Textbook in History for Class XII

THEMES IN
INDIAN HISTORY
PART III

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OFFICES OF THE PUBLICATION DIVISION, NCERT

NCERT Campus
Sri Aurobindo Marg
New Delhi 110 016 **Phone : 011-26562708**

108, 100 Feet Road
Hosdakere Halli Extension
Banashankari III Stage
Bengaluru 560 085 **Phone : 080-26725740**

Navjivan Trust Building
P.O.Navjivan
Ahmedabad 380 014 **Phone : 079-27541446**

CWC Campus
Opp. Dhankal Bus Stop
Panihati
Kolkata 700 114 **Phone : 033-25530454**

CWC Complex
Maligaon
Guwahati 781 021 **Phone : 0361-2674869**

Publication Team

Head, Publication Division	:	*Anup Kumar Rajput*
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Chief Editor (In charge)	:	*Bijnan Sutar*
Editor	:	*Vijayam Sankaranarayanan*
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FOREWORD

The *National Curriculum Framework* (NCF), 2005, recommends that children's life at school must be linked to their life outside the school. This principle marks a departure from the legacy of bookish learning which continues to shape our system and causes a gap between the school, home and community. The syllabi and textbooks developed on the basis of NCF signify an attempt to implement this basic idea. They also attempt to discourage rote learning and the maintenance of sharp boundaries between different subject areas. We hope these measures will take us significantly further in the direction of a child-centred system of education outlined in the *National Policy on Education* (1986).

The success of this effort depends on the steps that school principals and teachers will take to encourage children to reflect on their own learning and to pursue imaginative activities and questions. We must recognise that, given space, time and freedom, children generate new knowledge by engaging with the information passed on to them by adults. Treating the prescribed textbook as the sole basis of examination is one of the key reasons why other resources and sites of learning are ignored. Inculcating creativity and initiative is possible if we perceive and treat children as participants in learning, not as receivers of a fixed body of knowledge.

These aims imply considerable change in school routines and mode of functioning. Flexibility in the daily time-table is as necessary as rigour in implementing the annual calendar so that the required number of teaching days are actually devoted to teaching. The methods used for teaching and evaluation will also determine how effective this textbook proves for making children's life at school a happy experience, rather than a source of stress or boredom. Syllabus designers have tried to address the problem of curricular burden by restructuring and reorienting knowledge at different stages with greater consideration for child psychology and the time available for teaching. The textbook attempts to enhance this endeavour by giving higher priority and space to opportunities for contemplation and wondering, discussion in small groups, and activities requiring hands-on experience.

The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) appreciates the hard work done by the textbook development committee responsible for this book. We wish to thank the Chairperson of the advisory group in Social Sciences, Professor Hari Vasudevan, and the Chief Advisor for this book,

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Professor Neeladri Bhattacharya, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi for guiding the work of this committee. Several teachers contributed to the development of this textbook; we are grateful to their principals for making this possible. We are indebted to the institutions and organisations which have generously permitted us to draw upon their resources, material and personnel. We are especially grateful to the members of the National Monitoring Committee, appointed by the Department of Secondary and Higher Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development under the Chairpersonship of Professor Mrinal Miri and Professor G.P. Deshpande, for their valuable time and contribution. As an organisation committed to systemic reform and continuous improvement in the quality of its products, NCERT welcomes comments and suggestions which will enable us to undertake further revision and refinement.

Director
National Council of Educational
Research and Training

New Delhi
20 November 2006

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RATIONALISATION OF CONTENT IN THE TEXTBOOKS

In view of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative to reduce content load on students. The National Education Policy 2020, also emphasises reducing the content load and providing opportunities for experiential learning with creative mindset. In this background, the NCERT has undertaken the exercise to rationalise the textbooks across all classes. Learning Outcomes already developed by the NCERT across classes have been taken into consideration in this exercise.

Contents of the textbooks have been rationalised in view of the following:

- Overlapping with similar content included in other subject areas in the same class
- Similar content included in the lower or higher class in the same subject
- Difficulty level
- Content, which is easily accessible to students without much interventions from teachers and can be learned by children through self-learning or peer-learning
- Content, which is irrelevant in the present context

This present edition, is a reformatted version after carrying out the changes given above.

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DEFINING THE FOCUS OF STUDY

What defines the focus of this book? What does it seek to do? How is it linked to what has been studied in earlier classes?

In Classes VI to VIII we looked at Indian history from early beginnings to modern times, with a focus on one chronological period in each year. Then in the books for Classes IX and X, the frame of reference changed. We looked at a shorter period of time, focusing specifically on a close study of the contemporary world. We moved beyond territorial boundaries, beyond the limits of nation states, to see how different people in different places have played their part in the making of the modern world. The history of India became connected to a wider inter-linked history. Subsequently in Class XI we studied *Themes in World History*, expanding our chronological focus, looking at the vast span of years from the beginning of human life to the present, but selecting only a set of themes for serious exploration. This year we will study *Themes in Indian History*.

The book begins with Harappa and ends with the framing of the Indian Constitution. What it offers is not a general survey of five millennia, but a close study of select themes. The history books in earlier years have already acquainted you with Indian history. It is time we explored some themes in greater detail.

In choosing the themes we have tried to ensure that we learn about developments in different spheres – economic, cultural, social, political, and religious – even as we attempt to break the boundaries between them. Some themes in the book will introduce you to the politics of the times and the nature of authority and power; others explore the way societies are organised, and the way they function and change; still others tell us about religious life and ritual practices, about the working of economies, and the changes within rural and urban societies.

Each of these themes will also allow you to have a closer look at the historians' craft. To retrieve the past, historians have to find sources that make the past accessible. But sources do not just reveal the past; historians have to grapple with sources, interpret them, and make them speak. This is what makes history exciting. The same sources can tell us new things if we ask new questions, and engage with them in new ways. So we need to see how historians read sources, and how they discover new things in old sources.

But historians do not only re-examine old records. They discover new ones. Sometimes these could be chance discoveries.

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Archaeologists may unexpectedly come across seals and mounds that provide clues to the existence of a site of an ancient civilisation. Rummaging through the dusty records of a district collectorate a historian may trip over a bundle of records that contain legal cases of local disputes, and these may open up a new world of village life several centuries back. Yet are such discoveries only accidents? You may bump into a bundle of old records in an archive, open it up and see it, without discovering the significance of the source. The source may mean nothing to you unless you have relevant questions in mind. You have to track the source, read the text, follow the clues, and make the inter-connections before you can reconstruct the past. The physical discovery of a record does not simply open up the past. When Alexander Cunningham first saw a Harappan seal, he could make no sense of it. Only much later was the significance of the seals discovered.

In fact when historians begin to ask new questions, explore new themes, they have to often search for new types of sources. If we wish to know about revolutionaries and rebels, official sources can reveal only a partial picture, one that will be shaped by official censure and prejudice. We need to look for other sources – diaries of rebels, their personal letters, their writings and pronouncements. And these are not always easy to come by. If we have to understand experiences of people, then oral sources might reveal more than written sources.

As the vision of history broadens, historians begin tracking new sources, searching for new clues to understand the past. And when that happens, the conception of what constitutes a source itself changes. There was a time when only written records were acknowledged as authentic. What was written could be verified, cited, and cross-checked. Oral evidence was never considered a valid source: who was to guarantee its authenticity and verifiability? This mistrust of oral sources has not yet disappeared, but oral evidence has been innovatively used to uncover experiences that no other record could reveal.

Through the book this year, you will enter the world of historians, accompany them in their search for new clues, and see how they carry on their dialogues with the past. You will witness the way they tease out meaning out of records, read inscriptions, excavate archaeological sites, make sense of beads and bones, interpret the epics, look at the stupas and buildings, examine paintings and photographs, interpret police reports and revenue records, and listen to the voices of the past. Each theme will explore the peculiarities and possibilities of one particular type of source. It will discuss what a source can tell and what it cannot.

This is the last part of *Themes in Indian History.*

NEELADRI BHATTACHARYA
Chief Advisor, History

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TEXTBOOK DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

CHAIRPERSON, ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Hari Vasudevan, *Professor,* Department of History, University of Calcutta, Kolkata

CHIEF ADVISOR

Neeladri Bhattacharya, *Professor,* Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (Theme 9)

ADVISORS

Kumkum Roy, *Associate Professor,* Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (Theme 2)

Monica Juneja, Guest Professor, Institut Furgeschichte, Viennna, Austria

TEAM MEMBERS

Jaya Menon, *Associate Professor,* Department of History, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, UP (Theme 1)

Kunal Chakrabarti, *Professor,* Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (Theme 3)

Uma Chakravarti, *Formerly Associate Professor in History,* Miranda House, University of Delhi, Delhi (Theme 4)

Farhat Hassan, *Associate Professor,* Department of History, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, UP (Theme 5)

Meenakshi Khanna, *Associate Professor in History,* Indraprastha College, University of Delhi, Delhi (Theme 6)

Vijaya Ramaswamy, *Professor,* Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (Theme 7)

Rajat Datta, *Professor,* Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (Theme 8)

Najaf Haider, *Associate Professor,* Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University New Delhi

Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Executive Editor, The Telegraph*, Kolkata (Theme 10)

Partho Dutta, *Associate Professor,* Department of History, Zakir Hussain College (Evening Classes), University of Delhi, Delhi

Ramachandra Guha, *freelance writer,* anthropologist and historian, Bangalore (Theme 11)

Sumit Sarkar, *Formerly Professor of History,* University of Delhi, Delhi (Theme 12)

Muzaffar Alam, *Professor of South Asian History,* University of Chicago, Chicago, USA

C.N. Subramaniam, *Eklavya,* Kothi Bazar, Hoshangabad

Rashmi Paliwal, *Eklavya,* Kothi Bazar, Hoshangabad

Prabha Singh, *P.G.T. History,* Kendriya Vidyalaya, Old Cantt., Telliarganj, Allahabad, UP

Smita Sahay Bhattacharya, *P.G.T. History,* Blue Bells School, Kailash Colony, New Delhi

Beeba Sobti, *P.G.T. History,* Modern School, Barakhamba Road, New Delhi

MEMBER-COORDINATORS

Anil Sethi, *Professor,* DESS, NCERT, New Delhi

Seema Shukla Ojha, *Assistant Professor,* DESS, NCERT, New Delhi

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This is the last part of *Themes in Indian History.*

- ☑ Each chapter is divided into numbered sections and subsections to facilitate learning.
- ☑ You will also find other material enclosed in boxes.

These contain:

Short meanings

Additional information

More elaborate definitions

These are meant to assist and enrich the learning process, but are ***not intended for evaluation.***

- ☑ Each chapter ends with a set of ***timelines***. This is to be treated as background information, and ***not for evaluation***.
- ☑ There are ***figures, maps*** and ***sources*** numbered sequentially through each chapter.
  - (a) **Figures** include illustrations of artefacts such as tools, pottery, seals, coins, ornaments etc. as well as of inscriptions, sculptures, paintings, buildings, archaeological sites, plans and photographs of people and places; visual material that historians use as sources.
  - (b) Some chapters have **maps**.

Sources

(c) **Sources** are enclosed within separate boxes: these contain excerpts from a wide variety of texts and inscriptions. Both visual and textual sources will help you acquire a feel for the clues that historians use. You will also see how historians analyse these clues. **The final examination can include excerpts from and/or illustrations of identical/similar material, providing you with an opportunity to handle these.**

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☑ There are *two* categories of ***intext questions:***

(a) those within a yellow box, which may be used for practice for ***evaluation***.

(b) those with the caption ➲ Discuss... which are ***not for evaluation***

☑ There are ***four types*** of assignments at the end of each chapter: These include:

 **short questions**

 **short essays**

 **map work**

 **projects**

These are meant to provide practice for the final assessment and evaluation.

Hope you enjoy using this book.

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THEME NINE

Colonialism and the Countryside

Exploring Official Archives

In this chapter you will see what colonial rule meant to those who lived in the countryside. You will meet the zamindars of Bengal, travel to the Rajmahal hills where the Paharias and the Santhals lived, and then move west to the Deccan. You will look at the way the English East India Company (E.I.C.) established its raj in the countryside, implemented its revenue policies, what these policies meant to different sections of people, and how they changed everyday lives.

Laws introduced by the state have consequences for people: they determine to an extent who grows richer and who poorer, who acquires new land and who loses the land they have lived on, where peasants go when they need money. As you will see, however, people were not only subject to the working of laws, they also resisted the law by acting according to what they believed to be just. In doing so people defined the way in which laws operated, thereby modifying their consequences.

You will also come to know about the sources that tell us about these histories, and the problems historians face in interpreting them. You will read about revenue records and surveys, journals and accounts left by surveyors and travellers, and reports produced by enquiry commissions.

Fig. 9.1
Cotton being carried from the village to the mandi, Illustrated London News, *20 April 1861*

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1. BENGAL AND THE ZAMINDARS

As you know, colonial rule was first established in Bengal. It is here that the earliest attempts were made to reorder rural society and establish a new regime of land rights and a new revenue system. Let us see what happened in Bengal in the early years of Company (E.I.C.) rule.

1.1 An auction in Burdwan

In 1797 there was an auction in Burdwan (present-day Bardhaman). It was a big public event. A number of *mahals* (estates) held by the Raja of Burdwan were being sold. The Permanent Settlement had come into operation in 1793. The East India Company had fixed the revenue that each zamindar had to pay. The estates of those who failed to pay were to be auctioned to recover the revenue. Since the raja had accumulated huge arrears, his estates had been put up for auction.

Raja (literally king) was a term that was often used to designate powerful zamindars.

Numerous purchasers came to the auction and the estates were sold to the highest bidder. But the Collector soon discovered a strange twist to the tale. Many of the purchasers turned out to be servants and agents of the raja who had bought the lands on behalf of their master. Over 95 per cent of the sale at the auction was fictitious. The raja's estates had been publicly sold, but he remained in control of his zamindari.

Why had the raja failed to pay the revenue? Who were the purchasers at the auction? What does the story tell us about what was happening in the rural areas of eastern India at that time?

Fig. 9.2
Burdwan raja's City Palace on Diamond Harbour Road, Calcutta
By the late nineteenth century many rich zamindars of Bengal had city palaces with ballrooms, large grounds, entrance porches supported by Corinthian columns like these.

1.2 The problem of unpaid revenue

The estates of the Burdwan raj were not the only ones sold during the closing years of the eighteenth century. Over 75 per cent of the zamindaris changed hands after the Permanent Settlement.

In introducing the Permanent Settlement, British officials hoped to resolve the problems they had been facing since the conquest of Bengal. By the 1770s, the rural economy in Bengal was in crisis, with recurrent famines and declining agricultural output. Officials felt that agriculture, trade and the revenue resources of the state could all be developed by encouraging investment in agriculture. This could be done by securing rights of property and permanently fixing the rates of

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revenue demand. If the revenue demand of the state was permanently fixed, then the Company could look forward to a regular flow of revenue, while entrepreneurs could feel sure of earning a profit from their investment, since the state would not siphon it off by increasing its claim. The process, officials hoped, would lead to the emergence of a class of yeomen farmers and rich landowners who would have the capital and enterprise to improve agriculture. Nurtured by the British, this class would also be loyal to the Company.

The problem, however, lay in identifying individuals who could both improve agriculture and contract to pay the fixed revenue to the state. After a prolonged debate amongst Company officials, the Permanent Settlement was made with the rajas and *taluqdars* of Bengal. They were now classified as zamindars, and they had to pay the revenue demand that was fixed in perpetuity. In terms of this definition, the zamindar was not a landowner in the village, but a revenue Collector of the state.

Zamindars had several (sometimes as many as 400) villages under them. In Company calculations the villages within one zamindari formed one revenue estate. The Company fixed the total demand over the entire estate whose revenue the zamindar contracted to pay. The zamindar collected rent from the different villages, paid the revenue to the Company, and retained the difference as his income. He was expected to pay the Company regularly, failing which his estate could be auctioned.

Fig. 9.3
Charles Cornwallis (1738-1805), painted by Thomas Gainsborough, 1785
He was the commander of the British forces during the American War of Independence and the Governor General of Bengal when the Permanent Settlement was introduced there in 1793.

1.3 Why zamindars defaulted on payments

Company officials felt that a fixed revenue demand would give zamindars a sense of security and, assured of returns on their investment, encourage them to improve their estates. In the early decades after the Permanent Settlement, however, zamindars regularly failed to pay the revenue demand and unpaid balances accumulated.

The reasons for this failure were various. First: the initial demands were very high. This was because it was felt that if the demand was fixed for all time to come, the Company would never be able to claim a share of increased income from land when prices rose and cultivation expanded. To minimise this anticipated loss, the Company pegged the revenue

Taluqdar literally means "one who holds a *taluq*" or a connection. *Taluq* came to refer to a territorial unit.

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demand high, arguing that the burden on zamindars would gradually decline as agricultural production expanded and prices rose.

Second: this high demand was imposed in the 1790s, a time when the prices of agricultural produce were depressed, making it difficult for the *ryots* to pay their dues to the zamindar. If the zamindar could not collect the rent, how could he pay the Company? Third: the revenue was invariable, regardless of the harvest, and had to be paid punctually. In fact, according to the Sunset Law, if payment did not come in by sunset of the specified date, the zamindari was liable to be auctioned. Fourth: the Permanent Settlement initially limited the power of the zamindar to collect rent from the *ryot* and manage his zamindari.

Ryot is the way the term *raiyat*, used to designate peasants (Chapter 8), was spelt in British records. *Ryots* in Bengal did not always cultivate the land directly, but leased it out to under-*ryots*.

The Company had recognised the zamindars as important, but it wanted to control and regulate them, subdue their authority and restrict their autonomy. The zamindars' troops were disbanded, customs duties abolished, and their "*cutcheries*" (courts) brought under the supervision of a Collector appointed by the Company. Zamindars lost their power to organise local justice and the local police. Over time the collectorate emerged as an alternative centre of authority, severely restricting what the zamindar could do. In one case, when a raja failed to pay the revenue, a Company official was speedily dispatched to his zamindari with explicit instructions "to take charge of the District and to use the most effectual means to destroy all the influence and the authority of the raja and his officers".

At the time of rent collection, an officer of the zamindar, usually the *amlah*, came around to the village. But rent collection was a perennial problem. Sometimes bad harvests and low prices made payment of dues difficult for the *ryots*. At other times *ryots* deliberately delayed payment. Rich *ryots* and village headmen – *jotedars* and *mandals* – were only too happy to see the zamindar in trouble. The zamindar could therefore not easily assert his power over them. Zamindars could prosecute defaulters, but the judicial process was long drawn. In Burdwan alone there were over 30,000 pending suits for arrears of rent payment in 1798.

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1.4 The rise of the *jotedars*

While many zamindars were facing a crisis at the end of the eighteenth century, a group of rich peasants were consolidating their position in the villages. In Francis Buchanan's survey of the Dinajpur district in North Bengal we have a vivid description of this class of rich peasants known as *jotedars*. By the early nineteenth century, *jotedars* had acquired vast areas of land – sometimes as much as several thousand acres. They controlled local trade as well as moneylending, exercising immense power over the poorer cultivators of the region. A large part of their land was cultivated through sharecroppers (*adhiyars* or *bargadars*) who brought their own ploughs, laboured in the field, and handed over half the produce to the *jotedars* after the harvest.

Within the villages, the power of *jotedars* was more effective than that of zamindars. Unlike zamindars who often lived in urban areas, *jotedars* were located in the villages and exercised direct control over a considerable section of poor villagers. They fiercely resisted efforts by zamindars to increase the *jama* of the village, prevented zamindari officials from executing their duties, mobilised *ryots* who were dependent on them, and deliberately delayed payments of revenue to the zamindar. In fact, when the estates of the zamindars were auctioned for failure to make revenue payment, *jotedars* were often amongst the purchasers.

The *jotedars* were most powerful in North Bengal, although rich peasants and village headmen were emerging as commanding figures in the countryside in other parts of Bengal as well. In some places they were called *haoladars*, elsewhere they were known as *gantidars* or *mandals*. Their rise inevitably weakened zamindari authority.

Fig. 9.4
Bengal village scene, painted by George Chinnery, 1820
Chinnery stayed in India for 23 years (1802-25), painting portraits, landscapes and scenes of the everyday life of the common people. *Jotedars* and moneylenders in rural Bengal lived in houses like the one you see on the right.

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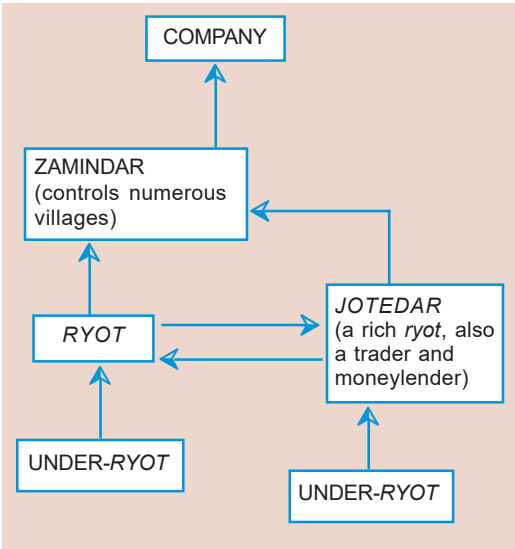
Source 1

The *jotedars* of Dinajpur

Buchanan described the ways in which the *jotedars* of Dinajpur in North Bengal resisted being disciplined by the zamindar and undermined his power:

> Landlords do not like this class of men, but it is evident that they are absolutely necessary, unless the landlords themselves would advance money to their necessitous tenantry …
>
> The *jotedars* who cultivate large portions of lands are very refractory, and know that the zamindars have no power over them. They pay only a few rupees on account of their revenue and then fall in balance almost every *kist* (instalment), they hold more lands than they are entitled to by their *pottahs* (deeds of contract). Should the zamindar's officers, in consequence, summon them to the *cutcherry*, and detain them for one or two hours with a view to reprimand them, they immediately go and complain at the Fouzdarry Thanna (police station) for imprisonment and at the munsiff's (a judicial officer at the lower court) *cutcherry* for being dishonoured and whilst the causes continue unsettled, they instigate the petty *ryots* not to pay their revenue consequently …

➲ Describe the ways in which the *jotedars* resisted the authority of the zamindars.



- Zamindars were responsible for: (a) paying revenue to the company (b) distributing the revenue demand *(jama)* over villages.
- Each village *ryot*, big or small, paid rent to the zamindar.
- *Jotedars* gave out loans to other *ryots* and sold their produce.
- *Ryots* cultivated some land and gave out the rest to under-*ryots* on rent.
- Under-*ryots* paid rent to the *ryots*.

Fig. 9.5
Power in rural Bengal

➲ Read the text accompanying Fig.9.5 carefully and insert the following terms in appropriate places along the arrows: rent, revenue, interest, loan, produce

1.5 The zamindars resist

The authority of the zamindars in rural areas, however, did not collapse. Faced with an exorbitantly high revenue demand and possible auction of their estates, they devised ways of surviving the pressures. New contexts produced new strategies.

Fictitious sale was one such strategy. It involved a series of manoeuvres. The Raja of Burdwan, for instance, first transferred some of his zamindari to his mother, since the Company had decreed that the property of women would not be taken over. Then, as a second move, his agents manipulated the auctions. The revenue demand of the Company was deliberately withheld, and unpaid balances were allowed to accumulate. When a part of the estate was auctioned, the zamindar's men bought the property, outbidding other purchasers. Subsequently they refused to pay up the purchase money, so that the estate had to be resold. Once again it was bought by the zamindar's agents, once again the purchase money was not paid, and once again there was an auction. This process was repeated endlessly, exhausting the state, and the other bidders at the auction. At last the estate was sold at a low price back to the zamindar. The

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zamindar never paid the full revenue demand; the Company rarely recovered the unpaid balances that had piled up.

Such transactions happened on a grand scale. Between 1793 and 1801 four big zamindaris of Bengal, including Burdwan, made *benami* purchases that collectively yielded as much as Rs 30 lakh. Of the total sales at the auctions, over 15 per cent were fictitious.

There were other ways in which zamindars circumvented displacement. When people from outside the zamindari bought an estate at an auction, they could not always take possession. At times their agents would be attacked by *lathyals* of the former zamindar. Sometimes even the *ryots* resisted the entry of outsiders. They felt bound to their own zamindar through a sense of loyalty and perceived him as a figure of authority and themselves as his *proja* (subjects). The sale of the zamindari disturbed their sense of identity, their pride. The zamindars therefore were not easily displaced.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century the depression in prices was over. Thus those who had survived the troubles of the 1790s consolidated their power. Rules of revenue payment were also made somewhat flexible. As a result, the zamindar's power over the villages was strengthened. It was only during the Great Depression of the 1930s that they finally collapsed and the *jotedars* consolidated their power in the countryside.

Fig. 9.6
Maharaja Mehtab Chand (1820-79)
When the Permanent Settlement was imposed, Tejchand was the Raja of Burdwan. Subsequently under Mehtab Chand the estate prospered. Mehtab Chand helped the British during the Santhal rebellion and the 1857 revolt.

1.6 The Fifth Report

Many of the changes we are discussing were documented in detail in a report that was submitted to the British Parliament in 1813. It was the fifth of a series of reports on the administration and activities of the East India Company in India. Often referred to as the Fifth Report, it ran into 1002 pages, of which over 800 pages were appendices that reproduced petitions of zamindars and *ryots*, reports of collectors from different districts, statistical tables on revenue returns, and notes on the revenue and judicial administration of Bengal and Madras (present-day Tamil Nadu) written by officials.

From the time the Company established its rule in Bengal in the mid-1760s, its activities were closely watched and debated in England. There were many

Benami, literally anonymous, is a term used in Hindi and several other Indian languages for transactions made in the name of a fictitious or relatively insignificant person, whereas the real beneficiary remains unnamed.

Lathyal, literally one who wields the *lathi* or stick, functioned as a strongman of the zamindar.

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groups in Britain who were opposed to the monopoly that the East India Company had over trade with India and China. These groups wanted a revocation of the Royal Charter that gave the Company this monopoly. An increasing number of private traders wanted a share in the India trade, and the industrialists of Britain were keen to open up the Indian market for British manufactures. Many political groups argued that the conquest of Bengal was benefiting only the East India Company but not the British nation as a whole. Information about Company misrule and maladministration was hotly debated in Britain and incidents of the greed and corruption of Company officials were widely publicised in the press. The British Parliament passed a series of Acts in the late eighteenth century to regulate and control Company rule in India. It forced the Company to produce regular reports on the administration of India and appointed committees to enquire into the affairs of the Company. The Fifth Report was one such report produced by a Select Committee. It became the basis of intense parliamentary debates on the nature of the East India Company's rule in India.

Fig. 9.7
Andul Raj Palace
The ruins of palaces are a visible sign of the end of an era. Satyajit Ray's famous film *Jalshaghar*, on the decline of the aristocratic zamindari style of living, was shot in Andul Raj Palace.

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For over a century and a half, the Fifth Report has shaped our conception of what happened in rural Bengal in the late eighteenth century. The evidence contained in the Fifth Report is invaluable. But official reports like this have to be read carefully. We need to know who wrote the reports and why they were written. In fact, recent researches show that the arguments and evidence offered by the Fifth Report cannot be accepted uncritically.

Researchers have carefully examined the archives of various Bengal zamindars and the local records of the districts to write about the history of colonial rule in rural Bengal. They indicate that, intent on criticising the maladministration of the company, the Fifth Report exaggerated the collapse of traditional zamindari power, as also overestimated the scale on which zamindars were losing their land. As we have seen, even when zamindaris were auctioned, zamindars were not always displaced, given the ingenious methods they used to retain their zamindaris.

Source 2

From the Fifth Report

Referring to the condition of zamindars and the auction of lands, the Fifth Report stated:

> The revenue was not realised with punctuality, and lands to a considerable extent were periodically exposed to sale by auction. In the native year 1203, corresponding with 1796-97, the land advertised for sale comprehended a *jumma* or assessment of *sicca* rupees 28,70,061, the extent of land actually sold bore a *jumma* or assessment of 14,18,756, and the amount of purchase money *sicca* rupees 17,90,416. In 1204, corresponding with 1797-98, the land advertised was for *sicca* rupees 26,66,191, the quantity sold was for *sicca* rupees 22,74,076, and the purchase money *sicca* rupees 21,47,580. Among the defaulters were some of the oldest families of the country. Such were the rajahs of Nuddea, Rajeshaye, Bishenpore (all districts of Bengal), ... and others, the dismemberment of whose estates at the end of each succeeding year, threatened them with poverty and ruin, and in some instances presented difficulties to the revenue officers, in their efforts to preserve undiminished the amount of public assessment.

➲ From the tone in which evidence is recorded, what do you think is the attitude of the report to the facts narrated? What is the Report trying to say through the figures? Can you think of any problem in making long-term generalisations from these figures of two years?

➲ **Discuss...**

Compare the account of the zamindars you have just read with that in Chapter 8.

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2. THE HOE AND THE PLOUGH

Let us now shift our focus from the wetlands of Bengal to drier zones, from a region of settled cultivation to one where shifting agriculture was practised. You will see the changes that came about when the frontiers of the peasant economy expanded outwards, swallowing up pastures and forests in the Rajmahal hills. You will also see how these changes created a variety of conflicts within the region.

2.1 In the hills of Rajmahal

In the early nineteenth century, Buchanan travelled through the Rajmahal hills. From his description, the hills appeared impenetrable, a zone where few travellers ventured, an area that signified danger. Wherever he went, people were hostile, apprehensive of officials and unwilling to talk to them. In many instances they deserted their villages and absconded.

Who were these hill folk? Why were they so apprehensive of Buchanan's visit? Buchanan's journal gives us tantalising glimpses of these hill folk in the early nineteenth century. His journal was written as a diary of places he visited, people he encountered, and practices he saw. It raises questions in our mind, but does not always help us answer them. It tells us about a moment in time, but not about the longer history of people and places. For that historians have to turn to other records.

If we look at late-eighteenth-century revenue records, we learn that these hill folk were known as Paharias. They lived around the Rajmahal hills, subsisting on forest produce and practising shifting cultivation. They cleared patches of forest by cutting bushes and burning the undergrowth. On these patches, enriched by the potash from the ash, the Paharias grew a variety of pulses and millets for consumption. They scratched the ground lightly with hoes, cultivated the cleared land for a few years, then left it fallow so that it could recover its fertility, and moved to a new area.

