Eighteenth-Century Statecraft and State Formation in North India

DEBORAH BYARS COBLE*

INTRODUCTION

In his translation of Firishtah's *History of Hindustan,* Alexander Dow described conditions in North India during the late eighteenth century in the following terms;

> Hindustan is, at present, torn to pieces by factions. All laws, divine and human, are trampled under foot. Instead of one tyrant, as in the times of the empire, the country now groans under thousands; and the voice of the oppressed multitude reaches heaven. It would therefore, be promoting the cause of justice and humanity, to pull those petty tyrants from the height to which their villanies has raised them; and to give to so many millions of mankind, a government founded upon the principles of virtue and justice.[1]

Similar contemporary accounts of the chaos and anarchy following the decline of the Mughal Empire reflected this bias towards familiar British ideals of government. One wonders to what extent such authors exploited the picture of eighteenth-century lawlessness and social decadence to justify the British meddling in Indian political affairs. Was the violence and disorder really as profound as contemporary British observers led people to believe?

In order to understand the political structure of North India at the close of the eighteenth century, it is useful to re-evaluate this portrayal of chaos and anarchy. To this end, the present analysis focuses on the process of regional state formation, which reasserted the predominance of local power structures during the period. A model of regional state formation is employed and two relevant historical examples are detailed.

*Ms. Coble, the first prize winner, holds both a B.A. and an M.A. degree from the University of Virginia. Having recently returned from Lahore, Pakistan as a participant in the Berkeley Urdu Language Program, she is planning to explore employment opportunities in government and international agencies associated with the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent. Alternatively, she may seek further education in a technically oriented field, such as agriculture or health sciences.

Although the eighteenth century witnessed the decay of the Mughal Empire and a corresponding disintegration of over-arching political organizations, this does not inevitably mean that the structure of local political organizations radically changed. Rather, political and economic power progressively concentrated more and more at the local level. Communities and regions reasserted themselves as self-sufficient structures, either because they could no longer rely on, or because they had succeeded in shaking off, the control of a weakened central government. Control shifted to the hands of nobles and local chiefs who exerted political authority in their territories just as extensive and absolute as that claimed by the Emperor over them.

This decentralization of imperial power, with similar sanctions into the ranks of the more enterprising elements of the nobility, and then further downward to local zamindars (hereditary land controllers) and European military freebooters, raises some interesting questions about the nature of authority within eighteenth-century regional states. Authority at any level cannot be meaningfully examined without considering the political structure in which it operates. "Sovereignty is not an isolated phenomenon of politics — it has many strong threads woven into the multiple social fabric of mankind." [2] When considering how elites established authority within eighteenth-century states, one must focus not only on the individual who wielded authority, but also on the political framework in which he functioned. In other words, the distribution of power within the social structure at any one time both offers and limits the opportunities for an individual or a political institution to consolidate or exert any authority. The "many strong threads" which a sovereign weaves represent the ties which bind diverse sets of interests into a distinct unit like the eighteenth-century state. These "threads" included channels of communication, preferences of behavior, political and economic alignments, symbolic sanctions of legitimacy — in short, all the resources which are available to a sovereign in his interaction with lower levels of political control.

Relationships between the imperial center and its outlying states ultimately determined the form the political systems of eighteenth-century North India would take. To explore this interaction, I have selected two eighteenth-century regional states consolidated by European military freebooters. The State of Sardhana from 1778 to 1803 and the State of Haryana from 1782

to 1802 both developed administrative mechanisms of their own, borrowing at times from the model provided by the center, but also exploiting the rules and structures of politics at the local level. Thus, authority within a state rested on a combination of imperial sanctions from above, local collaboration from below and the superior military force of a political entrepreneur.

Stewart Gordon's model of state formation in Central India during the eighteenth century provides a useful tool in analyzing similar interactions between the imperial center and regional states, and between the source of authority within a state and the local systems under its control (see diagram, p. 28). Gordon describes the dynamic behind this process as, "... the universal desire for maximum stable land revenue, not land as such, and maximum political control, that is reducing the largest possible number of people to clientship or dependency relations." [3] Counteracting this dynamic, however, is the ever-present need to maintain troops.

Gordon's flow-chart, in contrast to a static power-structure analysis, accounts for the extremely transient and indistinct nature of eighteenth century North Indian states, which cannot be defined in terms of the modern notion of nation-state. Using territorial boundaries in defining these states obscures the fact that land revenue collection, not centralized administrative control of land, defined the nature of sovereignty. These states further lacked a common identity or heritage shared by all inhabitants, except in terms of submission to a common superior military power. Thus the whole idea of a state existed not so much in the perceptions of its heterogeneous inhabitants, as in the mind of the military power which successfully subdued them.

The permanence and stability of North Indian states rested primarily on their founder's ability to establish and maintain a superior position by force of arms. The aggressive use of military force formed the basis of eighteenth-century state-formation. Groups and individuals entering the regional state system always began with a body of troops and the need to support them. Once an ambitious individual acquired enough money to raise a small body of troops, as well as a "symbolic sanction", in the form of local revenue collecting rights granted by a superior authority, he legitimately invaded and extorted revenue from the towns and villages of his assigned area.

In the next step, military leaders came to terms with the local powers. After subduing an area these elites established authority, not only by using force, but also by supporting local political figures who required an outside source of legitimacy to maintain their position. Invaders exploited tenuous claims to political power at the local level to gain allies with a vested interest in remaining loyal to new overlords.

Once local inhabitants recognized the new authority, the new elites required a base of operations where troops could be trained and supplies stored. These warlords achieved this goal either by building a new fort with resources gained from plunder, or subduing an existing stronghold.

With an independent base of operations and recognized authority over a particular revenue-collecting area, warlords shifted from desire for plunder to strengthening and extending their newly-established political power. Because plunder alone could rarely sufficiently support the vast number of troops required for any individual to advance this far in the state-formation process, these new elites acquired an alternative source of funds by reducing the forts of subordinates and thereby increasing their share of revenue. This meant replacing intermediaries and middle men with personal representatives, thus penetrating further into the local political system.

