CONCLUSION TO PART TWO

Bayly and Wink forcefully argued that the great empires of the seventeenth century—the Osmanlis, the Safavids and the Mughal Empire (and perhaps one ought to add the Ya’arubi Imamate)—were in the eighteenth century replaced by a series of “successor states.” These were typified by a smaller size but a more thorough exploitation of resources, by drawing-in more people of the middling sort, a more monetized levy of the land-revenue, a certain centralizing drive to have trade conducted by the state, and perhaps even a new language of absolute power of the monarch.¹

Now, there are serious problems with expanding the whole idea of the successor-state beyond Awadh and Bengal—practically the only two cases for which it seems really appropriate. For most of Kathiawar Peninsula or for Sonda and Savantvad the entire Mughal Empire was not much more than a fleeting episode; it seems faintly absurd to term Savantvad a Mughal “successor state” when the kingdom had been part of the Mughal Empire for a mere seven years! Again, Kutch had never been part of the Mughal Empire all along and yet had all the best characteristics of the “successor state.”

Two of these “successor states” and the most successful—Travancore and Mysore—had never been part of the Mughal Empire. Mysore under Haidar Ali—the most cited case—was still a successor state to the Vodayyar of Mysore and not to the Mughal Empire. As to the other habitually quoted instance, Travancore: it owed virtually nothing to the Mughal political tradition at all. Travancore was only a successor state to Travancore. Furthermore, other instances of successor states, such as the regime of the Nawabs in Ahmadabad—or for that matter in Surat—showed none of the assumed traits of the successor states. Here the tendency was toward a steady devolution of power rather than toward centralization. This tradition once again imposes a notion of an Indian union—equated with the Mughal Empire—upon the galaxy of kingdoms, kinglets, and chieftaincies making up the heterogeneous Indian political system of the eighteenth century. There is, in addition,

a major risk of losing sight of what was genuinely new in the successor states by focusing too much on what may have made them to “successors” to the Mughal Empire.

There is one final and perhaps fatal flaw to the whole notion: this regime of successor states supposedly only arose in—and the term is mostly only applied to—the late eighteenth century. Yet this was a period in which Indian states scrambled to respond as effectively as possible to the British military threat, or they were menaced by states sponsored by the British or the French. The successor states simply did not have the luxury to run a more decentralized regime any longer. In addition, there were more than the British as threats. Marthanda Varma had to rush through an administrative centralization since he was attacked by the VOC and later on by the Marathas and the British, while similarly the Savants of Vad were forced to centralize because they were under Portuguese attack. States that did not become more like the military-fiscal states would either be victimized by their neighbors who did—such as the Keladi Nayyakas and the Kalyasri raja by Mysore or the Signati by Travancore—or they ran the risk of slipping into the position of European protectorates, as in the cases of the Nawabs of Arcot or the Maharajas of Cochin.

If the concept of successor states already has major problems for the Indian situation from which it is derived, one should be doubly cautious applying the theory beyond its temporal and geographic limits. Nadir’s regime—as I have argued at length in this chapter—was not a successor state, but rather a radically different regime marked by a revolutionary departure from the Safavid past and the Ottoman Empire still existed.

Nonetheless, we have observed unmistakable parallels in the development of state and trade in the Arabian seas in this period, and to that extent there is definitely something to the notion of successor states. One tendency manifested throughout the Arabian seas is the spread of tax-farming parallel to the rise of vigorous portfolio capitalism. Again, I already pointed to increasingly sophisticated financial techniques, which were perceived as a potential revenue cornucopia by governments ranging from the al-Qasimi Imamate to that of the Gaekwar. Governments widely stood indebted to merchants from Baghdad—via Bukhara—to Cochin.

Yet far too many studies of Asia tend to be state-centric; it is simply assumed that the state caused economic growth (or by the same token, decline). To be sure, the Indian sources themselves, and the chronicles