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Chapter 7

Ganga-polity: Mughal Decline, the Zamindars and the Diwani Raj

[T]wo opposites reconciled successfully in Mughal polity, namely the absolute despotic power of the emperor, bolstered by immense centralization and a theory of semi-divine sovereignty; and a structure heavily systematized with such conventions governing the relations between the king and his nobles [emphasis added].¹

Introduction

As we have already seen, the Ganga was a fluvial high road of the Mughal Empire which connected the fertile plains of Hindustan with the maritime zone of the Bay of Bengal. The Mughals' political and economic expansion to the east along the Ganga coincided with the maritime economic boom. The trade of European and Asian merchants brought larger quantities of bullion into the Ganga plain. While the expanding economy benefitted the Mughal state, in the long run it also armed the dissident forces, from mobile warlords to zamindars along the Ganga.² Thus, the river's role in influencing economic and political trajectories is undeniable. During the rise of the Mughal Empire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the river channelled Mughal control over the zamindars who dominated the fertile agricultural tracts of the plain.³ In the heyday of the empire during the first half of the eighteenth century, the zamindars turned the political tide and began to exact "customs duty" from river traffic, formed their own armed flotillas, and raised militias to challenge Mughal authority. Why did this happen in the eighteenth century?

In the age of maritime commerce the growth of trade meant more income and political power for the state and zamindars alike. So long as the Mughals were able to alienate resources from the zamindars, the imperial system functioned well, but when the state failed to extract surplus resources from the zamindars, the latter grew in power. Trade primed the pump of politics. In particular, the dependence on maritime trade for the fiscal economy was felt acutely by the provincial rulers of Bengal. For example, in 1706 the Bengal governor Murshid Quli Khan requested that imperial

¹ Athar Ali, "Towards a new interpretation of the Mughal empire," in *Mughal India: Studies in polity, ideas, society, and culture*, ed. Irfan Habib (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 67.

² Zamindar could mean anyone who collected land revenue for the government from a local official to an autonomous chieftain. On zamindars in Mughal India see S. Nurul Hasan, "The position of the Zamindars in the Mughal empire," *IESHR* 1:4 (1964): 107–19.

³ J. J. L. Gommans, *Mughal warfare: Indian frontiers and high roads to empire, 1500–1700* (London: Routledge, 2002), 27, 103, 164–65.

authorities restore peace with the VOC, which had closed its factories at Kasimbazar and elsewhere two years before. The reason was that his revenues had fallen as the peasants stopped growing cash crops in favor of paddy and pulses.⁴ Like Murshid Quli Khan, the zamindars were no less aware of the income from trade in cash crops within and between their respective zamindaris. VOC officials and zamindars of Bihar signed a number of contracts for the purchase of merchandise and its transportation via river and overland routes controlled by the zamindars, a clear indication that the balance of political power was shifting away from the Mughal state to the zamindar-dominated political economy of the Ganga. It also underscores the fact that zamindars were amassing economic and political powers in smaller polities in a process that has been described as “regional centralization.”⁵ Zamindars formed yet another interest group alongside local traders and Indian merchants whose economic well-being increasingly depended on long-distance maritime trade. Sharing a common interest in overseas trade, in the eighteenth century these groups gradually loosened the Mughals’ grip on the political economy in the eastern tracks of the Ganga.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, historians of South Asia debated the causes of the Mughal decline. Though the debate yielded some very interesting insights and succeeded in veering away from the Mughal-centric, personality-oriented or institution-focused interpretations, yet the causes for the decline of Mughal Empire remained contested. In 1992 Sanjay Subrahmanyam suggested a new approach by looking at the Mughal state as a process, rather than a given structure frozen in time.⁶ If we accept that the formation of the empire was a process, then it follows that its decline was, too. The decline of the Mughal Empire is commonly said to have set in after the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, although cracks in the foundation had appeared long before that. Although the territory of the empire began to shrink in the early eighteenth century, the institutional legacies remained potent and warring groups and regional polities continued to view the Mughals as the paramount power and bestower of legitimacy until the last of the Mughals was forced into exile in 1858 following the Great Rebellion.

⁴ Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the economy of Bengal, 1630–1720* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 25. Prakash has cited Enclosure to H. B. 9.10.1706, K. A. 1622, fos. 63–68. There was a dispute over patrolling the Muslims merchant fleet in western Indian Ocean for which the VOC had signed a *muchalka* (surety). Despite these escorts, the ship of Abdul Ghafur, a leading Muslim merchant of Surat, was hijacked. The Mughals retaliated by putting charges on the VOC and by confiscating its merchandise at Surat. In retaliation, the Company blockaded the Mughal harbor between 1704 and 1706. See G. D. Winus and M. P. M. Vink, *The merchant-warrior pacified: The VOC (the Dutch East India Company) and its changing political economy in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), 92; on the Dutch convoy system, see Ashin Das Gupta, “Gujarati merchants and the Red Sea trade, 1700–1725,” in *The age of partnership: Europeans in Asia before domination*, ed. Blair B. Kling and M. N. Pearson (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1979), 123–58.

⁵ The term has been borrowed from Catherine B. Asher and Cynthia Talbot, *India before Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 249.

⁶ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “The Mughal state—structure or process? Reflections on recent western historiography,” in *IESHR* 29:3 (1992): 291–321; Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds., *The Mughal state 1526–1750* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), see introduction.

In order to understand the processes leading to the dissolution of the Mughal Empire and transition of the EIC rule from, in essence, trader turned landlord or zamindar, to the dominant power in South Asia, we need a more nuanced appreciation of the transformation of the political economy along the Ganga. There were a number of constitutive props which benefitted by holding the Mughal imperial edifice together, not only the Mughal administrators and officials, but also zamindars, portfolio capitalists, merchants, and financiers who came from a number of ethnic and religious groups. Many of these competing groups were busy nursing their own economic and political ambitions, but they were as dependent upon the empire as the empire was on them.⁷

The Mughals were the chief arbitrators of differences arising amongst the ethnic and religious groups of zamindars and jagirdars.⁸ In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the arbitration and resolution of disputes among these constituencies was one of the empire's essential functions, but in the eighteenth century the so-called successor states to the Mughal Empire appropriated some of these functions for themselves. This was thanks in large part to the greater opportunities to accumulate resources and raise large militias that resulted from regional centralization, a process that reached its acme when the East India Company secured the *diwani* (Mughal taxation rights) and consolidated its authority over the river trade emanating from Calcutta. Thus, following the lead of the Mughal successor states and big zamindars, by the second half of the eighteenth century the EIC emerged as a new diwan and came to be the region's supreme arbitrator, although it still acknowledged Mughal suzerainty. By the early nineteenth century, the Company gradually wrested or won over other regional states and emerged as a paramount power in South Asia.

Why did a European Company succeed in dispossessing regional powers and forming an Indian empire? Rather than repeating arguments put forward by the imperial and nationalist historians, I would suggest that most of the merchant groups in early modern Bengal were foreigners to the land: Armenians, Khattris, Marwaris, Jains, and Gujaratis, no less than the Dutch and English, were in Bihar and Bengal to make money. As we have seen, many of these merchants collaborated with each other. The power relations and emphasis on racial difference that came to colour the Raj in the nineteenth century and later were largely absent from the earlier market relations based on the exchange of goods and specie. Thus, the roots of the EIC's political success can be sought in the accommodations and dependant relationships that the market fostered

⁷ For the dual role of zamindars and jagirdars in stability and unsettling the Mughal Empire in different circumstances, see Satish Chandra, *Parties and politics at the Mughal court 1707–1740* (1959; repr. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3–11. For the mansabdars drawn from various ethnic and racial stocks, factionalism among them and the Mughal emperors' balancing act, see Athar Ali, *The Mughal nobility under Aurangzeb* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1996), 7–37, see esp. pp. 16, 18–19. See also Muzaffar Alam, *The crisis of empire in Mughal north India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707–48* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 10–16.

⁸ J. C. Heesterman, *The inner conflict of tradition: Essays in Indian ritual, kinship and society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 166–67; see also J. C. Heesterman, "India and the inner conflict of tradition," *Daedalus* 102:1 (1973): 97–113, esp. 103–4. Chandra, *Parties and politics*, 13–14.

in the Age of Commerce. In such a relationship, Indian and foreign merchants and zamindars often shared a common interest deriving from the long-distance oceanic trade, as I hope to demonstrate in this chapter. And the Ganga formed the link not only between the maritime and hinterland zones, but also between the forces that dominated these two spheres.

With the assumption of political power in Bengal the EIC instituted and regularized the laws regarding customs duty, enforcement of contracts for transactions and exchange in the market especially in cities like Calcutta. In theory these regulations were uniformly binding on Asians and Europeans and therefore they brought greater transparency in trade and commercial dealings at the market. The change of regime also brought about some readjustments such as the elimination of the big bankers, merchant magnates and some Mughal rank holders and the proliferation of smaller merchants. The latter group was numerically far more significant and it came to assume new responsibilities, participated in trade, collaborated with the new regime and survived in the changed political circumstances.

Our understanding of the economy of eastern India is broad based and more balanced because we consider agriculture, land reclamation, the crafts and productive activities, demography and labour, and the problems of environment. Keeping these factors in mind one may ask: whether and how did the political transformation affect the economic trajectory of the eastern Ganga plain in the eighteenth century? I shall approach this question by examining the role of zamindars in agricultural expansion and their participation in the money economy. By focusing on zamindars' intensive land management and their assertion against the Mughal rule, I will argue that it was the control over the Ganga, the imperial highway of trade and traffic, by the zamindars located along the river banks that led to the final liquidation of Mughal authority. The control over the Ganga by the British was like using the old foundation stones of the Mughal Empire for rebuilding an improvised imperial edifice.

So far historians have ignored the Ganga and the political economy that the river sustained. This ignorance may partly be explained by the regional approaches that allude only briefly to the maritime economy. Similarly, although maritime historians acknowledge the importance of productive hinterlands to overseas trade, they all but ignore the river that made the region fertile, facilitated the transport of resources from the hinterlands to the sea, and brought back specie and some merchandise. Focussing on the Ganga not only draws our attention to a long-neglected aspect of South Asian historiography, it also rescues us from confusion about eighteenth-century political and economic questions.

The chapter is organized into three sections. The first discusses the formal political landscape of the Mughal Empire, shows the administrative and military arrangements that held the empire together, and sketches the informal political landscape dominated by the local zamindars. Section two discusses the zamindars' growing interest in agricultural expansion and in promoting trade and a money economy in Bihar. It further shows the zamindars' growing control over the Ganga and

overland routes and their defiance of Mughal authority. Section three discusses the political and economic changes in the second half of the eighteenth century, and in particular the EIC's push for agricultural expansion, cash-crop production, and promotion of regional trade even as it sought to dominate the maritime commerce of the region. All these developments unfolded along the banks of the Ganga, which remains to be our focal point.

Section I: The Mughal Empire and the Political Landscape of the Eastern Ganga Plain

Mughal state institutions drew upon the principles of governance from a wide geographical zone encompassing South, West and Central Asia and as a result was characterized by a complex mix of traits found in a variety of centralized, segmentary, and patrimonial-bureaucratic states that depend primarily on land revenue resources.⁹ The administrative features of a range of pre-existing polities were appropriated and improvised upon to create institutions for governing the empire. Abul Fazl, the ideologue of the Akbar's empire, devised plans aimed at providing legitimacy to the Mughal dynasty. He resorted to myths and fables into which he wove strands from works on Mughal dynastic history which he employed to free Mughal imperial institutions from the vestiges of Turko-Mongol tribal kingship and governance.¹⁰ These measures reinforced the loyalty to the Mughal emperor and, in return, the imperial patronage to the ruling elites facilitated the extraction of agrarian resources.

In spite of being a largely agrarian empire, the Mughals took an active interest in the promotion of trade and commerce, in maintaining a complex tri-metallic currency regime, and encouraging financial institutions based on *shroffs* and *hundis* (bills of exchange). It was not a mercantilist state along the lines of those found in western Europe, and it differed from the model afforded by late imperial China, which supported a market economy in an agrarian society but harbored reservations about commercial capitalism, the major exception being its support of monopolies on salt and foreign trade.¹¹

The nature of the Mughal state has excited curiosity ever since François Bernier attempted to describe it in the seventeenth century. That it fits no one paradigm becomes apparent when historians depict the Mughal Empire as an extractive Leviathan

⁹ Muzaffar Alam, "Akhlaq norms and Mughal governance," in *The making of Indo-Persian culture: Indian and French studies*, ed. Muzaffar Alam, Françoise 'Nalini' Delvoye and Marc Gaborieau (New Delhi: Manohar: Centre de Sciences Humaines, 2000), 67–95; Muzaffar Alam, *The languages of political Islam: India 1200-1800* (London: Hurst, 2004), 43–80; see also Raziuddin Aquil, "Salvaging a fractured past: Reflections on norms of governance and Afghan-Rajput relations in North India in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries," *Studies in History* 20:1 (2004): 1–29, see especially pp. 10, 13; Douglas E. Streusand, *The formation of the Mughal Empire* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 2–20; Stephen P. Blake, "The patrimonial-bureaucratic empire of the Mughals," *Journal of Asian Studies* 39:1 (1979): 77–94; Subrahmanyam, "The Mughal state—structure or process?," 296–303.

¹⁰ Harbans Mukhia, *The Mughals of India* (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 45–51.