From the forests they collected *mahua* (a flower) for food, silk cocoons and resin for sale, and wood for charcoal production. The undergrowth that spread like a mat below the trees and the patches of grass that covered the lands left fallow provided pasture for cattle.

Who was Buchanan?

Francis Buchanan was a physician who came to India and served in the Bengal Medical Service (from 1794 to 1815). For a few years he was surgeon to the Governor-General of India, Lord Wellesley. During his stay in Calcutta (present-day Kolkata), he organised a zoo that became the Calcutta Alipore Zoo; he was also in charge of the Botanical Gardens for a short period. On the request of the Government of Bengal, he undertook detailed surveys of the areas under the jurisdiction of the British East India Company. In 1815 he fell ill and returned to England. Upon his mother's death, he inherited her property and assumed her family name Hamilton. So he is often called Buchanan-Hamilton.

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Fig. 9.8
A view of a hill village in Rajmahal, painted by William Hodges, 1782
William Hodges was a British artist who accompanied Captain Cook on his second voyage to the Pacific (1772-75), and then came to India. In 1781 he became a friend of Augustus Cleveland, the Collector of Bhagalpur. On the invitation of Cleveland, Hodges accompanied him to the Jangal Mahals in 1782, and painted a set of aquatints. Like many other British painters of the time, Hodges searched for the picturesque. Artists in search of the picturesque were inspired by the ideals of Romanticism, a tradition of thought that celebrated nature and admired its magnificence and power. Romantics felt that to commune with nature the artist had to represent nature as an idyll, uncorrupted by modern civilisation, discover unknown landscapes, and appreciate the sublime play of light and shade. It is in search of this unknown that Hodges went to the Rajmahal hills. He found flat landscapes monotonous, and discovered beauty in roughness, irregularity and variety. A landscape that colonial officials found dangerous and wild, peopled by turbulent tribes, appears in the paintings of Hodges as exotic and idyllic.

➲ Look at the painting and identify the ways in which it represents the traditions of the picturesque.

Aquatint is a picture produced by cutting into a copper sheet with acid and then printing it.

The life of the Paharias – as hunters, shifting cultivators, food gatherers, charcoal producers, silkworm rearers – was thus intimately connected to the forest. They lived in hutments within tamarind groves, and rested in the shade of mango trees. They considered the entire region as their land, the basis

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Fig. 9.9
A view of Jangal territory, painted by William Hodges
Here you can see the forested low hills and the rocky upper ranges, nowhere actually above 2,000 feet. By centring the hills and viewing them from below, Hodges emphasises their inaccessibility.

➲ Look at Figs. 9.8 and 9.9. Describe how the pictures represent the relationship between tribal people and nature.

of their identity as well as survival; and they resisted the intrusion of outsiders. Their chiefs maintained the unity of the group, settled disputes, and led the tribe in battles with other tribes and plainspeople.

With their base in the hills, the Paharias regularly raided the plains where settled agriculturists lived. These raids were necessary for survival, particularly in years of scarcity; they were a way of asserting power over settled communities; and they were a means of negotiating political relations with outsiders. The zamindars on the plains had to often purchase peace by paying a regular tribute to the hill chiefs. Traders similarly gave a small amount to the hill folk for permission to use the passes controlled by them. Once the toll was paid, the Paharia chiefs protected the traders, ensuring that their goods were not plundered by anyone.

This negotiated peace was somewhat fragile. It broke down in the last decades of the eighteenth century when the frontiers of settled agriculture were being aggressively extended in eastern India. The British encouraged forest clearance, and zamindars and *jotedars* turned uncultivated lands into rice fields. To the British, extension of settled agriculture was necessary to enlarge the sources of land revenue, produce crops for export, and establish the basis of a settled, ordered society. They also associated forests with wildness, and saw forest people as savage, unruly, primitive, and difficult to govern. So they felt that forests had to be cleared,

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settled agriculture established, and forest people tamed, civilised and persuaded to give up hunting and take to plough agriculture.

As settled agriculture expanded, the area under forests and pastures contracted. This sharpened the conflict between hill folk and settled cultivators. The former began to raid settled villages with increasing regularity, carrying away food grains and cattle. Exasperated colonial officials tried desperately to control and subdue the Paharias. But they found the task difficult.

In the 1770s the British embarked on a brutal policy of extermination, hunting the Paharias down and killing them. Then, by the 1780s, Augustus Cleveland, the Collector of Bhagalpur, proposed a policy of pacification. Paharia chiefs were given an annual allowance and made responsible for the proper conduct of their men. They were expected to maintain order in their localities and discipline their own people. Many Paharia chiefs refused the allowances. Those who accepted, most often lost authority within the community. Being in the pay of the colonial government, they came to be perceived as subordinate employees or stipendiary chiefs.

As the pacification campaigns continued, the Paharias withdrew deep into the mountains, insulating themselves from hostile forces, and carrying on a war with outsiders. So when Buchanan travelled through the region in the winter of 1810-11 the Paharias naturally viewed him with suspicion and distrust. The experience of pacification campaigns and memories of brutal repression shaped their perception of British infiltration into the area. Every white man appeared to represent a power that was destroying their way of life and means of survival, snatching away their control over their forests and lands.

By this time in fact there were newer intimations of danger. Santhals were pouring into the area, clearing forests, cutting down timber, ploughing land and growing rice and cotton. As the lower hills were taken over by Santhal settlers, the Paharias receded deeper into the Rajmahal hills. If Paharia life was symbolised by the hoe, which they used for shifting cultivation, the settlers came to represent the power of the plough. The battle between the hoe and the plough was a long one.

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2.2 The Santhals: Pioneer settlers

At the end of 1810, Buchanan crossed Ganjuria Pahar, which was part of the Rajmahal ranges, passed through the rocky country beyond, and reached a village. It was an old village but the land around had been recently cleared to extend cultivation. Looking at the landscape, Buchanan found evidence of the region having been transformed through "proper application of human labour". He wrote: "Gunjuriya is just sufficiently cultivated to show what a glorious country this might be made. I think its beauty and riches might be made equal to almost any in the universe." The soil here was rocky but "uncommonly fine", and nowhere had Buchanan seen finer tobacco and mustard. On enquiry he discovered that the frontiers of cultivation here had been extended by the Santhals. They had moved into this area around 1800, displaced the hill folk who lived on these lower slopes, cleared the forests and settled the land.

How did the Santhals reach the Rajmahal hills? The Santhals had begun to come into Bengal around the 1780s. Zamindars hired them to reclaim land and expand cultivation, and British officials invited them to settle in the Jangal Mahals. Having failed to subdue the Paharias and transform them into settled agriculturists, the British turned to the Santhals. The Paharias refused to cut forests, resisted touching the plough, and continued to be

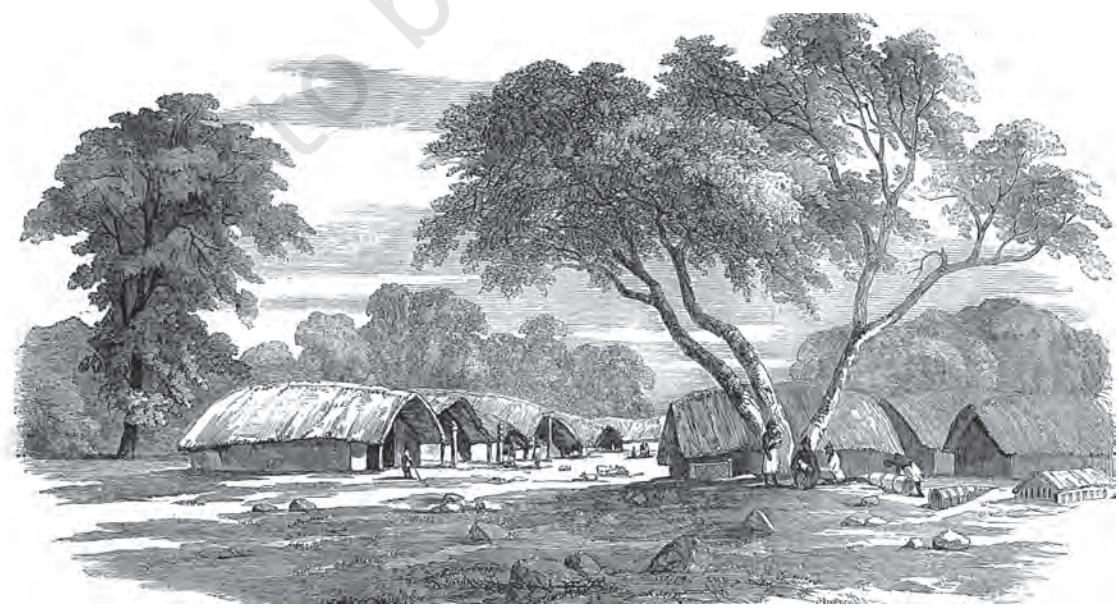

Fig. 9.10
Hill village in Santhal country, Illustrated London News, *23 February 1856*
This village in the lower Rajmahal hills was sketched by Walter Sherwill in the early 1850s. The village appears to be peaceful, calm and idyllic. Life seems unaffected by the outside world.

➲ Contrast this image of the Santhal village with Fig. 9.12.

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turbulent. The Santhals, by contrast, appeared to be ideal settlers, clearing forests and ploughing the land with vigour.

The Santhals were given land and persuaded to settle in the foothills of Rajmahal. By 1832 a large area of land was demarcated as Damin-i-Koh. This was declared to be the land of the Santhals. They were to live within it, practise plough agriculture, and become settled peasants. The land grant to the Santhals stipulated that at least one-tenth of the area was to be cleared and cultivated within the first ten years. The territory was surveyed and mapped. Enclosed with boundary pillars, it was separated from both the world of the settled agriculturists of the plains and the Paharias of the hills.

After the demarcation of Damin-i-Koh, Santhal settlements expanded rapidly. From 40 Santhal villages in the area in 1838, as many as 1,473 villages had come up by 1851. Over the same period, the Santhal population increased from a mere 3,000 to over 82,000. As cultivation expanded, an increased volume of revenue flowed into the Company's coffers.

Santhal myths and songs of the nineteenth century refer very frequently to a long history of travel: they represent the Santhal past as one of continuous mobility, a tireless search for a place to settle. Here in the Damin-i-Koh their journey seemed to have come to an end.

When the Santhals settled on the peripheries of the Rajmahal hills, the Paharias resisted but were ultimately forced to withdraw deeper into the hills. Restricted from moving down to the lower hills and valleys, they were confined to the dry interior and to the more barren and rocky upper hills. This severely affected their lives, impoverishing them in the long term. Shifting agriculture depended on the ability to move to newer and newer land and utilisation of the natural fertility of the soil. When the most fertile soils became inaccessible to them, being part of the Damin, the Paharias could not effectively sustain their mode of cultivation. When the forests of the region were cleared for cultivation the hunters amongst them also faced problems. The Santhals, by contrast, gave up their earlier life of mobility and settled down, cultivating a range of commercial crops for the market, and dealing with traders and moneylenders.

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Fig. 9.11
Sidhu Manjhi, the leader of the Santhal rebellion

The Santhals, however, soon found that the land they had brought under cultivation was slipping away from their hands. The state was levying heavy taxes on the land that the Santhals had cleared, moneylenders (*dikus*) were charging them high rates of interest and taking over the land when debts remained unpaid, and zamindars were asserting control over the Damin area.

By the 1850s, the Santhals felt that the time had come to rebel against zamindars, moneylenders and the colonial state, in order to create an ideal world for themselves where they would rule. It was after the Santhal Revolt (1855-56) that the Santhal Pargana was created, carving out 5,500 square miles from the districts of Bhagalpur and Birbhum. The colonial state hoped that by creating a new territory for the Santhals and imposing some special laws within it, the Santhals could be conciliated.

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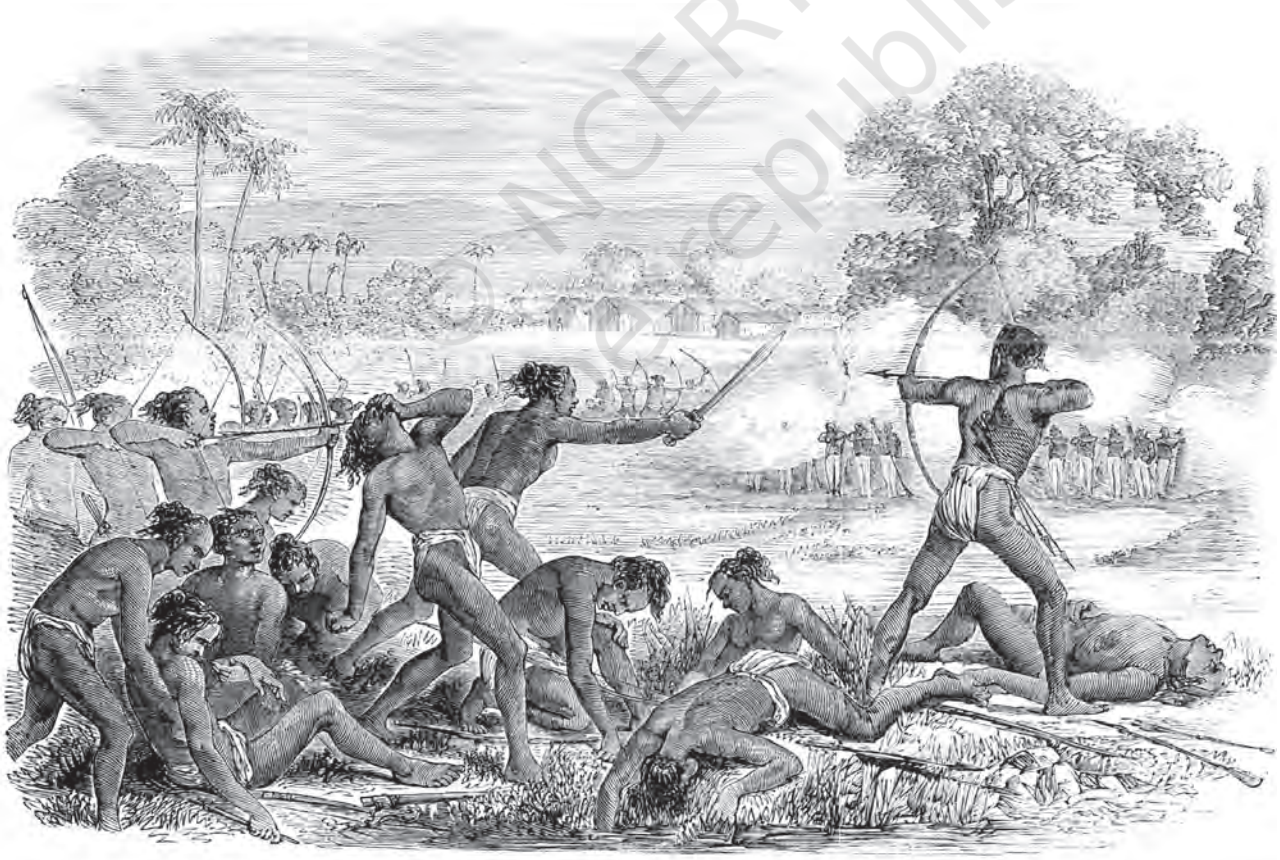

Fig. 9.12
Santhals fight the sepoys of the British Raj, Illustrated London News, *23 February 1856*
The rebellion changed the British perception of the Santhals. Villages that had earlier seemed calm and peaceful (Fig. 9.10) now appeared to have become places of violent and savage deeds.

➲ Imagine you are a reader of the *Illustrated London News* in England. How will you react to the images depicted in Figs. 9.12, 9.13 and 9.14? What image of the Santhals would these pictures create in your mind?

Fig. 9.13
Burning of Santhal villages, Illustrated London News, *23 February 1856*
After the rebellion was crushed, the region was searched, suspects were picked up, and villages set on fire. Images of the burning villages were shown to the public in England – once again as a demonstration of the might of the British and their ability to crush rebellion and impose colonial order.

Fig. 9.14
Santhal prisoners being taken away, Illustrated London News, *1856*
Notice how images like this one seek to convey political messages. At the centre you can see British officials triumphantly riding on an elephant. One officer on a horse is smoking a hookah: a picture that emphasises that the time of trouble was over, the rebellion had been crushed. The rebels are now in chains, being taken away to jail escorted and surrounded by soldiers of the Company.

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Source 3

Buchanan on the Santhals

Buchanan wrote:

> They are very clever in clearing new lands, but live meanly. Their huts have no fence, and the walls are made of small sticks placed upright, close together and plastered within with clay. They are small and slovenly, and too flat-roofed, with very little arch.

Source 4

The rocks near Kaduya

Buchanan's journal is packed with observations like the following:

> About a mile farther on, (I) came to a low ledge of rocks without any evident strata; it is a small grained granite with reddish feldspar, with quartz and black mica … More than half a mile from thence, I came to another rock not stratified, and consisting of very fine-grained granite with yellowish feldspar, whitish quartz and black mica.

2.3 The accounts of Buchanan

We have been drawing on Buchanan's account, but while reading his reports we should not forget that he was an employee of the British East India Company. His journeys were not simply inspired by the love of landscape and the desire to discover the unknown. He marched everywhere with a large army of people – draughtsmen, surveyors, palanquin bearers, coolies. The costs of the travels were borne by the East India Company since it needed the information that Buchanan was expected to collect. Buchanan had specific instructions about what he had to look for and what he had to record. When he arrived at a village with his army of people, he was immediately perceived as an agent of the *sarkar*.

As the Company consolidated its power and expanded its commerce, it looked for natural resources it could control and exploit. It surveyed landscapes and revenue sources, organised voyages of discovery, and sent its geologists and geographers, its botanists and medical men to collect information. Buchanan, undoubtedly an extraordinary observer, was one such individual. Everywhere Buchanan went, he obsessively observed the stones and rocks and the different strata and layers of soil. He searched for minerals and stones that were commercially valuable, he recorded all signs of iron ore and mica, granite and saltpetre. He carefully observed local practices of salt-making and iron-ore-mining.

When Buchanan wrote about a landscape, he most often described not just what he saw, what the landscape was like, but also how it could be transformed and made more productive – what crops could be cultivated, which trees cut down, and which ones grown. And we must remember that his vision and his priorities were different from those of the local inhabitants: his assessment of what was necessary was shaped by the commercial concerns of the Company and modern Western notions of what constituted progress. He was inevitably critical of the lifestyles of forest dwellers and felt that forests had to be turned into agricultural lands.

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Source 5

On clearance and settled cultivation

Passing through one village in the lower Rajmahal hills, Buchanan wrote:

> The view of the country is exceedingly fine, the cultivation, especially the narrow valleys of rice winding in all directions, the cleared lands with scattered trees, and the rocky hills are in perfection; all that is wanted is some appearance of progress in the area and a vastly extended and improved cultivation, of which the country is highly susceptible. Plantations of Asan and Palas, for Tessar (Tassar silk worms) and Lac, should occupy the place of woods to as great an extent as the demand will admit; the remainder might be all cleared, and the greater part cultivated, while what is not fit for the purpose, might rear Plamira (palmyra) and Mowa (*mahua*).

➲ Discuss...

What does Buchanan's description tell us about his ideas of development? Illustrate your argument by quoting from the excerpts. If you were a Paharia forest dweller how would you have reacted to these ideas?

3. A REVOLT IN THE COUNTRYSIDE
THE BOMBAY DECCAN

You have read about how the lives of peasants and zamindars of colonial Bengal and the Paharias and Santhals of the Rajmahal hills were changing. Now let us move across to western India, and to a later period, and explore what was happening in the countryside in the Bombay Deccan.

One way of exploring such changes is by focusing on a peasant revolt. In such climactic times rebels express their anger and fury; they rise against what they perceive to be injustice and the causes of their suffering. If we try to understand the premises of their resentment, and peel the layers of their anger, we get a glimpse of their life and experience that is otherwise hidden from us. Revolts also produce records that historians can look at. Alarmed by the actions of rebels and keen on restoring order, state authorities do not simply repress a rebellion. They try and understand it, enquire into its causes so that policies can be formulated and peace established. These enquiries produce evidence that historians can explore.

Through the nineteenth century, peasants in various parts of India rose in revolt against

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Source 6

On that day in Supa

On 16 May 1875, the District Magistrate of Poona wrote to the Police Commissioner:

> On arrival at Supa on Saturday 15 May I learnt of the disturbance.
>
> One house of a moneylender was burnt down; about a dozen were forcibly broken into and completely gutted of their content. Account papers, bonds, grains, country cloth were burnt in the street where heaps of ashes are still to be seen.
>
> The chief constable apprehended 50 persons. Stolen property worth Rs 2000 was recovered. The estimated loss is over Rs 25,000. Moneylenders claim it is over 1 lakh.

DECCAN RIOTS COMMISSION

moneylenders and grain dealers. One such revolt occurred in 1875 in the Deccan.

3.1 Account books are burnt

The movement began at Supa, a large village in Poona (present-day Pune) district. It was a market centre where many shopkeepers and moneylenders lived. On 12 May1875, *ryots* from surrounding rural areas gathered and attacked the shopkeepers, demanding their *bahi khatas* (account books) and debt bonds. They burnt the *khatas*, looted grain shops, and in some cases set fire to the houses of *sahukars*.

From Poona the revolt spread to Ahmednagar. Then over the next two months it spread even further, over an area of 6,500 square km. More than thirty villages were affected. Everywhere the pattern was the same: *sahukars* were attacked, account books burnt and debt bonds destroyed. Terrified of peasant attacks, the *sahukars* fled the villages, very often leaving their property and belongings behind.

As the revolt spread, British officials saw the spectre of 1857 (see Chapter 11). Police posts were established in villages to frighten rebellious peasants into submission. Troops were quickly called in; 951 people were arrested, and many convicted. But it took several months to bring the countryside under control.

A *sahukar* was someone who acted as both a moneylender and a trader.

Source 7

A newspaper report

The following report, titled 'The ryot and the moneylender', appeared in the *Native Opinion* (6 June 1876), and was quoted in *Report of the Native Newspapers of Bombay:*

> They (the *ryots*) first place spies on the boundaries of their villages to see if any Government officers come, and to give timely intimation of their arrival to the offenders. They then assemble in a body and go to the houses of their creditors, and demand from them a surrender of their bonds and other documents, and threaten them in case of refusal with assault and plunder. If any Government officer happens to approach the villages where the above is taking place, the spies give intimation to the offenders and the latter disperse in time.

➲ The words and terms used by a writer often tell us something about his or her prejudices. Read Source 7 carefully and pick out the terms that indicate any prejudices of the writer. Discuss how a *ryot* of the area would have described the same situation.

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Why the burning of bonds and deeds? Why this revolt? What does it tell us about the Deccan countryside and about agrarian changes under colonial rule? Let us look at this longer history of changes over the nineteenth century.

3.2 A new revenue system

As British rule expanded from Bengal to other parts of India, new systems of revenue were imposed. The Permanent Settlement was rarely extended to any region beyond Bengal.

Why was this so? One reason was that after 1810, agricultural prices rose, increasing the value of harvest produce, and enlarging the income of the Bengal zamindars. Since the revenue demand was fixed under the Permanent Settlement, the colonial state could not claim any share of this enhanced income. Keen on expanding its financial resources, the colonial government had to think of ways to maximise its land revenue. So in territories annexed in the nineteenth century, temporary revenue settlements were made.

There were other reasons too. When officials devise policies, their thinking is deeply shaped by economic theories they are familiar with. By the 1820s, the economist David Ricardo was a celebrated figure in England. Colonial officials had learnt Ricardian ideas during their college years. In Maharashtra when British officials set about formulating the terms of the early settlement in the 1820s, they operated with some of these ideas.

According to Ricardian ideas, a landowner should have a claim only to the "average rent" that prevailed at a given time. When the land yielded more than this "average rent", the landowner had a surplus that the state needed to tax. If tax was not levied, cultivators were likely to turn into rentiers, and their surplus income was unlikely to be productively invested in the improvement of the land. Many British officials in India thought that the history of Bengal confirmed Ricardo's theory. There the zamindars seemed to have turned into rentiers, leasing out land and living on the rental incomes. It was therefore necessary, the British officials now felt, to have a different system.

Rentier is a term used to designate people who live on rental income from property.

The revenue system that was introduced in the Bombay Deccan came to be known as the *ryotwari*

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settlement. Unlike the Bengal system, the revenue was directly settled with the *ryot*. The average income from different types of soil was estimated, the revenue-paying capacity of the *ryot* was assessed and a proportion of it fixed as the share of the state. The lands were resurveyed every 30 years and the revenue rates increased. Therefore the revenue demand was no longer permanent.

3.3 Revenue demand and peasant debt

The first revenue settlement in the Bombay Deccan was made in the 1820s. The revenue that was demanded was so high that in many places peasants deserted their villages and migrated to new regions. In areas of poor soil and fluctuating rainfall the problem was particularly acute. When rains failed and harvests were poor, peasants found it impossible to pay the revenue. However, the collectors in charge of revenue collection were keen on demonstrating their efficiency and pleasing their superiors. So they went about extracting payment with utmost severity. When someone failed to pay, his crops were seized and a fine was imposed on the whole village.

By the 1830s the problem became more severe. Prices of agricultural products fell sharply after 1832 and did not recover for over a decade and a half. This meant a further decline in peasants' income. At the same time the countryside was devastated by a famine that struck in the years 1832-34. One-third of the cattle of the Deccan were killed, and half the human population died. Those who survived had no agricultural stocks to see them through the crisis. Unpaid balances of revenue mounted.

How did cultivators live through such years? How did they pay the revenue, procure their consumption needs, purchase their ploughs and cattle, or get their children married?

Inevitably, they borrowed. Revenue could rarely be paid without a loan from a moneylender. But once a loan was taken, the *ryot* found it difficult to pay it back. As debt mounted, and loans remained unpaid, peasants' dependence on moneylenders increased. They now needed loans even to buy their everyday needs and meet their production expenditure. By the 1840s, officials were finding evidence of alarming levels of peasant indebtedness everywhere.

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By the mid-1840s there were signs of an economic recovery of sorts. Many British officials had begun to realise that the settlements of the 1820s had been harsh. The revenue demanded was exorbitant, the system rigid, and the peasant economy on the verge of collapse. So the revenue demand was moderated to encourage peasants to expand cultivation. After 1845 agricultural prices recovered steadily. Cultivators were now extending their acreage, moving into new areas, and transforming pastureland into cultivated fields. But to expand cultivation peasants needed more ploughs and cattle. They needed money to buy seeds and land. For all this they had to turn once again to moneylenders for loans.

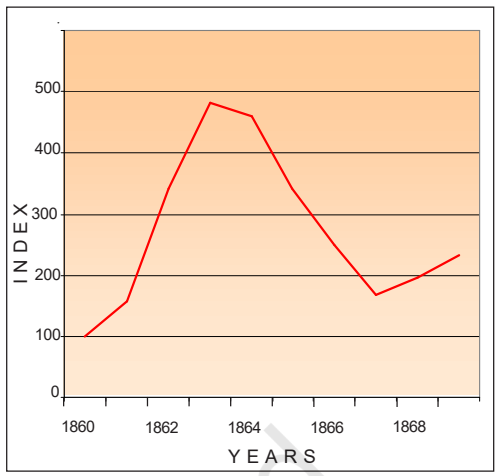

Fig. 9.15
The cotton boom
The line in the graph indicates the rise and fall in cotton prices.

3.4 Then came the cotton boom

Before the 1860s, three-fourths of raw cotton imports into Britain came from America. British cotton manufacturers had for long been worried about this dependence on American supplies. What would happen if this source was cut off? Troubled by this question, they eagerly looked for alternative sources of supply.

In 1857 the Cotton Supply Association was founded in Britain, and in 1859 the Manchester Cotton Company was formed. Their objective was "to encourage cotton production in every part of the world

Fig. 9.16
Carts transporting cotton halting under a banyan tree,
Illustrated London News,
13 December 1862

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suited for its growth". India was seen as a country that could supply cotton to Lancashire if the American supply dried up. It possessed suitable soil, a climate favourable to cotton cultivation, and cheap labour.

When the American Civil War broke out in 1861, a wave of panic spread through cotton circles in Britain. Raw cotton imports from America fell to less than three per cent of the normal: from over 2,000,000 bales (of 400 lbs each) in 1861 to 55,000 bales in 1862. Frantic messages were sent to India and elsewhere to increase cotton exports to Britain. In Bombay, cotton merchants visited the cotton districts to assess supplies and encourage cultivation. As cotton prices soared (see Fig. 10.15), export merchants in Bombay were keen to secure as much cotton as possible to meet the British demand. So they gave advances to urban *sahukars* who in turn extended credit to those rural moneylenders who promised to secure the produce. When there is a boom in the market credit flows easily, for those who give out loans feel secure about recovering their money.

➲ The three panels in Fig. 9.17 depict different modes of transporting cotton. Notice the bullocks collapsing under the weight of the cotton, the boulders on the road, and the huge pile of bales on the boat. What is the artist suggesting through these images?

Fig. 9.17
Transporting cotton before the railway era, Illustrated London News, *20 April 1861*
When cotton supplies from America were cut off during the Civil War, Britain hoped that India would supply all the cotton that British industries needed. It began assessing the supply, examining the quality of cotton and studying the methods of production and marketing. This interest was reflected in the pages of the *Illustrated London News.*

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These developments had a profound impact on the Deccan countryside. The *ryots* in the Deccan villages suddenly found access to seemingly limitless credit. They were being given Rs 100 as advance for every acre they planted with cotton. *Sahukars* were more than willing to extend long-term loans.

While the American crisis continued, cotton production in the Bombay Deccan expanded. Between 1860 and 1864 cotton acreage doubled. By 1862 over 90 per cent of cotton imports into Britain were coming from India.

But these boom years did not bring prosperity to all cotton producers. Some rich peasants did gain, but for the large majority, cotton expansion meant heavier debt.

Fig. 9.18
A fleet of boats carrying cotton bales down the Ganges from Mirzapur, Illustrated London News, *13 December 1862*
Before the railway age, the town of Mirzapur was a collection centre for cotton from the Deccan.

