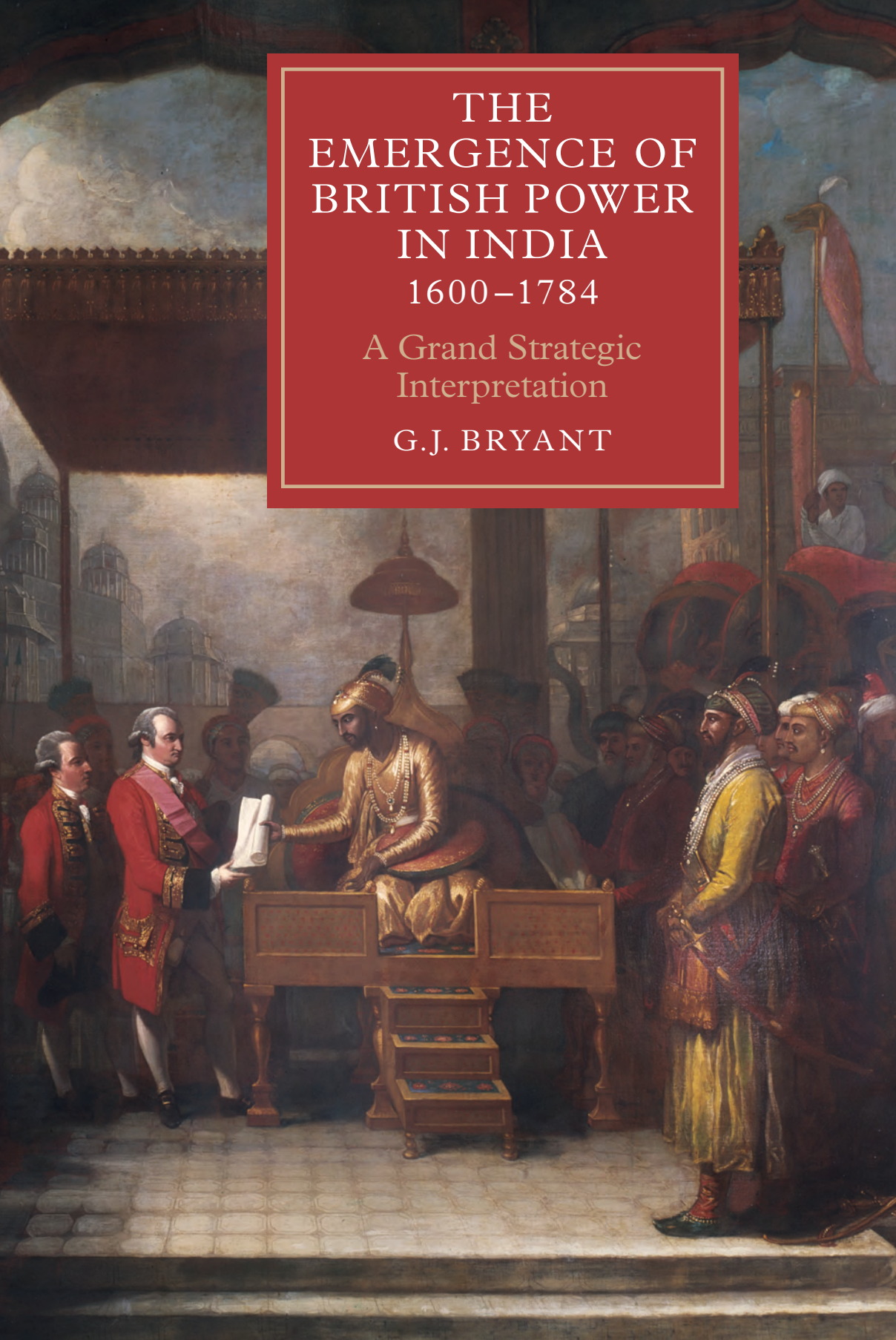
THE EMERGENCE OF BRITISH POWER IN INDIA 1600–1784

A Grand Strategic Interpretation

G.J. BRYANT



The Emergence of British Power in India 1600–1784

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A Grand Strategic Interpretation

G. J. Bryant

THE BOYDELL PRESS

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for her selfless support and forbearance
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PREFACE
Conceptual and Methodological Approach

War is nothing else but the pursuit of politics by other means. (Clausewitz)[1]

Scholarly research on the early political and military history of the British in India has been relatively neglected of late. Perhaps this is because any serious British writer on the subject has to tread warily through a critical minefield for fear of attracting accusations of being orientalist, triumphalist, militarist or determinist, or all four, in their work.[2] Or perhaps it is because an analysis of the grand strategic aspects (the formulation of political aims and their implementation by peaceful and/or military means) of the origins of the Raj is best approached and analysed by rooting it in a narrative sequence of events and the reality of circumstance as viewed by individuals, hovering just above the fractal reality of personal and group experience and reaction. This way, form will emerge from a cumulative consideration of the significance of the particular, rather than by imposing a more fashionable structuralist framework on events based on generalist social scientific concepts – not that the latter lacks

1 E. M. Earle, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler* (Princeton, 1961), p. 105.

2 Philip Mason, Tony Heathcote, J. P. Lawford, Sir Jadunath Sarkar and Lt Gen. S. L. Menezes have produced some good general histories of the (British) Indian Army; and there have been a few specialist monographs on the earlier period: Callahan, Barat and Nightingale. One has to rely on Orme's pioneering eighteenth-century work, and Fortescue's, Wilson's and Malleson's accounts written during the Raj for detailed campaign histories. P. J. Stern's *The Company State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India* (Oxford, 2011) is largely focused on the period before the one mainly treated here and is more concerned with the evolution and significance of the legal/constitutional status of the Company than its executive grand strategy. And Kaushik Roy's *Oxford Companion to Modern Warfare in India: From the Eighteenth Century to Present Times* (Oxford, New Delhi, 2009) primarily concentrates on comparative studies of armies and methods of fighting in India, as does my 'Asymmetric Warfare: The British Experience in Eighteenth-Century India', in *The Journal of Military History* 68 (April 2004), pp. 431–69. More analytically, C. A. Bayly's 'Returning the British to South Asian History: The Limits of Colonial Hegemony', in *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (New Delhi, 1998) establishes a general context. And P. J. Marshall, in 'British Expansion in India in the Eighteenth Century: A Historical Revision', *History* LX (February 1975), examines the economic incentives for the birth of the Raj. This book aims to complement the latter from the political-military angle.

efficacy in suggesting lines of enquiry and providing eventual interpretative perspectives. Nonetheless, getting to the nub and a deeper understanding of the evolution and reality of grand strategy in early British India is best advanced, in my view, by evaluating the roles, opinions and contributions of only a small number of individuals at the top of government (mostly in the East India Company's three Indian Presidency Councils and Committees (i.e. governing bodies) of Bombay, Madras and Calcutta) since it was they who developed policy and made the crucial decisions, supervised in a weak and general way by the Directors in London with intermittent interjections from Westminster. So, the evolving grand strategy analysed in this book will be largely that of the British viewed from and through their perspectives and perceptions of the significance of events as they affected their developing commercial and political position in India.

Liberal quotations from the writings of these Company men, at the head of each chapter and in the text, serve to give an idea of the themes to be dealt with and to convey a flavour of the debates and diversity of opinion amongst them as they gradually began to comprehend and respond to the novel political challenges and dangers that faced the English East India Company in India from 1744 when Britain and France – the other major European player in India at this time – joined opposite sides in the War of the Austrian Succession and extended their conflict to the East and, again, twelve years later, in the Seven Years War and, finally, in the American Revolutionary War in 1778. At the same time, they also reveal how the British came to appreciate the opportunities opening up before them in their relations with the primary Indian states to place the power and wealth of the Company on a higher political plane on the subcontinent. But Company governors in London and, to a lesser extent, their servants in India, also came to recognise that their success in this distracted them from fulfilling its continuing primary commercial purposes, ratcheted up threats to their security in India and generated controversy in Government and Parliament over whether the Company should continue to be allowed to control this expanding political and military power (which some later began to label 'empire'), because it would impinge on Britain's relations with other European countries and affect the British Government's emerging perception of itself in the later eighteenth century as a global grand strategic power.

Modern work on seventeenth/eighteenth-century India has tended to focus on general socio-economic developments on the subcontinent and their nexus with political change from an Indian perspective. In the longer chronological progression to the present day, as an independent India marches into the first rank of world powers and the influence of the British Raj in India diminishes and retreats into the past, this is surely justified. And it has performed a useful service in dismantling the old imperialist interpretation that the slow disintegration of Mughal imperial authority after 1700 brought in its train not only

political upheaval but also economic regression, moral decline and a loss of political confidence from which it was rescued by the British. Nonetheless, if only by omission by modern scholars, it would distort our understanding of India's history at the grand strategic level to airbrush out or minimise the importance of the increasing impact the British had on the political and military history of India after 1750. This book is intended to make a contribution to our understanding of the early years of the violent intrusion of the British into the political affairs of India, in terms of the evolution of their grand strategy and of the creation of the instrument (the British Indian Army) that carried it out and the power that it generated.

