

DELHI  
THROUGH THE AGES  
Selected Essays in Urban History,  
Culture and Society

*Edited by*  
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## PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

The story of this book and its construction is simply told. Some students of Percival Spear pondered what to do in honour of their old mentor. As his *chelas* or *murids*, they wanted to celebrate his fifty years of distinguished scholarship on India. No focal point seemed more fitting than the pulsating city which their guide had loved more than any other and in which he had spent the early decades of his career. He himself, captivated by the city's many pasts, as seen in ruins and shadow, had written two short books about Delhi: *Delhi, A Historical Sketch* (Bombay, OUP, 1937 and 1945) and *Delhi, Its Monuments and History* (Bombay, OUP, 1943 and 1945). Each was a finely crafted gem, serving to remind the general public of Delhi's historic importance. Spear's greatest scholarly work, *Twilight of the Mughals* (1951), was also centered on Delhi. It was not difficult, therefore, for the idea and the focus of this book to come together.

The enterprise began with an international conference. The event, a seminar-workshop held on 31 October and 1 November 1979 on the campus of the University of Wisconsin—Madison, was a public celebration of scholarship and of contributions to our understanding of India's past. Papers focusing on various aspects of 'Delhi Through the Ages' were presented and discussed. The occasion was enlivened by delightful and vigorous intellectual interaction, with Percival Spear himself at the centre. Among the twenty or more scholars who took part in this event were many of Spear's students; all who took part were, by their very contributions, giving tribute to the position among historians of South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka), which Spear had occupied. He had become a dean of Indian History for his day, especially among modern historians of India in the West. Alas, Spear himself never lived to see the book which had been organized in his name. Swiftly and without warning, he passed from among us (after a short stay in hospital, on 17 December 1982). The volume was published as a memorial to his work, a tribute to the high ideals and scholarly standards for which he stood.

# DELHI AND OTHER CITIES OF NORTH INDIA DURING THE 'TWILIGHT'

CHRISTOPHER BAYLY

Populous cities crammed with produce and thronged with merchants and learned men have always received praise from travellers and geographers in the Indo-Persian literary tradition. Yet there seems to be no single, all-embracing reason why large cities should exist in areas which have not experienced industrialization. The 'pre-industrial city' is a fickle concept and where it exists there is no evidence to suggest that it is either necessarily benign or 'parasitic' as a type. Cities are better seen as variable constructs of the social and economic organization of élite groups than as given entities which can be discussed and compared in isolation from the societies around them. This is particularly important in the case of eighteenth and nineteenth century India. The decline of the largest Mughal cities in the course of the eighteenth century has been put forward as the main plank in the argument that the century was one of unmitigated social and economic decline, a desperate weakening which terminated with the fatal illness of colonialism. The melancholy tales of European travellers, rhapsodising over decaying mosques and temples, and the cries of alarm of the Muslim literati of Delhi and Agra have given poignancy to this picture.

First, however, it is worth noting that the connection between the decay of large cities and an overall decline in urban population is far from obvious. There is, for instance, evidence to suggest that political change was redistributing town-dwellers to thriving new cities outside

This paper is based on late eighteenth century travellers' accounts; military route maps of the East India Company; the records of the Resident of Benaras; early British revenue and judicial records in Allahabad and other U.P. record rooms; translations of Persian historical and topographical works, and investigations of the family histories of leading merchant and gentry families in U.P. cities conducted between 1971 and 1976.

the traditional heartland of north Indian urban life. Where Delhi and Agra declined, centres of new dynasties such as Lucknow, Pune and Nagpur rose in their place. So that taking the continent as a whole, the number of people in large cities (roughly over 50,000) had not significantly diminished between 1700 and 1800. Alternatively, the percentage of the population living in larger cities may have declined, but there may have been a rapid growth of small market towns (*qasbahs*) and fixed bazars (*ganjs*) so that the percentage of the population living in centres with a population of more than 2,000 may have remained constant or actually increased during the century. Figures for the Gangetic plain are untrustworthy for the period, but one can point to a number of areas of exceptional small-town urbanization. There was, for instance, a rapid development of fortress market-centres in the areas of Jat and Rohilla conquest, and qualitative evidence that incoming merchant and service families from declining Mughal *qasbahs* accounted for part of the increment of urban population. Thus for instance, the decline of the town of Koil (Aligarh) after 1750 was almost exactly matched by the rise of the Jat lineage centre of Hatras. In rural Awadh too, there was a substantial increase in the vitality of small centres both where a powerful Rajput lineage was increasing its local dominance, as in Baiswara; and where Muslim military gentry were remitting the profits of service and plunder to their localities, as in the Hardoi district.