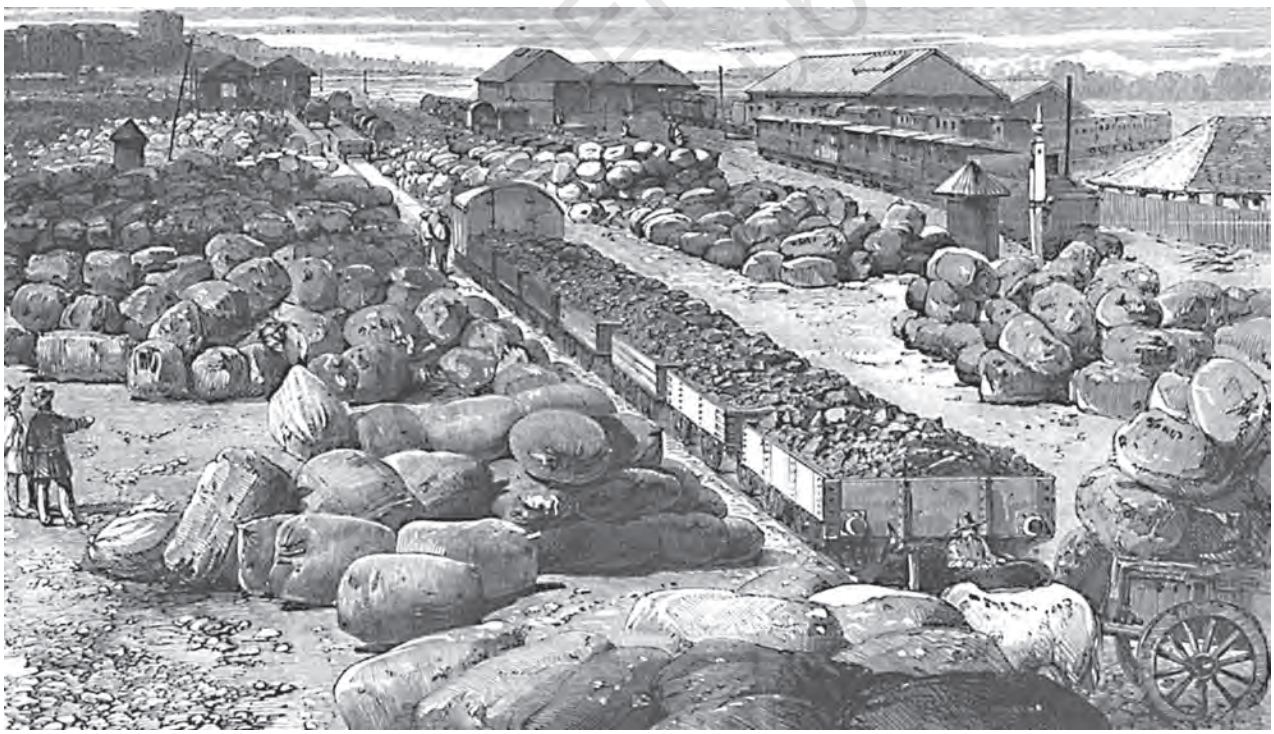

Fig. 9.19
Cotton bales lying at the Bombay terminus of the Great Indian Peninsula Railway ready for shipment to England, Illustrated London News, *23 August 1862*
Once the railways came up cotton supplies were not carried only on carts and boats. River traffic declined over time. But older modes of transport were not fully displaced. The loaded bullock cart in the foreground on the right is waiting to carry cotton bales from the railway station to the port.

3.5 Credit dries up

While the boom lasted, cotton merchants in India had visions of capturing the world market in raw cotton, permanently displacing America. The editor of the *Bombay Gazette* had asked in 1861, "What can prevent India from supplanting the Slave States (of U.S.A.) as the feeder of Lancashire?" By 1865 these dreams were over. As the Civil War ended, cotton production in America revived and Indian cotton exports to Britain steadily declined.

Export merchants and *sahukars* in Maharashtra were no longer keen on extending long-term credit. They could see the demand for Indian cotton fall and cotton prices slide downwards. So they decided to close down their operations, restrict their advances to peasants, and demand repayment of outstanding debts.

While credit dried up, the revenue demand increased. The first revenue settlement, as we have seen, was in the 1820s and 1830s. Now it was time for the next. And in the new settlement, the demand was increased dramatically: from 50 to 100 per cent. How could *ryots* pay this inflated demand at a time when prices were falling and cotton fields disappearing? Yet again they had to turn to the moneylender. But the moneylender now refused loans. He no longer had confidence in the *ryots'* capacity to repay.

3.6 The experience of injustice

The refusal of moneylenders to extend loans enraged the *ryots*. What infuriated them was not simply that they had got deeper and deeper into debt, or that they were utterly dependent on the moneylender for survival, but that moneylenders were being insensitive to their plight. The moneylenders were violating the customary norms of the countryside.

Moneylending was certainly widespread before colonial rule and moneylenders were often powerful

Source 8

A *ryot* petitions

This is an example of a petition from a *ryot* of the village of Mirajgaon, Taluka Karjat, to the Collector, Ahmednagar, Deccan Riots Commission:

> The *sowkars* (*sahukars*) ... have of late begun to oppress us. As we cannot earn enough to defray our household expenses, we are actually forced to beg of them to provide us with money, clothes and grain, which we obtain from them not without great difficulty, nor without their compelling us to enter into hard conditions in the bond. Moreover the necessary clothes and grain are not sold to us at cash rates. The prices asked from us are generally twenty-five or fifty per cent more than demanded from customers making ready money payments ... The produce of our fields is also taken by the *sowkars*, who at the time of removing it assure us that it will be credited to our account, but they do not actually make any mention of it in the accounts. They also refuse to pass us any receipts for the produce so removed by them.

➲ Explain the complaints that the *ryot* is making in the petition. Why was the harvest taken by the moneylenders not credited to the peasants' account? Why were peasants not given any receipts? If you were a moneylender what reasons would you give for these practices?

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figures. A variety of customary norms regulated the relationship between the moneylender and the *ryot*. One general norm was that the interest charged could not be more than the principal. This was meant to limit the moneylender's exactions and defined what could be counted as "fair interest". Under colonial rule this norm broke down. In one of the many cases investigated by the Deccan Riots Commission, the moneylender had charged over Rs 2,000 as interest on a loan of Rs 100. In petition after petition, *ryots* complained of the injustice of such exactions and the violation of custom.

Source 9

Deeds of hire

When debts mounted the peasant was unable to pay back the loan to the moneylender. He had no option but to give over all his possessions – land, carts, and animals – to the moneylender. But without animals he could not continue to cultivate. So he took land on rent and animals on hire. He now had to pay for the animals which had originally belonged to him. He had to sign a deed of hire stating very clearly that these animals and carts did not belong to him. In cases of conflict, these deeds could be enforced through the court.

The following is the text of a deed that a peasant signed in November 1873, from the records of the Deccan Riots Commission:

> I have sold to you, on account of the debt due to you, my two carriages having iron axles, with their appurtenances and four bullocks … I have taken from you on hire under (this) deed the very same two carriages and four bullocks. I shall pay every month the hire thereof at Rupees four a month, and obtain a receipt in your own handwriting. In the absence of a receipt I shall not contend that the hire had been paid.

➲ List all the commitments that the peasant is making in this deed. What does such a deed of hire tell us about the relationship between the peasant and the moneylender? How would it change the relationship between the peasant and the bullocks he previously owned?

The *ryots* came to see the moneylender as devious and deceitful. They complained of moneylenders manipulating laws and forging accounts. In 1859 the British passed a Limitation Law that stated that the loan bonds signed between moneylenders and *ryots* would have validity for only three years. This law was meant to check the accumulation of interest over time. The moneylender, however, turned

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the law around, forcing the *ryot* to sign a new bond every three years. When a new bond was signed, the unpaid balance – that is, the original loan and the accumulated interest – was entered as the principal on which a new set of interest charges was calculated. In petitions that the Deccan Riots Commission collected, *ryots* described how this process worked (see Source 10) and how moneylenders used a variety of other means to short-change the *ryot*: they refused to give receipts when loans were repaid, entered fictitious figures in bonds, acquired the peasants' harvest at low prices, and ultimately took over peasants' property.

Deeds and bonds appeared as symbols of the new oppressive system. In the past such deeds had been rare. The British, however, were suspicious of transactions based on informal understanding, as was common in the past. The terms of transactions, they believed, had to be clearly, unambiguously and categorically stated in contracts, deeds and bonds, and regulated by law. Unless the deed or contract was legally enforceable, it had no value.

Over time, peasants came to associate the misery of their lives with the new regime of bonds and deeds. They were made to sign and put thumb impressions on documents, but they did not know what they were actually signing. They had no idea of the clauses that moneylenders inserted in the bonds. They feared the written word. But they had no choice because to survive they needed loans, and moneylenders were unwilling to give loans without legal bonds.

Source 10

How debts mounted

In a petition to the Deccan Riots Commission a *ryot* explained how the system of loans worked:

> A *sowkar* lends his debtor Rs 100 on bond at Rs 3-2 annas per cent per mensem. The latter agrees to pay the amount within eight days from the passing of the bond. Three years after the stipulated time for repaying the amount, the *sowkar* takes from his debtor another bond for the principal and interest together at the same rate of interest, and allows him 125 days' time to liquidate the debt. After the lapse of 3 years and 15 days a third bond is passed by the debtor … (this process is repeated) at the end of 12 years … his interest on Rs 1000 amounts to Rs 2028 -10 annas -3 paise.

➲ Calculate the rate of interest that the *ryot* was paying over the years.

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4. THE DECCAN RIOTS COMMISSION

When the revolt spread in the Deccan, the Government of Bombay was initially unwilling to see it as anything serious. But the Government of India, worried by the memory of 1857, pressurised the Government of Bombay to set up a commission of enquiry to investigate into the causes of the riots. The commission produced a report that was presented to the British Parliament in 1878.

This report, referred to as the Deccan Riots Report, provides historians with a range of sources for the study of the riot. The commission held enquiries in the districts where the riots spread, recorded statements of *ryots, sahukars* and eyewitnesses, compiled statistical data on revenue rates, prices and interest rates in different regions, and collated the reports sent by district collectors.

➲ Discuss...

Check what rates of interest are charged in the region where you live at present. Find out whether these rates have changed over the last 50 years. Is there a variation in the rates paid by different groups of people? What are the reasons for the differences?

In looking at such sources we have to again remember that they are official sources and reflect official concerns and interpretations of events. The Deccan Riots Commission, for instance, was specifically asked to judge whether the level of government revenue demand was the cause of the revolt. And after presenting all the evidence, the commission reported that the government demand was not the cause of peasant anger. It was the moneylenders who were to blame. This argument is found very frequently in colonial records. This shows that there was a persistent reluctance on the part of the colonial government to admit that popular discontent was ever on account of government action.

Official reports, thus, are invaluable sources for the reconstruction of history. But they have to be always read with care and juxtaposed with evidence culled from newspapers, unofficial accounts, legal records and, where possible, oral sources.

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TIMELINE

1765	English East India Company acquires Diwani of Bengal
1773	Regulating Act passed by the British Parliament to regulate the activities of the East India Company
1793	Permanent Settlement in Bengal
1800s	Santhals begin to come to the Rajmahal hills and settle there
1818	First revenue settlement in the Bombay Deccan
1820s	Agricultural prices begin to fall
1840s-50s	A slow process of agrarian expansion in the Bombay Deccan
1855-56	Santhal rebellion
1861	Cotton boom begins
1875	*Ryots* in Deccan villages rebel

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Fig. 9.20
A rural scene, painted by William Prinsep, 1820

ANSWER IN 100-150 WORDS

1. Why was the *jotedar* a powerful figure in many areas of rural Bengal?
2. How did zamindars manage to retain control over their zamindaris?
3. How did the Paharias respond to the coming of outsiders?
4. Why did the Santhals rebel against British rule?
5. What explains the anger of the Deccan *ryots* against the moneylenders?

WRITE A SHORT ESSAY (250-300 WORDS) ON THE FOLLOWING:

6. Why were many zamindaris auctioned after the Permanent Settlement?
7. In what way was the livelihood of the Paharias different from that of the Santhals?
8. How did the American Civil War affect the lives of *ryots* in India?
9. What are the problems of using official sources in writing about the history of peasants?

MAP WORK

10. On an outline map of the subcontinent, mark out the areas described in this chapter. Find out whether there were other areas where the Permanent Settlement and the *ryotwari* system were prevalent and plot these on the map as well.

PROJECTS (CHOOSE ONE)

11. Francis Buchanan published reports on several districts of eastern India. Read one report and collate the information available about rural society, focusing on the themes discussed in this chapter. Highlight the ways in which historians can use such texts.
12. In the region where you live, talk to the older people within a rural community and visit the fields they now cultivate. Find out what they produce, how they earn their livelihoods, what their parents did, what their sons and daughters do now, and how their lives have changed over the last 75 years. Write a report based on your findings.

If you would like to know more, read:

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12125CH11

THEME TEN

Rebels and the Raj

The Revolt of 1857 and Its Representations

Late in the afternoon of 10 May 1857, the sepoys in the cantonment of Meerut broke out in mutiny. It began in the lines of the native infantry, spread very swiftly to the cavalry and then to the city. The ordinary people of the town and surrounding villages joined the sepoys. The sepoys captured the bell of arms where the arms and ammunition were kept and proceeded to attack white people, and to ransack and burn their bungalows and property. Government buildings – the record office, jail, court, post office, treasury, etc. – were destroyed and plundered. The telegraph line to Delhi was cut. As darkness descended, a group of sepoys rode off towards Delhi.

Fig. 10.1
Portrait of Bahadur Shah

The sepoys arrived at the gates of the Red Fort early in the morning on 11 May. It was the month of Ramzan, the Muslim holy month of prayer and fasting. The old Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah, had just finished his prayers and meal before the sun rose and the fast began. He heard the commotion at the gates. The sepoys who had gathered under his window told him: "We have come from Meerut after killing all the Englishmen there, because they asked us to bite bullets that were coated with the fat of cows and pigs with our teeth. This has corrupted the faith of Hindus and Muslims alike." Another group of sepoys also entered Delhi, and the ordinary people of the city joined them. Europeans were killed in large numbers; the rich of Delhi were attacked and looted. It was clear that Delhi had gone out of British control. Some sepoys rode into the Red Fort, without observing the elaborate court etiquette expected of them. They demanded that the emperor give them his blessings. Surrounded by the sepoys, Bahadur Shah had no other option but to comply. The revolt thus acquired a kind of legitimacy because it could now be carried on in the name of the Mughal emperor.

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Through 12 and 13 May, North India remained quiet. Once word spread that Delhi had fallen to the rebels and Bahadur Shah had blessed the rebellion, events moved swiftly. Cantonment after cantonment in the Gangetic valley and some to the west of Delhi rose in mutiny.

1. PATTERN OF THE REBELLION

If one were to place the dates of these mutinies in chronological order, it would appear that as the news of the mutiny in one town travelled to the next the sepoys there took up arms. The sequence of events in every cantonment followed a similar pattern.

Bell of arms is a storeroom in which weapons are kept.

1.1 How the mutinies began

The sepoys began their action with a signal: in many places it was the firing of the evening gun or the sounding of the bugle. They first seized the bell of arms and plundered the treasury. They then attacked government buildings – the jail, treasury, telegraph office, record room, bungalows – burning all records. Everything and everybody connected with the white man became a target. Proclamations in Hindi, Urdu and Persian were put up in the cities calling upon the population, both Hindus and Muslims, to unite, rise and exterminate the *firangis*.

Firangi, a term of Persian origin, possibly derived from Frank (from which France gets its name), is used in Urdu and Hindi, often in a derogatory sense, to designate foreigners.

When ordinary people began joining the revolt, the targets of attack widened. In major towns like Lucknow, Kanpur and Bareilly, money-lenders and the rich also became the objects of rebel wrath. Peasants not only saw them as oppressors but also as allies of the British. In most places their houses were looted and destroyed. The mutiny in the sepoy ranks quickly became a rebellion. There was a general defiance of all kinds of authority and hierarchy.

Fig. 10.2
Ordinary people join the sepoys in attacking the British in Lucknow.

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In the months of May and June, the British had no answer to the actions of the rebels. Individual Britons tried to save their own lives and the lives of their families. British rule, as one British officer noted, "collapsed like a house made of cards".

Source 1

Ordinary life in extraordinary times

What happened in the cities during the months of the revolt? How did people live through those months of tumult? How was normal life affected? Reports from different cities tell us about the breakdown in routine activities. Read these reports from the *Delhi Urdu Akhbar*, 14 June 1857:

> The same thing is true for vegetables and *saag* (spinach). People have been found to complain that even *kaddu* (pumpkin) and *baingan* (brinjal) cannot be found in the bazaars. Potatoes and *arvi* (yam) when available are of stale and rotten variety, stored from before by farsighted *kunjras* (vegetable growers). From the gardens inside the city some produce does reach a few places but the poor and the middle class can only lick their lips and watch them (as they are earmarked for the select).
>
> ... There is something else that needs attention which is causing a lot of damage to the people which is that the water-carriers have stopped filling water. Poor *Shurfas* (gentility) are seen carrying water in pails on their shoulders and only then the necessary household tasks such as cooking, etc. can take place. The *halalkhors* (righteous) have become *haramkhors* (corrupt), many *mohallas* have not been able to earn for several days and if this situation continues then decay, death and disease will combine together to spoil the city's air and an epidemic will spread all over the city and even to areas adjacent and around.

➲ Read the two reports and the descriptions of what was happening in Delhi provided in the chapter. Remember that newspaper reports often express the prejudices of the reporter. How did *Delhi Urdu Akhbar* view the actions of the people?

1.2 Lines of communication

The reason for the similarity in the pattern of the revolt in different places lay partly in its planning and coordination. It is clear that there was communication between the sepoy lines of various cantonments. After the 7th Awadh Irregular Cavalry had refused to accept the new cartridges in early May, they wrote to the 48th Native Infantry that "they had acted for the faith and awaited the 48th's orders". Sepoys or their emissaries moved from one station to another. People were thus planning and talking about the rebellion.

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Source 2

Sisten and the *tahsildar*

In the context of the communication of the message of revolt and mutiny, the experience of François Sisten, a native Christian police inspector in Sitapur, is telling. He had gone to Saharanpur to pay his respects to the magistrate. Sisten was dressed in Indian clothes and sitting cross-legged. A Muslim *tahsildar* from Bijnor entered the room; upon learning that Sisten was from Awadh, he enquired, "What news from Awadh? How does the work progress, brother?" Playing safe, Sisten replied, "If we have work in Awadh, your highness will know it." The *tahsildar* said, "Depend upon it, we will succeed this time. The direction of the business is in able hands." The *tahsildar* was later identified as the principal rebel leader of Bijnor.

➲ What does this conversation suggest about the ways in which plans were communicated and discussed by the rebels? Why did the *tahsildar* regard Sisten as a potential rebel?

The pattern of the mutinies and the pieces of evidence that suggest some sort of planning and coordination raise certain crucial questions. How were the plans made? Who were the planners? It is difficult on the basis of the available documents to provide direct answers to such questions. But one incident provides clues as to how the mutinies came to be so organised. Captain Hearsey of the Awadh Military Police had been given protection by his Indian subordinates during the mutiny. The 41st Native Infantry, which was stationed in the same place, insisted that since they had killed all their white officers, the Military Police should also kill Hearsey or deliver him as prisoner to the 41st. The Military Police refused to do either, and it was decided that the matter would be settled by a panchayat composed of native officers drawn from each regiment. Charles Ball, who wrote one of the earliest histories of the uprising, noted that panchayats were a nightly occurrence in the Kanpur sepoy lines. What this suggests is that some of the decisions were taken collectively. Given the fact that the sepoys lived in lines and shared a common lifestyle and that many of them came from the same caste, it is not difficult to imagine them sitting together to decide their own future. The sepoys were the makers of their own rebellion.

Mutiny – a collective disobedience of rules and regulations within the armed forces
Revolt – a rebellion of people against established authority and power. The terms 'revolt' and 'rebellion' can be used synonymously.

In the context of the revolt of 1857 the term revolt refers primarily to the uprising of the civilian population (peasants, zamindars, rajas, *jagirdars)* while the mutiny was of the sepoys.

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Fig. 10.3
Rani Lakshmi Bai, a popular image

Fig. 10.4
Nana Sahib
At the end of 1858, when the rebellion collapsed, Nana Sahib escaped to Nepal. The story of his escape added to the legend of Nana Sahib's courage and valour.

1.3 Leaders and followers

To fight the British, leadership and organisation were required. For these the rebels sometimes turned to those who had been leaders before the British conquest. One of the first acts of the sepoys of Meerut, as we saw, was to rush to Delhi and appeal to the old Mughal emperor to accept the leadership of the revolt. This acceptance of leadership took its time in coming. Bahadur Shah's first reaction was one of horror and rejection. It was only when some sepoys had moved into the Mughal court within the Red Fort, in defiance of normal court etiquette, that the old emperor, realising he had very few options, agreed to be the nominal leader of the rebellion.

Elsewhere, similar scenes were enacted though on a minor scale. In Kanpur, the sepoys and the people of the town gave Nana Sahib, the successor to Peshwa Baji Rao II, no choice save to join the revolt as their leader. In Jhansi, the rani was forced by the popular pressure around her to assume the leadership of the uprising. So was Kunwar Singh, a local zamindar in Arrah in Bihar. In Awadh, where the displacement of the popular Nawab Wajid Ali Shah and the annexation of the state were still very fresh in the memory of the people, the populace in Lucknow celebrated the fall of British rule by hailing Birjis Qadr, the young son of the Nawab, as their leader.

Not everywhere were the leaders people of the court – ranis, rajas, nawabs and *taluqdars*. Often the message of rebellion was carried by ordinary men and women and in places by religious men too. From Meerut, there were reports that a fakir had appeared riding on an elephant and that the sepoys were visiting him frequently. In Lucknow, after the annexation of Awadh, there were many religious leaders and self-styled prophets who preached the destruction of British rule.

Elsewhere, local leaders emerged, urging peasants, zamindars and tribals to revolt. Shah Mal mobilised the villagers of pargana Barout in Uttar Pradesh; Gonoo, a tribal cultivator of Singhbhum in Chotanagpur, became a rebel leader of the Kol tribals of the region.

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Two rebels of 1857

Shah Mal

Shah Mal lived in a large village in pargana Barout in Uttar Pradesh. He belonged to a clan of Jat cultivators whose kinship ties extended over *chaurasee des* (eighty-four villages). The lands in the region were irrigated and fertile, with rich dark loam soil. Many of the villagers were prosperous and saw the British land revenue system as oppressive: the revenue demand was high and its collection inflexible. Consequently cultivators were losing land to outsiders, to traders and moneylenders who were coming into the area.

Shah Mal mobilised the headmen and cultivators of *chaurasee des*, moving at night from village to village, urging people to rebel against the British. As in many other places, the revolt against the British turned into a general rebellion against all signs of oppression and injustice. Cultivators left their fields and plundered the houses of moneylenders and traders. Displaced proprietors took possession of the lands they had lost. Shah Mal's men attacked government buildings, destroyed the bridge over the river, and dug up metalled roads – partly to prevent government forces from coming into the area, and partly because bridges and roads were seen as symbols of British rule. They sent supplies to the sepoys who had mutinied in Delhi and stopped all official communication between British headquarters and Meerut. Locally acknowledged as the Raja, Shah Mal took over the bungalow of an English officer, turned it into a "hall of justice", settling disputes and dispensing judgments. He also set up an amazingly effective network of intelligence. For a period the people of the area felt that *firangi raj* was over, and their *raj* had come.

Shah Mal was killed in battle in July 1857.

Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah

Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah was one of the many *maulvis* who played an important part in the revolt of 1857. Educated in Hyderabad, he became a preacher when young. In 1856, he was seen moving from village to village preaching *jehad* (religious war) against the British and urging people to rebel. He moved in a palanquin, with drumbeaters in front and followers at the rear. He was therefore popularly called Danka Shah – the *maulvi* with the drum (*danka*). British officials panicked as thousands began following the *maulvi* and many Muslims began seeing him as an inspired prophet. When he reached Lucknow in 1856, he was stopped by the police from preaching in the city. Subsequently, in 1857, he was jailed in Faizabad. When released, he was elected by the mutinous 22nd Native Infantry as their leader. He fought in the famous Battle of Chinhat in which the British forces under Henry Lawrence were defeated. He came to be known for his courage and power. Many people in fact believed that he was invincible, had magical powers, and could not be killed by the British. It was this belief that partly formed the basis of his authority.

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Fig. 10.5
Henry Hardinge, by Francis Grant, 1849
As Governor General, Hardinge attempted to modernise the equipment of the army. The Enfield rifles that were introduced initially used the greased cartridges the sepoys rebelled against.

1.4 Rumours and prophecies

Rumours and prophecies played a part in moving people to action. As we saw, the sepoys who had arrived in Delhi from Meerut had told Bahadur Shah about bullets coated with the fat of cows and pigs and that biting those bullets would corrupt their caste and religion. They were referring to the cartridges of the Enfield rifles which had just been given to them. The British tried to explain to the sepoys that this was not the case but the rumour that the new cartridges were greased with the fat of cows and pigs spread like wildfire across the sepoy lines of North India.

This is one rumour whose origin can be traced. Captain Wright, commandant of the Rifle Instruction Depot, reported that in the third week of January 1857 a "low-caste" *khalasi* who worked in the magazine in Dum Dum had asked a Brahmin sepoy for a drink of water from his *lota*. The sepoy had refused saying that the "lower caste's" touch would defile the *lota*. The *khalasi* had reportedly retorted, "You will soon lose your caste, as ere long you will have to bite cartridges covered with the fat of cows and pigs." We do not know the veracity of the report, but once this rumour started no amount of assurances from British officers could stop its circulation and the fear it spread among the sepoys.

This was not the only rumour that was circulating in North India at the beginning of 1857. There was the rumour that the British government had hatched a gigantic conspiracy to destroy the caste and religion of Hindus and Muslims. To this end, the rumours said, the British had mixed the bone dust of cows and pigs into the flour that was sold in the market. In towns and cantonments, sepoys and the common people refused to touch the *atta*. There was fear and suspicion that the British wanted to convert Indians to Christianity. Panic spread fast. British officers tried to allay their fears, but in vain. These fears stirred men to action. The response to the call for action was reinforced by the prophecy that British rule would come to an end on the centenary of the Battle of Plassey, on 23 June 1857.

Rumours were not the only thing circulating at the time. Reports came from various parts of North India that chapattis were being distributed from village to village. A person would come at night and

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give a chapatti to the watchman of the village and ask him to make five more and distribute to the next village, and so on. The meaning and purpose of the distribution of the chapattis was not clear and is not clear even today. But there is no doubt that people read it as an omen of an upheaval.

1.5 Why did people believe in the rumours?

We cannot understand the power of rumours and prophecies in history by checking whether they are factually correct or not. We need to see what they reflect about the minds of people who believed them – their fears and apprehensions, their faiths and convictions. Rumours circulate only when they resonate with the deeper fears and suspicions of people.

The rumours in 1857 begin to make sense when seen in the context of the policies the British pursued from the late 1820s. As you know, from that time, under the leadership of Governor General Lord William Bentinck, the British adopted policies aimed at "reforming" Indian society by introducing Western education, Western ideas and Western institutions. With the cooperation of sections of Indian society they set up English-medium schools, colleges and universities which taught Western sciences and the liberal arts. The British established laws to abolish customs like sati (1829) and to permit the remarriage of Hindu widows.

On a variety of pleas, like misgovernment and the refusal to recognise adoption, the British annexed not only Awadh, but many other kingdoms and principalities like Jhansi and Satara. Once these territories were annexed, the British introduced their own system of administration, their own laws and their own methods of land settlement and land revenue collection. The cumulative impact of all this on the people of North India was profound.

It seemed to the people that all that they cherished and held sacred – from kings and socio-religious customs to patterns of landholding and revenue payment – was being destroyed and replaced by a system that was more impersonal, alien and oppressive. This perception was aggravated by the activities of Christian missionaries. In such a situation of uncertainty, rumours spread with remarkable swiftness.

To explore the basis of the revolt of 1857 in some detail, let us look at Awadh – one of the major centres where the drama of 1857 unfolded.

➲ Discuss...

Read the section once more and explain the similarities and differences you notice in the ways in which leaders emerged during the revolt. For any two leaders, discuss why ordinary people were drawn to them.

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2. AWADH IN REVOLT

2.1 "A cherry that will drop into our mouth one day"

In 1851 Governor General Lord Dalhousie described the kingdom of Awadh as "a cherry that will drop into our mouth one day". Five years later, in 1856, the kingdom was formally annexed to the British Empire.

The conquest happened in stages. The Subsidiary Alliance had been imposed on Awadh in 1801. By the terms of this alliance the Nawab had to disband his military force, allow the British to position their troops within the kingdom, and act in accordance with the advice of the British Resident who was now to be attached to the court. Deprived of his armed forces, the Nawab became increasingly dependent on the British to maintain law and order within the kingdom. He could no longer assert control over the rebellious chiefs and *taluqdars*.

Resident was the designation of a representative of the Governor General who lived in a state which was not under direct British rule.

In the meantime the British became increasingly interested in acquiring the territory of Awadh. They felt that the soil there was good for producing indigo and cotton, and the region was ideally located to be developed into the principal market of Upper India. By the early 1850s, moreover, all the major areas of India had been conquered: the Maratha lands, the Doab, the Carnatic, the Punjab and Bengal. The takeover of Awadh in 1856 was expected to complete a process of territorial annexation that had begun with the conquest of Bengal almost a century earlier.

Subsidiary Alliance

Subsidiary Alliance was a system devised by Lord Wellesley in 1798. All those who entered into such an alliance with the British had to accept certain terms and conditions:

(a) The British would be responsible for protecting their ally from external and internal threats to their power.

(b) In the territory of the ally, a British armed contingent would be stationed.

(c) The ally would have to provide the resources for maintaining this contingent.

(d) The ally could enter into agreements with other rulers or engage in warfare only with the permission of the British.