Grand strategy ultimately relates to and answers the fundamental Clausewitzian question: at any given time and in any given circumstances, should a state pursue its foreign policy positions and goals, if they conflict with those of other states, through peace (i.e. diplomacy) or war?[3] Of course, in practice, the choice is never as abrupt or stark as this formulation implies, and often diplomacy and war go hand in hand. Theoretically, when stimulating, or being confronted by, a dispute with another state, there is a rising scale of peaceful but threatening options that are open to a government (which might be explored over extensive periods of time) before taking (if at all) the ultimately drastic course of going to war to resolve it. These mount in their serious implications from the base of stable peaceful relations, reflected in the simple mutual recognition of the legitimacy of each other's existing sovereign political status, physical boundaries and interests (*the norm for almost all states and their relationships for most of the time*) signified by the practice of ongoing formal and courteous peaceful diplomatic intercourse conducted through permanent reciprocal resident agencies or special envoys.

[3] The term 'grand strategy' did not exist in the eighteenth-century political lexicon and the concept was not formally recognised under any other formulation by contemporary statesmen, soldiers and sailors. Nonetheless, they still faced the problems of achieving policy goals through strategic means, be they political, economic or military, and we may call the challenges and their attempted solutions 'grand strategic'. However, the absence at the time of a conceptual framework and theory, embodied in an institutional structure and practice, which integrated policy discussions and diplomatic or forceful executive options and actions as a continuous process in relations with other states, through peace and war and out again, undoubtedly hindered the devising of optimum grand strategies by governments. The Directors and the governors of the East India Company certainly wrestled with grand strategic issues, and this book will explore their growing recognition and understanding of their nature as they became conscious of their expanding political power in India between 1744 and 1784, and attempted to create an institutional framework to deal with them effectively. The term 'grand strategy' is generally seen as 'amoral' (though there are critics of this position), but it nonetheless has to factor into its calculations the impact of the contextual contemporary moral attitudes, accepted legal frameworks and conventions for international relations ruling at the time.

However, if the need arises for a state to fend off threats to its interests or if it develops a desire to enhance its own situation and power at the expense of another power, statements of increasing firmness and belligerence in diplomatic exchanges might be made, progressing from veiled threats of possibly breaking off diplomatic relations and carrying these into effect, implementing specific political and economic sanctions, and on to brandishing its armed forces ('coercive diplomacy'[4]) until finally, a threshold is, or is not, crossed into war. The escalating progression of confrontation towards war may be short-circuited by precipitate belligerent action by one of the parties, or it may stop at any point if the instigator decides more extreme measures are not worth the risk or their bluff has been called, or some kind of mutually acceptable (but sometimes temporary) resolution to the problem is achieved. If, however, the threshold is crossed into formal declarations of war or aggressive military action, there may again be choices between the levels of intensity at which the war is prosecuted. Initial restraint (for example, the marching and countermarching of armies or flourishing of concentrated naval might close to the adversary) may signal that the instigator is still open to a resolution of the dispute through diplomacy without resorting to all-out war. Alternatively, a more aggressive strategy might be pursued, involving military action aiming to gain victories on the battlefield to reduce the relative power of the adversary and occupy his territory, which will provide it with bargaining counters to pressurise the opponent to come to favourable terms. Finally, if the enemy remains recalcitrant and unresponsive to diplomatic démarches to settle the dispute, successful all-out efforts to destroy his ability and will to resist would enable the victor to dictate the form of the peace, at least for the time being.

A state might prefer to go to war than continue along the diplomatic path because, if totally victorious, this should deliver all its policy objectives, whereas a diplomatic resolution usually requires give and take on both sides. However, the risks and costs involved in choosing the option of war are usually greater than going down the diplomatic path. War is also often less controllable and predictable than diplomacy in its progress and outcomes. This is because the relative power, on both sides, of the variables involved in the prosecution of a war – the quality of a state's armed forces and their commanders, its resources and economic strength, the efficiency of its administrative infrastructure to deliver logistical support, its political determination and stamina to continue the conflict, the possibility of intervention by third powers after the war has started and so on – are more difficult to evaluate in combination *in advance*, and are less under the control of the participants once the war starts. Chance can play a far more significant role in war; a general's

4 G. A. Craig and A. L. George, *Force and Statecraft: Diplomatic Problems of Our Time* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 189–204.

mistakes in a campaign can have a catastrophic impact on the outcome for his side, whereas diplomatic errors are rarely so damaging.

Because of this unpredictability, wars often fail to progress as expected; in which case, the war aims and demands of the participants will usually change and grow either more or less ambitious. Wars, if they go wrong for the instigator, are also more difficult to walk away from than diplomatic negotiations without significant political or material loss. Finally, even if a state is triumphant on the battlefield, the material and political costs might greatly exceed the value of the gains. Diplomacy is a much more flexible, controllable, cheaper and less risky course; and morally more acceptable to the public and neutral opinion, which can be of political significance to the opposing sides. So it is the more normal way for states to implement their grand strategy and resolve disputes, with war as a last resort if the issue is deemed serious enough in relation to their perceived interests and if there is a reasonable chance of succeeding along this route. Ultimately, states will usually end a war through diplomatic negotiation or diktat; and, indeed, 'backstairs' diplomatic contacts between the combatants are usually maintained throughout the war. These are the options open to a proactive power.

A state that is content with the status quo but finds itself subject to the aggressive attention of a more powerful neighbour has fewer options.[5] If it is wise, it will have sought to create proportionate *deterrent* power against attack by building up its armed forces and arming itself through alliances with other states with similar objectives. But, if this nonetheless fails, what can it do? Seeking a solution through diplomacy is obviously preferable, perhaps trying to involve other, friendly states. If the choice comes down to either making substantial concessions or risking war, such a state might, though possibly weaker, still choose military resistance, at least for a time. If the discrepancy in power is not too great there may be a chance of successfully repulsing the attack or at least reducing its strength and therefore the extent of the concessions that might have to be made in a peace settlement. The unquantifiable variables mentioned above may turn out to favour the defending power to a greater degree than expected. Also, because, strategically, the defence on the battlefield usually offers an intrinsic advantage over the offence, this might

5 Interestingly, by 1765 the Company-dominated government of Bengal–Bihar was such a passive power, content with the local status quo, whereas their colleagues at Madras, and later Bombay, could be classed as potentially aggressive, wanting to enhance their power and wealth, by force if necessary. Ironically, the Company's military strength in Bengal–Bihar was far greater than was needed for its defensive stance, whereas neither Madras nor Bombay had sufficient force or resources to realise their expansionary ambitions in the later 1760s and 1770s and had to rely on Calcutta to rescue them from their attempts to expand their territorial power (see Chapters 6 and 8 below).

delay the military progress of the aggressor sufficiently to force it to temporise, or for the defender's diplomats to secure the support of other powers.[6]

Those in government who are responsible for formulating and executing grand strategy, and for coordinating the elements that contribute to its success, not only have to deal with specific crises. They should always be keeping under continual review (i.e. in peace and war) as circumstances change in an evolving configuration of international relations, the ongoing appropriateness of their country's foreign policy goals and priorities (i.e. assessing their importance and judging whether they are realisable and at what cost), political posture and relations and commitments to other states, while looking to the readiness of their own 'defence' forces to act effectively in an emergency, as well as to ensure that they have the necessary financial resources to back them as appropriate. This may require the political leaders to examine, perhaps enhancing, the effectiveness of their consultative framework, procedures and chain of command, involving the intercommunication of politicians, civilian advisors, diplomatic staff and leaders of the armed forces in their deliberations. The executive leadership may then more effectively and continuously implement its grand strategy on the basis of intelligence reports, comparative assessments of the strength, policies and intentions of real or potential enemies and friends, including their military, naval, economic and political capacity (internal support for government policy and the likelihood of them securing allies), and the relative vulnerability of their geophysical situation. Finally, a speculative appreciation should also be made of the competence, determination and primary aims of the leaderships (civil and military) of all the relevant leading states.

The East India Company's authorities, throughout the period discussed in this book, wrestled ineffectually with these challenges, exacerbated by the time lapses in communication between Britain and the East, of establishing a management structure which could develop and direct an informed, reasoned, coherent and clear-sighted grand strategy to deal with the unstable political situation (which the British and French India companies were partly responsible for creating) which arose in mid-eighteenth-century India with the progressive decline of the Mughal Empire.

This is the political context, conceptual framework and the analytical and interpretive tools that will inform this examination of the evolution of British grand strategy during the years that saw the beginnings of the Raj (i.e. up to 1784). The book will present and analyse the narrative of political

6 P. Kennedy, 'Grand Strategy in War and Peace: Toward a Broader Definition', in P. Kennedy, ed., *Grand Strategies in War and Peace* (New Haven, 1991); B. Brodie, *War and Politics* (London, 1972); Sir Charles Webster, *The Art and Practice of Diplomacy* (London, 1961); E. N. Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Harvard, 1987); G. H. Snyder and P. Diesing, *Conflict among Nations: Bargaining, Decision Making, and System Structure in International Crises* (Princeton, 1977).

events of interstate relations on the subcontinent as they affected the British and mainly from their perspective and through their assumptions, which the French and the Indian princes, on occasion, might have seen as distorted or wrong. Although the British and French East India companies were not states as such, because of their distance from the scene of the action their sponsoring governments had given them state-like powers in the East to conduct relations with each other and various Indian princes, but also to factor in the impact of the growing Anglo-French animosity in Europe and overseas that characterised the mid eighteenth century. Between 1744 and 1784 they had to deal with major dynamic grand strategic challenges and crises in India, unlike any they had experienced before, and to devise appropriate responses to deal with them; in other words to behave like states. But the interests and aims of the Directors in Europe (especially in the British Company) were narrower and simpler than those of the governments of most states (i.e. to operate within a secure commercial framework and maximise their trading profits). They were not glory-hunters and were reluctant to pursue territorial conquest, even if they might make money out of it, because they were not equipped to administer it and empire was outside their mindset. And the political risks at the time, both in India and Europe, were much more variable and difficult to assess than the slow, measured processes of trade with which they were familiar. Given the difficulties created by their distance from India (it took at least a year to exchange news, views and orders), the Directors of the companies in Europe had, reluctantly, to empower their agents in the East to take major initiatives involving war and peace, conditioned only by general policy guidelines. But they were hindered (especially in the British case) by inappropriate consultative and executive structures and procedures laid down a century earlier, better adapted to handling commercial matters than political developments, which sometimes resulted in a more intrusive intervention into India's political affairs than the Directors often wanted.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Huw Bowen and Professor Peter Marshall for their inspiration and advice in writing this book.

