Turbulent Delhi: Religious strife, social tension and political conflicts, 1803-1857

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Introduction

In the history of modern India, resistance movements are often regarded as a rural phenomenon, poor peasants raising their voices and weapons against oppressive landlords.[2] At the same time, urban riots are generally portrayed as manifestations of older pre-colonial social tensions, though the colonial record is dotted with instances of well-organised urban resistance against British rule.[3] But whether the emphasis is on resistance or rebellion, or on the maintenance of law and order, urban riots are hardly ever related to the political, social and economic tensions that urban environments generate.[4] This paper looks into the 'genotype' of these diverse tensions against the background of the transformation processes which took place in the towns of north India from the last decades of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century.[5] It focuses, however, on Delhi. The former capital of the Mughal Empire serves in many ways as a paradigm for this substantial transformation and, besides, the history of Delhi can also be read

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[1] Previous versions of this article and parts of it have been presented at Heidelberg University, the Institut fuer Asien und Afrikawissenschaften of the Humboldt University in Berlin and the Max Muller Bhavan in Delhi. I would like to particularly thank Narayani Gupta, David J. Gips, Evelin Hust, and Margrit Pernau for critical comments.

[2] See the various articles in the volumes of the *Subaltern Studies I–XI* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982 f).

[3] Gautam Bhadra, 'Four Rebels Of Eighteen-Fifty-Seven', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies*, Vol.IV, pp.228–75, esp. pp.263–73.

[4] Cf. Sandria B. Freitag, *Collective Action and Community. Public Arenas and the Emergence Of Communalism in North India* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1992); and Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction Of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[5] For the economic transformation of Mirzapur see Christopher A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age Of British Expansion, 1770–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp.234–53, 437–9. See also Christopher Bayly, 'The Small Town and Islamic Gentry in Northern India: The Case Of Kara', in Kenneth Ballhatchet and John Harrison (eds), *The City in South Asia. Pre-Modern and Modern* (London and Dublin: Curzon Press, 1980), pp.20–48.

as an exemplary story of the difficulties in implementing colonial rule, not only in Delhi but also in India.

Near Delhi, the British in 1803 defeated the Scindias of Gwalior, the then dominant power in North India and seized the old Mughal capital-residence which was under joint Maratha and Jat control. Additionally, the so-called 'Assigned Territories' in the vicinity of Delhi, comprising Rohtak and Panipat, became part of the British controlled area in upper India. The revenues of the 'Assigned Territories' were to maintain the *padshah* (the Mughal) and his entourage but, in fact, they were directly administered by the British who paid him a regular and, for the time being, formidable allowance.[6] At least this is the way the British interpreted the political situation. The *padshah* took a different view for he had, from his perspective, asked the British to help defend Delhi against the growing Maratha (Scindia) power and re-establish the old Mughal order. In fact, during the negotiations with the *padshah* immediately before the battle, the British offered nothing but a vassal's protection of their lord.[7] Nevertheless, in British historiography the 'Assigned Territories' are simply regarded as a kind of protectorate, the *padshah* being reduced to a pensioner of the East India Company.[8]

The control over Delhi and its trans-Jamna hinterland was only part of the large scale British expansion into the northern parts of the Gangetic Plain at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1801, the Nawab of Awadh was made to cede the districts of the Ganga-Jamna Doab to the East India Company to fund the maintenance of British subsidiary troops at his court. A couple of years later, the British finally fought the Scindia and annexed the rest of the Ganga-Jamna Doab in 1805.[9]

As part of the newly created Ceded and Conquered Provinces the Doab acquired the status of a border region. And until the Panjab was annexed in 1848, the area remained a turbulent frontier at the north-western fringe of the British territorial

[6] *Final Report on the Settlement Of Land Revenue in the Delhi District Carried on 1872–77 by Oswald Wood and Completed 1878–80 by R. Maconachie* (Lahore: Victoria Press, 1882), pp.133–4.

[7] Frederick W. Buckler, 'The Political Theory Of the Indian Mutiny', in Michael N. Pearson, *Legitimacy and Symbols. The South Asian Writings Of F.W. Buckler* (Ann Arbor: Centre for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 1985), pp.43–74, esp. pp.55–61.

[8] See, for example, *The Cambridge History of India*, Vol.IV (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937), p.448; and, more recently, Katherine Prior, Lance Brennan and Robin Haines, 'Bad Language: The Role Of English, Persian and Other Esoteric Tongues in the Dismissal Of Sir Edward Colebrooke as Resident Of Delhi in 1829', in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.35, no.1 (2001), pp.75–112, cf. p.78.

[9] Richard Barnett, *North India Between Two Empires. Awadh, the Mughals, and the British, 1720–1801* (Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1987), pp.90–5, 235–9.

possessions in north India. For example, the *raja*s of Mursan and Hathras in the central part of the Doab never accepted the implementation of British rule in their 'little kingdom',[10] waging several rebellions in an attempt to maintain their fiscal monopoly and local jurisdiction as well as their militia troops.[11] At the same time, a certain Kullu tried to found a 'little kingdom' in the northern Doab between Saharanpur and Hardwar, his Gujar retainers fiercely fighting regular British troops. Pacification could only take place after the British had massacred the population of Kullu's main fortress.[12] To maintain law and order or, at least, peaceful conditions, the British set up a network of military cantonments throughout the Ceded and Conquered Provinces, the most important ones at Meerut, Delhi, Mathura, Agra, Etawah and Kanpur.[13] Despite these measures north India continued to seethe with unrest into the 1830s and beyond.[14]

Although much of this unrest was rural or 'rurban' centred, many north Indian towns were also affected by disturbances during the first half of the nineteenth century. Banaras for example was hit by riots in 1809 and by a major *hartal* in 1810–11.[15] In the Ceded and Conquered Provinces, riots shook Bareilly in 1837, Aligarh in 1853, and Delhi in 1807, 1824 and 1856. In Awadh, clashes between Hindus and Muslims took place in Faizabad-Ayodhya in 1856 and in Lucknow in 1843, 1853 and 1856. The textile centre of Mubarakpur in eastern Awadh was the scene of economic riots in 1813, 1834 and 1842.[16] In the context of this continuing law and order vacuum in north India during the first half of the nineteenth century, the situation in

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[10] The term 'little kingdom' was established by Bernard S. Cohn in 'Political Systems in Eighteenth-Century India: The Benares Region', in his *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp.483–99, esp. p.489. The article was originally published in the *Journal Of the American Oriental Society*, Vol.86, no.3 (1962), and subsequently Richard G. Fox, in his *Kin, Clan, Raja and Rule: State–Hinterland Relations in Pre-Industrial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971) picked up the term, as Nicholas Dirks did much later in his *The Hollow Crown. Ethohistory Of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987). The term connotes an idea of shared authority or multiple sovereignty. See also Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1990), pp.175–95.

[11] Thomas R. Metcalf, *Land, Landlords, and the British Raj. Northern India in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1979), pp.51–2; and Michael Mann, *British Rule on Indian Soil. North India in the First Half Of The Nineteenth Century* (Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1999), pp.195–6.

[12] I am indebted to Dirk H.A. Kolff, who supplied me with the manuscript of his paper 'A Phase in the Deformation and Destruction Of an *Ancien Régime* Identity in Hindustan', presented at the Sixteenth European South Asian Studies Conference, Edinburgh, 5–9 Sept. 2000.

[13] T.A. Heathcote, *The Military in British India. The Development Of British Land Forces in South Asia, 1600–1947* (Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp.70–102.

[14] Eric Stokes, *The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp.63–89, *passim*.

[15] Richard Heitler, 'The Varanasi House Tax Hartal Of 1810–11', in *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol.9 (1972), pp.239–57; Gyanendra Pandey, 'The Colonial Construction Of "Communalism"', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies VI. Writings on South Asian History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp.132–69; and Cohn, 'Political Systems in Eighteenth-Century India', p.496.

[16] Pandey, 'The Colonial Construction Of "Communalism"', p.134.

Delhi—the largest city in the region—begs interesting questions. It too witnessed many upheavals. But were they part of a wider resistance movement against the colonial regime, or localised protests against the politics of the municipal authorities, or symptoms of popular stress brought on by the transition to colonial rule? To what extent, finally, can they be termed 'religious' or 'communal' conflicts?

Scholars of eighteenth and nineteenth century India remain deeply divided on the question of when 'communalism'—overt conflict between social groups defined by religious affiliation—began. Some, like Christopher Bayley, are dubious about applying the term in a pre-modern context. Although Bayly acknowledges that a number of religious conflicts occurred during the eighteenth century, he thinks they should be interpreted in the wider context of a growing 'patriotism' as it took shape in Maharashtra and particularly in 'Hindustan'. According to Bayley, it is only in the altered framework of post-Mutiny British policy and ideology that one can speak sensibly of the emergence of 'communal riots' as conventionally understood—that is, as public expressions of antagonism between Hindus and Muslims locked in pursuit of incompatible political aims.[17] On the other hand Sandria Freitag and Gyanendra Pandey have no problem with applying the term to early nineteenth century religious riots. They both take the pre-colonial existence of religious communities as separate, exclusive and fixed entities for granted.[18] And to some extent their views have been vindicated by recent work on the 'nationalisation' of Hindi with respect to language, literature, religion and (later) culture in Banaras, which appears to suggest that movements inspired by British policies of social reform were also helping to create a communal consciousness.[19]

It must also be pointed out, however, that the British did not react *unisono* upon the complex religious and social problems they encountered within the cities of north India. Most British magistrates tried to ground their policies in local traditions and customs even as other British officials laboured to construct discursive stereotypes of antagonistic Hindu and Muslim communities.[20] Looked at closely, the colonial regime's policy during the period appears to have been mainly one of trial and

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[17] Christopher A. Bayly, *Origins Of Nationality in South Asia. Patriotism and Ethical Government in the Making Of Modern India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), ch.7. Bayly extensively discusses the reaction to his initial exploration of this issue which appeared in an article in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.19 (1985), pp.177–203, in the first footnote. He says he was misread and misunderstood. But he now admits that it is more appropriate to speak of 'pre-conditions' rather than a 'pre-history'. See also ch.2, pp.36–62, esp. pp.44–9.