2.2 "The life was gone out of the body"

Lord Dalhousie's annexations created disaffection in all the areas and principalities that were annexed but nowhere more so than in the kingdom of Awadh in the heart of North India. Here, Nawab Wajid Ali Shah was dethroned and exiled to Calcutta on the plea that the region was being misgoverned. The British government also wrongly assumed that Wajid Ali Shah was an unpopular ruler. On the contrary, he was widely loved, and when he left his beloved Lucknow, there were many who followed him all the way to Kanpur singing songs of lament.

The widespread sense of grief and loss at the Nawab's exile was recorded by many contemporary observers. One of them wrote: "The life was gone out of the body, and the body of this town had been left lifeless ... there was no street or market and house

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Map 1
Territories under British control in 1857

which did not wail out the cry of agony in separation of Jan-i-Alam." One folk song bemoaned that "the honourable English came and took the country" (*Angrez Bahadur ain, mulk lai linho*).

This emotional upheaval was aggravated by immediate material losses. The removal of the Nawab led to the dissolution of the court and its culture. Thus a whole range of people – musicians, dancers, poets, artisans, cooks, retainers, administrative officials and so on – lost their livelihood.

2.3 *Firangi raj* and the end of a world

A chain of grievances in Awadh linked prince, *taluqdar*, peasant and sepoy. In different ways they came to identify *firangi raj* with the end of their world – the breakdown of things they valued, respected and held dear. A whole complex of emotions

Source 3

The Nawab has left

Another song mourned the plight of the ruler who had to leave his motherland:

Noble and peasant all wept together

and all the world wept and wailed

Alas! The chief has bidden adieu to

his country and gone abroad.

➲ Read the entire section and discuss why people mourned the departure of Wajid Ali Shah.

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Fig. 10.6
A zamindar from Awadh, 1880

and issues, traditions and loyalties worked themselves out in the revolt of 1857. In Awadh, more than anywhere else, the revolt became an expression of popular resistance to an alien order.

The annexation displaced not just the Nawab. It also dispossessed the *taluqdars* of the region. The countryside of Awadh was dotted with the estates and forts of *taluqdars* who for many generations had controlled land and power in the countryside. Before the coming of the British, *taluqdars* maintained armed retainers, built forts, and enjoyed a degree of autonomy, as long as they accepted the suzerainty of the Nawab and paid the revenue of their *taluqs*. Some of the bigger *taluqdars* had as many as 12,000 foot-soldiers and even the smaller ones had about 200. The British were unwilling to tolerate the power of the *taluqdars*. Immediately after the annexation, the *taluqdars* were disarmed and their forts destroyed.

The British land revenue policy further undermined the position and authority of the *taluqdars*. After annexation, the first British revenue settlement, known as the Summary Settlement of 1856, was based on the assumption that the *taluqdars* were interlopers with no permanent stakes in land: they had established their hold over land through force and fraud. The Summary Settlement proceeded to remove the *taluqdars* wherever possible. Figures show that in pre-British times, *taluqdars* had held 67 per cent of the total number of villages in Awadh; by the Summary Settlement this number had come down to 38 per cent. The *taluqdars* of southern Awadh were the hardest hit and some lost more than half of the total number of villages they had previously held.

British land revenue officers believed that by removing *taluqdars* they would be able to settle the land with the actual owners of the soil and thus reduce the level of exploitation of peasants while increasing revenue returns for the state. But this did not happen in practice: revenue flows for the state increased but the burden of demand on the peasants did not decline. Officials soon found that large areas of Awadh were actually heavily overassessed: the increase of revenue demand in some places was from 30 to 70 per cent. Thus neither *taluqdars* nor peasants had any reasons to be happy with the annexation.

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The dispossession of *taluqdars* meant the breakdown of an entire social order. The ties of loyalty and patronage that had bound the peasant to the *taluqdar* were disrupted. In pre-British times, the *taluqdars* were oppressors but many of them also appeared to be generous father figures: they exacted a variety of dues from the peasant but were often considerate in times of need. Now, under the British, the peasant was directly exposed to overassessment of revenue and inflexible methods of collection. There was no longer any guarantee that in times of hardship or crop failure the revenue demand of the state would be reduced or collection postponed; or that in times of festivities the peasant would get the loan and support that the *taluqdar* had earlier provided.

In areas like Awadh where resistance during 1857 was intense and long lasting, the fighting was carried out by *taluqdars* and their peasants. Many of these *taluqdars* were loyal to the Nawab of Awadh, and they joined Begum Hazrat Mahal (the wife of the Nawab) in Lucknow to fight the British; some even remained with her in defeat.

The grievances of the peasants were carried over into the sepoy lines since a vast majority of the sepoys were recruited from the villages of Awadh. For decades the sepoys had complained of low levels of pay and the difficulty of getting leave. By the 1850s there were other reasons for their discontent.

The relationship of the sepoys with their superior white officers underwent a significant change in the years preceding the uprising of 1857. In the 1820s, white officers made it a point to maintain friendly relations with the sepoys. They would take part in their leisure activities – they wrestled with them, fenced with them and went out hawking with them. Many of them were fluent in Hindustani and were familiar with the customs and culture of the country. These officers were disciplinarian and father figure rolled into one.

In the 1840s, this began to change. The officers developed a sense of superiority and started treating the sepoys as their racial inferiors, riding roughshod over their sensibilities. Abuse and physical violence became common and thus the distance between sepoys and officers grew. Trust was replaced by suspicion. The episode of the greased cartridges was a classic example of this.

Source 4

What *taluqdars* thought

The attitude of the *taluqdars* was best expressed by Hanwant Singh, the Raja of Kalakankar, near Rae Bareli. During the mutiny, Hanwant Singh had given shelter to a British officer, and conveyed him to safety. While taking leave of the officer, Hanwant Singh told him:

> Sahib, your countrymen came into this country and drove out our King. You sent your officers round the districts to examine the titles to the estates. At one blow you took from me lands which from time immemorial had been in my family. I submitted. Suddenly misfortune fell upon you. The people of the land rose against you. You came to me whom you had despoiled. I have saved you. But now – now I march at the head of my retainers to Lucknow to try and drive you from the country.

➲ What does this excerpt tell you about the attitude of the *taluqdars*? Who did Hanwant Singh mean by the people of the land? What reason does Hanwant Singh give for the anger of the people?

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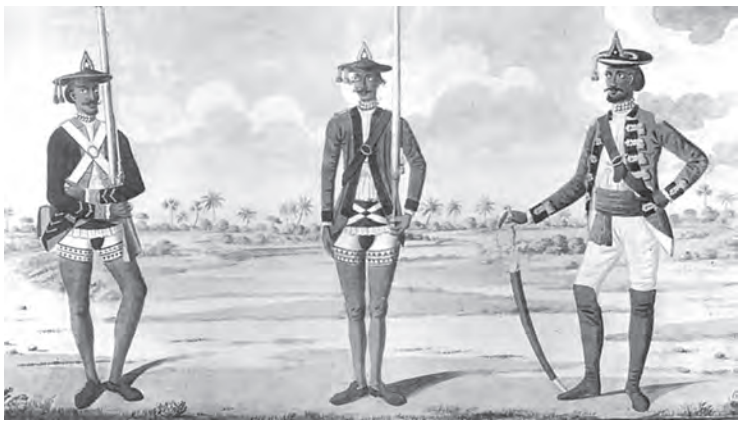

Fig. 10.7
Bengal sepoys in European-style uniform

It is also important to remember that close links existed between the sepoys and the rural world of North India. The large majority of the sepoys of the Bengal Army were recruited from the villages of Awadh and eastern Uttar Pradesh. Many of them were Brahmins or from the "upper" castes. Awadh was, in fact, called the "nursery of the Bengal Army". The changes that the families of the sepoys saw around them and the threats they perceived were quickly transmitted to the sepoy lines. In turn, the fears of the sepoys about the new cartridge, their grievances about leave, their grouse about the increasing misbehaviour and racial abuse on the part of their white officers were communicated back to the villages. This link between the sepoys and the rural world had important implications in the course of the uprising. When the sepoys defied their superior officers and took up arms they were joined very swiftly by their brethren in the villages. Everywhere, peasants poured into towns and joined the soldiers and the ordinary people of the towns in collective acts of rebellion.

➲ Discuss...

Find out whether people in your state participated in the revolt of 1857. If they did, find out why they did so. If they did not, try and explain this.

3. WHAT THE REBELS WANTED

As victors, the British recorded their own trials and tribulations as well as their heroism. They dismissed the rebels as a bunch of ungrateful and barbaric people. The repression of the rebels also meant silencing of their voice. Few rebels had the opportunity of recording their version of events. Moreover, most of them were sepoys and ordinary people who were not literate. Thus, other than a few proclamations and *ishtahars* (notifications) issued by rebel leaders to propagate their ideas and persuade people to join the revolt, we do not have much that throws light on the perspective of the rebels. Attempts to reconstruct what happened in 1857 are thus heavily and inevitably dependent on what the British wrote. While these sources reveal the minds of officials, they tell us very little about what the rebels wanted.

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3.1 The vision of unity

The rebel proclamations in 1857 repeatedly appealed to all sections of the population, irrespective of their caste and creed. Many of the proclamations were issued by Muslim princes or in their names but even these took care to address the sentiments of Hindus. The rebellion was seen as a war in which both Hindus and Muslims had equally to lose or gain. The *ishtahars* harked back to the pre-British Hindu-Muslim past and glorified the coexistence of different communities under the Mughal Empire. The proclamation that was issued under the name of Bahadur Shah appealed to the people to join the fight under the standards of both Muhammad and Mahavir. It was remarkable that during the uprising religious divisions between Hindus and Muslim were hardly noticeable despite British attempts to create such divisions. In Bareilly in western Uttar Pradesh, in December 1857, the British spent Rs 50,000 to incite the Hindu population against the Muslims. The attempt failed.

Source 5

The Azamgarh Proclamation, 25 August 1857

This is one of the main sources of our knowledge about what the rebels wanted:

> It is well known to all, that in this age the people of Hindostan, both Hindoos and Mohammedans, are being ruined under the tyranny and the oppression of the infidel and treacherous English. It is therefore the bounden duty of all the wealthy people of India, especially those who have any sort of connection with the Mohammedan royal families, and are considered the pastors and masters of their people, to stake their lives and property for the well-being of the public. …
>
> Several of the Hindoo and Mussalman Chiefs, who have long since quitted their homes for the preservation of their religion, and have been trying their best to root out the English in India, have presented themselves to me, and taken part in the reigning Indian crusade, and it is more than probable that I shall very shortly receive succours from the West. Therefore for the information of the public, the present *Ishtahar,* consisting of several sections, is put in circulation and it is the imperative duty of all to take into their careful consideration, and abide by it. Parties anxious to participate in the common cause, but having no means to provide for themselves, shall receive their daily subsistence from me; and be it known to all, that the ancient works, both of the Hindoos and Mohammedans, the writings of miracle workers, and the calculation of the astrologers, pundits, … all agree in asserting that the English will no longer have any footing in India or elsewhere. Therefore it is incumbent on all to give up the hope of the continuation of the British sway, side with me, and deserve the consideration of the Badshahi, or imperial government, by their individual exertion in

contd

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Source 5 (contd)

promoting the common good, and thus attain their respective ends; otherwise if this golden opportunity slips away, they will have to repent for their folly, … .

Section I – Regarding Zemindars. It is evident, that the British Government in making zemindary settlements have imposed exorbitant *Jumas* (revenue demand) and have disgraced and ruined several zemindars, by putting up their estates for public auction for arrears of rent, in so much, in the institution of a suit by a common Ryot, a maid servant, or a slave, the respectable zemindars are summoned into court, arrested, put in goal and disgraced. In litigation regarding zemindaries, the immense value of stamps, and other unnecessary expenses of the civil courts, … are all calculated to impoverish the litigants. Besides this, the coffers of the zemindars are annually taxed with the subscription for schools, hospitals, roads, etc. Such extortions will have no manner of existence in the Badshahi Government; but on the contrary the *Jumas* will be light, the dignity and honour of the zemindars safe, and every zemindar will have absolute rule in his own zemindary …

Section II – Regarding Merchants. It is plain that the infidel and treacherous British Government have monopolised the trade of all the fine and valuable merchandise, such as indigo, cloth, and other articles of shipping, leaving only the trade of trifles to the people, … Besides this, the profits of the traders are taxed, with postages, tolls and subscriptions for schools, etc. Notwithstanding all these concessions, the merchants are liable to imprisonment and disgrace at the instance or complaint of a worthless man. When the Badshahi Government is established all these aforesaid fraudulent practices shall be dispensed with, and the trade of every article, without exception, both by land and water will be opened to the native merchants of India, … It is therefore the duty of every merchant to take part in the war, and aid the Badshahi Government with his men and money, … .

Section III – Regarding Public Servants. It is not a secret thing, that under the British Government, natives employed in the civil and military services have little respect, low pay, and no manner of influence; and all the posts of dignity and emolument in both the departments are exclusively bestowed on Englishmen, … Therefore, all the natives in the British service ought to be alive to their religion and interest, and abjuring their loyalty to the English, side with the Badshahi Government, and obtain salaries of 200 and 300 rupees a month for the present, and be entitled to high posts in the future. …

Section IV – Regarding Artisans. It is evident that the Europeans, by the introduction of English articles into India, have thrown the weavers, the cotton dressers, the carpenters, the blacksmiths, and the shoemakers, etc., out of employ, and have engrossed their occupations, so that every description of native artisan has been reduced to beggary. But under the Badshahi Government the native artisans will exclusively be employed in the service of the kings, the rajahs, and the rich; and this will no doubt ensure their prosperity. Therefore these artisans ought to renounce the English services, … .

Section V – Regarding Pundits, Fakirs and Other Learned Persons. The pundits and fakirs being the guardians of the Hindoo and Mohammadan religions respectively, and the Europeans being the enemies of both the religions, and as at present a war is raging against the English on account of religion, the pundits and fakirs are bound to present themselves to me, and take their share in the holy war… .

➲ What are the issues against British rule highlighted in this proclamation? Read the section on each social group carefully. Notice the language in which the proclamation is formulated and the variety of sentiments it appeals to.

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Source 6

What the sepoys thought

This is one of the *arzis* (petition or application) of rebel sepoys that have survived:

A century ago the British arrived in Hindostan and gradually entertained troops in their service, and became masters of every state. Our forefathers have always served them, and we also entered their service … By the mercy of God and with our assistance the British also conquered every place they liked, in which thousands of us, Hindostani men were sacrificed, but we never made any excuses or pretences nor revolted …

But in the year eighteen fifty seven the British issued an order that new cartridges and muskets which had arrived from England were to be issued; in the former of which the fats of cows and pigs were mixed; and also that *attah* of wheat mixed with powdered bones was to be eaten; and even distributed them in every Regiment of infantry, cavalry and artillery …

They gave these cartridges to the *sowars* (mounted soldiers) of the 3rd Light Cavalry, and ordered them to bite them; the troopers objected to it, and said that they would never bite them, for if they did, their religion and faith would be destroyed … upon this the British officers paraded the men of the 3 Regiments and having prepared 1,400 English soldiers, and other Battalions of European troops and Horse Artillery, surrounded them, and placing six guns before each of the infantry regiments, loaded the guns with grape and made 84 new troopers prisoners, and put them in jail with irons on them … The reason that the *sowars* of the Cantonment were put into jail was that we should be frightened into biting the new cartridges. On this account we and all our country-men having united together, have fought the British for the preservation of our faith … we have been compelled to make war for two years and the Rajahs and Chiefs who are with us in faith and religion, are still so, and have undergone all sorts of trouble; we have fought for two years in order that our faith and religion may not be polluted. If the religion of a Hindoo or Mussalman is lost, what remains in the world?

➲ Compare the reasons for the mutiny as stated in the *arzi* with those mentioned by the *taluqdar* (Source 3).

3.2 Against the symbols of oppression

The proclamations completely rejected everything associated with British rule or *firangi raj* as they called it. They condemned the British for the annexations they had carried out and the treaties they had broken. The British, the rebel leaders said, could not be trusted.

What enraged the people was how British land revenue settlements had dispossessed landholders, both big and small, and foreign commerce had driven artisans and weavers to ruin. Every aspect of British rule was attacked and the *firangi* accused of destroying a way of life that was familiar and cherished. The rebels wanted to restore that world.

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The proclamations expressed the widespread fear that the British were bent on destroying the caste and religions of Hindus and Muslims and converting them to Christianity – a fear that led people to believe many of the rumours that circulated at the time. People were urged to come together and fight to save their livelihood, their faith, their honour, their identity – a fight which was for the "greater public good".

As noted earlier, in many places the rebellion against the British widened into an attack on all those who were seen as allies of the British or local oppressors. Often the rebels deliberately sought to humiliate the elites of a city. In the villages they burnt account books and ransacked moneylenders' houses. This reflected an attempt to overturn traditional hierarchies, rebel against *all* oppressors. It presents a glimpse of an alternative vision, perhaps of a more egalitarian society. Such visions were not articulated in the proclamations which sought to unify all social groups in the fight against *firangi raj.*

3.3 The search for alternative power

Once British rule had collapsed, the rebels in places like Delhi, Lucknow and Kanpur tried to establish some kind of structure of authority and administration. This was, of course, short-lived but the attempts show that the rebel leadership wanted to restore the pre-British world of the eighteenth century. The leaders went back to the culture of the court. Appointments were made to various posts, arrangements made for the collection of land revenue and the payment of troops, orders issued to stop loot and plunder. Side by side plans were made to fight battles against the British. Chains of command were laid down in the army. In all this the rebels harked back to the eighteenth-century Mughal world – a world that became a symbol of all that had been lost.

The administrative structures established by the rebels were primarily aimed at meeting the demands of war. However, in most cases these structures could not survive the British onslaught. But in Awadh, where resistance to the British lasted longest, plans of counter-attack were being drawn up by the Lucknow court and hierarchies of command were in place as late as the last months of 1857 and the early part of 1858.

➲ Discuss...

What do you think are the major problems faced by historians in reconstructing the point of view of the rebels?

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4. REPRESSION

It is clear from all accounts that we have of 1857 that the British did not have an easy time in putting down the rebellion.

Before sending out troops to reconquer North India, the British passed a series of laws to help them quell the insurgency. By a number of Acts, passed in May and June 1857, not only was the whole of North India put under martial law but military officers and even ordinary Britons were given the power to try and punish Indians suspected of rebellion. In other words, the ordinary processes of law and trial were suspended and it was put out that rebellion would have only one punishment – death.

Armed with these newly enacted special laws and the reinforcements brought in from Britain, the British began the task of suppressing the revolt. They, like the rebels, recognised the symbolic value of Delhi. The British thus mounted a two-pronged attack. One force moved from Calcutta into North India and the other from the Punjab – which was largely peaceful – to reconquer Delhi. British

Source 7

Villagers as rebels

An officer reporting from rural Awadh (spelt as Oude in the following account) noted:

> The Oude people are gradually pressing down on the line of communication from the North ... the Oude people are villagers ... these villagers are nearly intangible to Europeans melting away before them and collecting again. The Civil Authorities report these villagers to amount to a very large number of men, with a number of guns.

➲ What, according to this account, were the problems faced by the British in dealing with these villagers?

Map 2
The map shows the important centres of revolt and the lines of British attack against the rebels.

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Fig. 10.8
A mosque on the Delhi Ridge, photograph by Felice Beato, 1857-58
After 1857, British photographers recorded innumerable images of desolation and ruin.

attempts to recover Delhi began in earnest in early June 1857 but it was only in late September that the city was finally captured. The fighting and losses on both sides were heavy. One reason for this was the fact that rebels from all over North India had come to Delhi to defend the capital.

In the Ganegtic plain too the progress of British reconquest was slow. The forces had to reconquer the area village by village. The countryside and the people around were entirely hostile. As soon as they began their counter-insurgency operations, the British realised that they were not dealing with a mere mutiny but an uprising that had huge popular support. In Awadh, for example, a British official called Forsyth estimated that three-fourths of the adult male population was in rebellion. The area was brought under control only in March 1858 after protracted fighting.

The British used military power on a gigantic scale. But this was not the only instrument they used. In large parts of present-day Uttar Pradesh, where big landholders and peasants had offered united resistance, the British tried to break up the unity by promising to give back to the big landholders their estates. Rebel landholders were dispossessed and the loyal rewarded. Many landholders died fighting the British or they escaped into Nepal where they died of illness or starvation.

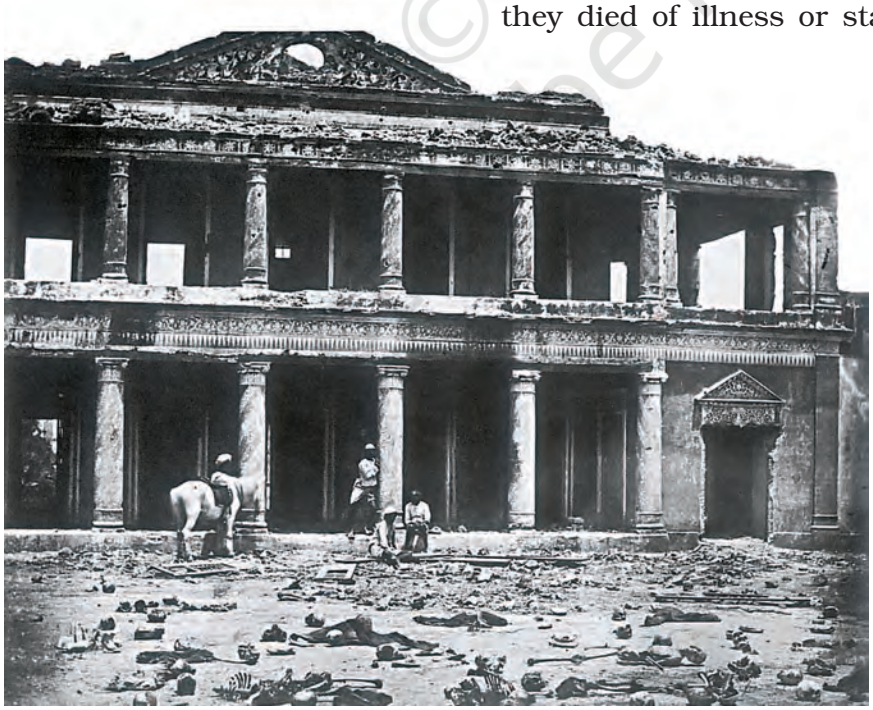

Fig. 10.9
Secundrah Bagh, Lucknow, photograph by Felice Beato, 1858
Here we see four solitary figures within a desolate place that was once the pleasure garden built by Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. British forces led by Campbell killed over 2000 rebel sepoys who held the place in 1857. The skeletons strewn on the ground are meant to be a cold warning of the futility of rebellion.

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5. IMAGES OF THE REVOLT

How do we know about the revolt, about the activities of the rebels and the measures of repression that we have been discussing?

As we have seen, we have very few records on the rebels' point of view. There are a few rebel proclamations and notifications, as also some letters that rebel leaders wrote. But historians till now have continued to discuss rebel actions primarily through accounts written by the British.

Official accounts, of course, abound: colonial administrators and military men left their versions in letters and diaries, autobiographies and official histories. We can also gauge the official mindset and the changing British attitudes through the innumerable memos and notes, assessments of situations, and reports that were produced. Many of these have now been collected in a set of volumes on mutiny records. These tell us about the fears and anxieties of officials and their perception of the rebels. The stories of the revolt that were published in British newspapers and magazines narrated in gory detail the violence of the mutineers – and these stories inflamed public feelings and provoked demands of retribution and revenge.

One important record of the mutiny is the pictorial images produced by the British and Indians: paintings, pencil drawings, etchings, posters, cartoons, bazaar prints. Let us look at some of them and see what they tell us.

5.1 Celebrating the saviours

British pictures offer a variety of images that were meant to provoke a range of different emotions and reactions. Some of them commemorate the British heroes who saved the English and repressed the rebels. "Relief of Lucknow", painted by Thomas Jones Barker in 1859, is an example of this type. When the rebel forces besieged Lucknow, Henry Lawrence, the Commissioner of Lucknow, collected the Christian population and took refuge in the heavily fortified Residency. Lawrence was killed but the Residency continued to be defended under the command of Colonel Inglis. On 25 September James Outram and Henry Havelock arrived, cut through the rebel forces, and reinforced the British garrisons. Twenty days later Colin Campbell, who

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Fig. 10.10
"Relief of Lucknow", painted by Thomas Jones Barker, 1859

was appointed as the new Commander of British forces in India, came with his forces and rescued the besieged British garrison. In British accounts the siege of Lucknow became a story of survival, heroic resistance and the ultimate triumph of British power.

Barker's painting celebrates the moment of Campbell's entry. At the centre of the canvas are the British heroes – Campbell, Outram and Havelock. The gestures of the hands of those around lead the spectator's eyes towards the centre. The heroes stand on a ground that is well lit, with shadows in the foreground and the damaged Residency in the background. The dead and injured in the foreground are testimony to the suffering during the siege, while the triumphant figures of horses in the middle ground emphasise the fact that British power and control had been re-established. To the British public such paintings were reassuring. They created a sense that the time of trouble was past and the rebellion was over; the British were the victors.

5.2 English women and the honour of Britain

Newspaper reports have a power over public imagination; they shape feelings and attitudes to events. Inflamed particularly by tales of violence

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against women and children, there were public demands in Britain for revenge and retribution. The British government was asked to protect the honour of innocent women and ensure the safety of helpless children. Artists expressed as well as shaped these sentiments through their visual representations of trauma and suffering.

"In Memoriam" (Fig. 10.11) was painted by Joseph Noel Paton two years after the mutiny. You can see English women and children huddled in a circle, looking helpless and innocent, seemingly waiting for the inevitable – dishonour, violence and death. "In Memoriam" does not show gory violence; it only suggests it. It stirs up the spectator's imagination, and seeks to provoke anger and fury. It represents the rebels as violent and brutish, even though they remain invisible in the picture. In the background you can see the British rescue forces arriving as saviours.

Fig. 10.11
"In Memoriam",
by Joseph Noel Paton, 1859

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Fig. 10.12
Miss Wheeler defending herself against sepoys in Kanpur

In another set of sketches and paintings we see women in a different light. They appear heroic, defending themselves against the attack of rebels. Miss Wheeler in Figure 10.12 stands firmly at the centre, defending her honour, single-handedly killing the attacking rebels. As in all such British representations, the rebels are demonised. Here, four burly males with swords and guns are shown attacking a woman. The woman's struggle to save her honour and her life, in fact, is represented as having a deeper religious connotation: it is a battle to save the honour of Christianity. The book lying on the floor is the Bible.

Fig. 10.13
Justice, Punch, *12 September 1857*
The caption at the bottom reads "The news of the terrible massacre at Cawnpore (Kanpur) produced an outburst of fiery indignation and wild desire for revenge throughout the whole of England."

5.3 Vengeance and retribution

As waves of anger and shock spread in Britain, demands for retribution grew louder. Visual representations and news about the revolt created a milieu in which violent repression and vengeance were seen as both necessary and just. It was as if justice demanded that the challenge to British honour and power be met ruthlessly. Threatened by the rebellion, the British felt that they had to demonstrate their invincibility. In one such image (Fig. 10.13) we see an allegorical female figure of justice with a sword in one hand and a shield in the other. Her posture is aggressive; her face expresses rage and the desire for revenge. She is trampling sepoys under her feet while a mass of Indian women with children cower with fear.

There were innumerable other pictures and cartoons in the British press that sanctioned brutal repression and violent reprisal.

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Fig. 10.14
The caption at the bottom reads "The British Lion's Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger", Punch, *1857.*

➲ What idea is the picture projecting? What is being expressed through the images of the lion and the tiger? What do the figures of the woman and the child depict?

5.4 The performance of terror

The urge for vengeance and retribution was expressed in the brutal way in which the rebels were executed. They were blown from guns, or hanged from the gallows. Images of these executions were widely circulated through popular journals.

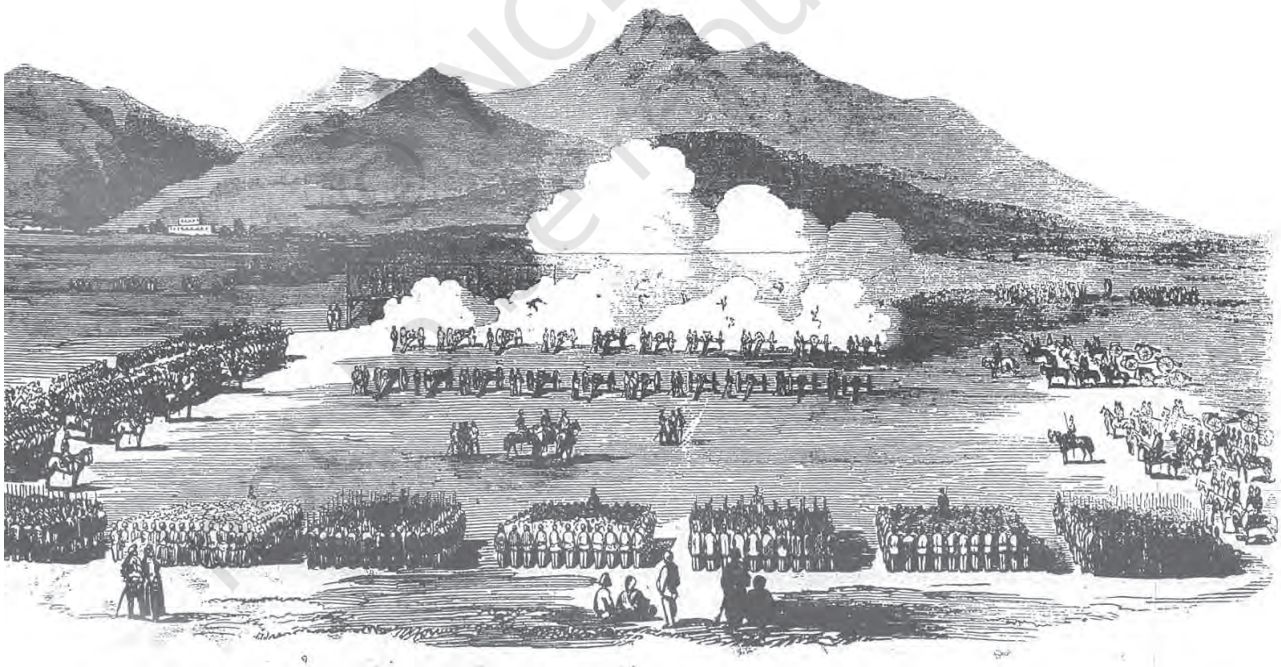

Fig. 10.15
Execution of mutineers in Peshawar: Blowing from the guns,
Illustrated London News, *3 October 1857*
The scene of execution here appears to be a stage where a drama is being performed – an enactment of brutal power. Mounted soldiers and sepoys in uniform dominate the scene. They have to watch the execution of their fellow sepoys, and experience the chilling consequences of rebellion.