¹¹ R. Bin Wong, *China transformed: Historical change and the limits of European experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 147.

working like a giant pump to suck up all the available agrarian surpluses from the peasantry.¹² First of all, it is unlikely that the Mughals could have taken everything beyond what the peasantry needed to subsist, which would have left nothing for local market transactions.¹³ Second, the administrative mechanisms designed to extract surpluses from the peasantry did not function effectively or uniformly across the empire. While the imperial heartland was probably well-administered for the collection of land revenue, the same cannot be said of the outlying areas of the empire, many pockets of which were controlled by autonomous chieftains.¹⁴ Third, the urban centres and townships could hardly be maintained by serving only the needs of elites and their conspicuous consumption. According to an estimate fifteen percent of the people living in the Mughal Empire lived in towns or semi-urban areas, and this urban population consisted of not only the ruling elites, but also peasant migrant labourers, small traders and shopkeepers, craftsmen and artisans, and mercenaries, all of whom depended on local market transactions for food and other necessities.¹⁵ Apart from the urban consumption, the proliferation of *haats* (weekly fairs), in rural areas allowed the peasants to spend on commodities from the earnings they retained after paying their share of revenue to the state.¹⁶

To properly situate the political transformation in the eighteenth century, the following paragraphs will sketch both the formal political structure of the Mughal

¹² For the claim that about half of the total agricultural produce was taken as the land revenue by the Mughals, see Shireen Moosvi, *The economy of the Mughal empire, c. 1595: A statistical study* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 106–18; see also Irfan Habib, “Potentialities of capitalistic development in the economy of Mughal India,” *Journal of Economic History* 29:1 (1969): 32–78, esp. p. 51; Tapan Raychaudhuri, “The state and the economy,” *The Cambridge economic history of India, c. 1250-c. 1750*, ed. Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 172–213, see esp. p. 173.

¹³ On the local markets and exchange networks, see B. R. Grover, “An integrated pattern of commercial life in the rural society of North India during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,” in *Money and the market in India 1100–1700*, ed. Sanjay Subrahmanyam (Delhi: Oxford University press, 1994), 219–55.

¹⁴ Ratnalekha Ray, “The Bengal zamindars: Local magnates and the state before the permanent settlement,” *IESHR* 12:3 (1975): 263–92; for northwestern India, see also Chetan Singh, *Region and empire: Punjab in the seventeenth century* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), 136–53.

¹⁵ Irfan Habib, “Population,” in *The Cambridge economic history of India, c. 1250-c. 1750*, ed. Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), see for fifteen percent of urban population in Mughal India pp. 163–171; see also Satish Chandra, *Medieval India: From Sultanat to the Mughals—Mughal Empire (1526–1748)*, pt. 2 (New Delhi: Har-Anand, 2006), 364–65.

¹⁶ An interesting study on the proliferation of rural markets in northern India, see Hiromu Nagashima, “Development of periodic markets in the central part of northern India—especially during the Mughal period—,” in *Markets and marketing in north India*, ed. Hiroshi Ishihara (Nagoya/Japan: Nagoya University, 1991), 135–52; for northern Bihar and its rural trade in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, see I. Jha, “Chaudahwin-pandrahwin shatabdi mein Mithila ka vyapar,” *Journal of Bihar the Research Society (JBRS)* 54:1–4 (1968): 382–88 (in Hindi.); Radhakrishna Chaudhary, *Mithilā in the age of Vidyāpati* (Varanasi: Chaukhambha Orientalia, 1976), 196; in general, for the markets in Jaunpur and other parts of northern India in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, see also Banarasidas, *The Ardhakathanaka: Half a tale; A study in the interrelationship between autobiography and history*, ed. and trans. Mukund Latha (Jaipur: Rajasthan Prakrit Bharati Sansthan, 1981); Banarasidas, *Ardhakathanak: A half story*, tr. From the Braj Bhasha by Rohini Chowdhury, prefaced by Rupert Snell (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2009).

Empire, which was designed for territorial control and the collection of agricultural surpluses, and the composition of the ruling elites what we might call the informal political structure found in Bihar. In the eighteenth century, the state's capacity to alienate resources from zamindars through a combination of diplomatic maneuvering and periodic demonstrations of force eroded considerably. Even though the zamindars accepted imperial suzerainty in theory, they held the upper hand because their control over production centres and transportation on the Ganga enabled them to amass ever greater resources as we shall see in section two below. In the second half of the century, the EIC became in effect a rival zamindar (with the diwani rights), albeit one with the far more sophisticated bureaucratic skills of a long-distance trading company.

Formal Political Landscape

We have only sketchy information on how Bihar was administratively organized during the reign of Sher Shah and earlier when it formed an appendage to, variously, Bengal, Jaunpur, or Delhi.¹⁷ From Abul Fazl's work we know that towards the end of the sixteenth century Bihar suba was divided into seven sarkars or districts.¹⁸ Owing in part to the existence of the free-minded Ujjainiya Rajputs in the troublesome geographical zone comprising the hills, jungle and rivulets, and partly for the purpose of administrative flexibility, Shah Jahan (1628–58) carved out the sarkar of Bhojpur-Shahabad from Rohtas. As a result Bihar now consisted of eight sarkars, Saran, Champaran, Tirhut, and Hajipur north of the Ganga, Shahabad-Bhojpur, Rohtas, Bihar (also spelled as Behar), and Munger to the south between the river and the northern fringes of the Chotanagpur Plateau. Each of the eight sarkars of the suba of Bihar had imperial officials such as faujdar and amil. The duality of the administrative structure at the provincial level was mirrored at the sarkar level, where the military power of the faujdar was balanced with the fiscal authority of an amil.

Except Tirhut, Champaran and Rohtas, the Ganga formed the boundaries for all other five sarkars.¹⁹ The accessibility to these sarkars through the Ganga facilitated Mughal administrative control in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but in the eighteenth century the zamindars laid claim over the river. Apart from the accessibility

¹⁷ The integration of rural areas of Bihar perhaps remained slow and protracted and these were not much affected by the changes brought about by the Muslim conquests, dynastic upheavals and political crises during the first half of the second millennium AD, see R. R. Diwakar, ed., *Bihar through ages* (Patna: Government of the State of Bihar, 2001), 399–408. For a brief reflection on Sher Shah's administration, see Parmatma Saran, *The provincial government of the Mughals, 1526–1658* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1973), 55–57; see also Aquil, "Salvaging a fractured past," 15, for the lack of sufficient material in the sources that could allow us to believe a sophisticated administrative structure under Sher Shah.

¹⁸ Abu'l-Fazl Allami, *The Ain-i-Akbari*, trans. H. S. Jarrett, second edn. Sir Jadunath Sarkar, vol. 2: *A gazetteer and administrative manual of Akbar's empire and past history of India* (New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint, 1978), 165–68. The districts were Bihar, Munger, Champaran, Hajipur, Saran, Tirhut, and Rohtas.

¹⁹ Irfan Habib, *An atlas of the Mughal Empire: Political and economic maps with detailed notes, bibliography and index* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1982), map 10 B. See also Kumkum Chatterjee, *Merchants, politics and society in early modern India, Bihar: 1733–1820* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), see map on p. 16.



Map 3. The political and economic geography of Bihar in the early modern period. Adapted from Habib's *An atlas of the Mughal empire*.

through the rivers, in the drier parts, to the south of the Ganga, the overland Ganga Route (or the Mughal Trunk Route) gave access to Rohtas, Bhojpur-Shahabad, Bihar and Munger sarkars. While the headquarters of Mughal administrative units were at locations accessible by river or overland routes, the entire territory of a sarkar was by no means within easy reach of the Mughal cavalry. As a result, some remote areas, especially the hills and jungles to the south and the swamps and Terai areas far north of the Ganga, were only loosely integrated into the Mughal administrative framework. We will see this in more detail while discussing the informal political landscape. In the following paragraphs I shall first describe the formal political landscape.

There were a number of administrative functionaries at the sarkar and pargana levels. The officials such as *amil* or *amalguzar* (collector of the land revenue) were

responsible for the extension of cultivation, measurement and assessment of the cropped farm. Another official known as karori collected the land revenue, maintained records and sent the collected sum to the state treasury. The faujdars, posted at the sarkar level administration were military officers and imperial agents directly appointed by the Mughal emperor.²⁰ A faujdar commanded a cavalry force and was entrusted with overseeing the revenue-paying areas held by the zamindars. He also ensured that zamindars did not augment their power centres or annex the khalisa or lands belonging to other grantees such as *aimadars*.²¹ However, as imperial control diminished in the eighteenth century, provincial governors began to appoint their own trusted men as faujdars.²² As long as the imperial system was enforced with money, logistics, and supplies, the faujdars were able to keep the zamindars in check, but as the system weakened in the early eighteenth century, the faujdars started developing their own fiefdoms by dismissing or co-opting the office of the amils. At the same time, other imperial officials and beneficiaries such as *qazis*, *madad-i-ma'ash* (charitable grant of land) holders and descendants of powerful Mughal rank holders became increasingly rooted in the soil.²³ For all practical purposes they became zamindars and profited from agriculture, cash-crops, crafts, and mineral productions from the land they controlled. If the local level formal political arrangement exhibited fluid situation in the eighteenth century, by and large it was a reflection of what was going on at the provincial level administration.

Provincial administration received particular attention of the Mughals, as the fertile areas of the provinces, such as Bihar and Bengal, formed the resource base of the empire. The placement of the high ranking and powerful imperial officials was aimed at securing the resources of the province for the empire. While the central Mughal administration at the imperial court revolved around the emperor and his select group of faithful high rank holders, the organization of the provincial administration was more elaborate. In the Mughal provincial administrative arrangement, the highest authorities in the suba were the subadar or provincial governor and the diwan, who was

²⁰ Abu'l-Fazl Allami, *The Ain-i Akbari*, vol. 2, 41–42. For the amil as collector of land revenue in the thirteenth century, see Diwakar, ed., *Bihar through ages*, 404. For the karori experiment of Akbar, see Saran, *The provincial government*, 275–77.

²¹ On *aimadars*, see *Return to an order . . . copy of the dispatch from the Governor-General of India in council to the court of directors of the East India Company* (London: House of Commons, 1841), 278. *Aimadars* were granted tracts for land reclamation. For examples from Midnapur in Bengal, see Gouripada Chatterjee, *History of Bagree-Rajya (Garhbeta): With special reference to its anti-British role, from late 18th century till the present times* (Delhi: Mittal, 1987), 158–59.

²² For the favours given to his family members and relatives by the Nawab Aliwardi Khan, see Ġulām Husain Khān Tabātabā'ī, *A translation of the Seir Mutaqherin; or View of modern times*, in 4 vols. (Lahore: Sheikh Mubarak Ali, 1975), 1:280–81, 344–46; 3:180; see also Chatterjee, *Merchants, politics and society*, 34.

²³ For example, towards the end of Jahangir's reign the governor of Bihar, Mirza Rustam Safri, was pensioned off for being old and received an annual sum of 1,20,000 rupees. The eldest son of Safri, Mirza Murad too received an annual pension of 40,000 rupees from Shah Jahan and settled in Patna. These pensioners certainly developed local roots along with those who received land grants. Jahangir and Shah Jahan lavished land grants as *madad-i-ma'ash* and presumably also under other titles such as *inam*, *aima* etc. to many notables and grantees, see Diwakar, ed., *Bihar through ages*, 491–94.

delegated with control of fiscal matters. Dual control was based on the classical Mughal administrative principle of checks and balances of the assigned authority between the two more or less equally powerful officials appointed at the provincial capital. Checks were also exercised by frequent transfers of the officials posted in different parts of the empire. However, at times this imperial rule was leniently applied in the case of some high ranking Mughal officials. In outlying areas imperial officials could remain in their posts for many years and between 1583 and 1599 Sayeed Khan Chagta was allowed to serve alternately as the governor of Bihar and Bengal.²⁴ Over time, imperial officials were allowed to stay longer in their posts and by the early decades of the eighteenth century powerful officials often ignored imperial regulations against this practice.

As imperial rule lost its focus, the Mughal officials also grabbed more power for themselves by securing appointments to two or more offices simultaneously. In particular, governors of Bihar tried to serve as both subadar and diwan. The first governor to make such a bid was Sarbuland Khan (1716–18), but it was Fakhr-ud-Daulah (1728–33) who effectively combined the two offices and began to take decisions without always seeking the sanctions of the Mughal court. This consolidation of power and authority enabled him to deal with rebel zamindars and negotiate new arrangements with them for the payment of land revenue. Fakhr-ud-Daula also attempted to reorganize the jagir administration.²⁵

In the Mughal administrative framework a jagir was an area assigned to an official against his pay and calculated according to his rank, or *mansab*. The responsibility for collecting land revenue from the jagir area was the responsibility of agents of the jagirdar such as amils and gomashtas. In principle, jagirdars were not supposed to come from the area where they held a jagir, on the principle that outsiders would have more difficulty to developing permanent links to the locality where they served. In an exception to the established Mughal norm, many local chiefs and zamindars held jagirs within their zamindari areas. Also many jagir lands were awarded permanently to retired or disabled military commanders or their descendants. In the eighteenth century, the jagirdars needed to forge strong ties with the local community because they could expect little assistance from the weakening imperial centre against

²⁴ For Sayeed Khan, see Diwakar, ed., *Bihar through ages*, 490–91; in other parts of the empire also the officials kept on rotating in a particular zone. It has been suggested that the familiarity and experiences of having served that particular area was a consideration behind their re-appointments, see Singh, *Region and empire*, 33–35; for outlying parts of the empire Richards give example of Mirza Nathan's prolonged service at the eastern frontier of Bengal during the reign of Jahangir, see J. F. Richards, "The Formulation of Imperial Authority under Akbar and Jahangir," in *Power, administration and finance in Mughal India*, in Variorum (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1993), 273; the Nawab of the frontier sarkar Purnia was held for twelve years by Afsandiyar Khan from 1680, see L. S. S. O'Malley, *Bengal district gazetteer: Purnea* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1911), 35; for the hereditary claim and division of jagir at Shahabad and contiguous areas among the sons of the deceased Nawab Diler Khan Daudzai in 1683 in Hardoi district of Uttar Pradesh, see Muzaffar Husain Khan, *Nāma-i Muzaffarī* (in Urdu), 2 vols. (Lucknow: Maktaba-I Mujaibai, 1917), 1:278, cited by see Hiromu Nagashima, "Development of periodic markets," 143.

