nashīns* who presided over Sufi shrines.⁹⁵ So began the so-called 'Post-Mutiny Reaction'.⁹⁶ Elite Indians heartily welcomed the change – surprisingly, even some of the *ulamā*, who decreed that British India was no longer *dār-ul-hārb*, since it provided 'tolerations of liberty of person, property and religion for Mohamedans'.⁹⁷

Produced in the 1960s, the Post-Mutiny Reaction Thesis remains a useful tool for conceptualising nineteenth-century British policy towards India. But, forty years on, it is in need of some revision. First, the Revolt did not retard, except briefly, the proselytising of the missionaries. The moral drawn by the Christian lobby was not that their efforts had been too aggressive, but rather that they had been too half-hearted, CMS secretary Henry Venn suggesting provocatively that the Revolt had been a divine wake-up call, sent to spur on the faithful:

Here the broad fact stands out to confront us; that India has been lying passive at the feet of Great Britain for the better part of a century . . . But the Christian Church has not taken advantage of the opportunities opened up in India . . . vast tracts of the country [are still] lying [steeped] in unbroken Heathenism – the paucity of the Missionaries, scarcely one for half a million, reproach[es] our neglect.⁹⁸

In the event, dozens of new recruits signed up, and donations from the public flowed in. Energised, the missions redoubled their efforts, especially in education. By the late 1860s, grants-in-aid to mission schools were absorbing nearly 15 per cent of average provincial expenditure. True, this 'golden age' did not last. During the 1880s, most societies started winding back their educational programmes in response to donor complaints about 'poor results' – code for insufficient conversions.⁹⁹ But the slack was picked up on other fronts, notably through medical missions. At the same time, the missionaries consciously pulled back from their earlier support of the government. In the best individualistic traditions of their eighteenth-century American forebears, the Baptists, in 1881, urged the Raj to cease drawing upon Indian tax revenues to pay the wages of 'chaplains' ministering to English expatriates.¹⁰⁰ Later, a number of British and American missionaries came out openly in support of Indian self-rule. Ironically, one of the consequences of this growing *de facto*

separation between State and Church was that the latter was no longer automatically seen by Indians as a proxy for imperialism, which made it easier for the missionaries to 'sell' Christianity as a liberal ideology. According to contemporary Church chronicler George Smith, the forty years after 1850 witnessed a sixfold increase in the number of Christian converts. Figures for Christian communicants, which Antony Copley thinks may be more indicative, rose from 14,661 to 182,722 in the same period.¹⁰¹ To put it another way, over the five decades after 1850, Christianity in India grew at a rate both faster than that of the population, and faster than that of any other faith. Loosed of its association with British colonialism, it became a marketable commodity.

Again, it would be wrong to conclude that, in disassociating itself after 1858 from the Christianising project of the missionaries, the Raj ceased to regard itself as a Christian power. If anything, the rebellion made the British even more conscious of themselves as Christians in a 'heathen' country; and this national identification was firmly embedded in the proclamation document itself, which defiantly asserted that future policy towards the Crown's new dominions in India would be guided by the 'truth of Christianity', a phrase apparently inserted into the government draft by the Queen at the suggestion of the Prince Consort.¹⁰² Not surprisingly, in the light of this directive, the Baptists' demand for an end to the practice of paying clerical salaries out of the state exchequer was given short shrift.

Third, although social reform was wound back it was not altogether halted. The best-known exception is the Age of Consent Act of 1891, which, against raucous protests from orthodox Hindus, lifted the legal age of marriage for women to twelve years. But it was not, as is often supposed, the only one. Other legislative interventions in the domain of native family law included the Indian Succession Act of 1865, which established fixed principles governing inheritance of family property, and the Parsee, Brahma Samajist and Christian Marriage Acts of 1865–72, which, *inter alia*, facilitated conversion by enabling apostates from Hinduism (though not from Islam) to have their existing marriages legally voided. There was even some localised regulation of religious custom, such as the Bengal government's 1865 resolution bringing the Hindu practice of 'hook-swinging' within the compass of Sec. 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure on the ground that it represented a 'demoralizing public spectacle' – although significantly for our theme, the government of Madras chose not to emulate Bengal's example, believing that a suppression of the ritual would probably 'be in contravention of . . . Her Majesty's Proclamation of 1858, which expressly disclaims any intention of interference with the religious . . . worship of any of Her subjects'.¹⁰³

Fourth, and despite follow-up legislation in 1863, governmental links to religious institutions proved difficult to sever. It was found that the Raj remained financially liable for thousands of small grants for the maintenance of temples, shrines and idols that the Company, in its wisdom, had pledged to fund in perpetuity. In the Punjab, the severance policy was compromised by a continuing British relationship with the management of the main shrine

of Sikhism, the Golden Temple in Amritsar, defended on the grounds that the temple constituted, because of its sanctity and history of sectarian disputation, 'a special case'.¹⁰⁴ And the devolution of temple management to committees of Indian trustees only replaced one administrative burden with another. Some trustees proved incapable, others misappropriated temple funds. Occasionally, committees became paralysed by intractable differences. These situations could only be resolved in the courts. Thus, while the reforms of 1842–63 relieved the *executive* wing of government of some religious responsibilities, this was more than compensated for by the additional caseload these changes imposed on the government's *judicial* branch – a development reinforced by the importation by the courts of evolving English legal ideas about the proper duties of 'charitable trusts',¹⁰⁵ and by the increasing embrace of the colonial judiciary by middle-class Indians. Surprisingly, the role played by the judiciary in the apparatus of British governance in India has been little considered. It warrants attention. By the second half of the century, not just disputes over temple management but all manner of religious questions were being fought out in the courts where, bizarrely, they were decided by mainly British Christian judges. Thus, it fell to the Allahabad High Court, in 1885, to determine whether three Wahabis attending a Hanafi mosque in Benares had committed an offence by shouting a certain word that the Hanafis were used to uttering quietly; and to the Madras High Court, in 1922, to rule on whether a Muslim man who had converted to the Ahmadiyya creed remained legally married to his Muslim wife.¹⁰⁶ Through such decisions, the government not only enforced indigenous religious law, but helped to *shape* it.

Fifth, the government continued, as befitted its boast of having imposed a Pax Britannica on India, to monitor religious festivals and put down riots. The administrative complications that flowed from this commitment to enforcing public order were many, as [Chapter 11](#) will document.

Lastly, some elements within the colonial ruling circle never bought the pragmatic vein of reasoning that had generated the Post-Mutiny Reaction. We have already met one of them, the Punjab School of Lawrence and Edwardes. Another was the Fort St George lobby. As noted earlier, residual responsibility for the good order of Hindu temples was devolved in 1863 to the courts. But Madras was never comfortable with this compromise. It wanted to return some powers of oversight to district officers, and put up bills to this effect in 1867, 1888 and 1894. Each was roundly rejected by Calcutta; but the Madras men continued to press. Then, finally, there was Lord Curzon. Viceroy from 1898–1905, George Nathaniel Curzon wielded formidable power and was a person of strong opinions. On the subject of 'religious neutrality', while he agreed that the Raj had an obligation not to favour one faith over the rest, he did not think the policy had ever been intended to prevent the government from intervening in the religious arena.¹⁰⁷ In January 1903, while on a cold-weather tour of eastern India, Lord Curzon visited the Mahabodhi Temple near Gaya, famed as marking the precise site of the Buddha's Enlightenment, and discovered to his chagrin that the place had been taken over by a group

of Shaivite Hindu monks and 'polluted with . . . incongruous rites'.¹⁰⁸ He resolved on the spot to see to it that the temple was returned to its former and 'proper' owners: the Buddhists.

Some years earlier it had fallen to the Home Member of the Government of India, Sir Antony MacDonnell, to comment on one of the aforementioned Madras bills to roll back the compromise of 1863. He had recommended it be vetoed:

if recent experience teaches any lesson . . . it teaches the lesson that we ought to be very slow to interfere with Hindu religious customs and practices . . . The first effect [of this latest bill] will be to bring the Government into collision with the Hindu priesthood . . . These endowments are now being managed by *mohunts* and Brahmins . . . Any attempt to enforce secular control over the . . . management of such endowments will naturally set the *mohunt* and his attendant acolytes against the Government; and this hostility will be propagated by every wandering *sadhu* and ascetic, and by every devout Hindu who visits the temple.¹⁰⁹

If Curzon had taken the trouble to track down McDonnell's minute he might have saved himself some grief; but then safety first was not his line. Besides, he had already taken on and beaten far more high-profile adversaries than the diminutive Brahman *mahant* of the Bodh Gaya *māth*, Krishna Dayal Giri. By the time of his visit to Gaya he had invigorated the working of the central secretariat, purged the pesky Calcutta Corporation, established, against opposition from the General Staff, an Imperial Cadet Scheme to provide the sons of princes with military training, shamed the judiciary into imposing tougher sentences on Europeans convicted of assaulting natives, and legislated to protect peasants from the grasping hands of greedy moneylenders. So he pressed ahead. Indeed, so confident was the Viceroy of a quick and easy resolution of the case that he left it to the government of Bengal to break the bad news to the *mahant*.

What followed was a fiasco. Krishna Dayal steadfastly refused to deal. Initially, he pleaded that he had no authority to sign away his sect's inherited rights over the temple. Then he took refuge behind a screen of 'advisers', including the Calcutta-based barrister and politician Henry Cotton, a particular *bête noire* of the Viceroy. Offered inducements, such as the possibility of an imperial honour, he played the wounded patriot, telling the Bengal government's emissary that he was not interested in material rewards and would sooner be branded a rebel than offend the Hindu nation. When the Lieutenant-Governor, J.A. Bourdillon, threatened to come in person, he feigned illness, and subsequently wrote to Bourdillon explaining that he had been advised by his doctor to take a long vacation in a place with a dry climate. Later, he was seen in Hazaribagh. 'It is difficult to force him to appear when he is equipped with medical certificates', Bourdillon wrote Curzon huffily, 'and I am not prepared to go in pursuit of him.'¹¹⁰

The Viceroy was surprised and angry, declaring the outcome a 'decisive . . . defeat for the Government'.¹¹¹ He immediately sent for his Law Member, Sir Denzil Ibbetson, and asked him whether it would be possible, by means of legislation, to bring the temple under imperial control. Ibbetson saw no objection to that way of proceeding.

But the bill never eventuated. A week or so later, a very 'distressed' Ibbetson told the Viceroy that he had been turning the matter over in his mind and now realised that he had given his superior 'bad advice' based on a 'serious mistake' of judgement in respect of the consequences that could flow from the proposed bill. The Hindu community would wonder why the government had seen fit to legislate when 'the public peace' was 'in no way threatened' and virtually no complaints about the *mahant's* administration had been received from Buddhist pilgrims visiting Bodh Gaya. The Raj already faced the prospect of having 'to fight the educated natives over the Universities Bill'.¹¹² Was it wise to risk alienating the 'bigoted' Hindu elite as well at this critical juncture? 'I should never have abandoned my original position, that the only safe course is [for us] to abstain absolutely from all interference in matters of religion', he ended apologetically.¹¹³

Initially, the Viceroy was inclined to override his Law Member's objections; but a week later he told Ibbetson to put the bill on hold. What seems to have changed Curzon's mind was a spate of rabidly critical editorials in the Calcutta press, which lent substance to Ibbetson's prediction of a popular backlash. It would be foolish, the Viceroy conceded, with the nationalists already fired up over other government initiatives, 'to add another to their number' that could 'provide a possible handle for a religious agitation'.¹¹⁴ In 1903, Curzon's term still had two years to run; but he never attempted to reopen the Mahabodhi case and for that matter never revisited Bodh Gaya. When, a decade later, some Buddhist activists called on the British government to finally give effect to Curzon's promises with regard to the restitution of temple, they were told 'that the matter must necessarily be left for settlement by the community itself'.¹¹⁵

Even though, true to form, Curzon never conceded that he had erred, the sorry tale of the Bodh Gaya affair initially confirmed, for most senior members of the ruling circle, the correctness of the policy line that the Company had initially taken, and that had been etched into the Queen's Proclamation of 1858: that of principled non-intervention in local religious quarrels. However, some officials, the more far-sighted shall we say, came to realise, on further reflection, that the real lesson of the Mahabodhi episode was that the principled quarantining of religion had become much harder. MacDonnell had sensed the way the wind was blowing in 1894. By the end of Curzon's viceroyalty a decade later, its direction was impossible to miss. One had only to read the vernacular press – papers such as the *Bengalee*, which had led the attack on the Great Man's plans for Bodh Gaya. Religion was invading the political mainstream.

10 Religion and nationalism

Shaping community

Once, place was paramount. In pre-modern times, when life for most people was sedentary and confined to the parochial world of the village, it was location that, more than anything else, defined how the masses saw themselves (as many surnames attest). In India, this remained true even into the colonial period and beyond. As late as the 1990s, a Muslim woman interviewed by American anthropologist Peter Gottschalk in rural Bihar responded to his suggestion that her Islamic identity might have been central to her sense of self with the vehement assertion: ‘I was born here and I was married here, so I do not know anything more than [this place] here . . . We are *Bihari* people.’¹ To be sure, identity is never singular. As Gottschalk acknowledges, ‘Biharis’ carried in their minds a ‘variety of maps’ that fixed their place in the social universe of the village, the district and the region.² And, for many people, even early on, religious affiliation seems to have been one of them. Nevertheless, as [Chapter 7](#) explained, as late as the early modern era, allegiance to putative communities defined by faith remained eclectic and fuzzy, more sentimental than ideological. By the late nineteenth century, religious loyalties had firmed up, become hard edged and politicised. The aim of this chapter is to examine the causes and consequences of this pregnant shift in Indian *mentalité*.

As a starting point, it may be noted that native space and religious affiliation were often physically congruent. As we have seen, Indian religion has always had two aspects: a high culture Great Tradition resting on written scriptures and linked to an overarching cosmology, and a mass-based Little Tradition, characterised by multiple sects and deities. In ‘Hinduism’, at least, many of the latter were quite localised and some even discrete to particular villages. For instance, it was customary for villages in northern India to ‘have a protective deity on the boundaries of the hamlet that, among other functions, guarded its inhabitants from the pernicious influence of outsiders’. But a similar congruence was also present in cities. In colonial Bombay, Jim Masselos notes, religious communities tended to form concentrated settlement patterns, to the point where, in many *mohullas*, there was an almost complete coincidence ‘between religion and habitation’.³

Second, the nineteenth century saw a significant evolution in the way religion in India was understood, configured and practised. Although parochial gods and locally renowned intermediaries, such as *pīrs* and *gurus*, remained, for most Indians, the focus of religious life, among the elite some intellectuals began to look outward, beyond the boundaries of their immediate sect, impelled by a desire to give greater emphasis to the commonalities they shared with members of other like sects. For instance, the gifted Vaishnava Brahmin Harishchandra of Benares (1850–85) spent the first part of his short adult life immersed in the lore of his natal sect, the Pushtimag, and his early musings were devoted mainly to defending the purity of its worship. But then, around 1870, he crossed a mental bridge and started to think more laterally. He wrote in his journal that it seemed wrong that the great Hindu fold should be ‘split’ into ‘different forms of religion’. In 1872, he formed the Tadiya Samaj as a vehicle for uniting the several sects of Vaishnavism, which he fervently hoped would become, eventually, the common subcontinental faith of the Hindus.⁴ These initiatives, in turn, tapped into and fed the late nineteenth-century efflorescence of devotional, or *bhakti*, forms of worship within the Hindu tradition, centred in northern India on the cult of Rama,⁵ and in the Deccan on the worship of the elephant-headed Ganesha. Long a family tradition in the region, especially among the Marathas, *Ganesh-pūjā* was reconfigured in the 1890s as a public celebration that climaxed in a procession featuring clay images of the god sponsored and crafted by Hindus from different neighbourhoods. In Bombay city, where the new form was pioneered in 1895, it appears to have prompted the growth of a stronger sense of Hindu communal identity.⁶ Earlier, across the north, Hindus watching and participating in performances of the Ram Lila, the re-enactment of Rama’s story, had felt a similar bonding.⁷ And the trend towards more integrated forms of public religious expression was not confined to the Hindu realm. One of the major festivals of the Islamic calendar is the feast of sacrifice, ‘Idu’l-Azha, held on the ninth day of the twelfth month of the Muslim year. But in pre-modern India it had been celebrated mainly by the *āshraf*. By the late nineteenth century that was no longer true. ‘Kurbani’, the *Moslem Chronicle* proudly reported in 1895, had become ‘a great national festival . . . of all the Muslims, uniting the rich and the poor, the ascetic and the recluse’.⁸

Third, confounding predictions about the secularising effects of modernisation, the depth and spread of popular piety across all the Indian faiths, if anything, *grew* during the colonial era. Read a different way, the *bhakti* movement, the explosion of Ram Lilas and Ganapati festivals, and the invigoration of Bakr ‘Id can be seen as symptoms of what in the Protestant confession is called ‘religious revival’. And much other evidence points in the same direction. For instance, the high colonial period saw the establishment of an astonishing number and range of new religious-communal organs: the Dar-ul-Ulum seminary at Deoband in 1867; the Anjuman-i-Islamiyah of Lahore in 1869; the first of many Singh Sabhas, at Amritsar, in 1873; the Arya Samaj in 1875; the Gaurakshini Sabha, or Society for the Protection of the

Cow, in 1882, the Sanatan Dharma Sabha in 1895; and the Chief Khalsa Diwan in 1902. Many of these went on to spread their wings across provinces and beyond through networks of branches and sponsored institutions. Deoband, for example, spawned about a dozen offshoots in western Uttar Pradesh (UP) and others later in eastern UP and Bihar; while the Anjuman-i-Himayat-i-Islam of Lahore, founded in 1884, raised five schools and an orphanage in its first two years of operation.⁹ Again, colonial figures attest to a steady rise in the number of Indian Muslims undertaking the annual *haj* to Mecca, and of Hindu pilgrims generally. Francis Buchanan estimated the attendance at the Brahmapur Shivaratri festivities, when he visited in 1812, at about 25,000; government figures for the same fair in 1894 and 1906 were 75,000 and 100,000 respectively.¹⁰ If these statistics are remotely accurate they attest to a fourfold increase, twice that of the population at large. And the British administrative record is studded with anecdotal, but informed, observations to the same effect. Sir Charles Aitchison discerned, in the 1880s, a 'great revival of Sikhism' in the Punjab; while the Census Commissioner for the NWP, reporting in 1901, concluded that there had been a 'genuine deepening of religious life' among the Muslims of the province.¹¹

Fourth, these revivalist movements shared a familiar theology. They were all, or almost all, as we say nowadays, 'fundamentalist'. The founder of the Arya Samaj, Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824–83), condemned idol worship, pilgrimage and priestly ritual, and held that only four Hindu scriptures, the Vedas, were valid.¹² Sikh reformers pushed the message of 'purity', attacked the practice of saint worship, called for regional fairs to be purged of non-Sikh innovations and vulgar merrymaking, and pressured Sikhs to shun all prohibited foods, including meat not cured by the approved *jātka* method. The '*ulamā*' of Deoband, energised by what seemed to them widespread evidence of religious decline, campaigned in writings and speeches and through classroom instruction for the practice of Islam in India to be purged of customary and superstitious accretions, and for Muslim family law to be brought back into conformity with the *sharī'a*; while the Ahl-i-Hadis, a sect inspired by the teachings of Shah Abdul Aziz's disciple, and later 'Wahabi' convert, Saiyyid Ahmed Barelwi (1776–1831),¹³ scandalised even other revivalists by rejecting the validity of the four medieval schools of jurisprudence in favour of a narrow conception of Islam based on a literal reading of Qur'an and Hadith. And the cow-protection societies campaigned for the observance of purdah and exhorted their members to strictly observe Hindu rituals such as the recitation every morning of the Gayatri Mantra.¹⁴

Over time, via the aforementioned networks and particularly through the efforts of itinerant missionaries, these teachings were widely disseminated through Indian society, outwards and downwards to the grass roots. Thus, in the early 1860s, one Ibrahim Mundul arrived at Islampore, in the Rajmahal district of eastern Bengal, and set himself up there as *khalīfa* over the local Muslims. He ordered his growing flock to dine together, to avoid non-essential social contact with Hindus, to stop charging interest on loans, and to eschew

tobacco and ‘fornication’. Those who refused to comply, or who lapsed back into the old ways, he ‘punished with fines’.¹⁵ Ibrahim’s strict but fair regime led many of the villagers of Islampore to convert to his puritanical brand of Islam. Some young men were even persuaded to travel to the district capital to seek further religious instruction and tuition in Arabic and Persian from learned *maulvis*. Missionary interventions of this type, replicated in hundreds of villages across eastern Bengal, in two generations changed the complexion of Islam in this part of India. Syncretic forms withered and puritanical forms took hold, especially that of the Ahl-i-Hadis. A British official who visited Malda in 1870 was amazed to find that ‘about three-fourths of the Mohamedans in the district . . . [now] belong to the new sect’.¹⁶ This transformation, Rafiuddin Ahmed remarks, paved the way for the ‘evolution of a new vertical solidarity encompassing the *ashraf*, the *mullahs*, and the masses’.¹⁷ Other communities, elsewhere, experienced a similar metamorphosis.

But that wasn’t all. As religions became more homogenised, they became, at the same time, more insistent upon the loyalty of their members. If one was a Hindu, one had to be *fully* a Hindu; if a Muslim, a *good* Muslim who observed the ‘four pillars’ and kept away from saints and paid no heed to rules of caste; if a Sikh, worthy of inclusion in the Tat Khalsa – a *pure* Sikh who did not intermarry with Hindus or eat meat prepared in the Muslim *halāl* style. Sikhs who transgressed this rule, once considered a minor infraction, by the early twentieth century were being denounced as apostates, in breach of their baptismal vows.¹⁸ This is not, as Oberoi notes, how belief had worked in earlier times; and it began to have quite drastic consequences. One was a gradual hardening of religious boundaries. As early as 1873, the Collector of Pabna reported that ‘class rules’ between Hindus and Muslims in the district were ‘becoming [more] rigid’, and the ‘separation’ between them ‘more marked’.¹⁹ And a similar trend was noticed by officials in the Punjab. Muslims and Hindus there were seen as increasingly aloof. ‘They form two classes’, wrote provincial Chief Secretary Woodburn, ‘separated by a strongly marked line of division’, and ‘draw off into opposite camps upon almost every question’.²⁰ Another was a growth in religious invective. Zealots in different camps began to exchange insults and threats in a systematic way not seen before. Bengali convert Maulana Siddiqi Ali remarked piously: ‘There is no way that a Hindu can go to heaven after his death. Rama, Krishna, Brahma, [and] Vishnu are all . . . *Namruds* [enemies of faith]’; in Poona Hindus were warned: ‘Do not be friendly to a religion [Islam] which is alien.’²¹ A third, as we shall find below, was a sharp rise in outbreaks of mob violence between adherents of different faiths.

It is no coincidence that this ideological turmoil occurred during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries at the apex of British colonial power. For one thing, there was the challenge thrown out by Protestant Christianity. As we saw earlier, Christianity was seen as a threat by many Indians, first because it was a proselytising religion bent on making converts, and, second, because they believed that the Protestant missionaries enjoyed the blessing,

if not indeed the patronage, of the colonial state. Although the latter fear was eased by the Queen's assuring words in her 1858 Royal Proclamation, the other remained. Many felt that the only way to fully protect India's native faiths was to reorganise and reform them. Making Hinduism less 'idolatrous' would dent missionary criticisms; and a consolidation of its diverse sects would give it added strength in numbers. This underpinned in part the rise of the devotional Rama cult, which can be interpreted as a shift towards monotheism. It also explains some of the daring innovations of the Arya Samaj, such as its opening of schools and orphanages, in direct competition with those run by the missionary societies, and its adoption of the rite of *śuddhi*, borrowed from the Christian practice of baptism.

Still more important was the impact of British colonial governance. Ruling India involved managing Indian society. Initially, as we saw in [Chapter 9](#), the British thought they could do this without getting involved with religion, but as this naive hope dimmed, they turned their attention to finding ways to make the chaotic world of Indian religions bureaucratically comprehensible. The strategy they found most useful was to ignore local variations and to focus on the 'major' faiths. Thus, in the census, Indians were required to identify with 'some recognized religion'; and any person who declined, or was 'unable to define his creed', was automatically classified as a Hindu.²² The British knew that this way of proceeding was reductionist; nevertheless, they felt it could be defended, not only on administrative grounds but also empirically. Looking at religion in India from the big-picture perspective of outsiders, it seemed to them that the narrow, esoteric differences of belief and ritual that separated the country's myriad sects from one another were far less significant and consequential than those that distinguished, say, Islam from Hinduism, or Sikhism from Christianity. Of course, this was very much a textually centred view that reflected the Western background of the rulers. European faiths had sharp boundaries and fixed creeds. Significantly, it was the Evangelical Charles Grant who, in 1787, coined the term 'Hindooism',²³ and a missionary-Indologist, M. Monier-Williams, who brought out the first book with that title.²⁴ Yet over time it came to be embraced by many Indians too, particularly members of the indigenous elite.

How did this happen? In part it was a function of necessity. Indians who needed the help or sanction of the colonial regime had to work within its terms of reference. The Orientalist notion that India was home to a number of communities defined by 'religion' dominated Indian governance during the late nineteenth century: it informed the census, as we have seen; it became the benchmark for allocating job reservations in the public service, and determining eligibility for the franchise; last but not least, the obsession with religion as a tool of social classification warped policy. Indians quickly grasped the implications. If they were to maximise such opportunities for material advancement as existed under British rule, they would need to advertise themselves as belonging to one, or other, of the religious/communal categories recognised by the government, organise to turn it into a functional reality, and

represent it as numerous and progressive: 'as a matter of fact and history', acknowledged Patna District Board member Saiyyid Tahiruddin, India's Muslims were 'a mass of heterogeneous races, tribes, castes and creeds, differing from each other in respect of the[ir] laws of succession and inheritance, marriage and divorce, religious usages and beliefs, manners and customs'. Nevertheless, as a client of the Raj, Saiyyid felt obliged to add, approvingly, that the government's line 'that the Muhammadans possess a distinct political status of their own' was 'perfectly correct'.²⁵ With a measured exercise of power, the British contrived, with Indian assistance, to bring into existence 'the reality they wanted to understand'.²⁶

But the colonial power relationship was not the only reason. Despite its obviously self-serving agenda, many elite Western-educated Indians were attracted by the scientific packaging of the government's project. Colonialist knowledge, such as the categories the British invented to describe Indian faiths, was accepted and acted upon by large numbers of subjects because it was seen to be scientific and *rational*. Likewise, 'reason' was more and more the benchmark of religious reform. Vaishnavite reformers, for example, urged that the Shastras should be dispensed with as a guide to behaviour where their advice was manifestly *unreasonable*; while cow protectionists, following Dayananda's lead, stressed the 'economic considerations' of preservation, such as the 'dietary and medicinal uses of Cow-milk', and the need to retain a large population of bullocks so as to keep down the escalating price of draught animals, almost as much as they emphasised the cow's sacred status in Hindu mythology.²⁷ Deoband might have favoured a 'revivalist' curriculum, but the internal organisation of the place was ostentatiously modern: 'departments' overseen by 'heads', and a transparent system of accounting. And modernisation made it possible for Indians to imagine communities that stretched beyond the familiar face-to-face realms of kin and neighbourhood. Introduced technology, such as the printing press, the railway, the camera and, later on, the internal combustion engine and the radio, allowed Indians to conquer the tyranny of distance. For the first time in Indian history, a substantial number of people got to learn about how others in far-off regions of the subcontinent looked and lived. Even subcontinental travel became a possibility. These excursions of the mind and spirit revealed many disparities but also some larger affinities, including religious ones. A Hindu devotee in Bengal looking at photographs of Hindu temples in Maharashtra could easily see there was some substance to the idea of 'Hinduism'. Earlier, we noted that there was a phenomenal rise during the nineteenth century of pilgrimages to sacred sites. The railway made this possible too.²⁸ And, through pilgrimage, 'increasingly, people were drawn out of their routinized spaces – villages, towns and cities – and into new spatial areas'.²⁹

Colonial governance, then, was an important catalyst. But so, too, was the Indian nationalist movement that developed, increasingly in opposition to British rule, in the late nineteenth century. Nationalism is an ideology built around the idea of the 'nation'. Essentially, nations are like the communities

described above: artificial constructs, which first have to be imagined then constructed, through networking and propaganda, yet which are usually represented as having some 'primordial' basis in history, geography and culture. Indeed, some national claims are virtually identical to the communal ones discussed above in that they are founded upon a claim of commonality grounded in religion. Nevertheless, for the most part, modern nationalism has affected a secular style. It has looked to build bridges across spiritual divides. And this was precisely the posture taken up by the early national movement in India led by the Indian National Congress (INC), which, after two years, severed its connection with the National Social Conference in order to avoid becoming embroiled in religious controversy.

Yet, while the institutional orientation of the Congress was avowedly secular – it welcomed all comers, regardless of religion or caste, and campaigned on a platform of creating a free society respectful of human rights – the signals given out by its leaders did not always reflect these lofty standards. Earlier, we alluded to the makeover, in western India, of the Ganapati festival. The main author of this highly successful innovation was a Congress politician, Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856–1920). Tilak's speeches to the Ganapati worshippers, his addresses at Congress gatherings and his extensive journalistic writings were all heavily laced with Hindu mythological references, especially to the stories of the *Bhagavadgītā*, on which he was a published authority. Especially, he liked to dwell on the famous passage in that text where Krishna advises the Pandavas' leader, Arjuna, that his duty lies in laying waste to his enemies, which he interpreted as a call to action or *karma-yoga*.³⁰ Another prominent Congressman of that era, the Bengali philosopher Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950), averred: 'Nationalism is not a mere political program; Nationalism is a religion that comes from God'.³¹ Still more Hinduised was the political style of the twentieth-century Congress supremo, Gandhi, who cultivated the appearance of an ascetic, operated out of compounds that he called ashrams, surrounded himself with devoted disciples, and, like Tilak, spiced his political rhetoric with Hindu metaphors, often drawing on the story of the golden age introduced by the god-king Rama's accession to the throne of Ayodhya, the age of 'Ram Rajya', to clarify his vision of the future free India. As he told a Gujarati audience in 1928: 'The democracy that I believe in is described in the *Ramayana*.'³²

To be fair, these messages were probably not meant to be read communally, as an invitation only to Hindus. At any rate, this was definitely not Gandhi's intention. Gandhi's religion was ecumenical. He once observed that the finest ethical statement in literature was Christ's Sermon on the Mount. And his politics were similarly pluralist. One of the goals of the Non-Cooperation struggle he launched against the Raj at the end of the First World War was to secure the restoration of the Khilafat, a cause that, until Gandhi joined it, had been a purely Sunni Muslim one. Indeed, most commentators now accept that the main motivation for the evocation of religious language and themes by these politicians was strategic. Dressing the national movement up in Hindu

garb allowed ordinary Indians (of which the vast majority were Hindus) to grasp what the Congress was fighting for and how the hitherto mysterious concept of ‘independence’ could transform their lives; and thereby paved the way for the conversion of what had been, in the nineteenth century, a mainly middle-class movement, into a mass-based one. Conversely, religious occasions provided wonderful opportunities for connecting with the public. ‘Why shouldn’t we convert the large religious festivals into mass political rallies?’ Tilak asked rhetorically.³³ Were they not ideal engines ‘for imparting instruction’?³⁴ Nationalists in Bihar certainly thought so. In 1908, they congregated at Sonapur, site of the region’s largest *mela*, to inaugurate the Bihar Pradesh Congress Committee (PCC), and over the following decades ‘recruiters for Congress regularly returned to this and other fairs to recruit new supporters’.³⁵

Nevertheless, however well meant, and however useful, the appeal to religion was open to misconstruction. As we noted in the Introduction, this was particularly the case with Gandhi’s contribution, which reinforced the popular perception that he was basically what his unofficial title proclaimed – a ‘Mahatma’. When Brij Krishna Chandiwala from Delhi encountered Gandhi for the first time in 1919, he was so overcome that he instantly ‘rushed towards him, touched his holy feet, and put the dust [picked up as a result of this contact] on my forehead’.³⁶ It was not an unusual reaction. Nehru, whom Gandhi would eventually anoint as his successor, saw many young men and women succumb to the pull of his mentor’s charisma, and he was disturbed by its potential to mislead, and distract from the main game. He recalls in his *Autobiography* that ‘I used to be troubled . . . at the growth of this religious element in our politics . . . I did not like it much at all . . . Even some of Gandhiji’s phrases sometimes jarred upon me.’³⁷ And later, after contesting provincial elections became part of its anti-colonial strategy, the Congress further compromised its secularity by entering into deals with local power brokers to secure votes, as for example in the Punjab. ‘In undivided Punjab’, Congressman Suresh Chandra recalled, ‘there was a most unfortunate link between the Congress and the Arya Samaj. The [Punjab] Unionist Party was definitely more secular.’ ‘I am afraid’, Chandra continued, that ‘Congress must take a lot of blame for the growth of communalism’.³⁸

Maybe that is putting it too strongly. Yet Congress did open the door and, what is more, significantly to its own cost, given that the introduction of Hindu religious idioms into the political arena alienated many non-Hindus from the freedom struggle, especially Muslims, but also native Christians, whose peak lobby group, the All-Indian Conference of Indian Christians, in 1917 distanced itself from the Congress call for Home Rule. As Andre Beteille notes, ‘religious symbols not only unite, they also divide’.³⁹ Thus, contrary to the intentions of its founders, the national movement in India increasingly acquired a communal colour, and this unfortunate tendency was reinforced early in the twentieth century by the formation of two *manifestly* communal parties: in 1906 the Muslim League and, a decade later, the Hindu Mahasabha.

Playing favourites

I am very much struck by what you say about the corruption [*sic*] of the Sikhs by [their] coming into Hindoo regions . . . It is obviously a cardinal point in India to keep races and classes as far apart from each other . . . as possible . . . we cannot afford in India to neglect any means of strengthening our position.⁴⁰

This piece of imperial wisdom was proffered by Secretary of State Sir Charles Wood⁴¹ in a letter to the Viceroy, Lord Elgin, in 1862. Statements in similar vein haunt the archives of the Raj. They make handy ammunition for historians bent on pushing a ‘divide-and-rule’ interpretation of British power. However, the nationalist writers and politicians who first levelled this charge were not so much concerned with imperial efforts to keep the ‘martial’ Sikhs from being reassimilated into the bosom of Hinduism, as with the state’s patronage and incitement of loyalist Muslims as a counterpoise to the Hindu-dominated nationalist movement led by the Congress. And this remains the real bone of contention. The British stand accused of having opened the Pandora’s Box of ‘Muslim separatism’, the tendency that spawned, half a century or so later, Pakistan.

There is, as we shall see (and as Wood’s frank admission testifies), some element of truth in the assertion that the British Raj sought to capitalise on divisions within Indian society. But the notion that Hindu–Muslim rivalry was an artifice whipped up by a clutch of British string pullers simply will not do.

For one thing, although colonial Orientalist designs gave it shape and purpose, the concept of ‘community’ in India was not a colonialist invention. Although Rajat Ray’s claim that a sense of nationalistic ‘felt community’ existed in pre-modern India and was sharpened by the intrusion of Westerners is perhaps overdrawn,⁴² it seems clear to us, as we have tried to show in earlier chapters, that, in certain settings, Indians, during these times, found it convenient, and perhaps spiritually rewarding, to self-identify as ‘Hindus’ and ‘Muslims’, or for that matter as ‘Christians’ and ‘Sikhs’. And this is Katherine Prior’s perception, too:

It is crucial to my understanding of religious disputes in the late-eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries that Hindus and Muslims could and did think of themselves as Hindus and Muslims and not just in circumscribed terms of locality, sect or profession. There seems to be no other way of explaining why . . . [in] a dispute . . . primarily between a town’s Ahirs and butchers, say, that the protagonists would petition the colonial authorities as ‘the Hindus’ and ‘the Muslims’ of that town. If we look at the aftermath of the 1809 Benares riots we find that the Muslims, although variously identified by the British as weavers, butchers or members of the ‘influential’ classes, petitioned the Magistrate as one body . . . Likewise the Hindus, despite their obvious internal differences, presented their case to the British with one voice.⁴³

We need to be careful. Petitions were political instruments, which Indians quickly learned to craft in ways that the imperial authorities could understand and relate to. Still, Prior's evidence shows that Indians in the early nineteenth century were familiar with these communal labels, and presumably comfortable with what they implied about religious difference.

For another thing, the Raj was not consistently pro-Muslim. In fact, for at least the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century, the reverse was true. While high-caste Hindus too were racially put down for their supposed weakness and effeminacy, the British reserved their harshest epithets for the Muslims, particularly those of inferior status. As late as the 1890s, the conventional wisdom among imperial policy makers was that Muslims, as a 'race', were 'cunning', 'bigoted', 'untrustworthy' and infected by a 'turbulent disposition towards the *British* power', traits attributed in no small part to the influence of Islam, which was thought to imbue its adherents with 'fanaticism' and a desire for martyrdom in the service of *jihād*.⁴⁴ In turn, these jaundiced perceptions predisposed the British rulers to see Islamic plots and conspiracies everywhere, many of which they loosely attributed to 'Wahabis' inspired by the militant ideas of the Arabian warrior-prophet Muhammad ibn 'Abd-al Wahhab (1703–92), and constrained them to deal very severely with the small minority of Indian Muslims who actually did take up arms against the government during this period. Thus, when the Great Revolt of 1857 broke out (initially, of course, in the ranks of the Bengal Army, an outfit composed largely of Brahman Hindus), the British insisted on branding it, on the strength of the rather reluctant participation of the Mughal court, a Muslim conspiracy, and made the north Indian Muslims pay dearly for it by temporarily banning entry to Delhi and closing the city's mosques to the public. Similar presumptions about the Muslim character underpinned the official judicial response, fourteen years later, to a communal affray in Bareilly, in the NWP, which saw five Muslims sentenced to death, eight to transportation for life and forty-eight to various terms of rigorous imprisonment, and *two* Hindus *fined* – verdicts that recognised the aggressive role that had been played by the Muslims, but that ignored evidence of a chain of Hindu provocations going back several years.

And, even later, when the general orientation of British policy did shift, the change was not universally welcomed within the bureaucracy. Around the time of the 'cow riots' of 1893, the acting Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Sir Antony MacDonnell, complained to the Viceroy, Lord Lansdowne: 'There is a bias in favour of Mohamedans on the part of my officers which must not be allowed to appear [become visible] . . . The strength of our position lies in our impartiality.'⁴⁵ MacDonnell believed that the rapprochement with the Muslims had been pushed too far, and that the Raj had become too closely identified, for its own good, with Islamic interests. It needed, he felt, to start rebuilding bridges with the other community. What is more, Lansdowne took his point and mused, in a minute commending the Bengal government's efforts:

I have always felt that it was not altogether easy for an Englishman to look upon these [Hindu–Muslim] disputes with perfect impartiality, and even if we are successful in divesting our minds of prejudice, it is almost impossible that the Hindus should not regard us as being biased against them.⁴⁶

MacDonnell and Lansdowne may have been in the minority by the 1890s, but the fact that, even at this late stage, some officials of high standing remained dubious about the wisdom of conciliating the Muslims suggests to us that the issue of ‘British partiality’ is not at all clear-cut.

Finally, while the rehabilitation of the Muslims clearly had a cynical dimension, as we shall see, it was also driven by a blinkered, but nonetheless genuine, sense that an important section of the subject population was struggling. Under the Mughals and their successors, Muslims of the *āshraf* class had received the lion’s share of official jobs and land grants. Accordingly, they were hard hit by the extinction of these regimes and by the resumption of most tax-exempt holdings by the new colonial state, which prompted some colonial officials to attribute their decline, in part, to British neglect. One of these, Bengal administrator William Wilson Hunter, in 1871 described the Muslims, bleakly, as ‘a race ruined under British rule’.⁴⁷ Actually, things were not quite that bad. Hunter’s assessment was based on conditions in Bengal. Further up-country, the process of decline, if decline it was, seems to have proceeded more slowly, and with less calamitous consequences, at least in respect of administrative posts. Nevertheless, twenty years on, Muslim leaders of Bareilly, in the NWP, once an Islamic stronghold, were insisting that ‘without the help of the kind government they should not be able to . . . maintain their rights, which are being encroached upon every day as they do not possess now wealth and influence’.⁴⁸ And that, too, was the message imparted by the results of the first local government elections held under the Ripon Reforms of 1882. In Punjab, where Muslims were in a narrow majority, barely one in four of their candidates got up. In Jambi, Sialkot, the Deputy Commissioner (DC) reported that ‘five Hindus have been elected to one Muhammadan’; in Lahore, where Muslims outnumbered Hindus 2:1, seven Hindus were returned as against nine Muslims.⁴⁹ Coupled with the bad news conveyed by the *Report* of the 1882 Education Commission, which showed that, in Bengal, another Muslim-majority province, Muslims comprised only 30 per cent of junior primary students and just five per cent of college students, these poll outcomes rang alarm bells in the corridors of power because they spelt trouble. It was not beyond the realms of possibility that an increasingly deprived Muslim underclass might eventually be driven to violence. In 1887, the Lieutenant-Governor of the Punjab suggested that future vacancies in the public service in the province be given to ‘qualified Muslims’ until such time as the Hindu–Muslim ratio approximated ‘their proportion among the upper and middle classes of the population’.⁵⁰ The scheme was approved. Over the following thirty years, positive discrimination in favour of Muslims was

progressively introduced across British India, first into the public services, then into other areas of perceived Muslim disadvantage such as municipal representation and public education. Some historians have interpreted these acts of largesse as payments for 'services rendered'; and there is something to be said for that viewpoint. Yet it would be hard to claim that a measure as reasonable and moderate as the Bengal education initiative of 1916, which set aside just 15 per cent of public high school places for Muslims,⁵¹ did not, also, advance the interests of social justice.

Nevertheless, the key factor in the change *was* one of political calculation. This is clear from the timing. Muslims began to rise in the governmental pecking order in the 1870s, following the commissioning and publication of Hunter's polemical book; but the process was gradual, and did not reach its apotheosis until almost the end of the century, thirty years later. The period 1870–1900 was precisely the moment in Indian history when the embryonic national movement became troublesome.

But then, the British did not view the movement as a genuinely national one. They saw it as narrow, and unrepresentative, a vehicle of estranged high-caste Hindus such as the Chitpavan Brahmans, who were said to be bent upon recovering 'their ascendancy in the country, as they had it during [the] last century',⁵² and imposing a 'Hindoo polity' at Calcutta;⁵³ and the *bhadralok* of Bengal. 'My view of the Congress', wrote Lord Curzon, 'is that it is a movement with which neither Government nor Government servants should feel or show any sympathy. In so far as it is innocent, it is superfluous; and in so far as it is hostile . . . or seditious, it is a national danger.'⁵⁴ The emergence in the 1890s of Tilak, a Chitpavan from Poona, as the leader of the 'extremist' wing of the Congress, and Tilak's appropriation, along with Aurobindo, of Hindu religious motifs and networks, which we discussed in the previous section, strengthened these imperial phobias. But it was the rise of cow-protection militancy that really spiked the Raj's complacency about its hold on the country. Founded by Dayananda in the Punjab in 1882, the cow-protection movement quickly spread. Within a few years branches had been established at Amritsar and Delhi, Mathura and Meerut. By the end of the decade it had invaded the towns of the Bhojpuri region of the NWP, western Bihar and the Hindi-speaking parts of the Central Provinces (CP), and had begun to penetrate the rural hinterland, its message disseminated through tracts, pictures and, especially, by itinerant preachers called *gau-swāmīs*. Particularly in Bihar, a number of powerful Hindu landlords threw their support behind the movement, as did many lowly cowherding Ahirs/Gwalas, who saw it as a way of raising their social status. And, as it expanded, it changed direction. The first cow *sabhās* were philanthropic bodies dedicated to providing homes for old and sick cattle; by the early 1890s, the movement had evolved into a quasi-political organisation devoted to the stamping out of cow-killing altogether, and willing to use physical force, and threats of economic boycott, to get its way. Increasingly, too, its rhetoric targeted the British, both for eating beef themselves, and for allowing Muslims to kill cows at 'Id. These

developments, especially perhaps the involvement of rural elements, which revived dark memories of peasant participation in the 1857 Revolt, panicked the government. Initially, it had dismissed cow protection as just another heathen curiosity. By the early 1890s, some DMs in Bihar were accusing the local *Gaurakshinī Sabhās* of fomenting 'open revolt against the constituted authorities'.⁵⁵ Indian politics, it appeared, had entered upon a new and dangerous phase.

As noted above, it had been a maxim of imperial policy since the 1857 Revolt that the safest course lay in keeping the country's 'races' from mixing. But this dedication to apartheid did not, at first, extend to actively bending the rules to favour one community over another. When the Hindu press, in the 1880s, first raised the spectre of 'divide and rule', the then Viceroy, Lord Dufferin, a moderate by late nineteenth-century colonial standards, was actually shocked by the suggestion that the Muslim 'split' from Congress had been effected by his 'Machiavellian cunning'. 'I do not think we could make a greater mistake than to endeavour to sow . . . seeds of dissension . . . between any classes of Her Majesty's subjects', he wrote righteously in a letter to London. 'Such a policy would in the long run recoil upon our own heads.'⁵⁶ But a very different official line was struck five years later in the flurry of official correspondence sparked by the outbreak of a wave of cow-linked riots across northern India. Responding to Lansdowne's assertion that an unholy alliance had been struck up between the Sabhas and the National Congress, the Secretary of State, Kimberley, agreed that the situation looked serious, but then added this interesting rider: that there was a 'set off to the gravity of the matter', in that the rise of the cow movement had made any 'combination of the Hindus and the Mohammedans impossible'.⁵⁷ There is a strong hint in this portentous remark that the beleaguered British were preparing to play the Muslim card.

The choice of the Muslims was not random. It reflected a conviction among the rulers that, first, the Muslims were deserving allies, and, second, that they possessed the will, and the wherewithal, to make an effective counterpoise to the (Hindu) nationalist party. Of course, in this latter sense, 'Muslims' was code for the *ashraf*, the section of the community that could still boast of learning, culture and landed wealth.

