

The Problem of the Eighteenth Century*

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This characterization of the last centuries of precolonial history conflicts sharply with time-hallowed images of old-order South Asia, the dominant perception being that South Asian history is a story of repeated decline, the last example of which took place in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when one region after another apparently succumbed to warfare and banditry (from 'chaos to chaos' in Morris's suggestive phrase).¹ Was not the eighteenth century the period when the Mughal empire, and thus 'the Mughal economy', so called, was effectively dismantled, long before colonial occupation, the trough from which the new colonial world would be born anew?² The developments of which we have spoken would thus seem to be merely of a cyclical, fluctuational, or even random character, occurring within given (could they be 'homeostatic'?) limits, and in this respect it is important to note that even modern works of economic history betray a fundamental agnosticism in relation to this problem.³

The reasons are clear: they reside in the conundrum, discussed above, concerning the extent to which India's history (i.e. South Asia's) should be considered simply an 'Indian history', that is to say, as an autonomous collectivity of evidence abraded here and there by contacts with European companies and commerce. If it can be considered so, then although the course of the eighteenth century will remain disputable, it will also remain part of that long and separate entity (the history of South Asia) abruptly broken into by the colonial conquests of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and

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provided... British Res...
tribute to Calcutta ever...
but that the bankers gained access to...
and began to take a close interest in court faction as they had done in Ben...
Hyderabad and Benares before. For instance, a famous Jain banker...
Bacchraj who appeared as a partner of the Benares magnate Lala K...
Mull in transferring tribute all over Hindustan in the 1770s and 1780s...
insinuated himself into the centre of the Lucknow court faction by the 1780s...
With the aid of the British Resident, he gained an influence over the...
and 'began to aspire to the distinction of Nairb',⁵⁰ a major officer of...
Bacchraj's drive for power foundered and he ended his life in a N...
prison, along with most of his family.⁵¹ But it was significant that even...
the most powerful and most agrarian of the north Indian successors...
Indian financiers could come so near to the sources of power.

THE FORMS OF URBAN ORGANIZATION

The political influence of trader-bankers was a common feature of eighteenth-century regimes. But was this power wielded simply by a great magnate families subject to the 'instability of oriental fortunes', or did it have a wider social and institutional base? There is indeed a body of opinion which might concede the political importance of individual capitalists in colonial Indian politics but argues that the culture and political ideas of India made it virtually impossible for merchants and townsmen to achieve a significant degree of autonomy or corporate identity in the face of ruling landed élites. Ultimately, these ideas derive from Max Weber's brilliant generalizations on the religion and institutions of India. According to Weber, occupational specialization based on caste fragmented Indian artisan, merchant and service populations, so inhibiting the development of mercantile trust, let alone political action. Caste restrictions made impossible the civic fraternization of which emerged Western corporate institutions, while the 'passive' Hinduism denied rising groups an ideology which could validate their political independence. Thus, urban centres and states remained dominated by 'patrimonial' regimes of warrior bureaucrats, and for Weber as for Marx, social change awaited the impact of colonial rule. These ideas continue to influence more recent work. Trade, it has been asserted, was 'merged into... managed by caste bodies';⁵² the Indian city was split into 'self-contained... mutually hostile neighbourhoods';⁵³ the political role of merchants was limited by their dharma, and they remained of low social status. Such ideas are almost circular since the richest sources relate to revenue administration and the cycle of dynasties, and there is a grave lack of evidence on the behaviour

and organization of social groups outside the ruling warrior élites and the literate classes dependent on them.