²⁵ Qeyamuddin Ahmad, "Bihar in transition," in *Comprehensive history of Bihar*, ed. Syed Hasan Askari and Qeyamuddin Ahmad, vol.2, pt. 2 (Patna: K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute, 1987), 203–7.

zamindars seeking to encroach on their lands. Such new arrangements for the jagirdars was in effect a sort of “scaling down” of imperial power or the central authority.²⁶ Thus, the jagirdars were able to convert the imperial jagir lands into *watan jagirs* (fiefdoms), accumulate resources, and form militias to secure their possession and to further expand them. The subadar of Bihar Fakhr-ud-Daula (r. 1727–33) tried to effect changes in the jagir administration and acquired the entire province on *ijara* (revenue farming) promising to send a stipulated amount to the Mughal court. But this move eventually put him in conflict with former Mughal tax-farmers, jagir-holding officials, and intermediaries, and before any reforms in the jagir-administration could be effected, he was recalled to Delhi. After the reign of Fakhr-ud-Daula in 1733, the suba of Bihar was merged with Bengal and Patna became the headquarters of Bihar government but subject to the Murshidabad darbar.

The Mughals had formerly been well aware of the potential danger of such a merging of two of the eastern Ganga plain’s richest states, and in the seventeenth century they had established the powerful sarkar of Purnia between the subas of Bihar and Bengal. Purnia was located to the north of the Ganga and although it was formally a part of the Bengal suba, it had an independent jurisdiction and was ruled by a faujdar. Usually a faujdar functioned under provincial government, but the Purnia *faujdari* (an areas administered by a faujdar) resembled a sort of small governorship with considerable autonomy.²⁷ Maintaining this wedge kept the resources of two extremely rich provinces from coming under one provincial government and destabilizing the imperial equilibrium. By ignoring the strategic value of an autonomous Purnia, the imperial authorities allowed for the merger of Bihar and Bengal and in effect made the Bengal government the manager of immense resources with the potential to threaten the integrity of the Mughal Empire.

Seen from the perspective of the warrior-entrepreneurs, the political opportunities of the early eighteenth century would not have seemed qualitatively different from the fluid political situation of the first half of the sixteenth century. Unlike in the earlier era though, the subcontinent was much more tightly bound to the maritime economy and the constant infusion of specie further complicated state control and strengthened the informal constituents of the tottering imperial edifice. Hence I examine the cash-nexus and particular interest taken by the zamindars in promoting trade and commerce in section two of the present chapter. In order to give a proper context for such developments, below I shall first discuss the informal political landscape in Bihar which was controlled by zamindars.

²⁶ Muzaffar Alam, “Eastern India in the early eighteenth century ‘crisis’: Some evidence from Bihar,” *IESHR* 28:1 (1991): 50–51.

²⁷ Salim Allah (Munsi), *A narrative of transactions in Bengal: During the soobahdaries of Azeem Us Shan*, trans. F. Gladwin (Calcutta: Stuart and Cooper, 1788), 67–73; Chatterjee, *Merchants, politics and society*, 14. On separate governorship (afzonderlijke landvoogdij) of Purnia, see also NA, VOC, Inv. Nr. 3075, MvO Tallefert to Vernet, Hugli, 17.11.1763, fo. 1389r.

Informal Political Landscape

The imperial administration and appointed officials may have ruled the formal political landscape, but there was also an informal political structure controlled by people attached to the Mughal administration by payments of tribute and vassalage. The most important of these were big zamindars who accepted Mughal suzerainty and paid tribute but who effectively administered their domains without interference from Agra or Delhi. There were many chieftains in Bihar who submitted to the Mughals after Akbar conquered the region. As long as the Mughal state remained powerful and supported imperial officers such as faujdars stationed in different sarkars of the province, the zamindars paid their due. But when the empire's resources began to dry up they increasingly flaunted their independence from the faujdars. In a dynamic that informs much of the first half of the eighteenth century, their enlarged military strength enabled them to ignore and frequently defy Mughal authority and to encroach upon the khalisa lands. An historical-geographic approach to the study of this phenomenon yields further insights into the processes by which the zamindars came to defy the Mughals. Therefore, it is necessary to briefly sketch the locations and geographical specificities of the big zamindaris found to the south and north of the Ganga.

The rugged terrain far south of the Ganga plain was a strategically important zone for state formation during the early modern period. Intersected with jungle and hills, the northern fringes of the Chhota Nagpur Plateau offered safe haven for rebellious chieftains. As we saw in Chapter 2, the hills and jungles of southern Shahabad enabled the Rajputs to use their hardened militia of cavalry and guerilla fighters to frustrate Mughal efforts to subjugate them. As the Mughals consolidated their empire and maintained strong garrison towns along the Ganga, the southern plain of the Ganga remained pacified. In the eighteenth century, the chieftains began to defy Mughal control by securing agricultural resources and claiming "customs duty" on overland and riverine traffic.

In the dry zone south of the Ganga, many chieftains had maintained strongholds in places such as Shahabad-Bhojpur, Gidhaur and Kharagpur in Munger for centuries. At the time Akbar's conquest of Bihar, the Ujjainiya raja controlled Hajipur, but in 1568–69 he was won over by the Mughal governor of Jaunpur.²⁸ The Ujjainiya Rajputs retained their territory and accepted Mughal suzerainty and paid a lump sum as tribute. Yet, they not infrequently rebelled and the Mughals had to enforce their authority by a combination of force and diplomacy, including a matrimonial alliance.²⁹ In general, the

²⁸ L. S. S. O'Malley, *Bihar and Orissa district gazetteers: Monghyr* (Patna: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1926), 36; Kolff has shown that in course of the Mughal campaigns in Bengal when Munim Khan died, his supporter Gajapati "took a sort of leave and went off to his own country." He turned a rebel, and the Ujjainiyas began plundering the towns, disrupted the supplies and imprisoned imperial officials who traveled by boat between Bengal and Hindustan. As the Mughals sought to punish him, remained fugitive in the hills and jungle of southern Bihar and died in 1577. See D. H. A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and sepoy: The ethnohistory of the military labour market in Hindustan, 1450- 1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 165.

²⁹ Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and sepoy*, 159–69, for the history of the Ujjainiya Rajputs in Bhojpur area and their volatile relations with the Mughals.

Ujjainiyas maintained informal ties to the empire and retained their chieftaincy without much interference from the Mughals. This was the sort of relationship that earlier empire builders such as Sher Shah had maintained with them in order to tap the military labour market in the area. Punctuated with occasional defiance and open rebellions, a tactical alliance existed between the Ujjainiyas and the Mughals during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the eighteenth century, however, the free-spirited Rajputs asserted their independence more vigorously and fought several battles with the provincial Mughal authorities.

While the Ujjainiyas alternately rebelled and allied with the Mughals, Raja Puran Mal of Gidhaur and Raja Sangram of Kharagpur had accepted Akbar's vassalage.³⁰ Just like Shahabad-Bhojpur, the landscape of Gidhaur and Kharagpur in Munger district consisted of hills, jungles, and fertile valleys to the south of the Ganga. Proximity to the Ganga meant that the region's products could easily reach markets, and the zamindars and warlords could demand protection money on river traffic, while in the event of Mughal attack they could easily withdraw in the hills and jungle. In the eighteenth century, the rajas of these areas rebelled against the provincial Mughal authorities, appropriated agricultural resources and asserted their control over the river traffic on the Ganga.

Important zamindaris such as Tekari and Mayi emerged in the district of Gaya around 1700. Although they originated as humble revenue farmers, through intensive management of land revenue these upstart zamindaris became fairly prominent in the eighteenth century in a dynamic that reflects the changing political economy of the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These zamindars expanded their land holdings and revenue resources, and were recognized by the Mughal authorities in exchange for which they presumably made themselves vassals of the Mughals. But this was hardly a simple vassal-overlord relationship.³¹

The political dynamic in southern Bihar was not very different from what was happening in other parts of the empire such as Awadh, where zamindars sought legitimacy and recognition from the Mughals even as they increased their resource base by encroaching upon other zamindaris, fortified their bases, and at times rebelled

³⁰ P. W. Murphy, *Final report on the survey and settlement operations in the district of Monghyr (south)* (Ranchi: Bihar and Orissa Secretariat Printing Office, 1914), 9–13, according to this source the descendant of Gidhaur claimed the ancestry of the family going back to the Sultanate period when Vikram Singh had accompanied the Ghurids in their Bengal campaign and had settled in Gidhaur; for a more detailed account of the family and ancestry see O'Malley, *Bihar and Orissa district gazetteers: Monghyr*, 209–10. On Kharagpur raja see Manoshi Mitra, *Agrarian social structure: Continuity and change in Bihar* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1985), 42–45.

³¹ Gyan Prakash, *Bonded histories: Genealogies of labor servitude in colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 88–89; the formation of large zamindaris through the recourse to warfare, seizure and patronage by the provincial Mughal government also replicated in Bengal and occurred during the late-seventeenth and mid-eighteenth centuries. It is interesting to note that the Rajput and Pathan zamindaris were always found in the hills and jungle zone, and probably had an access to the military labour market of dry zone. For locations of these zamindaris, see Ray, "The Bengal Zamindars," 273–6; see also John R. McLane, *Land and local kingship in eighteenth-century Bengal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 148–9.

against the Mughals. In southern Bihar the zamindaris of Terkari and Mayi followed similar tactics from the early decades of the eighteenth century. They intensified resource mobilization, displaced intermediaries, increased their military strength, conquered adjoining lands, fortified their bases, and sought recognition from the provincial Mughal authorities.³²

While the southern marchlands were hotbeds of rebellion, in the humid zone north of the Ganga, during the formative years of the empire the Mughals succeeded in subduing and forging alliances with several rajas whose families had held their chieftaincies for centuries. After the disintegration of the Oiniwar dynasty of Mithila in northern Bihar during the fourteenth century, several small feudatories had emerged. We know little about these feudatories' relations with the Delhi or Bengal Sultanates before the reign of Akbar. What we know is that in the first half of the sixteenth century Hajipur commanded a fort on the northern bank of the Ganga opposite Patna. Strategically located at the southern tip of the fertile agricultural tract in the humid zone, the Hajipur fort enabled the Turko-Afghan rulers to project their military strength onto the chieftains and myriad landholders of northern Bihar. While the Turkish cavalry would have been successful in subduing the dry and elevated areas along the Bur Gandak, the innumerable rivers, lowlands, swamps, and jungles that formed the *mawās* to the north, east and northeast of Hajipur hindered imperial penetration.³³ The emergence of larger zamindari of Darbhanga during the reign of Akbar and the incorporation of Hathwa and Bettia zamindaris in the Mughal Empire during the seventeenth century may be understood in terms of the constraints posed by this landscape on the Mughal imperial arrangement.³⁴ Leaving northern Bihar to trustworthy and loyal zamindars would have freed the imperial authorities to focus on the more troublesome elements in south Bihar and Bengal, as is obvious from the Mughals' decision to abandon the fort at Hajipur in favor of one south of the Ganga.

The establishment of the Darbhanga and several other zamindaris loyal to the Mughals was one of the notable achievements of Akbar's administrators active in the east. Several traditions relate the foundation of Darbhanga raj by Mahesh Thakur. The family pledged allegiance to the Mughals, managed the zamindari, paid tribute in a lump sum and occasionally rendered military service to help pacify the surrounding region.³⁵ The rulers of the zamindari of Bettia claimed descent from Gangeshwar Deo,

³² For southern Bihar, see Prakash, *Bonded histories*, 87–90; for examples from Awadh, see Alam, *Crisis of empire*, 92–110.

³³ On *mawās* see Heesterman, *The inner conflict of tradition*, 170–73.

³⁴ On Hathwa raj, see Girindra Nath Dutt, "History of the Hutwa Raj," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 73:2 (1904): 178–226; see also G. N. Dutt, *A brief history of Hutwa Raj, with a genealogical table of the Hutwa family* (Calcutta: K. P. Mookerjee, 1909); Chatterjee, *Merchants, politics and society*, 36.

³⁵ For description of the traditions regarding the foundation of the Darbhanga raj, see Jata Shankar Jha, "History of Darbhanga Raj," *JBR* 48:1 (1962): 14–18; for a close scrutiny of the *farmans* issued to the descendants of Mahesh Thakur and also for the gradual evolution of the Darbhanga estate into a large scale chieftaincy by Aurangzeb's time, see Qeyamuddin Ahmad, "Origin and growth of the Darbhanga Raj (1574–1666), based on some contemporary and unpublished documents," *Indian Historical Records*

who had settled in Saran in 1244 AD. In the seventeenth century, Agar Sen, one of the descendants of Gangeshwar Deo, conquered a large territory in the sarkar of Champaran, styled himself raja, and eventually obtained confirmation of the title from Shah Jahan. In 1659, he was succeeded by raja Guj Singh who built a palace at Bettia. Raja Guj too annexed more territory, but after fighting imperial troops was captured and taken to Delhi. Eventually released and restored to his former position, he committed “to send an annual offering of jungle and other produce”—probably elephants—to Delhi.³⁶ In the eighteenth century his three sons held the zamindari of Bettia, Seohar and Madhubani. As these examples of resistance and accommodation show, rajas and big zamindars dominated the informal political landscape on both sides of the Ganga. Yet, the zamindars to the north were more easily controlled than those to the south, the marchlands, scrub jungle and hills of which gave the chiefs there a pronounced geo-political advantage when it came to bargaining with the Mughals.

In the above paragraphs I discussed the formal and informal political landscapes controlled by the Mughals officials and the zamindars. During the seventeenth century, most of the chieftains had submitted to the Mughals, paid tribute, and rendered services with their militia. In return they enjoyed relative autonomy to govern their realms. This arrangement worked well for most of the seventeenth century, and as beneficiaries of the system, the zamindars helped buttress imperial authority at the local level. This situation changes in the eighteenth century when the zamindars took advantage of the weakening Mughal Empire, began appropriating resources resulting from agriculture and trade and increasingly undermined the formal Mughal political structure. Why they were and how they were able to do this is the subject of the following section, which also throws significant light on the reasons of Mughal decline.