[18] Freitag, *Collective Action*, pp.4–5, 128–38; and Pandey, *Construction Of Communalism*, pp.94–107, 148–60.

[19] Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalization Of Hindu Traditions. Bharatendru Hariśchandra and Nineteenth-Century Banaras* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), *passim*. See also Amrita Shodhan, *A Question Of Community. Religious Groups and Colonial Law* (Calcutta: Samya 2001), pp.27–33.

[20] Katherine Prior, 'Making History: The State's Intervention in Urban Religious Disputes in the North-Western Provinces in the Early Nineteenth-Century', in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.27 (1993), pp.179–203.

error which—not surprisingly—abounded with inconsistencies and contradictions. This takes us back to the point alluded to earlier—the regime's struggle to establish and maintain law and order in its recently acquired territories. It indicates a certain weakness in the colonial structure at large.

The above observations point to the need for a careful re-interpretation of urban riots. The case of Delhi suggests that the period of transition within the contested arenas of influence created opportunities for various economic interests, political strategists and social groups and religious communities to enlarge their presence and space for their self-representation in the emerging public sphere of the city. Delhi between 1803 and 1857 was a crucible in which urban poor,[21] traders and craftsmen,[22] an emerging 'middle class',[23] urban elites,[24] the *padshah* and the British vigorously competed for influence and control. But the essence and arguably the whole purpose of competition is securing advantage. It is all about winning. Clearly not all these divergent groups could compete successfully. So who actually controlled the city? What sort of space did British rule leave the various native 'agencies' in Delhi wishing to engage in public action? Answers to these questions turn on the issue of the extent of the colonial regime's *de facto* political power.

The Frontier Town
When the British took over the direct administration of the 'Assigned Territories' and the city of Delhi, they had to deal with the revenue settlement, the town duties and the criminal as well as civil jurisdiction. Out of this *ad hoc* imperial

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[21] The lowest level of Delhi's social fabric comprised day and wage labourers such as porters, builders and draughtsmen, in addition to washers, tanners, lime-burners and urban paupers. Most of the urban poor were Muslims living in the vicinity of the city's walls and gates, both inside and outside, sometimes squatting along the remnants of the old wall and within ruined buildings.

[22] The medium social strata of wholesalers, shop-owners, artisans, craftsmen, tradesmen, petty traders and retailers, also including small *banias* and *sarrafs*, mostly resided along the main bazaars and close-by *mahallas*.

[23] Cf. Margrit Pernau, 'From a "Private" Public to a "Public" Private Sphere: Old Delhi and the North Indian Muslims in Comparative Perspective', in Gurpreet Mahajan (ed.), *The Public and the Private. Issues of Democratic Citizenship* (New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London: Sage Publications, 2003), pp.103–29; and Margrit Pernau, 'Middle Class and Secularization: The Muslims Of Delhi in the Nineteenth Century', in Imtiaz Ahmed and Helmut Reifeld (eds), *Middle Class Values in India and Europe* (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2003), pp.21–41.

[24] Commercial and trading groups migrated into Delhi during the second half of the eighteenth century. Within decades, some of them established flourishing businesses and soon became part of the new urban elite. In addition to the Jain trading cum banking group, the commercial Khattri from the eastern Panjab and the Rajasthan Agarwals played an increasing economic and social role. There were also the old and new members of the intellectual elite. The Muslim *ulema* was split into the dominant Sunni branch, mainly organised in the Naqshbandi and the Chishti orders, and the Shi'a branch. Additionally we find the Panjabi Khattri, Kayasthas and Kashmiri Pandits as groups, and *hakim*s as a professional group, which became the core of the literate and learned people of Delhi from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards. See Shama Mitra Chenoy, *Shahjahanabad. A City Of Delhi, 1638–1857* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1998), pp.144–5.

involvement in municipal politics emerged what was to become known as the 'Delhi System' of administration. Its principal architect was Charles Metcalfe who served as Assistant to the Delhi Resident from 1811 to 1819 and as Resident from 1824 to 1829.[25]

Delhi attracted the special attention of the British as the Mughal residence was regarded as a centre of political intrigue and subversive intelligence. Charles Metcalfe opted for a 'firm hand' administration which left all final decisions entirely to him. This perfectly suited the British needs of a frontier province where hands-on decision-making was thought to guarantee good government and facilitate military planning. During the riots of 1807, the Resident transferred about one thousand soldiers from hinterland cantonments and permanently stationed them at Delhi, thus increasing British military strength there from a battalion to a regiment.[26]

This force was further augmented during the food riots in 1837.[27] When in 1846 the regular troops were withdrawn from Delhi and redeployed to the Panjab against the Sikhs, they were immediately replaced by irregular police units.[28] However the British never stationed European troops within the walls of Delhi—only *sipahi-*regiments.[29] It seems that a political decision was taken that the *padshah* and the inhabitants of Delhi were not to be additionally and unnecessarily provoked by the presence of exclusively European (i.e. foreign, white, disbelieving and impure) troops in the city.

For all this, though, the British at Delhi did not feel entirely safe within their 'own' city walls. Residing mostly in the vicinity of Kashmeri Gate in the north and in Daryaganj in the southeast, the British communities were conscious that the city walls lay in ruins following their demolition on the order of the conqueror of Delhi, Lord Lake, in 1803. A Maratha assault on the then unprotected city of

[25] For a discussion of the powers and responsibilities of the British 'residents' at the princely courts of north India, see Michael H. Fisher, *Indirect Rule in India. Residents and the Residency System, 1764–1858* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991). The Delhi Residency is discussed on pp.171–2 and pp.182–4. See also K.N. Panikkar, *British Diplomacy in North India. A Study Of the Delhi Residency, 1803–57* (New Delhi: Associated Publishing House, 1968), *passim.* With regard to the external relations, the precarious political role of the Delhi Resident has been pointed out in Prior *et al*, 'Bad Language', *passim.*

[26] A. Seton, Delhi Residency, 15 May 1807, No.4; Maj. Gen. A.M. Dickens, Muttra, 4 May 1807; Seton, Delhi, 6 May 1807, *ibid.*, extract of Political Letter from Bengal, dated 10 June 1807, Bengal Political Letters No.39, Board's Collections, 217/4758, Oriental and India Office Collection [hereafter OIOC], British Library.

[27] Memorandum by A. Fane, General C-in-C, relating to the City of Delhi, Dec. 1837, Foreign Department Secret Consultations, 18 Apr. 1838, Nos.1 and 2, National Archives of India [hereafter NAI].

[28] Thomas Fortescue, Sec. Foreign Dept., to G.H. Smith, Collector of Customs, Delhi, 17 Jan. 1846, Foreign Dept. Secret Consultations, 26 Dec. 1846, No.374, NAI.

[29] Percival Spear, *Twilight Of the Mughuls. Studies in Late Mughul Delhi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), p.145.

Delhi in the following year seems to have shown the vulnerable position of the British. Yet, it was ten more years before Charles Metcalfe thought about rebuilding the walls and it was not until 1820 that the work was actually begun.[30] And it proved no easy task, either. Money was short, so the towers, walls and glacis could not be restored according to the latest European fortification standards.[31] Several mosques and many houses had to be removed to make room for the construction works, and a number of Muslim tombs had also to be demolished to allow for the extension of the glacis. The British overseers exercised 'great caution and forbearance' so as 'not to excite the jealous feelings or the religious prejudices of the natives'.[32] Similarly hundreds of poor people living among the remnants of the crumbled walls were forced to leave their habitats without any compensation, on the grounds that

> People who have no Proprietorship otherwise than in the little Choppers (huts) they may have there on the ruined walls and who owing to the infinity of waste spots throughout the City of Dehlie are never at a loss for a new site for their Huts—In ejecting therefore this class of occupants provided they may be allowed to remove their Choppers, the wood or whatever their Huts may be composed of, with the exception of the Stones and Bricks (which last they would not want) no loss or difficulty could be experienced by them.[33]

Of course, for the contractor, these 'Stones and Bricks' represented valuable building materials. Thus the British doubly profited from the eviction of the wall dwellers. On the other hand it is almost certain that the evictions of these poor people aggravated their economic circumstances, and this may well have translated into a sense of grievance against the *feringhi*. Either way, these displaced people were potential rioters, waiting to be mobilised. Eventually for security reasons, it was resolved that no houses would be allowed within the range of a musket's shot beyond the walls (a distance of some 300 yards)[34] and that extensions or additions would not

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[30] John W. Kaye (ed.), *Selections from the Papers Of Lord Metcalfe* (London 1855), letter of 1814, pp.74–6, quoted in H.K. Kaul (ed.), *Historic Delhi. An Anthology* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp.390–1; and extract of Military Letter to Bengal, dated 26 Aug. 1818, para.40, Bengal Military Collection, No.29, Board's Collections, 897/23372, OIOC.

[31] Note by Capt. T.F. Hutchinson, Acting Garrison Engineer, Delhi, 2 Oct. 1822, extract in Bengal Military Consultations, 6 June 1823, *ibid*. Nevertheless the fortifications were considered quite formidable according to the Indian standards of the time.

[32] Major Archer, *Tours in Upper India, and in Parts Of the Himalaya Mountains*, 2 vols. (London: 1833), Vol.1, pp. 104–5, quoted in Kaul, *Historic Delhi,* pp.240–1.

[33] Capt. R. Smith, Garrison Engineer, Delhi, to Capt. Cobbe, 15 Mar. 1823, extract in Bengal Military Consultations, 5 Jan. 1824, Board's Collections, 717/19533, OIOC.