However, the evidence from several parts of north India suggests not only that the economic and political importance of the great trader-bankers was enhanced in the period of the successor states but that corporations of townsmen, merchants, and religious specialists had developed a new coherence and autonomy which in some cases amounted to a virtual civic self-government. These changes were not frustrated by caste fragmentation or the passivity of Hinduism: on the contrary, caste and religion provided building-blocks out of which mercantile and urban solidarities were perceptibly emerging. The influence of trading corporations over the landholding aristocracy was undoubtedly enhanced by the growing European presence in India. Merchants were adaptable to the style and requirements of the British and gained from the burgeoning of the export trades to China and Europe after 1770. But the commercialization of politics and the rise of the corporations were by origin intrinsic changes within the economy and culture. War and political change, far from destroying towns and trade, had actually galvanized them into greater independence. To illustrate the potential for such changes, we will take the case of Rajasthan. Not only was this an area removed from direct Western influence, but it was the natural habitat of the haughty Indian aristocracy.

As James Tod recognized, a century of war had not destroyed trade or production in Rajasthan; only the Pax Britannica made a desert, and paradoxical as it may appear, there was tenfold more activity and enterprise in the midst of that predatory warfare, which rendered India one wide arena of conflict, than in these days of universal pacification.⁵⁴

As in eastern India, merchants had strengthened their hold on the working of the revenue system by financing the deficits of the rajas and clan leaders and also by working the *takkavi* advances given to cultivators in the village. Contemporary with these economic changes,⁵⁵ the political status of townsmen and merchants was increasing. Political fluidity resulting from the decline of Mughal overlordship and the rise of small, local kingdoms caused what Tod called a 'neglect of legislation' during the eighteenth century.⁵⁶ Self-governing multi-caste assemblies had taken over responsibility for many aspects of administration, especially defence and the upkeep of trade routes and *sarais*. The influence of Jain merchant people had already secured them a number of special privileges or immunities which had developed around the concept of 'sanctuary' (*ashrama*). In several Rajput states, officers of the raja were excluded from the temples and living quarters of Jain merchants, and the high status they had achieved influenced the standing of other townsmen with

whom they had dealings. In some cases indeed the rights and privileges of merchants and towns were set out in documents which reminded Tod of medieval European town charters.⁵⁷ Tod's analogy between the emergence of Western representative institutions from feudal privilege and the promise for a kind of representative government based on Indian urban councils is fanciful. But he was sufficiently struck by these developments in Rajasthan to record a significant deviation from his usual picture of oriental feudalism. If he was not witnessing the emergence of parliaments, Tod had certainly seen subtle changes in the relations between constituent elements of the pre-colonial state.

Changes like this were taking place elsewhere in India, but the timing and context were often different. In Rajasthan, always a turbulent frontier of the empire, the apparatus of Mughal urban government, with its Muslim judicial officers responsible to a governor, had never developed strong roots. The bazaar and the service quarters of the towns bargained with or submitted directly to the raja and the Hindu warriors. 'Want of legislation' would force them directly into self-organization. But in the cities of the plains where up to 40 per cent of the population might be Muslim, the Mughal executive officer (*kotwal*) and 'registrar' (*kazi*) retained varying degrees of influence. In Rohilkhand and Awadh, which retained strong Muslim identities, the power of the Hindu urban and commercial groups was growing, but it remained encompassed by city-wide Islamic institutions. There existed formal processes of registration and arbitration by *kotwal* and *kazi* even if effective power was left to heads of the corporations.

In the more commercial south and east, however, the authority of the Mughal officials had been largely eroded before 1770 as chapter 8 will show. Here bodies of traders and service people had also attained a significant degree of independence in matters of police, defence, and arbitration. In Benares and Mirzapur particularly, the word corporation can properly be used to describe trading and religious organizations. People of different caste were tied together in broader communities which received explicit recognition from the rulers. Here monetization of revenue demand, the growth of inland trade, and of the city of Benares itself had put trader-bankers into a strategic position in the new Benares dominion.⁵⁸ By the 1770s, the power of the major mercantile houses was similar to that acquired by the Jagat Seths in Bengal in the later days of the Nawabi. They could, to use again the words of the British Resident, 'command the state to a large extent in the matter of revenue'. But how was this power represented in institutions? How coherent were mercantile organizations? The mid-Ganges at least appears to have seen the emergence of powerful mercantile corporations similar to the cross-caste

...the petty local raja or harami re-
...antile custom and its hinterland. The petty local raja or harami re-
...minated from the town and its hinterland. The petty local raja or harami re-
...considerable prestige and formally appointed a head or *chaudhuri* of
...the bazaar. But his wealth and power was dwarfed by that of the leading
...merchant houses and the religious corporations. It was they who patrolled the
...ated areas of the town, and it was their levies which policed the key trade
...route which ran south into central India. As in Rajasthan, the 'want of legis-
...ation and the impotence of small states had forced merchants and other
...groups with regional interests to take up the role of adjudication and pro-
...tection which had formerly been the preserve of kings.

