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## **The political economy of the Ganga River : highway of state formation in Mughal India, c.1600-1800**

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## Summary and Conclusion

*I hope your realm has reservoirs that are large and full of water, located in different parts of the land, so that the agriculture does not depend on the caprice of the Rain God.*<sup>1</sup>

### **Of Water, Wealth and the Ganga**

With its life-giving and regenerative capacity, water has been at the core of all civilizations that have emerged and endured in the world. Water is an even more precious resource when it is in arid zones. The impressive ancient Egyptian and Harappan civilizations emerged in well-watered but otherwise arid zones. At the interface of dry and semi-arid areas in Southwest Asia, in the river valleys of the Nile, Tigris, and Euphrates, scholars believe that the Fertile Crescent was the region where farmers first started food production and domesticated many useful mammals starting around 8500 BC.<sup>2</sup> Archeologists generally agree that a few hundred miles to the east, at the crossroads of Central and South Asia, the dry zone region of Mehrgarh (in Balochistan, Pakistan) was the first site in South Asia where people began experiments with food production, around the seventh millennium BC. In the fourth to second millennium BC, the region witnessed the growing complexities in society and economy with the growth and decline of first urban civilization of Harappa, which was watered by the Indus River.

The dynamic of a powerful river in an arid zone similarly informs the present work on the Ganga and its plain. Apart from being a source of perennial flow of water, the river also connects ecologically distinct zones over its 2,500 kilometre-length. The water from the rain and river sustained agriculture and food production in the humid zone, while drier marchland facilitated movement and transportation, cattle breeding, and limited agriculture. Economic and urban growth and state formation invariably gravitated to the strategic areas where the resources of these two ecological zones could be conveniently exploited. Thus, from the first millennium BC, the mahajanapadas emerged in areas where the arid and humid environment met and people could harness the resources of both zones. The most successful of these early mahajanapadas was Magadha, and it was in the same geographical area that the Mauryas succeeded in

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<sup>1</sup> Thus said the sage Narada while greeting Yudhisthira, the Indian king of Kurukshetra and Indraprastha of the *Mahabharata*. Quoted in A. K. Biswas and Tsuyoshi Hashimoto, ed., *Asian international waters: From Ganges–Brahmaputra to Mekong* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1996), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Jared Diamond, *Guns, germs, and steel: The fates of human societies* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 97–103.

establishing the first South Asia-wide empire, with their capital at Pataliputra, in the late fourth century BC.

The economic and political processes leading to the emergence of large empires in the Ganga plain began with the migration and settlement of Indo-Aryan speakers. Before moving south and eastwards, they were primarily pastoralists though also familiar with barley and wheat cultivation; these two occupations defined their mixed economy in the drier parts of the Indo-Gangetic plains. From around 1000 BC, probably pushed by a drier climatic regime and diminishing rainfall, population pressure, and the need for more land for their cattle, the Indo-Aryan speakers gradually moved to the Ganga plain following the banks of the Yamuna and Ganga. As we demonstrated in Chapter 2, with their sizeable cattle wealth and traction power, these migrants transformed the economy of the eastern Ganga plain, which abounded with cultivable land and was perennially watered by the rain- and snow-fed rivers. The new migrants' knowledge of agriculture benefited from their interactions with the previously settled population who practiced agriculture at a subsistence level and indulged in fishing and foraging. As a result of the interactions of people, skills, and resources, the people of the eastern Ganga plain developed an economy based primarily on wet rice cultivation and surplus food production. The changes in the economy help explain the urbanization and state formation in the Ganga plain of the first millennium BC. From the geographical location of Pataliputra, the empires of the Mauryas and Gupta exploited the agricultural resources of the humid Ganga plain and strategic resources such as elephants, iron, and wood from the relatively drier and well-drained southern Chhota Nagpur Plateau.