The groundwork for an Anglo-Muslim rapprochement had been laid by the efforts of Hunter and other official sympathisers. During the 1880s and 1890s, the process was helped along by some astute and forceful lobbying from the other side, in which the circle around (Sir) Saiyyid Ahmad Khan, centred on the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental (MAO) College at Aligarh, in the NWP, played a leading role. Saiyyid, a considerable scholar of Islam, but also a modernist, was an impassioned supporter of British rule because he held the Raj to be both a legitimate government and an improving one. During his early life he served the British faithfully and efficiently as a subordinate official; then, after retiring, he became a powerful advocate for it, in print, on political platforms, and through public societies, such as the United Indian Patriotic Association and the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental Defence Association, which

he established, significantly, in 1893, the year of the cow crisis. However, Saiyyid became worried during the 1880s about the thrust of British policy. Ripon's local government reforms signalled that the Raj was moving (albeit very cautiously) towards a system of popular representation. Simple arithmetic told him that such a system would favour the Hindus. 'It is certain the Hindu member [i.e., candidate for election] will have four times as many [votes], because their population is four times as numerous', he told a Muslim rally at Lucknow in 1887.⁵⁸ Accordingly, he attempted to persuade the British to maintain, at least in the provincial councils, the existing system of nomination, which allowed men of 'high social position', 'worthy of a seat', to be given the nod.⁵⁹ For the same reason, he spurned overtures from Congress leaders, and urged his co-religionists to stay away too – an intervention generally attributed at the time (not least by a grateful government) for the fall-off, after 1888, in the number of Muslims attending Congress meetings.⁶⁰

However, Saiyyid's lobbying failed to deflect the British from their chosen path of gradual liberalisation and, after his death in 1898, the next generation of Muslim leaders, prominent among them MAO College Secretary Mohsin-ul-Mulk, concluded that a new strategy was required if the Muslims were not to lose out altogether:

Although there is little reason to believe that any Mohammedans except the young educated ones will join that body [the Congress], there is still a general complaint that we take no part in politics, and do not safeguard the political rights of [the] Mohammedans . . . I am afraid [that if we do nothing] people will leave us to go their own way and act up to their own personal opinion[s].⁶¹

Eventually, this new 'political' course would lead to the setting up, in December 1906, of the All-India Muslim League in opposition to the Congress. However, its initial focus was on securing guarantees from the British in respect of their stated plans to further expand the legislatures. Would the government be willing to receive representations to that effect from a high-level Muslim delegation?

The British knew precisely what the Muslims wanted. A letter from Mohsin-ul-Mulk to the Principal of the MAO College, 'leaked' to Viceroy Lord Minto's Private Secretary, made it clear that they expected the foreshadowed reforms to set aside, in their case, the system of numerical representation. They also understood that the Muslims were calling in a debt. Facing a massive agitation in Bengal, uneasy about the eagerness of the new Liberal Secretary of State, John Morley, to devise a scheme that would appeal to the Congress, and somewhat sympathetic, personally, to the notion that the franchise should be restricted to persons of quality, Minto did not hesitate. In October 1906, he welcomed a pre-vetted group of Muslim notables, led by the Aga Khan, to his Lodge at Simla. During the audience he told the delegation that their substantive demand would be met. Without 'appearing to take sides', he

informed Morley, 'I heartily acknowledged the soundness of the Mohammedan arguments'.⁶² As is well known, the government duly honoured this pledge by providing, in the reforms package of 1909, reserved council seats for Muslims significantly in excess of their share of the population, and for Muslims to contest them in separate electorates.

Most historians consider the 1909 Government of India Act a crucial milestone on the pathway to Pakistan. Yet the promotion of 'Muslim separatism' was certainly not part of the plan. After all, the Muslims could only be of political use to the government while they remained within the mainstream. Probably, the trickier question for the British at this stage was whether instituting separate electorates for Muslims infringed their promise to maintain a stance of 'religious neutrality'. But that critique was neatly side-stepped by the pretence that 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' were 'social' categories defined by descent, and only incidentally tied to religion; and, moreover, were not mutually exclusive. As NWP official C.J. Lyall noted in 1882, of the Muslim 'depression': 'I believe it is almost entirely a question of social position.'⁶³

This claim was, of course, quite disingenuous. Ultimately, what defines a 'Muslim' is not wealth, or status, or language, but the confession of Islam. The name itself, which translates as 'one who has submitted' (that is, to Allah) makes this patently clear. 'Hindu' may be a slightly more defensible usage in this context, but the point still holds. Neither, for that matter, did the British position recognise that Indians might see things differently. Consider, again, the Muslims. Despite the formation of the League, elite Muslim politics after 1909 remained highly factionalised, in part along sectarian lines. Thus, the League's annual session in 1915 began smoothly enough with an address in English from the party President Mazharul Haq, but quickly degenerated into uproar when the gist of the speech, which among other things recommended that the League join with Congress in pleading the case of the Ali brothers, interned for criticising the war against Turkey, was translated into Urdu. Shouting over the din, Maulvi Hazrat Mohani from Aligarh asked to be heard. His request was refused, which prompted Maulvi Abdul Rauf of Bombay to remind the President that he was chairing a meeting of 'Muhammadans and not Hindus', and another delegate to interject angrily: 'you ought to appear like a Muhammadan . . . [and] speak the Muhammadan tongue. You pose to be [a] Muhammadan leader, but you [are] . . . a Kaffir Mussalman who does not dress like a Muhammadan and keep his beard.' Visibly shaken, Haq terminated the meeting. The following day it reconvened at the Taj hotel, restricted to Muslims approved by Bombay heavyweight Muhammad Ali Jinnah, which touched off another spate of hardline Sunni criticism, this time directed at Jinnah, who was described as unfit to lead because he was from the Khoja community, and therefore not an orthodox Muslim.⁶⁴ At the same time, the growing involvement of Muslims, through the League, in electoral politics, made them more sensible of the way Islam defined them as different from other Indians. Paradoxically, as David Gilmartin has demonstrated, the quarantining of Muslims in separate constituencies actually encouraged, not

diminished, this tendency, because it removed other elements from the political equation, and focused attention on what it might mean to be a 'good' Muslim.⁶⁵

Collateral damage

The most dramatic and destructive consequence of the reshaping of Indian society around hubs of belief was the rise of collective violence, especially between groups self-identified as 'Hindus' and 'Muslims'. As earlier chapters have shown, Hindu-Muslim, or 'communal', clashes, as they came to be called during the colonial era, were in some ways predictable and inevitable given that outdoor public ceremonies – typically consisting of processions of impassioned devotees and elaborate displays of confronting symbols and icons – are so much a part of Indian religious life. Taking place on the streets and in open public spaces, such rituals both advertise and provoke; they invite a competitive response. What is more, people engaged in the ecstatic business of worship are arguably people on a short fuse. Any religious festival, therefore, contains a potentiality for violence. But this prospect is greatly enhanced if two festivals compete simultaneously for the same sacred space, as regularly happens in respect of the Vaishnava rites of Ramnaumi and Dasehra, and the Islamic feast of Muharram. Hindus employ a solar calendar that runs for slightly longer each year than the lunar one used by Muslims, which ensures that the two sets of festivals, all of which fall within the first ten days of a new moon, must coincide every thirty-three solar years.⁶⁶ Also, religious riots provide an opportunity and a cover for the poor and the hungry to line their pockets, and for exploited labourers and artisans to settle scores with their class oppressors. Thus, an outbreak at Moradabad during the Muharram of 1872 was attributed to the appearance of 'bad characters . . . evidently pre-determined on mischief', and a Muslim-Parsi altercation at Bombay city in 1874 to pot-stirring by 'the disorderly classes of both communities'.⁶⁷

Yet, for all that, religious riots have never been as ubiquitous in the subcontinent as popular mythology maintains. The reality is that, although devotees of different religions typically live close together and their places of worship can often be found, in towns and villages, situated cheek by jowl, most Indians, for most of the time, have managed to find space to fulfil their ritual obligations without interference from others. As we have seen, serious disturbances triggered by religious disputes were uncommon in the pre-modern period: partly, it would seem, because of the diffuse nature of the boundaries of belief, at least at the local level. But, even during the colonial period and beyond, toleration was more the norm than conflict. Disputes arose frequently, but most were settled amicably. In the previous section we touched upon the issue of cow-slaughter. Along with clashing festivals, and the playing of music by Hindus outside mosques, this was one of the most common causes of Hindu-Muslim disputation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nevertheless, it was amenable to compromise. Even in the UP, their political heartland, Muslims tried, by and large, to perform *kurbānī* in a way

that gave the least possible offence. 'Hitherto, the Muhammadans have been as careful to conceal it as the Hindus to ignore it', a perceptive British observer noted.⁶⁸ Likewise, although the issue of music became, as we shall find, extremely tendentious during the 1920s, many learned Muslims held (at least privately) that opposition to it had no religious sanction.⁶⁹ And others seem not to have cared either way. Conversely, at least in parts of Maharashtra, Hindus out of 'respect for the feelings of Muhammadans' typically 'of their own accord gave up the use of music, or, at all events, the noisier kinds of music, when passing mosques'.⁷⁰

Religious differences, then, did not inevitably result in riots. In fact, for all the prominence it has acquired in the literature, religion-linked violence comprised, during the colonial period, only a small proportion of the lawlessness it fell to the Raj to control. For example, in the CP, nine 'offences against religion' were logged in 1880, as against eleven cases of gang robbery, twenty-three infractions of Railway Laws, and 2,002 instances of 'local nuisance'.⁷¹ Still, even allowing for the fact that the Raj was much more scrupulous in its recording of riot events than its predecessors, there seems no doubt that clashes between Hindus and Muslims became much more frequent as the nineteenth century wore on. In the half century between 1800 and 1850, only twelve such encounters were deemed by the government as serious enough to be reported to London, which equates to a frequency of about one major communal incident every five years. In the fifty years from 1870 to 1920, thirty-four communal disturbances are mentioned in official dispatches, which equates to a frequency of around one every two years. From 1920 to 1930, British India experienced, to judge from reportage in *The Times*, more than 150 major Hindu-Muslim riots, or about *fifteen every year*. And, as their number increased, so did their intensity. According to the official count, which is almost certainly too conservative, the Bombay affray of August 1893 left eighty people dead and 530 others hospitalised; while the September 1917 riots in the Shahabad District of Bihar left over a hundred villages devastated, and spawned more than 1,000 criminal convictions.⁷² What caused this massive shift?

One factor, the hardening of religious boundaries around new putative formations called 'communities', has already been touched upon. As that discussion made clear, this new communalism's emphasis on core, non-negotiable, beliefs struck deeply at the grass-roots tradition of practical toleration. But, even more damaging, certainly in the short run, was its promotion of showy gestures of religious piety (such as bigger and louder public festivals), which promoted a culture of rivalry and competition for 'rights'. For example, Muslims increasingly asserted their 'right' to kill cows at 'Idu'l-Azha. At Delhi, between twenty-five and thirty were slaughtered each year at 'Id during the 1870s. But, in 1884, 170 cows were sacrificed in that city; in 1886, about 450, allegedly as a deliberate payback to the other community.⁷³ The Dhobi Muslims of Rohtak sacrificed for the first time in 1889; and the first ever sacrifice at Chitpur took place in 1910. Moreover, the practice of

the rite became increasingly public and provocative, as *āshraf* Muslims who had previously sacrificed at municipal slaughter houses or discreetly indoors, began to insist on performing it in open sections of their compounds exposed to the full view of passers-by.⁷⁴ Similarly, the Shi‘a Muslims became less willing as time went by to compromise on the height of the *ta’zias* that dominate the Muharram procession. Rather, they tended to build them ever higher: a ploy that pretty much guaranteed that, somewhere along the processional route, a *ta’zia* representing the tomb of the martyred Shi‘a hero Imam Hussain would become entangled in the branches of a sacred pipal tree. But Hindus, too, increasingly sought confrontation: they took out processions that had no basis in precedent and deliberately routed them past mosques or through Muslim neighbourhoods. For instance, in 1886, the Hindus of Ambala for the first time celebrated the feast of Bawan Dawasi with a full-scale procession. By strange coincidence, its point of departure was ‘immediately in front of a Muhammadan shrine’. The local officials were convinced that the whole exercise was mounted with the object of provoking the rival faction.⁷⁵ And, in 1890, a procession at Rohtak was disrupted when some animal tails, which the exited devotees took to be cows’ tails, were thrown in front of a cart carrying an idol. It being Muharram, the perpetrators were assumed to be Muslims. The resulting build-up of tension fed directly into the bloody riot that erupted on the last day of the festival. But the presumption was mistaken. Inquiries by the police suggested that the offending items – which, upon closer examination, proved to be goat’s tails – had been thrown on to the road by Hindus acting as agents provocateurs.⁷⁶ ‘When the sects were in amity, rights were not pressed’, a British observer mused; ‘now they are insisted upon’.⁷⁷

Another element was economic change. The state’s encouragement of cash rents and its removal of restrictions on the purchase of agrarian holdings led to the large-scale acquisition of rural property by outsiders, while its rising tax demands created a growing need among property owners for expanded access to credit, which precipitated an influx into the *mofussil* of bankers and moneylenders. Nevertheless, landowners willing and able to adapt to the more market-orientated economic culture that was starting to take root, by, for instance, switching to cash crops such as cotton and, especially, sugar, prospered during the boom times of the 1870s and 1880s, triggered by the population surge and the spread of the rail network into the hinterland. In turn, the agricultural boom brought good times for grain merchants and other commercial middlemen, especially those operating out of towns that had railway connections. The problem was, most of those who profited from these developments were Hindus, particularly the *vaishya* castes, who virtually controlled the financial sector; Muslims, generally, fared less well. The consequence was a gradual shift in the balance of wealth, and associated economic power and influence, between the two communities. This had important repercussions for their religious relations.

For one thing, growing affluence provided pious Hindus with the means to extend their religious patronage. As we saw in [Chapter 9](#), the nineteenth century

witnessed a steep rise in new temple construction, which vastly outpaced that of mosques and Islamic shrines. Another manifestation of it was the trend, especially in northern India, towards marking the birthday of Rama with 'showy processions', rather than, as traditionally, with small-scale festivities in temples and private compounds.⁷⁸ For another thing, the shift in the axis of economic power had repercussions for the ordering of religious life in the urban centres where Muslims had long held sway. Used to dictating the terms of their localities' public religious celebrations, the urban Muslim elites found it more and more difficult to deflect demands from cashed-up Hindu merchants and lawyers for festival outlets and associated processional space. In Bareilly, where, as far as the British could ascertain, 'no idolatrous procession had ever been allowed by [the region's] Mohamedan rulers',⁷⁹ a coterie of rich merchants gave notice in 1837 of their intention to break with this tradition by taking out a Ramnaumi procession. Faced with vociferous protests and threats, they at length agreed to hold off after the city's Muslim leaders agreed to refrain in future from killing cows on Hindu holy days. But even this substantial concession bought the beleaguered Muslims of Bareilly only a short respite. In 1870, the Hindus renewed their demand to be allowed to celebrate their god's birthday with a procession, and the following year, against staunch Muslim objections, took one out. 'Hindus here, as elsewhere', opined the Commissioner of Agra, 'have begun to assert themselves, and they will not now willingly acquiesce, as they appear formerly to have done, in the superiority of the Muhammadans'.⁸⁰ Again, the financial resources available to the Hindu mercantile elites gave them considerable social leverage, a handy asset in the face of Muslim resistance. As part of their campaign to get the ban on Ramnaumi processions lifted, Bareilly's merchants attacked the poorer and more vulnerable sections of the other community by refusing to employ Muslim artisans, servants and musicians, or lend them money. At Rohtak, in 1890, Hindus 'systematically set about seeking a quarrel with the Muhammadans'⁸¹ by imposing economic boycotts and closing their shops, and, when the Muslims predictably retaliated with violence, sent out 'emissaries' armed with cash and promises of debt relief to raise a small army of vigilantes from among the Jat farmers living in the nearby villages. Last but not least, the freeing up of the rural labour market, the coming of a cheap mode of long-distance travel in the shape of the railway, and the higher wage rates paid to urban workers encouraged the migration of village people to the bigger interior towns and particularly to the great port and manufacturing cities of Bombay and Calcutta, which had the effect, in the latter case, of exporting communal animosities from the cow-protection heartland of NWP and Bihar to Bengal. In 1897, Calcutta experienced its first major Hindu-Muslim riot; by the 1920s, the city had become a notorious enclave of communal conflict.⁸²

The shift was not entirely driven by *organic* factors such as group consciousness and economic development, however; as with 'communalism' itself, *institutional* factors also played a part, and chief among these were the policies and governing practices of the British colonial state. Indeed, this was,

to an extent, recognised by the British themselves. Asked by the Home Department for its thoughts on the recent rise in communal violence across the country, the Punjab government, in a report of February 1887, pointed ‘first and foremost’ to:

the growth among the Hindu community of a spirit of independence and self-assertion, which is to a large extent the natural effect of British rule . . . [As] The Government of India is well aware . . . education among the Hindus has of late made rapid strides in the Punjab, and positions of influence are now much more largely occupied by Hindus than was the case during the first years of British administration. A large number of Hindu pleaders exercise their profession in the principal centres of trade. With the even administration of justice has arisen a disposition to insist upon the civil rights which pertain equally to all sections of the community. A down-trodden and subjected people has awakened to a sense of its rights under British rule, and the enforcement of these rights by the strong arm of the law is not regarded without apprehension by the Muhammadans who previously enjoyed a superior position . . . [Yet] the Muhammadan community has [in the case of cow-sacrifice] . . . no doubt taken frequent occasion, under cover of the neutral principles laid down on the subject by Government, to exercise their liberty of conscience in a manner which could not fail to irritate the Hindus.⁸³

Nevertheless, while there is undoubtedly much in this assessment that one can agree with, it is incomplete. Especially, it ignores those aspects of the state’s role that flowed directly, but often unintentionally, from the ideological presumptions, policies and administrative protocols favoured by the colonial government.

The chief problem that colonial state faced with respect to religious expression was deciding what should be allowed and what prohibited. As explained in [Chapter 9](#), the Raj initially favoured the touchstone of custom: which was supposed to be ascertained by means of ‘patient inquiry from those who know the usage’.⁸⁴ But, as further noted in that chapter, it often proved extremely difficult for district officers reliant on scrappy records and partisan advice to discover precisely what constituted the customary practice in their locality with respect to particular rites. This evidentiary vacuum led some officials to fall back on intuition, or their knowledge of practices in neighbouring areas, or simply on the arrangement they felt was most fair. In the absence of records, which had inconveniently been ‘destroyed in the Mutiny’, the DC of Rohtak rejected an objection lodged by Hindus against an application by Muslims in 1889 to slaughter cows at ‘Id in their homes on the grounds that in other district towns ‘the Muslims regularly sacrificed’ indoors,⁸⁵ while the Commissioner of Rohilkhand extended the same privilege in 1892 to Bareilly’s Muslims because the town seemed more ‘a Mahomedan than a Hindu capital’.⁸⁶ Nonetheless, even though capricious, at a certain level

these decisions acknowledged that, in northern India at any rate, 'custom' was in large part a legacy of the dominance that Muslims had enjoyed in earlier centuries. It provided a rough benchmark.

As time passed, however, some senior officials began to question the practice of linking colonial administration to a political reality long gone, and to call for a different benchmark. Accordingly, 'exceptions' started to be allowed in 'special cases', as when the Bengal government resolved that processions passing the Nakhoda Mosque in Calcutta's Chitpore Road should 'be required to stop their music' even outside regular prayer times, because of its 'size, importance and situation'.⁸⁷

Moreover, from the very beginning, the rule of custom sat uneasily with that other touchstone of imperial policy – neutrality – which, after mid-century, and especially after 1858, came to be interpreted as 'even-handedness', connoting that the government had a responsibility, in mediating religious expression, to ensure that worshippers of all shades had an equal share of its protection and patronage. And the British took this commitment seriously, too, implementing it with a rigour that sometimes bordered on the ludicrous. When, in 1890, Sikhs in Rawalpindi petitioned to be allowed to open a meat shop within the boundaries of the municipality, the government at once agreed to the request, holding that imperial policy dictated that Sikhs should be given 'exactly the same advantage[s] as Mohammedans'. But, not satisfied with that, it went on to direct the DC to find a location for the Sikh butchery that put it, and the existing Muslim *zibakhāna*, exactly 'equidistant from the accepted centre of the town'.⁸⁸ Superficially, though, neutrality was an appealing alternative, both because it cast the British colonial state as an honest broker, and because it seemed, unlike custom, to be amenable to consistent application.

However, as several historians have noted, the neutrality policy was not actually 'neutral', at least in its impact, since in many places it undercut religious privileges long claimed and exercised by Muslims and, in some others, prerogatives long claimed and exercised by Brahman groups at the expense of lower or heterogeneous Hindu castes. The *āshraf*, especially, were vocal in denouncing this official 'rectification' of the religious arena. Yet this did not, incongruously, inhibit Muslims from deploying the same maxim when they felt it would advantage them. At Salem, in Madras, Muslims fighting a Hindu application to have the hours of worship at a neighbourhood mosque restricted, appealed in 1881 to the Madras authorities to throw out the suit on the grounds that it constituted 'a violent contravention' of the assurances contained in the Queen's Proclamation of 1858.⁸⁹ And in the Punjab Muslims lobbied hard, 'under cover of the neutral principles laid down by Government', for unlimited rights in respect of *kūrbāni*.⁹⁰ As the words 'under cover' suggest, the British did not look kindly on this stratagem. They felt that the Muslims were acting deviously. Over time, this feeling hardened into a conviction that a minority of the population – barely a quarter – was dictating to the majority. In turn, this radical reflection sparked a serious official rethink, early in the twentieth century, about the wisdom of allowing policy to be guided by a

discourse of 'rights', which led to a downplaying, and eventual abandonment (though this was never acknowledged), of 'neutrality' as a benchmark.

These shifts of policy were, in themselves, consequential, since they upset long-standing and, in many cases, broadly accepted local religious arrangements. As Barbara Metcalf has sagely remarked, no official decision whose outcome was a win for one side at the expense of the other can accurately be described as 'neutral'. Moreover, imperial decisions cried out to be appealed. 'When a decision was made for one side, that side saw the decision as proof of its strength; the other side [inevitably] saw it as an invitation to try to assert itself again.'⁹¹ And these consequences were exacerbated by the tendency for British administrators to regularly overturn each other's decisions. In 1806, the Magistrate of Gorakhpur, acting on a petition from local Hindus, imposed a total ban on the killing of cows in the town of Mau. This ruling held good for almost sixty years, only to be overturned in 1863. A year later, the ban was reinstated by order of the District Session Judge. At Mathura, Krishna's birthplace, cow-slaughter was banned in 1805 by the Company's military commander in northern India, Lord Lake, but soon resumed with the full knowledge of the authorities. When questioned about this reversal by Hindu cow protectionists, the government explained that Lake's ruling had been only 'temporary in character'.⁹² And a similar official about-face occurred at Bareilly over access to public ritual space, when, in 1871, the DM sanctioned the taking out of a Hindu Ramnaumi procession, even though it was an innovation and in blatant contravention of the agreement of 1837, discussed above, which one of his predecessors had helped negotiate. At one level, these reversals weakened the authority of the Raj by making it seem whimsical and vacillating. At another level, they created a climate of uncertainty among religious stakeholders that weakened the force of local custom where it still applied and strengthened the perception that the government was open to persuasion in respect of demands for religious 'rights', especially if they were backed up by propaganda and agitation.

Accordingly there is much to be said for Congressman Narayan Dhar's assertion, at the time of the cow riots, that 'all the religious disturbances of the last ten or twelve years appear . . . to have been brought about, in no small measure, by the meddlesomeness of the Anglo-Indian officials in our affairs'.⁹³ But, even if communal conflict served as a convenient rationale for continued British occupation, and even though that moral was sometimes drawn by serving officers, there is no indication whatever in the files that the British welcomed the outbreak of religious riots, or for that matter any kind of riots; still less any evidence that they attempted to instigate them. This is not surprising. Riots were trouble. They created extra work; they put officials at risk; those that got out of control could shorten careers. The British regarded communal riots, particularly, as symptoms of administrative failure. Consequently, they put a great amount of thought, time and effort into averting and containing them.

11 The rule of law

Strategies of containment

One of the things that distinguished the British colonial state from previous ruling regimes in India was its visceral loathing of disorder. While pre-modern Indian rulers did not think twice about mobilising armies to put down threats to their patrimony, they did not generally bother to involve themselves and the state apparatus with outbreaks of civil strife that did not pose an obvious political threat, preferring to leave the question of their suppression (or not) to lower-level authorities – local *rājās* or clan bosses or village head-men.¹ The British, by contrast, felt compelled to respond to every such infraction: in part because they subscribed to a very different ruling ideology, one that obliged the state to impose itself comprehensively on society in order to facilitate its ‘governmentality’, and in part because they feared what even small-scale outbreaks of collective violence could lead to – a nervousness compounded by the regime’s consciousness of its alien roots. As the Government of India advised the Secretary of State in June 1874:

we conceive that . . . on the apprehension of any serious riot, the right course is to assemble such a military force as will show those who are disposed to break the peace that any attempt of the kind must be ineffectual, and to make use of that force promptly if occasion should require it. Hesitation and delay . . . [in taking action] appear to us to involve great danger, especially when the character of the population [in] . . . many of our Indian cities is taken into consideration, and regard is had to the political danger of any appearance of inability on the part of the Executive . . . to put down a disturbance.²

Also, the British Raj took justifiable pride in the fact that it was a government that operated under the *rule of law*. Everything it did, and everything it sought to prevent its subjects from doing, was underpinned by policies and regulations framed in accordance with statutes and with the interpretations placed upon them by the courts. This was one of the things that, arguably, made the Raj (as suggested in [Chapter 9](#)) a *modern* government. Yet, if its decrees were rendered, thus, on its own terms, ‘lawful’, and also, perhaps, less capricious

than those of some of its monarchical predecessors, it cannot be said that the Raj was less *despotic* than earlier Indian regimes in the demands it made of its subjects. In fact, it could be argued that the totality of its subjugation was greater, precisely *because* of its obsession with the rule of law. Willing to expose its own purposes to the constraints of law, the Raj expected no less of the citizenry. In particular, it expected them to respect the ‘public peace’. To this end, magistrates were empowered by the Criminal Procedure Code (CPC) enacted in 1861 to disperse ‘unlawful’ assemblies, or any ‘assemblies of five or more persons’ deemed likely to disrupt the ‘public peace’ (s. 127), direct ‘any person to abstain’ from an act if it seemed likely to cause ‘annoyance or injury’, or pose a risk to ‘human life, health or safety’, or to lead to ‘a riot or an affray’ (s. 144) and to visit persons found guilty of having participated in an unlawful assembly with fines and imprisonment (s. 145). The British Raj may have been technically a ‘Christian’ state, but its true patron deity was the god of Order.

The colonial government saw communal disputes fuelled by religious passions as posing a particular challenge. Nonetheless, their resolve was firm. ‘So glaring a defiance of authority’³ could not be accepted; and they believed they possessed the strategies and the resources to defeat it. For example, knowing from experience which issues were most likely to generate communal strife meant that the government was able to put in place a range of precautions. Animal slaughter in general, and the beef trade in particular, was tightly regulated. In the Punjab, government regulations prohibited butchers’ shops from operating near ‘any Hindoo religious building’, decreed that meat should not be ‘openly exposed for sale’, and required purchasers to ‘carry it to their homes in the city folded in a cloth’.⁴ Transgressors faced hefty fines and a possible jail term of six months. And so too were festivals. As Freitag observes: ‘Much attention was paid [by officials] to the size and nature of the festivities, what kinds of music, chants and shouts would be permitted and where; how many groups would be allowed to participate; what sized floats might be used.’⁵ Thus, sponsors of car festivals in Bengal were required to have the cars officially inspected for mechanical faults and to keep to prescribed routes lined on both sides with ‘palisades’ that separated procession and audience by at least forty feet.⁶ Likewise, there were exacting rules about when – if at all – processions could play music in the vicinity of mosques. Last but not least, administrators used a range of strategies to reduce the prospect of violence during clashing festivals: such as compelling community leaders to agree in advance on prescribed routes that ensured that concurrent processions never met, or to staggered timings; and using informers, and other sources of intelligence, to pinpoint likely hotspots and potential ringleaders. It is said that Sir Antony MacDonnell ‘was not satisfied unless he knew everything that was going on’ in his jurisdiction.⁷ He was not alone. Forewarned, the British felt, was forearmed.

Also, with advance warning of impending trouble, officials had an opportunity to ‘nip it in the bud’. One avenue open to them was to ‘bind over’

known hot-heads to keep the peace. Another was to solicit the cooperation of local community leaders whose status in native society justified the presumption that they could exert influence over it. Aware that a series of attacks on Muslim butcher shops in Amritsar by Sikh militants had soured communal relations there, the DC Major Davies held a 'darbar' at the town hall, to which 'every man of note in the city' was invited. For half an hour he harangued them in Urdu on the need for communal peace. According to the DC, many 'Hindoo and Muhammadan gentlemen, after the meeting broke up, embraced . . . in their anxiety to show that no traces of the ill-feeling . . . remained in their minds'.⁸ Major Rennick, DC of Rohtak, anticipating trouble at the 1889 Bakr 'Id, asked Sub-Judge Jugal Kishore 'to ascertain the feelings of the Hindus and to endeavour to influence them'.⁹ At Delhi, his colleague Gordon Smyth, faced with an imminent clash between partisans of rival processions:

sent for certain of the leading inhabitants and placed them in charge of those quarters of the city where they resided . . . In addition to these I sent for the *chaudhris* of three . . . colonies of butchers, for the heads of three gangs of wrestlers, for the *chaudhris* of the Muhammadan oil-pressers . . . and of other trades furnishing members of the turbulent classes, . . . and told these men that they were appointed officers over their . . . followers, and would be held responsible if the men under them committed violence.¹⁰

And similar measures were instituted, also at Delhi, to warn off Vaishnava extremists from disrupting a planned Dasehra procession by heterodox Saraogis. Here, though, the exhortations of the DC were backed up by specific threats. The 'principal representatives of the Vaishnava sect' in the city were warned that 'should any attempt at a breach of the peace be made, instigated by them or supported by their influence, their names will be struck off the Divisional and Provincial Durbar lists, and they will be visited with the severe displeasure of the Government'.¹¹ A third strategy was to stop processions being taken out altogether in towns beset by endemic communal friction. For obvious reasons, the British preferred to do this by persuading their sponsors to cancel, but in the last resort processions could be forbidden by executive order; as, for that matter, could the ritual of *kūrbānī*. Concerned at the rising incidence of cow-related violence in the NWP, the provincial government, in 1916, reminded its magistrates that they had 'the statutory power to prohibit the sacrifice', and to take all measures necessary to back up that prohibition.¹² Finally, officials anticipating trouble could seek to intimidate potential perpetrators by staging flag marches through high-risk areas.

If, notwithstanding these precautions, an outbreak did eventuate, the British could take comfort from the knowledge that they commanded, in principle, the means to snuff out any civil disturbance. In a previous chapter we spoke of the formidable coercive apparatus available to the British Raj at its zenith. What this meant on the ground can be seen by looking at the case of Bareilly.

In 1911, the Bareilly district boasted a police force of 50 sub-inspectors, 88 head constables and 825 ordinary constables. Seventy-five more police, some of them armed, guarded the town. In emergencies, 2,000 village ‘watchmen’ could be called upon to assist. Urban crowds could be large, even a thousand or more, but by their nature they lacked discipline. In a showdown with armed, properly trained police they had little chance: ‘we assert, without fear of contradiction’, the Bombay Government informed the Secretary of State, apropos Parsi–Muslim battles in the City in 1874, ‘that in no single instance in these riots was it found that the police could not master the rioters as soon as they acted in a body against them’.¹³ Likewise, police action, according to the DC, saved the day at Rohtak in 1889:

The noise of the fighting was no doubt the signal which brought to the attack the Hindus who were lurking in detachments all through the fields. They came on in great numbers, but not well packed together. The leading men got home, but were met by the Police with swords. Large numbers followed, and it was at the moment when it appeared that the sheer weight of the attacking party . . . would carry the day, that Sandhe Khan, the Deputy Inspector commanding the Reserve, ordered his men to fire. The effect was instantaneous; the riot was at an end.¹⁴

And if armed police constituted a formidable instrument of crowd control, so, even more, did regular soldiers. Troops were usually held in reserve and committed only in situations of dire extremity, but whenever they were the effect was invariably dramatic. In October 1886, the DC of Delhi, alarmed by the failure of the regular police to wrest control of the city from rampaging crowds of devotees gathered for Ram Lila and Muharram, wired the CO of the Lincolnshire Regiment bivouacked nearby for assistance. Two companies were quickly provided. ‘When the troops arrived, the mob at once melted away.’¹⁵

Nevertheless, aware that excessive repression could have negative consequences, the government much preferred its men on the spot to defuse threatening situations by using measures short of brute force, or, failing that, by the deployment of measured force against selected targets. By contemporary bureaucratic standards, this was asking a lot of men who had qualified for the Indian Civil Service (ICS) mainly by passing an examination. Yet, such was the expectation placed on English shoulders by the Social Darwinist racial theories of the late nineteenth century, that the colonial state not only felt entitled to make such demands of its officials, but had every confidence that, when challenges presented, they would discover in themselves sufficient pride, ‘pluck’, presence of mind and cool-headedness to prevail. And, remarkably, some of them did. A.R. Bulman, DC at Ambala, learning that an angry crowd of Hindus had surrounded ‘some Muhammadans’ pulling a cart loaded with beef down a street close to a temple, and that a separate body of Muslims was on its way to the scene, decided that the ‘juncture was a critical one’:

In another minute the Deputy Inspector would certainly have been knocked down, and the excited crowd would have reached the prisoners [the Muslims pulling the cart had been arrested] and attempted their rescue . . . To prevent this I ran to the assistance of the Deputy Inspector . . . I hit one of the foremost of the assailants over the pagri with my riding whip. A few constables who had followed me then succeeded in pushing back the crowd.¹⁶

And C.G.S. Faulder, Collector-Magistrate of Darbhanga, apprised that a crowd of Hindus had blocked off a road to prevent a Muslim named Hussein from taking a cow back to his house to be sacrificed, showed similar resolution:

I got out of my dog cart and walked down the gulli [lane] a distance of about 150 yards. As I got into the gulli I found the temper of the crowd still worse; men with lathis were standing here and there along it waving them in the air and yelling in a menacing manner towards Hussein's house, bricks were flying about and I was myself hit on the hat by one of them and my chaprasi [aide] who was following behind received a cut. The noise was such that it was impossible to give any order or to hear distinctly what any one said. I seized three or four of the most bellicose and obstreperous Hindus, including one man who defiantly waved his lathi in the air . . . [in the direction of] Hussein's house within a foot of me before he saw I had approached him . . . A head constable and 2 or 3 constables met me . . . and took charge of the prisoners and I was ultimately able to get a hearing and suggest the only arrangement which seemed likely to calm the passion of the mob.¹⁷

One can imagine Rudyard Kipling, then working as a journalist at the *Lahore Civil and Military Gazette*, sitting at his desk reading telegraphic accounts of these escapades, and murmuring, softly, to himself: 'well done'.

But was it always 'well done'? A flippant response would be that, if colonial plans had always worked as intended, there would still be a British Empire. More seriously, and in the immediate context, it is clear that the management strategies outlined above did not work, or at least not often enough or effectively enough to make a meaningful difference, because, as established earlier, the incidence and severity of communal violence in India steadily increased, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at a rate substantially in excess of the secular growth rate of the country's population.

And why they increasingly failed

In tackling the thorny question of why the British system of religious management in India often and perhaps *progressively* failed, we need to appreciate, first of all, that the British had little influence over what their subjects *thought*. With its bureaucratic power, the colonial state could permit or prohibit religious

processions, or regulate the times and places of ritual observance, virtually as it pleased, but it had no sway over what Indians believed or how they elected to express those beliefs in certain modes of worship. Indeed, outside ultra-Evangelical circles, this fundamental limitation was accepted as a given. The policy of 'neutrality' proclaimed not only that the British were disinterested, but that they harboured no ambitions to provide moral guidance. In this respect, of course, the Raj differed from its monarchical predecessors who, as earlier chapters show, were often key ritual players in their own right. It follows that, having no hegemonic power over religious *behaviour*, the colonial government never had any real prospect of preventing communal disturbances from happening. The best it could do, realistically, was to try to contain the collateral damage. And this constraint, too, was acknowledged by most seasoned officials. 'If we take ordinary precautions, and are able, when riots do occur, to put them down as speedily as [possible]', wrote one official, '... we will, I trust, be held to have done our duty.'¹⁸

Yet, judged even by this lesser test, the Raj seems, increasingly, to have struggled. One reason was structural. A bureaucracy is only as efficient as the sum of its component parts, and the Raj had to make do, in parts, with instruments of control and coercion that, thanks to underfinancing and human frailty, fell short of what was ideally required. As we have seen, police were usually effective when deployed in numbers, but in many places their numbers were few. 'We cannot entertain police in sufficient force in every town and village absolutely to ensure under all circumstances the maintenance of peace', admitted a Commissioner of Rohilkhand.¹⁹ And during the second half of the nineteenth century cost-cutting further reduced police strength in some large Indian towns. Several of these, such as Bombay and Bareilly, became sites of major disturbances. Significantly, the inquiry into the Bareilly affray of 1871 came down hard on the policy of 'false economy' that had been imposed after the Mutiny, which had led to the loss of 200 'well-trained' city constables.

What is more, the quality of this thinly stretched force was very mixed. There are reports of police in tight corners dropping their weapons and running; and of policemen fighting among themselves. And, especially at the lower levels, the force was intensely infected with communal prejudices, a problem made more acute by the fact that Muslims and Sikhs were heavily over-represented within its ranks, even in predominantly Hindu provinces such as the CP.²⁰ At Delhi in October 1886, virtually all the Muslims detained over communal rioting were 'arrested by Hindu constables and the Hindus by Muhammadan constables'.²¹ In turn, police partisanship compromised the integrity of the intelligence that flowed through to the civil authorities. At Amritsar, in 1874, Superintendent of Police (SP) Christie was fed a pack of lies by his Muslim informer about the perpetrators of a series of attacks on shops owned by Muslim butchers. This misinformation led him to institute prosecutions against several Sikhs later found to be innocent. The episode became notorious in official circles as 'Mr Christie's fiasco'.²² But these systemic deficiencies were not unique to the police; they were also rampant

on the civil side. The official *post mortem* on the Rohtak riots of September 1889 found that three assistant commissioners, a tahsildar and a naib tahsildar had 'all failed in their duty' by allowing themselves to be swayed by communal feeling. 'They were expected to sympathise with their co-religionists', the report read, 'and could not help doing so.'²³ In addition, the tahsildar was found to have lied to his superiors about the conduct of another officer. 'The object of the Tahsildar was, first by persuasion, and afterwards by implied threats, to influence me to relieve from his post [as Rohtak's police chief] the Muhammadan Deputy Inspector Kutb Din . . . and appoint a Hindu in his place', concluded Deputy Inspector-General (IG) Tucker.²⁴ Elsewhere, native subordinates were accused of slackness, deception and going missing in emergencies. After one such debacle, a senior member of the Punjab council minuted derisively, by way of explanation: 'Nine Munshis, especially Hindu Munshis, do not make one man.'²⁵

However, the problem was not a racial one. The white side of the ethnic divide had plenty of black sheep too. C. Maclean, the Magistrate of Salem, a town with a history of Hindu-Muslim tension, in August 1882 vacated his post four days before the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, leaving a junior policeman in charge. Later, he was seen relaxing at the Bangalore races.²⁶ In his absence Salem town 'passed into the hands' of a 'Hindu mob which attacked Muslims on sight' and set fire to a number of Muslim houses and a mosque.²⁷ In the wake of a riot at Jullundur, the senior district officer was carpeted for 'incompetence and neglect of duty'.²⁸ And the Bareilly riot of 1871 prompted similar accusations. 'What can be more significant than this', Sir John Strachey minuted sourly, 'than that *all the officers*, while the Bareilly riots were going on, were seated in buggies and carriages.'²⁹ Incredibly, this revelation led only to the men concerned being formally reprimanded, although disciplinary charges were later filed against a senior policeman for showing extreme 'cowardice' during a related incident in nearby Faridpur.³⁰

Still, the real damage was done not by laziness, or malfeasance, but by the errors of judgement to which all bureaucrats, even hard-working ones, are occasionally prone. Charles Roe, the DC at Multan, inadvertently set the town alight by reversing his earlier prohibition on the transportation of beef through a Hindu neighbourhood. Henry E.L.P. Dupernex, dispatched in 1893 to fill in at Azamgarh when the permanent incumbent fell sick, issued an order on the eve of 'Id that local Muslims who planned to sacrifice should register their intention with the police, which many took as an open invitation to do so; but then issued a second order to the effect that sacrifices could only take place where the rite had the sanction of custom. In the confusion, the district dissolved into mayhem. And another officer left a bitter legacy for his successors at Delhi by approving, in 1916, the construction of a new slaughter house, apparently unaware that the site abutted a temple patronised by both Hindus and Jains. The files record many such calamities. They were an inevitable product of an administrative system that saw fit to place a large measure of discretionary authority in the hands of well-intentioned but fallible functionaries.

And, if the performance of the colonial bureaucracy, in managing riots, sometimes fell short, so, even more, did that of the informal sector. As observed above, it had always been assumed by theorists of British colonial governance that the simplest and most cost-effective way of maintaining social harmony was to solicit the cooperation of 'sensible' native leaders. But this wisdom was increasingly questioned by the men labouring away at the coalface, who discovered from experience that, on the contrary, many sections of the native elite had little, or no, real influence over the 'turbulent' masses, and moreover that some of those who did command genuine leverage actually constituted the problem, rather than the solution. What possible chance did the government have of stopping riots, Bareilly inquiry commission head Francis Mayne mused gloomily, when those 'to whom people looked for . . . a lead' were intimately involved?³¹

Also, by placing increasing reliance, particularly in the cities, on the support of the more Westernised sections of the Indian elite, the Raj cut itself off from leaders who just might have been able to make a difference, such as the titular heads of the various Hindu sects. In the event, the government came to be tainted, in the eyes of the orthodox, by its political association with a class that a Shankaracharya of Dwarka once described sneeringly as 'utterly out of touch with the actual needs, wants, feelings and sentiments of the bulk of their co-religionists'.³²

Last but not least, executive strategies for managing communal violence often ran into trouble with the courts. At the district level, authority in British India was unified: the Collector/DC was also the Magistrate. Above that, however, it bifurcated; so, when appeals went up from the local courts, they were heard by full-time judges drawn from a separate branch of the Service and, at the highest level, that of the provincial high courts, in some cases directly from the English Bar. In this way, both the proceedings of the government and, more substantially, the laws on which those proceedings were supposed to be based, became subject to judicial review. Mostly this was routine. In the great majority of cases, the courts simply weighed up the 'facts' and then applied the law as appropriate. But now and then judicial interpretation led to administrative decisions being invalidated and overturned. After one such judgment, Home Secretary C.J. Lyall testily likened the process to finding the meaning of the words of an instrument 'to be different from that which it had previously been supposed to be' by everyone else.³³ Needless to say, such interventions invariably had administrative implications; and often they had dire political consequences as well.

That was certainly true of the following four criminal appeals, which had a major impact on the government's strategies of religious management. In the first case, of 1887, seven Muslim residents of the village of Mehim in the Punjab were convicted and fined in the court of the DC of Rohtak for slaughtering a cow in a public place in defiance of 'a rule prescribed by the Local Government'. The sentence was appealed to the Chief Court of the province. The superior court found that the 'rule' referred to by the DC was

simply an ‘opinion’ based on a government circular of 1849, and that in fact no ‘rules applicable to Rohtak’ had ever been officially prescribed. It set aside the convictions and fines. At the next ‘Id the district saw a rash of cow-killing, which triggered a major riot in Rohtak town. Subsequent investigations by the DC revealed that the Mehim decision had been ‘much discussed in other parts of the Rohtak District’ and that highly coloured reports of it had ‘emboldened’ the sacrifice that had precipitated the outbreak.³⁴ The second case was an appeal to the Madras High Court against an executive order issued by the DM of Salem, prohibiting the playing of music in front of mosques. The Court declared the order invalid and quashed it. The decision removed ‘one of the main props sustaining the fabric of communal peace in South India’, and helped to set in motion the chain of events that culminated in the disturbances of 1882.³⁵ The third case originated in eastern UP. On ‘Id day, 30 August 1887, two Muslim inhabitants of Tilhar, a village in Shahjahanpur District, were seen killing a cow in a field. They were arrested and brought before the DM, who found them guilty of an offence under section 295 of the penal code. However, on legal advice the defendants appealed the decision to the court of the Sessions Judge of Shahjahanpur who, conscious of the potential of the case to further aggravate the ‘strained relations that now exist between Hindus and Muhammadans’, referred it to the Full Bench of the High Court at Allahabad, which ruled that cows, being animate, and not associated with fixed sites of worship, did not qualify as ‘objects’ and so did not fall within the meaning of the section.³⁶ Not surprisingly, this highly technical decision was greeted warmly by Muslims and deplored by Hindus, including significantly an emerging leader of the cow-protection movement. And it is probably one of the main reasons that cow-sacrifice in UP started to rise around this time. As for the government, it was so dismayed that it took the unusual step of writing directly to the Chief Justice, pointing out the ‘hardship and injustice’ that the knock-back would impose on its administrators.³⁷ But the Court did not take the hint; and ten years later it handed down another tendentious judgment – that Muslims had an ‘inherent right’ to perform the duties enjoined by their faith – which immediately sparked a rash of applications to the civil courts for injunctions restraining district officers from restricting the number and location of cow-sacrifices at ‘Idu’l-Azhā.³⁸

At the same time, controversial interpretations by the courts invited accusations of bias, and in cases touching upon religion led to the accusation from nationalists that the judiciary was covertly implementing imperial policies favouring particular communities. And this jaundiced perception was not tempered by the addition of native-born judges to the bench from the 1880s, and by their tendency, whether from courage or partisanship, to hand down controversial judgments in matters concerning religion. The key judgment in the aforementioned Allahabad appeal case, which turned on the issue of whether a cow was a ‘sacred object’ within the definition of section 295, was handed down by a Muslim judge, Saiyyid Mahmud, the first-born son of the most prominent Muslim communal politician in northern India.³⁹ And in

another celebrated case, a native Christian member of the Lahore High Court bench upheld an appeal from a notorious Hindu activist, convicted in a lower court of having contravened section 153A by publishing a ‘scurrilous’ pamphlet about the life of the Muslim Prophet, on the shaky grounds that this section seemed to him intended to stop attacks on living persons, and as such did not apply to ‘polemics against deceased religious leaders’. A shocked Punjab government was left to deal with the fallout.⁴⁰

Every failure with respect to dispute management worried the colonial authorities. But what really alarmed them was the tendency for these failures to multiply as the scale, spread and ferocity of ethno-communal violence escalated across the subcontinent. In the 1890s, riot crowds became noticeably bigger and more organised. A fracas at Darbhanga, in 1890, was aggravated by the sudden appearance of ‘five thousand Mahomedans’ from the surrounding countryside, summoned by their co-religionists;⁴¹ and in September 1917, a mob of perhaps 25,000 Hindus attacked and laid waste to the Bihari Muslim hamlet of Ibrahimpur. In turn, forward planning allowed the stockpiling of projectiles, sharp-edged weapons and firearms, which led to riots becoming more deadly. The unprecedented toll recorded in the Calcutta disturbances of April 1926 – 110 people killed and 975 seriously injured – was attributed, in part, to this new feature. Communal riots in India had never been totally spontaneous irruptions; but now it appeared that some of them were being carefully planned – with a purpose – by well-connected leaders.

