During August of 1873 Captain T.C.S. Speedy, sometime lieutenant in 10th Punjab Regiment, recruited some 200 Sikhs and Pathans in the Punjab on behalf of the Mantri of Larut, a petty chieftain in Perak (Malaya), who planned to use them to subdue the growing power of the Chinese clans in the state. The next year, with the advance of British authority into Malaya after the Pangkor Engagement, Speedy was appointed assistant resident at Larut, and his force was taken into government service as the Perak Armed Police. Subsequently reorganized as the Perak Sikhs, and then, after the creation of the Federated Malay States in 1896, as the Malay States Guides, this force remained the premier body of armed police in Malaya until 1919, when it was disbanded. In Hong Kong as well, the late 1860s and early 1870s saw the recruitment of Sikhs for the colonial police. Together with Punjabi Muslims, these Sikhs constituted the predominant element in the colony’s police until the mid-20th century. In 1922, there were 435 Indians in the Hong Kong police; and 774 by 1939. The same tale of recruitment and policing can be told of the Chinese Treaty Ports, of the Straits Settlements, and, with the British conquest after 1890 of East and Central Africa, of Nyasaland, Kenya, Uganda, and Somaliland. By the end of the nineteenth century, across a great arc ranging from Zomba to Tientsin, from Zanzibar to Singapore, Indian, predominantly Sikh, contingents patrolled and policed the British Empire. For Africans and Asians, the turbaned Sikh, as much as the Englishman with his sun helmet, made visible their colonial subjugation.

This essay asks why and how Indians were recruited for service in colonial police forces; why Punjabis, above all Sikhs, were singled out for such recruitment; and how this transport not only of men, but of the shaping ideas and institutions of the late Victorian Raj to colonial
territories around the Indian Ocean, produced a distinctive imperial policing strategy connecting India with the colonies, from the 1870s to the First World War. Such a deployment, as we shall see, makes clear the limits of sovereignty, and of the bounded nation-state, in an imperial world. For Indians, the empire opened up opportunities that ranged far beyond the subcontinent, and for many encouraged a vision, usually unfulfilled, of themselves as citizens of a beneficent empire as well as of a putative Indian nation. For the British, policing the boundaries of the sovereign state was always subordinate to the larger enterprise of extending, and maintaining, imperial authority, for the empire alone gave Britain its predominance around the globe.

Singapore and Malaya

We can conveniently begin with Tristram Charles Sawyer Speedy (1836–1910). Born in Meerut, son of James Speedy, a lieutenant in the 3rd Regiment of Foot, Tristram Speedy was commissioned into the Indian Army in 1854. By 1860, posted first in Meerut then in Peshawar, Speedy had risen to the position of adjutant in the 10th Punjab Regiment. In that year, restless, he gave up his commission, and commenced a life of wandering adventure. This took him first to the court of King Theodore of Abyssinia, where he also served for a time as British vice-consul in Eritrea; then to New Zealand, where he enlisted in the local militia fighting the Maori; and ultimately back to Abyssinia, when Lord Napier summoned him to act as interpreter and adviser for the 1867–68 campaign that was to culminate in the siege of the fortress of Magdala and the death of King Theodore. Returning to India, Speedy secured the post of district superintendent of police in Sitapur (Oudh). In 1872 he moved on to the Straits, as superintendent of police in Penang. After little more than a year, in July 1873, he resigned this post to take up service with the Mantri of Larut. A month later he was on his way to Lahore.² For a man like Speedy, obviously, the boundaries of individual states had little meaning. On the edges of the empire, as well as within it, opportunities for the ambitious were limitless.

Speedy’s recruiting strategy was simple enough. Returning to an area, the Punjab, with which he was familiar from his army days, he signed up, within a few weeks, some 200 men; some were residents of Wazirabad and Gujranwala, others Pathans and men from the hill tribes. As the district superintendent of police in Lahore later wrote of Speedy’s activities, ‘He would not enlist residents of towns or cities, but villagers only. Each man received one rupee on enlistment as bounty,