

## ONE

# The World of Eighteenth-Century India

## THE MUGHAL EMPIRE AND THE REGIONAL STATES

During the eighteenth century, the Mughal Empire, which for two centuries had provided political and cultural leadership for virtually all of India, fragmented as a variety of regionally based rulers seized power. As these regional states clashed with each other and with the Emperor, little sense of a unified Indian nation existed. The expanding presence of rival European trading companies inserted further levels of discord into this contentious mix. Conflicting loyalties cut across each other, each demanding a different set of allegiances from the diverse peoples of India. Thus, over the generations preceding Dean Mahomet's birth in 1759, his family—among others—had to make fundamental and potentially dangerous choices about their commitments: to the nominally sovereign Mughal Emperor, to their Muslim community, to their distant relative who ruled the provinces of Bengal and Bihar, to their fellow elite of Patna city, or to one of the European East India Companies which increasingly offered employment.

The Mughal imperial dynasty drew its initial support from a band of central Asian and Iranian adventurers but over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it managed to command the submission and service of virtually all the peoples of India. The Mughals had invaded India from central Asia in 1526, justifying this conquest as their inheritance from their two world-conquering ancestors: Changiz Khan and Timur (Tamerlane). The great wealth and prestige of the Mughal imperial court continued to attract ambitious warriors, scholars, and merchants from west and central Asia. Dean Mahomet asserted that he descended from Arab and Turk immigrants drawn to India via Iran in the seventeenth century by the lure of honorable service to the Mughal Empire. Eventually, the Mughals coerced or enticed India's many regional rulers into subordination. Thus, the Mughal Emperors had woven together Muslim immigrants and members of India's regionally distinct local populations into a relatively centralized state; hitherto, this much of India had never been unified under one ruler.

Many factors held each of the many distinct regions of India together as a political, cultural, and economic entity. Every region—including Bihar, where Dean Mahomet's family lived—had long traditions as an autonomous state or, under the Mughal Empire, as a separate province. The majority of the people in each region had a distinctive language or dialect (although Persian had become the language of administration and high culture, linking the elites of each region to the Mughal imperial court). Much of the agricultural and craft production within each region circulated internally, yet the regions were linked commercially by interprovincial and international trade and fiscally by the Mughal land-revenue administration.

At the Mughal Empire's peak, its extensive land-revenue collection system drew from the Indian countryside sufficient wealth to support its elaborate centralized superstructure. The ornate Mughal imperial court and household, and the households of its upper officials which were nearly as grand, lavishly expended these vast resources. The dress, music, and literary compositions of the Mughal imperial court inspired imitation

in a range of elite households of both Muslims and Hindus across the subcontinent. In turn, these households gave employment to cascades of subordinate families, including that of Dean Mahomet, providing as well cultural models for them to emulate in consumption patterns and norms of comportment. The Mughal Empire thus offered honorable and lucrative employment for large numbers of both indigenous Indians and immigrants. It created an expansive service elite of administrators and military who continued to dominate Indian life for centuries.

The Mughal imperial armies in particular had provided regular or occasional employment for literally millions of officers and soldiers each year. One authoritative account from the end of the sixteenth century listed 343,696 cavalry and 4,039,097 infantry as the military manpower base within the Mughal Empire.<sup>1</sup> The Mughal armies, in turn, comprised vast markets for a variety of clothing, weapons, foodstuffs, and other necessities and luxury goods. They employed many times their number of provisioners, artisans, and other camp followers. These armies remained almost constantly deployed in extending the Empire, in enforcing imperial rule over resisting peoples within it, and in succession struggles among contending Mughal princes. Thus, their consumption of men and other resources continued to be insatiable. Indeed, one major factor in the eventual decline of the Mughal Empire from the end of the seventeenth century onward stemmed from its overexpenditure on the imperial court and army, given its declining income from an overtaxed agricultural and manufacturing resource base.<sup>2</sup>

During the eighteenth century, each province in the Mughal Empire broke away from the effective control of the Emperor. A number of imperial governors entrenched themselves in their provinces and transformed their appointments into hereditary possessions. One such dynasty, prominent in *Travels*, was the Shiite Muslim family ruling (1722–1856) Awadh, in the central Gangetic plain. Dean Mahomet claimed kinship with another such dynasty: the Nawabs (Governors) ruling (1740–1854) Bengal and Bihar provinces, in eastern north India.

