Introduction

In 1917, the political life of Southern India appeared to undergo a massive transformation. Madras, known for thirty years as the most ‘benighted’ and conservative of the presidencies, suddenly exploded into political activity. The Home Rule League, organised from a suburb of Madras city, confronted the British with the most serious and largest movement of dissidence which their rule had faced anywhere in India since the Mutiny. The non-Brahman movement, also organised from the provincial capital, spread a wave of racial hatred across the presidency and threatened to tear Southern society apart into mutually antagonistic political communities. Both the Home Rule League agitation and the non-Brahman movement represented extremely new phenomena in Madras politics. Contemporaries never tired of pointing out how, just five years before they appeared, there was not the slightest sign of their imminence.\(^1\) And even a casual glance at the political debates and postures of 1912 would support this conclusion. In that year, the men (and women) who were to lead the Home Rule League were recognised generally as the most loyal supporters of the British raj;\(^2\) the later arch-ideologue of the non-Brahman cause was presenting to a Parliamentary Commission evidence which not even his enemies considered to show a trace of communal bias;\(^3\) and the provincial government of Madras was steadfastly denying to its superiors in London and New Delhi the existence of anything resembling communal conflict within its territories.\(^4\) One of the main purposes of this book is to explain how and why the novel issues of politics in the years 1917 to 1920 arose.

But it was not just the issues of political controversy at this time which were so new: it was also the forms of expression, of ‘agitation’ and ‘movement’, and of political organisation. In 1912, campaigns to unite the whole of the province against its British rulers or to unite the millions of non-Brahmans against their Brahman ‘oppressors’ had

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\(^1\) See, for example, E. S. Montagu, *An Indian Diary* (London, 1930), pp. 113–14.

\(^2\) Mrs Annie Besant, C. P. Ramaswami Iyer, and G. A. Natesan, all of whom had been instrumental in defeating the Extremist challenge of 1906–9.

\(^3\) T. M. Nair. See *Hindu* 5 April 1913.

\(^4\) See G. O. 916 (L. and M.L) dated 12 July 1911. *T.N.A.*
not appeared, simply because nobody had as yet thought of them. More fundamentally, they did not exist because there was no place for them in the political structure of the period. In the context of the institutions, forces and interests of 1912, campaigns which set out to create ideological bonds of their species would have been politically meaningless to most contemporaries. The linkages of interest and purpose between different levels of the political system, the means by which the ideologies were communicated to and understood by the political actors and the circumstances which made apparent ideological conflict a crucial element in the political system, all of which conditioned the events of 1917 to 1920, were not present in 1912. There were profound differences in the political structures of the two adjacent periods, and the Home Rule and non-Brahman movements were at least as much the products of new structures as they were of new ideas. A second, and much larger, interest of this book is to uncover the ways in which the political institutions and relationships of Southern India were changing to produce the new forms of politics. In order to do so, it will wander over a wide range of matters and a broad time-span. It will examine the nature of change in many of the institutions through which political power was exercised and it will push back its inquiries to the point in time (the 1870s) from which it sees the changes which were crucial to the events of 1917 to 1920 beginning to emerge.

Chapter 1 outlines briefly the main social, economic and political contours of the Madras Presidency during the period of study. Chapter 2 initiates the analysis of political change by investigating the operations of government. It is natural that the concept of government should form a major organising theme of this book, for the powers and privileges of government did much to determine the entire political structure. The Government of Fort St George was much closer in type to the oriental despotisms which previously had ruled South India than it was to the circumscribed and constitutional governments of its European masters’ homeland. It was not simply the guarantor of the peace and security which would allow its subjects to carry on with their own business but it directly ordered their lives in a myriad of ways. It granted and denied the legitimacy of social and political positions right down to the level of village society; it extracted (and partially redistributed) a large proportion of the economic surplus; it gave employment to hundreds of thousands of people in its various departments; it worked as an economic entrepreneur, controlling vast commercial monopolies, building railways and digging canals; and it helped to develop and, more significantly, control edu-
Introduction

cational and cultural facilities and the learned professions. The influence of government pervaded social life to a degree unknown outside Asia. Its shape and organisation must be taken as the beginning of any examination of the political system. Moreover, of course, the British government of Madras was an alien, colonial government whose structure and policies were determined, to a considerable extent, by events in other parts of the world. It was not simply the reflection of a ruling class thrown up by indigenous economic and social pressures. In consequence, when analysing the nature and causes of political change in South India, government has to be treated in part as an autonomous agent which was capable of altering both itself and the forms of South Indian political life for reasons which had nothing to do with South Indian society – it was an exogenous factor in the politics of Madras. The purpose of Chapter 2 is to determine the locations in the governmental structure from which effective power was exercised and to trace over time changes in both the location and nature of this power.

Although extremely influential, however, government by no means controlled directly the distribution of all the economic resources in Madras nor did it possess a monopoly of all political authority. Indeed, in many ways the British deliberately had weakened the position which they had inherited from previous regimes and had permitted power over several important social institutions to slip from their hands. In consequence, in order to continue their government, the British were obliged to rely on the support and co-operation of a relatively small number of South Indians who exercised considerable political influence independently of them. Chapter 3 examines the institutions of ‘indigenous’ political organisation, which gave these men their power, and attempts to assess the changes which were taking place within these institutions. As its main purpose is to explain how order was maintained and how conflicts were settled, the chapter concentrates particularly on problems of social control.