The last three stages of the state-formation process represented a declining reliance on plunder and the growth of some sort of political infrastructure to replace the use of military force. An administration evolved which offered subordinates strong incentives for participation in the system. Previous enemies became salaried officials while rebellious villagers adopted the attitude of loyal subjects. An organized administrative system collected stable land revenue. Ultimately, the sovereign of a state had consolidated his authority to such an extent that he recognized the rights of his chosen successor. Even at this point, however, factional fighting between constitutent parts of a state could develop, thus threatening disintegration.

As applied to the case studies of Sardhana and Haryana, Stewart's model provides a framework in which regional states can be analyzed as processes of change, rather than as fixed structural entities.

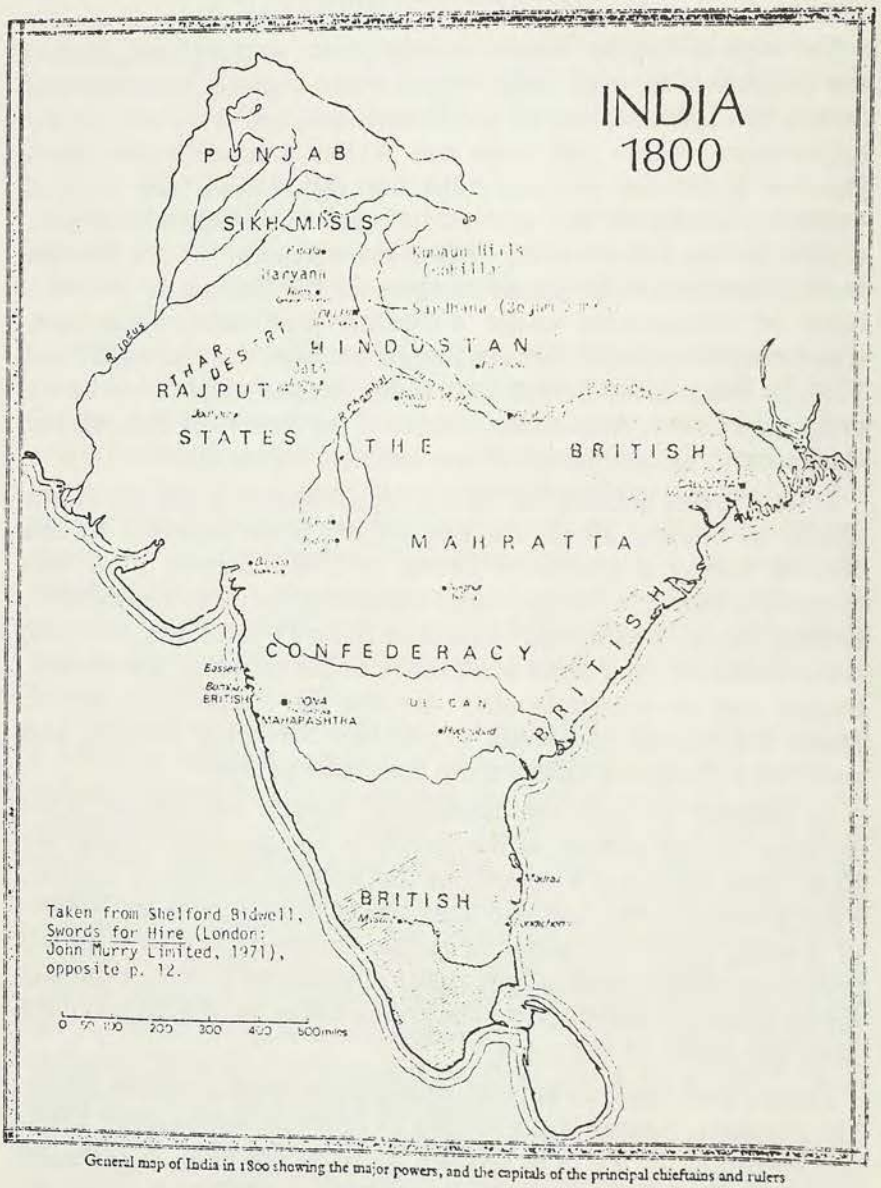
The State of Sardhana under Begum Sumru 1778-1803

The saga of Begum Sumru's rise to power as a regional actor in the political affairs of Delhi began when her husband, General Sumru (an Indianization of the French 'sombre', referring to his appearance), whose real name was Walter Reinhardt, received a jagir or grant for revenue-collecting rights from the Mughal emperor. Reinhardt had arrived in India from Luxemburg as a soldier in the French army. After the surrender of the French trading settlement of Chandernagore to the British, he joined a band of mercenaries under a French freebooter, Jean Law, wandering from South India to Bengal between the years 1757 and 1760. In Bengal, the British East India Company disbanded Law's army, and Sumru entered the service of the Nawab of Bengal, Mir Qasim, with the command of one battalion of sepoys.[4]

It was Sumru and this battalion which followed the orders of Mir Qasim to murder all of the English prisoners captured by the Nawab during a march on Poona in 1763.[5] Shortly after this massacre, Sumru's troops began clamoring for pay. The Nawab, lacking funds, was forced to dismiss Sumru's battalion, ordering them to deliver their arms and cannon to the officer of his arsenal. Sumru saw no reason to obey. He and his troops, fully armed, joined the Nawab of Awadh (a province bordering Bengal), and received a generous salary from their new patron.[6]

In October of 1763 the Nawabs of Awadh and Bengal were defeated by the British at the Battle of Baksar, establishing the East India Company's control in the political affairs of Bengal. Failing to realize the unscrupulous character of Sumru, the Nawab of Awadh, after his defeat in battle, entrusted Sumru with the protection of the royal harem. Sumru proceeded to secure the pay for his troops by surrounding the harem and extorting his just dues from the ladies of the court.[7]

Sumru next took up service with the Jat chief, Jawahir Singh. The Jat state, located in the vicinity of Delhi on the Gangetic Plain, was disrupted by civil war. At the Battle of Barsana, in 1774, the Mughal imperial forces were successful in regaining Agra, an important stronghold they had earlier lost to the Jats. Sumru's troops fought in this battle on the side of the Jats. Although the Jat army was defeated, the discipline and skill of Sumru's



General map of India in 1800 showing the major powers, and the capitals of the principal chieftains and rulers

European-trained troops were greatly admired by the general of the imperial forces. Upon the Jat's surrender, Sumru was offered a position of command in the Mughal imperial army.[8]

After receiving an official pardon from the Emperor, Sumru was granted a jagir in the prosperous area of the Gangetic Doab stretching from Aligarh to beyond Muzaffarnagar. The village of Sardhana, twelve miles from modern Meerut, became his headquarters (see map p. 12).