In Benares a similar set of relationships developed around the Naupatti Sabha (Society of Nine Sharers) which illustrates how merchant interests could be articulated across the boundaries of caste.⁶¹ This association was a body of nine leading city merchant families which had been brought together by the demand of the ruler of Awadh for a huge forced loan during one of his campaigns against Benares during the 1750s. The nine great burghers had come forward to subscribe a part of the loan and so save the holy city and its environs from sack. Political turbulence had galvanized the community into action which permanently placed the 'bankers' in a strong moral and customary relationship with the raja and the other great land-controlling magnates who had been unable to protect the city themselves. But we do have echoes of earlier cooperation for political purposes by the mercantile elite. A central mercantile organization appears to have existed at least from the beginning of the century, and it is said that they played an important role in helping Balwant Singh's line to power in 1739.⁶² The Nawab of Awadh who nominally controlled Benares was looking to renew the revenue-farm of the Benares territories to Mir Rustam Ali. But the story goes that the bankers calculated the greatest extent of their capital in order to put up an even larger bid and stronger security for Mansa Ram, the founder of the Bhumihar dynasty. This was a ploy to reduce Muslim influence in the territory and benefit a local dynasty with whom they were on much more equal terms. Though it seems unverifiable, the story encouraged the commercial community to claim high status in regard to the raja's family and descendants.

The nine families in the Naupatti came from different backgrounds. One was Gujarati Brahmin, one Gujarati Vaishya, one Oswal Jain, and the others Agarwals of various subgroups. In the beginning, there was a mix between old established Gujarati firms and relative newcomers from eastern India. All

... is one of fragmentation, but in the pre-colonial period might sometimes be better to use the image of the fascies in which the bond in of each individual element gives strength to the whole.

Let us set out the variety of these relationships. Direct marriage alliances were the lowest common denominator of both social and commercial life. In the course of the hundred years after 1750, the broad category of Agarwal merchants was drawn closer and closer by dozens of strategic marriages which pooled capital and skills. Rich newcomers like the Shah family were able to ally with more established but poorer families who headed the Pathan (Eastern) Agarwal caste brotherhood. These links could help maintain relations over a much wider area also. Khattri merchants continued to marry their daughters to aspiring families at the other end of the great east-west trade route in the Punjab. The Dassapurwal Gujarati merchants display an even more interesting pattern. They customarily brought in poor young men from towns in Gujarat and other regions, married them to their daughters, and set them up with houses and capital in Benares.⁶⁶

Caste provided larger building-blocks than extended family groups. For these were not the tight-knit caste institutions which appear in some of the anthropological literature. Instead, they were more like loose bodies of patrons and clients drawn from broadly similar ritual groups which clustered around a few important families wielding ritual authority and economic power. Thus, the famous family of Lala Kashmiri Mull was 'chief' of the city's Khattris and Saraswat Brahmins from the Punjab.⁶⁷ The cohesion of the group was enhanced by a relationship with the holy men of the local Nanak panthi assembly who acted as guru (spiritual advisor) to most of the Punjab people in the city. Like most other mercantile groups in Benares, the Khattris and their Saraswat Brahmin family priests and business partners had a caste assembly or panchayat. It seems to have met irregularly to deliberate on matters of morality and was, by tradition, quite separate from the multi-caste assemblies of 'respectable merchants' which adjudicated business matters.