ABBREVIATIONS

BL: British Library

Citations will prefix document references from the Library with:

Add. MS: for documents from the general collections relating to India, the East India Company or its servants, mainly personal papers (especially those of Warren Hastings and Lord Macartney). These were held by the British Library before the holdings of the old India Office Library (formerly known as the 'Oriental and India Office Collections', now the 'Asia, Pacific, and Africa Collections') containing, mainly, the official archives of the East India Company, were incorporated with them in the new British Library to form one collection relating to Britain's association with India. References to the latter records retain their former reference numbers and are cited in the footnotes with the following prefixes:

P: proceedings of the East India Company's Presidency Councils or, mainly, their Select or Secret Committees, in India, dealing with political or military matters, at Fort St George ('FSG', 'FSGP'), Madras; Fort William ('FW', 'FWP'), Calcutta; or Bombay ('Bb.', 'BbP').

Ct: Court of Directors (the Company's senior governing body) at its headquarters in Leadenhall Street, City of London.

E: correspondence between the Councils/Committees and the Directors.

para.(s): paragraph(s) in official Company letters between London and India.

MSS Eur.: miscellaneous papers of European persons associated with the East India Company.

Home Misc.: Miscellaneous papers relating to the East India Company's business.

OV: Papers of Robert Orme, Company civil servant at Madras in the 1750s.

Bod. Lib.: Bodleian Library, Oxford

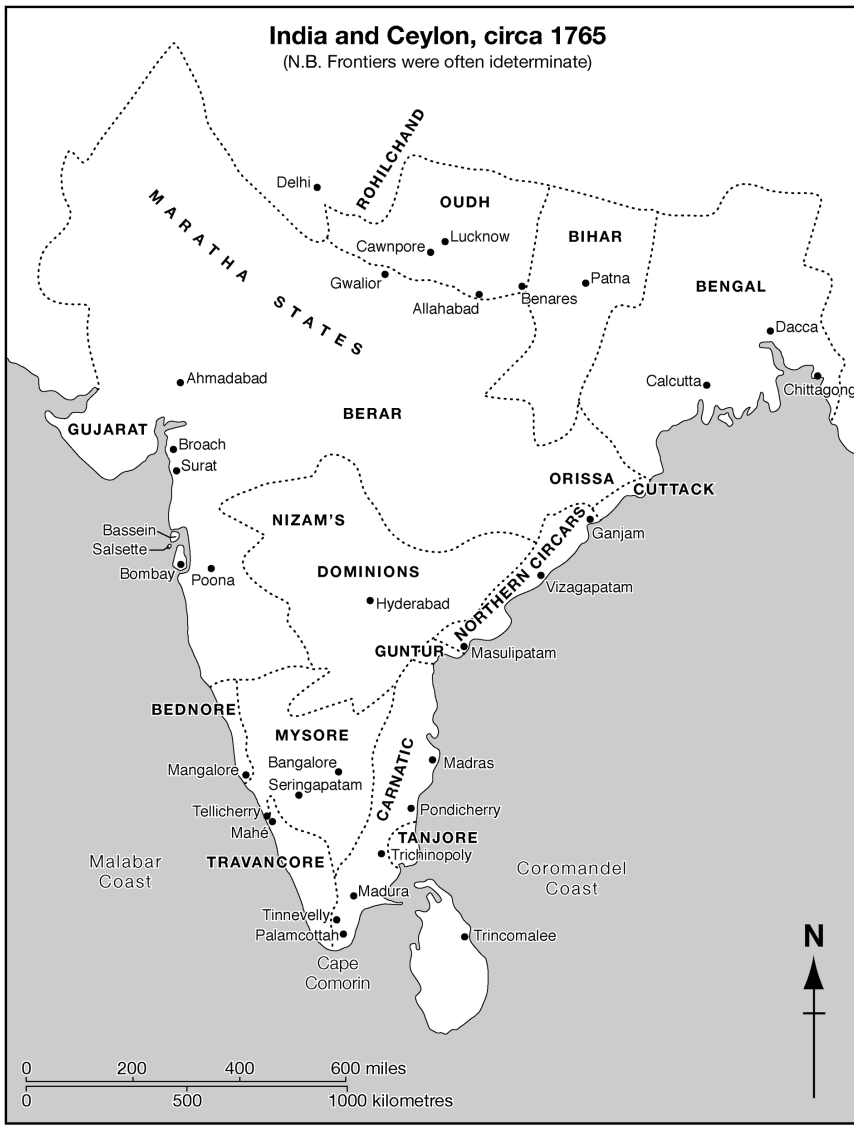
Nat. Lib. Scot.: National Library of Scotland