Next, it is important to bear in mind that the connection between the decay of large cities and economic decline is quite uncertain, and particularly so in India. T. C. Smith has shown, by contrast, that rapid economic growth in pre-industrial rural Japan led to a decline in large 'castle towns' while 'country places' where the artisan producers were face to face with their affluent rural buyers were flourishing. In India, the fate of large cities was equally tenuously linked to the pace of economic change. Here the famous 'putting out' system ensured that a great volume of artisan cloth production took place in dispersed villages where the weavers had the advantage of space, running water and rapid access to agricultural resources in case of famine. Country people bought and sold their own produce in periodic village markets or *baths*, while the special things that they needed from outside the local marketing system—salt, spices, iron for ploughs and cattle—often reached them through large country fairs at which there were transactions of great quantities, but from which no settled urban entities emerged. In the north-west of the

Gangetic region, for instance, one of the great annual market places, transacting three or four lakh rupees *per annum* in the eighteenth century, was the Hardwar religious fair, but the merchants who frequented it never established fixed *kothis* or agency houses there. Local increases in the total volume of agricultural production were not, therefore, rapidly or necessarily reflected in the growth of recognizably urban places. This would only occur when outside political power ensured that more and more produce was marketed in a specific place in order to provide cash for revenue payment. It is possible to imagine, therefore that modest agricultural growth might have persisted in a decentralized political system without giving rise to large towns.

Even when we move on to social and cultural life, the connection between the vitality of a civilization and its large towns cannot be assumed. True, both Hindu and Muslim writers imply that the provision of services by a large client population is a guarantee of an appropriate religious existence. Thus the city (*nagar*) for some Hindu theorists was where the system of castes reaches its most perfect expression and the greatest number of ritual specialists and *jajmans* are on hand for the protection of *dharma*. Similarly, for Muslims the city is the 'flower of earthly existence' because this is where the faithful can find the basis of social life—the mosque, running water for purity, learned *qazis* to settle disputes, and the Sultan to protect the *umma*. Yet these are not difficult requirements to fulfill. The elaboration of castes could be protected in any one of the small lineage centres which grew up in Rajput or Bhumihiar lineage centres as clansmen became *rajas* and subjects. Muslim urban life could similarly be constructed in any one of the small *qasbah* towns which gained a tenuous hold on the soil of north India as gentry élites strengthened their hold on revenue rights after 1720. In many ways it was the *qasbah* rather than the large city which gave vitality to the Muslim tradition throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and provided a new level of Muslim leadership. From here came the holy men who entered the religious seminaries, the poets who moulded the Urdu language and the service families who congregated at the courts of the illustrious dynasties of Lucknow or Hyderabad. By the late eighteenth century the pattern of urban historical and religious scholarship which had been developed in regard to Baghdad or Isfahan was being applied to small places in the north Indian countryside such as Bilgram or Kakori whose famous warriors and Sufi saints

were eulogised with equal pride. So also the vitality which Hermann Goetz saw in eighteenth century India was very much alive in the small towns of Kangra or Malwa where painting survived and flourished or in the Jat lineage centres where bardic tales and religious epics were being woven into the beginnings of Hindi verse.

#### *Survival and Decline in the Great Cities*

When we come to consider the fate of Agra, Delhi or Lahore during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century we are heavily reliant on eye-witness reports and comments by European observers. It is particularly important, therefore, to distinguish between evidence on the fabric and morphology of the cities and evidence of their decline as social and economic entities. By the late eighteenth century Europeans had come to regard the repair of buildings as a direct manifestation of the health of civic life. When they paused before the public buildings of the upper Indian cities and dwell on their 'melancholy decay' they were indulging not only a European perception but also the type of romanticising of the past and of the decay of great empires which informs the sketches of William Hodges, for instance. For eighteenth century Indians, however, masonry and its repair had different and rather more limited cultural implications. Given the mobile, flexible nature of eighteenth century politics, fixed buildings were often undesirable. The founder of the Awadh dynasty, Saadat Khan remarked that he 'had no special fancy for masonry'; Mohammad Khan Bangash of Farrukhabad forbade all but eunuchs to construct masonry buildings on the grounds that the fixed patrimonial bazar was an implicit act of rebellion, a token that a subject intended to withhold revenue and stand out against the Nawab's army. The apparent meanness and squalor of many eighteenth century cities did not necessarily reflect, then, the poverty of their inhabitants so much as special features of the pattern of consumption. Moreover, where areas of cities were in clear decline one must beware assuming that this reflected the elimination of urban wealth rather than its redistribution within urban economies. Travellers and Muslim literati often referred to the decline of mosques and shrines, but eighteenth century rulers who resumed earlier imperial *madad-i-ma'ash* grants continued to create revenue-free grants for religious purposes on a large scale in different cities or in different quarters of the same cities. For instance, the decline of religious endowment in Jaunpur was directly