Section II: Cash-nexus, Agricultural Expansion, and the Decline of Mughal Authority

Although still pledging allegiance to the Mughals, in the eighteenth century the zamindars tried to manage their agricultural resources more intensively, encourage trade, and control the river and overland routes. Easy access to maritime trade via the

Commission Proceedings 36:2 (1961): 89–98. for the loyalty of the Darbhanga rajas in the seventeenth century and the expedition of Alivardi Khan in 1733 to recover the revenue, see S. V. Sohoni, “Notes on the revenue history of Darbhanga Raj,” *JBRS* 48:1 (1962): 110–11; for a lump sum tribute of rupees 100,000 in the 1730s and a fresh revision of the total assessed revenue to the tune of 7,69,000 by Nawab Alivardi Khan, see Hetukar Jha, ed., *Mithila in the nineteenth century: Aina-i-Tirhut of Bihari Lal ‘Fitrat’* (Darbhanga: M. K. S. K. Foundation, 2001), 34–5; on rebellion of the zamindars of northern Bihar in the first half of the eighteenth century, see Diwakar, ed., *Bihar through ages*, 502–3; see also Sir Roper Lethbridge, *The golden book of India: A genealogical and biographical dictionary of the ruling princes, chiefs, nobles, and other personages, titled or decorated of the Indian empire* (London: MacMillan, 1893), 107–9.

³⁶ Lethbridge, *The golden book of India*, 67. Although Lethbridge does not specify the jungle produce but judging from the example of contiguous Tauter parganas of “Maccawanny country,” the Goorkally rajas of the area had traditionally paid tribute to the Mughals in elephants, see BL, APAC, IOR, G/28/2A, Patna Factory Records (PFR), 1771, p. 379.

Ganga prompted many zamindars to forge closer links with the merchants who transformed their cash crops and craft-goods into liquid money. Therefore there was an increased emphasis on intensive land management, farming out productive tracts, and squeezing the intermediaries such as *maliks* or village-level tax collectors. As agriculture and trade brought more wealth, the zamindars formed larger militias and employed their newfound power not only for further resource mobilization but also to challenge provincial Mughal authority. This pattern of regional centralization in zamindari areas clearly underlines the waning Mughal power. Moving beyond the cause-and-effect explanations of Mughal decline, I will show how and where in the eastern Ganga plain the Mughal Empire was failing. In view of the political and economic processes, I shall argue that the decline of Mughal authority was brought about by the convergence of interests of the zamindars with those of local and overseas merchants who oriented the economy of Bihar towards the maritime zone.

Land Reclamation and Agricultural Expansion

As we noted in Chapter 2, the Turko-Afghan conquests engendered a new cycle of state formation and a fresh wave of immigration onto the Ganga plain, especially southern Bihar, which received a fairly continuous streams of migrants, settlers, and colonizers. The process was less pronounced north of the Ganga. The drier upland along the banks of the Bur Gandak had been settled by agriculturalists since the age of the Buddha, yet there was scope for agricultural expansion and land reclamation. By means of *pulbandi* (management of the pools) and embankments the lower areas to the east of the Gandak were made fit for agriculture and settlement. In areas closer to the Himalayan Terai, where higher rainfall supported dense tropical rainforest, land reclamation for agriculture required clearing of the forest.

The colonization by new immigrants—at times encouraged by the state—played a role in agricultural expansion. The Mughals generally encouraged the settlement of Afghans in the areas dominated by refractory Rajput or Hindu zamindars.³⁷ The Afghan settlements certainly diluted the zamindars' power, although in the course of time they established their own zamindaris by extending agriculture and attracting trade. As long as the Mughals were powerful the Afghans willingly rendered essential services to the empire. However, as soon as the Mughal authority showed signs of weakness since the end of the seventeenth century, they defied the imperial authority and often colluded with one or the other zamindars.³⁸ The importance of the Muslim settlement in

³⁷ For example see how the Afghans were settled by the Mughals during the reign of Shah Jahan to keep a check on Kateheriya Rajputs in sarkars of Badaun and Sambal in the suba of Delhi, see Iqbal Husain, "Pattern of Afghan Settlements in India in the 17th Century," *Indian History Congress, Proceedings of the Thirty-Ninth Session, 1978* (Aligarh, 1979): 327–36. Husain also mentions the pre-Mughal settlements of Afghans in Jaunpur, Bhojpur and Bihar, see p.334.

³⁸ Aniruddha Ray, "Revolt of Sobha Singh: A case study," *BPP* 88 (1969): 210–21 and "Revolt of Sobha Singh: A case study," *BPP* 89 (1970): 58–73, see esp. pp. 63 - 66 for Afghan Rahim Khan's joining of the rebellion against the Mughals in Bengal. The Afghans of Darbhanga dared to capture Patna in 1748 after the provincial Mughal government disbanded their military corps, see Kalikinkar Datta, *Alivardi and his times* (Calcutta: The World Press, 1963), 103–7. For the tremors caused by the Afghans in

Darbhangha can be deduced from the fact that during the second half of the eighteenth century out of twenty-eight jagirdars and *altamghadars* (holders of revenue-free lands) in the Darbhanga raj twenty-five of them were Muslims, and the majority of them probably Afghans.³⁹ Traditionally the assignment of *altamgha* and jagir required the assignee to expand the cultivated area by bringing wasteland under the plough. This was generally done in one of two ways, *bankatai* (literally, felling of the jungle) and *pulbandi*.⁴⁰ Irfan Habib's atlas shows considerable jungle cover around Bodh Gaya and further south at the end of the sixteenth century. In northern Bihar, along the Terai area jungle cover was substantial during the sixteenth century.⁴¹ The cumulative effects of population growth, need for more food and export commodities and revenue demands by the state pushed the frontiers of agriculture, and it was in the far north and far south of Bihar that enterprising zamindars brought land under the plough, often with some state support. According to an eighteenth century document the *Historical Discourse on the Origins of Zamindari and account of Sarkar Bhojpur*, during the reign of Shah Jahan most of the zamindari originated in bankatai or settling areas after clearing forests. "Those who did so [clear forests] became zamindars and obtained *nankars* [the right to manage] for their lifetime. After the death of such zamindars, their sons obtained *sanads* [charters] for the rights held by them on condition of continued service." Another document, *Haqiqat-i-Suba Bihar*, informs us "From the time of Shah Jahan, it was customary that wood-cutters and plough-men used to accompany his troops, so that forests may be cleared and land cultivated. Plough used to be donated by the government. Short-term *pattas* [documents stating revenue demands] were given, [stating] fixed government [revenue] demand at the rate of 1 *anna* per *bigha* during the first year." The document further notes the official instruction

that after allowing one plough per 20 bighas of well-cultivated land, the other ploughs should be allotted to virgin land or that which had lain fallow for a long time.... Each *hal mir* [i.e. one who has four or five ploughs] should be found out and given a *dastar* [turban, as a mark of state favour and incorporation into the imperial fold] so that he may clear the forests and bring land into cultivation. In this manner, the people and the *ri'aya* [subject] would be attracted by good treatment to come from others regions and *subahs* to bring under cultivation wasteland and land under forests.⁴²

destabilizing the Mughal imperial cohesion since the late seventeenth century, see also, Ali, *The Mughal nobility*, 21.

³⁹ For the jagirdars and altamghadars in the Darbhanga raj, see Sohoni, "Notes on the revenue history," 121–24.

⁴⁰ In the early eighteenth century, the faujdar of Purnia Saif Khan established friendly relations with the zamindar of Morang, got the jungle cleared cultivation extended halfway up to the hilly border of Morang. As a result the revenue increased to eighteenth lakh rupees, see Ahmad, "Bihar in transition," 194.

⁴¹ Habib, *An atlas of the Mughal Empire*, sheet 10B.

⁴² Quotes are from S. Nurul Hasan, "Three studies on Zamindari system," *Medieval India: A miscellany / center for advance study, Department of history, Aligarh Muslim University*, vol. 1 (London: Asia Publishing House, 1969), 233–39; see also Alam, "Eastern India," 65–66. On *nankar* see, *Observations*

The second method of extending cultivated areas—and forming new zamindaris—was through the reclamation of lowlands and marshes. A British report of 1787 discusses how peasants improved dikes, dams, and raised causeways—pulbandi—in Bengal to prevent “either a too copious, or too indiscriminate an inundation.” By controlling floods, peasants could reap the beneficial effect of inundation from the Ganga and other rivers.⁴³ Although the British report sought an efficient management of the embankments by the large contractors functioning under government control, it is obvious that even before the proposed interventions there was a practice of land reclamation in marshy and other low-lying areas. While this report specifically discusses Bengal, such pulbandi were used by peasants in northeastern Bihar as well.

In the absence of historical works sketching migration to and settlement in northern Bihar in the pre-modern period, we know little about how new villages were founded, who initiated and led efforts at jungle clearance or embankment erection, or how cultivation was extended. In the almost famine-free zone of northern Bihar such as Darbhanga, continued population growth must have led to the foundation of new villages and cultivation of converted wastelands.⁴⁴ The pattern of settlement in these low-lying lands was likely the result of population pressure in upland cultivable areas. In 1783 and 1790 the collectors of Tirhut devised plans to attract more cultivators from the neighbouring dominions of the Vazir of Awadh, and by the mid-nineteenth century there was little room for further extension of cultivation.⁴⁵

Apart from migration, colonization, and land reclamation for agricultural expansion, the growth of the land revenue assessment from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries also indicates increased agricultural production. Recent research has shown that most parts of Bihar underwent sustained agricultural expansion from the late sixteenth century, and *jama* (assessed land revenue) and *hasil* (the collected land revenue) figures maintained a secular upward trend during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Although it used to be argued that increased *jama* figures simply

on the law and constitution of India, on the nature of landed tenures, and on the system of revenue and finance, as established by the Moohummudum law and Moghul government; with an inquiry into the revenue and judicial administration, and regulations of police at present existing in Bengal (London, 1825), 55.

⁴³ BL, APAC, IOR, Home Miscellaneous (HM), H/47, “Poolbundy—description of it; by a private hand,” 28th June 1787, pp. 25–35. Inundation was considered as the riches manure in Shahabad in Bihar, see BL, APAC, IOR, Mss. Eur. D 89, Buchanan Hamilton, “An account of the district of Shahabad,” p. 59.

⁴⁴ J. H. Kerr, “Selected para[graphs] concerning survey and settlement operations in Darbhanga district (1896–1903),” in *JBRS* 48:1 (1962): 169, “As a matter of fact, the cultivators of Darbhanga can and do weather more than one season of crop failure. . . . It is common proverb that it takes three bad years to make a famine.” Similarly, in south eastern parts of Muzaffarpur numerous Tal or lakes provided security from famine to the inhabitants of villages around them, see Stevenson-Moore, *Final report on the survey and settlement*, 10.

⁴⁵ Stevenson-Moore, *Final report on the survey and settlement*, 15. Also the genealogical records where the “moola,” or the village from where recent migration took place, normally indicates the movement of Brahman families from north-western parts of Tirhut to south-eastern parts, the later areas have a lower slope towards the northern banks of the Ganga. On “moola” see Ugra Nath Jha, *The genealogies and genealogists of Mithila: A study of the Panji and Panjikars* (Varanasi: Kishor Vidya Niketan, 1980), 65.

reflected inflationary trends in the economy, it is more likely that the rise in jama was the result of expanding agriculture, population, and production.⁴⁶

Between the late sixteenth and around mid-eighteenth century, there was a roughly threefold increase in jama for Bihar. The first such assessment of land revenue—221,919,404 *dams* (copper money, the fortieth part of a rupee)—given by Abul Fazl in his *Ain-i-Akbari* of 1595. By the time Akbar died a decade later, the jama rose to 262,774,167 *dams*, an increase of more than 18 per cent. In 1627, towards the end of Jahangir's reign, the figure stood at 316,033,672, another 20 percent gain. During the reigns of Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb there were further increases and in 1707 the total jama was 407,181,000 *dams*, a net increase of 87 per cent since Jahangir's reign. During the governorship of Alivardi Khan in the mid-eighteenth century, the jama figure reached 545,300,035 *dams*⁴⁷

Sarkar	Number of parganas		Jama in <i>dams</i> ⁴⁸	
	<i>Ain</i> (circa 1595)	18 th century	<i>Ain</i> (circa 1595)	18 th century
Bihar	46	63 (incl. 2 mints)	84,465,490	227,745,905
Munger	31	40	29,622,181	62,374,807
Champaran	3	3	5,513,420	11,375,920
Hajipur	11	11	273,635	51,244,470
Saran	17	18	16,172,304	42,955,045
Tirhut	74	102	1,922,082	44,397,542
Rohtas	18	7	40,879,201	36,044,103
Shahabad ⁴⁹	—	12	—	49,927,091

Table 7.1: Growth in the jama figure of land revenue in Bihar.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ For the jama figure reflecting inflationary trend, see Irfan Habib, "Monetary system and prices," in *The Cambridge economic history of India*, ed. Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 361–81; Aziza Hasan, "The silver currency output of the Mughal empire and prices in India in the 16th and 17th centuries," *IESHR* 6:1 (1969): 85–116; for a criticism of the price rise thesis, see Om Prakash and J. Krishnamurty, "Mughal silver currency: A critique," *IESHR* 7:1 (1970): 139–50; for a lack of any trend reflecting price rise in Bengal, see Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company*, 252–53; the Dutch Hugli diary (*Dag-register*) of the 1730s contains monthly rates of essential consumables such as ghee (clarified butter), mustard oil, rice, pulses, wheat and there seems to be hardly any upward trend, for 1730 see NA, VOC, Inv. Nr. 2195, From Hugli to Batavia 10.03.1731, entry of 01.11.1730, p. 430; see also NA, VOC, Inv. Nr. 2288, "Houglij's dagregister van den jaare 1732," see for entries of the year 1732, pp. 703, 749, 785–87, 793–94, 823, 846, 870–71, 986, 1068. However, the prices appreciated since around the 1740s and continued in the second half of the eighteenth century. Even if we accept that the official jama figure of 1750 may have reflected the inflationary trend, but this again got counter-balanced with the agrarian expansion occurring in the many zamindari areas the revenue figures of which remained outside the state purview. On the last one point for some examples from Bengal, see Ray, "The Bengal Zamindars," 279–82.