As the imperial center weakened, indigenous peoples in several regions

produced their own leaders who fought to reestablish regional autonomy. Such peoples included the Marathas (from west-central India), the Sikhs (in central Punjab), and the Rohilla Afghans (in the upper Ganges plain)—who all appeared in *Travels* as threats to English rule. The rulers of such states had strong cultural bonds with the dominant people of their home region, unlike the Nawabs of Bengal and Awadh. Nevertheless, virtually all regional rulers continued to submit symbolic and monetary offerings and promises of revenues to the Mughal court in order to legitimate their power with imperial-sanctioned authority. Such rulers then fought to extend their control over their neighbors, with varying degrees of success. Since each region had its own local culture, the conquered people often regarded these rulers as outsiders. For example, the people of Bihar, who spoke a local dialect of Hindi, became subordinated to the Bengali-speaking province of Bengal, under a Persian-speaking Nawab, who boasted family origins from outside of India but defended the province from Marathi-speaking conquerors from the southwest. In short, political identity proved highly diffuse and many loyalties remained divided. During Dean Mahomet's youth, service to one or another of the European trading companies seemed an attractive opportunity for families such as his.

## THE EUROPEAN EAST INDIA COMPANIES

The European presence in India had become quite diverse by the time of Dean Mahomet's youth, with a variety of implications for the shape of Indian society and politics. European travelers and merchants had been journeying overland to India, or via the established Indian Ocean trading networks, for centuries. The Portuguese had discovered a direct sea route to India in 1497, three decades before the Mughal Empire established itself. As the cosmopolitan Mughal Empire grew, it simply accommodated the burgeoning European presence without radical dislocations: in Mughal eyes, Europeans were just another set of peoples, having different values and strengths, but ones with whom they could deal.

During the seventeenth century, northern European states chartered national trading companies: England (1600), Holland (1602), Denmark (1616), and France (1664). Each European company built warehouse bases (called “factories”) on the Indian coast with dependent factories inland. In Patna where Dean Mahomet grew up, satellite factories were erected by the English (c. 1650), Dutch (c. 1650), and French (c. 1720). Patna’s production of saltpeter (essential for manufacturing gunpowder), indigo (a powerful dye for cloth), and opium (vital for the European trade with China) proved particularly attractive to these European merchants. To Dean Mahomet’s family and others like them in Patna, the various European companies may not have seemed threatening to their order at first. By the mid-eighteenth century, however, the expanding presence and aggressive policies of the competing European companies had begun to dislocate and reorient trade and culture at all levels in India.

European companies vied with each other, and with private European merchants, for control over production, trade, and—increasingly—political influence. The English East India Company proved the most successful of the European powers but it felt continually threatened by French operations in Europe, Africa, and Asia, especially by the French diplomatic and military presence in the courts of many of the Indian rulers. Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798 had as one major objective a threat to the British in India. Indeed, the French and the British remained almost continuously at war until 1815 (when Dean Mahomet was fifty-six years old and had been living in Europe for over thirty years).

While other European companies in India at times proved annoying to the English, they did not present the same military threat as did the French. The English fought one brief war with the Dutch in 1759, the year of Dean Mahomet’s birth, and subsequently reduced the Dutch Company to a limited role in India. In *Travels*, Dean Mahomet blamed the Dutch Company’s remaining factory in Bengal for the extensive and—in his view—immoral trade in opium from India to China. Dean Mahomet did not explain that the English Company monopolized opium production, collection, and sale in India or that the importation of opium

into China remained mostly in British hands. Even the English Company's Directors in London recognized the stigma of this trade, writing in 1781: "Under any circumstances it is beneath the Company to be engaged in such a clandestine trade; we therefore, hereby positively prohibit any more opium being sent to China on the Company's account."<sup>3</sup> The English Company's officials in India, however, responded that the economics of purchasing tea in China made this "not a matter of choice but necessity," since they had little else the Chinese would buy.<sup>4</sup> The Company's face-saving solution was to auction its opium in India to other merchants, including Dutch and private English traders, who then exported it to China.