Disturbingly, too, from the British viewpoint, this more purposeful brand of Indian communal violence appeared to have less to do with religion than with broader issues of identity. Although altercations over cow-killing, music and processions continued, they now competed, as causes of riots, with quasi-secular disputes between members of rival communities over job sackings, harassment of women, random acts of ‘hooliganism’, the hurling of insults, abductions and gripes against short-changing vendors. A 1913 clash in Lahore about the proper preparation of meat was ascribed to ‘one set of people trying to score off another, and bringing to their assistance a religious element’.⁴² The great riot of 1932 in Bombay, which cost 217 lives and led to nearly 3,000 people being treated for injuries, was triggered by the slapping of a Muslim boy by a wealthy Hindu man irked by his smirking request for alms.⁴³ And communal riots became more and more tied up with politics. Sensing, in April 1923, that trouble was brewing, the DC of Amritsar banned all processions within the city. ‘I took this action’, he explained, in a letter to his superior, ‘because it is notorious that [the] excitement had deliberately been fanned by interested men of position, principally . . . candidates [standing for] . . . the next council elections.’⁴⁴ Likewise, an outbreak at Sholapur in November 1925 was ascribed by the local DM to the ‘ill-feeling’ generated by agents of the Hindu Mahasabha, ‘a party that makes a political platform of nagging at the Mohamedans at every possible occasion’.⁴⁵

Indeed, the riot statistics would suggest that, by the early twentieth century, the political aspect had become integral. After 1905, Hindu–Muslim conflict

in Bengal rose steeply in the wake of the Congress agitation against Lord Curzon's politically inspired partition of the province along communal lines;⁴⁶ and, after 1921, violence escalated, more generally, following the introduction of the Montagu–Chelmsford raft of constitutional reforms that gave elected Indians, for the first time, access to ministerial positions in the provinces and foreshadowed the eventual setting up of a responsible ministry at the centre. Neither was coincidental. The Bengal case supports our claim, in the previous chapter, that political mobilisation in the cause of nationalism was a major factor contributing to the growth, in India, of communal solidarities; while the case of the 1920s indicates that communalism was also nourished by the party competition unleashed by Whitehall's hesitant move to a policy of devolution. As *The Times of India* observed insightfully, the decade's history of riots could be seen, from another viewpoint, as representing 'the beginnings of a struggle between the two communities for . . . control of political power' in India.⁴⁷

Against this heightened challenge, the standard peacekeeping strategies of the Raj struggled to cope, especially, perhaps, that of personal suasion. Indian crowds appeared increasingly resistant both to the masculine charm of European officials and to the aura of governmental authority. Thus, A.R. Bulman, DC at Ambala, facing a truculent crowd of Hindus and Muslims in October 1886, found himself literally lost for words:

we took every possible means to make it known to the crowd at large that they were ordered to disperse. [Certainly] In a crowd of two or three thousand people collected around a large tank it is possible that many individuals may not have heard the orders to disperse. But that the crowd generally heard them repeated over and over again, and had full and ample opportunity to obey them . . . I most distinctly declare. But our orders had no effect. The crowd remained sullenly and determinedly still. Hardly a man . . . so far as my personal observation extended I can say not a single man . . . made a motion towards leaving the place.⁴⁸

From the Punjab government's standpoint, it appeared that the Indian people had 'begun to understand the limits of executive authority'.⁴⁹ Of course, there still remained, as a last resort, armed force – but even more of that was needed as time went by to keep the mobs in check. In the lead-up to the 1925 'Id at Delhi, the DC, a man new to the post, received an application from a party of Muslims to take a cow destined for sacrifice along a street that wound through the heart of a predominantly Hindu quarter of the city. Even though this route had never previously been sanctioned, the DC granted the application – but then had to make extraordinary arrangements to guarantee the Muslims and their property safe passage. In the event, several cows passed through without incident, but only because the large crowd of Hindus who had gathered to watch decided that they could not take on two magistrates armed with signed warrants, two armoured cars and two entire companies of front-line British

troops.⁵⁰ Again, some, at least, of this behavioural change seems to have been due to the advent in the twentieth century of agitational politics, and the exposure of large numbers of Indians, especially in the towns, to Gandhi's model of civil resistance, which made them more defiant and less afraid.

Trapped in a downward spiral of diminishing returns, the British scrambled to find better administrative answers. They moved to strengthen the criminal law, amending the Indian Penal Code (IPC) to plug loopholes. A new section 153A, added in 1898, penalised the promotion by word, or deed, of 'feelings of enmity or hatred between different classes', and a revised section 295A, added in 1927, in response to the Lahore case mentioned earlier, outlawed 'deliberate and malicious' actions aimed at 'outraging the religious feelings of any class of His Majesty's subjects'. Also, more promisingly perhaps, they took a searching look at their executive practices, in particular the efficacy of regulating public religious rites according to the old rough and ready standard of custom. Urging that the best option was one that let people know, clearly, 'what may and what may not be done', Home Member Sir Philip Hutchins called for the introduction, with regard to the Bakr 'Id, of 'a general system of sacrificing under licence';⁵¹ and, after some discussion with the government of the Punjab, which had been experimenting with a similar arrangement, it was proposed to make the test for the issuing of a licence a continuous history of sacrifice for 'say, thirty years'.⁵² Likewise, there was a push, initially from the CP government, for the endless wrangling over what was customary in respect of music near mosques to be cut short by the introduction of an unvarying rule that prioritised 'the common right of the individual' to the unhindered use of the public streets. Such a rule, the local government suggested hopefully, would cause the problem of music as a source of friction to disappear, since 'no civil restriction in the use of a thorough-fare arises from the existence beside it of any place of worship'.⁵³

However, although they received widespread support from district-level officials, notably, later on, from the Magistrate of Gaya district,⁵⁴ these radical alternatives failed to win over their political bosses in Delhi. The viceroys who followed Curzon were reluctant to stir the pot, and some, like Irwin, were leery of attempts to 'enunciate general principles'.⁵⁵ Ironically, only a decade after a rights-based approach to the management of religious quarrels had been finally rejected by the executive, the courts started to hand down judgments informed precisely by this line of reasoning, culminating in a historic Privy Council decision of 1944 that upheld the unfettered right of Shi'as to process with *tazias* along public thoroughfares.⁵⁶ But this blast of legal rationality came too late in the life of the colonial state to impress itself upon British administrative policy; in 1944, the Raj had a war to fight and three years left to run. So caution won out.

But caution, if overdone, can lead to paralysis. Although the refusal of the Raj to embrace a 'rights'-based approach to managing religion was based on a seemingly logical risk-assessment, it reflected a failure of administrative nerve. It signalled that the colonial state had become preoccupied with

self-preservation. And, as time went by, other signs of this risk-aversion malaise began to manifest themselves, most importantly, from our point of view, a growing reluctance on the part of the government to take on religious activists who defied its authority. During the Cawnpore riots of 1931, in which at least 295 people died, the police refrained from firing and made only a handful of arrests. Four years later, on a July night in Lahore, police deputed to guard the disputed Shahidganj Mosque stood aside, under orders, as 'persons unknown', according to the official record, but identified by scores of fascinated eyewitnesses as Akali Sikhs, demolished the building with their bare hands.⁵⁷

At one level, the weak-kneed approach adopted by the authorities at Cawnpore and Lahore stemmed from the recognition that the police were now a less effective instrument of crowd control than they had once been. Urban crowds of the 1930s in India, even those drawn together ostensibly for religious purposes, more and more marched in step with the drum of nationalism, a doctrine that at heart proclaimed, 'we have legitimacy and you do not'. People so energised are not easily deterred. At another, as yet largely inarticulate level, it reflected a growing doubt within the ranks of the foreign ruling class about the continuing usefulness of their presence in a tradition-bound country that increasingly appeared not to want or need them.

The Raj in retreat

On 20 August 1917, Secretary of State Edwin Montagu announced in Parliament that, henceforth, the overarching goal of Britain's India policy would be to facilitate 'the increasing association of Indians with every branch of the administration and the gradual development of self-governing institutions, with a view to the progressive realisation of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire'.⁵⁸ First fruit of this policy of 'devolution' was the India Act of 1919, which introduced elected majorities into both the Central Legislative Assembly (CLA) and the provincial legislative councils, greatly extended the franchise, and allocated a number of portfolios in each of the provinces to Indians drawn from the body of elected members. By making legislative politics much more enticing, these changes sharpened competition for seats among Indian parties, in turn, as we noted above, intensifying communal mobilisation. At the same time, by giving elected Indians access to real, if limited, power, they put the government in the unfamiliar position of having to defend its religious policy from *insider* critics who, unlike the aloof British, had a vested *personal* interest in how the Raj dealt with customary personal laws, religious 'rights' and public expressions of piety.

More specifically, Dyarchy enabled Indian ministers and backbenchers to initiate changes in the way public ritual was organised, managed and funded through legislative enactments or amendments. In stark contrast to the late nineteenth century, when few such bills had been passed lest they gave offence to powerful vested interests, the 1920s and 1930s saw a flurry of legislative

activity. In the Punjab, a long-running and increasingly violent agitation by militant Sikhs to wrest control of their *gurudwaras* from hereditary lineages of priests was brought to a close by the enactment, in 1925, of the Sikh Gurudwaras and Shrines Bill, a measure drafted by respected Sikh members of the Assembly and piloted through the house by the Unionist Minister for Education, Fazli Hussain. In Bombay, the Assembly legislated to more tightly regulate charitable and religious trusts and to check the practice of young women being 'dedicated' to temples and idols, which had become a façade for prostitution. In 1937, the CLA in New Delhi passed an Act bringing diverse local Muslim customs in respect of succession into line with *sharī'a*. Most importantly, in 1925, the Justice Party in Madras used its majority to push through a bill that effectively reversed sixty years of British policy by withdrawing the supervision of public temples in the Presidency from the courts and placing them under the control of a Central Endowments Board, directly responsible to the executive. Arguably, temples in southern India 'had not been subjected to such a degree of supervision since the time of the Chola empire'.⁵⁹

All these measures, though, attracted opposition. True to form, the British tried as far as they could, within the limits of the new political arrangements, to discourage and restrain risky interventionist legislation in religious matters; and viceroys and provincial governors occasionally refused to certify bills that fell into that category. For example, an attempt by Hindu legislators in the CP in 1922 to empower municipalities to prohibit the slaughter of cows within urban areas was disallowed on the grounds that 'the prohibition of cow-killing for food' constituted an 'invasion of a civil right', which made it a central subject. Likewise, though again inconsistently, the government used its veto powers to quash a bill introduced into the CLA by Sir Muhammad Yakub, which sought to sanction cow-slaughter as a 'Muslim right'.⁶⁰ Other initiatives, such as Congress Party leader G.B. Pant's attempt, in the name of the 'sanctity of religion', to persuade the UP Assembly to introduce prohibition,⁶¹ were voted down mid-stream, while others foundered in the face of fierce party and public criticism from conservatives. A case in point was the bill that H.B. Sarda introduced into the CLA, in 1928, to raise the legal age of marriage for Hindu girls to sixteen years. This measure had both governmental and widespread Hindu support, yet ran into a wall of protest at the Select Committee stage. Orthodox elements claimed that it constituted a violation of 'the pledge of neutrality in matters of religion referred to in the Queen's Proclamation' and that the CLA, 'composed of different communities', had no right to make laws 'affecting the . . . religious customs of any particular community'.⁶² With the Assembly deeply divided, the bill's supporters eventually had to accept a lower statutory age of fourteen. But it was not just the devout who spoke out against the push to give government a greater role in the religious domain; some liberals dissented too. In 1939 S. Srinivasa Iyengar announced in the Madras Assembly that he was conscientiously unable to vote for a Bill authorising temple entry by Harijans (a cause he in principle supported)

because he believed 'the State should be neutral' and 'should not interfere . . . by any way, such as legislation, with the religious beliefs of the people'.⁶³

Watching this backlash unfold, most officials felt retrospectively vindicated, for it seemed to show that the Raj had been right to eschew controversy. Yet some preferred to draw a more cynical lesson, namely that the conflicts stirred up by Dyarchy proved that Indians were still too divided among themselves to be entrusted with self-rule. Virtually the first thing that the anti-Brahman Justice Party did, after it took office in Madras, was to issue a General Order instructing collectors to 'divide the appointments in each district among the several castes'.⁶⁴ Subsequently, 'Muhammadans' and Christians were added to the government's list of deserving communities. Outraged Brahmans denounced the two orders as naked exercises of patronage, designed to shore up non-Brahman rule; and they voiced similar criticisms of the Hindu Religious Endowments Act, and a 1933 Act that extended its provisions to the renowned and extremely wealthy temple at Tirupati. They were instruments to 'create jobs for their party people and [further the] aggrandisement of their party'.⁶⁵ At the same time, this communal point scoring helped the British maintain the fiction that their continued presence was needed to ensure fair play.

Reaction, then, on both sides of the political fence: but it did not stop the polity from evolving. Against staunch party and public opposition in Britain, the Conservatives, in 1935, oversaw a significant reform of the Indian constitution. The 1935 Government of India Act greatly extended the franchise and, at the provincial level, conceded something approaching full responsible government. In the area of religious governance, the effect of these changes was to reinforce the trend towards increased state involvement, first by further reducing the capacity of the British to restrain Indian ministerial initiatives, and second by drawing the vanguard Congress Party fully into the constitutional arena. In 1937 Congress-led ministries took charge of six of the most important Indian provinces, and they brought to the task a reforming fervour reminiscent of the Company's, though it drew upon different roots. The Chief Secretary of Madras, C.F. Brackenburry, was one of many British officials who found the Congress's new broom somewhat disconcerting. 'My view', he protested, 'is that the primary duty of Government is to collect [the] revenue, maintain law and order and, for the rest, generally to protect the individual in the exercise of his rights'. But the new Congress premier, Rajagopalachari, had made it plain that he 'would go much further': 'He considers that Government should regulate the lives of people and may intrude into every social relation and regulate the way people should live . . . The Congress [leaders] are missionaries with an ideology.'⁶⁶

Up to a point this prediction proved correct. Congress did have an agenda, and it used its newly won power to make a mark on society. Laws giving the state a bigger role in temple management, and opening public temples to 'untouchables', were enacted, during the 'provincial autonomy' period, in several of the Congress-ruled provinces, precursors to the more sweeping social

experiments the party would implement after Independence. Nevertheless, three years in government taught the party that change could not simply be decreed, that it needed to be negotiated. Learning from earlier mishaps, the Chief Minister of Bihar, tasked with piloting a measure on temple management reform through an unruly house containing many orthodox Hindus, took the precaution of meeting informally with the *mahants* of several of the more important provincial *māths* to ensure that the draft bill prepared by his advisers accorded with their views; and, in Madras, the ruling Congress party, forewarned of a massive backlash, voted against a swingeing private member's bill that would have thrown all public temples open to Harijans.⁶⁷ In this respect, too, the late 1930s provided valuable lessons for the future.

The inter-war period, then, saw a significant shift in the locus of state power, with regard to religious management, from appointed British administrators to elected Indian politicians. However, alongside the formal changes introduced by the Montagu policy of devolution, other momentous developments were taking place outside the legislatures, as a result of the growth of the national movement and, particularly, in the size, reach and authority of the INC. Founded in 1885, for thirty years the Congress remained a mainly bourgeois and urban-based organisation of limited means. But in the late 1910s, under the leadership of M.K. Gandhi, it underwent a significant transformation. A new constitution, drafted by Gandhi and adopted in 1920, drastically lowered the cost of membership and pushed the organisation's structural base down to the level of the villages, but at the same time centralised policy making in the hands of a new apex managerial unit, the Congress Working Committee (CWC). At one level, these structural changes were designed to replicate the formal constitution of the Raj, and could be seen, at least from the official perspective, as a general endorsement of the Westminster system, a point Mahatma Gandhi appeared to concede when he opined: 'The Working Committee is to the Congress, what Cabinet is to Parliament.'⁶⁸ At another level, they were intended to mount a direct challenge to the Raj by creating the framework for a parallel government, one equipped and ready to take charge of the administration of the country in the event of British rule collapsing or being withdrawn. This latter string to the Congress bow was made explicit in August 1920 with the launch of the Non-Cooperation Movement, whose ultimate aim, as its name suggests, was to cause the British colonial state to wither away by denying it material aid.

Despite garnering unprecedented mass support, Non-Cooperation failed – aborted in the end by the Mahatma himself, when it became rather too violent for his liking. Yet the campaign was an important watershed, and not just from the recruitment perspective. First, it planted the idea in the minds of many people that the Congress *was* a genuine alternative government, an agency they could look to for advice, sustenance and support. Second, and reciprocally, it implanted the notion in the heads of Congress cadres that they had a right and a duty to step in and help the citizenry, particularly in circumstances where

it was evident that the formal administrative processes were not working, such as seemed to be the case, more and more, in the arena of public religious disputation. At the height of the Calcutta riots of 1925, for instance, a phalanx of Congress heavyweights, led by Gandhi, Maulana A.K. Azad and Bengal PCC chief J.M. Sen Gupta, descended on the disturbed areas and confronted the milling crowds. Gandhi and Sen Gupta addressed the Hindus, Azad the Muslims. Afterwards, the city's Commissioner of Police acknowledged, generously, the 'sobering effect' produced by their intervention.⁶⁹ What is more, it didn't take long for other public bodies, recognising that such actions were an excellent way to raise their profile, to pick up on the Congress example. By the 1940s, cadres of trained, uniformed and motivated 'volunteers', answering to the command of organisations such as the Khaksars, the Hindustani Seva Dal, the Akali Dal, the Muslim National Guard and, most importantly, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), had become a commonplace of urban Indian society. In this way, to an extent with tacit British consent,⁷⁰ Congress and its nationalist rivals began to intrude into administrative spaces that previously had been the sole province of trained officials. What is more, they defended this usurpation by claiming that they were better able to keep the peace. Gandhi reckoned that:

the Congress should be able to put forth a non-violent army of volunteers numbering not a few thousand but lacs [hundreds of thousands] who would be equal to every occasion where the police and the military are [now] required. And a non-violent army acts . . . They would be constantly engaged in constructive activities that make riots impossible.⁷¹

Inevitably, these 'civil society' intrusions into the traditional sphere of the state served, over time, to weaken the traditional popular perception of the *sarkar* as the only natural and rightful arbiter of the social realm.

Moreover, this tendency was if anything accentuated by the formation of Congress provincial ministries in 1937. As the price of its agreeing to take office, the party insisted that its legislators should conform to the overall direction of the CWC and, for the most part, they submitted dutifully to this oversight. Bombay governor Lumley was impressed by his ministry and thought the Home Minister K.M. Munshi especially gifted; but at the same time he had little doubt about where Munshi's ultimate loyalties lay: 'through him', he noted, 'the Working Committee controls the Ministry'.⁷² Observing these transactions, many Indians understandably gained the impression that the Congress Party, rather than the *de facto* government, now called the shots – a misperception that would persist, as we shall see, into the post-colonial period. And another destabilising factor was the rusted-on loathing of some Congress legislators for British officialdom. Keen to settle scores, these hardliners encouraged aggrieved members of the public to bring their problems directly to the secretariat in an attempt to marginalise the bureaucracy, and

occasionally called for sanctions to be imposed on bureaucrats they judged to have acted with prejudice towards their constituents.⁷³ Already struggling to cope with the extra workload thrown up by the proactive policies of the Congress high command, the ICS predictably took a dim view of this behaviour. Some officials complained openly, and had to be reprimanded; others kept silent but strove in small ways to obstruct the implementation in their districts of government policies they disliked; many found the changed circumstances, in one way or another, quite ‘bewildering’.⁷⁴ Morale within the Service declined, and this had a flow-on effect that eroded the energy and resolve of the bureaucracy and reduced the quality of its response to communal violence. Following the massive communal riot at Cawnpore in March 1931, during which the city passed out of government control for three days, some senior insiders broke ranks and accused the police of gross dereliction. This was denied.⁷⁵ Yet, by the 1940s, the prospect of an imminent and wholesale ‘collapse’ was being openly touted. In a report of 1946, UP governor Sir Francis Wylie admitted that there had been a ‘marked deterioration in the tone and spirit of the services’, adding that he feared that the ‘European officer in this province’ was ‘getting very near the end of his tether’.⁷⁶

Last but not least, nationalist agitation, and the moral challenges thrown out by the Gandhi-led Congress – first from outside and then, after 1937, from within the ruling circle – gradually eroded the mystique and menace of British authority, and one result of this was an increasing disposition on the part of communal crowds to defy magisterial orders to disperse, and even to ‘take on’ police sent to enforce them – as happened during the Shahidganj Mosque agitation in Lahore, and on Barawafat Day 1942 in Lucknow.⁷⁷ Again, as nationalist loyalties took hold across the country, people stopped feeding news and information to district officials, which hampered the government’s capacity to react quickly to outbreaks. A harassed chief of police in UP admitted, in 1934, that four years of civil disobedience had left the provincial intelligence system broken, with the result that he was ‘no longer in a position to anticipate communal disturbances in rural areas’.⁷⁸

Arguably, by the late 1930s, the Raj was a state that had lost its old *raison d’être* but had yet to fully acquire a new one. Yet, in the midst of this crisis of transition, the Raj found itself beset by a whole new raft of challenges on the communal front as a result of the growth of militant separatism among a significant section of the country’s Muslims. Although the premier Muslim party, the Jinnah-led League, did not officially commit to the option of fighting for a constitutionally separate homeland for the country’s Muslim population until March 1940, the idea was widely canvassed during the previous decade, and various schemes for its realisation articulated. The Pakistan proposal, as it came to be called after 1940, galvanised the community as never before by interlacing its Islamic ties with feelings of national pride. Meanwhile, Muslim elites reacted viscerally to Congress’s transformation, in 1937, into the dominant party of government, convinced that it would try to use the executive

power against them. Like others, Muslims in the Deccan equated Congress rule with Hindu rule.⁷⁹ To most Muslims, the reports published by the League in late 1938 and early 1939, which catalogued a mountain of crimes of commission and omission perpetrated by Congress provincial governments against their community, came as no surprise.⁸⁰ Stoked by nationalism and righteous anger, the Muslim mood darkened. At the local level, this attitudinal change led to some Muslims boycotting Hindu and Sikh festivals and aggressively asserting their 'rights' by, for example, performing the *kūrbāni* sacrifice in places where it had never been practised before, and 'at times other than the Bakr-Id'.⁸¹

Muslims were not alone, however, in seeking confrontation. Many Hindus shared the apprehension of the Muslims that a Hindu Raj was in the offing. Senior Congressman and wealthy industrialist G.D. Birla told Sardar Patel that he thought 'the new power' that the party had inherited was 'intoxicating the rank and file'.⁸² In UP villages Hindus were heard to exclaim: 'My Lord is at the helm, there is nothing to fear.'⁸³ In Calcutta, Hindu students taunted Muslims with a raucous rendition of the Congress anthem dedicated to the Mother goddess, *Bande Mataram*. And in Gaya a fight broke out when the Congress tricolour was provocatively affixed to the dome of a mosque. Indeed, Bihar government intelligence suggests that 'nearly all' of the major communal riots that occurred in that region from January 1936 to May 1939 were started by Hindus, apparently encouraged in their actions by the belief that the predominantly Hindu Congress provincial government would 'treat them lightly'.⁸⁴ But then, as they say, it takes two to tango. If the Muslims hadn't retaliated, there would have been no riots. In the event, the number of outbreaks in northern India almost doubled between 1936 and 1938.⁸⁵ How well did the transitional state established by the reforms of 1935 cope with these fraught conditions?

We have already alluded to the Muslim League's verdict; and it has to be said that there was some truth in it. Congress policy called for prohibition, the adoption of Hindi, and the 'nationalisation' of the public primary education system. In practice, these objects were pursued unevenly; nevertheless, here and there, patriotic hardliners succeeded in pushing through changes that reeked, to Muslims, of paganism. Many schools introduced a requirement that *Bande Mataram* be sung before the start of classes; others urged their students to use 'Ram-ki-jai' as a term of greeting; in at least one case, Muslim boys were enjoined to ask for help with their studies from the goddess of learning, Saraswati.⁸⁶ In addition, Muslims in government service appear to have suffered disproportionately from the 'witch hunt' launched by the Congress ministries, on taking power, against officials 'who had made themselves obnoxious' to the party.⁸⁷ However, with the possible exception of the CP, there is little evidence that the Congress governments systematically treated Muslims in ways that could fairly be deemed 'communal'.

Consider the case of UP. The province was big, administratively under-resourced and home to a large and assertive Muslim minority, predominantly

clustered in its towns and cities; it ought to have been a problem. Yet in the main the UP Congress Ministry of Pandit G.B. Pant handled communal relations responsibly and with fairness to both sides. Departments were instructed to publish official regulations both in Hindi and Urdu and to recruit solely on merit. As a result, Muslims maintained their generous share of public service posts. And, at critical times, restrictions were imposed, even-handedly, on Hindu and Islamic worship alike. Although UP was a Hindu-majority province, Hindu devotees were never given special treatment. On the contrary, Hindus in Lucknow and several other big towns were periodically ordered by the Pant administration to stop blowing conches, ringing bells, reciting *kathas* and performing *artis*.⁸⁸ To be sure, none of these measures served to insure against communal riots – any more than similar British interventions had done. Nevertheless, on this front too, the Pant government performed well. Even as Hindu–Muslim disturbances raged in Benares and Allahabad in March 1938, Pant’s police kept their heads and ultimately kept control. The riots lasted for three days, but there was little loss of life. ‘I ask you’, Pant challenged his critics in the legislature, ‘have you ever heard of any previous riot in Allahabad or Benares having been tackled [successfully] within so short a period? Has any other Government handled the situation better in the past?’⁸⁹ The critics were silenced and, after that, Pant faced only one further serious test, the so-called Madhe Sahaba dispute of March–April 1939 at Lucknow, which triggered an invasion of the UP legislature; and that was an all-Islamic affair between Sunnis and Shi‘as driven by different readings of the Islamic past.⁹⁰

Despite Pant’s implicit criticism of past British practice, however, his government seems to have stuck rigidly to the tried and tested mechanisms for dealing with religious quarrels that the Raj had devised, painstakingly, over the previous century. By and large, ‘custom’ continued ‘to be the guiding principle’ for mediating public ritual.⁹¹ And when things got out of hand, all the standard containment strategies were wheeled out: appeals for restraint, negotiations with community leaders, section 144 orders, *lathi* charges, and controlled firings from police and troops. ‘The Ministry behaved in a most sensible way over these disturbances’, wrote the governor, Sir Harry Haig, apropos the riots at Benares and Allahabad. ‘Indeed the situation was handled . . . just as it would have been under the old conditions.’⁹² And another colonial convention was staunchly upheld by Pant as well. During the debate on his handling of the 1939 troubles, he steadfastly refused to lay any share of the blame on the police or accept the charge that some officers had been swayed by communal partisanship. ‘The SP [Superintendent of Police] may be a Muslim . . . the Collector may be a Hindu.’ The public service was open to everyone, regardless of what faith they professed. ‘If all these [Muslim] people are going to lose your confidence, then how is the administration to be conducted?’⁹³

The pattern was reproduced, with minor variations, in other nationalist provinces. After a shaky start and despite initial reservations on the part of

some European members of the services, the Congress ministries ended up embracing, rather than overturning, the governing ethos. And that was critical to how the next great watershed moment in Indian history unfolded. In the short run, the willingness of the nationalists to play by the book helped allay British fears about the consequences, for the country, of an early transfer of power. In the longer run, it suggested that the coming of Independence might not lead, as had earlier been predicted, to root-and-branch changes, and the building of a totally new system of Indian governance, but rather to a modest grafting and pruning of the existing administrative structure.

12 Religion and democracy

From ‘neutrality’ to ‘secularism’

By 1949, the Constituent Assembly meeting in New Delhi had devised a blueprint for post-colonial governance that, simultaneously and paradoxically, both circumscribed the power of the state to act, and mapped out a strongly interventionist role for the state in society. Promulgated on 26 January 1950, henceforth Republic Day, the new Constitution limited the despotism of the state by adumbrating a raft of Fundamental Rights possessed by the citizenry, the most revolutionary of which, arguably, was the right to vote. Even in its devolved incarnation, the British Raj had been a fixture. Now Indians had a choice. If they didn’t like what their government was doing, they could vote it out. And, in the event, that was increasingly what they did. Parliamentary democracy flourished, putting power, as never before, into the hands of ordinary people. On the one hand, this made religious management a riskier undertaking, since it was a matter on which crucial votes could turn; on the other hand, it made religious formations a potential source of electoral support, one that India’s new breed of democratic rulers would find difficult to ignore.

At the same time, though, the Constitution acknowledged that India’s hierarchical and tradition-bound society needed to be transformed. To this end, through its Directive Principles, it encouraged, and indeed mandated, heavy-handed governmental intervention as a means of facilitating change. This, of course, was a challenge the Nehru-led Congress was ready and eager to take up. Over the next fourteen years, Nehru used the power of the state relentlessly to drive the economy, redistribute scarce resources and ameliorate social disadvantage. Successor governments broadly cleaved to the same path. For the first time in history, the maul of the Indian state was felt ‘at the core of society’.¹ One can readily understand how some of India’s post-colonial politicians came to believe that they had finally acquired the means to impose toleration on the feuding masses.

Still, a theoretical hurdle had to be circumvented before any such ambitious plan could be put into operation: the stout endorsement by the Constitution of the principle of religious freedom. Article 25 (1) guarantees Indian citizens the right ‘to profess, practise and propagate religion’. Article 26 (a) provides that citizens may ‘establish and maintain’ religious institutions. Under Article

28 (1) state-sponsored schools are barred from giving religious instruction; while Article 28 (3) forbids schools operated by religious sects from forcing their students to attend religious classes. These clauses offer extensive protection to religious liberty. Article 25, note, avoids mention of ‘worship’ but speaks, instead, of ‘practise’, which theoretically extends the guarantee of the state to collective rituals such as processions and festivals,² but also concedes the right to ‘propagate’, which the courts have construed as extending to conversion.

It was resolved in this way. Having guaranteed to protect religious liberty, India’s Constitution-makers reasoned, as the British had done earlier, that the only effective way such a pledge could be implemented was to pass on that responsibility to the Indian state and give the state requisite power to act. In the event, the Assembly’s Fundamental Rights Committee, concerned that imposing limits on state interference in matters of conscience could ‘invalidate legislation against [the] anti-social customs which have the sanction of religion’,³ decided that the state should be empowered, not only to move against groups and communal organisations who were using religion to preach hatred and violence, but also to regulate aspects of worship. The result was the swingeing Article 25 (2), which allows the Indian state to make laws regulating any ‘secular’ activities ‘associated with religious practice’.⁴ With the passing in 1951 of the First Amendment Act, the state’s mandate was made even broader, to include the regulation of religious disputation ‘in the interest of public order’.⁵

Understandably, the CA preferred to justify these initiatives as a reconstitution of the country’s ancient polity, rather than as a continuation of colonial practices. Delegates repeatedly claimed toleration as a traditional Hindu virtue, and the ancient warrior-kings as its protectors. Several quoted sagely the Sanskrit aphorism, *sarva dharma samabhava* (‘let all religions prosper’). Similarly, the Hindu kings were pictured as vigorous religious activists. Texts on *rajādhārma* were cited to prove that they were expected, as a matter of duty, to contribute to the spiritual welfare of society by constructing temples, making land grants to Brahmans, enforcing laws about caste, and protecting cows. Several years later, the prominent Indian philosopher Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan praised the Constitution as ‘a document entirely in accordance with the ancient religious tradition of India’.⁶ Still, British precedents were acknowledged implicitly, for example in the characterisation of the Constitution’s sweeping provisions for the protection of minority rights and cultures as measures indicative of a ‘policy of religious neutrality’,⁷ a phrase straight from the Raj handbook.

Clearly, the CA was ‘not writing on a clean slate’.⁸ That being so, it is curious that many delegates insisted on describing the activist role in religious management assigned to the new Indian state as an embodiment of ‘secularism’. The classic Western definition of the secular state is the First Amendment to the American Constitution enacted in 1791, which declares that ‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free

exercise thereof . . .', which the majority of American commentators have interpreted in the light of President Thomas Jefferson's assertion, in a letter of 1802 to the Danbury Baptists' Association, that its sponsors had wanted to construct 'a wall of separation between the church and the state'.⁹ Obviously, this was not the desire of India's Constitution makers with respect to *their* Republic, and American observers were quick to notice the difference. In December 1949, the US Ambassador reported, apropos Article 48, which enjoined India's governments to ban cow-killing, that the inclusion of this provision would 'make it more difficult for Indian leaders to defend their claim that India is a secular state'.¹⁰ Later, the eminent jurist William O. Douglas wrote, of Article 25, that it represented 'a sharp break with the American ideal of religious liberty as enshrined in the First Amendment'.¹¹ Even stranger, there is little evidence of the s-term being aired prior to the CA.

Moreover, when the term finally did gain a certain currency, at the CA, it was not as a result of the discursive interventions of the Prime Minister or his Law Minister B.R. Ambedkar, who was responsible for overseeing the passage of the Constitution bill. Nehru rarely used the word himself, and when he did bring it up it was generally to chastise his colleagues for using it incorrectly. 'Another word is thrown up a good deal, this secular State business', he carped in August 1949. 'May I beg with all humility those gentlemen who use this word often to consult some dictionary before they use it?'¹² Ambedkar was similarly reticent; and when, on two occasions, Professor K.T. Shah formally moved from the floor for the term to be included in the Constitution's preamble, Ambedkar opposed the change. Their reasoning appears to have been twofold: (1) that, since 'Enlightenment secularism', with its core principle of separation, founded on the Protestant conception of religion as essentially a private concern with which states had no legitimate business, was never going to work in a country where rulers and religious publics had been interacting from time immemorial, it was better not to use the term at all, than to use it fraudulently; and (2) that giving official recognition to the term might lead people to think that the new government had religion in its sights. No friend of orthodox Hinduism, the low-caste Law Minister felt sufficiently worried by this prospect to remind members of the Lok Sabha, in 1951, that continued references in Parliament and the media to India being a secular state did not reflect what the Constitution was 'intended to mean'.¹³

Nevertheless, during the early 1950s, Nehru, at least, softened his stance. In 1955, in an address to the annual Congress session at Avadi, he characterised India as 'a secular State giving freedom to all religions . . . and favouring none',¹⁴ a formulation that managed to sidestep the awkward issue of separation. Perhaps this was because he recognised that, inappropriate or not, the term had begun to acquire a life of its own in the Indian context; but, more likely, it was because he desperately wanted his new nation to be seen in a good light abroad. It was left, however, to his daughter, Mrs Indira Gandhi, at the height of her self-proclaimed Emergency, to make the term official. In 1976 she rushed the draconian 44th (afterwards 42nd) Amendment Bill

through a rump Lok Sabha, which *inter alia* added 'secular' to the preamble of the Indian Constitution.

Meanwhile, the post-colonial state pushed ahead with its ambitious programme of social reform. During the late 1940s, a raft of new and amending temple-entry measures opened Hindu shrines across the country to untouchables. Next, the government turned to family law. Landmark legislation between 1954 and 1956 standardised and modernised the rules governing Hindu marriage, succession, inheritance, guardianship, adoption and maintenance.¹⁵ Third, Congress moved quickly to protect cows. The integrated states of Saurashtra, Rajasthan and Madhya Bharat (MB) already had tough penalties against cow-killing, a carry-over from their time as Hindu kingdoms, and in the early 1950s a number of ex-provinces followed suit: Bombay in 1954, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in 1955 and Orissa in 1956.

However, over the long term, it was the Republic's assertion of its right, under the Constitution, to oversee, audit and police the management of religious institutions that most clearly differentiated it from its predecessor. Early on, Congress governments, both federal and state, made it clear that they would brook no interference with public worship by individuals or groups pursuing sectarian agendas. 'I want every temple, every mosque, every *gurudwara*, every church, to be protected', thundered UP chief minister G.B. Pant. 'Whoever tries to defile them will be brought to book.'¹⁶ To make good this promise, the government was forced increasingly to deploy police and troops on, and around, religious sites. Sometimes, as in the case of the Golden Temple at Benares, in 1983, these actions subsequently morphed into full custodial control. When the other Golden Temple, the one at Amritsar, was occupied, the following year, by a party of Sikh militants led by Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, it was subjected on the orders of the Indira Gandhi administration to a full-fledged military assault, Operation Bluestar. Yet the Congress Raj did not stop at protecting freedom of public worship; it also took upon itself the task of ensuring that the country's state-owned religious institutions were properly run. Its goal was to impose an effective control over 'the affairs and funds of [all] the . . . religious endowments in the country'.¹⁷ To some extent, this plan was in line, as noted above, with the intentions of the Constitution. In practice, however, government officers had trouble confining themselves, as prescribed by the Constitution, to regulating only the 'secular' life of these institutions. They found themselves making judgements, not only about fee charges, cleanliness and general solvency, but also about matters arguably within the domain of the sacred, such as the appropriateness and propriety of the rituals being performed by the priests. Thus, the Collector of Udaipur had to provide regular reports to government attesting that the city's renowned Nathdwara Temple was being managed 'according to the customs and usages of the Pushti-Margiya Vallabhi Sampradeya', and that the Mahant was 'an honest person, pure in life', and thoroughly knowledgeable about the Vallabhcharya sect of Vaishnava Hinduism.¹⁸

Not surprisingly, this assertion of bureaucratic power met with strong resistance. The orthodox were especially offended. A petition urging the President of the Republic to withhold his assent to the Madras Hindu Religious Endowments Bill of 1951 described it as ‘a serious infringement upon the fundamental rights conferred . . . by the Constitution’. Another petition labelled the bill ‘revolutionary’ and warned that it would ‘cut at the very root of Hindu Religion and culture’.¹⁹ But the Nehru government was not minded to back down. Its only concession was to promise to appoint Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officers ‘professing Hinduism’ to districts containing important religious endowments, and to enjoin them to behave with ‘decorum and respect’ towards the priesthood.²⁰ Similarly, when the head of the Shaivite monastery at Bodh Gaya, taking a leaf out of his feisty predecessor’s book, tried to short-circuit a renewed push to return the Mahabodhi Temple to Buddhist control by applying for an injunction in the Patna High Court, the Bihar government immediately broke off negotiations and began drafting legislation to ‘put an end’ to the impasse; and, in January 1953, exactly half a century after Curzon’s humiliation, the hallowed shrine was formally handed over to a new managing committee composed substantially of representatives of the Buddhist Mahabodhi Society.²¹

Congress could afford to be stubborn. By 1971, it had won five successive federal elections, most of them by substantial margins; it could fairly claim to have been given a mandate by the people. Moreover, the courts had proved supportive too. In 1958 a group of Muslim butchers in Bihar launched civil action against the state government, claiming that its Prohibition of Cow Slaughter Act violated their rights, under the Constitution, to freedom of religion and equal treatment by the law. The case went to the Supreme Court, which unanimously rejected the claim; and subsequent challenges to the UP and MB Acts also failed. Likewise, the courts found no problem with the government’s approach to the management of endowments. In a landmark case of 1954, the Madras High Court ruled that government control of temples did not constitute an unwarranted ‘interference . . . in matters of religion’; and, in 1961, in *Durgah Committee Ajmer v Hussain Ali*, the Supreme Court held that the government was entitled, under the Constitution, to audit all aspects of the operation of religious institutions, save those that formed ‘an essential and integral part’ of their belief systems. Mere ‘superstitious beliefs’, Justice Gajendragadkar added provocatively, were not integral. Later, in *Shri Govindlalji v State of Rajasthan*, the same Court pushed this doctrine still further, holding that even practices regarded as integral by a religion’s own followers could be liable to official scrutiny.²²

To some extent, the nature of a state can be ascertained by how it describes itself in formal documents; the Constitution of 1950 makes it clear that the post-colonial Indian state was going to be modernist, progressive and proactive, not least as regards religious belief and practice. But states are also shaped by how they are seen by their subjects, the end-users of their governance. This is perhaps especially so of democratic states. It seems to us that, when India’s

subject-citizens sat down to ponder the worth of their rulers, one of the first things they considered was their piety – not necessarily whether they belonged to one religion rather than another, but whether they were properly God-fearing, sincere and devout believers in the power of the Divine. What did they see? They saw politicians who were pre-eminently Hindus, and this in itself was significant. But, beyond that, they saw leaders who wore their religious affiliations proudly, and were not afraid to bring religious values into the political arena. During his tenure as Chief Minister of Mysore, S. Nijalingappa never missed the annual Dasehra festival. A grainy 1958 photograph in the *Calcutta Statesman* shows Bengal's premier, B.C. Roy, sharing (as the caption has it) a 'private moment of devotion' in the company of the *imām* of a mosque.²³ Telegu Desam Party leader N.T. Rama Rao often appeared on the public stage dressed in saffron robes and sporting a *tilak* mark. Even if these gestures were to some extent contrived, it matters for our argument that India's politicians felt the need, time and again, to make them. Moreover, they invariably resonated powerfully with the masses. During the early 1950s, when Rajagopalachari was still part of Congress and the premier of Madras, the southern state was gripped by a punishing drought. Rajaji called on his supporters to pray for rain. At once, the skies opened. An admiring constituent wrote that the breaking of the drought had come as no surprise to him 'because . . . [as a] follower of [the] "Githa"',²⁴ the premier could not 'be untrue in his own words'.²⁵

In a classic study published in 1970, political scientist Rajni Kothari characterised the political leadership of the day thus: 'The political elite', he wrote, 'constitutes the new priesthood of modern India.'²⁶ The comment was intended to be read metaphorically, but we think it may have hit, inadvertently, upon a literal truth. Most scholars have accepted the official view that, after Independence, India became a secular polity, but to us this label conceals rather than elucidates. In particular, we think it obscures the extent to which the state built up during the Nehru years both engaged proactively with the religious life of the country, and *drew upon religion* to augment its legitimacy.

The numbers game

'As long as I am at the helm of affairs', Jawaharlal Nehru declared in September 1947, 'India will not become a Hindu State.' Theocratic states, he continued (doubtless with Pakistan in mind) were 'medieval' and 'stupid'.²⁷ However, not all in the Congress organisation shared the Prime Minister's liberal preferences in this matter. Many of the younger party cadres recruited after 1936, a group made up very largely of Hindus, took a more prosaic view. 'What is Congress?' a Youngman from Cawnpore asked rhetorically: 'it gets its power . . . from Hindus. If the Congress does not care for the majority section it is digging its own grave.'²⁸ Moreover, this conception resonated with the way many at the grass roots viewed 'democracy'; they saw it as a system that rewarded majorities. Hindus had always comprised the great bulk of the

subcontinent's population, and their demographic dominance was further strengthened by the Partition, which led to the mass exodus of north Indian Muslims to Pakistan. By 1950, only around forty million Muslims were still residing within the borders of the Republic, a number that allowed them to be characterised as an unimportant minority.

Consequently, when the CA began its deliberations, there was no lack of support from the floor for the proposition that Independent India should openly acknowledge, even celebrate, its dominantly Hindu identity. Moreover, many delegates, including senior Congressman Vallabhbhai Patel, made it very clear how they felt about Muslims, Sardar Patel suggesting they needed to stop expecting, as of old, to be allocated a share of power commensurate with their proportion of the population: 'That conception in your mind[s] . . . must be washed off altogether', he admonished. 'For the future of a minority it is best to trust the majority. Trust us and see what happens.'²⁹ Coming from the country's deputy Prime Minister, that was an ominous message.

In the event, the Assembly went on, guided by Ambedkar's sensible stewardship, to overwhelmingly endorse the liberal document we looked at in the previous section, one strong on freedom and toleration, and displaying scant traces of what Irfan Ahmad has called 'rabid majoritarianism'.³⁰ Nevertheless, the Indian Constitution embodies some serious contradictions. As previously mentioned, it recognises individual rights, but also bestows rights on groups, such as the 'minorities', whose cultures, languages, religions, scripts and religious endowments are comprehensively protected by Articles 29 and 30, and by the Explanation, added to Article 16, that acknowledges the fact that Sikh men are required, by their faith, to carry *kirpans*.³¹ Additionally, Article 15 (4) sanctions positive discrimination in favour of depressed castes and tribals, specifically, that places should be reserved for them in schools and colleges and in the public service, which is not only at variance with earlier clauses of the same Article, but, according to at least one eminent commentator 'with the principle of secularism'.³²

Moreover – another contradiction – this provision applies only to those Dalits and tribals who profess Hinduism. Originally, the CA had intended to provide assistance to all subaltern groups, but at the last moment it deferred to the pleas of Christian Health Minister H.C. Mookherjee and Bihari Muslim delegate Tejamul Hussain that concessions to Muslim or native Christian Dalits and tribals could make these minority groups objects of jealousy and resentment.³³ Privately, Nehru worried about the change. He thought it was 'against the spirit of our Constitution'.³⁴ Nevertheless, in 1959, reservations in favour of low-caste Hindus were extended for a further ten years. Predictably, the move excited a storm of protest from Christian lobbyists: 'we Indian Christians feel that we are . . . being discriminated [against]', thundered the General Secretary of the All-India Council of Indian Christians.³⁵ Sikhs, too, did not welcome the compromise, because the offending Article classified them for administrative purposes as *de facto* Hindus.

In short, although committed to equality, the India Constitution does not mete out equal treatment to the various groups (all, one might add, intrinsically defined by belief) it recognises as deserving of consideration by the state. And the same double standard has tarnished post-colonial Indian governance.

As we have seen, the Nehru government strove tirelessly to reform Hindu personal law (as, indeed, it was required to do under Article 44). But the family law of other faiths was conspicuously left alone, Muslim *sharī'a* law being expressly quarantined. 'I do not think', the Prime Minister ventured in 1948, 'one wants to change the law for a particular community by the vote of other people'.³⁶ Certainly not, he might have added, at a time when the community was having a hard time adjusting to the new regime. Yet, letting the Muslims off the hook, as it were, was a bad move – not only because it flew in the face of one of the Constitution's Directive Principles, and denied divorced Muslim women the possibility of acquiring a civil right to maintenance, but also because it provided powerful ammunition to opponents of an otherwise worthy reform, the Hindu Code Bill, who were able to contend, with President Rajendra Prasad, that:

If its provisions are sound and beneficial . . . there is no reason why its operations should be confined to one community and why the other community that suffers from the same or similar . . . deleterious personal laws and customs, should be deprived of the benefits thereof.³⁷

Of course, in the end, thanks to the filibustering of Prasad and other orthodox elements, there would be no common Civil Code, as envisaged by Article 44, even for Hindus, only the several Acts described above. This, in itself, was a sufficient backdown to precipitate the resignation from Cabinet, in 1951, of Ambedkar.³⁸ But it was not the end of the saga; the retreat continued. In 1963, the government formally put the issue of Muslim personal law reform to rest by promising never again to legislate in this area unless at the behest of the community. Thus, when Congress did, finally, take the plunge, during Rajiv Gandhi's term, by enacting the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act of 1986, it did so by passing a measure tailored to conciliate hardline Islamic clerics outraged by the Supreme Court's judgment, in the Shah Bano case, that divorced Muslim women were entitled to receive maintenance under Section 125 of the CPC.³⁹

Meanwhile, at lower levels of government, key decision makers conspired to deny citizens belonging to the religious minorities, Muslims especially, the same opportunities with respect to public employment extended to members of the Hindu majority. Muslims in the 1950s comprised about 10 per cent of India's population; by the end of the century their share had risen to about 13 per cent. In 1985, they held just 2 per cent of positions in the senior national administrative cadre, the IAS, and 3 per cent of positions in the Indian Police Service (IPS).⁴⁰ Two decades on, things had scarcely improved. The Sachar Committee found that, in 2006, Muslims filled 3.8 per cent of positions in the

Union postal service, 1.7 per cent of posts in nationalised banks, and around 4 per cent of positions in the Border Security Force (BSF) and the Central Reserve Police (CRP). At the state level, only in Andhra Pradesh (AP) did the representation of Muslims in the public services come even close to their share of the population.⁴¹ And it was the same story in other arenas. Muslims were systematically passed over by the political parties (including the Congress) and consequently struggled to win seats in the legislatures; and fewer yet were awarded Cabinet positions. The Bihar PCC sent 400 delegates to the Party's annual session in 1954; six of them were Muslims. When Rajagopalachari formed a new government at Madras in 1952, he broke with a seventy-year-old convention by omitting Muslims entirely. Over the ensuing half century, Muslim representation in Parliament languished at about 5 per cent. Stephen Wilkinson records systematic 'efforts by state governments to understate the size of their minorities', their unwillingness to provide the minorities with educational facilities in their own languages, and their insistence on printing official publications and civil service examination papers in scripts that some citizens from minority groups could not read.⁴² And public schools, while in principle open to all comers, often discriminated along ethnic lines. Irfan Ahmad remembers:

In the three *mofussil* Bihari government schools I attended in the 1980s, much of the schools' culture was already Hindu and callous to the sensibilities of Muslim students there. In the dining room of my school's hostel, [the] Muslim students (only a few) were segregated from Hindu students.⁴³

Employment-wise Christians and Sikhs fared better. Many of the former had been church educated and equipped with employable skills, while the latter benefited from the community's post-Partition consolidation in East Punjab, which gave it, for the first time, a strong territorial base. Dependent on Akali Dal support to stay in power, the Congress-led state government agreed, in 1949, to reserve 40 per cent of public service posts for the Sikh community, a more liberal arrangement than their population share warranted.⁴⁴ But the Christian faith came under sustained attack. There were calls for the banishment of all foreign missionaries and, in 1954, the Madhya Pradesh (MP) government appointed a commission of inquiry to investigate ways and means of achieving that aim; grants were withheld from Christian welfare bodies judged to be engaging 'in proselytisation or other objectionable activities'; Christian congregations were subjected to police searches; and, in 1968, MP criminalised the use of 'fraudulent methods' to convert Harijans or Adivasis. No wonder the Indian Christians came to the conclusion that government was 'against them'.⁴⁵

Majoritarian prejudice was not, it must be said, the sole reason why the minorities lagged. The Muslims, for instance, were hard hit as a group by the emigration of most of the community's wealthier and more highly educated

members to Pakistan. But prejudice lay at the heart of it – as we shall endeavour to show in the next section.