The commander of the imperial forces, however, anxious to make use of Sumru's knowledge of the Jat country acquired during his period of service under Jawahir Singh, transferred him to Agra as civil and military governor. Here he died in May of 1778.[9] Although Sumru left behind a son from a first marriage, this child had been born an idiot. Consequently his second wife, the Begum Sumru, assumed the rights to his jagir.

Sumru's wife, upon his death, was recognized by the Mughal court as legal heir to his jagir of Sardhana.[10] During Sumru's governorship at Agra, his wife had efficiently administered the affairs of his jagir, controlling the finances and provisioning the troops of Sardhana. The Begum had built up an effective force of five battalions of infantry, one body of irregular horse, and three hundred European officers and gunners, equipped with forty cannon.[11]

The Begum's jagir of Sardhana was a small but fertile tract of land, measuring about thirty-six miles north to south and twenty-four miles east to west. The inhabitants, mostly Jat cultivators, provided the Begum with about Rs. 900,000 a year in revenue. This income was supplemented by transit duties collected on goods transported through the area.[12]

Begum Sumru first turned her attention to increasing the wealth and prosperity within the area of Sardhana. Since she held no title at the Mughal court, thereby remaining initially aloof from Delhi politics, she focused on the suppression of crime and the establishment of her authority. Within Sardhana the Begum's power was absolute in both civil and criminal affairs. She maintained a well stocked arsenal and foundry for cannon within the walls of a small fortress built near her residence.[13] The Sardhana army was under the command of a British freebooter, George Thomas. As a jagirdar of the Mughal Empire, the Begum was required to station a portion of her army at Delhi, but the

majority of her troops remained within Sardhana defending the state against incursions from their Sikh neighbors to the north.

Not until 1787, when Ghulam Qadir Rohilla invaded Delhi, did the Begum became actively involved in affairs at the Imperial court. Summoned to the capital, the Begum immediately noted the precarious state of court affairs. With the Marathas [14] from the south and the Rohillas from the northeast threatening Delhi, the Emperor was frantically seeking allies. Begum Sumru collected the troops from all quarters of her jagir in order to give the Emperor, Shah Alam, an idea of her numerical strength. She then proceeded to pressure him for money and an increase in land assignment commensurate with the expenses required to maintain so large an army. If her demand was not met, she threatened to leave Delhi. In addition, she insisted on payment of her troops' allowances from the royal treasury.[15] Although her biographers have described the Begum as an unselfish, devoted servant of her king, she, as all the political actors of the time, attempted to exploit the weakness of the imperial center for her personal advancement.

The lack of funds in the Imperial treasury further accentuated the crisis. As the imperial power weakened, refractory local zamindars began to withhold revenue payments. One such zamindar was Najf Quli Khan, who had secured the fort of Gokulgarh in Rajputana to the west of Delhi. In 1798, the Emperor, accompanied by Begum Sumru and three battalions under the command of George Thomas, set out to subdue Najf Quli Khan in the hopes of replenishing the dwindling imperial treasury. During the seige of Gokulgarh, the Begum's troops bravely defended the Imperial camp and were eventually successful in forcing Najf Quli Khan to surrender. Returning to Delhi, the Emperor invested the Begum with a robe of honor and the titles 'Daughter of the Emperor' and 'Ornament of her Sex' (*Zeb-un-nissa*). The district of Badshapur was also added to her jagir.[16]

Not only did the Begum have to contend with affairs at Delhi and the defense of her jagir, she also had to maintain her authority among her troops. In 1793 a mutiny among officers almost led to her permanent loss of authority. The previous year Begum Sumru had replaced her commanding officer, George Thomas, with a Frenchman named Le Vaisseau, who had succeeded in impressing the Begum with his smooth, polished manner and intellectual pretensions. This contrasted with the rough, crude and somewhat

vulgar behavior of Thomas, who nonetheless, maintained a rapport with his men which largely accounted for their effectiveness as an army. Although influential with the Begum, Le Vaisseau alienated the troops with his aristocratic airs. Word of Le Vaisseau's secret marriage to the Begum increased the restlessness of the army. News of this discontent reached the Marathas, most likely by means of George Thomas, who had taken up service with a Maratha chief after his loss of command in the Begum's service. Emboldened by the promise of support from the Maratha army, a group of the Begum's officers murdered Le Vaisseau and imprisoned the Begum.[17]

Suspecting Maratha involvement, the Begum managed to dispatch a letter to Thomas offering the Marathas a handsome sum of money if they would withdraw their support from the mutineers and come to her assistance. Thomas worked out a deal with the Maratha Governor of the Upper Doab, Sindhia, promising him just compensation from the Begum if he would simply move his troops in the direction of Sardhana. Thomas, then, marched to Sardhana with a small force of fifty horsemen, sending a message in advance that he was approaching by order of Sindhia to reinstate Begum Sumru. The mutineers, believing the whole of the Maratha army was behind Thomas, complied with his commands, and Begum Sumru once again gained control of her army and jagir.[18]

Following this crisis, the Begum remained a semi-independent ally of the Marathas, who had gained paramountcy among the regional powers of the Doab. By 1798 her troops included six battalions. Five of these, however, were stationed with Maratha troops in the south where they fought in support of Sindhia against the British in 1802.[19] Only one battalion remained at Sardhana under the Begum's direct control. This was disbanded after the British took Delhi in 1803. The Begum remained a pensioner of the British from this time until her death in 1836.[20]

The Begum was able to maintain stability in the state of Sardhana due to its small size and homogenous population of Jat cultivators. She was never forced to over-extend herself. As other regional actors, she relied upon her army to establish and maintain her authority, but her army was small enough and the revenue from her jagir large enough that she did not normally need to engage in additional plundering expeditions or expansion beyond the frontiers of her state. She posed no threat to other regional

states and pursued the wise policy of subordinating herself to whatever power seemed to be most dominant at the time.