The Danish Company, with a factory near Calcutta (the English capital in India), also remained an irritating commercial rival—but not a substantial danger—to the English. Indeed, the Danes in India remained in an uneasy state of dependence, relying on purchases of cotton cloth, saltpeter, and other goods controlled by the English. Therefore, a variety of European companies and private merchants interacted, always in competitive—and often in hostile—ways.

From the mid-eighteenth century on, the English Company sought enhanced political influence with India's regional rulers (including the Nawab of Bengal) so as to extend both its own special exemptions from their judiciary and also tariff privileges for its trade—and for the private trade of its European employees. This led eventually to a transformation in the commerce in Bengal and Bihar, at the cost of established Indian merchants. In particular, the English Company reshaped the region's extensive cotton hand-weaving industry around its demands and requirements, a major factor in the English Industrial Revolution.

In Patna and elsewhere in north India, many prominent families declined under these trying circumstances and their own infelicitous choices of allegiance and commitment. Other families, such as that of Dean Mahomet, managed to take advantage of the unstable situation. Over time, the most successful families were those which oriented themselves toward commercial, administrative, or military service to the English Com-

pany, acting as intermediaries between the British and the other peoples of India. Since Dean Mahomet and his family chose to serve the English Company's Bengal Army, and since *Travels* tells us so much about life within that army from an Indian perspective, it will be useful to examine this army's origins and early development.

## THE DIVERSE ORIGINS OF THE BENGAL ARMY

A significant shift for Indian society—and for Dean Mahomet's family in particular—came as the English gradually transformed the role and form of the military in India from the late eighteenth century onward. During the years that Dean Mahomet's father, his elder brother, and he himself served the Company's Bengal Army, what it meant to be a soldier in India changed markedly. The amalgamation of European military science with various military patterns traditional in India proceeded sporadically, in the Company's armies as well as in those of its allies and enemies.

During the first half of the eighteenth century, the Company had maintained only a limited military component: a few European officers, drawn either from the Royal Army or from the Company's commercial branch, serving to supervise European or part-European "sentinels" and Indian "peons" who had guarded the Company's factories.<sup>5</sup> As the English Company involved itself in regional politics and in anti-French maneuverings, its armed forces grew. Indians with martial experience provided the only viable source—in terms of cost, quantity, and quality—for such expansion.

The English Company gradually developed a separate army in each of its three bases ("Presidencies"): Bengal, Madras, and Bombay. Although the youngest of the three, the Bengal Army developed into the largest. It arose directly out of the conflicts between the English Company and the Nawabs of Bengal. By the 1750s, the Company had five hundred soldiers (including Europeans and Indians) and ten to twenty British offi-

cers in Calcutta.<sup>6</sup> In June 1756, the newly installed Nawab of Bengal, Siraj al-Daula (r. 1756–57), expelled the English from Calcutta in retaliation for English repudiation of his authority, and seized the Company's reputedly large treasury. His capture of Calcutta caused the ignominious flight of most of the Company's British officials and officers there, a flight which abandoned most of the Company's Indian employees and soldiers to his mercy. Many of the captured Europeans died, giving rise to the "Black Hole" legend. On receiving word in Madras of this disaster for the Company, Robert Clive undertook a hurried expedition north by sea to Bengal with what forces could be spared from the Company's Madras Army.

On his arrival in Bengal, Clive rapidly recaptured Calcutta (January 1757) and began local recruitment of three to four hundred Indians—professional and semiprofessional soldiers and officers, most originally from Bihar.<sup>7</sup> Further armed confrontations led to the decisive battle at Plassey (June 1757), during which the English Company arranged the defection of much of the Nawab's army and defeated the rest. Indeed, Persian-language histories of the day explained the English Company's conquest as resulting from the internal factionalism and moral decline of the ruling Indian families of the region, rather than from English military superiority.<sup>8</sup> After the English drove the incumbent Nawab out of office, the Company installed a series of Nawabs, each more tightly under its control than the last. In addition, the high officials of the Company extracted vast personal fortunes—totaling some £2,600,000—as gifts from successive Nawabs in exchange for their elevation.<sup>9</sup>

Given the velocity of his military recruitment drives, Clive must have hired men from the extant Indian military labor market of professional and semiprofessional soldiers, many with experience serving in other armies. For most of these recruits, therefore, military service to the English Company would have been a job opportunity, rather than a career or an ideological cause. Only gradually did the Company shift military employment from more traditional and indigenous forms to a new model which reflected both Indian and European patterns.