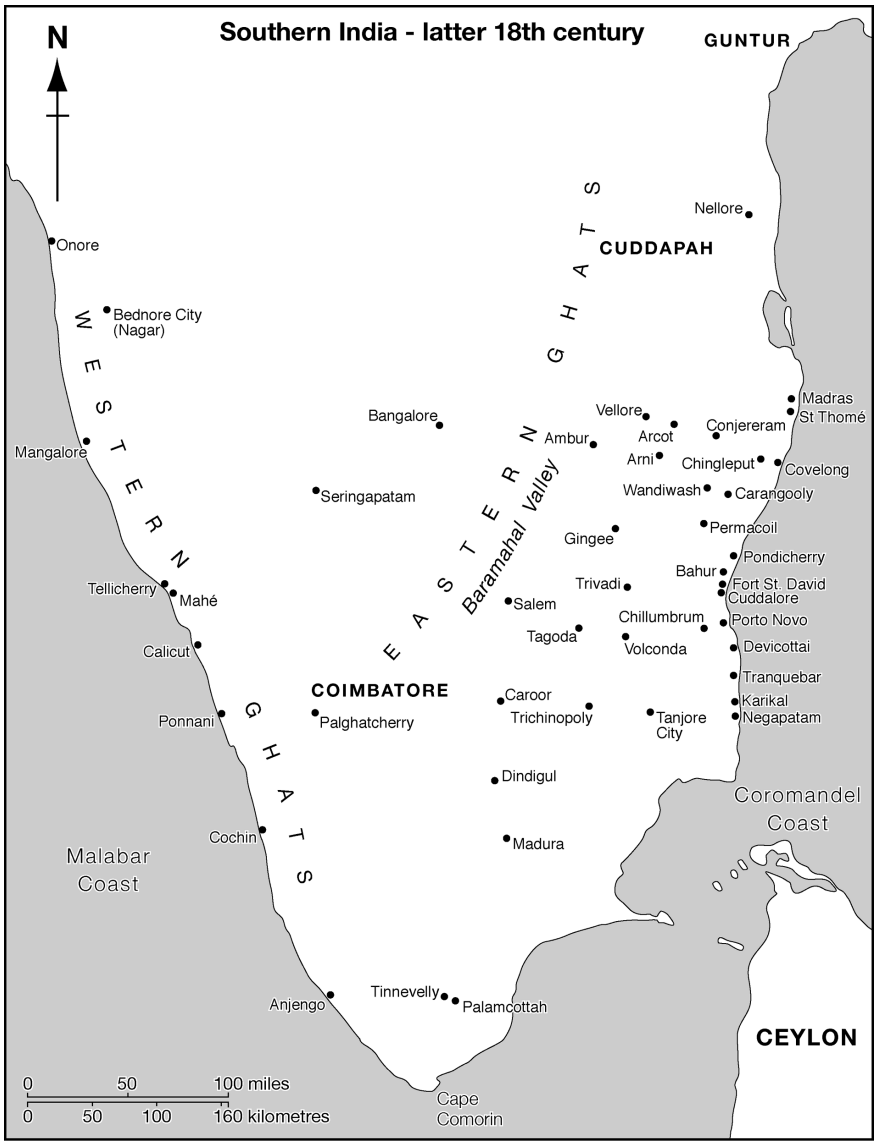
SRO: Scottish Record Office

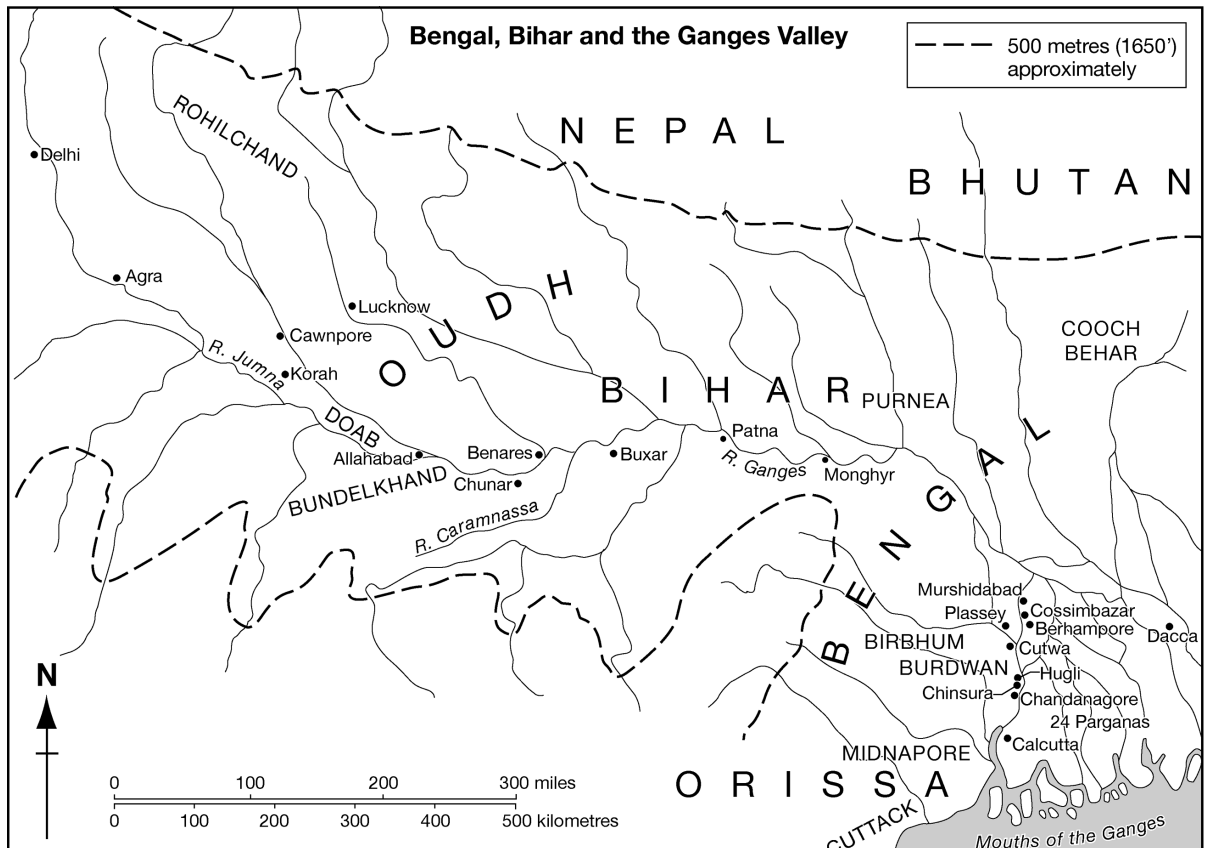
Nat. Lib. Wales: National Library of Wales

Indian Place Names

Throughout this book, to avoid confusion when quoting contemporary documents or subsequent secondary sources, Indian place names will usually be rendered as the British knew them at the time.


India and Ceylon, circa 1765
(N.B. Frontiers were often ideterminate)
ROHILCHAND
Delhi
OUDH
Lucknow
Cawnpore
BIHAR
Patna
Gwalior
Allahabad
Benares
BENGAL
Dacca
MARATHA STATES
Ahmadabad
Calcutta
Chittagong
BERAR
GUJARAT
Broach
Surat
ORISSA
CUTTACK
NIZAM'S
DOMINIONS
Bassein
Salsette
Bombay
Poona
Ganjam
NORTHERN CIRCARS
Vizagapatam
Hyderabad
GUNTUR
Masulipatam
BEDNORE
MYSORE
CARNATIC
Madras
Mangalore
Bangalore
Seringapatam
Tellicherry
Mahé
Pondicherry
TANJORE
Trichinopoly
Malabar Coast
TRAVANCORE
Coromandel Coast
Madura
Tinnevelly
Palamcottah
Trincomalee
Cape Comorin
N
0 200 400 600 miles
0 500 1000 kilometres


Southern India - latter 18th century
N
GUNTUR
CUDDAPAH
Nellore
EASTERN GHATS
Onore
Bednore City
(Nagar)
WESTERN GHATS
Mangalore
Bangalore
Vellore
Madras
St Thomé
Ambur
Arcot
Conjereram
Arni
Chingleput
Covelong
Wandiwash
Carangooly
Seringapatam
Baramahal Valley
Gingee
Permacoil
Pondicherry
Bahur
Fort St. David
Cuddalore
Trivadi
Tellicherry
Mahé
Salem
Chillumbrum
Porto Novo
Tagoda
Volconda
Calicut
Devicottai
Tranquebar
COIMBATORE
Caroor
Karikal
Ponnani
Palghatcherry
Trichinopoly
Tanjore
City
Negapatam
Dindigul
Coromandel
Coast
Cochin
Madura
Malabar
Coast
Tinnevelly
Anjengo
Palamcottah
CEYLON
0
50
100 miles
0
50
100
160 kilometres
Cape
Comorin


Bengal, Bihar and the Ganges Valley
500 metres (1650') approximately
NEPAL
BHUTAN
ROHILCHAND
Delhi
Agra
Lucknow
Cawnpore
Korah
R. Jumna
DOAB
OUDH
BIHAR
PURNEA
COOCH BEHAR
Allahabad
Benares
Chunar
Buxar
Patna
R. Ganges
Monghyr
BUNDELKHAND
R. Caramnassa
BENGAL
Murshidabad
Plassey
Cossimbazar
Berhampore
Dacca
BIRBHUM
Cutwa
BURDWAN
Hugli
Chinsura
Chandanagore
24 Parganas
Calcutta
MIDNAPORE
ORISSA
CUTTACK
Mouths of the Ganges
N
0 100 200 300 miles
0 100 200 300 400 500 kilometres

INTRODUCTION

The Early Years and the Evolving Grand Strategic Reality, 1600–1784

> Our business is trade not warr.
>
> Directors of the East India Company to Madras, 1677[1]

Dazzled Victorians saw the nineteenth-century Indian Raj as the jewel that gave lustre to the British imperial Crown, its defence secondary only to that of the homeland in grand strategic considerations. But the Raj had not originated in the customary 'heroic' and celebrated manner of some other empires – the realisation of the dreams of conquering soldier-statesmen such as Shih Huang Ti, Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Babur or Napoleon; or the 'lucky' creation of adventurers such as Cortez or Pizzaro; or, again, the product of steady accretion by dynamic political systems such as Rome or the Ottomans; all in search of glory, land, power, wealth or converts. Instead, the foundations of the Raj were laid between 1750 and 1784 by a trading corporation (the English East India Company, chartered by Queen Elizabeth in 1600), initially as a reaction to a perceived political and military threat to its commercial position in India by the French after 1748 in the wake of the War of the Austrian Succession. For 150 years the Company had focused on making a profit in Eastern marketplaces as cheaply and therefore usually as peaceably and politically unobtrusively as possible. Now, out of its depth in a new political and military milieu in India, it found itself engaged in a form of armed diplomacy that eventually led it to engage in an indirect military conflict to counter the French (when a formal peace existed between their sponsoring states) who had linked up with some local Indian princes to promote their joint political interests. Later, the Company more knowingly came to see India as a possible source of local wealth to pay for its exports to Britain, but only by the assertion of substantial territorial control and political dominance over other princes, upheld by an increasingly powerful private

[1] Court of Directors [Ct] to Fort St George, Madras [FSG], 12 December 1677, in E. W. C. Sandes, *The Military Engineer in India*, 2 vols (Chatham, 1933), vol. I, p. 2.

army (four-fifths or more of whose recruits were Indian) that by 1784 had become bigger than the peacetime British Army. From a few under-manned and under-equipped garrisons scattered around the periphery of the Indian subcontinent in 1750, the Company's Presidency governments at Madras, Calcutta and Bombay, thirty-four years later, had built up field forces capable of successfully taking on the major Indian armies and, with the aid of squadrons of the Royal Navy and detachments of the British Army, had at the end of the American Revolutionary War successfully contested with the French to be the pre-eminent European power in South Asia where, thereafter, if it chose, it might try to become the new hegemon in succession to the declining Mughal Empire. This study, then, is not only about the obvious emergence of British power in India and how it came about, but also the awakening consciousness in the minds of Company servants of the profound political implications of this phenomenon and the opportunities it afforded some to get richer sooner than by engaging in private trade, to others of playing at politics and war on a grand scale, and to others, again, of the responsibilities the Company was taking on in the governance of millions of people from radically different cultures religions and races.

