**SHOWING OFF.** Indian princes had long held grand state receptions in their durbars, or courts. But when Britain assumed power in India, durbars like the one pictured here became occasions for displaying British grandeur. British authorities took advantage of one draybar to proclaim Queen Victoria Empress of India in January 1877.

**INDIA UNDER THE RAJ**

The India in which Ramabai grew up was emerging into the modern world. In fact, the very name “India” was new, signifying things the people of India had never before known. The many cultures, kingdoms, and villages on the subcontinent—some having existed from earliest antiquity—had at no time been unified under a single system of government. Over the centuries, new peoples and tribes had entered the continent, mostly from the northwest, as military invaders, migrants, merchants, and mendicants. Domains of different size and strength had formed and fallen, expanded and crumbled, merged and split. What had been left behind was a rich mosaic of diverse cultures.

Europeans had also come from the sea. During the century before Ramabai’s birth, the entire subcontinent had been brought together and consolidated under a single over-arching political system. Yet this system, known as “India,” the “Indian Empire,” or the “Raj,” had never been solely the handiwork of foreigners. From its fragile beginnings in the 17th century, this had been a joint venture, a collaborative experiment in which indigenous elite communities played pivotal roles. Without Indian manpower, Indian money, and Indian methods there could never have been an Indian Empire. Just as some of India’s merchants had helped to construct the East India Company’s commercial empire, so some military manpower enabled the Company to extend its imperial rule far and wide.

By the time Ramabai’s father left Pune in 1818, armies of the Company numbered as many as 300,000 Indian sepoys (soldiers), and its Raj had expanded over the whole subcontinent. One year before Ramabai’s birth in 1858, sepoys in North India rose up in a Great Mutiny (or Revolt). The East India Company was abolished and a more distant and alien British Crown took its place, with Queen Victoria being declared Empress of India. By then, the sway of the Raj stretched across the Indian Ocean from the shores of Arabia, Persia, and Africa to Burma, Malaya, and beyond.

Twenty years later, when Ramabai arrived in Calcutta, new forces were challenging the Raj. Challenges came from within, from the very same elite communities that had helped to construct the Raj in the first place—those indispensable sinews of manpower and money and method that had made it possible. Challenges came from those who, through intellectual curiosity and dexterity, had not only demanded modern educational institutions but also gained a remarkable mastery over the English language, channels of communication, science, and technology.

The aspiring and affluent within British India were professional people—a “New India” of enlightened journalists, lawyers, physicians, teachers, bureaucrats, and even some of the landed gentry. These forward-looking elites saw themselves as “nationalists” and the “true Indians,” as distinct from the tiny numbers of Europeans (Britons) who occupied the highest seats in government and whose colonial society was increasingly perceived as “alien” and “foreign.”

Ramabai soon counted herself among India’s ardent nationalists.

Adapted from Robert Eric Frykenberg’s Introduction to Pandita Ramabai’s America (Eerdmans, 2003). Used by permission.