## THE NEW MODEL: THE SEPOY

Indian soldiers, including Dean Mahomet and others of his family and class, developed new roles under the command of European officers. With Clive as commander, the English Company started to train and equip Indian recruits uniformly along the lines of an innovative and distinctive military type: the sepoy. This Persian term (*sipahi*) had been long current in India to mean a cavalryman. From the mid-eighteenth century onward, however, the French and English Companies adapted it into their prime model for an Indian infantryman, trained, dressed, and armed in a semi-European manner.<sup>10</sup>

The military science of Europe, which had developed over decades of costly war on that continent, brought to India a pattern of military discipline and supply that would prove decisive in the English Company's conquest of India. The quality of European weaponry was not then superior to the best that India could produce by hand. Nevertheless, England's system of mass manufacture meant that large numbers of identical weapons of reasonable quality could be supplied at a relatively low cost. Instead of groups of Indian soldiers, often recently hired by their Indian commander, wearing a variety of clothing and bearing nonstandard weapons and requiring custom-made ammunition, the Bengal Army began to substitute the regular training of standing military units in disciplined field maneuvers, supplied with uniform equipment. Such European models of "rational-bureaucratic" organization of indigenous soldiers gradually made the difference in India—and elsewhere in the European colonies in Asia and Africa.<sup>11</sup>

In Europe, military scientists had discovered empirically that rigorous close-order drill of a standing, professional army enabled trained officers to reposition orderly bodies of troops even while under heavy fire or cavalry attack. In India, this meant that companies of sepoys with European or European-trained officers could stand up to—and maneuver while under attack by—the artillery and heavy cavalry that formed the core of many Indian armies. Further, the larger groups of less drilled foot

soldiers that filled out the forces of Indian rulers and landholders had to give way before the sometimes smaller but frequently more disciplined and uniformly armed units of Company sepoys. As a contemporary of Dean Mahomet recognized in his Persian-language commentary, so long as the British-commanded soldiers “maintain their formations, which they call ‘lines,’ they are like an immovable volcano spewing artillery and rifle fire like unrelenting hail on the enemy, and they are seldom defeated.”<sup>12</sup> The sepoy thus formed the dominant model for soldiers within the Indian component of what would become the Company’s new armies.

During the second half of the eighteenth century, many Indian states also followed this model. Across India, sepoys became increasingly a factor in war and in the enforcement of land-revenue demands, but such units proved relatively expensive. Individual European officers claiming the expertise to train sepoy units demanded from their Indian employers large salaries and often autonomy as well. The European-model weapons and training of sepoy units became a constant drain on the treasury of all who deployed them.

The English Company itself only just managed to sustain the cost of such European-pattern Indian armies. The Company’s Bengal Army consumed a high percentage of its budget: over the decade prior to 1770, the Company spent about £8,000,000 directly on the Bengal Army (in addition to the costs of building and maintaining the army’s bases), over 50 percent more than it spent on the purchase of trade goods.<sup>13</sup> In the eyes of the Company’s Directors and shareholders in London, the army was a largely unproductive expense; indeed, the army’s activities seemed only to generate further costly political and military entanglements with India’s regional rulers. Nevertheless, the Company recognized the growing necessity for an army for the defense and subjugation of territories under its control.