⁴⁷ Ahmad Reza Khan, "Revenue statistics of Bihar (1526–1707)," in *Comprehensive history of Bihar*, vol. 2, pt. 2 (Patna: K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute, 1987), 528; Alam, "Eastern India," 61. Irfan Habib, *The agrarian system of Mughal India 1556 – 1707* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 456–457.

⁴⁸ During the reign of Akbar forty *dams* was equivalent to 1 rupee.

⁴⁹ New *sarkar* carved out from Rohtas in the seventeenth century.

⁵⁰ Alam, "Eastern India," 67.

The economic growth of different parganas of Bihar can be appreciated by looking at the change in the jama figures between the end of sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.

The growth in the jama figures of Bihar province reflects the cumulative economic performance of its various sarkars; but not all sarkars performed equally. Muzaffar Alam has analyzed the jama figures for parganas in Bihar sarkar and found that those located near irrigable or navigable channels performed exceedingly well, while access to *mandis* (local markets) gave further incentives to the peasants and zamindars to grow more cash crops.⁵¹ Given the innumerable rivers of northern Bihar, Alam's findings would probably hold good for other sarkars with fertile land and access to the markets. The economic growth and emergence of the urban centres in northern Bihar owed very much to their access to the market.⁵²

According to Ahmad Reza Khan, the factors that led to the rise in revenue assessments and collections included increasing state control over the productive sarkars, growing state demand for land revenue through *ijaradari* (farming out the land revenue), the overall growth of the area under cultivation, changes in cropping patterns, and "a sharp price rise." Muzaffar Alam agrees that imperial penetration and control over southern parts Bihar during the seventeenth century brought more stability to the fertile and rich revenue-bearing tracts along the banks of the Ganga and northern Bihar. Apart from food grain, the cultivation of cash crops such as opium, sugar, and cotton would have accounted for the state's growing demand for revenue.⁵³ In stressing inflationary pressure as being the source for the high revenue figures of the eighteenth century, Reza Khan overlooks other perhaps more important factors such as population growth, internal consumption, and the expansion of long-distance overseas trade, which also contributed to the expansion of Bihar's economy and higher revenue yields.

Although the jama figures are important for reconstructing the growth in the state's revenue demands, we should bear in mind that the jama figures did not include non-assessed villages. For example, during the reign of Aurangzeb, out of a total of 55,376 villages in Bihar, 24,036 were left unmeasured, and the central government had no first hand report on the incomes from these villages. It is also worth noting that except for Bengal; Bihar had the highest percentage of unmeasured villages compared to any province in Hindustan, including Delhi, Agra, Awadh and Allahabad.⁵⁴ That so

⁵¹ Alam, "Eastern India," 67.

⁵² For example the towns which grew in the nineteenth century such as Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, Khagaria, Rusera, Samastipur, Hajipur, Revelganj, Govindganj, Lalganj and so on, owed to their location on one or the other rivers, as well as their connectivity with the Ganga, see Anand A. Yang, *Bazaar India: Markets, society, and the colonial state in Gangetic Bihar* (1998; repr. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2000), 28.

⁵³ Khan, "Revenue statistics of Bihar," 520–21; Alam, "Eastern India," 65, 67; Prakash, *Bonded histories*, 66–71.

⁵⁴ Habib, *The agrarian system*, 4–5. Out of the total number of villages of Delhi (45,088), Agra (30,180), Awadh (52,691), and Allahabad (47,607) the numbers of unmeasured villages were for 1,576, 2,877, 18,849, and 2,262 respectively for these provinces. Even in the late seventeenth century, Bengal was one

many villages went un-assessed by Mughal officials was a result of concessions made to the zamindars, who settled for payment of a lump sum as annual tribute while enjoying control over the resources of almost half of the Bihar villages. Such informal arrangements contained the seeds of fragmentation that André Wink explained through the concept of *fitna* and argued that such obstreperous tendencies were part of the early modern state-formation process.⁵⁵ Indeed it was the co-sharing of the resources between the Mughals and the subservient ruling class that sustained the imperial edifice. Once this delicate balance shifted in favour of the latter, as it did when the zamindars intensified agricultural expansion, resource mobilization, and appropriation of resources, it became impossible to hold the empire together. As I shall discuss below, when the demands for the commodities of Bihar peaked in the eighteenth century, the zamindars facilitated trade of the European Companies and signed numerous contracts and accumulated resources at the expense of the Mughal Empire.

The Zamindars, the Money Economy, and the Treaties with the VOC

Although evidence of the zamindars' participation in trade is relatively scarce, the sources do throw some light on their interest in promoting trade in their territory. Commerce stirred the local economy by encouraging production of commercial goods, and zamindars could also collect money from craftsmen and traders in the form of taxes and duties. As the eastern Ganga plain got more closely integrated with the maritime economy in the eighteenth century, the demands for agricultural cash crops and minerals expanded on an unprecedented scale, and with it the zamindars' interest in promoting trade. It is in this context that I shall examine their interactions with the European Companies.

VOC officials maintained friendly contacts with the zamindars along the Ganga to ensure security for the goods and men of the Patna fleet. As important was the need to secure contracts to trade in and transport commodities through the zamindars' fiefdoms, for which the Dutch officials signed contracts and paid an annual sum of few hundred rupees along with some presents in kind. The Dutch also kept local Mughal officials and customs officials in good humour and exchanged gifts with them. Such presents were necessary because the imperial farman prohibiting *rahdari* (road taxes) carried little force with local officials and zamindars. By means of gifts the Dutch cultivated a close relationship with the zamindars and encountered relatively few hindrances in conduct of trade.

While the exchange of gifts facilitated business, in the fluid political scenario of the eighteenth century, gifts alone could not guarantee security, and the VOC began to

of the least measured provinces of the empire and only 1.5 percent of the total 112,788 villages were measured, see Ray, "The Bengal Zamindars," 267.

⁵⁵ André Wink, *Land and sovereignty in India: Agrarian society and politics and the eighteenth-century Maratha Svarajya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 21-34, where he uses the concept *fitna* used in the sense of sedition.

employ militia on the vessels of the Patna fleet in the early eighteenth century.⁵⁶ Armed guards could thwart an attack, but procuring commodities still required a zamindar's goodwill. One risk was that a zamindar would play rival Europeans off one another to increase the competition, and thus the price received, for his goods. Therefore, friendships and diplomatic alliances were carefully cultivated.

Several zamindars and local Mughal officials welcomed the Dutch Patna fleet with chickens, victuals, and refreshments and drinks, and the Dutch reciprocated by sending spices, looking glasses, red velvet sheets, Japanese *nesjes doosjes* (nests of small boxes) and so on. The Dutch source mentions a zamindar called Raja Makam Singh at Gangaprasaad, close to Bhagalpur, who sent some chickens and refreshments to Jan Geldzak, the captain of the Dutch Patna fleet in 1733, and reminded him of the previous year's promised gifts. The captain immediately sent five pounds of cloves, five pounds of nutmeg, four pounds of cinnamon, twenty-four pounds of pepper, ten ells of red velvet, and seventeen ells of red *laken* (woollen cloth), one Japanese *schrijfloodje* (small writing box) and one looking glass.⁵⁷ The size of a gift often reflected the power and hierarchy in which a zamindar or an official was placed. When the fleet reached Bhagalpur, the *naib* (deputy), Makand Rai, greeted the captain with chickens and refreshments, and Geldzak promptly sent him goods and spices like those he had given Raja Makam Singh, though in lesser quantities. Another Mughal official at Bhagalpur, Sawadalichan [Saiyid Ali Khan?] sent the usual gifts of chickens and refreshments to Geldzak, and the captain thanked him with 6 pounds of cloves, 6 pounds of nutmeg, 4 ½ pounds of cinnamon, and 36 pounds of pepper along with 21 ells of red velvet, 17 ells of red *laken*, a small mirror and a Japanese betel box.⁵⁸ Saiyid Ali Khan seems to have been the highest-ranking of the three people Geldzak encountered in and around Bhagalpur on this trip.

When the fleet reached Munger, the captain was received by the servants of Ragia Mahmeth Artsier (or Raja Muhammad Arjast of Kharagpur), who sent victuals and refreshments. Geldzak tipped the raja's servants ten rupees and asked them to convey his thanks and inform the raja that "the Honourable Company had decided to enter again into the earlier friendship and the chief of Patna will inform him of the

⁵⁶ Numerous chieftains began collecting tolls on the boats passing through the Ganga since the first decade of the eighteenth century, see NA, VOC, Inv. Nr. 8739, From Hugli to Batavia 09.04.1709, "Reekeningh van alle sodanige penningen als door den derroga Ramsjent ten overstaan van den ondercoopman Willem Selkaart zijn uijtgeschooten soo tot largatie van s E: Comp:s goederen gelaaden in 22: Pattellaes van derriapoer [Dariyapur] tot Amchandeha als 't geene door den Roofgierigen Ragia Tabertsingh en andere met geweld van de selve is genomen," pp. 278–81; the Patna fleet of the Dutch carried several hundred militia as escort since 1713 onwards, see NA, VOC, Inv. Nr. 8744, "Ruijge staat reek: der Bengaalse directie, getrocken uijt de negotie boeken gehouden ten hooft Comptoire Houglij onder dato ulto: Januarij 1713," pp. 367–384 see esp. p. 375.

⁵⁷ NA, VOC, Inv. Nr. 8776, "Journaal oft dagregister gehouden bij den Luijtenand Jan Geldzak," entry of 10.10.1733, p. 810.

⁵⁸ NA, VOC, Inv. Nr. 8776, "Journaal oft dagregister gehouden bij den Luijtenand Jan Geldzak," for the entry on 15.10.1733, see p. 812.

agreed contract.”⁵⁹ We do not know the specifics of the VOC’s earlier arrangement with the raja of Kharagpur. A reference of 1728 informs that the Kharagpur raja provided a lodge or warehouse to facilitate the VOC’s opium trade,⁶⁰ although at the present we do not have a copy of a contract between the Kharagpur raja and the VOC. We do have a copy of the treaty signed in the year 1734 between the Hieracha Sjekwaer [Heera Shah Chakwar?] and the head of at the VOC’s Patna factory, Nicolaes de Munt. Heera Shah was the raja of Milki pargana in Hajipur sarkar.⁶¹ The raja issued a contract for the free trade and safe passage of Company boats, with or without militia, through his lands in exchange for an annual payment of four hundred rupees. Apart from this paltry sum, the Dutch were obliged to send some of the same gifts that the raja’s forefathers had received. The contract also specified that the Dutch gomasthas could operate freely in the raja’s territory. As the letter reads “let all help and facilities to be provided to their [Dutch] gomasthas who are already trading in my area and also to those who will come to trade, to collect goods and afterwards to carry those goods out of my region.”⁶² The raja appears to have been an important conduit of the cash-nexus that characterized the economy of Bihar and of the eastern Ganga plain.

Curiously, the contract includes no mention of Mughal provincial or central authority, which suggests that the raja operated entirely on his own in signing contract with foreign entities like the VOC. (It is also difficult to know whether the zamindar considered the VOC a “foreign” body or just another one of the merchant groups trading in Bihar commodities.) Clearly, like other zamindars this raja was drifting out of the orbit of the Mughal political economy, and foreign trade was an increasingly important mainstay of the economy in Bihar. It is apparent from the contract letters that the VOC’s friendship with zamindars had a strong material basis, aimed primarily at facilitating the Company’s trade. As the Milki raja’s forefathers are mentioned in the letter of contract, we may infer that such trade contracts had some precedent going back

⁵⁹ NA, VOC, Inv. Nr. 8776, “Journaal oft dagregister gehouden bij den Luijtenand Jan Geldzak,” entry of 19.10.1733, p. 813: “de wijle d’ E Comp:s weederom met hem in vorige vrundschap was getreden het Pattenaes opperhoofd hem ontwijffelbaar van het geslotene contract soude laeten goudeeren.” More than two decades later, in 1758, the raja of Kharagpur was still receiving the annual protection money on saltpeter boats passing on the Ganga. The Dutch had decided to stop such payment to the chiefs and regents because the acquisition of monopoly on saltpeter by the English adversely affected the VOC trade, see NA, VOC, Inv. Nr. 2920, Letter from Patna, signed on 17.03.1758 and received at Hugli 29.03.1758, fos. 1214v–1215r.

⁶⁰ W. Ph. Coolhaas, ed., *Generale Missiven van Gouverneurs-Generaal in Raden aan Heren XVII der Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, vol. 8 (’s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1985), 163, De Haan, Huysman enz., 31.01.1728.

⁶¹ Reza Khan identifies pargana Maki (with a question mark), which might well have been the Milki of the Dutch sources. Although the jama figure of this pargana is not given in *Ain-i-Akbari* (from which we may infer it to be under control of some autonomous raja) but in the eighteenth century the figure stood at 4,123,768 dam. Similarly, for Kharagpur also the jama figure is missing in the *Ain-i-Akbari* while in the eighteenth century it was 4,400,000 dam. See Khan, “Revenue statistics of Bihar,” 537, 540.

⁶² NA, VOC, Inv. Nr. 8776, From Hugli to Bavatia 25.03.1734, “Translaet Persiaans concept verland [verband?] schrift aan te gaan met het tegenwoordige hoofd der Sjekwaards Ragia hieracha [Heera Shah] tot een vrijen handel in, en een secure passagie voorbij zijne landen van ’s Comp: op en afgaande vaartuijgen,” pp. 844–45.

probably to the late seventeenth century. The rajas needed to encourage trade in their territory in order to export the commodities produced in their domains, and the raja- and zamindar-controlled economy became more oriented towards maritime trade.⁶³ As more goods moved down the Ganga and bullion flowed upstream to the territories of zamindars, a new political configuration was unfolding on the Ganga plain.