Thus the greatest asset that Begum Sumru possessed was her ability to judge correctly which state to ally with during complicated intrigues involving numerous regional actors. This required an astute sense of how the distribution of political power changed and how this change would affect the balance of power in North India. Another political entrepreneur whose success can be attributed largely to his innate understanding of how the eighteenth century political system functioned was George Thomas, to whom we now turn.

George Thomas's State in Haryana 1787-1802

George Thomas first appeared upon the stage of Delhi politics as commander of Begum Sumru's forces between 1787 and 1792. This military and administrative service familiarized Thomas with the norms of regional state politics, enabling him to build an independent army which for a short time controlled sufficient political resources to be considered a state.

Thomas's entry into the state-formation process began when, after leaving the Begum's employ in 1792, he organized a handful of armed men which he used to storm and loot a large village near Delhi. From this action, he derived enough booty to increase his force to two hundred and fifty men. He trained these men in the hopes of finding a patron who could use the services of a European-trained army. Requiring a safe place to drill his men and store his supplies, Thomas marched to the British frontier station of Anupshahr on the border of Awadh. Here a British East India Company border patrol was stationed with the permission of the Nawab of Awadh. Thomas set up camp, began drilling his troops, and attempted to establish a reputation among the neighboring nobility and chiefs.[21]

In early 1793, Thomas received an offer from the Maratha chief Appa Khandi Rao who was attempting to build an independent power base in the Upper Doab region. Appa urgently needed someone to collect revenue for him since his own troops refused to obey commands until they received their long overdue back pay. Appa directed Thomas to raise a battalion of one thousand men and one hundred horse, assigning him a district, located southwest of

Delhi, for support of his troops.[22] This whole area, however, was in a state of rebellion. Appa himself had never been able to subdue the inhabitants, who took shelter in the surrounding mountains upon the approach of an army.

Legally, this area belonged to the Mughal Emperor, who in turn had assigned it to the Raja of Alwar, not to Appa. However, effective local political control rested in the hands of the leaders of the Mewattis, the tribe of Rajputs who inhabited this area.[23] During the eighteenth century, the Mewatti tribes formed large social units, pooling their resources so that they could independently protect themselves. Thomas noted this change on his marches to raise "contributions" in Mewatti territory. "The small villages were found to be deserted and the large ones increased with numbers of armed persons." [24] An account by the French traveller, Comte de Modave, confirmed this process of local consolidation:

> In the province of Delhi, there are many large villages in favorable positions and easy to defend. The peasants of neighboring villages have abandoned their hamlets in order to retire to these chief villages. They have formed a common council which governs all their public affairs. They recognize neither the usurpers nor the legitimate masters of the province, they only pay when they are forced to do it, some money to save their crops. These villages have ten to twelve thousand muskateers within their walls who serve to defend them whenever they are attacked, and who during the remainder of the time are engaged in work on the soil.[25]

Under these circumstances, Thomas could collect revenue only by individually confronting each large, fortified village of the district. He could find no well-defined target or center of authority to strike. The exercise of political power and revenue collection had decentralized from the district level to the large villages. To extort one year's worth of revenue from the Mewattis took Thomas a full year. Thomas achieved even this limited degree of success only by storming the two largest strongholds in the Mewatti area, Tijara and Jhajjar. It was at Jhajjar that Thomas established his headquarters, later erecting the fort of Georgegarh there.[26]

With a base in Mewatti territory, Thomas became more confident. He realized that his strength was perhaps greater than that of his patron's and no longer deemed it necessary to subordinate his interests to those of Appa. In 1795, after storming a fort and seizing several pieces of artillery, Thomas ignored Appa's demands that the booty be surrendered to him.

After Appa's death in 1797, his nephew, Vaman Rao, succeeded him and attempted to take possession of Thomas's jagir. Vaman allied himself with a Brahmin zamindar of a populous district to the west of Jhajjar.[27] Together these two began to build an army reinforced by a large body of peasants organized under the zamindars of their respective villages. An unexpected attack from Thomas, however, broke up the alliance and Vaman's attempt failed. Before negotiations between himself and Vaman could begin, Thomas was called home by a Sikh invasion into his territory.

Thus, Thomas's position in the political system at the time remained ambiguous. Without a settlement with Vaman, Thomas had no authority other than military force. The death of Appa Khandi Rao had undermined his major source of outside legitimacy. The politics of the time demanded that Thomas find a patron if he wished to remain in the role of commander of an army and holder of a jagir. "A great deal could be done in India under the name of authority, even though the power evoked was a shadowy unreality." [28] Divorced from a name of authority, one had to be prepared to compete as an independent power.

For a short time, Thomas served under another Maratha general, Lakwa Dada. He was assigned three large territories around Delhi, along with his original jagir of Jhajjar. In return, his army defended the northern frontier against the Sikhs.[29] Soon, however, an opposition alliance of Maratha chiefs, jealous of Lakwa's widening influence, repossessed Thomas's districts, leaving Thomas with only Jhajjar to support a body of troops which had grown to three thousand.[30] This marked a turning point in the career of George Thomas. He had been a mercenary officer, fighting battles for others in return for a stipulated pay and acting under a legitimate authority. Now he was left to rely on his own resources.

The immediate problem which Thomas had to face was how to pay his troops. He could not simply disband them without first

paying their salaries, which had fallen into arrears. Thomas therefore raided the towns and villages of his weaker neighbors. His first target was a large town in the domains of the Raja of Jaipur which he beseiged and ransomed for Rs. 52,000.[31] In this way Thomas provided for his large army until he could collect enough money to establish a central base of operations.