The drier marches in the western parts of the Ganga plain emerged as the centre of political gravity in around the late first millennium AD. The imperial capitals of Delhi and Agra were located in the arid zone, and were able to project their political power down the Ganga and onto its humid fertile plain. This logistical arrangement worked fine for the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughals. During the Mughal Empire, the political and agricultural frontiers moved eastwards and the Ganga delta was integrated into the Mughal political economy. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Ganga played a pivotal role in ensuring Mughal control over the fertile tracts, and a string of garrison towns along the river such as Patna, Munger, Bhagalpur, Rajmahal, and Dhaka functioned as centres of imperial power.

The political and economic integration of the Ganga plain into the Mughal Empire had favourable effects on commercial expansion. Indian merchant groups such as the Marwaris/Jains and Khatri from western and northwestern India, respectively, accompanied Mughal armies to the eastern plain. They actively participated in the growing economy by extending credit to the peasants, converting agricultural surplus into cash, and facilitating land revenue collection of the state. Overall, they fostered the market economy of eastern India and maintained subcontinent-wide networks of bills of exchange, or hundi, and commodity exchange. Along with Indian merchants, the Armenians, too, joined in by the seventeenth century, participated in trade via riverine

and overland routes linking Bengal and Bihar with Gujarat, Agra, Delhi, Lahore, and Central Asia. The political integration and wider commercial networks had positive effects on the commodity-export-driven commercial economy in the geographical area between Patna and Hugli. As the market infrastructure and commodity production peaked in the seventeenth century, the European Companies could hardly ignore the opportunity to participate in the lucrative trade along the Ganga. Local merchants and producers in the fertile tracts of Bihar were successful in meeting the growing demand for saltpeter, opium, textiles, and other commodities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as we have shown in Chapters 4 and 5. Without water from the river and rains the productivity of the region would have been unthinkable.

The participation of the European Companies in the economy of the Ganga came only after they had established themselves in Gujarat and on the Coromandel Coast. It was only around the mid-seventeenth century that the eastern and western deltas of the Ganga were brought within the frame of the Mughal Empire. With this political integration, the agricultural frontier moved further east from Dhaka while the commercial centre of gravity came to be firmly located in the western delta, on the Hugli branch of the Ganga where the English, Dutch, French, and Danes all opened their factories since around the middle of the seventeenth century. Soon thereafter the Companies penetrated into the heart of production centres of the plain up to Patna via the Ganga. Keeping pace with global demand, the export of commercial goods expanded in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the region absorbed increasingly large amounts of specie. The Mughal state became the obvious beneficiary of this commercial expansion, as large revenues flowed into the state coffers, but the growing maritime trade gradually pulled the eastern Ganga plain out of the Mughals' orbit and incorporated the region with the global economy. As the maritime route became the most dependable and regular source of bullion stream in the region, the agrarian polities found it impossible to ignore this lucrative source of liquid money. In spite of the growing assertiveness of the Companies at the turn of the seventeenth century in Bengal, the Mughals simply gave in and allowed them to trade.<sup>3</sup>

By the early eighteenth century, the Mughal Empire's apparatus for governance and control were showing signs of weakness. In the long run, the growing prosperity of the eastern Ganga plain had a politically disruptive effect, paving the way for its economic and political alienation from the Mughal Empire. Benefitting from the trade boom in the age of commerce, the zamindars along the Ganga confidently appropriated local resources and in other ways asserted themselves against imperial authorities. The dry marches along the southern banks of the Ganga once again became a simmering zone of political transition, what André Wink calls *fitna*, or sedition. The warlords, the

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<sup>3</sup> On the VOC's blockade of the Mughal ports from 1704 to 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. For growing English assertion, see C. R. Wilson, ed., *Early annals of the English in Bengal: Being the Bengal public consultations for the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century*, in 3 vols. (London: W. Thacker, 1895–1919), 1:297, 2:xlvi.