matched by the vast expenditure of the Nawabs of Awadh on Shia monuments and shrines in Lucknow and Fyzabad.

Another reason for the rapid decay of urban property in the Indian case was the pattern of inheritance in Hindu and Muslim law. When large *havelis* (palaces) were divided up among a large number of heirs and collaterals there was a cumulative problem of maintenance which often created the impression of urban collapse. Finally, the apparent shrinkage of city sites during the eighteenth century did not always reflect an equivalent decline in their population. Less stable political conditions tended to greater concentrations of population. The various fixed markets or *ganjs* which had existed outside the city proper in both Delhi and Agra before 1720 had largely disappeared before the end of the century. The total built-up area of Delhi appears to have dropped by over 50 percent, but only 30 percent of the old markets had been closed down. Many others appear to have been concentrated behind the town walls.

Next we must distinguish in ideal terms between the various levels of political and commercial activity that characterized eighteenth century north Indian cities. Too often, contemporary accounts and more recent histories have conflated together these levels so that a decline, or rerouting of long distance trade and distress amongst great merchant houses is taken to apply to the commercial economy as a whole. First then there was the dependent household economy of the ruler and great nobles. This was stable or volatile in sympathy with the political fortunes of the ruling group and responded directly to the link between revenue functions and princely consumption. When the Rohilla grandees were expelled from their domains in 1774, or when the Nawab of Awadh moved his court from Lucknow to Fyzabad many of the luxury traders, bankers and skilled artisans moved with it, causing dislocation and limited mercantile distress. Next, however, there was a level of inter-regional economic activity which was much more 'sticky' and independent of purely local political fluctuations. The merchants and entrepreneurs who worked the Ganga-Yamuna river trades or controlled the flow of essential commodities such as iron, salt and bullion, adapted their trade routes to prevailing political conditions. Yet there was a great toughness and resilience here. The inter-regional traders and bankers were among those groups which were significantly increasing their political status during the century, and the price and transport advantages gained by moving commodities through well established break-of-bulk centres

were so great that it proved more or less impossible to choke off most trade routes, however fierce the political levies and plunder on them. Finally, there was the level of artisan and commercial life which responded directly to the requirements of the surrounding countryside for a central place. If the volume and style of agricultural activity in the hinterland changed, the town's central functions might modify or decline even when its entrepôt or higher political functions remained unimpaired. Conversely, political functions might decline but the town might continue to be important as a central market and entrepôt place. The Weber thesis of the peripatetic, court-camp city still has much to recommend it. Rulers actively built up large parts of urban economies by patronage and protection; they did much more than simply tax an existing trade; but at the same time there were areas of urban economies which persisted unaltered by political flux.

The larger imperial cities of the Indo-Gangetic plain were clearly experiencing varying degrees of dislocation during the eighteenth century. But the only two major centres which disappeared completely from the map of nineteenth century Hindustan were those that simultaneously forfeited all their commercial and political functions in the context of local agricultural decline. The most dramatic example was the city of Korah-Jahanabad<sup>1</sup> which had once been a provincial capital in the middle *duab* and possessed one of the largest caravansarais in upper India. At the end of the seventeenth century this had been a 'wealthy and populous city'. Indeed on Rennell's map and in the surveys of the 1760s it still appears to have had one of the largest inhabited sites in the subcontinent, consonant with an urban population of at least 30,000, though the Jesuit Tieffenthaler who visited the place sometime in the 1750s reported signs of decay. The main reason for Korah's nearly complete disappearance in the next fifty years was the collapse of its entrepôt and central place functions. The decline of traffic, and in particular of regular imperial military traffic down the Grand Trunk Road reduced the city's importance as a stopping and provisioning place for travellers. The last major building constructed here appears to have been a bridge over the river Rind put up by a local *bania* some time in the 1770s. Imperial control in the lower *duab* had, however, weakened dramatically after 1750 when the whole region became a march between the emerging Nawabi of Awadh and the Maratha forces advancing north-east from Gwalior. The disposition of local political power also changed as the *chaudhri* of the local Rajput dominant clan, Rup Rai, began to assume the