The politics of discord

Sardar Patel once famously likened the Partition, and the creation of Pakistan, to cutting off a ‘diseased limb’. Implicit in this grisly simile was the suggestion that, though regrettable, Partition might finally resolve the communal problem by drastically reducing India’s Muslim population. In the event, the mass migrations on the country’s eastern and western flanks reduced it still further, making this prospect even more likely, and indeed, for a time, the recipe seemed to be working. Only seven people were recorded by India’s Home Ministry as dying in Hindu–Muslim communal riots in 1958, a low not seen since 1922; and, with the glaring exception of 1964, this hopeful pattern persisted until the late 1960s. But then Ahmedabad erupted and Bhiwandi in 1971. In both instances, scores were killed and hundreds hospitalised. Everywhere, observers saw ominous signs pointing to a ‘marked deterioration of Muslim–Hindu relations’.⁴⁶ There was a further escalation in the 1980s, with major outbreaks at Moradabad, Delhi, Bihar Sharif, Hyderabad, Meerut and, yet again, Ahmedabad and Bhiwandi. Almost 2,000 people died in these confrontations, a toll higher than for any decade of the colonial era except the 1940s.

What had gone wrong? First, Patel’s hope that Muslims might in time disappear from India, at least as a significant demographic, proved mistaken (although he continued until his death in 1950 to vigorously pursue that objective by pressing Cabinet to agree to a ‘managed’ population exchange with Pakistan).⁴⁷ Even after the mass migrations, many localities in northern India, Calcutta, Bombay and Kerala were left with significant pockets of Muslim population, places where their numbers easily exceeded the 15 per cent figure that Gopal Krishna thinks is the minimum required for outbreaks of collective communal violence.⁴⁸

Second, rather than settling things down, the foundation of Pakistan aggravated Hindu and Sikh resentment towards Muslims, and local Muslims in particular. The events of 1947 had left deep scars; many Hindus and Sikhs had died at Muslim hands and their relatives could not easily forget or forgive those hurts.⁴⁹ Others had survived by escaping across the border to India, but at great cost to themselves physically, psychologically and financially, and, even as Indian authorities struggled to resettle these traumatised refugees, they worried about their potential to destabilise fragile ethnic relationships. ‘The influx of refugees’, Pant reported from UP, ‘has . . . complicated the [communal] situation . . . Some are out for trouble and cannot restrain themselves.’⁵⁰ Also, the advent of Pakistan ramped up the communal stakes by associating Muslims, in many Indian minds, with the nation’s sworn enemy, which Right-wing propaganda insisted was planning an invasion to recover territories rightfully assigned to India by the Radcliffe Boundary

Commission.⁵¹ Decades later, the Indian vernacular press was still accusing 'Pakistani infiltrators' of stirring up communal trouble.⁵² But local Muslims were the main target. They were seen as 'fifth columnists', sympathetic to Pakistani ambitions; as unsecular and narrow minded. Moderate politicians advised them to 'prove' their loyalty to the Republic; extremists called on the government to deny them the vote until they had.

Harassed, vilified and generally outnumbered, the Muslims during these years did the rational thing; they tried to keep out of trouble. As Nehru sadly acknowledged, they were a 'frightened people', who realised that 'any attempt at aggressive action would recoil on them'.⁵³ One indicator of this is the sharp decline that occurred, post-1947, in the practice of cow-sacrifice at Bakr 'Id. In February 1950, the Chief Commissioner of Delhi reported that 'no cows or buffaloes' had been slaughtered in the city 'since the disturbances'; and Pant claimed in 1952 that ritual cow-killing in UP, too, had 'practically stopped'.⁵⁴ This avoidance strategy is undoubtedly the main reason why, for a time, rioting fell away after the 1947 spike.

Nevertheless, it had never been popular with younger Muslims or hardliners who took their cue from the teachings of the Pakistan branch of the Jamaat-e-Islami; and these mutterings of dissent became more insistent during the 1960s as a generation of Muslims born after Partition reached adolescence. Less traumatised than their parents, yet weighed down by the feeling that they had inherited a legacy of communal humiliation, this group sought restitution by fighting back. Following a show of such aggression at Saharanpur, which culminated in the burning of a number of huts owned by Gujars, Delhi journalist Rizwan Siddiqi told staffers at the US Embassy that he welcomed the violence because it indicated a 'shift' in the 'tide'.⁵⁵ Moreover, locally at any rate, the tactic seemed to work. Muslims in Poona 'found that if they met riotous mobs with heavy stone-throwing, then the mobs invariably withdrew'.⁵⁶ On balance, though, resorting to violence did not do the Muslims much good except, perhaps, psychologically. They remained throughout the rest of the century by far the chief sufferers from communal violence. Twenty-four Hindus were killed in the 1969 Ahmedabad riots, and 430 Muslims; the mayhem consumed 573 Hindu-owned buildings and 4,226 Muslim-owned properties. At Jamshedpur, in 1979, twenty-five Hindus died and seventy-nine Muslims. The toll at Meerut in 1982 was ten Hindus and ninety Muslims. Since 1950, Muslims have comprised about 20 per cent of communal riot participants (a figure significantly higher than their population share), but in the vicinity of 60 per cent of all riot casualties.

Also revealing are the statistics that map how communal rioters in post-colonial India were treated by the police. In the aftermath of the savage Bhiwandi-Jalgaon riots of 1970 the police arrested several thousand men, most of them Muslims. Subsequently, 922 detainees were charged with offences: 901 Muslims and 21 Hindus. Similarly, following the Bhagalpur outbreak of 1989, 1,065 Muslims were taken into custody compared to 487 Hindus. But that is not all. Consistently, police responsible for putting down riots targeted

Muslims living in affected areas. For instance, curfews were generally administered more rigorously in these neighbourhoods, to the extent that their Muslim residents were often 'not permitted to move out of their houses to fetch water from public taps'. Hindus, even in adjacent *mohullas*, were rarely subjected to this level of restrictions.⁵⁷ Such systemic discrimination suggests that the country's (dominantly Hindu) police forces had become communalised, too, in their outlook; and this conclusion is borne out by direct testimony. Justice N.C. Saxena's report on the Meerut riots of 1983 concluded that the 'orders from the senior officers . . . to the police could be summarised in one phrase: "Muslims must be taught a lesson."' ⁵⁸ According to Vibhuti N. Rai, sometime IG in the BSF, many Hindu policemen nourished a 'deeply embedded' perception of Muslims as 'violent and cruel'.⁵⁹ And a Hindu barber interviewed by Shail Mayaram after the Jaipur imbroglio of 1989 told her: 'they gave us support. The Muslims could not do anything.'⁶⁰ Police partisanship greatly impeded the government's task of managing public religious disputation at a time when communal attitudes were starting to significantly impact on policies and political behaviour.

For a time, this trend was kept in abeyance by strong leadership from the top, not least on the part of Jawaharlal Nehru, who, as remarked earlier, had a visceral aversion to majoritarian dogmas. However, Nehru's influence began to wane in the early 1960s as his health deteriorated and, after his death in 1964, Congress lost momentum and something of its former moral authority. For a time, its new leaders struggled to make an impact, the American Ambassador writing in 1966 that Nehru's daughter had 'still to prove herself as a parliamentarian'.⁶¹

The resultant power vacuum opened the door to the Hindu Right, which had yet to make a significant impact electorally. In 1964, a group of senior Hindu leaders gathered at Bombay affixed their signatures to a document setting up a new umbrella organisation, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, or World Hindu Congress, to lobby and proselytise on behalf of the ancient religion across the country and abroad; in December 1966, a revived cow-protection movement led by an 'All-Party' committee composed of Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) and Ram Rajya Parishad politicians and leading religious figures, including several Shaivite Shankaracharyas, orchestrated a mass rally in New Delhi attended by several tens of thousands of semi-naked *sādhus* carrying tridents, flags and other paraphernalia, which led to the worst riot seen in the capital since 1947; shortly afterwards, a seventy-year-old hermit from Brindaban, and the Shankaracharya of Puri, commenced separate indefinite hunger strikes aimed at compelling the Union government to ban kine-killing centrally, and in all non-compliant states; in January 1967, as the two men neared death, Indira Gandhi, who had previously maintained that she would not 'cow to the cow-worshippers', agreed to implement a ban in all Union territories and establish a high-level committee of inquiry to investigate the possibility of amending the Constitution to allow her government to enact concurrent legislation; this backflip notwithstanding, federal and state elections

held in February saw a sharp swing away from the ruling party, especially in the 'cow belt' states of Rajasthan, MP and Bihar, where electors turned en masse to the BJS, delivering the party its best-ever results, and in the newly created state of Punjab, where the Akali Dal gained sufficient seats to form a government in coalition with the BJS and other minor parties. Watching these developments unfold over the winter of 1966–7, the American ambassador concluded that India was undergoing a 'religious revival'.⁶² In the light of more recent events, it reads like a prophetic comment.

By 'recent events' we mean, of course, the political achievements of the BJP, lineal successor to the BJS, and we pay considerable attention to them in the next section. However, it would be an error to think that the growing influence of religion in politics was confined to the parties of the Right, or indeed that it was wholly a party matter in the narrow sense. It happened across the board, and affected the way the politicians went about their business: it infected policies, it warped recruitment patterns, and it shaped the appeals thrown out to voters. Moreover, the genesis of this seismic shift in Indian political behaviour happened on the watch of that self-proclaimed socialist and secularist, Indira Gandhi.

In the 1970s, American-based anthropologist, Sanskrit scholar and Hindu convert Aghanada Bharati asserted that India's politics were becoming 'Sadhu-ized'.⁶³ It was an exaggeration, but only just. In retrospect, the Delhi march of December 1966 can be seen as the moment when *sādhus*, Hindu 'god-men', pushed out of the political arena by the colonial state and curiously overlooked by the Congress national movement,⁶⁴ returned to public life. And they quickly made a mark. In 1967, several *mahants* campaigned for the BJS; and in the run-up to the 1971 election, Congress recruited *sādhus* as candidates and campaign workers, a strategy that appears to have helped the party recoup its 1967 losses in Punjab.⁶⁵ By the 1990s, *sādhus* had become a familiar sight on the back benches of the national and state assemblies, with no fewer than seven capturing parliamentary seats in the 1991 poll on BJP tickets. The Shankaracharyas, meanwhile, although periodically dogged by accusations of improper and even criminal behaviour, consolidated and built upon the political platform they had carved out in 1966. Sometimes independently, and sometimes under the banner of the VHP, they began systematically to court politicians thought to be deemed to be sympathetic to their causes; at the same time, they increasingly intervened in public debates, invoking their spiritual authority to criticise Leftists and other enemies of faith on cow protection and other controversial issues.

But the induction of religious professionals into the political process was only one side of the coin and, in the larger scheme of things, the lesser. We have talked at length in this book about the emergence during the colonial period of communal solidarities underpinned by ties of religion, and the appropriation of these by the nationalist movement led by Congress. After Independence, the Congress drew on this legacy. In distributing tickets it tried, as far as possible, to match candidates with constituencies by nominating

people who reflected their communal make-up. In the north, for instance, the party often gave the nod to Muslims, who were numerous especially in the region's urban constituencies, and were reputed to vote as a bloc. When, in 1963, a by-election fell due for the Amroha Lok Sabha seat, Union minister Ibrahim Hafiz Mohamad was persuaded to stand against the Hindu incumbent on the presumption that his candidacy 'would ensure . . . the Congress the 38% Muslim vote in the constituency'.⁶⁶ By the same token, in Kerala, the KPCC not only made a practice of endorsing Indian Christians, but strenuously cultivated the state's Catholic bishops in the belief that their say-so largely determined the voting intentions of its 22 per cent Christian population.⁶⁷ To be sure, Congress, and the other political parties, pitched to castes and classes as well, and even when they did target communities as such, they often justified this approach by claiming that it was designed to serve secular ends. Nevertheless, the constant coupling of community and religion in government and party discourse strengthened, as Yoginder Sikand points out, the perception that the two were connected:

Since the Muslims came to be defined by the state mainly . . . by religion, the 'Muslim question' is generally framed by the state, political parties and politicians in terms of religion and religious identity. This is why, for instance, sops offered by governments and political parties to [the] Muslims . . . have mainly to do with questions of religion or . . . religious identity: Haj subsidies, schemes for madrasa 'modernisation', renovation of mosques, appointment of Urdu teachers (Urdu being projected as a 'Muslim' language), preservation of Muslim Personal Law, and so on.⁶⁸

Also, although naked appeals to piety were outlawed under section 123 of the Representation of the People Act, candidates from all parties regularly evoked religion at the hustings as a means of enhancing their reputations and/or belittling the credentials of their opponents. To combat this tactic, campaign managers looked for candidates who were not only well connected but had a reputation for sanctimony.

Indira Gandhi, though, took communal mobilisation to another level, and gave it an added edge by spicing her political rhetoric with coded messages designed to inflame or frighten the minorities, a practice that became more persistent after Mrs Gandhi was returned to power in 1980. Partly, her decision to go down this road was motivated by her awareness of the damage that had been done to the party's once-solid Muslim vote-bank by the Emergency; partly, it was a knee-jerk response to the situation in the Punjab, which was lurching towards open revolt as the hard-line wing of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee moved to embrace a policy of secession. At any rate, having decided to play the 'Hindu card', Mrs Gandhi did so with aplomb. She scheduled almost daily visits to temples, and meetings with 'saints', to demonstrate her piety. In one four-month period alone, in 1980, she took *darshan* at no less than thirty-one different shrines. Meanwhile, she adroitly

exploited the Punjab issue to shore up the party's Hindu vote-base, first by supporting the moderate Gill faction of the Akali Dal against the hard-line wing led by Sant Fateh Singh,⁶⁹ then by extending her patronage to an even more extreme splinter group, headed by the rustic but charismatic Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale – a gambler's throw she paid for with her life.

One scholar has called Mrs Gandhi's intervention in the Punjab 'perhaps the most cynical display of *realpolitik* in [the history of] modern India'.⁷⁰ That could well be true. But the most deleterious aspect of her strategy was that it brought communalism, hitherto considered a political vice embraced only by the parties of the Right, into the mainstream, thus legitimating it as an electoral tool. Despite Indira's bloody demise at the hands of her Sikh bodyguards, Congress continued to play religious politics. In 1984, the party struck a deal with the poisonous Shiv Sena to improve its chances in upcoming local elections in Maharashtra; and, in 1989, Rajiv Gandhi, who had succeeded his mother as party leader, opened his campaign for a second term at Faizabad, just a short drive from the sacred city of Ayodhya, with a speech promising voters that his election would lead to the return of Ram Rajya in India.⁷¹ The only substantial difference between mother and son, perhaps, was that Rajiv was rather more even-handed in his *modus operandi*, balancing his artless pitch to the Hindus at Faizabad with concessions to Islamists, such as his championship of the aforementioned Muslim Women's Bill and his imposition of a blanket ban on Salman Rushdie's novel *Satanic Verses*.

Whether and to what extent playing the religious card has paid electoral dividends is still an open question that we will take up shortly, but its social impact seems beyond dispute. The intensification of Hindu–Muslim violence in the 1980s, noted earlier, was a direct consequence of the competitive forces unleashed by this strategy; and it corroded other communal relationships too. Following Mrs Gandhi's assassination in 1984, Hindus in New Delhi, inflamed by a yearning for revenge, fell upon their Sikh neighbours. The pogrom caused the deaths of more than 2,000 people, mostly Sikhs. It was the bloodiest single communal incident in the city's history.

Let us recap for a second. Earlier, we showed how Indian states over the centuries, through their interaction with religious thinkers and institutions, helped in certain cases to harden or, alternatively, to blur sectarian differences; and in [Chapter 10](#) we demonstrated how the British colonial state contributed through its policies and processes to the growth of religious-sanctioned violence. Yet we were careful in tracing the rise of communalism to distinguish between outcome and intent. We found precious little evidence to support a charge that the colonial state *fostered* outbreaks of mob violence for political ends; on the contrary, we concluded in [Chapter 10](#) that the colonial state saw breaches of the peace as blots on its record and tried hard to devise ways of containing them. Was that equally true of its Republican successor?

A straight comparison is difficult because the Republic's officials faced a sterner challenge. The police had to contend with bigger and better-organised crowds armed with more deadly weapons. Handguns, knives and 'bicycle

bombs' crammed with explosives increasingly featured alongside *lathis* and brickbats. Rubber tyres were burned to attract reinforcements and instil panic. Victims were selected in advance; rioters arrested by the police have been found in possession of crude maps marked with street names and house numbers; and they were dispatched with a ferocity and callous efficiency that would have confounded colonial administrators. In 1984, a Muslim family were dragged out of a house in Maharashtra where they had taken refuge, doused with kerosene and set alight. Twenty people, including women and children, burned to death as the perpetrators applauded.⁷² In 1970, almost half of Bhiwandi was torched; and fourteen years later the town was fired all over again, leaving 1,200 homes and 200 textile factories in ruins. At times, it seemed as if 'virtual private armies of Hindus and Muslims' were on the rampage.⁷³ The intensity, and scale, of the violence made containment that much harder. So did technology. Unlike the crowds of earlier years, the riotous mobs of the 1970s and 1980s had access to radios and telephones, which facilitated mobilisation but also the rapid transmission of information and rumour, which widened the ambit of disputes. Bhiwandi first went up on 8 May 1970. Within hours of that event riots broke out in 237 towns and villages across Thana District and in Jalgaon, a town 200 kilometres distant. News of Indira Gandhi's murder triggered not only the aforementioned pogrom but copycat attacks in Kanpur, Indore, Calcutta, Rae Bareli, Benares, Jammu, Patna, Gwalior, Agartala, Jabalpur, Mathura and Lucknow. The destruction of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya in December 1992 was followed by payback attacks on Hindu temples in Dhaka, Derby and West Bromwich. Of course, the police had access to improved communications systems too, but this hardly gave them an advantage; at best, it evened up the playing field.

What more could government do? Federal and state agencies constantly wrestled with the conundrum. In 1961, section 153A of the IPC, covering the dissemination of communal hatred, was broadened to include a specific reference to 'religion'; in 1964, the strength of the paramilitary CRP was doubled to allow units of the force to be permanently stationed in places with a history of violence; in 1972, drilling, marching and related activities that had the potential to engender 'feelings of insecurity' were brought within the compass of the Criminal Laws Act; in 1990, a further amendment to the same Act made it an offence to change the character of any site of religious worship; and, in 1997, a general order went out instructing officials not to issue permits for any but 'traditional' religious processions. However, these worthy measures had only a marginal effect. In the absence of a panacea, the country's administrators had to make do with tried and tested methods such as 'flag marches' through sensitive districts, intelligence gathering, the cultivation of informants, judicial banning orders under section 144, curfews, 'peace committees' of local notables and, in the last resort, bullets, a range of strategies remarkably like those we examined earlier in [Chapter 10](#).

Moreover, whereas the Raj had relied on its magistrates to use their discretion and act independently, the Republican state increasingly sought to

oversee and second-guess its administrators. This had the effect of undermining their authority and weakening their resolve. Sometimes local officers hesitated to take action that might have prevented riots from breaking out, 'either because of the direct orders of their political masters or because they feared retribution if they acted without first seeking political approval'.⁷⁴ Likewise, the growing frequency of transfers made it hard for these officers to acquire a sufficiency of inside knowledge. Finally, the task of containing communal violence was complicated by the commitment of the Republican state to individual rights. In a landmark decision of 1950, the Bombay High Court held that, under Article 19 (1) (b), citizens were entitled to unfettered use of the public roads;⁷⁵ this ruling prompted the Maharashtra government to instruct its district officers that, in future, they should entertain no objection to the playing of music in front of mosques, a stance that rapidly became standard. Hindu hardliners, of course, took full advantage.⁷⁶ Well intentioned, the post-colonial state's attempts to rein in communal violence were hamstrung, like those of the British Raj, by legal constraints and logistic shortfalls. The key difference is that the post-colonial state had to operate in a much more politicised environment, one in which power was gained and held by chasing votes in elections.

The emerging scholarly consensus is that communal riots are no longer (if they ever were) local events, but have become plugged into the national story as elements in a 'new repertoire' of politics.⁷⁷ This conclusion is borne out by the tendency, noted above, for such riots to have supra-local repercussions; and by their growing synchronicity with national/political occasions such as public holidays and elections, which have come to be celebrated with the colour, noise and passion traditionally reserved for religious festivals. According to Asghar Ali Engineer, the primary cause of the Aurangabad riot of 1988 was 'election frenzy',⁷⁸ while the 1990 Bijnor riots followed directly upon the heels of a Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) rally featuring UP Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav. Indeed, there is some evidence that, on occasions, politicians and party functionaries actually attempted to incite riots as a way of settling scores. Following an outbreak at Aligarh on the eve of the 1971 polls, accusing fingers were pointed at a shady candidate for the Congress (R).⁷⁹ And observers of the 1989 Bhagalpur fracas came away convinced that Congress (I) apparatchiks and supporters were mainly responsible.⁸⁰ Mostly, however, politicians nurtured India's riot culture by taking sides, by positioning themselves as well-intentioned public advocates anxious to uncover the truth. Who were the real perpetrators? Who were the real victims? Self-serving answers to these questions allowed politicians to project themselves as noble benefactors and protectors of the weak, even as they cynically inflamed minority fears and majoritarian fantasies. Well timed, such discursive interventions could even determine an electoral contest, as when the incumbent BJP federal member for Bijnor greatly increased his majority in the 1991 poll by playing to the nationalist appetites of Hindu voters still euphoric from having a few months earlier 'put Muslims in their place'.⁸¹

Yet if, as American social scientist Paul Brass insists, modern communal riots 'are pre-eminently political events',⁸² that raises an awkward question: does it mean that the real culprit was democracy?

Towards Hindutva

Undoubtedly the most important development of the last half century in the realm of Indian politics and governance has been the dramatic rise to power of the Hindu Right. Yet, in the 1950s, few Indians would have taken odds on such an outcome. The main pre-Independence Hindu party, the Mahasabha, had never appealed to the electors. In 1946, it won just three out of 1,585 seats; at the first democratic poll in 1952 it won just one more in a much larger field, securing less than 1 per cent of the national vote. Admittedly, by this time, several new Rightist parties had entered the lists, including the ultra-orthodox Ram Rajya Parishad and the BJS; initially, however, their presence served merely to split the committed Hindu vote.

To be sure, the voting figures for these years may not have been a true measure of popular support for the Right, given that the Congress, at least until 1967, also presented itself as a party ready to go into bat for Hindu issues such as cow protection. But, if that was true, or partly so, for the 1950s and 1960s, it had ceased to be the case by the 1980s. During the dynastic tenure of Indira Gandhi and her son, tight central control weakened the Congress organisation, leaving it incapable of reaching out, as of old, to people at the grass roots. At the same time, the urban middle class, which included many committed Hindu voters, became alienated from the Congress as a result of Mrs Gandhi's disrespect for Constitutional conventions and Rajiv's for the Parliament, and the growing perception that the top levels of the party were corrupt. A political space was created, which the BJP, successor to the BJS, founded in 1980, proceeded in dramatic fashion to fill. In 1984, the party won just four Lok Sabha seats; in 1989, it secured 86; in 1991, 120; in 1996, 180. In 1996, the country's voters gave the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) a solid mandate.

The BJP was not just about Hindu religion and identity. Its protectionist stance on borders and the economy struck a chord with voters, as did its image as a 'clean', that is, not corrupt, outfit. As indicated above, growing dissatisfaction with Congress opened a niche for it, and Prime Minister V.P. Singh's decision, in 1990, to implement key elements of the Mandal Commission's report, which had recommended the reservation of 27 per cent of posts in the public service for Other Backward Castes (OBCs), also played into its hands. Yet religion was integral to its dazzling rise. We know that because it was only after the party shucked off its early moderate guise and adopted an agenda pitched directly at nationalist and religiously minded Hindus – a shift associated with the elevation of Partition refugee L.K. Advani to the presidency in 1986 – that the BJP bandwagon really got moving.⁸³

Crucial to this mid-1980s shift in orientation were the party's links to the RSS, the VHP, or World Hindu Congress, and the Bajrang Dal, or 'Army of the Strong'. The origins of the RSS were covered in [Chapter 11](#). By the time of the formation of the BJP in 1980, it had mushroomed into the biggest non-government organisation in the country, with a membership of nearly three million and a staff of at least 3,000 full-time cadres; and, when the new vanguard party of the Right was launched, these immense resources were formally placed at its command by Balasaheb Deoras, who had taken over from Golwalkar as RSS Sarsanghchalak and was keen to pursue a more overtly political strategy. The only condition was that the BJP had to embrace a Hindu nationalist agenda. Formed in 1964 to 'revitalise' Hinduism, strengthen Hindu society and protect it from the 'insidiously spreading clutches of alien ideologies', such as Christianity and Islam,⁸⁴ for the first ten years or so of its existence the VHP made little impact; but, in the early 1980s, the organisation was reinvigorated by fresh leaders elevated at the instigation of the RSS. This new leadership raised the profile of the VHP by forging links with a cross-section of Hindu divines (including all the major Shankaracharyas) and, against all odds, persuading them to work together for the greater glory of the faith; and it popularised the VHP brand by embracing a series of militant projects, starting with a mass reconversion, at Ajmer, of Hindu apostates and culminating in a highly successful agitation to reclaim the birthplace of the god-king Rama at Ayodhya, the 'Ram Janmabhoomi Temple' movement. By 1985, over a million believers had signed on to help.⁸⁵ The Bajrang Dal, founded in 1984, was advertised as the VHP's 'youth wing', but its specific purpose was to provide 'muscle' in the event that these activities sparked retributive violence from Muslims, which of course they did. Together, this family of organisations made the BJP a formidable presence. They gave it a social base in Hindu society, and access to powerful networks such as that of the *sādhus*, a number of whom became winning candidates for the party in the national polls of 1989 and 1991;⁸⁶ above all, they provided it with an issue.

The BJP leadership was not especially religious; neither Advani nor Vajpayee, for example, were regular temple-goers. And in other circumstances it might not have put so much store by the VHP's temple project. But it appeared that the country was in the grip of a Hindu revival. One very obvious sign of this was the VHP's swelling supporter-base; another, reports of increased attendance at temples and shrines. Between 1983 and 1986, the number of coconuts broken daily at the Ganesha Temple in Trivandrum jumped from 9,000 to 16,000; at the shrine of Sabarimala, another popular pilgrimage place in Kerala, the number of visiting devotees doubled during the early 1980s; while donations went up fivefold in the same period.⁸⁷ Yet a third was the phenomenal audience attracted by the serialisation of the *Rāmāyana* saga, aired on state television between 1987 and 1988. One might argue, of course, about what was cause, and what effect. Moreover, field studies by anthropologists tell us that many Indians, especially in rural areas, do not hold temples and priests in high regard. Nevertheless, for all that, it would

appear that a very considerable number of Hindus, particularly, perhaps, urban middle-class Hindus, were prepared to go into bat for the hero of the *Rāmāyana*, a deity who stood above the Little Tradition world of cults and superstitions, who had shown during his time on earth a practical concern for human problems, and who could be accessed without recourse to opaque priestly rituals; in short, a deity who spoke to modernist sensibilities. They showed that by turning out en masse, in 1983, to cheer on the VHP's Ekamata Yagna caravan in aid of Hindu unity and by making lavish donations of money and bricks to its temple project. Recognising that a rare window of opportunity had opened, the BJP, in 1988, pledged its full support for the Ram Janmabhoomi movement and, in September 1990, Advani whipped up public interest in the campaign by ostentatiously processing across the country in a Toyota truck decked out to resemble an ancient Aryan chariot. The party's manifesto for the 1991 election was headed: 'Towards Ram Raja'.

The new religious pitch paid handsome dividends. Over the course of the Ram temple campaign the BJP's national vote share went up by 12.5 per cent, enough to secure it 116 additional parliamentary seats. In addition, the Hindutva wave, as it came to be known, lifted the party into office in a number of northern states (Himachal Pradesh, Gujarat, UP, MP, Rajasthan and Delhi). Even though the BJP's progress was temporarily halted by the voter backlash precipitated by the frenzied destruction of the Babri Masjid by VHP and Bajrang Dal cadres in December 1992, its core vote continued to hold up. It was not just that many urban middle-class Hindus (high caste and OBC) wanted to reward the BJP for its stand on the temple issue. They were also swayed by events such as Advani's arrest, in October 1990, as his convoy neared Ayodhya, which the party president exploited to cast himself and his party as martyrs for Rama, and by the surge in Hindu-Muslim riots that followed the passage of his *yātra* and the VHP's earlier Ram Shila Pujan processions. As pointed out in the previous section, a climate of tension and anxiety can easily be turned to political advantage; and while the precise connection between riots and votes remains elusive – a point we will return to shortly – during 1989–91 at least, exit poll evidence that the BJP vote was higher than average in seats with a more than 40 per cent Muslim demographic suggests that fear of Muslim assertion was one of the major reasons Hindus backed the BJP during these years.⁸⁸ Moreover, even if the 1980s' evidence is ambiguous, the case of Gujarat in 2002 looks rock-solid. On 27 February, the Sabarmati Express train carrying Hindu pilgrims was attacked by Muslims while standing at Godhra station; some sixty were killed. A spate of vicious reprisals followed, facilitated by Hindu elements of the police. In December, Gujarat went to the polls. The BJP, running heavily on what it called the Godhra atrocity, won a thumping two-thirds majority. The biggest swings to the party were recorded in the districts that had experienced the greatest level of violence.⁸⁹

Still, the Hindu card was not new; it had been played before, by Congress. Where the BJP proved distinctive was in its approach to governance. While the Congress had not been above pressing majoritarian buttons during its

campaigns, it had tended to revert, in office, to a more secular or at least non-partisan style of administration; whereas the BJP, urged on by its militant partners, at once set about putting the machinery of the state to the service of its goal of making India Hindu.

For instance, the BJP regimes elected in the early 1990s lost no time putting their stamp on the public education system. Orders were sent out to departmental bureaucrats to revise curricula and rewrite texts on history and geography to reflect Hindutva values. Rama became a god ‘worshipped by all people’; the Hindu sage Manu the world’s ‘first economist’; the Partition a Christian plot; the *Iliad* a poem by an Indian scribe. ‘Whatever religions there are in the world’, one newly minted text asserted, ‘their origin lies in our Vedas.’⁹⁰ Later, the pattern was replicated at the centre, where arch-Hindutva ideologue M.M. Joshi was given the Human Resources portfolio, which included responsibility for education. The new BJP government took control of the National Council of Education, Research and Training, and directed it to devise a ‘truly’ national curriculum, specifically focused on ‘Indian-centred’ subjects such as Sanskrit, religion as revealed in the Hindu scriptures, ‘Vedic Mathematics’ and ‘Vedic Astrology’. It vetted university teaching, too, though with less success, and forced Oxford University Press New Delhi to pulp the most recent volume of its acclaimed *Towards Freedom* series on the grounds that the book was too left-leaning and insufficiently patriotic. Similarly, both at state and federal levels, the BJP pushed through discriminatory laws and administered hiring and granting procedures in ways that helped Hindus and hurt minorities. It channelled money to schools run by the RSS, and the Akhil Bharati Shiksha Sansthan, the educational arm of the Sangh Parivar, and gave preference in public service appointments to *swayamsevaks*. In MP, it subjected Christian clerics and missionaries to bureaucratic harassment; and in Gujarat it enacted a euphemistically styled Freedom of Religion Act requiring anyone wishing to convert to a new religion to obtain the written permission of the district collector. In Maharashtra, the Shiv Sena-BJP government, which won power in 1995, launched a crackdown on foreign-born Muslim immigrants, a community thought to number in excess of 50,000, and got as far as directing the police to round up the Muslims and expel them before the whole nasty enterprise was scotched by a Supreme Court injunction. Further, as the Sena had tried to co-opt the Mumbai police, so other Sangh Parivar regimes turned the instrumentalities of the state to their purposes, putting pressure on public prosecutors to withdraw cases filed against Hindu rioters, and restraining law enforcement agencies from taking prompt, or in some cases any, action against VHP and Bajrang Dal militants. Notoriously, UP premier Kalyan Singh told the DM of Faizabad, by telephone, in December 1992, not to use force against the *kar sevaks* advancing on the Babri Masjid, and particularly instructed him to keep the CRP detachment on site from deploying stun grenades and rubber bullets, which could have saved the day.⁹¹ Likewise, Narendra Modi, the BJP Chief Minister of Gujarat, waited a whole day at the height of the Ahmedabad pogrom to call up troops to assist the local police, and then found ways to

slow their deployment.⁹² In its recourse to blatant censorship, early BJP governance was reminiscent of colonial practice; but in its heavy-handed use of governmental power to advance the cause of Hindu hegemony, it recalled a much older style of rule, of the ancient Hindu kings in the service of *dharma*.

For Muslims, the Hindutva wave spelt trouble. Alarmist rumours and reports flew around the community. Typical was the following, from the reformist Muslim spokesman Syed Shahabuddin:

Muslim Indians today are in a state of religious siege. The sinister and senseless campaign against their religious institutions, the Masjids, the Makhtabs and the Madrasas as dens of Pakistani espionage and training ground[s] for terrorists . . . , the systematic occupation of Muslims graveyards . . . , the ‘conquest’ of Muslim shrines as in the Budhangiri caves in Karnataka . . . , the . . . saffronization of school education and of school culture to brainwash and Hinduise Muslim children, the routine burning of the Quran in . . . anti-Muslim riots . . . even in broad daylight in the capital city . . . all show the Sangh Parivar’s implacable hostility to Islam, the Holy Prophet and the Quran. How can the Muslims feel religiously secure if their faith is permanently under attack?⁹³

But Muslims weren’t the only ones concerned; liberal intellectuals, in India and overseas, filled the pages of magazines and academic journals with commentaries that represented the BJP’s initiatives as a concerted attack on secularism. In December 1992, immediately after the fall of the Babri Masjid, journalist Conor Cruise O’Brien concluded, in an article in *The Times*, that the BJP looked certain in the near future to inherit control of the Indian government, and that ‘India’s history as a secular state’ appeared to be rapidly ‘coming to a close’.⁹⁴

O’Brien was right, of course, about the BJP winning power; but his prediction that this would result in a scrapping of all pretence at secularism now looks, to say the least, premature. Seventeen years on, there is still no sign that the Republic is about to reinvent itself; indeed, the BJP’s resounding defeat in the national elections of 2004 could be seen as a sign that the Juggernaut is slowing. What has happened?

Hindutva was not a prominent issue in the 2004 campaign; that says a great deal. Moreover, the election was not just a showdown between two dominant parties, but rather a diffuse contest between loose alliances, the NDA, and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) led by the Congress. This highlights how complex, and how unpredictable, Indian federal politics has lately become. Since the mid-1990s, neither Congress nor the BJP has been able to govern at the centre without the support of minor parties. The United Front coalition, which ruled before 1996, had thirteen partners, sometimes derisively referred to as the ‘thirteen-headed Ravan’ after the demon-king in the *Rāmāyana*; the NDA coalition that won power in 1999 encompassed twenty-three separate parties in addition to the BJP; in 2004, minor parties delivered a third of the

seats that got the UPA over the line. The exigencies of this new coalitional brand of politics have impacted, obviously, on both major parties. But the BJP has had to make the more sweeping adjustments. Some of the minor parties are from regions such as Tamilnadu and Karnataka, which have a tradition of hostility to ‘Aryan’ culture; others are socialist, and strongly committed to secularism; others again, such as the Janata Dal and the BSP, mainly cater to OBCs and Dalits. They are not, for the most part, natural partners of the Hindu Right, and to win them over the BJP had to make concessions. The most crucial were those designed to ameliorate ‘the implacable hostility that most potential allies harboured towards the Hindutva project’.⁹⁵ So seriously did the party’s leaders view this imperative that they agreed to fight, in 1999, on a common NDA platform that totally ignored religious issues.

The new strategy seriously poisoned relations with the RSS and VHP and sparked a rift within the party itself, which led to the departure of some hardliners led by Kalyan Singh; but the BJP largely kept to the bargains it had struck. One measure of this was the number of electoral promises, made in its Hindutva days, which the party failed to honour in office during the seven-year term of the NDA government from 1998–2004: pledges to centrally ban cow-killing, to amend the Hindu Religious Endowments and Marriage Acts, to repeal the article of the Constitution that gives a special status to Jammu and Kashmir, and to implement a common civil code. Another was the improved confidence of India’s Muslims. A poll carried out by the New Delhi-based Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, in 2006, showed that, while Muslims were still very concerned about the socio-economic backwardness of their community, many felt that their condition had changed, over the decades, for the better. More remarkably still, only 4 per cent of those sampled believed their religious freedom had been compromised.⁹⁶

One reason the Muslims may have felt less anxious is that, against expectations, the elevation of the BJP at the centre did not lead to an upsurge in majoritarian militancy. Gujarat was a horrific example of what the modern state could let loose if it chose, but, mercifully, nothing like it has been experienced since. It now looks to have been a local aberration. Of course, the BJP has always pretended to be a stalwart defender of law and order, and perhaps there is something to that claim, counterintuitive though it seems at first glance. Such a conclusion would also fit with anecdotal evidence showing that, under some post-1980 BJP administrations, for example that of Kalyan Singh in UP, the local incidence of communal violence actually *fell*. However, American political scientist Steven Wilkinson has proffered a better explanation, which has the added virtue that it is not dependent on hypotheses about Sangh Parivar pathology. Wilkinson reasons that:

In states where the party in government relies on minority votes, the government has a political incentive to protect minorities . . . Where, on the other hand, the governing party . . . relies on the support of voters from only one community, [the] politicians have little electoral incentive

to moderate communal appeals from their own community, suppress anti-minority polarization, or order the administration to take firm action.⁹⁷

The argument is plausible; but, more importantly, it is backed up by some hard evidence. Wilkinson has carefully mapped the chronology and distribution of communal outbreaks across the country from 1961 to 1995. He establishes a clear correlation between violence and patterns of power. 'I show', he writes, 'that from 1961 to 1995, higher levels of party competition in the 15 major Indian states are statistically associated with *lower* levels of communal violence'.⁹⁸ The key factor, Wilkinson believes, was the level of competition for minority and, particularly, Muslim votes, not which party happened to be currently in power.

This brings us back finally to the question raised at the end of the last section. Has India, as Rajkumari Amrit Kaur once mused, paid a '*very* heavy price for democracy'?⁹⁹ The answer would seem to be 'yes'. The party political process has definitely encouraged communal assertion; democracy *is* part of the problem. The good news is that it appears, at the same time, to incorporate an inbuilt solution.

13 Conclusion

Mythologies

Over the years, Indian society has attracted more than its fair share of sweeping generalisations. It has been said that the society is pervaded by religiosity and moved by other-worldly goals; that on the Hindu side it is hierarchical, caste-ridden and dominated by Brahmans. At the same time (though perhaps paradoxically), it is roundly asserted that Hindu thought is inclusive and given to toleration of difference, and that this world view, along with the practical needs and economic interdependence of the masses living at the grass roots, made for a high degree of social harmony; and that, as a consequence, India in the pre-modern era was largely spared the religious strife that became so much a part of life during the colonial period and beyond. Also, it has been suggested, by Karl Marx and others since, that the organic nature of Indian society and the robust inward-looking culture of the typical Indian rural village, have made it hard for states to sink deep roots into the soil of the subcontinent, and that political life generally has always been an elite preoccupation and largely ephemeral to plebeian life.

To a surprising extent, however, these grand generalisations remain empirically untested. They are sometimes buttressed by quotations from Hindu scriptures or colonial reports or by references to village case studies by social anthropologists, but almost never grounded in systematic inquiry. Sociological writing, in particular, has tended to treat the basic features of Indian life, economy and governance, as fixed and constant throughout the pre-modern era, a strategy that has had the effect of reducing the Indian past to a rigid set of categories and patterns.

Historians, not surprisingly, have long been wary of this a-historical approach; and, more recently, it has been strongly critiqued by historically aware cultural anthropologists such as Richard Fox and Peter Van der Veer.¹ We take the same view. Initially, this book was conceived as a study of religion and governance during the modern era. But, early on, we came to the conclusion that only an extended longitudinal study – one going back to the roots of state formation in South Asia – would allow us to engage seriously with the big questions raised by the topic and subject the rather romanticised picture that informs the conventional understanding of it to a searching

historiographical scrutiny. This meant, of course, covering a lot of territory and left us with no prospect of producing anything like a connected narrative. But we hope and believe we have gone beyond static patterns and categories. The above chapters follow lines of argument rather than chains of events, but they trace an unfolding story, one that tells us that the religion/state nexus in India was ever (and remains) a work in progress – which in itself is a significant finding. Some others are: (1) that every Indian state has fashioned an intimate connection with religious belief and worship, even the British colonial state, which purported to follow a policy that promised quite the opposite; (2) that rulers and religious elites have enjoyed a sometimes tense but ultimately fruitful relationship grounded in the knowledge that neither party had a monopoly on power; (3) that, while states typically engaged closely with religion in the hope of controlling it, hardly any were true theocracies; almost all seem to have adopted a very eclectic approach, distributing their favours broadly among competing sects; (4) that, contrary to the influential Dumontian view, the state, vehicle of the Kshatriya class, was more often than not, and increasingly over time, paramount over the Brahman-controlled religious establishment; (5) that sectarian conflict was already present in India (although not endemic) when the British arrived and cannot therefore be explained away as a result wholly of colonial policies or the impact of modernisation; and (6) that claims that Indian governance has always been ‘secular’ are anachronistic and basically unfounded, since no government in South Asia has ever observed the Enlightenment principle of Church–State separation, including, notably, the current democratic regime.

What history shows

The peoples of South Asia discovered gods, and invented rituals to placate them, many centuries before they built states. The earliest Indian religious texts we have access to, the Vedas, date from midway through the second millennium BC; putting aside the equivocal case of the Harappan Civilisation, whose nature remains the subject of intense scholarly debate, the region’s first true states – the monarchical kingdoms of the eastern Gangetic plain – did not appear until a thousand years later. (And still, as we observed in [Chapter 3](#), some historians continue to harbour doubts about the capacity of the Guptas and other first millennium AD rulers to influence events at the local level and in places at a distance from their seats of power.) Moreover, religion assisted, and perhaps even made possible, the process of state formation, by sanctioning the institution of kingship and the rite of governance for the better conservation of the social hierarchy; while nascent states benefited from the wealth and contacts generated by emergent manufacturing and trading classes identified with deviant sects such as Buddhism and Jainism. In turn, rulers such as Ashoka became active and lavish patrons of the expanding network of Buddhist and Jain monasteries.

Thus, quite rapidly, a symbiotic relationship was established. For the rising Indian state, religion was a valuable asset: rulers, particularly upstart ones from families of low or foreign origin, needed the legitimation that religious professionals in communion with the gods were well placed to offer; further, religion, particularly in early times, helped to cement social bonds, and made for a convenient rallying cry when the ruler went to war. Likewise, expressions of royal religiosity were always well received by the masses, who expected their kings and sultans to be conventionally pious. As [Chapter 12](#) showed, even to this day, astute politicians pay regular visits to mosques, temples and shrines. Last but not least, the foregoing pages have thrown up numerous examples of statesmen who were drawn to religion because, like most people, they believed it purveyed seminal truths and held the keys to accessing an afterlife. Certainly, powerful and ambitious Indian states have often tried to manipulate religion for dynastic and political ends; the examples of the Mauryan and Mughal empires, examined in [Chapters 3](#) and [6](#), immediately jump to mind. We caution, however, against the trite conclusion that realpolitik was the beginning and end of their interest; it is clear to us that these rulers believed in divine power and feared it, even as they crossed swords with its earthly representatives.

But, if unquestionably a useful tool of governance, properly handled, religion also represented a potential danger to the state. The religious elite (Brahmans, gurus, *'ulāma*) constituted a competing locus of authority; while temples, monasteries and shrines were important local seats of power, which needed to be closely monitored. Religious disputes, a constant source of civil disturbances, threatened political stability. By the nineteenth century, a lot of the Indian state's capacity was expended on containing 'communal' conflict.

And the reverse was also true. For the religious elites, accommodation with state power was indispensable. They did not necessarily like or approve of what rulers did, and, of course, in earlier times the priestly Brahman caste felt themselves socially superior to kings and warriors who typically belonged to the 'lesser' Kshatriya class. But they relied on them for protection and patronage, and could not afford to provoke too far men who had the means to remove them from office, incarcerate them and strip their temples bare. Likewise, in later centuries the *'ulāma*, although entitled and indeed expected to speak out on matters of public concern, rarely arraigned themselves in direct opposition to the men of power, the sultan and his advisers, for fear of reprisals; even the heterodox Akbar was not openly criticised, at least while he lived. Indeed, both the Brahmanic and the Islamic priestly classes sought to avert any lasting break by trying to fit the institution of kingship into their dogmatic world view. Early on, Hindu rulers were inducted into the ritual of the sacrifice; gradually it became customary for rulers, on their accession, to be anointed by Brahmans in a ceremony that implied a gifting to them, second hand, of divine power; later still, especially during the early centuries of the first millennium, hagiographic texts were produced by Brahman philosophers that theorised that the kings of that age were actually descended from gods,

by way of Vishnu's *avatāra*, Rama, who himself took the form of a king and whose reign is celebrated in the Indian imagination as a model of good governance. Similarly, secular power in Sultanate and Mughal India was enhanced by the custom whereby, during Friday prayers, the *khutba* was read from the pulpit in the name of the ruler, which signalled that his rule had the complete support of the clergy. In short, to paraphrase Romila Thapar, the religious elite in South Asia have consistently acted as 'legitimizers of political authority'.²

Cooperation, though, was intermixed with tension, which turned ultimately on the question of which node of power was superior, the political or the religious. The learned consensus is that, in the early period at least, the priestly Brahmins held all the cards. They alone could access, through the sacrifice, the peerless power of the gods, so much greater than that of any human agency; they outranked the ruling caste in the *varna* scheme; and their temples were much older and more venerable than the palaces of the *arriviste* kings. But we think Louis Dumont and his followers are mistaken in regarding this hierarchical relationship as structurally embedded and essentially frozen. Our data point, rather, to a situation that, in practice (if not in Brahmanical theory), was fluid and capable of periodic adjustment. Certainly, it would seem that, over the course of time, royal power increased, in relation to priestly power, very substantially.