To support the expense of this army, the Company drew upon an extensive and effective revenue-collection administration, unprecedented financial support and subsidies from the English Government, and unsurpassed borrowing credit in India and England. Rival European com-

panies and the regional rulers of India could not command such a range and scale of resources. Thus, they could not sustain the continuous employment of the tens of thousands of European-trained Indian officers and men—like those of Dean Mahomet's family—who composed the English Company's armies.<sup>14</sup>

For many regional rulers, alliance with the Company, and hence access to the services of its sepoy armies, proved a superficially attractive but ultimately even more costly strategy. The Company subsidized large portions of its army by essentially renting its troops to its Indian allies. These troops went on the payroll of the Indian ruler, but remained under British command. Military dependency on the Company, however, meant that these rulers gradually lost much of their treasuries, sources of revenue, and finally their independence. Over the course of the period described in *Travels*, for example, the ruler of Awadh slipped from command over the most powerful military force in north India to almost complete military dependence on the Company's army and therefore on the Company's will. By the mid-nineteenth century all Indian rulers had succumbed either to annexation or to indirect control at the hands of the Company.<sup>15</sup>

## SEPOY BATTALIONS

Throughout the period of Dean Mahomet's *Travels*, the boundaries of the Bengal Army remained ill-defined. Sepoys and Indian officers moved relatively easily from one army to another, including into or out of the Company's army and that of its opponents of the day. For example, Clive raised his third battalion of sepoy (eight hundred to a thousand men) at Patna in April 1758, mainly out of men who had seen military service in other armies. Dean Mahomet's father most probably entered the Company's army in this recruitment drive, between the births of his first and second sons.

Not until 1764 did the Bengal Army formally start to institutionalize its sepoy model. The Company found that the existing relatively infor-

mal organization and discipline of the Bengal Army had led to mutinies variously by its European officers, European soldiers, and Indian officers and sepoys. Following the suppression of a mutiny by sepoys near Patna in 1764, the Army established a regularized body of rules and systematic set of maneuvers, based on the code of standing orders then in force in the Royal Army.<sup>16</sup>

This code of standing orders sought to bring further uniformity to the military conduct of the Bengal Army. Traditionally in India, a military labor contractor bargained for the best deal for himself and his professional or peasant-soldiers from any one of a number of possible military employers; soldiers felt free to shift from army to army as opportunity offered.<sup>17</sup> Many sepoys continued to regard service with the Company's army as a temporary situation, to be entered into or left at their pleasure. In 1781, for example, the Company complained that whenever one of its sepoy battalions relocated to a different region, locally recruited sepoys regularly deserted it and reenlisted in the new battalion transferring into their region, rather than accept relocation.<sup>18</sup> The English Company sought to reorient sepoys until they saw themselves as individuals bound professionally and by "honor" to the Company's army.<sup>19</sup>

British commanders used a semi-European uniform and drill to try to professionalize sepoys and minimize individuality and visible ethnic or community differences. Hindu and Muslim sepoys—indeed sepoys from all religions and regions—had to dress and act uniformly, at least while on duty. The sepoy uniform reflected European elements mixed with British interpretations of Indian traditions. The standard-issue military coat and flintlock "Tower musket" (one stamped as tested at the Tower of London) were European in pattern. The necklace of beads—the relative quality of the glass, conch shell, or precious metal beads respectively denoting rank—was apparently a British adaptation of the gorget used in European uniforms to denote military rank.<sup>20</sup> The Company's official specifications for a sepoy's uniform required: "1 turban, 1 cummerbund and caross [waist-shawl and crossed bands], 1 linen jacket, 1 pair of junghiers [military shorts], 1 coxcomb or turah [ornament], 1 silver reg-

imental device for ditto," plus a round shield (target) suspended at the back of the left shoulder of both sepoy and Indian officers;<sup>21</sup> Dean Mahomet supplied figure 2 to depict a sepoy and Indian officer in uniform.

For the Company, profit remained an intrinsic organizational principle in its army as well as its commercial operations. Each sepoy had to purchase his own uniform for Rupees 6, which gave a generous profit to his British commanding officers, who arranged to supply it. In addition, each sepoy had a fixed sum withheld from his monthly salary to pay for the new uniform coat he received each December. Yet the sepoy did not own the coat he so purchased; a discharged or promoted soldier had to give his used coat to his replacement. Thus, Indians inducted into the Company's Bengal Army increasingly found a vocation with professionalized characteristics growing ever more distinct from earlier military service patterns.