status of raja. He stationed forces at his lineage centre of Ghazipur, about twenty miles from Korah, and forced local merchants to settle there under his protection. Nevertheless, the interesting point about Korah-Jahanabad is that its population never stabilized at a size appropriate for a typical *qasbah*, dwindling to a population of a few hundred in the 1830s. This collapse appears to have reflected the extreme instability of agriculture as a whole in the locality and the fragility of the city's persona as an agricultural market centre.

This part of the lower *duab* between Allahabad and Kanpur has a loamy soil which varies in richness. The tract adjoining the river Yamuna was the poorest. It was ravine-ridden, with a very low water-table and inhabited largely by communities of Rajput herdsmen. It is noteworthy that in later periods of rainfall instability as well as during the scarcities connected with the terrible 'Chalisa' famine of 1781-4, these communities gave trouble, plundering the more affluent areas inland. To the north of the central *duab*, cultivation was better with the water table nearer the surface. But the area was still crucially dependent on human investment. The Grand Trunk Road had once provided this; the policy of the Mughal provincial governors had been to stabilize the tract on either side of the road by building tanks and wells and growing large groves of mangoes and other fruit. But by the 1770s most of these works were in disrepair, at the very time when climatic conditions were becoming unfavourable. Patches of cultivation mentioned in the 1769 surveys almost exactly correspond to favourable natural features, but the immediate hinterland of Korah which had a rather low water-table, had no such advantages. The dilapidation of wells or their destruction by 'the flying enemy' meant the complete destruction of the high agriculture which had helped maintain the city. Captain Williamson, a contemporary observer, reckoned that between 30 and 40 percent of the total population fled or died during the famine of 1783 in this area. Those that returned from the more stable areas to the east returned not to Korah-Jahanabad but to growing centres such as Kanpur.

It is significant that the only other major town of the high Mughal period which dwindled to a mere village in the course of the eighteenth century was also situated in the lower *duab*. This was Kara-Shahzadpur which lay on the Ganga about ten miles west of Allahabad. The town's decline had begun as early as 1585 when the headquarters of the Mughal province had been moved to Allahabad and the nobility and service people began to desert it. Kara's remaining political

functions finally evaporated when the exiled Emperor left the city in 1772, but already by the 1750s its once proud Sayyid families were said to be in decline. Nevertheless, what destroyed Kara, like Korah-Jahanabad, was the simultaneous disappearance of its other urban functions. The cessation of trade down the mid-Ganga after 1750 affected Kara's river traffic, while the end of European and Mughal investment in local handicraft industries had dissipated the artisan population before 1820. Political problems and lack of artificial irrigation destroyed the high cash-crop farming which had once occupied Kara's home *pargana*, so that even its agricultural functions were split up among a number of small nearby centres.

#### *Delhi and Agra: the Persistence of Urban Functions*

The fate of the three great cities of the Mughal imperial triangle, Delhi, Agra and Lahore, has been most particularly the subject of romantic lament. It is even more important to separate the evidence of political and moral decline from that of economic collapse. All three cities had an important central role for their agricultural hinterlands. Agra's was particularly noteworthy because quick river traffic down the Yamuna to the central plains enhanced its importance for marketing farmers and small merchants. In the early nineteenth century observers noted that the city attracted such traffic even from the vicinity of Delhi. The ring of market villages and possible cotton marts strung around Agra on Rennell's map tends to support this assumption. During the 1780s and 1790s the Yamuna was temporarily closed to river traffic by the build-up of gravel banks in its course. This must have impeded Agra's long-distance trade in salt and grain, but the city still lay athwart the best crossing-point from Rajasthan into the plains. Agra's central role was also maintained by the relative stability of the farming land for about ten miles around the city. The south-western *parganas* were probably subject to gradual deterioration and the hinterland water table was falling, but a new input of irrigation during the French and Maratha period averted a more serious crisis of subsistence for the city. On the basis of this seventy square miles or so of surrounding cultivation, Agra city was probably able to feed a population of around 80,000 except in the worst years. Above this number the city was vulnerable. During the high Mughal period foodgrains were brought in large quantities from as far afield as northern Awadh or Bengal to feed a population which may have

been as much as 300,000 excluding the royal army. When the population climbed slowly above the 120,000 mark in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, the city again suffered severe crises of subsistence in scarcity years and high prices in normal years.