Afghans, and zamindars of various hues led the process of regional centralization and resource generation. Agricultural expansion and intensive resource mobilization through *ijaradari* brought even more money into the coffers of zamindars, who could now maintain large militias of their own. The growing demand for commodities brought more money, which in turn gave more power to the zamindars. With resources and militia power they further expanded their domain. As opportunities to trade in commodities were at the doorstep, they became important conduits of the cash-nexus. Unlike their immediate predecessors, eighteenth-century zamindars effectively controlled the trade routes and levied “customs-duty” on merchant boats that passed through the Ganga. The weakening imperial control over the river, and the leakages of resource into the hands of local warlords and zamindars not only checked the flow of money to the Mughal centre, the imperial forces also faced more serious resistance from the increasingly powerful chieftains.

Why did the zamindars of eastern India broke away from the Mughal controlled political economy in the eighteenth century? The explanation can be found in the seaward orientation of the regional economy of Bihar and Bengal. As we noted in Chapter 7, the zamindars entered into trade contracts with the European Companies and facilitated trade and transportation of merchandise produced in their zamindaris. For the zamindars, maritime trade became a more dependable source of income.

Similarly, the merchants in Bihar and Bengal also developed a strong interest in the oceanic trade, either by participating directly in overseas ventures or by supplying merchandise to maritime merchants. In the first half of the eighteenth century, the unsettled political conditions in northern India, external invasions, and Maratha raids frequently disrupted the overland route to northern and northwestern India. Although the overland route remained functional, the maritime outlet became relatively more secure for the export of merchandise and the continuation of trade in eastern India.

As the economic interests of the zamindars and merchants got intertwined with maritime trade, the political transition from the Mughals to the EIC became relatively smooth. The alliance of many big merchants and bankers, zamindars, and Mughal officials with the EIC in the battle of Plassey can be explained more easily only if we keep in view the dynamics of the political economy of the time. This is not to suggest that the domination of the EIC met no resistance, but the ultimate failure of the opposition forces and the Company’s triumph depended on much more than a militarily determined political outcome.<sup>4</sup> In fact it was the common economic interest of the local

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<sup>4</sup> BL, IOPP, Mss. Eur. F218/3, n.f. In 1763 when Mir Kasim was at Munger and preparing to challenge the EIC, a vakeel belonging to Mr. Amyatt called Cussaul Chund (Kushal Chand) reported, “several principal Jemutdars [Jamindars?] sent word to Mr. Amyatt, soon after his arrival at Monghyr, that they wou’d readily join the English in case of a rupture; but they know not how to trust us on account of our having given up Ram Narrain in the manner we did.” Furthermore, Mir Kasim himself hardly had major problems with the English who he wanted to “stay in the country as meer [sic] traders, and give up the new fort they have made to him,—or else destroy it; then he will permit them to remain.” The vakeel also related that “Mirza Sally, and several other considerable persons are wellwishers of the English.” According to the gazetteer compiler of Bhagalpur district, the zamindar of Sonbursa, “Raja Fateh Singh,

elites and the English Company that sustained the latter's rule, though the peasants, weavers, and labourers came to bear the burden of the new military fiscal state. In spite of the intensified exploitation, the economic and political trend was a familiar one. Inheriting the pattern of regional centralization set into motion by the zamindars from the early eighteenth century, the EIC was able to successfully transform itself from a trading entity to the largest new zamindar, and having done so it carried forward the process of resource generation, agricultural expansion, and exploitation of resources. It was the wealth of the fertile and well-watered Ganga plain that sustained the so-called investment for the export of the EIC, and also paid for the sepoys that conquered the subcontinent in the early nineteenth century.

The Ganga remained central to commercial and political control in the later half of the eighteenth century. While commodities of the Ganga plain continued to be transported downstream to the coast, Calcutta began to project the political power upriver onto the Ganga plain. The "rise of the coast" to political and economic dominance was unprecedented, as the earlier arid-zone-based regimes had always controlled the coast from the interior. This logistical shift from the interior to the coast underlines the changes in the global economy based on long distance maritime trade. The rise of the coast was a global phenomenon during the early modern period and the rivers lent special logistical support in controlling the interior. As Anand Yang has shown us the Ganga remained central to the political economy until the middle of the nineteenth century when the railways displaced it as a primary artery of trade and transportation.