The Company did not formally represent the state before 1784, but it had successfully argued from the beginning that, since it was out on its own in the East, without any British Government support until the mid eighteenth century, it should have the right to represent itself diplomatically with Indian ('country') powers and rival European companies, to arm its ships and to raise a few soldiers (in reality these were poorly armed European and indigenous guards) for the defence of its warehouses and goods in India. It has recently been suggested that the origins of the Company's supposed militant imperialist ambitions, increasingly manifest after 1750, enabled by its quasi state-like status and powers, date back to the later seventeenth century.[2] I believe this ignores a major difference in the Company's outlook, grand strategic ethos and means between the earlier period and its tentative, and at first reactive but nonetheless substantial, intrusion into Indian affairs which began in the later eighteenth century, and also, even more, with the assured territorial expansion that followed at the end of the century and into the new one after the British Government assumed overall supervision of the Company's political enterprise in 1784. The alternative assertion of a continuity of Company militancy and imperial ambitions from long before 1750 (varying in impact only in terms of means and opportunity) is supported by examples of early, undeniably belligerent, declarations from particularly

2 C. A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (New Delhi, 1998), pp. 238–75; Ian Bruce Watson, *Foundation for Empire: English Private Trade in India 1659–1760* (New Delhi, 1980), pp. 3, 7–8 and 23; P. J. Stern, *The Company State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India* (Oxford, 2011), pp. vii–viii and 9–10.

strong-minded, but probably maverick, Company personalities such as its Chairman, Sir Josiah Child, in the 1680s and its governors in India, Gerald Aungier (1676) and Thomas Pitt (1701) at Madras.[3] Child and Aungier may have been encouraged in their belligerent and vaguely expansive attitudes by the more Company-friendly Restoration regime (the Directors secured a new charter in 1683 giving them clearer authority than before to wage war in the East should they feel the need[4]), the greater financial solidity of the Company and the allegedly more grasping demands of the local Mughal authorities.[5] The Directors (circa 1686) wrote to their agents in India at the time in aggressive (though still limited) terms:

> tho we prepared for and resolve to enter into a warr wth ye Mogull (being necessitated thereunto) our ultimate end is peace, for as we have never done it, soe our natures are averse to bloodshed and Rapine, wch usually attend most just warrs, but we have noe remedy left, but either to desert our Trade, or we must draw the Sword his Majty hath Intrusted us wth to vindicate the Rights and Honor of the English Nation in India.[6]

The Company was also seriously troubled at this time by the operations of freelance English merchants ('interlopers') breaking its constitutional monopoly of the Euro-Eastern trade and wanted a firmer legal base in India to challenge them as well as to discipline its own unruly servants.[7] In 1686–8 Child launched a small, ill-judged, naval and military expedition to India to coerce the Mughal Government to confirm the Company in its assumed freedom of trade in the Empire and unfettered sovereignty within three of its small coastal and riparian settlements (it believed it had secured these rights with £150,000 of presents at Delhi), *not* to conquer significant territories or to create 'colonies' in the conventional sense (they remained trading bases with a small, shifting European population deep into the eighteenth century).[8] Predictably, it got a bloody nose, and the Directors had to supplicate for re-admittance to trade in the Empire and to pay a hefty fine to get Bombay Island back.[9]

3 For example: in 1687, Child wrote to the Bombay Council of his desire 'that they will establish Such a Polity of civil and military power and create and secure Such a large Revenue to maintain … a large, well-grounded, secure English dominion in India for all time to come' [for 'dominion' read sovereign judicial power within the Company's small commercial settlements on or near the Indian coasts], in P. Woodruff, *The Men Who Ruled India: The Founders* (London, 1953), p. 62.

4 A. B. Keith, *A Constitutional History of India, 1600–1935* (London, 1936), p. 10.

5 A. L. Crowe, 'Sir Josiah Child and the East India Company' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, London, 1956), pp. 150–7.

6 In Sir George Forrest, *The Life of Lord Clive*, 2 vols (London, 1918), vol. I, p. 281.

7 Crowe, 'Sir Josiah Child', pp. 108 and 119.

8 Ibid., pp. 136, 146, 150–7, 160–1 and 167.

9 Sandes, *The Military Engineer in India*, pp. 21–2.

Prevailing Company policy before and after Child's aggression suggests that this had been a passing and aberrant episode. In 1615 Sir Thomas Roe, James I's emissary to the Mughal Court who aimed to secure entry into the Empire for the Company's traders, had set the tone for the more characteristically passive Company grand strategy up to 1750 when he advised:

> A war and traffic are incompatible. By my consent, you shall no way engage yourselves but at sea, where you are like to gain as often as to lose. It is the beggaring of the Portugal … that he keeps soldiers that spend his gains … He never profited from the Indies since he defended them. Let this be received as a rule that if you will profit, seek it at sea and quiet trade.[10]

Thereafter, until Child's forceful initiative, the Company, conscious of its political and financial weakness compared to the rival Dutch and Portuguese companies, did not have any other option than to keep a low profile in India. Between the 1620s and the 1650s the Directors did speculate about the desirability of gaining a fortified coastal post in western India to give the Company a measure of independence from Mughal authority at Surat, the key Indian mart in the north-west where the Company had a 'factory' (its servants were known as 'factors') – i.e. a commercial base with offices and warehouses – lightly fortified to shield it from turbulence in the interior, and to defend the Company's commercial operations from other Europeans.[11] Their desire was gratified not by conquest but by the lease of Bombay Island in 1660 from Charles II who had received it as part of the dowry of his new Portuguese Queen. And in 1679, the Directors reproved the Madras Council on the east coast for spending too much on forts and artillery, believing 'fayr complyance' and presents to the King of Golconda to be a preferable way to establish a secure trading position, while Surat was told that the Company, 'did not desire a trade that must be maintained by blood';[12] and, two years later, 'all war is so contrary to our constitution as well as to our interest, that we cannot too often inculcate to you an aversion thereto'.[13]

In the wake of the failure of Child's bullying strategy, the Directors renewed the Company's commitment to a passive stance, telling their Bengal servants in 1699: 'We desire to follow Our Trade and mind our busyness, and never

10 In P. Woodruff, *The Men Who Ruled India: The Founders* (London, 1953), p. 34.

11 W. Foster, ed., *The English Factories in India (1624–1629): A Calendar of Documents in the India Office* (Oxford, 1909), p. xxi; W. Foster, ed., *The English Factories in India (1651–1654)* (Oxford, 1915), pp. 161–71; W. Foster, ed., *English Factories in India, (1655–60)* (Oxford, 1921), pp. 207–8, 337–8; W. Foster, ed., *The English Factories in India (1637–1641)* (Oxford, 1912), pp. 89–90, 156–8 and 183–4.

12 In Sandes, *The Military Engineer in India*, vol. I, p. 23.

13 In 'Three Years Gleanings', *The East India United Services Journal and Military Magazine* XII (1838), p. 12.

want a fort but as it may prove a safe Retreat from Threatened Danger …'[14] In 1717 the Company, through diplomacy and financial sweeteners, secured *farmans* (royal grants) from Delhi giving it the right to trade free of duties in Bengal (and elsewhere in the Empire) and also an option to buy a number of villages (thirty-eight) close to Calcutta. The Directors looked at this territorial accession from a purely financial and strategic standpoint, telling their servants only to secure those villages contiguous with Fort William and which might increase its revenue – the rest would be too costly to defend and could lead to conflict with the local Mughal authorities.[15] This non-combative and non-acquisitive stance had not changed twenty years later (1741) when, on the eve of the War of the Austrian Succession, the Directors told Bombay not to use military men to negotiate with the nearby hostile Marathas because 'they [soldiers] have a strong Biass in their Minds by Warlike Notions which incline them to such Measures as are quite contrary to the True Interest of a Trading Society …' They went on to warn them against offensive initiatives because:

> there is a great deal of difference in point of Charges betwixt a defensive and Offensive State of War which latter must always be the Case while we live in open War. Besides, the continuing in such a State compels our Enemys to encrease their Forces and make them by Degrees to become Formidable and what is the End of all? Why we have a great deal to loose and they have nothing of any value that you can take from them.[16]

This became a recurrent fear in London when in the following years the Company was steadily drawn into military enterprises in India. In the early 1740s the Company's garrisons were so small that they could do little more than mount honour guards and defend their small communities on the periphery of India behind fixed fortifications that were soon shown to be woefully inadequate for their purpose. So, where there *was* continuity in the Company's policy towards India, even right up to 1784, it was in the Directors' desire to *minimise* their political and military involvement in Indian affairs. And, in India, most of the Company's servants (particularly the civil ones) did not see themselves as part of an imperial project, but rather as, hopefully, brief transients focusing on personal private pecuniary gain, and living in a commercial not a political environment, serving a company not a state, with *money* not *glory* as their sole goal.

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14 Ct to Fort William, Bengal [FW], 20 December 1699, in C. R. Wilson, ed., *Old Fort William in Bengal*, 2 vols (London, 1906), vol. I, p. 46.
15 Ct to FW, 3 February 1720, ibid., vol. I, pp. 103 and 109.
16 Ct to Bombay [Bb.], 15 March 1741, BL, E/3/110, paras 85 and 86.

I will argue in this book that Britain's progress towards imperial power in India in the latter part of the eighteenth century was marked by three major discontinuities in the *practice* and *control* of its grand strategy; stages when, despite the Company's institutionally peaceful stance, it progressively lurched into a 'forward' policy (without a clear imperial vision), transforming itself anomalously from a conventional commercial corporation into a substantial territorial power in India (but whose main *raison d'être* remained trade for a while yet) that for two hundred years was not to be reversed until a sudden headlong retreat in 1947, reminiscent of the much slower withdrawal of the Romans from Britain in the fifth century. The first discontinuity was in 1744 when the British and French became involved on opposite sides in the War of the Austrian Succession and extended their conflict to the East; the others were in 1765, when Clive secured the *diwani* (authority to collect revenues) for all Bengal and Bihar (the richest Indian state) from the Emperor, Shah Alam II, and in 1784 when, under Pitt's India Act, the British Government finally assumed a formal supervisory power over the Company's political activities in India. These events resulted, initially inadvertently, in a progressive British involvement in Indian political affairs (on the first two occasions determined by the Company, and on the third, after 1784, by the British Government). The intrusions were occasioned more by the impact of ongoing circumstantial events in India and the British reaction to them than the formulation of a new, considered imperial policy by the Company and the state.