As far as long-distance and international trade is concerned, Agra declined, but not absolutely. It lost the handling of Bayana indigo and piece goods bound for Surat and the south some time between 1730 and 1750; the closure of the European factories clearly led to unemployment among the many brokers and agents dependent on the Dutch and English. All the same, Agra was the point where Rajasthan salt and grain would naturally enter the plains of Hindustan. Only in exceptional years did the trade in these commodities die out completely. Insurance rates and charges simply adjusted to take account of unfavourable political or climatic conditions.

The only sector which appears to have declined completely was the nobility and the service classes immediately dependent on them. In this the city resembled Lahore but not Delhi. As early as 1740 the Dutch Company's factor at Surat was told that one third of the city's houses were empty. But the early maps and Archaeological Survey Reports suggest that this decline was concentrated in the aristocratic suburban quarters and the area lying between the Red Fort and the Taj Mahal. The commercial heart of the city fronting the river between Belanganj and the Fort appears to have remained in occupation. This decline appears then to have preceded the Jat and Maratha occupations. It probably represents an emigration to Delhi, Fyzabad, Hyderabad and other centres, and resulted from changed conditions of political power.

Along with the nobility parted or disappeared the courtly trader-bankers who served the nobles and the army. Compared with Benaras or Lucknow, there is remarkably little continuity in mercantile élites from the eighteenth to the early nineteenth century. The leading merchants of the city in 1810 were all newcomers from Rajasthan and east Panjab. Yet this flight of the old magnates may well have come quite late. Between 1750 and 1770 the nodal point in credit transactions by bankers between Bengal and Surat moved from Agra to Benaras. But it is during the political and economic crisis of 1780-3 that the Maratha newsletters continually report the flight of rich merchants whose subsistence was endangered by the simultaneous pressure of forced loan and acute scarcity. Some Agarwal family histories support this supposition. Though Agra's élites may have

suffered dramatically during these years, the place's natural military and commercial advantages rapidly re-asserted themselves. The Maratha and French rulers set about attracting merchants and others to the city after 1785. Agriculture recovered from the Chalisa due to the extensive provision of irrigation and the city was set for the modest boom which it experienced in the first decades of the nineteenth century.

In Delhi, the situation was somewhat different. Here the large, productive hinterland showed signs of fairly severe economic decline and the town's control over its hinterland was even more fragmented. It seems that the rich areas of commercial farming north and west of the city fell out of cultivation with the decline of the canal system and the famine of 1783 dealt a final blow. Warfare destroyed large areas of mango groves and other trees within fifty miles of the capital; bullocks and peasant labour were impressed for service in the army. Within the area which Delhi had once served as a central place there appears to have been a distinct growth of the nomadic, pastoral economy at the expense of settled agriculture. Gujar herdsmen penetrated the productive area which had once been irrigated by Firoz Shah's canal, and the influence of the Battis, a celebrated race of pastoralists and plunderers crept within seventy miles of the gates of the city. Ecological and political change reinforced each other so that by the end of the century a large majority of villages in the old Delhi dominion neither paid revenue nor sent their produce to the capital. In some areas like Sonepat and Ballabgarh the profits of good agriculture simply went into the pockets of Sikh or Jat magnates:

The great lords [of Delhi] are helpless and impoverished. Their peasants raise two crops a year, but their lords see nothing of either, and their agents on the spot are virtual prisoners in the peasants' hands, like a peasant kept in his creditor's hands until he can pay his debt.<sup>2</sup>

But in the expanding pastoral areas the point is that the lands could no longer produce the agricultural surplus which had once sustained the satellite markets of imperial Delhi. Here, all the villages had become accustomed to contribute was

the price of a horse or so, and a sixth of the property plundered by them. In all these villages cultivation was thought of and carried on only as a requisite for the food of the inhabitants; numerous herds of cattle were then, as now their chief support and riches.<sup>3</sup>

In west and central Asia, of course, large cities flourished in symbiosis

with pastoralists and nomads. But a speedy change in this sort of economy must have challenged the city's already weakening position in its domains. Whereas Marathas or Sikhs could have accommodated themselves to living off pastoralists by large-scale cattle rustling, city dwellers were in a less fortunate position. It is significant that before 1820 the new British rulers were attempting to recapture the social surplus of Haryana and 'Batti country' by reimposing a swingeing tax on the head of cattle which flourished in them.