In 1798 Thomas began to carve out an independent principality for himself in the area of Haryana, ninety miles to the northwest of Delhi.[32] Most of the country of Haryana was dry and barren. Only along the banks of the Jumna and Ghaggar rivers was the terrain of scrub and sandy desert interrupted. During the rainy season, when these rivers overflowed, they deposited a rich soil capable of yielding a good wheat crop. Otherwise, the land was utilized mainly for grazing cattle.[33]

Thomas described the peasants of this area in the following manner:

> The natives of Hurrianah for a succession of ages having been in a constant state of warfare, possess great personal bravery, they are expert in the use of arms, particularly in the exercise of the lance, sabre and the matchlock, but though brave they are in disposition cruel, treacherous and vindictive, and when engaged in domestic quarrels, scruple not to kill their antagonist on the slightest and most trivial occasions.[34]

Thomas did not face defenseless peasants concerned only with squeezing a living from the soil, but rebellious and robust people who had, out of necessity, taken up the responsibility of protecting themselves when a higher order failed to do so.

The internal rivalry among the inhabitants of these villages for political power, however, often weakened their defenses despite their strong fortifications. No single family established authority long before being challenged by another. A contemporary observer noted that, " . . . all the level country is sown with forts. . . . I have seen villages where there are up to three or four of them which are frequently held by opposite parties." [35]

Thomas chose for his first target the largest and best fortified town in Haryana. He rightly assumed that if he could subdue this stronghold, others less powerful would capitulate without a

struggle. After a severe battle, this town surrendered, and soon the whole southern part of Haryana followed.[36]

Thomas then established a garrison and base of operations in this newly acquired territory. Selecting the ancient fortress city of Hansi, Thomas began the tasks of restoring its crumbling walls and redigging its dried-up wells. To supply the demands of his army, it was necessary to repopulate and revive the city. Hansi was ideally located close to the Sikh border, surrounded by a sandy desert which provided a natural barrier of defense.[37] This made it a perfect frontier outpost for keeping an eye on troublesome Sikh neighbors to the north.

The boundaries of Thomas's territories remained in a state of flux, expanding when Thomas was in residence and contracting when he was out on a campaign. They reached their greatest extent at the end of Thomas's final raid into Sikh territory in 1801. His state then stretched from the fringe of the Thar desert in the west to the Jumna River in the east and Sutlej River in the north. This, however, was only briefly and very loosely consolidated. His more permanent holdings incorporated an area one hundred and twenty miles long and fifty miles wide in the southwest portion of modern Haryana. This area included a total of about eight hundred villages.[38]

To defend his newly created state, Thomas carried on incessant raids against his neighbors — the Maratha generals in the districts of Delhi to the southwest, the Sikh chief of Patiala to the north, and the Raja of Jaipur to the south. His independence rested upon a precarious balance of power among these three factions. As long as no united effort was possible, Thomas was strong enough to confront each of his enemies separately.

At the same time, Thomas had to enforce his authority at home. When on campaign, there was always the possibility of rebellion within his domains. One of the most severe of these rebellions occurred in Bihal, a Rajput town of about ten thousand. The inhabitants of Bihal had established a reputation for bravery by resisting the attack of an Imperial force in the previous decade.[39] Now they audaciously began to plunder the merchants of Hansi. Thomas quickly returned to settle this disturbance, since protracted plundering threatened agricultural work which formed the basis of his revenue. When Thomas arrived, Bihal was well

garrisoned by three thousand fully armed men, but badly supplied with provisions. Thomas, therefore, laid siege to the town, extracting a fine of Rs. 30,000 for its insubordination.[40]

By the year 1801, Thomas had firmly established himself in Haryana and had developed the first signs of an independent administrative system.

> I established a mint, and coined my own rupees, which I made current in my army and country; as from the commencement of my career at Jyjur, I had resolved to establish an independency, I employed workmen and artificers of all kinds . . . .[41]

He realized, however, that without a recognized source of legitimacy, he had to rely on military strength alone. This strained his resources and placed a very heavy burden on his army.

> I now judged that nothing but force of arms could maintain me in my authority, I therefore increased their numbers, cast my own artillery, commenced making muskets, matchlocks and powder, and in short made the best preparations for carrying on an offensive and defensive war, till at length having gained a capital and a country bordering on the Seik territories, I wished to put myself in a capacity when a favorable opportunity should offer of attempting the conquest of the Panjab, and aspired to the honor of planting the British standard on the banks of the Attock.[42]

Thomas then began searching desperately for a patron or ally.

He wrote to the British Governor-General of Bengal, Wellesley, announcing his intention of declaring war upon the Sikhs, and proposed that in exchange for a guarantee from the Company troops that they would protect his territories while he was out on campaign, he would take possession of the Punjab and relinquish the command of his army to the British. Wellesley, however, was at this time involved with affairs in South India and failed to respond to this offer.[43]

Thomas realized that his garrison at Hansi was no longer large enough to withstand the growing Maratha threat. The Punjab, however, could provide him with a magnificent recruiting ground

for more troops. Its fertile, well-watered land further offered the possibility of a large amount of revenue. After failing to obtain additional support through bribes to allies, Thomas invaded the Punjab and built up his power by more violent means. He had not yet reached a stage on Gordon's flow chart (see p. 28) where he could escape from the 'plunder dynamic'. His authority rested on military force. To maintain an army powerful enough to defend his state required more money than he could possibly obtain from revenue collection alone. His troops were not part-time soldiers who also engaged in farming or had some alternative source of income. Warfare was their profession and to keep them employed Thomas had to find battles to fight.

Two factors made the proposed campaign easier for Thomas. First, the Sikh confederacy of the Punjab was divided into several feuding clans. Second, after fifteen years of experience in protecting his northern frontier against the Sikhs, Thomas had established a reputation among them as "Jowruj Jung", or George the Conqueror.[44] Thomas exploited these advantages successfully in his march through Sikh territory. He subdued Sikh forces wherever he met them, and made collections from the small forts scattered about the countryside. He did not, however, establish any permanent control, nor did he attempt to take any of the larger forts. Upon reaching the Sutlej River, Thomas arrogantly declared himself "Dictator" of all the country south of the Sutlej.[45] Little did he imagine that the Sikh armies at that moment were assembling to solicit aid from the Marathas. United, the Sikhs and Marathas posed a formidable threat to Thomas.