Waning Mughal Control over the Ganga

The assertion of the zamindars of Bihar against the provincial Mughal authorities has been discussed in the standard literature, and we are familiar with the basic *modus operandi* of rebellions in which the zamindars sought to enlarge their domains and resource base even as they legitimized their gains by acknowledging Mughal suzerainty.⁶⁴ Rather than repeating the story of land aggrandizement by zamindars and their resource generation by an intensive land management through revenue farming, the present section focuses on their control over the main artery of the Mughal Empire: the Ganga.

The decline of Mughal imperial control from the early eighteenth century was more pronounced along the fluvial highroad of the Ganga than in the Mughal heartland of Hindustan. As we noted above, this was because the region was only loosely integrated into the formal Mughal imperial structure and the zamindars retained a high degree of autonomy even after they formally submitted to the Mughals. With the relaxing of Mughal control, a host of zamindars along the river began demanding protection money from merchants. In Munger, one “Baboe Sjettersaal” (Babu Chatrasal), who commanded about four thousand cavalry and four thousand artillery (*heeft hij vier duijzent soo ruijters als roerschutters*), extorted 250 rupees from each of 22 boats carrying VOC merchandise to Hugli—a total of 5,500 rupees.⁶⁵ The ability to appropriate such sums from boats on the Ganga enabled the zamindars to raise sizeable military forces. Because the provincial authorities were unable to enforce the law along the Ganga, merchants were left to fend for themselves. Although Mughal officials occasionally chastised some of the zamindars, their power was never crushed and they were soon back in the business of collecting protection money. Moreover, even if a Mughal faujdar succeeded in removing a zamindar from a customs post, the faujdar as

⁶³ There is an evidence of a similar trade contract between the zamindar of Bettia and the VOC in 1713, and possibly earlier. The Dutch merchants at Patna factory were instructed by the Hugli Council to pay 524 rupees as presents to the zamindar of Bettia, see NA, VOC, Inv. Nr. 8744, From Hugli to Batavia 6.03.1713, “Instructie of memorie na de welke ’s geligeerd Pattenase opperhoofd den onderkoopman Jacob Dijkhov,” p. 342. Again in 1758, the Dutch mentions their contract with the Bettia’s raja for the procurement of saltpeter of his territory, and complains about the naib subadar Ramnarain’s intervention for procuring entire produce for the English, see NA, VOC, Inv. Nr. 2920, “Aan den Edele Achtbare Heere Adriaan Bisdom Directeur en opperbeider,” Letter from Patna signed on 15.06.1758 and received at Hugli on 26.06.1758, fos. 1223v–1224r and for another letter from Patna signed on 28.09.1758 and received at Hugli on 11.10.1758, fos. 1244v–1245r.

⁶⁴ Prakash, *Bonded histories*, 82–98; Alam, “Eastern India,” 43–71. For a similar process in Bengal see Ray, “The Bengal zamindars,” 271–82; see also McLane, *Land and local kingship*, 161–70.

⁶⁵ NA, VOC, Inv. Nr. 8739, From Hugli to Batavia 09.04.1709, “Rekeningh van alle sodanige penningen als door den derroga Ramsjent,” pp. 278–81.

likely as not would begin extorting tolls from the merchants for himself.⁶⁶ In the eighteenth century, the Mughals were preoccupied with containing the big zamindars such as Ujjainiya, Tekari, Mayi, Bettia and Tirhut.⁶⁷ However, except for the raja of Kharagpur, most of the chiefs and zamindars asserting themselves on the Ganga appear to be relatively small and upcoming zamindars, and they were widely dispersed through Munger, Bhagalpur, Purnia and Rajmahal.

Cracks in the imperial façade were visible as early as the rebellion of the Bengal zamindar Sobha Singh in 1695–97. When his forces seized the fort at Hugli, the subadar Ibrahim Khan asked the Europeans to arrange for their own protection. This gave the English an opportunity to expedite the fortification of their settlement at Calcutta. The Dutch were somewhat indecisive about having a strong fortified enclave there and it was not until the threat of Maratha incursions in the 1730s loomed large that they decided to construct Fort Gustavus.⁶⁸

Although the European enclaves in Calcutta were protected by fortifications and heavy guns, assuring the safety of their Patna fleets proved more of a problem. Mughal authorities could provide little relief from the growing number of zamindars demanding tolls and protection money. In the wake of a host of zamindars claiming tolls and protection money, and the provincial Mughal authority providing little relief against them, the VOC depended on diplomacy and gift exchange, entering into treaties with them, and, as we have seen, restored to manning their boats with several hundred militia, as did the English.⁶⁹ The eighteenth-century practice of carrying well-armed militia (the overwhelming majority of them Europeans) almost as far as Patna contrasts sharply with the situation in the seventeenth century, when the state appears to have ensured security on the route and there was no need for private militia. Furthermore, in a strong, centralized empire, private diplomatic and trade alliances between zamindars and the foreign trading company would have posed an intolerable threat to Mughal authority. Seen from this perspective, the Mughal Empire of the late-seventeenth and eighteenth century can hardly be characterized as a centralized polity, at least in so far as the empire in Bihar and Bengal is concerned.

The Mughals' administrative ineffectiveness hardly improved in the decades of the early eighteenth century and the situation along the banks of the Ganga became

⁶⁶ W. Ph. Coolhaas, ed., *Generale Missiven van Gouverneurs-Generaal en Raden aan Heren XVII der Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, vol. 7 ('s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 646, Zwaardcroon, De Hann enz., 19.01.1723. It has been reported that after driving away the raja of Chanda, the faujdar of Bhagalpur insisted that the VOC had to pay protection money. The Dutch ruefully noted that the English protected their fleet by employing militia, and the faujdar hardly dared to claim any money from them.

⁶⁷ Alam, "Eastern India," 55–60; Prakash, *Bonded histories*, 82–98.

⁶⁸ Om Prakash, "The Sobha Singh revolt: Dutch policy and response," *BPP* 94:1 (1975): 32–4.

⁶⁹ Coolhaas, ed., *Generale Missiven*, vol. 7:72, Van Swoll, Douglas enz. III, 26.02.1714: "De Engelse laten in dese directie hunne vaartuygen en daeronder ook eenige van andere handelaers nogal met Europeesche militairen na Pattena en weder terug convoyeren," (Trans: In this region the English make use of European soldiers for the escort of their boats, some of which belong to other [indigenous] merchants, to Patna and back to Hugli.)

even more troublesome. It was this fluid political situation that forced the Europeans to fend for the security of their merchandise boats on the Ganga.

The practice of sending military escorts with the Dutch fleet appears to have become fairly regular since the late 1720s. All the European Companies hesitated taking the armed guards all the way to Patna for fear of displeasing Mughal officials there, and the private soldiers were normally lodged at Fatuha, a few miles below Patna, or in some instances at Singia or Nawada. In 1730, the letter of instruction issued to the Dutch captain ordered him to leave the military at the Company's lodges at Chhapra, Singia, Fatuha or Nawada. Further, the instructions pointed that taking military to the city of Patna had to be avoided because it would not only raise evil pretensions (*quaad nadenken in de regenten verwerken*) among the authorities there, but also that the soldiers might have quarrels with the city's cavalry-men as well as other wanton hooligans (*baldadig gespuis*).⁷⁰

The *instructie* for the Patna fleet captain in 1730 refers to zamindars as thieves and robbers (*dieve- en roverijen*) who controlled the customs posts and collected protection money. One such robber zamindar was Bier Sawh (the Dutch spelt Biersja) of Teyndpour, between Bhagalpur and Chanda. According to our source, on account of the activities of Biersja and his adherents, this place had become a robber's nest (*roofnest*) and was a great hurdle for company boats proceeding either to or from Patna. Following the death of Biersja and the ouster of his son Doekhernzig (Dukh Haran Singh?) some years ago, the emperor gave this place to a Mughal rank-holder as a jagir. Even so, the Company had no peace because in 1724, Seijtchan (Seif Khan), the powerful faujdar of Purnia, demanded 1,664 rupees for the free passage of boats.⁷¹ Clearly, there was by this time little difference between robbers and Mughal officials when it came to making money from merchants on the Ganga.

Another chieftain whose men extorted protection money from merchants and controlled the passage up the Ganga was Bagtoussersing at Pepria, west of Surajgarha and Samboa. He was said to have a force of 2,000 horsemen and 2,500 artillery and they controlled the area up to Samboa. Around 1710 the chief merchant at Patna, Jacob van Hoorn, had entered into a contract with the raja or his predecessor for the free passage of the Dutch fleet in exchange for an annual payment of 850 rupees and other gifts. Nonetheless, a few years later, the overseer of the Dutch fleet was extorted and mistreated, although he fared better than many indigenous merchants. In order to chastise him, the provincial government at Patna and the English Company sent troops

⁷⁰ NA, VOC, Inv. Nr. 8765, From Hugli to Batavia 30.11.1730, "Instructie voor den Manhaften Capitain D: E Jacob Willem van der Brughen," p. 1074; see also Coolhaas, ed., *Generale Missiven*, vol. 7:667, Zwaardecroon, De Haan enz., 03.12.1723: "het zenden van militairen tot het afhalen der vaartuigen uit Patna veroorzaakte geen moeilijkheden, maar mag niet herhaald worden." Also, there is mention of payments of protection money made to the head of Chakwars and Ragia Roosafschoen of Kharagpur.

⁷¹ NA, VOC, Inv. Nr. 8765, From Hugli to Batavia 30.11.1730, "Instructie voor den Manhaften Capitain D: E Jacob Willem van der Brughen," pp. 1060–61. On Seif Khan and his chastisement of the son of Birnagar zamindar Bier Sawh, see Salim Allah (Munsi), *A narrative of transactions in Bengal*, 68.

who drove him into the mountains, where he became embroiled in internecine alliances and feuds with other local zamindars. The Dutch were unclear about the actual jurisdictions of these feuding zamindars and the *instructie* asked the fleet captain to get additional information on the state of affairs in the district.⁷²

The detailed accounts of such hide-and-seek games between Mughal provincial authorities and zamindars found in Dutch sources can run to several pages and reveal patterns in the way zamindars operated. Zamindars living near where the river, mountains, and jungle were in close proximity were most likely to assert themselves against river traders, withhold revenue from the state, raise militias, and fight other zamindars and the Mughal state. The river brought them riches while the mountains and jungle provided them with safe havens against their enemies. Although the zamindars took protection money or “customs duties” from the merchants, they never entirely disrupted or prohibited trade, which was an important source of income. The examples of Dutch contracts with the Bettia zamindar for saltpeter procurement or with the Hajipur zamindar for general trade clearly demonstrate how entrenched in the local economy the cash-nexus was.

As we noted above, compared with the English efforts to fortify Calcutta the Dutch were relatively lethargic about constructing Fort Gustavus. As a trading entity in Bengal, the VOC benefited from the relatively strong Mughal state in the seventeenth century. The emergence of the zamindars, and their control over river traffic hurt the Dutch in more or less the same way as it did to other merchants. But far from harbouring any colonial ambitions to form an empire in eastern India, the VOC remained faithful to the existing Mughal political system for the conduct of trade. In a way it became as much a victim of the destabilizing effects of obstreperous zamindars’ political assertion and the Maratha raids as the Mughals. The private trade of the Dutch merchants hardly favoured the VOC’s commercial and diplomatic interests in the way that British private traders benefited the EIC. Dutch private merchants forged closer contacts and even partnerships with the English and other Europeans who undercut the VOC’s profits in Bengal. The desperate and rather haphazardly organized challenge to unseat the EIC from a politically commanding position in the battle of Bedara in 1759 hardly helped the VOC cause in Bengal.⁷³ In the second half of the eighteenth century, the VOC depended on the EIC’s favour and the English put a cap on the goods such as saltpeter and opium and gradually tightened its noose around the VOC’s commerce.⁷⁴

⁷² NA, VOC, Inv. Nr. 8765, From Hugli to Batavia 30.11.1730, “Instructie voor den Manhaften Capitain D: E Jacob Willem van der Brughen,” p. 1072–73.

⁷³ Winus and Vink, *The merchant-warrior pacified*, 124–133

⁷⁴ NA, Nederlandse Bezitting in Voor-Indie, 1.04.19, Inv. Nr. 29, document no.16, year 1778, n.f. The Dutch wrote a letter to Governor-General Warren Hastings complaining about the *peshcus* or present taken by the EIC on the Dutch commerce at Patna. Considering the VOC were now allowed to purchase only 23,000 *man* of saltpeter, 700 *kist* of opium, and 6,000 or 7,000 pieces of textiles at Patna—considerably less than what they had previously acquired—an appeal was made to do away with the *peshcus* claimed by the EIC. For various letters seeking to increase the quantity of opium purchase as well as complaints about the detention of Dutch boats and other vexations in conduct of trade, see NA, Nederlandse Bezitting in Voor-Indie, 1.04.19, Inv. Nr. 30, and Inv. Nr. 31, pertaining to the 1780s, n.f.

Once the Dutch and other European rivals became subordinate to the EIC's political power in Bengal, the commercial economy continued to operate in a pattern more or less similar to the first half of the eighteenth century. The British now undertook efforts to reorganize agricultural and craft production and trade. While agriculture attracted serious attention of the new English zamindar, the EIC focused far more intently on dominating the region's maritime trade while for the most part leaving internal production and trade in the hands of local zamindars and merchants.