While the mercantile population possessed a consciousness of caste and

...in the cloth trade.⁶⁸ Purbaye Agarwals were
the Ahir-Khatris dominated the grain trade.⁶⁹ Gujarati Banias in fine brocades,⁷⁰ and so on.
Nevertheless, most trades were multi-caste ventures, and in their dealings
with the authorities, merchants needed common institutions.
Sometimes these were based on an interest in the trade of one region. Thus
we find that, approaching the authorities in the 1780s, 'the merchants trading
to Lahore, Multan and the west', who included Gosains, Brahmmins, Khatris
and Jains; 'the merchants trading to the Duccin [Deccan] and southwards',⁷¹
including Sipahi Nagars,⁷² Maratha Brahmmins, and Bundelkhandi Jains, and
the mahajans and traders ordinarily resident in Benares',⁷³ including Agarwals,
Khatris and others. Another form of organization was based on the particular
function performed by merchants at different levels of the trading system.
The wholesale commission agents (*arethias*) trading to particular regions had
their own organization and spokesmen, as did the petty bazaar lenders.

Conceptions of status and mercantile honour also overrode caste, for it is
evident that trade and credit relations over long distances could not have
survived without them. 'Creditworthiness', having one's *hundis* accepted in
the bazaar, keeping regular commercial books, being frugal rather than 'ex-
pensive'—these were the measures of respectability which are mentioned
regularly in commercial cases, and they are witness to a consistent mercantile
'public opinion'. At the pinnacle of merchant society stood the members of
the Naupatti Sabha themselves who functioned as a final panel of arbitration
among merchants on matters such as debt, the division of assets in family
partitions, bankruptcy, and the status of mercantile custom on legal instruments.
During this period it seems to have been unusual for litigation to go beyond
these informal, local forums. Only in the few instances where family, caste,
or Naupatti arbitration had failed to impose a settlement would the *kotwali*
peon—the runner of the city's police chief—or the ruler's courts be brought
into the matter.⁷⁴ To all intents and purposes then, an ad hoc 'law merchant'
ruled. Excommunication remained the usual sanction for caste assemblies,
but what were the sanctions available to this wider mercantile opinion? In a
tight, face-to-face society, the failure of one's credit in the bazaar was a sen-
tence of commercial and sometimes of physical death. But the sanctions of
Hindu religion were also available. Oaths were made in Ganges water and in
the name of tutelary deities, or with the witness of a Gosain who was techni-
cally above caste and kin since he was dead to the world. The ultimate sanc-
tion was to have Brahmmins mutilate themselves before the door of a debtor in

order to heap spiritual demerit on him (dharna); this was only the most dramatic instance of the role of popular religion in reinforcing mercantile ties.

In Benares at this period there is tantalizing evidence of social cohesion based upon wealth. A witness in a case says 'it is not the custom of my caste to take the evidence of poor people at arbitrations'.⁷⁶ There is also the fact that members of the lower entrepreneurial castes (Kalwars, Telis, and Kachhars) generally appear to have arbitrated each others' disputes and did not have access to the Naupatti, though they were influenced by their mores and business style. Differences of class and status—*grand people* against *mean people*—are of course perfectly compatible with common civic or mercantile unity against outsiders. At other times, links of caste and patronage ensure that the complaints and difficulties of the poorer commercial people would reach the ears of the authorities. For instance, the merchant élite spoke up for workers in the Benares mint in 1791 when their livelihood was threatened by official action.⁷⁷ Later they fiercely resisted an attempt to bring in a limitation on suits for debt under the Bengal Regulations of 1793 on the grounds, among others, that it would damage the small lenders or *khurdeas*, who often waited for more than a generation for the payment of debts.⁷⁸

If there were many links which bound mercantile people together irrespective of caste in all but the spheres of marriage and formal interdining, there were also subtle ties which bound together different occupations and statuses among the residents as a whole. Religious observance created solidarities here too. Gujarati and local Agarwal families joined together in the veneration of the Krishna temple of Gopal Lalji and were counted as members of the Vallabhacharya sect.⁷⁹ But the rajas of Benares and cadets of the ruling family were also closely associated with the shrine. From Mansa Ram onward, they customarily supported Gopal Lalji and other major shrines in the city and at Bindachal, the holy place of Mirzapur. As chief devotees and benefactors of shrines so closely associated with the ruling family, merchant people acquired enhanced status.