The organisation of Chapters 2 and 3 implies a dichotomy between the governmental and the ‘indigenous’ or ‘social’ political systems. Obviously, however, this dichotomy is artificial, for although governmental and social power can be separated analytically, in reality they were inextricably enmeshed. Chapter 4 attempts to put them together again in order to show how their changing relationship, between 1870 and 1920, was beginning to produce new types of political construct. As the argument of these chapters will have developed, a further conceptual dichotomy will have emerged. A very clear difference is noticeable between the principles on which ‘state-’ or ‘provincial-
The emergence of provincial politics

level' politics and on which ‘local-level’ politics were organised. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 concentrate largely on the local level and try to show how a variety of changes within it were producing connections between the local and the provincial levels. Perhaps their most important finding is that the virtually autonomous political arenas of 1870 were becoming fused into a much more broadly based political structure. Chapters 5 and 6 explore the nature of the provincial political system and attempt to show how changes there were generating their own set of linkages to the locality. Political behaviour at the provincial level was being modified heavily by the new relationship to the localities. In Chapter 7, the argument reaches the events of 1917 to 1920 which it has set out to explain. The behaviour of the central political actors is placed within the changing context of the political system.

Several questions are raised by the writing of this book: Why a regional study; why this region; why this time and these events? The author’s answer would be that he believes that, in the present state of Indian historiography, a regional study of Madras in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can improve our knowledge of both modern Indian and British colonial political history. By selecting a region, an author does not have to pretend that he has chosen an entity which exists in complete isolation from everything outside it. Clearly, for example, Madras was part of a larger country, of a greater civilisation and of an international empire. The influences which stem from these wider contacts need not be excluded from study. Indeed, in this book they form a major area of investigation. But if concentration is placed only on the higher and larger categories of activity and existence, many of the nuances of historical development will be missed and a great many events will remain inexplicable. Bengal, for example, shared the relationships of Madras to country, civilisation and empire but its reaction to those relationships was very different and its political history notably distinct. There was a level at which the character of the social and political institutions of Madras and Bengal diverged sharply. The regional study, when compared to other regional studies, helps us to see the depth at which this level lay and the materials of which the different levels were composed. The regional study facilitates our understanding of the points of contact between greater and lesser institutions and hence our understanding of the processes of politics and of political change. As British colonial and Indian history contain so many points of contact between larger and smaller socio-political structures, it must aid our appreciation of them.
Introduction

A casual glance at the library shelves suggests one reason why South India is a peculiarly fitting subject for a regional study. In spite of its size, wealth and contemporary importance, very little of its colonial history has been written. It represents a vast gap on the historical map of India. A second glance, this time at the contents of the shelves, reveals a second and more substantial reason for its selection. Many of the analytical tools which have been used to carve the political history of modern India appear very blunt when they are applied to the South. Unquestionably, for example, the Madras Government was the most financially and bureaucratically oppressive of all Indian provincial governments. Unquestionably too, its administration and laws were designed to interfere more deeply in the economic and social institutions of indigenous life than were those of any of its neighbours. These factors ought to have made Madras a turbulent and dangerous presidency. Yet so far from meeting with the angry reactions of its subjects and having to face constant outbreaks of hostility, Fort St George governed the quietest and, in colonial terms, the most successful of provinces. Equally, Madras was among the leading presidencies in the development of western education which, we are used to being told, was the primary cause of the development of an Indian nationalist movement. Yet South India's overall performance in the nationalist stakes was, to put it kindly, not unduly noticeable. However, on two occasions Madras did break at the seams with nationalist fervour. For a few years in the 1880s and again between 1917 and 1920, it was in the forefront of the nationalist movement. But the people who took it there were certainly not the western-educated alone and their interest in the movement proved to be more pragmatic than intellectual or cultural. Moreover, in Indian history, we read much about the politics of communal conflict. Members of different castes, religions and races sometimes are seen to belong to separate political communities which jockey against one another for place, power and status. Before about 1915, however, almost no significant event in British South Indian history could possibly be understood in communal terms alone. And when overt communal conflict appeared, it did so in the most remarkable of forms. One community, representing 98 per cent of the population and possessing the vast bulk of wealth and effective political power, denounced another community, which consisted of less than two per cent of the population and was possessed of nothing like the same economic and political resources, for oppressing it. Superficially examined with many of the tools which are supposed to be part of the Indian historian's trade, South India appears to consist of nothing but paradoxes. By a closer examination, we may not only reconcile
The emergence of provincial politics

despite these paradoxes but also change our view on the utility of some of the tools.