Knowing that his chances for resisting this powerful alliance were non-existent, "Jowruj Jung" stubbornly refused to yield without a fight. Perhaps after witnessing the frequent reversal of fortunes involved in the game of eighteenth-century politics, Thomas was playing for time. The possibility always existed that internal dissensions would destroy the alliance of his enemies, or other circumstance would turn their attention away from Haryana. Thomas, however, had become all too clear a target.

In August of 1801, the two armies — Thomas and his troops against the Maratha alliance under General Perron — met at Bahadurgarh, about fifteen miles west of Delhi.[46] Negotiations between the two commanders failed to achieve a settlement. Perron demanded that Thomas give up his original jagir of Jyjur

district and receive instead a monthly salary of Rs. 50,000 from the Maratha Governor of the north.[47] Thomas refused and retreated to his fort at Georgegarh.

At this fort the combined enemy forces besieged Thomas, and after a month, his fort capitulated. Thomas, however, escorted by a personal bodyguard, broke out and escaped to Hansi. There, with about seventeen hundred men, Thomas prepared a final defensive stand. Greatly outnumbered, he refused to submit until persuaded by British mercenaries in Maratha employ to take refuge in British territory. In January of 1802, George Thomas surrendered and was delivered over to the safety of the British at Anupshahr, where ten years earlier he had trained his first army of mercenaries.[48]

General George Thomas was a victim of the state-formation process of his time. If his primary concern had been financial or military success, he would not have refused Perron's lucrative offer at Bahadurgarh. Thomas, however, defined his place in the eighteenth century political system in the same terms as any other North Indian regional political leader. He had no desire to become a salaried official in the larger administrative bureaucracy of the Marathas. He could not yield the jagir he had received from Appa during the start of his career, and the state he had worked so hard to consolidate in Haryana, without losing his sense of identity as ruler of a state. Thomas had struggled to maintain the resources which provided him with a position of authority within the regional political system. These resources were one by one withdrawn. First he lost the sanction of legitimacy which his patron Appa had offered. Then he lost the support of local allies. Finally, he was defeated militarily by a more powerful alliance.

Throughout his career Thomas operated using the same perceptions as other regional warlords of the era. His relative success was due to his personal courage and intuitive ability to exploit the nature of eighteenth-century politics. Thomas was perhaps more Indian than he was British. As his biographer confessed when writing Thomas's memoirs, "He proposed to deliver his information in the Persian Language, adding that from constant use, it had become more familiar to him than his native-tongue."[49] Thomas died at the British cantonment of Bahrampore while on his way to Calcutta, just months after his defeat.

Imperial Ideals, Local Power Structures and Regional Political Systems

A comparison of Begum Sumru's State of Sardhana and George Thomas's State of Haryana illuminates factors which prove useful in defining the eighteenth-century North Indian state. A focus is provided by the fact that both of these states existed under the umbrella of a crumbling Mughal imperial center.

The Mughals consolidated their empire by evolving a set of "rituals, traditions, myths and histories," [50] to legitimize and maintain their authority. The system-wide values defined common goals and provided a framework for the integration of a very wide range of competing segments into one distinct unit — the empire. Many of the political tools used by the Mughals in developing their political framework appeared on a smaller scale in the formation of regional states.

Political elites in both the regional states and the Mughal empire, for example, based success within their domains less on hereditary sanctions or ethnic background than on sheer military and administrative ability. Begum Sumru, inauspicious daughter of a Muslim trader from the small town of Kutana, rose to power by assuming possession of her husband's jagir and maintaining Sardhana as a separate state until her death in 1836. George Thomas, though highly Persianized, came to India as a common Scottish sailor. From this humble origin, Thomas emerged in India as commander of a formidable army which he skillfully used to create a short-lived, independent state. The unorthodox nature of these characters reflected the fact that political power rested with those who possessed both cunning and the insight into how to use it. Power was not reserved for traditionally privileged hereditary elites, but was achieved personally, offering the promise of status and prestige to anyone courageous and bold enough to exploit it for their own advantage. In this way, the local or regional state functioned as a channel for upward mobility politically, economically and socially. Such a state provided political entrepreneurs with the opportunity to employ their talents of statecraft in a system where success awaited those who had come to an understanding of how the political system operated.

Mughal authority, like regional authority, had rested firmly on the foundations of a strong army. But in the eighteenth century,

the style of warfare changed. Every petty chief augmented his army with greater and greater numbers of mercenaries. The demand for cash rose astronomically because these soldiers could not be supported by land grants. More efficient but also more costly European-trained infantry increasingly replaced traditional cavalry. Indian military commanders discovered the advantage of using well-trained infantry backed up by artillery. The costs of ammunition, equipment, and trained soldiers, however, at least doubled that of traditional cavalry warfare. The consequent financial burden meant that the regular revenue of a previously stable state was no longer sufficient to support its troops. Thus, the need for plunder arose, and a state was plunged into the vicious cycle of predatory warfare.

The style of warfare popularized by the Marathas focused more attention on the resources of the locality and increased local involvement in regional politics. Larger numbers of the local population were drawn into martial activity as a Maratha army recruited local groups through the promise of plunder. But it was not only the opportunity to plunder which familiarized peasant cultivators with military activity. They found the need to defend themselves against those who made a livelihood from plunder. The peasants of the well fortified villages were experienced not only with the use of the plow, but in the use of arms as well. When properly equipped, villagers easily passed over from the defensive to the offensive as allies in regional power struggles.

New conquerors attempting to establish their control over an area often forged alliances with powerful villages. For example, the Maratha chief, Vaman Rao, attempted to undermine George Thomas's position in his jagir by allying with a powerful Brahmin zamindar who had recruited a large body of armed peasantry from among his villages.