Critics may argue that if the Mughal integration of the eastern Ganga plain had a favorable effect on the regional economy in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, then by the same logic it follows that the weakening of the empire in the eighteenth century would lead to economic decline. Although apparently making sense, such reasoning ignores the larger economic contexts of these two processes of integration and disintegration separated by a span of at least a century. In the aftermath of the political and economic integration under the Mughals, the economic infrastructure and market institutions developed strong roots and consolidated a number of wide-ranging trading and financial networks. The additional demands for commodities generated by European maritime merchants further solidified the South Asian market and financial institutions. Thus, when the Mughal Empire was in decline these institutions were strong enough to be able to withstand the empire's disintegration process and managed to continue their business. The regional power centres that came up in the wake of regional centralization, and the successor states to the Mughal Empire facilitated the inter-region trade and the functioning of financial networks as they did during the Mughal Empire. The integration of the regional commercial economy with

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is said to have sided with the British Government against Mir Kasim in the battle of Udainala." See J. Byrne, *Bengal district gazetteer: Bhagalpur* (Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1911), 174.

the maritime global economy also played a role in injecting vigor into the market and financial institutions operating from the eastern Ganga plain.

Sceptics may also object that the present study gives too much agency to the Ganga for explaining the political and economic processes in eastern India. After all, wealth was produced in western India and the Deccan, too, and numerous prominent river-roads served important political and economic functions in other parts of South Asia. Why, then, should the Ganga be accorded so much importance? While the present work does not intend to downplay the importance of economically important regions like Gujarat and the Malabar and Coromandel Coasts or the economic functions of the Brahmaputra, Sabarmati, Godavari, or Kaveri rivers, the Ganga and its plain have experienced a distinct historical trajectory. As we have seen, the river itself has been central to economic, political, and social developments in northern India since at least the first millennium BC. The association of the Ganga with the Indian civilization is based not only on the poets' or sages' eulogies and celebration of the river. Rather it has to be understood that the river's mystical and spiritual power has a very strong material basis. If we consider agricultural productivity, demographic advantage, resource richness, relative security from drought and famine, and economic sustainability in the Ganga plain, such considerations makes it easier to comprehend why the banks of the Ganga have been the birthplace of so many mighty, often South Asia-wide empires—from the Mauryas to the British Raj.

Viewed from an environmental perspective, the Ganga qualifies quite well for being considered a distinct geographical entity. In Chapter 2, we noted the geographers' unsatisfactory division of the Ganga plain in three broad parts. We further highlighted the inability of this tripartite division to explain historical processes on the plain and thus suggested a division based on aridity and humidity. Throughout its plain the Ganga flows keeping drier and humid parts to the west and south and to the east and north respectively. We noted the pull of the resource and people towards the riverbanks, which formed an interstitial zone flanked by the distinct ecological zones. It was within this transitional zone that many historical processes had occurred ever since the Indo-Aryan speakers migrated to the plain. The so-called second urbanization in the Ganga plain during the early historic period unfolded and the ancient imperial capital was firmly located in this zone. In the early modern period, imperial armies marched along the banks of the Ganga and several strategic fortresses and garrison towns grew up there. From these garrison towns the Mughals subdued the fertile humid tracts, coerced the zamindars into submission and alienated their resources. Apart from these strategic considerations, the river functioned as a highway of trade and traffic as well. Finally, the decline of the Mughal Empire is easily in sight once the Mughals lost control over the Ganga to the zamindars and ultimately to the EIC in the eighteenth century. If the river has been at the core of political and economic processes for so long, denying it a historical agency and geographical entity can only lead to an imperfect understanding of early modern South Asian history.