[34] Capt. Smith to Lt. Col. Casement, Military Sec. to Govt., Delhi, 8 Aug. 1823, extract in Bengal Military Consultations, 29 Aug. 1823, *ibid*.

be approved in the case of existing buildings outside the walls within a further radius of half a mile.[35]

Five years later the defensive work was almost done and the city of Delhi looked again like a true fortress—ringed by walls thirty feet high and from three to five feet thick, surrounded by a moat twenty feet wide.[36]

But the British did not stop there. Charles Trevelyan, an administrator guided by the straightforward utilitarian principles of Haileybury College, decided to resettle part of Delhi's population, and to this end, in 1830, he bought 300 acres of land outside Lahori Gate to provide plots for the 'middling classes' living in the densely inhabited quarters of the city. These people were expected to acquire property and to build solid houses upon 'rubbish lands, with a view to their improvement'.[37] Trevelyan-ganj, as the suburb came to be known, seems to have been an attempt to solve the growing social problems of a deprived and pauperised population by 'ventilating the pressure' upon the better-off rather than by means of a practical scheme of urban planning. Apparently the British wanted to build their political power, at least partially, on the economic happiness of a new proprietary class.

The British were aware of Delhi's symbolic character as the *padshah*'s residence. At the same time they became more and more obsessed by the idea of a Muslim conspiracy against British rule in India centred in Delhi as the nodal point of *padshah* sovereignty and legitimacy. Despite intelligence from the palace, the British were barely able to filter and select relevant information because they lacked the ability to 'read', analyse and interpret this intelligence. This inability exacerbated their latent feelings of insecurity and constant threat.[38] It was for this reason that, shortly before the 'Great Rebellion' of 1857, the British seriously considered the occupation of Lal Qila as part of a plan to remove *padshah* Bahadur Shah's successor to the more distant premises of Qutb Minar.[39] This was of a piece with other British attempts during the late 1840s and early 1850s, associated particularly with Lord Dalhousie, to humiliate the *padshah*, weaken his claims to sovereignty, and usurp his legitimacy.

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[35] Narayani Gupta, *Delhi Between Two Empires, 1803–1931. Society, Government and Urban Growth* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981), p.14.

[36] Leopold von Orlich, *Travels in India Including Sinde and the Punjab*, 2 Vols. (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1845), Vol.2, p.4.

[37] Gupta, *Delhi Between Two Empires*, p.17.

[38] Christopher A. Bayly, *Empire and Information. Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp.84–6.

[39] Minute by Gov.-Gen. (Earl Canning), Aug. 1856, Foreign Dept., Political Proceedings, 29 Aug. 1856, NAI.

An exception to the rather strict security policy was made, however, with respect to the opening times of the city gates. Despite the advantage of early closure of the gates from a security perspective, they had to be kept open until late to facilitate the flow of traffic. An early closure would have prevented late-coming merchants from finding accommodation in the *sarai*s of the city.[40] To urge travelling merchants to take shelter within the city walls, the famous Mirza Ikram *sarai* outside Lahori Gate was ordered to be demolished in 1824. This left only the Lahori Gate *sarai* and the facilities of the old Id-compound which had been abandoned by the Muslims and was now occupied by Hindu grain and cattle merchants, available for accommodation.[41] Officially the *sarai* was torn down for security reasons but the action also helped channel commercial traffic into the city and enabled the British to extract customs duties.[42] Thus East India Company commercial interest compromised Delhi's need for security.

Defence and security measures proved to be quite expensive, too. To raise additional funds, Charles Metcalfe, now employed in the central secretariat in Calcutta, ordered grain taxes to be introduced in 1823. 'I want the Government to increase its army and levy a duty to pay it'.[43] Since most townspeople in British India were already heavily taxed, this additional duty must have been extremely oppressive, especially in the context of Delhi's existing town duties (*octroi*) on a vast multitude of articles.[44] But the revenue demand was determined solely by the needs of the government, not by its potential economic impact or the financial capacity of the inhabitants. In his report, Thomas Fortescue, the Civil Commissioner of Delhi, listed 562 items which were scheduled to be taxed at five percent, and another 51 items that were slated to incur a ten percent duty. 'It is obviously and really a great hardship on the poor and needy classes who labor for their daily bread'.[45]

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[40] W.H. Macnaughten, Camp, Allyghur, to Resident at Delhi, Fort William, 13 Nov. 1832, Consultation of 10 Dec. 1832, No.23; note by Sdy. M. Blake, Asst. Agent to Gov.-Gen., 31 Dec. 1832, Foreign Dept., Political Proceedings, Consultation No.47; Delhi Agency, Camp Paneeput, to H.M. Macnaughten, Sec. to Gov.-Gen., 26th July 1834, Foreign Dept., Political Proceedings, Consultation 2 Sept. 1834, No.20, NAI; and Charles Elliott, Sec. Military Board, to Sec. to Govt., Delhi, 14 Oct. 1823, extract in Bengal Military Consultations, 7 Nov. 1823, Board's Collections, 897/23372, OIOC.

[41] Elliott, Delhi, to Capt. Smith, Delhi, 30 June 1824, extract in Bengal Military Consultations, 16 Sept. 1824; and Capt. Smith's notes on observations made by Elliott, extract in Bengal Military Consultations, 1 Apr. 1824, Board's Collections, 897/23327; and Bengal Military Collection, No.29, *ibid.*

[42] Jitendra G. Borpujari, 'The Impact Of the Transit Duty System in British India', in *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol.10 (1973), pp.218–43.

[43] Memorandum by Capt. Smith, to Lt. Col. Casement, Delhi, 8 August 1823, extract in Bengal Military Consultations, 29 Aug. 1823, Bengal Military Collection, No.29, Board's Collections, 897/23327, OIOC.

[44] Memorandum, On the Subject of the Arrangement for the Maintenance of His Majesty Shah Allam and the Royal Household, 27 Apr. 1805, quoted in John W. Kaye, *The Life and Correspondence Of Charles, Lord Metcalfe*, 2 Vols. (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1858), Vol.1, p.150.

[45] Thomas Fortescue, Civil Comm., Delhi, to Holt Mackenzie, Sec. to Govt., Territorial Dept., 22 July 1820, paras.70–220, quote from para.101, Board's Collections, 748/20424, OIOC.

Political Riots

Delhi became a turbulent city only during the first half of the nineteenth century. Just one riot and one rebellion are mentioned as having taken place in the eighteenth century. The riot took place in 1729, when puritanical and orthodox (Muslim) Panjabi shoe-sellers were enraged by the conduct of a (Hindu) jeweller named Shubkharan who was on his way to Lal Qila. Shubkharan's court dress accidentally caught fire from a discharged fire-cracker during a local festival. To take revenge for 'this attack' or to simply protect their master, his palanquin bearers started a fight with the shoe-sellers. Subsequently, Shubkharan sought support from influential courtiers, and the quarrel ultimately turned into a major dispute between the members of the new Arab, Abyssinian, Afghan and Turkish court elite against the old Turani and Irani military elite which was still backed by the *padshah*.[46] The incident itself was of small moment, and only entered the historical record because of the way it was exploited by rival court fractions to settle political scores.[47]

With the British occupation of Delhi, the question of authority and sovereignty began to be fiercely contested between the British and the Mughal.[48] The Scindia of Gwalior, who had gained political control of Delhi with the 'Mughal–Maratha Treaty' of April 1752, and which made the Marathas *de facto* protector of the Mughal *masnad*, never questioned the emperor's 'constitutional' sovereignty.[49] The British were less deferential. Soon, the issue of a Muslim ruler and the Muslim population of his residence being forced to live under the authority of a non-Muslim power was exiting the attention of the city's Muslim theologians. In 1809 the widely-respected *maulavi*, Shah Abdal 'Aziz (1746–1824) issued a *fatawa* which stated:

> Promulgation of the command of *kufr* means that in the matter of administration and the control of people, in the levy of land taxes, tribute, tolls and customs, in the punishment of thieves and robbers, in the settlement of disputes, in the punishment of offences, the *kafirs* act according to their discretion. There are, indeed, certain Islamic rituals...with which they do not interfere. But that is of no account. The basic principle of these rituals are of no value to them, for they

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[46] S.A.A. Rizvi, *Shah Wali Allah and His Times* (Canberra: Ma'rifat Publishing House, 1980), pp.200–1.

[47] The Panjabi shoe-sellers were long known as an unruly group in Delhi. (I owe this information to Narayani Gupta.)

[48] Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies Of the Raj* (New Cambridge History of India, III, 3, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), esp. ch.2, pp.28–65.

[49] Steward Gordon, *The Marathas 1600–1818* (New Cambridge History of India, II, 4, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.138–9. A civil war in Delhi helped to finally establish Maratha military control over the city after a Maratha army had plundered it and placed a Maratha nominee on the *masnad* in Lal Qila.

demolish mosques without the least hesitation and no Muslim or *dhimmi* can enter the city without their permission.[50]

For Shah Abdal 'Aziz, the basic problem of the relationship between the new political regime and the population of Delhi (as well as North India) was not just the *kafir*s' disrespect for Islam, but also their gross disregard for the socio-political culture of the country. Only their vivid memories of the recent oppressive and sometimes brutal Maratha occupation deterred the Muslims from contemplating open resistance to the new rulers.[51]

Nevertheless the relationship between the emperor and the British continued to deteriorate as the latter sought to establish their legitimacy as the rightful rulers of India.

The British were deeply concerned about the ways and means through which they could establish and maintain peace within the city walls. Sheer force was not regarded as appropriate, though it would always be considered as a last resort. At any rate, politics of appeasement and balance among the urban elites, the religious groups and the social classes seem to have been much more on the Company's urban political agenda than the strict enforcement of rule of law as long as public order could be maintained with non-violent measures. On the other hand, as long as they could clearly identify their urban opponents or enemies, the British did not hesitate to use their military power to crush any sort of resistance. In 1806 when the heir apparent of the recently-deceased *padshah*, Shah Alam II, turned up with a band of soldiers at the British Residency close to Kashmiri Gate, the Resident, Archibald Seton, immediately called out troops and pursued the Mughal party until they barricaded themselves in Lal Qila. Subsequently, British artillery battered down the palace gate to force an entry. This brief exercise of power quickly re-established peace within the citadel and seems to have deterred further public disturbance in the city.[52]

Similarly, draconian reprisals followed the assassination of William Fraser in 1835.[53] With the death of Ahmad Baksh Khan, *Nawab* of Firozepur, in 1827, the British became involved in an inheritance dispute among the sons of the late

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[50] Shah Abdal 'Aziz, *Fatawa-yi 'Aziz* (Delhi, 1311 AH) I, 17, quoted in Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p.46. For a brief biographical sketch see Mahmood Ahmad Ghazi, *Islamic Renaissance in South Asia, 1707–1867* (Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, 2002), pp.164–78.