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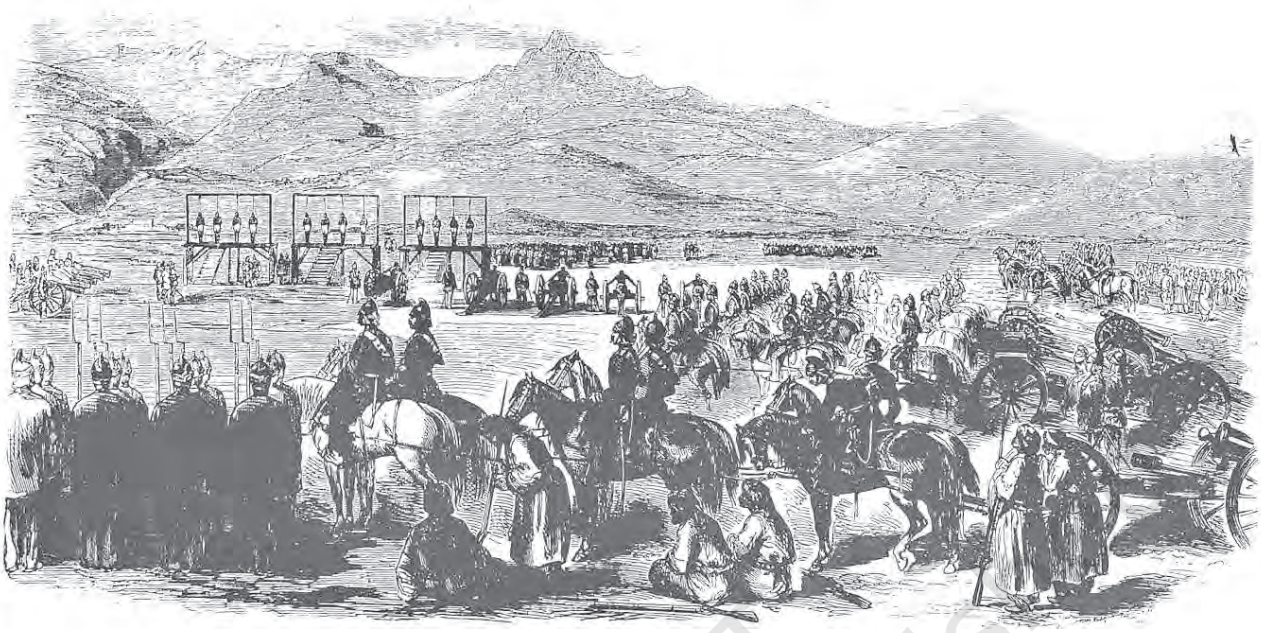

Fig. 10.16
Execution of mutinous sepoys in Peshawar, Illustrated London News, *3 October 1857*
In this scene of execution 12 rebels hang in a row, with cannons all around them. What you see is not routine punishment: it is the performance of terror. For it to instil fear among people, punishment could not be discreetly meted out in enclosed spaces. It had to be theatrically performed in the open.

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5.5 No time for clemency

At a time when the clamour was for vengeance, pleas for moderation were ridiculed. When Governor General Canning declared that a gesture of leniency and a show of mercy would help in winning back the loyalty of the sepoys, he was mocked in the British press.

In one of the cartoons published in the pages of *Punch*, a British journal of comic satire, Canning is shown as a looming father figure, with his protective hand over the head of a sepoy who still holds an unsheathed sword in one hand and a dagger in the other, both dripping with blood (Fig.10.17) – an imagery that recurs in a number of British pictures of the time.

Fig. 10.17
"The Clemency of Canning", Punch, *24 October 1857*
The caption at the bottom of the cartoon reads: "Governor General: 'Well, then they shan't blow him from nasty guns; but he must promise to be a good little sepoy'."

5.6 Nationalist imageries

The national movement in the twentieth century drew its inspiration from the events of 1857. A whole world of nationalist imagination was woven around the revolt. It was celebrated as the First War of Independence in which all sections of the people of India came together to fight against imperial rule.

Art and literature, as much as the writing of history, have helped in keeping alive the memory of 1857. The leaders of the revolt were presented as heroic figures leading the country into battle, rousing the people to righteous indignation against oppressive imperial rule. Heroic poems were written about the valour of the queen who, with a sword in one hand and the reins of her horse in the other, fought for the freedom of her motherland. Rani of Jhansi was represented as a masculine figure chasing the enemy, slaying British soldiers and valiantly fighting till her last. Children in many parts of India grow up reading the lines of Subhadra Kumari Chauhan: *"Khoob lari mardani woh to Jhansi wali rani thi"* (Like a man she fought, she was the Rani of Jhansi). In popular prints Rani Lakshmi Bai is usually portrayed in battle armour, with a sword in hand and riding a horse – a symbol of the determination to resist injustice and alien rule.

Fig. 10.18
Films and posters have helped create the image of Rani Lakshmi Bai as a masculine warrior

The images indicate how the painters who produced them perceived those events, what they felt, and what they sought to convey. Through the paintings and cartoons we know about the public that looked at the paintings, appreciated or criticised the images, and bought copies and reproductions to put up in their homes.

These images did not only reflect the emotions and feelings of the times in which they were produced. They also shaped sensibilities. Fed by the images that circulated in Britain, the public sanctioned the most brutal forms of repression of the rebels. On the other hand, nationalist imageries of the revolt helped shape the nationalist imagination.

➲ Discuss...

Examine the elements in each of the visuals in this section and discuss how they allow you to identify the perspective of the artist.

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TIMELINE

1801	Subsidiary Alliance introduced by Wellesley in Awadh
1856	Nawab Wajid Ali Shah deposed; Awadh annexed
1856-57	Summary revenue settlements introduced in Awadh by the British
1857	
10 May	Mutiny starts in Meerut
11-12 May	Delhi garrisons revolt; Bahadur Shah accepts nominal leadership
20-27 May	Sepoys mutiny in Aligarh, Etawah, Mainpuri, Etah
30 May	Rising in Lucknow
May-June	Mutiny turns into a general revolt of the people
30 June	British suffer defeat in the battle of Chinhat
25 Sept	British forces under Havelock and Outram enter the Residency in Lucknow
July	Shah Mal killed in battle
1858	
June	Rani Jhansi killed in battle

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ANSWER IN 100-150 WORDS

Fig. 10.19
Faces of rebels

1. Why did the mutinous sepoys in many places turn to erstwhile rulers to provide leadership to the revolt?
2. Discuss the evidence that indicates planning and coordination on the part of the rebels.
3. Discuss the extent to which religious beliefs shaped the events of 1857.
4. What were the measures taken to ensure unity among the rebels?
5. What steps did the British take to quell the uprising?

WRITE A SHORT ESSAY (250-300 WORDS) ON THE FOLLOWING:

6. Why was the revolt particularly widespread in Awadh? What prompted the peasants, *taluqdars* and zamindars to join the revolt?
7. What did the rebels want? To what extent did the vision of different social groups differ?
8. What do visual representations tell us about the revolt of 1857? How do historians analyse these representations?
9. Examine any two sources presented in the chapter, choosing one visual and one text, and discuss how these represent the point of view of the victor and the vanquished.

MAP WORK

10. On an outline map of India, mark Calcutta (Kolkata), Bombay (Mumbai) and Madras (Chennai), three major centres of British power in 1857. Refer to Maps 1 and 2 and plot the areas where the revolt was most widespread. How close or far were these areas from the colonial cities?

PROJECTS (CHOOSE ONE)

11. Read a biography of any one of the leaders of the revolt of 1857. Check the sources used by the biographer. Do these include government reports, newspaper accounts, stories in regional languages, visual material, anything else? Do all the sources say the same thing, or are there differences? Prepare a report on your findings.
12. See a film made on the revolt of 1857 and write about the way it represents the revolt. How does it depict the British, the rebels, and those who remained loyal to the British? What does it say about peasants, city dwellers, tribals, zamindars and *taluqdars*? What kind of a response does the film seek to evoke?

If you would like to know more, read:

Gautam Bhadra. 1987.
'Four Rebels of Eighteen-Fifty-Seven', *Subaltern Studies, IV*.
Oxford University Press, Delhi.

Rudrangshu Mukherjee. 1984.
Awadh in Revolt, 1857-58.
Oxford University Press, Delhi.

Tapti Roy. 2006.
Raj of the Rani.
Penguin, New Delhi.

Eric Stokes. 1980.
Peasants and the Raj.
Oxford University Press, Delhi.

You could visit:

http://books.google.com
(for accounts of 1857 by British officials)

www.copsey-family.org/allenc/lakshmibai/links.html
(for letters of Rani Lakshmibai)

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THEME ELEVEN

Mahatma Gandhi and the Nationalist Movement
Civil Disobedience and Beyond

In the history of nationalism a single individual is often identified with the making of a nation. Thus, for example, we associate Garibaldi with the making of Italy, George Washington with the American War of Independence, and Ho Chi Minh with the struggle to free Vietnam from colonial rule. In the same manner, Mahatma Gandhi has been regarded as the 'Father' of the Indian nation.

In so far as Gandhiji was the most influential and revered of all the leaders who participated in the freedom struggle, that characterisation is not misplaced. However, like Washington or Ho Chi-Minh, Mahatma Gandhi's political career was shaped and constrained by the society in which he lived. For individuals, even great ones, are made by history even as they make history.

This chapter analyses Gandhiji's activities in India during the crucial period 1915-1948. It explores his interactions with different sections of the Indian society and the popular struggles that he inspired and led. It introduces the student to the different kinds of sources that historians use in reconstructing the career of a leader and of the social movements that he was associated with.

Fig. 11.1
People gather on the banks of the Sabarmati River to hear Mahatma Gandhi speak before starting out on the Salt March in 1930

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1. A LEADER ANNOUNCES HIMSELF

In January 1915, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi returned to his homeland after two decades of residence abroad. These years had been spent for the most part in South Africa, where he went as a lawyer, and in time became a leader of the Indian community in that territory. As the historian Chandran Devanesan has remarked, South Africa was "the making of the Mahatma". It was in South Africa that Mahatma Gandhi first forged the distinctive techniques of non-violent protest known as satyagraha, first promoted harmony between religions, and first alerted upper-caste Indians to their discriminatory treatment of low castes and women.

The India that Mahatma Gandhi came back to in 1915 was rather different from the one that he had left in 1893. Although still a colony of the British, it was far more active in a political sense. The Indian National Congress now had branches in most major cities and towns. Through the Swadeshi movement of 1905-07 it had greatly broadened its appeal among the middle classes. That movement had thrown up some towering leaders – among them Bal Gangadhar Tilak of Maharashtra, Bipin Chandra Pal of Bengal, and Lala Lajpat Rai of Punjab. The three were known as "Lal, Bal and Pal", the alliteration conveying the all-India character of their struggle, since their native provinces were very distant from one another. Where these leaders advocated militant opposition to colonial rule, there was a group of "Moderates" who preferred a more gradual and persuasive approach. Among these Moderates was Gandhiji's acknowledged political mentor, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, as well as Mohammad Ali Jinnah, who, like Gandhiji, was a lawyer of Gujarati extraction trained in London.

On Gokhale's advice, Gandhiji spent a year travelling around British India, getting to know the land and its peoples. His first major public appearance was at the opening of the Banaras Hindu University (BHU) in February 1916. Among the invitees to

Fig. 11.2
Mahatma Gandhi in Johannesburg, South Africa, February 1908

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this event were the princes and philanthropists whose donations had contributed to the founding of the BHU. Also present were important leaders of the Congress, such as Annie Besant. Compared to these dignitaries, Gandhiji was relatively unknown. He had been invited on account of his work in South Africa, rather than his status within India.

When his turn came to speak, Gandhiji charged the Indian elite with a lack of concern for the labouring poor. The opening of the BHU, he said, was "certainly a most gorgeous show". But he worried about the contrast between the "richly bedecked noblemen" present and "millions of the poor" Indians who were absent. Gandhiji told the privileged invitees that "there is no salvation for India unless you strip yourself of this jewellery and hold it in trust for your countrymen in India". "There can be no spirit of self-government about us," he went on, "if we take away or allow others to take away from the peasants almost the whole of the results of their labour. Our salvation can only come through the farmer. Neither the lawyers, nor the doctors, nor the rich landlords are going to secure it."

The opening of the BHU was an occasion for celebration, marking as it did the opening of a nationalist university, sustained by Indian money and Indian initiative. But rather than adopt a tone of self-congratulation, Gandhiji chose instead to remind those present of the peasants and workers who constituted a majority of the Indian population, yet were unrepresented in the audience.

Fig. 11.3
Mahatma Gandhi in Karachi, March 1916

Gandhiji's speech at Banaras in February 1916 was, at one level, merely a statement of fact – namely, that Indian nationalism was an elite phenomenon, a creation of lawyers and doctors and landlords. But, at another level, it was also a statement of intent – the first public announcement of Gandhiji's own desire to make Indian nationalism more properly

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representative of the Indian people as a whole. In the last month of that year, Gandhiji was presented with an opportunity to put his precepts into practice. At the annual Congress, held in Lucknow in December 1916, he was approached by a peasant from Champaran in Bihar, who told him about the harsh treatment of peasants by British indigo planters.

2. THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF NON-COOPERATION

Mahatma Gandhi was to spend much of 1917 in Champaran, seeking to obtain for the peasants security of tenure as well as the freedom to cultivate the crops of their choice. The following year, 1918, Gandhiji was involved in two campaigns in his home state of Gujarat. First, he intervened in a labour dispute in Ahmedabad, demanding better working conditions for the textile mill workers. Then he joined peasants in Kheda in asking the state for the remission of taxes following the failure of their harvest.

These initiatives in Champaran, Ahmedabad and Kheda marked Gandhiji out as a nationalist with a deep sympathy for the poor. At the same time, these were all localised struggles. Then, in 1919, the colonial rulers delivered into Gandhiji's lap an issue from which he could construct a much wider movement. During the Great War of 1914-18, the British had instituted censorship of the press and permitted detention without trial. Now, on the recommendation of a committee chaired by Sir Sidney Rowlatt, these tough measures were continued. In response, Gandhiji called for a countrywide campaign against the "Rowlatt Act". In towns across North and West India, life came to a standstill, as shops shut down and schools closed in response to the *bandh* call. The protests were particularly intense in the Punjab, where many men had served on the British side in the War – expecting to be rewarded for their service. Instead they were given the Rowlatt Act. Gandhiji was detained while proceeding to the Punjab, even as prominent local Congressmen were arrested. The situation in the province grew progressively more tense, reaching a bloody climax in Amritsar in April 1919, when a British Brigadier ordered his troops to open fire on a nationalist meeting. More

➲ **Discuss...**

Find out more about the national movement in India before 1915 and see whether Mahatma Gandhi's comments are justified.

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than four hundred people were killed in what is known as the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.

It was the Rowlatt satyagraha that made Gandhiji a truly *national* leader. Emboldened by its success, Gandhiji called for a campaign of "non-cooperation" with British rule. Indians who wished colonialism to end were asked to stop attending schools, colleges and law courts, and not pay taxes. In sum, they were asked to adhere to a "renunciation of (all) voluntary association with the (British) Government". If non-cooperation was effectively carried out, said Gandhiji, India would win swaraj within a year. To further broaden the struggle he had joined hands with the Khilafat Movement that sought to restore the Caliphate, a symbol of Pan-Islamism which had recently been abolished by the Turkish ruler Kemal Attaturk.

2.1 Knitting a popular movement

Gandhiji hoped that by coupling non-cooperation with Khilafat, India's two major religious communities, Hindus and Muslims, could collectively bring an end to colonial rule. These movements certainly unleashed a surge of popular action that was altogether unprecedented in colonial India.

Students stopped going to schools and colleges run by the government. Lawyers refused to attend court. The working class went on strike in many towns and cities: according to official figures, there were 396 strikes in 1921, involving 600,000 workers and a loss of seven million workdays. The countryside was seething with discontent too. Hill tribes in northern Andhra violated the forest laws. Farmers in Awadh did not pay taxes. Peasants in Kumaun refused to carry loads for colonial officials. These protest movements were sometimes carried out in defiance of the local nationalist leadership. Peasants, workers, and others interpreted and acted upon the call to "non-cooperate" with colonial rule in ways that best suited their interests, rather than conform to the dictates laid down from above.

"Non-cooperation," wrote Mahatma Gandhi's American biographer Louis Fischer, "became the name of an epoch in the life of India and of Gandhiji. Non-cooperation was negative enough to be peaceful but positive enough to be effective. It entailed denial, renunciation, and self-discipline. It was training for

What was the Khilafat Movement?

The Khilafat Movement, (1919-1920) was a movement of Indian Muslims, led by Muhammad Ali and Shaukat Ali, that demanded the following: The Turkish Sultan or Khalifa must retain control over the Muslim sacred places in the erstwhile Ottoman empire; the *jazirat-ul-Arab* (Arabia, Syria, Iraq, Palestine) must remain under Muslim sovereignty; and the Khalifa must be left with sufficient territory to enable him to defend the Islamic faith. The Congress supported the movement and Mahatma Gandhi sought to conjoin it to the Non-cooperation Movement.

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self-rule." As a consequence of the Non-Cooperation Movement the British Raj was shaken to its foundations for the first time since the Revolt of 1857. Then, in February 1922, a group of peasants attacked and torched a police station in the hamlet of Chauri Chaura, in the United Provinces (now, Uttar Pradesh and Uttaranchal). Several constables perished in the conflagration. This act of violence prompted Gandhiji to call off the movement altogether. "No provocation," he insisted, "can possibly justify (the) brutal murder of men who had been rendered defenceless and who had virtually thrown themselves on the mercy of the mob."

Fig. 11.4
Non-cooperation Movement, July 1922
Foreign cloth being collected to be burnt in bonfires.

During the Non-Cooperation Movement thousands of Indians were put in jail. Gandhiji himself was arrested in March 1922, and charged with sedition. The judge who presided over his trial, Justice C.N. Broomfield, made a remarkable speech while pronouncing his sentence. "It would be impossible to ignore the fact," remarked the judge, "that you are in a different category from any person I have ever tried or am likely to try. It would be impossible to ignore the fact that, in the eyes of millions of your countrymen, you are a great patriot and a leader. Even those who differ from you in politics look upon you as a man of high ideals and of even saintly life." Since Gandhiji had violated the law it was obligatory for the Bench to sentence him to six years' imprisonment, but, said Judge Broomfield, "If the course of events in India should make it possible for the Government to reduce the period and release you, no one will be better pleased than I".

2.2 A people's leader

By 1922, Gandhiji had transformed Indian nationalism, thereby redeeming the promise he made in his BHU speech of February 1916. It was no longer a movement of professionals and intellectuals; now, hundreds of thousands of peasants, workers and artisans also participated in it. Many of them venerated Gandhiji, referring to him as their

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"Mahatma". They appreciated the fact that he dressed like them, lived like them, and spoke their language. Unlike other leaders he did not stand apart from the common folk, but empathised and even identified with them.

This identification was strikingly reflected in his dress: while other nationalist leaders dressed formally, wearing a Western suit or an Indian *bandgala*, Gandhiji went among the people in a simple *dhoti* or loincloth. Meanwhile, he spent part of each day working on the *charkha* (spinning wheel), and encouraged other nationalists to do likewise. The act of spinning allowed Gandhiji to break the boundaries that prevailed within the traditional caste system, between mental labour and manual labour.

In a fascinating study, the historian Shahid Amin has traced the image of Mahatma Gandhi among the peasants of eastern Uttar Pradesh, as conveyed by reports and rumours in the local press. When he travelled through the region in February 1921, Gandhiji was received by adoring crowds everywhere.

Fig. 11.5
Mahatma Gandhi with the charkha *has become the most abiding image of Indian nationalism.*
In 1921, during a tour of South India, Gandhiji shaved his head and began wearing a loincloth in order to identify with the poor. His new appearance also came to symbolise asceticism and abstinence – qualities he celebrated in opposition to the consumerist culture of the modern world.

Source 1

Charkha

Mahatma Gandhi was profoundly critical of the modern age in which machines enslaved humans and displaced labour. He saw the *charkha* as a symbol of a human society that would not glorify machines and technology. The spinning wheel, moreover, could provide the poor with supplementary income and make them self-reliant.

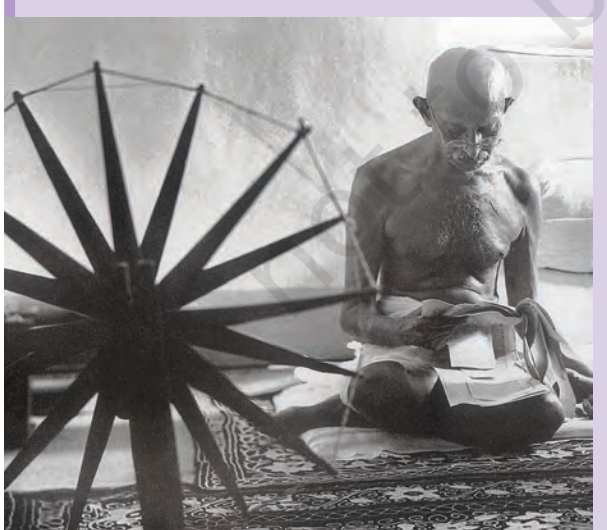

Fig. 11.5

What I object to, is the craze for machinery as such. The craze is for what they call labour-saving machinery. Men go on "saving labour", till thousands are without work and thrown on the open streets to die of starvation. I want to save time and labour, not for a fraction of mankind, but for all; I want the concentration of wealth, not in the hands of few, but in the hands of all.

YOUNG INDIA, 13 NOVEMBER 1924

Khaddar does not seek to destroy all machinery but it does regulate its use and check its weedy growth. It uses machinery for the service of the poorest in their own cottages. The wheel is itself an exquisite piece of machinery.

YOUNG INDIA, 17 MARCH 1927

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This is how a Hindi newspaper in Gorakhpur reported the atmosphere during his speeches:

> At Bhatni Gandhiji addressed the local public and then the train started for Gorakhpur. There were not less than 15,000 to 20,000 people at Nunkhar, Deoria, Gauri Bazar, Chauri Chaura and Kusmhi (stations) ... Mahatmaji was very pleased to witness the scene at Kusmhi, as despite the fact that the station is in the middle of a jungle there were not less than 10,000 people here. Some, overcome with their love, were seen to be crying. At Deoria people wanted to give *bhent* (donations) to Gandhiji, but he asked them to give these at Gorakhpur. But at Chauri Chaura one Marwari gentleman managed to hand over something to him. Then there was no stopping. A sheet was spread and currency notes and coins started raining. It was a sight ... Outside the Gorakhpur station the Mahatma was stood on a high carriage and people had a good darshan of him for a couple of minutes.

Wherever Gandhiji went, rumours spread of his miraculous powers. In some places it was said that he had been sent by the King to redress the grievances of the farmers, and that he had the power to overrule all local officials. In other places it was claimed that Gandhiji's power was superior to that of the English monarch, and that with his arrival the colonial rulers would flee the district. There were also stories reporting dire consequences for those who opposed him; rumours spread of how villagers who criticised Gandhiji found their houses mysteriously falling apart or their crops failing.

Known variously as "Gandhi baba", "Gandhi Maharaj", or simply as "Mahatma", Gandhiji appeared to the Indian peasant as a saviour, who would rescue them from high taxes and oppressive officials and restore dignity and autonomy to their lives. Gandhiji's appeal among the poor, and peasants in particular, was enhanced by his ascetic lifestyle, and by his shrewd use of symbols such as the *dhoti* and the *charkha*. Mahatma Gandhi was by caste a merchant, and by profession a lawyer; but his simple lifestyle and love of working with his hands allowed him to empathise more fully with the labouring poor and for them, in turn, to empathise with him. Where most

Source 2

The miraculous and the unbelievable

Local newspapers in the United Provinces recorded many of the rumours that circulated at that time. There were rumours that every person who wanted to test the power of the Mahatma had been surprised:

1. Sikandar Sahu from a village in Basti said on 15 February that he would believe in the Mahatmaji when the *karah* (boiling pan) full of sugar cane juice in his *karkhana* (where *gur* was produced) split into two. Immediately the *karah* actually split into two from the middle.

2. A cultivator in Azamgarh said that he would believe in the Mahatmaji's authenticity if sesamum sprouted on his field planted with wheat. Next day all the wheat in that field became sesamum.

contd

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Source 2 (contd)

There were rumours that those who opposed Mahatma Gandhi invariably met with some tragedy.

1. A gentleman from Gorakhpur city questioned the need to ply the *charkha*. His house caught fire.

2. In April 1921 some people were gambling in a village of Uttar Pradesh. Someone told them to stop. Only one from amongst the group refused to stop and abused Gandhiji. The next day his goat was bitten by four of his own dogs.

3. In a village in Gorakhpur, the peasants resolved to give up drinking liquor. One person did not keep his promise. As soon as he started for the liquor shop brickbats started to rain in his path. When he spoke the name of Gandhiji the brick-bats stopped flying.

FROM SHAHID AMIN, "GANDHI AS MAHATMA", *SUBALTERN STUDIES III*, OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, DELHI.

➲ You have read about rumours in Chapter 10 and seen that the circulation of rumours tells us about the structure of the belief of a time: they tell us about the mind of the people who believe in the rumours and the circumstances that make this belief possible. What do you think these rumours about Gandhiji reflect?

other politicians talked down to them, Gandhiji appeared not just to look like them, but to understand them and relate to their lives.

While Mahatma Gandhi's mass appeal was undoubtedly genuine – and in the context of Indian politics, without precedent – it must also be stressed that his success in broadening the basis of nationalism was based on careful organisation. New branches of the Congress were set up in various parts of India. A series of "Praja Mandals" were established to promote the nationalist creed in the princely states. Gandhiji encouraged the communication of the nationalist message in the mother tongue, rather than in the language of the rulers, English. Thus the provincial committees of the Congress were based on linguistic regions, rather than on the artificial boundaries of British India. In these different ways nationalism was taken to the farthest corners of the country and embraced by social groups previously untouched by it.

By now, among the supporters of the Congress were some very prosperous businessmen and industrialists. Indian entrepreneurs were quick to recognise that, in a free India, the favours enjoyed by their British competitors would come to an end. Some of these entrepreneurs, such as G.D. Birla, supported the national movement openly; others did so tacitly. Thus, among Gandhiji's admirers were both poor peasants and rich industrialists, although the reasons why peasants followed Gandhiji were somewhat different from, and perhaps opposed to, the reasons of the industrialists.

While Mahatma Gandhi's own role was vital, the growth of what we might call "Gandhian nationalism" also depended to a very substantial extent on his followers. Between 1917 and 1922, a group of highly talented Indians attached themselves to Gandhiji. They included Mahadev Desai, Vallabh Bhai Patel, J.B. Kripalani, Subhas Chandra Bose, Abul Kalam Azad, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sarojini Naidu, Govind Ballabh Pant and C. Rajagopalachari. Notably, these close associates of Gandhiji came from different regions as well as different religious traditions. In turn, they inspired countless other Indians to join the Congress and work for it.

Mahatma Gandhi was released from prison in February 1924, and now chose to devote his attention to the promotion of home-spun cloth (*khadi*), and

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the abolition of untouchability. For, Gandhiji was as much a social reformer as he was a politician. He believed that in order to be worthy of freedom, Indians had to get rid of social evils such as child marriage and untouchability. Indians of one faith had also to cultivate a genuine tolerance for Indians of another – hence his emphasis on Hindu-Muslim harmony. Meanwhile, on the economic front Indians had to learn to become self-reliant – hence his stress on the significance of wearing *khadi* rather than mill-made cloth imported from overseas.

> **➲ Discuss...**
> What was Non-cooperation? Find out about the variety of ways in which different social groups participated in the movement.

3. THE SALT SATYAGRAHA
A CASE STUDY

For several years after the Non-cooperation Movement ended, Mahatma Gandhi focused on his social reform work. In 1928, however, he began to think of re-entering politics. That year there was an all-India campaign in opposition to the all-White Simon Commission, sent from England to enquire into conditions in the colony. Gandhiji did not himself participate in this movement, although he gave it his blessings, as he also did to a peasant satyagraha in Bardoli in the same year.

In the end of December 1929, the Congress held its annual session in the city of Lahore. The meeting was significant for two things: the election of Jawaharlal Nehru as President, signifying the passing of the baton of leadership to the younger generation; and the proclamation of commitment to "Purna Swaraj", or complete independence. Now the pace of politics picked up once more. On 26 January 1930, "Independence Day" was observed, with the national flag being hoisted in different venues, and patriotic songs being sung. Gandhiji himself issued precise instructions as to how the day should be observed. "It would be good," he said, "if the declaration [of Independence] is made by whole villages, whole cities even ... It would be well if all the meetings were held at the identical minute in all the places."

Gandhiji suggested that the time of the meeting be advertised in the traditional way, by the beating of drums. The celebrations would begin with the hoisting of the national flag. The rest of the day would be spent "in doing some constructive work, whether it is spinning, or service of 'untouchables', or reunion of Hindus and Mussalmans, or prohibition work, or even all these

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together, which is not impossible". Participants would take a pledge affirming that it was "the inalienable right of the Indian people, as of any other people, to have freedom and to enjoy the fruits of their toil", and that "if any government deprives a people of these rights and oppresses them, the people have a further right to alter it or abolish it".

3.1 Dandi

Soon after the observance of this "Independence Day", Mahatma Gandhi announced that he would lead a march to break one of the most widely disliked laws in British India, which gave the state a monopoly in the manufacture and sale of salt. His picking on the salt monopoly was another illustration of Gandhiji's tactical wisdom. For in every Indian household, salt was indispensable; yet people were forbidden from making salt even for domestic use, compelling them to buy it from shops at a high price. The state monopoly over salt was deeply unpopular; by making it his target, Gandhiji hoped to mobilise a wider discontent against British rule.