Delhi's longer distance entrepôt trade may have been less disrupted than travellers' accounts suggest over these years. It was sustained above all by the trade to the north-west, Afghanistan and Central Asia in high value but low bulk goods such as dried fruits, shawls and drugs. Bulk trade such as in the Bengal and Patna rice which had once come up the river system to Agra and Delhi were more at risk than the 'luxury items' which could easily be rerouted over the northern mountains and would remain in demand among the still wealthy Islamic élites of north India. George Forster,<sup>4</sup> who travelled north from Delhi at the beginning of the 1790s, encountered four large caravans going to Delhi in the course of three months, and this was quite soon after the scarcities and political havoc of the late 1780s. His account reveals how lesser 'pedlar' merchants could attach themselves to the great caravans which were organized by the Muslim and Khattri merchants who worked the trade route which stretched as far up into central Asia as Astrakhan. Merchants who tried to take the route alone were evidently at risk from Sikh warbands and the petty hill kings. But the larger caravans had developed strong political relations with the hinterland rulers through whose domains they travelled. The Sikh *misdars* indeed actively patronised the Khattri merchants for by them they were supplied with weapons and fine cloths. In the mid-1790s moreover, the shawl trade through Amritsar and Delhi had begun to build up again, and this was rapidly becoming an important source of tax revenue for the emerging Sikh kingdoms. It is not surprising that Chandni Chawk and other bazars which dealt with the north-western trade were still considerable at the end of the century and 'greater than many another city'.

In contrast with Agra, Delhi's political functions also remained significant throughout the period. Even though the massive inflows of land-revenue had ceased before 1750, it was still important for aspiring north Indian rulers to have their *vakils* and agents in the imperial centre. The Archaeological Survey's 'List of Hindu and

Muhammadan monuments of Delhi' and Sayyid Ahmad's *Asar us Sanadid* gives us a fascinating glimpse of building in the city during the 'twilight' and though the volume had fallen off rapidly after 1740, it had by no means ceased. Prominent structures started between 1780 and 1800 were associated with local agents of the Marathas and the East India Company. They complemented the substantial residences in the capital put up by the Bangash of Farrukhabad and the Awadh dynasty since 1740.

### *Shifts in Urban Dominance*

The eighteenth century was not a period of universal decline and desolation for Delhi and Agra; there remained flourishing sectors in both cities which could be rapidly revitalized by the changes associated with the establishment of British rule. Another way of looking at the century, however, would be to see its political events as important turning points in the long process by which economic and cultural dominance in Delhi and Agra passed from a predominantly Muslim gentry to a predominantly Hindu commercial and professional group. This change predated the decline of the Mughals in origin and is by no means completed today. The pace of the transformation was more rapid in Agra than in Delhi.

The Mughal nobility and service classes in Delhi survived the bad years after the death of Najaf Khan by emigrating to Lucknow or Hyderabad, or by seeking service with the Marathas and the British. With the end of open warfare in the region after 1806, those that survived were able to recover in part the land rights that they had formerly held between Shahdara and Ghaziabad to the west. Rising land values within and outside the city and stable *malikana* or pensions held by the court and some of the nobility provided the economic basis for a 'silver age' revival associated with circles like that of Zakauallah. In Agra much less of the Mughal ruling class survived. The old *umrah* quarter had declined and the *ganjs* associated with Mughal military settlements were completely deserted. Three prominent families remained:<sup>5</sup> the *qazi* family of Mohamad Bakar Ali; that of Amir Ali Shah and Mirza Ghulam-Ali. These were associated with the old political structure of the city and its remaining religious endowments; so that the influence of the families of these notables with the still substantial Muslim population of the central quarters inclined the incoming Jats, Marathas and eventually the