Within the city, Gosains and other ascetic orders also acted as a body of brokers between different social groups. They attracted veneration from the mass of the people and also had a close hand in the running of the merchant communities, and had even come to head them in nearby Mirzapur. Brahmins similarly acted as a force of integration. Not only did nobles and commercial notables feed or directly maintain the large Brahmin population, but the commercial houses employed Brahmins as runners and agents whenever possible to avoid problems of caste status with their clients and correspondents. The British Resident was horrified to find that it was customary among the merchants to take several paise per rupee on every *dakhilla* or *hundi* transaction with the rulers for gifts to the Brahmins.⁸⁰ It was a further indication

and contributed greatly to the synthesis of wealth and Hindu practice which was emerging under the surface of the Indo-Muslim state.

ASCETIC ORDERS AND URBAN LIFE

The last chapter emphasized how Hindu ascetic orders of Bairagis and Gosains had come to play an important role in the eighteenth-century economy. Their annual cycle of pilgrimage from the borders of the Punjab through the holy cities of the plains to Bihar and Orissa allowed them to move goods, money and military force between stable agricultural tracts. They were the largest owners of urban property in Benares, Allahabad, Mirzapur and Nagpur in the 1780s, and they also helped supply the large fairs and markets of the countryside which were often unsafe for unarmed merchants of lower status. An open and flexible organization enabled the ascetics to pool resources and talent. They took in as novices young boys from war-torn villages, recruiting from all the higher castes.⁸⁷ It seems possible that there were as many as half a million Shaivite and Vaishnavite ascetics in north India in the last decade of the century.

For the ascetic corporations it was their religious status and organization which provided the basic immunities out of which a separate political role could grow. As with the Jains, the concept of sanctuary and immunity from punishment at the hands of the ruler encouraged the development of a strong corporate life. From an early period, the Dasnami Naga ascetics, for instance, enjoyed the privilege of self-government under their 'abbots' and regional controllers along with relative immunity from imposts and interference by the rulers' police officials.⁸⁸ Hindu holy men achieved an even higher status during the reign of Emperor Akbar when a clear effort was made to formulate an eclectic royal religion. But as with other corporations, it was Aurangzeb's lurch back towards a state founded on Muslim law which propelled the Dasnamis to a tougher defensive position. Tradition records a battle against Islamic revival in Benares in about 1664 when Gosains 'preserved the honour of Vishwanath's seat',⁸⁹ that is, preserved the great Viswanath temple on the Benares ghats from plunder. The Lingayat Math at Madanpura also preserved a tale of successful defiance to a Muslim ruler, though here it was a ghostly tiger which is supposed to have routed the interloper.⁹⁰ After 1707 the flux of political power stirred the corporations into more strenuous military activity. When the Afghans invaded southern Awadh in 1751, the Dasnamis who were gathered at Allahabad for the bathing festival offered armed resistance and saved the inner city from sack, for 'Siva gave help and thus saved the honour of the Dasnamis'.⁹¹ Hereafter, powerful Gosain armies stalked the north

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Indian countryside, playing the role of Swiss mercenaries in Renaissance Europe. Though their commanders were particularly honoured by the Hindu Jats, their status in the Awadh armies was almost as high. The Nawab invested one Gosain leader with the rank of 'four hundred *hazari*', a high order of Mughal chivalry, and also with the right to raise troops without reference to himself.