Fig. 11.6
On the Dandi March, March 1930

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Where most Indians understood the significance of Gandhiji's challenge, the British Raj apparently did not. Although Gandhiji had given advance notice of his "Salt March" to the Viceroy Lord Irwin, Irwin failed to grasp the significance of the action. On 12 March 1930, Gandhiji began walking from his ashram at Sabarmati towards the ocean. He reached his destination three weeks later, making a fistful of salt as he did and thereby making himself a criminal in the eyes of the law. Meanwhile, parallel salt marches were being conducted in other parts of the country.

Fig. 11.7
Satyagrahis picking up natural salt at the end of the Dandi March, 6 April 1930

Source 3

Why the Salt Satyagraha?

Why was salt the symbol of protest? This is what Mahatma Gandhi wrote:

> The volume of information being gained daily shows how wickedly the salt tax has been designed. In order to prevent the use of salt that has not paid the tax which is at times even fourteen times its value, the Government destroys the salt it cannot sell profitably. Thus it taxes the nation's vital necessity; it prevents the public from manufacturing it and destroys what nature manufactures without effort. No adjective is strong enough for characterising this wicked dog-in-the-manger policy. From various sources I hear tales of such wanton destruction of the nation's property in all parts of India. Maunds if not tons of salt are said to be destroyed on the Konkan coast. The same tale comes from Dandi. Wherever there is likelihood of natural salt being taken away by the people living in the neighbourhood of such areas for their personal use, salt officers are posted for the sole purpose of carrying on destruction. Thus valuable national property is destroyed at national expense and salt taken out of the mouths of the people.
>
> The salt monopoly is thus a fourfold curse. It deprives the people of a valuable easy village industry, involves wanton destruction of property that nature produces in abundance, the destruction itself means more national expenditure, and fourthly, to crown this folly, an unheard-of tax of more than 1,000 per cent is exacted from a starving people.
>
> This tax has remained so long because of the apathy of the general public. Now that it is sufficiently roused, the tax has to go. How soon it will be abolished depends upon the strength the people.

THE COLLECTED WORKS OF MAHATMA GANDHI (CWMG), VOL. 49

➲ Why was salt destroyed by the colonial government? Why did Mahatma Gandhi consider the salt tax more oppressive than other taxes?

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Source 4

"Tomorrow we shall break the salt tax law"

On 5 April 1930, Mahatma Gandhi spoke at Dandi:

> When I left Sabarmati with my companions for this seaside hamlet of Dandi, I was not certain in my mind that we would be allowed to reach this place. Even while I was at Sabarmati there was a rumour that I might be arrested. I had thought that the Government might perhaps let my party come as far as Dandi, but not me certainly. If someone says that this betrays imperfect faith on my part, I shall not deny the charge. That I have reached here is in no small measure due to the power of peace and non-violence: that power is universally felt. The Government may, if it wishes, congratulate itself on acting as it has done, for it could have arrested every one of us. In saying that it did not have the courage to arrest this army of peace, we praise it. It felt ashamed to arrest such an army. He is a civilised man who feels ashamed to do anything which his neighbours would disapprove. The Government deserves to be congratulated on not arresting us, even if it desisted only from fear of world opinion.
>
> Tomorrow we shall break the salt tax law. Whether the Government will tolerate that is a different question. It may not tolerate it, but it deserves congratulations on the patience and forbearance it has displayed in regard to this party. …
>
> What if I and all the eminent leaders in Gujarat and in the rest of the country are arrested? This movement is based on the faith that when a whole nation is roused and on the march no leader is necessary.

CWMG, VOL. 49

➲ What does the speech tell us about how Gandhiji saw the colonial state?

As with Non-cooperation, apart from the officially sanctioned nationalist campaign, there were numerous other streams of protest. Across large parts of India, peasants breached the hated colonial forest laws that kept them and their cattle out of the woods in which they had once roamed freely. In some towns, factory workers went on strike while lawyers boycotted British courts and students refused to attend government-run educational institutions. As in 1920-22, now too Gandhiji's call had encouraged Indians of all classes to make manifest their own discontent with colonial rule. The rulers responded by detaining the dissenters. In the wake of the Salt March, nearly 60,000 Indians were arrested, among them, of course, Gandhiji himself.

The progress of Gandhiji's march to the seashore can be traced from the secret reports filed by the police officials deputed to monitor his movements. These reproduce the speeches he gave at the villages en route, in which he called upon local officials to renounce government employment and join the freedom struggle. In one village,

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Wasna, Gandhiji told the upper castes that "if you are out for Swaraj you must serve untouchables. You won't get Swaraj merely by the repeal of the salt taxes or other taxes. For Swaraj you must make amends for the wrongs which you did to the untouchables. For Swaraj, Hindus, Muslims, Parsis and Sikhs will have to unite. These are the steps towards Swaraj." The police spies reported that Gandhiji's meetings were very well attended, by villagers of all castes, and by women as well as men. They observed that thousands of volunteers were flocking to the nationalist cause. Among them were many officials, who had resigned from their posts with the colonial government. Writing to the government, the District Superintendent of Police remarked, "Mr Gandhi appeared calm and collected. He is gathering more strength as he proceeds."

The progress of the Salt March can also be traced from another source: the American newsmagazine, *Time*. This, to begin with, scorned at Gandhiji's looks, writing with disdain of his "spindly frame" and his "spidery loins". Thus in its first report on the march, *Time* was deeply sceptical of the Salt March reaching its destination. It claimed that Gandhiji "sank to the ground" at the end of the second day's walking; the magazine did not believe that "the emaciated saint would be physically able to go much further". But within a week it had changed its mind. The massive popular following that the march had garnered, wrote *Time*, had made the British rulers "desperately anxious". Gandhiji himself they now

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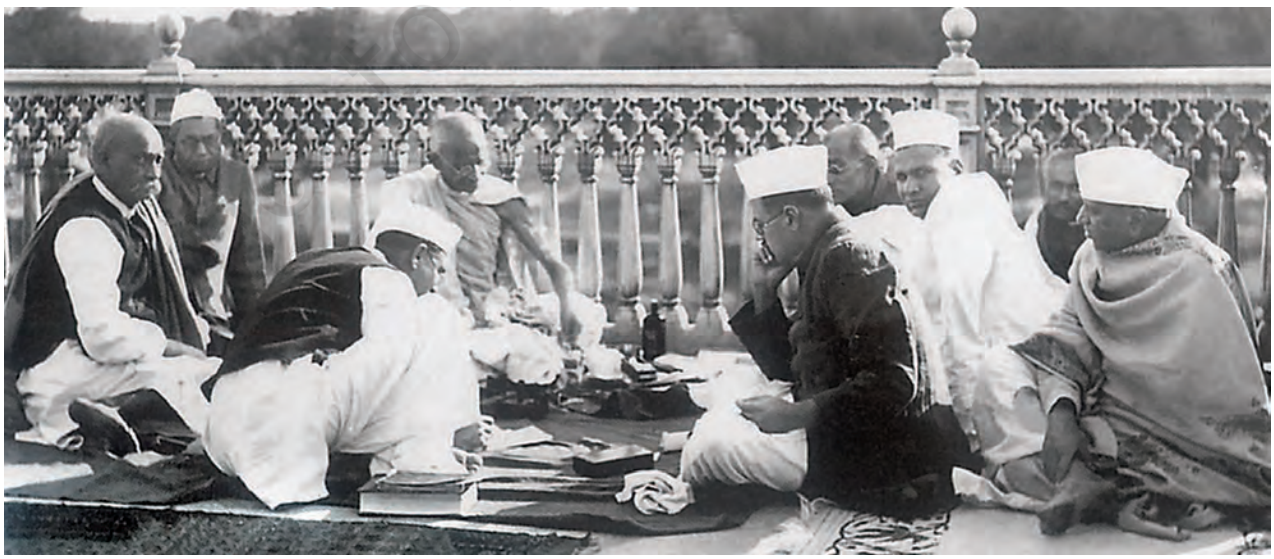

Fig. 11.8
After Mahatma Gandhi's release from prison in January 1931, Congress leaders met at Allahabad to plan the future course of action.
You can see (from right to left) Jawaharlal Nehru, Jamnalal Bajaj, Subhas Chandra Bose, Gandhiji, Mahadev Desai (in front), Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel.

Source 5

The problem with separate electorates

At the Round Table Conference Mahatma Gandhi stated his arguments against separate electorates for the Depressed Classes:

> Separate electorates to the "Untouchables" will ensure them bondage in perpetuity ... Do you want the "Untouchables" to remain "Untouchables" for ever? Well, the separate electorates would perpetuate the stigma. What is needed is destruction of "Untouchability", and when you have done it, the bar-sinister, which has been imposed by an insolent "superior" class upon an "inferior" class will be destroyed. When you have destroyed the bar-sinister to whom will you give the separate electorates?

saluted as a "Saint" and "Statesman", who was using "Christian acts as a weapon against men with Christian beliefs".

3.2 Dialogues

The Salt March was notable for at least three reasons. First, it was this event that first brought Mahatma Gandhi to world attention. The march was widely covered by the European and American press. Second, it was the first nationalist activity in which women participated in large numbers. The socialist activist Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay had persuaded Gandhiji not to restrict the protests to men alone. Kamaladevi was herself one of numerous women who courted arrest by breaking the salt or liquor laws. Third, and perhaps most significant, it was the Salt March which forced upon the British the realisation that their Raj would not last forever, and that they would have to devolve some power to the Indians.

To that end, the British government convened a series of "Round Table Conferences" in London. The first meeting was held in November 1930, but without the pre-eminent political leader in India, thus rendering it an exercise in futility. Gandhiji was released from jail in January 1931 and the following month had several long meetings with the Viceroy. These culminated in what was called the "Gandhi-Irwin Pact', by the terms of which civil disobedience would be called off, all prisoners released, and salt manufacture allowed along the coast. The pact was criticised by radical nationalists, for Gandhiji was unable to obtain from the Viceroy a commitment to political independence for Indians; he could obtain merely an assurance of talks towards that possible end.

A second Round Table Conference was held in London in the latter part of 1931. Here, Gandhiji represented the Congress. However, his claims that his party represented all of India came under challenge from three parties: from the Muslim League, which claimed to stand for the interests of the Muslim minority; from the Princes, who claimed that the Congress had no stake in their territories; and from the brilliant lawyer and thinker B.R. Ambedkar, who argued that Gandhiji and the Congress did not really represent the lowest castes.

The Conference in London was inconclusive, so Gandhiji returned to India and resumed civil disobedience. The new Viceroy, Lord Willingdon, was deeply unsympathetic to the Indian leader. In a private

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Fig. 11.9
At the Second Round Table Conference, London, November 1931
Mahatma Gandhi opposed the demand for separate electorates for "lower castes". He believed that this would prevent their integration into mainstream society and permanently segregate them from other caste Hindus.

letter to his sister, Willingdon wrote: "It's a beautiful world if it wasn't for Gandhi ... At the bottom of every move he makes which he always says is inspired by God, one discovers the political manouevre. I see the American Press is saying what a wonderful man he is ... But the fact is that we live in the midst of very unpractical, mystical, and superstitious folk who look upon Gandhi as something holy, ..."

In 1935, however, a new Government of India Act promised some form of representative government. Two years later, in an election held on the basis of a restricted franchise, the Congress won a comprehensive victory. Now eight out of 11 provinces had a Congress "Prime Minister", working under the supervision of a British Governor.

In September 1939, two years after the Congress ministries assumed office, the Second World War broke out. Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru had both been strongly critical of Hitler and the Nazis. Accordingly, they promised Congress support to the war effort if the British, in return, promised to grant India independence once hostilities ended.

Source 6

Ambedkar on separate electorates

In response to Mahatma Gandhi's opposition to the demand for separate electorates for the Depressed Classes, Ambedkar wrote:

> Here is a class which is undoubtedly not in a position to sustain itself in the struggle for existence. The religion, to which they are tied, instead of providing them an honourable place, brands them as lepers, not fit for ordinary intercourse. Economically, it is a class entirely dependent upon the high-caste Hindus for earning its daily bread with no independent way of living open to it. Nor are all ways closed by reason of the social prejudices of the Hindus but there is a definite attempt all through our Hindu Society to bolt every possible door so as not to allow the Depressed Classes any opportunity to rise in the scale of life.
>
> In these circumstances, it would be granted by all fair-minded persons that as the only path for a community so handicapped to succeed in the struggle for life against organised tyranny, some share of political power in order that it may protect itself is a paramount necessity ...

FROM DR BABASAHEB AMBEDKAR, "WHAT CONGRESS AND GANDHI HAVE DONE TO THE UNTOUCHABLES", *WRITINGS AND SPEECHES*, VOL. 9, P. 312

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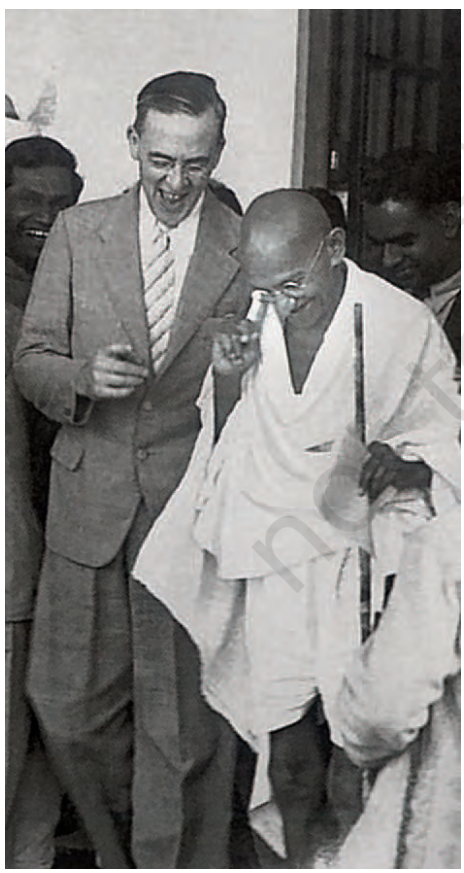
Fig. 11.10
Mahatma Gandhi and Rajendra Prasad on their way to a meeting with the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, 13 October 1939
In the meeting the nature of India's involvement in the War was discussed. When negotiations with the Viceroy broke down, the Congress ministries resigned.

The offer was refused. In protest, the Congress ministries resigned in October 1939. Through 1940 and 1941, the Congress organised a series of individual satyagrahas to pressure the rulers to promise freedom once the war had ended.

Meanwhile, in March 1940, the Muslim League passed a resolution demanding a measure of autonomy for the Muslim-majority areas of the subcontinent. The political landscape was now becoming complicated: it was no longer Indians versus the British; rather, it had become a three-way struggle between the Congress, the Muslim League, and the British. At this time Britain had an all-party government, whose Labour members were sympathetic to Indian aspirations, but whose Conservative Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, was a diehard imperialist who insisted that he had not been appointed the King's First Minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire. In the spring of 1942, Churchill was persuaded to send one of his ministers, Sir Stafford Cripps, to India to try and forge a compromise with Gandhiji and the Congress. Talks broke down, however, after the Congress insisted that if it was to help the British defend India from the Axis powers, then the Viceroy had first to appoint an Indian as the Defence Member of his Executive Council.

Fig. 11.11
Mahatma Gandhi with Stafford Cripps, March 1942



➲ **Discuss...**

Read Sources 5 and 6. Write an imaginary dialogue between Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi on the issue of separate electorates for the Depressed Classes.

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4. QUIT INDIA

After the failure of the Cripps Mission, Mahatma Gandhi decided to launch his third major movement against British rule. This was the "Quit India" campaign, which began in August 1942. Although Gandhiji was jailed at once, younger activists organised strikes and acts of sabotage all over the country. Particularly active in the underground resistance were socialist members of the Congress, such as Jayaprakash Narayan. In several districts, such as Satara in the west and Medinipur in the east, "independent" governments were proclaimed. The British responded with much force, yet it took more than a year to suppress the rebellion.

"Quit India" was genuinely a *mass* movement, bringing into its ambit hundreds of thousands of ordinary Indians. It especially energised the young who, in very large numbers, left their colleges to go to jail. However, while the Congress leaders languished in jail, Jinnah and his colleagues in the Muslim League worked patiently at expanding their influence. It was in these years that the League began to make a mark in the Punjab and Sind, provinces where it had previously had scarcely any presence.

In June 1944, with the end of the war in sight, Gandhiji was released from prison. Later that year

Satara, 1943

From the late nineteenth century, a non-Brahman movement, which opposed the caste system and landlordism, had developed in Maharashtra. This movement established links with the national movement by the 1930s.

In 1943, some of the younger leaders in the Satara district of Maharashtra set up a parallel government *(prati sarkar)*, with volunteer corps *(seba dals)* and village units *(tufan dals)*. They ran people's courts and organised constructive work. Dominated by *kunbi* peasants and supported by dalits, the Satara *prati sarkar* functioned till the elections of 1946, despite government repression and, in the later stages, Congress disapproval.

Fig. 11.12
Women's procession in Bombay during the Quit India Movement

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he held a series of meetings with Jinnah, seeking to bridge the gap between the Congress and the League. In 1945, a Labour government came to power in Britain and committed itself to granting independence to India. Meanwhile, back in India, the Viceroy, Lord Wavell, brought the Congress and the League together for a series of talks.

Early in 1946 fresh elections were held to the provincial legislatures. The Congress swept the "General" category, but in the seats specifically reserved for Muslims the League won an overwhelming majority. The political polarisation was complete. A Cabinet Mission sent in the summer of 1946 failed to get the Congress and the League to agree on a federal system that would keep India together while allowing the provinces a degree of autonomy. After the talks broke down, Jinnah called for a "Direct Action Day" to press the League's demand for Pakistan. On the designated day, 16 August 1946, bloody riots broke out in Calcutta. The violence spread to rural Bengal, then to Bihar, and then across the country to the United Provinces and the Punjab. In some places, Muslims were the main sufferers, in other places, Hindus.

In February 1947, Wavell was replaced as Viceroy by Lord Mountbatten. Mountbatten called onelast round of talks, but when these too proved inconclusive he announced that British India would be freed, but also divided. The formal transfer of power was fixed for 15 August. When that day came, it was celebrated with gusto in different parts of India. In Delhi, there was "prolonged applause" when the President of the Constituent Assembly began the meeting by invoking the Father of the Nation – Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Outside the Assembly, the crowds shouted "Mahatma Gandhi ki jai".

Fig. 11.13
Mahatma Gandhi conferring with Jawaharlal Nehru (on his right) and Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel (on his left)
Nehru and Patel represented two distinct political tendencies within the Congress – the socialist and the conservative. Mahatma Gandhi had to often mediate between these groups.

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5. THE LAST HEROIC DAYS

As it happened, Mahatma Gandhi was not present at the festivities in the capital on 15 August 1947. He was in Calcutta, but he did not attend any function or hoist a flag there either. Gandhiji marked the day with a 24-hour fast. The freedom he had struggled so long for had come at an unacceptable price, with a nation divided and Hindus and Muslims at each other's throats.

Through September and October, writes his biographer D.G. Tendulkar, Gandhiji "went round hospitals and refugee camps giving consolation to distressed people". He "appealed to the Sikhs, the Hindus and the Muslims to forget the past and not to dwell on their sufferings but to extend the right hand of fellowship to each other, and to determine to live in peace …"

At the initiative of Gandhiji and Nehru, the Congress now passed a resolution on "the rights of minorities". The party had never accepted the "two-nation theory": forced against its will to accept Partition, it still believed that "India is a land of many religions and many races, and must remain so". Whatever be the situation in Pakistan, India would be "a democratic secular State where all citizens enjoy full rights and are equally entitled to the protection of the State, irrespective of the religion to which they belong". The Congress wished to "assure the minorities in India that it will continue to protect, to the best of its ability, their citizen rights against aggression".

Many scholars have written of the months after Independence as being Gandhiji's "finest hour". After working to bring peace to Bengal, Gandhiji now shifted to Delhi, from where he hoped to move on to the riot-torn districts of Punjab. While in the capital, his meetings were disrupted by refugees who objected to readings from the Koran, or shouted slogans asking why he did not speak of the sufferings of those Hindus and Sikhs still living in Pakistan. In fact, as D.G. Tendulkar writes, Gandhiji "was equally concerned with the sufferings of the minority community in Pakistan. He would have liked to be able to go to their succour. But with

Fig. 11.14
On the way to a riot-torn village, 1947

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Fig. 11.15
The death of the Mahatma, a popular print
In popular representations, Mahatma Gandhi was deified, and shown as the unifying force within the national movement. Here you can see Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel, representing two strands within the Congress, standing on two sides of Gandhiji's pyre. Blessing them both from a heavenly realm, is Mahatma Gandhi, at the centre.

what face could he now go there, when he could not guarantee full redress to the Muslims in Delhi?"

There was an attempt on Gandhiji's life on 20 January 1948, but he carried on undaunted. On 26 January, he spoke at his prayer meeting of how that day had been celebrated in the past as Independence Day. Now freedom had come, but its first few months had been deeply disillusioning. However, he trusted that "the worst is over", that Indians would henceforth work collectively for the "equality of all classes and creeds, never the domination and superiority of the major community over a minor, however insignificant it may be in numbers or influence". He also permitted himself the hope "that though geographically and politically India is divided into two, at heart we shall ever be friends and brothers helping and respecting one another and be one for the outside world".

Gandhiji had fought a lifelong battle for a free and united India; and yet, when the country was divided, he urged that the two parts respect and befriend one another.

Other Indians were less forgiving. At his daily prayer meeting on the evening of 30 January, Gandhiji was shot dead by a young man. The assassin, who surrendered afterwards, was Nathuram Godse.

Gandhiji's death led to an extraordinary outpouring of grief, with rich tributes being paid to him from across the political spectrum in India, and moving appreciations coming from such international figures as George Orwell and Albert Einstein. *Time* magazine, which had once mocked Gandhiji's physical size and seemingly non-rational ideas, now compared his martyrdom to that of Abraham Lincoln: it was a bigoted American who had killed Lincoln for believing that human beings were equal regardless of their race or skin colour; and it was a bigoted Hindu who had killed Gandhiji for believing that friendship was possible, indeed necessary, between Indians of different faiths. In this respect, as *Time* wrote, "The world knew that it had, in a sense too deep, too simple for the world to understand, connived at his (Gandhiji's) death as it had connived at Lincoln's."

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6. KNOWING GANDHI

There are many different kinds of sources from which we can reconstruct the political career of Gandhiji and the history of the nationalist movement.

6.1 Public voice and private scripts

One important source is the writings and speeches of Mahatma Gandhi and his contemporaries, including both his associates and his political adversaries. Within these writings we need to distinguish between those that were meant for the public and those that were not. Speeches, for instance, allow us to hear the public voice of an individual, while private letters give us a glimpse of his or her private thoughts. In letters we see people expressing their anger and pain, their dismay and anxiety, their hopes and frustrations in ways in which they may not express themselves in public statements. But we must remember that this private-public distinction often breaks down. Many letters are written to individuals, and are therefore personal, but they are also meant for the public. The language of the letters is often shaped by the awareness that they may one day be published. Conversely, the fear that a letter may get into print often prevents people from expressing their opinion freely in personal letters. Mahatma Gandhi regularly published in his journal, *Harijan*, letters that others wrote to him. Nehru edited a collection of letters written to him during the national movement and published *A Bunch of Old Letters*.

Source 7

One event through letters

In the 1920s, Jawaharlal Nehru was increasingly influenced by socialism, and he returned from Europe in 1928 deeply impressed with the Soviet Union. As he began working closely with the socialists (Jayaprakash Narayan, Narendra Dev, N.G. Ranga and others), a rift developed between the socialists and the conservatives within the Congress. After becoming the Congress President in 1936, Nehru spoke passionately against fascism, and upheld the demands of workers and peasants.

Worried by Nehru's socialist rhetoric, the conservatives, led by Rajendra Prasad and Sardar Patel, threatened to resign from the Working Committee, and some prominent industrialists in Bombay issued a statement attacking Nehru. Both Prasad and Nehru turned to Mahatma Gandhi and met him at his ashram at Wardha. The latter acted as the mediator, as he often did, restraining Nehru's radicalism and persuading Prasad and others to see the significance of Nehru's leadership.

In *A Bunch of Old Letters*, 1958, Nehru reprinted many of the letters that were exchanged at the time.

Read the extracts in the following pages.

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Source 7 (contd)

From *A Bunch of Old Letters*

My dear Jawaharlalji, ***Wardha, July 1, 1936***

Since we parted yesterday we have had a long conversation with Mahatmaji and a prolonged consultation among ourselves. We understand that you have felt much hurt by the course of action taken by us and particularly the tone of our letter has caused you much pain. It was never our intention either to embarrass you or to hurt you and if you had suggested or indictated that it hurt you we would have without the least hesitation amended or altered the letter. But we have decided to withdraw it and our resignation on a reconsideration of the whole situation.

We have felt that in all your utterances as published in the Press you have been speaking not so much on the general Congress programme as on a topic which has not been accepted by the Congress and in doing so you have been acting more as the mouthpiece of the minority of our colleagues on the Working Committee as also on the Congress than the mouthpiece of the majority which we expected you as Congress President to do.

There is regular continuous campaign against us treating us as persons whose time is over, who represent and stand for ideas that are worn out and that have no present value, who are only obstructing the progress of the country and who deserve to be cast out of the positions which they undeservedly hold … we have felt that a great injustice has been and is being done to us by others, and we are not receiving the protection we are entitled from you as our colleague and as our President …

Yours sincerely
Rajendra Prasad

My Dear Bapu, ***Allahabad, July 5, 1936***

I arrived here last night. Ever since I left Wardha I have been feeling weak in body and troubled in mind.

… Since my return from Europe, I found that meetings of the Working Committee exhaust me greatly; they have a devitalising effect on me and I have almost the feeling of being older in years after every fresh experience …

I am grateful to you for all the trouble you took in smoothing over matters and in helping to avoid a crisis.

I read again Rajendra Babu's letter to me (the second one) and his formidable indictment of me ...

For however tenderly the fact may be stated, it amounts to this that I am an intolerable nuisance and the very qualities I possess – a measure of ability, energy, earnestness, some personality which has a vague appeal – become dangerous for they are harnessed to the wrong chariot (socialism). The conclusion from all this is obvious.

I have written at length, both in my book and subsequently, about my present ideas. There is no lack of material for me to be judged. Those views are not casual. They are part of me, and though I might change them or vary them in future, so long as I hold them I must give expression to them. Because I attached importance to a larger unity I tried to express them in the mildest way possible and more as an invitation to thought than as fixed conclusions. I saw no conflict in this approach and in anything that the Congress was doing. So far as the elections were concerned I felt that my approach was a definite asset to us as it enthused the masses. But my approach, mild and vague as it was, is considered dangerous and harmful by my colleagues. I was even told that my laying stress always on the poverty and unemployment in India was unwise, or at any rate the way I did it was wrong …

You told me that you intended issuing some kind of a statement. I shall welcome this for I believe in every viewpoint being placed before the country.

Yours affectionately
Jawaharlal

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Source 7 (contd)

Segaon, July 15, 1936

Dear Jawaharlal,

Your letter is touching. You feel the most injured party. The fact is that your colleagues have lacked your courage and frankness. The result has been disastrous. I have always pleaded with them to speak to you freely and fearlessly. But having lacked the courage, whenever they have spoken they have done it clumsily and you have felt irritated. I tell you they have dreaded you, because of your irritability and impatience with them. They have chafed under your rebukes and magisterial manner and above all your arrogation of what has appeared to them your infallibility and superior knowledge. They feel you have treated them with scant courtesy and never defended them from socialist ridicule and even misrepresentation.

I have looked at the whole affair as a tragi-comedy. I would therefore like you to look at the whole thing in a lighter vein.

I suggested your name for the crown of thorns (Presidentship of the Congress). Keep it on, though the head be bruised. Resume your humour at the committee meetings. That is your most usual role, not that of care-worn, irritable man ready to burst on the slightest occasion.

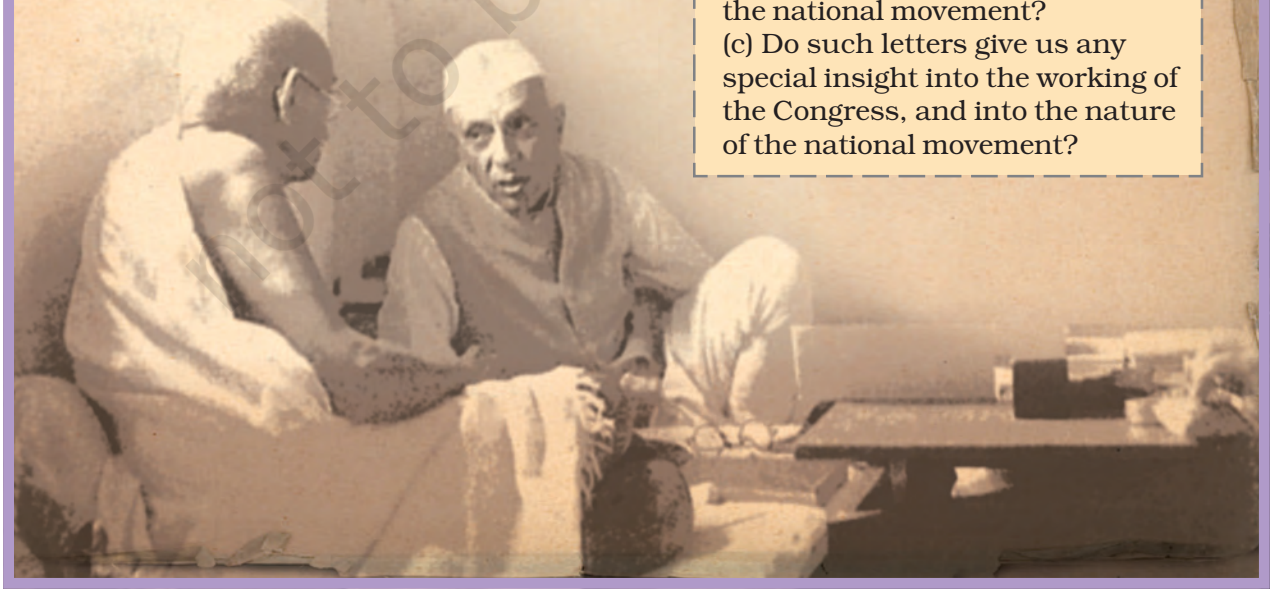
How I wish you could telegraph me that on finishing my letter you felt as merry as you were on that new year's day in Lahore when you were reported to have danced around the tricolour flag.