These local political factions with tenuous claims to authority often made alliances with powerful outsiders to secure political control of an area. Opposition forces within Begum Sumru's army used the Maratha's support in this manner. Although her leading officers were discontended, only Marathas' support allowed them to undermine her authority for a time.

Eighteenth-century political entrepreneurs of North India exploited both imperial tradition and local political systems to build

new states. In carving out independent areas of control these entrepreneurs used both collaboration with pre-existing local elites and the power of traditional imperial sanctions as means of establishing their authority. The following incident involving the mercenary soldier James Skinner illustrates this point.

In January of 1798, the Raja of Jaipur refused to send the tribute demanded by Sindhia, Maratha Governor of the Upper Doab. To punish this act of insubordination, Sindhia ordered his general, Lukwa Dada, to march against the Raja and compel him to pay. Accompanying Lukwa on this campaign was a brigade of mercenary soldiers under the command of a European officer, James Skinner. In his memoirs, Skinner described the defeat of the Raja of Jaipur and a subsequent encounter between himself and Lukwa. After the Rajputs had deserted their camp, Skinner's brigade was granted permission to plunder it. Tucking a few gold idols away in his saddlebag, Skinner began his return to camp when the following episode occurred.

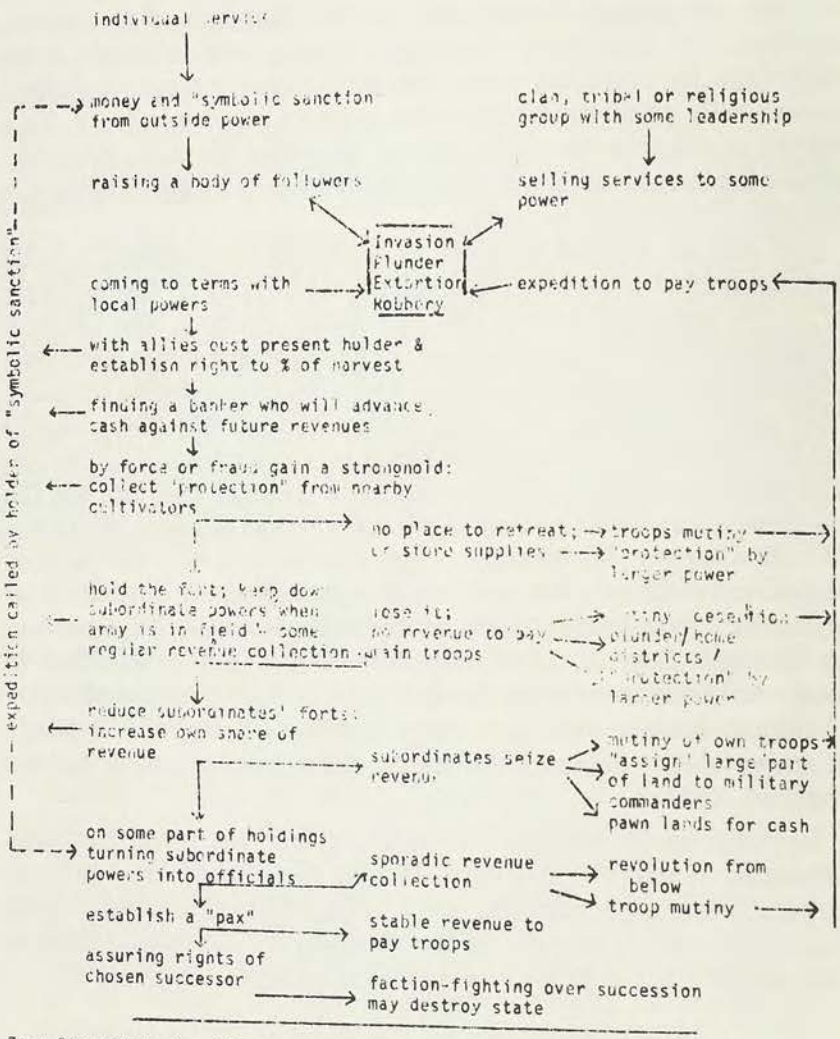
> In coming away I found a brass fish, with two chowries hanging to it, like moustachios. It attracted my curiosity, and I tied it to my saddle. On my way back I met numbers of Maratha chieftains going and coming, who all looked at me, and laughed as I passed, for what reason I could not then imagine. . . . Meeting a trooper who had been sent by Colonel Pholman to call me, I instantly followed him to that officer's presence. I found him sitting with Luckwa Dada. . . . Luckwa told me that he wished to see me . . . . (He) asked me what it was I had hanging to my horse . . . on which I loosed the fish, and presented it to him. . . . He then explained to me that the fish I had given was the actual Mahee muratib or imperial ensign of honour bestowed by the King of Dehlee upon the Rajah.[51]

The reactions of Lukwa and his subordinate chieftains indicate that the Marathas were familiar with the standard of the *mahee muratib* or fish of dignitaries. The Mughal Emperor had bestowed this honor on only nobles of the highest rank as a way of incorporating them into the imperial system. Thus, the petty Maratha chiefs, seeing this symbol hanging from the saddle of a European officer's horse, responded by derisively laughing at the degraded state this once coveted standard now assumed. To them

it meant nothing more than the fact that they were their own masters, no longer answerable to the Mughals. For Lukwa, however, this symbol of imperial authority was infinitely more important. By obtaining possession of the *mahee muratib,* Lukwa symbolically reinforced his victory over its previous owner. This served to enhance his status among the other Maratha generals, giving him an advantage in the constant power struggle among the Maratha armies of the north.

The use of Mughal symbols of authority by regional powers indicated the existence of common perceptions as to the meaning of these symbols. During the eighteenth century, the political habits developed by participation in the imperial system continued to determine the norms of political behavior, and to define the place that newly emerging regional powers would fill. The political system of the century was thus not simply anarchy and confusion. The breakup of the empire created not a political vacuum, but the re-emergence of local political systems inherent in the organization of Indian society. The attempt of entrepreneurs to consolidate local states necessitated the use of accepted Mughal sanctions of authority to supplement their use of military force. As described by Gordon's flow model of state-formation, the need to adapt to local conditions meant that the definition of a state was constantly changing. A state was not a fixed structural unit, but a dynamic process where imperial sanctions were reinterpreted in the regional context.