During the eighteenth century, then, Gosains, Bairagis and other religious corporations came to play an important role both within states and in directing the diplomatic, commercial, and military relations between them. In some localities they virtually acted as rulers in their own right. Gosain dominance at the great Hardwar fair, for instance, underlines the degree to which the corporations could take on the privileges of protection and punishment which had formerly been the preserve of Kings:

These mehants [abbots] meet in council daily; hear and decide upon all complaints brought before them, either against individuals, or of a nature tending to disturb the public tranquility, and the well management of this immense multitude.⁹²

This observer, Captain Hardwicke, saw two fraudulent Marwari merchants fined and lashed by order of the council.⁹³ The Marathas, who were nominally rulers of the area in which the fair was located, allowed the Gosains almost total control of relations with the other predatory powers and were either unwilling or unable to claw back much of the huge levy which the corporations amassed from visiting merchants and pilgrims.⁹⁴ In the holy cities, too, ascetics achieved a striking degree of self-government. Contemporary Muttra, for instance, was run by a combination of the Chaube Brahmins, who controlled local trade and pilgrimage, and Vaishnavite monasteries (*kunjis*) which provided protection and ran longer-distance trade.⁹⁵ The heroic and costly defence of the ascetics to the invasion of Ahmed Shah Durrani in 1761, when many thousands of them were slaughtered, permanently enhanced their local importance.⁹⁶ On the fringes of other dominions, as in major commercial towns, the Gosains were able to establish a near state of their own. One commander, Himmat Bahadur, carved out for himself a small kingdom in the cotton-growing tracts of Bundelkhand,⁹⁷ while the so-called Sannyasis of the east had established themselves on the borders of Bengal in the 1740s and 1750s to the discomfiture of its later British rulers.

In small Hindu states which emerged after 1740 the religious corporations also achieved important concessions and influence. In the Jat dominion of Bharatpur, for instance, Vaishnavite orders of Ramawat and Nemawat ascetics obtained considerable wealth and the honour of conferring benediction and legitimacy on the raja. Obeisance to the *mahants* of the main Bairagi

temples, which were set at the centre of the new town of Bharatpur, were an important ritual in all the marriage and other ceremonies performed by the royal house. But the *mahants*' power also had a more tangible aspect. They took a tithe in kind on all sorts of grain exported for sale in the bazaar, and secured periodical grants of the whole of the raja's share of the produce of the bazaar. In addition, sect leaders received generous grants of revenue in land or land at reduced revenue, and an annual cess of 4 annas to Rs 2 of the 1,200 villages within the bounds of the dominion. Not surprisingly, 'These melhants become very powerful, especially when they are also gurus or spiritual preceptors to the rulers.'⁹⁹

Other bodies of high status had achieved virtual independence within smaller dominions. Bodies of river-priests at Allahabad, Hardwar, Gaya and Muttra had existed for centuries. The Mughal peace had enhanced their numbers and wealth as more people came to the great ritual centres in order to perform the ceremony of oblation (*shraddha*) for their ancestors. The priests' success depended on the development of links with lineages of nobles and magnates whose members would visit and endow them with lands and money from generation after generation. The constant reiteration of the merits of these places in the Puranas kept them in the popular mind of the localities, and it was still possible to slip in new names and attributes as late as the eighteenth century.¹⁰⁰

There were also groups of teaching holy men at some of these centres. After about 1680 communications with the Deccan improved and a large body of Deccani and western Indian teachers began to gather in Benares. Their organization of preceptors and pupils for the purpose of teaching the classical syllabuses of grammar, astronomy, and the holy books were sufficiently well-developed to be regarded as 'colleges' or even as a 'university' by early European travellers. Nanakpanthi north Indians also had a 'college' in the city of Patna. These institutions with their wide and flexible curriculum were in a good position to brave the political changes of the century and to emerge with enhanced moral and political authority. The new Hindu rulers of Benares, like the Marathas and Jats, lavished donations on them. They