You must give your throat a chance.

Love
Bapu

➲

(a) What do the letters tell us about the way Congress ideals developed over time?
(b) What do they reveal about the role of Mahatma Gandhi within the national movement?
(c) Do such letters give us any special insight into the working of the Congress, and into the nature of the national movement?



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6.2 Framing a picture

Autobiographies similarly give us an account of the past that is often rich in human detail. But here again we have to be careful of the way we read and interpret autobiographies. We need to remember that they are retrospective accounts written very often from memory. They tell us what the author could recollect, what he or she saw as important, or was keen on recounting, or how a person wanted his or her life to be viewed by others. Writing an autobiography is a way of framing a picture of yourself. So in reading these accounts we have to try and see what the author does not tell us; we need to understand the reasons for that silence – those wilful or unwitting acts of forgetting.

6.3 Through police eyes

Another vital source is government records, for the colonial rulers kept close tabs on those they regarded as critical of the government. The letters and reports written by policemen and other officials were secret at the time; but now can be accessed in archives.

Let us look at one such source: the fortnightly reports that were prepared by the Home Department from the early twentieth century. These reports were based on police information from the localities, but often expressed what the higher officials saw, or wanted to believe. While noticing the possibility of sedition and rebellion, they liked to assure themselves that these fears were unwarranted.

Fig. 11.16
Police clash with Congress volunteers in Bombay during the Civil Disobedience Movement.

➲ Can you see any conflict between this image and what was reported in the Fortnightly Reports of the police?

If you see the Fortnightly Reports for the period of the Salt March you will notice that the Home Department was unwilling to accept that Mahatma Gandhi's actions had evoked any enthusiastic response from the masses. The march was seen as a drama, an antic, a desperate effort to mobilise people who were unwilling to rise against the British and were busy with their daily schedules, happy under the Raj.

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Source 8

Fortnightly Reports of the Home Department
(Confidential)

FOR THE FIRST HALF OF MARCH 1930

The rapid political developments in Gujarat are being closely watched here. To what extent and in what directions they will affect political condition in this province, it is difficult to surmise at present. The peasantry is for the moment engaged in harvesting a good rabi; students are pre-occupied with their impending examinations.

Central Provinces and Berar

The arrest of Mr. Vallabh Bhai Patel caused little excitement, except in Congress circles, but a meeting organised by the Nagpur Nagar Congress Committee to congratulate Gandhi on the start of his march was attended by a crowd of over 3000 people at Nagpur.

Bengal

The outstanding event of the past fortnight has been the start of Gandhi's campaign of civil disobedience. Mr. J.M. Sengupta has formed an All-Bengal Civil Disobedience Council, and the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee has formed an All Bengal Council of Disobedience. But beyond forming councils no active steps have yet been taken in the matter of civil disobedience in Bengal.

The reports from the districts show that the meetings that have been held excite little or no interest and leave no profound impression on the general population. It is noticeable, however, that ladies are attending these meetings in increasing numbers.

Bihar and Orissa

There is still little to report regarding Congress activity. There is a good deal of talk about a campaign to withhold payment of the chaukidari tax, but no area has yet been selected for experiment. The arrest of Gandhi is being foretold freely but it seems quite possible that nonfulfilment of the forecast is upsetting plans.

Madras

The opening of Gandhi's civil disobedience campaign has completely overshadowed all other issues. General opinion inclines to regard his march as theatrical and his programme as impracticable, but as he is held in such personal reverence by the Hindu public generally, the possibility of arrest which he seems deliberately to be courting and its effect on the political situation are viewed with considerable misgiving.

The 12th of March was celebrated as the day of inaugurating the civil disobedience campaign. In Bombay the celebrations took the form of saluting the national flag in the morning.

Bombay

Press *Kesari* indulged in offensive language and in its usual attitude of blowing hot and cold wrote: "If the Government wants to test the power of Satyagraha, both its action and inaction will cause injury to it. If it arrests Gandhi it will incur the discontent of the nation; if it does not do that, the movement of civil disobedience will go on spreading. We therefore say that if the Government punishes Mr. Gandhi the nation will have won a victory, and if it lets him alone it will have won a still greater victory."

On the other hand the moderate paper *Vividh Vritt* pointed out the futility of the movement and opined that it could not achieve the end in view. It, however, reminded the government that repression would defeat its purpose.

contd

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Source 8 (contd)

FOR THE SECOND HALF OF MARCH 1930

Bengal

Interest has continued to centre round Gandhi's march to the sea and the arrangements which he is making to initiate a campaign of civil disobedience. The extremist papers report his doings and speeches at great length and make a great display of the various meetings that are being held throughout Bengal and the resolutions passed thereat. But there is little enthusiasm for the form of civil disobedience favoured by Gandhi …

Generally people are waiting to see what happens to Gandhi and the probability is that if any action is taken against him, a spark will be set to much inflammable material in Bengal. But the prospect of any serious conflagration is at present slight.

Central Provinces and Berar

In Nagpur these meetings were well attended and most of the schools and colleges were deserted on the 12th March to mark the inauguration of Gandhi's march.

The boycott of liquor shops and the infringement of forest laws appear to be the most probable line of attack.

Punjab

It seems not improbable that organised attempts will be made to break the Salt Law in the Jhelum district; that the agitation relating to the non-payment of the water-tax in Multan will be revived; and that some movement in connection with the National Flag will be started probably at Gujranwala.

United Provinces

Political activity has undoubtedly intensified during the last fortnight. The Congress party feels that it must do something spectacular to sustain public interest. Enrolment of volunteers, propaganda in villages, preparations for breaking the salt laws on receipt of Mr. Gandhi's orders are reported from a number of districts.

FOR THE FIRST HALF OF APRIL 1930

United Provinces

Events have moved rapidly during the fortnight. Apart from political meetings, processions and the enrolment of volunteers, the Salt Act has been openly defied at Agra, Cawnpore, Benaras, Allahabad, Lucknow, Meerut, Rae Bareli, Farukhabad, Etawah, Ballia and Mainpuri.

Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru was arrested at Cheoki railway station early on the morning of April 14 as he was proceeding to the Central Provinces to attend a meeting of Youth League. He was at once taken direct to Naini Central Jail, where he was tried and sentenced to six months simple imprisonment.

Bihar and Orissa

There have been, or are now materialising, spectacular, but small-scale, attempts at illicit salt manufacture in a few places …

Central Provinces

In Jubbalpore Seth Govinddass has attempted to manufacture chemical salt at a cost many times in excess of the market price of clean salt.

Madras

Considerable opposition was shown at Vizagapatam to the Police when they attempted to seize salt made by boiling sea water, but elsewhere resistance to the seizure of illicit salt has been half hearted.

Bengal

In the mufassal efforts have been made to manufacture illicit salt, the main operation areas being the districts of 24-Parganas and Midnapore.

Very little salt has actually been manufactured and most of it has been confiscated and the utensils in which it was manufactured destroyed.

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➲ Read the Fortnightly Reports carefully. Remember they are extracts from confidential reports of the colonial Home Department. These reports did not always accept what the police reported from different localities.

(1) How do you think the nature of the source affects what is being said in these reports? Write a short note illustrating your argument with quotations from the above text.

(2) Why do you think the Home Department was continuously reporting on what people thought about the possibility of Mahatma Gandhi's arrest? Reread what Gandhiji said about the question of arrests in his speech on 5 April 1930 at Dandi.

(3) Why do you think Mahatma Gandhi was not arrested?

(4) Why do you think the Home Department continued to say that the march was not evoking any response?

6.4 From newspapers

One more important source is contemporary newspapers, published in English as well as in the different Indian languages, which tracked Mahatma Gandhi's movements and reported on his activities, and also represented what ordinary Indians thought of him. Newspaper accounts, however, should not be seen as unprejudiced. They were published by people who had their own political opinions and world views. These ideas shaped what was published and the way events were reported. The accounts that were published in a London newspaper would be different from the report in an Indian nationalist paper.

We need to look at these reports but should be careful while interpreting them. Every statement made in these cannot be accepted literally as representing what was happening on the ground. They often reflect the fears and anxieties of officials who were unable to control a movement and were anxious about its spread. They did not know whether to arrest Mahatma Gandhi or what an arrest would mean. The more the colonial state kept a watch on the public and its activities, the more it worried about the basis of its rule.

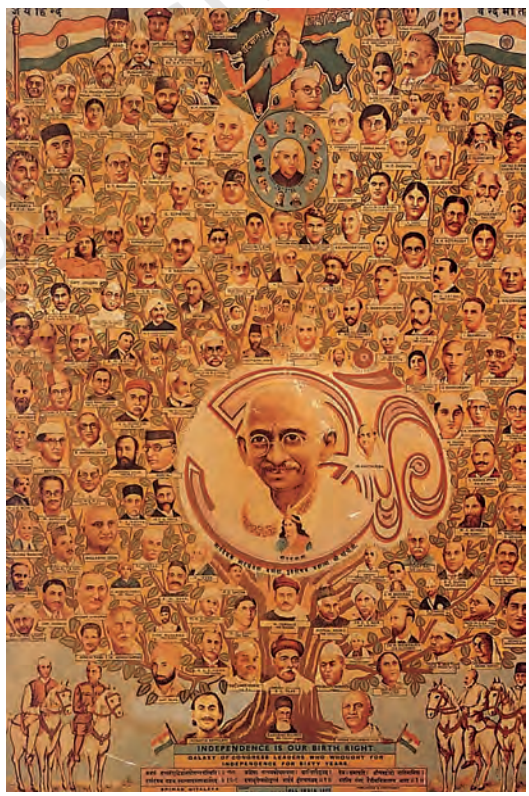

Fig. 11.17
Pictures like this reveal how Mahatma Gandhi was perceived by people and represented in popular prints
Within the tree of nationalism, Mahatma Gandhi appears as the looming central figure surrounded by small images of other leaders and sages.

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TIMELINE

1915	Mahatma Gandhi returns from South Africa
1917	Champaran movement
1918	Peasant movements in Kheda (Gujarat), and workers' movement in Ahmedabad
1919	Rowlatt Satyagraha (March-April)
1919	Jallianwala Bagh massacre (April)
1921	Non-cooperation and Khilafat Movements
1928	Peasant movement in Bardoli
1929	"Purna Swaraj" accepted as Congress goal at the Lahore Congress (December)
1930	Civil Disobedience Movement begins; Dandi March (March-April)
1931	Gandhi-Irwin Pact (March); Second Round Table Conference (December)
1935	Government of India Act promises some form of representative government
1939	Congress ministries resign
1942	Quit India Movement begins (August)
1946	Mahatma Gandhi visits Noakhali and other riot-torn areas to stop communal violence

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ANSWER IN 100-150 WORDS

1. How did Mahatma Gandhi seek to identify with the common people?
2. How was Mahatma Gandhi perceived by the peasants?
3. Why did the salt laws become an important issue of struggle?
4. Why are newspapers an important source for the study of the national movement?
5. Why was the *charkha* chosen as a symbol of nationalism?

WRITE A SHORT ESSAY (250-300 WORDS) ON THE FOLLOWING:

6. How was non-cooperation a form of protest?
7. Why were the dialogues at the Round Table Conference inconclusive?
8. In what way did Mahatma Gandhi transform the nature of the national movement?
9. What do private letters and autobiographies tell us about an individual? How are these sources different from official accounts?

MAP WORK

10. Find out about the route of the Dandi March. On a map of Gujarat plot the line of the march and mark the major towns and villages that it passed along the route.

PROJECT (CHOOSE ONE)

11. Read any two autobiographies of nationalist leaders. Look at the different ways in which the authors represent their own life and times, and interpret the national movement. See how their views differ. Write an account based on your studies.
12. Choose any event that took place during the national movement. Try and read the letters and speeches of the leaders of the time. Some of these are now published. He could be a local leader from the region where you live. Try and see how the local leaders viewed the activities of the national leadership at the top. Write about the movement based on your reading.

If you would like to know more, read:

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay. 2004. *From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India*. Orient Longman, New Delhi.

Sarvepalli Gopal. 1975. *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography, Volume I, 1889-1947*. Oxford University Press, Delhi.

David Hardiman. 2003. *Gandhi in His Time and Ours*. Permanent Black, New Delhi.

Gyanendra Pandey. 1978. *The Ascendancy of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh. 1926-34*. Oxford University Press, Delhi.

Sumit Sarkar. 1983. *Modern India, 1885-1947*. Macmillan, New Delhi.

You could visit:
http:/www.gandhiserve.org/cwmg/cwmg.html
(for Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi)

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THEME TWELVE

FRAMING THE CONSTITUTION
THE BEGINNING OF A NEW ERA

The Indian Constitution, which came into effect on 26 January 1950, has the dubious distinction of being the longest in the world. But its length and complexity are perhaps understandable when one considers the country's size and diversity. At Independence, India was not merely large and diverse, but also deeply divided. A Constitution designed to keep the country together, and to take it forward, had necessarily to be an elaborate, carefully-worked-out, and painstakingly drafted document. For one thing, it sought to heal wounds of the past and the present, to make Indians of different classes, castes and communities come together in a shared political experiment. For another, it sought to nurture democratic institutions in what had long been a culture of hierarchy and deference.

The Constitution of India was framed between December 1946 and November 1949. During this time its drafts were discussed clause by clause in the Constituent Assembly of India. In all, the Assembly

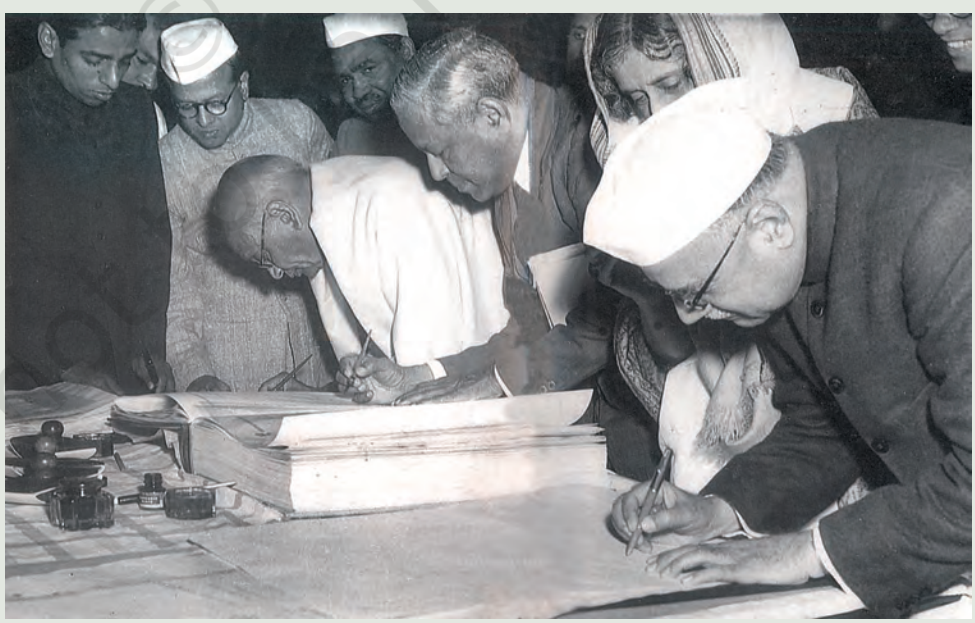

Fig. 12.1
The Constitution was signed in December 1949 after three years of debate.

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held eleven sessions, with sittings spread over 165 days. In between the sessions, the work of revising and refining the drafts was carried out by various committees and sub-committees.

From your political science textbooks you know what the Constitution of India is, and you have seen how it has worked over the decades since Independence. This chapter will introduce you to the history that lies behind the Constitution, and the intense debates that were part of its making. If we try and hear the voices within the Constituent Assembly, we get an idea of the process through which the Constitution was framed and the vision of the new nation formulated.

1. A TUMULTUOUS TIME

The years immediately preceding the making of the Constitution had been exceptionally tumultuous: a time of great hope, but also of abject disappointment. On 15 August 1947, India had been made free, but it had also been divided. Fresh in popular memory were the Quit India struggle of 1942 – perhaps the most widespread popular movement against the British Raj – as well as the bid by Subhas Chandra Bose to win freedom through armed struggle with foreign aid. An even more recent upsurge had also evoked much popular sympathy – this was the rising of the ratings of the Royal Indian Navy in Bombay and other cities in the spring of 1946. Through the late 1940s there were periodic, if scattered, mass protests of workers and peasants in different parts of the country.

Fig. 12.2
Images of desolation and destruction continued to haunt members of the Constituent Assembly.

One striking feature of these popular upsurges was the degree of Hindu-Muslim unity they manifested. In contrast, the two leading Indian political parties, the Congress and the Muslim League, had repeatedly failed to arrive at a settlement that would bring about religious reconciliation and social harmony. The Great Calcutta Killings of August 1946 began a year of almost continuous rioting across northern and eastern India (see Chapter 11). The violence culminated in the massacres that accompanied the transfer of populations when the Partition of India was announced.

On Independence Day, 15 August 1947, there was an outburst of joy and hope, unforgettable for those who lived through that time. But innumerable Muslims in India, and Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan, were now faced with a cruel choice – the threat of

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Fig. 12.3
Jawaharlal Nehru speaking in the Constituent Assembly at midnight on14 August 1947
It was on this day that Nehru gave his famous speech that began with the following lines: "Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom."

sudden death or the squeezing of opportunities on the one side, and a forcible tearing away from their age-old roots on the other. Millions of refugees were on the move, Muslims into East and West Pakistan, Hindus and Sikhs into West Bengal and the eastern half of the Punjab. Many perished before they reached their destination.

Another, and scarcely less serious, problem faced by the new nation was that of the princely states. During the period of the Raj, approximately one-third of the area of the subcontinent was under the control of nawabs and maharajas who owed allegiance to the British Crown, but were otherwise left mostly free to rule – or misrule – their territory as they wished. When the British left India, the constitutional status of these princes remained ambiguous. As one contemporary observer remarked, some maharajas now began "to luxuriate in wild dreams of independent power in an India of many partitions".

This was the background in which the Constituent Assembly met. How could the debates within the Assembly remain insulated from what was happening outside?

1.1 The making of the Constituent Assembly

The members of the Constituent Assembly were not elected on the basis of universal franchise. In the winter of 1945-46 provincial elections were held in India. The Provincial Legislatures then chose the representatives to the Constituent Assembly.

The Constituent Assembly that came into being was dominated by one party: the Congress. The

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Congress swept the general seats in the provincial elections, and the Muslim League captured most of the reserved Muslim seats. But the League chose to boycott the Constituent Assembly, pressing its demand for Pakistan with a separate constitution. The Socialists too were initially unwilling to join, for they believed the Constituent Assembly was a creation of the British, and therefore incapable of being truly autonomous. In effect, therefore, 82 per cent of the members of the Constituent Assembly were also members of the Congress.

The Congress however was not a party with one voice. Its members differed in their opinion on critical issues. Some members were inspired by socialism while others were defenders of landlordism. Some were close to communal parties while others were assertively secular. Through the national movement Congress members had learnt to debate their ideas in public and negotiate their differences. Within the Constituent Assembly too, Congress members did not sit quiet.

The discussions within the Constituent Assembly were also influenced by the opinions expressed by the public. As the deliberations continued, the arguments were reported in newspapers, and the proposals were publicly debated. Criticisms and

Fig. 12.4
The Constituent Assembly in session
Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel is seen sitting second from right.

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counter-criticisms in the press in turn shaped the nature of the consensus that was ultimately reached on specific issues. In order to create a sense of collective participation the public was also asked to send in their views on what needed to be done. Many of the linguistic minorities wanted the protection of their mother tongue, religious minorities asked for special safeguards, while dalits demanded an end to all caste oppression and reservation of seats in government bodies. Important issues of cultural rights and social justice raised in these public discussions were debated on the floor of the Assembly.

1.2 The dominant voices

The Constituent Assembly had 300 members. Of these, six members played particularly important roles. Three were representatives of the Congress, namely, Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabh Bhai Patel and Rajendra Prasad. It was Nehru who moved the crucial "Objectives Resolution", as well as the resolution proposing that the National Flag of India be a "horizontal tricolour of saffron, white and dark green in equal proportion", with a wheel in navy blue at the centre. Patel, on the other hand, worked mostly behind the scenes, playing a key role in the drafting of several reports, and working to reconcile opposing points of view. Rajendra Prasad's role was as President of the Assembly, where he had to steer the discussion along constructive lines while making sure all members had a chance to speak.

Besides this Congress trio, a very important member of the Assembly was the lawyer and economist B.R. Ambedkar. During the period of British rule, Ambedkar had been a political opponent of the Congress; but, on the advice of Mahatma Gandhi, he was asked at Independence to join the Union Cabinet as law minister. In this capacity, he served as Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution. Serving with him were two other lawyers, K.M. Munshi from Gujarat and Alladi Krishnaswamy Aiyar from Madras, both of whom gave crucial inputs in the drafting of the Constitution.

These six members were given vital assistance by two civil servants. One was B. N. Rau, Constitutional Advisor to the Government of India, who prepared a series of background papers based on a close study of the political systems obtaining in other countries.

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The other was the Chief Draughtsman, S. N. Mukherjee, who had the ability to put complex proposals in clear legal language.

Ambedkar himself had the responsibility of guiding the Draft Constitution through the Assembly. This took three years in all, with the printed record of the discussions taking up eleven bulky volumes. But while the process was long it was also extremely interesting. The members of the Constituent Assembly were eloquent in expressing their sometimes very divergent points of view. In their presentations we can discern many conflicting ideas of India – of what language Indians should speak, of what political and economic systems the nation should follow, of what moral values its citizens should uphold or disavow.

➲ Discuss...

Look again at Chapter 11. Discuss how the political situation of the time may have shaped the nature of the debates within the Constituent Assembly.

Fig. 12.5
B. R. Ambedkar presiding over a discussion of the Hindu Code Bill

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2. THE VISION OF THE CONSTITUTION

On 13 December 1946, Jawaharlal Nehru introduced the "Objectives Resolution" in the Constituent Assembly. It was a momentous resolution that outlined the defining ideals of the Constitution of Independent India, and provided the framework within which the work of constitution-making was to proceed. It proclaimed India to be an "Independent Sovereign Republic", guaranteed its citizens justice, equality and freedom, and assured that "adequate safeguards shall be provided for minorities, backward and tribal areas, and Depressed and Other Backward Classes ... " After outlining these objectives, Nehru placed the Indian experiment in a broad historical perspective. As he spoke, he said, his mind went back to the historic efforts in the past to produce such documents of rights.

Source 1

"We are not going just to copy"

This is what Jawaharlal Nehru said in his famous speech of 13 December 1946:

> My mind goes back to the various Constituent Assemblies that have gone before and of what took place at the making of the great American nation when the fathers of that nation met and fashioned out a Constitution which has stood the test of so many years, more than a century and a half, and of the great nation which has resulted, which has been built up on the basis of that Constitution. My mind goes back to that mighty revolution which took place also over 150 years ago and to that Constituent Assembly that met in that gracious and lovely city of Paris which has fought so many battles for freedom, to the difficulties that that Constituent Assembly had and to how the King and other authorities came in its way, and still it continued. The House will remember that when these difficulties came and even the room for a meeting was denied to the then Constituent Assembly, they betook themselves to an open tennis court and met there and took the oath, which is called the Oath of the Tennis Court, that they continued meeting in spite of Kings, in spite of the others, and did not disperse till they had finished the task they had undertaken. Well, I trust that it is in that solemn spirit that we too are meeting here and that we, too, whether we meet in this chamber or other chambers, or in the fields or in the market-place, will go on meeting and continue our work till we have finished it.

contd

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Source 1 (contd)

Then my mind goes back to a more recent revolution which gave rise to a new type of State, the revolution that took place in Russia and out of which has arisen the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics, another mighty country which is playing a tremendous part in the world, not only a mighty country but for us in India, a neighbouring country.

So our mind goes back to these great examples and we seek to learn from their success and to avoid their failures. Perhaps we may not be able to avoid failures because some measure of failure is inherent in human effort. Nevertheless, we shall advance, I am certain, in spite of obstructions and difficulties, and achieve and realise the dream that we have dreamt so long …

We say that it is our firm and solemn resolve to have an independent sovereign republic. India is bound to be sovereign, it is bound to be independent and it is bound to be a republic … Now, some friends have raised the question: "Why have you not put in the word 'democratic' here.?" Well, I told them that it is conceivable, of course, that a republic may not be democratic but the whole of our past is witness to this fact that we stand for democratic institutions. Obviously we are aiming at democracy and nothing less than a democracy. What form of democracy, what shape it might take is another matter. The democracies of the present day, many of them in Europe and elsewhere, have played a great part in the world's progress. Yet it may be doubtful if those democracies may not have to change their shape somewhat before long if they have to remain completely democratic. We are not going just to copy, I hope, a certain democratic procedure or an institution of a so-called democratic country. We may improve upon it. In any event whatever system of government we may establish here must fit in with the temper of our people and be acceptable to them. We stand for democracy. It will be for this House to determine what shape to give to that democracy, the fullest democracy, I hope. The House will notice that in this Resolution, although we have not used the word "democratic" because we thought it is obvious that the word "republic" contains that word and we did not want to use unnecessary words and redundant words, but we have done something much more than using the word. We have given the content of democracy in this Resolution and not only the content of democracy but the content, if I may say so, of economic democracy in this Resolution. Others might take objection to this Resolution on the ground that we have not said that it should be a Socialist State. Well, I stand for Socialism and, I hope, India will stand for Socialism and that India will go towards the constitution of a Socialist State and I do believe that the whole world will have to go that way.

CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY DEBATES (CAD), VOL.I

Oath of the Tennis Court

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➲ What explanation does Jawaharlal Nehru give for not using the term "democratic" in the Objectives Resolution in Source 1?

Nehru's speech (Source 1) merits careful scrutiny. What exactly was being stated here? What did Nehru's seemingly nostalgic return to the past reflect? What was he saying about the origin of the ideas embodied in the vision of the Constitution? In returning to the past and referring to the American and French Revolutions, Nehru was locating the history of constitution-making in India within a longer history of struggle for liberty and freedom. The momentous nature of the Indian project was emphasised by linking it to revolutionary moments in the past. But Nehru was not suggesting that those events were to provide any blueprint for the present; or that the ideas of those revolutions could be mechanically borrowed and applied in India. He did not define the specific form of democracy, and suggested that this had to be decided through deliberations. And he stressed that the ideals and provisions of the constitution introduced in India could not be just derived from elsewhere. "We are not going just to copy", he said. The system of government established in India, he declared, had to "fit in with the temper of our people and be acceptable to them". It was necessary to learn from the people of the West, from their achievements and failures, but the Western nations too had to learn from experiments elsewhere, they too had to change their own notions of democracy. The objective of the Indian Constitution would be to fuse the liberal ideas of democracy with the socialist idea of economic justice, and re-adapt and re-work all these ideas within the Indian context. Nehru's plea was for creative thinking about what was appropriate for India.

2.1 The will of the people

A Communist member, Somnath Lahiri saw the dark hand of British imperialism hanging over the deliberations of the Constituent Assembly. He thus urged the members, and Indians in general, to fully free themselves from the influences of imperial rule. In the winter of 1946-47, as the Assembly deliberated, the British were still in India. An interim administration headed by Jawaharlal Nehru was in place, but it could only operate under the directions of the Viceroy and the British Government in London. Lahiri exhorted his colleagues to realise that the Constituent Assembly was British-made and was "working the British plans as the British should like it to be worked out".

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Fig. 12.6
Members of the Interim Government
Front row (left to right): Baldev Singh, John Mathai, C Rajagopalachari, Jawaharlal Nehru, Liaquat Ali Khan, Vallabhbhai Patel, I.I. Chundrigar, Asaf Ali, C.H. Bhabha.
Back row (left to right): Jagjivan Ram, Ghazanfar Ali Khan, Rajendra Prasad, Abdur Nishtar

Source 2

"That is very good, Sir – bold words, noble words"

Somnath Lahiri said:

> Well, Sir, I must congratulate Pandit Nehru for the fine expression he gave to the spirit of the Indian people when he said that no imposition from the British will be accepted by the Indian people. Imposition would be resented and objected to, he said, and he added that if need be we will walk the valley of struggle. That is very good, Sir – bold words, noble words.
>
> But the point is to see when and how are you going to apply that challenge. Well, Sir, the point is that the imposition is here right now. Not only has the British Plan made any future Constitution … dependent on a treaty satisfactory to the Britisher but it suggests that for every little difference you will have to run to the Federal Court or dance attendance there in England; or to call on the British Prime Minister Clement Attlee or someone else. Not only is it a fact that this Constituent Assembly, whatever plans we may be hatching, we are under the shadow of British guns, British Army, their economic and financial stranglehold – which means that the final power is still in the British hands and the question of power has not yet been finally decided, which means the future is not yet completely in our hands. Not only that, but the statements made by Attlee and others recently have made it clear that if need be, they will even threaten you with division entirely. This means, Sir, there is no freedom in this country. As Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel put it some days ago, we have freedom only to fight among ourselves. That is the only freedom we have got … Therefore, our humble suggestion is that it is not a question of getting something by working out this Plan but to declare independence here and now and call upon the Interim Government, call upon the people of India, to stop fratricidal warfare and look out against its enemy, which still has the whip hand, the British Imperialism – and go together to fight it and then resolve our claims afterwards when we will be free.

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➲ Why does the speaker in Source 2 think that the Constituent Assembly was under the shadow of British guns?