The first 150 years of the Company's engagement with India (i.e. until 1744) had been characterised, in the main, by an accommodating but robust defensive stance aimed solely at sustaining, with the agreement of the Indian authorities, a financially viable commercial operation on the subcontinent on the basis of very little political and military power and miniscule territorial possessions. But thereafter, until 1784, occasionally aided by the forces of the Crown, a sometimes reluctant and usually unplanned, but nonetheless aggressive, 'forward' policy was pursued, which at first was driven by competition with the French for survival as traders in India, but which, after the latter's decisive defeat in 1761, somehow morphed into an increasingly intrusive imperialist adventure by the Company's civil and military servants in pursuit of greater security and revenues to finance trade through the extension of its political power.[17] This was primarily stimulated by attempts to stabilise and defend the Company's new political status in India. But it also derived from its local agents being unable to resist exploiting the opportunities that arose

[17] The freedom of action bestowed on the Company's servants by virtue of their distance from higher authority in Britain led some of them, for personal glory, adventure and profit, to intrude far more into Indian politics than London approved of; a process that has become known as 'sub-imperialism': P. J. Marshall, *Bengal: The British Bridgehead, Eastern India, 1740–1828*, The New Cambridge History of India (Cambridge, 1987), p. 91.

from time to time to acquire substantial *financial* resources for the Company's trade (and usually to enrich themselves through enhanced advantages in their own private trade and illegitimate perquisites from expanding public military and civil administration) by assuming political and military dominance over increasing areas of the subcontinent.

A few Company men in these years, particularly Robert Clive and Warren Hastings, drew a broader grand strategic conclusion from these developments. Having, in their struggles with the French, arguably 'inadvertently', become entangled with the volatile Indian dynastic and interstate politics characteristic of the period, and having extended a significant degree of influence over them, they became convinced that the Company could not withdraw without imperilling its future existence in India, because the Indian princes would never again trust the Company to confine itself to peaceful trade alone.[18] The big question for the Company's leadership then became where to draw the line on the expansion of its territorial power and, beyond that, how far, if at all, to try to extend its political influence into the interior of India. Some contemporaries were puzzled how it had all come about. Harry Verelst, Governor of Bengal, remarked on his retirement in 1769: 'The Ascendancy of the English in Hindostan [northern India] is in the Number of those Events which are distinguished by a Series of Fortunate and unforeseen Occurrences not the result of any fixed or connected Plan of Policy.'[19] So this study will focus mainly on exploring the evolving inchoate motivation, rationale and means for the intermittent expansion of the Company's political power and territorial encroachment in India between 1744 and 1784.

The second discontinuity was engineered by Clive in 1765, and he was much more deliberate and clear-sighted in recognising its implications for the future. He secured from the refugee Mughal Emperor, Shah Alam II, in return for resuming the customary annual tribute from Bengal–Bihar to the Empire (which had not been paid fully for many years) of 2,600,000 rupees (around £300,000 at the then current rate of exchange), an appointment of the Company as Imperial *diwan* (revenue collector) of the provinces (and notionally of Orissa, though the nawabs had lost control of most of this province to the Marathas in the 1740s). This made the Company master of all the province's finances, but not *formally* of its legitimate sovereign, an office still held by the Nawab, Najm ud-daula. Initially, Calcutta fulfilled its role indirectly through existing Mughal officers at provincial and local levels because it did not have sufficient expertise to become intimately involved in revenue administration, and perhaps did not want to; but in 1772, the Directors ordered its servants to take direct control of the collecting process.

18 Clive to his friend John Walsh, 4 January 1765, BL, MSS Eur. D546, III–VII.

19 Fort William Council (or of its Select or Secret Committees) Proceedings [hereafter, 'FWP'], 16 December 1769, BL, P/1/44, pp. 898–914.

This development, backed by the Company's army as the only effective military force in Bengal, marked the acquisition of *institutionalised* political power there, though there was still an impotent nawab (Mughal governor) as *nizam*, formally in charge of police and justice, on the *musnud* (a regal cushion equivalent to a throne) to mask its political nakedness. Verelst certainly saw it in this light: with the grant of the *diwani*, he wrote, 'we insensibly broke down the Barrier betwixt us and Government'.[20]

This act also marked a significant change in the Company's previous financial policy of only soliciting land revenue grants from Indian rulers to cover (usually inadequately) the spiralling military and civil costs it claimed to have incurred on their behalf. However, Clive sold the *diwani* scheme to the sceptical Directors (they had previously rejected an earlier offer by the putative Emperor as likely to engage them too deeply in 'country' politics[21]), as promising a permanent substantial supplement (considerably in excess of £1 million a year) to the Company's earnings from trade.[22] It came at a time when the Company's finances were strained from the costs of the recent war; and the situation soon got worse, almost bankrupting it, as shareholders beholding some of the Company's servants returning home enriched by the sudden bounty that flowed briefly as a result of Clive's triumph at Plassey (1757), forced the Directors to announce financially unjustified high dividends. While the profits from trade could always be portrayed by the Company as legitimate and 'fair' to the Indians, the siphoning off of Indian revenues on a regular basis for British shareholders could well (and did) attract criticism from outside the Company back home. Clive, himself, before embarking on the course that led him to accept the *diwani* from the Emperor, expressed doubts to the Company's Chairman, Thomas Rous, about the wisdom of it:

> I could have wished that our Operations had been carried on upon a Plan of Moderation and that we had not been obliged to maintain any other Military Force than what might be sufficient to pursue our commercial Advantages. But since our Views are extended and since Commerce alone is [not] now the whole of the Company's Support, we must go forward, to retract is impossible.[23]

Clive may only have been telling Rous what he imagined he would want to hear. When interpreting the sentiments (and any underlying agenda) of leading Company servants in their letters home at this time, the status of the recipient, be he Company boss, Government or Opposition politician, patron or (likely to be the most truthful) a trusted confidant such as a relative or friend, always has to be borne in mind.

20 FWP, 16 December 1769, BL, P/1/44, p. 901.
21 Ct to FW, 9 March 1763, BL, E/4/617, p. 582, para. 55.
22 Clive to Ct, 30 September 1765, BL, E/4/27, p. 32.
23 Clive (at Madras on the way to Bengal) to Thomas Rous, 17 April 1765, BL, MSS Eur. G 37/3 (Folder 2).

These developments suggested to some leading Company servants (particularly Clive and Hastings), the notion that the Company's political position in India had become tantamount to that of a territorial state, with the opportunity opening up before it of even becoming the new dominant power in India, should it choose to assume it. The practical military possibility of conquering India had earlier been suggested as feasible (rightly or wrongly) on the basis of the Company's experience in wars with and against 'country' forces down in the Carnatic. In 1751 the Fort St David Council wrote to the Directors: 'The Weakness of the Moors is now known, and it is certain that any European Nation resolved to War on them, with a tolerable Force may overrun the whole country.' Robert Orme, Madras councillor and later memorialist of early British military exploits in India, wrote to a Director in 1757: 'To oppose the forces of Indians alone, a Man cannot be too much of the Alexander, for no military Knowledge exists in India'[he meant the more advanced European military methodology].[24] Both Clive and Hastings declared themselves opposed to further conquest on the grounds that it was antithetical to the Company's interests.[25]

Such ideas were certainly not at all palatable to the Directorate back home because, aside from the risks of financial ruin arising from consequential wars with neighbouring 'country' powers and their belief that they did not have men of sufficient competence and integrity to run such an 'empire' successfully, they would see their power to control their servants and events in India progressively decline. It probably also offended their underlying philosophy that the sole purpose of the Company was trade.[26] They wrote to their Bengal servants in 1759: 'you seem so thoroughly Possessed with Military ideas as to forget your employers are Merchants, and Trade their principal Object, and were We to adopt your several Planns for Fortifying, half our Capital would be Buried in Stone Walls'; and, eight years later, after the grant of

24 Orme to John Payne, 6 July 1757, BL, Orme MSS, OV4, p. 179.

25 Clive's notes to himself as Governor in Bengal, 1765: BL, MSS Eur. G37/13. Three years later, back home, he wrote to his friend Henry Strachey: 'If I have any interest in the Directory, I shall absolutely forbid their Governors and Councils to attempt any more Conquests for the Company …': 10 May 1768, BL, Microfilm 485. Ten years after this, in 1779, Hastings wrote to his patron, the powerful Director Laurence Sulivan (a trifle wistfully perhaps – most great political leaders are attracted to the prospect of power, renown and action): we 'are capable of subjecting all India to the British Yolk.… I do not wish to attempt it. The Conquest would be easy, but I believe it would but accelerate our Ruin from Causes which it is not necessary to detail.' Presumably he meant ruin for the Company due to corruption of its servants and/or the takeover of the Company's possessions by the British Government. Hastings to Sulivan, 22 August 1779, BL, Add. MSS 29, 128, fol. 210.