Why was that? From the modern viewpoint, it is hard to see how the contest could have turned out any other way: the state today is a very powerful institution; it commands enormous wealth, and a vast pool of information, and exercises a monopoly control over the legitimate use of force. However, following Burton Stein, many scholars believe that the states of ancient and medieval India were quite unlike this modern conception, indeed that they were administratively weak and resource poor, 'segmented' rather than unitary, held together (if at all) by the gravitational pull of 'ritual sovereignty' exercised through 'cultural activities, symbols, and processes'.³ It is difficult to imagine the Brahmanic elite submitting to such fragile regimes as these. Priests based in the royal capitals might have felt sufficiently vulnerable to consider it, but surely not those living in towns and villages on the periphery?

Yet not all Indologists are convinced by Stein's model, and we are also sceptical, given the abundance of inscriptions documenting royal land grants and tax claims (for example, sources suggesting that the Chola kings were entitled to one sixth of the produce) that have survived from the medieval period.⁴ And, even if this evidence were not available, it does not seem plausible to us that the sum of state capacity across the subcontinent failed to increase between the fall of the Mauryan Empire and the establishment of the Sultanate of Delhi. Did the economy slip backwards during those 1400 years? Did society stagnate? On the contrary, the first millennium AD is considered a period of artistic efflorescence. In fact, some would claim that the Gupta Era actually marked the zenith of Hindu culture. And recent research suggests that it was a time of vigorous development, too, of buoyant domestic and

overseas trade and economic diversification underpinned by the adoption of new technologies. That picture makes sense because monumental art requires patronage. The period's sculptural glories, its statues and frescoes, point to a society with surplus capital. Some of that surplus must have found its way into the coffers of regional states. It follows that they had money to fund armies and bureaucracies, at least on a modest scale. The pre-modern Indian state would have had more than sufficient power to overawe elite opposition. We should not dismiss, either, in calculating the balance of forces, the weight of a thousand years of accumulated administrative know-how.

And political authority was further strengthened by developments in the form and organisation of Indian religion, especially on the Vaishnavite side. During the first half of the millennium, the theory of Vishnu's avatars was formulated and popularised by means of oral recitations and dramatic enactments of texts such as the *Rāmāyana*. This cemented the perception that gods and kings were connected. Not surprisingly, many rulers actively supported the emerging cult of Rama worship. Others reinforced the point by devising a form of court ceremonial that emulated the rituals performed in temples to honour the deity. Later, the rise of *bhakti*, which accelerated the fracturing of the Brahmanic religion into numerous, and sometimes antagonistic, sects, provided states with a further opening by making it possible for them to distribute their patronage selectively; while sectarian quarrels gave rulers an opportunity to act as religious arbiters. In this regard, the coming of Islam and Sikhism, often seen by historians as constituting a sharp point of disjuncture, merely served to multiply the number of sects competing for royal favour. None of this, of course, was greatly to the liking of the religious elite. But the extreme decentralisation of the Brahmanic faith made it difficult for its acolytes to mount a coordinated campaign of resistance. Apart from the Shaivite Shankaracharyas, who have a history of rivalry, the Hindu religion has never possessed leaders endowed with the authority to make political decisions binding on its followers. Last but not least, it seems that many Brahmins opted to place their learning and charismatic authority at the service of the royal courts in the hope of preserving some of their former social influence. This, if nothing else, shows that the balance of power had shifted fundamentally.

The state's co-option of religion for political and governmental ends had numerous effects. We have already noted its repercussions for the priestly elite; more consequential still was its impact on the way religion was understood and practised. First and foremost, royal largesse, and the increasingly high status of kings, which made them more and more role models for many in society, helped to establish and entrench some religious cults at the expense of others, pre-eminently perhaps the cult of Rama, who remains, to this day, the most politicised of all the major Hindu deities. But Krishna, too, quite an obscure god at the start of the first millennium, also benefited from royal recognition, while, as Thapar points out, it was the rise of new states in eastern India ruled by kings dedicated to Shakti worship that finally persuaded the

Brahman establishment to accept that heterodox and hitherto despised cult as legitimate.⁵ And there was a reverse effect, too. As the institution of kingship grew more sacralised, courtly forms and protocols started to be picked up and consciously imitated by religious leaders and organs. By late medieval times, the titular heads of some Vaishnava *bhakti* sects were styling themselves *mahārājas* (that is, kings) and their temple-seats *gaddis* (thrones).

Nevertheless, over the longer term, what really compromised the autonomy of the religious domain was the political tsunami unleashed on society by the invention of the monarchical state itself. From the start, states changed things totally by the mere fact of their existence. As [Chapter 1](#) explained, certain conditions had to be met before states in South Asia could be formed; crucially, social networks had to reach a minimal size. State formation accelerated this process of social bonding (in which religion played a key role), but did so in a fashion that favoured particular forms of religious expression. It has been established by sociologists that religion is affected by the relationship between the size of political/administrative units and the size of cultural units. Accordingly, when early Indian states expanded to incorporate multiple different cultures, in large part wholly unfamiliar with one another, the religious institutions that benefited most were those that preached universalist values, marginalised esoteric and particularist rituals, offered straightforward explanations for everyday life experiences that could appeal to a cross-section of society, and rejected exclusive dogmas that attributed events to the arbitrary actions of personal agents. The rapid growth of the Buddhist *sangha* during and after the Mauryan period is often attributed to Ashoka's patronage of the movement, an aspect discussed at length in [Chapter 3](#); however, in our view, the key factor was the advent of the imperial state per se, a political transformation that brought many hitherto discrete communities into contact with one another for the first time. Similarly, it has been established that state expansion facilitated long-distance trade, which in earlier times was often controlled by religious mendicants. A principal factor in the rise of the Ramanandi order, for example, appears to have been its exploitation of the commercial opportunities afforded by the reunification of the subcontinent under the Mughals.⁶

Still, we would argue that the way the Hindu kings engaged with religion has left an important legacy that warrants far more attention from scholars than it has received to date. As remarked earlier, and at several places in this book, there is a general consensus that the society of pre-modern India was very largely free of sectarian strife and attendant 'communal' violence; and that this was due to its having a highly developed capacity for toleration. The former assertion has some traction. We searched hard for pre-modern riots and did not find very many. Of course, this does not necessarily support a conclusion that Indian society in pre-modern times was completely harmonious. The lack of references to religious conflicts in the surviving sources could simply be because they did not, for the most part, show up on the pre-modern administrative radar, or because the elite authors who penned the

chronicles of those times preferred not to mention occurrences that might be taken as reflecting badly on their royal patrons. Interestingly, Shah Wali Allah, who is remembered as a canny and fearless commentator, insists that Delhi experienced just one religious affray during the entire eighteenth century,⁷ a claim we know to be incorrect. Still, the striking consistency of the evidence has to mean something; it cannot simply be ignored. So where should one draw the line? Our best guess is that there were more clashes over religion in early times than most historians and anti-secularist warriors such as Ashis Nandy would allow, but still far fewer than in colonial times, a conclusion that brings us back to the shaky proposition that early India was sociologically or ideologically predisposed to tolerance.

Three broad theories have been advanced to account for this supposed tendency: (1) that the imperative of economic interdependence, and the practicalities of communal living in villages and tightly packed urban *mohullas*, encouraged people at the grass roots to develop a robust tradition of *communitas* that allowed them to coexist in reasonable harmony; (2) that religious practice among these communities was commonly syncretic, composed of ideas imported from Great Tradition scriptures laced with local folk beliefs and rituals, which rendered it somewhat resistant to divisive elite notions of orthodoxy and hierarchy; and (3) that ‘Hinduism’, both expressly through its scriptures, and by dint of its inclusive nature, nurtured a spirit of toleration among its adherents. The first theory, in our view, is well founded. Even today, with communalism rampant in Indian politics and society, physical violence between communities is relatively rare, certainly compared to other types of social violence. Over most of the country, for most of the time, people belonging to different religions contrive to coexist. Also, there is plenty of contemporary anecdotal evidence that points the same way. In the 1980s, Nita Kumar looked into how a Muslim caste of weavers, the Ansari, was faring in the Hindu holy city of Benares. She discovered, to her surprise, that they got on quite well with the dominant community, and put this down to a persistent tradition that enjoined respect for the beliefs of others. ‘In everyday life, Hindus and Muslims [managed to] conduct their . . . worship without getting in each other’s way’, she concluded.⁸ Likewise, our findings confirm the hypothesis that popular syncretism blurred boundaries, making it harder for people to be singled out from the crowd on the basis of their religious preference. [Chapters 4 and 5](#) traced the impact of Islamic ideas on the north Indian *bhakti* movement; and we showed, in [Chapter 7](#), how, by the seventeenth century, some Bengali religious writers had begun to insert the Prophet and other figures from Islamic tradition into the Hindu pantheon. But we also noted, in [Chapter 10](#), how, from the latter nineteenth century, syncretic practices among Muslims in Bengal started to come under attack from Islamic missionaries; and some discerning scholars, Javeed Alam for one, doubt that Little Tradition religion in India can long survive the relentless homogenising appetite of the modern nation-state. Still, one should not underestimate its resilience. Researching in eastern Rajasthan about the same time as Professor Kumar was investigating

the Ansari caste in Benares, historian Edward Haynes discovered a ‘place of worship . . . used, by the same people, as a Hindu temple on Thursdays and as a Mosque on Fridays’.⁹

We take issue, though, with the notion that Hindu thought is inherently tolerant or, for that matter, as Hindutva warriors sometimes assert, ‘secular’. True, the former claim has a hoary history. One of its first iterations was penned by Enlightenment philosopher David Hume. However, the evidence for it rests on a highly selective reading of the Hindu scriptures, sources after all generated by Brahmins. Buddhist and Jain literature paints a different picture. And even the Brahmanical texts, if read carefully, contain clues that point in a different direction, such as their barbed description of the Buddhists and Jains as ‘heretics’ and their complacent reference to peoples external to caste society as blacks. Also, as Cynthia Keppley-Mahmood points out, the proposition that Hinduism is tolerant because it is ‘inclusive’ is open to question. Inclusion can be viewed as another word for assimilation, a practice nowadays roundly condemned by defenders of human rights. But Brahmanical Hinduism did not just disparage its enemies; at times, as we have shown, it openly persecuted them. We concur, then, with Keppley-Mahmood that the idea of Hindu tolerance is a myth.¹⁰ Unfortunately, this remains a minority view, even within academia, and it has so far wholly failed to penetrate popular culture.

Still, if there is not much to be said for Hindu toleration, we are still left with the undeniable fact of Hindu diversity; and we believe that probably did serve to ameliorate communal violence, not only because it helped blur the boundaries between orthodox and heterodox, but because it permitted states to patronise – at the same time – multiple sects and deities, which served to reinforce the message, already explicit in some of the Hindu scriptures, that there were several paths to ‘salvation’. In fact, we regard the integrative effect on society of the moral example set by royal pluralism as sufficiently important to warrant adding it to the above list of hypotheses. Aside from anything else, it would help to explain why religious conflict became more commonplace after the British conquest, which saw the extinction of many indigenous kingdoms.

But pluralism should not be confused with toleration. Although the two terms are often used interchangeably, they mean different things. The modern concept of toleration is rooted in the notion of an enforceable right to freedom of thought, as in the post-Second World War United Nations Declaration. Pluralism accepts difference but it does not recognise claims based on individual rights; it welcomes diversity, but does not concede that every belief system is of equal value; its approach to religion is hierarchical. When Ian Copland investigated the religious polity of the Indian states that had survived into the early twentieth century, he found that, almost without exception, it favoured that part of the population professing the religion of the ruler.¹¹ And, if pluralism is not the same as tolerance, it is certainly not a synonym for secularism, despite what the BJP claims. A secular state is one that has no religious affiliation, keeps out of religious controversies and eschews, in its

governance, appeals to religious doctrines or values. The pre-modern Hindu kingdoms and Muslim sultanates were definitely *not* secular. More surprisingly, the same can also be said for the British Raj.

Perhaps as befitted a regime established during the heyday of the Enlightenment, the Company state began life determined to have nothing whatsoever to do with religion, even the Christian religion to which it was nominally connected. It formed this resolve because it saw religious controversy as a distraction from its essentially commercial goals and as, potentially, a threat to its security. Almost at once, however, it found this position untenable. It discovered that it had inherited all sorts of religious obligations from former regional rulers that could not easily be discountenanced; its courts became flooded with petitions from aggrieved religious groups; here and there, religious disputes led to riots, which it felt duty bound to put down; and, after 1818, it was required, by Parliament, to let Christian missionaries proselytise. And, even as pressure from the Evangelical Movement forced the Company to cancel some of these commitments, especially those connected to Hindu temples and festivals, it entered into others, notably to the missionary societies in respect of English-language education. ‘Perfect neutrality’ was never possible; and, as the Raj matured, it started to acknowledge that openly in its official pronouncements, in line with Auckland’s seminal dispatch of 1837 on public support for religious toleration. Not only did this interventionist stance easily survive the policy *post mortem* that followed the 1857 Mutiny, and the discursive hand grenade lobbed into the debate by the promise included in the Queen’s Proclamation that the government would henceforward ‘abstain’ from such interference, it actually became *more prominent* under the rule of the Crown as the Raj steadily added to its administrative capacity. As sometime Member of Council Sir Alfred Lyall explained, managing religion was not a matter of choice, it was ‘a matter of political expediency’, and, moreover, something that, in Asia, had always been seen as a ‘duty of the State’.¹²

Particularly, in this respect, British officials pointed to the effort that went into keeping the lid on religious strife. One can readily understand why. By the end of the nineteenth century, the government had evolved, through trial and error, an elaborate bureaucratic system of prevention and containment that involved intelligence gathering, monitoring of processional routes, liaising with local ‘men of influence’ and schemes to regulate public worship with reference to what was considered ‘customary’ by the community. However, the Raj’s engagement with the Indian religious domain did not stop with the management of disputes; it extended to making rulings through its court system on religious doctrines, and farming out political and financial patronage to ‘communities’, such as the ‘Muslims’ and the ‘Sikhs’, defined essentially by religious affiliation. With growing experience, the British came to realise, like their predecessors, that religion could be a valuable asset, and they turned to it more and more, particularly in its communal manifestation, as opposition to the regime mounted. They began to see the virtue, ‘in the changing scheme of things’, of reaching out for ‘steady influences’. They were easily persuaded

that, in India, ‘the most powerful of those influences’ was religion.¹³ The governance of the British Raj has been described as anticipating modern Indian secularism, and as being more secular than the British government of the same era.¹⁴ We see no foundation for such conclusions.

Yet, if the colonial state in practice was consistently proactive towards religion, it must be said that it reaped a pretty poor reward for its efforts. Putting aside the question of how far the encouragement meted out by the government to the Muslim political elite contributed to the growing religious divide that culminated in Partition, which rather lies outside our brief, it certainly failed to stop the spread of ethno-religious violence. Despite more and more of the state’s police, legal and military resources being channelled into this task, despite repeated official reviews into procedures for handling religious clashes, which, arguably, resulted in them becoming more sophisticated, the number and ferocity of communal events steadily increased. By the 1890s, officials were starting to shake their heads; by the early 1930s, the mood in the corridors of power in Delhi had deteriorated to one of despair and resignation. Emblematic of this late colonial climate of defeatism was the order given to the police by the Punjab government, in 1931, to stay away from the Shahidganj Mosque, even though it had reliable intelligence that Akali Sikhs planned to attack it (an act of gross malfeasance that brings to mind the UP government’s negligence in regard to the Babri Mosque at Ayodhya in 1992). Although hard to quantify, it is clear that the government’s success rate in the area of riot control declined after the 1880s and especially after the First World War. On the face of it, putting aside the issue of will, it is rather hard to see why this should have been so, given how powerful the Raj was, especially compared to previous South Asian regimes. But perhaps it did not all come down to the issue of power; perhaps what mattered in the last resort was not power, but *authority*? Ian Copland’s study of the princely states shows that, head for head, communal incidents were less of a problem there than in the provinces; this could be interpreted as suggesting their rulers were better at managing communal conflict. Copland thinks this was because their position as religious insiders, and the exalted public status of the Hindu princes as sanctified ritual actors, endowed them with a certain charismatic authority that allowed them to regulate religious worship in a way that the Christian rulers of British India dared not emulate;¹⁵ and it appears that the latter intuitively understood this. Following the Bareilly business of 1871, the NWP government briefly flirted with the idea of banning religious processions in places with a history of violence (as, for several years, the nearby state of Rampur had banned Muharrum), but decided against it: the Nawab of Rampur had acted within his rights as a leader of the Shi‘a community; if the Raj, ‘a foreign power’, prohibited Muharrum, its motives would be exposed to ‘mistrust and misconception’.¹⁶

But then, the Indian state that succeeded the British Raj, the Republic, which did, arguably, draw a considerable quantum of moral authority from the fact that it had been elected, and was responsible to the people, also struggled to

get on top of the communal problem; by the 1980s, the death toll from Hindu–Muslim riots had reached unprecedented heights. Again one is struck by what this failure says about the modern state. The modern state is supposed to be a formidable institution, and the Indian Republic has, undeniably, huge resources. To judge by the published statistics (which are probably underestimates), its armoury has proved inadequate to the task. Before rushing to judgement, however, we would do well to pause for a moment to consider the nature of that task. Managing public worship has always been a challenge, but since the nineteenth century the challenge has grown by several orders of magnitude. First, the population in 1800 was about 200 million; it is now over a billion; second, the Republic has had to operate in the context of the bitter legacy of Partition and the shadow cast by Pakistan, the perennial enemy, which is widely held to be a covert patron of the country’s Muslim minority; third (and this is the ironic bit), the modern Indian state faces a much more difficult assignment than its predecessors because it has to deal with a different kind of society, one that has become open, mobile, articulate and organised *as a consequence of modernisation*.

Although recent scholarship has tended to play down the short-term impact of the rise of British power on Indian society, taking the nineteenth century as a whole it can fairly be argued that its effects were transformative, not least of the relationships between religious communities. In [Chapter 10](#), we saw how British economic policies led to an uneven rate of development that resulted in some classes, such as commercial caste Hindus, prospering and others, such as the rural Muslim gentry, falling behind; and how this growing wealth differential inflamed local rivalries over rights to public religious display. In [Chapter 11](#), we showed how the articulation, during the late nineteenth century, through vehicles such as the census, of an official sociology of India grounded in a reductionist perception of religious difference, caused elite Indians, acculturated by their exposure to ‘Western’ education to accept Western judgements about their country as scientific and rational, to look outward, beyond the traditional boundaries of sect and neighbourhood, to larger kinds of affinities such as ‘communities’ composed of ‘Hindus’ or ‘Muslims’ or ‘Sikhs’. And we noted too, in that chapter, how introduced ideas of the nation and of popular sovereignty encouraged and provoked the growing ‘educated’ Indian middle class to demand a bigger voice in the governance of the country, and eventually self-rule; and how the embrace of nationalism by the nascent anti-colonial movement led to its appropriation of religious myths, stories and symbols as a way of mobilising the masses and helping them to imagine the nebulous concept of nationhood. Then, in [Chapter 12](#), we looked at how political modernity, in the shape of parliamentary democracy, further exacerbated communal tensions by creating a new arena of elite competition populated by political parties that found it productive to appeal, at election time, to ‘banks’ of voters (identified, often, by religious affiliation) on the basis of ‘shared values’, and common interests vis-à-vis other com-

munities; and how the ferocity, spread and human cost of religious riots was transfigured, over the course of the late twentieth century, by modern technologies and products such as the telephone, petrol, television, the motor car, automatic weapons and remote control devices. Thanks to these multiple changes, the modern state has had to work much harder than its predecessors to achieve a comparable result.

And that was not its only handicap. Modern states are bureaucratic; and at least the democratic ones operate within an established framework of laws and regulations. In theory, at least, the government of a modern democratic state is barred from proceeding against troublemakers until they break the law. Pre-modern states were not encumbered by such constraints. They could crack down more or less at will. During the Emergency, when India lapsed briefly into despotism, the incidence of communal violence fell away markedly.¹⁷ Also, if Jan Heesterman is right, such states had a further advantage over their modern counterparts in that they were, at once, above *and part of* local civil society (or, as he puts it, the ‘inner frontier’). According to Heesterman:

the modern state denies internal conflict and [accordingly] does not know an inner frontier. Instead it is based on the notion of an unbroken . . . internal order. There are no more co-sharers in the realm [joined to it by] shifting networks of conflict and alliance [and part of] . . . the substance of the state, but only monadic subjects equal before the law and interchangeable.¹⁸

One component of the pre-modern dialogue that made up the inner frontier was, of course, religion. As this book has amply demonstrated, rulers and political leaders in those times were not simply religious *managers* but religious *actors*, in which capacity they routinely contributed to the discussions in society about doctrine and ritual (and sometimes tried to manipulate them to their advantage).

The British, though, broke with this practice. They had only marginal intellectual interest in India’s religious beliefs, and saw the monastic fighting *sādhus*, who had been highly sought after by previous regimes as mercenary soldiers, as a standing danger to the peace. They recruited some ‘*ulāma* and *pandits*’ as legal advisers, but the general body of religious professionals were deliberately kept at arm’s length by the colonial regime. This distancing policy denied the Raj a valuable line of communication into the heart of Indian society, one that could have been used to take some of the sting out of the anti-colonial movement; also, as William Pinch has pointed out, it led to Hinduism (and we would say Islam too) being co-opted by non-professionals for political purposes, which was one of the principal causes of the late nineteenth-century explosion of religion-related violence.¹⁹

Not surprisingly, when the country’s governance was restored to Indian hands, the policy was quickly reversed and the conversation resumed. Today,

Indian politicians of all stripes court *sādhus* and Shankaracharyas, and the parties of the Hindu Right enjoy a close relationship with the proselytising VHP.

Indian history shows that states that want to keep the volatile arena of organised religion securely under wraps cannot – by definition – be secular.

Governing the ungovernable

It is no coincidence that the concept of the secular state came into existence in the aftermath of the bloody European religious wars of the seventeenth century, and that it was first enshrined in legislation in the United States of America, a country founded, in large part, by dissenting Protestants fleeing statist religious persecution. The Protestant Reformation made individuals responsible for their own salvation by getting rid of the priesthood, and encouraged them to seek redemption through prayer. Dissenting sects such as the Baptists took this recasting further by dispensing with ritual, and introducing a simplified liturgy that could be performed in private houses. The Danbury Baptists, recipients of Thomas Jefferson's famous letter, did not need the patronage of the state; their worship required no lavish funding; what they were seeking and what they obtained from Jefferson was an assurance that the state would mind its own business. In turn, the American state, although cautious about legislating toleration, did not see the Baptists as a threat. In short, political secularism was evolved within, and to meet the needs of, a very specific kind of religious environment. Nevertheless, during the nineteenth century, as the ranks of Protestantism swelled, its basic precept that all believers have access to God through prayer came to be widely seen as normative, at least within the European religious world. 'Religion has become an individual matter', Ernest Renan told his audience at a lecture at the Sorbonne in 1882: 'it concerns the conscience of each person.'²⁰ In a Renan-style religious universe, the public management of religion would be unnecessary; indeed, it would be impossible. The state would be trying to govern the ungovernable.

But religion as understood, and practised, by most people around the globe is not like that. Even within the Protestant confession much worship is performed publicly, that is, congregationally; and in the more charismatic sects worship often includes rites, such as the 'laying on of hands', that are not only public but very theatrical. Evangelical religions also expect parishioners to 'bear witness' in their communities; and they actively canvass for converts. Catholicism, too, uses a lot of display in its liturgy, and frequently takes this outdoors. And processions and the like are, of course, critical components of most eastern religions such as Hinduism. Inevitably, these public religious forms impact on society. A procession cannot be held, a religious statue erected, without public space being set aside for the purpose. In the process, the rights of many people not of the congregation will be encroached upon. Proselytising is similarly invasive. So is much public religious statuary. Some of the many

icons of Hanuman, the monkey-god and loyal servant of Rama, which have been put up across India over the past few decades, are over fifty feet tall.²¹ And the consequences are likely to be still more drastic in cases where the same neighbourhood is occupied by adherents of different faiths, locked in competition for converts, processional privileges and access to disputed sacred sites.

In India, religion has been making waves in this manner for the better part of 3,000 years. Given that the first duty of any state, if it wants to prosper, is to maintain public order, Indian governments, virtually from the moment of their inception, have felt the need to intervene consistently and assertively in the religious domain to mitigate the social costs of sectarian disputation. The Constitution (at least in its post-1976 iteration) proclaims India to be a secular state, but the separation principle has never been a part of the tradition of Indian governance and is no more respected today than it was before the constitutional amendment was pushed through by Indira Gandhi. Does this mean that the oft-invoked concept of ‘Indian secularism’, and the historical consensus that the creation of a secular state was one of founding father Jawaharlal Nehru’s finest achievements, are total fictions?

Not at all; there *is* substance to these notions, not least in the elaborate protections offered by the Indian Constitution for religious freedom: the document asserts that Indian citizens are free to worship however they please; and any citizen who feels that his or her religious rights have been infringed can approach the Supreme Court directly for redress. Communities, similarly, have been offered constitutional protection for their cultural (in effect, often religious) customs and practices. These are valuable guarantees, and they sit very comfortably with the robust Indian tradition of religious pluralism, which at its best was a doctrine that encouraged toleration. However, the suggestion that all beliefs have an equal validity in the eyes of the state and must, therefore, be equally tolerated has caused the Indian courts, on occasions, to hand down judgments that have effectively given a green light to Hindu majoritarian aspirations. The judicial inquiry into the Bhiwandi riots of 1970, following earlier precedents, ruled that the action of the RSS-affiliated Rashtriya Utsav Mandal to take out a Shiv Jayanti procession in the mostly Muslim town at a time of heightened communal tension, though regrettable, was not unlawful since, under Art.19 (1), groups had ‘the same rights’ of passage in respect of public highways as individuals.²² And, in 1996, the Supreme Court dismissed a charge filed against the BJP Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Manohar Joshi, under the Representation of the People Act, of making an appeal to voters on the basis of religion, on the grounds that his use of the term ‘Hindutva’ did not, necessarily, equate to a stance of ‘hostility, enmity or intolerance towards other religious faiths’.²³

But then, when a state commits, as the Indian Republic has, to upholding religious freedom, it cannot just offload that task to the judiciary. The executive must also step up: to make sure that judicial decisions are implemented; and

to provide physical protection, from harassment or intimidation, for any and all individuals and groups engaged in lawful public religious business. To put it another way, if the state isn't able or willing to do this job, who can?

This isn't altogether a rhetorical question. The modern state is not, by any means, universally liked by social commentators, and of late some have started, rather gleefully, to predict the eventual demise of an institution they think has become (despite, or perhaps because of its accommodation with democracy) so totalitarian and all-encompassing as to be incapable of serving the diverse needs of grass-roots communities. According to John Hoffman, 'the [contemporary nation] state . . . compromises the freedom of all who live in the shadow of its force'.²⁴ 'At worst', a study of contemporary India concludes, 'the state simply fails to work'.²⁵ Nandy insists that the state has become 'ethnocidal'.²⁶ If the state is actually part of the problem, as these writers aver, then obviously any alternative would be an improvement. But what? The most favoured option is probably 'civil society': the networks and institutions of civil society – trade unions, chambers of commerce, friendly societies, non-governmental organisations and the like – can and do mediate social conflicts and would appear well suited to the task of resolving interfaith disputes since they are, typically, cross-ethnic in composition. Ashutosh Varshney argues persuasively, with respect to the Indian context, that, together with the commonplace everyday practices of neighbourhood life we talked about earlier, these civil society organisations have made a very substantial contribution to the project of communal harmony, forming, indeed, an 'institutionalized peace system' in the country.²⁷

Unhappily, though, the initiative that Varshney singles out as the most dramatic exemplar of civic-supported peacekeeping, the 'Bhiwandi experiment', has not fulfilled its promise. To be sure, the early signs were good. Following a second outbreak of Hindu–Muslim mayhem at Bhiwandi in 1984, the town got a new Police Superintendent, Suresh Khopade. Aware that he had inherited a communal hotspot, Khopade set himself to work out why the social cement of Bhiwandi had crumbled. After researching the riots of 1970 and 1984, he decided that the fault lay primarily with the local police, which had lost the confidence of a large part of the population, Muslims especially, and, as a result, access to valuable intelligence about the intrigues of anti-social elements. To address this problem, he came up with the idea of 'watch and ward' committees of residents, based in the city's *mohullas*. By 1990, over a score of these committees were in place. Above them stood an apex body, the Bhiwandi Peace Committee, chaired by the Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP). When, in 1992, post-Ayodhya riots exploded in Bombay, Bhiwandi remained quiet, and the general consensus was that this was due to the committee network.²⁸ Lately, however, Bhiwandi has reverted to its former ways. In July 2006, Muslim residents of Shanti Nagar, protesting against the erection of a police station on a plot of land they had appropriated as a burial ground, were fired on when they refused an order to disperse. Two were killed. 'The mob subsequently went berserk', torched five police wagons, attacked

the *kotwal*, and ‘lynched two constables’.²⁹ And what was Shanti Nagar’s *mohulla* committee doing as this mob ran amok? Nothing: because it had ceased to exist. ‘Around 90 per cent [of] Mohalla Committees have become defunct’, explained grocer Achyut Shetty, who had been one of Khopade’s first converts. ‘Nobody pays any attention to them anymore.’³⁰ Varshney spoke a bit too soon when he pronounced the Bhiwandi project a success. Nevertheless, it proved, in 1992, that civic engagement can work *if it is strongly supported by agencies of the state*. As Varshney has it, the lesson of Bhiwandi is that the best way forward is state–civil society *cooperation* in combating ethnic violence.³¹ In Bhiwandi, things eventually fell apart because the state failed to deliver after the retirement of Khopade’s successor.

The point to be stressed, though, is that the failure of the Indian state at Bhiwandi was one of will, not capacity. There is abundant evidence that the modern state has more than sufficient capacity to rein in fractious religious crowds. When well-armed police are deployed against riotous mobs, the latter invariably break and run; violence is cut short and lives are saved.³² Even personal intervention by respected authority figures can make a difference – as it did at Jalsa in 1970.³³ Indeed, the Indian story suggests that there is much that local officials can do to *pre-empt* outbreaks of communal violence by keeping a close watch on troublesome elements and using their influence to promote grass-roots interfaith harmony. Roger and Patricia Jeffrey contend that Bijnor District was insulated from communal violence for many years by the proactive stance taken by its magistrates, who ‘seem to have been willing (and able) to control potentially explosive events’.³⁴ And Lance Brennan demonstrates, in his analysis of the state’s response to communal conflict in post-colonial UP, that where ‘firm impartial leadership’ was displayed the incidence of violence fell.³⁵ Some would say that the modern state these days tries to do too much, and has become stretched too thin; certainly, its capacity to deal with the challenges thrown up by religious disputation would be enhanced if it channelled more of its resources into its ‘core function of supplying public goods’, such as safe streets.³⁶ Nevertheless, where there has been a ‘collapse of governance’ in respect of religious disputes, as, arguably, in Gujarat in 2002, the failure was because senior political leaders directed the local administration *not* to act, for reasons of presumed short-term advantage to themselves and their parties.³⁷

One would like to think that most governmental leaders are above such behaviour, even (dare we say) Indian leaders. But inflaming religious animosities is not just amoral, it is also bad politics. Academics consider the provision of ‘high levels of security from political and criminal violence’ one of the hallmarks of a ‘strong’ state.³⁸ In this they are at one with the populace; opinion polls show that people expect their governments to be benevolent and protective. Governments that encourage communal violence, or fail to act decisively to suppress it, are likely to suffer at the ballot box. Again, Wilkinson’s analysis of the Indian political scene suggests that party rivalry, which at times has led ambitious and unscrupulous leaders to play the

communal card as a way of attracting votes, at other times, such as when a party in government considers it needs the support of one or more religious minorities to stay in office, can actually be a moderating factor in the communal equation. If so, the recent trend in India towards the formation of coalitional governments is a most welcome development, since it will provide a further incentive for India's parties to soften their communal appeals. The Indian state unquestionably has the power to crush outbreaks of communal violence; what is more it has solid reasons to do so.

Yet are we not entitled to ask more of a twenty-first-century state than that? In addition to providing a secure environment for religious worship, should it not also be required to defend, and promote, the practice of toleration? As we saw in [Chapter 12](#), the Indian state is already obligated under the Constitution to protect people's freedom to worship as they choose; freedom of religion is flagged there as a Fundamental Right to which all Indians are entitled. However, this is a narrow and restrictive definition of toleration. We believe, with Niranjana Phukan, that, while religion should be protected, it must not be protected to the detriment of other forms of belief and that:

the coercive power of the state must ensure that religion does not interfere with or encroach upon the political obligations of the citizen and his respect for the laws of the state. Even the [task of securing] accommodation among different religions, their mutual toleration, may have to be ensured by such an authority.³⁹

People have a right to believe, but not to discriminate. If the state has a duty to protect the rights of believers, it has an equal responsibility to guard the rights of non-believers, even that minority among us who obstinately believe that there are no gods in heaven and that we ultimately control our own destinies.

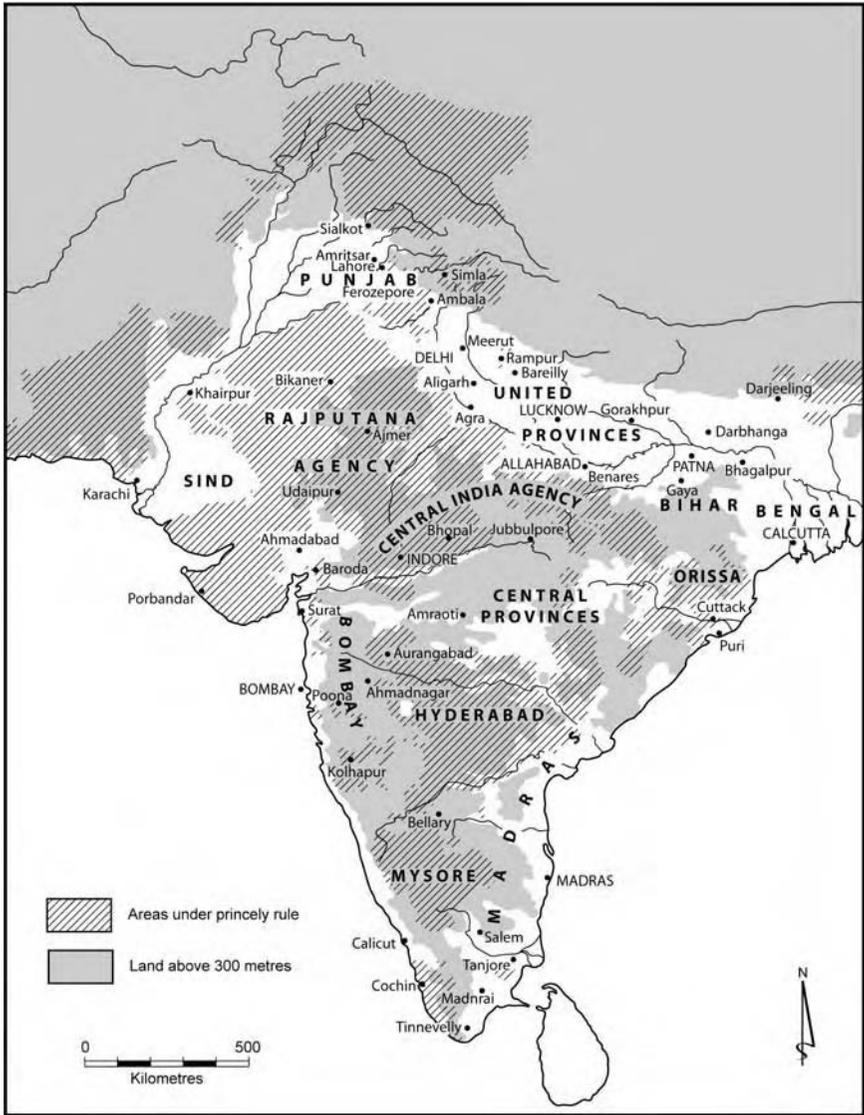
Maps



Map 1 Early India



Map 2 Mughal India



Map 3 Colonial India



Map 4 India, c.1985

Notes

1 Introduction

- 1 *The Sunday Age* (Melbourne), 30 November 2008.
- 2 Nehru to Chief Ministers, 26 April 1954, G. Parthasarathi (ed.) *Jawaharlal Nehru: Letters to Chief Ministers 1947–1964*, vol. 3 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 536.
- 3 Indian Constituent Assembly: *Official Report*, vol. 2, p. 401.
- 4 Frank D. van Aalst, 'The Secular State, Secularization and Secularism', *Quest*, 62 (1969), p. 25.
- 5 Nikki R. Keddie, 'Secularism and its Discontents', *Daedalus*, 132 (2003), pp. 15–16.
- 6 Cited in Donald Eugene Smith, *India as a Secular State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1963), p. 17.
- 7 The US story is ably recounted in Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Owl Books, 2004). Black judgment in *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421, SCR, 82 (1962), p. 1266.
- 8 Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (reprinted, New York: Free Press, 1965), p. 475.
- 9 Martin E. Marty, 'Our Religio-Secular World', *Daedalus*, 132 (Summer 2003), p. 44.
- 10 Peter L. Berger, 'Secularism in Retreat', *The National Interest*, 46 (Winter 1996), p. 6.
- 11 *The Age*, 12 November 2004; and *The Australian*, 4 October 2005.
- 12 For a critical appraisal of the role played by the authorities in these proceedings, based on a substantial body of first-hand testimony, see M.L. Sondhi and Apratim Mukarji (eds), *The Black Book of Gujarat* (New Delhi: Manak, 2002). The religious ties of the BJP, and its responsibility for the Gujarat pogrom, are further discussed in [Chapter 12](#).
- 13 A good discussion of the VHP can be found in Lise McKean, *Divine Enterprise: Gurus and the Hindu National Movement* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1996).
- 14 See especially Rajeev Bhargava (ed.) *Secularism and its Critics* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).
- 15 Ashis Nandy, 'An Anti-Secularist Manifesto', *Seminar*, 314 (1985), p. 16.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- 17 T.N. Madan, 'Secularism in its Place', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 46 (1987), p. 748.
- 18 T.N. Madan, 'Whither Indian Secularism?', *Modern Asian Studies*, 27 (1993), p. 695.
- 19 Nandy, 'Manifesto', p. 18; and 'The Twilight of Certitudes: Secularism, Hindu Nationalism, and Other Masks of Deculturation', in Veena Das, Dipankar Gupta

- and Patricia Uberoi (eds), *Tradition, Pluralism and Identity* (New Delhi/Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999), p. 410. It should be pointed out that, although bracketed here, the views of Nandy and Madan do diverge at several points, as the latter has acknowledged, and that Madan is generally more restrained and nuanced in his approach. T.N. Madan, *Modern Myths, Locked Minds: Secularism and Fundamentalism in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 275.
- 20 S.E. Finer, *The History of Government from the Earliest Times* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997), vol. I, p. 2.
 - 21 Akio Tanabe, 'Introduction', in Masaaki Kimura and Akio Tanabe (eds), *The State in India: Past and Present* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 1.
 - 22 See, e.g., Madan, *Modern Myths*, p. 263.
 - 23 Stuart Corbridge, Glyn Williams, Manoj Srivastava and René Véron, *Seeing the State: Governance and Governmentality in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 5.
 - 24 Most famously elaborated in his *Leviathan* (1651): see Stuart Hall, 'The State in Question', in Gregor McLennan, David Held and Stuart Hall (eds), *The Idea of the Modern State* (Milton Keynes/Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press, 1984), pp. 14–15.
 - 25 Charles Drekmeier, *Kingship and Community in Early India* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962), p. 247.
 - 26 Cited in J. Gonda, *Ancient Indian Kingship from the Religious Point of View* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1966), p. 3.
 - 27 Drekmeier, *Kingship and Community*, p. 245; and U.N. Ghoshal, *History of Indian Political Ideas: The Ancient Period and the Period of Transition to the Middle Ages* (reprinted London: Oxford University Press, 1966).
 - 28 S. Rokkan, 'Cities, States and Nations', in S.N. Eisenstadt and S. Rokkan (eds), *Building States and Nations* (London/Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1973), vol. II, p. 88.
 - 29 Hugh Urban, 'Politics and Religion: An Overview', in Lindsay Jones (ed. in chief), *Encyclopaedia of Religion* (2nd edn, Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference, 2005), p. 7254.
 - 30 Ibid, p. 7250.
 - 31 A.L. Srivastava, 'A Survey of India's Resistance to Medieval Invaders from the North-West: Causes of Eventual Defeat', *Journal of Indian History*, 43 (1965), pp. 349–68.
 - 32 Karl Marx, 'The Future Results of British Rule in India', *New York Daily Tribune*, 8 August 1853, as cited in Shlomo Avineri (ed.) *Karl Marx on Colonialism and Modernization* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), p. 132.
 - 33 Eric Stokes, 'The First Century of British Colonial Rule: Social Revolution or Social Stagnation' (1973), reprinted in Stokes, *The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 20.
 - 34 Burton Stein, *Peasant, State and Society in Medieval South India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980), especially concluding chapter; and Hermann Kulke, 'The Integrative Model of State Formation in Early Medieval India: Some Historiographical Remarks', in Kimura and Tanabe, *The State in India*, p. 65.
 - 35 Burton Stein, *Vijayanagara* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 49, 143; and Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1999), p. 20.
 - 36 Nandy, 'Twilight of Certitudes', p. 408.
 - 37 Natalie Zemon Davis, 'The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth Century France', *Past and Present*, 59 (1973), p. 178.
 - 38 David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 9.

- 39 Steven I. Wilkinson (ed.) *Religious Politics and Communal Violence* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), Appendix, pp. 405–44.
- 40 E.C. Sachau (ed.) *Alberuni's India* (Delhi: Chand, 1964), quotations from pp. 2, 122.
- 41 Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: An Essay on the Caste System*, trans. Mark Sainsbury (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1979).
- 42 Louis Dumont, 'The Conception of Kingship in Ancient India', *Religion, Politics and History in India* (Paris/The Hague: Mouton, 1970), p. 65.
- 43 Robert D. Baird, 'Religion and the Legitimation of Nehru's Concept of the Secular State', in Bardwell Smith (ed.) *Religion and the Legitimation of Power in South Asia* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), p. 73.
- 44 For example, see Nicholas B. Dirks, 'Political Authority and Structural Change in Early South Indian History', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 13 (1976), pp. 125–49; and *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), especially [chapter 1](#).
- 45 Ralph Buultjens, 'India, Religion, Political Legitimacy and the Secular State', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 483 (1986), p. 94.
- 46 Ainslie T. Embree, 'Religion in Public Space: Two Centuries of a Problem in Governance in Modern India', *India Review*, 1 (2002), p. 52.
- 47 Cited in Peter Robb, *Empire, Identity and India: Liberalism, Modernity and the Nation* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 210n.
- 48 A statement the American founding fathers would have endorsed heartily: cited in Bipan Chandra, Aditya Mukherjee and Mridula Mukherjee, *India After Independence* (New Delhi: Viking/Penguin India, 1999), p. 27.
- 49 *Harijan*, 24 March 1947.
- 50 M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of my Experiments with Truth* (London: Phoenix Press, 1949), p. 420.
- 51 Appropriately, this speech, of 23 September 1931, was delivered in a church. Raghavan Iyer (ed.) *The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 115.
- 52 Shahid Amin, 'Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921–2', in Ranajit Guha (ed.) *Subaltern Studies III* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), especially pp. 24–47.
- 53 Madan, 'Whither Indian Secularism?', p. 675.
- 54 Susanne Rudolph, 'Religion, States and Transnational Civil Society', in I. Lloyd and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, *Explaining Indian Democracy: A Fifty Year Perspective 1956–2006* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), vol. II, p. 104.

2 Religion and state formation

- 1 A.K. Narain, 'Religious Policy and Toleration in Ancient India with Particular Reference to the Gupta Age', in Bardwell L. Smith (ed.) *Essays on Gupta Culture* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983), pp. 17–51, at p. 17.
- 2 Resolution of the Lok Sabha dated 8 November 1962, cited in Ramesh Thakur, *The Politics and Economics of India's Foreign Policy* (London/New York: Hurst/St Martin's Press, 1994), p. 76.
- 3 Louis Dumont, 'The Conception of Kingship in Ancient India', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 6 (1962), pp. 48–77.
- 4 See particularly Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications* (Chicago, IL/London, 1980), pp. 76–9, at p. 76: 'That which encompasses is more important than that which is encompassed.' See also Dumont, 'On Putative Hierarchy and Some Allergies To It', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 5(1) (1971), pp. 58–81, especially at p. 69, where Dumont defends his position against various criticisms made by anthropologists.

- 5 Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 22, reviews the Dumontian argument for the primacy of religious categories and refers to the views of some of its critics.
- 6 Such an assumption is represented, for example, by the philosopher and first President of India, S. Radhakrishnan: 'The Hindu world view is not motivated by any consideration of political expediency. It is bound up with its religion and not its policy': S. Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* (2nd edn, London: Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 316 – but many similar examples could be cited.
- 7 G. Dumézil, *Mitra-Varuna: Essai sur deux représentations indo-européennes de la souveraineté* (Paris: Leroux, 1948).
- 8 See I.W. Mabbett, 'The Kauṭīliya Arthaśāstra and the Concept of Secularism', *South Asia*, 23 (2010), pp. 13–32.
- 9 Wendy Doniger (trans. and ed.) *Ṛg Veda: An Anthology* (Harmondsworth/New York: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 229.
- 10 Cited in David N. Lorenzen, *Who Invented Hinduism? Essays on Religion in History* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2006), p. 24.
- 11 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: New American Library, 1964).
- 12 S.N. Balagunadhara, 'The Heathen in his Blindness': *Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), p. 116.
- 13 Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 16.
- 14 Russell T. McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001); and see also Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'The Mystic East'* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), which explores the ways in which the concept of 'Hinduism' might be useful, but decides (see p. 111) that generally they are inappropriate.
- 15 Will Sweetman, *Mapping Hinduism: Hinduism and the Study of Indian Religions, 1600–1776* (Halle: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2003); Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009); Lorenzen, *Who Invented Hinduism*, p. 36; and B.K. Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented? Britons, Indians and the Colonial Construction of Religion* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- 16 Wendy Doniger, 'Hinduism by any Other Name', *Wilson Quarterly*, 15(3) (Summer 1991), p. 36.
- 17 Ernst Gellner, *Plough, Sword and Book: The Structure of Human History* (London: Collins Harvell, 1988). He argues, at p. 17: 'Agrarian societies tend to develop complex social differentiation . . . Two specialisms in particular become of paramount importance: the emergence of a specialized ruling class, and of a specialized clerisy (specialists in cognition, legitimation, salvation, ritual).'
- 18 Stephen K. Sanderson, *Social Transformations: A General Theory of Human Development* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995), p. 97.
- 19 R.A.L.H. Gunawardana, *Robe and Plough: Monasticism and Economic Interest in Early Medieval Sri Lanka* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, p. 344: 'Thus, if the relationship between the *sangha* and the king was symbiotic in character, it was to a remarkable degree an antagonistic symbiosis, since the expansion of the temporal authority of the monastery was, to that extent, a limitation of the authority of the king.'
- 20 Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 19.