CORPORATIONS AND THE ANALYSIS OF
INDIAN SOCIETY

These subtle changes in power and status have been buried by the more dramatic political annals of Mughal decline. Yet there are parallels here with the rise to power of two much more celebrated groups of Brahmins, the Chitpavans of the Deccan and the 'Sipahi' or military Nagar Brahmins of Gujarat. By the mid-century these two castes had staged a virtual coup throughout central and western India where they held a near monopoly of high offices in the state, and their influence spread with the Maratha armies into the Ganges valley.¹⁰³ Their success had something in common with that of the corporate groups which we have been discussing. They had mastered the art of diplomacy between the decentralized polities which emerged out of the second phase of Maratha expansion. Their subcaste groupings and marriage networks expanded over a wide area which gave them leverage in a number of small dominions; at first they were able to move information between one centre and another; later, as they began to amass money and land-rights, wealth could be moved around. A key to influence with the Maratha rulers was also their Brahminical status. They could help to 'transform' peasant Kunbi leaders into kingly Marathas, while their skills of literacy were invaluable in the process of state-formation. Like the corporations, then, these two groups of Brahmin administrators were at both a moral and, as it were, a geographical advantage in dealing with contemporary rulers. One major difference was that their internal organization was quite strictly bounded by caste. But this does not invalidate the comparison. It was Brahmins as a status group which achieved great power within the Maratha politics, symbolized by the great public feedings and distributions of charity to them (*dukshina*). Chitpavan Brahmins rose to prominence within this status group.

The intention in this section has been to take a new look at social and political change within the immediate pre-colonial politics of northern India. In doing this, we have encountered a number of changes which may seem surprising in the light of the still vital tradition of thinking about Indian society which derived from the ideas of Max Weber. This tradition insisted on the low status of merchants in India, and the domination of its cities by warrior or bureaucratic élites, which precluded the emergence of 'civic liberties':

in India—since the victory of the patrimonial kings and the Brahmins—it has been the endogamous caste with its exclusive taboos which has prevented the fusion of city dwellers into a status group enjoying social and legal equality, into a *connubium* sharing table community and displaying solidarity toward the outgroup. Because of

the intensity of exclusive caste taboos this possibility was even more remote in India than in China.¹⁰⁴

Weber's view depends on a number of assumptions and certain historical conditions. The main condition is the existence of large 'bureaucratic empires' or 'patrimonial states' which are held to prevent the emergence of strong corporate bodies. Where such states did not exist, he is prepared to accept that urban and mercantile solidarity might come into being.

To be sure in India during the period of the great salvation religions, guilds associated with hereditary elders (*schreshthas*) uniting in many cities into an association. Residues from this period there are, at present, some cities (Allahabad) with a municipal urban elder corresponding to the occidental mayor.¹⁰⁵

The argument of this chapter does not directly contradict Weber since he would have acknowledged that the decline of the Mughal state may have enhanced the possibility of self-organization among the local bodies.

This theme can be usefully applied to other periods of Indian history. In medieval south India, for instance, self-regulating bodies of long-distance merchants appear to have had great influence within the states which developed in areas of high farming.¹⁰⁶ If the rise of merchant religious corporations within the fragmented Mughal empire was evidence of social change, it was novel mainly by virtue of the geographical extent of bodies of merchants, ascetics, and Brahmins involved, and the broader context of commercial agriculture.

Weber's main assumption is that Hinduism and Jainism are essentially passive and therefore could never provide a basis for political action in the manner which conceptions of Roman law, and later revived Christianity, provided in the West. The degree to which Indian religious belief inhibited business in India has been severely qualified by Singer¹⁰⁷ and Morris,¹⁰⁸ among others, and the evidence for post-Mughal north India suggests that this passivity could be exaggerated in the political sphere also. As we have seen, the concepts of sanctuary (*ashrama*) and withdrawal (*sannyas*) could both, by a special paradox, provide the basis for self-government and self-defence. In contrast to Christianity, meekness was never a necessary concomitant of either. An Indian pilgrim's staff could readily be transformed into a symbol of authority (*danda*). The view that Hindu religious duty (*dharma*) excluded merchants from political activity is also simplistic. True, merchants were unwilling to compromise their profession as 'money dealers' and aristocrats were unwilling to deal openly in trade, but class distinctions were not absolute.