Nehru admitted that most nationalist leaders had wanted a different kind of Constituent Assembly. It was also true, in a sense, that the British Government had a "hand in its birth", and it had attached certain conditions within which the Assembly had to function. "But," emphasised Nehru, "you must not ignore the source from which this Assembly derives its strength."
Nehru added:

> Governments do not come into being by State Papers. Governments are, in fact the expression of the will of the people. We have met here today because of the strength of the people behind us and we shall go as far as the people – not of any party or group but the people as a whole – shall wish us to go. We should, therefore, always keep in mind the passions that lie in the hearts of the masses of the Indian people and try to fulfil them.

Fig. 12.7
Edwin Montague (left) was the author of the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919 which allowed some form of representation in provincial legislative assemblies.

The Constituent Assembly was expected to express the aspirations of those who had participated in the movement for independence. Democracy, equality and justice were ideals that had become intimately associated with social struggles in India since the nineteenth century. When the social reformers in the nineteenth century opposed child marriage and demanded that widows be allowed to remarry, they were pleading for social justice. When Swami Vivekananda campaigned for a reform of Hinduism, he wanted religions to become more just. When Jyotiba Phule in Maharashtra pointed to the suffering of the depressed castes, or Communists and Socialists organised workers and peasants, they were demanding economic and social justice. The national movement against a government that was seen as oppressive and illegitimate was inevitably a struggle for democracy and justice, for citizens' rights and equality.

In fact, as the demand for representation grew, the British had been forced to introduce a series of constitutional reforms. A number of Acts were passed (1909, 1919 and 1935), gradually enlarging the space for Indian participation in provincial governments. The executive was made partly responsible to the provincial legislature in 1919, and almost entirely so under the Government of India Act of 1935. When elections were held in 1937, under the 1935 Act, the Congress came to power in eight out of the 11 provinces.

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Yet we should not see an unbroken continuity between the earlier constitutional developments and what happened in the three years from 1946. While the earlier constitutional experiments were in response to the growing demand for a representative government, the Acts (1909, 1919 and 1935) were not directly debated and formulated by Indians. They were enacted by the colonial government. The electorate that elected the provincial bodies had expanded over the years, but even in 1935 it remained limited to no more than 10 to 15 per cent of the adult population: there was no universal adult franchise. The legislatures elected under the 1935 Act operated within the framework of colonial rule, and were responsible to the Governor appointed by the British. The vision that Nehru was trying to outline on 13 December 1946 was of the Constitution of an independent, sovereign Republic of India.

➲ Discuss...
What were the ideas outlined by Jawaharlal Nehru in his speech on the Objectives Resolution?

3. DEFINING RIGHTS

How were the rights of individual citizens to be defined? Were the oppressed groups to have any special rights? What rights would minorities have? Who, in fact, could be defined as a minority? As the debate on the floor of the Constituent Assembly unfolded, it was clear that there were no collectively shared answers to any of these questions. The answers were evolved through the clash of opinions and the drama of individual encounters. In his inaugural speech, Nehru had invoked the "will of the people" and declared that the makers of the Constitution had to fulfil "the passions that lie in the hearts of the masses". This was no easy task. With the anticipation of Independence, different groups expressed their will in different ways, and made different demands. These would have to be debated and conflicting ideas would have to be reconciled, before a consensus could be forged.

3.1 The problem with separate electorates

On 27 August 1947, B. Pocker Bahadur from Madras made a powerful plea for continuing separate electorates. Minorities exist in all lands, argued Bahadur; they could not be wished away, they could not be "erased out of existence". The need was to create a political framework in which minorities could live in harmony with others, and the differences between communities could be minimised. This was possible only if minorites were well represented within the political system, their voices heard,

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Fig. 12.8
In the winter of 1946 Indian leaders went to London for what turned out to be a fruitless round of talks with British Prime Minister Attlee. (Left to right: Liaquat Ali, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Baldev Singh and Pethick-Lawrence)

and their views taken into account. Only separate electorates would ensure that Muslims had a meaningful voice in the governance of the country. The needs of Muslims, Bahadur felt, could not be properly understood by non-Muslims; nor could a true representative of Muslims be chosen by people who did not belong to that community.

This demand for separate electorates provoked anger and dismay amongst most nationalists. In the passionate debate that followed, a range of arguments were offered against the demand. Most nationalists saw separate electorates as a measure deliberately introduced by the British to divide the people. "The English played their game under the cover of safeguards," R.V. Dhulekar told Bahadur. "With the help of it they allured you (the minorities) to a long lull. Give it up now … Now there is no one to misguide you."

Partition had made nationalists fervently opposed to the idea of separate electorates. They were haunted by the fear of continued civil war, riots and violence. Separate electorates was a "poison that has entered the body politic of our country", declared Sardar Patel. It was a demand that had turned one community against another, divided the nation, caused bloodshed, and led to the tragic partition of the country. "Do you want peace in this land? If so do away with it (separate electorates)," urged Patel.

Source 3

"The British element is gone, but they have left the mischief behind"

Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel said:

> It is no use saying that we ask for separate electorates, because it is good for us. We have heard it long enough. We have heard it for years, and as a result of this agitation we are now a separate nation … Can you show me one free country where there are separate electorates? If so, I shall be prepared to accept it. But in this unfortunate country if this separate electorate is going to be persisted in, even after the division of the country, woe betide the country; it is not worth living in. Therefore, I say, it is not for my good alone, it is for your own good that I say it, forget the past. One day, we may be united … The British element is gone, but they have left the mischief behind. We do not want to perpetuate that mischief. (Hear, hear). When the British introduced this element they had not expected that they will have to go so soon. They wanted it for their easy administration. That is all right. But they have left the legacy behind. Are we to get out of it or not?

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Countering the demand for separate electorates, Govind Ballabh Pant declared that it was not only harmful for the nation but also for the minorities. He agreed with Bahadur that the success of a democracy was to be judged by the confidence it generated amongst different sections of people. He agreed too that every citizen in a free state should be treated in a manner that satisfied "not only his material wants but also his spiritual sense of self-respect", and that the majority community had an obligation to try and understand the problems of minorities, and empathise with their aspirations. Yet Pant opposed the idea of separate electorates. It was a suicidal demand, he argued, that would permanently isolate the minorities, make them vulnerable, and deprive them of any effective say within the government.

Source 4

"I believe separate electorates will be suicidal to the minorities"

During the debate on 27 August 1947, Govind Ballabh Pant said:

> I believe separate electorates will be suicidal to the minorities and will do them tremendous harm. If they are isolated for ever, they can never convert themselves into a majority and the feeling of frustration will cripple them even from the very beginning. What is it that you desire and what is our ultimate objective? Do the minorities always want to remain as minorities or do they ever expect to form an integral part of a great nation and as such to guide and control its destinies? If they do, can they ever achieve that aspiration and that ideal if they are isolated from the rest of the community? I think it would be extremely dangerous for them if they were segregated from the rest of the community and kept aloof in an air-tight compartment where they would have to rely on others even for the air they breath … The minorities if they are returned by separate electorates can never have any effective voice.

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➲ Read Sources 3 and 4. What are the different arguments being put forward against separate electorates?

Behind all these arguments was the concern with the making of a unified nation state. In order to build political unity and forge a nation, every individual had to be moulded into a citizen of the State, each

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Source 5

"There cannot be any divided loyalty"

Govind Ballabh Pant argued that in order to become loyal citizens people had to stop focusing only on the community and the self:

> For the success of democracy one must train himself in the art of self-discipline. In democracies one should care less for himself and more for others. There cannot be any divided loyalty. All loyalties must exclusively be centred round the State. If in a democracy, you create rival loyalties, or you create a system in which any individual or group, instead of suppressing his extravagance, cares nought for larger or other interests, then democracy is doomed.
>
> *CAD*, VOL.II

➲ How does G.B. Pant define the attributes of a loyal citizen?

group had to be assimilated within the nation. The Constitution would grant to citizens rights, but citizens had to offer their loyalty to the State. Communities could be recognised as cultural entities and assured cultural rights. Politically, however, members of all communities had to act as equal members of one State, or else there would be divided loyalties. "There is the unwholesome and to some extent degrading habit of thinking always in terms of communities and never in terms of citizens," said Pant. And he added: "Let us remember that it is the citizen that must count. It is the citizen that forms the base as well as the summit of the social pyramid." Even as the importance of community rights was being recognised, there was a lurking fear among many nationalists that this may lead to divided loyalties, and make it difficult to forge a strong nation and a strong State.

Not all Muslims supported the demand for separate electorates. Begum Aizaas Rasul, for instance, felt that separate electorates were self-destructive since they isolated the minorities from the majority. By 1949, most Muslim members of the Constituent Assembly were agreed that separate electorates were against the interests of the minorities. Instead Muslims needed to take an active part in the democratic process to ensure that they had a decisive voice in the political system.

3.2 "We will need much more than this Resolution"

While welcoming the Objectives Resolution, N.G. Ranga, a socialist who had been a leader of the peasant movement, urged that the term minorities be interpreted in economic terms. The real minorities for Ranga were the poor and the downtrodden. He welcomed the legal rights the Constitution was granting to each individual but pointed to its limits. In his opinion it was meaningless for the poor people in the villages to know that they now had the fundamental right to live, and to have full employment, or that they could have their meetings, their conferences, their associations and various other civil liberties. It was essential to create conditions where these constitutionally enshrined rights could be effectively enjoyed. For this they needed protection. "They need props. They need a ladder," said Ranga.

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Source 6

"The real minorities are the masses of this country"

Welcoming the Objectives Resolution introduced by Jawaharlal Nehru, N.G. Ranga said:

> Sir, there is a lot of talk about minorities. Who are the real minorities? Not the Hindus in the so-called Pakistan provinces, not the Sikhs, not even the Muslims. No, the real minorities are the masses of this country. These people are so depressed and oppressed and suppressed till now that they are not able to take advantage of the ordinary civil rights. What is the position? You go to the tribal areas. According to law, their own traditional law, their tribal law, their lands cannot be alienated. Yet our merchants go there, and in the so-called free market they are able to snatch their lands. Thus, even though the law goes against this snatching away of their lands, still the merchants are able to turn the tribal people into veritable slaves by various kinds of bonds, and make them hereditary bond-slaves. Let us go to the ordinary villagers. There goes the money-lender with his money and he is able to get the villagers in his pocket. There is the landlord himself, the zamindar, and the *malguzar* and there are the various other people who are able to exploit these poor villagers. There is no elementary education even among these people. These are the real minorities that need protection and assurances of protection. In order to give them the necessary protection, we will need much more than this Resolution ...
>
> *CAD*, VOL.II

➲ How is the notion of minority defined by Ranga?

Ranga also drew attention to the gulf that separated the broad masses of Indians and those claiming to speak on their behalf in the Constituent Assembly:

> Whom are we supposed to represent? The ordinary masses of our country. And yet most of us do not belong to the masses themselves. We are of them, we wish to stand for them, but the masses themselves are not able to come up to the Constituent Assembly. It may take some time; in the meanwhile, we are here as their trustees, as their champions, and we are trying our best to speak for them.

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One of the groups mentioned by Ranga, the tribals, had among its representatives to the Assembly the gifted orator Jaipal Singh. In welcoming the Objectives Resolution, Singh said:

> ... as an Adibasi, I am not expected to understand the legal intricacies of the Resolution. But my common sense tells me that every one of us should march in that road to freedom and fight together. Sir, if there is any group of Indian people that has been shabbily treated it is my people. They have been disgracefully treated, neglected for the last 6,000 years. ... The whole history of my people is one of continuous exploitation and dispossession by the non-aboriginals of India punctuated by rebellions and disorder, and yet I take Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru at his word. I take you all at your word that now we are going to start a new chapter, a new chapter of independent India where there is equality of opportunity, where no one would be neglected.

Singh spoke eloquently on the need to protect the tribes, and ensure conditions that could help them come up to the level of the general population. Tribes were not a numerical minority, he argued, but they needed protection. They had been dispossessed of the land they had settled, deprived of their forests and pastures, and forced to move in search of new homes. Perceiving them as primitive and backward, the rest of society had turned away from them, spurned them. He made a moving plea for breaking the emotional and physical distance that separated the tribals from the rest of society: "Our point is that you have got to mix with us. We are willing to mix with you ... ". Singh was not asking for separate electorates, but he felt that reservation of seats in the legislature was essential to allow tribals to represent themselves. It would be a way, he said, of compelling others to hear the voice of tribals, and come near them.

3.3 "We were suppressed for thousands of years"

How were the rights of the Depressed Castes to be defined by the Constitution? During the national movement Ambedkar had demanded separate electorates for the Depressed Castes, and Mahatma Gandhi had opposed it, arguing that this would

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permanently segregate them from the rest of society. How could the Constituent Assembly resolve this opposition? What kinds of protection were the Depressed Castes to be provided?

Some members of the Depressed Castes emphasised that the problem of the "Untouchables" could not be resolved through protection and safeguards alone. Their disabilities were caused by the social norms and the moral values of caste society. Society had used their services and labour but kept them at a social distance, refusing to mix with them or dine with them or allow them entry into temples. "We have been suffering, but we are prepared to suffer no more," said J. Nagappa from Madras. "We have realised our responsibilities. We know how to assert ourselves."

Nagappa pointed out that numerically the Depressed Castes were not a minority: they formed between 20 and 25 per cent of the total population. Their suffering was due to their systematic marginalisation, not their numerical insignificance. They had no access to education, no share in the administration. Addressing the assembly, K.J. Khanderkar of the Central Provinces said:

> We were suppressed for thousands of years. ... suppressed... to such an extent that neither our minds nor our bodies and now even our hearts work, nor are we able to march forward. This is the position.

After the Partition violence, Ambedkar too no longer argued for separate electorates. The Constituent Assembly finally recommended that untouchability be abolished, Hindu temples be thrown open to all castes, and seats in legislatures and jobs in government offices be reserved for the lowest castes. Many recognised that this could not solve all problems: social discrimination could not be erased only through constitutional legislation, there had to be a change in the attitudes within society. But the measures were welcomed by the democratic public.

➲ **Discuss...**

What were the different arguments that Jaipal Singh put forward in demanding protective measures for the tribals?

Source 7

"We want removal of our social disabilities"

Dakshayani Velayudhan from Madras, argued:

> What we want is not all kinds of safeguards. It is the moral safeguard which gives protection to the underdogs of this country ... I refuse to believe that seventy million Harijans are to be considered as a minority ... what we want is the ... immediate removal of our social disabilities.'

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Source 8

We have never asked for privileges

Hansa Mehta of Bombay demanded justice for women, not reserved seats, or separate electorates.

> We have never asked for privileges. What we have asked for is social justice, economic justice, and political justice. We have asked for that equality which alone can be the basis of mutual respect and understanding, without which real cooperation is not possible between man and woman.

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4. THE POWERS OF THE STATE

One of the topics most vigorously debated in the Constituent Assembly was the respective rights of the Central Government and the states. Among those arguing for a strong Centre was Jawaharlal Nehru. As he put it in a letter to the President of the Constituent Assembly, "Now that partition is a settled fact, ... it would be injurious to the interests of the country to provide for a weak central authority which would be incapable of ensuring peace, of coordinating vital matters of common concern and of speaking effectively for the whole country in the international sphere".

The Draft Constitution provided for three lists of subjects: Union, State, and Concurrent. The subjects in the first list were to be the preserve of the Central Government, while those in the second list were vested with the states. As for the third list, here Centre and state shared responsibility. However, many more items were placed under exclusive Union control than in other federations, and more placed on the Concurrent list too than desired by the provinces. The Union also had control of minerals and key industries. Besides, Article 356 gave the Centre the powers to take over a state administration on the recommendation of the Governor.

The Constitution also mandated for a complex system of fiscal federalism. In the case of some taxes (for instance, customs duties and Company taxes) the Centre retained all the proceeds; in other cases (such as income tax and excise duties) it shared them with the states; in still other cases (for instance, estate duties) it assigned them wholly to the states. The states, meanwhile, could levy and collect certain taxes on their own: these included land and property taxes, sales tax, and the hugely profitable tax on bottled liquor.

4.1 "The centre is likely to break"

The rights of the states were most eloquently defended by K. Santhanam from Madras. A reallocation of powers was necessary, he felt, to strengthen not only the states but also the Centre. "There is almost an obsession that by adding all kinds of powers to the Centre we can make it strong." This was a misconception, said Santhanam. If the Centre was overburdened with responsibilities, it could not function effectively. By relieving it of some of its functions, and transferring them to the states, the Centre could, in fact, be made stronger.

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As for the states, Santhanam felt that the proposed allocation of powers would cripple them. The fiscal provisions would impoverish the provinces since most taxes, except land revenue, had been made the preserve of the Centre. Without finances how could the states undertake any project of development? "I do not want any constitution in which the Unit has to come to the Centre and say 'I cannot educate my people. I cannot give sanitation, give me a dole for the improvement of roads, of industries.' Let us rather wipe out the federal system and let us have Unitary system." Santhanam predicted a dark future if the proposed distribution of powers was adopted without further scrutiny. In a few years, he said, all the provinces would rise in "revolt against the Centre".

Many others from the provinces echoed the same fears. They fought hard for fewer items to be put on the Concurrent and Union lists. A member from Orissa warned that "the Centre is likely to break" since powers had been excessively centralised under the Constitution.

Source 9

Who is a better patriot?

Sir A. Ramaswamy Mudaliar from Mysore said during the debate on 21 August 1947:

> Let us not lay the flattering unction to our soul that we are better patriots if we propose a strong Centre and that those who advocate a more vigorous examination of these resources are people with not enough of national spirit or patriotism.

4.2 "What we want today is a strong Government"

The argument for greater power to the provinces provoked a strong reaction in the Assembly. The need for a strong centre had been underlined on numerous occasions since the Constituent Assembly had begun its sessions. Ambedkar had declared that he wanted "a strong and united Centre (hear, hear) much stronger than the Centre we had created under the Government of India Act of 1935". Reminding the members of the riots and violence that was ripping the nation apart, many members had repeatedly stated that the powers of the Centre had to be greatly strengthened to enable it to stop the communal frenzy. Reacting to the demands for giving power to the provinces, Gopalaswami Ayyangar declared that "the Centre should be made as strong as possible". One member from the United Provinces, Balakrishna Sharma, reasoned at length that only a strong centre could plan for the well-being of the country, mobilise the available economic resources, establish a proper administration, and defend the country against foreign aggression.

Before Partition the Congress had agreed to grant considerable autonomy to the provinces. This had been part of an effort to assure the Muslim League that within the provinces where the Muslim League came

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➲ Discuss...

What different arguments were put forward by those advocating a strong Centre?

to power the Centre would not interfere. After Partition most nationalists changed their position because they felt that the earlier political pressures for a decentralised structure were no longer there.

There was already a unitary system in place, imposed by the colonial government. The violence of the times gave a further push to centralisation, now seen as necessary both to forestall chaos and to plan for the country's economic development. The Constitution thus showed a distinct bias towards the rights of the Union of India over those of its constituent states.

5. THE LANGUAGE OF THE NATION

How could the nation be forged when people in different regions spoke different languages, each associated with its own cultural heritage? How could people listen to each other, or connect with each other, if they did not know each other's language? Within the Constituent Assembly, the language issue was debated over many months, and often generated intense arguments.

By the 1930s, the Congress had accepted that Hindustani ought to be the national language. Mahatma Gandhi felt that everyone should speak in a language that common people could easily understand. Hindustani – a blend of Hindi and Urdu – was a popular language of a large section of the people of India, and it was a composite language enriched by the interaction of diverse cultures. Over the years it had incorporated words and terms from very many different sources, and was therefore understood by people from various regions. This multi-cultural language, Mahatma Gandhi thought, would be the ideal language of communication between diverse communities: it could unify Hindus and Muslims, and people of the north and the south.

From the end of the nineteenth century, however, Hindustani as a language had been gradually changing. As communal conflicts deepened, Hindi and Urdu also started growing apart. On the one hand, there was a move to Sanskritise Hindi, purging it of all words of Persian and Arabic origin. On the other hand, Urdu was being increasingly Persianised. As a consequence, language became associated with the politics of religious identities. Mahatma Gandhi, however, retained his faith in the composite character of Hindustani.

Source 10

What should the qualities of a national language be ?

A few months before his death Mahatma Gandhi reiterated his views on the language question:

> This Hindustani should be neither Sanskritised Hindi nor Persianised Urdu but a happy combination of both. It should also freely admit words wherever necessary from the different regional languages and also assimilate words from foreign languages, provided that they can mix well and easily with our national language. Thus our national language must develop into a rich and powerful instrument capable of expressing the whole gamut of human thought and feelings. To confine oneself to Hindi or Urdu would be a crime against intelligence and the spirit of patriotism.

HARIJANSEVAK, 12 OCTOBER 1947

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5.1 A plea for Hindi

In one of the earliest sessions of the Constituent Assembly, R. V. Dhulekar, a Congressman from the United Provinces, made an aggressive plea that Hindi be used as the language of constitution-making. When told that not everyone in the Assembly knew the language, Dhulekar retorted: "People who are present in this House to fashion a constitution for India and do not know Hindustani are not worthy to be members of this Assembly. They better leave." As the House broke up in commotion over these remarks, Dhulekar proceeded with his speech in Hindi. On this occasion peace in the House was restored through Jawaharlal Nehru's intervention, but the language issue continued to disrupt proceedings and agitate members over the subsequent three years.

Almost three years later, on 12 September 1947, Dhulekar's speech on the language of the nation once again sparked off a huge storm. By now the Language Committee of the Constituent Assembly had produced its report and had thought of a compromise formula to resolve the deadlock between those who advocated Hindi as the national language and those who opposed it. It had decided, but not yet formally declared, that Hindi in the Devanagari script would be the official language, but the transition to Hindi would be gradual. For the first fifteen years, English would continue to be used for all official purposes. Each province was to be allowed to choose one of the regional languages for official work within the province. By referring to Hindi as the official rather that the national language, the Language Committee of the Constituent Assembly hoped to placate ruffled emotions and arrive at a solution that would be acceptable to all.

Dhulekar was not one who liked such an attitude of reconciliation. He wanted Hindi to be declared not an Official Language, but a National Language. He attacked those who protested that Hindi was being forced on the nation, and mocked at those who said, in the name of Mahatma Gandhi, that Hindustani rather than Hindi ought to be the national language.

> Sir, nobody can be more happy than myself that Hindi has become the official language of the country … Some say that it is a concession to Hindi language. I say "no". It is a consummation of a historic process.

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What particularly perturbed many members was the tone in which Dhulekar was arguing his case. Several times during his speech, the President of the Assembly interrupted Dhulekar and told him: "I do not think you are advancing your case by speaking like this." But Dhulekar continued nonetheless.

5.2 The fear of domination

A day after Dhulekar spoke, Shrimati G. Durgabai from Madras explained her worries about the way the discussion was developing:

> Mr President, the question of national language for India which was an almost agreed proposition until recently has suddenly become a highly controversial issue. Whether rightly or wrongly, the people of non-Hindi-speaking areas have been made to feel that this fight, or this attitude on behalf of the Hindi-speaking areas, is a fight for effectively preventing the natural influence of other powerful languages of India on the composite culture of this nation.

Durgabai informed the House that the opposition in the south against Hindi was very strong: "The opponents feel perhaps justly that this propaganda for Hindi cuts at the very root of the provincial languages ..." Yet, she along with many others had obeyed the call of Mahatma Gandhi and carried on Hindi propaganda in the south, braved resistance, started schools and conducted classes in Hindi. "Now what is the result of it all?" asked Durgabai. "I am shocked to see this agitation against the enthusiasm with which we took to Hindi in the early years of the century." She had accepted Hindustani as the language of the people, but now that language was being changed, words from Urdu and other regional languages were being taken out. Any move that eroded the inclusive and composite character of Hindustani, she felt, was bound to create anxieties and fears amongst different language groups.

As the discussion became acrimonious, many members appealed for a spirit of accommodation. A member from Bombay, Shri Shankarrao Deo stated that as a Congressman and a follower of Mahatma Gandhi he had accepted Hindustani as a language of the nation, but he warned: "if you want my whole-hearted support (for Hindi) you must not do now anything which may raise my suspicions and which

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will strengthen my fears." T. A. Ramalingam Chettiar from Madras emphasised that whatever was done had to be done with caution; the cause of Hindi would not be helped if it was pushed too aggressively. The fears of the people, even if they were unjustified, had to be allayed, or else "there will be bitter feelings left behind". "When we want to live together and form a united nation," he said, "there should be mutual adjustment and no question of forcing things on people ..."

The Constitution of India thus emerged through a process of intense debate and discussion. Many of its provisions were arrived at through a process of give-and-take, by forging a middle ground between two opposed positions.

However, on one central feature of the Constitution there was substantial agreement. This was on the granting of the vote to every adult Indian. This was an unprecedented act of faith, for in other democracies the vote had been granted slowly, and in stages. In countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, only men of property were first granted the vote; then, men with education were also allowed into the charmed circle. After a long and bitter struggle, men of working-class or peasant background were also given the right to vote. An even longer struggle was required to grant this right to women.

A second important feature of the Constitution was its emphasis on secularism. There was no ringing pronouncement of secularism in the Preamble, but operationally, its key features as understood in Indian contexts were spelled out in an exemplary manner. This was done through the carefully drafted series of Fundamental Rights to "freedom of religion" (Articles 25-28), "cultural and educational rights" (Articles 29, 30), and "rights to equality" (Articles 14, 16, 17). All religions were guaranteed equal treatment by the State and given the right to maintain charitable institutions. The State also sought to distance itself from religious communities, banning

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compulsory religious instructions in State-run schools and colleges, and declaring religious discrimination in employment to be illegal. However, a certain legal space was created for social reform within communities, a space that was used to ban untouchability and introduce changes in personal and family laws. In the Indian variant of political secularism, then, there has been no absolute separation of State from religion, but a kind of judicious distance between the two.

The Constituent Assembly debates help us understand the many conflicting voices that had to be negotiated in framing the Constitution, and the many demands that were articulated. They tell us about the ideals that were invoked and the principles that the makers of the Constitution operated with. But in reading these debates we need to be aware that the ideals invoked were very often re-worked according to what seemed appropriate within a context. At times the members of the Assembly also changed their ideas as the debate unfolded over three years. Hearing others argue, some members rethought their positions, opening their minds to contrary views, while others changed their views in reaction to the events around.

Fig. 12. 9
B. R. Ambedkar and Rajendra Prasad greeting each other at the time of the handing over of the Constitution

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TIMELINE

1945	
26 July	Labour Government comes into power in Britain
December-January	General Elections in India
1946	
16 May	Cabinet Mission announces its constitutional scheme
16 June	Muslim League accepts Cabinet Mission's constitutional scheme
16 June	Cabinet Mission presents scheme for the formation of an Interim Government at the Centre
16 August	Muslim League announces Direct Action Day
2 September	Congress forms Interim Government with Nehru as the Vice-President
13 October	Muslim League decides to join the Interim Government
3-6 December	British Prime Minister, Attlee, meets some Indian leaders; talks fail
9 December	Constituent Assembly begins its sessions
1947	
29 January	Muslim League demands dissolution of Constituent Assembly
16 July	Last meeting of the Interim Government
11 August	Jinnah elected President of the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan
14 August	Pakistan Independence; celebrations in Karachi
14-15 August	At midnight India celebrates Independence
1949	
December	Constitution is signed

ANSWER IN 100-150 WORDS

1. What were the ideals expressed in the Objectives Resolution?
2. How was the term minority defined by different groups?
3. What were the arguments in favour of greater power to the provinces?
4. Why did Mahatma Gandhi think Hindustani should be the national language?

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If you would like to know more, read:

Granville Austin. 1972. *The Indian Constitution: The Cornerstone of a Nation*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Rajeev Bhargava. 2000. "Democratic Vision of a New Republic"in F. R. Frankel et al. eds, *Transforming India: Social and Political Dynamics of Democracy*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Sumit Sarkar. 1983. "Indian Democracy: The Historical Inheritance" in Atul Kohli ed., *The Success of India's Democracy*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Sumit Sarkar. 1983. *Modern India: 1885-1947*. Macmillan, New Delhi.

You could visit:
parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/debates.htm
(for a digitalised version of the Constituent Assembly Debates)

WRITE A SHORT ESSAY (250-300 WORDS) ON THE FOLLOWING:

5. What historical forces shaped the vision of the Constitution?
6. Discuss the different arguments made in favour of protection of the oppressed groups.
7. What connection did some of the members of the Constituent Assembly make between the political situation of the time and the need for a strong Centre?
8. How did the Constituent Assembly seek to resolve the language controversy?

MAP WORK

9. On a present-day political map of India, indicate the different languages spoken in each state and mark out the one that is designated as the language for official communication. Compare the present map with a map of the early 1950s. What differences do you notice? Do the differences say something about the relationship between language and the organisation of the states?

PROJECT (CHOOSE ONE)

10. Choose any one important constitutional change that has happened in recent years. Find out why the change was made, what different arguments were put forward for the change, and the historical background to the change. If you can, try and look at the Constitutional Assembly Debates (http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/debates.htm) to see how the issue was discussed at that time. Write about your findings.
11. Compare the Constitution of America, France or South Africa with the Indian Constitution, focusing on any two of the following themes: secularism, minority rights, realtions between the Centre and the states. Find out how these differences and similarities are linked to the histories of the regions.

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CREDITS FOR ILLUSTRATIONS

Institutions

Alkazi Foundation for the Arts, New Delhi (Figs. 10.6; 10.8)
Collection Jyotindra and Juta Jain, CIVIC Archives, New Delhi (Fig. 11.15)
Photo Division, Government of India, New Delhi (Figs. 12.3; 12.4; 12.5; 12.9)
Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi (Fig. 12.6)
The Osian's Archive and Library Collection, Mumbai (Figs. 10.9; 10.18; 11.17)
Victoria Memorial Museum and Library, Kolkata (Figs. 9.6, 9.7)

Journals

Punch (Figs. 10.13; 10.14; 10.17)
The Illustrated London News (Figs. 9.1; 9.10; 9.11; 9.12; 9.13; 9.14; 9.16; 9.17; 9.18; 9.19; 10.15; 10.16)

Books

Bayly, C.A., *The Raj: India and the British 1600-1947* (Figs. 9.4; 10.10; 10.11)
Ruhe, Peter, *Gandhi* (Figs. 11.7; 11.11; 11.12)
Singh, Khushwant, *Train to Pakistan* (Figs. 12.1; 12.4; 12.12; 12.13; 12.15)

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Note

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