[51] Seton, Resident at Delhi, to N.B. Edmonstone, Fort William, Calcutta, 30 June 1807, extract in Bengal Political Consultations, No.26, 16 July 1807, Board's Collections, 217/4758, OIOC.

[52] Private on Delhi Royal Family, letter from Maj. Gen. Cunninghame to Ellis, 24 Sept. 1831, pp.13–36, Home Miscellaneous Series, 701, pt.1, OIOC.

[53] Fraser was Resident from 1829 to 1835.

nawab. During his second and short governor-generalship in 1805, Lord Cornwallis had created the *jagir* of Firozepur to consolidate the British position in the frontier region of the Doab and the adjacent western countries. In the same year, Lord Lake had conferred the *jagir* upon Ahmad Baksh Khan for his service during the war against the Marathas. In 1725 Baksh Khan nominated his eldest son, Shams-ud-din, as his heir. This was duly approved by the Resident, Charles Metcalfe. Two years later, however, Metcalfe's successor, William Fraser, supported the claims of Shams-ud-din's younger brother, advising him to pursue his right in Calcutta. (According to Muslim law of succession in India, all male issues are equally entitled to inheritance if succession has not been stipulated).[54] No official statement on this change of British policy is available, but it seems most likely that Fraser wanted to set an example of 'just' British rule by instrumentalising Indian law, and to enforce the British understanding of rational legalistic principles. However, what might have enraged Shams-ud-din more than the open partiality was the fact that Fraser more or less publicly 'considered the Nawab to be still but a boy, and [that] the only way to improve him was to treat him as such'.[55] Shams-ud-din seems to have taken this typically 'orientalist' put-down as a snub to his manhood.

Within a few days the role of Shams-ud-din in the assassination of William Fraser by Karim Khan was detected when an accomplice of the latter turned Crown's evidence—a break only made possible by the fact that the city now boasted the rudiments of a British legal system. After a short trial the *nawab* and Karim Khan were both hanged on 3 October 1835. Their execution in the vicinity of Kashmir Gate showed the people that the British were willing to publicly execute even high-ranking Indian 'offenders'. Yet military precautionary measures were so heavy that rumours spread that anyone who went to watch the executions would be shot. And as the dead body of Shams-ud-din turned towards the Prophet's tomb, the Muslims of Delhi claimed him as a martyr. The British had wanted to produce a morality play; but things were starting to go badly wrong.[56]

The British sensed that the city was on the verge of explosion, but they failed to grasp the undercurrents of discontent and resistance which were not immediately directed against them but which the incident had stirred. The new British legal-cum-juridical structure in Delhi was already damned in the eyes of Shams-ud-din and his supporters, for it looked to them as if a designated heir's right of succession was no longer guaranteed by the state. This new legal system seemed to allow

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[54] The background of the incident is given in Spear, *Twilight Of the Mughuls*, Ch.IX, pp.182–90; and in William H. Sleeman, *Rambles and Recollections*, 2 Vols. (Westminster: V.A. Smith, new ed. 1893), Vol.II, pp.106–25.

[55] Sleeman, *Rambles and Recollections*, Vol.II, p.111.

[56] Radhika Singha, *A Despotism Of Law. Crime and Justice in Early Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp.244–5.

opportunities for appeal. This is a good example of how the British created or enlarged the space to manoeuvre for political groups as well as individuals—in this case for younger sons of princes to make claims via the legal system in contradiction of Indian laws and customs.

By contrast, the British acted cautiously and sometimes even with uncertainty when they were unsure who their opponents were. On 1 May 1807 a wealthy urban banker named Hur Sukh Rai, most likely a Jain, told the Resident that he was planning to sponsor a *rathjatra* for installing an idol in a temple outside the city walls.[57] The Resident, Seton, fearing trouble could arise, asked him to refrain from staging a public procession. The latter agreed, promising to hold the ceremonies in private. Despite this, a Muslim 'mob'[58] (apparently comprising people belonging to the city's lower social strata) appeared in front of Hur Sukh Rai's house and began looting it. Metcalfe, at that time still assistant to the Resident, ordered out the troops to quell the tumult. In the meantime the 'mob' proceeded to *mohalla*s neighbouring the Jama Masjid, plundering the houses of rich traders and merchants. Several fights ensued, and casualties occurred on both sides. But by the time Metcalfe and his men had reached the scene, the crowd had already dispersed and everything seemed quiet.[59]

Resident Archibald Seton was currently outside the city. When he heard what had transpired, he immediately returned and went to the Jama Masjid. Here the well-known *maulavi* Rafi-al-Din (1749–1817), brother of the above mentioned Shah Abdal 'Aziz, was talking to numerous Muslims. Seton came to the conclusion that the *maulavi* was the spiritual ringleader, that the green 'inflammatory standard' must have been hoisted which subsequently (and consequently) must have turned Muslims 'fanatic'. Several persons were taken into custody by the Resident and

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[57] Charles Metcalfe to J.W. Sheerer, 16 June 1807, briefly summarises the events of this riot. See Kaye, *Life and Correspondence of Charles, Lord Metcalfe*, Vol.I, pp.155–6. The whole episode has been meticulously reported and compiled in Bengal Political Letter No.39, Board's Collections, 217/4758, OIOC. In Jaisinghpura and the villages of Talkatora there was a Jain temple which had been built by Raja Jai Singh in 1724. At the beginning of the nineteenth century more Jain temples were constructed at Patparganj and Shahdara. See N. Gupta, 'Delhi: the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', in Robert E. Frykenberg (ed.), *Delhi Through the Ages. Selected Essays in Urban History, Culture and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp.137–56, esp. p.146.

[58] It must be pointed out that the term 'mob' with which British officials characterised the riotous paupers of Delhi was not used in a racial sense since it was the contemporary British administrative or political language used by the governing people to describe the 'ungovernable' population. The same wording was also applied in Great Britain to describe the unruly parts of the lower social strata. See Ian Gilmoure, *Riots, Risings and Revolution: Governance and Violence in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Hutchinson, 1993); and Charles Tilly (ed.), *The Formation Of States in Western Europe* (Princeton, New York: Princeton University Press, 1975).

[59] Resident at Delhi to Edmonstone, Sec. to Govt., Political Dept., Fort William, 30 June 1807, para.1; Seton, Delhi Resident, to Edmonstone, Fort William, 15 May 1807; extracts in Bengal Political Consultations, No.3, 16 July 1807; and Resident at Delhi to Akber II King of Delhi, 9 May 1807, Bengal Political Letters, No.39, OIOC.

his assistant and criminal proceedings set in train in order to set an example of law and order. As Seton was aware that this might cause further disturbances, he ordered more troops to be stationed in the city.[60]

Was this an early 'communal riot'? I think the answer is clearly 'no'.[61] The procession of the Jains was all about their increased economic and financial position in the city. From the middle of the eighteenth century, Jains were immigrating into Delhi where they established themselves as an important mercantile community amongst other resident and immigrating merchants such as Agarwals, Khattris and Panjabi Muslims.[62] Old trading connections and networks were revitalised and attracted tradesmen from Gujarat, Maharashtra and the Panjab. A multi-ethnic and multi-religious culture arose in Delhi as well as in other towns of north India. The Jains of Delhi, comprising approximately three to five percent of the inhabitants, gained prominence particularly for advancing credit to the peasants and *zamindar*s in the city's rural vicinity. The Jains also clearly used the public space of Delhi for purposes of self-representation. Jains had spent more than twenty-five *lakh*s of rupees on religious edifices and public facilities in Delhi between 1790 and 1820.[63] Simultaneously, as can be seen from the events of 1807, they were willing to prevent conflicts and to compromise on the matter of a public procession—in short, on the public display of their economic power and social significance.

However riots broke out nonetheless. Despite the agreement between the Resident and Hur Sukh Rai, a section of the city's Muslims, led by Rafi-al-Din, seems to have been bent on accusing Sukh Rai of offending Islam. A group of Muslims rallied at his house and then the swelling crowd proceeded to the Jama Masjid. Yet as Archibald Seton observed, if the protest was initially grounded in religious sentiment, later on many unemployed and poor Muslims took the opportunity to loot the wealthy quarters adjacent to the Jama Masjid.[64] This might be seen as an indicator that the riots were a manifestation

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[60] Political letter from Bengal, 10 June 1807, paras. 10, 11.

[61] Contrary to this author's opinion, Warren Fusfeld argues that the British were eager to support the administrative and religious Muslim elite of Delhi in order to facilitate their rule within the city. The Muslim elite seems to have been more than willing to collaborate with the British regime. See his 'Communal Conflict in Delhi, 1803–1930', in *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol.19 (1982), pp.181–200.

[62] For these groups see above, fn. 24.

[63] Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaar*, pp.30–1, 123–5, 141–2, esp. fn.93, and on the multicultural background of contemporary Banaras, pp.178–83. The expenditure by Jain families on temples, bazaars and dwelling houses made a significant contribution to the depressed economies of north Indian towns. The building activities in Delhi especially must have supported a large part of the urban day and wage labourers who otherwise would have suffered from the decline of the Mughal building programmes in their capital-residence. See Christopher A. Bayly, 'Town Building in North India, 1780–1830', in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.9 (1975), pp.483–504.

[64] Seton to Edmonstone, Fort William, 1 May 1807, para.2, Bengal Political Letters, No.39.

of economic tensions among the lower social classes of the city that had little to do with religion *per se*. Muslims comprised the majority of the poorer people and could be quickly gathered for riots, which offered the opportunity for illicit personal enrichment.