The Company continued to recruit Indians by the thousands annually for its Bengal Army from the 1760s onward. By 1765, Clive reorganized it into 3 Brigades (each consisting of 7 battalions of sepoy plus 1 regiment of European troops, 1 company of European artillery, and 1 troop of cavalry), totaling some 14,000–15,000 Indian soldiers and some 3,000 European officers and men.<sup>22</sup> When Dean Mahomet attached himself to the Bengal Army (in 1769), it totaled 27,277 active Indian officers and men, in addition to about 522 European officers and 2,722 European soldiers.<sup>23</sup> By the time Dean Mahomet resigned from the Bengal Army (in 1782), some 52,500 Indians were currently serving in it, and over 115,000 in the Company's three Presidency armies combined.<sup>24</sup> In addition, many more Indians entered and then left the Company's armies over the years through resignation (as did Dean Mahomet), death, or disability. Thus, a substantial number of Indians enlisted in the Company's armies and submitted to the training and discipline that made them sepoy, then conveyed their experiences serving the British with them back into Indian society.

Further, a broad variety of Indian official servants and informal camp followers enveloped the European and Indian officers and soldiers.

Camp servants formally employed by the Company worked under the command of Quartermasters to set up and move the camp, transport its baggage and equipment, and handle the distribution of its supplies. Additionally, individual soldiers, officers, and units had a variety of personal servants and camp followers, according to their rank and purse. Indian mistresses or families of soldiers or officers, both European and Indian, often accompanied the army—even in the field. The ratio of official servants and unofficial camp followers to soldiers varied but generally averaged two or three of each per soldier: some 35,000 per brigade. Feeding, clothing, and defending such a large concourse of people proved a continual logistical problem of enormous proportions. Arthur Wellesley (later famous as the Duke of Wellington) maintained that his experience organizing the logistics of his campaigns in India (1799–1804) prepared him for his successful contest with Napoleon in the Iberian Peninsula. Dean Mahomet would himself number among the unofficial camp followers until he was twenty-three years old. In these ways, large numbers of Indians chose to enter the Company's military structure, either formally as sepoys or informally as camp followers; their collective participation in, and shaping of, British rule over India should not be overshadowed by the largely European accounts that have survived from this period.

## THE BENGAL ARMY'S EUROPEAN REGIMENTS

Alongside Indian sepoys, European troops served in the Company's armies, but under quite different conditions. Unlike sepoys, European troops remained perennially in short supply and expensive; nevertheless, the Company believed them to be the heart of its army. The long English wars in Europe created a chronic shortage of able-bodied European males—even for the Royal Army which, by law, held precedence in recruiting over the Company. Consequently, the Company engaged contractors ("crimps") to supply Europeans—of any nationality, including

French, German, and Swiss prisoners of war—at a rate of up to £5 per man.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, London newspapers reported that the Court of Directors illegally arranged for European men to be kidnapped and forcibly impressed into its armies.<sup>26</sup>

During this period, Company officers in India constantly complained, and London regularly made excuses, about the low quality and inadequate quantity of these European recruits. Mortality rates on those transport ships that reached India sometimes approached 50 percent. In addition, the high rates of deaths in India from disease—and occasionally from wounds—created a constant, and largely unmet, demand for European soldiers. Despite nominal requirements for age, size, and health, many of the recruits who finally reached India proved unfit for duty.<sup>27</sup> In 1768, the Commander-in-Chief wrote about the latest crop of European recruits: “they are exceedingly bad . . . the refuse of our metropolis. . . . The Company are at a great expence to send abroad annually a number of soldiers when in fact, instead of recruiting our army, they only serve to increase our Hospitals. . . . [A]t present our European Regiments compared to a Battalion of Sepoys appear like a Regiment of Dwarfs.”<sup>28</sup>

Despite the difficulties in recruiting such European soldiers, and the relatively abundant supply of Indian soldiers, the Company saw these European infantry regiments as its moral core—although they comprised only about 15 percent of the Company’s army in India. At this time European officers and European troops “mutinied” about as frequently as Indian troops. Nonetheless, many Britons in the Company believed that sepoys would only stand firm in battle if European regiments provided “stiffening.”

## DEAN MAHOMET’S YOUTH IN BIHAR (1759–69)

From the time of Dean Mahomet’s birth onward, the English Company proved the most consistent patron for his family and many others like it. Muslim families like his comprised an important component of the Com-