26 The Directors protested (pharisaically?) to a Parliamentary Committee of Enquiry in 1767: 'We don't want conquest and power; it is commercial interest only that we look for': in H. V. Bowen, *Revenue and Reform: The Indian Problem in British Politics, 1757–1773* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 68. But, of course, 'conquest and power' might *serve* 'commercial interest', but it also might also attract a state takeover – their real fear?

the *diwani*, that if war should ensue from the current political uncertainty in the province and the Company's involvement in it, 'it will be found we have not altered our Situation much to our Advantage, but have only exchanged a certain Profit in commerce for a precarious one in Revenue'.[27] They were also concerned that the British Government might conclude, as a result, that the Company had strayed too far from its commercial role, becoming illegitimately involved in intrusive politics in India and, consequently, would 'nationalise' it, destroying its identity, independence and, possibly, its profitability.[28] The British Government did indeed become increasingly concerned at the new path the Company seemed to be treading out in India, primarily, however, because of the political and financial impact this was having at Westminster and in the City, and also on its relations with other European states, as well as the need to curb the increasing corruption of the Company's servants in the East deriving from the growing power they wielded there. The global grand strategic implications of the expansion of the Company's territorial power in India seemed to be a secondary issue; and the Government's interest in them was intermittent, awoken only at times when Britain and France were at war with one another. Arguably, therefore, there was a third major discontinuity in the evolution of British grand strategy in India, when the British Government in Pitt's India Act of 1784, as a result of its desire to reform the Company's management, along the way also assumed formal and permanent supervision over the Company's political affairs there. Only then did the Company effectively become a political agent of the state, and the protection and possible enhancement of its Indian territories become fully integrated into the British Government's global grand strategy, rather than just a commercial concern (a *company* like any other with a royal charter) that had become, to some extent unwillingly, sucked into India's political affairs and which had become a major power there.[29]

If there was, nonetheless, as some have claimed, an imperialistic root (if not an imperial vision) stretching back into the seventeenth century in the aims and behaviour of the English/British in India, it was narrowly motivated before 1750 by one factor, and still was, primarily, thereafter up to 1784. This was the desire in the minds of the Company's directors, its servants (in their private enterprises and corrupt practices), the shareholders

27 Ct to FW, 23 March 1759, BL, E/4/616, para. 55, p. 882; and 16 March 1768, ibid., E/4/618, para. 140, p. 1023. At the same time the Directors warned Madras: 'the spirit of Conquest is by no means that which rules with us, and which we hope you will never suffer to gain the ascendant of you': Ct to FSG, 24 December 1765, BL, E/4/863, p. 280, para. 2.

28 Bowen, *Revenue and Reform*, p. 49; L. Sutherland, *The East India Company in Eighteenth-Century Politics* (Oxford, 1952), pp. 56–8, 237, 240 and 256.

29 Sutherland, *The East India Company in Eighteenth-Century Politics*, *passim*. V. Harlow, *The Founding of the Second British Empire, 1763–1793*, 2 vols (London, 1964), vol. I, pp. 165, 191–2.

and eventually *even* of the British Government itself to make money out of the Indian connection, primarily through privileged trade, though increasingly after 1765 from skimming Indian revenues one way or another; not by the lust for glory (except occasionally for some officers in the Company's army), power and land that is often said to fuel the drive for empire. All the Company men in India wanted to do was to make quick fortunes by 'shaking the pagoda tree'[30] and to get out again as soon as possible before the climate, alien diseases and their own intemperate habits killed them; few had any desire to settle there. Until around 1755, at the earliest, *if* the Mughal Empire or its regional authorities had regarded the relationship as unprofitable or even politically dangerous, it remained powerful enough to expel the exploitative foreigners without launching a major war against them. Up to that point, Anglo-Indian trade, though the British occasionally tried, not always successfully, to coerce the Indian authorities into granting them special privileges not otherwise freely offered, would only have survived in the long term, and indeed flourished after 1706, had it not been mutually beneficial (to some powerful Indians at least).

It has always been recognised that money conditions what is ultimately possible in war, but in the British Company's case in India during these early years money assumed a much more dominant and immediate role in the formulation of grand strategy than it would have done with state political authorities. While governments in the *short run* tend to give political objectives primacy in war and resort to any expedient to find the necessary immediate finance, leaving to posterity the headache of paying for it, commercial concerns, and the Company's Directors were no different, will place the highest priority on staying solvent from the beginning.[31] Leadenhall Street continually nagged its servants on this score and on the priority of securing immediate and continuing funds in India to finance their military establishments and ongoing operations, reminding them that the company was not a state.[32] The French were affected similarly but worse, for their company was in a parlous state financially. If known to the British, this was not a factor that they emphasised when they judged the relative military strength of the two sides after 1750. Madras most frequently stressed the invariably greater numbers of recruits sent out to their enemy by their masters in Europe and

30 'Shaking the pagoda tree' was slang amongst Company servants of the day for fortune-hunting in India; a pagoda was a South Indian coin worth 8/- at the time: Col. H. Rule and A. C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases*, new edn (Sittingbourne, Kent, 1994), p. 657.

31 In 1771 the Fort St George Council deeply upset the Directors when they implied that the annual dividend should be sacrificed if it was in the 'national interest': FSG to Ct, 6 February 1771, BL, E/4/304, para. 4.

32 Ct to FW, 4 May 1757: 'Remember you do not have a state's resources behind you … only the precarious profits of a trading company': BL, E/4/616, p. 572, para. 7.

that only by superior generalship and/or diplomacy could the British prevail. But Paris never ensured that their agents in India had enough money to pay their troops on time and so keep up their morale and commitment, which turned out to be the key requirement in ensuring their military superiority; it was this that ultimately led to their downfall.

The goals and policies of the English Company when it first came to India in the early seventeenth century and for a long time after were simple and relatively static – to focus on their trade and keep political engagement with host or neighbouring 'country' powers to a minimum, concerning themselves only to get a good fiscal deal with the local Indian authorities and freedom from harassment in their commercial activities in the interior. They sought to achieve this mainly through supplication and presents, occasionally backed by bullying through blockades of local ports with their superior naval power. They retained only a few soldiers to guard their warehouses and to afford their governors a military retinue when visiting local militarised dignitaries. This changed radically from 1744, however, when Britain and France found themselves on opposite sides in the War of the Austrian Succession (and again in 1756–63 and 1778–83) and their governments chose to extend their conflicts to the Eastern as well as the Western Hemisphere by significantly augmenting their companies' naval and military strength in India and empowering them to fight each other there.

Devising a grand strategy now became a much more serious, dynamic and complex process. And the companies were ill adapted to deal with it. Their agents in the East had been selected for their potential commercial skills, not their political and military abilities. Moreover, since promotion within the executive hierarchy was usually by seniority, it was a lottery as to whether a natural leader would be at the helm when a political crisis arose. When one did in 1744, the French at Pondicherry were lucky to have in Joseph Dupleix a man who revelled in his enhanced political role and who displayed great resource and vision in rising to the challenge, though in the end he over-reached himself. The British Governor at Madras at the time, Nicholas Morse, newly appointed in 1744, was totally out of his depth and ineffective; and his successor, Charles Floyer, was a playboy who was eventually sacked in 1750 for gaming and corruption. Another major problem for both companies, in devising and executing a grand strategy, was that the Directors in Europe, who were supposedly in overall charge of it, were disabled by their distance from the field of operations from exercising close supervision of policy and operations, while most had also never been to India and so only knew of the very different political and military environment there by report.[33]

[33] And communications between Britain and the East were interrupted by local hostile seasonal weather; Madras normally heard nothing from London between March and November

By the 1760s and 1770s, the Company's politics in London had become so turbulent and the Directors' authority so markedly less effective that their control over the Presidency governments in India was significantly reduced. Anyway, perforce, they had, unhappily, to delegate a good deal of grand strategic latitude to their servants in the East because of the similar turbulence in Indian politics, and were frequently to wring their hands in frustration at the risky and costly initiatives that they took. Although the leading Company servants in India were often shareholders and so had an interest in its financial success, they also usually had private commercial concerns in the East (sanctioned by the Company) that might be enhanced by manipulating local Indian affairs, but at the expense of the interests of their employers. Further, as their political power in India grew after 1750, so did the servants' opportunities for fraud in contracting to build forts for the Company and providing logistical support and medical care for its army; also, receiving 'presents' from associated Indian princes seeking influence and military help and taking bribes from Indian officials and merchants for favoured treatment, or, finally, in administering the land revenue system oppressing the mass of Indian artisans and peasants.

Some servants (Clive, Hastings and Dupleix were prime examples), might at times also evince an attachment (genuine or politically self-serving) to their interpretation of the 'national interest' in relation to India that could be at variance to that of their companies as perceived by their Directors.[34] And although, after 1744, the companies were backed with military and naval help to different degrees by their governments, there was not a total identity of grand strategic priorities between them; the French Directors, however, were much more beholden to the royal government at Versailles than their opposite numbers in the City of London were to Westminster.[35] The compa-

because of the monsoon: Henry Vansittart to Laurence Sulivan (Chairman of the Company), 2 July 1760, Bod. Lib., MS Eng. Hist. B191, Sulivan Papers, pp. 12–19. One old India hand commented to another in 1771: 'there is hardly amongst the Directors any who consider these matters [the structure of the Company's governance in India] attentively or make themselves masters of the Company's affairs …': Robert Palk (former Madras Governor) to William Goodlad, 2 April 1771, Historical Manuscripts Commission, 'Report on the Palk Manuscripts' (London, 1922), p. 157.

34 For example, Clive wrote to Pitt 'the Elder' in 1759 (six years *before* acquiring the *diwani* for the Company): Bengal 'may possibly be an object too extensive for a mercantile company; it is to be feared they are not of themselves able, without the nation's assistance, to maintain so wide a dominion': in Bowen, *Revenue and Reform*, p. 51. And Warren Hastings wrote vaguely to Lord North (the Prime Minister) from Calcutta on his appointment as Governor-General in 1774, of the 'acquisition of new resources of Wealth and Influence to the British Empire, … not by desultory Schemes of Conquest or Extension of Territory, but by means [?] which the most wary providence might allow and on Grounds of moral certainty both of safety and success': BL, Add. MSS 29, 127, fols 159–60.