Resident Seton insisted on punishing Rafi-al-Din to set an example, since he regarded him as the ringleader of the riots. According to the Resident, the riot showed that the *padshah* was clearly not able to guarantee law and order in the city; therefore he was compelled to take steps to establish peace according to his own understanding of justice and good government. But after some days, Seton indicated that he was no longer interested in a public trial nor, even more surprisingly, in any kind of legal prosecution. Instead, he came to a personal agreement with the Mughal to ban Rafi-al-Din from Delhi. What is more, the British paid off Rafi-al-Din's debts before they escorted him and his family out of the city, then allowed him to return to Delhi after just four months in exile.[65]

In addition to suspending the 'rule of law', what could have been the reason for this 'inconsistent' British (re)action? *Maulavi* Rafi-al-Din belonged to the Sunni Muslim learned elite—the *ulema*—of Delhi, where he had translated, in cooperation with his younger brother Shah Abdal Qadir (1753–1827), the Qur'an from Persian to Urdu, which was fast becoming the *lingua franca*. As a member of the reformist Naqshbandi order, Rafi-al-Din was keen for the truths of Islam to reach the widest possible audience. There are signs of an emerging urban public in north Indian cities at this time, and Rafi-al-Din appears to have played a major role in generating this embryonic public sphere.[66]

The most influential and prominent leader of the Naqshbandi order was Rafi-al-Din's brother Shah Abdal 'Aziz. His reformist programme appealed to the politically dominant public in the wake of the Hindu Maratha expansion after 1780 and the British occupation of Delhi in 1803. The British condemnation of certain local Islamic rites as illustrative of a degenerating Islamic culture resulted in a number of *fatawa* written by Abdal 'Aziz, dealing in a formal legal way with the ensuing problems. It is interesting to observe that in the course of this discussion Shah Abdal 'Aziz used references to indicate the sources of his legal opinions, thus replicating European scientific conventions.[67] The *fatawa* of Abdal 'Aziz

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[65] Seton to Edmonstone, Fort William, 12 May 1807, and Seton to Edmonstone, 15 May 1807, paras.8–9, *ibid*; No.3; and Resident at Delhi to Akber II King of Delhi, 9 May 1807, and Edmonstone to Seton, 28 Sept. 1807, extracts in Bengal Political Consultations, No.19 of 28 Sept. 1807.

[66] B. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, p.48.

[67] Jamal Malik, 'Islamic Institutions and Infrastructure in Shahjahanabad', in Eckart Ehlers and Thomas Krafft (eds), *Shahjahanabad/Old Delhi. Tradition and Colonial Change* (Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag, 1993), pp.43–64, esp. pp.53–5.

took on great importance as a means of day-to-day guidance for the Muslims of Delhi.[68]

The discussion was about the status of Islam under a non-Islamic government. The basic question dealt with the problem of whether Delhi and India were now *dar ul harb*, a country of non-believers, which would have made *hijrat* (mass emigration) on the one hand, or *jihad* on the other hand, necessary to re-establish *dar ul Islam.* Or did *dar ul Islam* still prevail in India? Several *fatawa* finally solved the problem in the 1820s, stipulating that as long as the practice of the Muslim faith is guaranteed by its political regime, Muslims can peacefully remain in a non-Islamic country.[69] Sometimes this discussion among the members of the Delhi Sunni *ulema* turned against the Shi'a *ulema* of Lucknow, centre of the other major branch of Islam in India. In Delhi itself, the polemic between the Shi'a and Sunni had intensified during the second half of the eighteenth century[70] with the revival in the fortunes of the more syncretistic Chishti order to whom the Mughal had always felt closely attached. In the 1770s Najaf Khan, occupier and protector of the Mughal residence, is said to have favoured the Shi'a.[71] After *padshah* Shah Alam had returned to Delhi in 1785, Shi'a influence grew further.[72] Therefore, the riots of 1807 may also point towards an increasing rivalry for religious and political influence between the two orders and their representatives, as well as an attempt to regain or expand their influence on the *padshah* and to incorporate the British into their political orbit.

Though Archibald Seton and Charles Metcalfe tried to pressure the *padshah* and the *maulavi* to take action against the spreading sedition-mongers, neither of them acted in the way the British representatives expected them to. According to the custom of Indian rulers, including the *padshah*, one does not immediately inter-fere in current disturbances but mediates at a later point of events.[73] At the climax of the disturbances, Metcalfe asked Rafi-al-Din for immediate help which the latter refused, protesting that he did not acknowledge any sovereign other than the

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[68] B. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, pp.49–52.

[69] Muhammad Khalid Masud, 'The World Of Shah Abd al 'Aziz (1746–1824)', in Jamal Malik (ed.), *Perspectives Of Mutual Encounters in South Asian History 1760–1860* (Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, 2000), pp.298–314, esp. pp.307–14.

[70] Saiyid A.A. Rizvi, *A Socio-Intellectual History Of the Isna Ascari Shi'is in India (16th to 19th Centuries)*, 2 Vols. (Canberra: Ma'rifat Publishing House, 1986), Vol.II, pp.88–9.

[71] Seton to Edmonstone, Fort William, 30 June 1807, extract in Bengal Political Consultations, No.26 of 16 July 1807, Board's Collections, 217/4758, OIOC.

[72] Rizvi, *Shah Wali-Allah And His Times*, p.256 and pp.358–78.

[73] Steward Gordon, 'Legitimacy and Loyalty in Some Successor States Of the Eighteenth Century', in John F. Richards, (ed.), *Kingship and Authority in South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp.327–47, esp. pp.341–5; and Freitag, *Collective Action*, pp.49–50. See also the striking example of the *raja* of Varanasi, in Heitler, 'The Varanasi House Tax Hartal Of 1810–11'.

Mughal.[74] As for the *padshah*, he showed no interest at all in quelling the disturbances. Ironically, though, Shah Abdal 'Aziz, in contrast to his brother Rafi-al-Din, did make some concessions toward the newly-established colonial regime.[75] This suggests a lively if not fierce discussion on religious and political questions taking place even within the Naqshbandi order.

The challenge of legitimacy was well understood at the Residency. The British realised that, in the circumstances, a simple military subjugation of the disturbances would be counterproductive,[76] while a public trial at court would force them to confront the question of legitimacy in the public sphere of Delhi. Better, Seton thought, to try to solve the complicated question of legitimacy in Delhi within the private and personal sphere of the Mughal court. A frustrated Metcalfe grumbled: 'Two authorities exist in the town, which gives rise to much trouble and confusion'.[77]

Intending to stabilise their own political regime, it became clear that the British had avital interest in supporting all of Delhi's urban elite communities. During the following decades, there were several incidents of rioting between various social and religious groups—between Jains and Hindus, Shi'as and Sunnis, and Muslims and Hindus. To some extent, the British supported the Mughal elite as the long and traditionally established rulers of Delhi, but never to the disadvantage of other important political and economic groups. However at all times the British were eager to mediate between the quarrelling groups and to keep some balance amongst them, because otherwise the control of the city could easily have slipped out of their hands. This suggests that the British were often urged to compromise on political, social and economic issues to prevent riot and rebellion.

Religious Riots

As has been demonstrated above, the personal regime of a Resident could quickly provoke resistance from local people. Moreover some resistance to the paternalistic style of government, typified by the 'Delhi System' of Charles Metcalfe, was

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[74] Seton to Edmonstone, 12 May 1807, and note, C. Metcalfe, Bengal Political Letter, No.39, Board's Collections, 217/4758, OIOC.

[75] Later, at another public occasion, the learned Muslim dignitary, Ghulam 'Ali (1743–1824), refused to stand up in respect for the British Resident, Charles Metcalfe, and turned disgustedly away from the British party which smelled of alcohol. The incident is mentioned in Jamal Malik, 'Encounter and Appropriation in the Context Of Modern South Asian History', in Malik (ed.), *Perspectives Of Mutual Encounters,* pp.315–32, esp. p.325.

[76] This must have been extremely frustrating for Charles Metcalfe who, still below twenty years of age, was a promoter of straightforward actions, especially when the Mughal's family and entourage were to be curbed. From his very early appointment in Delhi, Metcalfe argued constantly in favour of the Mughal's deposition. See C. Metcalfe to Sheerer, Meerut, 27 Aug. 1807, in Kaye, *Life and Correspondence Of Charles, Lord Metcalfe*, Vol.I, pp.163–4. Apart from this, Metcalfe thought Archibald Seton too compromising a Resident. See C. Metcalfe to Sheerer, 16 June 1807, *ibid.*, p.153.

[77] Letter dated 16 June 1807, in Kaye, *Life and Correspondence of Charles, Lord Metcalfe*, p.225.

registered from within sections of the British provincial administration, as when the Assistant at Delhi, Charles Trevelyan, successfully prosecuted his superior, Sir Edward Colebrooke, for being corrupt and eventually brought about his dismissal. It seems quite obvious that even within the British administration tensions and contradictions were omnipresent, particularly in cases where an 'old hand' (like Colebrooke) was challenged by a newcomer (like Trevelyan).[78] It has been claimed that in an attempt to ingratiate themselves with the locally dominant elites, the British generally tried to defer to tradition.[79] Yet with respect to religion and religious communities, the British in Delhi fostered tensions between Hindus and Muslims, thereby contradicting their own intentions. These contradictory politics were either founded on the differing personal regimes of British superior officers guided by the latest principles of an efficient administration, or on the individual understanding of what these officers regarded as local tradition. In many cases, appeasement seems to have been the guideline of British colonial rule.