- 21 A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), p. 75.
- 22 D.N. Jha, *Ancient India in Historical Outline* (rev. edn, New Delhi: Manohar, 1998), writes, at p. 108, that the cult of the god Vishnu ‘therefore acted as an effective instrument for reconciling the masses to their lot and maintaining the social division based on varna’. Romila Thapar, in *A History of India* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), vol. 1, p. 39, writes: ‘The priests were not slow to realize the significance of such a division of society and the supreme authority which could be invested in the highest caste. They not only managed to usurp the first position by claiming that they alone could bestow divinity on the king (which was by now essential to kingship) but they also gave religious sanction to caste divisions.’ Here, the Brahmins are credited with the initiative in constructing the social hierarchy based on caste and *varna*. Others, such as Jha, attribute the initiative to kings and nobles: ‘The ruling classes’, he writes, ‘often used religion for maintaining the social order based on varna.’ *Ancient India*, p. 106.
- 23 Where Buddhism is concerned, several contributions to a recent publication indicate support for this view. See Michael K. Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer (eds) *Buddhist Warfare* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- 24 We accept that religion furnished (and furnishes) legitimacy to the authority of political institutions through its cosmological dimension (on which see also below). However, the words ‘legitimacy’ and ‘legitimator’ have come to be associated with the theory that the function of priests in any pre-modern society was to invent a reason for people to accept the authority of their rulers, which they would not otherwise have had. This is not the same thing at all. It puts the cart before the horse, as suggested above. Sheldon Pollock gives a list of the weaknesses of the theory in ‘The Sanskrit Cosmopolis, 300–1300 CE: Transculturalism, Vernacularization, and the Question of Ideology’, in J.E.M. Houben (ed.) *Ideology and Status of Sanskrit* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), pp. 187–257, at pp. 236ff.
- 25 M. Archer, *Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 4.
- 26 Collins, *Nirvana and other Buddhist Felicities*, p. 21; he adds, however, that ‘we do know that they were given sufficient social prestige by those with military-political power that alternative discourses were suppressed’.
- 27 A. Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, vol. 1: *Power, Property and the State* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981), p. 67.
- 28 That such situations were well known in the India known to the author of the *Arthaśāstra* (hereafter *AŚ*) appears probable from the emphasis within this text upon the importance of spies and secret agents.
- 29 The problem of identifying the referent of the term *ārya* is discussed by David Lorenzen in his useful essay, ‘Religion, Skin Colour and Language: Ārya and Non-Ārya in the Vedic Period’, *Who Invented Hinduism?*, pp. 144–71.
- 30 Lorenzen, ‘Religion, Skin Colour and Language’, at p. 170, opts for ‘first religion and second skin colour’ as the main criteria recognised by Aryans.
- 31 A.A. Macdonell, *A Vedic Reader for Students* (London: The Clarendon Press, 1917), pp. 78f.
- 32 See the interesting discussion of this in J.C. Heesterman, *The Broken World of Sacrifice: An Essay in Ancient Indian Ritual* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1993).
- 33 M. Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or, Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965).
- 34 *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 1.6.4.21.

- 35 Additional terms for lordship or kingship that appear in early Indian texts include *bhaujya*, *svarājya* and *vairājya*, *AV* 10.128–9; *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, 39.1; and see B. Schlerath, *Das Königtum im Rg und Atharva Veda* (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1960).
- 36 See Hermann Kulke, ‘The Rājasūya: A Paradigm of Early State Formation?’, in A.W. van den Hoek, D.H.A. Kolff and M.S. Oort (eds) *Ritual, State and History in South Asia: Essays in Honour of J.C. Heesterman* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), pp. 188–98; R. Thapar, *From Lineage to State: Social Formations of the Mid-First Millennium B.C. in the Ganga Valley* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1984).
- 37 Kulke, ‘The Rājasūya’, pp. 129ff.
- 38 This process is discussed in greater detail in G. Bailey and I. Mabbett, *The Sociology of Early Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 77–107.
- 39 One way of looking at the process involves the hypothesis that the leaders of a relatively small community that finds itself specially advantaged in some practical way (such as access to growing river trade or to sources of valued materials such as iron for weapons) could attract the deference and allegiance of surrounding related communities. ‘Where a particular community is privileged above its fellow communities in the same broad cultural group by special access to desired goods, and if it maintains its edge over them in its own culture for long enough, these other communities may in the natural course of change accept ritually subordinate terms of association with it in order to obtain a share in the exploitation of the goods, rather than competing violently. This ritual subordination gradually turns into political subordination and the ritual eminence of the privileged community’s leaders gradually turns into the exercise of political power with the natural growth of economic activity promoted by exploitation of the goods.’ *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- 40 *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 5.1.1.13.
- 41 Kulke, ‘The Rājasūya’, p. 196.
- 42 P.J. Wilson, *The Domestication of the Human Species* (New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 80–1, 133. In the Ganges Valley, to some extent, it appears that political organisation (shown, for example, by the construction of huge earthworks) preceded the rapid application of technology (iron tools, writing, coinage) to economy and government. See G. Erdosy, ‘City States of North India and Pakistan at the time of the Buddha’, in F.R. Allchin (ed.) *The Archaeology of Early Historic South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 99–122, and R. Coningham, ‘Dark Age or Continuum?’, *ibid.*, pp. 67–71.
- 43 *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 5.3.1: these typically included the *rājan* himself, the general, the court chaplain (*purohita*, as mentioned above) and the chief queen; and cf. Kulke, ‘The Rājasūya’, pp. 191, 197 n. 11.
- 44 *Bṛhadārāṇyaka Upanishad* (hereafter *Bṛh U*) 3.1.1, trans. Patrick Olivelle, *Upanishads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 34.
- 45 *Bṛh U* 1.4.11, *ibid.*, p. 16.
- 46 *Bṛh U* 2.1.14–15, *ibid.*, p. 25.

3 Orthodoxies in competition and the birth of empire

- 1 Literally, as a ‘heard’ truth – the Vedas are often called *śruti*, ‘hearing’ (i.e. of divinely revealed words by the poet-seers who composed the Vedas) to distinguish them from the subsequent Brahmanical texts, containing exegesis and other material, which were designated as *smṛti*, ‘remembrance’. The latter were venerated for their human wisdom but were not held to be divinely inspired.
- 2 ‘Sanskrit’ (*saṃskṛta*) in Sanskrit means ‘refined’, ‘cultured’, ‘produced by art’, while Prakrit (*prākṛta*) means ‘raw’, ‘natural’ or ‘vernacular’. To the extent that the various regional Prakrits became fixed by written texts and to some extent

standardised, they became in their turn fixed literary systems, increasingly unlike actual spoken language as it evolved in daily use.

- 3 See A. Ghosh, *The City in Early Historical India* (Simla: Institute of Advanced Study, 1973), pp. ii, 66; and R.A.E. Coningham, 'Dark Age or Continuum', in F.R. Allchin and G. Erdosy, *The Archaeology of Early Historic South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 67–71.
- 4 See, for example, Hartmut Scharfe, *Investigations in Kautilya's Manual of Political Science* (2nd rev. edn, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1993).
- 5 See, for example, Sheldon Pollock, 'The Sanskrit Cosmopolis, 300–1300: Transculturation, Vernacularization and the Question of Ideology', in Jan E. Houben (ed.) *Ideology and Status of Sanskrit: Contributions to the History of the Sanskrit Language* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), pp. 197–247. At p. 197 he refers to the 'illusory and dangerous notions of the authentic, the autochthonous, the indigenous, the native'.
- 6 Thus, *Dharma* could be viewed as a real substance, though the claim has been debated: see P. Hacker, 'Dharma in Hinduism', *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 34 (2006), pp. 479–96. Much of the symbolism of the Vedic and Brahmanical texts offers seeming metaphors that were clearly meant to be understood in a literal sense, making substantial realities of words, statements and ideas.
- 7 For the points made in this paragraph we are indebted, particularly, to the excellent work done by J. Duncan M. Derrett: see his '*Rājadharma*', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 35 (1976), pp. 597–609, where he argues against Dumont's view of Indian kingship; and *Religion, Law and the State in India* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968).
- 8 See particularly Hacker, 'Dharma in Hinduism', at pp. 488f.
- 9 The triad of three ends of life, *artha*, *dharma* and *kāma* (material ends, *dharma*, and pleasure), was known early. A fourth was later added: *moksha*, meaning release or salvation. Whether *moksha* deserves to be called 'religion' to a greater or lesser extent than *dharma* is not a straightforward question.
- 10 Social psychologist Nandy associates the idea of the 'secular state' with 'a set of clear polarities: centre versus periphery, true faith versus its distortions, civil versus primordial, and great traditions versus local cultures'. See his *Time Warps: Silent and Evasive Pasts in Indian Politics and Religion* (London: Hurst, 2002), p. 64.
- 11 However, close examination must show that this text belongs, alongside the whole of Brahmanical literature, in an essentially pre-scientific world – ancient Indians did not have modern science to inform their world view. They made assumptions about the way things work that we do not. Yet, given the cosmological beliefs that they actually professed, their actions could be eminently rational. See Mabbett, 'The *Kautilīya Arthaśāstra*', loc. cit.
- 12 There are hints of karma theory, for example, in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad*, at 6.4.3 and at 6.4.12, where, in sexual congress, one partner may lose merit (called here *sukṛta*, not *karma*) to the other through certain faults, and where it is inferred that good mediation can facilitate the birth of a child with desirable characteristics.
- 13 See Padmanabh S. Jaini, 'Kama and the Problem of Rebirth in Jainism', in W.D. O'Flaherty [Doniger] (ed.) *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 217–38.
- 14 *Majjhima Nikāya*, III, 169–70; *Samyutta Nikāya*, I, 93–4; *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, II, 85–6; *Vin*, IV, 6.
- 15 Thapar, *From Lineage to State*, p. 150.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 150.
- 17 In the thinking of some schools, bad karma can be cancelled out, at death, by good karma, or a monk's attainment of enlightenment. The Buddhist philosophical text, Nāgajuna's *Mūlamadhyamakārikās*, discusses some contrasting theories of karmic action.

- 18 The historiography of this problem is reviewed in more detail in Bailey and Mabbett, *The Sociology of Early Buddhism*, pp. 13–36.
- 19 G. von Simson, 'Die zeitgeschichtliche Hintergrund der Entstehung des Buddhismus und seine Bedeutung für die Datierungsfrage', in H. Bechert (ed.) *The Dating of the Historical Buddha* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1991), p. 96.
- 20 S. Collins, *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 38.
- 21 A.K. Warder, 'On the Relationships between Buddhism and Other Contemporary Systems', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 18 (1956), p. 48.
- 22 R.S. Sharma, *Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India* (Delhi: Macmillan India, 1983), p. 126.
- 23 Kālāma Sutta, *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (P.T.S. edn), vol. 1, p. 189 (section 3).
- 24 U. Chakravarti, *The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 147ff.
- 25 W.H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1976), pp. 94ff.
- 26 K.T. Sarao, *Urban Centres and Urbanisation as Reflected in the Pali Vinaya and Sutta Pitakas* (Delhi: Vidyavidhi, 1990), pp. 175ff.
- 27 Romila Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations* (New Delhi: Orient Longmans, 1978), p. 55.
- 28 G.C. Pande, *Studies in the Origins of Buddhism* (3rd edn, Delhi: Banarsidass, 1981), pp. 327ff.
- 29 Warder, 'On the Relationships between Buddhism and Other Contemporary Systems', pp. 43–63, at p. 44.
- 30 *Udāna*, ed. Paul Steinthal (London: Pali Text Society, 1982), p. 10.
- 31 *Dīgha Nikāya* III.38.
- 32 See, for example, J.L. Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation State* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993).
- 33 Taylor, *Forest Monks*, pp. 214ff., 242 *et passim*.
- 34 Paul Mus, *India as Seen from the East: Indian and Indigenous Cults in Champa* (2nd edn, Clayton: Monash Asia Institute, 2010).
- 35 There are also several minor rock edicts and special inscriptions in some places.
- 36 Prominent is the work of K.R. Norman: see *Collected Papers* (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1990–2007).
- 37 Ananda W.P. Guruge, 'Emperor Aśoka and Buddhism: Some Unresolved Discrepancies Between Buddhist Tradition and Aśokan Inscriptions', *Vidyodaya Journal of Arts, Science and Letters*, 14 (1986), p. 6.
- 38 All Ashokan inscriptions known before the First World War were published by E. Hultzsch as *Inscriptions of Asoka*. The edition used here is the revised edition (Delhi: Indological Book House, 1969) (hereafter 'Hultzsch').
- 39 Pillar Edict 6, section B; Hultzsch, pp. 226ff.
- 40 Rock Edict 13, A–D; Hultzsch, pp. 207–12.
- 41 See Gérard Fussman, 'Central and Provincial Administration in Ancient India: The Problem of the Mauryan Empire', *Indian Historical Review*, 14(1–2) (1987–8), p. 51; cf. K.R. Norman, 'Lexical Variations in the Aśokan Rock Edicts', *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 69 (1970), p. 127, who offers the suggestion that, in Rock Edict 5, a reference to what is called 'conquered territory' in other versions is here replaced by 'the whole earth' (*sarvapurtivī*) perhaps to avoid local offence.
- 42 See particularly the Calcutta-Bairat inscription, B and D; Hultzsch, pp. 172–4.
- 43 M.A. Mehendale, 'Notes on Aśoka's Rock Edicts', in *Madhu Vidyā: Professor Madhukar Anant Mehendale Collected Papers* (Ahmedabad: Lalbhai Dalpatbhai

- Institute of Indology, 2001), pp. 307–12, proposes an amendment of Hultzsch’s reading of lines D and E to yield the meaning that monks should at all times refrain from praising their own sects and blaming others, and should always honour others.
- 44 Rock Edict 11, E; Hultzsch, p. 204.
- 45 B.N. Mukherjee, ‘Historical Data in the Aramaic and Greek Inscriptions of Aśoka’, in B.M. Pande and B.D. Chattopadhyaya (eds) *Archaeology and History: Essays in Memory of Shri A. Ghosh* (New Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1987), vol. 2, pp. 419–26.
- 46 Rock Edict 9, C.E.M.A. Mehendale proposes an improved reading of the passage in question to secure the probably intended meaning that, whereas the practice of *dhamma* yields karmic results in this world and the next, petty rituals produce effects only in this world: Mehendale, ‘Notes on Aśoka’s Seventh and Ninth Rock Edicts’, in *Madhu Vidyā*, pp. 313–17, at p. 316.
- 47 Minor Rock Inscription 1, E; Hultzsch, p. 228.
- 48 Rummidei Pillar inscription; Hultzsch, p. 164.
- 49 For example, the Nigali Sagar Pillar records that, after fourteen years of his reign, Ashoka doubled the size of the stūpa of the Buddha Konakamana (traditionally held to be a predecessor on earth of the known historical Buddha).
- 50 Minor Rock Edicts 1 and 3 (the latter found only at Bairat and moved to Kolkata), Rock Edict 8 and Minor Pillar Edict 1.
- 51 See U. Schneider, ‘The Calcutta-Bairat Edict of Aśoka’, in L.A. Hercus (ed.) *Indological and Buddhist Studies: Volume in Honour of Professor J.W. de Jong on His Sixtieth Birthday* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1982), pp. 491–8.
- 52 The Minor Pillar Edict found at Allahabad/Kosambi, Sanchi and Sarnath; Hultzsch, pp. 159–64.
- 53 See Heinz Bechert’s article in English, ‘The Importance of Aśoka’s So-called Schism Edict’ in Hercus (ed.) *Indological and Buddhist Studies*, vol. 2, pp. 61–8.
- 54 See Herman Tieken, ‘Aśoka and the Buddhist Sangha: A Study of Aśoka’s Schism Edict and Minor Rock Edict I’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 63 (2000), pp. 1–30, especially at pp. 16–18.
- 55 See particularly K.R. Norman, ‘Aśoka’s “Schism” Edict’, *Bukkyōgaku Seminā*, 46 (1987), pp. 1–34.
- 56 Rock Edict 5, H–K; Hultzsch, p. 87 [Dhauri].
- 57 Fussman, ‘Central and Provincial Administration’, p. 56.
- 58 A.A. Vigasin, ‘Aśoka’s Third Rock Edict Reinterpreted’, *Indian Historical Review*, 20 (1993–4), p. 21.
- 59 Rock Edict 13, R and S; Hultzsch, p. 211.
- 60 If any parts of the *Ārthaśāstra* are authentically of Mauryan date, we have abundant information about the structures and functions of government in the area administered from a capital city, but even in this case we have virtually none about the success of any actual government in controlling the outer regions of an empire.
- 61 First Separate Rock Edict (Dhauri and Jaugada), E and F.
- 62 See, for example, *ibid.*, I and J.
- 63 As Rock Edict 13, R and S, has it: ‘Even where the envoys of the Beloved of the Gods (Aśoka) have not gone, people hear of his conduct according to *dhamma*, and they follow *dhamma* and will continue to do so’; Hultzsch, p. 211.

4 Kings and sects

1 AŚ 6.2.13–24.

2 AŚ 2.9.33.

3 Cited in P.L. Gupta, *Roman Coins from Andhra Pradesh* (Hyderabad: Govt of Andhra Pradesh, 1963), p. 5.

- 4 Kathleen D. Morrison, 'Commerce and Culture in South Asia: Perspective from Archaeology and History', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 26 (1997), p. 94.
- 5 Kathleen D. Morrison, 'Trade, Urbanism and Agricultural Expansion: Buddhist Monastic Institutions and the State in the Early Historic Western Deccan', *World Archaeology*, 27 (1995), pp. 203–21.
- 6 See Richard H. Davis, 'Religions of India in Practice', in D. Lopez (ed.) *Asian Religions in Practice: An Introduction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 33.
- 7 P. Harrison, 'Searching for the Origins of the Mahāyāna: What Are We Looking For?' *The Eastern Buddhist*, new series, 28 (1995), pp. 48–69; and Hirakawa Akira, 'The Rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism and its Relationship to the Worship of Stupas', *Memoirs of the Toyo Bunko*, 22 (1963), pp. 57–106.
- 8 See particularly É. Lamotte, 'Sur la formation du Mahayana', in Johannes Schubert and Ulrich Schneider (eds) *Asiatica* (Leipzig: O. Harrassowitz, 1954), pp. 381–6.
- 9 G. Schopen, 'Burial *ad sanctos* and the Physical Presence of the Buddha in Early Indian Buddhism: A Study in the Archaeology of Religions', *Religion*, 17 (1987), pp. 193–225.
- 10 The three are the *dharma* body (the eternal transcendent truth or being of the Buddha), the *sambhoga* body (a manifestation as a resplendent heavenly being preaching to bodhisattvas), and the *nirmāṇa* body (the Buddha's earthly body, now taught to have been not physical but a supernatural projection).
- 11 *The Lotus Sutra*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 230: 'I am always here, never entering extinction.'
- 12 *RV* 6.49.7, 1.155, 6.69.
- 13 N. Dalsheimer and P.-Y. Manguin, 'Visnu mitrés et réseaux marchands en Asie du Sud-est: nouvelles données archéologiques sur le premier millénaire apr. J.-C.', *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient*, 85 (1998), pp. 87–123.
- 14 For example, at *Bhagavadgītā* 34 [12].1, Arjuna asks his charioteer (Krishna in disguise): 'Who are the wisest yogins – those who, constantly dedicated to you, attend on you with devotion, or those who seek the imperishable unmanifest?' The answer is unambiguous: the devoted worshippers. This text is important in giving weight to *bhakti* alongside the other orthodox routes to salvation.
- 15 H. Sarkar, *Studies in Early Buddhist Architecture of India* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1966), pp. 74–96.
- 16 The particular interpretation of *karman* advanced in this text is duty undertaken in a totally disinterested spirit, without the slightest inclination to gain reward or avoid suffering. This teaching allowed one to aim at salvation in any walk of life; the ascetic career of a monk was unnecessary.
- 17 Talagunda pillar inscription, cited in Narain, 'Religious Policy and Toleration', pp. 25, 27.
- 18 *Chandogya Upanishad* 6.8.6, 6.10.3, 6.12.3 *et passim*.
- 19 Manabendu Banerjee, *Historical and Social Interpretations of the Gupta Inscriptions* (Calcutta: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1989), p. 17.
- 20 D.R. Bhandarkar, B. Chhabra and G.S. Gai (eds) *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. III: *Inscriptions of the Early Guptas*, (rev. edn, New Delhi: Archaeological Society of India, 1981) (hereafter *C.I.I.*), no. 14, verse 6.
- 21 *Manusmṛiti* (*Mn*) 8.128: if the king punishes the innocent and fails to punish the guilty, he will go to hell. Cf. the *Nārada-smṛiti* at 18.14–15: if the king fails to apply the rod of danda (discipline, force), there will be a general collapse of social integration.
- 22 'Confusion of castes' (*varṇasaṃkara*) was held to be an evil consequence of breakdown in royal government; for example, the *Bhagavadgītā*, I.41, says: 'O Krishna, because of the prevalence of unrighteousness (*adharma*), the women

- of the family are corrupted; when the women are corrupted . . . there is confusion of castes.’
- 23 In the case of Samudra Gupta, the evidence is not in any inscription of his own but the Bhitari stone pillar inscription of Skandagupta, *C.I.I.* vol. III, no. 31, pp. 312–17: in line 2 the ruler is described as the ‘performer of the *aśvamedha* sacrifice that had been long delayed’.
 - 24 Cited and discussed by Lorenzen in ‘The Religious Ideology of Gupta Kingship’, in Lorenzen, *Who Invented Hinduism?*, p. 180.
 - 25 A dissenting view is offered by Ramchandra N. Dandekar, *The Age of the Guptas and Other Essays* (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1982), pp. 78ff. Dandekar claims that the Bhagavatas received patronage as a sect only from the time of Chandra Gupta II; his predecessor, Samudra Gupta, was, he claims, a Vaishnava but not a Bhagavata.
 - 26 Dandekar, *The Age of the Guptas*, p. 80.
 - 27 See, for example, *Epigraphia Indica (E.I.)* I, p. 13; *E.I.* XXI, pp. 8ff.
 - 28 Udayagiri Cave Inscription of Chandra Gupta II, AD 401, *C.I.I.* vol. III, no. 11, pp. 255–7, at line 5.
 - 29 This was the case for a Buddhist devotee, Amrakarddava, who was an official serving Chandra Gupta II and who made a donation to support the costs of feeding and maintaining monks: *C.I.I.* vol. III, no. 9, pp. 247–52 at lines 1–7.
 - 30 According to his account there were about 500 monasteries belonging to the Hinayana schools (the older schools, founded long before the rise of Mahayana); in the Punjab there were temples with ten thousand monks; in the area of the Yamuna River there were twenty monasteries with 3,000 monks; the kings of the region he claimed to be strong Buddhist supporters who would wait on the monks at table: Fa Hsien (Faxian), *The Travels of Fa-hsien (399–414 AD)*, trans. H.A. Giles (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), p. 20.
 - 31 S.R. Goyal, *A History of the Imperial Guptas* (Allahabad: Central Book Depot, 1967), p. 188.
 - 32 *Ibid.*, pp. 292ff.
 - 33 For example, B.P. Sinha, *Dynastic History of Magadha, c. 450–1200 AD* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1977), pp. 71ff.
 - 34 Jha, *Ancient India*, p. 116.
 - 35 *Mn* 7.8.
 - 36 Burton Stein, ‘Mahānavamī: Medieval and Modern Kingly Ritual in South India’, in Bardwell L. Smith (ed.) *Essays on Gupta Culture* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983), pp. 67–90. Cf. R. Lingat, *The Classical Law of India*, trans. J. Duncan M. Derrett (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973), p. 208: ‘The dominant idea of the dharmaśāstra writers seems to have been that it was not the king who had a divine nature, but the royal function itself.’
 - 37 *C.I.I.* vol. III, no. 16, p. 267 at line 2.
 - 38 *C.I.I.* vol. III, no. 1, pp. 203–20 at line 25.
 - 39 *Ibid.*, p. 214 at line 28.
 - 40 J.W. Spellman drew a diagram showing, in pyramidal tiers, the various graded conceptions of divinity that could be attached to kings: see his *Political Theory of Ancient India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 28.
 - 41 As F. Asher opines, ‘It seems likely that Indian sensibility would have been repelled by a literal identification of the king with the Divine and would have preferred a more subtle analogy’: ‘Historical and Political Allegory in Gupta Art’, in Smith, *Essays on Gupta Culture*, p. 64.
 - 42 *Ibid.*, pp. 54ff.
 - 43 *Ibid.*, p. 62.
 - 44 Dandekar, *Age of the Guptas*, p. 79.

- 45 The tradition of ‘men of prowess’ has been discussed, particularly in the case of Southeast Asian kingship: see O.W. Wolters, *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (New York: Cornell University Southeast Asian Program Publication no. 26, 1999).
- 46 *C.I.I.* vol. III, no. 28, pp. 296–305, at verses 3, 4 (translation adapted).
- 47 This argument is developed at some length in Burton Stein, ‘All the Kings’ Mana: Perspectives on Kingship in Medieval South India’, in J.F. Richards (ed.) *Kingship and Authority in South Asia* (Madison, WI: Dept. of South Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin, 1978), pp. 115–51.
- 48 D.N. Lorenzen, ‘The Religious Ideology of Gupta Kingship’, in Lorenzen, *Who Invented Hinduism?* p. 185. Lorenzen suggests that the heroic ideal appealed basically to ‘lower ranking soldiers and government servants’, the ideal of sacerdotal legitimisation through Brahmanic ritual to the wealthy upper caste peasantry and ‘sections of the incipient government bureaucracy’, and the moral ideal to the commercial class.
- 49 *AS* 4.1.5.
- 50 See, for example, C. Mackenzie Brown, *The Devī Gītā: The Song of the Goddess* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 242ff.
- 51 The importance for ordinary Buddhists, both monks and laity, of sacred sites as a source of sacred power has been well brought out in the work by Gregory Schopen referred to earlier; see G. Schopen, ‘Burial *ad sanctos* and the Physical Presence of the Buddha’, pp. 193–225.
- 52 See G. Flood, ‘The Śaiva Traditions’, in Flood (ed.) *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), p. 217; and cf. P. Younger, *Home of the Dancing Siva: The Traditions of the Hindu Temple* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- 53 This applied to Buddhists, too: see Adrian Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Southeast Asian Program, 1985).
- 54 Max Weber, cited in D.E. Smith, *India as a Secular State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 61ff.
- 55 Manabendu Banerjee, *A Study of Important Gupta Inscriptions* (Calcutta: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1976), p. 16.
- 56 Banerjee, *Historical and Social Interpretations*, p. 16.
- 57 *AS* 2.4.17.
- 58 Banerjee, *Historical and Social Interpretations*, p. 14.
- 59 *The Travels of Fa-hsien*, p. 20.
- 60 Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, ‘The Image of the Heretic in the Gupta Purāṇas’, in Smith, *Essays on Gupta Culture*, p. 109; and see also A.K. Narain, ‘Religious Policy and Toleration in Ancient India with Particular Reference to the Gupta Age’, in *ibid.*, pp. 17–51.
- 61 Doniger O’Flaherty, ‘The Image of the Heretic’, p. 107.
- 62 *AS* 5.2.3 says: royal agents may confiscate the property of ‘heretical communities’ (though this seems in the context to be justified not so much by any pro-Brahmanical moral judgement as by the belief that agents can expect to get away with it. Other vulnerable groups may similarly be targeted.)
- 63 A.H. Longhurst, *The Buddhist Antiquities of Nagarjunakonda, Madras Presidency* (New Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1938), p. 6: the author asserts that, in the absence of nearby towns or suitable roads, quarrying by builders cannot explain the depredations.
- 64 Doniger O’Flaherty, ‘The Image of the Heretic’, p. 121.
- 65 Narain, ‘Religious Policy and Toleration’, pp. 28ff.
- 66 *Ibid.*, p. 51: ‘Tolerance’, Narain concludes, was something that individual kings could adopt or not as they chose (p. 51). This view seems sensible and fits with

the argument we are seeking to make in this book that the common denominator of Indian religious governance was pragmatism.

- 67 The Krishna-Pranami sect, founded in the mid-seventeenth century, was, and continues to be, headed up by a guru called a 'maharaja'. The Krishna-Pranami Maharaja occupies a *gaddī* (i.e., throne) located at the sect's 'capital', Jamnagar, which is in present-day Gujarat state. See Gérard Toffin, 'The Propagation of a Hindu Sect in India and Nepal: the Krishna-Prānamī *Sampradāy*', *South Asia*, new series, 34 (2011), pp. 1–30.
- 68 On Vaishnava devotionalism, see particularly Gérard Colas, 'History of Vaishnava Traditions: An Esquisse', in G. Flood (ed.) *Hinduism* (Malden, MA/Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 229–70.
- 69 On the Shaivite devotional schools, see particularly Flood, 'The Śaiva Traditions', pp. 200–8.
- 70 Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), especially p. 61.
- 71 Declan Quigley, *The Interpretation of Caste* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 129.
- 72 A.M. Hocart, *Kings and Councillors: An Essay in the Comparative Anatomy of Human Society* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1936); and see also Quigley, *Interpretation of Caste*, [chapter 6](#).

5 Dār-ul-Islām

- 1 K.S. Lal reckons the Muslim share of the population, around 1600, at one ninth; on the basis of data from Rajasthan, Shireen Moosvi puts it a bit lower, around 9.4 per cent. K.S. Lal, *Growth of Muslim Population in Medieval India* (New Delhi: Research Publications in Social Sciences, 1973), p. 145; and Shireen Moosvi, 'Demographic Growth and Composition', in J.S. Grewal (ed.) *The State and Society in Medieval India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 118.
- 2 The order was given by the Mughal emperor Humayan. Cited in Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretist Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 30.
- 3 Susan Bayly, 'The Limits of Islamic Expansion in South Asia', in Anna Libera Dallapiccola and Stephanie Zingal-Avé Lallemand (eds) *Islam and Indian Regions* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1993), vol. 1, p. 454.
- 4 Richard M. Eaton, 'Introduction', in Richard M. Eaton (ed.) *India's Islamic Traditions, 711–1750* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 15.
- 5 Cited in Aziz Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 7.
- 6 K.N. Pandit (trans.), *Baharistan-i-Shahi: A Chronicle of Medieval Kashmir* (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1991), p. 34.
- 7 Ahmed Ali, *Al-Qur'ān: A Contemporary Translation* (2nd edn, Karachi: Akrash Publishing, 1986) [hereafter Qur'an], 9:5.
- 8 Lal, *Growth of Muslim Population*, p. 204.
- 9 Qur'an, 56:15–38.
- 10 T.W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam: A History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith* (2nd edn, reprinted New Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1990), p. 413.
- 11 Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), p. 309.
- 12 Cited in Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam*, p. 417.
- 13 Anthony Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought: From the Prophet to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 11–12.
- 14 *Maktūbāt-i-Sadi*, in William Theodore de Bary (gen. ed.) *Sources of Indian Tradition* (New York/London: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 420.

- 15 Occasionally, formal invitations to resettle were extended to Sufi masters by Muslim families living in outlying areas. Bayly, 'Limits of Islamic Expansion', p. 455.
- 16 S.A.A. Rizvi, *The Wonder That Was India* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1987), vol. II, p. 247; and Sachau, *Alberuni's India*, p. 50.
- 17 Cited in Asim Roy, 'The Interface of Islamization, Regionalization and Syncretization: The Bengal Paradigm', in Dallapiccola and Lallemand, *Islam and Indian Regions*, p. 110.
- 18 Mohammad Ishaq Khan, 'The Impact of Islam on Kashmir in the Sultanate Period (1320–1586)', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 23 (1986), p. 200.
- 19 Cited in M.N. Pearson, 'Pre-Modern Muslim Political Systems', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 102 (1982), p. 50.
- 20 Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, p. 308.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 309.
- 22 Roy, 'The Interface of Islamization', p. 103.
- 23 Richard Maxwell Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur: Social Roles of Sufis in Medieval India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 53.
- 24 R.L. Hangloo, 'The Sultanate of Kashmir', in Grewal, *State and Society in Medieval India*, p. 56.
- 25 Cited in Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur*, p. 71.
- 26 Cited in André Wink, 'Islamic Society and Culture in the Deccan', in Dallapiccola and Lallemand, *Islam and Indian Regions*, p. 218.
- 27 Pushed out of Delhi at the end of the thirteenth century, the Ilberī Turks eventually settled in Bengal. Anirudda Ray, 'The Sultanate of Bengal', in Grewal, *State and Society in Medieval India*, p. 258.
- 28 Cynthia Talbot, 'Becoming Turk the Rajput Way: Conversion and Identity in an Indian Warrior Narrative', *Modern Asian Studies*, 43 (2009), p. 225; and see also Simon Digby, 'Before Timur Came: Provincialization of the Delhi Sultanate through the Fourteenth Century', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 47 (2004), pp. 302–25.
- 29 *Futūṭ-i Fīroz Shāhī*, in Sir H.M. Elliot and John Dowson (eds) *The History of India as Told by its Own Historians* (Calcutta: Susil Gupta India Ltd, 1953–60), vol. III, p. 386.
- 30 Pandit, *Baharistan-i-Shahi*, p. 93.
- 31 Talbot, 'Becoming Turk the Rajput Way', p. 223.
- 32 Cited in Patricia Crone, *God's Rule: Government and Islam: Six Centuries of Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 270.
- 33 Qur'an, 4:62.
- 34 Sachau, *Alberuni's India*, p. 99 (our emphasis).
- 35 For a discussion of Islamic governance, see Ann K.S. Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam: An Introduction to the Study of Islamic Political Theory* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Lambton, 'Islamic Political Thought', in Joseph Schacht and C.E. Bosworth (eds) *The Legacy of Islam* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974); and E.I.J. Rosenthal, *Political Thought in Medieval Islam: An Introductory Outline* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
- 36 Cited in Muzaffar Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam: India – 1200–1800* (London: Hurst, 2004), p. 28.
- 37 Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture*, p. 7.
- 38 Rizvi, *The Wonder That Was India*, pp. 158–9.
- 39 Richard M. Eaton, 'Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States', in David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence (eds) *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Re-Thinking Religious Identities in Islamate South Asia* (Gainesville, FL/New Delhi: India

- Research Press, 2002), p. 252. Eaton here draws upon a Chishti narrative of the 'revolution' of 1347, which put Hasan Bahmani on the throne.
- 40 Cited in Rizvi, *The Wonder That Was India*, p. 156.
 - 41 Frederick Mathewson Denny, *An Introduction to Islam* (3rd edn, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2006), p. 204.
 - 42 Rizvi, *The Wonder That Was India*, p. 157.
 - 43 M.L. Bhatia, *Administrative History of Medieval India (A Study of Muslim Jurisprudence under Aurangzeb)* (New Delhi: Radha Publications, 1992), pp. 158–60.
 - 44 Cited in Irfan Habib, 'The Delhi Sultanate', in Grewal, *State and Society in Medieval India*, p. 41.
 - 45 Muhammad Habib and Afsar Salim Khan (eds and trans.), *The Political Theory of the Delhi Sultanate* (Allahabad: Kitab Mahal, n.d.), pp. 64–5.
 - 46 Hangloo, 'The Sultanate of Kashmir', pp. 57–8.
 - 47 John L. Esposito (ed.) *The Oxford History of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 402–4.
 - 48 Eaton, 'Temple Desecration', p. 253.
 - 49 Sultan Muhammad's relations with the Sufis remain a subject of considerable dispute. Esposito, *Oxford History of Islam*, p. 404, outlines some of the source problems that confront historians of his reign.
 - 50 Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 193–200; and A.K.S. Lambton, *Theory and Practice in Medieval Persian Government* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1980).
 - 51 Cited in Rizvi, *The Wonder That Was India*, p. 157.
 - 52 A. Schimmel, 'Introduction', in Dallapiccola and Lallemand, *Islam and Indian Regions*, vol. 1, p. 5.
 - 53 Cited in Esposito, *The Oxford History of Islam*, p. 404.
 - 54 Eaton, 'Temple Desecration', p. 252.
 - 55 Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur*, p. 288.
 - 56 Bruce B. Lawrence, 'The Eastward Journey of Muslim Kingship', in Esposito, *The Oxford History of Islam*, p. 404.
 - 57 Daniela Bredi, 'Shiism's Political Valence in Medieval Deccan', in Dallapiccola and Lallemand, *Islam and Indian Regions*, p. 137.
 - 58 Qur'an, 2:256.
 - 59 Cited in Satish Chandra, *Essays on Medieval Indian History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 300.
 - 60 Cited in Irfan Habib, 'The Delhi Sultanate', in Grewal, *State and Society in Medieval India*, p. 41; on the capitalist class in general, see Shireen Moosvi, 'Merchants in Medieval India', *ibid.*, pp. 135–46.
 - 61 Barani, *Tarikh-i Firuz Shahi* (Lahore: Sind Sagar Academy, 1974), p. 44.
 - 62 Chandra, *Essays*, p. 297.
 - 63 K.A. Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India During the Thirteenth Century* (2nd edn, Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, 2002), p. 336.
 - 64 Bredi, 'Shiism's Political Valence', p. 138.
 - 65 Cited in Chandra, *Essays*, p. 47.
 - 66 Habib, 'The Delhi Sultanate', p. 41; Talbot, 'Becoming Turk', p. 222; and Ray, 'The Sultanate of Bengal', pp. 255, 257.
 - 67 Slaves, who made up a sizeable part of the retainers of the sultans (Firuz Tughluq owned 180,000), were an exception. Conversion was insisted upon at point of sale. This made it easier, though, for able slaves to rise up through the ranks – and in the early thirteenth century a coup by Qutbuddin Aibak led to the founding of the first of the dynasties that would comprise the Delhi Sultanate, the 'Slave' Dynasty (r. 1206–90).

- 68 Elliot and Dowson, *History of India*, vol. 1, p. xxi.
- 69 Vincent A. Smith, *The Oxford History of India* (rev. 3rd edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 240–9.
- 70 Rizvi, *The Wonder That Was India*, p. 14.
- 71 Hangloo, ‘The Sultanate of Kashmir’, p. 59.
- 72 Muzaffar Alam, ‘Sharia and Governance in Indo-Islamic Context’, in Gilmartin and Lawrence, *Beyond Turk and Hindu*, p. 219.
- 73 Eaton, ‘Temple Desecration’, pp. 255–60.
- 74 Barani, *Tarikh-i Firuz Shahi*, p. 291.
- 75 *Ibid.*, p. 147.
- 76 Eaton, ‘Introduction’, in Eaton, *India’s Islamic Traditions*, p. 10.
- 77 P.M. Holt, A.K.S. Lambton and B. Lewis (eds) *The Cambridge History of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), vol. 2, p. 19.
- 78 Smith, *Oxford History*, p. 261.
- 79 *Ibid.*
- 80 Pearson, ‘Pre-modern Muslim Political Systems’, p. 56: Pearson was generalising here about the wider Muslim world, but clearly with the example of India partly in mind.
- 81 Cited in Habib, ‘The Delhi Sultanate’, p. 39 (our italics).
- 82 Talbot, ‘Becoming Turk’, p. 223.
- 83 Moosvi, ‘Merchants in Medieval India’, pp. 157–8.
- 84 Doniger, *The Hindus*, p. 447.
- 85 Cited in de Bary, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, p. 535.
- 86 *Ibid.*, p. 363.
- 87 *Ibid.*, p. 532.
- 88 Cited in Doniger, *The Hindus*, p. 445.

6 The Mughal dispensation

- 1 John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 1.
- 2 Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds) *The Mughal State 1526–1750* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 70.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 57; see also Katherine Butler Brown, ‘Did Aurangzeb Ban Music? Questions for the Historiography of his Reign’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 41 (2007), pp. 113–14.
- 4 Brown, ‘Did Aurangzeb Ban Music?’, p. 78.
- 5 Iqtidar Alam Khan, ‘Medieval Indian Notions of Secular Statecraft in Retrospect’, *Social Scientist*, 14 (1986), pp. 3–15.
- 6 Eaton, *India’s Islamic Traditions*, p. 24.
- 7 Carl W. Ernst, ‘Situating Sufism and Yoga’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3rd series, 15 (2005), p. 17; and see also Ernst, ‘Muslim Studies of Hinduism? A Reconsideration of Arabic and Persian Translations from Indian Languages’, *Iranian Studies*, 36 (2003), pp. 173–95; and Barbara D. Metcalf, ‘Too Little and Too Much: Reflections on Muslims in the History of India’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 54 (1995), pp. 951–67.
- 8 For example, Gilmartin and Lawrence, *Beyond Turk and Hindu*, pp. 1–20; Metcalf, ‘Too Little and Too Much’, p. 957; Cynthia Talbot, ‘Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu–Muslim Identities in Pre-Colonial India’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 37 (1995), pp. 692–722; and Rajat Kanta Ray, *The Felt Community: Commonality and Mentality before the Emergence of Indian Nationalism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), especially chapter 2.
- 9 Peter Hardy, ‘Abul Fazl’s Portrait of the Perfect Padshah: A Political Philosophy for Mughal India – or a Personal Puff Piece for a Pal?’ in Christian W. Troll (ed.)

- Islam in India: Studies and Commentaries* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1985), vol. 2, p. 130.
- 10 Yohanan Friedmann, 'Medieval Muslim Views of Indian Religions', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 95 (1975), p. 21.
 - 11 Gilmartin and Lawrence, *Beyond Turk and Hindu*, pp. 5, 12.
 - 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.
 - 13 Richards, *Mughal Empire*, pp. 7–8.
 - 14 Discussions of these groups, their prominence and numbers can be found in S. Chandra, J.S. Grewal and I. Habib, 'Akbar and His Age: A Symposium', in *Social Scientist*, 20 (9/10) (1992), p. 63; Satish Chandra, 'Jizya and the State in India during the Seventeenth Century', in Eaton, *India's Islamic Traditions*, pp. 141–2; Iqtidar Alam Khan, 'The Nobility under Akbar and the Development of his Religious Policy, 1560–80', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1/2 (1968), pp. 29–30; Richards, *Mughal Empire*, pp. 145, 147; and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Iranians Abroad: Intra-Asian Elite Migration and Early Modern State Formation', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 51 (1992), pp. 345–7.
 - 15 For a basic introduction to the religions of the empire, see Annemarie Schimmel, *The Empire of the Great Mughals: History, Art and Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), [chapter 4](#).
 - 16 Lisa Balabanlilar, 'Lords of the Auspicious Conjunction: Turco-Mongol Imperial Identity on the Subcontinent', *Journal of World History*, 18 (2007), pp. 1–39.
 - 17 Richards, *Mughal Empire*, pp. 13–15.
 - 18 Harbans Mukhia, *The Mughals of India: A Framework for Understanding* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 2004), p. 55.
 - 19 See Iqtidar Alam Khan, 'Akbar's Personality Traits and World Outlook: A Critical Reappraisal', *Social Scientist*, 20 (1992), pp. 16–30.
 - 20 Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'The Mughal State – Structure or Process? Reflections on Recent Western Historiography', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 29 (1992), pp. 303–5.
 - 21 *Tarikh-i Alfi*, cited in Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History of the Muslims in Akbar's Reign with Special Reference to Abu'l Fazl* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1975), p. 254.
 - 22 Subrahmanyam, 'The Mughal State', pp. 305–6.
 - 23 *Ibid.*, p. 306; Alam and Subrahmanyam, *The Mughal State*, pp. 22–3.
 - 24 The seminal text is probably J.F. Richards, 'The Formulation of Imperial Authority under Akbar and Jahangir', in Alam and Subrahmanyam, *The Mughal State*, pp. 126–67. Also important is the discussion in Alam, *Languages of Political Islam*; and see, too, Catherine Asher, 'A Ray from the Sun: Mughal Ideology and the Visual Construction of the Divine', in Matthew Kapstein (ed.) *The Presence of Light: Divine Radiance and Religious Experience* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2004), pp. 161–94. Older works that address the issue are Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *Akbar & Religion* (Delhi: Idarah-i Abiyat-i Delli, 1989); Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History*; and Sri Ram Sharma, *The Religious Policy of the Mughal Emperors* (2nd edn, London: Asia Publishing House, 1962).
 - 25 Cited in Khan, 'The Nobility under Akbar', p. 32, n. 16.
 - 26 *Ibid.*, p. 32.
 - 27 Cited in Sharma, *Religious Policy*, pp. 31–2.
 - 28 Khan, 'Nobility under Akbar', pp. 34–5.
 - 29 Hardy, 'Abul Fazl's Portrait', p. 130.
 - 30 The following discussion draws on M. Athar Ali, 'Translation of Sanskrit Works at Akbar's Court', *Social Scientist*, 20 (1992), pp. 38–45, and Ernst, 'Muslim Studies of Hinduism'.
 - 31 Ernst, 'Muslim Studies of Hinduism', p. 180; and see also Alam, *Languages*, pp. 65–7.