Section III: The Diwani Raj: Transition to Company Rule

In the above section one, I have discussed the centrifugal tendencies among the zamindars along the eastern tracks of the Ganga which led to the decline of the Mughal Empire. The zamindars' appropriation of resources and control over of traffic on the Ganga checked the flow of wealth to Mughal coffers. The trade contracts and mutual dependence of the zamindars and the European Companies further alienated an important local interest group from the Mughal-dominated political economy. As I have demonstrated in this and the previous chapter, the zamindars and local merchants became far more dependent on maritime trade for the regular supplies of liquid money. It would appear as though the gravitational pull of the maritime economy was drawing the resource-rich eastern Ganga plain towards the coast. The EIC's assumption of political power in Bengal was made possible not only by military intervention and better financial and institutional organization, but by the political-economic environment that allowed for a close working relationship between the EIC on one hand and the zamindars and merchants on the other. The latter groups had developed a significant economic interest in maritime trade beginning in the early eighteenth century.⁷⁵ After the EIC assumed political power, it quickly moved up the Ganga to exploit the region's productive economy in tandem with merchants and financiers who also reaped the benefits of the Company's economic and political expansion. Below I will describe the EIC's land management and agricultural exploitation before moving on to discuss its dealings with merchant groups in the second half of the eighteenth century.

The Company Diwan and an Intensive Management of the Land Revenue

The battles between 1757 and 1764 consolidated the EIC's hold over the eastern Ganga plain and eliminated other European rivals. Following the battle of Plassey, EIC officials took a more aggressive interest in the political and commercial situation in Bengal. With Mughal authority on the verge of collapse, private British merchants colluded with other merchants and zamindars, flaunted the laws, and plundered

⁷⁵ Between the English and the Mughal officials Farhat Hasan suggests "an alliance, however vague and undefined," see his "Indigenous cooperation and the birth of a colonial city: Calcutta, c. 1698–1750," *MAS* 26:1 (1992): 70; see also Farhat Hasan, "Conflict and cooperation in Anglo-Mughal trade relations during the reign of Aurangzeb," *JESHO* 34:4 (1991): 351–60, esp. 56.

unhindered through the 1760s.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, in 1764 the British defeated the combined forces of Nawab of Bengal Mir Kasim, Nawab of Awadh Shuja-ud-Daula, and Mughal emperor Shah Alam II at the British at Buxar. The victory resulted in the treaty of Allahabad in 1765, which granted the EIC the diwani right over Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. The Company assumed direct authority over the Twenty Four Parganas, Burdwan, Midnapur, and Chittagong districts through its covenanted servants, leaving other areas in the care of the Nawab's administration.

Given the burgeoning costs of military conquests and the parliamentary and legal uproar and moral dilemmas that the events in Bengal created at home, it appears that the military feats of the Company's unruly servants and private British merchants caught the Court of Directors in London unawares.⁷⁷ Suddenly drawn into Indian territorial politics, in order to sustain its imperial ventures the Company recklessly managed the land revenue and finances of Bengal up to 1772. In the messy years of the 1760s, the high-handedness of the private British traders and revenue farmers complicated the Company's problems with revenue and finance. The charges of exploitation and misrule during the period of dual governance (when the Nawabs were hand-picked by the Company) are legitimate. However, this period also provided new opportunities for the Company to gain expertise and knowledge about the workings of the agrarian regime in eastern India. In 1772, the Company's Committee of Circuit declared, "[r]evenue is beyond all question the first objective of Government, that on which all the rest depends, and to which everything should be made subsidiary."⁷⁸ But this urgent demand for agricultural wealth also necessitated a deeper engagement with land-revenue management, and it would be wrong to form an opinion about the economic trajectory of eastern India in the second half of the eighteenth century on the basis of the Company's experiences in the years immediately after Buxar. In the following paragraphs I will discuss the agricultural economy during the transition phase between 1757 and 1772 before turning to the subsequent reforms and efforts aimed at agricultural expansion and resource generation, so vital for the survival of the nascent British Empire.

In military terms the battle of Plassey was a relatively small skirmish, the long-term repercussions of which could not have been anticipated by the parties involved. After Plassey, the EIC secured the zamindari rights over the Twenty Four Parganas from the Nawab of Bengal and Robert Clive became its jagirdar. For the *raiyyats* (tenant-farmers) and majority of Bengal zamindars, Plassey symbolized nothing except

⁷⁶ Narendra K. Sinha, *The economic history of Bengal: From Plassey to the Permanent Settlement*, in 3 vols. (Calcutta: The author, 1956), 1:65–71; Søren Mentz, *The English gentleman merchant at work: Madras and the city of London 1660–1740* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2005), 22.

⁷⁷ P. J. Marshall, "British expansion in India in the eighteenth century: A historical revision," in *Trade and conquest: Studies in the rise of British dominance in India*, by P. J. Marshall, Variorum series (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1993), 30–31; P. J. Marshall, *Bengal: The British Bridgehead: Eastern India 1740–1828*, *The new Cambridge history of India*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 79.

⁷⁸ Radha Kumud Mookerji, *Indian land-system: Ancient, medieval, and modern (with special reference to Bengal)* (Alipore: West Bengal Government Press, 1958), 59, quoted by Mookerji.

a changing of the guard from Siraj-ud-Daula to Mir Jafar, who ruled with the backing of the EIC. As we saw above, several Bihar zamindars had signed trade contracts with the VOC, and it is likely that they hoped to gain additional commercial opportunities from the political interventions of a trade oriented maritime power. This probably explains why many zamindars actively supported the EIC and why a good many of them remained indifferent to the political change.⁷⁹ During Plassey some merchants, Mughal rank holders, and zamindars played much the same role as kingmaker that they had following Alivardi Khan's *coup d'état* in Bengal two decades before.⁸⁰

The return of Clive as governor and commander-in-chief of Bengal saw some disciplining of the private British merchants and the EIC's co-option of the Nawab's administration in what came to be known as the dual system. Under this system, about four hundred Europeans governed the Company's interest while the actual work of revenue collection, law and order, and mundane administrative matters were left into the hands of the zamindars and other local officials. In sum, the Company had power without responsibility while the provincial administration had responsibility without power. In return for the grant of the diwani rights, Clive was obliged to pay less than two hundred thousand pounds to the Mughal emperor, against which he promised the EIC's court of directors a return of two to four million pound.⁸¹ In order to meet its military and administrative costs in Bengal, the EIC tried its best to put pressure on the *naib-subadars* (deputy governors) in Bengal and Bihar to squeeze as much land revenue as possible from the *raiyats*.⁸² Matters were further complicated by the Company's failure to get any first-hand information about the total revenue-paying potential of the territory under its diwani. Such information was closely guarded by the specialized rural administrators known as *quanungos*, *patwaris*, *chaudhuris*, and so on. These bureaucratic obstacles were made worse by natural calamities such as flooding and crop failures, and the famine of 1770 led to the loss of more than three million people. From the 1770s, the Company authorities debated whether to grant zamindars permanent title

⁷⁹ For example, the maharaja of Nadia extended active support to the Company to attack Siraj-ud-Daula, while Clive exchanged letters with the zamindars of Birbhum, Burdwan, Dinajpur, and Nadia. While a majority of the zamindars were Hindus, the zamindar of Rajshahi was a Pathan who sought the overthrow of Siraj-ud-Daula. See K. M. Karim, "Social structure under the Nawabs," in *History of Bangladesh: A study of government under the Mughal imperial system*, vol. III (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1997), 51–55, cited by Biplab Dasgupta, *European trade and colonial conquest*, vol. 1 (London: Anthem, 2005), 325, n.8 at p. 365.

⁸⁰ Timothy H. Parsons, *The rule of empires: Those who built them, those who endured them, and why they always fall* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); this paragraph draws from pp. 169–91. On Clive's jagir and his Mughal mansabdari rank of 5,000 horse and 6,000 foot, see also Bruce Lenman and Philip Lawson, "Robert Clive, the 'black jagir,' and British politics," *Historical Journal* 26:4 (1983): 812.

⁸¹ Parsons, *The rule of empires*, 194; Clive's estimate was not far off the mark what the VOC knew about the annual revenue of Siraj-ud-Daula in 1755. According the Dutch officials at Hugli, the annual revenue of Bengal and Bihar stood at "drie karoer en agt en twintig Lak Ropijen," or 32.8 million rupees (about 3.28 million pounds), see NA, VOC, Inv. Nr. 3075, MvO Taillefert to Vernet, Hugli, 17.11.1763, fo. 1438r.

⁸² Romesh C. Dutt, *The economic history of India under early British rule* (1950; repr. London: Routledge, 2000), 54–57.

to their land, those in favour arguing that this would lead to land improvement and encourage agricultural production and thereby increase the Company's revenues. During the tenures of Governor-Generals Warren Hastings (1773–85) and Lord Cornwallis (1786–93), the Company came to realize that the exploitation of raiyyats and the refusal to consider long-term improvements to agricultural tracts by *ijaradars* (revenue farmers), who had a short-term interest in squeezing the peasantry proved counter-productive and self-defeating. Thus, the peasantry had to be saved and agriculture needed to be supported in order to meet the revenue claims of the government.

The nationalist historiography rightly emphasizes the exploitation of the raiyyats and zamindars by the Company, yet it conveniently skips similar antecedents from earlier periods.⁸³ The territories held by the zamindars and Mughal “successor” states in the eighteenth century had intensified peasants’ exploitation by resorting to *ijaradari*.⁸⁴ Furthermore, while the exploitation of *ijaradars* under the British is undeniable, nationalist scholars hardly discuss the effects of demographic trends, land reclamation, agricultural expansion, and the shift to lucrative cash crops that resulted in regular incomes in the eighteenth century. As we noted above, land reclamation, extension of agriculture and the growth of productive capacity of the rural economy were evident in the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth centuries, and these processes did not come to an abrupt end after the British came to power at mid-century. It is very likely that in the decades after Plassey some areas directly managed and supervised by the EIC with the Indian agents in Bengal bore the full brunt of colonial exploitation; yet in the long-run it was impossible to remain blind to the adverse effect of these policies on the rural economy, agricultural productivity, and ultimately the survival of the Company itself.

⁸³ For the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, the *nazims* (governors) of Bengal such as Shaista Khan (1664–78 and 1679–88) appropriated Rs. 90 million, Khan Jahan Bahadur Khan (1688–89) took Rs. 20 million, and Prince Azim-ud-din (1697–1712) by 1706 collected Rs. 80 million. Cumulatively they accumulated 190 million rupees in their rule of twenty-eight years. This sum was half of revenue demanded from Bengal by the Mughals in those years. It is likely that the sum appropriated by these governors was exaggerated, yet there existed scope for personal accumulation of the large sums. This clearly shows how little able the Mughals authorities were to form a clear idea of the total revenue capacity of the province. See McLane, *Land and local kingship*, 31–32. Compare the above instances of appropriation with Haji Ahmad’s accumulated wealth, which at his death in 1748 the Dutch officials at Patna estimated around 300 million rupees (an exaggerated figure, no doubt but the scale of exaggeration markedly differs from that of the seventeenth century exaggerated-figures which were comparatively modest). For Haji Ahmad see, see J. E. Schooneveld-Oosterling, ed., *Generale Missiven van Gouverneurs-Generaal en Raden aan Heren XVII der Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, vol. 11, 1743–1750 (Den Haag: Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis, 1997), 673, Van Imhoff XXXI, 31.12.1748; another source informs that the Afghans got 7 million rupees, and a large quantity of jewels and bullion as treasure hoarded by Haji Ahamad, see Datta, *Alivardi and his times*, 107. For the increasing revenue demands from the zamindars by the EIC, see Sushil Chaudhury, *From prosperity to decline: Eighteenth century Bengal* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995), 17.

⁸⁴ For the practice of *ijaradari* in the pre-colonial period, Habib, *The agrarian system*, 274–76; Alam, *The crisis of empire* 39–42; J. J. L. Gommans, *The rise of the Indo-Afghan empire, c. 1710–1780* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 118–19; Prakash, *Bonded histories*, 121–22.

The EIC was not oblivious to the fact that agriculture could yield positive results only if the raiyyats would get support during times of natural calamities. For example, in 1771 superintendent of Saran sarkar, Edward Golding reported to the “Comptrolling Council of Revenue” at Patna praising the efforts of the zamindars in Saran who extended relief to the raiyyats and gave “Support for their immediate Existence” and in some measures the “materials for future Cultivation.” Golding praised the “Ability and Attention” of zamindars to protect raiyyats that enabled the timely collection of revenue “after so fatal a [famine] one as the last.”⁸⁵

That same year, H. Palmer the superintendent of Rohtas sarkar reported to “Chief etc. of the Council of Revenue” of his mild treatment of and loans (*tacavi*) given for cultivation from the revenue farmer Reza Quli Khan to the raiyyats of Sasaram, which induced them to return to their farms and commence cultivation.⁸⁶ The Council of Revenue dispatched a letter to Colonel Alexander Champion urging him to be considerate of the complaints of renters in the area between Patna and Munger and to heed their apprehensions that bullocks, horses, and coolies in Champion’s army might harm the standing crops along the Ganga.⁸⁷ Another letter specifies the terms of the contract with the raiyyats.⁸⁸ In 1772, J. J. Keighly reported from Darbhanga of his just treatment of the cultivators and as a result of the agricultural improvements he succeeded to a large extent in realizing the settled revenue for the year 1771.⁸⁹

The new leads and experiences in land-revenue administration informed the policies of Warren Hastings and later Cornwallis in the second half of the eighteenth century. Furthermore, Bihar being a frontier province and considering its strategic importance, the control exercised by the revenue administration and the degree of peasant exploitation differed from that of Bengal, where the peasants were subject to the full force of the EIC’s military-fiscal state. Nevertheless, the regime change in the second half of the eighteenth century tied the economy of Bihar even more closely to oceanic trade and in general continued to encouraged agriculture and the production of cash crops.

The EIC and the Local Merchant and the Question of Transparency at the Market Places

As happened in the case of land revenue administration, commerce underwent significant reorganization under the Company’s regime. The famed operations of the Jagat Seths, the Chand brothers, and Khwaja Wajed were liquidated and the merchant magnates were replaced by a number of upstart merchants who began operating within a colonial framework in which the English Company held the upper hand. The EIC wanted to isolate the mega firms of the pre-colonial period, which had been notorious

⁸⁵ BL, APAC, IOR, G/28/2A, PFR, pp. 222–23.