The problem of cow slaughter proved to be the touchstone of British attempts to defer to local customs and, at the same time, to establish equal rights for all religious communities. When Scindia occupied Delhi his lieutenants allowed resident butchers to kill cows in deference to earlier Mughal tradition and contrary to the inclination of the Maratha rulers at large to impose a general ban on cow slaughter. After the British took over the government of Delhi, the *padshah* confirmed this arrangement, yet refrained himself from the sacrifice of cows.[80] Nevertheless the sacrifice of animals and even cows on the occasion of the Id festival was widely practised in private within the city walls. It is reported that in 1852 the *padshah* went in procession to the Idgah, situated to the west of Delhi, where camels and goats were sacrificed. Occasionally *padshah* Bahadur Shah also seems to have sacrificed animals in the *diwan e khas* in Lal Qila. Perhaps he did not want to offend the Hindu population of the city, though members of the *ulema* remonstrated against this kind of consideration.[81]

At this time there were few public altercations over the sacrifice of cows; but there was always an undertone of tension. Occasionally Hindus demanded that the right be restricted while, from time to time, Muslims campaigned for it to be extended. In 1819 the Delhi Magistrate, Thomas Metcalfe (younger brother of Charles), issued an order which generally permitted cow sacrifice within homes.[82] But three years later he reversed this decision, announcing a general prohibition on cow

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[78] Prior *et al*, 'Bad Language', *passim.*
[79] This is emphasised in Prior, 'Making History', *passim.*
[80] Rizvi, *Shah Wali-Allah and His Times*, pp.172–3.
[81] Gupta, *Delhi Between Two Empires*, p.10.
[82] Spear, *Twilight Of the Mughuls*, p.195.

slaughter within the city walls to prevent possible religious riots during Id.[83] Goats, however, were still permitted to be sacrificed within the city, and the sacrifice of cows was allowed to be performed outside Delhi.[84] This loophole caused much disturbance in Lal Qila and among the learned Muslims, and threatened to spread all over the city. After six prominent Muslims handed over a petition to repeal the proclamation, a second proclamation withdrew the first one on the next day, and the matter was thought to be settled satisfactorily when both the leading Muslim and Hindu authorities agreed on the revision.[85]

But apparently the seed of discontent had already disseminated into the lower and poorer Hindu classes. Voices were raised in the *mohalla*s demanding the reinstatement of the first proclamation. Precautionary measures were taken to prevent an outbreak of rioting. However the next morning the Hindus started a *hartal*, halting public life. Later the same day the *padshah* was harassed by a group of Hindus while parading through Chandni Chauk, Delhi's principal avenue, on his way to the Idgah. Under the protection of British–Indian forces, the procession went on and the sacrifice was performed, as usual, outside the city walls. To prevent further disturbances, additional *sipahi*-troops were commanded into town.[86] It seems that tensions did not only have religious roots but also economic and social aspects.

British authorities at the Board of Revenue of the North Western Provinces became worried about the events and Thomas Metcalfe was ordered to report. In his report, Metcalfe concluded that 'the rights of the Moslems would in no way be infringed by the prohibition, for as far as I regarded them, it was merely a matter of convenience whereas the religious feelings of the Hindus would be violently agitated by witnessing the slaughter of this favourite idol'.[87]

As we have seen, British 'policy' at the time was to refer to local religious traditions in case of disputes and legal conflicts. This kind of 'tolerant' politics was already practised in neighbouring Rohilkhand in consequence of an 1808 order of the magistrate there.[88] It seemed initially that Metcalfe's intention was to re-establish what he regarded as traditional or customary rights. However he himself admitted that he was unable to ascertain what these former customs were. It may also have

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[83] Bakr Id is the festival on which Muslims commemorate Abraham's preparing to sacrifice his son. Some Muslims kill cows on this occasion. Of course to Hindus the cow is sacred.

[84] T.T. Metcalfe to R. Williams, Sec. to Board of Revenue Western Division, 31 Aug. 1822, para.1, extract in Bengal Political Consultations, 27 Sept. 1822, Board's Collections, 827/21946, OIOC.

[85] A. Ross, AGG, Delhi to Swinton, Sec., 30 Aug. 1823, paras.2–4, extract in Bengal Political Consultations, 27 Sept. 1822, *ibid.*

[86] *Ibid.*, paras.5–9; and extract of Political Letter from Bengal, 12 Sept. 1823, *ibid.*

[87] T.T. Metcalfe to Williams, 31 Aug. 1822, para.3, extract in Bengal Political Consultations, 15 Jan. 1823, *ibid.*

[88] Prior, 'Making History', pp.193–4.

been that he was simply interested in supporting the Hindus who comprised roughly half of the city's population.[89] Taking this into account, it can be presumed that Metcalfe was less interested in ascertaining the nature of these traditional religious customs than in protecting 'from insult the prejudice of the Hindoos without at all infringing on the customs or comforts or superstitions of the Mahomedan part of the population'.[90] Unfortunately, this 'policy' actually created the space for communal sentiments and subsequent actions in a widening public arena and, eventually, provided the means for enlarging it.[91]

A letter of Richard Williams, secretary of the Board of Revenue, clarifies Metcalfe's intention. Williams accused Metcalfe of having not taken into consideration the current situation in Delhi and of having not observed the rules of the preceding years. Additionally, the secretary noted that no disturbances had occurred on the Id festival for several years and that it did not appear that any riots were imminent. Concerning the petition, Williams remarked that it 'contains no expression of the general feeling of the Hindoos, but was simply a complaint preferred by some individuals against others and which you might have noticed by informing the latter that they would be liable to severe punishment if they performed the sacrifice in the manner complained of'.[92] Last but not least, Williams was of the opinion that the proclamation would not prevent disturbances. On the contrary, he thought it might encourage them.

In spite of this withering criticism, Metcalfe did not give in but insisted upon his version of events.[93] But Metcalfe's rejoinder to Williams makes it clear that Metcalfe had mixed up personal dislike with general politics—especially with respect to a Muslim named Mir Khairati, *sherishtedar*[94] at the Court of Appeal in Delhi. During the preceding month of Muharram, Khairati had 'used his utmost

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[89] A rough estimate in 1809 put the population of Delhi slightly above 100,000. See Bayly, 'Town Building in North India', p.490. A first census taken by the British in 1833 shows an overall population of 119,860 within the city walls. See *The Cambridge Economic History Of India*, 2 Vols., (ed. Dharma Kumar) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), Vol.1, pp.470–2. A second census in 1836 showed 130,672 inhabitants. The distribution between Hindus and Muslims was 66,460 and 64,167 respectively. There was still a more or less equal distribution of Hindus and Muslims twenty years later. See Chenoy, *Shahjahanabad.* pp.141–2. The censuses of 1843, 1845 and 1853 showed the population rising from 131,000 to 137,000, then to 151,000. See Gupta, *Delhi Between Two Empires*, p.4, and graph p.46.

[90] T.T. Metcalfe, Principal Assist., Centre Division, to H. H. Thomas, Acting Sec. to Board of Revenue, 2 Nov. 1822, para. 8, extract in Bengal Political Consultations, 15 Jan. 1823, Board's Collections, 827/21946, OIOC.

[91] Gyan Pandey, 'Rallying Around the Cow; Sectarian Strife in Bhojpuri Region, c. 1888–1917', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies II* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983) pp.118–22.

[92] Williams to C. Metcalfe, 3 Sept. 1822, extract in Bengal Political Consultations, Board's Collections 827/21946, OIOC.

[93] *Ibid.*

[94] A s*herishtedar*was a registrar at an Indian court or district office.

endeavours to keep alive a spirit of animosity, and it is not irrelevant to state, that this individual was suspended in 1818 for encouraging and personally engaging in a contest between the two sects of Mahommendans'.[95]

Shi'a–Sunni conflicts were definitely not on the British agenda of the day. Yet at the same time Williams was right to accuse Metcalfe of having taken into consideration the opinion of merely six petitioners—even if they may have been sent by Khairati. And certainly the riots would not have occurred at all if Metcalfe had refrained from issuing the proclamation. Hence the proclamation may have served two purposes. First, the conduct of the Muslim court assistant might have given him an opportunity to act against the Muslim community (or at least what Metcalfe regarded as that community) and to limit the habitual sacrifice of cows at the Id festival. Secondly, the prohibition of cow slaughter was without doubt intended to further infringe the sovereign rights of the *padshah*. Though his jurisdiction had been, since 1803, restricted to Lal Qila, the *padshah* had continued to project himself as the protector of all faiths in Delhi, as would be expected of the sovereign lord of the country.[96] The proclamation showed he no longer ruled—even in his nominal capital.

The question of sacrifice of cows arose again in 1835 when an order was issued stating that Muslims would be allowed to slaughter cows at the Id festival in their homes and at accustomed places where it would not offend the Hindus. Nevertheless the Hindus protested. In 1852, with no sign of the dispute dissipating, Magistrate Roberts ordered a list to be prepared of persons who were in the habit of sacrificing cows. Those Muslims who, for various reasons, failed to get on the lists, lost the right to sacrifice cows. Generally, Muslims now had the opportunity to talk round the *padshah* and suborn the Hindus in the *padshah* administration to support the Muslim case, since those rights had been granted by the *padshah* and affirmed by the British administration. Simultaneously, Hindus, because they now knew the names of the 'offenders' and the places of 'illicit' cow slaughtering, could more easily target them.[97] When Thomas Metcalfe in 1853 issued a decree prohibiting the slaughter of cows on the occasion of religious festivals, the court physicians were unhappy about the decision. Within a short time the city's Magistrate, a Hindu, reached an amicable agreement with the British officials and the palace physicians. Shortly before the Great Rebellion, however, British officials reneged on their agreement and passed an order allowing the sacrificial slaughter of cows in certain places, and permitting Muslim butchers to kill cows for food even in Hindu-dominated neighbourhoods.

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[95] C. Metcalfe to Thomas, 2 Nov. 1822, extract in Bengal Political Consultations, 15 Jan. 1823.
[96] Cf. Jan C. Heesterman, 'The Conundrum Of the King's Authority', in Richards (ed.), *Kingship and Authority in South Asia*, pp.13–40.
[97] Spear, *Twilight Of the Mughuls*, p.196.

A *hartal* of Delhi's Hindu shop-owners lasted three days until the measure was
rescinded.[98]

Other religious tensions also surfaced in the first half of the nineteenth century.
In 1816 and 1834 clashes occurred between Hindus and Jains after which certain
public processions for the purpose of self-representation were prohibited. Apparently
the British were trying to prevent further disturbances. In 1827, for the first time in
centuries, a public Dasehra[99] festival took place in Delhi near the police station at
Kashmiri Gate, mainly hosted by the influential Bengali *babu* of Resident
Colebrooke, Ram Gopal. Some Muslims protested against the celebrations but
Colebrooke granted his principal Indian employee a military escort and, additionally,
two government elephants to privilege the procession. The Dasehra celebrations were
repeated the following year and from then on they became an established festival—
among many others—in Delhi. This episode indicates the growing prominence of
Bengalis in the political landscape of Delhi in the first half of the nineteenth
century—a demographic sub-imperialism protected and promoted by the Company.[100]

Shi'a–Sunni riots broke out, too, after Magistrate Lindsay altered the traditional
proclamation about *ta'ziyah*[101] in favour of the Shi'as in 1837. After the Sunnis,
twice as populous as the Shi'as, successfully petitioned against the measure,
Resident Thomas Metcalfe was urged to repeal the order.[102] In this case the
British tried to support a minority against the majority in order to weaken the latter.