- 32 Alam, *Languages*, pp. 13, 65.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 56.
- 34 Hardy, 'Abul Fazl's Portrait', p. 127.
- 35 Savitri Chandra, 'Akbar's Concept of Sulh-kul, Tulsi's Concept of Maryada and Dadu's Concept of Nipkah: A Comparative Study', *Social Scientist*, 20 (1992), pp. 31–7; and Chandra, Grewal and Habib, 'Akbar and his Age', pp. 66–7. See also Ernst, 'Situating Sufism', which discusses Sufi attitudes towards, and adoption of, yogic practices.
- 36 H. Blochmann (trans.), *The Ain-i Akbari by Abul Fazl 'Allami*, vol. 1 (2nd edn, Delhi: Aadiesh Book Depot, 1965) [hereafter *Ain*], p. iii.
- 37 Asher, 'A Ray from the Sun', pp. 176–8, 181, 184–5.
- 38 *Ibid.*, pp. 161, 167. The epithet 'Rauza-i Munawwar' is also applied to Muhammad's tomb in Medina, a fact Shah Jahan would undoubtedly have known; see *ibid.*, pp. 186–7.
- 39 Hardy, 'Abu'l Fazl's Portrait', pp. 124, 136–7.
- 40 Brown, 'Did Aurangzeb Ban Music?' p. 93. See also Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Witnessing Transition: Views on the End of the Akbari Dispensation', in K.N. Pannikar, Terence J. Byres and Utsa Patnaik (eds) *The Making of History: Essays Presented to Irfan Habib* (London: Anthem, 2002), pp. 122, 124. *Mansabdars* were holders of *mansabs*, the system of numerical ranking introduced by Akbar and which underpinned the structure of Mughal warrior nobility and administration.
- 41 B.L. Bhadani, 'The Profile of Akbar in Contemporary Rajasthani Literature', *Social Scientist*, 20 (1992), pp. 46–53.
- 42 Subrahmanyam, 'Mughal State', p. 319.
- 43 Cited in Khan, 'Akbar's Personality Traits', p. 26.
- 44 Alam, *Languages*, p. 69.
- 45 Cited in Khan, 'Medieval Indian Notions', p. 8.
- 46 *Ain*, p. iii.
- 47 Chandra, 'Jizya and the State', p. 138.
- 48 Cited in Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History*, p. 74.
- 49 Chandra, 'Jizya and the State', p. 147, n. 39.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 147, n. 43.
- 52 Alan M. Guenther, 'Hanafi *Fiqh* in Mughal India: The *Fatawa-i 'Alamgiri*', in Eaton, *India's Islamic Traditions*, pp. 209–30.
- 53 Cited in *ibid.*, p. 224.
- 54 See, in particular, Alam, *Languages*, p. 170; and Yohanan Friedmann, *Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi: An Outline of His Thought and A Study of His Image in the Eyes of Posterity* (Montreal/London: McGill University, Institute of Islamic Studies, 1971), pp. 87–102.
- 55 Wheeler M. Thackston (trans. and ed.) *The Jahangirnama: Memoirs of Jahangir, Emperor of India* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 304.
- 56 Alam, *Languages*, pp. 162–4.
- 57 Cited in Balabanlilar, 'Lords of the Auspicious Conjunction', p. 22.
- 58 Alam, *Languages*, p. 170.
- 59 *Ibid.*; Sharma, *Religious Policy*, pp. 114–15; on Dara as a Sufi, see Marcia K. Hermansen and Bruce B. Lawrence, 'Indo-Persian Tazkira as Memorative Communications', in Gilmartin and Lawrence, *Beyond Turk and Hindu*, p. 161.
- 60 B.N. Goswamy and J.S. Grewal, *The Mughals and the Jogis of Jakhbar: Some Madad-i-Ma'ash and Other Documents* (Simla: Institute of Advanced Study, 1967), p. 28.
- 61 Khan, 'Medieval Indian Notions', p. 12; Shirin Mehta, 'Akbar as Reflected in the Contemporary Jain Literature in Gujarat', *Social Scientist*, 20 (1992), p. 59. On

- Jahangir's relationship with the Jains, see Ellison B. Findly, 'Jahangir's Vow of Non-Violence', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 107 (1987), pp. 245–56.
- 62 Goswamy and Grewal, *The Mughals and the Yogis*, pp. 16–17. The letter is reproduced as Document VIII, p. 121.
- 63 Mehta, 'Akbar as Reflected in the Contemporary Jain Literature', p. 59.
- 64 Thackston, *Jahangirnama*, p. 59.
- 65 Metcalf, 'Too Little and Too Much', p. 115; see also, Brown, 'Did Aurangzeb Ban Music?' p. 115.
- 66 Balabanlilar, 'Lords of the Auspicious Conjunction', p. 19.
- 67 Chandra, 'Jizya and the State', p. 140.
- 68 On Dara Shukoh as a son, see Friedmann, 'Islamic Thought', pp. 56–8; also Ernst, 'Muslim Studies', pp. 184–5.
- 69 Brown, 'Did Aurangzeb Ban Music?' pp. 77–120.
- 70 *Ibid.*, p. 102.
- 71 Cited *ibid.*, p. 108. The full text of the letter can be found in Jamshid H. Bilimoria (trans.), *Ruka'at-i-Alamgiri or Letters of Aurangzebe* (Delhi: Idarah-i Abiyat-i Delli, 1972), pp. 14–19.
- 72 On these concepts, see Alam, *Languages*, especially pp. 39–43.
- 73 *Ain*, vol. III, pp. 451, 452.
- 74 *Ibid.*, p. 451.
- 75 Metcalf, 'Too Little and Too Much', p. 960.
- 76 Bilimoria, *Ruka'at-i-Alamgiri*, p. 30.
- 77 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 78 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

7 Cohesion and conflict

- 1 For a comprehensive statement of this position, see Bipan Chandra, *Communalism in Modern India* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1984).
- 2 C.A. Bayly, 'The Pre-History of "Communalism"? Religious Conflict in India, 1700–1860', *Modern Asian Studies*, 19 (1985), pp. 177–8.
- 3 See Marc Gaborieau, 'From Al-Beruni to Jinnah: Idiom, Ritual and Ideology of the Hindu–Muslim Confrontation in South Asia', *Anthropology Today*, 1 (1985), pp. 7–14.
- 4 Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Before the Leviathan: Sectarian Violence and the State in Pre-Colonial India', in Kaushik Basu and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds) *Unravelling the Nation: Sectarian Conflict and India's Secular Identity* (New Delhi/New York: Penguin Books, 1996), pp. 55, 58.
- 5 Bayly, 'Pre-History of "Communalism"?' p. 201.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 179.
- 8 Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 6.
- 9 Subrahmanyam, 'Before the Leviathan', p. 55, glossing an article by Jackie Assayag in *Annales ESC*.
- 10 Bayly, 'Pre-History of "Communalism"?' p. 202.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 178 (our emphasis).
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 194.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 214.
- 14 L. Subramanian, 'The Eighteenth Century Social Order in Surat: A Reply and an Excursus on the Riots of 1788 and 1795', *Modern Asian Studies*, 25 (1991), pp. 321–65.
- 15 The disturbances of 1789 in Calcutta were precipitated by a clash between processioners celebrating Durga-Puja and Muharrum. They resulted in considerable

- destruction and the deaths of two cows. For details see the *Calcutta Gazette*, 9 April 1789.
- 16 Narayani Gupta, *Delhi Between Two Empires* (New Delhi/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).
- 17 Bayly, 'Pre-History of "Communalism"?', p. 190.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 202.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 194: here, Bayly draws upon S.A.A. Rizvi, *Shah Wali-Allah and His Times: A Study of Eighteenth Century Islam, Politics and Society in India* (Canberra: Ma'rifat Publishing, 1980), p. 201.
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp. 202–3.
- 21 See, for example, M.S. Gill and Gaganjot Deol, 'Patterns of Riots in India', *Asian Profile*, 23 (1995), pp. 59–66.
- 22 Bayly, 'Pre-History of "Communalism"?', p. 184.
- 23 Iqtidar Husain Siddiqui (ed.) *Perso-Arabic Sources of Information on the Life and Conditions in the Sultanate of Delhi* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1992), pp. 2, 24–5.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- 25 Battuta, *Travels*, vol. 4, p. 80.
- 26 Gaborieau, 'From Al-Beruni to Jinnah', pp. 12–13, n. 13.
- 27 Abu'l Fazl, *The Akbar Nama*, trans. H. Beveridge, vol. II (Delhi: Rare Books, 1972), pp. 422–4.
- 28 See, for example, Najaf Haidar, 'A "Holi Riot" of 1714: Versions from Ahmedabad and Delhi', in Mushirul Hasan and Asim Roy (eds) *Living Together Separately: Cultural India in History and Politics* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 127–44.
- 29 Khafi Khan, *Muntakhāb*, in Elliot and Dowson, *History of India*, vol. 7, pp. 455–7.
- 30 In some sources the jeweller's name is given as Subh, but for a name of Sanskrit origin, Shubb (good/benign) would seem more likely, and this is the version preferred by Rizvi: see *Shah Wali-Allah*, pp. 200–1.
- 31 Subrahmanyam, 'Before the Leviathan', p. 65, wrongly identifies his rescuer as Raushan ud-Daula. Raushan is the Mughal courtier who accompanied the emperor's Wazir from Delhi deputised by the emperor to restore order. See Rizvi, *Shah Wali-Allah*, p. 201.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 Geeti Sen, *Paintings from the Akbar Nama: A Visual Chronicle of Mughal India* (Varanasi/Calcutta: Lustre Press/Rupa, 1984), pp. 104–9. The incident is also treated in [chapter 6](#).
- 34 Siddiqui, *Perso-Arabic Sources*, pp. 24–5.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- 36 Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974).
- 37 Babur's will, quoted by Syed Mahmud in *The Indian Review* (August 1923), p. 499. The original is in the State Library of Bhopal.
- 38 Ray, *The Felt Community*, pp. x, 4, 24–5.
- 39 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (rev. edn, London/New York: Verso, 1991).
- 40 Ray, *The Felt Community*, p. 25.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- 43 See above, [Chapter 5](#); and for a more extensive discussion of the 'response' of the *bhakti* movement to Islam see Aziz Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture*, [chapter V](#).

- 44 See H. von Stietencron, 'Hinduism: On the Proper Use of a Deceptive Term', in Gunther D. Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke, *Hinduism Reconsidered* (Delhi: Sage, 1991), pp. 32–53.
- 45 See P. Wagoner, "'Sultan among Hindu Kings": Dress, Title, and the Islamicization of Hindu Culture at Vijayanagara', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 55 (1996), p. 861; and Talbot, 'Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self', p. 700.
- 46 Sachau, *Alberuni's India*, pp. 17–20, 99–100.
- 47 Walter Slaje, *Medieval Kashmir and the Science of History* (Austin, TX: South Asia Institute, University of Texas, 2004), pp. 3–4: Slaje cautiously glosses *yavana* as 'Persian-speaking Muslims from the west', *turuska* as 'Turkish-speaking Muslims'; *mleccha*, he thinks, refers to both.
- 48 I.M.P. Raeside, 'A Gujarati Bardic Poem: The Kānhaḍade-Prabandha', in R. Snell and C. Shackle (eds) *The Indian Narrative: Perspectives and Patterns* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1992), p. 149; and see also Ramya Sreenivasan, 'The "Marriage" of "Hindu" and "Turk": Medieval Rajput Histories of Jalor', *Medieval History Journal*, 7 (2004), p. 90.
- 49 Raeside, 'A Gujarati Bardic Poem', p. 149.
- 50 See P. Lutgendorf, 'Imagining Ayodhyā: Utopia and its Shadows in a Hindu Landscape', *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, 1 (1997), pp. 31–6.
- 51 E. Zelliot, 'A Medieval Encounter between Hindu and Muslim: Eknath's Drama-Poem Hindu-Turk Satvād', in F. Clothey (ed.) *Images of Man: Religion and Historical Process in South Asia* (Madras: New Era Publications, 1982), pp. 177–8; and see also Lorenzen, 'Who Invented Hinduism?' p. 649.
- 52 Ray, *The Felt Community*, pp. 95–6.
- 53 *Ibid.*, p. 96.
- 54 *Ibid.*
- 55 David Lorenzen, 'The Historical Vicissitudes of the Bhakti Religion', in Lorenzen (ed.) *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community, Identity and Political Action* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 11–12; and for early Persian usages of the term, which display connotations of ethnicity but also of skin colour and social status, see A. Schimmel, 'Turk and Hindu': A Poetical Image and its Application to Historical Fact', in Speros Vryonis (ed.) *Islam and Cultural Change in the Middle Ages* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1975), pp. 107–26.
- 56 On the latter, see, for example, John M. Fritz, George Michell and M.S. Nagaraja Rao, *Where Kings and Gods Meet: The Royal Centre at Vijayanagara, India* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1984), pp. 122–45.
- 57 Lorenzen, 'The Historical Vicissitudes', pp. 1–32.
- 58 See H. Kulke, 'Mahārājas, Mahants and Historians: Reflections on the Historiography of early Vijayanagara and Sringeri', in S.Z.-A. Lallemand and A.L. Dallapiccola (eds) *Vijayanagara – City and Empire: New Currents of Research* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1985), pp. 125–6. Kulke's interpretation has been strongly critiqued by Wagoner (in the article above).
- 59 *Ibid.*, pp. 145, 150–1.
- 60 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 61 Lorenzen, 'Who Invented Hinduism?' pp. 651–2.
- 62 *Ibid.*, pp. 649–50.
- 63 J.T. O'Connell, 'The Word "Hindu" in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava Texts', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 93 (1973), pp. 340–4. Interestingly, in addition to the ten Bengali texts he surveyed, O'Connell also looked at three Sanskrit texts from the same period but failed to find any instances of the use of 'Hindu'.
- 64 *Ibid.*, p. 342.
- 65 This runs counter to V.S. Kotani, who, in his *Western India in Historical Transition: Seventeenth to Early Twentieth Centuries* (New Delhi/New York:

Oxford University Press, 2002), suggests that it is a nineteenth-century translation of the English ‘Hinduism’ (pp. 251 and 270, n. 1). In fact, we might wonder if it actually anticipates the English word.

- 66 See P. Axelrod, ‘Living on the Edge: The Village and the State on the Goa–Maratha Frontier’, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 45 (2008), pp. 553–80.

8 The Maratha polity

- 1 For overviews of the two main approaches, see P.J. Marshall (ed.) *The Eighteenth Century in Indian History: Evolution or Revolution?* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003); and S. Alavi (ed.) *The Eighteenth Century in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- 2 ‘Introduction’ to Marshall, *The Eighteenth Century*, p. 3.
- 3 The classic studies are Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of the Mughal Empire, 1556–1707* (2nd rev. edn, Delhi/New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); and M. Athar Ali, *The Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1966).
- 4 William Irvine, *Later Mughals* (reprinted, Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2007), p. 379.
- 5 Muzaffar Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1708–48* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 311.
- 6 Frank Perlin, ‘The Problem of the Eighteenth Century’, in Marshall, *The Eighteenth Century*, p. 54.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Frank Perlin, ‘State Formation Reconsidered’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 19 (1985), pp. 415–81.
- 9 Bayly, ‘Pre-History of “Communalism”?’, p. 181.
- 10 See Philip B. Calkins, ‘The Formation of a Regionally Oriented Ruling Group in Bengal, 1700–1740’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 29 (1970), pp. 799–806; and Kate Brittlebank, *Tipu Sultan’s Quest for Legitimacy: Islam and Kingship in a Hindu Domain* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- 11 Burton Stein, ‘Eighteenth Century India: Another View’, in Marshall, *The Eighteenth Century*, p. 74.
- 12 Govind Sakharam Sardesai, *The Main Currents of Maratha History* (Calcutta: M.C. Sarkar and Sons, 1926), pp. 7–8.
- 13 Bayly, ‘Pre-History of “Communalism”?’, p. 193.
- 14 William R. Pinch, *Peasants and Monks in British India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 28; and see also (on Kotah) Norbert Peabody, *Hindu Kingship and Polity in Precolonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): royal intervention in religious life during the first millennium AD is discussed extensively in [chapter 4](#).
- 15 Irfan M. Habib, ‘The Agrarian Causes of the Fall of the Mughal Empire’, *Enquiry*, 2 (1959), p. 81.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Subrahmanyam, ‘Before the Leviathan’, p. 66.
- 18 Stewart Gordon, *The Marathas 1600–1818* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 65–6.
- 19 Bayly, ‘Pre-History of “Communalism”?’, p. 183.
- 20 Alam, *The Crisis of Empire*, p. 306.
- 21 For a discussion of Shivaji’s caste status, see A. Vajpeyi, ‘Excavating Identity through Tradition. Who was Shivaji?’ in S. Saberwal and Supriya Varma (eds) *Traditions in Motion: Religion and Society in History* (Delhi/New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 240–71.

- 22 Gordon, *The Marathas*, pp. 87–9: that this attempt at legitimacy was not entirely successful and that Shivaji's claims to Kshatriya status were disputed is suggested by the apparent call for a subsequent *abhisheka* performed by tantric Brahmans and the continuing doubts as to Shivaji's status expressed by the orthodox. Ananya Vajpayi, 'Politics of History, Poetics of Contempt: A History of the Śūdra in Maharashtra, 1650–1950 CE' (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Chicago, 2004), notes (p. 183) that the original *abhisheka* created a power imbalance between the dominant Brahman groups, an imbalance the second *abhisheka* may have been designed to address.
- 23 The translation broadly follows S. Sen, *Shiva Chhatrapati: Being a Translation of Sabhāsad Bakhara with Extracts from Chitnis and Sivadigvijaya, with Notes* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi, 1977), p. 116.
- 24 R. Bharadwaj, *Rājavyavahāraśa of Raghunatha Pandit: Persian-Sanskrit Phraseology* (Delhi: Vidyanidhi Prakashan, 2007). Benoy Kumar Sarkar notes that this practice extended to the renaming of hill forts and a general Sanskritising of the Marathi language: see *The Positive Background of Hindu Sociology* (Allahabad: Panini Office, 1937), pp. 510–11. An epilogue to the *Rājavyavahāraśa* rationalises its composition thus: 'Having completely uprooted the barbarians, by the best of kings a learned man was appointed . . . to replace the overvalued Yavana words with educated speech.' Cited in S. Guha, 'Transitions and Translations: Regional Power and Vernacular Identity in the Dakhan, 1500–1800', *Comparative Studies of South Asia and the Middle East*, 24 (2004), p. 27.
- 25 Guha, 'Transitions and Translations', p. 29.
- 26 Eaton, *India's Islamic Traditions*, p. 11. *Shivabhārata* 1.59 describes the Nizam Shah, the ruler of the Ahmadnagar Sultanate, as the 'soul of *dharma*' (*dharmātmā*), while the *Paraśarāma Caritra* describes a period of rule by the 'King of the Yavanas' that gave way to a period of conflict. The aforementioned and other texts of the period are replete with such compliments: for further examples, see N.K. Wagle, 'Hindu–Muslim Interactions in Medieval Maharashtra', in Sontheimer and Kulke, *Hinduism Reconsidered*, pp. 137–8.
- 27 Sambhaji was the son of Rajaram (Shivaji's second son) and his second wife Rajas Bai. Ramchandrapant was an important administrator during Rajaram's reign (1689–1700), which the latter spent mostly on the run from Aurangzeb. Due to a falling out with Tarabai (Rajaram's first wife and mother of his first son, Shivaji II), who acted as regent after the death of Rajaram in 1700, Ramchandrapant left for Kolhapur, which became the seat of the second branch of the lineage descending from Shivaji.
- 28 Sen, *Shiva Chhatrapati*, pp. 2–3.
- 29 *Ibid.*, pp. 152–3.
- 30 *Ibid.*, pp. 9–11; and see also, R. Jansen, 'Hero and King', in H. Brückner, H. van Skyhawk and C.P. Zoller (eds) *The Concept of Hero in Indian Culture* (Delhi: Manohar, 2007), pp. 103–20.
- 31 Sen, *Shiva Chhatrapati*, p. 27.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- 35 *Ibid.*, pp. 55, 115.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 152.
- 37 *Ibid.*, pp. 27, 105, 118; and S. Guha, 'The Politics of Identity and Enumeration in India, c.1600–1900', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 45 (2003), p. 155.
- 38 Sen, *Shiva Chhatrapati*, pp. 46, 62. It is notable that, when the narrator employs his own voice, the vocabulary reflects a Sanskritic influence. Thus of Shivaji's

- slaying of Afzal Khan it is said: ‘This deed is not that of a man’; immediately after that we are reminded that Shivaji is an avatar (*ibid.*, p. 25). The author of the *Bakhar* is code-switching here.
- 39 See Metcalf, ‘Too Little and Too Much’, p. 958.
- 40 Sen, *Shiva Chhatrapati*, pp. 117–18.
- 41 *Ibid.*, pp. 25, 41, 57: in the *Mahābhārata*, Duryodhana is the eldest of the demon-incarnating Kaurava brothers opposing their cousins the Pandavas, of whom Bhima is the second eldest. Ravana is a demon *rākṣasa* who is eventually defeated by Rama. The story is recounted in the *Rāmāyana*.
- 42 The *Sabhāsad Bakhar* was composed about twenty years after Shivaji’s 1674 coronation, in preparation for which he was established as being of the Sisodia (Mewar) Rajput lineage in order that he could be conferred with the sacred thread of a twice-born Kshatriya. As to be expected, the *Bakhar* treats this as a fact requiring no further explanation.
- 43 Sen, *Shiva Chhatrapati*, pp. 41–2.
- 44 Dilir Khan had been attached to the staff of Prince Muazzam when the latter was governor of the Deccan.
- 45 Sen, *Shiva Chhatrapati*, pp. 46–7.
- 46 *Ibid.*, pp. 56–7.
- 47 *Ibid.*, pp. 48–9.
- 48 Chandra, *Essays on Medieval Indian History*, pp. 54–5, 222.
- 49 J.W. Laine and S.S. Bahulkar, *The Epic of Shivaji: Kavindra Paramananda’s Śivabhārata, a Translation and Study* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2001). The edition of Sadashiua Mahadeva Divekar (Pune: Bhārat Itihās Sāṃśodak Maṇḍal, 1927) has been consulted. See also J.W. Laine, ‘A Question of Maharashtrian Identity: Hindu Self-definition in the Tales of Shivaji’, in M. Kosambi (ed.) *Interactions: Socio-Cultural Trends in Maharashtra* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2000), pp. 59–78.
- 50 N.K. Wagle and A.R. Kulkarni, *Vallabha’s Paraśarāma Caritra* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1976); and N.K. Wagle, ‘Hindu–Muslim Interactions’, pp. 137–8.
- 51 See also Aziz Ahmad, ‘Epic and Counter-Epic in Medieval India’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 83 (1963), pp. 470–6; and above, [Chapter 4](#).
- 52 G. Harihara Sastri and V. Srinivasa Sastri, *Madhura Vijaya or Virakamparaya Charita: An Historical Kavya by Gangadevi* (Trivandrum: Privately Printed, 1924).
- 53 Allison Busch, ‘Literary Responses to the Mughal Imperium: The Historical Poems of Keśavdās’, *South Asia Research*, 25 (2005), pp. 31–54.
- 54 P. Wagoner, *Tidings of the King: A Translation and Ethnohistorical Analysis of the Rāyavācakamu* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993).
- 55 P. Granoff, ‘Holy Warriors: A Preliminary Study of Some Biographies of Saints and Kings in the Classical Indian Tradition’, *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 12 (1984), pp. 293–4; see also V. Narayana Rao and D. Shulman, ‘History, Biography and Poetry at the Tanjavur Nāyaka Court’, *Social Analysis*, 25 (1989), pp. 115–30.
- 56 Sheldon Pollock, ‘Rāmāyana and the Political Imagination in India’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 52 (1993), pp. 261–97: his position has been critiqued by Subrahmanyam in ‘Before the Leviathan’ (see p. 60). However, if Pollock has overstressed the rise in popularity of the *Rāmāyana* after the twelfth century (Subrahmanyam notes earlier South Indian examples); the adaptation of the text to stress the arrival of new ‘others’ seems clear enough.
- 57 Metcalf, ‘Too Little and Too Much’, p. 957.
- 58 See Jnan Chandra, ‘Aurangzib and Hindu Temples’, *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, 5 (1957), pp. 247–54; and ‘Ālamgīr’s grants to Hindu Pujaris’, *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, 6 (1958), pp. 55–65.
- 59 See, for example, Stewart Gordon, ‘Hindus, Muslims, and the Other in Eighteenth-Century India’, *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, 3 (1999), pp. 221–39; and

- 'Maratha Patronage of Muslim Institutions in Burhanpur and Khandesh', in Gilmartin and Lawrence, *Beyond Turk and Hindu*, pp. 327–8.
- 60 Sen, *Shiva Chhatrapati*, p. 39.
- 61 Gordon, *The Marathas*, p. 81.
- 62 Gordon, 'Hindus, Muslims, and the Other', p. 16; Sardesai, *New History of the Marathas*, vol. 2, pp. 340–51; K. Roy 'Military Synthesis in South Asia: Armies, Warfare, and Indian Society, c. 1740–1849', *Journal of Military History*, 69 (2005), p. 670; and S. Sen, *Administrative System of the Marathas from Original Sources* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1923), pp. 267–85.
- 63 The patronage of Sufis by the Maratha regimes has been noted recently by Nile Green: see his *Indian Sufism Since the Seventeenth Century: Saints, Books, and Empires in the Muslim Deccan* (London/New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 58–62.
- 64 Thomas Broughton, *Letters Written in a Mahratta Camp during the year 1809, Descriptive of the Character, Manners, Domestic Habits and Religious Ceremonies of the Mahrattas* (London: A. Constable, 1892), pp. 239–40. Cf. also Wagle, 'Hindu–Muslim Interactions in Medieval Maharashtra', pp. 147–8; Gordon, 'Maratha Patronage of Muslim Institutions in Burhanpur and Khandesh'; and for the early seventeenth century G. Smith and J.D.M. Derrett, 'Hindu Judicial Administration in Pre-British Times and Its Lesson for Today', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 95 (1975), p. 421. B.G. Gokhale, in *Poona in the Eighteenth Century: An Urban History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 183, notes that ten *pīrs* in Pune were frequent recipients of gifts from the government.
- 65 Gokhale, *Poona in the Eighteenth Century*, pp. 161, 184.
- 66 G.W.E. Forrest, *Selections from the Letters, Despatches, and Other State Papers Preserved in the Bombay Secretariat*, vol. 1, part 1 (Bombay: Govt Central Press, 1887), pp. 40–1; and Sardesai, *New History of the Marathas*, vol. 2, p. 186.
- 67 Gokhale, *Poona in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 183; an item in SSRPD 2.192 records the granting of an *inām* to a Portuguese gunner.
- 68 Gokhale, *Poona in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 183.
- 69 For a brief resumé of the literature on this controversial topic, see Ian Copland, 'What to Do about Cows? Princely Versus British Approaches to a South Asian Dilemma', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 68 (2005), pp. 59–76.
- 70 Wagle and Kulkarni, *Vallabha's Paraśarāma Caritra*, pp. 39–40, 59–60: again, though, modern scholarship has largely absolved him of this charge; at the 'Id, the later Mughals sacrificed camels.
- 71 Cited in Friedmann, 'Islamic Thought', p. 61.
- 72 Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies, with Numerous Maps and Illustrations* (reprinted, London: The Argonaut Press, 1930), vol. 1, pp. 282–3; and John Bruce, *Annals of the Honourable East-India Company* (London: Black, Parry and Kingsbury, 1810), vol. 2, pp. 544–55.
- 73 R. Orme, *Historical Fragments of the Mogul Empire of the Morattoes and of the English Concerns in Indostan* (London: F. Wingrave, 1805), p. 124.
- 74 N.K. Wagle, 'The Government, the *Jāti* and the Individual: Rights, Discipline and Control in the Pune Kotwal Papers, 1766–94', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 34 (2000), pp. 321–60.
- 75 Jadunath Sarkar (trans.), *Sindhia as Regent of Delhi (1787 & 1789–91)* (Bombay: Director of Archives, 1954), p. 27; and A. MacDonald, *Memoir of the Life of the Late Nana Furnuwees Compiled from Family Records* (Bombay: Deekhan Vernacular Translation Society, 1852), pp. 81–2.
- 76 Sumit Guha, 'An Indian Penal Regime: Maharashtra in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present*, 147 (1995), p. 122.
- 77 Surendra Nath Sen, *Studies in Indian History* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1930), pp. 114–15.

- 78 H. Fukazawa, 'State and Caste System (*Jāti*) in the Eighteenth-Century Maratha Kingdom', *Hitotsubashi Journal of Economics*, 9 (1968), pp. 32–44; Wagle, 'The Government'; and Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 64–79.
- 79 Norbert Peabody, 'Cents, Sense, Census: Human Inventories in Late Precolonial and Early Colonial India', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 43 (2001), pp. 819–50.
- 80 Sen, *Administrative System of the Marathas*, pp. 121, 251.
- 81 Guha, 'An Indian Penal Regime', pp. 119, 124; and cf. *SPD* 43.154.
- 82 Wagle, 'The Government', pp. 348–58; on *jāti* occupations in Pune, see Gokhale, *Poona in the Eighteenth Century*, pp. 135–74.
- 83 For details, see [Chapter 7](#).
- 84 Subrahmanyam, 'Before the Leviathan', p. 65.
- 85 I.M.P. Raeside, 'The Mahānubhāvas', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 39 (1976), pp. 585–600.
- 86 A. Bowles, 'Governance and Religious Conflict in the Eighteenth Century: Religion and the Civil Discourse of Separateness in the Maratha Polity', *South Asia*, new series, 33 (2010), pp. 61–71.
- 87 J.G. Lochtefeld, 'Getting in Line: The Kumbha Mela Festival Processions', in K.A. Jacobsen (ed.) *South Asian Religions on Display: Religious Processions in South Asia and in the Diaspora* (London/New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 32–4.
- 88 R. Burghart, 'Wandering Ascetics of the Rāmānandī Sect', *History of Religions*, 22 (1983), p. 374.
- 89 Lochtefeld, 'Getting in Line', p. 34, and 'The Construction of the Kumbh Mela', *South Asian Popular Culture*, 2 (2004), p. 110.
- 90 Sen, *Administrative System of the Marathas*, pp. 131–2.
- 91 The presence of Hindu dancing girls in mosques in eighteenth-century Maharashtra is attested to by V.S. Kadam; see his 'The Dancing Girls of Maharashtra', in A. Feldhaus (ed.) *Images of Women in Maharashtrian Society* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 67.

9 Colonial 'neutrality'

- 1 James Manor, 'How and Why Liberal and Representative Politics Emerged in India', *Political Studies*, 38 (1990), p. 26.
- 2 Robb, *Empire, Identity and India*, p. 63.
- 3 The gross revenue of British India increased by more than 600 per cent between 1834 and 1900, or well over five times correcting for inflation. Figures adapted from B.B. Misra, *The Administrative History of India, 1834–1947* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 327, 366.
- 4 Michel Foucault, 'Governmentality', in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (eds) *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1991), pp. 102–3.
- 5 The application of explanatory theories across cultures and continents is always contentious. Partha Chatterjee, for one, has argued strongly against the proposition that the colonial state, as it developed in places like India, was 'simply another specific form in which the modern state has generalized itself across the globe'. *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 14. But other scholars have discerned persuasive parallels; for example, David Scott, 'Colonial Governmentality', *Social*

- Text*, 43 (1995), pp. 191–220 warns (at p. 195) against ‘a too hasty homogenization of colonialism as a whole’.
- 6 Minute by Sir R. Grant, gov. of Bombay, dated 13 January 1837, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/1618/64968.
 - 7 Burton Stein agrees with the view of the erstwhile ‘Cambridge School’ historians that the colonial state grew out of foundations laid by contemporary and earlier patrimonial regimes. Stein, ‘Eighteenth Century India: Another View’, in Marshall, *The Eighteenth Century*, p. 78. Frank Perlin, however, observes ‘a substantial break between colonial polity in the early phase and that preceding it’: ‘State Formation Reconsidered, Part Two’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 19 (1985), p. 477. The interpretation offered here is closer to David Washbrook’s view that the shift to a ‘qualitatively new form of state’ in India occurred as a result of British administrative ‘rebuilding’ in the 1870s. See D.A. Washbrook, *The Emergence of Provincial Politics: The Madras Presidency 1870–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 333, and ‘Law, State and Agrarian Society in Colonial India’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 15 (1981), p. 713.
 - 8 W.H. Sleeman, *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official* (rev. edn, London: Oxford University Press, 1915), p. 195.
 - 9 Minute by Thackeray dated [November] 1822, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/960/27324.
 - 10 Evidence of Sir Charles Malet before the Select Committee of the House of Commons, 27 April 1813, *PP*, VII, p. 258.
 - 11 Court to Fort St George, 29 May 1807, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/347/8114.
 - 12 David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), p. 13.
 - 13 Note by Rafiuddin encl. in Archibald Seton, Resident, Delhi, to N.D. Edmonstone, Fort William, 3 May 1807, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/217/4758.
 - 14 A. Ross, Agent-to-the-Governor-General, Delhi, to Sec., Bengal Govt, Political Dept., 30 August 1822, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/827/21946 (our italics).
 - 15 Katherine Prior, ‘Making History: the State’s Intervention in Urban Religious Disputes in the North-Western Provinces in the Early Nineteenth Century’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 27 (1993), p. 186.
 - 16 Governor-General to Sec. State, 31 January 1873, NAI, Public A, January 1873, 585–6.
 - 17 G. Stratton, Collector of Chittoor, to officers of the ‘Tripattee Temple’, 9 September 1801, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/1945/84474.
 - 18 *The Bombay Times*, 13 May 1840, p. 308.
 - 19 Agent, Puri, to Govt of Bengal, 18 September 1803, cited in Biswamoy Pati, ‘“Ordering” “Disorder” in a Holy City: Colonial Health Interventions in Puri During the Nineteenth Century’, in Bisamoy Pati and Mark Harrison (eds) *Health, Medicine and Empire: Perspectives on Colonial India* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2001), p. 271; and memorandum by T.H. Maddoch, Sec., Legislative Dept., Govt of India, dated 16 July 1838, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/1819/74986.
 - 20 Kindersley to Nelson, 11 November 1828, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/1263/50837A (our italics).
 - 21 Pilgrims visiting the Jagganath Temple at Puri, for example, were charged between Rs.2 and Rs.10, depending on their economic circumstances. In early nineteenth-century India this was a lot of money. Revenue Sec., Bengal, to Collector of Jagganath, 21 November 1805, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/223/4892; and Govt of Bengal to Court of Directors, 14 November 1836, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/1819/74986.
 - 22 Memorial from the ‘Hindoos of Benares’ dated [November] 1809, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/365/9093.
 - 23 Petition from the ‘Brahmin Inhabitants of [the] Zillah of Dharwar’ dated 31 May 1835, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/1674/66967.

- 24 Brimnes looks at how the coming of colonialism affected the relationship between the broad traditional divisions of Tamilnadu Hindu society, the Left and Right Hand castes. He concludes that the inhabitants of eighteenth-century Madras saw the Company state as having essentially the same managerial duties towards religion as any 'South Indian little king'. *Constructing the Colonial Encounter: Right and Left Hand Castes in Early Colonial South India* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999), p. 239.
- 25 Officiating Judge Benares to Registrar, Nizamut Adawlat, 5 February 1808, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/581/14152.
- 26 Cited in Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 55.
- 27 William Croke, *The North-Western Provinces of India: History, Ethnology and Administration* (reprinted, Delhi: Indological Book House, 1971), p. 133.
- 28 W.A. Brooke to Sec. to Govt of India, 23 October 1809, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/365/9093.
- 29 Major F.M. Birch to Commissioner, Amritsar Division, 15 May 1871, NAI, Home, Judicial A, 29 July 1871, 45–61.
- 30 For a discussion of the public risks that attended Hindu car festivals, see NAI, Home, Public A, October 1872, 28–30, September 1873, 351–83, and October 1873, 6–7.
- 31 Robert Eric Frykenberg, 'Religion and Company Raj in South India', *Fides et Historia*, 17 (1985), p. 13.
- 32 Cited in Vijay Pinch, 'Bhakti and the British Empire', *Past and Present*, 179 (2003), p. 166.
- 33 Court to Govt of Bengal, 20 February 1833, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/1554/63441.
- 34 Minutes by Lord Auckland dated 1 April and 17 November 1837, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/1618/64968 and F/4/1819/74986.
- 35 Minute dated March 1849, NAI, Home Political, Deposit, November 1916, 52.
- 36 Minutes of Consultation, Madras, 4 May 1752, 9 June 1753, 14 November 1728, 14 November 1771 and 29 November 1771, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/330/9587; and Govt of Madras to Court, 6 February 1810, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/347/8114.
- 37 Minute by F. Ellis dated 20 August 1810, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/380/9587.
- 38 Fort St George to Court, 19 January 1821, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/724/19605.
- 39 Cited in Sandria B. Freitag, *Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 168.
- 40 Judicial Narrative from the Agra Presidency dated 12 July 1835, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/1554/63441.
- 41 T.H. Barber to Sec., Govt of Bombay, 2/3 June 1835, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/1674/6967.
- 42 Note by Sir A.P. MacDonnell, Home Sec., Govt of India, dated April 1887, NAI, Home Dept., Police A, April 1887, 84–91.
- 43 The classic sources include David Thomson, *England in the Nineteenth Century (1815–1914)* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1950), especially [chapter 2](#); Sir Llewelyn Woodward, *The Age of Reform 1815–1870* (2nd edn, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1962); and G.M. Young, *Victorian England: Portrait of an Age* (2nd edn, London: Oxford University Press, 1953).
- 44 Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1959), 'Introduction'.
- 45 Cited in Peter Van der Veer, 'The Secularity of the State', in Kimura and Tanabe, *The State in India*, p. 259.
- 46 Swartz to Gashim, 13 February 1794, *PP*, 1831–2, vol. VIII, Report of the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company, App. I, p. 92 (our italics).

- 47 Letter of 12 October 1838, cited in Antony Copley, *Religions in Conflict – Ideology, Cultural Contact and Conversion in Late Colonial India* (Delhi/New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 9.
- 48 Rev. Daniel Corrie to Rev. Josiah Pratt, 31 December 1813, CMS Archive, C/1/E/26.
- 49 Entry in Bowley’s journal dated 24 January 1834, CMS Archive, C/1/1/M6.
- 50 John Jebb and James Pattison to George Canning, 27 February 1818, *PP*, 1831–2, VIII, 255.
- 51 Fort St George to Court, 19 March 1818, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/1478/58125; and notes of CMS proceedings transcribed by Edward Strachey, Br. Lib., IOR F128/217.
- 52 Cited in G.D Bearce, *British Attitudes Towards India 1784–1858* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 81.
- 53 N.W. Kindersley to R. Nelson, Sub-Collector, Tanjore, 11 November 1828, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/1263/50837A.
- 54 This argument draws on recent scholarship reassessing the role played by the ‘periphery’ in the colonial–metropolitan relationship: see, for example, Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in England and India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).
- 55 Grant to Court of Directors, 16 August 1797, loc. cit.
- 56 Minute by Elphinstone dated 24 March 1821, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/1928/82800.
- 57 Minute by Grant dated 13 January 1837, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/1618/64968.
- 58 By the 1850s about 500 were working in India – a formidable lobby group. And the influence of the Church was further enhanced by Parliament’s decision, in 1813, to create and fund – from Indian revenues – an Anglican episcopacy, which incidentally did much to reinforce the popular impression that the Company was a Christian organisation, but also gave the Church easy access to the top echelons of Indian government. This channel of communication would be deftly exploited by the second Bishop of Calcutta, Daniel – a committed Evangelical. See Daniel’s report to the Court of Directors dated 23 January 1836, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/1723/69425.
- 59 Bernard S. Cohn, ‘Recruitment and Training of British Civil Servants in India, 1600–1860’, in Ralph Braibanti (ed.) *Asian Bureaucratic Systems Emergent From the British Imperial Tradition* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1960), pp. 119, 129, 132.
- 60 Evidence of M. Lewin, former judge of the Sudder Adawlat, Madras, to the Select Committee on Indian Territories, 18 April 1853, *PP*, 1852–3, XVII, p. 280.
- 61 On the stern convictions of the ‘Punjab School’, see Clive Dewey, *Anglo-Indian Attitudes: The Mind of the Indian Civil Service* (London: Hambledon Press, 1993).
- 62 Evidence of the Rev. W. Keane before the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Government of Indian Territories, 19 July 1953, *PP*, 1852–3, XXXII, p. 315.
- 63 To ‘trade with civilised men’, Whig MP Thomas Macaulay mused provocatively, was likely to prove ‘infinitely more profitable’ than governing ‘savages’. Cited in Stokes, *English Utilitarians*, p. 44.
- 64 Minute dated 2 February 1835, in de Bary, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, vol. II, p. 49.
- 65 Minute of 8 November 1829: R. Muir (ed.) *The Making of British India 1756–1858* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 293–6.
- 66 Court to Govt Of India, 20 February 1833, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/1618/64968.
- 67 Cited in *The Bombay Times*, 8 May 1838, p. 295.
- 68 Minute by the Senior Member, Sudder Board of Revenue, Bengal, dated 19 April 1838, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/1819/74968.
- 69 Minute by Edward Ironside, Bombay Council, dated 24 December 1836, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/1618/64968.

- 70 Minute dated 22 March 1841, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/1928/82800.
- 71 Minute dated 1 April 1837, Br. Lib., IOR F/4/1618/64968.
- 72 Maitland to the Duke of Richmond [1838], and Maitland to the Bishop of London, 16 August 1839, *The Bombay Times*, 13 November 1839, p. 725 and 13 May 1840, p. 308.
- 73 *The Bombay Times*, 8 May 1838, p. 295.
- 74 On these economic developments, see C.A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), [chapter 4](#).
- 75 According to the Hunter Commission, public places cost Rs.297 each while equivalent private sector places cost the state only Rs.39 each in aid. These are late nineteenth-century figures, but it is unlikely that private education would have been any less competitive in the 1840s and 1850s. *Report of the Education Commission of 1882* (Calcutta: Supt of Govt Printing, 1883), p. 454.
- 76 101,192, as against 23,163: evidence of Rev. J.C. Marshman and Rev. J. Kennedy before the Select Committee of the House of Commons on Indian Territories, 18 July and 8 August 1853, *PP*, 1852–3, vol. XXIX, pp. 25, 72.
- 77 *The Times*, 27 December 1883.
- 78 For details and other examples, see Christopher Hibbert, *The Great Mutiny: India 1857* (New York: Viking, 1978), pp. 51–2.
- 79 Cited in Ratanlal Ranchhoddas and Dhirajlal Thakore, *The Law of Crimes* (22nd edn, Bombay: N.M. Tripathi, 1971), p. 710.
- 80 D.F. McLeod to R.H. Davies, Chief Sec., Punjab Govt, 21 February 1859, Br. Lib., IOR L/PS/6/464.
- 81 Herbert Edwardes to John Lawrence, 31 August 1857, Br. Lib., Mss EUR F90, vol. 18.
- 82 John Kaye, *Christianity in India: an Historical Narrative* (London: Smith Elder, 1859), p. 484.
- 83 Evidence of T.H. Lewin to the Select Committee on Indian Territories, 18 April 1853, *PP*, 1852–3, XXVII, 284.
- 84 *The Bombay Times*, 8 May 1839, p. 292.
- 85 For further examples, see Penelope Carson, ‘An Imperial Dilemma: The Propagation of Christianity in Early Colonial India’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 18 (1990), pp. 184–6.
- 86 Note by H. Ricketts dated [September] 1858, NAI, Home, Education, 24 September 1858, 1–5.
- 87 Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph, ‘Occidentalism and Orientalism’: Perspectives on Legal Pluralism’, in Sally Humphreys (ed.) *Cultures of Scholarship* (Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan University Press, 1997), p. 234.
- 88 See, particularly, E.I. Brodtkin, ‘The Struggle for Succession: Rebels and Loyalists in the Mutiny of 1857’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 6 (1972), pp. 277–90; Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Awadh in Revolt: A Study in Popular Resistance* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984); and Eric Stokes, *The Peasant Armed*, ed. C.A. Bayly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
- 89 Mukherjee, *Awadh in Revolt*, p. 149.
- 90 Minute dated 27 April 1859, Br. Lib., IOR L/PS/6/464.
- 91 Cited in Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, p. 45.
- 92 The East India Company was made a scapegoat for the rebellion. The Proclamation was issued to mark the abolition of the Company and the transfer of its possessions in India to the British Crown. Muir, *The Making of British India*, p. 383, our italics.
- 93 Canning to Wood, 18 June 1860, Br. Lib., Mss EUR F78, vol. 55/4.
- 94 See Lytton to Lord Salisbury, 11 May 1876, in Lady Betty Balfour (ed.) *Personal and Literary Letters of the First Earl of Lytton* (London: Longman, 1906), vol. II, pp. 20–1.

- 95 Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam*, p. 47.
- 96 T.R. Metcalf, *The Aftermath of Revolt: India 1857–1870* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964), pp. 323–7.
- 97 *Fatwā* issued by Maulvi Mahomed Masood of Delhi, August 1872, in reply to the question of whether Muslims were required by their religion to resist British rule. Several other *ulamā* responded in the same vein. NAI, Home, Public B, August 1872, 562–3.
- 98 Statement by Venn on behalf of the CMS Corresponding Committee [October 1857], *The Times*, 7 October 1857.
- 99 P.W. Monie, sec. Ed. Dept, Govt of Bombay, to sec. Ed. Dept, Govt of India, 3 August 1916, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/1478.
- 100 Sec., BMS, Derby, to Sec. State for India, 5 April 1881, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/37.
- 101 George Smith, *The Conversion of India* (New York/Chicago, IL: Fleming H. Revell, 1893), p. 204; and A.R.H. Copley, *Religions in Conflict: Ideology, Cultural Contact and Conversion in Late Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. xiv.
- 102 Significantly, too, a reference to ‘religious neutrality’ in the India Office draft was later excised, again allegedly by the Queen. Jeffrey Cox, *Imperial Fault Lines: Christianity and Colonial Power in India, 1818–1940* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 33.
- 103 Bengal Judicial Resolution of 15 March 1865; and Govt of Madras to Sec. State, 27 October 1892, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/332.
- 104 Ian J. Kerr, ‘British Relationships with the Golden Temple, 1849–90’, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 21 (1984), p. 143. This arrangement lasted until 1925.
- 105 Arjun Appadorai, *Worship and Conflict under Colonial Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), chapters 4 and 5.
- 106 Queen Empress v. Ramzan, 7 Allahabad 461; and Narantakath v. Parakkal, 45 Madras 986, in Asaf A.A. Fyzee, *Cases in the Muhammadan Law of India and Pakistan* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. 405–19, 57–67.
- 107 Note by Curzon dated 16 January 1903, encl. in Sir W. Lawrence to C.E.A. Oldham, 17 January 1903, Br. Lib., Mss EUR F111, vol. 32.
- 108 Among other ‘desecrations’, the statue of the Buddha in the main hall had been anointed with a *tilak* and garlanded. Curzon to Lord George Hamilton, 22 January 1903, Br. Lib., Mss EUR C125, vol. 13.
- 109 Note by MacDonnell dated 20 July 1894, NAI, Home, Public, September 1894, 312–18.
- 110 Bourdillon to Curzon, 18 July 1903, Br. Lib, Mss EUR F111, vol. 208.
- 111 Curzon to Bourdillon, 26 May 1903, *ibid.*, vol. 207.
- 112 The bill proposed to drastically reduce the powers of the elected Senate of Calcutta University, alma mater of the Bengali intelligentsia.
- 113 Ibbetson to Curzon, 15 September 1903, *ibid.*, vol. 208.
- 114 Cited in Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, p. 155.
- 115 Home Dept. office note, n.d., NAI, Home, Political, 1926, 45.