British to do what they could to sustain them. Yet the earlier Muslim dominance in the city passed largely to Jat families, the most energetic group in the hinterland. A substantial number of buildings and attached marts constructed after 1805 were the property of the Jat Rajas of Bharatpur, Hatras and Mursan or their *wakils*. The British commissioner's office in the city had become the political centre of the locality and it was necessary for these notables to have a presence there. By 1841, the transformation had proceeded quite far:

At Delhi there is a large, intelligent, haughty but indigent Mahomedan population . . . Agra, on the contrary is a commercial town of modern growth. The respectable Mahomedans had been expelled from it by the Jats and Mahrattahs before we acquired the country, and the persons who have since settled here have come for the purposes of trade, or have been the natural dependents of the large military and civil station.<sup>6</sup>

The great Muslim families of Agra had declined more rapidly than those of Delhi because, first, they were unable to maintain even that degree of control over the rental income of the hinterland that was possible to the east of the imperial capital, and second, because it was the notion of 'imperial blood' that was of consequence in eighteenth century politics. Agra's distinguished history as an imperial centre was of little advantage to it.

Yet beneath the level of the élites the pace of change may not have been markedly different in the two centres. In part this was because the impact of Mughal-style courtly consumption remained long after the nobility itself had disappeared. The Jat and Maratha élites who usurped the place of the Muslim gentry in the countryside quite rapidly took up a conspicuous 'Moghlay' style of consumption, and this helps explain why such a large part of Agra's population (perhaps as much as 25 percent) remained Muslim artisans producing goods and services very similar to those which had been in demand amongst the old *umrah*.<sup>7</sup> Both Delhi and Agra supported throughout the nineteenth century large numbers of workers in gold and silver brocaded fabrics of the style known as *kalabatun*. In Agra substantial numbers of people were also involved in the production and sale of the particular style of *pietra dura* and inlaid work associated with the Shahjahani monuments of the city, besides famous industries for *unani* drugs, saddlery, rosewater and luxurious sweetmeats.<sup>8</sup> Whereas the fine muslins of Dacca and Murshidabad had become dependent on foreign demand and up-market goods for the Mughal

courts, Agra and Delhi retained many small-scale, diversified artisan industries which adjusted to the demand from the nineteenth-century princely states. While the stability of both north Indian cities during the first half of the nineteenth century can in part be attributed to income from expanding bulk trades such as cotton, indigo and salt, the contribution to employment of the older artisan industries must not be underestimated.

The pace of change amongst mercantile groups in Delhi and Agra may not have been so different as it appears if we concentrate on the chief commercial houses. The initial impression is that there was very little continuity in pre-1750 commercial élites in Agra as compared with Benaras or even Delhi. Certainly the dominant houses of the early nineteenth century in the city were newcomers from east Panjab, Narnul, or the Jat and Rajput states who made quick fortunes during the cotton boom of the years 1814–27. But the pace of change in the smaller bazars was much slower and while the 'tall poppies' who had served the Mughals as court bankers may have been lopped off, there was much more continuity among small traders. The late Mughal Emperors had been notably served by Khattri merchants (who claimed mythic descent from the great Todar Mal). It is recorded that Aurangzeb had given the brokerage right (*dalali*) in all Agra's bazars to the Khattris, and nineteenth century observers claimed that the community still retained this right. The most prominent Khattris in the city at the present time appear to be residents of Meithan *mohalla* who moved into the city as government service people in the 1830s and 1840s as the British administrative presence grew. But there are pockets of Khattris involved in the cloth and embroidery trades of the Kinari bazar area who appear to have been much older residents of the city. Similarly, the Jains of Seb ka Bazar and the surrounding *mohallas* are associated with shrines that seem to date from before the nineteenth century, and they positively state that they are ancient residents of the city. The invasion of Vaishnavite Maheshwaris and Agarwals from Rajasthan appears to have been a later phenomenon.<sup>9</sup>