Yet so long as the *padshah* resided in Delhi and the British respected local custom as
was expected from a just ruler, the city tended to remain quiet. Precautionary
measures in October 1853 prevented riots in Delhi when the Muharram and the
Dasehra festival happened to occur on the same day, whereas in nearby Aligarh,
another outpost of British power, the military had to be called out to quell riots
after rumours of a 'great civil war' spread throughout the cities of northern
India.[103] Likewise, the festival of Id and a *rathjathra* went off peacefully on the
same day in June 1854, Muslims celebrating on Delhi's main road Chandni

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[98] *Delhi Gazette* (12 Apr. 1837).

[99] Dasehra is a Hindu festival that takes place in October at the close of the rainy season, predominantly in
western and southern India. In the eighteenth century it also became a military festival of the Marathas who,
on the occasion of Dasehra, would ritually destroy a village to signal the opening of the season of military
campaigns. See *Hobson-Jobson. A Glossary Of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases* (London: Linguasia,
1989), p.333.

[100] Prior *et al*, 'Bad Language', p.110.

[101] The model of the tomb of the martyr Husain, grandson of the prophet Muhammad, is called a *ta'ziyah*. It is
usually made of wood and paper and is carried in Muharram processions in India.

[102] Gupta, *Delhi Between Two Empires*, p.10; and *Delhi Gazette* (12 Apr. 1837).

[103] *Delhi Gazette* (15 Oct. 1853), pp.673–4.

Chauk in the morning and the Jains having their procession in the evening. This was again true for the Id festival of the following year, when, according to British intelligence received from the palace, some intrigue by Muslims was about to threaten the urban peace. Precautionary measures were taken and no outbreak of violence occurred.[104]

To a large extent, the British were able to control the 'religious' situation in Delhi through the pragmatic strategy of compromise with local custom and with the affected religious groups—despite the general unwillingness of the Mughal and his court to intervene. On the other hand, inconsistencies in British policy created space for religious communities to sometimes openly, and in a few cases violently, act against each other. What the British regarded as 'equal rights' for all faiths and their followers gave religious groups within Delhi additional room to manoeuvre, which they utilised to enlarge their appearance as well as performance in public. Yet that very same space was also an arena where social, economic and political tension was ventilated through religious strife.

Food Riots

Delhi could also become tumultuous during times of food scarcity. From the start of the nineteenth century food prices rose sharply, severely affecting the livelihood of the poorer urban classes. With the onset of a severe drought in 1809, British authorities became aware of the extent of Delhi's critical dependence on the supply of agricultural products from the neighbouring Ganga-Jamna Doab, and of grain from Rohilkhand.[105] In 1824 rains failed and famine conditions developed in Delhi and the surrounding countryside. For the first time since the establishment of British rule in Delhi, food riots occurred in the Rohtak Division of neighbouring Haryana District in September of that year. Poor peasants from several nearby villages looted a *mela.* Asked by British officials for the causes of the disturbances, local inhabitants reported that according to the marauders, 'the Authority of the British Government was at end in Hindoostan'.[106] Firm believers in a moral economy, they expected their rulers to distribute grain to those who were starving. When this did not happen, they felt they had a right to plunder. This outbreak led Thomas Fortescue to pen his aforementioned memorandum lamenting the effect of British taxes on the poorer strata of the population. Likewise Delhi Magistrate

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[104] Note by William Muir, Sec., Foreign Dept., Fort William, 3 Sept. 1855, Foreign Dept., Political Proceedings, Consultations, No. 79–85 of 14 Sept. 1855, NAI; and *Ghalib, 1797–1869, Life and Letters*, (trans and eds Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam) (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1969), Vol.1, pp.122–3.

[105] Sanjay Sharma, *Famine, Philanthropy and the Colonial State. North India in the Early Nineteenth Century* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.22, fn.81 and p.23.

[106] 'Translation Of Descriptions Of Inhabitants Of Monga Mautha Taken by Captain H. Peach, Supervisor, Hissar Establishment, 28th September 1824', Home Miscellaneous Series, Vol.674, pp.201–7, OIOC.

William Fraser told his superiors that he feared that imperial revenues could, in the circumstances, be realised to the full only at the risk of driving people into mass emigration or rebellion.[107]

Ironically Delhi became unquiet because of the first 'man-made' famine since the commencement of British rule in northern India. The transformation of the Ganga-Jamna Doab's agrarian economy during the preceding decades had caused a fundamental transformation in the ecological balance and the agro-economic output of the region. Increasingly, peasants were forced to shift to agrarian products that were globally marketable, such as cotton, sugar cane and indigo—in short, cash crops—in order to comply with the rising British revenue demands. Everywhere the production of food crops languished, as did the storage of grain which would normally have been distributed in times of scarcity by the *zamindar*s as well as other intermediate notables. Moreover, wedded as they were to the philosophy of a free market,[108] the British did nothing to cushion the impact of these charges—much to the chagrin of native opinion. Reports in the weekly vernacular *Akbar-I-Delhi* not only complained about British bad manners but also criticised the harshness of the administrative measures they had recently introduced.[109] Little wonder that large parts of the urban population in the late 1830s still viewed the 'benevolent' *padshah* as the only rightful and legitimate ruler of the city and the country.

After a series of insufficient rains since the beginning of the 1830s, the monsoons almost failed completely in the region between Allahabad and Delhi in 1837. Soon the availability of basic food items deteriorated rapidly in the countryside. Starving peasants joined together in criminal groups and started looting their way across the land.[110] Some 300,000 desperate people descended on Agra from the surrounding districts, and from neighbouring principalities such as Bharatpur and Gwalior looking for food. Within a short time, smallpox and cholera raged with unimaginable ferocity in the densely-populated government relief camps. Mass emigration to central India followed. When the rains again failed in 1838, destitute

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[107] D.N. Panigrahi, *Charles Metcalfe in India: Ideas and Administration, 1806–1835* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1968), p.54.

[108] See Mann, *British Rule on Indian Soil*, pp.135–208. The ecological transformation and the agricultural revolution are not taken into consideration by Sharma. See his *Famine, Philanthropy and the Colonial State*, pp.218–9.

[109] Michael H. Fisher, 'The Office Of Akbar Navis: The Transition from Mughal to British Forms', in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.27 (1993), pp.45–82; Emily Eden, *Up the Country. Letters Written to Her Sister from the Upper Provinces Of India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930), p.97; and I.H. Qureshi, 'Two Newspapers Of Pre-Mutiny Delhi', in S.R. Bakshi and S.K. Sharma (eds), *Delhi Through the Ages* (Delhi: Amol Publications), Vol.3, pp.111–5.

[110] Sanjay Sharma, 'The 1837–38 Famine in UP: Some Dimensions Of Popular Action', in *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol.30 (1993), pp.337–71.

people left the north Indian plains *en masse*—perhaps eight million in all. British estimates put the number of dead at 800,000, but the real figure was almost certainly in excess of one million.[111]

Delhi suffered too, and serious food riots broke out in the city in 1837. Here, though, the prime villains of the piece were the grain dealers. As usual, the Jains organised the flow of grain into the city. However the retailers, who were almost all Vishnavaite Agarwals, hampered its distribution, causing an artificial shortage. This was exacerbated by speculative practices on the part of the city's *bania*s (traders-cum-bankers). As elsewhere, the population expected their rulers to intervene actively in the market to prevent price fluctuations in times of scarcity.

Before they could do this, however, the British had to surmount two difficult problems. First, their still ambiguous position within the city walls of Delhi prevented them from securing adequate information about grain price movements.[112] Second, the *laissez-faire* policy that was gaining ground in British India discouraged administrators from interfering with the forces of the market—although quite a few officials argued, contrary to the prevailing orthodoxy, that given the Indian climate and the country's lack of adequate emergency distribution facilities in times of famine, conditions for a policy of strict non-interference did not exist.[113]

Despite reports of a growing number of urban paupers being unable to buy their means of subsistence, the Delhi government, trapped within the ideological prison of its policy contradictions, failed to act. The situation grew worse when the Commissioner, Thomas Metcalfe, fined some citizens who asked for prices to be fixed on the plea that they had addressed him in an impolite manner. (In fact, he was not empowered to agree with the petitioners' demand under the existing regulations.[114]) Apparently the poor classes of Delhi's indigenous population wanted to re-establish just prices with the assistance of the British rulers.

Metcalfe did, as it happened, believe in the rules of a free market. But he also hoped that the distressing chain of events would eventually bring the merchants to their

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[111] Mann, *British Rule on Indian Soil*, pp.175–7; and Sharma, *Famine, Philanthropy and the Colonial State*, pp.63–7, 73–8.

[112] The rise of wheat prices was generally regarded as an indicator of famine, albeit not the only one. See Sourin Roy, 'A Rare Document on Delhi Wheat Prices, 1763–1835', in *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol.9 (1972), pp.91–100, esp. pp.96–7.

[113] Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, pp.331–2. For the intellectual background see S. Ambirajan, *Classical Political Economy and British Policy in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp 69–47.