10 Religion and nationalism

- 1 Peter Gottschalk, *Beyond Hindu and Muslim: Multiple Identities in Narratives from Village India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 73. For an interesting perspective on how the middle class in colonial Lahore configured their ‘mental map’, see Markus Daechsel, ‘Between Suburb and World Politics: Middle Class Identities and the Refashioning of Space in Late Imperial Lahore, c. 1920–50’, in Crispin Bates (ed.) *Beyond Representation: Colonial and Postcolonial*

- Constructions of Indian Identity* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 270–99.
- 2 Gottschalk, *Beyond Hindu and Muslim*, pp. 177, 4.
 - 3 Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity within the Sikh Tradition* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 14; and Jim Masselos, 'Appropriating Urban Space: Social Construction of Bombay in the Time of the Raj', *South Asia*, 14 (1991), p. 54.
 - 4 Vasudha Dalmia, '"The Only Real Religion of the Hindus": Vaiṣṇava Self-Representation in the Late Nineteenth Century', in Dalmia and Heinrich von Stietencron (eds) *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity* (New Delhi: Sage, 1995), pp. 178, 182, 188, 207–8.
 - 5 Interestingly, Gilmartin suggests that popular Islam during this period was affected by similar tendencies, which he links to the 'language of Sufi devotionism'. These linkages warrant further investigation. David Gilmartin, 'Democracy, Nationalism and the Public: A Speculation on Colonial Muslim Politics', *South Asia*, new series, 14 (1991), p. 131.
 - 6 Masselos, 'Appropriating Urban Space', p. 51.
 - 7 Sandria B. Freitag, 'Enactments of Ram's Story and the Changing Nature of "the Public" in British India', *South Asia*, new series, 14 (1991), p. 87.
 - 8 *Moslem Chronicle*, 30 May 1895, cited in Anthony Parel, 'The Political Symbolism of the Cow in India', *Journal of Commonwealth Political Studies*, 7 (1969), p. 188.
 - 9 Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (2nd edn, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), p. 125; and Ian Talbot, *Divided Cities: Partition and its Aftermath in Lahore and Amritsar 1947–1957* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 20.
 - 10 Anand A. Yang, *Bazaar India: Markets, Society and the Colonial State in Gangetic Bihar* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), p. 115.
 - 11 Cited in note by A.P. McDonnell dated 23 July 1887, NAI, Home, Public A, August 1887, 205–6; and in Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, p. 359.
 - 12 The best biography is J.T.F. Jordens, *Dayānanda Sarasvatī: His Life and Ideas* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978).
 - 13 The extent to which the Ahl-i-Hadis were 'Wahabi'-influenced is, though, much debated.
 - 14 Freitag, *Collective Action and Community*, p. 151.
 - 15 J.H. Reily, SP on special duty, to IG Police, Lower Provinces, 24 November 1871, NAI, Home, Judicial A, November 1872, 124–32.
 - 16 Reily to IG Police, Lower Provinces, 15 November 1870, *ibid*.
 - 17 Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims 1871–1906: A Quest for Identity* (2nd edn, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. xv.
 - 18 C.A. Barron, DC Hoshiapur, to C.E.W. Cotton, 26 June 1913, NAI, Home, Political A, June 1914, 50–3.
 - 19 Cited in Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, p. 107.
 - 20 J. Woodburn to Home Sec., Govt of India, 9 July 1887, NAI, Home, Public A, August 1887, 205–6.
 - 21 Cited in Ahmad, *The Bengali Muslims*, p. 57; and in Richard I. Cashman, *The Myth of the Lokamanya: Tilak and Mass Politics in Maharashtra* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975), p. 78.
 - 22 *Punjab Census Report*, 1881, p. 101.
 - 23 Geoffrey A. Oddie, *Imagined Hinduism: British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism, 1793–1900* (Delhi/Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006), pp. 71–2, 171.
 - 24 Monier Monier-Williams, *Hinduism* (reprinted, Delhi: Rare Books, 1971).

- 25 Note by Saiyid Tahiruddin dated 23 August 1912, encl. in Saiyid to H. Wheeler, Home Sec., Govt of India, 23 August 1912, NAI, Home, Political B, September 1912, 85.
- 26 Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, p. 356.
- 27 *The Bombay Times*, 11 September 1860; memorial to the Viceroy from Kanhiya Lal and others of Cawnpore District dated 16 February 1887, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/210; and petition to the King-Emperor from Ram Rattan and others of Ambala District dated [October] 1911, Br. Lib., IOR P/8713.
- 28 Ian Kerr, 'Reworking a Popular Religious Practice: The Effects of Railways on Pilgrimage in 19th and 20th Century South Asia', in Kerr (ed.) *Railways in Modern India* (New Delhi/New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 312ff.
- 29 Yang, *Bazaar India*, p. 147.
- 30 Tilak's exegesis on the *Gītā*, the *Gītā Rahasya*, was a heterodox one; and it differed diametrically from Gandhi's take on the same scripture. For a discussion of these issues see Mark J. Harvey, 'The Secular as Sacred? – The Religio-Political Rationalization of B.G. Tilak', *Modern Asian Studies*, 20 (1986), pp. 312–31.
- 31 Speech at Bombay, 1907, de Bary, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, p. 728.
- 32 Speech at Morvi, 28 January 1928, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 35 (Ahmedabad, 1969), p. 490.
- 33 Editorial in *Keśari*, 8 September 1896, cited in Cashman, *The Myth of the Lokamanya*, p. 75.
- 34 Editorial in *Mahratta*, 20 September 1896, *ibid.*, p. 97: the two papers, *Keśari* and *Mahratta*, were both owned and edited by Tilak; the first, though, was a Marathi-language journal, the second an English one.
- 35 Yang, *Bazaar India*, p. 160: in Western India religious processions known as *prabhat pheris* were co-opted for the same purpose: G. Balachandran, 'Religion and Nationalism in Modern India', in Basu and Subrahmanyam, *Unravelling the Nation*, p. 100.
- 36 Cited in Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, 'Gandhi's Lieutenants – Varieties of Followership', in Paul F. Power, *The Meanings of Gandhi* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1971), p. 48.
- 37 Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography* (reprinted, Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1962), p. 72.
- 38 Suresh Chandra to S. Nijalingappa, President INC (O), 21 June 1969, NMML, AICC, G-1 (A) Part II.
- 39 Andre Beteille, 'Secularism and Intellectuals', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 5 March 1994, p. 566.
- 40 Sir Charles Wood to Lord Elgin, Viceroy of India, 10 May 1862, Br. Lib., Mss EUR F84, Letter Book 10.
- 41 Wood had earlier overseen the Board of Control (see [Chapter 9](#)). Remarkably, he managed to avoid being saddled with responsibility for the disaster of 1857.
- 42 See above, pp. 135–6.
- 43 Prior, 'Making History', p. 183.
- 44 J.H. Reily, Officer on Special Duty, to Sec., Govt of Bengal, 31 December 1871, NAI, Home, Judicial A, November 1872, 124–32; *District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh*, vol. 13, *Bareilly* (Allahabad, 1911), 91–2; and note by C.J. Lyall dated 8 June 1894, NAI, Home, Public A, June 1894, 134–43.
- 45 MacDonnell to Lord Lansdowne, 4 August 1893, Br. Lib., Mss EUR D558, series VII, vol. 10, part 1: but he was no Hinduphile; see above, [Chapter 9](#), for evidence of MacDonnell's deep suspicion of the Brahman priestly class.
- 46 Minute by Lansdowne dated 28 December 1893, *ibid.*
- 47 W.W. Hunter, *The Indian Musalmans* (3rd edn, repr., Delhi: Indological Book House, 1969), p. 144.

- 48 Petition of the Muslims of Bareilly to the Lt. Gov. of NWP dated 1 September 1894, NAI, Home, Public A, November 1894, 210.
- 49 Col. C.A. McMahon, Commissioner, Amritsar Division, to Officiating Sec., Punjab, 12 April 1884; and Col. C. Minchin, Commissioner, Lahore Division, to Officiating Sec., Punjab, 18 June 1884, NAI, Home, Public A, December 1884, 7–19. And the situation did not greatly improve with the passage of time: in 1914 the Muslims of Allahabad, numbering 30 per cent of the population, failed to win a single seat on the District Board. The UP government had resisted calls for seat reservation, but in 1916, failing to get the parties to agree on a voluntary seat-splitting deal, it introduced enabling legislation. R. Burn, Chief Sec., UP., to Sec., Legislative Dept., Govt of India, 12 May 1916, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&S/6/1460/4196.
- 50 Cited in N.G. Barrier, ‘The Punjab Government and Communal Politics, 1870–1908’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 27 (1968), p. 534.
- 51 Resolution of the Govt of Bengal dated 3 August 1916, in C.H. Philips (ed.) *The Evolution of India and Pakistan 1858 to 1947: Select Documents* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 198.
- 52 See above, [Chapter 8](#).
- 53 Temple to Lytton, 9 July 1879, cited in G.R. Hambly, ‘Maharatta Nationalism before Tilak: Two Unpublished Letters of Sir Richard Temple on the State of the Bombay Deccan, 1879’, *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, 49 (1962), pp. 155–6.
- 54 Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, to Lord Ampthill, Gov. of Madras, 15 June 1903, in B.L. Grover (ed.) *A Documentary Study of British Policy Towards Indian Nationalism 1885–1909* (Delhi: National Publications, 1967), p. 213.
- 55 Cited in Anand Yang, ‘Sacred Symbol and Sacred Space in Rural India: Community Mobilization in the “Anti-Cow Killing” Riot of 1893’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 22 (1980), p. 585; and see also Lord Lansdowne’s minute dated 28 December 1893, which categorised the agitation as the biggest security challenge the Raj had faced since 1857, at Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/257.
- 56 As of course it did! Dufferin to Viscount Cross, Sec. State for India, 29 October 1888 and 4 January 1887, in Grover, *A Documentary Study of British Policy*, pp. 180, 179.
- 57 Kimberley to Lansdowne, 25 August 1893, in *ibid.*, p. 197.
- 58 Speech by Saiyyid Ahmad Khan at Lucknow, 28 December 1887, in John R. McLane (ed.) *The Political Awakening in India* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1970), p. 45.
- 59 *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- 60 Muslims made up about 16 per cent of delegates at the first few Congress annual sessions – not far below their proportion of the population. In the 1890s, the average figure was about 5 per cent.
- 61 Mohsin-ul-Mulk to W.A.J. Archbold, Principal, MAO College, 4 August 1906, in Grover, *A Documentary Study of British Policy*, p. 255.
- 62 Minto to Morley, 4 October 1906, *ibid.*, p. 273.
- 63 Note dated 24 September 1882, cited in Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 306; and see also the comment by the Commissioner of Rawalpindi that, in rural Punjab, ‘distinctions of religion’ were a distraction: cited in Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam*, p. 30.
- 64 Police intelligence reports, encl. with L. Robertson, Judicial Sec., Bombay, to Home Sec., Govt of India, 19 January 1916, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/1432.
- 65 David Gilmartin, “‘Divine Displeasure’ and Muslim Elections: The Shaping of Community in Twentieth-Century Punjab”, in D.A. Low (ed.) *The Political Inheritance of Pakistan* (London: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 106–29.
- 66 As Katherine Prior explains, the ‘biggest Krishnaite and Shaivite festivals, Janam Ashtmi and Shivratri respectively, can never clash with Muharram because they

- do not fall within the first ten days of the new moon'. It was for this reason, she suggests, that the major nineteenth-century clashes in the western part of the North-Western Provinces (NWP) took place in districts populated both by Muslims and by devotees of Rama. Prior, 'Making History', p. 181.
- 67 C.A. Elliot, Sec., NWP, to W.A. Forbes, Officiating Commissioner, Rohilkhand, 19 April 1872, NAI, Home, Public A, May 1872, 276; and Muslim petition to Govt of Bombay dated 25 February 1874, NAI, Home, Police, April 1874, 30–41.
 - 68 Col. L.J.H. Grey, Commissioner, Delhi, to Officiating Sec., Punjab, 2 December 1889, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/273.
 - 69 Address by G.B. Pant to the UP Political Conference, 26 November 1927, Nanda, *Selected Works of Govind Ballabh Pant*, vol. 4 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 357–8.
 - 70 G.C. Whitworth, DM Yeola, to Chief Sec., Bombay, October 1893, cited in Shabnum Tejani, *Indian Secularism: A Social and Intellectual History 1890–1950* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), p. 53.
 - 71 Report on the Police Administration of the Central Provinces for the Year 1880, p. 11, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/64.
 - 72 Statement with Govt of India to Sec. State, 26 September 1894, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/376; Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism*, pp. 167, 174; and G.R. Thursby, *Hindu–Muslim Relations in British India: A Study of Controversy, Conflict, and Communal Movements in Northern India 1923–1928* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975), pp. 81–2.
 - 73 Thursby, *Hindu–Muslim Relations*, p. 79; and G. Smyth, DC Delhi, to Commissioner, Delhi Division, 27 October 1886, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/211.
 - 74 In 1886, a party of Ambala Muslims dispatched several cows at the local slaughterhouse, loaded the carcasses into a cart, and dragged their bounty back into town, deliberately choosing a route that took them past a tank frequented by Hindus and which was 'only a few yards distant' from a place where 'images of the Hindu gods were placed'. A.R. Bulman, DC Ambala, to Commissioner, Delhi, 28 October 1886, and petition to the Lt.-Gov. of Punjab from the 'Hindu residents of Umballa' City' dated 19 September 1886, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/211.
 - 75 Lt.-Col. L.J.H. Grey, Commissioner, Delhi, to Sec., Punjab, 4 November 1886, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/211.
 - 76 H.C. Fanshawe, Sec., Punjab, Home Sec., Govt of India, 7 February 1890, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/273.
 - 77 Col. L.J.H. Grey, Commissioner Delhi, to Sec., Punjab, 21 September 1890, NAI, Home, Police A, March 1890, 50–96.
 - 78 Prior, 'Making History', p. 180.
 - 79 Note by E.C. Bayley dated 5 July 1871, NAI, Home, Public A, 5 August 1871, nos. 145–7.
 - 80 A. Cadell, Commissioner, Agra, to Chief Sec., NWP, June 1890, cited in Francis Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims: Politics of the United Provinces' Muslims 1860–1923* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 60, note.
 - 81 Major A. Rennick, DC Rohtak, to Commissioner, Delhi Division, 14 September 1889, NAI, Home, Police A, March 1890, 50–96.
 - 82 Arun Mukherjee, *Crime and Public Disorder in Colonial Bengal 1861–1912* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi, 1995), pp. 110, 113–17, 122.
 - 83 W.M. Young, Sec., Punjab, to A.P. Macdonnell, Home Sec., Govt of India, 22 February 1887, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/211.
 - 84 Resolution of the North-Western Provinces Government dated 19 August 1893, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/368.
 - 85 Major A. Rennick, DC Rohtak, to Commissioner, Delhi, 28 September 1889, NAI, Home, Police A, March 1890, 50–96.
 - 86 Order dated 7 July 1893, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/368.

- 87 Govt of Bengal to Govt of India, 4 June 1926, NAI, Home (Political), 1926, file 179.
- 88 Order by S.S. Thorburn, Commissioner, Rawalpindi, dated 18 March 1892, NAI, Home, Political A, February 1914, 50–3.
- 89 Petition from citizens of Salem dated 12 November 1881, cited in R. Suntharalingam, 'The Salem Riots, 1882: Judiciary Versus Executive in the Mediation of a Communal Dispute', *Modern Asian Studies*, 3 (1969), p. 199.
- 90 W.M. Young, Chief Sec., Punjab, to Home Sec., Govt of India, 22 February 1887, cited in Thursby, *Hindu-Muslim Relations*, p. 103.
- 91 Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, pp. 285–6.
- 92 Order dated October 1911, NAI, Home, Political A, January 1912, 71–3.
- 93 Bishen Narayan Dhar, *An Appeal to the English Public on Behalf of the Hindus of the N.W.P. and Oudh* (Lucknow: Privately Printed, 1893), p. 1.

11 The rule of law

- 1 See [Chapters 7](#) and [8](#) above. The classic study of the structural interrelationship between imperial and regional states and lower-level kin-based formations in the pre-modern period is Richard G. Fox, *Kin, Clan, Raja and Rule: State-Hinterland Relations in Pre-Industrial India* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1971).
- 2 Govt of India to Sec. State, 2 June 1874, NAI, Home, Police A, June 1874, 9–11.
- 3 Major F.M. Birch, DC Amritsar, to Commissioner, Amritsar, 15 May 1871, NAI, Home, Judicial A, 29 July 1871, 45–61.
- 4 Vernacular order by C.B. Saunders, Magistrate, Lahore, dated 20 May 1849, and memorandum by SJ, Amritsar, dated 2 August 1873, NAI, Judicial A, 29 July 1871, 45–61, and August 1874, 101–12.
- 5 Freitag, 'Enactments of Ram's Story', p. 71.
- 6 Note by E.C. Bayley, Home Member, Govt of India, dated 1 August 1873, NAI, Home, Public A, September 1973, 351–83.
- 7 John L. Hill, 'A.P. MacDonnell and the Changing Nature of British Rule in India, 1885–1901', in Robert I. Crane and N. Gerald Barrier (eds) *British Imperial Policy in India and Sri Lanka, 1858–1912 – A Reassessment* (New Delhi: Heritage Publications, 1981), p. 74.
- 8 Major W.G. Davies, DC Amritsar, cited in Home Dept office memorandum dated 28 July 1871, NAI, Home, Judicial A, 19 July 1871, 45–61.
- 9 Major A. Rennick, DC Rohtak, to Commissioner, Delhi, 14 September 1889, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/273.
- 10 G. Smyth, DC Delhi, to Commissioner, Delhi, 27 October 1886, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/211.
- 11 Sec., Punjab, to Commissioner, Delhi, 22 May 1877, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/109.
- 12 Cited in Thursby, *Hindu-Muslim Relations*, p. 106.
- 13 Govt of Bombay to Sec. State [February 1874], cited in Sec. State to Govt of India, 9 July 1874, NAI, Home, Police A, August 1874, 34–7.
- 14 Col. L.H.E. Tucker, DI Rohtak, to IG Punjab, 11 September 1889, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/273.
- 15 For obvious reasons, British troops were preferred over Indian in these situations. G. Smyth, DC Delhi, to Commissioner, Delhi, 27 October 1886, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/211.
- 16 A.R. Bulman, DC Ambala, to Commissioner, Delhi, 28 October 1886, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/211.
- 17 The solution proposed by the Magistrate was for the cow at the centre of the dispute to be impounded at his own house until things had cooled down, then handed over to the Hindus, and in the meantime for another cow to be sacrificed quietly in its

- stead. C.G.S. Faulder, Magistrate, Darbhanga, to Commissioner, Patna, 3 August 1890, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/289.
- 18 W.A. Forbes, Commissioner, Rohilkhand, to Sec., NWP, 5 November 1872, NAI, Home, Public A, February 1873, 135–9.
 - 19 The Rohilkhand region, east of Delhi, with its large population of ‘unruly’ Pathans, was considered an area of special volatility. Ibid.
 - 20 In 1880, Muslims comprised 27.4 per cent of the CP police force. In 1920s’ Punjab, 17,848 out of 20,095 constables were Muslims.
 - 21 G. Smyth, DC Delhi, to Commissioner, Delhi, 27 October 1886, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/211.
 - 22 Major W. Davies, Commissioner, Amritsar, to R. Taylor, 16 May 1874, NAI, Home, Judicial A, August 1874, 101–12.
 - 23 Col. L.J.H. Grey, Commissioner, Delhi, to Sec., Punjab, 2 December 1889.
 - 24 Lt.-Col. L.H.E. Tucker, Deputy IG, Ambala Circle, to IG, Punjab, 11 September 1889, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/273.
 - 25 Marginal note by H. Grey, Member of Council, Punjab, dated [September] 1889, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/273.
 - 26 Ripon to Kimberley, 29 May 1884, Br. Lib., Add. Mss 43565, B.P. 7/3.
 - 27 Suntharalingam, ‘The Salem Riots, 1882’, p. 205.
 - 28 Note by Sir Philip Hutchins dated 26 February 1886, NAI, Home, Police A, April 1887, 84–91.
 - 29 Note by ‘J.S.’ dated 21 July 1871, NAI, Home, Public A, 5 August 1871, 145–7.
 - 30 C.P. Carmichael, IG NWP, to Mayne, 17 April 1871, NAI, Home, Public A, 5 August 1871, 145–7.
 - 31 Officer on Special Duty, to Sec., NWP, 27 April 1871, NAI, Home, Public A, 5 August 1871, 145–7.
 - 32 Shankaracharya Shrimad Rajakeshwerashram Swami, chair of the ‘mass meeting held at Madav Baug, Bombay’, to E.S. Montagu, 28 August 1919, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/1548.
 - 33 Lyall to Judicial Sec., NWP, 8 December 1891, NAI, Home, Judicial A, December 1891, 113–25.
 - 34 Sec., Punjab, to Home Sec., Govt of India, 7 February 1890, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/273.
 - 35 Suntharalingam, ‘The Salem Riots’, pp. 197–8.
 - 36 *Queen Empress v Imam Ali and Another*, *Indian Decisions, New Series*, Allahabad, vol. VI, pp. 102–3. Chief Justice Sir John Edge pointed out that the Law Commissioners responsible for this drafting section had omitted to define ‘object’, which suggested to him that the word was meant to be understood in an everyday sense. But Justice Saiyid Mahmud’s much longer judgment canvassed other considerations, some of them squarely political.
 - 37 C.J. Lyall, Home Sec., Govt of India, to Sec., NWP, 8 December 1891, NAI, Home, Judicial A, December 1891, 113–25.
 - 38 Thursby, *Hindu–Muslim Relations*, pp. 105–6.
 - 39 Matthew Groves, ‘Law, Religion and Public Order in Colonial India: Contextualising the 1887 Allahabad High Court Case on “Sacred” Cows’, *South Asia*, new series, 33 (2010), pp. 87–121.
 - 40 The Editor of *Muslim Outlook* publicly accused the Court of bias, and was convicted of contempt. Sir Malcolm Hailey to Haig, 12 August and 13 June 1927, NAI, Home, Political, 1927, 123 Part II.
 - 41 C.J.S. Faulder, Magistrate Darbhanga, to Commissioner Patna, 3 August 1890, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/289.
 - 42 This was a recurrence of the old *halal v. jatka* controversy. Note by O.M. Creagh dated 28 August 1913, NAI, Home, Political A, February 1914, 50–3.
 - 43 Note by Lord Brabourne, Gov. of Bombay, n.d., Br. Lib., Mss EUR F97/24.

- 44 J.M. Dunnett, DC Amritsar, to Commissioner, Lahore, 15 April 1923, NAI, Home, Political, 1923, 125.
- 45 Magistrate, Sholapur, to Chief Sec., Bombay, 5 November 1925, NAI, Home, Political, 1925 106/XII.
- 46 According to Arun Mukerji, Bengal experienced just six communal riots between 1890 and 1905, but over 250 between 1905 and 1913. Mukerji, *Crime and Public Disorder*, p. 124; and, for the 1920s, see table in the *Indian Statutory Commission Report* (London: HMSO, 1930), vol. IV, pp. 108–20.
- 47 *Times of India*, 28 August 1929.
- 48 As noted earlier, Bulmer was eventually forced to call for military assistance. A.R. Bulmer, DC Ambala, to Commissioner, Delhi, 28 October 1886, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/6/211.
- 49 H.C. Fanshawe, Junior Sec., Punjab, to Home Sec., Govt of India, 7 February 1890, NAI, Home, Police A, March 1890, 50–96.
- 50 A.P. Muddiman, Home Member, Govt of India, to J.N.C. Johnson, Dep. Sec., Industries and Labour Dept., Govt Of India, 13 June 1925, and Indian News Agency telegram dated 3 July 1925, NAI, Home, Political, 1925, 273.
- 51 Note by ‘P.P.H.’ dated 16 November 1893, NAI, Home, Public B, October 1894, 103–6; and note by Lansdowne dated 14 October 1893, NAI, Home Public A, October 1893, 288–9.
- 52 Home Dept. note dated 30 August 1890, NAI, Home, Public A, December 1890, 138–40.
- 53 Chief Sec., CP, to Home Sec., Govt of India, 25 Mar 1926, NAI, Home, Political, 1926, 179.
- 54 Report by DM Gaya dated 1 March 1939, Br. Lib., Mss EUR 251/60.
- 55 Note by Sir Harry Haig, Home Member, Govt of India, dated 22 May 1936, NAI, Home, Political, 1926, 179.
- 56 *Martin and Company and Another v Syed Fayaz Husain and Others*, AIR, 1944, PC 33.
- 57 The government’s excuse for not acting was a very technical one, namely, a ruling by the courts that the building had become Sikh property by reason of the law of limitation and adverse possession.
- 58 Philips, *Evolution of India and Pakistan*, p. 264.
- 59 Christopher John Baker, *The Politics of South India, 1920–1937* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 60.
- 60 The ruling appears to conflict with Delhi’s dismissal, discussed earlier, of the ‘civil rights’ argument in the case of music near mosques. D.G. Mitchell, Legal Sec., CP, to Legislative Sec., Govt of India, 26 May 1922, and Legislative Dept. note dated 31 May 1922, NAI, Home, Political, 1922, 892/1; and Thursby, *Hindu–Muslim Relations*, p. 108.
- 61 Speech by Pant, 1 March 1924, Nanda, *Selected Works*, vol. 2 (1994), p. 11.
- 62 *Report of the Age of Consent Committee 1928–9*, in Philips, *Evolution of India and Pakistan*, p. 760.
- 63 Speech of 14 August 1939, in Mushirul Hasan (ed.) *Towards Freedom: Documents on Movement for Independence in India 1939, Part I* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 148.
- 64 Cited in Baker, *The Politics of South India*, p. 50.
- 65 ‘Devotees of Lord Venkateswara of Tirupati’ to the President of India, February 1951, NMML, AICC, file PD–7 of 1951.
- 66 Note by Brackenbury, n.d., encl. in Lord Erskine to Lord Linlithgow, 24 April 1938, Basudev Chatterji (ed.) *Towards Freedom: Documents on the Movement for Independence in India 1938* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), part 2, p. 1087.

- 67 The Rajagopalachari government went on to enact, in 1939, a much more limited bill that applied only to temples in the mainly Muslim and Christian district of Malabar.
- 68 Cited in Gopal Krishna, 'The Development of the Congress as a Mass Organisation, 1918–1923', in Thomas R. Metcalf, *Modern India: An Interpretative Anthology* (London: Macmillan, 1971), p. 259.
- 69 C.A. Tegart to Chief Sec., Bengal, 3 July 1925, NAI, Home (Political), 1925, 273/II.
- 70 Hard-pressed local administrators were increasingly glad of any public assistance they could get. Thus, in 1923, the DC of Amritsar enlisted the help of a passing Akali *jatha* to keep menacing groups of Hindus and Muslims apart until police reinforcements had arrived on the scene. A. Langley, Commissioner, Lahore, to Chief Sec., Punjab, 13 April 1923, NAI, Home (Political), 1923, 125.
- 71 *Harijan*, 26 March 1938.
- 72 Lumley to Linlithgow, 2 June 1938, Chatterji, *Towards Freedom*, p. 1885.
- 73 In March 1938, a Muslim Congress minister in CP ordered the release of a co-religionist arrested for raping a girl during a communal disturbance; in another CP case, Congress legislators demanded the transfer of the DM and the DSP following a communal riot at Jubbalpore.
- 74 Note by C.F. Brackenburry, Chief Sec., Madras, dated 24 April 1938, Chatterji, *Towards Freedom*, p. 1088; and circular from Chief Sec., Punjab to Commissioners dated January 1938, *ibid.*, p. 1069.
- 75 Govt of India to Sec. State, 6 June 1931, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/7/132.
- 76 Wylie to Lord Wavell, 7 August 1946, Nicholas Mansergh (ed.) *Constitutional Relations Between Britain and India: The Transfer of Power 1942–7* (London: HMSO, 1976), vol. 8, p. 201.
- 77 Report by J.T.M. Bennett, Dep. IG, Punjab, dated 22 July 1935, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/7/887; and Sec. to Gov., UP, to Sec. State, 31 March 1942, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/7/2587.
- 78 Cited in Gyanesh Kudaisya, *Region, Nation, 'Heartland': Uttar Pradesh in India's Body Politic* (New Delhi/Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006), p. 124.
- 79 Lumley to Linlithgow, 23 January 1940, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/8/686.
- 80 The so-called Pirpur and Shareef Reports.
- 81 Reports by Chief Sec., Bihar, for second half April and first half October 1938, and T.A. Stewart, Gov. of Bihar, to the Viceroy, 7 September 1938, Chatterji, *Towards Freedom*, pp. 1410, 1427, 1422.
- 82 Birla to Patel, 13 July 1938, Birla Papers, file 4.
- 83 Maulana Muhsin Sajjad to CWC, 22 December 1939, Mushirul Hasan, *Towards Freedom: Documents on the Movement for Independence in India 1939* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 242.
- 84 Gov. to Viceroy, 8 May 1939, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/8/686.
- 85 The number of communal riots in UP, for example, rose from 1464 in 1936 to 2750 in 1938. *The Leader*, 13 July 1939.
- 86 Press note by Govt of CP dated 9 February 1939, and memorial to Govt of Bombay by Saiyid Safar Husain S.A. Bukhari, President, Ahmedabad Dist. ML dated 22 December 1939, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/8/686.
- 87 Gov., UP, to Viceroy, 10 May 1939, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/8/686.
- 88 Address by Pant to the UP Press Consultative Committee, 11 January 1939, Nanda, *Selected Works*, vol. 9 (1997), p. 211.
- 89 Speech by Pant on 22 March 1938, *ibid.*, vol. 8 (1997), p. 106.
- 90 *Madh-e-Sahaba* is a verse 'in praise of the Companions', the first four 'righteous' caliphs, favoured by Sunnis. During the nineteenth century it had never been recited in Lucknow, which is a dominantly Shi'a city, and in 1906 was officially banned on 10th Muharrum. In 1936, though, local Sunnis defied convention and began to recite the verse on Fridays. The practice caused numerous riots. Pressured by its

Sunni members, the Pant government sought to defuse the issue by granting the Sunnis permission to recite the verse just on Barawafat Day, providing that this was done well away from Shi'a-populated areas. The announcement whipped the Shi'as into a state of 'intense emotional hysteria'. They demanded the order be withdrawn, and when this was refused embarked on a concerted campaign of civil disobedience. Note by Sir Harry Haig, Gov., UP, dated 18 April 1939, Br. Lib., IOR L/P&J/7/2587.

- 91 T.A. Stewart, Acting Gov., UP, to Viceroy, 28 July 1938, Chatterji, *Towards Freedom*, p. 1413.
- 92 Haig to Viceroy, 23 March 1938, *ibid.*, p. 1630.
- 93 Speech by Pandit G.B. Pant on 28/30 March 1939, Nanda, *Selected Works*, vol. 9 (1997), p. 93.

12 Religion and democracy

- 1 Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, p. 41.
- 2 There was, it must be said, considerable opposition in the Fundamental Rights Committee to the framing of the clause in this way. Some members of the FRC feared it could inhibit 'future social legislation' and 'would be wide enough to cover 'cow-killing, music before mosques etc.' As we shall see, India's courts increasingly took up a position not unlike this. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur to Sec., Constituent Assembly, 20 April 1947, and note by Sir Alladi Krishnamaswami Ayyar dated [April] 1947, NMML, AICC Papers, CL-5 of 1946-7.
- 3 Minutes of the FR Sub-Committee meeting of 26 March 1947, NMML, AICC, file CL-5.
- 4 In an explanation inserted in 1949, the reference to 'Hindus' was provocatively construed as referring also to 'persons professing the Sikh, Jaina or Buddhist religion[s]'.
5 Amendment to Article 19(2), cited in Ranchhoddas and Thakore, *The Law of Crimes*, p. 379.
- 6 Cited in Chandra, Mukherjee and Mukherjee, *India after Independence*, p. 48.
- 7 For example, Nehru to Chief Ministers, 17 October 1952, Parthasarathi, *Jawaharlal Nehru*, vol. 3, p. 132.
- 8 Minute by K.M. Panikkar dated [?] April 1947, NMML, AICC Papers, file CL-5 of 1946-7. As a former Diwan of the princely state of Bikaner, Panikkar was personally familiar with the traditional Hindu system.
- 9 Cited in Smith, *India as a Secular State*, p. 17.
- 10 Embassy to Sec. State Washington (telegram), 5 December 1949, NARA, State Dept Central Files, decimal file 845.011/12-549.
- 11 Cited in G.J. Jacobsohn, *The Wheel of Law: Indian Secularism in Comparative Constitutional Context* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 50.
- 12 Speech of 12 August 1949, S. Gopal (ed.) *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, 2nd series, vol. 12 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 168.
- 13 Speech of 6 February 1951, Vasant Moon (ed.) *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar's Writings and Speeches*, vol. 14, part 2 (Bombay, Education Dept., Govt of Maharashtra, 1995), p. 883.
- 14 Speech of 10 January 1955, NMML, AICC file G-1(B) of 1955.
- 15 In chronological order: the Special Marriage Act (1954), the Hindu Marriage and Divorce Act (1955), the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act (1956) and the Hindu Succession Act (1956).
- 16 Speech in UP Legislative Assembly, 4 February 1950, Nanda, *Selected Works*, vol. 13 (2000), pp. 179-80.
- 17 Note by Under-Secretary, Home Affairs Ministry, dated 6 December 1958, NAI, MHA, 17/268/58-Judicial I.

- 18 Chief Secretary, Rajasthan, to Joint Secretary, Home Ministry, 15/16 December 1958, NAI, MHA, 17/268/58- Judicial I.
- 19 Petition from '18 citizens to Madras' to President of India, dated 12 March 1951, and V.S. Ramachandran and others to President of India, 5 March 1951, NMML, AICC file PB-13 of 1951.
- 20 Shri Jagganath Temple (Amendment) Bill 1961; and memorandum by S. Rajagopalachari dated 25 August 1951, NMML, Rajagopalachari Papers, Instalment V, subject file 250.
- 21 Nehru to Chief Minister, Bihar, 27 November 1952, Gopal, *Selected Works*, 2nd series, vol. 20 (1997), p. 204; and Nehru to Managing Committee, Bodh Gaya, 12 May 1953, *ibid.*, vol. 22 (1998), p. 145.
- 22 *Narayanan v State of Madras*, AIR 1954, Madras, vol. 41, at 386; and Gajendragadkar J, cited in P.B. Gajendragadkar, *Secularism and the Constitution of India* (Bombay: University of Bombay, 1971), pp. 76–8. Below we discuss other important judicial decisions that had the effect of effectively buttressing governmental powers over religious life and, more generally, of stamping the state itself as a religious actor. On the other hand, the Supreme Court has vigorously enforced the clause in the Representation of the People Act of 1951 that forbids candidates standing for election from using appeals to religion to canvass votes.
- 23 As described in an intervention by Bhupesh Gupta during a speech by Pant in the Rajya Sabha, 14 February 1958, Nanda, *Selected Works*, vol. 17 (2002), pp. 399–400.
- 24 Abbreviation of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, one of the most hallowed of Hindu scriptures (see [Chapter 4](#)).
- 25 [Illegible] to Rajagopalachari, 22 May 1952, and [illegible] to Rajagopalachari, 23 May 1952, NMML, Rajagopalachari Papers, Instalment V, subject file 119.
- 26 Rajni Kothari, *Politics in India* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1970), p. 265.
- 27 Address to mill workers and labourers, Delhi, 30 September 1947, Gopal, *Selected Works*, 2nd series, vol. 4 (1986), pp. 107–8.
- 28 Nathu Ram Pathak to J.B. Kripalani, President, INC, 16 April 1947, NMML, AICC, file CL-10 of 1946–7.
- 29 Speech at meeting of the Minorities Subcommittee of the CA, cited in G. Balachandran, 'Religion and Nationalism in Modern India', in Basu and Subrahmanyam, *Unravelling the Nation*, pp. 109–10.
- 30 Irfan Ahmad, *Islam and Democracy in India: The Transformation of Jamaat-e-Islami* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 17.
- 31 This formulation follows closely upon the Fundamental Rights resolution passed by the Congress at its Karachi session of 1931. Minutes of CWC meeting, Bombay, 7–12 July 1931, NMML, AICC Papers, file G-6 of 1931.
- 32 No less than the former Chief Justice of India, P.B. Gajendragadkar: Gajendragadkar, *Secularism and the Constitution*, p. 62.
- 33 Anirban Kashyap, *Communalism and Constitution* (New Delhi: Lancers Books, 1988), p. 67.
- 34 Nehru to A.V. Thakkar, 11 August 1949, Gopal, *Selected Works*, 2nd series, vol. 12 (1991), p. 162.
- 35 Y. Santram, Gen. Sec., All-India Council of Indian Christians, to the President of India, n.d., NMML, AICC file PG-36 of 1959.
- 36 Quoted *ibid.*, p. 14.
- 37 Note by Prasad dated 15 September 1951, NMML, Rajagopalachari Papers, Instalment V, subject file 189.
- 38 Lok Sabha debates, vol. XVI, Part II, cols. 4730–7.
- 39 For the background of the case, and the Court's reasoning, see AIR 1985 SC 945. These and other documents relating to the Shah Bano story can be read in Ali

- Asghar Engineer (ed.) *The Shah Bano Controversy* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1987).
- 40 Balachandran, 'Religion and Nationalism', p. 114.
- 41 Justice Rajendra Sachar [Chairperson], *Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India* (New Delhi: Akalank Publications, 2006), pp. 168, 170.
- 42 Steven I. Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 116.
- 43 Ahmad, *Islam and Democracy in India*, p. 13.
- 44 Nehru to Dr Gopichand Bhargava, Chief Minister East Punjab, 4 February 1949, Gopal, *Selected Works*, 2nd series, vol. 9 (1990), pp. 351–2.
- 45 Nehru to T.T. Krishnamachari, 1 Aug 1953, *ibid.*, vol. 23 (1998), p. 245.
- 46 *The Times*, 29 May 1968.
- 47 He was unsuccessful; and that avenue was permanently closed off by the Nehru–Liaquat Khan agreement of 1950.
- 48 Gopal Krishna, 'Communal Violence in India: A Study of Communal Disturbances in Delhi – I', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 12 January 1985, p. 65.
- 49 This is not to imply that the violence of 1947 affected only Hindus and Sikhs, but the bereaved Muslims had mostly gone to Pakistan, which lies outside our brief.
- 50 G.B. Pant, Chief Minister UP, to Nehru, 10 November 1947, Nanda, *Selected Works*, vol. 18 (2002), p. 314.
- 51 Many historians would disagree; the modern consensus is that Pakistan was short-changed by the 1947 settlement.
- 52 Editorial in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, cited in Ambassador, New Delhi, to Sec. State, Washington, 5 February 1963, NARA, State Dept., Central Foreign Policy Files, RG 59, 1963, POL 25 (India), Box 3932.
- 53 Nehru to Shankar Dayal Sharma, 18 April 1956, Gopal, *Selected Works*, 2nd series, vol. 32 (2003), p. 135; and Nehru to Chief Ministers, 18 May 1959, Parthasarathi, *Jawaharlal Nehru*, vol. 5 (1989), p. 244.
- 54 Note by Shankar Prasad, CC Delhi, dated 23 February 1950, NAI, MOS, file 9(8)-P/50; and speech by Pant in the UP Legislative Assembly, 12 December 1952, Nanda, *Selected Works*, vol. 14 (2001), p. 295; also Commissioner, Meerut, to Chief Sec., UP, 8 November 1948, NAI, MOS, file 606-P/48, and monthly summaries for Cabinet no. 43, 14 January 1950, and no. 53, 14 November 1950, NAI, MHA, 1950, file 48-F.I.
- 55 Ambassador, New Delhi, to State Dept. Washington, 26 January 1967, NARA, State Dept., Central Foreign Policy Files, RG 59, 1967–69, SOC 11–2, India, box 3075.
- 56 Anil Avchat, 'Some Notes on the Poona Riots', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30 June 1973, p. 1141.
- 57 Vibhuti N. Rai, 'Handling Communal Riots', at www.india-seminar.com/1999/483/483%20rai.htm (accessed 23 April 2008).
- 58 Cited in Iqbal A. Ansari (ed.) *Report on Communal Riots: Prevention and Control* (New Delhi: Minorities Council, 1999), p. 22.
- 59 Rai, 'Handling Communal Riots', *loc. cit.*
- 60 Cited in Shail Mayaram, 'Communal Violence in Jaipur', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 13–20 November 1993, p. 2532.
- 61 Ambassador, New Delhi, to State Dept., Washington, 20 September 1966, NARA, State Dept., Central Foreign Policy Files, RG 59, POL 15–2, India, Box 2289.
- 62 Ambassador, New Delhi, to State Dept., Washington, 21 June 1967, NARA, Central Foreign Policy Files, RG 59, 1967–9, SOC 11–12, India, Box 3075.
- 63 Agehanada Bharati, 'Sadhuization – An Indian Paradigm for Political Mobilization', in Robert I. Crane (ed.) *Aspects of Political Mobilization in South Asia* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University, 1976), pp. 109–26.

- 64 Although the then Shankaracharya of Puri participated in the Non-Cooperation Movement, and was arrested while offering *satyagraha* in 1921. On the history of *sadhu* (especially Naga) militancy before and during the colonial period see Peter van der Veer, 'Taming the Ascetic: Devotionalism in a Hindu Monastic Order', *Man*, new series, 22 (1987), pp. 690–4; and Pinch, *Peasants and Monks*.
- 65 'Cost of Political Subsoil', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 15 December 1973, p. 2210.
- 66 Ambassador, New Delhi, to State Dept., 5 June 1963, NARA, State Dept. Central Foreign Policy Files, RG 59, 1963, POL 18, Box 3931.
- 67 Ambassador, New Delhi, to State Dept., Washington, 24 October 1964, *ibid.*, Box 2289.
- 68 Yoginder Sikand, 'Indian Muslim Community Discourses: Continuities, Changes and Challenges', at [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Progressive Pakistan](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Progressive_Pakistan) (accessed 15 January 2008).
- 69 Many Sikhs, however, were outraged by the fact that Congress was willing to 'interfere with . . . religious matters for political reasons'. Naranjan Singh Gill to S. Nijalingappa, September 1968, NMML, AICC, file G–1 of 1968.
- 70 Balachandran, 'Religious Nationalism', p. 121.
- 71 P.C. Upadhyaya, 'The Politics of Indian Secularism', *Modern Asian Studies*, 26 (1992), p. 845.
- 72 *The Age*, 23 May 1984.
- 73 *The Australian*, 25 May 1987.
- 74 Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence*, p. 94.
- 75 *Chandu Sajan Patil v Nyahalchand Panamchand Marwari* (1950), 52, Bombay LR at 214.
- 76 Deposition of S.P. Bhawe, SP Thana, cited in Home Dept., Govt of Maharashtra, *Report into the Communal Disturbances at Bhiwandi, Jalgaon and Mahad, 1970* (Bombay: Govt of Maharashtra, 1975), vol. 1, p. 158.
- 77 Paul Brass, *Forms of Collective Violence: Riots, Pogroms and Genocide in Modern India* (Gurgaon: Three Essays Collective, 2005), p. 97; and see also Amrita Basu, 'Why Local Riots Are Not Simply Local: Collective Violence and the State in Bijnor, India, 1988–1993', *Theory and Society*, 24 (1995), pp. 35–78.
- 78 Ashgar Ali Engineer, *Communal Riots after Independence: A Comprehensive Account* (Delhi: Sangam Books, 2004), p. 18. The Shiv Sena was founded in 1966 at Bombay. Its leader, Bal Thackeray, became notorious for his verbal attacks on 'foreigners', by which he meant non-Maharashtrians.
- 79 *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- 80 *The Times*, 28 October 1989.
- 81 Cited in Basu, 'Why Local Riots Are Not Simply Local', p. 74.
- 82 Paul R. Brass, *The Production of Hindu–Muslim Violence in Contemporary India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 115.
- 83 A judicious overview of the rise of the BJP is David Ludden (ed.) *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community and the Politics of Democracy in India* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996). See, especially, the essays grouped together under the header, 'Mobilising Hindutva'.
- 84 Cited in Manjari Katchu, 'The Early Hindu Vishva Parishad: 1964 to 1983', *Social Scientist*, 25 (1998), p. 17.
- 85 Inderjit Badhwar, Prabhu Chawla and Farzand Ahmed, 'Militant Revivalism', *India Today*, 31 May 1986, p. 83.
- 86 Virginia van Dyke, 'General Elections, 1996: Political Sadhus and Limits to Political Mobilisation in North India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 6 December 1997, p. 3150.
- 87 Badhwar, Chawla and Ahmed, 'Militant Revivalism', p. 80.

- 88 Yogendra K. Malik and V.B. Singh, *Hindu Nationalists in India: The Rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party* (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1994), p. 207.
- 89 Steven Wilkinson crunches the numbers in his 'Introduction' to Wilkinson, *Religious Politics and Communal Violence*; see especially p. 14.
- 90 Email communication to authors from ysikand@gmail.com, 19 December 2008. The most discerning study on this subject to date is Véronique Bénéï, *Schooling Passions: Nation, History and Language in Contemporary Western India* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).
- 91 Lance Brennan, 'The State and Communal Violence in UP, 1947–1992', *South Asia*, new series, 17 (1994), p. 31.
- 92 *The Age*, 5 April 2002.
- 93 http://Progressive_Pakistan@yahoogroups.com (accessed 13 April 2004).
- 94 *The Times*, 8 December 1992. Many of the key contributions to the academic debate on India's 'crisis' of secularism can be read in Rajeev Bhargava (ed.) *Secularism and its Critics* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), parts III and IV.
- 95 Sukumar Muralidharan, 'BJP and Friends', *Frontline*, 23 January 1998, p. 4.
- 96 The survey polled over 1,300 Muslims drawn from all regions and classes. *Hindustan Times*, 26 January 2006.
- 97 Wilkinson, 'Introduction', p. 17.
- 98 Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence*, p. 17 (our italics).
- 99 Kaur to Rajagopalachari, 30 October 1952, NMML, Rajagopalachari Papers, V Instalment, Subject File 118.

13 Conclusion

- 1 See, for example, Peter Van der Veer, 'Brahmans: their Purity and their Poverty: On the Changing Values of Brahman Priests in Ayodhya', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, new series, 19 (1985), pp. 303–21.
- 2 Thapar, *Cultural Pasts*, p. 969.
- 3 Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, 'State Formation in Asia: Prolegomenon to a Comparative Study', in Subatra K. Mitra (ed.) *Politics of Modern South Asia* (Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2009), vol. 1, p. 28.
- 4 Scharfe, *The State in Indian Tradition*, p. 239.
- 5 Thapar, *Cultural Pasts*, p. 1018.
- 6 Van der Veer, 'The Politics of Devotion to Rāma', in Lorenzen, *Bhakti Religion in North India*, p. 301.
- 7 Rizvi, *Shāh Walī-Allāh*, pp. 200–1.
- 8 Nita Kumar, 'Work and Leisure in the Formation of Identity: Muslim Weavers in a Hindu City', in Sandria B. Freitag, *Culture and Power in Banaras: Community, Performance, and Environment* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), p. 157.
- 9 Posting by Professor Haynes on h-asia@h-net.msu.edu (accessed 12 November 2010).
- 10 Cynthia Keppley-Mahmood, 'Re-Thinking Indian Communalism: Culture and Counter-Culture', *Asian Survey*, 33 (1993), p. 726.
- 11 As reflected, for instance, in how religious patronage was distributed, and the character and language of the vernacular education provided in public schools. Ian Copland, *State, Community and Neighbourhood in Princely North India 1900–1950* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), especially chapters 2 and 6.
- 12 Sir Alfred Lyall, *Asiatic Studies: Religious and Social* (London: John Murray, 1882), p. 285.
- 13 Resolution of the Govt of India, Education Dept., NAI, Foreign and Political, Internal B, November 1920, 302–18.
- 14 Smith, *India as a Secular State*, p. 99; and Peter van der Veer, 'The Secularity of the State', in Masaaki and Tanabe, *The State in India*, p. 264.

- 15 Ian Copland, 'The Political Geography of Religious Conflict: Towards an Explanation of the Relative Infrequency of Communal Riots in the Indian Princely States', *International Journal of Punjabi Studies*, 7 (2000), pp. 1–27.
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