If the transition was not as abrupt as it might appear in Agra, the slow modification of the cultural and commercial base of Delhi may well have proceeded slowly under the surface in the time of the late Mughal élites. Jain jewellers and merchants from Panjab and Rajasthan, and particularly from the town of Bhewani appear to have established a stronghold in Delhi before 1750. This drift into the city from the commercial towns of the hinterland appears to have continued

unabated during the late eighteenth century. Jain commercial people settled in the *mohallas* in and around the Jama Masjid during the 1750s and 1780s and there is a strong presumption that the city retained some degree of security by comparison with its western hinterland. Before 1800, moreover, the community in Delhi had begun a massive programme of building which is supposed to have led to the construction of temples and rest-houses to the cost of 25 lakh rupees over the next quarter-century. If the capital offered these people trade and a degree of protection, it also offered them association with one of the most important sectarian centres of Jainism (*bhatakaras*) in north India. Equally, there was a continuing slow drift into the city of Khattri commercial people from east Panjab. Associated initially with the salt and cloth trades, small firms from this community, like the ancestors of Chuna Mal Saligram of Chandni Chawk, had already begun to buy up urban property in the main thoroughfares of the city from indebted Mughal aristocracy long before the Great Rebellion gave another severe jolt to Muslim urban dominance.

Even during periods of decentralization in India in recent centuries, revenue has been paid in cash. So also religious and cultural patterns have retained an integrity throughout the subcontinent. Cities, therefore, though not dominant, have always proved tough and resilient. The antithesis between thriving Mughal urban life and the decay of the eighteenth century may in part be an illusion. What had occurred was more like a complex redistribution of a fixed amount of 'urban material' across the countryside. There was, however, under the surface of these political movements a slower moving change by which a Hindu hinterland of commercial agriculture asserted itself over the military, aristocratic and Islamic colonies which had been planted in its midst. But the eighteenth century was only one episode in this transformation.

#### NOTES

1. Route maps 1760s and '70s, Orme MSs, India Office Library; *Fatehpur District Gazetteer* (Allahabad, 1908); for Kara, Fida Hussain, 'Tarikh-i-Kara', MSs Mohulla Bazaar, Kara; *Allahabad District Gazetteer*, Kara article.

2. R. Russell and K. Islam, *Three Mughal Poets, Mir, Sauda, Mir Hasan* (London, 1969), p. 65.
3. T. Fortescue, 'Revenue System of the Delhi Territories', *Selections from Punjab Government Records, Delhi Residency and Agency, 1807-57* (Calcutta, 1922), p. 252.
4. G. Forster, *A Journey from Bengal to England through the Northern Part of India* (London, 1798), vol. I, p. 219.
5. Notes on 'respectable natives' of Agra, Magistrate of Agra to Government NWP, 28 February 1843, Agra Judicial, vol. 10, U.P. Central Record Room, Allahabad.
6. Minute by J. Thomson, 7 May 1841, in J. A. Richey (ed.), *Selections From Educational Records*, vol. II (Calcutta, 1922), p. 252.
7. Offg. Deputy Collector Govt Customs Agra, to Offg. Commissioner, 1 January 1835, Agra Customs, vol. 8.
8. Histories of artisan industries in Agra, Collector Agra to Commissioner, 11 May 1850, Agra Judicial, vol. 8.
9. Family histories from Sri P. C. Maheshwari, Ram Bakhsh, Moti Katra Agra.

## DELHI AND ITS HINTERLAND The Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

NARAYANI GUPTA

The dignified isolation of cantonments and government perambokes, although in sharp contrast to the congested confusion of old bazaar towns, are ... examples of a lapse in contemporary planning. ...

On the one hand the planner must strive to maintain the populous and gregarious nature of Indian life in village and town and yet abate its congestion and, at the same time, to lead more dwellings into garden villages without the town and provide more civil developments within. On the other hand, he must mitigate the Crusoe-like individualism of the scattered and formless bungalow compounds and endeavour to build them up into coherent communities.<sup>1</sup>

At a very significant moment, Geddes, who had just come out to India, diagnosed a malaise and suggested remedies. It was a significant moment because a few years previously the first Improvement Trusts and some town-planning measures had been enacted for Indian towns. Had his suggestions been heeded, a major change might have occurred in urban policy, and the barriers between the races become less rigid. Delhi was a seventeenth-century town, which in the nineteenth century had acquired a major railway suburb and an extensive Civil Lines, and, at the time Geddes wrote, its future was already fettered by a political decision made in 1911.

There is little information about the historical relationship of Indian towns to their hinterlands. Questions which economists and sociologists ask about the hinterlands of towns in developing societies can be projected backwards for earlier periods. This will enable us to see continuities or otherwise between colonial and pre-colonial eras, between the post-railway years and the centuries before. Questions arise relating to the cultural colonization of the rural hinterland by the urban complex, the employment opportunities created by the