[114] *Delhi Gazette* (11 Oct. 1837).

senses, 'to be more considerate to the wants of the people'.[115] But the merchants did not react in the way Metcalfe expected them to. *Purabias*—people from the eastern provinces who had come to Delhi in the search of food—began plundering boats full of grain destined for Agra, where scarcity was yet greater. Elliott, the first non-Indian *kotwal* of Delhi,[116] was unable to quell the riots with his *thana*-men, and the British Commissioner was forced to assist with troops. Then, to make matters worse, some Gujars from adjacent villages, who were part of Delhi's contingent of wage labourers, joined up with the Delhi 'mob'. To protect private property, the Commissioner was authorised to temporarily increase the police force, and 'to employ the destitute poor on works of public utility' for a limited time.[117]

The anger of Delhi's lower classes was fuelled when rumours spread that the British had sanctioned the redistribution of grain. It became evident that the wholesale grain dealers had sold their grain for 22–25 *seer*s per rupee whilst the city's retailers were selling at only 12 *seer*s per rupee. The population held the British responsible for this price gouging, and felt entitled to take 'public action against profiteering and plunder of the plunderers'.[118] On the other hand, the mercantile, financial and political elites of Delhi argued in favour of a *laissez-faire* politics because this not only guaranteed an efficient distribution of food even during famine times, but also secured them high profits. Private profiteering was thought to be justifiable even during times of scarcity.[119] However the inhabitants of Delhi skilfully played off the various civil authorities to their own advantage. When protesters again asked Metcalfe to intervene, he relented from his earlier stand and the export of grain was subsequently regulated by the British Magistrate and the police. This reduced the power of the *kotwal*, who had shown himself in the course of the disturbances to be incompetent.[120]

In 1838 the British had to face the same problem from a nearly opposite angle. When the *rabi* crops failed, the Joint Magistrate, John Bell, tried to regulate the supply of grain more directly. Bell suspected the city's wholesale merchants of manipulating the grain market for sheer profiteering. To break the monopoly of the grain merchants, Bell tried to establish a city-centred grain market in co-operation with

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[115] T.T. Metcalfe, Commr., Delhi Div., to J. Thomason, Offg. Sec. to the Lt. Gov., NWP, 7 Oct. 1837, North-Western Provinces, Criminal and Judicial, Oct. 1837, No.72, P/231/40, OIOC.

[116] *Delhi Gazette* (19 April 1837). The appointment of a non-Muslim to that post caused protests from Lal Qila, for the Mughal regarded this to be his sovereign right.

[117] Thomason to Commr., Delhi Division, Agra, 11 Oct. 1837, North-Western Provinces, Criminal and Judicial, Oct. 1837, No.73, P/231/40, OIOC.

[118] Sharma, *Famine, Philanthropy and the Colonial State*, p.128; and Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, pp.333–4.

[119] 'Imaginary Conversation on the Late Events, or Opposite Views Regarding Indian Political Economy Entertained by Buneahs, Bankers, and Sahib Log', *Delhi Gazette* (8 Nov. 1837).

[120] Gupta, *Delhi Between Two Empires*, p.11.

the wealthy *bania* Ramji Mal of the Gurwala family. This triggered a wild rumour to the effect that Bell was forcing Delhi's wholesale merchants to bring down grain prices to 17 *seer*s per rupee—a figure which would have made all such business unprofitable. (He was suspected of doing this in an attempt to undercut the *kotwal*'s position.) The merchant community responded by closing down their bazaars which, of course, further aggravated the grain supply crisis. Finally, the authorities were forced to repeal the previous orders of the *kotwal*, lowering grain prices to 25 percent of the market rate, at a great loss of face.[121] But they learned from their mistakes. When famine stalked Delhi again in 1853, the British promptly suspended their policy of *laissez-faire* and prohibited the *bania*s from selling grain in the course of the 1853 famine.[122] Significantly, the city remained quiet.

Despite the fact that the British were now unquestionably the paramount military power within Delhi and had the capacity to crush spontaneous uprisings at an instant, they only partially controlled the city. Residual authority still lay with the Mughal. Moreover it was evident to the British that this situation would continue as long as the *padshah* resided in Lal Qila.

Accordingly in 1856 the British announced that they would not recognise the rights of the heir to the Delhi throne, Mirza Jiwan Bakht, after the death of the reigning *padshah*. This edict caused fear and open discontent in the palace-fortress.

A few months later, shortly before the outbreak of the Great Rebellion at Meerut, rumours arose that the *shah* of Persia would assist the *padshah* in his struggle against the British. A notice appeared on the wall of Jama Masjid calling on the Muslims to unite and wait for outside help. In the event, only a pre-emptive war against the *shah* stopped the invasion. Arguably, the Great Rebellion in Delhi can be interpreted as an attempt by soldiers, courtiers, merchants and peasants to protect their sovereign and to keep up *dharma*.[123]

At any rate, when the mutineers from Meerut arrived at Delhi on the evening of 11 May, only a few segments of the urban population joined in the resultant killing of Europeans and Anglo-Indians. Most inhabitants of Delhi remained quiet and kept on with their daily business. Peace and an efficient government were established by the Mughal courtiers within days, only to collapse during the siege of Delhi.[124] Not until the suppression of the rebellion and the deportation of the last

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[121] Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, p.334–5.
[122] *Delhi Gazette* (4 Oct. 1853), p.414.
[123] Buckler, 'The Political Theory Of the Indian Mutiny', pp.54–60.
[124] Spear, *Twilight Of the Mughuls*, pp.200–8.

padshah, Bahadur Shah II, were the British able to firmly establish their rule over the city of Delhi.

Summary and Conclusion

Uproar afflicted Delhi through the first half of the nineteenth century for a variety of reasons. Numerous food riots occurred due to the deterioration of agrarian conditions in north India which made the region increasingly vulnerable to ecological disasters and the greed of grain dealers. There were several major political riots, as local interest groups competed for influence with the Mughal and the British. There was factional strife within the Muslim *ulema*. Social tensions periodically spilled over into violence, especially in the poorer sections of the city. Unrest was sparked, too, by British 'internal' security measures which transformed the govern-ance of the Mughal capital-residence. Finally, 'religious' riots occasionally punctured the peace of the city, though they cannot be regarded simply or only as 'communal' riots. In most such cases, conflict seems to have been related more to commerce, ideology, or the influence of elite groups, than to fanatic aggression among the followers of different religious beliefs.

From the beginning of their rule in Delhi, the British had to work with and/or around the varying groups of the city with their differing political and economic agendas. The simultaneous presence of two authorities—the British and the *padshah*—in the city was a major reason for much of the discontent among the upper echelons of the population. Delhi became a field for contesting and challenging the new British power and, simultaneously for the British, a test case of the *padshah*'s sovereignty. The new commercial and financial elites, with their recently acquired economic capital and power, sought new representation, while the old political and religious elite lost power and influence. Though it sometimes seems difficult to clearly depict the different elites in the sense of fairly homogenous groups pursuing certain political and economic aims, individual men as members of the elite groups (the British, the Mughal courtiers, the Jains, the various Muslim learned men, the emerging 'middle class') obviously pursued their own or, in some cases, their class's or group's interests. Therefore, urban resistance cannot be generally described as uniform and undifferentiated reactions upon local politics, but have to be analysed against their various backgrounds.

During the period of transition from Mughal to British supremacy, which in Delhi lasted essentially from 1803 through to 1858, the city turned into an unquiet and unruly place compared with the preceding century (if we except the horrendous sack-ings of Delhi by Afghan invaders and the Maratha Scindia). This transitional situation affected all parts of the urban population. In an attempt to keep conditions peaceful within the city, the British resorted to building 'shifting alliances' and

'random coalitions', and mediating between social classes and political groups as was expedient. From this point of view, what is usually described as their 'practical' approach to politics comes across as a fairly opportunistic strategy. The inconsistent and contradictory must, therefore, be regarded an integral part of that colonial system.

This new British 'system' enlarged the space for self-representation and political agitation in the emerging public arenas of north India's towns. However, this rebounded against the colonial regime, since the British were in many instances forced to react to Indian 'agency'. Consider the case of Resident Colebrooke's Bengal *babu*, Ram Gopal. Although Charles Trevelyan did his best to prosecute Colebrooke, and to implicate Ram Gopal in his dismissal, the 'new man' was not able to convict Gopal of any offence even a year after the Delhi Resident had left office—largely because of the latter's false court evidence in favour of Gopal. This episode shows 'that even at this late stage in Britain's conquest of India the new rulers were unable to monopolize the power that came with access to information'.[125] Next to the last resort of military action, British rule in India rested, to a very large extent during the first half of the nineteenth century, on the cooperation and collaboration of Indian economic and financial interests and administrative classes. Those who were willing to collaborate were duly fostered by the representatives of the colonial regime. On the other hand, British officers discouraged public actions by their Indian employees and subordinates which might compromise the interests of these collaborators and creditors.[126]

During the early nineteenth century the British gradually extended their understanding of India as a timeless society based on communal interests into an ideology of full-blown 'communalism' that divided the country's population into fixed groups along religious lines, and merged economic problems, ethnic differences and political tensions into 'simple' religious moulds. Yet the 'construction of communalism', as convincingly elaborated by Gyanendra Pandey, did not gain its momentum until the end of the nineteenth century.[127] What we see in the early part of that century is a growing 'agency' of urban groups and interests, some politically, others economically, and others again religiously, motivated. The specific 'dualistic' situation of Delhi created the room to manoeuvre for these groups which they used to express their self-understanding and to demand certain privileges or rights. At the same time, parallel processes were taking place,

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[125] Prior *et al*, 'Bad Language', pp.112.

[126] *Ibid.*, p.111.

[127] T. Metcalf, *Ideologies Of the Raj*; and Harald Fischer-Tiné and Michael Mann (eds), *Colonialism as Civilizing Mission. Cultural Ideology in British India* (London, Nashville: Anthem Press, 2003), *passim.*

varying in speed and time, which caused tensions at specific points—as when political and social, or religious and economic issues became entangled.

Neither state interference nor a lack of it alone caused the proliferation of urban resistance in Delhi, but the politics of a weak colonial regime guided by everyday necessities certainly contributed. British expansion did not bring about an 'age of reason' so much as an 'age of confusion'. On the face of it the coexistence of military power and legal forms with insecurity and instability within British India in the first half of the nineteenth century looks paradoxical. But it is in fact the characteristic of every colonial regime whose rule rests just on dominance and lacks real hegemony.[128] This is precisely the situation which can be observed in Delhi during the first half of the nineteenth century.

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[128] Ranajit Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony. History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).