35 H. Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient, 1600–1800* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 105, 111–12, 124, 135–7.

nies, not surprisingly, prioritised protecting and if possible enhancing their commercial interests, while keeping a sharp eye on rising military costs. The governments, with their global engagement with the enemy, though mercantilist in sentiment, saw financial factors as secondary to political and tended to see India as ranking behind Europe and the Western Hemisphere in importance.[36] This was reflected in the lesser support they gave to this theatre of operations and their readiness to sacrifice the companies' interests at the negotiating table in trading for gains elsewhere.[37]

Most states have institutionalised armed forces with well-established structures, traditions and protocols governing their conduct that date back centuries; but the handful of European and Indian soldiers the companies had engaged before 1744 hardly constituted 'armies' run by professional military institutions. The troops' training was largely limited to personal arms drill and defending fixed fortifications, so they were probably incapable of effective field service. But this was precisely what was expected of them from the middle of the eighteenth century; so the French and British companies rapidly had to improvise proper and effective field forces in the Carnatic almost from scratch, using local Indian as well as imported European troops. They naturally based their tactical systems on European forms and practice, though they soon found that they would need to adapt these to the particular nature of war in India and the abilities of their Indian soldiers if they were to get the best out of them.[38]

The English East India Company was confident from 1744 that it could rely on the British Government to supplement their own forces with warships and troops in India (though possibly not enough to guarantee all its interests), but usually only when Britain and France were at war or war was threatening between them. The British Directors, however, concluded in 1748, when the War of the Austrian Succession ended, that the French might seek to continue to undermine their Company's position in India by indirect means through political intrigue with the 'country' powers (as the Indian princes were usually collectively known). This led them to decide, after the sorry British performance in India in the recent war, to upgrade the quality, but not the size, of the military establishments and forts at their Presidencies to Euro-

36 Bowen, *Revenue and Reform*, p. 27; R. Middleton, *The Bells of Victory: The Pitt-Newcastle Ministry and the Conduct of the Seven Years War, 1757–1762* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 22, 24–5, 49, 54–5 and 176.

37 C. H. Philips, 'The Secret Committee of the East India Company', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* X, part 2, pp. 302–3. In the last year of the Seven Years War (1762) the British Army numbered thirty-two thousand active in the British Isles, eighteen thousand in Germany, sixteen thousand in the Atlantic theatre, 9,500 in North America, eighteen thousand on other detachments and 3,700 in India: BL, Stowe MSS 484.

38 G. J. Bryant, 'Asymmetric Warfare: The British Experience in Eighteenth-Century India', *Journal of Military History* 68 (April 2004), pp. 431–69.

pean standards in order to deter attacks in the future. But they could never afford to create sufficiently formidable forces capable of independent field operations in the interior of India *without* the military, financial and logistical support of local 'country' governments. And, indeed, the political association of the 'country' governments would be necessary to provide legal cover for the companies if they were to fight each other legitimately when their states were at peace in Europe. But Indian princely governments at this time were frequently fractured and unstable due to internal challenges to their legitimacy and their much looser grip on the subordinate local administrations. They also, naturally, had their own political agendas, while the diplomatic culture in India did not place the same stress on the importance of fulfilling treaties between states that was customary in contemporary Europe.[39] Clive's perception of Indian statesmen was typically blunt and forthright: they 'have adopted a system of Politicks more peculiar to this Country than any other, viz.: to attempt everything by treachery rather than force'.[40]

So the European company functionaries had to get used to operating in a political milieu of shifting and unreliable alliances, as also of desultory military operations since 'country' army commanders were usually dilatory in their conduct of war and often preferred to temporise on a campaign, thereby leaving windows open for a negotiated settlement of their disputes, rather than to follow the more direct European tendency to seek decisive military action once a war had started. In the twelve-year contest (1749–61) between the British and the French and their respective 'country' allies, who, up to 1756, were formally in control, for domination of the Carnatic, there were only two major battles (Bahur, 6 September 1752 and Wandiwash, 22 January 1760). Military resources were more often dispersed in positional warfare – the domination of territory utilising the numerous forts that dotted the country, which usually prolonged the conflict through lower-level operations, never quickly decisive in determining the outcome of the war. These circumstances affected the character of European grand strategy in India, involving a continuing diplomatic struggle to subvert the allegiance of their enemy's 'country' allies and to preserve the whole-hearted support of their own. This was of course not unknown in contemporary Europe, but it was much more pronounced in India where it sometimes played as important an ongoing role as military operations.

Senior Company servants who engaged with 'country' governments also had to adjust to constitutional and cultural differences between European and Indian norms and traditions in doing political business. Diplomatic practice

39 Company civil servants, with their commercial background and belief in the sanctity of contracts, probably found the loose adherence to treaty commitments by some of the princes even more irksome than cynical seasoned European diplomats would have done.

40 Clive to Laurence Sulivan, 30 December 1758, Forrest, *Clive*, vol. II, p. 120.

between Indian states at this time was not as regulated as it had become in Europe during the seventeenth century with permanent accredited agents and formalised procedures; it was often more ad hoc and personalised, conducted by a prince with the special representatives of fellow princes dealing with specific issues. And European company envoys at the beginning of this period were usually resident commercial agents or, later, military officers, both out of their depth when dealing in politics.

The character of the Company's governments in India was collegiate and internally democratic. This resulted in grand strategy being debated between senior colleagues with equal voting rights (the governor only had an extra casting vote in cases of deadlock) in secret or select committees which, after 1750, came to concentrate on grand strategic issues. Very full minutes of consultations were demanded by the Directors in London who would expect reasoned explanations and justifications for policies adopted and actions taken, with the threat occasionally used of dismissal for incompetence or wayward behaviour. Although strong personalities on the councils in India could dominate the process of discussion and decision, the overall *tendency* was for moderate and rational policies (in terms of the perceived Company interest) to be followed. However, there were occasions (for example in Bengal in 1763–4 and Madras in 1766–9 and 1776) when self-interested cabals within the committees forced through policies that were highly injurious to the Company both politically and financially.

The Indian princes who they had to deal with were constitutional oligarchs *formally* answerable to no one, thus producing a form of rule that could be highly personalised, so it behoved Company envoys to become familiar with the nature of their abilities and personalities if they wanted to negotiate successfully with them. However, the British in India at this time tended to believe that princes were more often guided by whim and emotion than by reason in their grand strategies (*dispositional* behaviour), while claiming for themselves *situational* motivation (i.e. policies arrived at by a dispassionate evaluation of the circumstances and the Company's interests), often not considering the possibility that their adversaries might be doing the same thing.[41] At the same time, as C. A. Bayly has demonstrated, the concepts of 'state' and 'empire' in India were less solid political institutions in specifically designated areas than in contemporary Europe;[42] and the structure of allegiance and obedience of the formally subordinate authorities to many Indian

41 In 1782, the Fort St George Council contrasted their claimed non-acquisitive policy with their belief that: 'An Eastern prince … could scarcely conceive the possibility of voluntarily declining any occasion of conquest or dominion and would therefore be apt to receive declarations of such a disposition with some degree of Coldness and Mistrust …': FSG to Ct, 26 January 1782, BL, E/4/309, para. 96.

42 C. A. Bayly, *The New Cambridge History of India*, II, 1 (Cambridge, 1988), p. 13.

rulers was much looser and weaker. So it was always advisable for the princes *informally* to take into account the attitudes and desires of important political, military and economic stakeholders within their states and societies; but they did not always do so, sometimes to their disadvantage or downfall. While their opposite European numbers might disappear from the scene through resignation, dismissal or death from natural causes, the princes might in the internecine political culture which characterised later eighteenth-century India die on the battlefield or be killed in a palace coup; so the personal political stakes were always higher for them.

The first Europeans to enter the Eastern seas had been ready from the outset to use significant force to drive their commercial interests. When, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Portuguese Estado da India, as an agent of the Crown, blazed a trail around the Cape of Good Hope to the East for others to follow, it deployed and used a great deal of naval power to assert itself. The Catholic Portuguese King regarded all Muslims as enemies – they had only recently been ejected from the Iberian Peninsula and they dominated the landmasses on the periphery of the Indian Ocean. So, when the Portuguese arrived in the East, they were not content just to engage in peaceful trade; they also set up a protection racket, using their command of the seas in the East to attempt, with some initial success, to extort tribute from local merchants using the Indian Ocean. For this purpose they seized a number of strategic ports at key points around the ocean (Cochin, Goa, Malacca, Colombo, Hormuz and Diu) as bases for their warships and as licensing stations. Only Aden held out against their attacks, which eventually proved to be a significant weakness in their system.[43] And the Dutch (with their monopolistic East India Company – Vereenigde Ost-Indische Compagnie (VOC)), who followed a century later, were similarly aggressive, but used their military power for mainly commercial purposes – to eject the Portuguese from their dominance of the Spice Islands in the East Indies and to coerce the hapless local people to raise production of spices (at the expense of growing food) to satisfy a world market eager for pepper, cloves and nutmegs. The Dutch company was strongly backed by its government, which was engaged in a war for survival with Spain, and this included Portugal since the two Crowns were united at the time.[44]

The much less well-capitalised private English Company on the other hand, venturing East at the same time as the Dutch, around 1600 (as also the French when they belatedly arrived on the scene later in the seventeenth century), could not afford to invest much in the way of armaments, soldiers and forts, nor, before the later 1740s, could it expect any military or naval

[43] C. R. Boxer, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire, 1415–1825* (London, 1969), p. 47.
[44] C. R. Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire, 1600–1800* (London, 1973), pp. 96–7 and 114–17.