⁸⁶ BL, APAC, IOR, G/28/2C, PFR, pp. 45–47.

⁸⁷ BL, APAC, IOR, G/28/2B, PFR, p. 75.

⁸⁸ BL, APAC, IOR, G/28/2B, PFR, 101–102.

⁸⁹ BL, APAC, IOR/P/2/3, Bengal Public Consultations, p.41.

for political interference. As we shall see, the EIC exerted control over the maritime trade in the goods produced in the region, leaving scope for local merchants to play a role in the regional commercial economy. Another important change that occurred after the political transition related to increased transparency in matters of trade at British-controlled cities such as Calcutta. While such measures eased business dealings, it also contrasted with the pre-colonial methods under which contractors, weavers, and opium growers enjoyed some latitude in terms of selling their final products to those who offered better price, even if they owed advance money and signed a contract with a merchant.⁹⁰ Under the new system, the producers lost their freedom but secured a guaranteed purchase at a regular basis and also some insurance against the risk associated with price fluctuations in the market.⁹¹

The European traders were no innocent lot, and they tried their best to evade customs duty or misuse the *dastak* (a pass granting duty-free trade rights to the EIC in accordance to the royal charter) issued by the provincial Mughal authorities. Controversy around the interpretation of Aurangzeb's farman to the English for "duty free" trade in Bengal is well covered in the literature.⁹² In the first half of the eighteenth century, the English Company misused their prerogative for duty-free inland trade by extending such rights to private British merchants and also to Indian merchants.⁹³ There are several instances of friction at the customs houses along the Ganga, when Dutch or English boats were asked to pay taxes. At times threats of violence or actual violent confrontations in the river complicated the matter.⁹⁴ What appears striking is the fact that in the absence of a uniform law for governing local trade there was differential treatment meted out to the Europeans, other non-Muslim and Muslim merchants under the Mughal regime. Such treatment did not win a constituency of all merchants that could unequivocally support the regime. This explains why a sizeable section of the local merchants remained indifferent to the change of regime in 1757, as they probably anticipated a government controlled by the EIC would create better environment for their enterprise.

The period after the battle of Plassey indeed saw the emergence of petty merchants who operated locally and played a subservient yet complimentary role for

⁹⁰ Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company*, 102–12.

⁹¹ For example opium prices crashed in 1756–57 leading to severe losses to the merchants and agents. See Suprakash Sanyal, "Ramchand Pandit's report on opium cultivation in 18th century Bihar," *BPP* 87:2 (1968): 183–84.

⁹² Susil Chaudhuri, *Trade and commercial organization in Bengal, 1650–1720: With special reference to the English East India Company* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1975), 33–35; Hasan, "Conflict and cooperation in Anglo-Mughal trade relations," 352–56; Dasgupta, *European trade and colonial conquest*, 1:286–87.

⁹³ Brijen K. Gupta, *Sirajuddaullah and the East India Company, 1756 – 1757: Background to the foundation of British power in India* (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 13–14; Kumkum Chatterjee, *Merchants, politics and society in early modern India: Bihar, 1733–1820* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 129.

⁹⁴ NA, VOC, Inv. Nr. 8760, "Dagregister gehouden door den Capitain Samuel Martinus Hogerwerf, gedurende den optogt naar Pattena in het Jaer 1728," entry of 21.11.1728, pp. 64–5 (the page no. should be 74–5 but the scribe made a mistake); NA, VOC, Inv. Nr. 8765, From Hugli to Batavia 30.11.1730, "Instructie voor den Manhaften Capitain D: E Jacob Willem van der Brughen," pp. 1061–63.

the EIC's external trade. The percentage of customs duty charged from the local merchants now uniformly applied, without any preferential treatment meted out to any particular group of traders. Encouragement of internal trade was in the interest of the EIC, which sought to collect customs duty. Along with endeavouring to expand internal trade, the Company even solicited to the Nawab for the establishment of the Danish factory at Patna.⁹⁵ By allowing the Danish and Dutch merchants to operate the EIC sought to augment more customs revenue. By the early nineteenth century, the customs in Patna showed impressive returns.⁹⁶ Probably this indicates that trade and production continued to expand which augmented larger customs duty into the coffers of the EIC.

In the Dutch and English Companies' documents one can easily find scores of indigenous merchants who supplied local products such as saltpeter, opium and textiles to the European traders and also redistributed essential commodities such as salt.⁹⁷ Thus the demise of large business houses, which had dominated the commercial space in the first half of the eighteenth century, gave way to a large number of smaller merchants to operate in the markets. In the years preceding Plassey, while smaller merchants would have found it difficult to operate without some backing from the large merchants who protected them against political elites and undue exactions, but after 1757 there was a level-playing field for all enterprising merchants.⁹⁸ This brings us to the question of transparency in market transactions and the enforcement of contracts.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Mughal towns had offered relative security to the merchants and their capital. However periodic bouts of insecurity in the eighteenth century had a disruptive effect on trade and commerce. Yet the flourishing port city of Calcutta, founded in the 1690s, offered considerable security to merchant capital. Since commerce dominated the life of the city and the finance of the city depended on trade, its laws were framed to serve the interests of merchants guaranteeing their private property. Any breach of contract was considered a serious offence. In contrast, the Islamic jurisprudence that governed the market rules of the Mughal Empire condemned breaches of contract but never considered it a punishable

⁹⁵ BL, APAC, IOR, H/117, HM, p. 22; see also WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Patna, vol. 2, 1774, p.163 (Patna the 11th July 1774).

⁹⁶ In 1814–15, the total revenue collection at the Government Customs House at Patna was 387,000 rupees; the following year the figure stood at 460,000 rupees. As the duty charged on goods was five percent, the total transaction probably stood at more than nine million rupees; see BL, APAC, IOR, P/111/68, BBRP (Customs), "Camp Culwar Zillah Shahabad 9 the August 1816," n.f.

⁹⁷ NA, VOC, Inv. Nr. 3831, Bengalen 6, 01.08.1788, "Memorie van betaalde intresten in het boekjaar 1787/88 te Patna," see pp. 1–49 for "memories" or reports that note dozens of local merchants who lent money, usually at 9 percent per annum to the VOC. See also, NA, VOC, Inv. Nr. 3920, Bengalen 4, 01.08.1790, "Memorie van sodaanige Capitaalen a deposito, als ten lasten van d' E: Compagnie tegens de Rente van 9 per cento 's Jaars genegotierd," pp. 72–80; for the year 1790–91, NA, VOC, Inv. Nr. 3954, Bengalen 8, comptoir Patna, 01.08.1791, "Memorie van sodaanige Intrest Penningen, als er geduurende dit Boekjaar 1790/91, so wel hier als te Houglij op de onderstaande obligatie betaald zijn," p. 19. For several dozen of local petty merchants who traded in salt, betel nut, lead and tin in the 1760s, see BL, IOPP, Mss. Eur. F 331/29, Vansittart Collection, pp. 76–79.

⁹⁸ For the need of some sort of protective cover by the smaller merchants, see Dasgupta, *European trade and colonial conquest*, 1:278; see also C. A. Bayly, *Indian society and the making of the British empire*, *The new Cambridge history of India*, vol. 2.1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 53–5.

offence. Therefore, it was not mere coincidence that merchant capital flowed in into Calcutta in the first half of the eighteenth century.⁹⁹

Dominance of the coast changed the rules of the game in favour of the EIC. After the provincial capital of Bengal shifted from Murshidabad to Calcutta in 1772, this new powerhouse on the coast increasingly exerted control over trade and commerce as well as on productive hinterlands. This was in clear contrast to the situation under the Mughals, when the hinterland-based polities exercised their control over lucrative coastal urban centres. The Ganga was central to the geographical shift in the location of the region's centre of power. The commodities of the hinterland continued to flow downstream, but political power now projected upstream onto the Ganga plain.

The move of the capital to Calcutta also signalled a decisive break from the old Mughal pattern of controlling ports from the interior. From Calcutta now the coast projected the political authority onto the hinterland through the Ganga, and the maritime economic sphere was able to penetrate the productive hinterlands of Bihar more closely. As we have seen, this was already the case when the zamindars of Bihar signed contracts with the European Companies. After its assumption of political power, the EIC and private British merchants became entrenched in the hinterlands of the Ganga plain, liberated commercial traffic from undue exactions by zamindars, and ensured the flow of merchandise.¹⁰⁰ As British power and influence moved up the Ganga, the institutional and juridical norms of Calcutta followed, and Indian merchants and small entrepreneurs collaborated closely with the new ways of conducting trade. So in Patna we find the families of the former Mughal rank-holders and elites petitioning His Britannic Majesty against the English Court of Judicature, which had become a source of indignation for them as the "low, mean, contemptible persons" from local society began to draw them into the courtrooms.¹⁰¹ At least some of these "contemptible persons" may well have been the newly emerging traders who could now drag some of the erstwhile Mughal aristocratic families into court to settle debts and other transactions. Tirthankar Roy suggests that while the Company received weak and

⁹⁹ Tirthankar Roy, *India in the world economy: From antiquity to the present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 106–7. See also Hasan, "Indigenous cooperation and the birth of a colonial city," 70–74. In the 1750s, one Krishnadas, son of a big zamindar of Bengal, Raj Ballav, fled to Calcutta with 53 *lakhs* rupees. We do not know how such a large sum was taken to Calcutta, whether in specie (which would have been pretty difficult) or whether the zamindar sold goods to the Europeans for some years and received credit from them to be paid in Calcutta. See Dasgupta, *European trade and colonial conquest*, 1:321.

¹⁰⁰ In response to the Dutch complaints about greater freedom of trade, the Company replied in 1785, "The Facilities for your Commerce are now greater than they were by the Removal of various Interruptions and Exactions which formerly impeded it ~ a Revenue of about 9 Lacks of Rupees is remitted to the Zemindars who used to exact a Duty at their Chokies upon all the Trade that passed by them." See NA, Hoge Regering van Batavia (HRB), Inv. Nr. 211, doc. nr. 40, n.f.

¹⁰¹ BL, IOPP, Mss. Eur. F 218/30, "Translation of a Persian Petition from the Native Inhabitants of the subah Azeemabad to the King," fos. 13–16, the quote is from fo.14, (the document is undated but probably written around 1780); see also *Encyclopaedia Britannica; or, a dictionary of arts, sciences, and miscellaneous literature*, vol. 6 (Edinburgh, 1823), 344.

opportunistic support from the landed elites and warlords, those merchants and bankers who collaborated with the new regime gave legitimacy to the empire. This became clear in the rebellion of 1857 when the former fought the regime while the latter defended it.¹⁰²

Conclusion

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Ganga was the most important artery of the Mughal Empire, through which the material lifeblood of eastern India was pumped into the rest of the empire. Imperial forces at the strategic towns of Patna, Munger, Bhagalpur, and Rajmahal not only guarded the river but also kept a check on the fissiparous zamindars along the riverbanks. In the early decades of the eighteenth century this scenario changed as newly empowered zamindars began appropriating resources of their zamindari areas and exacted “customs duties” from the boats passing through the river.

The conventional explanation is that the Mughal Empire began to decline after the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, when everything began falling into disarray, and the imperial system foundered. But this picture of dramatic decline resulting from the death of an emperor ignores important structural changes in the political economy and the processes that linked important local groups with the cash-nexus of the region. Trade contracts between the zamindars and the European Companies can be understood in the context of the expanding money economy. I have argued that the local economy oriented more towards maritime trade in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Overseas demand for local commodities further accelerated in the eighteenth century, and proportionately more money flowed into the region. Increased prosperity empowered the zamindars to subvert Mughal provincial authority. They defied the Mughals, withheld land revenues, and generated additional revenue by extorting protection money from merchant boats on the Ganga in the course of the first half of the eighteenth century.

The traditional historiography of Mughal India tends to generalize about Mughal decline and scholars of Mughal history hardly acknowledge the constraints that geography posed. A case in point has to do with the diverse strategies that imperial officials and generals devised to deal with the inhabitants of lands characterized by complex environments and terrain. As we noted above, the Mughals were content to have nominal submission of the zamindars, and tribute collection from them was only occasionally enforced. The Mughal imperial structure was based on constant negotiations with the chieftains that controlled informal political landscape. While officials in the garrison towns along the Ganga were able to ensure that landed magnates parted with their resources, negotiation was preferred to the use of outright force. In spite of the diplomatic negotiations, the zamindars on the fringes of the empire always maintained a tenuous relationship with the Mughals. In the eighteenth century,

¹⁰² Roy, *India in the world economy*, 122.

zamindars who ruled the strategic areas, particularly at places where the river and the hills came closer, they began to openly defy the Mughals and appropriate resources for themselves. We saw a number of such zamindars along the Ganga who now began to assert on the river and choked the flow of resources to the Mughal coffers.

The rise of the EIC to political dominance in Bengal appears to have begun in parallel with the emergence of powerful native zamindars in Bihar and Bengal in the first half of the eighteenth century. English and Indians alike profited from the expanding maritime global economy. While zamindars became interested in promoting trade to increase their income and bullion supply, the European Companies needed commercial agricultural and craft goods for long-distance overseas markets. Economically speaking, they complemented each other. In the second half of the eighteenth century, however, the EIC as a new zamindar focussed more on cash crops production and land revenue administration.

In the scheme of economic and political change in the second half of the eighteenth century, the Ganga remained a focal point. After all, the lucrative tea trade from China depended in a large measure on the opium produced in the farms of Bihar and Banaras. In 1772 the Company monopolized opium production and turned it into a profitable venture. Similarly, the EIC acquired monopoly control over saltpeter soon after Plassey and it controlled its sale to the other Europeans. Indigo also became a profitable commodity and many European indigo planters ventured in its production and trade. Textiles production in Bengal continued to depend on raw cotton supplied through internal trade networks. The Ganga remained a highway of trade and traffic and all of the above-mentioned commodities moved on it until the coming of the railway in the mid-nineteenth century.