Regional states emerged as local political entrepreneurs used principles of imperial politics to fit new patterns of local political power. Their skill in adapting the fraying imperial fabric to a wide variety of local styles reflects the potential for individual initiative inherent in eighteenth-century statecraft and state formation.



From Stewart Gordon, "Scarf and Sword: Thugs, Marauders and State-formation in Eighteenth Century Malwa". Indian Economic Social and History Review, 6.

A Note on Sources

Sources most often consulted by historians of 18th century India are travellers' accounts and diaries. Extensive extracts of these accounts and diaries appear in gazetteers of British India which are available in most major South Asia library collections in the United States. Other valuable sources of information are the numerous letters and official documents exchanged between political leaders of this period. Some of these have been classified and published as *The Calendar of Persian Correspondence,* but much written communication in Persian and Urdu remains untranslated and uncompiled. Unfortunately, many historians employing the reactions of contemporary observers use this material indiscriminately. However, the best histories of 18th century India carefully consider who the author was and his or her motive for writing a given letter or account.

NOTES

[1] Muhammad Qasim Hindu Shah Astarabadi Firishtan, *The History of Hindostan,* Volume II, translated by Alexander Dow (New Delhi: Today and Tomorrow's Printers and Publishers, 1973), p. 403.

[2] Karl Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication* (New York: Wiley Publishing, 1953), p. 54.

[3] Stewart N. Gordon, "Scarf and Sword: Thugs, Marauders and State-formation in Eighteenth Century Malwa," *Indian Economic Social and History Review* 6 (December, 1969), p. 421.

[4] E.T. Atkinson, *North West Province Gazetteer,* Volume 1, Bundelkhand District; Volume 3, Meerut District, (Allahabad: Northwestern Provinces and Oudh Government Press, 1874), p. 95.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] James Baille Fraser, *Military Memoirs of Lt.-Col. James Skinner, C.B.,* (London: , 1851), p. 280. (Hereafter referred to as *James Skinner.*)

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] Brajendranath Banerji, *Begum Samru* (Calcutta: M.C. Sarkar and Sons, 1925), p. 101.

[9] Sir William Henry Sleeman, *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official* (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1844), p. 384. (Hereafter referred to as *Indian Official*.)

[10] Inheritance by one's wife was not a customary practice. In theory, jagirdari rights, titles and all property reverted to the Mughal Emperor upon one's death.

[11] H. R. Nevill, *United Province Gazetteer* (Meerut District: Northwestern Provinces and Oudh Government Press, 1904), p. 157.

[12] Banerji, *Begum Samru,* p. 141-142.

[13] Sleeman, *Indian Official,* p. 395.

[14] Marathas were the inhabitants of an area in southwest India known now as Maharashtra. By the 18th century the Hindu rulers of this area had built a strong independent army of local Maratha chiefs who owed symbolic allegiance to their leader, the Peshwa, centered in Poona (see map, p. 12).

[15] *Calendar of Persian Correspondence,* Volume 8, edited by B.A. Saletore (New Delhi: National Archives of India. Imperial Record Department, 1953), p. 177-78.

[16] Atkinson, *North West Province Gazetteer,* p. 98.

[17] William Francklin, *The History of the Reign of Shah Aulum* (Allahabad: Dr. D. L. M. Basu, Panini Office, Bahadurgan, 1934), p. 195.

[18] Nevill, *United Province Gazetteer,* p. 160-61.

[19] Atkinson, *North West Province Gazetteer,* p. 295.

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] Herbert Compton, *European Military Adventurers of Hindustan* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1892), p. 113.

[22] William Francklin, *Military Memoirs of Mr. George Thomas* (London: J. Stickdale, 1805), p. 5. (Hereafter referred to as *George Thomas.*)

[23] H.G. Keene, *Hindustan Under Free Lances 1770-1820* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1972), p. 79.

[24] Francklin, *George Thomas,* p. 18-19.

[25] L. L. Dolisey de Modave, "The Delhi Empire a Century after Bernier," translated by Sir Jadunath Sarkar, *Islamic Culture* (July, 1937), p. 387. (Hereafter referred to as "Delhi Empire".)

[26] Compton, *European Military Adventurers of Hindustan,* p. 170.

[27] *Ibid.,* p. 135.

[28] *Ibid.,* p. 134.

[29] Shelford Bidwell, *Swords for Hire—European Mercenaries in Eighteenth-Century India* (London: John Murray Limited, 1971), p. 118. (Hereafter referred to as *Swords for Hire.*)

[30] Compton, *European Military Adventurers of Hindustan,* p. 136.

[31] *Ibid.*

[32] Francklin, *George Thomas,* p. 87.

[33] Bidwell, *Swords for Hire,* p. 129.

[34] Francklin, *George Thomas,* p. 90-91.

[35] de Modave, "Delhi Empire," p. 387.

[36] Francklin, *George Thomas,* p. 85.

[37] Bidwell, *Swords for Hire,* p. 129.

[38] *Ibid.*

[39] Compton, *European Military Adventurers of Hindustan,* p. 170.

[40] *Ibid.*

[41] Francklin, *George Thomas,* p. 93.

[42] *Ibid.,* p. 93-94.

[43] Compton, *European Military Adventurers of Hindustan,* p. 178.

[44] *Ibid.,* p. 172.

[45] Francklin, *George Thomas,* p. 215.

[46] Keene, *Hindustan Under Free Lances 1770-1820,* p. 94.

[47] Francklin, *George Thomas,* p. 222.

[48] Keene, *Hindustan Under Free Lances 1770-1820,* p. 100.

[49] Compton, *European Military Adventurers of Hindustan,* p. 213.

[50] B. S. Cohn, "Political Systems in Eighteenth Century India: the Benares Region," *Journal of the American Oriental Society,* 132 (July-September, 1962), p. 313.

[51] Fraser, *James Skinner,* p. 152-154.