The significance of the years 1917 to 1920 has not been missed in previous political studies of modern India. It was from this time that the Indian national movement took on its mass persona, that communal politics extended their appeal beyond tiny elites, and that the history of the British in India becomes the history of a retreat. Few historians would disagree that the road along which India would march to Independence and Partition was opened in these years. Yet, until recently, the historical reasons why the period should have been so important have remained obscure. Historians have preferred to see the wartime agitations as the beginning of ‘modern’ politics and to proceed forward from them towards the later achievements of nationalism and communalism. Naturally, this starting point has limited their appreciation of the period. Most of their accounts of the origins of the political movements of 1917–20 centre on such features as the pressures of the war and the characters of Tilak, Mrs Besant and Gandhi. While adequate on the nature of the issues which divided political life, these accounts fall far short as explanations of the qualitatively new forms of politics which were making the divisions apparent. It was not just that people were expressing new views but that they were acting politically in new ways. Demands made at the capitals of government were earning the support and hostility of men who previously had given no indication that they knew where the capitals were. Provincial and national political conflicts were concerned with a range of issues which had been very remote from them before. By looking at the bed-rock institutions of politics and by tracing the changes which had been taking place within them over the previous forty years, it is possible to approach the problem of 1917–20 from a more satisfactory angle. The Home Rule League and non-Brahman movements may then be seen not as the semi-inexplicable beginning of a chain of events but as the culmination of a long-term process of change. Moreover, the new structure of political relationships which had brought the movements into existence also may stand clearly revealed. It was the changes in structure, which remained long after the sparks and fumes of agitational invective had dispersed, which more truly heralded the end of British rule than did the mere issues of politics during the First World War. If we allow the events of 1917–20 to have had an important role in the evolution of modern India, then how much more important must have been the processes of institutional change which began in the 1870s and which made those events?
Introduction

The central concern of this book, therefore, is the changing political system of South India between about 1870 and 1920. In consequence, it may be necessary to warn the reader that the political history which he will find here will not look like that which he is used to finding in most of the historical literature on Indian politics at this time. Indian political history has tended to concentrate heavily on the analysis of particular political movements and agitations. This is hardly surprising, for India’s independence and partition – her greatest modern events – were won through these movements and agitations, and the historian, whatever his protestations, can but be drawn to the past through the present. The questions which have underlain this historical writing have been how did the Indian people oppose and eventually defeat British imperialism and how and why did the communal tensions, which colour South Asia’s experience in the twentieth century, arise. The perspective which it has adopted has been designed to illuminate the changes in values, ideas and political associations, which increased the hostility of Indians to the British and to members of other races and religions.

The present book, however, is written from a different perspective and seeks to uncover an essential but hitherto neglected area of South Indian history. While it is certainly true that nationalism and communalism were important political forces, it is also true that they did not succeed in tearing India out of her imperial connection nor in dividing the subcontinent into antagonistic ethnic and religious communities until the later 1940s. In consequence, throughout the period from 1870 to 1920 and beyond, there remained a viable colonial political system through which power was distributed and conflicts were contained and compromised. Indeed, it was only by destroying this system that nationalism and communalism came to achieve their later positions as dominant political themes. This book has chosen its particular standpoint in order to illuminate the salient features of the colonial political system. The questions which underlie its inquiries are how did this system function, why did it operate successfully for as long as it did and how and why did it change. Its perspective facilitates particularly an analysis of the relationships of power and authority in South Indian society: it examines changes in the disposition of sanctions, the location of forces and the distribution of resources. Naturally, given its unusual angle of vision, when the argument of this book touches nationalism and communalism, it will be attempting to make points of a different character to those which would be made from the other, more orthodox, viewpoint. It will be obliged to treat those phenomena only as they related to the
The emergence of provincial politics

political system and not as they stood apart from it: it will see them only as reactions to and influences on its own subject matter.

The author's justification for asking his particular questions and for following his particular approach is easily made. The triumph of nationalism and communalism has for too long provided the context of the present out of which the historian has drawn his questions to the past. But this triumph itself is no longer a feature of the present. India's contemporary problems and conflicts are the seedbeds from which ideas for the development of Indian historiography now must come. Of these problems and conflicts, as political scientists and sociologists have not been slow to see, the nature and locations of power in the political system have been crucial. Unfortunately, however, our historical understanding of the organisation of political power in the late colonial period, which the Indian Republic inherited in 1947 and which has conditioned her situation ever since, is remarkably poor. So dominant in the historical literature have been the themes of nationalism and communalism that we know almost nothing about the Indian political structure and its development. Indeed, we have less of the political fabric of the India of Their Majesties than we do of that of the East India Company or even of the Grand Moghul. This hiatus in understanding can be seen clearly in much of the literature of political science, where 1947 has been taken as a cataclysmic year in which the whole basis of Indian political activity switched from the high ideals of the movements for independence and partition to the low practices of a struggle over the distribution of power and resources. Without arguing that idealism had nothing to do with nationalism and communalism, it must be obvious that the struggle for power and resources in Indian society had been going on long before 1947 and that, in part at least, it had determined the course of nationalism and communalism. The political scientists' wonderment at the effects of independence and partition owes more to the deficiencies of the historical literature which they have been obliged to receive than to the scale of the transformation actually achieved by those events. It is to bring to the past some of the issues raised by India's present, and hence to extend the process by which the past can be historically understood, that this book has been written.